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# SAMURAI SHORTSTOP

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藏书章

DIAL BOOKS



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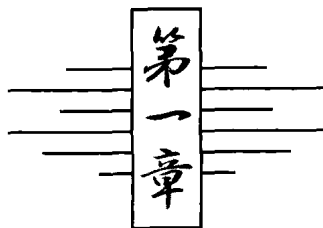
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TOKYO, JAPAN, 1890

## Chapter One

**TOYO WATCHED** carefully as his uncle prepared to kill himself.

Before dawn, he had swept and cleaned his uncle's favorite shrine, down to polishing the small mirror that hung on a post at its center. When that was done, he carefully arranged new *tatami* mats on the dirt floor. Everything had to be perfect for Uncle Koji's *seppuku*.

Now Toyo sat in the damp grass outside the shrine as his uncle moved to the center of the mats. Uncle Koji's face was a mask of calm. He wore a ceremonial white kimono with brilliant red wings—the wings he usually wore only into battle. He was clean-shaven and recently bathed, and he wore his hair in a tight topknot like the samurai of old. Uncle Koji knelt on the *tatami* mats keeping his hands on his hips and his arms *akimbo*.

Toyo's father, Sotaro, crouched next to Koji. Though older than his brother, Toyo's father was slightly smaller, with a long, thin face and a sharp nose like a *katana* blade. They

used to joke that Koji's nose had been as straight as his older brother's, until it had been flattened one too many times in judo practice. But today was no day for jokes. In fact, Toyo couldn't remember either of them laughing for a long time.

Sotaro wore a simple gray kimono with the family swords tucked neatly into his sash. The sight was strange to Toyo. For as long as he could remember, the katana and *wakizashi* had been retired to a place of honor in their home. Carrying them outside like this was illegal, though his father would soon be using the swords to carry out an order signed by the emperor himself.

Uncle Koji bowed to Toyo, the ceremony's other witness. Returning the bow from his knees, Toyo touched his head to the ground to show his great respect for his uncle. His father nodded, and Toyo stood and picked up a small wooden stand supporting a short sword about as long as his forearm. The point and the edge of the blade were razor sharp. Toyo strained to keep his legs from shaking as he entered the shrine. Kneeling a little clumsily, he bowed low to the ground once more to present the short *wakizashi* to his uncle.

When he felt the weight of the sword lift from the stand, Toyo looked up at Koji. His uncle held the *wakizashi* cradled in his hands as though it were a newborn child. Uncle Koji closed his eyes, touched the flat part of the blade to his forehead, and set the *wakizashi* in front of him on the mat. He gave a quick smile then for Toyo, the same grin he always flashed right before getting them into trouble.

Instead of making him feel better, the grin deepened Toyo's sense of panic. He didn't want to lose his uncle.

Throughout all the preparations, he had fought to focus on something else—anything else. His first day of school at Ichiko tomorrow, his coming sixteenth birthday, even baseball. But when this ceremony was finished his uncle would be dead and gone. Forever. None of his strength, none of his compassion, none of his spirit would remain.

Toyo backed away, unable to meet Uncle Koji's eyes.

"For my part in the samurai uprising at Ueno Park," his uncle said officially, "I, Koji Shimada, have been sentenced to die. The emperor, in his divine graciousness, has granted me the honor of committing seppuku rather than die at the hands of his executioner. I beg those present here today to bear witness to my death."

Uncle Koji bowed low, and Sotaro and Toyo bowed in return.

He slowly untied the sash around his waist and loosened the kimono wrapped underneath. Pulling the stiff shirt down off his shoulders, Koji exposed his smooth round belly. He tucked the arms of the kimono under his legs, which made him lean forward. Toyo knew this was to help his uncle pitch forward if he should pass out during the ceremony. It would make his father's job much easier.

Uncle Koji closed his eyes and began the poem he had written for the occasion of his death:

*"In the darkness after the earthquake,  
The Flowers of Edo burn bright and fast—  
Only to be replaced in the morning  
By the light of a new day."*

When he was finished, the samurai opened his eyes and put his hands on his stomach, almost as if he were saying good-bye to it. Then Koji took the short sword in his hands and turned the blade toward his gut.

“Brother,” Koji said, “please wait until I have finished my task.”

