

By the bestselling author of *I Want to Eat Your Pancreas*

I Have a Secret

by Yoru Sumino²



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*I Have
a Secret*

KA「」KU「」SHI「」GO「」TO「」 by Yoru Sumino

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TRANSLATION: Molly Lee

COVER DESIGN: Hanase Qi

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

PROOFREADER: Jade Gardner, Dayna Abel

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Nibedita Sen

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein

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WRITTEN BY

Yoru Sumino

TRANSLATION BY

Molly Lee



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"I'M SO POWERFUL, I can destroy this whole world in one blow!"

"Cool."

"What? That's not 'cool'! You should be asking me why I didn't tell you sooner!"

"I don't expect you to tell me every single thing about you."

"Doesn't it make you mad that I kept it from you?"

"I could never get mad at you for that."

"Oh, stop! You're making me blush!"

"What made you finally reveal yourself as a supervillain, anyway?"

"So much for 'stop,' I guess..."

"Yeah, I thought it'd be fun to keep going."

"Oh boy... Here's hoping I don't disappoint..."

"Hey, no pressure or anything."

"This is some kind of reverse psychology, isn't it?"

"I mean, I wasn't angling for that, but I was hoping it might help."

"Okay, well...it all started when I came here to destroy the world."

"You must be one scary supervillain."

"Oh, I'm scary, all right! Rawrrrr!"

"That...wasn't scary."

"I shouldn't have done that..."

"Anyway, continue."

"Right. So, as I was scoping the place out, I inadvertently took a liking to you all."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you have a heart."

"And there was one person in particular who was especially kind...hence I decided to come clean."

"How very flattering."

"The End."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Well, uh...I have a question, if that's okay with you."

"Be my guest."

"Thank you. What I'm wondering is: what secrets are safe to learn about the people around us?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, people wouldn't want to be friends with a supervillain, right?"

"Right."

"But there's probably a lot of people who would stay friends with you regardless."

"Gosh, I hope so. I'm not actually a supervillain, though."

"So what do we discover in other people that makes us love them?"

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OKAY, LOOK—even *I* know it's major cringe to notice when a girl smells different. But the fact is, it's not the sort of thing you can un-notice.

This morning, when Miki-san asked me "How's it going, kiddo?" I replied with the world's most boring answer: "I...I'm literally the same age as you." I instantly regretted not coming up with something better, but at the same time, I felt like I might just survive school today. Then, as she walked past, I noticed it. Her shampoo smelled different.

Did she switch brands? Weird, because I seemed to remember her saying she loved her shampoo so much that she carried a bottle of it around with her at all times. But yeah, obviously I couldn't ask her about it. She'd categorize me as a creep. And I enjoyed my current position as "average nobody," thank you very much.

Okay, not really.

As I sat at my desk in the back corner by the windows, I could see Miki-san at the front of the room, energetically hugging another girl. A question mark appeared over the other girl's head.

"Mickey, did you start using a different shampoo? How come?"

Even if sharing a hug was out of the question, surely even I could have found a way to casually ask her, like that other girl...? No, no, no. For me, it would only backfire. *Honestly, I should just be grateful someone else asked her in my place.*

As I watched her surreptitiously, she let out a nasally "Ha ha!" and answered, "It's a secret!"

An exclamation point hovered over her head—the question had made her happy.

Times like these, I always got to thinking. Her shampoo was different, and there was a secret reason behind it...but she *wanted* someone to ask about it.

Does she have a new boyfriend or something?

As my mood took a sharp nosedive, I heard the 8:30 bell start to ring.

"Who here knows the difference between 'thee' and 'thou'?"

We were in the middle of classical studies, and the teacher's question had put a question mark over just about everyone's heads, including my own. Not that I could see it, of course. Only a handful of people had exclamation points or ellipses, and of those, only one was willing to draw attention to herself: Miki-san.

"Pick me!"

Her hand shot up like an arrow. Classical studies was her favorite class of the day; she practically vibrated the whole time. During math class, however, an ellipsis hung over her head as she grumbled to herself. Truth be told, I could watch her all day and never get bored...but if someone caught me staring at her, my life would be over, so I had to be careful.

Unfortunately, it was proving difficult to appreciate her beauty with the "boyfriend" theory hanging over my head, making me miserable. *I bet HE gets to see all the sides of her she never lets show.*

After class, as I lay slumped over my desk, I heard someone sit down at the empty desk next to me.

"They said English class is gonna be in the language lab, just FYI."

"Oh. Gotcha."

"You okay? You looked like you were zoning out all through class, man."

"Oh. Gotcha."

"Are you even listening? I asked you a question!"

I looked up to find Zuka grinning at me cheerfully. His tanned face was so radiant, I half-wondered if he'd absorbed the sun's rays permanently.

"You feeling sick or something?"

"No, I'm just tired."

"Oh, okay. Yeah, me too."

He accepted my lame excuse without batting an eye. A single period floated overhead as he let out a big yawn. We'd been friends ever since our first year of high school; his face was always expressive, and his eyebrows carefully manicured.

"Come on. Let's get over there before they start cussing us out in English. Plus, I forgot my homework."

Snickering to himself, he clapped me on the shoulder. Then he went back to his desk and started prepping for English class. Likewise, I grabbed my textbook, notebook, and a pencil and stepped out into the hallway. Moments later, I heard Zuka behind me.

"I was up late last night watching nationals, so I didn't get much sleep. Did you watch it?"

"No..."

"Come *on*, man! I'm talking about *the* representatives for Japan!"

Frankly, I had no idea whether he was talking about soccer or baseball or what, so there wasn't much I could say. "Must be pretty cool to be Japan's best."

"Right?!" Zuka nodded, grinning. Crisis averted.

Although we were friends, the two of us were nothing alike. The only thing we had in common was our taste in music, which was how we ended up becoming friends with each other in the first place. But I guess sometimes that's all you really need.

Zuka was athletic, good-looking, and taller than me. Anyone who saw us together probably thought we were a mismatched pair. Hell, even *I* was insecure about it.

Nerds like us, we're cowards who would rather die than be caught copying the cool kids. If anyone deserved to be seen with Zuka, it was someone athletic and good-looking and cheerful and kind, like him. And if I had to choose someone from our class, it would probably be—

"Hey, Zuka! Notice anything different about me?"

Miki-san ran up next to Zuka as I walked beside him.

"What? Man, I don't know. Do you know?" he asked me.

Obviously I couldn't say it was her shampoo, but I couldn't think of an answer that Miki-san would like, either, so I just shrugged like I didn't care.

"There you have it, Mickey. Us guys aren't gonna notice if you get your hair trimmed half an inch or whatever."

Normally, whenever Zuka got sassy with her, she would just blink exaggeratedly and laugh. But today was different; an ellipsis rose up over her head. The emotions each type of punctuation represented generally varied from person to person, but in her case, ellipses signified frustration.

"With an attitude like that, no wonder Senpai dumped you."

Oof.

And so Miki-san stormed off. Admittedly, yes, Zuka's ex-girlfriend had ended their relationship just a few days prior. He claimed it was due to their differing tastes in music, but it sounded like there was more to it than that. Either way, he didn't seem too devastated about it, so I chose not to worry about it myself, either.

"Man, that was harsh," he laughed, like it was all fun and games. A single period floated over him—proof that he sincerely hadn't taken it personally.

Inside the pleasantly air-conditioned language lab, Zuka and I went our separate ways. The seating arrangement was the same here as it was in our regular classroom, except instead of desks, we sat at long tables that could accommodate two students each. Embedded at the center of each table was a single computer monitor that displayed the coursework; both students would have to share this monitor.

We started class by reciting a rote English greeting, and after we made sure everyone was "fine, thank you," it was time to focus on the monitor for listening practice. Since everyone had to share with their neighbor, this involved getting uncomfortably close to another student, which was typically nerve-racking for a loser like

me. But these days, I didn't have to worry about it; I had the monitor all to myself. Our class currently had an odd number of students, and as it happened, I was the only person sitting alone.

You see, one of the students in our class—Miyazato-san—hadn't been back to school since the start of Golden Week about two months ago. But our class didn't have any bullies or cliques that I knew of, so it couldn't be that.

Miyazato-san was even *more* introverted than I was, if you can believe it. She was so quiet and unassuming, her sole hobby was *cleaning her possessions*. Maybe something happened to her that she didn't feel comfortable talking about... I'd sat next to her for the first month of our second year, so every now and then I got worried, thinking maybe *I* had scared her off, but I had no way of finding out.

If I was sure that I had nothing to do with it, I could've asked Zuka to ask around on my behalf, but...truth be told, I had a reason to believe it might have been me. And I was terrified to think it was the conversation we had two months ago that drove her away.

I was on speaking terms with a handful of other girls in addition to Miki-san, and I was fairly confident I had successfully made friends with Miyazato-san, too. In which case, I would be well within my rights to worry about her and take action on her behalf. But I was a pathetic loser: the more I cared about someone, the more cowardly I became. It was hard for me to say the words that mattered most.

Miki-san, on the other hand, was amazing. At the start of our first year, she infamously started to pursue an older student she had a crush on by changing her shampoo, shoes, and even her belongings to suit his tastes. How did she even learn what he was into? I have no idea. Unfortunately, her obsession creeped him out, and he rejected her. Still, I often found myself wishing she would give me even a fraction of that energy...but then again, I wouldn't want to diminish her charm, so...

"On second thought, Zuka, lend me that aggressive attitude you use on all the girls."

"*On second thought?* I don't remember you having a first thought!"

Naturally, he didn't know about my feelings for Miki-san. I hadn't told anyone thus far, nor was I planning to.

"Well, Miyazato-san's in danger of getting held back if she keeps skipping, right?"

"How did you get from *that* to my so-called 'aggressive attitude with girls'? Because I do *not* get aggressive! And yeah, I'd love it if Miyazato could graduate with the rest of us, but...she might be in trouble here soon."

I appreciated his blunt honesty in times like these.

After English class came Biology. Then, after we finished eating lunch, we laid ourselves down on the floor of the empty music room and stared up at the ceiling, all while the AC was running on full blast.

"But if she doesn't wanna come to school, then it's not gonna be easy to get her to come back. Too much time has passed. Like with clubs, y'know? It's easier to quit than beg forgiveness."

"Oh. Gotcha."

"I gotta say, though, it's frustrating when people disappear. Part of me wishes she would open up and talk to us about whatever's going on, but at the same time, I dunno if it's something we can really solve. I just hate not being able to help, man."

Here was something he and Miki-san had in common: a strong sense of responsibility. This was what I meant by *aggressive*. They went the extra mile and took action, regardless of whether it was any of their business or not, because they cared. This was a trait I wished I had.

But I didn't, so instead I stared up at the ceiling and replied, "Yeah."

"What are you two up to in here?"

Out of nowhere, I could hear footsteps somewhere inside the music room. Zuka's perfect six-pack abs flexed as he pulled himself

up into a sitting position. "Oh, hey, Looney."

Now I knew who it was. Also pushing myself into a sitting position, I listened as they chatted back and forth for a bit. Once they were done, Zuka rose to his feet and looked down at me as I moved to follow suit.

"Did you wanna do something about Miyazato? Is that why you asked me to lend you my 'aggressive attitude'? Not that I have one, for the record!"

He always wore his emotions on his sleeve, and his punctuation matched his behavior. A question mark hovered over his head.

"No, it's not that. Not like me being aggressive will make her want to come to school any more than she does right now."

"Yeah, for sure. To be honest, though, I think you're fine just the way you are. If you ask me, you're exactly the kind of person Miyazato would want to sit next to. See, everybody has their own strengths—ever heard the fable of the North Wind and the Sun? You'd be the Sun, easy."

I could tell from the punctuation floating overhead that he wasn't joking around.

"And before you say anything, no, I'm not the North Wind."

Then he laughed and clapped me on the back—a little too hard, if I'm being honest. But I knew he didn't mean any harm.

Me, personally, I was lucky enough to have two suns lighting up my empty life.

Maybe that's what Miyazato's missing, I thought to myself.

But as it turned out, I didn't know the half of it.

The next day, no offense to Miyazato-san, something even more important happened. The empty seat beside me faded into the background.

When I passed by Miki-san, I noticed that she had gone back to her original shampoo. What could this signify? Clearly, she hadn't gotten rid of her old shampoo, so...did she use someone

else's? Well, maybe she spent the night at a friend's house. But if so, why didn't she just say that instead of "It's a secret"? And why was she happy that someone noticed?

Ultimately, I felt like crap all over again.

Even then, with a little time, I probably could have convinced myself that Miki-san had her own nonsensical reasons for alternating shampoos...except it kept happening. A week later, I smelled that different shampoo on her again. And if the exclamation points over her head were any indication, she was in an exceptionally good mood. There could be only one explanation.

Not to get needlessly detailed, but the new shampoo—a brand called Bilien—was pretty popular among the cool kids back in junior high. It felt like a massive billboard that read *I ONLY DATE COOL GUYS, NOT LOSERS!* Naturally, this made me even more depressed. Not that I had any right to be, but still.

If I'd had even an ounce of courage, I could have spoken up the last time Miki-san asked us if we noticed anything different about her. At the time, Zuka had replied "Did you gain weight?" only to promptly receive a punch to the gut, but after that, I could have casually pointed out that she changed shampoos. But I didn't have that courage, and maybe I never would.

Instead, like a total loser, I spent the whole week having had just one small, weird, and entirely unrelated exchange with Miki-san:

"Morning! Don't forget to take vitamins. You don't want to wind up with a nasty summer cold."

"Oh, uh, right. Thanks."

I didn't know why she felt the need to give me this advice unprompted, but it was another Bilien day, so I figured maybe she just liked to mother people when she was in a good mood.

Then it happened a third time. She had now used Bilien shampoo on three separate occasions. Once again, she tried to wheedle an answer out of Zuka, but he was clueless, and I couldn't say a thing. Meanwhile, midterms were now just two weeks away...but I couldn't bring myself to study.

Ideally, I would shrug it off and say to myself, *Eh, I'll just make up for it tomorrow*. But from that day forward, Miki-san started to use Bilien more and more frequently. The first and second occurrences were a full week apart, while the second and third were five days apart. The fourth was three days after that, the Thursday before last. Then the fifth was that Sunday, when I happened to encounter her at the corner store near my house. Then it happened again on Tuesday and *again* on both Thursday and Friday—twice in a row. It felt like I was slowly watching her move in with her boyfriend, and I was so crushed that I could tell I was probably going to bomb my midterms.

"What's the matter with you? You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Not once had Zuka even come *close* to noticing the shampoo situation. Every time Miki-san used Bilien, she hounded him all over again: "Something's different about me, isn't it? You can tell, right? Just say yes!" And today, Friday, his response was: "Well, your shoes are falling apart."

Technically he was right, since she had a giant hole in one of them, but according to her, she had left it like that on purpose to show off her "cute new socks." Ultimately, this was not the answer she was looking for, and thus it put her in a bad mood.

To be fair, you wouldn't normally notice the smell of someone's shampoo unless you were uncomfortably close to them...or you were paying a lot of attention...or you had some sentimental attachment to the scent itself. But as much as I would have liked to stand up for my friend, I wasn't brave enough to say anything to Miki-san directly, so instead I said it to Zuka. Maybe this way he'd stop putting her in a bad mood all the time.

That Friday, Miki-san was standing in the hall, chatting with a group of friends.

"Ugh, you never want to hang out with us anymore! Did you find yourself a boy toy or what?"

"Ha *ha*!"

As we walked past them, I turned to Zuka. "Is there something different about Miki-san lately?"

"Heck if I know. She's so psycho, she probably expects me to read her mind to find out what new fad she's gotten into."

He and Miki-san were both on the same track team during junior high, and as such, he didn't bother mincing words.

"That'd be ridiculous, even for her," I said. "Maybe she got a new perfume or something."

"Come to think of it, I noticed she *really* smells like some kind of shampoo lately. But even so, why bother telling *us* about it, y'know?"

An exclamation mark must have appeared over my head, because I had no idea he'd actually noticed the shampoo smell. But Zuka interpreted my surprise a bit differently.

"Relax! I'm not the kind of weirdo who goes around sniffing girls!"

The words felt like a bullet to the heart.

"I just noticed it when she walked by, that's all. Actually... now that I think about it, it smelled like that stuff we used to have in the locker room showers back in junior high. Remember? Bilien?"

I did, in fact, remember. Only the cool kids were brave enough to wear something with such an overpowering scent.

"Man, I regret ever using that crap. Just 'cuz my face is on the girly side, people started thinking I was actually a girl. Anyway, I'm not saying it smells bad or anything, and I get why she might wanna take a walk down memory lane, but...why does she keep hassling me? She's nuts, man."

Granted, he had a point. Surely no normal person would walk up to their platonic male friends and expect them to notice their shampoo. But this confirmed for me two things: one, that I had no idea what else could possibly be different about her, and two, she had indeed changed her shampoo. Nothing about the situation had been resolved. I didn't even know what a successful resolution would look like at this point.

And so I wasted my time feeling sick to my stomach as the final weekend before midterms rolled around at last.

Monday: the first day of midterms week. Everyone was struggling to a certain degree, and I myself was *definitely* supposed to be doing my best not to fail, but Miki-san still smelled like Bilien, and first period was my worst subject (biology), so suffice to say I wasn't off to the greatest start. After second period, I was ready to drop. Naturally, this prompted Zuka to check on me again.

"I mean, I guess I'm hanging in there? Anybody would be ready to pass out if they had to take a test in their two worst subjects back-to-back."

"For sure, man. And the next one's math, so you and me are totally boned. Oh, and Mickey, too."

As Miki-san walked past, Zuka dragged her unceremoniously into the conversation. I expected her to lash out at him with some sort of punctuation over her head, but instead, she blinked at him and smirked. Then she walked over to her other friends.

"Hey, Looney!"

As a side note, "Looney" wasn't actually the girl's name—it was a nickname, short for "lunatic." And since Miki-san apparently had no qualms giving someone this nickname, maybe she had a few screws loose herself, like Zuka always said. Personally, I felt it was proof that she was unique and creative, but evidently, I wasn't the only one attracted to that side of her... This train of thought was not going to help me do well on my math test.

Before the bell could ring, the teacher walked in, and we all returned to our desks. Only one was empty: the one directly beside me. Idly, I wondered what Miyazato-san's grades were like. If she got held back a year, wouldn't that only make it *harder* for her to come back to school? Was she going to drop out? What sort of future would she have then? To me, she was just the girl who used to sit next to me, and yet my chest ached for her. Okay, maybe she was more than that, but still.

The blank test papers passed from student to student, making their way down the rows of desks. And right as I was about to lose myself in thought, as if waiting for the opportune moment to startle me, the bell rang.

Not long after, I discovered why Miki-san had smirked at us. A few minutes into the math test, when the room was peppered with question marks and ellipses fading in and out, I was surprised to see her head dotted with exclamation points—so many that they blocked my view of the other symbols around her. As I watched in confusion, she suddenly thrust both fists into the air victoriously. Naturally, the teacher told her off for that.

The Miki-san I knew was *terrible* at math, so she must have studied pretty hard this time. Maybe she had correctly predicted what was going to be on the test. That extra confidence would certainly explain the smirk from earlier.

Seeing her happy made me happy, too. But I couldn't keep watching her all day long. I had other things to be worrying about at the moment...like my test score.

Perhaps the best word to use in this instance was "destroyed." Destroyed, decimated, torn to shreds. All the knowledge and concentration I thought I'd gained through studying had slipped away from me like sand through my fingers. Every time I tried to focus on a math problem, my brain started wondering if Miki-san's boyfriend had given her some private tutoring lessons. And once my brain thought of something horrible, it liked to hold onto it, tormenting me throughout the test, all the way to fourth period.

This was a serious problem. No matter how worried I was, I couldn't let it affect my schoolwork, or I'd end up retaking this same test with Miyazato-san next year.

Normally this was the part where I'd watch Zuka pull on his perfectly polished sneakers (believe it or not, he was actually something of a neat freak) and head off to the track team clubroom while I packed up to head home. Today, however, I was occupied with...well, a lot of things, honestly, but mostly concern

for my academic success. Thus, I decided to stay behind in the school library and do some extra studying.

When I arrived, the library was mostly empty; I sat down at a four-seater table near the windows, where I could see the athletic field. The sports teams weren't scheduled to have practice during midterms week, but nevertheless, dozens of students were outside running laps on their own, Zuka included. The exercise probably made them feel good and helped to clear their minds after all those stressful tests. I could see exclamation points popping up over their heads, one after another.

As for me, I decided to work just as hard by focusing on my studies. Key word: *decided*. Unfortunately, once my concentration was broken, it proved difficult to regain. You know, like trust or whatever...I assume. In the end, I spent my time trying to memorize a handful of English vocab words while watching Zuka run laps, with the occasional bathroom break here and there. But the next thing I knew, tragically, I had dozed off.

Of course, I only realized this *after* I woke up—but I guess you probably figured as much. I opened my eyes, found myself slumped over the table, and my next thought was: *oh crap*. Timidly, I raised my head. Sure enough, the library was dead silent. Reflexively, I let out a heavy sigh.

But that sigh stirred the air...and I caught a hint of a familiar scent. Then I sensed a presence—or breathing, or body heat—and looked at the chair next to me.

"Whoa!"

I yelped like I'd forgotten I was in a library. This apparently woke her—at least, I *think* it woke her, because she was slumped over the table just like I was, so she must have been sleeping, right? Anyway, she lifted her head and looked at me. I stared back, stunned.

"Hey."

That's all you have to say?! The thought that I had inadvertently slept next to Miki-san made my face burn up like a furnace. Meanwhile, she rubbed her eyes.

"Man, I'm sleepy..."

"Wh-what are you doing here?"

"Huh? Oh, right. I had something I wanted to tell you."

Like WHAT? As I braced myself, I saw an ellipsis rise up over her head. She turned and faced forward, then glanced back at me out of the corner of her eye.

"This is a message for Zuka—I mean, Oozuka-kun: Keep acting like that and you'll drive *all* the girls away."

Why did she phrase it like that? Regardless, my only option was to nod. "Sure, I'll...let him know...?"

"Well, see ya!"

With my confirmation, Miki-san jumped to her feet and hurried off.

"She's crazy..."

The words left my lips in spite of myself.

That night, I couldn't sleep a wink. My mind was filled with the smell of her shampoo and the sight of her brand-new shoes walking away from me.

I didn't know if yesterday's event had been a shock to my system or what, but Tuesday's tests went *much* better than Monday's. In first period, one of the test questions was about the difference between "thee" and "thou," and since Miki-san had answered this question in class, I remembered the answer easily. Plus, the English test was focused less on vocab (which I sucked at) and more on reading comprehension, and I was fairly confident that I did well.

But no matter how many test problems I solved, I still couldn't solve the mystery of what happened with Miki-san yesterday. She seemed in better spirits this morning, at the very least, because she greeted me with a smile. But when she asked "*How are you?*" in English, I once again replied with the world's most boring answer: "*I'm fine, thank you.*" The mystery deepened with her smile.

Once again, she smelled like Bilien, which made me wonder if maybe her boyfriend had cheered her up. Needless to say, it was a depressing thought. And needless to say, Zuka checked in on me again, because he was a good guy.

"You okay? Sleep deprived or something?"

"Yeah, I was studying. Aren't you proud of me?" I lied as we sat in the cafeteria after school and ate our food together.

"Hell yeah, I am! I went straight to sleep!" he replied, laughing. He was the honest type, so I could trust him not to read too much into anything.

"Hey, so, did anything happen with you and Miki-san yesterday?"

"Huh? Mickey? What about her?"

"I bumped into her on my way home yesterday, and she was acting weird."

"So? She's always acting weird. You know she asked me that same question again today? Like, dude, I don't *care* if something's different!"

He laughed again.

"No, I mean...she seemed kinda pissed." I casually left out the part where I found her sleeping next to me.

"Really? Well, I wouldn't worry about it if I were you. She's nuts, anyway."

"I mean, yeah, but..." Admittedly, this wasn't the nicest way to talk about a friend.

Zuka never bothered to think too hard about Miki-san, proof that they'd established a foundation of trust over all the years they'd known each other, and at times, I deeply envied that. But while his utter lack of curiosity was generally something I appreciated, today I was kind of hoping for a hint that could lead to a resolution. That was how strongly Miki-san affected me as of late. But this was my downfall, and I foolishly pressed on.

"Normally she's always so happy-go-lucky, so I'm kinda worried."

"Really? If you ask me, she yells and cries all the damn time. This one time in junior high, she drop-kicked me for no reason!"

"Wow, I wish I could've seen that. I mean, uh...maybe she got in a fight with her boyfriend or something?"

"Well, aren't you a saint! But for the record, no, Mickey doesn't have a boyfriend."

"What?!"

I flinched so hard, my chair clattered against the floor, and my voice even went up an octave. Too bad I couldn't see my own punctuation, because it was probably an exclamation point the size of a building. But that surprise only lasted a few moments before a warm, fuzzy feeling washed over me. Evidently my body and mind were more directly linked than I thought; my skin seemed to tingle, like all my worries were melting away. Reflexively, I let out a sigh of relief.

Oh, thank God.

But even if she didn't have one at the moment, it was going to happen sooner or later—or maybe she'd had one at some point in the past. And even if she *was* single at the moment, I didn't see it as my big chance or anything. But still...what a massive relief it was.

Then, as the aforementioned relief slowly faded, I remembered the friend sitting right across the table from me. I could only imagine what sort of expression my face must have made, because Zuka was staring back at me in wide-eyed shock, like I was some kind of zoo animal. A handful of question marks floated overhead.

But it wasn't until those question marks started to morph into exclamation points and ellipses that I realized the gravity of my error. And I wasn't overthinking it, either. Slowly but surely, Zuka's expression shifted from surprise to a smile, growing bigger and bigger with each passing second until he was grinning from ear to ear.

Oh crap.

"Z-Zuka?"

"Bro...dude...*dude!* Bro!"

Evidently, Zuka had transformed into a Dudebro who could only speak Dudebro-ese. Then he reached out with his long arms and clapped me on the shoulder. He seemed downright *delighted*, almost like he'd found out his one-sided crush was mutual or something.

If only he'd teased me or made fun of me, I could have denied it. But instead he accepted it with enthusiasm, and so I was rendered unable to fight it. Still, I had no plans to confirm it as fact.

"Man...wow. *Wow*, man!"

Floating over this Dudebro-turned-Wowman's head was a veritable *mountain* of ellipses and exclamation marks—surprise and acceptance, piled high.

"Dude, listen. I know for a *fact* that she's single, because Looney told me herself. Apparently, she had the same idea, so she asked Mickey about it, but she totally denied it. Well, newsflash, Mickey! You can mock me about my ex all you want, but we'll see who has the last laugh now! I had to bribe Looney with ice cream to get it out of her!" Having transformed back into an ordinary Earthling, Zuka launched into an explanation I never asked for.

"Shame you couldn't get your money's worth."

"Fine by me! I mean, it was worth at least a hundred ice creams for *you*, eh?"

He grinned playfully. He nearly had *me* swooning, and I'm a guy.

Now that Zuka knew about my feelings, I had a sense he would prove to be a useful source of information. Whether I would be happy to hear said information was a different story, however.

"Hey, guys. Oozuka-kun, you've got a bit of green onion on your cheek. Y'know, you two make a cute couple."

"Thanks, Looney! But if you can't comprehend our manly friendship, then get outta here!"

From there, Zuka continued to smile to himself—all throughout his interactions with other classmates, and even while he was eating his ice cream. And seeing him smile made me smile, too.

As we finished our dessert, I could tell my head was going to explode from the embarrassment of Zuka discovering my crush on Miki-san. I announced that I was going to go study in the library, knowing that he would then decide to go run more laps. Sure enough, I was right. I felt bad, since I was technically ditching him on purpose, but I needed a little time to organize my thoughts.

And so, parting ways with Zuka and his perpetual smile, I headed to the library, same as yesterday. Once I was alone, however, the condensed shame overwhelmed me all at once...and in the end, instead of studying, I spent the whole time screaming internally. But the tingly sensation I felt was not altogether unpleasant, and so my sleep-deprived brain finally drifted off into the darkness...

Once again, I awoke right before the library closed. And while I had unmistakably wasted my time, I still somehow felt accomplished. But it wasn't until I was already on my way home that I realized: none of the mysteries had been solved at all. Why was Miki-san switching her shampoo? And why was she hassling Zuka about it?

Apparently, Miyazato-san came to school yesterday. Everyone in class was talking about it. Personally, I was relieved to hear that she showed up for midterms, even if she had to take them in a separate room. As for Zuka, he was still in a good mood from yesterday. By contrast, Miki-san didn't seem too happy—was she having a bad day? The other girls invited her to go get ice cream after school, but she didn't even respond. An ellipsis flashed ceaselessly over her head.

I wasn't stupid enough to approach a girl while she was in a bad mood. Instead, I was planning to spend the day hiding behind Zuka's considerable height. But once again, she came over to ask her question.

"Zuka, haven't you been wondering about me lately?"

"No, I *haven't!*" he shot back emphatically. Maybe yesterday's events had gotten him worked up. In response, she glared at him—and then she glared at me, too. I hastily averted my eyes, but Zuka just laughed.

Why did she keep asking us about it? Neither of us had a clue, so her hints were falling on deaf ears. Was it safe to ask her about the shampoo, even just once?

No, no, no. Trust me, it's only going to make her think I'm a creep. Remember what happened last time?

Her bad mood lingered all day long, right to the very end of the final test. I had watched a handful of classmates tentatively approach her one after another, only to get shot down, and for the first time in who knows how long, I was grateful for my punctuation powers.

After we had finished our four tests of the day, we were officially done with midterms week. The instant the bell rang, I could practically feel the claustrophobic air rush out of the room. Exclamation points and ellipses popped up over everyone's heads, and I was relieved, too. Granted, I still had makeup classes to attend next week, so it wasn't like summer break started today or anything. But makeup classes were like the bonus tracks on a CD—you weren't expected to go out of your way to listen to them. They were so low-pressure, even Miyazato-san would probably feel comfortable attending.

As I contemplated this, cleaning time flew by in a blink, followed by homeroom. And factoring in the time our teachers needed to grade all the tests, plus the weekend, we had earned ourselves a four-day mini-vacation.

"I'm gonna be doing nothing but club practice the whole weekend... You going straight home?"

"Oh, gotcha. Yeah, I'm thinking I might go to the music store and see if they're selling the new mini-album ahead of its release date."

"Lucky! If you buy it, you gotta let me borrow it."

After our ordinary teenage conversation, I parted ways with Zuka and left campus without speaking to grumpy Miki-san. Or Miyazato-san, if she was here somewhere.

When I got home, I changed into a T-shirt and jeans, then walked for approximately twenty minutes to the combination book and music store. Inside, the air conditioning was cranked up to full blast, to the point that it was actually a little *too* cold. Even the sales clerk had to wear a hoodie, and judging from the ellipsis flashing over his head, he wasn't happy about it. Maybe a customer had filed a complaint about the store being too hot.

I glanced at the bookshelves out of the corner of my eye and then made my way to the second floor where they stocked the CDs. Sure enough, with a little searching, I soon found what I was looking for. I was already planning to buy it, but I couldn't wait that long—I put on the listening kiosk headphones and started the sample preview right away. This music was the one thing Zuka and I had in common.

We'd become friends at the start of our first year, when the seating arrangement had randomly put us next to each other. One day, he noticed my earbuds dangling out of my pocket, and with his signature Zuka smile, asked me what I liked to listen to. Tall and tanned, he was clearly nothing like me...but thanks to that smile, I found I wasn't intimidated by him.

In a way, it was strange to think that my favorite band was the catalyst for our entire friendship. But when I thought about the way he seemed to revel in our boyish, uncomplicated rapport, I couldn't help but smile... Then I noticed a woman in a business suit looking at me with a question mark over her head. When our eyes met, it transformed into an exclamation point, and she hastily averted her gaze.

Ugh, kill me.

I made it through the first three songs, then put the headphones back in the display case and picked up the CD. But right as I was planning to head for the register, I came to a stop. I could hear familiar voices coming from the other side of the shelf.

The shelf was taller than me, so I couldn't see their faces, but I could hear their conversation loud and clear...and I could see a question mark floating in mid-air.

As I listened, I realized: it was two girls from our class. One of them was Kuroda-san, or "Looney," as everyone else called her, but I chose to address her by her actual name. I didn't have any particular reason for this; it was how I referred to just about everyone, save for Zuka. Now that I thought about it, Looney generally referred to everyone by their actual names, too. Even the people she was close to, like Zuka and Miki-san.

Truth be told, I didn't really need to hide. I wasn't *that* socially awkward; I could have walked right out and said hi to them, especially since Looney was the outgoing type who was nice to everyone. The reason I was rooted to the spot was their topic of conversation.

"What's going on with Mickey lately?" the other girl asked.

An exclamation point popped over Looney's head, and she chuckled. "I bet you think Miki-chan's got a boyfriend, don't you? Well, apparently not."

"Then what's the story?"

A cluster of exclamation points sprouted over Looney's head to join the first. "Heh heh! This is top secret info. Can you keep a secret?"

"Hmmm... I might be willing to spill the beans if somebody bribed me with like, three pints of Häagen-Dazs."

"Sounds like I can trust you, then!"

Are all of Miki-san's friends total weirdos? I wondered idly as I listened for this top-secret info. I knew it wasn't cool to eavesdrop, but my body refused to budge. So in the end, I guess you could say I had no one to blame but myself.

"So here's the thing," Looney continued without bothering to lower her voice.

"Yeah?"

"Apparently Miki-chan's interested in Oozuka-kun."

Oh.

That was the last name I expected to hear. I struggled to keep my knees from giving out. Meanwhile, a big exclamation point popped up over the other girl's head.

"Wow, really? That's awesome! They'd be so cute together! Wait a minute... Is *that* why she keeps going over to talk to him constantly?"

"Yep! Not sure what exactly they talk about, though."

Now I get it.

With this added context, Miki-san's recent behavior now made total sense. That was why she kept striking up conversations with us—she was intentionally trying to waft that Bilien smell around, since she knew her crush liked the scent. That would explain why she got so frustrated every time it didn't work.

Now I could see the meaning behind that comment she made at the library, too. And it explained why she got new shoes after Zuka commented on the old ones.

I felt like I was on the verge of passing out. So instead, I gave up trying to buy my CD and hurried out of the store.

Sorry, Zuka, but I just can't take it.

Not to suggest that I was stupid enough to think I actually had a chance with her, but still... His gleeful smile floated to the forefront of my mind. How was I going to break the news to him?

No offense, but I don't think ice cream is enough to get her to spill the beans on this one.

Despite having finished my midterms, I remained unable to sleep for the next three nights following this revelation.

By Sunday, the last day of my four-day weekend, I still hadn't figured out how I was going to face Miki-san or Zuka. Instead of answering the email he sent me, I lay perfectly still on my bed. What if I flat-out told him what I'd heard the other day? What would he say?

I deleted my half-written reply and closed my eyes. I pictured Miki-san's bright smile...the scent of Bilien...her clean white shoes... My mind refused to stop agonizing over it. But thinking about it wasn't going to solve anything—I needed to take action. Yes, it had taken me three full days to reach this conclusion.

