

Chapter 19

The sun blazed overhead, casting a golden glow over the schoolyard. Nagano sat in the shade of a concrete shelter, his back against the wall and his guitar resting on his lap. His friends were a short distance away, their laughter and shouts filling the air as they played a game of baseball. But Nagano was deep in concentration, his fingers carefully threading a new string onto his guitar. The upper E string had snapped earlier, and he was determined to fix it before practice.

As he worked, a shadow fell over him, growing closer and closer. Nagano didn't look up, assuming it was one of his friends coming to pester him. "Look, man," he said, his tone half-amused, half-annoyed, "I'm busy here. You can just go on ahead—"

He paused, his hands stilling as he caught a glimpse of the figure standing in front of him. It wasn't one of his friends. It was Haruki.

"Wait, Haruki?" he said, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

Haruki stood there, her usual paint-stained seifuku uniform slightly disheveled, her sleeves rolled up to her elbows. In her hands were two bottles of soda, condensation dripping down the sides. But what caught Nagano's attention most was the look on her face—a determined, almost fierce expression that he hadn't seen before.

"Hey," Haruki said, her voice steady but firm. She held out one of the sodas to him. "I brought you this."

Nagano blinked, his confusion evident. "Uh... thanks?" he said, taking the bottle hesitantly. He glanced over at his friends, who were now watching the interaction with curious grins, before turning back to Haruki. "What's this for?"

Haruki smiled, her expression softening. "It's an apology," she said, her tone sincere. "For lashing out at you yesterday. I... I had a bad day."

Nagano laughed, the sound warm and easy. "It's okay. I didn't think much of it. I just didn't realize you were having such a rough time."

Haruki giggled, the tension in her shoulders easing slightly. For a while, they sat in comfortable silence, the sounds of Nagano's friends playing baseball filling the air. The crack of the bat, the shouts of encouragement, the occasional burst of

laughter—it all blended into a lively backdrop as Haruki took a sip from her soda. Nagano occasionally did the same, though his focus remained on his guitar.

He finished placing the new string on the fretboard and began tuning it, plucking each string and adjusting the pegs until the notes rang clear. “There you go!” he said, grinning to himself as he strummed a chord. “Good as new!”

Haruki watched him, a small smile playing on her lips. “Say, Nagano,” she began, her tone casual but curious, “you said you wanted to play on a stage, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Nagano said, his fingers idly playing a few chords. “I’ve done it now and then with some of my friends who also play music. But I think people get bored hearing the same things over and over, so they just stopped bothering.”

Haruki raised an eyebrow, amused. “Huh? You’ve already performed? And you’re still unsatisfied?”

Nagano shrugged, his grin turning sheepish. “I mean, it’s fun and all, but it’s not exactly what I dreamed of, you know?”

Haruki tilted her head, her curiosity piqued. “What kind of performance do you want to do before you graduate, then?”

Nagano’s expression grew thoughtful as he strummed another chord. “I just want to play for a happy crowd,” he said, his voice softer now. “And I guess that means I need to be sincere with what I’m playing. Not just covering other people’s songs, but playing something I wrote myself.”

Haruki’s eyes lit up. “Do you and your friends have an original song?”

Nagano chuckled, scratching the back of his neck. “We do, but... it’s bad. I’m good at the guitar, and my friends are great at their instruments, but none of us are good with words. The lyrics always fall flat.”

Haruki sat there for a moment, her mind racing. Then, like a lightbulb flicking on, an idea struck her. She leaned closer to Nagano, lowering her voice to a whisper. “What if... you got someone to help with the lyrics? Someone who’s good with words?”

Nagano blinked, his brow furrowing. “Like who?”

Haruki grinned. “Like Aoki Honoka.”

Nagano's eyes widened, and he leaned back, clearly taken aback. "Aoki-san? From the Literature Club? Do you think she'd even consider it? I mean, I know those clubs are usually super busy, and after what you told me yesterday... I'm not sure she'd want to work with me."

Haruki waved a hand dismissively. "Don't worry about that. I'm good friends with her. I can make it happen."

Nagano stared at her, his expression a mix of skepticism and hope. "You really think so?"

Haruki nodded, her determination unwavering. "I know so. Just leave it to me."

Nagano grinned, his usual confidence returning. "Alright. If you can pull this off, I owe you one."

Haruki laughed, standing up and brushing off her uniform. "You'd better believe it. Now, finish tuning that guitar. You're going to need it."

As she walked away, Nagano watched her go, a smile tugging at his lips. For the first time in a while, he felt a spark of excitement—not just about playing music, but about the possibilities that lay ahead.

Chapter 20

The hallway was bathed in the golden light of late afternoon, the rhythmic sound of students' footsteps and distant chatter filling the air. She adjusted her grip on the stack of classical books borrowed from the library—Balzac, Kawabata, a heavy anthology of Edo-period poetry—their weight familiar against her chest. The papers of student submissions for the Annual Magazine teetered precariously atop the books, threatening to slip with every step.

"Are you and Haruki having a fight?" Her friend asked, adjusting her own bundle of poster supplies as they walked. "You two seem far apart these past few days."

Honoka hesitated, her gaze dropping to the floor. "N-no, it's not like that Michiko." she murmured, though the uncertainty in her voice betrayed her. Then, softer: "Well... Maybe."

Michiko sighed. "Well," she said, shifting her load to one arm so she could nudge Honoka's shoulder, "I think you two should talk about whatever's troubling you. You're deskmates, you know? It's not exactly a good sight to see both of you looking sour all day in class earlier."

A faint smile touched Honoka's lips. Michiko had always been too observant for her own good.

"Yeah," she conceded, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's my fault, really." The memory of their last conversation in the editing room rose unbidden—the way Haruki's eyes had widened when Honoka called her *Fujiyama-san*, the cold formality of it. She hugged the books tighter. "But you're right. I... I kind of miss talking to her."

The words lingered in the air, heavier than she expected. She *did* miss Haruki—her sudden bursts of laughter, the way she'd doodle in the margins of her notes, the warmth of her presence beside her in class. But the memory of their last conversation—of Haruki's meddling, of her own tearful plea—still stung.

They reached the intersection where the east wing branched toward the art rooms. Michiko hesitated, her gaze flickering between Honoka and the hallway ahead. "I'm helping with the festival posters today," she said. "Are you sure you don't need help with the editorial work?"

Honoka shook her head, the motion sending her braid swaying. "It's okay. I'm fine on my own." She forced a brighter tone, the way she always did when she didn't want to burden others. "Good luck with the posters!"

Michiko studied her for a moment longer before nodding. "Don't work too hard, Honoka-chan. Good luck!" she said, and with a wave, disappeared down the bustling hallway.

