



Chitose
Is in the
Ramuhe
Bottle

2

Hiromu
Illustration by
raemz



Chitose
Is in the
Ramune
Bottle

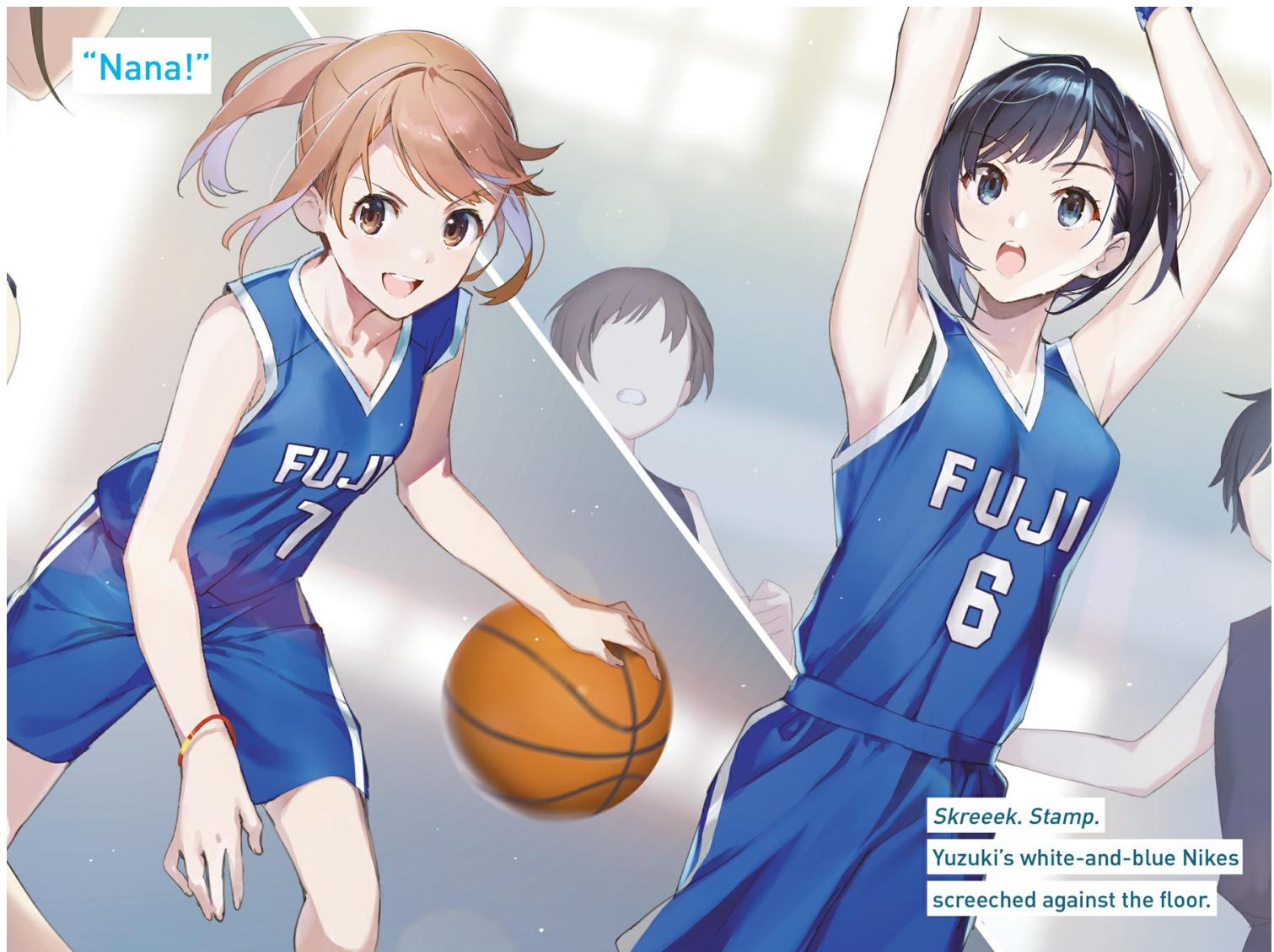
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Hiromu

Illustration by
raemz

Lunch break





“ ”
...
...



She was doing the whole bit. The whole
girl-comes-to-boyfriend's-house-and-
emerges-wearing-his-shirt bit.

Chitoshi the Rain Booth

c o n t e n t s

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Kaito Asano

Chitose Is in the Ramune Bottle

2

Hiromu

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raemz



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Chitose Is in the Ramune Bottle 2

Hiromu

Translation by Evie Lund

Cover art by raemz

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CHITOSE-KUN WA RAMUNEBIN NO NAKA Vol. 2

by Hiromu

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Saku Chitose

One of the most popular guys
in the school.
Ex-baseball club.

Yuuko Hiragi

A popular class princess.
Tennis club.

Yua Uchida

A self-made popular girl who tries
her best at everything. Music club.

Haru Aomi

A small and perky girl.
Basketball club.

Yuzuki Nanase

Every guy's favorite, along
with Yuuko.
Basketball club.

Asuka Nishino

A strange upperclassman,
socially unaware.
Likes books.

Kaito Asano

Popular jock.
Star player of the boys'
basketball club.

Kazuki Mizushino

A logical-minded, handsome guy.
A leading player in the soccer club.

Kenta Yamazaki

A shut-in, otaku nerd.

Atomu Uemura

Insecure popular kid, seeking
dominance over his nemesis, Saku.

Kuranosuke Iwanami (Kura)

Homeroom teacher of Saku and his
group. Fairly hands-off and laid-back.



Hiromu

Born in Fukui, residing in Tokyo. After the first volume was released, a lot of my old friends from my hometown got in touch to tell me they bought it. The best thing that happened was when my father's coworker asked me to sign a copy. Apparently, his light novel-loving daughter later said to him, "Dad, this is the first time in my life I've felt respect for you." (lol) **raemz**

Born in California, USA.

Works mainly on social-network games and game illustrations. I've been looking for a pet-friendly apartment recently.

PROLOGUE

The Boy



This is the story of a fake romance.

When is the exact moment that people fall in love?

Is it when they first lay eyes on “the one”? When they notice something surprising about them for the first time? Is it when that person reaches out to offer a kind hand? Or is it when the person they love leaves them behind and runs far, far away?

Any of those could be the catalyst for a big romance, but no, those aren’t the moments when people fall in love.

...I think it happens when you first put a name to that feeling that swirls up inside of you. And you call it love.

I’m in love with him. I’m in love with her. Once you realize it with words, that’s when it starts, and there’s no stopping it.

We live our lives having certain affinities for other people. We all do. Maybe we want to become like those people. Maybe we want them to really see us—to understand us in ways no one else does. A fantasy. Like the princes or princesses we dream about when we’re little.

But what happens when this admiration is nothing more than that, and we only call it love? Seduced by the sweet sound of the word, we put on rose-colored glasses. We only see the good side of them, we assume they must be “the one,” and we yearn for them.

A picture-perfect happy ending, one that we would gladly live in forever.

But in almost every case, that happily ever after comes with an expiration date.

Love is an excuse for us to hurt other people and get away with it.

The heroine of a tragic play turns her sword on her beloved. The chasm between her bittersweet feelings and the harsh truth of reality is too painful for her to bear. She has forgotten who was responsible for burdening another with that admiration in the first place.

I don't think she ever wanted it to end this way.

She simply wanted to get to know him better, this man who caught her eye. Once she got to know him, disappointment followed, but still she suffered, trapped in the torment of unstoppable feelings, conflict, and pain. She began to hate both herself and the one who did this to her. But still, she can't just give up... Then finally, she's gently lifted out of the mire by the thought that, well, that's what love is.

That's why I think it's better not to call it love until it's really the end.

...And that's where this all begins. This story of a (probably) fake romance.

CHAPTER ONE

A Transient Starting Line



Sixteen years old. Here I was, standing on the threshold of another May, the seventeenth one of my life and a rather special one.

It was the second Saturday of the month. When I looked up, the blue of the sky was a little bit deeper than it had been in April, but not as deep as the skies of summer I held in my memory. It was a perfectly satisfactory, if slightly lackluster color, smiling down from above with a calm tranquility.

The clouds, which were like cotton candy clutched in the tiny hand of a child, were drifting along merrily. Some floated apart from the herd, just doing their own thing, perfectly content with being solitary. Others clumped together for a time, then went their separate ways. Just like people do.

“Hey, that one looks like a dragon. And that one looks like a whale. That one over there, doesn’t that look just like a mermaid?”

I could hear voices, elementary schoolers playing nearby.

A fresh, green-smelling wind brushed past, stirring the hearts of young boys and girls alike as it dashed on its way. A passing doggo out for walkies picked up its pace in a jaunty step, perhaps ushered along by the breeze.

If you were planning to take a girl on a date, this would be a perfect day for it.

Whether it went well or not, you could return home with a carefree expression in this weather. It wouldn’t even matter that much what kind of roller-coaster ride of emotions you’d been on since you first left the house.

I got on my mountain bike and started pedaling at a languid pace. It was the

weekend, so everyone was still home enjoying a long and lazy morning. Either that, or they had taken the chance to get out of the sticks for the weekend and had already found something fun to do elsewhere. Whatever the reason, the main street was occupied by only a few cars this morning, at just past ten AM. I could hear the oddly pleasant *thwack, thwack* of someone beating a futon over their balcony somewhere nearby. The tiny town was (as it always was) wrapped up in a little cocoon of happiness.

I yawned hugely once and then tried to get motivated.

If you've got to deal with something troublesome, you really want to do it on a day like today.



I rode my mountain bike for about ten minutes and then arrived in front of Fukui Station. As the station right at the heart of the prefectural capital, it was technically the busiest one in the prefecture, but the surrounding neighborhood was as dead as ever.

People from big cities might find it odd that there were barely any pedestrians around on a weekend. But like many places out in the sticks, Fukui is a car-centric society.

The popular chain stores and large-scale shopping malls all generally have free and abundant parking and are either connected to the national highway or located along the bypass. Few people go out of their way to use the metered parking spaces in front of the train station.

Even if you did come to the area near the station, all you could expect to see is a street of shutters, shutters, and more shutters. The prefectural government and the local developers have tried their hardest to redevelop the area, but the shops and other establishments set up here over the past decade hardly hold any appeal for your average teenager. Most people hit up the big fast-food places they have in the suburbs. If you don't need to commute to school by train, you wouldn't even ever come to the station at all.

So as you can see, this place barely registered on my radar. I passed by sometimes, sure. But I almost never had this place set as my destination, like I did today.

I found a suitable place to stop and get off my bike, then I pushed it toward the covered shopping street. There were small shops abutting the arcade—your typical old-fashioned shopping district. Once, this place gained some degree of notoriety as a cool Instagram spot after an artist painted a mural of angel wings on the wall of an old building that was due for demolition. But the whole place emanated an aura of financial rot and urban decay, and there was no painting over that.

After walking for a bit, I spotted a shop with an exterior that was at odds with the rest of the forgotten street.

The wall and signboard were painted a deep ultramarine, contrasted by a light wooden door. To the right of the door, the entire front wall of the shop was floor-to-ceiling glass. Inside was a shelf with open cubby holes displaying different, eye-catching decorative elements. There was a Celeste-blue Bianchi mountain bike parked outside the shop.

I hadn't exactly looked up the address on a map or anything, but just from the exterior alone I knew this had to be the café I was seeking. I'd wondered why my companion for this rendezvous wanted me to meet them near the station, and it all made sense now. A secret spot no one else knew about. It was discreet but not in a super-obvious way.

I parked my mountain bike beside the Bianchi and pushed open the door without even bothering to check out the name of the café.

There was no doubt in my mind this was the place where Yuzuki Nanase had asked me to meet her.



I stepped inside the café, taking in the rough concrete walls offset with warm wood paneling. The combination made for a pleasant atmosphere, and the café itself stretched far into the back. For a moment there, I totally forgot I was still in the Fukui Station district.

Before the lady on duty in the café could greet me, I spotted the girl sitting at the table in the back, almost as if I was drawn to her. She looked up, noticing me, and raised one hand lightly into the air to beckon me over.

"I'm meeting a friend," I told the staff member, then headed over to take a

seat opposite Nanase. There were apparently no other customers.

She smiled up at me, cheeks cupped in her hands, more charm in that one smile than in all the Instagram spots in the world. Her midlength hair moved like threads of fine silk. Her skin was translucent, so clear it was almost unreal. No skin-smoothing app could hope to replicate it. And her eyes were sparkling and sweet.

Rather than focusing on building new attractions outside Fukui Station to draw in customers, they could get the same effect much faster by hiring Nanase and posting her to different restaurants for eye-candy appeal.

“Sup,” Nanase said to me in a relaxed tone.

Before I sat down, I quickly checked out her outfit. She wore a loose blue-striped T-shirt and pale denim short shorts that puffed out loosely around her thighs. A surprisingly boyish look.

“Sup.”

I repeated her greeting right back at her, and Nanase chuckled as if she found that really amusing. Then she crossed her legs. The loose shorts rode up, exposing an expanse of... Was it thigh or was it technically butt-cheek territory? Either way, it had a curvaceous beauty to it.



I pushed my chair casually up closer to the table and dragged my eyes away.

“Couldn’t you wear something a bit fancier? You’re supposed to be on a date with a hot guy, you know.”

My tone was jokey, but actually, I thought the casual outfit really suited Nanase. Like they say, a really delicious dish only needs a little salt. The lack of embellishments showcased her raw good looks, and she was giving off an aura of beauty and sexiness that was all her own.

All the usual compliments a pretty girl could get were just descriptions of her.

“Huh, I could have sworn that Saku Chitose didn’t care for the kind of girl who’d get too excited dressing up for a hot guy.”

She pushed her chair back a little and crossed her legs in a deliberate sort of way.

“Besides, doesn’t this outfit actually get your motor running more? It’s a boyish choice of clothing at first glance, yet it hugs the body in all the right places. And when I cross my legs like this, you get a glimpse of thigh, see?”

Wow, she read me like a book.

“Oh no, you have me all wrong. I wasn’t looking at your thighs. I was wondering why people always try to find out things they really don’t want to know and look at things they don’t want to look at—but when it comes to the important things, they turn away.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Could you do it again so I can watch this time?”

Nanase tipped her head to one side and giggled. “Nope. You only get one shot at most things in life, you know.”

“My elementary school teacher said: ‘*Make mistakes. As long as you don’t give up, your dreams will come true.*’”

“Sounds like a great teacher. If you ever see them again, you’d better not tell them your loftiest dream in life is peeking at girls’ thighs.”

The waiter came over then with two glasses of water. I took a gulp before

speaking again.

“Nanase, mind if I ask you a question?”

“As long as it’s something I can answer in a public setting.”

“Why are you here this early?”

We agreed to meet at noon. But it was only just past eleven thirty.

“Probably the same reason you’re here early. I don’t like to keep people waiting. It makes me feel like I owe them something. I knew you’d be the type to come nice and early, so I figured I should be even earlier still. After all, I’m the one who asked you to meet me here.”

“Hmph. So calculating. An overthinker won’t be popular with the boys, you know.”

“That’s true, I hear, for most people. However, I’m Yuzuki Nanase.”

“And I’m Saku Chitose. Let’s be friends.”



We both ordered eggs Benedict, the café’s most well-known lunch special. I ordered mine with bacon, and Nanase ordered hers with smoked salmon and avocado.

After a little wait, our lunches appeared. Eggs Benedict, covered in yellow sauce and served with a side salad containing what appeared to be edible flowers. All served on a plate with a matte finish.

I was about to cut into it from the edge like a beefsteak or a hamburg steak, but Nanase stopped me. “Hold on,” she said, holding up one hand. Then she proceeded to use her own fork and knife to cut the muffin and its toppings neatly in two down the middle.

The yellow yolk of the poached egg oozed out onto the plate, and the general effect was quite aesthetic.

I followed Nanase’s example and cut a piece of the eggs Benedict before popping it into my mouth.

Nanase leaned forward. “How is it?”

"Hmm. Kinda like a high-grade Egg McMuffin."

"Hmph. Can't you come up with a more sophisticated assessment?"

I usually don't like this kind of froufrou, pretentious food that girls seem to go crazy over, but the bacon was nice and thick, and the egg and sauce were rich and flavorful. Even a guy like me had to admit this stuff was delicious.

"This is a good place you know." I picked up my iced coffee as I spoke.

"Right? There's not much chance of running into anyone we know around the station district on a weekend. And recently some pretty decent places have been opening up around here. This place is kind of like my little secret spot."

"It almost sounds like you want to avoid being seen by anyone."

"Who wants an audience when they're trying to ask a guy out, huh?"

...And here we come to the subject at hand.

I thought back to last month. Nanase had said, "...*Maybe you'd consider... being my boyfriend? Or something like that.*" Her tone was jokey, like she was just playing around, of course, but I had the feeling there was more to it. The moment she asked me to meet her on the weekend, I thought: *Ah, here we go.* Yeah, I definitely saw something like this coming.

It was obvious she wasn't here to profess undying love for me.

But what *did* she want? I couldn't read her at all.

In our first year, Nanase and I were friendly enough. We'd stop and trade gossip when we saw each other. But she wasn't someone I hung out with outside of school, like Yuuko or Yua and those guys. Now we were in the same class, and we had gotten closer, but not by all that much.

She thought I was unique, sure. But that didn't mean she saw me as her "special someone."

Nanase dabbed her lips with a paper napkin and put on a coy expression. Then she looked up at me from beneath her eyelashes.

"So listen, Chitose... Do you have a crush on anyone right now?"

"All I know is that I'm under no obligation to answer that question at this

current moment in time.”

I shrugged, speaking in an offhand manner, and Nanase giggled.

“From that answer alone, it’s obvious you like me a whole lot, Chitose. And not just as a friend, either. As a woman.”

“Listen here, Nanase. I wish you would have told me in advance that you can read minds. I didn’t know this was supposed to be a supernatural-girl story. Changing up the plot now just makes it seem like they’re trying to pander to a wider audience to boost the ratings.”

“Silly. I can tell what’s up even without reading minds. After all, people like you and me are great at drawing lines in the sand, aren’t we?”

She continued, just as if she was making pleasant small talk.

“We make it clear when someone catching feelings for us would be a burden, right? Like, if you weren’t actually interested in me, you’d say something like ‘Eh, I might have my eye on a few people,’ wouldn’t you? But you wouldn’t want rumors spreading that you really did have a crush on a particular person, so you’d keep it vague. But in a way, that told me I shouldn’t get my hopes up.”

Nanase shot me a quick glance for confirmation. I kept silent but gave her a small nod.

“Still, it’s a shame you didn’t give me a goofy, leading response like ‘No crushes for me’ or ‘Maybe it’s you I have a crush on, Nanase.’ Now I know that you *do* kinda like me—but not enough to make even a lighthearted play for me, let alone a serious one. But you’ve made sure to leave your options wide open to go either way in the future.”

Then she gave me a “How’s that for the truth?” kind of look.

I gazed right back into her eyes as I answered. “...Don’t strip my soul bare before you even get my clothes off.”

I was being silly on purpose.

Then, to cover for the slight cringiness of that attempt, I took a big slurp of my iced coffee.

She was right about everything, though. Give me a break. This girl was a

handful.

Nanase went on to smoothly change the subject, as if she never expected or required a sensible answer at all. “Hey, Chitose. Don’t you think you and I go together pretty well?”

“Hmm. Those words have often been the beginning of a trap, in my experience. I won’t be fooled, I’ll have you know.”

“To think I put on a brand-new pair just to come out and meet you today...”

“You did?! Then what are we still doing here? Let’s get down to business! So what’s the pitch? You want me to sign up for insurance? You want me to buy the lucky talismans you’re shilling? Anything you want!”

“You’re unexpectedly easy to manipulate; anyone ever tell you that?”



Nanase’s lunch set came with a dessert, which had just arrived.

On Nanase’s recommendation, I’d added an elderflower cordial to my lunch order, and it was placed in front of me on the table after Nanase received her dessert. It seemed to be some sort of syrup-and-water drink infused with natural herbs. I can’t deny that a snide comment flashed through my mind (*More frilly girly cuisine*), but when I actually took a sip, it was freakin’ delicious. The fragrance of it was, dare I say, delightful.

After Nanase was done with her dessert, the waiter took our plates, and Nanase cleared her throat in an exaggerated manner. Then she turned her puppy-dog eyes on me.

“Listen. Chitose. I think I made my feelings pretty clear to you the other day. So...”

“First off, can you dispense with the annoying pauses and that puppy-dog expression? I know what you said: ‘*Maybe you’d consider being my boyfriend?*’ But I don’t remember you telling me your *feelings* at all.”

“But I... When a girl asks you to be her boyfriend, what other feelings could it be? Don’t make me spell it out for you.” Nanase’s face fell a little as she looked down at the table.

"Let me just ask you this. Why do you want a boyfriend so badly anyway? And why does this boyfriend have to be me?"

"Why...? Because I'm a girl in high school, the prime of my youth, that's why. All my friends have boyfriends. They talk about them all the time. When I hear them squee over their guys, it makes me think...I want that. It sounds so fun..."

Nanase clasped her hands together in front of her chest, like an innocent maiden caught in a dream.

"You're the hottest guy in our grade, you're amazing at sports, you're always surrounded by people... All the girls in our school think you're awesome. Okay, you can be kind of narcissistic, but you're basically super nice to everyone, and..."

Nanase looked at me, blushing.

"And now that we're in the same class, I realized I was getting excited about you, too. I realized I want you as my boyfriend."

I gazed back into her eyes and sighed a little.

"All right, it makes sense. You're Yuzuki Nanase. And I'm the guy with the top-tier list of qualifications you just reeled off. It's like you've been practicing."

Nanase's shoulders shook with silent amusement. "Only Saku Chitose would refer to himself as having 'top-tier qualifications'..."

If I wasn't so suspicious that she had some ulterior motive, a smile like that could make a guy fall in love.

"Well, I'm not lying, am I?"

"Nope, you're not lying, but you're not telling the truth, either."

Nanase gave me an "Oh?" kind of look.

"You started off saying you're a high school girl, listing the totally normal feelings a high school girl is expected to have. But that's not a good enough reason for wanting a boyfriend. Some people think the idea of having a boyfriend is great, and that's why they want one. Other people think, *Yeah, having a boyfriend seems great, but I'll wait for the right guy.*"

This is like the kind of misdirection you come across in novels.

“And maybe that last part is reason enough for you to want me to be your boyfriend, but it’s not a reason for liking me in particular. The guy you want to be your boyfriend because his ‘qualifications’ fit your preferences is not the guy you want to be your boyfriend because you like *him*. You’re doing a pretty good job of hiding it, but what you’re saying here has no substance. In my experience, asking someone out should start with you telling them how you feel about *them*.”

Nanase gazed right back at me, ears perked up and listening with interest.

“You don’t want me to be your boyfriend because you like me; you want me to be your boyfriend because you want a boyfriend. Right, Nanase?”

It was a trick I often used myself. A bald-faced lie often came with repercussions, so I liked to keep things vague and light on the details. Obscure things under a smoke screen and leave plenty of room for interpretation.

“Am I not allowed to want to date you just because you’re hot, like any normal girl?”

“I’m not saying you’re not allowed. I know I’m hot, and to be honest, I’d date myself. And I’m definitely into cute, beautiful girls like you, Nanase. Anyone looking at us would have to admit we’d be an amazing couple. Who knows, maybe we’ll even fall in love one day.”

I prepared myself to turn her down.

“—But today is not that day.”

A love that’s written in the stars never starts off like this; I know that much. It’s better if you don’t even realize it’s happening, until you look back and it all makes sense.

For just a moment, a smile passed across Nanase’s face.

“Wow, you’re so mean. Ever since we became classmates last month, I’ve had my eye on you, you know?”

“And I’ve had my eye on your boobs, Nanase. But from today forth, I think I’ll switch my attention to your thighs.”

"I want to be with you, Chitose. At school, walking home, going out on weekends together."

"Too bad. If you want to convince me, I'm much more agreeable in bed, you know."

"What do I have to say to make you believe my feelings are serious?"

"Perhaps if you give me a brief and unexpected kiss, like a sudden spring rain shower. Or..."

Without waiting for her response, I heaved a huge sigh.

"Listen, can we stop all this already? All this jabbing and sparring, the jostling for psychological domination, this game of thrones we've got going on. I'll admit it, okay? You and I would make a hot couple." I continued, gesticulating in a slightly exaggerated manner. "But this little play between us lacks imagination. Don't you think? There's no drama in just following the script. The magic happens when you go off book."

Nanase began saying her piece in a smooth and practiced manner—a perfect delivery of her lines.

"If you want to go watch a play that's like nothing that's been done before, then I guess I have to screw up the performance, huh? I have to take off the mask, so as not to be too perfect an actor."

"Yeah, and even if you had a hideous face underneath, I would look right at it and kiss you twice."

"Okay, so I'm the Phantom of the Opera, and you're Christine. But in that case, that means I have to stand by and watch as you go off and find happiness with someone else, right?" Nanase laughed then—a real deep belly laugh. "Ugh, what a crappy role."

Finally, I felt like I had gotten to the real Yuzuki Nanase.

I took a breath and changed up my way of speaking.

"Anyway! What I'm saying here is—let's quit all these negotiations, okay? I mean, aren't you tired of it? You must be! I sure am! And all these embarrassing lines have me squirming over here, you know? When I look back on this tonight,

I'm gonna be rolling around on the bed, chewing on my pillow and wishing for death. This is a totally dumb game of chicken. I mean, we can only laugh, right? So let's just go back to talking normal now, deal?"

"You're right! I was just thinking myself that if we continue this without hitting the brakes, we're gonna end up crashing and burning."

Then Nanase's tone lightened.

"But you know, you saying things like that... That's part of why I like you so much, Chitose. How can you unmask yourself in front of someone who doesn't even notice you're wearing a mask? I mean, it would be a big shock if they saw your true face and started screaming or something, after all."

Now we were finally both standing on the starting line together.

This game of feinting and testing each other, it led to greater understanding. Now we could start from the beginning, and I had a great first-step question to ask her.

"Just let me confirm one thing, though. You're not a natural-born princess like Yuuko, are you? It's all effort. You plan it all out, from the way you stand to the way you talk, your whole character. You got to your current position by working on it, right?"

Like Nanase had said outright, and like I figured for myself, she and I were alike. The way we went about life, our ideologies.

"That may be so, but don't go thinking I used to be some wallflower who got bullied, okay? And I guess it depends on who you ask, but I wasn't a mean girl, either. I don't think."

Probably not. I couldn't imagine either of those scenarios, at any rate.

"I've always looked kinda like this, and I've been able to handle anything when it comes to sports and school, ever since I was small. But those things make people jealous, right? And I mean, most of the popular guys in my year end up having a crush on me at some point."

"I can understand that, but that last little comment is the kind of thing that's gonna make people hate you, you know."

"I know that. I've never said that to anyone before you."

Then Nanase sighed, a kind of sexy sigh.

"...But I can't help it, can I? It's not like I'm a flirt. The guys just get it into their heads to start crushing on me. So that's why I adopted my current philosophy, for self-preservation. So people will stop using me as an object of comparison and just say, 'Yeah, that's how it goes with her.' I mean, how many people are out there getting seriously jealous and steamed up over celebrities? It's not zero, but it's not many; am I right?"

In other words, Nanase had been through the exact same experience as I had, and she had arrived at the same conclusions. She wasn't just cut from the same cloth, this was actually more like looking at myself in the mirror.

"Bit by bit, I'm starting to see it."

Right here in front of me, I was faced with someone who was more like me than anyone else.

"You wanted me to be your boyfriend, but that was because you're dealing with guy trouble, isn't it? But you can't really be honest about your issue, which is: 'I'm too popular with guys, and it's stressing me out,' unless it's with someone you can share that truth with first, right? You don't want people thinking you're boastful or too in love with yourself. That would be a pretty bad slipup and just make everything worse, wouldn't it?"

"I knew you'd understand me, Chitose. When I saw what you did for Yamazaki, I knew you wouldn't turn me away if I came to you for help. And I was right."

Nanase's tone lowered a bit and grew very sincere.

"If I saw an amazing girl like you having a hard time and just looked the other way, that would negatively impact all the self-worth I've built up as Saku Chitose. I could try to hide it, but you'd see through such a shallow motive immediately, so let me tell you straight."

If Nanase were me, or if I were Nanase, then this would be the right conclusion, a straight way to say it.

I still didn't know the full details of her issue, but here was a girl who had the same gifts and innermost feelings as I did. No doubt that was why she chose me to confide in.

...So there was only one thing left to say.

"Thanks, Nanase."

For the first time since I'd met Nanase, she gave me a look of absolute confusion. Usually, she had it all planned out, right down to the tone of her laugh. Seeing her this way, I was glad I'd come out after all.

"You've been sending me messages ever since you decided to talk to me today...to confide in me. Haven't you? 'I'm not a clingy girl,' 'Don't get the wrong idea and go falling for me,' and so on. Not in words so much, just in implications. Messages only I can receive, since we're on the same frequency."

Finally, the realization dawned.

If our places were reversed, I'd probably be doing the same thing.

"To look at this from a different angle, you chose me specifically because *I'm not the kind of guy who's going to get the wrong idea and fall for you.*"

Why hadn't she gone to Kazuki? Or even more obviously, Kaito, who was also on a basketball team? Let's leave aside the issues of him being kind of a meathead with the emotional IQ of a basketball. Looks-wise, he was more than up to snuff, and even if he didn't quite get it, at least he wouldn't have taken Nanase's explanation for bragging and self-obsession. They had known each other a long time, so surely she would have felt much more comfortable confiding in him than me.

...But honest-hearted Kaito would probably have gone ahead and actually fallen for Nanase.

Nanase gazed at my face, leaning forward with both elbows on the table, and giggled.

"Aw man, you even saw right through me, didn't you? Even when I don't want to, I can't help swooning over you a little right now."

"Like I said, enough of the starry-eyed act."

I gave her a playful karate-chop to the top of the head, and she reared back as if actually startled. But then she started giggling again.



After paying the bill at the café, we walked from the station to the nearby dry riverbed, pushing our bicycles. I wasn't sure what kind of issue she was going to bring up, but I figured it would be better to find a quiet place where waiters and other people couldn't hear us talk.

We were only a few minutes' walk away from the station, but the skies were fresh and blue, and the mountain range that snugly surrounded the area was visible. In front of us and behind us, we were alone, the only two walkers to be seen.

"So why'd you start wanting a boyfriend all of a sudden, then?" The implication in those words being: "Let's start fresh and try this again."

Beside me, Nanase began to speak, her face composed. "Try not to judge me, okay? Recently, I keep getting the feeling that someone's after me."

It was a pretty wild thing to come out with, but she didn't seem to be fooling around.

"Whoa, that got heavy all of a sudden. Are you a wife who secretly conspired to kill her husband? Sent in the brothers, who were all expecting a cut of the profits, to act as bloodstained assassins?"

My theatrics seemed to ease Nanase's burden, as her shoulders loosened and a little of her usual sparkle returned to her eyes. "That would be easier to understand. I'd hand all the riches over to you, and we'd escape to the northern hinterlands. Then we'd buy a little house, grow vegetables in our little garden, and live happily ever after. With two kids."

"Why do we have to go all the way to the frozen, isolated north? If we're going on the run, let's go south."

"What? But then it wouldn't have that same element of tragic heroism. Eh, at any rate, my family's not nearly that exciting." Nanase fell silent for a moment, before gazing right at me and continuing. "But it's not that. I think I might have a stalker."

This was clearly a much heavier situation than I'd first thought. I'd made the right call heading to a different spot. Under the clear blue sky, something like this would be easier to talk about.

"You might? So then, you're not sure yet?"

"Right. It might just be a case of me overthinking, and based on how things are right now, that's highly possible. But I'm being cautious. That's why I came to you for help like this, Chitose."

There's only one word for a stalker, but the way they operate is multifold. In the most basic sense, it's usually a jilted boyfriend who torments his victim with unwanted texts and calls, and some even send anonymous letters.

"Can you be more specific here?"

"Well, I don't have any concrete proof, nothing that would convince you even if I did go into specifics. It's more of a feeling. It's like... I'm going about my routine, but the whole time, I'm picking up on this kind of...static."

Nanase looked down at her feet as she spoke, which wasn't like her.

"I'll just be living my life, and then I'll have this moment of '...Huh?' Like when I open my shoe cubby or my bag—or when I'm walking home and turn around suddenly. Sometimes the way my shoes are lined up looks wrong, or I find something missing from my bag, or I make eye contact with a stranger in a weird way. It's just this feeling of something being out of place. I can't really explain it."

I listened closely, the squeaking of our bike wheels serving as ambient music.

"But then sometimes I just stop dead in my tracks for no reason, and the person, whoever it is, just gives me a funny look and walks past... Sorry, I know this is totally illogical. I wish I did have some proof."

"It's okay. You don't need to worry about trying to convince me," I interjected. "Usually, you would never spill your guts like this and let your hidden side show. So this is all the proof I need to believe you. Anyway, there's absolutely nothing for you to gain by lying about this."

Nanase gazed at me as if groping for the right words.

"Some girls try to close the gap between themselves and a guy by confiding in them, but you're more of a straight-talking seductress. You get faster results that way, too, right? So I already believe you. Now that that's out of the way, let's continue."

Besides, if Nanase had conclusive proof, she wouldn't be talking to me. She'd have gone to the school or the police already. There was no way that option wouldn't have occurred to her.

Instead, she weighed it out and decided it wasn't quite at that stage yet. And so she was trying this option first.

I decided to start with my immediate question about this.

"So this weird feeling of yours, how long have you been having it?"

Nanase looked surprised that I had believed her so readily, but she seemed to adjust fast. Now her expression looked milder and more composed.

"I don't remember precisely, but it started during winter break, and it's been escalating this past month. I wasn't aware of it at first, but I think I started noticing it and looking over my shoulder around that time."

"I see..."

I thought this over for a moment before continuing.

"It might be hard for you to judge this, since it involves your own mind, but I think that this bad instinct of yours needs to be taken seriously. The human brain is always taking notes and cataloging the things we see around us, so when something's different, it throws out error signals. It nags at the brain and makes us feel 'off.' And that's the sign that something really is different compared to what we see as normal."

"Something different, compared to what we see as normal... Huh."

"Also, I tend to really believe in sixth senses and stuff. Like when I played baseball, just before the pitcher made his throw, I could see the trajectory the ball was going to take playing out in my head. Also, sometimes I meet someone new, and I just know we're not going to get along, and then later on we end up arguing. It might just be a hunch based on past experiences—or maybe just my

brain calculating all kinds of environmental data I haven't even noticed myself. It could also just be plain coincidence, of course."

However, I thought.

When we as people sense something, there has to be a reason for it. Intuition is a message being sent to us by our subconscious, based on everything we've ever known to be true.

"All things considered, I think you should take this sixth sense of yours seriously."

"...I see. Somehow hearing that from you makes me feel so much better, Chitose. A small part of me thought maybe I was just being neurotic."

"Compared to most girls, you're a totally acceptable level of neurotic. Even if this does turn out to be nothing."

"Thanks for stopping me from losing my senses and falling for you, then. Just in time." Nanase met my ironic comment with some sarcasm of her own.

"Anytime. I hope you'll do likewise. So do you have any idea who the stalker could be?"

"Nope, no idea. But it could be anyone. Anyone at all." Nanase shrugged theatrically, palms to the sky.

"Hmm, could be."

"I don't think it's anyone with a grudge against me, someone I wronged or anything. I'm pretty careful not to do anything like that. But I was thinking maybe it's someone with a one-sided crush, someone I've never even spoken to, who's following me around. If that's what it is, then I have no idea who it could be."

I picked up on a hint of resignation in her voice.

"But," Nanase continued, "well, this is just something totally baseless; I have even less proof of this being true. It's probably just a big misinterpretation on my part. But recently, I keep spotting this boy from Yan High everywhere I go."

"Yan High, huh...?"

In the big cities, smart kids all go to private schools—or at least that's the image everyone has. But in Fukui, public schools are far more popular. The school we go to, Fuji High, is super high rated in the prefecture. Then you have schools like Takashima High. Both are public schools.

Of course, private schools have college advancement classes as well, and they also send plenty of students off to big universities. The general consensus is that having a private school as your safety school is a good idea.

If you don't have the smarts to get into a top-level high school, and if you don't want to go to an agricultural school or trade school, then you have to stake it all on getting accepted to a public school. Even though, really, in the best-case scenario, everyone wants to go to a private school with a general-education curriculum. You find a variety of academic abilities within those private gen-ed schools, but to be frank, Yakon High, abbreviated to Yan High, was one of the lowest-level ones.

"You know how their uniform is kind of unusual, right? It could just be that the uniform left an impression on me after only seeing it a few times, but I don't know..."

Well, to be honest, Yan High has a lot of delinquents among their student body. I, personally, find the term *yankii* a bit outdated now, but when it comes to students from Yan High, I think it's pretty apt.

Nanase used the mild adjective *unusual*, but the truth was that these kids wore their uniforms in a totally unorthodox way, sported flashy hairstyles, and had no manners in public. They oozed an aura that instantly let you know to stay away from them.

Basically, any junior high school will have rule breakers who everyone sees as delinquents. But once you get to high school, people start getting their act together and straightening up. There are always those who keep on going down that delinquent path once they've hopped on and then find they can't get off it, though.

Labeling people is against my personal policy, but you find a lot of those types at high schools that accept students who barely passed the general-education curriculum acceptance line. I can't really deny that.

I turned to look back the way we'd come. The path stretched out into the distance, and I couldn't see a single other person in sight.

"So if that's really the case, that's kind of a creepy situation, huh?"

Kids who don't get their shit together in high school are generally lacking a sense of morality and ethics, and often don't hesitate to go outside the borders of society. They don't have the broad-minded way of thinking that we do, nor do they think to temper their behavior and conversation to match the situation and group, like we do. Kids who think only in simplistic terms and act on impulse—they're our natural enemies.

How can you compete against an opponent who doesn't follow the same rules you do?

Take sumo, for example. It has simple rules: no kicking, and once you move outside the ring, you lose. The match can't even start until everyone taking part accepts these basic regulations. If the only thing that mattered was knocking your opponent over, then you could just grab a metal baseball bat and crack him on the head with it. Job done.

"Now I see why you came to me with this, Nanase. In other words, you want..."

"Hold on! I'm the one asking you for a favor here, so please let me at least be the one to say it."

Nanase stopped her bicycle by the side of the path, then turned to look right at me.

Her expression was stiff as she continued. "Now that we've gotten all the exposition stuff out of the way, I want to ask you to perform two roles to help me out. The first is to be my boyfriend, in a way that would be totally obvious even to any passing bystander."

Nanase held up one finger.

"In other words, if I really do have a stalker, I want him to think: *Oh, if she's with Chitose, then I guess girls like her only choose the hottest of the hot guys.* And then I want him to give up and go away on his own. Now, you've got the handsomest face around, so on that point, you more than pass muster."

"As the person asking a favor here, you might want to discuss my inner beauty, too."

Nanase ignored my light dig and kept going. "The second role I want you to play is this: If the person stalking me really does turn out to be a Yan High kid with a screw loose, I want you to protect me. You've got what it takes to handle someone like that. You can try to reason with him, or—and this is hard for me to say—you could even use force."

"It might surprise you, but I've never once been in a fight with anyone, not since the day I was born. I'm a lover, not a fighter, you know."

"Yeah, but 'won't fight' isn't the same thing as 'can't fight,' now, is it?"

"By definition, I guess not."

Then Nanase lowered her head before me in a very smooth and non-self-conscious way.

"You're the only one I can count on, Chitose. Please, help me. Please, go out with me."

Aw, man.

I'm no good at resisting this kind of thing.

Even if that cute little confession of hers came with ulterior motives. Yeah, even so.

"You're misunderstanding something here, Nanase. With the whole Kenta thing, I only helped out the poor guy because he was pathetic and I thought it would raise my status. That's the only reason I did it."

However, whether she was ready to accept that was a different issue.

Death is better than an unbeautiful life, after all.

I really should offer her a helping hand. If I wanted to keep living by my own personal aesthetic code, that is. And just seeing Nanase, her head lowered to me, practically begging me...

Still, I am a complex man, with a complex way of living.

No matter the situation, I need to keep my ducks in a row.

"At the present time, being seen publicly as your boyfriend would provide me with nothing but negative returns on my investment. I want to be like a light, puffy cloud, floating high overhead, the kind of man no woman could tie down."

"...You can do whatever you want to me." Yuzuki Nanase looked me right in the eye and said that like she actually meant it. "Anything you want. As much as you want, as many times as you want—I'll do anything you ask of me."

A rueful grin spread across my face. "I think you're being a little cheap with yourself here."

"No, I'm not. I couldn't possibly make *the Saku Chitose* do me such a big favor, without offering something of equal value in return. Right now, the ability to make Yuzuki Nanase do whatever you want her to do is what it's going to take to make up for the diminished returns on your investment in this relationship."

She kept talking in a very transparent, un-Nanase-like way.

"This way, we can both capitalize on our individual worth, and neither of us will be in a weak position compared to the other. I thought it all through, rationally and from a transactional standpoint. Can you get on board with it?"

Good grief. Was this girl just a female version of me or what?

"Yeah. Yeah, that's more than good enough. All right. I like that deal. But you don't know what it is I'm going to make you do, now, do you?"

"I told you, remember? I'm fully prepared to compensate a man for taking up his time and resources."

"...All right. But let's just confirm the finer points." I parked my bicycle by the side of the path as well, then faced Nanase head-on.

"You, Chitose, will pretend to be my boyfriend. This arrangement will last until it either becomes clear that the stalker was a figment of my imagination, or if he is real, then until the stalker situation is dealt with."

This could be over in a short time frame or drag on for months. We had no way of knowing until we took off the lid and peeked inside.

"I want it to look totally convincing. Everyone needs to think that we're really

dating. However, you can tell people you're really close to, and who you trust, the truth. But keep it in the inner circle. For the duration, I'm going to want you to walk me to school and back, and also to hang out with me on weekends, too."

"All righty. That all sounds fine to me so far."

"You're going to be like my own personal human can of bug repellant."

"Uh, there are so many different ways you could have chosen to phrase that, you know."

Nanase let my heckling slide. Instead, she looked at me, and in that moment, her eyes seemed filled with a world's worth of charm and loveliness. A strong wind blew, sending her dark hair flying around her face. A lock of it brushed her cheek, and she smoothly tucked it behind her ear, smiling so sweetly at me.

"So what do you say, *Saku*?"

"I say let's do it, *Yuzuki*."

"Then our contract is complete."

I felt an urge to grab the hand that Nanase offered and hold it tight. Instead, I gave her a high five, our palms clapping together. The first option seemed kind of clingy and lame.

"Just so we're clear... You said as many times as I want? And you'll fulfill any request I have?"

"Sure. I wouldn't lie to my boyfriend."

"Perfect. I've been feeling pent-up for weeks. I can't hold back anymore; just looking at you makes me want to get it all out. Come and help relieve me of this tension, would you? It might be too vigorous for you, right after a big lunch, but that's how it goes sometimes."

You can't compete against an opponent who doesn't follow the same rules you do. But if you're both playing from the same rule book, then all bets are off.

I'm not sure what kind of wild stuff you're imagining right now. I'm just trying to tell you what kind of guy I am.



"Mm... Ahhh... Uhhh..."

Yuzuki's erotic gasping in my ear spurred me on to go even faster.

"Hey...hold on. Just wait a sec... Please, let me take a rest..."

"Don't be ridiculous. You want to quit after only a couple rounds? I'm a red-blooded, virile high school boy, you know. Anyway, you agreed to do this with me today, didn't you? Come on. Put your back into it. Get on top and take charge for once."

Yuzuki bounced up and down, keeping a steady rhythm. Her motions were smooth and fluid, but her breathing was growing faster and harsher all the time.

"But...we haven't taken any breaks in between... I feel like I'm gonna faint. I'm gonna... Mmn..."



So there we were, playing basketball in East Park.

I was still miffed about losing to Haru last month, so I asked Yuzuki to play a few rounds with me.

"Agh, I seriously can't go on anymore! I'm taking a break." Then Yuzuki sprawled out on the grass.

Her sweat-soaked T-shirt was clinging to the contours of her body and even the lines of her underwear. Hmm, nice.

"What are you doing, flopping around on the ground like that? It's unseemly. Anyway, this is part of the job."

"I'm not like Haru. I excel in technique, not stamina. Anyway, what's with you? You're only meant to be a member of the go-home club, Saku, but you're not even out of breath after all that? Did losing to Haru really upset you that much?"

"Hmm. Even though it was a dumb game, I refuse to accept being the loser for long. The heavens must be misaligned, if there's someone out there who's better than me."

"That childish nature of yours is what makes you Saku Chitose, no doubt

about it.”

From my Gregory backpack, I grabbed the bottles of Pocari Sweat electrolyte drinks we’d bought earlier and pressed one against Yuzuki’s forehead. Her eyes closed in bliss.

Then I went to lie down on the ground as well and pressed a bottle of Pocari to my own forehead, closing my eyes.

