

whether to flee or stand his, or rather, Seiji's ground. "And how do you have a key?" he added at Seiji's whispered prompt.

"The deal with Ryuu was that I'd pay the entire rent until the lease expires," Daitaro said sleekly. "And if I'm paying the rent...I get a key."

The three were silent for a few moments and then Seiji stepped out from behind Takashi. "I understand," he said sadly. He looked at his wristwatch. "It's late, but I think I can stay at a friend's place tonight and figure something out tomorrow, I—"

"Well, if I'm so unwelcome," Daitaro said with boozy mock umbrage and getting haughtily to his feet. "I'll say good-night." And he swaggered out.

Takashi closed the door after him and leaned against it. "Ryuu's going to kill him."

"Ryuu should have been here to protect me," Seiji said dully, staring at the floor.

"I think Ryuu's doing the best he can under the circumstances," Takashi said, hoping he sounded reasonable.

"It's not good enough." Seiji looked up, his eyes dry, but very sad. "I can't stay here tonight. What if Daitaro comes back?"

"You have a bolt and chain on the door," Takashi said, looking it over. "That should keep him out." Takashi sighed and leaned his head against the door. "I could stay and sleep on the couch."

"What?" Seiji hadn't heard him speaking into the door.

Takashi turned around and said, "I said, I could sleep on the couch."

Without a word, Seiji walked forward and put his arms around his surprised friend. "You don't have to sleep on the couch," he murmured into Takashi's crisp white shirt.

"What?" Takashi could not believe his ears.

Seiji looked up. His eyes seemed warm with desire to Takashi, something Takashi had wanted to see for a long time, but just at that moment seemed a little strange. "I said, you don't have to—" Seiji began.

"I, ah, heard you," Takashi stammered. "I'm just, y'know, kind of surprised, I mean, I, you, you're not exactly yourself, Seiji."

"Yes, it's been a rough day. Finding Daitaro here didn't make it any better, Takashi," Seiji said reasonably. "But you don't have to sleep on the couch. You can go home. I'll be all right by myself." He stepped back from Takashi's embrace as if to prove it.

"Ah, I see," Takashi said, hoping he wasn't blushing. "I'll see you tomorrow then. Don't forget to lock these." He gestured to the inside locks. "And you have my cell if you need anything. Anything at all."

“I might need an escort home tomorrow,” Seiji said with a sweet, platonic smile.

“It will be my pleasure,” Takashi said, looping his arm around Seiji for a manly one-armed hug. “Good night.”

Seiji locked up behind Takashi and made short work of disposing of the empty champagne bottle and putting away the ice bucket he’d never seen before. Daitaro must have brought it with him. In the bedroom, Seiji found a few other things Daitaro must have brought with him and was so angry and used such language, he was glad Takashi wasn’t there to hear it. Or see the designer condoms and lube Daitaro had left on the nightstand.

The next day at work, after a halfway decent night of sleep, Seiji tracked Ryuu down and handed him a bag of Daitaro’s condoms and lube. “Tell your brother I don’t care if he’s paying the rent, I want him to stay the hell away from me.” The effort of keeping his voice steady made it all come out in a rush.

Ryuu stared into the bag, looking puzzled. “Where did these—?”

“When I got home last night, Daitaro was in our—I mean, my apartment—I mean, the apartment he’s paying the rent on that I live in, waiting for me,” Seiji said, getting angry again. “And then I found these—these things by the bed.”

“Why would Daita—?”

“Take a wild fucking guess, Ryuu,” Seiji hissed, furiously. “Or ask Takashi. He was there last night. He chased him off.” He stormed off under Shimada’s shocked look.

Figuring he better let Seiji cool off, Ryuu sought out Takashi, who confirmed Seiji’s story about Daitaro being there, waiting for him the night before. “I see,” Ryuu said sadly. “It’s a good thing you were there, to, uh...to protect Seiji. Um...thanks.”

“You’re welcome. What are you going to do?” Takashi asked.

“What Seiji told me to do,” Ryuu practically snapped. “Tell my brother to stay the fuck away from him.” He blew out an angry breath. “And make sure Daitaro isn’t there every night when Seiji goes home...what a fucking mess.”

“I can help,” Takashi offered. He stared pleasantly into Ryuu’s assessing look. “I mean it, Ryuu, I want to help. Seiji’s my friend, I don’t want to see him hurt. By anyone.”

“Okay, okay...thanks.” Ryuu squared his shoulders and went off to confront his dreadful elder brother.

Thenceforth, either Ryuu or Takashi saw Seiji home and into the apartment. Takashi was pretty good friends with Daitaro’s secretary and was able to get his after work schedule from her most days. On

days when it was a mystery where he'd be, Takashi or Ryuu would call him to find out. There were a few suspicious evenings when Seiji and his escort got to the apartment and it seemed like someone had been there. Eventually Daitaro gave up and confined his Seiji harassment to the office in the form of impossible jobs and a mountain of work. As Ryuu's mother recovered from her surgery, she demanded more and more of his time in the evening, until eventually there were few evenings when Ryuu could see Seiji home and they could fall into bed for a few hours. Their express sex life made Seiji feel used and, he was sorry to admit, but only to himself, that he was glad Ryuu, his stressed-out, demanding, domineering lover, was too busy to see him very often. Seiji kept waiting, hoping, wanting to miss Ryuu, as in absence makes the heart grow fonder. But the person he found himself missing was easy-going Takashi when Takashi was not around, which was seldom.

So the time Takashi and Seiji spent together was more peaceful, but Seiji felt guilty for it being so. The stress Seiji felt was that Ryuu's mother was on the mend, which was good. But Ryuu was beginning to talk about leaving his family and settling down permanently with Seiji, something Seiji easily hid his lack of interest in, due to Ryuu never really listening to him anyway. He'd even lost most of his sexual attraction to Ryuu by then.

