



THE DEVOTION OF SUSPECT X

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ONE

At 7:35 A.M. Ishigami left his apartment as he did every weekday morning.

Just before stepping out onto the street, he glanced at the mostly full bicycle

lot, noting the absence of the green bicycle. Though it was already March, the wind was biting cold. He walked with his head down, burying his chin in his scarf. A short way to the south, about twenty yards, ran Shin-Ohashi Road. From that intersection the road ran east into the Edogawa district, west toward Nihonbashi. Just before Nihonbashi, it crossed the Sumida River at the Shin-Ohashi Bridge.

The quickest route from Ishigami's apartment to his workplace was due south. It was only a quarter mile or so to Seicho Garden Park. He worked at the private high school just before the park. He was a teacher. He taught math.

Ishigami walked south to the red light at the intersection, then he turned right, toward Shin-Ohashi Bridge. The wind blew in his face, making his coat flap around him. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and hunched over, quickening his pace.

A thick layer of clouds covered the sky, their gray reflection making the Sumida River look even murkier than usual. A small boat was making its way upstream. Ishigami noted its progress as he crossed the bridge.

On the other side, he took a set of stairs that led from the foot of the bridge down to the Sumida. Passing beneath the iron struts of the bridge, he began to walk along the river. Pedestrian walkways were built into the

molded concrete riverbanks on both sides of the water. Further down, near Kiyosu Bridge, families and couples often strolled along the river, but such people seldom visited the riverbanks this far up. The long row of cardboard shanties covered in blue vinyl sheets kept them away. This was where the homeless lived, in the shadow of an expressway overpass that ran along the west side of the river. Ishigami figured the looming overpass must have provided some shelter from the wind and rain. The fact that not a single shack stood on the other side of the river gave weight to this hypothesis, though it was possible the first squatters had settled there by accident and the others had simply followed them, preferring the safety of their community, such as it was, to solitude across the water.

He made his way down the row of shanties, glancing briefly at them as he walked. Most were barely tall enough for a man to stand up inside, and some of the structures only rose as high as his waist. They were more boxes than shacks. Maybe it was enough to have a place to sleep.

Plastic laundry hangers had been rigged up near the boxes, signs of domestic life. A man was leaning up against the railing that ran between the walkway and the water, brushing his teeth. Ishigami had seen him around. He was past sixty, and his grayish white hair was bound in a long ponytail. He had probably given up on work. If it was physical labor he wanted, he

wouldn't have been hanging around now. Those jobs were filled in the early morning hours. He wouldn't be going to the unemployment office, either. Even if they did find a job suitable for him, with that long hair of his he'd never make it as far as the interview. The chances of anyone wanting him for a job at his age were close to zero anyway.

Another man stood near his sleeping box, crushing a row of empty cans under his foot. Ishigami had witnessed this scene several times before, and he had secretly named this fellow the Can Man. The Can Man looked to be around fifty. He had good clothes and even a bicycle. Ishigami figured that his can-collecting trips kept him more active and alert than the others. He lived at the edge of the community, deep under the bridge, which must have been a position of privilege. The Can Man was a village elder, then—an old-timer, even in this crowd—or so Ishigami saw him.

A little way on from where the line of cardboard shanties petered out, another man was sitting on a bench. His coat must have once been beige, but now it was scuffed and gray. He was wearing a suit jacket underneath it, though, and beneath that a white work shirt. Ishigami guessed that he had a necktie stashed away in his coat pocket. Ishigami had labeled him the Engineer a few days earlier, after spotting him reading an industrial trade magazine. He kept his hair cropped short, and he shaved. Maybe he hoped

he'd be going back to work soon. He would be off to the unemployment office today, but he probably wouldn't find a job. He would have to lose his pride before that happened. Ishigami had first seen the Engineer about ten days ago. He wasn't used to life along the river yet, still drawing an imaginary line between himself and the blue vinyl sheets. Yet here he stayed, not knowing how to live on his own without a home.

Ishigami continued walking along the river. Just before Kiyosu Bridge, he came upon an elderly woman taking three dogs for a walk. The dogs were miniature dachshunds, each with a different colored collar, one red, one blue, and one pink. As he approached, the woman seemed to notice him. She smiled and nodded. He nodded in reply.

"Good morning," he offered.

"Good morning. Cold, isn't it?"

"Quite," he replied, grimacing for effect.

The old woman bade him a good day as she passed by, and he gave her a final nod.

Some days before, Ishigami had seen the woman carrying a plastic convenience store bag with something like sandwiches in it—probably her breakfast. He surmised from this that she lived alone. Her home wouldn't be far from here. She was wearing flip-flops, and she wouldn't be able to

drive a car in those. She had probably lost her husband years before and now lived in a nearby apartment with her three dogs. A big place, if she was keeping three dogs there. No doubt her pets had kept her from moving to a smaller room somewhere. Maybe she had already paid off the mortgage, but there would still be maintenance fees, so she had to scrimp and save. She hadn't been to the beauty salon once this winter. Her hair showed its natural color, free from dye.

