

## CHAPTER VIII - I HATE YOU

I've never said the words "I hate you" to anyone before. It's hard to believe, but it's true. I've never told anyone that I hated them before. I don't think I've ever *felt* that emotion before, to be honest. Up until I was nine years old, I was always alone, but nobody ever *bullied* me. It was more like I just didn't have *friends*, like everyone was neutral towards me.

That was fine though.

Soon after my ninth birthday, in the heat of the summer, we got a new neighbour. The house beside mine—that is, directly to the right of mine if you're facing my front door—had been vacant for about a year and a half. Then, without warning, someone moved in. The very next day he went around the neighbourhood introducing himself.

That was the day I met Touma Koizumi. He was a rather tall boy, and a year my senior. He was fit and handsome (for a ten-year-old). I remember wondering if he played any sports. I don't recall asking him that, but I was nine years old.

Nine-year-olds are still kids. They have a habit of saying whatever comes to their minds. I don't really remember if I was an exception or just another part of the rule.

Touma and I quickly became friends (maybe because we both had trouble finding friends?). Since then, I've still never really had any reason to hate anyone. Before, everyone was just neutral. I didn't hate anyone because I didn't really feel anything about anyone. And now, I had Touma, not to hate but rather to *love*. Before I knew it, my heart was set on making him happy no matter what.

My mother told me it would be fine, as long as it made me happy.

And so, for the next six years, I worked hard in school to try and impress him. I learned to cook and clean like a proper housewife. He *is* the type that overburdens himself (especially when it comes to things like work), so if I can prove to be a good housewife for him just I know it would help him in the long run.

I know that.

And yet, there was Michiko Inoue. She was there to take him away from me. And that would have been fine too. Had she taken him and given him all the happiness he deserved, I'd have bitten the bullet and accepted defeat. After all, if my goal was to make sure Touma is happy, then had she taken good care of him, then my goal would be accomplished either way. I'd accept the role of the passive childhood friend and no more. I'd be content with his friendship if she loved him.

But no.

She hurt my Touma. Maybe it's just my jealousy, or maybe it's my sense of self-righteousness. Perhaps it's because I *loathe* the fact that she thought of my Touma as nothing more than a joke—a passing fancy.

Michiko Inoue didn't take him out of love. She took him because she *wanted* to. And why not? She's one of the most popular girls in our school, so why the hell *won't* she do whatever the fuck she wants? The moment I heard the rumours about her affair with that other boy (whatever his name was), those thought flooded into my head.

I could say it with certainty from that moment on.

I can say it now.

"Michiko Inoue, I hate you."

She stared at me, stunned, as those words left my mouth.

My left arm, unlike the rest of my body, hung almost flimsily off to the side. I'd come up here because I knew Touma liked to be up here. I knew that he wasn't in his classroom (I went and checked). And when I'd arrived, I was met with the scene of Michiko Inoue pulling my Touma close again, seducing him and hoping to steal another kiss.

She wanted to steal his heart one more time. She wanted to trick him and play along so that he'd believe it was all a little mistake in the past. She wanted to play off her actions as nothing.

I hate that.

The moment I saw her, I could feel nothing but rage well up inside of me. I couldn't help but start to cry, ever so slightly. I wanted to hit her. So, without thinking, I'd walked over and grabbed her by the shoulder. As expected, she turned my way. And in that instant, I'd swung my left arm in a backhand motion, my hand connecting with her right cheek. It was bright red. Possibly bruised. The back of my own hand was red too. I'd hit her hard.

I hate her.

Her expression was one of both nervousness and shock. Seeing it almost made me happy. I know I'm not in my right mind at this very moment, but that doesn't matter to me. I'll probably regret all this when everything comes to pass, but that's a problem for the future me to deal with. For now, I can just relish the feeling of excitement and satisfaction I had.

I hate Michiko Inoue.

Touma wore a rather surprised expression on his face. Perhaps he hadn't heard the door opening, or maybe he'd mistaken it for the wind vane on the rooftop. Maybe he hadn't seen me coming over. Or maybe he didn't expect that sort of outburst from me. Either way, it was the first time I've ever seen him surprised.

Michiko Inoue stepped backwards. "W-what the hell?" she manages to choke out.

"Shizue, what *was* that?" Touma demanded, having seemingly recovered from his prior surprise. "Regardless of your reason, you really can't go around—"

I don't want to hear that. It doesn't matter why you were going to kiss here again. I won't allow that. Grabbing Touma by the collar, I pulled him close and pressed my lips against his. As our lips locked, I felt a soft sort of warmth upon my face. He placed a hand on my shoulder, gently trying to push me away, but I resisted. Putting my arms around him, I held him tight and enjoyed our first kiss together.

