

THE DETACHMENT

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Dedication

To novelists J.A. Konrath and M.J. Rose, for seeing the way and blazing the trail.

Behind the ostensible government sits enthroned an invisible government owing no allegiance and acknowledging no responsibility to the people.

—Theodore Roosevelt

We're entering an era of the educated establishment, in which government acts to create a stable—and often oligarchic—framework for capitalist endeavor.

—David Brooks

My view is that Washington and the regulators are there to serve the banks.

—Chairman of the House Banking Committee Spencer Bachus

All governments lie.

—I.F. Stone

PART 1

...of course, we can always get lucky. Stunning events from outside can providentially awaken the enterprise from its growing torpor, and demonstrate the need for reversal, as the devastating Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 so effectively aroused the U.S. from its soothing dreams of permanent neutrality.

—Michael Ledeen

The only chance we have as a country right now is for Osama bin Laden to deploy and detonate a major weapon in the United States.

—Michael Scheurer, former head of the CIA's Bin Laden Unit

The government in a revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny.

—Robespierre

Chapter 1

I hadn't killed anyone in almost four years. But all good things come to an end, eventually.

It was good to be living in Tokyo again. The face of the city had changed, as it continuously does, and the great Touhoku quake and tsunami continued to make their presence known in the form of dimmed lights and weakened summer air conditioning, along with an atmosphere newly balanced between anxiety and determination, but in its eternal, essential energy, Tokyo is immutable. Yes, during my sojourn in safer climes, there had occurred an unfortunate profusion of Starbucks and Dean & DeLuca, along with their innumerable imitators, but the havens that mattered remained impervious to this latest infestation. There was still jazz at Body & Soul in Minami Aoyama, where no seat is too far from the stage for a quiet word of thanks to the band members at the end of the evening; coffee at Café de l'Ambre in Ginza, where even as he nears his hundredth birthday, proprietor Sekiguchi-sensei arrives daily to roast his own beans, as he has for the last six decades; a tippie at Campbelltown Loch in Yurakucho, where, if you can secure one of the eight seats in his hidden basement establishment, owner and bartender Nakamura-san will recommend one of his rare bottlings to help melt away, however briefly, the world you came to him to forget.

My sleep was sometimes restless, though I told myself no one was looking for me anymore. But I knew if they were, they'd start with a place I'd been known to frequent. Unless you had unlimited manpower, you couldn't use the bars or coffee houses or jazz clubs I liked. There were too many of them in Tokyo, for one thing, and my visits would be too hard to predict. You might wait for months, maybe forever, and though there are harder surveillance duty stations than the oases haunted by Tokyo's roving night denizens, eventually you'd start to stand out, especially if you were a foreigner. Meanwhile, whoever was paying would be getting impatient for results.

Which made the Kodokan a unique vulnerability. I'd trained there for nearly twenty-five years before powerful enemies forced me to flee the city, enemies I had, by one means or another, managed to outlast. Judo at the Kodokan had been my only indulgence of anything like a routine, a pattern that could be used to fix me in time and place. Going back to it might have been my way of reassuring myself that my enemies really were all dead. Or it could have been a way of saying *come out, come out, wherever you are*.

Randori, or free training, was held in the *daidojo*, a modern, two-storied space of four connected competition zones open to bleachers ringing the area a floor above. On any given night, as many as two hundred *judoka* wearing the traditional white *judogi*, male and female, Japanese and foreign, buzz-cut college stars and grizzled veterans, take to the training hall, and the vast space is filled with cries of commitment and grunts of defense; earnest discussions of tactics and techniques in mutually incomprehensible tongues; the drum beat of bodies colliding with the *tatami* and the cymbal slaps of palms offsetting the impact with *ukemi* landings. I've always loved the cacophony of the *daidojo*. I've stood in it when it's empty, too, and its solemn daytime stillness, its enormous sense of patience

and potential, has its own magic, but it's the sound of evening training that imbues the space with purpose, that brings the dormant hall to life.

On training nights the bleachers are usually empty, though nor is it unusual to see a few people sitting here and there and watching the *judoka* practicing below: a student, waiting for a friend; a parent, wondering whether to enroll a child; a martial arts enthusiast, making a pilgrimage to the birthplace of modern judo. So I wasn't unduly concerned one night at the sight of two extra large Caucasians sitting together in the stands, thickly muscled arms crossed over the railing, leaning forward like carrion birds on a telephone line. I logged them the way I reflexively log anything out of place in my environment, giving no sign that I had particularly noticed them or particularly cared, and continued *randori* with the partner I happened to be training with, a stocky kid with a visiting college team who I hadn't yet let score against me.

