

# RAINY SEASON

A HEARTBREAKER NOIR ROMANCE

KURT BRINDLEY

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SAMPLE

NOT FOR RESALE

*For Tokyo*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

RAINY SEASON

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## CHAPTER ONE

The evening view from the balcony was dismal in the most beautiful of ways. The hazy, steady downpour transformed the vibrant glow from the galaxy of neon signs advertising ramen shops, convenience stores, fast food restaurants, pachinko parlors, snack pubs, electronic stores, and all the other myriad ventures of trade along the bustling metropolitan street into a lush, impressionistic cityscape.

Rich smoked and took it all in, vague thoughts of Renoir tantalizing his mind. Below him, a churning sea of umbrellas flowed to and fro along a slick wet sidewalk desperate in their efforts to realize their destination. Just off the sidewalk to his right was a darkened stairwell leading down to a nondescript gray metal door. Above the door was an unlit cerulean blue gas neon sign that read *The Low Point*. Beneath the sign, a pure neon arrow the color of cinnabar red pointed down.

He took a long last drag on the cigarette, drawing it all the way down to a fiery nub, and then blew a thick, satisfying plume of smoke out into the rain. He checked his watch and walked over to the small table and chair set and tamped the nub out into a nub-littered ashtray. He drained the finger of whiskey left in the glass. It tasted so good he poured another and drained it. He picked up the near-empty liter of Yamazaki 12 and tucked it under his left arm. He then picked up the half-empty pack of Seven Stars, the bronze Zippo, and the thick, leather-bound journal with a vintage 1923 Waterman Patrician lying atop it.

With an elbow, he slid open the sliding glass door just enough for him to squeeze his lean frame through and duck inside to his cramped, one-bedroom Shibuya apartment.

## CHAPTER TWO

A Chet Baker tune crooned from the sound system like a sad lullaby. Kaito was behind the bar meticulously polishing the already polished tumblers. Takako finished lighting the last of the candle centerpieces, the cramped but cozy jazz club's primary light source when opened for business, and then walked over to the bar and sat opposite of Kaito. She reached across the countertop and dusted off the several dandruff flecks that stood out on the shoulders of his black shirt and then straightened his cerulean blue bowtie. She turned him around and tightened the stays of his waist apron, colored to match his tie, ensuring that the bow in the back was neat and symmetrical. He turned back around and pulled the apron down smooth over his black slacks creased to a razor's edge.

She stood on her tiptoes and checked her bleached-blonde, bobbed haircut in a mirror that ran the length of the wall behind the top liquor shelf. Garbed identical to Kaito, she brushed off the shoulders of her own black shirt just in case, straightened her bowtie, and smoothed down her crisp apron.

"Are you ready?" she asked, speaking in Japanese.

He looked the club over. Everything was neat. Everything was clean. Everything was his. He nodded.

She walked to the entrance and opened the door. The sound of falling rain washed into the room like a wave, drowning out the lonely cry of the crooner's trumpet over the sound system.

He walked over to a circuit panel near the dark front corner of the back wall and flipped a switch. The house lights went out and the dark, wood-paneled walls took on a soft glow from the candles, setting a mood perfect for jazz and for those moody types who appreciated it most. He flipped another switch.

She stuck her head outside the door and looked up at the sign. It crackled to life and then began a steady hum as the soft, alternating glows of blues and reds began blinking on and off, emanating out through the wispy haze of the steamy night. She took in a deep breath of the thick air before closing the door and then went back to the bar to wait.

## CHAPTER THREE

As soon as the door opened, Kaito came to attention behind the bar and Takako hopped off the stool and stood tall as well.

*“Trashaimasen,”* they both said together and bowed.

Rich walked into the club, half bowing, half nodding back to them in response. “Hello, Master,” he said to Kaito. He looked at Takako and presented a kind of a smile.

She went to him and took his umbrella in one hand and brushed the water droplets off the shoulders of his sportscoat with the other. As she slipped the umbrella into a thin plastic bag so it could be stowed within the decorative bin by the door, he left her to it and crossed the empty club carrying his journal under an arm and sat at a table near the black baby grand piano tucked tightly into the shadowed corner farthest from the bar.

Kaito set a bottle of Yamazaki 12 and a tumbler on Takako’s serving tray. She grabbed it and hustled over to Rich. She poured him two neat fingers of the whiskey, bowed, and then hustled back to the bar and sat and watched the American as she waited for more customers to arrive.

Rich took a liberal first pull on his drink and then removed the half-smoked pack of cigarettes along with a fresh one and his Zippo from his sportscoat’s right inside pocket. He lit a cigarette and set the packs with the lighter on top next to the bottle of whiskey. He sipped at the whisky and opened the journal, flipping through its pages until he found the one he was looking for. He scratched under the black patch over his left eye as he began reading over what had been written on the page.

*...and without the drawing of blood or the breaking of bone, how is it an emotion, a feeling, a thought, is capable of inflicting so much pain? And how is it that the root of both physical and emotional suffering originates from the same location in the brain, for, can the swift agony of a broken femur ever compare to the eternal aching of a broken heart?*

He removed the Waterman from the jacket’s left inside pocket and began unconsciously working its top with his thumb, loosening it, and then tightening it, loosening it, and then tightening it, repeating the process over and over until he finally began to write.

Takako turned to Kaito. He had his back to her as he needlessly aligned the already precisely aligned bottles of liquor on the shelves. She turned back to Rich.

“He doesn’t seem as drunk tonight,” she mused.

Kaito grunted an agreement.

She did a one-eighty on the stool and looked at his back. “What do you think he’s writing about all the time?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know but if this damn rainy season doesn’t end soon and stop chasing away our customers, he’s going to have to find someplace el—”

She snapped her fingers. “I got it!”

“Eh?”

“I finally figured out who he reminds me of.”

He looked back at her over his shoulder. “Who?”

“Rich-san.”

“Yeah, I got that. Who does *Rich-san* remind you of?”

Her big brown expressive eyes went wide. “A young F. Scott Fitzgerald.”

