
The Detective Is Already Dead
Ordinary Cases
1
Nagisa Natsunagi Still Wants to Be a High School Girl
Syusui Tsukimi
Illustration Hanekoto
Original Author nigozyu
Character Design Umibouzu


The Detective Is Already Dead
Ordinary Cases
1
Nagisa Natsunagi Still Wants to Be a High School Girl
Syusui Tsukimi
Illustration Hanekoto


Original Author
nigozyu
Character Design
Umibouzu



Contents

Prologue

Chapter 1
The Yellow Panties
of Happiness

Chapter 2
The Lost Pages of Youth

Chapter 3
Time-Capsule Paradox

Chapter 4
Our Way Home

Interlude
Lies, Smoke, and Adults

Epilogue

Afterword

Special Short Story by nigozyu
The Detective's Assistant
Wants More Friends




Siesta




High School Girls Dreaming
Haruru Agarie
Nagisa Natsunagi
Fuyuko Shirahama

Nagisa Natsunagi Still Wants to Be a High School Girl

The Detective Is Already Dead
Ordinary Cases

1

Syusui Tsukimi

Illustration Hanekoto

Original Author nigozyu | Character Design Umibouzu

YEN ON

New York

Copyright

Nagisa Natsunagi Still Wants to Be a High School Girl 1

Syusui Tsukimi
Illustration Hanekoto Original Author nigozyu Character Design Umibouzu
Translation Laura Sitzer This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

NATSUNAGINAGISA WA MADAJOSHIKOSEI DE ITAI Vol.1 TANTEI WA MO, SHINDEIRU.
Ordinary Case
©Syusui Tsukimi 2023 ©nigozyu 2023
First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2025 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: August 2025
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Anna Powers
Designed by Yen Press Design: Jane Sohn

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBNs: 979-8-8554-0926-0 (paperback) 979-8-8554-0927-7 (ebook)

E3-20250717-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Chapter 1: The Yellow Panties of Happiness

Chapter 2: The Lost Pages of Youth

Chapter 3: Time-Capsule Paradox

Chapter 4: Our Way Home

Interlude: Lies, Smoke, and Adults

Epilogue

Afterword

Special Short Story by nigozyu The Detective’s Assistant Wants More Friends

Yen Newsletter

Prologue

I can hear the sound of a heartbeat.

When I wake up in the morning, I lie in bed and place my hand on my chest.

Under my palm, I feel life pulsing over and over again in the same rhythm. It's precious and dear, pumping energy into my frail body.

Oh, I get it now.

I'm alive.

I get to live again today.

I sit up and take a deep breath, then let it out.

Once I'm out of bed, I walk to the full-length mirror. One step, two steps, three, until I see myself reflected from head to toe. Anyone would see me as a "normal" girl—and a cute one at that. A *really* cute one.

If you asked me what I'd wished for since I was little, what I wanted to be, I think I could answer faster than any other girl in the world.

I wanted to be a normal high school girl.

I wanted mornings when I'd run into friends on the way to school, and we'd walk the rest of the way chatting about everything and nothing. Afternoons when I'd run around the schoolyard in sneakers until I'm soaked with sweat. Evenings when we'd get bubble teas together in our matching uniforms, taking pictures and goofing around. Nights when I'd fall asleep talking to my crush from my class.

I bet no one wanted a collection of those moments more than I did. This whole "life" inside me longed to be a high school girl.

I wash my face, eat breakfast, and put on just a teensy bit of makeup. I slip my arms into my prized school uniform, tie my hair with my favorite red ribbon……

There, I'm looking perfect again today! Right now, I'm the cutest high school girl in the world!

With my schoolbag in my hand and school-issued loafers on my feet, I place my hand over my heart one more time before leaving the house and whisper: "Thank you for letting me live another day."

I open the door to a beautiful blue sky unrolling above me, as vast as the ocean. As the sun smiles brightly down on me, I have a feeling today is going to be an amazing day.

My name is Nagisa. Nagisa Natsunagi.

I'm just a high school girl who hasn't become anything yet.

Chapter 1

The Yellow Panties of Happiness

"Morning, Nagisa! What color undies are you wearing today?"

"Am I in hell?"

It was a mild May morning, and a girl called out to me on my way to school. Not satisfied with just hugging me from behind, she proceeded to engage in some textbook sexual harassment.

Her name was Fuyuko Shirahama, and she was my classmate—though that wasn't important.

"I left home in such a great mood, you know. I was thinking, 'Today's gonna be an amazing day,' and you had to spoil it in minutes. Can you not?"

"Nagisa, are you seriously monologuing like you're the main character on your way to school? Yikes."

"It doesn't matter! It's such a beautiful day, and now I can't enjoy it 'cause you had to come and ask me gross questions!"

"Yeah. Bright blue sky, white clouds. By the way, what color are your undies?"

"Whi—…… Hey, don't just slip back into harassing me!"

Fuyuko deliberately distanced herself from my rage and laughed. I should mention that while her greetings sucked, she was a total knockout—tall and androgynous with a beautiful face. Her voice was on the deep side, and she was athletic, too. It was all so unfair.

"Ha-ha. I love how you get flustered every time I tease you, Nagisa."

Wait, wasn't she supposed to be more of a tomboy type? Talk about overdoing the character customization. Also, she couldn't just casually drop the word *love* when she was so attractive. What if my brain had glitched out and taken her seriously?! Could she deal with the consequences?!

"Well, I can pretty much guess what you're wearing today. I

found out how many pairs you had and what colors you liked when I broke into your house.”

“Can you not suddenly go *yandere* on me, too? And you’re k-kidding, right?”

“Hee-hee. Have I ever lied to you, Nagisa?”

“You could at least tell me a white lie! I’m so scared, I’m gonna cry……”

“Anyone who makes you cry will pay dearly. I’ll protect you, no matter the cost.”

“Thanks. Then how about we go to the police right now?”

When I suggested that, Fuyuko turned uncharacteristically serious and shook her head. “I—I actually have some trauma from the police, so I’d rather not.”

“So you *do* have some criminal record I don’t know about?”

“What do you mean by that? Huh? Does that mean you don’t trust me?”

“Well, duh? How can I trust someone who grabs me and wants to know the color of my underwear first thing in the morning? And—”

“Morning, Nagi, Fuyuko. You guys are already at it, huh?”

Just as I was about to launch into a lecture, a flashy blond *gyaru* called out to us from across the street. She wore the same uniform as us (with a lot more skin showing), and she was—

“Morning, Haruru. You’re as energetic as ever today.”

“For sure! I grabbed a bubble tea at the station this morning!”

Haruru Agarie—a *gyaru* who bought bubble tea first thing in the morning and a friend of me and Fuyuko.

I was currently spending my high school life with the two of them. We went to school together in the mornings and ate lunch together in the cafeteria or courtyard. We sometimes hung out after school… Yeah, they were really important friends to me.

Despite realizing my dream of becoming a high school girl, I had missed class most of the time because of my poor health. I had special permission to submit reports and take exams to earn credits to make up for when I couldn’t attend, which let me move up a grade.

I started being able to come to school regularly about six months

ago…in the fall of my second year.

I was still absent a lot and didn't really fit in, but Fuyuko and Haruru had started talking to me, and one thing led to another until we were really close.

"Like, isn't drinking bubble tea first thing in the morning really bad for you?"

"No way! Morning bubble tea stops your hands from shaking, calms your heart, and gets rid of any little anxieties. Plus, you can snag a boyfriend and pull super-rare characters in mobile games."

"Is my friend really hitting me with a crazy sales pitch first thing in the morning?"

"Also, my boobs got bigger. That's legit."

"…Can you tell me where you got that bubble tea from later?"

Now I understood why, for a while, every high school girl was equipped with a bubble tea in her hand.

"So that's bubble milk tea?" I said. "Is it even any good?"

"Huh?! Nagi, have you never had it?"

I was embarrassed to admit that I was super behind on trends thanks to being cooped up in the hospital. Fuyuko and Haruru sometimes talked about bubble tea, so I knew it existed, but I hadn't tried it yet.

"N-no. I don't actually know what it tastes like… That's really embarrassing, huh?"

"Oh, that's okay!" said Haruru. "You don't need to know! Anyway—guess what my cat did!"

"Why not?! Don't blow me off—tell me! Don't just change the subject! You're supposed to say we should get some after school or something!"

When I yelled at them, they both cracked up like they were having a great time…

Ugh…why did I end up being the one everyone picks on? To be honest, in the high school life of my fantasies, I was the glamorous center of the group, while everyone else would follow my lead.

But this was a lot of fun, too. The high school life I had longed for was far more radiant than I imagined in my head. I was so grateful to the two of them for brightening up my days, and I loved them.

But…

Amid all this, there was one more thing. There was this feeling left in my *heart*—

"Aaah! I—I totally forgot!" Haruru suddenly shouted, interrupting my train of thought.

"Wh-what is it, Haruru?"

"I forgot to do the DLC from yesterday's math class!"

"My friend is trying to escape reality by pretending homework is something fun…"

"B-by the way, did you two do it?"

"That's a silly question. If I can't solve a problem the same day I start it, I leave it alone."

"You're amazing, Fuyu," said Haruru. "I really admire how you fail every time but always manage to explain it away with dumb lines. *You* did it, Nagi, didn't you?"

"Of course I did. I'm taking my time at school seriously, you know."

"Hey…we're friends, right? And we'll always be friends?"

"Don't you realize that when a girl phrases a request like that, it's practically blackmail?"

If I refused, it would be all over. They'd tell all the other girls that I was standoffish, and then I wouldn't have any friends—in a shoujo manga, this would be the start of the downturn into a bullying arc.

"Please, please! It's the last thing I'll ever ask of you! I'll even strip naked and lick your shoes like I did last time!"

"We're on the way to school! Could you not turn me into some perverted girl who makes her classmates strip and lick her shoes?! Are you trying to end my high school dreams?"

"You're coming at this all wrong, Haruru. Nagisa's the type who wants to do the bootlicking herself."

"Is this some new form of bullying that I don't know about?"

The feelings I had in my heart… Well, I guess figuring those out could wait. I'd always yearned for times like this when I could laugh together with my precious friends. And I wasn't going to leave such cute girls in need.

"Haruru, I can show you my homework, but today I have to go to

the nurse's office as soon as I get to school. Is after okay?"

"Whoa! Thank you, Nagi! But why the nurse's office? To fix your head?"

"That was totally uncalled for! You could've just asked if I was okay!"

"That's right, Haruru. There's nothing wrong with Nagisa's head. It's her mouth that's the problem."

"I won't deny it, but you guys are the ones making me act up, okay? I'm just going for my usual exam," I said.

Fuyuko, who was walking beside me, nodded in agreement with a "Right."

"Is this where they check to see if there's any problems from your heart transplant before you go back to school?"

"Yes. I've been in such good shape, it's scary. But if something happened to me, the school would get in trouble, too, so it's important for multiple reasons."

A donor had miraculously provided the heart that allowed me to live as a normal high school girl, and the surgery went off without a hitch. Luck and goodwill had kept me alive. I hadn't had the best life before now, but finding this heart had brought me the greatest happiness I could have asked for.

"Can we go with you?"

"Huh? Sure, but it's not that interesting. It'll be over quick."

"It's fine. We're your friends! Besides, it's awkward with me and Fuyuko alone together. Don't leave us like that."

"Don't tell me this group would fall apart without me…?"

Meanwhile, when Haruru said things were awkward, Fuyuko laughed weakly, her expression twisting ruefully.

Stop that! We're all good friends! It's true!

"Geez, I'm just kidding, Fuyu. So don't make that face. It gives me the creeps. You're still not satisfied after making me cry so much yesterday?"

"I-I'm sorry… I'll apologize if I was wrong, so please don't hit me in the face…"

"Sorry. But please don't do a surprise reveal of your secret, twisted love-hate relationship."

If you asked me, that misinterpretation was on Fuyuko. She was teasing Haruru, the *gyaru* who didn't know much about these things, and blaming her for it. To sum it up, they were the perfect pair in situations where they were both clueless.

"Fuyuuu… Nagi's gone quiet again with that weird expression on her face."

"Right, let's get her to the nurse's office as soon as possible. She needs to get her head checked."

I got lost in certain thoughts, and before I knew it, I was standing in front of the nurse's office. I didn't recall exactly what I'd been fantasizing about, but the baffling sentence "prince characters are versatile" stuck with me at the conclusion. What the heck?

A woman seated in a round chair at the back of the room greeted us as we entered the nurse's office. "Oh, I see you're with friends today, Miss Natsunagi."

The woman was dressed in a bright, chic shirt stylishly coordinated with a midi skirt and a white school nurse's coat over the rest of the ensemble. Her name was Koyomi Utsugi. I had my doubts about her slightly fancy way of speaking, but she was always kind to the students and concerned about my health.

She got along well with us, and we affectionately called her by her first name.

"Good morning, Ms. Koyomi."

"Yes, good morning, Miss Natsunagi. You too, Miss Agarie."

"Eh-heh-heh! Morning, Koyo! You give off such a grown-up lady vibe. I love it!"

"Ha-ha, I'm happy to hear that. Well, Miss Natsunagi, shall we proceed with your checkup?"

"Ms. Koyomi? Can you please stop casually ignoring just me? Ms. Koyomi?" Fuyuko raised her voice desperately, and Ms. Koyomi responded with an exaggerated smile.

Prince characters truly were versatile. They shone even when they were being teased.

“Have there been any changes to your health lately? Like fatigue, or tightness in your chest, or a racing heart even though you’re not exercising?”

“I’m fine. If anything, I’ve been feeling good lately.”

“Uh-huh. For example, doesn’t your heart race when you talk to a boy you like?”

“Wait, you meant romantically?!”

“You’re in your last year of high school. It would be unhealthy for you to not have at least some experience. Don’t you fantasize about hanging out alone with a boy you like…even a little?”

“W-well…not anyone in particular. But sometimes, I fantasize about a boy I like talking to me, and then I follow him without thinking and get roughed up?”

“All right. I’ll prescribe some medicine, mostly for your head.”

“Nagi’s such a hardcore masochist. I don’t get it.”

“But sometimes, she really picks on me, and it’s the best,” said Fuyuko.

“D-don’t tell me you’re all judging me? I was just honest about my fantasies!”

My checkup proceeded apace, despite the humiliation.

I’d been tired since the morning began…but this was the end, right?

“That reminds me, it’s almost time for the school blood drive. I expect it will be tricky for Miss Natsunagi because of her heart transplant, but Miss Shirahama and Miss Agarie, will you two be participating?”

The school blood drive, as the name suggested, was a donation event held at school. This time of year, it was done on a voluntary basis together with a physical…but most students did it in their first year, since they were asked over and over during enrollment to donate at least once during their time at school.

“Ah, I can’t. I was told not to because I’ve had a transfusion, kinda like Nagi. I wanted to help folks, too.” Haruru’s shoulders sagged in disappointment. I remembered hearing the story after we’d been friends for a while.

“You got badly injured in a car accident when you were little,

right?”

“Yeah. My folks died, but it was a long time ago, and I’m still alive, so it’s fine! If it hadn’t happened, I wouldn’t have this healthy body!”

Please don’t lift your huge boobs to show them off after such a dark story. I get emotional whiplash.

But she didn’t let a painful old story end in sadness. That was Haruru Agarie’s charm.

“So that’s what happened… I had no idea.”

“Don’t look so sad! Koyo, you only transferred here a few months ago, right? It’s normal not to know about my or the other students’ personal lives, you know.”

Ms. Koyomi started after New Year’s, not in the spring like the other teachers. The previous school nurse had suddenly gone missing, and she was hired to fill the spot…or something.

“I should at least know about the three of you, since you’re regulars in the nurse’s office. Oh! In that case, shouldn’t Miss Shirahama be able to participate in the blood drive?”

“No can do, Ms. Koyomi. I’ll reconsider if a cute girl asks me to do it.”

“So she says, but Fuyu’s just afraid of being stuck with a needle. Isn’t she a baby?”

“Wha?! Ha-Haruru! I told you that was a secret!”

Fuyuko looked a little cute when she got all ruffled at having her weakness exposed. I’d been stuck repeatedly with a needle for IVs and blood draws since I was little, so I was used to it by now—though I still didn’t like it.

“Well, it is voluntary. There are some students who decline for reasons like Miss Shirahama. Well then, that concludes today’s checkup. Thank you for your time, Miss Natsunagi.”

“Yes, thank you to—… Waugghh?!”

As I stood up, my foot snagged on the chair leg. I nearly toppled over and crashed to the floor of the nurse’s office, but I managed to catch myself with my hands.

“…That was close. I thought I was going to get injured in the nurse’s office.”

I pushed myself up after catching my breath, still on all fours, and felt an unusual number of eyes on me.

Three intense gazes were glued to my butt.

"Oh my! Miss Natsunagi, your panties are more childish than I expected."

"I love it when an aggressive girl has childish undies. I stan, I stan!"

"Nagi! I wore those panties when I was in elementary school! You match with me when I was a kid! Heh-heh-heh."

They all just said whatever popped into their heads.

Did they see? They saw…my underwear! My pa-pa-pa-panties!

Fearfully reaching for my skirt, I found it flipped up. They hadn't just had a peek. They'd seen. Everything.

"Waaaughhh! Th-th-this sucks! I get caught up in accidental fan service first thing in the morning, and now three girls are judging my underwear! I wanna go home!"

I stood up and fixed my skirt, but it was too late. My only option now was to blind everyone in the room and then bludgeon them until they lost their memories!

"You don't need to be so embarrassed, Nagisa. Or would you rather make this go away with money? How much?"

"Nagi's the kind of high school girl who'd do anything for money, isn't she?"

"Not only did the two of you see my underwear, but now you're painting the worst possible picture of me?!"

Ugh…I felt so good when I woke up that I purposefully wore a pair I'd just bought. But now that was ruined, after only a few hours.

"What a heartwarming exchange. When you grow up, you stop wearing expensive underwear because there's no one to show it to, so I'm a bit envious of you. Hee-hee…"

"Please don't smile with so much sorrow, Ms. Koyomi."

"Oh, you reminded me of something, Miss Natsunagi. Are you all familiar with the 'Yellow Panties of Happiness'?"

"W-we're talking about panties again, huh…"

It was Fuyuko who answered her when I was about to cry for real.

“People have been talking about it at school recently, right? Some kind of incident.”

“‘Incident’?”

I reacted to the word unconsciously. I didn’t know why myself.

“Yeah. It’s a strange case. After PE or club, people come back to the locker room and find a brand-new pair of yellow panties in a bag stuck to their locker door. Oh, and it only happens to girls.”

“What kind of case involves some major pervert? That was a waste of time.”

“I agree. This is obviously a case for a private dick. As expected of a pervert who likes panties.”

I ignored the ridiculously inappropriate thing Fuyuko had just said and turned to Ms. Koyomi.

“And? What’s with the yellow panties?”

“Like Miss Shirahama said, the incident itself isn’t serious. The girls at school have been saying whoever receives the yellow panties will become happy.”

“At least leave a handkerchief. Why underwear? What’s the point?”

“As a teacher, I can’t turn a blind eye. There’s trespassing in the locker room to consider, and if the culprit is a boy, it could quickly become a very disturbing incident.”

“That’s for sure… It’s not really hurting anyone, but it’s just plain creepy to imagine.”

Our school gave a locker key to every student when they enrolled. No one wanted their wallet or phone stolen, so even though it was a girls-only space, most students used that key to avoid worrying about theft of underwear or valuables.

“That said, it’s also a fact that the school doesn’t want to make a big fuss over it. As long as no harm is done, they’d like to avoid calling the police or holding a school assembly… So about that,” Ms. Koyomi said, looking at the three of us. “I’d like to ask for your help. After school, would you assist me with patrol duty?”

In other words, she wanted us to volunteer.

But the three of us looked at each other awkwardly, since we’d rather enjoy our time after school.

"Koyo, is there anything in it for us? Like giving our grades a boost if we catch the culprit or something like that?" said Haruru.

Ms. Koyomi nodded her head at Haruru's suggestion. "Of course," she said. "It's fun to solve mysteries after school, you know? When I was in high school, I used to do ciphers with one of my classmates who loved to read. We used to pretend to be *detectives* in mystery novels."

My heart was captivated by the unexpected word Ms. Koyomi had said: "detectives." It felt like I'd been powerfully attracted to the idea since I was a little girl, even though I'd never fantasized about mystery-solving before in my life.

"Heh-heh. You're the only one who looks intrigued, Miss Natsunagi."

"Oh, no! I didn't mean…"

Ms. Koyomi commented, like she could see right through me, and I instinctively denied it.

"Hey, speaking of detectives, that reminds me," said Haruru. "Didn't you try to find someone recently, Nagi? That anonymous boy who keeps showing up in the news and stuff. He's being hailed as an ace detective or something—"

I shook my head slightly. "I was just curious. I told you I'm not seriously thinking of finding him."

It was said there was a boy in town who just happened to be present at various *incidents* and helped solve them—everything from minor to complex cases.

"If it was just simple curiosity, you'd have easily forgotten about it. Besides, I thought you said you'd been feeling strange since the surgery."

"Oh? Miss Natsunagi, you need to tell me if you're feeling unwell." Ms. Koyomi had interpreted Fuyuko's words the way a school nurse typically would.

"I-it's not that…," I said. "But it's really strange. For example, I started wanting to read mystery novels, which I wasn't really interested in before, and when something happens on the news, I try to solve it."

It was like I'd become obsessed with mysteries.

"I never cared about them when I was younger. But sometimes, when it comes to solving mysteries, I feel like I'm not even myself."

"I see. I've heard some cases of people's tastes and personalities changing after an organ transplant. That could be affecting you. In that case…"

Ms. Koyomi clapped her hands lightly and voiced her idea: "Why don't you try your hand at solving the case of the Yellow Panties of Happiness? If the rumors about this detective boy are true, you might even get to meet him."

"What? …I wonder if I can?"

I couldn't help but be puzzled at Ms. Koyomi's words.

"He's apparently present at many cases and helps solve them. Don't you think such a mysterious boy might be involved in this incident in one way or another?"

"It's definitely possible…I guess?"

"The opportunity will certainly present itself if you become a detective. And it will satisfy the desire to solve mysteries that's swirling in your heart."

This would be my chance to size him up. If the extraordinary deductive powers and insight that led him to get involved in all those incidents were the real deal—

The greatest *mystery* I wanted him to solve was…

He might be able to help me find the owner of this heart.

My mouth was already moving before I knew it.

"I'll do it, Ms. Koyomi," I answered, adding in one condition. "I can't be a detective, but if you'll settle for a *proxy detective*, I'll take the job."

It was like someone else lurking within me made me say it. When I finished, I was surprised by my own words and covered my mouth…but it looked to be a little too late.

"Hee-hee, I don't mind. Well, I'll be counting on you, Miss *Proxy Detective* Natsunagi. And your assistants, Miss Shirahama and Miss Agarie. If you run into any problems, I'll of course lend a hand!"

In the end, that was how Ms. Koyomi pushed me into it. Shortly after, the bell rang, and we had to leave the nurse's office.

"Nagisa. If you really don't want to, I can go refuse for you?" Fuyuko asked me, looking concerned while I was lost in thought.

"Oh, no, it's fine. I was just…wondering why I said that. The moment I heard the word 'detective,' I thought, 'That's not right.'"

"I can't be a detective, but if you'll settle for a proxy detective*, I'll take the job."*

I had a sense of déjà vu, like I had said those words to someone a long time ago.

I didn't think I'd had the chance to say that, considering I didn't have any friends.

"I'll do it. I want to try being a proxy detective. But doing it alone worries me… Fuyuko, Haruru…will you help me, too?"

"Good grief. If you want to be a detective, you should listen to people, Nagisa."

"Good grief. Nagi lacks insight, doesn't she?"

I'd shyly asked them, all red-faced, but then they just sneered faintly, like that made no difference to them.

"Ms. Koyomi said she'd be counting on all of us."

"That's right. We were planning on supporting you to the max from the start! Like they say, 'Three heads in one'!"

"You mean 'three people means good head,' Haruru. You're so silly."

"Three heads are better than one, huh? Hmm, I actually think it might go more smoothly if I investigate alone…but…"

I took Fuyuko's and Haruru's big, warm hands that my own small hands couldn't completely cover.

"Thank you. I can do anything with you two on my side."

That might have been a bit of an exaggeration, though.

"Ah! I'd do anything for the two of you, Nagisa and Haruru!"

"Yeah! And I trust Nagi and Fuyu with my life!"

My precious friends didn't make fun of my words or ignore them. They responded directly, with the same enthusiasm. Oh, wow. I really loved them.

"While we're at it, how about we give our team a name? Does

‘Nagisa’s Pure Girls’ work?”

“Of course it doesn’t work! What gives, making us sound like an idol group from last century?”

“You know, the other students call us ‘Summers’—all our names have a summer vibe. Natsunagi, Shirahama, and Agarie. I love it.”

“Yikes! I was happier not knowing that! It sounds like an entertainer group, too, and ‘Summers’ makes it sound like I’m the ringleader who brought you two together! I hate that even more!”

“Ha-ha. That’s not true, boss ma’am. We’re always equals.”

“Friends who are equals don’t call their friends boss or ma’am!”

While we were talking nonsense in front of the nurse’s office—

“In that case, how about writing the name as ‘Spring, Summer, Winter’ with the reading as ‘Autumnless’? We have Miss ‘East Inlet in Spring,’ Haruru Agarie, Miss ‘Calm Summer Shores,’ Nagisa Natsunagi, and Miss ‘White Sandy Beach in Winter,’ Fuyuko Shirahama—but no autumn! Heh-heh.”

“Don’t tell me Ms. Koyomi’s going to join in?!”

The painful team name debate was somehow dropped when the bell rang to announce the start of homeroom. (Although “Autumnless” intrigued me a bit.)

Given the details of the incident, I wasn’t too keen on solving it. But I felt my spirits rising a little at becoming a proxy detective. They lifted even further with the hope that I might be able to meet *him*.

Incidentally, Haruru completely forgot to copy my notes, and she wound up getting a stern scolding from the teacher during math class—along with Fuyuko.

“So if we’re going to investigate the Yellow Panties incident, why exactly do we need to go to the mall in front of the station?”

After school, we made our way to the fashion floor inside the mall. It had been Fuyuko’s suggestion that we come here.

“Actually, I’m friends with a girl who got her hands on some yellow panties. Could you just…stand near the wall and shield me

from the chest down?”

Haruru and I took our positions, like we were cornering Fuyuko against the wall, as she requested.

“Ah, this is great. I feel like I’m being *kabedon*ed by two beautiful girls—I’m so happy!”

“If you’re making us do this for your own happiness, we might just mug you here.”

“Ha-ha. Nagisa, your smile isn’t reaching your eyes. It’s not like I got you two surrounding me just to fulfill my desires. I’m just a little embarrassed showing them in public.”

With that, Fuyuko put both hands under her skirt and reached up under—wait, huh?!

“Wh-what are you doing? That gesture’s completely…pa-pa-pa—”

“You’re gonna take off your panties, huh?”

“Haruru! A young woman should at least think twice about saying things like that in public!”

“I mean, Nagisa, you just publicly called it the ‘Panties incident’ a few minutes ago?”

Sh-she was right. A high school girl in the throes of adolescence should never mention panties. While I was busy nearly dying of embarrassment, Fuyuko commenced her counterattack.

“I told you, Nagisa. I’m kinda embarrassed to show the yellow panties I borrowed from my friend in public. Panties are meant to be worn, and they’re an item forbidden to men. Meaning, if I don’t do this, I can’t show them to you.”

“C-c-can’t you just take them off in the bathroom?!”

“You want me to come all the way back here from the bathroom in a vulnerable pantyless state? That’s too cruel. Unless…if things were the other way around, would you do that for me?”

In other words, she was asking if I’d hold down a flimsy piece of fabric to stop it from riding up in a crowded space while it was still light out—with guys from our class around. It was definitely a no from me… Telling me to walk through a crowd of people without wearing any panties was just—

“N-no, absolutely no waaay!” I shouted without thinking, immediately clapping both hands over my mouth.

"You're really cute with your face all red and your breath all heavy. But I'm not taking off my panties. I was just kidding when I stuck my hands under my skirt, and I never said anything about taking them off in the first pla… HURK!"

I brought my golden right hand down upon the head of my smooth-talking bad friend. I didn't want to hear her gurgling in pain, so it was just a chop. A clean strike, just powerful enough to not split Fuyuko's head in two. Just barely, not with my full strength.

"Nn, ugh…Ha-Haruru. Is my head still there?"

"Hmm? It's still attached, but I wouldn't say it's okay! Can you round pi to the nearest hundredth?"

"What am I, a supercomputer or something? You shouldn't hit those that hard, either."

"Sometimes, computers work better afterward! More importantly, are those the infamous panties?"

Haruru smoothly pulled a piece of fabric from Fuyuko's anguished hands and showed it to me.

"So these are the yellow panties of happiness, huh? From what I can see, they're normal underwear? They feel nice to the touch, they don't smell, and they aren't damp."

"You just stuck your face into those… Even if they are brand-new…you really scare me, Nagisa."

"If you haven't worn them, it's fine. Also, my friends aren't that bad. So the brand tag is…huh?"

My gaze moved from the brand name on the tag to the merchandise displayed in the window of the shop in front of me.

"It's the same brand?"

"Exactly. This is the only lingerie store near the school, so if the yellow panties were sold here, I thought we could stake out the place."

"I get it. Then, like Fuyuko said, we just need to mark down the students from our school who come here. And the one who buys yellow panties is our prospective culprit."

"Wow! That's smart for Fuyu! If I give her a few more whacks on the head, she might get even smarter!"

"Haruru…put your fist down. I thought of that before Nagisa hit

me. I'm not a magic mallet or a drum. Hitting me won't do anything, you know?"

I disregarded the princely girl being accosted by the violent *gyaru* and scanned the store again. There were mostly female customers in their twenties at this time of day but also high schoolers—none from our school, though, judging by their uniforms.

"Well, let's get right to our stakeout-slash-fake-shopping-trip."

Three girls after school, staking out an underwear store. What an amazing slice of youth this was. Was this…the high school life I dreamed of from my hospital bed? Ha…ha-ha.

"I think I'm gonna cry."

"What's wrong? You wanna talk about it, Nagisa?"

"Fuyuko. Don't act like a nice guy I'm not that close to who has ulterior motives."

