

# THE GANGSTER'S SON

A Shig Sato Mystery

By

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## Chapter 1

The police inspector knelt over the dead woman and gently tilted her young, battered face. Her hair, dusty with debris, fell at odd angles. Sticky crimson blood oozed out her nose, ears, and mouth. One eye stared into the night and what remained of the other was a swollen, bloody mass. He pressed his finger against a plum-colored cheek split open. Some bone was still intact.

As he got up, he noted again how her legs seemed oddly twisted beneath her, and how the sleeveless silk blouse and short black skirt she wore did not look disturbed. Nothing lay beside her. In the harsh crime scene lights, he thought she looked like a broken mannequin, carelessly discarded and alone.

It was a still, humid Tokyo evening, past midnight. Detective Ken Abe watched Inspector Shig Sato. Five minutes had passed since Sato said he wanted to have another look at the body. Abe wondered if his friend had lost his ability to concentrate, with his wife so ill, and this being his first night back in Criminal Investigations after two years of diplomatic security duty.

“Inspector?” Abe believed he hid the concern in his voice.

Sato raised his hand to shade his eyes from the blinding lights.

“Yes?”

Abe pulled a cigarette from his lips.

“So?”

Sato took another long look at the young woman, walked over to Abe, and said, “She was probably surprised, then beaten and left for dead. Probably dropped to the ground where she stood.”

Abe was relieved to see Sato focusing on the crime, putting what he saw into some sense of order.

Sato asked, “You said she’s a waitress at the jazz club?”

“Yep. Right in there,” Abe said, pointing at a neglected brown door. “A jazz club. Called the Down Low.”

There were many scattered anonymous doors along the alley. Some led to long, narrow, dim bars selling grilled chicken and beef on sticks to whet the appetite of the tired businessmen drinking beer after lonely beer. The meat’s lingering aroma, the grease, the alcohol, the sweat of the cooks – all clung to the thick night air. Behind other doors, sushi denizens had watched counter men slice their tuna and eel and octopus, caress their roe and rice, priests preparing their offerings. In tiny cabarets with low and plaintive jukeboxes, hostesses rested their aching feet while night managers quickly counted the evening take after rousting patrons from their drunken stupors.

The inspector saw the doors, once open in the vain hope of catching a midnight breeze, now closed tight against the bad luck that came with a dead body.

“It is too quiet here,” Sato said. He did not like the quiet, not in that part of Tokyo, on the fringe of nightclubs and cabarets and bars and restaurants, that place where two alleys met, where a woman lay dead.

Sato took another look, then turned toward the medical examiner.

“It looks like somebody struck her across the face so hard it snapped her head back against that concrete wall,” the doctor said. A slight, bald, fidgety man, he was truly at ease only when performing an autopsy. He hated making definite statements at crime scenes, but knew Sato needed to hear something. “Blunt force. Caused some type of bleeding in the skull, I’d say. Maybe something snapped.”

Sato looked back at the body, then at the doctor. “No one moved her, touched her in any way?”

“No!” If it had been anyone other than Sato, the doctor would have been insulted.

“Any signs of resisting? Bruising? Rape?”

“I don’t know.” The doctor scratched his ear. “Her underclothes don’t look like they’ve been disturbed, and there’s nothing strange about her thighs or buttocks. I mean, there are no strange marks or bruises. Like I said, it looks like she just dropped. Some kind of smack in the face, her head hits the wall. Probably burst something in her brain. Anyway, it probably shut down her central nervous system. That’s probably what killed her. We’ll know more later.”

Abe watched Sato talk to the medical examiner. He watched Sato’s face harden as the doctor gave his assessment. He waited for the conference to end before saying, “She was pretty.”

Sato turned to the girl. “What was she doing in a dark alley so late at night?” he wondered. “What could have happened that could lead to this?”

“This is Roppongi,” Abe said. “She probably liked the excitement. Nightclubs. Music. Lots of strange new people.”

“People,” Sato grunted.

“This club has a lot of foreigners coming to listen to jazz.”

