

ONNA Rising

With money and freedom, a growing pool of young, well-educated and ambitious Japanese professional women are no longer submissive, demure extensions of their men folks. They are ready to enjoy life, and with power and position four women (*onna*) have formed a strong supportive bond. Their friendship has withstood romance, the glitzy life in Tokyo, trials of the workplace and the insulting 'aninoko' label given to one of the four. Now secrets and lies from the past has embolden a blackmailer, threatening the very foundations of the friends' bond.

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Praise for ONNA Rising

From cover to cover this gripping book gives readers a very honest look at life in modern Japan through its four main female characters. Whether you laugh or cry at the satire and bitter sweet humor of this book, it will make you feel and go on reading....

–Hanna Laura Noack, German writer.

ONNA Rising

Rei Kimura

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CHAPTER 1

“The night is still young—stay on for a bit more, Emi,” the long-haired, vodka-swirling young woman with a body to diet and die for said, trying to make herself heard above the current Michael Jackson “This Is It” song craze in Tokyo.

Then as her friend mouthed the words, “What did you just say?” for the third time, Sachi Ishikawa slid off her seat and grabbed Emi’s arm, mouthing back “Look, let’s go outside for a while. I’ve just realized that I can’t compete with Michael Jackson in here! Really, this guy is still hogging the music charts and almost every bar in Tokyo, as popular and controversial in death as in life. I wish we could be more like him!”

“You don’t really want that, do you?” Emi screamed above the blaring music. “Do you know what his life was like?”

“Why not?” Sachi screamed back. “At least his life and all its messiness was challenging and impacted a lot of people all over the world—for better or for worse!”

Outside, the brisk early autumn air raised goosebumps on their bare arms and shoulders, but it felt refreshing after the smoke and heat of hundreds of gyrating bodies inside one of Shibuya’s many hip disco bars.

“Oh, the fresh air feels so good,” Sachi said, breathing deeply. She immediately contradicted herself by taking out her favorite LV cigarette case and lighting up. Her hands shook with the nervous energy of a young and restless woman, let loose in Tokyo with the money and freedom enjoyed by a growing pool of young, well-educated and ambitious Japanese professional women.

“Look at you,” Emi laughed. “I thought you just said the fresh air is so good and here you are, lighting up at the drop of a coin! You really shouldn’t smoke so much, Sachi.”

“Says who? This is Tokyo and I work as hard as I play. I can do anything I want as long as I don’t break the law!” Sachi retorted good naturedly, knowing that Emi was still so ingenuous that there wasn’t a mean bone in that flat-chested, small-waisted little girl body of hers. Emi didn’t smoke, drank very moderately, didn’t do the boyfriend-hopping thing the rest did and held a sane, down-to-earth job at a blue-blooded bank in Tokyo. Frankly, sometimes Sachi wondered what the hell she was doing hanging out with them.

The truth was that the fresh-faced Emi reminded Sachi uncomfortably of her conservative roots back in Matsumoto, where her mother still bowed the correct number of times and the correct number of angles, according to the rank and closeness of her visitor. Sachi’s father, Michio Ishikawa, lived his life very correctly as required by the city office bureaucracy he had been working for almost his entire adult life; he was truly a firm believer in Japan’s employment for life rhetoric. Sometimes Sachi pitied her father, who had to submit himself daily at the city office to the demanding taxpayers who paid his salary—then when he returned home, he had to hand himself over to his quietly domineering wife.

In fact, Sachi wanted to laugh whenever she read books or documentaries by Western writers and “experts” on Japanese society portraying Japanese women as submissive, demure extensions of their men folk walking at least three shuffling steps behind. But then, who could blame them? Look at her mother, for instance; who would imagine that behind that soft, demure face and sweet, gentle nature lurked a woman, hard as nails and twice as astute, who controlled the family’s purse strings with

ironclad fists and could quell her supposedly superior husband with just one silent, reproachful look?

And then there was the money issue. How many Western writers lamenting Japanese women's second-class status really knew about "salary men," like her father, who dutifully handed over his whole pay packet every month to her mother and waited for her to dole out his "lunch and pocket money?"