“Great weekend, isn’t it?” I said, and I was met with a languid “Shore is” (translation: It sure is) in retro Fukui dialect.

The May breeze came swooshing past, rustling the grass, and it felt great on my sweat-soaked body. Kids and their parents were playing not too far off, their happy-sounding shouts carrying on the breeze.

“You know, Saku...” Yuzuki was muttering, maybe more for her own benefit than mine. “You never said anything like: ‘Poor you, having to deal with this alone,’ or ‘There, there, you can rely on me now,’ or anything, did you?”

“Why would I? I’m not here to sympathize with you. We have a contract, don’t we? I weighed our agreement, decided it had merit, and made the choice to go with it. You hold up your end of the bargain, Yuzuki, and I’ll hold up mine.”

“So you’re not going to comfort me?”

“People like you and me absolutely hate people who say that stuff. ‘Oh, go ahead and show your vulnerable side; it’s okay.’ Being too perfect, it tends to make you a whole heap of enemies. People who are always looking for a weak point to poke at. They’re always quick to leap in and pretend to help you.” I was muttering now, too, more for my benefit than hers. “Also, if I really did have something that was bothering me, it’s not like another person could help me with it anyway. We have to take care of our own issues by ourselves.”

“That’s our strength, I guess. And our burden, too.”

“Could be. But we’re not about to switch up our methodology now, are we?” I rolled over and gazed at Yuzuki beside me. “So don’t focus on relying on others. Don’t put your weakness in other people’s hands. Solve problems the way you want them solved, and if you feel like my power can help you out, then use it whenever you want.”

“...What if I decide I need it, but you’re not by my side?”

“Just call my name. Nice and loud. Like summoning a superhero. I’ll come swooping in with perfect timing and knock out all the enemies with some cool moves.”

Yuzuki rolled over and looked at me.

A lock of her hair brushed my lip.

“You won’t lose, right?”

“Eh, who knows. I might. Or I might win in the end. I told you, though, right? I refuse to accept being the loser for long.”

“By the way, Saku... Has something piqued your interest?”

“Two peaks, actually.”

“I knew you were looking.”

“Ahem. Ahem.”

It’s not my fault the neck of her T-shirt was gaping.



Clomp, clomp, clomp.

Scuff, scuff, scuff.

The stares coming from all around us were making my skin crawl. Whether those eyes were warm or full of hatred, one thing was for sure—I was not enjoying this.

It was Monday, the start of a new week, and I had gone to pick up Yuzuki at her house. Now we were walking to school together. Apparently, she usually rode to school on her Bianchi, but I suggested she try to walk to school whenever she could.

Being too cautious about the whole possible stalker thing, that wasn’t going to get us anywhere. If we wanted to deal with the issue, we first had to make sure it even existed. We needed to find out if Yuzuki really was being followed.

The whole business of stalking someone has to be way different in Fukui than it would be in, say, Tokyo.

In a huge city, where you could easily get swallowed up in the hustle and bustle of a crowd, stalking someone would be easy, even for an amateur. But we couldn't underestimate Fukui's hick-town vibe and lack of people. Trying to follow someone on a bicycle while making sure not to get caught would be almost impossible here. No doubt the stalker himself knew that as well.

So I wanted to create an environment in which the stalker could operate more easily. We would walk to school, sticking to crowded paths as much as possible, to facilitate maximum stalking opportunity. Like a sting operation or something.

And so here we were, bumbling along together like we were super close, as we walked the raised riverside path. Our plan was to make sure we were the center of attention while at the same time trying to appear to be super low-key and cool about it.

Yuzuki walked close to me, close enough to bump shoulders. Every now and then, she'd laugh out loud, or playfully whack me, or pause to peer into my eyes, or tug my sleeve, and so on. All calculated ploys to give off the impression that she was an excited young girl, walking to school with her obviously hot boyfriend.

I played off her by maintaining a slightly embarrassed half smile, and whenever someone on a bicycle passed us from behind, I would hook my arm around Yuzuki's waist and pull her close.

Everyone was looking at us and gossiping. The juniors, the upperclassmen, and people from our grade. "They look great together!" they whispered. "So he went for her, not Hiiragi, then?" they gasped. But I could also hear people snarking, too: "Nanase's gotten awfully full of herself, hasn't she?" and "Looks like she's been drinking the man-slut shithead Kool-Aid."

Nothing I hadn't been expecting, of course. But just thinking about how much damage control I would have to do on this later made me want to groan.

Eh, I could just let it slide. Let everyone think I was always planning to dump her once I got what I wanted. That would be a lot easier on me.

"Saku...?"

A voice came from behind us, breaking through my thoughts.

I turned around to see Yua Uchida standing there, head tilted to one side in confusion, with a rather dopey look on her face. Her side ponytail flowed over the mounds beneath her blazer, and her sweet, innocent-looking eyes were fixed on me. She looked adorable again today. The mismatch between her developed form and her childlike eyes was as charming as ever.

"Good morning, Ucchi!" Yuzuki piped up before I could react.

"...Er, Yuzuki? What are you two doing together?"

There was something new in Yua's voice. It was hard to put my finger on what at first, but there was definitely a syrupy-sweet, naive edge to it that was different from her usual kind tone.

I looked closer. Usually, the smile I saw in the morning was as bright as a dandelion. But today, her smile was fragile, more like an anemone.

Incidentally, anemones are poisonous, and they symbolize forsaken love.

To be honest, this new version of Yua was scaring me a little. I was certain that she had been eavesdropping on our conversation until just before she called out to me. I felt myself wanting to take a step backward, but Yuzuki looped her arm through mine and clamped on.

...We had a deal, remember?

That's what her eyes were saying. We could always explain things later, sure, but even so, making a big scene right now would be so awkward.

"Uh, listen, Yua. The thing is... We've decided to start, you know, going out, and..."

"...Excuse me?"

I was still talking when Yua cut me off abruptly.

...Hewp, pwease. I shot a pleading look at Yuzuki.

"Th-that's right. Couldn't gettim outta mah head fer a while, but once we were put 'n the same class, ah jes' fell ass over teakettle. Once ah heard he was still single, ah decided ta' grab that bull by the horns 'n' asked 'im out last

weekend. An' he said yes, so here we are."

(Translation: Th-that's right. Couldn't get him out of my head for a while, but once we were placed in the same class, I really fell for him. Once I heard he was still single, I decided to just go for it and asked him out last weekend. And he said yes, so here we are now.)

"Sorry, I actually wasn't asking you, Yuzuki. I was asking Saku."

Oof! She was totally ignoring the whole retro Fukui bumpkin bit she and Yuzuki always did!

...Uh-oh, I'm in trouble!

Yuzuki looked at me as if to say, "All yours, Saku."

Don't look at me like that. We're high schoolers. We're too old to play hot potato.

With nowhere to run, I reluctantly cleared my throat. "Listen, Yua. I haven't done anything to betray you here."

"Uh, sorry? Betray me how? Did we have that kind of relationship?"

"Nope! No, we didn't! Oh dear, silly me, I must have gotten my wires crossed!!!"

Killed in action. RIP, soldier.

Yuzuki turned to face Yua again, no doubt planning to say whatever she could to smooth this over.

"Listen, Ucchi. We didn't plan this, you know? We wanted to tell everyone first, before we made our move, but we just couldn't fight our feelings. Let me explain. Will you agree to listen?"

"Spillyagerts!" (Translation: Spill your guts, in Fukui dialect.) I could only hope Yua meant this to mean: "Tell me everything, Yuzuki" and not: "I'm going to disembowel you now, Yuzuki." Super-scary stuff.

Another killed in action. Let her RIP, too.

What a tewwible bit of twubble.

I looked at Yuzuki. She seemed to have reached the same conclusion I had.

We both shared a silent moment of recognition and an almost imperceptible nod.

“Yua...”

“Ucchi...”

I took Yua’s right arm, and Yuzuki took her left. We both held on tight.

““Let’s just get to school!!!””

“Wh-what? Wait! Whoaaa!”

Finding herself suddenly dragged away by two jocks, all music club member Yua could do was squeal. And yes, she was furious with us both for this.



Before entering the classroom, we took Yua into a secluded area and explained everything to her. “Ah, I thought it was something like that,” she said, a look of exhaustion on her face.

I had explained the bare bones of the situation, not going into details on Yuzuki’s private feelings about everything, but she seemed to be able to put that together anyway.

“First off, I’d like to show concern for your situation, Yuzuki, but...” Yua walked down the hallway ahead of us. “The same kind of scenario is only going to keep playing out after this, you know. With Yuuko, and with Kaito, mostly.”

“Yeah...”

Yuzuki and I pictured it, and we both turned to look at one another.

Yuuko Hiiragi was another member of Team Chitose, a fellow student of Year Two, Class Five. She had been duking it out with Yuzuki for the title of hottest girl in our year ever since the start of high school.

That said, Yuuko was like an easy spring breeze, just doing her thing. It wasn’t her fault if guys fell in love with her left and right. Yuzuki was more like a gorgeous actress type who wore many faces, while Yuuko was like an airheaded princess who projected an idol-type aura in the eyes of all who beheld her. A lot of people acted like she and I were “endgame,” and Yuuko certainly didn’t seem averse to that. No doubt she would display zero chill once she heard about my

dating Yuzuki.

Just to add, Kaito Asano was in the basketball club, like Yuzuki—a tall, swole, meathead jock type. Still, no point in drawing comparisons. I mean, whatever.

Yua drew ahead of us a little, then whirled around to look at us.

"And so having said that, I'm going ahead. I do *not* wanna get involved in this."

In a panic, I yelled. "Wait, please, Yua! If we're seen suddenly strolling into class together, it'll throw everything into chaos!"

"Hmm. It's a bit late for worrying about things like that now. After all, you two are *dating*, aren't you?"

Yua tipped her head to one side and gave us a dry, sardonic grin before turning and dashing off.

If only I could have gotten a head-on view of her little run, I would have been able to see those beautiful C cups, so perfectly shaped, like a pair of Buddhist temple bells. I could have prayed before them and escaped reality, if only for a moment.

Yuzuki leaned over, bringing her face close to mine.

"Hey, Saku... Is it my imagination, or is Ucchi kinda seriously scary?"

"Indeed, she is. The last person I want getting mad at me is Yua Uchida."

Thinking it over, though, the whole situation was basically out of my hands.

We needed to make sure the news of Yuzuki and me dating spread as far as possible. We had to be prepared for a ton of troublesome fallout. It just came with the territory.

"Anyway, all we can do is press on."

Yuzuki nodded with an unreadable expression, and we started walking again.

Explaining things to Yua ate up some time, and now it was around 8:10. Still too early for Kura to show up; he usually strolled in at 8:35. But everyone should have already been in class around now, including all the club kids who had morning practice.

In other words, we had twenty-five minutes to unleash our relationship bomb on everyone and start dealing with the fallout.

Urgh. I felt like Kenta, hovering outside the classroom on the day he returned to school. How'd I end up in this situation, again?

Yuzuki tugged on my sleeve. "I'm sure you know this already, but just so we're clear, in front of our classmates..."

"I know, I know, I'll act the part. And you, be careful. Yuuko looks like an airhead, but she's sharper than anyone gives her credit for."

We were standing outside the classroom door now. Yuzuki and I gave each other a quick, low-down fist bump for good luck, and then we went in.

"Mornin'."

"Good morning!"

As I expected, Yuuko was the first one to react.

"Saku, good morning! ...Hmm—and Yuzuki, too? It's unusual to see you two together! Did you bump into each other on the way in?"

I was hoping to slide quietly into my circle of buddies, but Yuuko's beautiful soprano call echoed loudly around the classroom walls, bringing everyone's attention to us. *Thanks a bunch! Thanks for nothing!*

Yua, who was seated beside Yuuko, looked up at us with a grin and an expression of total innocence.

The corner of my mouth started to twitch. Beside me, Yuzuki flipped her switch and went into actress mode, cutting off any chance of a hasty exit.

"No, we didn't bump into each other. We walked to school together. Right, Saku?"

Then Yuzuki turned to me, blushing.

Before I could respond, Yuuko put her index finger against her chin and tipped her head to one side. "Hmm? Saku?"

Behind us, where no one could see, Yuzuki prodded me in the back several times. *...All right, all right, I said I'll do it.*

"Ah, yeah. I went to pick up Yuzuki at her house, and we walked to school together."

"Hmm? Yuzuki?"

Yuuko's head tipped even farther to the side. Little ? marks popped up all over her face.

Yuzuki gazed at her, continuing in a coy sort of voice.

"So well... Okay. I'll tell you, Yuuko. The thing is: We've started going out."

...

"~~~~~WHAAAT?!!!~~~~~"

After a beat, the whole class, which had clearly been listening, let out a collective yell of surprise that drowned out even Yuuko. The walls practically shook.

"What the heck?! This is the first I'm hearing of this!!!" Yuuko leaped to her feet and came stomping over to us. "Hold on a minute, Saku! What's the meaning of this?! No one told me! I was *not informed*!!!"

Yuuko blew her cheeks out and gazed up at me. I fought a sudden urge to pull her into my arms, say, "There, there," and pat her head. That's how cute she looked just then.

...If I somehow momentarily forgot about my current situation, that is.

Yuzuki lowered her eyes in a display of contrition. "Listen, Yuuko. It's not like we were trying to hide it, you know? I actually wanted to come and confide in you about things sooner. Only...only, the thing is—I just couldn't hold back. I had to tell him how I felt! I didn't want everyone to find out this way, but..."

Yuzuki was playing the scene perfectly. You know, the whole "I caught feelings for the guy my dear friend has a crush on, but it all just happened so fast... Like summer lovin'..."

But Yuuko completely ignored her, shutting her down entirely. "Quiet! Quiet! I can't hear you! I mean, are you for real?! Saku's not the type to get carried away and choose a girl on the spur of the moment! You must have used some kind of underhanded trick to snag him, Yuzuki! Relying on his good nature and

spinning it to your advantage! Just like Kentacchi!"

Kenta Yamazaki, the aforementioned Kentacchi, jerked in his seat as if a bullet had just caught him in the cross fire. His mouth began opening and closing like a fish's, like he was thinking, *Can you please not get me involved in this scary-ass scenario?*

Looking at him, you'd never guess he started out as an unpopular shut-in. When we walked in, he was chatting casually with Kaito, like it came totally natural to him. For a moment, I wasn't sure what dimension I was in.

Hey, don't turn your gaze away from me and retreat. Who do you think you are? Dammit.

As I was thinking about the transformation of Kenta, Yuzuki tried again. "Got carried away? Spur of the moment? ...Don't say that." But then she appeared to shrug it off and smiled, turning her shining eyes toward me. "That's not what happened...was it?"

The piercing gazes of everyone in class fell on me.

If I gave some kind of glib response here, the phrase *man-slut shithead* would shoot to the top of the search rankings on the school underground gossip site, make no mistake.

Preparing myself, I faced forward, girded my loins, and adopted a slightly subdued volume. "I didn't get...carried away..."

Yuuko digested this for a split second, then put her hands on her hips and stared Yuzuki down.

"See! Poor Saku doesn't know what to do! He's too kind; that's why he couldn't turn you down. You shouldn't take advantage of his good nature, you know, Yuzuki!"

"Listen, Yuuko. Is it really so strange, me and Saku getting together?"

"Yes! It is! Strange AF! At the very least... *Yuzuki and Saku?* It's unbelievable!"

Yuuko's outburst seemed to hit home. Yuzuki's lip curled up on one side, just a little. But enough for me to be able to pick up on it.

This was unusual.

It looked like Yuzuki was slightly pissed off. Usually, a girl in her social position would never be attacked so openly in a public setting.

I could understand how she felt, a little. Yuuko was unpredictable, kind of a wild card. For steady hands like Yuzuki and myself, she was a bit much.

I wasn't sure exactly what Yuzuki was thinking, but she leaned against me all of a sudden, nestling against my left arm.

Uh, Miss? I'm getting some boob contact here.

"What's unbelievable is the way you're acting right now, Yuuko."

Yuzuki blinked innocently, while Yuuko's face contorted with emotion.

"Ugh, geez! All right, fine! Challenge accepted!"

Yuuko suddenly grabbed ahold of my right arm and pressed herself in close.

I found myself sandwiched between a pair of teacup-shaped C cups on my left and a pair of globe-shaped D cups on my right. Was I the luckiest guy in the world or what?!

Then I was hit by a blast of death glares from every male student in the class.

Welp. This ain't good.

I tried very hard to ignore the girls jockeying for attention on either side of me and instead looked over to my buddies for help.

I made eye contact with Kazuki Mizushino. He was already the star of the soccer team by second year, and he always had a cool smile. But actually, he could be somewhat of a schemer. Super handsome, too. He was actually quite similar to Yuzuki and me, so he might prove useful here.

Kazuki had his usual effervescent smile on, the one that reminded me of drinking cool carbonated drinks in summer. He lifted one hand and made a cutting motion in front of his neck.

...All right, you'll pay for that later. I'm the type to hold a grudge over things like that.



Ah, there was no other way out of this. I needed the assistance of a total jellybrain.

I steeled myself before turning to Kaito, who responded by putting one leg up on the chair, scowling at me like he was a minor henchman character from a manga about *yankii*. He stuck out his tongue and made an extremely vulgar gesture with his hand, as if to say, “Go to hell!”

...Well, excuse me.

Ah, well, I saw that coming.

Still, I had one friend left. A guy I'd reached a deep level of mutual understanding with, a guy I really held in high regard... *Right, Kenta?*

But Kenta had his head buried in a Japanese language textbook.

Uh, Kenta? It's math, first period. Also, you're holding the textbook upside down. A classic comedic move, but now is not the time!

Darn it! I guess there's really no one else left but you, Yua. I... Ack! Sorry, sorry, sorry!

“Good morning! ...Hey, what’s everyone doing?”

Trapped between a couple of boobies...I mean, beauties, I remained frozen as the classroom door opened, and the voice of my savior floated in.

Haru Aomi entered, a fresh-looking ocean-blue sports towel wrapped around her neck. She raised one eyebrow with mild surprise as she took in the scene.

Haru was small, but she was a key player on the girls’ basketball team, along with Yuzuki, and she had taut muscles in her arms and legs. She was glistening slightly from morning practice. A bead of sweat slid down her neck. She radiated an aura of sensuality that seemed at odds with her offbeat personality.

Haru whipped the sports towel off her neck and quickly draped it over Yuzuki’s head.

“You too, Yuzuki? I don’t know what’s going on, but it’s too early in the morning for all this tension.”

As if the sudden appearance of her pal had snapped her out of a trance,

Yuzuki quickly separated herself from me and cleared her throat.

“Um, Haru... So the thing is—we’ve decided to start dating...”

“Great, great, just give me a minute. Let me eat my rice ball first, real quick.”

Haru plonked herself down at her desk and pulled a giant rice ball from her sports bag before proceeding to eat it.

As if we were all suddenly awakened from a spell, our group drifted apart with vague smiles.

I leaned in to whisper to Yuzuki as she was heading to her own desk. “So even the great Yuzuki gets flustered sometimes.”

“That’s rich, coming from a useless man-slut who only helps out when the mood strikes him.”

As you say, Mistress Yuzuki.



“...So that about sums up the situation.”

During our lunch break, I borrowed the key to the rooftop from our homeroom teacher, Kuranosuke Iwanami, aka Kura. Then all the members of Team Chitose—Yuuko, Yua, Yuzuki, Haru, Kazuki, Kaito, Kenta, and me—assembled there for a meeting.

As a general rule, students aren’t allowed to go on the rooftop, but since I had been appointed “rooftop cleaner” by Kura (a totally made-up role), I was able to access it whenever I liked.

The reason for the meeting, of course, was to explain the full situation between Yuzuki and me.

I was certain that neither Kazuki, Kaito, nor Kenta was our mystery stalker, and anyway, I couldn’t keep watch over Yuzuki all by myself. I needed as many sharp eyes on this as possible.

Yuzuki wanted the assistance of the gang, too, of course—only we skipped the internal soul-searching talk Yuzuki and I shared at the café on the weekend. At any rate, Yuzuki was the victim here, so there was no need for us to hide what she was facing from our group of trusted buddies.

Once everyone was done listening to Yuzuki and me telling our tale, Kaito finally spoke first. “Is she seriously being stalked by some random guy, though?” he asked, sounding a touch taken aback. “Yuzuki’s always chatting to guys from other schools’ basketball teams, but a stalker? I think that’s a stretch. And if it is a guy with a crush, why the need to be sneaky about it anyway? Why not just make an open play for her?”

Kenta smiled ironically from his seat on the ground beside Kaito.

“Not all guys can make open plays for girls like you can, Asano. I...I actually understand how this guy might be feeling.”

Everyone whipped their heads around to look at Kenta with “Wait... You?” kinda expressions.

Kenta jerked and immediately flapped his hand in front of his face in a “No, no, you’ve got it all wrong!” kinda way. “I mean, I’m an anime and light novel otaku, but there are also idol and voice actor otaku, too, right? Some of those guys can be pretty hard-core, or so I hear. Like the type that goes nuclear when their fave idol or actress gets a boyfriend or something. They act like they’ve been personally betrayed.”

Kazuki smiled wryly, a can of coffee in his hand. “I wouldn’t go quite that far, but I can see a stalker being a thing, too. During junior high, girls used to wait outside my house and force me to accept presents from them and things like that.”

I had similar experiences myself. Even for a guy like me, it could get pretty scary. If a girl like Yuzuki was really being stalked everywhere, or even if she was only under the impression that she was being stalked...it could really weigh on her emotionally.

“I’m not saying this is the case, but...,” Kenta continued. “...But I really think you should be careful, Nanase. You should be fine if you’re with the king, but you know, men tend to take their jealousy out on the woman—or so they say. If things go wrong with this fake-boyfriend plan, the stalker might really lose it.”

That was a shrewd assessment by Kenta. We would have to be careful.

If playing the fake boyfriend redirected the stalker’s fury toward me, that

would be good. Things could be wrapped up faster that way. But based on the long history of crazy guys in the world, Kenta's guess might actually turn out to be correct.

I shrugged and coughed, not wanting the others to see that a tiny seed of fear had sprouted in my mind.

"Well, we'll figure it out. Whether we end up provoking this guy really depends on who we're dealing with."

Then, uncharacteristically, Yua chimed in.

"I really don't like this. Saku, you don't seem to care if you get targeted. But Kenta could be right on the money here. Which means your safety is not at all guaranteed..."

Yuzuki screwed up her face.

In other words, me sticking my neck out to protect Yuzuki also meant I was potentially sticking my neck on the chopping block, too. But I was prepared for that when I agreed to our contract. The terms and associated risks hadn't changed at all.

And I knew that Yuzuki understood what those terms and risks meant, too.

Yua suddenly seemed to realize what she was saying—and who she was speaking in front of. She quickly tried to soften it by adding: "Ah didn't mean nuthin' bah it." (Translation: I didn't mean anything by it.)

"We'll all be on the lookout, too. I'm sure you'll both be just fine. And, Yuzuki, you should make sure never to go anywhere alone. Let's whup thaht low-dahn mangy varmint!" (Translation: Let's get that jerk!)

Yua's enthusiasm was infectious, and Yuzuki's expression brightened to match.

"Darn tootin'! Ah can't relah on a fella like Saku, so I'll be needin' yer assistance, Ucchi!" (Translation: I'm on board! I can't rely on a guy like Saku, so I'm going to need your assistance, Ucchi!)

"Jes' glad ter be of service!" (Translation: Just glad to be of service!)

The retro Fukui accent gag did a good job of relieving the tension, but was I

subtly being dissed here?

"Aaaaaanyway!" Yuuko, who had been uncharacteristically silent for this conversation, suddenly interjected in a raised voice. "We need to do this for Yuzuki, too! Let's root out this jerk, if he even exists, and give him a good lecture on manners!"

Honestly, I was a little surprised by this.

Based on her reaction this morning as well, it was obvious that Yuuko was mighty steamed about Yuzuki and me basically dating.

I peeked at Yuzuki. She seemed to be at a loss for words, too.

Yuuko continued.

"I mean, this kind of thing is terrifying! I'm going to be too afraid to walk by myself alone! I mean, how terrible is that, if there really is a stalker? Saku, make sure you protect our Yuzuki, okay?"

Yuuko gazed into my eyes, hands clasped in front of her chest.

Ah yes. There's our Yuuko.

"I'll do whatever I can. At the very least, as long as I'm playing the fake boyfriend, I'll do everything to protect Yuzuki, as my precious girlfriend."

Yuzuki was quick to follow this. "Yuuko... I'm really sorry. I promise I'll make this up to you, okay?"

Everyone ignored *my* feelings. Instead, Yuuko drew in a huffy breath over what Yuzuki just said, before releasing it angrily.

"Okay, now I'm *really* mad! Let's go at this one more time!"

...Wait, what?

"Just so you know, it's not like I've accepted you and Saku even *fake* dating! If you only needed someone to play your boyfriend, you could have just made Kaito do it! You're both in the basketball club, and it's not like he has any other romantic prospects or anything better to do with his time! And he's got muscle, too, that could certainly come in handy!"

Kaito, you gonna take that lying down? I looked over at him.

"Damn, she went for the jugular..." he gasped, and Kenta reached out to pat him consolingly on the back.

Yuuko's words seemed to have flipped Yuzuki's sarcastic switch.

"Oh, I see. So in your estimation, Saku and Kaito are totally interchangeable, is that it? Well, you'll have to excuse me. I'm of the opinion that only Saku will do for me. Why don't you make do with Kaito instead, Yuuko?"

"Don't put words in my mouth! I only want Saku, too! I don't wanna get stuck with Kaito!"

Things were devolving fast. This was going to end up being a repeat of this morning. I had to intervene.

"That's enough, both of you. Kaito is wilting like seaweed over here. What did he ever do to either of you, hmm?"

"""You stay out of this, Saku!!!"""

"Yes, Mistresses!!!"

Sorry, Kaito. I can't help you with this one. Rest in peace, brother.

While I was paying my last respects to Kaito in my mind, Haru finally stopped eating her bento lunch. "Mm, that was so good!" she chirped. "...Anyhoo, picking Chitose is just, like, the Yuzuki thing to do, if you ask me."

Then she gave everyone a loaded grin.

"After all, you guys are like two peas in a pod."

Yuzuki looked like she was about to say something back, but then she bit her tongue.

No wonder these two were a famous basketball duo, known throughout the prefecture. They knew just how to play one another, too.

Haru continued, one brow raised high as she gave Yuzuki an odd look. "Chitose, you'll be spending a lot of time with Yuzuki for the next little while, right? In that case, come watch weekend practice. I'll treat you to a little show of Haru's super plays on the basketball court."

"Sure, I don't mind. And maybe you and I could go off for a little private

practice afterward?"

"Dearest, are we really embarking on adultery so soon into your marriage?"

"Don't be a fool. I just want a rematch from that time you beat me when we played one-on-one."

"Who's the fool? All right. If I win, you'll have to... Oh, I know! You have to pretend to be my boyfriend, too!"

"I'm begging you, please don't toss any more gasoline on this dumpster fire!"

Haru cackled, and everyone else smiled along, too.



"...You can go ahead and light up now."

I told the others I was going to stay and lock up, then sent them on ahead. Then I mumbled the above sentence. I heard a click and a snap, then from the top of the water tank housing unit, I saw a plume of gray smoke slowly begin to rise in the air.

"Eavesdropping on your students' private conversations. It's a bad habit to get into, Teach."

"Spare me. I was simply up here enjoying a pleasant afternoon nap, when you all came barging in and started having yourselves a little party. Tch. This is meant to be my private time, where I actually get a break from you sex-obsessed brats, you know."

With a heave-ho, Kura got to his feet after unleashing that tirade of middle-aged male grumbling. Then he sat down on the ledge of the water tank housing unit. He must have kicked off his usual crusty thong sandals somewhere, since his dangling feet were bare. And dirty.

I climbed the ladder, too, and sat down beside Kura.

"So what do you think, then, Kura?"

"I think I must have done a truly amazing deed in my past life, and now my reward is to be surrounded all day long by lovely young high school girls with C and D cups."

"You keep saying stuff like that, and your punishment will be you winding up getting reincarnated as Kura again the next time around."

Kura muttered "Damn kid..." to himself under his breath, before blowing out a plume of purple smoke. "Watch yourself, Chitose. You're cruising for a bruising."

Then Kura's voice turned all serious, which was unlike him.

"Stalking is a criminal offense," he said.

"So you're saying we should go to the police?"

"Maybe it's a bit too soon for that. They might not take you seriously at this stage. Just because something's illegal, that doesn't always mean involving the law is the best way to deal with it. Unfortunately."

Both Yuzuki and I knew that, too. That was why we were pursuing our Plan B policy.

Kura continued. "That said, if you strike out and end up causing problems, it could reflect badly on my position and me, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, don't screw it up. There's a proper procedure for everything. In order for the heroes to take out the bad guys, everyone has to be playing by the same set of rules."

I knew what he was trying to say.

Without a clearly defined opponent, it would be too easy to dismiss the whole stalking thing as the overreaction of an overly sensitive kid. In other words, if we wanted the law to take care of things, we would have to wait until an actual, undeniable crime had already been committed.

"So we have to feel it out and improvise. That won't be easy..."

"Just don't get it wrong. Make sure you've got the situation straight. And if this goes beyond dumb kid discord, come to me immediately, and I'll handle it... Or so I'd like to say, but I can't make that promise. Seriously, though, come tell me. I'll hear you out, at least. A teacher can't really help you much in a case like this, besides give advice."

Yeah, he said that, but if the stalker I was confiding in Kura about really was a stalker, Kura would step in and throw down, no doubt. Maybe he wanted us to handle this ourselves up to a certain point, with him keeping a watchful eye on the situation. I'm not sure if it was the correct way for a teacher to handle something like this, but at the very least, we would all be grateful to have Kura backing us up.

Getting teachers involved—and heaven forbid, the police—would cause the kind of trouble that could really wreck a guy's high school life. I wanted to avoid that, unless we had a darn good reason, of course. I wasn't just worried about myself, though. Something like this could have repercussions for Yuzuki's club activities and even her acceptance to college in the future.

I stood up, swiping at the seat of my school uniform pants.

"Well, I'll do what I can. But I can't come running to the safety of your arms as a last resort, Kura. I have my reputation to consider."

"Now, Chitose, surely you've heard my nickname? The one they call me when I frequent the titty bar in the next town over by the name of Don't Make Me Take Off My Blazer...?"

"I don't know it, and I don't want to know it."

"He who has his choice of call girls switched out one by one by one... They call him *The Last Resort...*!"

"Oh, I see. You must be on a secret customer blacklist."



That day after school, just before seven PM.

I was seated and chilling by the entryway.

Half of the cloud-hazed sky was the color of night, and the other half was tangerine-orange where it hung over the school building. Students who had already finished up club practice were smiling and skipping lightly to the school gate. From the sports field, I could hear the sounds of the baseball and soccer clubs cooling down by running laps, their lighthearted voices carrying on the air.

I hadn't stayed this late at school in ages.

A year ago, around this time, I would have been out there on the sports field with the mud-spattered jocks, my voice a part of their post-practice chorus.

I got a sudden whiff of the scent of packed earth, and it stirred something in me.

It was the familiar scent of post-club-practice evening air.

The period of time just after school seems to have a distinctive atmosphere all its own. And there's a clear difference between how school feels after classes let out and how it feels after club practice lets out, too.

During the former, there's this excited atmosphere of "Let's go hang out!" or "Let's head to club practice!" but during the latter, everything feels more subdued. Almost sentimental.

During this season, when the sun sets in layers in the sky, it's the perfect time to share heartfelt moments with your school buddies. Time to talk about dreams for the future, time to bring up the name of that girl you've had your eye on.

I was lost in these kinds of philosophical thoughts when someone appeared in front of me, a slender silhouette crouching down. "Chi-to-se."

I took a moment to appreciate the shortness of the skirt, which barely concealed anything, before looking up. I was surprised when I saw who it was.

"Nazuna Ayase. It's unusual to encounter you by yourself."

Nazuna Ayase was another classmate from Year Two, Class Five, but she belonged to another, distinct, standout group in our class.

Nazuna and her group's main guy, Atomu Uemura, had been pestering Kenta only as recently as last month.

Even if I still held a slight grudge against them for picking on Kenta, that didn't mean I held any real animosity toward them. Nor did I see the need to force myself to be friends with them. Basically, I was maintaining a policy of nonintervention.

I mean, this was the first time I'd ever really spoken to any of them one-on-one.

Nazuna twirled her neatly curled hair around her finger and smiled. "Just Nazuna is fine, Chitose. Everyone had other stuff to do today, you know. I had nothing else to do, so I was just hanging out scrolling on my phone, and before I knew it, it had gotten this late."

"Wow, Nazuna. You sure know how to kill time. That's like some kind of special skill you have right there."

"Really?"

Her expression softened to something particularly innocent.

If you compared her with Yuuko or Yuzuki, her makeup was a little on the thick and flashy side. But her face was cute, and the makeup itself was well done and age appropriate. I still had a negative image of her from the way she acted toward Kenta and Yua, but chatting with her like this, it made me think that she might not be such a bad person after all.

Sometimes people can be jerks; that's all.

Still, judging a person based on your first impression, be it good or bad... There's something to be said for that. It's like I was discussing with Yuzuki. A sixth sense. It might seem like the opposite kind of thing, but actually, the two go hand in hand.

I mean, the side of yourself you show to one person might be totally different from the side of yourself you show to another. And there's no guarantee that the stuff that shows up on the surface is real at all.

"Chitose, are you by any chance waiting for Nanase?" Nazuna peered at me.

"Well, something like that."

Ah, I figured. But this was good. This was why we engaged in that big scene back there in the classroom, with the drama and raised voices. To make sure that everyone knew about us.

Just according to plan. Still, it made me feel antsy.

"What, seriously? Listen, Chitose... Are you seriously going out with Nanase?"

"I think what you heard this morning should be correct. Don't we make a cute couple?"

I said it in a joking way, but Nazuna screwed up her face with distaste.

"Uh, not even *slightly*. I mean, Nanase is a real bitch. You never know what she might be scheming! Yeah, excuse me, but I don't see it."

Nazuna shrugged, as if the conversation didn't concern her all that much, even while she was saying such spiteful stuff about Yuzuki.

"Uh, should you really be saying that to me? I am her boyfriend, you know. You go around saying that kinda thing, and people will start wondering who the bitch really is here."

"At least I'm not going totally behind her back, though, right? I'd say the exact same thing to her face."

Ah. So in a way, this was Nazuna's idea of fair play.

"Well, you must have a few choice words to say to me, too, then, in that case? I mean, I'm your local man-slut shithead, after all."

Nazuna let out a burst of laughter. "Nah, you're cool, Chitose. You're hot, and a guy, so I can give you a free pass for most stuff. Nanase is a girl who gets more attention than me, so that's why I hate her."

"You're refreshingly honest."

And I really thought it, too. I couldn't help chuckling as well.

"Hey, Chitose. Give me your LINE app ID."

"Again, is that the way you should be talking to someone else's boyfriend?"

I grinned wryly, but I still scanned the QR code Nazuna was holding out on her phone screen, all the same.

That was when the students who were just getting out of club practice started to spill out of the school, being funneled through the entryway.

Nazuna noticed them coming and quickly stood up.

"I'm off, then. As much of a treat for the eyes as it was to bump into you on my way home, I'd hate to end up in a tussle with Nanase."

Then she was gone, waving her hand in a "bye-bye" gesture.

Huh. I had been expecting her to start verbally sparring with me, but she was actually nice and left without any animosity.

Based on the way she had just spoken, I was wondering why she hadn't waylaid Yuzuki on her way home and personally bitched her out. Well, it made sense. Why seek out the target of her ire for a verbal bashing when she could just diss her to her boyfriend instead? In fact, Nazuna had gone for the more brutal option.

That's when I realized that seven PM had come before I knew it. I got up and stretched. I was stiff from sitting for so long.



Then about ten minutes later, Yuzuki and Haru came out of the entryway.

Haru noticed me first and dashed over.

"Sup, Chitose! Were you waiting for me?"

"I was certainly waiting, but I don't recall doing it for you, Haru."

"Oh come on, dearest. You know you're just delighted to see Haru's perky smile after a long day!"

She body-charged me then, her slim shoulder knocking into my chest. I caught a pleasant whiff of scented deodorant.

"If you really want me to think that, then you should be real nice to me, to make up for all the time I spent waiting. A few sweet compliments would go a long way."

Then Haru cupped her cheeks in her hands and stuck out her tongue in an open display of flirtatiousness.

"Hey, Saku-poo! Hawu's been missin' you! ♪"

"...Bwah-ha-ha!" I exploded with laughter.

"Hey! Chitose! What kinda reaction is that?!"

"Crazy girl! Don't just hit a guy with that without any warning! A guy needs time to prepare himself, you know!"

"What a big meanie you are, Saku-poo! Poor wittle Hawu is sooo sad now! ♪"

I snorted with laughter again. “P-please, no more! I give! I give! My back and stomach are both cramping up!”

“Oh, is Saku-poo feewing wumbwy in his tum-tum? ♪ Hee-hee?”

While Haru and I were joking and laughing together, Yuzuki approached with an exasperated look on her face.

“What do you think you’re doing with *my* boyfriend, hmm?” Yuzuki plopped her hand down on top of Haru’s head.

“Hey! It’s Yuzuki-poo! ♪”

“That’s enough, I said.” Yuzuki proceeded to mess up Haru’s hair. “Thanks for waiting, Saku. It took longer to get ready to leave than I’d expected.”

Grinning, Haru jumped on that one. “Seriously! Yuzuki was all, ‘Where’s my deodorant spray?! Where’s my body wipes?! Haru, lend me yours!’ ...Talk about panic. So annoying.”

“H-Haru!!!”

“So I told her, ‘Come on, it’s only Chitose!’ But she was like, ‘If it wasn’t Chitose, I wouldn’t care!’ Heh, what a delicate little flower!”

In a fluster, Yuzuki grabbed ahold of Haru by her short ponytail.

“Mind. Your. Place. Haru.”

Haru shook her head this way and that, responding with: “Does not compute... *Bleep, bleep, bloop!*” in voice like a robot that was beginning to malfunction.

“Anyway, all jokes aside, please take care of our princess here, Chitose. Make sure you see her safely home, okay?”

Haru, finally released from Yuzuki’s grip, took this opportunity to slap me playfully on the butt.

“No worries, Hawu! Weave it to Chitose, the White Knight!”

“White Knight? More like wolf in sheep’s clothing! Better watch out, Yuzuki! He *knight* eat you up!”

“Hey, that was pretty smooth.”



Once Haru was gone, like the swirling cyclone of destruction she was, Yuzuki and I were finally able to start heading on our route home.

I couldn't help noticing, as Yuzuki walked beside me, that she had the same scent as Haru. I found myself smiling.

"Uh, I hope that smirk isn't because of my predicament? Because if so, I'd be pretty pissed, you know?"

Yuzuki was looking at me with a disgruntled expression.

"Ah, sorry. I was just surprised you actually let a chink show in your armor. So I couldn't help smiling. Even though it really doesn't seem like something you would do—skipping out on deodorizing after sports practice, that is."

"I usually never skip deodorant. And today I put my stuff in my bag before I left home, like I always do. I remember putting both my spray and my body wipes in there."

Yuzuki wasn't joking around anymore; I could tell. No doubt she left out the details earlier, not wanting to worry Haru unnecessarily.

"Okay, this doesn't sound good. So this is something out of the ordinary, I'm guessing?"

Yuzuki nodded. "But on the girls' basketball team, we can get a little sloppy. Sometimes someone borrows another girl's deodorant spray and forgets to give it back before they go home, you know? It happens."

"Where do you leave your bags during club practice? The girls' basketball clubroom?"

"Yeah. As you know, it's just outside Gym 2. The door usually isn't locked, and it's right next to the boys' basketball clubroom, so it's not like it's a secluded area. At the same time, no one outside of the team members would really bat an eye at someone going into the girls' basketball clubroom."

Yuzuki was analyzing the situation in a matter-of-fact way.

The clubrooms located around there are separated from the outside by a not-so-high wall. If someone managed to get ahold of a Fuji High uniform or some

sportswear, then even if they were from a different school, they could sneak in pretty easily. The girls used Gym 1, located next to it, for their sports practice, but even if the door was wide open, you can't really see the clubroom from there.

So it could just be a coincidence. On the other hand, under the present circumstances, when we were dealing with a suspected stalker, it wouldn't be unusual for alarm bells to be ringing.

Honestly, I thought it was a stretch.

Still. If Yuzuki was concerned about it, then my job was to take it equally as seriously.

"It could be someone up to no good, sure. But we don't know for sure that you were actually the target of a crime during club practice. I actually staked out the outdoor shoe cubbies after school, but I didn't see anyone acting suspiciously."

Yuzuki's brow unfurrowed a little.

"Uh, probably because you were sitting out there in plain sight! Hee-hee. And here I was, thinking you were waiting for me to be done with practice..."

"I was waiting for you, too. It's really adorable that you got yourself into a tizzy over missing deodorant. You wanted to make yourself look pretty before we met, hmm?"

"Please, can we move on from that?"

Yuzuki covered her cheeks with her hands and looked down at her feet, really playing up the "poor me" bit.

"However," I continued. "Say it was an act of calculated theft. Why would the stalker want your *body wipes*, Yuzuki?"

"Hey! I resent that!"

"No, dummy! Usually a creepy stalker would go after your sweaty sports towel or gym clothes. If they really wanted to just swipe something of yours, they'd maybe even take your school uniform as a trophy, who knows."

"Oh... Ugh....!"

"Uh, hold on. Don't go freaking out on me for real, okay?"

We had been joking around like usual up until this point, but to be honest, things felt wrong.

Let's say, for example, that the stalker was your typical fetish creep, who wanted to steal Yuzuki's scented body products so he could smell like her. He would have just stolen the deodorant spray, in that case. Or if he was smart, he would have just checked out what kind of scent she wore and then gone to the store to buy his own can.

Actually swiping her stuff...was kinda crazy. The risks didn't seem to outweigh the rewards.

Considering the psychology of the average high school guy, if you really wanted to go on a risk-filled quest to swipe the personal items of the girl you liked, you'd want something that had some traces of your object of affection on it, surely. I mean, I didn't really see the appeal myself, but if you were so inclined, you'd want something like a towel they'd actually used, or the school uniform they wore all day, or even something more intimate like a used ChapStick.

Body wipes, though... Those were just basic self-care items, used to erase traces of sweat, dirt, and other bodily stuff.

When I thought about it that way, the whole thing started to strike me as very odd.

The items that went missing were the type that would make a young girl panic somewhat if she found herself suddenly without them. But at the same time, they were such minor items, just consumable body products. The timing, though... Just before she was due to meet her boyfriend after school...?

...Could this be the act of a fellow girl with a grudge?

I came to a halt and looked back the way we'd come.

The riverside path stretched out into the distance behind us, one long line. The indistinct outline of several Fuji High students could be seen here and there, illuminated by the glow of their smartphone screens.

"Saku?" Yuzuki said my name then, her voice tinged with concern.

I put on a playful sort of affect, like Haru did earlier.

"Ah, I was just thinking about how it's so dark out here, I could grab your butt and totally get away with it."

"Before checking the perimeter, maybe you should consider whether *I'd* be willing to let you get away with it first, hmm?"

"Surprisingly, you'd be okay with it, I think. You'd be like, 'Where'd that come from, weirdo?'"

"I'll consider it, if you let me grab your butt right back, Saku."

"Somehow, walking home together and mutual butt-grabbing don't seem to go together."

My intense look from earlier seemed to have had Yuzuki worried.

Protecting her from this stalker and minimizing the stress of it all for her was my job.

Yuzuki had been placed in a difficult position. The least I could do was try to lift her spirits and spend time with her. That would be the best way to keep her mind off things.

Not everyone who seems to be struggling actually is struggling, and not everyone who seems fine is really fine.

"Hey, Saku. Do you want to go on a date somewhere this week?" Yuzuki just asked me, straight up.

"What for?"

"What for...? Uh...we're dating, aren't we? Don't couples usually go on dates?"

Her words seemed sincere, not like the usual act she put on.

"Hmm, maybe. I don't really mind, but don't you have club stuff, Yuzuki?"

"Don't be silly. Test period starts tomorrow."

"...Oh."

I forgot.

Fuji High, like most advancement schools, cancels all club activities the week before midsemester tests and end-of-semester tests.

That must have been why everyone seemed so perky when they left after today's club practice.

"Still, you're the type to breeze through tests without ever cracking a single book, huh, Saku?"

I nodded and grunted.

I'm not saying I'm some study geek who's top of our grade or anything, but I maintain my position within the top ten students of the humanities track. And since I quit the baseball club especially, I find myself filling empty evenings with more studying than before.

"But didn't Haru say something about a practice game on the weekend?"

"That's different. It's against this hard-core team from a school that belongs to another prefecture. They don't share our schedule. It's been decided for months, anyhow. In an ideal world, I'd prefer to be perfectly prepared, but I guess it can't be helped this time."

Yuzuki hefted her heavy school sports bag back onto her shoulder. It looked far too big for her slim frame. I looked closer, noticing a bunch of scuffs and scratches on it. *Yep, that's a school sports club bag, all right.*

"Think you can beat this other team?"

