

EDGAR AWARD FINALIST

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AUTHOR OF *THE DEVOTION OF SUSPECT X*

SALVATION *of a* SAINT

A NOVEL



SALVATION OF A SAINT

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Also by Keigo Higashino

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Copyright

ONE

The pansies in the planter had flowered—a few small, bright blooms. The dry soil didn't seem to have dimmed the color of the petals. *Not particularly showy flowers, but they're tough*, Ayane thought, gazing out onto the veranda through the sliding glass door. *I'll have to water them when I get a chance.*

“Have you heard a single word I've said?” Yoshitaka asked.

She turned around and smiled faintly. “Yes, everything. How could I not?”

“You might try answering more quickly, then.” Yoshitaka, lounging on the sofa, uncrossed and recrossed his long legs. In his frequent workouts, he took pains not to put on too much lower-body muscle—nothing that would prevent him from wearing the slim-cut dress pants he preferred.

“I suppose my mind must've wandered.”

“Oh? That's not like you.” Her husband raised a single sculpted eyebrow.

“What you said was surprising, you know.”

“I find that hard to believe. You should be familiar with my life plan by now.”

“Familiar ... Maybe so.”

“What are you trying to say?” Yoshitaka leaned back and stretched his arms out along the sofa top, ostentatious in his lack of concern. Ayane wondered if he was acting or if he truly was that nonchalant.

She took a breath and stared at his handsome features.

“Is it such a big deal to you?” she asked.

“Is what a big deal?”

“Having children.”

Yoshitaka gave a derisive, wry little smile; he glanced away, then looked back at her. “You haven't been listening to me at all, have you?”

“I *have* been listening,” she said with a glare she hoped he'd notice. “That's why I'm asking.”

The smile faded from his lips. He nodded slowly. “It *is* a big deal. A very big deal. Essential, even. If we can't have children, there's no point to us being married. Romantic love between a man and a woman always fades with time. People live together in order to build a family. A man and woman get married and become husband and wife. Then they have children and become father and mother. Only then do they become life partners in the true sense of the word. You don't agree?”

“I just don’t think that’s all marriage is.”

Yoshitaka shook his head. “I do. I believe it quite strongly and have no intention of changing my mind. Which is to say, I’ve no intention of continuing on like this if we can’t have children.”

Ayane pressed her fingers to her temples. She had a headache. She hadn’t seen this one coming. “Let me get this straight,” she said. “You don’t need a woman who can’t bear your children. So you’re throwing me out and switch to someone who can? That’s what you’re telling me?”

“No need to put it so harshly.”

“But that’s what you’re saying!”

Yoshitaka straightened. He hesitated, frowning slightly, before nodding again. “I suppose that from your perspective it would look that way, yes. You have to understand, I take my life plan very seriously. More seriously than anything else.”

Ayane’s lips curled upward, though smiling was the furthest thing from her mind. “You like telling people that, don’t you? How you take your life plan so seriously. It was one of the first things you said when we met.”

“What are you so upset about, Ayane? You have everything you ever wanted. If there’s something I’ve forgotten, just ask. I intend to do everything I can for you. So let’s just stop all this fussing, and start thinking about the future. Unless you see some other way forward?”

Ayane turned to face the wall. Her eyes fell on a meter-wide tapestry hanging there. It had taken her three months to make it; she remembered the material, special ordered direct from a manufacturer in England.

She didn’t need Yoshitaka to tell her how important children were. She had wanted them herself desperately. How many times had she dreamed of sitting in a rocking chair, stitching a patchwork quilt, watching her belly grow larger with each passing day? But God, in his mischief, had made that impossible. So she had given up—it wasn’t like she’d had a choice—and resigned herself to living without. She had thought her husband would be okay with that.

“I know it might seem silly to you, but can I ask one question?”

“Yes?”

Ayane faced him again, taking a deep breath. “What about your love for me? Whatever happened to that?”

Yoshitaka flinched, then gradually his smile returned. “My love for you hasn’t changed a bit,” he said. “I can assure you of that. I *do* still love you.”

That was a complete lie, as far as Ayane was concerned. But she smiled and said that was good. She wasn’t sure how else to respond.

“Let’s go.” Yoshitaka stood and headed for the door.

Ayane glanced at her dresser, thinking about the white powder hidden in a sealed plastic bag in the bottommost drawer on the right.

Guess I'll be using that soon, she thought, the last glimmer of hope fading beneath the shadow

inside her.

As she followed him out the door, she stared at Yoshitaka's back, thinking, I love you more than anything else in this world. That's why your words were like a knife stabbing me in the heart.

That's why you have to die, too.

TWO

Hiromi Wakayama began to suspect something when she saw the Mashibas coming down the stairs. Their smiles were clearly forced—Ayane’s in particular.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Yoshitaka said as he reached the bottom of the stairs. A touch too curtly, he asked her if she’d heard anything from the Ikais.

“Yukiko left a message just now saying they’d be here in about five minutes,” Hiromi told him.

