

THE CHERRY BLOSSOM MURDER

CHAPTER ONE

Sort of like cotton wool, thought Josie. Or strawberry ice cream maybe. Candy floss – no, too pink. Gran’s hair that time she tried to dye it with henna and it didn’t quite work.

‘Come on.’ Keiko’s voice broke into her train of thought. ‘You can look at the cherry blossom later. We’ve got to get to Tammy’s party.’

‘Sorry,’ said Josie. ‘It’s just that cherry blossom is so great. We had a cherry tree down our street, lovely it was, but nothing like this.’

‘Give it to me,’ said Keiko, taking Josie’s phone from her hand. ‘Stand over there and I’ll take a photo of you with the blossom.’

Josie did as she was told, reaching up and pulling a branch towards her so the flowers framed her face.

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘Proper Japanese picture, that is. I’ll email it to my mum.’

They walked on, past the tall flytower of the Takarazuka Theatre that dominated the little town, and the big poster of Tammy Izumo by the stage door. Then they turned the corner and crossed the grey stone bridge over the Muko River, squinting as the last rays of afternoon sunshine shone into their eyes. When they reached the Takarazuka Hotel, where star actresses like Tammy always held their parties, Josie paused and shaded her eyes with her hand to look at it. Its white stucco walls and steeply sloping red roof gave it a determinedly European air, as though a Viennese burgher’s house had been dismantled, transported halfway round the world and carefully re-erected brick by brick among the gingko trees and weeping willows of western Japan. Behind it rose the green bulk of neatly wooded mountains; in front, the white gravel looked as though every stone had been hand-washed that morning. Which it probably had, Josie thought, given the Japanese obsession with cleanliness. They probably scrubbed and polished the trees while they were at it.

The only sounds were the occasional purr of passing cars and the soft mechanical calling of the cuckoo on the pedestrian crossing that indicated it was safe to cross; the air was lightly scented with cherry blossom and a sweet hint of freshly baked cakes. It could have been the opening scene of a beautifully drawn Studio Ghibli film. Hmm, all a bit too perfect, Josie thought. Next thing you know, a black cat will turn up and carry me off to a supernatural adventure.

‘There’s a huge queue,’ Keiko said. ‘It’s going to take ages to get in.’

‘It’s okay,’ said Josie. ‘We’ve got plenty of time before it starts.’

They joined the line that snaked towards the hotel entrance. A few people glanced at Josie curiously, clearly wondering what a foreigner was doing there, and one or two nudged their friends and pointed her out. Josie tried not to stand out; to somehow be less tall, less gangly and awkward, altogether less foreign. It didn’t work – it never did. It wasn’t so bad in Tokyo, where they were used to foreigners, but outside the big cities people still treated her as a freak. So I’ve got round grey eyes not narrow brown ones and I was taller than my older sister when I was twelve – that doesn’t make me a sideshow, she thought, trying to seem unaware of the looks she was getting.

‘Don’t let it get to you,’ said Keiko, guessing her thoughts. ‘You’re in Tammy’s fan club just like them.’

That’s right, thought Josie. I’m in the fan club too. Though I’ve never managed to explain to Mum exactly what it’s all about. I’m not sure I know myself, but that’s half the fun. She thought back to the first time she saw a Takarazuka show. A huge stage, a live orchestra belting out pop and rock classics, enough feather-clad dancers – all female, of course – to put the Notting Hill Carnival to shame and more glitter than the Eurovision

Song Contest. And Tammy Izumo in the middle of it all, in a pearl-embroidered trouser suit and a white fedora tipped rakishly over one eye, like a synthesis of Marlene Dietrich and Annie Lennox, radiating so much charisma you could have struck a match off her. Josie had been mesmerised.

All the same, she wouldn't have joined the fan club if she hadn't found herself sitting next to Keiko. Keiko had tried out her primitive English, beamed when Josie answered in Japanese and nattered happily away all through the interval. They went for a coffee together after the show and had been friends ever since.

Keiko worked in IT, which Josie had studied at uni though the only job she could get in Tokyo was as an office assistant; they both had much the same opinion of the male colleagues who were promoted over their heads. They got into the habit of meeting up a couple of times a week in Tokyo and then started taking weekend trips to Takarazuka, the small town outside Osaka where the Takarazuka Revue had begun.

'Come on – we're in,' said Keiko, and Josie readied herself for action.

The crowd swept through the glass doors, across the flower-scented foyer and onto an escalator already crammed with excited-looking women; behind them, more poured into the foyer and headed for the escalator in their turn, all talking nineteen to the dozen. Josie felt like a London pigeon that had strayed into the middle of a flock of escaped parakeets.