“Eh! Are you kidding me?” he said, turning back to the bottles. “Fitzgerald’s hair was red, not blond, and wasn’t he short? I mean, like even shorter than me?”

“Who cares?” she said, leaning in on her elbows. “Didn’t you ever see any of those old photographs of him when he lived in Paris and how he was always seen writing at that one café... what was it?... *La Closerie*, or something like that? That’s just like Rich-san, always writing here at our club.”

He turned and gave her a quizzical look. “Wasn’t that Hemingway?”

She was about to deny it, but then stopped to consider it further.

“But even if it was Fitzgerald,” he continued, “just because Rich-san likes to write in public places like he did doesn’t mean he looks like him. Besides, Rich-san wears an eye patch, Fitzgerald didn’t.”

She spun back around on her stool to face Rich. “Yeah,” she swooned, “but I bet he wished he did.”

He looked at Rich and shook his head skeptically. “Well, he drinks like Fitzgerald anyway.”

Rich placed a fresh cigarette into his mouth and, before he could grab his Zippo and light it, Takako grabbed a pack of matches off the bar and rushed over to his table. She lit the match and Rich leaned into it with the cigarette.

“*Domo arigato, Takako-san,*” he said in bad Japanese.

She beamed and said in equally bad English, “You are welcome, Rich-san.” But then her face transformed into an exaggerated expression of hurt. “Always I ask you call me Taka-chan.”

He blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling and smiled. “My apologies, Taka-chan.”

Her smile returned, larger than before. “Good.” She freshened up his drink. “You want something? Snack maybe?”

“No thank you, Taka-chan. I’m fine for now.”

She hesitated, looking down at his journal, and then looked at him as if she wanted to ask him something. Instead, she gave a short bow and then hurried back to her spot at the bar.

Kaito walked over to her, wiping down the spotless countertop along the way, his head bobbing along slightly with Coltrane.

“You’re blushing,” he whispered into her ear. “Were you flirting with the American again?”

She felt her cheek with the back of her hand without taking her eyes off Rich. “I wish. It’s impossible to flirt with a guy like Rich-san.”

“Why’s that? Too cool for a girl like you?”

She considered the question. “No, not too cool. Too sullen maybe.” She turned quickly to Kaito, her eyebrows raised. “Too mysterious even.”

“Hmm... Maybe I should start wearing an eye patch so I can be mysterious too.”

She laughed and winked. “First you need to look like a young Fitzgerald.”

His face dropped.

“Oh, I’m just joking. You know you will always be my favorite person to flirt with.”

“Yeah, right.”

She leaned across the bar and gave him a quick kiss, embarrassing him, but satisfying him, nonetheless.

They both watched Rich writing in his journal for a quiet moment.

“You know,” she said sadly. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone as lonely looking as Rich-san.”

He nodded without her seeing it as he pulled a jar of peanuts and a small bowl out from under the bar.

“I can tell,” she continued, “even though he smiles at me and is always kind whenever I speak with him, all he ever wants is to be left alone.”

He filled the bowl with peanuts and then set it on her serving tray. “Well, whether they are left alone or not, people like Rich-san will always be lonely.”

She sighed, nodding slowly in agreement as she began eating the peanuts.

## CHAPTER FOUR

With Kaito hovering in between two loners seated several stools apart from each other at the bar, and a young couple sitting at a table in the back leaning in close to one another talking softly, laughing softly, as if in their own little world, Takako sat at her spot at the end of the bar, her gaze lost somewhere in Rich's direction.

The sudden, barely audible buzzing sound coming from Kaito's back pocket was enough to draw her back from her daydream, however, and she instinctively reached for her own back pocket. But then she remembered that her phone was hooked up to the sound system providing the nights musical playlist and she looked toward Kaito.

Kaito whispered an apology to the two customers at the bar, both of whom were self-involved with their own phones and oblivious to him. He then turned his back on them to answer the call.

Takako leaned in toward him as she strained to hear his hushed conversation.

After disconnecting the call several minutes later and returning the phone to his back pocket, Kaito bowed to the customers at the bar and topped off their beers. Both nodded in vague acknowledgment without taking their eyes away from their phones. He then returned to his hovering and began once again wiping down the already spotless countertop.

Takako became impatient with her boyfriend and signaled for him to come to her end of the bar. "Who was on the phone?" she demanded in a loud whisper.

He wiped his way down to her. "My girlfriend, who else?" he said straight-faced.

"Keep dreaming, Romeo. You're stuck with me whether you like it or not. Now who was it?"

He wiped his hands with the towel. "Someone finally answered the ad we've been running. She's coming by tomorrow before we open for an audition."

Her forehead creased. "She?"

He nodded.

"Well, *she* better not be pretty. I don't need any more competition around here."

"Why? Shouldn't pretty girls draw more customers than ugly ones?"

Takako punched him in the arm. "How crude you are."

He rubbed his arm and laughed. "Don't blame me, blame the truth."

"Where's she from?"

"Didn't ask. Besides, this is Tokyo. Who knows where anyone's from around here?"

"Well, what did she sound like? Does she have a Tokyo accent?"

"Come to think of it, not really?"

"Well," she said impatiently, "what did it sound like? Someone from Osaka?"

He shrugged. "She'll be here tomorrow. You can interrogate her all you want then."

She sulked, "Well, she better not be too pretty."

He turned serious. "As bad as the turnout has been these past few weeks, we need all the help we can get."

"Yeah, can we even afford to pay her? Our last two performers ended up costing us more money than they brought in."

"Yes, but the last two were men. And neither was very good, or very handsome for that matter. Even you didn't bother flirting with them."

"That's true," she said seriously. "Be honest, are we going to be able to make our next payment? It's coming up soon, you know."

He shook his head and shrugged.

“I mean, if this woman auditioning tomorrow turns out to be good, and we advertise like crazy so that the crowds show up, we should be okay, right?”

“Honestly, Taka-chan,” he said with a worried look, “I don’t really know.”