Ryuu had been as understanding as he was capable of being when Seiji seemed to lose interest in sex. Their sex life was awkward even under the best of circumstances. Seiji was shy and nervous and Ryuu was demanding and impatient in bed. He'd always been the lead in all his endeavors before and after he'd met and fallen in love with Seiji, so it never occurred to him to be on anyone else's schedule. Ryuu was, in fact, something of a bully when he didn't have the time or inclination to understand someone else's point of view. He knew he knew more than Seiji about most things and if he waited for Seiji to get around to figuring out how he felt about sex, they'd still both be virgins. Ryuu estimated he'd be able to come out to his family and leave it because they'd never accept a homosexual son, let alone one in a couple. He'd finally be able to quit Shimada Miyagi and he and Seiji could start a new life. They could even leave Tokyo as they had a university friend in Nagasaki Ryuu had been thinking of contacting about work there. It didn't matter what they did for money, as long as they could be together without any obstacles to their happiness.

So it was a great and horrible shock to him that when he outlined this difficult, but beautiful, future to Seiji, Seiji then broke up with him. "You're kidding...I'm willing to give up everything for you!" Ryuu yelled. "Why?"

They were standing on the street, so Seiji didn't answer him until they were sitting on a bench in a small, deserted park near his home, the one he'd formerly shared with Ryuu. "Because I can never trust you again," he said. He'd gone through this in his head over and over. There was nothing Ryuu could say to upset him. Except...

"I love you, Seiji, why are you doing this?" Ryuu's voice was raw with sorrow, fear and dread.

Seiji stared at his hands folded in his lap and didn't say anything.

"Why can't you trust me?" Ryuu finally asked in a more normal voice.

"If your family can break us up once, they can do it again," Seiji said softly. "I don't want to give everything up, I want to stay in Tokyo with my friends and family, with you...but we could never be happy, there'd always be some problem with your family. I'm tired of hiding how much I loved you. I-I guess I got so good at hiding it, I lost it. I'm sorry, Ryuu, I just don't love you anymore."

"Seiji, I promise, in the future--"

"What future, Ryuu? The one where we're poor and hate each other because we're all we've got?" Seiji asked bitterly. "Or the one where we just live together because we're too scared or proud to break up. Let's be brave and end it here. Please. Before I really start to hate you."

"You hate me?" Ryuu nearly yelped.

"I could, I really think I could."

"Seiji, I did the best I could," Ryuu said when he could control his voice. "What would you have done in my place?"

"Hindsight is 20/20, Ryuu, but I wouldn't have lied about our relationship for so long," Seiji said, almost brutally. "And if I-I ever have another relationship with anyone, I'm going to be honest with everyone about it from the very beginning."

"I couldn't hurt my family, they wouldn't have understood," Ryuu said helplessly.

"You didn't give them a chance to understand or accept me in your life," Seiji said with rising bitterness. "You didn't give me a chance to really be part of your life. It was like you were ashamed of me."

"I was never ashamed of you!"

"But that's what it was like," Seiji said, feeling very tired of everything, especially this conversation. "That's what it always felt like with you. That I was something you had to hide, like a bad habit or--or a crime or something like that." He sighed. "And that made us weak, so your brother, your mom, your sister-in-law, really anyone who found out about us, could break us up. And here we are now. I was

never very strong in the first place, Ryuu, I thought if I just loved you enough, everything would work itself out. But loving you, or trying to love you enough, just wore me out, until I don't feel any more love for you. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm just done, I'm sorry." Seiji swallowed hard, but did nothing about the tears streaming silently down his face.

Ryuu stared furiously in front of him. "It's Takashi, isn't it?" he demanded. "Isn't i-?" He turned angrily to glare an answer out of Seiji, but his rage was choked off by Seiji's tearstained face and empty eyes. Seiji just shook his head and stared at him. "I'm sorry," Ryuu whispered. He put his arms around Seiji's limp form and whispered, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," over and over until Seiji finally pushed him away.

"I can get home by myself, Ryuu," he said, getting to his feet.

"I have to check for Daitaro," Ryuu said.

"He's out of town with Takashi," Seiji said bluntly. "Good-bye."

Ryuu didn't exactly give up on getting Seiji back after this, but he had to proceed with great caution. His family was too busy showing him pictures of prospective brides to notice how distracted he was. They assumed he was just thinking about the wife and family in his future.

Work for Seiji at Shimada Miyagi became a nightmare. He was depressed, and then the horrific automotive campaign competition with the MM agency, that ended up with MM getting the contract, was the last straw for him. He quit and moved back to his parents' home and slept for the better part of two weeks before he could see anyone.

In those two weeks, Takashi came to his house every other day to see how he was doing. He introduced himself as Seiji's friend and former colleague, left his contact information so they could let him know if he could do anything for Seiji. In the course of these visits, Takashi impressed Seiji's rather puzzled parents with his devotion and made friends with the family dog. In those same two weeks, Ryuu, who was living only three blocks away, left messages on Seiji's cell phone that Seiji never returned, but he never once showed his face at Seiji's home.

When Seiji finally snapped out of his funk, he began to look for work and called Takashi to thank him for stopping by and being a friend. Takashi happened to be on his way to visit him, so they wound up having dinner and going to a movie. They did not talk about Ryuu, Daitaro, or Shimada Miyagi. The next day his mother asked him if the previous evening had been a date and Seiji said he wasn't sure. His mom then said something that astounded him. She said, "Takashi seems like a nice young man, your father and I just want you to be