Katsura Izumi

Hinako Takanaga

The GUILTY vol.3

Redemption 贖罪

PARENTAL ADVISORY
EXPLICIT CONTENT

June™

Yaoi Novel

Toya skimmed quickly over the page. When he reached the article, he got a shock. Toya's eyes riveted to the headline and a chill snaked down his spine.

Mystery Author Kai Hodaka Gay? Spotted with Editor.

"Although we await further details on this unconfirmed story," the article read, "our sources are extremely reliable. Given the best-selling author's renowned history with actress Mari Tanaka, he's a very busy man."

Editor Toya Sakurai is the talk of the industry for his amazing work with best-selling mystery writer Kai Hodaka. But most people don't know that the root of Toya's success is his secret relationship with Hodaka. However, Toya's success leads to jealousy from his coworkers, and that jealousy fuels some hateful gossip. All of this compounds when rumors fly around the internet about Hodaka having a relationship with one of his male editors.

When Toya tries to distance himself from Hodaka to abate the rumors, everything gets worse, until finally, Hodaka asks for a new editor! Can these two guilty hearts find happiness together?



NOVEL / DRAMA / ROMANCE **US $8.95**

ISBN 978-1-56970-612-1

50895

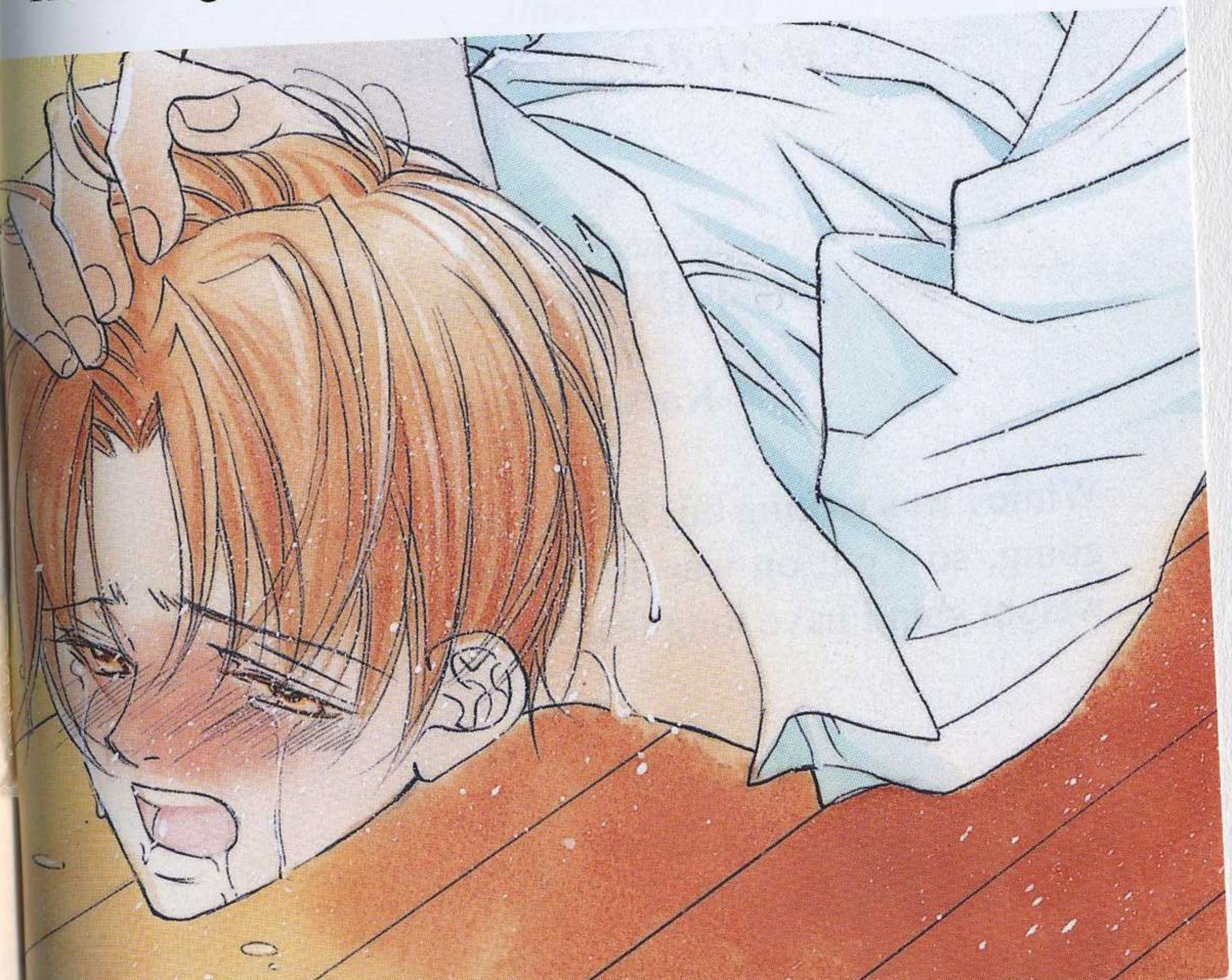
9 781569 706121



“Open up.”

“No—!”

Hodaka ignored Toya’s refusals and pushed forward.



Other novels published by
JUNÉ

Only The Ring Finger Knows
vol.1-3

Don't Worry Mama

The Man Who Doesn't
Take Off His Clothes vol.1-2

Ai No Kusabi – The Space Between
vol.1-5

Sweet Admiration

Better Than A Dream

S vol. 1-4

Gentle Cage

Like A Love Comedy

A Promise Of Romance

Immoral Darkness

The Guilty vol. 1-2

Contents

The Guilty
9

The Guilty: A Secret Look
205

Postscript
217

Chapter One

Toya Sakurai felt himself slipping into a delicious slumber as his body relaxed in the warm bathwater. He felt perfectly safe and secure.

"Toya, you'll catch cold if you fall asleep here."

A deep voice, rich with beautiful charm, trembled against Toya's ears. He opened his eyes and felt a moment of dizziness.

"Sir—"

Toya twisted his head around, his pale brown eyes reflecting the handsome face of his lover, Kai Hodaka. They had gotten into the bath together with Toya leaning against Hodaka's chest. Apparently he was so worn out from work that he had drifted off to sleep in the man's soft embrace.

Hodaka was tall with a strong and slender build. Toya on the other hand, though not as muscular, was not fragile either. But in Hodaka's arms he felt an odd sense of security and wondered why that was. Was that the special magic that made them lovers?

Toya gazed at Hodaka's beautiful face for several moments as he wondered. He saw his own face reflected back in the man's jet black eyes. It was almost too much to believe.

"What's wrong?" Hodaka asked.

It was typical of Hodaka to become suspicious of

the way Toya was acting, and he pressed a kiss against Toya's forehead as he asked his question.

"I just couldn't stop staring at you," Toya answered honestly, too caught up in the sight to tailor his words.

Hodaka laughed. "Are you sure you're not already asleep?"

The man's beautiful voice tickled over Toya's ears, tinged by an arrogance that overpowered him. Surely Hodaka was used to other people staring at him, but there was an unexpected note of embarrassment in his voice. Toya suddenly felt self-conscious.

"Maybe."

The lovers were often captivated by each other, though they were different from each other in almost every other way.

Kai Hodaka was extraordinary, blessed not only by his intellect, but also by his flawless good looks. He was a writer of mysteries that spoke to his generation, and so beautiful that people's eyes were naturally drawn to him.

His looks and abundant talent were no doubt reason enough for people to forgive his arrogance. But his sexuality was quite eccentric and some in the editing department where Toya worked had even called him "morally bankrupt." Toya called him "sir" because he was Hodaka's editor, but Hodaka was still his most important person.

"I've been really busy at work and pulled an all-nighter last night," Toya said.

"I think you editors have a much more stressful lifestyle than us authors," Hodaka murmured. He lightly

kissed Toya, tracing his tongue along the line from the base of Toya's neck to his shoulder, making him shiver.

"Do you want to go see the autumn leaves next month?" Hodaka asked.

"Wha—?" Toya's eyes widened at the unexpected invitation.

"Are you going to be busy? I'll be done with my work."

"Oh, yes. We'll be done proofing your book then. The designer really outdid herself and gave us a great cover," Toya answered, his voice full of feeling.

"Oh?"

"They're using a special kind of paper this time, so even though the book is thick, it won't be very heavy."

"You're really excited about this, aren't you?" Hodaka interrupted, a sulking note in his voice.

Toya stopped talking at once. He'd forgotten Hodaka's desire to keep business and pleasure strictly separate. When they were alone, Toya was only his lover.

"Look at me," Hodaka said, and Toya obeyed, turning around inside the big bathtub to face Hodaka. Hodaka looked a little downhearted, but Toya's own narrow face still paled beside his perfect, captivating features. Toya smiled gently and he kissed Hodaka's cheek shyly.

Toya didn't usually like being in a well-lit room where they could so easily see each other's naked bodies, but Hodaka had put some tablets into the bath that made the water milky white and his embarrassment was alleviated.

They hadn't slept together that day, but just being alone and relaxing together was satisfying. It was wonderful kissing again and again and being bathed by Hodaka's big hands. That sort of delicate accumulation, touch by stray touch, intoxicated Toya with happiness. He was relieved at how spacious the bathroom of Hodaka's apartment was.

The condominium Hodaka had in the high-rise apartment had a view of Hamarikyu, and the price made it even more incredible. He had a duplex on the fortieth and forty-first floors, which was a lot of space for just one man.

Nearly a year had gone by since Toya had started spending his nights with Hodaka. Lately, he spent more time there with Hodaka than he did at his own apartment. Every time they saw each other, they spent less time having sex. Passing their nights in easy familiarity was becoming the norm.

Toya thought it was because their relationship was more stable than before. Their ages, twenty-eight and thirty-six, might also have played a role. They weren't frivolous or shallow; instead, serene satisfaction filled the space between them. The air of maturity that surrounded Hodaka also helped.

"Shall we go to bed?" Hodaka asked, perhaps worried that they had been in the bath too long and would start to get lightheaded. Since Toya felt like he would fall asleep if he stayed there any longer, he couldn't argue.

Wrapping fresh bathrobes around their wet bodies, they went to Hodaka's bedroom. Toya sat on the king-

size bed and Hodaka, also wearing a bathrobe, stood in front of him.

"You're wet," Hodaka said.

Toya's heart skipped a beat at the offhanded way Hodaka said that and he looked up.

"I meant your hair," Hodaka said with a smile. Water was still dripping off Toya's hair, so Hodaka dried it with a large bath towel.

"Are you still sleepy?" Hodaka asked. His beautiful voice had a powerful effect on Toya, making his ears quiver. Toya shook his head slightly from side to side.

"Sir—"

Yearning to be shoved back on the bed, Toya circled his arms around Hodaka's neck and pulled Hodaka down over him. He initiated the kissing that night. Hodaka gave him several light kisses, holding back, as if trying to evade Toya's passion. Toya clung to his neck and Hodaka wrapped his arms around Toya's slender waist.

"Ah—"

Their tongues tangled and Toya swallowed Hodaka's into his mouth, mingling their saliva together hotly. Toya felt his lower body begin to ache, just from the kisses. His body had been trained to react to even the slightest stimulation, which made it hard for Toya to control himself.

Hodaka pulled away. "I thought you were sleepy. That was your goodnight kiss."

Toya looked up at him sulkily. "I'm not sleepy anymore."

How could Hodaka touch him like that and honestly call it a goodnight kiss?

"Even though you fell asleep in the bath?"

"That was because I felt so peaceful."

"So now you're going to fall asleep?"

"No, I'm not."

Toya was slightly alarmed by the sharpness of his refusal. He wondered when he'd become the sort of person who could need sex so shamelessly. But even so, his desire for Hodaka didn't fade.

"Then how should I start tormenting you?"

"However you want, sir."

"You mean everywhere? You're so dirty today, Toya."

Hodaka exposed Toya's chest and nipped at Toya's nipples, making Toya writhe instinctively. He was barely being touched, but heat was gathering in his groin. He was already erect, ripe with fluid, trembling obscenely despite the fact that Hodaka had barely touched him.

"How about here?"

"Nngh."

Hodaka stroked the base of Toya's thighs and Toya's entire body trembled. His entire body was very sensitive, but everything below his hips was even more so.

"I can't decide. You act so adorable no matter what I do," Hodaka murmured, almost to himself, and bit Toya's nipples. Toya felt the ticklish sensation run down his spine. The man rubbed and pinched the nipples and then returned to sucking them.

Toya felt ready to come, especially when Hodaka

scraped his teeth lightly over his skin.

"Ah! No!" Toya cried, not even aware of what he was refusing.

"You're reactions are lovely."

Toya's head thrashed from side to side as Hodaka played obsessively with his nipples, which had hardened instantly. His pale hair spilled across the pillow in disarray and his skin felt like it was on fire as he slid across the sheets.

"I wish you could see what you look like," Hodaka said in a shockingly tender voice, pinching hard on Toya's deeply colored nipples. He brought his face closer and nibbled on one, pinched it between his lips, and then trailed his tongue around it. Toya cried out constantly as Hodaka played, clawing at the sheets.

"Do you like it best here?"

"Ah—mm!"

Hodaka slid his body down suddenly and his mouth closed around Toya's naked arousal. The sensation was enough to make Toya's body leap. Hodaka's bathrobe had been rubbing against that sensitive part of Toya's body for a while and he was already sticky with anticipation. He was embarrassed to have made Hodaka's robe dirty, but his passion only mounted.

"W-wait—" Toya cried, trying to push Hodaka off.

"What's wrong?"

"I-I want to do that, too," Toya said hesitantly, his cheeks flushed. He started to get up.

"What a bold request." Hodaka's voice was teasing and Toya felt ashamed.

But since he'd said it, he couldn't take it back. "You don't want me to?"

"You think you can?"

Toya was abashed by the taunting in Hodaka's voice and whispered "yes" in a vanishing small voice. He didn't want to be the only one receiving pleasure—he wanted to make Hodaka feel good, too. That was all he wanted.

"Then show me."

Toya straddled Hodaka's body as he lay back on the bed and started to lower his face to it.

"Not like that. I can't do anything to you like that."

Hodaka made Toya move so that his hips were above Hodaka's head. Toya's face burned. But since he'd come so far, he vowed to see it through. With trembling fingers, he loosened Hodaka's robe and pulled his engorged flesh free. He kissed the tip timidly and a shiver ran through Hodaka's body. The sound of his gasp pleased Toya. Hodaka was always so cool and collected, but Toya had broken through and made him feel something. He adored that.

"Nngh." Hodaka grunted as Toya took him into his mouth. Toya took him in deeper while Hodaka rubbed over his own tender flesh, exciting Toya further.

Hodaka had taught Toya that the inside of the mouth was a sexual organ, too. It was clear when that part of his body exploded with sensation whenever he touched Hodaka. How many other erogenous zones had Hodaka found in Toya's body? Hodaka could flip the switches inside Toya so easily and dominate him,

making him cry and come.

"Mm!" Toya sucked on Hodaka, covering him with slick saliva. Toya was completely absorbed in pleasuring Hodaka, but suddenly he jerked his body away in shock.

"Anh!"

Hodaka had only been trailing his fingers lightly over Toya's sex, but he'd suddenly begun to utilize his skills. Hodaka thrust his tongue out to stimulate Toya, cradling the tip of his penis with his tongue.

"Ah—ahh!" Toya struggled to contain himself somehow, but it was enough to push him to his limits. Panting, Toya clung to the sheets and writhed. The aching pleasure that sprung up from his shaft shot through his nerves and charged his brain with electricity. His groin ached with passion, heralding the imminent end of his excitement.

"Why did you stop, Toya?" Hodaka asked teasingly. The attention to Toya's sensitive flesh rocked his body and made it impossible for Toya to continue pleasuring Hodaka.

"I—I can't—stop!"

Hodaka twirled his fingers, spreading the rising fluid over Toya's sex. Toya sobbed, ignorant of everything but that touch. All his awareness was focused on that one spot and his body convulsed when he felt just Hodaka's breath on him.

"Toya," Hodaka called again, but Toya couldn't respond. Hodaka reached out and pushed Toya's head down toward his shaft. Even without the added pressure, taking something so large into his mouth made tears

surge to Toya's eyes. When the man's erection thrust violently into him, Toya struggled to move his tongue, but couldn't.

"Nngh!"

"Do it right. If you do, I'll make it worth your while," Hodaka promised, dragging his tongue once more over Toya's firm flesh.

Toya was in the perverted position of being forced to take the man into his mouth while Hodaka also gave Toya pleasure. Awash with humiliation, Toya struggled to continue pleasuring Hodaka. But whenever he did, he knew that Hodaka was still in full control. Toya threw his head back suddenly and stopped what he was doing, turning his body over to the sweet pleasure.

"Ah! It's so good!"

He felt himself growing inside Hodaka's mouth as the man sucked on him. Surrounded by warmth, wet with the man's saliva and his own sweet fluids, his arousal trembled to its pinnacle. It was so, so good. With Hodaka's mouth playing and licking over his length, Toya felt himself on the edge of orgasm.

"I'm coming—"

But if he did, Hodaka would have to taste his semen. He was ashamed to do that, but Hodaka showed no signs of stopping.

"Let yourself go," Hodaka said.

Toya could no longer resist the profound temptation of the man's voice.

"N-no! Wait!"

But Hodaka wouldn't wait. He licked around the length of Toya's shaft, teasing his lover, and Toya

finally released his seed into Hodaka's mouth. Hodaka swallowed and pulled away from Toya as the younger man rode the riotous waves of pleasure. He sat up, leaning back against the headboard and watching Toya.

"Come here," Hodaka said.

"What do you want me to do?" Toya asked, his lips sticky.

"Whatever you want," Hodaka answered with a smile.

Toya steeled his resolve and kneeled at Hodaka's feet. He pushed Hodaka's clothes aside once more and pulled out the man's abandoned arousal and ran his tongue over it.

"Nngh—" Hodaka only made a low, nasal groan, but when Toya felt the man grow inside his mouth, happiness filled him. He liked using his body to excite Hodaka and overwhelm him.

Hodaka pushed Toya's head down slightly and pushed his hips up at the same time. The perverse movement of Hodaka's hips disturbed Toya, who imagined his mouth as the folds of flesh that usually allowed Hodaka into his body. He was still so ashamed of himself for being excited by that, for sleeping with another man, and being conquered and violated by him. Toya tried to tell himself that it was a natural expression of love, but his sense of guilt and the taint of immorality lingered.

"Ah!"

But despite that, his attentions to Hodaka excited him. When he imagined his own body being penetrated by the firm flesh he sucked on, his excitement flowed

out of his body in aching drops.

"What are you doing?" Hodaka asked in a low, intense voice as Toya consumed him.

Toya was about to ask what he meant when Hodaka pushed his head down, making speech impossible. His saliva was dripping over his fingers, but he wouldn't stop until he'd made Hodaka climax.

"Do you want me to shoot it on your face or in your mouth?" Hodaka asked with a coy expression.

Toya loosened his grip and looked up at him.

"I want to swallow it," Toya begged, almost moaning.

Hodaka had ejaculated into his face once before, and Toya never wanted to feel that again. It trampled over his self-respect as a man. But since he screamed and moaned tenderly whenever he slept with Hodaka, maybe he didn't have any pride left anyways.

"All right," Hodaka answered and shoved Toya's head down, thrusting his hips against him. Toya's eyes teared up with surprise, but then there was an abundant explosion of fluid into his mouth. Toya tightened his lips, trying to gulp it all down, and then pulled the man's erection away from his face as he stroked it. It was still a little dirty, so he licked it again, wiping up the semen.

"You've gotten good."

Hodaka praised him, placing a kiss on Toya's upturned forehead. A supple smile came over Hodaka's face and the honesty of it closed poignantly around Toya's heart.

"Sir—"

Toya needed to feel Hodaka's body.



They changed positions and Hodaka turned Toya onto his side. He hooked Toya's left leg over his shoulder and spread his legs wide. Forcing Toya's body into a depraved position, Hodaka pressed his shaft against Toya's entrance. Hodaka thrust inside swiftly, despite Toya's pain.

"A—ah!"

Toya turned to the right and clung to the sheets. Being rocked by each penetration, he felt as if Hodaka was commanding every sensation in his body.

"Does it hurt?" Hodaka asked.

"It feels—good."

Hodaka twisted his hips, as if verifying his connection to Toya through the part buried inside. Toya's flesh clung obscenely to the man as it swallowed him up, as if crying for him to never leave. His sensitive body would never be satisfied unless it was Hodaka penetrating him.

"Nngh—ah! Ahh! S-sir!"

"What?"

"It's so—so good—"

How had Toya ever come to believe that it felt good to have something so huge obscenely shoved into his body? Fluid pulsed from the tip of his penis, twitching at the very thought, in spite of his doubts.

"Go...deeper!"

"I like being at the opening."

"I love it—"

It felt so good, Toya couldn't even think anymore. His words slurred together. He wanted to take Hodaka all the way in.

"Oh, god—it's so deep—"

"You still want it deeper?" Hodaka muttered. He lifted Toya's leg high and thrust into him again and again. Toya cried out, intoxicated by the luscious feeling.

Toya had become Hodaka's lover after his initial role as the man's editor. He had been a huge fan of Hodaka's work for many years and had started working for a publishing company, dreaming of someday having the chance to work with Hodaka. After a lot of hard work, he'd gotten his wish.

Hodaka was a famous mystery author who had a rather unique work ethic: he would write only one work per company per year. He had kept that pace for several years.

When the pulp division of Sozan Publishing had lagged in sales, they had hoped to push their numbers up by publishing a second book by Hodaka the same year. After many failed attempts, Toya had extracted a promise from Hodaka that he would write twenty pages in one day if Toya could beat him at pool. Hodaka was stubborn but capricious, and he had agreed.

But what Hodaka had demanded in exchange was Toya's body. Toya accepted the bet without thinking Hodaka wanted his body sexually, and began sleeping with Hodaka as a result. As Hodaka schooled Toya in pleasure, at some point Toya began to fall in love. He'd fallen so far into that immoral love that he'd even tossed aside his fiancée, Miwa.

Maybe he'd fallen in love the very first moment he saw Hodaka in person. He could never say for sure. But as time went on, Toya suspected more and more that it had been love at first sight.

"Toya."

Gentle fingers combed pleasantly through his hair. He heard a voice call to him, and made a drowsy noise.

"Do you have work today?"

"No, I'm off."

A gentle beam of morning sunlight streamed in through the blinds. Toya rolled his eyes over to look at the clock on the bedside table and saw that it was after nine.

Some of the managers at Sozan Publishing allowed employees to work on flextime, which meant there was no fixed time when work started. If there were no meetings or appointments, an employee could decide when they went in to the office.

"Then you can sleep a little longer."

"Stay with me, sir—" Toya reached out and pulled on Hodaka's sleeve as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"You're spoiled today."

"It's been so long since we've been able to see each other."

"Maybe it keeps things fresh not seeing you every chance I get."

"That's not funny." Toya sounded unintentionally sulky, but Hodaka smiled serenely. He pushed Toya's shoulders down, pushing his head into his lap.

"I want to stay like this with you forever," Toya sighed.

"We could always be together, you know. You could move in with me. Then we could spend as much time together as we wanted."

Hodaka said it so casually that Toya sat up in bed.

Live...with Hodaka?

"I'd love to, but..."

"But what?" Hodaka urged him on.

"Are you serious, sir?"

"Of course I am."

Hodaka boasted of the fact that he never lied, and he was shockingly serious about adhering to that principle. He never missed a deadline and though he hadn't always told Toya important things, he'd never lied to him in their professional or private lives.

Toya knew Hodaka was like that, but he couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had never imagined the day might come when he would live with Hodaka. The offer brought home the truth that Toya was special to Hodaka.

"It's not a problem on days like this, but it's a lot of trouble having to go home and get ready before work all the time, isn't it?"

"That's true, but..." Toya stumbled to a halt. If he didn't stop to think, he would leap for joy. The major reason he hesitated was because he was Hodaka's editor. In both their business and private lives, they were partners.

"But so many of your other editors come here. If I lived with you, I might just get in the way. I don't think it's a very good idea." Hodaka was silent for a moment, and then nodded serenely.

"You're right. If you don't want to do it, that's fine."

Hodaka seemed to instantly grasp what Toya meant. He agreed much more readily than Toya ever thought he would.

"I'm sorry. I just don't want you to think that I can't keep my business and personal life separate," Toya said.

What that really meant was that Toya wanted to keep his relationship with Hodaka a secret. The only people who knew about it currently were Hodaka's maid and one of the authors Toya edited for, Yo Amano. Toya wanted to keep it that way.

He knew it was dishonest and selfish of him. But he would hate for anyone to think that the reason he got such good results from Hodaka was because he used his body to get them.

The fact that he had convinced Hodaka to bend his rules and publish twice with Sozan Publishing in the same year had become a legend. Because of that, Toya had to put in appearances at parties where mystery writers gathered and people often wanted to know how he'd done it.

Emergence, the first book Toya had worked on with Hodaka, had become a long-running best seller. It had cemented Hodaka's reputation as a mystery writer. Toya was afraid that if their relationship was revealed, it would sully the reputation of *Emergence*.

Even when they were alone, that concern was plain. He tried to leave as little trace of himself at Hodaka's apartment as possible and only left the absolute

essentials there. Otherwise, he would stop going back to his apartment altogether.

He was an adult and he wanted to draw his own boundaries, and that was the line that Toya drew for himself. So even though he'd spent the night there, Toya would go home before he went to work.

He was sure, though, that Hodaka would have no problem keeping business and pleasure separate if Toya moved in. He was much more adult and had better self-control than Toya did.

"You don't need to apologize. It's my fault for not thinking about how you would feel." Hodaka stroked Toya's hair.

"I'm really happy you asked."

"I know. It was just a suggestion. I wouldn't want you to feel uncomfortable because of it." The sweet sound of Hodaka's voice always eroded Toya's reason.

"I'm sorry."

Even if they couldn't live together, he wanted to keep Hodaka all to himself forever. Was that desire proof of his selfishness?

Toya rested his head on Hodaka's lap again, and just as he was falling asleep, his eyes met Hodaka's. The man's face looked more desolate than ever before.

Chapter Two

"Morning, Sakurai," Yoshikawa, one of Toya's coworkers, called out to him. Toya looked up from the fax that had just arrived and returned the greeting. It was actually after two in the afternoon, so morning was technically over, but the greeting sounded all right in the editing offices.

"Mister Hodaka's new book is going on sale next week, right?"

"Yeah. We're sending out ads at the beginning of the week."

Toya's voice was suddenly excited when he answered. Though the original schedule had called for the books to be delivered last weekend, they'd pushed back the deadline because of how long it had taken to come up with a cover design. The combined efforts of Toya and Hodaka in every detail of the book made it their masterpiece. Toya was eager to see it in bookstores.

"You put a lot of work into it. The guys in sales are getting behind it, too, so I bet the orders from bookstores are just pouring in."

"I just hope it sells."

A certain level of sales could be anticipated for any of Hodaka's books. His last book, *Emergence*, had been very popular, so they'd printed a large initial run for his new book, *Incubation*. The sales department

was being aggressive and the printing numbers they'd recommended shocked Toya, since he had worked in the more conservative literature and fiction department before. Their goals were making him a bit nervous.

Barely more than six months had gone by since Hodaka's last work was published in March, and it was entirely unheard of for Hodaka to publish twice with the same company in one year. He also didn't usually give magazine interviews or appear on television. But for *Incubation*, he was accepting the interviews that the sales department offered.

Toya was proud of bringing Hodaka's new novel to the world, but Toya wasn't sure how he felt about Hodaka's unparalleled cooperation with him. Was he giving Sozan Publishing special treatment because Toya was his lover? Toya had wanted to win Hodaka over on his own merits.

He walked to the breakroom to wash out his empty cup. As he passed the elevator, he heard people talking in the smoking room.

"Hey, you know how Kai Hodaka's new book is coming out?" a man's voice asked quietly, though it carried well anyway.

"Right. That ought to pick the pulp division up a little."

"Sakurai's evaluations have gone up, too. That guy's got it made now. And all because he was working with Hodaka."

Toya's heart skipped a beat as he realized they were talking about him. He knew it was rude to eavesdrop, but his feet came to a halt.

