



4

Ghost **Mikawa**

*Illustration by* **Hiten**

**DAYS**

*with my*

**STEPSISTER**



# DAYS *with my* STEPSISTER



Ghost **Mikawa**

*Illustration by* **Hiten**





"I saw you leave your classroom with your mom, and then I saw her go straight to Ayase... What's up with that?"

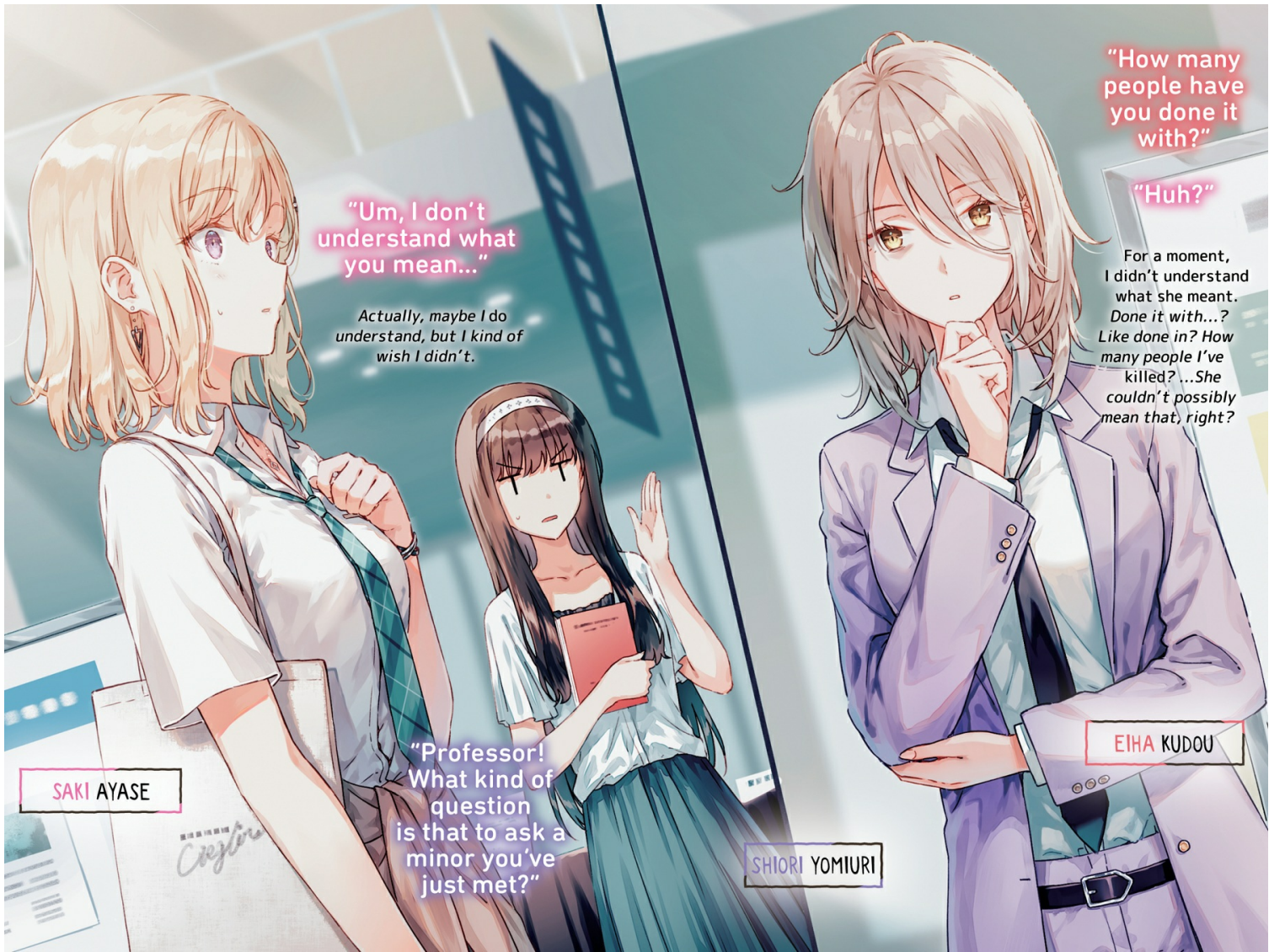
For a minute, I didn't want to tell him. Then I remembered Akiko's smile when she'd hugged me. It wouldn't be right to keep pretending.

"Ayase and I are siblings. I don't see any reason to tell the whole world about it, though."

KEISUKE SHINJOU

YUUTA ASAMURA





"Um, I don't understand what you mean..."

Actually, maybe I do understand, but I kind of wish I didn't.

"Professor! What kind of question is that to ask a minor you've just met?"

"How many people have you done it with?"

"Huh?"

For a moment, I didn't understand what she meant. Done it with...? Like done in? How many people I've killed? ...She couldn't possibly mean that, right?

SAKI AYASE

EIHA KUDOU

SHIORI YOMIURI





KAHO FUJINAMI

ENJOYING THE NIGHTLIFE IN SHIBUYA



## Chat Log from a Certain Day

# About the Future



The career path handout doesn't include many choices besides going to higher education.

I guess that's because we go to a prestigious high school meant to prepare us for college.



But this is a good chance to think about your future.



I want to get a job, support myself, and be independent... But I haven't thought about it realistically.



That's no good. You'll be an adult before you know it. You can't let time get away from you!

Yomiuri, you're closer to finishing college and getting a job than we are. Do you have any specific plans?



Of course!



Mind telling us?



I'm going to be a homemaker! Asamura will support me!



What?!

Enough jokes. Let's hear your real plans.



What a bore. Okay, guess I'll be a politician, then.



I have a feeling it's not that easy to become a politician...

That was very helpful. I'm so glad we have a reliable senior to count on.



Oh, nice one! I like how the extra positivity makes the sarcasm sharper. High points for artistry.

I think you should become a comedian, Yomiuri.



Ah-ha-ha...

# DAYS *with my* STEPSISTER

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**Ghost Mikawa**

*Illustration by* **Hiten**

  
New York



# Copyright

## DAYS *with my* STEPSISTER 4

**Ghost Mikawa**

Translation by Eriko Sugita ● Cover art by Hiten

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Yen Newsletter

Frontispiece and illustrations by Hiten



# C o n t e n t s

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Afterword

It can't be our destiny to part ways, because destiny is all about coming together.



## ● PROLOGUE—YUUTA ASAMURA

A girl just cut her long hair short.

In a romance novel, something like that would be a major event. But in real life, it was no big deal. Maybe it was too hot in the summer. Maybe it was getting in the way. Maybe she just wanted a change.

There were any number of possible reasons, and it was pointless to try and guess what she was thinking. It might even be considered an invasion of her privacy.

There was no reason for me to overreact. I should just play it cool and accept it.

I, Yuuta Asamura, probably shouldn't think anything of it. The obvious course of action was for me to accept it as just another mundane occurrence.

I wasn't certain, however. I'd never had a stepsister before, and I'd never encountered such an event in real life. I wished I could ask every older brother with a younger stepsister in the country about their experience.

For starters, I never dreamed that my dad, who was over forty, would get drunk at a work event and wind up marrying the pretty woman who took care of him. In fact, when he told me he was getting married again, my first reaction wasn't joy at his good fortune but concern.

*Is this going to be okay?*

*Is he being duped?*

I'd been right there as my parents' marriage fell apart and ended in divorce, and I remembered everything. After that experience, I stopped expecting anything from women.

I'd listened to my parents fight all night long, seen my mom look at me and

my dad with cold eyes. And in the end, she'd cheated on him. At least I hadn't been neglected, but that was about all you could say for my childhood. When my parents told me they were getting divorced, I was more relieved than sad.

My birth mother was the only woman I knew well, and she was someone who laughed off her own behavior while expecting the world from me and Dad, and being bitterly disappointed when we didn't measure up. My memories of her were all negative.

Because of her, I'd stopped expecting things from other people.

That was why I was so relieved when my new stepsister set the tone for our relationship.

*"I won't expect anything from you, and I don't want you to expect anything from me."*

To me, that sounded like the most honest relationship I could hope for.

She might be living in my house, but she wasn't going to demand anything, nor would she be walking on eggshells around me. Instead, she suggested that we coordinate and compromise.

That kind of dry, neutral relationship was exactly what I wanted, and that was the type of girl Saki Ayase was.

I was convinced we'd get along well and become the kind of siblings Dad and Akiko hoped for. I was sure of it.

But there was a big difference between us.