She was a bit taken aback by how well dressed everybody was, in that slightly over-the-top way that Japanese girls could carry off and English ones couldn't. Floaty lace dresses in ice-cream colours rubbed shoulders with sharp little suits that wouldn't have looked out of place on the Rive Gauche. Here and there ladies in traditional kimonos, their *obi* tied in decorative bows and their feet encased in starched white socks, tripped along on brocade sandals. Even Keiko, never normally seen out of jeans, was wearing a vintage fifties cocktail frock decorated with cabbage roses, though it contrasted oddly with her broad face and round glasses.

Josie wondered what on earth had made her think that last season's wrap dress from Zara was the right thing to wear. It had seemed quite edgy when she put it on but now she was uncomfortably aware that it was a bit too short and she was showing way too much leg. Plus her hair was already starting to escape from the French pleat she'd twisted it into, and she hadn't thought to bring extra hair-grips with her.

She pushed a loose strand behind her ear and followed Keiko off the escalator and across the hall to a pair of double doors flanked by a softly illuminated sign that said *Tammy Izumo's Tea Party*. Next to the sign was a table where Mai-chan, one of the fan club staff, was taking tickets and issuing seat numbers, searching laboriously through the papers spread across the table for each one. There was a thin film of sweat on her upper lip and a look of fierce concentration in her eyes.

'Here you are, Mrs Iguchi, table five near the front,' she said in a polite whisper. 'Sorry, Miss Suzuki, wait a minute... No, I've got it, table sixteen at the back again, I'm afraid. Good evening, Mrs Murakami, table one in the front row as usual.'

Josie felt sorry for poor Mai-chan, ever the dogsbody, who was clearly feeling the pressure of responsibility.

'What a pretty dress,' she said when their turn came, and was rewarded when Mai-chan looked up for a moment with a pleased smile and patted the frills of lace that trimmed her sleeves. The dress, patterned with tiny roses and sprigs of lily of the valley interspersed with smiling teddy bears, stretched tightly across her substantial stomach, while her chubby neck was garlanded with the pièce de résistance – a scarf of the same material with little toy teddy bears dangling at each end.

'It's from Pink House,' she murmured, as though sharing a secret. 'It's my favourite.'

Pink House was a shop on the Flower Path that sold cute flowery dresses like this one.

'It suits you,' Josie said, handing over her ticket.

There was an agonising wait while Mai-chan scrabbled through her papers. 'Er, just a

moment, let me see... I'll find it in a minute. Here we are – table twelve.'

Josie's face fell. That was almost at the back.

Keiko slipped her arm through Josie's. 'That's not bad,' she said. 'Last time I was practically in the corridor. This is a big improvement, believe me.'

Inside the double doors they found a chaotic mix of arriving guests, closely packed tables, and dinner-jacketed waiters circling like benevolent vultures. Keiko cut through the throng to their table with Josie following close behind her. As soon as they sat down, one of the waiters bowed and offered them drinks from his tray.

'What's the brown one?' said Josie, thinking it might be whisky.

'Iced oolong tea,' said Keiko, helping herself to a glass.

The only other options were orange juice and fizzy lemonade so Josie did the same. Another waiter put a small plate in front of her, added a lace-cut paper doily and a silver cake fork and placed a cake on the doily with a pair of silver tongs. Layers of white sponge and chocolate cream were topped with a delicate filigree of chocolate twigs and three artfully placed cherry blossoms. Josie picked up her fork and tried a corner. There was a faint hint of chocolate, as though the chef had stood with a cup of grated chocolate poised over the mix for a moment and then changed his mind; apart from that it was completely tasteless. She put her fork down again. Why was it that a nation so obsessed with food that they had invented a fifth taste unknown to the rest of the world couldn't grasp the appeal of chocolate?

'Have you done your envelope?' said Keiko, who had been scribbling away, leaving her cake untouched.

'My envelope?' said Josie.

'Yes, so they can send you a photograph afterwards. Didn't you get one?'

'No,' said Josie, looking around rather wildly, as though the envelope might magically appear.

'Well go and ask Mai-chan to give you one. Hurry up, before Tammy arrives.'

Josie pushed back her gilt chair and wriggled her way past the tables to the door. She could see that Mai-chan had already begun packing away her papers and hurried towards her but stopped when she saw Mrs Edogawa, the head of the fan club for the western half of Japan, and her deputy, Mineko, deep in conversation near the top of the escalator.