At the foot of Kiyosu Bridge, Ishigami climbed the stairs back up to the road. The school was across the bridge from here, but he turned and walked in the opposite direction.

A sign facing the road read "Benten-tei." Beneath it was a small shop that made boxed lunches. Ishigami slid open the aluminum-framed glass door.

"Good morning! Come in, come in," came the call. It was a familiar greeting and a familiar voice, but it somehow always managed to put a spring in his step. Yasuko Hanaoka smiled at him from behind the counter. She was wearing a white hat.

Ishigami felt another thrill as he realized that there were no other customers in the shop. They were alone.

"I'll take the special."

“One special, coming up,” she replied brightly. Ishigami couldn’t see her expression as he was staring into his wallet, unable to look her in the face. Given that they lived next door to each other, Ishigami felt like he should have something to talk about other than his boxed lunch order, but nothing came to mind.

When he finally came up with “Cold today, isn’t it,” he mumbled the words, and they were lost in the sound of another customer opening the sliding glass door behind him. Yasuko’s attention had turned to the new arrival.

Boxed lunch in hand, Ishigami walked out of the store. This time, he headed straight for Kiyosu Bridge, his detour to Benten-tei finished.

* * *

After the morning rush, things slowed down at Benten-tei, at least as far as customers were concerned. In the back, however, there were lunches to be made. Several local companies had the shop deliver meals for all their employees by twelve o’clock. So, when the customers stopped coming, Yasuko would go back into the kitchen to lend a hand.

There were four employees at Benten-tei. Yonazawa was the manager, assisted by his wife Sayoko. Kaneko, a part-timer, was responsible for making deliveries, while Yasuko dealt with all the in-shop customers.

Before her current job, Yasuko had worked in a nightclub in Kinshicho. Yonazawa had been a regular there and Sayoko had been the club's *mama*—though Yasuko hadn't known they were married until just before Sayoko quit.

“She wants to go from being the *mama* at a bar to the good wife at a lunch shop,” Yonazawa had told her. “Can you believe it? Some people never fail to surprise me.” Rumors had begun to fly at the club, but according to Sayoko, it had been the couple's long-held dream to run a place of their own. She had only been working at the club to save up for that.

After Benten-tei opened, Yasuko had made a habit of dropping in now and then to see how the two were doing. Business was apparently good—good enough that, a year later, they asked her if she'd be interested in helping out. It had become too much for the two of them to handle on their own.

“You can't go on in that shady business forever, Yasuko,” Sayoko had told her. “Besides, Misato's getting bigger. You wouldn't want her developing a complex because her mom's a nightclub hostess. Of course,” she'd added, “it's none of my business.”

Misato was Yasuko's only daughter. There was no father in her life after

Yasuko's last divorce, five years ago. Yasuko hadn't needed Sayoko to tell her she couldn't go on as she was. Besides her daughter's welfare, there was her own age to consider. It was far from clear how long she could have kept her job even if she wanted it.

It only took her a day to come to a decision, and the club didn't even try to hold on to her. They had just wished her well, and that was all.

Apparently she hadn't been the only one concerned about her future there. She had moved into her current apartment in the spring a year ago, which coincided with Misato entering junior high school. Her old place was too far from her new job. And, unlike the club, getting to her new work on time meant getting up by six and being on her bicycle by six thirty. Her green bicycle.

"That high school teacher come again today?" Sayoko asked her during a break.

"Doesn't he come every day?" Yasuko replied, catching Sayoko sharing a grin with her husband. "What? What's that for?"

"Oh nothing, nothing. We were just saying the other day how we thought he might fancy you."

"Whaaat?" Yasuko leaned back from the table, a cup of tea in her hand.

"You were off yesterday, weren't you? Well, guess what? He didn't come

in yesterday. Don't you think it's strange that he should come every day, except for the days when you're not here?"

"I think it's a coincidence."

"Well, we think maybe it's not." Sayoko glanced again at her husband.

Yonazawa nodded, still grinning. "It's been going on for a while now," he said with a nod at his wife. " 'Every day that Yasuko's out, he doesn't come here for his lunch,' she says. I'd wondered about it myself, to tell the truth, and when he didn't show yesterday, that kind of confirmed it for me."

"But I don't have any set vacations, other than the days the whole shop is closed. It's not like I'm out every Monday or something obvious like that."

"Which makes it even more suspicious!" Sayoko concluded, a twinkle in her eye. "He lives next door to you, doesn't he? He must see you leave for work. That's how he knows."

Yasuko shook her head. "But I've never met him on my way out, not even once."

"Maybe he's watching you from someplace. A window, maybe?"

