

Five Million Yen: Chapter 68

by Daniel Harris

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Ben's tactic for diverting Monique's thoughts from the encounter with Zoë and the horrific episode in his dressing room was to dance, dance, dance. They danced the band's entire last set, which ended with a long jitterbug to an extended version of Count Basie's *One O'clock Jump*. Halfway through, Ben and Monique had the dance floor to themselves. Everyone in the room was watching and applauding their moves. Ben was good, but Monique put on a show, giving viewers a lot of Monique. Paparazzi strobe lights flashed. The more flashes, the more Monique let her dress twirl above her hips.

—Ben, that was just what I needed, said Monique out of breath. You are the best dance partner. You anticipate my moves perfectly.

—You inspire me, sweetheart. You are absolutely stunning in that dress and the way you move is some kind of sexy.

—I'm sorry I lost my composure with Zoë, Ben. After the scene in your dressing room with Arris, I had no patience for Miss Hollywood kissing her ex-husband on the lips and exposing her breasts for those awful photographers.

—Monique, said Ben putting his arm around her and leading her back to the head table, you are my girl, or I hope you still are. Zoë is out of the picture. I'll hire lawyers that will see to it that she doesn't get any money. It will be Armageddon for her vainglorious lawyer: Arno Aghajanian.

—Good luck with that, Ben, said Monique, without conviction. What bothers me is what the tabloids will print. They will be running

pictures of Zoë, you and me for months. It might cost me my job with Pan Am. I'm also very worried about the *real* Ben. What are you involved in that someone would want to shoot you? I think I only know part of Ben, not the complete Ben.

—I don't have an answer for that, said Ben. I'm as baffled as you are. Arris asked me to deliver two paintings to Nice. I did that. He should be happy. Gringovitch tells me that there is a buyer for some of his own paintings. Arris should be pleased because he would garner more commission money.

—I don't think that's the whole story Ben, said Monique. Remember, I was with you in Marseille when you were talking about copying paintings with Signor Dente.

—Yes. Gringovitch asked me to have Girolamo Dente make copies of his paintings. I was a courier for Arris, but I am Gringovitch's friend. Anatoly is selling more than the Gorky painting. Arris is the dealer for the Gorky. Isabella Sanitizzare is the dealer for Gringovitch's paintings in Europe.

—I don't know Ben, said Monique. My first husband was always involved in shady deals. We lost our canal barge because of his criminal involvements.

—Monique, said Ben. I am not a criminal. I'm a musician: first, last and always.

Monique gave Ben a penetrating look. Ben's face assumed a soft pout. Then Monique broke into a smile. She leaned over and gave Ben a kiss on the cheek.

—You played brilliantly tonight. I am so proud of you.

—Thank you, my dear, said Ben. You know I'm head over heels in love with you.

—Watch out, here comes the tireless Lothario, Gringovitch.

Gringovitch approached the table. Ben and Monique rose to greet him.

—Monique, the most beautiful woman in the room, said Gringovitch. That dress is absolutely you. And when you dance, I can hear the hearts break.

—Come on, Anatoly, said Monique with a big smile. Flattery is flattery, Ben's my man tonight.

—Only tonight? said Anatoly raising an eyebrow. Does that mean I might have a chance?

—Well...she said with a coy grin.

—Forget I said that, Monique. Look, may I steal Ben for a few minutes? There have been some changes in my plans. I'm going to ask him for a favor.

—Just so it's on the up-and-up, said Monique. I don't want Ben getting in trouble.

—I promise, said Anatoly. It is a matter of logistics on Monday.

—Bring him back soon, said Monique. Ben has some serious business with me, if you catch my drift.

—I see, said Gringovitch, giving Monique a big wink. I promise he will be back in ten minutes.

The two men moved off to the side of the room.

—Ben I have some horrible news, said Gringovitch speaking close to Ben's ear.

—Well, so do I, said Ben. Arris tried to kill me.