"I wonder how he managed to sway a guy as hardheaded as Hodaka."

"The guy is so outgoing, Hodaka must have fallen for him. So he's getting all these nice favors."

"He's a total chameleon."

Toya didn't think the comments would bother him, but they did. He had sometimes wondered what his coworkers thought of him, but Toya was so easy-going that he had never had any real enemies before. He had only been criticized for being too laid-back and wishy-washy.

But ever since he'd become involved with Hodaka, the world had changed. Some of it was probably due to changes that had happened inside Toya. But it was more than just that: the eyes of the people around him had become harsher. Their gazes held envy and resentment.

Toya had felt those angry feelings before, but that was the first time he'd been confronted by it so directly and he couldn't help faltering in the face of it.

As they had mentioned, Sozan Publishing had adopted a system of rolling salary evaluations last year based on employees' performances, so Toya's salary had gone up and he'd also received a bonus because of Hodaka's books. Toya had gotten more out of Hodaka's success than anyone else and that truth stung his heart.

If Toya began living with Hodaka and people found out, the conjectures about him getting special favors from Hodaka would be inevitable. His cold refusal of Hodaka's invitation to live together weighed heavily on his heart, but he knew it was the right choice.

Toya wasn't ashamed of being in love with

Hodaka, but he couldn't withstand the harsh criticism from others. Toya had wanted to be an independent adult when he became Hodaka's lover, so he had no desire to let Hodaka pay for him. He didn't want to be taken care of; he wanted to make it on his own. Though he didn't expect Hodaka to understand, he still wanted to explain how he felt and the way he'd suffered. He thought Hodaka was at least aware he felt that way.

So why had Hodaka talked about living together?

Thinking about that brought anxiety crashing down on Toya. It had only been a very short time ago that they had grown in different directions and Toya had been truly tormented by insecurity over whether Hodaka actually loved him or not.

Hodaka rarely declared his love for Toya. He said "I love you" so rarely that Toya wondered if maybe Hodaka had suggested living together in order to alleviate Toya's anxiety about that. But that just made Toya pull away even more.

Hodaka was an exceptional person. His genius couldn't be measured by the same criteria as other people. It was impossible to believe that Hodaka ever suffered from anxiety or mistrust. Anything like that was just Toya forcing pedestrian concerns on Hodaka's genius. He wondered if he was just a burden to Hodaka, holding him back. Toya didn't have anywhere near enough confidence to convince himself that it wasn't true.

Toya started walking to the breakroom again. He washed his cup and took his time brewing two cups of coffee before going back to his desk.

"Oh, you're here!" a voice called to him. It was Makihara, the assistant editor and Toya's boss.

"I've been here for a while, sir."

It looked as if Makihara had just gotten in. He was rummaging through the stack of faxes on his desk.

"You're here early. Worried about *Incubation*?"

"A little bit." Still thinking about the conversation he'd just heard, Toya's words didn't come easily.

"It'll sell fine, like always. Don't worry about it."

"You're too optimistic, Mister Makihara."

Toya smiled and looked into his boss's open, unguarded face. He had also edited for Hodaka and done relatively well, despite the challenges inherent in working with the man. Actually, Hodaka seemed to change editors relatively often. Toya was the fourth one to take the job and he thought he was doing pretty well. He took a deep breath and tried to expel all the anxiety crowding inside him. They had overcome so many challenges already, after all.

Toya had once decided he would be better off breaking up with Hodaka, before he understood the man's eccentric personality. But Toya had been unable to relinquish his love for Hodaka.

He didn't want to let their relationship end and he was sure Hodaka felt the same way. They both desired and needed each other. It was a fundamental agreement. But it didn't go beyond the surface.

Toya tried hard to convince himself of that, but something obscure lingered in his heart. It pricked him again and again, like a tiny thorn, refusing to be ignored.

As Toya walked through the ticket stiles at the train station, he was dumbfounded to hear someone call his name. Turning reflexively to look, he saw a woman smiling at him brightly—one of Hodaka's editors from Six Winds. They weren't exactly friends—more like colleagues who worked in the same circles.

"Hello there. Are you on your way to see Mister Hodaka?"

"No, I have some business to take care of," Toya answered ambiguously. He had never imagined he would run into her on the street.

"Oh, really?"

"What about you, Miss Toyama? Are you going to Mister Hodaka's?"

Toya had finally remembered the woman's name. She laughed and shook her head. "Our company is in Hamamatsu. When I need to go to his apartment for a manuscript, I can just walk."

"Oh, that's true."

"I see you around here a lot, Mister Sakurai. Do you live nearby?"

Toya's heart skipped a beat. She was perceptive.

"No. Are you sure it was me?" Toya asked, fighting back the chaos of his heart and rallying his calm.

"Maybe. But you're pretty recognizable, you know."

The way she tilted her head in momentary consideration was very feminine and a little attractive. Toya had heard that Six Winds had assigned a young woman to be Hodaka's editor and everyone said that she was blessed with just as much beauty as brains.

"I think I'm pretty ordinary myself." Toya smiled brightly and let the woman's questions slide past him. But he doubted she would let it go at that and he tried to add a few more details.

"But you're right that I have been going to see Mister Hodaka more often recently, since we're putting the finishing touches on a new book."

"Oh, that's coming out soon, isn't it?" the woman asked excitedly, though it was obviously just a rhetorical question. "It's set in the same world as *Emergence*, right? I can't wait to read it."

"That's nice to hear."

Toya was very proud to hear such praise from a colleague, even if she was only being polite. But he didn't feel comfortable accepting her comment at face value.

After a few more pleasantries, Toya left. His palms were sweating, which never happened to him. He knew he was reacting that way because he was at the station for impure reasons.

It wasn't for any project. That night's visit was a private one and that knowledge made Toya extremely uncomfortable. Hearing the woman say that she'd seen him at the station so often only made it worse.

But maybe the gossiping at lunch had just put Toya on edge. There could be another editor at Hodaka's apartment, or one of his author friends. With Hodaka there to help, Toya was relatively certain things would be all right, but he couldn't be sure. They worked in such a small world. If they did anything to spark gossip, it would spread like wildfire.

They had to avoid that at all costs.

Was it shallow of Toya to reach that conclusion so quickly? Or just self-preservation? His unwillingness to cause trouble for Hodaka was just an excuse. Hodaka had never given a thought to criticism or how others perceived him. The only reason someone as brash as Hodaka worried about it was because Toya had begged him not to reveal their relationship to anyone.

Toya rode to the fortieth floor in the elevator and went to Hodaka's door. For security reasons, there was an intercom and auto-lock door on the building so that non-residents couldn't come in without permission.

"You look depressed," Hodaka pointed out when he greeted Toya at the door. Toya had been hanging his head, but he looked up quickly.

"I'm sorry," He said. He couldn't look depressed when he was there to see his boyfriend. Toya hurried to pull together a smile and looked into Hodaka's eyes.

"Are you still tired?" Hodaka asked.

"It's not that. I was just thinking about something," Toya answered awkwardly, and then sat down on the sofa. "Are you sure you're not tired, sir? I've been so demanding of you lately. I'm sorry. I know better than anyone how busy you are."

"It's no big deal."

As part of the campaign for the new novel, the sales department had arranged an unusually large number of magazine articles and interviews for Hodaka. Toya was sure it had been a burden on him. Hodaka's only request had been to do no book signings, but there were so many other things to do that Toya still felt a little guilty.

"That just shows how much they want the book to sell," Hodaka said.

"They don't have to do anything to make one of your books sell, sir."

"So maybe when they work at it, the book will sell even more. It's important to have a strategy."

Writing novels was more about business than personal passion for Hodaka, so he kept tight control over the sales of his books. "One book per company per year" was how he kept his readers wanting more. If he didn't publish constantly, his books weren't devalued.

Hodaka didn't believe in the idea that something could be so perfect that it was beyond price. He wanted to create things that were so perfect, people would pay any price for them.

Toya and Hodaka's other editors were grateful for that philosophy. They were in the midst of a slump in publishing, and the various publishing houses had lost clout, making it harder to put out books that didn't seem likely to sell. So if Hodaka's books wouldn't sell, there was no point.

"Once we get this book into stores, I intend to reward myself for all my hard work," Hodaka murmured, gazing into Toya's eyes.

"Sir—"

That was enough to make Toya's cheeks burn. It made him happier than he could say to have Hodaka look at him like that and treat him so kindly. Those feelings undermined his pride as a man, and he felt chagrin blossoming within him. But he just wanted to accept Hodaka's words without question.

Still standing, Hodaka pressed a kiss against Toya's lips, and then bent over him to bite Toya's neck.

"No—not there," Toya gasped, pushing Hodaka away gently.

"Why not?"

"People will see it."

"You mean I can't show people you belong to me?"

"I don't 'belong' to anyone!" Toya answered with forced jocularity, but Hodaka brushed it off.

"It's just a figure of speech."

"Mister Hodaka." Toya snuggled his face closer, begging for a kiss. Hodaka's full lips locked with Toya's, almost cutting off his breathing.

"Nngh!" Toya grunted as Hodaka's tongue rolled over his, making it hard to breathe. When Hodaka sucked on Toya's lips, he was powerless. All the strength fled from his body and before Toya realized what was happening, Hodaka had wrapped his arms around him, loosening Toya's clothes until nothing but his half-open shirt remained on his body.

"Sir—"

Toya's voice faltered. He was mortified to have his naked body exposed in such a brightly lit room. Toya hid his face, his cheeks flushed, but Hodaka ignored him. The man's fingers unlocked one by one the locks on Toya's body, opening wide the gates of his sensuality.

"Ah!"

A gasp escaped Toya. His penis twitched in reaction to the kiss while Hodaka cradled it in his fingers, magnifying Toya's pleasure instantly.

"No—I still won't—"

Toya could feel Hodaka's desires conquering his own racing heart. He thought he couldn't feel any more pleasure from Hodaka, but that touch made Toya melt into immediate ecstasy, as if he could never get enough.

"But look how wet you are. I barely touched you, and you're already this big. You must have been excited even before you left work," Hodaka observed cruelly. Toya's cheeks were tinged a light pink.

"I wasn't!" Toya's voice was understandably harsh with annoyance.

Hodaka's lips twisted into a smile. "But you weren't always this easy to excite."

"I don't—"

"You're sopping wet and all I did was touch you. Look, you're even dripping," he whispered from behind Toya, moving his fingers in sticky trails over Toya's body as if to prove what his body had become. His fingers trailed down to where the drops had fallen, making Toya's hips pulse with the teasing sensation.

"A—ah!"

"I can't think of any other explanation. You must have been hard at work."

"But I wasn't—"

Toya's entire face was flushed scarlet. His brain was barely working, but he struggled to think of a way to prove his body's innocence to Hodaka.

"I was—too busy at work." Toya brought his uneven breathing under control as he spoke.

Hodaka looked up at him with a slight smirk. "It wasn't an insult," he said, his breath tickling the nape of

Toya's neck, making his body tremble. "I'm just worried about how easily excited you are. If you don't learn some self-control, you might orgasm just from hearing my voice over the phone."

"I—I wouldn't—" As Toya opened his mouth to speak, a moan interrupted him.

"Maybe I should make you practice coming on your own."

"That isn't funny, sir."

"Do I sound like I'm joking?" Hodaka murmured as he fingered the slit at the tip of Toya's penis.

"You can come without me," he whispered conspiratorially and closed Toya's hands around his own erection.

Hodaka directed Toya to the small sofa once more and Toya couldn't resist any longer. He knelt on the sofa's footstool, exposed to the man's view. He was deeply ashamed, but his sex swelled quickly with fluid and twitched repulsively, despite how little it had been touched. He could feel the slow trail of fluid over his skin with a vivid immediacy.

Toya battled with shame. He wasn't being restrained physically, but he found it impossible to flee. He was immobilized while Hodaka sat on the sofa across from him and crossed his legs, watching.

"Can you do it on your own?"

Toya shook his head limply from side to side. He could bear to display himself, but that was his limit.

"Have you always had someone there to do it for you?"

The mockery in Hodaka's voice hurt Toya.

"I-I never wanted to do it."

"You expect me to believe that when you're so desperate for sex?"

"It's the truth!"

"I think someone must have played with you every day." Hodaka laughed harshly. "How else can you explain how easy it is to get you off?"

"You did this to me!" Toya shouted bitterly, glaring at Hodaka with eyes full of tears. "You—you touched me, and that's why I'm this wet."

"Touch it for me."

Toya could do nothing but obey. He wrapped his hand around himself, his excitement undeniable.

"What do you do when you can't be with me?"

Hodaka meant the days when Toya was so busy that he worked all night. Though he was definitely coming to Hodaka's apartment more often, he still didn't stay every night.

When he went to Hodaka's after a long time apart, their sex was intense. Toya was especially bad at keeping things under control and they would go on so late into the night that it was hard for him to wake up in the morning.

So when Toya had to sleep alone for a few days, he got lonely.

"You've never done it?"

"No, never," Toya answered hoarsely.

"Really? I'll know if you're lying. I've seen how thin it's been before."

Hodaka was talking about Toya's ejaculate. Toya hadn't expected him to refer that directly to something

so intimate and he was flustered.

"I-I don't know—"

He wanted to convince Hodaka it wasn't true, but his voice wavered. The only explanation was that he pleasured himself when their time apart became too difficult.

"It's true." Hodaka's voice was cloaked in a temptation that was difficult to resist, but Toya shook his head again.

"Do it like you do when you're alone," Hodaka ordered.

"I can't..."

"Close your eyes. I want to see how you do it."

Hodaka's voice was a whisper of beauty, making Toya close his eyes, caught in its spell. The temptation was narcotic. The man's voice alone intoxicated Toya; his sighs thrilled him. How frail was the human body that it could be broken down so easily, without any drugs or direct contact? But that frailty was a side effect of love.

"Pretend I'm not here. You're alone in your room."

Toya's body found that suggestion frighteningly attractive.

"We were just talking on the phone...no. You were just thinking about me and it made you all excited and now you're frustrated."

Toya could feel heat gathering in the place he'd touched.

"Oh—"

A passionate sigh slipped out as Toya stroked

himself timidly. His eyes closed, his humiliation exposed to Hodaka, his hips began to rock.

"Ah—"

He had trouble catching his breath. He struggled to bring his breathing under control. Just touching himself, his fingers trembled and his heart burned with eagerness.

"Do you remember how I do it?"

Toya nodded unconsciously.

"But I can't do it right," Toya said. He was pleading, but still stumbled over his words. He was becoming enthralled and couldn't speak clearly.

"You can't?" Hodaka asked cruelly.

Toya hadn't noticed, but Hodaka had stood up. He heard the man's voice right against his ear. Toya shivered, keeping his eyes closed.

"What does that mean?"

"Stop—"

"Don't you like it when someone plays with you? No—you're playing with yourself and it's natural to get excited. It's nothing to worry about."

Toya thought his skin felt so warm as he pulled it through his fingers. He felt like he would come just from that slight touch.

"No—not like this!" Toya said again and again, half-consciously, shaking his head. He was afraid to release the passion in his hips.

"So what do you want?"

Hodaka bent over Toya and laid a kiss on his forehead. When he felt Hodaka's kiss on his eyelids, Toya felt painfully alone.

"I don't know..."

"Toya." Hodaka bit Toya's earlobe, and then trailed his tongue down his neck. "Tell me."

Shame clouded Toya's eyes, but he finally managed to wring out the words; "I want to do it with my mouth."

"Oh, I see," Hodaka chuckled. "I'll let you do that any time you ask. But tonight I want to watch how you do it by yourself. Push on the base with your right hand."

Toya obeyed Hodaka without a second thought, blocking the pleasure at its source. He cried out. His body leapt with the sensation and he turned tearful eyes up to Hodaka.

"Ask me for it, like you always do."

"Wh-what?" Toya panted, his voice steeped in desire. It was so cloying, he barely recognized it as his own and that filled Toya with self-loathing.

"You don't remember? What a bad memory," Hodaka said with a sly laugh. "You agreed to always say 'please let me come.'"

"No!"

"No, Toya, you promised."

"I-I didn't—" Toya shook his head, sobbing at Hodaka's accusation.

"You can't take your right hand away until you say it. Clear?"

"Ahh!" Toya's hand pressed harder against the base of his arousal. But something wasn't right. Toya should have been able to take his hand away and claim the pleasure any time he wanted to. But he couldn't.

Hodaka truly seemed to control him.

"Please, sir—please."

"Please what?" Hodaka asked with a smile, parrying him, and Toya's body shook in agony. His ecstasy existed beside his barely contained humiliation and Toya had to beg Hodaka to let him release it. He couldn't control himself. His body swelled with excitement despite his effort. But he still couldn't say it.

"Do you feel close?" Hodaka's deep voice rolled over Toya's ears and he nodded desperately.

"I still haven't given you permission. You can't come yet." Hodaka's voice was icy, freezing against Toya's skin. Toya shrunk away from the cruelty and heartless indifference in his lover's voice.

"Sir!"

"If you want to come, you have to ask my permission."

"Ah—angh!"

Toya's left hand began moving all on its own, clumsily stroking his flesh. His passion only continued to build, trapped by his own hand. Toya felt himself on the verge of exploding, but he was powerless as long as Hodaka refused him permission to orgasm.

"You're so shameless to get excited this easily."

"No—no, I'm not. Please."

"Please what?" Hodaka smiled conspiratorially. "If you're having trouble talking, maybe you need to hold harder there."

"Ngh!"

Toya's right hand tightened its grip on the base of his penis and he threw his head back. Sweat ran down

his legs, drops streaking from his knees down to his feet. Toya's organ was slick and humiliatingly swollen, but there was nothing he could do to find relief.

"It can't be much fun to keep touching the same place all the time. Try playing with the tip."

"Ah—"

Toya obediently toyed with the tiny hole, and his body jumped at the sensation. He couldn't even remember to swallow, and saliva trailed from the corner of his mouth.

"Nngh—oh!"

He could feel his nipples hardening, even though they weren't being touched. Occasionally they rubbed against the fabric of his shirt, causing a painful sensation that filled his eyes with tears whenever he felt it.

"You still want to resist? I didn't know you were so masochistic when you do it alone. I guess I need to be harder on you next time."

The apathy in Hodaka's voice only drove Toya further.

"No, sir—" Toya had reached his limit.

"Then say it."

"L-let me come," Toya sobbed when he next opened his mouth. His thoughts seemed paralyzed, as if all the organs under his brain's control were numb. He needed Hodaka to give him permission soon. He wanted to come so badly.

"All right. Keep stroking it and slowly take the pressure off."

Toya nodded quickly and, continuing to masturbate with his left hand, slowly loosened the grip of his right.

"Ah!"

Moments later, he lost control. An intermittent trembling seized his body and milky fluid splattered across his belly and the sofa. Hodaka wiped up the fluid that fell on Toya's shirt, and then smeared it on Toya's lips with his fingers.

"Well? Do you see how thick it is?"

"Mmf!"

Hodaka thrust his fingers into Toya's mouth and Toya's tongue wrapped around them. It had become a habit for him.

"Toya." Hodaka smiled and stroked Toya's hand. "You're so adorable."

Sometimes Toya imagined that Hodaka's body must be giving off pheromones that enticed him. He didn't know how the man's existence could consume him like that, otherwise.

Hodaka's fingers moved freely in Toya's mouth, playing with his tongue.

"Aggh—"

Covering Hodaka's fingers with his saliva, Toya began to suck on them.

"You want me that badly?" Hodaka asked callously, pulling his fingers out of Toya's mouth.

"No, I just—!"

Hodaka gave a slight smile at that answer and gently stroked Toya's cheek. Toya felt how wet his fingers were and felt a sudden rush of embarrassment. He'd let himself get carried away. But still, when Hodaka pushed his fingers back in, Toya couldn't hold back. He played his tongue over Hodaka's index and

middle fingers, stroking them expertly. It wasn't until Toya felt his tongue going numb that Hodaka finally freed him.

Toya panted, choking, and Hodaka stared down at him. "Say it."

Toya knew what he had to say. But his voice was hoarse and he couldn't speak clearly.

"...Let me—"

"I can't hear you."

"Please let me go down on you," Toya pleaded in a vanishingly quiet voice. "I want to go down on you."

"You want to suck me off that badly?"

Toya nodded firmly.

"You deserve a reward for being honest."

Hodaka's voice was slightly hoarse. He stood beside Toya and put one knee on the sofa, making it easier for Toya to take him into his mouth. Toya gazed at Hodaka. He reached for his zipper and pulled it down.

"This time you can go down on me while you play with yourself."

As Toya gently guided Hodaka's penis into his mouth, moisture began to suffuse his flesh.

"Play with yourself again."

"I can't—"

"I told you to do it."

But Toya didn't want to. He gazed up at Hodaka through his tears, but Hodaka was determined to make Toya masturbate. Pleasing Hodaka filled Toya's body with heat, but it was hard to overlook his embarrassment.

"Toya," Hodaka urged again, and Toya reached



for Hodaka's groin in resignation.

Toya realized how very perverse his actions were. He took the man into his mouth, the very same organ that often penetrated him between his widely spread legs. He was already so sticky from his first climax, so he reacted quickly when he began touching himself again.

That excitement made it hard for Toya to concentrate on awakening Hodaka's desire, but he continued pleasuring the man, moaning deeply. After a while, Hodaka finally stiffened with passion.

"You've gotten good at this."

Pulling his mouth free for a moment, Toya whispered, "You taste so good."

"You look so happy to have me in your mouth. What do you do when you're alone without anything to suck on?"

Toya slavered over the man's arousal, following Hodaka's piercing example, trying to think through the haze of ecstasy in his mind. But he couldn't find an answer.

"Did you find someone to replace me?" As he spoke, Hodaka thrust deep into Toya's throat, reaching for the back.

"Mmf!"

"Suck harder and I'll make it worth your while."

Flushed pink, Toya nodded reluctantly.

"Yes—good boy. You really are adorable."

Hodaka's gentle words were shockingly impassioned. They were like an intoxicating poison, swaying Toya's will.

Toya was lying on the bed, filled with echoes of pleasure, when the doors to the master bedroom opened.

"Toya?"

Hodaka peeked into the bedroom and called to him, but Toya couldn't move a muscle.

"Yes?" Somehow, Toya managed to respond sleepily, and Hodaka smiled ever so slightly. He sat on the bed and started wiping Toya's face with a towel. He'd actually steamed it for Toya, and wiped away his sweat, leaving Toya refreshed and clean.

"This is so luxurious," Toya mumbled dully.

"What is?"

"Having you wash my face like this."

"Then I have to keep up the level of service," Hodaka said in a low voice, rubbing down the rest of Toya's body. Of course, that only made Toya feel self-conscious. He sat up quickly.

"No, that's okay," Toya said.

"What's wrong?"

"I can take care of that. I should take a shower anyway."

"You really don't need to be so shy with me anymore."

"Well, I am!" Toya's face burned.

"I don't understand. Why?"

"Well—" Toya didn't know what to say. It was probably futile to try and explain the concept of embarrassment to Hodaka. Toya could accept almost anything during sex. Even when his naked body was exposed, he could tell himself that he was carried away

by passion and ignore his shame.

But afterwards, being touched and looked at once the passion had passed, he was mortified. And since Hodaka never let Toya see him naked, Toya's shame only increased.

"You're so interesting," Hodaka said.

"You're just strange, sir."

"Maybe so." Hodaka shrugged, neither accepting nor denying Toya's evaluation of him.

Toya slipped out of the bed to shower and change before bed. He padded into the bathroom and turned on the shower. As he let the hot water pour over him, he searched his body and found Hodaka's kiss marks everywhere, marking him.

Next, he crouched down on the tiles and held the side of the bathtub with one hand while he pulled open the cheeks of his buttocks with the other. He cringed as the evidence of Hodaka's passion trickled out of him, running over his skin and making him shudder. The fluid that leaked onto the tiled floor, mixing with the warm water of the shower, showed how much emotion Hodaka had poured into Toya. In that moment, they had been connected. They had shared the rhythm of their heartbeats, the tightening of their muscles, and their frenzied movements.

Toya used his fingers and the spraying water to wash himself out. Feeling cleaner, he left the bathroom in a better mood.

Hodaka was leaning back against the headboard, flipping through a paperback book, but he closed it when he saw Toya. He lifted a corner of the blanket, inviting

Toya back to bed, and Toya burrowed eagerly into the covers beside him.

"You're going to be busy the next few days, right?" Hodaka asked.

"Yes...but the review copies of your book will be ready next week, so I'll bring them by."

"Are you talking to me about work again?"

"I'm sorry—would you prefer I didn't?"

"I don't mind." Hodaka crooked a finger under Toya's chin. He smiled vaguely, and then pressed a kiss to his lips. It was a kiss of such joy that Toya felt euphoric.

Toya used Hodaka's bathroom to wash his face and get dressed. When he descended the spiral staircase to the living room, he thought he heard someone talking in the kitchen. He doubted Hodaka had called to him, so what could it be? When he peeked into the kitchen, he saw Hodaka standing in front of the microwave, casually dressed with a look of concentration on his face.

"Mister Hodaka?"

"Ah, you're awake."

"Is something wrong?"

"I wanted to cook some eggs, but I can't get it to work." Toya peered into the microwave and his eyes widened in shock. Egg was splattered all over the inside of the microwave. The destruction shocked him.

"I already told you that you can't put raw eggs in the microwave."

"That was when we made sunny-side up eggs, though."

"You can't use it to make hard-boiled eggs, either."

Toya sighed at the thought of cleaning up, but he chastised himself for it. Hodaka had gone to all that effort to cook Toya breakfast.

Hodaka was exceptionally good at everything—except cooking. It was his one weakness. No matter how often he made salads, he would forget to wash the lettuce. His toast always burned, ham stuck together when he sliced it, and he usually pushed too hard on tomatoes and crushed them.

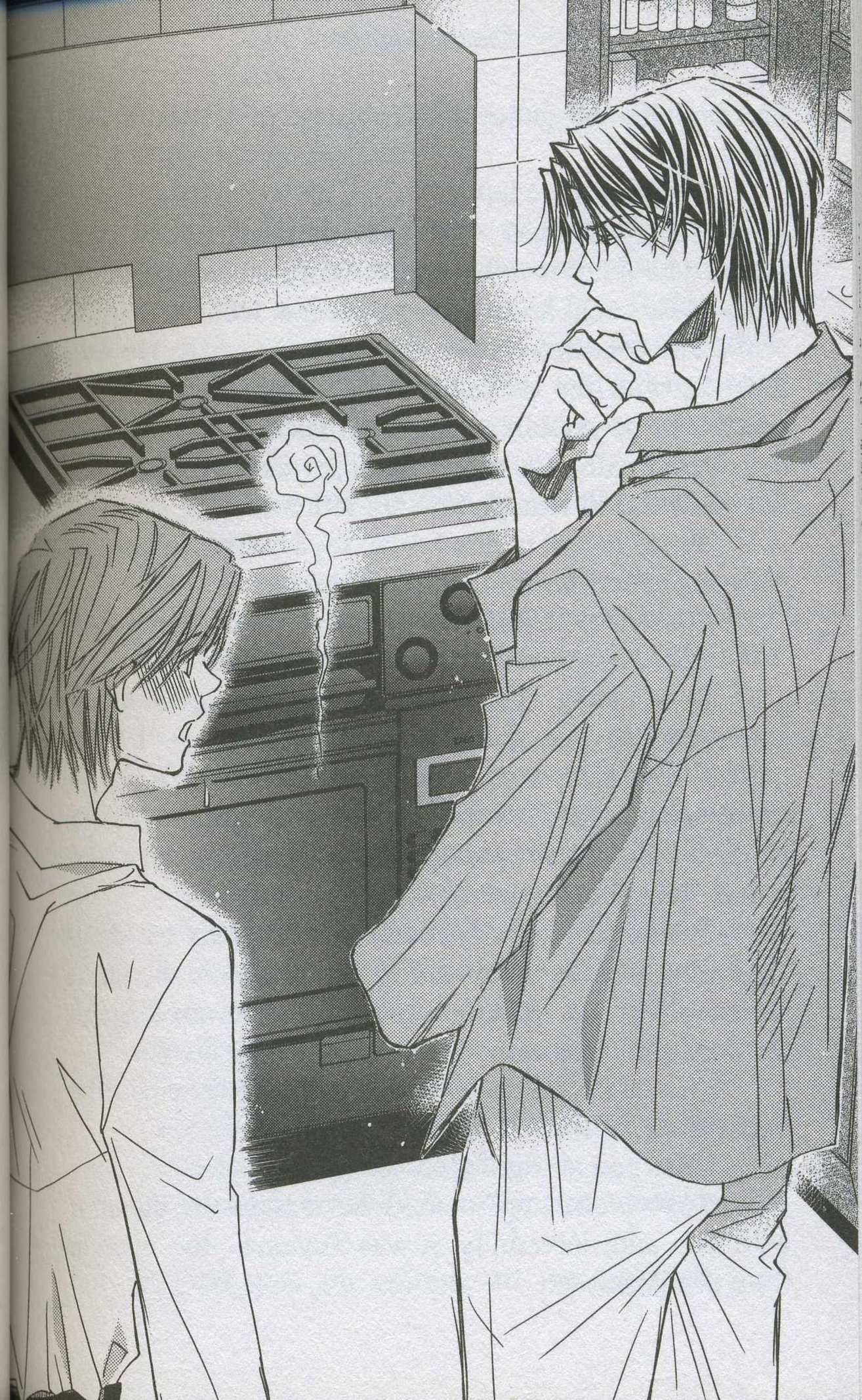
But he never stopped trying to cook for Toya. His housekeeper made impeccable breakfasts, but whenever Toya stayed over, she didn't come until noon.

