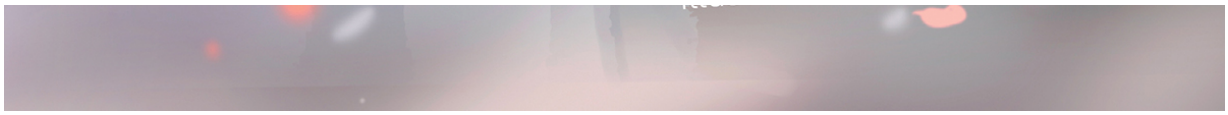
Kennoji
Illustration by Fly



8
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The Girl I Saved on the Train Turned Out to Be My Childhood Friend


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Kennoji
Illustration by Fly



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“I am your girlfriend, after all…”
“Ryou…”
Name:
Hina Fushimi
Age: 17
School year: high school, second year
Height: 5'3"
Ryou's childhood friend and an immensely popular, gorgeous girl.


“You saved me again.”

The Girl I Saved on the Train Turned Out to Be My Childhood Friend



Kennoji

Illustration by Fly

YEN ON
New York

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The Girl I Saved on the Train Turned Out to Be My Childhood Friend, Vol. 8
Kennoji Translation by Sergio Avila
Cover art by Fly

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Afterword
Yen Newsletter

1 A New Relationship and the Usual Day-to-Day

All the school events for the year were over, and now only the December finals remained.

The school festival was still fresh in everyone's minds, and with Christmas approaching, the mood in the classroom was as merry as ever.

"Did you hear, Takayan? Mimori and Satou from Class E started dating. I knew there was something between those two!"

It was our first day back at school, and Deguchi was already passing on festival gossip I hadn't asked for. He'd been in the audience for the closing party, watching everyone else.

"Wow, really?" I replied in a monotonous voice, having no real idea who he was talking about.

"I've known them both since grade school. Childhood friends! Didn't have to look very far, did they?" Deguchi heaved a big sigh.

"Y-yeah, I guess."

I wasn't sure how to respond. He could have been talking about me.

Someone close by…

I glanced at Fushimi next to me.

Childhood friends.

The closing party.

Memories of last weekend's festival came rushing back to me.

The closing party dance was a voluntary event, and it was said that if someone accepted your invitation, you were officially a couple. Fushimi had asked me, and I'd accepted.

Then…

…that means…

I stole another glance at her.

Her glossy hair reflected the soft morning sunlight, framing her smiling face. I watched her pink lips, slick with lip balm, move as she chatted with her friends. Then her wide eyes narrowed slightly as she smiled again.

She was my childhood friend, and she was covered head to toe in cuteness, like the coating on a candy. We'd gone to school together that morning.

She's…my girlfriend now.

"So Takayan, where were you during the closing party?"

"H-huh? I headed home, of course." That was the truth. I'd gone looking for Fushimi after she disappeared, then I'd headed home. "You asked Torigoe and got destroyed, right?"

"Don't remind me. See, Takayan, brother, I've realized something." Deguchi gazed into the distance. I already had a bad feeling about what he'd say next. "There's no one for me but Waka."

"Yup, you're delusional."

Waka was our homeroom teacher, Wakatabe—a woman of around thirty. This only proved how fickle Deguchi was. No wonder Torigoe wouldn't give him the time of day.

It seemed he'd only wanted to chat. Once he'd finished complaining about the school's new couple, he went to join the other guys.

Now I had no one to talk to.

Torigoe was somewhere in the back of the classroom, doing who knows what. After turning her down at the festival, I wasn't sure how to interact with her. In fact, she'd confessed to me once before, so I'd now refused her *twice*.

"Ah, good morning, Shii."

"Morning."

Torigoe came up, and Fushimi greeted her. *That's right, the Shii's short for Shizuka*, I thought idly as I desperately listed out my options.

1. Wait until she says something first.

2. Greet her like nothing happened.

3. Run.

Unfortunately, all my escape routes were blocked. Deguchi was cackling with the other boys, and Himeji was busy chatting with the girls.

"Morning." Torigoe poked me in the back before taking the seat in front of Fushimi's.

"Y-yeah, morning…"

"How's the man who only cares about pretty faces?"

"We're really going there…?"

I probably should have expected some snide remarks. That said, it was better to have her complain to my face than bottle up her emotions.

"I think I have the right to some sass, at least."

"Wait, are you talking about me?" said Fushimi, pointing at herself. She seemed unhappy at the suggestion I'd chosen her for her looks.

Torigoe had meant to hit me with her barbed remark, but in the end she'd gotten both of us.

"That's not what she meant, Fushimi," I said, covering for her.

"No, that's *definitely* what I meant. And it's true, too," said Torigoe, twisting the knife. She giggled, and Fushimi puffed out her cheeks in irritation. "C'mon, I've gotta tease you a bit. I've earned it."

"If you're only here to make fun of us, then just go back to your seat," I said.

"I came over to *congratulate* you."

You could've been nicer about it. But if it helps you feel better, then I guess I don't mind.

"Congratulations," she said. "I'm happy for you two."

Fushimi stood up and went over to her. Torigoe stood, too, and they hugged.

What's this?

"Thank you," said Fushimi, tears in her eyes. "I thought you wouldn't want to be friends anymore."

Torigoe patted her back. “No way. I might be bummed out, but I’m truly happy for you.”

“Aww.” Fushimi started crying into Torigoe’s shoulder.

Fushimi must have been just as uneasy as I was. Torigoe was a friend to both of us, and she was utterly irreplaceable to Fushimi.

“Why am I cheering *you* up…?” Torigoe forced a smile, and our eyes met. “So, have you *done it* already?”

“What is this, boys’ talk?” I said. “Give me a break.”

“Hey, you had Sunday and Monday free.”

To be perfectly honest, nothing had happened. It was just a regular long weekend.

That day, as Fushimi and I walked home together, I was too out of it to say much. Fushimi was the same, and only shared a few impressions of the festival.

On our way to school this morning, she’d acted exactly the same as she always did. She simply smiled and said, “We’d better start studying for finals!” And so I’d treated her normally, too.

“Not going to tell Deguchi?” asked Torigoe. She must’ve been listening to our chat earlier.

But I couldn’t exactly tell him I was dating my childhood friend right after he’d complained about some other students doing the same.

“I think I’ll wait for a better time,” I said.

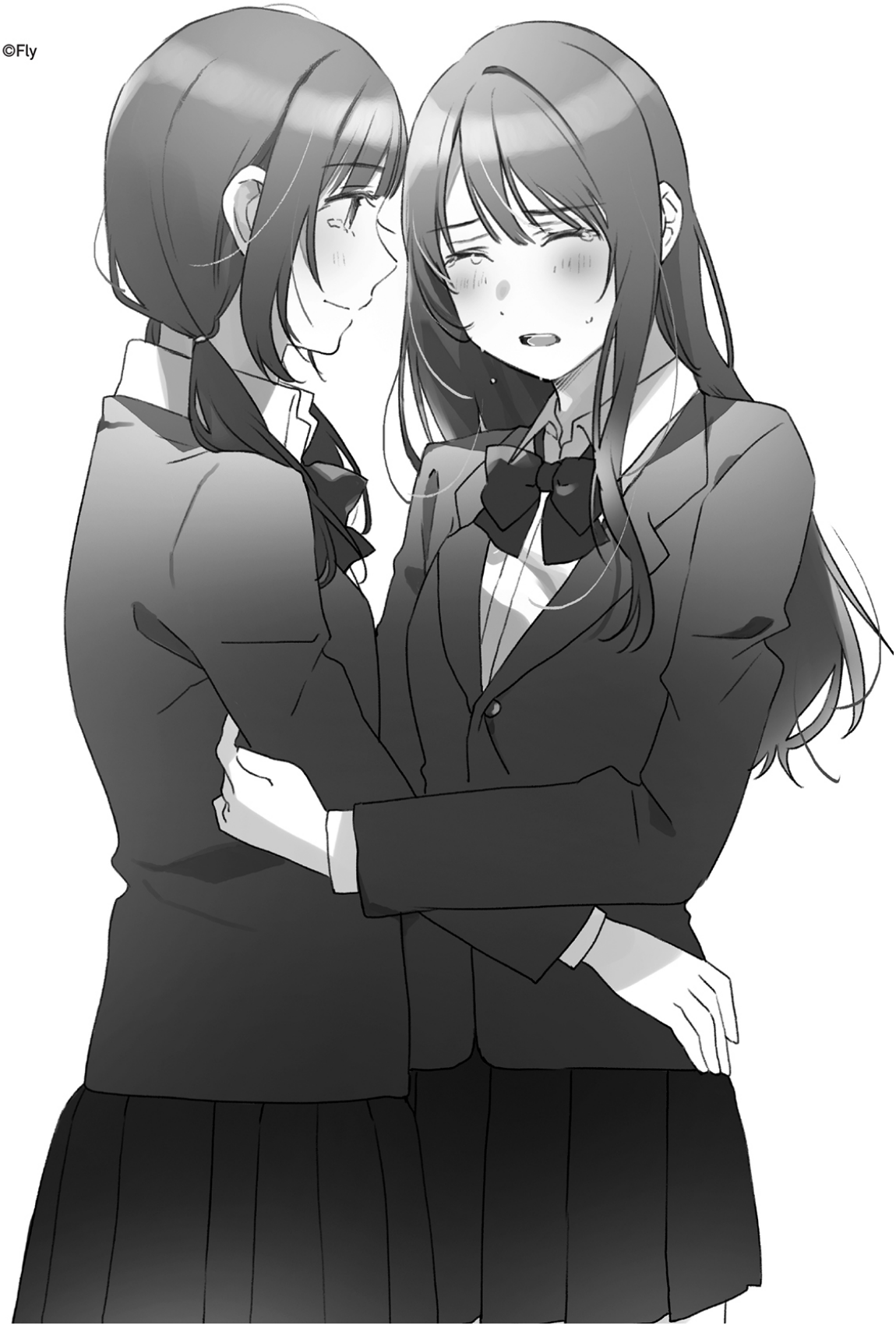
“Well, okay. So does this mean you’ll be having lunch with Hiina from now on?”

“You’re eating with us,” said Fushimi. She’d finally stopped crying.

“I’d just be in your wa—”

Fushimi cut her off and shook her head emphatically. She looked like a little kid talking to her elder sister.

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“Takamori, you sure?” asked Torigoe.

“If you don’t mind,” I said.

“I think I’d be a little sad if I had to go back to being a loner at this point, so I’m grateful for the offer.”

It seemed like Torigoe had gotten her feelings in order. Or maybe she’d always been prepared for this. She seemed frank and refreshed today.

Himeji came over and joined the conversation. Apparently, she’d heard us talking.

“Um, may I?” She timidly raised her hand.

“Go ahead.”

“If Ryou only cared about looks, he would have chosen me.”

“I didn’t choose anyone based on looks!” *Why does she sound like she just found a plot hole?* “Anyway, we’re past that topic. Don’t bring it up again.”

“Actually, I think I’d win that fight,” said Fushimi. She put on the face of a warrior ready for a duel.

“This isn’t a competition,” I snapped.

“You really think you’d win?” Himeji stared straight back at Fushimi. It seemed like they might lock swords at any moment.

Torigoe narrowed her eyes. “You’re both completely different types,” she said, sounding fed up. “It’s silly to compare.”

“Ai, aren’t you admitting that your face is your only redeeming qua—?”

Himeji frowned so quickly, you could almost hear a *fwsh*. Fushimi was purposely baiting her, and it worked. Himeji began shouting and throwing whatever she found on her desk.

“Stop that! You’re an adult!” cried Fushimi. But that didn’t stop her from fighting back.

Stationery soared over my head like tiny missiles. *You’re both acting like children.*

An eraser hit my cheek, and Torigoe started slapping her desk, trying not to laugh.

Eventually, the two combatants came back to their senses, their breathing ragged. First they glared at each other, then they looked away at exactly the same time. Despite their constant fighting, the

two of them were like peas in a pod.

The teacher arrived, and our classmates returned to their assigned seats. As she spoke about the festival and went over the day's announcements, Himeji faced forward sulkily and said, "That's not what I meant to say at all."

"Come on," I shot back. "You obviously came over ready to start a fight."

"Yes, it's your fault, Ai."

"And yours for responding, Fushimi," I said.

There was no winner here. Both of them were equally to blame.

"Hey, I'm sure Mr. Matsuda told you, but my play opens next weekend," said Himeji, switching topics.

It felt like just yesterday that she and Fushimi were auditioning for the part, but that had been during summer break.

"Here's a ticket," she said, carefully pulling out an envelope, as though it contained her life savings, and removing a slip of paper from it. "Surely you don't have anything better to do."

"I'd go even if I had to cancel my plans. Thanks." I put the ticket in my wallet.

"And for Hina." She handed me another one, and I passed it to Fushimi. "You might learn a thing or two."

"From you? I doubt it," Fushimi said, cocking her head dubiously.

"On second thought, Hina, seeing a professional at work might be too much for someone who's used to school plays."

"Thanks, Ai. I'm looking forward to it," said Fushimi sincerely, despite the other girl's sass. She waved the ticket around with a big smile, and Himeji finally softened up.

"I promise I'll knock your socks off."

"Don't flub your lines, okay?"

"Who do you take me for?" Himeji snorted.

She had experience as an idol, and it seemed she wasn't the least bit worried about going onstage.

Our teacher finished the morning announcements and left the room, giving us a short break.

"Here, Shizuka. Please come see my play." Himeji handed a ticket to Torigoe. It seemed she still had some left.

"Thanks! Break a leg!"

"You needn't worry."

She handed several more tickets out to some girls she was friendly with. She even had one saved for Shinohara.

"Shinohara, too?" I said. "You're so nice."

"Oh, I just had a few left over."

"She'll be over the moon, crying tears of joy."

Himeji winced. Maybe she could already picture it. She was Shinohara's idol, finally back on stage. The girl was bound to be even more excited than we could imagine.

"Looks like I have one left," Himeji said, looking at the envelope. Deguchi was staring at her expectantly.

"Can I give it to Deguchi?" I asked.

"Do whatever you wish, Ryou."

I took the ticket from her and walked over to Deguchi. I could see a fire burning in his eyes.

"Deguchi, Himeji says you can come."

"I knew it! We were in the same group during the school field trip. Of course she wants me to come see her play."

The guy had unshakable confidence. *I definitely can't tell him this was just a leftover.*

"Let's go together," I said, deciding not to burst his bubble.

"Wow, it's next weekend? I guess she *was* missing a lot of school for rehearsals lately. But wait, Takayan, won't you be busy with Fushimi?" Deguchi slapped my shoulder and whistled.

"Oh, you knew? And no, we don't have any plans that day."

But before I could add that Fushimi would be going, too, I noticed Deguchi shooting me a weird look.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"You didn't deny it… What's going on?" He looked like an abandoned puppy. "Are you for real?"

"About what?"

"Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa! Don't tell me you got caught up in that despicable closing party nonsense and wound up going out with Fushimi!"

"I wouldn't say 'wound up,' but yeah, I guess we did."

"How could this happen?!" Deguchi clutched his head. "With Fushimi? I was just messing around…! I thought you'd deny it! What the heck?!"

"Why are *you* mad?" *If anything,* I *should be upset with* him *for teasing me like that.*

"How awful… You promised me we'd both die virgins…"

"Why would either of us want that?"

And I definitely hadn't agreed to such a thing.

"I bet you… I bet you guys just got together because you didn't want to be alone for Christmas! I know how it goes! It happens all the time! It's okay, I understand!"

Deguchi's yelling caught everyone's attention. There were tears in his eyes, and it seemed like people weren't even listening, they just thought he was a weirdo.

At any rate, it didn't seem like he was mad at Fushimi and me in particular, as much as he was upset with everyone who'd gotten together during the festival.

"Hey, cheer up," I said. "It's not the end of the world."

"Shut it!" Deguchi raised his head and brushed my hand away from his shoulder. "This is too much… If you two were gonna get together, you should've done it ages ago…"

"We took a lot of detours along the way."

"Come on, God! Why didn't you give *me* a pretty childhood friend, huh? I'm not picky. She doesn't need to be gorgeous, just a normal girl—a girl-next-door type who makes me want to protect her…"

Now he was speaking to God. *Better just leave him be for now.*

I'd already fulfilled my mission and handed him the ticket, so I turned around to go back to my seat. But then he grabbed my shoulder.

"Congratulations, Takayan. Enjoy your Christmas…enough for the both of us…" Deguchi sniffled.

You're that sad about being left behind?

There weren't many people in my small circle of friends to give the

news to. But there was one person I still needed to tell.

I asked Fushimi to come home with me after school so we could tell her together, but when we got there, the girl in question still wasn't back. We decided to wait in my room.

I could imagine how she would react.

"Do we really need to be so formal?" Fushimi asked.

"Yes. This is pretty important." I heard a bike come to a stop outside. "She's here."

"O-okay…" Fushimi nodded nervously.

The door opened, and someone called out, "I'm home!" from below. Then we heard footsteps coming up the stairs, and finally, the door swung open.

"Hey, Hina." Mana smiled and waved. She was carrying a bag of groceries in her other hand. "Saw your shoes by the door."

"Yes, I am here."

"You're acting weird. What's wrong?" Mana looked at me, then back at Fushimi, then back at me. "Ohhh! Were you about to get it on? I bet you were. Well, I'll leave you to it!"

Mana giggled and started to leave, but I stopped her.

"Wait a second, Mana. We have something to tell you."

"Hmm?" She leaned to the side so her head was visible through the door.

I decided to cut right to the chase. "You see, we've started dating."

Mana blinked repeatedly. "Huh?"

"That's right, Mana," said Fushimi. "Ryou and I are a couple now."

I heard the grocery bag fall to the floor. Then Mana vanished and high-tailed it toward her room.

"Wait, Mana!" Fushimi called after her.

"H-huh?" I said. "Th-that's not the reaction I was expecting!"

What was with her? I thought she'd smile and say something lighthearted, like, "Whoa?! No cap? Gratz, Bubby!"

I heard the door to her room slam shut. I was still in shock, but Fushimi seemed to understand what was going on.

"I should have expected this," she said.

"What do you mean? I'm completely lost."

“Come on…” Fushimi sighed. “Don’t you remember back when we were kids, how she’d always come between me and Ai when we talked about who you’d marry? How she cried when you chose me?”

Is that true?

“You totally forgot. I can tell from your face.”

“You’re right. But we were just kids back then.”

“Yeah, I know. I figured there was a ten percent chance she was over it.”

Only ten percent?

“Mana’s just shocked because of how much she loves you.”

I guess she really was just joking about us “getting it on,” or whatever…

Fushimi braced herself and left the room. Worried, I tagged along, and we wound up standing outside Mana’s door.

“Mana,” Fushimi called out through the door.

Was she going to try to soothe her? Honestly, I had no idea what to do. I’d never seen Mana act like this.

“What we said wasn’t a joke.”

Come on. Don’t kick her while she’s down.

“You knew, didn’t you? That Ryou would start dating eventually.”

Mana didn’t answer. Fushimi and I had only been together for three days. We hadn’t done anything couple-like yet, but we’d get there eventually.

I heard a clatter from inside the room.

“I don’t care. Bubby can do whatever he likes. He doesn’t mean anything to me.”

Mana came out, her cheeks puffed up like they were about to explode. She pushed us out of the way and started down the hall.

“I hope you build a beautiful family! Jerk!”

She stuck her tongue out at me and picked up the fallen groceries before going back downstairs.

“I’m afraid I won’t be having dinner tonight…,” I said. I was dead serious.

Fushimi cleared her throat. “Ryou, Ryou,” she said, pointing at herself.

“Are you saying you’ll make dinner for me if Mana won’t?” She’d

done it once before.

"Hee-hee… Yup!" She nodded, grinning from ear to ear. "I am your girlfriend, after all…"

Her head was down, at the perfect height for patting, and I gave into the temptation.

"…!"

In return, she held me close.

I felt her small shoulders and lean chest. When I brushed her cheek with my finger, it felt as hot as a teakettle. Then I reached my arms around her back, realizing suddenly how slender she was.

"Ryou…" Her breathy voice tickled my ears.

There in the dark hallway, we locked eyes at close range.

"Hina, you wanna have dinner he—…?"

"Eep!"

"Whoa!"

We jumped apart. Mana was staring at us; she'd clearly seen.

"…"

"Oh, don't mind me. But thanks," Fushimi said nervously.

"Uh-huh…"

"Oh, but Mana, I *do* want dinner, okay?!" I had to say it before she decided not to feed me. "I really want to eat your cooking."

Mana's expression softened. It seemed my pleading had pleased her.

"Oh yeah? Well, I wasn't asking you." Despite her words, her mood seemed to have improved.

Once she'd left, Fushimi and I giggled.

"That scared the crap out of me," I said.

"I bet she came up here just to catch us."

"Nah, I'm sure it was a coincidence. I think she genuinely wanted to ask about dinner."

I let out a sigh of relief, then felt a hard poke on my cheek. "Ow!"

"I'm a little jealous. I know you care a lot about your little sister… I do, but…" Fushimi fidgeted.

I took her hand and led her back to my room.

Once I'd closed the door, Fushimi stretched and then gave me a little peck. Then she touched her hair, hiding her face from view.

I grabbed her free hand and entwined our fingers, and she let herself fall against me. Leaning against the door for support, I caught her in an embrace.

Her big eyes were already closed.

My mind used to grow hazy in moments like this, but now that haze was gone, and love bubbled up in my heart.

I brushed my lips against hers.

As I drew back, Fushimi opened her eyes. They were wet, and her face was beet red as she stood up on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around my neck.

Then our lips came together like we were two magnets.

My brain went numb at her scent and the soft sensation of her mouth on mine.

I barely managed to keep my breathing normal as my heart started to race from anxiety and excitement. Fushimi must have been the same. Her breathing was already starting to falter.

