‘FRESH AND FUN AND FULL-THROTTLE’

A. J. FINN, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW*



KOTARO ISAKA

INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BULLET TRAIN*

KOTARO ISAKA

Kotaro Isaka is a bestselling and multi-award-winning writer who is published around the world. He has won the Shincho Mystery Club Award, Mystery Writers of Japan Award, Japan Booksellers' Award and the Yamamoto Shugoro Prize and fourteen of his books have been adapted for film or TV. He is the author of the international bestseller *Bullet Train*, which was made into a major film starring Brad Pitt and Sandra Bullock.

BRIAN BERGSTROM

Brian Bergstrom is a Montréal-based lecturer and translator. His translations have appeared in publications including *Granta*, *Aperture*, *Lit Hub*, *Mechademia*, *The Penguin Book of Japanese Short Stories* and *Elemental: Earth Stories*. His translation of *Trinity, Trinity, Trinity* by Erika Kobayashi won the 2022 Japan–U.S. Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature. His most recent translation is *Slow Down: How Degrowth Communism Can Save the Earth* by Marxist philosopher Kohei Saito.

Copyrighted Material

ALSO BY KOTARO ISAKA

Bullet Train
Three Assassins
The Mantis
Seesaw Monster

Copyrighted Material

KOTARO ISAKA

Hotel Lucky Seven

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY
Brian Bergstrom

Copyrighted Material

VINTAGE

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Vintage is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies

Vintage, Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk/vintage
global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK

First published in Vintage in 2025
First published in hardback by Harvill Secker in 2024
Originally published by Kadokawa in Japan as *777* in 2023

Copyright © Kotaro Isaka / CTB Inc.
English translation rights arranged through CTB Inc.
Translation from the Japanese language by Brian Bergstrom

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Extract from *Seesaw Monster* © Kotaro Isaka / CTB Inc., 2019
English translation rights arranged through CTB Inc.
Translation from the Japanese language by Sam Malissa

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781529936001

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C018179
www.fsc.org

Copyrighted Material

Hotel Lucky Seven

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

BLANKET

Two days ago, in a different hotel

'IT'S ROOM 415, RIGHT?'

Blanket is talking to Pillow, who's walking ahead of her. They're both wearing the beige tops and brown bottoms that constitute the uniforms worn by the cleaning staff at the Hotel Vivaldi, Tokyo.

'Exactly. 415. Rhymes with *For One Life*.'

Blanket met Pillow ten years ago, while they were both on the girls' basketball team at her high school. She'd seen her face before, of course, but despite being on the same team, they'd never exchanged words. Though neither girl was the kind to talk much with classmates in the first place.

'What bullshit. Everything's decided at birth,' murmured Pillow, looking off in the distance after another game spent without even being allowed to fill out the bench. She wasn't actually trying to start a conversation – rather, her innermost thoughts had simply spilled from her lips, and Blanket had been there downstream to catch them. But Blanket knew what Pillow meant.

Copyrighted Material

Both of them were conspicuously small-framed, even among the other girls. The taller girls were obviously prized even if they were less athletic, and the smaller girls knew that no matter how hard they trained, they'd hardly ever be allowed to play.

'You're right,' said Blanket. 'It's so unfair, isn't it? The advantages some people are born with.'

'You have a pretty face and a good sense of style, and bang: you're on Easy Street. Even school will be fun. Your whole life will be smooth as silk. Makes me sick.'

'Well, that's not true for *everyone . . .*'

'It is! It's a truth determined at birth. Like, by your genes. So unfair. It's not as if they worked hard for it or anything. It's just always been like that, their whole life. Look at me: my face is only okay, I'm short, I have no style. Makes me want to go, *What did I do to deserve this?*'

From the outside, Blanket was in exactly the same boat as Pillow, but it had never occurred to her to ask, *What did I do to deserve this?* She felt a certain relief to hear Pillow say it. As if to reassure her: *It's okay, you're allowed to respond this way to the world.*

'Don't you think even privileged people have their problems?' Blanket said this just to hear Pillow's response.

'Absolutely not.' Pillow waved her hand dismissively. 'I mean, yes of course, everyone has problems. But if you ever asked them to switch places with you, you know they'd refuse! Deep down, they know Easy Street problems aren't really problems at all.'

All Pillow had done since opening her mouth was vent personal grievances, but Blanket didn't find herself put off. Perhaps because Pillow's tone was resigned, even philosophical, rather than spiteful. *It's not like there's anything we can do to fix it, anyway.*

'You know, I noticed something else about them.'

'What?'