"I don't think he can see my door from his window."

"In any case, if he is interested, he'll say something sooner or later,"

Yonazawa said. "As far as we're concerned, we have a regular customer thanks to you, so it's good news for us. Looks like your training in

Kinshicho paid off.”

Yasuko gave a wry smile and drank down the rest of her tea, thinking about the high school teacher.

His name was Ishigami. She had gone to his apartment the night she moved in to introduce herself. That’s when she’d learned he was a teacher.

He was a heavysset man, with a big, round face that made his small eyes look thin as threads. His hair was thinning and cut short, making him look nearly fifty, though he might easily have been much younger. He wasn’t particularly fashion conscious, always wearing the same sort of clothes.

This winter, when he came in to buy his lunch, he was wearing the same coat over a brown sweater. Still, he did do his laundry, as was evidenced by the occasional presence of a drying rack on the small balcony of his apartment. He was single and, Yasuko guessed, not a divorcé or widower. She thought back, trying to remember something that might have clued her in to his interest, but came up with nothing. He was like the thin crack in her apartment wall. She knew it was there, but she had never paid it that much attention. It just wasn’t worth paying attention to.

They exchanged greetings whenever they met and had even discussed the management at their apartment building once. Yet Yasuko found she knew very little about the man himself. She had only recently learned that he

taught math, when she happened to notice outside his apartment door a bundle of old math textbooks, wrapped in string and awaiting disposal. Yasuko hoped he wouldn't ask her out on a date. Then she smiled to herself, trying and failing to imagine the dour-looking man's face as he asked the question.

As on every other day, the midday rush at Benten-tei began right before lunchtime, peaking just after noon. Things didn't really quiet down again until after one o'clock.

Yasuko was sorting the bills in the register when the sliding glass door opened and someone walked in. "Hello," she chimed automatically, looking up. Then she froze. Her eyes opened wide and her voice caught in her throat.

"You look well," said the man who was standing there. He was smiling, but his eyes were darkly clouded.

"You ... how did you find me here?"

"Is it so surprising? I can find out where my ex-wife works if I have a mind to." The man looked around the shop, both hands thrust into the pockets of his dark navy windbreaker, like a prospective customer trying to figure out what he should buy.

"But why? Why now?" Yasuko asked, her voice sharp but low. She

glowered at him, inwardly praying that the Yonazawas in the back wouldn't hear them talking.

"Don't look so frightening. How long has it been since I saw you last? And you can't even manage a polite smile?" He grinned.

Yasuko shivered. "If you're here to chitchat, you can save yourself the trouble and turn around right now."

"Actually, I came for a reason. I have a favor to ask. Think you can get out for a bit?"

"Don't be an idiot. Can't you see I'm working?" Yasuko said, then immediately regretted it. *That made it sound like I would have talked with him if I wasn't at work.*

The man licked his lips. "What time do you get off?"

"It doesn't matter. I don't want to talk to you. Please, just leave and don't come back."

"Ouch. Cold."

"What did you expect?"

Yasuko glanced outside, hoping that a customer would walk in, but the street was empty.

"Well, if this is how you're going to act, guess I'll try someone else," the man said, scratching his head.

Warning bells went off in Yasuko's head. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean if my wife won't listen to me, maybe her daughter will. Her school's near here, right?"

"Don't you dare."

"Okay, then maybe you *can* help. Either way's fine by me."

Yasuko sighed. She just wanted him to leave. "I'm on till six."

"Early morning to six o'clock? That's some long hours they got you working."

"It's none of your concern."

"Okay, I'll come back at six, then."

"No, not here. Take a right outside, and walk down the street until you come to a large intersection. There's a family restaurant on the near corner. Be there at six thirty."

"Great. And, try to make sure you're there. Because if you don't show up —"

"I'll be there. Just leave. Now."

"Fine, fine. Kick me out on the street." The man took another look around the shop before walking out, closing the sliding door behind him a little too hard.

Yasuko put her hand to her forehead. A headache was coming on, and she

felt nauseated. A weight of hopelessness began to spread inside her chest.

It was eight years since she married Shinji Togashi. Now the whole sordid story replayed in her mind ...

When she met him, Yasuko was working as a hostess in a club in Akasaka. Togashi was a regular.

He was a foreign-car salesman. He lived large, and he had included her in his high-flying lifestyle. He gave her expensive gifts, took her to pricey restaurants. When he proposed, she felt like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*. She was tired of working long hours to support her daughter after a failed first marriage.

In the beginning, they were happy. Togashi had a steady income, so Yasuko could wash her hands of the nightclub scene. He was great with Misato, too, and for her part, Misato seemed to try hard to think of him as “Daddy.”