"Wait, Ryou, I… Hold up." Fushimi stepped back as though freed from a spell. "L-let's s-stop here…!"

She plopped down onto the floor, holding her rosy cheeks between her hands. I was probably just as flushed.

"I didn't expect you to be so assertive… So…aggressive."

"I'm surprised, too. I guess I've never done anything like this before."

It was obvious where we'd been headed… The more I regained my cool, the more I thought about what came after.

"Sorry," I said. "I guess I don't know how to stop."

"N-no, it's okay. I'm just surprised…… I'm not sure…I would have been able to stop, either."

"Really? You too?"

Fushimi stood up and grabbed her bag.

"I—I gotta go home! I have to stu— I mean t-test— No, study, for, um, midterms. Bye."

Her eyes were swimming all over as she spoke, then she bolted out of the room.

"Want me to see you home?" I called out after her.

"N-no! I'm okay!"

I heard her soft footsteps heading down the stairs. Without waiting for me, she put on her shoes and left.

Back in my room, I could still feel her warmth and smell the scent of her hair in the air.

“Did I go too far?” I mumbled.

Maybe I had. But Fushimi didn’t seem put off by it. In fact, she seemed a little out of control herself. And in that case, we were the same.

2 The Stage Play and the Christmas Present

We took a train, then a bus, and finally arrived at a stop called "Theater of the Arts." A lot of other people got off, too.

Right next to the stop was a huge library-like building. The structure itself was very clean and formal-looking, and the path leading up to it was well-maintained and lined with nicely trimmed trees. It could have been the city hall.

This was where Himeji's first show would take place—today, no less.

"Will Lady Hime be all right?" Shinohara muttered from behind me.

I can see your AIKA ♡ *fan jutting out of your bag. Seriously, put that away.*

"She looked super confident back at school, didn't she?" I turned to Fushimi beside me, and she nodded twice.

"Same as ever," said Fushimi. "She was, like, *Who do you take me for? Hmph!*"

I was pretty sure she didn't say *Hmph!* but I supposed Fushimi was trying to convey her prickly attitude.

"Himeji's always like that," said Torigoe. She was walking beside Shinohara. "But when push comes to shove, she can be unreliable. I have to admit, I'm a little worried."

Behind them were Deguchi and Mana.

"Ugh, Degu, what the hell? Of course she refused!"

"What?! That bad?!"

"You've got to set the mood first, my dude."

Apparently, he was asking her for some romantic advice.

The six of us had met up and come here together. We checked the theater's map and made our way to the main hall, where we ran into the other students from our class Himeji had invited.

"This place has a capacity of fifteen hundred people?" said Fushimi, reading from a flyer. "That's pretty big. But I guess they do hold orchestra concerts here, huh…?" Her face began to cloud over. She seemed worried.

"I do see a lot of commercials for the concerts and plays they do here," I said. "For ticket preorders and stuff."

"Yeah. This is the biggest, most *theater* theater in our area," explained Fushimi. I'd had no idea.

The main hall's doors were already open, so we headed inside and found our seats. We were the perfect distance from the stage; not too close, not too far.

We still had about thirty minutes before the show started, so I stood up to go grab a drink from the vending machine I'd seen on our way in.

"Ryyy!"

As I did so, I spotted my boss, Mr. Matsuda, across the hall. He was the president of Himeji's agency, so he was wearing a proper suit for her first show. It made him look like a well-dressed, wealthy patron of the arts.

"Oh, Mr. Matsuda. Hi."

He jogged up to me, moving his arms not forward and back, but side to side.

Even his run is feminine, huh?

"It's finally the big day," I said.

"I was looking for you!" he replied, puffing out his cheeks. "Why don't you answer your phone?!"

I checked and saw I had a several missed calls from him. I'd put my phone on silent before entering the hall, so I hadn't heard them.

"Ah, sorry. I just noticed. What's wrong?"

"It's Aika…!"

"Did something happen to Himeji?"

"Come with me to the greenroom."

"Huh?"

He grabbed my hand and took off. No time to explain, apparently.

"What happened?" I asked. "She's here, right?"

"She is. She did great in the rehearsal and was bragging about how she'd crush the show, but then… Gosh!" He moaned, clearly displeased.

We passed through a door marked STAFF ONLY and headed into the back of the building. Then, at the end of a narrow corridor, we stopped, and Mr. Matsuda knocked several times on the door in front of us.

"Aika, Ry's here to cheer you up."

"Um, I didn't say tha—," I started to protest, but Mr. Matsuda pinched my butt. "Ow! Hey!"

"Aika's as white as a sheet and shaking like a rabbit in there," he said.

Himeji, shaking like a rabbit? I couldn't imagine it.

"Back when she was in SakuMome, the biggest venue she ever played was for three hundred people. The scale of this place has her spooked." Mr. Matsuda sighed. "She's not as used to a big audience as she'd like you to think. She was the same before the audition, right up until you met her at the entrance."

As it turned out, Torigoe understood Himeji better than Fushimi or I did.

Mr. Matsuda gestured toward the door, and I nodded.

"Heeey, Himeji?" I said, knocking. "You scared?"

"Are you kidding? Scared of what?" …She sounded just as confident as ever. I turned to Mr. Matsuda. "She sounds fine to me…"

But he put on a stern face and shook his head, throwing open the door. "Go give her a kiss or something."

"Um, what?"

Then he pushed me inside.

The room was small, not even 108 square feet. There were two long tables shoved together to place items on and a folding chair, where Himeji was sitting, hugging her knees.

It seemed there was a different room for makeup. The only things on the table were Himeji's bag, a bottle of water, flowers from

the other staff, and two sets of packed lunches.

Himeji was already in costume, dressed as a common town girl. The play was a heartwarming story about her and the people around her.

"Are you nervous?" I asked.

"No."

"That's some big talk."

"What are you getting at? I can't believe you came to my greenroom and didn't even bring a gift."

She looked up, and I finally saw what Mr. Matsuda meant. Her eyes lacked their usual strength, and her face was pale.

"You weren't supposed to see me in character until I was onstage. If you were going to come back here, you should've showed up an hour earlier, at least. You're being a bother."

"Sorry."

I didn't just come back here, I was dragged *here*. But I decided to apologize anyway.

"That costume looks good on you."

"…Are you trying to tell me you think I'm some simple town girl?"

"It was a compliment." *Way to twist my words.* "Fushimi's here to see you."

"Of course she is. *I* gave her the ticket, remember?"

"You know, when she failed the audition, she cried and cried."

"…"

"I think it's your duty to go out there, guns blazing. You've gotta do your best both for yourself, and for everyone you beat out to get the part."

"…Who are you to say that?" Himeji said, pouting. She was right, of course. Nevertheless, I pressed on.

"Your acting's not bad anymore, right?"

"Of course not. Do you know how much I've rehearsed? I spent months listening to that bald director tell me how I was messing everything up, only for him to say *Yes! That's what I was looking for!* when I did the same exact thing the next day."

I knew my clumsy and obstinate childhood friend well enough to realize she'd given it her all despite such complaints.

I reached out to her. “Everyone would be disappointed to see you in here hugging your knees and moping. Aren’t you the invincible Lady Aika?”

She took my hand, and I pulled her up.

Just then, someone knocked desperately on the door. “It’s almost showtime, so hurry it—!”

“Hey, don’t rush my girl. She’s pulling herself together.” I could hear Mr. Matsuda grappling with them outside.

“But everyone else is already on standby…”

“Ry! I’ll buy enough time for you two to have a quickie! That’ll calm her down!”

I am not *doing that.*

“He’s so overprotective, huh?” Himeji sighed, and her face began to soften up. Then she cocked her head. “So what kind of quickie are we doing, Ryou?”

“We aren’t gonna do anything.”

“Sheesh. What a killjoy.”

“That reminds me, Shinohara brought an Aika fan.”

“Tell her I won’t speak to her ever again if I see it from the stage.”

“Roger.”

With that, Himeji stepped forward and brushed her cheek against mine. Then she backed up and smiled bashfully.

“I can have this much, can’t I?”

“O-oof… I was worried there for a second.”

While I hesitated, Himeji started to blush.

“That’s just a standard greeting in other countries.”

“But we’re Japanese, and this is Japan.”

“And?”

Himeji shrugged dramatically and started walking toward the door. We could still hear Mr. Matsuda arguing with the staff outside.

I gazed at her profile as she went. She was looking like herself again.

“I’ve got this,” she said.

The curtains fell, and a soft light shone on the audience as applause filled the hall. A voice over the speakers announced the end of the play, and everyone began to stand up and move outside.

"Ai did amazing," said Fushimi, sighing from the seat next to mine. "Her singing was so good."

"Not even a hint of stage fright," added Torigoe from Fushimi's other side. "I'm impressed."

Nobody here knew how she'd been just before the play. She'd looked like someone sick with a fever.

I'd returned to the main hall just in time and told everyone I'd gotten lost on the way back. There was no point in worrying them, and I doubted Himeji wanted them to know.

After Himeji left the greenroom, Mr. Matsuda had showered me with gratitude. "*Thank you, Ry. The baby rabbit is now a Valkyrie!*" he'd said. Whatever that meant.

I turned my phone back on and saw a new notification.

"Come backstage anytime for an autograph!"

It was a message from Himeji. She'd just sent it; it must have been the first thing she did once she got backstage.

Haven't you got anything better to do? I chuckled to myself.

"What's up, Ryou?" asked Fushimi.

"This just came from Himeji." I showed her my phone, and she laughed, as if to say, *Typical Ai*.

"She's just anxious because it's over."

"Shouldn't she be relaxed?"

"It depends on the person, but I think most people actually get kind of jumpy after a performance. Like they can't get out of character."

Apparently, that was typical. Her acting had been leagues above what she did for the school festival film. She'd been like a cardboard cutout when we first started shooting, but by the end, she was doing pretty decently. Still, her acting today was on a whole other level. It seemed the director's nitpicking had paid off.

Deguchi, Fushimi, and our other classmates all shared their impressions as they headed outside, and I followed a little ways behind.

"Himeji was so good," said Torigoe. "This is the first play I've been to since Hiina's. It's really different to see one live, huh?" Her expression remained flat, but she was speaking a lot more than usual; it must've really left an impression. "I gotta work hard myself."

"On your writing, you mean?" I asked.

"Yeah. I submitted the story I showed you last time to a contest, by the way."

"Wh-whoa. And?"

"Nothing. I knew it wouldn't be that easy, though. Really stresses how amazing it was that you won."

"That was just because not many people participated," I said, embarrassed.

"Stop putting yourself down."

Fushimi and Mana were waiting for us outside.

"Send Ai your thoughts, Bubby."

"Maybe I should."

I know it'll go straight to her head, though.

"Lady Hime… Amazing work today… I was so moved at seeing you back onstage that I am blinded by my tears…"

Shinohara said her message out loud as she typed—the cliché impressions of an overzealous fan.

I hope she doesn't get blocked.

"Takayan, we were talking about going to a diner or something after this. What do you say?" He pointed to the restaurant; apparently, he'd looked up the nearest place already.

Fushimi and I traded glances. It was only four PM, and we'd made plans for after the play.

"Sorry, Deguchi. I'm busy."

"Really? What're you up to?"

"Uh, well…"

Fushimi chimed in with a nod, and that got the point across.

Deguchi fell to his knees and punched the ground.

"Why……? Santa, please, give me a female childhood friend for Christmas… I won't ask for a princess, a *gyaru* will do. In fact, I

think I'd prefer a *gyaru*…"

You can't just ask Santa for a childhood friend.

"Oh, are you two going on a date?" asked Shinohara.

Torigoe shot us a teasing grin. "Wanna join in, Shii?"

"Oh, sorry. That's not what I meant. I don't want to get in the way."

"I see…" Fushimi seemed a little bummed out.

We left the group and took a bus downtown.

"Ai was so amazing," Fushimi muttered from the seat beside me. "She's really improved…"

She'd just seen her childhood friend give an amazing performance, and now she was staring out the window, as if the show we'd just seen was still playing on the other side. That spot in the limelight had nearly been hers; it made sense that she was feeling sentimental.

"Himeji has her strengths, and you have yours, Fushimi… Or at least that's how I see it."

"Ryou, don't you find it weird?"

"What?"

The question seemed to come out of nowhere, and I had no idea what she was asking. From her tone, I wondered if I'd messed up somehow.

"How long are you going to keep calling me *Fushimi*?"

Oh… Yeah.

"I'm your…girlfriend…so…," she said under her breath. "I don't want you…to call me like everyone else… I want a special name, just for me."

She took advantage of the bus shaking to lean against me.

A special name… "Like, *Hinapi*?"

"*Pfft.* C'mon, I'm being serious."

She looked up at me and smiled. At some point, she'd put her arm through mine. I got the feeling she wasn't going to let me go anytime soon.

"I think the *pi* makes it cute."

"Okay, then. But keep in mind you'll have to call me that in front of everyone else."

"…"

"See! You're already embarrassed!"

"I didn't say anything."

She saw right through me. But I wasn't about to admit defeat. I leaned into her ear and whispered: *"Hinapi."*

"*Pffft.* Gosh! Stop making it into a joke. I can't stop laughing."

"Okay, no more Hinapi. Except as a joke."

"Did you even hear what I just said?" she asked, giggling.

Once we got downtown, we immediately headed for the mall and started looking around the shops.

The whole city, including the mall, was already dressed up for Christmas, and you could see couples everywhere.

"Ryou, look at this weird book." Fushimi ducked into a shop and showed me what she'd found.

I wonder what kind of gift she'd like.

Thinking back, I hadn't given her a Christmas present since elementary school. And then I'd done it only because we'd had to for a school event.

Thanks to my job at Mr. Matsuda's agency, I had a decent amount of money to spend. I could splurge on something, but I didn't want her to feel bad about it.

Was she wondering about what to give me, too?

"Ryou?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry."

She was trying on fake glasses over by the register. "How do I look?"

"Gorgeous."

"Hee-hee." She grinned, clearly liking my answer. "I bet Ai would've said something like '*Obviously*.'"

She even mimicked her voice, and I could barely contain my laughter.

We left the shop and walked on, gazing at the mannequins in the storefront windows.

Maybe some clothes? I'd have to ask Mana for help.

"Let's take a break," I said.

There was a food court on the top floor of the building.

"Wha—?!" Fushimi's eyes grew wide, and she blushed furiously.

"Uh… I mean, I'm a little tired from walking. There's a café upstairs."

"Huh? Oh! A café. Yup, yup, you're totally right." Fushimi spoke unusually quickly, then dashed toward the escalators.

You misunderstood what I said, didn't you? I bet you thought I was going to invite you to a hotel or something.

You'd never guess it from her serious facade, but I knew Fushimi read erotic romance novels at home. She was obviously interested in *that kind of thing*.

While we were riding on the escalator, a college-aged couple in front of us started flirting. They got closer and closer to each other, and then their faces touched.

"Ooh."

They totally kissed right in front of us.

"Don't look!" Fushimi covered my eyes. She'd clearly seen it, too.

"I wasn't looking on purpose."

"Wh-why do people do that in public…? Geez…" As expected from our class representative. She awkwardly turned to face me so she couldn't see them anymore.

"Well, it *is* almost Christmas," I pointed out. "Though I've never seen anyone do that right in front of me before, so I was pretty surprised."

"Yeah. It was kind of shocking…"

And yet it seemed she couldn't contain her curiosity. She kept glancing behind her the whole ride up.

Once we got upstairs, we looked around for the least crowded spot and wound up in a little café.

"We came here back in April, didn't we?" said Fushimi.

"Yeah." I remembered.

Come to think of it, that was the first time we went on something you could call a date.

The waiter showed us to our seats, and we looked over the menu

while we waited for them to take our order. I got coffee, and Fushimi got café au lait.

Soon, our drinks arrived, and Fushimi grabbed her mug with both hands and lifted it to her lips.

I found I didn't mind spending time in silence with Fushimi. Before, I'd thought Torigoe was the only one I felt that way about, but maybe I just wasn't over my time apart from Fushimi, and I'd gotten it in my head that silence meant awkwardness.

We chatted as we sipped our drinks. First, we talked about the play, then our friends at school, then about what we used to do for Christmas.

"I'm still not over Ai's acting…"

Eventually, the conversation looped back to the play. Fushimi had been praising Himeji nonstop, her tone full of envy.

By then, we'd finished our drinks. Fushimi headed to the bathroom, and I went up to the register to pay.

"You paid for both of us?" said Fushimi when she got back. "But mine was more expensive…"

"It's fine. I can pay for our dates."

"What? But I can't let you pay every time…"

I smiled wryly as she tried to hand me a bill from her wallet, and I stubbornly refused to take it. *She's so serious about stuff like this.*

"Okay, then how about you treat me next time?"

"Oh, well, I guess that's fine," she said, allowing us to reach a peaceful agreement. "You've really grown up, Ryou."

"Hey, you too. I had no idea you'd started reading sexy novels…"

"Th-they're romance novels! There's a difference!"

I doubt it.

All the couples around us were holding hands, and we did the same without thinking too much about it.

Once we'd left the mall, we thought about where to go next. Fushimi pointed at a building advertising karaoke.

"Mind if we go inside, Ryou?"

I had a vague idea of what she meant—she probably wanted to vent her frustration over Himeji's acting. I agreed, and we made our way to the karaoke place.

We paid at the reception desk and then walked to our assigned room. It was dark and cramped, with only a couch for two and a table. Once inside, we took off our coats and hung them up on the stand.

"Nice and cozy," said Fushimi.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, this couch is perfect for snuggling."

Wait, is that *why you wanted to come here…?* Indeed, the space was so small, we had no choice but to snuggle up together.

Fushimi grabbed the control tablet and entered two songs right away. I watched her profile as she sang in a sweet voice, one tone higher than her regular voice. I could see the display reflected faintly in her eyes.

"You do one, too, Ryou."

"Lemme see."

The first song that came to mind was the one she'd requested at the party before the school festival. It was a love song, and couples would replace the name "Rina" in the lyrics with the name of their sweetheart. When I first heard it, I never dreamed I'd be doing that myself one day.

Fushimi canceled her second song.

"Wait, are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes. I want to hear you."

Her eyes were sparkling with anticipation. I could feel her gaze boring into my cheek from the side. The pressure was immense.

When it came time, I did as she requested and changed the name *Rina* to *Hina*.

"Waaah!" "Hee-hee-hee!" "Aaaah!" "This is so embarrassing!" As I sang, she kept making excited comments and slapping my arm.

"Stop it, you're making it even more embarrassing."

"I promise you it's more embarrassing to be on the receiving end."

The song finally ended, and I put the mic down. By the second half, I'd gotten over my embarrassment and decided to just go for it, but my cheeks were still burning.

"The lyrics are so good. 'Hey, Rina, you're the only thing I need to

smile.’”

It was easy to dismiss the song as cliché, but I agreed with her.

“I want to be that to you, Ryou,” she said, resting her head on my shoulder.

I reached my arm around her neck, and her pink lips quivered, asking for attention. I tilted my head down to answer.

Between the noises from the TV—sound effects, and the voice of a minor celebrity introducing the latest hits—I could hear the vivid, wet sound of our kiss.

“We did it in public…” Fushimi’s eyes narrowed happily, and she flashed me a shy smile.

“We’re all alone in this room, so it doesn’t count.”

“R-really…? Then…one more.” I almost couldn’t hear her over some band’s music video playing on the TV.

We kissed a second time, then a third atop the cheap leather sofa. I could hear heavy breathing, but was it hers or mine? All I knew was that our faces were burning up. Was my breath all right after drinking that coffee? Fushimi didn’t seem to mind. She puckered her lips, asking for more.

We booked the room for one hour to do some light singing, but in the end, we only sang the first few songs. We spent the rest of the time so close together that even the tiny sofa felt huge. Before we knew it, our hour was up.

Back outside, the December breeze cooled us down again.

“What’re you doing for dinner?” I asked. As far as I knew, she didn’t have a strict curfew, but I figured I’d check.

“I don’t want to go home yet.”

“Then how about we have dinner together and then head home?”

Better text Mana and let her know, or I’ll get an earful.

We returned to the mall, and I left Fushimi for a moment to go to the bathroom.

Where should we eat…?

I brought up a mental map. Fast food seemed too cheap for a date; maybe for lunch, but not for dinner.

Then again, maybe it’s fine. It would probably put less pressure on her…

I still had no idea what Fushimi preferred at times like this.

Maybe asking Torigoe for help would be quicker.

"I guess I'll just ask her what she wants to eat, and then we can look for a place."

After finishing my business, I left the restroom. Fushimi was right outside, but for some reason, she was talking to some guy in his thirties.

Another playboy?!

I cleared my throat so I could get loud if I needed to. Then I took a deep breath and strode over to them.

"E-excuse me! Is something the matter?!" I asked, coming up to them from behind.

They both shivered in surprise.

"Ryou! You startled me…!"

"Ah, um, is this your boyfriend?"

"…Hee-hee. Yes…" Fushimi nodded bashfully and scratched her cheek.

"Oh, hello. I'm sorry for taking your girlfriend's time."

"That's okay. You weren't hitting on her, were you?" I glared daggers at the guy, and he waved his hands in a panic.

"No, no, no… Well, I guess it's kind of close. But no."

Was that supposed to be a riddle…?

I furrowed my brow, and he showed me his business card.

"My name is Mori, with Cast Stadium Office. We're a model and talent agency, and I was just chatting with your girlfriend about our work…"

I took a closer look at the business card. It seemed he was telling the truth.

Mr. Mori wore a neat, casual outfit. Apparently, his job title was Chief of Management Support.

"Oh. Sorry for jumping to conclusions."

"No worries. I know how it looked. You did nothing wrong," he said, chuckling. Then he turned back to Fushimi. "If you're interested, please call the number on the card. Well then, enjoy your date."

