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## I. The Witnesses

### I

On the evening of the thirteenth of January, Tatsuo Yasuda invited one of his clients to join him at the Koyuki restaurant in Akasaka. His guest was a senior official at one of the government ministries.

Yasuda was the president of a company that sold industrial machinery. The company had grown considerably in recent years, a success it was rumoured to owe to its large number of contracts with the government. This explained why Yasuda often brought important officials like tonight's guest to the Koyuki.

Yasuda liked the restaurant. It wasn't the fanciest in this part of Tokyo, but that was precisely what gave it such an informal, relaxing atmosphere – and the waitresses who served in the private dining rooms were all more than up to the task. Yasuda was considered a good customer. He was happy to splash his cash around – or, as he liked to call it, his 'capital'. His clients were all the type to enjoy this extravagance. Still, no matter how friendly he was to the waitresses, he took care never to reveal much about his guests.

A bribery scandal had been in the news since the previous autumn, centring on a certain government ministry. A number of companies doing business with the ministry were also said to be involved. So far only a few lower-ranking officials had been implicated, but the newspapers were predicting that by spring the scandal would have spread to the ministry's upper echelons.

As a result, Yasuda had become even more discreet about his guests' identities. There were clients he had brought seven or eight times, whom the waitresses knew by affectionate nicknames like

‘Ko-san’ or ‘Wu-san’ – and yet, while they realized most of these guests were government officials of some sort, they learned nothing further about them.

In any case, it didn’t matter who they were. Yasuda was the one footing the bill. All they needed to do at the Koyuki was keep him happy.

Tatsuo Yasuda was around forty years old, with a broad forehead and a rather sharp nose. He had a dark complexion, kind eyes, and eyebrows so thick they could almost have been painted on. He radiated the easy confidence of an experienced businessman. Despite his popularity with the waitresses, it seemed he never had designs on any of them, instead showing the same friendliness to each.

His designated waitress was Toki, for the simple reason that she had been the one to serve him on his first visit. While they were on good enough terms, it seemed their relationship had never gone beyond the walls of the Koyuki.

Toki was twenty-six but with her beautiful pale skin could easily have passed for twenty. Her large black eyes made quite the impression on guests. When one of them addressed her, she would glance up and flash them a smile she knew they would find enchanting. Her oval face and delicate chin gave her a graceful profile.

It was no surprise, then, that several customers had attempted to seduce her. Rather than living in, the waitresses came into the restaurant at around four every afternoon and headed home sometime after eleven. Sometimes a customer would ambush Toki as she left the restaurant, asking her to meet him under the railway bridge at Shinbashi. She couldn’t turn them down flat – they *were* customers after all – so instead would breezily agree to their requests before standing them up three or four times in a row. That way, as Toki was explaining, the penny would usually drop.

‘Sometimes they’re a little slow on the uptake. One turned up the other day in a rage. Pinched me so hard I practically screamed!’

Still seated, Toki lifted her kimono, revealing to her colleagues a small blueish patch on her pale knee.

‘Well, what did you expect, leading him on like that!’ said Yasuda,

smiling as he tipped back his sake cup. The waitresses knew him well enough that he was privy even to this kind of gossip.

‘Say, Ya-san, how come *you* never try it on with us?’ asked Yaeko.

‘What would be the point? Knowing you lot, you’d only stand me up!’

‘Just listen to him! I know your type, Ya-san,’ teased Kaneko, another waitress.

‘Oh, I don’t know what you’re implying –’

‘It’s no use, Kane-chan,’ cut in Toki. ‘We’re all smitten with Mr Yasuda, but he barely even looks at us. I wouldn’t waste your time.’

‘Hmph!’ said Kaneko, flashing a grin.

It was just as Toki had said: the waitresses at the Koyuki were quite taken with Yasuda, and if he’d ever made approaches they would have been well received. His looks and personality made him an irresistible choice.

That evening, after seeing his guest off at the entrance, Yasuda had returned to the private room to relax with a drink. When he turned to Yaeko and her colleague Tomiko and asked, ‘By the way, you two – how about I take you out for a meal tomorrow?’ they jumped at the offer.

‘But what about Toki? Why don’t you invite her too?’ asked Tomiko, casting her eyes around for her friend, who had left the room on some errand or another.

‘Let’s make it just the two of you. I’ll take Toki another time. I can’t have you all skipping out on work.’

This was true. The waitresses were supposed to be at the restaurant by four and would arrive late if they ate out beforehand. It wouldn’t do for all three of them to join him.

‘That’s settled then. I’ll see you at three thirty, at the Levante in Yūrakuchō,’ said Yasuda, his eyes crinkling as he smiled.

When Tomiko walked into the Levante at around three thirty the next day, she found Yasuda drinking a coffee at a table in the back.

He greeted her and gestured to the seat opposite. It felt odd seeing him here, rather than in the usual setting of the restaurant, and she found herself blushing as she sat down.