“*Hai.*” Toyo’s father nodded.

Koji looked past Toyo then, past the little path to the shrine, past the line of trees that circled the clearing. Whether he saw something in the distance or not, Toyo didn’t know, but the faraway look stayed in his uncle’s eyes as he plunged the wakizashi into his belly. Blood covered his hands and his jaw locked tight, but Koji held his grip on the sword, dragging it across his stomach from left to right. Toyo fought the urge to look away. To honor his promise to bear witness, he forced himself to watch as his uncle’s insides spilled onto the floor of the Shinto shrine, the body deflating like a torn rice sack.

When Uncle Koji had sliced all the way across his stomach, he turned the wakizashi in the wound and pulled it diagonally up through his chest. Never flinching, his eyes remained steady and resolute. The knife reached his heart, and with the last of his strength Uncle Koji pulled the wakizashi out, laid it by his side, and fell forward on his hands and knees.

Toyo’s father sprang to his feet, raising the long katana blade high over his head.

“*Heeeeeeeeeeeeeiaaaaaaaaaaaa!*” Sotaro cried. He brought the blade down with blinding speed and chopped Koji’s head clean off his body.

The head rolled to a stop inches from Toyo, the eyes staring up at him. Toyo refused to let his father see his fear. As his father wiped the blood from the katana with a piece of paper, Toyo commanded his legs to stand.

“Did you watch carefully?” his father asked.

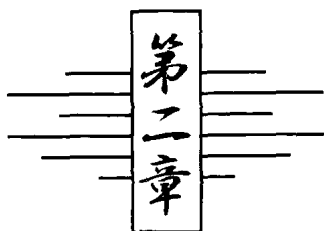
“Hai,” Toyo said.

“You observed precisely how it was done?”

“Hai, Father.”

“Good,” Sotaro Shimada said to his son. “Soon you will do the same for me.”





## Chapter Two

**A PHOTOGRAPH** of Emperor Meiji was enshrined above the chalkboard in the ethics lecture hall. Toyo stared at the picture of the man who had sentenced his uncle to die. The emperor was a young man, younger than Uncle Koji. He sat awkwardly in a Western-style chair with his legs dangling down, rather than a more traditional pose on a mat with his legs tucked beneath him. He wore a modern military uniform, with medals on his jacket and a braided rope on his sleeve. His hair was cut short in the European fashion, and he had a moustache on his lip and a goatee on his chin. In his hand, the emperor held a sword pointed down to the ground like a cane.

Beneath the image of the emperor, the school's headmaster, Hiroji Kinoshita, stood at the lectern. He spoke at length about the school, and Toyo drifted in and out of his address.

"First Higher School—Ichiko, as we call her—is the most elite of schools," Kinoshita was saying. "For the next three years, we will be your family. Think of us, your educators,

as your father, your fellow students as brothers. You will no longer have need of your mother, or of women at all. Ichiko is your mother now, her classrooms and dormitories your world. The life you had is over. A new one begins today."

"I hope this new one ends soon," Futoshi whispered. "I have to pee."

Toyo glanced at his friend. Like Toyo and the other nine hundred or so boys standing at attention in the room, Futoshi wore the black uniform of Ichiko. It was a strange sight after seeing Futoshi in the familiar middle school uniform they had worn for so long. Like they didn't yet belong here.

"Hai, me too," Toyo whispered back.

"Are you going to go out for the *besuboru* team this afternoon?" Futoshi asked.

"Hai," Toyo answered. "I just hope they don't already have a shortstop. Will you do judo?"

"Of course," Futoshi told him. "I'm the best."

Toyo smiled. Futoshi always thought he was the best at everything. He and Toyo were the only students from their middle school to pass the First Higher entrance exam. Two others had made it into Third Higher, and one was starting Fourth Higher next week. The rest would attend business or vocational schools.

"Your uniforms," Kinoshita said, drawing Toyo's attention, "mark you immediately as Japan's finest. Your black jacket and cap are symbols of excellence. You are to wear them with pride from the moment you rise in the morning until the moment your head touches your bedroll at night. You first-years will have noticed the brass badge on the front of

your cap with an imprint of an oak and olive leaf. The oak leaf signifies *bu*, the ancient way of the warrior; the olive leaf symbolizes *bun*, the new way of scholarship and letters. Together, they represent the modern Japan—the place where the old and the new become one, where the powerful and the thoughtful combine to become even stronger.”

