

HARD RAIN
a thriller by Barry Eisler

*Evening cherry blossoms:
I slip the inkstone back into my kimono
this one last time.*

-- death poem of the poet Kaisho, 1914

PART I

*Had I not known
that I was dead
already
I would have mourned
my loss of life.*

-- last words of Ota Dokan, scholar of military arts and poet, 1486

Chapter 1

Once you get past the overall irony of the situation, you realize that killing a guy in the middle of his own health club has a lot to recommend it.

The target was a *yakuza*, an iron freak named Ishihara who worked out every day in a gym he owned in Roppongi, one of Tokyo's entertainment districts. Tatsu had told me the hit had to look like natural causes, like they always do, so I was glad to be working in a venue where it was far from unthinkable that someone might keel over from a fatal aneurism induced by exertion, or suffer an unlucky fall onto a steel bar, or undergo some other tragic mishap while using one of the complicated exercise machines.

One of these eventualities might even be immortalized in the warnings corporate lawyers would insist on placing on the next generation of exercise equipment, to notify the public of yet another unnatural use for which the machine was not intended and of which the manufacturer would have to remain blameless. Over the years, my work has made me the anonymous recipient of at least two such legal encomia – one on a bridge traversing the polluted waters of the Sumida River, in which a certain politician drowned in 1982 (“Warning – Do Not Climb On These Bars”); another, a decade later, following the aquatic electrocution of an unusually diligent banker, on the packaging of hair dryers (“Warning – Do Not Use While Bathing”).

The health club was also convenient because I wouldn't have to worry about fingerprints. In Japan, where costumes are a national pastime, a weightlifter wouldn't pump iron without wearing stylish padded gloves any more than a politician would take a bribe in his underwear. It was a warm early spring for Tokyo, portending, they said, a

fine cherry blossom season, and where else but at a gym could a man in gloves have gone unnoticed?

In my business, going unnoticed is half the game. People put out signals – body language, gait, clothes, facial expression, posture, attitude, speech, mannerisms – that can tell you where they're from, what they do, who they are. Most importantly, *do they fit in*. Because if you don't fit in, the target will spot you, and after that you won't be able to get close enough to do it right. Or the rare uncorrupt cop will spot you, and you'll have some explaining to do. Or a countersurveillance team will spot you, and then – congratulations! – the target will be you.

But if you're attentive, you begin to understand that the identifying signals are a science, not an art. You watch, you imitate, you acquire. Eventually, you can shadow different targets through different societal ecosystems, remaining anonymous in all of them.

Anonymity wasn't easy for me in Japan when my parentage was a matter of public record and schoolyard taunts. But today, you wouldn't spot the Caucasian in my face unless someone tipped you off that it was there to be found. My American mother wouldn't have minded that. She had always wanted me to fit in in Japan, and was glad that my father's Japanese features had prevailed in that initial genetic struggle for dominance. And the plastic surgery I had undergone when I returned to Japan after my fling with U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam largely completed the job that chance and nature had begun.

The story my signals would tell the *yakuza* was simple. He'd only begun seeing me at his gym recently, but I was already obviously in shape. So I wasn't some middle-

aged guy who'd decided to take up weightlifting to try and regain a lost college-era physique. The more likely explanation would be that I worked for a company that had transferred me to Tokyo, and, if they had sprung for digs near Roppongi, maybe in Minami-Aoyama or Azabu, I must be someone reasonably important and well compensated. That I was apparently into body building at all at this stage in my life probably meant affairs with young women, for whom a youthful physique might ameliorate the unavoidable emotional consequences of sleeping with an older man in what at root would be little more than an exchange of sex and the illusion of immortality for Ferragamo handbags and the other implicit currencies of such arrangements. All of which the *yakuza* would understand, and even respect.

In fact, my recent appearance at the *yakuza*'s gym had nothing to do with a company transfer – it was more like a business trip. After all, I was in Tokyo just to do a job. When the job was finished, I would leave. I'd done some things to generate animosity when I'd been living here, and the relevant parties might still be looking for me, even after I'd been away for a year, so a short stay was all I could sensibly afford.

