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Opening Extract from...

Six Four

Written by Hideo Yokoyama

English Translation by Jonathan Lloyd-Davies

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Snowflakes danced through the evening light.

The man's legs were stiff as he stepped from the taxi. A forensics official in a police-issue overcoat was waiting outside the entrance to the station. He ushered the man inside. They passed a work area for duty officers and continued along a gloomy corridor before taking a side door out to the officers' parking area.

The mortuary stood by itself at the far end of the grounds, a windowless structure with a tin roof. The low rumbling of the extractor fan told him there was a body inside. The official unlocked the door and stepped back. He gave the man a deferential look, indicating he would wait outside.

I forgot to pray.

Yoshinobu Mikami pushed open the door. The hinges groaned. His eyes and nose registered Cresol. He could feel the tips of Minako's fingers digging through the fabric of his coat, into his elbow. Light glared down from the ceiling. The waist-high examination table was covered in blue vinyl sheeting; above it, a human shape was visible under a white sheet. Mikami recoiled at the indeterminate size, too small for an adult but clearly not a child.

Ayumi . . .

He swallowed the word, afraid that voicing his daughter's name might make the body hers.

He began to peel back the white cloth.

Hair. Forehead. Closed eyes. Nose, lips . . . chin.

The pale face of a dead girl came into view. In the same moment the frozen air began to circulate again; Minako's forehead pushed against his shoulder. The pressure receded from the fingers at his elbow.

Mikami was staring at the ceiling, breathing out from deep in his gut. There was no need to inspect the body further. The journey from Prefecture D – by bullet train then taxi – had taken four hours, but the process of identifying the corpse had been over in seconds. A young girl; drowned, suicide. They had wasted no time after receiving the call. The girl, they were told, had been found in a lake a little after midday.

Her chestnut hair was still damp. She looked fifteen or sixteen, perhaps a little older. She hadn't been in the water for long. There were no signs of bloating, and the slender outline running from her forehead to her cheeks was, along with her childlike lips, unbroken, preserved as though she were still alive.

It seemed a bitter irony. The girl's delicate features were, he supposed, the kind Ayumi had always longed for. Even now, three months later, Mikami was still unable to think back on what had happened with a cool head.

There had been a noise from Ayumi's room upstairs. A frenzied sound, like somebody trying to kick through the floor. Her mirror was in pieces. She'd been sitting with the lights off in the corner of her room. Punching, scratching her face, trying to tear it apart: *I hate this face. I want to die.*

Mikami faced the dead girl and pressed his hands together. She would have parents, too. They would have to come to this place, maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow, and face up to the awful reality.

'Let's get out of here.'

His voice was hoarse. Something dry was caught in his throat.

Minako seemed vacant; she made no attempt to nod. Her swollen pupils were like glass beads, empty of thought or emotion. This wasn't their first time – in the last three months they had already identified two bodies of Ayumi's age.

Outside, the snow had turned to sleet. Three figures stood breathing chalky clouds in the dark of the parking area.

‘A great relief.’

The pale, clearly good-natured station captain proffered his card with a hesitant smile. He was in full uniform, even though it was outside working hours. The same was true of the director, and of the section chief of Criminal Investigations flanking his sides. Mikami recognized it as a sign of respect, in case he’d identified the girl as his daughter.

He gave them a low bow. ‘Thank you for getting in touch so quickly.’

‘Not at all.’ *We’re all police.* Skipping any further formalities, the captain turned to gesture at the building and said, ‘Come in, you should warm up a little.’

There was a nudge in the back of Mikami’s coat. He turned and caught Minako’s imploring gaze. She wanted to leave as soon as possible. He felt the same way.

‘That’s very kind, but we should get going. We have a train to catch.’

‘No, no, you should stay. We’ve arranged a hotel.’

‘We appreciate your consideration, but we really do need to go. I have to work tomorrow.’

When he said this, the captain’s gaze dropped to the card in his hands.

Superintendent Yoshinobu Mikami. Press Director. Inspector, Administrative Affairs Department, Personnel Division. Prefecture D Police Headquarters.

He sighed as he looked back up.

‘It must be tough, having to deal with the press.’

‘It can be,’ Mikami said evasively. He could picture the mutinous faces of the reporters he’d left back in Media Relations. They had been in the middle of a heated argument over the format of press releases when the call had come in to notify him of the drowned girl. He had got to his feet and walked out without

a word, earning the wrath of the reporters, who were unaware of his family situation: *We're not finished here. Are you running away, Mikami?*

'Have you been in Media Relations long?' The captain looked sympathetic. In district stations, relations with the press were handled by the station's vice-captain or vice-director; in smaller, regional stations, it was the captain himself who stood in the firing line.

'Just since the spring. Although I had a brief stint there a long time ago.'

'Have you always worked in Administrative Affairs?'

'No. I spent a long time as a detective in Second Division.' Even now, this engendered a certain amount of pride.

The captain nodded uncertainly. It was unlikely, even in the regional headquarters, that he had seen any examples of detectives switching into the role of press director.

'I would imagine, with your insights into Criminal Investigations, that the press might actually listen to you.'

'I certainly hope so.'

'You know, it's a bit of a problem here. There are . . . certain reporters who like to write what they please, true or not.'

The captain scowled and, without changing his expression, waved towards the garage. Mikami was troubled to see the front lights of the captain's black car flick on. The taxi he'd kept waiting was nowhere to be seen. There was another nudge in his back, but he was hesitant at this point to call another taxi and upset the well-meaning captain.

It was already dark when they drove to the station.

'Here, this is the lake,' the captain said from the passenger seat, sounding a little awestruck as a deeper stretch of darkness appeared beyond the window to the right. 'The internet really is appalling. There is a horrible website, the "Top Ten Suicide Spots" – this lake is listed there. They've given it an eerie name, something like the "Lake of Promise".'

‘The “Lake of Promise”?’

‘It looks like a heart, depending on the angle. The website makes the claim that it grants you true love in the next life; the girl today, she was the fourth. We had one come all the way from Tokyo not too long ago. The press decided to run an article, and now we’ve got the TV to deal with.’

‘That’s terrible.’

‘Absolutely. It’s a disgrace, peddling articles about a suicide. If we had had time, Mikami, I would have liked to ask you for some pointers in dealing with them.’

As if he were uncomfortable with silence, the captain continued to talk. For his part, Mikami lacked the will to carry out any animated conversation. While he was thankful for the captain’s tact, his responses became increasingly terse.

It was a mistake. It wasn’t Ayumi. His thoughts were joyless all the same; no different to those on the journey out. To pray she wasn’t *their* daughter. He knew all too well that this was the same as wishing she was someone else’s.

Minako was perfectly still at his side. Their shoulders pressed together. Hers felt abnormally frail.

The car turned at a junction. The bright light of the train station came into view directly ahead of them. The square in front of the building was wide and spacious, strewn with a few commemorative monuments. It was almost empty of people. Mikami had heard that the building of the station was the result of political manoeuvring; no one had thought to consider actual passenger numbers.

‘There’s no need to get out, you’ll only get wet,’ Mikami said quickly. He had the rear passenger door halfway open, but the captain beat him out of the car regardless. The man’s face was flushed red.

‘Please accept my apologies for the unreliable information and the trouble you’ve taken to come here. We thought, well, from her height and the position of the mole that she might be . . . I just hope we haven’t caused you too much distress.’

‘Of course not.’

Mikami waved a hand to dismiss the idea, but the captain took hold of it.

‘This will work out. Your daughter is alive and well. We will find her. You have 260,000 friends looking for her, around the clock.’

Mikami remained in a low bow, watching the tail lights as the captain’s car pulled away. Minako’s neck was getting wet in the cold rain. He pulled her slight form close and started towards the station. The light from a police box – one of the *koban* – caught his eye. An old man, possibly a drunk, was sitting on the road, fending off the restraining arms of a young policeman.

260,000 friends.

There was no exaggeration in the captain’s words. District stations. *Koban*. Substations. Ayumi’s picture had been sent to police departments across the nation. Officers he would neither know nor recognize were keeping watch day and night for news of his daughter, as if she were their own. The police force . . . family. It inspired confidence, and he was indebted – not a single day went by in which he wasn’t thankful for being part of such a powerful and far-reaching organization. And yet . . .

Mikami bit down on the cold air. He had never imagined it. That his need for help could have become such a critical weakness.

Submission.

Now and then, his blood felt ready to boil. He could never tell Minako.

To find your missing daughter. To hold her alive in your arms. Mikami doubted there was anything a parent wouldn’t put themselves through in order to achieve such a goal.

An announcement rang out along the train platform.

Inside, the train was marked by empty seats. Mikami ushered Minako to a window seat, then whispered, ‘The captain’s right. She’s safe. She’s doing okay.’

Minako said nothing.

‘They’ll find her soon. You don’t need to worry.’

‘... yes.’

‘We had the calls, remember? She wants to come back. It’s just pride. You’ll see, one day soon, she’ll just turn up.’

Minako was as hollow-looking as before. Her elegant features shone in the dark window of the train. She looked worn. She had given up on make-up and hairdressers. How would she feel, though, if she realized this only served to draw attention to the natural, effortless beauty of her features?

Mikami’s face was also in the window. He saw a phantom image of Ayumi.

She had cursed the way she’d taken after him.

She had made her mother’s beauty the focus of her anger.

He slowly pulled his eyes away from the window. It was temporary. Like the measles. Sooner or later, she would come to her senses. Then she would come home with her tongue stuck out, like she had done when she made mistakes as a small girl. She couldn’t genuinely hate them, want to cause them pain, not Ayumi.

The train rocked a little. Minako was resting against his shoulder. Her irregular breathing made it hard to know if she was groaning or just asleep.

Mikami closed his eyes.

The window was still there, under his eyelids, reflecting the ill-matched husband and wife.

Since the morning a strong northern wind had been blowing over the plains of Prefecture D.

The lights were green up ahead, but the traffic was backed up and Mikami could do nothing but edge forwards. He took his hands off the steering wheel and lit a cigarette. Work had already begun on another cluster of high-rise apartments, gradually stealing away the outline of the mountains framed through the car window.

580,000 households. 1,820,000 citizens. Mikami remembered the numbers from a demographic survey he'd seen in the morning paper. Close to a third of that population lived or worked within the limits of City D. After a laboured and drawn-out process the city had successfully merged with the neighbouring cities, towns and villages, giving momentum to the process of centralization. Despite this, work on a universal public transport system – the very first item on the agenda – had yet to begin. With only a few trains or buses in service, most of the routes hugely impractical, the roads were overflowing with cars.

Get a bloody move on, Mikami muttered to himself. It was five days into December, and the morning congestion was particularly bad. The radio seemed poised to announce eight o'clock at any moment. He could make out the five-storey structure of the Prefectural Police HQ up ahead. The sight brought an unexpected sense of nostalgia for its cold but familiar outer walls, despite the fact that he'd only been away in the north for half a day.

He hadn't needed to go all that way. He'd known from the start that it would be a waste of time. It was obvious now, a day later. Ayumi hated the cold more than most; it was ludicrous to think she would venture north. Even more that she would decide to throw herself into a frozen lake.

Mikami stubbed out his cigarette and pushed down on the accelerator. Space enough for a few cars had opened up ahead.

Somehow, he managed not to arrive late. Having stopped in the station parking area, he hurried towards the main building. As he did this, force of habit pulled his eyes towards the spaces set aside for the press.

He stopped dead. The area, usually empty at this time of day, was packed full of cars. Correspondents representing each of the news outlets would be gathered inside. For a brief moment Mikami wondered if something had happened. But no – they were here to continue yesterday's discussions, that was all. They would be inside, waiting for him to show.

Gunning for an early start.

Mikami entered the building through the front entrance. It was less than ten steps along the corridor to Media Relations. Three nervous-looking faces looked up as he pushed open the door. Section Chief Suwa and Sub-chief Kuramae, both sitting at their desks facing the wall. Mikumo, at her desk nearest the door.

The cramped space made for subdued greetings.

The room was a little bigger than it had been before the spring, as they'd had the wall to the archive room torn down, but there was hardly room to breathe when the reporters decided all to barge in at once. Mikami had imagined such a situation before he came in, but the press were nowhere to be seen. Feeling as though he'd made a narrow escape, he took his seat by the windows. Suwa approached before he had the chance to call him over. He was unusually reticent when he spoke.

'Sir. Umm . . . about yesterday's . . .'

Mikami hadn't expected this; he'd been getting ready to ask

about the press situation. Late last night Mikami had called his reporting officer, Division Chief Ishii of the Secretariat, and given a full account of what had happened during the ID. He had naturally assumed Ishii would pass the news on to his staff in Media Relations.

‘It wasn’t her. Thanks for asking.’

The atmosphere seemed to brighten immediately. Suwa and Kuramae exchanged relieved glances and Mikumo seemed to reanimate; she jumped up and took Mikami’s mug off its place on the shelf.

‘More to the point, Suwa – the press are here?’

Mikami jerked his chin towards one of the walls. The Press Room was on the other side, housing the Press Club, an informal grouping of thirteen news groups.

Suwa’s expression darkened again.

‘Yes, they’re all in there. They were talking about stringing you up. They’ll be barging in soon enough.’

Stringing him up? Mikami felt a sudden irritation.

‘Oh, and if you could also bear in mind – they think you left because you had a relative in a critical condition.’

Mikami paused briefly before he nodded.

The quick-witted spin doctor. That was Suwa to a tee. He was ranked Assistant Inspector, having come up through Administrative Affairs. With three years of experience in Media Relations and another two in the field as a police sergeant, he had already achieved a deep understanding of the modern-day ecology of the press. While his precociousness could be annoying from time to time, his ability to win the reporters over, transitioning seamlessly between the twin roles of diplomat and spin doctor, was genuinely astonishing. Now that he had further polished his skills during his second posting, the department held him in increasingly high regard.

Mikami’s second posting to the office had been less fortuitous. He was forty-six, and the transfer had come after twenty years

away. Until the spring, he had worked as the assistant chief of Second Division; prior to that, he had managed a team in the field, investigating corruption and election fraud as a section chief in Non-violent Crime.

Mikami stood and turned towards the whiteboard next to his desk.

Prefecture D, Police Headquarters. Press Release: Thursday, 5 December 2002.

As press director, his first job of the morning was to run through all announcements to be made to the press.

The office received a non-stop deluge of calls and faxes reporting accidents and crimes from within the jurisdiction of the prefecture's nineteen district stations. The recent and widespread adoption of computers meant the same now applied to emails. Mikami's staff would summarize the reports using a template, then attach copies to whiteboards in the office and the Press Room. At the same time, they would get in touch with the prefecture's TV news. It was through activities like these that the force helped facilitate press coverage. Despite this, press releases often ended up becoming sources of friction.

Mikami checked the clock on the wall. It was after eight thirty.

What were they doing in there?

'Sir, do you have a moment?' Kuramae had come over to stand in front of Mikami's desk. His willowy form contrasted with his hefty-sounding name, part of which translated as 'storehouse'. His tone, as usual, was understated. 'It's . . . about the bid-rigging charges.'

'Sure. Did you manage to find out anything?'

'Ah . . .' Kuramae faltered.

'What is it? The CEO's refusing to come clean?'

'To be honest, I wasn't able to—'

'You weren't able to . . . what?'

Mikami's eyes sharpened unconsciously. It was five days since Second Division had made a series of arrests for bid-rigging

charges surrounding a project to build a prefectural art museum. They had raided six mid-tier construction companies and brought eight executives into custody, but the investigation was far from over. Their target was Hakkaku Construction, a regional contractor which they suspected had been behind the process. Mikami had heard whispers that the CEO had been quietly summoned to one of the district stations and that, for the last few days, he had submitted to voluntary questioning. If the police successfully brought in the ringleader, it would be big news for the regional papers.

It was common in Second Division for statements – and the formal issuing of arrest warrants – to be delayed until late at night. Mikami had sent Kuramae to get an overview of the current situation, with the hope of avoiding any confusion that might arise should the timing clash with the cut-off point for the next day's news.

‘Did you at least find out if the CEO has been brought in?’

Kuramae looked downcast. ‘I asked the assistant chief. But he . . .’

It wasn't hard to work out what had happened. They had decided to treat Kuramae as a spy.

‘That's fine. I'll go and see them later.’

Mikami watched Kuramae move away with slumped shoulders, then let out a bitter sigh. Kuramae had previously worked in an office job at Second Division in one of the district stations. Mikami had asked him to go in the hope that he would be able to use the contacts he'd made there to extract some new information, but he'd been over-optimistic. Anything you gave Media Relations went straight to the press, who would then use it as a bargaining tool. Many detectives still swore by this belief.

Mikami had been no exception.

Back when he was a rookie detective, Media Relations had been nothing but a department to distrust. *A pawn of the press. A guard dog for Administrative Affairs. A place to brush up for exams.* He had no doubt said as much himself, mimicking the behaviour of his fault-finding superiors. Even from a distance he had found

their intimacy with the press distasteful. They would spend night after night drinking, plying the reporters with compliments. At crime scenes they stood aloof, bystanders as they chatted to the press.

Mikami had never considered them to be fellow officers.

Because of this, he had become despondent when, in his third year as a detective, he had received his first transfer to Media Relations. He thought he'd been branded a failure. He took to the work in despair, fully aware of his inability to live up to the task. Then, after only a year, and before he'd even had a chance to learn the ropes, he had received a transfer back to Criminal Investigations.

He had been thrilled by the reinstatement, but had also found himself unable to write off the year-long gap in his detective's career as simply a whim of Personnel. He began to develop a festering mistrust of the system and, with it, an even more potent sense of fear. He buried himself in his work with newfound urgency, all the time wary of the next round of transfers. Even five or ten years later, he still felt on edge. It was true to say that his fear had served to heighten his fierce commitment to the job. He refused to let himself grow lazy, to submit to any form of temptation, to relax in any way – and this brought results. During his time in First Division he was decorated with commendation after commendation, regardless of whether he'd been working in Theft, Violent Crime or Special Investigations.

Even then, it wasn't until his transfer to Second Division that Mikami truly came into his own as a detective. Specializing in non-violent crime, he forged himself an indisputable niche within Criminal Investigations, in both district and the Prefectural HQ.

He still hesitated to call himself a genuine, dyed-in-the-wool detective. And those around him wouldn't let him forget what had happened, even if he'd wanted to. Whenever sensitive case information leaked to the papers, his colleagues and superiors would resist making eye contact. There was a limit to how much

he could dismiss as paranoia. The chill horror as the invisible feelers of the witch hunt drew closer was something only those who had experienced it first-hand could understand. Mikami had never been asked to join the hunt for the source of the leaks, no matter how much he'd impressed his superiors with his work, and regardless of his promotion from assistant inspector to inspector. In this respect, the time he had served in Media Relations had been akin to having a 'criminal record'.

You're going to be our new press director.

Mikami's mind had gone blank when Akama, the director of Administrative Affairs, had given him unofficial notification of his transfer earlier in the spring. The only words to enter his mind had been 'criminal record'.

Akama had gone on to lay out the rationale behind the appointment:

'I will not stand back and do nothing while the press continues to chastise us for every mistake we make; they lack integrity, along with any understanding of social justice. It's as though their only goal is to undermine our authority. We've been soft, and now they seek to abuse our trust. That's why we need someone like you, Mikami. A tough press director, someone fierce, someone ready and able to stare them down.'

Mikami had found it hard to accept these words. The police had a tough-guy culture and placed a premium on strength, meaning there was no scarcity of fierce-looking men either in Criminal Investigations or outside it. How did Personnel benefit from taking an inspector at the top of his game, one whose head was filled with the strict application of the criminal code, and assigning him to be protective gatekeeper in a role divorced from the force's original mission?

Akama had spoken of the transfer as though it were an opportunity. It was true that the post was director grade, usually beyond officers of Mikami's rank, and that it guaranteed his promotion to superintendent. Yet, even if he'd stayed in Criminal

Investigations, Mikami had expected to be promoted in two or three years, and he disliked having the carrot dangled before him when the promotion was in some other area of expertise.

He had been certain that his 'criminal record' had influenced the selection. When multiple candidates were considered for a single position, it was Personnel's standard policy, as a kind of insurance, to go with the person who had the most experience in the chosen field. So Mikami's issue hadn't been with the fact that he'd been chosen, but rather with Criminal Investigations having put him forward in the first place.

Mikami had steeled himself and visited Arakida, the director of Criminal Investigations, at his home that same evening. 'The decision's been made' was all the director had said. Exactly as he had twenty years earlier. It had felt to Mikami as if the man had simply dismissed his talent for the job. His disappointment and feelings of dejection were made all the worse for the long years he'd devoted to being a detective.

He was to return to Criminal Investigations in a couple of years. In the meantime, Mikami had taken on the role of press director with a single pledge: to keep his various emotions in check and prevent the rot from setting in. He would *not* repeat his previous mistakes, nor would he let himself become negligent, or squander the time. More than anything else, his long years of hard work had resulted in a physical and mental routine that ensured he couldn't bear to leave any problem unattended.

Reforming Media Relations. He knew he had to make this his first task.

His first move had been to launch an offensive on Criminal Investigations. He needed case information, something he could use as a bargaining chip. In dealing with the press, he understood that raw intel was the only real weapon he had at his disposal. He would confront them armed. He would build a mature relationship where each side kept the other in check. Administrative Affairs would come to interfere less and less, and they could

finally break free from that three-sided impasse. In this way, Mikami had outlined his schedule for reform.

The wall which Criminal Investigations – the self-acknowledged bull of the field divisions – had erected to protect itself had been substantial. The same was true of Second Division, Mikami's home for many years, but it was First Division's unwillingness to talk that had, he had to admit, been the most formidable. He had taken to making a daily pilgrimage to each of the divisions during lunch, circling the axis of First Division, striking up conversations with managers to get a feel for any investigations in progress. Outside work he leveraged his personal network to make contact with mid-level detectives. He waited for public holidays and days off, then showed up outside their apartments bearing small gifts. He bypassed politics and gave it to them straight. As he made the rounds, he told them he needed intel so he could stand up to the press.

He had kept his second motivation hidden. He'd been looking towards the future. If he was to return to Criminal Investigations in two years' time, it would be with a 'second offensive'. He had to make sure, during his time as press director, that no one in the department came to view him as an outsider. For better or for worse, he needed to keep them informed of what he was doing in Media Relations; it was a necessary preparation for his return.

His 'pilgrimages' continued for two, three months. While he gained little of actual substance, a second and secretly hoped-for reaction began to surface. What he was doing was unusual for a press director and had caught the attention of the media; the effect was far from insignificant. They had started to pay attention. There were noticeable changes in the way they saw him. He was unique, working for now in Media Relations, but a man whose true home was in Second Division. In a few years he could be in a position of importance in Criminal Investigations, and for this reason the press had treated him with a certain deference from the outset, opting to wait and see. It was as true then as ever

that Criminal Investigations was the most crucial source of information for the press. And Mikami's pilgrimages emphasized the 'proximity' between Criminal Investigations and Media Relations. Reporters approached him in increasing numbers. It was the first time the press had voluntarily shown up without an explicit invitation.

Mikami had seized the opportunity, and begun his plan of building up their expectations. He put to use what little information he had, plying it to maximum effect. Speaking to the papers individually, he used indirect phrasing and subtle changes in expression to lay down the scent of cases in progress. He made his presence known by keeping the press close, constructing a solid basis for their interaction, transforming the image of a weak press director. At the same time, he'd been careful not to let them get too comfortable around him. Whenever someone came in to kill time, he remained impassive and played up his stern image. He stood firm, and was quick to shut down superficial criticisms levelled against the police. At the same time, he displayed a willingness to listen to considered arguments. When they wanted to negotiate he gave them all the time they needed. He never sought to ingratiate himself with them, yet allowed for certain concessions when necessary. It had been going well. Mikami had eliminated the imbalance of power that had been to their absolute advantage, and yet they showed no signs of annoyance. They were always hungry for more information. The police were hungry only for good publicity. It was a relationship of convenience, with each side in a different corner, but it was possible nonetheless to find a common ground; all that was necessary was to bring a little trust to those face-to-face moments. The framework for Mikami's vision for Media Relations had continued to come together until Mikami had become convinced his plan was working.

His *bête noire* turned out to be the director of Administrative Affairs. Mikami had expected an improved relationship with the press to result in less interference, but his prediction had been far

from the mark. Akama had become annoyed with Mikami's management of the office, and started to express his reservations at every opportunity. He began to criticize Mikami for his 'defeatist' compromises, bemoaning his liaisons with Criminal Investigations as a stubborn unwillingness to move on. Mikami couldn't understand it. Akama had wanted a strong press director; Mikami had been sure Akama had taken into account his former connection to Criminal Investigations. He had used this leverage to the best of his ability. And it was bringing results. What problem could Akama have? His decision made, Mikami approached Akama directly. He argued the importance of using his access to case information as a tool for more diplomatic dealings with the press. He hadn't been able to believe Akama's response.

'Just let it go, Mikami. If we allow you access to that kind of information there's always a chance you could leak it to the press. You can hardly say anything if you don't know anything. Right?'

Mikami had been stunned. Akama had wanted a stone-faced scarecrow. *Don't act, don't think. Just stare with that fierce look of yours.* Akama might as well have told him that. Media Control, not Media Relations. A genuine hatred for the press. He'd been warped beyond anything Mikami had feared.

Mikami had been unwilling just to give up. Blind obedience to Akama would set Media Relations back twenty years. His reforms were finally in motion – he just needed to push them forward. It was too late to let them come to nothing. The ferocity of his own reaction had amazed him. No doubt it was because he'd felt the breeze of the outside world on his skin. He had learned to see things he'd never even thought of as a detective. It was as if there were a towering wall separating the police from the general public and Media Relations was the only window even close to opening outwards. It didn't matter how narrow-minded or self-important the press were: if that window was shut from the inside, the police would be completely disconnected from the other side.

Something had lit up in the part of Mikami that was still a detective. To submit and play scarecrow for Administrative Affairs would mean severing the few links he had left to his true self. And yet no one was foolish enough to go up against anyone with influence in personnel decisions. If he was posted to some district station in the mountains, then, far from being reinstated to Criminal Investigations, he would, in terms of the organization, become at once someone only vaguely remembered. Viewed differently, however, it had also been a rare opportunity. If the time came when the situation changed and a return to his home department seemed likely, the story of his standing up to the director of Administrative Affairs – the second-most influential man in the Prefectural HQ – would be enough to purge his ‘second offensive’ and more besides.

With the greatest care, Mikami began to resist Akama. He worked harder to present himself as a loyal subordinate, keeping his emotions at bay while he focused on being true to the cause. He listened quietly but objectively, offering tactful disagreement only when he found himself unable to stomach a particular instruction or order. He also spoke up on certain media strategies he supported, all the while quietly continuing with his plan to reform Media Relations.

He had known he was treading on thin ice. He could feel Akama’s irritability in his pulse. And yet he had persisted in making his opinion known. It was clear now that he’d been energized by the risk. For half a year he’d refused to shy away from Akama’s piercing glares. He’d felt the rush of combat. He might not have been winning, but he hadn’t been losing either.

But . . .

Ayumi’s disappearance had changed everything.

Ash tumbled from his cigarette and hit the table. He’d smoked two already. He checked the clock on the wall. Kuramae was visible, his profile a dim shadow at the edge of Mikami’s vision. Second Division had refused to share their intelligence. Did that mean their goodwill for him was spent? Kuramae was there as a

representative of Mikami. The field divisions would have been well aware of that.

It had to be because he'd stopped visiting the divisions, the detectives. Because his press strategy had regressed to being whatever Akama dictated.

A sudden commotion broke out in the corridor.

Here they come. Suwa and Kuramae had enough time to exchange looks before the door swung open, without so much as a knock.