Alone again, Honoka exhaled, the tension in her shoulders easing just slightly. The Editorial Division room was her sanctuary—a small, quiet space tucked away near

the library, usually reserved for her alone. As she walked, the rhythmic *tap-tap* of her loafers against the floor matched the cadence of her thoughts.

I should apologize. The realization settled over her like the golden afternoon light. She had overreacted, let her own insecurities color her words. Haruki had only been trying to help, in her own clumsy way. The thought of Haruki's usual exuberance—how she'd light up when discussing a new idea, how she'd doodle in the margins of her notes during lectures—made Honoka's chest ache.

She reached the familiar oak door, its frosted glass pane bearing the faded *Editorial Division* label in careful calligraphy. Balancing the books on one arm, she slid the door open—only to freeze on the threshold.

The Editorial Division room was a small, quiet space tucked away near the back of the school—a sanctuary of sorts, reserved mostly for her. As she slid the door open, the familiar scent of paper and ink greeted her. The room was empty, just as she'd hoped.

Setting her notebook down on the desk, she sank into the chair and exhaled slowly. The weight of the past few days pressed down on her—the confusion, the hurt, the guilt. She had been so quick to assume Haruki's intentions, so quick to push her away. And now...

Her fingers absently flipped open her notebook, revealing pages of half-finished poems and scribbled edits. Words had always been her refuge, but even they felt hollow now.

Honoka turned to a section where she usually recorded facts and information from her readings, but her breath caught when she saw the margins filled with Haruki's doodles. Sketches of their teachers with exaggerated features made her lips twitch - there was Mr. Tanaka with his caterpillar eyebrows stretching off the page, and stern Principal Kobayashi depicted as a grumpy badger. Between notes on classical poetry were futuristic designs she didn't recognize - sleek vehicles that looked like they belonged in a sci-fi novel, and a strange, round-eared cartoon character holding what appeared to be some sort of advanced gaming device (all things Haruki had absentmindedly drawn from her 21st century memories).

She's really a great artist Honoka thought, tracing a particularly detailed sketch of the school courtyard. A quiet giggle escaped her as she discovered a caricature of their physics teacher mid-sneeze, his glasses flying off his face.

The warmth of the memory faded as she returned to her work, her pencil hovering over an analysis of Bashō's haiku. The creaking floorboard behind her barely registered as she muttered, *"Why did he choose 'ancient pond' instead of 'old pond'? The syllable count is the same, but the feeling..."* Her pencil tapped rhythmically against the page, leaving tiny graphite dots like breadcrumbs of her concentration.

Before she could sink deeper into her thoughts, the door behind her creaked open, slightly breaking her concentration. The sound of footsteps and the faint jingle of a charm bracelet broke the silence.

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

The voice barely pierced her focus. Her finger continued tracing the kanji on the page as she whispered, "Maybe if I substitute 'stillness' here..."

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

"Honoka-chan!" Louder this time, tinged with frustration.

The pencil kept moving, now scribbling possible alternatives in the margin.

"Aw come on!" The girl groaned, "Are you still angry at me?"

When no response came, The girl's mischievous grin returned. She slipped off her shoes and began tiptoeing across the wooden floor with exaggerated care, each step calculated to avoid the known squeaky boards she'd memorized from previous visits. Her shadow loomed over Honoka's hunched form as she raised her hands like a cartoon villain.

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

Then, with a dramatic flourish, she clapped her hands on Honoka's shoulders and shouted,

"BOO!"

The effect was instantaneous. Honoka jolted as if electrocuted, her chair legs screeching against the floor before tipping backward in slow motion. Her arms windmilled wildly, sending papers soaring like startled birds. An open textbook

sailed past Haruki's head while Honoka's prized fountain pen clattered against the far wall.

Books, parchments, loose papers exploded into the air, cascading down like confetti in a parade of overwork. Her body caught on an open book—and she tumbled off her chair entirely, landing flat on her back with a heavy *thud*.

"H-haruki?!" Honoka sputtered, her glasses askew and hair now decorated with loose notes. "What was that for?!"

Haruki burst into laughter, doubling over as Honoka scowled. "You should've seen your face!" she wheezed, clutching her stomach.

Honoka's cheeks puffed up in indignation, her brows knitting together as she adjusted her glasses with exaggerated precision.

"This girl is impossible to deal with," she grumbled under her breath, crossing her arms tightly. But as she watched Haruki - her shoulders shaking with mirth, tears of laughter glistening at the corners of her eyes, that familiar unruly lock of hair bouncing with each guffaw - something in Honoka's stern expression began to waver.

A tiny snort escaped Honoka's nose despite herself. She immediately clapped a hand over her mouth, but it was too late. Haruki's laughter redoubled at the sound, and soon Honoka found her own shoulders shaking. The giggles bubbled up uncontrollably, her proper posture crumbling as she collapsed forward, her forehead nearly touching her knees.

"You - you looked like a startled cat!" Haruki managed between gasps, miming puffed-up fur with her hands.

"Oh shut up!" Honoka shot back, but there was no heat in it - just breathless amusement as she wiped at her own tears. The papers still scattered around them bore witness to their chaos, some drifting lazily in the air currents from the open window.

Their laughter gradually subsided into comfortable silence, punctuated only by occasional residual giggles. Haruki flopped down onto the floor beside Honoka, their shoulders brushing as they both caught their breath. The late afternoon sun streamed through the window, painting everything in golden hues and stretching their shadows across the paper-strewn floor.

For the first time in days, the air between them felt light again.

Chapter 21

Haruki helped Honoka tidy up the fallen books, stacking loose papers and student submissions neatly on the desk. The silence between them was comfortable now, filled only with the rustle of paper and the occasional creak of the old wooden floor.

Then, out of the blue, Honoka spoke, her voice soft but clear.

"I'm sorry for how I acted yesterday."

Haruki paused, a stack of papers in her hands. "What for?"

Honoka kept her eyes on the book in front of her, her fingers tracing the edge of the page. "I got angry at you. I shouldn't have. I know you and Nagano-kun are just friends—you two just hang out in the same group. Maybe I was just... insecure. I could never be as free and outgoing as you and him."

Haruki frowned, setting the papers down. "But why?"

Honoka exhaled, her shoulders slumping slightly. "Well... my parents never wanted me to play around like other kids. No sleepovers, no after-school hangouts. Just study, study, study, study." Her voice sounds bitter, before she continued.

"—so I can become a teacher one day."

The words hit Haruki like a punch to the gut. *Because she did become a teacher.* The Honoka she knew in the future—her mother—had followed that exact path.

