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12
My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex
"There's Only One Guy for Me"

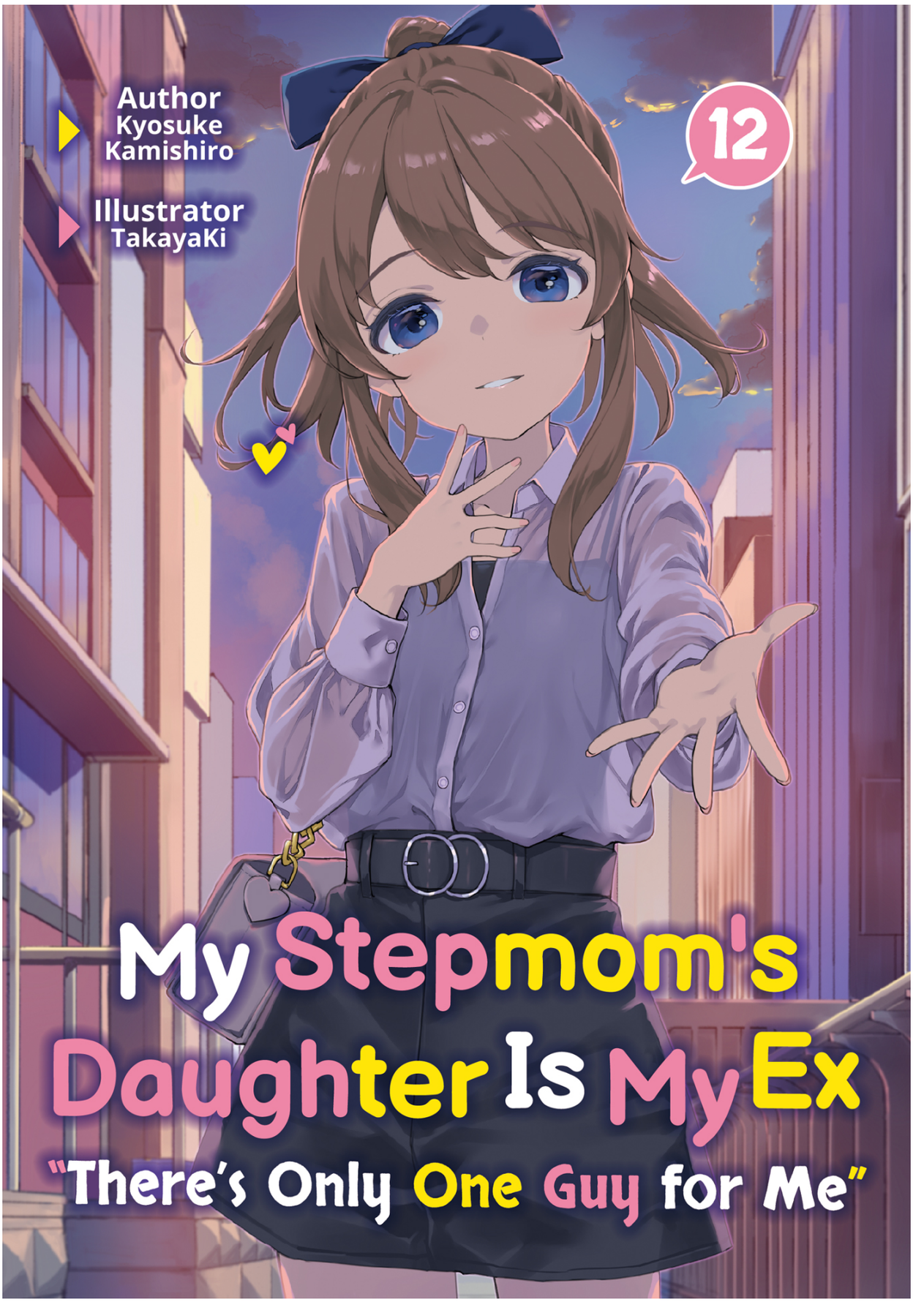

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Table of Contents

Cover

Interlude 1

Chapter 1: Only the Bird Chirping in the Morning Knows What Happened at Night

Interlude 2

Chapter 2: Adolescent Hell Heretic Address to the Gods

Interlude 3

Chapter 3: Paradise in a Closed-Off Garden

Interlude 4

Chapter 4: There’s Only One Guy for Me

Final Chapter: The Door Between Worlds

Afterword

Color Illustrations

Bonus High Resolution Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Interlude 1

Of all the guys in the world... Why did it have to be him? No matter how much I think about it, I can't figure out why. There were all kinds of guys in that same middle school classroom. Takahara was good at any sport he tried. Tsukishima was really chill. Even outside of our classroom, there were some cute underclassmen and reliable upperclassmen. And honestly, even outside of guys, there were a lot of girls that were just as great. For example, Takinaka-senpai was a star in track and Midori-chan looked up to me.

But out of all these people, for some reason, it still *had* to be Kogure Kawanami. We only became friends by pure chance. Sure, he was funny, considerate, and sometimes a gentleman, but there were so many better options than him for me to fall for. But somehow, it was Kogure Kawanami.

I'm sure this plays right into the age-old question "Why do people fall in love?" It is a question with no answer, so instead of spending my time thinking about one, it would've been more productive to work a part-time job or something. Even so, I couldn't stop 22thinking about Kogure Kawanami, no matter how pointless it was, no matter how silly it was—as if I had some lingering feelings for him. He occupied so much space in my head without even deserving it.

Chapter 1

Only the Bird Chirping in the Morning Knows What Happened at Night

Mizuto Irido: In the Midst of a Cultural Summer

It was now summer. The only thing keeping the depressing heat away while listening to an annoying chorus of bugs was the air conditioning. This was what modern summer culture had become. Going to the rivers and mountains had become outdated. Why go anywhere and expend your energy when the most comfortable place to be was your own room? As I armed myself with arguments against leaving the comfort of inside, I tried to recover the energy I'd expended yesterday.

"Ah!" Chikuma yelped from beside me.

We were playing a video game on the TV, and I'd sent his character flying off the stage to win the match.

"Whaddya wanna do?" I asked him casually, my controller in hand and the results screen staring him down.

"Rematch..."

So we reselected our characters and jumped into another round.

It was Obon and, as usual, our family had returned to the Tanesato house in the countryside. Chikuma had grown a little since the last time I'd seen him, but it didn't look like he'd changed too much on the inside—he was still shy and reserved. This only seemed to make him more prideful when it came to the things he actually liked. I could relate to him...both metaphorically and literally, because we were actually related.

Last year, I would have never thought I'd play games with him. I found myself marveling at how what I'd thought to be useless training in games with Isana and Kawanami was now bearing fruit. I was playing games with my little cousin, sitting cross-legged on the tatami, while enjoying the cool air from the air conditioning. I, honestly, was pretty okay with this situation. *Maybe this year I won't*

even get to some of the books and they'll stay unread.

In the next moment, I sent Chikuma's character flying off stage again. *So how're you gonna recover?* I tried to read his strategy and guard the edge when I heard a voice from behind me.

"Mizuto, Chikuma-kun, there you guys are."

"Ah," the two of us said in unison as I whiffed my edge guard and he mistimed his recovery move, leading both of us to die, but since I was a little lower than him, I died first and lost.

As we froze in place, a girl with long, black hair came in between the two of us.

"Natsume-obaachan cut some watermelon. Do you two want any?" Yume asked, smiling as she looked at me.

Meanwhile, Chikuma moved a little away from Yume, embarrassed.

"We'll eat here. This is a duel between men."

"'A duel between men'? We're in the twenty-first century."

"Sorry, a duel between two *humans*."

Yume giggled. "Why is *that* the part that you fix? Trying to be PC?"

For some reason, it seemed that Chikuma was sneaking glances at her. *Is it possible that he's already figured out that we're dating?*

"Well, if you're so concerned about PC culture, then come to the kitchen and get it yourself. It wouldn't be right for women to serve you food, right?"

"Good point."

When I started to stand, I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. *Hm?*

"Give me a sec," I said, looking at my phone and seeing an unexpected name displayed. "Kawanami...?"

LINE messages were normal from him, but an actual phone call? I couldn't even remember the last time he called me. *What could he be calling about?* I accepted the call and brought the phone to my ear.

"Hello?"

On the other end of the phone, I could hear a ragged, desperate voice.

"Irido! Help me!"

Kogure Kawanami: A Guy's Memories

Someone was here. I wasn't sure if I could tell because of the sound of their breathing or the rustling of their clothes, but it was like a pebble had been thrown at me in my half asleep state. *Who is it? Did mom or dad come home?*

Then I heard footsteps moving away from me, but I could hear them clearer now and they were much faster, as if they were running. Then I heard the door open. *Why are they leaving without saying anything? It should've been obvious I was asleep without them having to come all the way to my bed to check...* But then a certain thought crossed my mind, causing me to slowly open my eyes.

My vision was barely coming into focus, so I still couldn't really make out what I should've been able to. I felt like a newborn, only able to recognize movement but not actually see it in detail. There was a ponytail bouncing from side to side and a swish of a skirt. But then the door shut and I was left staring at it in silence for a little.

Minami...? It took me ten seconds longer than it should've to finally realize that the ponytail belonged to Akatsuki Minami. She was my troublesome childhood friend, but that didn't explain why she'd been in my room. *She hasn't been staying over here that much recently, so why'd she come here?*

As I continued to process everything that'd happened, my mind became clearer, and I felt something off. *Why does it feel so breezy?* I couldn't help but note the sensation of my blanket on my bare skin. That's right. Bare skin, without anything in between. I flipped over my blanket and found that I was in nothing but my boxers. I'd been sleeping in nothing but my boxers.

It was already August, so we were right in the middle of summer break. *Did I sleep like this because of how bad summers are here in Kyoto? Or maybe I took off my clothes while sleeping. But more importantly...when and how did I fall asleep?*

As I listened to the sound of the insects chirping in the morning, I sat up in my bed, put my hand on my head, and tried thinking, but I kept coming up blank. I couldn't remember anything about last night. If anything, I felt remnants of a fatigue that sat deep in my chest. *I can't remember last night. I'm naked. Minami was in my room for some reason. From these clues, I can conclude that...*

"Mn... Go ahead..."

“Mm… Ko-kun!”

I fell silent remembering these snippets of sound. Though it was the apex of heat during the summer, I felt my body growing cold to the bone.

No, it’s too early to fall into despair. I wiped off my sweat with a towel and decided to at least get some clothes on. I put on shorts and a T-shirt. While I was at it, I folded up the pajamas that were for some reason messily thrown across the floor and stuffed them into a drawer. As I did, I noticed the garbage can next to my bed. If the situation I feared most had occurred last night, then…

I nervously checked inside and found a receipt from a convenience store, the lid to an instant noodles cup, and some balled up tissues. I picked up the one on top. *I’m pretty sure I blew my nose into this and nothing else. Nothing strange to see here in the garbage can…*

I couldn’t exactly relax yet, though. The most important thing for me to do right now was remember what’d happened last night. I left my room to go into the living room, and there I saw the remnants of a party. There were plates with half-eaten food and opened bags of snacks. This was just kinda how it was when you essentially lived by yourself because both of your parents were pretty much always at work. It wasn’t anything strange for the living room to be messy, but it wasn’t a mess that I’d made by myself.

“Oh, right. Makoto and the others were over.”

I was beginning to remember how I’d had a hangout with some middle school friends. There was a bigger party planned for our full class of twenty tomorrow, and this had been kinda like a mini reunion. I picked up all the empty bags of snacks I could on my way into the kitchen. The sink was filled with cups and utensils that’d been tossed in there like trash. As I thought about how I needed to put them into the dishwasher, I threw the crumbs of the snacks into the bag for recycling. It was only then that I realized something. Inside the bag, I saw an unfamiliar, empty can. I pulled it out and my eyes narrowed as I discovered that it was beer. Since my parents drank in the house, it wasn’t exactly strange for there to be beer here, but it was a different brand than the ones that they drank.

“No… No way.”

Suddenly I was getting an explanation for the fatigue and lack of memories. Though I wasn't exactly an honor student, I wasn't a delinquent. Rakuro, the high school I attended, was a private prep school. If it was ever found out that I drank, even if it was on summer vacation, I could be expelled.

"Did they bring it?"

I put the can back in the bag and then decided that it'd be best to hear this straight from the horse's mouth. But when I went back to my room to look for my phone, I couldn't find it. *Now that I think about it, I usually leave it by my pillow when I sleep, but I didn't see it when I woke up.* I tilted my head before going back to the living room, and saw it lying on the rug we'd taken out for winter but had never put away.

"Oh, there it is."

Why's it here? I picked up my phone and noticed a stain in the rug. *Ugh, so dirty. Did someone spill something here?* Regardless, I went ahead to check my phone. *I'm pretty sure we made a LINE group.*

Shoma: Be there soon
Sota: I got some gifts!

The last message sent was yesterday at 1:42 p.m. *Right. That's 'cause we were meeting here at two...* I thought about it a little bit before sending a new message.

Kogure: Hey, everyone get home okay?

My thinking was that if anyone was at my house late, then one of them might've gotten caught and questioned if they left drunk. After waiting a little bit, I saw one read receipt and then got an answer not too long after.

Yamato: Okay is...a relative term depending on what you mean.
Kogure: Yeah, yeah. So is that a yes?
Yamato: Shoma tried to pee outside and we didn't even drink! Cracked me up!

Dude… Shoma, you're a high schooler. Why are you trying to expose yourself in public? But wait, we didn't drink?

Kogure: You guys didn't drink? I thought you brought booze?
Yamato: You don't remember? Did *you* drink? Sota brought some but we decided not to drink because your high school's uptight. Remember?

So they didn't drink? Does that mean I didn't either? If so, then…

"Why don't I remember anything?"

Even if I couldn't remember what'd happened yesterday, it didn't negate the fact that I was hungry. I was out of bread, so I decided to go out and buy breakfast. My first instinct was to go to the supermarket, but it was just early enough in the morning that they weren't open yet, so I decided to go to a convenience store first. Awaiting me there was a run-in with someone who'd been thinking the same thing.

"Ah…"

"Ah."

Akatsuki Minami was in the snacks section of the convenience store. Her jaw dropped when she saw me and I froze. As I stood there frozen, it dawned on me that if I wanted to know about last night, then I should ask someone who had actually been in my room. I was probably blowing things out of proportion. Up until now there'd been a lot of times things seemed on the risky side, but we'd never crossed that one line. Saying it like that kinda made me annoyed at how much of a coward I sounded like. *I just have to ask her casually about her being in my room this morning.* With that in mind, I decided to start with a greeting, but I closed my mouth no sooner than I opened it upon seeing her sheepishly begin to laugh.

"Ah… Heh heh… Morning, Ko-kun."

"O-Oh yeah. Morning."

Hm? Wait. Did she just call me "Ko-kun?" Usually she called me by my last name. *I mean, sure, sometimes she switches back to how she used to call me, but that's only on special occasions, and when she*

wants to make me remember how we used to date in the past…


Garvette

“You gettin’ breakfast too?”

“Hmm? O-Oh. Yeah.”

“I recommend this one, then. It’s good and healthy.”

As she spoke, I noticed that she had her hand on her back as if she were supporting herself. I was freaking out, but I knew I had to ask her.

“Is there…somethin’ wrong with your back?”

“Oh, well…y’know. Don’t worry, though.”

I felt a cold sweat on my back. The way she was calling me by my old nickname, her pained back, the weird way she was acting…it was all nothing I needed to worry about, right? There was no way that we’d crossed that line, right? I could feel my body temperature drop. I was getting so frightened of that blank in my memories. *What did I do last night?*

I grabbed a random sweet bread and left the convenience store. There was only one person I could think of who knew about the weird circumstances between me and Minami *and* could have a calm, levelheaded conversation with me. At this point, I couldn’t handle this on my own. Just when I felt as if I were being crushed by the overwhelming sense of isolation, I pressed the call button.

“Hello?”

“Irido! Help me!”

Mizuto Irido: Armchair Detective Part 1

“You need my help? With what?”

“I’m freaking out about what I did last night! I can’t remember at all! What did I do?! You’re smart, right?! I bet you know, don’t you?!”

This was a more serious conversation than I’d expected, so just in case, I went outside to sit on the veranda. *Ugh, it’s hot.* Also, I wasn’t sure if it was out of concern or if she was just curious, but Yume had followed me too.

“Listen, how am I supposed to know something that you don’t even know yourself? I’m not a mind reader.”

“But I heard all about how you saw through the fight the girls were having on the school trip.” *Oh, the thing about the guidebooks being stolen? I might’ve stood out more than I should have let myself when I worked through that.* “There’s no way I did anything! I just

need a clue, even a scrap will do! Please!”

“It sounds like you already have your answer, though. Honestly, I thought it was just a matter of time. Congrats. Now take responsibility like a man.”

“No… There’s no way that actually happened… No way…”

It sounded like Kawanami was muttering this like some kind of self-hypnosis. *His condition’s more serious than I thought. Why is he so adamant to not accept this as a possibility?* But as I heard him out, I also thought that there were some strange things—his memory in particular. It didn’t seem like anyone, not even his former classmates, drank any alcohol, so why was there an empty can in his recycling? The first thought that came to mind was that he did actually drink, but I didn’t take Kawanami for the type to have an interest in drinking as a minor. In that case, why was there a blank in Kawanami’s memories of yesterday and who drank the beer?

“Fine. I’ll try to figure out what I can about what you did last night.”

“I owe you…”

There was one part of his story that was bugging me, though. “So, remind me. When you woke up, you were in just your boxers?”

“Yeah.”

“Where’d your clothes from yesterday go? You at least remember what clothes you were wearing yesterday, right?”

“Oh, yeah… Where are they? Wait a sec, I’m gonna go look for them.”

He hung up, so I removed the phone from my ear. *Wow, what a case for an armchair detective to take. I don’t even want to think about whether or not someone I know* did *or* didn’t *go all the way. But judging by the way Minami-san reacted, there probably isn’t really any other explanation, though.*

“Hey…” Yume said with a somewhat displeased look.

“Yeah?”

“I heard a little bit of what you were saying and…I think I may have a clue about what happened.”

“You do?”

Yume looked away, a wry smile filling her face. “Well, I actually kinda got one too…about an hour ago.”

“You got a what? From who?”

“A phone call from Akatsuki-san.” She forced a laugh to try and downplay this before explaining. “So, according to her…”

Akatsuki Minami: A Girl’s Memories

It felt kinda good. It was warm, smooth, and a little squishy… I felt more at ease than when I fell asleep inside a kotatsu and maybe even happier. Why was I so happy? I slowly opened my eyes trying to find out why, and as I did, I finally noticed someone’s soft breathing as they slept. *Am I sleeping with someone?*

When my eyes opened, there was Ko-kun’s face as he slept. But that wasn’t where the surprises ended. I could see his clavicle and his chest. This entire time, the thing I’d been clutching like a body pillow was actually Ko-kun’s bare upper body. *Well, of course it felt good.* I was just in a sports bra and panties, so there were hardly any barriers between my skin and his. Everywhere felt good. *Oh, I get it. This is a dirty dream.*

Am I really that sexually frustrated? But as I thought of this in my stupor, my body began moving by instinct. *Well, if this is a dream, then there’s no problem with me enjoying it, right?* I took my finger and poked his nipple, which had been in my field of view.

“Mm…”

Ko-kun groaned, still asleep. His body twisted as if he were being tickled. *Oh, he’s not waking up? It’s not my fault if he’s this defenseless right? He’s practically begging to be messed with.* I moved my lethargic body underneath the blanket, covering his body with mine to look closely at his sleeping face. *Hmm…isn’t this a little too high resolution for a dream?*

Now that I think about it, between me feeling his chest, his toned muscles, his slightly pained face while he sleeps, his groans, his hair, and my excitement…there’s a few too many real *things in here to be a dream. Uh…is this actually real?*

I slowly, very slowly, left the bed and looked at myself. I was wearing my usual sports bra and panties. Then, I looked down at Ko-kun and saw that he was in nothing but a pair of light-blue boxers. We were just two people in nothing but their underwear in bed. Suddenly, I felt blood rushing to my head. *Did we do* it*?!* Up until now I’d kept tight control on myself to prevent things from ever getting this far, but had I finally snapped? Did I go into

berserk mode all without even having any conscious memory of doing it?

But more importantly, how did this happen? I felt myself panicking, so I quickly put on my clothes and flew out of his house. And into mine, diving into my bed and hiding there. How did this happen?! I clutched my head. I couldn't remember at all. It was like my memories of yesterday had been removed from my brain. I could at least remember eating dinner, but anything after that was as empty as a blank page. *What happened?! Oh my god, this is freaky!*

"Wh-Wh-What do I do? What do I do?!"

After a while of pointlessly repeating this, I found my phone on my desk. I felt relieved that it was here because I was worried that I might've left it at Kawanami's. I stood up and started my new routine, this time with phone in hand. *What do I do? What do I do?!* My mind had entered a loop. *What do I do? What do I do?! If it happened, I at least wish I remembered! What a waste! Wait, no that's not what the takeaway here is! What do I do? What do I* do*?! Maybe I* am *sexually frustrated... What do I do? What do I—*

"What do I do, Yume-chan?!"

"This is how we're starting the morning?!"

Before I knew it, I'd called Yume-chan. She was just about the only one I could talk to about Kawanami. I explained the situation to her, losing my mind a little more with every word. *Now that I think about it, maybe this isn't the kind of topic I should be talking to Yume about, but also I'm at my wit's end here!*

"Um...well, are you okay?"

"Huh? Wh-What do you mean?"

"Well, if you did *that* and you don't even remember, then maybe you need to be prepared for...you know..."

"Oh! You're so right! Maybe I can tell if he shot it inside me! I'll go check!"

"Can you *please* not scream that at the top of your lungs this early in the morning?!"

I went to the bathroom and checked. I'd heard stories about girls still having some drip out even the day after, so it was totally possible for some to still be there after one measly night, but...

