

## An Excerpt from *Burnt Shadows: A Novel*

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### PROLOGUE

Once he is in the cell they unshackle him and instruct him to strip. He takes off the grey winter coat with brisk efficiency and then— as they watch, arms folded— his movements slow, fear turning his fingers clumsy on belt buckle, shirt buttons.

They wait until he is completely naked before they gather up his clothes and leave. When he is dressed again, he suspects, he will be wearing an orange jumpsuit.

The cold gleam of the steel bench makes his body shrivel. As long as it's possible, he'll stand.

*How did it come to this*, he wonders.

### THE YET UNKNOWING WORLD

*Nagasaki, 9 August 1945*

Later, the one who survives will remember that day as grey, but on the morning of 9 August itself both the man from Berlin, Konrad Weiss, and the schoolteacher, Hiroko Tanaka, step out of their houses and notice the perfect blueness of the sky, into which white smoke blooms from the chimneys of the munitions factories.

Konrad cannot see the chimneys themselves from his home in Minamiyamate, but for months now his thoughts have frequently wandered to the factory where Hiroko Tanaka spends her days measuring the thickness of steel with micrometers, images of classrooms swooping into her thoughts the way memories of flight might enter the minds of broken-winged birds. That morning, though, as Konrad slides open the doors that form the front and back of his small wooden caretaker's house and looks in the direction of the smoke he makes no attempt to

imagine the scene unfolding wearily on the factory floor. Hiroko has a day off--a holiday, her supervisor called it, though everyone in the factory knows there is no steel left to measure. And still so many people in Nagasaki continue to think Japan will win the war. Konrad imagines conscripts sent out at night to net the clouds and release them in the morning through factory chimneys to create the illusion of industry.

He steps on to the back porch of the house. Green and brown leaves are scattered across the grass of the large property, as though the area is a battlefield in which the soldiers of warring armies have lain down, caring for nothing in death but proximity. He looks up the slope towards Azalea Manor; in the weeks since the Kagawas departed, taking their household staff with them, everything has started to look rundown. One of the window shutters is partly ajar; when the wind picks up it takes to banging against the sill. He should secure the shutter, he knows, but it comforts him to have some sound of activity issuing from the house.

Azalea Manor. In '38 when he stepped for the first time through its sliding doors into a grand room of marble floor and Venetian fireplace it was the photographs along the wall that had captured his attention rather than the mad mixture of Japanese and European architectural styles: all taken in the grounds of Azalea Manor while some party was in progress, Europeans and Japanese mixing uncomplicatedly. He had believed the promise of the photographs and felt unaccustomedly grateful to his English brother-in-law James Burton who had told him weeks earlier that he was no longer welcome at the Burton home in Delhi with the words, "There's a property in Nagasaki. Belonged to George--an eccentric bachelor uncle of mine--who died there a few months ago. Some Jap keeps sending me telegrams asking what's to be done with it. Why don't you live there for a while? As long as you like." Konrad knew nothing about Nagasaki--except, to its credit, that it was not Europe and it was not where James and Ilse lived-- and when he sailed into the harbour of the purple-roofed city laid out like an amphitheatre he felt he was entering a world of enchantment. Seven years later much of the enchantment remains--the glassy loveliness of frost flowers in winter, seas of blue azaleas in summer, the graceful elegance of the Euro-Japanese buildings along the seafront--but war fractures every view. Or closes off the view completely. Those who go walking in the hills have been warned against looking down towards the shipyard where the battleship *Musashi* is being built under such strict secrecy that heavy curtains have been constructed to block its view from all passersby.

Functional, Hiroko Tanaka thinks, as she stands on the porch of her house in Urakami and surveys the terraced slopes, the still morning alive with the whirring of cicadas. If there were an adjective to best describe how war has changed

Nagasaki, she decides, that would be it. Everything distilled or distorted into its most functional form. She walked past the vegetable patches on the slopes a few days ago and saw the earth itself furrowing in mystification: why potatoes where once there were azaleas? What prompted this falling-off of love? How to explain to the earth that it was more functional as a vegetable patch than a flower garden, just as factories were more functional than schools and boys were more functional as weapons than as humans.