Sachi would never forget the day she saw her father stuff a wad of 10,000 yen notes behind a picture and warn her not to tell her mother about it. Even at 12 years old, she could already empathize with him for having to hide any additional money he made just to have some economic independence from his wife! Of course, Michio lied about his annual bonuses and held back a little of his hard-earned money for himself. Sachi remembered the fun she'd had being a willing accomplice to these "scams."

Her mother ruled the family with a silken glove. She seldom raised her voice but, somehow, it was still understood that her word was law in the house. On weekends, Matsumoto would join the league of housewives who needed to de-stress from a week of hard homemaking and throw the children at their overworked, exhausted husbands. These fathers entertained the kids with compulsory trips to the zoo, baseball and soccer games, fishing spots or Disneyland and amusement parks—if there were any—just to keep them away from their stressed-out mothers.

Sachi started off by pitying her father and his weekend duties because her mother had her weekends but her exhausted, overworked father couldn't even sleep in on a Sunday and never seemed to have any time off for himself! But as she grew older, Sachi realized the wisdom of such weekend interactions with her father because it was the only time they actually saw each other.

Michio, like most of the "salary men fathers" all over the country, left home no later than 7 a.m. each morning

before their children were up and often came home late at night, especially on closing of accounts seasons, long after they had gone to bed. Sometimes Sachi could go for weeks without seeing Michio on working days and if not for those enforced weekend-bonding sessions, Sachi was sure she would never even have known her own father.

The weekend trips started as soon as she was old enough to ride the toy horses in the park and carry plastic pails and spades to dig for imaginary crabs and shells in between the doddering sand castles she built at the nearby beach. All of this happened under the bored supervision of her chain-smoking, newspaper-wielding father. Michio had strict instructions never to smoke in front of his daughter because the smoke was hazardous to a child of her age, but who was to know or tell on him? So Michio whiled away the time answering Sachi's endless questions absent mindedly while he lit up. But when Sachi grew old enough to tell on him, the smoking abruptly stopped, then was replaced by something infinitely more rewarding and powerful.

By the time she was 8 years old, Sachi had become a friend, companion and useful ally for Michio against her mother; she was no longer just a weekend duty her father had to endure to escape the cold and reproachful silence of his wife. They began to actually have fun pitching with the other father and child teams at a nearby field reserved for predominantly weekend amateur baseball in a nation obsessed with the game. Some weekends, Sachi and her father trudged down to the mammoth Arakawa river to spend hours hunched over their fishing rods and discuss anything from his work and clients to her studies at school. Sometimes, they'd have at least one good therapeutic session to bitch about the person they called the Minister of Finance and Home Affairs, the woman of the house, Michiko Ishikawa.

One day, their conversation took on a more serious tone as Sachi asked her father a question that had been

bothering her: What was she going to do with her life? She was just 12 years old and already being pushed unceremoniously into punishing after-school, tuition classes to prepare for the harsh entrance exams into the best jyuku or cram schools in the area. The Ishikawas did not have a son and Michiko was determined that her only child would get into the best local cram school so she could hold her head up high among the neighbors who either had sons to carry on the family name or had children already proudly ensconced in the best schools and jyukus. So Sachi was pushed even harder than many of her peers and she resented losing her precious weekend outings with her father to more tuition classes, which wore her out even before the weekend was over.

One day she heard her parents fighting over her punishing weekend study schedule, and it was the first time she had ever seen Michio so angry.

“Everyday after school, Sachi is already balancing piano lessons with more tuition in math and science; now even weekends, you are insisting she goes to cram schools to prepare her for THE cram school you want her to enter!” Michio shouted. “Really, Michiko, do you know how many children in Japan are committing suicide because they just cannot cope with their parents’ demands on them? Do you want to push our only child to that?”

“I don’t know why you are so angry and shouting at me like that, Michio! All I’ve ever done is for the good of this family!”