"I don't think anything happened..."

"Why do you sound kinda disappointed? Can you worry about

your body a little more?”

“I also checked to see if I have any hickeys, but I don’t have any.”

“So doesn’t that mean that nothing happened?”

“Then why were we sleeping naked with each other?”

“Hmm… I wonder why…” I was just as stumped as Yume-chan and tilted my head with her. “Was there anything else you noticed that was different than usual?”

“Hmm, I dunno…” I drank a cup of water with the phone still at my ear, and that was when I realized something. “There’s a strange taste in my mouth…” Suddenly I was met by silence from Yume-chan. “What’s wrong? Oh…” After hearing her go silent, I realized what I’d implied with my words. “You’ve really gotten dirty, Yume-chan. I really wanna beat up Irido-kun now.”

“Wha— I didn’t say anything!”

I didn’t hate dirty girls, but seeing how a pure girl like Yume-chan had been corrupted by her boyfriend didn’t exactly spark joy. *But also, I don’t hate it.* I wasn’t sure if it was because I’d drunk some cold water, but I felt a lot calmer.

“I guess there’s no point continuing the kinda gossip you see in those special dirty columns in girls’ magazines.”

“Well, what do you wish happened? Something? Or nothing?”

Hmm…I’m not sure. If something had happened, I probably should be somewhat happy. It would mean that he finally accepted me. But the fact that I couldn’t remember such an important moment pissed me off.

“It’s complicated… If I could remember even a little bit about what happened, I could use it to tease him…”

“Then why don’t you pretend like you do remember?” Yume-chan said in a voice that sounded a little annoyed. “If you act awkward around him, you’ll probably be able to tell what happened last night from his reaction.”

“That’s it!”

Everyone needs a smart friend like Yume-chan.

Mizuto Irido: Armchair Detective Part 2

“So…” As I sat on the outdoor hallway, bathed in the rays of the summer sun, I finished listening to what essentially sounded like a

special segment about a dirty experience someone had, and decided to sum up what it all meant. “Minami-san acted like something happened in order to make Kawanami notice her, but she doesn’t actually remember anything that happened last night?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And this was all your idea?”

“Yes, sir…” Yume said, shrinking her shoulders uncomfortably. “I mean, how was I supposed to know that Kawanami-kun wouldn’t remember anything either? I thought if she could play coy, she could get the information out of him…”

“Well, in that case, the weird way he was acting definitely didn’t help clear anything up…”

“Akatsuki-san might think that they actually did something…”

Each of them was trying to discern the truth based off of the other’s reactions, but this only served to reinforce their preconceived notions about what’d happened.

“This is gonna get really complicated…” I said.

“Just don’t tell them the truth too soon, okay? Akatsuki-san’s doing her best right now.”

“Well, fortunately, it won’t be too hard to clear up the misunderstanding anytime we want.”

It was good that we were third parties in this. From our objective stance, we could tell them how things actually went down, and get rid of any misconceptions they had. I could only imagine how annoying things would be for anyone not in this position. Just as I was thinking this, my phone rang. Apparently, Kawanami was calling me again.

“Hello? Find your clothes?” I asked.

“Yeah, they were in the washing machine.”

“They were washed?”

“Probably. Not that I really remember…”

“Then how about this, is your head itchy?”

“Huh? Why?”

“Checking to see if you took a bath last night.”

“Well, now that you mention it…yeah, it’s kind of itchy. I probably didn’t take one yesterday.”

In that case… I glanced at Yume and noticed that she was wearing a doubtful look.

“Sorry Kawanami, but I’m not coming up with anything. I’ll call you again once I get my thoughts in order.”

“Please do! My sanity is on the line here!”

I waited until his plea ended before hanging up.

“Did you think of something?” she asked.

“Kawanami didn’t take a bath last night, but his clothes were in the washing machine and were probably washed. In that case, the washing machine had already run by the time he checked it. That would mean that it ran last night.”

“And…?”

“Try thinking about what kind of situation would lead to that. Kawanami took his clothes off, put them in the washing machine, and went around in nothing but his boxers instead of taking a bath.”

“Sure, but… What if the clothes got there because he and Akatsuki-san went a little crazy?”

“Kawanami saw her leaving fully clothed, meaning that *her* clothes were in his room. That means that when she entered his room, she had her clothes on. It sounds too ridiculous for Kawanami to be in nothing but his boxers and for Minami-san to be fully clothed.”

“True… Not much of a mood setter.”

“But who knows, really? They certainly don’t since they can’t remember anything. At the very least, at this point in time, I don’t think anything indecent happened between the two of them.”

To be honest, I couldn’t care less if they did or didn’t do anything with each other. What did interest me was that they both couldn’t remember last night. What could’ve happened for them to not remember anything? Alcohol couldn’t have been the sole cause of that, and from what Kawanami said, there was only one empty can. Sure, they were minors and didn’t have experience drinking, but there shouldn’t have been any way that they got so drunk from one can of beer that they forgot everything. At the very least, one of them had lost their memories from something other than alcohol…

“Hmm… I see…” Yume said, tilting her head, not really fully accepting my explanation. “I feel like there’s something off, though.”

“Yeah, me too. Something’s not adding up…” Specifically, there

was something weird about what they both had said. Something big.

“But, well, for the time being, we’re saying that nothing happened between them, so…” Yume mused innocently. “They’re acting awkward for no reason?”

“To be clear, that’s your fault. You know that, right?”

There were some things that were better left unsaid in this world.

Kogure Kawanami: What a Guy and a Girl Do When They Cross a Line Part 1

While I was home, I couldn’t help but think about what *she* was doing on the other side of this wall. This might have sounded like a thought born from some kind of bittersweet teenage romance, but for me it came from the fact that I had a huge problem. I couldn’t really focus on what to do, so I thought about going out, as people do during their summer breaks. Unfortunately, today of all days, I didn’t have any plans…or so I thought. Suddenly, the group chat between my friends who came over yesterday started to move.

Yamato: Anyone down to get ramen?

I immediately said yes to Yamato. Unfortunately, Sota and Shoma already had plans, but Makoto decided to join since I was going. For the time being, I put the mystery about my memory loss on hold, hopped on my bike, and went to Kawaramachi-sanjo.

I parked it at the usual lot, where parking was free for three hours, and went to our meeting place. Unlike Irido, thinking wasn’t my forte and wouldn’t get me anywhere closer to an answer, so I decided to forget about Minami and focus instead on hanging out with my friends. Or at least that was what I thought about doing, but…

“Oh, there he is. Kawanami!”

At the place we were meeting, I saw Yamato and Makoto, as well as two girls who hadn’t been a part of our plans, and…Akatsuki Minami. *Why?!* Seeing me freeze up, Yamato chuckled lightheartedly.

“We ran into them while waitin’ for you. Apparently they just finished havin’ a reunion of their own not too far away, and when I asked if they wanted to come with us to Ichijoji for ramen, they said yeah.”

“I’ve always been interested in *the* ramen street.”

“Yeah, and it’s hard to go there as girls, you know?”

“Totally,” the three girls, including Minami, said in unison.

These girls had also been middle school classmates with Minami and me. Though she might have hung out with meeker girls like Irido-san and Higashira now that we were in a private prep school, our middle school had been a public one, and these two were very gyaru-like. That being said, they were just *loud* like gyarus. The way they dressed and did their makeup was more mature and focused on beautifying. I could only imagine how great this situation felt for Yamato, since he didn’t have a girlfriend, but for me, I couldn’t have felt worse.

“You’ve really changed a lot since middle school, Makoto.”

“Y-You think so?”

“Yeah, in a totally good way!”

It didn’t seem like Makoto was exactly displeased either.

Yamato came over to me with a smirk and put his arm on my shoulder. “You’re still friends with Minami-san, right? Perfect timing, don’t you think?”

“Yeah…”

That was all I could say. Of course I couldn’t tell him how awkward it was to see her right now because there was a chance that we *did it* last night. When Yamato went back to join the rest of the group, I felt someone poking my back. When I turned around, I saw Minami with a cryptic smile looking up at my face.

“Sorry about crashing your bro time. Don’t worry about *that* too much, okay?”

“Right…”

Even the most innocuous words sounded like they had hidden meaning. *What am I not supposed to worry about? Them joining us? Or about last night?*

“Let’s get goin’! I’ve worked up an appetite for ramen after all that talking!” the girl with black hair said.

And just like that, our group of six took off toward the bus station. It was about thirty minutes to get to Ichijoji by bus. *As long*

as my group and her group sit in separate seats, I'll be good… But just as I was thinking that, I felt a cold hand wrap around mine. I reacted too late and that'd created an opening for someone to intertwine her fingers with mine, our hands tight together as if we were dating. When I finally turned to the side, I saw Minami looking at me, giggling deviously. I already knew my course of action.

I let go of her hand and moved to be with the rest of the group. *She was totally trying to have the thrill of doing something naughty without anyone noticing. That's exactly what would happen between two people who crossed that line but nobody else knows it, so they keep their flirting a secret to be considerate!* My mind was a mess. My heart was beating out of control. I wasn't sure why it was beating so hard anymore. Was it because I was afraid of being discovered? Or afraid of my reaction to Minami?

Akatsuki Minami: What a Guy and a Girl Do When They Cross a Line Part 2

After thirty minutes on the bus, we arrived at the Ichijoji Sagarimatsucho bus station and headed toward the ramen street while checking our phones for directions. This area was at the edge of the city of Kyoto, meaning that we could see the mountains on the eastern border of the city. I was pretty sure that the Gozan no Okuribi, where they lit flames to spell out Japanese characters, happened there. I was pretty sure I had even climbed the nearby Mt. Daimonji when I was in elementary school.

The vibe of the town wasn't quite countryside, but it wasn't really as bustling as a city either. It was pretty firmly suburban. The huge pachinko place right at the entrance of the ramen street only helped reinforce that vibe.

At first glance it looked like a normal two-lane road. It had neither flashy neon signs nor so many people that it was hard to get anywhere. But looking at the types of stores here, I saw a ramen place, a restaurant, a ramen place, a secondhand bookstore, a ramen place, another ramen place, and so on. But also most of these restaurants had so many customers that there were lines out the door.

"So where we goin'? Where we goin'?"

“Oh look at this one. It looks real nice inside.”

“But, like, don’t ramen places that’re a little beaten up have more charm?”

My group gathered and checked places on their phones. Kawanami’s group also got together and seemed like they were debating where to go. But amid that, I could feel a pair of eyes frequently glancing at me. It was like he wanted to stop, but couldn’t. *Aw, he can’t take his eyes off of me. If you keep stealing glances at me like that, though, the others’re gonna notice, you know? Aw, Ko-kun’s such a cutie. You care so much about the girl you slept with? Maybe you’re remembering what happened last night?*

Judging by how skittish he was acting, there was no doubt that we did it last night. I was absolutely convinced that there was no other explanation. It sucked that I couldn’t remember any of our night together, but it was like we had finally moved forward from the purgatory our relationship had been in. *I’m gonna be optimistic here and take this as a good thing!*

Five months ago on White Day, I realized that Kawanami’s allergies to girls with a thing for him had pretty much been cured. Before, whenever he felt affection from a girl, he’d break out in hives and sometimes even barf. But through exposure therapy, I had been able to help him get past that without him even realizing.

But even so, just immediately trying to close the distance between us might’ve resulted in him relapsing. After all, the cause of that allergy was a deep trauma inflicted by none other than yours truly. That was why my plan had been to observe him while slowly getting him used to being cured, but to my great surprise, we’d somehow crossed the one line that I had been trying to make us not cross, all without me knowing.

I had no clue how that happened, but now that it’d happened, it seemed that I could probably ask him out anytime I wanted without having to worry. Then we’d be able to let out the smoldering feelings we’d been holding back for an entire year and I’d burn it into our brains. *Heh heh heh. I’m gonna use this chance to turn him on. Now that I don’t have to worry about that allergy of his, I’m* invincible*!*

After a while, we finally decided on a ramen place and stood in line. When we got inside, I casually took a seat right next to

Kawanami. While I was looking at the menu, I made sure to press my body against his a bit.

"Hmm… What to get…"

At the same time, I moved my hand across Kawanami's thigh.

Kawanami yelped and made a face of surprise, but he immediately tried to look normal again. *Yeah, that's right. Act normal. Everyone's looking.*

"Yeah, I think I'll go with the tonkotsu, but I dunno what I'll do about the marinated soft-boiled egg. What do you think, Kawanami?"

"What's the point of asking me? Do I look like I know how hungry you are?"

Kawanami kept his poker face while I rubbed his inner thigh. *How's this? Feels good, doesn't it? You want me to touch you more, right? You want to touch me too, don't you? I'm good to go for days on end!*

At this point, my head was filled with dirty thoughts, but that was okay, wasn't it? What's better than girls with dirty minds? *I'm gonna show you that girls with big tits don't have a monopoly on being sexy!*

Kogure Kawanami: We're Friends, Right?

I sighed as I stood in front of the urinal. After finishing our ramen, it was still a bit too early to go home, so we decided to go to a karaoke place we found nearby. While the girls were excitedly picking songs, I ran to the bathroom to hide.

She's…dangerous. If she had an aura, it would be a horny one. Her eyes were like those of a predator stalking her prey. This was the lust beast version of Akatsuki Minami I hadn't seen since middle school. Despite how cute, cheerful, and innocent she looked, she was an unstoppable ball of lust once you got her rolling, and I was…probably the one who lit that fire last night. *Dammit! Seriously, what the hell did I do last night?! Did I really fuck up?!*

As I stood there, cradling my head, the door to the bathroom opened and Yamato came in.

"Hey."

"Hey…"

Yamato stood in front of the urinal two down from mine. Since I was done, I went to the sink to wash my hands. As I was distracted by the cold of the water, Yamato started talking.

"You're dating Minami-san, aren't you?"

I splashed water from surprise and I frantically moved my hands away.

"Wh-What makes you say that?"

"Well, the two of you seem kinda close despite being supposedly broken up."

Did I ever tell Yamato we broke up? I mean, he knew that we dated because we were in the same middle school, but... Oh wait, I must've told him yesterday.

"Well, it's like...we're not dating, but we live next to each other, so we can't be at odds forever, you know?"

"Is that how it is? Yeah, I don't get it."

"Once you get a girlfriend and break up with her, you'll get it."

"Dude, why do you gotta say it like that?"

Looks like I got him off my back for now. She really needs to be more conscious of who's watching. I put my hands under the air dryer while Yamato washed his hands. We left the bathroom at the same time, and waiting outside the door for us was Makoto.

"Hey, don't ditch me!"

"What's your problem? Can't be around girls or something?" Yamato teased.

Makoto looked away awkwardly. "I'm not good with them... I never know what to talk about."

I chuckled lightly. "Makoto...you may look different, but you haven't changed one bit."

"Shaddup!"

Makoto had always been bad with more talkative girls and usually only ever hung out with us because of that. The unease I felt from Minami's actions was somewhat soothed by nostalgia as I thought back to middle school. *Man, I feel so at peace. I thought Makoto would have changed after starting high school, but I guess it's only the outside that's different.*

Makoto seemed to be looking at my expression. "So, Kogure... I heard a bit of the conversation from earlier."

"Hm?"

"You don't have to hide it if you're dating Minami-san."

“Huh?”

“Yeah, exactly!” Yamato said, putting his arm around my shoulder. “Don’t be so cold! What’s to hide anyway? Everyone in our middle school knew the two of you were dating.”

“We’re not! We really broke up! We’re just childhood friends now!”

“‘Just childhood friends’… Damn, I’d love to say that myself one day,” Yamato said.

“Shaddup…”

I was used to getting teased like this, but right now it hit a little too hard because there was a high chance Minami and I weren’t just childhood friends anymore.

“Well, I guess if you say you’re just friends, then okay,” Makoto said, chuckling lightly. “Anyway, if you need to talk to anyone, I’m there for you. We’re friends, right?”

“You’re the last person I’d ever wanna go to for help, Makoto.”

“Hey, come on!”

As we chatted, we walked back down the hall to the karaoke room. If I could at least prove that nothing happened last night then I could boldly deny our relationship. *Come on, Irido… You’ve gotta have come up with something already, right?*

Mizuto Irido: A Statement from Someone Experienced

The sound of sizzling meat made the rounds over the riverside. As the Tanesatos had their yearly barbecue, I was reading a book as I always did. Thanks to the rays of the sun being a little softer today, the shadows from the tree weren’t too dark, so I could still read.

“Mizuto?” I heard the sound of gravel under sandals, and I looked up.

Standing there was Yume, wearing a swimsuit and a light jacket. She was wearing the same white bikini she’d worn during the Okinawa trip, increasing her skin exposure a little from last summer’s trip here.

She’d bought this bikini to wear under the wetsuit during the Okinawa trip, and though it should’ve been obvious due to the jump in skin exposure, it showed me just how much more self-confidence Yume had now. It was like she’d actually become bold,

unlike last year when she had just been forcing herself to act like that. Then again, it could have just been that she'd grown physically bigger too.

She didn't look too different from Madoka-san now, although the former's slimmer waist might have given her the edge. Yume brought over a paper plate for the both of us and knelt on the blanket I was sitting on.

"Were you thinking of something dirty right now?" she asked.

"Of course not."

"You sure? I felt a stare."

The plate she put next to me was filled with sauced meat and vegetables. "I was never able to figure out what you were thinking before because you don't show what you're thinking, but I've figured you out now."

"That goes for me too."

"Yeah, true," Yume said, sitting next to me. She tilted her neck to see what I was reading.

"If you're so interested in what I look like in this bikini, want me to put it on for you sometime?"

"Yeah. When our parents aren't around."

"Oh my, what are you planning to do to me?"

"What would you like me to do? You should think about that while you still have the chance."

After all, I wasn't confident I'd have the self-restraint to take the time to listen to her requests in the heat of the moment. I'd always thought that I was the type of guy with a lower libido, but after taking the next step with Yume, I had been forced to realize that I wasn't. I wasn't sure if I'd always been like this or if Yume was just too hot. I'd let the history books decide that.

"Don't get too crazy, kids..."

"Whoa!"

Yume screamed as if she'd seen a ghost, but I silently turned around to see Madoka-san looking at us with suspicious eyes.

"You're just gonna get blue-balled if you flirt too much since there's no good time to let all that out here..."

"Wh-What are you talking about?"

"Don't even try to do it outside, okay? Even if there's nobody to get on your case here, the bugs'll definitely get you."

"S-Seriously, what are you talking about?!" Yume stammered

with a burning blush.



Madoka-san snickered at her reaction. I hadn't seen her since the cultural festival, but even without us saying anything, she somehow knew that Yume and I were dating. I wasn't sure if Yume had told her or if she was just that perceptive.

"Well, jokes aside, you two really should be more careful. It's not too hard to tell when a guy and girl have done the deed."

"We're already being careful, though..." Yume said.

"You say that, but I don't really think so. Especially you, Yume-chan. You're constantly flashing these horny eyes at him."

"H-Horny..."

No argument there.

"I know it's fun and new, but you gotta be more reserved than normal couples."

"I-It's not exactly *new*..."

"Oh? So you've been like this for months, then?"

"I'll shut up now..." Yume's head dropped.

Yeah, that's for the best. When it comes to this topic, Madoka-san has a leg or two up on us.

"Man, this feels nostalgic," she said, putting her elbow on her knee and resting her head in her hand. "When I was in high school, every day was like this, but now, without the power of alcohol, it's hard to have fun like this. Like last time, I drank so much I woke up at my boyfriend's place. I couldn't remember a thing. Hilarious, right?"

I really don't want to hear about this kind of story from a relative of all people... Wait, I heard a similar story.

"When that happens, do you know that you lost your memories because you drank?" I asked.

"Pretty much," Madoka-san said. "Usually if you drink that much, you'll get a hangover—oh, but my friend's a total lightweight and might black out after a single drink. When they wake up the next day, they don't remember a thing. Apparently, they find out if they drank too much by asking the friends they drank with or from the aftertaste in their mouth."

"The aftertaste?" Yume asked.

Just like her, this word caught my attention too because I'd heard something similar recently.

"I wonder what the two of you'll be like. I can't even imagine."

"I think Yume'll be able to hold her liquor. We had a cake with

alcohol in it, and she ate it with no problem. Yuni-san can drink like a fish too."

"Oh, true. That lady can keep up with the drinkers in our family, so she must have a high tolerance. Going off that, you'll probably be about the same. Oh, but what if when you drink too much you become real cuddly?"

"Heh heh, that'd be fun."

Madoka-san and Yume grinned while looking at me. *Ugh...*

"Well, I'll stop being a third wheel and go back to the adults' table," Madoka-san said, standing up. "Have fun! Oh, but not *too* much fun."

She waved goodbye and went back to where the adults were having fun and drinking. The sky eventually turned orange as the sun set, and though I couldn't look at the time, it was most likely after six. I'd completely forgotten about it until now, but there was something that was bothering me about what I'd heard from Kawanami this morning after speaking with Madoka-san.

"Yume, don't you think it's about time we tell Kawanami and Minami-san the truth?"

"Yeah... I'm sure she's already done flirting with him. Oh, but just make sure you don't tell Kawanami-kun that Akatsuki-san was acting like that on purpose."

"I'll only tell him my conclusion from what he told me: that I don't think they did *anything*. That good?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

I slipped my phone out of my jacket pocket and called Kawanami.

Akatsuki Minami: The End to a Fleeting Dream

"Bye! See you guys tomorrow!"

"See ya!"

After taking the bus back from Ichijoji, we disbanded for the day. Now, it was just Kawanami and me, and we were going together to the lot where he'd left his bike. After getting it, we walked together to go back home.

"Let me ride on the back," I said.

"You wanna get stopped by the cops? Besides, don't you have your own bike?"

Oh? He's acting quite cold. I was expecting a more heated response from him. Truth be told, I'd left my bike in the same lot as his, so I paid the fee and took it back. It was free for three hours, but after that, it was a hundred yen—which was a steal, especially since getting around Kyoto was best by bike.

