

Five Million Yen: Chapter 45

by Daniel Harris

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* * *

Ben woke in a black mood. His head was ready to explode and his throat was raw

-Jesus, I hate playing in smoky pubs, he sputtered between coughing jags. Everything in this room smells like cigarette smoke.

Ben knew there was no food or drink in his studio. He took a shower and went out to procure essential supplies. When he passed the reception desk, there was a new person on duty.

-Bonjour. Is Sophie Kessel here today? asked Ben.

-No, I'm her replacement. My name is Céline. Sophie no longer works here.

-What happened to Sophie?

-She quit school. One must be a student to work here, announced Céline.

-That is sad, I liked her, replied Ben.

-Perhaps you liked her too much, Monsieur Clarone. Monsieur Bernardi expelled her.

-Are you sure?

-Absolutely. Did you have a question?

-Yes, is there a supermarket near here?

-There is a Casino Supermarche on Gorbella, replied Céline.

-Ah, that's correct. I believe I saw it the other night looking for a parking place. Thank you.

Ben's black mood became two shades darker. He hoped he wasn't the cause of Sophie being expelled, but he did have sex with her and she was in his studio. He felt responsible. Sophie shouldn't be

penalized like this. No one was hurt. But now he knew his studio was under surveillance.

He drove to the Casino Supermarche and purchased 500 francs worth of groceries and non-food items. On the way back he discovered a boulangerie one block from the front gate of Villa Arson.

-Fresh bread every day. The French way to live, said Ben to himself.

He was carrying groceries from his car to the gate when Michel accosted him.

-Monsieur Clarone, Sophie has been expelled. Monsieur Bernardi discovered that she had been in your atelier. Sophie needs your help. Will you speak with Monsieur Bernardi and tell him that you requested she come to your atelier? Perhaps you can convince him to reinstate her.

-Why was she fired?

-She entered your atelier alone. We are only allowed to enter an atelier with another staff person, never alone. There were thefts until he instituted that rule. I am also guilty, but he did not fire me because you had guests.

-How would he know? asked Ben.

-Surveillance cameras.

-But, I requested her to come to my atelier to put make-up on my black eye.

-Please tell Monsieur Bernardi. Everyone likes Sophie. The whole school is sad.

-Yes, of course, I will speak with Monsieur Bernardi. But can you find a cart to carry these groceries to my atelier?

-Wait one minute, I will return with a cart.

Ben didn't need Sophie's predicament with all the other things gnawing at his nerves.

Ben was enjoying a breakfast of peanut butter on toast, scrambled eggs, ham and strong coffee when Monsieur Bernardi knocked his door.

-Welcome, come in, said Ben.

-Ben, I'm here to explain some of the rules of Villa Arson.

-Yes, I heard about Sophie. I asked her to come here because I needed her to make up my black eye. She is an experienced theater make-up artist. Hausenstockmann would be furious if he saw my black eye. I still have to wear sunglasses when I'm with him.

-Yes that is some eye: green, blue, and black.

-Much better than it was.

-You should put raw beefsteak on your eye, suggested Bernardi.

-I prefer horsemeat, it heals faster, said Ben completing the joke.

-You are a quick read, Clarone.

-I can sight-read flyspecks perfectly at a hundred yards, he boasted. Would you like some coffee? It's fresh.

-Thank you, I'll have a cup.

Shit, thought Ben, now he's going to stay and I need to test reeds and warm-up.

-Sugar and cream?

-Please.

-Sorry, but I'm allergic to milk, so there is no milk or cream, and I only have honey, no sugar.

-In that case, I'll pass on the coffee.

There was an uncomfortable silence as Ben finished his breakfast.

-Monsieur Clarone, I must tell you that Villa Arson is a school and a museum. The students are young and playing the role of artistes. They are not artists yet, but they like to act the part: drinking, experimenting with sex and drugs, rebelling against society. I think you remember from your youth how they act. Monsieur Clarone, you should not consider our hospitality a license to pick and choose among our impressionable young women for your pleasure.

Ben tore off a chunk of fresh bread and dipped it into his coffee.

Bernardi studied Ben. Ben gave Bernardi's eyes his best x-ray stare.

-Monsieur Bernardi, I am here to play some concerts with the Monte Carlo Orchestra. That is my mission. I am more than pleased to give master classes and to make myself available as a musical resource to the students and faculty of Villa Arson. But if you are

going to monitor my movements so that I feel compromised in living the life of a mature man, then I will have to find lodgings elsewhere. I consider video surveillance a serious intrusion on my life. If you want to film a master class, that is no problem. We are in concordance. If you want to watch me shower in the morning, I have a serious ethical problem with that. Either we have *rapprochement*, or I ask Jean-Claude to find suitable lodgings elsewhere. You remove the video cameras and you reinstate Sophie Kessel. I have reporter friends at Nice-Matin. Your life could become uncomfortable.