When things fell apart, it happened suddenly. Togashi was fired from his job when his employers discovered that he had been embezzling company funds for years. The only reason they didn’t press charges was that they wanted to cover the whole thing up, afraid their own judgment and oversight would be called into question. So there it was: all the money he had been spending in Akasaka had been dirty.

After that, Togashi changed. Or maybe it was just that the real person he had always been finally came to the surface. The days he didn't go out gambling he spent lying about at home. When Yasuko complained, he became violent. He started drinking more, too, until it seemed as though he was always bleary-eyed drunk and looking for a fight.

Yasuko had no choice but to go back to work. But all the money she made, Togashi took from her by force. When she tried hiding it, he started turning up at the club on payday and taking the money before she could stash it away.

Misato learned to be terrified of her stepfather. She didn't like being left alone with him at home. At times she even came to the club where Yasuko worked just to avoid him.

Yasuko asked Togashi for a divorce, but he wouldn't hear of it. When she pressed harder, he started hitting her. Finally after months of anguish she turned to a lawyer recommended by one of her customers. The lawyer was able to get a reluctant Togashi to sign the divorce papers. Evidently, her husband realized that he had no chance of winning in court and that unless he agreed to go quietly, he might even end up having to pay alimony.

Yet divorce alone did not solve the problem. In the months that followed, Togashi had made a habit of dropping in on Yasuko and her daughter. His

affairs were all settled, he told her; he was devoting himself to his work.

Wouldn't she consider mending things between them? When Yasuko tried to avoid him, he started approaching Misato, sometimes even waiting outside her school.

When he came to Yasuko literally on his knees, she couldn't help but feel pity, even though she knew the whole thing was a performance. Perhaps a little bit of the affection she had once felt for him remained. She gave him a little money.

It was a mistake. Once Togashi got a taste, he started coming more frequently—always with the same groveling demeanor, yet growing increasingly shameless in his requests.

Eventually Yasuko switched clubs and moved to a new apartment. Even though she hated to do it, she also changed Misato's school. And Togashi stopped appearing. Then a year ago she moved again and took the job at Benten-tei. She had wholly believed she had rid herself of that walking catastrophe for good.

She couldn't let the Yonazawas hear about her ex-husband and his reappearance. She didn't want to worry them. Misato couldn't know about it either. She had to make sure, on her own, that he never came back to see her again. Yasuko glanced at the clock on the wall and gritted her teeth.

Just before six thirty, she left the shop and made her way to the restaurant. She found Togashi sitting near the window, smoking. There was a coffee cup on the table in front of him. Yasuko sat down, ordering hot cocoa from the waitress. She usually went for the soft drinks because of the free refills, but today she didn't intend to stay that long.

"Why?" she asked with a glare.

Togashi's mouth softened. "You're sure in a hurry."

"I've got a lot to do, so if you really have a good reason for coming here, out with it."

"Yasuko—" Togashi reached out for her hand where it lay on the table.

She drew it back quickly. His lip curled. "You're in a bad mood."

"Why shouldn't I be? You better have a good reason for stalking me like this."

"So antagonistic! I know I might not look it, but I'm serious about this."

"Serious about what?"

The waitress brought her cocoa. Yasuko picked it up and took a scalding sip. She wanted to drink it as fast as she could and get out of there.

"You're living by yourself, right?" Togashi asked, staring at her from under lowered brows.

"So? What business is it of yours?"

“Hard for a woman living by herself to raise a kid. She’s just going to cost more and more, you know. What do they pay you at that lunch shop, anyway? You can’t guarantee her future on that. Look, I want you to reconsider. Reconsider *us*. I’ve changed. I’m not like I was before.”

“What’s changed? You working?”

“I will. I’ve already found a job.”

“But you’re not working yet, are you.”

“I said I got a job. I’m supposed to start next month. It’s a new company, but once things get rolling, hey, you and your daughter could live the easy life.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. If you’re making all that money, I’m sure you won’t have any problem finding someone else to share it with. Just, please, *leave us be*.”

“Yasuko, I need you.”

Togashi reached out again, trying to touch her hand where she held the cup. “Don’t touch me!” She recoiled from his grasp; a little bit of the cocoa spilled as she moved, dripping on Togashi’s fingers. “Ow!” He jerked back his hand. When next he looked at her there was malice in his eyes.

Yasuko glared back. “You can’t just come here and give me the same old lines, not after what’s happened. How do you expect me to believe you?”

Like I said before, I haven't the slightest desire ever to be with you again, not the slightest. So just give it up. Okay?"

Yasuko stood. Togashi watched her in silence. Ignoring his gaze, she put the money for her cocoa down on the table and headed for the door.

As soon as she was outside the restaurant, she retrieved her bicycle from its parking spot and began to pedal away. She pictured Togashi running after her, sniveling, and it made her pedal faster. She went straight down Kiyosubashi Road, turning left after Kiyosu Bridge.