“Guess I’ll get the champagne ready, then.”

“No, let me,” Ayane said hurriedly. “Hiromi, would you mind getting the glasses?”

“Not at all.”

“I’ll set the table, then,” Yoshitaka said.

Hiromi watched Ayane disappear into the kitchen before she walked over to the tall cupboard against the dining room wall. The cupboard was an antique that had cost somewhere in the neighborhood of three million yen, or so she had heard. The glasses inside were all suitably expensive.

Carefully, she took out five champagne flutes: two Baccarat and three Venetian-style. It was customary in the Mashiba household to offer the guests Venetian-style glasses.

Yoshitaka was busily setting out placemats for five at the eight-person dining table. He was an old hand at dinner parties, and Hiromi had gradually picked up the routine.

She arranged the champagne flutes at each place. She heard the sound of running water from the kitchen. She stepped closer to Yoshitaka.

“Did you say something to her?” Hiromi whispered.

“Nothing in particular,” he answered without looking up.

“You did talk, though?”

He glanced in her direction for the first time. “About what?”

“*About what!?*” she was going to say when the doorbell chimed.

“They’re here,” Yoshitaka called into the kitchen.

“Sorry, I’ve got my hands full. Can you get it?” came Ayane’s reply.

“Absolutely,” Yoshitaka said, walking over to the intercom on the wall.

Ten minutes later the hosts and their guests were sitting at the dining room table. Everyone was smiling, though to Hiromi it looked forced—as if they were all taking great pains not to disturb the

casual mood. She wondered how people learned this kind of artifice. Surely the skill wasn't inborn. Hiroki knew it had taken Ayane at least a year to blend into this particular scene.

"Your cooking is always just exquisite, Ayane," Yukiko Ikai exclaimed between mouthfuls of whitefish. "You don't often see a marinade getting the attention it deserves." It was typically Yukiko's role to praise each dish during dinner.

"Of course you're impressed!" her husband Tatsuhiko said from the seat beside her. "You always just get those mail-order instant sauce packets."

"I make it myself sometimes."

"Aojiso sauce, maybe. That minty stuff."

"So? It's good!"

"I rather like aojiso myself," Ayane put in.

"See? And it's good for you, too." Yukiko smiled.

"Please, don't encourage her, Ayane," Tatsuhiko grumbled. "You'll have her smearing that sauce on my steak next."

"Why, that sounds delicious!" Yukiko said. "I'll have to try it next time."

Everyone laughed except for Tatsuhiko.

Tatsuhiko Ikai was a lawyer. He was the legal advisor for several companies, including Yoshitaka Mashiba's. He was also significantly involved in the management of it. The two men had been friends since college.

Tatsuhiko retrieved a bottle from the wine refrigerator and offered to pour Hiroki a glass.

"Oh, I'm fine, thanks," she said, placing her hand over the rim.

"You sure? I thought you liked white, Hiroki."

"Oh, I do, but I've had enough. Thanks."

Tatsuhiko shrugged and poured some for Yoshitaka instead.

"Are you not feeling well?" Ayane asked.

"No, I'm fine, really. I've just been out drinking a lot lately and I don't want to overdo it."

"Ah, to be young and going out to parties all the time!" Tatsuhiko filled Ayane's glass before glancing at his wife and bringing the bottle to his own glass. "Yukiko's off alcohol for a while, so I'm usually drinking alone."

"Right, right, of course," Yoshitaka said, his fork stopping in midair. "I suppose you have to abstain, don't you?"

"Unless she wants to drink for two!" Tatsuhiko said, sloshing his wine a little. "Whatever she eats shows up in the milk, after all."

"How long before you can drink again?" Yoshitaka asked her.

"About a year, the doctor says."

"A year and a half, I'd say," her husband said. "Two years wouldn't hurt. And if you're going to go

that far, you might as well quit altogether.”

“So I get to take care of the baby and not have a sip for years? Not going to happen. Unless you’re planning on taking care of our little prince? Then I might reconsider.”

“Fine, fine,” her husband said. “But wait a year, at least. And then take it easy, hmm?”

Yukiko glared at him but her smile quickly returned. She gave the impression that this sort of marital exchange was a pleasant little ceremony that she actually enjoyed.

Yukiko Ikai had given birth two months ago. It was their first child, and one for which they had waited a very long time. Tatsuhiko was already forty-two, and Yukiko was thirty-five. They fondly described their pregnancy as sliding into home base at the end of the ninth inning.

The gathering tonight was something of an after-the-fact baby shower. It had been Yoshitaka’s idea, and Ayane had made all the arrangements.

“So the kid’s with your parents tonight?” Yoshitaka asked.

Tatsuhiko nodded. “Yep. They told us we could stay out as late as we wanted. Said they were actually looking forward to taking care of a baby again. Sometimes it’s convenient to have your parents living nearby.”

“Though, to be honest, I’m a little worried,” Yukiko admitted. “Your mother takes a little *too* much care of him sometimes, if you know what I mean. My friend says you should let them cry a little before you go pick them up.”