Fushimi bowed, then the man waved at us and left. I looked at

the card again, then glanced up at his back as he walked away.

"CSO… So it's a talent agency?" *Hold on a minute.* "Wait, were you getting scouted just now?"

"M-maybe. He just introduced himself and gave me his business card."

"I think that counts…"

Fushimi seemed to realize something and fished another card out of her wallet.

"Ah! Look! The one I got last time was also CSO." She showed me the card. "The one from Mr. Takashiro, back at the summer festival. He was from the same agency as Mr. Mori."

"Oh, right. He handed me one, too." I had no idea where I'd put it. I probably threw it away or lost it. "Maybe there's some sort of fate linking you to that company."

"You think…?"

"Hey, it's happened twice now. And this time a scout approached you personally."

"Doesn't that kind of thing only happen in Tokyo?"

"……I—I guess you have a point."

We could get to Tokyo by train, but we were still pretty far away. I had never heard of talent scouts going out into the sticks. Instead, the stories were always about celebrities being scouted on the streets of the big city.

"But then why would he give you his business card?"

"Because he wanted to contact me…personally?"

Fushimi was a lot more suspicious these days. She'd already had some weird agency's director try to take advantage of her.

"But in that case, wouldn't he give you his socials instead? A business card means it's for business."

"Maybe you're right." She stared intently at the card, thinking deeply.

If this had happened back during summer break, she would have gone for it without a second thought. It seemed she'd finally learned the move Think About It.

For now, I decided to ask her what she wanted to eat for dinner, and she suggested a famous chain serving Western-style food.

"I want some omelet rice, or pasta, or steak," she said.

"Wow, you're pretty hungry."

"Ha-ha. I didn't mean I'd eat all three."

We joined hands and walked to the closest franchise.

"The dessert here is good, and the price is reasonable," she said. "And don't you just feel like eating Western food around Christmas?"

"Well, it *is* a Western holiday."

We'd been seeing Christmas decorations all day, so it was no wonder Fushimi was feeling the holiday spirit.

We found the place we were after right on the main road and went inside. As we escaped the cold wind, Fushimi sighed in relief.

"We still have finals to do before Christmas…"

"And then entrance exams next year…"

We reached our seats, then stared into the distance for a moment, thinking about our tests.

"Let's have a party with everyone on Christmas," suggested Fushimi. "What do you say?"

"I thought you'd want to spend it together, just the two of us."

"I thought about it, but considering we'll be studying for entrance exams next year, this might be the last Christmas we can all hang out."

"You're right."

And besides, we could spend time alone together whenever we wanted.

I looked at the menu, then stole a glance at Fushimi. Back before the sports festival, she'd said she didn't need to rush to find an agency. It made sense for her to be wary after what had happened. But it was someone from the Thespian Academy who introduced Mr. Takashiro to her.

"Won't you at least hear him out?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Mr. Mori."

"Mm… I'm not sure. We have all those tests coming up… And then there's you…"

"Me?"

"I… I want to spend a lot of time with you…" Fushimi looked

down, and her ears turned red. *She's so cute.*

"I want to spend time with you, too."

"Horndog."

"Why would you say that? We're not doing anything dir—"

Memories of what happened in my room and at the karaoke place suddenly came rushing back to me.

I fell silent, and so did Fushimi. She was even redder than I was.

…Right.

We aren't just childhood friends hanging out anymore.

She's my girlfriend. I'm her boyfriend. It's only natural for two people who like each other to wind up doing stuff like that when they're together…

"See, you're already thinking dirty thoughts!" Fushimi cried.

"Keep your voice down. You're the one who said you wanted to spend time together."

"Oof. Yeah, I did."

"And you even said *a lot*."

"Hghh… So what?! I'm happy!"

"Well, yeah. Me too."

We giggled at each other.

Suddenly, I thought back to the reviews I'd received for my independent film.

My girlfriend was a talented actress, recognized by industry judges. She was attending an acting school.


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She was responsible and smart, and I couldn’t tie her down.

You couldn’t get things like looks and talent just by wishing.

I remembered how Fushimi had cried when she failed her audition; how jealous she still was of Himeji; how she stared out into the distance, yearning for what others had; how she worked so hard to achieve her goals.

I got the feeling she’d already made her decision.

“Well, you can at least ask if he was scouting you or not. If he wasn’t, then you can just move on.”

All I needed to do was give her a little push.

3 Studying and the Cold Wave

"Wasn't Aika amazing?"

It was the day after Himeji's first show. When I arrived at work, Mr. Matsuda greeted me with a big smile, then immediately launched into a discussion of the play.

"She was," I agreed. "I'd never seen a musical before. But it was fun, and Himeji's acting has really improved."

"I know, right?" Mr. Matsuda giggled and twirled on his chair like I was praising him. "But I get chills just thinking about what could've happened if you didn't come."

"I never thought of her as the type to get stage fright like that."

"Well, it's something you have to get used to."

Apparently, she was the same back when she first started as an idol. She'd had to slowly build her confidence before she could become the Lady Aika everyone knew.

"Oh, by the way, Aika told me that you're dating Fushimi now."

"Yes. We recently started going out." I'd been planning to tell him, so this saved me some time. "I'm currently thinking about what to get her for Christmas," I said casually while booting up my work PC.

Mr. Matsuda had good fashion sense, and I was hoping his feminine sensibilities would prove useful.

"Well, what could be a better gift than, *you know*?"

"What?"

"You know." He made a raunchy hand gesture.

I was expecting real advice from you, man. "I'm being serious."

"I'm always serious!" he shot back.

Why the heck are you getting mad at me?

"Ry, listen. Physical contact is important. You gotta put out."

"That's…uh, *blunt*." *I feel like we're already getting plenty of physical contact…* "We've only just started dating."

"So your little Ry isn't sc*rea*ming for attention yet?"

My what isn't what, now?

"But you're so young. Your hormones should be raging."

"Well, I guess I do want that kind of attention… But I don't want to make it seem like I'm just interested in her body."

"Oh, don't be silly." He twirled on his chair again. "I'm sure she's just dying to get hot and heavy." He was making dirty hand signs again.

Hot and heavy…?

An image of Fushimi half-naked and shooting me a bashful look popped into my mind.

"Y-you think…?"

It had crossed my mind before, but I was worried that if I made one wrong move, everything would fall apart. It was just too risky. It would definitely be better to give her a regular present.

As it turned out, Mr. Matsuda's advice couldn't have been more masculine. Still, I was grateful for it. The only other person I could ask about that sort of thing was Deguchi, and I couldn't ask him about Christmas presents or he'd get so jealous, he'd combust.

"Let me rephrase my question, then," I said. "What sort of *object* do you think would make a good present?"

"Just buy her something she likes."

"Not a lot of detail there."

"She'll be happy just knowing you're racking your brains thinking about what to get her. The actual gift isn't that important."

"You mean it's all about the feeling?"

"Yup. And this feeling, too."

"Put your hands down already!"

Mr. Matsuda was more into locker room talk than I'd expected, though he kept cackling the whole time.

We continued to talk as we worked, and he explained that he'd gone to the first showing personally to greet the play's staff and

various industry guests, but that his subordinates would be handling the subsequent showings.

"All sorts of people come to see plays like that, especially on the first day. Stage directors, TV and movie producers, and so on and so forth."

Mr. Matsuda gathered up a stack of documents and hit them against the desk to line up the edges. Then he beckoned for me to come over.

"The reception was just as good as I'd hoped. I think she'll be getting very busy."

He giggled, sounding satisfied. He might be terrible with computers, but he was a great judge of character.

"Here you go," he said, handing me the stack of paper. It looked like some sort of presentation.

"What's this?"

"Up until now, we've mostly outsourced music and promotional videos, but I'm thinking of creating a video production department in-house. It'll be expensive, but it should save us money in the long run. It will also give us more flexibility. You know how companies these days make official social media accounts and upload videos and all that? We'll be getting in on that stuff, too."

"Okay."

"That's it? You're kind of slow, you know that?"

"People tell me that a lot."

"I'm asking you to help establish the new department."

I looked up from the stack of papers. "Me? But I'm just a part-timer."

"Doesn't matter. You'll be my secretary *and* video creator!" He pointed his index finger at me.

"What?! When did I become your secretary?"

I was fine with being a video creator—it sounded pretty fun. But…did that mean I was his secretary right now?

"I'll hire you once you graduate. And I'll give you a juicy paycheck."

"J-juicy…?"

How much are we talking about, exactly?

I decided not to ask. If I started talking details, it'd become a done deal.

Mr. Matsuda moved his index finger against his thumb like he was rubbing two bills together. The look on his face was positively diabolical. I had to tread carefully.

"You'll get a taste of what it's like to be a pro, learn how to handle things in the field, and rack up loads of experience. I know you're frothing at the mouth already. And with you around, Aika won't be lon—"

"Wait, is that what you're *really* after?"

He wants to use me like some drug to keep Himeji calm.

"What's the problem? Do you know how hard it was to cheer that girl up after your school festival?"

Himeji needed cheering up…? That *Himeji?*

I couldn't picture it. I got the feeling she'd lash out if you so much as tried.

"Anyway, just think of it as adding a few more tasks to your plate," he said. "If there's something I think you can do, I'll show you the ropes."

"Okay."

"And I'll pay you properly for your work, so don't worry."

I'm not worried about that. You already paid me handsomely for Himeji's music video.

Mr. Matsuda was crafty, in a good way. Himeji was his number one priority, and he was hoping to use me as a tool to keep her motivated. But he saw more in me than just that. I could tell he also had tentative expectations for me as a creator.

"I feel like Himeji would be too proud to keep me around, though."

After all, I'd already chosen my other childhood friend.

"Do you really think that? Even after what happened yesterday?"

"I suppose you have a point…," I admitted, raising the white flag at last I wanted Himeji to succeed, and I got the feeling that going along with Mr. Matsuda's schemes would help her do her best. Besides, I was interested in the job itself, too.

In the end, I gave in and accepted.

I checked my phone after work and saw I had a missed call and a text from Fushimi.

The text said, I'll try giving them a call first.

She didn't specify who she was talking about, but I assumed it was the talent agency. Of course, she was interested—this was about her dream, her life's goal.

Calling them on the phone was probably a wise idea, considering her traumatic experience last time. I hoped this agency was a little more respectable…

"Oh, right!" I exclaimed.

I was still getting ready to leave, and I'd spoken out of the blue. Mr. Matsuda shot me a puzzled look. "What's up?"

"Do you know of an agency called CSO?"

"Of course. What about them?"

I explained what had happened the day before.

"Fushimi got scouted?" he asked. "That's not surprising, I suppose. There's something about that girl."

He had asked her to join his own agency in the past. The fact that another agency was expressing interest only proved he'd been right about her.

"So she decided to give them a call," I explained.

"I see. I would've loved to have her here. A shame." He shrugged, but he didn't seem too put out by it. "CSO is smaller than us, and they're more involved in the local scene. They mostly have models for ads and local entertainers, so I'm not sure it's quite what she's looking for."

I'd had no idea. I quickly looked them up online and saw they had multiple models and entertainers I'd never heard of.

I left the building and sent Fushimi a reply.

I asked Mr. Matsuda about them, and it sounds like they're not shady.

That was the extent of what I could do. The rest would depend on Fushimi's decision.

Her reply arrived faster than I expected.

We're going to meet up and talk in person. Mr. Takashiro will be there.

I didn't know what they'd discussed over the phone, but it sounded like Fushimi was pleased enough to continue talking.

Thanks for asking Mr. Matsuda! Thank goodness they're not shady!

Himeji might see the agency as small potatoes, but for Fushimi, it was another important step toward her goal.

As I walked to the nearest train station, I thought about how to reply.

Was Fushimi all right going with a local agency? Or did they talk about something else? Based on what I'd heard from Mr. Matsuda, it didn't sound like they handled much acting work.

Hope it goes well!

That was all I said.

As soon as I stepped off the train, Fushimi called me. It was almost as if she'd timed it.

"What's up?"

"Can you talk?"

"Yup. So, this Mori guy. He wasn't a weirdo?" I was also on high alert, considering what happened last time.

"He looks like a normal guy. He talked about what the agency does. He said they have models and entertainers that work in local ads and commercials…"

That was exactly what Mr. Matsuda had said.

"And what did you think? It sounds a little different from stage plays, movies, and TV."

"Yeaaah." She heaved a heavy sigh. Apparently, she'd been thinking the same thing. *"The only acting parts they handle are for docudramas and extras in TV shows when they film somewhere local. Ha-ha."*

Fushimi gave a breathy laugh. I could just see her bitter smile.

Considering Himeji's big success (on her first day, at least), the agency's work sounded especially insignificant. And Fushimi had almost made the audition for the play, too.

"But they said they get audition invitations, so maybe I could join them."

"Well, if you say so…" I almost said, *Yeah, why not?* But I

swallowed my words at the last moment.

Fushimi was my girlfriend, and we'd just started dating.

Himeji had skipped school to attend rehearsals—what if Fushimi got just as busy? The thought made me hesitate to give her that last push.

…No, I support Fushimi even more than Himeji.

I'd imagined we would do typical high school couple stuff once we started dating. But timing was important. You had to act when luck came your way.

I couldn't tie my precious girlfriend down.

"Yeah, why not?" I said.

"Cheer me up again if I fail another audition, okay?"

"My shoulder is always available."

She giggled.

Suddenly, I thought about my dad and Fushimi's mom, Satomi Ashihara. But before I could think any further, I heard Fushimi's voice in my ear.

"Hey, Ryou… Do you have anything to say to me?"

"What?" It didn't feel like she was cross-examining me. It sounded more like something she'd asked on a whim. "Not that I can think of…"

I had nothing to feel guilty about, and I hadn't told any big lies or anything.

"Hmmm. I feel like you do."

What was going on? It almost sounded like she had proof of me cheating and was waiting for me to fess up.

"I really have no idea what you're talking about."

"Hmmm, I see. Okay, then."

"Well, all right."

So in the end, it wasn't that important…?

Around then, I arrived back home. It seemed like a good stopping point, so we said good-bye, and I headed into the living room. The heat was on, and Mana was there, in short-shorts and bare feet, fiddling with her phone on the sofa.

"If you're cold, put on some pants," I said.

"But these are so cute."

"Why does that matter? There's no one here to see."

"Your fashion consciousness is so low, it'd be a waste of time trying to explain."

A waste of time…

She pointed at me with her pink pedicured toes. "Your fashion level is eight."

"What about Fushimi's?"

"After some recent leveling up, two."

"Wow. And that's after leveling up."

Mana laughed out loud, then said excitedly, "I heard the weather next week is gonna be awful. It's gonna snow like crazy!"

"That's rare around here."

"They said a nasty cold wave is gonna get us."

I decided now was a good time to weave the question on my mind into the conversation.

"Mana, if you were to get a Christmas present, what would you want?"

"Wha—?! You're giving me something?!" Her eyes shone like stars.

"No."

"No? Then why are you asking me, you weirdo?" Her mood quickly turned sour. *I said this was hypothetical!* "I think I deserve one, actually. For all I do for you every day."

"Thank you, Mana. I would be dead without your cooking." Essential utilities: gas, electricity, water, and Mana.

"You know what they call people like you? `*Tsunderes*.'" She giggled, then flipped over on the sofa.

I decided to cut right to the chase. "I was thinking of getting Fushimi a present. But I have no idea what to get her."

"Oh, so this is for Hina."

Mana lost all interest and began kicking her feet while looking at her phone.

"Any advice? You're my only hope, Mana. I need a fashionista at max level."

She glanced over at me and grinned. "I do like having my Bubby rely on me. Hmm, your first gift. How about silver jewelry? Cliché

but sweet.”

I had no idea that was cliché. It seemed I had a lot to learn.

“Is it okay to go with a cliché?”

“First, you go through all the clichés, then you think about changing things up. Go with something tried-and-true for starters. Then you can’t go wrong.”

“Thank you, merciful officer of the fashion police.”

“I’ll be waiting for my gift,” she said, blowing me a kiss.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Guess I’ll get her something, too. But I won’t tell her that yet.

The following week, Fushimi and I arrived at school together and saw Himeji surrounded by a crowd.

“Was I nervous? Not in the slightest!” she boasted, impressing all the girls around her.

Yeah right, you liar.

“Ai’s so popular,” said Fushimi.

“It’s just like back when she first transferred,” I agreed.

She’d joined our school right before the field trip. I was a little surprised to realize how much time had already passed.

Himeji’s seat was right next to mine, so I could hear what she and the other girls were saying.

“Did you start having feelings for the actor playing your love interest?”

“Were rehearsals hard?”

“Your singing was so good.”

Questions and praise rained down on her. She was really getting the main character treatment. And it was clear from her increasingly boastful tone how all this made her feel.

“Oh no, of course not. He’s just my coworker.”

The girls squealed at every smug remark.

“I was invited out for dinner a few times after rehearsals, but I said no.”

“Whaaa?” “Oh my god!” “Wooow!”

For someone like Himeji, who craved attention, it must have been paradise.

It wasn't every day you had a celebrity classmate, much less one who'd just done so well in a big part. Even if you didn't know about Himeji's past and weren't the type to obsess over stars, after a performance like that, anyone would want to talk to her.

"About yesterday," said Fushimi.

"You mean the agency?"

"Yup. I asked Mom about it."

She asked Ms. Ashihara? Her mother was a famous actress, and her relationship to Fushimi was at once close and distant. It made sense that she had her mother's contact details, but I was surprised she'd decided to ask her for advice.

"Set a thief to catch a thief, eh?" I said, before realizing it was a little rude.

Fushimi giggled. She must have had the same thought.

"Well, you're not wrong. Mom said that if I'm even a little bit interested, I should give it a try."

"Oh good. I'm glad you asked."

I was sure her mother's advice would be better encouragement than anything I could say.

Ms. Ashihara was pretty negative when it came to Fushimi's dream, but maybe she'd changed her mind after seeing her daughter's acting at the school festival.

"I'll be meeting with them tomorrow."

"I hope it goes well."

"Yeah!" Fushimi said, beaming.

I'd been right to encourage her.

"You see that smug look on Himeji's face?" said Torigoe, joining our group. "It's really something else, eh? I'd like to immortalize it in marble."

"Morning, Shii," said Fushimi. "Oh, I saw the movie you recommended!"

"Hey. What did you think?"

The two of them started talking excitedly. Once they reached a lull in the conversation, another girl called out to Fushimi, and she

left her seat. They seemed to be going to the restroom.

"Torigoe, what would you give Fushimi for Christmas?" The two of them had just been talking about the holiday, so it was an easy segue.

"I…" She thought for a moment before saying, "A book cover, maybe?"

"Oh, that's a great idea."

"Huh? Y-you think?" Torigoe sounded happy.

"I mean, it's related to her interests, it's practical, and it's not expensive enough to make her feel guilty."

"Yup, and it's perfect for when you don't want other people to know what you're reading on the train."

"You just say that because you're always reading BL."

"Yes, I am." Torigoe's expression was serious. She looked almost boastful.

"Anyway, I think that's a pretty good choice."

"But I don't think I'd like to get something like that from my boyfriend."

"Really?"

"I mean, I'd be happy to receive it, of course, but I think I'd want something a little extra. I mean, receiving a present from your boyfriend should feel a little different from receiving one from a friend."

Philosophizing so early in the morning, are we?

She had a point, though.

"But hey, the fact that you're so worried about it you're asking around for advice is kind of a present itself. I'd be really happy to hear that." I stared at her, and she continued, "In other words, you didn't just pick anything. You took the time to think about me and what I'd want, and…"

She started to trail off under the pressure of my gaze. I'd expected to hear something like that from Mr. Matsuda, but not from Torigoe.

"Wh-what? Got something to say?" she asked, indignant.

"I was just thinking about how you can be pretty girly sometimes."

"…Well, I *am* a girl." Torigoe looked away shyly and then returned to her seat.

Eventually, lunchtime arrived, and I headed to the physics room with Fushimi and Torigoe.

"You sure I'm not in the way?" Torigoe asked.

Fushimi and I looked at each other and shook our heads.

"We need you here to plan our Christmas party."

While that was true, I figured Fushimi was using it as an excuse so Torigoe wouldn't feel bad.

We talked about the date and time of the party, and what we wanted to do. Then, in the middle of our conversation, someone threw open the door.

"Wheeew! I'm saved!" It was Himeji. "I'm sick and tired of all the questions about my play."

Then why do you look like you're on cloud nine? Are you sure you wouldn't rather go back and be showered with their unending praise?

Himeji sighed and came over to sit with us.

"We were just talking about the Christmas party," Fushimi said.

"Please make sure it's a day when I don't have to perform," said Himeji. She looked at Fushimi with an aggressive smirk.

"Don't worry, we'll be checking with everyone, so nobody will have to miss it."

"I see." Himeji looked a little deflated when she didn't receive the usual counterattack.

"Just don't forget about our tests," said Torigoe.

Himeji and I blanched. Torigoe's grades were average, but Himeji and I had a real chance of failing.

I suspected Himeji was doing even worse than I was, since she'd been skipping school and leaving early for rehearsals.

"Himeji, wanna ask Mii for help?" suggested Torigoe.

"I can't stand people like her, but I suppose I can't refuse," she replied.

Shinohara… If only you could hear what your idol is saying about you.


©Fly



"I'll take care of you, Ryou," said Fushimi. She was giggling, but her eyes were dead serious. "I won't let a fellow class rep fail."

I was reminded of the time she tutored me before. Fushimi was always true to her word, and the ability to get things done was one of her strong points. That said, she sometimes went too far, especially when it came to tutoring me.

I guess it's back into the trenches… Usually, I'd be ecstatic at the chance to spend time alone with her. So why did I feel like crying?

"Why don't we make the Christmas party into a kind of post-exam celebration?" said Torigoe.

