

# THE TOKYO KARAOKE MURDER

## CHAPTER ONE

‘Thank you, Miss Clark. We’ll let you know.’

Josie stood up and bowed formally. Had it gone alright? She thought it had, but it was so hard to tell. She hadn’t had many job interviews in Tokyo, and this was the one she really cared about. AZT Insurance was a global insurance company with a reputation for looking after its new recruits and, more importantly, being open to employing foreigners. There weren’t many Japanese companies, even now, who took that in their stride.

The good-looking young HR assistant who had sat in on the interview got up and escorted her out of the room.

‘How do you think it went?’ said Josie as they walked down the corridor to the lift.

The assistant looked at Josie appraisingly, taking in her height – she was several centimetres taller than him – and her unruly brown hair, which she’d wrestled into a bun from which it threatened to escape.

‘I think you’re in with a chance. AZT wants to show how forward-looking it is, and an English recruit would certainly do that.’

‘I didn’t make too many grammatical mistakes, did I?’

‘No you didn’t. Your Japanese is impressive. Where did you learn it?’

‘In Sapporo. I’ve been working there as a teaching assistant for a couple of years, but I thought it was time to branch out. And I’ve always wanted to live in Tokyo.’

The lift announced its arrival with a discreet *ding*. The assistant held the door open for her.

‘I’ll let you know as soon as they make a decision,’ he said. ‘Give your pass back to reception as you leave.’

‘Thanks,’ said Josie, returning his smile.

I hope I’ve got it, she thought, as the lift whizzed her down from the twenty-second floor. It’s what I’ve always wanted. In spite of all the sacrifices. She tried not to think about her family back in south London and Dave, her boyfriend, who tried so hard to hide how lonely he was without her. Tokyo came first.

The lift door opened and she stepped out, handed her visitor’s pass back to the uninterested woman at the reception desk and walked out into the chilly February wind. It had snowed earlier in the day and little crusts of grimy snow still lay in the gutters, but the streets and pavements were clear and the sun had broken through. For someone who was used to the deep winter snow of Sapporo, this counted as almost springlike. Josie felt her spirits rise. She was free for the next week, and she was in Tokyo.

She looked at her watch – it was four o’clock. Good; she could pick up her bag from the coin locker at Tokyo station, check into her hotel and then go out and find somewhere to have dinner. Somewhere nice, but sophisticated too – the kind of place she didn’t normally go. She’d only been to Tokyo a couple of times before and didn’t know her way around all that well, but after all, how different from Sapporo could it be? They were both Japanese cities, and that meant that they were both full of places to eat well and cheaply if you just used your eyes.

She found her hotel in east Ginza, cheap but central, dumped her bag and headed out. It was beginning to get dark and the glass skyscrapers glittered in the fading light. To the east the sky looked threatening, with storm clouds promising more snow before long. But the streets of Ginza were as bright as day, and the shops were crammed with shoppers. Josie went into the big Mitsukoshi department store by the Ginza metro station and rapidly came out again, intimidated by its elegance. Maybe Tokyo wasn’t much like Sapporo after all.

She walked on until she reached the noise and chaos of the overhead station at Yurakucho. It was

rush hour, and crowds of commuters hurtled passed her, heading for the station entrance and their trains home. Tired of fighting her way past them, Josie turned down a quiet side street and strolled along it until she reached an office building with a signboard in the window full of tiny pictures of mouthwatering dishes. She stopped. She knew enough about Japan to know that if you wanted a restaurant, the place to look was not on the street but up – on the top floors of anonymous office blocks. The restaurants advertised themselves on boards like this so if you saw something you liked you could take the lift up to a mini street of restaurants in the sky.

She studied the pictures. She didn't fancy ramen or sushi – she ate plenty of that in Sapporo. There were a couple of Italian restaurants and a place specialising in omelettes. Then a picture caught her eye, of a restaurant on the thirteenth floor that specialised in tofu. It looked unusual and smart – just what she was looking for, in fact. And she was getting hungry. She pushed open the glass door and headed for the lifts.

## CHAPTER TWO

When the lift doors opened onto a plush reception area, with a large pot of orchids on a polished table and a glass cabinet of kimono-clad dolls that stared sightlessly across the room, Josie wobbled, thinking she might have accidentally gone more upmarket than she'd intended. But the prices on the signboard down below hadn't looked that frightening. And the greeter who came to take her coat and show her to a table was welcoming enough. She started to relax.

She was given a table by the window, one of a series of small tables for two that ran the length of the room. Most of the other tables were occupied and Josie realised she'd been lucky to get in; any later and the place would have been full. She spent a long time studying the menu and then ordered carefully – a range of little dishes of tofu done in different ways, with rice and miso soup to finish. Then she sat back and looked round the room.