"Oh, come on, you idiots! Look at that couple over there!"

"You're talking like you're not an idiot yourself! What's wrong with you, geez…"

Haruru was pointing at a boy and girl from our school. They were probably first-years; their uniforms still looked new. The two of them were blushing and picking out expensive underwear.

"That's the type of girl who comes to an underwear store as a couple, flirts with her boyfriend, and buys the sexy underwear the guy likes! Let's snuff them out here and now to protect the healthy boys!"

"I think a savage girl like you is the one who should get snuffed."

"Okay, Haruru. I'll give you the signal in three seconds. I'll take the right, like usual. You take the left."

"Hang on just a second. Do you two always do things like this?!"

But I understood how they felt. When I went to buy underwear, I honestly felt kinda weird with boys in the store. That said, it didn't mean I wanted to subdue them by force.

"Stop saying dumb things. We're continuing our stakeout."

"Since we're already here, you should buy some undies, Nagisa. We'll choose for you."

"Mind your own business. Ah, hey…!"

Fuyuko picked up a nearby pair of black panties (a *thong*!) and

placed them on top of my skirt with the hanger still attached.

"Yep. I knew black would suit you, Nagisa. *Her eyes glistening with a hint of sadness, she signals to him that she doesn't want to go home tonight… The black peeking through the gaps in her unbuttoned shirt seems to promise a passionate night*."

"You're way off, Fuyu! Nagi's totally red! She aggressively reels in the boy she likes to bed with a blazingly passionate seduction… She's a classic man-eater!"

Even though it was over my skirt, the two of them took turns holding their underwear choices against me and having unauthorized fantasies about me. Wasn't this horribly obscene? My face was burning from all the harassment.

"S-stop—! I don't need new underwear or anything! Besides, the ones I'm wearing today are brand-new!"

"No, those are lame. They'd make a guy wilt."

"That's right, Nagi. Imagine getting in the mood with your boyfriend, and then he sees those and goes, '……Sorry, Nagisa. I just can't today.' What then?!"

"*He sighs softly, muttering, 'Good grief,' as he re-dresses and goes to sleep. Nagisa, watching his back, wets her pillow with tears. She's so miserable. But that's good. She wants it to be that way*."

"Don't construct elaborate scenarios about me in your heads! Besides, I'm not ready for that yet."

Forcefully pushing the lingerie away, I made a run for it and bolted out of the underwear store. Fuyuko and Haruru were quick to chase after me, cackling and patting me on the head.

"I just can't. You're really so cute, Nagi. You get instantly embarrassed over being teased just a little… I want to write *pathetic* with the *furigana* for *cute* over it."

"There, there. I love how shy you are, Nagisa. Well, you'll be fine even without winning underwear. And if you meet a guy you want to test your underwear with, I'll kick his ass. I'll protect you from any undesirable guys."

"Haruru aside, I'm terrified of Fuyuko… Hey, there's a bench. I'm tired, so can I rest a little there?"

"No, let's investigate tomorrow if you're tired. I don't think we'll

be getting anything useful from this store anyway."

"Huh? What do you mean, Fuyuko?"

"I actually showed the clerk the yellow panties of happiness during our stakeout and asked if any high school girls had bought the same pair recently. And they said the stock hadn't moved at all."

That meant the culprit hadn't purchased the underwear used for the crime here, at least. In hindsight, if they'd bought several pairs at an underwear store near the school, they would have been easy to trace…

"By the way, why didn't you tell me that earlier? You might as well have checked as soon as we went into the store. Right?"

In response, Haruru and Fuyuko exchanged glances and laughed theatrically.

I see. So that's it.

"You already knew, but you wanted to play with me. Is that it?"

"…Hee-hee-hee!"

"…Ah-ha-ha!"

"I'll forgive one of you. Whoever buys me something to drink first gets off the hook. Ready, go!"

I watched my two best friends take off at full speed, and then I returned to the underwear store. Picking up the two pairs of panties that had been foisted on me earlier, I secretly compared them to the pair I currently had on in the store's dressing room.

"They're not lame… They're not lame at all."

But if I bought underwear they recommended, somehow it felt like losing a battle. *Instead, I'll wear my brand-new pair with perfect poise…!*

The next day, we went somewhere other than the day before. If we couldn't pin them down in the act of buying underwear, we could catch them at the scene of the crime. The three of us had discussed it over the phone until late, and the place we'd decided to meet up was—

"First underwear, then swimsuits—it's like an anime fan-service

episode. Well, this was my idea."

There was an indoor swimming pool on the school grounds. It was originally used by a powerhouse of a swim team, but that was many years before our time. The swim team had since disbanded, and now it was only used for gym classes and training by other sports clubs in the summer.

"Well, asking was definitely worth a shot. Ms. Koyomi worked hard and apparently got us permission to use it for about two hours."

Fuyuko had emerged from the locker room after me. Her height gave her long limbs that looked great in a competition swimsuit. She was like a model; even the girls couldn't take their eyes off her.

"Nagisa, why're you standing there in a daze? You okay? Wanna touch my thighs?"

"How would touching your thighs help?"

"There must be some nourishment you can only get from them. Well, I'm used to being ogled. People used to peep at me in the locker room in junior high. I miss that."

"Don't you think it's weird that you're reminiscing about it that way?"

"No! Because it was a really nice memory!!"

"Whoa! Don't suddenly yell with that huge grin on your face!"

Was Fuyuko an exhibitionist…? I felt embarrassed being looked at, even by other girls. Even now, I truly hated wearing a competition swimsuit like this.

"There's no point in getting worked up over *my* body. There's an even more impressive one coming—look."

Saying that, Fuyuko pointed to where my friend—? No, to where two melons on legs were. The melons were melony melons. Melons with legs? Melons sprouting on legs? This was undoubtedly an unsolvable mystery—too enormous for me to figure out.

"Nagi, Fuyu! Thanks for waiting! Well, the swimsuit the school loaned me is a bit small. Especially around the boobs. It looks like I'm in bondage! Ha-ha-ha!"

The melons that shook with every step…huh? Wait, that was just a hallucination. When I looked closer, they were Haruru.

She had her hair tied up in a bun, which made her look different than usual. But this was…

"The worst! A slender, beautiful girl and a voluptuous, innocent *gyaru*! And I'm sandwiched in between them like an NPC with no features at all!"

"It's supposed to be flowers in both hands, not on both sides!"

"Like, if Fuyuko is a rose, and Haruru is a sunflower…then I'm just a fleabane at best?"

"Hey, you should've matched our seasonal names with the flowers. Roses bloom in early summer, sunflowers in the summer. Fleabanes are spring. They're also called 'poverty grass,' Nagisa."

"So basically 'poor luck' in a literal sense… Also, it's kind of annoying that you know so much about flowers. Especially since it kinda works for you."

"It's okay, Nagi. If we're gaudy flowers, you can be one that blooms with all its might. A dandelion, at least!"

"All right, challenge accepted. I'll cut you down like the flower you are."

"I'm sorry! At least let a hot guy pick me when I'm on display at the flower shop."

I had a hunch that *let a hot guy take me home* was closer to what she meant… They were so noisy. *Sigh.* I'd been pretty confident, too. I thought I might cry.

"Wait, I don't want to be a rose; I want to accentuate your beautiful breast, Nagisa. I should be a dandelion instead. You know, the ones they garnish sashimi with!"

"Those aren't dandelions; they're edible chrysanthemums. Idiot."

"And fleabanes are related to chrysanthemums! What a twist, Nagisa! Well done!"

"True, thank you. Unrelated, but the world record for holding your breath underwater is about twenty-four minutes. So should we swim together?"

"Y-your eyes say you're about to cause an accident that isn't an accident! A twenty-five minute one!"

Getting back on topic, we decided on our goal for the day while warming up.

“Do you really think the culprit behind the Yellow Panties incident will go into the locker room while we’re swimming?” I asked.

“Nagisa, you’re being really half-assed about this, considering it was your idea. The sports club rooms have been on high alert lately, so it’ll be hard to infiltrate them. But not many people use the pool locker rooms…”

“And fewer people around makes it the perfect place for a crime. While we’re playing around in the pool, the culprit will secretly sneak into the locker room, and…gotcha!” Haruru threw her arms around Fuyuko from behind, and the two of them looked at me smugly.

Though the decoy plan started as my idea, the two of them had fleshed out the details, and this was the result.

“It’ll be fine. Ms. Koyomi is guarding the pathway that leads from the school building to the pool. All we need to do is get loud in here…so they’ll hear it outside!”

Having said that, Fuyuko finished her warm-up and dived into the pool, swimming the full twenty-five meters in one go in a graceful front crawl before climbing out the opposite side. Waving her hand happily, she almost seemed to shine.

“Isn’t Fuyu great? She’s always upbeat and drags us along with her.”

Standing next to me, Haruru watched Fuyuko with just a hint of envy in her eyes.

“Yeah. I think so, too. When I first came back to school, I was kind of out of place, right?”

“Hm? You definitely were. What about it?”

“She spoke to me like we were friends who’d just hung out yesterday…smiling like always.”

“Mm-hmm. That’s what’s great about Fuyu. Well, she’s got her quirks. Maybe you two sensed you had something in common? Me too, of course!”

I thought about the day I first talked to Haruru and Fuyuko. I’d been looking forward to high school. But I was even more nervous about the thought of every day at school.

The two who’d appeared before me were undoubtedly heroes.

“It’s incredible. She’s so interesting, and kind, and cool.”

“Right! You don’t find a cute girl who cares about her friends like that every day!”

As the two of us reminisced about old times, Fuyuko returned.

“Oh, the idiot’s back.”

“You’re right. Here comes the idiot swimming with the full force of an idiot.”

“What’s this all of a sudden?! What a couple of mean girls! You have too much fun talking behind my back! By the way, why aren’t you two swimming? Is it too hard on Nagisa’s heart or something?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Surprisingly, I can even run and stuff. But there’s something I want to do today, so I brought this with me!”

I retrieved a certain something from the plastic bag I’d placed by the poolside.

“This! An assortment of SuperBalls! In this TV drama I saw when I was little, there was a scene where students competed to see how many of these they could grab during swimming class. I’ve always wanted to do it, too.”

It was probably something lots of kids had experienced themselves in real life, just like in the drama. But in that hospital room—in my old world—it was a glittering fantasy.

The plastic balls sparkled as they reflected the sunlight, like beautiful jewels.

“So I wanted to do it with you two… That was the thought anyway. D-do you think it’s childish of me? Ha-ha.”

I suddenly felt embarrassed and tried to laugh it off like I was doing an imitation of Haruru. How dumb of me. A high schooler playing like an elementary schooler during class. Even if I would enjoy it, there was no way they would.

“Ready, Haruru?”

“’Course I am, Fuyu. Well then…here we go!”

Haruru grabbed a bunch of balls from my palm and tossed them into the pool as hard as she could. I was shocked, and Fuyuko tapped me on the back.

“What’re you spaced out for, Nagisa? I’ll grab them all before you!”

"I will, too! Oh, and the one with a diamond on it is worth ten points, 'kay?"

With a splash, the two of them left me behind and dived into the pool headfirst. The water splashed and wet my cheek. My two precious friends were like elementary school kids, eager to search for the sunken treasure at the bottom.

"W-wait! I'll go in, too! There's no way I'll lose to you two!"

I followed suit and dived into the pool. As long as my breath lasted, I desperately scrambled for the plastic balls… It was kind of fun. Something I hadn't been able to do before with my old heart. It was a world full of the fantasies and ideals I'd imagined as a child.

I could really feel that fantasy had become reality.

Ah, geez. What now?

I knew being a high school girl would be tons of fun!

"Ahh, that was fun! But an hour of that was probably a little too much."

We sat on a bench by the pool, drinking sports drinks that Fuyuko had bought. Even I had to admit this was a classic high school experience. Yeah, I was feeling emotional.

I turned to my right. "Sports drinks after exercising are the best! Right, Haruru?" I asked, and she gave me an uncertain look.

"Hmm. I'm kinda conflicted. It's too sweet for me to really enjoy…"





“Heh-heh. Are you saying the drink is bad after making me buy it?” said Fuyuko. “You’re a sadist, Haruru. I’m about to flood this place with salt water.”

Fuyuko, who was seated on my left, gazed at the sports drink can with a desolate expression on her face and fell silent. It felt like their master-slave dynamic was going to continue even after we graduated. That reminded me…

“What can you do? Haruru’s got a unique *palate*,” I said, looking at Fuyuko.

Fuyuko nodded. “She really does.”

We weren’t trying to be sarcastic by saying, “Miss Haruru thinks she’s too good for us,” or something; there was a real reason behind it.

“Sometimes, I get really sick of my body! I can only drink certain kinds of juice—there are snacks and fast food items I can’t eat, too, and my palate’s way too picky!”

Annoyed, Haruru finished the sports drink in one go and crushed the can.

There were many people in the world, like wine sommeliers, who had a more refined palate than the average person just because of their profession. But Haruru had an even more unique palate than that.

“Haruru, you can tell someone’s health or mood by tasting their fluids, like blood or sweat, right? Isn’t that a pretty interesting skill to have?”

True to Fuyuko’s words, Haruru’s palate was on another level—like in America, where people with a discerning palate were apparently called “supertasters.”

“It’s never been useful, though. The only time was when I tasted my boyfriend’s half-finished coffee, found it tasted like another girl, and hounded him until he confessed that he was cheating.”

“That’s useful as hell! Wait, Haruru, you had a boyfriend?”

“Ha-ha, I just made that up. But classmates who know about it have asked me to do stuff like that before. I said no because I didn’t know them that well, though.”

“Most mystery novels would fall apart if you were the

protagonist… That kind of skill would make a detective weep.”

At that point, it was practically ESP. More of a sixth sense than a palate.

“But if it was you two, licking your sweat or blood would be… fine?”

“The only other people in the world who would say that are vampires.”

“By the way, any fluid that comes out of your body works. Like p __”

I had a hunch that she was about to say something insensitive, so I stuffed a towel in her mouth. Both my friends had no shame…

“Blecch… Nagi, your towel tastes like the daily lunch special from the cafeteria…”

“How?! I brushed my teeth afterward! You’re the one who’s particular!”

“Nagisa, they say your first kiss tastes like lemon, but it actually tastes like whatever you ate or drank just before. You should carry mouthwash.”

“Shut up! Don’t talk like you’ve already had your first kiss!”

“Then seeing as we’re both inexperienced… Want to practice with me?”

“We are not getting into a flowery yuri romantic comedy here,” I said.

For some reason, Fuyuko and Haruru looked at each other and blushed. Had something happened? A flowery development that I didn’t know about? Oh, right, she said she was inexperienced, so it was probably one of her usual jokes.

“You’re so responsible, Nagisa. I’m worried that when you’re a college student, some bad boy will lure you into his apartment and do something irresponsible under the influence of alcohol.”

“Oh, I can see it, too. He’ll say, ‘How about you do something irresponsible for once?’ and just like that, birds will be chirping in the morning.”

“I-if I’m going to do something irresponsible, I’ll be upfront and honest about it!”

“Doesn’t that declaration sound a little forced?”

“She’s definitely gonna fall for the wrong guy… Oh, I’ve got a message. It’s from Koyo!”

Saying that, Haruru retrieved her phone from her cleavage. Her cleavage…?

“Haruru, where did you just pull your phone out from…?”

“It was in the way, so I wedged it in there when I went to the bathroom before. My very own Haruru Agarie special phone case! Isn’t it funny?”

“I think that case could withstand any impact. My brain might not survive the blow it just took, though.”

“More importantly, Koyo says a student just came into the pool from the pathway! They’re probably in the locker room already! Wh-what do we do?”

Fuyuko and I exchanged glances and nodded at the panicked Haruru.

“I’ll head to the locker room. Can I leave the pool exits to you two?”

“Got it. But let me back you up, Nagisa. There’s a chance the culprit might resort to violence.”

“I’ll guard the exits, then! I’ll stay on the phone with Koyo, so don’t worry about me! Now, let’s hurry!”

We rushed from the pool and moved to our positions. Haruru covered the exit that led to the pathway, while Fuyuko stood next to me, prepared for a potential emergency.

I opened the locker room door a crack and peered inside.

“Someone’s there…! Is that our yellow-panty prankster?”

They wore a school-issued tracksuit, a cap from the baseball team pulled down low, and a white mask on their face. Could it be that culprit was on the baseball team? No, it was probably a disguise.

“Bet they’re rummaging through our lockers.”

Fuyuko peered inside, too, observing the culprit’s actions. The culprit opened three lockers, checked something…and closed them again. Their hands were empty. Our wallets and clothes were safe. Then the culprit pulled something out from a bag that had been in the pocket of their tracksuit.

"They stuck them on the locker."

They had attached panties on Haruru and Fuyuko's lockers with packing tape. Mine was next. I was struck again by how creepy the culprit's behavior was.

"H-huh? Is he leaving?"

The culprit put the packing tape in their pocket and started to leave.

Oh, I get it. So that's how it is?

So what they were trying to say was I wasn't worth giving a pair of yellow panties to.

In other words, I was the only one safe. No damage at all.

That…

…really pissed me off!

"Hold it right there! I'll never let a total perv like you get away with this!"

Before I knew it, I'd kicked the door open, driven by rage, and burst in. Fuyuko entered next and immediately locked the door.

"You can't get away now. Your days of satisfying this particular fetish are over!"

The moment we were about to approach the culprit, he turned his back on us and made a break for the locker room window. I got it. It was the only place he could possibly escape to, and I understood the impulse to try.

"…Ugh! Ungh…!"

He removed the lock and desperately tried to yank the window sideways, but it was no use.

"Sorry, but we already took care of that from outside, using the classic method of jamming the window. Well, then…"

"I-I-I-I'm so sorry! Please forgive me!"

The culprit knelt on the ground and pressed his head to the floor. Ah, this was awkward.

"Even if you apologize, even if your voice is cute, we won't forgive you…huh? Your voice is cute?"

I thought maybe my ears were malfunctioning, but Fuyuko looked surprised, too. In the face of our confusion, the culprit removed their baseball cap and mask—and it wasn't the high school boy twisted by lust that I'd imagined.

"K-Kogane?"

It was a girl from the same class as us—Kokoa Kogane.

After apprehending Kogane for the time being, we finished changing and headed to the nurse's office to ask her why she was doing this, along with Ms. Koyomi. We considered handing her over to the teacher in charge immediately, but it didn't feel right doing that to a classmate. Besides, I didn't think Kogane was doing this for her own gratification.

"And? Why were you doing something so fetishy, Kogane?"

"Oh, you can call me Kokoa, Miss Natsunagi. We're friends."

"Are you trying to escape your crime by suddenly being all buddy-buddy with me?! Just saying, that won't work!"

"N-no…I really meant it."

Kogane's—Kokoa's awkward smile made my face heat up. I'd fallen into the same back and forth I did with my own friends, and when she seemed conflicted, my heart sank…

"We may have never hung out before, but we're in the same class, and that means we're friends. Right, Miss Natsunagi?"

"If so, it bugs me that you're still calling me 'Miss,' but…well, whatever. Why were you giving out yellow panties?" I asked her bluntly.

She fell silent. I was even more confused that someone whose definition of a friend was so broad was doing something like this. Still, she likely understood that she couldn't just refuse to answer, and she slowly explained the reason to us.

"…A pervert at the station took a video of me."

We were shocked by her confession. That kind of thing wasn't exactly rare, but it was despicable and repulsive.

"Oh, he didn't grope me, though. I was on the escalator, and he…

put his phone up my skirt. Then he jumped on the train and got away."

"That's a common method. It's inexcusable that such a cute student had to suffer through that. Didn't you talk to your homeroom teacher or the police?" Ms. Koyomi admonished her gently, but Kokoa shook her head.

"I thought about it. But…I was scared of the video being shared. If it was posted online…everyone would find out what happened to me."

If she had told someone, and patrols were increased without proper planning, the jerk might have realized what was going on and disappeared. Meaning she would never be able to retrieve the original data.

"You must've been scared, Kokoa. But how is that connected to you giving out yellow panties?"

"Um, well…that's what I was wearing the day it happened. So I thought it would be okay as long as no one could pinpoint that it was me in the video."

"Uhhh, so that means…?"

"If I gave out this underwear to everyone and got a lot of girls to wear them thinking they were 'panties of happiness,' no one would know I was the one it happened to, right? I know it was a horrible idea, but…"

"Sure, but how would anyone be able to pinpoint you from just our school uniform and yellow underwear? No one even knew you were wearing the—"

I got that far and came up with a possibility. There was probably someone who knew. Like someone of the opposite sex who you could go underwear shopping together with, even if you were embarrassed. In short—

"You mean…you didn't want your boyfriend to know?" I asked.

Kokoa's face turned bright red, and she nodded slightly.

Her boyfriend would be just as shocked as she was to have a creepshot of his girlfriend online, and she didn't know what he might do out of anger. So Kokoa had caused this incident to avoid unnecessary trouble.

“Even if he couldn’t see my face, he could tell by the design of the blazer and skirt what school I went to. There’s always a chance my classmates could find it… Wa, waaah.” Kokoa finally burst into tears while Fuyuko gently patted her on the back.

In this day and age, social media was everywhere. The possibility that one of the hundreds of boys at school could find the video and share it with his friends in a rush of excitement was very real.

“That’s absolutely unforgiveable,” I said quietly, and Kokoa’s shoulders twitched. I turned to this girl filled with guilt and fear and said, “He won’t get away with this. I’ll never…forgive a pervert!”

“…Huh?”

For some reason, Kokoa’s eyes had widened, like she’d expected me to tell her off. I wondered why she thought I’d yell at her.

“We’re proxy detectives, and we’ll catch that cowardly scumbag! Then we’ll make him wear ghost-pepper-coated underwear and walk him on all fours to the police station!”

The blood coursing through my body boiled with anger, and the anger was transformed into words that rushed out my mouth.

“Hey, Fuyuko! Haruru! And Ms. Koyomi! Do you have any good ideas? Give me your best idea on how to catch this scumbag threatening the peace of high school girls!”

The three of them nodded intently. Then Haruru took a step forward and made her suggestion. “Leave it to me! I have an ace up my sleeve to flush out those rabble controlled by lust!”

“An ace up your sleeve…?” I said. “Fine, do whatever. Use me as you like. I’ll do whatever it takes to punish a pervert who thinks he can do anything he wants!”

“Heh-heh. That’s what I love about you, Nagi! Then I guess it’s time to bust this out.”

Saying that, Haruru produced from her schoolbag…

It was seven PM, past dusk.

We’d finished our strategy meeting at the nurse’s office, and we headed to the station where Kokoa had been victimized. It was the

nearest station to the school. Kokoa usually managed the baseball club, and the day she was secretly filmed, she got off to do some shopping in front of the station after club.

"I get it. The evening rush has slowed a bit, but a high school girl would still stand out. It's the perfect time to hunt for targets." Fuyuko calmly analyzed the plaza in front of the station. We'd taken a couple buses to get here.

"I'd always thought the escalator at this station was dangerous. It's long and steep, so someone might try to see up your skirt if it's short enough." Haruru similarly identified the station's flaws.

"U-um! Hey, you two…are we really doing this?"

I was the only one who couldn't stay calm. Of course I couldn't. I mean, I was—

"I mean, I totally look like a nympho!"

I was wearing a shirt with the buttons wide-open and the tails tied at the bottom and a loose necktie. My belly button peeked out just a little if I stretched—it was really laying the *gyaru* style on thick. My skirt was rolled up as short as it could go, and the loose socks underneath were way too loud!

"Produced by me! Isn't it great? You look really slutty, Nagi!"

"Th-that's not a compliment! *Cute* or *pretty* would be fine, but this… Uuuugh! I'm too embarrassed—I can't! I can't!"

I cowered instinctively, and Haruru just gave me a thumbs-up and muttered, "Good job!" I wanted to kick her.

But if I did that, they'd see! Glimpses of…y'know, stuff!

"You look so cute, Nagisa. If I were a guy, I'd approach you and ask, 'How much?'"

"That's the worst thing you could possibly say! I don't do things like that!"

"Hm? I only meant it like, 'How much did you pay for those socks?' What did you think I meant, Nagisa? Heh-heh…you really are a naughty girl."

"Arghhh!"

I talked a big game! I said I'd do anything! I flew too close to the sun!

"Don't tell me your strategy is a sting operation! That's

impossible!”

No, if I thought about it, it was painfully clear. If we were dealing with a repeat offender and recreated the situation with a similar target… Put a high school girl out as bait, and the idiot would probably be all too happy to take it!

“You’re being too shy, Nagi. You’ve got an undershirt on top and shorts underneath, so there should be no problem, right?”

“…It’s still embarrassing!”

“Your defense might look low, but your shielding is dynamite! It’s just like in RPGs where the strongest gear is the sexy stuff, right? Heh-heh!”

“Don’t confuse fiction with reality, you nerdy *gyaru*!”

“Sexy gear might improve her defense, but don’t you think it’ll damage her virtue?”

“Fuyuko, if you’re gonna comment, don’t make it sexual harassment!”

But I had no choice since I’d come this far. One station over—the nearest station to the school—Ms. Koyomi and Kokoa were standing by. The three of us would board the train bound for the school, the one the culprit used to escape, and flush him out. Even if we missed our chance to catch him inside the train, we wouldn’t let him escape.

Since I had two friends I trusted, there was no need to worry. But still, *still*!

“…Fine. I’ll do it. I’ll do it, but promise me something?”

I grabbed Fuyuko’s and Haruru’s shoulders and glared at them as hard as I could.

“If the culprit gets a video and escapes, I’ll take pictures of *your* panties and post them online as payback. Got it? We’re friends, right?”

They seemed to understand that I wasn’t joking, and both nodded enthusiastically. *I get it now.* I understood a little bit how Kokoa must have felt. Yellow panties aren’t so scary if we all wear them.

We entered the station, passed through the ticket gate, and got

on the escalator. There didn't seem to be any suspicious people yet. According to Kokoa, the Peeping Tom was a young man in a suit who stuck close behind her and put his phone up her skirt.

Since this was a sting operation, I intentionally took the escalator alone, while the other two headed up the stairs to the second story platform, keeping an eye on me the whole time. Things seemed fine for the moment.

"It's pretty crowded. Be careful, Nagisa."

I met them at the platform and boarded the train that had just arrived. Like Fuyuko had said, it was still crowded for the time of day. The three of us got on the same car, with the two of them still watching me from a distance.

"'A young man in a suit'…huh."

As I stood in the corner of the car, there were three people near me who fit the description. They were all on their phones and didn't look at me directly, though.

It felt like our eyes met a few times.

This wasn't good. I had to stay facing the door without looking at anyone's face.

"…One of them moved," I relayed to Haruru and Fuyuko through the wireless earbuds in my hand.

Just one. There was one man who had crept several steps behind me. W-was he watching me?

My smooth, pale thighs protruded from under my skirt. Since the skirt was shorter than normal, it gave the illusion that you could see all the way to the tops of them.

If I bent over just a little, everything would be on display, even though I was wearing shorts. No matter what, I couldn't drop anything. Plus, if someone was standing next to me, they could get a good peek at my chest through the open shirt.

I couldn't explain away anything in this outfit.

Yikes. Seeing my reflection in the glass door…I might have been a total nympho.

"Hmm…?"

There was a guy standing next to me before I knew it… No, he was too young for that. He looked maybe halfway through

elementary school. He was on the small side, about as tall as my chest.

But the problem was…

"Uh-oh! He's looking at you, Nagi." Haruru's voice came through the earbuds in my ears.

The boy was probably on his way home from cram school. He was holding a blue backpack in front of him and swaying with the motion of the train. But his gaze wasn't focused on the streets rushing past beyond the glass door… It was on my thighs.

"He's at that age where he's curious, heh-heh. I wonder if he likes older women?"

"Shut up. Don't be dumb." I brushed off Fuyuko in the barest whisper and tried to continue the sting operation, but the boy's eyes were glued to me.

A kid his age with a thigh fetish wasn't going to amount to anything.

No, unless…

"……!"

I lifted the hem of my shirt just a little, and the boy's eyes widened in wonder. *I knew it*. He was staring at my belly button. Why would he even look there? My breasts and butt could hold their own, but…

It was a belly button. Didn't he see anything else he liked?

What happened today and my belly button would probably stay in this boy's memory for the rest of his life.

I see, I see… I'm going to be a memory to this kid.

Would he think back to this day in junior high or high school, or even as an adult? He had a cute face for such a naughty boy. What was this? I was feeling a real thrill.

Since he was already looking, just a little more, a very little—from this older woman—

"The exit will now be on the left. Please don't forget any belongings as you disembark…"

An announcement marked our arrival at the station.

H-huh? What was I just about to do…? I had the nagging feeling I'd gotten too caught up in my fantasies and almost did something

strange.

"Good job, Nagisa. We were watching from over there, but we didn't see any suspicious men… What's the matter?"

"Oh? Nagi, why are you all red? Still embarrassed?"

"I—I didn't do anything, okay?!" I-I'm not a nympho! I'm not!" I shouted once we were on the platform.

The two of them stared at me in puzzlement.

Ugh… I'm the worst. He was such a cute boy, and I was trying to flaunt my belly button at him. I'd rather be the one getting bullied! It's all this outfit's fault!

"Whoa. Nagi's face is all red again, and she's off in her own world!"

"I bet she was fantasizing about doing naughty things to that *shota* who was standing next to her!"

B-bingo! No! It was only an attempt! Nothing actually happened! I didn't violate the law or the boy's body whatsoever!

"M-m-more importantly, that means…our culprit never got on board?"

"Not that we know of. Let's meet up with Ms. Koyomi and Kokoa for now and decide whether we should continue the sting into tomorrow."

"…It's your turn tomorrow, okay?"

"Hey! You guys! Something's going down in front of the station!" shouted Haruru, who had gone down the escalator first.

We hurried to the ticket gate and saw a number of black and white cars stopped at the traffic circle ahead.

"Patrol cars? Was there trouble?"

"Miss Natsunagi!" Ms. Koyomi came rushing over while we tried to make sense of the situation.

"Ms. Koyomi, what's going on?"

"They caught the Peeping Tom in the suit!"

"…Whaaat?! H-how? We didn't even get to do anything."

Confused, we left the crowd forming at the scene and got the whole story from Ms. Koyomi in front of a nearby convenience store.