-Mister Clarone, you cannot threaten me. You will leave Villa Arson. I must be in control of this facility and the school. I will notify Jean-Claude Lyon. You will vacate by noon tomorrow, Tuesday, November second.

-If that's what you must do, so be it. I am just passing through. I wish I could thank you for your hospitality, but you are acting like a small-time fascist. Your rights ended when you invaded my privacy, and you know it.

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Jean-Claude Lyon dialed Isabella Sanitizzare's number. He had called all day and gotten her answering machine, which was now full. He was ready to hang up the phone, when Isabella answered.

-Allo?

-Isabella? Jean-Claude Lyon. I need a favor.

-Jean-Claude, of course, what is your problem?

-Our featured artist, Ben Clarone, who is staying at Villa Arson was caught on video in *flagrante delicto*. You have some contacts up there. Is there anything you can do to convince Bernardi to let Ben stay?

Isabella could not believe how easily Clarone was falling into her net.

-Jean-Claude, as you know Bernardi is a bit of a control freak. One of my clients is away for the month of November. They have a large flat in an old building that has been completely modernized. I'm sure I can arrange for him to stay there. Can I call you back in an hour? I've just returned from skiing and need some time.

-Of course, Isabella. Ben needs to vacate by noon tomorrow.

-I can almost guarantee it. The clients owe me big time.

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Victor Taxi telephoned Inspector Lilly Rose.

-Oui, said Inspector Rose.

-Ben Clarone is leaving Villa Arson.

-Where is he going?

-I don't know. One of the students told me he has until noon tomorrow to vacate.

-Thank you Victor. You are doing good work, but you are fired. INTERPOL, the Brits and the Americans want you *out*. Your cover is blown and you screwed up too many times.

-If I have good information can I still call you?

-Use a pay phone and leave a number, not your home, where I can reach you. Keep your head down. Every one knows you are a spy. At least one of the people is well connected. He would kill you or a family member without remorse. We would deny any association with you. You would be another small-time hood caught in gang crossfire.

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The rehearsal that afternoon was a bitch. Ben was hurting from all the expenditures of the previous evening playing with Lezardino. His contra needed some adjustments. The conductor, Igor Markevitch, was much more exacting than Hausenstockmann. The co-soloist, bassist Serge Nobokolov, came to the rehearsal stoned. Jean-Claude was not there to mediate. It was one of those rehearsals musicians dread. Ben tried to pull it together, but then either Markevitch or Hausenstockmann would chide him for some small detail or for playing over Nobokolov. Being a fellow Ruski, Markevitch never called down Nobokolov, even though Nobokolov was constantly missing notes, entrances and rhythms.

By the time Ben left the rehearsal at five, he needed food and drink. He called Gabe Benjamin from a phone cabine. The receptionist told him Gabe had left instructions for Ben to meet him at the hotel at eight that night.

Ben then telephoned the Ritz in Paris. Dan Arris had checked out. On a whim, Ben telephoned Girolamo Dente at Find Arts in Marseilles.

-Pronto.

-Signor Dente?

-Si.

-Ben Clarone.

-You can take the painting tomorrow afternoon.

-Can I bring the other one?

-Yes.

Click.

I'm one step closer to snaring Isabella, said Ben to himself. She had the aura of a woman who knew what to do in bed and she probably was a good conversational acrobat. He looked for the phone message in his pack. He dialed her number

-Allo.

-Is this Isabella?

-No, this is her grandmother Ida.

-Ida! This is Ben Clarone. Remember me? I was on the flight from JFK?

-Of course. How could I forget? Isabella has been talking about you non-stop. I think she is smitten.

-I think you exaggerate. Is she there?

-No. She is at Villa Arson in a meeting. I gather you have caused a problem.

-I think it is *they* who have caused the problem. They snoop on everyone.

-Don't tell Isabella I told you, but I overheard her talking on the telephone and she found you much better lodgings.

-I won't. I'm headed to Villa Arson to shower. Later I meet a Brooklyn friend for dinner.

-You might meet Isabella. She will be pleased to see you.

-Likewise.

-Ben you should come for dinner. Both of us are gourmet cooks.

-Just give me a date. Never missed a downbeat in my life, boasted Ben.

-It will be an upbeat occasion, Ben.

-Caught me in my own pun. Have a good night, Ida. Hope to see you soon.

Ben drove to Villa Arson. The upside was that he didn't have another rehearsal until Thursday morning. It would be the first with the orchestra. First rehearsals of new music with orchestras were notoriously dreadful. He could already hear the grumbling. Even though the orchestra had many excellent younger players, the old gaffers would complain about the music. They would laugh at his instrument.

Hopefully, Hausenstockmann's presence would mitigate any serious rebellion.