Despite all that, it was a display of Hodaka's love. Even if he didn't show his feelings outwardly, Toya was always touched by Hodaka's clumsy attempts to cook for him. It made him happy. But it was still bizarre how little Hodaka improved.

Toya made do with a breakfast of salad and toast, and then left Hodaka's and headed for the station to catch his train. Once on, he fought back a yawn as the subway rocked around him. Once he got back to his apartment, he would have to go straight to work. The routine was starting to wear on him.

So sleepy—

He was just leaning back against the train doors, dozing, when he suddenly started awake. Where was the envelope? He had a meeting with an author that day and



had brought the galley proofs home to Hodaka's last night.

Where had he left it?

Toya searched his memory desperately and realized he'd left it sitting on Hodaka's coffee table.

How could he have forgotten it at Hodaka's?

The meeting was in an hour and a half. He was meeting with the author specifically to give him the proofs, so he couldn't go empty-handed. Toya briefly considered calling a bike messenger or parcel service, but there wasn't enough time for either.

When he got to Shinbashi, Toya called Hodaka on his cell phone. Thankfully, he picked up.

"Mister Hodaka?"

"Oh, it's you. What's do you need?"

"I'm sorry, but I forgot something at your apartment, so I'm going to come pick it up. I'll be quick," Toya said, stopping a nearby taxi. If there wasn't too much traffic, it wouldn't take that long to get to Hodaka's apartment in Hamarikyu. The driver gave him a nasty look, but Toya didn't care.

When he reached Hodaka's apartment building, Toya forgot all his usual caution. He unlocked the guest entrance with his fingerprint key, and then ran through the door and leapt onto the elevator when it arrived.

"Excuse me," Toya panted and slowly wiped the sweat from his face.

"Are you all right?"

Toya looked up to see who was in the elevator with him and, incredibly, it was Toyama—the woman from Six Winds.

Cold sweat dropped down Toya's back.

"Oh—Mister Sakurai!"

"Good morning."

The atmosphere was very uncomfortable. He'd run into her only yesterday, and then she saw him was bolting into the elevator, sweaty and hair disheveled. Had she noticed that he was wearing the same clothes as yesterday? More importantly, if he told her that he'd forgotten something at Hodaka's, his lie yesterday would be exposed.

He regretted the lie, but it was too late to do anything about it.

The silence weighed on him while the elevator accelerated upwards and finally stopped at the fortieth floor. Toya held down the open button and let out a slow breath.

"After you," he said.

"Thank you."

Toya was still searching for an explanation as he watched her step into the hallway. But he didn't seem likely to find one. What could he possibly do? Bitter emotions burned in his throat. As he watched her press Hodaka's doorbell out of the corner of his eye, Toya struggled to look composed.

The door opened.

"Good morning, Mister Hodaka."

Though her voice startled Hodaka, he answered with a toneless, "Good morning."

He looked over at Toya and put on a more natural smile.

"Thank you for coming all the way out here,

Mister Sakurai. Here you go."

Hodaka handed over a thick envelope, but it didn't have the logo of Toya's company on it. Hodaka had switched the proofs into a plain envelope. Hodaka was good at thinking of that sort of thing.

"Thank you, sir." Toya accepted the package, bowing with real gratitude. "I'll let you get back to work."

"Thanks again for coming."

Toya was grateful that Hodaka had spoken for him. If he had mentioned that he'd forgotten something, the whole charade would have been exposed. Hiding the truth wasn't the same as telling a lie, so Toya was relieved that he hadn't forced Hodaka to break his rules.

He didn't want anyone to find out about their relationship. But was that just a cowardly evasion? Perhaps the time had come to reevaluate what exactly it was he needed to protect.

Chapter Three

Toya wrote "leaving after meeting" under his name on the whiteboard, and then called out to say goodbye to his coworkers. He felt the heavy pull of the books in the paper bag he was holding, and it filled him with a deep sense of satisfaction. His second work with Hodaka had finally been seen to publication. Toya carried in his hands the newest novel by Kai Hodaka, a novel no one else had read yet and that fact thrilled him.

They had requested numerous revisions from the designer for everything from the cover, to the paper, to the color of the advertising inserts. They had chosen a white cover to evoke an egg-like image, since the book was called *Incubation*. It made the book look a little plain at first, but the simplicity was refreshing. That very simplicity would probably make it stand out even more on bookshelves.

Toya's run-in with the editor from Six Winds still hung in the back of his mind, but Toya couldn't obsess about it forever. He didn't want to cause Hodaka any unnecessary trouble, and that day, he just hoped the book sold.

Of course, he had absolute confidence in Hodaka's storytelling. There would be many people drawn into the unique world after simply flipping through the book. The previous volume, *Emergence*, had told a passionate

story of immature love. However, *Incubation* was a tale filled with solitude and longing for something slipping away. The story's hook was not a mystery or a love story, but something that penetrated more deeply, at a fundamentally human level, so a sense of incomparable solitude pervaded the book. Hodaka seemed to have a deep connection to the concept of solitude.

The titles seemed like they would progress more logically from *Incubation* to *Emergence*, but Toya knew that Hodaka had good reasons for choosing to do the opposite. The two novels shared a common world and the characters were somehow linked, but even without reading *Emergence*, *Incubation* still evoked powerful emotions.

At the beginning, when Hodaka had taken over Toya's body by force, Toya had resisted him, too. Those feelings had only been subdued when Toya discovered the loneliness deep inside Hodaka.

No matter where he was, Hodaka was alone.

Hodaka's talent, good looks, wealth, and respect did nothing to alleviate him of his loneliness. He probably didn't see much value in being hailed as a genius.

Could Toya cure Hodaka of his abiding solitude and experience a life of happiness with him? He was overcome by terrible unease at the thought.

They couldn't live together and Toya hesitated to even go out in public for dates. When they did go out, he took care not to act any more intimately than necessary and continued their charade of being just an editor and author.

Toya didn't know if he could give Hodaka the relationship he wanted. And that scared him—more than he could stand.

He left the station by foot and hurried to Hodaka's apartment. The bag was heavy, so he should have hailed a cab, but it was so close and he wanted to delay their meeting just a little bit longer.

The high-rise building where Hodaka lived—in fact a tower of apartments—was visible even from a distance. With each step, Toya's earlier excitement disappeared, replaced by an oppressive anxiety.

No, he had to put on a cheerful face. Hodaka's newest novel, which they had so long anticipated, was finally complete. He had to reclaim his professionalism and act cheerful with Hodaka.

Toya went through the building's entrance like always and headed to Hodaka's apartment. Apparently, Hodaka had already sent the maid home because when Toya rang the bell, Hodaka answered the door himself.

"I came to deliver your new book," Toya said as cheerfully as he could.

"Oh, it's ready?" Hodaka asked with a smile.

"Yes, sir."

Toya came in and sat on the couch before taking out the envelope containing the book and held it out to Hodaka. Though the thick hardcover was made with specially ordered paper, it was still quite heavy.

"I like the cover."

"I'm glad to hear it," Toya said. He received praise from Hodaka so rarely that it made him honestly happy and he was able to smile genuinely.

"You gave us another masterpiece, so we have high expectations for it," he continued.

"I tried to do everything I could to help, so I'm eager to see how it does."

"Just leave it to us." Toya smiled brightly.

"We're going to celebrate the publication today, right?"

"I made reservations at a restaurant in Takanawa. The place where Mister Kiyohara, the *sommelier*, works."

"Well then, shall we go?" Hodaka stood up and reached out a hand to Toya, who still sat on the sofa.

"Sure..." Toya said, though really, he wanted to stay there. He wanted to fall into Hodaka's arms and forget about all his other problems. But that desire meant being less of a man than Hodaka, and that was too painful. Toya felt as if he had been stripped of his pride and everything else he had.

The lights in the restaurant were low, making the candles on each table the chief source of illumination. Toya had wanted to try the restaurant for a while, but the atmosphere was even better than he'd expected. Sixties-era jazz played in the background, its notes soothing Toya's nerves.

"Is the duck good, sir?"

"It's great. I love wild game when it's in season," Hodaka said, taking another bit off his dish.

The restaurant's philosophy was to combine

reasonable prices with classic French cuisine. It wasn't one of the most exclusive restaurants in town, but Hodaka seemed to like the atmosphere and the food.

Each plate provided good portions, so even as adult men, it was difficult for them to make it through a three course meal. If the waiter hadn't warned them not to order too much ahead of time, they never would have finished their meal.

"Do you want to try it?" Hodaka asked teasingly.

Toya shook his head quickly. "No, that's all right."

"You've been staring at my plate jealously."

Toya didn't think it was the wine that made his ears flush red. He didn't realize he'd been staring at Hodaka's plate so covetously.

"It was a joke. Don't be so serious," Hodaka said.

"What?"

"You don't need to worry that much about what people are going to say. This is such a tiny restaurant, everyone's going to respect each other's privacy."

Toya could only feel mortified at how incisively Hodaka had seen through to the real reason for his hesitation.

"You're being too sensitive," Hodaka said.

"I'm sorry."

But on the other hand, Hodaka wasn't concerned at all. Incautious wasn't quite the right word, though. Maybe brazen or overconfident, or just indifferent. It might be more forgivable if it seemed genuine, but Hodaka emphasized his eccentricity, so it left a bad taste.

Toya was always looking for ways to keep their relationship going. Dragging their relationship out into the light of public opinion served no purpose. But that was probably tied to Toya's sense of self-preservation. He found the part of him that looked out for himself so ugly it sickened him. It depressed him that he couldn't act as confident as Hodaka. All he could do was worry about if they were really right for each other.

"You're not worried?" Toya asked.

"I already told you, I don't care if anyone finds out."

They had already had this discussion. But Toya was still paralyzed by anxiety. He wasn't like Hodaka—he couldn't be so detached all the time.

Hodaka was a genius who could be forgiven for being different, but Toya was just a regular person. There were millions of people exactly like him in the world. Even if he was more handsome than some, pretty good at his job, and had an extraordinary person as his lover, those were only small exceptions.

All Toya could do was draw the potential out of Kai Hodaka, the author, and give the world new stories. And Toya wasn't the only one who could do that.

Producing two books with Hodaka had actually given Toya an inexplicable inferiority complex. Hodaka didn't seem to realize that there were huge differences between them that Toya had trouble getting over.

The *sommelier* refilled their empty wine glasses and broke Toya from his thoughts. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm being so tactless when we're supposed to be celebrating."

"Don't worry about it."

The more Hodaka brushed the problem off, the harder Toya took it. Toya was too caught up in the subtle implications of everything they did to just let it go.

Was the reason that Hodaka could be so detached because he wasn't actually that serious about Toya? Since he was a genius, Toya knew Hodaka didn't worry about matters the way he did.

Stop it.

Why was he being so negative? His brooding was pathetic. They were supposed to be celebrating. He had to stop following the same old circles in his mind and start thinking clearly again. All he had to do was enjoy being with Hodaka.

Toya glanced at his watch and saw that he still had some time before his appointment. He was worried about how *Incubation* was selling, so he wanted to find the biggest bookstore he could.

The book had been on sale for three days and it would be the third time Toya had peeked into a bookstore, but he was really nervous. When he'd checked yesterday, many people had picked up a copy. But maybe when he checked again, it would be different.

Obviously, he couldn't get so wrapped up in one project that he neglected his other work. He knew that, but still, *Incubation's* performance was vital to Toya at the moment.

The books were piled up prominently in the

store, which was itself decorated with posters and other announcements at the registers. When he saw an older man pick up a copy after long deliberation and walk to the registers, some of the rock-hard tension in Toya's chest loosened. But his anxiety didn't go away completely, even after seeing the sales improve by one. All he could think about was whether he was right for Hodaka or whether Hodaka was just toying with him.

He needed more confidence. With a little more confidence, he would have been able to declare that Hodaka was his lover with pride.

How stupid...

Toya stopped thinking about it and left the store. The road was bright with the color of the trees and smelled of autumn. Toya remembered Hodaka's invitation to go see the autumn leaves.

He'd turned down Hodaka's invitation to move in together and had brushed off that invitation, too. Toya would have preferred to not discourage Hodaka by quashing all his efforts.

His thoughts still in a muddle, Toya headed toward Yuraku-cho and the brewery café where he was supposed to meet Yo Amano.

"Mister Sakurai! Over here!"

Amano had already arrived and taken a seat at a table for two. He waved exuberantly at Toya when he saw him. The sight made Toya's lips curve into a smile.

Yo Amano was younger than him, still a student, and he was just as enthusiastic as his name sounded. He was fashionable in a youthful way and handsome with his bleached golden hair. But, despite his stylish

appearance, his mysteries generally centered on remote, rural villages.

"Sorry, have you been waiting long?"

"No, I just got here a few minutes ago. I already ordered, though."

Amano was no longer the rookie author he had been when Toya discovered him. His profound storytelling style appealed mostly to the younger generation. The novel Toya had helped him publish had been picked up as a series, one the publisher hoped would be extremely long-running. That's what their meeting was about.

Most of Toya's meetings with Amano were over drinks and a quick meal. He respected Hodaka's order to never see Amano privately, so Toya tried to limit his time with Amano just to business meetings. Amano had no doubt noticed it, but he never complained.

Amano was one of the few people who knew about Toya's relationship with Hodaka, and he often helped Toya through the rough patches. But Toya felt even that was asking too much.

Amano had freely admitted that he was gay and had confessed feelings for Toya. But Toya had trampled all over those feelings and confided his relationship troubles with Hodaka to Amano. He was taking advantage of Amano's affection for him, and it made Toya feel immature, even though Amano was younger.

"The beer and sausage here are great," Amano said.

"These German-themed cafés are so low-key. I'm really grateful that you introduced me to them." Toya smiled and Amano's handsome face lit up.

"Great! I thought you'd like it. Though the fact that it's under a railroad bridge is a little annoying. It gets so noisy when a train goes by."

There were a lot of shops crammed under that bridge on Japan's Rail line between Yuraku-cho and Shinbashi. Toya had been to an Italian restaurant there, but it was his first time at the brewery.

"You know so many great restaurants, Mister Amano."

"You just don't know any at all. Doesn't that make it hard to plan meetings with authors?"

"It really does."

Since every person's tastes were different, Toya always had to research a wide variety of restaurants for each meeting.

"That Japanese bar we went to before gets really good reviews," Amano said.

"I can see why. When you live alone, you almost never get to eat food like that."

Amano's professionalism relaxed when Toya's beer arrived. They toasted each other and tapped their steins together. Just being with Amano lightened Toya's burden. Amano and Hodaka had very different personalities, but Toya found the difference refreshing.

"Is there something on my face?" Amano asked.

"Huh? Oh, no—" Toya was flustered as he realized he'd been staring at Amano yet again.

"Can't get over how good looking I am, huh?"

"No!" Toya said quickly, then abruptly shut his mouth as he realized how impolite his hasty denial had been. Amano started to laugh. Toya was sure he'd had a



conversation like that with Hodaka before.

"You're so adorable, Mister Sakurai."

"It's not nice to tease your elders."

"But you're acting like a little kid."

Toya was annoyed at the idea of someone younger than him calling him a little kid. He'd often been told that he was more mature than his years. The only people who said he was adorable were Amano and Hodaka.

"Don't get upset. It was just a figure of speech. I only said it because it's you, Mister Sakurai. I don't know. You just looked cute all of a sudden." Amano waved it away as a minor incident. "So, if you two ever break up, you can always switch to me."

"I don't know if I could just 'switch' like that..." Toya couldn't help but detect a hint of seriousness behind Amano's playful words, so he answered evasively.

"Sorry. I guess I just don't know when to give up. But you're the only one I'm interested in lately, Mister Sakurai."

"I don't know whether I should feel flattered or guilty to hear you say that."

Toya's shoulders drooped disconsolately and Amano looked troubled, tilting his head in concern. Toya felt as if he never did anything but hurt the cheerful boy.

The thought made him feel sad and sorry for himself. Was it really all right to keep Amano at a friendly distance? Did he feel comfortable?

"I'm always happy to see you, even if it is just for a meeting. It's a break in my lonely bachelor's life." Amano grinned. "But I shouldn't be so down during

meetings. I know you went to a lot of trouble to see me."

Amano's cheerful tone finally reassured Toya. He'd felt ashamed of himself for looking so pathetic.

"But why are you so down today?" Amano asked, and his mild question slipped through Toya's defenses. He'd asked the exact question that Toya had wanted him to ask.

"I just feel like it's so hard to keep hiding my relationship with him..." The slight emphasis Toya gave to the word "him" told Amano everything he needed to know.

"Considering how handsome he is, he's bound to be noticed. So?"

"That's not what I mean. I can't exactly have him come over to my apartment, so I end up going to his all the time."

There was a look of insight on Amano's face. Apparently that was enough for him to understand the problem.

"You have a point. You may be his editor, but you two aren't always working on a project together, so if you go see him regularly, people are going to get suspicious."

Toya knew that much. But he was annoyed with himself because he saw the problem and there was nothing he could do about it.

"And even so, he's like a celebrity. The media was all over that thing with him and Mari Tanaka."

"Really?"

"You really don't follow that stuff, Mister

Sakurai?" Amano sounded surprised.

"I've never been very good at keeping up with it, no. My—" Toya had been on the verge of saying that his fiancée Miwa used to talk to him about that sort of thing all the time, but he cut himself off.

"He's been on TV for the publication of *Incubation* lately, right?"

"Yes..." Suddenly, Toya began fumbling for words.

It was rare for Hodaka to appear on television. The first time he'd done it, it had been in order to get tickets to see a play with Toya. At the time, the program's host had been an actress named Mari Tanaka. Rumor had at one time counted her among Hodaka's lovers and it was whispered that she still carried a torch for him.

"I heard Mari Tanaka even said she wanted to marry Kai Hodaka someday."

"Really?" A sharp pain shot through Toya's heart.

"I'm just telling you what I read in a magazine. I went to the store for something and wound up reading it."

Toya had never imagined that Amano read such low class things. He really was difficult to understand.

"There aren't any juicy rumors in the industry right now, so I guess people will pick up on anything."

"But Mister Hodaka is an author, not a celebrity."

"Even if he doesn't make the headlines himself, Kai Hodaka is tied to Mari Tanaka, who is a celebrity. So his name still shows up in the articles," Amano pointed out, deflating Toya's objection.

"You're right. I'll try to be more careful."

"Even without all the rest of it, Hodaka has hardly ever been on TV before, so it's a big deal now since people will know what he looks like. You never know who's watching, so you should be careful, Mister Sakurai."

"You're right."

Toya had already run into Toyama, the editor from Six Winds, at Hodaka's building ten days earlier. Toya had been more cautious since then. He hadn't been back to Hodaka's since dropping off the review copy of the book and he hadn't even stayed that night. Hodaka seemed keenly aware of his behavior, which was just one more factor compounding Toya's stress.

Not being able to see Hodaka made him sad. He was lonely. The worst part was that outside forces interfered with their meetings. It depressed Toya to consider the fact that he might not be cut out to be involved with a celebrity.

He knew that he was a weak and worthless human being. He felt sorry for himself. He felt as if love had tossed him about and he'd lost sight of who he was. So he had to control himself more. If everything went on as usual, he would lose himself entirely in Hodaka's love and when it was over, there would be nothing left. That was unacceptable.

Some part of Toya still expected the relationship to end. He was trapped by his passion for Hodaka, and even as he sank deeper into it, he still felt that it would end eventually.

So maybe he was being a coward. He was unconsciously looking for ways to avoid being hurt

because he anticipated the end. He was calculating, trying to minimize his pain for the eventual day when Hodaka would dump him. But thinking about the day when it would be all over still scared him. He wished that day would never come.

It was self-contradictory, but he couldn't help it.

After the publication of *Incubation*, work was even busier for Toya than usual. The company's every expectation had been met and *Incubation* was doing extremely well, shooting to number one on the bestseller list. Makihara had said that if the pace kept up, there was likely to be a huge reprinting. As a result, *Emergence* was also selling well, and even though they'd printed a new edition for *Incubation's* release, they were still running out.

Toya had been practically living at the office for the past several days, but suddenly he noticed something different in the air around him, prickling his skin, and he couldn't figure out what it was. He didn't remember doing anything particular. But whenever he passed other employees in the hall, he became aware of their eyes on him.

"Oh, Toya!" Yoshimi Fujiwara, the part-timer, called out to him in a strained voice.

"Morning," Toya replied, feigning a smile.

"Good morning. Say, have you—I don't know—checked out the Internet lately?"

"What? No, I don't go on the Web very much."

Toya reacted blankly and she glanced at him in surprise. She took a sheet of paper from a pile on her desk. It was a printout of an Internet newsletter that published news—more like gossip—that wasn't carried in magazines or on TV.

"Here, I printed this out for you."

"More than 10,000 subscribers—that's impressive."

"Well, it's free and really easy to subscribe to."

"You follow this kind of stuff, too, Yoshimi?"

"Sometimes they have stories about authors and I—but that's not the point. Look at the story in the middle of the page."

Toya skimmed quickly over the page. When he reached the article, he got a shock. Toya's eyes riveted to the headline and a chill snaked down his spine.

Mystery Author Kai Hodaka Gay? Spotted with Editor.

"Although we await further details on this unconfirmed story," the article read, "our sources are extremely reliable. Given the best-selling author's renowned history with actress Mari Tanaka, he's a very busy man."

Toya thought it was a miracle that he didn't cry out in surprise. Yoshimi was looking at him uneasily.

"I was so surprised. There are so many rumors about Mister Hodaka's exploits with women, but maybe that was all a cover and he's actually gay," Yoshimi said.

"He wouldn't bother having a cover story, especially something as complicated as that. He hates

deception," Toya said, finally able to pull together a smile.

"Can you imagine if it's Mister Makihara? What a creepy image!"

"Mister Makihara is married."

It seemed that Yoshimi didn't suspect Toya. She probably figured that since Toya had just been engaged, he wouldn't be involved with Hodaka.

"I suppose. But if it really is an editor, doesn't it make you wonder who it is?"

"Yes, but I respect Mister Hodaka's privacy. I don't want to pry."

"You should be careful, Toya. There are a lot of people who'd start groundless rumors about you."

"Thanks. I'll be careful."

Still, Toya had the feeling that, despite how bright the future had seemed since *Incubation* was published, it would all be for nothing.

"What's up, Sakurai? You look down in the dumps," Makihara called out to Toya.

"I'm fine." Toya chased the gloomy thoughts out of his mind. "Really."

"Oh, I see. You saw that website. It's been making the rounds at the office."

Toya could feel the expression fall from his face as Makihara shot straight to the heart of the matter.

"Are you okay, Sakurai? Did I say something wrong?"

"I just found out about it. People from other departments have been staring at me funny. I thought maybe my tie was just crooked." Toya smothered

his distress to answer lightly, and Makihara laughed boisterously.

"Everyone's got too much time on their hands. There are probably dozens of men who edit for Hodaka. I wish they'd stop writing such unfounded stuff. Recently there was a rumor about me having an affair with another editor. I don't know why they bother involving editors in their reports."

"I'm sorry—I didn't know."

"No big deal."

"You know, I'd love to see how Mister Hodaka reacts to this," Yoshikawa cut in with interest, but the other employees raised objections.

"I doubt he cares about rumors like that. Do you think he'll even hear about it?"

"You have a point. This is Hodaka we're talking about, after all," Makihara mumbled. He suddenly cut off the conversation, as if he'd had enough of the discussion.

But at least the reason for the cold stares Toya had gotten was clear. Those scant few lines of text pointed to a truth that could destroy Toya.

Chapter Four

"Hey, did you hear about Kai Hodaka?"

"You mean how he's sleeping with one of his editors?"

"Yeah. It's all over the Web right now. I heard it's Sakurai."

As these careless words reached Toya's ears, he paused in his meal. Two young employees sat behind him gossiping about the latest rumor. They were in the cafeteria and probably hadn't noticed that the person they were talking about was right behind them.

"Sakurai...the guy in the pulp division?"

"Yeah, the one who worked on *Emergence* and *Incubation*."

It was the second time Toya had inadvertently overheard unflattering gossip. Word moved quickly through the office, but Toya still couldn't stand to hear it. It wouldn't be so bad if the rumors were good, but they never were.

"He did good work on that."

Toya was relieved that one of the men seemed to have no interest in his friend's gossip. So the company wasn't just full of people obsessed with everyone's sex lives.

"Aren't you surprised about him being gay?"

"Well it's not really unusual, is it? There are so

many rumors about Kai Hodaka, but everyone just assumed they were about women. It's not really shocking to find out an author is gay. And if Sakurai does his job and helps us turn a profit, who cares?"

"I don't mean Hodaka, I mean Sakurai. Don't you think he's being unethical?"

Toya poked at his salad mechanically. His appetite disappeared as each word of the conversation stabbed into him.

"Those books were just a special favor since they're lovers. Otherwise we never would have gotten two books in one year. And when an author's book sells well, the editor gets a bonus."

"Oh, is that what happened?" The man seemed convinced, and Toya could understand why. "But there's no proof that the guy is Sakurai, right?"

"Well, no."

"Then we should be careful what we say. It wouldn't be good to get on the wrong side of a guy with as much influence as Kai Hodaka."

Finally, the conversation moved on to other topics.

It deeply upset Toya that he heard all the rumors going around the office first hand. Lately, even other departments had been talking about him. The recent publication of *Incubation* had no doubt piqued everyone's interest in him. The two men he'd just overheard probably hadn't even considered that he could be behind them.

Even when trying to be careful, people slip up. Toya did. When he went out with Hodaka, he always had

his public face on. They always had some professional pretext for going out together, so there wouldn't be even the slightest whiff of intimacy, and that was what made the situation so unexpected.

Toya doubted that the woman from Six Winds was the source of the rumor. He didn't think she would want to do anything to cause Hodaka problems. But whoever the culprit was, Toya only had his own carelessness to blame.

Toya wouldn't be able to see Hodaka for a long time. Since Hodaka wasn't a celebrity, the major news sources wouldn't pick the story up. But the rumors of Hodaka's homosexuality were gaining credibility on the Web. When Toya had once worked up the courage to look, he'd found a fan site of Hodaka's filled with complaints from women.

It made his stomach hurt.

The fact that the rumor had started in the chaos of the Internet only made it worse because it was so accessible. All Toya could do was watch as people with only a mild interest jumped on the rumor and spread it to others. The sheer amount of gossip meant that some might even reach Hodaka. What would he think about it? Toya hoped hearing such a nasty rumor wouldn't interfere with his writing.

But once the rumor had gotten under Toya's skin, he found himself glancing at all the women's magazines and ads that he'd always ignored before. The articles about Mari Tanaka that these magazines featured were another source of tension for Toya. In the articles about her new movie, there were ambiguous suggestions like

"rumors of another lover surround Kai Hodaka, the author so well-liked by Miss Tanaka."

I can't let this bother me, Toya told himself, trying to clear his mind. If he worried about it too much, he would start over-thinking his actions and let something slip.

