

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.

## Chapter 13

Haruki was fast asleep, her breathing steady as she sprawled on the iron-framed bed. The events of the previous day had left her exhausted, and she had fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep. The cabin was quiet, the only sound the faint rustling of leaves outside the window.

But then, a knock broke the silence.

It was soft at first, almost tentative—a single tap on the window. Haruki stirred slightly, her brow furrowing, but she didn't wake. A moment later, the knock came again, louder this time.

Haruki groaned, pulling the pillow over her face. "Go away," she mumbled, her voice muffled.

The knocking persisted, growing more insistent. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Haruki sat up suddenly, her hair a mess and her eyes bleary with sleep. "What is it?" she snapped, her voice tinged with annoyance. She glared at the window, but the curtains were drawn, and she couldn't see who—or what—was outside.

With a sigh, she threw off the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her feet hit the cool wooden floor, and she shuffled toward the door, rubbing her eyes. She unlocked it and pulled it open, squinting against the early morning light.

Standing on the doorstep was a figure she hadn't expected to see.

It was Sakura, standing on the doorstep with a bright smile. Behind her, the boys from the motorcycle gang were gathered, chatting and laughing. Nagano was among them, his guitar slung over his shoulder. When he saw Haruki open the door, he waved enthusiastically.

"Morning, Haruki-chan!" he called, his grin wide and carefree.

Haruki blinked, still groggy from sleep. "What... what are you all doing here?" she asked, her voice tinged with confusion.

Sakura stepped forward, her hands clasped behind her back. "We thought you lived somewhere close by, so we decided to visit," she explained. "Or, more accurately, Nagano-kun took quite a liking to you and decided to invite you to spend Saturday with us."

Haruki stared at her, trying to process what she was hearing. "Wait, what?" she said, her voice slow and disbelieving. Maybe it was the grogginess, but this felt like something out of a dream.

Nagano stepped forward, his hands in his pockets. "Well, you're new here, right?" he said, his tone casual but kind. "It's important to have friends you can depend on. And honestly, you are rebellious and impulsive, I think you'll fit with us." He grinned, clearly teasing her.

Haruki chuckled, taking it as a compliment. "Thanks, I think," she said, her lips curling into a small smile.

Sakura glanced past Haruki into the cabin, her expression curious. “By the way, does your grandfather mind if you come with us? We heard you live with your grandparents. We don’t want to get you in trouble.”

Haruki froze for a moment, her mind racing. She had completely forgotten about the lie she had told about living with her grandfather. Thinking quickly, she turned her head slightly and called into the empty cabin, “Grandpa, is it okay if I go out with my friends? I’ll be back before nightfall!”

She paused for a moment, as if listening to a response, then turned back to Sakura with a sheepish smile. “He says it’s fine, as long as I’m back before dark.”

Nagano, leaning against his motorcycle with his usual careless grin, chimed in. “Maybe you can just sneak out, Haruki. Your old man wouldn’t know.” He winked, clearly teasing her.

Sakura shot him a disapproving look, her hands on her hips. “You’re horrible! Haruki could get in trouble!”

Nagano shrugged, unfazed. “I sneak out all the time. My old man doesn’t care. He’s too busy with work to notice, anyway.”

Sakura rolled her eyes. “You definitely don’t know what it’s like to be a girl, Nagano. We can’t just do whatever we want. People talk, and it’s always us who get blamed.”

Nagano raised an eyebrow, his grin fading slightly. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. It’s not fair, but that’s just how it is, huh?”

“Alright then,” she said, turning back to Haruki. “Go get ready. We’ll wait by the road at our usual spot.”

Haruki nodded and closed the door, leaning against it for a moment as she let out a quiet sigh of relief. That had been close. She hurried to the bedroom.