‘Oh, no Yaeko yet?’

‘She’ll be along any moment,’ replied Yasuda with a smile, then ordered her a coffee. A few minutes later, Yaeko walked in, looking similarly bashful. Dressed in kimonos that gave away their profession, the two waitresses stood out from the young couples filling the café.

‘What kind of food do you two feel like? How about something Western? Chinese? Maybe tempura, or eel?’ asked Yasuda.

‘Western food,’ they replied simultaneously. It seemed they were already getting their fill of Japanese food at the restaurant.

The three of them left the Levante and headed towards Ginza. The streets weren’t too busy at this time of day and, though a cold wind was blowing, the weather was fine. They walked at a leisurely pace, crossing at the corner of Owari-chō towards the Matsuzakaya department store. In stark contrast to the end-of-year holidays two weeks earlier, Ginza was practically deserted.

‘Jam-packed on Christmas Eve, wasn’t it!’ commented one of the waitresses as they walked behind Yasuda. He led them up the steps of the Coq d’Or. The restaurant, too, was almost empty.

‘Well, order whatever you like,’ said Yasuda once they were seated.

‘Oh, don’t worry, we’ll have anything,’ Yaeko and Tomiko replied, out of politeness. But once the menu was in their hands they began debating their options at length. They seemed to be struggling to decide.

Yasuda’s eyes darted to his wristwatch. This didn’t escape Yaeko, who turned and asked, ‘Oh dear, Ya-san – somewhere you need to be?’

‘No, not particularly. It’s just that I’m off to Kamakura this evening,’ replied Yasuda, his hands clasped on the table.

‘Oh, we’re sorry. Tomiko, we should hurry up and choose!’

And so they finally reached a decision. The meal began with a soup course and took quite a long time to finish. The three of them

chatted about this and that. Yasuda seemed to be enjoying himself. When the fruit was served, he glanced again at his watch.

‘Time to be heading off?’

‘Not quite yet,’ replied Yasuda. But when their coffee arrived he pushed back his cuff once more.

‘You need to get going, don’t you? We’ll make ourselves scarce,’ said Yaeko, making to leave.

‘Hmm . . .’ Yasuda, puffing on a cigarette, narrowed his eyes as if to think. ‘To be honest, I’ll feel a little lonely if we part ways like this. How about you see me off at Tokyo station?’ It was hard to tell from his expression whether he was joking or serious.

The two waitresses looked at each other. They were already late for work, and going to the station would only delay them further. But behind Yasuda’s casual tone they detected a peculiar seriousness. Perhaps he really did feel lonely. And there was the fact that he had just treated them to a meal. No, it would hardly do for them to turn him down.

‘Of course.’ It was Tomiko who replied first, and decisively. ‘I’ll just phone the Koyuki and tell them we’ll be a little late,’ she said. She returned shortly afterwards, a smile on her face. ‘That’s all sorted. Now, let’s see you off.’

‘Sorry to put you out like this,’ said Yasuda as he rose from his seat. He glanced at his wrist once again. The man certainly looks at his watch a lot, thought the waitresses.

‘Which train are you getting?’ asked Yaeko.

‘The 6.12, or the one after that. It’s twenty-five to six now, so if we leave right away we’ll be there in good time,’ Yasuda said, hurrying off to pay the bill.

It was a five-minute taxi ride to the station. On the way, Yasuda apologized again.

‘Oh, don’t worry, Ya-san, it’s the least we can do,’ said Yaeko.

‘Yes, it’s really no bother!’ added Tomiko.

When they arrived, Yasuda bought his ticket and gave the waitresses platform tickets. His train to Kamakura, on the Yokosuka line, left from platform 13. The electronic clock showed almost six o’clock.

‘Ah, good. I’ll catch the 6.12,’ said Yasuda.

His train had not yet arrived at the platform. As they waited, Yasuda looked east towards tracks 14 and 15, from which the long-distance trains departed. One such train was currently waiting at platform 15. The tracks in between were clear, giving them an unobstructed view from where they were standing.

‘That’s the Asakaze Express. Goes all the way down to Hakata in Kyushu,’ remarked Yasuda.

The platform was already buzzing with the excitement of an imminent departure. Passengers bustled about in front of the train, accompanied by those seeing them off.

It was then that Yasuda exclaimed: ‘Look! Isn’t that Toki?’

Yaeko and Tomiko, their eyes round with astonishment, turned to see where he was pointing.

‘Oh, yes! That’s her all right,’ said Yaeko excitedly. And indeed it was Toki making her way through the crowd on platform 15. From her elegant outfit and the suitcase in her hand, it was clear she was about to board the train. Tomiko, finally spotting her, cried out: ‘Goodness, it is her!’