An old man walks past with skin so brittle Hiroko thinks of a paper lantern with the figure of a man drawn on to it. She wonders how she looks to him, or to anyone. To Konrad. Just a gaunt figure in the drabest of clothes like everyone else, she guesses, recalling with a smile Konrad's admission that when he first saw her--dressed then, as now, in white shirt and grey monpe--he had wanted to paint her. Not paint a portrait of her, he added quickly. But the striking contrast she formed with the lush green of the Kagawas' well-tended garden across which she had walked towards him ten months ago made him wish for buckets of thick, vibrant paint to pour on to her, waterfalls of colour cascading from her shoulders (rivers of blue down her shirt, pools of orange at her feet, emerald and ruby rivulets intersecting along her arms).

"I wish you had," she said, taking his hand. "I would have seen the craziness beneath the veneer much sooner." He slipped his hand out of hers with a glance that mixed apology and rebuke. The military police could come upon them at any moment.

The man with the brittle skin turns to look back at her, touching his own face as if trying to locate the young man beneath the wrinkles. He has seen this neighbourhood girl--the traitor's daughter--several times in the last few months and each time it seems that the hunger they are all inhabiting conspires to make her more beautiful: the roundness of her childhood face has melted away completely to reveal the exquisiteness of sharply angled cheekbones, a mole resting just atop one of them. But somehow she escapes all traces of harshness, particularly when, as now, her mouth curves up on one side, and a tiny crease appears just millimetres from the edge of the smile, as though marking a boundary which becomes visible only if you try to slip past it. The old man shakes his head, aware of the foolishness he is exhibiting in staring at the young woman who is entirely unaware of him, but grateful, too, for something in the world which can still prompt foolishness in him.

The metallic cries of the cicadas are upstaged by the sound of the air siren, as familiar now as the call of insects. The New Bomb! the old man thinks, and turns to hurry away to the nearest air-raid shelter, all foolishness forgotten.

Hiroko, by contrast, makes a sharp sound of impatience. Already, the day is hot. In the crowded air-raid shelters of Urakami it will be unbearable--particularly under the padded air-raid hoods which she views with scepticism but has to wear if she wants to avoid lectures from the Chairman of the Neighbourhood Association about setting a poor example to the children. It is a false alarm--it is almost always a false alarm. The other cities of Japan may have suffered heavily in aerial raids, but not Nagasaki. A few weeks ago she repeated to Konrad the received wisdom that Nagasaki would be spared all serious damage because it was the most Christian of Japan's cities, and Konrad pointed out that there were more Christians in Dresden than in Nagasaki. She has started to take the air-raid sirens a little more seriously ever since. But really, it will be so hot in the shelter. Why shouldn't she just stay at home? It is almost certainly a false alarm.

Why risk it? Konrad thinks. He retrieves his air-raid hood from inside the house and starts to walk swiftly towards the shelter which the Kagawas had built in the back garden. Halfway across the garden he stops and looks at the wall which divides the property from the vacated lot next door. He hasn't checked on his birds, on the other side of the wall, since the last rain shower. Tossing the air-raid hood on the grass, he strides to the boundary wall and hoists himself over it, slinging his body low to reduce the chances of being seen by passers-by or the military police.

If anyone were to see him they would think he looked ridiculous--a gangling European tumbling over a wall, all arms and legs and hooded eyes, with hair and close-cropped beard of a colour so unexpected in Nagasaki that Hiroko Tanaka had thought, the first time she saw him, that the hair of Europeans rusted rather than greyed as they aged. Later she discovered that he was only twenty-nine--eight years older than she was.

The dry grass crackles beneath his feet--he feels as though he is snapping the backs of tiny creatures--as he walks across to the giant camphor tree to which the birds are fastened, rotating slowly in the faint breeze. It is Hiroko who first referred to his purple notebooks as birds--the day they met; the only time she has been inside his house. She lifted a notebook off his desk, splayed, and glided it around his room. The animation of her touch made him acutely conscious of the lifelessness of his words: sentences thrown down on paper year after year simply so he could pretend there was some purpose to his being here, some excuse for cowering in a world from which he felt so separate that nothing in it could ever implicate him.