*The powerful and the thoughtful*, Toyo echoed silently. The warrior and the scholar. If there was a better description of his father and his uncle, Toyo couldn't think of one. Uncle Koji had always been the fighter of the family—the first to stand up for what he believed with the steel of his blade and the courage in his heart. Sotaro was the scholar of the family. His weapons were his brush and his brain, and he wielded them to argue eloquently in papers, essays, and articles.

Toyo put a hand to the symbol on his cap. The oak and the olive leaves. Koji and Sotaro. He looked again at the portrait of the emperor above Kinoshita's head. Had Meiji written the death order himself, or had some bureaucrat done it for him? Perhaps Koji had been nothing more than a single sheaf in a pile of papers, stacked neatly on the emperor's new Western-style desk. “For refusing to give up his swords.” Signed in pen and ink, but unread.

“What was it like?” Futoshi whispered.

Toyo blinked. For a moment, Toyo thought his friend had been reading his mind, but he knew Futoshi must have been wanting to ask him about it all day.

“It was . . . it was awful,” Toyo said quietly. “Awful and . . . beautiful.”

“Beautiful?” Futoshi asked.

"I don't know. Noble, somehow. Perfect. Until—"

Toyo fell silent. Koji was dead, and for what? Because the emperor had decided there should be no more samurai, and Koji could not give up being a samurai.

"Do you know what the Flowers of Edo are?" Toyo asked, remembering his uncle's death poem.

Futoshi frowned. He shook his head. "Edo is the old name for Tokyo. The *sakura*, maybe? Tokyo is famous for those."

Toyo doubted his uncle was talking about cherry blossoms. Koji's death poem remained one of the many things he didn't understand about his uncle's death.

"It is a great honor to attend First Higher School," the headmaster was saying. "You students of First Higher will someday stand in the upper crust of society. Whether in politics, the arts, or scholarly affairs, you are the future leaders of Japan. Good grades should not be your main focus. More important at Ichiko is the perfection of your character. Manliness. Honor. Public service. These are the lessons you will learn at First Higher."

"Good grades shouldn't be our focus?" Futoshi whispered. "I like it here already."

"In keeping with First Higher's goal to make you into leaders," Kinoshita said, "there will be changes to the way you live your lives here at Ichiko. Those of you who have been here for one or two years already will be familiar with faculty room inspections, hall monitoring, and curfews. Those practices end today."

There was a surprised murmur among the students. Toyo

and Futoshi got quiet with the rest of the crowd and listened attentively.

“As Ichiko graduates,” Kinoshita said, “you will one day lead our country. Your dormitory will therefore be the training ground for state-craft. From this day forward, you will govern yourselves. You will be responsible for drafting your own constitution, writing your own rules, electing your own officers, and policing your own halls. In return for responsible self-governance, I pledge that I and the other faculty will not interfere without your permission.”

Toyo and most of his fellow juniors didn’t know how to react to this news, but the seniors across the aisle—the second- and third-years—were clearly buzzing. Quickly they came to order under Kinoshita’s quiet gaze.

“Finally,” Kinoshita continued, “before handing the program over to your student leaders for the swearing-in ceremony, I want to direct a few words to the first-years about the high wall that surrounds our campus. You may be tempted to think of it as something that keeps you from the outside world. But the great wall of Ichiko was not built to keep you in; it is to keep the vulgar world *out*. For you to lead a moral life while surrounded on all sides by extravagance and weakness is a formidable task. In this regard, the wall is your ally. Without it, you would be overwhelmed by bad influences and obscenity.”

Toyo and Futoshi glanced at each other. They had grown up in Tokyo, and they had never considered it ill-mannered or obscene.

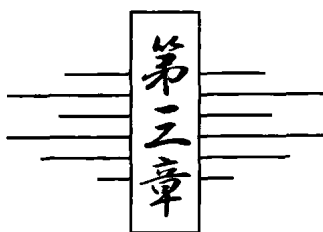
“You must view these grounds as hallowed,” Kinoshita

told them. "The barrier that surrounds First Higher is sacred—a sacred Wall of the Soul. Inside it, you are safe. But understand, when you take just one step off the campus, everyone is an enemy. Think of Ichiko as a castle of rightness under siege."