Haruki opened the wardrobe in her bedroom, discovering that the clothes there all looked vintage. Well, they *were* vintage—or rather, they were the height of fashion in this time. But to her, they looked old-fashioned and unfamiliar. Haruki was used to her baggy hoodie, skinny jeans, and sneakers, but it seemed that style of fashion hadn't made its way to 1961 yet. With a sigh, she pulled out a plain polo shirt, a cardigan, and one of the skirts that seemed to dominate the wardrobe. She slipped them on, feeling oddly out of place in her own skin.

Standing in front of the mirror, she paused. The reflection staring back at her looked... different. The polo shirt and skirt gave her a polished, almost prim appearance, and the cardigan softened her edges in a way that felt strangely comforting. But what struck her most was how much she resembled her mother. It shouldn't have surprised her—Honoka probably dressed the same way at this age—but the realization still caught her off guard. For a moment, she felt a pang of something she couldn't quite name. Longing? Nostalgia? Or maybe just the bittersweet ache of seeing herself in someone she thought she knew so little about.

Shaking off the thought, Haruki grabbed her sketchbook and tucked it under her arm. She didn't know where they were going, but she wasn't about to leave without it. Taking a deep breath, she walked out the door and joined her friends.

The group was waiting by the road, their motorcycles gleaming in the morning sun. Nagano was leaning against his bike, strumming his guitar absently, while Sakura chatted with the other boys. When Haruki approached, Sakura turned and smiled.

"There you are! You look nice," she said, her tone warm and genuine.

Haruki glanced down at her outfit, feeling self-conscious. "Thanks. I guess this is what everyone wears here, huh?"

Nagano looked up from his guitar, his eyes scanning her with a playful grin. “Yeah, but you make it look cool. Not everyone can pull off the ‘serious student’ look.”

Haruki rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t help smiling. “Thanks, I think.”

Sakura laughed, linking her arm with Haruki’s. “Don’t mind him. He thinks he’s funny, but we all know better.”

Nagano feigned offense, clutching his chest dramatically. “Ouch, Sakura. You wound me.”

The group erupted into laughter, and Haruki felt a flicker of warmth in her chest. It was strange, being here with these people who felt so familiar yet so different from the parents she knew.

“So, where are we going?” Haruki asked, glancing around at the group.

Nagano slung his guitar over his shoulder and hopped onto his motorcycle. “It’s a surprise. But trust me, you’re gonna love it.”

Sakura nudged Haruki gently. “Don’t worry, we’ll take care of you. Just hold on tight, okay?”

Haruki nodded, though a small knot of nervousness tightened in her stomach. She’d never ridden a motorcycle before, and the idea of speeding through the countryside with Nagano at the helm was equal parts thrilling and terrifying.

As the engines roared to life, Haruki climbed onto the back of Nagano’s bike. The wind tugged at her hair as they sped down the road, the world blurring into a kaleidoscope of green fields and blue sky. For a moment, she forgot about the lies, the secrets, and the weight of her situation. She was just Haruki, a girl on an adventure with her friends, and for now, that was enough.

Haruki tagged along with her newfound friends, the warmth of the morning sun on her skin and the promise of adventure in the air. The day unfolded like a dream, each moment blending into the next in a whirlwind of laughter and shared experiences.

Their first stop was a dusty baseball field on the outskirts of town. The gang spread out across the field, their shouts and laughter echoing in the open space. Haruki had never been much of an athlete, but the energy was infectious. Nagano handed her a bat, his grin wide and encouraging.

“Come on, Haruki-chan! Show us what you’ve got!” he called, tossing a ball into the air.

Haruki gripped the bat, her heart pounding with a mix of excitement and nervousness. The first few swings were clumsy, the bat cutting through empty air, but then—*crack!* The ball soared into the sky, and the group erupted into cheers. Haruki’s face lit up with a grin as she ran the bases, her feet kicking up clouds of dust. She even managed to catch a few balls, her hands stinging from the impact but her spirits soaring. For the first time in what felt like forever, she felt carefree, like she belonged.

