

*Fallen  
Sakura*

APRIL MOONE

To Jennifer, my biggest fan and little sister.

# Glossary

Baka (bah-kah)

Idiot, moron, stupid.

Chan (cha-n)

Honorific reserved for young loved ones, primarily female. Childish and inappropriate when used by older persons.

Desu (dess)

Polite copula.

Ee (Aa-eh)

Less formal way of answering “yes,” rude if used inappropriately.

Gaijin (guy-gin)

Foreigner. Literally “outsider” and considered rude.

Hai (hai)

Yes.

Hime-sama (hah-meh-sah-mah)

Princess.

Itai (ih-tie)

Ouch/that hurt.

Kanpai (kahn-pai)

Cheers!

Kā-san (kah-sahn)

Mom, less formal than Mother.

Kuso (kuh-soo)

Shit.

Mattaku (mah-tah-coo)

Geez, for crying out loud.

Ne (neh)

Hey.

No Honorific

Very intimate, reserved for family and very close friends; considered disrespectful when intimacy is not earned.

Onee-chan (oh-nēh-chan)

Big sister, when used in direct address.

Oji-san (oh-gih-sahn)

Uncle.

Sakura (sah-coo-rah)

Cherry blossom or cherry tree.

San (sahn)

Typical honorific, used most widely.

Seinen (sēh-nehn)

Young man, teen, and/or adolescent target audience.

Senpai (sen-pai)

Used to refer to upperclassmen and senior colleagues, usually in school situations.

Shōchū (shōh-choo)

Type of rice alcohol, can also be distilled from barely or sweet potatoes. Higher alcohol content than sake.

Shonen-ai (shō-nehn-ai)

Manga genre that targets at women depicting homosexual male relationships. Lighter version of yaoi.

落花枝に帰らず破鏡再び照らさず

A fallen blossom does not return to the branch;  
a broken mirror cannot be made to shine.

—Japanese proverb

## Chapter One

CHERRY blossoms were always our favorite. They were a symbol of life and its delicate, fleeting existence. More than that, for me, they were keepers of past memories. They were a constant reminder that she'd been here. Her body was gone, but her spirit remained by way of silky pink petals. We'd sit for hours at the riverbank and watch the *sakura* petals fall to the earth, be gathered up by the river, and float off to a new existence. We'd take turns making up life stories for the petals. Mother insisted that each and every one had their own story, and that one day we'd be able to finish that story for every last petal that fell. Alas, we never got to continue our own tale. She became one of the fallen.

Today was the anniversary of her death, so naturally I had to be here, by the river. Only I wasn't alone. That was how I met him, in my mourning. He was just sitting there, alone, the cool beauty. He looked like he was posing for a clothing or cologne ad, lounging among the cherry blossoms falling all around him. The sight was serene, and yet he

looked so terribly sad. Perhaps he was mourning too—his expression bore the type of pain I understood. He'd lost something important to him. What? I wondered. I knew then that I had to talk to him. I had to know him. I wanted to know why someone so gorgeous looked so miserable sitting in the most spectacular place on the earth.

“Beautiful place, huh?” I asked. He said nothing. I rocked back on my heels, hands deep in my pockets as I watched the river. “Yeah, this is my favorite place. I love it here.” He remained silent. I was determined to get him to say something.

“*Ne*,” I said cheerily, leaning down to see his face. Up close he was even more gorgeous: soft features, high cheekbones, and a perfect bow mouth. His beauty was darkened, though, by that sad expression. I wanted to see him smile. “Can I sit with you?”

He looked up slowly. His hair was long and damp, parted to the side. Dark eyes were half-lidded and cynical. The cold stare he was giving me made me nervous, but I refused to let that chase away my smile. I had to be happy. She'd be sad if I couldn't smile.

Finally he looked away and answered dryly, “Do as you please.”

I nodded and sat down next to him, pulling my knees up to my chest. We were silent for a long time, watching the Mochizuki River. It was mid-April, but the day was cool, making me wish I had worn something warmer. Still, I was content. At peace. This was my place of mourning, memories, and happier times.

“I'm Kobayashi Haru. Haru as in the character for springtime.”

“Sakurai Aki.” He never bothered looking at me. “Aki for autumn.”