If Toya could just ride out the worst of the rumors, all the attention would eventually go away. But it wasn't just himself he was worried about. Toya had to move very carefully to protect Hodaka, too. He vowed to do exactly that.

"Could I see you for a second, Sakurai?" Makihara said.

Toya was writing schedules due to be submitted the next day, but looked up when his boss spoke to him.

"What is it, sir?"

Makihara's expression was grave, which put Toya on edge. Makihara was always cheerful and more than a little scatterbrained, but he was a man Toya felt he could trust as his superior. However, he had never seen Makihara look like that before.

"We need to talk. Come with me."

As he followed his boss down the hallway, Toya wondered what the man could possibly need to talk to him about so urgently.

They were headed for a coffee shop near the office. Toya had met with Amano and other authors there before. Makihara ordered two house blends without asking Toya what he wanted, and then turned to look at him.

"So."

Calling Toya out of the office so suddenly meant Makihara had something serious to discuss. Toya's stomach tensed at the thought, but he vowed not to flinch no matter what Makihara said.

Incubation was still selling briskly and just that morning he'd heard they were already issuing a third printing, so that couldn't be the problem.

A short story collection by one of their less famous authors published three months ago wasn't selling as well as expected, and Toya had been thinking about how to improve that performance. But aside from that, Toya couldn't think of any reason for Makihara to sit down with him, so he couldn't help being anxious.

"It's about Mister Hodaka."

Makihara was silent, and Toya watched his expression carefully. The coffee shop was empty in the late afternoon, and utterly silent. That probably made Makihara feel more hesitant than otherwise.

"What about him?" Toya pressed forward, unable to bear the silence.

"He told me he wants a new editor."

"What?" Toya's voice caught on his surprise. He couldn't believe it. His heart convulsed painfully. Toya reached for his coffee in order to hide it, but his hands shook and he almost spilled it. He was forced to return the cup to its saucer without drinking.

"The rumors that have been spreading on the Internet bothered him. He said we should find the right opportunity and then make the change."

"But, sir!" Toya couldn't sit quietly and just accept what Makihara was telling him. "Many of Mister Hodaka's editors are men! It's not just me."

"I know that. But I've given this a lot of thought." Compared to how frantic Toya was, Makihara looked like the picture of serenity. "I checked with Mister Hodaka and he said the rumor is true."

"What?"

"He told me that you two are involved."

The shock robbed Toya of his voice. His body was almost shaking with the combined outrage and humiliation of the sudden invasion into his privacy. He didn't have enough experience in confrontations to be able to contain it.

"I don't particularly care who you associate with. I don't concern myself with other people's preferences. But when it kicks up a commotion like this, it makes it hard for you both to do your jobs. I think Mister Hodaka's request is wise."

"But removing me now would let people know that the rumors are true. We can't put Mister Hodaka in that situation," Toya insisted, but he couldn't summon much force and his voice only grew weaker. Hodaka's reasoning made too much sense.

"So, it is true." Makihara slumped.

"What does that mean?" Toya gasped, and then realized what Makihara had just said. His boss had tricked him. Hodaka would never discuss his private life with a business colleague, even Makihara. That was part of his almost maniacal stubbornness. Toya ought to have known that better than anyone, but he'd been so



flustered it never occurred to him.

"Anyway, lovers or not, Mister Hodaka does want a different editor. We can wait until all this excitement dies down. He didn't say it had to be done immediately, since he isn't planning to take on any projects with us for a while."

"Will he keep publishing two books a year for us if I'm not his editor?"

"He seems willing to. He said he would submit the next one in March."

Toya felt like a knife had slipped between his ribs. He'd thought Hodaka had broken his rules as a special favor to him. He'd also believed that despite the fact that they were lovers, Toya's abilities as an editor had helped make the project something special.

But it wasn't true.

"Will you please reconsider?" It took all Toya's power to beg for even that much.

"When it's what the author wants, I think it's best to assign a new editor. The editor's primary responsibility is to make it easier for the author to work."

"I know. But I'd like to ask Mister Hodaka why he made that request."

It wasn't like Hodaka to pay attention to rumors.

"That's your right, but...just don't make things worse. Hodaka is our most important writer."

"Yes, sir." Toya nodded. He tried to look calm, but he hadn't anticipated how hard it would be. It was as if someone had reached into his head and stirred his thoughts into mush.

"But Hodaka was never this considerate before. I think that shows how much he cares for you. I'm sure he'll tell you not to waste your time editing for him."

That was just Makihara's interpretation. He was only trying to convince Toya to step down from the position himself.

"I should be so lucky." Toya's heart skipped as he heard the bitterness in his own voice. It seemed to reveal the depth of his shock and upset him even more.

"I'm going to head back," Makihara said, standing up. Perhaps things had gotten too uncomfortable for him to stay. Leaning against the window frame beside him, Toya watched as Makihara picked up the bill and paid it at the register. The meeting left Toya feeling miserable.

Was the request for a new editor really a sign of Hodaka's fondness for him, like Makihara said? To Toya, it looked more like he was solving the problem by severing ties with Toya.

No—the best reason had to be the first one. Considering what an obstacle the situation presented for their work, asking for a new editor would cause fewer waves than if Toya were to request being reassigned instead. But he could never be happy about a decision that completely ignored his own wishes.

But what else could we do?

He had wanted a clear separation between his professional and private lives, but this was too much. Being told that Hodaka's special treatment had been for Sozan Publishing and not for him was also horrible to hear.

With Toya taken off of Hodaka's projects, it would only be more suspicious for him to go to Hodaka's

apartment. He doubted that Hodaka hadn't anticipated that, but Hodaka still wanted to cut off his professional relationship with Toya.

The café wasn't cold at all, but goose bumps prickled Toya's skin. He rested his head on his folded arms. Toya realized, too late, that the position he and Hodaka had been in was a dangerous and fragile one. Since Hodaka had asked for a new editor, it would only be a little while before one was assigned. Unless Toya could change his mind.

Toya was drunk.

He didn't get back to his apartment until after ten that night, and then he fell right into bed without taking off his suit. He'd gone to a bar, nibbled on a little yakitori, and drunk a lot of saké all alone. He'd thought it was a pathetic way to go drinking, so he didn't get too drunk.

It would have been better if he could have drunk himself free of the memory of that day. Then he would have been able to escape the loneliness that had invaded his heart, for a brief moment at least.

He had no courage to face reality anymore.

The rumors had died down earlier than Toya had expected, and he wouldn't have to worry about them anymore. Hodaka's private life hadn't made a splash in the mainstream news, and when someone asked Toya about the rumor a little maliciously at a night out with coworkers, it was easy to brush it off with a laugh.

But it was a mistake to think that would be the end.

Once a rumor started, people would forever be prejudiced by it. He and Hodaka had to be more cautious than they ever had before.

Toya was afraid to think about what he might lose if the rumor was ever discovered to be true. He didn't want people to lose confidence in him and think that he earned his professional success with his body. And it was unbearable to imagine that Toya might cause the reputation of a genius like Hodaka to suffer. He couldn't stand to have people think that Hodaka had betrayed his principles for debauched lust.

So he hesitated to visit Hodaka.

He hated to even look himself in the eye since Makihara had said those things to him. But he still lacked the courage to meet Hodaka face to face and demand the truth from him.

Hodaka had already given him up. He no longer had any use for Toya. Toya was nothing more than the catalyst that had helped Hodaka write his two latest novels, and Toya had finally exhausted his usefulness.

But if Toya started thinking like that, he would never escape his fatalism. After all the time he'd spent wrapped up in his thoughts, he wanted to avoid coming off as gloomy when he finally confronted Hodaka.

In the end, he was more afraid of Hodaka hating him than anything else. Despite their repeated conflicts, Toya couldn't stop loving the man. He knew that people couldn't live on love alone. But the days of losing himself in his work and his romance were the most

satisfying of his life. They had obscured reality.

It was pathetic. How could he call himself a mature, adult man? That was what came of getting so wrapped up in his job and romance.

Toya let out a deep sigh and closed his eyes, trying to sleep.

Suddenly, his phone rang out shrilly, and Toya sat up in surprise. He picked up the phone, which had rung so rarely lately. Who could it be at that hour?

"Hello?"

"Hello. This is Kiyomi."

It was a woman's voice, sounding somehow tense. Toya was pretty sure he had never heard it before. He couldn't place her at all.

"Do we know each other?" Toya's voice was cautious. It could be a sales call, despite the time.

"Kiyomi Nakagawa. We were in the same club in college."

"Oh!" Toya cried. He remembered her. She was the best friend of his ex-fiancée, Miwa Okamoto. He hadn't known her well. Miwa had talked about Kiyomi all the time and Toya remembered getting a drink with her once.

"It's been a while! Is something wrong?"

"I need to ask you something."

"What?"

"You're an editor for Kai Hodaka now, right? Is that rumor true?"

Toya froze at her point-blank question. He could feel the blood draining from his face.

"What rumor?" he asked, and congratulated

himself for speaking without letting his voice waver.

"Please, don't play dumb. I mean the rumor that you're Kai Hodaka's lover."

"Don't you think it's a little rude to call up someone you haven't spoken to in years to ask a question like that?" Toya chose the gentlest words possible, but she wasn't interested.

"How can you behave like that?" Her voice was sharp, catching Toya off-guard.

"Like what?"

"Don't tell me you've already forgotten about Miwa! Do you have any idea how much you hurt her, calling the wedding off like that?"

Toya was cowed by that sudden attack. "I feel bad about that. But that has nothing to do with the rumor."

"Oh, you 'feel bad?' Miwa found a new boyfriend and they're talking about marriage, but this rumor still hurt her a lot. She just broke down and hasn't been back to work until recently."

Toya couldn't respond. If it hadn't been about Miwa, he could have laughed it off as an unfair accusation.

"Did you dump Miwa for Kai Hodaka?"

"I'm not going to talk to you about this."

"You coward!"

So what if I am?

Toya brushed his hair out of his eyes impatiently. "I know I hurt Miwa. But that has nothing to do with you. Or does it?"

"Miwa called me every night, crying. She said it was all right if you had a problem with her, but she

couldn't deal with it if you broke up with her for Kai Hodaka. She said that was too disrespectful."

"Mister Hodaka had nothing to do with why I broke off our engagement. I'm sorry I was so indecisive about it. I did something horrible to Miwa, but it's over now."

What had happened to him back then? He'd encountered a love strong enough to change his life. Nothing but Hodaka had mattered to him. He would throw away everything in order to be with him. It was a love that trampled over everything Toya had ever been, and he hadn't cared at all.

Chapter Five

Toya drummed his fingertips on his desk and gazed at his desk calendar. It had already been more than a week since Makihara had suggested reassigning Toya from Hodaka's projects. Toya had to talk with Hodaka.

Why was he asking to change editors? How was he taking the current situation?

Toya put out casual feelers with Hodaka through phone calls and e-mail, but each time he was rebuffed and he began to feel frustrated. He needed to talk to Hodaka face to face, but instead Toya pretended to be swamped with work and avoided a direct meeting. Toya then ended up distracted by his anxiety over Hodaka and spent his days not feeling well.

He had to go see Hodaka.

Toya wondered if he would be able to express his feelings and hear what Hodaka had to say, although Toya barely understood his own feelings welling up inside him.

Why wasn't love enough to hold two people together?

"Here you go."

That was the first moment Toya realized that Yoshimi was standing next to him, and he jerked his head up to look at her.

"Oh—thanks."

Yoshimi handed him a cup filled with coffee and Toya smiled at her. Usually he got his own, but Yoshimi had been making coffee anyway, so she made some for everyone in the office. Yoshimi, who had recently been promoted from part-time to full-time, was very considerate. She was indispensable to the department.

Her lips moved as if she was trying to work up the nerve to say something, but she gave up and went back to her desk. She was probably just going to observe that Toya looked stressed out or that his face was cut by a deep frown.

Toya let out a little sigh as he checked over the proofs a freelance proofreader had sent in. It was wrong for him to make other people worry because of his private problems. He had to control himself better. But the more he tried, the further his heart fell into uncontrollable territory. Toya was just fed up because Hodaka was more awkward than normal people, but also because he couldn't overcome the fact that his lover was a man.

Their problem had begun because it couldn't be expressed verbally. They needed to find the words to explain their feelings more comprehensibly.

"Huh?"

Toya had checked through nearly half the galley proof when he frowned suddenly. Since the author had added a chapter after submitting the first draft, Toya had printed out the latest draft, but that section hadn't been corrected at all. Since the author had e-mailed the new version, Toya could check to see if any corrections had been done on it or not. He might have made a mistake

and sent out the older file to be printed.

Toya tapped furiously on his keyboard, calling up the right file from his folder of current projects. He expected to see the old and new files mixed together, but in fact the new file hadn't overwritten the old one as it usually did. Instead, it just had a different file name.

The file would still be attached to the author's e-mail but Toya decided to make sure. When he opened the mail program, he got a surprise.

"No—"

It wasn't there either. He hurried to check the deleted files, but he couldn't find the e-mail anywhere. He finally realized what had happened. He'd updated his mail software a few days ago, but hadn't done a complete backup and he'd lost a few e-mails.

Apparently that had been one of them.

It was the first time he'd made such a mistake and Toya was deeply disappointed in himself. He constantly checked for submission files and was extremely careful to back them up on external devices, not just on the hard drive, but he'd been so preoccupied lately.

The novels were published three months after submission, so there was still some time, but he would have to explain the situation to the author, apologize, and ask him to send the file again.

"What's wrong, Toya?"

Yoshimi had noticed Toya's distress and called over to him. Toya could feel the eyes of their coworkers turning toward him at the question, and he pulled together an uncomfortable smile.

"Oh, nothing serious."

People might think that his uncharacteristic mistake was related to the rumors about him and Hodaka. More than that, though, Toya's pride wouldn't allow for the perception that he was inattentive. It was impossible for Toya to ask anyone for help. He knew that his feelings would keep stressing him out, more and more. He needed relief.

At times like that, he found himself missing Amano the most. He was sure the young man could take in all of Toya's gloominess with a smile. But Hodaka had strictly ordered Toya not to see Amano privately.

Toya didn't know how to salvage his emotional balance. But he needed to do something. He couldn't go on in this state of mind. He had to talk to Hodaka, about the editor problem and about their future. He couldn't put it off any longer.

Firm in his decision, Toya wrote an e-mail to Hodaka asking if he had any plans that night. He knew Hodaka would make time for him even if he did have plans. That very confidence was no doubt a sign of how Hodaka had indulged him.

Toya was nervous.

It had been more than two weeks. He and Hodaka had rarely gone so long without seeing each other. When Toya rang the doorbell outside his apartment, Hodaka appeared at once.

"Long time no see."

"I'm sorry. I've been very busy," Toya said,

somewhat stiffly, and Hodaka shook his head magnanimously.

"Editors are always busy. Don't worry about it. Come in."

Toya searched every word for hidden meanings. He needed to know if Hodaka was treating him as his editor or his lover. Toya looked up at Hodaka as he took a seat on the sofa in the living room.

"Do you want some coffee or anything?"

"No, thank you."

"All right. What can I do for you?" Hodaka sat down across from Toya and got to the point as easily as if they were talking about the weather. He must have realized from the way that Toya was acting that he wanted to get right down to business.

"Mister Makihara told me that you want a new editor."

"Yeah." Hodaka nodded as if it were completely unimportant. Toya had expected Hodaka to be more emotional and being treated so coldly only irritated him. But Toya couldn't rush into it, so he controlled his reaction.

"Why did you do it?"

"Did you come here to ask me that?" Hodaka frowned. "I already explained to Makihara. I said that neither of us wanted it to affect our work."

"That's irrelevant! I can be completely professional with my work. I won't allow myself to be tossed aside like that."

"But every time you come here, you're as timid as a rabbit. And that makes me uncomfortable."

"You think I'm timid?"

Hodaka's mockery had succeeded in infuriating Toya.

"Then you're a curled up hedgehog. You hurt others, trying so hard to protect yourself." Hodaka's fingertips brushed Toya's cheek. They trailed down to his chin, making Toya's hair stand on end with an indecent sensation.

"Don't get so upset. It's just business," Hodaka said. His lips touched Toya's, but Toya couldn't surrender to Hodaka.

"What do you mean, it's just business?" Toya asked.

"I'm sorry if that upsets you. It's just a figure of speech." That completely disinterested apology only riled Toya's anger further.

"I love my job. I do it with pride. No one has grounds to criticize that, whether I'm your lover or not," Toya said.

"But I don't want to watch you destroy yourself over it. You're just a regular person, Toya."

Five simple words. But with them, Hodaka drew a sharp line between them. Toya shuddered at the realization.

"You're not used to talking to people you've never met before and acting enthralled by their stories. I don't want to inflict that on you," Hodaka went on.

No "regular" person could ever be with Hodaka. But did that mean Hodaka couldn't work with Toya either? That sent a jolt of pain through Toya's heart. Hodaka must have discovered some difference between

the genius and the everyman, and he found it more detestable than he could bear. There was nothing exceptional in Toya, so Hodaka had no reason to love him. That's what Toya heard in Hodaka's words.

"I don't need you to protect me," Toya said, and every word he pronounced made his lips tremble. Pain seared in his chest, as if it were being ripped apart. Toya couldn't be sure if it was out of fury or grief. "It's not so hard that I can't deal with it. And I'll never know unless I try."

"But I can't deal with it," Hodaka replied curtly.

"Why not?!"

"There's no reason for you to be hurt."

It couldn't be real. It just couldn't. Toya searched for some other interpretation, for some key to escape the endless, twisting maze they'd somehow fallen into.

"You can't decide everything yourself. Listen to what I have to say," Toya said.

"So you can deal with it? Even though you can't handle being seen in public with me unless it's for work?"

Toya felt a jolt when his pettiness was laid bare. His legs shook, even though he was sitting on the sofa.

"Is that why you want to get rid of me?" Toya asked.

"I'm not trying to get rid of you."

"What are you talking about? How can you not understand how I feel?" Toya realized how harshly he was speaking and tried to control his voice. But it was a wasted effort. Hodaka didn't understand anything about Toya's pain or suffering. Nothing.

"You've always been like that. You think you're pampering me and making me happy, but you don't actually know the first thing about me. You don't even try," Toya said, but as soon as the words were out of his mouth, he regretted how savage they were. But once spoken, they couldn't be snatched back.

"If that's how you feel, then maybe we can reach a mutual agreement." Hodaka's pretentious choice of the words "mutual agreement" just upset Toya even more.

"You don't mean that. Why even suggest it? If you actually wanted to come to some kind of agreement, you would have talked to me sooner."

"Toya." The unhurried tone of Hodaka's voice as he tried to appease Toya was especially hurtful.

"You think I enjoy having you pour your love on me in a one-way stream, like I'm your pet? If that's love, I don't want it."

"I know that, and I've been trying to indulge you. But you're still not satisfied?"

"I never asked you to indulge me." Toya didn't need that. He wanted to be treated like an equal. His mounting emotions made every word Hodaka spoke provocative.

"You need to calm down," Hodaka whispered, pushing Toya back onto the sofa, trying to kiss him. Toya shoved him back. He didn't want to let that distract him.

"Don't try to change the subject! I want to talk to you about this!"

"I wasn't trying to change the subject. You're really worked up today."

The real mystery was how Hodaka could be so calm. Was that one of the fundamental differences that separated them?

Suddenly, everything seemed pointless.

Toya had believed that if they could just spend time together, it would get better. He thought they would be able to overcome what lay between them. But after nearly a year together, there was still an unbridgeable chasm between them.

Toya finally realized that.

"You're an extraordinary person, sir. I suppose a regular guy like me can't understand how you think."

Hodaka flashed a freezing stare on Toya. "There's nothing to figure out. I want to treat you like you're extraordinary, too."

"That's not what I mean. If being extraordinary means being like you, then I'll pass."

Hodaka couldn't understand even the simplest things, and Toya's disappointment with that fact fueled the next sharp words that fell from his lips, "So if you think that's going to convince me, I—I wish you'd just say you want to break up with me!"

"Oh, really?" Hodaka grunted and stared down at Toya. "All right, then. I see how you feel now. I'll treat you how you want."

Hodaka suddenly pulled Toya's tie out from his collar and used it to bind Toya's arms behind his back. Toya didn't have any time to resist. "Are you going to try and persuade me physically?" Toya snapped.

"No. But I think I can distract you," Hodaka said calmly.

He unbuttoned Toya's shirt with disturbing detachment.

"Are you insane?!" Toya writhed, trying to block Hodaka, but there was nothing he could do. Hodaka pressed his knee lightly against Toya's thighs and Toya flinched away, anticipating pain.

"You think talking does no good. So what choice do I have?" Hodaka asked.

"You're a coward. This isn't like you!" Toya's voice was hoarse with terror.

"You think I'm a coward? Do you have any idea what kind of person I am?"

Toya gasped, struck by the question that stabbed into his heart. His silence was proof that he didn't.

Hodaka pinched Toya's nipples roughly. Toya gasped in pain, but the man was oblivious, twisting and pulling them in his fingers. At last they hardened and Hodaka knew that the sensation had broken through. He could see how corrupt Toya's body was as it succumbed to pleasure.

"Ahh—"

Toya struggled to contain his voice, but a momentary groan escaped him. To underscore it, Toya spoke up, pronouncing each word carefully, so his voice wouldn't falter.

"Are you trying to make me hate you?"

"Why would I do that?" Hodaka's voice was filled with scorn. "If you're going to hate someone, you ought to hate yourself for surrendering so easily. Pleasure brings you to your knees every time."

"No—!"



"Yes, it does."

Toya's cheeks flushed bright red. Hodaka sounded as if he was predicting the future.

"Let me go!"

"Uncooperative as ever." Hodaka's lips twisted. Toya stared back at him resolutely, resisting the chill authority of his eyes. "How do you want me to rape you?"

"I don't want that!"

Toya's body tensed with a gasp as Hodaka's tongue flicked over his other nipple. How had Hodaka tied him up? Toya's arms were held painfully secure, without the slightest give in the restraints.

"That's enough!"

Toya tried to shout angrily, but his voice caught on his lips. Hodaka's kiss was intense, seeming to swallow up everything in him and sending a thrill through his groin as their tongues met.

"Nngh!" Toya grunted, the kiss making him almost forget to breathe. But Hodaka showed no signs of stopping.

Just being kissed made Toya's body ache. Hodaka was the one to blame for the obscene nuisance of Toya's body. It had only been two weeks. No, even longer. He hadn't been touched for so long. That void was enough to ignite Toya's body and heighten his every response.

Hodaka's fingers traced the line of Toya's body, brushing over his hip bones and the place where his thighs joined his body. Toya's hips were particularly sensitive and the man's touch threatened to overwhelm him.

Trembling with the ticklish pleasure, Toya lost his will to act.

"Mmf!"

"I want you to make more noise," Hodaka said.

"Just—please!" *Stop,* he wanted to say, but he couldn't make it to the end. Bending Toya's body backwards, Hodaka tore off Toya's pants and underwear, laying him bare. Because his arms were bound, Toya's shirt could only be pulled open to reveal his chest. Toya felt ashamed, exposed the way he was.

"I'm going in soon, don't worry," Hodaka whispered next to Toya's ear.

"Wh-what do you—?"

"You don't know how this calls out to me, do you?"

Toya felt his mind being clouded by the seduction in Hodaka's voice as he whispered those obscene words. But he couldn't yield. Hodaka would only take advantage of it. Toya was tired of being tricked and overwhelmed.

"Ah!" Toya let out a little cry as the warm tip of Hodaka's tongue touched his entrance.

"Untie me!" Toya twisted around violently, but Hodaka didn't budge. He only glared at Toya as he struggled, and then put his mouth on Toya's skin again.

"Unnh!"

Hodaka's wet tongue rolled around Toya's entrance, tasting him. He was slathering his saliva over it, loosening the puckered bud of flesh. But he had still not touched the center—his own brand of cruelty.

"I remember telling a story about this part of

you," Hodaka said in a low voice, devoid of emotion. "It's such a lovely pink. Always so clean, but as soon as I play with it a little, you start twitching with your lust to have a man inside you."

"No!"

Exposed to the calculating eye of an author, Toya cried out in an almost tearful voice, trying not to hear what Hodaka said about him. But Hodaka paid no attention at all.

"You're just about ripe, dripping with juice and tempting me. I wish you could see how sexy it looks."

Toya wished Hodaka wouldn't taint his voice with such lurid ideas. They made Toya's cheeks burn with shame and he continued struggling desperately to get out from under Hodaka's body.

When Hodaka relaxed his arms for a moment, Toya bolted off the sofa, but he fell clumsily to the floor. He banged his knees so severely that the pain immobilized him.

"You just don't know when to give up," Hodaka said as he stood in front of the struggling Toya as he tried to get up. Hodaka looked down at him arrogantly.

"You said I was treating you like a pet?" Hodaka's voice lacked any human warmth—it was cold and cruel. "Then I guess I'll show you what it's really like to be treated like an animal."

As Hodaka's voice was filled with contempt, fire flashed through Toya. But it wasn't the time to fall for Hodaka's provocation. He was tired of having his body seized by brute force. His self-respect as a man couldn't allow it to happen again.

But Hodaka wouldn't allow Toya to get away.

"Augh!"

Hodaka rested a foot on Toya's back, and then kicked him down. Toya's chest and stomach crushed painfully against the wooden flooring.

"You'd better settle down and let me do this," Hodaka said.

What if Hodaka killed him? Every possible fear shot through Toya's mind.

"You think I'll just—"

Hodaka's weight pressed down on Toya's back.

"You're pretty disobedient for a pet. Do I need to train you some more?"

Hodaka pulled his foot away suddenly and loosened his grip on Toya. Toya bent in half, coughing violently. Then he sensed Hodaka coming toward him again. Toya felt something cold and wet on his skin—rubbing against his entrance.

"What are you—?"

"I suppose an animal like you doesn't have much experience with this." His voice was cold in its taunting. "But I can't just push straight into you—even if you are dirty enough to want it."

"Stop playing around!" Toya shouted. His voice echoed strangely in the sparsely furnished living room.

"Sorry, but I'm not playing. I'm always completely serious."

The lube rubbed over Toya's budded flesh, and he felt true fear. Hodaka had used lubricants like that many times, but usually he would rub Toya affectionately until Toya relaxed enough to take Hodaka in on his own. He'd

never used it to force Toya's body open before.

Hodaka wasn't himself.

Toya was afraid.

But Toya's terror warped into a twisted pleasure and he began unconsciously rubbing his groin across the cool floor, giving himself a pathetic pleasure that was little different from pain.

"You're getting my floor all wet. Are you that excited?"

Hodaka wiped up the fluid on the floor with his fingertips and shoved them into Toya's mouth. Toya's cheeks burned with shame.

"Nngh—"

Hodaka's fingers played with Toya's tongue and wiggled inside his sensitive mouth, as if he were taking Toya's temperature. Toya could feel the violation of his tender flesh surging blood to his groin.

"Don't drip on the floor. Don't you have any self-control?"

Toya was sure the venom in Hodaka's voice would make him cry. If he couldn't at least rub against the floor, he really wouldn't be able to control himself. Hodaka knew all that, knew about Toya's weaknesses. He knew that taunting Toya like that would excite him, even if Toya didn't want it to.

"You'd get off from any kind of abuse."

"No!"

"Why don't we just see about that?"

Toya's arms were bound behind his back, making it impossible to brace himself as Hodaka bent over him and gripped his shoulders for support.

"Stop!" Toya cried out as Hodaka pulled his buttocks open.

"Open up."

"No!"

Hodaka ignored Toya's refusals and pushed forward. When his hot shaft touched Toya, Toya moaned despite himself. Despite the violent resistance of his spirit, Toya's body seemed eager to surrender to Hodaka. But Toya still struggled to resist, clinging desperately to his reason.

"You don't want me to tear anything, do you?" the man asked with heartless detachment. He pushed into Toya's body, still tight and unstretched. It was hard taking Hodaka in.

"You're so tight. You really are fighting this, huh?" Hodaka's voice sparked a twinge of annoyance in Toya. "Or are you thinking about taking some other man into your body?"

"No!"

"Then loosen up. It's too early for you to be squeezing me so eagerly. I won't enjoy it as much."