Hiromi stood up from her seat, noticing that Yukiko’s glass was empty. “I’ll go get you some water.”

“There’s a bottle of mineral water in the fridge, just bring the whole thing,” Ayane told her.

Hiromi went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. The fridge was enormous, with double doors that opened in the middle. The inside of one door was lined with bottles of mineral water. Hiromi plucked one out and returned to the table. As her eyes met Ayane’s, Ayane’s lips moved, forming the words “Thank you.”

“It must really change your life, having a child,” Yoshitaka was saying.

“Certainly your home life revolves around the kid,” Tatsuhiko replied.

“I should imagine. But doesn’t it affect your work, too? They say having children increases your sense of responsibility. So, how about it? Do you find yourself going that extra mile now that you’re daddy?”

“As a matter of fact I do.”

Ayane took the bottle of water from Hiromi and poured a glass for everyone, a smile on her lips.

“Speaking of which, isn’t it your turn next?” Tatsuhiko said, his glance shifting between Yoshitaka and Ayane. “You’ve been married for how long, a whole year now? Aren’t you tired of the newlywed couple thing yet?”

“Honey!” Yukiko swatted her husband’s arm. “That’s none of our business.”

“Fine, fine,” Tatsuhiko said with a forced chuckle. “To each their own, I suppose.” He downed the rest of his wine, his eyes turning to Hiromi. “What about you, Hiromi? Don’t worry,” he held up his hand, “I’m not going to ask a single woman anything improper. I was just wondering how things are at the school. Everything going well?”

“So far so good. There’s still lots to learn, though.”

“Well, you have the best teacher,” Yukiko said. She turned to Ayane. “So are you just leaving everything to Hiromi these days?”

Ayane nodded. “I’m afraid I’ve already taught her everything I know.”

“Well, that’s impressive,” Yukiko said, smiling at Hiromi.

Hiromi’s expression warmed and she cast her eyes downward. She was sure that neither of the Ika cared much about what she did. They were just trying to find some way to include her, the young fifth wheel at a table with two couples, in the conversation.

“Which reminds me,” Ayane said, standing, “I have a present for you two.” She fetched a large paper bag from behind the sofa and brought it back to the table. When she revealed its contents, Yukiko gave an exaggerated yelp of surprise, covering her mouth with her hands. It was an elaborate patchwork bedcover, intricately quilted. It was much smaller than the usual size.

“I thought you could use it for the baby’s bed,” Ayane said. “And when he gets too big for it, you can hang it on the wall as a tapestry.”

“Oh, it’s marvelous!” Yukiko said, an ecstatic smile on her face. “Thank you so much, Ayane.” She clutched the edge of the quilt in one hand, feeling the fabric. “I’m sure he’ll love it. Thank you!”

“That’s quite the gift. Don’t those take a long time to make?” Tatsuhiko asked, turning his eyes toward Hiromi for confirmation.

“How long *did* that one take, half a year, maybe?” Hiromi asked Ayane. She was only vaguely familiar with the process for making this particular style of quilt.

Ayane furrowed her brows. “I don’t exactly remember—” she said, then turned her attention to Yukiko “—but I’m glad you like it!”

“Oh, I love it!” Yukiko said. “But I don’t know if I should accept it. Honey, do you know how expensive these are? A genuine Ayane Mita bedcover goes for a million yen at the gallery in Ginza.”

“Whoa,” Tatsuhiko exclaimed, his eyes going a little wide with genuine surprise that something made out of little bits of cloth sewn together could cost so much.

“Frankly, I’d never seen her invest so much passion into one of her quilts before,” Yoshitaka told them. “Even on my days off she’d be sitting there on that sofa, working her needles. All day long, sometimes. It was an impressive display of dedication.”

“I’m just glad I finished it in time,” Ayane said quietly.

After dinner the party relocated to the living room, where the men announced they would move on to whiskey. Yukiko wondered aloud if she could have some coffee, so Hiromi headed back into the

kitchen.

“Oh, I’ll make the coffee,” Ayane said. “Why don’t you get some glasses and water for the whiskey? There’s some ice in the freezer.” Ayane went to the sink and filled the kettle.

By the time Hiromi returned to the living room with a full tray, the conversation had turned to gardening. The Mashibas’ garden had numerous small outdoor lights placed at clever angles; even at night the various shrubs and potted plants were attractively displayed.

“It must be tough taking care of so many flowers,” Tatsuhiko said.

“I’m a little fuzzy on the details,” Yoshitaka replied, “but Ayane does seem to tend to them pretty regularly. There’s a few up on the second floor balcony, too. She waters those every day. I couldn’t be bothered myself, but she doesn’t seem to mind. She really does love her flowers.”

Hiromi got the impression that Yoshitaka wasn’t particularly engaged in the topic of growing things; she was aware of his general disinterest in the natural world.