So I got dressed, went outside, and started getting my exercise for the day. My feet carried me back to the book and music store, eager for a rematch. I wasn't in the mood to listen to anything, of course, and it was possible Zuka had already bought the CD himself by this point, but I couldn't think of anything else to do.

Fortunately, Miki-san never went to this store, and Zuka was probably still busy with club practice. There were two different high school supply stores, one on the east side and one on the west side, and everyone generally stuck to their local store. Miki-san lived on the east side, while Looney, Zuka, Miyazato-san, and myself all lived on the west side. So there was no chance that someone from the east side would come all the way out here—or so I thought.

Then I remembered the time I ran into her at my local corner store, and I put two and two together.

Speak of the devil, and she will appear.

The store's automatic doors slid open, and someone walked out, accompanied by a gust of cold air.

"Wh-wh-whoa!"

Miki-san jumped backwards, exclamation point flashing overhead. A royal blue bookstore bag dangled from her hand. My heart thumped in my chest. I was so thrown off rhythm, I tripped over my tongue even more than usual.

"Good, uh, g-g-good m-morning..."

"Ha *ha*! What's wrong? Did I scare you?"

Says the girl who nearly jumped out of her skin. But she deigned to ignore this and teased me instead, complete with her signature nasally laugh.

"Uh, yeah, totally," I replied. As I nodded, I caught a glimpse of her pristine white sneakers. I could smell a faint whiff of Bilien mixed in with the store's air conditioning.

Ah. Now I get it.

An exclamation point popped over her head. "Are you here to look at CDs? Zuka told me there's a new one coming out or something."

His smile flashed through my mind.

"Yeah. Wh-what about you? What brings you all the way to the west side?"

"Oh, uh..."

"Meeting up with...K-Kuroda-san? Or...Zuka, maybe?"

The words left my lips before I could stop them. Normally I'd never ask prying questions—I didn't have the guts. But I wanted to know the truth behind Kuroda-san's "top secret info," even if it meant I might get hurt.

An interrobang rose up over her head. She wasn't confused; she was struggling to think of an answer.

"Uhhh, well...um... First, let's go back inside! We're letting all the cold air out."

She was obviously trying to change the subject, but her expression still matched her punctuation, and her uncertainty was palpable. She simply wasn't the lying type.

I recognized the thrill in her eyes—the mixed fear and excitement of getting caught.

I took five steps forward and heard the automatic doors shut behind me. It was the weekend, so the store was packed. On a whim, we moved to the area with the least amount of traffic: the corner spot by the entrance with all the capsule toy vending machines. It was a cramped little nook, and the close proximity made my heart flutter. Meanwhile, Miki-san didn't speak a word, and I was terrified to think she might hear the thumping in my chest.

My chance had come, and due to a mix of sleep deprivation and extreme tension and probably some other stuff, believe it or not, I actually went for it. My first move, in terms of pro wrestling, was to throw her into the ring ropes.

"So, uh, M-Miki-san..."

"Hmm?" A question mark appeared overhead.

"Is...is something...going on with you...lately?"

Her question mark changed to an exclamation point. Was she simply surprised? Or was she a tiny bit happy, too? If so...then perhaps I had nothing to be afraid of. Perhaps it was safe to speak my mind. Perhaps everyone else had figured it out a long time ago and I just never knew until now.

"Say, um..."

"Yeah?"

Then, at last, I asked her: "You've been using a different shampoo, right?"

A giant exclamation point popped up over her head. Her eyes flew open, and she stared at me, joy written all over her face. But I couldn't bear to look at her for a single second longer. I was afraid of what might be written on *my* face.

Unfortunately, Miki-san was the type to take my plans and drop-kick them into outer space. Luckily for me, however, today she was feeling a tiny bit more generous than usual. She grabbed me by the shoulders and gazed at me, point-blank. I froze, staring back at her like a deer in the headlights of a speeding semi-truck.

Her cheeks looked faintly flushed—was it from the excitement? As for me, I was pretty sure my whole face looked like a tomato. Her long eyelashes fluttered mere inches from mine.

"Well?" she demanded.

"...Huh?"

"Don't you have...something else to say?"

Something else? Like what?

I mean...I could think of *one* thing, sure. Normally I'd never be able to say it, but...if I told myself I might never get a second chance, maybe I could...let it slip...

Meanwhile, Miki-san waited patiently for my *something else*, her passionate emotions flashing just overhead. Then something inside me snapped. If it was a war of attrition, then I had well and truly lost.

I just needed to say a few more words. *Miki-san, I'm in love with...*

"Mi...Mi...Mi..."

"Yeah?"

"Mi...Miyazato-san uses that same shampoo, doesn't she?"

Figures. Of course I didn't have the guts. How pathetic.

Words cannot express the amount of disappointment I felt toward myself in that moment. But unfortunately for me, I had chosen the exact wrong moment to hang my head in defeat... because the next thing I knew, Miki-san's shoulder had slammed an uppercut into my chin.

I reeled backwards, and the ceiling came into view, followed by the biggest whiff of Bilien I had smelled thus far. That was when I realized that Miki-san had thrown her arms around me. My whole body throbbed.

"M-Miki-san! We're in publ—"

But she refused to pull away.

"THANK YOU SO MUCH!" she shouted into my ear.

Uh...for what?

"Thank you, thank you, *thank you!* I was so scared I was gonna run out of time!"

"Sorry, uh...what's...?"

At this, she finally pulled her arms away from my neck. But she didn't show even a tiny hint of embarrassment; instead, her eyes practically blazed with glee.

"Now Miyazato-chan can come back to school!"

“...M-Miyazato-san?”

My voice was breathy and trembling in the wake of her body heat.

“Yeah! See, she and I agreed that if I could find out for sure that you didn’t hate her, she’d come back to school! God, what a relief. I thought maybe your sinuses were too congested to smell anything, which is why I kept asking you about your health all the time, but I didn’t want to be too obvious. Was it too obvious?”

“Wait, wh-what? Wh-why would I hate Miyazato-san?”

“That’s what *I* want to know!”

Just like that, her expression shifted to a sharp glare. She was so wild and unpredictable, I couldn’t keep up. Sure, I could see her punctuation, but it didn’t help me parse her crazy mood swings.

“Remember when you complimented Miyazato-chan’s shampoo? Why did you get all distant after that?”

She took a step forward, so I took a step back.

“I’m gonna need a detailed explanation, mister! Ha *ha*!”

And with my back against the wall, Miki-san’s high-pitched laugh was suddenly a lot more intimidating.

Back in April, when Miyazato-san still sat next to me in class...

We were in the same class last year, too, so we were on pretty good terms. She was really, *really* quiet—one time, I dropped my eraser, and she struggled to get my attention for ten solid minutes. But she always responded when I spoke to her, and since we had to scoot in real close to each other to look at the monitor in the language lab, I figured it might be less awkward if I got to know her a bit more. Thus, I struck up all sorts of idle conversations with her.

One time, I noticed her shoes were spotless—so clean and white, they looked practically brand new—so naturally, I complimented them. In response, she told me that she had

carefully cleaned those same shoes for years. That was the day I learned that she was so reserved, her sole hobby was cleaning her possessions. But in response to my praise, an exclamation point rose over her head, and she thanked me in a tiny voice.

This was the sort of decently close friendship we shared. And because I felt I could relate to her...I inadvertently crossed a line.

We were in the language lab, sitting side by side like always, looking at our English coursework on screen. I was still embarrassed to be in such close proximity with her, but I had gotten used to it somewhat. Then the teacher went into her office, and the students all started chatting with each other. That was the moment I smelled a fragrance I recognized. And without thinking, I asked:

"Oh, do you wash your hair with Bilien?"

A giant exclamation point shot up over her head. But I misinterpreted it as a sign of excitement.

"I remember it was really popular back in junior high. I always liked the smell."

At the time, I was simply making conversation. But the reaction she had was much different from the one I was expecting.

All manner of punctuation flashed over her head, representing hesitation, displeasure, confusion, panic. Naturally, I reacted with confusion myself. Then tears sprang to her eyes, and she turned away from me in flat-out rejection.

From the bottom of my heart, I sincerely regretted crossing that line with her. So from then on, I made sure not to make any more personal comments. I exercised restraint on par with hers, carefully choosing my every word. Over time, the conversations slowly petered out between us until eventually we barely spoke at all. Then Golden Week rolled around, and Miyazato-san didn't come back.

You see, that shampoo carried sentimental value for me, too, not just Zuka. That was how I noticed Miki-san using it. But after the day I offended Miyazato-san, I had vowed never to comment on a girl's shampoo ever again.

"Ha *ha*! It *a/////* makes sense."

We didn't want to cause a scene in the store, so we had moved outside to the corner of the parking lot. There, Miki-san stared directly into my eyes as I explained my side of the story—barring the punctuation stuff, obviously.

"You're both such total sweethearts," she mused, though I didn't understand why. "Both of you are too busy worrying about how the other feels! I'm telling you, sometimes there's really no need to overthink these things. Try to be more like me and Looney! Oh, but if everyone acted like us, the world wouldn't be so complicated anymore... It would probably stop functioning, huh? Ha *ha*!"

"...Okay, but...how is it that you needed me to smell your shampoo in order for Miyazato-san to come back to school...?"

At my question, Miki-san's face lit up. Both her expression and her punctuation seemed to say: *hooray, my turn!*

"Well, you see, I was never good friends with her."

Maybe she expected this to come as a huge revelation, but I wasn't surprised in the least. When you spent forty hours a week stuck in the same room, these things became obvious whether you liked it or not. That being said, they didn't actively dislike each other or anything like that. Human beings simply had the tendency to gravitate toward others like them and didn't generally feel the need to speak to anyone outside that circle. I would normally never speak to Miki-san, so this conversation we were having was merely an exception to that rule, as was my friendship with Zuka. So yeah, I wasn't surprised that she and Miyazato-san weren't close.

"But lately, I've gotten to know her."

This wasn't a surprise to me, either. How else would Miki-san have learned all that stuff about me? She must have heard it all from Miyazato-san.

"I think it was about a month ago now—I was on my way home from Looney's place when it started pouring down rain. But I hadn't brought an umbrella, so I was running down the street in a

panic when I spotted Miyazato-chan pulling laundry off the clothesline in her front yard. She was having a heck of a time, so obviously I ran over and helped her. But by then my uniform was soaked through, and one thing led to another, and I ended up spending the night at her house."

I could only imagine the conflict and strife Miki-san's version of events conveniently omitted. *Bless your soul, Miyazato-san.*

"It was super awkward at first, but I see a tough nut and I crack it, y'know? So I just kept being nice to her until she finally opened up to me. And do you know what she said when I asked her why she wasn't coming to school?"

"Wh-what did she say?"

"She said you didn't like her anymore, so she wasn't going to come back until we got a new seating arrangement! God, I was so tempted to track down your house and clothesline you!"

I pictured Miyazato-san saying this and then pictured Miki-san running at me with her arm outstretched, and my brain started to scream.

"Look, it wasn't my fault! I thought *she* hated *me*!"

"Yeah, and like I said, both of you need to stop worrying so much about other people! Miyazato-chan said you gave her a weird look when the topic of her shampoo came up. She thought you were making fun of her."

"Wh-what? No, of course not!"

"Yeah, I know. But for some reason, the thought popped into her head."

...Right. For ordinary people who couldn't see any punctuation, it was impossible to know what other people were thinking. Why didn't I ever stop to think about it from her point of view? *Man, I'm such an ass.*

"Hey now, don't get all sad on me! Keep a smile on that face! Anyway, do you happen to know why Miyazato-chan thought you were making fun of her?"

Truth be told, there *was* one potential reason I could think of, but only someone like me or Miyazato-san would understand. No offense to Miki-san or Zuka, but they just wouldn't get it. Hence, I shook my head.

"Darn."

Like me, Miyazato-san was probably embarrassed to be caught copying the cool kids. That was probably why she thought I was mocking her. Her shyness wasn't just a natural inclination toward being taciturn; there was an element of insecurity to it as well. And when I started policing myself, she interpreted it as me pulling away entirely.

"So anyway, I figured the solution would be to confirm that you didn't actually hate her at all. But when I offered to ask you, for some reason Miyazato-chan was *convinced* that you'd never admit to me that you hated her."

My face was so hot, it felt like it was going to explode. I thought back to the haiku we learned in Miki-san's beloved classical studies class:

*I vowed to myself
None would discover my love
But then they noticed.*

"So I was like, *Well, how am I supposed to ask him, then?!* Because obviously I knew you didn't hate her, right? You were just innocently commenting on her shampoo. So I decided to use it as a hint!" She reached up and patted her hair.

"Wait, but I thought you were going to clothesline me."

"That part doesn't matter! My point is, if you *actually* hated her, you wouldn't have commented on it at all, am I right?"

I'm not sure about that, I thought to myself, but then I realized: Miki-san wasn't the badmouthing type. If she had a problem with someone, she went right up to them and drop-kicked them.

"So I decided I'd use this shampoo to get you to talk about Miyazato-chan. And you did, which means I win."

"Th-this isn't a game, you know! Why didn't you just ask Zuka to ask me?"

"What? No way! Miyazato-chan told me not to tell anyone! And besides, Zuka would've blabbed everything to you anyway since he loves you so much... Er, not to suggest I hate you or anything!"

I appreciated the friendly disclaimer, but at the same time, given everything I heard from Looney, it was kind of a "Huh?" moment.

"So yeah, since I couldn't say anything to you directly, I had to wait until you were with Zuka to bring it up. But every time I tried to be subtle about it, he'd turn around and kill the conversation a second later!"

That was your idea of "subtle"? Impressive. Evidently even Miki-san didn't have the guts to talk to her crush one-on-one. *Wait, what?*

"So I tried to create the same situation that happened with Miyazato-chan, but you didn't notice at all! Then I almost lost my temper at the library that one time, but I still stuck to my guns. Remember? I didn't say anything directly!"

So THAT'S what that was about... Wait, so when she said "You'll drive all the girls away," what she actually meant was...?

"I gotta be honest: I was never too good at this indirect communication stuff. So I asked Looney, like, *how do I subtly express my feelings to someone who's on my mind?*"

...Huh?

"Wait, what? So when she said 'interested,' she didn't mean romantically...?"

"When who said what?"

The words had slipped out unbidden, and I hastily fell silent. Fortunately, the mixture of disappointment and relief that had crawled up from the pit of my stomach didn't make it past my lips.

Now I get it. I should've known. Good thing I didn't make a giant ass of myself by asking her out. Instead, my shameful idiocy was kept safely locked away in my head. Of course, deep down, I was still devastated...but at the same time, a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

"Wait...Looney didn't blab about it, did she? Ugh, I'll kill her!"

The misunderstanding was so absurd, I couldn't help but laugh. Then the rage faded from Miki-san's face as an exclamation point sprang up in its place.

"Alrighty then! Guess I'll take you to Miyazato-chan's house!"

"Oh, gotcha... Wait, what? Right now?!"

I could picture a massive interrobang floating over my head. In response, Miki-san looked at me with a question mark.

"Huh? Yeah, right now. She's been tutoring me for midterms, so I came here to buy her a magazine as a thank-you gift. I'm telling you, I totally aced the math test, and it's all thanks to her! Everything we reviewed was on the test! Besides, not like you have any plans, right? Oh, wait, you were gonna buy a CD. Okay, you go take care of that, and I'll wait here."

You've gotta be kidding me. But I couldn't argue with her, so instead I decided to go along with it. I was only going to be gone for five minutes tops, and yet she saw me off with a wave and a giant grin.

"Man, I'm so glad Miyazato-chan can have fun with us at school again!"

Floating over her head was a supersized exclamation point. She wasn't lying, nor was she joking, nor was she just being polite. She sincerely meant every word.

She was weird, and crazy, and she kinda got my hopes up about some stuff that turned out to be a misunderstanding...but nevertheless, I was proud to be in love with her.

And yet the very next day, I was back to being sleepless and depressed.

"What's the matter with you? Did you miss breakfast? Want mine?"

That morning, as I stared blankly into space, my kind and generous friend Zuka plopped down at the desk next to mine and offered me a pastry from the bag he was carrying.

"Nah, that's okay. But just so you know, you can't sit there anymore."

"How come?"

Before I could answer, however, the classroom erupted in whispers.

"Guess who's back, everybody? It's Miyazato-chan!" Miki-san announced loudly as the two of them walked into the room. Miyazato-san stood behind her, looking very, very, very uncomfortable...but I could tell from the punctuation overhead that she wasn't actually upset.

Before today, this sort of thing probably would have made her run for the hills, but today she allowed it. Why? Because she had grown to love Miki-san. I could relate to the feeling. People like me and Miyazato-san spent our whole lives fretting over other people, so you couldn't help but admire people with the power to turn a blind eye to the small stuff. She was like the Sun and the North Wind *combined*; she could strip away a weary traveler's sorrow and fear in seconds flat.

I looked at Zuka beside me. He was gazing at them with joy in his expression and his punctuation. Then he turned that smile in my direction. "I bet you feel better now, huh?"

Oh, Zuka, you truly are a saint.

It made sense, of course. Of course it made sense. But that didn't mean I was ready to accept it. And so, once again, my mood soured.

Yesterday, when we went over to Miyazato-san's house, she sat in stunned silence as Miki-san explained everything that happened. I apologized, and then Miyazato-san apologized, and right as we'd made it back to almost-friends or thereabouts, for

some reason Miki-san suddenly decided she wanted to give Miyazato-san a nickname.

"What should it be? I feel like anything would work, but...I mean, people don't call me 'Mickey' as a play on 'Miki.' It's because Zuka said my laugh reminds him of some cartoon mouse."

"Oh, I see," Miyazato-san replied, quietly impressed. This must have encouraged Miki-san to keep going.

"That's why I came up with the nickname 'Zuka.' See, right now he's tall and handsome or whatever, but back in junior high, he could pretty much pass for a girl. So I was like 'I bet you could be the first male member of the Takarazuka Revue!' and from there, it got shortened to 'Zuka.' Whenever we meet someone new, they're always like, 'How did you get *Zuka* out of Takasaki Hirofumi?' Ha *ha!*"

As usual, her laugh was nasally...and it was thanks to me that she was laughing at all. I was over the moon to have officially made friends with Miki-san and Miyazato-san.

"You and Zuka are super close, huh?"

"Well, we were in the same club for all those years, y'know? Feels like I can't get away from him."

But then Miyazato-san delivered the final blow in her small, meek, delicate, modest voice: "Oh, you're not dating? I would have thought you were."

Normally Miki-san would have protested like crazy, launching into a vicious tirade against Zuka. But instead her face flushed bright red, and she stared at the floor. "Yeah, right," she muttered under her breath. And I didn't need to look at her punctuation to know what that meant.

I get it.

But of course, I couldn't say that out loud.

...Wait, what?! Seriously?!

As I screamed internally, I felt Miyazato-san tap me on the knee. I looked over, and for some reason, she did a little fist-pump in my direction. The only thing I could think of to take my mind off

the situation was: *Man, everyone who makes friends with Miki-san turns into a total weirdo.*

Anyway, back to today. Zuka rose from the desk beside me. Then Miyazato-san slipped past Miki-san as she continued to make a scene and timidly headed over in our direction. And when she saw my face, her lips curled in a smile.

Don't get me wrong—I was still depressed. But when I saw her expression and her punctuation, well...not to disregard the issue with Miki-san or anything, but...I decided to just be grateful that Miyazato-san had showed up at all.

"Good morning, Oozuka-kun."

Accompanying her quiet voice was the faintest hint of Bilien.

I / HAVE \ A = SECRET x

GROWING UP, I always wanted to be the hero, not the love interest. I didn't want pretty dresses—I wanted a transformation belt. Instead of letting the handsome prince protect me, I wanted to be the one to rise up and protect the weak from dark forces.

Now that I was in high school, I knew superheroes and villains didn't actually exist...but deep down, I was still a kid at heart.

"Look out! Mickey's gonna do her dropkick!"

No, I'm not!

They say life's biggest struggles are interpersonal relationships, but for me, that stuff was easy-peasy. I could just look at the little seesaw beam floating at their chest, and as long as it was tilting to the "plus" side, I had done a good job. Sure, if I got a little too aggressive and they shut me down entirely, the beam would tilt to the "minus" side, but even then, I could still make up for it with the depth of my love! That was all there was to it. That said, it didn't always work...but eh, who cares? I didn't let it get me down.

So as you can see, I was never too worried about relationship stuff. If I was worried about something, it was generally about something...*bigger*.

We had just finished rehearsal for the day, and now it was time to change out of our costumes. "Mickey, your kicks are flawless," an adorable voice called out to me from behind as I pulled on my blazer. I recognized who it was right away; I whirled around and latched on to her.

"Was I badass?"

"Mm-hmm. Next week's performance is gonna be a hit."

"Aww, thanks! Ha *ha*! You smell nice!"

At this, Elle smiled bashfully, and her beam tilted to the right—the plus side. Every time I saw my friends' emotions lean

positive, it made me so happy, I could feel my own beam tilting to match.

"Ooh, your tote bag is really cute. I like the polka dots."

"Thanks! Yours, too. Is it new?" She smiled shyly.

See, Elle was a super-quiet girl, and in the past, if I tried to hug her, her beam would plummet into the negative. Fortunately, things between us had improved dramatically since then—something I was grateful for every single day. So yeah, nine times out of ten, my relationships with other people only ever brought joy into my life.

As for the name "Elle," it was just a nickname I gave her—short for Elmo. She wasn't bright red or anything, but her big googly eyes reminded me of a Sesame Street muppet. Likewise, my nickname was Mickey. Both of us were still very much Japanese, however. In my case, I got this nickname because I have a nasally laugh that sounds like some cartoon mouse. Allegedly.

But right as I was contemplating this—

"Gyah!"

Yelping, Elle nearly jumped out of her skin. Puzzled, I looked over...and spotted Looney standing directly behind her. Instantly, I knew she must have had something to do with it.

"I saw you two hugging and figured it was Tickle Me Elle Day," Looney replied, pulling her hand out from under Elle's skirt with a perfectly straight face. "Miyazato-chan, you've got a pimple on your butt."

Scandalized, I pulled Elle into the safety of my arms. "Stop that! Don't subject poor Elle to your lunacy!"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. Here, you can touch me back." Looney lifted her arms into the air like she was raising the roof. It was pretty cringey.

"Just touch her and get it over with," I advised Elle.

Then she reached out and lightly pinched Looney's tummy fat. So modest! So cute! But that wasn't enough to count as

proper revenge, so I decided to set a good example.

"You gotta do it more like *this*!"

First, I touched Looney's stomach. Then I ran my hands up the stitches of her favorite red sweater...but right as I arrived at her *you-know-whats*, I hastily drew my hands away.

"Wait, what the...?!"

"Was that enough for you? Okay then, let's get going," Looney shrugged, running a hand through her mid-length wavy hair. Before she could walk away, however, I grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and dragged her over to the corner of the room.

"Uh, Looney?! Why aren't you wearing one?!" I hissed quietly, ensuring the boys couldn't hear me.

"What are you talking about? Oh, you mean a bra? Uhhh... woman's prerogative."

What does THAT mean?! I must have silently asked her this exact question a thousand times since the day we first met. Meanwhile, Looney furrowed her brow like *I* was being weird for asking about it.

Interpersonal relationships were supposed to be easy...and yet...every now and then...this *one* particular lunatic drove me up the wall. She was impossible to read—I mean, take her beam, for example! Instead of tilting left or right, or even just maintaining its balance, her beam spun in circles. *Constantly*. It wasn't something I needed to worry about, per se, but...looking at it made me feel stupid in more ways than one.

Evidently Looney the Lunatic didn't pick up on my confusion, however, because she instead took the opportunity to dodge past me and escape outside.

Whoops! I was so distracted with the braless Looney situation, I forgot to mention the thing I'm actually worried about. Long story short: post-graduation stuff. Setting aside all the hyper-specific questions of which college, and which major, and which classes, I didn't even know what I wanted to *be* when I grew up!

Sometimes it was really aggravating not being able to see my own beam.

"If you major in literature, you're gonna have a hard time finding work. You'd be better off spending those four years looking for a man who can take care of you."

"What, and be a full-time housewife? No thanks, bro. I think I'd die of boredom."

"If you don't learn to address your teachers with respect, you won't even make it to college in the first place!"

He looked angry, and yet, his beam was leaning positive. It was clear to me that he hated all this formal hierarchy nonsense just as much as I did, but because he was a teacher, he had a reputation to maintain.

"Yes, *sir!* As you wish, *sir!* I'll keep it in mind, *sir!*"

And that was how the student-teacher conference ended.

Then Monday rolled around. I could never really think and do other stuff at the same time, so I was zoning out in front of my shoe locker when I heard a voice behind me.

"Morning! What's up, Miki-chan? Find a love letter in your locker?"

"Oh, morning, Looney... Wait, what the...? Ha *ha!* Did you give yourself a style makeover?"

When I turned around, I spotted Looney standing there, her usual waves flat-ironed perfectly straight. Reflexively, I reached out and touched it—*whoa, it's so silky!* Then for some reason, she took a step toward me, so I ended up touching something else, too. Instantly, I stopped caring about her hair.

"Looney, seriously! What if the boys find out?!"

"It's so freeing, you have no idea. I feel like I could fly."

Smoke will rise and lunatics will climb. That's how the saying goes, right? As usual, her beam was spinning around wildly.

"So, did you get a love letter?"

"No, not this time."

"So you've actually gotten one before? Impressive."

"Will you shut up?! I'm trying to figure out *life after high school*, got it?"

"Oh, right. Still having trouble deciding?"

"Yeah..."

"Just do whatever you want. Who cares?" she shrugged, as if to suggest it was the most minor thing in the entire world and thus wasn't worth thinking about.

Maybe *she* felt that way, but *I* sure didn't! I couldn't just *do whatever I wanted*; I needed to think about *employability* and all that other crap my teacher mentioned. I needed to make sure I wouldn't regret my choices later on down the line. And it wasn't easy to find a safe middle ground.

I pouted my lips at her. Then she walked right up to me, her expression dead serious. Startled, I reflexively stepped backwards, right out of my indoor shoes.

"What, you didn't want me to kiss you? Guess I misread the signs. Here."

She picked up my shoes and handed them to me. She wasn't even embarrassed about what she almost did! People at school liked to call me "crazy" because of my tendency to kick my friends, but *she* was the real lunatic here, not me!

"It'll be okay," she said suddenly, as I was pulling my shoes back on.

"What will?"

"Your future. The Miki-chan I know and love would never make the wrong choices."

See? Only a true lunatic could say that kind of crap with a straight face.

For the most part, everyone's beams worked the same way. But every now and then, I'd find people whose beams subverted my expectations. In our class, there were three such people. Looney was one of them, and the other two were boys.

"Hey Mickey! We got permission to use the auditorium after school, so there's gonna be a meetup for the main cast and crew," said Boy #1 right before last period as he passed by my desk. Nickname: Zuka. See, he used to be really short, so with his androgynous features, he could've theoretically joined the Takarazuka Revue as their first-ever male member. That's how I coined the nickname, anyway. But lately he'd had a growth spurt, and now the girls were all over him, which was kind of annoying.

Also annoying: no matter what I said to him, his beam never moved an inch. A balanced beam represented perfect composure, and whenever Zuka spoke to me, that composure never wavered. Pretty rude, if you asked me.

"Okay, cool. Thanks!"

But enough about him—it's time to introduce Boy #2, currently seated behind me. He was the polar opposite of Zuka; anytime I spoke to him, his beam would swing left and right like an energetic seesaw. And if I turned and looked at him right this very moment, it would probably happen again.

"Whoa! Wh-what's up, Miki-san?"

"Oh, nothing."

See that? It flip-flopped so much, it made me get the wrong idea at first—*Oh ho, you got a crush on me? Alas, it's so hard being this beautiful*—but now I was pretty sure that wasn't the case. After all, if he had a crush on me, then you'd think his beam would lean positive whenever we talked. But since it so frequently leaned negative, my pet theory was that he was actually low-key afraid of me. Pretty self-obsessed of me to mistake it for love, if I'm being honest. Cringe. But anyway. Going forward, I'd just need to get real friendly with him so he wouldn't be afraid of me anymore.

That being said, Elle sat at the desk directly beside his, and lately things seemed to be getting a little flirty between them, so I decided to rein myself in. They were good friends, and whenever they spoke to each other, their beams both leaned positive. Lucky me, I was friends with both of them, so I could tease them mercilessly once they hooked up. Oh, and as for his nickname...I

was still trying to come up with one. Recently, Looney had started calling him by his first name, so now everyone was calling him Kyou-kun.

"Alrighty! Cast, sound crew, and lighting crew, head to the auditorium! Costumers, prop designers, unless you've got something more important going on today, head on over to Miyazato-chan!" a drawling voice called out across the classroom as soon as the final bell stopped ringing. It was Looney, shouting up at the ceiling from her desk at the front of the room.

"Use your indoor voice, Kuroda!" our teacher scolded her.

"I'm so excited to start rehearsal," she replied without apologizing, almost as if she hadn't heard him. Then she turned around and started giving orders to each person.

As you might have guessed, we were currently working on a presentation for the school Culture Festival. All the stage performances were scheduled for Saturday, while all the refreshment stands would open for business on Sunday. Each class was required to choose one or the other; our class had chosen to perform. And as it happened, Looney had led the charge.

It all started about a month ago, back when the topic of the Culture Festival first arose. Sure, we were all on pretty friendly terms with each other, but even then, I expected we'd take turns sharing our opinions, followed by a majority vote. But no. Instead, Looney raised her hand and made a declaration that closed the book on the entire conversation:

"We're going to do a superhero show. The people who want to take center stage can have the lead roles, the people who want to give acting a try can have the minor roles, and the people who don't want to be on stage at all can be part of the production crew instead. I'll write the script, film it, and submit it to the admissions office of my dream college, so everyone please help me get in, okay? Thanks."

She didn't waste time with lead-up—just went straight for the kill. And since no one else had any alternative suggestions, it was easier and faster to just roll with it. Fortunately, our class had plenty of kids like Elle who were good at crafting things, plus a

handful of over-enthusiastic guys like Zuka...and of course, at least one person self-obsessed enough to want to play the lead role. Yep, you guessed it: me.

And so, just like that, it was decided that our class would put on a superhero show. As it turned out, not only had Looney already paid a visit to the theater club, but she'd already written the script, too. We each got a copy that very same day.

Naturally, we all knew about Looney's dream college, and we all wanted to help her make it happen. Our class was chock full of good people, and Looney herself seemed inclined to agree. "You guys are the best. Let's make this Culture Festival one we'll never forget," she said to us, like a line out of a cheesy movie. But somehow, she made it sound genuine. Probably because she wasn't thinking about it too hard.

"Hey! Braless *again*?! Seriously?!" I shouted as I ran after her.

"Yep! Want proof?"

She stopped, unbuttoned her blazer, untucked her sweater and button-down shirt, and started to hike it up. Then her band tee slid up along with it, exposing her porcelain tummy, and I hastily grabbed her hands, stopping her. "Don't you dare!"

There were other students all around us. Kyou-kun looked at us in puzzlement for a moment, then averted his eyes and hurried away.

"That reminds me. Miyazato-chan finished the costumes ahead of schedule, and she was saying she might make the helmets by hand, so she wants to measure your head."

"That's it? Not gonna comment on the fact that you almost gave Kyou-kun a peek at the goods?"

She hadn't even readjusted her uniform, and yet she had already changed the subject to a more serious topic. My snarky retort earned me a dumbfounded look. This was the part about Looney I *really* couldn't comprehend—no matter how ridiculously she behaved, she could play it off like it was normal! And yet

somehow people like Zuka and Kyou-kun thought *I* was the crazy one! It was offensive!

Then again, Kyou-kun seemed to have picked up on it lately, so that was a relief. Maybe now he could relax around me a bit more. And for the record, yes, he was one of the cast members in our show. He was never the dramatic type, but Looney had given him a role to play regardless. You see, certain circumstances had put him under her direct control, and while I was mildly concerned for his safety, at the same time, it was kind of hilarious.

"Alrighty then, time for another rehearsal!" Looney exclaimed as we entered the auditorium. For the most part, everyone's beams leaned positive.

For the next week, we could forget about college entrance exams and everything else and just focus on prepping for the last Culture Festival of our high school careers...

Aaaaagh! Seriously though, what am I gonna do after I graduate?!

"Whoa, you weren't kidding! They're so firm and tough!" Elle gushed as she felt the fingers on Looney's left hand. *So sweet. So pure.*

"Kyou's fingers are getting there, too," Looney replied, licking the ice cream clutched in her other hand.

"Really? Show me your left hand," I told Kyou-kun, who was seated across the table from me.

"No, dummy," Looney cut in. "It's his *right* hand. He's a lefty, remember?"

At her prompting, Kyou-kun timidly offered me his right hand. When I touched it, I could tell that the pads of his fingers had firmed up from making chords and stuff, although it wasn't quite as obvious as Looney's. Meanwhile, as usual, his beam was flip-flopping all over the place.

Sure, it didn't move like that when Looney or Elle was touching him, but I felt no need to refrain because of it. If anything, I touched him *more*. Shock therapy, baby! Too bad it

didn't seem to be working. Quite the opposite, in fact—he seemed to be especially restless today, since he was the only guy present. Personally, I couldn't fathom being nervous around my classmates. As for how he had ended up the sole male presence today, Zuka was off attending club practice. The three of us had spotted Kyou-kun flying solo in the cafeteria and pounced.

"We spent the whole summer break practicing, so now he's got some calluses, and he can even play a few songs. You should perform for everyone sometime."

"I'd love that!" Elle exclaimed, gazing at Kyou-kun hopefully. He shook his head vigorously, but his sensei wasn't having it.

"Kyou, I've been reviewing all the basics myself *just* so I can teach you. This is an order from your sensei: once the Culture Festival is over, pick a song and practice it, then perform it for everyone. Miyazato-chan, Miki-chan, prepare to be amazed by the raw talent of my favorite disciple."

At this, Kyou-kun looked utterly crushed...and yet his beam tilted ever so slightly to the plus side. But I was the only one who could see that. The heart was honest to a fault, and truth be told, he was itching to make use of his new skills. He was both apprehensive and excited. *You've got this, Kyou-kun.*

"Man, you've gotta be really busy with guitar practice *and* Culture Festival prep *and* studying. Ha *ha!* Oh, and there's post-graduation stuff to worry about, too... Haaah..."

"I'm telling you, we don't have to worry about all that for a while yet! It's not like you to get so anxious, Miki-chan. Sighing won't help you fly... No, what you really need is a *jetpack!*"

Looney shot to her feet as if preparing for takeoff. I shot a pointed look at Elle and Kyou-kun, then looked back at her. "You say that, but this is a serious issue! It'll affect my whole life—of course it's gonna weigh on me!"

"Well then, why not ditch your bra? That'll take some weight off."

Looney started to lean her chest in my direction, so I grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and sat her back down in

her chair. Just when I'd thought I had the perfect chance to ask Elle and Kyou-kun for their input...she had to interrupt our happy lunchtime with her lunacy.

