

CHAPTER XIII - GIRL TALK

IT FEELS LIKE FOREVER SINCE MICHIKO ASKED WHAT I WAS DOING FOR LUNCH. I'M SURE IT SOUNDS PETTY, BUT EVER SINCE SHE STARTED DATING TOUMA, WE HAVEN'T SPENT TOO MUCH TIME TOGETHER. NOW, ON THE ONE HAND, I DON'T PARTICULARLY MIND. IN FACT, I'M KINDA JEALOUS OF HER. TOUMA KOIZUMI HAS ALWAYS HAD A SORT OF MYSTERIOUS CHARM TO HIM, AND HE'S IS STILL A KIND-HEARTED GUY WHEN IT COMES DOWN TO IT. AND HE'S GOOD-LOOKING. AND HE...OKAY, THIS IS GETTING OUT OF HAND.

ALRIGHT, ALRIGHT, QUICK DISCLAIMER BEFORE THIS GOES ANY FURTHER. I ADMIT THAT I'M NOT JUST FLATTERING TOUMA. I HAVE, LIKE, A HUGE CRUSH ON HIM. BUT THAT'S, LIKE, NOTHING COMPARED TO MY FRIENDSHIP WITH MICHIKO, SO DON'T GO THINKING THAT I SUGGESTED THAT SHE GET TOGETHER WITH JUNICHI FOR THE SAKE OF BREAKING HER AND TOUMA UP. I'M NOT PETTY IN THAT WAY. THAT SORT OF CRISIS WASN'T THE IDEA. SHE JUST LOOKED FRIGGIN' MISERABLE, AND I COULDN'T THINK OF ANYTHING ELSE THAT COULD HELP. I MEAN, SEX HELPS CURE SEXUAL FRUSTRATION, RIGHT? I WAS EXPECTING FOR HER TO MAKE IT A ONE-TIME THING AND GET IT OVER WITH, BUT EVEN I COULDN'T HAVE IMAGINED HOW FAR SHE TOOK IT.

SHE MAY HAVE (SUBCONSCIOUSLY?) WANTED THAT SORT OF ILLICIT RELATIONSHIP, Y'KNOW?

NOW, LISTEN UP. I FULLY SUPPORTED TOUMA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH MICHIKO, BUT I CAN'T HELP BUT BE A LITTLE JEALOUS OF THEM. NOT ONLY WAS I LOSING MY CRUSH TO MY BEST FRIEND (UHH...INFERIORITY COMPLEX, MUCH?), BUT I ALSO LOST THE CHANCE TO SPEND MORE TIME WITH MICHIKO. FUCK'S SAKE, I'M THE BIG LOSER HERE! I ADMIT THAT I DIDN'T EXACTLY LIKE THAT SITUATION. MICHIKO AND I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN POPULAR FOR OUR LOOKS, BUT I'VE NEVER BEEN ALL THAT SOCIAL IN ALL HONESTY. THANKS TO THEIR RELATIONSHIP, I DID JUST LOSE MY CLOSEST FRIEND, AND I'M NOT EXACTLY A FAN OF THOSE FAKE "FRIENDS"—THOSE FANGIRLS—THAT THE POPULAR KIDS HAVE. IT'S JUST NOT MY STYLE.

ACTUALLY, I WONDER IF I QUALIFY AS ONE OF MICHIKO'S FANGIRLS...

OKAY, I OFFICIALLY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT ANYMORE.

NO, NOT REALLY. I JUST DON'T WANNA DIG ANY DEEPER THAN I HAVE TO.

I THINK

OKAY, MORE IMPORTANTLY THOUGH, WHEN MICHIKO ASKED ME ABOUT MY LUNCH PLANS (JUST LIKE OLD TIMES), I GOT A RUSH OF EXCITEMENT. OF COURSE, I KNOW IT CAN'T POSSIBLY BE BECAUSE SHE JUST WANTED TO HAVE LUNCH WITH ME AGAIN, BUT I'LL TAKE WHAT I CAN GET FOR NOW, I GUESS. BESIDES, I DO WANNA CHAT WITH HER FOR A BIT. I STILL HAVE TO ASK HOW HER RELATIONSHIP WITH TOUMA IS. I CAN JUST MAKE IT SEEM LIKE GIRL TALK, RIGHT?

"UHH, YUKI?" MICHIKO CALLS TO ME. "ARE YOU DOING OKAY?"

I TELL HER THAT I'M FINE.

"GREAT. SO, WHAT'RE YOU HAVING FOR LUNCH?" SHE ASKED AGAIN.

"OH, I DON'T HAVE ANYTHING," I REPLIED WITH A LAUGH. "I THOUGHT I'D JUST GO TO THE CAFETERIA TODAY. I'LL GRAB A SANDWICH OR SOMETHING."

MICHIKO NODDED. SEEMINGLY SIMULTANEOUSLY, THE TWO OF US GLANCED BRIEFLY BACKWARDS. I'M NOT SURE IF SHE NOTICED ME LOOK THAT WAY TOO, BUT WE WERE BOTH PEEKING AT TOUMA'S SEAT. HE'D LEFT THE CLASSROOM. I ASSUME HE'S HEADED FOR THE CAFETERIA. HE ALMOST NEVER BRINGS A LUNCH, SO IT'S A SAFE ASSUMPTION.

"WANNA GO THEN?" MICHIKO ASKED SUDDENLY. "TO THE CAFETERIA, I MEAN."

"Y-YEAH, SURE," I REPLIED. "SORRY, I KINDA SPACED OUT THERE."

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TOUMA PICKED UP A YAKISOBA SANDWICH AT THE CAFETERIA AND CALMLY WALKED OUT OF THE ROOM. I FOUND MY EYES TRACING HIS PATH CAREFULLY. WAIT, THAT'S CREEPY. OOPS.

I ORDERED A CHICKEN SANDWICH AND FOUND MY WAY TO MICHIKO, WHO WAS ALREADY SURROUNDED BY OTHER GIRLS. LEAVING THEIR SIDE WITH A KIND GOODBYE, SHE CAME OVER TO ME, AND WE WORDLESSLY LEFT THE CAFETERIA. FOLLOWING ON HER HEELS, I FOUND MYSELF HEADING OUT TO THE COURTYARD. MICHIKO LEAD ME TO A SUNNY BENCH AND SAT DOWN, OPENING UP HER BOXED LUNCH.

DAMNIT, THAT LOOKS DELICIOUS.

MICHIKO HAS ALWAYS BEEN A GOOD COOK (OR, LIKE, SHE HAS BEEN FOR AS LONG AS I'VE KNOWN HER, WHICH WOULD BE SINCE THE BEGINNING OF MIDDLE SCHOOL). HER FRIED EGGS ARE ALL NEATLY ROLLED AND THEY GIVE OFF A GOLDEN GLEAM BENEATH THE SUNLIGHT. THE RICE IS NEATLY PACKED INTO A PART OF THE BOX, AND THE CAREFULLY CUT CARROTS DECORATED THE ENTIRE BOX, WITH TINY STRIPS OF ONION AND NEATLY TRIMMED BROCCOLI TO PROVIDE A BEAUTIFUL CONTRAST IN TERMS OF COLOR. THE TINY SIDES OF MISO BUTTER SHRIMP AND CHICKEN NUGGETS ARE MAKING ME DROOL. I KNOW IT SOUNDS FUNNY, BUT LIKE, I'M DAMN HUNGRY AND I CAN TELL YOU FROM EXPERIENCE THAT MICHIKO'S COOKING IS TO DIE FOR.

ESPECIALLY HER CURRY. I'D LIKE TO SEE IF ANYONE CAN MAKE IT BETTER THAN HER.

MICHIKO TAKES OUT A PAIR OF CHOPSTICKS. "CARE FOR A BITE OF SHRIMP?" SHE INQUIRES, TOLDING TWO OF THEM UP FOR ME. I NOD. LAUGHING A BIT AT MY (LIKELY SILLY) EXPRESSION, MICHIKO PLACES THE SHRIMP ATOP MY SANDWICH AND RETURNS TO HER OWN LUNCH. WE DIG IN, THE SILENCE SETTING IN FOR A SECOND.

"TOUMA AND I BROKE UP," MICHIKO SAID, FINALLY KILLING THE DEAFENING QUIET. I LOOK UP FROM MY SANDWICH IN SURPRISE. I CAN'T SAY I NEVER EXPECTED THIS DEVELOPMENT AFTER HEARING THAT TOUMA HAD CAUGHT HER CHEATING, BUT MICHIKO'S WORDS STILL MANAGE TO IMPACT ME. I'M NOT EXACTLY BLAMING TOUMA (I MEAN, LIKE, HE DID GET CHEATED ON AT THE END OF THE DAY), AND I DON'T THINK IT'S FULLY MICHIKO'S FAULT EITHER (SINCE I CONVINCED HER TO GO CHEAT), AND YET

I'M AT A LOSS FOR WORDS. THEY REALLY BROKE UP. SO MUCH FOR GIRL TALK, THAT'S A PRETTY SERIOUS TOPIC.

I KINDA SAW IT COMING, I GUESS. TOUMA IS A SERIOUS PERSON, USUALLY, SO I DIDN'T THINK HE'D TAKE THE WHOLE "CHEATING" THING VERY WELL. HOWEVER, MAYBE IT'S JUST ME BEING IN DENIAL OF THE SUDDEN CHANGE OR SOMETHING. NOW, IF MICHIKO WASN'T MY FRIEND, I THINK I'D BE HAPPY ABOUT THIS. HONESTLY, I'VE WANTED TO ASK OUT TOUMA KOIZUMI FOR A LITTLE WHILE NOW. IT'S ALWAYS BEEN SOMETHING IN THE BACK OF MY MIND. BUT EVER SINCE HE STARTED DATING MICHIKO, I'D DECIDED TO WISH FOR MY FRIEND'S HAPPINESS AND LEAVE WELL ENOUGH ALONE. MAYBE I SUBCONSCIOUSLY SUGGESTED THAT MICHIKO SHOULD CHEAT ON TOUMA SO THAT I COULD GET WITH HIM LATER ON, BUT I SWEAR THAT WASN'T MY INTENTION.

BUT...THE QUESTION IS WHETHER OR NOT I SHOULD TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY NOW.

"YUKI, ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING?" MICHIKO'S VOICE INTERRUPTED MY THOUGHTS.

"OH, FUCK! I COMPLETELY SPACED OUT. SORRY!" I CRIED APOLOGETICALLY.

"YEAH, THAT'S FINE BUT YOUR SANDWICH IS STARTING TO FALL," MICHIKO LAUGHED. "BUT ANYWAYS, I WAS JUST SAYING HOW TOUMA AND I ARE SPENDING SOME TIME APART. I THINK HE DESERVES THE TIME TO THINK AND TO ACT. I...WE TECHNICALLY BROKE UP, SO I TOLD HIM THAT HE COULD TRY DATING AROUND A BIT, BUT I'VE JUST BEEN WORRIED ABOUT THE TYPE OF WOMEN HE'D BE AROUND. I DUNNO. I CAN'T GET IT OUT OF MY HEAD. WHENEVER I THINK HE COULD HAVE BEEN WITH ANOTHER WOMAN, I FREAK OUT."

"I THINK THAT'S...NORMAL, ACTUALLY," I SAID.

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I sighed. I was hoping Yuki would get what I meant. "No, like, I'm worried about Touma because I'm afraid another girl will make him fall head-over-heels in love with her, and I'll lose my chance to get back together with him," I said. "I mean look. We've met Shizue Sasaki already, and something tells me *she* won't be much competition."

"What makes you say that?" Yuki asked, taking a bite of her sandwich.

"Well think about it," I said. "She's about my height, her boobs are around my size and she's pretty much the same as me, but she's the childhood friend! Doesn't that mean I should just have the advantage?"

"Actually," Yuki sighed, "I hate to burst your bubble but that's an anime trope. I'm pretty sure the childhood friend has an *advantage*, not a *handicap*."

Okay, true. That and she didn't cheat on him, but that's in the past now! Wait, what am I getting so worked up for anyways?

"Listen, just go with it, alright? I'm trying to make myself feel better here," I complained.

"Well, denial *is* the first stage of grief," Yuki shrugged comically, "so fair enough."

"I think I'm beyond that stage," I mutter, "but that's besides the point. See, the thing is, do you remember that blonde lady we met that day when we went to return Touma's phone?"

Yuki nodded. "Do you think he's banging her?" she asked.

"Well, *no*, but that's not to say that he can't *start* doing it now that he and I aren't a thing anymore...like, damn!" I groan. "I don't know anymore. Listen, I want to talk to him again. Do you think I should just ask him to meet me on the roof again? I...I don't even...like...oh, for the love of God!"

Yuki nods. "Well, talk it out with him. He's an understanding sorta guy, for the most part. Just text him and ask, and if he shows up, then talk to him. Simple as that," she said, finishing her lunch.

"Yeah, I guess so," I mutter. "I'll invite him. But are you sure texting him is the best option?"

"Yeah," Yuki said sternly. "Look, if you two have broken up now, it's best if you don't talk *too* often face to face. You'll look desperate to get back together. Or sometimes it's just awkward. Sometimes it's even both."

Well...so much for girl talk. This just ended up being an advice column for me. But still...

"Yeah, you're right," I said. "I should text him. I'll do that real quick." Taking out my phone, I find Touma's contact information and send him a text, asking him to meet me on the roof after school tomorrow.

At this point, I just want to talk with him. I think.

But really, I don't even know anymore.