Ayane brought coffee for three back from the kitchen. Remembering the whiskey, Hiromi hastily began pouring water into two glasses.

It was already past eleven when the Ikais started making rumblings about going home.

“Well, that was a feast. And quite a present, too!” Tatsuhiko said, standing. “You should come over to our place next time—of course, it’s a complete mess with the baby and all.”

“I’ll get around to cleaning soon enough,” Yukiko said, jabbing her husband in the ribs before giving Ayane a smile. “You’ll have to come see our little prince. Though he looks a bit more like a faerie cherub right now.”

Ayane assured her she’d love to come visit.

It was getting close to the time when Hiromi needed to be heading home, too, so she decided she would leave with the Ikais. Tatsuhiko offered to have their taxi drop her off at her apartment.

“Oh, Hiromi, I’ll be out tomorrow,” Ayane called out as the younger woman was slipping on her shoes in the entranceway.

“That’s right, it’s a three-day weekend, isn’t it? Are you going away?” Yukiko asked.

“Not really, just to my parents’ place.”

“That’s up in Sapporo?”

Ayane nodded, smiling. “Yes, my father isn’t doing so well, so I thought I would keep my mother’s company. It’s nothing serious, mind you.”

“Well, that’s too bad. And here you are giving us a baby shower!” Tatsuhiko looked sheepish.

Ayane shook her head. “No, please, don’t worry. Like I said, it’s nothing serious.” Turning her attention back to Hiromi, she said, “If anything comes up, you have my cell number.”

“When are you coming back?”

“Well...” Ayane made a little frown. “I suppose I’ll have to give you a call when I know for sure. I won’t be away that long.”

“Right, okay.” Hiromi glanced toward Yoshitaka, but he was staring off into the distance.

Finally taking their leave, the three of them walked down a side road from the Mashibas’ house to the main street, where Tatsuhiko hailed a cab. As Hiromi would be dropped off first, she got in last.

“I hope we didn’t talk too much about children,” Yukiko said as the taxi pulled out.

“So? It was a baby shower,” Tatsuhiko said from the front seat.

“I was just thinking that we should have been a little more considerate of their situation. They’re trying to have children, aren’t they?”

“Yoshitaka said something along those lines a while back...”

“What if they *can’t* have children? You haven’t heard anything, have you, Hiromi?”

“No, nothing. Sorry.”

“Oh,” Yukiko muttered, sounding disappointed.

Hiromi wondered if they had offered her a ride home in hopes of prying information out of her.

* * *

The next morning, Hiromi left her apartment at nine o’clock, as usual, to head over to Anne’s House in Daikanyama. They’d converted an apartment into a classroom where they taught patchwork quilting. The school was Ayane’s brainchild, and thirty or so students came to learn techniques directly from Ayane Mita herself.

As she walked out of her building Hiromi was surprised to find Ayane standing there, a suitcase by her side. Ayane smiled when she saw her.

“Ayane! Is something the matter?”

“No, I just wanted to give you something before I left.” Ayane reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a key.

“What’s that for?”

“It’s a key to our house. Like I said, I’m not exactly sure when I’ll be able to return home ... I was hoping I could give you this just in case anything came up.”

“Well, I guess so.”

“Would it be a problem?”

“No, it’s not that. But this is a spare, isn’t it? You have your own copy?”

“Oh, I don’t need one. I can just call you on my way home, and if you can’t make it, my husband will meet me.”

“If you’re sure...”

“Thanks.” Ayane took Hiromi’s hand and placed the key in it, closing her fingers until she was holding it tight.

“So long,” Ayane said, and she walked off, pulling her suitcase behind her.

“Wait,” Hiromi said, thinking. Then, more loudly: “Ayane?”

Ayane stopped and looked around. "Yes?"

"Oh ... nothing ... just, have a safe trip."

"Thanks." Ayane gave a little wave and resumed walking.

* * *

The quilting classes ran until late in the evening, and Hiromi hardly had a moment to herself. By the time she was seeing the last students off, her neck and shoulders were as stiff as wood. She had just finished cleaning up the classroom when her cell phone rang. She took a look at the display and swallowed. It was Yoshitaka.

"Classes all done for the day?" he asked as soon as she lifted the phone to her ear.

"Just now, yes."

"Great. I'm out with some clients now, but I'll be home as soon as I'm done. You should come over."

He spoke so casually that Hiromi wasn't sure how to respond.

"Unless you have other plans?"

"No, not at all ... you're sure it's okay?"

"Of course it's okay. Suffice it to say, she won't be coming back for a while."

Hiromi stared at her handbag. The key Ayane had given her that morning was tucked inside the inner pocket.

"And there's something I wanted to talk to you about," Yoshitaka added.

"What?"

"I'll tell you when I see you. I'll be home at nine. Just give me a call before you come." He hung up before she could reply.

* * *

Hiromi ate by herself at a pasta place, then gave Yoshitaka a call. He was home, and there was excitement in his voice when he told her to come over quickly.

