

CHAPTER IV - TOO MANY WOMEN

The people around me seem to share one opinion about me: there are too many women in my life. As much as I would rather turn a blind eye to that, I can't deny the truth in their words. I have too many women in my life.

I've known Shizue for six years now. She's a kind and relatively cheerful girl, but there are a few things about her that I could never understand, and one of those things in particular keeps gnawing at me whenever I think of her. Namely, despite her academic success, she's never really tried to be anything *special*. Indeed, in all the years I've known her, Shizue's dream has been quite modest: to become a housewife. It sounds like the opposite of the modern feminist ideal or whatever, and I get that, but I can see where Shizue's coming from. Nobody needs to have too grand of aspirations. You'll only get nowhere—life is nobody's dream come true. It's only ever a miserable disappointment. And that's fine.

Shizue's a realistic girl. She doesn't push her boundaries. In a way, that's a bad thing, preventing her from ever moving forward. But in another way, it's a good thing that won't let anything hold her back. Sure, she has no motivations to improve, but she also has no limiters to restrict her. She's free as a bird.

And then, there's Michiko. At this point, I don't know what to believe about Michiko anymore. I wish I did. I thought I was doing fine, and that I was making her as happy a girl as I possibly could have. And yet things seemed to tip out of my favor. Perhaps I should hate her. Maybe that's the right thing to do, and yet I can't help but believe she's innocent and that I did something terribly wrong—disappoint her. That has to be it. My Michiko wouldn't betray me like that if I didn't do anything wrong. I know it.

And at the same time, I know nothing.

As much as I try to pretend I know *everything* about Michiko, I know nothing. She's as enigmatic as they come, despite giving off the illusion that she's an open book. It's odd. It's perplexing. It's *frustrating*.

And as if that wasn't *already* too many women in my life for me to over-analyse, there's Celeste. Wait, no, there technically isn't a woman named "Celeste" in my life. Her name is Caecilia (it's a German name—she tells me it's the German version of the English name "Cecilia"). Her father is Admiral Wolfe, one of the high ranking executives for the Japanese branch of the company for which I work (she herself is best described as my manager). Caecilia's middle name is Celestina, from which the nickname of "Celeste" that I cleverly came up with is derived.

Celeste is a mystery of a whole other kind to me. Unlike Shizue, it's not that her motivations for her life goals are enigmatic in any way. Unlike Michiko, it's not like I don't know anything about her (I think—ever since last night, I've begun to doubt everything I think I know about EVERYONE). Celeste is confusing because of how *unbelievably incredible* she is.

Standing at 170 centimeters tall and likely weighing somewhere around 55 kilograms, Celeste is (for the lack of a better way to put it) *beautiful*. She has a pair of blue eyes with a color like that of the ocean. She wears glasses, but the frames are small and quite rectangular, only rounding out at the edges. Her hair is long and a natural blonde color, with slight curls here and there (in sharp contrast to Michiko's straight hair). Combine that with her curvy body (I have no idea what her measurements are, but she's bound to be close to having the body of a supermodel), and you have yourself a virtually *perfect* woman in terms of appearance.

Celeste's mother is Japanese, and she was born and raised in Japan. She has a light Kansai accent from what I can discern, but either she's great at masking it or it wasn't a big deal to begin with. She's got a university degree in mathematics, despite her age (like me, she's 16, and aside from the university she hasn't been to school for a day in her life, or so she claims—she was apparently homeschooled). Perhaps it was her time in university, but she has a habit of being *punctual*, and today should be no exception.

I glance at the clock. It read "15:58." She'd called earlier today and told me that she was coming over at four to deliver me a little "care package" from my employer, and though it was never mentioned to me directly, it's safe to assume that what I'll be receiving is the courtesy of none other than Admiral Wolfe himself.

I glance at the clock again. It still read "15:58." Crap.

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Yuki and I casually walked and talked as we headed down the road towards Touma's house. We'd purposely took a train that was a little later than usual today, as to avoid his neighbour from realizing that we were essentially following her (though that wasn't our intention; she and Touma do like *next* to each other, after all). Touma and I actually live in the same direction from school. After getting off the train at our station, we exit from the south door of the station and turn left to go straight east. A few minutes later, we find a split path. If we go right, then we reach Inoue family inn within a few minutes. If we go left, then we make another left turn after seventeen intersections and we'll be on the street where Touma's home is. It doesn't sound *that* far, but the time it takes for me to walk to his place is close to 40 minutes. He's a little faster, clocking in at about 35. He takes bigger strides than I do. I think.

I check the time on my phone. It's approaching four in the afternoon. I hope Touma's willing to talk to me.

Finally turning the corner at the seventeenth intersection, I sigh anxiously. Yuki seems to notice my distress, but she says nothing. I don't blame her. What was she supposed to ask? Saying nothing and pretending she didn't hear me sigh was probably the safest option.

We fell silent.

As we continued to walk, I suddenly felt Touma's work phone buzzing in my pocket. Pulling it out, I sighed. The black Nomia flip phone glared back at me. Flipping it open, I took a look at the name it displayed. "Who the hell's 'Celeste?' The fuck?" I asked.

"Huh? 'Celeste?' Never heard of *her*," Yuki muttered. "Could it be a sign of the legendary reverse-affair?"