I was a guy who found it troublesome to go against the grain. I tended to bend to the prevailing wind and let things blow over me. I'd listen to what others had to say and go along with it.

But Ayase wasn't like that.

She didn't like giving in to social pressure. She wanted the strength to fight back against those who would impose silly stereotypes on her and to force them to yield.

Ayase was working hard to be able to live independently. She put in the effort to raise her grades, always ranked high on tests, and had even worked on her

appearance so others would see her as attractive.

She said her look was like her armor. The shiny earrings and long bleached hair blowing in the breeze meant she was ready for battle.

As the days went by, I saw how she lived, and before I knew it, I had developed a great interest in Saki Ayase.

Then, at the end of August, about three months after I began living with her, my stepsister cut her hair.

It probably didn't mean anything. Haircuts like that were only significant in TV shows and novels—in fiction.

But a month later, something *did* change.

"Hi, Ayase."

"Hey, Asamura."

Interactions like that vanished from our lives.

Autumn had arrived.

I opened the door to our apartment and announced quietly that I was home.

I proceeded along the hallway, lit only by a dim night-light, to the living room.

It was deserted.

Dad worked a regular job, and he had gone to bed a long time ago. Akiko worked at night and was out. Ayase was the only person who might still be awake, but whether she was studying or asleep, she didn't answer.

Dinner was set on the dining table, covered with plastic wrap.

"Oh, hamburger steak."

A sticky note on the table said to heat it in the microwave.

There was rice in the rice cooker, miso soup in a pot on the stove, and a salad in the fridge. I was used to this by now, and once I'd heated everything that needed it, I sat down at the table.

I mumbled my thanks for the meal, then picked up my chopsticks and split open the hamburger steak. Cheese oozed out from inside.



“Cheese! Yes!” I quietly cheered.

Ayase’s cooking skills were improving daily, and for a guy like me, who had only ever had hamburger steak at diners or as frozen meals from the supermarket, getting to eat some made from scratch and stuffed with cheese was downright magical. I figured Ayase would dismiss my praise and claim she’d just thrown it together, though. She always said that.

I glanced at the door to her room.

It was a little soon to start worrying about midterm exams, but lately she was always studying when I got home. We ate together less and less, and though she was still working at the same bookstore, her shift had changed this month, and we rarely saw each other.

Was she avoiding me?

I shook my head. *Of course not.*

Whenever we saw each other, she acted exactly like she always had. And high school-aged siblings probably didn’t spend that much time together anyway.

The hamburger steak I’d just heated seemed suddenly cold.

“*Big Brother*, huh?”

Ever since that day, she never called me anything else.

## ● SEPTEMBER 3 (THURSDAY)—YUUTA ASAMURA

I was in homeroom just before school ended, and the teacher handed out a piece of paper at the last minute.

“Don’t forget to submit these to the class president by next Thursday,” he said, then promptly headed out.

As the door closed behind him, the classroom exploded in chatter. Usually, the students would immediately grab their bags and head out the door, but today they remained seated.

Voices saying things like, “Hey, what are you going to do?” and “What are you going to put down?” filled the classroom.

A few students started asking those around them for advice, while others stared at the paper and sighed.

Reactions were varied, but everyone was serious. The handout was a questionnaire about our plans after graduation. Parent-teacher conferences on the subject would begin at the end of the month, and these questionnaires would serve as a basis for the conversation.

“It’s that time of year again...,” I said, waving the sheet at my best friend, Tomokazu Maru. He was seated at the desk in front of mine.

“Yeah, well, we’re already in our second year. Everyone’s getting more serious. Judging by your gloomy voice, should I assume you’re not sure what to write, either?” Maru turned around, and I saw that he was frowning.

“‘Either’? You mean you’re still undecided, too?”

“Why do you look so surprised?”

“I was sure you’d be looking for a way to play baseball.”

Our team was pretty good, and although Maru was still only in his second year, he'd already seized the position of primary catcher. Winning the national high school championships and going pro...might be a bit of a stretch, but looking at his dedication, I'd assumed he'd want to pursue a related career.

"I am."

"You are? Then why do you look so down in the dumps?"

"I'm not sure what you mean. I, for one, don't make a habit of digging around in the local landfill."

"I don't think many people do." Now he had me wondering about the origin of the phrase.

"Asamura, even you must realize that just because I belong to the baseball team, that doesn't mean I'll be able to pursue it as a career. Naturally, I have doubts and anxieties. And getting back to the point, I think you've misunderstood something."

"Oh?"

"I wasn't frowning because I wasn't sure what to put down. I'm concerned about the parent-teacher conferences. They'll start at the end of the month and go on for almost two weeks. And what do you think will happen then?"

"Well..."

I glanced at the paper in front of me. It included a brief note to one side saying that the school day would be shorter during the conference period and that we'd be dismissed at noon.

"I guess meetings will be held in the afternoon instead of classes," I said.

"That means we'll have more time for extracurriculars."

What Maru was saying made sense, but I was a little surprised this was a concern for him. Maybe even Maru, who was really into baseball, wasn't over the moon about longer practice sessions.

"Why would that upset me?" he asked. "I welcome every opportunity to practice more."



“Hmmm. Then why?”

“If parent-teacher conferences are going on in the afternoon, anyone on the team who has to attend a meeting won’t be at practice. That means we won’t be able to do any drills that require everyone. We’ll have to simplify our activities, and people won’t take them seriously. They’ll start getting lazy.”

Apparently, though Maru loved baseball practice, he hated wasting time. This was typical of a video game nerd. He was a total efficiency freak.

“Listen, Asamura. Games aren’t all about efficiency.”

“Sorry. Maybe that was a bad comparison,” I said, putting my hands together in apology. Maru was the expert on this stuff. I should’ve known he wouldn’t like my layman’s analysis.

“Anyway, who’s gonna be at your conference? Will it be your dad, like last year? Or will your stepmom show up?”

“Huh?”

Now that he mentioned it, I realized he was right. I was no longer the child of a single parent. Akiko could come to the conference, too. But...

“Last year only my dad came, so I figure it’ll be the same this year.”

Suddenly, Ayase popped into my head. Would Akiko be the one attending her conference...?

The color of the sky changed slightly as we entered September.

The sun’s rays were still strong, but the sky wasn’t as clear and blue as in summer. Now it looked hazy, like we were seeing it through one or two panes of glass.

I gazed up at the sky above my apartment before entering the building. Once I stepped off the elevator, my footsteps slowed as I thought back to the handout in my schoolbag.

Rather than thinking about my future prospects, I found my mind drifting to my new stepmother. Dad generally left me to my own devices and had never butted in about my future. But what about Akiko?

I opened the door to our apartment, announced that I was home, and headed for the living room.

I'd figured as much after seeing their shoes at the door, but Ayase and Akiko were inside, chatting at the dining table. Akiko had her makeup on and looked ready to head off to work.

Ayase raised her head and said, "Hi, Big Brother."

"H-hi, Ayase," I replied, praying that she didn't notice my stutter. A month had passed since she started calling me *Big Brother*, but I still couldn't work up the nerve to call her by her first name—*Saki*. "What were you two discussing? ... Oh."

"You got one of these, too, right?" said Ayase.

I could see her copy of the handout on the table. It seemed they'd been discussing what days Akiko was available.

"Perfect timing," Akiko said, looking up at me.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Taichi and I were just discussing what to do about your conference."

"My conference?"

"Yes. The truth is...Taichi is really busy at work right now."

Akiko explained that Dad was in charge of an important project and that it would be difficult for him to take even half a day off. He didn't often talk about work, so I'd had no idea. Despite this, he was apparently trying to pile extra work onto his schedule each day to make time for my conference. If he couldn't even take half a day off, his days must have already been packed, and yet he was trying to do even more. No wonder he'd seemed so tired lately...

In light of the situation, Akiko had volunteered to go in his place. Things were turning out just like Maru had said. I began to wonder if he was clairvoyant or something.

But all jokes aside, there was one problem with Akiko attending my parent-teacher conference.

“You haven’t told people at school that you two are stepsiblings, have you?” said Akiko. “Taichi said he didn’t want to cause you problems, and I agree.”

At school, Ayase and I had kept our new relationship secret so curious classmates wouldn’t pry into our lives. We’d even arranged to keep using our current surnames until we graduated high school.

But if someone realized Ayase and I had the same mother, the cat would be out of the bag. Few students hung around the classrooms during parent-teacher conferences, and I didn’t think it was that big a risk, but Akiko seemed worried.

“I see...”

“I’ve been thinking about it, and I’m wondering if we shouldn’t plan your conferences for different days.”

““Huh?!”” Ayase and I said in unison.