Hodaka's words were so evil that Toya wanted to scream at him. But with Hodaka forcing him into the floor, his backside in the air, Toya's anger wouldn't be very persuasive. And since the necktie that bound his arms refused to budge, it was impossible to escape.

"You've got some nerve fighting me, considering how obscene you are."

Toya could feel the strength being sapped from his body.

Even though his penis hadn't been touched,

Hodaka's attacks excited Toya, making him drip wet with anticipation.

"Are you really enjoying this?" Hodaka asked.

"Pull out—" Toya whispered desperately.

"Pull out? Don't you mean, go further?" Hodaka moved ever so slightly and Toya felt his flesh responding to Hodaka's every move.

"Augh!"

Toya's obscene flesh loosened as the man's heat worked on it. Toya's body surrounded Hodaka gleefully, welcoming him in. Toya was overwhelmed by self-pity when he felt it.

"I'm almost halfway in," Hodaka said.

"Please—" Toya begged for mercy as his face was ground into the floor, but Hodaka gave him nothing.

"But you're so wet," Hodaka said, and reached for Toya's lewdly spattered organ. "How did you get so wet without me touching here? You're a lot better than a whore."

"I-I'm not a—"

"You're not a what?"

Hodaka moved his fingers more skillfully and he began stroking Toya, rubbing over the shape of his engorged sex.

"Ah—angh!"

What could Toya do? He had no idea. He didn't want to be humiliated, but his body didn't shy away from it and that pushed him toward insanity.

"I thought you didn't like it. Why are you moaning like that?"

"I don't kn—ngh!"

"What are you trying to accomplish by screaming so enticingly? Are you trying to find someone to sleep with you?"

"N-no—"

Toya knew these attacks were only intended to fan his erotic shame and guilty pleasure. But being tormented by such a sensual voice left him helpless. He existed to serve Hodaka and his body yearned to open itself to his dominance.

"Mmm, you're trembling back here, too. You must like being humiliated." The man laughed in a low voice. The slight motion traveled through his body and gave Toya a maddening pleasure.

Hodaka had forced such a cruel experience on Toya, and then he was laughing about it? Being confronted with that horrifying reality broke down Toya's last defenses. He wanted to destroy his heart and body together, if only he could.

"Nngh—agh!"

Was the stickiness of Hodaka's fingers from the lube, or the fluid Toya's body had produced?

"Stop moaning and say something."

"Please—stop—"

"You don't want me to make you feel better?"

"No!" Toya was desperate. He had to keep hold of his reason, or the torrent of passion would carry him off.

"Then you prefer it when I torture you?" Hodaka made a ring of his fingers and squeezed tightly at the base of Toya's penis. He had done it to Toya before, but Toya was completely unprepared for it. He was caught

by surprise and his organ twitched pitifully.

"Agh! Stop!"

"Stop what?"

"Mmf—" Toya couldn't surrender to Hodaka. Toya fought back the temptation desperately, digging his nails into his palms.

"This always gets you."

Pressing into the base with his left hand, Hodaka traced his right hand over Toya's penis in lewd patterns. He flicked the tip with his fingers and Toya felt clear, sweet passion spring up in his body.

"How about this—if you loosen up in here, I'll let you come."

"I-I can't—"

"Am I asking too much?" Hodaka chuckled low in his throat. "We can stay like this forever. I could put a chastity belt on you and keep you from coming unless I say."

"No—not that—" The terrible vision forced itself on Toya and his body trembled. He was ashamed by the weakness he displayed with his pitiful entreaty.

"Then let me in."

"I can't—!" Toya shook his head, but he didn't expect Hodaka to give up that easily. Hodaka wiped his fingers, dirty with Toya's fluids, over the skin of his back, exposed by a shirt that was barely on. It was as if he were painting a picture on a blank canvas with the translucent fluid.

"Ah—agh!" Toya's hips trembled as he cried out. Hodaka's engorged flesh was inside him, even if only halfway. He desperately wanted Hodaka to slide in

deeper, as far as he could. Toya's own sultry thoughts made him blush all the harder.

"Loosen up."

Toya yielded to Hodaka's repeated order almost instinctively.

"Aggh!"

As Hodaka slid slowly inside, he forced Toya open with his commanding size, penetrating teasingly deeper. It was not sex for pleasure, like they usually did. It was for the sake of violence. And that made it harder to bear.

"Ungh—gh!"

Toya wanted Hodaka to take his fingers off his penis. Unless he released the grip on the dam holding back his pleasure, Toya would only suffer. He wanted to let go.

"Hurry—"

Hodaka heard that almost voiceless request. "Hurry and do what?"

He thrust into Toya as he asked, making a powerful shock run down Toya's spine. Hodaka kept Toya's sagging body pinned easily and continued violating him. Toya was sure his flesh would tear open from the abuse.

But despite that fear, Toya's hips moved all on their own, inviting Hodaka even deeper inside. Every time Hodaka pounded his shaft into him, Toya heard the sound of skin rubbing over skin and he felt ashamed.

"Do you like being treated this way?" Hodaka's cruel voice whispered at his ear. "It's humiliating, isn't it?"

"Nngh—" Even if Toya started to cry, Hodaka wouldn't stop. If he wanted to escape the pain, he had to surrender to the pleasure.

"Just say it. Say you want me to rape you even harder, and I'll do it."

That would make everything so much easier. Toya's trembling lips moved to speak, but he couldn't.

"It's so much better without love involved, isn't it? It'll be so much easier for both of us that way."

Yes. Hodaka was right. Toya twisted his face around to look at Hodaka and he felt something stab into his heart. It was Hodaka's face, glistening with sweat, which was colored by an unusual sorrow.

"If you tell me it's what you want, I—I'll give you a reason to leave me," Hodaka said.

Hodaka was so wonderful. Even if Toya was ground into dust, violated, or hurt, he could never give up his feelings of adoration for Hodaka. But he couldn't take it anymore. Toya had lost Hodaka's love. That much was obvious. They had reached a point of no return. It was the first time that Hodaka had suggested breaking up.

Toya had always been the one to run from the relationship before, but Hodaka wanted to do it and he was trying to give Toya a reason to do it as well.

"A-all right. Yes! Please, stop!"

"No."

Hodaka flatly rejected Toya's entreaty and, after pulling his hips all the way back, thrust deep into Toya's body.

"Agh!"

"That's not right, Toya. Say it properly."

Toya didn't know how he could take any more, so he did as Hodaka asked. "Rape me!" he said, but his voice when he cried out wasn't a moan—it was a scream. Still, Hodaka showed no signs of releasing Toya.

"Tell me how you want it."

"Be...hard..." A small sob escaped Toya, but he went on with his shameful, indecent request. "Please, sir—be rough with me—"

Toya didn't even know what he wanted anymore. But unless he begged for something, his salvation would never come. The torrent that finally crashed over him was not pleasure, but pain and despair.

Chapter Six

"Hey, Sakurai!"

Makihara laid his hand casually on Toya's shoulder, sending Toya jumping in surprise. He'd been reaching for some documents on his desk, and they all went flying into the air.

"Sorry. Is something wrong?" Makihara asked.

Even Toya was surprised at how extreme his reaction was, so of course Makihara found it suspicious, too. He was staring at Toya's hands intently.

"No, I'm fine. Sorry, I just wasn't paying attention."

If Toya told him he was afraid of being touched without warning, he knew Makihara would wonder why. Toya didn't want to cause his good-hearted boss any unnecessary worry.

"If you say so." Makihara scrutinized Toya, and then his face cracked into a broad grin. It was afternoon and he had just arrived at the office. "You reacted like a girl who's getting sexually harassed, so you surprised me."

"I don't appreciate that comparison."

Makihara laughed. "If you can talk to me like that, you must be fine. You've had dark circles under your eyes lately, so you should be more careful. When you have a problem, it always shows on your face, you know."

"Yes, sir."

But what could Toya do about it? He couldn't hide the effects of sleeplessness with makeup like a woman, so he would have to resort to sleeping pills.

It had been three days and Toya had barely slept, meeting the rising sun with groggy wakefulness. What Hodaka had done hurt Toya deeply. Just the memory of the terror he'd felt made a shudder run through his body.

Toya didn't like to use the word "rape" lightly, but what else could he call something he hadn't agreed to?

In the end, Toya had reacted, but only physically.

In order to escape the pain, Toya had tossed aside all reason and thrown himself into the pleasure. He'd moaned lewdly, just like Hodaka had wanted him to, and had opened his body to the man. It had been the only escape left to him, but still Hodaka had taunted and condemned him for his licentious behavior.

There had been other times when Hodaka had been forceful with Toya. But that night, Hodaka had been different. He had assaulted Toya and violated his body simply to wound his pride. But it was due to the complexity of Toya's emotions that he still couldn't be angry. Despite all of it, he still loved Hodaka and wanted to be with him.

Toya knew that Hodaka did what he did out of hate. But the adoration Hodaka had shown Toya firsthand was so overwhelming that Toya shrank away from it.

Toya was helpless to confront something so intense. Realizing that was the hardest part of all. It was worse than falling victim to malicious rumors, or

being told Hodaka wanted a different editor, or being physically hurt.

Those feelings showed Toya that he could never be Hodaka's lover. He didn't understand the first thing about how Hodaka felt. He didn't even know how to take Hodaka's feelings into account when they were together.

Toya was twenty-eight—it was pathetic. It was pitiful and embarrassing. Even worse, there was a lasting effect from that night: he was afraid to be touched, especially by men close to his own age. He hated getting into crowded subways so he was careful to avoid rush hour.

Toya felt nausea rising and he quickly put a hand to his mouth. He excused himself and headed to the bathroom. He would feel better if he threw up, but there was nothing to purge except stomach acid.

Toya rinsed his mouth out, and then looked at himself in the mirror. He was shocked to see how pale he was.

The steady sales of *Incubation* were another source of torment for Toya. He could recognize the value of it and *Emergence*, but reading them was like torture. It was painful just to hold those books that he had helped to make with such devotion. The realization horrified Toya, but also steeled his resolve.

Toya was incapable of understanding Hodaka and he had been forced to confront that fact. But even staring the problem in the face, he hadn't found a solution. He had chosen an extraordinary man as his lover, but he couldn't adapt to that life. That made him unfit to be

Hodaka's lover. Hodaka needed someone flamboyant who could walk with him in the open. Someone special.

That thought made Toya's heart ache as well as his stomach.

What did he have that Hodaka needed? How had he managed to stay with him as long as he had? Toya realized he was thinking about it all in the past tense, and that astonished him. Something within him had changed.

But no—"something" was too ambiguous. Toya already knew what it was. The attachment he had to Hodaka would never fade, but their relationship couldn't go on.

Hodaka had raped him because Toya agreed with that. Toya was afraid to admit it, but when he thought back on that night, he saw no other explanation. Their love was over. Hodaka had never realized what Toya wanted from him. Not once.

"What'll it be?" the bartender asked quietly. Toya looked up with a sedate expression.

"Vodka tonic."

It was five minutes before eight o'clock. Toya was early, so Hodaka still hadn't arrived.

He had a reason for calling Hodaka to the bar at a hotel: if they met at Hodaka's apartment, the heat of Hodaka's body would overwhelm Toya like it always did. Toya felt extremely uncomfortable sitting alone at the bar.

"Evening."

Before Toya even had time to turn around, Hodaka had come over and sat on a stool beside him. He ordered a whiskey from the bartender.

"Feeling better?"

Hodaka was wearing basic black, though his shirt and jacket were two different hues. He looked great, with his lithe body, his gorgeous face, and the genius he'd been born with. Everything about him was so different from Toya.

"I've been sleeping better the last few days. Thanks for asking."

Toya heard the venom in his own voice, but it was inevitable that he would be defiant and bitter. Hodaka had brought the subject up, but Toya wished he'd waited a little longer to mention it.

"Ah." Hodaka brought his tumbler of whiskey to his lips. The large ice cubes in it clinked together.

"I don't want to see you anymore," Toya said, trying to declare his decision as casually as possible, without hesitating.

"All right," Hodaka replied, and it was so terse, it unnerved Toya.

"Do you understand what I'm asking for, sir? The way things went last time, I wasn't sure, since you weren't very understanding."

"I've learned from that, so don't worry. Is that all?"

"Yes."

"All right." Hodaka's reply was so simple that he didn't even seem upset.

Toya gazed at Hodaka's empty glass, feeling equally hollow. He didn't want Hodaka to argue with him, but he didn't want him to let it end so easily, either.

Hodaka had decided they needed to break up and so he'd raped Toya. Toya understood that. It was the only feasible result.

But he'd wanted Hodaka to overrule him, to apologize and say they could still work things out. Toya had gone there on that last, slender hope. To have it so casually dismissed left Toya speechless. He had no idea how to react.

"I'll be going, then." Hodaka took his wallet out of the inner pocket of his jacket and laid a ten thousand yen bill on the bar.

"Your drink didn't cost that much."

"But it would take a lot more to offer you a real payoff." Hodaka gave a vague smile and Toya couldn't tell if he was telling a joke or not.

"I don't want to be paid!" Toya whispered sharply, finally looking away from Hodaka.

Money could never compensate for the pain that had cut Toya's body and soul to shreds.

"I know," Hodaka murmured, and stood up.

Toya had no words to try and stop him. In fact, he didn't have a reason to try and stop him. It was the best solution for them both. He had been right. Hodaka wanted to break up. Toya had taken his feelings into account and made the best decision.

Toya tried to convince himself of that.

But if that was the case, then why did his heart

ache so? It felt like it was being carved apart by a knife. He wished Hodaka had broken his heart into rubble instead of his body. That way Toya would never have to remember Hodaka's kindness or warmth again. Physical wounds would heal. But his love for Hodaka had carved deep scars into his heart, scars that would never go away.

"Mister Amano!"

Toya was meeting up with Amano, and looking around, found him standing in the travel guide section of the bookstore. He looked like he was enjoying himself until he turned and looked at Toya with wide-eyed surprise.

"Wow, you look terrible!"

"I'm fine. Are you reading about the Maldives?"

"Yeah. I want to go for research. You want to come with me again, Mister Sakurai?"

Toya wondered if a trip like that would really be for research. But still, a tropical ocean really suited Amano's sunny smile.

"I might be able to. It would be a lot of fun going with you, though I'm not very good at water sports."

Amano peered at Toya, and then asked worriedly, "Is everything okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"You look like you're going to fall apart any second." Amano's voice was kind and deeply concerned.

"You're always so blunt. I don't know if I should be happy or if you're just teasing me," Toya said.

"I'm not trying to tease you."

Toya found Amano's choice of words funny and he laughed. That put a relieved smile on Amano's face as he headed for the check-out counter.

"I'm going to go buy this," Amano said.

Whenever Toya was with Amano, he felt his heart relaxing. Perhaps it was because Amano made it possible to interact as more than just an author and editor.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Shall we go?" Amano asked with a friendly smile.

Toya nodded and walked beside Amano. The restaurant Amano had invited him to was like a modern thieves' den. All the tables were walled off from the main room, making them more private, so it seemed like a place people could talk without being overheard. Since most of the tables were already full, they waited and read a brochure that mentioned a famous designer who had been involved in the restaurant's creation.

"What are you having?" Amano asked.

"A beer, I think."

"Me, too, then. Two beers, please."

Food was only available in fixed menus, so Toya let Amano order their food.

Once their food arrived, they toasted and drank their beer. Amano picked up an appetizer with his chopsticks, and then turned the conversation toward the subject on both their minds.

"Did something happen between you and Mister Hodaka?"

Amano's tone was casual, but it didn't come off as rude—it was more like what a friend would ask. Toya was grateful that Amano felt he could talk to him that way.

"We broke up."

"Seriously?"

"Yes." Toya didn't know what else to do, so he just smiled at Amano, who sat across the table from him.

"Can I ask why?"

Toya pondered for a moment. Why had they broken up? Because of the rape? Or because Hodaka had asked to have Toya replaced as his editor? Or, going even further back, was it because of the article in that Internet newsletter?

Toya didn't think so.

It was because he didn't understand Hodaka at all; because Hodaka's love was too oppressive; and because he had realized his own frailty. Breaking it down like that, everything seemed like a cause for their breakup.

"Was it because of that rumor? Rumors always go away eventually. Even if it seems widespread on the Internet, it's really not. People who don't obsess about that stuff wouldn't even know."

"That's not why we broke up," Toya faltered.

"Was it because you weren't in love anymore?"

Toya didn't answer. He still loved Hodaka. He couldn't stop that. Something lingered on in Toya's heart for Hodaka, whether it was love or just nostalgia. But he couldn't impose on Amano by telling him everything. Besides, though Amano may have asked in all earnestness, he had once confessed his feelings

to Toya, so Toya was reluctant to expose more of his heartbroken defects.

"If you don't want to tell me, that's okay," Amano said, stuffing grilled Yamagata beef into his mouth. "But if it's true, do you want to start seeing me again?"

Toya took the light-hearted question well at first. He hadn't really ever gone out with Amano before, so he didn't know how they could do it again.

"What? You and me?"

"Yeah," Amano answered brightly, smiling. "It might give you a different perspective on things."

"But...just because I'm not with Mister Hodaka now doesn't mean I can just switch to you."

"You can just try me out," Amano said casually, as if his outrageous suggestion were perfectly natural. He fixed his eyes on Toya's. He had beautiful, bright eyes without any sadness in them.

"What do you mean, try you out?"

"You know, like a test drive, to see if you like me."

"Love isn't like that," Toya countered, looking pensive.

"You're so straight-laced," Amano pouted. He set his chopsticks down and looked Toya straight in the face. "You've never been with a man other than Mister Hodaka, right?"

"No, I haven't."

"So going out with me would give you a different perspective. It'll be fun!"

"I'm not going to fall in love just to change my perspective," Toya warned gently.

"Man, you're a tough one," Amano mumbled. "Then let me ask you this. How do you feel about me as a person? Not as an author."

"Well..." Toya met that unexpected question with silence. He couldn't just shoot off an answer to a question like that. "You're nice enough."

"So you like me?" Amano's face was a portrait of joy.

"Of course. I like getting together with you like this. We get along well. But being lovers would be different," Toya answered, never addressing Amano's question directly.

"That means it's not completely hopeless, though, so why not?" Amano was so excited that Toya grew hesitant about just flatly rejecting him, even as the younger man persisted.

"Just go out with me for a month and think things over," Amano said.

"Think what over?"

"Everything. You have too much on your shoulders."

Toya hesitated. They already had their share of misunderstandings, but overall Toya had built a good relationship with Amano. They never fought like he did with Hodaka. Amano was the perfect friend.

If only Hodaka had been that easy to be with.

Amano's kindness was inexhaustible, the changes of his emotions were much easier to follow, and he spoke frankly. But if Toya and Amano became lovers, it would change everything between them. The most difficult problem Toya and Hodaka had faced was the

fact that they worked together. There was no reason to think that issue would disappear just because he was with Amano instead.

"I don't want to get involved with people I work with anymore," Toya said, since that was how he felt.

"Are you afraid of people gossiping?"

"There is that, but more importantly, I don't want to feel like I'm using the person I love."

"With Mister Hodaka it's different, but with a novice like me that shouldn't be a problem, right? It just looks like I'm using you."

If the status of the person changed, would people's interpretations change, too? Toya saw Amano's point, but he didn't want to be involved in any more relationships that looked like they had professional advantages for one person or the other.

"You're not a novice, Mister Amano. I'd be exaggerating if I called you one of our big players, but you're an excellent resource."

"Then doesn't that make us equals?"

Dissuading Amano was proving to be extremely difficult. Maybe Toya's heart just wasn't in it. He was forced to play his ace in the hole.

"I like you very much, Mister Amano." Toya's words were unceremonious. With Amano, he could voice his feelings without embarrassment. "But I don't know if I can think of you as a lover. And if the relationship is that open-ended, I don't know if I can go out with you."

"You're more of a coward than I thought, Mister Sakurai," Amano said slowly, his eyes fixed on Toya. "You're scared that there's no going back once we become lovers."

Maybe Toya was afraid. In a certain sense, his relationship with Hodaka had been irreversible. Toya would never be the way he had been before he'd met Hodaka. The man had colored his thoughts and lifestyle. The scars of his relationship with Hodaka were so deep, he almost believed that it would be impossible for him to ever love someone again.

"But I think it's totally natural that you can't go forward. Because you get so deeply involved with one person," Amano said.

"And it's cowardly to be afraid of that?"

"Yeah. You're a pessimist, and I think you're not used to being in love."

The waitress came by again, and they ordered saké before Amano turned his gaze back to Toya. "It's hard to be friends again after you become lovers, but if you can upgrade friendship to love, it could work out."

Toya was overwhelmed by that unexpected rebuttal and burst out laughing.

"Wh-what?" Amano asked.

"You're so kind, Mister Amano."

Amano wanted Toya to accept his offer of a trial period very much. And it was purely for Toya's own good. If things didn't go well, Toya could see Amano getting hurt. But still he was trying to envelope Toya in his kindness.

"I'm not being kind—it's pure selfishness," Amano said.

"How so?"

"If things go well, we'll be together. That's what

I'm hoping for. And if it doesn't work out, we can still be friends afterwards." Amano sounded like he was joking, but his voice was filled with such serene determination that Toya sat up a little straighter.

"But you know that I'm much less trustworthy than you are, Mister Amano."

"I doubt there's much difference. Everyone becomes dishonest if they shelter themselves."

Then what about Hodaka? Was he dishonest? Or a coward? Hodaka had been trying to tell Toya something by seizing his body, but it wasn't unreasonable to say that outside of that, he was a gentleman.

Maybe that was why Hodaka's feelings were inscrutable to Toya. If only Hodaka had revealed his raw emotions, not just his cool detachment and cruelty. Toya needed to know that Hodaka experienced human frailty, too.

Once would have been enough. But Hodaka had never revealed why he was surrounded by such a suffocating sense of loneliness. In the end, Toya had never been anything but an outsider to him. They were lovers, but Hodaka had never let him into his heart.

"So what do you want to do? You don't need to decide right now," Amano asked.

Toya already felt a little tipsy, from the alcohol and Amano's kindness. Amano wasn't going to change anything. Toya wouldn't evolve at all and he and Amano would both end up hurt.

What would Toya do if history repeated itself?

His rational mind urged caution, but his heart, starved for warmth and tenderness, already seemed on

the verge of collapse. His heart knew what it wanted. And if he wanted to banish the specter of Hodaka from his heart, going along with Amano's suggestion was the best option.

Toya looked Amano in the eyes and declared clearly, "Let's try it."

"Since it's a trial period, we have to establish some ground rules," Amano said excitedly.

Toya had only just decided to go out with Amano, so he hadn't given any thought to anything else. Amano had invited him over to his apartment and Toya had entered it hesitantly. He had the excuse of picking up Amano's corrected proofs, but he couldn't stay long.

"Ground rules?"

Amano lived in a one-bedroom apartment that was full of traditional Japanese elements, such as a low floor table surrounded by floor cushions. No doubt it was part of his interest in medieval Japanese comedy.

"Like, be casual when we're together. But when we're in work mode, I think politeness is more natural."

"If you think that would be best."

"You already messed up," Amano laughed. "But you're so cute."

"I want you to stop calling me cute. I'm not a girl."

"Oh, come on! Well, it's the first day, so I guess I can be generous. But you can't call me 'Mister Amano' anymore. Call me Yo."

"Y-Yo?"

Amano had told him to be more casual, and he had already slipped up, but saying Amano's first name was scary.

"You don't need to sound so scared. It's all right. Look, I'll call you Toya."

Toya's cheeks flushed in embarrassment. There was something sweet and tender in the way Amano said his name.

"Toya." Amano repeated Toya's name almost teasingly, perhaps noticing his embarrassment.

"You don't need to call me that, Mister Amano."

"You just broke the rules," Amano laughed. He gazed at Toya, who sat beside him.

"I'm sorry."

"Let's play a game. Every time you break the rules, there's going to be a penalty. You're never going to learn otherwise."

"What?" Toya was about to ask what kind of game when Amano kissed him. The light kiss quickly became more heated and, without realizing it, Toya hesitantly returned its intensity.

Toya's first impression was how pleasant it was being touched by Amano. The throbbing wounds that had tortured Toya ever since being raped by Hodaka started to fade, ever so slightly. Toya wasn't afraid even when Amano touched him, and that helped him relax. But there was something off; it wasn't right.

His rational mind urged caution. But the desire to surrender himself to the warmth of Amano's body filled Toya.

The warmth of another person's body soothed his heart.

"That's the penalty."

Amano pulled his lips away with a passionate whisper. It felt like a thread stretching between them as he pulled away and Toya stared after him blankly.

"Did you like that, Toya?"

Amano's question brought Toya back to his senses.

"Please don't ask me that," Toya said.

"You got a lot sexier as soon as I kissed you," Amano murmured as he bit Toya's earlobe, making Toya gasp. "I've always thought you'd be super easy to excite. Don't you get pent up when work gets too busy to have fun?"

Amano swept his palm over Toya's shirt, rubbing his nipples through the cloth, but Toya squirmed to get away from his touch.

"No—st-stop that."

"But you're my boyfriend." Amano spoke teasingly, running his tongue from Toya's ear down his neck.

"Stop, Y-Yo!" As panic and pleasure mingled in Toya's voice, Amano pulled back. He smiled at Toya kindly. It was a peaceful, drowsy smile.

"You called me Yo."

The sight of the tenderness in Amano's eyes set Toya's heart blazing, too.

"You're so cute, Toya." Amano held Toya's chin and kissed him once again.

Toya parted his lips slightly, inviting Amano

further, so Amano could dart his tongue into Toya's mouth.

They had been holding back before, but there was no longer any hesitation in the kiss. Their tongues tangled together, their lips sucking on each other, sensitizing the flesh inside their mouths. Amano kissed differently than Hodaka did. Even the flexibility of his tongue felt different.

The fact that he was kissing a man other than Hodaka lit a fire inside Toya's body. He felt like he would be swept away. But he knew he had to get back to the office.

Toya strained to hold onto his reason and gently pushed Amano back. Amano pulled his lips away and smiled, in sharp contrast to Toya's blushing.

"Are you getting more comfortable kissing me?" Amano asked

"I'm trying to."

"You're so dedicated," Amano chuckled and pressed his lips to Toya's cheek.

Even the way he did that was different from Hodaka. The warmth of his lips as they kissed, the heat of his fingertips on his skin. All of it was different.



Chapter Seven

"You seem pretty sedate," Makihara said as he slurped up his soba noodles. The restaurant he was in with Toya was crowded during the lunch hour and loud with the sound of talking.

"Huh?" Toya asked.

"I've just been wondering how you're doing lately."

That being the first thing they talked about after entering the restaurant drained Toya of his energy.

"I have to wonder how serious your concern is since you chose a place like this to bring it up," Toya said.

"Sorry about that. I had too much to drink last night and my stomach was bothering me, so I needed some soba."

"I can understand that." Toya gave an offhanded shrug and picked up his chopsticks to get back to eating his own meal.

Makihara noticed Toya's subdued attitude, and Toya was keenly aware of the concern that his boss felt for him, but it only made Toya more annoyed. In fact, since Toya had chosen to break up with Hodaka and start a "trial period" with Amano, he was only just regaining his equilibrium.

Amano was sensitive to the subtleties of other

people's emotions, especially Toya's, and Toya was rather fond of him. But Toya didn't think he could make the transition to a romantic relationship.

Toya had spent Christmas and New Year's Eve alone, but Amano had asked him to come stay the night at his apartment that weekend. Toya didn't refuse, but he didn't know what he would do if Amano made physical advances on him.

Obviously, when Amano had told Toya of his feelings and they had started the trial period, Toya knew that their relationship was likely to reach that point sooner or later, but he had avoided thinking about it.

He wasn't a woman who worried about her reputation. Toya's problem lay in his feelings. Could he want to have sex with Amano? What they were doing was supposed to be a distraction, nothing more than a stopgap measure. He was just taking advantage of Amano's kindness. Of course, Amano was complicit in it as well. But the vast majority of the blame belonged to Toya.

Toya mulled the problem over constantly, but never found a solution. No, that wasn't true. He had found a solution. It had been the only one possible from the very beginning. Toya wanted to laugh at how stupid he'd been. Even the arrangement with Amano would never absolve Toya from his memories of Hodaka.

