

The Autumn Fifty Years ago

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Chapter 1

The distant chirping of sparrows, filled the evening.

Sounds of brass musical instruments. Trombones, Tubas, Trumpets, somewhere across the school yard, practicing.

The distant screeching of shoes, the rhythmic thudding of basketball being bounced at the gymnasium below.

The rhythmic scratching of a paintbrush against canvas filled the small room, each stroke deliberate, each movement lost in the rhythm of creation.

The room smelled of acrylics and turpentine, a scent that Haruki had come to associate with freedom—a freedom she rarely felt outside these four walls.

In the center of the room stood a girl, her figure silhouetted by the golden light of the setting sun streaming through the window. Haruki Fujiyama, her dark hair tied loosely in a ponytail, stood before an easel, her paintbrush moving almost instinctively across the canvas. Her brow was furrowed in concentration, her lips pressed into a thin line as she lost herself in the world she was creating.

To anyone watching, it might have seemed like she was painting a landscape or a portrait, but to Haruki, it was something more. It was a world—a world where the colors bled into each other like emotions, where the lines blurred between reality and imagination. A world where she could be anything.

She stepped back for a moment, tilting her head as she studied her work. The painting was abstract, a swirl of blues and purples with streaks of gold cutting through like sunlight breaking through a storm. It wasn't perfect—nothing ever was—but it was hers.

For a fleeting moment, she wondered if such a place could exist. A place where she didn't have to argue with her father about art school, where her mother didn't gently suggest she consider a "more practical" career. A place where she could just *be*, without the weight of expectations pressing down on her shoulders.

Her brush hovered over the canvas as her thoughts drifted. What would it be like to live in a world where her dreams weren't just dreams? Where she could paint all day, every day, and no one would tell her it was a waste of time? Where her father's stern face would soften with pride instead of disappointment? She sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly. Maybe such a world only existed in her paintings. Maybe it was foolish to hope for anything more.

Before she could sink deeper into her thoughts, the door behind her creaked open, pulling her back to reality. The sound of footsteps and the faint jingle of a charm bracelet broke the silence.

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"Haruki-chan!" a sing-songy voice called out, bright and cheerful. "There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you!"

Haruki didn't hear her at first. Her mind was still lost in the world of her painting, far removed from the Art Club room. She was thinking about the shadows—how they should fall, how they should interact with the light. Should the reds be warmer? Did the greens clash? She murmured to herself, her brush hovering uncertainly over the canvas. "Maybe if I add a touch of ochre here..."

The girl, standing by the door with her hands on her hips, frowned when Haruki didn't respond.

"Haruki-chan!" she called again, louder this time. Still, Haruki didn't turn.

The boy, standing beside Aiko with arms crossed, let out a quiet sigh. “Aiko, don’t,” he warned, already sensing what she was about to do.

Aiko flashed him a grin, ignoring his disapproving tone. “Oh, come on, Akihito. She’s too in her head again.”

Akihito adjusted his glasses, exasperation flickering across his face. “So? Let her concentrate.”

“Or,” Aiko said mischievously, “I could bring her back to reality in the fun way.”

Quietly, Aiko tiptoed across the room, her sneakers making no sound on the wooden floor. She crept up behind Haruki, her hands poised to strike.

Then, with a dramatic flourish, she clapped her hands on Haruki’s shoulders and shouted, “Boo!”

Haruki jumped, her paintbrush slipping from her fingers and smearing a streak of green across the canvas.

“Aiko!” she exclaimed, spinning around to glare at her friend. “What was that for?!”

Aiko burst into laughter, doubling over as Haruki scowled. “You should’ve seen your face!” she wheezed, clutching her stomach. “Priceless!”

Akihito let out another sigh and shook his head. “You’re impossible,” he muttered, walking over to inspect the damage. “And now she has to fix that.”

Haruki groaned, turning back to her painting. “Ugh, Aiko! This was almost done!”

“Relax, relax! You can totally turn that into, uh...” Aiko squinted at the streak. “A tree branch? A shadow? A really abstract emotion?”

Akihito pinched the bridge of his nose. “Or you could just not ruin her work in the first place, Aiko.”

Haruki sighed, rubbing her temple. “You two are exhausting.”

“See?” Aiko grinned, nudging Akihito. “She means you too.”

Akihito simply crossed his arms. “At least I’m not the one causing her problems.”

Haruki shook her head, but despite herself, a small smile tugged at her lips. The three of them were an odd balance—Aiko’s chaos, Akihito’s restraint, and her own quiet focus—but somehow, it worked.

“Yeah, yeah,” Aiko said, still giggling. She stepped closer, peering over Haruki’s shoulder at the painting. “Whatcha painting there, Picasso?”

Haruki didn’t look up, her focus returning to the canvas. “Komorebi,” she said simply. “I need practice painting light.”

Aiko tilted her head, studying the painting. It was a tree, its leaves dappled with sunlight that seemed to shimmer even in its unfinished state. “Whoa, that’s awesome!” she said, her voice dripping with mock enthusiasm. “Is the light going to be brighter than your future?”

“Don’t be silly. It’s just a painting.” Haruki chuckled despite herself, shaking her head. “Why the weird question?”

Before Aiko could answer, Akihito cleared his throat from where he stood, arms crossed. “Speaking of your future,” he said, his tone even but pointed, “you still haven’t filled out your Career Plans paper.”

“Mrs. Kitagawa has been asking about it all day. You’re one of the last people who haven’t submitted it.” He reached into his neatly organized bag and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. “You left this at your desk this morning.”

Haruki’s smile faltered as she looked at the paper. “Oh, yeah,” she said quietly, setting down her painting knife. She peeled off her paint-stained gloves and apron,

then took the paper from Aiko. The words “Career Plans” were printed in bold letters at the top, and the sight of them made her stomach twist.

“So, have you thought of any?” Aiko asked, leaning casually against the table. Her tone was light, but her eyes were curious, searching Haruki’s face for an answer.

Haruki sighed, setting the Career Plans paper down on the table. “No... I’m not sure.”

Akihito, who had been re-organising his bag, glanced up. “What about Tokyo University?” he suggested. “You’re one of our best painters in the Art Club. Their fine arts program is one of the best. My older brother goes there to study computer science, he says the professors are amazing, and their alumni do well in the industry.”

Haruki hesitated, her fingers tightening around her paintbrush.

Aiko perked up at the idea. “Ohhh, that’s a great idea! You’d totally get in,” she said, nudging Haruki with her elbow.

But instead of excitement, Haruki’s shoulders slumped. She turned back to her painting, brushing light strokes onto the canvas as if to distract herself. “You know my dad,” she murmured. “He’d rather I become a doctor or something ‘respectable’ than go there.”

Akihito frowned slightly but didn’t push. Aiko, on the other hand, scoffed. “Pfft, *respectable*? As if painting isn’t just as important!”

Akihito gave her a pointed look. “That’s not how the world works, Aiko.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Aiko waved him off before turning back to Haruki. “But seriously, Haru-chan, don’t let your dad kill your dreams.”

Haruki swallowed, eyes lingering on the painting in front of her. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “Maybe it’s not a dream if I can’t even say it out loud.”

Aiko frowned, crossing her arms. “Why not? Didn’t one of the seniors from Art Club go there?” She tapped her chin, trying to remember. “I think she used to be the vice president of the Art Club back when we were first-years.”

Haruki paused, her brush hovering over the canvas. “Matsuda-senpai?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Yeah! Yaeko Matsuda!” Aiko said, snapping her fingers. “Her paintings were gorgeous. Didn’t she go to Tokyo University to pursue fine arts?”

“Aiko... Didn’t you know?” Akihito said, “She never enrolled.”

“Wait,” Haruki swiftly turned to him, for a second, she abandoned her painting to fully turn towards them. “What do you mean?”

“Although my brother didn’t study fine arts there, he is studying computer science,” Akihito explained. “I asked him about Matsuda-senpai once, just out of curiosity. But when he checked, she wasn’t on any student lists. None of the professors had heard of her, and even the students she was supposed to be friends with had no idea where she went.”

Haruki fell silent, her expression darkening. The room seemed to grow colder, the cheerful chatter of the brass band outside, the rhythmic thudding, screeching and cheer from the gymnasium below fading into the background. She set her brush down and turned fully to face him.

Aiko blinked, confused. “Wait... so what are you saying?”

Akihito exhaled, folding his arms. “I don’t know. Just that she disappeared before graduation, and nobody—not her classmates, not even her close friends—knows where she went.”

Aiko’s playful demeanor flickered, replaced by unease. “Are you implying that she—?”

Haruki didn't answer right away. Her fingers tightened around the brush in her hand. *Disappeared?* That couldn't be right.

Her gaze drifted past Akihito and Aiko, toward the wall of polaroid photos behind them. The Art Club's memories, snapshots of their weekly plein-air painting sessions, their shared laughter, the occasional paint-smudged chaos. Her eyes scanned over familiar faces, frozen mid-laughter, mid-brushstroke, before landing on one particular photo.

Yaeko Matsuda.

Her hair was tied in a neat braid, round glasses perched on her nose, a gentle yet confident smile on her face. Below the picture, scrawled in thick marker, were the words: *Fight on, Vice President Matsuda!*

Haruki's throat tightened. Back when she was a first-year, she had looked up to Matsuda more than anyone. It was Matsuda who had trusted her, who had passed on the role of Vice President before her graduation. Haruki had always believed that Matsuda was out there, pursuing her dreams, painting, creating—just as she had always encouraged Haruki to do.

But what if she never made it?

"No..." Haruki swallowed, her fingers loosening from the brush. "That can't be right."

She tore her gaze away from the photo, but the weight in her chest remained. The room felt colder, the usual warmth of the Art Club replaced with something hollow and uncertain.

For a moment, none of them spoke. The distant sound of the brass band outside felt oddly out of place, as if the world beyond their quiet art room had no idea that a mystery had just settled in the space between them.

Then, Akihito exhaled and ran a hand through his hair. “Sorry,” he said, offering a sheepish smile. “I didn’t mean to make the room feel like a horror story.” He leaned back against the table, glancing between them. “It’s probably just a rumor, anyway. A big university like Tokyo? My brother might’ve just had bad luck trying to find her.”

Haruki let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. The tension eased, if only slightly. “Yeah... maybe,” she murmured.

Aiko, sensing the shift, clapped her hands together. “Alright! Enough ghost stories before sunset.” She stretched, her usual energy returning, though there was still a flicker of unease in her eyes.

Haruki forced a small smile. “I’ll tidy up for a bit, then I’ll meet you at the bicycle park.”

“Got it!” Aiko chirped, her usual sing-songy voice back in full force. But as she turned to leave, she paused at the doorframe, glancing back at Haruki. “Hey, Haruki-chan.”

Haruki raised an eyebrow. “Hmm?”

Aiko grinned. “Have you thought of any career path, just off the top of your head?”

Haruki tilted her head. “Off the top of my head—?”

“Quick! Answer, no time!” Aiko teased, rocking on her heels.

Haruki hesitated for a moment, then smiled. “Art school,” she said firmly. “That’s what’s on the top of my head.”

Aiko’s smile widened, and she gave Haruki a thumbs-up. “Then write it on your paper and submit it before Mrs. Kitagawa continues nagging me about it!”

Haruki laughed, the last remnants of tension finally lifting. “I will, I will. Now go on, I’ll catch up.”

As Aiko disappeared down the hallway, her footsteps echoing faintly, Haruki turned back to her painting. The *komorebi*—the sunlight filtering through the leaves—seemed to glow brighter now, as if reflecting the spark of determination in her heart. She dipped her brush into the thinner, cleaning it carefully before putting everything in its place.

Chapter 2

The sky was a deep shade of purple, streaked with the last remnants of orange as the sun dipped below the horizon. Haruki pedaled her bicycle alongside Aiko and Akihito, the cool evening air brushing against her face. The streets were quiet, save for the occasional hum of a passing car or the distant laughter of children playing in a nearby park. Their conversation drifted between idle chatter and the lingering weight of their discussion in the art room, though none of them spoke about Matsuda again.

Eventually, they reached the point where their paths diverged. Aiko stretched her arms above her head before turning down her street. “See you tomorrow, Haruki-chan! Don’t forget to submit that paper!”

Haruki laughed lightly. “I won’t! See you!”

As Aiko disappeared around the corner, Haruki turned her bike toward her own street, only to hear Akihito clear his throat beside her.

“Seriously, Haruki, you haven’t forgotten, right?” He adjusted his grip on the handlebars, casting her a skeptical glance. “You know Mrs. Kitagawa won’t go easy on you just because you’re the Art Club’s Vice President.”