She stared at the paper in her hands - an essay on *The Tale of Genji* - seeing not the words but her memory of mother in the present time, in her own time. Grading papers at the kitchen table late into the night, feeling restless and sleepy, fuelled by coffee and stress.

"But you said you wanted to be a poet," Haruki said carefully, picking up another stray sheet. "You've written that poetry book and everything."

"Yeah, but..." Honoka smiled faintly, still not looking up. "It's just a hobby, you know? Something for myself. Publishing is expensive, and the thousands of rejections is a going to take so much time... And my parents don't want any of that uncertainty, they want me to have a stable career." She said, scribbling of graphite could be heard as she talks.

"I'm just glad they allowed me join the Literature Club at all. Knowing how strict they are."

She set down her pen, finally meeting Haruki's gaze. "I envy you and Nagano. You both seem like you have all the time in the world—riding around Japan on his bike, doing whatever you want on weekends."

"Meanwhile, I'm stuck at home studying Souseki, Shikibu, Kawabata, Mishima... Knowing that I wouldn't be able to make something of my own to show the world."

The air between them grew heavy. Haruki remembered with sudden clarity that night in her home, that didn't exist in this time - the dining table where her father had calmly placed the nursery school application. The way her mother's hands had fluttered nervously pouring tea as Haruki's voice rose in protest.

The slam of her palm against the dining room table. The bitter taste of green tea gone cold in her mouth. The way her mother had reached for her wrist as she stormed toward the front door - that desperate grip she'd shaken off so violently she heard her mother stumble.

Rain had been falling that night. She remembered how it soaked through her sneakers as she ran blindly down the lamp-lit street, how she'd screamed into the storm that they were just like all the same - crushing dreams beneath obligation. That they didn't understand art mattered more than some safe career. That why she lived mattered more than how she lived.

Now, watching Honoka's fingers trace the edges of her poetry notebook with the same restrained longing, Haruki understood the truth: her mother hadn't been the enemy that night. She'd been someone who recognized the shape of the cage because she'd lived in one herself.

Haruki moved behind Honoka's chair and wrapped her arms around her friend's shoulders in a tight embrace.

"H-Haruki? What are you—" Honoka stiffened in surprise, her hands hovering uncertainly.

"I'm sorry..." Haruki whispered, pressing her forehead against Honoka's shoulder blade. The scent of ink and faint floral shampoo filled her nose - so familiar, so much like home.

Honoka relaxed slightly, though confusion still laced her voice. "It's okay, Haruki-chan." She patted Haruki's arm awkwardly.

"I can still write poetry in my spare time!" She continued, forcing cheer in her tone only made Haruki hold on tighter. "I guess Nagano has it good, doesn't he? To be able to hang out with his friends whenever he wishes, come home as late as he wants..."

Haruki's grip loosened as she drew back slightly. The golden light caught the dust motes swirling between them as she took a deep breath.

"But..." she said quietly, moving to sit beside Honoka, "Nagano isn't that free either."

Honoka blinked, leaning back in her chair. "What do you mean?"

"His father owns an automotive company," Haruki said matter-of-factly. "And his father before him probably did too. It's obvious he's expected to inherit it."

Honoka's smile turned wistful. "That's nice."

"But he doesn't *want* that," Haruki insisted. "He loves music—singing, playing guitar, performing. You know he's terrible at math and physics. He *hates* engineering."

Honoka's expression softened. "But... he still has to inherit the business nonetheless."

Haruki nodded. "He still has to go to engineering school after graduation. He'll have to give up on music."

A heavy silence settled between them, the weight of unspoken dreams pressing down. Honoka stared at her notebook, her fingers absently tracing the spine.

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 pencil against notebook, the crunching of pages being flipped. filled the small room, each scratch deliberate, each movement lost in the rhythm of creation.

The room smelled of old ink and pages, a scent that Haruki thought, Honoka had come to associate with freedom—a freedom she rarely felt outside these four walls.

"But you still love him, don't you, Honoka?"

Honoka's pencil stilled. Her breath caught, and for a moment, she considered denying it—again. But the words died before they could form. There was no hiding it anymore. Not from Haruki. Not from herself.

"Yeah..." she admitted at last, a small, helpless smile tugging at her lips. "I do."

Haruki's face lit up like the sun breaking through clouds. "That's why," she declared, throwing her arms wide with a flourish, "We're going to make his dream come true!"

Chapter 22

The next day found them pressed against the weathered brick wall near the school courtyard, their uniforms rumpled from crouching too long. Honoka's fingers trembled around the chilled soda bottle, condensation dripping onto her carefully polished loafers. Haruki could practically hear the frantic calculations whirring behind her friend's furrowed brow.

"It's okay, Honoka-chan," Haruki whispered, patting her shoulder with far more confidence than she felt. "Just give him the soda. It'll get you talking! He loves this stuff!"

But Honoka had already spiraled into catastrophe scenarios. "What if he thinks I'm weird? What if I drop it? What if—" Her voice hitched. "What if his friends start laughing and he laughs too and—"

"You're thinking way too much about this!" Haruki interrupted, peeking around the corner. The sunlight caught on Nagano's guitar case as he ambled across the courtyard, his usual entourage of motorcycle friends trailing behind him. "Look! It's him! It's your cue!"

Before Honoka could protest further, Haruki gave her a firm push between the shoulder blades—sending her stumbling into the open with all the grace of a startled deer.

From her hiding spot behind the rusty water fountain, Haruki watched as Honoka straightened her blazer, still buttoned despite the sweltering heat. and began the long march across the sunbaked courtyard. Every step seemed painfully deliberate, like she was walking toward her own execution rather than a baseball field shelter. The way her polished loafers hesitated before touching the dirt path reminded Haruki of someone testing icy water.

Come on, you've got this! Haruki mouthed, giving an exaggerated thumbs-up when Honoka glanced back for the third time. Her friend's expression—somewhere between nausea and sheer terror—would've been hilarious if it wasn't so heartbreaking.

As Honoka reached the shelter's shadow, her nose immediately wrinkling at the assault of odors: leather mitts left too long in lockers, the sharp tang of sweat, and beneath it all, the earthy scent of freshly turned dirt from the field. Five boys lounged on the benches in various states of undress—sleeves rolled haphazardly, ties hanging loose like nooses, towels draped around necks. One was using his blazer as a makeshift pillow.

"Um... Excuse me," Honoka's voice came out smaller than she intended. When no one noticed, she cleared her throat and tried again, fingers tightening around the soda bottle. "Is Nagano Fujiyama here?"

The chatter died instantly. Five pairs of eyes swiveled to stare at the anomaly before them—a proper honors student in full uniform, standing stiff as a paper doll in their sweaty sanctuary. Someone whistled low under their breath.