Toya wondered if Hodaka had already moved on. His feelings smoldered inside him, burning him. The pain stopped him from unguardedly accepting Amano's youthful enthusiasm. He had wanted kindness and tranquility like his, but the transparent emotions Amano

offered made it strangely impossible for Toya to relax.

"Oh, and about Hodaka—" Makihara had finished his soba and picked the conversation back up cheerfully.

"Y-yes?"

"We still haven't found a new editor for him. We've only got eight people in our department and three of them have already worked with him. And it's still too early to put Yoshimi Fujiwara on as an editor. We don't need to rush anything, but it's hard to rest easy until that's settled."

Makihara sounded like he was at a loss, though he had obviously given the problem much thought.

"I wish we could keep you there. That'd be easiest."

"You can't do that, though, can you?" Toya asked, since Makihara was the one who'd told him to step down in the first place.

"Well, no. But you definitely had the best success with Hodaka."

Toya frowned deeply at that, but he realized that Makihara was looking at him and struggled to soften his expression.

"I'm just joking. Don't get so upset!"

"I'm sorry."

"Did you two break up?"

"Yes." Toya nodded crisply. There was no reason to hide it.

"I see." Makihara sipped his roasted tea, and then began speaking again. "Actually—"

Toya readied himself for what Makihara would

say next, but a waitress interrupted them.

"Excuse me—we're pretty busy right now, so if you gentlemen don't mind, we're going to need these seats."

Evidently they wanted customers to leave as soon as they finished eating. Lunch spots everywhere were crowded, and it hurt their business to have customers linger in a soba restaurant at lunchtime.

"Oh, all right. Thanks for the great meal," Makihara answered brightly as he paid for both of them.

"Well, as long as you're better off. Life's too short to spend it stressed out," Makihara said.

"You're right. I'm sorry for making you worry about me."

Makihara looked somewhat relieved to hear the upbeat tone in Toya's voice and he nodded. "You keep too much to yourself, so I worry about you. I thought you might still be putting up with a lot, even if you do look more relaxed now."

"I'm fine."

Toya had always been all right when he was on his own. He assumed he always would be. It would be pathetic for a grown man otherwise. If he didn't tell himself that again and again, as an adult, as a man, he wouldn't be able to defend himself. That knowledge made Toya more vehement. Though what Makihara said stuck in his mind, he decided not to pursue it. No matter what Makihara said, it was too late, anyway.

"It's just that sometimes you look very sad," Makihara said.

"I suppose I do."

Had Toya's new relationship soothed him a little bit? He had chosen to be with Amano for that reason, but whenever he was alone again, Toya's heart sank back into dark despair.

"I haven't changed at all," Toya muttered contemptuously on the way back to the office. Makihara only made ambiguous noises and didn't respond.

Toya had accomplished nothing. He would make himself miserable, and drag Amano down, too. After experiencing intense torrents of love, could Toya ever love normally again? Soon Toya would have to decide what he wanted to do. The trial period was too unfair for Amano. No matter how much Amano had cajoled him into it, Toya couldn't keep him waiting forever.

"Oof." Toya grunted as he finished packing his bags.

Toya figured that Amano could probably lend him some sweatpants to sleep in, so he decided to pack only underwear, his tooth brush, a thriller Amano had wanted to see, and several Sherlock Holmes DVDs. Toya was relieved that all of it fit easily into his canvas bag. He made sure his door was locked and his stove was turned off, and then left his apartment.

Amano was so kind and so honest that it made Toya feel guilty. Surely he had gotten that from a good upbringing. But Toya was taking advantage of Amano's generosity and kindness.

Toya had always thought it would be much

simpler if he'd let it conquer him in the very beginning, but he didn't work that way. Toya's personality was too complex to let him jump straight from one relationship to another.

He couldn't forgive himself for any of it. For that reason, Toya had secretly made his decision. After that night, if he still didn't want to take things further with Amano, he would tell Amano he wanted to end the trial period. He couldn't stand to show Amano any more weakness.

Amano's apartment was on the same line as Toya's station, so it was easy to get there. He arrived at Amano's apartment at six o'clock. When he rang the bell, the door opened immediately.

"Come on in!"

"Thanks." Toya smiled shyly, but Amano's smile was friendly and unrestrained, like a bright ray of summer sunlight. Toya doubted he himself was capable of smiling like that. He felt a moment of mushy sentimentality, but it was pushed aside by the strange smell that floated out of the apartment.

"What's that smell?"

"Curry. Actually, it's the only thing I know how to make. I made it with shrimp today."

"I've never had shrimp curry before!"

"The sauce came out a little weirdly. But the taste is guaranteed."

For some reason, that made Toya think of Hodaka since the man was somehow good at everything except cooking—which he was hopelessly incapable of. He couldn't cut thin slices of bread and he had put eggs into

the microwave to cook them, causing them to explode.

But Toya loved that about him. Hodaka knew he was no good at it, but still he tried to make breakfast for Toya. Toya found that sort of unasked-for effort unbearably endearing.

To Toya, though, the food Hodaka made was more delicious than any gourmet meal. Toya had never once found it inedible. He couldn't even imagine thinking of it as anything less than delicious.

"Do you need any help?" Toya asked, interrupting his retrospection with as cheerful a voice as he could muster.

"Could you make the salad dressing? I have some vinegar around here somewhere."

"Sure."

With Amano, Toya could be himself. The tiny kitchen was cramped with the two of them in it, but it was fun to be cooking together. Toya felt that the times when he could laugh were the only times he could forget Hodaka.

Outside, Toya heard the siren of a firetruck growing distant. He heard music, too, and realized it was coming from the TV. He must have dozed off for a while. He stole a glance to the side and saw Amano staring at the screen, entranced.

The shrimp curry Amano had made had been wonderful. They sat beside each other on a rug spread over the wooden floor, watching a DVD. Amano had

made *sangria* with lots of fruit in it.

When had Toya become capable of such a healthy relationship? Even in quiet moments with Hodaka, the air had threatened to erupt with sensuality.

Toya returned his eyes to the TV distractedly when he felt Amano's fingers touch his hand. He didn't pay it very much attention since it was so casual, but Amano's fingers held on to him and he finally turned to look at him.

Amano turned Toya's chin slightly and stared at him. Toya began to speak Amano's name, but his lips were sealed with a kiss. They exchanged several light kisses before Amano asked, "Do you want to go further?"

Amano must have been even more nervous than Toya since Toya noticed how cold Amano's fingers were. Toya's heart filled with inexplicable compassion.

"What do you want to do?" Toya asked.

"You know I want to do it. I want to sleep with you, Toya." Amano's voice was husky, colored by his lust, which made Toya's senses ache. "Tonight is the end of our month. Now that you've tried me out, do you know what you want to do?"

"Yo," Toya said, and it still felt strange to call him that. Toya felt as if Amano had seen through to his heart.

"I'm sure I do things differently from your last boyfriend, but I've been kind—trying not to scare you." Amano's voice became gentle. "So don't be afraid."

"I'm not."

"So what is it, then?" Amano kissed Toya's

collarbone and Toya twisted away. "If you don't say anything, I'm just going to keep going."

Amano pushed Toya down onto the rug. Toya felt his heart racing so fast he thought it might burst.

"You're shaking..." Amano observed quietly. He picked up Toya's right hand and slipped Toya's fingers one by one into his mouth, sucking on each one. "You're so sexy."

"Am I?"

Is Amano going to sleep with me? Toya wondered vaguely.

Amano's tongue trailed down Toya's throat and ran over the hollow of his collarbone. His right hand reached slowly down to Toya's groin and fingered him leisurely through the cloth, making Toya's breath catch.

"You can make noise. I don't care if my neighbors hear us."

"Yo—wait."

Amano showed no signs of stopping. His right hand began moving on its own, unfastening the buckle of Toya's belt and pulling down his zipper. He touched Toya through his underwear, but Toya flinched from the sensation.

"You're still as sensitive as ever," Amano whispered breathily. Toya shook his head plaintively.

"You're so adorable—"

Before, Toya's sex drive had been weak. He hadn't had sex once since breaking up with Hodaka, but he'd masturbated several times while thinking about him. He felt ashamed of that.

Toya tried to push Amano back, tightening his

hands on the man's shoulders. He felt like he might succumb otherwise. He was afraid of how weak his willpower was.

He wasn't really afraid when Amano touched him. He seemed to have gotten over the painful memories of Hodaka's rape all on his own. But when things became sexual, he hesitated.

"Wait—"

"No. I can't just ignore all the pain I see. This will make it better."

"What pain?"

"The pain in your heart."

When Amano said that, Toya knew it wouldn't work out. Toya's mind was already made up and he was powerless to change that decision.

"No—"

Seeking out a warm body to alleviate his suffering wouldn't solve anything. Toya pushed Amano away gently and sat back up. He smiled sadly at Amano, who sat so close beside him.

"I just can't make myself want this."

"You don't know until you try. We're still in the trial period." Amano's pleading made him sound so young.

"But even if we only did it once, we'd never be able to be friends again afterwards."

"So you won't be my boyfriend? Is it because there's something wrong with me?"

Toya shook his head, feeling guilty.

"I like you a lot. But I don't believe I can ever like you the way I liked Mister Hodaka."

"You're such a coward, Toya," Amano said with a sad smile. "If you're just going to use me, you might as well go all the way."

"I didn't mean to use you. I never wanted that."

"You thought, 'I'm lonely, so I can just try him out'—right?" His fingers were so gentle on Toya's skin. "I don't mind if you use me. Let me help you when you need it. I don't need anything in return. Just as long as I can make you happy again."

There was a note of derision in Amano's voice and he was smart enough to know it.

"I'm sorry. Really," Toya said, the whispered words a long time coming. Toya had often thought that Hodaka was insensitive, but Toya was being far more cruel and obtuse than Hodaka had ever been. He had let himself take advantage of Amano's generosity for too long.

"Am I completely useless to you? I may not be able to heal you when bad things happen, but I can at least stand beside you."

"I would still be in pain. Even with you, it would be hard for me. I can't forgive myself for taking advantage of your kindness." As Toya talked to Amano, he felt his thoughts becoming clearer.

"But I told you I don't mind being taken advantage of," Amano said.

"I'm flattered to hear you say that, but I can't have another relationship where people take advantage of each other." Toya gazed at Amano, whose eyes were lowered in pain, and his heart ached sharply.

He didn't want anyone else to heal the wounds

in his heart. He wanted to do it himself. He wanted to lighten the burden of inescapable loneliness that Hodaka carried inside himself. That was something Toya thought only he could do.

Maybe anyone could do it with a little bit of effort. But Toya had seen Hodaka's secret loneliness, kept in a part of him that he allowed no one else access to. All he wanted was to alleviate that, even just the tiniest bit.

"And you're wrong, anyway," Toya continued.

"Wrong about what?"

"I don't really want anyone to heal me. I just want to be kind. I want to make other people feel better. To let people know they're not alone."

Amano's fingers touched Toya tenderly, closing tightly around his body. Toya closed his eyes, feeling up close the man's scent and the beating of his heart. But he still didn't feel the relief and adoration he felt in Hodaka's arms.

"But who's going to make you better, Toya?"

"I don't need to be made better." Toya whispered that faintly, half to convince himself. He couldn't be special like Hodaka. But it didn't matter how ordinary Toya was, as long as Hodaka told him he needed him. It was that simple.

"As long as he needs me, that's all I need," Toya said. His vision clouded over as tears poured from his eyes. He had tried to never cry after breaking up. Panicked by his weak display, Toya wiped his tears away.

"I'm sorry. Don't cry," Amano murmured in a shockingly kind voice. He stroked Toya's back

soothingly. "Please don't cry. I was using you, too. I wanted to finally be able to forget all about you."

Amano lied to him kindly. He was trying hard to dispel the guilt that Toya felt.

"I'm sorry..." Toya said, but he was running away.

He'd been afraid of Hodaka's oppressive love. Toya had only accepted it when it was convenient for him, and when the moment had come to test his feelings, he'd faltered. He'd taken only what he wanted and never given Hodaka anything. He hadn't been able to.

And he was doing the same thing to Amano.

It was perfectly understandable that Hodaka had finally reached the limits of his affection.

"It's my fault. I took advantage of you at a weak moment. I hope you don't let this hurt you," Amano said. He pressed his lips to Toya's temple and he hugged Toya again. Toya felt the tension in his heart melting away inside Amano's serene warmth.

His tears wiped away, Toya raised his face and put on a smile. "I feel better."

"I'm glad." Amano smiled. "Then you should thank me instead of apologizing."

"Thanks."

"Though you can apologize for not going to the Maldives with me." Hearing the flippant tone in Amano's voice, Toya didn't know whether to apologize or laugh.

Toya was on his own, searching out someone to force his love onto so he wouldn't be alone.

If he found someone though, it would only cause

the other person unnecessary pain.

The brand that Hodaka had burned into Toya's heart would never fade. The mark of his affection would remain undimmed forever. *Too late,* it smoldered inside Toya, something unquenchable burning his body. Cleaning up the wreckage of that love without anyone's help would be a show of his respect for Amano. He could never forget that.

Chapter Eight

"I'm so glad you came, Sakurai. You hardly ever come out when I invite you," Yoshikawa said, gulping down his beer. They were far outside the normal hours to go drinking so a mellow atmosphere prevailed in the bar.

"If I didn't, you'd be here drinking by yourself. And I can't allow that." Toya cast a glance at Yoshikawa, who laughed loudly. His uncomplicated cheerfulness was terribly painful for Toya. "Besides, I have no idea what I'm going to write for next month's tag lines."

"That locked room mystery? Everyone runs out of inspiration eventually. You don't need to worry about that yet. I've been in the pulp division ever since I joined the company. All my tag lines come out practically the same now." Yoshikawa stirred their dish of grilled chicken around grumpily.

Lately, Toya hated being alone, so he'd been honestly happy when Yoshikawa had invited him out. He hadn't yet been pushed to such utter, indiscriminate desperation that he would do anything to feel the warmth of another human being, but neither was he bold enough to go straight back to Hodaka.

Besides, Hodaka might already have replaced him with someone new.

Hodaka may have been obtuse about personal

relationships, but even he couldn't have misunderstood when Toya had said, "I want to break up." Hodaka had also been the one who had forced the decision on Toya, though he had obviously shared the desire to break up. Compared to Hodaka, Toya was repulsively clingy. All he could do was pursue Hodaka and grow impatient.

"But those rumors about you and Hodaka were a real disaster, huh?"

After polishing off two mugs of beer, they were moving on to saké when Yoshikawa unexpectedly brought that subject up. Toya had real trouble deciding if his colleague's lighthearted statement was serious or not.

"It didn't get quite that bad. But when authors say they want a different editor, you don't have much choice," Toya said.

"I suppose. But I changed my opinion of him after all that. There's some good in him, after all."

"What do you mean?"

Yoshikawa took an appreciative drink of his saké, draining the cup and licking his lips before answering.

"Didn't Makihara tell you?"

For convenience, Makihara was managing Hodaka for the time being. It had been almost two months since Toya had stepped down, so they would need to find someone to replace him soon. But the search had been more difficult than they'd imagined.

"Tell me what?"

Yoshikawa looked as if he regretted mentioning it, but he decided to go on. "Well—this is off the record, all right? But Hodaka felt bad that he'd gotten you into such

a bad situation, so he asked to have you transferred."

"What?" Toya's voice was almost shaking. But Yoshikawa was starting to get drunk, so he didn't notice.

"Basically, he doesn't care what anyone thinks about his sex life, but he felt bad that you'd gotten dragged into it and been damaged by it."

Seeing Toya fall silent, Yoshikawa interpreted his reaction as anger.

"Uh—he also said that you were a really talented editor and that you'd do a great job with other authors, so he didn't want to risk your job over stupid rumors. But I heard all this secondhand."

Toya's eyes widened and warmth flickered through his heart. He couldn't believe Hodaka had said something like that. Makihara had told him something similar, but Toya had assumed it was just his boss trying to smooth things over. Hodaka wasn't the type to be as considerate as that.

Hodaka had never shown any interest in Toya's work. One of the things that had driven them apart was Toya's annoyance at Hodaka insisting it was "just" a job, even if that was only a figure of speech.

They had often talked about how Toya was busy with correcting author's proofs, but Hodaka never showed interest in who those authors were. So Toya had bitterly assumed that Hodaka would never praise his work as an editor.

"I don't know if you and Hodaka got along or not, but you worked well together. And it looks like the great Kai Hodaka thinks you're worth the trouble."

"I don't really want him to put a price on me."

That just reminded Toya of how Hodaka had used his body. He felt on the verge of accidentally letting the truth slip, so he shut his mouth. That was how deeply Yoshikawa had affected him. Talking about Hodaka still caused him nothing but pain. But he didn't want to miss a word of it. Toya was more than ever at the mercy of those contradictory emotions.

"You can get along with anyone. Kai Hodaka is proof of that. To be honest, I heard the rumors about how Hodaka was morally bankrupt, so I was shocked he could show anyone such consideration. Then I wondered if that rumor was true—" Yoshikawa stopped, covering his mouth and muttering, "Sorry."

Toya didn't like how earnest Yoshikawa's apology was, and he didn't know if Yoshikawa believed it was all true.

"Don't worry about it. I'm used to it," Toya said.

Toya couldn't admit that the rumor was true, and that made him the biggest coward of all. He'd pushed the blame onto Hodaka, he'd hurt Amano, and he'd made himself an unnecessary burden to those around him.

"I'm just glad to see you're getting back on your game."

"Sorry to have worried you," Toya said, still calm enough to smile. He wanted to avoid giving people any more reasons to worry.

"Well, we do work together, after all," Yoshikawa teased.

"Oh, thanks a lot!"

As they traded jokes, their conversation grew more intermittent until they finally called it a night. They left the club together, and then Toya headed back home alone.

He hadn't known.

Toya spent his entire walk home reflecting on what Yoshikawa had told him. He followed his path home from the station and entered his one-bedroom apartment. The cold, dark apartment was the polar opposite of Hodaka's condo, which had been filled with the man's warmth. Toya was overcome with self-pity and loneliness as he reminisced about it.

Toya was completely drained. He took his suit jacket off, and then crumpled to the floor. He leaned against his bed, trying to banish the memory of what Yoshikawa had said.

"Oh, sir—"

He was full of sweet memories. Why did he have to be alone that night? How had he ever thought he could do without the warmth of that man's body?

Why? How? His heart was full to bursting with questions.

If only—

If he could go back in time, he would go back two months—or even just one month. He wanted to say he was sorry. He wanted to apologize to Hodaka from the bottom of his heart, if only it were possible.

Toya was uncomfortably familiar with how petty he was. All he had done was revel in Hodaka spoiling him, too afraid of being hurt to do anything else. He'd been afraid of being involved in a scandal, being the subject of gossip, and having people talk about him

behind his back, so he'd rushed to protect himself and had betrayed Hodaka's love.

Toya saw that he had been so afraid of being exposed that he had never let his professional demeanor slip with Hodaka. He had never really made any effort to convey his true feelings.

But Hodaka was different. He had acted to protect Toya from rumors, but at the same time, he didn't fear them. He lived the way he wanted to and did only what he wished.

That strength dazzled Toya—that tenacity of Hodaka's qualified him to live an exceptional life. As Toya thought about Hodaka, he was overwhelmed by his memories of the man's warmth. Toya felt a tingle shoot through his lower body and felt flustered.

No—he just had to shower and—get changed.

Despite the aborted physical relationship he'd had with Amano, Toya had completely forgotten the pleasure of feeling his skin against someone else's. Hodaka's fingers. His lips. Toya remembered the feeling of the man's skin and his body ached.

Toya leaned back against the bed and, still sitting on the floor, reached a hand down to his groin.

"Ah—"

He heard Hodaka's voice reawaken in his mind—that beautiful voice that rolled over his ears and refused to be stripped away.

Touch it for me.

Toya acted as if possessed by Hodaka's spirit. He raised his knees and pulled his sex free from the loosened folds of his clothing. He held himself with

both hands, stroking from the base all the way to the tip of his member.

He felt like an idiot doing it. But he had to touch himself. Nobody could go back in time. Toya had made bad choices and he had hurt people. He would probably never get another chance to make amends for his crimes. The despair in his heart only multiplied the pleasure he felt.

"Nngh—ah."

Fluid pooled quickly on the tip of Toya's sex, dirtying his hands. He rubbed it all over, spreading the fluid around and moving toward the peak of his pleasure.

"Oh, sir—"

He wasn't even aware of the moans that escaped him. Gripping the wet part of his body as he touched himself, he knew that the pleasure he felt was only a fraction of what it could be. But he didn't care. His heart was racing so fast, he felt like it might rip in two. But he needed more. He touched his hardened nipples, pinching one roughly.

"Ah!"

He threw his necktie to the floor and unbuttoned his shirt, pushing his hand under the cloth. He felt pathetic masturbating, but that shame only increased his perverted pleasure. That and the emptiness he felt at his inability to take what he wanted.

"Sir—oh, sir! I want to come!"

Toya's hips rocked, and he cried out as if in a nightmare.

Go ahead, then. Come. Hodaka's voice whispered

through his memory.

He wanted to hear it. He wanted to climax to the man's beautiful voice.

"Ah! I'm coming!" Toya whispered as he released his sticky fluid. The thick semen splashed over his stomach, reaching all the way to his chest. He was suddenly ashamed.

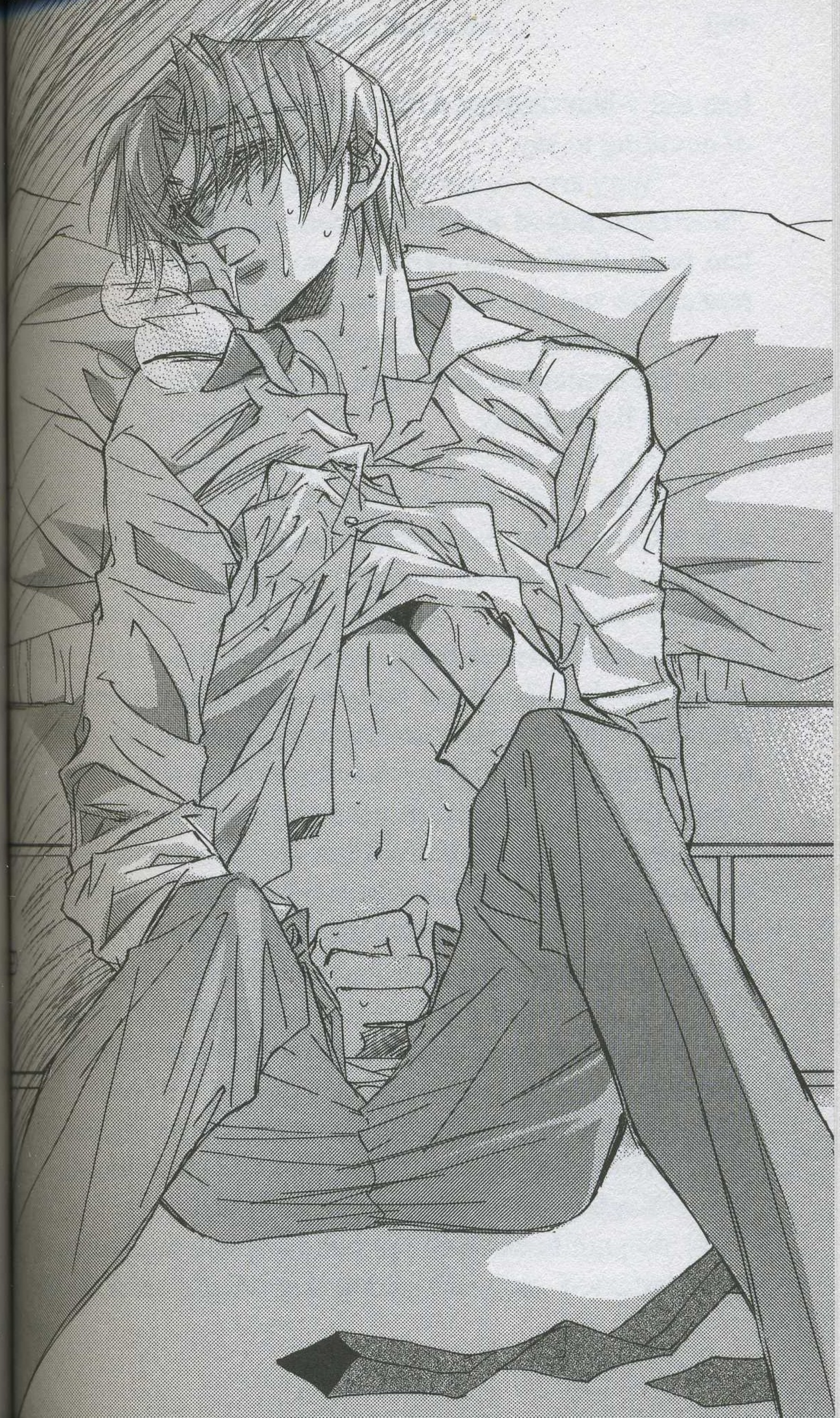
Love pinned Toya's heart down with heavy nails. If he couldn't forget about Hodaka, he would wind up spending the rest of his life only remembering Hodaka's fingers, lips, and warmth. It was a lonely, depressing, hollow prospect, but he was the one who had chosen that life.

The winter sun set early. When Toya went through the sliding doors into the front room of the campus building, he was surrounded by a warm breeze. Professors passed in and out for several minutes while Toya stood deliberating over whether or not to ask the guard seated at the entrance to call someone for him. Standing in front of the entrance, Toya was rather noticeable. He heard a sound of surprise and turned around to see someone he recognized.

"Toya. It's been a while."

"Miwa—"

Miwa gave a slight smile. Apparently she was doing better. She was also a little more plump and healthy than she had been before. But more than anything, she looked happier. Toya had gone there to see



her, but when they were face to face, he couldn't think of anything to say.

"Why are you here?" Miwa asked.

He'd hoped to catch her around that time, and it had paid off. She had her coat on and was carrying her purse. She was just on her way home.

"I just happened to be in the area, for work."

He wanted to apologize to her, but unable to say so, Toya lied quickly.

"Ha. You haven't gotten any better at lying."

Miwa looked Toya over, and then pointed at a sofa set out in the lobby for visitors. "Do you want to sit down? You have to be quick, though. I have to meet someone soon."

Toya nodded meekly. She'd seen that he wanted to talk to her, so there was no point in pretending otherwise. Was it going too far to suggest that he wanted to clear up the past? That was how Toya felt. He had thought about Miwa from time to time, but he hadn't been able to call or write to her. He thought he would just cause her unnecessary pain by getting in touch for his own selfish reasons. But that day, he had trusted in her straightforward personality and finally went to see her.

"Is there some reason you came here to see me?" she asked.

"I heard you were doing pretty badly before."

"Who told you that?" She frowned suspiciously.

"Kiyomi. She called me."

"Oh no, I can't believe she told you that." Miwa's face darkened and she shook her head. "I'm sorry

she called you. Things weren't going well with my boyfriend then."

"I see..."

"But we're fine now. See?" She held up her hand, where a platinum engagement ring glittered. "And not just because we decided to get married, but things are just calmer now. I'm over you, too."

"I'm glad to hear that." Toya finally felt some relief and he smiled.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Stop lying. You look terrible. And have you lost weight? You're squandering your good looks."

"Please don't talk like that."

"But your face is your best asset." Miwa laughed loudly. "I finally got a chance to read *Emergence* when I took some time off from work. I was always a fan, but I thought *Emergence* was really something special. Kai Hodaka is amazing. I can see why you like him," she said, and then went on indifferently, "The whole book is one long love letter to you, Toya. When I realized that, a lot of things started to make sense."

No response came to Toya immediately. What could he say to the woman he'd left?

"You don't sound surprised," he finally said.

She had already all but acknowledged that he and Hodaka were together, but he could think of nothing else to say.

"Of course I was surprised. We did date, after all. How could I ever imagine you'd go running after him? But the more I think about it, the more I realize that I

didn't really understand you very well. I never thought you would break off our engagement."

Miwa spoke quietly, as if she were reliving the memories.

"And when I read that book I understood that you were confused, too. I didn't want that for you."

"I didn't even see it myself," Toya said. Even though he was Hodaka's editor and he'd read the book before anyone else, he hadn't seen it that way.

"You're not very intuitive. I read *Incubation*, too. I didn't want it to make me cry, but I couldn't help it."