She had said everything there was to say, but she was sure she hadn't seen the last of him. He would show up at the shop again before long. He would stalk her, become a nuisance, maybe even make a scene. He might even show up at Misato's school. He would wait for Yasuko to give in, figuring that when she did, she would give him money.

Back at her apartment, Yasuko began making dinner. Dinner wasn't much more than warmed-up leftovers she had brought back from the shop, but even so, tonight cooking seemed like a difficult chore; every few moments her hands fell still as some horrible thought occurred to her, some scene played out in her mind.

Misato would be home soon. She was in the badminton club at school and usually spent time after practice talking with the other girls. She usually

made it back around seven o'clock.

The doorbell rang. Yasuko frowned and went to the door. It wouldn't be Misato. She had her own key.

"Yes?" Yasuko called without opening the door. "Who is it?"

There was a brief pause, and then, "It's me."

Yasuko didn't answer. Her vision dimmed. A terrible feeling crept up inside her. Togashi had already found their apartment. He had probably followed her from Benten-tei one night.

Togashi began knocking on the door. "Oi!"

She shook her head and undid the lock, leaving the door chain fastened.

The door opened about four inches, revealing Togashi's face right on the other side. He grinned. His teeth were yellow.

"Why are you here? Go away."

"I wasn't finished talking. Boy, short-tempered as always, aren't you?"

"I told you, we're done. Finished. Never again."

"You can at least listen to what I have to say. Just let me in."

"I won't. Go away."

"Hey, if you won't let me in I'll just wait here. Misato should be getting home anytime now. If I can't talk to you, I'll just have to talk to her."

"She's got nothing to do with this."

“So let me in.”

“I’ll call the police.”

“Go ahead. What’s wrong with a man coming to visit his ex-wife? The police will take my side. *You could at least let him in, ma’am*, they’d say.”

Yasuko bit her lip. She hated to admit it, but he was probably right. She had called the police before, and they had never done the slightest thing to help her. That, and she didn’t want to make a scene. Most tenants had a guarantor backing up their rent, but she had moved in here without one. One troubling rumor and she could be kicked out onto the street.

“Okay. But you have to leave right away.”

“Sure, of course,” Togashi said, a light of victory in his eyes.

Yasuko undid the chain and opened the door. Togashi stepped in, taking off his shoes as he glanced around the room. It was a small apartment, just a kitchen and two other rooms. The room closest to the door was done in the Japanese style and was wide enough for six tatami mats on the floor, with a doorway on the right side leading into the kitchen. There was an even smaller Japanese-style room toward the back, and beyond that, a sliding door opened onto a small balcony.

“Little small, little old, but not a bad place,” Togashi commented as he sat down, tucking his legs underneath the low, heated kotatsu table in the

middle of the room. “Hey, your kotatsu’s off,” he grumbled, fumbling around for the cord and switching it on.

“I know why you’re here.” Yasuko stood, looking down at him. “You can say whatever you like, but in the end, it’s all about money.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Togashi frowned, pulling a pack of Seven Stars from his jacket pocket. He lit one with a disposable lighter and started looking around more deliberately, noticing the lack of an ashtray for the first time. Getting up, he fished an empty can out of the trash and set it on the table. Sitting back down, he flicked his ashes into it.

“It means you’re only here to get money out of me. I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Well, if that’s how you want it to be, then I’m fine with that.”

“You won’t get a single yen out of me.”

He snorted. “That so?”

“Leave. And don’t come back.”

Just then, the door to the apartment flew open and Misato came in, still dressed in her school uniform. She stopped for moment when she saw the extra pair of shoes in the doorway. Then she saw who was there and a look of abject fear came over her face. The badminton racket dropped from her hand and clattered on the floor.

“Hello, Misato. It’s been a while. You’ve grown,” Togashi said, his voice

casual as could be.

Misato glanced at her mother, slipped out of her sneakers, and walked in without saying a word. She made a beeline for the room in the back and closed the sliding door behind her tightly.

Togashi waited a moment before speaking again. “I don’t know what you think this is all about, but all I want to do is make things good between us again. I don’t see what’s wrong in asking that.”

“Like I said, I’m not interested. Surely you didn’t think I would really say yes? You’re just using that as an excuse to bother me.”

That had to have hit the mark. But Togashi didn’t respond. Picking up the remote, he turned on the television. It was a cartoon show.

Yasuko sighed and went into the kitchen. She reached into the drawer by the sink and pulled out her wallet. Opening it, she took out two ten-thousand yen bills.

“Take it and leave,” she said, putting the money on top of the kotatsu.

“What’s this? I thought you weren’t giving me any money.”

“This is it. No more.”

“Well, I don’t need it.”

“You won’t leave until you get something. I’m sure you want more, but things aren’t easy for us either.”

Togashi looked at the bills, then up at Yasuko's face. "Fine, I'll leave.