From the back of the shelter, a familiar head of messy brown hair popped up. Nagano blinked sweat from his eyes, his guitar pick still wedged between his lips. When he recognized Honoka, he nearly choked on it.

"Aoki-san?" He scrambled upright, hastily buttoning his wrinkled dress shirt. "What are you—I mean—" His eyes darted to the soda in her hands, then to his snickering friends, then back to her face which was now the color of cherry blossoms in full bloom. "Did you... want something?"

Honoka's mouth opened, but the carefully rehearsed speech about music collaborations evaporated under the collective gaze of Nagano's motorcycle gang. The soda bottle made an ominous cracking sound under her grip.

Honoka stiffened like a marionette with its strings pulled taut. The shelter's wooden beams creaked in the summer heat as she stood there—a perfectly pressed island of propriety amidst the sea of disheveled masculinity. Where the boys' shirts clung to their backs with sweat, her blazer remained impeccably buttoned. Where their socks pooled around their ankles, her knee-highs stayed precisely aligned. Even her nervous swallow looked more refined than their boisterous laughter.

"I want to talk to you about something," Honoka stammered, her fingers leaving damp prints on the soda bottle.

Nagano leaned against the shelter post, his grin easy. "Oh, did Mrs. Kobayashi need something from me again?" He winked at his friends, who erupted in knowing chuckles. Everyone remembered when Honoka had recruited him to move heavy anthologies last month—the only time they'd ever spoken alone.

The silence stretched like taffy. Honoka's lips moved soundlessly as Nagano's smile gradually faltered. A bead of sweat trickled down her temple, catching sunlight as it fell.

"N-no," she finally managed, her voice barely above a whisper yet somehow carrying across the suddenly quiet field. "I want to talk to you personally."

The shelter exploded in raucous cheers. Baseball mitts hit the dirt as players abandoned their game. Someone wolf-whistled so sharply it startled sparrows from the nearby trees. Within seconds, what had been a private conversation became spectator sport, with students materializing from every direction like moths to flame.

From behind the water fountain, Haruki slapped both hands over her face. *Why didn't you just lie?* she groaned into her palms. But even as she said it, she knew—this was Honoka Aoki. The girl who returned lost yen coins to teachers. Who apologized to library books when turning pages too quickly. Of course she couldn't lie.

All eyes locked onto the mismatched pair: the prim literature club princess and the motorcycle gang's golden boy. Honoka looked ready to dissolve into the dirt, while Nagano's usual confidence flickered under the unexpected spotlight.

Then—with a clap that silenced the crowd—Nagano tossed his bat aside. "Alright," he announced, rolling his shoulders back. "Come on, guys." He shooed his friends with both hands. "Give us some space!"

The collective groan of disappointment could've been heard across the prefecture.

Chapter 23

The narrow hallway behind the shelter smelled of old mop water and sun-warmed wood, its shadows stretching long across the chipped linoleum. Honoka stood rigid as a bamboo stalk, her back nearly touching the janitor's closet door as if it might swallow her whole. Across from her, Nagano leaned against the opposite wall with forced casualness, his fingers drumming a nervous rhythm against the soda bottle she'd given him. From the outside, he looked perfectly at ease - but the way his Adam's apple kept bobbing betrayed his unease.

Twenty meters away, pressed against the hallway's corner, a pile of baseball players formed a sweaty human pyramid trying to eavesdrop. Haruki elbowed her way between two particularly large outfielders, earning a few grumbles before she made her way to prime viewing position.

"So," Nagano broke the silence, twisting the soda cap with a sharp hiss of carbonation. "You like this brand too?"

Honoka shook her head so fast her glasses slipped. She pushed them up with one trembling finger. "I-it's for you," she stammered, thrusting the bottle forward again as if he might have forgotten holding it. "I heard you liked it."

"Oh! Thanks!" Nagano's grin flashed too bright, too quick. "How considerate of you." He took an exaggerated swig, the bottle's condensation dripping onto his already sweat-damp shirt. "So... what did you want to talk about?"

The silence that followed was so thick even the eavesdroppers held their breath. Haruki could see Honoka's fingers worrying the hem of her skirt, the way her throat worked around unspoken words. The baseball players exchanged betting glances - this had all the hallmarks of a legendary confession scene.

"I've heard you wanted to make music for the end of summer festival..." Honoka finally managed.

From behind the wall, a ripple of murmurs spread through the baseball team like wildfire.

"Ooooh, *she's asking him to the festival!*" whispered the pitcher, nudging the catcher.

"*Dude, she's totally confessing!*" someone hissed.

"*Will you morons shut up?*" Haruki snarled through clenched teeth, delivering a sharp elbow to the shortstop's ribs for emphasis. The group collectively winced but fell silent.

Nagano blinked. *How the hell did she know about the festival music?* He hadn't told anyone except the band guys, and they weren't exactly gossipy types. His fingers tightened around the soda bottle, condensation slick against his palm. Then it hit him—the way Honoka's gaze kept darting toward the hallway corner where Haruki was (badly) hiding with a bunch of his inconspicuous baseball team.

"Yeah, I do." His eyes narrowed playfully. A slow grin spread across his face. *Of course.* Haruki had a hand in this. That girl was like a typhoon—impossible to ignore, leaving chaos and half-baked schemes in her wake, "Did Haruki tell you that?"

Honoka's nervous giggle fluttered like paper in wind, and this time, her voice didn't shake. It danced—just a little. She pushed her glasses up, not to hide, but to see him better, "Yeah, she did."

"Hey! Don't bring me into this--" Haruki's protest was immediately shushed by a grimy hands clapping over her mouth from various baseball players.

"Will you shut up?" hissed one of the baseball player.

The tension cranked tighter as Honoka took a shuddering breath. Haruki could practically see the words stuck in her throat, the way her lips shaped silent rehearsals. The baseball team leaned forward in unison, their cleats scraping against the floor.

"You know... I..." Honoka began, her voice barely above a whisper.

In the hush that followed, a single bead of sweat rolled down the pitcher's nose and splattered on the tiles. The cleanup batter mouthed she's gonna confess to the shortstop. Haruki dug her nails into her palms, torn between wanting to throttle Honoka for taking so long and strangling the baseball team for their commentary.

From her vantage point, she could see Nagano's grip tightening around the soda bottle—his knuckles whitening even as his smile stayed perfectly, painfully relaxed. The boy was a master of pretending he wasn't freaking out.

Then—

"I, as a member of the Literature Club, can provide you help with the lyrics!" Honoka blurted.

A beat of absolute silence. Even the flickering hallway lights seemed to pause.