My play had reached a level at which for the most part I was able to anticipate an opponent's attack in the instant before he launched it, subtly adjust my position accordingly, and frustrate his plan without his knowing exactly why he'd been unable to execute. After a while of this invisible interference, often an opponent would try to force an opening, or muscle a throw, or would otherwise over-commit himself, at which point, depending on my mood, I might throw him. Other times, I was content merely to flow from counter to counter, preventing battles rather than fighting them. A different approach than had characterized my younger days at the Kodokan, when my style had more to do with aggression and bravado than it did with elegance and efficiency. As the offspring of a Japanese father and Caucasian American mother, I once wore a heavy chip on my shoulder. My appearance was always Japanese enough, but appearances have almost nothing to do with prejudice in Japan. In fact, the society's worst animus is reserved for ethnic Koreans, and *burakumin*—descendants of leather workers—and those others guilty of hiding their impurities behind seemingly Japanese faces. Of course, my formative years are long behind me now. These days, with my dark hair increasingly shot through with gray, I no longer pine for a country that might welcome me as its own. It took time, but I've learned not to engage in those conflicts I've always lost before.

From their size, close-cropped hair, and Oakley wraparound shades, favored these days by Special Forces and their private sector counterparts, I made the visitors as military, maybe serving, maybe ex. That in itself was unremarkable: the Kodokan is hardly unknown among the American soldiers, Marines, and airmen stationed in Japan. Plenty of them come to visit, and even to train. Still, I prefer to assume the worst, especially when the assumption costs me little. I let the college kid throw me with *tai-otoshi*, the throw he'd been trying for all night and obviously his money move. In my former line of work, being underestimated was something to cultivate. I might have been out of the life, but I wasn't out of the habit.

I was careful when I left that night, my alertness at a higher than usual pitch. I checked the places I would set up if I'd been trying to get to me: behind the concrete pillars flanking the building's entrance on Hakusan-dori; the parked cars along the busy, eight-lane street; the entrance to the Mita-sen subway line to my left. I saw only oblivious

sarariman commuters, their interchangeable dark suits limp and rumpled from the diesel-laced humidity, their brows beaded with sweat but their expressions relieved at the prospect of a few undemanding hours at home before the next day's corporate exertions. Several riders on motor scooters went by, the two-stroke engines of their machines whining in and then fading out as they passed, but they weren't wearing the full-face helmets favored by motorcycle drive-by gunners, and they never even slowed or looked at me. A woman rode a bicycle past me on the sidewalk, a chubby-cheeked toddler secured in a basket attached to the handlebars, his arms outstretched and his tiny hands balled into fists at what I didn't know. No one felt out of place, and I saw no sign of the soldiers. If they didn't show up again, I'd classify their one-night presence as a nonevent.

But they did show up again, the following night. And this time, they stayed only briefly, probably just long enough to scan through the scores of *judoka* and confirm the presence of their target. If I hadn't been doing my own frequent, unobtrusive scans of the spectator seats, I would have missed their appearance entirely.

I continued training until eight and then showered as usual, not wanting to do anything out of the ordinary, anything that might suggest I'd spotted something and was preparing for it. But I was preparing, and as a plan unspooled in my mind and adrenaline snaked out through my body, and as the presence of danger and the certainty of how I would deal with it settled into place with an awful, familiar clarity, I had to acknowledge to myself that I'd been preparing my whole life, and that whatever intervals of quiet I had ever briefly indulged were as meaningful and relevant as dreams. Only the preparation was real—the preparation, and the purpose it always enabled.

Chapter 2

Ben Treven and Daniel Larison sat on stools at the window counter of a Douter Coffee shop fifty yards south of the Kodokan on Hakusan-dori, sipping black coffee and waiting for the two contractors to return. Treven had wanted to join them, to get a firsthand look at the man whom up until the week before he'd thought to be a myth, but Larison had insisted there was no upside to sending in more than two of them, and Treven knew he was right. It bothered him how easily and naturally Larison had established himself as the alpha of the team, but he also had to admit that Larison, in his mid-forties, ten years Treven's senior, had seen more of the shit even than Treven had, and had survived heavier opposition. He told himself if he kept his mouth shut he might learn something, and he supposed it was true. But after ten years in the Intelligence Support Activity, the deliberately blandly named covert arm of the military's Joint Special Operations Command, he wasn't used to running into people who acted like his tactical superiors, and even fewer he thought might be right about it.