"Hmm, honestly, it might be difficult. They've got a better setup than we do."

No doubt that was Yuzuki's objective and informed opinion, based on her observations of the other team.

I rubbed my chin, then spoke. "Really? Then I take back what I just said."

Yuzuki turned to me, looking surprised.

"If I'm going there to cheer you on, then you'd better win that game. Then, as a reward, I'll take you on a date."

"I never knew you were the type to be so encouraging, Saku."

“I just want to see you playing with some real passion, Yuzuki.”

Her gaze was challenging. “I’ll have you know I’m a pretty awesome player.”

“Not to copy you here, but if you really do win, I’ll grant you one request. Anything you like.”

“Challenge accepted!”

Yuzuki whooped, pumping her fist in celebration.

I watched her, smiling a little inside.

Then, as if she had seen through me somehow, Yuzuki lowered her voice.

“Thank you, Saku.”

“Hmm? What for?”

“Hmm, what for, indeed?”

“If you really felt like thanking me, you could allow me one generous grope of your thigh.”

“...Doofus.”

I fell back a step, and making sure Yuzuki didn’t notice, I took another quick look behind us.

The uniform procession of walking blazers, illuminated by the glow of the smartphones they were peering at, flowed seamlessly like a procession of paper lanterns.

CHAPTER TWO

Auspicious Days and Ordinary Days



It had been only twenty-four hours since Yuzuki and I first embarked on this whole fake romance gambit, but the school was already awash with rumors about us.

The usual gossip site was filling up with a diverse range of diss posts.

I got plenty of hate, of course, but that was nothing out of the norm for this man-slut shithead. It was the posts about Yuzuki that were really something.

Slut.

She'll do it with anyone.

I heard she's two-timing him with a college student.

Pretty spicy stuff, don't you think?

No doubt Yuzuki had put herself in the line of fire. But the outpouring of venom was kinda extreme, and it left me cold inside. Clearly, people had decided to slot Yuzuki into the "fair game for roasting brutally" category, along with me. Now we had apparently become a special unit, both of us equally ripe for online vitriol.

But even if this was an anonymous forum, who could say such horrible things about other people? Weren't they ashamed? Obviously, some people were genuinely riled up. But others were just jumping on the bandwagon and using this as a free excuse to sling mud. It was all par for the course, naturally, but I was still a bit stunned by it.

Anyway, moving on...

This kind of exposure served to fulfill our original objective perfectly. The people's interest had been well and truly piqued. So there was no need to do any more acting work on it today. Instead, we decided that the girls and guys would split off at lunch and do our own thing.

Kazuki, Kaito, and I dashed to go buy stuff for lunch as soon as class let out. Once we had each grabbed some basic sandwiches, we hurried to the gym. Sitting on the ledge of the stage, we gobbled down our lunches, and then we started doing competitive free throws with the basketball Kaito brought.

We'd had plenty of chances to eat lunch as a group since second year started, but it had been a while since it had been just us three guys hanging out. We did invite Kenta, too, but he said: "*You're telling me you want me to play basketball with you right after eating? Are you trying to kill me?*" and shot us down. Yuuko and the rest of the girls dragged him off with them after that, so good for him. Hmm, I wonder if he planned it.

Whoosh.

I threw a pretty good shot, if I say so myself, and got it in the basket.

I went and grabbed the ball, then passed it to Kaito, who was standing back on the three-point line. Since he was the star player of the basketball club, the other two of us wouldn't stand a chance without a handicap. Kazuki and I both took our shots from the free throw line, leaving Kaito to take his shot from the three-point line. It was something we agreed on long ago.

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

Kaito grabbed the ball from me and dribbled it expertly at his feet. He didn't have Haru's dexterity with the ball, but he did have power.

"So what's up, Saku?"

Kaito bent his knees and focused on getting the timing right as he spoke.

"What's up with what?"

"What's up with you and Yuzuki, of course. Hup!"

Kaito leaped into the air, all six feet of him in perfect, pin-straight form, like the trunk of a great big tree. The ball flew from his hands and almost seemed to

be sucked down inside the net. His shot barely even made any sound.

Kaito passed the ball off to Kazuki and came over to me.

“What do you mean, what’s up with me and Yuzuki?”

“Are you planning to date her for real? That’s what I’m...*asking!*” Kaito kicked me firmly on the butt as he spoke.

Watch it, meathead! That actually hurt.

“What’s that supposed to...*mean?*” I kicked him back with all the strength I could muster.

“Geez, Saku!” Kaito yelped, grabbing his thigh as he continued. “I mean, you two make a good couple. You’d make a good one with Yuuko, too, but that’s neither here nor there. What I’m saying is, you make a good partner for Yuzuki.”

Kazuki piped up from the free throw line, where he was holding the ball.

“Like Haru said yesterday, you and Yuzuki are actually kinda similar. Like you’ve both constructed these impenetrable but transparent walls around yourselves.”

Kazuki took his shot, using the backboard to bounce the ball off it and into the net.

Kazuki walked over after picking up the ball. He was spinning it on the end of his finger. Kaito held up his finger as well and took the still-spinning ball from Kazuki. With his free hand, he reached up and made it spin even faster.

“Right. Even when I see Yuzuki chatting with her friends during basketball games, it’s kinda like...she always has the same expression. It’s always the same, whether they win the game or lose it. She only ever seems to really relax when she’s with Haru.”

No doubt Kaito had spent the most time around Yuzuki, since he was also a basketball club student. But I hadn’t ever realized he was so...observant.

Anyway, I’d long held the same impression of Yuzuki myself.

Kaito was a man of many layers. He goofed around with his buddies, but he

was actually a pretty serious type. When I dragged Kenta back to school, he just accepted him without any calculated, self-serving intentions like the ones Kazuki and I secretly held.

“But these days, when she’s with you, Saku, she seems much more at ease.”

I thought back on our conversation during the walk home last night. When we started discussing the upcoming weekend’s game, Yuzuki was wearing her usual poker face. Or so I thought. But maybe it actually looked a bit more relaxed than usual?

I grabbed the ball from Kaito and started to break for the net. Kaito took up the chase, zooming after me. I did a layup and went for the basket. Kaito blocked me, and I snatched the wayward ball. Then I started dribbling, working on my position.

“Would you be able to handle it if she and I really did end up dating for real?”

“Handle what?”

“I’m asking if you don’t actually have a secret crush on Yuzuki, and... Hyuh!”

I feinted to one side, then broke forward. Kaito whirled around and closed in on me, blocking my route to the net.

“Yeah, right. Yuzuki’s just a friend. All I’m saying is: If there’s a way you can help her out, then I want you to do it... Hyah!”

Kaito charged at me, aiming to steal the ball.

I took a quick step back, evading him. “What are you, her daddy? I’ll remember you saying this. Don’t come swinging for me if she and I end up hooking up for real... Hyugh!”

“If I’m ever going to end up swinging for you, it’ll be to punish you for making her cry... Hyah!”

“I’ll bear it in mind. Still, as long as I’ve got my wits, a meathead like you would never land a punch on me... Hup!”

I passed the ball behind me without even turning around.

Kazuki was waiting on the three-point line and grabbed it.

"Hey! No fair!" Kaito rushed to block it, but he was too late.

Another beautiful shot, bouncing neatly off the backboard. Kazuki and I exchanged a high five.

"See, I told you. Meathead."

I turned to grin at Kaito, who was looking rueful. Kazuki placed his hand on my shoulder.

"You're kind of a meathead yourself, though, you know, Saku."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's not like you'll listen to my advice anyway, but I really think you should consider making a firm choice and letting go of the other options. It's a good life skill."

I shrugged off Kazuki's hand—and his advice.

I knew what he was implying here.

But for me, at this current stage of my life...it was still far beyond me.

Like a time capsule you promised to dig up one day but then forgot about, I had the feeling that day wouldn't ever come.



After school, all the members of Team Chitose headed to the Fukui Prefectural Library.

It was a little far from school, so both Yuzuki and I made sure to come to school by bicycle today. This was the go-to study spot not only for Fukui High students, but for all high school students in Fukui City. It was beloved by both pretest study groups like ours and third-year students cramming for college entrance exams.

The library is located only a little off of Fukui's "main street" of National Highway 8, a stylish Goliath of a building on a neat plot of land surrounded by nothing more than rice paddies. From the big glass windows of the main building, you can see meticulously cultivated and trimmed grass and trees all around. It's a relaxing, refreshing sort of space in which to read or study, in anyone's estimation.

The library's interior is fully equipped with single-person study desks, large tables meant to seat multiple people, and even comfy chairs for reading in. There's a spot to suit everyone. The members of my group all picked single-person desks that were situated at intervals spaced apart from the desks in front and to the side, in order to focus on studying. Yuzuki and I, however, snagged an open table.

Naturally, we did this to make sure everyone in that library knew we were dating.

We considered sitting side by side, but it looked kind of weird to an outside observer, and it gave us much less room to spread out our textbooks and study sheets. In the end, we decided to sit on opposite sides of the table. This would look more natural than snuggling up would anyway.

I looked over to the single-person desks. Yuuko was glaring at Yuzuki's back, and as I watched, she pulled down her lower eyelid and stuck out her tongue in a gesture of contempt. She'd said she would join us at the table when we were all choosing seats, but Yua convinced her otherwise, and in the end, she agreed to compromise and reluctantly sat down at the nearest single-person desk.

She caught my eye just then, giving me a cheeky wink and blowing me a kiss. I pretended to flick the kiss back at her.

After that, I looked around the library, taking in our surroundings.

I noticed that a good 30 percent of the students belonged to our own Fuji High. Another 30 percent looked like they came from Takashima High, and the remaining 40 percent were students from a variety of high schools. Nothing out of the ordinary about any of that.

I sneaked a glance at Yuzuki, who had already gotten out her pencils and pens and started studying. She usually kept her hair tucked behind one ear at a time, but right now both sides were tucked tight behind her ears. Her defined and beautiful features were on full display for once. She seemed to be focused on taking a practice test, her mechanical pencil scratching rhythmically on the page.

I spaced out for a few more seconds, focusing on the sounds of the library.

Scratch, scratch.

Rustle, rustle.

Clatter, clatter.

Step, step.

Flip, flip.

Thunk, thunk.

Shuffle, shuffle.

Muffled slam.

Everyone here was taking care to keep the amount of noise they made to a minimum. I've always loved libraries.

The scent of old books, the rhythmic flipping of pages, the muted squeaking sound of library staff pushing heavy carts. All of this combined made it feel like time was running just a little bit slower than usual.

When you emerge from a library, it feels like you've been given back some of the time you would have otherwise spent. But most people just go on about their day after that, never noticing it.

Life is sprinkled with odd little phenomena like that. And I like it that way.

“...Saku? Sa-ku.”

While I was lost in my thoughts, unable to make myself actually start studying, I heard a small voice calling my name.

I lifted my head to see Yua standing beside me. She was wearing glasses with dark-blue frames.

“Sorry. I was spacing out.” I kept my voice low, checking to make sure there was no one in the vicinity.

“Oh, it’s okay. Sorry to interrupt you while you were thinking. Do you have any loose-leaf paper? If so, could I have some?”

“Yeah, I’ve got some.” I pulled out a few sheets and handed them to Yua.
“You’re wearing glasses today, huh?”

Yua looked away, as if she was suddenly embarrassed. "...Yeah. It's more comfortable to wear these when I'm concentrating on studying. I guess they look weird, though, don't they?"

"No, they don't. I've never thought your glasses looked weird. They look really natural on you, actually. They remind me of last year. Kinda takes me back."

"Please, don't try to remember last year too hard..."

Yuzuki, who seemed to have been listening in, joined our conversation then. "You used to wear glasses? So you were your class's resident glasses girl?"

Yua laughed awkwardly. "I don't know about being the resident glasses girl; I guess I just never really thought that much about it. Glasses or contacts, I mean. I never really cared about that stuff."

"Huh, that's a little surprising. You keep things kinda on the plain side, Ucchi, but I still had the impression you're someone who cares a lot about their appearance."

"Hmm, I'm not sure about that. You and Yuuko are both so beautiful, and I'm, well, me. But well, I guess a lot has happened since our first year..."

Yua seemed to be having difficulty with this. I decided to help her along.

"I actually asked her to consider contacts. I told her that the 'secret beauty who stuns everyone when she finally takes off her glasses' trope is tired. Now it's the 'regular beauty who switches it up and adds a cute new dimension when she puts her glasses back *on*' that people want to see. And I see Yua as the latter one."

Yuzuki raised an eyebrow as if picking up on something unsaid. She jumped right on it.

"So that's what you're into, is it? Hmm, I'll make a mental note."

"It has to be unexpected, though. Not calculated. You'd be like: 'So did your heart skip a beat then, or what?' and the whole bit would just collapse. It would be too transparent."

"I really think you should reconsider boosting up another girl's ego right in front of your girlfriend, though?"

"Yuzuki, your charm is like a geometrical pattern carefully calculated to be pleasing to the eye. But Yua is more like a just-peeled sweet chestnut, a little raw and unrefined. Either way, you shouldn't be competing against one another."

"...Um, is it all right if I go back to my seat now?"

And with that final word from Yua, we cut all the chitchat, and everyone got down to some serious studying.



"...Yuzuki."

After Yua returned to her desk, we studied for about an hour.

Now I was leaning forward, whispering Yuzuki's name. Once I had her attention, I surreptitiously handed her a single sheet of loose-leaf paper with a note I had written on it.

Some guys from Yan High are here.

Yuzuki scanned the note. Her shoulders instantly stiffened, and she exhaled deeply. She took a second to compose herself and return her face to its usual impassive expression. Then she scribbled something on the paper and handed it back to me.

Where?

Her phone appeared to be zipped up inside her bag, which is why I went the classic route with a good old pen and paper note. I was hoping she'd read it and then respond over the LINE app, but no dice.

Usually, Yuzuki was sharp enough to intuit something like that, but she was clearly a little shaken right now.

Passing notes back and forth like this could get conspicuous, so I used my eyes to indicate to Yuzuki where the guys were. She seemed to get it. Slowly, she turned to look over her shoulder. Then she looked back at me as if to say, "Them?"

I gave Yuzuki a smile, hoping it would look like we were just chatting normally, and nodded slightly. Then, still facing Yuzuki, I looked over her shoulder to

check what was going on now.

They were behind Yuzuki but not in the actual library itself. They were out in the garden space visible through the library windows. There were three of them, and just from a glance, they didn't look like the types who would ever really frequent a library to study. They were staring in without a hint of self-consciousness. And they weren't doing it from a distance, either. They were right up against the glass, smirking. The students sitting at the single-person desks by the window were looking uncomfortable.

As I watched, it became apparent that they were looking for someone. They were wandering up and down the path outside the windows, until one of them turned his gaze this way. He stopped, pulled out his phone and showed its screen to the other two. They nodded, and the first one pointed through the glass, right at my table.

Their sharklike grins grew wider all of a sudden.

Now then, what's all this about?

"Yuzuki, can you explain this problem to me?" I picked up the math textbook as I spoke.

"Oh, sure."

Yuzuki got to her feet and came around behind me. She put her hand on my shoulder and peered at the textbook on the desk.

Viewed from afar, we looked exactly like a young couple in love, studying together.

I leaned in to whisper in Yuzuki's right ear, behind the curtain of silky hair that fell in front of it.

"Don't make eye contact. Just act as natural as possible."

Yuzuki twitched. Then she whacked me lightly on the back in a "Hmph! You big dummy!" kinda way.

"Did you see them?" I murmured to Yuzuki again, still playing the part of the lovestruck high school boy listening patiently as his girlfriend explained a math problem. The Yan High guys couldn't possibly make out what we were saying

from out there, so there was no need to whisper beyond the dictates of the usual library etiquette.

"I caught a glimpse. I can't be totally sure, but I don't think I know any of them."

"Keep your face down. It's photo shoot time, apparently."

One of the three guys was holding his phone up toward us. At this distance, and through thick window glass, he couldn't hope to get a particularly clear shot. Still, if it was spank-bank material they wanted, they could go to hell.

"Any way you slice it, it's obvious they're after one of the two of us."

After I said this, Yuzuki leaned in to whisper in my ear, just like I did to her moments before. The feel of her sweet breath on my earlobe sent an electric shock down my spine.

"Maybe they're here to pay you back for stealing someone's girlfriend in the past?"

I was relieved that Yuzuki seemed to have regained some of her usual sass.

I didn't think that was likely, based on the shit-eating grins on the faces of the Yan High guys. But then again, Yuzuki probably knew that, too.

"Will you be all right by yourself for a while? You could go and sit with Yua and the others, but that would just bring you closer to the glass and make those fools happy."

"I think I'm okay alone... But what are you planning to do?"

"I'm just going to take a walk. Get some air."

"What? Hold on..."

I got up from the table and walked off, ignoring Yuzuki, who tried to stop me by drumming on my shoulder.

I bought a can of coffee from the vending machine by the entrance and stepped outside.

The air smelled like fresh green grass.

It was a perfect May day outside.



I strolled around the perimeter of the library until the three Yan High guys came into view.

I stopped about thirty feet away from them and pulled the tab of my can of coffee.

Yuuko and Yua, who were sitting by the window, looked out at me with matching expressions of concern. I shot them an “It’s fine” sort of glance and sipped my coffee while gazing out at the pleasantly manicured grass.

Such a nicely tended garden, but there was no one out here at all except for me and the three goons.

Clunk, clunk, clunk.

Clunk, scuff, clunk.

Right on cue, I started to hear the sound of leather shoes clunking and scuffing as they approached along the wooden deck that hugged the library’s wall. One of them seemed to have crushed the backs of his shoes and was wearing them like slip-ons. The sound of his footsteps had an unbalanced quality.

The scuffing and clunking of the shoes stopped nearby and were replaced by a voice.

“Hey, man.”

Who knew if they were even addressing me? I pretended not to have noticed.

“Don’t ignore us. I said hey!”

Someone grabbed my shoulder just then, so I had no choice but to turn toward the voice.

The guy standing in front of me looked for all intents and purposes like a giant human rooster. Like a rooster from a cartoon. The sides of his head were shaved, and he had a bright red tuft of hair sticking up in the middle like a comb. He wore a white tracksuit instead of a school uniform. He was also a bit hunchbacked, with bad posture, but he had his face thrust forward toward me.

I thought he looked pretty amusing from the outside, but up close like this, his

appearance really packed a punch.

No matter what his real name might turn out to be, I decided to christen this guy Cock-a-Doodle Doofus.

And he was definitely more of a *yankii* gangster than a minor delinquent. Let's just call him a *yankii* for convenience. The other guys were clearly *yankii*, too, but there was nothing else about them that really stood out.

"Sorry, you're not the type I usually hang around with. I wasn't sure you were talking to me."

My way of speaking and general attitude was that of a Fuji student, and it seemed to give Cock-a-Doodle Doofus of Yan High pause. He narrowed his eyes for a second, then shrugged slightly and let go of my shoulder.

"You're the guy who was just sitting at the table in there with Yuzuki Nanase, right?"

Huh, so they were after Yuzuki after all. It was pretty obvious, all things considered, but still.

Well, if it was me they wanted, they wouldn't have bothered to take pics.

"Yeah. I'm her boyfriend." That's all I said for now.

If they had just happened to come to the library to read books, and had just happened to see a pretty girl and take an interest in her, then they would surely back off upon learning that she had a boyfriend.

But the fact that they knew Yuzuki's full name had dropped that possibility down to basically zero.

"So then, you're Saku Chitose, right?"

Cock-a-Doodle Doofus's response was unexpected. He shouldn't have known either of our names. But apparently, he knew them both.

What was going on, and why did this guy know both of our full names?

And what did he mean by "So then...?" That verbiage implied forethought and planning.

"That's me, Saku Chitose from Fuji High. What do you want?"

In response to that, Cock-a-Doodle Doofus put his arm around my shoulder, all buddy-buddy-like.

My nostrils were assaulted with the scent of a famous brand of cologne, the type a total cologne newbie would pick.

"What do I want? How's about an introduction? To Yuzuki Nanase."

His breath smelled smoky, like Kura's.

"I just told you she's my girlfriend, didn't I?"

In response to that, the guy tightened his arm around my shoulder, getting close to a choke hold. His stubble-covered cheek pricked my skin, and even the excellent weather today couldn't make this situation any better.

"I was listening, man, I was listening. But you're a notorious man-slut, aren't ya?"

"Hmm. I can't deny it."

"So... Yuzuki Nanase. She's the type to let a guy stick it in right away, huh?"

Huh. Truly fascinating, what this fellow was saying right now.

Getting labeled as a man-slut has its perks, and one of the biggest ones is that people tend to give you a wide berth. But on the other hand, sometimes the label attracts vulturous insects who come swarming around, looking for scraps.

Let's do some digging here, shall we?

I changed up the tone of my voice and started to act friendly. "Oh, that's all it is? Don't scare me, man. I was about to piss my pants. I mean, here I am, surrounded by a bunch of Yan High bros. Where'd you hear this tasty bit of gossip, though?"

My change in character was all to convince them that I was a meek honor student who was slightly afraid of them. But did it work?

Cock-a-Doodle Doofus switched up his act, too, and became rather haughty and pompous.

"My bad, my bad. You're a Fuji High guy, so you're not used to how we do things. Who did I hear it from? My boss. He's got his sights set on Yuzuki

Nanase. He told us to go sound her out. We just need her LINE ID; that's all, man."

I was half right, half wrong, then.

I got them to open up to me but found no real useful information there.

"Huh. Your boss, is he the scary type?"

"Scary as heck, man. Punches ya without a moment's hesitation. And he's got a soft spot for hot, easy girls like yours. You're planning to dump her before long anyway, right? So just hand her over to us; what do you say?"

This wasn't really what I would call stalking.

What kind of stalker sends a grunt like this to do their dirty work?

"Whoa, sounds tough, man. So you've been following your boss's orders and tailing Yuzuki these past couple weeks?"

"...What did you say?"

Cock-a-Doodle Doofus's voice grew low and menacing.

A simple admission from the guy would have solved the whole issue, or so I thought, but I have to confess I don't really know much about the unwritten rules of *yankii* conduct.

Cock-a-Doodle Doofus tightened his arm around my neck even harder.

"I ain't followin' no *orders*. It's duty, man, duty. Just give me the darn LINE ID already. Keep on being her boyfriend if you like; our boss don't mind that kinda thing. Cuckold fetish, ya know? Come on, man, let's shake hands."

He let go of my neck and grabbed my hand, squeezing it in his fist as if trying to show off his strength. No doubt my comment about him following orders hurt his *yankii* pride. This wasn't going how I'd hoped at all. Manipulating this goon was proving to be harder than I'd thought.

I sighed a little and muttered under my breath.

"American-style handshake, huh? All right."

Then I crushed Cock-a-Doodle Doofus's hand in mine.

"Ouch! Fuck, dude!"

I ignored his yelps of pain and glared right at him. "What's that? Don't you know handshake etiquette? You got to look the other person in the eye and squeeze nice and tight... Then you *shake*."

I yanked on his arm, pulling him forward from the shoulder. "Gack!" he gurgled in surprise, losing his balance. Cock-a-Doodle Doofus went flying, landing hard on his hands and knees.

"...Shit, that hurts. You wanna die, man?!"

"Sorry, you're a lot weaker than I gave you credit for. It sounded like you were insulting my beloved girlfriend just then, so I ended up putting too much force into it, see."

Idiot. Don't underestimate the grip strength of someone who spent every day since elementary school swinging a baseball bat.

That was when Yankii B and Yankii C started to step forward.

Everything was going according to plan so far.

I don't know where they heard those totally unfounded rumors, but if they were just targeting Yuzuki as a way to pass the time and had taken it too far, then shoving me around a bit should have been enough to satisfy them. If their boss's anger got refocused on me, then they would be off the hook.

If I got in their way, they might become annoyingly fixated on me, which wouldn't be good, but the best policy was to stand up to them in a clear and straightforward way. The only thing that worried me was that the members of Team Chitose, or the girls' basketball team, or even other Fuji High students might get drawn into this. That would complicate things.

If I started a fight right now, then the *yankii* guys would focus on me, rather than going after others. I was Yuzuki's boyfriend, after all, so they had two choices. Tussle with Saku Chitose, who was openly gunning for them, or ignore me and approach Yuzuki directly. The path they took would be one of those two options; I was sure of it.

Now, let's see what these guys decide.

Just as Yankii B (or was it Yankii C?) grabbed me by the shirtfront, I heard a familiar voice.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?!"

I turned my face to see Kaito and Kazuki running this way.

...Scratch that. Kazuki was actually strolling casually. *You snake.*

Kaito's sheer size and bulk seemed to have some sort of effect on the *yankii* guys, and now the odds were even, three against three. The hand clutching my shirtfront suddenly unclenched, releasing me.

Cock-a-Doodle Doofus had gotten to his feet by this point and was shooting us venomous looks. But then he seemed to sigh, as if all the wind had gone from his sails.

"Ah, this is a waste of time. We're done here. But I'm gonna tell my boss all about you."

Oh phew. If he said something clichéd like "You'd better watch your back!" I wouldn't have been able to keep from laughing out loud.

Cock-a-Doodle Doofus and pals were just turning to leave when I spoke to their backs.

"I don't know what you've heard, but Yuzuki Nanase is not that kind of girl. She and I are seriously dating, so I'd really prefer it if you stayed far away from her."

I'm pretty sure they heard me, but the three *yankiis* said nothing and continued on their way.

Once they were out of sight, Kaito spoke. "What the heck, Saku? That wasn't like you at all."

"You fool. It was all going according to my plan. Anyway, you only came out here because you smelled an opportunity to punch some guys, right?"

"Well, obviously. Why wouldn't I step in, when my buddy looks like he's about to get creamed?"

"I was not about to get creamed! And you, Kazuki! You're supposed to be

Kaito's impulse control."

Kazuki had finally made his way over and was grinning.

"My bad. When this guy saw you getting strangled, he leaped to the rescue. I didn't have a chance to stop him. Actually, Kenta was hesitating over whether to come with us, but I told him to sit tight and let us handle it."

"Ah, I'm glad to hear that. Seriously, though, you needn't have bothered."

I pictured Kenta sweating over whether to leap to my assistance, and I felt some of the tension drain from me.

Kaito went on, his brow furrowed as if he still didn't get it.

"Saku, those guys were from Yan High, right? Were they behind it all? The stalker Yuzuki's been talking about, I mean?"

"Hmm, they're the most likely candidates at the moment, I guess."

Kazuki spoke next. "I know a guy from my junior high who went on to Yan High. Common sense won't work with these guys, so you really need to watch out. They do crazy stuff for fun, like drop desks off the second-floor of the school building and force all the younger guys to shave their heads with barber's clippers. They're out of control."

"Yikes. Now that I don't have to keep my hair short for the baseball club, I don't want barber's clippers anywhere near my head."

Kaito grinned. "Never mind that. Even in a situation like that one, you're still Saku Chitose, aren't you? Can't you react like a normal human and show an ounce of fear? You were just surrounded by three Yan High *yankiis*, you know?"

"You kidding? I was so scared I was about to piss my pants."

It was true, actually. And that was a normal reaction in a situation like that.

I had a lot of faith in my athletic ability, but I always tried to approach disagreements with a cool and level head. Once violence enters the air, though, it's only human nature to get all riled up. To be honest, if Kaito and Kazuki hadn't shown up just then, if all three of the *yankiis* had attacked me at once...I would have lost, no doubt about that.

"But I had to consider my manly reputation. What if Yuzuki saw me trembling like a leaf out here? I had to make a choice. And it seemed like there was only one right answer."

""You poser.""

"Give me a break."

Kaito put his arm around my shoulder. He was rough about it, just like Cock-a-Doodle Doofus had been. But with Kaito, there were no ill intentions.

"Anyway, call on us whenever you need us. I'm scared, too, to be honest, but I can't just stand by and do nothing. I'd rather get messy than do that."

Kazuki gave me a light, playful punch to the stomach. "What he said. If we get an SOS, we'll come running."

"I haven't forgotten the way you were wandering over here just before, you know."

We all exchanged big grins.



Nobody felt like studying anymore that day, so we decided to call it and head home.

Just in case, we decided that Yuzuki, Kazuki, Kaito, and I would leave first, and the others would wait awhile before heading home separately.

The Yan High guys might still be lurking around somewhere. No doubt they could find this stuff out with a little digging, but we had to do whatever we could in the meantime to make sure they didn't realize Yuuko and the others were part of our group.

After walking for a while and checking to make sure Cock-a-Doodle Doofus and pals weren't around, Kazuki and Kaito split off from us and headed their separate ways.

I wanted to hold back on telling Yuzuki exactly what happened at first, but she seemed to have figured it out. Keeping the details from her probably wasn't a great plan anyway, especially when I needed her to be on guard now more than ever.

We bought drinks from a vending machine and headed back down the riverside path, while I explained the details to her.

"So that's what happened. That might be the end of it, but for a while, you should stick close to me. You could use Kaito and Kazuki as bodyguards, too, but they have club practice."

The gradually darkening sky was reflected on the softly undulating surface of the water.

I took off my blazer and rolled up my shirtsleeves, pitching pebbles into the river using a sideways throw. I got one of them to bounce twice, but then it sank with a pathetic little *plop*.

A fish surfaced somewhere with another audible *plop*, as if startled by the pebble.

"I used to be great at skipping stones. I got it to skip five times once, when I was in elementary school."

I took a seat on the ground beside Yuzuki, who gripped my sleeve.

"...Sorry. I'm sorry, Saku." Her voice was tremulous.

I pretended not to notice, continuing in a breezy manner.

"Come on. Are you still fixating on what Yua said yesterday? It's always been my dream to be like, 'Keep your hands off my girl,' you know? It's the kind of situation every young boy dreams of."

Yuzuki shook her head, as if she wasn't even listening.

The hand that was clutching my sleeve slowly moved down to my hand, which she then held tightly.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I made you have to do that, Saku."

This wasn't very Yuzuki-like of her.

It's not like I couldn't guess why she was acting this way. Wanting to stop her trembling as much as I could, I squeezed her slim hand right back.

"I wanted to do it."

As if clinging to a certain hope, or as if in prayer, Yuzuki enveloped my hand

with both of hers and pressed it to her forehead.

"But, Saku. You almost got punched."

"Oh, please. Like I'd allow myself to get punched by a couple of dumb *yankiis*. That's enough now; just be quiet for a minute. Come back when you're ready to be Yuzuki Nanase again."

I draped my blazer over my right hand and Yuzuki's face at the same time.

I couldn't let her lose her Yuzuki-ness over something like this.

It didn't matter what the scenario was. She couldn't lose herself over a silly matter of spiteful intentions.

That's why, right now, I had become something akin to a little Jizo Buddhist statue you might encounter on a desolate mountain path.

You're not sure if it really has any divine blessing to give you, but you should still pray to it anyway and unload your burdens before it.

After all, once you're done praying, you're going to have to continue on that mountain path using your own two feet.

We stayed like that for around ten minutes.

Then Yuzuki poked her head out from underneath my blazer, smiling like a child waking up on the first morning of summer vacation.

She let go of my hand and stretched. "I wanna eat katsudon."

"...Excuse me?"

"Katsudon. From Europe-Ken, Fukui's finest katsudon eatery!"

"Did you transform into Haru while you were under there or something?"

"Oh, come on. Any Fukui Prefecture resident worth their salt would want to eat katsudon at a time like this, wouldn't they?"

Yuzuki gave me an adorable smile that seemed only slightly manufactured. It looked like she was going to be all right, at least for today.

"All right, then. I'm hungry, too, after all that excitement. I'm not used to it. I'll go eat with you. You mean the place near East Park, right? Your treat, of

course."

"You just got to share the warmth of a beautiful young girl. Surely that's all the compensation you need?"

"On the contrary, actually, katsudon might not be compensation enough... You should probably throw in a fried shrimp topping as well and maybe a complimentary boob grope, too..."

"You pig!" Yuzuki got to her feet. "But you know, you're something else, Saku. You stood up to those guys, and they were seriously scary."

"They were, so you should try to remember this, Yuzuki. If you kick a guy square in the crotch, you only need about forty percent of your usual kicking power to immobilize him completely. But it comes with inherent risk. Don't miss the shot."

"Really? Does it even work on you?"

"It's fine; you don't need to test it out. Hey, cut it out. I'm not kidding around here."

"I see, I see..." Yuzuki bent down and scooped up my blazer, patting the dust off it. "I'll try to remember. Okay, time for your reward!" She held the blazer out for me to put my arms through.

"After I stuck my neck out for you, this is all the thanks I get..."

I threaded my arms into my blazer while Yuzuki held it up, then she put her hands on my shoulders and leaned against me. I felt her softness against my back.

And I felt her hot breath on my ear.

"You were really cool. Thank you."

That was all she said before she pulled away.

...Hmm. I guess all that hard work was worth it.

"Let's get a move on!"

She went off ahead, her straight, dignified back looking somehow beautiful.

If only everyone could live like that. There would be fewer lonely children in

this world in that case, maybe.

It's hard for anybody to live strong in this world. So seeing Yuzuki try her best like this—it struck me as beautiful.



"Hahhh."

It was lunchtime the day after my run-in with the Yan High guys. I sighed theatrically and slumped in my seat in the cafeteria.

"Wh-what's wrong, King? What's with the big sigh?" Kenta was sitting beside me, slurping some noodles.

"I mean..." I stared at Kenta's face. "Hahhh..."

"All right, I get it. You're thinking, *Why do I have to eat lunch one-on-one with this guy*, right? Darn it, King."

Kenta had fit nicely into Team Chitose and taken up a role as a heckler for the boys.

I nodded, eyes doleful, and Kenta shrugged.

"Aw, all right. If you insist on looking at me that way. All our friends are eating lunch with their school club buddies, since they can't meet after school during the test period. The only ones with nothing better to do are you and me."

"At least call us lone wolves; make it sound cool! You're painting us as sad, friendless losers!"

"Well, we are sad and friendless. Just accept it. Quit fighting it."

"Can you stop sounding so...spiritually enlightened? It's kinda cool. I don't like it at all."

Everything had been off-kilter since yesterday.

I drained my bowl of ramen right down to the soup, then a thought struck me.

"Kenta, did you see what happened yesterday?"

"Of course. Even safe behind the window, I thought I was going to have a heart attack, I was so scared. We had scary guys like that in my junior high. Luckily, I was basically invisible, so they never even noticed me at all."

"Do you think guys like that would ever stalk someone?"

I had actually spoken to the Yan High guys face-to-face yesterday, and I was dubious. But I still hadn't told Kenta the ins and outs of what we spoke about, and I was keen to get his unbiased opinion from the perspective of an onlooker.

"Hmm, stalkers have this rep of using force against the people they stalk, but what if their fetish is more like just...finding out stuff about her or something like that?"

Fetish? I wasn't expecting to hear that word. I kept quiet and nodded, cueing him to continue.

"I'm just saying that it's a possibility. A person with a stalking fetish, they enjoy lurking. It only makes it more exciting for them. Or maybe they're seeking the thrill of observing their target, seeing the fear take hold of her as she realizes she's being followed."

"It's amazing how your mind works, Kenta. I never would have thought of something that creepy and gross."

Kenta let out a small "heh" and pushed up the bridge of his glasses.

"I vehemently deny that I am a connoisseur of all conceivable forms of light novels, anime, and visual novels."

"I certainly hope you haven't been exposing yourself to any R-18 content, Kenta."

"Ahem! Ahem!"

Still, this was an interesting way of thinking about it.

People like myself, we focus on prioritizing the end result.

If the stalker's end goal was to date Yuzuki, or at least enter into some kind of physical relationship with her, then there were plenty of other more effective ways to go about it. A sane person would go with one of those first, right?

Take the guys from Yan High. I didn't really want to picture it, but if they were fixed on threatening and bullying Yuzuki into dating one of them as a last resort, then surely there was no need for this roundabout approach.

But if the act of stalking itself was the fetish, then it would be a different story.

Kenta took a sip of water, calmed himself, and continued.

"Gathering info on your stalkee—that's basic stuff. In simple terms, it might involve looking for weaknesses to exploit. Find out something she's keeping hidden from everyone and use it to your advantage. It's a less problematic option than using physical force."

"Kenta...you're starting to scare me, man. All this time, you've only been pretending to be my friend, is that it? In secret, you've been looking for proof that will expose me as a man-slut shithead?"

"It's not like anyone needs any more proof of that."

All jokes aside, this was actually quite a serious subject.

Maybe I allowed the word *stalker* to mislead me, about both the unknown subject's eventual goal and the steps they were taking. Maybe us all keeping an eye on Yuzuki wherever she went wasn't going to be enough to keep her safe, after all.

While I was thinking it over, a tray landed on the table by my right side.

It was a table meant to seat eight, and only Kenta and I had been sitting there, side by side. So it wouldn't be unusual at all for another student to make use of the free space. That said, there were six other free seats the person could have chosen—why did they have to plonk themselves down beside me?

I was about to hop back on my train of thought when the guy beside me started talking.

"You're Chitose, right?"

Apparently, he wanted something with me, which was why he was sitting so close in the first place.

I turned and saw a neat and tidy-looking young man sitting there. His face wasn't unattractive. His shirt didn't have a single wrinkle, and he wore his school uniform according to all the rules, too. Even his hair was smooth and shiny, and he had a bright and appealing smile.

If I had to categorize him, I'd put him in a similar category as Kazuki.

"Ah, sorry to approach you out of the blue like this."

"It's fine, really... Do we know each other?"

He looked like he was probably one of the cool kids, and I thought I remembered seeing him around. But I was also pretty sure we had never actually spoken.

"No. I know a lot about you, Chitose, but unfortunately we've never had a chance to speak before now. Ah, can I call you Saku?" The guy gave me a warm smile.

"Sure, if you like. And you are...?"

"I'm Tomoya Naruse, from Class Seven. Tomoya's fine, though, Saku."

He seemed like the kind of guy girls like a lot. Ah, the kind I can't stand.

"Tomoya. All right, then."



Kenta bobbed his head in greeting and gave his “Sup?” in a low voice. Kenta had gotten used to his Class Five classmates by now, but he was still too new at this to act all that casual when meeting new people, apparently. Tomoya looked at Kenta for a moment, then back at me.

“I heard the rumors about that. You brought a shut-in otaku out of his room and convinced him to come back to school, right? That’s inspiring stuff, man. Really.”

Kenta seemed willing to let it slide, so I decided to cut to the chase.

“...So what’s up, then? I sure hope you’re not here to confess to having feelings for me.”

“Uh, well, about that. It’s not that I’m here to confess my feelings, exactly... Um, sorry, Kenta, would you mind moving to another table for a bit?”

This was clearly something he didn’t want anyone else overhearing.

“S-sure,” Kenta said, obediently getting up from his seat.

“Tomoya—sorry, but Kenta and I were eating lunch together. He’s careful with his words, so I guarantee he won’t repeat anything you say. If you still don’t want him hearing it, then pick another time to come talk. All right?”

Tomoya looked a little taken aback for a second but quickly nodded. “Oh, of course,” he said. “Yes, that was quite rude of me. I’m terribly sorry, Kenta.”

“It’s...it’s fine! I can head back to the classroom myself.”

“Sit your ass down,” I told Kenta.

“...So then, what is it you want?”

Tomoya’s face grew very serious all of a sudden, and the tone of his voice lowered.

“Okay, so...I know it’s rude to approach you and ask you this, but...are you and Yuzuki Nanase really dating?”

Ah, I thought.

Of course, guys like this would start coming out of the woodwork.

A guy with Tomoya's looks and presumed level of popularity was the kind who would naturally be interested in a girl like Yuzuki. He knew I'd gotten the jump on him, but he wanted to hear it from me personally, just to find out if he still had a chance.

I felt a little guilty about this, but I had to put the contract Yuzuki and I made together above anything else.

"Yep, we're really dating. I was thinking it was about time to put my man-slut shithead days behind me anyway."

Tomoya's shoulders slumped, looking utterly dejected, but he kept talking.

"I realize it's rude of me to ask this, and I don't care if you punch me for getting the wrong idea, but it's not all just a big fake out, is it?"

"What, you don't think Yuzuki and I go well together?"

The youth shook his head vehemently. "It's not that. Actually, you go together really well. Too well. But from what I know of Nanase, she's, how do I say this... not the type to go and get herself a boyfriend that casually..."

Hmm, well, he wasn't wrong in that observation.

"Let me just make sure we're on the same page here... So you have feelings for Yuzuki, right?"

"...Ever since the day of the school entrance ceremony." Tomoya paused, looking down at the table, before pressing his lips firmly together and looking me straight in the eye.

"I fell for her at first sight, the moment I saw her. And I've been crazy for her ever since. I think she's had her eye on me, too, at least a little bit. And my feelings... They're the real deal. So I figured if there was still even the smallest chance, I wanted to know... I'm sorry; I know this is really creepy of me."

I shot a glance at Kenta, who looked back at me with an expression that seemed to say, "Welp!"

Hmm, what to do?

I made a contract with Yuzuki. I knew I had to honor its terms. And telling Tomoya the truth wouldn't really do anything to give him any greater chance of

dating Yuzuki. That said, though, faced with this lovelorn young man, I started to feel like I just couldn't toss his precious feelings on the garbage heap, all in the name of pragmatism.

I hesitated for a few moments, but eventually my kind, naive side won out.

"Tomoya, are you the type who can keep a secret? Are you prepared to receive some information in good faith, promising not to let it slip or use it for nefarious purposes? Let me assure you, I'm not joking around about this. I'm the type to give back twice as good as I get, you know."

Tomoya responded breathlessly. "I would never tell a secret. I know it rings hollow after I just spilled my feelings about Yuzuki to you, Saku, but they really are completely sincere. I would never dishonor them that way."

I exhaled. "All right. Then you're sworn to secrecy. The thing is, there's something going on, and to handle it, Yuzuki and I are pretending to date for the time being. Don't ask me to explain what the situation is, though. I can't disclose it until certain developments have occurred. Is that good enough for you?"

Tomoya's face suddenly brightened. "Of course! So that's it... That's all it is..." He pumped his fist silently under the table several times. "Actually, I wanted to ask you one more thing, if it's not too much."

"You've got a very honest face for someone so careful and deliberate. What are you, Kenta's long-lost brother or something?"

I shot a "Hmm?" kind of look at Kenta, who turned his face to the side and started whistling off-key.

Tomoya chuckled. "I can't say I'm thrilled to be classed together with Kenta. Anyway, Saku. If you're going to be fake-dating Nanase from now on, can I make one request?"

"You've got some nerve, Two-Face! I'll have you know, when it comes to whose side I'm on, Yuzuki Nanase will always come way before you. I've never even spoken to you before today. You think I'm going to feed you info, like what her type is when it comes to guys? Get outta here. That's playing dirty."

Well, it's not like I knew that stuff anyway.

"I had a feeling you'd say that, Saku. In that case, could you at least tell me what you and Nanase talk about each day—and just general stuff like that? Then I can think about the info I find out by myself. There's nothing wrong with chatting about that stuff among friends, right?"

Hmm, all right. That might be acceptable.

I could just decline to mention anything I didn't feel like telling him.

Hey, wait a minute. This guy was totally manipulating me, wasn't he? Oh well.

"One more thing," said Tomoya.

"You're not done yet? You're like a TV shopping channel that keeps throwing in accessories 'absolutely free!'"

"Oh, don't be like that. You're super popular with girls, right, Saku? So I thought, leaving Nanase aside, maybe you could give me some tips and advice. Like 'be my love guru' kind of thing."

Hold on! I didn't sign up to take on the "wise teacher" role for a second time.

I shot Kenta a sharp glance, but he continued his off-key whistling and even started to wipe out the vacuum flask his chicken soup came in with his handkerchief. *The heck are you doing, man?*

I looked at Tomoya, who was watching me with stars in his eyes. Grudgingly, I nodded.

"Listen. Yes, I'm popular with girls. I enjoy more female attention than Kenta here could hope to experience in a hundred lifetimes. However, I don't know any romance techniques. I just live my life, and girls love me for it."

"Then, teach *me* how to live. That way, girls will love me for it, too. That's your secret to catching all the girls' eyes, right?"

Tomoya kept on beaming a big, innocent smile.

"This is just a theory, but you're not using this whole 'love guru' thing as a way to knock out your biggest rival, are you? You're not hoping that this will prevent me from pursuing things with Yuzuki for real...are you?"

"What? No, no."

"Don't be naive, fool. No one knows how and why people fall for each other. I don't care if I am giving you girl advice; I'll still keep dating Yuzuki the whole time, and if we fall for each other, then we're gonna date for real. Like I said, Yuzuki means more to me than some guy I never even met before today."

"That's too bad. But all right, then. Message received, loud and clear."

I was actually having a crisis of conscience here, so for Tomoya to just brush it all off like that...really rubbed me the wrong way, for a different reason than why I was annoyed with Kenta, who had basically left me to rot.

"...All right, all right, I guess you win. But listen, it's a busy time right now. All I can do is give you the most basic of basic advice, all right?"

Tomoya grinned and thrust his hand out toward me.

I grabbed it and shook it firmly.