"I agree with Shizuka," said Himeji. "Besides, the twenty-fifth is during winter break."

If you failed your tests, you'd have to take supplementary lessons over the break.

…Is Himeji trying to avoid the twenty-fifth because she expects to fail?

"You've got way too much pride, Himeji," I said.

If she had to take extra lessons on the day of the party, she wouldn't just feel left out—everyone would realize that she'd failed.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." She turned away.

Torigoe's eyes met mine, and she shot me a wry smile. She must've been thinking the same thing.

As our tests loomed ever closer, and with Christmas party discussions still ongoing, my after-school study sessions with Fushimi began.

"I'll be studying on my own while I wait, so tell me when you've finished the problem."

At first, I'd assumed we wouldn't get much done. I figured that since we were dating, we'd start flirting as soon as we sat down together. But I'd underestimated Fushimi—she was much more serious than that.

"How did it go with the agency?" I asked as I worked. It had been a couple days since their scheduled meeting.

"We'll talk about it later."

She was always standoffish during study sessions like this. Unless it had to do with schoolwork, she wasn't going to engage.

We had one week left to study. It felt like a lot of time to me, but apparently, Fushimi didn't agree. She glanced at the clock, then at my work, and frowned.

"Mmm… We might not have enough time, at this rate," she said.

"No way, there's still plenty."

"Ryou, you've only done about ten percent of the problems covered on the exam."

All progress was good progress in my book. We only needed thirty points to pass, so I only had to cover 20 percent more. *Pretty good, right?*

"We need you to get an eighty, at least."

The light disappeared from my eyes, and I fell headlong into despair. I had a good chance of achieving my humble goal, but Fushimi wasn't going to accept a small victory. I sighed.

"Back to what you asked earlier," she said. "I decided to join them."

We were on the train home when she finally answered my question.

"Oh. So you don't mind that they're focused on local work and all that?"

"I can't say I don't mind, but apparently, it's pretty normal not to get big jobs like Ai's right from the start. I guess that makes sense, right? They said they'll look for acting jobs, and I want to try doing whatever they're able to offer me."

Himeji's big break was mostly thanks to her stint as an idol. She and Fushimi had both reached the final stages of the audition, but it would have been very unusual for someone without experience, like Fushimi, to end up being chosen. It was already impressive that she'd made it as far as she had without an agency. She clearly had the looks and the potential.

"Since I seemed open to joining, Mr. Mori even brought an offer with him."

"Oh, wow!"

Apparently, the guy who scouted her would become her manager. And if he'd already gotten her a job, he must have been pretty competent. However, Fushimi would be just one of the people he managed.

"I'm gonna be a hair model for this beauty parlor's ad in the free local newspaper."

"I can already imagine it."

Himeji would probably make fun of her if she found out.

"We're having a shoot on Sunday."

"Your first job, eh?"

"Yup. I'm pretty nervous!"

I wondered if they would cut her hair for the ad, but it sounded like they'd just be styling a wig for her to wear.

This means I'll be spared from studying on Sunday. I exhaled, but my relief didn't last long.

"So, since I'll be away on Sunday, we'll have to make up for it the day before."

"Hey, no fair."

"Don't try to get out of studying just because I have work. You've gotta make an effort on your own, okay?"

"Have mercy, please. When do I get to rest?"

"After exams are over, of course."

Don't look at me like I'm asking stupid questions. You're being way too harsh.

…And so Fushimi arrived at my house early on Saturday morning.

"Good morning, Ryou!"

She came into my room, walked up to my bed, and started shaking me. Then she ripped off my blanket and began trying every method imaginable to wake me up.

"C'mon… What time is it?" I checked my phone. It was eight. "It's like I have school…"

"No, it's not. I've given you an extra thirty minutes."

Not enough.

When she said we'd be studying, I didn't realize it would feel like I was in class even on the weekend.

…Wait. Does this mean we'll be at it for five to six hours?

"Unbelievable…"

I tried to pull the blanket back over me, but she grabbed it before I could.

"Mana made breakfast. Come downstairs, and then we'll study."

"I've heard the world 'study' so many times over the last few days that it's losing all meaning." *Stuhdee? Whassat?*

Fushimi got me up and pushed me out of the room.

I was finally getting to live the dream of having my childhood friend wake me up, and yet I didn't like it one bit.

Mana had breakfast ready in the dining room when I arrived.

"Hina's here really early," she said.

"She wants me to study."

"Ah…" From the look in her eyes, I guessed Fushimi had woken her up, too.

"Gonna keep each other warm?" said Mana, taking a sip of her miso soup. "Good thing I'm going out today."

"Looks like it's gonna snow." The TV was turned on to the weather, and I could see a snow mark next to today's date.

"Cool."

I think it's gonna be a little colder than that.

"Have fun studying. I'll be singing karaoke with my friends. We're having an early Christmas party."

"Karaoke? In the morning?"

"We're aiming for the before-noon special. We're gonna hang out at a café until then."

"Oh."

That sounded kind of pricey for a bunch of kids.

Oh yeah, I need to start shopping for presents once exams are over.

I stared vacantly at the TV while I ate breakfast, still half-asleep. Mana finished quickly and washed her dishes before leaving the dining room.

"It's already snowing!" she called out. "Bubby, c'mere!"

She beckoned for me to join her, but there were windows in the dining room, too.

"I can see it from in here."

Once I was done, I went upstairs and headed back to my room. After turning on the heat, I set up a folding table and opened my workbooks and textbooks.

"So we're picking back up from yesterday?" I asked.

"Oui," Fushimi replied.

I thought I deserved praise just for coming back and not running away. Fushimi said we'd study for an hour, then take a break, and that was exactly what we did. Then we did it again, and again.

"It's like we're studying for college entrance exams…," I muttered, lying listlessly on my bed during one of our breaks.

"Just think of this as practice for the real thing," said Fushimi with a smile. How could she be so positive?

I checked my phone and saw I had a text from Mana. She told me to warm up whatever I found in the fridge for lunch and that she was heading out.

You could've come up to say good-bye.

Maybe she didn't want to get in the way of our studies.

Just like last time, I'd had a tiny speck of hope that we might flirt again, but at this point, that didn't seem very likely.

We ate a simple lunch, then got back to work. Then we had another break, followed by more studying.

"What in the world am I doing…?" I was starting to lose my mind from all this schoolwork.

"We're studying, Ryou."

"Right… I was starting to think I was being tortured."

"Ha-ha. No way." Fushimi thought I was joking, but I was at least half serious.

Time wore on, and the sky turned dark. I could see snowfall through the cloudy window. I pushed it open and took a look outside. The snow from this morning had been piling up all day.

"It's been a while since we had snow that didn't melt around here."

"Whoa! You're right!"

Fushimi popped her head out beside mine. She exhaled, then jumped around excitedly like a little kid.

I got a text from Mana reading, I'm gonna be out all night.

"…Guess we'll have to order something," I said.

Mana's text had arrived just before dinner, meaning she hadn't prepared anything and I'd have to fend for myself.

"Mana's not coming back?"

"Nope. The *gyarus* are partying all night."

"What a delinquent…"

I wasn't sure staying out all night made someone a delinquent, but apparently it did in Fushimi's book.

"Why don't we have a little party ourselves?" she suggested.

"Wanna get some pizza?"

"Yeah!"

After staying in my room with Fushimi all day, I'd begun to feel like it was the only place in the world.

We were looking online, trying to decide where to get our pizza, when Fushimi was reminded of something.

"Ryou, what about your mom?"

"She texted me earlier. Her work got snowed in, and she's going to stay there overnight."

"…I see."

…She's stopped talking about studying. Does that mean we're done for today?

Relieved, I chose a pizza and placed our order.

"Look at you, getting delivery by yourself. You're such a grown-up, Ryou."

"Am I?"

I didn't do stuff like this that often, but it wasn't anything special.

The pizza arrived, and we shared it in my room. I felt a little bad about making the delivery person come all the way here in the snow.

"Oh, right. I gotta pay for my share," said Fushimi.

"Don't worry about it. Consider it your fee for tutoring me."

I still had plenty of money in my wallet, and if I didn't make up a good excuse, Fushimi would never give in.

"Aww, but…"

To keep her from insisting, I immediately changed the topic.

"So tomorrow's your first job, huh?"

"Yeah. I have to leave at the same time I normally would for

school."

That's early.

Fushimi talked about the agency and her work, then asked about my job. The pizza vanished as we chatted, and before we knew it, it had gotten pretty late.

Snow was everywhere outside, but thankfully, the Fushimi residence was only five minutes away by foot.

"I'll see you home," I said.

"Thanks."

I handed Fushimi her coat, then put on a down jacket—the warmest thing I owned. I couldn't be bothered to put on boots, though. I slipped on a pair of sneakers as we stepped outside, holding hands.

I shrank back at the cold wind, but the snowy scenery was gorgeous.

"Everything's all white," I said.

"Wow! It's snowing!"

"We already knew that."

I chuckled at Fushimi's excitement. I might've acted the same if I was alone.

I could hear the snow crunching under our feet.

"It doesn't feel so cold when we're holding hands," Fushimi remarked.

"Yeah."

We'd just left the warm house, so I wasn't sure if we'd be saying the same thing in another ten minutes.

"So, have you decided what to call me?"

This was something I'd been thinking about in the back of my mind for some time. I'd run several simulations and finally decided on something simple.

"Not 'Fushimi' and not 'Hinapi,' okay?" she said.

"I know… Is 'Hina' all right?"

"Good."

I felt like a dog getting their owner's permission.

We stopped by the park, and Fushimi crouched down to play with the snow.

…Wait a minute, is she…?

"Take this!"

As I'd expected, she chucked a snowball at me.

"Ah, wait!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

I managed to dodge and began making some ammo of my own, but Fushimi was faster.

"Fire!"

"Bweh?!" A ball even bigger than the last one hit my head. "It's freezing!"

"Ah-ha-ha!"

I was an easy target, crouching down. Fushimi held her sides and cackled.

"Hey," I said. "What if you punch today's studies out of my head?"

"That's easy. You'll just have to relearn it all."

"Can't you come up with a better alternative?"

She might be talking about academics, but her answer was so straightforward, it was almost stupid.

"Hup!" I threw a snowball at Fushimi.

Slam! She slapped it down.

"What *are* you, the final boss?" I cried.

"Call my name, Ryou." She threw the next ball gently, like we were playing catch. I caught it and threw it back.

"Hina."

"Nice. One more."

Our white breath melted into the air, our voices echoing in the silent neighborhood.

"Hina."

"Hee-hee. Good." Hina trudged over and wrapped her arms around me. "Ryou… I know we're already halfway there, but I don't wanna go home."

I brushed the snow off her hair and responded with a kiss. She sighed and smiled, and then we wrapped our cold hands together.

After that, we traced our steps back to my empty house, this time in silence.

We kept holding hands as we went upstairs. Back in my room, we

sighed as the leftover warmth from the heater greeted us.

Hina slowly closed the door. I reached for the light switch, but she caught my hand and held it, stopping me.

The room should've been pitch-black, but the snow was reflecting the streetlights, creating a glow a little different from moonlight. Hina seemed like she wanted to say something but didn't. I pulled her waist to mine and took off her coat with one hand.

Just before it hit the floor, our lips met. The rustling of my jacket as I took it off sounded incredibly loud. Our cheeks touched. They were so warm, despite being out in the cold only moments before.

I could see Hina's damp eyes even in the darkness. Her expression got me even more worked up, and I left all reason behind.

My lips brushed against hers, and then my tongue slipped inside.

"Mmm…!"

Hina responded in kind.

We didn't know what we were doing. It was an awkward, grown-up kiss. My mind and body went numb, except for the feeling of her lips and tongue.

I slid my hand from her waist up to her chest. For a moment, Hina froze. She seemed to come to some decision, however, and in the end, she gave in to my touch. I gently pulled her clothes away, and she covered her chest.

"…Don't stare too much," she said.

"I can't see very well in this light anyway."

"But you *can* see."

"Yeah."

"Not like there's much to look at…"

"They're cute."

"Idiot!"

I touched her gently, and Hina stiffened up. I could hear her breathing heavily. She couldn't keep standing, and she sat down on my bed, pulling me after her.

Even in the darkness I could tell she was blushing as I slowly positioned myself over her.

Suddenly, I was hit by a sense of déjà vu. Maybe Hina had been

ready for this ever since that last time.

She reached her arms around my neck and drew our lips back together.

I woke up to the sound of a cat's meow.

"Oh, nononononono!"

Or at least, I'd thought it was a cat. It was actually Fushimi. I opened my eyes and saw her beautiful white back.

"What's wrong…?" I asked.

My brain was still booting up as I watched her desperately fishing for her underwear.

"Ahh! It's bright, don't look!"

"But I saw last ni—"

A tissue box hit my face.

Hina finally found her underwear and put it on under the sheets so I wouldn't see. She hurriedly put on her clothes, ruining all the work she'd done carefully folding them the night before.

"Why're you in such a hurry…?"

"Work! I'm late!"

Her first job. It was today.

"S-seriously?! Shoot!"

"Do you understand why I'm screaming now?! Gosh, now what? Dad isn't home, so I'll have to run to the station!"

Hina finished getting dressed and grabbed her bag. She was about to run outside, but then she turned back.

"Ahh, I almost forgot! Good morning, Ryou!" She gave me a kiss.

"Stop wasting time!" I said, finally fully awake.

Hina was putting on her shoes at the entrance when I rushed downstairs and grabbed the key to my bike.

"Wait! I'll take you," I said.

"But it's all snowy outside."

"We can ride over the packed parts."


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It would still be slow going, but it was better than trying to run in the snow.

I pulled my bicycle up to the front door and got on.

"Hurry, Hina!"

"But Ryou, we can't ride togeth—"

"It's an emergency!"

That didn't make it legal, but after a moment of hesitation, Fushimi joined me.

Thankfully, the snow was melting, and you could already see the street in places. There were no cars around to get in our way, and we were able to choose the easiest places to ride.

I pushed down on the pedals and took off. Hina clung to my waist as we gained speed.

"Please don't run into the police please don't run into the police please don't…"

I ignored her pleas and sped up. "You're going to your first job straight from a man's house."

Objectively, this made her sound like quite the delinquent.

"I think that makes you worse than Mana," I said.

"Aw… B-but… I wanted to be *intimate* with you."

It was a real shame I couldn't see her face as she said that. She'd worded it in a roundabout way, but it was clear what she meant.

"So you *did* want to."

"Yes, shut up!" Hina slapped my back.

"Okay, okay. Sorry, I wasn't trying to be mean."

My breath was getting ragged from talking. That was when I noticed I was still in my pajamas.

Hina jumped off the bike as soon as we reached the station. "Thanks, Ryou! I think I'll make it!"

"Good luck."

"Bye!"

She waved and disappeared into the station. The train she needed was just arriving. *Right on time.*

I sighed in relief and was just starting to turn back when I saw a *gyaru* walk out of the same building.

"Oh, Bubby! Are you here to pick me up?" she asked, waving.

My little sister looked pretty energetic for someone who'd just pulled an all-nighter. It didn't seem like she'd seen Fushimi on her way out.

Let's roll with it.

"Yeah."

"That's so funny. You're in your jammies, and look at that bed hair! I think you coddle me a little too much." She was still in party mode. "How did you even know what train I got on? Were you just waiting here for me?"

"Uh, well, you see… Yeah." I was trying to dodge her question, but to her, it probably just looked like I was embarrassed.

"You waited for me in the cold right after waking up? You're so adorable, Bubby!" She ruffled my hair.

Stop treating me like a loyal dog.

Mana sat on my bike's luggage tray without hesitation.

Guess she doesn't care. Unlike Hina, who was losing her mind the whole way here.

"Let's go," I said.

"Ahoy! Go, Bubby, go!"

Thinking I'd waited for her in the cold must have made Mana pretty happy. She had even more energy now than when I first saw her.

4 Christmas Party

It was lunchtime, and Torigoe and I were alone in the physics room, just like old times. It was cold when we arrived, but now that the heating had been on for a little while, we were starting to feel pretty comfortable.

"So it's the beach gang going to the Christmas party," Torigoe said, chopsticks still in her mouth.

She'd kept on her scarf and thrown a blanket over her shoulders when we first came into the room, and hadn't yet taken them off.

"We don't want it to get too big, so I decided to stick with close friends only. It'll be me, Fushimi, you, Himeji, and Shinohara. Also Deguchi and Mana. I think that's everyone we need."

"Yup. Agreed. It should be a lot of fun."

Our group chat, titled "Beach Gang," was seeing activity for the first time in a while. After some back-and-forth in the chat, we decided to hold the party at a karaoke place that let us bring in our own food. Deguchi had already made the reservation.

"But first, we have to pass our exams," I said, my smile forced.

Torigoe hung her head. "Don't remind me. I've heard every subject is gonna be difficult this time around."

"Well, I've been studying."

"Don't brag about doing the bare minimum." Torigoe giggled.

"Hey, I'm working harder than ever before."

"Yeah, yeah, got it."

Hina's strict training was paying off, and even I could tell I was improving.

"So Hiina's fine not being with you today?" asked Torigoe. She

was confused about why I'd shown up to lunch alone.

"She said she didn't want to ghost her friends, so she's eating with other people today."

"How admirable. She's a real honors student." Torigoe's tone was equal parts sincere and sarcastic.

"That's just the kinda girl she is."

"Hiina's popularity with the other girls is exploding right now. They're super impressed she's still spending time with them despite having a boyfriend."

"They know?"

"You thought they didn't? People saw you leave together after Himeji's play. It was pretty obvious."

Torigoe finished saying her piece, then she went back to eating. She was stuffing her cheeks like a squirrel.

I'd figured the news about Hina and me would get out once I told Deguchi, but this was a little ridiculous. It just went to show how popular Hina was, with both boys and girls.

"And what do they think about her dating me?" I asked.

Torigoe had told me once before that she was on the class's group chat. She didn't strike me as the type, but it was a great source of information.

"No one's surprised. I think they were all expecting it."

I sighed in relief. "That's nice to hear. I was afraid they'd say I don't deserve her."

"No way," said Torigoe immediately.

"What? You sure?"

How could anyone think we're a good match?

She was a beautiful girl, well-known around school, and popular with everyone. And her performance at the school festival had earned her even more fans.

"You're like the leader of our class, and your short film won an award. Don't underestimate yourself."

Torigoe…! Do you really see me like that?

Somewhere deep down, I'd been worried she resented me for choosing Hina—that I might have lost a dear friend.

"Well, if you say so," I said. "That's good to hear."

“A few people aren’t too pleased, though. They’re saying you chose her based on her looks.”

“…”

I was reminded of the day of the closing party, when Torigoe stuck her head out of the window in the growing dark.

In the end, all you care about is looks!

“Oh, I don’t mean me, by the way. That’s what Mii said.”

“Shinohara?!”

She thought the same thing?

“That’s not true,” I said. “But I guess no one’s gonna listen to me now, huh?”

“I wonder.”

She tilted her thermos and poured the contents into the little cup that doubled as a top. White steam rose up from the surface as it hit the air. She could have drunk directly from the thermos, but I knew why she didn’t.

She brought it to her lips to take a sip, then put it right back down. “Ow, hot!”

“If thinking I chose her for her looks makes you feel better, go ahead. I don’t mind.”

“I just think I have a right to a sarcastic remark or two.”

“Do as you please.”

“Ha-ha-ha.” She laughed out loud.

I’d been worried we might never talk like this again. If it meant I was wrong, a few barbs were no big deal.

After that, we moved on to recent news. I told her about Hina’s first job, and we chatted about our New Year’s plans. Then Torigoe updated me on the progress of her novel. I was surprised how much we had to talk about.

Eventually, the door rattled open, and Hina appeared.

“It’s so warm in here!” she said.

“Come on in, Hiina.”

“You shouldn’t turn on the heating when there’s no class, you know.” I should have expected a scolding from the class rep.

“It was on when we got here,” said Torigoe. “The teacher probably forgot about it after fourth period.”

"Well, if you say so," said Hina, falling for the lie. *Torigoe's good.* "I see you two are as chummy as ever."

Hina was smiling, but there was something dark about her tone. I could practically see the black aura oozing out from her.

"R-really? I'm not sure I'd say that…," I replied, trying to weasel out of the situation. But Torigoe quickly chimed in, once again employing her "right to a sarcastic remark."

"We were always like this," she said. "Nothing's changed. If anything…it was you who got between us."

"Huh?" said Hina. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing." Torigoe turned around, a smirk on her face.

"Don't bully Hina," I said. "She's not used to it."

"You're using her first name now?" Torigoe blinked in surprise.

"Yeah, since the other day. Some stuff happened," Hina said proudly.

"Then you can call me Shizuka, Takamori."

"I'm not doing that."

"Too bad." She shrugged. Apparently, it was just a joke. "So, what's this 'stuff' that happened?"

"Huh?" Hina froze.

"Takamori must've been stubborn. He doesn't mind nicknames, but he's really resistant to first names."

Torigoe knew me well—it was true, I preferred to call people by their last names. It was pretty special for me to call someone by their first name.

"Nothing happened. Nothing at all." Hina shook her head.

You're making it so obvious… Aren't you an actress?

I resisted the urge to tease her, not wanting to spill the beans myself. Torigoe was sharp. She'd figure it out in no time.

"Reeeaaally?" she asked.

"We didn't get intimate or anything!" Hina cried.

"Hina, you can't just say…"

Torigoe's gonna see right through that euphemism.

Torigoe fell silent and blushed. She looked at Hina, then at me, then back to Hina.

"Uh. Uhhh…?"

She looked away, then back at us, then fell silent again.

She totally knows! I bet she just imagined us going at it!

"It's almost time for class," said Hina, looking at the clock. "We should go."

Torigoe and I stood up.

"Ahem." Torigoe cleared her throat. "T-Takamori… Just don't forget to use protection."