In the taxi on the way to the Mashibas', Hiromi languished in a bit of self-loathing. It irked her that Yoshitaka didn't seem to have a shred of guilt about what was going on. Yet, at the same time, she had to admit her own happiness.

Yoshitaka greeted her at the front door, smiling. He didn't hurry to get her inside. His every movement was calm and assured. In the living room, she smelled coffee brewing.

"It's been months since I made my own coffee," Yoshitaka said, coming up from the kitchen with a cup in each hand, neither of them on a saucer. "Hope I didn't mess up." He handed her one of the cups.

"I don't think I've ever seen you set foot in the kitchen."

"Maybe not! I haven't done much of anything since I got married."

“She’s a very devoted woman,” Hiromi murmured. She sipped her coffee. It was dark and rather bitter.

The corners of Yoshitaka’s mouth curled downward. “I put in too much coffee.”

“Want me to make some more?”

“No, don’t bother with it now. You can make the next pot. And I didn’t ask you here to chat about coffee.” He set his cup down on the marble tabletop. “I talked to her yesterday.”

“I thought you might’ve.”

“I didn’t tell her it was you. She thinks it’s someone she doesn’t know. If she believes me at all, that is.”

Hiromi thought back to that morning, to Ayane’s face when she handed her the key. She hadn’t seen any scheme behind that smile.

“What did she say?”

“She accepted it.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I told you she would.”

Hiromi shook her head. “Maybe it’s not my place to say this, but I can’t understand how she could just *accept* it.”

“Because those were the rules. Rules *I* made, but still ... At any rate, you’ve got nothing to worry about. It’s all settled.”

“So we’re good, then?”

“Better than good,” Yoshitaka said, putting an arm around Hiromi’s shoulder and drawing her close. Hiromi let herself fall into his embrace. She felt his lips by her ear. “You should stay the night.”

“In the bedroom?”

Yoshitaka’s mouth curled into a little smile. “We have a guest room. It’s got a double bed.”

Hiromi nodded, still feeling a strange mix of bewilderment, relief, and lingering unease.

* * *

The next morning, Hiromi was in the kitchen about to make coffee when Yoshitaka walked in and asked her to show him how.

“I only know what Ayane taught me.”

“Good enough. Show me,” Yoshitaka said, crossing his arms.

Hiromi placed a paper filter in the dripper and poured in coffee grounds with a measuring spoon. Yoshitaka leaned closer to check the amount.

“First you put in a little hot water. Just a little. Then you wait for the grounds to sort of swell.” She poured a little boiling water from the kettle into the dripper, waited about twenty seconds, then began to pour again. “You pour it in a circle. The coffee rises up a touch as you pour, and you want it to stay

at about the same level. Then, as you're pouring, you watch the lines on the serving pot and take the dripper off the moment you have enough for two. Leave it on and it'll get weak."

"Surprisingly complicated."

"Didn't you used to make coffee for yourself?"

"With a coffeemaker, yeah. Ayane threw it out when we got married. She said coffee brewed this way tasted better."

"Knowing you're a coffee addict, she probably just wanted to make sure you were getting the best possible cup."

Yoshitaka smiled faintly and shook his head. He always did that whenever Hiromi started talking about the depth of Ayane's devotion to him or her school or her work.

When he drank his coffee he did admit it tasted much better.

As he sipped his coffee, Hiromi got her things together. Anne's House was closed on Sundays, but Hiromi worked as a part-time instructor at a traditional arts school in Ikebukuro, another job she had taken over from Ayane.

On her way out, Yoshitaka asked her to call him when she was done so they could have dinner together. Hiromi had no reason to say no.

* * *

It was after seven o'clock by the time she was done at the art school. She picked up her phone and called while she was getting ready to leave, but he wasn't answering his cell. She let it ring for a while, then hung up and tried the Mashibas' house phone with the same result.

Maybe he's stepped out somewhere? But he never leaves his cell phone behind.

Hiromi decided to go to his house anyway. She tried calling several times on her way there, but there was still no answer.

Eventually, she found herself in front of the house. She looked up from the gate and saw that the light was on in the living room. Still no one answered the phone or came to the door.

Shrugging, she fished Ayane's key out of her bag, unlocked the front door, and went in. The light was on in the entryway.

Hiromi took off her shoes and walked down the short hallway. She detected a faint scent of coffee. Yoshitaka must have made more during the day.

She opened the door to the living room and froze.

Yoshitaka lay, sprawled on the wooden floor, motionless. Dark liquid had spilled from a coffee cup lying next to him, spreading in a small puddle on the wood.

I have to call an ambulance—what's the number, that number they tell you to call, that number With shaking hands, Hiromi took out her phone. But she couldn't for the life of her remember what the number was.

THREE

Elegant houses lined the gently sloping curve of the road. Even in the thin light from the streetlights it was obvious that no expense had been spared in their upkeep. The sort of people who lived in this neighborhood never had to save to afford a down payment.

Several police cars were parked along the street. Kusanagi tapped the taxi driver on the shoulder. “Right here’s good.”