"After you all took the bus to the next station for the sting operation, Kokoa and I were guarding the station when all hell broke

loose…”

The two of them had been caught up in the commotion, and they headed for the ticket gate at the station, where they saw him.

“There was a bloodied and battered man in a suit lying at the bottom of the stairs leading to the platform. He was clutching a phone.”

“Don’t tell me…!”

“Yep. That was our culprit. The station staff quickly caught up with him, arrested him, and immediately reported it to the police. Apparently, he was caught secretly filming inside the train and tried to flee when the train reached this station.”

“And he was in such a hurry that he slipped and fell?”

“No. Apparently, he collided with a high school boy who was passing by and tumbled down the stairs. It’s unclear if the high schooler bumped into him on purpose, though…”

My heart jumped when I heard that a high school boy was suddenly involved in the incident. *There was no way. No, it couldn’t be*.

A boy who just happened to be present at various *incidents* and helped solve them.

I wondered if that high school boy could be him.

“N-Nagisa! What’s with you all of a sudden?”

I took off, wanting to clear my doubts. Where had he gone? If he was still on the scene, he might have helped the police to some extent.

Surveying the traffic circle, I…suddenly noticed a single police car parked farther away. A boy in a school uniform was opening its door and about to get into the back seat.

“W-wait!” I shouted, but he didn’t hear. The police car was already gone before my legs could move. I might have had the wrong person. There was a possibility it might have been a complete stranger. Even so…

My chest—my heart—had a hunch. Its rhythm was etched into me so strongly that it was scary. I had a feeling it was telling me

that he was the boy.

"Are you all right, Miss Natsunagi?" Ms. Koyomi called out, snapping me back to reality. She had followed me over, and Fuyuko and Haruru were with her. I noticed something.

"I'm fine. By the way, where's Kokoa? I haven't seen her the whole time."

"When I told the police that she'd been filmed without her consent, they decided to talk to her at the police station. Don't worry; she seemed very relieved."

"I see… I wonder if we helped her out in the end."

"You did. Thanks to you proxy detectives, a wounded girl was saved. You all did well."

I knew this was insignificant compared to something like a global crisis. It was just a small mystery, something that could happen to anyone in their daily life. Yet in the end, we'd helped someone. If we could right one wrong with our efforts and time—

"Being proxy detectives might not be so bad after all, heh-heh," I murmured, and Fuyuko and Haruru smiled and nodded back. I couldn't have done it alone. It did feel like the high school boy who'd appeared out of nowhere had taken all the credit, though.

It seemed the three of us could do anything.

"Here's a reward for the three of you, then. Should we go have some ramen?" Ms. Koyomi asked, starting to walk ahead of us.

"Really, Koyo? Ramen for four girls? Sure, I'm hungry, but don't pancakes fit the bill more?" Haruru pouted, and Ms. Koyomi cocked her head in doubt.

"Is that so? Then let's look for a pancake restaurant that serves alcohol."

"Ms. Koyomi, don't tell me you were after beer instead of noodles? What about you, Nagisa? I'm fine with that bubble tea you were looking forward to, or whatever."

"Ramen's fine. Let's go!"

Everyone seemed surprised by my positive reaction. There were definitely things I longed for in my everyday life. Bubble tea was one

of them…but actually, maybe I was fine with anything.

"Four girls going out for ramen might be enough of a high school dream by itself, don't you think?"

I couldn't have known this back when I was always eating hospital food alone—the important thing wasn't what you were eating; it was who you were eating it with.

"If Nagi says so, we have to. She had to endure all those lustful stares from men with her boobs and butt and belly button exposed, after all!"

"I'd treat you to a bowl of ramen every day if it meant I could see you like that. To me, Nagi's miniskirted *gyaru* style is a complete meal."

"Oh. By the way, Miss Natsunagi, that's quite the outfit you're wearing today. Our school does have loose rules, but I can't approve of loose virtue."

The idiots (including the teacher who knew about the situation) were teasing me again…but it was fine.

That high school boy was still bothering me, but I'd forget about it for now. Eating ramen together was way more important!

Afterward…

As it turned out, while Kokoa had been secretly filmed, the video wasn't shared online or among the culprit's acquaintances. The videos on the culprit's confiscated phone hadn't been traded on illicit websites or social media; they were just a personal hobby.

Even so, it seemed there were quite a few victims, and the police were going to be wasting a lot of time on this creep from here on out.

"I'm glad we avoided the worst-case scenario," said Fuyuko.

It was lunchtime, and we were having tea in the café space outside the cafeteria. Fuyuko took a sip of her lightly sweetened canned coffee, looking even nicer than usual since she was quiet. Not that I'd tell her that.

"The yellow panties of happiness are still being treated like a rare

item by the students, but I'm sure this weird craze will settle down soon!"

Haruru was right. High school girls were susceptible to trends. The whole thing would fade away when no one was giving out underwear anymore.

I was sure we would talk about it one day at a class reunion or something. I imagined my classmates a few years older, laughing together. *What was with those panties?*

"Kokoa thanked us over and over, too, so it was worth the effort. Oh…I finished my drink. I'm going to throw it out."

The moment I stood up from my seat…

It was a nice day out, with a gentle breeze that swept through at intervals, making it a pleasant afternoon. But the breeze wasn't here to congratulate me on my accomplishments as a proxy detective. Instead, it played a childish trick on me.

The breeze lifted my skirt, exposing what lay beneath to Fuyuko's and Haruru's gazes.

"…I-it's not like that. Kokoa gave them to me as a thank you! These are expensive! And even if you two don't like them, I think they're cute! Aren't they? Aren't they?!"

My two best friends laughed at me as I desperately tried to explain myself.

"I've seen those several times now, and I still think they're hella lame, Nagisa. Hurry and take them off. I'll take them home with me and let you wear my leggings instead."

"Nagi's style is unique. So unique that I wouldn't wear those for fifty thousand yen. They might bring *you* happiness, though. Ha-ha!"

"Ughhhh! Th-they're cute, I tell you! These have a cute design, no matter what you two say! I'm gonna wear them forever!"

And that was how the Yellow Panties of Happiness incident came to a close.

True to my word, I continued to wear the underwear Kokoa had given me for a while, but Fuyuko and Haruru forcefully gave me several pairs as gifts, too. I wasn't going to wear them, but they

wound up in my drawer anyway.

But that's another story.

Chapter 2

The Lost Pages of Youth

We solved the Yellow Panties of Happiness case, the weekend passed, and it was Monday.

In the library after school, I had begun another investigation—not as a proxy detective, but for myself.

A high school boy who happened to be present at various incidents in town and helped solve them. I skimmed through some newspapers—mostly local editions—and found a few people who seemed to fit the bill, but…

"I guess he uses assumed names a lot… That's annoying."

For example, "Boy K. Found a Lost Kitten Again!" or "The Super High Schooler Who Prevented Bank Transfer Fraud!" The headlines made it sound like he was *the* usual suspect, but his real name was never conclusively revealed.

It was so frustrating to have an unsolvable mystery right in front of me. I wanted to solve it as quickly as possible.

"Hmmm. I've just started researching, but maybe I'm not doing it right. Maybe I should look through some older newspapers or online articles. If there's nothing in the school library, maybe I'll try the public one…"

"Nagisa, are you done researching?"

I'd been cleaning up the newspapers, and Fuyuko had come to get me before I knew it. Haruru was with her, of course.

"I see your drive to solve mysteries is as strong as ever. I'm glad you're getting into the research, but it's sad that you're neglecting us."

"If you keep staying this late, the three of us won't even be regulars in the go-home club anymore."

"Well, we're definitely in the go-home club, but I don't exactly want to be a regular… Hey, what does the go-home club even do at

tournaments?”

“This year, the tournament’s in Hakone. We’re having a New Year’s introvert rap battle!”

“Right next to where they’re holding the university relay race?! And you’re going to have a bunch of people already scarred from their childhoods dissing each other?!”

What happened to going straight home…? Well, whatever.

“I was thinking of going home soon anyway. Wanna go somewhere today?”

“Yeah! I’m going shopping with Fuyu! See you tomorrow, Nagi!”

“You’re seriously planning to have fun tomorrow with the person you just casually brushed off?”

For now, we (the actual three of us) decided to wander down the shopping street in front of the station. We looked at clothes we didn’t intend to buy and envied couples we passed. But sometimes, we just wasted money on silly little things, indulging in the little expenses of youth.

It was so much fun. The three of us could never stop laughing when we were together.

“Oh, right. Can we stop by the bookstore?” I suggested, and the two of them nodded slightly.

“I get it. Today’s the day when that porn manga Nagisa loves to read goes on sale!”

“Cut it out! Don’t say things that’ll ruin my image! I’ve never bought one of those!”

“Meaning you’ve read them before?”

“…Sh-shut up! I’m going through puberty, too—it’s fine!”

“Oh, that’s rare. You’re not denying it. I’m not really interested in that stuff, though…sorry?”

“Well, we market ourselves as pure, so unlike you, Nagi, we’ve never even touched anything like that.”

“No, you’re nowhere near pure. You’re sludgy and tainted by dirty jokes and sexual harassment.”

We entered a large bookstore near the station, and I headed

straight for the novel I wanted. It was a slightly older light novel that I discovered thanks to social media. New volumes didn't come out often due to the author's schedule, but it was still a popular series that kept getting reprinted.

"Huh……? Volume Three is missing."

"Of course it is. The first volume sells the most, so any bookstore will have it. But the middle volumes are rarely restocked."

"I know! You can read the continuation for free if you pay, but it's really annoying when the next volume's not on the shelf. I'm going to snap and become an anti."

"Whoa, you're the type of fan who joins the dark side for really problematic reasons. They might have it in the school library, though… Wait, Haruru, your eyes are scaring me!"

I had just told them how to read it for free in the real sense, though.

"Nagiii! Think about how the author would feel if they got a fan letter that said, 'I read your book in the library, but I didn't buy it!'"

"Is that the next level of those 'tell me how the author's feeling right now' questions on a lit test?"

"What if the teacher was a problematic fan? If I gave the wrong answer, my grades could take a hit."

The troublesome otaku pressured me and Fuyuko to buy two volumes at the register, and then we left the bookstore. Then we tried to drink some bubble tea, but the place Fuyuko liked was closed, so that was amended to banana juice.

"I really wanted some bubble milk tea." I let my true feelings slip as we sat together on a bench in front of the store, sipping a drink that wasn't what I wanted most.

"So get some. You don't have to go all around town to get it; they have it at convenience stores now."

"I know, but I want to drink it together with everyone. It's what I've always wanted…"

I wound up sounding like I was pouting. The two of them put their hands on my head.

"Nagisa's so cute!"

"Nagi's so cute!"

They gently petted my head in time with their words.

"It's strange that we've never had bubble tea together. Next time, the three of us will look for the best place and drink some. I promise."

"Nice! Leave it to me—I know lots of places! We'll go to celebrate something! Like if something good happens! Heh-heh!"

Fuyuko and Haruru had to be sick of bubble tea by now. I was really happy that they were willing to use their time for my sake. My friends were the best, for sure.

"Th-then…I want to take a nice picture of the three of us in a row!"

"A picture costs you extra. Three thousand yen a shot, on an acrylic board."

"Can I throw my bubble tea in the trash when we're done taking pictures? Too many calories."

"My friends are the worst, actually!"

It was the next day. I'd decided to look for the next volume of the light novel I'd bought in the school library.

"Fuyuko, Haruru, want to go to the library together after this?" I said to them in the classroom after school, but they looked depressed somehow.

"Sorry, Nagisa. Can you go by yourself?"

"I'm sorry for you, but we don't have time to go to the library. Sorry!"

It stung a little. The two of them were usually the ones to suggest that we do something, not the ones turning down invitations from me.

"Ha, ha-ha… I forget sometimes. The two of you were friends before you met me, so I must get in the way sometimes."

"That's right… We can't go with you now. "

"Because we're…supposed to hang out with someone else after this."

I couldn't help but look away. So there *was* someone else. The

bonds between Autumnless were nowhere to be found—or so I thought, until I noticed what they were holding.

"That's the math homework you two didn't do for some stupid reason, right? Don't tell me you're about to take a make-up class after this?"

The two idiots deliberately turned away when I pointed it out.

"No, Nagisa. That makes us sound stupid, don't you think?"

"Right! We're just going to be playing the extra DLC together with Ms. Hachisu after this!"

"Sure you are. I'm going ahead to the library, then. You can join me when you finish your fun game, okay?"

I felt like an idiot for worrying. But I was a little relieved.

"Just look at her, Haruru. Nagisa looks incredibly relieved. She's so cute!"

"That face you made when you thought we'd been NTR'd by another girl! I could eat three bowls of rice!"

Ugh…they'd seen right through me again. My face was hot. For two people who were normally idiots, I wish they'd stop being so sharp when it came to me.

"A-anyway, Ms. Hachisu seems pretty strict? I'm surprised she'd have a make-up class just for forgetting your homework. Ha, ha-ha."

"You suck at trying to change the subject, Nagisa. Well, just about every teacher besides Ms. Hachisu is watching me like a hawk, so I'm used to this."

"I don't like Ms. Hachisu. She's popular with the boys, but most girls say she's impossible. She has a soft, ditzy vibe, but her classes are hard as heck!"

Our homeroom teacher, Ms. Hachisu, was a young woman who'd just started in April. The math classes she taught were tough, but she spoke politely to the students, and her clothes were neat and tidy. She always smelled of sweet perfume, and she was a hit with the boys.

"I definitely prefer Koyo when it comes to female teachers! Ms. Hachisu has a dark side for sure—like, despite her vibe, I bet she's really thirsty for a man."

"Oh, yeah… Huh? H-Haruru? Don't you think that's going too

far?”

“Ha? She’s soft in the daytime but a sadist by night! Yep, I can imagine it. And in bed she’s… Aaaah?!”

Sigh. I said she’d gone too far.

Ms. Hachisu was standing behind Haruru, a threatening smile on her face.

“Hello, Miss Agarie, Miss Shirahama. We’re going to have a fun make-up class today, right? Making that extra workbook really paid off. Heh-heh.”

“Huh, wai—! I didn’t even say anything!”

“You’re both responsible for your friend’s slip of the tongue. Well then, Miss Natsunagi, I’m borrowing these two.”

Just like that, my two friends were dragged into the nearby multipurpose classroom, bracing for death. I felt bad for Fuyuko, who’d gotten caught up in it, but it was still kind of funny.

“I’ll be fine by myself. I’ll find the book and read while I wait for them.”

Strangely enough, I was the only one in the library today. Normally, there’d be a few students studying.

“Strange things happen. Now, the light novel section is…over there.”

I went to the shelf I wanted and found my book right away. I thought I’d check for the next volume while I was there, but when I looked at the shelf again…

“Aw…there’s a missing one here, too?”

Volume 3, which I needed next, was the only one missing. The rest of the series from Volume 4 onward was there, which really pissed me off!

But it wasn’t just the series I picked up that had a problem.

“Wait, it’s not just the light novels… The literary novels and other ones have gaps, too. I wonder why?”

“Should I tell you why, Miss Cute Schoolgirl?”

“Aieeeee?! Wh-wh-who are you?!”

I really hadn’t noticed her approach at all. There were no

footsteps or breaths to alert me. The girl had appeared behind me before I knew it.

She was in high school and had pitch-black hair, a distinctive white headband, and frameless glasses that gave her an intellectual air, like the perfect-student-librarian type.

"I must have startled you. My name is Yomiko Naoki, a second-year student. As you can see, I'm a student librarian."

"Oh, don't tell me your appearance is meant to reflect your character…?"

"That's right. I was born into a family of logophiles; my father was a novelist, and my mother worked at a publishing company. So I thought a job related to books would be my calling. I am a good daughter, aren't I?"

"You even have the word for reading in your name, so it definitely fits. I don't know if you're a good daughter or not, though."

"But I really wanted to be in a band. I wanted to stand on the gym stage at the school festival—wear showy clothes while singing anti-establishment songs and shouting about inequality…"

"Y-you're full of regrets! Not to mention, those are some pretty crazy dreams! But it's not too late to change the way you're living!"

"It's fine. I'm already dead, so…"

"Your individuality is, for sure. But your name and appearance are just what someone would imagine for a student librarian, so in that sense, maybe you do have some individuality after all."

Oops. I'd made a quip only three seconds after meeting her. Probably because she reminded me so much of my two idiot friends.

"Right. I should've said it earlier, but I'm Nagisa Natsunagi. I'm a third-year."

"Nice to meet you. So what were you looking for?"

"You're really casual for an underclassman. Well, that's fine… I was looking for a novel. The next one in this series."

When I showed her the book I was holding, Yomiko tilted her head vaguely. "Hmmm?"

"I'm not as worried about not finding the book I want—I'm more worried about how many novels are missing."

"It seems that way. I've been a student librarian for a while, and

it’s been like this.”

“Is someone pulling a prank? Or is there a reason behind it?”

“You’re just like a detective, worrying about something like that. Curiosity killed the cat. Like when Sherlock Holmes was taken out by the mafia for knowing too much about the underworld…right?”

“Huh? Wasn’t Holmes dragged over a waterfall by his archnemesis, Professor Moriarty? Not to mention he came back to life afterward?”

“I didn’t know that. I despise mystery novels.”

“Poor Holmes, having his death made up by some know-it-all woman. Are you sure you’re a student librarian?”

“You doubt me, even with my appearance and glasses? You’re so suspicious of everyone. That’s just like a detective. Curiosity killed the cat. Like when Sherlock Holmes laid down his life fighting his archnemesis.”

“You’re way too quick at processing info and updating your catchphrases!”

The only things that made me believe she was a librarian were her appearance and glasses. But I was more interested in the missing books.

“It’s fine if you don’t know why the novels are gone.”

“I do know. Or rather, I could say I don’t know.”

I thought she was joking again.

“Follow me. I’ll show you the stacks, Natsunagi.” The self-proclaimed librarian said that with such confidence that I couldn’t help but want to follow her.

We went behind the library counter and into the room beyond it.

“Wow. I didn’t know the stacks were back here.”

“It’s very small compared to the stacks in a real library. This is where we keep books that are going to be disposed of or books that haven’t had their circulation barcode added yet,” Yomiko said. She moved to a nearby shelf and motioned for me to join her.

Curious, I stepped closer and saw rows of several novels.

“Oh…! This is the volume three I was looking for!”

And that wasn’t all. The missing volumes from the other series I’d found before were also there.

“But why aren’t these in circulation?”

“The books here are banned for a variety of reasons. Take this one.” Yomiko picked up the book I’d been trying to find. “What do you think of the illustrations in this light novel?”

Looking at the page she’d opened to, I saw the illustrations were a little risqué.

“It’s a girl with big boobs crying after something naughty happened to her, but it looks like something a teen boy would enjoy?”

“That’s right. It’s a little naughty, in my opinion, but a nice illustration. That’s the reason.”

Yomiko picked up a different book with a small sigh.

“This is a normal mystery novel, but the synopsis is disturbing. It reads like a high school boy is committing the crimes. Most of the other books are here for similar reasons.”

“So you’re saying they were moved here because the contents and illustrations were deemed inappropriate?”

“Exactly. The student council president at the time was very fastidious. He raised the topic himself at a student assembly and then had them shelved here with almost no input from anyone else.”

When I looked closely, there was a large black stamp on the back cover and edges that read DISCARDED. The barcode for lending and the cellophane on them appeared to have been torn off.

“Isn’t it stupid? There’s no story that can dictate a person’s thoughts or actions. The books here are just a small part. Many of them have been destroyed.”

“That’s horrible. Couldn’t the student librarians stand up to him?”

“From what I heard, they fought back at the next assembly and got the school to purchase twice the number of books discarded. It’s a legend passed down at this school—the First Library War.”

“There’s suddenly a school legend I’ve never heard of?!”

“In the Second War, the student librarians found some dirt on the student council president and finally got him to resign.”

“It keeps getting more vicious!”

But when I looked at Yomiko’s face, it didn’t seem like a lie or a

joke. To be honest, I was more interested in this than the next part of my series. Maybe next time, I'd go read the student assembly records.

"Huh? Hang on, Yomiko. Now that I'm looking, these books all have torn pages inside."

As I flipped through them, I suddenly realized they each had a page damaged. One book even had its cover torn.

"Is this the reason why these weren't in circulation?"

"That could be considered both correct and incorrect. The real reason is that the pages were torn out after these books had already been marked for disposal."

"Huh? Why would someone do that?"

"Well, now. Can you figure out why all the books marked for disposal have exactly one page torn out?"

I turned over the books again and compared each one. But the books and their pages had nothing in common at all.

"Was it just a prank?"

"That could be considered both correct and incorrect. Right, Miss Cute Detective?"

Smiling, Yomiko gazed straight into my eyes. I almost found myself entranced by the fragile aura around her. But that feeling disappeared with her next words:

"Can you solve this *mystery*? I'd say it's nearly impossible. I mean, no one's figured it out yet. It's a very difficult one."

She was provoking me. It was so obvious, not even a child would fall for it.

But my heart was already ablaze for reasons I couldn't explain at the words *mystery* and *detective*.

"Fine, I'll do it. But I'm not a detective. That could be considered both correct and incorrect. I'm a proxy detective, Yomiko."

A determination to solve the mystery was born within me.

"Heh-heh. How lovely, Natsunagi. But if you're going to imitate my catchphrase, I'd like you to do it with a bit more style."

"…I agree with you there!"

That was how I found myself facing a new mystery.

“Another woman stole Nagisa away.”

After being presented with the mystery by Yomiko and leaving the library, I met back up with the idiots who’d finished their make-up classes, and we took a break at the vending machine corner.

“I wasn’t stolen away… Did the math make you even dumber?”

“No, this is textbook NTR! While we were out, you invited some girl called Yomiko over and had a flirty chat! That’s definitely cheating!”

“I—I don’t know if it was exactly a flirty chat?”

“We’ll find that out right now! Right, Haruru?”

“Got it!”

Fuyuko circled behind me in an instant and pinned me to the back of the bench so I couldn’t get away.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing…? Don’t tell me you’re planning to humiliate me and make me confess to everything? I’ll never surrender!”

“Hmm. That’s a wild fantasy. I’m shocked at your masochistic streak.”

“Well, you’re right that we’re going to mess with you, though.”

Right after that, Haruru leaned in close to my neck and—

“N-nnn…!”

A sweet sensation hit me, like a mild electric current coursing through my body. It tickled and was a little warm, but it felt just a teensy bit good.

So this was a kiss.

Haruru had kissed the back of my neck.

“You’re so cute, Nagi. Can I do it again…one more time?” She let out a dreamy sigh. I couldn’t summon much resistance. It was like I was hungry for what came next.

“Uh…ah…but we’re both girls.”

“Ohh? You don’t seem to hate it, though. Deep down, you’re a bad girl who wants more… I’ll seal your lips this time.”

“Um? Can you two stop being in your own world and ignoring me? Or at least let me join in! You’re torturing me here!”

I was brought back to reality thanks to Fuyuko shouting behind me. Th-that was close… The whole “I’ll never surrender” thing was

an act, frankly, and Haruru's face was so beautiful that I'd nearly lost myself.

"Stay out of this, Fuyu. A guy caught between two girls in a yuri situation can't complain, even if he dies."

"I'm not a guy, though! I may be a tomboy and a prince character, but that doesn't mean I'm actually one! More importantly, was Nagisa telling the truth?"

Fuyuko's words finally made me understand the meaning behind their actions.

"You guys suck for using Haruru as a lie detector!"

"Ha-ha! I can see through any lie by tasting just a little bit of your sweat! And the result was that you're totally guilty! Tasted like anxiety. It was sooo bitter."





“I knew it. You didn’t have to taste her sweat; I could see that on her face.”

“Huh? So you were just making fun of me?”

If they weren’t Haruru and Fuyuko, I would have already called the police.

I’d only told them that I met a strange girl in the library and left out the details. Was I that obvious?

“Ooh, this hurts. I liked Nagi first, and now some girl is serving me BSS. It’s super depressing.”

“And now Haruru’s using cryptic abbreviations. What does that even mean?”

“It means ‘I (*boku ga*) liked (*saki ni*) her first (*suki datta no ni*)!’ It’s a type of manga where some loser noob has the girl he loves snatched away by a hot, popular guy while he’s being wishy-washy!”

“How’s that different from NTR?”

“The protagonist doesn’t actually get with the heroine, so he can’t say anything, and you get to share and savor the butterflies in his stomach and his frustration and irritation, like in a Hollywood movie!”

“Your Hollywood movies exist in a parallel universe, huh?”

I was glad to see them both in good spirits even after getting an earful from Ms. Hachisu. As they continued their usual inane conversation, a familiar school nurse in a white coat approached.

“Oh my, Miss Natsunagi. Are you keeping these underachievers company? How kind of you.”

“Greeting us with harsh elitist ideology? That’s definitely not something a teacher should say!”

“Heh-heh, I’m just joking. I was envious of how you always make sharp quips with that cute face and thought I’d give it a try.”

Ms. Koyomi bought a rehydration drink from the vending machine and took a sip. The choice was puzzling.

“Wouldn’t you normally buy coffee or juice?”

“Yes, I would. But I abused my liver yesterday, so I need to endure for its sake.”

“Don’t give yourself a hangover when you’ve got work the next day…”

"When you grow up, you wind up looking at beer labels more often than the faces of your parents or friends. So what were you all discussing?"

Ms. Koyomi seemed very interested herself, so I told the three of them over again what had happened in the library—about the student librarian Yomiko and the mystery she'd given me to solve.

"…Hmm. Yomiko, was it?"

What had caught Ms. Koyomi's attention after I'd finished wasn't what I expected.

"*Th-that's* what you were interested in?"

"Oh, no. I just thought she had the same name as me."

"Huh? But those are completely different names."

"Look. My name is Koyomi, and if you rearrange the letters, it becomes *Yomiko*, right?"

"Did you really need to make an anagram?!"

If that counted as having the same name, then the whole world would be full of people claiming it. Like *Karin* and *Rinka*. I was Nagisa, so…*Sanagi*? No girl would have that name!

"It's weird, though. One or two books missing a page might be one thing, but six books with a single page torn out? It just seems like a malicious prank to me."

"I thought that too, but Yomiko said no, so there must be some actual answer. Haruru, what do you think?"

"The first thing that came to mind was that maybe there was something special in the torn pages? Like an illustration, if it was a light novel!"

"I think those pages might have some value," said Fuyuko. "Sometimes, when you have old manga or novels, they update things in the reprints. Maybe someone tore out just that part before throwing it out…"

Ms. Koyomi nodded and said, "I see. Sometimes the unrevised version can be valuable to collectors of old manga. It's possible for novels, too…although just one page being torn out is a mystery."

It was true that a book's worth generally came from being complete or in good condition. A torn page would be practically worthless if you tried selling it at a secondhand shop or on a flea

market app.

No one else ventured a guess after Ms. Koyomi spoke. I purposely made a loud noise when I stood up from the bench to try and break the brief silence.

"I guess there's no point in discussing it further. Why don't we go to the library at lunch tomorrow? It's probably already closed today since Yomiko apparently went home."

"Seeing is believing, huh? I'm sure we'll be able to come up with more ideas if we have a look at the torn pages ourselves."

"Okay! I know a lot about light novels, so I might be able to help! Well, this humble lady is more of an aficionada of general anime and manga than light novels, though. Heh-heh."

Haruru suddenly transforming into an endangered species of otaku aside, the three of us might figure something out if we went together. And while we were going—

"Ms. Koyomi, would you like to solve the mystery with us? I think it'll be more like a fun game than the Yellow Panties case," I offered, but Ms. Koyomi shook her head.

"An adult would be like a fish out of water in a children's game. Even if you were all fine with it, as an adult, I'd be embarrassed. Besides, I'm not fond of the library."

"I see… That's a shame, but I understand."

"Oh, but…I'd love to know the answer to the mystery, so please tell me. If it's interesting, I'll treat you to something again. Heh-heh."

I didn't think this particular mystery was worth that much…but since there was one to solve, I was game to take it on. This was my second time feeling the exhilaration of encountering a mystery I couldn't understand.

Was this feeling truly mine? No, I didn't need to know that yet.

The next day, several students were using the library when I visited it at lunch.

There were all sorts: people reading diligently, people studying, and people escaping the hustle and bustle of the classroom to sleep.

Disregarding them, we were ready to get started on solving the mystery. But…

"Guess Yomiko isn't here today."

A middle-aged female librarian was sitting at the counter. The boy working next to her seemed to be a student librarian. He looked bored.

"I see. Here I thought I'd get to see the vixen who seduced Nagisa."

"Fuyuko…you're still jealous a day later? No one likes a girl who's too pushy, you know."

"That's fine. I don't care if I make every girl in the world my enemy, as long as you love me, Nagisa!"

"Yeah, yeah. I shouldn't need to say this by now, but I love you very much. So stop being jealous, okay?" I stood on tiptoe and patted Fuyuko's head, and she blushed for some reason.

She opened and closed her mouth like a goldfish, like she wanted to say something. But what?

"Nagi, you always say such embarrassing stuff like it's nothing. Fuyu's usually acting like the top, and she completely froze up."

"Huh? Really? Is it such a big deal to tell your best friends you love them? Of course I love you, too, Haruru."

"*Squee!* I love you, Nagi! Make me your bride! Then I'll soar through the sky in my wedding dress with you in my arms!"

"What the hell?! Who has such an unrealistic wedding ceremony?"

"Oh, you don't know the reference? It was a video that went viral online about four years ago. A girl in a dress jumps out a window carrying a boy dressed in a tuxedo. It was probably an edit, though."

"Isn't that backward? A guy being carried by a girl is too pathetic. I wouldn't want to marry a guy like that."

He would probably let his girl drive a motorcycle or car and sit proudly in the back, too. Well, that was me stereotyping.

"The video's already been deleted from the internet. Aw, I wanted to show you, Nagi."

"Ha-ha. I kinda wanted to see what a frail boy he is. Anyway, we're getting off topic. I'll go ask the librarian to let us look at the

stacks.”

“Okay. I’ll see if I can fix this frozen prince in the meantime.”

When I headed to the counter and asked the librarian if I could borrow the discarded books, she agreed so readily that it was almost a letdown. The only condition was that I couldn’t take them off school grounds.

“Thanks for waiting. I’ve got the books.”

Fuyuko and Haruru had completely recovered by the time I returned, and together, we spread out the books I’d borrowed on a table and looked at them.