—I heard something like that when I was in police custody.

—You in police custody? Why?

—Someone assassinated Olivia Krackenthorpe this afternoon. It turns out she is a British spy. KGB agents killed her. But it was a close call for me. My nude drawings of her were found in her hotel room. I think Arris had something to do with it because my hotel room was ransacked and two paintings stolen. The paintings were later found in Olivia's apartment. You know he *was*, and maybe still *is*, a spy.

—Hell of a partner, said Ben. He tried to shoot me in the head and he stole paintings from you. Arris thinks I'm trying to double-cross him. After what happened in my dressing room, I *will* double-cross the bastard. Monique came within an inch of having her foot shot

off. And if I can screw Zoë's jerk divorce lawyer, Aghajanian, I'll be even happier.

—Easy, Ben. Keep your voice down. We are both on the same page.

—I hope so. Nobokolov tried to punch me out tonight after the Hausenstockmann. What the hell is going on?

—I can't help you with the Ruskie. But I can tell you that Arris is in police custody for more than trying to shoot you. He won't be acting as my dealer when I take the Gorky to Lena Koshka at Villa Arson on Monday.

—Do you need me to give you the original?

—Actually no, said Gringovitch checking for possible eavesdroppers. Lieutenant Giles LaPonti told me that Victor Taxi, who was working for INTERPOL *and* Arris, stole the Gorky that Arris and Sanitizzare showed Aghajanian. Taxi gave it to Inspector Lilly Rose. Inspector Rose agreed to give it back to me, so I can complete the sale to Aghajanian.

—Does Aghajanian still want to buy it?

—Absolutely, said Anatoly. Your soon-to-be ex-wife, Zoë Bontemps, is pestering him to hang it in his office.

—Gorky's *Unfaithful Wife*, the perfect painting for a Hollywood divorce attorney, said Ben. But, what about the original in my bank vault?

Gringovitch ignored the question.

—There's even more bad news. Isabella Sanitizzare was murdered last night. Whoever killed her also killed her grandmother, Ida Oates. Now I have no agent, which means more money for me, but also more headaches with taxes. For all your trouble in this sordid affair, I'll give you Isabella's commission for the Gorky.

Ben looked over at Monique. She was having an animated conversation with Lena Koshka. It looked like Lena was complimenting Monique on her dress. Monique made a pirouette and moved close to Lena so she could feel the fabric.

—Do the police have any idea who did it?

—If they do, they didn't tell me, said Anatoly.

Ben looked at the heavy security presence in the room and then at Gringovitch.

—Ben, I'm going to need my two paintings to show Lena on Monday morning. We must meet at your bank when it opens Monday. Is the Gorky wrapped?

—Yes, but your two paintings are not. They were still drying.

—Perfect. Francesca will meet us at the bank. She will take the original Gorky and the two boys to Rome on Monday morning. You'll drive me to Lena's office at Villa Arson. We'll have the Gorky I'm picking up from Inspector Rose, the two paintings you have that are the Dente copies of my over paintings, and the two paintings I brought from Rome. There is the potential for some nice coin.

—Anatoly, you know if Arris finds out about this, he will kill us both.

—I think Arris is going to jail for the rest of his life.

—Even from there, he could have us killed, said Ben.

—I don't think so. We're talking Devil's Island for Arris. Besides, do you really want to play straight with a guy who tried to kill you? Aghajanian wants to destroy you in divorce court. He told Arris that he was planning to use the money from Zoë's divorce to pay for a big chunk of the Gorky. And who says I won't pay Arris? I will give you a 25% commission on the sale of the two Dente copies. It was your brilliant idea to have Dente make the copies.

—I just want to be invisible in all this. Monique is very suspicious that I'm doing something illegal. She may just walk out on me.

—Are you kidding, Ben? The girl's mad for you.

—Well, I had her in my arms when Arris tried to kill me. Thankfully, Mulvihill is a skilled cop. He saved our lives. Understandably she's more than a little rattled.