The frankness of Miwa's words always resounded in Toya's heart. As if conscious of Toya's feelings when he fell silent, Miwa continued casually.

"I don't think Kai Hodaka knew what it meant to be lonely before he met you. It makes me sad to imagine that he wrote *Emergence* after learning what it means to yearn for someone."

"I didn't do anything that incredible," Toya said modestly. All Toya had done was abandon himself to sex with Hodaka. But what had Hodaka said? That loneliness could define the words "I love you"? Had he learned what love and loneliness were?

"But Kai Hodaka needs you, Toya. There's no getting around it. I used to love you, too, but maybe I just wanted someone to marry. That thought makes me feel like a total failure." Her voice was candid as she smiled at Toya. "But the two of you? You're good for each other."

"I've wanted to apologize to you for a long time," Toya said. "It won't change anything, but I always

regretted hurting you."

"It's fine—it doesn't bother me anymore. And I think if we had gotten married, sooner or later we would have gotten fed up with each other. So I'm glad you moved on before it was too late." Miwa spoke as if none of it mattered. There wasn't even a trace of sentimentality or regret in her voice.

"You really have gotten over me," Toya said, feeling strange.

"Women are stronger about this kind of thing." She laughed loudly. "It's not going well with Hodaka, is it? That's why you came to see me."

"You're right. We broke up, about a month ago."

"I figured."

"How did you know?"

"I guess because of your personality. You're so exacting that if anything isn't right, you just can't deal with it. It was like that when we broke up. If you feel that way now, doesn't it seem reasonable that I would figure out you two broke up?"

They really had known each other a long time, Toya thought with a smirk. He was trying to straighten things out with Amano and Miwa, but Hodaka was the only person he couldn't reconcile with. They had broken up, so Hodaka should have been consigned to Toya's past. But Toya just couldn't make a clean break.

"Mister Hodaka is an exceptional man. How could an ordinary person like me ever have a relationship with him?"

Miwa was completely at ease, so Toya felt like he could talk to her without awkwardness. He wanted to

relieve himself of at least one burden he carried. He and Miwa couldn't go back to being friends, but maybe they could interact calmly. Toya felt that they could.

"That makes it sound like you still love him," Miwa said.

"I guess so. But it doesn't matter how much I love him. It's not enough to keep us together." Toya realized he had said something similar to Amano recently, and he gave a small, rueful smile. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be talking to you about this stuff."

"Hey, Toya..." Miwa suddenly looked serious. "It may not be my place to say this..."

"What?"

"Well, since you taught Hodaka what it means to be lonely, you have to take responsibility for that."

Toya said nothing. Was she saying that he had changed Hodaka? That arrogant, self-important man who couldn't treat people like human beings?

"It must be hard to suddenly not be special anymore. He's never felt that way before. He's probably never loved anyone before. I don't think he knows what to do."

"Maybe."

"Maybe the reason Hodaka is upset is because he doesn't know how the person he loves will treat him." Miwa stood up, and without looking at Toya said, "So you need to take responsibility for that, Toya."

Responsibility for what? For loving Hodaka? For Hodaka's love of him?

"You should read *Emergence* and *Incubation* again."

Toya would have liked to talk a little longer, but Miwa waved and walked through the sliding doors.

Left by himself, Toya watched until the campus had faded into darkness. There was a peaceful serenity in Toya's heart, and also a raging storm of desire for Hodaka.

The two coexisted inside him.

"So? You wanted to talk to me?" Makihara tilted his head curiously after Toya called him down to a small meeting room below the office.

"I talked to Yoshikawa about Hodaka."

Makihara motioned for him to sit down, but Toya stayed standing. He didn't feel like sitting down. The last thing he had to do to put his feelings in order was confront Makihara. Makihara frowned, saying nothing, so Toya pushed forward.

"He told me that Mister Hodaka said he wanted to change editors because it would damage my career if I continued working with him. Is that true?"

"More or less, yes," Makihara said in a low mumble.

"Why didn't you tell me that in the first place?"

"What would you have done if I had told you?"

What would Toya have done if he had known Hodaka's reasons for taking the blame in order to protect him?

"You hate being protected, even if it is Kai Hodaka doing it. You've got a lot more pride than the average

person. You don't like having someone shield you."

"That's true...I suppose."

"And I didn't want to deal with any unnecessary fighting, so I did what Hodaka wanted."

There was a note of regret in Makihara's words and Toya realized that Makihara was sorry for putting an end to their relationship.

"It's not your fault we broke up, Mister Makihara."

"Of course not." Makihara folded his arms across his chest and, leaning back in his chair, stretched his legs out in front of him. "But I think it's a good thing you did."

"Why?" Toya's eyes widened at his boss' unexpected words.

"Every time something happened between you two, your emotions would swing. It was very hard to watch from the sidelines. If it made things easier for you, I was all for you two breaking up, or switching editors, or whatever. But maybe I was wrong."

At the end, Makihara was practically talking to himself.

"You got upset worrying about Kai Hodaka, but that's part of who you are. You didn't stop acting like yourself after being tossed aside by Hodaka—you opened up."

That made Toya suddenly want to argue, but only because he was humiliated to be told that when he lost control, he was being himself.

"But that's not entirely a good thing," Toya said.

"That's true. I can't decide if the results are good

or bad yet. Sometimes we need the passage of time to figure things out," Makihara sighed. "But you regret it, don't you?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Yes. I worry about you."

"I want to apologize to Mister Hodaka," Toya said simply. He couldn't think of a better way to say it.

"Why?" Makihara asked with such sincerity that Toya was forced to answer.

"He didn't do anything wrong and I hurt him anyway. I blamed him. I have to apologize for that."

"Is an apology the only thing you plan on giving him?"

Toya hesitated a moment, and then shook his head slowly. The rest of his plans didn't concern Makihara, but there was no point in hiding it. He'd wanted to forget about Hodaka. He'd wished for it so many times, but it was hopeless. Kai Hodaka was carved deep in Toya's body and soul. He had become an indelible memory.

"I want to give it another try, if he's willing."

After a few moments' silence, Makihara spoke up again.

"People are so strange," he murmured. "I've had terrible fights with my wife and wanted to leave her many times. But every time, we would decide to work things out and keep going. Love makes you want to try again. You just can't fight it."

Makihara had said the word "love" quickly, no doubt embarrassed to be talking that way. It was very typical of him.

"But maybe you're not the only one who thinks

so," Toya murmured, and Makihara raised his hands defensively.

"Hey now, Sakurai. Don't try and trap me. I decided long ago not to discuss personal matters with the authors," Makihara said teasingly, and then coughed. "Anyway, I'm pretty sure Hodaka is available right now, so it's up to him who he wants to go out with."

With that finally verified, Toya knew the facts. If Hodaka had already chosen someone else, Toya would have had to give him up.

"Oh, and remember those rumors about Hodaka and Mari Tanaka?"

"Yes...?"

"He's going to the premiere of her movie and he gave me a ticket. You should go instead. You can talk to him there."

"But he invited you. Won't I get in trouble if you don't go?" Toya was thrilled that Makihara was giving him a chance to talk to Hodaka, but Toya couldn't just replace Makihara on the invitation list.

"I'm going golfing the day before, so I'll just pull a muscle."

Toya gaped. There was a hint of discord between Makihara and Hodaka in the plan. Toya hesitated to participate fully. "Um..."

"Hodaka is a hard man to deal with. I'd like to move you back onto his projects peacefully, if we can. But I need you to be sure before I can do that."

"I understand."

If Toya wasn't prepared to deal with rumors about him and Hodaka, he couldn't be his editor. Until he was

ready to face that, Hodaka probably wouldn't take Toya back.

"Even after all this, I still like Hodaka's books. I really believe he's a genius," Toya said.

"Me, too."

Toya could hear it in Makihara's voice. In one sense, Hodaka was an author who needed a lot of looking after, but Makihara was already indulgent toward him.

"After you became his editor, there was a new depth to Hodaka's books. Not just in the worlds he created, but in the way he delved into the characters. I think meeting you has been good for Hodaka's writing."

Those words jolted Toya's heart.

"Being together has changed both of you. And definitely not for the worse. Don't you think meeting someone like that is important?"

Toya didn't know what to say. But there was power behind everything Makihara said and it stirred Toya's heart.

"Regular editors or lovers or friends are all well and good. But if you two stay together, I know you'll keep influencing each other."

"I hope so."

Toya would make any sacrifice for that. He wanted Hodaka, and that was what it took to be an exceptional person. It also involved being exposed to the gazes of insensitive people. Hodaka had always been surrounded by those gazes. It was only natural that he would question whether or not Toya could get used to it, since he had never experienced them.

Toya needed to apologize. He didn't know if he

would be forgiven, but he bitterly regretted hurting Hodaka. Hodaka's love had clouded Toya's vision. He hadn't lost himself in Hodaka's riotous affection—he had just been tamed.

Toya always classified Hodaka as exceptional. But maybe Hodaka had been lonely. Perhaps it had been hard on him to have Toya, who was closer to him than anyone, judge him.

Hodaka had used unfamiliar kindness to try and protect Toya. He would always shelter Toya and intercept the insensitive looks and rumors.

Maybe, after all the time that Toya had spent trying to get Hodaka to reveal his weaknesses, he had actually succeeded. Maybe Hodaka hadn't wanted Toya to find out about his own ugliness and unimportance and so had kept the most important things hidden.

Toya hadn't revealed his weaknesses, either. He had only demanded them from Hodaka, and that was asking too much. No wonder it hadn't worked out. They had passed each other in the night.

Toya regretted his foolishness in ignoring his own faults, but it was too late. He didn't know how he could make up for it. He just had to try to do better.

Chapter Nine

"This is never going to work."

Toya opened his closet door to choose something to wear to the movie premiere, but he slumped down onto his bed when he saw what was inside. He didn't worry about his clothes very much, so he didn't have a very wide range of suits, and certainly nothing flashy. Any of them would be all right if he was dressing casually, but since he was going to talk to Hodaka, that seemed too dismissive.

His inability to pick a suit resembled how lost he felt.

What would Hodaka think when he saw Toya brazenly show up at the premiere? Toya was sure he wouldn't like it.

But Toya needed to apologize in person. He doubted he could express himself well over the phone or in an e-mail. He also wanted to prove that he could be seen with Hodaka in public.

Toya was weak, so he doubted that he could stand up under the curious looks of people by himself. But with Hodaka beside him, he knew he could do it. He could even overcome them. If he could just give it another try, he wouldn't let it bother him again.

He'd made up his mind about that.

The problem was whether or not Hodaka would

welcome him back. Maybe Hodaka would refuse. Could Toya really crawl back and beg Hodaka to be with him again?

Hodaka was a fascinating person. Even if he was morally bankrupt, there were other people who could be with him just as easily. Toya wasn't at all unique. But since Toya was wholeheartedly in love with Hodaka, it was a little easier for Toya to be with him. That was all.

Toya didn't know of any other emotion as powerful as his adoration for Hodaka. As long as Toya felt motivated, it wouldn't be too hard to understand Hodaka. Nor would it be for anyone—it didn't have to be Toya.

He knew that he should have already abandoned his ardor. Toya wasn't very young anymore, either. It would be much better for him to just forget all about his reckless passion. But he couldn't.

Toya picked up the invitation that Makihara had given him and let out a breath. If he just tore it up, that would put an end to everything. He could go back to his normal, peaceful days, not hurting anyone and not getting hurt.

He still didn't know what he wanted to do and he was afraid; afraid of being rejected. But he couldn't forget. He couldn't lock it all away in the past. Toya's feelings for Hodaka still snaked around his heart, biting into it viciously. He wished for the courage to face Hodaka again.

"Oh—"

Toya suddenly remembered something he'd wanted to do. He needed to read *Emergence* and

Incubation again. He wanted to see if they really were love letters Hodaka had written to him.

After staying up all night reading the two books, Toya felt a little disoriented, but the premiere was taking place that evening and he had finally decided to wear a casual jacket with pants. There would be many celebrities and journalists there, so he felt like a suit would only make him stand out.

What would he say when he saw Hodaka?

He hated himself for holding on to so little hope. He hoped Hodaka would forgive him. He hoped Hodaka's deep affection for him still lingered somewhere in his heart. And he desperately hoped that Hodaka would give those feelings to him once again.

Cursing his shallowness and disloyalty, Toya became pessimistic. But since it was all a product of the love he held for Hodaka, he couldn't expunge it. It was ridiculous how he clung to that lost love. But he wanted to fight for it one last time.

Urging Toya on were Hodaka's two novels. The suffocating sense of loneliness that filled the stories had deeply moved Toya.

Once at the premiere, before the film began, Toya peeked into the main hall to see if Hodaka had shown, and then he went back to the entrance. He waited there for Hodaka to come, gazing at the doors.

As he looked listlessly around, a group of women started making a commotion. His eyes turned toward

them casually and he saw Hodaka walking toward him, all alone.

"Mister Hodaka!"

When Toya called out, Hodaka turned to look at him. He frowned dubiously. The fact that Toya hadn't called him "sir" was a sign of Toya's state of mind. As Hodaka opened his mouth to respond, a suspicious-looking young woman approached, leading a television crew.

"Can we have a few words, Mister Hodaka?"

"Yes?" Hodaka looked annoyed for a moment as she shoved a microphone into his face, but his annoyance disappeared as soon as it had come. He wasn't smiling effusively, but he wasn't being unpleasant, either.

"We don't usually see you at these sorts of events, Mister Hodaka. Is the reason you've chosen to attend tonight's premiere because the rumors about you and Mari Tanaka are true?"

Her question was rather rude.

"She and I go out together as friends. We don't give much thought to such crass fantasies." Hodaka answered with crisp formality and began to walk away, leaving both Toya and the news crew behind. Toya ran after him.

"Mister Hodaka!"

Toya followed Hodaka through a large area arranged with sofas and tried to strike up a conversation with him. But Hodaka didn't stop.

"My invitation to this premiere was for Mister Makihara."

Hodaka seemed to be unusually conscious of the



people around them. His voice was much lower than usual, which combined with its inherent beauty to infuse it with a unique eroticism.

"Mister Makihara wasn't feeling well today."

"He told me he would make it no matter what." Hodaka didn't turn around.

"He gave the ticket to me."

"We're no more than strangers to each other now."

"That's not true!" Toya shouted suddenly, causing the guests who were walking by in the hall to stop and stare at them. But Toya's resolve to not care who found out had pushed him to that point.

"Mister Sakurai..."

"I love you, sir. I wanted to tell you that, and to apologize."

When Hodaka finally turned around, his expression was hesitant as he stared piercingly into Toya's eyes.

"What did you—"

That was all Hodaka managed to say before Toya noticed the news crews watching them from a slight distance.

They would never ask Hodaka to his face if he was gay, but as they watched the two of them, it was clear that the reporters had certain suspicions. But Toya didn't care.

"And I'm sorry for the childish way I acted," Hodaka said in his clear, carrying voice. "You worked so hard on the project, and all I did was gripe about the book signings."

The atmosphere in the room relaxed at that

revelation. It was true that Hodaka had refused to do book signings, but not recently, and he had never made a big deal about it. But what he said didn't violate his policy about not telling lies, either.

"Excuse me." The reporter from earlier took a step forward. "This reminds us that you've never held a book signing before. Will you ever make a public appearance for your fans?"

"Considering all the bizarre rumors that started after I appeared on TV, apparently I need to do what I can to protect my privacy." Hodaka's cool tone left no chance for a reply. He was trying to salvage the situation so that when Toya came back to his senses, he wouldn't be embarrassed.

"Writing is a creative profession, and easily affected by outside conditions in the environment. Any unnecessary distractions can interfere with my creativity." He spoke without the slightest hesitation. "If you enjoy my books, I would prefer being left in a position where I can continue writing, rather than being fawned over."

The reporters were already vying to ask questions, so Hodaka simply left with the words, "I'm sorry, the movie is about to start."

Toya was astounded by Hodaka's quick handling of the situation. Until Hodaka nudged him to come along, he simply stood frozen, wondering how to react.

"When the movie's over, meet me at the Redderick," Hodaka said, giving the name of a hotel he had taken Toya to before.

"What—?" Toya's head snapped up.

"The assistant manager will know the room number."

If they could talk things over there, that would be wonderful. Filled with anxiety and thrumming nerves, Toya went into the theater.

The windows on the first floor of the Redderick Hotel offered a view of the city's night lights that could only be described as magnificent. The clear winter air refined each of the lights on the ground into an individual, sparkling jewel.

Passing through the lounge, Toya headed for the front desk. He saw the assistant manager in one corner, a man in his early thirties who was consulting some papers. He was handsome, though in a different way from Hodaka. He looked extremely clever and young, and when he recognized Toya, his face softened. That mixture of professionalism and open youth was somehow beautiful.

"Hi, um—"

"Hello, Mister Sakurai."

The man smiled. Toya was surprised to hear his name and he fell speechless.

"We've been expecting you. Allow me to show you to your room."

"How did you know my name?"

"You've come here before with Mister Hodaka."

Toya's eyes went wide at the man's memory. He also had a vague memory of the man, but he'd thought

he was a concierge, so he hadn't made the connection right away.

"This way, sir." The young man led the way and Toya followed hesitantly.

"You have an amazing memory."

"That's kind of you to say, sir," he answered with a subtly beautiful voice as he led Toya to the room furthest back on the top floor. He rang the bell and a few moments later, the door opened.

Hodaka glanced out and cruelly snapped, "Come in."

"Have a pleasant stay, gentlemen," the assistant manager said.

Hodaka answered the manager without so much as a smile and, leaving Toya at the door, retreated further into the room. Toya was wondering what to do when he heard Hodaka's angry voice.

"What are you waiting for?"

Toya stumbled in and saw Hodaka standing in front of a window, its curtains thrown open to reveal the night view.

"What were you thinking?" Hodaka demanded without turning around.

"I wanted to see you. I had to talk to you. I wanted to prove that I could stand beside you no matter who was watching."

Toya stood tall with emotion and gazed at Hodaka. Standing in the luxurious room, Hodaka looked like part of a painting.

"I wanted to apologize for acting so selfishly toward you. I won't ask you to forgive me. But...I was wrong."

"About what?" Hodaka's voice was frigid, concealing his every emotion. Toya felt further rejected by Hodaka's turned back.

"About wanting to breaking up."

"And?"

"I know it was disrespectful. And I know that I'm being selfish to come back after what I said." Toya's voice shook, he was so ashamed of himself. But he summoned up his courage and went on. "I was only thinking of myself and never tried to understand how you felt. I was supposed to be your boyfriend...but I didn't think. I never said the most important things."

Hodaka said nothing.

"I want to know you better. I want to know how you love me, and how I'll love you, too...but that's not all. I also want you to know everything about me, even the things that make me pathetic."

It was probably far too late for that. But that was honestly how Toya felt.

"If you're not seeing anyone else right now, and if you still have some feelings left for me, I'd like another chance," Toya said, having told Hodaka everything.

The silence was thicker than the veil of night outside. In the stillness that covered them like fine silk, Toya could hear the wild pounding of his heart echoing in his ears.

Finally, Hodaka answered. "Did you think I was a heartless man?" Hodaka continued to stare out the window, but his fingers gripped the curtain. He held the fabric tightly, bunching it in his hand. "Did you think you could do whatever you wanted and it wouldn't

affect me? That I—"

Hodaka's voice broke as Toya threw his arms around him. "Oh, sir!"

That was all Toya needed to know.

He still feels it.

The remnants of their love were still there. That sinful love that pushed them ever onward and left them in anguish.

"Sir—oh, Mister Hodaka..."

Toya held onto Hodaka's shoulders, burying his face in Hodaka's back. Tears poured from his eyes, unstoppable.

"I'm so sorry..." Toya said.

He would never forget the violence of the moment he was raped. But then how had he forgotten the look of excruciating sorrow that had filled Hodaka's face?

"I'll give you a reason," he'd said.

How had Toya missed Hodaka confessing the contents of his heart? Hodaka wasn't the only one who had decided to let it end that night.

Hodaka had given Toya an excuse to leave him. He'd taken on such a horrible role in order to reduce Toya's guilt. Toya thought he finally understood why Hodaka had said what he said that night. He would have accepted whatever decision Toya made. He had prepared himself for it early on. That was the final kindness Hodaka had shown.

"Please forgive me." Toya's voice shook.

Toya had believed Hodaka was stronger because Hodaka was so exceptional. But Toya had been wrong. Even Hodaka suffered when people hurt him. He felt

pain. They were both human beings, but the things that hurt them weren't the same. Toya had just never realized it because he thought Hodaka was superhuman. But he had managed to drag Hodaka down from his lonely throne.

"Sir—I'll never leave you again. Not until the day you tell me to leave."

Hodaka stayed stubbornly silent.

"Please, just tell me how I can make up for this."

Could he atone for the crime he'd committed?

Toya's hands clung to Hodaka's shoulders and, softly, Hodaka covered them with his own. "Promise me," he said as he turned around so suddenly that Toya fell against his chest. "I will never let you leave me."

Before Hodaka could hold his chin, Toya threw his arms around Hodaka's neck and pressed his lips against Hodaka's. The kiss was so loving that Toya's heart ached. He was intoxicated by it and felt dizzy.

"Swear you'll never leave me," Hodaka said.

How could Toya ever leave Hodaka again? Toya didn't believe he could live without Hodaka anymore. Not when he'd discovered Hodaka's lonely soul. Not when he knew the happiness of loving the man as well as his sadness, and then of being loved in return.

"I seal the promise with a kiss," Toya whispered as he pressed his lips once more to Hodaka's. "No matter what happens, I'll never leave you."

He pressed more kisses to Hodaka's eyelids, his forehead, his cheek, his chin, the very tip of his nose.

"I want you to make me a promise, too, sir. I'll tell you whatever I'm thinking, so please, don't make



up your mind about something without asking me. Talk to me about everything. I want to do what I can for you. That's what made us strongest together."

They had let their bodies run loose and never established the most basic ground rules. If that was what had caused their misunderstanding, they had to correct the underlying problem.

"All right. If that's how you want me to treat you, I'll do my best." Hodaka gazed at Toya. "I'm sorry, Toya. I—I love you."

"And I love you, sir."

That might have been the first time he'd ever heard Hodaka apologize. And that was enough.

"Let's go to bed," Toya whispered, pulling on Hodaka's arm.

Since they had reached an understanding, all Toya wanted was to make love to Hodaka.

Toya boldly pushed Hodaka back onto the bed and removed the man's necktie. He tossed it to the floor, and then moved on to unbuttoning Hodaka's shirt. Their roles were reversed, but that was what Toya wanted.

"You're so aggressive," Hodaka said.

Toya pressed his lips to the snatches of bare skin that appeared between the parting cloth, pulling at it eagerly with his lips.

"Where'd you learn to tease like that?" Hodaka whispered lustfully.

He touched Toya's shoulders as he climbed on top

of him. They were falling back into their rhythm.

"I've been starving for you."

Toya brushed his fingers over Hodaka's collarbone, down his breastbone, and over his nipples.

"Stop that!" Hodaka laughed. "Toya, take your clothes off."

"But—"

"Take them off. It's my job to pamper you."

Pressured by his words, Toya pulled off his shirt. He hesitated over what to do after removing his belt and Hodaka seized the opportunity. He sat up and pulled Toya's pants down around his knees. Toya's wet erection was exposed to the air and it twitched.

"Done already?" Hodaka asked.

Toya shook his head. It would take more than foreplay to make him climax that night. He tossed off the rest of his clothes and straddled Hodaka's hips.

"Sir—"

Hodaka sat up to meet him and they kissed. Toya wanted to pamper Hodaka for once. No, that wasn't quite the right word. He wanted Hodaka to experience some pleasure for once. He wanted to excite Hodaka with his body.

"Let me play just a little bit longer, please," Toya wheedled, placing another kiss on Hodaka's skin.

"Toya—"

"I've always wanted to do this."

While they'd been apart, he'd wanted to touch Hodaka so badly. He'd even masturbated to the thought of Hodaka's warmth. Just because he was a man, that didn't mean that he would be happy with anyone who

came along. He needed more than just warm skin from his partners. What Toya needed, the only person who mattered to him, was Kai Hodaka.

Toya slowly moved his head downward and removed Hodaka's belt. He unzipped Hodaka's pants, and then touched the man's still-soft member. Toya pressed it to his lips and kissed it again and again, making wet noises.

"You're so warm, Mister Hodaka—"

Toya wanted to make it warmer, to make it grow, and then to test his work with his body. He brought Hodaka to his lips and licked. He knew that wouldn't be enough, but he intended to use every technique he had ever learned.

"Don't call me that. It's so distant."

"...Kai," Toya corrected himself in a faint voice and Hodaka reached out to stroke his hair. Toya was relieved that he wasn't angry. He buried his face once more and lost himself in the movements of his mouth. He felt a desperate desire for Hodaka's body, so long absent. Toya forgot his shame and trepidation and took the man into his mouth.

"Mm—ngh," Hodaka murmured.

Toya glanced up and saw a sheen of sweat glistening on Hodaka's forehead as he leaned back against the headboard. His sensual expression captivated Toya.

Toya drew Hodaka's sex through his fisted fingers as he gazed up at Hodaka's face, and then bent over once more, flicking his tongue around the swelling tip. He dragged his tongue over the slit to stimulate Hodaka

again and again, and the organ engorged quickly.

"Wow..." Toya gasped.

"What?"

"You're so big."

Toya whispered passionately before taking Hodaka into his mouth once again. As he squeezed his lips tight around it, bobbing up and down, he felt the flesh harden in his mouth while his saliva rolled over it. He felt an indulgence beyond description when he tasted Hodaka's clear fluids.

"You like going down on me that much, huh? I think I asked you that before," Hodaka laughed.

Toya raised his head and said softly, "I love it. Because I love you. It's so good."

Saliva that Toya hadn't managed to swallow trailed from his lips. Seeing Toya's cheeks red with his excitement at pleasing him made Hodaka smile.

"I love licking you, and swallowing you, and everything."

Toya covered Hodaka's balls and the entire length of his shaft with saliva, but he still felt like it wasn't enough. He was sure there were still more ways he could pleasure Hodaka.

"You say such adorable things," Hodaka said.

"Mmf—nngh."

Toya couldn't believe how excited he had become just from going down on Hodaka. But he was already erect and dripping with anticipation. He wanted to play with himself and share Hodaka's pleasure. But he fought back the urge and focused on Hodaka instead.

"You can stop now, Toya." Hodaka's voice

sounded hoarse, as if he was approaching his limit.

"I don't want to..." Toya answered, his face ecstatic with lust. He continued servicing Hodaka, moving his aching tongue over him. He'd kept his mouth open so long that his jaw felt sore, too, but Toya wasn't about to stop. He wanted to swallow up everything that Hodaka could give him.

"You can come," Toya murmured passionately. He flicked his tongue over the hole at the tip of Hodaka's hardness. When his lips closed around the crown and stimulated it, Hodaka tried to push Toya's head away, but Toya was stubborn and held on.

Within moments, Hodaka's flesh pulsed and shot semen into Toya's mouth. Toya pulled away, gulping it down and coughing terribly. The heavy fluid had slipped down his throat and into his body.

"It's so thick," Toya said, smiling blissfully. So Hodaka hadn't been with anyone else. That realization thrilled Toya.

"I can't believe you," Hodaka said. He sat up and grabbed Toya's shoulders while he struggled to catch his breath, and pushed Toya back onto the bed.

"Now I'll have to punish you for disobeying me."

"Sir—"

Hodaka gave Toya a quick kiss and smiled. "No. You said it right before."

"Um...Kai."

"Good. Now I'm going to remind myself how shameless your body is."

Hodaka rubbed Toya's pert nipples with his right hand and Toya couldn't help crying out. Hodaka paid

no attention to it, and instead began feasting on Toya's body.

"I like seeing my marks on you," Hodaka said as he trailed his tongue over Toya's smooth skin, leaving a long line of wetness.

"Ah—angh!" Toya was scared at how good it felt. The more the tip of Hodaka's tongue wet his body, the more his skin tingled with ecstasy. Hodaka was uncovering, one by one, the keys to pleasure that lay just below Toya's skin.

"Did you get excited going down on me?" Hodaka touched Toya's warm skin as he asked.

"Yes—" Toya choked and Hodaka laughed.

"You're already dripping wet. You look like you could blow any second. And you've got a lot to blow."