Treven was facing the window in the direction of the Kodokan, and saw the contractors, whom he knew only as Beckley and Krichman, approaching before Larison did. He nodded his head slightly. "Here they come."

Larison had instructed all of them to use their mobile phones as little as possible and to keep them shut off, with the batteries removed, except at previously agreed-upon intervals. The units were all rented, of course, and all under false identities, but good security involved multiple layers. The CIA's careless use of cell phones in the Abu Omar rendition from Milan had led to the issuance of arrest warrants from an Italian judge for a bunch of CIA officials, including the Milan station chief, and Treven figured Larison was applying the lessons of that op to this one. Still, the current precautions struck him as excessive—they weren't here to kill or kidnap Rain, after all, only to contact him. On the other hand, just as with sending only the two contractors into the Kodokan for the initial recon, he supposed there was no real downside to the extra care.

The contractors came in and stood so they were facing Treven and Larison and had a view of the street. Treven had seen plenty of foreigners in this section of the city, but even so he knew they were all conspicuous. Treven's blond hair and green eyes had always been somewhat of a surveillance liability, of course, but he figured that to the average Japanese, such features wouldn't much distinguish him from Larison, with his dark hair and olive skin, or from any other Caucasian foreigner, for that matter. What the natives would notice, and remember, was the collective size of the four of them. Treven, a heavyweight wrestler in high school and linebacker for Stanford before dropping out, was actually the smallest of the group. Larison was obviously into weights, and, if Hort could be believed, maybe steroids, too. And the contractors could almost have been pro wrestlers. Treven wondered if Hort had selected them in the hope their size might intimidate Rain when they made contact. He doubted it would make a difference. Size only mattered in a fair fight, and from what he'd heard of Rain, the man was too smart to ever allow a fight to be fair.

"He's there," the man called Beckley said. "Training, just like last night."

Larison nodded. "Maybe we should switch off now," he said in his low, raspy voice. "Two nights in a row, he's probably spotted you. Treven and I can take the point."

"He didn't spot us," Krichman said. "We were in the stands, he barely even glanced our way."

Beckley grunted in agreement. "Look, if the guy were that surveillance conscious, he wouldn't be showing up at the same location at the same time every night in the first place. He didn't see us."

Larison took a sip of coffee. "He any good? The judo, I mean."

Krichman shrugged. "I don't know. Seemed like he had his hands full with the kid he was training with."

Larison took another sip of coffee and paused as though thinking. "You know, it probably doesn't really matter that much whether he saw you or not. We know he's here, we can just brace him on his way out."

“Yeah, we could,” Krichman said, his tone indicating the man found the idea hopelessly unambitious. “But what kind of leverage do we have then? We found him at the Kodokan. Tomorrow he could just go and train somewhere else. Or give up training, period. We want him to feel pressured, isn’t that what Hort said? So let’s show him we know where he lives. Brace him there, make him feel we’re into his life in a big way. That’s how you get people to play ball—by getting them *by* the balls.”

Treven couldn’t disagree with the man’s assessment overall. He was surprised Larison didn’t see it that way, too. But Larison must have realized his oversight, because he said, “That makes sense. But come on, he must have seen you. Treven and I should take the point.”

“Look,” Beckley said, his tone indicating the tail end of patience, “he didn’t see us. Krichman and I will take the point.” He gestured to one of the buttons on his damp navy shirt. “You’ll see everything we see, through this. If he spots us, and I doubt he will, we’ll switch off like we planned. Okay?”

The button was actually the lens of a high definition pocket video camera that shot color in daylight and infrared-enhanced black-and-white at night. Each of them was similarly outfitted, and each unit transmitted wirelessly to the others on the network. A separate unit, about the size of a pack of playing cards, could be held in the hand to display what the other units were transmitting. It was nothing fancy, just a stripped-down and slightly modified version of the Eagle Eyes monitoring system that was increasingly popular with various government agencies, but it enabled a small surveillance team to spread out beyond what traditional line-of-sight would allow, and also enabled each team member to know the position of all the others without excessive reliance on cell phones or other verbal communication.

Larison raised his hands in a *you win* gesture. “All right. You two cover the entrance of the Kodokan. Treven and I will wait here and fall in behind you when you start following him.”

Beckley smiled—a little snidely, Treven thought. And it did seem like Larison, maybe in a weak attempt to save face, was pretending to issue orders that had in fact just been issued to him.