—You worry too much, Ben. I'll see you at tomorrow's concert. I wasn't able to hear tonight's concert because the police were questioning me. But my sketches of the bad guys helped them apprehend the mastermind behind Olivia Krackenthorpe's murder.

—It's going to be tight. I have to take Monique to the airport Monday morning. She's scheduled to work the flight to New York.

Monday night we record the Hausenstockmann. Tuesday or Wednesday I'll travel to Paris. I need to return Selmer's contrabass to them and pick up mine. I'll try to leave for New York that same day, if not I'll leave Thursday the eighteenth. I get a few days to organize my life and then I'm booked solid until May.

—For a homeless guy, you're doing nicely. Where are you staying in New York?

—Good question. A hotel, I guess.

—I'll bring the keys to my Brooklyn house Monday. You can live there as long as you need. We plan to stay in Rome until school summer recess.

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The Fleurs Célestes van was parked on a side street adjacent to Olivia Krackenthorpe's hotel. It was now after 8 p.m. The bellman, who was preparing to leave for the day, walked over to the van and looked inside. It was difficult to see the contents because the view from the cab windows into the back was obstructed by a partition. The windows on the rear doors were painted over with flowers. He walked back to his post and asked the policeman who had been on duty at the front of the hotel to look at the van.

—This van has been here all day, said the bellman to the policeman. It's too late for a flower delivery now. The hotel receives its fresh flowers daily at six in the morning.

—Let me call my sergeant, said the officer.

The sergeant and three officers inspected the van. The sergeant shined his flashlight into the van. He grabbed his radio.

—Lieutenant, I think I found the gurney and possibly the body. There is a flower van parked on the street immediately to the east of the hotel.

The lieutenant said something to the sergeant.

—Yes, sir, said the sergeant. I will have my men do that.

A police tow truck arrived and took the van away. When the van arrived at the police garage, there were two MI-6 operatives waiting in addition to the local police. When they opened the van there was

the gurney and a bloody body bag, but no body. There were also two blue jump suits and rubber gloves.

There was nothing else in the van.

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—You boys get ready for bed, said Francesca. No TV and no reading. Put on your pajamas and brush your teeth.

—Yes, mama, said Dante.

—Did you see my dance moves tonight? said Zeno. Wasn't I the best dancer there?

—Yes, Z, said Francesca, tousling his hair. Now get ready for bed, my Fred Astaire.

—Both of you may be dreaming of terrors of the deep after your aquarium trip today.

—I'm going to dream of Monique Zwaan, said Zeno, Wow! Some hip moves.

When the boys had settled in their room, Francesca poured herself a glass of wine and turned on the television. There was a rerun of the French literary program *Apostrophes*. Bernard Pivot and his panel were grilling the Australian feminist writer, Germaine Greer. With a sneer, she turned off the television and tuned the radio to *France Musiques*. They were playing a rebroadcast of a jazz concert featuring Ben's group *Pieces of Eight*. She'd heard enough new music for one day and turned that off too.

—I'll see you tomorrow at intermission, said Gringovitch exiting Ben's rental car. Make sure you treat Monique right, Ben. She's a jewel, a genuine keeper.

—Don't worry, said Ben, I won't let her escape.

—Goodnight, Anatoly, said Monique offering him her cheek.

Gringovitch gave her a kiss and stepped away from the car. Ben beeped the horn lightly as he pulled away.

Anatoly stopped at the desk and inquired about messages.

—No, monsieur Gringovitch, there are no messages. Madame and your two sons returned about a half hour ago.

—Thank you.

—Management has requested that I inform you that your stay here is as a guest of the hotel.

—Please thank the management for me. I appreciate the hotel's consideration.

—Here is your key. We hope you have a pleasant night.

—Thank you. I've had enough excitement for one day.

Francesca's screams could be heard at the front desk from the sixth floor. Immediately three police officers, two bellmen, Gringovitch and another desk clerk bolted to the elevator.