Josie liked Mineko, who effectively ran the western fan club almost single-handed and still managed to look twice as elegant as Josie ever could; but she was not so sure about Mrs Edogawa, who could be disconcertingly odd. She was somewhere in her forties with fading hair and usually looked as though she'd got dressed in the dark, in clothes that had been slept on by several cats, but today she seemed to have made an effort; her silk dress only had a few visible stains and her earrings were actually quite stylish. Her heavy features had been given a light dusting of powder, though her lipstick, a bright orange splodged on with a heavy hand, rather spoiled the effect. She caught sight of Josie and smiled.

'Ah, our foreign guest,' she said in a blurred voice. 'On your way to the bar for a proper drink?'

She swayed a little and rested her hand on Mineko's arm to steady herself.

'Oh, no, actually,' said Josie, trying to edge towards the table where Mai-chan was now piling her papers into a big sports bag.

'Well that's where I'm going,' said Mrs Edogawa, letting go of Mineko's arm and walking with slow concentration towards the escalator. 'You'll be alright without me, won't you, Mineko?'

'I think we can manage,' said Mineko, her voice expressionless.

As Mrs Edogawa vanished down the escalator, Mineko checked her watch and went back into the party room. Mai-chan bent over the table, struggling to close the zip of her bulging sports bag.

'Excuse me...' said Josie.

Mai-chan whirled round. 'Oh, it's you,' she said, her taut face relaxing.

'Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you,' said Josie. 'I just came to ask for an envelope. I didn't get one when we came in.'

'That's all finished. I've put everything away,' said Mai-chan, her face flushed with the effort of struggling with the zip.

'Oh,' said Josie. 'Well, I don't suppose...'

For a moment it looked as though Mai-chan was going to refuse, but then she unzipped the bag again, reached in and extracted a battered envelope. 'Here,' she said.

'Thanks,' said Josie, taking the envelope and turning to go.

Mai-chan went back to trying to zip the bag up, but it was jammed part way. She tugged on it but only made it worse.

'Shall I try?' said Josie. 'I'm good at things like that.'

'It's got stuck,' said Mai-chan. 'And I'm in a hurry.' She stood back.

Josie pulled the zip back, extracted a thread from the teeth where it had jammed and zipped it up again. 'There you go,' she said. 'All done.'

'Thanks,' said Mai-chan. There were dark circles around the armpits of her teddy bear dress and the sweat was now trickling down her face.

'Are you alright?' said Josie. 'You look a bit off-colour.'

'I'm alright. I've just got a lot to do.'

'Yes, of course, the party.'

'No,' said Mai-chan. 'I've got something else to do, something really important. I've got to go.'

Josie could hear the music starting up in the party room. 'Oh,' she said. 'Okay. Thanks for the envelope.'

The music gave way to an announcement she couldn't quite hear. She turned back towards the party room, vaguely aware that Mai-chan had tucked the bag out of sight under the table and headed off towards the escalator without it.

'Where've you been?' said Keiko when she got back to her seat. 'You've been gone ages.'

'Sorry. I just... Sorry.'

'Never mind. Mineko's just starting the announcements. Hurry up and write your envelope before Tammy gets here.'

Josie did as she was told, stumbling a little over the *kanji* characters of her Tokyo address. Keiko looked over her shoulder when she had finished and nodded approvingly.

Josie relaxed and turned her attention to the tiny stage where Mineko was explaining the arrangements for when Tammy arrived. She made them all rehearse shouting out 'Welcome, Tammy!' in unison, which Josie found oddly enjoyable, though back home in Catford she'd rather have sunk through the floor than do something like that.

Then the lights dimmed and there was a fanfare from the sound system. They all turned round as the doors at the back of the room flew open and Tammy appeared in a white St Laurent tuxedo that made her look like a model straight off the catwalk. Everyone broke into loud applause and delivered their carefully prepared welcome with more enthusiasm than skill.

Tammy laughed as she walked down the narrow track leading from the double doors to the stage, while everybody agitatedly scraped back their chairs to make room for her. She passed so close that Josie could almost have reached out and touched her.

As Tammy mounted the steps to the tiny stage, Keiko leaned across to Josie. 'Lucky us,' she mouthed.

Josie grinned back.

The party was just as much fun as Keiko had promised. Tammy answered all the questions that Mineko, discreetly positioned at a microphone at the side of the room, put to

her. She told them how she learned her lines by reading them to her yorkshire terrier, how she liked the russet leather jerkin she wore in the battlefield scene because it was so comfortable, how they'd laughed in rehearsals when she muddled up her lines so the backing dancers launched into a can-can in the middle of a scene and how she liked to go shopping on her day off. The audience nodded and laughed and murmured in agreement.