Beckley and Krichman went out. Larison turned and watched through the window as they walked away.

Treven said, “You think he’s going to come out again at the same time? Hort said he was so surveillance conscious.”

Larison took a sip of coffee. “Why do you think Hort sent those assholes along with us?”

It was a little annoying that Larison hadn't just answered the question. Treven paused, then said, "He doesn't trust us, obviously."

"That's right. They're working for him, not with us. Remember that."

Colonel Scott "Hort" Horton was Treven's commander in the ISA, and had once been Larison's, too, before Larison had gone rogue, faked his own death, and tried to blackmail Uncle Sam for a hundred million dollars worth of uncut diamonds in exchange for videos of American operatives torturing Muslim prisoners. He'd almost gotten away with it, too, but Hort had played him and kept the diamonds for himself. Treven wasn't entirely sure why. On the one hand, Hort's patriotism and integrity were unquestionable. A black man who might have been denied advancement in other areas but who was not only promoted, but held in awe by the army meritocracy, he loved the military and he loved the men who served under him. Yet none of that had prevented him from fucking Larison when he'd needed to, as he'd once tried to fuck Treven. He'd told Treven why: America was being run by a kind of oligarchy, which didn't seem to trouble Hort much except that the oligarchy had become greedy and incompetent—grievous sins, apparently, in Hort's strange moral universe. The country needed better management, he'd said. He was starting something big, and the diamonds were a part of it. So, he hoped, would be Treven and Larison, and this guy Rain they'd been sent to find, too, if he could be persuaded.

So of course Hort didn't trust them. They weren't under duress, exactly, but it wasn't all a positive inducement, win-win dynamic, either. Larison had to be looking for payback, as well as a chance to recover the diamonds. And Treven had wised up enough to recognize the strings Hort had been using to manipulate him, and to know he needed to find a way to cut them, too. There was the little matter of some unfortunate security videos, for example, that could implicate Treven in the murder of a prominent former administration official. It didn't matter that it had been a CIA op and that Treven had nothing to do with the man's death. What mattered was that Hort and the CIA had the tapes, and might use them if Treven got out of line. So for the moment, the whole arrangement felt like an unstable alliance of convenience, all shifting allegiances and conflicting motives. Hort would never have sent them off without a means of monitoring them, and under the circumstances, Larison's injunction that he remember who Beckley and Krichman were really working for felt gratuitous, even a little insulting. Maybe the man was just chafing at the fact that the contractors didn't seem to give a shit about what Larison assumed was his own authority. Treven decided to let it go.

But what he wouldn't let go was that Larison had ignored his question. "Same place, same time, same way out, two nights in a row?" he said. "That sound like our guy?"

Larison glanced at him, and Treven could have sworn the man was almost smiling.

"Depends," Larison said.

"What do you mean?"

“Rain spotted them last night for sure, when they were there for longer. Very likely, he spotted them again tonight, too.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I would have spotted them. Because if this guy is who Hort says he is, he would have spotted them. Because if he’s not good enough to have spotted them, Hort wouldn’t even be bothering with him.”

Treven considered. “So what does that mean, if he spotted them but comes out the same way at the same time anyway?”

This time, Larison did smile. “It means I’m glad it’s not us walking point.”

Chapter 3

When I left the Kodokan, I knew someone would be waiting for me. Most likely it would be the pair of giants I’d seen twice inside. Possibly they were just recon, and someone else would be set up outside, but if whoever it was had more manpower, the sensible thing would have been to rotate different members of the team to deny me the chance to get multiple IDs. Of course, it wasn’t impossible that I was supposed to see the two I’d already spotted—after all, their bulk was hard to miss—so that I’d keep searching for them when I went outside and consequently overlook the real threat. But if that had been the game, they would have stayed longer that evening, to be sure I had a chance to see them again. My gut told me it was just the two of them, handling both recon and action.

I kept to the left side of the exit corridor as I left the building, using the book and souvenir kiosk as concealment until the last moment to deny them additional seconds to prepare for my appearance. I doubted they had guns—firearms are tightly restricted in Japan, and anyone with the connections to acquire them would likely have fielded a larger and less conspicuous team. A sniper rifle would have been even harder to get than a pistol, and even if they’d managed to procure one, what were they going to do, rent an apartment overlooking the entrance of the Kodokan? Too much trouble, too much paper trail. There were better ways.