—That sounds like my wife, said Gringovitch. What the hell is going on?

When they arrived at Gringovitch's suite, the door was open, Francesca was sobbing convulsively in the hallway with her arms protectively around her sons. Zeno was trying to calm his mother. Dante stood with his mouth open in an expression of terror.

—Francesca. Francesca, what's happened?

—Look in the bedroom, *è assolutamente macabre*.

Gringovitch and two police officers went to the door of the bedroom. Lying on the bed naked, on her back was the body of Olivia Krackenthorpe. Her mouth was frozen in an exaggerated smile; her eyes were wide open; her legs were spread open as if for sexual intercourse. A roll of 100-dollar bills had been thrust into her vagina. *Rigor mortis* made her a frozen sex doll.

—Don't touch anything or enter this room, ordered the Corporal. He turned and walked to the window of the living room. He confirmed the identity of the corpse by consulting his copy of Gringovitch's drawing of Olivia in the shower. He called the Lieutenant on his radio,

—Lieutenant, said the Corporal, I've discovered the dead body of Olivia Krackenthorpe.

* * *

Detective-Sergeant Claude Mulvihill and Inspector Lilly Rose sat in Lieutenant Giles LaPonti's small office. Mulvihill's right wrist was in an ACE bandage. LaPonti's desk was clear of everything except the telephone and one file folder.

—In this dossier is the clue to the murders, said LaPonti. He opened the folder and withdrew four U.S. 100-dollar bills. He paused to look at his two companions. Mulvihill looked totally exhausted. Lilly Rose face wore a bemused expression.

—This, he continued, is a genuine United States one hundred dollar bill. He passed the bill to Lilly Rose. Here is a known Dan Arris forgery of a United States one hundred dollar bill of the same series, courtesy of the United States Department of the Treasury. Here is one of the dozens of 100-dollar bills found on the beach this morning near the body of Serge “Bebe” Babikov. This last bill was found, (he paused searching for a decorous way to continue), in a body cavity of the late Olivia Krackenthorpe.

—Do you have a magnifying glass? asked Mulvihill holding the genuine bill and the known Arris forgery.

—Actually, I have two, Detective. LaPonti pulled two twenty-power magnifiers from his center desk drawer. He also removed two sheets of photographic paper.

—I have taken the liberty of having our photographic services enlarge the area where the forgery is detectable. You could search for days, and never find the forger's error.

LaPonti gave Rose and Mulvihill each a copy of the enlargement.

—How do we know Arris supplied these bills? said Rose. Couldn't they be from an old KGB stockpile?

—I know that answer, said Mulvihill. Arris used bleached one-dollar bills for his original forgeries. Those were the forgeries that were detected. The treasury department changed the paper formula for 100-dollar notes immediately after Arris was apprehended. About eight million dollars worth of Arris's forged bills were confiscated and burned. Intelligence estimates indicate that the Soviets printed between 10 and 12 million c-notes on dollar bill paper.

—How did Arris print 12 million dollars worth of bills? asked Rose.

—He didn't, said LaPonti. He made the plates; the Soviets printed the bills. They still use Arris's plates, or copies of them, on paper they make today. They did make a correction on Arris's plates; these are vintage Arris 100's. They must be from his personal stash.

—So what you are implying, said Rose, is that Arris paid Babikov to murder Isabella Sanitizzare and her grandmother Ida Oates with Arris forged 100's.

—We know from the mutilation of the bodies that the two murders fit Babikov's *modus operandi*, said Mulvihill.

—We can assume that Arris murdered Babikov to keep him quiet, said LaPonti. Babikov was never known for being discreet. The KGB shipped him to a Siberian Gulag because he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

—But where is the motive? said Rose. There has to be a reason Arris had Isabella Sanitizzare and her grandmother murdered.