Moments later, the bell rang. We put away our trays like the good students we were, threw away our trash, and headed off for cleanup duty. It was kinda stupid, but...the way we each went our separate ways after lunch, it felt like a metaphor for life's whims pulling us in different directions, and it made me sad. Graduation was only a year and a half away...

Honestly, I was an idiot for getting all sentimental over nothing. Looney was right—this wasn't like me at all.

After school, we were permitted to use the gym, so the cast and crew stayed to rehearse. The gym was where the performances would be held, so we needed to use what limited time we had left to adapt our blocking to the big stage. This was our third rehearsal in the gym, and I could feel everyone's tension—through their mics *and* their beams.

What about me, you ask? I was totally fine! As a superhero, I was used to performing under pressure. If I had my way, I'd be on stage the whole time, but of course, the script had a few scenes I wasn't part of. So I left Looney and the evil goons onstage in the gym and walked to the student store to buy a sports drink. Being a superhero was a real workout, and I needed to replenish my electrolytes.

At any other time of year, the student store would be pretty empty after school, but the Culture Festival was now just a week away, and the place was packed. I bought a bottle of Pocari and was on my way back to the gym when I spotted a friend sitting on a bench outside the cafeteria. So, naturally, I flung my drink at him.

"Ow!"

"Ha *ha*! You've got a long way to go if you can't even catch a sports drink!"

"Dude, not cool! You can't just go around hurting people! You're supposed to be the good guy!"

Laughing, Zuka tossed my bottle back. I caught it and then sat down next to him. "I know you don't have club practice, and the costumers all have the day off today, so what are you doing here...? Oh, I get it. You're waiting for Kyou-kun, eh?"

"Yep. I'm a loser with no life."

As usual, his beam was perfectly balanced. I *saw* it waver when I threw the Pocari, and yet my words didn't affect him even remotely? I mean...not that it mattered...I guess.

"Why don't you just hang out with us in the gym?"

"I'll be a distraction and you know it," he grinned, as if it were a superpower he could willfully control. In reality, he was just a nuisance whose mere presence made all the boys get rowdy.

"Gotcha. Okay, well, we need to borrow your boyfriend for a little longer, but I promise you'll be able to go on your date after we're done."

"It's not a date, dumbo. We're just gonna look at CDs."

"Meaning you're gonna walk around window shopping? That's a date, my friend. And a pretty big one at that... Oh, *now* I get it! Y'know, if it weren't for you hanging all over him, he and Elle might actually get together sometime this century!"

"What?"

Oh my God. I always knew Zuka was dense, but I hadn't realized just how terminal it was. Then again, maybe it was silly of me to expect him to notice things about other people when he couldn't even see what was right in front of him.

"You know Elle and Kyou-kun have been flirting lately, right? They're always talking and laughing."

Personally, I thought I did an excellent job of conveying my point without having to mention my beam power, but Zuka didn't respond. And instead of responding, he stared at me with the most obnoxious slack-jawed derp face I'd ever seen. Then he let out this big, dramatic sigh, and while admittedly I had no idea what was going on with him, it pissed me off something fierce, so I went ahead and punched him just in case.

"Wait... Did Kyou-kun say something about it to you? Or did you and Elle talk about it while you worked on the costumes?"

"No, but...you know having a fun conversation with someone doesn't automatically mean it's flirting, right?"

Like you would know! I glared at him. In response, he fixed me with that quiet smile that made all the girls go gaga over him.

"What? You think it's sexy to be a killjoy? You wanna go, punk?"

"Will you wipe that evil sneer off your face? You're supposed to be a hero! Oh, and that reminds me: Looney told me you're, like, worried about something?"

"Oh, yeah, that. I've just been thinking about post-graduation stuff."

"That's weird. You're not really the thinking type."

"On the one hand, you're not wrong. But on the other hand, *cram it.*" I leaned in and glared at him point-blank.

"Seriously, quit sneering!"

He pressed one of his big mitts against my face and pushed me away. Unlike Looney's stiff, guitar-callused fingers, Zuka's was rough from all the sports. *Get your stupid hand out of my face!*

"What, so you're saying *you've* got it all figured out?"

"I wanna work outside Japan, so I'm gonna study foreign languages."

"Oh. Uh...wow."

"If I go to a national university, that'll save me some tuition costs. Plus, I can work part-time to cover my life expenses while saving up to travel abroad while I'm getting my degree. Supposedly summer breaks in college are more than a month long, right? But of course, if I wanna get into a national school, I'm gonna have to study like hell to get my math scores up. That's what they said during my student-teacher conference, anyway." He let out a charming little laugh.

I was impressed and panicked at the same time. Not because he was thinking hard about his future—I was already doing that

myself—but because he answered the question so quickly and easily. I had known this guy for five years of my life now, and his confidence and conviction had never posed this much of a threat.

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!”

“What is it this time? Practicing one of your lines?”

He seemed to enjoy watching me squirm. So naturally I decided to give him a firm headbutt, but right as I grabbed him by the hair, I heard a meek voice call out:

“M-Miki-san...Sensei’s asking for you...and please don’t bully Zuka...”

I turned to find Kyou-kun standing there, his beam leaning somewhat negative.

“No, it’s not what you think! I’m the victim here! Anyway, my bad. Sorry I wasn’t on standby.”

I was being completely honest, and yet his beam remained on the minus side. Until I let go of Zuka, that is. Then it returned to the plus side. *Aww, he was just worried about his friend.*

“Okay, well, I’ll be in the library. Come get me when you’re done.”

“You’re gonna study?”

“Nah, I’m just gonna chat with the librarian. Oh yeah, Mickey!”

Right as I rose to my feet, he beckoned me over. And like a normal, well-adjusted person, I leaned in. But then he whispered something that was punishable only with the most merciless superhero punch:

“I dunno what’s gotten into Looney, but she was rubbing her boobs all over me today!”

“Gross! TMI!”

Was Looney’s new bralessness a tactic to seduce Zuka? She had never seemed that interested in him before now, so it struck

me as totally out of left field. But then again, when it came to a lunatic like her, sudden baffling behavior was par for the course.

Come to think of it, just this morning at the shoe lockers, I was chatting with Kyou-kun when Zuka showed up. Right as I waved at him and said good morning, however, Looney dashed over, threw herself into his arms, and dragged him away somewhere. Now that I thought about it, I seemed to remember her trying to do a “playful wink” in my direction. What was *that* about? “He’s mine” or something?

There are more important matters at hand, people!

In a blink, the Culture Festival was now just two days away, and I hadn’t made *any* progress figuring out my plans for life after high school. Sure, we were still in the second half of our second year, so it wasn’t that urgent, but still. In my case, I was the kind of girl who set her sights on something and charged straight at it like a bull. This had worked out for me pretty well thus far. So while I could tolerate a reasonable amount of aimless studying, eventually I was gonna hit a brick wall, and knowing me, it would probably happen at the worst possible time. Everyone had their own way of doing things. And while I was still just a teenager, I had managed to find a lifestyle that worked for me—one that naturally produced the best possible outcome—and as such, I had no plans of changing it.

“Remember: even when you’re backstage, you’re still performing. Yes, it’s dark and the audience can’t see you, but you still have to stay focused the entire time. Think of your fellow cast members as part of the audience. And don’t worry; you have nothing to be nervous about. Everyone here is a star.”

It was such a cheesy line, anyone who dared to say it aloud would surely writhe at the mere memory for years to come. Anyone but Looney, that is. She had worked her butt off to get us ready for the Festival, and now we were fully prepared—the polar opposite of my post-graduation situation.

“Tomorrow we’ll be using the auditorium after school, so we’ll position the set and do a whole run-through. Then the day after that, we’ll check sound and lighting in the gym during fifth period. Don’t worry, we’ve got this! S-T-A-R! What’s that spell?!”

"STAR!" we answered in unison, which was a miracle considering none of us saw it coming—we'd all been taken in by her inexplicable charisma. Then we burst out laughing at ourselves. Pretty much everyone was wearing their stage costumes, too, which added a whole new layer of fun. Yet at the same time, part of me was still hung up on the post-graduation stuff. I knew it wasn't like me to be so indecisive...but I just felt so...overwhelmed...

Ugh, if only I could see my own beam! Then I'd be able to see what made it lean positive or negative! This "life after high school" problem stressed me out more than friends or romance ever did. Pretty hardcore, man.

"Miki-chan, why do you look like you're about ready to kill someone? Need help hiding the body?" asked Looney.

"No! A superhero would never do such a thing!"

I knew if I nodded, she would probably have a murder plot outlined by tomorrow. Instead, I ignored her and headed to the shoe lockers, where I changed into my loafers. Then, without waiting for her to catch up, I walked out through the front doors and encountered a group of female classmates standing around outside. Evidently, they were waiting for me and Looney to get back from returning the auditorium key.

"Oh, sorry, guys. Didn't realize you were waiting on us."

"No problem! Listen, we were just talking, and...don't you think something's going on with those two?"

I looked in the direction she pointed—at Zuka and Kyou-kun headed to the front gates. They walked side by side, with no real palpable excitement, and while their voices were too quiet to overhear, they kinda looked like an old married couple. The costume team had finished their work early today, so clearly Zuka must have stayed behind to wait for Kyou-kun again.

"They say they're just friends, but what if they're both secretly in love with each other?!"

I laughed. I'd forgotten she was a fan of that sort of thing. Then I remembered what I'd said point-blank to Zuka's face just

yesterday. Evidently, I wasn't all that different.

"No way! Kyou likes girls, I'm sure of it. He gives off straight vibes," Looney announced out of nowhere as she caught up to the group. Perhaps she, too, had sensed the chemistry between him and Elle. "My dear disciple just needs a little more courage, that's all."

"Ha *ha*! Settle down there, Sensei."

Ever since she took Kyou-kun as her guitar pupil over summer break, Looney had adopted the attitude of a seasoned educator. But when we all started to tease her about it, this apparently delighted her so much that she started dancing in the street like the lunatic she was.

So yeah, that was how my day ended.

And, just like that, it was the day before the Culture Festival. We'd had more than a month to prepare, and yet it all seemed to fly by in a blink. Looney was still running around campus without a bra on, still claiming it was "a woman's prerogative," so I let her off the hook with a light punch to the shoulder. It felt like everything was going to plan.

But that was when a big problem occurred: the boy assigned to the supervillain role broke his arm in a bike accident.

I could hear him apologizing on the other end of the phone, but Looney didn't fault him for his carelessness. Instead, she laughed and said, "I swear, only *you* would get injured at a time like this. But hey, since you can't eat ice cream with a broken arm, I'll eat it for you. I want three pints, you hear me?" And with that, she ended the call.

Then I asked the question that was on everyone's minds: "What are we gonna do?"

Smiling vaguely, she answered, "I'll just handle it myself, of course."

Ignoring everyone else's concerns, Looney's beam continued to spin wildly, like it was having the time of its life. Rehearsal that day hit a few minor snags but was otherwise almost flawless. And

those minor snags weren't because of Looney; no, she performed her new role perfectly. Granted, maybe this wasn't a surprise considering she was the one who wrote the script and the plot to begin with. Plus, she was directing everyone else's acting, too. That being said, I'd been under the impression she'd never done any acting before.

"I like to keep my bases covered, so I practiced all the parts at home every night, just in case."

She wasn't scared to wear a lapel mic, either, something the whole crew found impressive. Then she looked at me with that unreadable expression of hers.

"I'm glad you're still around, Miki-chan."

"Yeah, I bet you are!"

Instantly I understood what she meant. Although she could probably play most of the parts with relative ease, mine was the only exception. Sure, at first glance Looney may have seemed "absurdly hyper-competent at everything" (her words, not mine), but this was not actually the case. You see, while she was a hard worker who generally tried to keep all her bases covered, this only bore fruit when it came to her studies or her hobbies. When it came to anything athletic, Looney was completely and utterly *hopeless*. She wouldn't be able to do the high kicks and jumps that came with the superhero mantle.

"For this last part, I'd like to go over the action blocking for the finale between me and Miki-chan. Everyone else is free to go. Sorry it's so last minute, Miyazato-chan, but could you adjust the size of the villain costume?"

"Sure!"

Luckily, the costume in question was just a plain floor-length black robe with a fox mask and a staff.

"Anyway, don't worry about the hiccups. The worst of our bad luck is already behind us. Now go home, eat a nice big dinner, take a bath, and get lots of sleep. Come tomorrow, no matter what happens, we're gonna have a blast. So that's that! Dismissed!"

After that...reassuring?...farewell, everyone filed out of the auditorium, buzzing with excitement and anxiety. The numbers dwindled one by one, and once it was just the two of us, what I felt most wasn't loneliness but fear. It was still the same auditorium we'd visited a thousand times, but without everyone else there to fill the space, I felt strangely out of place. Why was it so hard to breathe all of a sudden?

"L-Looney, let's hurry up and get this blocking figured out! Oh, and you had *better* wear a bra tomorrow, got it?"

"Heh heh heh. No promises."

One look at her stupid smirk and her spinning beam, and the fear inside me faded away. For once, her ability to make people ask themselves "Why did I ever bother worrying?" had actually come in handy.

Fortunately, we figured out all the stage blocking without much trouble. For the most part, I was the one doing all the jumping around while the villain moved her staff accordingly to block my attacks. Even Looney could handle it, and this was the same girl who somehow managed to take thirteen entire seconds to complete a fifty-meter dash.

"That was *perfectamundo*, Miki-chan! Now all that's left is for me to spend the rest of the night learning to embrace the dark side... Yeah, that's right. I'm not going to eat *any* of my carrots at dinner!"

"Wow. Diabolical."

After we towed off our sweat, took off our tracksuits, changed back into our school uniforms, and sprayed the whole auditorium with deodorizer, we locked up for the night and headed for the staff room, side by side. As we walked down the dimly lit hall, we could see light spilling out from inside. And when we finally reached the entryway, we arrived right as our teacher was stepping out.

"Here's the key, broski!"

"That's Sensei to you," he replied sharply as he accepted the key.

I laughed. "Sorry, Sensei!"

"Be careful on your way home, now. Especially you, Miki—you tend to stumble headfirst into trouble whenever you're feeling cocky. We're all expecting big things of you tomorrow."

"Just leave it to me, Teach! I'll knock your socks off!"

"How many times must I tell you..." He sighed and then chuckled, as we turned and ran off.

You tend to stumble headfirst into trouble whenever you're feeling cocky.

At the time, I hadn't paid it much thought...but it wouldn't be long until I came to regret not listening more carefully to that warning.

After a full night's sleep and a balanced breakfast, I was in top form. On the way to school, everyone kept whispering about how nervous they were, but as for me, my heart was racing with excitement right from the moment I woke up. At the shoe lockers, I said hi to everyone, pulled off my outdoor shoes, and while I was at it, I went up and threw a friendly kick at Zuka's back. *On top of my game, baby!*

As our director, I figured Looney would be a little nervous herself, so I checked in with her at the first opportunity. But she apparently really *had* embraced the dark side, because she kept referring to herself as a "Demon Lord." She had this creepy blank look on her face, too. So I snapped her out of it by making her eat one of my carrots at lunch.

"You're incredible, Mickey. I've had the jitters since yesterday. Couldn't get a wink of sleep last night. Ugh, I'm such a loser... Break a leg, okay?"

Somehow Elle was even more nervous than the rest of us, and she didn't even have to worry about going onstage. She had finished readjusting the villain costume, and sure enough, it fit Looney perfectly. Oh, and when the original actor walked in with his arm in a cast, we all ran over to doodle on it. This was a fitting punishment, I think.

That morning, Looney and the sound/lighting crew went to the gym to do a quick final check. When they returned, they told us that the gym windows were now covered in blackout curtains, which meant backstage would be even darker than usual. Fortunately, this wouldn't be a problem, since we wouldn't need to shuffle around too much while the lights were off.

The costumes and everything else had all been relocated to the gym storage room. We were ready. All we had to do now was knock their socks off.

After morning homeroom ended, we all filed into the hall and walked to the gym in an orderly fashion. We weren't quiet about it, though. We were all *way* too worked up.

"It's finally happening!" I whispered to Elle behind me in line.

She blinked at me for a minute and then shouted "*Break a leg!*" in an uncharacteristically loud voice that got us both in trouble with the teacher. But even that wasn't enough to put a damper on our high spirits.

Arriving at the gym, I took a deep breath...and stepped inside.

The mood in the room was tense and curious and apprehensive and excited—nothing like it usually was. It felt like our thumping heartbeats were vibrating the floor, and everyone's beams were going crazy, tilting positive and negative. And then there was Looney's, spinning out of control, like always.

This is awesome. I am LIVING for this.

Today's schedule was as follows: first up, the club performances—dance, band, choir. Next, the class performances. Then, lastly, we'd finish the day with a performance from the theater club. See, our school's theater club was actually kind of a big deal; they put on a musical every year, and it was always a huge hit. And as it happened, the stage manager for our performance was a theater club member. With her help, Looney's script had really taken on a life of its own. Plus, she was going to be acting in the theater club performance later today, so I was really looking forward to that.

We all sat down in our assigned section. Then they started off with the opening speech, and before we knew it, it was time.

The dance, band, and choir performances were all really good, and I recognized my friends from other classes among them, which was fun, but...my heart was focused on our superhero show.

Applause filled the gym as the club performances came to an end. At last, it was time for the five class performances. During the fifteen-minute intermission, the first class set up their stage while the second class got ready in the dressing rooms—and we were the second class.

There were two dressing rooms, one for boys and one for girls. But these rooms were too small to fit all of us, so the stage crew—costumers, prop designers, etc.—would stay behind while the cast members, including me, changed into our costumes. Then, when the first class finished their performance and the curtain fell, the crew members would rush to change out the set pieces while the cast waited backstage. Naturally, we had practiced this process during yesterday's dress rehearsal.

As the cast rose to their feet, I could hear our classmates whispering "You got this!" and "Break a leg!" Meanwhile, set-designer-turned-villain Looney exchanged a fist bump with the injured actor—using his non-broken arm, of course. And with that, we headed to the dressing rooms. *Everyone's* beams were flip-flopping around, even the people still seated.

The girls' dressing room smelled like old sweat, but I used to do track back in junior high, so I was used to it. If anything, it put me in a competitive mindset.

"Gosh, Elle's so talented," Office Worker A commented behind me as I pulled an oversized tracksuit on over my superhero costume. And it was my costume she was referring to. Elle had designed it to incorporate both Looney's overall vision and my own suggestions. It was an indulgent masterpiece, far surpassing our allotted budget and forcing our class adviser to pay for it out of pocket.

"Ha *ha*! Thanks for noticing. Took you long enough!"

"Don't act like you raised her, Mickey! But...yeah...I didn't really notice before. And I guess it's thanks to you that she's started to open up to the rest of the class lately."

"She told me she wants to go to college to study fashion design."

"Oh, that'd be perfect for her!"

Just then, Looney returned from visiting the boys' dressing room, still wearing her uniform. I grabbed my super-cool superhero mask and walked over to her...but before I could say anything, a peal of applause broke out in the gym. The first performance had begun.

Next thing I knew, I felt a fist against my chest.

"We're all depending on you, Miki-chan. Don't let us down," she told me with a goofy grin.

So I mimicked her gesture, pressing my fist square against the center of her chest. "Leave it to me."

Twenty minutes later, the third-year class finished their performance—a stage adaptation of *The Little Prince*. I was a fan of that story, so I kinda wished I could have seen it, but as soon as the curtain fell, that thought went right out the window. Quietly, we slipped backstage while the crew got everything set up for us. I could hear some people taking deep breaths, while others flailed their limbs, trying to get the jitters out. Kyou-kun (AKA "Pedestrian B") stood beside me, his beam wobbling all over the place, the way it did whenever I spoke to him.

Then the crew members hurried offstage, and one of the student council members peeked behind the curtain to check if we were ready. It was time. In just twenty minutes, the past month of hard work would finally come to an end.

"Next, we have a superhero show from Class 2-A. Let's all get in touch with our inner children and root for the hero!"

The audience applauded...and then the stage lights went down.

There was a short lull before the curtains would open again. In the sudden darkness, I couldn't see a thing. After all, I couldn't

see anyone's beams if I couldn't see their faces. It was so quiet, even our whispers threatened to carry out to the audience...and in that moment, I realized something: my heart was pounding harder than usual.

Oh crap. Am I...nervous?

Now that I thought about it, my legs felt like jelly, and I could feel sweat trickling down my back. Right...this was what it felt like to be nervous. It'd been so long, I'd almost forgotten.

Oh God, but I'm the hero! This whole show is riding on me! Crap, crap, crap! My cue isn't for a while still, but...I'm gonna be fine, right? Right? Someone, please tell me—

"It'll be okay."

In the darkness, I heard a voice, loud and clear. Then, the next thing I knew, someone reached out and grabbed my cold, tingly left hand. Their fingers weren't rock-hard like Looney's, but I could feel some stiffness there. Before I could figure out who it was, however, the hand pulled away, and a few seconds later the house lights came back on. That was the cue for Pedestrians A, B, and C to walk onstage.

Whoever had grabbed my hand, I had felt their warmth...and the faintest tremble. Then I realized my nerves had disappeared—wait, no, they hadn't. I could still feel it. But when I balled my hand into a fist, those feelings started to shift into something else.

Oh, okay. Now THIS I can work with.

Summoning all my emotions into my left hand, I looked out at the less-than-manly figure walking away from me and silently thanked him.

As it turned out, once you harnessed the power of your stage jitters, everything else was a piece of cake. The show progressed smoothly, without a hitch. We had a veteran thespian running the sound and lighting, so no worries there. Plus, our narrator standing at the very front of the stage was from the broadcasting club, and as you might expect, his voice was like butter. The other actors seemed to have harnessed their jitters, too, because the

Pedestrians and Office Workers were reciting their lines with no hiccups.

Now it was my turn to walk onstage, accompanied by Looney and another girl. Our characters were just ordinary teenage girls, gossiping about dumb stuff, but the audience was actually laughing at our jokes! *What a relief.*

The first act was primarily focused on establishing the superhero and the bad guys through dialogue, including some foreshadowing that there might be a wolf in sheep's clothing. Naturally, we made one character look blatantly suspicious as a red herring. But in actuality, Looney's character was wearing the same wristband as the evil mooks in full-body spandex. This was an Easter egg Looney added to give the audience a hint, and she made sure to casually draw attention to her wrist as she recited her lines.

Then the stage lights dimmed, and eerie music began to play as a group of evil mooks ran onstage. The teenage girls all screamed, and when it looked like the mooks were going to carry them away, they began to call for the famous superhero. But she didn't show up right away.

This was my cue to run offstage, leaving Looney behind while I hastily changed out of my tracksuit and affixed the ornaments to my superhero costume underneath. Meanwhile, the narrator addressed the audience, encouraging them to call for me. Then I put my mask on, and right as the crowd was hyped up, I ran back out to them!

From there, the superhero protected the civilians as she mowed down all the evil mooks, *tokusatsu*-style. *Damn, I'm such a badass!* Once they were defeated, a thunder sound effect played, and the burliest guy in our class walked onstage, dressed up like a powerful warrior. As the other characters shrank away in fear, I alone rose to the challenge. This would be a hard fight, but with the help of my special moves, I would ultimately defeat him. Then the bad guys all scrambled offstage with their tails between their legs.

At last, peace was restored to the town! Or so you might think. But then a high-pitched laugh rang out from backstage, and

the audience realized Looney was gone. Cue the true villain: our favorite lunatic. A shocking betrayal by someone I thought was a friend. Originally this scene was going to have some romantic undertones to it, since the villain was written to be male, but oh well. Instead, my character was purely devastated to learn that their friendship was a lie. But I had to fight her if I wanted to protect the people.

That said, as the true villain, Looney was no pushover. Sound effects played as she deflected all my attacks with her staff. Then, using her witchcraft, she overpowered me. The superhero was in danger! Now it was time for the minor characters to cheer for me while the narrator encouraged the audience to join in. Fortunately, our audience was primed to play along, and with their voices calling for me, I rose to my feet. Sound effects and lighting cues abound, I shouted the name of my ultimate attack and threw out a kick!

Looney had given me some very specific stage direction for this scene: *Come at me with all you've got*. So I aimed my strongest kick at her (padded) shoulder, and she dramatically staggered backwards. Then, with one last line of dialogue, she breathed no more. The evil mooks carried her lifeless body offstage, leaving only her fox mask. The minor characters all cheered, and the narrator prompted the audience to applaud.

This scene required some nuanced acting on my part. The evil was defeated, yes, but my character couldn't truly celebrate. I had vanquished my friend with my own two hands, and now I would have to live with that knowledge while cherishing the peaceful world I had protected... According to Looney, this was "a message to fellow Japanese people who never truly stopped to think about the costs of our freedom," or something like that. Pretty deep, if you asked me.

Either way, bottom line, the story was about the value of peace. The minor characters would all rejoice, I would say my closing line, and then we were done. This was the end of our superhero show, and only a small amount of dialogue remained.

As Office Worker A said her lines, I felt myself relax a tiny bit. At this point, we were finally in the clear. There were no more

hurdles to overcome. After all, we had nailed this last scene in every single rehearsal. What was I ever nervous about?

I let out a breath, making sure my lapel mic wouldn't pick it up. For the first time, I was calm enough to really take in my surroundings. Prior to this point, I was laser-focused on performing everything correctly. I glanced offstage and saw Looney smiling proudly. Then I looked out at the audience and saw Elle clapping her hands anxiously while Zuka grinned. Here on stage, I was surrounded by my beloved classmates, including the guy who gave me the courage I needed: "Pedestrian B," who wasn't wearing a mic at all since he (tragically) didn't have any lines.

Gosh, this past month has been so much fun, I thought to myself out of nowhere. Maybe Looney's spontaneity had rubbed off on me, because I was just suddenly so...happy. Everyone was so awesome, and the costumes, the set pieces, the sound, the lighting... Everyone's talent and hard work and perseverance had gotten us this far. I was truly blessed to be here, standing among them. And without Looney's ambitions, this whole play never would have happened. I could never admit it to her face, of course, since she was such an oddball. It'd be too awkward.

She knew exactly what she wanted to do, and she went out and did it without ever hesitating. As for me, I was terminally wishy-washy, and not in a cute way. I simply couldn't decide what future I wanted for myself. My mind was an ocean of pluses and minuses... *Ugh, if only I could stop being pathetic and focus on what I want to do with my life like everyone else...*

"...Huh?"

Then, at long last, I realized I had done the unthinkable. I had zoned out. While I was still on stage. I had gotten lost in thought and forgotten everything. And it wasn't until the girl next to me was forced to nudge me on the shoulder that I realized it was my turn to speak.

Oh God, I can't believe I screwed up here of all places!

Hastily, I adjusted my lapel mic. It was the final piece of dialogue in the play, just three lines long.

*C'mon, I gotta say it right! Everyone's counting on me!
Looney's dreams are riding on this! Looney's...dreams...*

The girl next to me looked at me with concern.

I know, I know. It's my turn. It's my last line.

Looney had instructed me to boldly direct my final line at the audience; I remembered that much, at least. So I turned my body to face them. The stage lights shone into my eyes, penetrating my skull until my mind went as white as a sheet.

I had never experienced anything like this.

"Wh...wha...huh?"

It felt like I had fallen into a bright white abyss. An endless abyss. And I was trying desperately, *desperately*, to remember everything that had led up to this moment, but there was nothing to grab onto, and I kept falling, falling, falling.

Uh...uhhh...uhh...wha...what...what...what's my line?

My silence dragged on a little too long, and now I could feel everyone else on stage starting to panic. Then the audience picked up on said panic and started to whisper amongst themselves. My five senses were oddly sharpened, so I could hear it all:

"What's wrong?"

"Brain fart?"

"Ugh, right at the end?"

"That's so sad..."

Wait...n-no...it's not that... I didn't forget... I swear, I remember... I mean, we did this scene a dozen times... C'mon, c'mon, I gotta say something! I know I gotta say something, but... I can't...think of anything... I can't remember! I can't, I can't, I can't! Right when I finally stopped being scared... C'mon, everyone's counting on me! Looney's dreams are riding on this! At this rate, I'll...I'll ruin everything...!

I knew this, and yet the words wouldn't come. Why? Maybe my throat was blocked, because they came out through my eyes instead. In the form of tears.

Miki—you tend to stumble headfirst into trouble whenever you're feeling cocky.

Why now, of all the worst possible moments? My legs were jelly again, except worse this time. It felt like my knees were ready to give out at any second. *I can't pass out, no matter what!* Desperately, I struggled to stand my ground.

But truth be told, I was fighting a losing battle. In the end, the only thing that kept me upright was the person who dashed out from backstage and wrapped their arms around me to prop me up. I was still in panic mode, and I couldn't think straight. But as murmurs rose up from the audience, I heard a voice in my ear that lodged itself straight into my brain.

"It's okay, Miki-chan. Don't worry. Just take a deep breath."

"...Looney?"

At last, I understood. Looney was holding me. She had removed her lapel mic, but I had accidentally spoken into mine, and my voice carried across the gym. For better or for worse, however, I was no longer worried about screwing up the show. All I knew was that she wasn't supposed to be onstage.

"L-Looney, you can't be out here!"

"Hmm?"

"You dummy! You're messing it up! Your dreams, your college, your goals, your beam...it'll all lean negative!"

I was babbling like a crazy person, and everyone in the room heard me. They must have felt my panic. The audience was uncomfortably quiet. And as a result, my lapel mic picked up Looney's voice.

"But Miki-chan...you're crying."

What are you talking about?

"Who cares? Your dream—"

"Friends come first. Only an idiot would stop to worry about that stuff."

No, that's backwards! An idiot WOULDN'T worry about it!

But my feelings didn't reach her. Instead, she hugged me tightly and whispered so only I could hear: "I'll handle this."

Then, still dressed in her villain robes, she walked over to the narrator. What was she planning to do? How was she going to fix it?

Then she snatched the narrator's mic and addressed the audience directly. "Ladies and gentlemen, we'd like to apologize to you."

I'm sorry... This is all my fault...

"We're sorry for deceiving you, but...we were putting on an act."

I could practically see the thought bubbles over everyone's heads, including my own: *No kidding, Sherlock!*

Looking back, no one understood what she was getting at.

"Yes, this was all an act. You see, it occurred to me that, in this world of unending strife, perhaps humanity could never truly unite unless there was a greater evil. And so, to become humanity's most formidable foe, I had no choice but to transform myself into evil incarnate. But once the people vanquished that evil, I knew they would need a leader. So I forced my friend to take up that mantle. And once she defeated me, I was prepared to never set foot in the civilized world ever again. But she couldn't bear to subject me to that...and I couldn't bear to abandon her when she was hurting. So our plan failed, all because we were too naive. We were only ever pretending to be superhero and villain. But think about it: when the time comes that a true villain reveals themselves, are we sure that a true superhero will rise up to fight? If we don't join hands today, we might be too late by tomorrow. And that's the moral of this story."

Once Looney's speech came to an end, classical music started to play—that was our ending theme. Then the stage lights slowly faded to black, and the curtain fell. One or two people hesitantly started clapping, and after a moment of hesitation, the rest of the audience joined in until eventually the applause was genuine.

"That's the moral of this story" was the cue I was supposed to say to signal the end of the show. But Looney hadn't simply recited my lines in my place. Whatever speech she gave just now, it wasn't in the script at all.

Then it dawned on me: perhaps she had prepared an alternative ending in advance, just in case I messed up. Feeling sad and guilty, I took off my lapel mic and thanked her in a shaky voice as we stood there in the darkness.

"Hoo boy. You know, I wasn't sure what I was doing when I took that mic, but maybe I just have a knack for improv."

Are you kidding me? That was all off the top of your head?

There was no denying it—she was a lunatic, through and through. That speech could have gone wrong in any number of ways! Instead of simply letting me take the fall, she could have single-handedly screwed us up even worse!

But...she didn't.

I wouldn't call our play a success, but somehow, Miss "Friends Come First" managed to brute-force her way to a happy ending. *Ugh...* I never wanted to admit it, since it'd be awkward, and I wasn't even trying to flatter her, but nevertheless, it trickled out with my last tear.

"You're really incredible, Looney."

Then the lights came back on so the next class could set the stage for their performance, and I was finally able to see everyone's faces. They all looked relieved. As for me, I probably looked like a mess.

Only Looney was smiling. Smiling and spinning her beam around like a pinwheel.

How are you so awesome?

Even after the play was over, I continued to cry and apologize and cry some more. I couldn't possibly count how many tears I shed, so don't ask me for an exact amount. But if you're cool with just the parts I remember, then here you go.

Everyone kept smiling and saying nice things, like “I guess even *you* get nervous sometimes, huh?” and “I’m sure you would’ve remembered your line eventually!”—I remember that part for sure. Then I spent the whole night depressed and overthinking things. Then I fell asleep at some point, and when I woke up the next morning, I was back to normal. Can’t stay hung up on these things forever, y’know.

Today was Sunday, the day we were free to kick back and relax after working our butts off yesterday. We were permitted to walk around and peruse all the stores the other classes had set up until the end of the day, at which point we would meet up at a burger joint by the train station for a cast party. There was no school on Monday, either, so this was basically the start of our weekend.

Together with Looney, Elle, and the other girls, we walked around, ate some food, and grabbed some drinks. Oh, and we stopped by Zuka’s club exhibit to make fun of him, of course. Looney and I had both demanded he give us free extras as a “friendship perk,” but when our food arrived, Elle’s plate was the only one stacked four waffles high. It was all so childish. When I went to pay for our food, the fist holding my money may have accidentally collided with Zuka’s shoulder.

All things considered, it was a fun day, but at one point I ended up stepping away from the group. There was someone I’d been meaning to talk to today, and I’d just spotted him sitting by himself in the courtyard, eating *takoyaki*. But I didn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea and start teasing him, of course, so I made some vague excuse and slipped away from the other girls before I approached.

“Sup, Kyou-kun!”

At my voice, he flinched so hard, the whole bench flinched with him. He nearly dropped his *takoyaki*, too, so I hastily reached out to keep the container upright. As he choked on his bite of food, I could see his beam wobbling away, like always.

“M-Miki-san! Wh-what’s up? Weren’t you with Miyazato-san and the others?”

"Yeah, but I snuck away."

"Snuck away? Wha...but...wh-what for?"

"Um, well..."

When I thought over what I was planning to say, however, I started to get the feeling that maybe it was actually really embarrassing.

"Miki-san...?"

Eh, screw it. "I just wanted to say thank you."

"For what?" He tilted his head at me.

"Remember yesterday, backstage, when you...g-grabbed my hand? Well, it really helped me calm down. I mean, obviously I still screwed up right at the end, but I'm still really grateful to you, so... thanks."

For some reason, I could still remember how his hand felt against mine. Anyway, I had accomplished my mission, and now it was time for both of us to giggle bashfully...or so I thought. But Kyou-kun's reaction was one I hadn't anticipated. Not only did he continue to tilt his head at me, but I could practically see a giant question mark floating over his head... Then his cheeks flushed red, and he started shaking his head vigorously.

"No, I...I never grabbed your hand! I didn't do it! I swear!"

"What? Yes, you did! Remember? You were standing right next to me! You grabbed my hand and told me it was gonna be okay!"

"That first part wasn't me! I only did the second part!"

Then he told me something I never would have imagined.