He got out, checking his watch as he headed toward the scene. It was already past ten. *Guess I’m not seeing that movie*. He had missed it in the theater, then held off on renting the DVD when he heard it would be on television. When the call came that evening, he left the house in such a hurry that he had forgotten to set his recorder.

Due to the late hour, there didn’t seem to be any onlookers. Not even the news crews had arrived. *Just give me a cut-and-dried case, and the movie can wait*, he thought without much hope.

A police officer, his face set in an appropriately stern expression, was standing guard in front of the house. Kusanagi flashed his badge, and the officer wished him a good evening.

He paused before going up to the door. It looked like all the lights in the place were on. There were faintly audible voices inside.

He glanced across the front lawn and saw someone standing by a hedgerow. It was too dark to make out her features, but from her stature and the length of her hair, Kusanagi had a pretty good idea who it was. He walked over.

“What are you doing here?”

Kaoru Utsumi turned around slowly, utterly unsurprised to see him. “Good evening, Detective.”

“What are you doing outside?” he clarified.

“Nothing much. Just checking out the hedge and the flowers in the garden here. There’re some up on the balcony, too.”

“Some what?”

She pointed upward. “Flowers.”

Kusanagi looked up and saw that there was, indeed, a second-story balcony on this side of the house, with flowers and bushy leaves sticking out through the railings. Nothing about it seemed particularly noteworthy.

He returned his gaze to the young detective. "Let's try this again," he said. "Why aren't you inside?"

"Population density. There's already a crowd in there."

"Not big on mingling, are you?"

"I just don't think there's much point in looking at something everyone else has already seen. I didn't want to get in Forensics' way, so I took it upon myself to examine the exterior of the house."

"But you're not examining anything. You're looking at flowers."

"I've already completed a circuit of the premises."

"Fine. Did you at least check out the scene of the crime?"

"I haven't checked out anything in there. I turned around at the entrance," Utsumi replied.

Kusanagi shot her a quizzical look. In his experience, a detective's natural instinct was to want to examine the scene of the crime first—an instinct that apparently wasn't shared by the department's new recruit.

"I appreciate that you've given this a lot of thought, but you're still coming in there with me. There's a lot of things you need to see with your own eyes if you want to do this job right."

Kusanagi turned and walked back toward the door. Utsumi quietly followed.

Inside, the house was packed. Kusanagi saw officers from the local precinct milling about as well as people from his own department.

Junior Detective Kishitani spotted him and came over. With a wry smile on his lips he said, "Sorry to call you into work this early, sir."

"You got a problem with the hours I keep?" Kusanagi grumbled. Then: "Is this even a homicide?"

"Not sure yet. But it looks likely."

"Explain it to me. And use small words."

"Well, the gist of it is, a man, the owner of the house, died. In the living room. Alone."

"We're sure he was alone?"

"Come over here."

Kishitani led Kusanagi into the living room, with Utsumi trailing behind. It was a big room—over five hundred square feet, he guessed. There were two green leather sofas and a low marble table in the middle.

An outline of the body had been drawn in white tape on the floor next to the table. The body itself was already gone. Kishitani stood looking down at it for a moment before turning back to Kusanagi. "The deceased's name is Yoshitaka Mashiba, married, no kids."

"I heard that before coming over," Kusanagi said. "He was the president of some company, right?"

"Yeah, an IT place. He wasn't at work today, though, it being Sunday and all. We're not even sure yet if he left the house at all."

"The floor was wet?" Kusanagi asked, noting a slight stain on the flooring.

“Coffee. They found it spilled next to the body. One of the guys in Forensics got it with a syringe

There was a coffee cup, too, on its side.”

“Who found the body?”

“Er...” Kishitani opened his memo pad. “Woman by the name of Hiromi Wakayama. One of the wife’s pupils. Actually, more like her apprentice.”

“Apprentice what?”

“The wife is a famous patchwork quilter.”

“There are famous quilters?”

“Apparently. It was my first time hearing about it, too. Maybe a woman would know?” Kishitani looked over at Utsumi. “You ever hear of an ‘Ayane Mita’?” He showed her his memo book where he had written down the characters for her name.

“No,” she replied. “And why would you expect a woman to know?”

“It was just a thought,” Kishitani said, giving his head a scratch.

Kusanagi suppressed a smile as he looked at his two subordinates. Poor Kishitani had finally got a new recruit of his own to push around—and it was a woman. *He has no idea how to handle her.*

“Tell me about how the body was found,” Kusanagi asked.

“Well, his wife had gone to her parents’ house up in Sapporo yesterday. Before heading out, she left her house key with Ms. Wakayama. I guess she didn’t know when she’d be getting back, so she wanted someone else to have a key in case anything came up. Ms. Wakayama says that she was worried how Mr. Mashiba was getting along by himself and called him, but he wasn’t answering his cell or the house phone. So she got all worked up, and came over to the house. She says she first called a little after seven, and it was almost eight when she got here.”