After we exchanged LINE IDs, Tomoya left, and Kenta and I returned our trays before deciding to head back to the classroom. There was still around half an hour of lunch left, but since we were done eating anyway, there was no reason for us to hang around the cafeteria.

As we walked down the hallway that connected the school buildings, Kenta finally piped up.

"Was that wise, King? You have your contract with Nanase, after all, and plenty of other things on your plate right now, besides..."

"Worried about me? That's personal growth right there, Kenta," I said jokingly, and Kenta turned a sharp eye on me.

"Also...compared to how it was with my situation, you really played it straight with him, didn't you? What happened to your whole schtick of weighing up the pros and cons, coming back with a firm no, waiting for the other guy to be totally dumbfounded, then finally telling him you always planned to help him all along?"

"Don't tell me you're actually jealous of that rando? I *had* to pull all that trickery on you, since you were so resistant to getting any kind of help at first. Besides, I do have an ulterior motive."

True, I had just added another heavy load to the burden I was already having to deal with, but this one also concerned Yuzuki. So it wasn't like I was embarking on a whole different side quest here or anything.

Also, I wasn't sure how much Tomoya expected of me, but this wasn't like teaching Kenta the ways of the popular kids. There are no "techniques" when it comes to getting a girl. If his motive was "It doesn't have to be any specific girl, just make it so that tons of girls think I'm a hot stud!"...in other words, if his aim was to cast himself a wide net and boost his profile, then sure, I could give him a few pointers there. But the kid was already pretty good-looking and had a decent-ish personality. Surely he was in the clear already when it came to that.

But it was Yuzuki Nanase he wanted.

How could I give him pointers on capturing a girl even a guy like me hadn't managed to pin down myself? Well, maybe Tomoya was already aware of that.

His overarching goal seemed to be to get close to me, the guy Yuzuki was closest to. Then he would slowly ingratiate himself into her inner circle. Still, what is it they say? Any friend of a friend is a friend of mine. Besides, it was a task that was well within my wheelhouse. The least I could do was teach him what *not* to do when it came to winning Yuzuki's favor.

I looked to my side, to see Kenta tapping away at the LINE app on his phone. Apparently, he wasn't planning to pursue this conversation any further. He was probably messaging with another member of Team Chitose. Before, Kenta spent all his time on sites like 5chan and the school underground gossip website, so this represented real growth. I grinned to myself, thinking about how funny it was that it *wasn't* funny to be strolling through the school with this guy by my side.

"Ah, King? Mind accompanying me somewhere for a sec before we return to class?"

"All right, but what's up?"

"Ah, I just forgot something in the bio specimen room."

"Sure, but do we need anything from the bio specimen room for class today?"

"Just come along; don't ask questions." For some reason, Kenta started pushing me along by my back. "Here, King, I'll open the door for you."

"What? Why are you being so...servile?"

Kenta pushed open the door to the bio specimen room and shoved me inside.

I tottered several steps into the room, and then the door was slammed behind me.

"The heck, Kenta? What are you playing at?!"

I lifted my head, scowling, and that's when I saw...

Two demons standing there waiting for me.

One of them was Yuuko, standing there with her hands on her hips and exuding a big grin. The other was Yua, an expression of love and understanding on her face. For some reason, she was holding a giant triangle used in math on a blackboard.

I knew immediately that I'd been set up, but when I whirled around, I saw Kenta watching through the glass window of the door. He had his hands held palms together as if in prayer—or as if trying to express condolence.

"You asshole! You threw me into the lion's den!!!" Kenta turned tail and trotted off as fast as his legs would carry him.

Nervously, tentatively, wincingly, I turned back around.

"Saaaku. ♡"

"Sa-ku. ♪"

The two demons grinned at me.

"“Just take a seat for a moment!””

Darn it. I was toast. My life, a graveyard of regrets.



"So, Saku, don't you think you have some explaining to do?" Yuuko advanced on me, grinning.

At the same time, Yua came around behind me and latched the door.

“Wh-what’s this all about, hmm?”

My eyes darted about evasively as I sat down on the nearby chair.

“Hup!”

“Ouch?!!!”

I felt like something just jabbed me in the back. I turned around to see Yua there, wielding the triangle like a weapon.

“Who told you that you were allowed to sit in that chair, hmm?”

“...Eh?”

“Sitcha ass ’n *seiza*!!!” (Translation: Sit down in the *seiza* position.)

“Yes, Mistress!”

I quickly got down on the floor and sat with my legs folded underneath me in the *seiza* position. Yua loomed over me, slapping the triangle against her palm rhythmically as she cleared her throat.



"What was it I said to you, Saku? Are you sure you don't know what this is about?"

"Er...you said something about me not caring if I get targeted, and that being, uh, bad."

"Mm-hmm, and?"

"And...I'm very, very sorry about yesterday."

I bowed my head almost to the floor. I meant it, too.

Yuuko crouched down in front of me. "Saku, did you ever stop to think how we must have felt, watching you yesterday? We were all convinced you were going to get punched by those Yan High guys. We were seriously, *seriously* concerned."

"Ah, about that. I apologize, really."

Yuuko and Yua were totally right.

Based on how events unfolded, I made the right choice as far as I saw it, and I still stand by it. However, I didn't include certain factors in my calculations. My own well-being was one of the things I disregarded. The other was my friends and their emotions.

Yuuko's voice softened a little, and her silky hair spilled over her shoulder.

"Listen, Saku. Even a dummy like me can appreciate that there are some things that can't be handled with guys like that just by talking it out. And I know that sometimes meeting force with force is the best way to reach a conclusion."

Yuuko paused then, before sucking in a big breath and yelling "HOWEVER!!!" before continuing, her voice growing harsher and more menacing.

"When it comes to situations like that, you'd better be doing it for big reasons! Like, 'I have to protect someone' or 'I have to make it back alive, no matter what it takes.' You can't be so cavalier about it, just barging in and flying by the seat of your pants!"

I wasn't winning this one; that was clear.

But it was evident, based on the actions I took, that I did it to protect Yuzuki,

wasn't it? It didn't seem like that was what Yuuko was talking about, though. Either I did it because I was all riled up from wanting to protect Yuzuki or I did it because it just seemed like it was the most optimal solution. The two seemed connected, yet there was a chasm of difference between them.

Yuuko's eyes were as clear as a pristine, undiscovered lake nestled in the mountains. With them, she seemed to see right through me, to the weakest, smallest inner part of me.

Yua sat down beside Yuuko.

"We had to stage this intervention privately, since we didn't want Yuzuki feeling bad about this if we spoke about it in front of her. But let me repeat myself, okay? We all want to help Yuzuki just as much as you do. But there's absolutely zero reason for you to go getting hurt over this."

Yua reached out toward my throat. Carefully, she stroked the red welt left there from when I got grabbed by my shirtfront yesterday. "But if it turns out that that's the only option, please talk to us about it first. We hate watching something terrible happening to you when we can't help. If we can prepare ourselves, at least, then we can deal with that pain better."

"...All right. I promise."

My response made Yua and Yuuko both smile brightly, beautifully. Apparently, they were going to let me off the hook.

"By the way, girls, I've had a clear view up both your skirts ever since I sat down, and... Gack! Sorry, Yua! Please, not the jugular!"

"You disgrace!" Yua said scoldingly, before thrusting her little finger up at me. Beside her, Yuuko followed suit and linked her finger with Yua's.

"Saku, make the pinkie promise. If you lie to us again, we'll become your mortal enemies."

Silently but deliberately, I curled my little finger around both of theirs.



After school, Yuzuki had a simple meeting about the weekend's game, apparently, so while I was waiting for her, I decided to kill some time. With a paperback in my back pocket, I headed to the rooftop.

I turned the doorknob and was surprised to find it already unlocked.

I figured it was Kura, but if it was another teacher, it would be a pain in the butt trying to make up excuses. Noiselessly, I opened the door a little so I could peek in.

“Mm-mm-mm, mmm-mmm. ♪”

From the crack of light that extended only a few inches, I could hear a voice, someone singing in a husky, ephemeral tone that made me visualize the echoes of a world turned to rubble and ruin.

I'd never heard her sing before.

If I opened the door any farther, I would end up interrupting her. So I stayed still for a few moments, bending my ear to the melody. It was an old song, “Guild,” by Bump of Chicken. I played it on repeat last year, so many times I made myself sick of it.

Once she was done with the verse, I slowly pushed the door all the way open.

The sound of the door creaking made her stop singing altogether, just like I predicted.

“Bravo. How about an encore?”

The upperclassman Asuka Nishino was standing up on the rooftop's water tank structure, looking uncharacteristically startled to see me. She took a second to compose her expression, but she still couldn't hide the red flush to her cheeks. She looked down, then finally fixed me with a glare.

“The rooftop is out of bounds to all unauthorized students.”

Her voice had a clipped edge to it.

Getting to catch Asuka unawares was a rare treat. I couldn't help grinning.

I withdrew the rooftop key from my pocket and held it up in front of my face.

“Didn't you know? I'm the reserve Roof-Cleaning Officer.”

“...Darn that Kura. He kept that from me on purpose, I bet...”

I ascended the ladder, my shoes thunking on each rung.

Sulkily, Asuka sat down on the edge and hugged her knees to her chest.

I took my paperback out of my pocket so it wouldn't get bent and sat down beside her.

"Apparently, Kura has this tradition of giving this key to the brightest and baddest student in his class."

I chuckled, and Asuka turned to look at me suddenly, her jaw hanging.

"Hold on! This is the first I'm hearing of it! When it was my turn—"

She suddenly clammed up as if worried she was saying too much. I shrugged and changed the subject.

That's just how that old guy was. No doubt he just came out with whatever he felt like saying on the spot.

"You've got a great voice, Asuka."

"I know you were trying to be courteous just then, but you just keep rubbing me the wrong way here, you know?"

Asuka huffed, burrowing her cheeks into the small gap between her pretty knees.

"I suck at singing. Always have." She was talking like a sulky child here.

"I was just wishing I could hear more. I love that song." I started humming the song at about the same volume.

"God, you suck," she said.

"How so?"

"You're actually not bad at singing. Ugh, I hate it."

"You were good, too, Asuka."



"Hmph." She was as unpredictable as a sudden rainfall.

"This song...actually, the whole album...you lent it to me, right? Remember?"

Finally, she turned to really look at me.

The pleasant rooftop breeze picked up her short hair and sent it fluttering. She narrowed her eyes, which reminded me of a carefree stray cat's, and her small lips made the shape of a crescent moon. The small mole under her left eye would be the first star of the evening, then.

"Of course I remember, friend. I remember how much you liked it. You were grinning like a wandering cat."

We were both just thinking about cat analogies in our heads. I was pleased with the mental connection we clearly shared. It tickled me, yes, but it also made me feel funny inside. Besides, I have the feeling I was more like a stray dog than a stray cat back then.

The CD she gave to me that day came with liner notes she'd written herself in handwriting that really didn't look like it belonged to a high school girl. Man, that CD really helped me make it through.

Asuka flicked her bangs out of her eyes with her little finger and continued.

"This song reminds me of you especially."

"...Does it?"

I felt like I shouldn't delve any more deeply into it, so I changed the subject.

"Asuka, can we do our usual thing?"

"Consultation time with the guidance counselor again, you mean?"

"You could call it confession time. That would make it sound slightly cooler."

Then, like always, I started filling her in on recent events in my life.

Of course, I told her everything that happened, from Yuzuki and me making a fake dating contract to the altercation yesterday. Asuka always took a neutral standpoint, so I didn't have to worry about what I should tell her and what I should leave out. I told her all of it.

Once I was done, Asuka reached down and picked up the paperback I had placed by my side, flipping through it.

"*The Box Man*, by Kobo Abe?"

"It's not because of what's going on. I just felt like reading it randomly."

Asuka clapped the book shut and muttered something. "You know what's so great and yet so dubious about you, friend?" Her soft voice seemed to carry on the wind. "You just assume you can handle everything by yourself, and so you end up doing everything by yourself."

I let her words sink in for a moment before speaking.

"Actually, Yuuko and Yua said the same thing to me today. But they were referring to how I don't care if I get hurt as long as I can keep someone else from getting hurt."

Even as I said it, I realized I sounded like a total lame-o, and I had to grin wryly.

Asuka sniggered along with me. "The way you go about it, you act like you've got someone to rely on, but actually, it's just you. And yet even if you act like it's just you, the truth is that you always have someone."

That was definitely a dubious way of being, for sure.

I was about to speak, but Asuka beat me to it, muttering again.

"Just like a wind chime, tinkling on the breeze, out on the veranda on a summer's day."

How was I supposed to take that?

Loneliness, companionship. Kindness, coldness. Strength, weakness. Happiness, sadness. There's ample room for interpretation—but no room for choice.

Just like how I didn't get a choice.

The door clacked in the latch below us.

Apparently, today's session with the guidance counselor was to be cut short.

"Sakuuu?"

I heard Yuzuki's voice. Getting to my feet, I raised a hand in greeting.

Beside me, Asuka also stood up, her expression composed.

"Sorry, were you in the middle of something?"

"Nope, we were just about to finish up."

We descended the ladder, Asuka first, followed by me.

"Yuzuki, let me introduce you. This is Asuka Nishino from Year Three. Asuka, this is Yuzuki Nanase, who I was just telling you about."

Yuzuki froze up, her face resembling that of a penguin who finds itself in the Savannah all of a sudden, with no clue how it got there. A moment later, she unfroze and turned to Asuka, nodding politely.

Then, wearing her usual unreadable expression, Asuka spoke to Yuzuki.

"Hello, Nanase. I already heard from my young friend here, but it sounds like you're in quite a difficult situation. You probably don't want any sympathy from an outsider you've never even met before, but here's one piece of advice from me: Don't close your eyes to the truth."

"What do you...mean by that?"

Yuzuki's confusion made sense. I didn't have a clue what she meant, either.

Asuka looked at me. "From what I just heard, Nanase is another you, friend."

Yuzuki and I exchanged looks.

It was true. Yuzuki and I were cut from the same cloth. But I was certain that there was more to what Asuka had just said. Her words seemed loaded with meaning.

Apparently, that was all Asuka planned to say before she turned and started to walk off.

"Uh, hold on..." Yuzuki called after her.

"What's the relationship between you and Saku, Nishino?"

It was a perfectly natural thing for a normal girl to ask, but it was also perfectly un-Yuzuki-like. She could have just asked me afterward if she wanted

to know. I certainly had no intention of misleading her if she did ask.

"You wanted my answer on that?" Asuka's voice was cool and mature as she responded. But then she went into deep-thinking mode with a childish-sounding *hmm*. "Let's see. Whatever relationship you're picturing, it's something a little more abstruse than that—and a little less tangible, kinda like..."

She started to grin then, like a kitten mastering a new form of mischief.

"Kinda like a girl and her younger male friend, a guy who really ought to develop a stronger sense of danger, maybe?"

"Hold on...!"

But having said what she wanted to say, Asuka disappeared like the breeze.



"What is the deal between you two anyway?"

Uh-huh, yes, I knew we'd end up doing this.

I often forgot, since she was always saying such smart and philosophical things, but Asuka was kind of a wild card. A free spirit. I certainly didn't have a hope of keeping her in check.

On the way home, Yuzuki seemed to be angry.

It was kind of like taking a stroll through town, and then a bucket of ice water gets thrown on you from the sky all of a sudden. I felt like Asuka got me good, and I wasn't too pleased about it.

"Asuka told you. Just an older girl and her younger male friend."

"She made it sound like it was a lot more than that."

"Relationship status: It's complicated."

Yuzuki swung her sports bag and whacked me hard on the ass with it. That apparently helped to lighten her mood somewhat, and she went on to mutter quietly under her breath. "I was just a bit surprised, is all."

"About what?"

"About you having someone like that in your life."

Yuzuki looked me in the eye, as if searching for confirmation of something.

“What do you mean when you say ‘someone like that’?”

“Someone special to you. Someone who thinks you’re special, too. That kind of relationship.”

“Come on. I’m more of a boredom distraction to Asuka, someone to kill time with.”

I wasn’t being modest or self-deprecating, either. That’s what I really felt.

“You wouldn’t be so buddy-buddy up on the roof with her, calling her Asuka, if she was just another girl to you, though. And besides...” Yuzuki paused and sighed. “You must have noticed, right? Nishino called me by my last name, Nanase, but she had a particular way of referring to you. In places where someone would normally call you ‘Chitose’ or just even just ‘him,’ she referred to you as her friend *specifically* every time. There’s no way you’re not special to her.”

Honestly, I found that reassuring.

Come to think of it, that was the first time I’d spoken to Asuka with a third party present. I always assumed Asuka avoiding my name was something she was doing to keep the line between us in place. After all, she was in the year above. But maybe it had some other, different purpose to Asuka. Who knew.

I was pretty sure it didn’t indicate any romantic feelings toward me. *At least, please don’t let it mean that.*

I changed up the subject and started teasing Yuzuki instead.

“Getting jealous over the sudden appearance of a rival? You’ve slipped into girlfriend mode a little, huh?”

“Maybe I have.”

I thought she’d hit me with a witty comeback, like she usually did, but instead, her voice had something of a delicate quality to it.

“I was probably just thinking of my position... Yeah, that was it. I’ve been under the impression that I was the only one who knew the true Saku Chitose, the only one he could chat with that was on his wavelength.”

"Well, that's still true. There's no one around who's more like me than you are, Yuzuki."

"You're not getting it. I'm telling you, in my own way, that I'm just a girl like any other. I don't mean in the way that I've fallen for you or anything silly like that. It's just that I was proud that I was special enough to be standing beside someone as special as you. That's all."

"Listen, Nanase..."

But before I could finish speaking, Yuzuki pressed her finger to my lips.

"That's right, *Chitose*. I'm *Nanase*. We're friends before being boyfriend and girlfriend. I'm probably not going to turn out to be your special someone, I know. It was just a shallow feeling I had. A tiny blow to the ego of the girl who thought she was the only special one."

I...didn't know what to say to that.

I wanted to clear the air with a light joke, but I couldn't even do that.

Because, after all, I had realized that a part of me was thinking the same way Yuzuki was.

To Yuzuki, I was someone special. At some point, without realizing it, I started to think of myself as the kind of guy who could stand by the side of a special girl like Yuzuki, share everything with her, and protect her.

If I knew there was a more caring guy out there than me for Yuzuki, well... I could understand it. I could understand it, but a part of me would probably be unhappy about it. Then that unhappiness would lead to a different kind of understanding.

"I thought you were a lone wolf, Saku. Just like me."

"I thought you were a lone wolf, Yuzuki. Just like me."

"Neither of us is as smart or logical as we believe ourselves to be, huh?"

"Probably not."

Yuzuki thrust out her hand in front of me.

"Are you trying to block me or something?"

"Uh, if you can't recognize the 'let's hold hands' gesture, then there must be a serious bug in your social programming software."

"Giving me a hard time again?"

"I thought I could become your special someone that way."

"Cut it out, before it becomes a habit."

"Oh, pah."

Then we kept on walking, keeping up the usual boy-girl distance.



After about twenty minutes of walking, we arrived at Yuzuki's house.

Yuzuki told me it was just a normal household, but it looked like the house itself must have been built in the last decade. It was painted white and looked fancy, and there was a car parked in the driveway that was made by a German manufacturer anyone would be able to identify at a glance.

I unlocked my mountain bike, which was standing parked and forlorn in a corner of the driveway, and called out to Yuzuki, who was checking the mailbox.

"Then, I'll be heading home now."

"Right. Thanks for to—" Yuzuki stopped flipping through the stack of mail all of a sudden. "Wait! Saku!"

Her voice was slightly frantic. I got back off my mountain bike.

"What...what *is* this?"

Yuzuki handed me a plain white envelope. It had no postmark or address, and it wasn't even sealed. Unless there was some mistake, someone would have had to put it into the house's mailbox directly. I held it up to the light of the sun to try to see through it. There was a square silhouette visible.

"It's a letter... No, photographs. I'm going to look inside."

Something about the pristine whiteness of the envelope gave me the creeps.

It was like someone had gone and bought a brand-new envelope and then fastidiously placed the contents inside it. I turned it over in my hands, and several square pieces of paper fell out. They did seem to be photographs.

I quickly scanned the photos, keeping them out of Yuzuki's range of vision. Familiar faces jumped out at me.

"Saku, show me."

I could try telling her she'd better not, but she'd never listen.

Silently, I handed her the three photographs.

"It's me...and you, Saku."

One shot of the two of us studying at the library. One of us walking to school on the riverside path. The last photo was the real issue, though.

It showed Yuzuki and me eating eggs Benedict at the café near the station.

"I guess you were right all along, Yuzuki."

"...Yeah."

On that day...at that *time* of day...we were the only two customers in that café. Based on the setup of the shot, it had to have been taken from outside. I had been completely focused on my conversation with Yuzuki at the time, and Yuzuki still hadn't been on high alert back then yet, either. It would have been easy for someone to snap sneaky photos of us.

"Two photos taken yesterday. The library was full of students, so we'd never be able to narrow it down to any specific one. Based on the timing, the jerks from Yan High seem good for it. But this photo alone isn't proof of that. Same with the riverside path photo. We've been too lax about this. This is a lot worse than I thought."

I was used to people snapping cell phone pics of me and uploading them to the school underground gossip site with captions like: *Spotted: Man-slut shithead putting the moves on Whatshername from Class Whatever.* But this...this was a serious shock to the system.

Realizing that someone was fixating on me while I remained blissfully unaware—it felt bad. I was sure Yuzuki felt it, too. No doubt in her short life so far, she herself had dealt with plenty of unwanted attention and adoration from guys she had never even noticed.

But the purpose of photographs like this was to force us to see ourselves as

our tormenter saw us.

Someone, whoever it was, had looked at us that day in the café exactly the way this photo showed.

The mentality behind that was...sickening.

"Those are some pretty good shots of me. You can really feel the love the photographer harbors toward the model here." I grinned, and Yuzuki's stiff expression softened just a little.

"That hits a little too close to home, don't you think? I mean, you've got bigger concerns right now, Saku, surely."

It was obvious what she meant.

"Ah, what a waste of a handsome guy. It's not like I lost a game of *Hanetsuki* and had to get my face drawn on with ink as a punishment."

In each of the photos, someone had cut an X through my face, using a paper cutter or knife of some kind. The rest of me had been scribbled on with red marker pen. I had really been subjected to some serious abuse here. On the riverside pic, there was a message, too. It read BREAK.UP.NOW. Maybe they were trying to conceal their handwriting; it was written in jagged capitals. Rather than invoking fear, the message made me want to burst into inappropriate laughter.

"Hmm. Looks like some kind of dubious link, although I don't think I've ever seen a dot-now domain."

Yuzuki snorted with laughter. "You're the master of making stupid jokes during serious situations, aren't you?"

"You flatter me. I'm about to start blushing."

At any rate, this was clearly the first time Yuzuki had ever been attacked so openly and directly. I knew she would have told me if anything like this had happened before. She wouldn't be looking this upset and shocked, either.

And we didn't even need to ponder it. The reason for the attack was written down clearly for us.

Apparently, our unknown subject didn't like that Yuzuki and I had started

dating. The only people who knew it was all a big fake were the members of our group—and now Tomoya. Most people wouldn't even think to question the validity of our relationship.

Now, was this a cause for celebration or a cause for regret?

Originally, one of our goals had been to draw the stalker out into the daylight. For the unknown subject to get feisty and make a clear attack on us... Well, that was just according to plan.

Yuzuki's hope was that once her stalker saw she had a boyfriend, he would back off and give up. That would have been the end of it. But clearly, he was the type to get angry instead.

The appalling graffiti treatment of the three Chitoses in the photos was small-minded stuff, like something the Yan High jerks might do. And even the stupidest person would think of disguising their handwriting.

"Yuzuki, are you okay?"

"Oh thanks, White Knight. You know, usually you'd check on the damsel *first*, wouldn't you?"

Ah. Good point.

"...Of course I'm not all right. I feel sick. But I think it would have been a lot worse for me if I discovered those photos without you here. I mean, being hated on, that's more your thing, isn't it, Saku?" Yuzuki shoulder-bumped me playfully.

"Good, you're still capable of sarcasm. Still, let's just be glad they weren't photos of you changing clothes or something."

"If such photos did exist, what would you do?"

"Don't look at them, Yuzuki! I'll just...confiscate these for later disposal!"

"Officer? Yes, this is the guy you've been looking for right here."

We both cracked up.

"All jokes aside, what do we do now?" I asked. "Any ideas?"

"If I offer you up as a sacrifice, maybe I can get off the hook."

“Interesting. Tell me more?”

“Kenta was telling me about boys who like to wear dresses. I can dress you up and have the stalker fall in love with you instead. One night between the sheets with Chitose might just do it.”

“Wow, now there’s a direction even I never thought you’d go in.”

I figured she was trying to pretend she was okay.

I needed to get this situation cleared up before Yuzuki lost even her ability to put on a brave face.

“To be real, though, installing a security camera outside the house would probably be the fastest way to end this.”

Yuzuki shook her head. “Sorry. Getting you involved is one thing, Saku, but I really don’t want to have to confide in my parents about this.”

“Makes sense. Roger.” I nodded understandingly.

Yuzuki was looking subdued, but I didn’t press her any further. A high schooler who doesn’t want to confide in their parents... It’s like a Fukui Prefecture resident who doesn’t want to eat egg on their katsudon. In other words, totally normal. Hmm, maybe I need to come up with a better analogy.

At any rate, we would have to proceed in a defensive manner only.

I wanted to hit back somehow, but if the pieces we had already gathered got scattered, we’d have a tough time putting the puzzle together again from zero.

In the end, neither of us had any good ideas, and the sun was going down fast. The solidly built German car sat perfectly still on the driveway nearby, almost as if it were watching over us.



Back home, I showered, whipped up and ate a simple meal, and then realized someone was calling my phone.

I checked the caller ID—Tomoya Naruse. I tapped the ANSWER CALL icon.

“The number you have dialed is not in service...”

“Outdated joke. Besides, it’s not a phone call, it’s the LINE app talk feature.”

“What do you want?”

“What do you mean? I thought we discussed it at lunchtime, Love Guru.”

“You’re not seriously planning to call me every day, are you?”

“Come on, Saku. You’re always with Nanase or your other classmates. What choice do we have?”

His smooth voice was getting on my nerves, but he had a point.

At least he was being considerate of my right to an uninterrupted lifestyle. It was hard to fault him there.

I decided to fill him in on what happened today. I didn’t touch on the run-in with Asuka on the roof, or the conversation we had after, or the photos, but I gave Tomoya a basic rundown of the ordinary stuff.

“Huh, interesting. So even Nanase is surprisingly typical.”

“Of course she is. Did you think she transformed after school and went off fighting the forces of evil or something?”

“No, I just thought she was above certain stuff. Like she’s so perfect, and you never hear any nasty rumors about her, unlike with you, Saku. It’s like she’s not truly of this world...”

“Why did you insert that little dig at me in there? Listen, if you want to get to know Yuzuki, you should discard all those notions you have, ‘cause you’re way off.”

“What do you mean?” Tomoya genuinely sounded surprised.

“Let me ask you something first. Why did you fall for Yuzuki? If you want me to help you with your love life, you should at least tell me why. Otherwise, how can I help you?”

“You’re right. To be honest, it was her looks that got me at first. She’s so beautiful that I just couldn’t get her out of my mind. After that, I always had my eye on her, and I guess that’s how I fell for her.”

I heard a little crackle, like he was plugging in earphones.

“After school one day, I ate dirt. It was like a scene from a manga, I went

sprawling, and the contents of my bag were strewn about everywhere. Everyone was laughing at me, just walking past, y'know? Even worse, it was dark already, and I couldn't manage to gather up all my stuff."

"But Yuzuki stopped. She put her phone screen light on max so you could both see, and then she helped you pick everything up."

"What? How do you know about that?"

It was obvious, based on context.

"That's not the kindness you thought it was. It's a form of kindness, sure, but she only did it because she didn't want to be as bad as the rest of the kids who were walking past you and refusing to help."

"I don't really get what you're saying here."

"I'm not saying there was zero kindness on her part. Of course, what she did was based on kindness. But if you're really thinking it was pure, angelic benevolence on her part, well. You're never going to have a shot at dating Yuzuki."

Tomoya was silent on the other end of the line.

"Stop seeing this perfect stone idol you've carved in your own mind and see the actual girl, Yuzuki, herself. The girl who picks her nose sometimes, who gets earwax, who stinks of sweat after club practice, who projects a very calculated image of herself to everyone. You need to really grasp that concept first."

"Nanase's human, so all that stuff goes without saying...but it's not exactly nice to think about."

"No, it's not, but it's important. I won't deny that most relationships start out as a kind of mirage. But when you get closer, the mirage disappears on you. And that misguided impression you had is only going to hurt the person you care about."

"You're not pulling any punches here, are you?"

"I've seen the same old tired story play out so many times. I'm sick of it."

I was getting fired up. Thinking back on the day's events, I guess I let my emotions get the better of me. This wasn't really the sort of conversation I

wanted to be having with a guy I'd only met earlier that day, though.

"Sorry if I spoiled your mood. All I'm saying is, this is the sum of what I can tell you about relationships. You wanna quit now?"

"No. Actually, I'm pleased that you'd open up to me like this. I'd like to continue, if you're down."

"This is going to sound cheesy, but I think to really impress a person, you have to go with brutal honesty and passion. You've got to clash heads, and crash and burn, and get up, and do it all over again. That's what youth is all about."

Wow, that really was cheesy, I thought.

"So if you truly want to date Yuzuki for real, Tomoya, you need to talk to her and strike up a rapport. Get her LINE ID, chat with her a little each day, find out more about her. Then, once you get to know a side of her that's beyond the picture-perfect image you had in your head, if you still feel that you love her, then you have to confess your feelings."

"That sounds surprisingly unsophisticated. I thought you'd give me, like, some slick lines to use on her or something."

"That's another delusion. You not only have wildly wrong ideas about Yuzuki, but you're also hallucinating versions of Saku Chitose that don't exist, as well."

Yeah, I said too much again. All this fake relationship stuff has apparently gotten me acting oddly sentimental about the subject of romance.

But I felt it was best to say my piece.

It was up to Tomoya to decide what actions he took after that. He could handle the responsibility by himself.

"I think I'm starting to get what you mean. You're saying I still don't know Nanase at all, right?"

"Basically. But just remember this: Fortune favors the brave. The safest path doesn't always lead to the treasure."

"So there's no shortcuts to love, in other words. Thanks, I think this was the kick in the pants I needed. I'm going to try to learn more about her."

"Good, good. Well, time for beddy-bye."

"Yeah. Until tomorrow."

After I ended the call, I sat on the edge of my bed for a while.



Thursday passed by, followed by Friday, and then it was Saturday.

Over the course of the past two days, two new envelopes were discovered in Yuzuki's home mailbox, and both her pencil box and day planner had disappeared from her bag somehow. The second envelope was pretty much the same deal as the first, but the third round of photos included ones of Yuzuki as a first-year student.

I wasn't pleased with how things were going at all.

Yuzuki acted the same as ever, but the fact that she was appearing so unbothered made me realize she wasn't herself. Usually, when everything was fine with her, she'd burst out laughing over the smallest joke or bit of sarcasm, but not now. It was clear she was emotionally wrung out.

Tomoya called every night, and I tried to give him what advice I could. Just like how it was with Kenta, I regretted giving myself so much trouble at first. But before I knew it, I came to anticipate his calls. "*Hmm, he should be calling around this time...*" It's creepy how quickly we can get used to stuff.

I actually invited him along to today's girls' basketball practice game, but he said, "*I don't want her thinking I'm a weirdo if I suddenly show up at her game*" and declined. I understood how he felt, so I didn't bother trying to convince him.

The game was due to take place at our school, in Gym 1. When I entered, the Fuji High team and the other school's team were already doing warm-ups. Keeping one eye on the scene, I headed up to the second-floor catwalk. I originally figured there wouldn't be a lot of people watching today, since it was just a practice game, but the other school turned out to be nationally famous, so there was actually something of a crowd.

Neither Yuzuki nor Haru had gone out of their way to invite the other members of Team Chitose. It doesn't sound too great, but it's a fact that

something like a club practice game isn't that big of a deal to the players, even if their opponent is a big-name school. It's just another regular event. If they went out of their way to invite people to watch, people might end up feeling obligated to come, even during the busy test cramming season. Yuzuki and Haru would never do something so selfish.

And yet I had been invited, hadn't I? What's up with that, huh? Well, special circumstances and all that. I could let it slide.

"Hey! Saku!"

It was Kaito, standing there being excessively tall as usual and calling out to me with zero finesse.

"Sup. You came to watch, too, huh?"

"This is a nationally ranked girls' team, you know. I could learn a thing or two. And it's not like any more studying is going to help my grades at this point."

"It's people like you who really should be hitting the books right now."

"Saku, don't you know? When you've done all you can, you have to leave the rest up to fate!"

"What, you're a washed-up has-been already, man?"

I looked around again. Then I spotted a few faces I wouldn't have expected to see here.

Assuming the stage is the top side of the gym, we were standing on the left-side catwalk. On the opposite, right-side catwalk, I could see Nazuna and Atomu.

They seemed to have noticed me, too. Nazuna waved over at me.

I waved back, and Atomu narrowed his eyes with clear displeasure.

They didn't seem like the types to come and watch high school sports on a date. Maybe a mutual friend of theirs was playing in today's game.

I looked back down at the court again.

The Fuji High players, dressed in the team color of aquamarine blue, were practicing shooting. Just as I was idly thinking about the girls' basketball

uniforms and appreciating how they projected a particularly appealing image of sportiness, I realized the familiar twosome were absent from the circle.

Concerned, I looked all around the gym. Miss Misaki, Haru, and Yuzuki were all standing off-court by the wall, talking with serious expressions on their faces. Based on their positioning, it looked like Yuzuki was the subject of the conversation.

I started to get a bad feeling in my chest. I dashed toward the stairs.

"What's up, man? Gotta poop? Game's about to start, y'know." I could hear Kaito's goofy voice behind me.

"Stop talking literal crap and come with me."

As we approached, Miss Misaki turned and gave us the evil eye. "What is it, Chitose? And Asano, too? If you're here to show support, go upstairs."

She had a mature body with curves in all the right places, and her refined features and ice-cold way with words had many a Fuji High guy rating her highly among the female teachers. But now wasn't the right time to focus on her appeal.

Despite the boys' and girls' basketball teams being separated by gender, they still trained every day in the same gym. Kaito had often observed Miss Misaki's acid tongue. Despite being excessively tall, he was currently trying to hide himself behind my back.

"Sorry, I was actually watching from up there and was concerned. Has something happened?"

Haru responded without pause. "Chitose, Yuzuki's basketball shoes are missing. We usually leave our shoes in the clubroom, and she had them for the last practice we had before the test period leave started..."

Another theft. That was the first thing I thought of.

Miss Misaki continued where Haru left off. "Haru's another story, but Yuzuki would never be so careless with her belongings. That said, when I checked the clubroom this morning, it was still locked up tight."

"This might sound weird, but did everyone leave the clubroom at the same

time today?"

Miss Misaki frowned in response to that. "Well, yes. After the other team's students arrived, our girls all assembled in the gym to officially greet them, and then we went right into our team meeting."

I was thinking that if there was a chance for anyone to swipe something, it would be then.

Yuzuki chimed in as if on cue, her voice oddly chipper.

"Well, I can't deny that I was really fired up for this game, and not having my shoes kind of ruined the start of it for me. But no worries. It's all good. I can borrow some shoes from another girl with the same size feet. Or in the worst-case scenario, I can play in slippers."

"It is *not* all good, dummy."

I'm not sure if I could speak for Yuzuki, but I know that when I had a big baseball game, I would have freaked out if I was told to use someone else's bat or gloves. For sports players, sports gear has a huge impact on performance.

I grasped the situation right away. "Kaito," I said over my shoulder as I headed to the gym exit.

Yuzuki called after me. "Saku?"

"I don't want you using this incident as an excuse for not winning. You just focus on the game, Yuzuki."

Haru called after me, too. "Uh, dearest, if you're really leaving now, make sure you don't come back empty-handed, are we clear?"

"Consider it handled."

Kaito and I left the gym, then we decided to split up and run around speed-searching.

I reckoned we had a 50 percent chance of finding the shoes.

If the culprit swiped Yuzuki's shoes just because he wanted a trophy, then we were out of luck. Those shoes would be long gone from campus. But if the culprit simply wanted to mess with Yuzuki by whatever means available, then

we might still not be too late. All we could do was proceed based on the assumption that was most favorable.

"Kaito, go through all the garbage cans in this vicinity. Then go into the main building and check everywhere you can think of in there."

"Roger. What about you, Saku?"

"I'm going to check the entire campus grounds, besides the school buildings. Then I'll check the streets near campus."

We both fist-bumped, and then Kaito ran off.

I started sniffing around outside, beginning outside the clubroom itself.

I checked between the fences and the road, then went around the fence where it skirted the buildings. I checked the gaps between the buildings, too. Then behind the gym, then the small equipment shed. I checked everything that looked like it might be harboring a stolen pair of shoes. But I was having no luck.

This was a race against time.

I took off my blazer and hung it on a nearby fence post, then rolled up my sleeves and tightened the laces of my Stan Smiths.

Then I took a huge breath in and let it out.

You're clever, I'll give you that, you skulking stalker. You're leading me on quite the wild-goose chase, here. But picking a fight with Saku Chitose is a decision you'll regret until the day you die. I'll see to it about that.

I launched into a sprint against the loose dirt.

From inside the gym, I could hear the sound of a whistle blowing. The game was starting.

Dammit! This wasn't working.

I checked both sides of the irrigation ditch that ran horizontally to the school, my breath coming in harsh gasps now. I checked the playing field, the cafeteria perimeter, the bicycle shed, the parking lot near the school, and the nearby park. I ran all around the area, but there was no sign of Yuzuki's basketball shoes. More than twenty minutes must have gone by since I started searching.

The game would be into its third quarter by now.

I was dripping with sweat, completely flustered.

Goddammit. If the culprit took the shoes home with them, to gloat over their little trickery, then I would make it my mission to chase them to the ends of the earth and shove the toe of my Stan Smiths up into their nasal cavity. My phone buzzed just then. I was getting a call from Kaito.

"It's no good, Saku. I can't find 'em."

"Shit. Do one more circuit for now, Kaito. Check the janitor's closet or something. Anywhere someone might have chucked a pair of basketball shoes. I'm going back to the clubroom once more."

"What are you gonna do?"

"You use your brawn, and I'll use my brain, okay?"

"Hey! I resent that!"

I hopped back over the fence and made my way back to just outside the girls' basketball clubroom.

I wouldn't find the shoes just checking places at random.

Roughly wiping away the relentless rivulets of sweat, I tried to think calmly and logically.

I had no way to confirm the actual events that had transpired, but no doubt the culprit swiped the shoes this morning, while all the club members were in the gym.

There were quite a few people here to watch the game today. The visiting team's fans, and kids like Kaito and me. The gallery was full. But it was still the pretest period, and school clubs were basically on hiatus. The school was mostly empty, unlike most weekends when club activities ran. If anyone was lurking around the school carrying a pair of bulky, high-top basketball shoes...that would be suspicious AF. If the goal was just to mess with Yuzuki, all they had to do was keep the shoes away from her until the game started. They didn't really need the most sophisticated hiding place in the world to pull that off.

It had to be somewhere close by, somewhere easily accessible, but

somewhere out of sight...

I tried to put myself in the thief's shoes, tried to see things through their eyes.

There was no obvious hiding place in the vicinity. Leaping over the fence and making a run for it would have been the easiest solution. But that ran the risk of being spotted by a local—or worse, by a teacher. Moving through the building, though, the thief could always come up with a good excuse for what they were doing. Unless they ran right into someone from the girls' basketball team itself.

Where were the girls' basketball team members, though?

In the adjacent Gym 1 building, of course. But any one of them might leave the gym at any time, for any reason. Thinking psychologically, the thief would want to avoid going near the gym.

So that added to the list of places the thief wouldn't have gone. I can't say I understand the criminal mind, but the kind of basketball shoes favored by Yuzuki and the other girls on the team...were pretty expensive.

If the thief was caught with the stolen shoes, the school might even notify the police. They wouldn't just be let off with a warning for pulling a prank. The thief would need to weigh up the benefits of messing with Yuzuki against the potential drawback of getting into serious trouble themselves.

Therefore, the best thing to do would be to leave the shoes somewhere Yuzuki would easily find them after today's game.

If anyone found a stray pair of basketball shoes lying around the school, no doubt they'd return them to the basketball club's room. If the shoes were located, the culprit would be off the hook for actual theft.

I went into my mental mind map of the school's layout. What was opposite Gym 1?

...There. It had to be there. It fit all the conditions I'd just worked out in my mind. A place I still hadn't checked yet.



"Yuzukii!"

A young man came busting through the doors of the gym, yelling at the top of

his lungs. The visiting team had just made a basket, and there was a brief lull in the game, during which everyone turned to look at him.

The guy clearly wasn't a member of the team, yet he was dripping sweat and brandishing a pair of basketball shoes. He also seemed to be smeared with dirt in places, and he had dry leaves in his hair.

"Time out!" Miss Misaki called for a break.

Yuzuki came running over.

I thrust the blue Nikes with the white logo on them into Yuzuki's hands and quickly checked the score. Then, with a heavy dose of irony and a wry grin, I spoke.

"Wow, you guys are really stinkin' up the joint, huh?"

I put my back against the wall and sank down onto the floor.

They were at the top of the final quarter.

The visiting team's score was eighty-eight, and Fuji High's was eighty. The girls had clearly fought bravely against the much better team, but with the time remaining, victory seemed remote.

Yuzuki crouched down before me, cradling her basketball shoes in her arms. I noticed the glistening sweat on her bare arms, but I didn't have time to appreciate that now.

"Pfft... Ha-ha-ha!!!"

Yuzuki reached out and messed up my sweat-soaked hair, laughing half hysterically.

"Saku, you've got leaves stuck in your hair! And your hair is all flat and stringy with sweat. And what happened to your knees? They're all skinned! Pah-ha-ha!"

"I thought I'd change up my character. Go for the 'wild and dirty guy' kinda vibe, y'know."

"Hey! If you've got the shoes, then get a move on." Miss Misaki's voice floated over to us.

Still spluttering with laughter, Yuzuki changed from her slippers into her basketball shoes, pulling the laces tight. Putting the hair band from around her wrist between her lips for a moment, she pulled her hair back into a ponytail and tied it off.

“Nana, Umi, are we ready? Let’s show those fools what we’re made of.”

““Sure thing!””

Yuzuki and Haru both yelled back in chirpy voices, responding to Miss Misaki’s encouragement. Nana and Umi—those must be, like, their court names. I heard some teams gave players nicknames based on in-jokes and stuff like that, but Nana for Nanase and Umi for Aomi seemed pretty straightforward. It suited Miss Misaki’s vibe.

Yuzuki glared at the scoreboard for a second before turning around and grinning at me, looking like she was in a great mood.

“Watch this, Saku. I’m about to show you some serious skills. Hopefully.”

Then Yuzuki dashed back onto the court.

Haru turned to me and gave me a big thumbs-up, then ran off with a spring in her step.

I realized that Miss Misaki was looking down at me with a cool eye.

“Sorry, I should watch from the second floor; you’re right.”

As I was getting to my feet, she held up a hand to stop me. “Nana owes you one. You sit there and watch.”

“Thanks. By the way, I hate to ask for more favors, but do you think the girls’ basketball club budget could stretch to hedge repairs?”

Back to the subject of Yuzuki’s basketball shoes for a second. The last place I checked was the archery range near the gym. The archery range is covered all around by a tall hedge to avoid any visual distractions that might put off the archers, and the hedge is so thick that you can barely see through it, even if you’re standing right beside it.

Even during the test period, the archery club would still have morning practice, so come Monday morning, any shoes stashed there would definitely

be discovered. Yep, the archery club's range was a hiding spot that fulfilled every one of my decided-upon criteria.

The problem was, how to get inside?

The thief could have easily tossed the shoes over the hedge, but the gate to access the range itself was locked. The only way to check inside myself was to bust my way in through the hedge.

I was stressed and out of time, so I stopped thinking too hard about it and just forced my way through the hedge like a human battering ram. And here we were.

"You seriously expect the basketball club to pay?"

"I guess not..."

"Hmm... Still..." Miss Misaki smiled faintly. "Let's just feign ignorance, shall we?"

This was clearly high compassion, coming from her.

"So which one is it, Nana or Umi?"

"So you're another one asking me the awkward questions, huh?"



The game started once more.

As I observed both teams again, it was even more obvious that the opposing team's players had a serious height advantage.

Even Yuzuki, the tallest girl of our group, would be the shortest one if she, for some reason, joined the other team. The rest of our basketball team were all shorties, including Haru.

That said, Fuji High was showing a high rate of ball possession.

And Yuzuki was right at the center of it all.

From the POV of a layman like me, she had absolute control over the ball, enough to give you chills, and she evaded the other players while scanning shrewdly for someone who was open. Then, when she saw the opportunity, she would throw an eye-opening pass. It was like she had 360-degree vision or

something.

Haru was there to catch each pass, which seemed as though it was thrown intending to leave not only the enemy team but our own team in the dust. She was zipping and zooming all around the court.

Haru showed some of the speed and dexterity that I'd already gotten a good glimpse of, neatly weaving her way through the defense and lightly aiming at the basket. She favored layups in the midst of the action—and midrange shots. She never left herself open, not for even a nanosecond.

Haru made another basket using her layup technique.

"Chitose! How'd you like that, huh?"

Dummy. Focus on the game.

Haru shot me a victory sign with her fingers while I waved dismissively.

Thanks to the dream team of Yuzuki and Haru, the score now read: VISITORS: 94, FUJI HIGH: 88. They had managed to close the gap considerably, but only three minutes remained. Based on the difference in skill level involved, a dramatic comeback seemed a remote possibility.

"Chitose, is this your first time watching Nana play?" Miss Misaki suddenly asked me.

"Uh, no, I've come to watch several practices to cheer Haru on, too. But I have to admit, the cool-and-collected, hyper-accurate style of play she's showing today really does leave an impression."

"You still don't know the first thing about her, then. She's not like Umi, who has the accelerator pressed to the floor the whole time. Nana always keeps herself under tight control. She's always thinking about how to conduct herself on the court to support Umi and the rest of the team."

Miss Misaki stopped talking then, made a gun out of her thumb and two fingers, and pressed it to her temple.

"But then sometimes...she goes wild."

The moment Miss Misaki said that, Haru went for the ball and knocked it off course as a member of the opposing team was passing it.

“Nana!”

Skreeek. Stamp.

Yuzuki’s white-and-blue Nikes screeched against the floor, and she grabbed the ball from beyond the three-point line.

Fwoosh.

Yuzuki threw the ball one-handed, like a guy, and it fell almost silently into the basket. I had no time to swoon. The other team began a furious volley. Another wild shot was thrown from the three-point line, and Haru grabbed possession of the ball once more.

She flew up the court like a flash of lightning, dribbling the ball, staying low. She jerked to a halt, feinted around an opponent, and did that several more times. No one else could keep up.

She made an easy pass, then ducked under the opponent’s basket and leaped higher in the air than you’d expect a girl of her height to be able to.

But the other team’s center, who had been marking Haru closely the whole time, blocked her. Haru went for a double clutch, but the opposing player’s jump had a longer duration than Haru’s.

“Umi!”

“Nana!”

Almost knocked off-balance midair, Haru contorted her body and threw a hard pass out beyond the three-point line.

Yuzuki’s focus was already concentrated on the hoop.

Skreech. Stamp.

The ball was in her hands, and Yuzuki leaped without hesitation.

Fwoosh.

The ball went cleanly through the net.

The score now read VISITORS: 94, FUJI HIGH: 94. It was a dead heat.

Miss Misaki put her hand on my shoulder.

"What do you think of our girls? Not bad, eh? You've got sportsman blood running through your veins, too, don't you, Chitose?"

"Whatever do you mean, Teach? I am but a lowly ex-baseball club member."

The opposing team seemed to have sped up their play.

Fuji High's defense tried desperately to hold them back, but they were too strong. One of them pulled off a layup.

Now they were two points ahead. With only thirty or so seconds remaining.

"Come and get it!!!"

Haru broke through the front line, exchanging easy passes with a buddy, showing off her fighting spirit.

But the opposing team's defense was strong, and Haru couldn't get free to shoot.

Blocked from taking a shot in front of the goal, Haru whirled around.

"Let's finish this, Nanaaa!"

The ball went flying over the three-point line like a speeding bullet, but Yuzuki was faster.

She grabbed the ball.

Skreek. Fwoosh.

Yuzuki was airborne.

She looked like a twirling cherry blossom petal caught in an updraft, more than a human girl.

The moment was beautiful and fleeting.

Yuzuki was absolutely calm.

Two of the opposing team members desperately tried to position themselves in the way of the path of the ball.

You're wasting your time. This moment belongs to Yuzuki alone.

Fwoosh.

The ball flew from Yuzuki's hands.

The buzzer blared noisily, signaling the end of the game.

No one could block that, I thought.

With a faint rustling sound, the ball arced through the air with a curve like that of a beautiful full moon, following a trajectory that could almost have been mapped by the stars.

No human being should have been able to touch such a perfect parabola.

The ball passed through the hoop, leaving the net fluttering like the closing of the curtains that come down to mark the end of a play.

For two or three seconds, there was only silence. Then the gym erupted in yells of intermingled celebration and dismay.

The victor seemed to awaken from her state of frozen anticipation and let herself relax, clenching her fist for a second in muted triumph.

Then slowly, she turned and pointed right at me with both index fingers, grinning widely and winking.



"I just can't believe you, Saku!"

"Ah, look, I'm really sorry."

I looked away from Kaito, who was getting up in my face.

Fuji High had won the game by a single point. Now both teams were cooling down. Once all the excitement was over, I finally remembered Kaito existed. I gave him a quick call, but it was too late to escape his wrath.

"I ran around and around the school without stopping until you called me...!"

"Yep. You're a stand-up guy, Kaito. I'll treat you to a bowl of Hachiban's sometime soon, so just let me off the hook. Oh, and make sure you tidy up all the garbage cans you tossed everywhere. And make sure to go back and shut the doors of all the lockers you searched."

"Aw, give me a break!"

We were sitting on a bench outside the gym, drinking the bottles of Pocari

Miss Misaki had handed out and bantering back and forth, when Atomu started to walk past.

“Hold on a sec, Kaito.”

I got up and jogged after Atomu, who was headed to the school gates.

“Sup? A weekend date to the high school, huh. How modern.”

“What? Ugh, it’s you, Chitose. Don’t even talk to me, man,” Atomu muttered darkly under his breath.

“Aw, come on, don’t be like that. I didn’t know you were a basketball fan.”

“I ain’t. It’s Nazuna. She used to be in the basketball club. She was pretty good, too, apparently. She said she wanted to see how our team did against that other school.”

Huh. She was full of surprises. I really hadn’t pegged her as the sporty-girl type.

“So where is Nazuna?”

“She didn’t like how our team won like that. She already left right after the game. She said she didn’t want to have to watch Nanase’s reaction.”

“Hmm, yes, I can see how that would be troublesome.”

“Yeah. Seeing someone else do so well is hard to swallow.”

Atomu almost seemed to be thinking out loud. Then he quickly looked away, as if embarrassed. I decided to change the subject.

“Let me ask you one more thing, man. You got any friends at Yan High?”

“Huh? No, I don’t.”

“What about Nazuna, then?”

“The heck, man. Fine. Yeah, she mentioned having a friend who goes there once.”

“I see. Thanks. I had a little run-in with some Yan High guys the other day. So they’ve been on my mind since then.”

“You quit baseball just to get into fights? You really amaze me.”

Perish the thought.

“Sorry to take up your time, man. See you at school next week.”

Atomu snorted before exiting the school gates.

Still missing too many pieces, I thought.



Kaito and I both went around the school tidying up together, but Kaito left early, saying he wanted to go and work out. Was charging around the school searching for basketball shoes some kind of warm-up to him? The guy was powerful; I had to give him that.

Exhausted and totally wiped out, I went to lie down on a nearby bench and was just dozing off when I felt something being placed against my neck.

“That’s cold.”

Startled by the freezing touch, I leaped up. Haru was standing there holding a type of popsicle called a Chupet that comes in a plastic tube you can snap in half and share. She was sucking on one half while holding the other half out to me.

“Nice work today, Chitose.”

Then Haru shoved the other Chupet half into my mouth.

The fruity flavor of the familiar childhood favorite flowed over my tongue. Back when I was a kid, I’d often buy these at the candy store to split with a friend.

“Nice work yourself. Where’d you get that?”

“Parents were handing them out.”

“Where’s Yuzuki?”

“She’ll be a little while longer, I think. She got a little fired up toward the end there. She’s probably taking some time to cool her head.”

Haru’s expression struck me as funny, and I couldn’t suppress a laugh.

I straightened up and sat myself properly on the bench. Haru took a seat beside me without even hesitating. She kicked away her shoes, peeled off her

socks, and sat barefoot with her knees drawn up to her chin.

Her basketball shorts rode up, exposing a length of still-flushed thigh.

To distract myself from that sight, I started talking.

"You and Yuzuki were both amazing. I haven't watched a game in a while, but you two were in a whole different dimension."

Haru chuckled, still sucking on her Chupet.

"Yuzuki's always good, of course, but today she was god-tier. Under those circumstances, against that team...she goes and gets three shots in a row? And that last one was practically from the center line. Usually, you'd never be able to make that shot from that location in the last seconds of a game."

"Well, she had a lot riding on it. She must seriously want that date with me tomorrow."

"No, dummy, you're totally wrong." Haru slung her arm around my shoulder and brought her face up close to mine. "It's because a certain someone acted very out of character, in a dramatic way. Which made a certain someone else also want to act out of character."

Haru slung her legs up over my thighs as if to say, "It's all because of you and your actions." She pulled her hair elastic out, letting her short ponytail swing free. Using the sports towel she had slung around her neck, she made a pillow for herself on the bench and lay back.

"Miss Haru, what's all this?"

"It's all good; just appreciate the opportunity."

"But why?"

"Because I'm extra exhausted from keeping up with Yuzuki, who *you* got all riled up."

Even so, that was no reason to expect a massage from a male peer.

Hmm, what to do?

While I was hesitating, Haru sat up and shoulder-bumped me.

"What's up? Getting all flustered over sexy Haru?"

"All right. You asked for it." I grabbed her little foot in my hand and began kneading it with all my might.

"Yeowch! Ouch, ouch, ouch! Not so rough!"

"Don't be coy! I'm just appreciating over here!"

"Yeowch! That huuurts!!!"

After tussling back and forth for a while...

"Ahhh! I thought I was gonna die. Although..." Haru leaped onto the ground, even though she was barefoot, and bounced up and down a few times. "I think I feel a bit lighter on my feet."

"Of course you do. Do you think I just half-assed that massage or something?"

Haru nodded with satisfaction, then plopped herself back down on the bench and stretched out her legs luxuriously.

"Chitose, if it was my basketball shoes that went missing, would you have searched for them the same way?"

"Why ask me this all of a sudden?"

"No reason, really. Just felt like asking."

"Hmm, let's see. If it was you, I might have been like, 'A little thing like that shouldn't slow *you* down! I'm off to watch the game!' ...Or something."

"I see..." Haru sounded unexpectedly glum. I glanced over at her.



She was looking down, her hair hanging and hiding her face from view.

"That said..." I continued, as if making up an excuse. "If Yuzuki asked me for a massage, I probably wouldn't do it. That's only for you, Haru."

Haru lifted her head and looked at me.

"Why?"

"She's too hot. I wouldn't know where to put my hands."

"...What? Hey, hold on, what's that supposed to mean!?"

A second later, Haru was back to being her usual self, and the two of us chatted back and forth while I continued to wait for Yuzuki.



The basketball club dispersed right after tidying up after the game, so Yuzuki, Haru, and I decided to head to Hachiban Ramen. I ordered my usual, spicy ramen with extra spring onion and a side of fried rice. Yuzuki ordered salt-flavored veggie ramen, and Haru ordered the A-set, *tonkotsu* veggie ramen, extra large, with *gyoza* dumplings and a side of rice.

"Hey, Saku, what do you think about the case of the missing basketball shoes?"

After we finished ordering, Yuzuki got down to business. "It's just my guess, but I don't believe the perpetrator was actually anyone from Yan High."

I offered my thoughts, the ones I'd been mulling over all afternoon.

"For the sake of argument, let's say they managed to borrow a Fuji High uniform for the purposes of infiltration. The crime would still be difficult to have pulled off so well. I mean, the archery range isn't the kind of place an outsider to the school would immediately think of. But they not only targeted the exact vulnerabilities of the basketball club, they also displayed insider knowledge of the particular features of Fuji High's campus."

Yuzuki no doubt had reached the same conclusion. She nodded, looking pensive. Haru chimed in to the conversation just then.

"So what you're saying is that the stalker could be someone from our

school?"

"Not exactly. I had a hunch when I had that tussle with them the other day, but now I really do think that the Yan High guys are involved in this somehow. Maybe they had an accomplice—or should I say, maybe they forced someone else to pull off the shoe heist."

Yuzuki thought that over for a second. "Then that means the actual thief could be anyone at Fuji High, besides us, I mean. It's the same as finding out zero information at all."

Precisely.

Which was why I hadn't broached this subject myself before now.

If we pursued the accomplice angle, whoever it was could claim to have been singled out at random and threatened, which would lead us to no conclusion at all. If we could have caught them red-handed, it might be different. But something like targeting the girls' basketball clubroom was a risky bridge that no one would dare to cross twice.

We could stake out a single area, like Yuzuki's house, and keep it under surveillance, but we had no idea what time of day the stalker liked to be active. We might watch the house all night long, while the stalker caught up on sleep and then made a midnight attack. We couldn't do anything about that.

"Ayase and Uemura were there today, weren't they?"

Haru spoke casually, as if this held no real significance.

Apparently, Nazuna and Atomu had been watching the game from the catwalk from start to finish.

"Huh?" Yuzuki seemed to find this interesting.

Surely the shoe thief wouldn't have been cocky enough to stick around and watch the game, to enjoy the fruits of their labor?

"I can't recall, but were they friendly with anyone from our group?"

"No, not that I've heard anyway. What about you, Chitose? Did you speak to either of them?"

"You think I had time in my schedule today for that?" I was trying to throw them off the scent a little.

I hadn't spoken to Nazuna, true, but I had spoken to Atomu.

Still, I wasn't the type to casually repeat things people had told me.

Just then, our ramen arrived, and talk naturally turned to the food.

"Chitose, give me a bite of your noodles and fried rice." Haru reached out toward my tray.

"Sure, but you've got rice yourself. How much are you planning to even eat?"

"It's been a while since we had such an intense game! I'm all out of gas, and I need refueling! Here, you can have some of my *tonkotsu* ramen. Have a dumpling, too."

Haru slid her bowl of ramen over to me with the chopsticks and Chinese soup spoon still in it. I gave her my bowl of spicy noodles, complete with my chopsticks and the slotted spoon for scooping out the chunky ingredients.

I slurped up the *tonkotsu* ramen, thinking to myself how the usual veggie ramen option wasn't half bad every once in a while.

Haru being Haru, she slurped up a huge mouthful of spicy noodles, and then... started choking.

"Gack! Ack! Chitose! You put too much vinegar on this! And too much chili oil!"

"But that's what makes it so good."

"Hmm... It's painful, but I can see the appeal now..."

"How much are you planning to eat here?"

Yuzuki was watching us both, one eyebrow raised high, as if she wasn't amused.

"What's that? Oh, you wanted some, too, Yuzuki?"

Haru started prodding the plate of spicy noodles toward Yuzuki, but Yuzuki pushed it back. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"Oh, I thought maybe you were upset because I was using Chitose's chopsticks and spoon just then."

"I'm not in elementary school, you know."

"I actually just got a foot massage from Chitose earlier!"

"...Explain. In detail."

I watched the two of them go at it, feeling kinda cozy.

These two were clearly partners, and not just on the court.

Putting Haru's personality aside for a second, Yuzuki at least was someone like me, someone who liked to keep strict boundaries.

I'll go this far with this person. A little further with this other person. How much to show of myself? Which side of my personality to unleash? I made my way through life thinking a lot about things like that. We both did. And we both needed a partner who was accepting of that.

I watched Yuzuki, who was visibly relaxed around Haru. It made me feel comfortable, too, and sort of happy inside.

"So then where are you two going for your date?"

Haru suddenly busted my moment of contemplative peace. I had mentioned our date to Haru earlier, so I wasn't that surprised she brought it up now, but apparently Yuzuki hadn't.

I felt a sharp gaze fixed on me.

Haru had acted like Yuzuki going on a date with me tomorrow was par for the course, so I totally just assumed Yuzuki had already spoken with her about it.

My bad, for real.

"It's not a date. It's part of the performance, to sell the impression of us being a couple; that's all." Yuzuki was scrambling to explain things to Haru.

It was interesting that she was so flustered. I decided to challenge her.

"Excuse me? I heard that you wanted to go on a date with me."

Hey! Don't throw the wet napkin at me!

"You know, Yuzuki..." Haru was grinning. "You're much more of a typical girl than you realize."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what I said, what else?"

Yuzuki scratched her head as if thinking deeply. Then she nodded firmly and spoke again. "Haru, are you sure this is how you want it? Just so you know, I won't hold back, even if it's you. I won't give you a pass if you can't keep up, either."

"I'm not too sure what you mean, but bring it on. I won't allow myself to be beaten by a girl who needs to borrow a guy's strength to get fired up."

"And I won't allow myself to be beaten by a girl who couldn't hope to borrow a guy's strength if her life depended on it."

Oh dear, the gloves were really coming off here.

I got to my feet as quietly as possible and made for the bathroom.



Clack, clunk, clank.

"Your attacks are also so uninspired, Haru! Hyah!"

Clack, clunk.

"Well, you always try to be too precise about everything, Yuzuki, which means you think way too slow! Hyuh!"

Clink. Clank. Clatter. Clack.

"Whoo-hoo!"

"Gahhh!!!"

Swoosh. Clunk. Clatter, clatter, clatter.

"Aw yeah!!! I win!"

"Haru. Another round."

...How did we end up here?

I was originally planning to play only Haru and settle the score from last time,

but before I knew it, we all ended up playing air hockey at the arcade. Then, when I got back from the bathroom, I stumbled into...this.

They weren't even letting me play. I was apparently only here as a spectator.

With the most recent victory included, Haru was in the lead with three wins to two losses. Ever since they started playing, she had refused to let Yuzuki pull into the lead.

She was blessed with fast natural reflexes, of course, but Haru gave off an impression of being focused on nothing but the goal. Fundamentally, she had no concept of defense and treated blocking an opponent's shot as just an opportunity to steal the puck and make her own shot.

Yuzuki was the opposite. She went to block every shot that came anywhere near her territory and weighed up the best possible timing for her own shots, using the side walls of the air hockey table as strategic buffers to bounce carefully triangulated shots off of.

Haru got about ten shots in for every thirty attempts she made on goal. Yuzuki got eight shots in for every ten attempts she made on goal.

...That's the kind of game it was. Hi, I'm Saku Chitose, here today with nothing better to do than provide a running sports commentary in my own head.

"Chitose."

"Saku."

""Go get more coins.""

"Yes, Mistresses!"

I came back with a handful of hundred-yen coins and fed one into the machine.

Yuzuki was in the lead when I left, but now it was Haru.

As the puck clacked back and forth, she spoke up.

"Hey, Nana-Yuzuki? Want to put a wager on this?"

Yuzuki was focused on the puck, head down, and I couldn't see her face.

"Sure, what kinda wager?"

We jocks just love making sports wagers.

I grinned to myself, then Haru looked up and grinned, too. “If Nana wins this game, I’ll give her one extra. She’ll get to be the overall victor, a real comeback sensation.”

“What’s in it for you, Umi?”

“If I win this game...” Haru brandished her mallet. “I get to go on tomorrow’s date instead of you.”

The puck went in.

“What...?”

CLUNK. Clatter, clatter, clatter.

Yuzuki was slow to react, and Haru got a sneaky shot in right through Yuzuki’s goal.

I had the feeling I had just overheard something very spicy and hard to dismiss...

Yuzuki collected the puck calmly before speaking.

“So this is a declaration of war, since we’re citing court names, huh?”

The air was heavy with tension, like how it was during that practice game earlier.

“Right. This isn’t a friendly game any longer, we both agree?”

The puck went whooshing across the table, evaded Haru’s grasp, and clunked into the goal.

Haru retrieved the puck, grinning wickedly.

“Hmm? Feeling a little fired up now, are we? You must really, really want that date with Chitose.”

“Whatever. I just don’t feel like losing to the likes of you, Haru.”

“If you really don’t want to lose, then show me your game face, Nana.”

“I’m not you, Umi. I don’t need to grunt and strain myself to win.”

“Have it your way, then.”

Curling her arm tightly, Haru whacked the puck backhanded.

"You keep playing like that, and you'll lose worse than you did that one time I could mention. Don't start crying if it comes to that, okay?"

"What time are you referring to, exactly?"

CLANK. CLUNK. WHOOSH. CLUNK.

...Are we all of a sudden in a sports manga?

"You always hold back just a little, Nana! You think you're so far beyond everyone!"

"I'm beyond the three-point line, you mean?"

"Yes, yes, all right, you were good today."

"Just wildly shooting at the goal every chance you get won't guarantee victory, you know... Ugh!"

"You've never made a straight shot for the goal in your life... Hng!"

Then a fierce rally ensued.

This didn't seem like good clean arcade fun anymore.

"Hyaah! Nanaaa!!!"

"Quit... goofing around... Umiii!!!"

The two of them devolved into a furious exchange of wordless grunts and roars, as the fate of tomorrow's date hung in the balance...



Clatter, clatter, scuff, scuff.

Clip, clop, clunk. Clatter, scuff, scuff.

The backdrop of the shrine was filled with the pleasant sound of wooden-soled geta sandals clunking and clopping.

Colorful booths lined the path in neat rows, each releasing wafts of tantalizing and unique smells.

Red, blue, orange, green, with patterns that were round, triangular, square.

As girls passed by, this way and that, their robes were blooming like colorful flowers. There were bright colors everywhere, down to the glistening red candy apples and the bright toy yo-yos bobbing in crates of water.

Adults watched attentively as kids ran around wearing plastic toy masks and brandishing toy swords. They were holding beers, and their faces looked softer, kinder than usual.

Paper lanterns illuminated the scene, seeming to float almost ethereally above the crowd. Bathed in their glow, the shrine resembled a tiny storybook village. The lanterns were emblazoned with the names of local businesses.

It was Sunday, the day after the practice game, around seven thirty PM.

I was waiting for Yuzuki under the big red *torii* gate that marked the entrance of the small shrine located in Fuji High's vicinity.

I know I promised her a date, and I was thinking of maybe taking her to a movie or doing some shopping at Lpa. But then I found out that they were having a festival at this shrine.

Clonk, clop, scuff.

The sound of geta sandals stopped in front of me.

I lifted my head, and time seemed to stand still for a second, at least for me.

She was wearing a white *yukata* with a delicate design of bright-blue and ultramarine hollyhock flowers all over it. Her *obi* belt was a contrasting deep midnight blue, and her shoulder-length black hair was pinned up with an ornate hairpin. The nape of her neck was fully exposed, in an almost sensual manner. I'm not sure if she was wearing lipstick, but when she smiled, her lips seemed a touch redder than usual.

She was understated and as quietly stylish as ever, but today Yuzuki was also far more beautiful than anyone else walking by.



I suspected she would come decked out in a *yukata*, but this was far more spectacular than I could have imagined.

“Sorry! I kept you waiting a little today, huh?”

I looked at Yuzuki, who was blushing a little and still smiling. For some reason, I started to feel weirdly emotional.

“...Saku?”

I took my misplaced emotions and tossed them in my mental garbage can. Then I spoke up, my tone casual. “Hmm? What’s this? You look good enough to make a guy wanna...you know.”

“Can’t you try to give me a more earnest compliment than that?”

“At times like this, I really have to wonder if you’ve got anything on under that at all...”

“Listen here...”

Yuzuki sighed as if annoyed for a moment, then she brightened up and, with a sultry look on her face, gripped the collar of her *yukata*.

“If you’re that curious, would you like to see for yourself?”

“I give, I give. You got me. Before we get down to some serious flirting, let’s behave ourselves and go eat a candy apple or something.”

I started walking, but Yuzuki grabbed ahold of me. “Wait up.” She clapped and clunked back two or three steps, taking in my appearance. “It kinda gives me a funny feeling.”

“Hmm, I wanted to even the playing field by including the element of surprise. I know, I know; I look good. But on occasions like this, the guy’s supposed to let the girl blossom, right?”

Probably, Yuzuki was referring to the fact that I, too, had come wearing a *yukata*. It was a simple indigo-blue one without much of a pattern, but I figured, why not, and yanked it out of my closet before coming.

“It’s kinda unusual for a guy to have a *yukata* on hand.”

“Last year, I was pushed into it by...someone.”

"Hmm? And what kind of odd relationship do you and this 'someone' have?"

"I told you: I'm not saying."

"But, Saku, you need to have the chest part a bit more open..."

"Hey, the dirty jokes are my job."

I started to walk off in earnest then, and Yuzuki looped her little finger around mine.

It's an auspicious day, after all. Surely the gods will overlook this, just this once.

Beckoned into the shrine by the pipe-heavy festival music, we passed under the *torii* gate together.



We bought a bright-red candy apple and took turns taking bites of it as we wandered around the festival.

I've always loved festivals, ever since I was a kid.

Clutching a small handful of coins, debating over what to buy, leaving it too long, and then finding out that half the stalls had sold out. Fukui festivals are pretty much frequented mostly by neighborhood friends, but there was always the excitement of spotting girls from your class there, all the same.

Who'd have thought that one day I'd grow up and start going to the festivals with a pretty girl by my side. Last year during spring, I was absorbed in the baseball club, and in the summer, even though Yuuko and the others invited me, I just couldn't get in the mood to go. I realized that this was my first festival since starting high school. As I munched on the apple, now crumbly under its candy coating, I thought about how festivals weren't half bad, after all.

"Hey, Saku. Let's go and do the goldfish scoop." Yuzuki's face was bright with excitement.

I was a little worried about her after what happened yesterday, but this festival seemed to be a welcome distraction.

"Sure, but if you catch a fish, you gotta care for it, okay?"

"Okay! I used to have pet fish from the festival when I was little."

We both paid the old fella manning the stall three hundred yen apiece, and he gave each of us a plastic hoop with a paper sheet stretched over it, for scooping.

Yuzuki rolled up the sleeves of her *yukata* and dunked the scoop into the water carefully, a target already in her sights.

She got a fish positioned directly in the center of the plastic scoop for a second, but then the paper broke, and the fish escaped.

"Dang it!"

"Amateur."

Yuzuki puffed out her cheeks in indignation. "You do it, then, Saku. I want that little red one—oh, and the little black one, too."

"*Wakin* and *demequin* goldfish swim at different speeds, so it's not feasible to scoop two at once. How about two red ones or one of those *ryukin* goldfish with the feathery fins?"

Yuzuki's eyes sparkled as she nodded.

"There's a knack to it. Observe the scooper. The side with the paper stretched over it is actually the back side. If you scoop with that side facing up, it's harder for the paper to break."

I held up my own scooper as an example.

"Keep your cup ready, as close to the surface of the water as possible. Dunk your scooper at an angle and move fast. If you only get half of it under the water, it's going to break that much faster."

As I spoke, I went for one of the black *demequin* goldfish with my scooper.

"Then use the rim of the scooper, and if possible, flip the fish by its head. Here we go."

I scooped a red *ryukin* at the same time.

I held up the cup with the two fish swimming around in it for Yuzuki to see. She leaned in, peering at the fish.

"Amazing! Just amazing!"

"Hee-hee. It may surprise you to learn this, but as a kid I was such a super scooper that I was actually banned."

"I never would have guessed! I would have thought you were the type to hang back and watch your friends do it, with an 'I'm above all this' look on your face."

"Hey, you may not believe it, but I'm a festival kinda guy. I carried the *mikoshi* portable shrine and all that."

"You wore a *happi* coat? I'd love to see that!"

I would have felt guilty about scooping more than our fair share, so I returned my scooper and had the guy bag up the two fish. I think the old fella must have been sweet on Yuzuki or something, because he threw in a small bag of fish food for free, along with a sappy smile. *Uh-huh, uh-huh, I get it, old friend.*

We decided to take a rest, and I snagged us some *marumaru yaki*, a portion of *yakisoba*, and a bag of Baby Castella cake balls that we could eat sitting on the stone steps. By the way, *marumaru yaki* is basically a small fried savory pancake, *okonomiyaki*-style, about as big as your palm. And since we would probably be thirsty after eating all that, I also got us two bottles of Ramune as well.

While I was busy, I kept sneaking glances at Yuzuki, who was holding the bag of fish up to the light and smiling at it.

Seeing how happy she was with her fish, I silently thanked my kid self for putting all that practice into goldfish scooping.

"Hey, Saku, what should I call them?"

"Red Fish and Black Fish."

"That's a bit too literal, isn't it?"

"Festival goldfish tend to be weak; sometimes they die on you right away. You shouldn't go giving them meaningful names; it'll only make saying good-bye harder."

"Then I'll call them Saku and Chitose."

"You want a *marumaru yaki* to the face, huh?"

Yuzuki prodded the bag lightly. "I'll take good care of them so they don't croak on me."

Her face looked so innocent in profile, illuminated by the mellow light of the festival lanterns. I felt another wave of melancholy wash over me, just like how I felt standing under the *torii* gate, when I saw Yuzuki for the first time tonight.

I don't even know what had gotten me feeling that way.

But the feeling slowly unfurling within my chest was definitely one of sadness. It was all so fleeting. I couldn't bottle the scent of the festival, I couldn't capture the hustle and bustle of the happy crowd, I couldn't capture this moment and preserve it forever. And this same exact moment would never, ever come again. That thought made me feel hopelessly sad.

But it was still too early to put a name to this feeling.

"Want some *yakisoba*?"

I snapped open my disposable wooden chopsticks, as if marking the end of something.

As I dug in to the cheap but hearty taste of festival food, Yuzuki reached out her hand as if to say, "Gimme."

"Mmn."

I handed her a new pair of wooden chopsticks, along with the plastic pack of *yakisoba*.

...For some reason, she handed the chopsticks back to me.

I handed her a different, unused pair of wooden chopsticks.

My silent seatmate shook her head from left to right.

...She didn't want to use those chopsticks, either, apparently.

Experimentally, I offered her the same chopsticks I had been eating with.

Finally, Yuzuki nodded, grabbed them, and dug into the *yakisoba*.

"What's all that about, you wanted to make Haru jealous or something?"...is

what I wanted to say, teasing her, but Yuzuki was looking away as if she was embarrassed, so I decided to drop it.

Once we were done with the *yakisoba* and the *marumaru yaki*, we both readied our Ramune bottles, then with a “Ready? Go!” we popped the caps and sunk our marbles into the soda. These were actually plastic bottles, not the traditional glass ones, which was a little disappointing, but never mind. Yuzuki let her hand off the top a fraction too soon, and foam started spurting up out of her bottle. She started squealing, but I brought the bottle to my lips and gulped the foam.

I was surprised by how much foam was burbling out of the bottle. It was a real tidal wave.

Yuzuki was laughing. I started laughing, too. As soon as she stopped, I started again, and then she joined in once more.

Even the Ramune bottles joined in, the marbles knocking around inside giving off a sound like muted, chuckling voices.

Once we were done drinking, we took off the caps and removed our marbles. Then, like we did when we were kids, we held them up in front of our eyes to look through.

The world seen through the Ramune marble was upside down, colorful, and seemed to be floating.

I could see small boys running around, tiny girls dressed in colorful *yukatas*, couples strolling, holding hands and looking like they wanted to be doing a lot more than that. But none of them seemed to realize that they were upside down.

“Hey, Saku. You look pretty handsome, viewed through a marble.”

So said Yuzuki.

“And you look pretty beautiful, viewed through a marble.”

The festival atmosphere seemed to have taken ahold of both Yuzuki and me.

Come tomorrow, this would go back to being a small, everyday kind of shrine. And this heat between us, it would soon dissipate again, as our boundaries

were asserted once more.

So I figured it was okay for us to stay caught up in this moment, for just a few minutes longer.



Once we had finished all the Baby Castella cake balls, we decided to make another circuit of the festival.

Yuzuki was meandering in the direction of an area beyond the glow of the lanterns.

I thought she might have been searching for the bathrooms, but she stopped in front of a tree—correction, two trees—draped with rope. Then she beckoned me over.

“What’s up?”

As I approached, Yuzuki silently pointed to a sign.

It said: HUSBAND AND WIFE GINKGO TREE on it. I quickly read the description. Apparently, this shrine had several trees like these ones that have two trunks growing together, just perfect for praying before in hopes of a happy bond.

Yuzuki checked that I was done reading, then put her hand on one of the tree trunks. The trunks seemed to form a V shape.

“Come on. Why not?”

I could more or less guess what she was after.

I put my hand on the other trunk.

I sneaked a glance at Yuzuki, who had closed her eyes. I kept on looking at her. Even when I finally closed my eyes, I had no idea what to pray for.

A few moments later, I made eye contact with Yuzuki, who suddenly opened her eyes wide. She gave me a slightly sad smile.

“This feels more like a two-timing tree than a happy husband and wife tree,” she commented.

“You said it.”

At a moment like this, all I could do was go for the humor.

No doubt Yuzuki could go no further. Nor did she particularly want to. Neither of us had the guts to strike first, so we were just waving our swords around at each other here.

I was thinking about that, when...

"Hey. Saku Chitose."

...Oh, give me a break.

I don't know where he came from, but all of a sudden, a familiar big dumb rooster had come clucking its way in between us.

"Eek!"

Yuzuki stumbled back, overly shocked, and fell on her butt in the gravel.

I was pissed off already, but I fought it back, cooled myself down, and offered a hand to Yuzuki.

That's when someone kicked me hard in the back. I was crouched down in my *yukata*, which was hard to move around in anyway. I fell on Yuzuki, knocking her flat.

Someone was cackling behind us, an infuriating sound.

Are you kidding me right now? Shit.

As I was trying to get up, I looked quickly at Yuzuki.

She was staring over my shoulder, her face a cold mask of terror that I had never seen from her before. Her hand clawed at my *yukata*, trembling, and her beautiful lips had gone white.

"Whoo, lookin' hot, Yuzuki Nanase," Cock-a-Doodle Doofus crowed, and I quickly tugged the hem of Yuzuki's *yukata* back down over her legs.

I planted both feet far apart, bracing myself in case he was going to kick me again. Half dragging Yuzuki, I got us both back standing once more.

I turned, pushing Yuzuki protectively behind my back. There was another guy standing behind Cock-a-Doodle Doofus, a much taller guy.

He was about the same height as Kaito, maybe a little shorter. He was skinny all over—too skinny, with gangly arms and legs. With his height, it looked

unnatural. Creepy.

I quickly scanned the area. I could see no sign of the other two guys that had been at the library.

Still, if it came to a fight, I would be at a disadvantage in a *yukata* and wooden sandals.

If it came down to it, *yakisoba* or *okonomiyaki* would be my weapons of choice. Maybe a grilled squid.

At any rate, shoving some kind of piping-hot food down the back of their shirts might buy me enough time to grab Yuzuki and make a run for it.

"It's been too long, Yuzuki."

The tall, gangly guy emerged from the shadows and advanced on us.

He had kind of a samurai-style haircut—short on the sides, with the long top part pulled tight in a ponytail high up at the back. He had sharp, narrow, mean eyes. Immediately, I knew this was the “boss” Cock-a-Doodle Doofus had spoken of.

And the way he spoke to Yuzuki made it clear that they knew each other.

Yuzuki clung to my sleeve. She was shaking, and her nails were beginning to dig into my skin.

“...Yana...” Yuzuki sounded close to tears. “...Yanashita...”

I took a deep breath and let it out.

All right. The blood's not rushing to my head anymore. Just be cool.

I put my hand over Yuzuki’s. “What do you want with my girlfriend?”

Yanashita grinned faintly in response to that. “So you’re Saku Chitose. Get lost. I came here to see Yuzuki.”

“So you say, but as you can see, Yuzuki’s not about to let me go. It’s tough being a favorite with the ladies, y’know.”

Swoosh. Yanashita kicked a clump of gravel at us.

Yuzuki jerked, startled, then clung to me even harder, so hard it was hurting.

"She's mine."

"That's the first I'm hearing of it. What's this, the scorned ex-boyfriend routine?"

Behind me, Yuzuki shook her head vigorously.

"Come on, Yuzuki. You told me you didn't want to date anyone, but the minute you get into high school you start spreading your legs for this show-off loser?" Yanashita's face twisted. "Since you'll clearly do it with anyone, why not with me? You don't want a repeat of what happened, do you?"

"...What happened?" I asked.

Yuzuki let out a strangled squeak, as if to say, "Please, don't ask."

Yanashita grinned. "You don't even know, do you? When this one gets all scared and weepy, it's the biggest turn-on ever."

Geh-heh-heh. He laughed. The sound was obscene. Yuzuki clung to me even harder.

...Ah, okay. That's about enough of that.

I let the blood rush to my head.

One punch to the snout should do it. Then this whole unpleasant time could be behind us.

Even though I knew it wasn't like me to choose violence.

I clenched my fist—and then I remembered two sets of little fingers, hooked around mine in a three-way pinkie swear.

Right. I can't do this. Not like this. Not now.

I clenched and opened my fist a few times, trying to release tension.

It was going to be just fine, this time.

I gathered my strength, then sucked in a huge breath.

"AAAARGH!!! HELP! These guys are trying to do lewd things to me!!! They said they're horny for good-looking youngsters of any gender!!! HEEEELLLPPP!!! Someone, HEEELPPP!!!"

I screamed at the top of my lungs.

It seemed like everyone in the whole dang shrine turned to look this way. People started whispering.

Cock-a-Doodle Doofus looked totally confused by what was happening for a good few seconds. Then he seemed to snap out of it and advanced on me, growling, "You're gonna die."

"IT'S A PERVERRRRT!!! Their fetish is licking the six-packs of high school sports players!!! They said they love to bury their faces between a guy's pecs and massage his finely toned thighs and biceps!!! Then they wanna finish while clutching the guy's well-tempered gluteus maximus! Please, save me from this terrible, sexually depraved fate!!! HEEELLPPP!!!"

"Cut it out now, or you're dead..."

"FAREWELL TO MY BOYISH INNOCENCE, AAARGH!!!"

The people nearby started frowning, clearly unable to hide their disgust.

Yanashita and Cock-a-Doodle Doofus looked like they were about to drop dead of absolute shock. They turned and hurried off, not saying another word.

Hee-hee. Getting in a few good hits doesn't always require the use of fists.

And sometimes you have to sacrifice what you hold dear to save something else you treasure.

Yuzuki put her arms around me and buried her face in my chest. What, no laughter?

CHAPTER THREE

Defined Relationships and Undefined Distances



The day after our encounter at the festival with Yanashita and Cock-a-Doodle Doofus of Yan High, Yuzuki was uncharacteristically absent from school.

My guess was that she was too exhausted to keep up the usual act of being herself.

I didn't tell my friends about what happened last night. It wasn't because I wanted to hide the danger I was in or because I didn't want to make them worried about me. It was because I still didn't understand myself what had transpired between Yanashita and Yuzuki to make her react the way she did. Without all the facts, I couldn't just go ahead and give my friends an incomplete story. Who knows what kind of repercussions that might have for Yuzuki, after all.

Yesterday, after seeing Yuzuki home, I sent her a text before bed asking if she was all right, but her response was simply: "*I'm skipping school tomorrow.*" I was well aware that asking someone who was clearly not all right if they were all right was the dumbest of the dumb. I knew I would probably have had another run-in with the Yan High guys at some point, but Yuzuki seemed terrified. I really wasn't expecting that.

Maybe I needed to do some more work trying to understand her.

I thought about that all day, and then school ended. I headed to a local Saizeriya restaurant with Tomoya to do some studying for the tests. Honestly, I wasn't really in the mood, but since I got to take a day off from playing Yuzuki's boyfriend today, I guessed I had some free time to advise Tomoya on love

matters for once.

We studied for around two hours for the midsemester tests that would start tomorrow. It seemed like a good time to take a break. I ordered a hamburg steak with veggie sauce and a large portion of rice, figuring I'd eat an early dinner. Tomoya ordered the Milan-style *doria*, a gratin dish made with rice instead of pasta.

Once our orders arrived, and we had both made our umpteenth trip to the unlimited soft drinks bar for refills, Tomoya cleared his throat as if he'd been waiting for an opportunity to chat. "So how was the festival yesterday?"

Not wasting any time, are we? I thought, but it made sense. Given Tomoya's position, no wonder he wanted to know about that.

It wouldn't be fair to keep silent. I had already told him I would be taking Yuzuki to the festival, after all. Last night, I didn't feel like giving Tomoya any lighthearted love advice, so I made him wait for the date report. Since he was crazy about Yuzuki, he had no choice but to stay patient, as much as he disliked it.

But my state of mind was my own, and I wouldn't let anything slip out in front of Tomoya.

I tried to lighten my own mood and responded in a casual tone.

"Oh yeah. A date to the festival is really great, man."

"Well, duh. You got to walk around with Nanase wearing her *yukata*. I ought to shove this dish of *doria* in your face." Tomoya scowled at me resentfully.

"Don't be like that. After all, here I am, giving up my free time for you today."

"Only because Nanase was absent. It's not like her, is it? She hasn't seemed sick lately or anything."

"Maybe it's a heavy flow day. Give her a break."

"Again with the gross comments..."

Hmm. Maybe that wasn't the best joke to throw out there over dinner.

Tomoya sighed, as if frustrated. "Maybe there's something bothering her...?"

"Listen..."

I finished cutting my hamburg steak and sunny-side up fried egg into bite-size pieces, then put down my knife.

"Like I said before, you really need to quit that bad habit of yours. Trying to romanticize everything about girls, like you're writing a story in your mind about them. If it's not the heavy-flow guess I just made, then she probably just caught a sudden head cold or something, and she's dripping snot everywhere."

All right, on this occasion at least, Tomoya had guessed right about Yuzuki being bothered by something.

Still, throwing a hundred balls and managing to get one good one by chance isn't enough to make someone a pitcher.

"I've been trying to be more careful about that ever since you pointed it out, Chitose, but I can't help it sometimes. Anyway, whether Nanase is sick or in trouble, I just want to help her any way I can."

Tomoya smooshed his *doria* around with his spoon, grinning and blushing.

"Having some guy she's barely interacted with show up desperate to play nursemaid for her will only make Yuzuki think she's in some kind of horror film. Anyway, just assuming that you can do something to fix another person's issues...is totally conceited."

...So then what exactly is it you're doing, huh?

In my mental mirror image, a clown was grinning back at me.

"But you helped Kenta Yamazaki out with his problem. And here you are, helping me. Doesn't that count as helping to fix other people's issues?"

I knew it. I knew he'd go for the weak spot.

He was right. I did believe I could do a better job than most other people. But I also admitted that there were other people out there who could no doubt do a better job than I could.

It was an inconsistency, yes, but it was *my* inconsistency. Right now, I had to find the right words, for Tomoya's benefit.

"Getting help from others, getting that push—it's all well and good, but in the end, you're the only one who can help yourself. It's the same for you, Tomoya. If you can't bring yourself to actually speak to Yuzuki, you're never going to make the slightest bit of progress."

"Couldn't you possibly introduce...?"

"Sure, I could, but do you not have the balls to approach her yourself? Yuzuki would never fall for a guy that weak; I know that."

"I guess you're right..." Tomoya hung his head, looking oddly despondent.

"Don't overthink things, Tomoya. Just say hi. Ask her: 'Remember that time I ate dirt outside the school?' or something. Oh, wait, don't do that. That might freak her out, kinda."

"It was kind of a major scene, so I'm sure she remembers it. But what if she doesn't? What if she's like, 'Who are you, again?' I might just die."

"Then say something like: 'The Hokuriku region is always so cloudy, huh?' or 'Excuse me, have you seen a sandwich with a croquette filling, 'cause I dropped one around here?' Anything, man; just talk to her! Geez, you're such a downer! You're not going to get *anywhere* until you can at least do that."

Tomoya sat there, opening and closing his mouth. I ignored him. "Now, listen here," I said, continuing. "Even I don't know the proper way to fall for someone. But I do know that you start by getting to know the other person and having them get to know you. You've got to put in some effort and give them a reason to like you. You need to let them know how you feel. These are, like, basic fundamentals, wouldn't you agree?"

I don't believe in things like love at first sight.

That feeling is nothing more than an awareness that you're interested in someone. It's more like a preliminary stage to being in love.

"You haven't even taken the first step, Tomoya. Sorry to tell you this, but in real life, all those 'written-in-the-stars' type of situations you see in movies and read about in novels have zero practical application. The world's full of humdrum, kinda boring, and uninspired relationships starting and ending every single day between guys and girls. So..."

I paused for effect and looked Tomoya in the eye.

"So settle for talking to her in a fumbling, hesitant way. Stammer as you ask her for her LINE ID. Ask her on a date, let yourself feel that excitement and nausea the whole time. That's how things get started. You can go ahead and call it fate later."

"But...but what if she turns me down?"

"Then you lock yourself in your darkened bedroom sobbing and writing crybaby poetry. Then when you get sick of that, you go buy a guitar and turn them into songs. Then it turns out you really dig doing that, so you form a band, perform at the school's Battle of the Bands, and then you discover a whole new love."

"Uh..." Tomoya was giving me an uncharacteristically sharp look. "That's because you've never experienced real love, Saku. Only someone who never met someone they knew to be The One could say stuff like that."

"Yeah, maybe." I meant it, too. "Leaving that last little guitar joke aside, I do understand the depths of your feelings, Tomoya. And I guess I really don't know what true love is. But I like to think I know the right and wrong way to go about things."