"Sensei said 'Even when you're backstage, you're still acting.' Then she told me if I ever got nervous, 'Just clap yourself on the shoulder and tell yourself it'll be okay. Make it sound convincing, like you're reciting a line from the play.' So yeah, I did. But I swear, I didn't grab your hand, honest!"

...Oh.

Now I understood why she didn't tell us about the blackout curtains...why she made me touch Kyou-kun's hand in advance... and quite possibly why she told me she was glad I was around. It all vaguely made sense, and then out of nowhere, I was struck with the strangest feeling. Something I hadn't felt in a long time: the shame of having an emotional reaction to what was actually a misunderstanding.

"Well, uh...either way, you still really helped me feel better, so thank you anyway sorry I gotta go now but Zuka's exhibit is closing soon so you should probably head over there okay cool see you later!" I blurted out in a single breath. Then I spun on my heel. For some reason my face was burning hot, and I didn't want him to see it.

Sorry, Kyou-kun. You did nothing wrong, honest.

Starting now, my first order of business was to find Looney.

I kept waiting right up until the cast party, but in the end, I never did find an opportunity to talk to Looney one-on-one. Thus, I was forced to wait until afterwards, when we were on our way home. After I invited myself over to her house, we were about halfway there when I finally broached the subject.

"Ugh," she muttered. "I told him to make it sound convincing."

"So you were trying to prank me?!"

"Cat's out of the bag, I guess. I admit it—I was the one who grabbed your hand."

"What? But it would've been your right hand, and it wasn't all stiff like yours!"

"Like I said, I've had to practice the basics all over again."

She held out her right hand, and sure enough, it felt identical to the hand that had grabbed mine backstage.

"Since Kyou is a lefty, I've had to switch hands in order to be able to teach him. And since we both started practicing around the same time, our right hands are at about the same level."

"No kidding... Wait, but why would you do that? Are you trying to help Kyou-kun get over his fear of me?"

"Yeah, something like that," she nodded, her expression blank.

"Huh? Then why not make him grab my hand himself?"

"Because he'd derail the whole play."

"What? I don't get it."

I blinked at her. She grinned.

"I can't really explain it, but...I'm a sucker for a love story."

"Huh...? Oh, that reminds me, actually! Looney, have you been going braless in order to rub your stupid boobs on Zuka?!"

She stared at me wide-eyed for a moment. Then the realization dawned on her, and she burst out laughing.

"No, the braless thing was just a red herring. And the boob-rubbing was because...well...I try to keep all my bases covered, you know?" she declared triumphantly.

I tried to parse the meaning behind this, but couldn't. *Eh, forget it.* She was just a lunatic anyway. Nine times out of ten, trying to understand her would only give you a migraine. Then I remembered something else.

"That reminds me—I've decided to major in literature," I said. "I know it won't be easy to get a job, but I'll just have to cross that bridge when I come to it."

"Is that what you want to do when you grow up?"

"Yeah. I just really love classical studies."

Talking about the things I loved always put a smile on my face. Looney didn't smile with me, but she listened intently and nodded.

"Then I think you should go for it. Life's too short to be able to fit in every single thing you want to try, so there's no sense in wasting time doing stuff you hate."

It was a cool line that made her sound wise beyond her years. And in that moment, I think I finally realized why Looney

seemed so different from everyone else.

“You were the real superhero all along, weren’t you?”

It was a statement so out of left field, I must have sounded like a lunatic myself. And yet she didn’t bat an eyelash. All she said in response was, “No. That’s you, Miki-chan.”

As with every other day, her beam was spinning endlessly... but today, it reminded me of a transformation belt.

I 1 HAVE 2 A 3 SECRET 4

LOOKING AT THE HEARTBEATS of the other students walking through the airport in their school-sanctioned coats, I realized their pulses were all racing. *Ah, of course.* It was proof of just how excited they were for this field trip.

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. I could see each beat in numerical format. As for my own heartbeat, it continued to maintain its usual steady pace. No matter how happy I was or how much fun I was having, *my* heart never raced. After years of being able to monitor everyone's pulses, including my own, this was the result. I had trained myself to stay composed.

Some would call this a good thing, but they would be wrong. I was just a cold, unfeeling person. Sure, it was an uncharitable mindset, but at the same time, it showed just how firmly I believed myself to be a special snowflake who was different from everyone else.

First thing in the morning and I had already hit the self-loathing stage.

When I arrived at the airport terminal where we were all set to meet up, I immediately spotted one of my classmates staring into space. Reluctantly, I forced myself to strike up a conversation.

"Good morning. How are you feeling today, my prince?"

"...Oh, hey, Looney. I'm nobody's prince, but, uh...I daresay I am in good humor this day...?"

"Glad to hear it."

As I spoke, I took half a step closer and brushed my arm against his—a tiny gesture, to be sure, but I was using the shampoo he had mentioned liking, and I wanted him to smell it. Furthermore, I knew men liked short girls, so I made sure to emphasize our height difference while I was at it.

Alas, as usual, it had seemingly no effect. My prince maintained a level head at all times. And when I looked at the four-beat rhythm floating at his chest, I once again thought to myself:

I really can't stand that about you.

Sure, I didn't get excited over field trips, but even I had a hierarchy of people I preferred over others. And as it happened, he was the classmate I hated most.

"Zuka." The popular kid.

To be clear, I didn't hate him because he was tall or handsome or good at sports. I hated him because his heartbeat resembled mine. His true colors were a secret only I knew.

No matter how excited he acted, how happy he sounded, his heart never wavered for anything except exercise and athletic reflexes. On the inside, he was a solid block of ice, just like me. And that was the sort of person I could never like.

So I unbuttoned the front of his peacoat and plunged my hand inside. I knew this probably wouldn't have any effect on him either, but I figured there was no harm in trying anyway. He didn't bother to stop me—just watched.

"The heck are you doing, Looney?"

"I'm cold."

Sure enough, even if I openly acted like a clingy girlfriend, his heart never missed a beat. Next, I shifted my position into more of a hug. Again, I had figured nothing would happen, but to my surprise, there actually was a palpable effect this time.

Not on him, but on me.

There was a tiny jingling sound, and when I heard it, my heart fluttered. Then, when I recognized it, I reflexively moved away from him. He cocked his head at me, and I felt my heart pound...but then it quickly went back to normal. So I donned my most surprised face and decided to gauge his reaction. "Is that a bell I hear?"

At this, something happened that was equally as rare as my heart racing: *his* heart raced. In other words, the bell in his pocket had to carry some deeper meaning to him. I decided to wheedle it out of him.

"Why do you have a bell?"

"Eh...uh, well..."

I had hoped he might let something slip, but his guard was up, and he didn't finish the sentence.

"It's not for Miki-chan, is it?" I pressed.

I figured if I name-dropped her, I could gauge his reaction regarding her specifically. But his heart didn't waver any further. Instead, he glanced behind me and grinned.

"Uhh, it's a secret. Anyway, look behind you."

A secret? A SECRET? Wait, behind me?

"Gooooood *morning*, Looney! Wait, what's going on? Why are you sad? C'mon, we're going to Okinawa!"

Someone jumped onto me from behind, knocking all my questions up in the air. Once I was finally freed from her tight grip, I turned around. There stood my beloved friend, the only person crazy enough to wear summer clothes to the airport in February, when everyone else was bundled up in scarves and woolly hats.

"Good morning, Miki-chan. Flip-flops in the middle of winter, I see. Truly the cutting edge of fashion."

"Oh, c'mon! I'm telling you, we're not going to need our stupid scarves when we get there! We're going to the *tropics*!"

As she gleefully shook me by the shoulders, I could see that her heart was racing faster than anyone else here. That alone was enough to put a smile on my face.

I had a hierarchy of people I preferred over others, and Miki-chan was at the top. She was dense, thoughtless, narrow-minded—if she heard me describing her this way, she'd probably kick me—but above all, she was a good person who was capable of reacting on an emotional level. Unlike me.

But although I knew I could never be like her, it didn't stop me from dreaming.

"It's okay, Miki-chan. I love you anyway."

"Where did *that* come from?! Ha *ha*! Well, thanks. Oh, good morning!"

She spotted another friend about fifty yards away and ran over to her. It was Miyazato-chan, who flinched and then smiled

softly when she saw Miki-chan barreling toward her. It was then that I remembered to collect my questions out of the air and put them back in my head—but when I turned back, I found Mr. Popular in the middle of a conversation with some other classmate.

And so I was forced to board the plane feeling even more frustrated with him than I normally was.

Somewhere out there, there's this asshole named God who gets to decide the compatibility of two given people. Most of the time, it's based on appearance, or relative position, or the way that they met, or sometimes it's something even more important. And for the most part, people just accept it—a subconscious choice, but a fatal error nonetheless.

Height. Popularity. How long they've known each other. Number of friends. These are the sorts of inconsequential things people use to determine their entire relationships with each other. But I didn't want my beloved Miki-chan to end up like that. Speaking as someone who spent her whole life overthinking things to an obnoxious degree, I wanted to believe that the power of love could supersede all those other things.

And so I had spent the past few months attempting to play Cupid for one particular boy. Who was his target, you ask? Why, none other than my dear friend Miki-chan. Rest assured, his was no fleeting fancy.

At first I decided to simply watch over them as a third party while ensuring that no *unwanted pests* got in the way. Every now and then I'd tell other people things that Miki-chan had told me to make sure he found out about it, but that was the most I ever did. Problem was, that didn't lead to any progress.

Next, I took a more active supporting role, creating situations where they'd end up alone together. Cliché, I know. But surprisingly, that didn't result in progress, either—and at the rate they were headed, I knew Miki-chan was probably going to default to ending up in a relationship with my prince, since they'd known each other for so long. Therefore, as someone who liked to keep all her bases covered, I decided to knock him out of the running.

But how? Well, the easiest way would be to take him off the market myself. In other words, I needed to seduce him.

So I tried all sorts of things. I found out what hairstyle his ex-girlfriend used to have and tried to imitate it, I pressed my chest against him, I ate the same food as him, and so on. And while nothing seemed to be working thus far, I wasn't planning on letting up during this field trip...but now the circumstances had changed. The item in his possession—the bell—had complicated things.

Allow me to explain, since I imagine its special significance is unique to our community. You see, our school had one of those sickeningly trite romantic superstitions: *If you give a bell to someone during a field trip, you'll be together forever.* I'll spare you the lore behind it, since it doesn't really matter how this particular urban legend came to be. Also of unimportance: whether or not it was actually true. All you need to know is that to us, giving someone a bell was tantamount to a love confession. And my prince had a bell in his pocket.

Either someone had asked him out, or he was planning on asking someone himself. Not only that, but when I asked him about it, he saw Miki-chan coming and changed the subject. If he had merely received it from some girl in a different class, I could let it slide, but unfortunately, chances were high this had something to do with Miki-chan. And that was a problem.

Naturally, I couldn't risk making a scene about it. Doing so would only make the two of them more conscious of each other, which would fan the flames of their romance, and I couldn't have that. I would never permit someone as cold and unfeeling as *him* to steal Miki-chan's passionate heart. So I waited until he was busy chatting with another guy on the track team and then made my move.

"Did you know my prince got a bell from someone?" I asked, putting an arm around Kyou's shoulders without warning as we walked through Okinawa Peace Memorial Park. He flinched, and his heart rate spiked.

"Jeez, you scared me! You mean Zuka? I hadn't heard about it, but I'm not surprised, I guess."

"From Miki-chan."

At this, his pulse skyrocketed full-throttle, like someone had just set off a bomb.

"Just kidding. But it could happen, you know."

"Oh. Yeah. Gotcha. Cool."

To this day, Kyou had never outright admitted his feelings for her, but my superpower made it crystal clear regardless. I liked how hard his heart pumped for her.

"Wh-what about you, Sensei? Are you gonna give a bell to anyone?"

I was only his "sensei" when it came to guitar, but the nickname amused me, so I had made it permanent.

"Maybe. Did *you* bring a bell?"

"Uh...no..."

"As your sensei, I hereby command you to buy a bell and give it to Miki-chan during the field trip."

Again, his pulse quickened and strengthened. He must have envisioned himself confessing to her. But if his imagination alone was enough to make his heart pound at full speed, then what would happen during the actual confession? Would he pass out? Even then, I still wanted him to try.

Knowing Miki-chan, once our third year of high school rolled around, she would start seriously dedicating herself to her studies. She had the tendency to hyper-focus on whatever was right in front of her, which meant she was able to shut out distractions when necessary. This, however, was a double-edged sword. Kyou needed to give her a token of his affection while he still had time.

"Don't worry. With Miki-chan, you just gotta go for it. It'll work out."

It really was just that easy, too. Unlike me, she was a warmhearted person who responded well to passionate emotions. Of course, if Kyou was the kind of guy who would force his feelings on her with no regard for her own, then make no mistake, I would sink him in the Pacific Ocean. But Kyou was the type who was

quick to back down, so he needed a fair amount of firm pushing to get him going, like so.

"Miki-chan! Come quick! It's Kyou!" I called to her in a loud voice.

Kyou fixed me with a dead-eyed stare as she jogged over.

"What's going on? What about Kyou?" she asked.

"He has a c...question for you about classical studies. Anyway, I gotta go."

Shooting Kyou a threatening wink, I left them alone together.

I was willing to startle people on purpose whenever necessary to achieve my goals. When their heart rate spiked, their composure wavered, and sometimes humans were better off without the icy hand of rationality holding them back. In Kyou's case, he needed to fly by the seat of his pants if he wanted to get anywhere at all.

So I walked up to the group of girls Miki-chan had stepped away from, said something loony, and added myself to the fray.

It was my beloved Miki-chan who first came up with the nickname Looney.

Growing up with this superpower, I quickly learned how to fluster people. I wanted to be the sort of person who left an impact on others—it gave me a token amount of self-esteem. And after persistently making people's hearts pound for long enough, I suddenly ended up with a new name one day: Looney, as in *lunatic*. Ironically, I wore this name like a badge of honor. At the same time, I didn't want people finding out about the real me.

"Looney" had its uses, after all. Certain people were allowed to get away with things others couldn't, depending on their personality. So if people thought I was crazy, then no matter what I did to them, they would simply shrug it off. And I wanted to take full advantage of the role I was given to play.

"It's time for everybody to confess those mushy feelings!"

"Pipe down, Kuroda!"

Night one at the hotel, during dinner. As the teacher shouted at me, I surveyed the heart rates of everyone in the room. At the word *confess*, some stayed the same, but others beat a little faster. Naturally, I focused my attention on all the fastest ones. Had they already made their move, or were they waiting for the perfect timing? Some were probably scared stiff simply at the thought of it, like Kyou, but if you asked me—eh, forget it.

From the looks of things, neither Miki-chan nor Miyazato-chan had much of a reaction to my declaration. And none of the girls who were close with my prince had a spike in their pulses, either—the ones I knew about, at least. Was this confirmation that he was planning to give it to someone? Now that I thought about it, the average person probably wouldn't confess their feelings *before* the trip...

Meanwhile, the jerk in question carried on eating his deep-fried shrimp like he hadn't even noticed. Then he saw me looking and grinned at me. It pissed me off, though I didn't let it show.

Ultimately, nothing happened during the first night, as far as I knew. More accurately, the pillow I threw at Miki-chan ended up triggering a massive pillow fight across the entire room, and by the time it came to an end, everyone was so exhausted that we all went straight to bed. As it turned out, the slightest actions could incite wars, bringing needless fatigue to the people. Very educational.

Before I knew it, I was the only one still awake that night.

Every now and then, my brain would spend the night thinking instead of sleeping. This was the reason people often complained about how "spacey" I seemed, and tonight was one of those nights. So I tossed and turned for a while, got up and crawled under the covers with Miki-chan for a while, drank from my bottle of tea for a while... Then eventually I ran out of tea, so I decided to go down to the vending machine on the first floor and buy another. Perhaps it would make a nice change of pace.

They'd assigned five students to each room. Once I checked everyone else's rhythmic heartbeats, I stepped out into the darkened hall. We were located on the fifth floor; the teachers' rooms were on the fourth floor, and the boys' rooms were on the

third. As I walked through the darkness to the elevators, I spotted two teachers in the process of trading places for guard duty.

"I can't sleep, so I'm going to go buy a drink," I explained honestly, then stepped onto the elevator and pressed the button for the ground floor. Then I let out a breath.

A short while later, the elevator came to a stop; I figured I'd arrived at the first floor, so I started to leave but ended up walking face-first into a wall of muscle.

"Oh, sorry, Looney."

I looked up to find my prince standing there, dressed in a tracksuit. Then I looked at the indicator for the current floor: 3. Rolling my eyes internally, I took a step back.

"You know this is heading *down*, right? Aren't you going up to have your way with the girls?" I asked, half-joking, half-probing.

"No! I'm not! I'm thirsty, so I'm gonna buy a drink. What about you?"

"Well, you see, my dear prince, I was going to go have my way with the boys until *you* showed up."

"Seriously, what's with this 'my prince' crap?"

It wasn't even that funny, and yet he donned a soft smile at the exact moment the elevator doors slid open to reveal the first floor. In the lobby, where the vending machines were located, I could see a group of teachers chatting. Naturally, I recognized all of them. When they saw the two of us walk out together, the adults all got suspicious, and I didn't want to have to deal with it, so I made the first move.

"We just finished *working up a sweat*, and now we need to step outside to cool down, if you know what I mean."

"We bumped into each other in the elevator, that's all," my prince clarified, once the teachers started laughing.

I pulled out my wallet and then headed for the vending machines. "Quit messing around and hurry back to your room," my class advisor called after me.

Newly purchased tea bottle in hand, I turned back to find my prince getting harangued by his club supervisor. Without hesitation, I moved to leave him behind, but then he caught up to me.

"What happened to you buying a drink?"

"Oh, right."

It wasn't like him to be so forgetful. That was Miki-chan's job, not his.

He jogged off and bought a bottle of tea, plus a can of coffee. Evidently, he wasn't planning on sleeping anytime soon. Meanwhile, the elevator went back up to the fifth floor without me.

"Right, so, about the bell, uh...it's really nothing," he said out of nowhere, while I was standing there waiting for him in silence.

I wasn't expecting him to bring it back up, so I looked at him in mild surprise.

"Nice try. It's never 'nothing' with you."

He laughed. Not his cheerful, charming sort of laugh, but an awkward one, and I contemplated the meaning behind the look on his face.

"Seriously, Looney, it's nothing you gotta worry about, so like..."

"So what?"

"So quit digging around and just have *fun*, okay? What's with that comment you made at dinner?"

This was what I couldn't stand about him. To conceal my displeasure, I boarded the elevator as soon as it arrived back at the first floor.

"I mean, if *you're* planning on asking somebody out, then that's a different story."

"My heart is wholly dedicated to you, my prince. That's why I'm terrified you're going to give that bell to someone else."

"Ha ha ha! Thanks. But for real, there's nothing you need to worry about."

The elevator came to a stop. Third floor.

"Okay, well, see you tomorrow. Have a good night." He waved goodbye.

"I will," I replied.

But judging from the sound of my voice, one thing was for sure: I wasn't going to get any sleep tonight.

In the end, I didn't fall asleep until early the next morning. I laid there on my side and listened to music as I watched the clock tick; the last thing I remembered was seeing the hour hand between 4 and 5. Then Miki-chan woke me up at 6:30, wearing her cute little PJs. I pretended to be half-asleep so I could wrap my arms around her and push her down to the ground; the punch I received in return helped wake me up. Then we ate breakfast, filed onto the bus, arrived at the beach, and boarded a boat, all before noon.

While we were on the boat, while we were walking along the beach, while we were enjoying the Okinawan folk songs and plenty of other interesting sights and sounds, my mind kept drifting back to last night.

Why did he go out of his way to say that? His heart rate was steady the entire time, just like always, so maybe it sincerely wasn't a big deal to him. But even then, why tell *me*? Nine times out of ten, people said "There's nothing you need to worry about" when what they meant was "I don't *want* you to worry about it." But now that I thought about it, when I first asked him about it that morning, his heart rate fluctuated... Did that mean he simply didn't *want* me worrying about it? This brought me back to my original question: who was tied to his bell?

"You're zoning out again. Are you sleepy? Because I sure am," my prince yawned beside me.

It was the afternoon of the second day. We had just finished eating lunch, and now we were at the aquarium. My prince and I were standing side by side, just the two of us, looking at the fish tanks. We were *supposed* to stay with our assigned groups, but

Miyazato-chan and I had worked together to separate him and Kyou. Now Kyou and Miki-chan were standing a short distance away, talking and looking at the fish.

Nice. Enjoy your little aquarium date. Heck, give her a bell while you're at it. But as far as I could see, that didn't seem to be happening. So I waited until Miyazato-chan left to go to the restroom and then struck up a conversation with my prince.

"Yeah, uh, something you said kept me up all night. Look..." I pouted my lips as though I were genuinely bothered by it. Then I shot a furtive glance at him and hung my head. "Are you planning to...give it...to someone?"

He shook his head like he wasn't even paying attention to my performance.

"Like I said, it's nothing you gotta..."

He stopped short. I followed the direction of his gaze to find Miyazato-chan on her way back from the restroom. She was wearing a white shirt and blue skirt—had she given her outfit a nautical theme on purpose? Either way, it complemented her short stature.

"What's wrong? Do I have a stain somewhere?" Miyazato-chan looked down at herself and then started touching her face.

My prince smiled amiably. "No, no. I was just thinking—your outfit reminds me of shaved ice. Doesn't it, Looney?"

"...Oh, yes. Downright delicious. I could gobble you up."

Then she laughed, and I found myself grateful that she had opened up to us. She was a good girl, and I liked her a great deal. Unlike me, she didn't disguise herself as someone else. And if my prince didn't want Miyazato-chan knowing about his bell, then he was out of his mind to try to pretend it was "nothing."

Was she who he was planning to give it to? They were both in the same group during the Culture Festival, so they *did* seem to be more friendly these days. Could I get him to spill the beans somehow? Generally, I tried to do whatever I could, because it was the things I *didn't* do that I usually ended up regretting. And anything I could get out of him would be a net positive.

As we walked along the designated route, we came upon a giant fish tank. Up ahead, Miki-chan was shrieking about how “awesome” it was. As for me, I had decided to make some comment to my prince about how this aquarium was “beautiful” and/or “the perfect place for a date.”

“You know—”

“Looney! Look! Isn’t it incredible?!”

Unfortunately, Miki-chan’s excitement foiled this plan. She ran over, grabbed me by the arm, and dragged me away. I didn’t even need to look at her chest to know that her heart was racing; I could feel it through her skin. Truth be told, she was hurting me a tiny bit. But she was so happy, I couldn’t bring myself to stop her. And naturally, I wasn’t going to prioritize my conversation with my prince, either.

The moment I actively chose to go with Miki-chan, I caught a glimpse of him smiling in amusement.

“That. Was. AMAZING!”

That night, Miki-chan continued to gush and swoon about the aquarium like a little kid at Christmas. It was adorable. Once she started raving, no one could stop her. That said, someone like Kyou probably could have listened to her for hours without ever getting tired. I certainly could have.

“Man... Maybe I should be a teacher when I grow up...”

“Not an aquarium attendant?” my prince retorted.

“No! I mean, the teachers get to come here every year!” she argued, pointing at him with her chopsticks. Her table manners left something to be desired.

“That’s the dumbest reason I’ve ever heard. Classic Mickey.”

Then she dropped a karate chop on his shoulder.

Fortunately, I was relieved to see that Kyou was smart enough to suspect there was something more to this interaction beyond simple frustration. But at the same time, his heart rate

pissed me off. If he was so nervous about it, then why didn't he take immediate action? If *I* were in Kyou's shoes...

But perhaps all of my meddling and projecting had earned me some bad karma.

After dinner, I took a shower and then looked over the schedule for tomorrow. Then my fellow roommates started talking about boys, so I decided to do some more meddling by promoting Kyou as much as possible. But that was when the spotlight turned to me.

"Looney, I never hear you talk about guys at all. Are you planning to give a bell to anyone?" asked one of the...ahem...more experienced girls in our class. She wasn't just asking to be polite, either; I could tell from the look on her face that she was genuinely curious. Normally she was a pretty level-headed person, but for some reason her heart was beating a little faster... Then I looked around and realized this applied to Miki-chan and Miyazato-chan, too. Maybe it was normal for your pulse to quicken during a field trip at night. Maybe I was the weird one.

But since they were all kind enough to pay any attention to a total snoozefest like me, I decided to reward them with an honest answer.

"Nah, I'm not interested. Solitude breeds creativity, you know. Heh heh heh... I can't have any men getting in the way."

I didn't know how they'd chosen to interpret this, but either way, they laughed. That said, although this was generally how I dodged most questions, tonight it didn't quite work.

"But what about Zuka-kun? You keep hanging all over him and calling him your 'prince,' right?"

Interesting. I guess we're really going there. Still, I had no reason to panic. I had already anticipated this question, and as such, I had prepared a few different answers. Which one fit the mood best? I paused to think about it—but then, surprisingly, Miyazato-chan vouched for me.

"Yeah... I was totally shocked at first. But the more I watched, the more I realized you're just doing it for the laughs."

It was a good answer, mostly because I was able to shrug the whole thing off with a simple "Yeah, something like that" without actually admitting to anything myself. That way I could deny any romantic implications while still leaving *something* unsaid.

"Aww, is that it?"

The other girls sighed, and Miki-chan laughed out loud. "Ha ha! Gimme a break! I can't even imagine Looney and Zuka together. If I tried, I'd probably bust a gut laughing!"

Chuckling, she flopped down onto her futon. Then, as I watched, she suddenly fell silent, staring up at the ceiling, her lips still curled in a smile.

"But I wouldn't be surprised if you got a bell from someone."

"Yaaaay... I would love that..."

"Can you at least *try* to sound like you mean it? Sheesh!" She rolled over to look at me. "I wonder what type of guy you'd be into...or if there even *is* such a type," she muttered in her usual tone of voice, like she wasn't thinking about it too hard.

"Who knows... Maybe there is, maybe there isn't."

For a moment, I struggled to answer. I couldn't play it cool like usual. Why? Because my heart had fluttered, and it startled me. It had been a long, long time since something like this actually got me flustered... It was so unusual, it made me queasy.

"I'm gonna go buy a drink. Oh, and if anyone wants to tail me so they can have their way with me in the dark, I'm cool with it. Wait—Miki-chan, what's with that look? Are you gonna go for it? Eeeee!"

"Will you shut up and get going?!" my beloved Miki-chan snapped back at me, just as expected.

I walked out of the room and into the hall. As I took deep breaths, my heart rate quickly returned to normal, and the nausea went away. But since I was so sleep-deprived, I couldn't help but stagger slightly. Hopefully tonight I would fall asleep quickly.

But I was foolish to hope for that, because I didn't sleep a wink. Instead, I listened to Miki-chan snoring softly all night long.

On the third day, the sun's rays were overpowering. We were still in February, and yet it had me wishing I wasn't wearing long sleeves. Great weather, though. No wonder Okinawa was said to have the longest life expectancy in the nation.

Today was a mostly educational day. We were doing fieldwork to learn about the military bases and the general history of Okinawa as a prefecture. A deeply interesting itinerary, to be sure, but unfortunately a problem had arisen. One to do with my health.

Normally I could handle a fair amount of sleep deprivation just fine, since I only ever had to sit at my desk. Then I would go home, pass out, and rise like a zombie just in time for dinner. I was never the energetic type to begin with. Maybe God took my physical stamina in exchange for this superpower when I was born.

Then I guess He turned around and gave it to my prince instead, because the guy was practically a bundle of energy, despite his claims that he didn't get much sleep. His heart was beating at its usual steady rate, too. But mine was beating a little faster than normal—from the sleep deprivation, probably.

"You only have two and a half days left," I threatened Kyou as we boarded the bus that morning. Then I sat next to my prince, hoping to maybe rest against his shoulder so I could preserve some of my energy. But a few seconds after the bus took off, he turned to me and whispered:

"Look, Looney, I'm sorry, but could you drop the joke now?"

I could understand where he was coming from and why he felt the need to whisper, but I couldn't nod along or else I'd be admitting the whole thing was just a joke. So instead, I played dumb.

"What joke?"

He smiled stiffly. This I could accept. I didn't mind if he wanted to believe it was all just fun and games on my part, but I at least wanted to leave some room for ambiguity.

"No more touchy-feely, no more 'my prince.' It's funny and all, but c'mon—you know you'd rather be having fun with Mickey."

Hmmmm.

Well, frankly speaking, I was more than happy to comply with his request. After all, I wasn't sure I would have enough energy to keep up with him today. Maybe I'd be better off taking it easy, hanging with someone like Miyazato-chan. But naturally, I couldn't possibly agree just like that. With an impish grin on my face, I mouthed the words: *What's with the bell?*

He must have anticipated that I'd make this my bargaining chip, because his heart rate didn't waver even a fraction. He donned another stiff smile and shook his head.

I knew I was running low on energy, and I knew he wouldn't like what I was about to do. But I was fueled purely by disgust, and so I committed myself to a single course of action. Then I relaxed my body and leaned against him, resting my head on his shoulder.

"Let's get cozy, my prince."

"Oh, good grief..."

He was well within his rights to get angry with me, but instead, he simply smiled wryly. He was too much of a good person—on the outside, at least. But I was perfectly content to take advantage of that, because he was a dirtbag. On the inside, at least.

I closed my eyes. If this were any other day, would I have still refused to concede? Probably not. Maybe the sleep deprivation was making me emotional, or maybe it had something to do with last night.

And so I decided to stand my ground and fight my prince.

Unsurprisingly, a large part of our fieldwork involved walking. A lot of walking.

"Don't push yourself, Looney."

"I...I'm okay..."

Despite having told me just this morning to stop being "touchy-feely," my prince offered me his hand at every steep incline or set of stairs. After so much exercise, even my superpower couldn't keep my heart rate in check...and yet his was barely elevated, like he'd just danced a slow waltz or two. *How is he always like this?*

With his assistance and the kind support of Miki-chan and my other friends, I survived the morning itinerary. At lunch, I sat with my prince. Normally, I'd be considerate enough to let him do his own thing for a while, but like I said, I had chosen to stand my ground and fight him. So instead, I hand-fed him some of my food and then tried to get him to feed me in return. Miki-chan found it hilarious, but Miyazato-chan looked conflicted. Clearly, she was the most sensible person among us.

Incidentally, I only ended up eating twenty percent of my lunch due to fatigue. Then I gave the rest to my prince.

Fortunately, the afternoon itinerary was much easier: after a tour of the local military base and the art museum, we would be treated to a mini-concert. A good student shouldn't complain about the "difficulty" of a field trip, but right now, it mattered.

During the post-lunch bathroom break, I was contemplating buying a sports drink when someone tapped me on the shoulder from behind. I turned to find Miyazato-chan standing there in the lobby with me, her heart beating fast. The rest of our group was nowhere to be seen. *What's wrong?* I cocked my head at her inquisitively.

It was then that I learned what her conflicted expression was all about.

"Look, um, th-this might be none of my business, but...um...I think you should probably stop joking around with Zuka-kun."

"Oh dear. Does my prince seem bothered by it?"

"Not exactly, but...I mean, you don't seem to be having fun doing it..."

Her words seemed to cut right through me, and while normally I could have kept a straight face, I was just so exhausted, and so for a split-second—I swear, it was barely an instant—I felt the muscles in my face shift slightly. And since Miyazato-chan was highly observant about these sorts of things, she must have noticed. She took a step back.

Having realized my folly, I forced a laugh. "Don't be silly. Of course I'm having fun."

But it was too late—she was still looking at me funny. Immediately I knew I had screwed up.

Truth be told, I had known—or at least, sensed—for a while now that Miyazato-chan was ever so slightly afraid of me. Whether it was because I confused her or because she could tell I was dead on the inside, I wasn't sure, but either way, her fear was completely valid. And yet, this was my first time witnessing said fear right in front of me, and it was actually a fairly painful experience. If we weren't in public right now, I probably would have crumpled to the floor.

So I decided to apologize. After all, she cared about me and my prince so much that she summoned her courage and made her feelings known, and yet *that* was the response I gave? But at the same time, if I said I was sorry, it felt like I would be admitting that I didn't have feelings, and if I did that, I was pretty sure she would hate me for real. And so the apology died on my tongue.

Something new to add to the list of reasons why I hated myself.

"Looney? Elle? What's going on? Some kind of fake smile competition?"

Just then, Miki-chan returned from the bathroom. This either resolved the situation or made things a hundred times worse—I couldn't tell, because we spent the rest of the night oddly distant from each other due to the misunderstanding I wasn't able to clear up. Then again, it wasn't a "misunderstanding" at all. Whatever she felt about me, she was probably right.

Now that it was too late to back out, I spent the rest of the field trip tagging along with my prince and standing my ground. What was I trying to achieve? Even I wasn't sure anymore. But after I thought about it, I decided it was the only way to express myself.

All this time, I had made a concerted effort to be Looney. To get everyone to like me. I couldn't let myself be the person I really was.

I need to work harder. I need to work harder, I repeated to myself silently, probably because I was so tired—both physically and mentally. Miyazato-chan had drained the last drop right out of me.

Ugh, there I go again, blaming other people when it's really all my fault.

And naturally, everything that happened afterwards was all my fault, too.

After we finished our military base tour, art museum trip, and mini-concert showcase, we all headed back to the hotel. There was still time before dinner, so while the group leaders all needed to go collect tomorrow's schedules, the rest of the students chose to spend this time resting in their rooms. Each group consisted of five or six people; my prince was our designated group leader. He would let us know about tomorrow's schedule over dinner.

In our room, the girl who had asked me about boys last night was presently nowhere to be seen, as she was the leader of a different group. So it was just the five of us, and Miki-chan was having fun gushing with everyone about all the great places we'd explored today. I listened quietly to their conversation for a while, then told them I was going to go buy a drink and excused myself from the room.

For the most part, we were supposed to stay put until the group leader meeting was over, but we could go to the lower floors as long as we had a clear reason for doing so. I asked the teacher on guard duty for permission to use the stairs, since all the elevators were on lower floors. The group leader meeting had probably just ended, and now they were trying to come back up,

and the boys would need to deboard at the third floor, and it would take way too long to stand there and wait...or so I explained to the teacher, anyway. But in truth, I just wanted to be alone in a quiet place to organize my thoughts. Because I had a lot of them.

I gingerly pushed open the heavy door and entered what was probably the employee stairwell. Then, step by step, I worked my way down through the empty space—slowly, like I was trying to conceal my footsteps for some reason.

As I passed by the door to the third floor, I could hear the male students' rowdy voices. Then, as I reached the second floor, I suddenly came to a stop. This particular floor was reserved for unaffiliated hotel guests, but as far as we were told, we were the only people currently booked to stay here. Even the elevators had been set so they wouldn't stop at the second floor. In other words, the whole floor was empty.

Resigning myself to an angry scolding later, I decided to sneak onto the second floor. I took a few steps, then plopped myself down on the sofa next to the elevator doors. Not much of an adventure, but all I really wanted was to catch my breath and go back to being my usual self.

But in the end, I failed to accomplish this...and it was all my fault.

Right as I inhaled enough oxygen for a sigh—

"Could you knock it off already?"

"...Huhwha?"