'These Easy Streeters, they always drag other people into their lives.'

Copyrighted Material

'You make it sound like Easy Street is an actual place,' said Blanket, giggling.

'*You can only be happy if you have a boyfriend*, they say. *Let's all go have fun!* Everything they want to do you can't do alone. I have plenty of fun staying by myself at home, but from where they sit, I have a sad, pitiful life.'

Where they sit? Blanket didn't know where that would be, exactly, and it seemed like a rather arbitrary way of speaking, but she nonetheless answered, 'You're so right.'

And this was the first real conversation she ever had in high school.

They reach the elevator. The one for the cleaning staff. Pillow walks in first, then Blanket. She pushes the button for the fourth floor.

'By the way, Inui seems to be looking for someone,' says Pillow.

'He does?'

'Someone who used to work for him. A woman in her thirties. He's really going after her.'

'Did she walk off with his money or something?'

'Worse than that, I think. Though I admit it's kind of fun seeing him all upset.' Pillow laughs.

'He's still our savior, though.'

'Or, put another way, he's a manipulator who saw we were in trouble and used that as a way to mix us up in this world.'

'He might be our age, but you just know he's had a completely opposite life from ours. He's so the type to spend every day in high school singing its praises, you know? Boys and girls both hanging on his every word, making him feel good. An Easy Streeter, 100 percent.'

'Singing praises, huh? Like Fujiwara no Michinaga? "I feel as if the world belongs to me." '

'If he'd been in a band, he'd have been the lead singer for sure.

Copyrighted Material

He'd never have even spoken to the likes of us if we'd been in the same school.'

Inui may not be quite as handsome as a pop idol, but he's clean-cut and fresh-faced, with a tall, lean frame and a charismatic way with words – a born communicator.

'I really thought he was a nice guy when we first met him.'

'Pure calculation. Knowing everyone, kissing up to VIPs – everything. He's the type who gets everything handed to him. Making moves behind the scenes and then stealing the credit. He never does anything himself.'

'It's true! He leaves all the dirty work to his underlings. I remember calling him out on it once, and he all he said was, "That's not true, I flush my own toilet." '

'He does a lot for politicians. Oppo research, covering up scandals.'

'But it's everyone else who's breaking a sweat! Inui just rides high, soaking up praise for other people's work. I bet finding this woman is a job for some politician, too.'

'He's been sending her picture around. "If you see this woman, let me know." Showing taxi drivers and delivery people, or low-level employees like us. Her name is Kamino-san, I think, the woman he's searching for. Something-something Kamino.'

'It's only a matter of time before he finds her. Inui's reach is amazing.'

'And once they find her, it's going to be horrible for her.'

'You think he'll paralyze her and dissect her alive?'

The girls exclaim in unison: 'Gross!'

'You think it's really true? That stuff about him liking to cut people up?'

'It's awful. We're right to try to get away from him.'

'But when will that be?'

The elevator reaches its destination.

Copyrighted Material

They pass through the employees-only passage into where the rooms are. The halls are dim, the indirect lighting lending everything a sense of unreality.

After checking the room number – four-one-five*: for one life* – Pillow passes the keycard through the reader and listens as the door unlocks. She opens the door carefully, making as little sound as possible, and slips into the room.

Blanket, pushing the cleaning cart, follows after.

A man is sitting on the sofa, facing the television. It's always easier when they're standing, but what can you do? No big deal, all things considered.

'Excuse us,' says Blanket, nodding respectfully. She recalls how she would address the senior players back when she was on the basketball team.

The man startles, then rises from his seat. He's obviously thrown by Blanket and Pillow appearing like this. He can see they're cleaning staff, but he's confused as to why they'd enter his room without knocking.

Blanket pulls a white sheet out of the cart.

'Hey, I think you got the wrong room!'

The man is wearing beige slacks and a navy blue shirt. He's very tall, and conspicuously well-built.

'Oh my gosh,' says Pillow, her voice rising in surprise. 'Though I think I see a chink in your armor.'

Animals confronted with things larger than themselves naturally become wary, but when confronted with the opposite – anything smaller than themselves – they feel no fear. Humans share this trait. They prostrate themselves before anyone who seems bigger and stronger and look down on anyone smaller. Blanket and Pillow shared their thoughts about this long ago: if women were ten inches taller than men on average, the whole world would be different.

Copyrighted Material

Watching the man turn toward her, Pillow can't help but

wonder at his stupidity. The moment he looked at them and decided they weren't a threat, his fate was sealed.