Silence hung over the first-years as they considered Kinoshita's words. When Toyo thought about it, he found himself agreeing with the headmaster. In a way, Uncle Koji had been the victim of a dishonorable world. Toyo had never known a man of greater moral character than his uncle, and yet he had been sentenced to die because he refused to compromise his integrity. Perhaps they were already under siege from the outside world. All of them. All the time.

Kinoshita turned the program over to some of last year's senior leaders for the swearing-in ceremony, and the faculty filed out of the lecture hall.

"All right, first-years!" a senior said when the faculty were gone. "I hope none of you have to go to the bathroom, because we're going to be here a while. A *long* while. We'll begin by learning seven of our most important school songs."



## Chapter Three

**TOYO HAD** never had to pee so badly in all his life. Everything below his belt was on fire. Beside him, Futoshi had been silent for the last three hours. His knees were locked, and there was a look of intense concentration on his face. A boy ahead of them hadn't been so successful; his pants were soaked down his right leg and his head was bowed in shame.

Meanwhile, a seemingly unending stream of seniors had stepped up to the podium to yell and scream at them. First had come the songs. Long, exuberant songs about First Higher that they had to memorize. Then came the four tenets of dormitory life—self-respect, public spirit, humility, cleanliness—each given a lengthy explanation. Later had come more praise for the sacred Wall of the Soul, condemnation for being mama's boys, and harsh warnings that they should never think of, speak to, or act like girls.

At that moment, Toyo was willing to promise never to *look* at another girl if they would let him go to the bathroom. His eyes began to glaze over, and he felt himself wobbling.

Then everyone in the room was falling over—no, bowing. Bowing to the school flag. Toyo joined them, using the bow to hide his unsteadiness.

When he had bent over halfway, Toyo realized there was no way he could straighten back up without peeing in his pants.

Suddenly Futoshi was nudging him. “Stand up!” Futoshi croaked. “Run! What are you waiting for!”

Clenching his muscles and looking up, Toyo realized the bow to the flag had been the end of the swearing-in ceremony. The first-years were practically trampling each other as they scrambled out of the lecture hall, and he allowed himself to be swept up in the mad dash for the door.

It took them all a desperate moment to realize none of them knew where the bathrooms were. Like birds released from a sack, they fled in different directions.

“Dormitory,” Toyo grunted. “Have to be bathrooms near the dormitory.”

He had never run so hard, not even when trying to steal home. Futoshi staggered behind him. Along the way, Toyo spotted the character for “Men” painted above a doorway.

“Here!” Toyo cried out for the benefit of his helpless classmates.

Futoshi was already a few steps ahead of him as Toyo bolted through the door to the bathrooms. He shoved his pants down as he crossed the room, almost tripping himself up as he hurtled headfirst toward a urinal and propped himself up weakly with both hands on the wall. Taking no



care whatsoever to aim, Toyo gave in to the sweet release with a groan.

At the urinal next to him, Futoshi was talking to himself as he peed. "I am so sorry, my friend. I promise I'll never treat you badly again."

The door slammed open, and more first-years flooded inside. Throwing all sense of decorum to the wind, they crowded around Toyo and Futoshi and the other toilets to urinate together. Dozens more hopped and cried as they waited their turn.

"What are you doing in here!?" a voice demanded. Toyo was relieved enough to be able to turn around. A couple of seniors were working their way through the crowd, pushing first-years out of the way with little regard for their rather delicate situations. The largest of the seniors, a boy old enough to be growing a scraggly goatee, addressed the silent crowd.

"Didn't you see the sign above the door outside?" He turned to a trembling junior who was quite literally holding it. "What did that sign say?"

"M-men," the boy said.

"That's right. But I don't see any men here." The senior turned to one of his friends. "Do you see any men here, Moriyama?"

Moriyama laughed. "Just you and me, Junzo. Just you and me."

"You ladies should be in the women's guest bathroom, around the other side of the building," Junzo told them.

Half the first-years still in line ran to find the other toilets, women's or not.