AZABU GETAWAY

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Azabu Getaway

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"Everything a *sokaiya* does has meaning."

—Kenneth Szymkowiak, *Sokaiya*

"Whenever a person says to you that they are as innocent as lambs in all concerning money, look well after your own money, for they are dead certain to collar it, if they can. Whenever a person proclaims to you 'In worldly matters I'm a child,' you consider that that person is only a crying off from being held accountable, and that you have got that person's number, and it's Number One."

— Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

List of Characters

Hiroshi

Hiroshi, Forensic accountant, main detective
Ayana, Hiroshi's girlfriend

Detectives

Sakaguchi, Chief of homicide, ex-sumo wrestler
Takamatsu, Old-school detective, smokes
Ishii, New female detective
Akiko, Detective staff, Hiroshi's assistant
Sugamo, Detective, ex-sumo wrestler
Osaki, Detective, ex-rugby player
Ueno, Detective injured by gunshot, stays in office
Ota, Deaf private investigator
Shibutani, Old-school private investigator, Ota's boss, Takamatsu's friend

Walsh Family and Friends

Patrick, Investment whiz, father, husband
Miyuki Bank account manager, mother, wife
Jenna, Older daughter
Kiri, Younger daughter
Grandmother, Miyuki's mother
Kyle, Patrick's best friend
Miki, Kyle's girlfriend
Taiga, Babysitter for Walsh family
Reon, Taiga's brother

Nine Dragons

Leung, Head CEO
Arisa, Former office manager
Mehta, New office manager
Tran, Head of security

Other characters

Watanabe, Bureaucrat at National Tax Agency
Kosugi, Old-school yakuza and investor
Nozaki, Chasing his money down
Tim Helps Patrick, arrested
Tamura, Miyuki's divorce lawyer
Kamiya, Head of Pacific Investment
Daisuke and hosts, Host club hosts

Chapter 1

Patrick Walsh waited outside, tired of the cold, of the dark, thinking it through, worried that the key wouldn't work.

In case it didn't, he'd brought along a mini cordless drill, three sizes of drill bits, a screwdriver, a pick, and needle-nose pliers packed into a drawstring bag. He'd watched a few online videos on how to ream out a lock.

He keyed in the passcode at the entrance of his Azabu apartment building—it still worked—and rode the elevator to his floor. He kept his head down under a cap and resettled his mask, protection against cameras, as much as against viruses.

He'd almost never met anyone in the hallway and no one was there now. That's what you paid more for in the middle of Tokyo—few neighbors, silent hallways, extra rooms.

And cleaners. There were always cleaners. The hallways gleamed.

He slipped the key in, held his breath as he twisted, and the deadbolt fell to the side. With the drawstring bag back over his shoulder, he twisted the door handle, stepped in, and toed off his shoes in the *genkan*.

In the room to the left, his mother-in-law was sprawled in her regular spot on her tatami chair in front of the TV. She kept the TV blaring 24/7, but she was out cold, as usual, stoned on a mix of sleeping pills and glasses of *shochu* she hid on a shelf above the refrigerator.

He tiptoed over and turned off the TV. Her cosmetic-smeared wrinkles and thinning hair were just the same, but she was a bit pudgier, eating well on the money he sent while she filled Miyuki's ears with invective against him. She must have smoked inside too, or the smell just oozed out of her.

Patrick turned off the lights in the small tatami room and slid

the door shut. She was supposed to be at her weekly mahjong game, but maybe the others had kicked her out for cheating.

After Miyuki's father died and her mother and multiple TVs moved in, the house resonated with the inane patter and forced laughter of quiz shows, travelogues, comedy routines, and program after program about food. Everything was *oishii*, *sugoi, or yabaii*, the exclamations silly and senseless. She demanded the most expensive tatami mats, but filled their home with drivel.

The living room looked smaller than he remembered, but that was because the rooms in Wyoming were so large. For Tokyo, their place was huge for a family of four, plus grandmother. Until Wyoming, it was the largest place he ever lived in. Miyuki had been overwhelmed to silence when they first looked at it. The living room alone was bigger than their entire former apartment in Monzen-Nakacho.

They'd paid for it in cash, so much cash even Miyuki had been startled when they hauled it to the realtor. After they paid, she collapsed weeping in his arms, surprised at how their happy their life had turned out.