We were both stunned. If our conferences were on different days, that meant...

“You’re planning to make two trips?” I asked.

“I think it’ll be less risky than having them one after the other. What do you think?”

“Are you sure? Isn’t that a lot of extra trouble?”

“Hmm?”

“I mean...Dad isn’t the only one who’s busy. And you work at night. Isn’t it already a big ask to have you come out during the day?”

Akiko’s workday started in the evening and lasted until late at night. She had to clean up and set up the kitchen for the next day before she came home, so it was usually morning by the time she got back. She then slept through the afternoon. On weekends and holidays, she would match our schedule, but on the whole, she was a night owl.

It already seemed like a hassle for her to come to school in the middle of the day. If she had to do that two times—once for Ayase and once for me—it wouldn’t just be twice as stressful, she’d probably have to take a whole extra day off from work.



But despite my concerns, Akiko smiled and said brightly, “It’s okay!”

“But...”

“Oh! ...Sorry, Yuuta. I have to go now.”

She must have glanced at the wall clock. She quickly got to her feet, grabbed her shoulder bag off the table, and ran to the door.

I chased after her.

She slipped into a pair of high heels and kicked the backs lightly against the floor to settle them on her feet. As she turned the doorknob, she glanced over her shoulder at me and said, “We’ll discuss the matter later. Give it some thought in the meantime.”

“Um, okay.”

“See you!” she said cheerfully before muttering, “I’m gonna be late!” and taking off down the hall at a sprint, her heels clicking.

“Will she be okay running like that?” I asked.

“Oof,” said Ayase. “I hope she doesn’t fall.”

I turned and saw Ayase behind me with a sports bag draped over her shoulder. “Oh? Are you leaving, too?” I asked.

“It’s almost time for work.”

“Oh... Okay. See you later.”

“Yeah. See you, Big Brother.”

She slipped past me, centimeters from my nose, her hair swaying gently. I heard the door close.

I didn’t have work today. All that time we’d spent together at the bookstore over summer break seemed so far away now.

I tossed my schoolbag down in my room, then sank into a chair in the living area. I sighed unconsciously, surprising myself. *What’s wrong with me? Why do I feel so disappointed?*

But at the same time, I felt relieved.

*Big Brother.*

Every time she called me that, I felt the air around us grow heavy and suffocating.

There was no need to wonder what I was feeling. I already knew.

“Okay... Time to check out the leftover situation.”

When evening rolled around, I forced myself to lift my butt, which seemed plastered to my seat, and open the refrigerator.

We had vegetables but no meat or fish.

*Crap. I should have gone shopping.*

Now that Ayase and I had different shifts at work, we’d made some changes to our routine. It didn’t feel right to keep asking her to make dinner for me when she got home exhausted from the bookstore. So Ayase made dinner when I worked, and I did the same for her.

Not that you could call the dinners I made *proper meals*.

A light, airy *ping* sounded, and I glanced at the phone I’d left on the table. Dad had sent me a text message. I caught a glimpse of the notification with the first line of the message before it disappeared. It read, I’m running late, so I’ll grab dinner before I head home. He really did seem busy...

That meant I would be cooking for two.

Akiko had turned on the rice cooker in the afternoon, and it was now on warm, so I decided to make something to go with that.

“Okay, then I’ll start with some miso soup.”

It was more efficient to start with whatever took the most time and effort. Copying Ayase, I made my miso soup from scratch, starting with the soup stock.

I filled a pot with water, then cut kombu into palm-sized pieces and dropped them in. I would let that sit for half an hour and decide what else to make in the meantime.

I looked in the refrigerator again.

“Eggs...are about all we have. In that case...”

Various egg dishes raced through my mind. I could think of a bunch, but I couldn't make any of them. I just didn't have the skills. About the only dish I could make using eggs was...

"Sunny-side up, I guess."

That, or hard-boiled eggs. I decided to go with the former.

I took two eggs out of the fridge and placed them on a dish. I'd learned the hard way that if you put them directly on the counter, they tended to roll off the edge and break on the floor.

I went back to the fridge and took out some vegetables. Then I cut them into bite-sized pieces, put them in a microwave-safe container, added water, and covered them with plastic wrap. I heated the container for about three minutes. After that, I opened it and checked on them. If they weren't ready, I could just pop them back in the microwave.

I poked the carrot pieces with the tip of my chopsticks to make sure they were soft enough to eat. The tip of the chopsticks slid in smoothly, meaning they were done.

I then transferred the vegetables to a large dish. I could wait until it was time to eat to split them into portions and pour dressing over the top.

I went back to my miso soup and turned on the stove to begin boiling the water. After grabbing some bonito flakes from a pack bigger than my head, I tossed them into the pot. That, combined with the kelp, would create the soup stock.

*What should I do while that's cooking...?*

"Oh... I haven't prepared anything to put in the soup."

I'd already made a mistake. But I knew how to cover for things like this.

I opened the freezer and pulled out my secret weapon—

*—frozen chopped green onions!*

In my mind, I called this out in the voice of Doraemon. They say you talk to yourself a lot when you live alone... But I figured I was still in the clear, since I hadn't said anything out loud.



Ayase planned to move out and live on her own after graduation, and I idly wondered what kinds of things she'd say to herself.

I scooped the green onions Ayase had pre-chopped out of the plastic food container. I didn't have any tofu, but I figured I might as well keep things simple.

"Should be about time."

I used a ladle strainer to remove the kelp and bonito flakes from the pot, and *voilà*, the soup stock was ready. I then put in the green onions and brought the mixture to a boil, then lowered the heat and added the miso. I had to be careful not to let the soup boil once I'd put in this last ingredient.

I turned off the stove. *That should do it for the soup.*

Finally, it was time to cook the eggs.

Sweat formed on my forehead as I maneuvered the frying pan. It was early September, and temperatures were still high. With the burner on, the air was quick to heat up. I cranked up the AC and finished cooking Ayase's and my eggs. I'd really outdone myself today—both yolks were perfectly intact.

I decided to cover Ayase's eggs with plastic wrap, then did the same with her steamed vegetable salad. She would be home soon, and I could have just waited. But at the moment, I wanted to spend as little time around her as possible. It would be better to keep my distance until my emotions settled down.

I picked up a sticky note and a pen and pondered what to write, then changed my mind. I'd been thinking about something the whole time I was in the kitchen—our parent-teacher conferences.

I felt bad for not realizing how busy Dad was. But I felt even worse about potentially burdening Akiko just for Ayase's and my convenience. But that wasn't something I could decide by myself. I would have to talk things over with Ayase.

In the end, I decided to wait for her instead of holing myself up in my room as usual.

For better or worse, I could waste an infinite amount of time staring at my phone.

I had a bunch of e-books I'd meant to read stacking up, and just as I started on the second one, I heard the door open and someone quietly say, "I'm home."

It was Ayase. She was keeping her voice down in case Dad or I was asleep, though I was the only one there, since Dad was still working overtime.

She looked surprised when she stepped into the living room.

"Haven't you eaten yet?" she asked.

"Not yet. You're going to eat now, right? What do you say we sit down together? We haven't done that for some time."

She nodded. "That's perfect. I actually had something I wanted to talk to you about..."

The two of us paused for a moment, hesitating, then—

""About our parent-teacher conference...""

—we both spoke at the same time, and our eyes met. The timing was so spot-on, we both laughed.

*Ayase must have been thinking about it, too.*

"Why don't we talk about it over dinner?" I suggested.

"Okay. I'll put my stuff away."

I warmed the miso soup and the eggs and set everything out while Ayase got changed.

We sat at the table, said our thanks for the meal, and picked up our chopsticks.

Whenever I did the cooking, this was always the tensest moment for me. I was so nervous, I couldn't help staring at the person sitting across from me until they took their first bite.

Ayase popped a piece of egg into her mouth. "Mmm. It's good."

"It is? Phew."

“You did a good job. You’re really improving. Did you leave my yolk runny on purpose?”

“I had a feeling that’s how you liked it.”

Ayase and Akiko sprinkled salt and pepper on their eggs, while Dad and I preferred soy sauce.

Since learning each other’s taste preferences, we started letting each person season their own food. We now kept a bunch of seasonings right on the table, like you’d see at a diner. That was why I hadn’t salted or peppered the eggs when I was making them.

That had resolved the seasoning issue, but the difference in our food preferences went even deeper.

After watching Ayase for a while, I realized that she liked her yolks runny when she ate fried eggs. When they were well-done, she’d use whatever soup we were having to help wash them down. That was when it hit me—Dad and I liked our yolks tough and dry because we poured soy sauce over them. But if you were using salt and pepper, a yolk like that would dry out your mouth.