I rode my bike next to Kawanami, and gradually, the atmosphere from the Kawaramachi shopping district grew farther and farther away as we entered the calmer business district. *Now it's time for the fun to start!* I wasn't sure whether Kawanami's place or mine would be better, but either way, I'd find a reason so that we'd be together. *I've been working up his sexual appetite all day, and I know that the instant we're behind closed doors, he'll explode. It means that I'll be at our class reunion tomorrow fully aware of the dirty deeds Kawanami and I do tonight, but maybe that's better. I'm so excited!*

When we got back to our apartment building, we parked our bikes in the bike lot and took the elevator together. The entire ride was spent in silence, but if anything, it felt like we were in the mood. My heart was beating hard. *Cute bra? Check. Cute panties? Check.* Yesterday had happened out of the blue so I'd been wearing a very unsexy sports bra, but this time, I was fully prepared. *I'm sexy today!*

When the elevator doors opened, we silently stepped out and walked down the hallway until we reached our respective doors. *This is it!* I tugged longingly at his sleeve.

"My parents aren't home today…" I cooed, making sure that my voice was cute. "Could we…hang out a bit more?"

And that's game, set, match! There's no guy out there that could resist after hearing this! I'm sorry for teasing you all day, but now that we're home you don't have to hold back anymore! But also, I *can't hold back anymore!* I looked up at him as I waited for his nostrils to flare and him to nod, but…

"Heh," he snorted. "Sorry, but my parents *are* home today. See ya."

Then he shut the door behind him. There wasn't even a chance for me to stop him before he disappeared. *Uh…huh? That's not supposed to happen. What happened? This is definitely* the *day, isn't it? Why am I standing out here by myself?*

I opened the door to my empty, cold apartment, fully confused.

My body was ruthlessly sobered up by the fact that I was alone here. *What the heck just happened?! He was* definitely *reacting to me all day! He was freaking out so much! Why's he suddenly all calm now?! Did I have to rile him up more? Did I have to tempt him more? Was I not tantalizing enough? Should I have been more direct?! I should make him wanna do it right now!*

I used my rage and horniness as fuel to take off my clothes, toss them onto the floor, go into my room, and take a ton of dirty pictures of myself. *I look hot in my underwear. I look hot naked. Hmm, or would it actually look more hot if I was in clothes? Where's my skirt? Let's put it on and roll it up to make it shorter!*

By the time I was done, my phone's memory was filled with my dirty selfies, and finally, I had calmed down. *What am I even doing?* If a heap of sex appeal was all I needed to return us to how we used to be, then it wouldn't have taken this long. It was only because I didn't try to be the same crazy person I was in middle school that we had been able to get slowly closer.

Sheesh... Now that I was back in my right state of mind, everything just seemed stupid. *What was I getting so excited about by myself? There's no way that our problems got magically solved without me even knowing it. I'm sure that nothing even happened last night, although I am curious why Kawanami suddenly started acting calmly again...*

"I should pick up my clothes..."

I left my room and went to the living room where I'd taken off my clothes. As I bent over and reached to get my blouse, I suddenly remembered something. *This morning, I picked up clothes on the floor in the living room too...*

"Huh?"

And then I remembered everything that happened last night.

Mizuto Irido: The Identity of the Hang-up

Through the darkness of night, I could hear a chorus of frogs in the distance. I'd already taken a bath and was now relaxing—chilling, one might say. As I sat under the light in the old, Japanese-style room, I silently turned the pages of my book. I was sharing a room with my dad, but he and the other adults were all still partying their guts out. As a result, in addition to the frogs, I

could hear their raucous laughter. Though it would be unbearably loud if I was there with them, at this distance, it was the perfect amount of background noise. But through all the noise, I heard footsteps approaching.

"Mizuto, you there?"

The moonlight cast Yume's silhouette onto the sliding door.

"Yeah."

After hearing my response, she quietly opened the door. She was wearing her usual pajamas, and since she had just gotten out of the bath, there was steam faintly coming off her skin, and her long, sleek black hair was shining.

"Can you help me dry my hair? I would ask mom or Madoka-san, but they're both...busy."

"Sure. Come here," I said, putting the book I was reading down.

Yume shut the door behind her, a sheepish smile on her face, and then came over to me and gave me the hair dryer. She sat down with her back to me while I plugged in the hair dryer and turned it on. Her elegant hair swayed like the long leaves of a willow tree as the hot air blew on it.

I ran my fingers through her hair, getting rid of any tangles I came across. Her hair was so smooth and softer than silk, it felt calming to touch like this. *This honestly isn't too bad.* I'd spent almost all of the last year in turmoil, but now it was the exact opposite. I felt as stable as an old tree with a thick trunk. That sense of security was strengthened with Yume by my side, but sometimes she made my heart beat faster too. Honestly, I was in an ideal situation.

The sound of the frogs once again reached my ears, and peaceful silence filled the old room. There was no reason for either of us to fear a silence between us, though.

"How's that?" I asked, turning off the hair dryer.

"Yeah, it's good," she said, feeling her hair before suddenly leaning back against me.

I could feel the warmth from her delicate body and the faint heat from her hair.

"Warm?" she asked.

"Yeah, kinda."

I wrapped my arms around her waist, and she rested her head against my shoulder. I felt the silky warmth of her hair against my

cheek. I began to hold her even tighter against me and she turned so that our cheeks were touching. From there, I simply turned my neck a bit to kiss her.

"Did you forget Madoka-san's warning?" she asked, a bemused look in her eye.

"I'm not going too far."

"You think so? Mm…"

This time, I gently nibbled on her ear that was peeking out through her hair. Yume's body twisted as if it tickled.

"How was your second time coming to the family reunion?" I asked in a lowered voice, keeping my mouth by her ear.

"I think I feel more comfortable here now… Mm. Last year was pretty crazy, so it was hard to know what to do, but… Hnn. I think both mom and I feel more part of the family now… Mmn. Stop doing that while I'm talking…"

She was complaining, but Yume was the type who was fun to tease because she didn't actually hate what I was doing.

But that being said, I couldn't go too overboard here. I lessened my grip on her waist so I wasn't clinging to her as much.

"Ow!" Yume said, looking up, wincing.

"Oh, sorry. Did I get your hair?"

"Yeah, I should tie it up."

"I'll help."

Yume split her hair into two bunches and put one over each of her shoulders. She tied the right side with a scrunchie, while I did the left side. It was a little hard to do from my current position behind her, though, because our arms got in the way of each other. *Girls with long hair really have it rough. It's always a whole thing to wash their hair and tie it up. I can't even imagine having to do this day in and day out. It sounds so annoying, I couldn't deal…*

"Oh."

Ponytail.

"Hm? Something wrong?" Yume asked, turning around after noticing that my hands had stopped.

"Ponytail…" I was stunned, but I was able to choke out the word.

"Huh?"

"When do you use a ponytail?"

I figured it out. I know what was bugging me about what I heard

from Minami-san's and Kawanami's stories. This is the hang-up. I moved away from Yume and frantically got my phone while stating what was probably obvious.

"There's no way she slept with a ponytail…"

Kogure Kawanami: Ponytail and Skirt

I was currently having a nice, calm evening, and it was all thanks to Irido. When we were leaving Ichijoji after finishing karaokeing, I got a call from Irido, and I heard his theory. Judging from the situation, he said that there was a low chance that anything happened between Minami and me. The way he explained everything made it very easy for me to accept his theory. This left me feeling very relieved and free, allowing me to regain my composure.

Though I still wasn't sure what had happened to my memories from last night, I was just happy to know that nothing had happened between us. Most likely, the way she'd been trying to lead me on today was just her usual exposure therapy. *I mean, she's not always going to announce that she's doing it ahead of time.*

After eating dinner and then taking a bath, I refreshed myself with a cool, citrus soda. But as I did, I heard my phone ringing. *Is someone calling about the reunion tomorrow?* I took out my phone and was surprised to see that it was Irido again. *Hm? What're you doing, man? Just forget about me and do some fun things with Irido-san.* I pressed the accept button and brought my phone to my ear.

"Hello? What's up?"

"Kawanami, I want you to check something for me." I was taken aback by the serious tone in his voice. *What's going on?* "I want you to look on top of your desk, by your pillow, or under your pillow, under your bed, your covers—just somewhere around there for something that isn't usually there."

"Huh? What're you talking about?"

"If it's what I'm thinking, then it'll be something that you definitely don't own, and it contradicts something you said."

I have absolutely no clue what he's talking about, but judging by how serious he's acting, I'll listen to him. I went to my room and checked around my desk where my laptop was, but of course, I didn't find anything out of the ordinary.

I mean, I'm pretty sure I would notice if there was something in my room I definitely don't own. So then that just leaves around my bed. Since it was summer, I was using a thinner blanket and began shaking it, but nothing really came out. I knelt on the ground, checking under the bed, but I didn't see anything. Finally, I looked under my pillow, and...

"Oh."

I found something underneath my pillow...

"I found a purple ribbon."

"Is there a hair tie too?"

"Yeah, with the ribbon..."

"I thought as much," Irido said.

This wasn't something that I hadn't seen before, but it was definitely something I didn't own. *This is what* she *uses to tie her hair.*

"Kawanami...I'm gonna say something kinda frightening," Irido continued. "You told me that when you woke up, you saw a ponytail and a skirt, right?"

"Y-Yeah... I was kinda half asleep, but I remember that much at least..."

"So, Yume actually spoke with Minami-san, and she said that when she woke up in your bed, she panicked and put on her clothes and ran out of your place."

First time I'm hearing this. If she put on clothes, does that mean she wasn't wearing any in my bed?

"And?" I asked.

"You don't realize what I'm saying? She didn't mention once that she tied her hair up."

I felt a chill run down my spine, and it wasn't from the soda.

"Minami-san's always wearing a ponytail, but she at least lets her hair down in bed 'cause it's hard to sleep with one. I can't imagine that she'd sleep while wearing a ponytail, meaning that when she woke up in your bed, her hair was down, and then she panicked, got dressed, and ran out of your place. She didn't have the time to tie her hair up."

"W-Wait... But I saw someone with a ponytail leave my room!"

"So why are Minami-san's hair tie and ribbon in your room?"

I was holding the very evidence he spoke of. She couldn't have tied her hair up without these. When she left my room, she wasn't

wearing a ponytail.

"The skirt part is suspicious too. Minami-san didn't say anything about getting dressed before leaving your room, but before leaving your place. For example, if she left her clothes in your living room, then there was no way you could've seen what she was wearing when she left."

I had no clue what was happening. *What does this mean? What the heck is going on?!*

"Minami-san didn't check to see if you were awake, and you didn't check to confirm that the person leaving your room was Minami-san. Also, neither of you can confirm if both of the things you witnessed happened at the same time."

Minami left my room. I saw a ponytail leaving my room. If these two events weren't the same, then…

"There's one thing I can think happened," Irido said. "The girl you saw wasn't Minami-san. The girl you saw came after she left and was someone completely different. Someone else came into your room while you were sleeping." Any warmth left from the bath I'd just taken had completely disappeared. I felt frozen to my core. "Do you have any idea who that could be? Someone who might've been at your house at that time?"

I do. They were just at my house recently too. I even hung out with them today. "Irido… I'll talk to you later. Thanks."

"Kawanami—"

I hung up and put my phone down on my desk. They were someone who was different than they were in middle school and not comfortable around girls. They were always hanging around us, but they didn't come into the bathroom with us.

Makoto Koyama—the one girl at yesterday's mini reunion.

Suddenly I felt hives breaking out on my skin, and a strong wave of nausea knocked me back on my bed.

Her saying she'd go to ramen if I was going, her asking if I was dating Minami, her saying that I could go to her if I had any problems… I had no doubt now. Makoto had been in my room. *Makoto was…* And then everything went dark in my head, like someone flipped a breaker.

Interlude 2

What am I even doing? That was the only thought in my head as I looked down at him sleeping. I didn't have the right to be here, doing this. No matter where I went, I was always a third wheel, and he already had someone perfect for him. I had no doubt I was in the way of that too.

She was a lot cuter than me, more cheerful than me, and more… Why did it have to be him? My friends would always say that there were many guys out there, but for some reason, I could only think of him. For some reason, he was in my head so much that I was standing next to his bed, watching him as he slept.

There was only one Kogure Kawanami. Unfortunately, there was only one of him. If I could redo things…if I could have a do-over of middle school… Could there have been a version of the present in which nobody had to get hurt?

Chapter 2

Adolescent Hell Heretic Address to the Gods

Kogure Kawanami: My World Turned Upside Down

“Kogure, even if it’s summer, you’re gonna catch a cold if you sleep like that.”

I awoke to the sound of my mom’s voice. I slowly sat up, groaning my way through the thick haze of sleep and the remaining feeling from last night of wanting to throw up. I’d fallen asleep without a blanket on. *Hmm? I slept? No.* Though my memory was faint, I could vaguely remember that I’d fainted after finding out that Makoto had been in my room.

I covered my mouth, feeling like I was going to vomit again, and my arm started to itch from the hives. Though this annoying allergy of mine had mostly subsided recently, it was now resurfacing in full force.

Makoto Koyama was one of the people I had been closest with in middle school. Though she was the only girl in our group of guys, she wasn’t a tomboy. If anything, she was a misfit with the girls and thus hung out with us guys instead. According to her, in elementary school, she had more fun playing video games with guys than dolls with girls.

Girls like her weren’t exactly too uncommon. There were always some of them at any school, in any era. That was why even though she was a girl, I’d never seen her in a romantic way.

Ever since she’d started high school, she’d begun to look more like a girl, to the point that Minami and her gyaru friends complimented how she dressed. But even so, I always saw Makoto as a friend. I didn’t even think about any other possibility, and I thought it was the same for her. *But then…why was she in my room? Should I ask her?*

Fortunately, today was the reunion, so I’d have tons of chances to ask her then. But if Makoto approached me and acted obviously flirty because she did have a thing for me…could I handle it? Just

knowing she was in my room already made me feel like I was gonna faint. My defensive instincts were telling me I should rest at home today and not go to the reunion. Minami would be there too. There was no way I'd be safe, but at the same time...

In the midst of my thoughts, I heard my mom's voice.

"Kogure? You have that reunion of yours today, right? You're going to be late if you don't get ready soon."

Today of all days, mom was home. I wasn't sure if this was lucky or not. Either way, hearing her pushed me to go to the reunion as planned, all the while not knowing what sort of hell awaited me there.

Mizuto: You okay?

As I walked over to the reunion meeting place, I saw that I got a message from Irido. I wasn't sure if he was worried because of the way I had cut off our call last night or if it'd shown in my voice how sick I'd felt. But also, it was possible he was simply worried because he knew that someone had been in my room. Either way, it was surprising how much he'd changed if he was actually worrying about me. *I should probably respond.*

Irido had already done a lot for me by figuring out that there was someone else besides Minami who'd come into my room. Now that I knew it was Makoto, I could take care of the rest.

The reunion meeting place was in front of our old middle school front gate. In front of the nostalgic gate were some nostalgic faces, and as I got closer they noticed me.

"Oh, hey, it's Kawanami! How've you been?"

"You trying to steer even more into the playboy look?"

After taking a few breaths, I answered my old friends. "Like hell I am. I'm a student at preppy Rakuro."

"I still can't believe *you* got in."

"Yeah, the guy who waits until the night before to study somehow got into Rakuro. How much did you have to cram?"

I couldn't blame them for the jabs. I didn't have the worst grades in middle school, but I wouldn't say they'd been stellar either. Plus, I wasn't doin' too hot in Rakuro anyway. If it weren't for Irido, I'd probably be failing. My greetings with the other people went pretty much the same way until I saw *her*.

“Oh, hey, Kogure. Haven’t seen you since yesterday,” Makoto Koyama said, smiling and lightly waving her hand at me.

In middle school, she’d had shorter, kind of curly hair and a much more boyish aura to her, but she’d since grown out her hair and become a lot more girlish, to the point that the gyarus yesterday complimented her. At this point her hair reached just below her shoulders, and the curls turned into waves. She could definitely wear her hair in a ponytail if she had a hair tie.

Makoto had been on the track and field team in middle school and had worn her hair in a ponytail a lot to keep it out of her face. I could practically see it in a ponytail now, leaving my room.

“Yeah, hey again.”

I did my best to try acting normally while hiding how I felt inside. I didn’t have the courage right now to straight out ask her if she’d been in my room yesterday morning.

“Hm? You’re wearing long sleeves?” Makoto asked, tilting her head. “Won’t you be too hot?”

“Oh…don’t worry about it. I just forgot to shave.”

“Wow, arm hair? What a man you’ve become,” Makoto said teasingly while lightly slapping me on the shoulder.

She’s touching me! Okay, no. Calm down! We’re old friends. Her slapping me on the shoulder isn’t anything new. Friends do this regardless of gender. I took a deep breath without her noticing in order to calm myself down.

In the first place, I didn’t have any evidence that Makoto had been in my room. After all, I’d been half asleep. I could’ve totally thought I saw something that hadn’t actually been there. It might’ve been a mixture of a dream and reality.

Makoto really interacted with me like one of the guys despite being a girl. Though it wasn’t impossible, it was hard to believe that she’d do something straight out of Minami’s playbook. *Has she been acting like we’re friends while secretly crushing on me this entire time? I don’t wanna let my imagination go out of control. I left that part of me in middle school. I’ll treat her normally like nothing happened. As long as I do that, I’m sure everything’ll work out.*

“Hey, Kogure,” suddenly Makoto lowered her voice and brought her mouth close to my ear. “Did you hear about Maehara and Ozaki-san? Apparently at the graduation ceremony…”

She’s so close! I could feel hives breaking out underneath my

sleeves. The blood was leaving my head, and my field of view was narrowing. My body suddenly felt cold, but I couldn't stop sweating.

"Hmm? You okay, Kogure?" Makoto asked, confused as she took her hand off my shoulder.

"I'm gonna go say hi to the others," I was somehow able to squeak out.

"Oh, sure."

I left Makoto and was able to recover a bit. It was definitely a good choice to wear long sleeves today. It would've been easy to tell what was happening to me if I'd worn short sleeves.

There's no doubt about it... The way she was casually touching me and getting close to me... Makoto's trying to make a move on me. She's probably been trying to do that since middle school. Despite acting like she just wanted to be friends, she was waiting patiently for her opportunity to strike. It's been like that the whole time. She's seen me as a love interest all this time! Dammit! *I can't believe her! She knows I haven't noticed her feelings for me and now she's acting all touchy-feely, breathing into my ear, and doing all these flirty things! She's lust incarnate!*

"Hey, you okay?"

As I shook with fear, disappointment, and rage, I heard a voice from right next to me, making me jump. Standing right there was Akatsuki Minami. She looked at me as if she was concerned. *Dammit! I forgot that she was going to be here too! I already have my hands full with Makoto, but if she's gonna act like she did yesterday again...*

"Are you okay? You don't look too good."

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine. Just hungry."

"Oh, okay then." *Hmm? She's...behaving herself? After how unhinged she acted yesterday?* "See ya."

In the midst of my confusion, Minami left. *What's going on?* It was hard to believe she was the same person from yesterday. Despite looking at me like I was a prime slab of meat yesterday, it was like she wasn't looking at me at all anymore. It was a complete one-eighty. It was as if the world had turned upside down overnight.

Mizuto Irido: A Restless Outsider

Kogure: Sorry I hung up. My stomach hurt all of a sudden, but I’m good now.

He sounded like he was making it up. I wasn’t going to pry if that was what he was saying, but I wished he could come up with an excuse that was a little more believable. With that kind of crappy excuse, even someone like me who liked staying out of other people’s business couldn’t help but worry.

But based on what he’d said yesterday, it seemed like he’d figured out who the person in his room might have been. If it was someone he didn’t know, I hoped he’d report it to the police, but if it was someone he knew, I had a feeling he’d try to solve it by himself.

I looked at the time on my phone and saw that it was ten in the morning. It was early for someone like me who was on vacation, but dad had already gotten up and left the room despite drinking until late last night. I slowly got up and pulled out a change of clothes from my bag. After changing, I used my hands to fix my hair and then went to the living room.

“Morning,” Yume said.

She was sitting on a cushion and playing on her phone.

“Morning…” I said, my voice a bit hoarse from just waking up.

“Breakfast’s on the dining table.”

I nodded and went to the dining room. There, I found a bowl of rice, a plate of grilled fish, and a bowl of miso soup, all covered in plastic wrap. Usually I ate a piece of bread for breakfast, but as usual, there were real meals at the Tanesato household. *Three dishes is a little heavy for me, but oh well. I’m sure I’ll work up an appetite while eating.* I put the cold miso soup into the microwave and took the rice and fish back to the living room where Yume was.

As I entered, she looked up. “You’re eating here?”

“May as well.”

By the time I put the rice and fish down, the microwave was finished, so I went back to get my miso soup. When I came back and put it down next to the rest of the food, I realized I’d forgotten chopsticks, so I went back again and decided to get some tea while I was at it.

When I got back, I finally dug in. As I did, Yume put her phone

down and watched me eat.

“Today’s the festival, right?” Yume asked.

“Yeah,” I said, sipping my miso soup.

“Well… What do you wanna do this year?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, are you gonna go off on your own again?”

“Oh…”

Last year, I’d gone off on my own when the fireworks started and watched them from a deserted shrine, but Yume had come, and…

“What would you prefer?” I asked, smiling softly.

Yume pouted, making a conflicted expression.

“Well, I mean, that place is like a secret spot, but wouldn’t it be kinda suspicious if the two of us disappear again this year?”

“Yeah, it’ll be totally suspicious.”

“So, I guess we should stay with everyone, then…” Yume said, a somewhat disappointed look on her face.

“If you wanna have a date at the summer festival, you should just say that,” I said as I began picking the fish apart with my chopsticks.

“But we’re supposed to be family while we’re here.”