He turned and headed back to his post near the two customers, leaving her alone to wonder.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Rich stepped out of The Low Point and into the blinking blue and red neon glow of the foggy night with the *sayonaras* of Kaito and Takako trailing behind him. He walked slowly, carefully, up the steps, holding onto the railing until he had both feet set securely on the sidewalk. The misty rain wasn't heavy enough for him to bother with the umbrella for the twenty or so steps it took for him to reach his apartment building. At its entrance door, it took him several attempts before managing to unlock it.

His third-floor apartment was small, exceedingly small for a man his size, and dark except for the faint blues and reds of the club's neon sign refracting off the fog and blinking into the living room through the sliding glass door. After entering, it took a bit of concentration and effort for him to maintain his balance while slipping off his shoes within the tight confines of the entryway.

He tossed his keys onto the kitchenette counter as he padded by and in three short strides he crossed through the living room and reached the bedroom, a room just big enough for a futon, a small nightstand, and a modest dresser and chair, and not much more. A narrow window hiding behind thin yellow curtains that allowed the blinking blues and reds to filter in looked out onto the street below.

He opened the window and pressed his forehead against the screen and looked out at the foggy street. The young couple from the club was walking up the steps arm in arm. They turned right at the sidewalk, still seemingly oblivious to the world around them. He watched them until they were lost within the fog and then stripped down to his boxers and collapsed onto the futon. He got lost staring at the blinking blues and reds flashing on the wall before him. When the blinking stopped and the room fell to a sudden, constant black, he checked his watch even though he knew the time. Its light cast his face in a green, phantasmagoric glow. It was 3:00 a. m. He dropped his arms heavily to his sides, returning the room to the dark.

His face lit up green again. His watch now read 4:12 a. m. The room went back to the dark. Except for the sound of the rain now falling, there was a period of strained silence followed by a heavy sigh of resignation and some rustling around noises until his face lit up brilliantly with the strike of the Zippo. He snapped the lighter shut and his face glowed red from the burning tobacco as he took a deep, frustrated drag.

He sat up with a grunt and tried to rub the sting away from his dry, sleepless eye. With cigarette in mouth and smokes and lighter in hand, he rose and made a careful way through the dark living room to the glass door. He slid it open and stepped out into the muggy night. The hard-falling rain sounded tropical and worked to soothe his exhausted senses. He leaned against the rail and smoked and watched the shadowed, glistening city as it slept within the downpour.

## CHAPTER SIX

The afternoon sun shone weakly behind the low silver clouds and he was again back at the balcony rail smoking, but now he was dressed and his blond hair was slicked back wet from a recent shower. There was a brief respite from the rain and for the first time in days the faces of the people walking by below were not hidden beneath their umbrellas. Tires on the steamy, wet street hissed at him as the cars passed by. The forlorn donging of a distant train crossing signal left him feeling melancholic, hollowed out; but by the signal, he now knew it to be 5:00 p.m.

Still, he checked his watch for redundancy and sat down at the table to pour himself a drink. He threw it back and then poured another and sipped on it as he took the pen out from between the open pages of the journal and began the loosening and tightening of its cap with his thumb.

*When a cut is made to the body and the blood begins to flow, the healing begins at once. Blood cells will clot to stop the bleeding, these clots will turn to scabs to repair the damaged skin, and the scabs will form into scars, creating a bond where the wound once was that will be stronger than ever before.*

*But when a cut is made to the soul and the anguish flows like blood, there's nothing to heal the wound but sorrow and time...*

He often spent his time at the rail seeking out faces among the flowing crowd, watching them as they approached, trying to will them to look his way. It was a pointless exercise, a silly game, but at least it helped to move the day along. None hardly ever looked up at him though, their minds too focused on what lay ahead to bother with the moment that contained them. He looked to his left to watch the crowd flowing in from the train station several blocks east of him. He noticed her immediately.

She had a dark, sultry beauty and an aloof but alluring magnetism about her that made her stand out among the others. Even had she not been wearing the pair of black, patent leather high heels that she was, he could tell she would still be taller than most of the women around her, and probably a lot of the men as well. She took long elegant strides, somewhat like a fashion model would walking down a runway, but without the exaggerated sway and pretentious air. Her long, straight black hair gleamed, and loose strands blew in the wind with her movement as the rest fell straight down to the middle of her back. A thin canvas tote bag and a small purse hung from her right shoulder; a clear raincoat was draped over the forearm. She held a closed-up, colorful umbrella in her left hand. He lit up a fresh smoke without realizing it, lost within the siren-like rhythm of her movements.

As she approached his balcony, she looked up at him with large, almond-shaped eyes, the whites of which shone bright about dark, sparkling irises that reminded him of black onyx gemstones. His heart jumped at the eye contact, as he had forgotten his game. Perhaps she smiled faintly at him, but she looked away too quickly for him to tell for sure.

Usually once they passed him by, he moved on immediately to find the next face to follow. But he did not move on from her and he was surprised when she stopped suddenly in front of The Low Point. He watched her, wondering if she was going to turn back to look at him again.

Instead, she pulled a phone out from her purse and tapped at its screen. She seemed satisfied by what it told her and headed down the steps to the club, perhaps catching another glimpse of him from the corner of her eye as she descended.

He could not see her at the bottom of the stairs, unless he were to lean far over the rail, which he briefly considered doing. But he could hear her knock on the door. And he could hear Takako as she opened the door and greeted her. And he could hear the door close again after she went inside. He tried to imagine for what reason a woman such as she would have for visiting a club such as The Low Point. He could not come up with anything adequate to match his impression of her so he returned to his people watching, this time looking to select someone from the stream of people coming in from his right, the direction of the art district.

Instead, his eye caught on a determined-looking, heavy-set man scurrying across the street, zigzagging his way through the unyielding traffic, his black, unbuttoned raincoat flowing behind him as he ran. When the man made it across, he leaped onto the sidewalk and came to a stop right at the spot where only moments before the woman who had just entered The Low Point had stood.

The man, his large round bald head slick with perspiration and his large round eyes magnified behind black glasses, large and round, fished inside the raincoat's right pocket and pulled out a phone, using it to take pictures of the club's sign, the stairwell leading down to it, and the immediate area around it. If he noticed he was being watched, Rich couldn't tell.