And I really didn't come here for money. This was your idea."

Togashi took the bills and shoved them into his pocket. Then he pushed the rest of his cigarette butt inside the can and slid out from under the kotatsu. Rising, he turned, not toward the front door, but toward the back room. Moving quickly, he threw open the sliding door. Yasuko could hear Misato's yelp from the other side.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Yasuko shouted at his back.

"I can say hello to my stepdaughter, can't I?"

"She's no daughter or anything else of yours anymore."

"Give me a break. Fine. See you later, Misato," Togashi said, still peering into the room. The way he was standing blocked Misato from Yasuko's view, so she couldn't see how her daughter was reacting.

Finally, he turned back toward the front door. "She'll make a fine woman someday. I'm looking forward to it."

"What nonsense are you talking about?"

"It's not nonsense. She'll be making good money in three years.

Anybody would hire her."

"I want you to leave now."

"I'm going, I'm going. For today, at least."

“Don’t you dare come back.”

“Oh? Don’t think I can promise that.”

“You’d better not—”

“Listen, Yasuko,” Togashi said without turning around. “You’ll never get rid of me. You know why? Because you’ll give in before I will, every time.”

He chuckled quietly, and then leaned over to put on his shoes.

Yasuko, stunned into silence, heard something behind her. She turned to see Misato, still in her uniform, rushing past her. Holding something above her head, Misato came up behind Togashi. Yasuko, frozen in place, couldn’t move to stop her, or even to cry out. She could only watch, horrified, as Misato brought the object down, striking Togashi on the back of his head. All she heard was a dull thud, and then she saw Togashi collapse on the floor.

TWO

Then something fell from Misato’s hand. It was a copper flower vase—a thank-you gift the Yonazawas had handed out to customers when Benten-tei opened for business.

“Misato!” Yasuko screamed, finally finding her voice. She went over to her daughter.

Misato’s face was blank. She had become a statue; for one long moment

she stood unmoving. Then her eyes jerked open wide. She was looking past Yasuko—over her shoulder.

Yasuko whirled around to see Togashi staggering to his feet. He was grimacing, one hand pressed to the back of his head.

“Son of a...” Togashi grunted, his face red with hate. His eyes were fixed on Misato. He stumbled again, then took a lunging step toward her.

Yasuko kept herself between them. “No, stop!”

“Out of my way!” Togashi grabbed her arm and roughly shoved her aside. Yasuko reeled, hitting the wall hard and falling to her knees.

Misato turned to run, but Togashi grabbed her by the shoulders and brought all his weight to bear, pushing the girl down to the floor. Then he leapt astride her, grabbing her long hair and striking the side of her face with his right hand. “I’m gonna kill you, you little bitch!” he roared.

He is going to kill her, Yasuko thought. He really is going to kill her—

Still on her knees, Yasuko looked around frantically. The electrical cord snaking out from beneath the kotatsu caught her eye. She reached over, grabbed it, and yanked it out of the wall socket. The other end was still attached to a corner of the kotatsu top. She stood, making a loop out of the cord in her hand.

She stepped behind Togashi where he sat atop her daughter, hitting her

repeatedly, howling in blind anger. She slipped the loop over his head and pulled with all her strength.

Togashi gave a strangled yelp and fell over on his back. Realizing what was happening, he tried to work his fingers under the cord, but Yasuko kept pulling. This man was a curse on her and her daughter. She had to get him off her daughter. She had to be rid of him. If she let go now she might never get another chance.

But Yasuko had only a fraction of her ex-husband's physical strength.

The cord slipped in her hands as they struggled. Meanwhile, Misato had scrambled out from beneath the man when he toppled over. Now she joined in the fight, clawing at Togashi's fingers, pulling them away from the cord around his neck. She straddled his chest, pinning him to the floor.

"Quick, mom! Quick!" Misato shouted.

There was no time for hesitation. Yasuko screwed her eyes shut and pulled as hard as she could. Her heart pounded in her chest. She could hear the blood surge inside her as she drew the garrote tighter and tighter.

She could not have said how long she stood like that, straining blindly, desperately. Finally, a faint voice calling "*Mom, Mom,*" began to penetrate her mental fog and brought her back to her senses.

Slowly Yasuko opened her eyes, the cord still tightly gripped in her

hands.

Togashi was right in front of her face. His open eyes were blank, the color of slate, glaring out into nothingness. His face was a sullen blue, suffused with blood. The cord had left a dark line across his neck.

Togashi wasn't moving. A line of drool hung from his lips. His nose ran.

Yasuko yelped and dropped the cord from her hands. Togashi's head hit the tatami with a thud. He still showed no sign of life. Misato gingerly slid off him and onto the floor. The skirt of her school uniform was a wrinkled mess. She leaned back against the wall. For a moment mother and daughter sat in silence, their eyes glued to the unmoving man. The buzzing of the fluorescent light in the kitchen sounded loud in Yasuko's ears.