Tatsu had given me a dossier on the *yakuza* a month earlier, when he'd found me and persuaded me to take the job. From the contents, I would have concluded that the target was just mob muscle, but I knew he must be more than that if Tatsu wanted him eliminated. I hadn't asked. I only wanted the particulars that would help me get close. The rest was irrelevant.

The dossier had included the *yakuza*'s cell phone number. I had fed it to Harry, who, compulsive hacker that he was, had long since penetrated the cellular network control centers of Japan's three telco providers. Harry's computers were monitoring the

movements of the *yakuza*'s cell phone within the network. Any time the phone got picked up by the tower that covered the area around the *yakuza*'s health club, Harry paged me.

Tonight, the page had come at just after eight o'clock, while I was reading in my room at the New Otani hotel in Akasaka-Mitsuke. The club closed at eight, I knew, so if the *yakuza* was working out there after hours there was a good possibility that he'd be there alone. What I'd been waiting for.

My workout gear was already in a bag, and I was out the door within minutes. I caught a cab a slight distance from the hotel, not wanting a doorman to hear or remember where I might be going, and five minutes later I exited at the corner of Roppongi-dori and Gaienhigashi-dori in Roppongi. I hated to use such a direct route because doing so afforded me limited opportunity to ensure that I wasn't being followed, but I had only a little time to pull this off the way I'd planned and decided it was worth the risk.

I had been watching the *yakuza* for over a month now, and knew his routines. I'd learned that he liked to vary the times of his workouts, sometimes arriving at the gym early in the morning, sometimes at night. Probably he assumed the resulting unpredictability would make him hard to get to.

He was half right. Unpredictability is the key to being a hard target, but the concept applies to both time and place. Half-measures like this guy's will protect you from some of the people some of the time, but they won't save you for long from someone like me.

Strange, how people can take adequate, even strong security measures in some respects, while leaving themselves vulnerable in others. Like double-locking the front door and leaving the windows wide open.

Sometimes the phenomenon is caused by fear. Fear not so much of the requirements, but rather of the consequences of life as a hard target. Seriously protecting yourself requires the annihilation of ties with society, ties that most people need the way they need oxygen. You give up friends, family, romance. You walk through the world like a ghost, detached from the living around you. If you were to die in, say, a bus accident, you'd wind up buried in an obscure municipal graveyard, just another John Doe, no flowers, no mourners, hell, no mourning. It's natural, probably even desirable, to be afraid of all this.

Other times there's a form of denial at work. Circuitous routes, extensive security checks, an ongoing internal dialogue consisting of *If I were trying to get to me, how would I do it?* all require a deep acceptance of the notion that there are people out there who have both the motive and the means to cut short your time on Earth. This notion is innately uncomfortable for the human psyche, to the point that it produces enormous stress even for soldiers in battle. A lot of guys, the first time they come under close-range fire, they're shocked. "Why's he trying to kill *me*?" they're asking themselves. "What did I ever do to him?"

Think about it. Ever look in a closet or under the bed, when you're alone in the house, to ensure that an intruder isn't hiding there? Now, if you really believed that the Man in the Black Ski Mask was lurking in those places, would you behave the same

way? Of course not. But it's more comfortable to believe the danger only in the abstract, and to act on it only half-heartedly. That's denial.

Finally, and most obviously, there is laziness. Who has the time or energy to inspect the family car for improvised explosive devices before every drive? Who can afford a two-hour, roundabout route to get to a place that could have been reached directly in ten minutes? Who wants to pass up a restaurant or bar just because the only seats available face the wall, not the entrance?

Rhetorical questions, but I know how Crazy Jake would have answered. *The living*, he would have said. *And the ones who intend to go on that way.*

Which leads to an easy rationalization, one that I'm sure is common to people who have taken lives the way I have. *If he'd really wanted to live, the rationalization goes, I wouldn't have been able to get to him. He wouldn't have permitted himself that weakness, the one that did him in.*

The *yakuza*'s weakness was his addiction to weights. Who knows what fueled it – a history of childhood bullying that made him want to appear visibly strong afterward, an attempt to overcome a feeling of inadequacy born of being naturally slighter of build than Caucasians, some suppressed homoeroticism like the one that drove Mishima. Maybe some of the same impulses that had led him to become a gangster to begin with.