Fuyuko analyzed the books with interest while sorting them into genres.

“We have six books total, all novels. Three romantic comedy light novels, one coming-of-age novel, one horror, and one mystery. One of the light novels doesn’t have a cover.”

“The light novels are all from the same genre, but the stories themselves are different. They don’t have anything in common with the other genre works, either. Maybe we won’t find anything from putting all six together?”

Like Haruru said, on the surface, they had nothing in common.

“In that case, it’s highly likely that the secret’s in the torn pages. These books are just fakes to throw us off the scent. They’re just a pretend mystery!”

“Wow. Nagisa’s making something totally simple sound like a proper deduction!”

“Nagi’s so funny making those smug deductions. I’m gonna die laughing.”

“Sh-shut up! I don’t want a bunch of idiots making fun of me! I’m sure you guys have some great ideas yourself, don’t you?”

“I think there’s a clue in the publication dates,” said Fuyuko. “If we order them by date and connect the first letter of each torn page, we should have an answer.”

“I’d organize them by author,” said Haruru. “Like, maybe there’s a message if we order them alphabetically and read the torn pages horizontally! Vertical reading was trending online for a while!”

“Th-those were more legit theories than I expected…! I-I’ve given

it some thought, too, you know?”

My deduction was simpler than theirs, and it went like this:

“The stories themselves are clues. The fact that some of them are mystery novels is the only bit of conscience the creator of the mystery had.”

“…Meaning what?” said Fuyuko, and I organized my thoughts.

“Similar events happen in all six stories, which you’d know if you read them all the way through. The pages are torn where the answers are! How about that?”

It was an ace deduction…or so I thought.

“Would they really do it in such a roundabout way? The genres are all different, so I don’t think similar events would be happening.”

“I thought that, too. Besides, the torn pages were mostly from the beginning and middle of the books, and one was the cover. I doubt the answer would show up that early in the story. That reads way too much like a neoclassical whodunit.”

My theory was totally rejected. Well, that was just plain sad. The wind went right out of my sails.

Between the three of us, I was supposed to be the brains of the operation, the main proxy detective, with the others assisting me.

“Anyway, there’s no point debating until we find the torn pages!” I said. “So let’s split up and get some books that aren’t damaged.”

“Ah, Nagi changed the subject because she didn’t have a rebuttal. I guess it worked?”

“In mysteries, that’s the culprit’s last resort when they get caught.”

“Ughh! I swear I’ll solve this mystery and make you two understand!”

We spent two days making the rounds of bookstores and nearby libraries, and we managed to find a copy of each book with no missing pages. In the library after school, we each began matching the answers we’d talked about the other day.

“I’ll go first. You two might not even get a chance? Just kidding.”

Fuyuko, certain of her victory, began arranging the books. First, she arranged them in reverse chronological order, then connected the first letter of each sentence from the torn pages.

"Hmm…I guess that's not it. The list is meaningless."

After groaning, she tried arranging them in chronological order to no avail. Sighing in disappointment, she let Haruru have her turn.

"Well, I'm next! I'll arrange the authors in alphabetical order, line up the torn pages, read the sentences horizontally, and… Whoa! Amazing! It makes no sense at all! Ha-ha!"

Whether she read it from right-to-left or left-to-right, it didn't make sense in the middle. I'd honestly thought that Haruru's deduction was the closest thing to a right answer, but I was wrong.

"Okay, I'm last!"

"Oh, you don't have to bother, Nagisa."

"I know what you're going to do anyway."

"How?! W-well…as you might've guessed…"

I could tell just by skimming the books that I was wrong. It would have looked so cool and intellectual if I'd been right!

"Since we're already here, let's try some other things. From here on, it won't be a competition but a collaboration where the three of us combine our wits."

After Fuyuko's suggestion, we tried various opinions and tested the theories that came from them, but after spending one hour, then two, on the solution…we couldn't solve the mystery.

We tried anagrams using the first letters of the stories. We reordered them by publisher. We tried wordplay using the numbers of the torn pages. We tried reading vertically instead of horizontally. We tried reading diagonally. We tried searching for clues in the stories, characters, and even the epilogues.

The answer we sought was nowhere to be found.

"Are we still doing this, Nagisa?"

"Let's go home. School's almost out anyway."

Somewhere along the way, the two of them had gotten completely bored and were voicing their desire to leave. Not yet. I

didn’t want to go home yet. It might have been stubborn of me, but I didn’t want to lose to this *mystery*.

“All right. Let’s go on home, Haruru.”

“Yeah. Nagi’s more stubborn than she looks. We have to let her take this as far as she wants! Well, see you tomorrow!”

The two of them didn’t force themselves to stay, and they let me do as I pleased.

“Thanks, you guys. See you tomorrow.”

The two of them smiled and waved softly back at me as they left the library. This was what I loved about them. We could do what we liked without stepping on each other’s toes. The relationship between the three of us, and my time with them…was so precious to me.

“Now, then. I’m gonna keep at it a while longer!”

“Cutie spotted. Hee-hee.”

“Aieeeee?”

I was startled out of my chair at the voice behind me. The face above me was a bookworm of a girl who fit right in here.

“D-don’t surprise me like that, Yomiko! Why are you sneaking up on me?”

“How rude. I’ve been here in the library all day. Didn’t you notice me?”

“You were? I was with my friends today.”

“‘Friends’—how lovely. I have none myself. There was one, but I haven’t seen them in years, so it’s effectively zero. By the way, I see you’re still working on the mystery.”

Yomiko pointed at the opened book on the desk and laughed softly.

“It’s not like anyone will be harmed if you don’t solve it. Even if it’s a game, do you have a reason to be so desperate?”

“You’re right. I really can’t argue with that.”

No one would be hurt by this mystery. No one wounded, no one falling through the cracks and being left in despair. No one was victimizing or being victimized in this mystery.

Still, I had no intention of fleeing from one right in front of me.

“I don’t want to play it all cool, like I’m leaving the mystery a

mystery, when it's just because I don't know the solution. *Unsolved* is just a convenient word. There has to be an answer!"

Something within me was screaming that it didn't want to let the mystery go, and it was now driving me forward.

"…But I guess I won't be able to find it without a hint. Um, do you have any? Huh?"

"Can you stop peeking hopefully at my face? Honestly, what a pathetic proxy detective. This certainly needs a hint to be solvable, so I'll give you one."

Yomiko picked up a light novel from the row of books. It was the missing third volume I'd been looking for initially. "Tell me the author's feelings about this cover design."

"Not again! The most impossible, subjective question that shows up on Japanese tests!"

"Wrong. It might be difficult, but it's not impossible. Creating a book is about more than the story. Many people are involved as it's printed and sent out into the world, and that's how a book takes shape as a book."

I wanted to think she was just a bookworm mincing words, but there was something in her serious gaze that made me reconsider.

"To love books—and die for them—is my true wish. Now, try to solve the mystery I've given you. Well then, I'm going home. Bye-bye, Natsunagi."

With that, Yomiko went into the stacks behind the counter.

She might have been grabbing her belongings to go home, but it would have been more fitting if she'd just left the library…

"A book taking shape as a book, huh? Maybe I need to go back to the drawing board and think it over."

With the books stacked in my arms, I left the library. I could still keep facing this mystery, and I wanted to—because there was someone named Yomiko Naoki who expected me to solve it.

For the next week, I kept trying to solve the mystery. I neglected my classes, my brief recess, and even lunch to dedicate all my time to it.

Before I knew it, with nothing accomplished, I was facing the last after-school period of the week in the classroom.

"I can't… I'm giving up on the mystery… I want bubble tea… I want pizza."

"Nagi looks so funny, slumped over her desk all depressed. I'm taking a photo to keep."

"Nagisa may be tough, but it's cute when she acts like a normal high school girl. It's like she's making depressed posts on social media late at night, then frantically deleting them in the morning."

"I don't do that! Anyway, what are you watching?"

Fuyuko, who was sitting in front of me next to Haruru, was watching something on her phone.

"It's an old interview clip of the author of the light novel you were reading, when they were doing an anime adaptation. I found it while I was searching and started watching. It's interesting."

I didn't feel like peeking at it, so I just listened. They talked about all sorts of things, like how the series came to be, and the characters.

The stream of words slipped easily into my ears.

A sensation came over me that suddenly made my brain tingle.

A clue. A hook. The hint I should grab hold of—I could see it.

"Fuyuko! Back up that video a little!"

Fuyuko obeyed and rewound the video, although she seemed a little weirded out.

But there it was, while the author was sharing their own pet theory on light novels.

"I think the cover is the first page of a light novel. If the story starts from page one, then this illustration is page zero."

So that was it. These were the author's feelings about the cover design.

I could see a single thread sewing together the six completely different books.

"What's connecting these books is the story woven from the torn pages."

I took the books with the torn pages out of my locker and lined them up in order.

"This is the first one, the light novel with the torn cover. The one by the author whose video Fuyuko was just watching."

"Why is that the first one?"

"The author said that the cover was page zero, right? So this is the smallest number."

And as for the "numbers" of the remaining five books…

"They're on the torn pages. The second one is this horror novel. The torn page is the title page for a short story. It has no number on the front, but the number ninety is on the back. Here, use the number on the back."

"…Oh! I get it!" said Haruru. "Line those two up and you get the number! That number's—"

"I see you're following, Haruru. Zero, nine, zero. A number starting with zero-nine-zero is a cell phone number."

Six books and an eleven-digit number—now I just needed to get eight numbers from the remaining four books.

"Arrange the first and second books, and we'll find the rule. It's not ordered by the release date or author's name. Look at the last page—there's another number. The print runs!"

The number of times the book had been reprinted. The light novel with the torn cover was a first edition. The horror novel with the torn illustration on page ninety was a third edition.

"The next lowest numbers are the two remaining light novels. They're the fourth and fifth editions. The mystery novel is on its eighth edition, and the last one is a famous coming-of-age novel that was adapted into a film. Wow, tenth edition."

The print numbers weren't perfectly ordered from first to the sixth editions, probably to avoid making the answer too obvious. The cover being page zero was pretty clever, though.

I didn't know who came up with this mystery, but they were quite the contrarian.

The author and editor. The illustrator. The cover designer. And the printers.

With many people involved, it was printed and sent out into the

world, and that was how a book took shape as a book—

"Put them in order by reprint number, then connect the smaller numbers from each torn page… There we go. I did it. This is the answer to the mystery."

I stared at the numbers I'd written on my paper and fell silent. Was this really a number I should be calling…?

"I gave it a call, Nagi!"

"Why are you so quick to jump into action?! At least hesitate a little!"

"If some strange old guy picks up, I'll deal with him, so don't worry."

"Hm, I don't think I like that. It sounds like you're used to calling old men."

The call connected quickly. I put it on speaker and started recording, just in case. And what came through was…

"Static, huh? And…words in a foreign language?"

Just as Fuyuko said, it was just a lot of white noise and some mysterious words. The call was cut off in under ten seconds. We tried to call back, but it never connected again.

"What the heck? That's scary," I muttered, and the two of them nodded hard.

None of us in the Autumnless Trio had a stomach for horror.

"H-how about the three of us go to a shrine on our way home today? Or is it supposed to be a temple?"

"A-a-are you scared, Fuyu? I'm fine, but I might pick up some things at the convenience store on the way home. I'm all out of salt! And I need a change of underwear."

"You peed your pants?! I-I'll go home with you! Oh… But I need to stop by the library before that. I need to report back to that sneaky girl who gave me the mystery."

As the sun set, I jogged through the school building that had started to take on an orange color, heading for the library. The school building in pitch-black darkness could be pretty intense, but I found twilight to be just as spooky.

"I wonder if Yomiko's around?"

Opening the door to the library, I saw the bookworm seated at

the counter.

"Hello, Natsunagi. I see you're not alone today."

"Huh? I did come alone."

"Is that so? Then who's that girl standing behind you in the bloodstained uniform?"

"Eeeek! Y-you're too much! Don't you realize the reason your friends are leaving you is because you're always saying things like that?!"

When I shouted back at her, Yomiko laughed happily. She really was evil.

"Wouldn't it be interesting if there were at least one ghost who could become a school legend? By the way, are you here for a reason?"

"Of course. I've completely solved the mystery you gave me. This is the answer, right?"

When I handed her the paper with the phone number written on it, Yomiko nodded intently.

"Oh, this is amazing. You really did find the right answer. I think the former student librarians would be happy, too."

"…'Former student librarians'?"

"Yes. This mystery was created by the student librarians eight years ago at the culture festival. It's a homegrown mystery that reuses books that were discarded because of the self-righteous student council president."

Yomiko opened a book that she had under the counter. There was a printout stuck between the pages, and she held it out to me.

"Let's see… 'The Mystery of the Lost Pages! Event hosted by the library!' What the heck?"

"We distributed it at the culture festival. The student librarians at the time made it themselves."

"Huh…? D-don't tell me the mystery I worked so hard to solve is…"

"You're quick; that's a proxy detective for you. There's no big secrets or nefarious plots. It's just a tiny mystery made to entertain a certain type of eccentric."

I'd wasted so much time—time I could have spent eating and

sleeping, in class or after school—believing that there was something more to this…

"Don't tell me it was just a culture festival event… Ugh. What a waste of time."

"And as you can see from the paper, there are loads of hints. It shows the rules for arranging the six books in the order they were printed in and using the cover as page zero."

"I wouldn't have wasted all my time if I'd had this flimsy piece of paper! Hey, isn't it super unfair to hide this printout and then tell me to solve the mystery?!"

"It was. But you solved it without using any of these hints. When all the mismatched pieces fit together, I bet you felt an incredible sense of satisfaction, didn't you?"

I thought about arguing back, but I couldn't.

I didn't really like quizzes or puzzles when I was a kid. I really had changed since I got this heart. The stubborn drive to solve the mystery in front of me, and the completely addicting, incomparable rapture and ecstasy I felt the moment I solved it—it was something I'd never experienced before.

"Heh-heh. Guess I pegged you correctly, Natsunagi. When faced with an impossible mystery, you're the type who tackles it head-on and finds the answer, no matter what anyone says. I think that's wonderful."

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks."

"I know you're sulking. Only a clueless, inexperienced guy would fall for that cute little act. Well, I've had my fun, so I'm leaving."

Yomiko rose and headed for the library exit.

The sunset light streaming in through the windows made her profile glow, giving her an almost ethereal appearance. It was incredibly beautiful. As she moved from twilight into the shadows, I couldn't help but call out to her.

"I had lots of fun, too! Thanks to you, I discovered how much I enjoy solving mysteries! And you said you had zero friends, but that's not true!"

I pointed at my face and said to Yomiko, "We're friends now, right? Next time, let's hang out somewhere besides the library! You

can meet my friends!”

Yomiko’s beautiful eyes widened for a moment, like she was surprised by my words. Then she gave a small smile.

“Thank you, Natsunagi. I’ll always treasure those kind words.”

With that, Yomiko left the library, and I was left alone.

I shoved the papers she’d left behind into my skirt pocket and followed her out. Yomiko was nowhere to be seen. The glittering orange light illuminating the hallway was shifting to a cold blue.

It was after school, the beginning of next week. The three of us went to tell Ms. Koyomi the answer to the mystery.

“Ms. Koyomi, are you in?”

When we entered the nurse’s office, Ms. Koyomi was sitting in her chair as usual and welcomed us.

“Hello, girls. Is there anything you need today?”

“Yes. We solved the library mystery, so we thought we’d tell you about it. First, there’s this paper… Ms. Koyomi?”

When I produced the printout and showed it to her, Ms. Koyomi looked unusually solemn. She silently took it from us and looked at it for a little while.

“So you solved this mystery, did you?” she said.

“Y-yes.” I nodded. “That’s right… Is something bothering you?”

Ms. Koyomi didn’t answer right away. After hesitating briefly, she finally told us the reason: “I was a student at this school eight years ago.”

“Huh? You’re an alum?”

I exchanged looks with Fuyuko and Haruru, but they both shook their heads. While we were busy being surprised, Ms. Koyomi continued.

“I was always late or absent, so I barely graduated. It wasn’t that I hated school, but various circumstances made me prone to missing classes.”

“Wow… And you seem so serious.”

“Heh-heh. I was quite the opposite. But even I had one close

friend. She loved books, and I met her while I was skipping class in the library."

For a brief moment, the image of the bookworm girl flashed through my mind. No, she should've had nothing to do with this; we were talking about eight years ago.

"She was a dedicated student librarian who even planned an event for the culture festival. No one was interested in what a librarian had to offer, though. She was a perverse yet strangely earnest girl."

Ms. Koyomi's gaze fell on the printout in front of her. Her gaze wasn't focused on the text but seemed to be somewhere beyond it.

"She died organizing books in the stacks the day before the culture festival. She was using a stepladder and lost her balance, hitting her head on the floor."

"Ms. Koyomi, don't tell me that student's name was…"

I felt like I shouldn't know, but I was involved now. I had come face-to-face with the girl who created that mystery. I couldn't stay ignorant.

"She had the same name as the girl you met in the library. Her name was—"

Yomiko Naoki.

It shouldn't have been true. That was unrealistic. All of us must have felt the same. But as the contours of *her* true identity became clearer, I could see Fuyuko's and Haruru's faces turning pale.

"So that means Yomiko Naoki…is a ghost?"

"N-no way! I mean, she spoke to Nagi."

"But she never even talked to us, let alone met us. She always showed up when Nagisa was alone. It's weird how we never saw her, which means—"

"Eeeek! Don't talk like that, Fuyuuu! I'll cry! I'll pee myself again!"

I couldn't believe it myself. She'd had legs, and she hadn't been wearing a triangular headband. Her body hadn't been see-through. There was her laugh, her low voice, her beautiful eyes.

It didn't feel like her life had been lacking in any way. At that time, in that moment, Yomiko Naoki had definitely existed in the peaceful library.

That was why I called the number I had gotten from solving the mystery one more time: to find proof of Yomiko Naoki's existence.

"…I knew it wouldn't connect."

But no matter how many times I tried, the call never connected again.

I couldn't come to terms with the incomplete ending to the mystery. It was difficult to hope for anything more, given that the girl who had brought the mystery to life was no longer here.

"I wish I'd at least solved the mystery of that weird noise."

"'Noise'?"

"Yes. After the three of us solved the mystery and made the call, the phone connected once. And what came through was something that sounded like a foreign language."

I took out my phone and played the call I'd recorded for Ms. Koyomi. At first, she listened with a serious expression.

"…I see. Indeed, that's just like her. Pfft, ha-ha-ha!"

And then she burst into wide, open-mouthed laughter—something I'd never seen before.

"M-Ms. Koyomi? Are you okay?"

"Aww, Koyo's broken. Will hitting her fix it?"

"No, Haruru. Unlike me, Ms. Koyomi is fragile. Why do you always try to solve problems with brute strength anyway…?"

"I'll solve it! With my fists!"

While we were puzzled, Ms. Koyomi eventually managed to stop laughing and explained:

"My apologies, everyone. My friend was quite the contrarian, and I believe she didn't intend for anyone to solve the mystery to begin with."

"Meaning?"

"This is an inside joke. It was a strange game we liked to play. There's no way anyone else would understand this… Honestly, she really was messed up."

In the end, even though we were still clueless, Ms. Koyomi said, "Let me borrow this data," and we sent the strange audio to her phone.

"With this app…we should be able to solve the mystery."

What came out of Ms. Koyomi's phone was—

"I knew you were the only one who could solve my final mystery. Thank you for finding the answer, Koyomi. I'll buy you something to drink as a reward."

They were actual words. And they were addressed to a specific person.

"We used to have this game where we would make a recording, reverse it, and send the audio to each other. Back then, we'd do silly things like this at school and laugh together," Ms. Koyomi said, and there was no sadness or loneliness in her voice.

It was cheerful and full of nostalgia for memories with her beloved friend.





"So does that mean she created the mystery for you to begin with?"

"That could be considered both correct and incorrect. She was a serious person, so while she was able to create it, she probably thought no one would seriously try to solve it."

Except for me, that was.

After using a phrase I'd heard somewhere before, Ms. Koyomi smiled and added one more thing.

"I caught her making these mysteries all the time. She loved books from the bottom of her heart, and I loved the look on her face when she was surrounded by them in the library."

"I'm sure…Yomiko loved you, too, Ms. Koyomi."

She'd said she only had one friend. I remembered the exchange we'd had. Her face had hardly ever changed, but when she had mentioned her friend, she'd had such a cute smile.

"Yes. The delinquent girl and the bookworm. Neither of us was the type to have any friends. Now, then…"

Ms. Koyomi rose from her chair, stretched, and smiled at us.

"The atmosphere's gotten a little heavy in here. No more mystery solving! As promised, I'll treat you to some tasty meat!"

First ramen, now *yakiniku*. Well, that was pretty charming in itself.

"No, we can eat another time," I said. "Right, Fuyuko, Haruru?"

They seemed to understand what I was trying to say without me needing to say it.

"Everyone knows delicious food and sweets satisfy a girl's appetite, but we'd rather have something else… A good, rewarding drink."

"That's right! We want to hear more about Koyo's high school days! Specifically, the romantic parts! Heh-heh!"

In response, Ms. Koyomi smiled a bit awkwardly.

"Oh my, old stories are embarrassing. I'd rather treat you to expensive *yakiniku*…but I guess I can't say no. Just for today, okay?"

After that, the four of us talked until the sun went down—about

school, studying, romance, and old stories about precious friends.

What exactly was the Yomiko Naoki I'd encountered?

Maybe she was a lingering vestige of feelings that had remained in the library since that day.

Maybe she was a classmate who came from far away to visit an old friend.

Maybe she was a completely different person using her name. A look-alike. A prank by Ms. Koyomi.

Her true identity didn't matter now; it was a trivial thing.

But there had definitely been a girl there.

So there was no need to uncover the big mystery of her identity.

To Ms. Koyomi, and to us, Yomiko had become an important page of our youth.

Chapter 3

Time-Capsule Paradox

"We're in the eighth round of the Maiden Heart-Pounding Championship! These fantasies are amazing!"

"Yay! *Clap, clap, clap!*"

"Ah, geez. How did this even happen…?"

One day after school, we were poised to have a wild conversation in the nurse's office.

We didn't usually talk about spicy stuff like this. Everything went wrong when Ms. Koyomi asked us for that favor earlier!

"Tomorrow, the school will be holding a reunion for alumni."

After classes were over, we were hanging out and chatting in the nurse's office for no particular reason when Ms. Koyomi suddenly seemed to remember something.

"Oh, right. I think classes finish in the morning, and there's a mixer with the alumni in the afternoon. The mixer is optional, so we're essentially free to leave at noon," Fuyuko answered for me, since I'd completely forgotten.

The real mystery was how she managed to remember these things while never coming to class.

"Yes. Well, even if there are no participants, the student council leaders are obligated to attend, so the outcome shouldn't be too tragic."

"So why are you telling us this?"

"Tomorrow's class reunion is for alumni who graduated twenty years ago. These alumni took part in something while they were in school, although it's not so much of a thing anymore."

Ms. Koyomi pointed at a large cherry tree in the corner of the schoolyard that you could see from the nurse's office window.

"It's a traditional event where people bury their memories from high school, right around there."

"Oh! A time capsule!" said Haruru. "I've always loved those in manga and anime! I didn't know our school did them, too! Aww, that makes me happy!"

Ms. Koyomi smiled ruefully and shrugged. "They're fun when you're in high school but a pain to dig up as an adult. It's a lot of work, and sorting through everything is a hassle, too. So about that…"

Ms. Koyomi put her hand in the pocket of her white coat and took out a flyer. CLASS REUNION VOLUNTEERS WANTED was written on it in large letters. *Don't tell me…*

"Apparently, the student council is shorthanded, so they asked me to recruit some people. You all have some free time, right? Can at least one of you help?"

"…Do we get anything for volunteering?"

"Of course, Miss Natsunagi. You'll get a prepaid book card worth five hundred yen!"

Selling a high school girl's precious after-school time for five hundred yen? *Nope, no way*. But only one of us had to participate. Not all three. Meaning that if someone sacrificed themselves…we'd be safe tomorrow after school!

And it seemed we were all thinking the same thing.

"Oh, I can't tomorrow," I said. "I have a shift at a coffee shop. You know, the one by the station."

"You're a bad liar, Nagisa. Even a little sexual harassment pisses you off; there's no way you can work at a maid café whose selling point is miniskirts and kitty ears."

"No! I'd never wear those indecent cosplay maid outfits! The design is kinda cute, though…isn't it?"

"You might look good in it. Oh. That reminds me—I think our drama club is actually wearing something like those for our next play. Why don't you try one on?"

I wasn't sure why…but I could vividly picture myself wearing it.

No, no, I'd never wear one! I wasn't going to, right?! She wasn't

going to make me?!

"By the way, I have a date with a cute girl tomorrow," said Fuyuko. "One-on-one. Sorry."

"There's another girl besides us? Then give back all the time I spent on you! Give it back now!"

"Nagisa, you're freaking me out! Well, it's not a lie. I mean, tomorrow, either Nagisa or Haruru will be volunteering. So I'll be on a date with the one who's left."

"Bold of you to assume you're not gonna be the volunteer… Haruru?"

"I really don't want to go on a date alone with Fuyu?"

"Oh, I was asking if you had any plans tomorrow, not if you wanted to go on a date with Fuyuko. Look—you hurt her feelings."

"Fuyuko's even cuter when you bully her. Right now, I'm trying to popularize the 'Fuyu oppression' genre at our school! I've already got three people endorsing it!"

"If everyone at school starts doing it, wouldn't it just be regular bullying?!"

Fuyuko, who was being embroiled in a fiendish plot, pursed her lips together with teary eyes. Wow, she really was even cuter. Maybe I'd start oppressing her, too.

"*Sigh*…meaning the three of you are free. So let's do this," Ms. Koyomi suggested as she handed me a printout and a pen. "We'll play a game, and the loser has to volunteer tomorrow. Don't you think that's fair?"

Her thoughtless solution led to a devilish game.

"And it's the eighth round. I've never played something this stupid once, let alone eight times."

"Oh, I see… We've been doing it when you're not around. Sorry."

"Fuyu! You promised to keep it a secret so Nagi wouldn't get hurt!"

"No, no, no, I'm not hurt or anything. In fact, when I'm not around, you two can do whatever you want. Seriously."

Was there anything I'd ever wanted to be left out of more? If we

were swapping love stories or whatever, I'd probably just be depressed, but this was a fantasy-revealing contest.

"In other words, here you can speak openly about the things you fantasize about doing with boys before you go to sleep at night. Whoever gets our hearts pounding the most is the winner."

"By the way, anything explicit is disqualified. Just up to PG-13!"

"The rules are well-thought-out for such an appalling competition…"

At this point, they probably wouldn't listen to anything I said. In a group of three, two versus one was inevitable.

"But, well, a masochist like Nagisa probably has predictable fantasies, so they might not even be interesting," said Fuyuko.

"Rude. How dare you, Fuyuko. Besides, I'm not a hardcore masochist! You two misunderstand me; I'm just your normal adolescent girl!"

"Uh-huh. So what does normal-girl Nagi fantasize about?"

Think…of a wonderful, heart-pounding fantasy that won't get you disqualified.

Things like holding hands on the way home from school or being *kabedon*ed and kissed in an empty classroom were all a little too simplistic and cliché.

Okay, I had it.

"I guess it has a lighthearted vibe, though? When I go to his place—we say we're studying for exams—we fool around a little in the gloomy light of the setting sun while we're taking a break. But things gradually escalate, and before I know it, he forcefully pushes me down onto the bed and ties my hands with cord he had ready for some reason.

"I desperately try to resist, but he reaches around from behind me and touches between my breasts and armpits like he's tickling me, and his hand occasionally reaches the base of my butt. The exchange never really crosses the line. He's ultimately a coward, so even though he's already gone this far, he doesn't take off my uniform or kiss me. At most, he secretly touches my thighs. Well, it's only natural…since we're not dating yet.

"But on the way home, part of me is hoping I'll end up back at

his place again. His scent and warmth still linger on my body. I savor those sensations and arrive home thinking about how I'd like him to whisper insults in my ear next time.

"I might graduate in a different sense before I get confessed to properly as a high schooler… I fantasize about that before going to bed, and after a sleepless night, I meet him again on the way to school. It just feels like part of my everyday life…right?"

"No?"

"No!"

"Also, it would be great if the guy sighed and said 'good grief' in a bored tone."

"There's even extra toppings?! Could you not…say 'great' with that blissful smile?"

"I'm low-key getting indigestion from that extra lust, mushy brain, and second helping of fantasizing…"

The two of them listened to me but looked somewhat alarmed.

"I-it's not that serious, okay? Those situations come up all the time in shoujo manga!"

"Not the shoujo manga I know!"

"I've seen something similar in a vaguely raunchy ad before."

No one else was on board with my fantasy. Why? Maybe the two of them would have preferred something a little more hardcore? This was tricky.

"…Right. Nagisa can be exempt from volunteering."

"…Yup," said Haruru. "So between me and Fuyu, whoever loses at rock-paper-scissors will do it? I'm not hungry for any more after that. Ha, ha-ha."

The two of them weakly played rock-paper-scissors, and Fuyu lost.

I wanted to hear their fantasies, too. Wasn't that a little unfair?

Ms. Koyomi's gentle smile had faded. "High school girls these days…," she trailed off gravely. Weird.

The next day, Fuyuko volunteered as promised, and Haruru and I

ate lunch together in the cafeteria and happily went home together.

The Yellow Panties of Happiness incident and the mystery Yomiko had given me—with those two incidents behind us, I had thought that our days would be peaceful for a while. But—

"Morning, Nagisa. I came here just for you!"

The next day, my friend was waiting for me with a bright smile on the way to school.

"Morning, Fuyuko. You're always so energetic first thing in the morning."

"Of course! Because I get to see you. I was sad that we couldn't go home together yesterday. Can we hold hands…while we walk? Wanna ply the yuri trade together?"

"I think the stress of volunteering is getting to my friend. What demand is there for that anyway?"

"So it would be wrong to hold hands with my beloved Nagisa if there was no demand?"

When she said that, with a face that was even better looking than the boys' and her piercing eyes…e-even I got shy. If Fuyuko put her heart into it, she could get any girl to fall for her. It was really unfair.

"I-it's not wrong… J-just for a bit, okay?"

Just as I had placed my hand over Fuyuko's and was about to link my fingers with hers—

"I came because I heard my two best friends were doing yuri!" Haruru hollered. "Is this the right venue?!"