Our eyes met, and we both turned red.

The cat's out of the bag. Why'd you have to go and say that, Hina?

Torigoe had never had any qualms talking about sex before, but it seemed even she got embarrassed discussing it in front of someone with experience.

"Y-yeah," I said. I had indeed used protection.

"Shii, Ryou, let's go."

Students were starting to show up for their next class, and at Hina's urging, we finally headed out.

"…I thought couples usually waited a bit longer before doing stuff like that," said Torigoe.

It felt like she was attacking me for going too fast; I didn't know how to respond.

"I guess Hiina's an overachiever both as a student and as a girlfriend."

She wasn't too far off, actually.

Hina was very serious, and her love for me sometimes made her go a little too far. Like when she came into my room for the first time in years, or when we kissed over Golden Week, or when she sneaked into our room during the school field trip.

If it weren't for my trauma, we might've wound up doing it much earlier. She was just as serious about being my girlfriend as she was about academics, and that seriousness sometimes left her with regrets.

"It wasn't really Hina that came on to me…"

"P-please, I don't need the details." Torigoe slapped my arm.

"Hey, you brought it up," I said. "I thought you were curious."

"I am curious, but I didn't ask."

"…"

We saw Hina staring at us with a blank expression, so we stopped talking.

"*She's so scary!*" Torigoe whispered.

I nodded back discreetly.

◆ Shizuka Torigoe ◆

Lately, I was studying with Himeji every day after classes.

As we walked from school to the nearest library, people on the street would turn to look at her. I'd seen commercials for her play on TV, and rumors were spreading about her past as an idol. Her popularity was through the roof.

Some younger girls from our school waved at her and wished her good luck, and Himeji smiled back at them. As expected of an actress, she was good at PR.

As soon as we were alone, she put on a self-satisfied smirk. "Four shows left," she said.

"Oh, really?"

Himeji was bragging about how busy she was again. By now I was used to it. Stuff like this didn't even make me jealous; she should be telling Hiina instead.

We passed through a set of automatic doors into the library, then walked to the study room. It was full of students from other schools preparing for their entrance exams.

We came here to meet up with Mii.

"Lady Hime needs help studying again? Why, who better to help her than I…?!"

When Mii heard that Himeji and I were studying together, she was filled with a keen sense of duty, practically frothing at the mouth. Real fans were something else.

"I can't wait for the party," I said.

"Me neither. I'm going to destroy Hina at karaoke." Himeji smirked.

"*Easy now. We're supposed to be having fun*," I whispered back, careful not to disturb those around us.

"Don't you want to get back at her?"

I immediately knew what Himeji meant. She pursed her lips and said no more. I was probably the only person who knew how she was feeling.

She'd been getting ready for our study session, but now she paused, her hands suddenly still. I reached out and gently hugged her.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" she said.

"For now, we've only got each other for comfort."

"Please, I'm above such things…"

Despite what she said, she didn't let me go.

I'd been prepared for this outcome for a long, long time. I'd held on to a tiny shred of hope, but at the same time, I'd been getting myself ready for the inevitable.

Himeji was different.

She was too confident and proud. Maybe she'd been the exact opposite—almost completely sure he'd choose her, with only a tiny, stubborn sliver of doubt.

To borrow Himeji's words, we were as different as an ignorant frog stuck in a well and a killer whale swimming freely in the deep blue sea.

But despite her shock, she'd knocked it out of the park with her first show. I was impressed with her consummate professionalism. She hadn't let her sadness defeat her.

Or maybe her job was what kept her from sinking into depression. Himeji was proud, but she was also fragile. *What an adorable girl.*

I patted her back.

"Ah. Mii's here."

Himeji pushed me away the moment she saw Mii by the entrance. Faced with an avid fan, her expression was soon back to normal.

We waved Mii over, and she sat between us. It was time to get to work.

◆ Ryou Takamori ◆

"Oh, Hina's running late?"

It was the day of the Christmas party, and Mana was waiting for Hina to arrive, determined to give her the customary fashion check.

"She said she has work to do," I explained.

Mana checked her hair and clothes in the mirror by the entrance. I already had my shoes on, ready to go, but Mana ignored me and kept staring into the mirror.

"Hina's a star all of a sudden, huh?"

"I guess."

"You must feel pretty cool, as her boyfriend!"

"I dunno about that, but I was hoping she'd be successful."

"How mature! …Okay, all done!" Mana held on to my shoulder as she put on her boots. "Spend a lot of time with her, and give her a lot of kisses, m'kay, Bubby?"

"Why?"

We stepped outside just as Himeji was about to ring the bell.

"Right, Ai?" said Mana.

"Right what?"

"Hina's gonna be late today because of work," I said.

"Already acting like a star?" Hah!" Himeji snorted.

Hina had only recently told Himeji about her new agency and her job as a hairstyle model. Himeji had reacted much the same as she had just now. Needless to say, they'd started arguing immediately.

"What is it this time?" she asked. "Hair model for a free newspaper again?"

"I didn't ask."

I stepped outside, and the two girls followed.

"Now *you've* got a sense of style, Ai," said Mana.

"Heh. Of course." Himeji smirked and started bragging about her clothes. I barely understood anything she said, but Mana did.

"Oh yeah, that brand is so cute," she said. "I wish I had the money!"

"You hear that, Ryou?"

"Yeah, yeah. We'll see," I said vaguely.

The truth was, I'd bought something for Mana when I bought Hina's present. Whether she'd like it was another matter.

I'd been able to afford it thanks to my new responsibilities at work. With the start of my video editing job, Mr. Matsuda had added a little extra on top of my regular paycheck. I was shocked at how much he gave me for such a simple task, but he claimed most people made even more.

That was why I could afford to more or less empty my pockets at the moment. Next month, I'd have more than twice this month's salary in my bank account. There was no need for me to worry about overspending.

The three of us rode the train all the way downtown. We were meeting up at the karaoke place, so we headed straight there.

"Ryou," said Himeji. "Mr. Matsuda said, and I quote, '*Oh, why doesn't Ry just join the companyyy?*'" Himeji had known him for a long time and was good at mimicking his delivery.

"I know. He's so obviously setting me up. Giving me good equipment, a job I'm interested in, a sense of accomplishment, good pay…"

Wait a second, what's the drawback?

"Setting you up for paradise?" Mana cackled.

"I agree with him," said Himeji. "If you don't have any complaints, you should join up."

"I appreciate it, but I still want to go to college."

I'd told Mr. Matsuda the same thing. I'd even asked to take a break next summer so I could focus on entrance exams.

If I kept going like this, I'd be in too deep to get out. I'd intended to quit after summer break.

"Mr. Matsuda might be a calculating adult," said Himeji, "but he has a good eye for valuable people, and that includes you and me."

I was happy to have my work acknowledged, of course.

"Well, if I end up changing my mind, I'll let you know," I said, putting an end to the topic.

The others—Torigoe, Shinohara, and Deguchi—were already at the karaoke place.

Torigoe looked around. “So Hiina’s arriving late?”

“She’s just scared I’ll crush her in our competition,” said Himeji.

“You know that’s not true,” I replied.

“We’re already checked in, let’s go!” said Deguchi. He led the way, carrying a bunch of snacks.

Shinohara held a paper bag with the care of a mother protecting her chick.

That’s the cake, huh? Wouldn’t it be safer in a fridge than in your hands?

And lo and behold, there was a small fridge in the party room. Shinohara put the cake inside, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

The room was about fifty square feet, with a large display bigger than my TV at home and plenty of lights on the ceiling.

“Takayan, did you bring it?”

I shot Deguchi a thumbs-up. He raised his hand, and I gave him a high five.

I’d finished editing the video he’d been asking for, from when we went to the beach. The plan was to play it today. Of course, I hadn’t made the pervy cut Deguchi wanted. I’d made a heartwarming compilation of our summer memories for everyone’s enjoyment.

“If we connect this cable to your phone, we can put it up on the big display.” Deguchi showed me the cable he’d brought, and we both nodded.

“What’re you drinking, Bubby?”

“I’ll get it later. Just leave my cup.”

“Stop acting like a big shot in front of your friends!”

I totally wasn’t embarrassed to have my sister coddling me in public… Definitely.

Mana went around asking everyone what drinks they wanted. She was so considerate. I ended up helping her out, and we filled up everyone’s cup and headed back to the room.

“Oh, right, Mii, did you bring the lighter?” asked Torigoe.

“Don’t worry, I have everything.”

“Wait. Boss, you smoke?” asked Mana.

“I don’t smoke! And how many times have I told you not to call me ‘Boss’…?!” Shinohara frowned, and Mana giggled and apologized.

"This is pretty fancy," said Himeji, looking around at our setup.

"Yeah," I replied.

Hina had suggested the idea, but in the end, Deguchi wound up arranging everything.

"Why is the cake in the fridge all wrapped up like we're not supposed to see it?" Himeji cocked her head to the side.

"I know, right?"

I knew why. I was just playing along.

There was no need to hide a Christmas cake. But that wasn't what this cake was for. When the others had told me the plan, I'd agreed immediately. Obviously, it wasn't a cake celebrating Hina and me getting together. Someone here would be pretty mad if it was. And this cake was for *them*.

"Let's not worry about it, though," I said.

"But I didn't pay enough for a cake," Himeji insisted. "And I'm the one with the most money."

No need to brag, okay?

Himeji was the type of person who sounded like she was showing off even when she wasn't.

"I think we're supposed to chip in later."

Our budget was for more than just karaoke and snacks, and I was pretty sure the amount Deguchi had told Himeji was significantly lower than what the rest of us had paid.

"Well, okay." Himeji didn't sound entirely convinced, but she let the matter go.

Everyone sat down on the couch, drinks in hand, and Deguchi stood at the front with the mic.

"Ahem, ahem, testing. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for gathering here on this holy day, the nativity of yours truly."

"It's not your birthday!" I shouted.

"Just say cheers, Degu!" added Mana.

"My friend Takayan found happiness amid the heartbreak of the school festival, but I am left alone in the stinging December wind… Please enjoy the following piece."

"Stop being dramatic."

"Get off the stage, Degu!"

We played along and heckled him.

"Is this a comedy routine?" Torigoe murmured.

Himeji got tired of waiting and gulped down her juice. The moment her cup was empty, Shinohara attacked.

"Do you want more orange juice, Lady Hime?"

"I want tea."

"Tea it is." Shinohara skipped over to the door.

"Don't spoil her, Shinohara," I said.

"What's the problem?! I want to spoil her!"

"ManaMana, you have entrance exams next year, right?" said Torigoe. "Don't you need to study?"

"Nah. I've got this. I'll be going to your school, Shizu."

"Oh, really?"

The party was beginning, and Deguchi still hadn't gotten to say cheers.

"Stop it! No more partying until I say cheers!" he shouted.

"Just give up, man," I said.

"You guys are like dogs that haven't learned to stay."

"No one's listening."

"CHEEEEEERS!!" He shouted with all his heart, but no one was paying any attention.

Mana and Torigoe were chatting about exams, and Shinohara was enthusiastically serving Himeji as the latter talked about her job.

"Takayan, let's sing."

I guess this is the perfect time, since everyone's distracted. We'll be like background music.

"Why do girls talk so much?" he asked.


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I agreed, but if I said that out loud, I'd be in for trouble. I cocked my head ambiguously.

"Whaaa? Who doesn't like talking love?" said Mana. "Degu, you didn't really like Shizu, did you? You didn't care who it was, as long as they liked you."

"It's not nice to talk about that here, Mana!" Torigoe shot back.

"Huh?! Shii?! When did that happen?!" Shinohara was breathing so heavily, her glasses fogged up.

"He just asked me to join him for the closing party dance… It's nothing." Torigoe seemed a little taken aback by her friend's outsized reaction.

"Closing festival dance?" Shinohara repeated.

"Asking someone to the closing party dance is tantamount to a declaration of love," Himeji explained.

"Wow! Oh my goodness!" Shinohara sounded like a housewife busy at the rumor mill.

"And then he asked her for advice about a different girl," said Mana. "See why I'm angry?"

"Well, Deguchi's obviously the type who will go with anyone, as long as they have a hole." Torigoe was clearly even angrier.

"By the way, Ryou, do you know how many people asked *me* out?" Himeji smirked.

"No."

She put forward both hands, with all her fingers extended.

Ten?! Wow.

"Eight."

"Can't you count?"

I guess the gesture was unrelated.

"First-years, second-years, third-years. All kinds of guys. And I turned them all down!"

There was something nasty about her tone. She was smiling, but her eyes were cold.

"So anyway," I said, recapping. "The tradition at our school is to ask the person you like to dance."

"Coed schools sound so fun…" Shinohara's glasses fogged up again as she hung her head. There probably wasn't a lot of talk

about dating boys at her private girls' school.

Following that, she chose a song about heartbreak. Himeji crossed her arms and legs and listened like she was a judge.

"I, the queen of heartbreak songs, shall show you how it's done next," she said.

"Nobody asked for that," I quipped. "Just focus on having fun."

"You have no right to complain."

Himeji grabbed the tablet and picked a song—about heartbreak, of course.

Mana and Torigoe glanced at me, then looked at Himeji with pathos.

……This is awkward. Hurry up and save me, Hina.

I grabbed a bunch of chips and threw them in my mouth, pretending I didn't notice the girls' expressions.

"I'll sing a sad one, too, then," said Mana. "Wanna join, Shizu?"

"Sure. Is it one I know?"

"You'll know it."

"I think I'll sing one, too," said Deguchi.

"Don't be a poser. Your heart's not broken."

According to Mana, Deguchi had tried his hand with multiple other girls after Torigoe turned him down, and thus his heartbreak didn't count.

"Hey, you don't get to decide whether my heart's broken or not!"

I turned to Deguchi, taking pity on him. "Wanna sing together?"

Deguchi looked at me, his eyes as big as saucers. "I'm not letting a happy guy with a girlfriend sing this!"

Come on, man.

Himeji stood at the front and began to sing. She was even improvising some dance moves. *Is she looking at me?*

She'd had voice training and was always pretty good. But now she was even better. She sang slowly, pouring her emotions into her voice.

Deguchi, Mana, and Torigoe were lost in her song. Only Shinohara was clapping along to the rhythm.

I don't think this is the kind of song you clap to…

After a while, the clapping stopped, and I turned to check on her.

She was crying and waving her hand as if she were holding a penlight. She looked like a die-hard fan at a concert.

"Lady Hime's voice penetrates my heart and echoes in my soul…," she muttered.

Considering how you cried at the play, too, I think your heart might be a little too soft.

Just then, I saw someone peek through the window in the door.

Isn't that…?

Hina opened the door and stepped inside. Everyone turned to look, and she put her hands together in apology.

Himeji shot her a sharp glare as the interlude began. "Hina. This is a duel."

"All right! Let's do it! You have to buy me a drink if you lose."

"You think a frog in a well can defeat me?"

Hina took the seat next to me—the spot Himeji had been sitting in before she got up.

"Hey. How was work?" I asked.

"I have a lot to tell you, but let's wait until later."

From the look on her face, it didn't seem like anything bad.

The song ended, and Shinohara started clapping furiously. After a few moments, the other three snapped out of their trance and joined in.

"Himejima, you're amazing," said Deguchi. "A real pro."

"I mean, she is a former idol and the current star of a musical!" said Mana as she looked for a song. Torigoe nodded.

"Have you sung yet, Ryou?" asked Hina.

"Not yet."

"Let's sing together, then. A fun one."

"That's not really the mood in the room right now."

"Hmm?" Hina looked at me in confusion, as Himeji came back and forced her butt into the tiny space between us. "H-hey, Ai!"

"What? I just came back to my seat."

Hina could tell Himeji was trying to pick a fight.

Himeji *had* been sitting beside me, but there was an open spot right on my other side, between me and Deguchi. She'd chosen this side on purpose.

“Congratulations on your show and all,” said Hina, “but I don’t think this is very professional. You’re just like those shameless ladies on the train.”

Oh yeah. There’s always that one lady who forces her way into a seat.

“Oh, sorry, I don’t take the train to work, so I wouldn’t know. Don’t tell me you’re still using public transit? Oh, poor you. I wish you the best in your hair model endeavors.” Himeji was letting it all out.

“Stop fighting,” I warned. But once they got started, it was a lost cause.

“You don’t even know what you’re missing as a hair model. It’s so fun trying out a bunch of different styles.”

“Heh. Good for you. How much are you getting paid? Like one hundred yen?”

“That’s low… You can make fun of me, but not my job.”

This was nothing new for me, but Deguchi and Shinohara weren’t used to it, and it showed on their faces. Mana and Torigoe didn’t mind, however. They’d already started their song.

I ignored the argument and listened to our friends sing while enjoying some snacks and juice.

“You should sing something with Bubby, Shizu.”

“Th-that’s okay, ManaMana.”

“You don’t want to?”

“I value my life.”

Just then, Mana noticed the look on Hina’s face. She had the stern expression of an ascetic monk, back from years of rigorous training.

“What’re you gonna do about it, Hina?” asked Mana.

“Nothing.”

“If you end up in a different class next year, are you gonna glare at everyone like that every time you see them?”

“Hngh…”

“You can’t ask him not to talk to other girls. You gotta let him sing with Shizu at least, or you’ll die of jealousy.”

It was a reasonable argument. Hina pressed her lips together.

She knew I was close with Torigoe. That was probably why she was so wary.

Himeji felt like she was receiving backup and nodded dramatically.

"You'll get used to it. It'll just take some time," said Torigoe.

Her comment eased the mood somewhat, and Deguchi chose that moment to cut in.

"Well, now that we're all in a great mood…"

"I'm not sure I'd call it 'great.'"

"Takayan, just go with the flow!"

"Oh, sorry."

It had been a few minutes since Hina had arrived. I knew where Deguchi was going.

"Takayan, stand by."

"Yes, boss."

The girls looked at us, wondering what we were about to do.

I opened the video file on my phone. It was pretty large. Meanwhile, Deguchi plugged the cable into the room's display. We turned off the lights, and the room sank into darkness.

"R-ready, Takayan? This is gonna work, right?"

"No idea."

Deguchi handed me the other end of the cable, and I plugged it into my phone.

I fiddled with the settings, and then my background showed up on the screen. It had worked.

"What are you doing, Ryou?" asked Hina.

"Remember when all of us hung out before?" Nobody except Deguchi knew where I was going; they all nodded vaguely.

"We went to the beach, remember?" said Deguchi. "For the film. We got up super early to take the train."

Gradually, everyone caught on, and their expressions changed.

"I edited a video of our trip," I explained. "I'm about to play it for you."

The room fell silent, and everyone watched expectantly.

D-don't worry. There's nothing weird in the video. There was no reason for anyone to criticize me. *Though I guess everyone except*

Torigoe is in their swimsuit for the second half.

My phone screen was mirrored on the display. I expanded the app with the video and pressed play.

It was like a behind-the-scenes video set against sand, sea, and sky. Hina and Himeji looked very serious as Mana did their makeup and checked their clothes with a thoughtful frown.

"Whoa! This really takes me back!" Mana exclaimed, already nostalgic. "Ai and Hina look so serious."

"So do you," I said.

The video kept going, and Deguchi appeared in the corner.

"Stop recording me, Takayan!"

"You just ran into the frame. What're you, a deer in the road?"

Everyone in the room giggled and shared their memories of the trip.

"The wind was so strong," said Mana. "I worked so hard doing their hair, and it all went wrong in seconds. I was, like, this is so *over*."

"Yeah, I remember feeling bad that you had to keep fixing it," said Hina.

"And Hina kept asking for retakes," commented Himeji.

Hina turned to her. "And your acting was like cardboard, Ai."

"What? You got a problem with that?"

"Nope."

In the video, Shinohara was clinging to her beloved Aika like a shadow.

"Mii, that's how a stalker acts," said Torigoe. "You're gonna get arrested."

"Hey, this is nothing," she replied.

Himeji hadn't been aware of it back then, and now she was getting a little creeped out.

Back at the beach, Mana made lunch for everyone. I'd been with Hina by the rocks.

"Takayan, Takayan. I had the camera for a bit, right? That must be coming up soon." Deguchi chortled.

"Oh yeah. That. I cut most of that stuff."

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-why?!"

Deguchi had been working the camera with his lower half. He'd filmed the girls in their swimsuits, focusing mainly on their chests, their armpits as they jumped around, their sandy butt cheeks, and their sunlit white thighs. I couldn't show the others any of that.

Soon lunch was over, and everyone started playing around. This was where Deguchi would have taken the camera if I hadn't cut it all. The only part I'd kept was some footage of Torigoe wearing a hoodie.

Everyone in the video seemed happy. We'd had a lot of fun, and I was glad we'd gone.

"Omigosh, I wanna go again!" Mana said, speaking for everyone. "This time, you've gotta take off your hoodie, Shizu."

"N-no, I'm fine."

"Don't let those giant titties go to waste, girl!"

"D-don't say that!" Torigoe twisted her torso away from Mana.

"Some treasure is more valuable for being hidden," said Deguchi. He had the tone of a philosopher, but his argument was unbelievably shallow.

Evening arrived in the video, and we brought out the fireworks. We'd started passing the camera around, so I showed up on-screen from time to time.

Eventually, the video came to an end.

"That was very nice," commented Himeji.

"I'm glad you liked it," I said.

Deguchi grabbed my shoulder. "Takayan, I am not giving up."

"Get over it. I already deleted it."

"*Oh my god, nooo…*" Deguchi clutched his head in despair.

We were all in the perfect mood to break out the cake. But this was no Christmas cake. No—it was to celebrate the success of Himeji's show.

Shinohara nervously got the cake out of the fridge, then opened the box as if it contained a fine piece of glasswork.

"Christmas cake! Wait, no?"

Himeji realized what was going on instantly. After all, the cake had a little plaque, reading "*Congratulations, Aika!*" Himeji looked right, then left, hoping for an explanation.