"What do we do?" Yasuko said, her voice barely a whimper. Her mind was blank. "I killed him."

"Mom..."

Yasuko looked up at her daughter. Misato's face was white, but her eyes were red, and dried tear tracks ran down her cheeks. She must've been crying, though Yasuko couldn't imagine when she'd had the time.

She looked again at Togashi. She was torn, half wanting him to spring back to life and half wanting him to stay dead. Not that it mattered what she wanted. From the looks of him, he wasn't coming back.

“*He* did this. It was *his* fault.” Misato drew up her legs, hugging her knees to her chest. She buried her face between them and began to whimper.

“What do we do—?” Yasuko began. Then the doorbell rang, and her whole body jerked with surprise.

Misato looked up, her cheeks glistening. Their eyes met, asking each other, *Who could it be?*

Then there was a knock on the door, and a man’s voice. “Ms. Hanaoka?” It was a voice she’d heard before, though she couldn’t for the life of her place it. Yasuko was fixed to the spot, paralyzed. She and Misato simply stared at each other.

Knock, knock.

“Ms. Hanaoka. Ms. Hanaoka?”

Whoever was outside knew they were home. One of them would have to respond. But how could they open the door when inside was ... this?

“Go to the back room. Close the door, and don’t come out,” Yasuko ordered Misato in a hushed voice. Her brain was slowly regaining its function.

Another knock at the door.

Yasuko took a deep breath. *Nothing happened. Just another ordinary*

evening. “Yes?” she called, acting the part she knew she had to play. The part of a woman who hadn’t just strangled her ex-husband to death on the living room floor. “Who is it?”

“Oh—it’s me, Ishigami. From next door.”

Yasuko started. Who knew what kind of noise they’d been making? Of course their neighbors would have ample cause for suspicion. Ishigami was checking in on them.

“Just a moment please,” Yasuko called back, trying to sound calm, and entirely unsure of her success.

Yasuko looked around the room. Misato had retreated to her room and closed the sliding door. Yasuko then looked at Togashi’s body. She would have to do something about that.

The kotatsu table was at an angle to the wall, pulled out of its usual place. She dragged the table a few more feet until it just covered the body; the thick quilt hanging down from its sides hid Togashi from sight. It was an odd placement for a kotatsu, but there was nothing she could do about that now.

Yasuko checked to see that her clothes were in order and stepped down into the entranceway. Then she noticed Togashi’s scuffed shoes lying there. She shoved them out of sight.

Then, careful not to make any noise, she gently slid off the door chain.

The door was unlocked. She patted her chest to stop her heart from fluttering.

Opening the door at last, she found Ishigami's large round face hovering just outside. His narrow eyes stared in at Yasuko. There was no discernable expression on his face; it gave Yasuko the chills.

"Um, er, can I help you?" Yasuko said, managing a smile, even as she felt the muscles in her forehead twitch.

"I heard some noise," Ishigami said, his face still impossible to read.

"Did something happen?"

"Oh, no, nothing," she replied, shaking her head vigorously. "S-Sorry to have bothered you."

"Well, if you're sure it's nothing," Ishigami replied, his eyes wandering toward the room behind her.

Yasuko's skin was on fire. She said the first thing that came to mind. "It was a bug. A cockroach."

"A cockroach?"

"Yes. A cockroach on the wall, and I—my daughter and I were trying to get it. I'm afraid we made quite a ruckus..."

"Did you kill it?"

Yasuko's face hardened. "What?"

"The cockroach. Did you kill it?"

"Yes ... yes, we did," Yasuko said, bowing her head with each word.

"Killed it good. Everything's fine. Thanks."

"I see. Well, if there's ever anything I can help with, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you very much. I'm sorry. Really sorry. For all the noise."

Yasuko bowed her head deeply and shut the door. Then she locked it. Only when she'd heard Ishigami return to his own apartment and shut the door behind him did she allow herself a deep breath. Then she crouched down, putting her hands to the floor to keep from toppling over.

She heard the sliding door open behind her. "Mom?"

After a long moment Yasuko stood shakily. She glanced at the bulge in the kotatsu cover and a new wave of despair came crashing down on her.

"We didn't have a choice," she said at last.

"What are we going to do?" Misato asked, looking up at her mother.

"What can we do but call the police?"

"You're going to turn yourself in?"

"You have a better idea? He's dead. I killed him."

"But what'll happen to you?"

“I don’t know.” Yasuko pulled back her disheveled hair. She realized that she must have looked frightful. She wondered what the mathematician next door had thought. Not that it mattered.

“Will you go to jail?” Misato asked.

“Well, I suppose so, yes.” Yasuko’s lips shaped a smile. She could already feel herself giving up. “I did kill him, after all.”