Haruki huffed, rolling her eyes. “I know, I know. I’ll finish it when I get home.”

“Just making sure.” Akihito smirked before pedaling ahead, calling back over his shoulder, “I better not hear you complaining about an extension tomorrow!”

Haruki waved with a small smile, watching him disappear down the street before resuming her ride home. The air was crisp, carrying the scent of damp earth and distant food stalls.

She continued on her way, the rhythmic sound of her bicycle wheels against the pavement filling the silence. Soon, she turned onto a tree-lined street, where the houses grew larger and more imposing. Her own home stood at the end of the road, a traditional Japanese estate that exuded both elegance and isolation. The wooden gate creaked softly as she pushed it open, and she wheeled her bicycle into the garage, the dim light casting long shadows across the empty space.

The house itself was grand, with a sloping tiled roof and a meticulously maintained garden that seemed almost too perfect, as if it had been frozen in time. The sliding doors were made of polished wood, and the paper screens glowed faintly with the warm light from inside. Despite its beauty, the house often felt cold and empty, as if the walls themselves were holding their breath.

Haruki slipped off her shoes at the entrance, placing them neatly on the shoe rack. She glanced at the other pairs—her father’s polished leather shoes were absent, as usual, but her mother’s modest flats were there. She was home early today.

“I’m back,” Haruki called out, her voice echoing through the spacious hallway. The house seemed to swallow her words, leaving only silence in their wake.

Haruki stepped into the house, the polished wooden floors cool beneath her socks. She closed the door softly behind her, careful not to make too much noise. The last thing she wanted was to draw her mother's attention. She was tired, her shoulders heavy from the day, and all she wanted was to retreat to her room and lose herself in her sketchbook.

She tiptoed through the hallway, her footsteps barely audible. To her left was the open doorframe leading to the kitchen and dining area. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her mother sitting at the dining table, still in her tailored suit from work. Her laptop was open in front of her, its screen casting a faint glow on her face. Stacks of papers—student assignments waiting to be graded—were piled neatly beside her. Her mother's glasses perched low on her nose as she scribbled notes in the margins of a worksheet.

Good, Haruki thought, relief washing over her. *She's busy. Now's my chance to slip through.*

She quickened her pace, her hand already reaching for the banister of the stairs. But just as her foot touched the first step, her mother's voice cut through the silence.

"Haruki?" Her tone was stern and steady, the kind of voice that brooked no argument. "Come talk with me at the dining table."

Haruki froze, her heart sinking. She closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath to steady herself. "Yes, Mom," she said, forcing her voice to sound neutral.

She turned and walked into the dining area, her shoulders tense. Her mother didn't look up immediately, her pen still moving across the paper. Haruki stood awkwardly by the table, her hands clasped behind her back, waiting.

Finally, her mother set down her pen and removed her glasses, setting them carefully on the table, her nametag written "Honoka Fujiyama" is still etched on

her tailored suit. She looked up at Haruki, her expression unreadable. “How was school?” she asked, her voice calm but probing.

“It was fine,” Haruki replied, her tone clipped. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, avoiding her mother’s gaze.

There was a brief silence between the two, broken only by the occasional click-clacking of her mother’s laptop keys. The sound was sharp and deliberate, each keystroke echoing in the quiet room. Haruki stood awkwardly, her hands fidgeting behind her back, wishing she could just disappear upstairs.

Then her mother took a quick glance away from her laptop, her eyes narrowing as she noticed something on Haruki’s uniform and face. “What is that on your uniform and face?” she asked, her voice tinged with disapproval.

Haruki blinked, caught off guard. She looked down at her sleeve, where streaks of red and green paint had dried into a messy splatter. Her fingers instinctively brushed her cheek, and she felt the faint crust of paint there too. “Oh,” she said, surprised. “It’s just paint...”

Her mother sighed, setting down her pen and removing her glasses. “Have you been painting again in that club of yours?”

“Yes, Mom,” Haruki said, her voice steady but defensive. “I’m the vice president of the club now, so I have to keep it running.”

Her mother leaned back in her chair, folding her arms across her chest. “You know...” she began, her tone softening but still firm, “you’re in your third year now. You’re about to finish high school. You can’t keep getting lost in your head anymore. One day, you’ll need to go to university, get a job, and support yourself.”

Haruki stayed silent, her jaw tightening. Inside, her heart was a storm of emotions. She wanted to argue, to shout that she *could* keep getting lost in her head, that she *could* make a living as an artist, that she *could* decide her own

future. She was tired of being told what to do, tired of feeling like her dreams were nothing more than childish fantasies. But the words stuck in her throat, heavy and unspoken.

All she could muster was another quiet, “Yes, Mom.”

Her mother’s gaze lingered on her for a moment longer before she turned back to her laptop. The click-clacking of the keys resumed, filling the silence. But then her mother paused, her fingers hovering over the keyboard, and looked up again.

“Have you received your Career Plan papers yet?” she asked, her tone casual but probing. “You should have gotten one by now.”

Haruki hesitated, then nodded. “Yes, I did.” She reached into her bag and pulled out the folded sheet of paper, holding it out reluctantly.

Her mother took it, scanning the form with a critical eye. “You should consider becoming a nurse, Haruki,” she said, her voice matter-of-fact. “The pay is good, and you said you don’t want to become a doctor. I think nursing would suit you.”

Haruki’s stomach twisted. She clenched her hands into fists at her sides, her nails digging into her palms. “B-but I don’t want to become a nurse either, Mom,” she said, her voice trembling slightly.

Her mother’s eyes narrowed, and she set the paper down on the table. “Then what do you want to be?” she asked, her tone sharp.

There was a heavy silence between them, the air thick with tension. Haruki’s heart pounded in her chest, her mind racing. She knew what she wanted to say, but the words felt like a betrayal, like they would shatter the fragile peace between them. Still, she couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“I want to go to art school,” she muttered, her voice barely above a whisper. “I want to become an artist.”

The room fell silent, the weight of her words hanging in the air. Her mother stared at her, her expression unreadable. For a moment, Haruki thought she might not have heard her. But then her mother's lips pressed into a thin line, and her eyes hardened.

"What?" her mother said finally, her voice low and incredulous.

Haruki flinched but stood her ground. "I want to go to art school," she repeated, her voice firmer this time. "I want to study art and become an artist."

Her mother leaned back in her chair, her arms crossed over her chest. "An artist?" she said, her tone dripping with disbelief. "Haruki, do you hear yourself? Do you have any idea how difficult it is to make a living as an artist? How unstable that kind of life is?"

"I know it's not easy," Haruki said, her voice rising slightly. "But it's what I love. It's what I'm good at. I don't want to spend my life doing something I hate just because it's 'stable.'"

Her mother's eyes flashed with anger, but she kept her voice calm, which somehow made it worse. "You're being naive, Haruki. Dreams don't pay the bills. You need to think about your future, about how you're going to support yourself."

"I *am* thinking about my future!" Haruki shot back, her voice breaking. "I'm thinking about what makes me happy, not just what makes you happy!"

The words hung in the air, sharp and unyielding. Haruki's chest heaved as she stared at her mother, her eyes burning with unshed tears. Her mother's expression softened for a moment, but then she sighed and shook her head.

"You'll understand one day," she said, her voice tired. "When you're older, you'll see that I'm only trying to protect you."

Haruki didn't respond. She couldn't. The lump in her throat was too big, the weight of her mother's words too heavy. She turned and walked out of the dining room, her footsteps echoing in the empty hallway. As she climbed the stairs, her vision blurred with tears, but she blinked them away, refusing to let them fall.

When she reached her room, she closed the door behind her and leaned against it, sliding down to the floor. Her sketchbook lay on her desk, its pages filled with drawings and paintings that felt like pieces of her soul. She stared at it, her heart aching.

After a moment, she stood up and walked over to her desk, where her Career Plans paper lay crumpled at the edge. She smoothed it out, her fingers trembling slightly as she picked up a pen. Her mind raced, but for the first time in a long time, it felt clear. She knew what she wanted. She had always known.

With a deep breath, she wrote in neat, deliberate letters: Tokyo University Fine Arts Program.

Her hand shook as she set the pen down, but her resolve was steady. This was her choice. Her future. And no one—not her mother, not her father, not anyone—was going to take it away from her.

She stared at the paper for a long moment, the words staring back at her like a declaration of war. It was a small act of defiance, but it felt monumental. For the first time in what felt like forever, she felt a flicker of hope.

"I'll show them," she whispered to herself, her voice trembling but determined. "I'll prove them wrong."

She folded the paper carefully and placed it back in her bag, ready to submit it tomorrow. As she sat down at her desk and opened her sketchbook, her heart felt lighter. The colors on the page seemed brighter, the lines sharper, as if they too were emboldened by her decision.

For now, all she could do was keep painting, keep dreaming. But this time, it felt different. This time, it felt like the beginning of something new.

Chapter 3

The morning sunlight streamed through the classroom windows, casting a warm glow over the rows of desks. Haruki sat at her usual spot, her sketchbook open in front of her, pencil moving swiftly across the page. Instead of her classmates, the desks in her drawing were occupied by whimsical creatures—a fox with nine tails lounged in the corner, a dragon coiled around the teacher's podium, and a flock of tiny winged sprites flitted through the air. A smirk tugged at her lips as she added the finishing touches to a griffin perched smugly on Aiko's desk.

Aiko, seated beside her, leaned over to peek at the sketch. "You look unusually happy today," she noted, her tone equal parts curious and suspicious. "Did something good happen?"

Across from them, Akihito sat with his arms crossed, half-listening while flipping through his own notebook. He raised an eyebrow at Haruki's expression but didn't comment.

Haruki didn't look up, her pencil still moving. "I submitted my Career Plan," she said, her voice light and sing-songy.

Aiko's eyes widened, and she practically shot forward in her chair. "You did?!" she exclaimed, much too loud for the classroom. A few students glanced their way, but Aiko didn't seem to care. "What did you pick?"

Haruki finally looked up, drawing out the moment with an infuriatingly smug grin. "Tokyo University," she said, pausing dramatically. "Fine Arts program."

Aiko and Akihito reacted at the same time—

"What?!" Aiko gasped, her eyes sparkling with surprise.

"WHAT?!" Akihito groaned, his tone laced with horror.

Meanwhile, Akihito rubbed his temples as if physically pained. "Look, I know you're impulsive and stubborn as a mule, but I didn't think you'd just *impulsively decide the trajectory of your career in a day, let alone from my off-hand remarks.*" He stared at her in disbelief.

Haruki scoffed, half-annoyed. "Look, you were the one who suggested Tokyo University yesterday!"

"*Suggested!*" Akihito emphasized the word. "I was thinking at least you'd put it into consideration as *one* of your choices, not *nose-dive* into it!"

"But I *want* to go to Tokyo University," Haruki said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Akihito exhaled sharply, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Look—" he started, his voice filled with exasperation. "Did at least your parents approve of it?"

"No," Haruki said in a sing-songy tone.

Akihito stared at her, deadpan. "Of course."

Aiko snorted, clapping Haruki on the back. "Well, you're in for an interesting conversation at home."

Haruki grinned, twirling her pencil between her fingers. "Oh, I'm well aware."

Akihito groaned, dropping his head onto his desk in defeat, "You're crazy."

Haruhi shrugged, her pencil still moving. "Maybe. But it's my future, not theirs."

Aiko leaned back in her chair, running a hand through her hair. "Wow. I mean, I knew you were stubborn, but this is next level. What are you going to do when they find out?"

Haruhi's smile faltered for a moment, but she quickly recovered. "I'll deal with it when the time comes," she said, her tone casual. "For now, I'm just happy I finally made a decision."

Akihito shook his head. "You're unbelievable, you know that? But hey, It takes guts to go after what you want."

Haruhi chuckled, her smug expression softening. "Thanks. That means a lot."

The bell rang, signaling the start of class, and the room filled with the sound of shuffling papers and murmured conversations. Haruhi closed her sketchbook and tucked it into her bag, her mind already wandering to the future. For the first time in a long time, she felt like she was in control of her own destiny.

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The school day had ended, and the hallways buzzed with the chatter of students heading to clubs, cram school, or home. Haruki stretched her arms above her head as she walked, a grin spreading across her face. "Ahh, I've been waiting for this all week," she mused aloud. "Today's the plein air session! I wonder where we'll go this time. Maybe the riverside? Or that garden behind the old shrine? Ugh, I can't wait to just sit outside and paint."

Aiko trailed beside her, shaking her head. “You’re way too excited for someone who just turned their entire career plan into an act of rebellion.”

Behind them, Akihito sighed, his hands stuffed into his pockets as he matched their pace. “I thought you’d at least talk with your parents and try to convince them, Haruki,” he said, his tone serious. “Arguing against your parents is one thing, but going against them is another.”