Will he try to grab their clothes? Or kick them? Those are the choices. Blanket imagines scenarios as she throws one end of the white sheet to Pillow.

After that, things go like they always do. The two girls approach the man, each holding one edge of the sheet. Unfurling it as they advance, they engulf his entire upper body, including his head. He's immobilized at once. Blanket throws Pillow her edge of the sheet. Pillow almost immediately releases the edge she's been holding, and Blanket grabs it. Repeating this exchange again and again, Blanket and Pillow wind the sheet around and around the man as if he were a mummy.

Wrapped in the sheet, the man loses his balance and falls to the floor.

He kicks up a fuss, moaning, but it makes little difference to the girls. Over the sheet, they wrap a towel around the man's neck and then, after pulling with only a slight bit of combined effort, they hear it snap.

'Thank you, leverage,' whispers Blanket. The principle of leverage is the magic wand that wipes away advantages like height and strength.

They make the dead man hug his own knees, folding him up so they can haul him into the cleaning cart. The bottom is reinforced, so it doesn't give under his weight. They stack folded linens on top of him to hide him.

Now, to remove any evidence, they start actually cleaning the room. Partway through, though, Pillow stops and points at the wall. 'Oh! It's Yomo-pi!'

The flatscreen TV mounted on the wall is showing the news.

A reporter holding a microphone listens as a man in a suit talks. The interviewee has sharp, manly features and holds

Copyrighted Material

himself proudly, so that despite being in his late fifties, he seems much younger.

'Saneatsu Yomogi! Isn't he a politician?'

'He's part of the Information Bureau now, our version of the CIA. He's the head honcho there. He quit politics after the accident.'

The accident. Blanket recalls it immediately. Three years ago, someone in an imported electric car driving down a wide boulevard downtown suddenly swerved onto the sidewalk, running over a mother and child. Apparently the fault of a drunk driver, it ended up causing quite a stir in the media, as the victims were the wife and child of Yomogi, then a sitting member of Parliament.

Now he's on TV, a microphone thrust in his face. 'Director Yomogi, is it true your life was threatened back when you were in politics?'

'I can't really comment on that,' says Yomogi, a rueful smile on his face. 'But if you were the one coming after me, this would be it for me – I've let you get too close!'

'You know, I've always liked Yomo-pi. He says whatever's on his mind, but I usually find myself agreeing with him,' says Pillow. 'Like how he always said there should be fewer members of Parliament.'

'Well, that I agree with. Private industry has had to restructure and fire so many people, we should do the same with politicians! As a cost-cutting measure.'

Yomogi called for the reduction in the number of members of Parliament from the moment he was elected to the moment he left politics. His statement, 'It would be better if older politicians retired,' caused a firestorm of debate at the time.

'And he's also right about old politicians! As you age, you naturally lose your physical strength and your memory, even your

Copyrighted Material

judgment. It doesn't matter how great you are, that's what happens. You even lose your ability to drive! Younger is better, absolutely.'

'Too young is scary, though.'

'Well, think about it. Who would you want running your country, Oda Nobunaga when he was fifty, or when he was eighty? Fifty, right?'

Blanket finds herself stumped by the question. Pillow pushes on.

'Come to think of it, though, Oda's a pretty scary guy, maybe I wouldn't like that. He'd probably be easier to get along with as a grandpa.'

Blanket finds herself feeling bad about Oda – who lived hundreds of years ago and would never meet either of them – being called 'a pretty scary guy.'

'Sounds like some people really hated Yomo-pi, huh? I guess, though, if you ask for politicians to be sacked then you make yourself their enemy.'

'I bet that's true. People with power make it their life's work to hold on to that power. Maybe that's why he quit being a politician and became a bigwig at the Information Bureau – he decided to change things another way.'

'Change things? Like, the system?'

'He seems pretty tough. Remember the story about when he was first elected and he tackled that guy on the train who was stabbing everyone?'

It was fifteen years ago, when a passenger on an express bound for Shinjuku started stabbing the other passengers around him. Over ten people ended up killed or injured, but the person who put a stop to things was Yomogi. He was forty at the time, and he ended up sustaining injuries that put him in the hospital, but not before grabbing the guy and neutralizing him.

'You know, I heard that the accident three years ago, with the

Copyrighted Material

drunk driver, was no accident. And that the real target was Yomo-pi, not his family,' says Pillow, still staring at the TV screen.

'No accident?' Blanket is shocked.

'It wouldn't surprise me.'

Blanket recalls a certain senior member of the basketball team. She hadn't agreed with the coach's methods, especially his erratic leadership style, and she tried to change things to make the team better and healthier for everyone. But the other senior members of the team resisted her efforts, ganging up on her until they drove her out entirely.