Tomoya's voice lowered, as if he realized he might have spoken out of turn just before. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said all that. You're here trying to help me, after all."

"No apology necessary. I said what I wanted to say, and so did you."

I drained my glass of melon soda. (Why is it that whenever I come to a family-style restaurant like this one, I get the urge to drink melon soda until the pumps run dry...?) Then I stood up and decided to voice a thought that just came to me.

"By the way, Tomoya, do you have any hobbies or anything?"

"What? Why are you asking that all of a sudden?"

Tomoya was looking at me with a quizzical expression.

"Hmm, I just realized we haven't discussed any friend-type stuff at all."

"Well, I don't write any sad guitar songs, but I do actually like music a regular amount."

"Oh yeah? You should recommend something to me sometime."

"All right. I'll think of something."

We both grinned at each other and decided to call it for the day.



That evening, I thought about it for a while and then decided to send a message to Yuzuki.

Wanna role-play? I'll be the nurse who comes to attend to you, but you're so sweaty and gross that I need to give you a rubdown.

I felt embarrassed as soon as I sent it, but the message was marked as read immediately.

All right, but only if you catch my cold, and it triggers the event where I get to be the one to nurse you.

How much of me will you rub down, Yuzuki?

How much of you do you want rubbed down?

Well, of course, all the dirty places.

Something tells me you've done this before and made girls cry.

Curse you! How did you know about that?!

She seemed to have regained some of her Yuzuki-ness.

Hey, Saku? That wasn't me, okay?

Just as I was thinking about how she was back to being Yuzuki, she sent me that message without waiting for my response.

Too late. I can't erase the image I have of you, Yuzuki, enjoying the festival like a real girl.

And you were more of a real boy than ever, Saku.

We weren't using any emojis or LINE stamps, which made our messages

simpler, but it was harder to read the emotion behind the words. I wondered what kind of expression Yuzuki was wearing right now as she gazed down at her own phone.

I decided on a simple topic to discuss.

How's Red Fish and Black Fish?

Saku and Chitose are happily swimming around together on top of my desk.

Oh, good. Remember to whisper that you love them every night.

I love you, Saku Chitose.

You forgot the comma in between. Saku, Chitose. You don't want me to get the wrong idea, here.

Right now, I would like you to get the right idea.

But she still didn't seem serious.

I thought about it for around five minutes, then sent one back.

Nanase, how about becoming my girlfriend for real?

Our messages had stopped pinging back and forth now.

I had to wait another five minutes before a response came.

It's not possible right now, Chitose.

Oh phew, I thought.

I'm glad she's still Yuzuki Nanase, giving me a classic Yuzuki Nanase-type response, I thought.

Too bad. Thought this might be a good chance to catch you in a moment of weakness and plead my case.

That only works for normal girls. Remember, I'm Yuzuki

Nanase.

And I'm your local man-slut shithead. I'll prepare a more elegant approach for next time. Kindly forget that cringeworthy pickup line.

Yuzuki finally sent me a LINE stamp, one depicting a black cat.

It was brandishing its claws, saying, "Meeeow!"

Come to school tomorrow, Nanase.

I will come to school tomorrow, Chitose.

Good night, Yuzuki.

Good night, Saku.

And just like that, we went back to being temporary boyfriend and girlfriend.



The next day, when I went to Yuzuki's house to pick her up, she looked back to normal, at least on the outside.

We made it to school, and she still seemed normal while the members of Team Chitose were all trying to guess how the test would go today.

I was hoping the day would go without a hitch, but a certain someone wasn't about to let a golden opportunity slip past.

It was about ten minutes before the first test was due to start.

Nazuna was just heading back to her desk after laughing it up about something with Atomu and the rest of her usual crew, when she knocked into Yuzuki's desk.

"Oh, my bad."

Nazuna trailed off as the drawer under Yuzuki's desk slid open and a mass of papers spilled out, landing all over the floor.

Our school has a rule that our desk drawers need to be empty during tests. Most of the students moved their desk stuff to their lockers after classes yesterday. Yuzuki had been absent, but Yuuko and Yua had kindly taken care of her stuff for her and let her know.

So both Yuzuki and I were shocked by what had just happened right in front of our eyes. Too shocked to react at first.

"What's this? Photos of you on a date with Chitose? Geez, how many did you print? Ugh."

Once Nazuna's words had sunk in, it was already too late.

Yuuko, who was standing nearby, bent down and picked up one of the photos. She froze.

There were about ten pictures, all showing the same thing. Yuzuki, dressed in her *yukata*, walking around the shrine grounds with me, our little fingers looped together.

Yuzuki gasped and got down on her knees, desperately scrabbling to gather up the rest of the photos.

The sight of Yuzuki getting uncharacteristically flustered, to the point that she actually forgot that there were people around watching, only made it more obvious that there was something she wanted to hide here. I realized I couldn't do or say anything to help this situation.

Nazuna looked down at Yuzuki, snorting with amusement.

"Lame. It's just dumb date photos. What's all the panic for?" Yuzuki glared up at Nazuna from her position crouched under her desk. Then she caught Yuuko's eye and looked away guiltily.

Nazuna picked up on that, grinning and speaking without any filter.

"Uh-oh, was it supposed to be a secret from Hiiragi? Pretty sneaky."

I wanted to do something. But me jumping in right now would only make things worse. After what Nazuna just said, anything I said would sound like I was covering for Yuzuki.

Since Yuzuki and I were publicly officially dating, neither of us should have cared if Nazuna or the other students in class saw proof of it. The problem was if it was seen by the members of Team Chitose, and especially Yuuko, who thought it was all just a big fake.

In that moment, I think both Yuzuki and I had gotten a little carried away.

It's not like we betrayed anyone, exactly. Nor did we act with dishonor. But if you asked us if we would have acted the way we did at the festival if Yuuko and the others had been there, the answer would have been an absolute no.

As an example, it was as if a young boy or girl penned a secret, heartfelt novel, only to stumble upon the person they cared about the most reading it behind their back. It was that kind of feeling.

I felt guilty and embarrassed, even though there was really no reason for me to feel that way. I couldn't help it, though.

Nobody had said anything for a while. It looked like no one knew what to say. Then Nazuna broke the silence.

"Boring! I knew you weren't a good match for Chitose."

I was glad the first test was a math test.

If it was contemporary literature, I'm sure I would have been too distracted by my own story.



The first day of tests was over, and we were released before noon. We all decided to go and eat at Hachiban Ramen.

The table seats could only accommodate six, so we had to spread out across two tables.

At my table, there was Yuzuki, Yuuko, Kenta, and me.

The other table held Kazuki, Kaito, Yua, and Haru.

Was it me, or was this seating arrangement devised for max discomfort?

The other table was happily chatting and exchanging notes on the test answers. Meanwhile, our table was like the reception after a funeral. I checked before we left school and discovered that it wasn't only Yuzuki's desk. All the members of Team Chitose, including me, had a copy of the same photograph tucked inside their desk drawers. The truth was bound to have come out sooner or later.

Yuuko was silently but passive-aggressively slurping a large bowl of miso veggie ramen. Yuzuki was sipping her salt-flavored broth with a tight

expression. Kenta was desperately scoffing his bowl of *tonkotsu* veggie ramen with *chashu* pork. *Yeah, you're definitely a lamb to the slaughter, a sacrifice added to this table to make up the numbers. I feel for you, man.*

For my part, I had ordered my usual spicy noodles, but only one portion today. For some reason, I couldn't work up an appetite.

"S-so how did everyone find the test today? I wasn't so sure about that math," Kenta piped up, as if he couldn't bear the tension a moment longer.

Good boy. There's my prize pupil.

Now, let the mutual understanding commence.

Neither Yuuko nor Yuzuki responded, though, so I decided against saying anything, either.

Kenta shot me a look that said, "Curse you, King, how could you leave me high and dry like that?" but I began whistling soundlessly and looked away.

"K-King. You could have invited me, if you were going to a festival. I've never seen girls in *yukatas*, or an actual festival, in real life before. I thought all that stuff only existed as scenes in fiction."

Oh, not bad.

Steering us to the issue at hand with a light touch. You really have come far, Kenta.

...But I still remained silent.

Kenta gave me another look; this one said, "I thought you were the one who told me making conversation is like playing catch, King," but I just looked away again and focused on pinching bits of the minced meat off my noodles with my chopsticks.

Eventually, Yuuko, who seemed to be done with her noodles, lifted her bowl to her lips with both hands to drink the broth. With a wet slurping sound, she drained the bowl. Then she put it back down on the table with a heavy thud.

Next, she grabbed her water glass and chugged it down.

Kenta scrambled to refill her glass from the water pitcher on the table.

"Well, I've got something to say!" Yuuko bellowed, clearly prepared to charge into battle now.

Yuzuki and I straightened up a little in our seats.

"...You were holding hands! Weren't you? Like this, little fingers all friendly-like!"

"...Yes."

Yuuko's voice sounded oddly menacing.

Clack!!!

The water glass, freshly drained, landed on the table again, and Kenta leaped in with the refill.

"Weren't you two supposed to be in a *fake* romance?"

"...Yes, Yuuko."

"So then, what's with the *yukatas* and the date and the hand-holding, then? I mean, right, Kenta?!"

"Y-yeah! Right! What's with that?"

Apparently, Kenta had aligned himself with the opposition.

Darn it, this was his revenge for before.

"Um, I-listen, Yuuko..."

I was just about to try to reason with her, when the glass slammed down again, cutting me off.

"You be quiet, Saku! I mean, it was obvious Yuzuki was the one who initiated the hand-holding!"

Yuzuki sat there in awkward silence, and Yuuko continued.

"I mean, it's not like I'm telling you *not* to hold hands or anything. That's your right. You can do that whenever you like, right? But what I'm trying to say is... What exactly are your intentions here, hmm?"

"Our intentions...?" Yuzuki's voice came out in a weak whisper.

"I'm asking if Saku's the only one for you after all, Yuzuki. If anyone would do,

if you just need a warm hand to hold, then cut it out. I know I don't have the right to say that, but seriously...cut it out." Yuuko's voice was unusually clipped and clear.

"It's not...it's not that anyone would do..."

"If it was Kentacchi on the date with you, would you have held *his* hand?"

"No, I wouldn't." Yuzuki responded without even a nanosecond's hesitation.

Hey, ladies, I must ask that you kindly refrain from wounding poor Kenta in your cross fire here.

"Then, what if it was Kazuki or Kaito?"

"I guess...I wouldn't."

"It had to be Saku, right?"

"...Sorry, I don't know."

Yuuko sucked in a huge breath and then forced it out. "All right, I see how it is now. So you and I are rivals, from this day forth!"

Yuzuki gazed at Yuuko with confusion on her face.

I probably looked much the same.

"No, I never said anything about that."

"That's what they all say, at first." Yuuko nodded firmly, then continued like a shrewd detective who was on the case. "But you know, you can't lock down that lovable dingus sitting beside you by being all wishy-washy! At your current level, Yuzuki, you're still not good enough to be Saku's special girl. I'm not there yet, either. The difference is that I know I'm not there yet! That's why I'm one step ahead of you!"

Yuzuki blinked and stiffened up as Yuuko pointed an accusatory finger right between her eyes. Then she let out a snort of laughter, which turned into a belly laugh.

"You're so odd, Yuuko! The way you see things is insane!"

"Nuh-uh! What you see is just pure honesty."

"Normal people don't leap to 'pure honesty' at a moment's provocation, though."

"What a truly *annoying* girl you are."

Then Yuuko fixed her eagle eye on me.

"And you, you lovable dingus!"

"Yeah?"

"That's 'yes, *ma'am*'!"

"Yes, *ma'am*!!!"

Yuuko leaned over the table and jabbed her index finger against my forehead.

"Listen! Here! You! Your kindness and naïveté are to your credit and your detriment, Saku! But if you hold hands with every girl who takes a fancy to you, you'll end up causing a human chain long enough to go all the way around the globe!"

"Er, if I held hands with every girl, it wouldn't really form much of a human chain... I've only got two..."

Her manicured fingernail poked against my forehead.

"If you've got so much free time you can go strutting about in a *yukata*, which I still haven't gotten to see you in, by the way...then why don't you get on with it and help Yuzuki solve her problem for good? Then you'll be free, and there won't be anything holding you back from going to see the fireworks with me this summer, dressed in our *yukatas*. Nope, nothing holding you back at all!"

I nodded, the fingernail still partially embedded in my skin.

Surrender seemed the best policy at this juncture.

Thanks to Yuuko, our relationship had been brought back into clear definition. If things hadn't been exposed like this, the stuff left unsaid between us would have just kept growing bigger and bigger.

The occupants of the other tables were staring at us with an "Are you done?" sort of look on their faces.

Yeah, let's wrap it up here.

Everyone's ire seemed to have been drawn increasingly toward Yuzuki, and the atmosphere was getting pretty frosty.

Things had run a course, and as uncomfortable as it was, it was too late to react now.

If only I could hit one last final home run, something to shake things up a bit.

But I was out of bright ideas. All I could do was slurp up the rest of my noodles.



After we paid the bill, I stopped by the bathrooms before leaving the restaurant. When I came out, I found Yuuko waiting by the handwashing station.

While I was washing my hands, Yuuko was staring at me in the mirror the whole time. I finished up, nervous that she was still mad. Finally, she spoke. "Saku, do you want to borrow my handkerchief?"

"It's okay. They've got one of those hot air blowy things. I'm cool."

"Hmph."

What was with her? While I was drying my hands, she held out her own toward me.

"Hey. I drank all the ramen broth. I think my fingers have swelled up a little from the sodium. Look, look."

"You're not a water balloon. Of course you haven't swelled up."

"Hey! Take a closer look. Go on!"

I couldn't figure out what she was doing. With no other choice, I looked down at Yuuko's hands, which she was still jabbing at me.

"They're fine. The same pretty hands as ever."

"Hmph! That is *not* what I'm asking here!"

I did what she asked. Why was she pouting?

Seriously, what was up with her?

"Everyone's waiting outside the restaurant for us. Let's get a move on."

Yuuko pulled her hands back and, with a subdued "Fine," turned and started to walk off ahead of me.

"Yeek!"

Apparently, she didn't notice the step leading down. She stumbled and pitched forward.

"Watch out!" I grabbed ahold of Yuuko's hand.

Yuuko managed to regain her balance and turned to look at me. For some reason, she was grinning widely.

"What's so funny? You're such a klutz, Yuuko. Watch where you're going in the future."

It was like my words weren't reaching her. Yuuko lifted up her hand, which was still being held by mine, and pushed it up in front of her face.

"On the record, you initiated this hand-holding, didn'tcha, Saku?"

Oh, I get it.

I finally realized what Yuuko was smiling about. Without thinking, I snorted with laughter.

"I guess I did, huh."

"Hee-hee!"

Yuuko looked satisfied. She nodded several times before releasing my hand, turning and heading for the exit once more. I called out after her.

"Yuuko."

"Ye-es?"

"You did wash your hands after leaving the bathroom, right?"

"Dingus! Of course I did!"



Yuzuki was officially recovering from being out sick, so we decided to go our separate ways outside of the ramen place. We headed home.

I stole a peek at the silent face walking beside me.

The tussle with Yuuko seemed to have restored Yuzuki's spirits somewhat, but now the aftereffects of that were rapidly wearing off. Yuzuki's face wore the same perfect composed expression as ever, but it was obvious that she was feeling worn-out and despondent.

She kept sighing, although apparently she wasn't even aware she was doing it.

No wonder. I hadn't heard any details about exactly what kind of connection she had with Yanashita of Yan High, but it was obviously something that weighed heavily on her emotionally. Then, when you factor in what happened this morning on top of that...

When I thought about the pressures high school girls are under, it's not so strange to think they might cry over things that happened in the distant past. But Yuzuki was the type to keep her feet firmly planted on the ground and her eyes dry.

"Are you...?"

I was about to say "Are you okay?" but I stopped myself.

Those kinds of words ring hollow in situations like this. I realized as much that night of the festival, too.

If I asked her if she was okay now, Yuzuki would be obliged to fake a smile and reply that she was fine, only adding to the mental burdens she was under.

I really wished there was something I could do to help her.

If I thought it would help, I'd be happy to head on over to Yan High and punch those guys' faces in. I'd even be willing to go to Kura or the police, if I thought talking things out would help.

But Yuzuki was in the midst of her own battle. What right did I have to go busting in, full of self-righteousness? After all, it wasn't happening to me. I was just a spectator in all this. It would be ridiculous for me to be the one to run out of patience and go crossing the line.

Yuzuki asked me to pretend to be her boyfriend and serve as a bodyguard.

She did not ask me to handle the situation for her, nor did she ask me to get involved in her own internal struggles and offer her emotional care.

Trying to cross that line...would be to satisfy myself more than anything else.

I found myself clenching my hands into fists.

...Not yet.

As things stood, right now, I could do nothing more for her.

"Hey, Saku..."

I realized Yuzuki had just said my name.

"Am I going forward the way I should be, do you think?"

I'm not sure she was really after a serious answer to that.

"Well, you're not Michael Jackson. It's hard not to go forward when that's the way you're facing. Ever tried to moonwalk? Not that easy."

She giggled, just a little. "That joke sucked."

I hoped that, come tomorrow, Yuzuki would be able to muster up more laughter than this.

I really, really hoped so.



The second day of the test period dawned with characteristic Hokuriku-region rainy skies. Yuzuki and I made our way gloomily to school, where a morning far shittier than any we could have anticipated awaited us.

As soon as we entered the classroom, all the students started looking back and forth between their phones and us. I figured there was fresh slander on the school underground gossip site about me, but actually it seemed like Yuzuki was the target of everyone's curious gaze.

I was getting a bad feeling about this.

Yua looked up, spotted us, and came running over. "Saku..." She handed me her phone.

I checked the screen. Then I quickly dropped it into my blazer pocket.

"Show me." Yuzuki knew something was up. She held out her hand.

"It's nothing. Just more online takedowns bashing the man-slut shithead. If you see it, you're going to be like, 'Let's see other people,' and I don't think I could take it."

I knew that Yuzuki wouldn't be fooled that easily, though.

Yuzuki got out her own phone, and just then...

"Nanase, you know, you're such a..." Nazuna was walking up, holding her own phone facing screen forward. "This kinda guy is your type? Seriously?"

There was an image on the screen. Just one.

It showed Yuzuki, who looked to have been in junior high at that point. She was with a guy.

The guy had his arm tight around her waist and was pulling Yuzuki against him.

The guy was Yanashita, without a doubt, looking younger and more innocent than he did when we ran into him the other night.

"Ooh, dating bad boys. It's such a stereotypically middle schooler thing to do. Hilarious!"

No doubt, you could be forgiven for having that impression at first glance.

But the Yuzuki in the photo showed the truth. She was facing away from Yanashita, head tilted down, and it looked like she was biting her lip. Her eyes glistened with tears. She was holding her own wrist with her other hand, and it looked like she was gripping on for dear life.

People who knew Yuzuki well, like Yua and me, could see something was odd. But Nazuna clearly hadn't given it much thought. She'd assumed that this was a photo of Yuzuki with an ex-boyfriend. She was treating it like a joke.

But Yuzuki's reaction was extreme.

She clung on to my arm and began shaking. It looked like she was about to faint.

Nazuna continued her attack. "Still trying to butter up Chitose? Desperate to

convince him that he's your one and only these days?"

Yuzuki blinked, jerking, and quickly let go of my arm. "...When?" Her voice came out sounding strangled. "When did I ever try to butter up Saku?"

Nazuna sniffed. "You're always trying it. You put on this mask to make everyone love you, but you keep changing it up, always trying to win everyone over. It makes me sick."

"...So?" Yuzuki was getting heated. All warmth was rapidly draining from her voice.

Now she was staring at Nazuna with an expression like ice.

"So is that why you decided to become a gofer for the Yan High students, Ayase? Is that why you've been doing all this?"

"What?"

Oh shit, I thought.

But Yuzuki plowed ahead before I could stop her.

"When my deodorant got stolen, I noticed you hanging around the classroom surprisingly late, compared to when you usually leave. When my basketball shoes got taken, you were at the game, for some reason. Then yesterday, you just *happened* to bump into my desk and spill those photos everywhere..." Yuzuki smiled thinly. "A lot of convenient coincidences are starting to rack up here, aren't they? And you just so happen to have a friend at Yan High, don't you, Ayase?"

I was surprised to find that Yuzuki apparently knew all about Nazuna hanging around late at school the day of the deodorant heist—and that she had a friend at Yan High, too.

Those were two pieces of information I'd kept from Yuzuki.

No doubt, based on the circumstantial evidence, it was possible that the person cooperating with Yan High was Nazuna.

But it was all just speculation.

Because if Nazuna really was behind the crimes, that would make her the

dumbest person alive.

Stopping to chat with me right after swiping Yuzuki's deodorant? That would be a brainless move. Sticking around to watch the game? Too suspicious. And the thing with the photos yesterday. Every member of Team Chitose got a copy in their desk. All Nazuna had to do was wait for one of us to uncover one.

If Yuzuki was in her right mind, she would have realized all this herself.

And at any rate...this just didn't fit with the impression I'd gotten of Nazuna, when we had our chat that day after school, under the twilight sky.

"Excuse me?" Nazuna was fighting back. "The hell are you talking about? I don't know what your problem is, but are you trying to accuse me of doing stuff to mess with you?"

"I'm not accusing anyone. I'm just putting the evidence together."

"Why would I do something like that?"

"My guess is that you have plenty of reasons."

"...Don't screw with me, bitch!"

Nazuna flung her phone onto the floor, where it landed with a smash. It bounced once and flipped over, revealing a screen covered in cracks.

"I know I'm not exactly what you'd call a good girl at this school. I really don't like you at all, either, Nanase. That said..."

Nazuna glowered at Yuzuki, who was stone-faced.

I could see that her eyes were glistening with angry tears.

"...That said, if I had an issue with you, I'd tell it to you straight! Messing with someone behind their back... I'd never do something so cowardly! What, you think I'm afraid of you or something?!"

Yuzuki blinked, letting Nazuna's fury wash over her. Then she cleared her throat. "...What? But I was so sure that you..."

"Yuzuki!!!"

My shout cut off Yuzuki's ice-cold voice.

I couldn't let her say any more.

This wasn't like her. This wasn't the way the real Yuzuki Nanase did things.

"You're completely in the wrong here, Yuzuki." I plopped my hand down on her shoulder, a little more forcefully than needed.

Yuzuki finally realized what she was doing, and she clamped her lips together.

"Um..." Atomu spoke up then, bending down and scooping up the smashed cell phone. "I know Nazuna's pretty mouthy, and she can be kind of a jerk, but you're totally wrong about the basketball game."

"Hey, mind your own business," Nazuna snapped.

Atomu ignored her and turned to Yuzuki. "Nazuna did basketball in junior high, you know? She was actually a big fan of your playing style, Nanase. When she found out our team was playing that 'big shot' team, she was like, 'I gotta go watch.'"

Based on the circumstances, a revelation like that was enough to tip the scales in Nazuna's favor. Few people knew what the circumstances were that had led to this altercation, but it was more than enough to have Yuzuki regretting her words.

Nazuna snatched her phone back from Atomu and stomped back to her desk. Just then, Kura entered, as if he had timed it down to the second.

Dammit, Atomu. If you'd just mentioned that earlier, I could have taken you both off the short list of suspects already. I was feeling churlish, but honestly, it wasn't his fault.

Yuzuki had launched a totally unfounded, biased attack. Nazuna was caught up between feelings of admiration for Yuzuki and feelings of dislike. Atomu was trying to spare Nazuna's pride and chose to keep certain details from me. And here I was, with no way to have prevented any of it.

I knew that Yuzuki would blame herself worse than anyone else for this.

She dropped her sports bag to the ground and ran out of the classroom.

"...Hey! Kura!"

Kura seemed to grasp the situation right away.

Scratching his messy hair, Kura nodded.

"All right, Nanase can retake the exam another time. As for you, you can have an extra twenty minutes at the end to make it up. Go on."

Dammit. Why was I the only one who had to play on hard mode?

I didn't have time to snark back at Kura. I raced out of the room in pursuit of Yuzuki.



I finally caught up with her on the landing that held the door leading to the rooftop. Spare desks and chairs that weren't needed for use in the classroom were piled haphazardly in the space. It was like Yuzuki was using them as a barricade. She sat on the other side, knees drawn up to her chin.

"Hey, didn't you know? This place is usually locked up. If you want to use the rooftop, you have to apply to Kura in writing. Unless you're Roof-Cleaning Officer Saku Chitose."

Yuzuki mumbled something, cheeks pressed against her knees. "I'm sorry..."

I grabbed the rooftop key from my pocket and smoothly unlocked the door.

Sadly, all I could see outside was a gloomy, overcast sky filled with dark clouds.

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to, now, am I?"

"I know, I know... But, Saku, the test..."

"Japanese is my best subject. I only need, like, half an hour." I sat down beside Yuzuki. "You need to apologize to Nazuna properly."

"...Mm."

"No point coming up here. It's raining out, you know."

"...Mm."

"Let's sit here for a minute, then do you think you can go back and take the test?"

“...Mm.”

“Can I touch your boobs?”

“...Mm.”

“Sheez.”

I was glad it was raining today.

With the door standing open, all you could hear was the sound of rain.

“Let’s kill time. We can tell pointless stories about our pasts.” I started talking, not sure where I was going with this. “There’s this one incident that always sticks in my memory. I was in kindergarten.”

The rain kept on pouring down.

Listening to it, I let my mind drift away to a day many years ago.

“The teacher made up a game for us. She’d say, ‘Who here has two feet?’ and we’d all stand up. Then she’d say, ‘Who here loves soccer?’ and only the people who liked soccer would sit down. There were no real winners or losers. When I think about it now, it’s like...why were we all so excited to play such a dumb, simple game? It always makes me laugh.”

The world was so much simpler then.

“Then, one time, the teacher said, ‘Who here has hair?’ then followed it up with, ‘Who here is a girl?’ and the guy beside me, a friend of mine, got all confused, and he forgot to sit down, so he was still standing with all the girls. What do you think I did then?”

No response from my little neighbor.

“I knew I had to make him realize before he ended up totally embarrassed. So I was like, ‘No, no!’ grabbed him around the waist, and yanked him down. Only...”

Recalling the scene in my mind, I spluttered with laughter.

“Only I yanked all wrong, and his pants ended up coming down. Everyone got a good look at his cute Ultraman-print briefs. Even the girl he had a thing for. He went bright red and started crying, beat the crap out of me, then wouldn’t

speak to me for the rest of the day.”

At the time, even though I was just a kid, I felt like I had committed a crime I could never atone for.

“But the next day, everyone had forgotten about it, even him. We all just got in a circle and started playing Duck, Duck, Goose.”

Yuzuki lifted her head a little and muttered, “...What kinda story is that?”

“Just killing time. I told you. The meaning... That’s up to the listener. You’ve got to draw out your own meaning from it.”

Yuzuki fell silent again. She was probably thinking what a goof I was.

“Hey, now, how can we make that rain stop?” I continued. “If this was a musical film, this would be a great time for a musical number. But nothing too on the nose.”

“...All right, let’s try that, then.”

I launched into a discordant but enthusiastic rendition of “Teru Teru Bōzu,” followed by “Ame Furi,” two classic children’s songs about rain. As I was about to sing another round, Yuzuki threw up the white flag. “All right, all right, I’ll go back to class now.”

Fifteen minutes. It was close, but I made it.

I watched as Yuzuki went down the stairs, looking almost as if nothing had even happened. I watched as she rounded the corner, then I gritted my teeth together, clenched my hand into a fist, and slammed it down on one of the desks.

She was still putting up a front.

Still acting the cool girl, so she could go on pretending to be “Yuzuki Nanase.”

I couldn’t let her see my anger, my sadness.

I pulled myself together, and only then did I head down the stairs after her.

Incidentally, the lyrics to the “Teru Teru Bōzu” nursery rhyme end like this...

“But if it’s cloudy and I find you crying / Then I shall snip off your head.”



“Saku. Yuzuki. The guys from Yan High are here.”

We had made it through the second day of tests, when Kaito came bringing this totally unwelcome bit of news.

Beside me, I could sense Yuzuki trembling.

Man, what an absolutely tedious day.

“How many of them?”

“Two by the front gates and another two by the back gate. Four in all.”

No doubt Yanashita and Cock-a-Doodle Doofus had formed two teams, each pairing up with either Henchman A or B, those other two minor goons who were also at the library. I managed to scare Yanashita off that evening at the festival, but he clearly wasn’t the kind of guy who would remain deterred for that long.

Still, I really didn’t want this to become a big thing, if it could be avoided. Confronting us at our own school was way over the line.

“How did they seem?”

“They weren’t bothering the other students. They seem to be just hanging around, at least for now.”

If their plan was to intimidate us, well, it was working.

The members of Team Chitose were all gathered, anxious expressions on their faces.

“What should we do? Should I gather the basketball team so we can go home in a big group? That’s all I can think of.”

That was Kaito’s plan.

“No... You guys are still on the outside of this. I don’t want you getting involved. We’ll just stay here at school and study for now. Maybe those guys will get sick of hanging around and leave on their own.”

Yua cleared her throat hesitantly.

“Saku... Yuzuki...”

"I know, I know. I'll uphold my promise. I won't do anything dangerous without consulting everyone first."

Kazuki made a fist and punched me lightly on the shoulder. "So I'm guessing you have a backup plan in case they get even more persistent?"

"Hmm, well. Anyway, you guys just go home as normal. I'll update everyone via LINE later."

The members of Team Chitose still looked worried as they all trooped out of the classroom together.

"Time for a study sesh, I guess."

Yuzuki must have had a lot she wanted to discuss with me. Strategies and so on. But she didn't say a word. She just quietly started spreading out her pencils and books.



There was nothing to be gained from panicking. We sat tight for a few hours after that.

Yuzuki and I focused on test studying. We were as focused as if we were actually in class. No, even more so.

Even if we hurried home, we would have just been doing the same thing there. We were killing time, yeah, but we were doing so in a productive way, so it didn't bother us.

The clock above the blackboard read six PM.

It was funny, but the annoyance of knowing that we couldn't leave made for some intense study focus. Maybe we were just hiding out from reality, but Yuzuki seemed to be feeling the same effect. I heard her pen scratching away for ages without even a pause.

I kept making regular checks outside, but the Yan High guys were annoyingly persistent. At first, they seemed to be loitering around near the gates, but now they had taken seats on the ground right by the front and back gates and appeared to be chatting and enjoying themselves.

Annoyingly, the afternoon's fierce rain seemed to have dried up.

In the end, I realized that even though it was getting really late, they were showing no signs of leaving. They had nothing better to do than we did—that is to say, all they could really do was sit around chatting. Apparently, they didn't mind sitting on packed earth outside Fuji High all evening. Or maybe they were just that pissed at me. Or maybe they were just that obsessed with Yuzuki.

"We've got no other choice. Shall we head home?"

"What...?"

Yuzuki looked worried as I began packing up my study stuff on my desk.

"I'm going to play one of my hands. Not sure how much it'll work, if at all, but hey."

We walked out of the entryway, and Henchman A spotted us immediately. Sitting beside him was Yanashita, who slowly got to his feet. Henchman A whipped out his phone and made a call. No doubt, Cock-a-Doodle Doofus and his buddy would come running up any minute.

Yuzuki hid behind me, as if she didn't want to look at their faces. She was clutching my blazer.

"Sup," Yanashita called out to us.

I stopped just shy of the school gates and responded.

"Looks like we kept you waiting, huh. Sorry you had to hang around on a rainy day like this one. Hope you didn't all get soggy butts."

"The time went by in a flash. We were feasting our eyes on the Fuji High girls. These fancy college prep schools sure have a lot of sophisticated-lookin' hotties."

"I imagine the girls themselves were wondering what a couple of grubby countryside potatoes like you were doing vegetating in the dirt outside the Fuji High gates, eh?"

Yanashita took a silent step forward, then stopped, apparently trying to contain himself.

...Just three more steps.

"Still, Yuzuki's in a different class from the rest. Don't you think?"

"Oh yeah. But if you want something to go with your potatoes, you've already got that walking fried chicken there."

I looked over at Cock-a-Doodle Doofus, who was running up at that exact moment.

...Two more steps.

"Saku Chitose. Don't tell me you seriously think you're safe there? You think we won't lay a hand on you? 'Cause we're gonna. Tell him, Yuzuki."

I couldn't see Yuzuki's face, since she was still hiding behind me, but I could tell what her reaction would be.

...One more step.

"Don't worry. If I thought for a second you were planning to use logic over violence, my jaw would fall off from shock."

"That's enough. You're finished."

Yanashita passed under the gate arch and grabbed me by my shirtfront.

Yuzuki clung to my back.

Clatter, clatter, shuffle, shuffle.

Footsteps were approaching—the shuffling of leather-soled sandals we were so used to hearing.

"Hey. You kids. No fighting."

The drawling voice that carried over was unmistakably, incorrigibly Kura's. I felt the tension drain from my shoulders.

Yanashita leaned his face in close to mine, still gripping my shirt.

"You squealed?"

"Don't make it sound so uncivilized. I simply put in a report about suspicious trespassers on campus property."

Yeah, the hand I decided to play? It involved borrowing the power of the faculty. There was no simpler method for stopping a brawl from brewing at the

school gates.

Kura had given me one order, “*Draw them onto school grounds.*” I had been trying to provoke Yanashita into stepping forward this whole time.

“You think a teacher’s enough to scare us?”

“Who knows? Personally, I’d rather not get caught up with that old guy.”

By that time, Kura had strolled over to us.

“No cooties, now.” Kura karate-chopped his hand down in between Yanashita and me.

“Ow!” Yanashita leaped backward.

“The hell are you doing? Listen, old man, you think a teacher’s allowed to raise a hand against a student?!”

Kura was rummaging in his pocket. Hey, was he planning to smoke? Right in front of the school gates?

“Oh, that was too fast. You didn’t see it? Look, my hand’s in my pocket; it’s not against a student or anything.”

How old are you, Teach?!

Kura crumpled up his pack of Lucky Strikes, which seemed to be empty anyway. Then he made a grab for Yanashita’s school uniform chest pocket.

“Ah, a pack of Sevens? That’s a real flex; you’re just a high schooler...”

Kura yanked a pack of Seven Star out of the pocket, then lit one up with his own lighter.

Yanashita and the others looked shocked. Kura certainly wasn’t acting much like an educator as he blew out a plume of purple smoke, a blissful look on his face.

Yanashita watched him, before letting out a dramatic sigh.

“You’re getting in the way, old man.”

Yanashita seemed pissed, maybe because nothing was going the way he planned it. He advanced on Kura and, clearly without much forethought, kicked

out at him.

It was like he hadn't stopped to think of the repercussions of doing that in a place like this—and to a teacher, no less. He didn't stop to think at all.

"Owww!"

It was the kicker who yelped in pain, though.

Kura had lifted his leather-thong-sandaled foot and kicked Yanashita swiftly in the shin with it. Not bad, old man.

"Yan High! Ah, it takes me back." Kura kept talking, plumes of smoke escaping his mouth. "Back in my day, some of 'em used to wear those baggy juvenile delinquent pants with their school uniforms. 'Course, they're not in style anymore."

Yanashita scowled at Kura.

"You bastard! Teachers these days only pretend to care about protectin' kids!"

"I'm not pretending anything. I only came over here to tell you to take it elsewhere. I don't care where. Just somewhere I can't see you. Go enjoy your youth out of my sight. I can't stand looking at you."

"You want me to go squeal on you to the Board of Education?!"

"Our students all saw you staking this place out. Besides, I'm a teacher at an elite college prep school. I could punch you two or three times, and the board'll still cover my ass. If you hang around our school again, I can easily make up some bad stuff about you and go ask my buddy in the prefectural police to come and handle you."



What a dirty, crooked adult.

"You got that, Ponytail? That's what it means to live in a society. You think it's cool to go against the rules? Then don't be surprised when someone else breaks the rules, too, and hands your ass to you."

Kura flicked his wrist, waving dismissively.

Yanashita shot me a filthy look before turning and storming off. Either he'd realized his big plan was a total failure, or he really was afraid of having to explain things to the police. But just in case, we had Kura drive us a safe distance in his beat-up Nissan Rasheen, before dropping us off.

Yuzuki had been clinging to my hand for a while now and still showed no signs of letting go. The rain, which had finally ended earlier, started to fall again in big, fat drops.



Yuzuki Nanase was being pelted by raindrops.

The rain had started to come down in earnest now. Yuzuki just stood there, looking up at it, no umbrella or anything.

We were standing in a park nearby where Kura dropped us off. Luckily, there was no one else out in this weather. No one suspicious watching us, either.

In this dark, indistinct landscape, it was only the far-off glow of car headlights and the sound of rain splashing down and forming puddles that seemed to be anchoring Yuzuki to this world. Her soaked uniform clung to her like a second skin, and big droplets were cascading from her sleeves and hem.

"Yuzuki, that's enough. You're going to catch a cold."

Yuzuki turned slowly toward me. Her face looked like it had been painted with watercolors. The rain might wash all the paint away, leaving her without a face.

"Hey, Saku... Did I do something wrong?" Her face crumpled up.

"No. You've just been being Yuzuki Nanase." I opened up my plastic umbrella and shut out the freezing-cold rain. "Let's go. I'll take you home."

Yuzuki collapsed against me, shaking her head over and over again. "Please. I

can't be alone tonight."

I wanted to say something about how her family was waiting for her, but I don't think that's what she meant.

"I understand how you feel, but we can't stay out here all night."

"Your place, Saku..." Yuzuki looked at me pleadingly. "You said if we won the practice game you'd do one thing for me, right? You're not going to go back on your promise, are you? I want to cash in that favor now. Please, let me cash it in."

"How did you know about me living alone?"

"I heard it...from Yuuko, a while back."

"Your folks will be worried about you."

"I'll tell them I'm staying over at Haru's, to study. I don't think they'll even question it."

"Even so..."

Yuzuki threw her arms around me, gazing up at me with utter desperation in her eyes.

"Please, Saku. Please take me home with you. Help me!!!"

I was still hesitant, but I just couldn't leave Yuzuki alone in this state. And I wasn't sure I could convince her to let me walk her home.

Besides, I still didn't have it in me to let go of that trembling hand.



I snapped on the lights.

The mellow glow of the light bulb lit up the space.

It was an ordinary, nondescript living room.

There was a dining room table with chairs to seat four, a sofa that could seat three, and a low table. The only points of interest in the room were the bookshelves full of novels that took up one of the walls, and a Tivoli Audio radio that was placed in one corner. The bedroom was next door and was extremely simple. Just a single bed and a side table, a desk for studying, and an old leather

one-seater sofa chair. There was no TV and no PC.

I felt hesitant to suggest that Yuzuki take a shower and get changed right off the bat, so I pulled a new bath towel out of the closet and draped it over her shoulders, helping her take a seat on the living room sofa. I turned on the Tivoli, and a local radio station personality started laughing and chattering in a laid-back way.

I headed to the kitchen to make some hot coffee for us both. When I returned, Yuzuki hadn't moved a muscle, so I sat beside her and started drying off her hair in a businesslike manner.

"Here, drink this. It'll warm you up."

It was like Yuzuki hadn't even heard me. She rested her head on my shoulder and leaned against me. Her still-damp hair smelled like rain and the residue of her shampoo.

I stayed silent. Yuzuki's hand slid up my arm and cupped my cheek. I still didn't move. As if frustrated, she tightened her hand, gazing at me from a distance of about four inches.

Her lips were parted and glistening slightly in the light. Her breath spilled between them, tickling my own lips.

She closed her brimming eyes and leaned in closer, reducing the gap between our faces to only two inches now.

Her body was pressed against mine, the outline of her underwear clearly visible through her clothes.

You're taking it this far? I thought.

My dam was in danger of bursting ages ago.

"...That's how you want it, Yuzuki Nanase?"

I took hold of Yuzuki's shoulders and flung her roughly back against the sofa.

"Yeek!"

Yuzuki let out an uncharacteristic yelp, but I didn't care.

I ignored the way her skirt was riding up her legs and got on top of her.

Startled, Yuzuki drummed her legs and tried to throw me off, but I clamped her down with my thighs.

"This is what you wanted, huh?"

Yuzuki's eyes, which had filled with a sudden fire, were now colored with what was clearly fear.

Oh, how I had looked into those eyes with such impatience over the course of the past week.

"Stop...stop it, Saku!"

"It's too late for that. You came here of your own accord. You invited this. And when we made our contract, you said I could do anything I wanted to you, as much as I wanted, and as many times as I wanted. Didn't you?"

Yuzuki tried to sit up, desperately attempting to get out from under me, but I grabbed her wrists with one hand and secured them up above her head.

The mound of her chest rose up distinctly.

Fat teardrops began to spill out of her eyes.

"Please, Saku. I don't like this. I'm scared. I'm scared."

"I see... So that guy was right. When you get all scared and weepy, it really is the biggest turn-on ever."

Yuzuki squeezed her eyes shut, turning her face away.

I took hold of her chin with my free hand and forced her face back toward me.

"That's no fun. If you close your eyes, you can't see anything."

"...Sorry. I'm sorry. Please... I won't do it again..."

"Hey, hey. What exactly are you expecting of me? Mercy? I'm the guy who's about to rip your clothes off. You do realize that, right?"

I gave her smooth cheek a tiny *slap*.

That was enough to make her slim body freeze up completely.

I loosened the pressure I had on her thighs, shifting my weight to my knees on the sofa.

"Are you scared? This is far gentler than one of Haru's heckles. Your plays on the basketball court looked much more aggressive. I'm surprised to see a girl who can handle stuff like that with a cool facade freaking out like a weakling over something like this."

...Figure it out, Yuzuki! Figure it out faster!

Again, I gave her other cheek a light *slap*.

"Put up more of a fight than that; go on. Has a little slap disconnected your brain? What, you'll do anything now? What have I been telling you? Is that all Yuzuki Nanase amounts to? Don't make me laugh; that's so lame."

A little bit of emotion came back to Yuzuki's eyes just then, as if she was remembering when Nazuna also called her *lame*.

Yuzuki's eyes were narrowed as she glared at me. Her face was as beautiful as it had been that time she took that shot from the three-point line.

"You're really that scared of that guy, huh?" I reached down to Yuzuki's shirt and undid the top button. "You're scared of a little thing like physical strength?"

Now I undid the bottom button.

"I won't just smack you and be done with it. I'm gonna make you do what I want. I'm gonna take pictures and videos, hit you in all your weak points, your past, your family, your friends, leaving you nowhere left to run to."

I didn't have any other buttons left that I could undo, so with no other choice, I started loosening my tie. "What scares you more?"

...Come back to yourself! Take a stand, Yuzuki Nanase!

Then I yelled at her, with as much force as I could muster.



*

“I’M ASKING YOU WHO SCARES YOU MORE?! HIM OR ME?!!!”

“...FUCK YOOOOOU!!!”

With a dull thwacking sound, I took a direct hit right to the crotch.

“Wheeeeh!”

I crumpled forward and fell limply on top of Yuzuki.

“Th-that was a heck of a lot more than forty percent kicking power...”



Tap, tap, tap.

“Gugh.”

Pat, pat, pat.

“Gegh.”

I was curled up in a ball on the floor. Yuzuki was rapping on my lower back reassuringly with her fist.

“Pfft... Heh... Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

“It’s not funny! Were you trying to castrate me or something?!”

“It’s just... It’s just... The famous Saku Chitose, reduced to... Sorry, a-ha-ha-ha!”

Yuzuki was laughing her head off, as if the horror on her face just a few moments ago had never even been there.

For my part, though, I knew my own face was contorted in agony.

“Hey, hey. Does it really hurt all that bad?” Yuzuki poked me in the butt cheek several times.

“Of course it does! Oh, shit, oh man, it hurts! I was doing my best not to actually hurt you, and this is what I get?! Did I do something in a past life...? Okay, seriously, please don’t stop with the patting.”

“All right, all right, my bad. Pat, pat, there, there.”

But it seemed like she just couldn't stop laughing. She pressed her palm to her mouth, but I could hear her snorting and snuffling behind it. I was twitching, too, but not from amusement.

"Owwwww..."

"If you really insist, I can massage the actual wounded part for you?"

"Why are you the only one who's back up to making jokes, huh, you ballbusting...?!"

Once I finally started to feel a bit better, I took a seat on the sofa again. My crotch was still throbbing.

"I think I've got the picture, but if you feel like it, go ahead and talk."

Yuzuki nodded. "I'm scared, you know, of violence..."

It was a confession that confirmed what I myself had predicted.

Thinking back, she had sent plenty of hints rolling my way, ever since that day when we talked at the café.

That time when I playfully tried to karate chop her, that time when Yuuko suddenly thrust an accusatory finger at her... In fact, when anyone approached Yuzuki unexpectedly or suddenly, Yuzuki froze up in a way that seemed out of proportion to the situation. She also reacted during my altercation with Cock-a-Doodle Doofus outside the library—and again during the festival. And just now, when we were tussling on the sofa. Yuzuki reacted with overblown terror.

That said, it was hard to pinpoint whether Yuzuki was afraid of violence that might turn sexual or if she was afraid of violence, full stop.