“Foreigners.”

“Young girl looking to meet foreigners, maybe have an adventure.”

“Adventure.” Sato shook his head.

“Hey, Tokyo’s booming,” Abe said. “It’s 1991. Things are good. Lots of people come here from all over the world, looking to make money, have a good time.”

“Maybe she had a boyfriend,” Sato said. “Maybe a jealous boyfriend.”

“Maybe a secret admirer,” Abe said.

“Yes, maybe.”

The uniformed police officers at the crime scene believed now that she was dead, the best thing for the poor girl was having Inspector Sato lead the investigation into her murder. Everyone at Azabu Police Station was pleased when the inspector returned there for his last month with the department. Even the station chief, old Wada, seemed pleased, and he was never pleased about anything.

A cheerful, gray-haired sergeant noticed the rookie officer next to him watching Sato with a look of pure awe. The sergeant whispered, “Lucky girl. She got Sato.”

The rookie barely managed to say “Sato.”

The sergeant whispered, “I’d want him hunting down my killer.”

The rookie nodded.

“Sato can talk a confession out of anyone,” the sergeant said. “And watch the other guy. Detective Abe. He can smell dog shit at fifty yards and tell you if it was breakfast or lunch. If there are any clues here, they’ll find them.”

“Smell?”

The sergeant nodded. “People say Abe was hit in the head with a baseball when he was a kid.

Hit some nerve. I don't know. But he's got a nose on him."

The young officer admired how despite the sticky heat, Sato looked cool and commanding – dark suit, white shirt, plain blue tie. He saw the inspector's face fixed in intense concentration, seemingly impervious to the muggy night air.

But Detective Abe. The rookie saw a rotund, affable, sweaty, middle-aged man who looked more like a cheerful bum than a detective – a bum who slept in his clothes and did not care if his socks matched or not, or if his broken shoelaces were haphazardly knotted together.

"That's Sato's partner?" the rookie whispered as he watched Abe crouch down, the palm of his hand lightly caressing the pavement, like a mother stroking her baby.

Sato spotted the sergeant and walked over. "We have a name for this poor kid?"

"Kimi Yamada. College student," the sergeant said. "Twenty-two years old. Works at that night club three nights a week."

"Kimi Yamada. Okay."

"The other detectives are with the staff inside."

Sato nodded.

Then the sergeant coughed. Sato turned to see Abe on his hands and knees, inspecting the cracked asphalt, the gravel, the minute rubbish scattered before him, his nose inches from the ground despite the damp from the rain earlier in the evening. Finding the smallest detail was Abe's forte. Sato knew Abe could be relied on to find something no one else could. The crime scene team, the medical staff, the police officers, all were transfixed by Abe's search for some unseen object, mesmerized by his darting glances, his studying one thing, then another. A sigh punctuated the silence. Then a cough. Sato absentmindedly began whistling.

"This is no good," Abe said, still crouched down. "Someone's been walking all over the tracks."

"What tracks?" the crime scene leader cried.

Abe ignored the man. “Two men, average size, I’d say. One wearing leather-soled shoes and the other sneakers. Both on motorbikes. Stand off to the side. I want to see where the tracks go.”

Abe stared at the pavement for a long minute.

“Aha. Two different directions. Odd.”

Sato had seen this time after time with Abe. It was always something amazing. He was pleased for his friend, and jotted Abe’s observations in his notebook. Sato knew Abe was one of the most dedicated detectives in the department despite his odd behavior. But now it was hard for even Sato to watch as Abe waddled a few feet further down the alley, and like a dog on the scent, stick his nose inches away from a splat of reeking vomit. Abe sniffed. He sniffed again.

The sergeant whispered to the young officer, “I heard he can tell which brand of beer is in a puddle of puke.”

The rookie stifled a laugh.

“It’s a useful trick,” Sato said, glancing at the officer, a faint smile on his face. “I depend on Abe knowing the difference between Kirin and Asahi.”

The rookie blushed. “Yes sir.”