As I hit the glass doors, I kept my head steady but let my eyes sweep the sidewalk and street within my field of vision. Nothing yet. The night before, I’d gone left and taken the subway, and though I hadn’t seen them at the time, I now assumed they’d been lurking somewhere and had logged my movements. So if they were hoping to follow me tonight and introduce themselves on terrain they found more favorable, they’d set up to the right. If the plan was for me to walk into them, they’d be to the left. No way to be sure, but other things being equal, I prefer to see what’s coming. And why not let them see me repeating the pattern I’d established the night before? It would give them a little

more data to rely on in underestimating me. I turned left onto the sidewalk, my eyes still moving, checking hot spots, my ears trained for footfalls behind me.

I spotted the first instantly, leaning against one of the pillars fronting the building. He was bigger even than I'd estimated from seeing him in the stands. His hands were visible and one of them held a cigarette. Not the best cover for action in Tokyo. The country is a little behind the times on the nonsmoking front, and with the exception of smokers visiting Starbucks and hospital intensive care units, no one goes outside for a tobacco break, especially in the wet summer heat.

I passed him and hit the stairs of Kasuga station, keeping my head down to conceal my face from the security camera staring down from the ceiling, my footsteps echoing along the concrete walls. Ordinarily, I found the cameras a hindrance if not an outright threat, but for the moment, their presence was cause for comfort. No one wants to do a hit in the Tokyo metropolitan subway system, where the number of closed circuit video cameras could make a Las Vegas casino blush. In the past, the cameras had never been a particular concern, but then again my specialty had always been the appearance of natural causes—one of the advantages of which is that no one examines security tapes afterward, trying to find out what happened. The Mossad team that did the Hamas official in Dubai, for example, had likely been planning on the appearance of a heart attack, and so wasn't worried about the hotel and airport cameras that filmed them. But they'd blown the job, and what was obviously an assassination led to an investigation. I wondered at the time why they hadn't called me. Maybe Delilah had told them I was out of the life. I smiled bitterly at the notion, and the memory, and kept moving down the stairs.

I turned the corner into the station proper and there was the second guy, standing under the florescent lights in front of the ticket vending machines, looking at the wall map above like an extra-large, extra-confused tourist. Kasuga isn't a main thoroughfare, and the area was mostly deserted—just a glassy-eyed ticket puncher in a booth, looking about as sentient as a potted plant, and a couple of high school kids who were testing their English trying to help my new friend find whatever it was he was looking for. I heard him grumble that he was fine as I moved past and could almost have sympathized—having a civilian address you when you're trying to be invisible is always a bitch. I slid a prepaid pass into the ticket machine and went through to the platform.

I strolled slowly along, the grimy tracks below me and to my right, the white tiled wall gleaming to my left. I passed a few Tokyoites standing here and there—a girl with tea-colored hair and garish makeup texting on a mobile, a *sarariman* absently practicing his golf swing, a couple of people I recognized from the Kodokan—but no one who tickled my radar. About two thirds of the way to the end I stopped and stood with my back close to the wall. But for the hum of an air conditioning unit, the platform was silent. From somewhere inside the tunnel to my left, I could just hear dripping water.

I might have glanced back, but doing so would only confirm what I already knew: they had fallen in behind me. They'd keep well down the platform, and when a train arrived they'd get on it, two or three cars away. At each stop, they'd check through the sliding

doors to see if I was getting off, and follow me when I did. When they'd tailed me to a venue they found sufficiently dark, or isolated, or otherwise suitable for the business at hand, they'd do what they came for and depart.

But that's the problem with dark, isolated, and otherwise suitable venues. Like tracer rounds, they work in both directions.

I felt a rumble approaching from far down in the tunnel to my right, and a voice over a public address system announced the arrival of a Meguro-bound train. The rumble grew louder. I glanced to my right and glimpsed the two giants, pressed against the wall about halfway down the platform—the spot I'd most likely overlook if I glanced in the direction of an approaching train. Not too close to alarm me; not so far that they'd get picked up in the natural angle of my vision. I didn't know who I was dealing with, but the positioning showed some experience.

It wouldn't have been hard to lose them. I doubted they knew the city well at all and they couldn't possibly have known it the way I do. But I didn't see the point. A long time ago, in another context, a man I considered dangerous told me the next time he saw me, he would kill me. I took him at his word, and prevented him from carrying out his promise. It was the same now. If these guys wanted to meet me, we'd get the meeting over with tonight. I wasn't going to spend the rest of my days looking over my shoulder, wondering when they'd show up next. And I wasn't going to look for an opportunity to politely ask them about the nature of their interest, either. When you've spent a lifetime in my former line of work, and when two guys this big show up at your only possible known locale and start following you, it's time to assume the worst, and to act accordingly.