“Yeah,” Aiko chimed in, nodding sagely. “You know, like, make a PowerPoint presentation or something. *‘Top Ten Reasons Why I Should Go to Art School.’*”

Haruki smirked. “You’re siding with *him*, Aiko? I thought you were all about rebelling against parental expectations with me.”

“I *know*,” Aiko groaned dramatically, throwing her hands up. “But me arguing with my parents is one thing—we argue all the time. *You* arguing with *your* parents is another thing entirely.” She gave Haruki a pointed look. “Your parents are *scary*.”

“Yeah, look.” Akihito shot her a skeptical glance. “Tell me you’ve at least discussed this with one of them.”

Haruki smirked but didn’t slow her pace. “I talked with my mom,” she said simply.

Akihito narrowed his eyes. “And your dad?”

Haruki shrugged. “He wasn’t around,” she said, her voice casual. “But I don’t think he’d care.”

Akihito let out a sharp breath, running a hand through his hair. “You’re crazy,” he muttered. “Do you even hear yourself? Your dad’s not just some businessman—he’s the CEO of a major automotive company. Of *course* he’d care!”

Haruki stopped in her tracks and turned to face him, her expression calm but unwavering. “No, he wasn’t around,” she said, emphasizing each word. “He’s *never* around. He’s too busy with work to care about what I do.”

Akihito frowned but didn't argue. Aiko shifted uncomfortably beside them, her gaze darting between the two.

Haruki sighed, gripping her sketchbook tighter. "Look, I know it sounds reckless, but I can't keep waiting for their approval. If I do, I'll never get to live my life. I have to take this step, even if it's scary."

Akihito's jaw tightened. "That's not the point. You might not care about what *they* think, but they'll definitely care about *you* going against them. And your parents aren't exactly the 'let it go' type."

Haruhi nodded, a small smile tugging at her lips. "I know. But I'll figure it out. I always do."

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As Haruki sled the door open to the arts club room, the room was buzzing with energy as club members prepared for their weekly *plein air* session. Easels were being adjusted, canvases stacked, sketchbooks flipped open, and tubes of paint uncapped. The faint scent of oil paint and graphite filled the air, mixing with the chatter of students discussing the best locations for today's outing.

At the center of it all, like a captain amidst a storm of creativity, stood Makoto, the Art Club's president. He was giving instructions to a group of younger students, gesturing animatedly with a charcoal stick in hand.

But as Haruki scanned the room, something unusual caught her eye—someone who definitely wasn't a regular in the Art Club.

Mrs. Kitagawa.

Haruki stiffened. What was the school counselor doing here?

Aiko and Akihito entered behind her, the three of them exchanging wary glances. Before Haruki could dwell on it, Makoto's voice rang out over the hum of activity.

"Haruki! Mrs. Kitagawa wants to see you."

A murmur of curiosity rippled through the club, but everyone quickly went back to their preparations.

Haruki exhaled, schooling her expression into something neutral. She slung her bag off her shoulder, setting it down in the corner, before making her way toward Mrs. Kitagawa.

Haruki crossed her arms, shifting her weight slightly as she faced Mrs. Kitagawa. "If this is about my Career Plans form, I swear I submitted it this morning," she said, forcing a small, confident smile. "I didn't forget."

Mrs. Kitagawa nodded. "Yes, I received it."

Haruki tilted her head. Then what is it?

"But that's not why I called you here," Mrs. Kitagawa continued, her tone even, measured.

Haruki's stomach dipped slightly. Her fingers curled around the strap of her bag. "Then... why?"

There was a pause.

Mrs. Kitagawa exhaled softly before delivering the news. "Your father is in the teacher's office. He's here to pick you up for a family occasion."

Haruki felt the words before she fully processed them—a strange weight settling in her chest, as if the air had thickened around her.

Her grip tightened on her bag. "What?"

Mrs. Kitagawa's expression remained gentle but firm. "Your father requested that you leave with him immediately."

Haruki's pulse quickened. This had to be a mistake. Her father never just *showed up* like this. He was supposed to be *too busy* for things like unannounced visits.

And today—*today*—was the club's *plein air* session.

"But I have club activities," she argued, her voice steadier than she felt. "We're heading out for *plein air* today, and Makoto needs my help with the first-years—I *can't* be absent."

"I understand," Mrs. Kitagawa said, her voice soft but unwavering. "But this is your father's request."

Request.

No, this wasn't a *request*. It was an order.

The weight in her chest sank lower. There was no room for negotiation here.

Slowly, reluctantly, she turned toward Akihito. "Can you cover for me?" she asked, her voice quieter now. "Help Makoto with the first-years?"

Akihito hesitated for a fraction of a second before nodding. "Yeah. Don't worry about it."

Haruki swallowed, then reached for her bag. The excitement from earlier—the rush of stepping into the clubroom, the anticipation of an afternoon spent outside with paint and sunlight—was gone, drained out of her like ink washing away in the rain.

Without another word, she followed Mrs. Kitagawa toward the door.

Aiko and Akihito stood in silence, watching her go.

Haruki trailed behind Mrs. Kitagawa, her steps slower than they needed to be, as if dragging her feet might somehow delay the inevitable.

This is it...

The thought settled heavily in her chest, dull and suffocating. She watched as the club rooms passed by—each doorway revealing glimpses of students lost in their passions.

The soft melody of a violin drifted from the music room, accompanied by the occasional stumble of fingers pressing the wrong note. Someone in the literature club gestured wildly as they debated over a novel, voices overlapping in a lively discussion. Inside the manga club, students huddled around a table, sketching, erasing, redrawing—completely immersed in their craft.

They were all doing what they loved. Pursuing what made them *feel alive*.

Haruki swallowed hard. *And I'm walking the green mile.*

She felt it with every step—like she was heading toward something final, something irreversible. As if, the moment she reached that office, she wouldn't just be facing her father.

She'd be facing the end of her dream.

Her fingers tightened around the strap of her bag.

No. Not yet.

She kept walking, but the weight in her chest only grew heavier.

Haruki stepped into the teacher's office, her breath catching for a split second.

There he was.

Nagano Fujiyama.

Even in the casual setting of a school, he exuded the same commanding presence that made boardrooms fall silent upon his arrival. His tailored suit sat flawlessly on his frame, not a crease in sight. His dark hair, streaked with silver, was neatly pulled back, revealing sharp, assessing eyes that took in everything without a hint of warmth. Around his fingers gleamed heavy rings—symbols of wealth and power.

The nametag still hung from his neck, *CEO of Fujiyama Automotive Company*. As if he needed a reminder.

As if *she* did.

Mrs. Kitagawa cleared her throat lightly, stepping aside as he offered her a slight bow.

"Thanks for bringing my daughter," he said smoothly, his voice even, businesslike. Then, finally, he turned his gaze on Haruki.

"Haruki..."

Just her name. Simple. Unreadable.

She gripped the strap of her bag, her heartbeat quickening.

"Come," he said, gesturing toward the hallway. "We're going to talk."

It wasn't a request.

Chapter 4

The dining room was silent, the air thick with tension. The table was bare, no food in sight, just the three of them sitting across from one another. Haruki sat stiffly in her chair, her hands clenched in her lap, her heart pounding in her chest. Her father sat at the head of the table, his expression stern and unreadable. Her mother sat beside him, her face a mixture of concern and frustration. The room felt suffocating, the weight of their expectations pressing down on Haruki like a heavy blanket.

Her father was the first to break the silence. His voice was low and steady, but there was an edge to it that made Haruki's stomach twist. "Your mother told me about your... *desire* to go to art school," he said, his tone carefully controlled.

Haruki's breath hitched. There was no going back now. Her mother had told him, and the truth was out in the open. She straightened her shoulders, forcing herself to meet his gaze. "Yes," she said, her voice trembling but firm. "I want to go to art school."

Her father's eyes narrowed, and he leaned forward slightly, his hands clasped on the table. "And what?" he said, his voice sharp. "Starve on the street as you play with your paint?"

Haruki flinched but didn't look away. "No," she said, her voice steady. "I want to make a living as an artist. I want to create something meaningful."

Her father's jaw tightened, and he shook his head. "No," he said firmly. "I won't allow it. You'll become a nurse. Because I have no options left for a stable career for you. I offered you the position of chairman in my company—you wouldn't

accept it. I suggested medical school—I have connections so you could get in. You refused. What do you truly want?”

Haruki’s chest tightened, but she held her ground. She had known this moment would come, and she had prepared herself for it. “Art school,” she said, her voice clear and resolute. “I want to be an artist.”

The room fell silent again, the weight of her words hanging in the air. Her parents exchanged a glance, their expressions unreadable. For a moment, Haruki thought she saw something flicker in her father’s eyes—disappointment, frustration, maybe even a hint of sadness. But it was gone as quickly as it appeared.

The room fell silent again, the weight of her words hanging in the air. Her parents exchanged a glance, their expressions unreadable. For a moment, Haruki thought she saw something flicker in her father’s eyes—disappointment, frustration, maybe even a hint of sadness. But it was gone as quickly as it appeared.

Her father took off his glasses and set them on the table, his movements slow and deliberate. He leaned forward slightly, his gaze locking onto Haruki’s. “I’ve heard about your senior... Yaeko Matsuda,” he said, his voice low and measured. “The Parent’s Board has been told of her story.”

Haruki’s breath caught in her throat. “Please don’t bring her into this, Father,” she said, her voice trembling.

Her father’s expression didn’t change. “I know you looked up to her a lot,” he continued, his tone softening slightly. “But our situation and hers are different. She was the youngest child in her family, with two working older sisters. She could pursue art all she wanted because her older sisters could provide for her if she failed.” He paused, his gaze intensifying. “But you, Haruki, your situation is different. You are our only child. We can’t allow you to fail. You *cannot* fail,

because who will support you? Who will look after you when we're gone? Who will feed you if your art fails? I can't afford for you to fail, Haruki."

Haruki's chest tightened, but she forced herself to speak. "I can support myself," she said, her voice shaking but defiant. "I know a place. I know some connections. I can make it work—"

Before she could finish, her father slammed his hand on the table, the sound echoing through the room like a gunshot. Haruki flinched, her words dying in her throat. Her father's voice rose, sharp and filled with anger. "Yaeko Matsuda *killed herself*, Haruki! Do you think I will allow you to follow in her footsteps?!"

Her mother gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. "Nagano..." she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Haruki froze, her heart pounding in her chest. She had been looking down at her hands, but now she slowly raised her head, her eyes meeting her father's. His face was flushed, his jaw clenched, but beneath the anger, she saw something else—fear. Raw, unbridled fear.

The room was silent, the weight of his words pressing down on her like a physical force. Haruki's mind raced, trying to process what he had just said. Yaeko Matsuda... killed herself? No, that couldn't be true. She had just disappeared. That's what everyone said. That's what she had believed.

But the look in her father's eyes told her otherwise.

Haruki's voice was barely a whisper when she finally spoke. "What... what do you mean?"

Her father's shoulders slumped, the anger draining out of him as quickly as it had come. He ran a hand over his face, suddenly looking much older than he had a moment ago. "Yaeko Matsuda... she didn't just disappear, Haruki. She... she took her own life. Her family tried to keep it quiet, but the truth came out eventually.

She couldn't handle the pressure. She couldn't make it as an artist, and she couldn't face the failure."

Haruki's vision blurred, her chest tightening as if a vice had been clamped around her heart. She shook her head, trying to deny it, but the words wouldn't come. Yaeko Matsuda, the talented artist she had admired, the one who had inspired her to keep pursuing her dreams... gone. Just like that.

Her father's voice cut through the silence, firm and unyielding. "I've signed you up for a prep school," he said, his tone leaving no room for argument. "It's a program to prepare you for nursing school. It's a stable job, and it's what your mother recommends. You'll start next week."

Haruki's breath hitched, her hands gripping the edge of the table as if it were the only thing keeping her upright. Her father continued, his words sharp and final. "And you'll quit the Art Club. You need to focus on your future, Haruki. No more distractions."

The room seemed to close in around her, the walls pressing closer with every word. Haruki sat silent, her body rigid, her mind reeling. She felt like everything had left her—her breath, her voice, her strength. She was still, as still as a rock, her eyes fixed on the table in front of her.

Her father's words echoed in her mind, each one a hammer blow. *Prep school. Nursing. Quit the Art Club.* The truth about Yaeko Matsuda's disappearance—no, her death—was still sinking in, a heavy, suffocating weight on her chest. And now this. It was too much. It was all too much.