'People who try to change things are seen as troublemakers.'

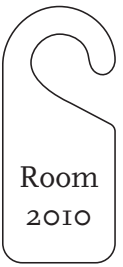
'That's so true,' Blanket agrees, looking again at Yomogi's image on the screen.

'Don't give up, Yomo-pi!'

Their clean-up complete, Blanket and Pillow leave the room.

Copyrighted Material

NANAO



'I'M HAPPY SHE REMEMBERED MY BIRTHDAY!'

There's something about this guy that makes him seem like a good boss. A certain good-natured magnanimity, a trustworthiness, as if he'd say to an underling who failed, *Don't worry about it, these things happen.*

'So it's been a while since you've seen your daughter?' Nanao doesn't really care, but he can't stand being silent any longer, so he says the first thing that pops into his head. 'She's overseas now, somewhere in Europe?' He doesn't know the exact country, so he's forced to be vague.

'Yes, that's right. Europe.'

'Studying to be an artist, is that it? On exchange?'

'Art, yeah. She's an exchange student.'

Nanao's on the top floor of the Winton Palace Hotel, in Room 2010. It's business as usual, being the feet on the ground for a job Maria got from somewhere.

Copyrighted Material

'Go to the room and hand over the package. That's it. Easy.

Shockingly so.' She gave him the same song-and-dance she always did when she asked him to do a job, then followed it with a description of the hotel's layout. 'Twenty stories high, with an underground parking lot. A lounge in the first-floor lobby, and three restaurants on the second floor – Japanese, Chinese, Western. Four elevator shafts run through the center of the building. Banquet rooms are on the third floor. Hallways run east–west, with about ten rooms in each direction. Two emergency stairwells per floor, located at the end of each hallway.'

'What's in the package?'

'A girl wants to send a birthday present to her father. Your job is to deliver that present to him. It's almost unsettling, isn't it, how safe and easy it is?'

'What's unsettling is you using the words "safe" and "easy." '

'All you're doing is delivering a present!'

'Why can't she do it herself?'

'She's overseas. An exchange student. What choice does she have? Seems they didn't get along in the past, but now that she's away, she realizes how grateful she is for all he's done for her. So she wants to give him a present on his birthday. Isn't that nice?'

'Why does it have to be delivered while he's on a business trip? Couldn't she send it to his house?'

'He's a busy guy, always away on business. Hardly ever at home. Besides, what good's a birthday present that's not delivered on his birthday? In any case, the job is to take this present and hand it over. Aren't you the one who asked for no more dangerous assignments? So here you go, it doesn't get easier than this. I don't see how you could refuse.'

'That's what you said about the E2 job, too, remember?' Nanao's tone was forceful. Everyone in the trade refers to that incident by the make of the Shinkansen bullet train on which it took place: E2. An incident that produced a mountain of bodies; he'd been a hair's breadth from being one of them. Despite it

Copyrighted Material

being a simple matter of bringing a suitcase onto a train and getting off at the next station – what could be easier?

'This time will be different. An actual easy job. You'll hand over the present, and that's it. Though it might be nice if you could take a picture of the father as you do. As proof the job is done.'

Maria's not one to prattle on; rather, her tendency is to speak coolly, matter-of-factly. It's the secret to her persuasiveness – whenever she catches your ear, you can't help but think, *Yes, of course, you're absolutely right.* Nanao ended the call to evade further brainwashing.

But now here he is, in Room 2010 in the Winton Palace Hotel, facing a guy wearing khaki chinos and a white shirt, the type of guy who you want to stick a badge on saying *World's Best Boss*.

He seems like a guy with a high-level job at a company that's doing well, at least judging from the expensive watch peeking out from beneath his sleeve and the luxury brand logos on the bags scattered around the room.

The man seemed extremely surprised by Nanao's sudden visit to his room. Which means the sender must not have warned him beforehand. Which makes it Nanao's problem. The man peered at Nanao through the barely cracked door, only open as far as the bar lock would allow, his face filled with undisguised suspicion.

Nanao tried to sound as non-shady as possible as he explained what he was there to do. 'Your daughter wants to give you a birthday present, that's all, once I hand it to you I'll leave.' The man's face lit up. 'Aaah, I see!' And then he invited Nanao in, saying the package looked heavy, so should he help bring it inside for him?

Nanao looks now at the parcel they'd brought in and set on the ground. It isn't very thick, but too big to carry in one hand.