Haruki's cheer was immediately drowned out by the baseball team's collective groan—a sound like a deflating parade balloon. The pitcher ripped off his cap and hurled it to the ground, where it spun in a pathetic circle before settling at Honoka's feet.

"That's it?!" he groaned, disbelieved. Voice cracking. "*We risked Coach's wrath for THIS? No confession? No—*" He clutched his chest, "*—clutching each other as the sunset paints them gold?!*"

The shortstop collapsed to his knees, pressing his glove to his forehead like a Victorian heroine. "*The greatest romantic tragedy of our time,*" he declared, as the cleanup batter solemnly patted his shoulder.

One by one, the team shuffled away, their cleats dragging mournfully across the linoleum. The third baseman paused just long enough to shoot Nagano a distant look of utter betrayal. *"I believed in you, Fujiyama."*

Then they were gone, leaving behind only the faint scent of sweat, sunflower seeds, and shattered dreams.

Haruki stood alone in the sudden quiet, the click-click of the baseball team's retreat echoing down the hallway. She stared at the abandoned soda cap still lying near Honoka's shoes.

A few beats of silence stretched between Nagano and Honoka. Then—

"Wait..." Nagano's eyes widened, "Are you serious? You will?" The forced calm shattering into genuine shock.

Honoka nodded, her earlier nervousness melting into something brighter. Her glasses caught the light as she straightened, and for the first time, she looked sure.

"That's awesome, Aoki-san!" Nagano's voice cracked mid-cheer. "That'll be a huge help! Me and my band suck at words—we've just been yelling 'yeah baby!' over guitar solos!"

He ran a hand through his hair, grinning like he'd just been handed a winning lottery ticket. "Having the vice president of the Literature Club and head of the poetry division on our side will make us unstoppable!"

Honoka giggled, waving a hand as if to bat away his praise. "It's nothing, really—"

"Nothing?" Nagano scoffed. "You're the one who wrote 'The River in Winter' for the school's weekly paper, right? That thing made our drummer cry like a baby."

Honoka's cheeks went pink. "That... might've been an accident, it was just for the weekly papers afterall."

"A good accident if you could call it that!" Nagano chuckled, and for a second, his usual swagger flickered into something quieter. Sincere.

Nagano's shoes scuffed against the linoleum as he leaned against the lockers, his motorcycle keys jingling in his pocket. Then he paused.

"That's a fancy book," he said, nodding at the thick novel wedged under Honoka's arm. A silk tassel dangled from its pages, the kind used in old libraries.

Honoka stiffened, as if caught smuggling contraband. "O-oh! It's, um—" She fumbled the book into view, revealing the gold-embossed title: *The Makioka Sisters*. "One of the texts I'm reviewing for the school magazine's literature column."

Nagano plucked the book from her hands before she could protest, flipping it open to a random page. His nose wrinkled at the dense paragraphs. "No pictures? What's it about—some rich people eating fancy dinners?"

"N-no! Well, yes, there are dinners, but—" Honoka reached for the book, then hesitated when Nagano's calloused fingers brushed against a marked chapter titled "*Taeko's Rebellion*."

They talked for a while—longer than Haruki expected. Nagano, usually all swagger and half-baked jokes, leaned against the lockers, actually listening as Honoka cradled her worn copy of *The Makioka Sisters*, its gold-embossed title gleaming under the hallway lights.

"It's about these four sisters in Osaka before the war," Honoka explained, fingers tracing the dragonfly on the cover—a creature caught between water and air, just like them. "The youngest wants to marry for love, but the family keeps delaying it, waiting for... for things to be perfect. Like if they wait long enough, the world will stop changing around them."

Nagano tilted his head. "So it's a sort of tragedy?"

"No! Well—yes, but—" Honoka pushed her glasses up, her voice gaining momentum. "It's about how tradition isn't just rules, you know? It's this... this thing people cling to when they're scared. Like the sisters' *obasama*, insisting on kimono in a world of sewing machines."

A pause. Nagano's soda bottle hovered halfway to his lips.

"You mean," he said slowly, "They're not protecting tradition. They're hiding behind it."

Honoka's breath caught. "Yes! Exactly! Like—like how Taeko cuts her hair and opens a shop, even though it shames the family. She chooses the modern world, even if it's messy." Her hands fluttered, as if trying to sculpt the idea between them. "I tried explaining this to my club, but they just argued about 'proper themes'—"

Nagano laughed—not his usual bark, but something warmer, richer. "Sounds like they're the ones scared of mess." He flicked the soda cap at her playfully.

Honoka's nervous giggle tangled with his laughter, and for a moment, the hallway—with its scuffed floors and the distant echo of janitor's radio—felt less like a tunnel and more like a sunlit clearing.

Then the bell rang, shrill and inevitable.

Honoka jumped like she'd been shocked. "Oh! I—I have chemistry." She scrambled to her feet, nearly dropping her book.

"Aoki-san!" Nagano called after her as she retreated down the hall. "What time are you free to talk lyrics?"

She turned, clutching the book to her chest. "After school. The literature club room—third floor."

A nod. "Got it."

She took two steps, hesitated, then spun back. "And—!" Her voice hit a squeak. She cleared her throat. "You can just call me Honoka."

Nagano blinked. Then, with a slow, deliberate smirk: "Alright then, Honoka-san!" He dragged out the honorific like a challenge. "See you after school!"

Honoka's face flamed. She fled.

Chapter 24

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 thudding of books being moved, the crunching of pages being flipped. filled the small room, each scratch deliberate, each movement lost in the rhythm of cleanliness.

The Editing Room of the Literature Club smelled of lemon polish and old paper—a scent Honoka usually found comforting. Today, it reeked of desperation.

Haruki kicked her feet up on a freshly dusted desk, watching as Honoka adjusted the repaired lamp for the fifth time. The room already gleamed: floors mopped to a dangerous shine, stacks of manuscripts squared like military formations, even the wilting azalea on the windowsill had been resuscitated with aggressive watering.

“Honoka-chan, you do realize,” Haruki said, spinning a broom between her palms, “People usually just sit on their first date. They don’t deep-clean like they’re hiding a crime scene from a Murakami novel.”

Honoka’s polishing rag froze mid-swipe. “It’s not a date! It’s a collaboration! Who is Murakami anyway, you’re making it up!”

“Mhm.” Haruki leaned in, grinning. “Which is why you made me scrub the ceiling fan. And why you squeaked when he called you ‘Honoka-san’—”

“I did not squeak!” Honoka’s voice did, in fact, squeak.