I was so caught off guard, I ended up sounding every bit as loony as my nickname suggested. And that was a critical error on my part.

"You're freaking obnoxious!"

She spat the words at me so fast, I struggled to process them, and right as I finally realized who had spoken and what she had said to me, she fixed me with a sharp glare and took off like a bullet toward the stairs.

"Wait, but...wha...?"

It was so sudden, I couldn't think straight. She was my classmate—one of the girls staying in the same room as me—but she'd gone to the group leader meeting—wait, what? Then why was she here on the second floor? And why did she say that? She was mad at me, but why? Was it justified? What did I do? She seemed like she was...crying...

Evidently, I would need someone else's help to solve this mystery. When I glanced in the direction from which the girl had come, I spotted a tall figure standing there.

"Looney..."

It was...my prince. One look at him and it was as if I'd eaten the fruit of knowledge. I instantly understood what she was talking about.

Apparently, I had hurt someone yet again.

Then I heard a faint tinkle from inside his loosely clutched fist.

"Don't worry about it, Looney," he said to me yet again. But this time, he meant it in an entirely different way, because this time, he was consoling me.

So here's the rundown: The girl who yelled at me was in love with the boy I referred to as "my prince." That was why she asked me whether I was interested in anyone. At that point, I had essentially denied any interest in him. But then I spent the next day clinging to him even more, which she had possibly interpreted as an act of spite towards her. Unable to stand it any longer, she arranged to meet up with him and then gave him a bell. But it was no mere gift; she wanted an answer from him. And just as he shot her down, she encountered me right there. She must have thought to herself, *are you here to laugh at me?* Either that, or perhaps she just never liked me to begin with.

Mind you, this was simply my read on the situation, but I was pretty sure I was right. All I'd heard from my prince was that he had turned her down, but that was all I needed. "Don't worry about it"? Not possible. Was there a human alive who could hurt

someone and then continue to go about their day like it was nothing? Sure, I was cold and unfeeling, but our hearts were *built* to worry. I contemplated going straight back to our room to give her an explanation and a sincere, heartfelt apology...but then I thought better of it. Even if she said she forgave me, I was the only one who would feel better. I cursed myself for being so thoughtlessly selfish.

But if I couldn't apologize, then there was nothing else I could say to her.

When I returned to the room, she wouldn't even look at me, and as I sat there in silence, Miki-chan started teasing me about having forgotten to buy a drink, and since I naturally couldn't joke back as easily as I normally would have been able to, she got worried and asked me if I was okay. Guilt surged in my chest.

Don't worry about me—worry about her!

Obviously, I couldn't say that, but at the same time, if I acted sad, then the other girl would think that I thought *I* was the victim. Thus, I did my best to act like everything was fine.

At dinner, I barely ate. I claimed I wasn't hungry, but naturally, my friends weren't coldhearted enough to buy that excuse. My prince gave me a hard look, probably because he knew what was going on with me, but I didn't have the composure to handle it, so instead I gave him the rest of my food.

Desperately, I tried to think of a solution to this problem. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that this was really just a symptom of everything that was wrong with me, and in order to patch things up with Miyazato-chan and/or the other girl I hurt, I would need to fundamentally change who I was as a person. And *that* was not something I could feasibly accomplish over the course of a single field trip.

After dinner, we reviewed tomorrow's schedule, went back to our rooms, then headed off to the communal bath. Unsurprisingly, the other girl continued to avoid my gaze. Miyazato-chan must have been worried about my condition, because she actually spoke to me. But while her tone was casual, I could tell that she was

flustered. So, out of respect for her as my friend, I did my best to keep things casual in return.

I took off my clothes, washed my body, and then stepped into the bath. The movements came second nature to me, which was helpful since my mind was too much of a mess to function. So instead, I just went through the motions with flawless accuracy. But even *that* backfired, because the Looney everyone knew was not a robot.

"Looney, seriously, what's gotten into you?" asked Miki-chan. "You usually try to mess with me whenever I'm washing my hair."

"...Ah, well, my intent was to *betray* that expectation this time around. But if you were looking forward to it so badly, I'll be sure to go all-out tomorrow!"

It came out sounding too forced. More specifically, I was now keenly aware of just how forced *all* of my acting had been thus far. Nothing I said was ever uttered purely on a whim; I always carefully evaluated my words before they left my lips. I never spoke from the heart. My words had no soul to them.

I submerged myself right up to my nose and spoke in bubbles.

"Huh? What was that?" she asked. Knowing her, she probably didn't think too hard about anything she said. But I didn't answer, because I didn't have the courage to repeat the words: *Miki-chan, you shouldn't talk to me.*

Instead, I sank deeper.

Then I thought of something: what if I dropped out of school after this field trip was over? Surely everyone would shrug it off as more of Looney's lunacy. Then the other girl wouldn't have to see my face—she had already left the bath, so she clearly despised me. Oh, and Miyazato-chan wouldn't have to be afraid of me anymore, either... This was starting to sound like a good idea.

Alternatively, I could...

For some reason, my body was going completely out of whack. My heart was racing, and I couldn't stop crying—all because of the bathwater heating me up, probably. I pressed my

face against the edge of the tub. Then, as Miki-chan and the others were getting ready to leave, I told them I wanted to stay a little longer. Did my voice shake? Did they see the tears in my eyes? I was scared.

If only I didn't have this power to see people's heartbeats. I never asked for this. Things would be so much better if only I had the power to stop crying...or stop someone else from crying, I thought to myself like the idiot I was.

But just then, my wish came true ever so slightly, and my tears dried. Sniffing, I rose to my feet. I felt lightheaded—perhaps I'd stayed in the water a little too long. I set one foot out of the tub and onto the cold tile floor.

At first, I thought I'd slipped.

With my utter lack of athletic reflexes, I frequently fell flat on my face. I figured the same thing must have happened again. But this time, it felt different, somehow. There was no palpable feeling of my foot slipping or the floor sliding away from me. The simplest way I could possibly put it would be that it felt like the floor had vanished entirely.

I heard a girl scream. My heart was pounding in my ears a million miles a minute. I tried to summon my strength, but it was no use...and then eventually, as my mind faded, I couldn't hear anything at all.

I felt hot and weightless and sick to my stomach. Again and again, someone poured something cold into my mouth, and I swallowed it. Then they put something cold on my forehead. Unless I was imagining it.

I awoke in darkness, and for a while I couldn't tell up from down or right from left, even with my eyes open. Eventually I managed to twitch my fingers. They brushed against fabric, and I realized I was lying on a futon. From there, I discovered I could move the rest of my body, though it felt like lead. I lifted an arm and then let it fall back to the futon; I figured if someone was around, they'd hear the sound and realize I was awake. And sure enough, I was right.

"Are you awake? Can you see me?"

A dim light clicked on, and an unfamiliar woman came into view beside me. I couldn't find the energy to speak, so I just nodded instead. She told me she was a doctor. With her help, I rolled over onto my side and sipped a sports drink from a straw. It was so cold, I could practically feel it seeping into my blood vessels.

First, she told me I had passed out in the bath—a type of heatstroke, apparently. When she asked me what might have caused it, I told her I was sleep deprived, out of shape, and hadn't eaten much that day. She scolded me gently and then told me she was going to go scold my teachers for neglecting to look after me properly.

"But...it's my fault..."

At this, she scolded me all over again. Fortunately, heat syncope was relatively minor in the scope of things, and my symptoms were mild. And so she left to go report back to the teachers. Her last words to me: *Take it easy and get some rest.* Easier said than done—would I even be able to sleep?

Luckily, this turned out to be an unnecessary worry. As soon as I closed my eyes, my brain shut off, and I fell asleep.

The next day, we were scheduled to take a boat out to a remote island, but I stayed behind at the hotel with one of the teachers. During a normal field trip, I'd *never* have the chance to spend a whole day zoning out in an air-conditioned room, but here we were.

Last night when I passed out, it caused a big scandal, just as I suspected. Miki-chan was in her underwear, trying to drag my limp, naked body out into the hall, and everyone had to work together to stop her. The mental image was hilarious, but the reality of it was probably a lot more serious. Despite being told to let the teachers handle it, she was caught wandering the hall in the middle of the night. As a result, she was running on hardly any sleep today when she left the hotel.

When I ran into her this morning, I wanted to apologize for causing a scene, but I couldn't. One look at her puffy red eyes and pounding heart and I knew I had really scared her. Times like these, even I knew the right thing to say wasn't *sorry*, but *thank you*.

Alone in this quiet makeshift infirmary, I thought it all over and ultimately decided that I was being uncharacteristically irrational yesterday. And with all the health stuff piled on top of that, I ended up losing control of my heart rate. Right now, my pulse was a little faster than normal but still stable. The memory of yesterday made it start to waver again, but I could handle it. Going forward, I could make up for my mistakes.

Now that I thought about it, I was an idiot to consider dropping out of school. If I vanished at a time like this, Miyazato-chan and the other girl would both worry about me, and Miki-chan would probably show up at my house every day. I couldn't possibly force her to have to do that. Honestly, if a little heatstroke was all it took to finally get a clue, then maybe I got off lightly.

Fortunately, this morning I managed to be my usual self in front of them. I toyed with their hearts and then sent them off with a smile. Hopefully that way they'd spend the day having fun instead of worrying about me.

Now my only concern was my prince and his bell. When I initially discovered he had one, it was the morning of the first day, and no one would be stupid enough to make their move that early. Therefore, he had to be planning to confess to someone—but who? At the time, his eyes were on Miki-chan. What if he gave it to her today, while I wasn't around? What would I do then?

I thought back to the conversation I had with him yesterday. It took place immediately after he had finished rejecting someone who had feelings for him, and yet his heart rate was perfectly steady... No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't bring myself to like him. But at the same time, I only knew about his heart because of my power, so to everyone else, he was just a friendly guy. Thus, I couldn't really blame his victims for falling for his act. Instead, I wanted to keep them safe from him.

Obviously, I was aware of my hypocrisy here. After all, I was no different, trying desperately to be friends with Miki-chan and the others while hiding a darker side, and yet I was willing to absolve myself of those same crimes. But it was because of that that I dearly wanted Miki-chan to notice the pure-hearted soul who cared for her far more deeply than my prince and I did. That way she could eventually forget all about us.

Was Kyou putting himself out there today? Because tomorrow, we were scheduled to fly home.

By evening, my health had fully recovered, but I wasn't looking for excuses to needlessly expend my energy. Thus, I continued to nap in my futon—at least, until I heard the murmur of voices in the distance. Evidently the others had returned. I sat up and smoothed the wrinkles from my clothes. This quickly proved to be the right call, because I soon heard a knock at the door. I opened it to find the teacher who had spent the day looking after me. He asked me how I was doing, so I told him I was fine, and when he asked me if I was hungry, I told him I was starving—you know, in a Looney sort of way.

A short while later, my class advisor showed up and told me to wait here in this room until dinnertime, at which point I would be permitted to meet up with the others in the dining hall. "If I send you back to your room now, Miki's gonna scream her head off," he said jokingly, though I could tell he half-meant it, too.

And so, I decided to wait patiently for dinner. I folded up my futon and then sat down on the chair near the window. When I opened it, a pleasant breeze rolled in.

It was a peaceful moment in which no thinking was required—more than likely the first of its kind since this field trip began. *But peace is always temporary*, I thought to myself—I didn't want to believe this about the world in general, but when it came to my personal peace, it certainly applied. And indeed, the end came swiftly and abruptly.

There was a knock at the door.

Though it was still a bit early for dinner, I figured it was one of the teachers again, so I opened the door, completely unaware and unprepared for the face I would see on the other side—and frankly, I wasn't sure whether I managed to conceal my disgust in time.

"Hey, Looney, how you feeling?"

"Long time no see, my prince."

"Oh, come on," he laughed, just like always. Then he held up the travel guide in his hands. "This is for you. We have a lot of updates, so I wanted to let you know since I'm your group leader... or so I told the teachers, anyway. Real talk, everybody's worried sick, so I came here on their behalf to check on you. Can I come in?"

"Do you really need my permission?"

"No, but I thought I'd ask. Mickey said if I made you stand at the door for the whole conversation and you started feeling sick again, she'd kill me," he joked.

He entered the room, and I flipped the lights on. There were two chairs positioned on opposite sides of a small table, so we sat there, facing each other.

"Are you all better now?"

"Well, I'm far from one hundred percent, but I'm feeling much better now that you're here."

"You're really gonna keep up the act, even when it's just you and me? That's wild."

Chuckling, he told me all the updates that had been relayed to them today, plus all the relevant group information. Although he'd claimed it was just an excuse he'd given the teachers for coming to see me, he was responsible enough to actually follow through. That was why the others trusted him enough to let him visit me. Obviously, the teachers were bound to be nearby somewhere, but still...a guy and a girl, alone together?

"How very naughty."

"What are you talking about? Anyway, that's it for the important stuff."

"Aww, thanks, buddy! On the way home I'll buy you a popsicle."

"Dude, I'm not five! Okay, so, now for the personal stuff."

Personal stuff? I tried to think of what it could be, but before it could come to mind, he continued:

"I'm *not* planning to give the bell to Mickey."

"...Oh, you're not? What made you decide to let me know?"

"Because I figured it was on your mind."

I paused to contemplate this and then replied, "You thought I'd be worried about Miki-chan stealing your heart?"

"No," he shot back firmly.

Then he looked deep into my eyes, almost as if he was steeling himself to make the confession of a lifetime. Naturally, his heart rate was perfectly steady, like always...but what about mine?

"You don't want someone like me getting with Mickey."

"Right."

He smiled brightly.

"Because you hate me. Right?"

...I'll be honest: my heart skipped a beat. My pulse surged. What had I done to make it obvious? I pored over my memories. Was it then? Or that other time? Was it just now, when I opened the door? No...his heart rate was slow and steady. He must have suspected it for a long time. And he must be pretty confident he was right, too.

Next, I contemplated why he would say it to my face. As a warning? As a demand? As a threat? I considered all the possibilities, but none of them fit. So my first instinct was to play it off—call him "my prince" like usual. The reason I didn't, however, was because I thought about Miki-chan. Hadn't I vowed to myself that I would never outright lie to the people I considered my friends?

And so I nodded my head, willfully bringing an end to my current strategy.

"But to be clear, it's not *hate*, per se."

"So you just don't like me? Is that it?"

"Yeah, that. Bingo. Bulls-eye."

He laughed, though I wasn't sure what was so funny about me admitting that I didn't like him...so I decided to ask.

"Why are you laughing?"

Then he said something that *really* surprised me.

"I dunno, it just feels good. Feels like you're finally being honest with me."

"I'm always honest."

"Then why were you pretending to like me?"

I hesitated for a moment and then shook my head.

"Like you said, I didn't want you hooking up with my beloved Miki-chan. Thus, I tried to make you like me. But alas, I never said a single word about *me* liking *you*."

"Alas, indeed. Okay, now I get it. You're always like this, aren't you?"

I hated the way he spoke as if he knew me.

"Like what?"

"It's like...you hide the truth behind some other truth, I guess? And you're absurdly good at it, too."

"Sorry, but I think I might actually hate you now."

At this, he howled with laughter, and I thought to myself: *I think we might have a lot more in common than I ever thought possible.* That was why we understood each other...and why we hated each other. I was so sure of this, I decided to get confirmation.

"I'll bet you hate me too, don't you?"

I was expecting him to nod without missing a (heart)beat, but instead he stared back at me. "*Me?* Hate *you?* No way. I think

you're funny."

Ah. Now I get it. I nodded. I had forgotten the massive, immutable difference that prevented us from being two perfect peas in a pod. A difference that would naturally affect how we each viewed each other.

I had a special power. This wasn't a fair fight.

But despite this key difference, we still had a lot in common, obviously. We shared the same visceral emotions. Anyone would feel hurt if someone they liked didn't like them back. So it wasn't that I wanted to be honest with him—I just didn't want to have an unfair advantage.

"I'm not the funny girl you think I am."

In a sense, it was the biggest confession I'd ever made. Normally, I would have weighed the pros and cons of telling him something like that.

Maybe I hadn't fully recovered after all.

"When I make my 'funny' jokes, it's because I've carefully calculated what to say to get a laugh. And when I act in 'funny' ways, it's because I'm intentionally trying to startle people."

I had thought this explanation was pretty straightforward, but he tilted his head in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"What I'm saying is...I'm not your *lunatic*. I'm not some carefree, spontaneous, hot-blooded girl. You just think I am."

"Yeah, and I think I'm right."

"You're not. I mean, sure, I'd love to be the kind of girl who doesn't stop to weigh her options—who sees what she wants and just goes for it—but that's not who I really am. My words and actions are all chosen to...to craft the ideal me. It's not the real me at all."

Why was I telling him all this? My heart was pounding, and I was starting to think maybe the heatstroke had impacted my mental state. Why else would I spill my guts to the person I disliked most of all?

That said, at least now things were fair. To make up for me spying on his heart rate, he now knew a secret of my own. Now we were both on even ground. Now he could finally hate me. After all, I had just revealed that I had been lying to everyone right from the moment we first met...as had he.

And yet he continued to look confused.

"Isn't everybody like that?" he muttered.

Then he kept going.

"If that's the kinda person you *want* to be, then that's the kinda person you *are*. You're telling me you do all that crazy stuff *literally on purpose*, and yet you think you're *not* a lunatic? Gimme a break!"

He laughed.

"Take me, for example. I'm not the leader type, but I volunteered to do this group leader stuff, and sometimes I give people advice, because that's just the kinda guy I wanna be. Maybe it's because I'm the big brother at home."

I decided to hear him out.

"Mickey's like that too, y'know. She always talks about how she wants to be a superhero, but she's constantly screwing up, or causing drama, and sometimes she doesn't think at all. Just saying, if *she's* our hero, the whole world's totally boned. But anyway."

He beamed...and somehow, I got the sense that he was truly proud to call her a friend.

"She wants to be a hero, so she goes out of her way to visit a classmate who's been ditching school, for example. And to me, like...that literally *is* what a hero would do. Sure, she's not *naturally* heroic, but she's still freakin' badass. Oh, and don't you dare tell her I said any of this or I'll never hear the end of it."

"...Yeah, I suppose so."

"I'm tellin' you, any compliments go straight to her head."

I was agreeing with the idea that Miki-chan was a hero, not *that* part. But oh well.

"Anyway, my point is, everyone's like that to some degree. Me and Mickey, we know who we wanna be, but we suck at it. We can't keep up the charade. We slip up at the most critical times—especially me lately—but I think that's why it never gets tiring."

"....."

"You, on the other hand, are way too good at it. You know you're allowed to relax, right? If you keep forcing it, you're gonna pass out again. And in your case, based on what you just told me, I think you'd have more fun if you chilled out a little."

As I struggled to choose my words, he rose to his feet.

"Anyway..."

I saw the travel guide in his hands and realized he was apparently done talking.

"I'll see you at dinner, then."

"Is *that* why you came here?"

Surely, he understood what I was asking. And yet, he simply laughed. "Well, that, and I wanted to see what it'd be like to sneak into a girl's room."

"I beg your pardon?"

I laughed at his stupid joke before I could stop myself. *Who am I, Miki-chan?* As he went to leave, I was going to simply let him go, but then I remembered a question I had and decided to ask it.

"So what's with the bell, then?"

He came to a stop, his hand on the doorknob.

"Mmmm..." He murmured hesitantly for a moment and then looked back over his shoulder at me. "For now, let's just say it's nothing."

And with that, he walked out of the room without waiting for my response.

Normally I would have examined his pointed remarks more deeply, but today, since he'd gone to all the trouble of cheering me up, I decided not to pursue it any further.

Sometimes composure is a kindness.

The fact that I had this thought at all—and worse, that *he* inspired it—was perhaps proof that I was still sick.

On the final day of the field trip, most of our time would be spent traveling freely downtown, and then we were scheduled to return home in the afternoon. Our collective excitement had slowly morphed into sadness. Everyone's hearts were beating to a different sort of rhythm compared to when we first departed.

As for me, I had given up on clinging to my prince. Instead, I decided to indulge my desire to spend my final day having fun with Miki-chan. Besides, I found out that he had received a rather harsh lecture about sneaking into a sick girl's room without permission from a teacher, and I didn't want to get him in even more trouble.

Downtown, we were instructed to travel with our assigned groups for the most part, so we ate some sugary junk food and explored the souvenir shops.

I hadn't changed my stance on my Looney persona, but to be clear, I wasn't intentionally defying my prince's warning. That being said, I wasn't going to take it as gospel, either. But now I understood: this was who I was, and I didn't need to change it. "Looney" was the nickname Miki-chan gave me, and I was genuinely, unironically proud of it from the bottom of my heart. As for Miyazato-chan and the other girl I angered, I decided I would make it up to them bit by bit. From now on, we would be *real* friends.

At one point we stopped for lunch. Then we went back to the souvenir shop that had the best gifts and decided to split up to do some shopping. As the girls were browsing the accessories and the guys were looking at weird knickknacks, I caught Miki-chan making painfully obvious eye contact with Kyou. Curious, I watched as he walked over to us, asked to borrow Miyazato-chan, and then the two of them went off somewhere together. I'd thought maybe Miki-chan was trying to play Cupid for them again, but evidently not.

Once the two of us were alone, Miki-chan quietly took me by the hand and led me out of the store. Then she turned to face me.
What's going on?

"Here. This is for you."

Before I could take it, I realized what it was based purely on the sound it made. Sitting in her palm was a little bell decorated with a tiny seashell.

"What's that?"

"It's a bell, dummy! They say if you give one as a gift, you'll be together forever, right? And you have to be in private when you give it to the other person. But thanks to stupid Zuka, I couldn't find the right timing to give it to you... See, this is a special bell I bought yesterday."

Silently, I accepted it. I just couldn't find the words.

"What's wrong?"

"...Thank you."

"Barf! Why are you getting all mushy on me? I was so sure you'd squeal about how I'm 'in love with you' or some other nonsense. I had a comeback ready and everything!"

"I'll treasure it. I promise."

It was the honest truth. Although, to be even *more* honest, I had more to say...but instead I clutched the bell to my chest and gently suppressed it.

"Oh yeah, so what did you think of my little hint, hmm? Remember when I said you might get a bell from someone? I got you good, didn't I?"

"That was supposed to be a *hint*? Oh, good lord. You're so bad at this."

"Hey, c'mon! For the record, I gave bells to everybody else too, but *yours* is special!"

"I'm not the only one who got one? Now I'm devastated."

Honestly, I had figured it was some sort of friendship gesture, but I wanted to tease her about it just a little. After all, a

certain someone had given me permission to chill out.

Wait, but...if she gave one to everyone...

"Oh yeah, and don't worry about repaying me or anything. One-way gifts are A-OK in my book. Oh, but I did end up getting a gift in return. This one was from Kyou-kun."

She pulled a tiny bell from her pocket, and I saw her heart flutter ever so slightly.

"He said he wanted to reciprocate my gift, so he gave it to me. I know he didn't mean it in *that* way, but still, I was so nervous!"

"Wow. I'm surprised." *Well done, my pupil.*

Right as I was planning to bully him later for not reporting back to me, Miki-chan looked up at the sky and stretched her arms wide. "Man, I'm so glad I managed to give everybody their gifts! See, I gave Zuka his first, and like, we're technically friends and all, but it felt so weird, knowing he was the only person who got a bell from me..."

Indeed, I could understand where she was coming from. Anyone would have felt restless in her shoes.

Wait... He was the first?

"When exactly did you give the bell to my prince?"

"Ugh, *please* stop calling him that. Anyway, it was the first day. Super early, I know."

This brought to mind the memories of what happened at the airport...

"Are you kidding me?!"

It wasn't like me to shout—but then again, maybe it was. The words left my lips before I could stop them. *You're telling me THAT'S the answer to the mystery I spent the whole trip agonizing over?!*

Looking back, he was the one person she didn't say "good morning" to—probably because she'd already said it to him earlier that same day. And he had probably refused to explain the bell to me specifically *because* she had asked him not to spoil her

surprise. This was also probably the reason why he changed the subject when Miyazato-chan returned from the restroom at the aquarium. The more I thought about it, the more sense it made, but damn it!

"About what?"

"It's nothing. Sorry, but I can't stand your precious Zuka."

"Ha *ha*! But you were hanging all over him like a day ago! You're so weird."

Now that it all made sense, I was starting to feel really stupid for overthinking it so much. If I had to choose the moral of the story, it would be "don't miss the forest for the trees," or, in other words, "it's okay to relax."

Whatever. At least that's settled.

Or so I thought, but then Miki-chan took me even deeper down the rabbit hole.

"I gotta say, though, he can be *such* a jerk. When I tossed the bell to him at Okinawa Peace Memorial Park, he smacked it to the ground on instinct! Got a fat scratch on it and everything! I'm starting to think he and I might not be 'together forever' after all. Ha *ha*!"

"Wait, so...you *didn't* give it to him first thing in the morning?"

"Nope! We both got dropped off at the airport at the exact same time, and naturally our folks know each other, so I couldn't bear to give it to him then. Plus, a bunch of other students were already there, too. Why do you ask?"

"...No reason."

That can't be right. If Miki-chan was telling the truth, then that would mean he *did* in fact bring a bell with the intent of giving it to someone...but who?

When we stepped back into the store, we found Kyou, Miyazato-chan, and my prince happily eating homemade doughnuts.

Just then, I had an epiphany. A eureka moment, if you will.

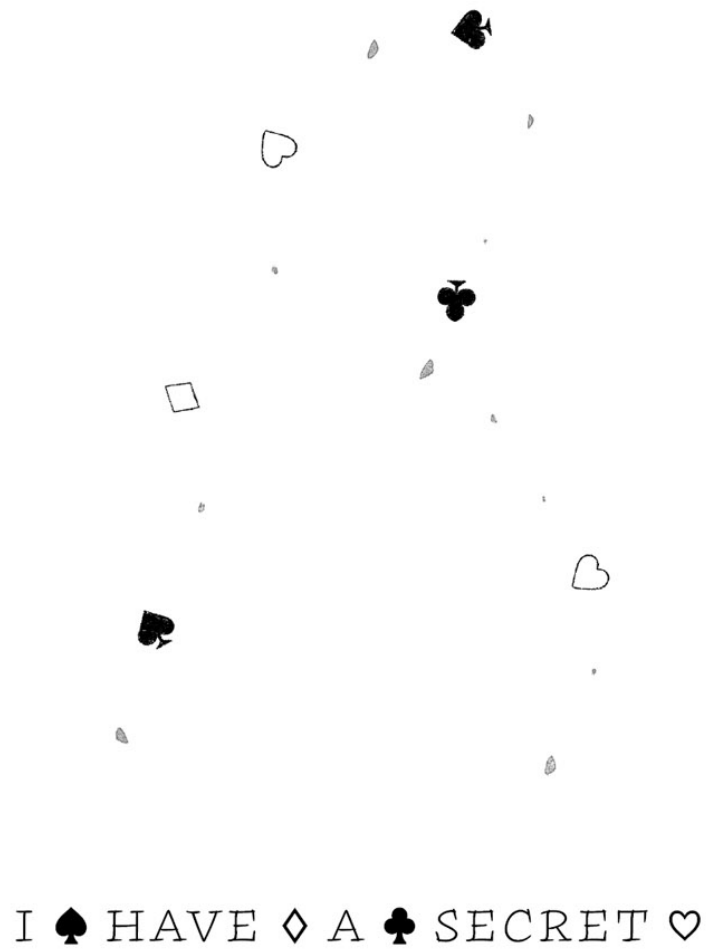
"Remind me, Miki-chan: how does my prince refer to Miyazato-chan?"

"Huh? He calls her Elle, doesn't he?"

Now I get it.

That morning, when I asked him why he had a bell, I thought he had simply stumbled over his words, but in fact, he had let something slip.

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. In that moment, as he grinned at her, his heart seemed to beat just a tiny bit faster.



I ♠ HAVE ♦ A ♣ SECRET ♥



THAT DAY, third-year classes ended before lunch in preparation for parent-teacher conferences. When I arrived at the cafeteria, I found Mickey sitting at a table with a bunch of cookies laid out in front of her. When I snuck over and stole one, I was met with a vicious gut punch.

"These aren't for *you*!"

"Well, they're good!"

A diamond floated overhead, symbolizing her anger. Meanwhile, a spade of joy rose up over the girl seated across the table: Elle. Did she make these? She smiled softly at me, but I unintentionally averted my gaze. I kept doing that lately.

"*I* didn't even get to have one yet!"

"Oh, really? My bad. They're great, though."

She threw out another punch, and I let it land so she could vent her anger. But I didn't want her to think I was being nice, so I added:

"Not like *you* could ever make these."

Another anger-diamond rose up over her head. Then a smaller one rose over Elle's; perhaps she didn't appreciate me teasing her friend. But it quickly faded—one of those so-called fleeting annoyances. Nothing to worry about.

"Rrrgh! Forget it! I'm just going to ignore you."

Mickey pressed her hands together, then picked up a cookie and took a bite. The anger-diamond faded, replaced by a large joy-spade—the largest, in fact, out of everyone currently on campus. I couldn't tell which pips were whose, but I could see their size and location across the entire school building, and Mickey's was by far the biggest. Pretty impressive, considering all it took was one measly cookie.

"*It'sh sho good!*"

"See, I told you."

"What are you still doing here? Don't you have track practice? Buzz off! Go to hell!"

"Wow! Rude! We don't have practice during parent-teacher conference week—just studying or solo laps. I was over in the library just now, but then Kyou got called in for his conference, and I was bored and hungry... Elle, was I not supposed to eat these?"

"No, it's okay. I can always make more."

"Hmph! For Elle's sake, I'm willing to forgive you. Consider yourself lucky."

"Gee, thanks. Come to think of it, Looney's conference is today too, isn't it?" I asked, dodging her snide remarks.

"Yeah, it is. Must be nice to have such perfect grades... I bet they spend the whole meeting patting her on the back," Mickey shrugged, though she didn't actually seem that jealous. Over the six years since I first met her, I'd watched her spades turn to diamonds and her diamonds turn to hearts with absolutely no grasp on how her mind worked. It was hilarious.

"Elle's got good grades too, right?" I asked, changing the topic of the conversation to the girl smiling across the table from me.

"Totally. But she had a *lot* of absences last year, so that might have impacted her report card."

Some people might have disapproved of the way Mickey showed no hesitation in broaching what might otherwise be a touchy subject, but I wasn't one of them.

"Hmmm... Can't I just say I didn't realize the weekend was over?" Elle joked.

"Oh my God! Ha *ha*!"

A year ago, Elle would *never* have cracked a joke at school. As Mickey laughed, a big heart of amusement rose up over Elle's head.

Sometimes it was actually *more* painful to have your friends walk on eggshells around you. Mickey keenly understood this, and so she opted to joke with her instead. Relieved to see Elle smiling, I sat down next to Mickey and ate another cookie. There was no follow-up punch this time.

"These are so good. Did Kyou and Looney get to try them?"

"Huh? No..."

"Sucks for them! Now Mickey's gonna eat 'em all."

At this, a club of sadness rose up over Elle's head. Maybe she was starting to regret the fact that she didn't get to offer any to the others. *Oops*. I hastily changed the subject—not merely to be nice, but because I wanted to minimize Elle's sadness as much as possible.

This was uncommon for me. Normally if I saw a club over someone's head, no matter the size, I'd try to find out what caused it and then try to help them find a solution. Nosy, I know.

"Anyway, these are great. Is there a secret ingredient?"

That said, perhaps going against tradition wasn't always inherently a good thing. "Tried and true" was an accepted phrase for a reason. I was so used to meddling in other people's business that I hadn't anticipated what would happen if I put my own feelings first for a change.

"Ooh, I wanna know, too! Tell me, tell me!"

"Settle down, kiddo. It's a little early for you to be experimenting with advanced techniques."

At this, I took another punch, and Elle giggled.

"Huh? Hee hee... It wouldn't be a 'secret ingredient' if I told you."

As she declined Mickey's request, she wore the same soft, sweet smile she always did. Then, still smiling, she quietly rose from her seat.

"I'm going to the bathroom. Anyway, if I had to say, it's probably my love. I always daydream about who's going to eat them while I make them."

And with that adorable confession, she walked away.

Normally I would've averted my gaze out of embarrassment, but this time my eyes were glued to her. Not to her smile, but to the pip swelling over her head. What was *that* about? As I watched her flee to the restroom, I reflexively sucked in a breath. Her pip

grew and grew and grew until eventually it overtook Mickey's spades and hearts as the largest emotion in the school building.

"Her love, huh?" Mickey murmured to herself. But I ignored her and watched Elle and her pip until she left the cafeteria. Then Mickey noticed my silence. "What's wrong?"

But obviously I couldn't tell her about what I'd seen. "Eh, I'm still hungry. I think I'm gonna go buy something... I'm craving salty food."

I rose from my seat. Coincidentally, the food stand was in the same direction as the restrooms. As I left Mickey behind, I followed after Elle and attempted to figure out what was up with her. Did she feel bad for not telling us her secret ingredient? Surely her pip was far too big for *that*. Maybe I got it wrong the first time, and what I *actually* saw was a joy-spade. After all, they were the same color.

I dearly hoped I was right about that, and so I searched for her to get confirmation. Unfortunately, this hypothesis proved false. Floating over her little head was a giant inky black sadness-club.

And for some reason I couldn't begin to explain, the sight of it made my chest ache.

I first noticed I was off my game well before the Culture Festival or any of that, but it was February's field trip that put the final nail in the coffin: a girl in my class asked me out, and I turned her down. What was odd about that, you ask? It was the first time I ever turned down someone's advances.

We weren't really that close, but I knew her to be an outgoing, friendly girl, as well as one of the prettiest in our class. Naturally, I was flattered she felt that way about me, and normally I would have readily agreed without thinking too hard about it. Not that I'm a ladies' man or anything, but I usually didn't really care how well I knew a girl—if she was into me, then that was all I needed.

Looking back, this applied to more than just my love life. Maybe because of my power, I tended to value myself equal to other people. Add in my tendency to look out for people, and this would generally result in me putting their desires first.

But this time, I didn't do that. And there was only one reason: because there was a girl I was interested in.

Oddly enough, my life was easier before I knew what kind of "interest" I meant by that. But when I turned down that confession, I started thinking maybe these feelings were more serious than I realized. Then I started to notice my own behavior, and *then* it occurred to me why I had decided to hold on to a bell "just in case," and I got so scared, I threw it away.

Ashamed as I am to admit it, this was only my second time ever feeling this way about someone. At least if I was sure I was in love with her, then I could act on it. But like an idiot, I was still trying to decide, and now I was too chicken to do anything.

That said, this wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Speaking as someone whose most recent ex accused me of never stopping to think about how I feel, and then proceeded to dump me, it was possibly a *good* thing. The bad part, however, was that I found myself unable to do anything when the apple of my eye was hurting.

I wasn't all-powerful. Sure, I could tell when people were happy, sad, angry, or amused, but I had no way of knowing what made them feel that way, nor how to solve it. And although life had taught me a lot in that regard, the rules were different for each individual person in my life, so it wasn't easy.

Elle had left campus ahead of us, claiming she had an errand to run, but the dark mark over her head never once faded.

Sitting in the counselor's office, I flipped through a college guidebook, but no matter what I did, I couldn't get her darkness out of my mind.