'I wonder what she got me!' The man reaches out to touch it, his eyes glittering. Or, at least, that's how it seems.

'I wonder,' says Nanao, and then, thinking he sounded a bit

Copyrighted Material

dismissive, he hastily adds, 'Maybe it's a painting!' It seems like a safe enough guess, since she's supposedly overseas 'studying to be an artist.'

'True, yeah. Maybe it is,' says the man as he begins unwrapping it.

It's not part of the job to know what's in it, so Nanao starts to leave, but as soon as he turns, a postcard slips out from somewhere and lands on the floor at his feet. He picks it up and sees what's written on it.

I painted this based on how you looked when we were video-chatting, Papa! Looks just like you, right?

The present is indeed a framed painting. Oils, from the looks of it. A superbly rendered portrait of a man facing forward, smiling, with a kindly gaze. It looks quite realistic. Nanao lacks the ability to assess its artistic quality, but it's clear it was painted with a great deal of care, making Nanao feel a certain affinity for the sender, despite having never met her.

Great. It's done. Nothing happened. This is what Nanao decides to tell himself. *This should be the beginning and end of it. Perfectly* safe*, perfectly* easy. *No problem at all.*

All he has to do is leave – and ignore his growing anxiety.

'Wait a second. What's going on?' says Maria on the other end of the phone. 'Did something happen? Even on a job this safe and easy?'

'Safe. Easy.' Nanao hasn't forgotten her favorite buzzwords.

'Where are you?'

'Still at the hotel. The Winton Palace. What a hotel, right? The rooms are so chic and classy, they'd satisfy even the most discerning aristocrat.' The dark wood-grain wallpaper on the accent wall sets off the beige flooring nicely, he notes.

Copyrighted Material

'I'm not familiar with what discerning aristocrats like or dislike.' He hears her sigh. 'It wasn't an easy job? Just handing over a gift?'

'It was a really nice painting! Of her father, it seems.'

'So what's the problem?' Nanao gets the clear sense she doesn't want to hear him go off on any more tangents.

'The face was different.'

'The face?'

'The face in the painting wasn't the face of the man in the hotel room. Different body, too.' The man in the painting is hearty and round-faced, while the man in Room 2010 is slim. Too few points in common to be explained away by perspective or weight loss.

'Is that so? Well, that's art, isn't it? It doesn't have to reflect its subject exactly. Look at Ryūsei Kishida, or Modigliani.'

'That's what I thought, too. It looked to me like realism, but who's to say it's not intentionally avant-garde in some way? Not something I'm qualified to judge. I don't know anything about art.'

'That's for sure.'

'So I decided to call you and ask what you thought. About the discrepancy. What's going on? Is it just an art thing? I wanted your sage advice.'

'And this is that call?'

'No. This is the call *after* that.'

'What do you mean?'

'So there I was – I'd decided to give you a call . . .'

Nanao looked at the man in Room 2010 and asked, 'Would it be all right if I made a phone call?'

'A phone call?' The man cocked his head.

'It's really nothing. Just a matter of paperwork.' Nanao kept it vague. He'd never had to do any 'paperwork' since he'd started

Copyrighted Material

working with Maria, but he figured that what he did do with her was close enough to qualify.

'Can I ask you to step outside, then? Otherwise I'll end up overhearing.'

'Of course.'

It made Nanao nervous to leave the room. Would the door lock automatically behind him? Would he have to ring the bell to get back in? Though he'd already done what he had to do; maybe he should just leave. Who cared if the painting didn't match the subject? Wasn't art supposed to reveal reality's true nature? Maybe it was something like that.

Nanao was busy telling himself this as he turned again toward the door, but as he did, he encountered a sofa in an unexpected place and nearly stumbled into it. He twisted his body at the last minute to avoid a collision.

'That was a mistake,' Nanao says now to Maria. He's a little worried she's no longer listening, but then she says, 'What was?'

'It startled him. He rushed me from behind, trying to put his hands on my throat. I think because I made an unexpected sudden move, and it scared him.'

'Wait a minute. What do you mean, he tried to *put his hands on your throat*?'

'Judging from how it all ended up, he must have been an imposter. The man in the room was counterfeit, and the man in the painting was real. The man in the room wasn't the father of the girl who painted the picture.'

Maria presses him: 'I don't understand what you're telling me. Try to explain more clearly; tell me again what you think happened now that it's over.'

Speaking quickly, Nanao does his best to explain.

'The man may have been suspicious from the moment I showed up out of the blue with that painting to give him. I don't know if he'd already made the decision to kill me when he let me

Copyrighted Material

into the room or if he decided to do it after seeing my reactions while we were talking, but whatever the case, as soon as I turned my back on him to leave the room, he tried to strangle me from behind.'