It was long and narrow, with a bar at one end where people were ordering drinks. Most of the tables, apart from the ones along the window, were for groups, and it seemed like a place people went to celebrate – at a table on the far side the waiter had just brought a frosted cake stuck all over with lit sparklers and they were singing *Happy Birthday* to a blushing girl in the centre.

A voice reached her from the next table.

'You wouldn't say that if you'd been there,' it said, in a teasing way, followed by laughter. Josie turned to look. The voice belonged to a girl in her twenties, about Josie's age, who seemed to be the centre of attention at a table for six. The girl was chatting animatedly, turning her head from side to side to catch the eyes of the others at the table, making sure she had their attention. She needn't have tried so hard; she was heart-stoppingly beautiful with a round face and pointed chin, and a sort of glow about her that made it hard to take your eyes off her. She sat opposite a polished young man who laughed louder than the others, with an enthusiasm that struck Josie as artificial, as though he was trying to convince people, and perhaps himself, that he was enjoying the evening. The girl didn't seem to mind; she glanced across at him coquettishly and he reached across the table, took her hand and turned it over so that the light caught the substantial diamond on her ring finger and made it sparkle. She smiled at him and turned her hand from side to side to make it flash some more.

So that was it – an engagement party. That explained the air of excitement that enveloped the table. Not just excitement – something else Josie couldn't quite put her finger on. An odd sense that they were not as comfortable together as they wanted people to think, that beneath the smiles and affectionate gestures they were uneasy. She wondered why, and if they realised they were more transparent than they would wish.

As Josie ate her dinner, she found herself listening more and more to their conversation. She didn't have a clear view of them, but she pushed her chair back and angled it discreetly so she could glance at them occasionally without being obvious about it.

'I bet the assistant was amazed when you said you'd have this one,' said a plain girl sitting next to the ring wearer. She was short and thin, even for a Japanese girl, with bony shoulders revealed by an unflattering dress. Pretty girl's plain best friend, thought Josie. The same the world over.

'Oh no, it was a top notch jewellers, they sell rings like that all the time,' said the polished young man. 'My boss gave me an introduction there, so they knew it would be a worthwhile sale.'

The girl with the ring smiled and stretched out her hand to look at the ring again.

'But won't you feel nervous wearing something so valuable?' the thin girl said. 'Suppose you lose it or something? Leave it on the side of the sink when you wash your hands and walk off. It's easily done.'

'Don't be silly. I won't do anything like that. And anyway, I'm not going to wear it all the time.'

I'll keep it in the bank and just put it on for special occasions.'

'Very sensible. That's what I'd do,' came a female voice from the far end of the table, out of Josie's line of sight. 'It's an investment so you need to look after it.'

'But you will wear it sometimes, won't you?' said the polished young man. 'It does set off your pretty hands so well.'

The girl giggled and glanced down, giving everyone a chance to admire her long eyelashes. When she looked up her eyes met Josie's and Josie hastily looked away, embarrassed to have been caught eavesdropping. But the girl didn't seem to mind.

'I think this whole custom of buying engagement rings is dying out,' said the young man who sat at the end of the table nearest to Josie. He had a discontented expression and his eyes darted around, never settling anywhere, as his thin hands played restlessly with the paper envelope that had held his chopsticks. 'It's not Japanese anyway, it's western. You should have had a proper *yuino* instead.'

'A *yuino*?' said the pretty girl with the ring. 'Does anyone do that any more?'

'Hardly anyone,' said the polished young man. 'And anyway, a *yuino* is a family thing and I don't have any family left – only Reiko.' He turned to the girl Josie couldn't see and smiled.

'A *yuino* is so old-fashioned,' said the plain girl. 'And who wants to get given a cuttlefish? Or kelp?' She and the pretty girl laughed together.

'But it's the proper way to celebrate an engagement,' said the nervy young man, folding and unfolding his slip of paper. 'The way it's always been done. I think we should value that.'

'And the things you get given in a *yuino* all have a meaning,' said a calm male voice. It came from the last member of the group. All Josie could see of him was his large, work-worn hands.

'Yes, but they're so embarrassing,' said the girl with the ring. 'I mean, cuttlefish! Long and thin...' She rolled her eyes and pretended to be too shy to go on. 'Too crude.'

She looked round the table, inviting them to laugh with her, and caught Josie's eye again. Josie quickly looked down, but it was too late. The girl got up and came over to her table.

'You speak Japanese, don't you?' she said. 'I could tell you were following our conversation.'

'I'm sorry,' said Josie. 'I didn't mean to be rude.'

'It's okay. You're here on your own so why not? It's so boring otherwise. Tell you what, why don't you come and join us? It'll be fun. Better than spending the evening all by yourself.'

'Well,' said Josie. 'If your friends don't mind.'

'Of course they don't. Come on.'

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