“You’re so observant...,” Ayase said.

“I wish I could use my powers to notice when the refrigerator is empty. If I’d realized how low we were on food, I could’ve stopped by a supermarket on my way home. I had to do with just green onions for the miso soup.”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you.”

“It’s my fault for not checking. I knew you were working today.”

“But I should have told you.”

“No, it’s my fault...”

We looked at each other and laughed.

“Anyway, about our parent-teacher conferences,” I said, getting to the point. “I’ve been thinking it’s a little selfish of us to insist Mom and Dad go along with keeping our relationship secret at school.”





Ayase nodded.

"I think it's wrong to burden Akiko on our account," I continued. "I feel bad about asking her to take off two full days when she's so busy."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"I don't mind if people at school know. But I'm not the only one it will affect."

She nodded again.

"So I wanted to talk it over with you."

"I feel the same way," Ayase said. "It isn't something I can decide on my own. But I remember one time, Mom worked so hard, she almost collapsed."

*That's awful...*

"In that case, I feel even more strongly. I don't want Dad or Akiko to overwork themselves."

"Yeah. Then I guess it's decided."

This time, I was the one to nod. I realized once again how similar our thought processes were.

"If Dad's too busy and Akiko attends my conference instead, we'll have both on the same day. That way, she'll only have to make one trip."

"Agreed. And..." Ayase lowered her voice to a whisper. "...I'm not just concerned about causing Mom trouble. I want her to attend both our conferences for other reasons as well." She spoke so softly that I couldn't tell if she intended for me to hear or if she had inadvertently said what she was thinking out loud. "I'll go ahead and tell Mom."

"If you want me to speak up, too, just let me know."

"Okay."

By the time our discussion was over, we'd already finished eating dinner. Ayase stood and began picking up the plates and utensils, and I rushed to stop her.

"I'll handle this. You must be tired after working."

“Then we’ll clean up together,” she said, smiling.

It seemed like forever since we’d last stood side by side in front of the sink and done the dishes. We chatted about this and that as we washed and rinsed two sets of dishes and utensils. There wasn’t much, so there was no need to use the dishwasher. And besides, I felt like doing it by hand. I wondered if Ayase was the same.

We talked about what was going on at school, the books we were reading, and videos we’d found online. Before we knew it, we were done.

Ayase carefully wiped down the last dish and returned to her room.

It was but a fleeting moment—a small spoonful of happiness.

“But this is for the best,” I said to myself.

I was sure there were siblings out there whose relationships had soured or who had grown apart over the tiniest little things. I should be happy we were able to do chores together like this. *This should be enough.*

Our parents must have considered how things would be for us when they got married, like whether a high school-aged boy and girl would mind suddenly having to live together. They must have hoped with all their hearts that we would get along.

I didn’t want to betray them. I had to control my emotions—I had to put a lid on my feelings and bottle them up.

At the end of the day, Ayase was my stepsister.

## ● SEPTEMBER 3 (THURSDAY)—SAKI AYASE

The bell rang, marking the end of the school day. I grabbed my bag and headed for the classroom door.

“Saki!”

I froze without turning around and sighed. I knew who it was without looking, and I knew that if I turned around, she wouldn’t let me leave. I knew...but there wasn’t much I could do about it now.

“What?” I asked.

“Hey! Don’t ignore someone when they’re talking to you!”

“I’m not ignoring you. I stopped, didn’t I? What is it?”

“Impatient, aren’t we? Take it easy. I swear, young people these days! Busy, busy, busy.”

She walked over to me, arms crossed. Despite what she said, she was the exact same age as I was.

Maaya Narasaka—my only friend.

I answered with another exaggerated sigh. “So what do you want?”

There were a few other students standing behind Maaya. I didn’t have much interest in memorizing everyone’s names and faces, but I recognized the people in this group. We’d gone to the pool with them over summer break.

It was a mixed group of seven, including Maaya, and one of the guys spoke up.

“We’re about to go to a karaoke place. Do you wanna join?”

*What was this guy’s name, again?*

I looked at Maaya. She was waving around what looked like a ticket.

“I snagged a coupon!”

*Aha.*

“Uh...,” I said, hesitating.

“Don’t like karaoke?” she asked.

The old me would have said no and ended the conversation right there. But now...

I looked at the students behind Maaya. From their expressions, I could tell they were a little anxious but also somewhat excited. They were hoping I’d come along.

“I appreciate the invite, but I can’t today. I have something to do at home, and I need to hurry back. Sorry.”

I couldn’t believe I was being so polite. I was even smiling! But I didn’t want to ruin everyone’s memories of the fun time we’d had over the summer. I had no desire to be disliked or make others uncomfortable, either.

“I’ll see you guys later,” I said with a quick bow. Then I picked up my bag and left the classroom.

From behind, I could hear my classmates talking. They were shocked I was in such a hurry, and one of them said, “Too bad, Shinjou.”

*Oh yeah. I remember someone named Shinjou. Can’t recall his first name, though.*

I rushed down the hall, then changed into my outdoor shoes at the entrance. I had to hurry home today—I wanted to get back before Mom left for work.

Shibuya’s main street was always congested, even at four PM on a weekday.

I’d left school in a hurry and was trying to get home, but the sidewalk was packed with pedestrians, and they kept blocking my path. It was stressing me out, but there was nothing I could do. Besides, I was well aware that it was impossible to run through central Shibuya. Mom had worked there for as long as I could remember, and I knew it like the back of my hand.



I turned away from the main street and headed down a narrow alley into a residential district, where I could finally walk at a brisk pace.

I turned a corner, and our towering apartment building came into view. This was Mom's and my new home.

"How strange."

Up until June, I'd taken a different path to a different home.

That was when Mom and I moved into the new apartment. I'd only been walking this route for about three months—not long at all. I had yet to discover alternative paths, and I still didn't know any good shops to stop by on the way home.

I was still living in Shibuya, though. As I got closer to school, the number of familiar signs and shops increased.

And yet my life had changed so much. It now seemed as unfamiliar as the scenery around our new apartment building. Everything had been so much simpler before.

I remembered feeling pretty hopeless about my situation back then. That was why I'd been so desperate to change it.

I respected my mom for working at a bar downtown in order to keep me clothed and fed, and I wanted so badly to get back at everyone who criticized her. I was acutely aware of how people looked at my mom, and I knew getting good grades wouldn't be enough to make a difference.

I reached our apartment building and typed in the security code to open the door. After passing the supervisor's office, I got into the elevator.

*Oops. Forgot to check our mailbox. Oh well, I'll do it later.*

I got off on the third floor—almost home. I was out of breath from rushing back and uncomfortably sweaty. The sleeves on my uniform stuck to my arms, and I felt icky. As I put the key in our door's lock and twisted it, I wondered if I would have time to take a shower before leaving for work.

"I'm home!" I called out, then noticed Mom's shoes in the entryway.

I found her in the living room, ready for work with her makeup all done.

“Welcome back,” she said.

“Do you have a second before you need to go?”

“Of course. I already let them know I’m running late, so there’s no need to rush.”

“Phew...”

I sank onto the couch, pooped after running home in the late summer heat.  
*Whew! I made it!*

I’d been in such a hurry because Mom had told me she had something important to discuss.

It was about our parent-teacher conferences.

My homeroom teacher had passed out the questionnaires this morning, and I’d texted Mom right away so she could adjust her schedule. We’d texted back and forth during recess, and I’d thought everything was settled. But then she’d said she had something she wanted to talk to me about.

To be honest, I was a little panicked. I’d anxiously hurried home, but once I saw her sitting there with her usual relaxed expression, I realized it wasn’t that big a deal.

“You could have just texted me, you know,” I said.

“Your mother’s old-fashioned. I worry I won’t be able to get across all the little nuances.”

“Oh well... I guess that’s true.”

I *did* get what she was saying. That was the sort of person she was. She had good face-to-face communication skills, which was part of why she made such a good bartender. Unlike me, a child raised in the era of social media, she must have some reservations about communicating with text alone.

“Okay, I’ll listen. Just give me one minute.” I ran to my room and tossed my schoolbag on the bed, then grabbed the sports bag I took to work and returned to the living room. “Okay, I’m ready. What did you want to talk about?”

“Well...,” Mom said. She was hesitating, which was unusual. “How are things

with Yuuta at school?”

My heart skipped a beat. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve been calling him your brother at home lately, right?”

“I have.”

“I wondered if you were doing the same at school.”

My heart was thumping harder and harder, but I felt confident it didn’t show. I was good at maintaining a poker face.