'Why would a normal person do that?'

'Because he wasn't a normal person! He's like us, a professional who does his business outside the law.'

'I wonder if he was on a job he felt uneasy about.'

'Maybe. Unfortunately, he's no longer in a position to tell us.'

Maria falls silent at that. And then, another sigh.

Nanao glances up at the sofa in front of him, where the man is sitting but no longer breathing.

'So he's dead?'

'That's a rather heartless way to put it.'

'Who cares how I *put it*! Okay, fine: did you *usher him into the next world*? Better?'

'Better. But it wasn't me. As I said before, he rushed me from behind, going for my throat – but then he fell. Maybe he slipped on the paper on the floor. He went ass over teakettle all on his own.'

The man's forehead connected with the corner of the marble-topped table in the center of the room as he went down. As Nanao watched, eyes wide, he collapsed, convulsed a few times, then grew still.

Some time passes, and then Maria finally responds, saying, 'I see . . .' in a dull, distant voice. It's unclear whether she's mulling things over or simply upset at this unexpected turn of events, but eventually she says, 'Okay, you can't get mixed up any further in this. There's nothing else to do but just leave. The door will lock automatically behind you, right?'

'But we'll be exposed the moment housekeeping comes by. They have a master key that allows them to enter any room, right? Or, I guess, a master keycard in this case?'

Copyrighted Material

'Of course they do. Otherwise they wouldn't be able to get into a room during an emergency. But normally, the cleaning staff won't go into a room until after checkout, right? I don't think they're going to bust their way in there anytime soon. You can hit a Do Not Disturb switch to keep them out as well, I think.'

'How many days was he scheduled to stay here?'

'How should I know?'

'Well, it *is* you, after all.' Nanao doesn't bother to hide his irritation.

'It's 5 p.m. right now. So, worst-case scenario, his checkout time will be sometime past noon tomorrow. Housekeeping shouldn't come until after that. I'll ask around, see if there isn't someone who can do something about the body before then. Could you hide it in the bathroom or the tub for safekeeping till then?'

'Absolutely,' replies Nanao, despite not being all that sure about any of this. 'But just to confirm: do you know for sure that the person who hired you is who they say they are?' He's beginning to wonder if the doting daughter even exists. 'If they're coming to *you* for this, it's unlikely to be just some regular person off the street, right?'

'They have ties to the trade, yes.'

'I knew it!'

'But they're not the type to do anything crazy. Simple requests to move goods for them as they go back and forth overseas, or to pass information through discreet channels, things like that. I ask them to do things for me from time to time, even.'

'I wonder why he went for me, then,' muses Nanao, and then he remembers. 'Oh, right!' The man in the room and the man in the painting are two different people.

'Can you take a photo of the man in the painting and send it to me? I might know who it is. I'll get back to you later.'

'Later? You can't do it now?'

Copyrighted Material

'I can't right now. I didn't say, but I'm driving at the moment. I'm on the freeway, using the "hands-free" system to talk to you. So I can't look at a photo right now.'

'You're on a trip?' Without adding: *Even as you make me work?*

'Don't be disagreeable. I'm *returning* from a trip. People need a breather from time to time if they're going to do their best work, right?'

'What should I do, then?'

'Do some general clean-up, then go home. I'm going out after this anyway.'

'Going out?' *Aren't you already out?*

'I have plans to go see a show after I get home. Doors open at six thirty, show at seven.' And then she tells him the name of the troupe putting on the show. She goes on to name the theater and the dates of the show's run, chatting about how popular the show has been and how lucky she feels having gotten her hands on the tickets, despite Nanao asking for none of these details. After she's gone on like this for a while, he cuts in.

'So you're moving directly from taking a break to taking another break?'

'Okay, so, I just want to remind you,' says Maria, her voice hardening noticeably, 'go straight home. And be careful.'

'Be careful? I'm going to leave the room, take the elevator, and get off on the ground floor. Then I'll leave the hotel and head to the subway station. That's it.' Nanao is saying this less to reassure Maria than as a kind of prayer to whatever entity controls fate (or luck) who might be looking down at him right now. 'Nothing tricky about it.'

Right?

'You know better than anyone, surely. It's exactly when there's "nothing tricky about it" that you somehow end up getting mixed up in something you shouldn't.'

'You're right, I do know better. Of course I do.' Nanao's in no

Copyrighted Material

position to deny it. He sighs. 'It's you who seems to forget. First, you tell me how "safe" and "easy" this job is, and now you're telling me "be careful." Which is it?'