"Ah, here comes the demand."

Thanks to the three of us being together and returning to our usual vibe, I wound up not holding hands with Fuyuko.

"Waah…I was so close to making Nagisa fall in love with me."

"Love isn't something you can force; it has to happen on its own, right? More importantly, how was volunteering yesterday?"

"Oh, right! I was going to tell you two—we ran into an interesting *mystery*."

I tensed up when I heard that word.

"This isn't some weird mystery like last time with the books,

right?”

“Don’t worry about that. If anything, it’s a pretty big mystery. In fact, it wouldn’t be strange if the boy you were looking for was involved.”

The moment that boy flashed through my mind, my muscles seized up according to some invisible force. *What the heck?* It was like someone else—not me—was fixated on his existence.

“A data CD was found in that time capsule. We don’t know who it belongs to, and it seems like an artifact that doesn’t belong in this day and age… Someone’s treasure.”

Haruru and I listened intently to Fuyuko while we walked to school.

“I helped dig up the time capsule, and we were supposed to give the contents to the class reunion president afterward. Since everyone is an adult now, not everyone was able to attend.”

Fuyuko had handed the contents over to the president. The president had accepted them and distributed them to his old classmates by referring to a list in the gym… Things seemed to have gone well up to that point.

“For those who couldn’t attend, they decided to mail theirs afterward, except for one thing—a data CD left behind with no owner.”

“That’s the artifact? But twenty years ago, a CD wouldn’t exactly be rare, right?”

“Nagi’s right. If you’re talking rare storage mediums from twenty years ago, maybe an SSD? You see them all the time now, but back then, they were only just starting to spread.”

As Haruru kept going, I tried looking up the history of SSDs on my phone. It looked like major manufacturers started distributing them just a short time later. But since Fuyuko was specifically referring to CDs, it seemed irrelevant.

“No, what’s weird isn’t the CD itself. It’s what’s on it.”

“You mean it has data that couldn’t possibly exist in this day and age?”

"Yes. Nagisa's right. By the way, have either of you heard of *Lick-Lick Syndrome Sisters*? It's a popular light novel that got an anime adaption?"

In contrast to me, who didn't know much in that area, Haruru's eyes were sparkling.

"Wha—?! I never thought I'd hear Fuyuko talk about *Peroimo*! I really love it! The animation in episode five where the little sister licks her brother's body gets so slippery smooth!"

"'Slippery smooth'? Brothers getting licked…? Uhh…is this, um. Kind of a sexy series? Haruru?"

"No? Sure, it might seem that way if you just watch the scene where the brother gets licked. But it's a depiction of love. It's like a last resort the brother and sister use to save each other when they get infected with 'lick-lick syndrome'—"

"Wait, hold on. What even is that?"

"An extraterrestrial life form. The younger sister gets infected with it, and her repressed love and lust for her stepbrother explode, and her brother destroys the balance of the world to save her—"

"Ah, whatever."

In other words, light novels like that existed. I might've even seen a poster for it when the three of us went to the bookstore recently.

"Is it pretty popular?"

"Yup! The original novel series for *Peroimo* sold a million copies, which is an unprecedented amount for a novel that won the Rookie of the Year award! It's a super popular work that will pave the way for the next generation of light novels for sure! All of humanity should support it!"

That made sense. I had the gist of it now, thanks to the otaku-*gyaru*.

"And? What's the connection between this *Peroimo* and the CD from the time capsule?"

"Like the otaku-*gyaru* just said, *Peroimo* is a recent work. It was published three years ago when it won the Rookie of the Year award…supposedly."

Fuyuko took out her smartphone and showed me an image. It

was a single CD in a case, which appeared to have been taken out of the time capsule. The label on it read PEROIMO SHORT STORY COLLECTION.

"Huh? Wh-what the heck? The time capsule is from twenty years ago, so how does it have the short story collection?"

"Heh-heh. That's the big mystery. Depending on how the analysis pans out, this could cause a huge uproar in the light novel world. The yellow panties and torn pages can't compare."

If this mystery were to be revealed, it would send shockwaves across the internet and the light-novel-fan community.

There were reasons why my heart sped up at the thought of such a powerful mystery. Just like before, I had the intellectual curiosity that yearned to solve it.

And beyond that, I had both the hunch and expectation that *that boy* would get involved in a mystery this big.

"Fuyuko, what's happening with the data CD now?"

"The school has temporary custody of it, and Ms. Koyomi, who happened to be there, is looking after it. I'm guessing…you're interested?"

"Of course! There's no way a proxy detective would ignore such an interesting mystery! You two are helping out, right?"

Fuyuko nodded, but the otaku-*gyaru* had strangely lost her hype.

"O-oh? You're not interested, Haruru?"

"Huh? N-no, not really? If you want to solve the mystery, of course I'll help you!"

I was slightly confused by her evasive reply. In any case, the next mystery that the Autumnless Trio was going to take on had been decided.

"Okay! After school today, let's go straight to Ms. Koyomi and ask her to let us borrow the data off that CD!"

"*Peroimo* is so good. I love the scene in episode seven where the younger sister's younger sister aggressively licks her brother's body and the older younger sister gets super jealous!"

Even our school nurse was a slave to lick-lick syndrome. And involving the younger sisters of younger sisters was too convoluted.

"I know!" said Haruru. "When the brother licks the younger sister's neck and apologizes, I cried my eyes out. 'Can we put that licking from before behind us now?'"

"Miss Haruru, I see we're kindred spirits. Shall we…make a *doujinshi* filled with love for *Peroimo* for the next fan event?"

"I can draw, so leave it to me! I'll have my two friends here hawk the books in bunny costumes, so we'll have plenty of manpower! Heh-heh!"

Was she trying to make me and Fuyuko into bunnies? *If I had to pick, I'd rather be a cat-eared maid… No, that's not the point here!*

"Ms. Koyomi, sorry to interrupt the fun, but—"

"Oh, Miss Natsunagi. Would you mind if I measure your bust and hips for the costume later?"

"I'll strangle you with the tape measure. I'm not wearing that. But I would like to see the *Peroimo* data CD that was in the time capsule, if that's okay?"

"Oh, sure. Hold on a moment," Ms. Koyomi said as she took the data CD out of a cardboard box that was in the corner of the nurse's office. The box was probably filled with items from the time capsule that had nowhere to go.

"Here you are. At the reunion, there was an obsessive fan who made a huge fuss about it. He said something like, 'I'll upload the data online and solve it with my friends!' but I politely declined the offer."

"Ha-ha…that could definitely turn into a problem. So this is the data CD…?"

It looked like a completely normal CD at first glance.

"Yes. I said I would find the alum who owned it and return it to them. Miss Shirahama was adamant that you, Miss Natsunagi, would be able to solve the mystery with no trouble."

"Hey, that's raising the bar ridiculously high!" I complained. "Don't say such irresponsible things, Fuyuko…"

"Oh? Was it too much to ask? If you don't want to, you can turn it down. I'm sure even a globe-trotting ace detective wouldn't be

interested in a mystery that didn't pique their curiosity."

"Grr. I didn't say it couldn't be solved!"

For some reason, I'd gotten worked up, but the problem was the contents of the CD?

"If it really is data that's stood the test of time, that's a pretty big deal. The contents of the CD are the *mystery* I'm charged with solving this time, right?"

"Yes. I took a quick look at the contents myself, and they were astonishing. Have you and Miss Shirahama read the original novel?"

The answer was no. We both shook our heads together.

"It was a unique setup—a pure romantic comedy about siblings. It was highly praised by the Rookie of the Year Award Judging Committee for its originality."

"In other words, its unlikely that the idea or title just happened to overlap?"

"I don't think there's more than one genius in the world who could come up with a title as off the wall as *Lick-Lick Syndrome Sisters*."

"Yeah. I thought that myself when I said it, too…"

For example, if we had a fantasy about swords and sorcery—in that case, the author might be influenced by similar works, and the world building, characters, and the names of spells used might overlap.

"But with a romantic comedy, the titles probably wouldn't overlap even if the concepts were the same…right?"

"Nagisa, what if the author happened to be an alumnus here and put the CD in the time capsule to commemorate being in the literature club or something?"

"Yeah, I think that's the strongest possibility, too."

"No, that can't be true," Haruru cut in to reject our theory. "The author's from Kyushu and lived in their hometown until they graduated from college. They even said it in an official interview, so I think it's correct. The age is wrong, too."

"Really? Then this theory is way off base…huh."

So this wasn't a mystery that could be solved so easily. But that just increased my chances of meeting him. I was getting fired up,

too.

"In that case, what if someone put it in the time capsule as a prank?"

"Sorry, but there's no way. The time capsule was locked securely when I helped dig it up. The student council and Alumni Association kept a close eye on the key, so it would be hard to steal."

With even Fuyuko denying it, the obvious path to a solution was eliminated. We spent some time just groaning and thinking, Ms. Koyomi included.

"Goodness, Nagi, Fuyu. Don't you think there's more important things than getting stuck on the surface-level mystery?" Haruru suddenly said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean seeing is believing! Except for Koyo, you don't know a thing about *Peroimo*, right? Let's give you a crash course!"

Fuyuko and I tilted our heads in confusion, not realizing what she was getting at.

Haruru picked up her schoolbag and went to leave the nurse's office.

"I'll show you two the best world there is!"

After that, the three of us were on the train to a certain part of the city.

The famous town had once been a fruit and vegetable market, but it had transformed itself into an electronic district that was renowned worldwide. As we exited the station, a view unfolded before us that we would never see commuting between home and school.

"Welcome to the abyss where the otaku lurk! Welcome to the underground!" Haruru shouted with glee, spreading her arms wide. A showy *gyaru* was one of the last people you'd expect to see here.

Passersby were overwhelmed by Haruru's glittering aura, too—or maybe put off.

"Wow…I've seen it before in dramas and manga, but it's my first

time here. What about you, Fuyuko?”

“I guess I’m the same. This is *that* town, right? The one with dreamlike cafes made just for me, where the maids will do whatever you ask as long as you have the money?”

“They’re not made just for you, and there’s already maid cafés in our town. Like the one in front of the station.”

“That maid café is too stuffy. They got mad at me just for petting a girl’s thighs.”

“Why would you think that wouldn’t upset them? Huh?”

“If a girl’s pale thighs are peeking out from under her miniskirt, it’s only polite to touch them.”

“You’ll be having a brush with the law along with her thighs, you know. Anyway…Haruru, why would you bring high school girls in the prime of their youth here?”

There were plenty of districts popular with young people around here.

“Our home base is still farther ahead, but I thought this town would be easier for you to understand—hey! See, look over there! It’s a billboard for *Peroimo*!”

Haruru pointed to a billboard on top of a building advertising the original novels. And *Peroimo* wasn’t the only series; there were illustrations of cute girls all over. It was a strange place, almost overwhelmingly so.

“The energy is through the roof! It’s so fun—like we’re at a theme park!”

“On the other hand, there are no mascot characters walking around…”

“*Gasp!* Are the otaku walking around not enough for you?”

“Could you not say such horrible things right in front of the station?! Don’t treat the people who love this town like mascot characters! Especially considering you’re one of them!”

“If anything, we have way more cred as mascot characters. It’s not too crazy to ask for a picture of three gorgeous high school beauties walking together. Oh, and it’s five thousand yen a shot.”

“We definitely stand out, but that’s expensive for a photo! Last time it was three thousand yen for just you, Fuyuko!”

If we divided it by three, it would actually be a bargain at two thousand yen per person…but that wasn't important.

"So? Where are we headed now?"

"Hmm. I guess we need to start by checking out the merch! This way!"

Haruru led the way, and Fuyuko and I followed her through the streets, walking close together. We would only attract this much attention in this particular town. I'd had guys stare at me before but never this many at once.

"Whoa. Nagisa's trying to open a new door."

"I-I'm not! F-Fuyuko, does this not bother you at all?"

"Well, me and Haruru are used to men staring. I guess because we're popular, unlike you."

"Hm? You wanna fight? Besides, doesn't this town have plenty of places to look? There's pictures of cute, scantily clad girls everywhere."

"Ha-ha. You're such a child, Nagisa. Even elementary school boys wouldn't get excited by those. Oops. I think that girl in front of us dropped something. I'll get it for her… Eeeee?!"

The moment Fuyuko picked up the book at her feet and looked at the cover, she let out a short, strange noise, and her ears turned bright red. Yep, she was embarrassed.

I couldn't think straight, either, when I saw the illustration of two handsome, shirtless men embracing each other.

"Wh-why are they naked? D-do guys hug each other naked? Is it for a festival?"

"Ah…ah, ha. Hee-hee-hee. Ah-ha-ha?"

"Fuyuko?! Fuyuko's more flustered than ever! Help me, Haruru!"

I called out to Haruru, who was bouncing along ahead of us like she was going to leave us behind.

"What's up? When did you discover you were into BL? That's not even a major pairing."

"That's not it! This fell out of a lady's bag just now, so we were picking it up for her, um—"

"Oh, I see. By the way, that reply isn't because you're into BL, right?"

"Shut up! Just give this back to that lady!"

"*Oui.* Going by who's on the cover, it's that lady with the can badge on her bag. Too bad I don't ship these two, though. I have a different pairing I like. Heh-heh."

Haruru called out to the lady in her usual friendly way and returned the book. She was surprised for a moment that a *gyaru* had called out to her, but when she saw what Haruru was holding, they had a lively conversation. She thanked Haruru and left.

"Apparently, her friend drew it! I even got their circle's business card! I'll have to go say hi at the next event!"

"Where did you pick up the communication skills to become friends with a stranger in ten seconds…?"

"Wellll, I'm not like that with just anyone, you know? It's because I knew we had a common interest we could share!" Haruru admitted shyly before adding quietly, "But if she's wrong about any of the scenes or characters we might have to fight it out."

Hopefully, there wouldn't be any bloodshed over just that.

"You know…you really love it here, don't you, Haruru? This town, the works that color it, the kindred spirits walking here…," I said.

Haruru smiled her biggest smile of the day.

"Yep! I love it! This town's like a treasure chest filled with everything I love—the people, everything! It's a place where I can open my heart in the truest sense!"

"I see. Then you really were uncomfortable in that classroom."

Haruru and I first met in the fall of our second year of high school. She was reading a manga in the corner of the classroom with a somewhat uncomfortable expression.

Despite her clothes and makeup, Haruru was an otaku. She was teased for her hobbies by her peers in her first year of high school and wound up with Fuyuko as her only friend.

"Ha-ha! It was the worst! For me, dressing as a *gyaru* is like cosplaying. But my friends at the time would say things like, 'Anime with that look?'"

She was rejected, and the things she loved were disparaged. That's why Haruru Agarie hadn't been able to forgive them.

"I thought no one outside this place or the internet would accept

me. But Fuyu wasn't like that. She tried to learn about the things I love."

"That's just like Fuyuko," I said. "I couldn't come to school much in those days, though."

"But you did come back to school and started talking to me, right? You said, 'I love that manga, too! I read it all the time in the hospital!' That made me super happy!"

Even though Haruru was shunned by the majority, she chose to keep being in the minority.

Maybe the reason I got along so well with her was because I hardly ever went to school and didn't understand those kinds of prejudices.

"I didn't have any friends in my class, either…so I was happy to make friends with you. Well, there was some conflict with Fuyuko then."

"That's true, now that you mention it! Well, it didn't really feel like a fight, and I wasn't worried, 'cause I knew the two of you would get along! That's why, Nagi…"

Her face, covered with happiness, was illuminated by the dazzling sun. I was captivated by the face of my beloved friend, who was able to say she loved the things she loved.

"Today, I won't just teach you about *Peroimo* but all the things I'm into! Lots of things I love to my beloved friends! I want to share many things I love with my dear friends!"

"…Okay! But in moderation, all right? Once you start talking, you never stop."

"Heh-heh. I wonder about that. Anyway, where did Fuyu go? I'm telling a really emotional story here."

"You're right… Oh. Hey, isn't that her?"

As I watched, Fuyuko was being waited on by girls in maid outfits.

The girls handing out flyers were swarming her, and she didn't appear to mind it at all…! The maids seemed to like her, too, since they were casually touching her and squeeing.

You can probably touch their thighs now, Fuyuko.

"I give up. I can't say no with so many girls asking me out. But

today, I'm on a date with my two best friends. I'd love to meet you all one by one another day. Heh-heh."

Yep, she was over the moon.

"Since we're already here, let's ignore Fuyuko and walk around together."

"Yeah. Let's make the Autumnless Trio the Spring-Summer Duo for today."

We began walking, ignoring the popular prince. Apparently, Fuyuko realized she was being left behind and was shouting after us, but I didn't want to interrupt our happy moment, so I thought I'd go on a date with Haruru, just the two of us.

We went around to various stores after that: a store with lots of sexy figures on display; a strange store with dozens of capsule machines and nothing else; and a large arcade that, for some reason, sold *taiyaki* at the front desk.

There was even a shop displaying sexy *doujinshi* that high school girls probably shouldn't read. All the shops we usually wouldn't visit as a trio.

Maybe Haruru was right about it being like a theme park.

"Hm! Today was the best! I'm super satisfied. The best. The *best*!"

After that, we took a break at an unremarkable diner. I guess these kinds of places are better for high school girls…? Nah.

"You taught me so much about *Peroimo*, Haruru!"

"Sure did. I never thought I'd wind up buying the original series. Haruru's sales pitch was just too strong! I can't wait for the twist where the younger sister's sister gets together with the older sister of her brother."

"Volume Three! After that, the two had some ups and downs… Oops, that was close! I'm avoiding spoilers! I almost let my otaku nature loose!"

"I wound up playing the *gacha*, too. This thingy is so cute."

I'd bought a rubber *Peroimo* charm. It was the kind of thing you saw a lot, featuring a deformed character on the front and their

name on the back. But it was pretty cute.

"Isn't she great?! She's the younger sister's sister, Rika! The author likes her a lot. She's popular for a minor character, and she shows up a lot even from the first volume!"

"Oh, so that's why she's kinda the main character of Volume Three?"

"Exactly! Yui—that's the idol who sings the theme song; she's adorable—she said Rika was her fave in an interview! But mine is—"

Ordering only the drink bar and a mountain of french fries, we spent about two hours chatting. Of course, we didn't just chat about *Peroimo*.

When I grow up, if someone asks me about my time in high school—I'd probably tell them about the time I spent with my two friends. Club activities, studying, and even being immersed in the things you love were all a part of being young.

We would become adults after experiencing our own unique springtime.

When I got home that night, I gazed at the data CD I'd borrowed from Ms. Koyomi.

From here on out, my job was being a proxy detective. I'd face the mystery we couldn't solve as a trio one more time.

"I guess I'll start with the data from this CD."

I checked the manufacturers' logo engraved on the case to see when the CD was made. Fuyuko had shot down the theory in the nurse's office, but I'd had nothing to support it.

If the CD had been manufactured recently, it would give weight to my theory that it had been added later, but…

"The manufacturer was absorbed by a rival company over fifteen years ago, and the brand name no longer exists… Huh."

That meant it had to be from when the time capsule had been buried. There went my theory that a high school girl from the future had crept into the grounds in the dead of night, dug up the time capsule, and put the CD inside.

"Next, let's actually take a look at the contents."

I inserted the CD into the disk drive on my laptop and checked the files that were on it. There were a number of files listed, all short *Peroimo* stories. According to Haruru, the short stories were vignettes that didn't appear in the original work.

"If these really were written by the same author, this would be a gold mine for fans."

I immersed myself in the short stories for a while, but I didn't find anything. At least there was nothing to find there for a casual reader like me… Oh.

"I get it. There might be nothing for a reader, but the author…"

I opened up my social media and entered *Peroimo* into the search box. Authors were so much more accessible to the readers than they used to be.

There was no need to send a paper fan letter anymore; as long as the person checked their smartphone or tablet, you could easily connect with them.

"I found them! The author of *Peroimo*…Gosho Mito's account!"

About to send a message, I paused. *How much should I even explain…?*

Should I say, "There was a collection of your short stories in a time capsule at our school"? Who even knows if they'll respond to a message out of the blue… Agh, whatever!

"What a pain! You knew it was a long shot!"

Fueled by momentum, I quickly typed a message and sent it to Gosho Mito. The message was a simple greeting that mentioned I was a fan, and one question.

"I have a question for you about Peroimo*. Did you ever write any short stories for it before the main story was published?"*

"It's a pretty straightforward question. I wonder how they'll respond?"

This was the hypothesis I had come up with: If the author answered in the negative, that would be the end of it. But if they

replied in the affirmative, there was a chance that the stories on this data CD were legit.

It would mean *Peroimo* had been created over twenty years ago, and the collection of short stories had been published somewhere—like at an event for literary works. Or maybe it was distributed at the literature club at a high school or college.

One of our alumni might have obtained a copy and placed it in the time capsule as a memento. That would make sense, at least.

"…Whoa! He already replied!"

I'd gotten a notification while I was lost in thought.

"Good evening. Thank you for reading my work. I've never published any short stories for Peroimo *in the past. I did write a few as purchase bonuses, though."*

I hurriedly typed my thanks and went in for my next question.

"Did you write any stories before winning the Rookie of the Year award? One of my friends, apparently, read a Peroimo *short story collection, and I was wondering…"*

The second part was fake. I didn't want to say too much and make it confusing.

After that, we exchanged messages in a flurry in real time.

"There are no short stories. I'm not good at writing short stories to begin with… The only one I can think of is one I wrote as a store bonus for the novels."

I replied again, with a glimmer of hope in my heart.

"Did you ever make a Peroimo doujinshi *for an event…or anything like that?"*

"I'd get into a lot of trouble if I did that lol. There was a decently long novella as a bonus for the anime Blu-ray, though. Your friend must have thought that was a short story collection."

"Ugh…that's not it. It really seems like he has no idea."

I'd already looked into the bonus novella. But its contents were completely different from the short story collection in the time capsule, and it was a stand-alone novel.

"In any case, I should thank him."

We exchanged several messages after that and finally ended with some kind-yet-heavy words from Mr. Mito: *"Please keep being my fan until one of us dies."*

I didn't get the sense he was lying, and I had no idea why he would in the first place.

My theory dissolved in the darkness of the mystery and disappeared without any impact.

"…So where did you come from? Who in the world created this story?" I murmured, stroking the old case, but no answer came to me.

The mystery didn't answer questions. It only responded when confronted with the one, unshakable truth. The mystery was waiting for the time when its identity and the yet unknown truth would be revealed.

"I think I've hit a wall, so I guess I'll watch the *Peroimo* anime and go to sleep."

No matter how thin the thread, there was always a possibility that something was connected at the end of it.

That was why I'd leave no stone unturned to solve the mystery!

I hadn't been able to solve it in the end, even after thinking about it all night and using my weekend.

It was the beginning of the next week. In the morning, in the classroom, I told Fuyuko and Haruru about the events of the previous night while rubbing my tired eyes.

"I got in touch with the author, but nothing came of it…I guess. The mystery only deepened."

"Mr. Mito is way too good at fan service! I'd be scared to answer a high school girl who had a vaguely sexy selfie as her profile picture."

"I don't have one of those! Mine's a picture of a cute cat! Oh, but I did watch the whole anime. I think I get it now why *Peroimo* is so interesting to people."

"Right?! Like the plot in episode ten of the anime where Rika awakens, overcomes her lick-lick syndrome, and goes on a date with her older brother! I cried a hundred times!"

"I get it! Yesterday, I realized that the Rika I won in the *gacha* is wearing the same outfit she wore on the date, and it made me kinda happy!"

I took out the *Peroimo* charm from my uniform pocket. I showed it off to the two of them, then noticed something.

Huh? There was something strange about this.

"It's different."

It was Rika and yet not. The Rika I knew was definitely this girl. She'd even appeared in the main story.

But the name of the younger sister's younger sister in the other story was—

"Nagisa, what's wrong? You went quiet suddenly…"

"Does your tummy hurt? I'll rub it for you. All the pain will fly away into tomorrow!"

"That's a magic spell that will send your future self straight to hell, Haruru. And could you please not bounce your weird jokes off me? That's Nagisa's job."

"Hey, you guys—," I began, ignoring the negotiations taking place in front of me. "Did you read the short stories?"

Both of them shook their heads.

"I've finished most of the main novels, but I haven't touched the anime or short stories."

"Yeah, I just lightly skimmed them."

I got it. That's why I was the only one who noticed what was out of place.

“Let’s go to the nurse’s office during lunch. There’s something I have to ask Ms. Koyomi.”

“Oh my, it’s the Autumnless Trio. Hello there.”

When we went to the nurse’s office during lunch, Ms. Koyomi was eating a gigantic cup of instant ramen.

“I’m amazed you can eat in a space that reeks of disinfectant…”

“I stock up on these when they’re on sale at the supermarket for a hundred yen each. If I could, I’d like to eat something outside school, like the fancy pasta near the station. Yes.”

Ms. Koyomi knocked back the rest of the soup, put the garbage in a bag, and turned to face us. I wondered why she was treating us so often when she had no money…but enough of that.

“By the way, Ms. Koyomi, have you read the short stories on the data CD?”

“Yes. The writing was a little amateurish, but they were quite interesting, especially since I’m a fan of the younger sister’s older sister, not the younger sister’s younger sister, so I was very glad she showed up.”

“Can’t you just say older and younger sister like normal? Is there some kind of rule?”

“Miss Shirahama, that’s a very thoughtless retort. There’s a reason for it in the original work, so be sure to read it by tomorrow and reflect on why I scolded you.”

“Huh? Why is everyone hating on me today?”

“About the younger sister’s younger sister, Rika…”

I used Ms. Koyomi’s computer to open one of the short stories.

“There’s one difference between the original and the short stories. In the one Gosho Mito wrote, the name *Rika* is used for her consistently. But in the short stories…it’s this.”

Her character, her feelings for her brother—everything was the same about the younger sister’s younger sister, Rika.

She didn’t appear much in the short stories, but her name was different.

It was still pronounced *Rika*, just spelled with different kanji. A trifling difference.

"You're right…! It's the same in all the original novels and the anime."

"She doesn't show up much in the short stories, so I nearly overlooked it as a typo, but it's just Rika's name that's different, like she came from another world. No, unless…"

It was an absurd possibility. I, Fuyuko, and Ms. Koyomi all held our breaths.

"What if this data CD itself came from a parallel world—"

"Hold it right there. Can we not turn our fun, youthful mystery into a sloppy school-sci-fi plot?"

It was Haruru who reclaimed the vibe and stopped our world from changing.

"Well, I have no choice. This mystery is too difficult for casual fans. I kept quiet because I thought Nagi and the others might find the answer, but…"

"You mean…you had the answer all along, Haruru?"

"Yes. Because I'm…"

No one could have predicted the words that came next.

"…an ancient otaku from the past, just like this data CD."

Our youth had become a school-sci-fi plot for real.

The ancient otaku who'd been charged with writing the solution chapter—or rather, Haruru—told us the truth behind the huge discrepancy in the data CD.

"*Peroimo* is, in a sense, before its time."

"What do you mean? Didn't Mr. Mito win the Rookie of the Year award three years ago and make his professional debut? If anything, isn't that ridiculously early?"

It had also been adapted into a manga and anime, with the second season in production. I thought it was abundantly clear that it had been appreciated.

"That's naive of you, Nagi. That's only commercial success."

I mulled over Haruru's words and tried to break them down. In other words, had *Peroimo* been published elsewhere before the author won the Rookie of the Year award?

"That makes no sense, Miss Agarie. *Peroimo* was never serialized online, and of course there's no trace of such a thing if you search."

"Yeah. Ms. Koyomi's right. I looked into that possibility, too. If it had been published somewhere twenty years ago, the existence of a short story collection wouldn't be contradictory…but that's impossible."

The time period of twenty years eliminated that possibility. I'd done a quick search myself. Back then, there was no place to publish it.

"These days, there's all sorts of blogs and sites that you can submit novels to, and you can even self-publish e-books. But there were no places like that on the old internet…"

"That's exactly why this is a mystery that today's youth can't crack."

Haruru didn't falter under our objections at all. She must've had absolute confidence in the answer she'd arrived at.

"It's true that there were few places to share your own novels back then. But not none—because the norm was to create them yourself."

Personal websites.

Ms. Koyomi, the oldest of the group, was the only one to get it immediately.

"I see. Back then, people used to make their own websites with software tools and web-hosting services, didn't they?"

Adding that she had been a kid back then, too, Ms. Koyomi continued, "It was one of the few ways to send your creative works out into the world. Nowadays, you can easily upload illustrations, music, and even videos to big social media platforms."

"Yup, I knew Koyo would get it. That said, I'm one of today's youth, too, so my knowledge is secondhand! The 'ancient otaku' stuff is just an act. I'm just your average otaku-*gyaru* high school girl."

"I was a little worried that you'd really come from the past…"

“I feel like the internet culture from back then really shone, so I’d love to try going back into the past. The otaku of today shine the brightest, though!”

“Back in the day, at least, there was a lot of prejudice against otaku… It’s definitely much better now in terms of that.”

Ms. Koyomi was correct. Nowadays, young and old alike enjoy anime, manga, and games—but to our parents’ generation, those were hobbies for children and nerds.

“Huh…? Wait a sec. When I was messaging Mr. Mito, he said he hadn’t written any short stories before he won the award.”

“Oh. I saw your messages in class, Nagi, but you went about asking the wrong way, because Mr. Mito clearly said that he hasn’t written any short stories.”

“Oh, I get it. But…the mystery behind the *Peroimo* short stories still remains. Even though Mr. Mito published the original story itself on his personal site, he never wrote any short stories.”

That was right. Not everything about the mystery had been uncovered yet.

That said, Haruru really did live up to her self-proclaimed title of “ancient otaku”—

“It’s true, Nagi. Mr. Mito never wrote any short stories for *Peroimo*, because these are…fan fiction, written by a fan who read *Peroimo* twenty years ago.”

Haruru handed me the pamphlet she brought with her to the nurse’s office. I thought it was some kind of catalog, but it was a free paper with release information for light novels.

“This is a pamphlet that was distributed to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Rookie of the Year award, when Mr. Mito made his debut as a writer. I got it at a certain event, and it’s quite rare.”

“I didn’t find anything like that when I searched online…”

“Yup. It’s an insider’s secret, even among fans! This is about the only interview where Mr. Mito talks about his personal website in public!”