"Hey there, my prince. Did you forget to make a pass at Miyazato-chan? ...What's that look for?"

"Nothing. I see you're as loony as ever."

"Woo-hoo," Looney replied flatly, raising her arms in a less-than-genuine celebratory pose. Then she went back to sipping from her juice box. As usual, she had two pips floating over her head: an amusement-heart and a sadness-club. She was the only weirdo who always managed to have two at once.

"Is now really the time to kick back with a juice box? Don't you have your parent-teacher conference today?"

"What, you jealous? Wanna sip from the same straw? Free indirect kiss, you know."

"No thanks. I just ate, so I don't need anything sugary."

At this, she retracted her offered carton. "I bet you'd say yes if I were Miyazato-chan," she remarked unhelpfully.

She would never make these sorts of jokes in public; she only said it because she knew no one would go out of their way to visit the counselor's office after school. But whether I affirmed or denied her comments, she would only criticize me, so I stayed quiet.

Here in this empty room, with no teacher around to supervise us, I could hear her swallowing loudly, almost like she was doing it on purpose.

"For the record, I already finished my conference. I was going to visit the library, but then I saw Kyou and Miki-chan all buddy-buddy by themselves and decided not to interrupt. Why aren't you with them?"

"Well, I was studying with Kyou, but then Elle left and Mickey showed up, so I figured I'd make myself scarce. Bro code, y'know. Besides, I wanted to borrow one of these college guidebooks anyway. Is that why you're here?"

"Yeah, the teacher told me to pick a safety school just in case...not really, but I assume you'll believe me."

I had suspected that she probably saw me leave the library and decided to tail me all the way here, and apparently, I was right on the money. *What a busybody*, I thought to myself like a total hypocrite.

"So, how do you feel about Miyazato-chan?"

"I don't know," I answered sincerely, flipping through the guidebook without internalizing a single word that was written in it. But Looney didn't seem to buy it.

"Really now," she sighed. "And what will you do if someone steals her away while you're still trying to figure it out, hmm?"

"Nothing I *can* do, is there?"

She let out another sigh. "Well, I suppose I'll have to wait until entrance exams are over before I start worrying about that sort of thing. Everyone but me is such a tryhard... I know I shouldn't be harping on Kyou to make any progress, but you never know when another anomaly will occur."

"Yeahhhh..."

I knew what she meant by *anomaly*, and she wasn't kidding.

No sense in hiding it, so I'll explain. About three weeks ago, believe it or not, some guy from a different class asked Mickey out. Then, like a total monster, Looney went and told Kyou about it, and to say he was devastated would be putting it lightly. Personally, I would've liked her to save it until *after* our exams, but instead I was stuck thinking about how to keep him on track in case the worst-case scenario came to pass. Fortunately, however, it didn't—Mickey turned the guy down, and Kyou went back to studying.

"I still don't get why you did that. He would have been better off never knowing about it."

"What if she'd said yes, then went and told Kyou the happy news? How do you think he would have felt?" With her juice box now empty, she poked me with her straw. "He has a right to know, and he needs to make a move. The worst regrets of all are those you're helpless to do anything about."

"Is that last part still about Kyou, or...?"

"Who knows."

With a shrug, she spun on her heel and started walking. I figured she was headed back to the library, so I didn't stop her. Instead, I went back to my book.

Then I heard her ask, "Let me guess: you have no idea why Miki-chan said no to that other guy, do you?"

I looked back over my shoulder to find her staring at me with a soft smile on her face—an uncommon sight.

"You really are clueless. But then again, I suppose love is blind."

With those parting words, Looney left the counselor's office... and right on cue, the counselor walked back in.

Meanwhile, the words *you really are clueless* smoldered in my gut.

The next day, it was my turn to have a parent-teacher conference. After school, I grabbed a meal with Kyou and settled down in the library for some studying. Then Looney joined us, followed by Elle, but no sign of Mickey—apparently, she had an errand to run.

Elle's sadness-club was still there, although it seemed to have shrunk in the time since I saw it last. What was she so sad about? Surely she wouldn't still feel guilty about the secret ingredient thing a full twenty-four hours later.

As we studied, the girl scheduled ahead of me came by to tell me it was my turn.

"Can you watch my stuff for me?" I asked Looney.

"I don't know. I might eat it if I get too hungry."

And so, I left my pencil case in her trusty hands.

When I arrived at the classroom, I found my mother standing there in the hallway, waiting for me. Together, we stepped inside. Then she greeted my teacher, and we all sat down.

Most of this lecture I had already anticipated. *These are your worst subjects—study them harder. If you have lofty ambitions, you need to have a safety net in place. Blah, blah, blah.* No disrespect to my teacher, but I spent the whole time thinking about Elle instead. Why was I so interested in her? And if I *was* in love with her or whatever, then what was I going to do about it?

Unfortunately, my only conclusion was that I was indeed clueless.

"If you're dead set on traveling abroad, then you'll need to put in the equivalent amount of effort," my teacher explained with a smile.

"Don't worry. When push comes to shove, I always pull through. Just you wait and see," I replied, smiling back.

And so my conference ended on a high note, with no sadness-clubs floating over my mother's head. I saw her off at the front entrance, told her I'd be home after I did a little more studying and then headed down the hallway to the library.

But I was so busy thinking, I didn't notice Elle and Kyou walking my way until they were practically on top of me.

"Welcome back, Zuka. How'd it go?" Kyou asked, snapping me back to reality.

"Oh, hey, guys! I dunno. I was told I need to 'study harder,' and that's all I really remember."

"Thank God I'm not the only one."

The two of us shared a laugh, and Miss Good Grades smiled pleasantly, though her sadness-club was ever-present.

"So, Elle, where are you two headed? And where's Looney?"

"Huh? Oh, we were just on our way to buy some drinks. Looney's still in the library. She hasn't taken her eyes off your pencil case since you asked her to watch it for you."

"Good grief, that nutjob."

"Oh, c-come to think of it, you...you should come with us, Zuka-kun."

It was just an ordinary, friendly invitation—I knew that. But normally Elle would never outright invite me along, so it made my heart skip a beat. Naturally, I agreed. A small joy-spade rose up next to her club.

Then, as we were walking down the hallway in the direction of the cafeteria, she initiated a conversation with me. Again, this was rare for her.

"You know, Zuka-kun, it's amazing that you already have a career picked out."

"Don't you?"

"Mmmm... I'm not sure. I keep going back and forth, and the more I agonize about it, the less confident I feel... I wish I were like you."

Obviously, I enjoyed her compliments...but I couldn't take them at face value.

"It's better to agonize over it," I said, purely on reflex. Even I wasn't sure how I expected her to interpret this. Both she and Kyou looked a little confused.

Thinking about it, what I probably meant to say was this: The reason I wanted to travel was because I felt like it wasn't in my nature to sit still all the time, and English was a useful language to know, and I wanted to make enough money to theoretically support a family, so I just went for whatever offered me all those things. Looking at it that way, perhaps I hadn't fully thought it through—I'd simply shrugged and said "good enough." Sure, it *did* interest me, but it wasn't my number one choice. It was possible I wasn't giving my future the attention it deserved, and compared to that, Elle's careful consideration seemed like the smarter option.

But I failed to adequately express this, and before I knew it, we had arrived at the school store.

Today, Kyou pulled me aside and said he wanted to talk to me—another rare occurrence. That said, I knew we'd just be chatting over our food in the cafeteria like always. But it worked out perfectly, since there was something I was meaning to ask him, too. It was about Elle and her sadness. Kyou and Mickey were close to her, so I figured one of them might know something I didn't.

But when we took our seats at a table in the far corner of the cafeteria, Kyou hit me with something I wasn't expecting:

"Do you think something's going on with Miyazato-san?"

Outwardly, Elle was still wearing her usual soft smile, so I was surprised to learn that Kyou had noticed something was off. After all, *I'd* only noticed thanks to my power. But while I was mildly impressed...at the same time, he didn't seem to know any of the details.

"Elle? What about her?"

"Well, ever since yesterday she's been sort of...distant? So I thought maybe she was mad."

I thought about teasing him, like "What are you, her boyfriend?" but that would make things complicated in more ways than one, so I bit my tongue.

"Huh. Come to think of it, she *has* been kinda quiet."

"It feels like she's avoiding me."

"Avoiding you? What about that trip to the school store?"

"Trust me, it was *extremely awkward* until you got there. I think I must've upset her somehow..."

As I took in Kyou's sincere concern—kinda off-topic, no offense—I found myself proud of what a good person he was. When my friends seemed sad or angry, I never let it really affect me too much. I'd think of a solution, and then take action; it was a matter-of-fact kind of approach, but also one that took a certain level of emotional ignorance.

Guys like Kyou, however, were more sensitive. They stopped to consider whether *they* might be the source of the problem, which, in turn, kept them from just taking action like I could. He once described me as having an "aggressive attitude" with girls, but if you asked me, that more accurately described *him*.

"Maybe you said something rude that pissed her off? Called her fat or something?"

"I would never say that! I'm not *you*! And besides, Miyazato-san isn't fat!"

"Okay, well, maybe you said something like 'Girls ought to be more athletic, like Miki-san!' That'd piss her off for sure."

"Man, why is she avoiding *me* when I'm nowhere near as rude as *you*...?"

I let out an evil chuckle; Kyou sighed and slumped his shoulders. I wasn't able to tease him much the past few weeks due to Mickey's anomaly, but I was glad to see he had recovered enough to complain about me. It really helped to lighten the mood.

"I can't think of a good reason why she'd avoid you, to be honest. I could see Looney doing it as part of some scheme, but Elle's not that kind of girl."

"Yeahhhh... Hmmm... Could you ask Miki-san if she knows anything?"

"Ask her yourself! Actually, that reminds me..."

I was about to ask him about what Looney had said to me two days ago. After all, she made it sound like Mickey had turned that guy down for a clear reason. This led me to believe that Looney or Kyou must have done something to discourage her. Obviously, it was old news by now, so it didn't really matter, but I thought it might help me get a clue, so I wanted to know. Maybe it tied back to Elle somehow.

But I stopped myself before asking, because I was seated facing the entrance, and I'd just seen Mickey and Elle walk in. As I froze like a deer in headlights, Mickey spotted us and waved eagerly. I waved back, and then Kyou looked over his shoulder. The pip over his head instantly switched; maybe he was reacting to Elle's presence just behind Mickey. As for the girls, I could see their emotional reactions with perfect clarity...but I couldn't breathe a word of it, of course.

Mickey sat down next to me, and Elle timidly sat down next to Kyou, so I struck up a casual conversation. "You guys have your parent-teacher conferences today, right?"

"Yep! Me and Elle are fully prepared to listen to them talk about how great we are!"

"I wouldn't hold your breath if I were you, Mickey."

"I'm gonna beat your ass, punk."

I had expected her to punch me, but she was in a good mood, and her joy-spade didn't waver. Instead, she let me off with a warning.

"Anyway, I heard it's supposed to be sunny for the next two days! Man, I'm so glad the rain won't ruin our cherry blossom picnic. Everybody remember to bring your assigned items!" she exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear.

I had completely forgotten the picnic was scheduled for the day after tomorrow, but if I admitted this, Mickey would probably beat my ass for real. Lately, I'd been thinking so much, I kept zoning out.

Anyway, yes, we (and by "we," I mean the same five-person friend group we had established late last year) had decided to throw a somewhat belated cherry blossom picnic this weekend. It was all Mickey's idea, since she didn't want us to "lose sight of the important stuff" while we were busy dealing with college entrance exams. Then Looney picked a date, and with that, our plans were set. Naturally, Kyou and Elle couldn't possibly turn down an invitation from Mickey, and as for me, I loved seasonal events, so I was on board, too. Looney didn't really care about going to look at cherry blossoms, but she kept whining about us all going on a "double date" without her, so she didn't have a choice.

Now that I thought about it, however, it felt like this maybe wasn't the best timing. Elle was still smiling like always, but she was leaning slightly away from Kyou...and naturally, Kyou had noticed. Both of them had sadness-clubs overhead. But Mickey carried on with a big smile regardless.

"Aren't you excited?! Because *I'm* excited!"

She didn't sweat the small stuff. I liked that about her, but every time her cheerful voice echoed through the cafeteria, Elle's sadness seemed to swell bigger and bigger. I contemplated talking to her about it... But then again, even if I asked Mickey to ask Elle on my behalf, she was downright *terrible* at playing it cool.

Mickey saw my stiff smile and misinterpreted it. "What, you think I'm childish for getting excited about cherry blossoms?" She

looked at Elle. "Stay away from him, okay? He's totally dead inside."

At this, Elle smiled stiffly to match me, but Mickey didn't seem to notice. Instead, she kept going on and on about how "excited" she was. No way was I going to be able to use her for my purposes.

For what was probably the first time, I found myself wishing Mickey had a power like mine. Once she spotted something she wanted, she charged straight at it like a homing missile, and no one could stop her. The rest of us could only watch her go with nervous smiles on our faces.

That said, I did shoot Kyou a look that said: *Take note—this is the girl you like.*

"No clue. I wouldn't know," Looney replied.

"For real?"

"My prince doesn't trust me? I'm going to cry," she sniffed. "Actually, I think it's just allergies."

She pulled a college guidebook from the shelf. Likewise, to escape the guilt that sprang from using the counselor's office as our secret meeting place, I grabbed a book at random. Naturally, the counselor in question was nowhere to be seen.

"I swear, I have no idea. Anyway, we're talking about the kind of girl who keeps her feelings bottled up inside. Remember when she decided she could solve her problems by skipping school?"

"Dude, don't insult her."

"I'm not! I'm just saying, we still don't know why she did that—I can only hope she'll open up to us about it someday. But when someone like her starts acting out, there's usually something serious behind it. Does Kyou have any idea what it is?"

"I asked him, and he said no."

He was pretty depressed about it, too. Not good, considering Mickey's picnic was tomorrow.

"Maybe the whole thing is a misunderstanding and they just don't realize it. A comedy of errors, if you will. Or maybe you had your way with Miyazato-chan and didn't give her the proper aftercare."

"You know, I'm devastated that you think I would do that."

"You totally would! You know if she made the first move, you'd totally go for it. You're too nice. And too stupid."

I couldn't really argue with that, so I didn't. *No comment.*

"That being said, you don't usually come to me for advice. Normally, you walk around with a smug smirk like you've got it all figured out."

"No, I don't. To both." There was no point in me lying to her, so I figured I'd just be honest. "Generally speaking, I figure it's for the best if I only do the stuff I know I'm good at and stay away from everything else. But this time around, I want to get to the bottom of this—for my own sake and no one else's."

She didn't respond.

"But I'm clueless, remember? So I thought maybe you could give me a hint."

"*A drowning man will clutch at a lunatic*, as they say. Now I get it... At last, you're no longer my prince."

"Dude, I was never your prince to begin with."

I laughed at her stupid joke, and yet, she didn't laugh with me. She just kept flipping through the pages of her guidebook, though I couldn't tell if she was actually reading it.

"You've always been the kind of arrogant prince who thinks you can solve other people's problems. And lately, I've actually started to come around to you. But when it comes to Miyazato-chan...she deserves your desperate side, Zuka."

For the first time ever, Looney had addressed me by my nickname. I stared back in shock. At this, she finally laughed.

"Let's get back to the library."

At her prompting, I returned my guidebook to the shelf and contemplated every word she said.

And for some reason, from that day forward, she never called me her “prince” again.

On the day of the cherry blossom picnic, I made enough yakisoba for five people, then set it in a basket, along with a blue tarp. Then I hopped astride my faithful old bike.

This year, the picnic was located at a big park on the west side of town, which made sense, since most of the people who were attending lived on that side. Maybe if the one east-sider was *Elle*, things would be different, but since it was Mickey, she insisted she could just ride her bike over—and she looked pretty eager about it, too. She was a dumb jock, just like me.

As I rode my bike down the street, I could see all sorts of pips floating over the heads of the people I passed. It was a pleasant, sunny Saturday, and sadness-clubs were a bit less common than usual...and yet, despite the perfect picnic weather, I spotted Kyou waiting at the crosswalk with his usual gloomy expression.

“Yo!”

“Oh... Hey, Zuka.”

He greeted me casually, like always, and his sadness wilted slightly. He was probably worried he might bump into Elle on the street. Not just because it would be “extremely awkward,” but because he didn’t want *her* to feel miserable being around *him*.

The signal turned green, and together we set off across the street. Silently, I prayed that today would work out. As we pedaled, Kyou’s sadness continued to shrink; maybe I was helping him take his mind off of things.

“So Zuka, what’d you make?”

“Huh? Oh, just some yakisoba. You know the premade, ‘just add water’ kind they sell at the store? I bought that and put some extra veggies in it. What about you?”

“...Also yakisoba.”

“Uh oh.”

"Let's pretend we didn't ask."

"Right you are."

Luckily, since Looney and Elle would be there, our meal probably wouldn't end up turning into a sea of brown... Then it hit me: what if Elle's sadness grew so heavy that she couldn't bear to show up today? I hadn't considered the possibility, and now I was scared.

But just then, I spotted a figure up ahead that put these worries to pasture. Without looking at Kyou, I raced to catch up with Elle on her bike.

"Hey there, Elle!" I called out from behind her. She flinched, snuck a glance over her shoulder and then slowed to a stop. Likewise, we hopped off our bikes.

"Morning, Zuka-kun. Morning, Kyou-kun."

"Uh...g-good morning, Miyazato-san!" Kyou stammered, reminiscent of whenever he spoke to Mickey, except this time he was nervous for a different reason. Elle's smile didn't waver, but her pip did. The sadness-club that floated over her head before we arrived was now swelling even larger. It was downright massive now.

Fortunately, Kyou probably couldn't detect this shift in her emotions. As for me, I'd been kinda hoping time would solve this problem, but it didn't seem that way. Despite what Kyou claimed, *something* must have happened between him and her to cause her sadness. And I wanted to know exactly what it was.

But first, the three of us decided to stop by Looney's house near the park to pick her up, because she had asked—or rather, demanded—that we come by in the event that we arrived early. With me in the lead, the three of us set off on our bikes once more. Behind me, the other two didn't say a word, and for the first time, I understood what Kyou meant by *extremely awkward*. It was so strange—just a few days ago, they were like two peas in a pod, to the point that Mickey thought they should hook up.

Wait a minute. That can't be it...can it?

What came to mind was a possibility that none of us would enjoy.

Right as I shook the thoughts away, however, we arrived at Looney's house. We rang the doorbell, and a short time later she walked out in a hoodie and jeans, carrying a bright blue portable cooler.

"Morning! Oh, and feel free to park your bikes here in the yard."

We did as requested, and then set off on foot to our destination.

The park was filled with far more people than I'd expected. I was so sure everyone would be tired of cherry blossoms by mid-April, but apparently not. Picnic lovers abounded.

Together, we headed for our arranged meetup spot: the fountain. We were nowhere near close when we heard someone shout "HEY GUYS!" Instantly, I knew it was Mickey. Sure enough, there she was, sitting on the edge of the fountain and waving eagerly.

"Good morning!"

"I see you're early today."

"I'm so happy I ended up making it in time!"

No, seriously, you're really early. I was going to say this out loud, but then Mickey beamed at Elle, and Elle smiled back, and her sadness-club shrank a little, so I decided not to ruin the moment.

Although there were a lot of people here, the park itself was pretty expansive. And though the spots under the trees were taken, we still managed to find a decent place to lay down our tarp. Kyou and I handled that part while the girls unpacked their paper plates and what have you.

At last, our flower-viewing party was underway...but neither Elle nor Kyou looked all that excited. I followed Looney's gaze and realized she was watching the two of them.

And so began a tense day of tiptoeing and probing...plus one oblivious idiot, of course.

"EVERYTHING'S *BROWN*!" Mickey shouted even more loudly than usual, cheerfully clapping Kyou on the back so hard that a nearby flock of pigeons got spooked and flew away. Naturally, it was Looney and I who conspired to get him to sit right next to her in the first place. Normally, he would have been nervously excited about it, but today it seemed his concern about Elle had won out. I wasn't sure if anyone else could tell, but to me, he seemed depressed, as did Elle herself.

That aside, the situation we found ourselves in was kinda hilarious. Together, Kyou and I had brought enough yakisoba for a total of ten people, Mickey had brought fried chicken, and as I expected, Elle had brought something slightly fancier: Salisbury steaks simmered in beef demi-glace. Every single one of these things was brown.

As for Looney's Viennetta ice cream, we quickly ate it before it could melt.

"I think we've got some fried rice balls in the freezer back home. Shall I go heat 'em up?" Looney offered.

"Those are brown, too!" Mickey and I snapped in unison.

Then I continued, "Real talk, though, who cares if the food is brown? It's still good! I know it's partly my fault for making the same thing as Kyou, but hey...Elle's looks good, at least! Is it homemade?"

Before she responded, I saw Looney smirk at me from Elle's other side.

"Oh, um, yeah... Technically they're homemade, but they're also really easy, so... Anyway, Mickey's fried chicken sure looks good!" Elle gestured to Mickey's chicken with her dainty little hand.

"Man, I haven't had her mom's fried chicken since junior high."

"You don't think maybe *I* made this?"

"Nope!"

A little anger-diamond rose up over her head. Then, for some reason, one rose up over Elle's head, too...but it was quickly replaced by a sadness-club. It reminded me of the time I made fun of Mickey in the cafeteria...

Hold on. Maybe I can figure this out.

Every time I insulted Mickey, Elle got angry. Was it because she didn't want Mickey to feel bad? In that case, why didn't she get angry when *Looney* insulted Mickey? On second thought, did Elle mistakenly think Mickey was in love with me or something? If so, then she was probably sad that I was choosing to support Kyou's crush on Mickey instead. That would make sense.

In that case, all I needed to do was clear up the misunderstanding.

I'll just explain everything to Mickey and—wait, but then she might figure out that Kyou likes her. Okay then, maybe I should tell Elle that Mickey and I are both interested in other people? No, that'll just backfire!

"Your cooking is a delight, Miyazato-chan."

"Hee hee! Thank you, Looney."

And yet her sadness didn't fade.

"Ha *ha*! Yeah, no kidding! This is awesome!"

"Th-thank you!"

Mickey's joy-spade was bigger than ever—totally at odds with Elle's feelings. But that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes one person's joy could overwrite another person's sadness. Unfortunately, this was not one of those times.

"Yeah, uh, it's really good, Miyazato-san," Kyou chimed in courageously.

"Uh...yeah."

Shot down, just like that. Kyou slumped his shoulders. I looked at Looney, half-expecting her to tease Elle about her awkward response, but instead she looked at me. Then, with a tiny head-tilt, she reached out with her disposable chopsticks and took

a big bite of yakisoba directly from Kyou's Tupperware container without even putting it on her plate first.

"Kyou'sh yakishoba ish—"

"Don't talk with your mouth full!"

She swallowed hard. "There, happy? Anyway, Kyou's yakisoba is pretty good, too. You should try some, Miyazato-chan."

She held the container in Elle's direction. Clearly, she was trying to change the subject to Kyou on purpose so she could probe Elle's feelings. This was what I wanted, too, so I appreciated it.

Sadly, this attempt ended in failure. Though Kyou's was the only dish Elle had yet to try, she shook her head vigorously. "I-I don't want any! I mean, uh, I'm not that hungry!"

"...Oh. Okay then. I'll happily consume these calories in your place."

Looney took another giant bite directly from the container. She shot me a quizzical glance and then began to chew with her usual sleepy look on her face.

As they talked, I watched Kyou the whole time. Frankly, I felt the urge to jump to my feet. But I couldn't, of course. If I took action right away, Elle would blame herself for ruining the party. Instead, I stayed seated and prayed for Kyou to hang in there.

After a few more conversations and a few pieces of chicken, I looked over at him. "Hey, do you know where the bathroom is?"

He noticed the look in my eyes. "I...I'll show you."

He promptly pulled his shoes on. Likewise, I rose to my feet and stepped into my sneakers.

"This way," he called, and with that, I followed after him. A few dozen steps later, I breathed a sigh of relief. At last, I'd managed to get him out of there. Any longer and he would have crushed us beneath his giant sadness-club. Not literally, of course—the pips weren't tangible objects—but even then, it was big enough to make me nervous.

"What did I do wrong?" Kyou asked, once we were well out of earshot of the girls. I didn't need to look at his pip to know how he was feeling, and that was a bad sign. I didn't have to worry about anyone else seeing his pips, but if Mickey saw the look on his face right now, she'd totally cause a scene. *Thank God I got him out of there.*

"Something's definitely up with her."

There was no point in me trying to reassure him without any evidence. The bathroom thing was just an excuse, but we walked in anyway, just to keep up the pretext.

"Remind me: how long has this been going on?"

"Since the day after my parent-teacher conference."

"Okay, so something must have happened the day before. Maybe she got upset about something and didn't tell you."

As we heeded nature's call, Kyou recounted everything he could remember about what happened that day.

"I honestly can't think of anything! We talked the same amount as usual...about normal stuff... We complained about the art essay for history class, but that's about it. Miyazato-san was the one who initiated the conversation, too, because she didn't understand one of the prompts... And that same morning, we ran into each other on the way to school, and she gave me a cookie! And I told her it was good!"

"A cookie?" Was it one of *those* cookies?

"Yeah. She said she made them as a study snack."

"What kind was it?"

"Just plain little round ones. Did she give you some, too?"

"Yeah, I ate a bunch. They were definitely good."

"Okay, then that can't be it! Seriously, why would she get mad at me?"

Good question. At this point, Kyou was well within his rights to be upset with Elle, too. After all, she was pushing him away for no discernible reason. But of course, no anger-diamond ever rose up over his head. Instead, he was deeply worried about having

upset her. Once again, I found myself admiring him for being so different from me...but now wasn't the time to focus on that.

"Maybe I should ask her about it directly?" I offered, since it felt like our only real option. But Kyou didn't look enthused.

"If she thinks I made you ask her for me, she'll only get even *more* upset."

This struck me as a little paranoid, but hey. "Should've known you'd say that."

In that case, what were we left with? For my own personal purposes, I needed them to restore their friendship, and the cookies were my only clue. *Hmm*.

Wait, but...I'd asked Elle if Looney or Kyou had gotten to try her cookies, and she'd said no. Why would she lie about that? What harm was there in Kyou eating her cookies? *Hmmmm*.

"Okay then, I'll casually ask Mickey about those cookies from the other day. Maybe she knows something. You're cool with that, right?"

"Well...yeah, I guess it can't hurt..."

Good, good. Our not-quite-plan was set. Now I just needed to observe everyone's emotions and think carefully. I would have to wing it, but eh, that was just my style.

When we returned to the tarp, Mickey was wearing a joy-spade overhead, as usual. Looney had both an amusement-heart and a sadness-club, also as usual. Only Elle was out of place with her one giant sadness-club. I plopped down in my previous spot.

I knew if I launched right into the main topic, it'd be obvious that we'd planned it, so instead I decided to start off with something innocuous as a cushion. Something like: *funny to think that by this time next year, we'll all be in college.*

But before I could speak, Mickey interrupted me with the world's most fake *ahem*. Then she looked around at all of us, and her joy-spade swelled.

"Okay, now that everyone's here, there's something I want you all to see."

Well, this is sudden, I thought to myself, but judging from her spade, it was probably something positive, so I decided to let her have the spotlight. This could very well be precisely the kind of cushion I needed. She fidgeted for a moment, then reached behind her and pulled her book bag onto her lap.

"*Ahem!* Well, you see..."

Then she paused to look at all of us a second time, with a gleeful grin that was utterly ignorant of how anyone else was feeling.

"Will you spit it out?!" I snapped impatiently.

"Okay, *fiiiine!* Guess what? I made cookies! Now clap for me!"

Elle was the only one who obliged. The rest of us froze, staring at her.

"Uh, guys? Hello?" Mickey scowled at us for ruining the excitement of her surprise.

Then Looney said the words that were on my mind: "Is something wrong with you?"

"Excuse me?"

Mickey glared at her, and Looney glared back. This should have been hilarious, but nobody laughed. So instead, I took it upon myself to ask the million-dollar question:

"What's with the cookies all of a sudden?"

There were two meanings to this. One: why would she choose *this exact moment* to announce her cookies? The timing was so eerily perfect, it made me wonder if she'd overheard my conversation with Kyou. Two: why would she think to try another baking experiment when we all knew very well that she was a complete disaster at anything domestic?

"Well, I wanted to try something different for a change of pace."

Don't you remember what happened last time?!

Only Looney and I knew Mickey well enough to know just how terrible she truly was. Take her shoes, for example—when she

tried to patch a tiny hole, she ended up ruining them completely and then tried to pass it off as “the latest fad.” Naturally, she couldn’t cook her way out of a paper bag, either. She was worse at Home Ec. stuff than Looney was at sports, and Looney couldn’t even ride a bike.

The looks on our faces must have been pretty severe, because Mickey burst out laughing. “Yeah, I know it’s not often I bake something! Okay, long story short...”

At this, Elle sucked in a tiny breath, but Mickey didn’t notice. Or maybe she did but interpreted it differently.

“Elle encouraged me to try her recipe—you know, those cookies you *stole* that one day in the cafeteria? She made them for me so I could see an example of the final product. But then *somebody* started EATING THEM! Ugh, I’m mad all over again!”

Sure enough, an anger-diamond rose up over her head...but then her smile returned. As for me, I was used to her mood swings, so I wasn’t worried.

“Anyway, yeah, I tried out Elle’s recipe!”

“Okay then. If it’s *Elle’s* recipe, it’s safe to eat.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?!”

I was trying to be supportive instead of argumentative, but Elle’s sadness had started to grow even larger, right from the moment she sucked in a breath. What was the harm in sharing her recipe? I couldn’t begin to imagine. Meanwhile, Mickey continued her little presentation, her emotions the polar opposite of Elle’s.

“To be clear, I practiced several times over the last week, and I’m pretty sure I got them right this time.”

“Oh, so *that’s* what you meant by ‘I ended up making it in time’...”

“Yep! Anyway, try ‘em!”

“You know I already got to try Elle’s finished product, right?” I teased. “My standards are gonna be *super* high. Not sure you’ll be up to par.”

Just a normal conversation with Mickey, like always. Lighthearted ribbing from a longtime friend. None of it was said with malice...and yet my words sparked an anger-diamond over Elle's head. But before I could figure out whether she thought I was being serious—

"I mean, yeah, I don't expect mine to taste as good as hers!" Mickey shot back. And at this, Elle's anger flared up even larger than her sadness.

To everyone else, her behavior must have seemed rather sudden. As for me, I knew she was trying to escape the feelings weighing down on her, and so it seemed perfectly reasonable. Either way, there was one brief moment in which she glared at me, exposing that flood of emotion. Then she jumped to her feet and pulled on her shoes.

"I'm going to go wash my hands."

And with that, she sped away.

"Huh? What's gotten into her?" Mickey murmured.

But I turned away and nonchalantly stood up. Then, with a glance, I left everything to Looney and stepped into my shoes.

"You too, Zuka? You guys know I brought wet wipes, right?"

"Sorry. I'll be right back."

"Miki-chan, shall we play a round of Old Maid while we wait for their return? I didn't bring any playing cards, but we can all use our imaginations."

The idea was so idiotic, it got a laugh out of Mickey, and I took that opportunity to chase after Elle. No longer did I pause to wonder what was going on with her. I didn't worry about making her feel bad, either—I just went after her because I wanted to.

Fortunately, I found her pretty quickly, taking short little steps on her short little legs all the way to the park entrance.

"Elle!" I called after her once I had caught up.

She flinched. Her anger was gone now; only her unfittingly large sadness-club remained, practically blocking out the sun. But

she didn't look back. Instead, she ran through the trees. Naturally, I gave chase.

"What's the matter?"

I knew it wasn't the most tactful question, but it was all I had. She remained silent, pressing forward into a deserted grassy section of the park. But something told me I couldn't let her leave. *If necessary, I'll have to stop her by force*, I thought to myself like an idiot.

But as it turned out, I wouldn't need to go that far. She steadily slowed her gait—whether out of courtesy to me or some other reason, I wasn't sure. Then, at last, she came to a stop, as if to suggest she was out of energy entirely.

I took a few extra steps, then came to a stop myself. Was she willing to talk to me? Hopeful and scared, I gazed at her from behind and waited for her to speak.

What I heard next was a tiny, feeble voice.

"Leave me alone."

Small, yet sharp, like a rose's thorn.

As I stood there in silence, she spoke again, still quiet.
"I'm sorry."

I didn't know what to say, so I just went with my gut.

"Nah, you don't have to apologize. I just felt like maybe I hurt you, so I wanted to talk to you about it. And if so, then I'm sorry, too."

She didn't respond to this. Then a group of kids ran past on the street nearby, possibly spurring her to continue.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Zuka-kun. I'm sorry."

"I didn't? Okay then... Did something else happen? Want to talk about it, or...?"

"It has nothing to do with you," she answered flatly.

Normally, this was the part where I'd back down. If she didn't seem to want my help, then I'd tell myself there was no

point in me pressing the issue. But I felt differently this time around.

"You're right—maybe it doesn't. But I still wanna help you. So if you're willing to talk to me about it, then I'd really like it if you did."

It sounded so utterly idiotic, even to me. All I did was repeat the same exact request she already denied, and it was painfully obvious how little consideration I was giving to her feelings. But in spite of my regrets, Elle responded nonetheless.

"Nothing 'happened,' Zuka-kun," she said in a quiet voice.

Well, at least she didn't reject me a second time. But I had no idea why her answer was different this time around. There was a long silence—one minute? Five? Ten?—and then, after a few deep breaths, Elle finally conceded.

"...Cruel."

"What?"

At first I thought she was talking about me, but she wasn't.

"I was cruel."

Then she finally turned to look at me, and when I saw her face, I knew I had screwed up. I shouldn't have chased after her. She left because she didn't want anyone to witness this, just like Kyou and I earlier. I understood now...but it was too late.

"I was cruel to Mickey."

"How?"

"The secret ingredient."

I looked at her.

"I kept it from her."

Real talk, I thought I was hearing things. "What?"

I just couldn't believe it. All that sadness over *an ingredient in a recipe*? I failed to take it seriously, and as a result, I made the dumbest possible suggestion.

"You know Mickey probably doesn't care, right? Just tell her some other time."

"No! You don't get it!" She shook her head vigorously, and then revealed to me her deepest worry—something I never would have expected. "I was scared that...I was going to lose my best friend..."

"Your best friend?"

She nodded wordlessly, and I half-expected her head to fall right off her neck.

"You mean Mickey?"

She shook her head, and I half-expected it to come flying off.

"Kyou-kun."

"*Kyou?*"

Now I was *really* confused...but I could think of one potential explanation, so I summoned up my courage and asked:

"Are you in love with him?"

"It's not like that."

At this I felt a rush of relief, but I would have to figure out why some other time.

"Listen, I...I know I'm being weird..."

"Yeah?" I nodded, preparing myself to hear whatever came next.

"But for some reason, I...I don't want to think about my best friend getting with his crush. I don't like Kyou-kun the way he likes Mickey—we're just friends—but it just makes me so sad...and so I...I lied..."

Her voice was hard to hear, but I did my best to listen. Then she paused, and I waited for her to continue.