The man then shoved the phone back into the pocket and again scurried back through the traffic to the other side of the street. He walked at a quick pace a little way eastward up the sidewalk until he reached the shabby storefront for a dry-cleaning business that Rich had never had an occasion to use. He thought the man had gone inside the shop, but soon after disappearing within the store's shadowed alcove, his head peeked out from the corner so he could look back and watch the club.

After a few moments, Rich got bored watching the strange man watching the club, so he sat down at the table, poured himself two fingers of whiskey, and opened his journal just as the rain returned.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The door to the nightclub opened and Rich could hear the voices of Takako and Kaito offering their thank yous and goodbyes in Japanese. He stood up just in time to see the woman popping open her flower-patterned umbrella as she rose to the top of the stairs. She turned left and headed back in the same direction from which she came, hidden securely from Rich's view beneath the umbrella.

Still mesmerized by her movements even though she was partially obscured, he watched her until she had crossed the street at the corner and floated away within the sea of umbrellas flowing along with her.

He sat down heavily and, having had forgotten all about the strange man hiding in the alcove, he didn't see him emerging from the shadows to follow behind the woman from the other side of the street.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The A-frame sign on the sidewalk in front of the stairs to the jazz club was something Rich had never seen before. The only thing he could read on it was “THE LOW POINT,” which was written in English in blue chalk at the top. An arrow drawn in red chalk beneath the club’s name pointed diagonally down toward the stairs. The rest of the writing was in Japanese, so he didn’t pay the sign any more mind except to follow the arrow’s direction and head down the stairs.

Kaito and Takako presented him with their usual pleasant salutations upon his entrance. He performed his awkward half bow, half nod as he said his hellos and turned for his table, immediately noticing the spotlight shining down on the piano. Takako, who was right behind him with his whiskey and tumbler set upon her serving tray, smiled when he looked back at her questioningly. He sat down, the light from the piano bleeding over to his table.

She set her tray down and began serving his drink. “Tonight is big night, Rich-san.”

Rich shook out the tip of a cigarette and then pulled it the rest of the way out with his mouth. “Why’s that?”

She took the lighter from his hand and sparked a flame for him. “Tonight, we have real music. Maybe many crowd, too.” Just as she said this a handsome, middle-aged couple that Rich had never seen before walked into the club. Takako looked at them and then back at Rich. Her eyes went wide and her smile flourished ever further. She grabbed her tray and bowed as she hurried off to greet the new patrons.

He watched as the couple was seated. He took a sip of whiskey and more people entered the club. He took out his pen and pulled the journal in front of him but didn’t open it. He just smoked and drank and brooded as the seats in the club filled quickly and the noise level grew until he could barely hear Miles Davis blowing out *So What* over the sound system.

As people kept flowing in, he returned his belongings to their respective pockets and then grabbed his journal and stood to leave. That’s when she walked in the door, the same beautiful, aloof woman whom he had seen visiting the club several days before. Eyes were drawn to her. When Takako saw her, she nearly ran to greet her. Even Kaito managed a smile when he saw her. Takako quickly whisked her away down the short hall past the bar to a back room.

Intrigued, Rich sat back down, set the journal off to the side, and then emptied the contents of the pockets back out onto the table. He freshened his drink and lit another cigarette and waited.

Takako came out of the back office and went behind the bar and whispered something into Kaito’s ear. Kaito nodded as she spoke. He then went over to the sound system and, as soon as *So What* came to its conclusion, he paused the phone’s music app. Takako then hurried down the hall and disappeared back into the office.

Moments later, the two women emerged from the office and walked out onto the floor. Takako gave the other woman an encouraging smile and then returned to her patrons. The woman studied the crowd briefly before walking through the tables toward the piano. Candlelight shimmered off her black sequin sheath dress like the promise of a million stars. Her black hair hung straight down to the middle of her back like a thick silken shawl. All eyes in the room were on her. Heads turned to follow her as she passed.

Rich, too, watched as she walked toward him on her way to the piano. He watched her as he had from his balcony days before – unconsciously, unguardedly. Yet, unlike before, she passed him without a glance, leaving behind for him an almost imperceptible hint of her perfume – something of lavender, something of lemons, something that could stay with one forever.

It was hard for Rich not to turn in his chair to follow her, as if he were being pulled within the current of her fragrant wake, but he didn't. He stayed seated with his back to the piano, unable to see her as she reached the instrument, turned to the crowd, offered them a hint of a smile, and then bowed. The audience, which had fallen completely silent from the moment she had entered the room, applauded politely.

Without a word she sat down at the piano. The applause ended with the touch of her fingers upon the keys. The silence in the room felt tangible, pulsing, as if everyone were holding their breath in anticipation of the first note.

Her first piece was a moving rendition of Sarah Vaughan's signature song *Misty*. She swayed as would a bough with the breeze as she sang and as her fingers danced along the keyboard. It was hard for Rich to tell which was more beautiful: her passionate playing of the piano, or her sultry, seductive voice. What was not hard to tell, however, was how mesmerized everyone became by the hypnotic intensity of her performance.

Rich couldn't help but turn in his seat to watch her, drawn helplessly by the undeniable siren call of her voice, of her beauty.

Only Takako remained free from the woman's spell. Sitting at her spot at the bar, she was more interested in the crowd's response to her, especially Rich's, than she was in her musical attributes. She looked back over her shoulder. Kaito, too, was watching the performance as if in a trance, his ever-present towel thrown uncharacteristically over a shoulder.

She leaned back. "Hey," she said in a loud whisper, "you better be careful. You're starting to drool."

Kaito nodded slowly without breaking his concentration.

"Look at Mr. Lonely over there," she said sullenly, pointing to Rich with her chin. "It seems as if our beautiful Miko-san has even gotten to him."

Again, he nodded mindlessly.

She looked at her boyfriend and shook her head. "And he gives me a hard time about acting like a silly schoolgirl around Rich-san," she said, muttering to herself.

## CHAPTER NINE

Miko brought *Whisper Not* by Anita Day to a dramatic conclusion and the audience rose to their feet in applause. She stood and walked to the front of the piano and bowed several times, the applause growing each time she did. She gave one final, deep bow, held it for several seconds, and then left the piano to make her way through the admiring crowd and return to the office in the back.

Kaito fired the music app back up on Takako's phone and a Stan Getz tune began blowing out dreamily over the sound system. He then loudly announced last call and returned to his thirsty customers at the bar.

Takako was busily working the floor taking orders.

When Mikako emerged from the office several moments later, she was surrounded immediately by new fans who showered her with praise. Kaito caught her attention and motioned for her to take Takako's empty seat at the end of the bar. As she made her way through the crowd, she tried to catch a glimpse over to where the man with the eye patch sat, but she couldn't see through the people surrounding her.

When she sat down, Kaito leaned over to her, his face flushed. "That was a beautiful performance, Mikako-san. Truly."

She bowed in her seat. "That's so kind of you to say, Master. But please, call me Miko."

"Oh yes. That's right. I'm sorry." He bowed quickly to acknowledge his error. "What can I get you to drink, Miko-san? Whatever you want, it's on the house."

She smiled. "Thank you. That's so kind. If it's no trouble, I'll have a vodka martini, please. Dry."

He rushed off to make the drink, even more flushed now from the close exchange with her.

When the crowd began to thin out around her, she sat up in her chair and stretched her neck until she had a clear view to where the man with the eye patch had been sitting.

His table was empty.

She stood up from her stool and looked around the club.

He was gone.

## CHAPTER TEN

The cigarette embers flared in the dark, lighting up Rich's face in its amber glow as he sat on the futon and smoked and wrote in his journal by the light of the blues and reds blinking into the room through the open window, the soft sounds of the falling rain heard just above the muffled sounds of jazz and gaiety floating up to him from below.

*There must be no power as great as love. And whether it's founded as an evolutionary response to nature or from the sting of a god's arrow, without it surely our species would never survive. For, only the promise of love could convince a woman experienced in the pain of childbirth to bear another. Only the promise of love could convince a man experienced in the pain of a broken heart to ever consider love again...*

He reached for his glass of whisky as he read over what he had just written. He brought the glass to his lips but found it empty. He reached for the bottle, but it too had been drained. He closed the journal on the pen and tossed it to the floor next to him. He then tamped out the cigarette and then punched the pillow into shape before falling into it with its misguided promise of sleep.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The door to the club swung open and the sounds of music and conversation spilled out into the rain sodden night. Before her foot hit the first step, Miko had popped her umbrella open and tucked herself beneath it. The door swung shut behind her as she climbed the stairs, subduing the revelry and accentuating the sound of the falling rain.

When she reached the sidewalk, she did a pirouette and had to contain herself from shouting out in joy. Finally, her music was appreciated. She paused to admire the misty glow around the streetlights and the gleam off the wet empty street that stretched out before her. Without noticing that the chalk writing on the A-frame sign had smeared into an incomprehensible mess of colors, she began walking with a bounce in her step, passing under Rich's open window, her heels clicking on the sidewalk providing a rhythmic countermelody to the sound of the rain pattering on the ground around her.

From the darkened alcove on the other side of the street, the flame of a lighter lit up the face of the bald man, his eyes large behind his black, circle-framed glasses. He smoked and watched Miko as she headed up the street. After she crossed to the next block, he popped open a black umbrella as he emerged from the alcove to begin following her.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Rich opened the door to the ramen shop and was hit instantly by a three-fold barrage of a thick, mouth-watering aroma, a thick hot wall of humidity, a humidity even more intense than that of outside – both the aroma and the moisture emanating out from a large caldron of broth simmering in the open kitchen on the other side of the counter immediately off to his right – and a loud chorus of *irashaimasen* that was sung out by the entire staff of cooks and servers welcoming him to the shop.

He forwent the empty stools at the counter and made his way to an empty table in the back. The server was by his side almost instantly with a glass of ice water and a menu. She turned to go but Rich held up a finger and smiled. He then quickly looked the menu over and pointed to the picture of a delectable order of *katsudon*. The server, a sheen of sweat shining from her forehead, nodded a quick bow and said an emphatic *Hai*, and then took the menu from him and hurried off to the center of the counter to place the order with the cooks.

Rich took his journal out from his backpack and flipped through the pages slowly, unable to not notice the four teenage girls dressed in their school uniforms up front by the large window leaning in around their table looking back at him and giggling. As with most places he went in the city, he was always a distraction with his tall frame, his blond hair, and, of course, the eye patch. He couldn't get used to the feeling that it seemed he was always being watched, most often in a discreet manner from the corners of glancing eyes. However, the girls up front made no effort to hide the fact that he was a curious object of their teenage interest. He began going over his writing and did his best to ignore them.

Which is why he didn't notice Kaito and Takako when they entered the shop.

Takako, however, noticed him right away. "Rich-san!" she called out, squealing with delight.

Chopsticks froze in midair as everyone in the shop turned toward the door to look at her, and then followed along with her as she rushed straight to Rich's table.

By the time Kaito bagged and stowed their umbrella and caught up with her, she had already slid a table over to Rich's so the two of them could join him.

Kaito gave his girlfriend a scolding look and then smiled at the American. "Rich-san, it's so good to see you. I apologize for us disturbing you like this. We can sit somewhere else."

Rich set his pen down on the open page and stood up to shake Kaito's outstretched hand. "No, no problem at all. It's good to see you, too. Please, by all means, join me." He motioned for the couple to sit.

Even before Kaito had taken his seat, Takako began speaking to him in rapid-fire Japanese.

"I'm sorry, Rich-san. Takako would like to know why you stopped coming to the club." He then gave Rich a conspiratorial look and said on the sly, "She has a crush on you, you know."

Takako was smiling and nodding along as if she understood what Kaito was saying.

Rich smiled awkwardly. Unsure how to take the last comment, he decided to only address the first.

But just as he was about to respond, the server shuffled back over with a set of menus and tried to hand them out to Kaito and Takako. Kaito shook them off and spoke quickly in Japanese, placing two orders of *miso ramen*. Takako quickly followed him up by adding a side order of *gyoza*.

When the server departed, the couple returned their attention to Rich.

"I'm sorry," Kaito said, "You were saying?"

"Yes, well, as far as me not showing up at the club lately, I'm sorry, Master, but—"

“Please, Rich-san. Call me Kaito. Master is a silly name we should use only at the club.” He shrugged. “Strange Japanese custom, right?”

“Oh. Yes, of course. Kaito... Kaito-san.”

Kaito gave a nod to Rich’s journal. “Perhaps you haven’t been coming because it’s become too noisy for you to write?”

At the mention of his writing, Rich unconsciously closed the journal. “Uhm, well, no, not exactly. It’s just, I thought since you’re now drawing such large crowds that maybe I shouldn’t take up an entire table by myself, you know, just so I can write.”

“I don’t understand. What did he say?” Takako said impatiently to Kaito in Japanese.

Kaito ignored her. “Oh no, Rich-san. You are one of our first customers, and you surely are our most favorite. You will always have a table at our club.”

“That’s very kind of you, Mast—Kaito-san.”

Takako continued to pester Kaito for a translation, and Kaito continued to ignore her. “Please promise you will come tonight. I would like to introduce you to our new performer. In fact, she asked about you after she played at the club the first time. You left before she could meet you.”

Takako finally had enough. She smacked Kaito on the arm and spoke to him between her teeth.

“Excuse me, Rich-san. Takako insists I tell her everything that you’ve said to me.” He proceeded to speak low and fast to his girlfriend to catch her up. She nodded with intensity as he spoke. When he finished, she smiled broadly at Rich and held out her right pinkie finger to him.

Rich looked at Kaito puzzled.” What’s this?”

“Pinkie promise,” Takako said firmly in English.

Kaito looked embarrassed. “She wants you to promise you will come to the club tonight.”

It was Rich’s turn to look embarrassed, but he hooked his pinkie finger with hers. “I promise I’ll be there tonight, Takako-san.”

Takako gave him a stern look.

“Taka-chan! I promise I’ll be there tonight, *Taka-chan*.”

Takako’s smile beamed brightly. She spoke to Kaito as she looked straight at Rich.

“Takako said that before we hired Miko-san, our new performer, you were our club’s biggest attraction.”

“Excuse me?” Rich said, first looking at Kaito and then Takako.

Kaito shook his head and smiled apologetically. “I’m sorry, she can’t help saying exactly what she thinks. She says women especially would come to the club just to see the mysterious foreigner writing in his notebook, just like F. Scott Fitzgerald. That’s how she feels anyway.”

Rich didn’t know how to respond. But before he could say anything, Takako began speaking to Kaito again.

“Ask him what he’s writing about,” she said.

“No way. We shouldn’t be so rude.”

“Ask him!”

“I’m sorry, Rich-san, but Takako has many things she wants to ask you. Is this okay?”

“I... guess so. Sure.”

“Thank you. She is wondering what it is you are writing about in your notebook.”

Kaito saw the look on Rich’s face and said right away, “I’m sorry, Rich-san. I told her we shouldn’t be so rude.”

Rich worked to create a smile. “No, it’s okay... But it’s easier to say what I’m not writing about though.”

Kaito looked at him questioningly.

“Well, I guess by profession I’m a Hollywood script writer and...”

At the mention of the word Hollywood, Takako asked Kaito, with much persistence, what Rich had just said. Kaito whispered a quick translation to her and her face lit up like a klieg light during a movie premiere.

“Sorry, Rich-san,” he said. “You know how Taka-chan is by now. Please continue.”

Rich smiled knowingly. “Yes, well, anyway, I should be writing movie scripts, but instead I seem to be only writing about... Ah, here comes our food.”

Three servers swarmed their table, setting down steaming bowls of ramen before Kaito and Takako and tantalizing dishes of *katsudon*, which went before Rich, and *gyoza*, which Kaito offered to be shared by all. Rich dug right in, using the timely distraction to turn the conversation away from the question of his writing, to his longtime love of Japanese cuisine.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Low Point hummed with a positive vibe of loud laughter and conversation that challenged Sydney Bechet's soprano saxophone blowing out *Blue Horizon* over the sound system. The joint was filled to capacity: every barstool taken, every table filled... every table, that was, except for Rich's.

Takako had to maneuver her way through the thick wall of patrons who stood without a seat mingling in the small section of empty space between the bar and the floor. When she reached the end of the bar, her cheeks were flushed from the efforts of her labor and the energy she drew from the night's electric vibe. Her usual stool had been sacrificed to the crowds long ago, so she leaned in with her elbows on the bar to wait for Kaito to work his way down to her.

"Some crowd, eh," he said when he finally reached her.

She nodded and handed him her order slips. She then turned and leaned back against the bar.

He saw where her eyes went. "You know, maybe we should just go ahead and let someone sit there. It's silly to—"

"I really thought he would come tonight," she said looking off in the direction of the empty table.

He shrugged and set to work on a whiskey sour. "He's a writer. You know how they say they are, always so temperamental and unpredictable."

"But he promised," she said turning back to him. "He and I..." Her voice trailed off as she stood up straight, her mind working a thought. Without another word, she pushed her way through the crowd toward the entrance.

The door to the club swung open and the music and raucous din from the inside poured out and melded with the lively night sounds of the city. Rich's gaze instinctively turned down toward the club. He saw Takako emerging up the stairs, her head already straining to look up over the stairwell toward his apartment. He eased back into the balcony shadows, cupping his cigarette in his hand to hide the glow of the embers.

She returned frustrated to the bar just as Kaito set the last drink order on her tray. He looked at her knowingly and gave her a sympathetic smile.

"I don't care how crowded it gets," she said as she hoisted up the tray and held it by the flat of her hand shoulder high, "we're not letting anyone sit at his table. Understand?"

He wiped his hands on his towel and nodded. He started to walk away but she wasn't finished.

"We told him his table would be there for him whenever he comes so I want to at least keep our promise. Understand?"

She walked away without waiting for his answer.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rich walked into the club, its atmosphere heavy with smoke and the mingling odors of perfume and alcohol. He made his way through the crowd until he could get a good view of the floor. Miko was at the piano playing the Julie London version of *I'm In the Mood for Love*. His table was empty, a white placard with Japanese writing on it set in front of the centerpiece.

Takako came hurrying over to him. "Rich-san! I knew you come!" She held out her pinkie finger to him as she bounced excitedly up and down on the balls of her feet.

Rich locked his pinkie with hers and smiled. He turned toward the bar. Kaito bowed and then held up a fresh bottle of Yamazaki 12 like a trophy.

"I get whiskey," she said. She dashed off just as the song was coming to an end. She came back and grabbed Rich by the hand and led him to his table as the crowd began to applaud.

Miko rose from the bench and turned to face the audience. As she went into her bow, she saw Rich coming toward her. Her eyes stayed with his, all the way through the bow and until she turned back to the piano to play her next selection.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Without life's breath  
And with cold, dead eyes  
An infant in the grave  
Will ne'er again arise*

He set the pen down and reached for a cigarette. The pack was empty. He poked a finger inside it and fished around to make sure. Nothing. Inside the apartment, he checked the refrigerator. No luck. Right away his nicotine craving began to surge. He grabbed his keys off the counter, slipped his feet into a pair of loafers, and then exited the apartment posthaste.

At the top of the narrow staircase at the end of the hall, he stopped abruptly. "Oh, hey Anja. Let me help you with those."

"Oh, thank God, Rich," Anja Bang said with relief as he took two of the three heavy bags of groceries from her arms. "My arms were about to break."

He let her pass and then followed her up the stairs to the apartment directly above his.

"Can I get you a beer?" she said as she set the bag on the counter.

He slipped off his shoes in the entryway and set the bags next to the other. "No thanks. I was just on my way to get some cigarettes."

She dug into one of the bags and pulled out a pack of Marlboro Reds and tossed it to him.

"There you go. Now, no excuses." She pulled her ponytail out from the band and shook her long blonde hair free. "Why don't you go out to the balcony and watch the rain fall like you do while I put the groceries away. I'll be out with the beers in a minute."

"I didn't know you smoked," he said as he crossed the living room, tearing open the pack.

"Well, maybe you would have found out if you had ever accepted any of my invites up."

He was leaning on the rail smoking when she walked out onto the balcony. She handed him a Budweiser.

He lit another cigarette from the cherry of his and handed it to her. As he cracked open the beer, he looked at it skeptically. "I'm finding it hard to believe that you drink Budweiser. I thought you Vikings liked your mead with a little kick to it."

"What can I say? It's cheap." She tapped his can with hers. "*Skol.*"

They drank and smoked and watched the rain fall.

"So, how's the script coming along?"

He gave her a sideways glance.

"You are a screenwriter, aren't you?"

"How did you know?"

She laughed. "Uhm, there is this thing called Google. Maybe you've heard of it?"

"You googled me?"

She looked at him funny. "Are you kidding me? It's a girl's first line of defense. Just because a guy's good looking doesn't mean he isn't wanted for murder."

He nodded slowly. "I see."

"So, about that script. It wouldn't happen to have a role in it for an out of work Norwegian model would it?"

"That's what you do? You're a model?"

"Do you have to act so surprised?"

“No, sorry. Obviously that’s not what I meant. I mean, there’s no doubt that you’re beautiful enough to be a model...”

“That’s better.”

“But, I just didn’t know that foreigners could make a living over here doing something like that.”

“Well, it’s not much of a living, that’s for sure. Which brings me back to my question about the script.”

He laughed. “You’re good.”

“Thank you.”

“But, sorry to say, I haven’t written a decent script in quite a while now.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. Writer’s block?”

He shrugged and looked down at the street.

“Sorry, bad habit. I’ll stop prying now.”

“No, it’s okay. It’s just that it’s been a long time since I’ve felt inspired enough to even want to create anything new.” He drained his beer.

“I’ll go get us another one, hold on.”

“No, it’s okay. I really should be going.”

“What? After I finally managed to get you up here?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a lot of important staring into the rain to do.”

“Come on, Rich,” she said, putting a hand on his back. “Stay a while. I can make us dinner. I bet we both could use the company.”

He smiled. “Maybe some other time, okay?”

“Okay,” she said as they began walking toward the door. “But remember, a girl can be rejected only so many times before she finally gets the hint.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The house lights were on and the last of the crowd was filing out the door. Kaito and Takako stood off to the side bowing and offering each departing patron their gratitude and farewells.

When Rich made it to the door, before he could offer the couple his goodbyes, Kaito took him by the arm and pulled him out of the queue. “Rich-san, please, can you wait a moment before you go.” He pointed him over to the bar, inviting him to have a seat while he waited.

After all the patrons had departed, Kaito went over to him. “Sorry, to make you wait, Rich-san, but Taka-chan and I would like to—” He caught sight of Miko walking out of the back office tucked tight in her raincoat, an umbrella hanging from her wrist. “*Mattete...*” he said absentmindedly in Japanese as he began walking over to her. He stopped and turned back to Rich. “Uhm, sorry, Rich-san, I meant, just a moment please.”

Confused, Rich sat back down as Kaito went to Miko. He saw that Takako was behind the bar doing something he couldn’t tell what.

Kaito walked back over to him, bringing the woman with him by the arm. “Rich-san, Taka-chan and I were hoping you and Miko-san would join us in celebrating the recent success she has brought to our club.”

Takako came out from behind the bar practically skipping, carrying a tray with a small strawberry shortcake set atop it. “Please, let’s celebrate everyone!” she said, her smile beaming bright.

Kaito led Rich and Miko to a table. “Please, have a seat and get to know each other while I make refreshments.”

Takako set the cake on the table and then skipped away.

Rich and Miko both sat down warily, alone together at the table. They both watched Kaito and Takako behind the bar for an awkward moment.

Rich cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, but I don’t speak Japanese.”

Miko dropped her eyes. “And my English is so poor.”

He chuckled. “I have a hunch, though, it’s much better than my Japanese. Especially the way all those songs you sang so beautifully happened to be in English.”

She smiled.

“Anyway, my name is Rich.” He held his hand out to her.