I opened the pamphlet and read the interview carefully.

"I posted the award-winning Peroimo *on my personal website in the past. The site has already been taken down, and there are no archives as far as I know."*

"Excluding my friends, there was just one person who'd read it. But…that one person truly loved my work."

"She was the first to send feedback when I released the latest chapter, and she e-mailed me her fan fiction novel, too. The younger sister's younger sister, Rika, was inspired by her fan fiction."

"I reworked my manuscript at the time by adding Rika, submitted it for the Rookie of the Year award, and won. I'm truly fortunate to have been able to publish Peroimo *as a book twenty years later."*

Now that the mystery was completely solved, the impatience inside me melted away. Then a feeling of exhaustion came over my entire body, and I couldn't help letting out an odd sigh.

Because this mystery was…

"This was unsolvable! You would need to be familiar with old internet culture, get your hands on the author's interview in the booklet, *and* notice the inconsistencies with Rika's character!"

Even the world's greatest detective would be tearing their hair out over this.

It felt like no big deal now that it was solved, but this was outside my area of expertise.

It was a fantastically nerdy mystery that only the most obsessive fans, who truly loved the work and the author, could understand. Not casuals like us.

"Heh-heh. You're not there yet, Nagi! I could solve the mystery faster than you since it was limited to a specific genre!"

"…Don't tell me you knew the answer from the beginning?" I said, and Haruru stuck out her tongue with a cute little smile.

"Yup! I really did! Besides, if I'd told you the answer right away, your desire to solve the mystery would have gone unsatisfied! Besides, look!"

After a beat, Haruru pointed to the pamphlet I was holding.

"I wanted Nagi and Fuyu to love my favorite work, too. I thought it would be really great if there was a work that the four of us, Ms. Koyomi included, could enjoy together."

When I thought about it, Haruru should have been the first to jump on a mystery that had anything to do with *Peroimo*. But when Fuyuko had asked her about it, she'd looked almost bored.

But later on, she'd invited me and Fuyuko to that town like she'd thought of something, and that was the reason.

If I hadn't overlooked the feeling that something was wrong and pursued it right there—

—I could have solved this difficult case before it even happened.

"…I hate to admit it, but Haruru really won this round. We wound up completely loving *Peroimo*, and we wouldn't have been able to solve the mystery without her help."

"Heh-heh! I'm a big winner! Let's continue to support the best work with the greatest love! Okay?"

In the end, I couldn't have reached the answer alone, no matter how hard I tried. I had a long way to go despite calling myself a proxy detective. I needed to acquire sharper insight and broader knowledge… More. More.

"Well, you two, don't you think we need a heartwarming epilogue after all that mystery solving?"

Once everything in the *Peroimo* short story collection was uncovered, Fuyuko began crafting the ending to the story, with the class reunion attendee list in hand.

"Thanks to Mr. Mito's interview, we know that the author of the short story collection is a woman. There were six people who didn't help dig up the time capsule, and as luck would have it, only one of them is a woman."

"Then that woman is…!"

"Yes. She's the world's first *Peroimo* fan. I don't know if we'll be able to get in touch with her, though."

"As an educator, I'll take responsibility and try asking the class reunion president. If anyone still keeps in touch with her, we should be able to reach her."

Ms. Koyomi smiled softly and took the attendee list from Fuyuko. Now all the dots had been connected. I wondered if the woman who wrote the short story collection knew what had become of *Peroimo*.

Miss Koyomi obtained the woman's contact information between lunch break and the end of school. Apparently, the class reunion president was still in contact with her. Everything was starting to fall into place rapidly, as if all the time we'd spent struggling with the mystery hadn't happened at all.

"Whether you call her or not is up to you." In the nurse's office, Ms. Koyomi handed us a piece of paper with a phone number written on it and left the next steps to us.

Ordinarily, I would be the one who would decide what we did.

"Haruru, you can decide."

Haruru was the one who led us to solve the mystery and appreciated *Peroimo* the most. Since I wasn't an otaku myself, I didn't know if I should be the one reaching out.

But a fellow otaku would be different. Even if they were different ages, they would be two people who enjoyed the same thing. They'd be able to understand each other.

"Of course we're calling!"

Haruru dialed the number rapidly, and the call connected. We held our breath while it rang several times.

And then came the moment when the old-school fan and new fan were connected.

"Hello? Who is this?" said a woman on the other end, and Haruru jumped right to it.

"Um! My name is Haruru Agarie! I'm your junior from the high school you went to! I wanted to talk to you about the CD you put into the time capsule…about the *Peroimo* short story collection!"

From then on, it was Haruru's turn to tell her that the series she once loved had been made into an anime and that a character from her fan fiction had appeared in the main story. That she loved *Peroimo*, too.

The woman who was her senior quietly listened to the passionate speech of her cute junior otaku, and then—

"I see… It's really become something amazing. I had no idea."

"It has! It's become an amazing work, hasn't it? That's why I'm asking if you'd like to write a fan letter to Mr. Mito together with me sometime?"

"Oh, no thank you."

"…Huh?"

Haruru sounded deflated at her otaku senior's icy words.

And then the woman confronted her with reality: *"I'm not into those things anymore, and I'm a normal housewife now. That was just a dark chapter in my past, so please smash the CD and throw it away. Well then, if you'll excuse me."*

With those words…the phone call with the normal housewife came to an end. Haruru, the otaku left behind in a world of fantasy, was dumbfounded.

"I get it…so she graduated in two senses of the word."

"Oh my, Miss Natsunagi. You summed that up well."

Ms. Koyomi and I muttered to each other in the awkward silence that ensued.

Then Haruru dropped to her knees, clutching her head in anguish.

"Ughh! No way…no way! Just because she became a housewife, she can't be an otaku anymore?! That's ridiculous! Stupid…! Grr, grrrr…!"

Making noises that were kind of like groans (but not really), she finally started rolling around on the floor.

"Haruru. Your panties are completely exposed. It's vulgar. And dangerous in multiple ways."

"I don't care about panties! I don't need them! I'm so frustrated, I can't stand it! How could she throw away all that passion after following such an amazing series in real time… Waaaah!"

She finally started to cry. You should probably care about panties, though, right?

We didn't really understand, but maybe it was a jealousy or twisted sense of envy unique to otaku.

"Nagisa, we can't help her now. Without the same level of passion, all the comfort and sympathy in the world would be fake. Let's let her cry for a while. We got to see her sexy panties, so it was a bargain."

"You're right. I'll go buy some cocoa. The kind in the paper carton that Haruru likes."

"Please. We're going to have a chaotic time after school at this rate."

"Ha-ha. Yeah. Whenever something bad happens in Haruru's favorite anime or manga, she restrains us and babbles about it for ages."

Well, I didn't hate that, either.

I went out into the hallway and started toward the nearby vending machine. The boy hadn't gotten involved in this incident, either, huh…

Maybe he only got involved in cases that he could keep an eye on.

"But…I swear I'll find him."

The mystery left behind in the time capsule had been solved by one otaku girl.

Anyone could love something, but how long they could continue to love it…that was the part that took talent, maybe.

The more intensely the flames of passion burned, the greater the contrast when they eventually died out. And even if they did burn out, we could turn the ashes into nourishment for our hearts again.

People could recover as many times as it took. They could bring back *those days* once more.

That was what I thought about while I walked through the empty school building, holding my cocoa. Most of the students had already gone home.

"I have to find the answer soon, for the passion in *this* heart." I placed my hand over my still-beating heart and whispered it, as if making a vow.

Beginning tomorrow, I would start rifling through newspaper and internet records again, then—

"Eeeeeeeeek!"

My heart jumped at the scream that had come out of nowhere. Surprised that I'd been caught off guard, I searched for the source of the voice.

"Upstairs…the top of these stairs!"

I skipped steps, dashing up them as fast as I could. What had happened? That was definitely a girl's voice.

Had she screamed while she was fooling around with her friends? Did she see a bug she didn't like?

Or maybe she saw a ghost leaving the library?

That was fine. If any of those were the case, today would end peacefully.

But that scream—it was definitely a tone that would change our youth forever.

"What the…?"

A girl was lying there, at the entrance to the girls' bathroom at the top of the stairs.

Her pale, lovely arms in the sleeves of her sailor uniform…

…were bleeding a red so bright, it didn't seem real.

Chapter 4

Our Way Home

"This makes three days in a row. It's becoming a huge deal."

It was morning in the classroom. Normally, we would be having first period, but instead, a special school assembly was taking place. Classes had been canceled for the day, and you could feel it in the air.

I nodded at Fuyuko's words and thought back to three days ago.

"The first-year girl I found was bleeding, too."

I'd run up the stairs and found a girl collapsed in front of the girls' bathroom, unconscious and bleeding from her upper arm. I'd called for Ms. Koyomi right away, but her injuries weren't serious or life-threatening. However…

"It's kinda scary that other students have been getting hurt the same way for three days straight."

Haruru was right. Starting that day, a series of bloody incidents had taken place at our school. All three victims suffered the exact same injury: bleeding from their shoulders or upper arms. The only saving grace was that they hadn't suffered any further violence or theft.

"According to the rumors, all three victims were attacked from behind. They were strangled, and their arms were injured while they were still out of it."

"Hey, Fuyuko, something like that would take a lot of strength and skill, right? I've heard that taking out your opponent with a choke hold is common in judo or self-defense drills."

"Yeah. I'm pretty knowledgeable about this stuff, so I get it—but even an adult man would struggle to actually do it, let alone a high school girl. It's definitely not something delicate maidens like us could pull off."

One wrong move, and the victims could have easily been killed.

Fuyuko's soft murmur sent more chills down my spine.

If I'd arrived just a little earlier, the same thing might have happened to me.

"In your case, you heard a scream, right? Meaning the victim was surprised by someone suddenly appearing, and the crime occurred in the small window before you arrived. The culprit must be pretty skilled."

"Ha, ha-ha… All I can say is I was lucky."

"That's right! Nagi, you always wander off when we leave you alone, so I'm kinda worried!"

"You don't need to worry about that, Haruru. I won't be acting alone, at least until the culprit's caught. I won't stay late after school, either."

Except for make-up classes, club activities and the like had been suspended after school. Students taking make-up classes were required to walk with a teacher or friend while on school grounds.

"I hope the police catch the culprit soon. If I keep going home straight after school, I'll become the ace of the go-home club for real… Oh, right!"

Haruru stopped and leaned over her desk like she'd just had an idea.

"Since we're all here today, why don't the three of us have a sleepover?"

"'S-sleepover'?" I yelped at the unexpected suggestion.

"Now that you mention it, we've never had a sleepover before."

"Right?! Like Haruru said, we're business friends. We have to make a decisive pitch here."

"To who?! We're not 'business friends'!"

Classmates who were only in it for personal gain—those types seriously gave me the ick.

"Yeah! Nagi and I really are friends. But Miss Shirahama has defaulted on her friend payments for the month, so there's a little distance between us."

"Ha-ha-ha… I told you not to mention that in front of Nagisa. I'll go to an ATM later and withdraw eighty thousand yen, so can you just wait?"

“If a high school girl earned and paid that much every month, she’d be paying income tax with a little more effort! Why eighty thousand, though?”

“Lucky number eight. It means that we’ll always be friends. Best friends forever, Nagi!”

“You guys have a relationship so twisted, it makes being a sugar baby pale in comparison. Actually, it’s more like blackmail than sugar.”

As usual, I cut the stupid chitchat short and got back on topic. (Although, was Fuyuko actually checking her bank balance on her phone? Probably just my imagination!) “I’m fine with a sleepover, but whose house are we having it at?”

“I live with my grandparents, but it’s fine! They go to sleep at eight PM and wake up at four AM, so as long as we’re quiet, there’s no problem!”

“The Agarie family is the ultimate in ‘early to bed, early to rise’… What about you, Fuyuko?”

“I live with a really busy aunt, so I think the house will be free. The only thing is she comes back at random times, so it might get awkward.”

“I see. Then we can use my place. But it’s basically a studio.”

There was a bed and a sofa, so a sleepover with the three of us should still be fine.

Their eyes sparkled like I’d never seen before.

“Nagisa’s place! I’ve always wanted to go! I definitely wanna go!”

“Me too, me too! I’m sure it smells great! She probably has diffusers!!”

“For sure! I wanna smell her pillows!”

“Then I get dibs on her room socks!”

“Anyone who smells anything in my room without permission gets wasabi shoved up their nose. Anyone who goes through my stuff without permission gets their fingernails peeled off. Anyone who touches my person gets thrown out on the spot. Can we follow those rules?”

The two of them cheerfully raised their hands with a “Yes,

ma'am!" when I laid down the law. They probably had no intention of listening… I was a little worried, but whatever. My friends would never do anything I truly disliked.

"Then go home for now and come to my place in the evening when you're ready."

"Got it! I'll bring some food and other stuff, too. Haruru, can you bring a boatload of rubber bands?"

"Roger that! And don't forget the big watermelon, Fuyu!"

"Hey, you guys, you're not planning to wrap a lot of rubber bands around a watermelon and make it explode for a video, right? You're kidding, right? Right?"

We headed for the shoe cubbies after planning everything out. On the way, we ran into Ms. Koyomi, who looked more exhausted than usual.

"Oh, it's the Autumnless Trio. I see you're getting along as well as ever."

"And you're the only one who uses that lame nickname," I said. "Are you still working?"

"I am, Miss Natsunagi. Because of the incident, teachers are required to regularly patrol school grounds. Today's my turn, so I hope nothing unusual happens."

"Oh, so that's why you look so depressed…"

"Koyo! More booze isn't the answer when you hate your job!"

"She's right, Ms. Koyomi. If you don't mind, I'll listen to you and give you a hug."

Ms. Koyomi finally smiled after Haru and Fuyuko tried to cheer her up.

"Thank you. When the restrictions on after-school activities are lifted, feel free to visit the nurse's office anytime. Well then, good-bye."

I felt a bit regretful just going home as we watched Ms. Koyomi wave good-bye and leave. Even though there were still some *mysteries* left in this *incident*, it seemed I wasn't needed.

Once the police were involved, any proxy detective or high school girl who was poking around would just be getting in their way. I forced myself to accept it and let go of any lingering regrets. I'd just

indulge in my life as a high school girl a little more than usual today.

"Hey, Fuyuko, Haruru, what do you think high school girls eat at sleepovers?"

It was evening, and Fuyuko and Haruru had come over to my place.

This was nice. Really nice. Definitely fun. The best.

But there was a problem unfolding in front of me.

"Takoyaki parties or pizza parties are popular. Also, just lazing around in your pajamas eating snacks."

"I've done both of those! And don't forget bringing a popcorn maker and eating freshly popped popcorn with soda while watching a movie!"

"Uh-huh, that sounds right. A girls' night has that sparkly vibe, right? Then why are we making *yakisoba* and yakitori on a hot plate?!"

The aroma diffuser in my room was dead. The hot plate Fuyuko had brought sat on my stylish, glass-topped table. The savory smell of the sauce had taken over my apartment, along with the sizzling sound of grilling thick noodles and skewered chicken.

"A street stall? Is my room a street stall now?! Are you having a festival?!"

"Ha-ha. Nagisa, your room isn't a street stall. I think someone's having a little too much fun."

"Yeah! How about I poke one of your eyes out with these skewers? I'll take one and do it now!"

"Nagi, you're scaring me… You're usually so kind, so why are you mad? *Sniff.*"

"Because I'm pissed! *I'm* the one who wants to cry here! *Sigh…* Well, whatever."

I gave up and put the kitchen exhaust fan on full blast while opening the balcony window. At least it wasn't fried food.

"It'll be fine. Right, Haruru?"

"Sure will be! Not only did we bring juice, snacks, *yakisoba*, and

yakitori, but we also brought air fresheners! Isn't that a big brain move?"

"I feel like there were better ways you could have been considerate? *Sigh…* I'm not mad, so it's fine. Well, I am mad, but I've given up. All the yelling made me hungry."

I sat on the sofa and was presented with a mountain of *yakisoba* and soda. The two idiots looked like they were having so much fun. I guess that's why I always forgave them. Maybe I was sappy and stupid, too.

I took up my chopsticks and picked up a bite of the *yakisoba* Fuyuko was holding out with both hands. Then I chugged the soda Haruru had poured with my free hand.

"Mmm… It's too good," I said. "Now stop acting like you're my minions and eat up. It won't be as good if it gets cold. Heh-heh."

The two of them exchanged looks and nodded happily.

"Nagisa! The yakitori's really good, too, so eat all you want!"

"Nagi! Tell me if you're thirsty. I'll pour you a refill!"

Good grief… We were such idiots. The three of us were ridiculously dumb. Probably anything would have tasted amazing if we were eating it together. That's how much fun we were having.

That's how it is, not being alone anymore.

We ate and had a great time playing some games on the TV that Haruru had brought. I didn't have any at my place—in fact, I'd never played a video game before in my life—so it was really new and interesting.

I thought I might have played on a handheld in the hospital when I was little, but most of my old memories were so vague that it might have been a dream.

Right. Compared to my life back then, I was living a dream every day.

What should I do? I'm so happy.

I'd gotten to experience so many normal things, and if I wasn't careful, I was going to cry.

"Well, now that we're done playing games…"

As the night wore on, Fuyuko suddenly clapped her hands and took charge of the sleepover.

"Should we finish up with a thrilling bath that makes your heart race…? Heh-heh-heh."

"Oh, no way. I'm fine with Haruru, but I'm instinctively rejecting you, sorry."

"Wh-why?! That's a sleepover classic! Girls taking a bath together, frolicking, feeling up each other's boobs and comparing them! That was my dream!"

"Then you can pay for that kind of experience at the establishment of your choice when you grow up. Haruru, want to get in together?"

"Yes! I can't wait to take a bath with you, Nagi! I wanna use a bath bomb that has a toy inside!"

A purehearted *gyaru* and an evil prince—the choice of who to bathe with was easy.

The rejected prince sniffled quietly.

"*…Sniff.* The two of you are always leaving me out like this, even though I love you both and would give my life for you. It's such a cruel, thankless role… *Sob, sob.*"

Fuyuko covered her face with both hands and let out a sob. Huh? Was she really crying?

"Nagisa shyly undressing and getting angry when I grope her breasts while we're together in the bath…my heart fluttering when I see her moist profile… None of my dreams are going to come true!"

"U-uh? Fuyuko? Those super-creepy dreams aside… Don't cry like that. If you promise not to do anything, I-I'll take a bath with you!"

"Hot damn! Thank you! Then let's get into that bathroom right away! Hell yeah!"

"You faker! You tricked me into committing! That radiant smile is the worst!"

"Nagi. Should I read the room and leave you two alone?"

"Why?! If you're reading the room, you should be protecting me!"

In the end, the three of us took a bath together. All sorts of things happened when we took off our clothes, washed our bodies, and soaked in the tub…but I'll skip all that. A lot of amazing things

happened to me, but whatever anyone says, what happened in the bathroom is a secret.

After that, the night passed in the blink of an eye. We had a pajama-reveal event after our bath, and to my delight, Haruru gave me a brand-new pair of pajamas as a present—fluffy loungewear with shorts that were super easy to move in.

By the way, Haruru was wearing a cat *kigurumi* as pajamas. Fuyuko had plain middle school track pants and a T-shirt. We were all super on-brand, which was fun.

Even though I had a sofa and a bed, we wound up chatting on the futon I laid out on the floor and fell asleep before we knew it.

"…Hm? Oh, right."

When I woke up in the middle of the night, I was lying in bed next to Haruru for some reason. No one was on the futon where we'd all just been. I didn't see Fuyuko on the sofa next to the bed, either.

Suddenly, I noticed that the curtains of the window leading to the balcony were slightly open. I slowly slipped out of bed so as not to wake Haruru and pulled them back.

"What are you doing out here, Fuyuko?"

When I opened the window, I saw Fuyuko sitting on a small chair on the balcony.

"Oh, Nagisa. Did I wake you up?"

"No. I'm a light sleeper, so I wake up in the middle of the night sometimes. Can I sit with you?"

It was a little chilly on the balcony but not unbearably so. It wouldn't be long before the cold weather was over. I really liked this time of year, when I could feel the gentle breeze of summer on the horizon.

"I tend to sleep in short cycles. At most, I'll wake up after about three hours."

"Really? Not sleeping properly is horrible for your skin. It would be a shame to waste that pretty face of yours, Fuyuko."

"Ha-ha. I trained myself to do it in middle school, and it became a habit. I was a pretty disappointing kid back then. But…that wasn't the only reason I woke up."

"What happened when you were sleeping?"

"I had a dream," Fuyuko answered simply, looking at the sky. I did the same. It wasn't the right season for the stars to be beautiful yet, but I could see two stars, side-by-side.

"When I was sleeping with my face buried in your pillowy breasts —yikes, that's a scary face. I didn't mean to! I just happened to fall asleep there!"

"Hmm… And?"

"I was talking with someone in my dream, listening to the soothing sound of their heartbeat. She was a little bossy but stunningly beautiful, and she didn't listen to a word I said."

I placed my hand over my chest as I listened to Fuyuko's story. *Was it you? Were you the one talking to my friend in her dream?*

"She was mostly talking at me, but in the end, I was nodding and agreeing. When I woke up, I'd forgotten everything…but it's been so long since I've dreamed that I was surprised."

"So that's why you were getting some air on the balcony."

"That's right. Then I carried the two of you to the bed— Hey. Um…Nagisa."

"Hm? What? It's not like you to be shy."

"Can I…hold your hand?"

I thought she was joking or harassing me like usual, but I could see in the moonlight that Fuyuko's profile was a deep red. I could tell it wasn't a joke when I saw that her eyes were slightly damp.

"…Okay. This is the first time I've seen you so serious."

"Really? I think I've always been honest with you and Haruru."

Fuyuko's long, pale fingers gripped my hand. They were a little warm. But her fingers and palm felt a bit rough—not like you'd expect from a girl. I'm sure it was proof of the life Fuyuko had carved out for herself before she met me, a side of her I didn't know.

"Ah, wait…Fuyuko, aren't you moving a little fast?"

"Why? Don't you like me? I know I like you, so I want to stay like

this."

"You're making it hard to say no…"

Bit by bit, our fingers entwined like lovers' would.

"Ha-ha. I always thought I'd do this sort of thing with a boy… Ah!"

Before I knew it, Fuyuko had turned to face me. She wrapped her free arm around my back…and gently pulled me close.

"Fuyuko…? Was your dream that scary?"

"Nagisa, my instincts are very sharp, just like Haruru's palate. The things I have a hunch about tend to come true. Of course, I'm wrong sometimes."

Her fingers linked with mine, and the arm around me tightened a little.

"I think in the future…you'll take a different path than us. A day will come when you'll have to do something only you can do, that you'll only be able to handle *because* you're you. That's how I feel."

"…Do you mean after we graduate? Like…career paths?"

"No, something much bigger than that. Ever since I met you, Nagisa Natsunagi, I've had this feeling about you. And it's only grown stronger by the day."

Thump, thump. The rhythm of my heart had quickened.

"But, Nagisa…even if you become *someone*, I'll be your friend. I'd risk my life for you, even if it meant going up against the whole world's sense of good and evil."

I thought she was just my friend who always teased me. But to hear those words from her, they sounded almost like a confession… I felt happiness, joy, and just a little bit of confusion and loneliness.

"What are you talking about? You and Haruru will always be precious friends to me. Even if it means going up against the whole world, I'll be on your side, too!"

If someone were to see us now, they'd probably laugh at us, a couple of immature high school girls getting carried away. But I didn't care what anyone thought of me or what anyone said, because we truly cared about each other.

"Thank you, Nagisa. Well…can I kiss you?"

"Huh?! N-no! No, no! I don't know what you mean! We're both

girls!”

“You’re so old-fashioned. Did you think I was saying I liked you for character development?”

“Yeah, I actually totally did.”

“Wow, that hurts. But these are my true feelings. So…please? I want you to close your eyes.”

Huh? No way? Is she really going to kiss me? Her right hand was holding mine, and before I knew it, it was around my shoulder. Was my first kiss going to be with Fuyuko?

Fuyuko was my precious friend, and I guess I didn’t really mind it… Whoa, her eyelashes were long. Her skin was flawless. Her face was too beautiful!

“…D-don’t put your face so close to mine, Fuyuko…”

“Don’t tease me, Nagisa. What’s the point of getting embarrassed over a simple kiss?”

“Y-you can’t kiss me, because I haven’t brushed my teeth! Nn, that tickles…!”





“It’s fine. I’ll love you no matter how dirty you are. So surrender yourself to me already… Ah!”

Then Fuyuko quickly pulled away from me, as if she’d noticed something. When I followed her gaze behind us…Haruru was pointing her phone camera at us from inside my room, breathing heavily and motioning for us to continue.

“Hurry up! It’s my chance to see Nagi being kissed! Hurry and kiss her! Waffle, waffle!”

When I saw my other friend’s face and heard her ridiculous commentary, I suddenly lost interest. That had been dangerous. A little more and we really would have…

“Hey, Fuyuko.”

“Yes, what? Do you want me to keep going? Ha-ha.”

“Stay there for a while and cool off.”

I quickly went into my room, locked the window, and closed the curtain. I heard some noise outside for a while, but by the time Haruru and I were ready, it was quiet.

“Are you sure, Nagi? It’s cold out today.”

“I said I’d let her in after about thirty minutes. By the way, what does ‘waffle, waffle’ mean?”

“It’s a spell we ancient otaku use to make people get it on!”

“I see. Well, let’s brush our teeth and get ready for bed, okay?”

After that, I let Fuyuko back in thirty minutes later, like I’d promised. I took the sofa, Haruru took the bed, and Fuyuko took the futon on the floor. Then we woke up in the morning, washed our faces together, and ate breakfast.

To have a sleepover when the next day was a normal school day… We really were the best of friends. I was sure that from now on, we’d keep spending our youth together—so I just wanted this creepy incident to be over.

“No way…”

When we got to school, our homeroom teacher, Ms. Hachisu, told us something unbelievable.

"There was another victim yesterday, and all students who don't have make-up lessons today are to go home immediately following afternoon classes. The police will be coming, and the school will be locked down. Make sure you leave, okay?"

Despite her sweet voice, the facts she presented us with were shocking.

Homeroom ended, and then our other classes were over in the blink of an eye.

My heart was racing. Why was that?

I had a feeling that something really bad was going to happen. My heart was pounding more and more, like I'd run as fast as I could, but my breathing was fine, so maybe I was imagining it.

What are you trying to tell me? Say it.

What do you *want me to do?*

"…Nagisa!"

"Huh? F-Fuyuko?"

My thoughts were interrupted by my friend's usual smiling face.

"What's wrong, Space Case? It's time to go home—but just for the Summer-Winter combo. Natsu and Fuyu."

Still smiling, Fuyuko pointed at Haruru, who was holding her textbooks and notes with a grim look.

"I have a pile of make-up lessons until evening…"

"Huh? Haruru, your grades aren't that bad, right? So why?"

"That's right! It's because all my work was incomplete! After English, I'll be in Ms. Hachisu's math hell! It'll be the last train by the time I go home…"

"No, you don't even do incomplete work. You're always forgetting to turn in your homework and notes…"

"On the other hand, even an underachiever like me can avoid make-up classes as long as I submit my notes—I don't know if that makes our school strict or lenient."

Incidentally, even if a student didn't have make-up lessons, they'd still have to retake a test if they failed it. Fuyuko, for example, had to retake all her second-year finals, including Home Economics.

"Fuyu, you're a third-year now, so let's try and steer clear of retaking your midterms, okay?"

"Ha-ha. It sounds like the underachiever who has to take make-up classes is trying to say something, but I can't hear her!"

"I'll brain you with the corner of my textbook. Well, that's how it is, so you two can go home ahead of me. Actually, you *have* to go home."

Like they'd said in homeroom, students who didn't have make-up classes had to leave. The library, the nurse's office, and everything were supposed to be locked down.

"We do. Well, see you tomorrow, Haruru."

"Yeah! Let's talk on the phone when I get home!"

"I'm done butting in, okay? I'll just join the group call on my own."

Afterward, Fuyuko and I went to a café in front of the station. For some reason, I didn't feel like going home yet.

"You've been spaced out the whole day, Nagisa," Fuyuko said from where she sat, opposite from me on the patio, toying with her straw.

"R-really? I think I've been normal."

"No, you haven't. If you were acting normally, you'd be quipping at me more. Lunch was horrible. I was joking around and harassing you, and you barely reacted. I wondered if you were feeling sick."

"You can tell how I'm feeling by how often I quip at you?"

"Of course. We're your best friends."

It was truly devious of her to smile and bring up Haruru, who wasn't even there.

There was no real need to keep everything to myself. Maybe I'd try talking about it…

"…My heart's been pounding since this morning because of what's been happening. I can't stop thinking about it once I start. My emotions have been all over the place."

"The people getting hurt at the school? You're a sweet girl, so I understand why you'd be shocked."

"That's not it."

I was shocked, but that wasn't the only reason for my pounding heart. I was furious at whoever was trying to ruin our youth.

"I want to know who's behind this and why. I'm a proxy detective, aren't I? So…I want to find the answer to this mystery!"

I didn't mind if someone laughed at me for showing kindness. If someone was being hurt just living their life, I wanted to help them—especially if we went to the same school!

Just like with Kokoa and Yomiko, I wanted to save the people I could reach.

"I don't get the point of sticking your neck out recklessly to follow your feelings. In time, they'll turn into poison and eat away at you."

Fuyuko's cool words calmed me just a bit.

My feelings—my fury—probably couldn't be stopped by anyone.

"It's fine. If I get hurt because of my own actions, then so be it."

"…Ah, fine!" Fuyuko stood up and began shouting at me. "You're really stupid! You're too kind and too sweet! And while we're at it, you're too cute! You're too eager to sacrifice yourself, and it's insanely reckless! You're the type who'd throw her life away for the man she loves!"

"Huh? Huh? Huh…?"

"You need someone to hold your hand! It doesn't have to be me; anyone is fine. If you don't have someone you trust to guide you, you're going to screw up royally somewhere!"

Fuyuko managed all that in one breath and offered me her hand.

"I, Fuyuko Shirahama…will stand with the *proxy detective* and guide her. You're not alone, Nagisa. Let's solve this mystery together, the three of us."

I took her hand and asked my precious friend a question.

"In that case, Fuyuko—be my assistant?"

"As you wish—my friend."

