

## CHAPTER VII - SEPARATE PATHS

Touma came to class.

I was seriously thinking that he wasn't going to. I had convinced myself that he'd either call in sick and have Shizue Sasaki cover for him if they went to her for information, or that he'd claim to have a job and not show up. Our school is rather tolerant of that sort of thing, in a sense. Touma's had to leave in the middle of class for something related to his company at one point near the end of the last school year. It was about a month after he got the job.

The teacher didn't even bat an eye.

Come to think of it, that's kind of weird, isn't it? A bartender skipping school to work? And the school's *okay with it* on top of that? It's ludicrous. But then again, if meeting that "Celeste" woman has told me anything, it's that (provided Touma really is a bartender) the company for which my boyfriend works is *powerful*. If that woman was merely a *messenger* and she dresses in some expensive-looking clothes.

Regardless, however, Touma came to class. He took his usual seat by the door of the classroom in the very back, and I could glance over at him easily. Touma sat two seats behind me, and one seat to the right. In other words, he's almost directly behind Yuki, who sits straight to my right. I can sneak my little makeup mirror into the pages of a textbook and use it to look at him. We're far from the windows and because of how our classroom is angled I don't ever have to worry about the sunlight reflecting off my mirror.

Actually, it's pretty creepy that I'd watch him like this. I know it's creepy. And in spite of that, I'm going to do it. The first time I did it was last year (in our first year of high school, or tenth grade). Our seating positions were a little different, but the trick worked all the same. I'd fallen for him in an instant, and I couldn't help it, so I spied on him a little.

The second time I did it was creepier, actually. Probably the worst example of my pseudo-stalking to date. I watched him on the train. It was the first (and only) time I did it outside of school. I couldn't help it. He was standing pretty close, so I pretended to be checking my makeup using the mirror. I mean, fair enough, right? Wrong. I was spying on him again.

The third time I did it was during math class. I couldn't focus, so I wanted a distraction. And what better to distract me than to spy on my crush?

And the fourth time I did this...that would be this time, actually.

I'm not a very persistent stalker. Thankfully.

Slipping the little mirror in between the pages of my textbook, I started preparing for class. Yuki was busy dozing off as always. She's a

strange one, to be sure. Sneaking a peek with my mirror, I noticed Touma gazing off towards the window, seemingly deep in thought.

I kinda wish he'd glance at me.

I just want him to be thinking of me, just like how I'm thinking of him.

I can't help it.

I miss Touma.

I can feel my hands curling up into fists as I try to hold back my feelings. I want to go up to him right now and just kiss him. I want him to hold me in his arms again. I miss his touch. I miss his scent. I miss the very thought of being by his side that makes my heart flutter and my hands tremble.

I miss that happiness.

•

I wish I could get Michiko out of my head. I really do. It really is as I thought. I'm too weak—too scared of her. I'm not afraid of her in a physical sense—I know she can't overpower me per se—but rather in a psychological sense, I suppose. I can't help but worry over the thought (or even the possibility) of her looking at me with disappointed, condescending eyes.

I hate that feeling.

I know I need to talk to her. I need to just end this. Shizue was right—it's for the best if we break it off.

I know I don't deserve Michiko's love and kindness. Of course she'd get tired of me and run off to somebody else. Somebody *better*. Somebody who's cool, popular, good-looking and rich.

Why the fuck couldn't I have been born as any of those?

To be sure, I feel blessed to have my Patron Spirit and I wouldn't trade that for the world, but even then...sometimes I can't help but feel a little inadequate. Maybe I'm not as good as that other guy in bed. I dunno. I don't spend my time looking at other guys' junks to have an idea of where I stand on the scale of "small to big." Not that it matters. Who cares what the reason is?

The point is, I'm not good enough for Michiko.

We should break it off before things get any more out of hand.

Pulling out my phone (not the work one, of course), I open up my contacts list. It's rather bleak. In fact, it's all but empty. I have only two numbers on it. The first one belongs to Shizue. It's a number I use quite a bit, both to text her and to call her. And mostly to receive calls from her. As for the other number, however, it's a little more special to me. Or rather, it *was* special, I guess.

Michiko's number.

The phone number that I'd found at the bottom of the love letter she'd given me. The "prank letter." Who knows? Maybe it really was a prank letter and she's

been taking me for a ride (literally?). Maybe she'd planned this. It doesn't matter. If I was a good boyfriend then maybe she would've dropped the whole "prank" thing.

It doesn't matter though.

I couldn't help but feel a little pitiful looking at my joke of a contacts list. Ironically, my work phone was better. I have the contact info of a few of my coworkers with whom I find myself going out for drinks with on occasion (we're almost all underaged to *some* extent, but who cares? We've earned it). I also have Celeste's number. I have the number of a good friend of mine named Hayate Hayashi. And lastly, I have the contact number for the head office that puts me directly in contact with Admiral Wolfe (it's for emergency use only though, quite logically).

Fighting back my frustrations regarding the pathetic contact list I have on my regular phone, I check the time. Class is about to start. I fire off a text to Michiko quickly and put my phone away. Opening my textbook, I find myself focusing intensely on its contents.