We were opposites, it seemed. I smiled to myself, looking at Sakurai with my cheek pressed to my knees. He really was a cool beauty, the silent strong type, and yet as delicate as the cherry blossoms his surname represented. He stared off at nothing, like I wasn't there. My presence didn't bother him and that was a start—perhaps we could be friends. This made my smile broaden into a toothy grin. “Pleased to meet you, Sakurai-san.”

“*Ee,*” he agreed softly.

We spent the rest of the afternoon in comfortable silence, save for the occasional word here and there. Sakurai, I realized, was a man of very few words. But I liked that about him—I found a sort of nobility and pride in the type of person who only spoke when it really mattered. There were no needless words exchanged.

We sat among the spring grass and the fragrant blossoms until the sky darkened. Then we parted, just like that, with nothing more to say to one another except for a very brief conversation where we exchanged numbers—which I of course started. But, he agreed. He wanted to talk to me again, and I couldn't have been any happier. It was one of the most peaceful days I'd had in a very long time. Sadly, one of the last for even longer. I should have walked away the moment I laid eyes on Sakurai Aki that day.

## Chapter Two

I FROWNED into my phone. “What do you mean, ‘not available?’”

The sharp feminine voice on the other end snapped, “Like I said. He’s not available. He’s....” There was a shuffling of cloth against the mouthpiece. In the background, I heard the familiar male voice ask who it was. Sakurai was there and this woman was keeping me from him. The woman answered, “Some guy,” and then her voice was loud in my ear again. “Busy.”

I sighed, leaning over my desk. It had been more than a week already since that day at the river when I met Sakurai and we exchanged numbers. But I couldn’t get him out of my mind. I wanted to know why someone so beautiful could look so tormented. I wanted to see him smile. To know him. Still, it took me this long just to build up the nerve to call. Only when I did, there was a snag. This crabby woman answered what I thought was his personal cell phone instead of Sakurai himself.

“Look,” the woman with the bad Japanese accent said again, smacking her lips in my ear, “when we’re done, he’ll call you back. Okay?”

*Done?* I instantly disliked her, whoever she was. And I didn’t dislike anyone. Mostly. “Uh, okay. Can you let him know that Koba—”

Click.

I pulled the phone away from my ear and looked at it like it had turned into a rotten banana. I couldn't believe that she hung up on me. I sighed heavily, dropped the phone to my desk, and stretched out across the top, pressing my forehead to my papers. Done? What could she have meant by "done"? Done what? Class, work... *sex*? I sighed again. Why did I care, anyway? It wasn't like I wanted to date him. I didn't even know him. Besides, I was pretty sure I wasn't lucky enough for him to be gay. I was usually alone when it came to that.

There was a sudden hit on my back and I jumped up, crying out in surprise. I spun in my chair to find Jeff standing behind me, grinning like an idiot. I had met the newly married American years ago during his first week in Japan and knew I had to have him work for me. For a *gaijin*, his Japanese was good, even if he liked to use English to confuse me. He had a fantastic art style that synced well with my own, and he was a stellar guy. On top of all that, he didn't judge me for my lifestyle. He accepted me how I was. I think it had something to do with the fact that his brother-in-law was also gay. But that didn't matter to me. Jeff was my personal assistant and best friend.

"*Mattaku*, Jeff, you scared me."

"What's wrong, dude?" he asked, looking me over with an exaggerated frown. "You look, I don't know, down. You're never down."

I forced a smile, putting my phone away as I attempted to make some semblance of organization with my workspace after his ninja attack. "Ah, it's nothing. Just this guy I met."

"Oh yeah?" he asked with a devilish grin. I knew exactly what he was thinking and I had to fight not to blush. "You

found a new boyfriend? Told you you'd be okay. Nothing keeps little Haru-*chan* down!"

I laughed despite the urge to cringe at his misused Japanese. "*Chan*", again? *Mattaku*," I mumbled, then I sighed. "No, I don't think he's like that. Just some interesting guy I met at the river last week. I just thought we could go out for drinks. *Not* a date." I made sure to put plenty of emphasis on "not," but I knew Jeff would pretend he hadn't heard that part.

"Aw, Haru-*chan*, if you needed an attractive young man to drink with and keep you company, you know you can always count on me. I can even cuddle if you want!" He hugged me from behind, nearly pulling me out of my chair. "I love *onee-chan*!"

I shoved his arms away from around my neck before he choked me. "Stop calling me your sister! And using *chan*! What are you, five? Now get off. *Mattaku*. You have no sense of what's proper, do you? No shame at all." I spun in my seat to look at him. Despite being such good friends with him for so long, I still had a hard time accepting his misused language. I knew he knew better, that he knew he was being unbelievably disrespectful. But then, that was Jeff's charm, wasn't it? He just didn't give a crap what anyone thought. And I thought it wasn't worth the trouble, because in the end Jeff did what Jeff wanted.

"Nope," he answered, grinning. "You know you can always rely on me, Haru-*chan*."

"*Chan*," I grumbled under my breath and spun away with an annoyed groan. He really did whatever he wanted. "I need more friends than just you and Ayame, Jeff. *Mattaku*, give me a break."

“Aw, come on. You know I’m messing with you. Ayame adores you, and you’re my best bud.” He spun my chair back around to make me look up at him. I huffed, ready to complain, but then he looked suddenly serious, telling me no more joking. “We’re just worried about you. After Kenic—”

“Please,” I said, holding a hand up. The very mention of his name made my whole body tense with unease and weariness. “I don’t want to hear his name again, please.”

Jeff frowned for real, not a look I saw often. “Sorry, Haru-senpai.” He leaned forward, resting his hands on the arm of my chair, and I sighed. Jeff was in my face, and I had to sit back just to focus on him. “We really are worried. Ayame wants you to come have dinner with us this Friday night. Will you come? Please say you’ll come. It’ll make her so happy. She asks about you all the time. You haven’t been over in so long.”

I sighed. There really was only one answer, and he knew it, too. “Sure. Friday night. I’ll come.”

“Great!” Jeff popped up, clapping his hands as his brilliant smile returned full force.

“But,” I interjected, “no more ‘chan’ or one of your other pet names for me, okay? I’m your boss, not your sister.”

He turned away, laughing. Through his laugh, I heard him say, “Sure you are, *onee-chan*. Later.”

I muttered a not very nice word, out of love, and turned back to my desk. Anywhere else, Jeff would have been fired for the level of disrespect he showed, calling me sister and manhandling me like I was his brother or something more intimate. But it was true, Jeff was my best friend, and I

depended on that friendship. He could call me whatever he wanted, even if it was *onee-chan*—“big sister.”

I tried to finish my work. I really did—and there was just so much of it to do today. But it was no good, I couldn't focus. I kept thinking about who that woman on the phone was. About why I cared. It wasn't like I was looking for a new boyfriend. Not right now. I couldn't, I just couldn't. The sad thing was, while I knew it wasn't my fault, I still blamed myself for Kenichi. Guess I wasn't totally convinced it wasn't my fault after all. If I had been a better boyfriend, he would never have screamed at me. If I hadn't made him so angry, he'd never have hit me. I just wasn't good enough. It was that simple.

Jeff and Ayame were there for it all. They saw the whole thing: Kenichi screaming in my face, spitting on me. Me crying, trying to explain. And then Kenichi hitting me. And he wouldn't stop—I couldn't stop him. Jeff saved me. He stopped Kenichi from hitting me again and made him leave. I never saw him after that.

At first, I was lonely. I craved for Kenichi to come home and take me into his arms. I needed him to want me. Now, three months later, I wasn't so sure what my feelings were. Yes, I was lonely. I missed the security that physical touch offered. Feeling the concern of someone who loved you as they held you, comforted you. At night I imagined Kenichi was with me in bed, holding me like he used to. But I wasn't so sure it needed to be Kenichi anymore.

Yes, I found my new friend Sakurai attractive. But he wasn't gay—the woman answering his phone pretty much confirmed that for me. I could admit, if only to myself, that I had imagined what it'd be like to be in his arms once or

twice. I imagined him smelling good and being so very warm. Those delicate, long fingers tracing over my naked flesh.

I shook my head hard. I didn't need that kind of relationship right now, anyway. It was too soon. "Yeah," I sighed to myself. "Definitely too soon."

## Chapter Three

THE afternoon wore on slowly, but I managed to focus enough to do some work. I did have a looming deadline, after all, for my last *shonen-ai* piece. After this, I was moving into a true yaoi story, and the prospect of exploring a new genre, yet wholly familiar lifestyle, had excited me ever since my editor approved the initial story idea months ago. I only had to finish what I was on now, which at the moment seemed possible as I found a renewed burst of enthusiasm to attack my work.

I was sitting at my desk, immersed in a new panel, nose nearly planted to paper, when the phone in my pocket started to vibrate. Surprised, I jumped, nearly messing up my art, and dug the phone out. I looked at the display and frowned. The number was local, but not one I knew. Normally I'd ignore an unknown number, let the call go to voice mail, but for some reason I was compelled to answer. Guess I was hoping it was my new friend, calling from another phone. God, I was starting to sound desperate already.

*“Hai, Kobayashi desu.”*

There was a pause, and then a voice I recognized was filling my ear. “Kobayashi-san? This is Sakurai.”

I could feel Jeff eyeing me from his desk. I turned away, putting my back to him. “Yes, good to hear from you.”

There was a long silence.

“What did you want?”

“Oh, right.” I laughed, pulling myself together again. “Listen, I was thinking about going for a drink after work. Would you care to join me?”

Long silence again. I was sure he was going to hang up on me, that I’d overstepped my welcome and made him uncomfortable. What was I thinking? *Of course he doesn’t want to go; he doesn’t even know me and probably sensed I was gay. I blew it!* “Okay, well, it’s fine if you don’t—”

“I’ll come.”

“Really?” I had to hold back a sigh of relief. “Do you know Tsuki Rakka? It’s downtown, by the river.” His answer was a soft hum of acceptance. “Great, let’s say....” I looked at my watch. It was only just after four; I still had lots of things to finish before I could go. “Eight? Is that okay?”

“Fine.”

“Fantastic, I’ll see you—” I held the phone out, staring at it in shock. “What the hell?”

“What’s wrong, *onee*-dude?” Jeff asked from over my shoulder.

I rolled my eyes at Jeff for his half-Japanese, half-American slang and snapped my phone shut. He appeared at my side. I blinked up at him, bewildered and a little put off. “What is it with people hanging up on me today?”

“Who hung up?” Seeing the look on my face, Jeff pressed further. “Come on, *senpai*. Something’s wrong. Don’t think you can fool your big brother.”

I laughed and turned back to my desk. Despite the lighthearted tone of his words, he had called me *senpai*. He only ever called me properly when he was getting serious.

Serious Jeff always worried me. He returned to his seat as I pretended to work and explained the phone call I had made earlier and about the rude woman. When I was done, Jeff was silent. Like, a deathly, unnerving silence. I spun in my chair, looking at him. He was staring at me. I wondered how long he had been staring.

“What?”

“Dude. That was his woman.”

“Dude,” I said, mocking him, though my accent made the American word sound really weird, and I spun away. “I got that.”

“What are you going to do?”

I huffed, dropping my papers, and spun again. I wasn’t going to get anything done today. “What do you mean, what am I going to do?”

“I mean, he’s not gay.”

“Wow, thanks for the news flash, Jeff. *Mattaku*, could you say it any louder?” While all of my coworkers knew I was gay, and it was a fact that our company produced *shonen-ai* and yaoi projects, I thought it was rude to rub it in their faces. I never brought my boyfriends to company events. I never made people deal with feeling uncomfortable with my homosexual relationships. Real life was nothing like the glamorized lives in the manga I created. Real life wasn’t nearly as pretty. In fact, I was learning real life was damn ugly when you got right down to the core of things.

Jeff laughed loud enough I knew the whole place could hear him. When couldn’t they? “I mean, what’s the point, then? If you’re not after him for some hot tail, then why bother?”

I rolled my eyes, shaking my head at him. He really was way too comfortable with my sexuality, but that made him charming in his own goofy way. “Seriously?” I smiled broadly. “I told you, I need more friends than just you. *Baka.*”

He laughed and tossed a handful of paperclips at me. “All right, boss man. I get it. Just so long as you don’t have your hopes up for something that isn’t going to happen.”

I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking, “*Oh God, please don’t let Kenichi happen again to my little Haru-chan.*” I scoffed at my own thoughts, calling myself *chan*. Jeff was such a bad influence. Out loud, I said, “I don’t need to be lectured by you.”

He held his hands up in defense. “Sorry, just looking out for you.”

I stood with a sigh and went to Jeff. I smiled and slapped a hand on his shoulder. “I know, and I appreciate it. You’re a good guy...” I smiled harder. “Even if you’re an idiot!”

“Hey!” He shot up from his seat and chased me from the cube we shared, yelling in English and throwing paperclips. The other artists and assistants stayed out of the battle, ducking the makeshift ammo. This was nothing new to them, our fighting like this. It was almost a weekly show that they had come to expect. And as we fought it out with paperclips and crumpled papers of discarded drawings, the others cheering us on, I thought that maybe I didn’t need any other friends. I had the best friend a gay Japanese man could ever ask for. What else did I need than someone who understood me?

APRIL MOONE's obsessive love of anime and manga (to be honest, anything Japanese) inevitably led her to the yaoi genre. She wrote for years for herself and online venues but never dreamed she'd see her own fantasies in print. While she's not talking to the characters in her head, she loves reading, digging in her garden, riding her sports bike, or just playing with her two Australian Shepherds. Despite the naughty she writes, she blushes easily and can sometimes be found sporting a mane of purple.

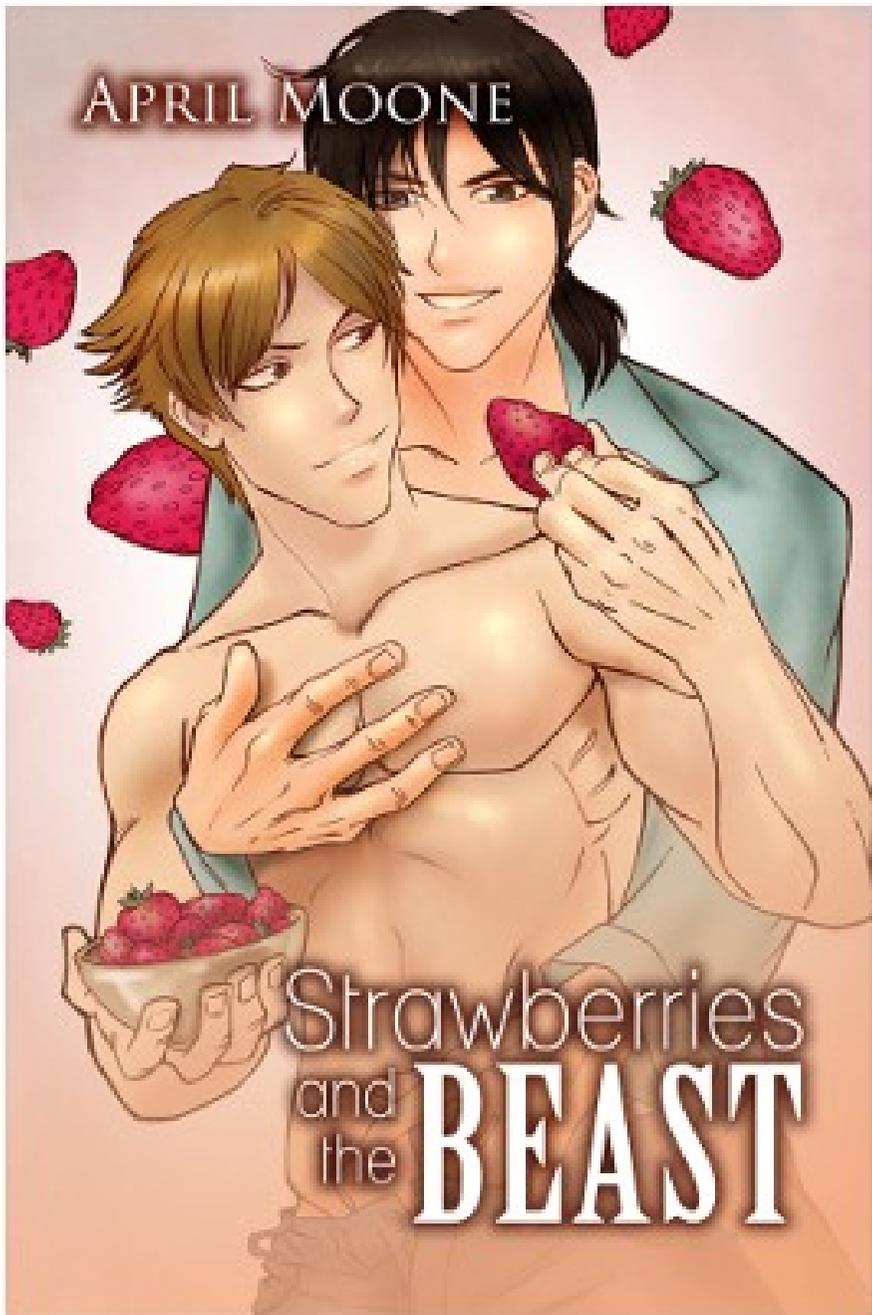
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