"Now that your play is over, it just felt like the right time," I said.

"…You did this for me?" She looked around and fidgeted. Everyone nodded.

I'd expected her to say, *"I already had a cake with my coworkers, so you really didn't need to."* But she completely betrayed my expectations.

"Thank…you," she said, clearly moved.

Deguchi bashfully rubbed his upper lip with a finger. *No one does that anymore, man.*

"It was Shinohara's idea," he said.

Shinohara looked like she was about to cry in the face of Himeji's sincere gratitude.


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"Thank you, Minami."

"I-it's nothing. You did great, Lady Hime."

"The play was super good, Ai," said Mana. "It was the first time I'd ever seen something like that, and I loved it."

"At first, I thought I would feel sad watching a play I was almost part of, but that wasn't the case," said Hina. "Your acting made me forget all about that. Congratulations."

"I already told you what I thought via text," Torigoe said succinctly.

"Oh yeah. That essay. Let me see…" Himeji brought up her phone to look for it, and Torigoe snatched it away.

"Do not read it in front of the others."

"I was joking!"

Himeji glanced at me. *Looking for my thoughts?*

"I can still remember Mr. Matsuda coming to me, white as a sheet. And despite all that, your acting and singing was incredible. I was so impressed. You've got grit."

"Can't you praise me without making fun of me? Sheesh," she said, but she was smiling.

Everyone was curious about my mention of Mr. Matsuda, but no one asked.

"Saving the best for last, eh?"

Deguchi stood up, ready to give his speech, but Himeji interrupted him to thank everyone again.

"Thank you for doing this for me even though the party is for everyone. I was not expecting this. I mean it."

"You're so cute when you're being honest," said Mana.

"Yup," said Hina. "Especially since she has such a big mouth most of the time."

These two comments brought Himeji back to Earth.

"I can hear you," she said.

"Yeah, she's usually so arrogant," Torigoe murmured.

"Shizuka." *She heard that, too.*

Everyone laughed out loud.

Hina went out to borrow a knife, while Torigoe and Mana prepared the paper plates and drinks.

Deguchi was left behind, deflated. “Hey, Takayan, I was going to say something really nice…”

“Looks like she doesn’t care.” Or maybe she just forgot about him.

Hina came back, and Mana sliced the cake. Once the knife was in my sister’s hands, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Congratulations, Himeji.”

We made a toast and had our cake.

Once our time was up, we cleaned up and headed out.

Hina and Himeji had their karaoke match, and Himeji won three to two.

“You’re on for a rematch, Ai!” said Hina.

“It’s futile. I’ll only win again.”

Himeji had boasted about crushing her before, but Hina had put up more of a fight than she’d expected, and Himeji was hoping to avoid a rematch.

We all walked back to the station together, and Hina told me about her work.

“I’m going to be in a commercial for a local company. We had a meeting for it today.”

“What? A commercial?”

“For the web. I won’t be on TV or anything.”

“But hey, that’s a big step up from hair model.”

“It doesn’t really feel like it, since it’s just a local company.”

Himeji’s ears perked up at the word *commercial*, but she lost interest again after hearing *local company* and *web*.

“It seems like the agency is expecting big things from you.”

“You think? I don’t know what’s normal, but I hope so.”

Hina was smiling from ear to ear.

5 Eve

It was the week after our exams, and the results were in.

The teachers handed out our papers with stern faces. Apparently, the averages were low in every subject.

"Those tests were hard, right?" I asked Hina after classes. I figured she probably knew better than anyone else.

"A bit, but not *that* difficult."

Well, shoot. I guess this isn't even hard mode for a star student like her.

I'd beaten the average, but I only reached Hina's goal of eighty points in a single subject. She gave me the okay despite this, however, and it looked like I'd be free from her lessons for a while. As far as I was concerned, I'd passed with flying colors.

Incidentally, Himeji kept her scores secret. I couldn't even manage to get a peek; she put up an iron defense. That couldn't be good news. Yet she wasn't bummed out at all. Apparently, she'd accepted her fate.

Good luck in make-up classes hell.

We gathered for an especially long homeroom; Waka's face was just as dark as it had been during class, and she spent the time discussing the following year's entrance exams and how busy the third-years were at the moment.

"I'd been letting it slide since our class did so well in the school festival and had a higher average than the other classes, but I think it's time. We're doing a seat change."

Those happy with their current seats booed in objection, while those who were unhappy clapped in joy.

“Miss, I don’t think seats have anything to do with test scores,” Hina pointed out, objecting indirectly.

“You’re not focusing during class.”

I felt like changing seats wasn’t a surefire way to fix that, but it seemed Waka had made up her mind.

“We’re drawing lots. Line up.” Waka turned to the blackboard and assigned numbers to each seat.

“Ryou.” Hina gave me a sad look.

“That’s what you get for flirting in class.” Himeji stuck out her tongue.

Hina leaned over her desk and shot back, “We do not flirt in class!”

“Yeah, sure. I see you guys poking each other all the time.”

“That doesn’t count as flirting, does it, Ryou?”

“You’re just numb to it because you’ve gone so much further. You’re such a horndog, Hina.”

“Hngh…” Hina turned beet red.

“Changing seats has nothing to do with flirting,” I said. “And I got pretty good grades, unlike a certain someone whose scores were abysmal.”

“You don’t know that,” Himeji countered.

“Show me, then.”

“Sorry, it’s my turn.” Himeji stood up and walked to the teacher’s desk to draw her lot.

Next, it was my turn, then Hina’s. I looked at my number, then checked the blackboard. I was moving two seats to the left.

“We’re drifting apart…” Hina frowned as she looked at my number. “I’m gonna be lonely.”

“Yeah.” I reached out to pat her head, then remembered we were at school and stopped myself.

“Don’t be dramatic, you’re still in the same classroom.” Himeji heaved a heavy sigh.

After the move, Himeji ended up to my right, with Torigoe in front of me. Deguchi was to her right.

“We’re neighbors again,” said Himeji.

“Yeah.”

“Nice. I’m with Takamori and Himeji.” Torigoe was downplaying it, but she seemed pretty happy.

Meanwhile, Hina was far away in a corner, all alone. She watched us with sad, puppy-dog eyes.

On our way home, she continued complaining. “What a ridiculous excuse. There’s no way grades are going to improve just because we changed seats.”

I agreed. “Waka probably just wants to keep us on edge so we don’t slack off before entrance exams.”

“I guess.” Hina puffed out her cheeks.

I poked one of them. “Stop it!” she said, but she clearly wasn’t bothered. She giggled as if I’d tickled her.

It was freezing outside, so we held hands to keep warm.

“The back of my hand is cold,” Hina said, then stuffed both our hands in my pocket.

She was right. I already felt warmer. But it would be embarrassing if anyone saw us.

“Any plans for tomorrow?” I asked.

“I have a shoot.”

“Oh, the one you were talking about?”

“Yeah. The schedule was pretty tight, and they decided to move it up,” she said apologetically.

It was Christmas Eve tomorrow. I’d thought for sure she would have the day open. But it was only natural for her to prioritize her job. It might be just a web ad for a local company, but she was finally getting to act in a commercial.

“No worries,” I said. “Do your best.”

“Yeah, thanks! Look forward to it!”

“When is it going up?”

“They said it’ll be in January.”

“Wow, only next month? And you’re shooting tomorrow?”

After working for Mr. Matsuda, I’d realized how early production began for projects like that. Most of them started at least half a year in advance.

“Big companies have to start things way ahead of time, but my agency and the company I’m shooting for are pretty tiny, so we can

get everything done a lot quicker."

That made sense. A local ad would have a much smaller budget than the kind of ads that ran all over the country.

Still, what a shame. We had our last day of school tomorrow, and I'd wanted to go on a date in the evening and give her my present.

I guess I'll go to work, too, then.

I saw Hina home, looked around to make sure no one was watching, and gave her a kiss at the door. She beamed, and I waited until she was inside before I headed home.

"Just so you know, I'm free tomorrow," said a certain middle-school *gyaru* the moment she saw her brother walk in the door. Today had been her last day of school. She peeked at me while browsing her phone.

"Well, I'm not." I'd asked Mr. Matsuda if there was any work to do on my way home, and he'd said yes.

"Oh, so you can't go out with your adorable little sister now that you have a girlfriend?" Mana booed.

"I'm not that enamored with you."

"You say that, but you were so lonely without me that you came all the way to the station to pick me up."

She must've been over the moon. Mana had been bringing up the incident constantly.

"You just want a present."

"That's not true at all!"

I could see right through her.

"Come on, Mana. Who do you take your Bubby for?"

"Hmm? What're you on about?"

"Of course I bought you a present."

"Whaaa?! No cap?!"

Mana jumped off the couch, her eyes sparkling. *You might act like a grown-up in the weirdest ways, but you're still just a kid.*

"Bubby, you gotta make that sorta thing a surprise! It's a day early!" Despite this comment, she was overjoyed.

"No complaining."

"I wub you, Bubby!"

"You love presents."

Now the question was whether my choice would please the chief of the fashion police. I prepared myself for the worst-case scenario—that she'd throw it right back in my face.

"So? What is it?" she asked.

"First, calm down."

I went up to my room to get the present, and she followed behind, skipping. It was in my closet—a box wrapped in green paper with a red ribbon.

"Here you go."

"For real?! You really got me one!"

She'd given me advice about Hina's present, and she did a lot for me on a daily basis. She deserved a little something in return.

Mana grabbed the present and wrapped her arms around me. *Mana, your chest…*

"Thank you, Bubby!" She let me go and opened the box. "Wow! Gloves! Daring today, aren't we? LMAO!"

I'd bought them at her favorite *gyaru* shop. I was hoping that she wouldn't hate them, at least, and it seemed I'd succeeded. Mana was the type to come right out and say, *"Ew, this sucks,"* and she hadn't.

She seemed to like the design. They were black with fur around the wrists. Low-key enough to wear them to school, and, most importantly, you could use a phone with them on.

"You can use your phone with them, and even take them to school."

"Hey, you're even starting to think about the little details. You've grown up, Bubby." She patted my head.

"Hey, I'm your big brother. It should be me patting *your* head."

Mana ignored my retort and put on the gloves before skipping downstairs. "I'll get a present for you tomorrow."

"Nah, it's fine."

"It's *not* fine! I want to get you something!"

…Adorable little rascal.

"Nothing too expensive, okay?" I called down after her.

Whether she heard me or not was another matter.

I was sitting in class on the last day of school before winter break.

Looking around, I noticed that few girls wore gloves to school and began to worry about the adequacy of my present.

If Mana didn't want it, she would've said so. I probably shouldn't dwell on it.

After class, Hina waved good-bye to me, Torigoe, and Himeji and hurried out the door. I explained why to the others, and they nodded.

"I wonder how that low-budget, local ad will turn out…" Himeji smirked.

You're hoping to make fun of her, aren't you? Can't you just let her be?

"What are your plans for today, Ryou?" she asked.

"Work."

"…I'll go with you, then. You're headed to the agency, right?"

"Don't you have anything better to do?"

"Actually, I have my own reasons to go there," she said, refusing to look me in the eye. She was probably lying.

Himeji headed out into the hall, ready to go.

"Torigoe, are you gonna hang out with Shinohara?" I asked.

"Don't mind me."

"Ryou! Come on, already!" Himeji popped her head around the doorframe.

"W-wait, Takamori. Take this!" Torigoe took out a palm-sized box from her bag, beautifully wrapped in Christmas colors.

"A present? For me?"

"Y-yeah."

For a moment, I was dumbstruck. "Th-thanks. I wasn't expecting this."

Torigoe waved dismissively, her hand moving at the speed of light. "I-i-i-if you don't want it, just throw it away!"

"I'm not throwing it away."

"I-I-I'm giving one to Mii, too, okay!"

"Sorry I didn't get you anything."

"It's fine. I'm just doing this because I want to. Ahh! I d-d-don't mean anything weird by it, okay?!"

Her face was completely flushed. She kept running her mouth and urging me to put the gift away. I tucked it into my bag just as Himeji peeked inside again.

"Ryooou! I'm waiting! It's cold out here!"

"Shut up, nobody told you to wait outside."

I shouldered my bag and said good-bye to Torigoe before leaving the classroom.

"Were you talking about something with Shizuka?" asked Himeji.

"Just about winter break," I lied.

"I have a few auditions."

No one asked.

"So I'm meeting with Mr. Matsuda today about that," she added.

"Is that so."

Apparently, she really did have something to do at the agency.

We took the train, and I headed into the director's office as usual. Mr. Matsuda raised an eyebrow when he saw Himeji come in behind me.

"Aika, what are you doing here?"

"I stopped by to talk about my auditions."

"What? We already did that. There's nothing else to discuss."

"…"

So she *was* lying.

Mr. Matsuda looked at me, then back at Himeji. He narrowed his eyes, a look of pity on his face. "Aika… You wanted to spend Christmas Eve with Ry, didn't you? Poor girl…"

"N-n-n-nooo, I didn't!!"

The whole room shook from the sheer volume of her voice. This was why they paid her the big bucks at musicals.

I sat down at my desk and unwrapped Torigoe's present inside my bag. It was a mug-sized thermos—the sort of thing that kept your drinks hot for a long time. I could put coffee in it while I worked. Perfect for my desk job.

Excellent choice, Torigoe. Practical and inexpensive… You could tell how much thought had gone into it. I could already feel my productivity rising.

Thanks for the thermos! It'll get a lot of use at my job.

I texted Torigoe my thanks, and she replied with a picture of an alien, saying *You're welcome*.

Mr. Matsuda and I began working right away, and Himeji had nothing to do and no one to talk to, so she quickly headed home.

Once she was gone, Mr. Matsuda started talking about her. Apparently, the auditions she had were for new idols.

"Wasn't she already an idol?" I asked.

"You don't have to be a total newbie. And after seeing her in the play, I'm sure of it. She's meant to be seen live onstage."

The rehearsals had fixed her wooden acting, but her forte was still singing and dancing.

After a while, Mr. Matsuda stood up. "I'm going to head out to a meeting, then go straight home from there. You can take off whenever you find a good stopping point."

"Okay. Thank you."

"I love your editing work and flexibility, so don't leave us, okay?"

He blew me a kiss and waved as he left.

I had a boss who appreciated my work and gave me good pay. How could I leave?

Maybe I should *join the agency. Entrance exams sound hard. And I have no clear idea what I'd like to study in university.*

Mr. Matsuda's offer had started to sound pretty good.

"Wait a second. He's got me dancing in the palm of his hand, doesn't he?"

I'd promised Hina we would go to the same university. *Does she still remember?*

Once I wrapped up work and left the agency, I gave Hina a call. She was nearby, so we decided to meet up and go back home together.

"I had to do a little dance like this."

Hina showed me the choreography she'd practiced for the ad.

"That's so weird."

"Right?! I thought the same, but everyone was so serious about it. I was like, *What the heck am I doing?* and almost started laughing in the middle of the shoot." She giggled at the memory.

"Maybe it'll make a big impression."

"You think? I can only see Ai's cackling in my future." Hina shook her head sadly. Then she clapped her hands together apologetically. "Sorry I couldn't make time for us to spend Christmas Eve together."

"It's fine, don't apologize. I want to support you, and you can't miss an opportunity like this."

"Yeah. Thanks. I'll keep doing my best."

"Just don't overwork yourself, okay?"

"Noted!" she replied.

We got off at our station, and when we reached the place in the road where we usually split up, Hina pulled me toward her house.

"Our Christmas starts now."

She was skipping so merrily, you could practically see musical notes popping up in her wake.

We had no plans for tomorrow, and Hina's house was empty. Her family was away, visiting friends or out on a trip. She had the place all to herself.

We arrived at her room, and she took out the fried chicken and snacks we'd bought on our way back.

We made a toast with some juice from her fridge and started on the chicken. The TV was on, but we weren't really watching it. Hina's room was pretty big, but she clung to my side, refusing to let me go.

I decided to leave the serious topics, like university, for later. It was finally a good time to give her my present.

"For you," I said.

"A present?! What is it?!"

She giggled like a little kid, and I told her to go ahead and open it. The wrapping paper rustled as she tore it off and lifted the lid to reveal a silver necklace.

"Wow! This is so elegant, like the type you'd see in pro costumes!"

Let's goooo!! Thank you, Manaaa!!

"I know you don't really wear necklaces, but I thought this one was simple enough that you could pair it with just about anything." Or that was what Mana said anyway.

"You're right…! It's not too gaudy, but it adds a little something… Thank you, Ryou!"

She hugged me tight. She kept holding me as I took the necklace and fastened it around her neck. She finally let go and went to look in the mirror. She held up the necklace, and tears filled her eyes.

"I'm so happy…," she murmured.

"You're welcome."

"I have something for you, too." She wiped her tears and smiled bashfully, then walked over to her desk and grabbed a big bundle wrapped in red and green. "Here's your present."




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"Thanks. Let's take a look, then."

I unwrapped it and found a cute teddy bear inside.

…How should I react to this?

I was sure some people might consider this the perfect present, but I was a guy in my second year of high school. Maybe if it was the other way around—if I'd given it to her.

I totally forgot. Mana's been giving her fashion lessons, but her tastes are still a little warped.

Uh, what now?

I stole a glance at her and saw that she was waiting for my reaction.

I knew what I had to do.

"Wow, it's amazing. Thanks, Hina!"

"Thank goodness! I'm so happy you like it!"

She flashed me a genuine smile, and I instantly relaxed. If someone else was here, they might have said something to her, but we were all alone. I had no choice but to pretend I was overjoyed.

I finished unwrapping it and placed the bear on my lap. I'd say it was about medium size. An odd choice for a gift, but I had to admit, it *was* adorable.

"…That's my seat."

Hina brushed the bear aside and sat on my lap, facing me. She was blushing, and she drew our faces together for a kiss. I sneaked my hand under her clothes from behind.

"…Ryou, you naughty boy."

She scolded me teasingly but showed no genuine resistance. We kept kissing as I carefully unhooked her bra.

…At the time, I had no way of knowing that this would be our last date for the rest of winter break.

6 A New Everyday

It was the first day of classes after winter break, and I once again set foot in the familiar classroom.

There was only one topic on the other students' lips—they were all asking each other if they'd seen *it*.

Were they talking about a big New Year's special, or a hot new drama with everyone's favorite celebrity starting up in the spring? No.

I'd heard all about it from Hina a few days ago. They were talking about a certain ad where a girl repeated the name of a business while doing a weird dance to the beat of a hip-hop song.

"Did you see Fushimi's ad?"

"Yeah, it was wild. She looks so cute."

Yes. Hina's web commercial was trending.

Himeji sat in the seat next to mine, clearly upset. "Stuff like this is just down to luck."

"It's still amazing," I countered.

"Her dancing is terrible. I'm better. *And* cuter."

"I won't argue with the first part, but I can't agree to the second."

"If you did, I'd tell on you for cheating."

"I knew it was a trap."

I tried defending Hina. "Look, they *made* her do that silly dance. That's exactly what they wanted."

It only emphasized her cuteness, and the Internet started buzzing with people wondering about the pretty mystery girl's identity.

The ad went public at the beginning of the year, and Hina had

been swamped with work ever since. They had her shoot an alternative version right away, and she was getting offers from famous companies and fashion magazines. The mystery girl from the minor talent agency had become the woman of the hour.

She'd already had work scheduled for after Christmas, and she ended up occupied all break long. I kept in touch with her through calls and texts, but the only time we met up was for the customary temple visit on New Year's Eve. We hadn't gone anywhere alone.

"Wasn't she going to be an actress? This is just a publicity stunt." Himeji, Hina's self-proclaimed rival, could not accept the fact that the other girl was getting more attention.

The it girl was in her distant corner seat, surrounded by classmates and even students from other grades.

A little later, Torigoe arrived and waved at us.

"Did you see? There's a bunch of people uploading shorts mimicking Hiina's dance."

"I did," I said.

"You should do one, too, Himeji. I'll record it."

"No, thank you."

I bet she's gonna be cranky until this blows over.

"You never know what's gonna happen in life, huh?" Torigoe said, glancing at Hina and the surrounding crowd.

Soon, Hina was back to being our school's idol.

We hadn't gone on a date since Christmas Eve, if you could even call the two of us hanging out in her room a date.

She continued to appear in more and more ads, and everyone recognized her as "the girl who does the weird dance."

While I was very proud of my successful girlfriend, we were no longer able to meet outside of school. And now she was on the other side of the classroom.

Hina said things were going great. I thought she looked tired, but apparently the sense of accomplishment won out.

After a while, our unspoken agreement to text or call each other

every day started falling by the wayside. I began to think, “Well, I’ll see her tomorrow anyway,” and she probably felt the same.

We had stuff to talk about, but if we used it up at school, we’d have nothing to say the next morning during our commute. Somehow, we’d forgotten how to make small talk.

The agency was solidly behind her and had even created a social media account just for her. Her stage name became “Hinami,” and her account was the first result when you searched it. She told me that her follower count had passed thirty thousand almost immediately.

I recalled how Torigoe had called Hina an overachiever. She really did do well at everything. As Hinami, Hina was able to put all her skills to use.

We didn’t do much as boyfriend and girlfriend…or as anything… and a whole month passed in the blink of an eye.

As the humdrum days went by, I began to feel like the month following the school festival had been nothing but a fleeting dream.

It was after PE, and I was in the locker room listening to Deguchi’s banter.

“Man, you’ve got one Valentine’s present secured. I wish that were me. Why couldn’t it be me?!”

“Mmm, I wonder. She’s kinda busy.”

“Oh, no, no, no. What’s with the negativity?” Deguchi blinked in surprise. “I can’t believe you’re saying that.”

I’d been bottling up my feelings. I didn’t want to sound like I was just grumbling, and I didn’t really have anyone to talk to about it. I couldn’t ask Torigoe and Himeji—not after I’d rejected them.