Patrick had just started at Nine Dragons and Miyuki had been promoted after her bank merged with two others. They set up savings, investments, even college funds, and still had more than they knew what to do with. But it wasn't just the money then. It was being together about everything.

The sofa was where they'd curled up every night during her pregnancy, both of them worn out from work, Miyuki doubly tired with the pregnancy. She took leave as late as she could before Jenna arrived, and again, a couple of years later, when Kiri arrived. Miyuki had kept working at the same bank as accounts manager even while taking most of the burden for the girls.

Through it all, their large multisectional sofa served as nursery, game room, study center, work station, bed, table, and, occasionally after the girls went to sleep, the spot for a quick one. He called it "the whale," as it became piled with games, toys, study

books, sports equipment, cats, caged bugs, and work files that Miyuki and Patrick carried home to finish up side-by-side.

After nine months away in Wyoming, those times seemed farther away than ever. Patrick looked down the hallway toward the bedrooms.

The cats came out and eyed him suspiciously, but he was too tired from the long flight to re-friend them. The support group advised staying flexible and flowing, without getting stuck on any one task. Now, all he needed to do was gather the girls and get out of there. The support group advised him on all the details of what to do, since they'd been through it all before.

Behind him, the front door creaked open and a man's voice echoed into the entryway. "*Dare desu-ka*? Miyuki? *Ano, dareka iru no?* Miyuki?"

Patrick tiptoed back to the front wall half-expecting to see Miyuki's next conquest. Was this the next one? What man would be coming into the apartment?

He waited behind the wall.

The soft thud of shoes being removed and the crinkle of a plastic bag was followed by silence. Patrick knew this was what the support group meant when they said, "Remain flexible."

A young man, twenty-something, gangly and tall in loose clothes, stepped into the living room. He was carrying a plastic bag weighed down with small cartons.

Patrick stepped out. "Who are you?"

The boy's handsomely chiseled face looked half Japanese, half Western. His hair was longish and dyed in streaks.

"I'm Taiga…the…the babysitter…" he sputtered, in English. "Who are you?"

If he was the babysitter, why was he calling Miyuki by her first name? He was a decade younger, more, and an employee. Babysitter? Did he mean home tutor? What was he doing here this late?

Instead of asking, Patrick swung the drawstring bag full of tools.

The kid ducked but slipped. His head hit the edge of the sideboard and his body crumpled to the heated flooring.

Patrick waited for him to get up, but he didn't. A trickle of urine spread from his crotch and blood oozed from below his spiky, streaked hair. That was a bad sign. A very bad sign. He'd swung the tool bag too hard.

Patrick slung the bag over his shoulder and leaned over to pick the scrawny kid up from under his arms and drag him to the tatami room. He slid open the door at the opposite end from where his mother-in-law slept and wrestled him inside as quietly as he could. Blood dribbled out and quickly soaked into the finely woven *igusa* rush straw of the tatami.

"Remain on task and in motion," the support group had advised. They had done all the recon for him, after he told them the details of their daily life. They were good at what they did. They found the right time, and helped plan it all. All except the babysitter.

He followed the rest of their advice and pulled out two plastic ties for the boy's wrists and ankles. He went for towels from the kitchen, set one under his head where it was bleeding and tied the other across his mouth. The wound didn't look too bad, just a scratch.

He stared at his mother-in-law, stepped back, and slid the door shut. He got some paper towels and wiped the drips of blood from the floor. He rinsed the towels out, threw them away, and washed his hands.

He hurried into Jenna's room and tears sprang to his eyes. Draped in Disney princess pajamas, her limbs were splayed out in all directions, half in and half out of the covers. She'd grown and her hair was longer.

Beside her, Kiri slept in a fetal ball with her fists on her cheeks. She slept that way when she crawled into bed with Miyuki and him. When he left for Wyoming, he'd told her she had to start sleeping alone. At the time, she'd nodded seriously, but she must

have started sleeping with her older sister instead.

Their hair was strewn in long tangles over the menagerie of stuffed animals sleeping beside them. He could smell the warm scent of their bodies and hear the little snuffles of their breathing, soft as waves. Watching them sleep was the most beautiful experience in the world. Now, he'd have them every day, and they'd be safe.

He sat down on the bed and jiggled Jenna's leg, but Kiri opened her eyes first.

"Daddy? Is that you?" Kiri wrapped her arms around his neck.