We’d already abandoned the rule that we had to act like siblings all the time—now we had a new rule that we’d act like siblings when the situation called for it. That was why even when our parents weren’t home, we’d never done things that we couldn’t tell anyone else about in the living room. Since we were on a family trip, we couldn’t exactly have a date under our current rule. That being said, what we’d done last night had been kinda risky.

“So I guess this year we’ll play it safe.”

“Yeah…”

“There are a ton of summer festivals back home anyway.”

“Yeah…”

“But…I guess I always go off on my own every year.”

Up until now she’d seemed really disappointed, but hearing this, her expression brightened. “Maybe you can ask Madoka-san to be your alibi. That way we may be able to have some alone time.”

It was obvious how happy this made her and then she looked away, embarrassed. “We’re going to pick out yukatas today, so…I’ll

ask her then."

"Okay."

Madoka-san wasn't exactly good at discretion, though... Was this gonna work out? But just as I was starting to get worried, I heard a voice.

"Did someone call me?"

"Whoa!"

Yume jumped as Madoka-san suddenly appeared, wrapping her arms around Yume. *Oh yeah, she really likes to grab people from behind like that. Up until now, she's always done that to me, but this year she's only done it to Yume. Or maybe she's being considerate to Yume and only doing it to her.*

"You two having a secret discussion? Do tell. What've you two been talkin' about?"

"W-Well, uh... You know, about how we're going yukata shopping today."

"Oh, yeah. Well, y'know, I thought it'd be good since you're a lot more *adult* this year, so it'd be better if you got a new yukata." She snickered while groping the air in front of Yume's chest.

Yume's face turned a bright red. *A yukata's not like a bra or a swimsuit, though. The size shouldn't matter, right?*

"Not that it really matters, though," she snickered again. *Uh...I'm starting to doubt that we can really rely on her.* "Oh, right. That reminds me. I don't think I've ever asked, but what cup size are you? I wanna hear every last detail."

"Why do you like sexually harassing me like an old man?!"

I finished eating while sympathizing with what Yume had to deal with. As I did, I realized that I'd received a new message. *Kawanami?* Or so I thought, but it was actually Isana.

Izanami: `Mizuto-kun, might I borrow you for a little?`

What's this about? It's rare for her to be up this early, especially on break. After bringing my dishes to the sink, I replied and gave her the okay.

"I-I'm so terribly sorry to bother you while you're visiting relatives..."

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I’ve got nothing but time,” I said as I sat on the veranda.

I would’ve preferred to sit in a room with air conditioning, but I was worried about other people hearing our conversation.

“Did you review the DM our account received?” she asked.

“Yeah, I did. It’s about time.”

The illustration account the two of us managed currently was set so that only mutual followers could send messages to us. So that was why, just in case, I made sure to follow all sorts of accounts that could become clients of ours—everything from publishers, other illustrators, and even VTubers. Now, we’d finally gotten lucky.

A fairly famous VTuber had contacted us and made a request with the deadline, compensation, and details all perfectly laid out. They wanted Isana to make an illustration for a cover video they were doing. That’s right: we had work.

Though it was a personal commission, it was still something we’d get paid for, so it counted as work. Up until now we hadn’t made anything off of her work. She’d pretty much just been drawing for fun this entire time, but now she was finally going to make her debut as a professional illustrator.

“Wh-Wh-What should I do? I don’t know what I should do!”

“Calm down. I already looked into what to do from here.”

Isana might never have imagined this happening, but I had expected this to happen sooner or later. She’d been gaining followers like crazy and the quality of her art was at the point that it was hard to believe she’d only started drawing a year ago. Of course there were still places she could improve, but she was skilled enough now to have her art used professionally. This was inevitable.

“That being said, since we’re being contacted by a single person, I’m going to use my connections to see if there’re any problems.”

“Like what kind of problems?”

“Like them not paying or being ridiculous about the corrections, or if they’re a catfish.”

“Oh, I see!”

Well, at least as far as I can tell, this VTuber is a bona fide girl, so I’m pretty sure that there’s no need to worry about the catfishing

problem, but then again she could also be in love with Isana like Yoshino. Or she might think that Isana's a guy since it's hard to tell Isana's gender from her username.

"They've been in the industry for a while, so I'm sure I'll get a handle on what they're like after asking around a bit."

"Who exactly are you asking? Do you know other illustrators?"

"I'm using my connections through Keikoin-san. I told you that I started doing some part-time work for him recently, didn't I?"

Keikoin-san was Yume's biological father, an indie game director and founder of a social game company. Because of that, he knew a lot of people. I was sure that he'd have some information about this live streamer.

"So you can either leave me to decide what to do with this request or...you can make the decision yourself."

"Myself...?"

"Well, take a few days to think it over. I'm sure she doesn't expect a response during the Obon holiday anyway."

"Okay..."

After this, I hung up the phone. *I should've asked her a little bit more seriously about what she wants to do and what she thinks about making money off her work.* If she did well on this request, I could predict what would happen next, and if what I predicted happened, then I wasn't sure how Isana would react.

"How is it that I'm out here in the countryside and I'm busier than ever?"

Between Kawanami's SOS and Isana's first commission, I had a lot on my plate. The wind blew as I was bathed in the sunlight. I was surrounded by nature, but my mind was as busy as Tokyo. In both situations, I didn't need to make any decisions, but... Sheesh, when did I start caring about others so much?

I got up and began walking down the outdoor hallway. As time passed, morning turned to noon, and we had lunch. *Well, I guess I'll just spend today living the slow, countryside life. I'll wait for them to make their decisions. I'll spend time thinking about them once they've done that.* Or at least that was the original plan, but as I was reading over some somen for lunch, I got a call from Kawanami that felt like déjà vu.

"Irido... Help me..."

Again? Just like yesterday, Kawanami began telling me about

something that happened after waking up.

Kogure Kawanami: Kogure Kawanami's Report of Crimes

Now that everyone was here, we headed to the bowling alley that we'd reserved, and then our group of twenty split into four lanes. Truth be told, I was pretty average when it came to bowling—I was neither amazing nor horrible at it. I was just happy if I could get a strike every now and then.

It might have come as a surprise to other people, but out of our small group of friends, Makoto was the best bowler. Then again, that was how it was for not just bowling, but most other sports too. But even so, she'd never really stood out because our class had Akatsuki Minami, who had a level of athleticism that bordered on superhuman.

"Yes!" Makoto triumphantly clenched her fist after knocking down all the pins.

The other guys from our mini reunion mellowly cheered, unsurprised at how good she was. We were used to it by now. There was something that caught my attention, though. Every time she got a strike, Makoto would look at me as if she were checking to make sure I was watching, as if she were waiting for me to praise her.

Every time I felt her look at me, I remembered how Minami had acted with me yesterday, and I felt like I was gonna barf. It was like hearts were shooting out of her eyes at me. Though Minami was behaving herself now, Makoto had begun to step up her game. *Dammit. How did things come to this? Does the universe hate me or something? I don't need a girlfriend. I'm okay watching other people's romances...*

"Looks like I'm gonna win again," Makoto said, sitting next to me as I drank my oolong tea.

Though she always won against us when it came to sports, it seemed that she was still proud.

I forced a smile to hide how sick I was feeling. "Don't you get tired of winning? You were pretty much unbeatable in middle school."

"Nope, not at all. I've got no chance against you guys in Smash, but I can win as much as I want in sports."

While we talked, Shoma headed to the lane for his turn.

“Sheesh, don’t take out your frustration over losing in a video game in real sports.”

We’d hung out at each other’s houses to play games often enough, and Makoto was about as good as an average player. She hated to lose, though, and while she had gotten better over time, she still trailed behind the rest of us. I could easily win against her, but also, there were girls like Isana Higashira in this world, who dumpstered me without breaking a sweat.

“I wanna play video games again some time. Ever since I started high school, whenever I do something with friends, it’s suddenly more grown-up now. Makes me miss middle school.”

“Yeah, I get that. All the money you get from your part-time jobs opens up your world to what you can do.”

Even Irido had started working a part-time job. I thought he said that he was doing some odd jobs at a company and working as a tutor or something. Though he started earning his own money, he never really used it for himself, but…I wondered if he used it for Irido-san. I had to hold myself back from smiling at the thought of him having a lavish date, and as I did, I felt Makoto tug on my arm. I looked at her, startled, and saw that Makoto’s lips, sparkling with lip gloss, had curled into a bright smile as she began to say something.

“Would it be okay if…I went over to your place again sometime?”



Shi— Before I could run away, Makoto pulled harder on my arm, pressing her chest against my elbow.

"We finally met again after all this time... It'd be sad if we just went back to how things were before, right?"

She has a sound argument... But also, when did you become capable of making this kind of flirty expression?!

"W-Well, yeah..." I finally said as I felt hives on my arm. "The other guys too...right?"

"Hmm? Yeah, of course. Oh, wait, did you think..." A mischievous smile spread across Makoto's face and she looked right into my eyes. "Were you thinking of doing something...dirty with me?"

My vision blurred and it shrunk to the size of a pinhole. I shot to my feet, unable to bear this any longer.

"Bathroom..." I squeaked out before scurrying away.

After we finished bowling, we went to the karaoke place in the same building. Of course, there weren't rooms big enough for twenty people, so we split into two groups. In our room, we had the same five members from our mini reunion and the five from Minami's group. This was also where we planned to have lunch, so we ordered some karaage, takoyaki, french fries, and some other things, filling our table with the classic go-tos. As we ate, Sota and some others used the tablet to pick out songs.

"Gettin' kinda nervous... Feels like my coolness is being judged."

"You worry too much! Anime songs, VTuber songs—anything's good! Put in whatever you want!"

Amid the excitement, I strongly gripped my cold cup. Makoto was sitting next to me. She'd done so as if it were the most natural thing in the world, all before I'd even realized she'd sat down. There was nowhere for me to run.

Normally I wouldn't even give this a second thought, especially since we'd usually sat like this whenever the five of us went to karaoke in the past. But now I couldn't help but think that she had an ulterior motive for sitting next to me.

One way to escape was by grabbing the microphone and singing, but I really wasn't in the mood. My body was tense and my head wasn't working. I couldn't remember any of the songs that I could sing. Resigned to my fate, I began eating karaage silently, like someone who'd come to a karaoke party but wasn't

friends with anyone there.

“Are you hungry?” Makoto asked, smiling slightly, making me nearly choke on the piece I was eating. She giggled as I gulped down some orange juice to wash it down. “What’re you panicking for? The food’s not going anywhere.”

One of the girls from Minami’s group picked up the mike. “First victim! Wish me luck!”

Everyone cheered for her as she began. She sang confidently and well for about a minute or so, but...

“Gwah!”

As a joke, the other girls began stuffing karaage into her mouth. She tried to keep singing with her mouth full, and her friends kept feeding her. It was really a childish way for them to play around with each other. But honestly, it was kinda heartwarming to watch.

“I like the way they think,” Makoto said as she watched. She moved toward the takoyaki near her and grabbed one and put it in front of me, steam still coming off of it. “Say ‘ahh.’”

“Wh-Why?”

“You’re hungry, aren’t you? I’ll feed you.”

“I can eat by myself!”

“You really know how to embarrass a girl, don’t you? Come on, open wide!”

I felt like being stubborn here would have the opposite effect, so I relented and opened my mouth, accepting the takoyaki in my mouth. Makoto giggled as she watched me chew.

“Taste good?”

The way she looked at me was like a girlfriend looking at her boyfriend. It was almost like how A-chan had looked at me when we dated in middle school. I felt like I was gonna hurl, but I swallowed that down with the takoyaki.

“There’s plenty more where that came from. Here, say ‘ahh’!”

“Blehhh.” I bent over the toilet and vomited out the contents of my stomach.

I had goose bumps all over my body. It was as if a dam had burst and all the reactions to girls’ advances came flooding out. It wasn’t as if this was the first time that a girl had flirted with me like this, but usually that only resulted in hives at worst. I hadn’t gotten

this sick ever. But ever since yesterday when I'd found out that Makoto had been the one in my room, whatever had been holding back these reactions had broken and they spilled out with the food.

After I flushed the toilet, I shut the lid and sat on top of it. *What do I do…? Seriously… Should I run? Should I say that I came down with something? I held on long enough today, right? But if I do that, I'll have to see Makoto again. Every time I see her, I feel like I'm gonna barf. Should I say something like my head hurts—or no, my stomach hurts, and run home? Should I never meet up with her again? Should I stop being friends with her entirely?*

How many friends would I lose like this in the future? Who would be left at the end if I kept cutting people off because of how my body reacted? What would be left for a person who couldn't fall in love or be friends with others?

No, I can't let myself think this negatively. This isn't good. It's seriously bad. I know that, but I can't stop. But I'm so scared of taking a step out of this bathroom stall, it feels like what's waiting for me is a dragon's lair. Please, someone…do something. I prayed weakly. As I did, I remembered a friend of mine who was able to calm me down, even if it had only been for a little bit yesterday. Desperate and unable to think straight, I took out my phone. Then I called him and said the same thing as yesterday.

"Irido… Help me…"

Mizuto Irido: Hearing the Above Story

All I could say after hearing his circumstances was… "Are you trying to brag?"

"Does it sound like I'm trying to brag here?!" Kawanami snapped back so loudly that I had to move my phone away from my ear.

"Well, I mean… You're saying that you're being seduced by a girl you were friends with in middle school, right? What is this if not you bragging?"

"A huge problem, that's what it is! She *likes* me! Makoto likes *me*!"

"You're talking like I know who this girl is. Besides, are you absolutely sure that she actually likes you?"

“H-Huh? No matter how you look at it…”

“Let’s go over what you presented as evidence. First, she casually tapped your shoulder. Then, she held her body against your arm. Last, she fed you. These are all things that friends do too, you know?”

“Are you *stupid*?! Stop using Higashira as a base for what’s normal! Normal girls aren’t that touchy-feely if they just wanna be friends!”

“Huh? So what are you trying to say? Isana’s been pretending to be my friend while trying to seduce me and fulfill her own desires?”

“Yes!” *He’s crazy… Hmm… Or maybe not?* “You’re friends, but you’re still a guy and a girl—there should be a certain line you don’t cross. Makoto’s clearly going past that with how touchy-feely she’s been. She… She clearly wants to get in my pants!”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Higashira was like that too, wasn’t she?!”

He’s crazy… Hmm… Or maybe not? “But here’s the thing, even if that’s true, what’s the problem? Why not just accept her feelings whether you feel the same way about her or not?”

“I can’t…”

“Why not?”

When I asked him, he clammed up. From what I could tell, this girl wasn’t a stalker or anything. Her feelings for him were totally pure. Though one could be jealous, there didn’t seem to be any need to worry about her doing anything crazy. Someone as friendly as Kawanami must’ve had plenty of experiences with these kinds of girls. But also…why was his voice so hoarse? He hadn’t been at karaoke long enough to sing himself sore.

“I…” But right as I thought Kawanami was going to talk, he stopped. “No. Forget it. I was stupid to try and rely on someone.”

“Kawanami?”

“I’m already far away from being a normal high school student. I can’t be like you guys. I’m broken…and there are no parts to fix me in the romance department,” Kawanami said like a monk muttering a sutra. His voice sounded drier as he added, “I just need to accept that already.”

I stared at my phone in silence after he hung up, tilting my head. *What…just happened?*

Kogure Kawanami: No Longer Human

After leaving the stall, I vigorously washed my face. *I was wrong. I should've tried to take care of this myself. What am I being so weak for? Why should I try to rely on someone else, especially when they wouldn't understand even if I explained it to them?* I was the only one who could understand the pain I went through. The pain of accepting too much love and there still being so much more behind it, the pain of being killed by someone's affection... The pain of the aftereffects... There was no way that someone who was only stalked for a little bit could understand. There was especially no way that someone with such shallow experience in love could understand.

Love was supposed to be brilliant, but to me it was as distant as a star and looked ugly and repulsive. I could never feel its warmth again. I could never be in love again. No, what I felt wasn't so shallow as jealousy like that. What I'd felt had been pure love, but...I could never feel that again. For me, romance wasn't meant to be experienced, but watched. I wasn't equipped to do anything besides that.

I left the bathroom, but I wasn't trying to think of what to do next. Like a zombie, I shuffled back toward the room, but on the way, Makoto was waiting for me in the middle of the hall, leaning against the wall. When she saw me, she walked up to me with a worried look on her face.

"Kogure... Are you okay? You don't look too good..."

"Oh..." I faintly chuckled.

What a beautiful attempt for her to try and score some points.

"If you're not feeling well, you should go home and rest. Don't worry, I can tell everyone for you."

"Just stop." The words I'd been holding back this entire time spilled out of my mouth. "I'm so tired of you... Just leave me alone."

Makoto's face filled with surprise and she stared at me, confused. "Huh? Wh-What's wrong?"

"Stop talking to me!" I shouted, passing by Makoto, who jumped in surprise.

I couldn't stop the hives. I couldn't stop the nausea. I couldn't stop the ringing in my ears. I could hear the world flying away from me. It was like I was on a plane and my ears were popping. I

could only hear my own thoughts now. All that was left was a corpse-like ball of trash. That corpse had tried to act like a human and was now pathetically wailing. The alternating feelings of anxiety and anticipation when changing seats, the butterflies in the stomach on Valentine's, crushing on the cute girl at work…those beautiful dreams were nowhere to be found inside me. I was nothing but a beast that'd been left behind in a monochrome world, refused to recognize that I was little more than a walking corpse, and kept fighting for a world of dreams and color that didn't even exist.

But…whatever. After all, in the end, every last person just forced their desires onto that beast. Even the girl working at the karaoke counter. She definitely wanted something from me. In the daytime, they'd be sweet, changing my clothes like a doll, feeding me like a pet, but then when night came, they'd become a different person and have their way with me.

The group of four high school girls that were passing by in front of me was the same. Just like the key holders on their bags, they wanted to display me too. They wanted to get me down and drain me until there was nothing left. After they satisfied themselves, they'd leave me a husk and parade me around like an achievement. It was in their instincts. That was the true identity of love.

The love I saw was an illusion. Even if it existed somewhere in this world, it was never meant to be something for me. After all, nobody else understood this. Nobody else knew this to be the truth except for me. That was why they could keep on dreaming. But the spell had been broken for me and I couldn't use dreams to obscure reality.

I knew the truth and I'd continue living knowing this truth. I'd keep pretending to be human despite not being one. It was like I was putting on a human suit to live normally every day and hiding from the eyes of the world. *This ringing in my ears won't stop. But I still have to try and look normal. My head feels like it's gonna split. But even so, I'm sure the doctors will say that I'm fine. My vision's getting blurry. If I don't pretend like I can see, I won't be able to work, forever and ever and ever…*

"Urk…" Suddenly, I felt hot tears spill down my face. *Aaagh, dammit. I don't want to live like that…*

“It’s okay…”

I felt a small hand gently patting me on the back. I didn’t know when I’d curled up with my back against the wall, but I slowly looked up and there was A-chan—Akatsuki Minami—wearing an encouraging smile.

“No matter how broken you are, I promise to take responsibility.”

You think…you have the right? At first, I felt anger, but for some reason it faded just as quickly as it’d come. I understood deep down that the person who’d messed up my life was the only one who could take responsibility for me—it could only be her.

“I’m… I’m so tired…”

“I know.”

“I’m so tired of how broken I am… I’m so tired of everything I see… I don’t wanna see anything anymore… I don’t wanna talk anymore. I don’t wanna be touched by anyone… It’s all… It’s all your fault.”

“Then let’s run away,” A-chan said, taking her hand and firmly holding mine. “Let’s run off to somewhere nobody is, somewhere nobody knows you.”

The hives slowly receded. This sensation was my ultimate salvation.

Interlude 3

Why does it hurt so much? It wasn't possible for someone to become someone else's. No matter how close you are, how much you love each other, how long you've been dating, even if you get married and stay that way until you die, nobody can become someone else's possession. That's why there's no such thing as "losing" someone.

Even if the guy I was so close with is with someone else and not me, it would be impudent to say that I lost him. But even so...I didn't want to lose him. I thought about how I wanted him for myself. I didn't want him to leave. I wanted him to be with me. For that's sake, I'd become as cute as I needed to be. I'd act like a girly girl as much as I needed to. I'd do all this even if it meant we couldn't be friends anymore. If the alternative was losing him, then, I... I would...

Chapter 3

Paradise in a Closed-Off Garden

Mizuto Irido: From a Distant Place

“What do you think?” Yume asked, raising her sleeves, showing me in her yukata.

Last year, she’d worn a white yukata with pink flowers on it, which had been more on the cute side of things, but this year, she was wearing one with more muted colors, which seemed a little more mature. Madoka-san was right when she said that something like this would suit Yume more now, especially after all that’d happened over the past year to both her and me. I decided to give her my candid opinion.

“I think you look beautiful.”

“You…really think so?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“It feels kinda like a cheap compliment when you just say it so easily like that.”

“So it’s a problem if I’m too honest with my opinions now?” *What do you even want me to do?*

“Hmm…” Madoka-san let out a sound of admiration, causing Yume to turn to her.

“What’s wrong?” Yume asked cautiously.

“It’s like the two of you have really mellowed out. Last year it was like you were crazy teenagers, but now it’s like you’ve grown up.”

“Y-You think so?” Yume asked.

“It makes me rethink how I act. You know, a lot of my friends call me immature.”

“O-Oh, that’s not…uh…”

“See? Even you think so!”

In Yume’s defense, Madoka-san only seems mature on the outside.

“Well, anyway, I’m glad you’re getting along so well, but I wanted to see the two of you acting all lovey-dovey and touchy-

feely."

"Why would we ever show you that side of us?" Yume asked.

"In other words, you act that way when nobody's looking?"

Yume paused for a bit before answering. "No comment."

"Oh?!" Madoka-san's breathing became frantic, kind of like Isana's. Then she wrapped her arm around Yume's shoulders and began whispering. "Then I guess I'll make sure you two can be alone during the festival so that you can be as lovey-dovey as you want to be."

"Huh? I-It's okay..."

"Aw, don't be so cold. Oh, I'll teach you how to fix your yukata so that even if it gets messed up, it won't be a problem."

"Wh-Why?"

"You're really gonna make me say it out loud?"

Though they were whispering, I could easily hear their conversation. But as a gentleman, I pretended not to be able to hear them and checked my phone for what might've been the umpteenth time today. After my phone call with Kawanami, I'd sent him a message because I was worried, but I didn't get a reply —not even a read receipt.

There was nothing normal about the way he was acting. I couldn't even imagine what was going on with him right now. How could he be so bent out of shape from something as simple as his friend putting moves on him?

"No response yet?" Yume asked with a worried look on her face after finally having freed herself from Madoka-san.

Because of everything yesterday, I'd told Yume about my call with Kawanami. "Yeah, nothing. He's usually pretty quick to respond..."

"I tried reaching out to Akatsuki-san too, but she hasn't even read my messages... She usually answers immediately."

"So both of them are ignoring messages?" *Is this a continuation of what happened yesterday?*

"Maybe they're both just out having fun?" Yume suggested.

"But they should both be at their middle school class reunion."

"Maybe they left together."

"Sounds like something that'd happen at a mixer."

"How would you know? Have you been?"

"Just saying in general," I chuckled lightly.

I used to be annoyed by her acting this way, but now I found it endearing. “But if they were just having fun together, I don’t think Kawanami would’ve sounded so backed into a corner. He didn’t seem to be enjoying the situation he was in either.”

“You mean his friend from middle school hitting on him? There are people like him who feel the same way.”

“Just saying in general,” Yume chuckled lightly.

We were able to joke like this now. “But there was something bugging me about his story,” I said, tilting my head.

Yume tilted her head slightly as well. “Like what?”

“It’s just, something doesn’t add up, but I can’t put my finger on it…”

It was the same feeling I’d had about what he told me happened yesterday morning.

I couldn’t help but feel like there was some kind of contradiction somewhere…

“If it’s bothering you that much, I’ll try looking into it too and sharing what I find. Even if they’re not talking to us, maybe they’re talking to other people. I’m in touch with more people at our school than you.”

“Just barely.”

“Still more than you.”

Either way, this was happening far away from us here in the countryside. There was nothing we could directly do from here anyway.

Kogure Kawanami: Running Away to Osaka Part 1

Minami pulled me by the hand and took me onto a train at Sanjo Station. We were taking the express train to Yodoyabashi. Because we were right in the middle of the Obon season, the train was packed when we first got on, but most of the passengers got off at the next station, Gion Shijo, which opened up a lot of seats. As the train moved, Minami watched through the window as we passed through the dark tunnel.

“How far are we going?” I asked.

“As far as we can, for now,” Minami replied, looking at me.

“So, Osaka?”

Objectively, it wasn’t extremely far away, but it felt far enough

away since it was the last stop. It was the end of the line—as far as these train tracks ran, at least. It was the end of the world that we as high schoolers were allowed to explore.

"We've never been to Osaka together, have we?" she asked.

"We haven't... I've been with other people, though."

"Yeah, whenever there's a concert or something happening, we usually have to go to Osaka for it. But I've never actually really explored it outside of field trips," Minami said cheerfully.

The way she was acting now was different from how wild she'd been yesterday, and how reserved she'd acted earlier today. She was being almost *too* normal, as if she'd gone back in time...and I found myself comforted by this. *Wait, really? Me? Comfortable with Akatsuki Minami of all people?* This felt wrong, like gears being forced to spin against each other. But for how I felt right now, I needed to cling to this feeling of comfort to stay sane.

The train rattled along the tracks until we left the tunnel and there was an announcement saying that we'd arrived in Shichijo.

"Kawanami, we're here."

Suddenly, I woke up at my shoulders being gently shaken. We'd reached the last station, Yodoyabashi. We got off the train, walked past the turnstiles and made our way from there into the Osaka metro station. Its underground tunnel seemed to continue forever. Minami looked at it and the stairs that led outside before turning to me.

"Now what?" she asked.

"You're asking me? You brought me here."

"True enough. Hmm..." As Minami tilted her head, my stomach made a noise. "Hungry?"

"Yeah..."

After all, I'd thrown up everything I'd eaten at karaoke. I hadn't been in any state to eat before we got on the train. I wasn't sure if sleeping on the train had helped me feel better, but right now, I felt pretty hungry.

"Let's go to Shinsaibashi, then. There's a huge shopping district there, right?"

"Yeah... It's near Dotonbori—near the Glico billboard, right?"

"Yeah, that's it! Let's get some takoyaki, yeah?"

Takoyaki... I suddenly remembered Makoto feeding me, and my

face tightened.

“Didn’t you have any at karaoke?” I asked.

“Yeah, but this is where they come from! They’re completely different! Probably, at least…”

Her argument was very typical of Kansai natives like us. But either way, Minami took me by the hand and began leading me through the metro so that we could get on the subway and take it to Shinsaibashi.

It was a lot easier to navigate than the underground in Umeda. We carefully read the signs and were able to get from Yodoyabashi to Shinsaibashi without too much trouble. When we exited the station, we were met with a sight that really made it sink in that we weren’t in Kyoto anymore.

The buildings were huge and the roads were wide. The fancier areas of Kyoto had tall buildings too, but they had height restrictions. We also didn’t have eight-lane roads, maybe because of the kind of grid system that Kyoto had. This was enough to make me feel like I was seeing something new.

“Looks like it’s that way,” Minami said, looking at her phone and leading me.

We walked across the sidewalk, crossed a street, and finally reached a crowded shopping district, which made me feel much more at home thanks to the similarity to Kyoto’s sights. As Minami walked through the district’s arcade, she looked up.

“Y’know, I thought about this when we were in Okinawa too, but these kinds of shopping arcades have the same vibe no matter where. Even though they all have straight paths, they all feel really messy and chaotic.”

“Well, yeah, it reminds us of Teramachi Kyogoku. I’m sure people from here who go to Kyoto would think that it reminds them of Shinsaibashi.”

“True.”

As we walked with the crowd while casually glancing at the stores around us, we reached a point where if we kept walking, we’d reach the famous Dotonbori bridge, but we ended up making a right instead, making our way to a place called the American Village.

At first glance, there wasn’t anything American-looking about it. There were various stores, secondhand clothes shops, and the

like. Overall, it just seemed a hangout place for the younger crowd, but not the more trendy kinds. The people here seemed more on the delinquent side.

"Oh, look at that building's wall!" I said.

"Oh yeah, what's that called. Gra… Gra…something."

"Graf, uh… Graffiti?"

"Yeah, that's it!"

"Really makes me feel like we're in the city!"

Huge English letters had been sprayed onto the side of the building. This wasn't something you ever really saw in Kyoto. Thanks to that, we were reacting like we'd hopped off the first train from the countryside.

There was a triangle-shaped park that was used in the American Village as a meeting spot, and around there were outdoor stalls like you'd see at a festival. There were all kinds of stalls lined up next to one another selling takoyaki, baby castella, and more. Among them there was one that was apparently famous, and it showed by the line that'd formed for it.

"Since we're here, why not try the most famous one?"

And so we got in the back of the line. Though standing in a long line together was something that couples who'd just started dating would want to avoid no matter what, it was nothing at this point for Minami and me.

Mizuto Irido: I'm Not a Tsundere

We waited for the line to get shorter as the sun continued to sink into the horizon.

"I hear that couples who just started dating lose some feelings for each other when waiting in long lines," I said as Yume looked at me, her face illuminated by the lantern light from the festival. "But do you think that's because they test each other too much to see how good they are at small talk? Even among celebrities, there are some who aren't good with it."

"So in other words, you're bored?"

"Yep."

"Not even trying to be subtle, are you?"

We were lining up to get takoyaki. Though all of the food stalls seemed the same to me in terms of how interesting they were, I

felt that since we were here, we might as well get in line for the takoyaki one. I looked at the price tag for these store-bought frozen takoyaki and couldn't help but think they were way overpriced.

"Back then, I'm pretty sure I tried being considerate of you and figuring out how to keep you entertained. Sure, it was fun at first, but now that I'm used to doing that, I feel like I'm more prone to bringing up random topics."

"'Prone to'? You *do* jump from topic to topic way too much…"

"I'd like to think it shows how comfortable I am with you."

"Well, I'd prefer if you sometimes were more careful and acted like we only just started dating."

"True. I'm too careless sometimes."

"'Sometimes'?"

Worrying about whether the person you're dating will like you or end up disliking you is a stage that we'd already passed. Yume was already much less selective with her words thanks to that. As a side note, Madoka-san and Chikuma were lined up at another stall. There shouldn't have been any chance of our conversation being heard by them over the chatter of all those gathered here.

"But that being said, it's not too bad having these kinds of conversations void of substance. It's so much more fun than just scrolling on a phone."

"Are you…complimenting me?" Yume asked. "Weren't you the one who told me that you don't expect me to be the type of person to keep a conversation going?"

"Well, that's true. I have absolutely no hopes for you in that regard."

"Seriously?"

"But I didn't fall for you because of that."

Hearing this, Yume frowned. "That's unfair to say out of the blue like that."

"If I don't say something now, who knows how you'll misinterpret things, and that scares me. You're the type to overthink things."

"I mean, I know I am, but…"

"Try to be more self-aware going forward. After all, you're not a tsundere anymore."

"When was I ever?!"

As we continued our pointless conversation, we finally reached the front of the line. I bought a tray of six takoyaki covered with sauce and aonori. The katsuoboshi on it danced in the heat. Yume put mayonnaise on hers.

After we got our food, we found a spot off to the side to stop and stand since eating these and walking was a little hard. Just as I was about to eat my second, Yume held one of hers out in front of me.

“Here…” Yume said, bringing it toward my mouth. “The flavors are different, you know? That’s why we should share, or something…”

“Didn’t take long to go back to your tsundere roots, huh?”

“Shut up,” Yume snapped, slightly pouting.

“Here comes the ‘dere’ part.”

But this was fine with me. I gladly accepted the mayonnaise-coated takoyaki as a token of her love.

“Hot!”



Kogure Kawanami: Running Away to Osaka Part 2

“Hot!” I cried as soon as the takoyaki entered my mouth.

Minami giggled from next to me. “Of course it is! Come on, you gotta blow on it first,” she said, demonstrating.

As I blew on it, suddenly Minami’s mouth was right by mine, blowing on it too.

“Wha—”

Our mouths were so close together, they could touch. I panicked and leaned back. Seeing this made her giggle again.

“Bet it’s cool enough now.”

“You could’ve made me drop it…” I complained before eating it, blowing air out as I did. “It’s good…”

“I totally understand why it’s in the Michelin Guide.”

“This tastes so Michelin-esque. Way to go, Michelin Guide.”

“Are you even tasting the food yourself or are you just eating the experience someone else fed you?”

“Oh, that’s from a manga, right? I think I read it online.”

Minami began eating her takoyaki too, blowing air out as she did. “So good!” she said, her eyes sparkling.

“It tastes so much better than the frozen ones or the ones sold in chain stores.”

“I wonder how they make them so fluffy. No matter how much I try to make them this way at home, they never turn out like this.”

We spent some time talking about the takoyaki. In the triangle-shaped park we were sitting in, there were concrete benches. Around us were other tourists, street performers break dancing, and tons of other young people.

I felt like the two of us stuck out. Not only were we high schoolers, but we’d also come dressed in the same clothes we’d worn for our reunion, and had come from Kyoto. But I was sure that was all in my head. Nobody seemed to give us a second thought at all and instead were focused on the stalls around here. Nobody was looking at me. Nobody had feelings for me. Every time I thought about that, it felt like my heart got a little lighter.

“So where to next? You’re still hungry, right?” Minami asked after eating, taking out her phone.

“How about we try other takoyaki places? There are a bunch

around here, right?”

“Oh, good idea! Let’s do it!”

After that, we went around eating takoyaki, octopus crackers, and other snacks. We went to secondhand clothing stores and even played a crane game in the basement of one of the malls. I didn’t have to think about anything. I didn’t have to be afraid of anything. It was like I’d returned to being a kid and time just flew by, but eventually…the sun set.

The sky turned a shade of orange and I suddenly began to feel a sense of desolation and unease welling up inside me. *We…have to go home soon, don’t we.* We’d come here without telling anyone. We probably needed to apologize to our reunion group.

“Don’t wanna go back yet?” Minami asked, judging what I was thinking from my expression. “That’s fine. We can stay here longer. That was the plan from the start anyway.”

“Huh? But we need to get going or else it’ll be the middle of the night. We’re obviously high schoolers. We’ll get caught immediately for staying out this late.”

“We’ll be good, don’t worry. I already thought about that,” she said while looking at her phone. Then she took me by the hand and started leading me somewhere. “This way.”

We moved from the American Village to Namba. We walked past a freakishly large Takashimaya and after that, the number of people began to decrease.

“Should be around here…” Minami muttered, looking around.

This seemed to be a kinda sketchy area. There were signs for “Rest,” “Lodging,” “Stay,” “Hourly Rate,” “Bachelorette Party,” “2900 Yen,” “8000 Yen,” and… “No Minors.”

“W-Wait, is this—”

“So I heard from a bit of a ‘bad’ upperclassman about this.” Minami grinned as if she’d successfully pulled off a prank. “I asked her if there were any kind of ‘bad’ hotels where minors could stay, and voilà.”

We were in a love hotel area. There were as many as far as the eye could see, lined up right up against each other. They were even closer together than the ramen shops on the ramen street in Kyoto.

“I think it’s not too far away now,” she said.

I nervously followed Minami. After passing by a completely pink building that looked like a castle made of candy, which really felt like a stereotypical love hotel, there was suddenly a building that looked like it was the home of a midsize company's office, but it had the words "Rest" and "Lodging" flashing on it. I might have never noticed it if we'd kept walking. We passed by the signs that people of our age shouldn't have been used to seeing, and when our surroundings changed, Minami stopped.

"This is it."

It was like it was disguised to blend into the city. At first glance, I never would've thought it was a hotel. It looked like a normal building's normal tenants secretly put up a board with rates on it. It was made in a way that the entrance wasn't visible like with public bathrooms, but it practically screamed "shady."

"Are you serious about this place?"

"Don't be so freaked out. It'll be okay as long as we act like we belong," Minami answered, much more enthusiastic than I, who was having second thoughts.

Minami wrapped her arm around mine and forcefully dragged me toward the entrance. It was a little dark here, and as we entered, there were some lit-up buttons like the ones you saw on vending machines in the middle of the night. There were about twenty or so buttons, each with a different room and rate on them.

"Which one should we go to?"

As she casually browsed the list, I felt frozen in place from nerves. There were some buttons that were lit and others that weren't. The ones that were lit were the ones that were vacant, which meant that the ones that weren't lit were the ones being used.

"A-A cheap one's probably good enough, right?" I said, trying to hide my nerves by acting unfazed.

Calm down. Calm down. It doesn't look like anyone works the front. We won't run into anyone on the way to the room. There's nothing to worry about. We're just sleeping here. It's not any different than a normal hotel, so calm down. Calm down.

"'Kay, then let's do this one."

Minami used her slender fingers to press one of the buttons to confirm the room we wanted. It then printed out a receipt with the

room number and dropped a key. *I guess you pay later?* Minami took the receipt and the room key and we walked deeper into the dimly lit entrance hall.

We got on the elevator at the end; it hummed for a little bit as we moved up, and once it stopped, the doors opened to an empty hall. Heading in, I could tell how stiff my joints had gotten with every step I took. I tried to quiet my breathing so Minami wouldn't notice.

"I think this is it," Minami said, checking the number on the door against the one on the receipt. She was proven right when the key opened it successfully. "Sheesh, it's dark."

The moonlight lit a faint way forward for us. When we entered the room and shut the door, the lights didn't turn on. *I'm guessing the switch is somewhere around here.* As we walked through the darkness, I noticed a singular full-size bed. I reflexively gulped and moved to the side of the bed, noticing a control console on a side table.

"Is that it?"

As I approached it I squinted, examining the control panel. It seemed that you could control the brightness and colors of the lights from it. It was completely different from normal hotels. For now, I slowly increased the brightness of the lights.

"Whoa!"

Now able to fully see the entire room, Minami let out a sound of amazement. The walls were covered in a tacky wallpaper with flower patterns. The room was overall as big as a studio apartment. There was one bed, a round table, two chairs, and a disco ball-looking type of light above. The room was a tight fit with everything in it, but the even more surprising thing was...

"Whoa, look at this! You can totally see inside!"

The bathing area with the bathtub and shower was right by the bed, and instead of a wall separating the two, there was only a pane of clear glass. The white bathtub was totally visible just from sitting on the bed. Minami, excited, ran inside the bathing area and gave me a peace sign from inside. All I could do was return that with a forced smile. It was completely erotic in here. There was nothing here that *wasn't* erotic. Did all adults do dirty things in this kinda atmosphere? I'd thought I understood what it meant to be an adult, but now I wasn't so confident.

Minami returned from the bathroom and hopped onto the bed to sit.

"I love it! It's exactly what I thought a love hotel would be like! Hm?"

Minami's eyes fell onto the pillow. I followed her gaze and gulped, seeing what was next to it. There was a cylindrical shaped object...

"Oh, this is the kinda thing you use for shoulder massages!" Minami said without any hesitation, looking at me with a grin. "What's this doing here? Do you think people get massages here?"

"You're messing with me, aren't you? You know what it is."

"Do I?" she asked playfully. "Who knows."

Minami turned it on and it began to vibrate. Just as I noticed that my eyes were gravitating toward her lower half, I quickly looked away. *This place is crazy... Every part of this place is practically screaming at you to do it.* Then my eyes fell to the side table where there were two thin, square pieces of packaging. When I'd turned on the lights it'd been too dark for me to notice them, but they'd been here the entire time. I could feel myself losing my mind. In order to not be too close to Minami, who had climbed completely on the bed to sit on her knees, I sat in a chair.

"Tired?" she asked.

"Well, yeah, we pretty much walked all day."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sweaty. I think I'll take a shower."

My head spun to her and I saw that she was grinning and giggling teasingly. Behind me was a bathroom which had nothing but a transparent glass wall, which left nothing to the imagination in regard to what was going on behind it.

"You can see everything anyway, so you might as well take one with me, right?"

"N-No way!" I yelled, putting my head in my hand while looking at the blackout curtains that we'd tightly closed. "I'll face that way, so take your bath."

"Who cares if you look? I mean, what haven't you seen at this point?"

"I'm not gonna look! There's nothing there that I wanna see anyway at this point!"

"There's probably more for you to see than you think. Come on, let's go," Minami said, getting off the bed.

Then she entered the bathroom and disappeared behind the door. *She really has no shame… I mean, yeah, I've seen her naked before, but who wants to be stared at when they're naked?* Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Minami and the color of her skin as she entered the bathing area. I panicked and turned my back to her. She wasn't the type of person to think about wearing a bath towel first to see how things were.

"Hmm…how do I turn on the hot water… Oh, is this it? Yeesh, that's cold!"

In the next moment, I heard the sound of running water from behind me. As long as I didn't turn around, I wouldn't see anything, but if I nudged my head just a little bit one way I'd be able to see *everything* very easily.

I'd be able to see how her hair hung around the nape of her neck. I'd be able to see her breasts. I'd be able to see her tight waist. I'd be able to see her nicely shaped butt. I'd be able to see her legs toned from sports. *No! Stop! Don't imagine any of this!* I could clearly imagine all these parts of her because I'd seen them before. But we were only here to sleep for the night. *We're not doing anything tonight. Not tonight. Not tonight. Not tonight.* I repeated this to myself over and over again like a chant and eventually I heard the water stop.

"You can look now."

I sighed with relief. It was like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I turned around, relaxed, but standing behind the glass was Akatsuki Minami in all her naked glory.

"Gah!"

"You fell for it!" Minami smiled like a predator catching its prey by attracting it with a sweet smell. "You won't get this chance every day, so you should get a good look. You're gonna make me lose confidence in my body," she said.

She was somewhat more mature than she'd been in my imagination. She pressed up against the glass as if to show herself off to me. This was the first time I'd seen her naked since the Arima hot springs. Her naked body had more than just sex appeal. She was beautiful—elegant, even. But even so, my body's primal urges couldn't help but react. I felt a heat as hot as magma rise up from within me.

"Wh-What confidence? Who would care about your childlike

body?”

I was somehow able to tear my eyes away, but Minami began cackling.

“You’re not fooling anyone! You were staring holes into me like you wanted something.”



Dammit. This is the mistake of a lifetime. It'd all happened so fast that I was taken off guard and had stared for a lot longer than I'd meant to. Outside of my vision, I heard her wet footsteps as she left the bathroom. Then she put on a loose bathrobe and came out. Her hair that was usually tied up into a ponytail was completely down.

"Wanna take a bath?" she asked.

"Like hell am I taking one in there!"

"I won't peek, okay? You should take one—you're kinda sweaty."

I am? I guess I have to take a shower, then... I switched with Minami and went into the bathroom, and took off my clothes. As I peeked into the bath area, I looked out through the glass into the bedroom and saw Minami sitting with her back turned, drying her hair.

Okay... I made up my mind and walked into the bath area and began showering inside the wet bathtub. *I can't calm down... We're not even taking a shower together, but the thought that someone might be able to see me while I'm showering is nerve-racking.* Plus, I was still recovering from the shock of seeing her naked body and I could feel it in every last part of my body. I couldn't help but feel restless.

A quick wash later, I pushed my wet hair out of my face and opened my eyes. I felt a little better now. The urges that had bubbled up inside me not too long ago had gone away with the water down the drain. But when I turned around, I saw Minami ogling me through the glass.

"Hey!"

I turned around, quickly thinking to at least cover my front half. Minami was sitting slovenly cross-legged in the robe and was observing my naked body on top of that.

"You've grown..."