After that, we started to organize an overview of the case.

"The first victim was a first-year girl. I was the one who found her, and she had no serious injuries. She was bleeding a small amount from her arm."

"The second to fourth victims were about the same. They were three girls and one boy. There was no specific pattern to their grade levels, but they were all injured in the same way, and the attacks all happened after school."

I thought all over again about how strange an incident it was as I wrote it all down in my notebook.

No other violence had occurred. The culprit's motive was completely unclear.

"…It's kind of creepy how they're so fixated on blood, regardless of gender. Maybe the culprit's a vampire? Just kidding."

A Western monster said to go after human blood. The victims didn't succumb to the vampire's good looks and charms, but they did lose consciousness after being strangled.

"A vampire, huh…"

"Hm? What's wrong, Fuyuko? Is that bugging you?"

"No, it's just—someone told me an urban legend like that before. Well, most of what she says is nonsense anyway, so I'll ignore it."

Hmm. That had piqued my curiosity, but oh well.

"Could there be a meaning to making them bleed? Maybe it's for a religious ritual or something like that."

"Well, they don't need blood, but things like Mr. Cupid are common among adolescent girls. There's quite a few manga and novels like that, but we're talking about a scale too large to do a proper search."

I half-heartedly searched for something similar on my phone, but there were no results that matched.

"Personally, I don't think it has anything to do with the occult. The fact that one of our students is being carefully selected each day suggests that there's a reason for it."

"I agree. But we have no idea at all what that reason could be."

We were silent for a while after that. Before we knew it, the sky above the patio had turned a gloomy gray. Small raindrops fell onto my notebook, and we decided to move seats.

"Whoops."

A light slapping sound came from Fuyuko's direction.

"Fuyuko? What's wrong?

"A real loser tried to kiss me while we were taking shelter from the rain. I'm just going to take this napkin and…"

Fuyuko scrubbed her palm with the napkin and showed me the bug that had been sheltering with us.

A mosquito. It was about the season for them to start coming out in numbers… *Huh?*

"Hey, Fuyuko. There's a reason why mosquitoes suck blood, right?"

"…The survival and prosperity of all mosquitoes? Blood is like nutrition for them."

"Right. And sometimes we humans intentionally take blood, too."

Dots began to appear in my mind, accompanied by images and words.

May. The nurse's office.

Something that Haruru and I couldn't do.

Something that Fuyuko could do but didn't.

Something that most students did on a voluntary basis—and the person who encouraged it.

The dots connected, and I drew a line.

A line that only showed one answer, which was too beautiful to deny, and cruelly colored the mystery.

"It's the blood drive! Don't tell me all the victims…?!"

"Yes. They're probably students who didn't give blood at school. The second and third victims were our classmates, and I know for sure the two of them didn't donate blood."

"I know the fourth boy. He has a fear of needles and faints just looking at one. He's refused to donate blood since his first year."

I didn't know about the first girl, though. Even so, the number of students who didn't donate blood at our school was under 10 percent. The strange common denominator seemed to be connecting the fourth, who had little in common otherwise.

"You mean the culprit is deliberately going after students who haven't donated blood."

That common denominator also applied to us. And to Haruru Agarie, who wasn't here— "Let's go back to school! Haruru's going to be in danger!"

"…Damn. I tried calling her, but no dice. It wouldn't connect. Let's go, Nagisa."

We burst out of the café into the rain and started to run, with the face of the mastermind behind this incident stuck in my mind.

The main gate was wide open when we arrived at school. However, the entrances into the school building, including the main entrance, the visitors' entrance near the office, and the doors of the pathway leading from the building to the gym, were locked down.

"Wh-why… What do we do? We can't get in like this!"

"Let's get in the nurse's office from outside. I have a duplicate key; we can get in with that."

"…Do I want to know how you got that?"

"I sweet-talked the president of the health committee into giving me a duplicate key. I'll give it back to her when I graduate."

"You're really a womanizer… You're gonna get stabbed one day."

But we were able to get into the school, thanks to Fuyuko.

The nurse's office was very quiet. No…the whole school was quiet as a tomb.

"What's going on here? Did all the teachers leave when make-up classes ended? I thought the police were coming to investigate."

"…Nagisa, here."

Ignoring my confusion, Fuyuko beckoned me over. She removed a massive file from the desk drawer that contained certain information.

"The records of all the students' physicals?"

"Including blood donations. And look at these sticky notes."

Following the notes led us to students who hadn't once donated blood during their time at school. There were numerous students besides the four victims, and Fuyuko and I were no exceptions—our files had them, too. So did Haruru's.

"So we've already been marked."

Fuyuko clicked her tongue softly and closed the file. As she started to leave the nurse's office, I called after her.

"Hey, Fuyuko. The fact that this is here…means what I think it does, doesn't it?"

She didn't reply.

"She was able to confirm whether we'd consented to donate blood, and she transferred here at an unusual time. She always encouraged us to donate blood…and was always kind to us."

The school nurse who'd dubbed the three of us Autumnless.

Koyomi Utsugi.

She was the culprit behind this incident.

Fuyuko looked away with a complicated expression. She wanted to deny it. But if she was going to be my assistant, I needed her help.

Apparently, we both thought the same thing.

"Nagisa, that's—"

"That could be considered both correct and incorrect."

We knew that voice and its awkward, ladylike speech.

When we turned to face the entrance to the nurse's office… somehow, Ms. Koyomi was already standing there.

"Ms. Koyomi! Don't tell me you're the…"

"Culprit. If that's what you mean to say, you're incorrect," she replied, walking toward us. "However, if you've deduced that I'm involved in this incident, you're correct."

"Ms. Koyomi, please don't come any closer," Fuyuko said icily, standing in front of me. "If you're our enemy, and you intend to hurt Nagisa and Haruru…then I won't hesitate to destroy you. So please answer us."

"What are you asking me to answer, Miss Shirahama?"

"Whether you're on our side or not. That's all."

Ms. Koyomi had stopped and remained silent for a while. But she was soon smiling her usual gentle smile. "Yes, I'm on your side. I'm sorry for all the confusion."

What a relief. Ms. Koyomi wasn't here to hurt us. I was relieved that my favorite teacher wasn't our enemy, but Fuyuko wasn't convinced.

"…Can you prove it?"

"Heh-heh, that's fair. Think carefully. If I were your enemy, wouldn't I have attacked you two immediately when you entered the nurse's office?"

Ms. Koyomi pointed to the bed reserved for sick students and continued.

"I was right over there, and you didn't notice me. But it might be more accurate to say you couldn't notice me. If your lives had been on the line here…what might have happened?"

Fuyuko finally relaxed after that argument. That said, I couldn't believe she'd been here the whole time when I thought she'd appeared out of nowhere.

"Ms. Koyomi, please. Please…help our friend!"

I bowed my head deeply, despite our current situation.

"Of course. That's my mission and my duty as a teacher. Can I skip the more complicated details for now?"

"Yes. I'll ask you when it's all over."

"You're a clever one, Miss Natsunagi. You're able to make prompt decisions to avoid wasting time, and you have a talent for saving people," Ms. Koyomi said, then took a device out of the pocket of her lab coat and handed it to us. "Even so, to put it as simply as possible, the culprit of this incident has a grudge against me. They're opposed to the organization I belong to. Miss Agarie is just a victim and was abducted by them for a certain reason."

"An organization and someone who opposes it…? Ms. Koyomi, who are you?"

"If I had to say, I'd call myself someone who assists heroes of justice. I promise to tell you everything after we help Miss Agarie."

"…Understood. So where exactly is the culprit and our friend?"

"The school is completely locked down, so they should still be here somewhere. You two search the west side of the school; contact me on this walkie-talkie immediately if you find the culprit. I'll rush over to where you are."

Time was of the essence right now. Fuyuko and I thanked Ms. Koyomi, and we were about to leave the nurse's office…

"Miss Natsunagi, Miss Shirahama."

…but we stopped in our tracks when we heard Ms. Koyomi's apologetic voice.

"I'm so sorry. I'm terribly ashamed to have embroiled children like you in adult matters. I will help Miss Agarie no matter what, so please don't…get in over your heads."

"You don't have to apologize, Ms. Koyomi."

"What? Wh-why is that?"

"Because you're trying to protect our youth. To us, you're a hero yourself, so please don't look so gloomy. Well then, we're off!"

Fuyuko and I rushed into the dark hallway without waiting for a reply.

The school was eerily quiet, with all the lights off except the emergency ones. Even the staff rooms in the office, where someone would usually be, were pitch-black. It was disconcerting, like the school itself had been cut off from the outside world.

"Creepy… Why are we the only ones here? This can't be right."

"Maybe the culprit did something, or Ms. Koyomi did. Watch your step, and let's hurry, Nagisa."

Hurry. I wanted to move forward even just one step, just one second faster, to find that girl. I kept praying that she hadn't suffered any scary or painful experiences. My heart throbbed with pain when I remembered her bright smile.

I would never forgive the person who attacked our friend.

"Hey, Nagisa. If we find the culprit and things get physical, will you let me handle it?" Fuyuko suddenly proposed, running next to me.

"No way. I can't let you handle something so dangerous alone!"

"It's okay. I like to think I'm pretty good at martial arts and defending myself. Besides, if push comes to shove, I have this."

Fuyuko opened her cardigan and showed me something.

I almost made a strange sound without thinking, but I figured it would be fine since it was Fuyuko.

"Right…okay. But don't get in over your head. Calling Ms. Koyomi

should be our priority instead of fighting if we find the culprit.”

“Of course. And there’s one more thing I need to ask you—when I give the signal, I want you to use this.”

I didn’t understand the meaning of the small tool she handed me after saying that, but I put my trust in her anyway.

“Leave it to me. I’ll do my best!”

“Thanks, Nagisa. Now let’s go get our friend!”

We ran and stopped in front of classrooms, over and over again. Having explored almost the entire west side of the school, we headed for the last place to check: a music room in the deepest area of the top floor.

“This is the last place, huh?” Fuyuko said, looking me in the eye as she opened the door to the music room.

Please let her be here. Please, Haruru. Let’s walk home together —

“……?!”

But the person shrouded in the darkness of the music room wasn’t our friend. It was a woman in a pantsuit, wearing a uniquely shaped gas mask.

An enemy.

I had a gut feeling that they were the culprit who stole our youth, and I tried to send a voice message on the walkie-talkie, but—

“Ahh…!”

—a short knife was thrust into the walkie-talkie I was holding. I could instantly tell it was broken and let go of it. Apparently, the edge of the blade didn’t pierce my palm, but the web of my hand had a small cut, and a sharp pain shot through me.

“Nagisa, are you okay?!”

Fuyuko rushed to pull out a handkerchief and wrapped it around my wound to protect it.

This amount of pain and blood was nothing. More importantly…

“I’ve got a small cut, but I’m fine. But the walkie-talkie isn’t…!”

…now we couldn’t call Ms. Koyomi.

The culprit who'd thrown the knife produced a new one from somewhere—I didn't know where—and twirled it in their hand while examining us.

"If it isn't Miss Natsunagi and Miss Shirahama!"

Their voice was muffled, but I recognized it as it echoed from inside the mask.

No, everyone in our grade would have known the math teacher with the saccharine voice and flirtatious tone.

"I can't believe you were the culprit, Ms. Hachisu."

When I said her name, the woman—Ms. Hachisu—removed her mask. Her face looked the same as usual, but she still had an eerie vibe around her.

"Oh my. You've found me out… Well, I guess there's no need for that ridiculous tone now. It doesn't matter if a bunch of brats like you know my identity."

All she had changed was her manner of speaking, but the woman in front of us was not the Ms. Hachisu I knew. She was terrifying. My instincts were screaming at me to run.

It was like something deep inside me was warning me that I was no match for her.

"…Why did you target Haruru? Why did my friend have to be kidnapped by someone like you?!"

Even so, my feet didn't waver, and I kept on shouting.

I just wanted a justification. I wouldn't let my youth be destroyed for no reason.

Whether her motivation was a ransom, or a personal grudge, or anything else—as long as there was something, I'd be able to accept it.

"Haruru Agarie has precious blood flowing through her veins."

"What do you…mean?"

"What the hell? You're always together with that infuriating woman in the nurse's office, and she hasn't told you anything? I was worried you were working for her, but…I guess I was overestimating you."

"I—I don't know what you're talking about! Explain it to us!"

Hachisu gave a small sigh and nodded. "Fine. Haruru has a

special type of blood called ‘return-blood.’ It causes abnormal development of the five senses and sometimes even affects physical abilities. It has the potential to transform the very essence of humans.”

“Why would Haruru have that…?”

“Her blood transfusion, Nagisa.”

Fuyuko gave me the extremely simple answer.

“Oh…! Haruru had a blood transfusion when she was young,” I said.

“Yes. That’s probably when it got into her body.”

Hachisu smiled slightly at our deduction. “Correct. That girl received something that was intended for our organization by mistake, so we took it back. That’s all.”

“That’s the only…reason?”

“Yes. Our only goal was the blood. It was challenging to infiltrate the school as a teacher and get around that woman to sneak a peek at the blood donation list, but she’s clearly lost her edge. She couldn’t even see through my disguise. Heh-heh.”

Laughing at Ms. Koyomi, Hachisu continued her monologue.

“However, the only way to tell if any power remains in the return-blood is to extract it. I was prepared to do so by force, but it was truly fortunate that it only took four people.”

Hachisu had planned to hurt all the students who hadn’t donated blood if necessary.

The sheer selfishness of it only strengthened the disgust in my heart.

“I was locked inside the school, but I’ve already transported the return-blood. I was going to kill that woman last and get out of here, but…I guess I could just kill you all, too.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Don’t you understand? If I cut off your heads and leave them on display, I’ll at least be able to buy myself some time. While everyone is freaking out, I’ll leave tow—”

“No, you won’t! Who cares what happens to horrible people like you?!”

Just because her blood was a little different than everyone else’s

—it had only turned out that way because of a small, cruel twist of fate. Haruru had received that blood to stay alive; taking it for such a selfish reason was just— "Unforgiveable."

Terrifying so many people… Bleeding students and making them suffer… And most importantly, robbing us of our youth.

"I'll never forgive you for any of it!"

My heart was ablaze—no. It wasn't just my heart. It felt like a flame was burning within me.

My thoughts, my heart—everything was kindling, feeding this emotion.

"I can't hold it back anymore."

My passion intensified.

Change the reality in front of you.

My heart was getting hotter and hotter, as if it were shouting those words.

Just I was about to step forward in this fit of passion…

"Huh?"

…I didn't even know what had happened. The next moment, my whole body had been slammed to the floor of the music room.

"Nagisa, what's wrong?!"

I heard Fuyuko's voice through a haze as she lifted me up. It wasn't just that. Her face, her scent—it was like all my senses had a filter over them.

It was like my body and mind were floating apart, cleanly separated.

"What is this…?"

"A fast-acting neurotoxin," Hachisu replied in a sinister voice. "All my knives are coated with a special poison. It's a deadly toxin that rapidly causes unconsciousness if it penetrates your skin. A slight tear on the thin skin of your hand, and you'll lose control of your body and mind for a while."

"…You're sick, doing that to a high school girl," Fuyuko spat in rage, but Hachisu just snorted.

"This isn't a place for fun lessons anymore. Your struggles are life and death now. Plus, I love torturing the weak, especially if they're conscious but unable to move."

Her mouth contorted into a smile of pure malice, and she turned toward me.

"I'm going to kill you slowly."

I hate this. I hate this. I hate this.

I hated that I couldn't do anything. I was just a weakling here.

But my body refused to move. If anything, my consciousness was growing fainter and fainter.

No, no.

I can't just sleep here like this.

"Nagisa, I want you to leave things here to me now."

Her kind, strong voice was a lifeline to my fading consciousness.

Fuyuko. My precious friend who supported me. But that was exactly why…

"No… Fuyuko. I can't leave you alone to deal with her."

"It's okay. I can't forgive her, either. That's why I think I'll cut loose for the first time in a while."

"'Cut loose'…?"

"It's the side of me I don't really want you to see—the one that's tainted."

Fuyuko placed me against the wall and put her uniform sweater over my knees. Her warmth, her scent that I loved, brought a wave of relief over me.

"Hey, Nagisa. Can I ask you just one thing?"

She swept back her hair and glared at the enemy in front of her. She really did look handsome, like a prince—I wanted to say so, but I could barely nod.

"Please order me to crush this little rat. If the one I love tells me to, I know I'll be at least ten times as strong!"

There was no way my support or words could actually make her stronger—that's what some adults might say.

But I believed we'd be able to do it.

Why? I didn't know the reason. But my heart screamed *Go!*

My body felt broken from the way I'd hit the floor, but I tried to

pull myself up anyway. I didn't care if I broke for real. I shook my head to escape the numbing pain, even though I felt drowsy. Prepared to be hoarse tomorrow, I mustered the loudest voice I could.

"Fuyuko! Take that woman down! Protect…our youth!!"

As I shouted, the eyes of my reflection in the music room window…

…seemed to flash red for just a moment.

"Thanks, Nagisa. From here on out, this is a job for the assistant, not the proxy detective."

◆◆◆ Fuyuko Shirahama's Battle

It was strange. The order from my beloved Nagisa gave me an amazing feeling—like I was a feather floating through the air or a butterfly flying through flowers. Or even a cloud floating in the sky.

My steps felt light, my movements quick. Maybe I was more of a masochist than I realized?

"Are you done putting her to sleep?"

A grating voice interrupted my reverie.

Ugh, how annoying. Like a mosquito buzzing close to my ear on a summer night.

"You think a high school girl like you could kill me? What a joke."

Hachisu readied the poison-coated knife as I got closer. The short blade's edge was kept sharp; if she stabbed me with it, I'd lose a lot of blood.

"I can't win. I can't kill you. If I said that and apologized, would you forgive us?"

"I'll win this fight and kill you regardless. I might have some personal compassion for you, but that won't save you. All lives have equal value when they're taken, even infants or caterpillars."

"I hate that kind of thinking. All lives that can be saved should be

saved equally, right? Well, whatever. I was taught plenty in the past by a woman a lot meaner than you…!”

Using my left foot as a pivot, I kicked Hachisu in the side as hard as I could. My leg was extended, but I felt nothing at the tips of my toes or the top of my foot. Ah, so she backstepped.

“What a ridiculous way to run away from a high school girl! Lame!”

“That’s a cheap taunt. Even a man who had trained his body diligently would be in agony after getting hit by that kick. You have a good core and are trained well, but it’s useless.”

For a brief moment, a fraction of a second, a blink of an eye, I gave her a reprieve. Hachisu didn’t miss that chance. She closed the distance again at inhuman speed and stabbed at my face with the knife in her right hand.

“…!”

I felt a breeze, and the sound of the blade slicing through the air sent a warning alarm to my nerves. My cheek would be torn, leaving the poisoned knife to drive into my bloody mouth—in the worst-case scenario. I desperately tilted my head to get away from the blade.

“I see. You’re young, so your reflexes aren’t bad.”

“Do you really have the time to be praising your enemy?”

The knife slashed past my face. I grabbed hold of the wrist that held it and used all my strength to yank it away.

I broke Hachisu’s stance, slipped past her reach, and sprang a shoulder throw on her.

If I released her mid-throw…she would crash into the wall back-first.

“How naive.”

However, Hachisu forcibly changed her posture in midair and landed against the wall on her feet.

“That’s a move that would scare a cat. Are you even still human?”

“Find out for yourself, if you want to know!”

She pressed against the wall firmly and pushed off, about to lunge at me, but I could see the trajectory she was most likely to take.

Normally, I would have done my best to avoid her, but the words,

the trust Nagisa had given me were propelling me on.

"Guh…ahh……?!"

In an evasive half-step maneuver, I shifted my body sideways and kicked upward. That was all it took to drive my toes into her abdomen.

I felt her flesh squish beneath my foot and heard the cracking of bone. The awful sensations were transmitted to my toes and ears.

"Yeah, you really do feel inhuman."

My indoor shoes were custom-made safety boots with steel toes and insoles. Most people would faint on the spot being kicked by these. Worst-case, they'd die.

"You brat! You brat, don't tell me some stupid kid…made me spit blood!"

Hachisu had lost speed and tumbled to the floor; she got up with ease, but she was clutching her side. Her arrogance and self-assurance had been painted over with pain and rage. She had a toughness that couldn't be explained away by high pain tolerance.

She was definitely on that side.

"Fuyuko Shirahama…don't tell me you're *one of us*?"

"No, didn't I say before? I was taught plenty by a woman meaner than you—a red-haired woman with a big attitude and an ass to match."

"Don't be ridiculous! You're a civilian; you only know the basics! You shouldn't stand a chance against me! Which organization are you from?!"

"She was a civilian. Well, if I had to say, I guess I'm from this school? Also, I'm the first assistant to the world's cutest proxy detective."

"Die!" Hachisu brandished her knife again in a clumsy motion. She advanced and swung, a careless move that led to a wild dance of stabs.

What an idiot. There was no way that was going to hit me, was there? To execute a killing blow, you had to outwit your opponent—draw attention to the first part of the move and hide the end. If your approach to kill your enemy was just slicing off their head—now *that* was basic.

"…I never wanted to remember those days again."

But it was all right. Thanks to them, I was able to protect the people I loved.

"Why aren't my blows landing?! Why don't my techniques work on an amateur when they've killed countless people on *our side*?!"

"Yeah. You probably have more experience than me, but I've got talent."

As I kept evading her in a monotonous rhythm, my thoughts naturally drifted back to my past.

I was kind of a brat in junior high, and I was caught by a red-haired woman after an incident.

"Be happy. I'm going to train you and make you my subordinate."

Those words didn't make me happy at all, and in fact, they marked the start of the worst period of my life. Training and more training. Horrific violence and verbal abuse. I hated it so much. I really did! I resented my talent, and I thought about turning against the whole world.

I'd cursed my fate every day. But it had led me to today, when I could protect Nagisa and Haruru, the people I loved— "It was worth having that woman train me up and be tough as hell about it!"

I decided to put an end to the tedious death match. I read the trajectory of her knife and drove my clenched fist into Hachisu's face.

"Guh…ah……?!" Hachisu flinched at the unexpected counterattack, and her knife stopped.

The first blow had broken her nose. The next one smashed her cheek. The third successive one was a feint. I saw her take a defensive posture, so I decided to deliver another roundhouse kick instead of my fist, landing a devastating blow to her liver through flesh and sinew. But…

"Uhh…guh, ahh……! Damn, damn, damn you……! I can't believe some kid did this to me!"

"I'll give you credit for being tough enough to stay conscious, Ms. Hachisu. I still need to pay you back for bullying me in those make-up math classes. I really hated those workbooks you made."

Our rock-paper-scissors game of offense and defense never

stopped. I'd destroyed Hachisu's defense, and once it was gone, I demolished her as she tried to flee. There was no room for luck in the process. It was a one-sided game built solely on domination through violence.

Hachisu's movements began to falter as she understood who was the winner and who was the loser here.

"Let's end this."

If I had been alone, things never would have turned out like this. I probably would have been at a disadvantage without Nagisa cheering me on. Her voice and words truly had a mysterious power that made me forget the limits of my body.

I made my right hand into a fist again and slowly pulled it back, trying to find a place where I could take down my stubborn opponent in one blow.

"Well, I guess anywhere is fine…since this is my trump card."

I was able to show off my full power because my core was so strong. I held my fist vertically and delivered a right straight, like an arrow shot from a bow. It was a one-hit-kill technique that even *that* woman had praised.

My fist drove into Hachisu's solar plexus, and after letting out a small gasp, she crumpled to the ground.

Neither I nor Nagisa had a scratch on us. It was a perfect victory, with no complaints.

◆◆◆

"Ugh…hm, Fuyuko?"

When I regained consciousness, the face of my beloved friend greeted me.

"How do you feel, my adorable Sleeping Beauty?"

I was a little confused that she looked the same as she had before I fell asleep, but when I saw Hachisu crumpled in a corner of

the music room, I immediately understood.

"You did it…! You did it, Fuyuko!"

She'd won. Fuyuko had won! She'd taken down that woman!

"That's amazing, Fuyuko! You're so cool! You didn't get hurt, did you?" I couldn't help but throw my arms around Fuyuko. I would do anything for her today! Anything that made her happy!

"Ha-ha, I'm fine. How are you feeling, Nagisa? Need me to massage your boobs?"

"There's not really enough to massage."

"There definitely is! Ha-ha. If you can make quips like that, I know you're fine."

When Fuyuko said that, I realized that my body had mostly recovered already. I just felt a little unsteady on my feet. Maybe I'd only absorbed a small amount of poison?

For someone as frail as I'd been, it was incredible that I'd recovered so quickly. Like some unseen person had healed me with mysterious power.

"Yeah, I think I am fine. Thank you, my prince… Just kidding. Heh-heh."

"Pfft. Don't tell me you've finally fallen for me, Nagisa?"

"Yep! I think I could kiss you today!"

"I—I don't know how to handle a blunt reaction from you… I really feel shy."

Fuyuko hid her mouth with her hand and turned her face away. She was legit embarrassed. My prince was being too much of a maiden.

"Besides, it's all thanks to you, Nagisa. I think I was moving better than usual because you were cheering me on."

"Huh? What does that have to do with it? More importantly, we need to call Ms. Koyomi. We need to find out where Haruru went, too— Aah!"

By the time I'd sensed someone's presence behind me, it was already too late. The woman who should have been at the very edge of my field of vision, defeated and unconscious, was gone.

Hachisu was up and restraining me.

"You let your guard down, you brat…! How dare you make a fool

of me! I'll kill you!"

Hachisu put one hand around my neck and pointed her knife at me with the other. Oh, this was no good. At this rate, I was really going to— "Let her go, Hachisu."

I had screwed my eyes shut with fear. When I opened them again, I saw Fuyuko…and she was holding a cocked gun. It was a small handgun like you'd see in movies and manga—an illegal weapon meant for killing.

"Oh my, Shirahama. What a bad girl you are, pointing that at your teacher," Hachisu taunted.

Fuyuko was silent.

"It almost looks real, but there's no smell of gunpowder or iron on it. Someone who couldn't get their hands on a real gun might rob a convenience store with that, but that's it. And you think you're going to kill me with it? How foolish."

"Why don't you find out whether it's real or not?"

"What a dumb brat you are. You can't kill me with a modded air gun. Well? Want to switch places with your friend? But I'm going to pay you back plenty for before."

"I'm not going to take her place."

"Oh? You're going to abandon your friend? Fascinating!"

"I'm not abandoning her. I'm going to hit you with this bullet right between the eyebrows."

"…Then take your best shot before she dies!"

She raised the knife high, ready to stab me in the chest. But I wasn't scared, because Fuyuko was there.

Fuyuko raised her left index finger, the signal to use what she'd had given me earlier.

"Huh…?!"

Boom. An ear-piercing explosion echoed in the room.

That wasn't all. The smell of gunpowder reached my nose, telling me that a bullet had been fired from a gun…but that was an illusion. The explosion and the smell of gunpowder had come from the small firecracker I was holding—the trump card I'd taken out of my skirt pocket.

The only thing that had exited the barrel of Fuyuko's gun was a

small air gun pellet.

"You misjudged *because* you're a pro," Fuyuko muttered, taking advantage of the momentary opening and closing the distance between us. She landed a powerful uppercut to Hachisu's jaw, ending the fight in one blow this time.

"Since you were aware of the gun, you sensed the smell of gunpowder and the explosion. You misjudged the bullet that hit your forehead. Even against ants like us, you didn't let go of your weapon. You're a coward, and that messed up your perception, didn't it, Ms. Hachisu?"

Hachisu fell to the ground, and I was sure she was unconscious this time, but…

"You can still move? …Even I'm cringing."

…unable to stand, Hachisu slowly tried to crawl out of the music room on her belly.

She'd deceived so many people. She'd tried to kill so many people. And she alone was still trying to live. The selfishness and shamelessness of this awful woman, who was guilty of so many crimes— "I just can't forgive you."

Before I knew it, I'd picked up a guitar that had been left against the wall. It was an instrument used by students who had chosen music as their elective. It was the perfect weight for swinging around, although I definitely shouldn't.

But right then, it was the only weapon I had.

"Aieee… S-stop. Don't hit me with that." Hachisu looked up at me with frightened eyes. Her voice was so frail, it was hard to believe she'd just been in a deadly fight.

How, *how* could someone like that have taken away our precious friend?

It was unforgivable. Unforgivable.

A filthy grown-up like you—

"You messed up our precious, irreplaceable youth—and I'm gonna double-kill you!"

I brought the guitar down, and it shattered on impact. Its parts scattered in the air, and the broken strings played a jarring chord.

I hadn't brought it down on Hachisu's head, but slightly to the side of her on the floor.

"That threat was so rock and roll, Nagisa," said Fuyuko. "Take a look at Hachisu."

Out of breath, I flung the remains of the guitar down and looked at the woman lying unconscious on the floor.

"She fainted…"

"People do that when they think they're going to die. Now, thanks to your outburst, we don't know where Haruru is."

"Oh! S-sorry! I should have interrogated her first."

"It's okay. We know she wasn't working alone because she told us herself."

Fuyuko felt around in Hachisu's suit and produced a small phone.

It wasn't locked, and we were quickly able to find evidence that she'd contacted her accomplices.





“She said she’d abducted Haruru a little while ago. It looks like they’re planning to give her to someone else at a rest stop on the highway.”

“Then we need to hurry and contact Ms. Koyomi!”

“Yeah, let’s go— H-huh? The door to the music room is locked?!”

Apparently, Hachisu had never intended to let us leave the room. It might have been a trap, but the door to the music room was tightly sealed. We couldn’t escape through the window, either, since we were on the top floor. *What now…?*

“Are you two all right?!”

To our amazement, the door to the hallway was broken down with tremendous force. It was Ms. Koyomi, who’d been looking for us.

“Ms. Koyomi! Fuyuko and I are fine, but Haruru is…!”

Ms. Koyomi entered the music room and let out a sigh of relief when she saw that Hachisu was unconscious. She secured Hachisu’s wrists with specially designed handcuffs, then smiled gently at us.

“Don’t worry about her; she’s fine. While you two were fighting Hachisu, I made sure to rescue your friend.”

“Huh?! B-but they drove Haruru away…”

“I know. When she was dragged into a car outside the school, a nearby high school boy happened to get involved. Apparently, he wound up helping her.”

“A high school boy…?”