Jenna rubbed her eyes, startled, and sat up before burrowing in beside Kiri, pulling on his shirt and hugging him and trying to wake up all at the same time. "Is this a dream?"

"The best one ever." Patrick held them against his chest, looked at Jenna's mirror, and choked back tears. "Can you two get up and get dressed?"

"Is it morning?" Jenna asked. Her voice had become a little husky.

"We have a plane to catch. To America. We're going to ride horses."

"Horses?" Jenna's face lit up with excitement.

"Where the wild things are?" Kiri asked.

"No, the wild things are here. We're going where they aren't." Patrick hugged them tight for a minute and then set them loose to fill the fold-out vinyl bags he brought for them. They started snatching up their favorite clothes and dolls, and everything they loved so far in their short lives, everything they couldn't live without, and put it in the bags.

"Isn't Mom coming?" Jenna asked.

"Of course she is, but it's a surprise."

Jenna and Kiri looked at each other. "Like a surprise party?" Jenna asked.

"Exactly."

Kiri set one of her dolls back. "Is Taiga coming too?"

"He's coming later with Mom, if he can get away."

"And what about school?" Jenna put her clothes into her bag. She seemed very awake. Patrick wasn't sure if that was good.

"Just a short vacation. Mom will call the school. You'll be back before you know it."

"Before I know what?" Kiri asked.

"Before you know where the wild things are." He checked his watch. They could still make it to the airport, get checked in, and be gone, if they hurried.

Kiri giggled. She was on the borderline of believing in impossible things. But then again, so was he, things like getting away safely.

Chapter 2

The glass doors of Nine Dragons Wealth Management slid open with a soft whoosh. Sanjay Mehta, office manager, put away his passcard and reminded himself to change his key code for that week, as required by the security director.

Mehta grumbled to himself about forgetting to take home the new accounts, but he only had himself to blame. He'd forgotten to upload the new ones.

As office manager, his main responsibility was to keep such things in order. Nine Dragons had become the fastest-growing wealth management firm in Tokyo, and he wanted to keep it that way. If that took a little extra effort at times, so be it.

His apartment was only a short walk from the office along a raised walkway over the roads, shops, and ground floor sidewalks of Shinagawa. Coming back in the middle of the night still meant getting dressed. With all the surveillance cameras, it wasn't a good look if someone decided to check. At least he could dress nicely.

The doors shut behind him and Mehta turned toward his space at the back of the twentieth floor. The office design featured waist-high walls with glass dividers to the ceiling so everyone could see everyone else. Everyone used tables, desks had no drawers, files were online, so the space felt uncluttered and orderly.

The building was located in a prime spot near Shinagawa Station, an area where the post-war tangle of old-style drinking spaces and pipe-frame eateries had been transformed into a hub for high-end tourists and international business. The station marked the southern tip of the Yamanote Line that circled the interior of Tokyo. An express train ran directly to Haneda Airport and high-speed Shinkansen trains left every fifteen minutes.The

whole Shinagawa area had become as clearly marked and easy to get around as an airport.

For Mehta, it was the first time to live outside Hong Kong where he grew up and Singapore where he got his MBA. He had settled in quickly to Shinagawa's globalized familiarity, its predictable conveniences.

Since he moved to Tokyo, he hadn't seen much of the city other than the Nine Dragons office. A few weekend outings to temples and tourist sites had broken the routine, along with once-a-week dinners at Michelin-starred restaurants, for which he hired a companion who spoke enough English to avoid confusion during dinner, and after.

But mostly what he'd done was keep things running smoothly as the company expanded. As soon as the deluge of new clients eased up, he promised himself more nights out. Tokyo felt like a city set up for adventures. He wasn't going to miss that.

Nine Dragons had set up its offices in Shinagawa because of Joseph Leung, its CEO. For most of the company's mission, Mehta considered him visionary, but questioned the high outlay for office space. Leung had just smiled and explained his idea of *feng shui*. The right geographic location tapped into earth's energy forces and stimulated the currents of monetary value.

The *feng shui* worked. Overseas investment and wealth management had taken off. Nine Dragons had a waiting list of moneyed Japanese unused to waiting for anything. Some called daily and others gave up angrily, but high-end investors, trust funds, and surprisingly flush pension plans kept coming. Mehta was just glad to be on board the team helping make Leung's vision a reality.