"I don't need your commentary!"

"You've got some good muscles, kid. Ten out of ten."

"Don't score me!"

This damn dirty girl... I can't let my guard down around her at all. Right now we were in a space where nobody could see us. It was just me and her. I had no doubt that within the confines of this small room, we could live the way we wanted to.

After that, the two of us ate the food we'd bought from the convenience store before coming here and then lay on the bed while watching videos on our phones. Ultimately, after changing our positions a lot, I ended up with Minami's head on my shoulder.

"So, I heard from a friend, but…" she started.

"Yeah?"

"Girls with big boobs can use them to prop up their phone."

"Sounds convenient."

"I know, right?"

It seemed that the fatigue from walking around all day had finally caught up with me. It was so strong that it felt like my head was trapped in a spider's web. I couldn't work up the motivation to move even a single finger. Eventually I left my phone on my chest and stopped looking at it, letting it autoplay because it was too annoying to look at in this position. At a certain point, a video of a VTuber giving commentary on a game I hadn't heard about started. This was a comfortable lethargy. When was the last time that I was able to just relax like this and give into my fatigue? I couldn't even remember the last time I simply felt tired.

Oh, I see. I haven't been sleeping. All this time, I've just been fainting as if I were disconnecting from the world, letting go of my consciousness. But none of that was sleep. I didn't rest. I just couldn't stand the world anymore.

I didn't have to be afraid here. I was free here. I didn't have to pay attention to anyone. I didn't have to be disappointed in myself. I didn't have to hate my past. I didn't have to feel like there was no future for me. I could just live on impulse.

"Hey, Ko-kun?" Suddenly, I heard Minami's nostalgic voice in my ear. Her porcelain hand was on my shoulder. "Have…you already noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

Immediately as I said this, Minami moved her head and softly pressed her lips against mine, but I didn't burst into hives. This soft, warm feeling was so nostalgic.

"You're…already cured," she whispered quietly. "You don't have to be scared about people showing you affection anymore. You don't have to be scared of facing your own emotions. You've been free for a while now."

"Yeah, sure I am…" Even with the truth thrust in my face, I

couldn't accept this. "But what about Makoto? The pain I felt from her was real. It was like the world turned upside down. I couldn't see straight and my insides turned out..."

"You just haven't realized it yourself yet. You still think you haven't been healed yet."

"There's no way that's..."

But then her lips pressed on mine again as if to override anything further I was going to say.

"I'll keep doing this until you realize it yourself," Minami said, her face close to mine. Then she hugged me. "I love you."

She whispered it right into my ear as if to make it go directly to my brain. "I love you. I love you so, so much. I'm so sorry for all the horrible things I did back then. I regret what I did, and I've learned from it... I know sometimes I can have an awkward or sharp attitude around you, but it's just because I've never stopped loving you..."

Each time I heard her profess her love, for some reason, tears beaded up in my eyes and started sliding down my cheeks. I didn't know why. I really didn't. Most likely, I was sad. Sad that A-chan had done this to me, and that I'd become allergic to affection. When we were just childhood friends, I never thought that things would turn out like this between the two of us.

"I love you, Ko-kun... That's really it. You may not believe me, but—"

I couldn't withstand the sadness. I embraced her small body and got on top of her. Her hair spread across the pillow and in the midst of it, her moist eyes were looking right at me. Her bathrobe got messed up and her breasts peeked out from underneath the loosened collar. From underneath the gap in the robe, I could see her sky blue panties with a small ribbon at the waistband.

"You can do whatever you want to me." A-chan giggled softly. "Back then, I did whatever I wanted to you, so... This time, you can do whatever you want to me. I won't feel better unless you do that..."

I was scared, but even so, her gentle eyes and her accepting lips melted my fear away just a little bit. I nervously brought my lips close to hers until they pressed together. Then I did it again, and again, and again. Each time I kissed her, I could feel the twisted knots inside of me unravel one by one. My thoughts

disappeared, my emotions disappeared, my rational thought disappeared, until all I had left were my instincts.

"Mm... Nn... Ha..."

Before I knew it, our tongues were intertwining with one another. We were ravenously seeking out each other's mouths. As she accepted my desires, A-chan moved her hand down, and I felt her cold hand slip under my bathrobe and touch my lower half.

"It's gotten so big..." she said as she looked down, slightly smiling.

Internally, I was snapping back at her, saying that I bet her body was reacting just as eagerly as mine. As I did, I reached my hand down her robe too.

"Ah! Mmff..."

Her breathing became ragged. A-chan and I both stopped being humans capable of intelligent thought. We became two beasts entangled with each other on the creaking bed. But even so, I didn't care. If living as a human meant living in a world where I could barely breathe, I'd much rather the easy life of a beast.

"Ah! Mmn! Ko-kun... Ko-kun... Ko-kun!"

Sweat gradually began to break out across her small body as I held her. As she called my name, she tightened her grip on my back as if trying to keep from falling away. Eventually, her back arched as she reached her climax, before dropping back to the bed. Her face was red as if she'd been drinking, and her eyes looked so unfocused, it was like she'd fainted. But even so, she kept them pointed at me.

"Is...that it?" The edges of her saliva-stained pink lips turned up invitingly. "Is that...all you want to do?"

I'd already gone past the point of self-control. Everything that had been held back these past few years, the things I'd diligently kept sealed in, the things I'd stayed away from because of fear... *How good would it feel to get back at her for everything she did to me back then?*

A desire that I'd long been rejecting grew until it crowded out all other thoughts. This time, *I'd* kill her with love. After all, she was cute. She had long eyelashes, she had doe-like eyes, and she had soft cheeks. She was very expressive, her every movement was adorable, and she was meek when she wanted to be spoiled.

If anyone had her as a girlfriend, they'd want to love her like a

pet. So I could too, right? I could make her feel a lot of love. I could whisper in her ear all night about my love until it was the only thing that occupied her brain. I could ravage her petite body until she understood what she was born for. I could fill her head with joy, pleasure, satisfaction, and submission until it broke. I would do it every day, without listening to her pleas.

The desires and love that were boiling up inside me were things that I'd make her remember forever, and ever, and ever, and ever, and ever, and ever, and ever, and ever.

A-chan slightly raised her knees. Her panties were already down her legs. She offered her perfectly ready self to me. All I needed to do was move forward. The condoms on the side table weren't even a thought in my head. Right now, all I could think about was if I just moved a little further forward, just a little more, and...

"Dammit..."

Suddenly tears began rolling down my cheeks like rain.

"Ko-kun?"

"I can't... I can't do it..."

I felt the strength being drained from me. I buried my head next to hers, staining the pillow with my tears.

"I wanna get back at you... I want to so bad, but...I can't. Why... Why did it have to be someone like you that I... Dammit... *Dammit*!"

I loved her. I loved Akatsuki Minami. That was why this was wrong. This kind of future was wrong. I didn't want this. This wasn't what I dreamed of. I wanted to treasure her. I wanted to be by her side forever. My family was rarely ever home, but she was always there with me. That was why I... I... *I don't want to run.* I didn't want to run back then because I really...

"It's okay." A-chan once again gently embraced me despite how pathetic I was. "I'll be waiting. I'll always be waiting for you, no matter how long it takes."

And then we simply lay in bed holding each other.

Mizuto Irido: The Identity of What Was Bugging Me

Each time a flower of fire bloomed in the sky, the sound echoed inside me, followed by silence and darkness. Yume and I were currently watching the fireworks show from the stairs of an abandoned shrine.

“It’s kinda nostalgic, isn’t it?” Yume said through a sigh as she watched the vibrant colors. “A year has passed since we watched fireworks here last year.”

“Yeah…”

Thinking back over that year made it feel like just a small moment in my life, but it was probably the longest year in my life. The more I thought about it, the more I realized since then, something had decisively changed. Ever since she’d kissed me here last year, it was like the world that’d been frozen for me had begun moving again.

“Hey, Mizuto?”

I felt Yume tugging on my sleeve, so I turned to look at her and I saw the expectant look in her eyes.

“Yeah.”

She closed her eyes and turned her head toward me. *Oh, I see.* While the fireworks thundered above us, I lay my lips over hers. After a few seconds, I moved back and she blinked a little, looking at me as if she were a little unsatisfied.

“You’re kinda unfocused.”

“Am I?”

“It’s like you’re lacking gentleness or love or something.” As she tried to explain her vague impressions, she let out a heavy sigh. “This is such an important place for us, and that’s the kind of kiss you give, huh?”

“S-Sorry… At the very least, I didn’t think I wasn’t focusing on you…”

“You’re still thinking about Kawanami, aren’t you?”

I clammed up. She was right. It was true that somewhere inside me, I was still hung up on something about how he’d cut off all communications, how weird he’d been acting, how he’d told me about an experience that only sounded like he was bragging. It was really bad timing. I realized something though about what had been bugging me about Kawanami’s story while I was going around the festival with Yume.

“He doesn’t matter, not when you’re the one in front of me.”

That’s right. He may be the one on my mind, but Yume’s the one right in front of me. So I need to try harder to focus on her. For some reason, Yume gently smiled.

“I’m happy that you want to prioritize me, but…” Then she

began to talk to me like a mother would to her child. “A boyfriend who cares a lot about his friends just might make his girlfriend love him more, you know?”

I… I… After the fireworks ended, I began talking about the thing that’d been bugging me.

“So when eating takoyaki…” I started.

“Hm?”

“If someone’s feeding you one, isn’t it normal to react to how hot it is?”

“Yeah… Hm?” Yume tilted her head.

“But when Makoto Koyama fed him, Kawanami ate it without any problems.”

Interlude 4

All I wanted to do was watch over him. I wanted to pretend like all that stuff I did back then never happened. I wanted him to never notice what'd happened. I wanted things to return to how they were before that night, but...why did he look like he was in so much pain? Why did he try to be alone? Why was reality so different from what I thought was happening when we went bowling and to karaoke? It was only then that I finally realized that there was no way to turn back the clock. There was no way to pretend like something didn't happen. That's why I prepared for what I needed to do.

Chapter 4

There’s Only One Guy for Me

Kogure Kawanami: The Envoy of Truth

I drowsily opened my eyes and saw Minami’s face filled with joy.

“Morning.”

“Morning…” I replied out of reflex, my voice hoarse.

I couldn’t remember when I fell asleep, but it felt like I’d finally gotten some proper rest for the first time in a while. But that was only natural. The night before last night, I’d just fainted, and the night before that I couldn’t even remember what happened. Neither of those experiences were really me sleeping.

I still felt groggy, so I just stared at Akatsuki Minami’s face, and she silently looked back at me. I’m not even sure how much time we spent simply staring at each other before I finally snapped back to my senses.

“Are we…okay on time?” I asked.

I wasn’t really familiar with how love hotels worked, but I was assuming there was a checkout time.

“I think there’s enough time for a shower at least.”

“A shower…”

I could see the bath through the glass behind Minami. It was a bit too much to deal with this early in the morning.

“Maybe another time…”

“Time to wake up, then?”

“Yeah.”

Minami put her hand on the bed sheets and vaulted over me to get off the bed. As she did, there was a soft sound as Minami’s sky blue panties fell off the bed.

“Oh.” Minami reacted as she looked at her feet.

They were around her foot like a ring toss. Seeing this made me remember what had happened. Last night, I took off her panties and then fell asleep. From what I remembered they should’ve been around her knees, but most likely they fell off while we slept.

“Ha ha… Oh, right,” Minami said sheepishly before pulling them back up.

There was a second when I could see her butt through a gap in the bathrobe, which made me gulp. Minami turned around and looked at me.

“Uh…” she said awkwardly, but kind of jokingly. “Want some help with that?” she asked, pointing at my crotch.

I hesitated with my answer.

We paid at a machine at the front of the hotel. I wasn’t sure if this was to be expected or pathetic, but we split the cost evenly. Minami and I both got a decent amount in terms of allowance and we both did part-time jobs every now and then, so we had money. Even so, our wallets were about the same amount of empty right now.

“What should we do? I still have some money left on my train card,” she asked.

I fell silent. We had to go back to Kyoto. I knew that. We couldn’t stay out for days on end, but if we went back to Kyoto, I’d have to deal with Makoto…and myself. Could I do that? I felt a lot better than yesterday, but at my core I still felt scared. I was frightened that I might lose myself again and return to the pain I’d felt.

Minami had said that I was cured and that I simply hadn’t realized it yet. But even so, I couldn’t believe that I was better. Though it was true that I didn’t get hives when I was around Minami anymore, it didn’t make sense that I was still reacting to Makoto. If Makoto was flirty with me again, wouldn’t I just be in pain again?

At the very least I wished that someone could prove to me that that wouldn’t happen. And conveniently, such a person was waiting for us outside the entrance of the hotel.

“Finally,” they said.

There were two very unexpected people standing outside of the hotel. A couple like them that had a pure and bright romance seemed so out of place in the deserted backstreets where we were. They’d been waiting for me as I emerged from the dark.

“Y-Yume-chan?! Irido-kun too?! Why are you two here?!” Minami’s eyes widened with surprise.

Irido-san smiled weakly. “We came straight here after coming

home from the countryside early this morning. I'm glad we made it before you two left."

"How did you know we were here? This place isn't even on love hotel apps."

"I heard from a certain 'bad' upperclassman. I contacted her on a whim, and I dragged it out of her."

Oh yeah, now that I think about it, Minami said that she heard about this place from a 'bad' upperclassman too. I'm assuming it's that girl from the student council. The one who's all over Todo-senpai. I guess Minami hangs out with her a lot.

I was surprised by how strong Irido-san looked compared to a year ago. She used to be a timid honor student, but now she seemed very formidable. Maybe spending time with Irido or the student council made her grow up.

"Irido…" I said, walking to him as he stood there with his arms folded. "Why did you come all the way here?"

"Because you were playing victim, deep in your own delusions, over the phone."

"Huh? What do you mean?" *Delusions?*

"I knew it. You're not aware of it yourself." As Irido said this, Minami awkwardly looked away. "You said over the phone that Makoto Koyama was all over you in the bowling alley and that she fed you takoyaki at karaoke, right? That's how she was flirting with you?"

"Y-Yeah…"

"That never happened," Irido decisively declared. "All the things you spilled over the phone were figments of your imagination—delusions."

Kogure Kawanami: The Real World

Staying too long in that part of town was a bad idea, so we left and went to the closest metro station. While we waited for the train to Yodoyabashi, Minami and I came clean about everything. We talked about how we used to date in middle school, how I got ulcers from how overbearing she'd been, how I developed an allergy to romance after that, and how Minami had since then tried to cure it with exposure therapy.

Minami seemed so small in her seat after revealing her true

nature to Irido-san.

“I’m sorry for keeping this from you all this time, Yume-chan…” she said in such a soft voice that the sounds around us threatened to drown her out. “I still haven’t fixed my old bad habits. I’ve done some creepy things while trying to make sure you didn’t notice…”

Irido-san was surprised to hear the dark side of the usually bright and cheerful Akatsuki Minami that she knew, but it wasn’t long before she was wearing a gentle smile.

“I don’t mind at all. It’s normal to keep a secret or two from your friends. You’ve always been my bright and cheerful friend, and I don’t think there was any lie about that.”

“Yume-chan…”

“Also…”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t think you were doing a good job of hiding what you were doing anyway.”

“Huh?!”

You really thought you were? You wear your desires on your sleeve.

“An allergy to romance, huh?” Irido mumbled while rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s a little hard to believe, but it makes sense if it’s like a form of PTSD. It’d also explain how you were acting yesterday, Kawanami.”

“Can you tell me already what exactly I was imagining? Also what basis do you have for saying that everything was all in my head?”

Right as I asked that, the train we were on arrived at Yodoyabashi. From here, we would transfer to the Kyoto line and take it straight to Kyoto.

“I’ll tell you later. Let’s get off the train. It’ll be a little quieter in the station,” Irido said, getting off the train, the other two following suit.

I slowly got up and shuffled off as if there were lead in my legs. After walking past the Osaka metro turnstiles, we went down the long tunnel back to the Kyoto line. As we did, Irido began talking.

“My reasoning is simple. There were contradictions in your story.”

“Contradictions…?”

“It was hard to visualize. There were parts of your story that wouldn’t make sense if they’d actually happened.” Irido turned

around and pointed to his mouth. “So there was a summer festival where I was yesterday and I had some takoyaki.”

“Wow, what a coincidence… I had some too yesterday. After I called you, we had some at a famous place in the American Village.”

“They were hot, weren’t they?”

“I mean, yeah…”

I casually replied, but then I realized something. That wasn’t the only time I’d eaten takoyaki yesterday…was it?

“Yesterday, you told me about how this Makoto Koyama girl fed you takoyaki, and you mentioned how she put them into your mouth, but you never once said anything to me about how hot they were. Usually, they’re so hot they can burn your mouth. If she did actually feed you takoyaki, then your mouth would’ve been burned and you’d still be feeling it.”

“S-Sorry…” Irido-san said, an awkward look on her face.

I wasn’t sure why she was apologizing, nor did I have the mental bandwidth right now to ask.

“So, Kawanami, tell me, did you burn your mouth after eating takoyaki at karaoke yesterday?”

“N-No…”

I couldn’t remember that happening. When I had takoyaki at the American Village, I noticed that I almost burned my mouth, but I couldn’t remember anything about burning my mouth at the karaoke place.

“There’s another contradiction that’s even stranger,” Irido said, continuing despite me still being confused.

“You said that this Makoto Koyama girl sat next to you when bowling, right? But that’s impossible.”

“Huh…? How can you be so sure?”

“Well, first off, you said that there were four spots. Usually when you go bowling, there are four people to a lane, so that makes sense. You also said that all the guys from your mini reunion were there. So, logically that’d mean that Shoma, Sota, Yamato, and you would be there, right?”

“Yeah, but what are you trying to…”

“There were four spots at the lane, and each of you sat next to one another, right? If each of you had a seat, where could the fifth person sit?”

I gasped. *Wait…yeah. But—* “What if we switched seats with whoever’s turn to bowl it was? Then it’d make sense that Makoto sat next to me, right?”

“No, because you said that Makoto Koyama was *already* sitting next to you, and *then* Shoma got up to bowl. If he was getting up for his turn, then at that point all four seats should have been filled. How could she have been already sitting down if all four seats were full?”

But then… That can’t be… But now that he mentions it…

“This is just my own theory, but there was probably another set of seats in front of your group and that’s probably where she was sitting. You interpreted that in your mind as her sitting next to you and that’s what you told me. To you at that moment, that was the truth. But delusions have limits to them in terms of details.”

“So it was all in my head? Is my head that messed up?”

“It happens to everyone,” Irido said nonchalantly. “Some people think they said something another person said, or think that something that happened in a dream was real, or just in general have unclear memories. You don’t have to be so bothered by it.”

“But…”

“Of course, I doubted you at first, but I understood after hearing about your allergy. What you experienced yesterday was essentially anaphylactic shock.”

“Huh? Is that the thing that you get when you’re stung twice by a bee?”

“Yeah. Yesterday night, when I told you that someone else had been in your room, that was the second sting for you. It made your allergy go into overdrive. Every little thing became blown out of proportion and even the slightest touch would make you think that someone had feelings for you. If I’d known that’d happen, I never would have said anything to you. I’m sorry about that.”

A second…sting. But that makes it sound like there was a first.

“Irido… I don’t remember anything, but are you trying to say that I don’t remember the first time Makoto did something to me three days ago?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“What do you mean, ‘maybe’? You already know, don’t you? You know that Makoto was in my room, what happened that night, and why I was sleeping basically naked in my room.”

“Well, all I can really say is…” Irido said, stopping as the turnstiles came into view. “Your clothes were in the washer because they got *dirty*.”

Huh? They got dirty? Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Minami purse her lips.

“I can’t tell you any more than that. You would need to ask the person who actually knows about all that.” Irido turned around, moving a little out of the way of the turnstile, the path back to Kyoto. “What’s your choice?”

I… I… I don’t want to be stuck like this without ever being able to move forward. Not one bit. If everything I saw was just a bunch of delusions, then what really happened couldn’t have been as malicious as I thought. I want to know. I need to know the truth.

I took out my train card and touched it against the reader.

Kogure Kawanami: The Reason It’s You

We got back to Kyoto a little after noon. When we got off at Sanjo Station, Irido-san asked if we were hungry, so we had lunch. Though it was a pretty busy station with all kinds of different foods, we settled on something a little more familiar and went to a family restaurant.

“How was the trip, Yume-chan?”

“It was more relaxed than last year. It’d be nice if I became even more used to it. There’s a lot of nature.”

“Yeah, and after a few days you’ll get bored because there’s nothing to do.”

“All *you* did there was read books like you already do here.”

“Hey, I played some video games this year.”

As the three of them enjoyed their conversation, I sent a message to Makoto.

Kogure: `We need to talk. You free?`

After finishing lunch, the Irido siblings left. I couldn’t have them sticking around. They knew what I was about to face, but neither of them mentioned a thing about it. They seemed no different than usual when they left.

“See you,” Irido said shortly.

It was rare for him to say bye at all, but it felt like he was trying to reassure me that everything was going to be okay. He was trying to reassure me that it wasn't over—that my world wasn't over. I could live today normally, as well as the next day and the day after that. It was really simple what I was doing. I was just going to get the truth. All I had to do was say my true feelings.

"Well…I'm gonna go home," Minami said, stopping as we walked. "You've got another stop before coming back, right?"

"Yeah."

"It's just a stop, right?" It felt like she was worried about me, but maybe that was just me overthinking things.

"Sorry, but I'm gonna give that answer to Makoto first."

It might've been just a stop on the way, but that was where I needed to be right now. Minami seemed to relent, but she looked happy and nodded.

"Yeah, that's for the best."

Then I watched as her small back disappeared into the distance before turning around and going to the meetup place. It was the place we'd graduated from long ago. The very same middle school that Makoto and I had both gone to.