"Uh-huh." Haruki twirled a finger around her ear. "'Call me Honoka~' So bold! So romantic!—"

"Haruki!" A blotch of red spread from Honoka’s neck to her hairline. She nearly upended the inkwell in her fluster. "It’s just polite! And once again I told you, this isn’t a date!"

Haruki collapsed into giggles. Outside, the cicadas’ drone swelled—nature’s own laugh track.

“Besides,” Haruki continued, poking Honoka’s shoulder, “Who brings up The Makioka Sisters as small talk? ‘Oh yes, Nagano-san, let me romance you with metaphors about economic decline in pre-war Osaka—’”

Honoka hurled a pillow at her. “Stop twisting it! You know I didn’t mean—”

A knock at the door.

Both girls froze mid-motion - Honoka with her polishing rag suspended above an already gleaming desk, Haruki with her teasing grin still locked in place. The cicadas outside seemed to hush in anticipation.

"Uh...hello?" Nagano's muffled voice came through the wood. *"Is this the Editorial Room?"*

Honoka made a sound like a deflating balloon - something between a gasp and a squeak. Her hands flew to her hair, patting down imaginary flyaways, then to her skirt to smooth nonexistent wrinkles.

Haruki watched with gleeful horror as Honoka's entire body seemed to short-circuit. The usually composed Literature Club vice president was now doing a bizarre little dance of panic - one foot stepping toward the door, then retreating, hands fluttering like startled birds.

"Y-yes! Just a second!" Her voice cracked

The doorknob turned. Haruki could hear the rusty hinges whining in protest, each creak stretching the moment taut with anticipation. She caught a glimpse of Honoka's face - eyes wide behind her glasses, lips pressed into a thin line, the flush on her cheeks spreading down her neck like spilled ink.

Just before the door opened fully, Honoka seemed to remember her role as host. She lunged forward in a jerky motion, yanking the door the rest of the way open with enough force to make it bang against the wall.

"Welcome!" she announced, voice an octave too high. The cheerful tone clashed spectacularly with her deer-in-headlights expression.

"Hey, sorry we're late—" Nagano shouldered his way in, guitar case bumping the doorframe with a *thunk*. Behind him, two band members gaped at the suspiciously sparkling room like they'd walked into a shrine instead of a literature club.

Nagano jerked a thumb at the duo. *"This is Ryo—"* The drummer, a lanky boy with drumstick calluses peeking from his pocket, gave a peace sign. *"—and Jun."* The trumpeter, whose hair defied gravity in a way that suggested either genius or sleep deprivation, nodded solemnly.

Haruki blinked. *A drummer and a trumpet player?*

Honoka bowed, snapping Haruki back to reality. *"Aoki Honoka, vice president. Thank you for coming."*

Haruki copied the bow, then smirked. *"And I'm Fujiyama Haruki, I'm just tagging along."*

Honoka elbowed her ribs before gesturing to the desks. *"Please, make yourselves comfortable."*

Ryo immediately collapsed into a chair, spinning a drumstick across his knuckles. *"Whoa. This place smells like my grandma's house."*

"That's the polish," Jun muttered, eyeing the gleaming shelves. *"And possibly regret*."**

Nagano set his guitar case down with a grin. *"Ignore them. They're allergic to cleanliness."*

Haruki leaned into Honoka's space, stage-whispering: *"You sure you don't want me to leave? I could vanish*. Poof."** She wiggled her fingers. *"Give you four some privacy—"**

Honoka snatched her collar, yanking her back. *"You're staying,"** she hissed, cheeks flaming.

-0-

The borrowed low table wobbled precariously as they settled onto cushions that Honoka had fluffed into near-spherical perfection. Steam curled from the teapot in delicate tendrils - chamomile with a hint of citrus, Haruki noted with private amusement. *Some things never change.* The mother who always served tea to her daughter's school friends had clearly been doing this since her own teenage years.

Nagano slapped three crumpled notebook pages onto the table. *"Alright, geniuses. Behold - our masterpiece."*

Ryo and Jun leaned forward with the solemn pride of artists unveiling a gallery piece. Haruki smoothed out the first sheet and immediately choked on her tea.

*"Racing through the night like a shooting star,
My heart burns for you no matter where you are—"*

"Are these... love lyrics?" Haruki wheezed, wiping tea droplets from the page.

"*Youth* lyrics," Nagano corrected, crossing his arms. "It's metaphorical."

Honoka carefully took the second page, her eyebrows performing a slow ascent toward her hairline as she read:

"Your smile shines brighter than chrome,
Together we'll never feel alone—"

Jun nodded sagely. "That one's my favorite stanza."

Haruki opened her mouth, but Honoka's elbow found her ribs with practiced precision. The literature club vice president adjusted her glasses, the very picture of academic composure. "The... *emotional intent* comes through strongly," she began diplomatically. "And your use of vehicular imagery as a metaphor for freedom is... inventive."

Nagano's eyes lit up. "Right? The bike represents—"

"But," Honoka continued gently, "Perhaps the *execution* could benefit from more... subtlety?" She pointed to a line. "When you rhyme 'fire' with 'desire' three times in one verse, it loses some... *nuance*."

Haruki could no longer contain herself. "It's *horrible*," she declared. "This reads like a love letter written by a traffic light! 'My heart burns for you' - are you a shooting star or a *grease fire*?"

Ryo gasped in mock offense. "You wound me, Fujiyama-san!"

Nagano snatched the papers back, but he was grinning. "Alright, critic. Let's hear *your* genius lyrics."

Honoka hid a smile behind her teacup. "Perhaps," she said softly, "we could try writing something *together*?"

The room stilled. Nagano's fingers tapped against his knee - not nervous, but *anticipatory*. "Yeah," he said at last. "Show us how it's done, Aoki *Honoka-san*."

The way he emphasized her name made Honoka's teacup rattle in its saucer. Haruki smirked. *Game on*

And so, as the fading afternoon light bled gold through the paper blinds as they worked, turning the editorial room into a lantern of murmured ideas and crumpled drafts. Pencil smudges decorated Honoka's fingertips like inkblots, while Nagano's guitar pick had worn a groove into the table's edge from restless tapping.

What began as stilted suggestions blossomed into something alive - Honoka's careful metaphors weaving through Nagano's raw energy, Haruki's blunt revisions sanding down the roughest edges.

By the time the school bells chimed sunset, the second draft lay before them - transformed from its clunky beginnings into something that made Ryo drum his fingers against his knees and Jun hum under his breath.

"Alright," Nagano said, fingers already finding chords on his guitar. "Let's hear this monster."

Honoka's hands fluttered. "W-wait! The third stanza's meter is still—"

But Jun's trumpet was already at his lips, releasing a bright, brassy note that startled a laugh from Haruki. Nagano grinned and began to play, the melody rough but earnest, like sunlight through tree leaves.