—I think you have the answer, said Mulvihill, giving Rose a slight condescending look. Victor Taxi stole the Gorky painting, *The Unfaithful Wife*, from Arris. Arris probably assumed Isabella stole it. So he sent Babikov to work her over. When Arris went to search Isabella's apartment, he probably thought Ida was an accomplice and had Babikov kill her also. Then he killed Babikov to keep him quiet.

—But your superior, Lieutenant Harold Smith, says that Arris always works in threes, said Rose. So if there is more than one copy of *The Unfaithful Wife*, where are the others?

—Again I think you have the answer in your possession, said Mulvihill. Didn't you say that a painting was burned at Découvrir Art in Marseille? You wanted that painting, but someone beat you to it, or what was left of it.

—That's true, said Rose. Do you think Arris, claiming to be an INTERPOL agent took the damaged painting after the fire at Découvrir Art and destroyed it?

—Yes, said LaPonti. If I have three of something and two are forgeries and one is the original, there has to be some mark on the copies that is not on the original otherwise even the forger couldn't tell the difference, especially someone as good as Arris. Now if there are only two copies, how can someone who is not the forger distinguish between the original and the copy, even if they find a minute subtle difference? Arris, as the forger, could easily discern a copy from the original. He probably could identify which copy was which. Forgers know how to identify their work.

—The painting you have, Inspector Rose, said Mulvihill, must be the original. Otherwise, why would Arris have two people brutally murdered and then garrote his paid assassin?

—Possibly, said Rose, but if Arris is the forger, he would know the copies from the original. If Isabella was presenting a copy as the original, Arris might want to know where the original was.

—Which may explain why Arris tried to assassinate Ben Clarone, said Mulvihill. Clarone was the courier. He may have switched the original for a copy.

—I don't think so, said LaPonti. I escorted Clarone to the bank. He put two paintings in his vault; both were Gringovitch paintings. There was no Gorky painting.

—There may have been two copies, said Mulvihill, but I believe Arris destroyed them, or had them destroyed. If Clarone, Gringovitch, or even Sanitizzare, had the original, one would think that under threat of death, they would give Arris the original.

—I like that line of thinking, said LaPonti.

—That may explain those murders, said Rose. But who assassinated Olivia Krackenthorpe and why did they leave a roll of easily traced Arris forged 100-dollar bills in the vagina of the victim?

—Now, Inspector Rose, you are entering the land of double agents and international espionage, said LaPonti taken aback by Rose's use of the word vagina. A forceful blow to both ears killed Olivia Krackenthorpe, breaking her eardrums and causing severe bleeding in the brain. Gringovitch was fed a tall story by the clever Alexis Trovopolov, also known as Kobra, about a secret Soviet weapon.

Giving a sharp blow to both ears with cupped hands is a known way of killing an opponent in hand-to-hand combat. A master KGB assassin, Serge Gorelka, bought 5,000 francs worth of chips at the Monte Carlo Casino tonight with Arris-forged 100-dollar bills. MI6, who Olivia Krackenthorpe worked for as an *agent provocateur*, has two agents trailing him as we speak. I suspect he will have disappeared by morning.

—But why did the assassin leave Arris-forged 100-dollar bills in the corpse?

—I might venture a guess, said Mulvihill. We know Arris has been, and may still be, a double agent. The KGB may have wanted to frame him for Olivia Krackenthorpe's murder by leaving such an obvious clue. The KGB hoped MI6 would pick up the bait and eliminate Arris, who is a serious embarrassment to Moscow.

—MI6, the KGB, or the CIA may still find a way to eliminate Arris, said Rose.

—It is almost dawn, said LaPonti opening the window blinds. I believe we have enough evidence for the legal people to convict Arris for murder and two counts of murder by contract. May I suggest a *grappa* and then sleep?

—I suspect Arris killed his wife, Claudia Monschaud, in the Ritz three weeks ago, said Rose.

—That is Paris. Thankfully, it is out of my jurisdiction, said LaPonti pouring three glasses of *grappa*.

To be continued.