I shouldn't think about Michiko right now.

I shouldn't.

I'm still thinking about Michiko.

Bad dog.

•

I can feel myself physically jump as my phone buzzes in my pocket. Pulling it out, I unlock it and check my notifications.

Touma texted me.

I can feel my heart immediately begin to race. I can feel my cheeks quickly growing flushed. I can feel an almost apprehensive sort of joy welling up inside of me.

Even though class is about to start, at that very moment nothing is more important to me than checking the text he'd sent me. Even if he was to blame me for everything...no matter what the contents of the text are, I'd be happy. Even if it's one word...I'd be able to hold on to my barely controllable feelings for just a little longer, as long as I could hear *something* from him.

I open my messages eagerly, my hands beginning to tremble.

The bell's gonna ring any second now.

I don't give a shit.

I tap on Touma's name on my screen, with a big blue "1" displayed beside it to tell me I had one new message from him.

There's only one sentence. 'Please come see me on the roof after school today.'

I slowly blink.

The bell rang.

•

The next few hours were some of the most excruciating ones I'd ever experienced. During lunch, I wanted to find Touma, but he'd disappeared without a trace. He came back after lunch ended.

I couldn't help but keep glancing at him again and again through my mirror as class went on. I was never caught by anyone, thankfully. As soon as the final bell rang, signaling the end of class, I immediately took the mirror out of my textbook and checked behind me. Touma was gone, as expected. I loaded my books into my bag and slipped my mirror in, before zipping it up carefully and hanging it from the hook at the side of my desk. Each and every one of us had one of these hooks, but I almost never use mine.

Today's an exception though.

This is important.

When I get to there—the roof, that is—whatever Touma says to me, I'm pretty sure I'll accept it. I think I can accept just about any insult or punishment that he gives me. If anything, it'll make me feel just a little less guilty. Not that I'll ever be washed clean of my guilt anymore.

Swinging the door to the roof open, I peek in. Even though Chusei High allows its students on the roof (many schools don't for some reason), almost nobody ever comes here. It's almost like a pseudo-hideout for Touma and I to enjoy. And today was no exception.

There was only one other person on the roof today. His familiar, short black hair still rather messy, but somehow more endearing than it ever has been to me. I could feel my heart racing as I slowly walked out onto the rooftop. I mutter a little prayer hoping that nobody interrupts us.

I take a step forward and let go of the door. It swings shut relatively quietly. A gentle breeze is blowing in the air. A slight creaking sound was audible, likely from the old wind vane that the administration had installed atop our school's roof.

Touma's just meters away from me, and I'm slowly walking towards him. Within seconds, he'll be within arm's reach. I'll finally be able to hold him again. Even if it's merely for a second, I'd be satisfied, I think.

There's about four meters between us.

Three.

Two.

"Michiko." I froze instantly. The sound of his voice saying my name was mesmerizing. At that moment, I found no greater power in this universe than the sound of my own name, said in his familiar voice. He sounded heavenly. My heart was pounding. Just one word (and my own name, no less) had sent me into a panic.

Touma turned to face me. He wore a calm smile on his face, but I could tell it was forced. It was fake. He wanted to remain calm for my sake.

That smile made my heart ache. I knew deep down he hated me. Even beneath his self-loathing...even if he believed that he blamed himself, deep down part of him hated me. And I don't blame him. I wanted, at that instant, nothing more than the chance to hold him again. I wanted to hug him tightly, so that he could cry into my shoulder, and so that I could let my own tears flow as well. I wanted to comfort him and for him to whisper his assurances to me. I wanted us to be what we once were.

I knew it was impossible.

And yet I wanted it.

At that very moment, I desperately wanted it. I *needed* it.

Touma looked me in the eye. "Michiko," he said, "I'm sorry for everything." And he bowed deeply.

•

I knew it. I couldn't bring myself to look Michiko in the eye any longer than that. Perhaps I really am just afraid of her. Or maybe a part of me blames her for my own shortcomings. Maybe I just want to get this over and done with so I can just escape into my own little world.

And I know that I should.

I'm not good enough for her. Not for anyone, really.

I should just go and disappear into my little world. And never come back.

The people at my company still need me though. They *require* my skills. And I'm happy to oblige, I suppose. I guess I am good enough for that.

And yet, I want to escape. Maybe I'm wasting Michiko's time. She could be having her fun with that other guy...or *any* guy other than me.

I can't bring myself to raise my head.

I feel Michiko's fingers slowly touch my cheeks. They're warm. She's gently grasping me, and yet it feels as if her nails are digging deep into my flesh. It's like she was asking me if I was retarded. It's like she was *telling* me to stop wasting her time and just leave. She doesn't need me here.

Michiko's hands caress my cheek. Her soft hands draw me closer, forcing me to raise my head. I look her in the eyes. She shakes her head gently and leans in close until there's less than a centimeter between our lips. She purses hers and draws me closer still.

Placing my left thumb against her chin, I force her away, finally managing to regain some of my composure. I can see Michiko's fingers trembling ever so slightly. She seemed surprised. Perhaps she didn't expect me to be able to react like that.

I have so much I want to say, and yet only one phrase escapes my lips. "I'm sorry, Michiko," I say as loud as I can (though it comes out as barely any more than a whisper).

Without warning, Michiko throws her arms around me. She buries her cheek into my torso and holds me tight. Her left arm is wrapped around my back, with her fingers curled around my shoulder, as if clinging onto me for dear life. Her right arm is wrapped around my waist, drawing me closer to her own body. I feel a slight wetness upon my chest.

Michiko's crying.

Through her tears, she looks up at me with a slight glimmer of what may be hope, or just desire, in her eyes. Even with her face distorted by her tears, she's absolutely beautiful. She's an angel. And I didn't deserve her.

Being careful not to hurt her, I gently tried to pry Michiko's fingers off my shoulder, but she only grabbed on tighter. The shimmering bit of hope (?) in her eyes seemed to flicker dangerously, as if begging me not to make her let go. I could tell that, for one reason or another, she wanted this.

I stopped struggling and let her pour her tears out for a minute before I finally detached her from myself. Then, taking a deep breath, I looked straight into the eyes of the now much more calm Michiko.

"I'm really sorry for failing you," I said, "and I think it's best for us...for us both...if we go our separate paths from now on. I'm not good enough, and I recognise that, so if it'll make you happier, then I give you my blessing to be with someone else—"

•

Terror overcame me.

I thought I'd been ready for anything that Touma could have said. And yet, here I am. Even now, he'd been thinking of me. "Failing me?" No. I failed him. I *betrayed* him. And I deserve to die for that. And still, he blames himself for *me*. "Not good enough?" No. *I'm* not good enough. I don't deserve his love, and yet I stubbornly refuse to let go. And I still refuse.

"I can't accept that. I'll never be happy again if it's not with you," I said. It was the truth. I know that, if I were to lose Touma now, I'd never find happiness again. My heart already belongs to him, and to him alone. I *need* him in my life. I need him more than I've ever needed anyone else.

"Touma, I refuse to accept such a blessing from you," I said. "I'm happy that you'd still think of me...that you'd be willing to give me up if it meant helping me find happiness. And I...I admit that *I'm* not as wonderful a person as you are. Because even though I know *I* should give *you* up...even though I know there would be someone else who would never betray you and your love...I refused. I still *want* you." I gulped. "Listen to me. If you demand that we break up today, then I'll accept that. However," I said, "know this: I will NEVER love any other man. I'll keep waiting for you until the day you accept me again. I'll wait for the rest of my life if I have to."

He stared at me wordlessly.

"Touma Koizumi, I love you," I declared.

"I don't deserve you," he said.

"But I need you," I replied.

"There are better men out there," he said. "Ones who are rich, handsome, powerful and a million times better than I am both in and out of bed. There are better men for you out there who are *waiting* for you."

I find a serene smile upon my own face. "That doesn't matter to me. I see only you," I answered. "I love you, Touma, and I'll settle for nothing less. Because to me...you're the most wonderful man I could ever have. I love you. I always will."

"You deserve better," Touma said.

"So do you," I replied.

We stared at each other wordlessly for a moment.

"Kiss me," I said.

"I can't," Touma replied sternly. "I just can't do that. No matter what you say, I...I just can't make myself do it. I can't help but feel you belong to another man now, and that I'm doing something wrong."

"I'm only yours," I replied. Looking him in the eye, I took a deep breath. "Just *one* kiss," I pleaded. "Just one last time for the road...even if we never have anything to do with each other again, I want to have this final kiss because...because at least we can end it off on a high note...at least I can feel your warmth one last time." Tears had formed in the corners of my eyes, but embarrassment no longer mattered to me. There was nothing more that I wanted than for Touma to kiss me again, even if it's just one final time.

"Fine," Touma said, taking a deep breath. "One final kiss." He managed to crack a smile. A real one this time, however faint.

I felt my own cheeks becoming flushed.

This is it.

I reached forth, taking his hand in my own. Bringing him close, I began to lean in once more for a kiss. He was reluctant at first, but he didn't resist this time and closed his eyes. The wind picked up a little as our lips drew closer together. There was a slight creaking sound in the background, but I paid it no heed. The wind vane was probably acting up again.

That didn't matter right now. Something more important just happened.

I did it. We're back together. Finally...we're together again. Touma's mine again, and I am his. My lips were less than a centimeter from his. He showed no signs of protest. Bringing us close, I felt his gentle breath against my face. I love this feeling. I closed my eyes slowly as I prepared to finally kiss him for the first time in what felt like ages.

Finally, our happiness was back. Even if it was just for a fleeting moment, our happiness had returned to comfort me. And that's all I need.

Truly, that's all I need.

My heart racing, I felt the trembling in my hands disappear.

Suddenly, I felt a squeeze on my shoulder from behind. My eyes shot open in surprise. I let go of Touma and turned around, confused.

The next thing I knew, I felt a sharp, stinging pain against my right cheek.