

# THE NINJA'S DAUGHTER

ALSO BY SUSAN SPANN

*Claws of the Cat*

*Blade of the Samurai*

*Flask of the Drunken Master*

THE  
NINJA'S  
DAUGHTER

A HIRO HATTORI NOVEL

SUSAN SPANN



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*For Sandra. Thank you for believing, both in Hiro and in me.*



# CHAPTER I

**K**nocking echoed through the silent house.

Hattori Hiro sat up in the darkness and pushed his quilt aside. His cat, Gato, tumbled to the floor. She mewed in protest.

Careful footsteps passed the door to Hiro's room. He recognized the pace of Ana, the housekeeper who cooked and cleaned for the Portuguese priest whose home they shared. Her rapid response told Hiro sunrise must be close at hand. Only a person already awake and dressed would reach the door so quickly.

"Hm. Unreasonable hour for visitors." Ana's irritated mutter carried through the walls.

Her footsteps faded into the entry. Moments later, Hiro heard the creak of a door and Ana asking, "What do you want?"

"My name is Jiro," a male voice said. "Please . . . I need to see the foreign priest."

Hiro crossed his room and opened the paneled door to hear more clearly. Unexpected visitors brought news, but also threats, and though most people thought him merely a translator, Hiro was also a *shinobi*—a ninja spy and assassin—hired to protect the priest.

"Return at sunrise," Ana said. "Father Mateo is asleep."

"I beg you," Jiro said, "please let me in. I cannot wait for dawn."

The paneled door beside Hiro's room slid open with a muted rattle.

"It's all right, Ana," Father Mateo called, "please show him in."

Hiro shut his door, slipped on his favorite gray kimono, and wrapped an *obi* around his waist. He checked the samurai knot atop his head. As he expected, not a hair lay out of place.

Dressed and ready, he entered the common room.

Father Mateo knelt by the hearth, across from the man who called himself Jiro.

The visitor had gangly arms and narrow shoulders that tapered to bony wrists. His skinny hands protruded from his sleeves like twigs from a bank of snow. He wore a fine but faded kimono that seemed to be recently slept in, and his close-cropped hair stuck out at odd angles above a slender face that Hiro recognized at once.

Jiro was the apprentice of a prosperous merchant and moneylender who owned a shop in Kyoto's Sanjō Market. Hiro and Father Mateo had met the youth, and his master, while investigating the murder of a brewer several weeks before.

As he walked to the hearth, Hiro wondered why his investigations returned to haunt him like hungry ghosts. He hadn't come to Kyoto to help the families of murdered strangers, and although he enjoyed the hunt for a killer, it attracted more attention than he liked.

Father Mateo smiled at Jiro. "Good morning. Aren't you Bashō's apprentice?"

"Yes, sir." Jiro bowed his head. "I feared you wouldn't remember me. Please, I need your help."

Ana stood near the entrance, watching the youth with a wrinkled frown that made her opinion perfectly clear: no one should bother the Jesuit before dawn and without an appointment.

For once, Hiro agreed with her. Predawn visitors never brought good news. He gave the woman a barely perceptible nod, and her frown deepened into a disapproving scowl. She circled the room along the wall and exited through the door that led to the kitchen.

Gato trotted after her, tail high.

"Has something happened?" Father Mateo asked Jiro.

The young man drew a breath and blurted out, "Last night I killed a girl and left her body by the river."

"The priest does not help murderers," Hiro said. "You need to leave."

"Hiro." Father Mateo raised his scarred right hand.

Hiro bristled at the gesture, even though the Jesuit meant no insult. When distracted or surprised, Father Mateo often forgot the rules of Japanese etiquette.

The priest turned to Jiro. "What help do you think I can offer?"

Jiro ducked his head. "I don't want to die for a crime I didn't commit."

"You just confessed to killing a girl," Hiro said. "Did you do it or not?"

"That's the problem." Jiro looked up. "I don't remember."

Hiro raised an eyebrow. "Either you killed a girl or you didn't. It's not the sort of thing you forget overnight."