Then they played games – charades in which Tammy acted out words for the fans to guess; jokey multiple-choice questions in which the right answer was the one that Tammy chose; team games where the tie-breaker was scissors/ paper/ stone and Tammy was the judge. And then Tammy sang one of the songs from the show and, as a storm of applause swept across the room, one final encore. As the last notes died away Mineko pointedly looked at her watch and Tammy, with a little apologetic smile, stepped down from the stage and walked back through the ecstatic audience, pausing in the doorway to wave and blow a kiss before she disappeared from view.

‘Please stay in your seats,’ said Mineko. ‘We have some more entertainment for you before the party wraps up.’

The rest of the fan club staff appeared and performed a funny parody of Tammy’s previous show. Mai-chan wasn’t among them but Josie assumed she’d been sent off on an errand.

As the show drew to a close Keiko began to fidget. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘If we don’t get out of here now we’ll be stuck behind this crowd.’

Josie grabbed her bag and the girls hurried back down the escalator. It was a relief to escape the hot overcrowded room and cross back over the Muko River in the cool evening darkness. The night was peaceful, just the gentle sound of water gurgling over the stony riverbed and the silence of the clear night sky overhead. The mountains were no more than black shapes in the distance, while the lights of Takarazuka town twinkled cheerfully below, promising a hospitable welcome to anyone looking for a good meal and pleasant company.

They were heading for a restaurant on the other side of the railway tracks that bisected the town. It was an odd little place that served fried noodles with crunchy lotus root and tofu; they usually washed the food down with a couple of bottles of Kirin beer and then Keiko would move on to hot sake while Josie had a grapefruit sour, squeezing a fresh half grapefruit into her sake glass. The old couple that ran the restaurant would let them stay until late, then they’d give the girls a hot cup of tawny *hojicha* tea to drink before they strolled back to their hotel.

It’s good to relax once in a while, thought Josie. I’ve pushed myself hard since I came to Japan. Two tough years teaching English in a freezing cold school in Sapporo and studying Japanese half the night, and then finding my feet in this new job in Tokyo. And telling Dave I don’t know when I’ll come back to England and he should consider himself free to look for someone else. That was the worst, but you have to make sacrifices to get what you want and I’ve got what I wanted - a new life in Japan. No regrets.

They reached the far side of the bridge, turned the corner and walked past the back of the theatre. Up ahead the lights of the Flower Path twinkled comfortingly through the branches of the cherry trees. Next to them was the curved wall of the theatre with a row of little shops beyond. The other side of the road was in darkness apart from a pool of light from the street lamp and a slight glow from the overhead railway bridge. The stage door, so busy in the daytime with fans waiting to see the actresses arrive, was quiet and shuttered. Everything was reassuringly familiar, except for an odd little group of women standing awkwardly on the path ahead. A sudden bitingly cold wind rattled through the tree branches and Josie shivered and pulled her cardigan around her.

Keiko, who had been chattering on about the party and the funny things that happened, stopped and said,

‘Oh, look at the cherry blossom! Good thing we took pictures before the party - this

wind's blown nearly all of it away.'

Josie looked up. The blossom that had been so lovely before, dancing above their heads like an omen of good luck, was now thin and ragged. Drifts of it were piled on the ground, shifting and scattering in the wind that chilled Josie's unprotected knees.

Something about a pile of cherry blossom by the theatre wall worried Josie. She stared at it and realised the blossom half-covered a pile of clothes someone had dumped in an alcove.

That's all wrong, Josie thought. People here never throw anything away in the street, not even a sweet paper. No one would dump a pile of clothes like that.

She looked at the heap again and made out a pattern of tiny sprigs of roses and lily of the valley interspersed with smiling teddy bears just like the dress Mai-chan had worn at the party. The wind had blown the fallen cherry blossom around it like a blanket.

A tingle of fear ran down Josie's spine. Mai-chan wouldn't throw her dress away, not the dress she was so proud of. It's the last thing she'd do.

Josie clutched Keiko's arm and pointed at the pile.

'What's that?' she said.

'Don't know,' said Keiko. 'It's sort of odd. Something's not right.'

Both girls peered at the heap in the darkness beyond the reassuring gleam of the lights on the path. It had a frighteningly familiar shape, like someone lying on their side. Josie gradually made out a stout brown shoe, the white flash of an ankle, a hand turned at a strange angle and a tangle of blue-black hair.

Josie felt as though her heart had stopped. It was Mai-chan, had to be Mai-chan, and she was dead. Her tumbled hair mercifully hid her face but even in the dim light Josie could see that her neck was swollen and bruised. Wound tightly round it was her silly pretty scarf, the little toy teddy bears dangling at each end still smiling vacantly.

The wind grabbed a few petals from the pile around the body and blew them mockingly up into the air.

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