In the end, Deguchi’s banter was what broke the dam.

“I sometimes wonder if we’re even still dating.”

“Hold the phone! This is way too heavy! I didn’t mean to set you off, man!” Deguchi threw his gym clothes at me.

“I’m just being honest.” I threw them back, and he finally switched gears.

"Okay. Let me hear it. I want all the details, especially if they're naughty."

"She's so busy now that it feels like we're back to just being friends."

"Well, she *is* a celebrity these days."

"She said she's auditioning for a web series, too."

The producer had specifically asked for her, so she'd probably get the role.

"Oh, I see. You're like, *Oh, poor me, it's so hard dating a fledgling actress*."

"C'mon, be serious."

"I'm sorry."

"But you're right."

"Hey, man! Don't agree with me!"

Eventually, Deguchi realized I couldn't handle our usual banter, and he got a little more serious.

"Hey, that's just how things go sometimes, right? Like when a club's preparing for a tournament, and your friend has to train, so you can't walk home together, and you stop talking as much."

I didn't have any friends in clubs like that, so I'd never had that experience. But according to Deguchi, it was pretty common.

"But this isn't a school club we're talking about," he continued. "I guess it'll keep going on like this until she quits… And Hinami is pretty popular. She's no longer just your Fushimi, huh?" Deguchi nodded like he'd understood. "So that's why you've seemed so down lately," he said, patting me on the shoulder.

"I seemed down?"

"Torigoe and Himejima were worried, too. Your reactions just aren't as animated as they were last term. You don't seem depressed exactly, but it was clear something had changed."

Apparently, the three of them agreed.

It was almost time for our next class, so I hurriedly finished getting ready.

"Thanks for hearing me out. I feel a little better now."

"No worries. And…why don't you talk to Torigoe or Himejima, too? They can give you a girl's perspective."

"I guess that makes sense."

"They're both worried. I think they'd be happier if you just came out with it instead of bottling it up." He shrugged and grinned. "Though that's just my guess."

After thinking over what Deguchi said during class, I decided to ask Himeji and Torigoe for advice.

They listened curiously at first, but as I repeated what I'd told Deguchi, their expressions gradually turned serious.

They sat down in their own seats, and Himeji crossed her legs, while Torigoe put her elbow on my desk and rested her head in her hand.

Himeji sighed. "Gosh. You do realize who you're coming to for help, right?"

"I do. I feel bad about it, too. But I figured you would know more about how things are in the industry, and Torigoe is Hina's good friend…so I think you two are the best people to ask."

That was the biggest reason why I'd come to them.

"I guess you don't have many friends, do you, Takamori?" said Torigoe.

"Exactly. I don't have a lot of choices."

"…I must say, I'm pretty surprised by how much work she's been getting," said Himeji. "It doesn't seem like it will stop anytime soon, either."

"Going viral isn't something you can do on purpose. I think Hiina must just have that something special. But either way, you knew about her dream from the beginning. You should've known this would happen sooner or later."

Torigoe immediately went for the gut punch.

She was totally right. I knew Hina wanted to be an actress when I chose her, and that it was possible she'd get very busy. That would continue to be the case forever, unless we broke up.

Torigoe was cutting right to the heart of the issue: *Weren't you prepared for this?*

"I have no excuse, I know… I really thought I wanted her to succeed."

That said, I'd never expected our relationship to go back to how it was before our second year of high school, even though we were now a couple.

"Why don't you break up with her, then?" said Himeji.

"Himeji," Torigoe chided. "You know he's asking us because he doesn't want to."

"I know. I'm just joking." Himeji sighed with annoyance.

"Does Hiina know how you feel?"

"I haven't told her. I don't think this is something we can talk out, and I don't want to cause her problems."

I hadn't been prepared, and now I was being selfish. But at the same time, I was still happy to see her succeed.

Hina had left school early for work that day, too.

"I don't think I have the right to tie her down," I said. Maybe my dad had felt the same way.

After a moment's pause, Torigoe said: "Then why not break up with her?"

"Shizuka!" said Himeji. "What did you just say to me?!"

"I'm joking."

"This is Hina's moment," said Himeji. "And I bet she'll only get busier. I'm sorry to say this, but Ryou, even as her boyfriend, you're going to have to get used to being second place."

She was asking me, *Can you take it?*

◆ Hina Fushimi ◆

"Here?"

"Yes. Thank you," I said.

My manager, Mr. Mori, parked his car in the visitor lot behind the school.

"All right," he said. "Good work today. I'll get back to you with the details later."

"Yes. Thank you. Have a nice day."

I got out of the car and bowed before heading off.

Work had wrapped up a little early, and I didn't want to leave Ryou to do both our jobs as class reps, so I'd come back to school.

There was so much I wanted to talk about. I'd listed everything out in my phone's notes app. Stuff about work, and about the people I'd met there. And about how all of it was thanks to his support.

I made my way around to the students' entrance and changed into my indoor shoes. I checked Ryou's shoe box just in case. He still hadn't left.

It hadn't been long since school ended. He was probably filling in the class journal all by himself.

My footsteps echoed in the silent hallway. As I got closer to the classroom, I began to hear voices.

Ryou wasn't alone. I could hear two girls—probably Ai and Shii. Maybe they were helping him with the journal.

As I approached the door, I could make out their conversation.

"Why don't you break up with her, then?"

What?

I felt like someone had just grabbed my heart and squeezed.

It was Ai's voice. What were they talking about?

I stood still, just a few steps outside the classroom, too shocked to hear anything else.

Ai's words kept circling round and round in my mind.

Is Ryou talking to them about breaking up with me?

My breathing grew uneven.

Are they trying to persuade him to dump me…? I know they like him, but I can't believe they'd do something like that. Does that mean it was Ryou's suggestion…?

I wanted to leave, but my feet wouldn't move. I kept waiting for Ryou to refuse outright.

"I don't think I have the right to tie her down."

I felt my strength leave me.

He hadn't refused. Was our relationship weighing on him?

I'd gotten home late the night before, then headed straight to Ryou's house in the morning.

We didn’t talk about work on the way to school. I’d been told over and over again that we couldn’t leak information to anyone, no matter what. I’d still told him it was for a web series, though. I was so happy to have his support, I just couldn’t stop myself.

He must’ve found the conversation boring.

Our relationship now was completely different from how it had been last month. We hadn’t been on a real date in forever, and I couldn’t tell him anything. Maybe he’d stopped having fun when he was with me.

After a while, I heard Shii’s voice. “Then why not break up with her?”

My vision began to blur. I couldn’t bring myself to stay there, so I turned and fled. The silver necklace felt so cold against my chest.

◆ Ryou Takamori ◆

Talking to the others had brought me no closer to a solution.

They’d both told me to break up with her if I didn’t like the situation. It was extreme, but it also made some degree of sense… No, it was definitely too extreme.

I wasn’t sure how Torigoe and Himeji felt, but letting it out had helped me. I’d forgotten how useful it was to talk things out with people.

Simply thinking about it on my own had me going in circles, unable to reach any conclusions. It was shocking to hear someone suggest breaking up, but it was also bracing. It gave me some perspective.

When I got home, Hina was waiting by the door.

“Oh, you’re not at work?” I asked.

“We finished early.”

Why not tell me, then? Oh, well.

“Do you wanna come in?” I asked. I was probably worrying for no reason.

Or so I thought.

"No… Ryou, listen."

I'd hoped we might finally have some time alone together, but it turned out she didn't feel the same.

I had a dreadful feeling about the serious look on her face, and all my fears resurfaced.

There was a long pause.

The longer the silence stretched, the more my dread grew. The anticipation made her words feel much heavier than they should have.

"…I might not be able to go with you to school in the mornings anymore."

"O-oh yeah. Mornings. Okay, got it."

"I have work until late at night sometimes, and I might wind up making you wait."

"O-okay."

Hina always came to my house just barely in time for us to make it to school. She did that for me—she was matching my usual timing. But because of that, if she showed up late, I'd definitely be late. She must have been worried about that.

But for her to arrive on time, she'd have to leave her house at the same time as I did. There was no reason for either of us to take an earlier train, and nothing to do at school if we got there early.

That meant what she was saying was just an excuse. I wished I could ask her why. Had something happened? But I was afraid that if I did, it might be like dropping a lit match into the gasoline spilled all around us.

For now, I just wanted to avoid an explosion.

"That's all I wanted to say. Sorry. I should've just texted you."

"No, no. Thank you for…coming all the way here…" I had to change the topic.

While I was looking for something to say, Hina passed right by me and started heading home. Her profile looked pained, and her eyes were full of sadness. I'd known her so long that I could tell right away.

Without thinking, I threw my fist against the door. I'd never once wanted to break up with her. But did she want to break up with me?

"Were we always so distant?"

I was trying so hard not to say something careless that I wound up unable to say anything meaningful.

"Is that you making all that ruckus, Bubby?" Mana popped her head out a window. "You're not coming inside? Aren't you cold?"

"I guess you're right," I replied listlessly.

I headed inside and peeked into the living room. Mana was on her phone, wearing an apron.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

"Making some chocolate. This is my test batch. Wanna taste?"

"Maybe a little."

"Wanna make some?"

"Huh?"

"It's tradition for the girl to do it, but I heard there's a lot of boys who make chocolate, too. It's a good way to ask a girl out. Though since my class is already in their last year, they won't get to spend very long with anyone going to a different high school."

"Ah…"

"Though I guess you'll be getting some from Hina this year."

I wonder.

Based on her attitude just now, it seemed unlikely she'd surprise me with chocolate as though nothing had happened.

I kept that thought to myself, though. I didn't want to worry Mana.

Torigoe, Himeji, and I had made a group chat today to discuss things, and I quickly sent them a message.

Think I can give her some chocolate?

It was just the three of us in the chat.

Sounds pretty good. I would like it, said Himeji.

Torigoe agreed. They'd both responded right away.

"I think I'll try making some," I told Mana.

"Hey! Chad move." She whistled mockingly, copying Deguchi. "I'll show you the ropes."

"Couldn't ask for a better teacher."

"Hee-hee. I know, right?"

Mana pulled me into to the dining room, not wasting a second.

The fourteenth was a Sunday, so if you wanted to give someone chocolate at school, it had to be Friday.

All the boys were restless, carefully watching the girls' moves. Last year, I'd done the same. Who could've guessed I'd be on the giving side this year?

I was nervous all morning. I'd made the chocolate under Mana's supervision. It couldn't be bad—I was sure of that, at least.

I'd already seen several girls giving boys chocolate in secluded areas of the school. Come to think of it, I'd never officially declared my love to Hina. I probably would've been too anxious for something traditional like that.

Deguchi was in his seat, gathering intel with the other guys. He kept clutching his head, then looking down, then back up again in an endless cycle of ups and downs.

"Are you going to give it to her?" Himeji asked from her seat next to mine.

"That's the plan."

"Hormone-crazed teenagers get pretty excited about Valentine's Day, huh?"

"I mean, obviously."

All the guys were on edge. The simple thought of receiving a confession from a girl had them positively euphoric. And yes, being on the other side was just as nerve-racking.

Himeji already had a bag brimming with chocolate and candy from the other girls.

"Why would people give chocolate to someone like you?" I muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing."

"Torigoeee, don't you have anything for me?" cried Deguchi.

"No."

"Agh, what a cruel world."

"Why would I bring chocolate for you?"

"I mean, we're friends, aren't we? No chocolate for your pal Deguchi?"

"Hmm? Did you say something?"

“Please!”

Torigoe narrowed her eyes at Deguchi, who hung his head. I thought they were getting along pretty well, personally.

Hina used to get bags full of chocolate, just like Himeji. But from what I could tell, she hadn’t received any yet.

Do you have time after school?

I’d just gotten a text from Hina. I reflexively glanced toward her seat, but it was already empty.

Does this mean that she brought chocolate for me?

Sure, I replied immediately. At least I didn’t have to ask her now.

“I think she might have brought me some.”

“Oh, is that so?” Himeji said, frowning. “Wipe that grin off your face already.”

“I’m not grinning.”

“You are, too. And with such a pretty girl right in front of you…”

I rubbed my face with my hands, massaging it back into place. I hadn’t meant to grin.

“Well, good for you, I suppose,” she said.

Maybe mine will be tastier, since Mana helped. We’ll have to do a taste test after we’ve exchanged them.

Himeji told Torigoe, but she didn’t seem to have anything to say about it.

School ended, and Hina and I finished our work as class reps. All we had to do was turn in our class journal to the teacher.

“Ryou.”

“Y-yeah?”

Hina paused, choosing her words carefully.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said at last.

Uh-oh… This doesn’t sound like it’s going where I thought it was.

“I just don’t know anymore,” Hina said, forcing herself to smile.

I could see tears forming in her eyes. It was obvious what she had to say wasn’t positive.

“A-about what?” A feeling of dread crept up my spine.

“I love you, but I’ve been thinking that maybe you don’t feel the same way.”

“What? Why would you think that?”

“You seem to have more fun talking with Ai and Shii.”

“No, no, no. We’re friends, so obviously we have fun, but that’s it. It’s the same for you, right…? Why are you saying this all of a sudden…?”

This was the last thing I’d expected, but it seemed Hina had been thinking about it for a while now.

Now that we sat far away from each other in class and she was busier with work, we didn’t talk as much. It was true that I was having trouble thinking of things to say to her recently.

“So, how about we take a little breather?”

Her voice was shaking. Her eyes were dry, but she looked like she was crying.

“I made chocolate for you,” I said.

I’d ignored the flow of the conversation and cut right to the chase. I didn’t even attempt a segue. I was baffling even myself, but I wasn’t sure what else to say.

I had the chocolate ready, but I pretended to look around for it to give us both a little extra space.

“Ryou.”

“I have no idea how it came to this,” I said. I heard the wrapped box in my hand buckle under the pressure of my grip. “Am I in the way of your job?”

“No! Of course not!”

“Then why?!”

“I love you, but I feel like we might not be able to make it work.”

“How do you mean?”

“…I’m sorry. I’m so sorry… I need some time to cool my head… I’m already overwhelmed with work. I don’t know what’s going on anymore…”

It sounded like she was drawing a line in the sand. She didn’t want me to press her any further.

She apologized again and grabbed her bag before leaving the classroom.

I was still sitting in my seat in a daze when I heard voices out in the hallway.

It was a group of girls, speaking softly.

"Sorry for eavesdropping, but we were worried about Takamori. I had no idea this was going to happen." The first voice was Torigoe.

"…Sorry, I have to go," Hina replied.

"Hold up," said Himeji. "Can you explain to me what's going on?"

"Why do I have to explain it to you?"

"Ryou was worried about your relationship, and he was excited at the thought you might give him chocolate today."

"Oh, I see. So that's why you three were talking after school. You were stirring him up, weren't you?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Torigoe.

"Don't play dumb! You two were trying to get into his head! I heard you!" Hina's yelling echoed down the hallway. "You told him to break up with me!"

"You were listening?" asked Himeji. "…We said we were joking right after. Didn't you hear that part? How convenient. Are you going to make this our fault now?"

I heard a noise like a bag full of air getting popped. The sound of a slap.

"Hah! Looks like I was right," said Himeji. Then I heard the same sound again.

"Stop, you two!" Torigoe shouted.

"She's using her job as an excuse. She takes advantage of Ryou's patience, then ignores his pain!"

"Easy for you to say," countered Hina. "You don't have any work right now."

"What?!"

I couldn't just sit there and listen. I stood up and went out into the hall.

Just as I'd thought, my two childhood friends were grappling as Torigoe stood to the side, afraid to intervene.

"Stop it, you two. Come on." Torigoe was trying, but they weren't listening.

"Stop fighting right now." I forced my way between them.

Their hair and uniforms were disheveled, and their breath was ragged. Each of them had one bright-red cheek.

Himeji's hand flew through the air and crashed into my face.

"Ow! Wh-what're you doing?"

"Sorry, I guess I hit you a little hard."

"Shouldn't you apologize for hitting me at all?"

"Well, this is also your fault."

"So what?"

As I had it out with Himeji, Torigoe confronted Hina.

"Hiina, are you sure about this?" she asked.

"I figured it would be better for both of us this way. I don't want us to be together unless we're both fully committed."

"He chose you. Be happy," said Torigoe. "If you don't, we'll start thinking he should have chosen us."

Hina gave no response, and Torigoe and Himeji turned and left together.

Now alone, Hina and I headed out, too.

I had to ask her now—what I couldn't bring myself to ask before.

"What do you mean by taking a breather?"

"Like, putting our relationship on pause."

"I see…"

"I'm sorry."

She'd just started her job, and she was already this busy. It was obviously taking a toll on her, both physically and mentally. Hina always took things so seriously. She was probably desperate to meet everyone's expectations.

"If you don't mind," she said, "I'd like you to wait for me, until things settle down."

"Okay."

"…Are you sure you want to say yes just like that?"

"Yeah." I'd never had a choice.

"You won't switch and start dating Ai or Shii?"

"No."

"Really?"

"Really."

"What about other girls?"

"I'm not switching. Do you think I could do that? I'll wait. In exchange, you've gotta do your best."

"Thank you, Ryou." She finally smiled.

But how long would I have to wait? I couldn't ask her that.

There was also the possibility that, once things settled down, Hina might decide she didn't want to come back to me. Just thinking about it hurt, so I decided to put it out of my mind. I'd already decided to wait.

I didn't know what would happen once this "pause" was over. But right now, the only thing I could do was show my support and wait for her. And, in my heart, I'd prepare myself for the worst.

…Two days later, on the fourteenth, a gift arrived in our mailbox.

"Bubby? I found this with the mail." Mana put it on the table along with the newspaper.

"What is it?"

"What do you mean? It's chocolate."

"How do you know?"

"You know what day it is. You already have Hina, and now you're getting chocolate from another girl?"

Mana had assumed Hina already gave me hers. I hadn't told her about us, and just hearing Hina's name stung.

I wasn't sure how Mana would react if I told her. Would she fume like Himeji, or understand and just try to cheer me up? I didn't want her to make Hina into a villain, so I kept quiet.

I unwrapped the gift. It was immediately obvious this wasn't chocolate you could buy at a store.

"That doesn't look like the kind of thing you get from a friend," said Mana, shooting me a cold stare. "You sure are popular with the ladies."

She was making it sound like she'd just discovered me cheating on my girlfriend.

"I am not."

But what should I do if there's a love letter inside?

There was no stamp or label on the package. Whoever it was must have put it directly into our mailbox.

Could it be…?

“What, my chocolate wasn’t enough? Now some strange woman knows where we live! What have you been up to, Bubby?! You already have Hina!”

“Stop yelling.”

There were six bite-sized chocolates and a folded note inside.

“W-wow… Those look pretty tasty.” It seemed Mana approved of the mystery woman’s skills.

The note was only two words long.

Until spring.

“What? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“…I dunno,” I said, playing dumb.

It had to be her.

Mana grabbed a piece of chocolate and ate it.

“Hey! That’s mine!” I said.

“Wow. They’re just as good as they look.”

Mystery chocolates from an anonymous source, but with a little hint. It was so like her. After what she’d said about taking a breather, she must not have wanted to be too obvious.

“I’d like to try your chocolate, too,” I said, turning to Mana.

“Okay! I’ll get you some.” Mana pulled her masterwork out of the fridge. “It’s the best chocolate ever. Prepare to have your socks blown off.”

I didn’t mean right now.

But she was smiling so confidently, I couldn’t refuse. So I got out a fork and ate a piece.

The chocolate melted in my mouth, producing a rich cacao flavor. A soft sweetness remained on my tongue after I was done.


©Fly
Until spring



“Whoa, that’s good stuff!”

“I know, right?” Mana giggled with pride. “Oh, right. I saw Hina’s new commercial yesterday.”

Mana had become a total Hinami maniac, and she started sharing all the latest info.

I recalled they’d shot the ad last month. It seemed it had finally been released. Mana turned her phone on its side and played the video.

It was a sequel to the previous web ad and consisted of Hina doing another weird “adorably awkward” dance and repeating the company’s name. It lasted about thirty seconds.

“She’s so cuuute. To think she’s your girlfriend. What a weird feeling. And she looks so different from how she usually dresses. Although her original sense of style *is* pretty funny.”

Mana had a unique perspective on the matter, since she’d been in charge of hair, makeup, and costumes for our short.

“You think they’ll make memes of the new dance, too?” she asked.

“I don’t think it’ll be as popular as the original.”

“It goes like this…and this…”

Mana tried mimicking it. It wasn’t hard, and she learned it right away.

“The song is so weird. I can tell they’ve purposely made it so it gets stuck in your head.”

She’d ignored me. Maybe her question was meant to be rhetorical.

Mana played the video again. She was right—Hina looked like a different person on the screen.

7 Until Spring

Himeji puffed out her cheeks. "She is not going to get away with this."

On Monday, I got to class and found an irate Himeji sitting in the seat next to mine. She crossed her arms, furrowed her brow, and glared into the void.

I got the feeling she wanted me to ask, so I did.

"You mean Hina?"

She nodded and sighed. "What is *wrong* with her?"

"I'm grateful you got mad on my behalf, but all that's settled now." I had to put a stop to this, or their friendship was going down the drain.

"You think this is about you?" snapped Himeji.

"Huh?"

"She implied I wasn't getting any work. *Me!*"

That's what you're mad about?

Now that I think of it, that's when the slapping started. Hina didn't really say those specific words, but I guess it was implied.

Apparently, that was the comment that had set her off.

"Does she know who she's talking to?! And who does she think she is anyway?! A one-hit wonder from a no-name agency, that's what!" Himeji fumed, her breathing ragged.

"Just make up, okay? I'm sure she'll apologize."

"No way. She *slapped* me. She slapped this beautiful face."

Himeji's rock-solid confidence was as impressive as it was annoying.