Yves Bernardi was showing off his video surveillance system to Jean-Claude and Isabella. The guard monitoring the cameras switched one of the three cameras in Ben's atelier to the main monitor. It was the front door camera, which also had the hallway mirror in its field of view. They watched as Ben showered.

-Yves, this is sick, said Jean-Claude. Do you spy on everyone like this?

-Jean-Claude, before I came, there was serious theft of art from the museum and from the artist's ateliers. It has completely stopped. Don't question my actions.

-I like watching a hard-bodied man shower, said Isabella trying to lighten the mood.

Jean-Claude glared at her.

-I think Ben should move to a different place, said Jean-Claude.

-I agree, nodded Isabella.

-Well, that makes three of us. That's exactly what I told him. He's out by tomorrow noon.

Isabella knocked Ben's atelier door. Ben had on jeans, but no shirt. He answered the door. Isabella and Jean-Claude stood outside the door.

-Ah, Jean-Claude, Isabella, I gather you have heard about my situation.

-Isabella was getting her thrills watching you shower. We are moving you to a more suitable location.

Isabella shrieked!

-Ben what happened to your ribs? she said with her hands over her mouth.

-Taxi accident, replied Ben. You probably noticed my eye, too.

Isabella gently touched Ben's ribs.

-Do they hurt? asked Isabella.

-Not as much as they did. Playing was a bitch, but they are much better. They only hurt when I sneeze or cough.

-Did a doctor look at them? They could be broken, interjected Jean-Claude.

-At Orly. They said I was lucky. So, what am I going to do for lodging?

-Isabella has found a marvelous residence for you.

-You will appreciate this new place, said Isabella. It is an eighteenth-century mansion in central Nice. You have a 180 square meters on the top floor all to yourself. It has twenty-foot ceilings and French windows. You can almost do laps in the bathtub. There is a washer and dryer. The kitchen is modernized, but the rest of the flat is absolute Victorian. The main living room has a huge fireplace and the den has a smaller one. You will be surrounded by twentieth century masterpieces. The owners are clients of mine. They are in Pondicherry, India on family business and are more than pleased to have you stay in their Nice home. If you have friends visiting, there are two extra bedrooms, one with bunk beds.

-Sounds great. When do I move in?

Jean-Claude and I will help you pack. We can have you situated in the new place in less than an hour.

-That's good. I have to meet my friend Gabe at eight tonight. You may remember him Isabella.

-Ben, it's only six-thirty. We can have you moved in an hour.

Even though it was a five-floor walk-up, the new place was perfect. Isabella produced a bottle of champagne and the three of them toasted Ben's new residence.

-I think you will be very happy here, said Isabella. You can walk to almost anything in downtown Nice. You can practice anytime you want. You don't have the views Villa Arson has, but then no one is video taping you showering.

-I can't thank you both enough for rescuing me from the oppressive surveillance at Villa Arson. If I had known, I would never have agreed to stay there.

-Ben, I thought it would be a good fit. I didn't know about the video cameras.

-Well, it seemed good and the students wanted me to give classes and help them with their multi-media projects. They appeared like typical art school students to me. I'm sorry I won't be interacting with them.

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Ben met Gabe at Hotel Beau Rivage.

-So how is it sleeping in Matisse's old room? asked Ben.

-Old, replied Gabe. How is your new place?

-Gotta love it. There's even room for you, if you want to leave your hotel.

-I'll check it out after we have dinner. I'm starved.

-That makes two of us.

After dinner Ben showed Gabe his new digs. Gabe was enthusiastic.

-Are you sure it's okay for me to stay here? asked Gabe.

-I don't know why not. I can check with Isabella tomorrow. If it's not, I'll let you know.

-It's no big deal. The film company is paying my per diem. Maybe we'll just intrude on you for parties. You don't mind famous film actresses swooning on your bed, do you?

-Bring 'em on Gabe. I have a lot of experience with famous actresses. My estranged wife, Zoë is now a famous actress.

-How soon I forget. Her picture was on every bus and in every subway car in New York City. "Zoë Bontemps stars in *I'd Rather Not*, Friday Nights on NBC". Are her tits really that big?

-A trick of photography and brassiere design, replied Ben. She's your everyday woman in that department.

-She is some woman. What's it like...

-Gabe, interrupted Ben, you sound like every horny guy in America.

-Sorry. Didn't think you still had feelings for her.

-Well, she *is* my legal wife, even though I haven't seen her in months. By the way, I need the painting Roi de Quoi has at the opera.

-I thought you wanted me to put it in my bank vault, said Gabe.

-I did, but now my partners want me to take it to some restorers in Marseilles.

-Not a problem. I'll call Roi de Quoi early tomorrow and we'll pick it up. You can take it to Marseilles. When the restoration is complete we can put it in my vault.

-Sounds good to me.

To be continued.