### 3

The waitresses were even more startled to see Toki chatting away merrily to a young man at her side. They could only see the man in profile, but he didn’t look familiar. He was wearing a dark overcoat and carrying a small suitcase. The pair kept appearing and disappearing as they threaded their way through the crowd on the platform, heading for the rear of the train.

‘Where could they be going?’ asked Yaeko, scarcely able to catch her breath.

‘And who is *he*?’ exclaimed Tomiko.

Unaware that she was being observed, Toki continued along the platform with her companion. After a while, they stopped in front of one of the carriages and appeared to check which number it was. Then, the man leading the way, they boarded the train and disappeared from view.

‘Quite the dark horse, our Toki! Off to Kyushu with her boyfriend, you reckon?’ said Yasuda, grinning to himself.

The two waitresses stood rooted to the spot, their faces still screwed up in surprise. They stared wordlessly at the carriage into which Toki had disappeared as passengers continued to mill around in front of the train.

‘I wonder . . .’ said Yaeko after a moment. ‘Must be travelling a long way if they’re taking an express.’

‘So she had a boyfriend all this time?’ asked Tomiko.

‘Who would have thought it!’

Tomiko and Yaeko had both dropped their voices, as if they had discovered something extraordinary.

In fact, neither of them knew much about Toki’s personal life. She had never been one to talk about herself. They knew she wasn’t married, and they’d never heard about any lovers or flings. In general, women in their line of work were either entirely open with their colleagues and wanted to talk about everything or they wrapped themselves in silence. Toki was one of the silent ones. As a result, the two waitresses were shocked to have stumbled across this secret corner of her life.

‘I’m going over there to see who he is,’ said Yaeko eagerly.

‘No, don’t. We should leave them to it!’ said Yasuda.

‘Come on, Ya-san – aren’t you jealous?’

Yasuda laughed. ‘Why would I be? I’m off to see my wife!’

Soon the train for Kamakura pulled into platform 13, blocking their view of platform 15 entirely. It would later be known that this train had arrived at 6.01.

Yasuda boarded his train, waving goodbye to the waitresses as he climbed into the carriage. His train was due to leave in eleven minutes, and he would have a short wait on his hands. He leaned out of the window and told the waitresses: ‘I’ll be all right from here, thank you. Shouldn’t you be getting back?’

‘I suppose we should,’ said Yaeko, who was in fact dying to rush over to platform 15 and get a closer look at Toki’s companion. ‘Well, we’ll be off then, Ya-san.’

‘Goodbye. And see you soon!’



The two women shook his hand and took their leave. As they walked down the stairs from the platform, Yaeko turned to her friend.

‘Tomi-chan, how about we go and take a look?’

‘I’m not sure we should . . .’ replied Tomiko, but her show of reluctance was less than convincing, and soon the two of them were running back up another flight of stairs that led to platform 15.

They found the right carriage and, standing among the crowd on the platform, peeked through the window. In the train’s well-lit interior, Toki and her companion were easy to spot.

‘Look at her, chattering away!’ said Yaeko.

‘He’s pretty good-looking, too. How old do you reckon he is?’ said Tomiko, clearly more interested in Toki’s companion.

‘Twenty-seven or so, I’d guess.’ Yaeko narrowed her gaze. ‘No, twenty-nine, maybe.’

‘So a few years older than her.’

‘Let’s go and surprise her.’

‘No, Yae-chan, don’t!’ Tomiko stopped her friend from climbing on to the train. Then they watched for a little longer, until Tomiko managed to drag Yaeko, who was still looking on enviously, away from the scene.

‘Come on, let’s go. We’re late.’

Back at the Koyuki, they immediately told the proprietress what they had seen. She was just as startled as they’d been.

‘Well I never! Yesterday, she asked me for five or six days off so she could visit her family home. She never said anything about a man!’

‘I suppose that was just an excuse. Anyway, didn’t she say she was from Akita, up north?’

‘And she always seemed so well-behaved! Just goes to show – you can never tell with people. I bet they’re strolling happily around Kyoto or somewhere by now . . .’ The three women exchanged knowing looks.

The following evening, Yasuda returned to the Koyuki with another client. After seeing his guest off as usual, he turned to Yaeko. ‘No Toki today, I assume?’

‘Not just today. She’s taken the whole week off!’ replied Yaeko, her eyebrows raised.

‘Has she now! Off on their honeymoon then, you reckon?’ said Yasuda, sipping his drink.

‘I suppose so. I just can’t believe it!’

‘What’s so hard to believe? If anything, you girls should follow her lead!’

‘No such luck for us. Unless *you* fancied whisking us away, Ya-san?’

‘Ha, me? No chance. I couldn’t handle the lot of you.’

After chatting a little longer, Yasuda left the restaurant. He was back again the next evening with another two clients. Again Yaeko and Tomiko waited on him, and again their conversation turned to Toki.

But it wasn’t long before Toki and her companion were found dead – and in a rather unlikely location.