By noon, they made their way to the port town, the salty breeze tugging at their hair. Haruki had never been here before, not even in her own time. The sight took her breath away—rows of ships bobbing gently in the harbor, their masts reaching toward the sky like skeletal fingers. The water sparkled under the midday sun, and the air was filled with the sounds of seagulls and distant chatter. They found a spot to sit and unpacked their lunches, sharing stories and jokes as they ate. Haruki couldn’t help but marvel at how alive everything felt, how different it was from the quiet, almost ghostly port she knew in the future.

As the afternoon faded into evening, they headed to the beach. The sand was warm beneath their feet, and the waves lapped gently at the shore. Someone produced a volleyball, and soon they were diving and laughing, their shouts mingling with the sound of the surf. Haruki played with abandon, her cheeks flushed and her hair wild. When the sun began to dip below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of purple and orange, they finally stopped to catch their breath. They sat together on the sand, watching the sun sink into the sea, the world bathed in a golden glow. Haruki felt a quiet contentment settle over her, a sense of peace she hadn't known she was missing.

As the last light faded, they made their way back to the usual spot near the forest, not far from Haruki's cabin. Nagano and his friends revved their engines, ready to head home, but Haruki hesitated. She caught Nagano's eye and gestured for him to stay.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" she asked, her voice soft but steady.

Nagano nodded, waving his friends on. "Go ahead, I'll catch up," he called. The others roared off into the night, their laughter fading into the distance.

Haruki led Nagano to a small wooden shelter near the edge of the forest. The air was cool now, the scent of pine and earth filling her lungs. She sat down on the bench, her hands clasped in her lap, and Nagano settled beside her, his guitar resting against his knee.

Nagano teased her, a mischievous glint in his eye. "What is this, a confession from the new girl?"

Haruki's cheeks flushed, and she shot him a look. "What, no! You're weird!" she retorted, though there was no real heat in her words. It was strange, bantering with someone who was technically her father—or at least, the younger version of him. The thought made her stomach twist with a mix of amusement and unease.

Nagano held up his hands in mock surrender. “Okay, okay, geez. I was just kidding.” He leaned back, his tone softening. “So, what’s on your mind?”

Haruki took a deep breath, her heart pounding. This was it—the moment she’d been waiting for. She turned to him, her eyes searching his face in the dim light. “I just... I wanted to thank you. For today. It was... amazing.”

Nagano grinned, his usual carefree self. “Hey, no need to thank me. You’re one of us now, remember?”

“Yeah...” Haruki smiled, though her chest felt tight. She looked away, her gaze drifting to the fireflies that had begun to gather in the bushes around them. Their tiny lights flickered like stars, casting a soft glow over the clearing. The cicadas’ rhythmic chirping filled the air, a soothing backdrop to the silence that settled between them.

For a while, they just sat there, side by side, watching as the town below began to light up. The orange glow of gas lamps and fluorescent lights spread like a warm blanket over the landscape, contrasting with the cool, dark forest around them. Haruki felt a strange sense of peace, as if the world had paused just for this moment.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Nagano said quietly, his voice almost a whisper.

Haruki nodded, her throat too tight to speak. She wanted to say more—to tell him how much this day had meant to her, how much *he* meant to her, even if he didn’t know it yet. But the words stuck in her throat, tangled up with the fear of saying too much, of revealing the truth she couldn’t yet share.

Instead, she glanced at him, taking in the way the faint light softened his features. He looked so young, so full of life, so different from the stern, distant man she knew in the future. It was hard to reconcile the two versions of him in her mind—



the carefree boy sitting beside her and the father who had always seemed so unapproachable.

“Nagano-kun,” she began hesitantly, “do you ever think about the future? About what you want your life to be like?”

Nagano gave a dry laugh, the sound hollow and tinged with bitterness. “I don’t need to think about it,” he said, leaning back against the wooden bench. “It’s already been decided for me since I was born.”

Haruki frowned, her chest tightening. “What do you mean?”

“I’ll be taking my father’s position as the chairman of his automotive company,” Nagano replied, his tone matter-of-fact, as if he were reciting a script he’d memorized long ago.