And then he sang.

Honoka's protests died in her throat. Nagano's voice wasn't polished - it cracked on the high notes, his tempo occasionally stumbling - but it was *warm*, thrumming with the same energy as when he talked about music. Without realizing, she found herself tapping along to the rhythm, her earlier anxiety melting like spring snow.

Haruki, ever fearless, was the first to join in, harmonizing off-key but with gusto. When Honoka finally added her voice - softly at first, then stronger - their mismatched choir filled the small room. The lyrics they'd agonized over now took flight, carried by three voices that had no business sounding good together, yet somehow did.

Outside, the cicadas provided percussion. Inside, for these fleeting moments, there was only music and shared breath and the impossible rightness of creation. Even the musty editorial room seemed to hold its breath, the stacked manuscripts and Honoka's carefully arranged pencils bearing witness to this fragile, perfect thing they'd made together.

As the last note faded, Nagano's eyes met Honoka's - and for once, neither looked away.

The cicadas had quieted by the time they stepped onto the school's front path, the warm hush of summer night settling over them like a blanket. Streetlights flickered on one by one, casting long shadows that tangled together as the group walked—Ryo attempting to balance a drumstick on his nose, Jun humming their newly-minted melody under his breath.

"That was..." Honoka began, then stopped. The words *the most fun I've ever had in the Editorial Room* lodged in her throat, too vulnerable to voice.

"It was the best time I've ever had in the Editorial Room," She admitted, her cheeks flushing pink in the dim light. The confession left her lips tingling, as if she'd bitten into a stolen strawberry.

Nagano's grin faltered for half a second. "Wait—really? It's usually just you in there, right?" He adjusted his guitar strap, the leather creaking. "Kinda thought you'd be sick of the place by now."

Honoka tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "We used to have five members. But after the third all-nighter formatting poetry submissions, everyone transferred to the Newspaper Club." She mimed a dramatic escape with her fingers. "Now it's just me and the weekly stack of unfinished haikus about cafeteria food."

"So you're like... the last samurai of student literature?" Ryo chimed in, spinning a drumstick.

"More like a glorified proofreader," Honoka laughed, but her fingers absently traced the ink stains on her sleeve—the badge of her lonely dedication.

Nagano studied her for a moment, the streetlight catching the thoughtful crease between his brows. "Guess that makes this song your first real collaboration, huh?"

The way he said it—like it mattered, like *she* mattered—sent a warm shiver down Honoka's spine.

"Which means we gotta give it a title worthy of Aoki Honoka's editorial standards," Nagano declared, slinging his guitar case higher. "So? What're we calling our masterpiece, folks?"

A chorus of voices erupted:

"*Eternal Youth!*" Ryo crowed, nearly dropping his drumstick.

"*Racing Against the Sunset*," Jun intoned, as if announcing a samurai film.

"*Ode to my youger years*," Nagano added.

Haruki waited until the laughter subsided before adding. "*The Summer Fifty Years Ago*."

Silence.

"*The hell kind of title is that?*" Ryo blinked.

"*Think about it*," Haruki said, kicking a pebble down the path. "*When you're old and gray, listening to this song again—it'll take you right back here. To this summer. To now**."* She gestured around at them—Honoka's ink-stained fingers, Nagano's guitar pick gleaming in his palm, Jun's trumpet case covered in peeling band stickers. "*It's not just a song. It's a time machine**."*

For a moment, no one spoke. A breeze rustled through the trees, carrying the scent of warm pavement and distant rain.

Then Nagano slung an arm around Haruki's neck, ruffling her hair. "*You're a weird kid, Fujiyama. But that's perfect**."*

Honoka's smile was soft in the dim light. "*It really is*."

And just like that, it stuck.

As they continue walking down the road, the boys reached their motorcycles first, their laughter and clattering gear fading into the humid night as Nagano swung his leg over the seat. He lingered just a moment longer than necessary, one hand on the handlebars as he turned back toward Honoka.

"See you tomorrow, geniuses," he called, his smile visible even in the dim light. The engine roared to life, but not before Haruki caught the way Honoka's fingers twitched at her sides - as if resisting the urge to wave too enthusiastically.

Then it was just the two girls walking their familiar path home, the cicadas' song swelling around them like a living thing. The warm asphalt still radiated the day's heat through their shoe soles, and fireflies pulsed lazily along the overgrown ditch beside the road.

Then—*whap!* Honoka's palm connected with Haruki's upper arm.

"Ow! What was that for?" Haruki rubbed her arm, though the sting was more surprise than pain.

"You're horrible," Honoka giggled, the sound bubbling up uncontrollably. Moonlight caught the edges of her smile as she ducked her head. "All that scheming just to get me to talk to Nagano-kun."

Haruki shrugged, kicking a pebble down the road. "Anything to prevent you from dying alone in your old age. You can't marry books, you know."

"Shut up, Haruki-chan." But Honoka's laughter tangled with hers, blending into the summer night's chorus.

They walked in comfortable silence after that, shoulders occasionally bumping as they navigated the darkened path. The usual intersection approached too soon, where the streetlights formed a pool of yellow light that marked their parting spot.

"See you tomorrow," Honoka said, already half-turned toward home.

But then -

"Haruki-chan!"

Honoka's voice spun Haruki back around. There, framed by the halo of a streetlamp, Honoka stood with her arms wrapped around herself—not in hesitation, but as if holding the warmth of the day close.

"Thank you," she said, simple and sincere.

For once, Haruki had no joke ready. The words lodged in her throat, sudden and unexpected. So she just smiled—real and unguarded—and called back, *"You're welcome!"*

Their waves mirrored each other, hands fluttering like the pages of an open book, until distance turned them into silhouettes.

Chapter 25

Days dissolved into weeks like pages torn from a calendar—each one marked by ink-stained fingers, crumpled lyric sheets, and the ever-present scent of Honoka’s chamomile tea steeping in the Editorial Room. The room, once pristine with Honoka’s compulsive order, gradually surrendered to the chaos of creation: guitar picks embedded in the tatami mats, teacups ringed with forgotten stains, and draft after draft of lyrics papering the walls like stubborn autumn leaves refusing to fall.

Haruki watched the evolution with quiet satisfaction. The song had grown roots—Nagano’s rough chords blossoming under Honoka’s meticulous phrasing, Ryo’s drumming finding syncopated rhythm with Jun’s brassy countermelodies. Even the air smelled different now—less like lemon polish and more like *possibility*, tinged with Nagano’s cologne and Honoka’s lavender-scented erasers.