"You slapped her, too."

“She slapped me first.”

“You’re both to blame.” There were no heroes or villains here.

“What’re you talking about?” Torigoe said, approaching us.

“I’m telling Himeji to make up with Hina.”

“There’s nothing to make up for,” insisted Himeji. “We’ve been arguing like this since we were little.” She turned away with a *hmph*.

“That kind of argument is not normal at our age. You were slapping each other. You only see that in dramas and pro wrestling.” Torigoe chuckled. “Hiina takes everything very seriously. I think she’s hurt.”

“You’re on her side, Shizuka?”

“Stop it, Himeji, please,” I said.

“I am not apologizing, no matter what.” She stood up in a huff.

“Grow up!” I said.

“She really is acting like a child,” agreed Torigoe. “Although that side of her is cute, too.”

If you didn’t know what she was like, you might see Himeji as a mysterious beauty who transferred into our school out of the blue. But that was only if you didn’t really know her…

The other guys were fooled by her outward mystique, making her more and more popular. But none of them knew the truth.

Once my conversation with Torigoe more or less dried up, I summed up what I’d been thinking.

“We might not go back to how we were before, but I’ve decided to wait. That’s all I can do.”

“Sounds like a solid decision. I’m sure Hiina put a lot of thought into it, too.”

“Did she ask you about it?”

“No way. I think she blew up because she kept it all to herself. She’s the type to solve everything on her own, after all.”

I’d talked about my feelings with Deguchi, Himeji, and Torigoe. That had helped me gather my thoughts and come to terms with the situation. But that meant Hina didn’t have anyone to go to.

“If I were in Hiina’s shoes, I don’t think I could bring myself to talk to her about it, no matter how close we were,” said Torigoe. “Nothing worse than the girlfriend asking the girl who got rejected

about her boyfriend troubles."

"…Makes sense."

If only she had another friend to rely on. Hina was friendly with lots of people, but the only person she could be completely honest with was Torigoe.

Her relationship with Himeji was a little different. They were childhood friends, but they were also rivals. I couldn't imagine them going to each other for romantic advice.

"Although like Himeji said, it's your fault, too."

"Maybe part of it, but not all."

"I'm not so sure," she said, shrugging.

And just like that, Hina and I went back to the way we were before our second year. We were calling it a breather, but we really only talked when we had to do class rep work together. We didn't chat at school, and we didn't text or call each other, either.

Rumors that we'd broken up quickly spread through the school, and more boys started trying to talk to her during breaks. I even saw guys from other classes and grades hand her notes.

At some point, that had all stopped. But now, if things were really the same as before, I had to assume the notes were from boys hoping to confess their love and ask her out.

I'd assumed we were simply going back to our regular, boring school lives, but so many guys were approaching her, I was constantly on edge. Nevertheless, I kept my distance and pretended not to notice. We were on a breather, so I figured it wasn't my place to butt in.

Hina and Himeji's relationship went back to normal, though I wasn't sure if either of them ever apologized. When I thought back, I realized the two of them had never said sorry after an argument. After a while, they'd just forget, and everything would go back to how it was. That was the way it had been ever since they were kids.

White Day arrived, and I decided to give Torigoe something in return for her Christmas present.

Once everyone else was gone, I took a wrapped box out of my bag.

"Torigoe. This is for you."

“What?! F-for me?!” She was flabbergasted. “Huh? Wha? Wh-why?”

She restlessly toyed with her hair, tapped her chest, and took a few deep breaths.

“I remembered I didn’t give you anything in return for your Christmas present.”

“O-oh.” Torigoe’s cheeks turned a rosy red. “A-and?”

“…Huh? Well, I thought I should return the favor, I guess.”

“…A-and that’s it?”

“Yeah.”

Torigoe deflated like a balloon and plummeted back into her seat. “Oh… Yes. Of course.” She heaved a deep sigh and reached out to me curtly. “Give it to me. What is it?”

I placed it in her hand, and she unwrapped it.

Inside was a foldable keyboard.

“Oh!”

“I wasn’t sure what you like to use for writing, but I figured you could work in the library or in a café with just this and your phone.”

“Thanks. That’s surprisingly thoughtful of you.”

“Why are you surprised?”

I’d drawn inspiration from her own practical choice of gift. I went with something she could use frequently that wasn’t too expensive.

“It’s smaller than a regular keyboard, but your hands are small, right?”

I remembered Torigoe and Hina had once compared their hand sizes. Torigoe was shorter and had smaller hands; Hina had called them cute.

“I thought maybe this would be easier for you to use.”

“Wow, you even thought about that?” Torigoe sighed in admiration. Then she set down the keyboard and tried typing on it. “It feels pretty nice.”

“Good to hear.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“You already said that.”

“No, I mean thank you for everything.”

“For everything?”

Torigoe nodded and smiled.

"So much happened this year, a lot of it sad and painful, but it was fun. And it was all thanks to you being my friend."

I hadn't done anything that deserved her thanks. I really hadn't. In fact, she should probably resent me. The fact that she didn't see it that way just proved how good a person Torigoe was.

"Without you, I would have finished high school without any friends," she said. "So I wanted to thank you."

"Torigoe…… Do you have a terminal illness?"

Her words felt somehow ominous.

"Don't be dumb." She could tell I was joking and giggled. "I'm being serious here."

"I guess we might end up in different classes next year."

I was starting to feel embarrassed, so I purposely changed the subject.

"That would be one less superficial jerk in my midst."

"You're still saying that? And is it my imagination, or are you getting even meaner?"

"Maybe I am."

Torigoe laughed out loud, like she'd just pulled off a satisfying prank.

Spring was right around the corner.

It wasn't a very special time for me, but it was a big deal for Mana. Entrance exams had just wrapped up.

Everyone was off the day the results were posted on our school's bulletin board, so all three members of the Takamori household, along with Torigoe, went together to check.

We were in the car on our way there.

I turned to Torigoe. "So why are you here?"

"ManaMana asked me to come. She was probably worried. She acts tough, but I think it's all a front."

"Both of us got in, so I'm sure Mana will be fine."

I turned to Mana, expecting her to agree, but she was squeezing

her eyes shut, her hands together in prayer.

"You're pretty adaptable, Ryou, but Mana is a bit different," Mom said.

Really? I think she's a lot smarter and more adaptable than I am.

We arrived at school and saw a few middle schoolers and their guardians already looking up at the big board near the entrance.

"Ugh. Shizu, you go look," said Mana.

"It's okay, Mana," said Mom. "After all, your brother got in."

"Hey," I said. "You're also insulting Torigoe."

"Oh, don't worry about me," Torigoe chimed in.

Mana timidly held her ticket in one hand as Torigoe dragged her over to the bulletin board. Mom and I followed behind and approached the crowd.

"What's your number, ManaMana?" asked Torigoe.

Mana handed over the wrinkled piece of paper and hugged the older girl like she was a giant plushie. Because of Torigoe's height, she looked like Mana's little sister, but she was definitely acting the part of the big sister.

"You smell so nice, Shizu," said Mana.

"Stop sniffing, you're embarrassing me."

Mom and I checked the number in Torigoe's hand and looked up at the board.

"Hey, there you are!" I said.

"He's right, you're up there," Torigoe assured her.

"Yes, right there! Look!" Mom was pointing.

"No cap?!" Mana lifted her face from where it was buried in Torigoe's hair. "I'm there! I'm totally there! Thank God!"

"Congratulations, underclassman." Torigoe turned around and patted her head.

"Acting like my senior now, Shizu?"

"I *am* your senior."

I opened up our neglected group chat and informed everyone that Mana had passed her exam. Deguchi, Himeji, and Hina all sent messages congratulating her right away.

Mom announced that we were going out to eat to celebrate, and that Torigoe was coming with us.

Back at the car, Torigoe checked the chat, then muttered, "Do you think we'll all be able to hang out together come summer?"

"If for some reason I can't, you guys should go on without me," I said.

"I don't want to go on without you."

I wasn't sure what she meant by that, but I felt she was cheering me on.

During spring break, I worked five days a week.

The new department was called the Art Direction Team, and 80 percent of my duties were working on their video production.

"What a ridiculous proposal."

Mr. Matsuda had just returned from an internal meeting, and he was huffing indignantly.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The former TV director I have leading the Art Direction Team said he wants you to work under him."

"Really?" I was shocked to learn that someone else in the company valued my work. "That's an honor."

"What are you talking about? I can't have someone else taking a liking to you."

Now you're *being ridiculous.*

"So I told him that you have to be with me to really shine."

"That's not true."

I knew Mr. Matsuda appreciated me. That was obvious from my salary—he paid me as much as a full-fledged employee.

"Aren't you just trying to keep me from quitting?" I asked.

"…"

After a moment's pause, Mr. Matsuda turned around and laughed this off.

So I was right. Well, I'm not planning on quitting anytime soon, so I guess that's fine.

"Excuse me! I'm waiting outside." Himeji popped her head into the office.

She had come to the agency on some business right as I was about to finish my shift, and we'd decided to head home together. That was about ten minutes ago.

"The devil's come for you, Ry."

"If you'd stop chatting about nonsense with him, he'd already be out here."

"But it's so much fun!"

"Stop making puppy-dog eyes. You're way too old for that."

"I am *not* old!" Mr. Matsuda glared daggers at her.

As I got ready to go, Himeji stepped into the office and grabbed my arm.

"Let's go, Ryou."

"Huh? Uh, okay. Good-bye, Mr. Matsuda."

"Bye-bye!"

Himeji hurried out of the agency, pulling me along. On our way back, she started grumbling.

"Those girls don't know anything. They all think becoming an idol is the end of the line, the fools."

Himeji had easily passed her audition to become an idol the other day, and was now talking about the girls she was taking lessons with.

"Don't be mean," I said.

"They have no drive."

Come to think of it, I didn't even know why Himeji was working in this industry. I didn't get the impression she was following in the footsteps of someone she admired, like Hina was, and I'd never heard her talk about an idol she looked up to.

"Himeji, why did you start working in entertainment?"

"What? You're asking that *now*?"

"I guess I just never thought about it."

"To reunite with you, of course."

"Huh?"

"After we were separated, I thought that if I became famous, we could meet again."

"…Seriously?" I stole a glance at her, and she smiled ambiguously.

"I'm lying," she said. But I wasn't sure that was the truth.

“There’s another reason, too. To show everyone how awesome I am.”

I was pretty sure she wasn’t doing it to spread smiles around the world or anything, and indeed, this reason seemed very in character.

“That’s what I expected.”

Her self-confidence was completely maxed out. Her goal was predicated on the fact that she was already amazing.

And she was still smirking. She must have even more to say.

“I mean, there’s no other girl like me.” Her face was taking the word *smug* to new heights. “I am not some one-hit wonder.”

Is she still not over that?

She might have her eyes set on conquering the world, but she still saw Hina as her rival.

“Going viral like that is a cheater’s way to the top. They’ll soon realize she has no talent and throw her away,” she said. “There are plenty of girls with nothing but a pretty face out there. She’s completely disposable.”

No one could compete with Himeji when it came to dissing Hina. She looked straight into my eyes and smiled valiantly.

“Just wait. In ten years, you’ll regret not having chosen me.”

“I guess we’ll see.”

“…Oh, are you already regretting it?”

“No.”

Himeji trotted a few steps ahead of me, then looked back at me over her shoulder.

“This is your chance. Hug me tight from behind and whisper, *It’s actually you I love*, and I’ll give you the honor of being my boyfriend. And I’ll forgive you for getting it wrong the first time.”

It was a proposal brimming with confidence. She’d even said it would be *my* honor.

“Although I’ll never forget your mistake.”

What a terrifying addition.

“Stop testing me. I’m pretty sure I chose right,” I said, catching

up to her.

"What a fool." She slammed into me from the side.

"If my love life fizzles out, cheer me up, okay?" I said.

"No way."

"I knew you'd say that."

We giggled.

"Ryou, you need to be a little selfish. I don't think worrying about inconveniencing each other makes for a good relationship."

I glanced at her from the side. Her face was surprisingly serious.

When it comes down to it, you're pretty nice, too, Himeji.

8 The Girl I Saved on the Train

Hina had said *until spring*, but I didn't know exactly when that meant.

I'd decided to wait, so I figured there was no need to ask.

I got the feeling this was how Hina had felt this whole time. She'd kept our old promise in her heart and patiently waited for me to choose her. When I thought about that, a few months didn't feel like that big a deal.

But it would be hard to keep in touch if we ended up in different classes.

Spring break ended, and I put on my uniform for the first time in a while.

Mana's first day of school wasn't until the following day, so there was no need for her to put on her uniform yet. But now that she had it, she'd been in front of her mirror all morning, trying out different styles and making little adjustments.

She already had the fashionably unkempt look down pat. You'd never guess she was a brand-new student.

"Bubby, what will you do if all the boys fall head over heels for me?"

"Cheer you on."

"No! You have to protect your cute little sister!"

"Okay, okay. Thanks for breakfast, by the way. It was good."

"Hee-hee. Bye!"

She was so excited about going to her new school that I thought she might kiss me at any moment.

I said good-bye and headed out.

I'd seen Hina on the train a few times on the way to school.

We always got on the same car. I never knew what to do when our eyes met, so I always went to one corner and tried not to make eye contact with anyone.

It was around this time last year that I'd saved that girl whose face I couldn't see.

Today, we were as far apart as possible, and Hina was leaning against a pole near the seats, looking out the window.

I wondered why she never had friends to chat with. Maybe they all came from different directions.

Himeji frequently arrived late, and when she didn't, she was always in a rush and would wind up jumping into a different car.

I was trying my best not to stare at Hina like a stalker when I heard a man's voice.

"Um… Excuse me!"

He was pretty loud, and everyone turned to look. I did the same on reflex and saw him standing next to Hina.

He was chubby and wearing the kind of faded-out hoodie you might find for sale in a supermarket. He was holding his cell phone in one hand, talking to Hina.

"Hinami, right? I'm a big fan. I always cheer up when I see your cute commercial."

"Erm, sorry, I think you've got the wrong person…" Hina smiled and bowed awkwardly, then went back to looking out the window.

"Th-that can't be! Don't lie! I-it said on this website that someone saw you on this train, a-and it's even got your picture!"

He shoved the phone in Hina's face.

She tried her best to smile and bowed again. "I'm sorry, I really think you're mistaken."

I could hear a waver in her voice. Her hands were trembling.

My vision went red. The train was full, but before I knew it, I was making my way through the car. It was even easier than it had been a year ago.

"You're lying! Don't lie! I bet you're just waiting for men like me to come up to you! Otherwise, you'd wear a disguise or something!"

The man's voice got louder, and Hina shrank.

I shoved myself in between them.

"She said you're mistaken."

He took half a step back in surprise. "What? Wh-who are you?"

"Who cares? I'm saying you should stop bothering her."

The people around us furrowed their brows and murmured to each other.

There were other students from our school, but everyone kept quiet.

"Let's get off at the next station," I said, trying to grab the man's hand.

"Wh-what? Don't touch me, you freak." He turned around and clicked his tongue, then fled to a neighboring car.

I could feel Hina's gaze.

I wasn't sure if she'd be mad at me for overstepping while we were still on a breather. I couldn't meet her eyes.

"…Sorry," I said without thinking.

I stepped away to follow the man, but Hina grabbed my sleeve.

"Wait."

I stopped, but before she could say anything else, two ladies came up to her, looking worried.

"Are you okay?" one asked.

"There are some scary guys out there."

"Oh, I'm okay. Sorry about the fuss." Hina let go of my sleeve as she replied to them.

The train came to a stop soon after the man left. It wasn't the station nearest to the school, but Hina got off anyway. I thought she might be going to report him.

She glanced back at me. I felt like I should get off, too, so I did.

Very few people used this station. It was a simple building with only two gates, both located right by the platform. I saw two stray cats outside.

"*He's not getting off*," I whispered, after confirming he wasn't on the platform.

"Thanks," Hina said. "You saved me again."

We hadn't talked since deciding to take a breather; there hadn't been any reason to. Once again, a strange situation had given us an

excuse to interact.

"…Be careful," I said. "This isn't like what happened last year."

"Yes, sir!"

"And I think you should consider what he said. Maybe you *should* use a disguise."

"Yeah."

I didn't want to lecture her. "…Let's get on the next train. We'll be late."

I checked the time on my phone. I was surprised by how easy it was to talk to her.

"Ryou, what did you think of my web ad?"

"What do you mean?"

"How was I?"

"Well, I think you were great."

"That's it?" Hina pouted.

It had been so long since our last exchange that I wasn't sure what answers she was looking for.

"Um… I think you looked cute."

Her eyes lit up. "Really? You see, they told me to pretend that the person I liked was on the other side of the camera while I danced."

"Umm…" I knew what the right answer was now, but I wasn't entirely sure if I should say it.

Hina pointed at me, then I pointed at myself, too.

"*I thought of you*," she whispered, looking away bashfully. "That's why I looked so cute, I think."

An express train ran past the station, and a rush of air blasted us, bringing with it cherry blossom petals. They fluttered down to rest at our feet.

"I guess we're still on a breather, but…" I felt I should be honest. "I've been thinking about a lot of things. I had doubts, and a lot of the time I felt like, even though we were dating, I was just another face in the crowd—that I wasn't anyone special."

Hina shook her head, as if to contradict me. Then she turned away.

"Sorry. I wish I'd been better." Her voice was shaking. She raised her hands to her face; she must have been crying. "I had a lot of

time to straighten out my thoughts, and I understand now."

I heard her sniffling.

I probably never said it.

I showed it by going to her after the school festival, but I never put it into words.

I did a lot of things I wouldn't have done if I didn't have those feelings. So I'd assumed that she would understand.

Once, she'd asked if I had anything to say to her. Back then, I'd had no idea what she meant, but now I got the feeling she'd just wanted me to say it out loud.

"Hina."

She didn't turn around.

I walked over to that small, lonely girl and held her from behind.

"I love you."

She wiped her eyes and slowly nodded again and again.

"I'll wait for you," I said. "It doesn't matter how long. Spring, or however long it takes for things to settle down. Whenever. I'll be waiting for you."

Even if she eventually changed her mind, I was ready to accept that, too.

"Thank you, Ryou. You never said it. I was worried that you regretted choosing me… Work got so busy, and I was scared. The more scared I got, the harder it was to talk to you."

"I'm sorry I made you wait all this time."

She budged, so I let go. Then she turned around and looked straight into my eyes.

She pressed her lips together, and a single tear, like a shooting star, ran down from her red, puffy eyes.

"I love you, too, Ryou."

"I've loved you since we were kids."

She narrowed her eyes. "Lies. You liked Ai for a while."

"…"

Oh yeah.

We were having such a perfect moment. Stuff like that was just a figure of speech.

I guess she's still upset about me switching to Himeji.

"But, uh, that's because Ms. Ashihara said those mean things to me," I said.

A smile formed on her teary face. "Sorry. I was being mean."

The station's speakers announced the arrival of the next train.

"I won't become like my mom," she said. "I can't. Even though I said we should take a breather, I wanted to see you so badly—to talk to you, kiss you, cuddle with you." She smiled wryly. "I know what's most important to me now. I can't just focus on acting and stop caring about anything else. Our breather ends as of this moment."

The bell rang at a nearby crossing, and the gates came down. I could hear the train approaching.

"I'm empty inside, and I can't recharge without being with my special person."

I felt something hollow inside me fill up.

Her face, so close by, the sound her gentle voice, her big eyes, her hair reflecting the spring sunlight, her hand in mine.

The train was growing larger and larger in the distance.

Hina put her hands on my shoulders and stood on her tiptoes. Bringing her face close, she brushed her lips against mine. Then she reluctantly pulled away, only to lean in at the last minute for one more kiss.

The train arrived at the platform, and the doors slid open. A few students from our school were inside.

"I think everyone saw us," she said.

"They definitely did."

"Hee-hee. Oh, well." She beamed and pulled me by the hand. "Let's go, Ryou."

I felt everyone's eyes on us as we boarded. This seemed to make Hina even happier, and she smiled the whole time.

We arrived at school and checked our class assignments, then changed into our indoor shoes and headed inside.

I checked the seat chart in the classroom and sat down.

Hina sat next me, just like she had before.

"This makes one more year together…," she said. "But let's not let it end there."

"I feel exactly the same."

The girl I saved on the train turned out to be my childhood friend —and now, she was my girlfriend.

We'd resumed our relationship. One step back, two steps forward.

It was then that I realized something:

As long as Hina was by my side, nothing else mattered.


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Afterword

Hello. Kennoji here.

And with that, this series has come to an end. What did you think?

Personally, I believe it came to a satisfying conclusion, but when I look at the series as a whole, I'm tormented by my lack of skill.

I did the best I could while writing it, but now I can see many places where I feel like I could have done better.

That said, I think having a romcom go on for eight volumes is quite an accomplishment in this day and age. I would have liked to write more if I could have.

Eight volumes of light novel equal about twenty volumes of manga.

Romcom manga don't tend to run that long, either. Even the popular ones don't try to draw things out and conclude the story at just the right time. In any case, I'm glad these eight volumes have allowed so many people to get to know these childhood friends and me.

I started this series on *Shousetsuka ni Narou* in 2019. I think it was around March. Many series conclude within a year, so I'm very lucky to have been able to continue for four. It's all thanks to you, my readers, and to Fly's illustrations, as well as to everyone else who contributed.

I want to give a huge thanks to everyone involved in the creation of this book, and to my readers.

The manga adaptation will continue, so please keep supporting it.

I've written other novels, such as *Drug Store in Another World*, which received an anime adaptation, and *Awakened "Children" Fight to Fall Asleep Again*, which was published recently by Dengeki

Bunko. They're entirely different genres from this story, but if you're interested, please check them out.

I hope we meet again in another novel or manga. See you then.

KENNOJI

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