His obsession had nothing to do with health, of course. In fact, the guy was an obvious steroid abuser. His neck was so thick it looked as though he could slide a tie up over his head without having to loosen the knot, and he sported acne so severe that the club's stark incandescent lighting, designed to show off to maximum effect the rips and cuts its members had developed in their bodies, cast small shadows over the pocked

landscape of his face. His testicles were probably the size of raisins, his blood pressure likely rampaging through an overworked heart.

I'd also seen him explode into the kind of abrupt, unprovoked violence that is another symptom of steroid abuse. One night, someone I hadn't seen before, no doubt one of the club's civilian members who liked the location and thought that rubbing elbows with reputed gangsters made them tougher by osmosis, started removing some of the numerous iron plates that were weighing down the bar the *yakuza* had been using to bench-press. The *yakuza* had walked away from the station, probably to take a break, and the new guy must have mistakenly assumed this meant he was through. The guy was pretty sizable himself, his colorful spandex sleeveless top showing off a weightlifter's chest and arms.

Someone probably should have warned him. But the club's membership consisted primarily of *chinpira* – low level young *yakuza* and wannabe punks – not exactly good Samaritan types who were interested in helping their fellow man. Anyway, you have to be at least mildly stupid to start disassembling a bar like the one the *yakuza* was using without looking around for permission first. There were probably a hundred and fifty kilos on it, maybe more.

Someone nudged the *yakuza* and pointed. The *yakuza*, who had been squatting, reared up and bellowed, "*Orya!*" loud enough to vibrate the plate glass in the front of the rectangular room. *What the fuck!*

Everyone looked up, as startled as if there had been an explosion – even the new guy who had been so clueless just an instant earlier. Still bellowing expletives, the

yakuza strode directly to the bench press station, doing a good job of using his voice, either by instinct or design, to disorient his victim.

Everything about the *yakuza* – his words, his tone, his movement and posture, screamed *Attack!* But the man was too frozen, either by fear or denial, to move off the line of assault. And although he was holding a ten-kilo iron plate with edges considerably harder than the *yakuza*'s cranium, the man did nothing but drop his mouth open, perhaps in surprise, perhaps in inchoate and certainly futile apology.

The *yakuza* blasted into him like a rhino, his shoulder driving into the man's stomach. I saw the man try to brace for the impact, but again he failed to move off the line of attack and his attempt was largely useless. The *yakuza* drove him backward into the wall, then unleashed a flurry of crude punches to his head and neck. The man, in shock now and running on autopilot, dropped the plate and managed to raise his arms to ward off a few of the blows, but the *yakuza*, still bellowing, slapped the attempted blocks out of the way and kept on punching. I saw one of his shots connect to the left side of the man's neck, to the real estate over the carotid sinus, and the man began to crumble as his nervous system overcompensated from the shock of the blow by reducing blood pressure to the brain. The *yakuza*, feet planted widely as though he had an axe and was splitting logs, continued to hammer at the top of his victim's head and neck. The man fell to the floor, but retained enough consciousness to curl up and protect himself to some extent from the hail of kicks that followed.

Huffing and swearing, the *yakuza* bent and caught the prostrate man's right ankle between an enormous bicep and forearm. For a moment, I thought he was going to apply

a jujitsu leglock and try to break something. Instead, he straightened and proceeded to drag the man's prone form to the club's entrance and out into the street.

He returned a moment later, alone, and, after taking a moment to catch his breath, resumed his rightful place on the bench without looking at anyone else in the room. Everyone returned to what they were doing: his affiliates, because they didn't care; the civilians, because they were unnerved. It was as though nothing had happened, although the silence in the club indicated that indeed something had.

A part of my mind that's always running in the background logged what I saw as the *yakuza*'s assets: raw strength, experience with violence, familiarity with principles of continuous attack. Under weaknesses, I placed lack of self-control, shortness of breath after a brief and one-sided fight, relatively minimal damage caused despite ferocity of assault.

Unless he was a borderline sociopath, which was statistically unlikely, I knew the *yakuza* would now be feeling slightly uneasy about what people must have made of his outburst. I took the opportunity to stroll over to the bench-press station and ask him if he needed a spot.

"*Warui na,*" he thanked me, grateful, I knew, for the comfort this simple interaction afforded him.