“Yes, and it’s good for Sachi to be pushed beyond her endurance just so that you can tell the neighbors that your daughter got into the best jyuku in this area? I won’t accept every weekend in cram school, Michiko!”

When Sachi’s mother saw that her husband had dug his heels in for once and would not budge, she reluctantly agreed to a compromise and Sachi’s outings with her father were thankfully restored, at least every other weekend.

The young Sachi could not understand her mother and as she grew older, the complexities of Michiko's mind became even more perplexing.

"Why is it, father, that Mother fights so hard for me to go to the best cram schools, the best high schools and now is fighting for me to get into the best universities and then she tells me it's all right to get a good job after graduation for the main purpose of finding a good husband? And after that, I can quit my job and spend the rest of my life caring for my husband and children!" she confided in her father on one of their fishing trips. "She never asks me if that is what I want! It's almost as if all that hard work and money spent on my education is just to be in the right place at the right time to find a good husband and nothing more! Can you see any sense in that?"

"I guess to your mother, there is nothing wrong with this mindset because she too walked the same route as her mother before her. Do you know, she was a Waseda University graduate and was working in a bank when she met me? When we got married, it just seemed so natural for her to resign from her job and stay at home without a thought about whether she was wasting a perfectly good education in finance. If she had wanted to continue working I would never have stopped her, but I couldn't insist otherwise her family would have thought that I was reluctant to fulfill my duty to provide for my wife and that I wanted her to bring home a pay packet as well!"

"Oh my God, did Mother really graduate from Waseda University? Do you know how many students—myself included—want to get in there? Looking at her now, no one would believe she once graced the blue-blooded halls of Waseda University!"

Sachi shuddered as she thought of the prospect of becoming like her mother and continued. "No father, I would much rather be a career woman and I mean a *career* woman and not an office tea-and-coffee lady many female university graduates seem satisfied to be. And if I scare off

the men with what Mother calls my ‘unfeminine ambitions,’ so be it!”

“You can be anything you want Sachi chan, provided you work for it. I am not the kind of father to clip your wings. But you will have to fight a system that does not place women in a very high priority for long-term careers, a system you can’t really blame because women like your mother have encouraged it as their desired role in society.”

Sachi looked at her father and her eyes shone with love for him. Unlike other fathers who would have gladly relinquished their roles of weekend child-minders, Michio had actually fought to maintain the status quo of their weekend bonding. He really cared about her and was no absentee father, like so many of her friends’ fathers were. Sachi decided that this alone would make her different, for good or for bad.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Emi’s voice cut into Sachi’s nostalgic memories of her childhood and growing-up years in Matsumoto. “You have been standing there with that scowl on your face for a long time. I’ve been to the ladies’ room and back and you’re still here with that scowl! What on earth are you thinking of?”

“Just thinking of my father and how much I miss him and those innocent childhood days when he was the center of my life!” Sachi replied. Then she let out a scream as the cigarette she had been holding burned to the quick and scorched her fingers.

The moment was broken. Someone opened the door of the bar and a blast of music drenched them like a sudden rain shower and Sachi shouted above the din, “Come on let’s get back in there!”

CHAPTER 2

It was 6 a.m. and a few streaks of dawn light had just started to brighten the sky over Tokyo. In a small but cozy apartment in upmarket Shibuya, a kinky pink alarm clock (which had been set for that unearthly hour, as always, on weekdays) released its loud, relentless squawking that was fit to wake the dead. There was a shuffle and a golden brown mop of curly hair on the pillow a few feet away from the clock moved and groaned.

A hand reached out and flung the offending object across the room, but the alarm clock had become immune to such daily assault and continued to ring indignantly, undeterred and louder than ever, as if to protest its abuse.

After a while, Suzue Tanaka, the owner of the golden brown mop of curly hair, gave up and padded across the room to retrieve what she called her “daily morning bully.” God, how she hated having to get up each morning almost at the crack of dawn! Some days she even wondered why she didn’t give up the struggle and just get married and be a home maker—that way her life would not be controlled by pink alarm clocks and “must have, can’t lose” clients who set tight deadlines to punish and terrorize their agencies.