“Yes, my name is Mikako,” she said taking the hand. “But you can call me Miko if you like.”

They released their hands slowly.

“Rich is short for Richard?”

“Yes, it is. Richard Carmichael is my full name.”

“Richard Carmichael,” she said, trying out the pronunciation for herself. “I like that name.”

He smiled and offered her a cigarette. She slid it from the pack and placed it between her lips. He flipped open his Zippo, struck a flame, and held it out to her. She placed her hand on the back of his, looking him in the eye as she brought the cigarette down to the flame.

He lit one for himself. “You really do have a beautiful voice,” he said through the lingering cloud of smoke.

She smiled, nodding her head in a slight bow, and then took a drag on the cigarette without looking away from him.

They didn’t notice Takako approaching the table moments later carrying a tray of martinis until she set them down between them.

“Isn’t Miko-san pretty, Rich-san?” she said provocatively.

Rich and Miko returned from the little world they had inhabited briefly together and looked up at Takako smiling at them as she served the drinks.

“Yes, she is,” Rick said, his gaze returning to Miko.

“Cake and martinis. What could be better?” Kaito said, walking up to the table with plates and silverware. “I see you have introduced yourselves to each other.”

“Don’t you think they make a beautiful couple?” Takako said to Kaito in Japanese as she cut the cake and began handing out slices.

“Eh!” Miko said in embarrassment.

“Taka-chan, behave yourself,” Kaito said in English smiling. He looked at Rich and shrugged, as if saying, what are you going to do?

Rich smiled and nodded in understanding.

Takako took a seat while Kaito remained standing. He held his martini up for a toast. The others did the same.

“First, a toast to Rich-san, one of our first and certainly most famous customers.”

“*Kompai!*” they all said as they laughed and touched glasses all around.

“Second,” Kaito continued after they all had taken a drink, “a toast to the talented and lovely Miko-san, who sings like Sarah Vaughan and plays piano like Thelonious Monk.”

Miko covered her embarrassed smile with her free hand as they all offered her their cheers and touched glasses.

And then the celebration began in earnest.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

There was a loud thud on the outside of the door to Rich's apartment, followed by what sounded like a scuffle of some sort. There was a jangling of keys on a ring and then a scratching of metal on metal. With a click the door flew open.

Rich and Miko, entangled in a passionate embrace, came spilling into the dark apartment, tripping on the step up from the entryway but somehow managing to stay on their feet as they bounced off counters and walls and spun toward the bedroom, peeling off layers of clothes along the way.

She fell on top of him as they collapsed onto the futon, their naked bodies enflamed with an irrepressible desire. Straddling him, her hands braced on his chest, her hair hanging down around his face permitting him only a vision of her, she took him within.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rich's waking was slow and luxurious, it had been so long since he had rested so well. However, when he opened his eyes, Miko, the reason for his welcomed exhaustion, wasn't lying in bed next to him where he expected her to be. She was standing at the end of the futon in her bra and panties, slipping her dress over her head, her hips wiggling nicely as she worked it down into place.

He leaned up on an elbow. "Is everything okay?"

She rushed around the room gathering her things. She looked panicked. "I'm sorry, Rich-san, but I'm afraid I had too much to drink last night. I really don't remember much after leaving the club."

He sat up, alarmed. "Wait. Do you... do you think I took advantage of you?"

Her search expanded out into the living room. He wrapped the sheet around himself and rushed out of the room to follow her.

She found her purse on the small loveseat and swiped her pantyhose off the back of the recliner, wrapping them up in a ball and then stuffing them into the purse.

"Miko, answer me. Please. I need to know what you're thinking... If you think that I—"

"I'm sorry, Rich-san, but I have to go," she said as she looked herself over in the entryway mirror, sounding much more in control now. She smiled at him regretfully in the mirror and then opened the door to leave.

"Miko wait, please. I promise that what happened between us... I never had any intention of taking advantage of you."

She turned to look at him, the door halfway open. "I'm sorry, Rich-san, but if anyone was taken advantage of, it was you." She dipped her head in a bow and left.

He stared at the closed door in disbelief only for a moment.

He reached the balcony just as she was exiting the building. He thought about calling after her, but it seemed she was walking up the sidewalk as fast as her legs could carry her. Rain fell all at once in a downpour. Without slowing down, she popped open her umbrella just as others began popping open all around her.

He watched her bright, flower-patterned umbrella flow away from him within the crowded sea of multi-colored, plastic and nylon taffeta domes until a strong gust of wind blew the rain into the balcony, soaking his sheet. It was cold, shocking him out of his focus on her departure.

He was about to go inside when the strange bald man stepped out of the alcove, popped open his black umbrella, and headed quickly after Miko, the tails of his black raincoat flowing behind him.

"Hey!" Rich shouted.

The man didn't look back.

Rich ran back inside, threw on his boxers, a pair of jeans, and an old Bob Seger concert shirt. At the entryway, he made a futile attempt to slip his feet into his loafers but gave up after the first try and went dashing out of the apartment barefoot, remembering to grab his umbrella at the last second.

Moments later he came busting out the apartment building and went running down the sidewalk, weaving in and out of umbrella toting pedestrians. The rain was really coming down now and he tried to open his umbrella as he ran. It popped open only partially. He forced it open, but several pegs broke and when the wind caught it, it popped open backwards. He tossed it in a trashcan as he ran past.

The crosswalk signal's little red man had just stopped flashing and turned solid as he reached the corner, but he didn't slow down, arcing along the outside of the waiting crowd and running straight across the street, almost getting clipped by a car making a turn. But by the time he reached the end of the next block, the signal had long turned red and traffic at the major intersection was thick. He had no choice but to wait.

He couldn't see over the umbrellas, so he shouldered his way to the front of the crowd. It wasn't hard. Once people saw him looking completely soaked, barefoot, and with his one eye searching madly everywhere, they were happy to get out of his way. But once he had a clear view, Miko's bright umbrella was nowhere to be found. He didn't bother looking for the bald man. There were too many black umbrellas.

He turned around and began walking back to his apartment, the umbrellas parting around him as he passed.

END OF SAMPLE

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