I shook my head. "It's probably his employer," I said. "I'll pick up and let her know that I'm returning the phone. I press the answer key and hold the phone up to my ear.

"Koizumi, traffic kinda sucks so I may be there a minute or two late," the voice on the other end (it was distinctly female—I don't think I've ever heard this voice before, either) said.

"U-uhh...sorry, but Touma forgot his work phone at my place yesterday and I'm en route to go return it," I said. "I'm his girlfriend, Michiko Inoue."

The voice seemed to fall silent. Then, suddenly, the woman on the other end cleared her throat. "I see," she said. "Alright then." And she hung up.

"What the fuck?" I muttered.

"So it is a reverse-affair?" Yuki asked.

"She still addresses him as 'Koizumi' in a call which wasn't supposed to be heard by anyone *other* than Touma, so it's safe to say that they aren't like that," I replied. And yet, a small seed of doubt once again planted itself in my mind. Touma has too many women in his life.

A few short minutes later, we reached Touma's house. I looked around. It seems like it's been forever since I'd been here, but it's really only been a few days. I check my watch again.

It reads "3:59." Great.

"You ready?" Yuki asked, giving me a warm smile.

I nod. "Yeah," I replied.

Touma's house is a decent size. It's a modern Japanese house, with a short brick fence (or rather, a wall) and an equally short gate made of metal bars surrounding the property. Between the fence and the house itself, there's about two meters of grass in every direction, with a tiled path leading to the front door. There are two doorbells: one installed right by the front door, and one installed outside the short metal gate on the brick fence (it has two little "pillars," one on either side of the metal gate; the doorbell is installed on the pillar to the right). They make different sounds, as Touma tells me.

Moving my hand, I gently press the doorbell on the brick fence. Just once.

There's absolute silence. Nobody answers the door.

I wait a moment, and move my hand over. I ring again.

Silence.

I slowly move my hand over and ring the doorbell a third time, a bit more forcefully, as if that would make a difference.

Absolute science, even now. Is he not home?

I move my hand a fourth time. However, before I can press the doorbell, a hand shoots out of seemingly nowhere and grabs me by the wrist, gripping me tightly. I instinctively pull back a little, but to no avail. Whoever it was had an iron grip.

The hand was quite pale (certainly more pale than I am). It looked strong and battle-hardened, and yet it was slip and feminine, with smooth skin and not a single blemish. I turned to look behind me to find Yuki staring, her mouth slightly agape.

I felt my own jaw start to drop.

The person who'd grabbed by hand was a blonde woman. She was a little shorter than Yuki (no more than five centimeters), and she had a relatively slim build. She had a blazer on (it was streak white, similar to the one that Touma had worn on the day which I'd first seen his powers) and she wore a matching white skirt, with a pair of black pantyhose underneath. She wore a pair of glasses (they were small, but their shape was almost rectangular, rounding out at the corners) Her voluptuous body was almost as incredible as Yuki's was too, but unlike Yuki (who had *died* hair), it was clear that this woman was *naturally blonde*. A foreigner, perhaps?

"U-umm...hi?" Yuki managed to choke out.

"What business do you have here?" the woman asked. She was completely fluent. She may not really be a foreigner after all, actually. In fact, she sounded familiar. She stared at Yuki for a second, raising an eyebrow as if my friend was some unknown species. Then, she turned to me. And for a split second, I could swear that she shot me a glare—one that told me she would kill me if I gave her the wrong answer to her question.

What business did I have here? Is there even a *right* answer to that question?

"U-uhh...I'm here to s-see my boyfriend," I told her honestly. "I heard from a classmate that he'd fallen ill, and I didn't know, so I wanted to drop by."

"You told me earlier that you were coming to drop off his work phone," the woman replied. "Which one is it, miss Inoue?"

I paused. No wonder she sounded familiar! This was the woman to whom I'd spoken on the phone!

"O-oh! Well, it's kinda *both*," I replied. "I need to drop off his phone, but he's really sick! His neighbour said so!"

"Right," the woman (Celeste) sighed. She didn't seem to fully believe me.

"S-so, uhh...miss Celeste—" I began.

"Don't call me that," Celeste (the woman; I don't know *what* she wants me to call her) replied.

"Then what do I call you?" I inquired.

"You don't call me *anything*. Just call me 'lady' or something. I don't give a damn. Hand over the phone," Celeste (there's no way I'm just calling her "lady" like she suggested) ordered.

"W-why?" I asked. "It's not yours."

"Mister Koizumi's work phone is technically company property. Mine is too. I technically have the right as his managing officer to confiscate it from him at my discretion," Celeste replied flatly. She glared at me again, even more menacing this time. I gulped and nodded, taking the phone out of my pocket and handing it to her.

Celeste inspected the phone quickly and nodded to herself. Then, bending over a little, she picked up two suitcases that were on the ground in front of her (when the *fuck* did they even get there?) with her left hand and, stuffing the phone into the pocket of her blazer, walked over to the metal gate. However, instead of ringing the doorbell, she placed a hand on one of the pillars beside the gate. Then, as if she was weightless, she lifted herself over the brick fence with a single heave, landing gracefully on the other side with both suitcases still in hand. Then, having seemingly forgotten about Yuki and I, she walked to the front door and rang the doorbell.