The delicate odor of steaming rice wafted into the room. Ana must have started cooking before the visitor arrived. Hiro's stomach growled. Hunger always shortened his temper, but Hiro didn't care. A samurai had no obligation to heed a commoner's plea at all, let alone before the morning meal.

"Tell us everything you remember," Father Mateo said. "Would you like some tea?"

"No, thank you," Jiro said. "I couldn't impose upon your kindness."

*Just our sleep and safety,* Hiro thought.

"Tell us what happened," Father Mateo said, "and we will help you, if we can."

Hiro didn't argue. There was time enough to send Jiro away when he finished with his tale.

"Last night," Jiro said, "I went for a drink at a sake shop in Pontocho. I'd never been to one before, but yesterday morning a customer gave me some silver coins for delivering a package." After a pause, he added, "I didn't spend them all on sake."

Hiro loathed the pleasure districts, especially crowded Pontocho, but couldn't fault the boy's attraction to lovely women and cheap sake. Most men found the entertainment quarters irresistible.

"You met a girl in Pontocho?" Father Mateo asked.

Jiro blushed. "I could never afford the girls in Pontocho. I drank three flasks and left the sake shop."

"Three?" Hiro asked. "That seems a lot for a youth your age and size."

"I didn't drink them alone," Jiro said. "I split them with the man who shared my table. Even so, I left the shop almost too drunk to walk. I didn't realize how much sake a silver coin could buy."

"Is there a girl in this story somewhere?" Hiro asked.

Father Mateo frowned.

Jiro bowed his head. "I'm sorry. I will speak more clearly. I left the teahouse feeling sick, and went to the river to get some air. The guards on the bridge didn't stop me—I think they knew that I was drunk."

"That, or they knew your story would take all night," Hiro muttered.

Father Mateo gave Hiro a look, but Jiro apparently missed the comment.

"South of Shijō Road, I saw a beautiful girl by the river." The young man's voice grew soft with memory. "Moonlight glimmered on her hair and set her skin aglow. She seemed like a dream, but when she turned I recognized her face."

Hiro fought the urge to stifle the youth's romantic fancy. It seemed young Jiro had spent many hours with poems, and far too few with real girls.

"You knew the woman?" Father Mateo asked.

"Her name is Emi," Jiro said. "She lived in a teahouse in Pontochō and worshipped at Chugenji, the little shrine just east of the river at Shijō Road. We met there a couple of weeks ago, and after that I saw her several times."

"The girl is an entertainer?" Father Mateo asked.

"Yes," Jiro said. "That is, she was, but I don't know which house she worked for. She said she didn't want the owner learning we were friends."

"A teahouse owner can bill a man for spending time with an entertainer," Hiro explained to Father Mateo. "Even if they meet outside the teahouse."

Father Mateo nodded and turned to Jiro. "Please continue."

"Emi hated the teahouse," Jiro said. "The owner didn't like her, and the other girls were mean. She planned to escape, but couldn't afford to buy her contract back."

Hiro wondered if the girl had asked the youth for money. Entertainers often spent a lifetime working off the costs of education and room and board. The lucky ones found a wealthy patron or acquired sufficient fame to earn their independence. But for girls with lesser skills and plainer faces, life in a teahouse could, indeed, be cruel.

“Then, last night, Emi said she’d found a way to buy her freedom.” Jiro sounded on the verge of tears. “She wouldn’t tell me how, or why, but said the teahouse owner had agreed to let her go.”

Father Mateo smiled at the boy. “You wanted to marry her, didn’t you?”

Jiro’s cheeks flushed red. The color went all the way to his ears. “She was a beautiful teahouse girl. I’m . . . I didn’t know if she would have me.”

“So you asked, and she refused, and then you killed her.” Hiro hoped the accusation would speed up the narrative.

The color drained from Jiro’s face. “No . . . at least, that’s not the way I remember it. We sat together by the river. She told me about her plans to move to Edo. I felt dizzy from the sake and lay down, in hopes of feeling better.

“Next thing I remember, I woke up and found her dead.”