Tokyo

Mo Hayder

Chapter 1

Tokyo, summer 1990

Sometimes you have to really make an effort. Even when you're tired and hungry and you find yourself somewhere completely strange. That was me in Tokyo that summer, standing in front of Professor Shi Chongming's door and shaking with anxiety. I had pressed my hair down so it lay as neatly as possible, and I'd spent a long time trying to straighten my old Oxfam skirt, brushing the dust off and ironing out the travel creases with my palms. I'd kicked the battered holdall I'd brought with me on the plane behind my feet so it wouldn't be the first thing he saw, because it was so important to look normal. I had to count to twenty-five and take very deep, very careful breaths before I had the courage to speak.

'Hello?' I said tentatively, my face close to the door. 'Are you there?' I waited for a moment, listening hard. I could hear vague shufflings inside, but no one came to the door. I waited a few more moments, my heart getting louder and louder in my ears, then I knocked. 'Can you hear me?'

The door opened and I took a step back in surprise. Shi Chongming stood in the doorway, very smart and correct, looking at me in silence, his hands at his sides as if he was waiting to be inspected. He was incredibly tiny, like a doll, and around the delicate triangle of his face hung shoulder-length hair, perfectly white, as if he had a snow shawl draped across his shoulders. I stood speechless, my mouth open a little.

He placed his palms flat on his thighs and bowed to me. 'Good afternoon,' he said, in a soft, almost accentless English. 'I am Professor Shi Chongming. Who are you?'

'I - I'm-' I swallowed. 'I'm a student. Sort of.' I fumbled my cardigan sleeve up and pushed out my hand to him. I hoped he didn't notice my bitten nails. 'From the University of London.'

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He eyed me thoughtfully, taking in my white face, my limp hair, the cardigan and the big shapeless holdall. Everyone does this the first time they meet me, and the truth is, no matter how much you pretend, you never really get used to being stared at.

'I've been needing to meet you for almost half my life,' I said. 'I've been waiting for this for nine years, seven months and eighteen days.'

'Nine years, seven months and eighteen days?' He raised an eyebrow, amused. 'So long? In that case you had better come in.'

I'm not very good at knowing what other people are thinking, but I do know that you can see tragedy, real tragedy, sitting just inside a person's gaze. You can almost always see where a person has been if you look hard enough. It had taken me such a long time to track down Shi Chongming. He was in his seventies, and it was amazing to me that, in spite of his age and in spite of what he must feel about the Japanese, he was here, a visiting professor at Todai, the greatest university in Japan. His office overlooked the university archery hall, where dark trees gathered round the complex tiled roofs, where the only sound was crows calling as they hopped between the evergreen oaks. The room was hot and breathless, dusty air stirred by three electric fans that whirred back and forward. I crept in, awed that I was really there at last.

Shi Chongming shifted piles of paper from a chair. 'Sit. Sit. I'll make tea.' I sat with a bump, my heavy shoes pressed rigidly together, my bag on my lap, clutched tightly to my stomach. Shi Chongming limped around, filled an electric Thermos from a sink, oblivious to the water that sprayed out and darkened his mandarin-style tunic. The fan gently shifted the stacks of papers and crumbling old volumes that were piled on the floor-to-ceiling shelves. As soon as I walked in I'd seen, in the corner of the room, a projector. A dusty 16mm projector, only just visible where it had been pushed up in the corner among the towering piles of paper. I wanted to turn and stare at it, but I knew I shouldn't. I bit my lip and fixed my eyes on Shi Chongming. He was delivering a long monologue about his research.

'Few have a concept of when Chinese medicine first came to Japan, but you can even look at the Tang era and see evidence of its existence here. Did you know that?' He made me tea and rustled up a wrapped biscuit from somewhere. 'The priest Jian Zhen was preaching it, right here, in the eighth century. Now there are kampo shops

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everywhere you look. Only step outside the campus and you'll see them. Fascinating, isn't it?'

I blinked at him. 'I thought you were a linguist.'

'A linguist? No, no. Once, maybe, but everything has changed. Do you want to know what I am? I'll tell you - if you take a microscope and carefully study the nexus where the biotechnologist and the sociologist meet . . .' He smiled, giving me a glimpse of long yellow teeth. 'There you'll find me: Shi Chongming, a very little man with a grand title. The university tells me I'm quite a catch. What I'm interested in is just how much of all this . . .' he swooped his hand round the room to indicate the books, colour plates of mummified animals, a wall-chart labelled Entomology of Hunan '. . . how much of this came with Jian Zhen, and how much was brought back to Japan by the troops in 1945. For example, let me see . . .' He ran his hands over the familiar texts, pulled out a dusty old volume and put it down in front of me, opened at a bewildering diagram of a bear, dissected to show its internal organs coloured in printer's pastel shades of pink and mint. 'For example, the Asiatic black bear. Was it after the Pacific war that they decided to use the gall bladder of their Karuizawa bear for stomach ailments?' He put his hands on the table and peered at me. 'I expect that's where you come in, isn't it? The black bear is one of my interests. It's the question that brings most people to my door. Are you a conservationist?'

'No,' I said, surprised by how steady my voice was. 'Actually, no. It's not where I come in. I've never heard of the - the Karuizawa bear.' And then I couldn't help it. I turned and glanced at the projector in the corner. 'I . . .' I dragged my eyes back to Shi Chongming. 'I mean that Chinese medicine isn't what I want to talk about.'

'No?' He lowered his spectacles and looked at me with great curiosity. 'Is it not?'

'No.' I shook my head precisely. 'No. Not at all.'

'Then . . .' He paused. 'Then you're here because . . .?'

'Because of Nanking.'

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He sat down at the table with a frown. 'I'm sorry. Who did you say you were?' 'I'm a student at London University. At least, I was. But I wasn't studying Chinese medicine. I was studying war atrocities.'

'Stop.' He held up his hand. 'You have come to the wrong man. I am of no interest to you.'

He started to get up from the desk but I unzipped my holdall hastily and pulled out the battered pile of notes secured in an elastic band, dropping some in my nervousness, picking them up and putting them all untidily on the desk between us.

'I've spent half my life researching the war in China.' I undid the band and spread out my notes. There were sheets of translations in my tiny handwriting, photocopies of testimonies from library books, sketches I'd done to help me visualize what had happened. 'Especially Nanking. Look,' I held up a crumpled paper covered in tiny characters, 'this is about the invasion - it's a family tree of the Japanese chain of command, it's all written in Japanese, see? I did it when I was sixteen. I can write some Japanese and some Chinese.'

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