Inside the office, it was quiet. It was true that in the daytime, the office felt cheery and bright, but at night, the ambient glow from the streets and shops below, and from nearby buildings, ricocheted through the glass dividers at distorted angles.

A faint bluish light trickled from Leung's office, the

commanding space where he met clients and planned strategy. Leung's desk faced inward from his slice of the oval. The glass gave the feeling of everyone being on the same team, and Leung could see the whole team at once.

Mehta stepped into his office at the other end from Leung's and clicked on his desk light. He was in the job of a lifetime, and he was lucky to have it, so he wanted to make it work. Attention to detail, he reminded himself, was key. Practiced habits were key too. He'd read all the books on business, leadership, and productivity he had time for. Sometimes he read abridged versions with basic summaries because he wanted the main points quickly.

Mehta spun his ergonomic chair around and sat down to upload the files on new clients to access outside the office. The new security system would record his login, though, which he would have to explain at the morning meeting. All the info was on a flash drive, the one by his headphones. That was less secure, but OK this one time. He wanted to prep for Leung's daily morning meeting.

He tossed the flash drive up, caught it in his other hand, and headed back toward the elevators.

The outer doors to the elevator area glided open. Before he could press the elevator button, though, he noticed something wrong with the long ceramic mural, the proud symbol of Nine Dragons that dominated the entryway wall. The nine differently colored dragons writhing in fierce flight with poised talons and menacing eyes always impressed clients.

But now, the head of the dragon closest to the elevator had been knocked to the floor. Heaps of chips were strewn across the carpeting.

Why hadn't he seen that on the way in? Because he was looking at his cellphone?

Mehta leaned down and picked up the chunk of heavy, glazed ceramic. The thin whiskers and square jaw were intact. One eye

stared up at him. He held the dark blue dragon head up to its place on the wall at the end. Maybe the night-time cleaners accidentally knocked it off and fled, or didn't even see it. No one else could get into the office.

He turned it over in his hands. Where would he put the head until morning?

Strictly speaking, vandalism was a security issue, which was the domain of James Tran, the security specialist. But larger problems were all his, as office manager. A broken mural was serious.

He should notify Tran, but he'd never really bonded with Tran. They rarely even spoke. Tran's English wasn't too good, even though the official language of the company was supposed to be English. He spoke some dialect of Chinese with Leung, but Tran's communicative competence was entirely in the realm of computer code. He ran security with strict efficiency.

So, where should he put the dragon head until morning? He couldn't leave it on the floor. He hovered his passcard over the reader, keyed in his code, and the doors whooshed open again.

He stepped inside with the head in both hands. From the far office, a steady glow of bluish light came from Leung's computer. Mehta hesitated to interrupt him, but it was maybe best to take this in to Leung right away. If he wasn't there, he could set the dragon on his desk and leave a note of explanation.

A few steps away from Leung's office, he stopped and stared at the front glass of his workspace. The blue light from the two computer monitors outlined a dark splash across the glass.

Not only had the cleaning crew bashed the expensive dragon mural, but they had somehow not cleaned a stain from the window—the window of the head of the company.

Granted, there were a lot of windows to clean, but leaving the boss's office messy like that was a serious oversight. Tran had vetted the cleaning company as part of his security update, but Mehta would get this issue on that morning's agenda.

Mehta turned from the glass to Leung's black lacquer desk and closed his eyes.

He looked back at the glass again and blinked. The splatter was not cleaning fluid.

Leung's tall, thin body was slumped in his chair, his face badly smashed. One arm dangled limp by his side.

Mehta backed toward the door, but the raw, stagnant air followed him.

Two meeting chairs rested on their sides. The single, locked cabinet Leung kept in his otherwise pristine office had been ransacked. Papers spilled out from Leung's briefcase, crumpled and stained brownish-red. The screens of both monitors were cracked and his cellphone screen was in shards.

Mehta shook his head and walked back to the desk. He set the dragon head down and placed his hand on Leung's neck and then held it over his nose which had been smashed flat into his face.

No pulse and no breath.

Mehta backed to the door and pulled out his cellphone. He called the security office of the building.

None of the internal security guards spoke English, but he managed "*Kite kudasai. Ni-ju-kai*" three times to get them to come to the twentieth floor.

He stepped away from the office into the glass hallway. The reflection of the grisly scene on the windows started to fade, and the reality of it sharpened.