'This wasn't a job that should have produced a dead body. So yes, now I'm scared. Of your sheer unluckiness.'

Nanao looks again at the white-shirted corpse before him. 'I do try my hardest not to get involved in people's deaths.'

'There's something else I'd like you to remember.'

'What?'

'I know you don't like to take people's lives. I respect that. But it's a separate issue if someone's trying to take *your* life.'

'Separate from what?'

'If someone tries to kill you, you can't just let it go. If that's their aim, you have to make it your aim, too. It's like a penalty kick in soccer – both the kicker and the goalie have to engage to make it work.'

'That doesn't seem like the best analogy I've ever heard, but I get it. Once I leave the hotel and things seem settled, I'll send you a message.'

'I won't be able to check my messages during the show, though . . .'

'Check it afterward, then, it's fine.'

Nanao hangs up and then moves the body, dragging it into the bathroom and putting it in the tub. He does his best to scrub away the bloodstains from the carpet with a wet towel. Then he throws the towel in the tub, too.

After checking to make sure there are no traces left, he's left wondering what to do with the framed painting that started all this. And why the wrong man was in the room in the first place. Then it comes to him.

Nanao picks up the paper the painting had been wrapped in and flips it over. A label showing the intended recipient's name and room number is still stuck to it. The handwritten label reads

Copyrighted Material

2010 – but, looking again, couldn't it also be read as 2016? Was that what happened? In the blink of an eye, doubts begin to bubble up in Nanao's mind. Did he misread 2016 as 2010?

It's possible he went to the wrong room. A mistake.

Whose mistake?

His.

And if that's the case, then this man in Room 2010 let Nanao in with very little hesitation despite the name on the package not being his own.

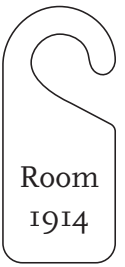
A normal person would have said something like, 'Are you sure you have the right room?' But someone engaged in something shady might decide to see where it was going and invite him in, thinking, *Is there some hidden meaning to this?* It's a definite possibility.

Is this a case where expecting the unexpected has ended up backfiring? The world is filled with such ironic incidents.

But the question remains: should he take the package to its intended destination, Room 2016?

Copyrighted Material

KAMINO



'THE WINTON PALACE is a grand hotel, isn't it? The building itself isn't so big, but the interior is truly magnificent. Even just walking around in one of the rooms can give you a little thrill.'

Yuka Kamino, watching Koko talk, is reminded of her long-departed mother. Affable, friendly, yet not overly so – the type of person who makes you feel instantly close to her. Kamino supposes she's in her sixties, but she wouldn't be shocked to learn she's in her fifties, either.

Kamino has been staying here since yesterday, and Koko has just arrived.

'I made my reservation with the idea that I'd run through my entire life's savings here.'

Wha-at? Koko's voice is a mixture of admiration and horror. 'You know what they say about this place? That it's a hotel where you can't die even if you want to.'

'Eh?' It's Kamino's turn to be brought up short.

'Oh, people don't mean it in a scary way. They mean that

Copyrighted Material

staying here, you become so happy that even if you came here wanting to die you'll end up wanting to live, that's all. So if you feel like you hate your life, you should try staying here for a bit.'

'I see.'

Koko reaches into her bag and brings out a tablet, placing it on the round table in front of her. She unfolds a small keyboard as well, and then busies herself tapping away on it.

'So, um. Can you really do this for me?'

'Really do this? You mean, help you escape? Of course! Why else am I here? Isn't that why you called me? Oh, I know . . . when I arrived and you saw how old I am, you began having second thoughts? Is that it?'

Kamino shook her head in an emphatic *No*. 'Inui was very clear – if you want to do a total reset on your life, call Koko. She's the best.'

Inui never said this to Kamino directly, of course. It was something she overheard him say on the phone to someone else.

'If you want to drop out of your own life, leave it to me!' Koko says the line with a practiced flourish. 'So you got my contact info from Inui?'

'I have all of Inui's business contacts in my head.'

'In your head? You have that kind of memory?'

The more questions Koko asks, the more she reminds Kamino of her mother.

'Yes.'

'Wow. You sound sure of yourself. Despite seeming so modest.'

'There's no denying my memory. It's why all this is happening, after all.'

Her stomach twists as she speaks. She brings her right hand to her head as if to grab it. Grab it, then pull her own brain out.

'All this? What do you mean, all this?'

'It's why my life has become what it's become. Why I started working at Inui's office. And now, why I have to get away.'