"*Iya,*" I replied. It's nothing. I stood over him and helped him get the bar in the air. I noted that he was moving a hundred and fifty-five kilos. He managed two repetitions, with some assistance from me on the second. He would still be fully adrenalized from his recent altercation, and I made a mental note of the limits of his strength at this exercise.

I helped him guide the bar back onto the uprights, then whistled quietly through my teeth in slightly theatrical deference to his power. I moved to the foot of the bench as he sat up and told him that if he needed another spot, he should just ask me. He nodded his head in gruff thanks and I began to turn away.

I paused as though considering whether to add something, then turned back to him. “That guy should have checked to see if you were done with this station,” I said in Japanese. “Some people have no manners. You taught him a lesson.”

He nodded again, pleased at my astute assessment of the important social service he had provided in pulverizing some harmless idiot, and I knew that he would be comfortable calling on me, his new friend, from time to time when he needed a spot.

Like tonight, I hoped. I moved quickly down Gaienhigashi-dori, easing past pedestrians on the crowded sidewalk, ignoring the cacophony of traffic and sound trucks and touts, using the chrome and glass around me to gauge whether there was anyone to my rear trying to keep up. I turned right just before the Roi Roppongi building, then right again onto the club’s street, where I paused behind a thicket of parked bicycles, my back to the incongruous pink exterior of a Starbucks coffee shop, waiting to see who might be trailing in my wake. A few groups of young partygoers drifted by, caught up in the urgent business of entertaining themselves and failing to notice the man standing quietly in the shadows. No one set off my radar. After a few minutes, I made my way to the club.

The facility occupied the ground floor of a gray commercial building hemmed in by rusting fire escapes and choked with high-tension wires that clung to the structure’s façade like rotting vegetation. Across from it was a parking lot crowded by Mercedeses

with darkened windows and high-performance tires, the status symbols of the country's elite and of its criminals, each aping the other, comfortably sharing the pleasures of the night in Roppongi's tawdry demimonde. The street itself was illuminated only by the indifferent glow of a single arched lamplight, its base festooned with flyers advertising the area's innumerable sexual services, in the shadows of its own luminescence looking like the elongated neck of some antediluvian bird shedding diseased and curling feathers.

The shades were drawn behind the club's plate-glass windows, but I spotted the *yakuza*'s anodized aluminum Harley-Davidson V-Rod parked in front, surrounded by commuter bicycles like a shark amidst pilot fish. Just past the windows was the entrance to the building. I tried the door, but it was locked.

I backed up a few steps to the club windows and tapped on the glass. A moment later the lights went off inside. *Nice*, I thought. He had cut the lights so he could peek through the shades without being seen from outside. I waited, knowing he was watching me and checking the street.

The lights went back on, and a moment later the *yakuza* appeared in the entranceway to the building. He was wearing gray sweatpants and a black cut-away A-shirt, along with the obligatory weightlifting gloves. Obviously in the middle of a workout.

He opened the door, his eyes searching the street for danger, failing to spot it right there in front of him.

"Shimatterun dayo," he told me. Club's closed.

“I know,” I said in Japanese, my hands up, palms forward in a placating gesture. “I was hoping someone might be here. I was going to come by earlier but got held up. You think I could squeeze in a quick one? Just while you’re here, no longer than that.”

He hesitated, then shrugged and turned to go back inside. I followed him into the hallway, then into the club.

“How much longer have you got to go?” I asked, dropping my gear bag and changing out of my unobtrusive khakis, blue oxford-cloth shirt, and navy blazer. I had already slipped on the gloves, as I always did before coming to the club, but the *yakuza* hadn’t noticed this detail. “So I can time my workout.”

He walked over to the squat station. “Forty-five minutes, maybe an hour,” he said, getting into position under the weight.

Squats. What he usually did when he was finished bench pressing. *Shit.*

I slipped into shorts and a sweatshirt, then warmed up with some pushups and other calisthenics while he did his sets of squats. The warm-up might actually be useful, I realized, depending on the extent of his struggles. A small advantage, but I don’t give anything away for free.

When he was through, I asked, “Already done benching?”

“*Aa.*” Yeah.

“How much you put up tonight?”

He shrugged, but I detected a slight puffing of his chest that told me his vanity had been kindled.

“Not so much. Hundred and forty kilos. Could have done more, but with that much weight, it’s better to have someone spot you.”