The words hit Haruki like a punch to the gut. Of course—that was her father’s job in the present. The job that had consumed his life, leaving little room for anything else. She remembered the long nights he’d spent at the office, the weekends he’d missed, the way he’d always seemed so distant, so tired. It was a life she had resented, but now, hearing Nagano speak about it with such resignation, she felt a pang of guilt. This was the weight he had carried, even before she was born.

Nagano continued, his voice low and tinged with a quiet sadness. “After high school, this’ll probably be the last bit of fun I’ll have in my life. My father wants me to continue the company. He wants me to study engineering and economics, then take over when he retires.”

Haruki’s heart ached for him. “Can’t you just... say no?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Nagano shook his head, his expression grim. “I don’t have a choice. My father built that company from the ground up, even since the war. He survived all of that—the bombings, the hunger, the loss—and he made something out of nothing. I can’t just

throw that away. I don't want to disappoint him. And if I fail..." He trailed off, his gaze dropping to the ground. "If I fail, I don't want to drag my family down with me for generations."

Haruki felt a lump rise in her throat. She had never thought about it like that—about the sacrifices her father had made, the weight of his responsibilities. She had only seen the man who was never there, not the boy who had given up his dreams to carry the burden of his family's legacy.

"Nagano-kun," she said softly, "if you had a choice... what would you want to become?"

For a moment, Nagano was silent, his fingers absently tracing the edge of his guitar. Then, a small smile tugged at his lips, and his eyes lit up with a dreamy, faraway look. "A musician," he said, his voice soft but full of longing. "I'd want to play in front of a big crowd one day, to see people laughing and dancing and having fun because of my music. That's the dream, you know? To make people happy with something I created."

Haruki's chest tightened as she watched him. For the first time, she saw the passion in his eyes, the spark of something that had been buried under layers of duty and expectation. But just as quickly as it had appeared, the light in his eyes dimmed, and his expression turned somber.

"But it's just a dream," he said, his voice heavy with resignation. "Once high school is over, I'll have to abandon my guitar, sell my motorcycle, and go to university to study engineering. That's just how it is."

The finality in his words made Haruki's heart ache. She wanted to say something—to tell him that he didn't have to give up, that he could chase his dreams and still make his father proud. But the words stuck in her throat. How could she, of all

people, tell him that? She knew how his story ended, and it wasn't with a stage and a cheering crowd.

Nagano stood up, brushing off his pants and grabbing the keys to his motorcycle. "Well then, sorry to make the atmosphere so blue," he said, forcing a faint chuckle. "You have to go home too, Haruki. It's already late, and your old man will—"

But before he could finish, Haruki scrambled to her feet, her heart pounding in her chest. She took a quick step forward, closing the distance between them, and before Nagano could react, she threw her arms around him in a tight, desperate hug. Her face pressed into his striped shirt, the fabric soft against her tear-streaked cheeks. Nagano recoiled slightly, caught off guard, his body leaning back against his motorcycle for balance.

"H-hey, what are you—?" Nagano stammered, his arms hovering awkwardly at his sides.

"I'm sorry you have to go through all of that," Haruki said, her voice cracking. She buried her face deeper into his shirt, her tears soaking into the fabric. "I didn't know how much you sacrificed, or how heavy the weight is on your shoulders."

Nagano hesitated, then slowly brought his arms up to pat her back. "H-hey now," he said, his voice softer now, "it's nothing for you to worry about, Haruki. I can always manage, you know?"

But Haruki didn't let go. She clung to him, her fingers gripping the back of his shirt as if she could somehow anchor him to this moment, to this version of himself. She couldn't remember the last time she had hugged her father in the present—the real Nagano, the one who was always too busy, too distant. The last time might have been when she was a little girl, scraped and crying after falling during a game of tag. She remembered how he had rushed to her then, scooping her up and holding her close, his hand patting her back just like this. And she

remembered the words he had always said to her, the words that now echoed in her mind as Nagano spoke them.

“Calm down now,” Nagano said, his voice gentle as he patted her back. “No need to be sad. Everything is okay.”

Haruki’s chest tightened, and for a moment, she couldn’t breathe. She wanted to stay like this forever, to hold onto this version of her father who was still kind, still hopeful, still dreaming. But eventually, she pulled away, her face a mess of tears and snot. She wiped her cheeks with the sleeve of her cardigan, sniffing loudly.

“I’m sorry, I—” she stammered, her voice trembling.

“Look, it’s okay,” Nagano said, his tone reassuring. “It’s sad, I know.”

Then, as if to lighten the mood, he flashed her a teasing smile. “Because, you know, if I did become a musician, who knows? I might accidentally sweep you off your feet.”

Haruki’s sniffles turned into a laugh, and she gave him a playful shove. “You are the worst!”

Both of them laughed, the sound echoing in the quiet night. For a moment, the weight of everything—the lies, the secrets, the unspoken truths—felt a little lighter.

“Alright now,” Nagano said, mounting his motorcycle and starting the engine. “You should go home. Your grandpa might already be looking for you.” He put on his helmet, his voice muffled but still teasing. “And wipe your tears while you’re at it. If your gramps finds out I made you cry, he might start hunting me down.”

Haruki chuckled, wiping her face with her cardigan. She watched as Nagano revved the engine, the sound cutting through the stillness of the night. He gave her

a quick wave before driving off, his silhouette growing smaller and smaller as he disappeared down the road.

Haruki stood there for a moment, the cool night air brushing against her skin. The fireflies still flickered around her, their tiny lights dancing in the darkness. She took a deep breath, the scent of pine and earth filling her lungs, and began the walk back to the cabin.

As she walked, her mind replayed the evening—the laughter, the tears, the way Nagano had patted her back just like her father used to. She thought about his dreams, his resignation, and the weight he carried. And she thought about her own role in all of this. Could she change anything? Could she help him hold onto the part of himself that still dreamed, even if it was just a little?

## Chapter 14

Haruki walked along the paved road back to her cabin, the cool night air brushing against her skin. The stars above were bright, their light filtering through the trees that lined the path. But unlike the lie she had told her friends, there was no grandfather waiting for her at home. No family, no warmth—just the empty cabin, silent and still.

As she walked, her mind drifted back to the night she had first arrived in this time. She remembered the fight with her father, the way she had shouted at him for asking her to quit the arts club. She had been so angry, so sure that he didn't

understand her. But now, after spending time with the younger version of him, she realized how wrong she had been. She hadn't known back then—hadn't known how much he had sacrificed for her, for their family. The weight of that realization pressed heavily on her chest, and her pace quickened.

Her father had given up his dreams—his music, his freedom—to take on the responsibilities that had been thrust upon him. He had become stern, distant, because he had to. Because he had no other choice. And now, as Haruki thought about her own dreams, her own rebellion, she saw the parallels between them. She was artistic, passionate, and stubborn—just like him. The only difference was that she still had the chance to chase her dreams, while he had buried his long ago.

The guilt she felt was overwhelming, a sharp ache that spread through her chest and made it hard to breathe. She had been so quick to judge him, to resent him for not being the father she wanted. But now, she understood. And that understanding only made the guilt worse.

Her walk turned into a jog, her feet pounding against the pavement as she pushed herself forward. The night air rushed past her, cool and sharp, but it did nothing to ease the heat building inside her. Her thoughts were a whirlwind, a storm of emotions she couldn't quite untangle. She needed to get back to the cabin, to the place where this journey had begun. Maybe there, in the quiet solitude of that old house, she could make sense of everything.

By the time she reached the cabin, she was sprinting, her breath coming in short, ragged gasps. The house loomed ahead, its two sets of front doors standing like silent sentinels in the night. Haruki skidded to a stop, her chest heaving as she stared up at the familiar structure. It looked the same as it had the night she arrived—old, weathered, and filled with secrets.

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silent sentinels in the night. Haruki skidded to a stop, her chest heaving as she stared up at the familiar structure. It looked the same as it had the night she arrived—old, weathered, and filled with secrets.

Haruki walked around to the back door, her mind racing. She had to go back. Her parents must be worried sick about her. She had to go back. The thought consumed her, driving her forward with a desperate urgency.

The back door—the one she had tried to pry open the night before from the inside, to no avail—stood before her now, its wooden surface rough and unyielding under her hands. She grabbed the handle and pulled, her muscles straining as she tried to force it open. When that didn't work, she kicked it, the impact sending a sharp jolt of pain up her leg. Still, the door didn't budge.

“Come on,” she muttered under her breath, her voice trembling. She slammed her body against the door, once, twice, the sound echoing in the quiet night. But it was no use. The door remained firmly shut, as if mocking her efforts.

Frustration boiled over into desperation. Haruki grabbed a heavy rock from the ground and hurled it at the door, aiming for the lock. The sound of the impact was loud, but the door didn't so much as creak. She tried again, this time with a log, her arms shaking with the effort. Still, nothing.

“Let me go back!” she shouted, her voice breaking as tears streamed down her cheeks. She pounded on the door with her fists, the sound sharp and frantic. “I'm sorry, alright!” she cried, her voice raw with emotion. “I'm sorry I was so selfish! I'm sorry I ran away! I'm sorry...”

Her legs gave out, and she slumped against the door, her forehead pressing against the rough wood. Her breaths came in ragged gasps, her body trembling with exhaustion and grief. “I miss Mom...” she whispered, her voice weak and

trembling. “I miss Dad... I miss Aiko and Aikihito...” Her voice grew even softer, barely audible. “I want to go back...”

The night was silent except for the sound of her quiet sobs. The stars above seemed distant and cold, their light offering no comfort. Haruki sat there, her back against the door, her arms wrapped around her knees. She felt small and alone, the weight of her guilt and longing pressing down on her like a physical force.

Then, a voice broke the silence.

“You’re going nowhere by prying it open, you know?” The voice was soft but clear, coming from somewhere behind her. Haruki turned her head sharply, her heart skipping a beat.

At first, she didn’t see anyone. The backyard was bathed in shadows, the moonlight casting long, eerie shapes across the ground. But then her eyes landed on a figure sitting near a tree, partially hidden by the darkness. An easel stood in front of the figure, and the faint sound of a brush against canvas reached Haruki’s ears.

“Rocks, logs, run a car into it if you want to. It won’t open,” the girl said, her tone matter-of-fact, as if she were commenting on the weather.

Haruki stood up slowly, her legs still shaky from crying. She took a step forward, then another, her eyes fixed on the girl. As she got closer, the details became clearer—the round glasses perched on the girl’s nose, the braid trailing down her back, the way she held the brush with practiced ease. A sense of déjà vu washed over Haruki, a nagging feeling that she had seen this girl before. But where? And when?

The girl dipped her brush into a jar of paint thinner, cleaning it with slow, deliberate movements. She didn’t look up, her focus entirely on the canvas in front of her. Haruki could see the painting now—a detailed depiction of the cottage from



behind, the backyard garden rendered in soft, muted colors. It was beautiful, but there was something haunting about it, something that made Haruki's chest tighten.

"You know..." the girl said, her voice calm and measured, "I would never have expected to see anyone here from the future." She finally looked up, her eyes meeting Haruki's. "Especially you, Haruki-chan."

Haruki's breath caught in her throat. The girl's face—those round glasses, that braid, the faint smile playing on her lips—it all clicked into place. Memories flooded her mind: a classroom, an upperclassman who always seemed to be sketching in the corner, a quiet presence that Haruki had admired but never really known.

"M-Matsuda-senpai?" Haruki stammered, her voice barely above a whisper.

## Chapter 15

Matsuda sighed, her hands on her hips as she surveyed the cottage. "Gosh, Haruki, you are a mess! What have you done to my cottage?" she complained, gesturing to the scratches and dents on the back door. "Did you try to pry it open on the inside too?"

Haruki winced, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "I-I'm sorry! I just wanted to go back, you know? I never would've thought this was yours."

“It is mine!” Matsuda said, her tone indignant as she moved to the small stove in the corner of the room. She filled a kettle with water and set it to boil, her movements brisk but precise. “Didn’t you see the names anywhere?”

Haruki hesitated, her brow furrowing as she tried to recall. “It says... Matsuko,” she said slowly.

“Yeah...” Matsuda replied, her voice softening as she turned to face Haruki. “That’s my new name.”

Haruki blinked, confusion written all over her face. “Your... new name?”

Matsuda—or Matsuko, as she now called herself—pulled out two teacups and placed them on the small wooden table. She didn’t answer right away, instead focusing on preparing the tea. The kettle began to whistle, and she poured the steaming water into a teapot, the scent of chamomile filling the air.

Finally, she placed a steaming cup of tea in front of Haruki and sat down across from her, cradling her own cup in her hands. “It’s... a long story, Haruki,” she said, her tone more serious now.

Haruki stared at her, her mind racing with questions. “But... why? Why change your name? And why are you here? How long have you been here?”

Matsuda took a slow sip of her tea, her expression thoughtful. “One question at a time, Haruki-chan. You’re going to give me a headache.”

Haruki flushed again, realizing she had been firing off questions like a machine gun. “Sorry,” she muttered, wrapping her hands around the warm teacup.

Matsuda chuckled, the sound warm and familiar. “It’s okay. I get it. You’re confused, scared, and probably a little overwhelmed. Trust me, I’ve been there.”

Haruki looked up at her, her eyes wide. “You have?”

“Of course,” Matsuda said, leaning back in her chair. “Do you think I just woke up one day and decided to live in a creepy old cottage in the middle of nowhere?”

Haruki couldn’t help but laugh, the sound surprising even herself. “I guess not.”

She hesitated for a moment, then asked the question that had been burning in her mind since Matsuda revealed her identity. “Matsuda-senpai... how did you end up here?”

Matsuda paused, her fingers tightening around her teacup. She looked at Haruki, her expression thoughtful, as if deciding how much to share. Finally, she set the cup down and leaned back in her chair.

“Do you remember my graduation?” Matsuda asked, her voice soft. “When I gathered the Arts Club members for that farewell party in the club room?”

Haruki nodded, the memory coming back to her in vivid detail. She remembered how Matsuda had been the heart of the club, her passion for art inspiring everyone around her. She remembered the laughter, the music, the way Matsuda’s eyes had lit up when she announced her acceptance to Tokyo University’s Fine Arts program. It had been a moment of pure joy, a celebration of all they had accomplished together.

“I remember,” Haruki said, a small smile tugging at her lips. “You were so excited. We all were.”

Matsuda’s smile was bittersweet. “Yeah. I was excited. But... I never got to go.”

Haruki’s smile faded, replaced by a look of confusion. “What do you mean? You were accepted, weren’t you?”

“I was,” Matsuda said, her voice tinged with regret. “But my parents... they didn’t approve. They said it was too expensive, that life in Tokyo would be too hard. They told me the job prospects were unstable, that I’d be throwing my future away.” She sighed, her gaze dropping to the table.

Haruki’s chest tightened. It did sound familiar—painfully so. It was the same argument she had had with her parents, the same fears and doubts thrown back at her. The realization hit her like a punch to the gut. Matsuda had been through the same thing. She had faced the same struggles, the same heartbreak.

“What... what did you do?” Haruki asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Matsuda’s expression darkened, and for a moment, she didn’t answer. Then, slowly, she began to speak.

“I ran away. I couldn’t take it anymore—the arguments, the pressure, the feeling that no one believed in me. So I left. I didn’t know where I was going, but I ended up at an abandoned house. I thought I’d just stay there for the night, figure things out in the morning. But when I woke up... everything had changed.”

Haruki’s breath caught in her throat. “You... you traveled back in time?”

Matsuda nodded, her eyes distant. “Yeah. Just like you.”

She took a sip of her tea, her expression thoughtful. “I also went to school here,” she continued, her voice calm but tinged with curiosity. “And I met my own parents—the younger versions of the Matsudas. It was... strange, to say the least.”

Haruki’s eyes widened. “You did? What were they like?”

Matsuda chuckled softly. “Young. Naive. Completely unaware of who I was, of course. But that’s not the weirdest part.” She set her teacup down and leaned forward, her gaze intense. “When I checked the school records, I found something that didn’t make sense. There was a record of Yaeko Matsuda—my name—from 1960. As if I had always been here.”

Haruki’s breath caught in her throat. “That... that’s impossible. You shouldn’t even have been born yet.”

“Exactly,” Matsuda said, her voice low. “And I’m guessing you’ve noticed something similar, haven’t you?”

Haruki nodded slowly, her mind racing. She had seen her own name in the school records too, listed as a student. At the time, she had brushed it off as a strange coincidence, but now... now it felt like something more. Something deliberate.

“What does it mean?” Haruki asked, her voice trembling. “Why are our names here? Why are we here?”

Matsuda leaned back in her chair, her expression serious. “I’ve spent a lot of time reading the books and journals in this cabin, trying to figure that out. And I’ve come to one conclusion.” She paused, her eyes locking onto Haruki’s.

“You have to get your parents together before the end of summer. Otherwise, the door will close forever.”

Haruki’s heart skipped a beat. The words hit her like a thunderclap, sending a jolt of realization through her. Of course. It made sense now—why she had been brought here, why she had met the younger versions of her parents. This wasn’t just about understanding them or reconciling with the past. This was about changing it.

“If they don’t get together,” Haruki said slowly, her voice barely above a whisper, “then... I won’t exist. Is that what you’re saying?”

Matsuda nodded, her expression grim. “Exactly. And if the door closes before you can make it happen, you’ll be stuck here. Just like me.”

Haruki’s chest tightened at the words. “What do you mean, ‘just like you’?” she asked, her voice trembling. “Are you... stuck here forever?”

Matsuda sighed, her gaze drifting to the window. The moonlight streamed in, casting a soft glow over her face. “Yeah,” she said quietly. “I’ve been here for two years now. I arrived when you were still a first-year remember?”

Haruki’s eyes widened. “Two years? But... how? What happened?”

Matsuda leaned back in her chair, her expression distant. “Back then, I had the same chance you do now. I was supposed to make sure my parents met and fell in love before the end of summer. But... I failed. Summer passed, and they never got together. And in this timeline, there will never be a ‘Yaeko Matsuda’ because I was never born.”

Haruki’s breath caught in her throat. The weight of Matsuda’s words settled over her like a heavy blanket. “So... you’re just... gone? In the future?”

Matsuda nodded, her smile bittersweet. “Yeah. Poof. Like I never existed.” She paused, then added, “But life goes on, you know? I graduated here, in this time. I found work as a painter—advertisements, magazines, even galleries sometimes. It’s not the life I imagined, but... it’s mine.”

Haruki stared at her, her mind racing. She couldn’t imagine what it must be like to lose everything—your family, your friends, your entire existence—and still find a way to move forward. “Do you... do you miss it?” she asked softly. “The present, I mean.”

Matsuda was silent for a long moment, her fingers tracing the rim of her teacup. Finally, she spoke, her voice calm but tinged with sadness. “I used to. Every day. But... I’ve let it go. I’m a new person now. A painter. It’s what I’ve always wanted, even if it’s not how I thought it would happen.”

She looked up at Haruki, her eyes steady. “And if I ever want to see my time again, I just have to wait fifty years. It’s not so bad, really. I’ve made a life here. A good one.”

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

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

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

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