My suspicions were basically all confirmed when I saw that photograph of her and Yanashita.

A junior high-aged Yuzuki, turning her swollen cheek away from the camera, trying to hide the bruises on her right wrist, the ones that were left behind by being grabbed.

The lazy sound of oldies records being played on the airwaves seeped out of the Tivoli Audio.

Raindrops splattered against the windowpane.

"Will you listen to my story? ...Saku."

"If you'll let me, Yuzuki."

Quietly, she began to confess what had happened to her.

...I was in my second year of junior high.

Because of my appearance, I've suffered more unpleasantries than your average person has to deal with. I was still young at the time, but I was smart, and I had grown to be pretty shrewd, too.

I tried my best to be friendly with everyone, boys and girls alike, but I kept strict boundaries that I wouldn't let anyone cross. I did my best to play the part of the "girl who's so nice that you can't be jealous of her."

I really believed I had it down pat. But then one day, I heard that Yanashita, who was in the year above, had taken a liking to me. He was famous throughout school for being a bad boy. Several of my girlfriends had big crushes on him because he was the type you'd see fighting sometimes, and he had connections with scary older guys in high school. And I mean, his looks aren't so bad, either, you know? You might not realize it at first, but he comes from a decent family, and before he went down the path of serious juvenile delinquency, he was a lot like Saku. A popular guy. He just had a dark side to him, and a lot of girls were really into that.

But at the time, I wasn't really interested in guys. I was too busy with myself. So when I heard the rumors, it didn't really seem like it had anything to do with me.

Then one day a while later, Yanashita asked to see me. It was clichéd, but he wanted to see me behind the school building, a pretty isolated area. He was there with some of his henchmen.

I was scared, honestly, but I thought I could handle it myself. I always had, after all. I told myself I'd sweet-talk him into leaving me alone, and then there would be no more trouble.

But he didn't call me out there to confess that he had a crush on me or

anything quite so cute. Instead, he said, “You. Be my woman.” Like he was issuing an order.

I laughed and brushed off what he was saying... Or at least, that's what I was trying to do.

But then, all of a sudden, Yanashita muttered “Enough of this” and grabbed me by my right arm, pushing me up against the wall. I can't forget the sight of his face, right up against mine. I see it in my dreams sometimes.

He was too strong, and I couldn't push him away. I scrambled to get free, thinking *No, no, please*, but I couldn't. I tried to push his face away from mine with my left hand, which was still free, and that's when he slapped me.

The shock of it made everything go black for a second. Then the pain came. It was like burning. I didn't know what was happening. Tears started falling, and I couldn't make them stop.

I was so mad and so scared, all at the same time, and I just couldn't bear it.

I try to do everything right; I try to act cool at all times, but I'm still a girl, and the physical strength an average guy has—it just isn't something I can hope to win against. I realized that, then.

I realized how one slap to the cheek could be enough to knock all rational thought from my mind.

“...So there. That's the past I've been hiding from you, Saku. I cried so much—like a baby—and in the end, he said, ‘Let me get a pic so I can brag about this to my buddy at another junior high.’ He made me take that picture with him. That was the end of it. I thought he must have completely forgotten about me by now...”

Yuzuki finished up her story, looking like some kind of evil spirit had just released its grasp on her.

I couldn't stop myself this time. I pulled her into my arms and hugged her.

“...Saku?”

“Thank you, Yuzuki.”

“Why are *you* thanking *me*?” Yuzuki chuckled, and I knew that if I didn't keep

it together, I might even start crying.

What a truly...truly beautiful smile she had.

"Thank you for never giving up on being Yuzuki Nanase, despite something like that happening to you. Thank you for continuing to walk on forward. I don't know why, exactly, but for whatever reason, I'm just so happy you kept going."

Some would laugh through their noses, thinking that something like that wasn't such a big deal.

Others might sympathize, saying how sorry they were that Yuzuki had to experience something like that.

Never mind any of that.

Everyone goes through painful stuff in their life, and some of it sticks with you forever. We all have our share of bad luck. Things that make us want to question life itself. Thinking you're the only one who goes through hardships... That's a delusion.

But this girl, Yuzuki Nanase, didn't try to wrap up what happened to her in a package called trauma and use that as a reason to run away or hide. You could have understood if she turned into a wallflower, blending into the corners of the classroom, or if she developed a serious terror of all men. But she didn't.

The fact that she was still standing here today, as Yuzuki Nanase—to me, that was something precious.

I'm not sure if my feelings reached her, but Yuzuki stayed still and remained in my arms for a little while longer.

"Incidentally," Yuzuki said when I finally let go of her, "what the hell was that scene back there? I was seriously terrified, you know? One wrong move, and you could have traumatized me all over again. It wouldn't have been funny, you know?"

"Yeah, if the school counselor heard about it, I'm sure they'd faint from the shock. Then it would be straight off to the shrink's office for a psychiatric evaluation."

Even I knew that my approach had been too heavy-handed.

But I thought I needed to do something seriously impactful, something to blast open the terrible memories that even a girl of Yuzuki's caliber still wasn't able to forget. Anyway, I had faith that a girl this strong would be able to break free of her own past with a little nudging.

Yuzuki grinned at me, chuckling a little.

"They say it's scariest when people who never get mad start to yell. It's totally true. I was worried that when you were done toying with me, you'd hand me over to some dodgy red-light establishment. But..."

Yuzuki seemed seriously amused. She kept laughing, her whole body shaking.

"But then you were all like, '*Wheeeeh!*' You always act so cool, but that...that was pure gold!"

"Hey, cut it out. Are you trying to give me a traumatic experience I'll never forget here, too?" I composed myself and continued in a more serious tone. "I don't want you to get the wrong idea. This wasn't about me trying to teach you how to kick a guy in the crotch and stop his attack. It's hard to pull off, and it can sometimes only serve to provoke the guy and make the situation even more dangerous for you."

"All right. So you're telling me not to disconnect my brain, right?"

Huh, so that really did come across.

"Back at the festival, you showed me an example of what to do. I might not be able to win against a guy using my strength, but I might be able to find another strategy, as long as I can keep my brain connected. That's what you wanted to say, right?"

"Violence can be scary, sure, but pain is just pain. Something like a slap on the cheek doesn't hurt nearly as much as eating it on concrete and scraping up both your knees, or slamming into another basketball player when you're both totally fired up and into the game. What I'm saying is: Don't let a small thing cause you to freeze up completely."

Yuzuki laughed, actually showing her white teeth for once.

"I think I'll be fine. I've updated my mental memory banks. The mental

imagery of the scariest face I've ever seen, and the goofiest face I've ever seen, have both been updated. The older versions have been totally erased."

"Couldn't you try to overwrite half of that again for me?" I sighed audibly. "... I'm sorry, though. I know I frightened you. I just wish I had found a different way to do it. Something faster and more effective."

"I know, Saku. I understand." Yuzuki reached up and touched my cheek gently. "You came running once I called for help, right? Thank you. My hero."

This was Yuzuki's problem.

If Yuzuki didn't take a step forward by herself, then this whole situation would end up being meaningless. There was no guarantee I'd be by her side the next time misfortune landed in her life.

But Yuzuki made the decision herself to rely on my help, and now she was facing forward.

So from now on, this was *our* problem.

You really acted out your selfish whims, didn't you, you stalker bastard?

But I had a plan to return it to him a hundred times over. I was just thinking about it when Yuzuki peered cheekily at me.

"Hey, you wanna carry on where we left off...?"

"You think I'm gonna be able to get it up now?! I said 'Wheeeeh!' remember?!"



Yuzuki was feeling much better, so I thought she would probably return to her own home. Apparently, though, she was determined to sleep over for real.

I decided not to argue. Instead, I ran a bath, then handed her a new towel. I told her she could pick whatever clothes she wanted from the closet. There wasn't much to be done about her underwear, but it transpired that she usually kept a spare pair in her sports bag to change into after club practice, in case she got really sweaty. Paranoia after the deodorant heist had led her to start keeping her changes of clothes in her schoolbag instead. So no problem there.

I really didn't need to hear that information, though. Now I would have to

think about it every time I looked at her schoolbag.

Clatter. Swoooosh.

The apartment originally had two bedrooms and an eat-in kitchen, but it had been forcefully remodeled to house one bedroom and a combination living room, dining room, and kitchen. Once you opened the door, you were right there in the living room. The toilet and dressing room were separated by only a single curtain. It was nice and simple for someone living alone, but in a situation like this, it was proving awkward. What young, red-blooded guy could fail to picture the beautiful girl changing clothes just behind that curtain? If such a guy existed, he would have to be some kind of demigod.

I turned up the volume on the Tivoli, so I couldn't hear her changing. But the radio wasn't enough to block out the sound of the shower. It was a bit delayed, but I started thinking about how soft and warm Yuzuki had felt when I pinned her against the sofa.

Yikes. I was at risk of becoming nothing more than a commonplace pervert. I certainly wouldn't be able to mock our stalker friend anymore.

I started making dinner in an attempt to drown out my thoughts.

I hadn't been expecting a guest, though, so I didn't have much in the fridge. And I was actually fresh out of rice. But I had some dried Echizen soba noodles, a pack of thinly sliced pork, half a daikon radish, one leek, and one onion. Kind of a difficult lineup to make a meal out of.

Still, I could serve soba noodles with sliced onions.

First, I sliced the onion up very finely and moved it to a sieve. I rubbed some salt on it and left it for a while, before plunging it into a bowl of water.

While it was sitting, I grated up the radish.

Once I had a nice mound of grated radish, I lifted the sieve over the bowl and drained the water, before arranging the sliced onion on a plate. I covered it in plastic wrap and put it in the freezer for a few minutes. This would make sure it was nice and crunchy.

Swoosh.

I could hear the door to the bath sliding open.

That was quick. She's done already?

"Saaa-ku! Wanna join me?"

"Don't be so generic! Go soak yourself up to the shoulders and count to a hundred."

"Bo-ring!"

Kasploosh. I heard her sink back into the tub again.

Probably, she had left the door open a crack so we could continue talking.

"Yuzuki, can you handle spicy food?"

"Hmm? Yeah, I love it."

"All right."

"Hey."

"What?"

"Are you imagining it?"

"You want me to come and scrub off all of your skin with that loofah, hmm?"

"One, two," she started counting, sounding like she was enjoying herself. She was just relaxing, not really worrying about my presence all that much.

I washed the leek and cut off the root, before slicing it into discs of a couple inches. I diluted some soup stock with water, tasted it, then squeezed in a tube of Tobanjan Chinese chili bean sauce, mixing it up with my chopsticks.

Before I forgot, I grabbed the onion slices from the freezer and moved them to the fridge.

I put an old cast-iron frying pan on the stove top and heated it under a medium flame. Once it started to smoke, I glugged on some oil I had saved in an oil pot and swirled it around until the pan was coated. Then I returned the oil to the oil pot and turned the heat down to low.

The frying pan had been a gift, and I was familiar with the basics of cooking. I didn't mind this sort of thing. The various steps and all.

I added a generous amount of sesame oil, then threw in the sliced-up leek from before. Once that looked nicely cooked, I took it out, replacing it with the sliced pork.

After the pork was browned, I poured in the *mentsuyu* and Tobanjan sauce mixture.

The meat sizzled. A great aroma was beginning to fill the kitchen.

Clatter. Swoosh.

This time, Yuzuki really had gotten out of the tub.

"Hey, what smells so good?"

"You must be hungry. How long do you need to dry your hair?"

"Uh, maybe fifteen minutes if I hurry."

That would give me just enough time.

I filled a saucepan with plenty of water and put it on to boil.

"Saku, that shampoo you have smells really nice."

"Right? Yua recommended it. It's from MUJI. Kinda expensive, but it's supposed to be really good for hair."

"Hmm..."

The sauce seemed done, so I added the leeks back in.

Vwooo.

I could hear the sound of the hair dryer.

"Hey, this thing's pretty powerful. Nice."

I could hear Yuzuki exclaiming.

I answered her, yelling over the sound of the dryer. "It was a gift from Yuuko! She said she was going to buy a new one anyway."

"Uh-huh..."

I washed the cutting board, and just then, the saucepan of water started bubbling.

I grabbed a bunch of the soba noodles and flung them in there. I set a timer on my phone, for a minute shorter than the usual amount for boiling soba. The leeks looked done, so I turned off the heat under the sauce.

Then I waited for around five minutes.

The sound of the hair dryer stopped.

The curtain swooshed open, and Yuzuki emerged.

“...”

I was struck dumb for a moment.

She was doing the whole bit. The whole girl-comes-to-boyfriend's-house-and-emerges-wearing-his-shirt bit.

The white shirt was a little baggy on her, and the hem hung low, with her bare legs below drawing the eye, even if you tried to fight it. Her thighs and calves were undeniably sexy, but there was something about the sight of her bare toes against the floor that was really, well, wowza. It was a part of her I usually didn't get to see, and the rare sight had me completely distracted.

...Sorry, Haru. But I was right. Those are feet I couldn't touch in a casual way, unlike yours.

I quickly looked up, taking in Yuzuki's still-damp hair, her flushed cheeks, and the thin-framed glasses she was wearing.

Yuzuki, who usually appeared perfect from head to toe, looked oddly mismatched wearing those glasses. It was like getting a glimpse behind her perfect facade. I felt an urge to tease her about it, but I swallowed it back down with everything I had.

Yuzuki giggled, seeming to pick up on my shock. “What do you think? Heart skip a beat?”

“...More than I would have expected it to.”

“More than the sight of Ucchi in glasses?”

“Was that your goal?”

Honestly, her springing it on me that way accounted for at least half the

damage I had incurred.

Yuzuki grinned with delight. “Fine, you win. Now go and put some decent clothes on. I know you brought a T-shirt and some shorts in there with you.”

“You don’t want me to pour you a drink or something first?”

“Did you time-warp here from the eighties? Just hurry up and change; dinner’s almost ready.”

“All righty.”

The soba noodles were floating, so I scooped them out of the water and rinsed them under the cold tap.

I turned on the flame under the frying pan again and heated up the sauce once more. I prepared two dipping bowls and filled those with additional sauce. Then I topped those with the drained radish, juice and all.

Then I poured the heated pork, leek, and broth into two big ramen bowls. I served the soba piled up on a plate, garnishing it with the onion slices I’d taken from the fridge—and plenty of shaved bonito fish flakes.

We had soba noodles, cold dipping sauce with grated daikon, hot soup with pork, also for dipping the soba in, and cold onion slices. I set the dining room table for two and arranged the dishes. I was just pouring cold barley tea into two cheap glasses, when Yuzuki emerged from the dressing room again.

“Wow, Saku, you cook, too? I figured you for a convenience foods kinda guy.”

“Sorry, I didn’t have much, but I did the best I could. We’ve got onion slices, daikon dipping sauce, and a spicy Chinese-style pork soup, too. You can dip your noodles any way you like, since I prepared us two bowls of sauce each.”

By the way, noodles with daikon dipping sauce is kind of like Fukui soul food. Most people pour the sauce all over the noodles, but since I also prepared a Chinese pork soup today, I served the sauce in a separate bowl.

“Saku, you know, you’re really...” For some reason, Yuzuki looked annoyed. “I just finally managed to win ten points over you, but now you’ve gone and casually evened the score again!”

“You’re exaggerating.”

"A high school boy who can whip up all this? That's totally unfair!" Yuzuki sat down opposite me, pouting.

"“Let’s dig in!””

Yuzuki quickly tasted the sliced onion and tried out the noodles. She went for the daikon dipping sauce first, then the Chinese pork-style sauce.

“...This doesn’t help the situation, you know.”

“What’s that? Is it good? Or does it suck?”

“It’s all delicious, obviously! Are you kidding me right now? Where’s the fun in this? You skipped the whole, ‘girl comes over to stay at guy’s house, then whips him up a home-cooked meal to show off her domestic skills’ event?!”

“No one ever mentioned anything like that to me.”

“I let my guard down. I never thought to link you and cooking together in my mind. It’s really tasty, though.” Yuzuki was cheerfully slurping up soba noodles.

“You’re exaggerating anyway. I can’t make anything really complicated. Just basic bachelor stuff.”

“Mmm, this Chinese pork is yummy!”

“Hey, I’m talkin’ here.”

I started in on my own portion. Echizen soba noodles are thick and kind of dark-colored. Country soba, you know. But I like it better than pure-white, high-grade soba. It pairs perfectly with the slight heat of grated radish.

“Hey, Saku, can I ask you something?”

“Sure. I’ve got nothing to hide.”

“You know what it is I wanna ask about...right?”

“Of course.”

I’m not sure how it is in the big city, but in Fukui, it’s odd for a high school student to live alone. Extenuating circumstances have to be involved. It would be strange for her not to wonder about it.

“It’s a pretty boring story. My parents got divorced when I was in junior high.”

Yuzuki's chopsticks paused in midair.

She was looking at me with empathy in her eyes.

"Don't make it weird. I already told you, it's not like I've been hiding it. My parents... Even as their son, I had to wonder why they would have ever gotten married in the first place. Polar opposites, you know. Pop, he's Mr. By-the-Book. And Ma, she's a total free spirit."

Yuzuki chuckled. "...Sorry, sorry. It's just so cute, how you call them Ma and Pop. I thought you would have called them Mom and Dad, or maybe 'my old man and my old lady,' something like that."

"Leave it."

Actually, there's someone else who's brought me tons more strife than either of those two, but let's leave that alone for the moment.

"They were always fighting, ever since I was small. Pop always tried to argue with logic. Ma argued based on emotion. Obviously. Anyway, one day, the end finally came."

"Didn't you want to go and live with one or the other, Saku?"

"I couldn't really decide. So when I was like, 'Why don't I try living alone?' My pop said, 'If you can keep yourself clean and safe, then you should do what you like. We'll send you an allowance.' And Ma said, 'That sounds great! But no bringing girls over!' ...Oh, whoops, I guess I've done that now."

Both my parents work, and they're pretty career-oriented. So I decided to let them fund my solo life. They brought over most of the furniture and stuff from our old house for me.

"You talk very casually about it."

"I don't make a big deal out of my past. It wasn't that painful a memory anyway... Unlike some people I could mention."

Yuzuki looked like she wasn't sure whether to laugh or take that seriously.

"It's amazing, though. Living alone, starting in junior high, your parents divorcing. Most kids would crack, dealing with something like that."

She was feeling for me what I'd been feeling for her all this time.

"It's like how it is with your situation, Yuzuki. It's easy to let bad experiences hold you back, but you've got to take responsibility for your own life. I, for one, refuse to let someone else's issues derail me from my path."

"If only we could have had this discussion earlier. I wonder if I might have been able to reach my own breakthrough that much sooner?"

"You couldn't. That's why you toughed it out and walked this far on your own two feet."

"Maybe I'll be able to repay the favor to you someday, Saku?"

"I think I've had my fill of your favors for now, Yuzuki."

"Don't mock me, dummy."



Once we were done eating, and we'd finished cleaning up, we studied in silence at the dining room table for about three hours.

I finished up first and went to take a bath, deciding not to go for the kind of elaborate display Yuzuki had come out with earlier. I just showered, soaked, then roughly towel-dried my hair and slicked it back, before putting on my usual long shorts and exiting the bathroom shirtless.

Yuzuki was more shocked than I expected her to be. "The boys on the basketball team change like this in front of you sometimes, don't they?" I said.

But Yuzuki responded: "That's a totally different thing!" and threw her bath towel at me.

"Oh, but wait. Let me take a quick photo before your hair's fully dry."

"Now I'm feeling embarrassed. Can't I just grab a shirt first?"

"*Non, non.*"

"Then let's get you and your glasses in the shot, too."

"Nope. Don't worry, this is just for occasional viewing by me."

It was half past eleven at night now.

We had tomorrow's test to consider, so we should probably be getting to sleep soon.

"Yuzuki, you can use the bed. I'll sleep on the living room sofa."

"No way!"

"Then, I can sleep in the bed?"

"Geez, that was quick..."

"What, then? Whaddaya want?"

In the end, after much debate, we compromised and decided to drag the living room sofa into the bedroom and push it up against the bed.

Yuzuki took the bed part, and I took the sofa part.

It would have felt awkward if it was too quiet, so I left the Tivoli playing in the living room, with the timer shutoff function activated. I tuned it to a random station first. Since the weather today had been so gloomy, they were playing songs like "Singin' in the Rain" and "Rainy Days and Mondays."

I checked that Yuzuki was in bed before snapping off the lights.

Yuzuki tossed and turned for a few seconds, then spoke. "Can I say something kinda girly?"

"What?"

"I can smell you, Saku."

"Sorry, do I stink?"

"Hee-hee. It's kinda calming."

The room was filled with silence for a few moments.

The rain had apparently stopped. It was no longer rapping against the windowpane.

I turned over lazily and realized Yuzuki was facing this way.

"Hey, Saku. You got a crush on anyone?"

"That's the second time you've asked me that."

It seemed like a lifetime ago now when we met at that café with the amazing eggs Benedict. But it was only just over a week. In that space of time, I guess I'd reached the point where I was obligated to answer her question.

"As for me..."

Apparently, the owner of the small voice wanted to talk more than listen.

"I don't think I've ever had a real crush on a guy. There have been guys where I've been like, *Oh, he's kinda nice*. But once I realized that those guys didn't seem to really like me, only the 'Yuzuki Nanase package,' I completely lost interest."

I understood what she was saying, to a painful degree.

"Everyone's searching for their own treasure chest, stuck in their own dream. You won't find something like that no matter where you look for it. Don't they know that?"

"But, Yuzuki, you get fired up when another girl gets compliments. And when you see a guy shirtless, you giggle and blush as much as anyone."

"Yeah. I fart, too."

"I..."

All of a sudden, I felt like talking.

"I think there was a girl once, who I really liked."

"Oh?"

I thought back to when I was small.

Talking about my own bittersweet memories was a little too bitter, but well, they were a part of me, after all.

"I was in elementary school, and it was summer. I went to stay with my grandma on Ma's side. Her house was still in the prefecture, but it was totally surrounded by rice paddies. Way more country bumpkin than it is around here. For me, that house in the rice paddies was like an encapsulation of all my childhood summer memories."

Yuzuki was silent, listening to me talk.

"There was this girl who showed up in the neighborhood every year. She had a face like a doll's and hair that went down her back. I was always thinking to myself how her hair was probably a real pain to take care of. I think she was younger than me. Come to think of it, I didn't even know her name."

I was lost in my childhood memory scene.

The rice paddies, filled with green stalks. If you peeked between them, you could see pond skaters on the water. In the daytime, there were the cicadas. Then in the evening, it was the frogs. They made a real racket.

"One time I followed her, and I found her in her bright-white dress covered in river mud. She was really crying. Only..."

I tried to recall the girl's face, but all I could see was that white dress, like something a manga heroine would wear.

"I remember her saying something like, 'You're lucky you're so free.' I was used to people saying I was cool, or good at sports, but she was the only one who ever said anything like that. It made me happy, honestly."

To borrow Yuzuki's analogy, I think that girl was the first one who ever bothered to unwrap the "Saku Chitose package" and show any interest in what was inside.

"But then, one summer, I stopped seeing her around. According to rumors, there was another guy she had a crush on. Someone really cool, good at sports, really smart. So that was my first crush. And my first heartbreak."

"I see..."

Yuzuki's voice was warm.

"Only one unbreakable mirage, huh."

Apparently, my reason for choosing that childhood story had come across.

There was no decisive incident. My parents' divorce didn't destroy my faith in romantic relationships or anything. Nor was I still chasing after that elusive "first love" like it was some kind of intangible mirage.

But over the years of meager disappointments and betrayals, at some point, I started to think to myself, *Oh yeah. That was it.*

Take all those girls who professed undying love for me, their eyes bright with excitement. The very next day, they'd have swallowed some gossip another guy told them, and they would look at me with hatred in their eyes. Of course, that guy would turn out to have been a so-called friend of mine. Then the two of them would begin dating, becoming the next hot couple. That kind of romance was cheap and boring, and it had been all around me for some time.

"Saku, do you think you'll ever have a crush on someone again?"

"..."

"I'm scared of it, to be honest. What if the guy starts liking someone else? What if I end up hating him? After all that? That's why I envy Yuuko."

"I'm envious of her, too. Her light is so bright, it's blinding."

Yuzuki's hand reached out and gently touched my fingers before retreating.

"Good night, Saku."

"Good night, Yuzuki."

We were both tired, probably. Once I heard Yuzuki's breathing slip into the rhythm of sleep, I tried to match mine to hers. Soon, I felt myself begin to melt into sleep, too.

If such a thing as an unbreakable, impenetrable, and perfect love exists in this world, then surely it would only be possible to find it inside a memory that was already in danger of fading away.

Like looking back on a night like this, one day in the far future, when I had already grown up and become an adult a long time ago.

...When I awoke, Yuzuki was gone.



The morning after my sleepover with Yuzuki, I found myself walking alone to school for the first time in a while. It felt like last night was just a dream. Almost all traces of Yuzuki had been neatly tidied up and taken away from my place. But the dishes were also neatly stacked in the sink drainer, and there were two used towels in the laundry basket.

I wasn't sure why Yuzuki would have left early without saying anything, but no

doubt she had her reasons. I was a little disappointed I missed the chance to see what she looked like first thing in the morning, though.

As I made my way along the riverbank path, I spotted a familiar figure up ahead.

I hurried up behind her and patted her on the back.

“Morning, Yua.”

“Huh? Saku?” Yua turned around, looking slightly taken aback.

“Good morning. Where’s Yuzuki?”

“I appear to have been ditched.”

“Did something happen yesterday? After...you know?”

“Hmm, yeah, a lot happened. But nothing bad, I don’t think.”

Yua seemed relieved as she fell into step alongside me, smiling.

“Hmm? Saku? What’s this?” Yua reached out and touched the back of my neck.

“What are you doing? It’s too early in the day for this. Don’t get me all riled up.”

“Hmm, so that’s what happened...” Yua whipped out her phone and snapped a photo.

Then she silently showed me the photo she just took on the screen. I could see bright-red writing on my skin, as red as...lipstick.

Cute sleeping face! Thanx! ❤

“...So is this graffiti the work of a little elf, then?”

Yua shook her head, looking disgusted.

Darn it, Yuzuki. Here I was, thinking she had left my place like a good girl, but no. She made sure to leave me a souvenir.

“Do you do that kind of thing with everyone, Saku?”

“Give me a break. I’ve only given myself to one person.”

"Hmm, doubt." Yua laughed softly, like a dandelion.

"Hey, Yua?"

"Hmm?"

"Could you scrub this off for me with your makeup remover sheets?"

"Hmm, I could, but the question is: *Will I...?*"



When we walked into the classroom, the atmosphere felt oddly tense.

No doubt the cause of it was Yuzuki and Nazuna, who were facing off against each other in front of the blackboard. Yuzuki looked perfectly composed, but Nazuna was unable to hide her irritation. Oh, man, were they going at it again?

"So what is it you want to talk about? I need to study for the test, you know."

"Er, never pegged you for the type to study until the last minute, Ayase."

"Don't try to talk like you know anything about me, Nanase."

"You're right, I don't know anything about you."

A frown line appeared between Nazuna's eyebrows.

What was Yuzuki doing? Trying to start an argument all over again?

"So look, about yesterday. Sorry about that." Yuzuki spoke in an offhand manner, as if it was no biggie.

"...What?"

"Like I said. Sorry about yesterday."

"...You're creeping me out. Whatever. I don't want to be your friend anyway."

"Uh, I don't, either."

"You bitch..."

If I didn't step in, this situation looked like it might explode.

They were standing at the front of the class, and everyone's attention was on them. This really wasn't very Yuzuki Nanase-like. But the difference between her attitude now compared to yesterday... I welcomed it.

"Also, thank you for coming to watch the game."

Nazuna's cheeks visibly reddened. "What's your angle here, seriously...?"

"I just figured I need to learn how to admit when I'm wrong, or I'll never be able to face up to stuff."

"Yeah, I don't get it."

"You don't need to. It's more for my own benefit, really."

Then Yuzuki noticed Yua and me watching her and grinned.



"What?! You and Saku are gonna stop going out?!" Yuuko yelped.

To celebrate getting past the third day of tests, and to refresh a little before the final day, we members of Team Chitose all decided to go eat at Europe-Ken, the one next to East Park. Kazuki, Kaito, Haru, and I all ordered an extra-large katsudon, while Yuuko and Kenta had the regular katsudon, and Yuzuki and Yua ordered the Paris-don. Incidentally, the Paris-don is a bowl of rice with a ground meat cutlet on top instead of the standard pork cutlet. Although, of course, it was served with the same kind of katsudon sauce.

"But why? Those Yan High guys showed up at our school just yesterday. It's still dangerous."

Yuuko's skepticism made perfect sense.

After everyone's orders were delivered to the table, we started eating and chatting. Then Yuzuki all of a sudden said she was considering putting a stop to the fake dating gambit.

Now Kaito spoke up in opposition, after Yuuko. "I'm against it, too. Staking out a different high school like that? Those guys are seriously crazy."

Haru also agreed. "I'd like to respect your opinion, but it kinda sounds like you're putting on a dumb, brave front here, you know? I mean, consider the timing at least."

"Listen..."

Yuzuki started talking—speaking for herself, not me.

"I've been thinking that I might have been making this issue worse all by myself. Things started really getting bad right after I asked Saku to be my fake boyfriend. I'm thinking I should have turned the guy down before all this got started. Maybe that would have been the end of it."

Kaito still looked unconvinced.

"You think common sense is going to work against this guy? A guy who actually tried to kick a teacher? Come on."

Of course, we had already shared about what happened yesterday after school.

But Kaito didn't need to point it out to us. We were actually there, after all.

But Yuzuki just smiled softly. "I understand what you're trying to say. But at this rate, no matter which way we proceed, the situation is just going to keep getting worse and worse. Saku...the rest of you guys...you can't be my bodyguards around the clock. Someone has to take action and resolve this situation."

Yuzuki was speaking with strength and conviction.

"And the only person who can really do that is me, right?"

Kaito and Haru, who knew Yuzuki best, were both silent. Apparently, they knew that any further pushing would get them nowhere. Everyone else seemed to vaguely realize that the situation was only worsening—and that decisive action really needed to be taken.

What Yuzuki was saying made sense. If the situation could be resolved by Yuzuki turning the guy down, then that would be the best possible outcome. If she wanted to go down that route, none of us were in a position to stop her.

"Um..." Hesitatingly, Kenta spoke up. "At the least...would it be okay for the rest of us to go with you? You know, when you talk it out?"

This was a huge show of bravery on his part. That was obvious.

Yuzuki smiled at Kenta. "Thank you, Yamazaki. I appreciate the thought, but I think that might have the opposite effect. If he sees Saku again, he might really punch him this time."

I nodded solemnly.

Last night, the guy looked mad enough to spit nails.

"At any rate, it's not like I'm going to roll up to Yan High and ask for a meeting. I plan to just go about life like normal for now, and the next time he starts to mess with me, I'll give it to him straight."

After last night, I was the only one who understood what it must have taken for Yuzuki to come to this decision and how much danger she was willingly facing.

Kazuki, who had been listening in silence this whole time, turned to me.

"Saku? You okay with this?"

I swallowed the bite of cutlet I had in my mouth and answered casually. "If that's what she's saying she wants, then it's fine by me. My stance, basically, is *Don't chase what eludes you; don't reject what comes to you*. I think Yuzuki should do what Yuzuki wants to do."

"Saku!"

Kaito leaped to his feet and came charging at me, but Kazuki fended him off with one arm.

"If that's the case, then Yuzuki should be heading home now. It's still early afternoon, but she should probably stick to the main streets."

Yuzuki nodded, leaving her share of the bill on the table before standing up.

"Saku, everyone, thank you. I've had enough of this now, myself. I'm mad. I'm going to sort this out, and then I'll be back to being Yuzuki Nanase again!"

Yuzuki waved, and we all watched her leave the restaurant. Kaito didn't seem able to contain himself after all. He grabbed his bag and got to his feet.

"I'm going after her, Saku."

"Suit yourself."

At any rate, probably nothing would happen today.

After Kaito clattered and banged his way out of the restaurant, my remaining friends all looked at me with expectant faces.

The jerk didn't even leave his share of the bill, I thought.



We departed Europe-Ken, and then, since I was already done prepping for the following day, I headed to Saizeriya alone to meet up with Tomoya.

"My bad; hope you weren't waiting long?"

"Ah, no. It's fine. I was studying. Hey, by the way, this is the first time you've asked me to meet up, isn't it?"

The other day, when Yuzuki was absent from school, Tomoya found out about it and asked me to meet him here. Come to think of it, he was right. This *was* the first time I was the one inviting him to meet.

"I have something I have to talk to you about."

"What? You're scaring me, man."

Tomoya looked suspicious. I prepared myself to speak as sincerely as I could.

"Last night, Yuzuki stayed at my place. I can't be your love guru anymore."

There was a *clunk*, and Tomoya's glass of iced coffee fell from his frozen fingers. The puddle of liquid started spreading out across the table from Tomoya's side. It dripped off the edge, black coffee all over my Stan Smiths.

I couldn't let a little thing like coffee distract me from the subject at hand, though. I kept on staring Tomoya right in the eye.

"Oh, shoot..." Tomoya finally broke the silence.

He grabbed a paper napkin and got to his feet, dabbing at his own pants first. Once that was done, he started mopping up the iced coffee all over the table.

Once the tabletop was clean, Tomoya gave up on wiping and looked at me.

"When you say stayed over..."

"I actually live by myself. Yesterday, a lot was going on with Yuzuki. She seemed like she was having a hard time, so I let her sleep over."

Tomoya was silent for a moment. Then he sighed deeply.

"Well, you did say you wouldn't hold back on account of me. And at least you

told me straight up. That was fair of you. Uh, so...this is awkward, but would it be fair to say that you two have embarked on...*that* sort of relationship?"

"I didn't cross any lines. Hmm, but we both got a little heated. Showed each other a different side of ourselves. I even took a photo...and I can't say it was entirely chaste. Anyway, I don't think I can give you frank and honest advice anymore. Sorry."

"So you're going to start dating for real now?"

"No..." I quit messing around with my phone and laid it flat on the table. "Actually, the opposite. Me pretending to be her boyfriend, we're gonna call time on that. We won't be walking to school together anymore. I know this might sound odd, after what I just told you, but if you still like Yuzuki the same, you might have a chance at actually dating her now."

Tomoya lifted his head.

"I haven't fallen for Yuzuki or anything. I just don't feel like giving you love advice anymore; that's all."

"Sorry, I honestly don't get what you're saying here."

"It's a complicated story. And a long one. Do you want to hear it?"

Tomoya nodded meekly.

Believing that it was the last bit of counsel I could give to the guy, and also believing that it was the honest thing to do, I told him everything about Yuzuki's situation, from that day she came to me at the café for help until now. I added certain fake details, and obfuscated certain true ones, but otherwise, I told him about how Yuzuki had been hurt in her life up to this point and the situation she was in right now. I believe he understood.

"So our current relationship aside, you and I are square, considering the amount of info we both have now."

"Now that I've heard that story, I'm not sure I have a chance of winning with her." Then Tomoya laughed, as if putting it all behind him.

"Whether you stop here or take the next step, it's up to you, Tomoya. I'm willing to consult with you anytime, not as a teacher-student type deal, but as a

regular friend.”

“Thanks, Saku. You really taught me a lot, but I feel like I haven’t shown any real growth.”

“Dummy. That’s ‘cause you never planned to grow. How long is it gonna take until you’re capable of talking to her, huh?”

“Once I’ve raised my chances a little higher...”

“Your whole life, then.”

We looked at one another and laughed.

There was nothing else that needed saying, was there?

I got up to use the bathroom. I took my time, and once I was done, I grabbed my phone off the table and dropped it into my pocket. Shouldering my Gregory backpack, I put my half of the bill down and left the restaurant ahead of Tomoya.



Outside, the curtain of night had completely fallen.

We were right outside the station, and the sky seemed endless. A new moon laughed overhead. The streetcar rolled slowly past—*clatter, clatter, clunk, clunk*—carrying the day’s weary folk home.

In the plaza, the moving dinosaur monuments were illuminated. The symbolic, long-necked Fukuititan, and opposite him, the Fukuisaurus and the Fukuiraptor. I’ve always thought that I might feel more attachment to them if I gave them nicknames, but so far I’d only been able to come up with Lanky, Stumpy 1, and Stumpy 2. It had been a while, so I was thinking about buying a book before heading home.

I headed to the bookstore, which wasn’t far from the Saizeriya. There were several branches in the prefecture, but this was the main one. It retained the flavor of an old bookstore but still had everything you could want. I’ve always liked this bookstore a lot, ever since I was a kid.

I was browsing the aisles, when I saw an unexpected figure in the reference book section.

“Asuka?”

She turned around, her expression solemn. She replaced the book she was holding on the bookshelf and turned to me once more. Then she was her usual easygoing Asuka self again.

“Ah, here’s the naughty boyfriend, loitering and up to no good. Has the Nanase case been closed yet?”

I shook my head.

Asuka laughed, like she was talking to her little brother or something.

“Shall we leave? Let’s walk awhile, friend.”

We headed to the prefectoral office, situated a little ways from the station.

The Fukui prefectoral office is built on the high stone foundations of the old Fukui Castle, so it’s kind of a strange sight to people from different prefectures. We’ve been looking at it ever since we were kids, so we don’t really think anything of it. The moat’s still there and everything, and it’s kinda nice to walk around the grounds on a quiet night like tonight.

There were ducks afloat on the moat, and the moon quivered in the reflection the sky cast across the surface of the water.

A bicycle came whizzing past us, the bell chirping at us once.

It was such a quiet, still night, but I felt like crying. Maybe because I wasn’t looking forward to tomorrow coming.

We sat down on a bench located on the rear side of the prefectoral office.

It felt a bit clichéd, chatting philosophically on a night like this. Then again, perhaps a night like this was the best time to do so.

“Asuka, are you deliberating over the right path?”

“So you saw, did you?”

It was a red-covered book that Asuka had been holding. I didn’t manage to read the name of the university written on it, but only someone who was deeply conflicted would be crouched down in the bookstore staring at a college entrance exam prep book.

"You know..." She started talking, her voice like a small bell ringing. "Have you ever thought about getting out of this tiny town?"

A dull pain seemed to seize my chest.

Asuka was studying for college entrance exams. A question like that could only mean one thing.

"Many times."

My answer was an honest one. I'd say at least half the people born and raised in Fukui think about leaving one day. The idea never even occurs to the other half.

Asuka was one of the thinkers.

"I love this town... I love it, and I hate it."

I understood what she meant.

At the same time, I got the feeling I couldn't share her sentiments that easily right now.

Uncharacteristically, Asuka continued talking about herself. "I'm not sure which way I should go. Basically, should I stay here or should I go to Tokyo?"

"Tokyo..."

Strangely, that's the place that always comes to my mind when I think about leaving Fukui.

Leaving the countryside and making it in the big city of Tokyo... These days, it doesn't have the same cool ring to it. That's why I don't really mention it. All the same, it's a thought that I've held close to my chest for a long time.

Fukui's such a small world. You know all your neighbors. You go to Lpa, and you see a car in the parking lot, and you're like, oh, so-and-so is here.

Compared to that, the Tokyo we see on TV really feels like "the city."

Finding out that Asuka held the same kind of cheap fantasy that I did made me feel a little disillusioned but also slightly relieved at the same time. I was getting sort of fed up with myself.

"Have you ever been to Tokyo?"

“On family trips, when I was little. So long ago, I’ve forgotten it all.”

That was back when I was too young to understand the meaning of the word *divorce*.

“I never have. Even so, I’m deciding between Fukui or Tokyo. Strange, huh?”

I stayed silent. I wasn’t sure I had the right words for this type of conversation.

“I’d really love to go to Tokyo.”

“Then let’s go. To Tokyo. That’s how you roll, right, Asuka?”

I knew it was a corny line.

“If I said that’s what I wanted, would you come with me?”

Asuka’s line was corny, too.

“You know, I love watching that TV show, *Hajimete no Otsukai*. The one where they send little kids off running errands by themselves.”

“Well, if I fall down and start crying, will you comfort me by singing ‘Shogenai de yo Baby’...?”

“Yeah, since I’m a better singer than you, right?”

I looked at Asuka beside me. She was chuckling.

“The Yuzuki case...,” I muttered softly, as if I was trying to turn back the hands of a clock. “I think it’ll come out all right.”

“Will you tell me the tale after? Like you always do?”

“The day might come where I can’t tell you my stories anymore, as much as I would like to. You might want to brace yourself now.”

I wanted to tell her everything. But I wasn’t oblivious enough to drop my worries in the lap of someone who was debating her entire future.

“What lonely sounding things you say sometimes.”

“I just heard a really lonely sounding thing from a girl I know; that’s why.”

I felt like I shouldn’t say it.

Asuka smiled softly.

“Maybe you and I will both become grown-ups before we know it. We’ll shove our straw hats and dresses in the closet and pull out our crisply laundered suits.”

“I never want to forget my long shorts and flip-flops.”

“Yeah, those would suit you way more.”

It looked like our conversation had run out for the evening.

“Asuka...”

I was about to say something, but I thought better of it and said something else instead.

“I prefer a bright-white dress to a crisply ironed suit any day.”

“You wouldn’t fall for a version of me who looked good in that, I don’t think.”

We decided to call it a day, after yet another encounter where it felt like we kept just missing each other.

Whether you want it to or not, time keeps on flowing, and relationships keep on changing.

Until someone takes a step forward, I’m stuck here on the landing of the stairs. Just stepping in place, going nowhere fast.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Distant Moon



I, Yuzuki Nanase, realized early on that I was a special kind of girl.

When I was little, most of the boys would do anything I said, and the girls would flock to me. They'd be all "Yuzuki" this and "Yuzuki" that.

However, I also realized fairly early on that being special didn't mean I'd be able to make it smoothly through life. Before long, the boys started expecting a return on their interest in me, and the girls started to leave me out, whispering behind my back.

To try to erase the little voice inside me whispering how much I hated it, I tried inventing new versions of myself. I started turning to the other girls for favors, instead of the boys, and I would stick up for the girls and shout at the boys if they were being mean. I made little changes, so many of them, bit by bit.

It wasn't all that difficult for me. I was able to discern what would make other people happy and what would make them mad. All I had to do was give them the version of myself that would most please them. Some might see me as just a suck-up people pleaser and mock me for it, but it was better than being shunned by everyone.

I lived my life believing that.

Of course, it wasn't just surface-level. I tried really hard to be a good, honest person, better than others. The fastest way to become someone no one has a bad word to say about is to avoid saying a bad word about anyone yourself.

Every now and then, I would be asked, "Why are you trying so hard?"

The people who asked me that, they were expecting it to stem from some huge incident in my past. They assumed I'd achieved personal growth through overcoming some kind of trauma or complex. But it was nothing so serious.

Why do we need a big reason for trying to better and improve ourselves?

But a past spent trying to face up to the problems right in front of me, and trying to find a way to handle them in my own way, was what brought me to where I am now.

I had no real enemies. In elementary school, and in junior high, my school life was all smooth sailing.

Then something bad really did happen to me.

It was the incident with Yanashita, the one I told Saku about.

I felt fear deep inside me for the first time. Naturally, I was afraid of violence, of pain. But the thing that scared me more than that was that none of the weapons I had carried with me to this point were any use in that situation. And I had no other reserves of strength within me.

Yuzuki Nanase's pride won't allow a stupid, uncouth guy to beat her down with violence! She will not allow the same thing to happen to other girls! She will not allow him to break her, not for the sake of the one she loves! ...There was none of that in me. I had nothing.

I don't like thinking about it, but if Yanashita hadn't been content to finish messing with me by taking that photo, I think I might have given up on resisting entirely. *Maybe if I just agree to date him, things will go better.* That kind of thought might have crossed my mind.

The memory wasn't frightening just because of the violence I suffered. It was frightening because of what I discovered about *me*.

I appear to have everything a girl could want, but really, I've got nothing inside me at all.

And I had no idea how to become someone who does.

At the time, I didn't hesitate to write the whole thing off, all the feelings I couldn't process, as just a traumatic, random incident, like being bitten by a

dog.

Then I met someone who shone brighter than I did. Someone who was like a sparkling sun rising over a bright-blue ocean.

I was in my third year of junior high, and it was the prefectural semifinals for basketball. I can't lie and say our opponents had a strong team. We outclassed them in everything from passing, to number of shots at the basket, to formation. Honestly, I dismissed them as a team that had gotten this far on sheer passion alone. I actually planned to preserve my energy for the real final, not bothering to really play my best.

So we played our game against this scrappy team who had nothing going for them but pluck. And we lost abysmally.

A girl called Haru Aomi was undoubtedly the MVP of the game. She zipped around the wide court at incredible speeds, blocked multiple shots, and even when we cooperated to block her from the basket, she just roared and rallied for another try. She was only a small and scrappy thing, with not much in the way of strength, but she used that to her advantage and made it part of her technique.

Every time she rushed the basket, we beat her back and sent her flying. But she would grin and dash off for another try. Her team's passion and enthusiasm rose up to match hers.