But ever since Germany's surrender shifted his status in Nagasaki from that of ally into some more ambiguous state which requires the military police to watch him closely the lifeless words have become potent enough to send him to

prison. It says all there is to say about the paranoia of Imperial Japan: notebooks of research and observation about the cosmopolitan world that had briefly existed within a square mile of where he now lives are evidence of treason. Yoshi Watanabe made that clear to him when Germany's surrender started to seem imminent. You write about a Nagasaki filled with foreigners. You write about it longingly. That's one step away from cheering on an American occupation. And so, the night Germany surrendered, Konrad constructed a mobile of strong wire and hung each of his eight purple-leather notebooks from it. He climbed over the wall to the vacant property that adjoined his own, and attached the mobile to a tree. The wind twirled the purple-winged birds in the moonlight.

He remains certain that no one will think to enter the deserted garden to search for treachery amidst the leaves. The people who would willingly sift through every particle of dust in a house for signs of anti-state activity can always be deceived by a simple act of imagination.

Ducking beneath a low swooping branch, he reaches out a hand and finds the leather books dry and unmarked, though slightly faded. He looks gratefully up at the protective canopy of leaves before noticing the white streak on one of the leather covers: a real bird's comment on these purple impostors. His face breaks into one of those smiles which sometimes fool people into thinking him handsome. As he steps away from the tree his attention shifts to the slightly deranged tone that has crept into the mournful call of the air-raid siren. Not much point dropping a bomb here, Konrad thinks, making his way without haste back to Azalea Manor's air-raid shelter. The former Foreign Settlement where he lives is characterised now by absence, and always by waste. In Urakami ten families could live in this space! Hiroko said the first time they met, gesturing at Azalea Manor. And she followed it with: The rich! Ridiculous! before turning to ask him what he intended to pay her for the translation work he was requesting.

Weeks later, he accused her, laughingly, of driving up her price by playing on his guilt. Well, of course, she said, with characteristic frankness; scruples and starvation don't go well together. Then she spread her arms wide and scrunched her eyes shut as though concentrating hard on conjuring up another world: When the war's over, I'll be kind. Opening her eyes, she added quietly, Like my mother. He couldn't help thinking her mother would never have approved of starting up a romance with a German, or even walking alone with him through the hills of Nagasaki. It discomfited him to know his happiness was linked to the death of her mother, but then she took his hand and he doubted that anyone, even a revered mother, could have told Hiroko Tanaka what to do. Why should rules of conduct be

the only things untouched by war, she once asked him? Everything from the past is passed.

Kicking the air-raid hood on the ground before him he enters the capacious shelter built into the slope of Azalea Manor's garden. The air musty and tinged with bitterness. Here, the deck of cards with which he and Yoshi Watanabe and Keiko Kagawa kept each other distracted, particularly useful during the early days of the air-raid sirens when there was more terror than boredom associated with the warnings; here, the oak chair from which Kagawa-san surveyed the behaviour of his neighbours and family and staff during those rare occasions when the air-raid sirens found him still at home; here, the hopscotch squares which Konrad had drawn in the dust for the younger Kagawa children; here, the hidden bottle of sake which the cook thought no one else knew about; here, the other hidden bottle of sake which the teenage Kagawas came in search of late at night when the shelter was empty. They knew Konrad could see them from his caretaker's house, but while their parents might still be uneasy after seven years about quite how to negotiate their relationship with the landlord who folded his lanky frame into the tiny house at the bottom of the garden the younger Kagawas knew him as an ally and would have happily welcomed him into their drinking parties if he had shown any inclination to join them.

Now all the Kagawas cross over to the other side of the road if they see him walking towards them. One round of questioning by the military police about the suspect loyalties of their landlord was all it had taken to move them out of Azalea Manor.

Konrad sits on Kagawa-san's oak chair, bouncing his air-raid hood on his knee. He is so immersed in what was that it takes him a moment to realise that the figure which appears in the entrance to the shelter, hood in hand, exists in present tense. It is Yoshi Watanabe.

As if asking for permission to enter a private party, Yoshi says, in English, "May I come in? I'll understand if you say no."

Konrad doesn't respond, but as Yoshi mutters a word of apology and starts to walk away, Konrad calls out, "Don't be an idiot, Joshua. How'd you think I'd feel if a bomb landed on you?"

Yoshi steps inside, looping his spectacles over his ears and blinking rapidly. "I'm not sure."

Picking up the deck of cards, he kneels on the ground, shuffling the cards and then dealing ten each to himself and the empty space across from him.

Yoshi Watanabe is the "Jap" whose telegrams James Burton had referred to when packing Konrad off to Nagasaki. His grandfather, Peter Fuller of Shropshire,

had been George Burton's closest friend and neighbour. When Konrad arrived in Nagasaki it was Yoshi who was waiting at the harbour to welcome him, Yoshi who showed him around Azalea Manor, Yoshi who found him a Japanese tutor, Yoshi who produced the Kagawas as though they were a bouquet of flowers hiding within his sleeve within hours of hearing Konrad say he'd be far more comfortable living in the cosiness of the caretaker's house, Yoshi who regaled him with stories of Nagasaki's turn-of-the-century cosmopolitan world, unique in Japan--its English-language newspapers, its International Club, its liaisons and intermarriages between Europe an men and Japanese women. And when Konrad said he needed someone to translate Japanese letters for the book he was planning to write about the cosmopolitan world, it was Yoshi who had introduced him to his nephew's German teacher, Hiroko Tanaka.

It was one of those friendships which quickly came to seem inevitable, and unbreakable. And then in a conversation of less than a minute, it ended.

They come increasingly to check on me, Konrad. My mother's family name was Fuller. You know what that means. I can't give them any other reason to think I have divided loyalties. Until the war ends, I'm staying away from all the Westerners in Nagasaki. But only until the war ends. After, after, Konrad, things will be as before.

If you had been in Germany, Joshua, you'd say to your Jewish friends: I'm sorry I can't hide you in my attic, but come over for dinner when the Nazi government falls.

"Why are you here?"

Yoshi looks up from the fan of cards in his hand.

"I was at home when the sirens started. This is the nearest shelter." At Konrad's raised eyebrow he adds, "I know. I've been going to the school house's shelter these last few weeks. But with this New Bomb . . . I didn't want to risk the extra minutes out in the open."

"So there are risks in the world greater than being associated with a German? That's comforting. What New Bomb?"

Yoshi puts down his cards.

"You haven't heard? About Hiroshima? Three days ago?"

"Three days? No one's spoken to me in three days." In the shelter at Urakami, Hiroko is packed in so tightly between her neighbours she cannot even raise a hand to wipe the sweat damping her hairline. It hasn't been so crowded in here since the early days of the air-raid sirens. What could have provoked the Chairman of the Neighbourhood Association into such a frenzy about rounding up everyone

in his path and ordering them to the shelter? She exhales through her mouth and turns her head slightly towards the Chair-man's wife, who responds by turning quickly away from Hiroko. It is impossible to know if this is guilt or disdain.

The Chairman's wife had been a close friend of Hiroko's mother--she recalls the two of them giggling together over the newest edition of *Sutairu*, in the days before war brought an end to the magazine: no place in war time Japan for a publication that advised women on the etiquette of wearing underwear with Western dresses. As she was dying, Hiroko's mother had called the Chairman's wife to her bedside with a single request: protect my husband against himself. There was even less place in war time Japan for an iconoclastic artist than for magazines about modern girls. For a long time, the Chairman's wife had carried out her promise, persuading her husband to regard Matsui Tanaka's outbursts against the military and the Emperor as a symbol of a husband's mourning that was so profound it had unhinged him. But in the spring, Matsui Tanaka had been walking past a neighbourhood house and saw the cherry blossom festooning it to commemorate the sacrifice of the fifteen-year-old boy who had died in a kamikaze attack. Without saying a word to Hiroko who was walking silently beside him Matsui Tanaka darted forward, pulling out a book of matches from the pocket of his trousers, and set fire to the cherry blossom.

Seconds later he lay bloodied on the ground, the dead boy's father struggling against the neighbourhood men who had finally decided to restrain him, and Hiroko, bending down over her father, found herself pulled up by the Chairman's wife....