The train hurtled out of the tunnel and began to slow, its brakes hissing, its wheels screeching against the metal tracks. It shuddered to a stop and the doors slid open. A few passengers stepped out. I walked into a mostly empty compartment and stood facing the doors, just in case. No one else got on. After a moment, a loudspeaker voice warned passengers the train was leaving, and then the doors hissed closed and the train jerked into motion.

I thought I'd take them to Jinbocho, two stops away on the Mita line and best known for its numerous antiquarian bookshops. I liked the area, too, for a coffee shop not far from the station, appropriately enough called *Saboru*, the Japanese word for lounging, loafing, playing hooky, or otherwise taking a timeout from the world. Though I would only take the giants past the coffee shop, not inside. And the timeout I had in mind for them was going to be longer than what *saboru* ordinarily implied.

When the train stopped at Jinbocho station, I got unhurriedly off and headed for the A7 exit. I didn't look behind me. I didn't need to. They might have been sufficiently familiar with Tokyo to know how quickly you can lose the subject of surveillance in the shifting nighttime crowds, the unmarked, narrow alleys, of a section of the city as old and labyrinthine as Jinbocho. Or they might not have been even that familiar, in which case

they'd lack the confidence to let anything more than a short gap open up between us. Either way, they would stay close now until their first opportunity.

When I was a kid, I had to learn to deal with bullies. First in Japan, where small half-breeds like me attracted the righteous attentions of larger children for whom cruelty and joy were indistinguishable; later, after my father died, in small town America, where I was an exotic half-Asian kid with limited English and a funny accent. During my first week at the American public school in which my newly-widowed mother had enrolled me, I'd noticed a much larger kid eyeing me, a meaty, crew-cut blond boy the other kids called the Bear. The Bear had acquired his nickname, apparently, because his favorite thing to do was to grab his victims in a frontal bear hug, squeeze them senseless, then throw them to the ground, where he could hurt and humiliate them at will. I saw one hapless kid get the treatment—the Bear sucked him in; the kid tried to push away but then his arms crumbled; the Bear threw him down and beat the crap out of him. I figured everyone he'd ever grabbed must have reacted the same way: if someone is trying to draw you in to squeeze you to death, you'd naturally resist. So it stood to reason that the Bear might not be prepared for someone who failed to resist his embrace. Who, instead, embraced him back.

It didn't take long for my turn to come. Though I lacked the frame of reference at the time, I recognized the behaviors—the looks, the comments, the accidental-on-purpose hallway shoulder slams—that for bullies on both sides of the Pacific constituted a kind of foreplay. And I instinctively understood that the little signs were all a tactical weakness, too, because they informed the intended victim of what was coming, and when. I resolved never to display such warnings myself, and I never have.

It was on a grass berm behind the school's weedy baseball field that the Bear decided to consummate our incipient relationship. I'd studied him enough, and was experienced enough, to recognize even before he did that this would be the place and time. So when he nudged his friends and pointed at me, it was almost comforting, like watching an actor dutifully playing his part in a drama the conclusion of which I already knew. He swaggered over to where I was standing and demanded, *What are you looking at?* It was so much what I'd expected, I think I might have smiled a little, because although I didn't respond, for an instant I thought I saw doubt pass across his features like the shadow of a fast-moving cloud. But then it was gone, and he was again accusing me of looking at him, the one line of inquiry apparently having exhausted his creative capacity, and he threw out his arms and lunged at me, just as I'd hoped he would.

As his arms circled my back and he started to pull me in, I shot my hands forward and dug my fingers into the back of his neck, my elbows braced against his chest. I felt him jerk in surprise but he only knew the one move and it had always worked before, so he didn't stop—he locked his hands and started to squeeze, but now I was squeezing, too, my biceps tightening with the effort, my forearms corded, bringing his head alongside mine, and as our left cheeks connected I dug my face in, bit into his earlobe, and ripped it free with a jerk of my head. He screamed, suddenly trying to push me away, but I was clamped onto him like pliers and I bit him again, this time on the back of the ear.