Copyrighted Material

And, perhaps, it's also why she's had to live her whole life without ever having a friend.

'Isn't having a great memory a good thing? Like when you're playing cards, for example?'

'I've always been good at cards, it's true.' Kamino's tone is forceful due to the immediacy of the memory. As a child, she remembers blithely flipping over cards during a matching game, filled with pride at her own abilities. *Here it is! Here, too! Why does everyone guess wrong all the time?* Gradually, she began to realize that other people didn't share her ability to remember each and every little thing, and, at the same time, that there might be utility in the ability to forget.

Isn't it best to just forget the bad stuff?

People say this to her, and Kamino always answers the same way.

Forget? How?

'I remember everything, for all time. Whatever it might be – if I see it or hear it, I remember it. Sometimes it's okay if I zone out while I'm watching something, but the moment I become conscious of myself doing so, it's too late.'

'So everything ends up inscribed in your memory?'

Kamino nods emphatically. '*Inscribed*. That's exactly it – the perfect metaphor. It never leaves my head again, no matter how much I try to scrub or wash it away.'

'Really?' Koko's eyes grow wide. Koko gets up and walks across the room, her purpose becoming clear as she picks up a folder from next to the bed and brings it over to Kamino. 'So, what you're telling me is that you could read this and remember everything it says?'

Kamino opens the folder and sees that it's the terms and conditions of her hotel reservation. She nods her head and looks the document over. Less than thirty seconds pass before she says, 'Okay, I've got it.'

Copyrighted Material

And then, looking the half-disbelieving Koko straight in the eye, she recites every sentence on the page from memory.

'Oh my gosh, that's amazing!' says Koko, and then, after looking off into the middle distance for a bit, adds, 'I admit, I can't help being a bit jealous. I feel like I can't remember anything.'

'When I was a kid, I remember wondering why my friends and family kept forgetting things all the time.'

'You must have been good at taking tests, right? Most schoolwork ends up being a matter of memorization anyway.'

Kamino is compelled to nod her assent again. From elementary school on, she never had to work for her grades much at all. At some point, she noticed that people were saying, 'Oh Yukachan, she's such a good student!'

'But everything else ended up in my head, too – a little thing a friend might say, or if I didn't like someone's attitude. It was all there.' Kamino taps her head with her finger. She remembers ruminating over things people said to her – even minor, throwaway remarks, or things said with no ill will behind them – and, unable to forget, she'd begin having unbidden thoughts like, *I think she said that because she doesn't like me,* or, *Maybe I wasn't being nice enough then,* her head filling with increasingly terrible, yet imaginary, slights and regrets.

Getting close to someone always means painful memories. Not just of what the other person says or does, but one's own personal failures and misjudged words, and to be unable to forget them is even more painful. Kamino, remembering everything so well, found herself besieged with feelings of guilt and regret that never lessened over time, only intensified.

So, when she became a teenager, Kamino began to avoid contact with others as much as possible.

'I never had friends, not even one. I made the minimum conversation at school to get by, but I never met anyone outside school, not for fun or for anything.'

Copyrighted Material

She doesn't remember feeling lonely, though. But sometimes, she'll look at social media and see a lovely couple having fun together, or meet a handsome man and his beautiful wife who proudly show her pictures of their cute children, and she finds her mood growing dark, thinking to herself, *What am I doing with my life?*

Kamino tells all this to Koko, who responds by waving her hand dismissively. 'Those people aren't really happy. They only feel good when they show off like that. Having a lot of friends doesn't bring happiness – they only suck you into a vortex of jealousy and dissatisfaction.'

'A vortex?' Kamino knows Koko's only saying this to cheer her up, but she nonetheless finds herself smiling at her words. 'But having no friends is lonely too. When I entered college, I thought a lot about it. How should I live? What sort of job would be right for me?'

'How about becoming a lawyer or something like that? With a memory like yours, you'd be able to memorize the various laws and regulations with no trouble at all.'

'I did think of that.' She remembers regretting not entering the Law Department. She also remembers thinking that qualification exams of any sort would be easy work for her, so she should perhaps become something specialized in that way. 'But then, well, it may sound strange to say it this way, but doctors and lawyers are people who help people in trouble, right?'

'I mean, sure, they rescue people from their problems.'

'If I end up having to remember the stories of all the people in trouble I meet, I don't think I'd be able to stand it.'

'I think I see what you mean.'

'So, after thinking it over for a long time, I came to a conclusion: I should make sweets.'

'Really? Just like that?'

Copyrighted Material