I could remember clearly when I'd met Makoto Koyama. In our second year of middle school, the guys and I had really gotten into playing chicken. It was a really stupid thing we'd do where we'd bring our game consoles to school and play as long as we could without getting noticed, since we weren't technically allowed to bring them to school. It was a weird game, since we could've just played games on our phones, which were allowed at school. But even so, we specifically tried playing on our game consoles because the risk was more thrilling.

During lunch, we would go behind the dojo that the kendo and judo club used, since they wouldn't be there during lunchtime, and neither would any teachers. It was our own little hideout. One day, we were silently playing games with each other as usual when suddenly…

"Hey, what do you guys think you're doing?"

Suddenly, Makoto scolded us like a teacher would. We jumped and quickly turned around and saw her grinning. "Sorry, you guys just looked like you were having so much fun. What're you guys

playing? Smash?" she asked, very curiously looking at the screen.

With her skirt, there was no mistaking that she was a girl, but she acted so naturally like one of the guys that we were able to easily interact with her and accept her into our group.

We heard later that she wasn't really getting along too well with her girl friends. Of course, on the surface, she had a group she was a part of and there didn't seem to be any problems, and they would all seem fine with each other. But after she started hanging out with us, the time she spent with the girls lessened and that didn't sit well with them.

"I have an older brother and I think because of that I started being more interested in guy things. Even in elementary school, the girls in my class were really into Precure, but the guys were into card games, and so was I. When we played dodgeball, I was the only girl that the guys actually tried to hit like I was one of them," Makoto said one day.

I realized that she wasn't really the type to fit into girl groups. That was why when we saw her looking more like a girl now that she was in high school, we got worried about her. We couldn't help but wonder if she was doing okay. We worried that she might not have been able to find people like us to accept her and she was just lying about who she really was as a person in an attempt to fit in.

That was probably why our mini reunion was even more lively than it should've been. That might've been why I turned a blind eye to that idiot who brought alcohol. Though I couldn't really remember, I felt like I wanted to bring Makoto back to how she used to be. That was why what happened after our mini reunion came like a sudden punch in the gut. The wound that should've been healed felt like it'd been gouged open once more.

"Kogure..." In front of the open school gates, Makoto slightly waved to me. "Hey."

I walked to her, my hands in my pockets. "I'm really sorry about yesterday...about suddenly going off on you."

"No, it's okay. Your mind can go kinda crazy when you're sick, right? But you should be more worried about the rumors. Have you heard? There's no end to the dirty talk about you and Minami-san going off by yourselves," Makoto said, chuckling.

But to me, it didn't really seem like she was genuinely laughing.

Eventually, her smile faded. “So…you have something you want to talk about?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re not asking me out, are you?”

“I’m not.”

“Right…” Her eyes fell to the side and then she turned around and she glanced back at the school gates. “It’s probably better to try to talk inside than the side of the street.”

“Is it okay to go inside?”

“What, so it was okay sneaking to the back of the dojo to play games, but now you’re scared of going back to the school you attended?” she asked, teasing me. “Just kidding. I got permission from a teacher. I told them I was feeling nostalgic and they laughed at me, saying it was just a year and a half ago.”

According to adults, the older you get, the faster the flow of time feels. I could believe that since a year in elementary school feels longer than how this past year felt. But even so, this past year and a half had felt so long. It had been a painful time for me and I could only imagine how lonely Makoto had felt.

“Okay. Let’s go, then. It’s not every day we get to do this, right?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

So we entered through the front gate of the school. Each step felt like we were walking deeper into a different world. Despite us going here essentially every day not so long ago, this didn’t feel like our world anymore. The time we spent here wouldn’t come back. But at the very least, we could get some glimpses into what it’d been like.

“It’s so nostalgic. Remember how we saw Shibayama-san’s panties on those stairs?”

“*That’s* the first thing you remember?”

“It was the first time I saw someone’s panties like that. It was really memorable to me. It was pretty fun how freaked out you guys got too.”

“It was awkward, especially with a girl next to us who was freaking out over seeing someone else’s panties.”

We had so many nostalgic stories. Every time we passed by somewhere we recognized, Makoto would remember something new. She talked about the sports festival; how I sucked at tennis; how one of our classmates, Sonoda-san, did something during

science class. We passed by the school courtyard, the tennis court, the outdoor walkway, the stairs, the science classroom, the art room—all places we'd seen before—in order. I knew exactly where we'd stop. It was the place where we hung out the most: our old classroom, 3-2.

The soft light of the setting sun lay a thin veil over our old classroom. The blackboard and bulletin board had a different schedule than the one that we remembered. The blackboard in the back of the classroom had different doodles on it than when we were in it. The classroom we once knew had changed and now it was updated with traces of the kids that were currently in the class.

Makoto passed by all that and went to the window. As she opened it, a gust of wind blew in, blowing the curtain around her as if she were spreading her wings. It looked like she was being embraced by the summer wind. And then...

"Thanks for coming here with me," she said, a little sadly, before looking back at me. "You said you wanted to talk, right? I'm ready. Go ahead whenever you're ready."

I looked at her face, filled with the determination to hear me out and knew that I couldn't be roundabout with my words. That was why I just came right out and asked.

"Did you ask me out three days ago?"

This was a very strange question for me to ask and it looked like Makoto was on the verge of tears, but she still smiled back at me.

"I thought so... You don't remember."

"Yeah. I don't even remember what happened during our mini reunion. But...you do, don't you? You know why I don't remember anything, right?" Makoto stayed silent. "I probably threw up and passed out after hearing you ask me out, didn't I? I probably don't remember anything from the shock."

It'd explain why my clothes had gotten dirty and been put in the washing machine. This was probably what Irido had wanted me to notice from the hint he'd given me. After hearing Makoto ask me out, I had a strong allergic reaction and threw up on my clothes. That was why I'd taken off my clothes and why they'd been in the washing machine. It was to wash away the vomit. Knowing that, it made me remember something else—the stain on the carpet.

When I went to the living room, I noticed that there was a stain

on the carpet. I was now certain that it was from my own vomit. Most likely, my phone had ended up there because I collapsed and it fell out of my pocket. That was the first “bee sting.”

In order to seal away the shock from it, I wiped that entire night from my memory. Later, I received a second “bee sting,” which sent my body’s allergic reaction into overdrive, causing me to create an entire delusion in which I was being attacked.

“Seeing how I reacted, you ran away at first, but then you came back to check on me the next day and came into my room, right?” I asked.

Makoto awkwardly looked away. Though she didn’t say anything, her reaction was enough of a confirmation.

“I was hoping we could just both forget it…” Makoto said softly. “I was hoping we could forget how I asked you out, how I ran away when you were hurting, and how I like you. I was hoping that we could just pretend none of that happened.”

“I saw you leaving my room. I was still half asleep, so I’m not a hundred percent it was you, but…”

“Oh, I see… I guess I stayed a bit too long,” she said, smiling as if to mock her own mistake. She put her hands on the windowsill. “You know, this last year and a half, I’ve been wondering why I fell for you specifically.” I stayed silent to listen to her.

“Like, I have a lot of other guy friends, right? There’s Yamato, Sota, Shoma, but…somehow it was you. But I could never come up with an answer and I could never get you out of my head. There was no way this would’ve ever worked out since you have Minami-san. I’m not so rude as to try and get in between two childhood friends, nor do I have the courage. But all that only makes me wonder even more…why *you*?” I still stayed silent.

“I don’t have any guy friends in high school. The girl group I’m in has a kinda power dynamic. I’ve gotten pretty tired from how much more annoying maintaining relationships is in high school compared to in middle school. It’s really made me nostalgic for how we used to just laugh at stupid things back then. Then we had that mini reunion and I saw you again, and…” In the next moment, she had a smile on, but she looked ready to cry. “When I heard that you and Minami-san broke up, I thought it was my chance.”

So that’s what started this. It made her feelings that she didn’t let surface in middle school come out.

“When we left your place, I pretended to go home, but then went back, pretending I forgot something, and then in the heat of the moment, as a joke, I gave myself an out, and I said it in such a lame, nervous way…”

I could see the scene in my head. As I cleaned up the mess in the living room, she might’ve helped. She might’ve gotten a reason to stay over that way. I could see her helping to clean up and using the sounds to cover her unnatural non sequitur.

“‘If you’re not dating anyone, then…would you wanna date me?’ Sheesh, hearing it out loud really makes me realize how doomed my confession was before I even tried.” She let out a dry laugh. “And then you went pale as a sheet and asked me if I was serious. At first, I meant to just play it off as a joke because you reacted that way, but I couldn’t back down, so I told you that I was. As soon as I said that, you threw up—I had no clue what was going on.”

“So why did you come back in the morning?”

“I was worried. When I came back, your door was unlocked and nobody answered when I called out.”

This must have been after Minami ran out of my place. It makes sense that it wasn’t locked. “I peeked into your room and saw you sleeping there basically naked. I saw a long strand of hair on your bed and…it all made sense.” She had no choice but to run and that was what I saw. “Why did you throw up? Even if you don’t remember exactly what happened that night, you must at least know why you threw up, right? Do you have some kind of chronic illness or something?”

“No, it’s because of a trauma…” And then, I began to talk about everything I’d been quiet about. “Whenever a girl shows me affection, I suddenly get sick. I’ve gotten a lot better now, though.”

“Now that I think about it, you were in the hospital in our third year because of ulcers. Was that it?”

“Yeah, that was the start…”

“And Minami-san has to do with this?”

“She does.” *More than anyone.* “She was the one who broke me, and also the one who fixed me.”

She spent an entire year and a half to atone for what she did to me.

“I see…” Makoto let out a long sigh. “Yeah, I can’t win against

that…” I still didn’t say anything, but it was already clear inside her. Even if she’d run over to me when I’d collapsed…

“Makoto…you’re an important friend to me. It’s not that I don’t see you as a girl or anything, but…the way I see you just hasn’t changed.”

“Yeah…”

“Also, I can’t forget about the person who was always there for me in my most difficult times. I mean, sure, she’s also the *cause* of those difficult times, but…she’s also the one who saved me.”

“Yeah…”

“That’s why I’m sorry, but I can’t date you.”

Makoto quietly closed her eyes and calmly nodded. “Yeah.”

I felt like I finally was able to face the fact that within the story of people falling for each other, the story of people falling in love with people, I wasn’t just an observer. I was part of that story.

“You’re a lot more serious a person than I thought, Kogure.”

“Huh? A-Am I?”

“Yeah. If you knew everything, then there wasn’t really any reason to talk to me face-to-face. You could just pretend like nothing ever happened. But you set things straight, you settled everything, and you…respected my feelings,” she said with a sad, lonely, but refreshed smile. “That’s why I fell for you.”

Kogure Kawanami: Answer

A fire blast appeared in the night on a distant mountain, but it wasn’t a Pokémon move. It was the Gozan no Okuribi. My room was on a pretty high floor, and from the balcony I could kinda see the burning Japanese characters in the mountains far away. It was so far away that I could only really tell what it was with certainty if I used my phone’s zoom, but this was loads better than going to a place where you could see it up close and suffering the crowds.

It felt like a signal that summer break was coming to an end. As much as it used to feel like a tribute to the past, right now the Gozan no Okuribi felt more like a tribute to the future. I felt like I could do the things I couldn’t in the past. I was freed from my shackles, as if a curse had been lifted—like a weight had finally been lifted from my shoulders. For some reason, I felt a refreshing sense of empowerment, despite not having done anything specific

to achieve it. *The way I am now, I feel like I could even give* her *an answer.*

“A-chan,” I said, speaking to the person on the balcony next to me. We were separated by a white partition that instructed tenants to break it in the event of an emergency.

“What?” A-chan, Akatsuki Minami, said while gazing at the Gozan no Okuribi off in the distance.

“You’re the one who undressed me and put me in bed, right?” She didn’t answer. “After Makoto ran away, you found me passed out after vomiting. You took off my dirty clothes, put them in the washing machine, and put me in my bed. The reason you didn’t put clothes on me was because it’s hard to dress someone when they’re passed out, right?”

A-chan stayed silent, but I could tell that she was listening to me. “The reason you were with me in bed was probably to make sure I stayed warm, right? To do that, you needed to raise your body temperature and…that’s why you drank the beer. But since you’re not used to drinking and downed it all at once, you lost your memories of that night, right?”

A-chan didn’t deny anything I was saying. Her silence was enough to confirm my theory. That night, the two of us hadn’t done anything at all. That was the truth. I’d hurt one of my friends and then my neighbor and childhood friend had come to my rescue.

“Thanks. You really saved me. I just wanted to tell you that.”



Irido probably already realized the truth, but he knew that it was better to come from my mouth than his. I couldn't help but be surprised that a guy like him, who used to shut everyone else out, had learned to be so considerate.

After a long silence, A-chan finally spoke. "I didn't do anything to be thanked for," she said as if trying to deny what she'd done. "I just couldn't win against my desires… It wasn't because I was worried about you. It wasn't because I was hoping for your happiness… In the end, all I could think about was myself…"

And then A-chan slowly began talking about everything that happened.

Akatsuki Minami: You're the Only Guy for Me

Let me preface this story with the fact that the walls are thin in our apartment building. Because of that I heard someone asking him out, someone whose voice sounded familiar. She sounded just like the girl that Kawanami had been good friends with in middle school. They'd been so close that I got jealous of them when he and I dated. They always acted like they were guy friends, though, so ultimately, I let my guard down with regard to her. But right now that very girl was asking out my ex.

I had no right to complain. Over the past year and a half, a lot of things had happened, and he and I still weren't exactly back to where we used to be. There was absolutely nothing wrong about a single guy being asked out by a single girl. If anything, it made sense to me. Makoto Koyama had more in common with Kawanami than I did, knew him better than I did, was cuter than I was—not to mention more cheerful—and…she wouldn't be as clingy as I would be.

If I had to compare the situation…it'd be like Irido-kun dating Higashira-san. They didn't end up dating, though, so how would things play out for me? It wouldn't have been weird if they started dating. If anything, it was weird that they didn't end up dating. When a guy and a girl who were as thick as thieves reunited after a long time, it'd make sense for them to realize just how important they were to each other and make the decision to date.

Maybe that was okay. Maybe it was for the best. *Oh. I've already come to accept it in my head.* It made more sense for him to date

Koyama-san than a mental case like me. He'd have a much easier time and a much healthier romance. I understood this even if I didn't want to. My heart felt like it was cracking. But this was the punishment I deserved. If this could help him get back the years he missed out on, then working to cure him over this year and a half was good.

Then I heard him ask if she was serious. In the place where my love ended, I started feeling joy—or I should've...

When I heard her say that she was serious, there was a heavy sound like something had fallen. After a while, I heard the sound of someone frantically running away and a door opening and closing. *What happened?* Out of curiosity, I poked my head out of my front door and saw a familiar girl frantically running down the hall. After losing sight of her, I left my apartment and went to the one next door. It was unlocked. *I guess Koyama-san ran away without locking the door.*

"What happened...? Are you okay?" I asked in a hesitant voice as I opened his door.

When I went into the living room, I saw him passed out, curled up, with vomit on the carpet.

"A-Are you okay?!"

I panicked and ran over to him. As soon as I looked down on him, balled up, I realized what'd happened. His allergy... *I thought it was already healed. He's not even affected by anything I do anymore.*

I'd started exposure therapy because I knew that one day his allergy would hurt someone's feelings, and now he wasn't breaking out into hives over a bit of flirting...or at least that's what I'd thought. But why had the thing I feared most happened?! For the time being, I needed to do something about him. I squatted next to him.

"Are you okay? You conscious?" I asked while slowly reaching for him.

"Don't...touch me." After hearing his groaning voice, I stopped. "Your clothes'll...get dirty."

Kawanami's clothes were dripping with vomit and even in his mostly unconscious state, he was worried about it getting on me.

"Ugh, you idiot!" I didn't have time to try and convince him. I stood up and stripped down to just my bra and panties. "Look, now I won't get my clothes dirty!"

I put my arm underneath his armpit and began to move his body slowly, taking him away from where he'd thrown up. By that point, he'd completely lost consciousness. His eyes were shut and he looked like he was hurting.

What do I do? What's best for me to do here? Should I take him to his bed? But maybe it's best to take off his clothes first. Otherwise his bed'll get dirty. I laid him on the ground and pulled both of his arms up over his head so I could take off his shirt. Then I took off his shorts. For the time being, I left his clothes there and took him to his room.

I took a breath and then realized that it probably wasn't the best to leave the living room in the dirty state that it was in. It'd be a whole thing to have to explain what happened here to his parents if they came home.

I found a cleaning rag and then wiped away most of the vomit. It sucked that there was still a stain, but it wasn't any different from a stain from a juice spill or something. After that, I washed his clothes in the bathtub before throwing them into the washing machine. After turning it on, I went back to Kawanami's room to check on him.

He was out cold on his bed, still practically naked. I put a blanket over him, but that probably wasn't enough to keep him warm. *I need to put clothes on him...* I began searching through his drawers and found pajamas, but try as I might, it was much harder to put clothes on an unconscious person than it was to take them off.

I stood up, still holding his pajamas. *What should I do now?* I already had an answer. *What should I do?* Even so, I repeated this question in my head, not looking at reality. *What should I do?*

Why did it have to be you? Maybe because I wasn't frantically rushing around anymore, I suddenly found I wasn't panicking anymore. Now all that was left in my head were complaints and regrets.

No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't figure out why. There were all kinds of guys in that same middle school classroom. Takahara was good at any sport he tried, Tsukishima was really chill; even outside of our classroom, there were some cute underclassmen and reliable upperclassmen. And honestly, even outside of guys, there were a lot of girls that were just as

great. For example, Takinaka-senpai was a star in track and Midori-chan looked up to me.

But out of all these people, for some reason, it still *had* to be Kogure Kawanami. We only became friends by pure chance. Sure, he was a funny guy, considerate, and sometimes a gentleman, but there were so many better options than him for me to fall for. But somehow, it was Kogure Kawanami.

I'm sure this plays right into the age-old question "Why do people fall in love?" It was a question with no answer, so instead of spending my time thinking about one, it would've been more productive to work a part-time job or something. Even so, I couldn't stop thinking about Kogure Kawanami, no matter how pointless it was, no matter how silly it was—as if I had some lingering feelings for him. He occupied so much space in my head without even deserving it.

What am I even doing here? I wondered as I looked down at him as he slept. I didn't have the right to be here. I was just a third wheel no matter where I went. There was a perfect person for him and I had no doubt I was just in the way. Koyama-san was much cuter than me. She was much more cheerful than me. She was so much more...

Why did it have to be you? My friends always told me there were plenty of fish in the sea, but for some reason I couldn't stop thinking about him. I had no clue why I couldn't stop thinking about him to the point that I was standing in front of his bed. Much to my chagrin there was only one Kogure Kawanami in the world. If I could redo middle school, could things turn out differently? Could nobody have been hurt now?

Why does it hurt so much? It wasn't possible for someone to become someone else's. No matter how close you were, how much you loved each other, how long you'd been dating, even if you got married and stayed that way until you died, nobody could become someone else's possession. That's why there was no such thing as "losing" someone.

Even if that guy I was so close with was with someone else and not me, it would be impudent to say that I lost him. But even so...I thought I didn't want to lose him. I thought about how I wanted him for myself. I didn't want him to leave. I wanted him to be with me. For that's sake, I'd become as cute as I needed to be. I'd act

like a girly girl as much as I needed to. I'd do all this even if it meant we couldn't be friends anymore. If the alternative was losing him, then, I... I would...

I dropped his pajamas on the ground and went back to the living room, and found something that I'd noticed the minute I'd come in here. There was a can of beer on the living room table. Right now, there were two things I needed. One was a way to warm up Kawanami. The other was the courage to be selfish again.

I picked up the can, pulled the tab, and drank the warm beer down to the last drop. I could feel it soaking my throat, all the way to the depths of my stomach. Then when I was sure there wasn't any left, I tossed the can in with the recycling.

Warmth radiated from deep within me. It was like my brain was floating. *Is this what it's like to be drunk? I feel so free.* My brain wasn't holding my body back anymore. I could let my emotions take over.

Ko-kun. I went to his room as if spurred on by something. *Ko-kun.* I knelt on the bed and got underneath the blanket. Our almost naked bodies touched and I felt his smooth but firm skin. *Ko-kun... Ko-kun... Ko-kun... I don't want you dating someone else. I want you to always be with me. I don't want you to look at other girls. I want you to only ever look at me. I want you to only touch my body. I won't say anything selfish anymore. I won't do anything selfish anymore. I won't cause problems for anyone.*

I wrapped my arms around him and held him tightly in order to warm him up...in order to not let anyone take him away from me.

There's only one guy for me. For me, it's just him. Not even Yume-chan or that time I tried to get with Irido-kun...nobody could take your place. Even if someone tells me that I just don't know what's out there, or that I'm casting a very small net, there was never a choice for me besides Kogure Kawanami. I'm sorry that your childhood friend is such a mental case, but I promise I'll take responsibility. I'll take responsibility for making you like this, so please... Please don't leave me!

Kogure Kawanami: Break

"This is just who I am," A-chan admitted in a soft voice that

melted into the night. “I can’t be kind like Yume-chan. I can’t separate my feelings like Higashira-san can. All I can do is be self-centered, stuck in the past, and cling to others. I’m pathetic. I’m just a parasite…”

It was like she was dissecting herself with a sharp knife. She might have been trying to punish herself by spilling everything that was inside her. Or maybe she just couldn’t hold anything in anymore.

“Pretty annoying to have someone lay all this on you as if they’re expecting you to comfort them, right? It’s not too late, you know? I bet Koyama-san’s not this type of person.”

“Then why did you help me yesterday?” When I was trapped in my own delusions and thought that the entire world was my enemy, she found me crouched down and crying in the hallway of the karaoke place. “You already remembered what happened that night by that point, didn’t you?”

“Yeah… I remembered after we came home from Ichijoji after I got undressed.”

“And so just like what you said, you feel bad for what you did that night, right?”