“Well, we’re in different classes.”

We didn’t have much interaction to begin with. Still, it’d be a hassle if people started spreading rumors, so I might use his name if we saw each other... But I couldn’t be sure until it happened.

That was what I said to my mom, though it wasn’t the whole truth.

Our classes were right next to each other, so we had PE together, though the girls and guys were usually split up. That meant that while we weren’t necessarily interacting, we were often on the field or in the gym at the same time. If we weren’t careful, there was a good chance we could run into each other.

In fact, that had already happened, though I’d made sure not to look at his face.

“So I guess nothing much has changed,” I said.

“Does that mean no one at school knows you two are siblings?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure. We haven’t told anyone anyway.”

Except Maaya, of course.

“Hmm. Then I guess I’ll have to rethink things.”

“Rethink what? Isn’t this about my parent-teacher conference?”

“Well, you see, Taichi is very busy right now.”

“Uh-huh.”

Mom explained that it would be incredibly difficult for Dad to attend the

parent-teacher conferences, and she didn't want him to overwork himself. To help him out, she'd been thinking of attending both my conference and Asamura's. And in that case, it would be easier for her if they were both on the same day so she would only have to take one day off work.

"Our bar is pretty small, so it's not easy to take multiple days off." The staff at Mom's bar consisted of her, the manager, and another employee who wasn't often there. She didn't want to leave the place short-staffed. "But if both of your conferences are on the same day one after the other, your classmates might find out, and that would be a problem for you two, wouldn't it?"

Everyone would find out that I was Asamura's little sister. But...was that really a problem? It was the truth. We couldn't quit being siblings.

"That's not what I'm really concerned about, though," she continued.

"It's not?!" I stopped looking down at my lap and glanced up at her.

"I'm just worried Yuuta still doesn't see me as his mom, and that makes me a little sad."

*Oh, so that's it. That's what she meant. The fact we're both so reluctant to let our classmates know we have the same mom made her feel rejected... Why was I so fixated on my own feelings? I didn't even think about that.*

Mom was smiling, but her eyes looked troubled. I didn't think she was really upset, but...she was trying to be a good mom, not just for me, but for Asamura, too. I didn't want her to feel like she wasn't doing enough.

I opened my mouth and started to say "Mom—," but then I felt my voice catch.

Just then, I heard the door open, followed by Asamura's voice. Soon, he was in the living room.

Automatically, I started speaking. "Hi, Big Brother."

"H-hi, Ayase."

He stuttered for a moment, then said my name as usual. He still called me Ayase. It was pretty normal to call a younger sibling by their first name, but he didn't use it. "Ayase" made me sound like a stranger.

“What were you two discussing?” He glanced at Mom and me, then noticed the handout on the table. “...Oh.”

“You got one of these, too, right?” I said.

“Perfect timing.” Mom looked up at him.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Taichi and I were just discussing what to do about your conference.”

Mom went on to explain to him what she had told me. I listened without interrupting, wondering how she would convince him.

But what she said surprised me.

“I’ve been thinking about it, and I’m wondering if we shouldn’t plan your conferences for different days.”

““Huh?!”” we said in unison. I couldn’t stop myself.

Mom sounded as if she’d been considering doing so all along. Wasn’t that a huge hassle for her?

Asamura appeared to feel the same way I did.

“I mean...Dad isn’t the only one who’s busy,” he said. “And you work at night. Isn’t it already a big ask to have you come out during the day?”

*Exactly. You get it, Asamura.*

Yet Mom smiled brightly and said it was okay. Then she picked up her bag, said it was time to go to work, and took off.

“Will she be okay running like that?” he asked as she sprinted down the hall.

“Oof. I hope she doesn’t fall.”

*What should I do? Why didn’t Mom tell him she wanted to schedule our conferences on the same day, like she told me?* I was so confused.

*I have to get out of the apartment. If I stay here in this state of mind, I’ll wind up relying on Asamura. I won’t be able to keep up my poker face.*

I grabbed my sports bag.

Asamura turned around and asked, “Oh? Are you leaving, too?”



"It's almost time for work," I said.

"Oh... Okay. See you later."

"Yeah. See you, Big Brother."

I was responding on autopilot. I'd been saying those words over and over, forming a habit, so they came out naturally, without me having to think about it.

But the whole time, I kept picturing my mom's face. She'd looked troubled and sad when she was talking to me, but as soon as Asamura came home, she hid her emotions completely. Her poker face was something else.

She didn't want Asamura to go out of his way for her. We must have inadvertently made it seem like we really didn't want anyone to find out we were siblings, and she'd given up. I felt increasingly sure that was the case.

Even later, when I was working at the bookstore, I couldn't get it off my mind. What should I do? What was the right answer?

"Excuse me, miss."

I heard someone calling out to me as I was placing books on a shelf, and I turned around. A mother with a stroller was holding a hefty childcare magazine in her arms.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I missed the previous issue of this magazine. I don't suppose you still have a copy?"

"Unfortunately, we don't. But...um, would you like me to see if I can order a back issue?"

It wasn't old. Maybe the publisher or our distributor still had a copy.

"Oh, it's all right. There was an article I wanted to read, but don't bother. Thank you, though."

"Oh, it's no problem."

"I'll just buy this one, then," the woman said, turning toward the cash register.

I saw her struggling to carry it while pushing the stroller, so I offered to take it and then led the way to the checkout area.

The woman finished paying for her magazine, thanked me, and left the store. Then I went back to work.

I thought over my conversation with Mom again and decided I didn't want her to feel sad anymore. I'd have to talk things over with Asamura when I got home.

Once I'd made up my mind, I felt better. It was like something had been caught in my throat, and I'd finally managed to swallow it. I'd been avoiding Asamura lately while I worked through my feelings, and it had been a while since the two of us had talked for any length of time.

Eventually, I finished my shift and returned home.

I opened the door and announced myself quietly. It was late, and Asamura was probably in his room. I went up to his door—right before the one leading into the living area—and knocked.

No answer. Maybe he was already asleep or was taking a bath. I continued into the living area...

...and there he was.

Dinner was on the table, freshly made.

Hesitantly, I asked if he'd eaten yet, and he suggested that we eat together. I wasn't sure what he wanted, but it was convenient for me, since I had something to discuss with him.

““About our parent-teacher conference...””

We spoke at exactly the same time. Had he been thinking about it, too? That was a relief.

We decided to talk it out over dinner...

...and he said pretty much the same things I'd been thinking all day.

“I think it's wrong to burden Akiko on our account,” he said.

*This is so unfair!*

Here I was, trying to erase my feelings for him, and he was shaking my resolve

over something so trivial.

I was genuinely happy that he was thinking about my mom and what would be easiest for her.

“I’m not just concerned about causing Mom trouble,” I said. “I want her to attend both our conferences for other reasons as well.”

She was trying so hard to be a good mom for Asamura.

In the end, we agreed that it was okay if people at school found out that we were siblings.

It would be a joint declaration from both of us.

## ● SEPTEMBER 4 (FRIDAY)—YUUTA ASAMURA

My dad and I both got up early on Friday.

As soon as we sat down at the dining table, my dad turned to me and said, “Akiko and I have been thinking about something.”

“Both of you?”

I gave him a puzzled look as I scooped rice into his bowl. Dad and Akiko seemed to live in two different time zones, and I wondered when in the world they found time to talk.

I asked, and Dad said he and Akiko often texted each other. He used to find it annoying to text me, and I took a moment to consider how much he’d changed.

“I’ll take a day off work to go to your parent-teacher conference. Work is pretty busy right now, but it isn’t right to make Akiko handle everything.”

“Actually, Dad, about that...”

I explained what Ayase and I had talked about the previous night and told him that we would schedule our conferences so Akiko could attend both on the same day. That way, he wouldn’t have to be absent from work.

“Really? Are you sure?” he asked.

I nodded. “Ayase and I both agreed. We don’t want to cause problems, and it’s weird to keep hiding the fact that we’re siblings.”

I had never seen Dad look so happy.

“Akiko will be thrilled,” he said. Then he went on to tell me things she’d said about wanting to be a good mom for me.

If I was still a child, things might have been different. But I was sixteen now. My dad getting married might mean he had a new wife, but it didn’t mean I had

a new mother.

Dad and Akiko seemed to sense that, and he added that Akiko's desire to be my mom didn't mean she wanted to be my guardian.

"She says she wants you two to be family and that she thinks it's achievable. She thinks that to do otherwise would be a waste of the ties she formed when she married me."