Suzue had studied communications and upon graduation joined a major advertising agency in Tokyo, exchanging her comfortable home in the spacious Kyushu countryside for a small 1DK apartment in order to take the job. Her family and friends waited for her to find a husband from the pool of energetic, attractive young men she worked with and announce her resignation, but Suzue had disappointed them because nine years into her job she was still there, steadily climbing from a junior accounts executive to her current position of senior accounts director. Recently, her massive contributions to the company and large pool of clients had even gained her a

place in the boardroom among the poker face “corporate suits” who obviously didn’t like a skirt in their midst.

One enviable corporate position and impressive remuneration package later (not to mention the acquisition of a beautiful apartment in trendy Shibuya), Suzue’s mother was won over. However, her grandmother was still not convinced that this was how a Japanese woman should live her life—single and in the fast lane.

“Today will be an adrenalin-charged day,” Suzue declared grimly to the face she hated most, the naked one that stared back at her from the large, uncompromising bathroom mirror each morning, pale but glistening with the shine of overnight moisturizers.

God, Suzue shuddered, how could her latest ex-boyfriend ever think that her plain, unmade up “morning face” was her best? “Men can be so dumb and self-absorbed,” she mused. “If Taki had been less of both, we might still be having fun together!”

Then her mind switched to the high-value pitch her team was making that day for a mega pharmaceutical client; they’d be fighting tooth and nail with their arch enemy, a competing agency. Suzue shuddered again at the thought. Had she make the right decision? The room would be full of traditional male suits and she could imagine the look on their faces when they realized that the woman at the head of the long shining conference table was not the agency’s “tea” lady but a top-notch director who would be spearheading the pitch for the day.

Some of her other clients had good naturedly dismissed the agency’s habit of having a woman spearhead its major accounts as one of the idiosyncrasies of advertising agencies; after all, gays and women in suits went so well together! It was annoying but Suzue had learned the hard way as a junior accounts executive that what mattered most was not morals, justice or even ethics—it was about who could ruthlessly elbow anything and anyone out of the way to get a coveted account.

Still, should she have caved in to her coordinator's insistence that for this pitch, at least, they send in the male directors? Conservative Japanese pharmaceutical men in black suits did not take women seriously, and the account was too huge to risk losing just because of gender issues. "After all, winning the account is all that matters, right?" Takuya, the other senior account director, argued. Suzue seethed at the open condescension in his voice and dug her heels in even more. All of the hard work had been done by her and Fumiko, her assistant; chain smoking, caffeine-ridden days and nights of merciless research, strategic planning and stroking the balls of petulant and demanding lower-level executives of the client company who wanted to feel important. No way in hell was she going to hand over all this hard work to a couple of male directors and watch them get all the glory and credit if the pitch was successful!

"Why? Just because people in Japan still think women should only be serving tea and bowing at the right angles in the work place?" she had fumed to Emi, a banker, and the newest member of what Suzue called "the four pillars." They were friends, representing the new generation of Japanese professional women. The other three pillars were herself, Sachi, a fashion designer and owner of her own fashion house and Tomoko, a financial advisor and hard-talking lawyer. The pillars met at least once a week, drawn together by a common goal to work hard and play hard. They had broken away from the chains of tradition to compete alongside their more privileged male counterparts in hard corporate careers, refusing to budge even if they had to work at least two or three times harder than the men, just to prove themselves.

Poor Emi—she was the most feminine, soft spoken and nurturing of the four of them, and she always had to listen to all their garbage. Whenever a relationship went wrong, it was on Emi's decidedly calm shoulders that they cried on. But it was Suzue herself who provided the launching pad when some real character assassination and

aggression was needed. Sometimes Suzue felt that she was so cynical and hard because of all that angry energy the girls loaded on her. But she knew that was not really true. She had been resentful and rebellious for as long as she could remember, ever since she became old enough to realize that her family was different and she was a kind of pariah in the tight and judgmental small town Japanese society she grew up in.