Cartilage crunched and tore loose and my mouth was filled with hot, coppery blood, and a primal frenzy swept through me as I realized how I'd made him bleed. He screamed again, lost his balance, and fell onto his back with me on top of him. I spat out what I'd chewed off, reared up, and started raining punches down on his face. He covered up blindly, in a panic. Someone tried to grab me but I slipped free and darted in for another go at his ear. This time I couldn't find it—there was too much blood, and not enough ear—but just the feeling of the renewed attack made the Bear shriek in terror and scramble from beneath me as the other kids pulled me loose.

We both stood, the Bear crying now, his eyes wide in disbelief, his left hand groping shakily at the mutilated stump on the side of his head. The two kids who were holding my arms let me go and stepped warily to the sides, as though realizing they'd been standing too close to a wild animal. I looked at the Bear, my fists balled, my nostrils flaring, and felt a bloody smile spread across my face. I took a step toward him, and with a hitching, anguished squeak, the Bear turned and fled for the safety of the school.

The Bear's parents made a fuss, threatening a lawsuit and excoriating my mother for raising such a wanton, savage child. The school held disciplinary proceedings, and for a while it looked like I might be expelled. But the hearings turned to a discussion of previous incidents in which the Bear had been involved, and of how he was so much bigger than I was, and I sensed in the official expressions of disapproval something pro forma, something with the aroma of a whitewash. Eventually, I realized that some cabal of frustrated teachers and outraged parents had been secretly pleased at the Bear's comeuppance, and had used the hearings as the means by which they could achieve an outcome that had already been decided. It was the first time I'd seen such a thing, but later, I came to understand the dynamic is common, occurring, for example, every time some government appoints a blue ribbon commission to investigate the latest scandal. In the end, my run-in with the Bear blew over. Surgeons were able to save what was left of his ear. He grew his hair long to cover his deformity, and he never came near me again.

I learned two things from my encounter with the Bear. First, the importance of surprise. It didn't matter what size, skills, or other advantages your enemy had if you didn't give him a chance to deploy any of it.

Second, that there's always an aftermath. Following the fight, I was lucky not to have gotten in more trouble with the authorities. Meaning it was better to take care of such matters in a way that couldn't be attributed to you. Winning the fight itself wouldn't mean much if you lost more afterward, legally or otherwise.

At the top of the stairs, I turned left onto the nameless narrow street fronting Saboru, with its eccentric mountain hut façade and profusion of potted plants around the door and under the windows. The light hadn't yet entirely leached from the sky, but the area was already thick with shadows. A few knots of pedestrians passed me, probably heading home from work, or perhaps for a beer and *yakitori* in nearby Kanda. I knew my pursuers were close behind me, but they wouldn't be comfortable yet—the pedestrian density wasn't quite right. They'd be waiting for an especially congested area, where

there would be so many people and so much tumult that no one would notice what had happened until several seconds after the fact. Or for an especially empty area, where there would be no witnesses at all.

I had a knife, a Benchmade folder, clipped inside my front pants pocket. But I would use it only for contingencies. Knives make a lot of mess, all of it laced with DNA. Guns, too, create an evidence trail. For sheer walk-awayedness, there's really nothing like bare hands.

Past Saboru, the neighborhood grew more residential; the yellow streetlights, fewer and farther between. Within a block, the sparse clusters of pedestrians had evaporated entirely. Over the incessant background screech of cicadas I could just hear a set of footfalls from ten meters back. Coming, no doubt, from whichever of them was keeping me in visual contact. The secondary guy would be about the same distance behind the first, needing only to maintain visual contact with him. If they narrowed the gap between them, it would mean action was at hand. I wasn't going to give them that chance.

There was a small parking lot on the left side of the intersection ahead. I had noted it on one of my periodic tactical explorations of the city's terrain, and liked it because among a cluster of dim vending machines to its rear was the entrance to a series of alleys, more like crevices, really, leading back to the street we were walking on now. In fact, I'd just passed a gate that led from one of the alleys, though I doubted my pursuers would notice it, or, even if they did, would understand its current significance. From the sound of the lead guy's distance behind me, I estimated that I could make it through the alley to the inside of the gate at about the same time the first guy would be pausing at the parking lot's corner, trying to figure out where I'd gone, and the second guy would be passing the gate.