Perfect. “Hey, I’ll spot you.”

“Nah, I’m already done.”

“C’mon, do another set. It inspires me. What are you putting up, twice your body weight?” My underestimate was deliberate.

“More.”

“Shit, *more* than twice your body weight? That’s what I’m talking about, I’m not even close to that. Do me a favor, do one more set, it’ll motivate me. I’ll spot you, fair enough?”

He hesitated, then shrugged and started walking over to the bench-press station.

The bar was already set up with the hundred and forty kilos he’d been using earlier. “Think you can handle a hundred and sixty?” I asked, my tone doubtful.

He looked at me, and I could tell from his eyes that his ego had engaged. “I can handle it.”

“Okay, this I’ve got to see,” I said, pulling two ten-kilo plates off the weight tree and sliding them onto the ends of the bar. I stood behind the bench and gripped the bar about shoulder-width with both hands. “Let me know when you’re ready.”

He sat at the foot of the bench, his shoulders hunched forward, and rotated his neck from side to side. He swung his arms back and forth and I heard a series of short, forceful exhalations. Then he lay back and took hold of the bar.

“Give me a lift on three,” he said.

I nodded.

There were several additional sharp exhalations. Then: “One... two... three!”

I helped him get the bar into the air and steady it over his chest. He was staring at the bar as though enraged by it, his chin sunk into his neck in preparation for the effort.

Then he let it drop, controlling its descent but allowing enough momentum to ensure a good bounce off his massive chest. Two thirds of the way up, the bar almost stopped, suspended between the drag of gravity and the power of his steroid-fueled muscles, but it continued its shaky ascent until his elbows were straightened. His arms were trembling from the effort. There was no way he had another one in him.

“One more, one more,” I urged. “C’mon, you can do it.”

There was a pause, and I prepared to try some fresh exhortations. But he was only mentally preparing for the effort. He took three quick breaths, then dropped the bar to his chest. It rose a few centimeters from the impact, then a few more from the northward shove that followed, but a second later it stopped and began to move inexorably downward.

“*Tetsudatte kure,*” he grunted. Help. But calmly, expecting my immediate assistance.

The bar continued downward and settled against his chest. “*Oi, tanomu,*” he said again, more sharply this time.

I pushed downward instead.

His eyes popped open, searching for mine.

Between the weight of the bar and plates and the pressure I was delivering, he was now struggling with almost two hundred kilos.

I focused on the bar and his torso, but in my peripheral vision I saw his eyes bulging in confusion, then fear. He made no sound. I continued to concentrate on the clinical downward pressure.

With his teeth clenched shut, his chin almost buried in his neck, he threw everything he had into moving the bar. In extremis he was actually able to get the weight off his chest. I hooked a foot under the horizontal supports at the bottom of the bench and used the leverage to add additional pressure to the bar, and again it settled against his chest.

I felt a tremor in the weights as his arms began to shake with exertion. Again the bar moved slightly north.

Suddenly I was struck by the reek of feces. His sympathetic nervous system, in desperation, was shutting down nonessential bodily activities, including sphincter control, and diverting all available energy to his muscles.

The rally lasted only another moment. Then his arms began to shake more violently, and I felt the bar moving downward, more deeply into his chest. There was a slight hissing as his breath was driven out through his nostrils and pursed lips. I felt his eyes on my face but kept my attention on his torso and the bar. Still he made no sound.

Seconds went by, then more. His position didn't change. I waited. His skin began to blue. I waited longer.

Finally, I eased off the pressure I had been putting on the bar and released my grip.

His eyes were still on me, but they no longer perceived. I stepped back, out of their sightless ambit, and paused to observe the scene. It looked like what it almost was:

a weightlifting addict, alone and late at night, tries to handle more than he can, gets caught under the bar, suffocates and dies there. A bizarre accident.

I changed back into my street clothes. Picked up my bag, moved to the door. A series of cracks rang out behind me, like the snaps of dried tinder. I turned to look one last time, realizing as I did that the sound was of his ribs giving way. No question, he was done. Only his convulsive grip on the bar remained, as though the fingers refused to believe what the body had already accepted.

I stepped into the dark hallway and waited until the street was clear. Then I eased out onto the sidewalk and into the shadows around me.