Hodaka fondled Toya's supple balls, heavy with sweet fluids. Toya shook his head in humiliation. He tried to push Hodaka away reflexively, but Hodaka wasn't about to let him.

"I waited for you, Toya."

"Stop—ah! Mm!"

Toya was embarrassed, but when Hodaka touched him he felt like every part of him would explode from the pleasure. Even worse, he moaned loudly.

"You look like you've been saving it up. Didn't you play with yourself?"

"Yes..." Toya sobbed his answer.

"Was it hard? How pathetic."

Hodaka left a line of marks on Toya's burning skin. He rolled one of Toya's nipples around in his mouth and it hardened immediately. Hodaka rubbed it

between his fingers and Toya moaned.

Toya's pink nipples flushed scarlet and stood erect under Hodaka's pinch play. Every time his tongue touched one, a sharp sensation racked through Toya's body. All Toya could do was sob each time.

Toya knew the air conditioner was on, but the room felt incredibly hot. His sweaty skin clung to the sheets, which became more disheveled every time he moved his arms and legs. But he quickly ceased to care and reached up with both hands to clutch at Hodaka's hair.

"Ah! Oh—no, stop! Mm!"

Hodaka was attacking more than just his nipples: he moved over Toya's legs, his throbbing erection, everywhere. Hodaka held his desire, dripping with shameless fluids, and Toya cried as he stroked it. The delicate motions of Hodaka's fingers only drew out more pleasure. Toya's scorched body had difficulty controlling his ecstasy.

"Ah! No!"

When Hodaka stimulated the flesh holding back his sexual fluids, Toya screamed. He had experienced several smaller climaxes already, and his body was slick with moisture.

Hodaka was apparently no longer satisfied pleasuring Toya with only his hands and took him into his mouth. His tongue and lips gave Toya intense pleasure and all Toya could do was cry out.

"Y-yes. Mm—wait, no! Ah!"

Toya's desire exploded into Hodaka, spreading his creamy fluid through the man's mouth. And Hodaka swallowed it all with an unhurried look on his face.

That caused Toya the most embarrassment of all. It was different when he did that to Hodaka, but Hodaka was amusing himself by fondling Toya, who was embarrassingly at his mercy.

"Now for the next step," Hodaka murmured, putting a pillow under Toya's hips to prop them up. He began gently rubbing Toya's bud of flesh with a fingertip. A few rolling turns around that part that had so far resisted was enough to make Toya's cheeks burn with pleasure.

"Hold your knees up," Hodaka said.

Despite his embarrassment, Toya held his legs up as asked, exposing himself to Hodaka. He was still as embarrassed as ever to be looked at, but that night he wanted to obey Hodaka's every order.

He had already climaxed, but he was still excited. His twitching, fluid-painted organ and his entrance were exposed, trembling in anticipation for Hodaka's shaft.

"Stay like that for a second," Hodaka ordered, and then disappeared.

"Sir!"

Toya bit his lip against the shame of being forced to wait for Hodaka in that position. He squeezed his eyes shut, so he didn't notice when Hodaka came back.

"Ah!"

Toya cried out when he felt something refreshingly cool dribble over his entrance. His eyes snapped open and he saw Hodaka holding one of the hotel's amenity bottles and squeezing out some kind of lotion. A distinctive and relaxing aroma filled the air.

"I'll loosen you up a little bit."

"Nngh! It's so cold!"

"It'll warm up soon."

Toya felt Hodaka smearing the lotion into his entrance, warmed by his body and Hodaka's fingers. Toya thought his lewd body would convulse just from that, but Hodaka held him open gently, making Toya gasp.

"Relax, Toya."

Hodaka's encouraging command melted Toya's heart and loosened his muscles. Hodaka trailed his wet finger over him. Toya gasped and, in the same moment, Hodaka slipped his finger inside.

"Nngh! Ah—"

"If you get this excited from just my finger, I'm not going to get much out of you," Hodaka chuckled. "It's still cute and pink."

"Stop—"

Hodaka's lotioned finger pushed even further inside. He felt the contractions of Toya's walls again and again and when he'd decided they were relaxed enough, he slipped in another finger.

Toya's insides sucked Hodaka's finger in, rejoicing. He felt Hodaka's touch in every corner of his greedy body. When Hodaka rubbed his fingers over the flesh, it forced a shrill cry out of Toya. It had been so long since they'd made love that Toya felt some pain. But Hodaka fondled Toya's arousal, skillfully distracting him.

"Sir—oh, sir, please—please!"

Hodaka's two fingers were approaching the limit of what they could accomplish rubbing over Toya's

flesh. What Toya really wanted was something hotter and thicker.

"Are you talking to me? That's not my name," Hodaka teased.

"Please—Kai—" Toya wanted something that would let him feel completely connected to Hodaka. "Please. I want—" Toya begged, his breath ragged.

"What?"

"In my...other...mouth," Toya begged, trembling as he pronounced his embarrassing request. "I want you there."

"What part of me?"

Hodaka's question drew tears to Toya's eyes. Just one little word, but it was so hard to say. Toya begged for what he wanted, despite his embarrassment, and Hodaka pressed a kiss to his forehead.

"Very good," he whispered. "Now for your reward."

"Will you let me do it the way I want?" Toya asked in a ragged voice and Hodaka nodded generously. Relieved to be granted his request, Toya moved to straddle Hodaka, despite his nervousness. That was what he wanted to do, even if it was embarrassing. He wanted to show Hodaka how much he had yearned for him.

"Wait, Toya." Hodaka tried to stop him. Maybe he was worried about trying a position they'd never used before.

"It's fine," Toya insisted. With the help of the lotion, Toya thought it would be all right. Toya rested his hand on the man's shaft and gingerly lowered his hips.

Toya gasped.

He had been loosened up a bit, but it had been so long that it hurt to take Hodaka in. Wincing, Toya tried to relax and adjust his position. He let out a silent gasp, and then strained to relax his muscles and take the man in. Hodaka gently supported Toya's body, trying to help.

"Ah—ah!"

It hurt. But Hodaka's warmth, which had claimed Toya's attention, was more precious to him than anything. As his body trembled, he slowly lowered himself over the man's shaft. An incomparable sensation of foreignness filled his lower body. He was filled by Hodaka—so full he could burst.

"Ah—mm!"

His voice faltered sweetly, powerfully erotic. He was embarrassed to hear himself, but he wanted to take Hodaka in as quickly as possible and he pushed down to meet the object that unfolded him and entered his body.

"You're in—" Toya said, his breathing rough so he couldn't speak clearly. But he was suddenly frenzied and he rocked his hips. He could never do something so humiliating with anyone but Hodaka.

"Is it good?" Hodaka asked.

"You're so deep—"

Hodaka was deep inside, hitting a good spot, and it felt incredible. As the hardness gripped by Toya's flesh rubbed past his opening, it stimulated a sensitive part of him. Toya felt on the edge of orgasm.

"How deep is it?"

"It's t-touching! Ah!"

"Touching what?" Hodaka's slightly hoarse voice was incredibly sensual.



"So deep—it's—ah!"

Thrusting his body up and down, intoxicated, Toya guided Hodaka to the best place. Hodaka wasn't playing with him, but Toya was still hard, his organ surging with creamy, obscene fluid. Toya saw the drops fall onto Hodaka's belly, but he couldn't stop them.

"It's great—Kai!"

He felt Hodaka deep inside his body. His flesh closed tightly around Hodaka and Toya's hips fell into a lewd rhythm.

"No—no—it's too much!"

Hodaka's huge, warm sex plunged into Toya's body. The robust flesh entered Toya and stretched him in every direction until it was hard to even take a breath.

"You're in control," Hodaka said.

He was right. Toya had yearned to be filled. He'd wanted Hodaka to slide inside him, deep and rough, filling every available space.

Toya's walls clung to Hodaka's shaft, welcoming every sensation. Toya was the one moving, but he was in a trance as his hips rocked, as if he were a puppet to his passion.

"Do you move your body like this with other men?"

"No! Only you, sir—I—love you," Toya declared haltingly as his muscles clamped down on Hodaka. The moment the panting whisper had left Toya's lips, Hodaka grabbed Toya's hips and pulled him down.

"Kai!"

Toya called his lover's name as he came, and then he felt Hodaka's semen explode inside him. Twitching

slightly, Toya also spattered his milky fluid, all the way up Hodaka's chest.

"Ah—"

"Are you all right?"

"Mm." Toya nodded, exhausted. He sat on top of Hodaka without breaking their connection. Finally he realized that he might be heavy on Hodaka's stomach.

"I'm sorry." His voice was completely hoarse. He tried to pull himself away, but Hodaka held his hips fast.

"Not yet, Toya."

"Angh!"

With the man still deep inside him, Toya was bent in half as Hodaka held him against his body.

"K-Kai...I can't keep going."

"That's not fair, getting me so excited and then saying that. You still want more, don't you?"

Hodaka had taken back the initiative. He took Toya's right hand, which gripped the sheets, and moved it over to touch his own penis.

"Ah..."

Toya couldn't believe it, but he was still erect.

"You weren't lying about not leaving me, right?"

"Kai—" Toya clung to Hodaka and bit his shoulder.

Hodaka grew hard inside Toya and he began to move his hips, pushing past Toya's walls. His hardness rubbed along Toya's engorged flesh until Toya was driven to the edge. Toya's own member was rubbed between their bellies, covering itself in sweet fluid, threatening to burst at any moment.

"No, I-I'm coming—"

It felt like shards of pleasure were stabbing into his brain. They pierced him again and again, dragging Toya up unending heights.

"That was quick," Hodaka said.

"I'm coming—I'm—I want to—"

Maybe something that had held Toya in check had finally broken. Hodaka hadn't given him permission, but Toya took his penis in his own hand and began to fondle it, moaning desperately all the while.

"Go in—all the way!" Toya said. His hands were sticky with fluid, but that just increased his pleasure.

"Go ahead and come. Don't let me stop you."

"Pull out—please, sir—" Toya begged, his voice something between a scream and a luscious moan. His words slurred together. He wondered if he'd managed to share that feeling with Hodaka.

"I told you not to call me that."

"Kai! Kai—I love you—"

The penetration came faster.

"Mm—!"

Hodaka's lips sealed Toya's mouth, drinking in the rest of his sweet sighs. Toya didn't know how many times Hodaka had kissed him that day. He'd lost count. And that filled him with joy. Joy so strong that he thought his breathing might stop.

Chapter Ten

It was after midnight. It was a very strange time to visit people, but that was the time it tended to be when Toya finally got to Hodaka's apartment after finishing all his other errands.

Work had been hectic and Toya's life refused to calm down professionally or privately. He hoped things would start to clear up soon.

When he rang Hodaka's doorbell, Hodaka peeked out and seemed like he was in a good mood. Maybe he'd just finished writing. Toya had been able to pick up on those kinds of subtleties in Hodaka's moods lately.

"Good evening."

Toya greeted Hodaka formally, but Hodaka just shrugged and said, "Hey."

"Were you on your way out?" Toya asked, noticing the heavy zip-up jacket in Hodaka's hands. Hodaka never went out at that hour.

"I thought I'd buy some food for us."

"There's nothing but convenience stores around here, though."

"I know."

"You were going to a convenience store?" Toya raised his eyebrows at the incongruent image.

"Yes, even I, Kai Hodaka, go to convenience stores."

"But is there anything you can eat there?"

There were usually only additive-laden onigiri and prepackaged meals, and Toya didn't want Hodaka eating instant ramen.

"I can cook something. You have ingredients at least, right?" Toya asked.

"Odds and ends..."

Hodaka didn't usually keep any food on hand. Toya chuckled and, after borrowing Hodaka's bathroom, went straight to the kitchen. Taking stock of the fridge, all that looked usable were some mushrooms, bacon, English muffins, butter, and mayonnaise. There were also the makings for a simple salad: lettuce, arugula, mustard, and a bottle of salad dressing.

That was enough.

Toya took it all out, though he suspected the salad was supposed to be for Hodaka's breakfast and he silently apologized to the maid. He would send her a fax later.

"I can make something simple with this in just a minute."

"Aren't you tired?"

"Yes, but I'm hungry, too."

Hodaka's concern pleased Toya, but it had been so long since they'd seen each other that all Toya wanted to do was fix them a meal.

"Why didn't you eat?" Hodaka asked.

"You just want to hear me say I was eager to see you, don't you?"

"Yeah." When Hodaka smiled, Toya felt a deep intimacy flow between them. "It makes me happy to

hear you say that."

Hodaka's words sent an unusual flutter through Toya's heart. Toya gazed at him adoringly before remembering that he was supposed to cook. But if he tried to use a knife in that state, he would cut himself. Toya took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves, and then got down to cooking.

It had been about two weeks since he and Hodaka had gotten back together. But Toya had already made several decisions in that time. Decisions that he wouldn't let even Hodaka interfere with.

"Could you get some plates out, Mister Hodaka?"

Hodaka was sitting in the dining room looking bored, but he got up to select dishes from the cabinet.

Toya sautéed the bacon and mushrooms together and seasoned them with mayonnaise, and then spread everything on the English muffins to make quick open-faced sandwiches.

"Impressive," Hodaka said.

"I've been on my own for a long time."

Hodaka started brewing some coffee, but he was oddly grumpy about it. "I live by myself, too."

"But you have a maid."

Hodaka was acting so petulant that Toya had to smile.

"So you still don't want to live together?" Hodaka asked.

"That's the one thing we absolutely cannot do," Toya declared. He turned to face Hodaka. "I want to keep business and pleasure strictly separate. If we lived together, that distinction would start to fade and I would

just let you spoil me all over again."

"I can't argue with that." Hodaka smirked. "But you've been so busy lately that we haven't been able to see each other."

"Were you lonely?"

"Yeah."

Hodaka admitted it so readily that it caught Toya off-guard and he started laughing.

"What?" Hodaka asked.

"Nothing. I'm just happy."

"You enjoy it when I'm sad? You've become a sadist," Hodaka snapped as he bit into a muffin.

Toya wanted to tell Hodaka that he was adorable even when he was sad, but he knew that if he said it, Hodaka would make him pay. So Toya said nothing.

When they'd finished eating, Toya had some of the coffee Hodaka made. They chatted about unimportant things for a while before Toya cut in to ask, "Are you busy this weekend, sir?"

"Not in particular."

"Good. I want to do something with you."

Hodaka frowned suspiciously. "Do something? Like go shopping?"

"No." Toya took a key out of his pocket. The metal was warm from the heat of his body. "I'm moving and was wondering if you could help me."

"Really? Moving where?"

Of course Hodaka didn't know. Toya hadn't told anyone that he was moving.

"To Shinbashi."

Hodaka's eyes widened as Toya said the name. He

stared at him. Hodaka so rarely showed any cracks in his cool façade that the sight pleased Toya.

"Shinbashi is still inside Hamamatsu, so it's just within walking distance of here. Are you surprised?"

"Yes, very."

Toya smiled to see Hodaka so taken aback.

"I could only afford a one-bedroom apartment with a separate kitchen, but if I need a place to stretch out I can always come here. This key is for you, sir."

Toya had gotten another bonus when *Incubation* had followed the success of *Emergence*. And since he was getting a raise, he didn't have to worry about his budget, so he decided to take the opportunity to leave the apartment he'd had since college. It had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, but he'd been lucky and found a new property where he had been offered his choice of apartments.

It would take longer to get to work, but it had a separate kitchen and separate room for the bath and, most importantly, it was closer to Hodaka. Shinbashi was the closest station, so even if Toya was seen there all the time, it wouldn't be suspicious.

"Does that mean you're inviting me to come over and play?" Hodaka asked.

"Yes. It's a little early, but consider it my Valentine's Day gift."

"I can't believe you didn't tell me about this," Hodaka said with a small smile.

"I'm sorry. But I wanted it to be a surprise."

"If you think this will make me forgive everything, you underestimate me!"

Despite what he said, Hodaka sounded excited, so Toya found himself teasing in return. "Then you don't want it?"

"I didn't say that. I'll make an exception this time."

Holding the key loosely in his right hand, Hodaka pulled Toya into his lap. The chair creaked under their weight, but they paid it no mind.

"Now I need to get you something, too. What would you like?"

Instead of answering, Toya bent down to gently kiss Hodaka's lips. There was only one thing he wanted. A sweet, passionate kiss from his exceptional lover.

The Guilty
A Secret Look

Sozan Publishing had a visitors lounge on the first floor where people could conduct quick meetings. When novice author Yo Amano came for a meeting with his editor Toya Sakurai, they often met either there or at a nearby café. Toya sat on the sofa across from Amano, the evening light that came in suffusing Toya's soft hair with a pale glow.

It should be illegal to look that good, Amano thought to himself.

Amano considered love affairs with coworkers to be strictly off-limits, but Toya had been an exception. Amano, who was usually so even-keel, had rushed into pursuing Toya without any thought for the consequences.

It hadn't affected their relationship badly, though, so he didn't regret it. It may even have strengthened the trust between them as author and editor—though that could just have been Amano's prejudice.

"And in this chapter, the protagonist—uh, Mister Amano?" Toya cut himself off hesitantly and Amano looked up with a start.

"I'm sorry, Mister Sakurai."

"Is something wrong?" Toya's delicate features seemed better suited to the literature and poetry

department where he had worked before, but he was actually a huge fan of mystery novels. He gave excellent advice and fought hard and enthusiastically to produce the best story possible. So even in the pulp novel division, he had a strong record.

Amano didn't know many editors, but he knew that he was lucky to have met someone as passionate as Toya. When Toya's dedication had pushed Amano's first publication to unexpected sales levels and a serialization contract, Amano was thrilled.

"I was just thinking," Amano said.

"About what?"

"Let's just forget about it. Sorry." Amano apologized for getting distracted during a meeting and Toya accepted it and returned to the topic of the manuscript.

Since Amano had gone over the draft carefully before submitting it, Toya didn't have much to critique. But he pointed out a few important problems that made Amano groan at himself. Toya had a very creative way of looking at things and, if tempered by others, his view definitely added depth to the novels he worked on. Amano wanted to hurry home and consider the suggestions right away.

"But what were you thinking about before? Was it about the manuscript?" Toya asked excitedly, which Amano found adorable. He smiled and shook his head.

"No. It's just, last night I reread *Emergence* and *Incubation* before I went to bed," Amano said shyly. Toya's expression softened.

To a fledgling author like Amano, Kai Hodaka

was a leader in the field whom he respected very much. His incomparable genius, which had brought to the world masterpieces that transcended the mystery genre, was surely the envy of every creator.

"Didn't you do that once before, Mister Amano?"

"I love those books. I can read them again and again."

Hodaka's latest series had marked a new era in the mystery genre, featuring romantic elements with unprecedented importance to the plot.

The worlds Hodaka had created before were intellectual and rigidly logical, but they tended to lack emotion. Then *Emergence* came out. Hodaka had added a critical element to the story that explored love. It had transformed his writing into something even more remarkable. Amano couldn't help but be amazed by that.

There was more to life than winning and losing, but Amano realized that he'd lost. What was worse, Amano knew exactly how much Toya had suffered because of his relationship with Hodaka, so Amano couldn't trust Hodaka completely. But since Toya seemed more relaxed lately, their relationship had to be less rocky.

So long as Amano made a distinction between Hodaka the author and Hodaka the man, he could still be enthralled by his books.

"There aren't that many books out there that you feel lucky to have read. So I feel like I should thank you for making it possible for me to read one."

Toya must have thought it was just praise, because

all he said was, "You're welcome."

"I bet the only thing that could have inspired Mister Hodaka to write a book like that is an incredible lover," Amano teased. "Am I right?"

With their meeting over, Amano felt he could talk more casually.

"Mister Hodaka isn't the sort of person who would allow his private life to affect his creativity." Toya's quick deflection brought a grin to Amano's lips.

"What is Mister Hodaka like in private, anyway?"

"I shouldn't say..."

Toya's ears turned pink and he fell silent. Amano had gotten over Toya, but seeing the object of his old crush act so unguarded still charmed him. Amano felt himself getting carried away.

"He seems like he would take care of everything. I bet he cleans and does the dishes, is a great driver, and is also really awesome at sports. Oh, and you said he was a pro-level pool player, too."

As soon as Amano mentioned pool, Toya nodded awkwardly.

"I wish I could play against him sometime. I want him to take it seriously, though, so we would have to bet on it."

"Bet?"

"Like, to be lovers or something," Amano suggested jokingly.

Toya's eyes suddenly widened in shock and Amano wondered if something had happened. He turned around to see someone familiar coming toward them.

"Mister Hodaka..." Amano said.

It seemed too incredible to be true, but Kai Hodaka was walking toward them. He couldn't have been there to see Toya so early in the day. Amano's heart started to pound faster. He had only seen Hodaka face-to-face twice, so he was totally unprepared. He couldn't stay composed. Even Toya's cheeks were flushed, and Amano could tell that he was flustered, too.

"Hey, there. It's been a while," Hodaka said.

Amano started to stand up, but Hodaka stopped him with a haughty gesture and stood beside him. His eyes glinted, but he didn't look angry. His lips twisted into a smile.

On the face of it, Toya and Amano were meeting as author and editor, so Hodaka had no grounds for suspicion. But facing off against a former rival in love put even Amano on edge.

"I just thought I'd come say hello. I'm not interrupting, am I?"

Hodaka's soothing baritone reached deep into Amano's heart. All he could do was shake his head. He knew he was being intimidated, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"Not at all. I hope we're not keeping you from your business here, sir," Toya said.

Hodaka answered with a shrug of the shoulders and curling lips. For a moment, his hard expression softened. "I came to give an interview to a magazine."

"We were just talking about your books, sir." Toya spoke very humbly, probably because Amano was with them.

"That's right. I read *Incubation* in one day. It was so good, I thought I would cry. I can't wait to read the next installment." Amano almost wanted to laugh at how his speech faltered.

They had first met by chance in a bar. The second time, they had confronted each other over Toya, so Amano had been worked up. He'd said a lot of things he regretted, but he hadn't seen Hodaka since. After that, Amano had also gone through a trial period with Toya where they had played at being lovers. If Hodaka didn't like him, that was only natural. And if he rubbed Amano's face in his victory, there was nothing Amano could do about it.

"Thank you." Hodaka's response was brief, but it didn't sound unpleasant. Amano was relieved.

"I guess I'll be going, then," Amano said.

"What? But Mister Amano, what about our lunch?" Toya asked.

"It's okay. Invite Mister Hodaka instead," Amano whispered next to Toya's ear.

"But..."

"I don't really want to watch all this." Amano gathered up the papers that were spread over the table and stuffed them into his bag. "And I want to get home and start working on those revisions."

Amano bowed, and then started to walk past, when Hodaka unexpectedly spoke up. "I liked your book *Appearance*, too."

"What?" Amano stopped in surprise.

"The protagonist's final monologue ties back to the prologue, right? I thought that was an interesting device."

"You noticed? Er, I mean—you read my book?!"

"Sure." Hodaka nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Amano gaped at him in shock.

Many people tied the prologue and epilogue of a story together, so he'd really racked his brains about how best to do that. After time, though, he considered the device too awkward, but none of his readers had noticed. Of course, other authors considered it so overdone that they had laughed at him. It had been a mistake.

"Why would you read anything by me?"

"I don't have time to waste on uninteresting books," Hodaka said. His response was unequivocal.

Even if Hodaka did read other authors like Amano as part of his work, it was still hard to believe that Hodaka would pick up Amano's entirely unknown debut novel. He must have read it because his friend Kotaro Ichikura, another mystery writer, said he'd enjoyed it. Or maybe it had been to find out more about Amano and Toya's relationship. But whatever the reason, Hodaka had read Amano's book and liked it, and that made Amano proud.

"Th-thank you, sir!" Amano was embarrassed at how high-pitched his voice was. A complex look came over Toya's face as he watched the two of them talk.

"What's wrong, Mister Sakurai?" Amano asked.

"Well, whenever I tell you I'm looking forward to your next book, you never react like that for me."

"Well..." Stymied, Amano looked at Toya. The corner of Hodaka's mouth curled in a smile.

At the sight of that indulgent gaze, Amano felt

something that had long been buried in his heart fade away. There were bonds between the two other men that no one could violate.

"Well, I'll be in touch when I have the corrections done, Mister Sakurai," Amano said and bowed to Toya and Hodaka.

"Thanks, Mister Amano."

Amano didn't know what Hodaka was thanking him for, but he knew he shouldn't question it too deeply. He left quickly, though he didn't leave the building. He lingered for a bit out of sight, and watched the two of them. He saw them in profile, talking to each other about something, with Hodaka's eyes riveted on Toya.

If their gazes had been threads in the air, they would have been tangled together in a web of love that no one could cut. Despite his intelligent features, Toya could be surprisingly dense. He didn't seem to notice how tenderly Hodaka looked at him. But it was definitely better that way. If he ever realized he was being looked at like that, he would die of embarrassment. Hodaka's love and tenderness for Toya poured out of him, undeniable.

When Amano had met Hodaka for the first time, the man had been extremely jittery and sour-tempered. But he was nothing like that anymore. He seemed capable of protecting Toya.

If they continued acting like that, in no time they would become the subject of rumors again. But Toya said they were prepared to face it, so Amano was sure they would be all right. It would just be cruel to throw cold water on them when they seemed so happy together.

Besides, Amano should have been proud; he had

helped improve the relationship between an author he respected and an editor he loved.

I should find someone for myself sometime.

Amano considered that, and then wrung his hands together.

"But first I need to write something incredible."

It had to be an amazing novel that would impress Hodaka. He could worry about love after that. Amano made that vow in a voice low enough that no one would hear him, and then walked out of the building while humming quietly.

Postscript

Hello, I'm Katsura Izumi.

The third volume of *The Guilty* series is already here!

Since this is the last volume of a longer story, I tried to tie it as closely as I could to the first two books for all my loyal readers.

All that's left now is the fourth volume, which tells the further tales of our sinful lovers, and its reissue is fast approaching. There still aren't any plans to issue it in this mass paperback format.

I also feel very blessed to have had the first volume of *The Guilty* recorded as a CD. It's just full of Hodaka's needling and Toya's sexy comebacks. I loved it, and I hope you will, too.

Since this volume marks a definite end in the story, I wanted to try and get a glimpse of Hodaka's psychology. But since this series is told from Toya's perspective, it turned out to be really hard to do.

Since we've come this far, I was also able to include scenes I'd been wanting to write for a while. That made me really happy. People have told me they

like this scene or that scene in their fan letters, and so that just makes it even better.

For the sex scenes, I'd gotten a request from my editor to include positions we've never done before, so I spent a lot of time pondering over what to use. When I went back through the story to check everything for the new editions, even I was shocked at how strange they were! (laughs)

Since I had already written the epilogues from Toya's perspective and then from Hodaka's perspective, this time I decided to try out Amano's point of view. It was hard writing about Toya and Hodaka's intimacy from a third person's point of view, so I went at it through trial and error. I hope you enjoy it!

I always thought Amano would make a great boyfriend, but I could never give him a chance until now. (laughs) I hope with all my heart that he can find happiness!

I am so grateful to Hinako Takanaga for her stunning illustrations and everyone on my editing team. Thank you all so much.

I also want to thank all of you who've decided to pick up my book. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

I've also published a book called *Sweet Seduction* with Daria Bunko. This is another story between characters of two very different ages, but it's completely different from *The Guilty* series, so if you're interested, I hope you give it a try!

Until we meet again,
Katsura Izumi

* For information about professional and unofficial publications, please check the site
http://www.k-izumi.jp/

Congratulations on the reissue of volume three, Miss Izumi!

Here we are in the third volume of the series! I love these stories about older men, and this book drives me wild every time! But this time—wow!! I felt so sorry for Mister Hodaka...I was totally on fire! (huh?) Toya is so dumb! He's so negative! You need to do better, boy! But since Toya managed to get a reaction like that out of Mister Hodaka, I guess I approve. (I think everyone knows which reaction I mean...) These two are just too cute when they start to get comfortable together. I'm sorry for being the one who got picked to draw them! I drew them, praying that I was good enough to make people think "Hodaka's hot!" or "Toya is so dirty." (um...) I just hope I haven't shattered your image of them. I'm so sad that this is the last part of the story...But thank you Miss. Izumi and our editor for putting up with me. Thank you for telling such an incredible story!

XX Hinako Takanaga XX