Abe slowly got back on his feet. “French fries. Cola. Hamburger of some sort. Recently consumed.”

“Oh?” Sato was impressed.

“Mos Burgers, I’m sure. That was a rice bun,” Abe said, wiping his hands on a handkerchief he pulled from a pocket.

“Okay,” Sato said, writing in his notebook.

“What’s strange is there’s no alcohol,” Abe said. “Whoever did that wasn’t drunk.”

“Okay. Any ideas?”

“Girl comes out here, sees two guys, something happens. One guy throws up, then the two

guys leave.”

“Two people out here are gone,” Sato said.

“Yep.” Abe saw Sato’s frown. He knew Sato did not like the idea of two people unaccounted for. Two trails. Two motorbikes. Two missing suspects.

Sato’s grunt of disgust did not surprise him.

“Inspector?” an unseen voice called out.

“Yes?”

Sato saw Detective Hisoka Endo emerge from the door leading to the Down Low. He had met Endo a few hours earlier, when the shift began. So far, he saw the young man for what he seemed to be - small, handsome, polite, with the bearing and self-assurance most up-and-comers would kill for. His attempt at appearing professional on his first night at Azabu led him to choose an understated gray suit, white shirt, and black tie. When Sato met Endo earlier in the evening, he thought the young man dressed well and seemed competent.

Then Detective Mo Kato emerged from inside the club. Sato and Kato were old colleagues, and Sato was glad to have the tall, broad-shouldered veteran on his team.

“The customers are getting restless,” Kato said in his low, lazy voice. “How long are we going to hold them? We’re finished with them. Most of them said they didn’t see anything.”

“Got anything?”

Kato stopped chewing on his toothpick as he pulled out his notes. “Well, there are two American GIs in there. There were three, but one of them left around 10 or 10:30.”

“He’s gone?”

“Yes. And he’s the dead girl’s boyfriend.”

“The girl’s GI boyfriend is missing? He’s not here?”

“No one really noticed at the time,” Kato said, looking down at his notes. “The band was playing. The waitresses were busy. The two other GIs stayed to watch the show. Nobody had anything to say until that girl was found dead.”

“No one knows anything, and this GI is on the loose,” Sato grumbled. He knew the GI could be anywhere, and knew no matter what clues Abe may have found in the alley, the American had to be found before the press or anyone else linked a GI to the murder of a Japanese girl.

“Who is still in there?”

“Everyone. The customers, the staff, the other GIs.”

Sato had known Kato for years, and knew his easy nonchalance hid an intense, almost predatory instinct to hunt criminals. He knew the detective was reporting what he knew so far. But the investigation was off to a bad start. He wondered how far the GI, or even the two motorbikes, had gotten in the hour already passed.

“Kato, I’ll phone the military people when I’m done here,” Sato said. “Stick with forensics. Find out what you can, and tell headquarters what happened, but leave out the Americans for now. When headquarters wants to start issuing press releases, make sure they stick to what we know. No assumptions. Especially nothing about any Americans. I don’t want any reporters jumping to any conclusions and ruining this case.”

Kato nodded. He did not mind waiting for forensics to finish. He was a patient man. Kato believed waiting was a part of investigating. Asking someone to hurry caused mistakes, as far as he was concerned.

“I’m going inside to talk to those customers and those GIs before they begin to forget things,” Sato said.

“Okay.”

Kato leaned his tall, heavy body against a long, dirty concrete wall and resumed chewing on his

toothpick as Sato and Abe followed Endo into the club. He watched the medical team prepare the woman's body for removal. Only when they were through and ready to leave did he stir.

His mind was not on the missing GI or the dead girl but on Detective Endo. It had been on his mind ever since the beginning of the shift. Not that Kato was unhappy that suddenly there was a new detective on the team, but it was the inspector's first night back at Azabu Police Station, and Endo just shows up, a last-minute addition. Kato did not believe in coincidences. He could not put a name to his misgivings, but he was happy Sato was back. He decided to focus on that.