She felt like she was drowning, the waves of her father's expectations and her mother's quiet resignation pulling her under. She had to sacrifice everything—her dreams, her passion, the one thing that made her feel alive. For what? Stability? Security? A life that wasn't hers?

Her father's voice broke through her thoughts, softer now but no less firm.

"Haruki, this is for your own good. You'll understand one day."

Haruki didn't respond. She couldn't. Her throat was too tight, her chest too heavy. She stared at the table, her hands trembling in her lap. The room was silent, the air thick with tension, but all she could hear was the pounding of her own heart.

Her mother reached out, placing a hand on her arm. "Haruki..." she said softly, her voice filled with concern. But Haruki didn't look up. She couldn't.

Her mother reached out, placing a hand on her arm. "Haruki..." she said softly, her voice filled with concern. But Haruki didn't look up. She couldn't.

Then, suddenly, Haruki stood up. The chair screeched against the floor as she pushed it back, her hands trembling but her body rigid with defiance. Her parents stared at her, startled by the sudden movement. For a moment, the room was silent, the air thick with tension.

And then Haruki exploded.

"I've followed everything you wanted!" she shouted, her voice shaking with anger and years of pent-up frustration. "Everything! Back in middle school, I studied late every night. I gave up playing with my friends, I gave up *everything* just to get into this competitive high school. And for what? To be miserable? To feel like I didn't matter?"

Her father opened his mouth to speak, but Haruki didn't let him. She was done listening. "I was miserable," she continued, her voice rising. "Every single day, I was miserable. Until my first year of high school, when Matsuda-senpai saw my drawing. She asked me to join the Art Club. She taught me how to paint. She believed in me. And for the first time in my life, I felt like I mattered. Like I belonged somewhere. People liked my paintings. People found meaning in my art. And it was all because of her. Because *she* believed in me!"

Her chest heaved as she spoke, her words pouring out like a flood she could no longer contain. “And now you’re telling me to quit? To give up the one thing that makes me happy? The one thing that makes me feel alive? No. I won’t do it. I *can’t* do it.”

Her father’s face was a mask of shock, but Haruki wasn’t finished. She turned to him, her eyes blazing. “Maybe Matsuda wouldn’t have done what she did if her parents had believed in her! Did you ever think about that? Did you ever think that maybe she just needed someone to tell her it was okay to dream? That it was okay to fail?”

The room fell silent, her words hanging in the air like a thunderclap. Her mother’s hand was pressed to her mouth, her eyes wide with shock. Her father sat frozen, his expression unreadable.

Haruki didn’t wait for a response. She turned and stormed out of the dining room, knocking the chair she had been sitting on to the floor with a loud clatter. Her mother called after her, “Haruki! Wait!” but she was already gone, her footsteps echoing down the hallway.

She flung open the front door and ran outside, the cool night air hitting her face like a slap. She didn’t know where she was going, but she didn’t care. All she knew was that she couldn’t stay there. Not in that house. Not with those expectations. Not with that suffocating weight pressing down on her chest.

Her feet carried her down the street, her breath coming in ragged gasps. The tears streamed down her face, but she didn’t stop. She ran until her legs burned and her lungs ached, until the house was far behind her and the world around her was quiet and still.

Finally, she stopped, leaning against a lamppost as she tried to catch her breath. Her heart was pounding, her mind racing, but for the first time in what felt like forever, she felt free. Free to feel. Free to dream. Free to be herself.

But as the adrenaline faded, the weight of what had just happened settled over her. She had shouted at her parents. She had defied them. And now... now there was no going back.

Chapter 5

Haruki ran and ran, the click-clacking of her school-issued shoes breaking the stillness of the night. The sound of crickets and cicadas filled the air, their rhythmic chirping a stark contrast to the chaos in her mind. Tears streamed down her cheeks, blurring her vision, but she didn't stop. She couldn't. She didn't want to believe what she had heard. She didn't want to face it.

Her breath came in ragged gasps, her chest burning with every step. The cool night air whipped against her face, but it did nothing to soothe the fire raging inside her. She ran past darkened houses, their windows glowing faintly with the warm light of families inside. Families who, unlike hers, might understand. Families who might support their children's dreams instead of crushing them.

She didn't know how far she had gone. The streets were unfamiliar now, the shadows of trees stretching long and eerie across the pavement. The moon hung low in the sky, its pale light casting an otherworldly glow over everything. Her

white sailor school uniform stood out against the dark backdrop of the night, a ghostly figure darting through the stillness.

Her legs ached, her feet throbbing in her stiff leather shoes, but she pushed herself to keep going. She didn't know where she was headed. She didn't care. All she knew was that she couldn't stop. If she stopped, the weight of everything would catch up to her—her father's harsh words, her mother's quiet resignation, the truth about Yaeko Matsuda. It would all come crashing down, and she wasn't ready to face it.

As Haruki ran, the sky opened up. At first, it was just a drizzle, the faint patter of raindrops against the pavement barely noticeable amidst the chaos in her mind. But as she continued, the rain grew heavier, the drops falling faster and harder until they soaked through her uniform, clinging to her skin like a second layer. The cool water mixed with the tears on her cheeks, blurring the line between the storm outside and the storm within.

She looked around, her vision blurred by rain and tears. The streets were empty now, the houses dark and silent. In the distance, she saw the outline of a forest, its trees swaying gently in the wind. Without thinking, she turned and ran toward it, her shoes slipping on the wet pavement.

The forest was dense, the canopy of leaves above her providing some shelter from the rain. She stumbled through the underbrush, her breath coming in ragged gasps, until she finally reached a clearing. There, she stopped, leaning against a tree as she tried to catch her breath. The rain was softer here, the sound of it hitting the leaves above creating a soothing rhythm.

For a moment, she stood there, her chest heaving, her mind racing. Then, slowly, she sank to the ground, her back against the tree. She pulled her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them as the tears came again, hot and silent.

The forest was quiet, the only sounds the gentle patter of rain and the occasional rustle of leaves against the rain. Haruki closed her eyes, letting the cool air wash over her. She felt small here, insignificant, like the world had swallowed her whole. But in a strange way, it was comforting. The forest didn't judge her. It didn't demand anything from her. It just was.

She stared out into the darkness, her mind replaying the confrontation with her parents. Her father's stern face, her mother's quiet pleading, the way they had looked at her when she shouted at them. And Yaeko Matsuda... the truth about her death. It was too much. It was all too much.

Haruki buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking as she cried. She felt lost, adrift in a sea of expectations and fears, with no way out. But even as the tears fell, a small, stubborn part of her refused to give up. She couldn't let this be the end. She couldn't let her dreams die, not like this. Not like Yaeko.

-O-

The rain went on and on, growing more intense with each passing minute. The sound of it pounding against the leaves and the ground was deafening, a relentless drumbeat that matched the chaos in Haruki's mind. After what felt like an eternity, she rose unsteadily to her feet, her body trembling from the cold and exhaustion. Her movements were slow and labored, her walk more like a limp, as if every step required the last ounce of strength she had left.

Her uniform clung to her skin, soaked through and heavy with rainwater. Her hair was plastered to her face, and her shoes squelched with every step. The rain had taken its toll, leaving her shivering and weak, but she forced herself to keep moving. She needed shelter. She needed to get out of the storm.

If anyone had seen her in that moment, they might have mistaken her for something out of an urban legend—a wisp, a ghost, a walking dead. Her pale skin glowed faintly in the darkness, her white uniform a stark contrast against the shadows of the forest. Her movements were slow and deliberate, her eyes hollow and distant, as if she were no longer fully human.

She walked and walked, her legs dragging through the mud and underbrush. The forest seemed endless, the trees closing in around her like silent sentinels. But then, in the distance, she saw it—a rectangular shape barely visible through the rain. Her heart leapt, and she forced herself to move faster, her limp becoming more pronounced as she stumbled toward the silhouette.

As she drew closer, the shape became clearer. It was a house, its outline stark against the darkness. But something about it felt... off. The windows were dark, the paint peeling from the walls. The garden was overgrown, the fence sagging and broken. It was abandoned.

Haruki hesitated for a moment, her breath coming in shallow gasps. But the rain was relentless, and she had no other choice. She limped toward the house, her feet slipping on the wet ground. The door was slightly ajar, creaking softly in the wind. She pushed it open, the hinges groaning in protest, and stepped inside.

Water dripped from her skirt and shirt, pooling on the dusty floorboards. The air inside was damp and musty, the smell of mildew and decay filling her nostrils. The house was silent, save for the sound of the rain pounding against the roof. It was empty, abandoned, but for now, it was shelter.

Haruki's legs gave out beneath her, and she collapsed onto the floorboards, her body sinking into the worn wood. The storm was no longer hitting her, the relentless rain and wind now muffled by the walls of the house. For the first time in what felt like hours, she could breathe. The air inside was warmer, almost comforting, as if the house itself were wrapping her in a fragile embrace.

Her eyelids grew heavy, her vision blurring as exhaustion finally caught up with her. She tried to fight it, to stay awake, but her body refused to obey. The warmth of the house, the stillness, the soft patter of rain on the roof—it all lulled her into a sense of safety, however fleeting.

Her thoughts drifted, fragmented and hazy. She thought of her parents, their faces etched with disappointment and fear. She thought of Yaeko Matsuda, her bright smile and the way she had encouraged Haruki to keep painting. She thought of the Art Club, the one place where she had felt like she belonged. And she thought about her future, the path her parents had laid out for her, and the one she so desperately wanted to carve for herself.

But those thoughts were distant now, fading into the background as sleep pulled her under. Her breathing slowed, her body relaxing against the floorboards. The last thing she felt was the faint warmth of the house, the last thing she heard was the gentle rhythm of the rain.

And then, she was gone, lost in a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter 6

Haruki didn't know how long she had slept. Time had lost its meaning in the quiet, rain-soaked darkness of the abandoned house. When she had collapsed on the floorboards the night before, all she had wanted was shelter from the cold and the rain. Now, as she slowly opened her eyes, she felt disoriented, her mind struggling to piece together where she was.

She sat up, her body stiff and aching, and looked around. The first thing she noticed was that she was no longer wet. Her shirt, her skirt, her hair—all of it was dry, as if the storm had never happened. She patted herself down, her fingers brushing against the fabric of her uniform, now clean and crisp, as though freshly laundered.

But that wasn't all. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she realized that the house itself had changed. Gone was the caved-in roof, the peeling paint, and the thick layers of moss and mold. The walls were smooth and clean, the wooden floorboards polished to a warm, golden sheen. The air no longer smelled of mildew and decay; instead, it carried the faint, comforting scent of cedar and tea.

Haruki got to her feet, her heart pounding in her chest. She turned in a slow circle, taking in the room around her. The windows, once cracked and grimy, now gleamed in the soft morning light. The furniture, which had been broken and covered in dust, was now whole and pristine, arranged neatly as if waiting for someone to return.

"What...?" she whispered, her voice barely audible. She reached out to touch the wall, half-expecting her hand to pass through it, as if this were all some kind of dream. But the wood was solid beneath her fingers, cool and smooth.

She stepped further into the house, her footsteps echoing softly on the floorboards. The hallway was lined with framed photographs, their faces blurred and indistinct, as if the memories they held had faded with time. The kitchen, which had been a mess of rusted appliances and broken cabinets, was now spotless, the counters gleaming and the stove polished to a mirror-like finish.

Haruki's breath quickened as she moved through the house, her mind racing. Was she dreaming? Had she hit her head and slipped into some kind of hallucination? Or was this... something else entirely?

She stopped in the middle of the living room, her eyes drawn to a large mirror hanging on the wall. Her reflection stared back at her, wide-eyed and pale, but otherwise unchanged. She reached up to touch her face, half-expecting it to feel different, but it was still her. Still Haruki.

The realization grounded her, if only for a moment. She wasn't dreaming. This was real. Or at least, it felt real.

Her gaze shifted to the front door, the one she had stumbled through last night. She walked over to it, her footsteps echoing softly on the polished floorboards. The door was solid and heavy, its wood smooth and unblemished. She reached for the handle and turned it, expecting it to open easily.

It didn't budge.

She frowned and tried again, this time with more force. The handle rattled, but the door remained firmly shut. She leaned her shoulder against it, pushing with all her strength, but it was no use. The door was locked.

Haruki stepped back, her heart pounding. She glanced around the room, her eyes landing on the other door—the one at the back of the house. It was smaller, less imposing, but it was there, a faint glimmer of hope.

She crossed the room, her footsteps quickening as she approached the second door. This one was different, its frame painted a soft, inviting white. She hesitated for a moment, her hand hovering over the handle, before she turned it.

This time, the door opened.