I made a left into the parking lot, and then, the instant I'd turned the corner, accelerated and turned left into the entrance to the alleys. Another left, past a row of garbage cans, and I was at the inside of the gate I'd just passed. I paused, my back to the wall, enveloped in darkness, and watched as the secondary guy passed my position. I waited several seconds before gripping the metal rail at the top of the gate and moving it back and forth to confirm solidity and soundlessness. Then I hopped up, eased my belly over, put a hand on each side, and rotated my legs around, landing catlike on the street side. There was the second guy, just a few meters ahead, approaching the edge of the parking lot. He was moving so slowly, it seemed he was aware his partner would have stopped just around the corner to look for me, and was trying to give him time. I wondered for an instant how he could have known his partner had paused—maybe just a sensible precaution when turning a corner?—but it didn't matter. What mattered was that I was closing in on him, and that for the moment I had his back.

I traded stealth for speed, knowing I had only an instant before he might check behind him, and in fact as I reached him, he was just beginning to turn. But too late. I leaped into him, planting my left foot in the small of his back as though trying to climb a steep set of stairs. His body bowed violently forward and his head and arms flew back, and a

startled grunt, loud enough, I was aware, for his partner to hear from around the corner, forced itself from his lungs. As he plunged to his knees, I wrapped my left arm around his neck, trapping his upturned face against my abdomen, secured my left wrist with my right hand, and arched savagely up and back. His neck snapped as easily as if it had been made of kindling, and with a similar sound. I let him go and he crumbled to the ground.

His partner appeared instantly from around the corner. He cried out, “Oh, fuck,” the vernacular, and the accent, I was distantly aware, both American, and lunged at me. I had no time to get out of the way, but neither the inclination. Instead, I held my position, extending my torso away from him so he was forced to reach for me, and twisted slightly counterclockwise as we came to grips. I extended my left leg, planted the sole of my foot against his right knee, grabbed both his biceps, and used his momentum to spin him counterclockwise in *hiza-guruma*. He was overbalanced and couldn’t get his legs out to correct because of the way I was blocking his knee. There was an instant of resistance, and then he was sailing past me, parallel to the ground, trying to twist away from me and turn his body toward the coming impact. But he was moving too fast for that now, and I was assisting his rapid descent, applying pressure to his shoulders to make them fall faster than his feet, wanting his cranium to bear the brunt.

He hit the pavement with a thud I could feel as well as hear, his shoulders connecting first, then the back of his skull as his head snapped back. I dropped to my knees next to him but he wasn’t out, and even shocked and dazed as he must have been, he managed to turn into me and go for my eyes with his left hand. I grabbed his wrist with my left hand, slamming my elbow into his face on the way, snaked my right arm under his shoulder, secured my own left wrist, extended my body across his chest, and broke his elbow with *ude-garami*. He shrieked and tried to buck me loose. I scrambled back, reared up, and blasted a palm heel into his nose. The back of his head bounced into the pavement and I hit him again the same way. He rolled away from me, trying to get up, and I launched myself onto his back, throwing my left arm around his neck, catching my right bicep, planting my right hand against the back of his head, and strangling him with classic *hadaka-jime*. He struggled and thrashed and I kept an eye on his remaining good arm, in case he tried to access a concealed weapon. The choke was deep, though, and his brain was getting no oxygen. In a few seconds he was still and, a few more after that, gone.

I released my grip and came shakily to my feet, my heart hammering. I wiped sweat from my eyes with my sleeve and looked around. There had been that single scream, but I saw no one, at least not yet. Not likely either of them was carrying identification, but I felt I could afford a moment to check.

I knelt and pulled the guy I’d strangled onto his back. He rolled over with liquid ease, his broken arm flopping unnaturally to the pavement next to him. I patted his front pants pockets. A folding knife in the right. Something hard and rectangular in the left—a cell phone? I pulled it out and saw that it was a phone, as I’d hoped. But there was something else in the pocket. I reached back in and felt something metallic. I pulled whatever it was out and stared at it. It took me a moment to realize what I was holding: a small video camera.

Oh, shit.

A wire extended from the unit, disappearing beneath his clothes. I slipped my fingers between the buttons of his shirt and tore it open. The wire ran to one of the buttons. I leaned in—it wasn't easy to see in the dim light—and looked more closely. Shit, it was no button at all, but a lens. And I was staring right into it.

I tore the wire free and stuffed the camera and phone into my pockets, then scrambled over to where the other guy lay. He was similarly equipped. I pocketed the second phone and camera, too, then walked off, keeping to the quiet streets paralleling Yasukuni-dori. I would take the batteries out of the phones to make sure they were untraceable and examine the cameras when I was safely away from the bodies. If the two giants had been using the equipment only to monitor each other, I would be okay.

But I had a feeling they weren't just monitoring each other. And if I was right, I was in for another visit, and soon.