*Ties...*

Now I understood. Akiko didn't want to be my mother because she felt obligated to be my guardian. She might be my stepmother, and I her stepson, but that wasn't what she meant by *family*. She simply wanted to cherish our time together—her, dad, Ayase, and me.

"So I think she'll be very happy when she hears that you've accepted her as part of your family," he said.

I felt a little guilty. I hadn't even thought about that.

"Good morning, Dad. Hey, Big Brother."

Ayase came into the living room.

"Oh! Good morning, Saki."

"Do you want breakfast, Ayase?" I asked.

She'd woken up a little late, so I wanted to make sure. She usually left for school before I did, so she might not have time to eat.

"Oh, sorry you wound up making breakfast. I'll take over from here."

"Go ahead and sit down. We just got up, too. Here's your miso soup...and rice and chopsticks."

"Oh... Thanks."

"You're welcome. But...aren't you in a hurry? Did you oversleep?" I asked, though that didn't seem very likely.

After sitting down, she turned her smartphone around and showed me the screen. Did she want to show me something?



“...Text messages?” I asked.

“Mom said she’ll be home in a couple of hours. Now, about what we were discussing yesterday.”

*Oh, okay.*

Last night, Ayase had said she would text Akiko about what we discussed. She must have received a reply this morning and talked things over via text. That was probably why she was running late.

“Mom was delighted.”

“See?” Dad said happily. I felt a stinging sensation in my chest again.

“So about the schedule. Mom gave me her preferred date.”

“When is that?” I asked.

“September twenty-fifth, if possible.”

“The twenty-fifth...a Friday,” I said as I checked the calendar.

“Does that work?”

“Yeah, no problem. If the twenty-fifth works for her, that’s what we’ll put on our forms. And, Ayase—?”

We would need to explain our situation to our teachers ahead of time. We’d have to let them know that our mom couldn’t take multiple days off, so we would need to schedule our conferences for the same day. Both my teacher and Ayase’s were already aware that our parents had gotten married.

“Oh, good point,” she said.

“If we were in the same class, I could have just explained for both of us, but...”

“No problem. I’ll talk to my teacher myself.”

Ayase said to leave it to her and then continued eating her breakfast. A little while ago, she’d been reluctant to handle things like this. Maybe that had been changing lately.

Ayase finished eating, did the dishes, and left at her usual time.

Dad was the next to leave, and I was the last one out.

As I walked to school, I looked up at the sky. The breeze didn't feel as hot as it had the day before.

Akiko wanted us to be family. *Ayase calls Dad "Dad." Maybe I should call Akiko "Mom," too.* Not because I saw her as my real mom, but so that the four of us could be family.

I wondered if that was why Ayase had started calling me Big Brother.

I caught sight of our school's main gate and put a stop to the thoughts swirling around in my brain.

Classes would start in five minutes.

The warning bell rang just as Maru walked in through the classroom's rear door.

He wasn't the only one—students who had morning sports practice trickled into the room in twos and threes. They always tended to arrive just before the final bell. Maru sat at the desk in front of me and turned around, as if he'd just thought of something.

"Hey, Asamura."

"Yeah?"

"You really did go to the pool with Narasaka and her friends this summer, didn't you?"

"Oh, uh... Well, yeah."

"I heard a rumor that you were getting along pretty well with Ayase."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It was just a rumor. But seeing how Ayase has been acting lately, I'm starting to think it might be true."

What *might be true*, exactly?

"So spill," he continued. "What's the deal with Ayase?"

I wasn't sure how to answer. In the end, I was forced to take the cliché route and fire back a question of my own.

“Why are you asking me that all of a sudden?”

“Don’t you think it’s the responsibility of a friend character in a dating sim to ask his buddy about his love life?”

“I think you need to separate games from reality.”

“Hmm. To tell you the truth, I just heard about this a little while ago. I don’t have any evidence to back it up or anything.”

I supposed that meant people on the baseball team were talking about Ayase and me, saying we were *getting along pretty well*.

*Why?* I’d only realized my feelings for Ayase during our trip to the pool, and I’d immediately resolved myself to get rid of them. She was my sister, after all, and I was expected to be her brother. I needed to forget about all that, erase it. And yet for some reason, the people around me kept reminding me of what had happened over the summer, like they could see right through me.

Wondering what I should do, I opened my bag to start preparing for class. That was when I saw the handout and I remembered.

Ayase and I had talked about this, and we’d reached a decision. We’d agreed that it was okay if our classmates found out we were siblings.

“Hey, Maru?” My voice was quiet. I still wasn’t ready to tell the whole world.

Maru shifted toward me. Leave it to my best friend to immediately understand I was about to talk about something sensitive.

“About Ayase and me...,” I said. I told him that our parents had gotten married, that we were now stepsiblings, and that we’d finally decided to be more open about it.

I still didn’t want him to go around spreading the word, though. I said I’d told him because I trusted him.

“Of course,” he replied. “I’m not the sort of guy who blabs about sensitive subjects like that.”

“Thanks.”

“But now it finally makes sense.”

“Huh? What makes sense?”

“When you suddenly started asking me about Ayase, I was shocked. It was like you were obsessed with her.”

“Obsessed...?”

“Sorry, wrong word. But you had me pretty worried there.”

Back in June, Ayase had been the subject of some bad rumors. Her flashy clothes—the ones she called her armor—and the fact that she was seen in downtown Shibuya late at night were more than enough to start some wild gossip.

“That was all a misunderstanding,” I said.

“Yeah, it seems so. My apologies. But now it all makes sense. And that means I was bad-mouthing your sister. Sorry, man.”

“Well, you couldn’t help it, since you didn’t know.”

“I kept thinking you’d fallen for her.”

For just a moment, my heart skipped a beat, and I felt my palms start to sweat.

*He thought I’d fallen for her...fallen in love with her.*

There was nothing wrong with siblings caring for each other, of course. But this was different.

“I never...”

“Oh, sorry. That was uncalled-for. But you know, I’m relieved. You wouldn’t have stood a chance against those guys. I don’t want to watch my best friend get hurt.”

“Those guys?”

“Haven’t you heard? People are saying Ayase changed after summer break.”

According to Maru, Ayase had become a lot nicer, and her popularity had skyrocketed. Guys who had been scared of her before and thought she was a delinquent were now vying for her attention. She’d stopped being a loner, and all sorts of boys had started talking to her and trying to get closer. Naturally,

that included some real catches.

“There was no way in hell you were gonna come out on top... Or so I thought. But you weren’t competing in the first place. You were just her brother.”

“I can’t believe you.”

“Calm down, buddy.”

Maru seemed convinced.

As I watched him, I thought things over. He was right, of course. My chances against whatever suitors she might have didn’t matter if we were brother and sister. What did I care if some hunk approached her?

Only in fiction did brothers worry about protecting their sisters from other boys. Ayase was sixteen. She could think about things like dating on her own. She didn’t need her brother meddling, whether we were related by blood or not.

Right. I needed to remain calm. So what if there were guys trying to date Ayase? It had nothing to do with me.

Our teacher walked in and began class. He asked for anyone with their handouts ready to turn them in, and I handed mine over, quietly explaining the situation.

“I see,” he said. “So your stepmother will be attending your conference?”

“Yes, sir.”

Our brief exchange over, I returned to my desk.

After school, I was in a hurry.

I had work that day, so I grabbed my bag as soon as homeroom was over and hurried to the school entrance to change shoes. That was when I noticed a loud group of people approaching.

I heard a familiar voice among them and turned to see Narasaka in the center. The other kids were from the class next door. As usual, Narasaka was surrounded by her friends, laughing. She was always careful to talk to everyone and make sure no one was left out.

Ayase was with them. She walked in line with the others, keeping a neutral distance. Every now and then, someone would say something to her, and she would respond.

When I saw her smiling and chatting, I reflexively grabbed my shoes and hid. Keeping to the shadows, I crept out the door. I told myself that I didn't want to disturb her.

She had been smiling. It was the first time I'd seen her laughing with her classmates. I was glad. Before, she'd seemed like an outcast.

It was just as Maru had said—Ayase had changed. The way she'd refused to rely on anyone might have made her look like a cool loner, but in truth, she'd merely been cutting ties with people because she didn't know how to deal with them.

She had since learned that she didn't have to cut other people off to be independent.

Now she was softer, nicer. And she was with people I didn't know, chatting and laughing. Why did that make me feel so strange? Why couldn't I just be happy for her?

The sky had turned a dark crimson by the time I reached the bicycle parking area near the train station.

The days were shorter now. It was September, and the sun was setting earlier and earlier.