Misato shook her head violently. “But that’s not fair!”

“Why not?”

“It’s not your fault. It was all *his* fault. He was gone, history! But he kept coming back, tormenting you, and me ... You shouldn’t have to go to jail for him.”

“Murder is murder. Everything else is just details.”

Oddly enough, Yasuko could feel her own feelings coming under control as she explained the situation to Misato. She could almost be coolheaded about the whole affair. And as soon as she began to calm down, she started wondering if it was really true that she had no other option. She hadn’t wanted Misato to grow up the daughter of a nightclub hostess. A murderer’s daughter had to be worse. But she couldn’t think of a way out. Still, even if there was no getting around the fact of what had happened, at least she could try to make both of them look as good as possible in the eye of the

public.

Yasuko saw the cordless phone where it lay in a corner of the room. She went over and picked it up.

“Mom, no!” Misato darted across the room, trying to take the receiver from her mother’s hand.

“Let go!”

“No, you can’t!” Misato shouted, grabbing Yasuko’s wrist. She had a strong grip, probably from those hours of badminton practice after school.

“Let go of me, *please*.”

“No, Mom, I won’t let you do it. I’d rather turn myself in.”

“Nonsense! What are you talking about?”

Misato shot her mother a defiant look. “*I* hit him first. You were just trying to save me from him. And even after it all started, I helped. I killed him, too.”

Yasuko’s body stiffened, and her grip on the phone weakened. Misato snatched it from her hand. Hugging it to herself she went to the far corner of the room, turning her back on her mother.

Yasuko thought furiously. What would the police do? Would they believe her if she said she’d killed Togashi by herself? Would they just take her word for it?

No, the police would make a thorough investigation. She had seen enough police dramas on television to know that they would want evidence—and they would use every means at their disposal to get it. They would question the neighbors, there would be a forensics team, and then—Yasuko's vision dimmed. The police could threaten her all they wanted, she would never tell them what Misato had done, she was sure of that. But what if their investigation revealed the truth anyway? It would all be over. She wondered if there was some way she could make it look like she had killed him by herself, but she soon discarded the idea. If she tried anything of the sort, they'd see right through her amateurish efforts.

I have to protect Misato. The girl had had it so tough, growing up with a mother like her. Yasuko would gladly give her own life if it meant Misato would not have to suffer anymore.

So what should I do? Is there anything I can do?

A curious sound shook Yasuko out of her thoughts. Gradually, she realized it was the phone, ringing as Misato clutched it. Misato's eyes went wide and she looked at her mother.

Yasuko quietly extended her hand. Misato bit her lip, then slowly handed over the phone.

Yasuko steadied her breath, then lifted the receiver to her ear and pressed

the talk button. “Yes? Hello? Hanaoka speaking.”

“Um, hi. It’s Ishigami, from next door.”

Yasuko stared stupidly at the phone. *It’s that teacher again. What could he possibly want this time?* “Yes? Can I help you?”

“Erm, well, actually, I was wondering what you were going to do.”

Yasuko had no idea what he meant. “I’m sorry, about what?”

“Just, well—” Ishigami paused before continuing. *“If you were going to call the police, well that’s fine, I’ll say nothing about it. But if you weren’t, then I was thinking there might be something I could do to help.”*

“What?” Yasuko’s mouth hung open. What the hell was he saying?

“How about I come over there now,” Ishigami said, his voice hushed over the phone. *“Would that be okay?”*

“What? No, I don’t think—no, that would not be okay.” Yasuko stammered, her body breaking out in a cold sweat.

“Ms. Hanaoka,” Ishigami went on. *“It’s very difficult to dispose of a body. A woman can’t do it by herself.”*

Yasuko was speechless.

He must have overheard. He must’ve been able to hear her talking with Misato. Maybe he had been listening to everything—her argument with Togashi, the struggle, everything.

It's over, she thought, lowering her head. There was no escape now. She would have to turn herself in. She would just have to try to make sure that Misato's involvement never came to light.

"Ms. Hanaoka, are you listening to me?"

"Um, yes. I'm listening."

"Can I come over then?"

"But I just told you—" Yasuko stopped and looked at her daughter.

Misato stared back at her, fear and confusion on her face. *She must really be wondering who I'm talking to.*

If Ishigami had been listening to everything from the neighboring apartment, then he knew Misato was involved in the murder. And if he were to tell the police what he knew ...

Yasuko swallowed. "Right. Okay. There is something I wanted to ask your help with anyway. Please do come over."

"Be right there," came Ishigami's reply.

"Who was it?" Misato asked as soon as Yasuko had hung up.

"The teacher from next door. Mr. Ishigami."

"Why? How did he—"

"I'll explain later. You go to your room, and close the door. Quickly!"

Still looking confused, Misato went into the back room again. At almost