“Yeah… I wanna crawl into a hole and die. It makes me sick how shallow a person I am.”

“That’s why during the reunion you stayed away from me, right? But then why did you come to me and tell me that you’d help me? That we should run away?”

A-chan stayed silent for a little before finally saying the truth. “Because I’d made up my mind.”

“About what?”

“There’s no way to go back in time. There’s no way to pretend nothing ever happened. That’s why I made up my mind to take responsibility. No matter how you felt at the end of everything…all I could do was accept how you ended up.”

That was why she’d tried to tempt me like that at the hotel? She was trying to take everything on by herself because she was the only one that didn’t trigger my allergy.

“But that ended up being a swing and a miss too. You really hurt my pride as a girl.”

“That’s what you think?” I replied without any hesitation. “If you didn’t take me to Osaka… If you didn’t tempt me like that…I

might've fallen apart. It's only because of you that I was able to calm down, and I…" The night breeze brushed past my ears and the burning character in the mountains was going to be extinguished soon. "Hey, A-chan?"

"Wait!" she shouted, cutting me off. "You just turned down Koyama-san, right? You should wait a bit, you know? Like a mourning period."

"Is that really what you're worried about?"

"I-It's kinda cold, huh? The fire's almost out too. Let's go back inside."

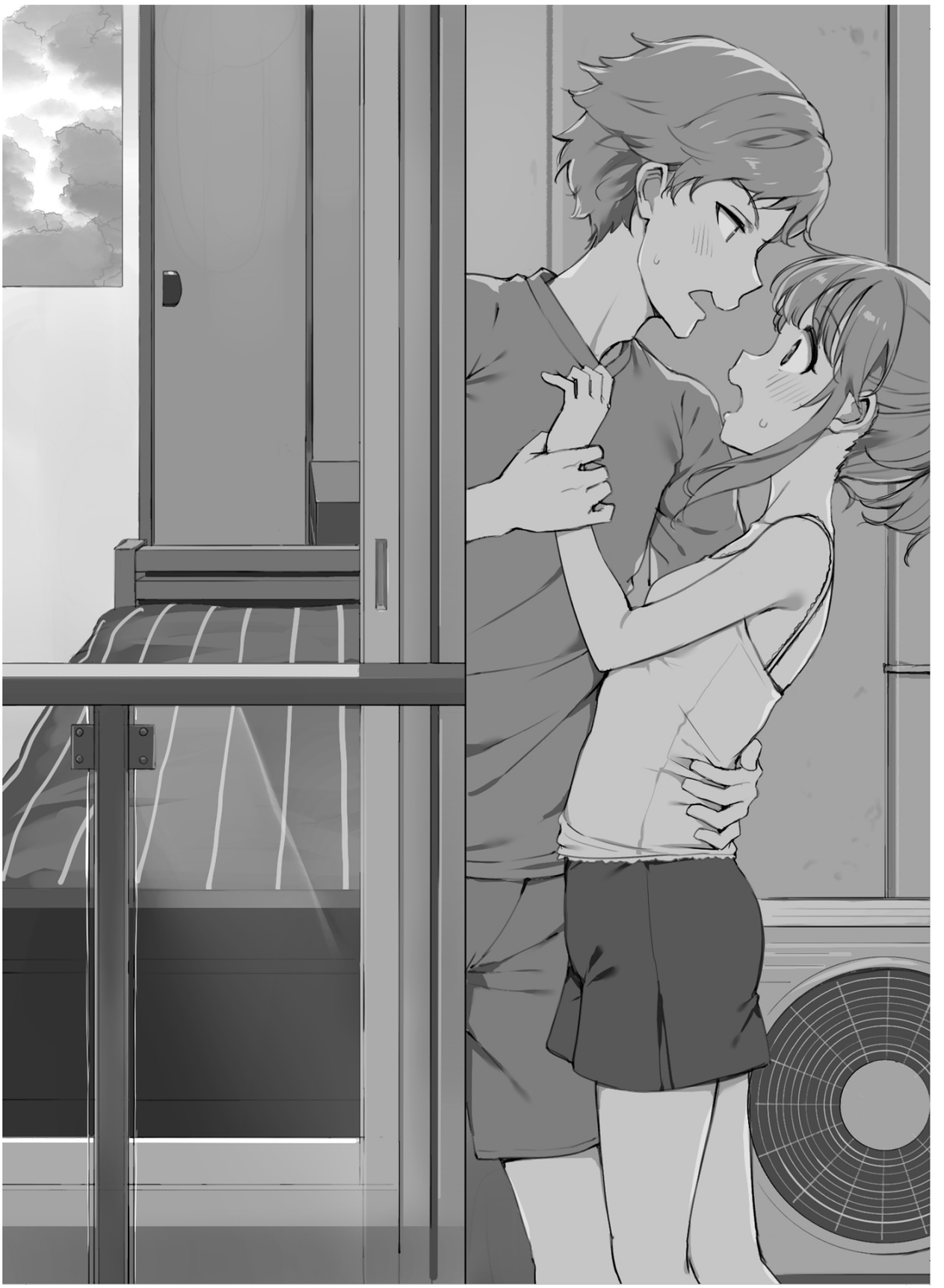
A-chan's ponytail flipped as she turned around, disappearing behind the white barrier between us. *It's okay to break it, right? After all, this is definitely an emergency.* I kicked it as hard as I could and broke through it.

"Huh?!"

A-chan turned around, her hand still on the glass of the balcony. In that instant, I grabbed her hand so she couldn't run away anymore. A-chan, Akatsuki Minami looked up at me, stunned.

"Wh-What are you—"

"It was an emergency." I forcefully pulled her small body against mine and pressed my lips against hers.



I could feel her breathing. Her body felt different from when we were at the hotel. It was soft and warm, but also so small, dainty, and fragile. That was all I could feel on this midsummer evening. When I finally took my lips off of hers, I could see her wide eyes and red face.

"I'm sorry for making you wait so long," I continued while looking into her eyes. "I fell for you once, then I hated you, and then I fell for you all over again. Please go out with me again."

Akatsuki opened her mouth a little and her lips quivered before she shut them. Tears welled up in her eyes and she lay her face against my chest as if to hide them.

"I'm…crazy. You know that, right? Dating me is like navigating a minefield."

"I know."

"I might go too crazy again…"

"I'll warn you."

"I might never listen to you…"

"Then I'll run away. I know you're the kind of person that just needs time."

"I… I… What I did to you…"

"Any mistake you made can be fixed. I make mistakes too. Back in middle school, I couldn't say no to you. There's nobody out there who's perfect, but it's not right to never fix your mistakes."

That's why last year when you lost your mind with the Irido siblings, I just watched. But if I had any regrets, if I had anything that I wanted to change, then…

"I accept you, and all your mistakes. I'll stick with you until you fix all of them. I've been there from the beginning because we're childhood friends, and I'll stay with you to the end."

Akatsuki silently tugged at my shirt and cried into it. I held her small back until the last of the fire in the distance died out.

Final Chapter

The Door Between Worlds

Mizuto Irido: Bragging

“And yeah, so my parents were home for Obon, right? So I told them that Akatsuki and me are dating, and can you guess what they said?”

“‘Weren’t you two already dating?’”

“How’d you know?!”

I was walking while listening to Kawanami report on what happened over the phone. Though the Gozan no Okuribi had come and gone and Obon with it, summer hadn’t ended yet. I scowled as I felt the rays of sun on my face.

“I bet you’ll hear the same thing from our classmates,” I said. “I don’t think recently it’s been too much of a secret that you two were childhood friends.”

“What? So just ’cause we’re kinda close, they already thought we were dating? Man, the world’s gone crazy.”

“I mean this in the most polite way possible: Are *you* really one to talk, Mr. Self-proclaimed ROM expert?” *I’ve thought the same exact thing about you two a billion times already.*

“Oh, right. I guess I gotta change that title of mine.”

“You were nothing more than a peeping tom to begin with.”

“Irido, do you know where ‘ROM’ comes from?”

“It’s an acronym for Read Only Member, isn’t it? At least, that’s what you told me.”

“Yeah, but actually, some people say it comes from CD-ROM, so it could be read as Read Only Memory.” *CDs? Oh, like the ones that played music? They’re not really used these days.* “The antonym of ROM is RAM, which is Random Access Memory. It means that you can read and record memory.”

“So?”

“That means from now on, you can just call me RAM-chan.”

“Goodbye.”

“Hey, come on! I set you up for that joke! Aren’t you at least gonna quip back?”

What’s the point of going through the effort of making a name for someone who both watches and partakes in romance? You’re just a normal human being. But would saying that be a little inconsiderate? Ever since I’d begun running Isana’s socials, I’d been more careful about my words.

“So, kinda off topic, but now that all that’s settled, I wanna thank you,” he said.

“Thank me? For what?”

“For hearing me out and coming all the way to Osaka. If you need any help let me know. I got connections.”

Hmm. It’s true that I’m lacking in the connections department. It may not be a bad idea to change that.

“Okay. You’ll be my informant from now on.”

“Oh, I like that! Sounds cooler than bein’ a RAM. I’ll call myself a romance informant, and I don’t come cheap.”

“There’s no money involved at all. Keep all the information to yourself. Just watch everyone quietly like you’ve been doing.”

Then again, he hasn’t been good at just being an observer. But as I thought this, I heard a voice in the distance.

“Ko-kun?”

“Ah, sorry. I’m headin’ out soon, actually.”

“On a date?”

“Uh… Well, yeah…” he said a little hesitantly. Then he sheepishly added, “We’re not *just* childhood friends anymore.”

After that we said our goodbyes and hung up. This time, it felt like he was actually bragging to me. I put my phone away just as the place I was heading to came into view—the apartment building that Isana lived in.

Ever since I’d gotten back together with Yume, I’d stopped coming here as much, but today was a day that I wanted to have a face-to-face with Isana no matter what. During the Obon holidays, Isana received a message about doing illustrations for a music video. Today, I was going in person to hear her answer on what she wanted to do.

Mizuto Irido: Divide

I entered the Higashira household as I usually did and lightly knocked on Isana's door.

"I'm here," I said.

"Come in..." a sleepy voice responded.

Hearing that, I opened her door and saw Isana lying on her bed while playing a game on her phone. She was wearing a camisole and loose shorts. As usual, she was wearing the most defenseless of outfits. I shut the door, sighing at the cold air from the AC as she leisurely kicked her bare legs on her bed. She didn't even look like she was going to turn to face me.

"Please wait a moment. I will complete my daily quests momentarily."

"That better be research for work, right?"

"W-Well, of course! It goes without saying that I am analyzing the pinnacle of art in an attempt to grow my own skills."

Ever since she'd started drawing for real, anything could become research material for her, and it felt like as a result she'd become more self-indulgent in her entertainment. *I guess it's not the worst as long as she's only being sucked into her otaku hobbies. She's not wrong that it could be reference material.*

By the time the sweat on my body from my walk here had disappeared, Isana finally put her phone down by her pillow and sat up with a grunt. Then she sat cross-legged while turning to me, sitting on a cushion on the floor.

"Apologies for the wait."

"You seem pretty calm. You do know that, depending on your choice today, your life could drastically change, right?"



I'd already looked into the VTuber who'd requested Isana draw for her, and she checked out. If anything, she had a spotless record and there was nothing off about the talent herself. The only thing left was for Isana to make a decision. Essentially the question was whether or not she wanted to make money on her art.

"Hmm…" Isana tilted her body to the side. "Truth be told, it still hasn't sunk in quite yet. How do I explain it… It doesn't feel real? I don't completely comprehend what it means to make money from my drawings… But you'll assist with the difficult aspects such as quotes and invoices, correct?"

"Well, really, I'd like you to do it if you can. Thinking about the future, it'd be best if you could do this kinda thing on your own."

"No way. Absolutely not a chance. Never will I ever be capable of doing so," she said, shaking her head from side to side. *Yeah, I figured.* "As such, I have decided to keep the difficult parts of this future out of my consideration and think solely about the drawing aspect."

"And?"

"I will give it a try." She chuckled meekly. "All I know how to do is put my sexual desires into my drawings. However, I do admit I have some interest in what it would be like to realize someone else's dreams."

"Got it. Then let's get the ball rolling."

"Thank you."

It seemed that she'd made the decision a little casually, not really even able to imagine what kind of future it would lead to. On the other hand, I already more or less knew what opening this door meant, and the girl known as Isana Higashira had just opened the door to the world.

I took out my phone and logged into Isana's account. *I wonder if there are any other high schoolers who've gotten over fifty thousand followers in less than a year.*

Yume Irido: Decision

"Good morning," I said, opening the door to the student council room.

Inside already was the president, Suzuri Kurenai, who

welcomed me with a smile. “Good morning, Yume-kun. Did you have a good Obon?”

“Yes, I guess. You look pretty refreshed yourself.”

At this, she giggled, to which I fell silent. For some reason she seemed a lot more radiant than usual. In contrast, her boyfriend, the treasurer of the student council, Joji Haba, seemed to have lost a lot of weight, or maybe dried out. Ever since White Day when they started dating, there were days like this. I had a feeling I knew what was going on, but both Aso-senpai and I had decided not to touch the subject at all. The only one who didn’t catch what was going on was probably Asuhain-san. Speaking of her, when she noticed me come in she stood up like a subordinate seeing their superior and ran over to me.

“It’s nice to see you after all this time, Irido-san.”

“Uh, has it really been that long? I could’ve sworn we saw each other at the start of August.”

“I’ve read a lot of books in the two weeks we’ve been apart. I’ll give you some more recommendations.”

“O-Oh, okay. Thank you.”

The way that she’s all up in my face reminds me of how Akatsuki-san was when we first met. But also, I’m happy that she’s enjoying reading because of me. The only ones I can really talk about books with are Mizuto and sometimes Higashira-san.

“You were just leisurely reading books the entire time?” Aisa Aso-senpai asked in a menacing tone. “Don’t you know the culture festival’s comin’ up? Are you two ready for that?”

It was true that we were entering the period of planning for the culture festival. Historically, the second-years of the student council took care of it. The third-years took a backseat and the first-years supported the second-years. It was a way of passing the torch, so to speak.

In October, the third-years would step down, leaving us with the keys to the entire student council. It still didn’t feel real that they wouldn’t be here anymore, or that I would be in the driver’s seat.

“You also have to recruit new members,” President Kurenai said with her elbows on the desk. “For years now, the student council has accepted new members based on recommendations from current members. Of course, even if both of you brought a candidate, that wouldn’t be enough to fill the student council, so

either way you'll need to find others. That being said, do you have any underclassmen that you have your eyes on?"

"No, nobody yet..." I answered, awkwardly shaking my head.

I didn't have any idea what kind of people I wanted on the student council. Asuhain-san also shook her head beside me.

"I'm in the same position. I was planning on scouting some capable people during the culture festival committee meeting."

"You don't have to think too hard about it. I pretty much chose you 'cause of your cute face, Ranran," Aso-senpai said nonchalantly.

Despite how relaxed she was acting, I couldn't help but feel uneasy. It felt like I'd been enjoying myself so much this entire time that I hadn't really been thinking about the future at all. It felt like all of a sudden I was completely lost on what kind of person I wanted to become.

Even last year, Haba-senpai didn't recommend anyone, so at the very least, I knew that the student council members didn't have to be scouted, but...not doing that felt like running away. I began asking myself the hard question: Was it really okay to shy away from the hard choices in order to maintain the status quo?

"But more importantly, do you already have a choice for next year's president, Suzurin?" Aso-senpai asked casually. But hearing this, I couldn't help but freeze. "Around this time last year, it was already pretty much a sure thing that you'd be the next president."

"I was a special case because neither you nor Joe had any intentions of being president."

"Like I'd ever wanna compete with you. But yeah, I never really had any interest in being president."

"I'd like to be president," Asuhain-san declared in a clear voice. "I'd like to be like you, President Kurenai."

Asuhain-san had always looked up to her. She'd even said that she'd only entered the student council because of her admiration for President Kurenai. I had no doubt that she had some attachment to the seat of the student council president. President Kurenai flashed a cryptic smile while turning toward me.

"What about you, Yume-kun. Do you have any interest in being the student council president?"

"I..."

"If you're the president, I will support you with everything I

have," Asuhain-san said, bowing toward me, making me bend back with bewilderment.

"D-Don't you want to be president?" I asked.

"These are two separate matters. After all, you never know what will happen."

It seemed that Asuhain-san was very set on what she wanted to do...unlike me.

"Well, take your time to think about it. I'll be thinking on it myself while watching you two work the culture festival."

"I shall endeavor to meet your expectations," Asuhain-san said.

"'Endeavor' isn't really a word girls in high school use, Ranran," Aso-senpai said.

And just like that, this group of five working together on the student council stepped closer to its end. As I was forced to think about my future, I couldn't help but remember what Madoka-san had told me when we left the countryside.

"Oh, right, Yume-chan. Do you remember what I told you in the bath last year?"

"Huh?" I'd racked my brains to remember and ultimately I came up with... *"A-About what to do after doing...dirty stuff?"* I'd asked hesitantly.

"Of course not! But on that *topic... How's it goin' for you?"*

"I-I'm not saying anything!"

Madoka-san had snickered teasingly. *"Well, not that I need to ask. It's obvious."*

Just as I'd gotten annoyed at her teasing me again, Madoka-san had put on a gentle smile, albeit with a seriousness behind it. *"I'm talking about when* that *time comes—when the two of you need to decide your feelings and what the two of you are gonna be."*

"Oh..." Those words had been in the corner of my brain, but that had made me all the more confused. *"*That *time's already come and passed, though, hasn't it?"*

Mizuto and I had decided to go back to dating. That was why I thought by taking that option, we'd already passed the time she'd been referring to.

"Oh... Were you thinking that I was talking about your maturity levels to be able to make that decision to start dating again?"

"You weren't?"

"Oh, no. This is all about something more tangible and inevitable."

“Inevitable?”

“From where I’m standing, that *time refers to something in the near future. I’m sure when that time does come, the two of you will have to take a good look at the both of yourselves and maybe even rethink your relationship. I’m sorry if I’m scaring you, but it’s nothing too bad, so don’t freak out. I’d just be happy if when that time does come, you’re like, ‘Oh yeah, she did say something about this…’”*

At that time, I hadn’t been sure what she’d meant by *that* time. But eventually both Mizuto and I would need to think about our paths. We were halfway through high school. The choices for our future kept piling up and, slowly, I was getting closer to having to make them. I needed to find out what I would choose—decide what my goal would be. But right now, I didn’t have a clue.

Isana Higashira: Myself

The hellish summer vacation finally ended. While I agonized over working on illustrations that deviated from my typical method of simply obeying my fetishes, I was somehow able to complete my work by the end of August. It was perhaps by far the least restful summer vacation I’d ever had.

However, looking back, it had been quite enjoyable. The VTuber who commissioned me was also incredibly pleased with my work. All that was left now was to get through the new semester and decide how I’d spend the money I earned. Though I considered trying to venture into the unknown world of working on an LCD tablet, Mizuto-kun told me that if I were to try and exit my comfort zone, then it’d be best if I tried a drawing tablet.

Apparently, his reasoning was that other tablets would ruin my posture and hurt my back. Though I understood what he was saying, using an LCD tablet gave a stronger atmosphere of being an illustrator. However, the days that I was still allowed to act carefree like that were few in number.

“Isana, did you see the DM?”

“I did…”

My account had received a new message. This time, it was from a publishing company.

`We have a new light novel project and would very`

much like you to be the illustrator.

The days of me doing my daily quests in mobile games, drawing whatever I liked, and relying on Mizuto-kun were coming to an end even though I hadn’t graduated from high school. The time for me to decide who I wanted to be had arrived.

Afterword

“I can’t believe you’re making high school girls read this, Kamishiro-sensei.”

This was what Ato-chan told me with scrutinizing eyes, their hair losing its battle with the June humidity.

At first I wasn’t sure what they were talking about, but soon enough I realized they were talking about the love hotel.

“Don’t you have any shame, guilt, or moral compass here?” they asked.

“I don’t think there’s any problem here. Isn’t this kinda stuff already in the normal stuff that you read?”

“It’s different when characters that have been in this series for eleven volumes are moaning all of a sudden!”

She and I were close like this. In regard to how close the two of us are, let’s pretend like Ato-chan, Ato Kakitsubata, and I live next door to each other. Outside of that, the rest of this section is real. She has a very sharp eye for light novels that rivals those of pro authors and editors. If anything, she’s become my second editor—or actually, maybe she’s my true editor.

“Don’t you think people will get mad at you for writing this kinda scene in the twelfth volume? Ikumi Hasegawa’s voice is playing on repeat in my head!”

“I wrote that scene precisely because it’s the twelfth volume, though.”

“Meaning?”

“Up until now, I’ve been mixing genres a little bit, so I thought doing a new genre would be fun.”

“You have a bad personality, you know that?”

“I think it shows I’ve matured as an author.”

“Fine, whatever. I get it now. You even used that trick where you don’t reveal a character’s gender. Have you even done that before?”

“I’ve been practicing recently,” I said, smiling. “Maybe you’re actually a guy, and not a girl.”

“If you’re using your standard writing style from *Tier 1 Sisters*, I

bet you already revealed my gender by saying ‘she and I.’”

“Spot on. Do you have any aspirations of being a great detective in a novel?”

“As long as no moaning is involved.”

“Well, at least not in the first eleven volumes.”

“The serialization would be stopped at volume zero,” she said, much more strict than a real editor.

All I could do was chuckle dryly.


My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex
"There's Only One Guy for Me"


"What do I do, Yume-chan?!"
Akatsuki Minami
Yume Irido
Irido Mizuto
"Irido! Help me!"
Kogure Kawanami

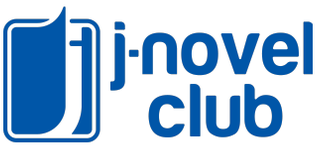

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I did whatever
I wanted to you,
so... This time,
you can do
whatever you
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