A cool breeze brushed against her face as she stepped through the doorway, the air fresh and crisp. She found herself standing on a small porch, overlooking a garden that stretched out before her. The storm was gone, replaced by a clear, golden morning. The garden was lush and vibrant, filled with flowers in full bloom and trees heavy with fruit. A narrow path wound its way through the greenery, leading to a gate at the far end.

Haruki stared, her breath catching in her throat. This wasn't possible. The house had been abandoned, surrounded by a dense, overgrown forest. And yet, here she was, standing in a place that felt like it belonged in a dream.

She stepped down from the porch, her feet sinking into the soft grass. The air was filled with the scent of flowers and earth, and the sound of birdsong echoed in the distance. She walked along the path, her hand brushing against the petals of the flowers as she passed. The gate at the end of the path stood open, inviting her to step through.

Haruki turned back to look at the house. It stood tall and proud, its windows gleaming in the sunlight. For a moment, she considered going back inside, but the thought of the locked front door stopped her.

Haruki stood at the edge of the garden, the gate creaking softly behind her as it swung shut. Before her stretched a narrow paved road, its surface smooth and unblemished, as if it had been freshly laid. She frowned, her mind racing. She didn't remember walking on a paved road last night. In fact, she was certain there had been nothing but dirt paths and overgrown trails leading to the abandoned house.

But here it was, undeniable and real, winding its way through the field of tall grass and disappearing into the distance. The road seemed to beckon her, its quiet stillness inviting her to follow.

Haruki hesitated, glancing back at the house. It stood serene and unchanging, its windows reflecting the golden light of the morning. The garden behind her was just as still, the flowers and trees frozen in time, as if waiting for her to make a decision.

She turned back to the road, her heart pounding in her chest. There was something about it—something that pulled at her, urging her forward. She didn't know where it led, but she knew she couldn't stay here. Not when the house felt so strange, so otherworldly.

Taking a deep breath, Haruki stepped onto the paved road. The surface was cool beneath her feet, the sound of her footsteps echoing softly in the quiet morning air. The tall grass swayed gently on either side of her, the breeze carrying the faint scent of earth and wildflowers.

As she walked, the road began to curve, leading her further away from the house and the garden. The landscape around her shifted subtly, the fields giving way to clusters of trees and small, rolling hills. In the distance, she could see the outline of a town, its rooftops glowing in the sunlight.

Chapter 7

Haruki walked along the narrow paved road, the bright glow of the morning light growing more intense with every step. The air was warm and golden, the kind of light that made everything seem softer, more dreamlike. She squinted against the brightness, her heart pounding as she approached the end of the road.

And then, she saw it.

The town spread out before her, its streets and buildings bathed in the warm morning light. But it wasn't the town she knew. Not the one she had grown up in, with its modern buildings and bustling streets. This town was smaller, quieter, its buildings low and traditional, their wooden frames and tiled roofs weathered by time. The streets were narrow and winding, lined with old-fashioned storefronts and houses that looked like they belonged in a different era.

Haruki stopped in her tracks, her mouth falling open as she took in the sight. This was her town—she recognized the layout, the curve of the streets, the placement of the hills in the distance—but it was... different. Some of the buildings she remembered were missing, replaced by empty lots or smaller, older structures. Others were still there, but they looked different, their modern facades replaced by traditional wooden frames and sliding paper doors.

She turned in a slow circle, her mind struggling to make sense of what she was seeing. The town was alive, but it felt like a memory, a snapshot of a time long past. People moved through the streets, their clothes old-fashioned and their movements unhurried. A man in a worn kimono swept the steps of a small shop, while a woman in a simple dress balanced a basket of vegetables on her hip. A group of children ran past, their laughter echoing through the air.

She turned to where her house should have been, her heart pounding in her chest. But there was nothing there. Just an empty plot of land, overgrown with grass and wildflowers. No grand, traditional estate. No familiar gate or garden. Just emptiness.

Haruki stumbled back, her legs trembling beneath her. This couldn't be real. It had to be a dream, a hallucination, something. But the air smelled of earth and woodsmoke, the sounds of the town were too vivid, too real. She reached out to touch the wall of a nearby building, her fingers brushing against the rough wood. It was solid. Real.

She was here. In the past.

Haruki stumbled back, her legs trembling beneath her. This couldn't be real. It had to be a dream, a hallucination, something. But the air smelled of earth and woodsmoke, the sounds of the town were too vivid, too real. She reached out to touch the wall of a nearby building, her fingers brushing against the rough wood. It was solid. Real.

She stood there, her mind racing, trying to make sense of the situation. The town around her was alive, bustling with activity, but it felt like a world she didn't belong to. The people, the buildings, the smells—it was all too much. She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath, trying to steady herself.

And then, from somewhere in the distance, she heard a shout.

“Hey!”

Haruki opened her eyes, glancing around. The voice didn't seem directed at her, so she ignored it, her thoughts still swirling.

“Hey! Watch out!!” the voice shouted again, louder this time.

Haruki turned her head, her brow furrowing in confusion. Before she could react, something hard and fast smacked into the side of her head with a loud *thwack*. Pain exploded across her temple, and she stumbled, falling to the ground with a groan.

“Ow...” she muttered, clutching her head as she sat up. Her vision swam for a moment, and she blinked, trying to clear it. A baseball rolled to a stop a few feet away from her, its white surface scuffed and dirty.

“Oh no! Are you okay?!” a voice called out, footsteps pounding against the cobblestone street as someone ran toward her.

Haruki looked up, squinting against the sunlight, to see a boy skidding to a stop in front of her. He was around her age, his dark hair messy and his cheeks flushed from running. He wore a simple white shirt and shorts, and in his hand, he held a worn baseball glove.

“I’m so sorry!” he said, his voice filled with genuine concern. “I didn’t see you there! Are you hurt?”

Haruki winced, touching the side of her head where the ball had hit her. It throbbed, but the pain was already fading. “I’m... I’m fine,” she said, her voice shaky. “Just... surprised.”

The boy crouched down next to her, his eyes wide with worry. “Are you sure? That looked like it hurt. Here, let me help you up.” He held out his hand, and after a moment’s hesitation, Haruki took it.

He pulled her to her feet with surprising strength, his grip firm but gentle. Haruki swayed slightly, still feeling a little dizzy, but the boy steadied her with a hand on her shoulder.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” he asked, tilting his head as he studied her. “I’ve never seen you before.”

Haruki blinked, her mind still reeling from everything that had happened. “Uh... no,” she said, her voice hesitant. “I’m... just passing through.”

The boy’s eyes dropped to her uniform, and his face lit up with recognition. “Wait, are you from Fukumitsu High School?” he asked, pointing to the emblem on her blazer.

Haruki’s heart skipped a beat. Fukumitsu High School. Her school. The one she attended in the present. She nodded slowly, her voice barely above a whisper. “Yes... I’m from Fukumitsu.”

The boy grinned, his worry replaced by excitement. “Oh, great then! I’m from Fukumitsu too! Me and my friends are just hanging out, passing some time before class. Maybe you should join us so we can go to school together.”

Haruki stared at him, her mind struggling to process everything. Fukumitsu High School existed here, in this time. It was still standing, still a part of this town. The realization gave her a small flicker of hope, a tiny anchor in the sea of confusion she was drowning in.

“Uh... sure,” she said finally, her voice shaky. “I’ll join you.”

The boy’s grin widened, and he picked up the baseball, tossing it lightly in his hand. “Great! Follow me!”

Haruki followed him down the street, her mind racing. She didn’t know what was happening or how she had ended up here, but at least her school was still here. At least there was something familiar in this strange, unfamiliar world.

As they walked, Haruki’s curiosity got the better of her. She glanced at the boy, he had called himself—and asked, “What year is it?”

The boy stopped mid-step, turning to look at her with a puzzled expression. “What happened?” he asked, half-laughing. “You just met a someone, and the first thing you ask is what year it is? Not even an introduction?”

“O-oh, I’m sorry, excuse me.” Haruki stumbled, “I-I’m Haruki, Haruki Fujiyama.”

“Fujiyama?” The boy pondered, then studied her. “Have I seen you somewhere?”

“Umm, maybe it was just a coincidence,” She chuckled, “There’s many people with the name Fujiyama, afterall.”

“Oh right,” She chuckled, “Forgive me, but why do you want to know what year is it?”

Haruki flushed, realizing how strange her question must have sounded. “I... I was just curious,” she stammered, trying to cover her slip.

The boy shrugged, his easygoing smile returning. “Well, if you really want to know, it’s June first, 1961. The start of summer.”

Haruki froze, her feet stopping as if rooted to the ground. Her mind raced, trying to process what he had just said. *1961*. She had traveled over six decades into the past. The realization hit her like a punch to the gut, leaving her breathless.

The boy stopped too, turning back to look at her with a confused frown. “What’s the matter?” he asked, his tone tinged with concern.

“Wait...” she said slowly, Haruki stared at him, her heart pounding in her chest. her voice barely above a whisper. “*Who are you?*”

The boy blinked, taken aback by the intensity of her question. “Me?” he scoffed, before extending his hand with a grin.

“I’m Nagano. Pleased to meet you.”

Haruki’s breath caught in her throat.

“Nagano...” she repeated, her voice trembling. “Nagano Fujiyama?”

The boy—Nagano—nodded, his grin widening.

“Yeah, that’s me. How’d you guess that?”

Haruki’s legs felt like they might give out beneath her. She stared at him, her mind reeling. This couldn’t be real. This couldn’t be the same man who had raised her, the stern, distant figure who had always seemed so unapproachable. The boy in front of her was nothing like that. He was kind, smiling, easygoing. There was no trace of the white hair or the stern voice she associated with her father. He was... different.

“D-dad?” she managed to ask weakly, her voice barely audible.

Chapter 8

“Dad?” he repeated, Nagano’s grin faltered, replaced by a look of confusion. His tone incredulous. “What are you talking about? I’m not your dad.”

Haruki shook her head, trying to clear the fog in her mind. “No, I mean... you’re...” She trailed off, unsure how to explain. How could she tell him that she was his daughter from the future? He would never believe her.

Nagano tilted his head, studying her with a mixture of curiosity and concern. “Are you feeling okay?” he asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Haruki forced a weak smile, though her heart was still racing. “I’m... I’m fine,” she said, though her voice betrayed her. “I just... I think I need to sit down.”

Nagano nodded, his easygoing demeanor returning. “Alright, let’s find a place to sit. You look like you’ve had a rough morning.”

As they walked, Haruki’s mind was a whirlwind of emotions. She had found her father—or rather, the boy who would one day become her father. But he was so different from the man she knew. So... alive. So full of life.

And yet, the thought of what lay ahead for him—for both of them—filled her with a deep, aching sadness. She didn’t know how, but she had to find a way to change things. To make sure that the boy in front of her didn’t lose the light in his eyes.

But for now, all she could do was follow him, her heart heavy with the weight of the future.

Haruki sat on a piece of concrete pipe, her legs dangling as she watched the boys play a makeshift game of baseball. There were four of them, their laughter loud and carefree as they swung bats and chased after the ball. Nearby, four motorcycles were parked, their sleek designs a stark contrast to the simplicity of the game.

The girl sitting next to her—a cheerful, dark-haired girl with a bright smile—handed her a carton of apple juice. Haruki took it, glancing at the unfamiliar brand name before sticking the straw in and taking a sip. It was sweet and refreshing, a small comfort in the midst of her confusion.

The girl opened her mouth to start a conversation, but Haruki interrupted her, her words slightly muffled by the straw in her mouth. “If you turned out to be Honoka Fujiyama... I’m going to lose my mind.”

The girl blinked, her brow furrowing in confusion. “Honoka Fujiyama?” she repeated. “You mean Honoka Aoki from Class 1A?”

Haruki froze, the carton of juice halfway to her mouth. *Aoki*. That was her mother’s maiden name. Of course. Her mother hadn’t taken her father’s surname yet. She was still Honoka Aoki in this time.

The girl tilted her head, studying Haruki with a curious expression. “What’s your name, by the way? I’m Sakura Emasu.”

Haruki hesitated, her mind racing. “Haruki... Haruki Fujiyama,” she said finally, her voice quiet.

Sakura's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh, are you and Naga-kun related?" she asked, gesturing toward Nagano, who was currently arguing with one of the other boys over a questionable call.

Haruki stared at her, her frustration bubbling to the surface. She didn't know how to answer that question. Was she related to him? Technically, yes. But how could she explain that to someone who had no idea about the future—about who Nagano would become, about who *she* was?

Without a word, Haruki stood up, crumpled the empty juice carton in her hand, and threw it toward a nearby trash can. It missed, bouncing off the rim and landing on the ground. "I don't know!" she said, her voice tinged with frustration.

Sakura blinked, taken aback by Haruki's outburst. "Uh... okay," she said slowly, her tone cautious. "You don't have to get mad about it."

Haruki sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I'm not mad," she said, though her voice still carried an edge. "I'm just... confused."

Sakura studied her for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, if you say so. But you know, Naga-kun's a good guy. If you're related, you're lucky."

Haruki didn't respond. She just sat back down, her eyes fixed on Nagano as he laughed and joked with his friends. He was so different from the man she knew—so carefree, so full of life. It was hard to believe that this was the same person who would one day become her stern, distant father.

As she watched him, a strange mix of emotions swirled inside her—frustration, sadness, and a flicker of something she couldn't quite name. Hope, maybe. Or determination.

She didn't know how she had ended up here, or why, but she knew one thing for sure: she wasn't going to waste this chance. She was going to find out what had

happened to her parents—to *these* versions of them—and maybe, just maybe, she could change things.

-O-

As they hung out, the faint sound of a bell echoed in the distance, cutting through the laughter and chatter. One of the boys—a tall, lanky kid with a mischievous grin—shouted, “It’s the class bell! Let’s go!”

The others scrambled into action, quickly packing up their baseball gear and rushing toward their motorcycles. Nagano slung his glove over his shoulder and jogged toward his bike, his movements quick and practiced.

“C’mon, let’s go! The class is starting!” Sakura called, already running toward one of the motorcycles. Haruki hesitated for a moment, then followed, her heart pounding as she tried to keep up.

Sakura hopped onto the seat behind one of the boys, her arms wrapping around his waist as the engine roared to life. The other boys followed suit, their motorcycles growling like restless beasts.

“Hey! Haruki!” Nagano’s voice cut through the noise, and she turned to see him sitting on his motorcycle, his helmet already on. He grinned at her, patting the seat behind him. “C’mon, you don’t want to be late on your first day at Fukumitsu, do you?”

Haruki stared at him for a moment, her mind racing. This was surreal. She was about to ride a motorcycle with her father—her *young* father—to a school that existed decades before she was born. But there was no time to think. The other

motorcycles were already pulling away, their engines roaring as they sped down the road.

She took a deep breath and ran toward Nagano, hopping onto the seat behind him. Her arms instinctively wrapped around his waist as he revved the engine, the vibrations coursing through her.

“Hold on tight!” he called over his shoulder, his voice barely audible over the noise. Before she could respond, he hit the throttle, and the motorcycle surged forward.

The wind whipped through Haruki’s hair as they sped down the road, the world blurring around her. She clung to Nagano, her heart racing as they weaved through the streets. The other motorcycles were ahead of them, their riders laughing and shouting as they raced toward the school.

Haruki’s mind was a whirlwind of emotions—fear, excitement, disbelief. She was riding through 1960s Japan on a motorcycle with her father, heading to a school that shouldn’t exist in this time. It was like something out of a dream, but the feel of the wind on her face and the rumble of the engine beneath her told her it was real.

As they approached the school, Nagano slowed down, pulling into the parking lot alongside the others. He cut the engine and turned to Haruki, his grin wide and carefree. “Not bad for your first ride, huh?”

Haruki nodded, her legs trembling slightly as she climbed off the motorcycle. “Yeah... not bad.”

Nagano laughed, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “C’mon, let’s get to class. You don’t want to miss your first day.”

Haruki followed him, her mind still reeling. She didn’t know what to expect, but one thing was clear: this was just the beginning. She was in the past, surrounded

by people who would one day shape her future. And she had no idea what to do next.

But for now, all she could do was follow Nagano, her heart pounding with a mix of fear and determination.

Chapter 9

The boys stopped and parked their motorcycles a short distance from the school, careful to follow the rules—students weren't allowed to ride motorcycles directly onto school grounds. Nagano parked his bike alongside the others, and they all dismounted, slinging their bags over their shoulders as they began walking toward the school.

Haruki trailed behind them, her eyes scanning the familiar yet unfamiliar surroundings. The school building stood tall and imposing, its traditional architecture a stark contrast to the modern structure she knew. The walls were made of wood and plaster, their surfaces weathered but well-maintained. The windows were framed with brass, their panes gleaming in the morning light.

As they entered the school complex, Haruki's heart sank. The layout was the same, but so much was different. The club room where she used to host the Arts Club—her sanctuary—wasn't there. In her time, it had been on the floor above the gymnasium, but now that space was empty, just a blank wall where the door should have been. She supposed it hadn't been built yet.

The group moved through the courtyard, their footsteps echoing on the cobblestone path. Haruki's eyes darted around, taking in every detail. The school grounds were immaculate, the gardens neatly trimmed and the pathways spotless. It was a far cry from the slightly worn, modernized version she was used to.

As they stepped inside the school building, the differences became even more apparent. The floors were made of polished wood, their surfaces gleaming and squeaky clean. The walls were lined with brass fixtures, their surfaces gleaming in the light streaming through the windows. The air smelled of wood polish and fresh paper, a far cry from the faint scent of plastic and metal that permeated her school in the present.

Haruki's footsteps echoed softly as she followed the group down the hallway. The classrooms were arranged in the same order she remembered, but the doors were made of solid wood, their surfaces carved with intricate designs. The students milling about wore uniforms similar to hers, but the fabrics were heavier, the styles more traditional.

Nagano glanced back at her, his grin wide and carefree. "First day jitters?" he asked, his tone teasing.

Haruki forced a smile, though her mind was still reeling. "Something like that," she said, her voice quiet.

He laughed, slinging his bag over his shoulder. "Don't worry, you'll get used to it. Fukumitsu's a great school."

Haruki nodded, though her thoughts were elsewhere. She didn't know how she was going to navigate this strange, unfamiliar version of her school. But one thing was clear: she couldn't let herself get overwhelmed. She had to keep moving forward, no matter how surreal it all felt.

As they reached the staircase, Nagano turned to her. "What class are you in?"

Haruki hesitated, her mind racing. She didn't know how the class system worked in this time, but she had to say something. "Uh... Class 1A," she said, hoping it was the right answer.

Nagano's grin widened. "No way! That's my class too. C'mon, I'll show you the way."

Haruki followed him, her heart still racing from the surreal experience of being in this unfamiliar version of her school. But before they could take more than a few steps, a gruff voice stopped them in their tracks.

"Hold it right there!"

They froze, turning slowly to see a large man in a suit standing behind them. He carried a thick wooden ruler in one hand, his expression stern and unyielding. Nagano leaned over to Haruki and whispered, "That's Mr. Genzo, the math teacher. He's super strict. Don't move."

Mr. Genzo stepped forward, his eyes narrowing as he surveyed the group. "You're all three minutes late," he said, his voice sharp and cutting.

Three minutes?! Haruki thought to herself, her stomach tightening. In her time, being 15 minutes late was considered tardy, but here, even a few minutes were enough to draw his wrath.

Mr. Genzo began circling the group, his wooden ruler tapping ominously against his palm. He inspected each student's uniform with a critical eye, and every time he spotted a discrepancy—no matter how small—he didn't hesitate to strike. He hit Nagano on the arm for having sleeves that were too long. He smacked Sakura's leg for her skirt being too short. The others weren't spared either, each receiving a sharp rap for minor infractions.

Haruki's heart pounded as Mr. Genzo approached her. She had heard stories from her teachers about how strict and brutal educators were in the past, but hearing

about it was nothing compared to experiencing it firsthand. She stood stiffly, her hands clenched at her sides, as he stopped in front of her.

“Well, who is this?” Mr. Genzo said, his tone dripping with suspicion. “I’ve never seen you before.”

Haruki opened her mouth to respond, but no words came out. Her mind raced, trying to come up with an explanation, but before she could say anything, Nagano stepped forward.

“She’s a new student, sir,” he said quickly, his voice steady despite the tension in the air. “I heard there’s a new transfer student starting today. This must be her.”

Mr. Genzo’s eyes narrowed, and he studied Haruki closely. For a moment, it seemed like he didn’t believe Nagano’s story. He turned to one of the teachers standing nearby and whispered something to them. The teacher nodded and hurried off, presumably to check the records.

Mr. Genzo turned back to Haruki, his expression softening slightly. “I’m terribly sorry, Mrs. Fujiyama,” he said, his tone now polite and almost apologetic. “I didn’t know you were the new student. Please follow Mrs. Azuki to your classroom.”

Haruki blinked, stunned by the sudden change in his demeanor. “T-thank you,” she muttered, her voice barely above a whisper.

Mr. Genzo nodded, then turned to Nagano and the others, his stern expression returning. “As for you lot,” he said, his voice sharp, “to the principal’s office. Now!”

Nagano and his friends exchanged resigned glances but didn’t argue. They turned and walked away, their shoulders slumped as they headed toward the principal’s office.

Haruki watched them go, her heart aching with guilt. Nagano had stood up for her, and now he was paying the price. She wanted to say something, to thank him or apologize, but before she could, Mrs. Azuki—a kind-looking woman with glasses—gestured for her to follow.

“This way, dear,” Mrs. Azuki said, her voice warm and reassuring.

Haruki nodded and followed her down the hallway, her mind still reeling from what had just happened. As they walked, she couldn’t help but glance back at Nagano and his friends, who were disappearing around the corner.

Mr. Genzo’s final words echoed in her mind: *“Next time, I suggest you stay away from these lackeys. There are better students in your classroom.”*

Haruki clenched her fists, a flicker of defiance sparking in her chest. She didn’t care what Mr. Genzo thought. Nagano and his friends had been kind to her, and she wasn’t going to abandon them just because they didn’t fit someone else’s idea of “better.”

For now, though, all she could do was follow Mrs. Azuki, her heart heavy with the weight of everything that had happened—and everything that was yet to come.

Chapter 10

Haruki walked behind Mrs. Azuki, her footsteps echoing softly in the quiet hallway. The teacher's kind demeanor and gentle guidance reminded her of Mrs. Kitagawa, the teacher who had taken her from the Art Club in the present. The memory was bittersweet, a sharp pang of longing cutting through her chest.

She thought about her weekly plein-air sessions with the Art Club, the way the sunlight would filter through the trees as she painted, the laughter and camaraderie of her fellow club members. She thought about her father, standing at the end of that hallway in the present, his stern expression as he told her it was time to leave the club behind. That had been the last day of her life as she knew it—the day her dreams had been taken from her.

But now, standing in this strange yet familiar version of her school, it felt like a whole new beginning. Everything was the same, yet different. The walls, the floors, the air—it all carried a sense of nostalgia, as if she had stepped into a memory she didn't know she had.

Mrs. Azuki stopped in front of a door, her hand resting on the handle. Haruki looked up and saw the sign above it: *A1*. Her heart skipped a beat. This was her classroom—or at least, the 1960s version of it.

"Here we are," Mrs. Azuki said, her voice warm and reassuring. "This is your classroom, Class 1A. I'll introduce you to the teacher, and then you can take a seat."

Mrs. Azuki gently opened the door and peeked inside, interrupting the lesson with a soft knock. The teacher—a tall, stern-looking man with glasses perched on the

bridge of his nose—paused mid-sentence and turned to the door. Mrs. Azuki whispered something to him, gesturing toward Haruki. The teacher nodded, his expression serious but not unkind.

He turned back to the class, his voice firm and commanding. “Class, we will be joined by a new student today. Please welcome her properly.”

Mrs. Azuki stepped aside and motioned for Haruki to enter. Haruki took a deep breath, straightened her uniform, and stepped into the classroom. All eyes turned to her, the students sitting upright in their seats, their hands neatly folded on their desks. The atmosphere was formal, almost rigid, a stark contrast to the more relaxed environment she was used to in the present.

The teacher gestured for Haruki to stand at the front of the class. “Introduce yourself,” he said, his tone leaving no room for hesitation.

Haruki swallowed hard, her voice trembling slightly as she spoke. “My name is Haruki Fujiyama. I’m... pleased to meet you all.”

The class responded in unison, their voices loud and clear. “Welcome, Haruki-san!”

The teacher nodded, seemingly satisfied with the introduction. He pointed to an empty seat near the back of the room. “You may take your seat there, Fujiyama.”

Haruki bowed slightly, a gesture of respect she had seen in old movies but never practiced herself, and made her way to the desk. The students watched her with polite curiosity, their gazes following her as she walked. She sat down, her hands resting on the wooden desk, and glanced around the room.

The classroom was smaller than she remembered, the desks arranged in neat, orderly rows. The walls were lined with wooden panels, and the blackboard at the front was framed by brass trim. The air smelled of chalk and polished wood, a far cry from the faint scent of plastic and metal that permeated her school in the present.