“He left without introducing himself, but thanks to him, Haruru was fine when I found her. She’s safe now. Right?” Ms. Koyomi asked, facing the hallway.

Our precious friend, our spring in the Autumnless Trio, Haruru Agarie, was standing there.

“Haruru!”

Fuyuko and I opened our arms and waited for Haruru to jump into them. But instead of coming into the room, she stood there without moving.

“I’m sorry, guys.”

Why was she apologizing? Why did she look so upset? Why was she about to cry?

“It’s my fault you two got caught up in this. It had nothing to do with you… And it wasn’t even just you two. I caused trouble for the other students, too, and even Ms. Koyomi.”

She looked more heartbroken than I’d ever seen her. Fuyuko and I couldn’t move, either.

“They said my blood was different from normal people’s. Hachisu told me. She said that a freak like me shouldn’t be able to have a normal time in high school. That’s why I can’t be with you two anymo—”

“Don’t act like we’re dumb!”

I shouted at Haruru as she tried to reject us.

“There’s nothing wrong with you! So what if you have blood that’s a little different? We’re not going to stop being friends…just because of that, are we?”

Her cute smile.

Her innocent, mischievous heart that sometimes showed itself.

Her sexy, voluptuous body.

Her charming voice.

The happiness on her face when she talked about her favorite anime and manga.

Her bliss when she enjoyed sweet snacks.

Even if her blood and palate were a little different than most people’s, all those things made her who she was—a normal high school girl named Haruru Agarie!

“That’s why I— That’s why *we* love you, Haruru. We want to stay with you forever. Tomorrow, and the day after, and when we grow up, and when we get old… Always, *always*!”

I wanted to stay friends forever.

Stay friends with me, Haruru. I’ve always wanted to live out a normal high school life, and I want to do it with you.

“Nagisa.” Fuyuko took my hand after I finished shouting. As I felt her warmth, we broke into a run together.

“…Ah!”

We stood there, at the boundary between us and our beloved friend. Then we threw our arms around her and hugged her tightly again and again.

"I love you, Haruru. I'd never be okay without you."

"I love you, too, Haruru. I love you *because* you're you."

As Haruru took in our words, her hands slowly came up to circle around our backs. She hugged us hard enough to hurt, but it was a good pain.

"I…I love you guys, too. I don't want to be away from you. I want to be together forever…!"

I held her with all my strength, putting all my love into it.

Then our *normal* friend started to fill in our future schedule.

"For summer vacation, I want to buy new swimsuits and go to the beach or pool together!"

"Sure. I'll give you the cutest swimsuit as a gift."

"And for the culture festival, I want the three of us to run a maid café with cute costumes."

"Leave it to me. I'll work all night and make us three maid outfits so we can have a trio look."

"On our field trip, I want to sneak out of the hotel at night and talk on the beach by the sea."

"I want to set off fireworks, too, even if it means the teacher catches us and yells at us."

"For Christmas, I want to have a sad girls' takoyaki party."

"If Santa doesn't come, I promise to give you happiness on Christmas Eve."

"For our graduation ceremony, I want to go out to eat together and scribble in each other's photo books."

"Sure. We'll eat *yakiniku* and look back on our youth while wearing our uniforms one last time."

"Are you really going to make all my selfish dreams come true…?" she asked in a shaking voice, her face drenched in tears and snot.

Fuyuko and I answered her with the obvious, "You dummy. Of

course we are. The three of us are going to do everything together."

"Yeah, you're really dumb. We're going to be best friends till the day we die."

Haruru kept crying. "That's so, so unfair. You're being so nice; I'm only going to love you guys more. Nagi, Fuyu…we'll be friends forever…!"

I was crying too, and Fuyuko was sniffling next to me. We showed each other our matching tearstained faces, and we just hugged each other for a while.

But the end had to come, even for a youthful day like today.

"Well, everyone, it's long past time for all of us to go home, so please slip out the window of the nurse's office. I'll tidy up afterward. Heh-heh."

Heeding Ms. Koyomi's words, we walked back through the school building at night, holding hands. Three girls walking in a row might have been a nuisance to other students, but…

…I hoped that, for just this moment, we could get away with it.

Because we were living our best lives as high school girls.

"Hey, how about we go to a diner after this? I'm hungry and want to eat a mountain of fries! And hamburgers! And a parfait to finish with!"

"Nagisa's a big eater for someone so thin."

"Well, I am a proxy detective. I use my brain a lot, so my three great desires are stronger than most people's."

"Whoa?! That means the other two, sleep and se—"

"Shut up, Haruru. To be precise, I'm just a big eater and big sleeper!"

"A diner would be nice, but how about going for karaoke after we eat, just the three of us?"

"Ooh! That would be the best, Fuyu! I want to sing a song I learned the other day, the sapphire one! Do you two know it?"

"Huh? I don't know any sapphire songs."

"It's the number one song on both streaming and download! Isn't that crazy?!"

“Nagisa’s out of touch. She’ll have no friends if she keeps going on like this.”

“I—I will not! Besides, if I do…I—I have you guys.”

“Nagisa, you’re so cute!”

“Nagi’s the cutest!”

“Ah, whatever! Shut up! Hurry up and go home!”

The three of us could enjoy anything and go anywhere.

With the three of us together, even the school building at night was a great place to chat.

I felt like our youth would continue for a long time to come.

Even once we graduate high school and go to university, and then when we become adults—always.

But for just a little longer, I—we—

—wanted to be high school girls!

Interlude

Lies, Smoke, and Adults

◆◆◆ Koyomi Utsugi Tidies Up

After seeing off the three girls, I headed to the front gate of the school.

I'd already reported the incident. The appropriate person should have been handling it, but…yes, it went just as I'd predicted.

"Good work, Detective."

I greeted the woman listlessly smoking next to the unmarked police car parked in front of the gate. When she heard my voice, she crushed her mostly finished cigarette in a portable ashtray.

"How about instead of praising me, you don't create a situation where I'm needed in the first place?"

"Oh, scary. You'll get even more wrinkles around your eyes if you're that angry. Skin starts aging before you're in your thirties, you know."

Sure enough, she angrily pulled a new cigarette from the worn-out carton in her breast pocket, and lit it.

I thought her fist might meet my face if I told her that smoking damages your hair and internal organs, so I kept that one to myself!

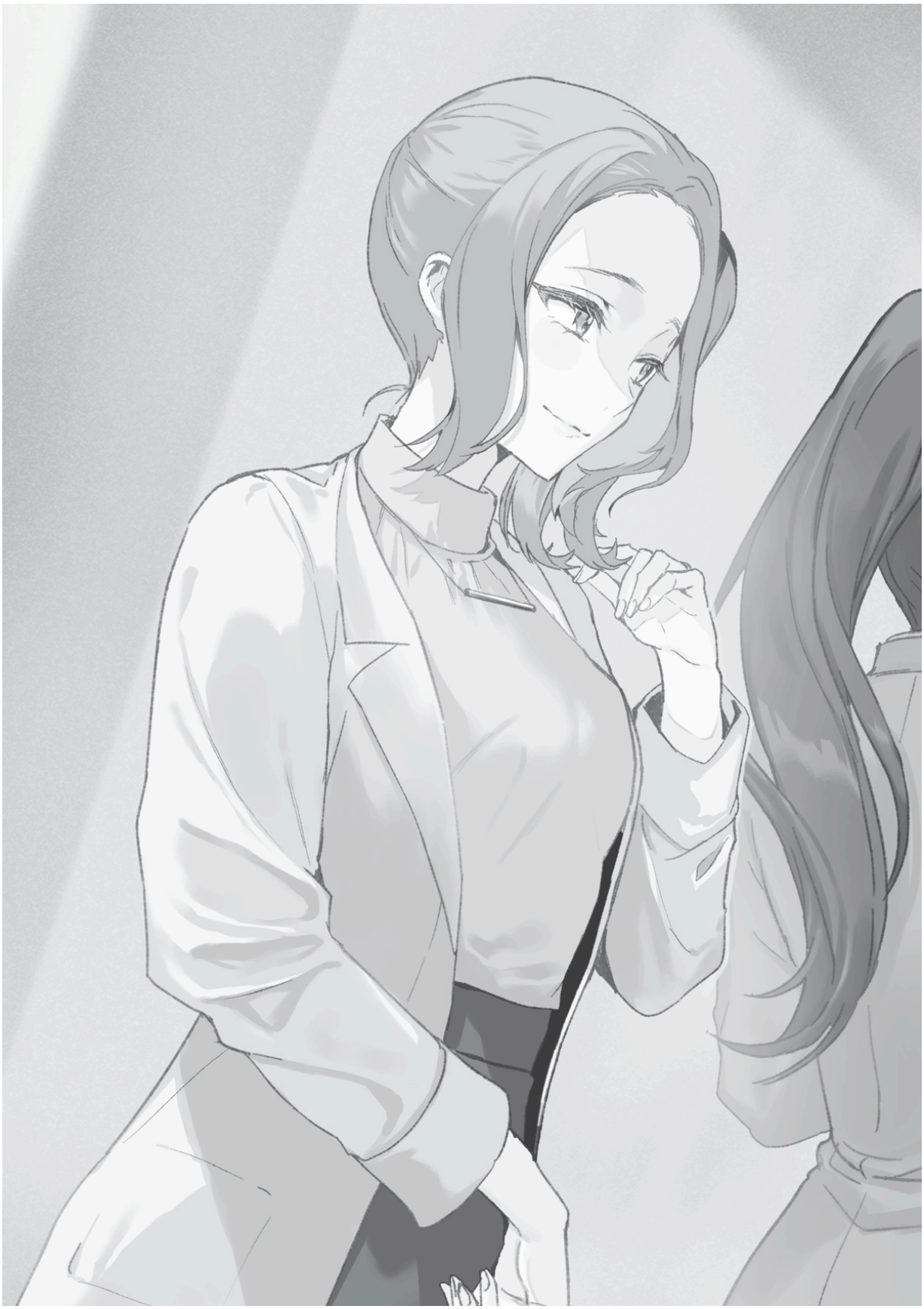
"Utsugi, there's something I need to ask you."

"What is it? Last night, I had two bags of potato chips and vegetable juice for dinner, which was a very healthy, vegetable-rich

meal.”

“Why did you leave the two of them to face Mosquito when you were here? Tell me.”

Mosquito. That was the code name of the organization in charge of the woman who’d changed her name, face, and body to be Ms. Hachisu.





Heh-heh. She truly did have a scary face and voice. She'd completely glossed over my unique dinner, though.

Her frosty gaze and quiet fury could make an infant faint.

"It's simple—I wanted to give our promising young people some experience, is all."

"…'Experience'?"

"Yes. Those girls have many things to learn as they run through the springtime of their lives, after all."

Setbacks and regrets, failures and blunders. Failing to do something you thought you could do, stumbling on familiar paths and falling dramatically.

That's what makes young people into adults.

"Discovering things you didn't know. Observing countless opposite sides of the same coin. That's how people grow up."

"Is that the official policy of the organization you belong to?"

"No. I'm the school nurse as long as I'm on the premises. And as an adult, it's my job to be a role model to the children. You, however…"

"Huh? Spit it out."

"You're being surprisingly overprotective, considering you've ended countless lives of the people on *our side* with your fists or knives. Is Fuyuko Shirahama that important to you?" I asked.

She spat out a short "ha!" and crushed her cigarette. "She was definitely my masterpiece. In just a little over two years of training, she easily surpassed the theoretical limits of what a human could achieve. And her physical prowess was pure talent."

"Was she more talented than the other agents you trained?"

"Yeah. She could hold her own. She was crap at handling a gun, but her close-combat skills were exceptional, almost abnormal. Even I would've been in trouble if I weren't more experienced." Then, childishly, she added, "Unless weapons were involved. Then it was like taking candy from a baby."

"If you regarded her so highly, why did you let her go?"

"I told you, because of her physical prowess. She was a hopeless idiot and a romantic. My subordinates have to be ruthless, cruel, and realistic."

“Meaning she wasn’t?”

“If you were on our side, you would understand. People who take actions they shouldn’t and incorrectly think that all lives should be saved equally are of no use. We don’t need kids who are so sweet and kind you could puke.”

“Indeed. Children like that would easily die in a life-and-death struggle.”

In other words, she was a failure. Even with all her talent, she couldn’t advance.

The detective took out a lightly sweetened canned coffee from her car and took a sip.

“That’s why I’m pissed off that you had her up against Mosquito. If the two of them had been killed, the return-blood would have fallen into their hands, crossed the ocean, and been spread across the globe.”

“And that would have ultimately meant more work for you.”

“Right. Which is why I’m pissed off.”

“Meaning you didn’t approve of my actions as an enforcer of justice, correct? However, I believed that Miss Natsunagi and the Miss Shirahama you recognized…would be able to save Miss Agarie.”

“Ha. You’re spouting those ideals now, after all the blood and lies?”

“I suppose. But I’m an idealist now. I’m so kind and sweet you could vomit. Just like that canned coffee you’re sipping.”

When I pointed to it, she wrinkled her nose and retorted, “They were out of black coffee.” Oh, she was adorable.

“The return-blood increases a person’s biological strength. If someone compatible obtains the blood, their physical strength, intellect—everything—would be more than human. Especially now, some people want that kind of thing.”

“You mean those people you call ‘seeds.’”

“So you did know about that, you piece of shit. Your organization is full of scum who like to snoop around. It’s obnoxious.”

“Oh, please don’t misunderstand. We’re definitely good at information gathering, but your organization once approached us to cooperate regarding the seeds.”

"…What did you say?"

"Apparently, the person from your organization in charge of the seeds fell ill, and they were left hanging for a time. Those people in black clothes were speaking to my superiors."

"Tch…I can't believe the higher-ups reached out to you guys at the Mediation Association."

The Mediation Association. That was the name of the organization I belonged to, and our main purpose was to deal with those on *our side*.

Meaning, when the people who preserved world peace were busy, they called on us.

"Even heroes of justice want to be intimate with their loved ones or go have popcorn and laugh at the movies. But while they're enjoying their pleasure and leisure time, there are people in back alleys being subjected to violence and malice."

"That's where we come in. We monitor crises in the world, but those with a lower priority are postponed. The 'Humanity Serum' people who tried to take blood from Haruru Agarie were on our radar as a dangerous organization, but…"

"The people on our side in Japan tend to be overlooked because they're not considered much of a threat."

In the past, Japan had many vicious individuals as well, but nowadays, even those lurking in what normal society calls the underworld couldn't be called "our side" anymore.

The country had grown in the right direction and become far more peaceful.

"And? Why did the Mediation Association refuse the request to subjugate the seeds?"

"No special reason. My boss said we didn't need to get our hands dirty wiping the mud off the world's justice. Heh."

Plus, there were people in her organization who had that role already—those who nipped the evil flowers that spread death, the enemies of the world, before they could bloom.

If we at the Mediation Association had chosen the wrong path and enemy…I might have wound up in a death match with this wonderful lady in front of me.

“You make an annoyingly sound argument. That’s why, when it comes to the seeds, I’ll—”

She started to say something, then retreated into silence. She was as bad a conversationalist as ever. Just like a high school boy. But that was what made her so cute.

“I went off topic. I’ll continue to leave Humanity Serum to you guys—but if you screw it up, I’ll go and destroy the Mediation Association.”

“Would that be for your job?”

“No, it would be private. Like when I have ramen on the way home on my days off.”

“You’d spend your precious days off destroying organizations?!”

Was this country really okay if a woman who loved violence so much was a police officer…?

“We’ll take care of Mosquito for now. I’ll tell my subordinates to make it look like the police took care of this incident and notify the school staff myself.”

“Thank you. Then I’ll handle the media cover-up.”

“Yeah. Mosquito probably doesn’t have much viable information, but I have to give them payback for bullying my cute apprentice. Heh-heh.”

“Well, this one…she had a really evil look on her face. Though, I bet she didn’t think so herself. Wait, are you leaving already?”

“Public servants don’t have that much free time—especially detectives like me. Or how about we go at it for the first time in a while? I still haven’t forgotten you punched me in the face.”

“But you made my body go *snap* in return. That was why I had to take a step back from the front lines, you know? But this isn’t about that.”

Now that we were grown-ups, what suited us better was…

“Would you like to get some cheap sake at a dive bar?”

Her eyes widened in surprise at my invitation, but after a brief call on her phone, she opened the door to the driver’s seat.

“Just one drink. I won’t have any more than that, Utsugi.”

“…Yes, yes! Of course! We’ll have one drink and talk a lot.”

“Just so you know, you’re covering the drinks and the ride.”

I sat in the passenger seat of the unmarked police car, heading toward the city with a woman I'd once fought with until we were both bloody when we were young.

I was conscious of how much we'd both grown up. We'd clashed with enormous emotions, worn our souls down to nubs, and experienced a lot of pain and suffering when we were young and immature, and that was why we were able to grow up.

That's why I keep preaching to my cute students…

…the preciousness of youth and the importance of the bonds we nurture with all our might, even when they hurt.

Epilogue

The bloody incident at the school was resolved by the police, and we were able to return to our normal school lives.

One day after school, as spring came to a close, Ms. Koyomi called the three of us to the nurse's office.

"Um…er, what can I say? Um, I'm terribly sorry for the trouble I caused you all, Miss Natsunagi!"

Seated in a chair, Ms. Koyomi placed her hands on her knees and bowed her head. But none of us blamed her.

"You don't have to apologize, Ms. Koyomi."

"That's right. We weren't harmed at all."

"I wasn't, either! I was a little scared, but my precious friends and Ms. Koyomi helped me!"

Ms. Koyomi slowly raised her head, but she still looked a bit perplexed.

"It's still true that I got you involved… You could even say that my organization used Miss Agarie as bait to lure Hachisu…"

"It's fine, Koyo!" said Haruru. "It's a little over my head, but you're basically on our side and protect us from the bad guys, right?"

Ms. Koyomi nodded slightly.

"Then that's fine! Please don't quit being our teacher and keep protecting us, okay?"

"But I promised you all I'd tell you my true identity…" Ms. Koyomi looked back and forth between me and Fuyuko apologetically.

"You don't need to tell us, as long as you keep being our teacher and stay on our side," I said.

"Yeah. I'm with Nagisa. Right, Haruru?"

"Yeah! Oh, but if you really do feel sorry about it…treat us to

sushi next time?”

“Ah, that’s a good idea. I want to go to that expensive-looking place at the station!”

“Ha-ha. Ms. Koyomi’s wallet is going to be totally empty. How about it? We won’t ask you for anything else, and we don’t need an explanation. Just keep living your life like you’ve been.”

We all laughed and waited for Ms. Koyomi to reply.

Our request might not have sat well with her, as an adult. If anything, the desire to come clean and unburden herself might have been stronger. But as far as the three of us were concerned, we’d be much happier having Ms. Koyomi stay our teacher and spend our youth with us.

“…Thank you very much. It makes me very happy to hear you all say that. I hope we can keep getting along going forward.”

We all looked at each other and smiled.

Now, starting tomorrow, I’d be a normal high school girl again.

But…

There was still one big mystery remaining in my peaceful, precious daily life: the owner of this heart of mine.

This heart wanted to meet someone. I couldn’t just spend my days goofing around with everyone until I figured out who that person was.

“By the way, Miss Agarie, did you tell Miss Natsunagi about the boy yet?”

“Oh! No, I didn’t! Right, Nagi?”

My thoughts couldn’t keep up with the sudden change of subject.

“What are you talking about?”

“The high school boy who saved me! When I got kidnapped, they grabbed him up, too, like a weird two-for-one special—but he managed to help me out!” Haruru said.

“I couldn’t see his face because I was blindfolded, but I did hear his voice. He sounded kind of hot, and he said things like ‘good grief’ and ‘not this again’ in a pretentious way. He was probably a student at our school.”

“I missed asking you this in all that, but are you trying to say the boy you were kidnapped with is…”

"Yes. He's the one you're looking for!"

Just when I'd thought I would have to wait a long time to find him, the figure that had been wrapped in mystery was suddenly about to be revealed. I couldn't accept that yet.

"B-but do you have any conclusive evidence that it's him?"

"I've looked into it, Nagisa," said Fuyuko, and she handed me a whole stack of documents, including newspaper clippings and printed online articles. "A good assistant finishes her research before the detective even begins the investigation."

In the documents, his name was highlighted carefully with a marker.

"I asked Ms. Koyomi about the boy and investigated him for the past few days. He was anonymous in the articles you found in the library before, but some of the older ones had his name in them."

When she said that, I went to pick out his name from the newspaper articles—but I couldn't take that next step yet.

"If he's at our school, why didn't he show up for the other mysteries…?"

"I thought about that with Haruru. The key point was whether the police were needed in the incident. He appears at crime scenes that the public is aware of."

"Look, the first incident we solved, the Yellow Panties one, involved a pervert and voyeurism, right? But the other two were different."

"In the Yellow Panties incident, the culprit made contact with a high school boy, tripped, and fell down the stairs. If we assume that high school boy was him… What do you think?"

Their deduction had been much more thorough than mine, even though they were *my* assistants. The nerve.

But I was incredibly happy that they'd been so thoughtful and gone to such lengths to find him for me.

I glanced over the newspaper articles, stared at his name again, and murmured it to myself. Then I finished reading the other articles Fuyuko had brought me, placed my hand over my chest to calm myself, and took a big breath.

Will you give me the answer I'm looking for?

I had a feeling that if I met him…I'd be writing a different story altogether. But I was fond of this life. A life where I wasn't anyone yet, and I could find something in that.

I might have to let go of this beautiful and unbreakable life—like a picture book the four of us had created—for just a short while.

"Fuyuko. Haruru. Ms. Koyomi. Can I…go to him?"

The people I loved nodded firmly.

"Have a good time, Nagisa. If you solve the mystery about your heart, let's go get some bubble tea."

"That would be a real anniversary, Nagi! If he does anything weird to you, you can tell me about it, okay?"

"Miss Natsunagi, I'll always be here for you if your heart or body is wounded."

I was going to see him for my own self-satisfaction and because my friends had encouraged me.

"Thanks, everyone. I'm going!"

I shoved the articles Fuyuko had given me into my schoolbag and rushed out into the hall. Class was done for the day, and not many people were around.

One step, then another—my legs moved as rapidly as my heart. Before I knew it, I'd broken into a run.

My heartbeat was shouting in a clear voice, *I want to see him. I want to see him soon*.

At the same time, I became inexplicably angry. Why hadn't he come to see me? Why hadn't he searched for me himself all this time?

I felt like the anger wasn't really mine, but if he was cheeky, I'd shove my hand into his mouth and touch the dangly thing at the

back of his throat.

"That's really weird of me."

I couldn't stop thinking about him, and we hadn't exchanged a word yet. I wanted him to see me soon, and I wanted him to fulfill this wish…this heart's desire.

I'd found his name on the class roster by the staff room, so I knew which classroom to enter. Most of his classmates had gone home, but there was one boy left alone, face down on his desk.

Huh…? Don't tell me he doesn't have any friends? Normally, someone would have woken him up.

"Well, whatever. It's easier for me to deal with someone who isn't normal anyway," I muttered. I placed my schoolbag on the seat in front of him and observed him.

How was I going to greet him?

It was best to be friendly, right? Oh, but I remembered Fuyuko saying that boys liked it when girls bullied them, so maybe I'd go with something a bit more extreme.

If my request made him hesitant, I might give him a little extra incentive, too.

Well, it was about time for me to awaken this boy…

…who was sleeping his life away to escape the reality of being alone forever.

I grabbed him by the shirtfront and hauled him up with all my strength. Then I asked him as he looked up at me with an idiotic expression, still half asleep—

"You're the ace detective?"





Afterword

I love "The Detective is Already Dead"—a book by an author who debuted in the same Newcomer Award round as me, and the series gave me a tremendous sense of exhilaration when I read it. As entertainment, it's like a blade that's been honed to a keen edge of perfection, and it encompasses a variety of genres. I recall that it strongly resonated with me, not as an author, but as a reader—the best kind of novel, crammed full of excitement and fun, like a toy box. It made me think, "Ah, this is the exact kind of light novel that I've always loved."

I've rambled on, but let me introduce myself. My name is Syusui Tsukimi. Like I said before, I made my debut with the 15th MF Bunko J Newcomer Award, the same round of the competition as nigozyu-sensei. And when the esteemed nigozyu-sensei asked me to write a spin-off with Nagisa Natsunagi as the main character, I immediately accepted. I mean, there was no reason to refuse. I love this series more than any other light novel author in the world, and I love Nagisa Natsunagi, too. That's why I wanted to attempt writing it—why I *definitely* wanted to write it. With those thoughts in mind, I was able to get on board with the spin-off.

While writing this story, I engaged not just with the original work, but also the anime and related mediums to face the enormous body of work head-on—the feelings and themes that were put into the work, and the charm of the characters. And with a lot of love, and a few small tidbits, this finished product happened.

At first, I struggled with how to pick a subject for my favorite work. I decided on "a school story with Natsunagi and her friends," but in the original work, her classmates are (mostly) not depicted. Then, after I consulted with nigozyu-sensei, Fuyuko Shirahama and

Haruru Agarie were born—a cool, prince-like girl and an otaku girl who make Natsunagi laugh, push her around, and support her.

After I'd finished writing, I fretted over whether these girls, who were so full of "Syusui Tsukimi-ness," would fit into the world of *Tanmoshi,* but I remember feeling deeply relieved when I received positive feedback from Mr. Nigozyu that began with, "it was interesting!" At the same time, there were moments when I thought I'd been able to add a small splash of color to the world of *Tanmoshi* with my inexpert brush. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all involved: the editor who has been looking after me since my previous book, and the editor in charge of *Tanmoshi*, who invited me to the project; Hanekoto-sensei, who depicted Nagisa Natsunagi with fresh charm; and nigozyu-sensei, who has tirelessly continued writing this wonderful series since creating and sending it off to the Newcomer Award five years ago.

Finally, to those of you who love *Tanmoshi* and picked up this book: The world of *Tanmoshi* will continue to grow even more, and I would be thrilled if *Nagisa Natsunagi Still Wants to Be a High School Girl* became a special book in that world for you. It would be an irreplaceable joy for me to know I've lit a fire in someone's heart. And let's continue to love and support Nagisa Natsunagi together!

Let's surpass Siesta, Nagisa!!

Special Short Story by nigozyu

The Detective's Assistant Wants More Friends

I'd come to a café with Natsunagi in the early afternoon, lured by their limited seasonal sweets.

"Ooh, that looks yummy!"

Natsunagi held up her phone in front of the cake we'd been brought.

"Haruru and Fuyuko need to see this, too."

I recalled those were the names of her high school friends, since I'd heard them mentioned a few times.

"I'm jealous, Natsunagi. That looks fun."

"Haha, why don't you show Yui, then?"

"I hadn't thought of that!"

I quickly took a picture of the cake and texted it to Saikawa.

"So that's the smile of a guy who's found an excuse to contact the girl he likes."

Natsunagi's smile seemed a bit wry, but I decided not to worry about it for the moment.

"Don't tell me we're the only friends you have, Kimizuka?"

"…Actually, I'm surprised to know that *you* have another community."

It was completely normal, but it felt surprising because I hadn't considered it before. In school, you form multiple relationships with your classmates and club members, and after school, you get to know people through part-time jobs or cram school. Nowadays, you

might form connections through social media, too. Belonging to multiple communities was nothing special.

"You two are all I have right now," I said.

Natsunagi tilted her head, looking puzzled.

"So please pay more attention to me."

"That's hilarious." Natsunagi chuckled softly and took a bite of her cake. "But it's only thanks to Siesta that I made friends at school."

Siesta's mission had once been to send Natsunagi to school and let her live a normal life. And now, seeing Natsunagi's smile, I had no doubt that Siesta had fulfilled that mission.

"I guess it's the same for me."

I suddenly recalled a conversation I'd had with Siesta a few years ago.

While we were traveling the world together, Siesta had broached the topic.

"Come to think of it, I've never seen you get along with anyone besides me."

"If you hadn't dragged me on this weird journey, I'd be living my high school dreams right now."

"Really? You didn't seem to have any close friends in middle school, either."

Siesta had seen right through me.

"And you have friends yourself?"

"I have plenty of acquaintances you haven't met—like oracles, assassins, vampires, and the like."

"That's a really suspicious lineup."

"Oh, wait. That was important foreshadowing, but I blurted it out without thinking. Forget it all."

"You were joking, right? You don't actually know anyone like that, right?"

Siesta laughed. "*I don't*," she said before hitting me with a question that was as sad as it was straightforward. *"Why don't you make any friends?"*

"No one comes near me because I attract trouble. Well, I've

gotten used to it."

Siesta asked, *"Isn't that boring?"*

I replied, *"This how my youth goes."*

"A solitary youth?"

"Not quite."

Her blue eyes widened slightly. *"I'm enough for you."*

"For now."

There was a comfortable silence for a while, and Siesta spoke again.

"You'll make friends eventually. Maybe not a hundred, but one day you'll definitely have friends who are important to you."

"Don't tell me you're going to help me with that?"

"*If you like. I'm an ace detective*." Siesta laughed.

And now—Nagisa Natsunagi was sitting in front of me. And I had Saikawa and Charlotte, friends I'd never imagined back then. I couldn't help but wonder how much of the future Siesta had envisioned back then.

"Kimizuka?" Natsunagi asked, worried because I'd been silent for a while.

"No, it's nothing. Let me meet those friends of yours someday."

Like Siesta had said, it might not be a hundred, but maybe expanding my circle of acquaintances wouldn't hurt.

"Huh, that's a bit much."

But Natsunagi's response was surprisingly hesitant.

"I really can't. They're both so cute."

"Why is that a problem?"

Oh, so that's how it is.

"If I fell for one of them, you'd get jealous, right? Like I was being taken away."

She was being awfully honest today. But it was true that romance among a friend group could cause trouble. As I nodded in agreement, Natsunagi looked at me like she was looking at trash.

"Wrong. I just don't want you to take Fuyuko or Haruru away from me."

“…Is that so?”

The coffee I’d ordered with the cake tasted awfully bitter. Just as I was sullenly pouting over that, Natsunagi laughed.

“Well, I’ll let you meet them one of these days.”

Was that okay? She’d just been worried about me taking her friends away from her, so why the change of heart?

She seemed like she was trying to laugh as she said, “Think about it, though. There’s no way Haruru and Fuyuko would fall for someone like you, right?”

“That’s not fair!”

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink