

Haruki's chest ached at the words. She wanted to say something—to tell Matsuda how brave she was, how strong—but the words stuck in her throat. Instead, she reached out and placed a hand on Matsuda's arm, her touch gentle but firm.

"You're amazing, Matsuda-senpai," she said, her voice trembling. "I don't know if I could do what you've done."

Matsuda smiled, her eyes softening. "You're stronger than you think, Haruki-chan. And you still have a chance. Don't waste it."

Haruki nodded, her resolve hardening. She wouldn't let Matsuda's fate become her own. She would do whatever it took to make sure her parents got together, to make sure she had a future to return to.

## Chapter 16

The next few weeks were a chaotic mess of failed attempts and mounting frustration for Haruki. Determined to get Nagano and Honoka together before the end of summer, she threw herself into the role of matchmaker with all the subtlety of an elephant in an orchestra. Unfortunately, her efforts were met with one disaster after another.

Haruki had thought her plan was foolproof. She convinced the PE teacher—with a combination of flattery, persistence, and a well-timed offer to clean the equipment shed—to schedule Class 1A and Class 2A for a joint volleyball session. Haruki's heart raced as she watched Nagano and his friends saunter onto the court, their laughter echoing across the gym. This was it. This was her chance.

She quickly paired herself with Honoka, hoping to steer her toward Nagano's team. But Honoka, ever the shy and studious type, turned bright red at the mere suggestion of playing with the boys.

"I-I can't!" Honoka stammered, clutching her volleyball like a lifeline. "What if I mess up? What if they laugh at me?"

“They won’t laugh at you!” Haruki insisted, her voice a little too loud. “Nagano’s really nice, I promise!”

But Honoka was already retreating to the safety of the girls’ team, leaving Haruki to face Nagano’s team alone. The match ended with Haruki getting hit in the face with the ball—twice—and Nagano teasing her mercilessly about her “unique” playing style.

Undeterred, Haruki hatched another plan. This time, she convinced Nagano to help her transport a stack of freshly printed papers from the Literature Club’s print room to the editing department. She had heard Honoka mention something about editing, so surely this would work.

“Why do I have to carry all these?” Nagano grumbled, his arms laden with papers as they trudged down the hallway.

“Because you’re strong and reliable,” Haruki said, flashing him her most convincing smile. “And because I’ll buy you a soda later.”

Nagano rolled his eyes but didn’t complain further. Haruki’s heart raced as they approached the editing department. This was it. Honoka would be there, and they’d strike up a conversation, and everything would fall into place.

But when they arrived, the room was empty except for a lone third-year student who looked up from their desk with a bored expression. “Oh, the editing team’s in the other building today,” they said. “You’re looking for the print department, right?”

Haruki’s smile froze on her face. “Uh... right. Thanks.”

Nagano shot her a suspicious look. “Did you even know where we were going?”

“Of course I did!” Haruki lied, her cheeks burning. “I just... got the buildings mixed up. Let’s go!”

By the time they found the correct department, Honoka was long gone, and Haruki was out two sodas.

Haruki’s third attempt was perhaps the most ambitious—and the most disastrous. She convinced Honoka to join her after school, claiming they were going to “hang out” with some of the boys from Class 2A. Honoka, though reluctant, agreed—mostly because Haruki had promised to help her with a difficult math problem.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Honoka asked nervously as they waited outside the school gates. “I don’t really know these boys...”

“It’ll be fine!” Haruki said, her voice a little too cheerful. “They’re really nice. And Nagano’s coming too!”

Honoka’s eyes widened. “Nagano?”

“Yeah!” Haruki said, grinning. “He’s super cool. You’ll like him.”

But as the minutes ticked by, it became clear that something was wrong. The boys never showed up. After an hour of waiting, Honoka finally sighed and turned to Haruki. “Maybe they’re not coming. Should we just go home?”

Haruki’s heart sank. She had been so sure this would work. “Yeah... I guess so.”

As they walked home, Haruki couldn’t help but feel a pang of guilt. Honoka had trusted her, and she had let her down. Again.

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Haruki sat at a desk in the Editing Department of the Literature Club, her chin resting heavily on her hand as she doodled aimlessly on a scrap of paper. The room was quiet, save for the soft rustle of pages and the occasional scratch of a pen. Honoka sat a few desks away, her brow furrowed in concentration as she reviewed poem entries for the school’s annual magazine.

Haruki’s doodles grew more aggressive as her frustration mounted. She had tried everything—every plan, every scheme—and still, Nagano and Honoka hadn’t so much as exchanged more than a passing greeting. The end of summer was creeping closer, and Haruki could feel the weight of her failure pressing down on her.

“Haruki-chan,” Honoka’s voice broke through her thoughts, soft and hesitant.

“What do you think of this one?”

Haruki glanced up to see Honoka holding up two sheets of paper, each covered in neatly written haikus. She sighed, her indifference evident as she pointed to one at random. “That one.”

Honoka blinked, her expression puzzled. “You didn’t even read them.”

“Does it matter?” Haruki muttered, slumping back in her chair. “They’re all the same anyway.”

Honoka frowned, setting the papers down and turning to face Haruki fully. “Haruki-chan... is something wrong? You’ve been acting strange all week.”

Haruki hesitated, her gaze dropping to the doodles on her paper. She wanted to tell Honoka everything—about the time travel, about her mission, about the fear that she might never go home. But how could she? How could she explain something so unbelievable to someone who wouldn’t—couldn’t—understand?

“It’s nothing,” Haruki said finally, her voice flat. “Just... tired, I guess.”

Honoka was silent for a moment, her expression thoughtful. Then, hesitantly, she spoke again. “It’s about Nagano-kun, isn’t it?”

Haruki’s head snapped up, her eyes wide. “W-what? No! I mean... it’s not like that!” she stammered, her face flushing. She didn’t know how to explain that her frustration was about *Honoka* and Nagano, not herself. The words tangled in her throat, leaving her flustered and unsure.

Honoka’s expression turned stern, her usual gentle demeanor replaced by something sharper. “If you like him, just say so,” she said, her voice firm. “Haruki-chan, I’ll step aside for you. You don’t have to hide it.”

Haruki was taken aback, her mind racing. This wasn’t what she had intended at all. But as she thought about it, she realized how it must look. She had been spending so much time with Nagano lately, trying to orchestrate moments for him and Honoka, that she hadn’t noticed the whispers and sideways glances from their classmates. In a school where interactions between boys and girls were scrutinized, her efforts had backfired spectacularly. Rumors had spread, and now everyone—including Honoka—thought Haruki was trying to win Nagano’s affection.

“Honoka, it’s not like that,” Haruki said, her voice desperate. “I’m not interested in Nagano. I was just... I was trying to help *you* get closer to him.”

Honoka’s eyes widened, but then her expression hardened. “I don’t want your help,” she said, her voice trembling. “I’m fine with how things are. I don’t need you meddling in my life.”

Haruki opened her mouth to argue, to explain herself, but Honoka cut her off. “Just stop it,” she pleaded, her voice cracking. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she quickly turned away, wiping them with her sleeve.

The room fell silent, the weight of Honoka’s words hanging heavily in the air. Haruki watched, her chest tightening as Honoka gathered the submitted haikus and crammed them into her schoolbag. Her movements were quick and jerky, as if she couldn’t get out of the room fast enough.

“I’m going to sort all of this at home,” Honoka said, her voice barely above a whisper. She stood up, slinging her bag over her shoulder. “I’m sorry for acting rudely, Fujiyama-san.”

And with that, she slid the door shut behind her, leaving Haruki alone in the empty editing room.

Haruki sat there, stunned, her mind reeling. The sound of the door closing echoed in her ears, a final, painful punctuation to the conversation. She slumped forward, resting her forehead on the desk, and let out a long, shaky breath.

## Chapter 17

Haruki walked out of the school building, her shoulders slumped and her steps slow. The sky above was painted in streaks of orange and magenta, the sun dipping low on the horizon and casting a warm, golden glow over the campus. Around her, students chattered excitedly, their laughter and voices filling the air as they finished their club activities and headed home. The atmosphere was lively, almost electric, but Haruki felt none of its energy.

To her, the world seemed muted, as if she were walking through a fog. The vibrant colors of the sunset blurred together, and the cheerful voices of her classmates sounded distant, like echoes from another life. She dragged her feet along the path, her schoolbag hanging heavily from her shoulder, its weight mirroring the burden in her chest.

The school gates loomed ahead, their iron frames casting long shadows across the ground. Haruki paused for a moment, staring at them as if they were a barrier she couldn't bring herself to cross. Beyond the gates, the road stretched out, leading to the cabin that had become her temporary home. But tonight, it felt less like a refuge and more like a reminder of how far she was from everything she knew.

Just as she was about to step through the gates, a voice called out from behind her. "Hey, Haruki-chan!"

Haruki turned, her heart sinking as she saw Nagano jogging toward her, his guitar slung over his shoulder and a carefree grin on his face. She hadn't realized how close they had become over the past few weeks, but now his presence felt like a weight she couldn't bear.

"What's up?" Nagano asked, falling into step beside her as if nothing were wrong. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Haruki didn't respond, her gaze fixed on the ground. She didn't have the energy to pretend everything was fine.

Nagano, undeterred, continued talking. "Anyway, me and the guys are planning something for next Saturday. We're thinking of heading to the beach again. You should come! It'll be fun."

Haruki shook her head, her voice lifeless. "No, thank you."

Nagano blinked, his grin faltering. "Whoa, what's with the attitude? You're usually all over these kinds of things."

Haruki didn't answer, her steps slowing as she tried to put distance between them. But Nagano wasn't one to let things go so easily. He matched her pace, his tone shifting to one of concern. "Hey, seriously, what's wrong? You've been acting weird all day."

"Leave me alone," Haruki mumbled, her voice barely audible.

Nagano chuckled, trying to lighten the mood. "Come on, Haruki-chan. You can't just say that and expect me to drop it. What's going on? Did someone say something to you?"

Haruki stopped walking, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. She could feel the anger bubbling up inside her, a storm she could no longer contain. "I said, leave me alone!" she snapped, her voice sharp and trembling.

Nagano raised his hands in mock surrender, but his smile didn't fade. "Alright, alright. No need to bite my head off. I'm just trying to help."

"Help?" Haruki echoed, her voice rising. "You're not helping! You're just... you're just an inconsiderate, selfish person! You don't care about anyone but yourself!"

Nagano's smile vanished, replaced by a look of genuine confusion. "What are you talking about? What did I do?"

"You hurt Honoka's feelings!" Haruki shouted, her voice cracking. "She's been trying to talk to you for weeks, for months! Why didn't you even try to notice her? Why didn't you care?"

Nagano stared at her, his brow furrowed. "Honoka? Aoki Honoka? What are you talking about? I didn't even know she felt that way."

Haruki's chest tightened, her anger giving way to a crushing sense of despair. "You... you didn't even like her?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Nagano shrugged, his expression apologetic but honest. "No. I mean, she's nice and all, but... I didn't even know she liked me. I don't feel that way about her."

Haruki felt as if the ground had been ripped out from under her. All her efforts, all her plans—they were for nothing. Her parents weren't going to get together. She wasn't going to exist. The weight of that realization was too much to bear.

In a burst of anger and frustration, Haruki shoved Nagano with all her strength. He stumbled backward, his guitar slipping from his shoulder as he fell to the ground. "H-heh, what the—" he stammered, his voice a mix of surprise and indignation.

"Idiot!" Haruki bellowed, her voice raw with emotion. Before Nagano could say anything else, she turned and ran, her feet pounding against the pavement as tears streamed down her face.

The world blurred around her as she ran, the orange and magenta streaks of the sunset smearing into a haze of color. Her chest burned with each breath, but she didn't stop. She couldn't stop. Not when the weight of her failure pressed down on her like a physical force.

She ran past the wooden shelter where she had once sat with Nagano, where she had listened to him talk about his dreams and his fears. The memory flashed in

her mind—his voice, soft and resigned, as he spoke about abandoning his music for the sake of his family. She had felt such empathy for him then, such understanding. But now, all she felt was anger—at him, at herself, at the unfairness of it all.

Her feet carried her down the familiar road she and Honoka usually took home from school. The road where they had walked side by side, chatting about everything and nothing. Haruki hadn't realized how much she had come to rely on those moments, on Honoka's quiet presence and gentle smile. It had been almost a month now, and she had grown used to Honoka's company, to the way she made even the most mundane days feel a little brighter.

But now, that was gone. Honoka's tearful plea echoed in her mind: *"Just stop it..."* Haruki's chest tightened, and she ran faster, as if she could outrun the guilt and regret that chased her. What did Honoka think of her now? Did she hate her? Did she think Haruki had been playing some cruel joke on her all along? The thought made Haruki's stomach churn.

She ran and ran, her legs aching and her breath coming in ragged gasps, until finally, she reached the cabin. Matsuda wasn't home yet, and the silence that greeted her felt oppressive, suffocating. Haruki slammed the door shut behind her and slumped against the wall, sliding down until she was sitting on the floor. She pulled her knees to her chest, shielding her face as she hugged them tightly.

The tears came then, hot and uncontrollable, streaming down her cheeks as she buried her face in her knees. Her shoulders shook with silent sobs, the weight of her failure crashing down on her all at once.

"What have I done..." she thought, her mind spiraling. She had been so sure she could fix things, so determined to bring her parents together. But instead, she had only made everything worse. She had hurt Honoka, lashed out at Nagano, and now... now she had doomed not only herself but her parents' future.

The realization hit her like a punch to the gut. If Nagano didn't love Honoka, if they didn't get together... then Haruki would never exist. Her entire life, her memories, her family—all of it would be erased, as if it had never been. And it was all her fault.

She thought of her parents in the present—her stern, distant father and her kind but weary mother. She thought of the fights, the misunderstandings, the moments of quiet love that had kept their family together despite everything. And she



thought of the younger versions of them she had come to know in this time—Nagano, with his dreams of music, and Honoka, with her quiet strength. They were so different from the people she knew, and yet, in some ways, they were exactly the same.

But now, because of her, they would never become the people she knew. They would never become her parents.

Haruki's sobs grew louder, her body trembling as she hugged her knees tighter. She felt so small, so helpless. She had tried so hard, and yet it hadn't been enough. It would never be enough.

The cabin was silent except for the sound of her crying, the walls closing in around her. She didn't know how long she sat there, lost in her thoughts and regrets. But eventually, the tears slowed, and her breathing evened out. She wiped her face with her sleeve, her eyes red and swollen.

She didn't know what to do next. She didn't know if there was anything she *could* do. But as she sat there, staring at the floor, a flicker of determination sparked within her. She couldn't give up. Not yet. Not when so much was at stake.

## Chapter 18

*Knock, knock, knock.*

Yaeko Matsuda stood in front of the bathroom door, her arms crossed and her foot tapping impatiently. The sound of running water had stopped a while ago, but Haruki was still holed up inside, and Matsuda was running out of patience.

"Haruki!" she called, her voice sharp but not unkind. "Come on, you've been in there for three hours! Hot water isn't cheap in these times, you know!"

Inside the bathroom, Haruki was huddled in the bathtub, her knees pulled to her chest and her arms wrapped around them. The hot water she had drawn earlier had long since turned lukewarm, but she couldn't bring herself to get out. Her

mind was a whirlwind of regret and self-pity, and the bathroom felt like the only place she could hide from the world.

“Five more minutes!” Haruki called back, her voice muffled by the running water.

Matsuda groaned, leaning her forehead against the door. “That’s what you said an hour ago! I want to take a bath too!”

There was a pause, and then Matsuda added, her tone a little softer, “If you’re in there wallowing in pain because some boy from the sixties hurt your feelings, you can talk to me about it! But not until I take a bath!”

Haruki sighed, her shoulders slumping. She knew Matsuda-senpai was right—she couldn’t stay in the bathroom forever. But the thought of facing the world, of admitting her failure, felt like too much to bear.

Still, the sound of Matsuda’s foot tapping outside the door was getting harder to ignore. With a reluctant groan, Haruki pulled herself out of the tub, the water sloshing around her as she stood. She wrapped a towel around herself and shuffled to the door, her hair dripping and her expression a mix of annoyance and defeat.

She opened the door just enough to peek out, her eyes meeting Matsuda’s impatient gaze.

“Here you go,” Haruki said flatly, stepping aside to let Matsuda in.

Matsuda raised an eyebrow, taking in Haruki’s disheveled appearance. “Thank you,” she said, her tone dry but not unkind. She stepped into the bathroom, then paused, turning back to Haruki. “And don’t think you’re off the hook. We’re talking about this as soon as I’m done.”

Haruki groaned, pulling the towel tighter around herself. “Do we have to?”

“Yes,” Matsuda said firmly, closing the door behind her. “Now go put some clothes on. You look like a lost child.”

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The night was calm, the air filled with the soft hum of cicadas and the occasional rustle of grass in the breeze. Fireflies danced in the garden, their tiny lights

flickering like stars against the dark backdrop of the trees. Haruki sat on the porch bench, her legs tucked beneath her and a fresh sweater keeping her warm. Her slightly short, curly hair was tied into a messy bun, and her eyes were fixed on the fireflies, though her mind was elsewhere.

The door creaked open, and Matsuda stepped out, holding two steaming cups of tea. She handed one to Haruki, who accepted it with a quiet “thank you,” and then sat down beside her on the bench. For a moment, they sat in silence, sipping their tea and watching the fireflies.

Finally, Matsuda broke the quiet. “Now,” she said, her tone gentle but firm, “care to tell me what happened?”

Haruki sighed, her grip tightening around the warm cup. “It’s just... it’s complicated.”

Matsuda chuckled softly. “Everything is. You just have to not make it complicated, and then everything will be easy to do.”

Haruki pouted, shooting Matsuda a sideways glance. “Easy for you to say.”

Matsuda smiled, unfazed. “Do you still remember the painting technique I told you about?”

Haruki frowned, her brow furrowing. “Which one?”

“The one about starting with a fresh canvas,” Matsuda said, her tone patient.

“When you first get a new canvas and want to make a picture, what are the steps?”

Haruki thought for a moment. “You... get the paints?”

“What’s next?”

“You paint the underpaintings?”

“And after that?”

“You paint the bigger shapes, then work out the details.”

Matsuda nodded, her smile widening. “And do you think painting is hard?”

Haruki hesitated, then shook her head. “No... I don’t think so.”

“There you go,” Matsuda said, her tone triumphant. “It’s the same with life. You start with the basics, then build from there. You don’t have to figure everything out at once. Just take it one step at a time.”

Haruki smiled faintly, her gaze still fixed on the fireflies flickering in the garden. "You're always so wise, Matsuda-senpai."

Matsuda chuckled softly, leaning back against the bench. "Let's just say... I've had my own fair share of lessons."

They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the night air filled with the rhythmic chirping of cicadas and the distant hum of car headlights on the streets beyond the woods. The fireflies danced in the darkness, their tiny lights weaving patterns in the air, and for a moment, the world felt still.

Eventually, Haruki broke the quiet, her voice soft but heavy with emotion. "I don't think I'll be going back."

Matsuda paused, setting her teacup down on the porch railing. "Hmm?" she asked, her tone gentle but curious. "What makes you think that?"

Haruki pulled her knees to her chest, burying her face in them as if she could hide from the weight of her words. "My parents..." she began, her voice muffled. "The love doesn't go both ways. And my mom hates me. I don't think I have a chance anymore."

Matsuda was silent for a moment, her expression thoughtful. She reached over and placed a hand on Haruki's shoulder, her touch warm and reassuring. "I don't think your mom hate you, Haruki-chan. I think she's just... hurt. And confused. Maybe just like you are now."

Haruki shook her head, her voice trembling. "You didn't see her face, Matsuda-senpai. She looked at me like I was some kind of... stranger. Like I had betrayed her."

"People say and do things they don't mean when they're hurt," Matsuda said softly. "That doesn't mean they stop caring."

Haruki sighed, her shoulders slumping as she stared at the fireflies. "I got into an argument with my father too," she admitted, her voice quiet. "I knew he didn't do anything wrong, but I got so angry. I screamed at him and ran away. He'll probably never talk to me again after that."

Matsuda let out a small giggle, the sound light and unexpected.

Haruki turned to her, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "Don't laugh! What's so funny?!"

Matsuda waved a hand, trying to stifle her laughter. “Oh, it’s nothing... It’s just... it’s absurd. But absurdly funny.”

Haruki pouted, crossing her arms as Matsuda continued to chuckle. She stayed silent, her annoyance growing, until finally she muttered, “What do I do now...”

Matsuda wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, her laughter subsiding. “Say, Haruki-chan,” she began, her tone thoughtful, “if by chance your parents haven’t fallen in love by this time... I think they still love something else, don’t they?”

Haruki frowned, confused. “What do you mean?”

“For example,” Matsuda said, leaning back against the bench, “my father was really into bicycles. He collected a bunch of them. And my mother loved gardening. Before they loved each other, they loved those things. I suppose your parents have something they love too, don’t they? A hobby? A passion?”

Haruki fell silent for a moment, her gaze drifting to her nearly empty teacup. She swirled the leaves around, her mind racing. Nagano and Honoka *did* have something they loved. She remembered how Nagano played the guitar and sang *Ue o Muite Arukō*, his voice warm and full of emotion. He was good—really good. And Honoka... she was always writing poetry or haiku during free moments in class, her passion for words shining through in every line. She loved editing for the Literature Club, pouring her heart into every page.

“My father always loved music,” Haruki mumbled, her voice soft. “And my mother loves poetry.”

Matsuda smiled, her eyes twinkling. “That’s it. And if you work with the things they love, I think you can bring them together. Think of it as your primary colors.”

Haruki sat there for a moment, the words sinking in. Then, like a spark igniting, an epiphany hit her. She shot to her feet, her eyes wide with excitement. “I got it!” she exclaimed, her voice ringing out in the quiet night. “Matsuda-senpai, you’re a genius!”

Before Matsuda could respond, Haruki threw her arms around her in a tight hug, then dashed back into the cabin, her footsteps echoing on the wooden floor. Matsuda watched through the window as Haruki rushed to her notebooks and sketchbooks, her hands flying as she began to scribble down ideas and plans.

Matsuda smiled, a quiet sense of pride swelling in her chest. Haruki, her kouhai, still had that fire in her. That determination, that spark of creativity—it was what made her special. And Matsuda knew, no matter how many obstacles lay ahead, Haruki would find a way to overcome them.

She took a sip of her tea, her gaze returning to the fireflies dancing in the garden. The night was quiet, but the air felt alive with possibility. For the first time in a long time, Matsuda felt a flicker of hope—not just for Haruki, but for herself as well.