“Which is when she found the body?”

“Correct. She used her own phone to call nine-one-one. The ambulance got here right away and determined he was dead. They got a nearby doctor to come and check him out. That’s when they decided there was something suspicious about it and called the precinct ... and here we are.”

“Hmph.” Kusanagi grunted and glanced at Utsumi, who had wandered away, over toward the cupboard. “So where’s this ... whoever it was who found the body?”

“Ms. Wakayama is resting in one of the cars. The chief is with her.”

“What, the old man’s here already? I didn’t notice him on the way in,” Kusanagi said with a frown. “They got a cause of death yet?”

“It’s looking a lot like poison. Suicide’s always a possibility ... but we wouldn’t be here if there weren’t a good chance of it being homicide, would we?”

“Hmph,” Kusanagi grunted again, his eyes following Junior Detective Utsumi as she walked into the kitchen. “So when this Ms. Wakayama got to the house, was the door locked?”

“She says it was.”

“The windows and sliding-glass doors, too?”

“Everything except the bathroom window on the second floor was locked when the officers from the precinct got here.”

“And is that window big enough for a person to go in and out of?”

“I haven’t actually tried, but I don’t think so, no.”

“Okay, why does the precinct think there’s a chance it’s homicide, not suicide?” Kusanagi sat down on the sofa and crossed his legs. “Why do they think someone poisoned his coffee? If they did, how did they get out of the house? It doesn’t add up.”

“Well ... based just on the crime scene evidence, I agree. It’s hard to imagine.”

“Something here that I’m missing?”

“Well, when the guys from the precinct were examining the scene, Mr. Mashiba’s—the deceased—cell phone rang. The call was from a restaurant in Ebisu. Apparently, he had made reservations for two at eight o’clock tonight. They were calling because no one had shown. According to the restaurant, he made the reservation an hour and a half before, at six thirty. And, like I said, Mr. Wakayama called Mr. Mashiba a little after seven, by which time he wasn’t answering. You see what the problem is. It doesn’t make sense for someone who calls and makes reservations at a restaurant at six thirty to go and commit suicide at seven.”

“Yeah,” Kusanagi said with a frown, crooking one finger to scratch the edge of his eyebrow. “It also doesn’t make sense for you not to tell me this right away.”

“Sorry. You were asking so many questions, I hadn’t gotten around to it.”

“Right,” Kusanagi said, giving his own knees a slap as he stood. Utsumi had come out of the kitchen and returned to her spot in front of the cupboard. “Hey,” he called to her. “Kishi’s giving you the lowdown. What are you doing wandering around?”

“I was listening to everything. Thank you, Detective Kishitani.”

“Er, you’re welcome,” Kishitani managed.

“Anything I should know about that cupboard?”

“Look here,” she said, pointing with her finger inside the open cupboard. “Doesn’t this part of the shelf look a little lonely compared to the rest?”

There was a space in the spot she indicated, large enough for a plate to fit.

“I guess.”

“I checked in the kitchen and found five champagne glasses in the drying rack.”

“So that’s probably what went there.”

“I think so, yes.”

“And? Why do we care about champagne glasses?”

Utsumi looked up at the detective, her lips slightly parting. Then she shook her head, as though she had changed her mind about whatever it was she was going to say. “It’s not important,” she said.

was just thinking, they must've had a party recently. When else would you use champagne glasses?"

"Sounds like a reasonable assumption. And a well-to-do couple like this with no kids probably hosts their share of parties. Still, it doesn't have much bearing on whether this guy committed suicide or not." Kusanagi looked back toward Kishitani before continuing. "People are complicated creatures who sometimes do seemingly contradictory things. I don't care if they just held a party or made reservations for dinner, when someone wants to die, they die."

Kishitani sighed and gave a noncommittal nod.

"What about the woman?" Kusanagi asked.

"Sorry, woman?"

"The victim ... er, I mean deceased's wife. Has anyone called her yet?"

"Oh, right. No, they can't get ahold of her. She's all the way up in Sapporo, and a distance outside the city, besides. Even if they do get through, she probably won't be able to get back until tomorrow at the earliest."

"No, I guess not, not from the middle of Hokkaido," Kusanagi said, inwardly relieved. If the wife were on her way, someone would have to wait around for her, and knowing Division Chief Mamiya that someone would almost definitely be Kusanagi. It was late enough at this point that going around asking the neighbors questions would probably have to wait until tomorrow. Kusanagi had just begun to dream that he might be able to go home when Mamiya's square face appeared in the doorway.

"There you are, Kusanagi. Glad you decided to show up."

"I got here ages ago. Kishitani filled me in."

Mamiya nodded, then turned to look back outside. "Please, come right in," he said, ushering into the living room a slender woman in her mid-twenties. Her hair, just above shoulder length, was naturally black—*unusual for a woman her age these days*, Kusanagi thought. The color set off the whiteness of her skin. Although, given the circumstances, it might've been more appropriate to say she looked pale. Either way, she was definitely attractive and knew how to use her makeup.