Most of Haru's shots got blocked, and she actually went out of her way to mark me, our team's ace player. They shouldn't have had a chance of winning, so why, then, are your eyes so fixed on the goal?

"Move...your...ass!"

It was down to the final ten seconds. Only one point was between us. I couldn't stop her from leaping into the air and making a final wild shot at the basket.

"What high school are you planning on going to?"

"Fuji High."

That's when I made up my mind about my future path, too.

The next person to draw my interest was a boy as enigmatic as a new moon on a dark night.

This boy, a friend to both Haru and Kaito, was the first person I had ever met who was just like me.

Great looks. Blessed with ability. And the ability to smoothly control his life and image.

Always laughing and having fun, surrounded by friends. But sometimes, he looked so incredibly bored with everything. I knew he carried a darkness within him, just like I did.

...When you're capable of doing absolutely anything, you can't actually do anything.

It was a small and superficial kind of darkness, the kind that could be laughed away if you told anyone about it.

I was sure we'd end up in a relationship of complicity. At the very least, in the world as far as I knew it, he was the only one who could ever really understand me—and I him.

I wanted to get close to him as soon as possible. But I didn't want to come across as too eager. He might think I was just any ordinary girl. It's okay, I told myself. Two such similar people, attending the same school, with friends in common. Just let it be, and the chance will come along.

Then second year started, and we were placed in the same class. I waited, for around two months.

I saw him in my mind as a full moon, floating softly above the clouds, like smoke, high in the sky, watching over us all.

He was nothing like what I thought. He was nothing like me, after all.

What a clumsy, inelegant way to live.

He was supposed to live life smoothly, like me, evading every obstacle. But he only pretended to be cool. In reality, he bumbled around, bumping into situations, getting out of them somehow, then barging headlong into the next mess, all with such perfect honesty and earnestness.

"...We're alike, you and me," Saku had said.

...We're nothing alike, I thought. I'm not clumsy like you.

Generally, if you want to soothe a girl's wounded heart, you pull her into your arms and sweetly whisper, "It's okay, I'll protect you." That's standard stuff! If you acted like that, I might have even let you get almost all the way to a kiss...

But no. Who ever heard of a prince who throws a girl down on a sofa to force her to confront her traumatic past?!

And yet, and yet...

I started thinking that I wanted to live that way, too. Beautifully, I mean.

I realized that, within me, there was a part that longed for something that was unshakable.

So I'm going on a kind of a crazy journey. The first one in Yuzuki Nanase's history.

If I come back from my journey with something that I never had before... Well, you'd better just prepare yourself, Saku Chitose.

...Because let me inform you that I'm not the kind of naive girl who's just going to wait around for you to come and claim her.



It was Friday, the final day of the tests, which were now over.

Saku and Haru and the others were going out to eat, apparently, but I left the school alone. Just thinking about the looks of worry on their faces made me want to snort with laughter. Honestly, they were such a loving bunch.

I had an idea of what was ahead.

Yanashita wasn't all that patient, after all.

After the incident at the festival and the incident at the school gates, Yanashita should be getting antsy for more right about now.

He didn't come yesterday. So that meant today was bound to be the day.

I walked about ten minutes away from school, down the usual school route, alongside the usual park. If Yanashita popped up in the park, it would come as

no surprise to me.

"Hey, Yuzuki."

His lazy drawl still made me stiffen up, as always, but I took a deep breath and turned to glare at him.

"Shall we talk, Yanashita?" I entered the park of my own free will.

Casually, I scanned the perimeter. There didn't seem to be anyone around, but there was a low hedge and trees all over. It wasn't like we were totally hidden from the outside. There weren't many of them, but occasionally people passed by on bicycles or on foot. If I screamed, someone would probably notice. There were two other small exits besides the entrance I just came in by. One of those was the fastest way to escape to the main road.

It's all right. As long as I don't disconnect my brain, I can handle this somehow.

I went over close by the exit that led to the main road, so I could escape easier if I needed to. Then I turned back to face him.

"So what is it you want with me?"

Yanashita's face contorted into a horrible grin. I've always hated obnoxious grins. Only people who can't control their emotions let their faces go like that. Not at all like someone else I could mention, someone in total control, drawing people to them like a philosopher or religious leader.

He started to speak, messing with his high ponytail. "I wanna do what I didn't get to do in junior high."

His eyes were sharp, razor narrow. He raked his gaze up my body, from my feet to my head.

"You weren't much back then, but who would have thought you'd bloom this much? I knew I should have touched you when I had the chance."

Yeah, my butt and boobs were bigger than they were back then, and even I was aware that my body had become more womanly. But what gave this guy the right to talk as if I would be willing to hand myself over to him?

"So you want to date me? Or is it just sex?"

He was delighted to hear that word from my lips; his grin grew even wider, and he didn't even try to hide it. Gross.

"Yeah, dating or whatever. Although actually, I'd prefer it if you'd just let me bang you once, for posterity. After all, you've been spreading your legs for all kinds of guys since high school started. If you let me be one of them, then I'll leave you alone after that."

Yanashita was still talking.

"Don't worry, I won't tell Saku Chitose. So what do you say? There's a love hotel right over there. Anyway, you do the same kind of thing with him all the time, so no big deal, right?"

I felt the blood rush to my head all of a sudden.

Don't you dare... Don't you dare mention his name!

Don't you dare talk like you have anything in common with him!

He's had plenty of chances to do whatever he likes, but he's never laid so much as a finger on me! Don't you dare defile the name of a guy who's never tried to touch anything but my heart!

I clenched my hands into fists and braced my legs.

"I don't know what kind of nonsense you've been hearing about me..."

I sucked in a huge breath.

"But I'm a virgin, you dumb fuck! And I'd never let a pig like you be my first!!!"

"...Huh?"

But Yanashita didn't seem surprised, didn't recoil. He just grinned even wider.

Probably, my steely resolve and willpower hadn't registered with him at all. He didn't care to notice. He was incapable of seeing anything but his own delusions of the world around him.

"Even better. I'll teach you from scratch."

Still, I refused to drop eye contact. I refused to go back to that day.

"I am not an object. I am Yuzuki Nanase. I don't know what kind of girls you've

been dating, but I am not the kind of girl you can control with force!"

"You've come a long way from the little girl who bawled her eyes out over a slap."

Yanashita's shoes scraped against the gravel as he took a step toward me.

My body started to freeze up, but I just kept repeating *Stay calm, stay calm* inside my head.

"You can try using force, but you won't get what you want. You can force a kiss on me, you can tear off my clothes, but I will never, ever be yours!!!"

"...I've had enough of this."

Yanashita came striding forward, grabbing me by the wrist, and then...

"Let's try it and see, then."

SLAP.

My vision went blurry for a second as he slapped my right cheek.

Two, three seconds later, the pain hit. It burned.

"Go on, cry then."

I looked up at him. My arm was trembling, his fingers still clamped on my wrist, but my mind was oddly cold and calm.

I remembered what Saku did that night.

He was so scary when he was mad... But he was mad on my behalf.

Compared to that, the weak anger from this guy whose rage was only on his own selfish behalf...seemed so pathetic.

I clenched my stomach. I drew my eyebrows together.

I made up my mind that I wasn't going to cry.

"Let me repeat myself. You can force a kiss on me, you can rape me, but I will never be yours. There's no space for you inside my heart. If you're fine screwing a girl who's thinking of another guy the whole time, then why don't you go ahead and do whatever you want to me, huh?!!!"

SLAP.

This time, he hit me on the other cheek.

No, I can't do this; I'm scared... I am NOT scared!

"No matter what you do, a pathetic guy like you can't truly hurt me at all. I'll make a note of everything you do, and then I'll walk myself right down to the police station. I'll tell everyone all about the pitiful deeds committed by a pitiful loser."

"Try it, bitch."

He yanked me up close to him.

It's okay.

I've got a fire burning within me, after all.

It's all because of you that I've started to catch feelings... Feelings that can be defined by a single word.

But it's a shame, though. I wanted a fair fight, between an untouched version of myself and your stubborn self.

Now that it's come to this, it doesn't matter what this guy says to me; no matter what he does to me, I'll be repeating one name in my mind like an incantation.

So it stays unshakable—so it doesn't grow dim and fade away.

Saku, Saku, Saku, Saku, Saku...

"Saku!!!"

"...You called, Princess?"

I heard his voice, relief flooding me. Yanashita shoved me roughly away from him, and as I stumbled back, falling on my butt, I saw him punch Saku in the face at almost exactly the same moment.



"Please! Please stop!"

Saku had been knocked flat by the punch, and now a storm of violence was raining down upon him. He curled up, using his arms to desperately protect his head. I had never seen him so vulnerable; the sight caused me immense pain.

"Nope! He's the one who came flying at me, trying to look all cool."

Yanashita continued to kick Saku in the shoulder, back, stomach, and legs, without even a pause in between each one.

"You're fooling yourself if you think some honor student from a fancy school has a chance against me. I've been fighting for years!"

Saku was out of breath, shoulders heaving.

This was all my fault.

Saku had to have noticed how I truly felt. And once he did, he couldn't stop himself from running to my rescue.

"*You've got what it takes to handle someone like that,*" I said.

In the end, I was just trying to use Saku as a shield to protect me from the violence I was most scared of, wasn't I?

"If you shut your trap and agree to come with me, Yuzuki, then I'll leave him be." Yanashita grinned.

"I'm...I'm calling the police."

I tried to sound tough, bringing my phone out of my pocket, but he kept on grinning.

"Sure, but where's the proof I did any of this? If there was a passerby who might corroborate your story, then you would have already called, right? Not that I have any intention of letting you use your phone, mind you."

This guy doesn't play by the rules. How frightening is that? Common sense meant nothing to him.

The bravado I did my best to muster up was crumbling away, bit by bit.

It was all my fault that Saku was...Saku was...

"Come on, say you're willing to date me. This guy's dying here."

My lips trembled.

The once brightly burning fire inside me was on the verge of being extinguished by his filthy words.

...I mean, I had been alone this whole time, after all.

Even surrounded by friends, laughing all the time—in the end, I was always alone. I should have dealt with my troubles by myself. Even this ridiculous, miserable situation—I should have dealt with it alone.

If I did, would it hurt even half this much?

Seeing someone I cared about being hurt, all because of me.

I don't want to say it. I don't want to say it, Saku.

"I'll go out with..."

"Can't hear ya." He kicked Saku again.

No. He wasn't the type who should ever be tyrannized this way. He was honest, lived life right, and brought happiness to so many people.

"I'll go out with you, Ya..."

"No... Yuzuki..."

I couldn't see his face, but I could hear Saku's voice.

"This is just...pain."

I gasped.

I was sure his next words were going to be "Don't let it get to your mind."

I mean, I knew it. He was the one who had taught me that.

My mind started working again.

Right...just need to think...think...think...

What can I do? All I can really do is...run. Yes, run away from here.

If possible, I needed to bait Yanashita away and lead him to the main street, somewhere he couldn't escape, then scream for help. That way, I could save Saku.

Just like Saku did that night of the festival, I got to my feet, planting myself firmly.

I know I probably don't have the right to say this, but I'm going to save you,

just like how you saved me.

Don't fall, tears. Move now, legs. Look straight in front of you.

Run, run, run.

...Just hang in there, Saku. I swear I'll be back.

I sucked in a breath.

"I'm Saku Chitose's girl! You think I'm gonna let a coward like you touch me? You couldn't get a girl to sleep with you if your life depended on it!!!"

Then, just as I was about to make a break for the park exit...

"All right, cut!"

I heard a familiar voice. All of a sudden, Kazuki Mizushino appeared, holding his phone up.

I froze, taken aback. Kazuki was beckoning this way. I turned to look at Saku.

"He's fine. Don't get in his way. Just come over here. Quickly."

In a state of total confusion, I ran over to Mizushino. Well, I'd been planning to leave Saku and get help anyway.

I got behind Mizushino, then turned to look at Saku again.

"Ouch. Dammit, Kazuki, you couldn't have gotten here faster?"

Bracing himself, hands on his knees, Saku slowly stood up.

My eyes filled with tears to see him.

Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you.

"Give me a break. I was busy working the angles and the zoom to make sure anyone who viewed this clip would be able to get a good grasp of the situation, you know."

"Are you kidding me right now...?" Yanashita was grinning horribly, looking this way. "You think another fancy honor student's presence changes anything here...?"

Mizushino answered him, his voice light. "Give me a break; I'm a noncombatant here. It's the scary dude over there you need to worry about."

"What he said, Yan, my man. Boy, you really went to town on the kicking. What am I, a can that a bunch of elementary schoolers are kicking on the walk home?"

Saku took off his blazer, then rolled up his shirtsleeves. Then he pushed his sweaty hair back flat over his head.

"Huh, so you can stand. I give you one point for that."

"Playing the boss character? Pretty funny stuff, Ponytail. I'm gonna call you Anglerfish Dick."

He was making his usual funny jokes again. That was reassuring. Then the gravity of the situation hit me once more.

"Mizushino. Quick, call the police."

"It's all right. If we bring in the police now, Saku's efforts will all be for nothing."

Saku was still talking. "As long as I protect my face and head, the other hits are no worse than catching a hard dead-ball as a pitcher." He turned this way, smiling. "Sorry I was so slow to come and rescue you. But you were right. Just leave it to your reliable boyfriend, Saku Chitose."

You idiot! This is hardly the time for acting cool!

"You're gonna die." Yanashita was closing in on Saku.

My muscles tensed up, and I screamed. "Enough already, just run!"

I forced my eyes open, even though they wanted to close, as Saku leaped backward, out of range of Yanashita's foot. He was doing what he could to reassure me, seeing that I was ready to leap into the fray to help him, useless though I might have been. Yanashita was pissed now. He lashed out at Saku with his feet and his fists, but Saku nimbly dodged both, as if the beating he received earlier had never even happened.

"Get back here."

"It's not boxing; there's no ring. I'm free to retreat as much as I like, so avoiding you is a breeze."

Saku was true to his word. He backed up lightly, making little leaps and sometimes sidesteps. Like this, he was able to keep distance between them.

"I can predict what kind of ball a pitcher's going to throw just from the tiniest of motions, everything from hundred-or-so-mile straights to curveballs. At the festival, I had Yuzuki in her *yukata* to worry about, and at the school gates, I didn't really feel like taking you on seriously. That's all."

Yanashita was beginning to breathe hard.

"Now see, that's what you get for smoking at such a young age. I'm not sure what kind of delusion you're under, but did you really think a lazy couch potato like you could win against someone like me? I've been playing sports for years."

There was a dull thumping sound.

When Yanashita paused for breath, Saku rushed him and punched him straight in the middle. "Ugh... Guh... Gack..."

It must have been the solar plexus. Yanashita went down to his knees.

"Here's a tip, man. Getting violent doesn't mean you're strong. It means you're so darn weak you've got to rely on violence to get anyone to pay attention to you."

Saku loomed over Yanashita, who was still unable to stand, and continued.

"You know what's really scary about guys like you? You go beyond the limits. Most people stop to think about what happens after you punch someone. What happens with your parents, your school, your club activities, your future? But you forget all about that and just focus on beating out the clock."

I was starting to calm down now, which meant I was also beginning to realize what Saku wasn't saying here. What was Mizushino doing at the park? Why did he show up at that exact moment?

Surely...surely Saku didn't plan it this way?

After all, that would mean subjecting himself to a beating for it to work.

"So I made preparations, to drag you into the same ring as me and to let the gloves come off. I've made sure that we recorded everything nice and clearly. You hitting Yuzuki. And you using excessive force against me."

Yanashita seemed to have managed to catch his breath. Now he stood up. "So you want to have a no-limits, all-out brawl, do you?"

"I wish you wouldn't make it sound so barbaric. This is pure self-defense on my part."

"Shut up!"

Yanashita grabbed Saku by the shirtfront. Saku grabbed him back, by the arm and around the neck. Then he twisted, slamming Yanashita's back against the ground.

"That's called a *Sasae-tsurikomi-ashi*, a major judo throw. You really gotta pay attention in gym class."

Saku climbed on top of the fallen boy, straddling him. Yanashita lashed out at him, but Saku grabbed his arms and pinned them above his head with one hand, just like he did to me that rainy night.

Saku's expression was as cool as ice.

"...Now let's see how you like it."

SLAP!

Saku drew his hand all the way back and then slapped Yanashita in the face, hard.

Yanashita's cheek immediately turned bright red and started to swell.

"Are you scared?"

"Fuck you! You'd better watch your backs, you and Yuzuki both..."

SLAP!

Saku backhanded him across the other cheek.

"Answer the question, boss. Are you scared, being smacked in the face by someone so much stronger than you, while you can't escape or defend yourself?"

"S-so this is about revenge, is it? Fine, do your worst. Next time, I'll bring a whole bunch of guys with me, and we'll all take turns wrecking Yuzuki's..."

SMACKKK!!!

Wordlessly and mechanically, Saku slapped Yanashita's cheek again. His eyes were completely devoid of emotion.

Then the smug-faced jerk who had acted like he was king of the school ever since junior high—showed fear on his face for the first time.

"You stuck-up honor student... You think you're so much better than me... In the past, I..."

But Saku cut Yanashita off, even as he was about to say something.

"Sorry, but I'm not even slightly interested in your past. I don't care if something bad happened to you, and that made you choose the crappy path you're on. I don't care."

Saku grabbed him by the collar.

"What I can say is this. I respect someone who tries to grit their teeth and get on with living life the best way they can a million times more than someone who uses their past as an excuse to hurt other people."

"...You'll regret this... I'll make you regret this..."

"You still don't get it, do you?"

DONK.

Saku head-butted Yanashita neatly in the nose, then leaned in, glaring right into his eyes.

"Listen here. I can't compete against an opponent who doesn't follow the same rules I do. But if we're both playing from the same rule book, then all bets are off. That's the kinda guy I am."

"Uhhhh..."

For the first time, Yanashita let out a groan of fear in response to this.

"If you ever come near Yuzuki again, I'll use every trick I can think of to beat you to a pulp. You can come after me with a hundred guys, but I'll only focus on you. For every hit they land on me, I'll pay it back with three hits on you. And only you."

Yanashita was silent now, pinned beneath Saku's weight.

"...Stop... Please stop now, Saku."

I realized I was the one who was talking.

I knew I didn't have the right to ask something like that. But seeing Saku dash aside his true heart and act the hero—no, the villain, really—made me feel sad, and just... It felt all wrong, somehow.

Look what I made him do.

I had made him shoulder everything, once again.

I looked at Mizushino, who was standing there solemnly, but he shook his head slowly.

Was this what Yuzuki Nanase amounted to? Was this the outcome of the equal and special relationship we shared? Was I nothing more than an extra in this story, one who pushes her selfish delusions on him, just to wear down his rough edges?

That face doesn't suit you.

I want your usual "I'm Mr. Cool" smile back.

I want you to make me laugh with another of your hopeless jokes.

"You're scared, aren't you? You know how Yuzuki felt? She's been fighting alone against memories of fear that are a hundred times stronger than any I could force on you."

Saku grabbed Yanashita's shirtfront with both hands and dragged him to a sitting position.

Then, with an emotionless smile, he said...

"Well, this is all just preamble. There's only one thing I really wanted to say." His hands tightened into fists.

"Touch my girl again, and I will fucking kill you!!!"

Then Saku leaned in, bringing his mouth to Yanashita's ear.

"..." He whispered something inaudible.

“...It.”

“I can’t hear you.”

“...Got it. I swear I won’t come near Yuzuki again.”

Yanashita seemed to have lost all will to fight. Saku relaxed, standing up.

I would never, ever forget the sight of the soft, sad smile he gave me in that moment.



“You idiot! You complete and total dumbass!!!”

Once we had all watched Yanashita stumble out of the park, I rounded on Saku, who was sitting down and looking exhausted.

“Why was that the only plan you could come up with, hmm?!!!”

I knew I was being unreasonable, but I couldn’t stop myself; I straddled Saku’s stretched-out legs and began pounding his chest with my fists.

The tears I had been holding back in front of Yanashita were spilling over now, but what did I care?

“Hey, steady, Yuzuki. I’m officially a wounded man, you know.”

“Shut up, shut up! Usually you’d never let anyone beat you like that. Why did you do that?!”

“Look, it was kind of like...settling the score. So I could wrap this all up in the most beautiful way.”

“You had all the evidence you needed to plead self-defense when he slapped me! Why did you have to go and get yourself kicked to pieces like that?!”

“Because I was going to be the one punching him out in the end. Punching him just as payback for slapping you might have looked like an example of excessive force.”

“...You’re an *idiot*, Saku.”

I was tired of pummeling him now. I rested my forehead against his wide, sturdy chest. I had to bite my tongue, or I might have started bawling, and then I wouldn’t be able to stop.

Saku stroked my hair softly, gently.

“Why did you...come to save me?”

“I mean, technically, you never officially dumped me, so...”

I couldn’t hold back anymore. I threw my arms around him.

“Uh...you two?”



Kazuki had been watching us in silence, but he spoke up now.

Oh, right. It's not just us here.

I shook my head, scrubbing away my tears, and looked over at him.
“Mizushino... Thank you.”

“Well, I just did what Saku asked me to do. Although, I have to say I think that Kaito would have been much more suited to a down and dirty scene like this one...?”

Saku gave him a sarcastic grin.

“He’s too much of a good guy. I needed someone who would stay cool and keep shooting, even while I was getting my ass handed to me.”

“You’re a good judge of character, my friend.”

The two of them grinned and bumped fists in a satisfied way.

Boys really might just be the dumbest people on the planet.

“By the way, what was it you whispered to Yanashita at the end there?”

My question made Saku look away awkwardly. So I turned to Kazuki instead.

“I dunno. I don’t even want to imagine what goes through the minds of bad guys.”

I was the one who made Saku a bad guy.

I was the one who made Saku act like that, in the name of breaking Yanashita mentally.

That irrefutable fact weighed heavy on my chest.

“All right, then...” Saku put his hand on my shoulder. “Could you kindly get off? Even I don’t really want to have my first time outdoors on the dusty ground.”

That’s when I realized for the first time that I was straddling his lap. I flushed bright red in a very girlish way and leaped off him.

Saku got gingerly to his feet, and Mizushino lent him his shoulder.

“All right, my job here is done, and this time it’s for real. Will you be okay

getting home alone?"

I still had a mountain of words I wanted to say and feelings I wanted to express to him, but we had all the time in the world for me to do that later.

I smiled and nodded, watching their backs as the two of them left together.



After parting from Saku, I walked home along the river path, feeling as fine as the weather.

...Ah no. Actually, I was still feeling a little antsy. Come to think of it, I should have been the one to help Saku home. I envied Mizushino a little for being the one to lend him a shoulder. Huh, weird. Guess I just couldn't get out of that girlish mode. In all the fuss of the aftermath, I forgot the most important event.

It felt like the Yuzuki Nanase I had been just yesterday was far, far away.

But I think I'm going to like this new version of myself better.

I felt my cheeks spreading in a big grin as I thought about that, and I had to fight hard to keep them under control. Just then, I heard light footsteps coming up behind me.

My lips spread into a perfect grin.

Even though he was all beat up, he still couldn't bring himself to let me walk home alone.

Right until the end, he was the coolest of the cool. Ah, I was so happy.

He grabbed my hand. "Yuzuki."

I put on a sweet smile and turned around, to see...

"I'll walk you home, Yuzuki."

I took in the sight of the person standing there; then I flung the hand away and took off running at top speed.



"...Wait!"

Why?

Why, why, why?

Why was I running right now?

Saku had dealt with the Yanashita issue. I should have been walking home, my heart floating among the clouds.

What was this guy doing here, and why was he chasing after me?

“Please wait, Yuzuki!”

The voice was getting closer and closer.

If I kept running, he would catch up to me anyway. I steeled myself and came to a stop, turning around once more.

He stopped, too, shoulders heaving as he struggled for breath. Then, with a surface-level, dashing smile, he came closer.

“I’m sorry. I must have startled you when I approached you out of the blue. It must have been terrible, all that stuff with the Yan High guys.”

How does he know about that? I thought.

“Um...” I opened my mouth to speak, but he cut me off.

“It must have been so hard for you. Did they get rough with you? I’m sure I can help you out, Yuzuki.”

It didn’t make sense to me. The words he was saying. The way he reached for me, like I was a beloved girlfriend of his or something. His smile. None of it.

I felt cold sweat run down my spine, and I realized my initial instinct, to run away, had been correct.

What on earth was this person saying?

“Um...!”

“Is Saku Chitose bothering you now, too? Not just the Yan High guys? You’ve been at the mercy of that Yanashita guy ever since he took that embarrassing photo of you, right? I know how you feel. It must have been so hard. But it’s all right now.”

“Listen!!!”

He was trying to show me the screen of his phone, but I ignored that and started yelling.

“Who the heck are you?!”

Time stood still for a second.

The guy standing there looked like a budget version of Mizushino, who I had been with only minutes before. But this guy’s lip was twitching visibly.

“Who am I...? Don’t you remember last winter—you helped me pick my stuff up in front of the school gates.”

“Sorry, I don’t remember that...”

“It’s me! Tomoya Naruse! I introduced myself to you then! You must have heard about Saku becoming friends with me lately?”

“Saku hasn’t said anything about—”

“Don’t you lie to me! Ever since then, you’ve—no, even before then... You’ve been on my mind, Yuzuki. Even after we first talked, we made eye contact in the halls so many times! You even smiled at me once!”

The way he was babbling made me sure of one thing.

My stalker... It hadn’t been Yanashita at all.

I knew something was off the whole time. That guy wouldn’t go around snapping pics of me to use as torture. He wasn’t the type.

I thought maybe he roped in an accomplice to do it, but that wasn’t right, either.

This guy—he was my stalker.

“...You’re the one who put those photos in my mailbox and desk drawer?”

“Those were warnings. *You’re being targeted at Yan High. Chitose is deceiving you.*”

I was so mad, I forgot to be scared.

What the heck was the meaning of this?

“Saku is deceiving me, you say?”

"Right! He doesn't love you, Yuzuki. He told me as much himself. All I had to do was put on a friendly front, and he told me everything. He's only showing you a fake smile, Yuzuki. In reality, he's teaching me all about girls so that you'll notice me instead!"

Ah, okay. I was starting to get it.

He saw through all of this, from way back at the beginning.

It was kind of a dick move not to tell me anything, but I think I could understand his reasoning. While keeping it a secret from everyone, he had been trying to steer this guy back in the right direction.

Saku really wasn't living a very free life, I thought with a grin.

Just how far was he willing to go to lend a hand?

Was he trying to save everyone who came to him for help or something?

Hmm, well, he really did save me. So perhaps I have no room to talk.

...Thank you, Saku.

Thanks to you, I don't feel scared at all anymore. It's funny, but it's true.

"Hey." I spoke up again, feeling totally calm now. "Saku told you all kinds of things, right?"

The guy in front of me snorted dismissively. "A lot of useless info, yeah. Like, how I shouldn't hold on too tight to a delusion of you. It was all stupid stuff; I didn't bother remembering it."

"So then, do you know this...?"

Thinking of Saku made me break into a big smile.

"You know, when I get my period, I totally gush bright-red period blood, and I get even crankier than usual. Oh, and I get explosive diarrhea as well, every now and then. Oh, oh, and sometimes, when I see a hot guy, I go home and masturbate for hours. You know all that about me, do you?"

The guy's face contorted, as if he just couldn't believe what I was saying.

"...Chitose said...some similar-sounding things. No doubt he coached you to say all that as well, to deter other men, didn't he? But it's all right. I won't be

fooled so easily.”

“I don’t know what you and Saku talked about, exactly...” I sighed. “But Saku was totally correct about all of it.”

“No, he wasn’t!”

The guy shoved his cell phone screen in my face again.

“He’s the kind of guy who takes gross pics like this!”

The screen showed a girl wearing the Fuji High uniform. She was shot from behind and appeared to be on her hands and knees. Her skirt was rolled up at the waistband, exposing what looked like brand-new panties. Her slim, slightly muscled thighs were blindingly white.

“He knows the kind of trauma you went through because of Yanashita, but he’s the type to do the exact same thing! To make sure you can never get away —”

I knew it.

I’d experienced it enough times.

And I was afraid of it, all this time.

Idealization, disillusionment. Mirages and reality.

The guy continued.

“But I got ahold of this photo. Now you have a reason to listen to me, right? This is your chance to break away from Yanashita and Chitose. I’ll treat you far better than delinquent scum or a man-slut shithead ever could.”

He was a raving lunatic.

He didn’t seem to realize that he was blackmailing me, too.

“Just so you know, even if that did turn out to be a photo of me...” I paused, then blushed and smiled as I continued. “If Saku asked me to take it... I’d probably oblige him.”

After all, I’d already put a name to my feelings.

If I was going to be disillusioned, then bring it on.

If a panty shot was what it took to bring the reluctant opponent to the dance floor, then so be it.

“Didn’t you know? I’m just that kinda girl.”

“What...? Why...? For a guy like that? Who acts so smug? All because he’s good-looking? You’re not that kind of girl, Yuzuki. You see right through to a person’s soul...”

“Right. I look beyond the surface to what’s inside of Saku. Compared to that... What part of me are you looking at, huh?”

The guy was muttering something under his breath, but I ignored him and carried on.

“If you want to get close to Yuzuki Nanase, you need to really see who I am first. Don’t use sneaky tactics; actually face me head-on and break down that wall I put up!”

“...Shut up! Just shut up!” He reached out and grabbed my arms.

Uh, that wasn’t what I meant by head-on.

My ability to smile and roll my eyes over all of this wasn’t shaken yet.

What was shaking was the trembling flame of fury in front of me, a flame that probably couldn’t be stopped from wreaking destruction.

I tried to stay cool, like a certain someone we all know, and aim for the right timing.

Forty percent. At least 40 percent is all I need.

“Hyup!”

I kicked the guy square in the crotch, trying not to kick too hard. He crumpled to the ground, his display of quivering rage from seconds ago disappearing in an instant.

He looked so pathetic on the ground, and for a moment, the image was overlaid with a similar image of Saku in my mind. It really tickled me for some reason, and I ended up snorting with laughter.

“Your name was Tomoya Naruse, right? I’ll remember that. I’ll remember it

forever, as the one who finally helped me realize my feelings for him.”



...And so when our hero of justice, Saku Chitose, made his way up the bank, having watched the proceedings play out, Yuzuki registered zero surprise.

Well, after all the work I did setting things up, it was easy to see now who was the one pulling the strings, wasn’t it?

I looked back and forth between Yuzuki and Tomoya, who was curled up on the ground.

So this is how it all ended up, huh?

“Do we need to compare notes?”

Tomoya responded in a wretched voice. “Chitose...you set me up.”

“Now, now, that’s a cruel joke. All right, so I may have left some things out. But you’re the one who stole that off my phone. One of Kenta’s embarrassing photo reel highlights, that was.”

“How long...how long have you suspected me?”

“From the start. There was something I just didn’t like about you. The snobby way you treated Kenta didn’t do you any favors, either.”

The Yan High guys had a mole at Fuji High; that much was always obvious. I knew that long before the basketball shoe heist even happened.

The theft of Yuzuki’s deodorant from the clubroom. The fact that the culprit had a photo of her from first year. An outsider couldn’t have done that. Nor could they have swiped Yuzuki’s pencil case and writing implements from the classroom.

Besides, petty stuff like that wasn’t the Yan High guys’ style. Still, Cock-a-Doodle Doofus and co were talking like they had insider info on Yuzuki’s doings from the start. They made it sound like they’d heard stuff from their boss... In other words, Yanashita, but they knew stuff about not only Yuzuki, but me, too. That didn’t really track.

Then, as soon as Yuzuki and I embarked on our fake romance, who came along trying to get close to me? Tomoya.

Of course, I was bound to be suspicious.

Honestly, I suspected Nazuna was the accomplice for a while. My reasons for shifting my suspicions to Tomoya were based mostly on a hunch. The deciding factor, though, was when the Yan High guys showed up to menace us at the festival. The only other person who knew about our date besides Haru was—Tomoya. That's when my suspicions were all confirmed.

The thing I wasn't sure of, right until the end, though, was who was the mastermind, and who was the servant? Had Tomoya sicced the Yan High guys on us? Or was it the Yan High guys who were manipulating Tomoya into doing their bidding?

But I came up with a clever trick for finding out for sure.

"What did you think of Kenta's skirt, then? He's got quite the ass on him, doesn't he?"

"What do you...?"

"That photo was from Kenta's drag photo shoot. Produced by the legendary Yuuko Hiiragi, herself."

Yesterday, after Yuzuki left, I had discussed today's plan with my friends in minute detail.

Yuuko and Yua were opposed, of course, but I was able to convince them in the end, reminding them that it was all to protect another person and that I had fulfilled my promise of letting them know in advance this time.

I knew they would both probably be worried sick right around now, so I made sure to ask Kazuki to give everyone a buzz so they'd know I was okay.

The plot to trap the Yan High jerk was a simple one, but tackling Tomoya, now—that was the toughie.

I wanted to see how far he'd go, just to play the good guy.

So when I explained Yuzuki's past to him, I lied. I told him Yuzuki was dealing with some kind of sexual trauma, after she was forced to do what Yanashita said because he had incriminating photos of her. I basically fed him dummy info. I made sure to mention *taking photos* when I confessed to Tomoya about

Yuzuki sleeping at my place. Then all I had to do was leave my smartphone unlocked on the table while I went to the bathroom. He pounced on it right away.

"I'm not sure if you were just eager to see dirty photos of Yuzuki, or if you wanted blackmail material to use later, or heck, maybe it was both. By the way, did you feel like you were being watched? Yua Uchida of Team Chitose was sitting at the next table, observing everything."

Tomoya looked stricken.

This featherbrained fool probably thought there was zero chance of him ever being found out.

"I'm sure you've already figured this out, but there was no way I could let you have an actual picture of Yuzuki to drool over. So I decided to ask Kenta to pitch in, since he was always like, '*Isn't there anything I can do to help? Anything at all?*' Then I asked Yuuko to pitch in, too, and she was like, '*Totes!*' so then it was off to the lingerie shop we went. It was really quite something, you know."

Probably Kenta would never offer to help with anything ever again, but oh well. He did us a big solid this time, so I would let him off the hook in the future.

"So you were the one who got the Yan High guys involved and set them on Yuzuki, right?"

At my request, Nazuna had asked her friend at Yan High for some insider intel. It was as easy as pie. It turned out the friend actually went to the same middle school as Tomoya.

If he was being forced into this, he would have had no reason to risk his neck just to feed them info they could never have found out themselves.

"The stuff with the photo—I'm sorry about that. I lost my mind briefly there. But I am not a stalker or anything of the kind."

"You're not? Then how come you knew Yuzuki wore a *yukata* to the festival?"

"I just...I just assumed a girl like Nanase would wear one."

"Indeed? Then what's this about?"

I showed him my phone screen. It was displaying an image of a guy wearing a

cap pulled low over his eyes, holding a white envelope. It was unmistakably Tomoya.

Yuzuki peered at it, murmuring. “Is this...is this my front yard?”

“Yeah. Haru came up with some kind of clever excuse, and we got your dad to let us check his dashcam. Of course he had one, with an expensive car like that. I was wondering if it’s the type that keeps recording while the car’s parked—and yep. Bingo.”

Checkmate, Tomoya.

You’ve never been the type to think that much before you act, have you? You started off just following Yuzuki around by yourself secretly. But from things that Cock-a-Doodle Doofus said, you knew there was some sort of connection between Yanashita and Yuzuki in the past, right? All you had to do was start leaking interesting rumors about her being slutty.

I’m no detective, and I can’t speak to the guy’s motive, but it seems to me like he was doing whatever he could to back Yuzuki into a corner of whatever dream world he was living in, so he could then swoop in and try to save her.

A damsel in distress is easier to get, after all.

“But then you realized I was starting to suspect Nazuna, so you tried making it look like she was behind it. So we had you, playing the clichéd stalker, while letting the Yan High guys act as the heavies, all the while trying to frame Nazuna. You added too many elements, didn’t you?”

No doubt, he would have done any number of dirty tricks to torment Yuzuki psychologically and create an opening for himself. His erratic methodology only served to throw us off the scent.

“I had a lot of trouble putting the puzzle pieces together, you know.”

Tomoya lifted his head, looking as if he was still about to try to make excuses.

“So you were fooling me the whole time.”

“Let’s just leave that massive boomerang accusation aside for a moment. I honestly did give you real advice. I thought it would be great if I could actually get through to you. If you stopped all this on your own, I was willing to take

your secrets to the grave.”

I sighed, a real big sigh.

No one wants to trap a person they were pretending to befriend like this.

“I told you: Don’t take the easy shortcut. But you ignored me, and now we’ve come to a very simple conclusion. Yuzuki’s pain, the pain I told you about—you saw it as nothing but a lucky item that would help you complete your quest.”

“Then what was I supposed to do?!”

“I told you what to do. I told you to be brave and talk to her. You never even managed to make it to the starting line, did you?”

Still, this guessing game of sins committed wasn’t going to be saving anyone’s soul.

If there was nothing more to be said, then there was no way forward.

Tomoya couldn’t become the kind of person that Kenta was.

People who try to force their own story line on others will end up being ejected from that person’s narrative, to remain a nameless NPC forevermore.

What a sad, sad story.

Tomoya was on his knees now, head hanging to the ground like he’d lost all will to live.

“Listen, Tomoya. Lock yourself in your darkened bedroom sobbing and writing crybaby poetry. Then when you get sick of that, go buy a guitar and turn them into songs. Personally, I’d prefer to hear some lame punk rock instead of beautiful love songs. So next time, you’ll be able to be deal with the object of your affections in a sincere way.”

After a brief refrain of the advice I gave him that one time, Yuzuki and I left the scene.



“Hmph! I was really, *really* worried about you both!!!”

Yuuko was singing her same old song again. How many times had we heard it now? But Yuzuki and I listened patiently with wry smiles.

After that, with Kazuki having made his reports over the phone, they all decided to meet up at a nearby family-style restaurant. So Yuzuki and I headed over there, too.

As soon as Yuuko saw us, she came running over to hug us and started bawling right there in the restaurant. Yua pursed her lips as she took in the sight of my dirty blazer. Haru came over and patted me hard on the back. It was quite the scene.

Even Kenta, who was desperate to have his sexy and incriminating photos deleted as soon as humanly possible, was smiling. Our basketball MVP Kaito, who had known nothing about the day's plans, was half indignant. "Seriously, Saku?" he complained, but not too strongly. I mean, come on, man. You'd have leaped in to help before I finished even explaining the plan, and you would have ruined everything.

We were all feeling free after the end of the test period, too, and we ended up chatting and having fun for so long that the restaurant staff actually came out and asked all the high schoolers to leave.

We still hadn't had enough, though, so we headed to the nearby park to enjoy a little stoppage time.

Yuzuki told Yuuko, "All right, all right, I'm sorry about everything," and after that, she turned to the rest of the group to thank them, too, and apologize for the whole situation for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Yuuko, everyone, I'm really sorry for causing you to worry. But thanks to your help, we were able to bring the situation to a tidy conclusion. Thank you."

Yuzuki grinned happily, and Yua put her hand on her shoulder.

"You held up really well, Yuzuki. It musta bin a real hard time, but y'faced it like a rill champ, fer shur!" (Translation: It must have been a very hard time, but you faced it like a real champ, for sure.) "I'm stronger'n ah look! Ah've already fergot that sorry varmint!" (Translation: I'm stronger than I look. I've already ditched my memories of that pathetic little man!) Ah, hearing these two talk in Fukui dialect really makes me feel chill.

Haru put her fist out for a bump. "Did I win, Umi?"

"Yeah, ya won, Nana."

Then they bumped fists.

Kenta cleared his throat. "Um, so..."

Yuzuki took hold of Kenta's hand, as if to make him stop talking. Then she shook it firmly. "Yamazaki! Hee-hee. Um, how do I say this...? You really..."

"It's fine; just go ahead! Laugh! I know you want to!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Thank you! Seriously, thank you so much."

Kazuki grinned, watching them. "If you'd like, I could show you the test shots we took while we were setting up our pretty Kenta photo shoot?"

Yuzuki narrowed her eyes at Kazuki. "Never mind that. Mizushino, delete that video you took earlier, this instant."

"But it's important proof. After all, what was it you yelled? '*I'm Saku Chitose's girl...*'"

"...You should stop talking right now if you want to ever have children."

I turned to Kaito, who was looking much smaller than usual for some reason.

"Come on, man, stop sulking. I already said I'm sorry."

"But...I was the only one who didn't get to do anything cool."

Yuzuki rolled her eyes and chuckled. "You helped Saku find my basketball shoes, right? That made me really happy. Thank you, Kaito."

The tall guy's face lit up when she said that. *Dude, way to make it obvious.*

"So then..." Yuzuki sneaked a quick glance at her phone. "I guess it's time for the gang to disperse. It'll be midnight before we all get home."

"What...?" Yuuko yelped in surprise, but then she quickly shook her head. I mean, it was already eleven thirty PM. If the police caught us loitering in the park this late, they might even take us into custody.

"Hey, Saku. Could you walk me home? Your last official duty as my fake boyfriend." Yuzuki gave me a cheeky grin.

"I'm on it."

Kaito said he would walk Yuuko and Haru home, and Kazuki and Kenta agreed to walk Yua. Once that was all decided, we left the park. After everyone split up to go their separate ways, I heard Yuuko call “Saku!” after me.

“I’m gonna message you on LINE later, so make sure you check it!”

She grinned and waved, and with that, I realized the whole situation really was over and done with.



Has it really been two weeks since this all started?

A laughing new moon bathed us in light as Yuzuki and I walked slowly home. Idly, I wondered if this was how a couple who had just decided to break up might feel.

There were no people around this late, and not even a single car passed us on the road. All we could hear was the croaking of the frogs in the fields.

It was pretty warm, considering it was night. I would need to swap out my summer clothes from storage soon. I hoped that Yuzuki was feeling much lighter now, as if stripping off a heavy jacket she’d been forced to wear for too long.

I wasn’t sure if Yuzuki was deep in thought or just staring at something far away. But her profile, which I had become so used to seeing lately, looked composed and calm. She was still so close, but soon, she would be going beyond my reach. I wanted to hold on. But I forced myself to look at the sky instead.

...Putting a name to this feeling, defining it with words... I’d rather leave it until the very, very last moment.

I could see her house in the distance now.

The high-end German car was waiting on the driveway, looking reproachfully at Yuzuki for being out walking with a boy late at night. It felt like the car’s headlights were eyes, seeing into my heart somehow. I stopped in front of it. The streetlight’s bulb was almost out of juice. It kept flickering, casting a reassuring spotlight that illuminated both Yuzuki and me.

“Well, I guess I’ll be going now.” I spoke as casually as possible, wanting to

keep this dignified.

Yuzuki took out her phone and checked it quickly. Then she grabbed my blazer by the front and held on.

"...Just a little bit longer."

"What, you want me to sing you a lullaby or something before you go to bed?"

She didn't respond to my quip.

There was silence for a moment, then the pocket of my blazer started to vibrate several times.

I took out my phone, and just as I read Yuuko's name...

Smooch.

I felt a light, soft, brushing sensation on my left cheek.

It was a kiss as fleeting as summer rain.

"If you really want to give me a reward for saving you, you could try that again a smidgen farther to the right."

"Happy birthday, Saku."

"Hey, now, that's...not playing fair."

I didn't think I could hold it together if I looked at her just then, and I didn't want her to look at me, either. So I turned my back.

"Good night, Chitose."

"Good night, Nanase."

Seventeen years old. The start of my eighteenth trip around the sun. I was standing on the threshold of an important day in my life.

Someone took a step forward today. Someone else couldn't quite take one.

I could hear her footsteps fading away behind my back.

I listened to the lingering silence once they were gone, gazing up at the distant moon.

EPILOGUE

The Girl



This is the story of a true romance.

What is the exact moment that people fall in love?

In most cases, it starts by finding something small to admire about someone.

They can run faster than I can. They're taller. They're good at laughing at the right moments. Or they're a lot like I am.

Then you start to notice them more than other people.

And since you have your eye on them, you want to know more about them. You want to talk to them. You want to get close to them. Maybe even touch them. Why not?

But if you need a reason to go any further, then you've got to put a name to that feeling.

Honestly, that might not even be the right way to go about it.

A mistaken sense of interest in someone might lead to a mistaken result. You might end up just missing each other by a slight margin. Over and over again.

But just like how a hero needs to raise the banner of justice when he fights the bad guys, you need to put the indulgent name of "love" to your feelings, when you wanna shout out loud that you're into someone.

You can stare at that moon, shining in the distant sky all you like, but that doesn't mean you'll ever reach it.

If you drag your heels, the rabbit that's been dancing on its surface might get

bored and hop away before you can act.

Pushing your one-sided feelings of admiration on someone—that's not what taking the first step is.

That's just narcissism, indulging in bittersweet emotions.

And if you end up hurting someone as a result, then it's even more true.

In this world, some people can't act without putting certain things into words first. You need to pick up the pistol if you want a chance of ever shooting down that moon.

That's why you've got to put a name to those unstoppable feelings. That name is love.

...And that's where this all begins. This story of a (definitely) real romance.

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