"I let Kyou-kun try my cookies, then lied about it and refused to share the secret ingredient. I knew my cookies were better, but I kept it from her to *make sure* hers would be worse. I don't know why I was so cruel... I was just so scared..."

I wanted to say something. I racked my brain, looking for the perfect words. But in reality, the perfect words didn't exist...

because I didn't understand how she felt. I had never been in her shoes.

Why would anyone be *afraid* of their friend's love life going well? I couldn't even imagine it. Was it because they wouldn't spend as much time together or something? It wasn't like they spent a ton of time together as is. Was it because Kyou wouldn't think about her as much? It'd be weirder if he did!

Even if the two of them *did* grow apart somewhat, it wouldn't change the fact that they were friends. As long as Kyou was happy, that was all that mattered. Romance was just another part of life, and there was nothing sad about it at all.

As I stood there in silence, Elle shook her head. "I'm sorry. I know it's dumb, and I know I shouldn't care, and I know it's wrong, but...I'm sorry..."

"No, you don't have to apologize—I'm sorry, too."

I had nothing else to say.

"I've been trying to do something to fix it...so I tried distancing myself from him...but it hasn't been working..."

Aha.

"I'm just scared... No matter how close we get, I'm scared he'll abandon me..."

THAT'S your biggest fear?

She loved her friends so much. She worried so much about what they thought of her. This was no time for me to let my mind wander, and yet I couldn't help but feel mildly impressed.

"I don't know how to explain it, but..." She shifted her gaze to look at me, like she was searching for the words that eluded her. "I think it's probably just me being paranoid... I'm sorry."

Paranoia. Excess self-consciousness. Something she had that I lacked.

"I know I need to stop being so self-obsessed, and I want to change, but..."

Reflexively, I shook my head. "You're fine the way you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. You're fine the way you are," I repeated automatically.

It was an unfiltered response to her statement, just like when we talked about life after high school like a few days ago. Once again, I wasn't sure how I wanted her to interpret this. There were so many things I wanted to say, but I couldn't find the right words to express them all.

Thinking about it, what I probably meant to say was this: *You're fine the way you are because you help us more than you realize.*

For example, she got Mickey to finally take an interest in people who weren't dumb jocks like her (and me, for the record). Mickey had never even contemplated the concept of refusing to go to school until Elle came along and taught her how to find common ground with someone who was different from her. She had broadened Mickey's horizons.

As for Looney, Elle helped *her* change, too. Hard to believe someone like Looney would ever say "I can only hope she'll open up to us about it someday." Normally, everything she said had an underlying purpose or joke, but she stood to gain nothing from making that comment to me. It had been a true expression of her sincere feelings—something she'd probably never revealed to anyone but Mickey. Something that came from the softest depths of her heart. Real talk, ever since she became friends with Elle, Looney had really started to connect with the rest of the class.

As for Kyou, well, it went without saying. He was so happy to have Elle around—honestly, he probably related to her a lot more than he did to me. And when she found the strength to come back to school, he seemed to find his own courage, even if only a fraction.

In short, I wanted Elle to know that she had helped all of us simply by being herself. Besides, even I...

Once I arrived at my own feelings, I finally understood.

"I know I shouldn't be like this... I'm sorry."

"That's not true, Elle."

"Yes, it is."

"No, it's not."

I had finally figured it out. Not how to ease her sadness, or how to fix her friendship with Kyou. By thinking about her, at long last, I had selfishly come to understand *myself*—why I was interested in her, what made her special to me.

"You don't have to apologize for it."

It was all so simple. Long story short, I was trying to learn from her—desperately trying to glean the knowledge only she could offer, just like Mickey and Looney and Kyou, hoping to one day find the humanity I never had.

"You're not weird. You're fine just the way you are."

You see, I'd had one particular belated realization—about myself, not her.

As it turned out, I'd been repressing the sadness I felt over my last breakup. Sure, my ex was the one who'd asked me out in the first place, but I'd enjoyed being with her, and when she dumped me, I was crushed. I just tried to convince myself I wasn't. I told myself it was what she wanted. But deep down, I always thought to myself, *maybe if I had actually stopped to think about my own feelings, she would have stayed with me*. Maybe then I never would have needed to pretend I was fine when I wasn't.

I wanted to learn that it was okay to be sad, and I wanted someone like Elle to teach me. Someone as self-conscious as Kyou, but far more stubborn.

"Me and Mickey don't see things the way you do," I said.

Knowing Elle, she was worried that Kyou would forget about her completely...because she worried that if *she* would forget about *him* completely if their positions were reversed. If I'd been that self-aware, maybe my breakup wouldn't have been so painful.

"So, no, you don't need to change yourself. You're unique the way you are, and you don't have to apologize for it."

It was the truth of how I felt. She was fine the way she was, and I didn't want her to change—nothing more, nothing less. But of course, now that she had opened up to me, I knew that sentiment wouldn't help her sort out her feelings whatsoever, so I continued.

"Basically, like...Mickey and I don't think that way, so you don't need to worry. If you told her what you told me, she'd just shrug it off. I mean, look at Looney! She's a jerk to us all the time, but we're still friends, y'know?"

"But I was *trying* to be mean...on *purpose*..."

"Okay then, just do something extra nice for her to make up for it! Bake her some more cookies or something, I dunno."

"But what if I'm mean to her again?"

She wasn't going to be easily persuaded. She was convinced that her sadness and fear would never truly go away. This was the same girl who, when being in the classroom became too much for her to bear, chose not to change classes but to remove herself instead. Not only was she stubborn, but she was determined, too.

I felt a strange, tight sensation in my chest, like trying to fit a square peg through a round hole.

"Well, uh, it'll still work out! Trust me, I've known Mickey since junior high. I *know* what it takes to make her mad for real."

"And I was cruel to Kyou-kun, too..."

"Kyou's not the kind of guy who would hold it against you."

"...Zuka-kun?"

"Yeah?"

"Haven't you ever stopped to think about what your life would be like without Mickey?"

The sudden question caught me off guard. I contemplated it for a moment, but in the end, I still couldn't see things her way.

"Can't say that I have. Obviously, I'd never say this to her face 'cuz it's cringey and all, but...we'll always be friends, no matter what."

"You don't know that."

"Sure I do."

I knew what friendship was like, and it wasn't that fragile. Honest to God, I wasn't lying...and yet Elle's sadness and anxiety showed no signs of shrinking. Then again, I hadn't exactly provided any evidence to support my claims. I *did* have some, though.

Elle shot me a look that said *Are you telling the truth?* Then I looked into her eyes, into her fearful heart, and finally conceded. Silently, I apologized—but not to her.

Sorry. I know I shouldn't say this, but I'm still taking baby steps. I hope you can forgive me.

With that selfish apology complete, I looked Elle in the eye and donned a smile. "Yeah, I think you're gonna be just fine."

She looked straight back at me, but I didn't avert my gaze. In exchange for learning about her way of thinking, I would instead share a bit of my own. That way we could fill each other's gaps. And as the thought crossed my mind, for the first time, I felt my heart take shape.

"You see, uh, the truth is..."

I was perfectly fine keeping it to myself, but as I prepared to reveal my secret for the first time in who knows how long, I was overcome with shame. In that moment, I felt like this exchange had taught me more about human emotions than I'd ever learned from looking at the pips.

"Ta-daaaa! See? Don't they look good?!"

"Whoa... Coming from you, I wasn't sure what to expect, but they actually look like cookies!"

At my compliment, Mickey glared at me for a moment, then smirked and thrust her chest out proudly. "Ha *ha*! Pretty impressive, am I right?"

"Wait, but...didn't you use Elle's recipe? Why do they look different?"

"Good eye! See, I added chocolate as my secret ingredient!"

She gestured happily to her cookies, which were just as brown as everything else we'd eaten.

"If you think *chocolate* counts as a *secret ingredient*, we may need you to get your eyes checked," Looney snarked. Mickey responded with a smile and a punch, then handed out little gift bags to each of us—first Looney, then Elle, then me, then Kyou.

These cookies were really nothing special, but nevertheless, Kyou was as stiff as a board. I elbowed him for fun.

"How about it, boys? Does your heart flutter, getting cookies from a girl?" Mickey grinned. Unbeknownst to her, however, she was right on the money. About Kyou, anyway.

"Well, it's better than the M&M's you gave me for Valentine's, I guess," I answered on his behalf. Normally this would be enough to satisfy her, but today she was too worked up to let Kyou off the hook.

"What about you, Kyou-kun?"

"Uhh...er..."

"Well?"

"Um, y-yeah. I'm really touched. They look great."

"Ha *ha*! Glad to hear it!"

Her joy-spade swelled overhead. Kyou was always terrible with compliments, so it took a lot of courage for him to praise someone outright. Joy-spades sprang up over Looney and Elle, too. So, on behalf of the group, I gave Kyou another elbowing for good measure.

"Go on, now! Everybody dig in!"

On command, we all untied the ribbons on our bags, pulled out a cookie, and put it in our mouths. For a moment, everyone fell silent...and what happened next betrayed my every expectation.

"Holy crap, these are good?!" I blurted out without thinking.

"They are," Looney nodded. "And there's no way Miki-chan has any connections to a cookie factory."

"What cookie factory?! I bought the ingredients, I made them, and now I delivered them! It was all *me*!"

"Mickey, these are great! The chocolate really adds something!" Elle exclaimed without a trace of sarcasm.

Beaming, Mickey thrust her fists into the air. "Yes!" Then she looked at Kyou. "What about you, Kyou-kun?"

Questioned yet again, Kyou hastily chewed and swallowed his second cookie so he could respond. It was entertaining to watch.

"Uh...y-yeah, they're good. Really good."

"Awesome! Good thing I took Elle's advice!"

As she raised her fists in victory once more, I found myself quietly relieved. Not about the cookies—about Kyou and Elle. But as I would soon discover, this wasn't the only good thing that would happen today.

"Kyou-kun, I'm going to have some of your yakisoba, okay?"

As Elle reached for Kyou's Tupperware container with a smile, Mickey let out a tactless "What the...?"

"Weren't you full?"

"I thought I was, but apparently not. Whenever I eat something sweet, I always start craving something salty... Yeah, this is really good!"

Elle grinned at Kyou, who stared back in shock. Then he smiled, too, and a joy-spade rose over his head. Words couldn't begin to express how relieved I felt. At last, all of our problems had been solved.

"You know, I'm glad we did this," I said suddenly.

"Right?!" smirked Mickey, the main organizer of our little event.

"When Miki-chan fails her entrance exams, let's all get together and have a good laugh," Looney suggested, ruining the

moment. Then Mickey retaliated with a karate chop, and Kyou and Elle laughed. Spades and hearts as far as the eye could see.

Then something else occurred to me: I didn't actually care about helping people. *This* was what I wanted.

And when the realization set in, it felt like my ex's voice finally stopped reverberating in my head.

Okay, time to talk about my secret. Not that it's all that important, mind you.

I got my first girlfriend back in junior high. Back then, I was every bit as sports-obsessed as I am now, so I didn't know much about relationships and wasn't that interested. Still, I had the vague understanding that romance was something that happened between close friends. So, naturally, I ended up dating my closest female friend. I was comfortable around her; she was more fun than the other girls, so I figured I probably had feelings for her. To me, it was love, and it appeared to be mutual. And so our relationship began with two sentences:

"Wanna be my girlfriend?"

"Ha *ha*! Sure!"

But about a month after we became an item, I think we both simultaneously realized that something didn't feel right. On the way home after my club practice, we were eating ice cream when she said it out loud.

"Something doesn't feel right."

Then, for the first time, I realized: friendship was not the same thing as dating. Platonic love was very different from romantic love.

Looking back, we were too bashful to even hold hands with each other. So naturally, we broke up soon afterwards, and things were awkward for a while after that. But fortunately, it was only temporary, and after about a month I was ready to laugh it off. Like an idiot, I had decided that it was less embarrassing to just lean into it.

But while she laughed along with me, she must have been *really* embarrassed about it deep down. After all, even if she really *did* have romantic feelings for me, the relationship still hadn't worked out, in the end. As far as I was concerned, we'd gone back to being regular friends and I'd gradually forgotten all about it, but for her, this shame must have deepened with each passing month. Then, on the day of our junior high graduation, she brought it back to the forefront of my mind and made me swear I wouldn't tell anyone it happened, blushing beet-red as we made our pinky promise.

"Cross my heart and hope to die... I don't wanna do the needle part, though," I muttered to myself.

"Huh? What was that?" Mickey asked, glancing back at me as she rinsed out our Tupperware containers in the drinking fountain—a chore foisted upon us after we lost a round of rock-paper-scissors.

"Oh, uh, nothing."

Maybe I couldn't manage the needle thing, but I'd let her hit me with one of her kicks, probably.

After she washed the last container, I towel-dried it, and then we headed back to the tarp where the others were sitting. Mickey was humming to herself, enjoying our stroll through the park. And as I gazed after her, I found myself wanting to tell a friend what I'd selfishly learned about my feelings, even if I knew she wouldn't understand it.

"Next time, it'll be the real deal," I said.

I was expecting her to say "huh?" and shoot me a puzzled look. But instead, she stopped humming, and her joy-spade swelled like a balloon as she looked up at the sky.

"Ditto," she said.

"What?"

I stopped short. Likewise, she came to a stop and glanced over her shoulder.

"I took Elle's advice," she continued.

Then she set off walking once more. And when she spotted my best friend carrying the rest of the dirty Tupperware, she took off like a jet.

Dazedly, I watched her go. Then I started laughing.

We were all so clueless that it was kind of hilarious.



I ← HAVE ↑ A → SECRET ↓



DEAR FUTURE ME, *Ten Years From Now:*

Nice to see you again. For me it's summer break—what about you? Do you have the day off from work today?

Do you remember writing this letter? I think you probably do. I can't imagine what sort of person you are now, but regardless, I have a feeling you still remember this letter. Sorry if I'm wrong about that.

Are you

Three days had passed since I stopped writing mid-sentence. Somehow, I just couldn't think of anything else to write.

Though it was a Saturday during summer break, and I had no supplementary lessons to attend, we third-years still had important business to take care of. Thus, I resigned myself to yet another day at the library.

When I arrived early that morning, I found I wasn't the only one here to prep for entrance exams. In the study room, I spotted an empty four-person table and sat there. Then, after about two hours of concentrated math practice, I decided to take a break from it and pulled out my letter. Surely today I would think of something else to write. I sat there for ten minutes, pen in hand... but nothing came to mind.

It was hard to write a letter to myself (especially my *future* self) when I'd never even written any to a friend. I didn't even know what colleges I wanted to apply to a few months from now—how was I supposed to know what my life would look like in ten years? Nevertheless, I only had a week left to write this letter and turn it in...

Right as I contemplated what to do about it, I saw a hand grab the chair across the table from mine.

"Oh, good morning, Kyou-kun," I whispered.

"Good morning, Miyazato-san," he whispered back. Then he sat down opposite me, unpacked his bookbag, and started

studying.

In the months since our third year of high school began, we had met up at the library almost every weekend. These days, we skipped the small talk. I put my letter away, then decided to switch gears and study history for a while. No way could I possibly write anything with an audience present.

Another two hours of concentrated study passed, interspersed with the occasional bathroom break or sipping of a drink. Looking at the clock, it was now almost 1 PM. After a hushed conversation with Kyou-kun, the two of us decided to leave the library to grab lunch together—our reward for being early birds this morning. Again, this was nothing new, so we didn't dwell on it very long.

As we stepped outside, we were assaulted by everything the library walls had blocked out: namely, the heat and the wail of the cicadas. I could feel it all rushing over my exposed skin. My heart raced, and I stretched my arms out wide.

Every time we went out for lunch, we always went to the same place: the food court at the local supermarket, just a five-minute walk from the library. They had a McDonald's, a takoyaki stand, an udon stand, and...that was about it, but it was still enough variety to keep us coming back twice a week. And since we were just here last weekend, the menu hadn't changed at all.

If anything had changed, it was...*this*.

"Ack! I'm sorry!"

Kyou-kun seemed to be lost in thought; he went to take his change back from the McDonald's cashier and ended up dropping his coins all over the floor. I watched him from a distance as I stood in line at the *udon* stand. This had been happening a lot lately, and I was starting to wonder if something was going on. Did something happen between him and Mickey? Whenever I noticed him acting unstable, that was usually the reason behind it.

While his French fries were still frying, I received my kitsune udon and sat down at a table to wait for him. A few moments later, he walked over with a sheepish smile on his face, carrying his combo meal.

"Well, that was embarrassing."

Yeah, I could tell.

"What's going on, Kyou-kun? This keeps happening to you lately," I commented without cushioning my words. He was unaware that I knew who he had a crush on.

"Uhhh...it's nothing," he replied evasively.

"Oh, so it's a secret."

"No, seriously, it's nothing."

"Okay, so it's a secret. Got it."

He frowned at me. Lately I'd discovered how much fun it could be to bully him. (But just him. At least, for now.) As I looked at him with a smirk on my face, he hastily changed the subject.

"Oh yeah, I was wondering: that letter you were writing at the library—is that the one for the time capsule?"

"Yup, you guessed it. But I can't think of anything to write, so I haven't made any progress. Did you finish yours?"

"No, not yet. It's really hard to picture what I'll be like ten years from now."

"Same! I can't even picture what I'll be like at twenty. Maybe I'll be in love with someone. What about you?"

"Wha? Uhh...hmmm..."

He was *terrible* at playing it cool.

For a moment, I considered telling him outright that I knew. That way, he'd have someone he could vent to. Maybe then I could help him with his problems, and he wouldn't force the poor McDonald's lady to watch him pick up every single loose coin off the floor. Yeah...it wasn't good for us college hopefuls to have other problems distracting us from our studies.

But right as I went to name Kyou's crush—the one I had spent the past several months pretending I didn't know about—out of nowhere, he glanced over my shoulder. Then an arrow shot out of his body and straight through me.

Ah, we've got company.

"What is it?" I asked, turning to look.

Sure enough, it was Mickey and Looney, on their way out of the supermarket, each of them carrying an ice cream bar. I wasn't good at shouting, but I waved at them aggressively. Looney was the first to notice me, and she raised her hand in return. There was an arrow shooting out of her, too.

Then Mickey finally noticed what Looney was looking at. She waved at me eagerly. At the same time, an arrow fired out of her and straight through me, skewering me like one of those eel kebabs they showed on the cooking channel yesterday. Unlike the eels, however, I was fine. I gestured to a nearby vacant four-person table, and the two of us moved our stuff over there.

Kyou-kun and I sat across from each other. Then Mickey jogged up and sat down next to me. "Gooooood *morning!*"

A beat later, Looney walked up, nibbling on her watermelon pop. She sat down next to Kyou-kun. "I see the apple doesn't fall far from the tree," she announced spontaneously, in lieu of a proper greeting.

At this, Kyou-kun and Mickey both gave her a look that said *What are you talking about?* In Mickey's case, she literally said it out loud, too. "What are you talking about?"

As for me, I could kind of see what Looney was getting at, but I wasn't entirely confident I had it right. Nevertheless, I decided to wager a guess:

"Are you saying...the watermelon pop tastes like watermelon?"

"I should have known you would understand me, Miyazato-chan. As for the rest of you, you need to start paying attention. Honestly, you're both a couple of morons. You should hook up."

I was relieved to know I had guessed right, but also startled by how far she took the joke. The other two must have gotten even more flustered than me, because they both started to panic and change the subject with a "That reminds me." This caused the conversation to come to a standstill.

Smirking, Looney looked at me. Our eyes met, and I giggled.

As my two friends continued to be adorably nervous, I decided to eat my kitsune udon before the noodles got soggy.

After lunch, we stayed at the library until 6 PM. Looney left on foot, since she lived in the neighborhood, while Mickey headed eastward on her bike. And with that, it was just me and Kyou-kun again. Our houses were in the same direction, so whenever we met up at the library, we'd always walk home together afterwards.

Once we were alone, Kyou-kun let out a small breath. It always made me a teensy bit giddy to know that he was comfortable enough to let his guard down around me. Likewise, whenever it was just the two of us, I could feel myself relax...but I could never admit it out loud, of course, since it'd be awkward.

"Mickey was her usual rowdy self today, wasn't she?"

"Yep. Rain or shine, she's always full of energy."

And rain or shine, whenever I mentioned Mickey, Kyou-kun always responded eagerly. In a way, I was sincerely impressed. I'd never crushed that hard in all my life.

Oh, that's right. Before they showed up, I was going to tell him I know about his crush. Almost forgot... Yeah, I guess I should go ahead and tell him now.

With that decision made, I looked over at him.

"So..."

We both spoke in perfect unison. For a moment we stared at each other in wide-eyed surprise, but then we burst out laughing, and I gestured for Kyou-kun to go first. "Go for it."

"Thanks. So, um...I wanted to get your thoughts on something... I mean, it's totally fine if you don't have the answer, but...well...um...mind if I go ahead and ask anyway?"

"Sure." I was flattered that he came to me for advice.

"Okay, so, the thing is...I was told I should apply to the same college as Miki-san. Do you think I should go for it?"

"Who told you that?"

"Miki-san herself. She sorta dropped it on me out of nowhere, and I wasn't sure what she meant by it, so I kinda wanted to get a girl's perspective..."

Did I roll my eyes at him for worrying about something a lot of people would see as a first-world problem? No. After all, I'd probably have the same reaction myself if I were in his shoes. But at the very least, this explained why he seemed so distracted lately.

"Well, I'm not sure... What about your major?"

"She gave me a brochure, and it's listed right on there."

"Okay then, why not go for it?"

"Mmmm... Well, their admission standards are a bit higher than my top choice..."

"Just study extra hard!"

"...Mostly I'm just confused why she would tell me *now* of all times. Maybe this is another one of Sensei's schemes..."

He used to only refer to Looney by this nickname because she demanded it, but these days, he seemed to enjoy it. As far as I could tell, there was no deeper significance to it, but I still found it kind of funny.

"Anyway, what were you going to say?"

Honestly, I wouldn't have minded if he chose to keep venting to me, but instead he dutifully offered me the chance to take my turn. *You better not regret asking*, I thought to myself playfully as I decided to reveal my big secret: that I knew his big secret.

"I mean, setting Looney aside, wouldn't it mean a lot to you if you could attend the same college as Mickey?"

I was so sure he would look at me in surprise. I was prepared to take it all in. But his reaction ran counter to my expectations.

"Uh...well, yeah, it would," he mumbled, like it was a perfectly ordinary question.

"Wait—you're not surprised that I know how you feel?"

"...What? Wait, what?"

My excitement deflated. "Darn it! I could have been teasing you about it all this time!"

"Please don't... Zuka and Sensei already tease me enough as it is. Just keep pretending you have no clue."

"No way! C'mon, it's awesome that she invited you to go to the same school as her. Maybe you should make plans to confess your feelings! Be like 'Just FYI, I'm going to ask you out after exams are over' or something!"

"If I said that, I'd literally be confessing my feelings right then and there..."

"Perfect! Then go for it!"

"Oh God, is *this* how you're going to tease me? I was planning to blame Zuka and Sensei if I failed my exams, but at this rate, it might just be your fault, too."

"That could work, too. 'I'll be there next year, so just wait for me.'"

"Wow, you *want* me to fail? Some friend you are!"

Kyou buried his face in his hands and pretended to be devastated. At first it made my heart skip a beat, but then he started laughing to let me know he wasn't serious. Likewise, I grinned so he knew he hadn't made me feel bad.

"Does it really matter *why* Mickey wants you at her college? Why not just go for it?"

"Mmmm... I'm not sure I should interpret it that literally..."

"You know she's not the type to speak in riddles."

He seemed to pick up on the unspoken "unlike you or me" I'd left off the end of my statement. But Mickey's blunt honesty was one of the things he loved about her—like, *really* loved. I got secondhand embarrassment just thinking about it.

"It's not that. I just wonder if there's more to it that she's hiding from me."

Ohhhh. He was probably thinking back to the shampoo thing. *Sorry, my fault.* But I knew my apology wouldn't do much to make up for it, so instead I decided to clue him in on something.

"I don't think she really has time for mind games right now. You know how she is—whenever she sets her sights on something, she makes a beeline straight for it."

"Yeah, her tunnel vision is something else. She doesn't even notice Sensei messing with her anymore... Maybe she gets it from all those 100-meter sprints she used to do."

He probably had no clue just how happy he looked whenever he was talking about Mickey. But if I pointed it out, he'd probably never talk about her again out of shyness, so I kept it to myself for another day.

And I didn't correct the record about his little misunderstanding, either.

She wasn't hiding anything. It was blatantly obvious. Kyou-kun simply hadn't noticed because, like me, a lack of self-confidence meant the possibility hadn't ever occurred to him. *But that's the only thing keeping this cat in the bag, Mickey.*

It was the first I'd heard about the college thing, but I suspected the idea might have been Looney's originally. So on Monday, after my supplementary lessons were over and after the library had closed, I decided to ask her myself.

"You know the word *caution* doesn't exist in Miki-chan's dictionary," Looney said. "She marked it out with a Sharpie. Just like she did with the word *assistance*."

"So you had nothing to do with it?"

"Nothing, I tell you! So that's why Kyou's all fidgety, I take it. I swear, they're so childish. Want a Pino?"

"Oh, sure, I'll take one."

She ripped open the package she'd bought at the corner store and popped three of them into her mouth, one after another. Then she handed me the entire box. "Hyou canh haf da resht."

This wasn't the first time she had done this, so I gratefully accepted, using the little plastic mini-fork to dig in. Lately I'd come to understand that modesty had no place among friends.

As we slowly made our way home, the sun's rays felt a little bright for 6 PM.

"In a way, it's only a secret to Mickey and Kyou-kun," I mused. "Like a backwards T-shirt—they're the only ones who can't see it."

"Spoken like a true poet! I agree, it *does* feel sort of backwards that everyone knows except them. Like going to see a musical, but they only show you what's happening backstage... Yep, that analogy makes no sense whatsoever. Good job, me."

For some people, ice cream tasted better in the summer. But for Looney, every day was just as fun as the one that came before.

"I'm surprised she didn't talk to you about it," I continued.

"Is it not expected, my dear?" Looney asked in a theatrical voice. "That girl is as pure as the driven snow. She would be all too embarrassed to mention it of her own volition...despite how painfully obvious it is."

"*Painful* is an understatement," I nodded.

"But they each believe their secret is safe, and at the very least, neither one of them knows about the other's. But like with a time capsule, we cannot allow them to forget what they've buried!"

"I'm impressed you can say that with a straight face."

She sidled up close to me, her expression still perfectly emotionless. She had a point, though—every adult I had spoken to about time capsules had told me they'd forgotten where theirs was buried. Probably because too much time had passed, allowing them to get distracted with other things. And it would be tragic if that happened to Mickey and Kyou-kun.

"Ideally," Looney said, "I'd like them to confirm their feelings to each other at least once...but if Miki-chan's only just now managed to invite Kyou to her college, then you know she's not going to make a move until after exams are over."

"Totally."

"SO LET'S CHANGE THE SCRIPT!"

"Whoa!"

Whenever Looney shouted like that, she always made me flinch. One of the neighborhood cats woke from its nap and ran away, but she paid it no mind.

"You know those letters we're supposed to write to our future selves for the time capsules? What if we wrote four different letters to each person in the group?"

"What? And then give them to each other ten years from now?"

"Nah. I want these letters to be completely, brutally honest. Then, when we dig up the time capsule, we'll just re-read them ourselves. That way we can get a kick out of how our opinions of our friends have changed over time...and that way we can get Kyou and Miki-chan to write down their honest feelings. Once they put those emotions into words, they'll never forget."

"Oh, I get it," I nodded, clapping my hands together in understanding. "Wait, but...has everyone else already finished their letters to themselves? Because I haven't."

"Well then, that works out perfectly. To be honest, I doubt anyone's finished theirs. I know *I* sure can't think of anything to say to my future self."

"What? But it was *your* idea!"

"I'm all talk and no action. Somebody get me a career in politics, am I right?"

She seemed to find this hilarious. Admittedly, I wasn't all that upset myself. After all, it sounded *way* easier to write letters to everyone else instead—and a lot more fun, too. Since we wouldn't be sharing them, we could be as honest as we wanted.

As I contemplated who to write to first, Looney snickered with a knowing grin on her face. "This way, even Mr. Suave might actually remember what's important to him! Oh, uh, disregard

that. I didn't say it on purpose just to make you mull over it in the back of your mind."

"Wha... Hey, no fair!"

As I frowned in puzzlement, she looked at me and laughed even harder. What sort of person would she be in ten years' time? I was really looking forward to writing to her.

By "Mr. Suave," she probably meant Zuka-kun... What's the story there?

But before I knew it, it was time to go our separate ways.

In the end, the only person who actively opposed the change was Mickey. She stormed over to Looney and pinched her cheeks. "I! Already! Finished! Mine!"

I was impressed. Knowing her, she probably had a crystal-clear vision of where she wanted to be in ten years. And since I didn't want all her hard work to go to waste, I suggested we all still write a self-addressed letter but with no length requirement. This was the compromise that resolved the conflict.

Fortunately, she seemed enthusiastic about writing more letters. She claimed she "could use a break from studying."

This just left Kyou-kun. When Looney broke the news to him, she had him backed against the wall like she was mugging him.

"You don't gotta show anyone, so just write whatever you want," Zuka-kun explained casually.

"Uggghhh," Kyou-kun groaned.

Nothing against Zuka-kun, but I could understand how Kyou-kun felt. Even if we didn't have to say it out loud, even if no one else ever found out, it was hard to imagine our feelings mattered enough to be immortalized. But his deserved to be expressed.

I smiled encouragingly. "He's right, Kyou-kun."

Later, on the way home, Kyou-kun, Looney, and I all stopped by the stationery store. When we found out he'd been writing his letter on a torn-out scrap of notebook paper, we decided to make him buy actual stationery...and by we, I mostly mean Looney.

"Where's the romance in a scrap of notebook paper? It's thoughtless!" she scolded him.

In the end, he picked out a sky-blue stationery set—a hopeful, ambitious color. Since we were here, I went ahead and bought some that indicated the page number with little kittens, and Looney bought a strawberry-scented eraser.

Then, after I got home that evening, I sat down and wrote the first letter in its entirety. Compared to the days I'd spent agonizing over my self-letter, it was obvious just how deeply I cared about my friends, and at first, I was tickled pink. But then I started to wonder what *they* were going to write to *me*, and my brain wouldn't let me sleep.

Dear Zuka-kun,

I'm actually really embarrassed to write about how I feel right now. Ever since I cried in front of you back in April, I've felt like such a pathetic loser, and I wish I could crawl in a hole and die. But of course, even then, I'm not half as embarrassed as I am grateful. It meant a lot that you were willing to share your secret with me to make me feel better.

You seem like a laid-back, carefree guy, but in reality, you're the one who's paying the closest attention to the rest of us. You have a responsible side that I respect very much. Because of that, I imagine that in ten years' time, you'll have made your dreams come true. Who knows—maybe you flew back to Japan specifically to help us dig up the time capsule. I wouldn't be surprised if your future girlfriend or wife wore the pants in the relationship.

Out of everyone in the group, I think you and I are the most different from each other, but I dearly hope we'll still be friends ten years from now. Until then, I'll try to be the kind of person who can cheer you up when you're sad.

Come to think of it, I've never seen your arrow, not once. But no matter where it points, I support it with my whole heart, just like I support your ambitions.

Early Sunday morning, dozens of students reported to the local prep school to take a mock written exam. Zuka-kun was in the same classroom as me, though we were on opposite sides of the room.

When lunchtime rolled around, we met up in the cafeteria, me with my packed lunch and him with the sandwich he bought from the corner store. One by one, the other three turned up to join us.

"Terribly sorry to interrupt your date, but is this seat taken?" Looney asked in a simpering voice.

For some reason I was sick to my stomach with anxiety, despite the fact that it was only a mock test, but her smug smirk made me feel a little better. Then Mickey and Kyou-kun showed up. For a total coward like me, it was deeply reassuring to see some familiar faces here in this unfamiliar environment.

For a while, we sounded like stereotypical students, complaining about certain questions on the test and arguing over English sentence structure. But eventually, the topic shifted to the time capsule. Due to the recent rule change, the deadline had been extended for an additional two weeks, starting last Friday.

"Has everyone finished professing their love? You'd better hurry up or I'll take it all for myself," Looney joked.

I glanced at Kyou-kun and Mickey. Normally Looney's teasing would get me all flustered, but this time I was in on the scheme. Plus, I knew why she was doing it, so I couldn't really stop her.

"Well, uh, so far I've only written an angry diatribe about Zuka," Mickey joked back, trying to camouflage her bashfulness.

"Likewise," Zuka-kun grinned.

"Well, *I* love both of you," Looney replied serenely, her deadpan voice adding a hilarious contrast, and Kyou-kun laughed.

It was just another ordinary lunchtime, and yet it must've worked wonders on me. After I sailed through my afternoon tests, I was really starting to feel confident about my prospects.

On the way home, we stopped by a burger joint and made small talk for another half an hour and then decided to call it a

day. Third-years didn't have time to truly relax; once we got home, we'd hit the books all over again.

Instead of asking my mother to pick me up, I caught a ride on the back of Kyou-kun's bike. Honestly, I knew I shouldn't, but it was a little too far to walk. Beside us, Looney rode on Zuka-kun's bike as we took a path no cars could follow.

If Mickey lived in our neighborhood, I would've let her take my place instead...but then it occurred to me that Kyou-kun would probably get so nervous, the whole bike would topple over. The thought made me laugh.

Then, with a wave, we parted ways with Zuka-kun and Looney. I told Kyou-kun I could walk the rest of the way, but he insisted he may as well take me all the way home.

"What were you laughing about just now?" he asked.

"Oh, I was just thinking... If Mickey were here instead of me, you'd get nervous and probably crash your bike."

"Wha?! I mean...well...yeah..."

"Thought so. Did you finish writing your letter to her?"

Technically it wasn't really a "letter" at all, since we weren't going to give them to their recipients, but still.

"Not yet," he answered, shaking his head.

"Well, you have to write one. And you have to be a hundred percent honest."

"Nnnn..."

"Seriously, I really think you should."

For a while, he didn't respond. I started to get nervous—maybe I was being too nosy, and he didn't appreciate it? Then the bicycle slowly rolled to a stop. We had arrived at my house.

"Thanks," I told him as I hopped off.

"I'm scared," he replied without looking at me.

"Of what?"

Deep down, I knew the answer, but the flow of the conversation forced me to ask anyway, and I felt awful about it. He

smiled awkwardly at me, the way he did whenever Looney teased him.

"A lot of things."

Yeah, that makes sense.

We waved goodbye. Once he disappeared from sight, I turned in the opposite direction and prayed for him.

Dear Looney,

Up until recently, I was always a tiny bit afraid of you. Whenever you looked at me, it felt like you could see right through me. You're always casually joking around, but I get the sense that you pay more attention to people's feelings than you let on, and it used to frighten me. But not anymore.

If you knew I felt this way, you might get mad at me, but...I think you and I are similar in a certain way. I think we're both afraid of other people, to some extent. Or am I just overthinking it?

Either way, I love both your funny outer persona AND your inner cautious side. Ten years from now, I'm sure you'll still be the same Looney we all know, and I look forward to the charming adult woman you'll become.