After arriving at the bookstore, I went to the employee area in the back, changed into my work uniform, and stepped out onto the sales floor.

My first order of business was to straighten up the merchandise. I passed by the sales counter, greeted the manager, and headed for the shelves.

I started at the far end and began looking over the books.

Most Japanese bookstores organize their products by publisher first, rather than by author. Each publisher's offerings are then further separated by imprint. Finally, each imprint is lined up alphabetically by the author's last name according to the Japanese sound system.



Take a book published under the MF Bunko J imprint. If you look at the top of the spine, you can see a few mysterious letters and numbers. One might say “Mi-10-16,” for example. This means that there are several authors whose last name starts with “Mi” published under this imprint and that the book in question is the sixteenth book published by the tenth such author.

My job at the moment was to use these numbers to move stray books back to their proper place. I had the late shift, so new arrivals had already been set out and the stock adjusted. I could see that space had been made for newer books, so all I had to do was straighten out the ones already there.

As I idly picked out books customers had inadvertently moved and returned them to their proper place, my mind began to go blank. I was gradually reaching a state of zen, when— “Hey there, young man. You’re just the person I wanted to see.”

At the sound of this familiar voice, I turned around to find a Japanese beauty with long black hair, carrying a pile of paperbacks. There was no need to read the name tag on her uniform—I immediately recognized her as Shiori Yomiuri, my senior coworker.

“By the way,” she said, “what’s that expression supposed to be?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just clearing my mind of worldly thoughts.”

“Doing some deep thinking, huh?”

“I think that’s actually the opposite of what I was doing.”

“Oh-ho? Well then, kiddo. Be clear. What *were* you doing?”

“Stop acting like some middle-aged man. I’ll tell the manager you’re harassing me.”

“You will? That’s wonderful. It’s important to have gender equality in *all* aspects of the workplace.”

I didn’t think harassment could be called “wonderful” no matter who was doing it.

“Well, young man, never mind all that. Isn’t there something you ought to say to a beautiful girl carrying a heavy load of books in front of you?”

“Oh, sorry. I’ll take those.”

The paperbacks she was carrying needed to be added to the shelves.

The introduction of a POS cash register—one with a computer equipped with point-of-sale software—allowed us to update our stock records with each sale. Thinking about how employees of the previous era had to rely on their own memory for things like that scared me a little. They must have kept records on paper and counted the inventory on the shelves by hand, but that still sounded like a lot of work. And taking stock of the whole store wasn’t something you could do every day, so a lot had probably come down to memory. Now all it took was a quick look at the automated database.

The mountain of paperbacks I took from Yomiuri belonged on the light novel rack in front of me.

I took a good look at them and saw that they were from a long-running series by an author who had several works made into anime and who had recently begun branching out into other markets.

“This is a good series,” I said, “but I wonder why it’s suddenly selling so well?”

“You said you’d read it, didn’t you?”

“Yeah... Oh, right!” Suddenly, I remembered. “The anime must have just started broadcasting.”

“Yes, exactly. We have a POP display up, and there are a bunch more laid out on the special stand over there.” She pointed toward the front of the store, and I turned to look.

Past the paperback shelves were prominently located stands with books stacked flat on top so you could see their covers. We placed titles that were likely to sell well there, in addition to their usual spot on the shelves, since it made them easier to spot when you could see more than just the spines.

A handwritten card was fluttering next to the pile. These special ads were called POP for “point of purchase” and were used to draw extra attention to a product in the store.

“That masterpiece was made by yours truly,” said Yomiuri.

“Is that so?”

“I wrote, ‘This amazing story will have you in tears! I cried a whole bucket!’”

“You know you’re not supposed to lie, right?”

Knowing Yomiuri, I figured she was probably joking. I’d have to go and read what she actually wrote later. Even as I thought this, it occurred to me that I’d probably already fallen into her trap.

“Wait a sec. That means...” I’d just realized something important.

If the anime was starting now, in the fall, then the three months through December would be the peak sale season for the novel.

I picked up one of the paperbacks Yomiuri had brought onto the sales floor. A new ad paper was wrapped around it, announcing the airing of the anime. The publisher must have added these to the newest print run. It also said that a new book would be released the following month.

“So there’s a new one coming out...,” I muttered.

“You seem pretty tired, Yuuta.”

Yomiuri sounded concerned, so I glanced up at her.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re lacking vitality.”

“I’m not skipping meals or anything.”

“That’s not what I mean. Before, you always knew about new volumes of your favorite series three months in advance.”

New volumes of books and manga were announced as early as three months before they went on sale, so someone working at a bookstore could potentially find out quite early.

“...I suppose you’re right.”

“See? You’re lacking vitality.”

“That’s not—”

“Aw, come on. I can see right through you. Yuuta not being interested in the

latest volume of a series he likes is huge. It's a major incident!"

"It is? Well... I guess so."

She was right. The old me would never have let something like this slip his mind.

"Are you missing Saki because your shifts are different?" Yomiuri giggled suggestively.

"Watch out, Yomiuri. If you keep smirking like that, you'll lose all your fans."

"There, there. You can talk to me about your problems. Now, open up your heart and jump into my arms."

"It's not like that, okay? We're siblings. It couldn't be like that."

"Like what?"

"I'm not missing her. People don't miss their sister just because they don't get to work with her."

"I don't have an older brother, so I wouldn't know. Maybe that's true. But Saki is only your stepsister, right?"

"She's still my sister," I said, feeling my chest constrict.

"What a sensible, boring response!"

"I wasn't trying to entertain you."

"Hmm. Okay, then. Moving on, I have some juicy info for you that might get your energy levels back up..." Yomiuri held up one finger for emphasis. "...My college has an open campus coming up. You should come."

"An open campus? You mean where interested students can come and learn about the curriculum and so on...?"

"Exactly. You'll be surrounded by cute college girls. That'll cheer you up."

A lot of guys would be over the moon if they got to spend time with a bunch of pretty college girls like Yomiuri. I'd once seen her with a group of other girls I assumed were friends from college, and they'd all been attractive young women.

But there was a key problem with my coworker's suggestion.

"Yomiuri, don't you go to an all-girls college?"

"Yeah, so?"

"I don't think they'd let a guy like me go to your open campus."

"What?! So much for gender equality!"

I doubted we'd reached an age so enlightened that a boy could enroll at an all-girls college.

I knew Yomiuri was just trying to cheer me up, but I couldn't bring myself to smile at her. Even I didn't know what I was so depressed about. I had no reason to feel down, after all.

I finished my shift and went straight home.

I found dinner and a note waiting for me on the table. The night before, Ayase and I had eaten dinner together for the first time in a while. But today, she'd only left me a note and holed up in her room.

She wasn't avoiding me...was she?

I wished I could have seen her face. It seemed I'd lied to Yomiuri earlier.

A single thought echoed in my mind:

*This was inevitable, wasn't it? After all, Ayase and I aren't real siblings.*

## ● SEPTEMBER 4 (FRIDAY)—SAKI AYASE

A bell rang, announcing the end of fourth period, and all the students relaxed at once.

“Time for lunch!” a girl shouted.

I looked at her and sighed. How was she so full of energy every day? Not that it mattered.

“Lunchtime, lunchtime!”

The girl sounded like she was skipping... *Oh wow, she really is skipping.* As I waited for the bundle of energy named Maaya Narasaka to come over to my desk, I noticed several of our classmates behind her.

“Hey, Ayase,” said the girl sitting next to me. “I’m going to the cafeteria, so feel free to use my desk.”

“Thanks.”

She picked up her wallet and left the classroom. I watched her go, then pushed her desk against mine and pulled a lunch box out of my bag.

“Saki,” said Maaya. “Sorry there’s such a crowd today.”

“It’s okay.”

I had secured a desk for Maaya, who walked over swinging her own lunch box from side to side. But what should I do about the people behind her?

I was stumped for a minute, and then I saw them talking to the surrounding students and borrowing desks all on their own.

About half the class went to the cafeteria or their clubrooms to eat lunch. That meant their desks weren’t being used, so as long as everyone got permission, there wouldn’t be any problems. Personally, however, it seemed

like way too much trouble just to eat lunch with someone else.

Usually, I wouldn't have even wanted to do something like this, but I already knew some of the people with Maaya from our summer trip to the pool, and the others were people I'd begun talking to recently.

Before I knew it, we'd formed a little island from the surrounding desks.

I silently said my thanks for the meal.

Then Maaya turned toward me and said, "I wonder what's for lunch today?"

"Shouldn't you be looking at your own food, Maaya?"

"Oh! An omelet!"

"Get your chopsticks away from my lunch!"