As the teacher resumed the lesson, Haruki's mind wandered. She thought about Nagano and his friends, about the strict Mr. Genzo, about the strange, surreal world she had found herself in. She didn't know what the future held, but one thing was clear: she couldn't go back. Not yet.

For now, all she could do was take it one step at a time.

-0-

The current lesson being taught was chemistry. The teacher stood at the front of the room, writing equations on the blackboard with precise, deliberate strokes. Haruki sat at her desk, her notebook open in front of her, but her mind was elsewhere.

For the first time since arriving in this strange version of her school, she felt a flicker of normalcy. She was a student, sitting in a classroom, listening to a lesson. It was familiar, almost comforting. But as she glanced around the room, a part of her expected to see her best friends, Aiko and Akihito, sitting nearby, ready to pass her a note or share a joke. Instead, she was met with the faces of strangers—students who wouldn't be born for decades in her own time.

The realization hit her like a punch to the gut. She sighed, leaning forward and resting her chin in her hand. But before she could sink too deeply into her thoughts, the teacher's sharp voice cut through the air.

"Fujiyama," he said, his tone firm but not unkind. "Sit properly, please."

Haruki straightened immediately, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. “Yes, sir,” she murmured, adjusting her posture and folding her hands neatly on her desk. The other students didn’t react, their attention focused on the lesson, but Haruki couldn’t help feeling out of place.

The teacher continued the lesson, his voice steady and authoritative. Haruki tried to focus, but her mind kept wandering. She missed Aiko’s quick wit and Akihito’s quiet support. She missed the Art Club, the freedom to create, the sense of belonging she had found there. But here, in this time, those things didn’t exist—at least, not yet.

When the lesson ended, the teacher announced a class assignment. “You will work in pairs,” he said, his tone leaving no room for argument. “Complete the problems on page 42 and submit your answers by the end of the period.”

The students began pairing up, their movements quick and efficient. Haruki hesitated, unsure of what to do. She didn’t know anyone in the class, and the thought of approaching a stranger made her stomach twist with anxiety.

But then the girl seated next to her—a quiet, serious-looking student with her hair tied back in a neat braid—turned to her and nodded. “You can work with me,” she said, her voice soft but firm.

Haruki blinked, surprised by the offer. “Thank you,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The girl nodded again, opening her textbook to the assigned page. She didn’t introduce herself at first, simply turning to Haruki and pointing to the problems on the page. “Let’s start with this one,” she said, her tone matter-of-fact.

Haruki pulled her chair closer to the girl’s desk, her heart still racing. She didn’t know what to expect, but for now, she was grateful for the small act of kindness.

The girl began explaining the problem, her voice soft but confident. Haruki tried to follow along, but it quickly became clear that she hadn't fully grasped the lesson.

The girl noticed Haruki's confusion and paused, her brow furrowing slightly. "You didn't understand the lesson, did you?" she asked, her tone more curious than accusatory.

Haruki flushed, embarrassed. "Not really," she admitted, her voice quiet.

The girl smiled, her expression kind. "It's okay. You can just follow my lead." She began jotting down the steps to solve the problem, her handwriting neat and precise. Haruki copied her work, her mind still reeling from everything that had happened.

They sat there in silence for a while, the only sound the scratching of their pens on paper. Then, the girl leaned closer and whispered, "Hey."

Haruki looked up, surprised. "Yeah?"

"You're Fujiyama, right?" the girl asked, her voice low so as not to disturb the other students.

Haruki nodded. "Yeah."

"Are you perhaps related to Nagano Fujiyama from 2A?" the girl asked, her tone casual but curious.

Haruki hesitated, her mind racing. How could she explain her connection to Nagano without revealing the truth? Finally, she shook her head. "No," she said, her voice firm. "We just share the same surname."

"Oh," the girl said, a hint of disappointment in her voice. "I'm sure there are a lot of people with the name Fujiyama. Sorry, I jumped to conclusions." She giggled softly, her cheeks flushing slightly.

Then, as if realizing something, the girl's eyes widened. "Oh, I'm so sorry! How rude of me—I haven't even introduced myself!" She reached out her hand, her smile warm and genuine. "I'm Honoka Aoki. Nice to meet you."

Haruki's heart skipped a beat. She stared at the girl, her mind struggling to process what she had just heard. "Honoka... Fuji—" she started to say, then corrected herself. "Honoka Aoki?"

The girl nodded, her smile widening. "Yeah. That's me!"

Haruki's pen stopped mid-stroke, her hand freezing as realization dawned on her. This girl—this kind, easygoing girl who had been helping her with the assignment—was her mother. Honoka Aoki. The woman who, in the future, would become her strict, traditional mother, always pushing her to conform to societal expectations.

But here, in this time, she was just a teenager. A student. A girl who giggled and apologized for being rude. A girl who didn't yet know the weight of the future that awaited her.

Haruki's chest tightened, a mix of emotions swirling inside her—shock, sadness, and a strange, aching tenderness. She didn't know what to say or how to act. All she could do was stare at Honoka, her mind racing.

Honoka tilted her head, her expression concerned. "Are you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Haruki forced a smile, though her heart was pounding. "I'm fine," she said, her voice shaky. "It's just... nice to meet you mo— I mean, Aoki-san."

Honoka smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Nice to meet you too, Fujiyama-san."

As they returned to their work, Haruki's mind was a whirlwind of thoughts. She didn't know how she had ended up here, or why, but one thing was clear: she had been given a chance to see her parents as they truly were—not as the stern, distant figures she knew, but as the people they had been before life had shaped them. And maybe, just maybe, she could change things. For them. For herself.

Chapter 11

After the final bell rang, signaling the end of the school day, Haruki and Honoka walked together through the hallway, their footsteps blending with the chatter of other students. The air was filled with the sound of laughter and the shuffling of shoes as everyone made their way to the exits.

Haruki glanced at Honoka, her hands clutching the straps of her bag. "Aoki-san," she began, her tone hesitant, "I-is the class usually this strict?"

Honoka looked at her, her brow furrowing in confusion. "Strict? I thought it was pretty laid back today. Why? Was it different at your previous school?"

Haruki hesitated, unsure of how much to reveal. "Well... yeah," she said carefully. "At my old school, the teachers were usually pretty relaxed. Sometimes, we could even talk to them like friends. But here..." She trailed off, glancing around the hallway as if expecting Mr. Genzo to appear with his wooden ruler at any moment. "It feels like I could get hit with a ruler for just breathing wrong."

Honoka giggled, covering her mouth with her hand. “You’re funny, Fujiyama-san. Are you from the city or something? I’ve heard the schools there are a lot more laid back.”

Haruki blinked, caught off guard by the question. She couldn’t exactly tell Honoka that she was from the same town, just fifty years in the future. So, she nodded, going along with the assumption. “Yeah, I’m from the city. It’s... different there.”

Honoka’s eyes sparkled with curiosity. “That sounds exciting. I’ve always wanted to visit the city. Maybe one day I will.”

Haruki smiled faintly, though her heart ached at the thought. She knew what the future held for Honoka—a life tied to tradition and expectations, far removed from the dreams she might have now.

Honoka tilted her head, studying Haruki for a moment. “You know, if it helps you relax a bit, you can just call me Honoka.”

Haruki’s eyes widened in surprise. “A-are you sure?”

Honoka nodded, her smile warm and genuine. “Of course. We’re classmates now, after all.”

Haruki hesitated, then nodded. “Alright then, Honoka-san,” she said, testing the name on her tongue. “Then please call me Haruki.”

Honoka’s smile widened. “Okay then, Haruki-chan.”

The nickname caught Haruki off guard, sending a warm, familiar feeling through her chest. She hadn’t been called that in a long time. In the present, her mother always addressed her formally, her tone strict and distant. But here, Honoka’s voice was friendly and down-to-earth, filled with a warmth that felt both familiar and alien at the same time.

It was strange, hearing her mother—her *young* mother—call her by such an affectionate name. It made her feel at home, yet also reminded her of how much had changed over the years. How much *she* had changed.

As they walked through the bustling hallway, Honoka turned to Haruki with a bright smile. “By the way, Haruki-chan,” she said, her tone casual but enthusiastic, “I’m the editor of the Literature Club. If you haven’t joined any clubs yet, you should consider joining mine. We’re always looking for someone to help out with the papers!”

Haruki hesitated, her mind racing. The Literature Club. It wasn’t the Art Club she had loved so much in her own time, but it was something. Still, after everything that had happened today, she felt exhausted—mentally and emotionally. She needed time to process everything.

“Thank you, Honoka-san,” Haruki said, forcing a small smile. “I’ll think about it. But today... I think I just need to rest. It’s been quite a day.”

Honoka nodded, her expression understanding. “Of course. You’ve had a lot to adjust to. Take your time.”

They continued walking, the chatter of other students fading as they neared the school gates. Honoka glanced at Haruki, her curiosity getting the better of her. “So, where do you live, Haruki-chan? Maybe we’re neighbors!”

Haruki’s heart skipped a beat. She hadn’t thought about this. Her house—the grand, traditional estate she knew in the present—didn’t exist yet. The only place she could call home in this time was the small, abandoned house in the forest where she had taken shelter the night before. She needed to come up with something believable.

“I, uh... live in a cabin in the forest,” Haruki said, her voice hesitant. “With my grandfather.”

Honoka's eyes widened in surprise. "Really? That's so interesting! I didn't know there were cabins out there. I live not far from the forest, actually. My family's house is just a short walk away."

Haruki's mind raced. That's right—her grandparents' house on her mother's side was somewhere near the forest. She had heard stories about it from her mother, though she had never seen it herself. The realization made her chest tighten with a strange mix of emotions.

"Oh," Haruki said, her voice soft. "That's... convenient."

Honoka smiled, her expression warm. "If you're heading home now, we could walk together. It's always nicer to have company, don't you think?"

Haruki hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Sure. That sounds nice."

They stepped out of the school gates, the cool afternoon air brushing against their faces. The sun was beginning to set, casting a golden glow over the town. As they walked, Honoka chatted easily, telling Haruki about her family, her favorite books, and the Literature Club's upcoming activities. Haruki listened, her heart swelling with a mix of emotions—nostalgia, sadness, and a strange, aching hope.

As they walked toward the gate, Haruki noticed a group of students gathered nearby. The motorcycle gang from earlier was hanging out, their bikes parked in a neat row. Nagano sat on the edge of the sidewalk, an acoustic guitar resting on his lap. His fingers moved skillfully over the strings, playing a familiar tune—*Ue o Muite Arukō*—while his friends sang along, their voices loud and slightly off-key.

"Hey, it's Haruki-chan!" Nagano called, spotting her as she approached. He grinned, his fingers still strumming the guitar. "Come join us!"

Haruki smiled, her heart lifting at the sight. She turned to Honoka, who was standing beside her, her face suddenly flushed and her hands fidgeting nervously.

"Hey, it's Nagano over there," Haruki said, her tone cheerful. "Let's go say hi!"

“H-Haruki?” Honoka stammered, her voice barely above a whisper. Her cheeks turned bright red, and she looked like she wanted to disappear. But before she could protest, Haruki grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the group.

Nagano’s grin widened as they approached. “Hey, Haruki-chan! And... oh, it’s Aoki-san!” he said, his tone teasing. “What brings you two here?”

Honoka’s face turned even redder, and she looked down at her feet, unable to meet Nagano’s gaze. “I-I was just walking home with Fujiyama-san,” she mumbled, her voice barely audible.

Haruki, on the other hand, was unfazed. She let go of Honoka’s hand and sat down on the sidewalk, leaning back on her palms. “We heard you playing and thought we’d come over,” she said, her tone casual. “You’re pretty good, Nagano.”

Nagano laughed, his fingers still moving over the guitar strings. “Thanks! I’ve been practicing. You know this song?”

Haruki nodded. “Yeah, it’s *Ue o Muite Arukō*, right? It’s a vintage classic.”

Nagano’s fingers faltered for a moment, and he looked at her with a puzzled expression. “Vintage? What are you talking about? This song just came out last year. It’s a global hit right now—everyone even people in America is listening to it.”

Haruki froze, her cheeks flushing as she realized her mistake. Of course. She wasn’t in the present anymore. This song wasn’t a nostalgic throwback here—it was brand new, fresh and popular. And her parents—well, the younger versions of them sitting right here—were part of the generation that had made it a hit.

“Oh, right,” Haruki said quickly, trying to cover her slip. “I mean, it’s just so good that it feels like a classic already.”

“I know, right?”, He grinned, and started playing again. “Well, if you like it that much, maybe I’ll play it more often.”