Then came the afternoon Haruki arrived late, her footsteps muffled by the hallway’s summer hush. Through the editorial room’s half-open door, she saw them: Honoka bent over a notebook, her brow furrowed in that endearing way it did when she wrestled with a stubborn metaphor. Nagano sat closer than usual—no guitar between them today, just a shared dictionary passed back and forth, his calloused finger tracing a word that made Honoka laugh softly.

No bandmates. No audience. Just two people leaning into the same light.

Haruki’s hand froze on the doorknob. A smile curled at the edges of her mouth as she stepped back—*not today*. Let them have this unobserved moment, this fragile, ordinary magic. She turned on her heel, the wooden floors silent beneath her sneakers.

Outside, the sun hung heavy and golden over the school gates. Haruki tilted her face to its warmth, humming their unfinished melody. Some bridges, she thought, needed to be built without witnesses.

The song had taken on a life of its own now—no longer just ink on piece of notebook paper, but something that pulsed through the walls of Nagano’s makeshift studio. Haruki watched as Honoka, once so hesitant to speak above a whisper, now leaned over Nagano’s shoulder to point at sheet music, her laughter ringing clear as Jun’s trumpet notes. The lyrics they’d agonized over for weeks had

become second nature, sung absentmindedly while Ryo tuned his drums or when Nagano tested a new riff, his calloused fingers finding the chords by muscle memory.

What began as lyric-writing sessions had evolved into full-fledged rehearsals. Haruki often found herself perched on an amp, clapping along as they workshopped the bridge for the twentieth time—Nagano scowling at his guitar when a note resisted him. Sometimes Haruki and Honoka became their first test audience, singing along until their voices frayed at the edges. Honoka, who used to mouth poetry silently in library corners, now belted lyrics with her hands cupped around her mouth like a megaphone.

When they invited the baseball team and Haruki's classmates for an impromptu gig, the room had buzzed with the kind of energy that made the windows rattle. By the final chorus, even the most skeptical listeners were stomping their feet in time.

But the real transformation happened in the quiet moments after.

At first, it was the usual routine: Haruki and Honoka riding the late tram home, dissecting every chord change and lyric tweak while the city lights blurred past.

Then one evening, Honoka bit her lip as the tram approached—*"Nagano-kun offered to drive me home on his motorcycle."*

Haruki had to physically restrain her grin. *"Better hurry then. Your chariot awaits, princess."* She shoved Honoka toward the parking lot where Nagano waited, helmet tucked under his arm.

Soon, it became routine—Honoka climbing onto Nagano's motorcycle, her arms tentative around his waist at first, then sure as a melody finding its rhythm. Haruki would wave them off, the bike's growl fading into the city's hum, and board the tram alone.

Tonight, Haruki stood alone on the tram platform, watching red taillights carve through the city dark—Nagano's bike weaving toward the riverbank route he'd confessed was his favorite. The breeze carried back Honoka's laughter, bright as the trumpet's high notes.

On the evening on the next day, the school bell's shrill cry sent a ripple of motion through the hallway as students spilled from classrooms like marbles from a split bag. Haruki fell into step beside Honoka, their shoulders brushing in the familiar

rhythm of after-school departures. But today, Honoka's steps hitched at the stairwell—that tiny, telltale pause.

"I, um—" Honoka adjusted her bookstrap, fingers worrying the frayed edge. "I need to stop by the music room first."

"Better hurry then," Haruki grinned, nudging her toward the east wing. "Wouldn't want to keep a certain guitarist waiting."

Honoka's elbow connected with Haruki's ribs, but her lips quirked upward. *"Shut up."*

"Break a leg! Not literally!" Haruki called after her as Honoka disappeared down the corridor, her usual measured pace giving way to something dangerously close to a skip.

Alone now, Haruki meandered toward the shoe lockers, the soles of her loafers scuffing against waxed linoleum. The late afternoon sun slanted through the windows, painting long gold rectangles across the floorboards—like stepping stones leading somewhere new.

"Fujiyama-san!"

Haruki turned to find Sakura trotting to catch up, her bobbed hair bouncing with each step. The late afternoon sun caught the red ribbon in her hair - the same shade as the motorcycle gang's insignia Nagano's crew painted on their jackets.

"You look like you've swallowed a persimmon whole," Sakura said, falling into step beside Haruki. "Where's your other half? Did Aoki-san finally get tired of you?" She bumped Haruki's shoulder playfully.

Haruki rolled her eyes. "We're not twins, you know."

Sakura gasped dramatically. "Could've fooled me, you two looked simmilar! Ever since you transferred in, you two have been..." She mimed gluing her hands together.

They passed a group of girls practicing cheerleading routines in the courtyard, their chants punctuated by the rhythmic smack of volleyball practice nearby. The air smelled of freshly cut grass and the faint metallic tang of the bicycle racks.

"Seriously though," Sakura continued, "Nagano's been skipping our lunch breaks too. Ryo says he's always running off somewhere with sheet music." She plucked a

leaf from a low-hanging maple branch, twirling it between her fingers. "You'd think he was preparing for the end of summer festival with how secretive he's been."

Haruki bit back a smile. "Maybe he found something more interesting than listening to you complain about math tests."

"Ouch!" Sakura clutched her chest. "And here I thought we were friends, Fujiyama-san."

They reached the shoe lockers, where Sakura paused to retie her sneaker. "So?" She peered up at Haruki. "What's the big secret? Did our resident delinquent finally hit off with someone?"

The realization hit like a well-thrown dodgeball. Sakura's fingers froze mid-knot.

"Wait. Nagano's been disappearing. Aoki-san's been absent. And you're walking alone..." She slowly straightened, eyes widening. "No. Way... Are you implying that..."

Haruki's smirk was all the confirmation she needed.

"Finally!" Sakura clapped her hands together, loud enough that a passing teacher frowned. The sound echoed through the hallway like a firecracker. "I thought she'd marry a book before a boy!" She hooked her arm through Haruki's, steering them toward the exit with renewed energy. "Details. Now. How long? Who confessed first? Have they—"

"Don't you have club activities?" Haruki deflected, laughing as Sakura nearly tripped over a stray volleyball.

"Canceled! This is way more important than calligraphy practice!"

As Haruki chattered about rumors and secret admirers, she cast one last glance over her shoulder at the empty hallway. Somewhere beyond those walls, Honoka was probably laughing at one of Nagano's terrible jokes, her cheeks pink with something brighter than embarrassment.

Haruki tucked her hands in her pockets, smiling at the peeling festival poster on the school board. Right on schedule—just faster, messier, *better* than any plan. Like the song, like summer, like love itself, the pieces had found their own rhythm.