There was a good minute before I pulled away. Touma was once again stunned. Michiko Inoue grabbed my hand and pulled me backwards forcefully. "What are you *doing*?" she demanded. "Listen to me. I don't care *who* you are to him. Touma is *my* boyfriend. I never said I intended on giving him up, and that still hasn't changed. You can't just go around kissing someone else's boyfriend!"

"You *also* can't go around having sex with one person while you're dating another, but clearly *you* haven't been able to take that hint," I retort.

"I already told you that I intend on fixing my mistake," Michiko Inoue declared. "I never asked you to trust me, but still! You have no right to hit me!"

"Listen here, you skank," I snap. I'm really losing my patience. This isn't like me. "I don't *care* how you feel. You hurt my Touma, and that's all that matters right now. Your little 'mistake' isn't just some kind of mistake in a game! Own up to it. If you want him to be happy, then let him move on. You *know* I'm better for him than you are."

"I already told you that I don't give a shit about your opinion," she said, scowling. "I *will* make Touma happy. I *want* to. I *need* to."

"Cut the crap! You're as loyal a lover as you are a good actor!" I scream at her. "Since you don't want to give him up, then fine. I'm making it official. I'm declaring *war* on you, Michiko Inoue. I *will* win my Touma's heart back, no matter what it takes. If you think you can stand in my way, I invite you to try."

Michiko Inoue sighed. "Alright, fine," she replied, clearly at her wit's end as well. "If that's how you want it, then I'll oblige. I accept your declaration of war, but know this: I won't *ever* give up on my Touma. I love him, and I will continue to love him for the rest of my life."

"Oh, save the bullshit," I answer.

"Are you picking a fight or something?" she shouts at me.

"Who knows? Am I?" Raising my left hand, I swing it forwards towards her left cheek.

•

Touma stopped her. As Shizue swung her hand, ready to slap me a second time, Touma reached out and caught her arm. I was a quick movement, like a counterattack done by an expert. She didn't struggle against him. In fact, the moment he'd touched her arm, it seemed to lose every ounce of energy it had just swung at me with.

"That's enough. Both of you," he said sternly. He glared at us both. His eyes scared me. They terrified me beyond belief. His blood-red eyes, normally burning with passion, looked both tired and frustrated at the same time.

He wanted to end this.

His eyes looked cold and unfeeling. They held no passion, nor did they show a reason. He simply *wanted* to intervene. There was no reason for it, and there were no feelings behind it. Those cold, unfeeling eyes delivered silent judgement upon us—both Shizue and me—and they stared straight into our very souls.

My body began to tremble again.

Letting go of Shizue, Touma sighed. "Please don't fight," he said. "I'm not worth it. And besides," he added, turning to me, "I'm serious about breaking up." He stretched his arm casually. "I just can't keep going like this. Regardless of whether this is only a temporary separation, or if it's a permanent goodbye, we need some time apart. Or rather, just *not* as a couple. If I'm being honest, I can understand why you weren't satisfied with me as a boyfriend, but I still can't fully process what has happened, nor can I accept it that easily. I can't forgive *either* of us just like that. I *also* need time to recuperate."

I nod. "Alright," I said. "That's okay."

"Do you mind if I be completely honest with you?" he asked. "Even if it may mean saying something you don't wanna hear?"

I smiled. "Go ahead," I replied.

"I need some time to think things over. To...get to know you all over again, I suppose," Touma said. "I need a bit of time. I'm going to explore my options a little. Maybe even date another girl or two and see how it goes. If that works out, then perhaps this *is* just goodbye. It may be for the best. And if I can't get that sour taste out of my mouth—if I find that I really can't love anyone other than you, Michiko—then...would you be willing to start over with me?"

"I should be asking *you* that," I answered, my spirits quickly rising. "Listen, I did something horrible to you. I don't deserve your forgiveness, regardless of my reason. I have no *right* to oppose you on this." I sighed. "Although I don't particular *like* the idea of you dating other girls, it's probably for the best that you find just what you want to do for yourself. And if all those other girls loving you *still* makes you want to be with me...if you can find it in your heart to forgive me, then I'll gladly take you back whenever you're willing to take me." I smile at him. "I don't *want* other girls to be with you, Touma. I admit that I'm greedy in that way. However," I added, "after what I've done, I can't really complain or blame you if you want to reevaluate your options. After all, even if it's a temporary separation," I said, "at least for the time being we're technically no longer lovers. It's not cheating, so I can't exactly stop you."

Touma and I hug again (much to Shizue's disapproval, it seems, as I could hear her click her tongue in the background). "Thank you, Michiko," he whispered into my ear.

"Thank you too, Touma," I answer. "Thank you for everything. Thank you for both everything you given me up until now, and everything you might give for me in the future. I love you."

"I love you too, Michiko," he whispered.

And those word, as always, were music to my weary ears. All of a sudden, the stinging pain in my right cheek didn't feel so strong or bad anymore.