Hiromi Wakayama, I presume.

"You were saying that you discovered the body as soon as you walked into the room, correct?" Mamiya was asking her. "So you would have been standing right about where you are now?"

The woman stopped looking at the floor long enough to glance in the direction of the sofa, remembering the moment of the discovery.

"Yes," she answered in a thin voice. "Right around here."

Maybe it was the fact that she was skinny, or the paleness of her face, but to Kusanagi it looked as though the woman was having trouble just standing. *She's still in shock*, he thought, *and no wonder.*

"And the last time you were in this room before then was the night before last?" Mamiya asked, confirming.

Hiromi nodded.

“Is anything different about the room now from how you saw it then? Anything at all? Even little details are fine.”

She looked almost fearfully around the room for moment, then quickly shook her head. “I’m not sure. There were a lot of other people here the night before, and we’d just eaten dinner...” Her voice was trembling.

Mamiya nodded, his eyebrows drawing sympathetically closer together as if to say, *It’s all right, of course you don’t remember.*

“Well, we won’t keep you here any longer tonight. You should go home and get some rest. We’ll most likely need to talk with you again tomorrow, if that’s all right?”

“That’s fine,” she said, “but I’m afraid there’s really not much I can tell you.”

“I know, but we have to be sure we have as much information as possible. I hope you will be able to help us.”

“Okay,” Hiromi said, without looking up.

“I’ll have one of my men take you home,” Mamiya said, looking over at Kusanagi. “How’d you get here tonight? Did you bring your car?”

“Taxi, sorry.”

“Figures you would choose today to leave your car behind.”

“I haven’t been driving much recently.”

Mamiya was clucking his tongue in disapproval when Utsumi said, “I brought mine.”

Kusanagi turned. “You drive? In Tokyo? On your salary?”

“I was out at a restaurant when the call came in. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” Mamiya said. “Maybe you can drive Ms. Wakayama home?”

“Certainly. If I might ask her a question first, though?”

“What question?” Mamiya asked, shocked at the abrupt request from the new recruit.

Hiromi visibly tensed.

“I understand Mr. Mashiba was drinking coffee when he fell, and I was wondering if he was in the habit of not using a saucer with his cup?”

Hiromi’s eyes widened slightly and her gaze wandered off to one side. “Well, I suppose he wouldn’t, maybe, if he was drinking alone.”

“That would mean that he had a visitor either yesterday or today,” Utsumi said with confidence. “Any idea who that might be?”

Kusanagi looked up at her. “How do you know he had a visitor?”

“There’s an unwashed coffee cup and two saucers still in the kitchen sink. If Mr. Mashiba had been drinking coffee alone, it doesn’t make sense that there would be one saucer out, let alone two.”

Kishitani went into the kitchen and came right back out. “She’s right. One cup, and two saucers.”

Kusanagi exchanged glances with Mamiya before turning again to the young Hiromi Wakayama.

“Any ideas?” he asked her.

She shook her head. “I ... I don’t know.” There was anxiety in her voice. “I mean, I haven’t been here since the party the other night. How would I know if he’d had any visitors?”

Kusanagi glanced at the chief again. Mamiya nodded, a troubled look on his face. “Right, well, we’ve kept you here long enough. You’ll see her home, Utsumi? Kusanagi, you can go with them.”

“Yes sir,” Kusanagi said, understanding instinctively what Mamiya wanted. The young Mr. Wakayama was clearly hiding something, and it would be his job to get her to spill the beans.

* * *

The three left the house together, and Utsumi asked them to wait while she went to get the car, which she had left in a nearby parking lot.

While they were waiting, Kusanagi kept an eye on the woman next to him. She looked crushed—and he didn’t think her shock at finding a body was entirely to blame.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Were you planning on going out anywhere tonight?”

“Tonight? Are you kidding?”

“I was just wondering if you might’ve had any prior engagements.”

Hiromi’s lips moved slightly. She looked hesitant, uncertain.

Kusanagi said: “Sorry if you’ve already heard this a hundred times, but if you don’t mind me asking...”

“Yes?”

“What exactly made you call Mr. Mashiba tonight?”

“Oh, well, since Mrs. Mashiba left her key with me, I thought she wanted me to check in now and then. I think she was worried about leaving her husband all by himself, so if there was anything I could do to help...” Her voice trailed off.

“So when you couldn’t reach him, you came to the house?”

“Yes,” she said with a little nod.

Kusanagi raised an eyebrow. “But surely people don’t always answer their phone—cell phone or land line. Maybe he was out and couldn’t pick up for some reason? Didn’t you consider that possibility?”

After a moment’s silence, Hiromi shook her head. “I guess I didn’t.”

“Why not? Were you worried about something in particular?”

“No, nothing like that. I guess I just had a strange feeling...”

“A ‘strange’ feeling?”

“Is it wrong to come to somebody’s house because something didn’t feel right?”

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