I doubt anyone else knows about this, but I've seen the way you suppress yourself to prioritize the happiness of the person you love. From the bottom of my heart, I pray that you'll find happiness someday, too.

The next day, after supplementary lessons, Mickey said she was craving sweets. Normally I would have gone straight to the library after classes ended, but this time I decided to visit the cafeteria for a snack. Everyone tagged along, save for Zuka-kun, who was running laps around campus. Mickey bought a chocolate cornet while the rest of us bought ice cream, and then we all sat down at a table in the corner to give our brains some much-needed sugar.

"How are those letters coming along?" asked Looney, who was eating her mini-pint with a curry spoon instead of the little wooden one that came attached to the lid. Normally Mickey would be the first to chime in, but right now her cheeks were puffed out like a squirrel's, so I stepped in to cover for her.

"Two down, two to go. They're so much easier to write than the one to myself!"

"That's my Miyazato-chan! See, I don't actually know what to write for mine. Could you show me yours as a reference?"

"That's cheating!" Mickey shouted like a referee after she swallowed her bite of cornet.

Looney clicked her tongue. "I was hoping you'd fall for it." Grinning, she paused to scoop up another spoonful of ice cream. "I must admit, I'm really curious to know your thoughts, Miyazato-chan. How stupid would you say Mickey is? I know you must have written about it."

"Elle would *never* write about that, thank you very much!"

"Yeah! I don't think she's stupid at all. She just has a lot of *other* problems."

"HEY!" At my joke, Mickey stared up at the ceiling. "I...I have *problems*...?" she asked quietly, as if God himself would answer. I knew she wasn't actually offended, but I wanted to smooth things over anyway.

"I'm just joking, silly," I said. "I haven't even written your letter yet. But I'm not planning to say anything mean, and if you don't believe me, you can read it yourself."

I swear, I had no ill intent. I was only trying to reassure her. But that was no excuse, of course. Why was I like this? Why did I say things without thinking them through?

Either way, my regrets were too little, too late.

"Oh yeah? Want to trade letters after all?" Looney suggested, though she probably wasn't serious.

"No, dummy! I was just joking!" I repeated.

I thought it would end there. But the individual lines of a conversation weren't separate entities that could be carefully navigated one by one, like rain puddles.

Instead, they ran together like a raging river.

"We should do that! It'll be more fun!"

What I didn't realize is that we all helped shape that river... and it would take immense power to fight the current it created.

"Yeah, I like it!"

Mickey nodded eagerly, her eyes sparkling. Flustered at the conversation suddenly changing course, I tried to push back.

"But...uh...don't you think there are some things you'd rather keep to yourself?"

"Nah, not really! I'm fine telling you everything. I mean, sure, it's kinda cringey, but it'll be ten years later, right? As long as it's just between us, I can handle it."

I was at a loss for words. Once again, I found myself amazed at just how *pure* she was. I could tell she was honestly willing to share the entire contents of her letter. She had *confidence* in her feelings, and it took my breath away.

Reflexively, I looked at Looney. She was looking at Kyou-kun. *Oh, I get it.* Since we originally came up with this idea to help them, she probably wanted to let Kyou-kun have the final say. I looked over at him, but before I could glean anything from his expression, Mickey's loud, clear voice shot over to him along with her arrow.

"What are your thoughts, Kyou-kun?"

I could tell she was talking about more than just the proposed rule change, and I was deeply worried about how he was going to react. *Whatever you decide, just be honest with yourself,* I thought quietly. I didn't want him to agree to her suggestion, only to turn around and write lies in his letters.

But in actuality, that never came to pass.

"...No."

His voice was small and quiet, but I was pretty sure Mickey got the message. He stared her dead in the eye and shook his head. Then he averted his gaze and looked in my direction instead.

His words had the power to go against the flow. Anyone could tell he was sincerely opposed to the idea from the bottom of his heart. But it scared me to think he might have made Mickey feel bad. I was afraid of interpersonal conflict in general, but more than that, I was afraid of her heart—her arrow—going down the wrong path.

“Hmmm. Okay then.”

With her lips pouted, she looked every bit as disappointed as she sounded...and a little hurt, too. Then Looney made one of her usual jokes and got the conversation back on track.

But Mickey and Kyou-kun didn't speak again after that.

On the way home, after we parted ways with Mickey, I prayed desperately that her arrow wouldn't change directions after today. Now it was just the three of us: me, Looney, and Kyou-kun. Looney was the first to break the silence.

“Relax. Miki-chan might spend the rest of the day pouting, but by tomorrow, she'll have forgotten all about it,” she explained with a chuckle, like it was no big deal—because she knew that to Kyou-kun, it *was* a big deal.

“Nnnn,” he groaned.

“Seriously, I'm impressed. You could have caved and written her a bland, inoffensive letter, but instead you held your ground. Kudos.”

Personally, I was inclined to agree...but that was because I knew how he felt. From Mickey's clueless point of view, she might think he refused the idea because he wanted to write something mean about her in secret. Maybe that was why she didn't say another word to him afterwards.

“Mnnngh,” he groaned again.

Knowing him, he was at least *trying* to process her words of reassurance, but he didn't have the strength to swallow it. He was probably a total mess on the inside—I knew this because he and I were both that sort of person. We read too deeply into every word and gesture, then jumped to conclusions at the first sign of our worst fears coming true, all without ever stopping to confirm the facts.

What would I want someone to say if I were in his shoes right now? I couldn't be like Mickey, or Looney, or Zuka-kun. And since I couldn't think of anything to say, I ended up passively letting Looney handle it.

Then, at last, we came to a crossroads. Not metaphorically or anything—I mean the literal crossroads between our houses and Looney's. Normally, whenever we reached this fork in the road, Looney would give an airy wave and continue on her way, but this time I could sense her hesitation. Fortunately, she must have realized that walking on eggshells with Kyou-kun would only backfire, because after a brief moment of eye contact, she spoke.

"Welp, see you fine folks tomorrow." And with a wave, she was gone.

After a moment of icy silence, Kyou-kun headed off down the street in the direction of our houses, and I followed after him. I was trying to think of something kind and thoughtful I could say to him, but a few steps later, he beat me to the punch.

"I'll be okay."

He smiled stiffly, and my nose stung like I'd just eaten wasabi. I couldn't take it.

"Let me guess: you're lying, aren't you?"

He didn't answer—just groaned again. So I followed up with another question.

"Can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

I didn't really need the details. I just wanted to know how much it mattered to him.

"Why did you say no?"

I figured he probably wouldn't answer...but as it turned out, I was only half-right. He didn't answer the question directly; instead, he told me something that seemed to be unrelated, but was in fact the other side of the same coin.

"I'm not going to switch to a different college."

What?

I stopped short. Likewise, Kyou-kun took a few more steps, then came to a stop and donned a smile. He was always the kind of guy who would give you the shirt off his back if he thought you needed it.

"I thought about it, and...that's what I decided."

"Wh-why not?"

"Mmmm..." This time, instead of just groaning, he kept going. "I just don't see it happening."

"I mean, sure, their admission standards are a bit higher, but..."

Truth be told, I knew it wasn't about admission standards or GPA. Those things were important, but right now, they clearly didn't matter. But I played dumb, hoping to mask my feelings. Not for any particular reason, of course.

"After we started writing these letters, for the first time in my life, I took a hard look at my plans for the future. And in the end, I realized...a loser like me just isn't..."

He wasn't just pausing to catch his breath—he simply wasn't willing to continue. He was too scared. He knew how he felt, but he didn't want to admit it.

"And you're the only person I can talk to about it."

I knew what he meant by that. He knew I would understand, and so he wanted my compassion. Unfortunately, I could *easily* imagine how he must have felt.

Like him, I'd spent my whole life thinking of myself as a loser. Lesser. Unworthy. Obviously, I knew everyone had their own personal insecurities, but when it came to people like myself and

Kyou-kun, for whatever reason, those same insecurities were painfully debilitating. Maybe we were just born this way.

But while I understood his pain, I no longer believed it was my duty as his friend to mindlessly validate it. This was something I learned after getting to know him and the others.

"Stop that." I took a deep breath. "If...if you're going to be a quitter, then do it right! Don't hide your letter from her—write the words 'I don't love you' and...and go show it to her right now!"

My voice cracked and wavered. After all, *a loser like me* had no right to say this.

"*She's* the one you need to tell! Not me!"

It would have been so easy to talk him out of his own feelings—he was factually incorrect, after all. I would simply have to sacrifice our friendship in the process. But I didn't go that route. *Not* because I was scared of losing said friendship, mind you.

If he got his wish through sheer inertia, without ever actually working for it, his arrow would entirely go to waste. A love as tremendous as his deserved to have real effort put into it.

"If you keep acting like this, you won't want to meet up with us ten years from now!"

We had a lot in common, and I knew if he kept lying to himself and pretending it was over—if he never tried to be anything more than friends with Mickey—then by the time ten years had passed, he wouldn't want to come dig up the time capsule with the rest of us. He wouldn't want to come face to face with the regret he had buried there.

Then it occurred to me: maybe those adults hadn't actually forgotten where their time capsules were buried.

Kyou-kun fell silent, and the time I spent waiting for him to respond was nothing but sheer terror. It had taken me a lot of courage to say all that, but in hindsight, I wasn't confident it was any of my business. Regret welled up inside me—regret and anxiety and a tiny hint of despair. *Almost like BOTH of us are struggling with one-sided feelings*, I thought to myself.

Then his conflicted expression shifted to sadness as he gazed at me. A moment later, I realized it wasn't sadness at all, but fear. He let out a small breath, the same way he did whenever he was about to say something he knew he shouldn't.

"I mean...it's thanks to you that I've become friends with her," he said.

I strongly disagreed with that, but for the sake of conversation, I nodded.

"And so I keep asking myself: do I really need more than that?"

I started to tell him to stop thinking like that, but then he kept going.

"And every time, I think..."

Yeah?

"Deep down, I know the answer to that question is *yes*. Being friends was never going to be enough for me. With every passing day, I..."

Love her more and more. My brain automatically filled in the blank. But he didn't really need to say that part out loud. I wasn't the target audience, anyway.

I could read his expression, and out of all the scary things in the world, I knew what frightened him most of all: his feelings. No matter how hard he tried to convince himself that he was content, his feelings wouldn't listen, and he was terrified that they would run down a different path. Which path? Well, there was really only one option. But it felt so distant...and *deep*.

"What am I supposed to do?" he asked, as if he'd searched every corner of his heart and those were the only words he could find. But I didn't have any helpful advice for him.

"I don't know for sure, but...do you want my opinion?"

I made sure to ask first. He nodded softly.

"I think it would make her happy. She would really take it seriously, too."

It sounded like something out of a stereotypical shoujo manga, and after I said it, I realized: he already knew that. That was *why* he was scared.

Together, we trudged down the street, agonizing over Mickey. He hadn't brought his bike today, so we were both on foot. Then, at long last, we came to a stop at the branching path between his house and mine. I must have felt the impulse to say something, and before I knew it, the words had left my lips.

"I'd hate to see someone else steal her away."

It was one of my deepest, darkest thoughts, and I knew it would only make him feel even more pressured. *Why did I say that?* Immediately, I cursed myself...but at the same time, deep down, part of me was proud of myself for speaking my mind.

Perhaps he sensed this small fragment of untimely joy. "So you approve?" he asked with a small smile—the first I'd seen from him all day. I nodded without hesitation.

Then, with a wave, we went our separate ways home.

Later that night, I was having trouble sleeping, so I decided to write another letter.

Dear Mickey,

You have the power to change people from the inside out. You might not know this, but when you showed up at my house last year, I was really annoyed at first. Annoyed that some girl who didn't even know me would suddenly force her way in. And I admit, I thought you were rude and inappropriate. But when you looked me in the eyes and told me you wanted to be friends, the next thing I knew, I found the courage to trust you...and now I'm really glad I did.

After we got to know each other, I discovered that there's really nothing more adorable than a bubbly, down-to-earth girl who wants to be a hero. Plus, you're so pretty and athletic... It's completely unfair. Of course, while you have lots of strengths, you have plenty of flaws, too. I know because I'm your friend. But if I

were a boy, I'd probably fall in love with you, flaws and all. I repeat: It's SO unfair.

You're a hero, Mickey, and everyone around you intuitively trusts you. For example: Normally, a guy with no self-confidence would never dream of being in love with a popular girl like you. But in your case, he could rest easy, knowing you'd never scoff at his feelings. That's just another reason why we all love you so much.

Lastly, allow me to be blunt: You're as blind as a bat, you dumbo!

I woke up, looked at my clock, and then sprang out of bed. *Crap! School!* But as I was pulling on my uniform, I belatedly remembered that the teachers had canceled today's supplementary lessons. That was why I set my alarm back an extra hour.

I took my uniform back off, then went to the kitchen and ate the breakfast Mom cooked for me. And as I was eating, I realized that it was probably a bad thing that the lessons got canceled.

Normally, whenever we didn't have class, we'd all meet up in the library (plus or minus Zuka-kun, depending on if he had practice that day). There was no pre-established agreement to meet up at any certain time; we'd just naturally bump into each other in the middle of our other plans. So if someone didn't show up, it wasn't a big deal. But we were now so used to meeting up at the library that any absence would be painfully obvious.

With the status quo as our guidepost, we could easily decide our course of action each day. After all, it made everything much less complicated. But if someone didn't show up today, it would mean something had deviated from the norm, whether intentionally or by chance...and either way, it wouldn't look good...

Everyone please show up today, I prayed as I left the house. Normally I would take my bike, but this time I decided to go on foot for a change, since the weather was nice. A few minutes in, however, I realized it was actually much hotter than usual and immediately started to miss my bike.

I took a sip of water and headed straight for the library, all the while hoping I'd bump into Kyou-kun on the way. Not so he could give me a ride or anything like that—just for the emotional reassurance. I wanted to stop being afraid that he wouldn't show up today. But of course, the one day I wanted it to happen, it didn't.

Since I was alone, there were plenty of other things I could think about—things I was going to have to figure out eventually, like how many private schools I was going to apply to, for example. And yet, for whatever reason, my brain chose to ignore all the more pressing issues and instead agonize over something I'd wondered ever since I was young. Probably because I'd been paying more attention to the subtleties of the phenomenon as of late.

Every few months, I would find myself wondering: *why me?*

Normally I never paid it much mind, but I must have been feeling a little extra-sensitive after what happened yesterday. With every couple I passed on the street, I asked myself: *Why am I able to see people's love?*

I had never particularly resented having this power, but I had never felt especially grateful for it, either.

When I first found out that other people couldn't see the arrows, I was dumbstruck. It felt like we weren't looking at the same world. Nevertheless, I did my best to act like I couldn't see them—that way no one would think I was weird.

But they were still clearly visible to me. And I'd seen the changes that occurred over the past few months.

"It's not like that! He's not my type at all, so it's totally not that!" she had blurted out, blushing furiously, back in February.

"I mean, um...yeah, no, it's not like that. It's just...well...yeah, no," she had stammered, fidgeting, back in March.

"Love confessions are supposed to be nerve-wracking, right? But I didn't really feel nervous at all... If anything, that time he gave me a bell..." she had trailed off, suggesting she already knew what was up, back in April.

Setting aside how downright adorable it was, she didn't seem to realize what she was revealing to me, but honestly, it was obvious from the look on her face. And in my case it was even *more* apparent, thanks to my special power. That being said, however, I only had the information the arrows gave me. Sad to say, this power didn't enable me to do anything to help—all I could really do was continue to be a supportive friend.

Maybe if a prettier, more outgoing girl had been given this power, she could have found a better use for it, but alas, God wasted it on me instead. Hence, I found myself periodically wondering if there would ever come a day that this power would help someone. What role did He want me to play?

Oh, I see now. In the end, my smaller problems all shared the same massive root cause. The reason I couldn't imagine my future self, the reason I couldn't choose a career path, the reason I couldn't comprehend my power—and maybe even the reason I lacked self-confidence—was because I didn't know who I was as a person. The question I failed to answer after seventeen years of thinking had now embedded itself inside even bigger questions. Of course I wasn't going to be able to write a letter to someone I barely knew.

Naturally, this wasn't the sort of question I could answer within fifteen minutes, and before I knew it, the library was in sight.

Come to think of it, I hadn't given much consideration to the possibility of using my special power to bolster my future career. What kind of job would benefit from a power like mine? ... Matchmaker? Marital counselor? *No, no, no!* I couldn't possibly work in a field that would have such lasting impact on other people's lives. My little heart couldn't take it.

As I stood at the library entrance, the automatic doors slid open and a gust of nice, cold air washed over my entire body. On the first floor was a large reception desk surrounded by dozens of books, all lined up. Every time I passed through it, I found myself admiring how fun it looked to hang out down here, but as a high school third-year, my destination was the study area upstairs.

It was still early in the morning, and only one-third of the seats were occupied, allowing me to leisurely take my pick of the free tables. But just then, as I looked around, I spotted Kyou-kun.

After what we discussed yesterday, I was too shy to speak to him out loud. So instead, I ripped a sheet of lined paper out of my memo pad, wrote "Good morning" on it, and slowly, gently slid it onto the table from behind him. I knew I was being weirdly obnoxious, and I wasn't proud of it. But he looked up at me and smiled, then reached over and wrote "Morning!" on my paper.

Having neatly avoided a rehash of yesterday, the two of us spent a long while peacefully focused on our own tasks. After about twenty minutes, I felt I had gained enough composure to handle just about anything. But this false confidence didn't last long. If my life had had its own soundtrack, this was where they would've inserted the suspense music...because a monster was about to strike.

Pretty rude of me to call her that, seeing as I'd referred to her as a "hero" just last night, but the fear she instilled in me that morning was on par with Godzilla. And when she turned up there in the quiet study area, I nearly shrieked.

As she took a seat next to Kyou-kun across the table from me, her smile was far more exaggerated than her usual good-mood grin. When she spotted our written exchange, she added her own "Good morning" and then lifted the paper to show us.

To be clear, there was nothing wrong with Mickey's smile. It was very pretty. No, what surprised me was something else—something only I could see. And I'd never seen a more aggressive arrow in all my life. What about her was causing it?

I glanced at Kyou-kun out of the corner of my eye. Mickey's mere presence had made him nervous, but his arrow was as pure as ever.

So, for lack of other options, I smiled at her. Then she pointed her grin in my direction—*eeeeek*. The air was tense, and I could feel something about to happen. *Looney or Zuka-kun, one of you please hurry!*

But maybe it was a mistake to let myself pray for that. My feelings weren't strong enough to stop Mickey's runaway train.

Here she was in the study area, and yet she didn't take out any of her textbooks. Why was she here, then? The room was so quiet, it felt as though my smallest thoughts were audible. As if to answer my question, she finally took out her pencil case...and a sheet of pink stationery.

What was she planning to do with that? I could practically feel a cartoon question mark floating over my head. Then she nudged Kyou-kun, who was busily pretending to study, and pointed to her paper.

Once he was watching, she wrote:

Dear Kyou-kun,

I screamed internally. If my feelings took the form of a seesaw beam, it would have been swinging like crazy right about now. Meanwhile, Mickey was still grinning away. Looney probably could have managed it a little more gracefully, but Mickey didn't have that skill.

Now I was starting to understand the meaning behind her exaggerated grin. If I had to guess, she was using it to forcibly conceal something else. Maybe some sadness or anger or some other negative emotion had gotten mixed in with her feelings for Kyou-kun, resulting in an arrow the likes of which I'd never before seen.

As for Kyou-kun, he was frozen stiff. I couldn't possibly imagine how he must have felt, sitting right next to someone who was about to write a secret letter about him *right before his eyes*. I also wasn't expecting Mickey to do something this passive-aggressive.

What do I do? I tried to think. Was this really the best way for him to find out? But on the other hand, if I made her stop, would her feelings take a turn for the worse? *Ugh, what do I do?!*

Just then, something gave me pause: *Since when does Mickey act like this?* Was she really the sort of self-centered jerk who would bully someone just because they had a disagreement? Was I wrong about her all this time?

As my panic started to lead me down an unexpected rabbit hole, Mickey took a deep breath and then pressed the tip of her pen to the body of the paper.

Instantly, Kyou-kun jumped to his feet, his chair clattering behind him. At the sound, everyone in our vicinity glanced over... but a moment later, the incident was dismissed as just another part of the library. The only one who couldn't shrug it off was Mickey.

Blinking in confusion, she reached over to the memo paper and wrote "What's wrong?" Then she held it up for him to see. My eyes were glued to the paper.

Kyou-kun reached for his pen, fumbled, dropped it, then picked it up again and wrote "Bathroom break." In response, Mickey wrote "K. I'll wait until you get back."

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.

She kept grinning widely, paying no mind to the fear it instilled in her victims. After I watched Kyou-kun make his brief escape, I gathered all my courage, then leaned across the table and whispered, "Wh...wh-wh-what are you *doing*?!"

Still smiling, she turned her eyes on me, then picked up her pen and wrote: "It's nothing! Don't worry about it!"

At this, I shook my head. *Oh, no you don't! I know for a fact something's going on!*

She looked at me and let out a tiny laugh under her breath. Then she scribbled out: "I'm here to set things straight."

Oh God, she knows?

As if to answer this silent question, she added: "I've got it all figured out."

My heart was pounding so hard, I was terrified the whole room could hear it. What did she figure out? My pulse spiked, and

a muddy stream of thoughts filled my mind, but no words came out—I just flapped my lips helplessly like a goldfish.

Kyou-kun returned, and I wasn't sure I was happy he'd come back. I saw him read what Mickey wrote—and watched as he panicked even harder. It made me wish I'd hidden the paper when I had the opportunity. But of course, it was too late now.

As he sat back down in his chair, Mickey took this as her cue to grab her pen and press it to the stationery.

Hastily, I scribbled "Wait!" on the memo paper. It was one word—why didn't I just say it out loud? I couldn't think straight. All I knew was that there was one question I needed to ask right off the bat: "Should I be here for this?"

I made eye contact with Mickey and then Kyou-kun. Mickey put a hand to her chin in contemplation; Kyou-kun nodded faintly. Then I watched as Mickey wrote "It's cool." So I closed my eyes and attempted to summon the resolve I didn't have.

She knows. She knows. She knows.

The only thing she could possibly be referring to was Kyou-kun's crush on her. What else could she have "figured out" about me or Kyou-kun that she didn't already know? My special power? No one could possibly find out about it unless I told them myself.

If my hypothesis was right—if Mickey had noticed Kyou-kun's feelings for her and was now attempting to tell him how she felt in return—then chances were likely they'd reach a happy conclusion. But why did she seem sort of...angry? Was it just impatience?

Either way, her pen would decide today's outcome, and I could only sit there and watch. I couldn't stop her by force—if anyone was going to do that, it was Kyou-kun. But of course, I knew he wouldn't.

At last, the tip of her pen embedded itself against the paper. But before it could leave an inky dot, she started scrawling letters, one by one:

You have a crush

And that was where she stopped.

I was stunned. So was Mickey. So was Kyou-kun—understandably so.

After all, he'd probably never imagined he would reach out and put his hand on hers to stop her.

He hastily retracted it, but there was no undoing what he'd done. He stared down at his hand, clenching and unclenching it. "Sorry," he muttered in a tiny voice.

Mickey froze for a moment, dazed. Nevertheless, she recovered more quickly than the rest of us—she was probably used to this sort of thing. She reached over and wrote "What's the matter?" on the memo paper. Then she offered him her pen, even though he clearly had his own right there in front of him.

He looked at it for a moment. Then, reluctantly, he accepted it. And after a moment of thought, he wrote a carefully chosen one-word response: "Stop."

When I imagined how it must have felt for him to write those four letters, a mix of emotions welled up in my chest, and for some reason I felt like crying. But of course, I held it in.

Mickey scowled, snatched her pen back, and wrote "Why?" before offering the pen back to him. He avoided looking at her as he responded. Judging from the look on his face, he was biting back the urge to scream. It was all so unbearably painful to watch.

"I'm sorry, Miki-san," he wrote. "I had a feeling you might have figured it out, and I appreciate you coming here to tell me. I figure you probably want to make things clear. But I don't want to make you feel awkward, so don't worry about it. Oh, and for the record, I'm not planning to follow you to your college, either. Sorry I'm such a loser."

It ended the way it began: with an apology. His confession shocked me. He knew she'd figured it out, but instead of pressing her about it, he wanted to back off?

But it was the last line that resonated with me most of all. *Sorry I'm such a loser*, or in other words, *sorry a loser like me is in*

love with you.

How was Mickey going to react to this? I watched her as she read his response and prayed she wouldn't hurt him. I didn't know what made her decide to try to write her letter right in front of him, but if only things weren't so weird and complicated, the two of them would surely...

"What do you mean, you're sorry?" Mickey asked, in a tone of voice that suggested she had completely forgotten we were in a library.

It wasn't hostile or accusatory in any way, and yet it felt like Godzilla's fire breath.

"Why are you sorry?"

I had witnessed Mickey's irritation and annoyance many times in the past, but this was my first time seeing her genuinely *furious*.

"Don't talk to me like I'm stupid!"

Her chair screeched as she leapt to her feet. Altogether, this deviated too far from the norm for the rest of the library to ignore. But naturally(?), she paid them no mind. Instead, she shoved her things back into her bookbag and then snatched up her stationery, crumpled it into a ball, and tossed it back onto the table. Then she shot me one final look, and without another word, turned and loudly stormed off.

Kyou-kun and I dazedly watched her retreat down the stairs. Then we looked at each other and froze for a good ten or twenty seconds.

During that time, we were both probably thinking about a lot of things. Why did Mickey get angry? What did she mean when she said those things? Which part of Kyou-kun's apology offended her? And what were we supposed to do now?

I didn't have the answer to any of these, but before I knew it, my mouth was moving on autopilot.

"Go."

Kyou-kun gave me a questioning look. Evidently I, too, had forgotten we were in a library, among other things. For that brief moment, I forgot I was a loser with no identity. I wasn't supposed to stick my nose in his business, either, but I forgot that, too.

"Go after her! You have to go after her *right now!*"

Ordinarily I never would have wanted to make a scene, and yet I was shouting. Because if I didn't, I was afraid Kyou-kun might not see the light.

He froze for a few more seconds. Then I watched silently as he rose to his feet and ran out after Mickey.

As my shoulders heaved, and everyone stared, I suddenly realized: *Maybe this is it.* I still had the rest of my life ahead of me, but...maybe I was given this power for this one moment in time. After all, the only reason I managed to advise Kyou-kun with full confidence was because I could literally see the arrow shooting out of Mickey toward him.

So I started praying...but this time, I didn't turn around. No, this time I prayed from the very bottom of my heart, sending him all my love and support. Then I rose to my feet, bowed in apology to all the other people nearby, and left the study area.

After personally apologizing to the librarian, I headed down to the first floor. Mickey and Kyou-kun were nowhere to be seen. But just then, the automatic doors slid open, and a familiar face walked in. It was Zuka-kun.

I rushed over to him, and he noticed me immediately. "Nice to see you," he told me with a charming smile.

I wasn't sure if he knew anything about Mickey or Kyou-kun, but either way, his perpetually unchanging attitude made me kind of exasperated.

Dear Kyou-kun,

First, I'd like to write about what happened today at noon—about the feelings I can't tell anyone about. In ten years' time, I'll let you read this, and when you realize how much suffering you've all put me through, I'm going to bully you mercilessly.

Let's start with your beloved Mickey, that clueless Godzilla. Yes, she's an idiot. Really. I would have said it to her face, but I didn't get the opportunity due to...you know...everything else that happened.

And while I'm at it, allow me to be crystal clear: you're an idiot, too. The only reason things went to hell today is because your idiocy and hers were in perfect sync. After we've all grown up, I expect you to make it up to me and Mickey by taking us out for barbecue.

Now, I'll write about YOUR idiocy. Kyou-kun, you underestimate things WAY too much. Lest you forget, your stupid secret forced me to have to apologize to everyone in the whole library. You really think Mickey would figure out how you feel about her? You completely underestimate how dense she is. She's NOT sharp enough to notice that sort of thing. In fact, she's TERMINALLY dense, given the assumptions under which she's operating. Ten years from now, you'll need to have a better grasp of that if you want to avoid any more incidents like today's.

But that's not the only thing you underestimate. This next part is important, so please read carefully: Kyou-kun, you undervalue yourself. Trust me, I get it—whenever you interact with other people, you can't help but think of yourself as a loser. I know what it's like because I'm the same way. But to me, it feels like you don't think anyone would notice if you were gone. That's the difference between you and me: I constantly worry about making people hate me, whereas you're convinced no one cares about you at all. This is an important distinction.

To be clear, I don't have any self-esteem myself. But after making friends with you and Mickey and Looney and Zuka-kun, I've slowly, SLOWLY started to feel like maybe I belong. Hopefully ten years from now I'll have a lot more self-confidence. Likewise, I hope it happens for you as well, because this, too, will help you avoid any more incidents.

After today, I had an epiphany: Just like we each have our own personalities and interests and viewpoints, so too do we have our own secret roles to play. And I've started thinking that maybe our roles all complement each other. I still don't really understand

what I bring to the table, but since you all seem to enjoy having me around, I've decided to believe that there must be something I can offer.

Going forward, I'd really like to repay you all for everything you've done for me. But I feel like "What do I offer to other people?" and "Who am I as a person?" are kind of the same question. Anyway, I did apologize to the entire library for you, so that's something.

Of course, you have a lot to offer me in return. You're the easiest person to talk to out of all my friends. Maybe that sounds like a minor thing, but in my case, I've always had a hard time talking to people, so it means a lot. Everybody's always teasing you, aren't they? Maybe you're so easy to talk to because we know you'll listen. It's a tiny gesture from a big heart. And you're an idiot for not seeing it (among other reasons). But that's exactly why the rest of us have no choice but to support your crush on an even BIGGER idiot.

What happened today at the library really frightened me. I was terrified that the two of you would permanently change everything between the rest of us.

It's been ten years now—do you still remember what Mickey said after the misunderstanding was cleared up? She thought the reason you didn't want us to exchange letters was because you didn't want ME to see it. Why? Because you were looking at me at the time, and also, because you're always so calm and relaxed around me. She thought that you and I were in love, and she didn't want to get in the way, so she was preparing to officially get over you and focus on college entrance exams. She said to me, and I quote, "But then he got all condescending about it, and it pissed me off!"

She was completely wrong!!! What a moron!!! Every time she got all awkward when the subject of romance came up, I figured she was just embarrassed about her feelings for you, but no—she was worried about MY feelings for you! Unbelievable!

But to be fair, this is YOUR fault, too. You saw that memo paper and assumed she knew about your crush on her. Then you wrote a whole screed to her, which she then interpreted as you

arrogantly shooting her down! God, you're so stupid! Please find attached the memo paper in question. Re-read it and WRITHE.

Anyway, sorry this letter is getting kind of long. I wanted to write it while today's excitement was still fresh. I hope you'll read it ten years from now. With all that being said, there's really just one thing I want to say to you, and I'm too shy to say it in person, so here it is. Ready?

I wish you both a lifetime of happiness together!

"Well, I guess that settles that."

The next day, Looney and I walked home together while sharing an ice cream bar. She'd been absent yesterday due to a sudden death in the family, but apparently, she had already heard the whole story from Mickey earlier today.

"You're so lucky. I wish I could have been there," she mused.

"Trust me, it wasn't fun."

"If they fail their entrance exams after all that, I'm gonna laugh so hard."

She'd said something similar a while back. At the time I just shrugged it off, but this time around, I nodded firmly. "Me too."

"Wow, you're evil!"

"I'm just tired of putting up with these idiots all the time."

Looney let out a cackle. "I'm happy, though."

For once I could tell she wasn't joking...although I pretended not to notice the hint of sadness in her voice.

"This is a new beginning. The rest is up to them."

"Yeah."

A new beginning—not just for them, but for the rest of us, too. Starting now, we would all head off down our own paths. It was a scary, exciting time for every one of us; after all, none of us yet knew what lay in store for us ahead.

"Wait..."

"Hmm? What's up, Miyazato-chan?"

"I suddenly feel like I might be able to write that letter to my future self after all."

If I had to guess, it was some kind of eureka moment. As soon as I got home, I was going to grab my pen and start writing. And with that problem finally solved, the ice cream started to taste a whole lot sweeter.

"That reminds me—do you know why Kyou's the only person Miki-chan's never nicknamed?"

"No, why?"

"Heh heh heh. When she told me about it, it *blew my mind*."

My heart thumped in my chest. Then she stuck her tongue out at me.

"Apparently she couldn't think of a good one. Crazy, right? I thought for sure there was some special reason."

"Wha...?! Oh, come on!"

Here I'd started thinking maybe she sensed she might fall for him right from the start, so she instinctively avoided giving him a dorky nickname. But apparently, I was just overthinking it. With every new secret I learned, they kept getting dumber and dumber.

When it came to the things left unspoken, we inevitably ended up exaggerating their complexity in our minds. I had always figured we could probably avoid these misunderstandings if only everyone else had a power like mine, but when I stopped to really think about it, I could easily picture us creating more trouble for ourselves by reading too deeply into the things we saw.

A few minutes later, like all the days that came before, we ultimately arrived at a fork in the road.

Dear Future Me:

Promise me one thing.

No matter what you do, no matter who you do it with, no matter who you become...just promise me that you'll read these

letters with a smile.

Until then, I wish you the very best.

P.S.

Oh, and I hope someday you'll see an arrow that's pointed at you!

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EPILOGUE

4



"DO YOU WANNA KNOW everything about me?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I said. Wanna know my whole life story? All the inner workings of my heart?"

"Ehhhh... That's probably not necessary."

"What do you mean, *probably*?"

"I mean, if you want to talk about it, I'll gladly listen."

"But you don't feel the need to know everything?"

"If I know too much, I might start second-guessing. I'd rather just trust you."

"Oh, you! You're making me blush!"

"As far as I'm concerned, the story started when we first met. It doesn't matter what came before—I only need to know the part that happens afterwards."

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Yes, of course."

"I mean, you're not wrong. The people in my life all had their own lives before me, and maybe they'll have their own lives after me, too. I only get to see a small fraction."

"Well then, just tell yourself that this fraction is the best part."

"Oh, I see. Maybe that's what 'destiny' truly is."

"Yeah, maybe. Maybe you'll get to catch a little glimpse of the parts you missed—in the stories I tell you or shared memories recounted by someone else."

"That sounds fun."

"Likewise, I figure I'll just wait until you feel like telling me."

"Then that's what I'll do, too."

"Because you trust me?"

"Yeah."

"Ugh, now *I'm* blushing. Well, uh, looks like we're here. See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah. See you tomorrow."

"Okay. See you."

"Actually..."

"Huh?"

"I could think of a few things."

"Yeah?"

"Things I don't mind telling you."

"Such as?"

"Well, um..."

"Yeah?"

"I was wondering... Would you wanna come over?"

YORU SUMINO

First started writing while still in high school. Sumino's debut work, *I Want To Eat Your Pancreas*, became a bestseller and took second place in the 2016 Japan Booksellers' Awards. Other literary works include *I Had That Same Dream Again* and *At Night, I Become A Monster*. Enjoys listening to music.



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