Haruki smiled weakly, her mind racing. She couldn’t help but think about her father in the present, how he would play this song on his old tape recorder whenever he was relaxing by himself. She had always thought it was just a random habit, but now she realized—this was where it had started. This song, this moment, was the origin of that tradition.

Honoka, still standing awkwardly to the side, finally found her voice. “I-It’s... it’s a beautiful song,” she said softly, her eyes flickering toward Nagano before quickly looking away.

Nagano smiled at her, his expression softening. “Thanks, Aoki-san. You should sit down and sing with us. We’re just hanging out before heading home.”

Honoka hesitated, her face still flushed, but Haruki reached up and tugged on her sleeve. “Come on, Honoka-san. Sit down. It’ll be fun.”

Reluctantly, Honoka sat down beside Haruki, her hands folded neatly in her lap. Nagano continued playing, his friends joining in with the singing. The atmosphere was lively and carefree, a stark contrast to the strict, formal environment of the school.

As the music filled the air, Haruki couldn’t help but smile. For the first time since arriving in this strange, unfamiliar world, she felt a sense of belonging. She glanced at Honoka, who was still blushing but seemed to be enjoying herself, and then at Nagano, who was completely absorbed in his music.

This was her parents’ past—a time before the weight of expectations and responsibilities had shaped them into the people she knew. And for now, she was a part of it.

As Haruki and Honoka continued their walk home, the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting a warm, golden glow over the rice fields that stretched out on either side of the road. The air was filled with the chirping of crickets and the occasional rustle of the wind through the tall grass. It was peaceful, but Honoka's mood was anything but.

She walked a few steps ahead of Haruki, her arms crossed and her lips pressed into a pout. Her shoulders were hunched, and every now and then, she let out a small, frustrated sigh. Haruki watched her with amusement, recognizing the sulky demeanor all too well. It was so much like her mother in the present—stubborn, dramatic, and impossible to ignore.

“Honoka-san,” Haruki said, her tone light and teasing. “What’s the matter? You’ve been sulking the whole way.”

Honoka mumbled something under her breath, her voice barely audible.

“What was that?” Haruki asked, leaning closer.

“I said,” Honoka repeated, her voice louder but still tinged with annoyance, “You should’ve given me a heads-up before dragging me over there like that.”

Haruki blinked, surprised by the response. “A heads-up? About what?”

Honoka stopped walking and turned to face Haruki, her cheeks flushed and her eyes narrowed. “About Nagano and his friends, obviously! You just pulled me over without warning, and I wasn’t ready!”

Haruki stared at her for a moment, then burst out laughing. The way Honoka sulked and grumbled, her mannerisms and tone—it was so reminiscent of her

present-day mother. It took Haruki a second to realize what was happening, but when it clicked, she couldn't stop grinning.

"Oh, I see," Haruki said, her voice dripping with mock seriousness. "It's about Nagano-kun, isn't it?"

Honoka's face turned bright red, and she sputtered, "Wh-what? Where did that come from?!"

Haruki smirked, crossing her arms. "Come on, Honoka-san! It's obvious!"

"Sh-shh!" Honoka hissed, lunging forward and clapping a hand over Haruki's mouth. She glanced around nervously, her eyes scanning the empty road and the vast rice fields around them. Satisfied that no one was nearby, she slowly removed her hand and let out a long sigh.

"You're impossible," Honoka muttered, her cheeks still flushed. She hesitated for a moment, then sighed again, her shoulders slumping. "Fine. I trust you, Haruki-chan. So... I'll tell you."

Haruki raised an eyebrow, trying to suppress a smile. "Tell me what?"

Honoka looked down at her feet, her voice barely above a whisper. "I... I like Nagano-kun."

There was a beat of silence. Haruki's expression didn't change—it remained deadpan, almost unreadable—but a small, involuntary chuckle escaped her lips. The absurdity of the situation hit her all at once. Here she was, standing in the middle of a rice field in 1961, listening to her teenage mother confess her crush on her teenage father. It was like something out of a surreal comedy.

Honoka's eyes widened, and she stared at Haruki, her confusion evident. "W-what is that reaction?" she asked, her voice rising in panic. "Is it that obvious?"

Haruki's lips twitched again, but she managed to keep her expression mostly neutral. "Oh, no, no," she said, her tone dripping with mock seriousness. "It's not obvious at all. I'm just... processing."

Honoka frowned, clearly not buying it. "Processing? What does that even mean?"

Haruki shrugged, her deadpan expression finally breaking into a small grin. "It means you're not as subtle as you think, Honoka-san."

Honoka groaned, covering her face with her hands. "This is a disaster."

Haruki reached out and gently pulled Honoka's hands away from her face. "Hey, it's not a disaster. It's cute. And honestly, I think Nagano-kun likes you too."

Honoka's expression shifted, her earlier flustered demeanor giving way to something more somber. She took her hands away from her face, her voice quiet but firm. "No, he doesn't."

"Didn't you see how popular he is?" Honoka continued, "He's surrounded by all those popular boys, and the girls in class—no, the entire school—are always talking about him. About how cool he is, about the rumors of him defying the principal, how he avoids punishments and not being scared by it."

Haruki blinked, surprised by the sudden shift in Honoka's mood.

"I'm just an editor for the school press in the Literature Club," Honoka continued, her voice trembling slightly. "I'm not popular. In fact, my name isn't even written in the school press. No one notices me unless they need something proofread. You're the only one who actually talks to me and doesn't think my rambling about books and literature is boring." She looked down at her feet, her shoulders slumping. "What chance do I have with someone like Nagano-kun?"

Haruki's heart ached at the raw vulnerability in Honoka's voice. She had always known her mother as a strong, confident woman in the present, but here, in this

time, Honoka was just a teenager, grappling with insecurities and self-doubt. It was a side of her mother she had never seen before, and it made her feel both protective and sad.

“Honoka-san,” Haruki said gently, placing a hand on her shoulder. “You’re amazing. You’re smart, kind, and passionate about what you love. That’s not something everyone has. And Nagano-kun... he’s not as untouchable as you think. He’s just a guy who likes music, motorcycles and hanging out with his friends. Trust me, he’d be lucky to have someone like you.”

Honoka looked up at Haruki, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. For a moment, it seemed like she wanted to believe her, but then she shook her head again. “It doesn’t matter. Even if he did like me, it wouldn’t change anything. I’m not... I’m not the kind of girl he would even notice.”

Haruki opened her mouth to argue,

But Honoka cut her off. “Please, Haruki-chan,” she said, her voice pleading. “Just... keep this a secret, okay? I don’t want it to turn into some rumor. I don’t want to be laughed at.”

Haruki hesitated, then nodded. “Okay,” she said softly. “I won’t tell anyone. But just know that you’re worth more than you think, Honoka-san. And someday, someone’s going to see that. Maybe even Nagano-kun.”

Honoka gave her a small, grateful smile, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Thanks, Haruki-chan. You’re a good friend.”

They continued walking in silence, the weight of Honoka’s confession hanging in the air. Haruki couldn’t help but feel a mix of emotions—sadness for Honoka’s insecurities, frustration at the unfairness of it all, and a fierce determination to help her mother see her own worth.

For the first time since arriving in this strange, unfamiliar world, Haruki felt a flicker of connection. She didn't know how long she would be here, or what the future held, but for now, she was grateful for this moment. For the chance to see her mother as she truly was—not as the stern, distant figure Haruki knew, but as the kind, vibrant girl walking beside her.

As they approached the edge of the forest, Honoka pointed down a narrow path. “My house is just down that way,” she said. “Where’s your cabin, Haruki-chan?”

Haruki glanced toward the dense trees, her heart pounding. “It’s... a little further in,” she said, her voice quiet. “I’ll be fine from here. Thanks for walking with me, Honoka-san.”

Honoka smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “Of course! See you tomorrow, Haruki-chan.”

Haruki watched as Honoka walked away, her figure growing smaller as she disappeared down the path. For a moment, Haruki stood there, her chest tight with emotion. Then, she turned and made her way into the forest, her footsteps slow and deliberate.

The small, abandoned house came into view, its silhouette stark against the fading light. Haruki stepped inside, the air cool and still. She sat down on the floor, her back against the wall, and closed her eyes.

She didn't know how she had ended up here, or why, but one thing was clear: she had been given a chance to see her parents as they truly were—not as the stern, distant figures she knew, but as the people they had been before life had shaped them.

And maybe, just maybe, she could change things. For them. For herself.

Chapter 12

Haruki continued walking along the paved road that wound through the forest, the fading light casting long shadows across the path. The scene was serene, a stark contrast to the rainy, muddy night when she had first stumbled upon this place in the present. The air was crisp and cool, filled with the gentle rustling of leaves and the distant chirping of birds. It was peaceful, almost idyllic, and for a moment, Haruki allowed herself to forget the weight of everything that had happened.

As she walked, the small house came into view. It was a humble cottage, nestled among the trees, its wooden walls weathered but sturdy. The roof was sloped and tiled, and the windows were framed by simple shutters. It wasn't grand or imposing, but it had a quiet charm that made it feel like home—at least, for now.

Haruki approached the house, her footsteps soft against the paved road. The two doors—one at the front and one at the back—stood as a reminder of the strange, almost magical quality of this place. She paused for a moment, her hand resting on the handle of the front door, before pushing it open and stepping inside.

The air inside was cool and still, the faint scent of wood and earth filling her nostrils. The interior was simple but cozy, with a small wooden table, a few chairs, and a fireplace in the corner. The floorboards creaked softly under her feet as she walked further in, her bag slung over her shoulder.

Haruki set her bag down by the table, her back against the wooden chair. She closed her eyes, letting out a long breath as the events of the day replayed in her mind. Meeting Nagano and Honoka, seeing them as they truly were—young, vibrant, and full of life—had been both exhilarating and overwhelming. She had

seen a side of her parents she had never known, a side that made her heart ache with a strange mix of joy and sadness.

Haruki sat at the small wooden table, her thoughts swirling like a storm. She couldn't stop thinking about what she had done in the present—how she had run away from home, angry and hurt, after her parents had crushed her dreams. She had been so consumed by her anger that she hadn't stopped to consider how they might feel. Did they regret their decision? Were they worried about her? Or were they just as stubborn and unyielding as ever?

But now, after meeting Nagano and Honoka—the younger versions of her parents—she was reminded of the good times she had shared with them. She thought about her father singing *Ue o Muite Arukō* to her when she was little, his voice warm and comforting. She thought about her mother, who, despite her busy schedule, would sometimes talk to her or ask for help in the kitchen. Those moments had been rare, but they had been precious.

She also thought about Aiko and Akihito, her best friends. What were they thinking now? Were they worried about her? Did they think she had disappeared like Yaeko Matsuda? The thought made her chest tighten. If she didn't return, would she become just another rumor—a girl who went missing before graduation because of an argument with her parents? The reputation of the Art Club would be tarnished, with two vice-presidents disappearing under similar circumstances.

Haruki missed everything from her time—her strict parents, her best friends, her club. She missed the life she had left behind, even if it hadn't been perfect.

Her gaze drifted to the door opposite her—the one she had come through. Beyond that door was the present, the 2000s, her real home. She got up from the table and walked over to it, her heart pounding. She grabbed the handle and tried to pry it open, but it wouldn't budge. She nudged it, then forced it, slamming her body against it in desperation. But the door remained firmly shut, and all she succeeded

in doing was hurting her shoulders and knocking over the items on the nearby shelves.

Haruki sat on the floor, rubbing her sore shoulders and wincing in pain. As she caught her breath, she noticed something among the scattered items—a leather-bound book. It was red with brass edges, and its pages had fallen open to a specific spread. Haruki picked it up, her curiosity piqued.

On the left page was an illustration of the door before her, the sketch eerily accurate. The details were precise, from the grain of the wood to the brass handle. It was as if someone had drawn it from life.

On the right page was a poem, its text surrounded by intricate illustrations and decorations that looked medieval—far older than the time she was currently in. The words were written in an elegant script, and they read:

*“When the sun meets the moon
When the dark meets the light
When the evil meets the good
When the man meets the lady
The gate shall open.”*

Haruki stared at the page, her mind racing. At first, she thought it was just a vintage book, perhaps something the previous owner of the cottage had collected. But the illustration of the door and the cryptic poem made her wonder if there was more to it. Was this a clue? A way back to her own time?

She closed the book and placed it back on the shelf, her thoughts a jumbled mess. She was too tired to make sense of it now. All she wanted was to sleep and process the bizarre day she had just experienced.

Haruki walked to the small room with the iron-frame bed and lay down, her body sinking into the thin mattress. She stared at the ceiling, her mind still racing, but

exhaustion soon overtook her. As she drifted off to sleep, the words of the poem echoed in her mind, a faint glimmer of hope amidst the chaos.