"Half! Just give me half!"

"Ugh."

I broke my omelet into two pieces and tossed one into Maaya's lunch box. She seemed to think this was a trade and placed a piece of fried chicken in mine.

"Isn't this a lot bigger than what I gave you?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it. Ooh, Yumi's salmon looks good, too."

"I'll trade you a piece in exchange for that Narasaka family special-recipe chicken!" said Yumi.

"Done!"

*Oh. So the chicken is a family recipe.* I lifted it to my mouth and bit down. The crust wasn't too greasy, and the juicy meat inside fell apart in my mouth. It wasn't fatty, so I figured it was chicken breast, not thigh.

"This is good...", I said.

"Isn't it?! Narasaka's fried chicken is magical."

"It's not magic, it's fried chicken!" Maaya said, her expression serious. Everyone laughed, and I found myself laughing along, too.

"Maaya. Did you fry this twice?" I asked.



“Mmm?”

“Oh, go ahead and finish eating. You can tell me later.”

“Mm-mmm.”

Maaya nodded, her mouth still full of chicken. Everyone laughed again.

I’d always thought dealing with other people was a waste of time and that I’d never need any friends other than Maaya. But now I was making a conscious effort to build new relationships.

We ate and talked in between bites. I couldn’t quite keep up with the others’ conversations, and I wasn’t all that interested in trying. Still, as I sat there with them, pretending to listen, I realized I was starting to enjoy myself.

Human psychology was surprisingly simple. I wondered if this phenomenon had a name.

“Hey, guys...” One of the boys called for everyone’s attention, and I looked up. “Why don’t we all go out together again this month?”

Who was this boy again...? What was his name...?

“Good idea, Shinjou. When and where were you thinking?”

“How about karaoke? Some Sunday when we’re all free.”

*Oh yeah. Shinjou.*

Everyone seemed on board with his suggestion, saying “Great idea” and “It’s been a while.”

“How about you, Saki?” asked Maaya.

I hesitated. *What should I do?* In the past, I would have turned down the offer, saying I had to study or work.

“Uh...”

“Do you have to work? Or maybe you’re busy studying.”

She’d beaten me to it. She was giving me an out if I wanted it.

“I’m not working on the twenty-seventh. I’d usually be studying, but...”

“Oh-ho. I knew you were a good student. Hmm. What should we do?”

“In that case,” said Shinjou, turning to me, “how about we get together for a study session?”

*Why is he looking at me like that?*

“Where?” someone asked.

“How about the library?”

“Oh, how about my place?” Maaya said, piping up.

The others seemed unsure what to make of this suggestion. I wasn’t surprised—there were six of us here. But I knew we’d all fit in Maaya’s living room.

Maaya said her parents were taking her brothers out somewhere that day. She curled in her fingers to mimic a cat’s paw and made a beckoning gesture. “Come on over,” she said. If I was serious about building new relationships, I figured it would probably be a good idea to attend.

And if I had more interactions with other people, maybe I could finally get rid of my improper feelings for Asamura.

Once I got home, I started making dinner and setting up for breakfast the following day.

*Oh, right.* I opened the refrigerator and reached for the chicken. If I made fried chicken, we could have some tomorrow morning and pack the leftovers as lunch. I thought about Maaya’s family recipe. She probably deep-fried each piece twice—once at a low temperature and then again at a high temperature. I didn’t usually do that, since I was always pressed for time, but I thought I’d try it today. Fortunately, I didn’t have work.

For dinner, I grilled sun-dried horse mackerel and made miso soup with eggplant and dried tofu. I topped it off with a drop of sesame seed oil for a different taste.

Dad came home while I was cooking and ran hot water in the bath. He ate dinner while waiting for it to fill.

“Oh, the miso soup tastes different today,” he noted.

“You don’t like it?”

“It’s delicious. Yuuta’s going to love it.”

I wasn’t expecting him to say that, and I struggled to maintain a poker face.

“That’s...good,” I managed.

“Akiko sometimes uses sesame seed oil in her cooking, too, and it’s great. Is this a family recipe?”

“...You might say that.”

I’d momentarily forgotten, but it was Mom who taught me the trick of using sesame seed oil to vary a dish’s flavor.

Dad took his bath and then headed off to bed.

I finished frying the chicken, then wrote a note for Asamura for when he got home from work.

After that, I went to my room and began preparing for the next day’s classes.

I put my headphones on to block out the world around me, turned on some lofi hip-hop, and opened my textbook.

I had math tomorrow, and the teacher liked to ask students questions in student number order. That was determined by our last name, so there was a good chance that I’d be called on, since “Ayase” was right at the front. I needed to make sure I was ready.

As I worked, I thought about my plans for the following Sunday, and memories of that summer day at the pool swirled in my mind.

If I really wanted to distance myself from Asamura, then shouldn’t I stop making dinner for him and leaving him notes? But then wasn’t that going a little too far? Rather than distancing myself, it felt like completely cutting him off. I didn’t want to do that...

I didn’t want to push him away. I really didn’t. That would be even worse than when we were strangers.

Did I think that because we were family? Because I didn’t want to destroy our give-and-take relationship? Or...

...was this a sign of my lingering attachment? Even I wasn’t sure.

And in the end, I couldn't solve a single problem in my textbook.

## ● SEPTEMBER 24 (THURSDAY)—YUUTA ASAMURA

September flew by. Perhaps it was the cool autumn air, or maybe it was because my days were so colorless now that I was talking less and less with Ayase. Before I knew it, it was the day before our parent-teacher conferences.

“This is just a hypothetical, okay...”

It was lunchtime, and I decided to take advantage of the noise to ask Maru a question while we ate.

“Say a guy has a broken heart.”

“Hmm?” Maru raised his head.

“He needs to forget about his feelings for this girl. What should he do?”

“Asamura, you can’t expect the right answer with such a vague description.”

“Uh, sorry?”

“Oh, never mind. I’m just guessing here, but...I think the difficulty will vary depending on if the girl is someone this guy sees every day, or if she’s someone he only knows online.”

*Oh, I see. He’s talking about distance.*

“Let’s say she’s someone he sees often, then.”

Maru looked up from his lunch box and glanced at me. Then he looked back down and scooped out some rice topped with seaweed. That one scoop was at least 50 percent larger than the bites I took. Maybe that was normal for people who did sports.

Maru chewed for a while, then took a swig of tea from a plastic bottle.

“How about dating different girls? Love is pretty hard to define, but I figure something about this girl moved his heart...”

I froze for a split second when he said the word *love*. Praying he hadn't noticed, I tilted my head a bit and prompted him to go on.

"But even if he thinks he's madly in love," Maru continued, "it might just be his imagination. It's entirely possible that meeting another attractive girl could change his mind in no time."

"Do you think it would be that easy...? And meeting new girls sounds pretty hard."

"Asamura... Are you blind? There are at least twenty girls in this classroom alone. Girls are all around you."

I was pretty sure girls were not all around me.

"Are you trying to say that since women are half the population, it should be easy to meet one? That's just an old cliché."

"But it's true. When it comes to meeting girls, it's all about perspective."

"Other girls, huh...?"

I gave it some thought.

It seemed to me there was a huge gap between knowing a woman existed and forming a relationship with her. But I didn't want to dismiss out of hand this divine revelation from my friend.

*Perspective, huh?*

Basically, Maru was saying this: We normally see strangers as just that—strangers. Ayase was the same. If our parents hadn't gotten married, I would have seen her as nothing more than a flashy girl from the next class over. Even if we wound up introducing ourselves, we probably wouldn't get much further than saying "Hi" when we passed each other in the hall.

But she just happened to become my stepsister, and we got to know each other well in the process of learning to live together. As a result, I found out a lot about her, and that was stirring up my feelings.

If that was the case, all I had to do was make an effort to get to know the other girls around me. Maybe I'd find someone who moved my heart even more than Ayase did...

"I don't know," I said.

"If it's tough to imagine a random girl, maybe this guy should start with people who are already close to him. When you're having a hard time winning, it's best to focus your attention where you have the most information."

"What are you talking about now?"

"I'm just explaining the prevailing view."

*The prevailing view on what, exactly?*

That aside, Maru seemed to be suggesting that I start with someone close by. In my case, that would be...

*"There, there. You can talk to me about your problems. Now, open up your heart and jump into my arms."*

I immediately thought of Yomiuri, the college girl at my part-time job. Maybe it was that weird thing she'd said the other day about how I could talk to her about anything.

"Well, whatever," Maru said, breaking into my thoughts. "It might be a good idea to try something new, girl or no. Might get your mind off things. It's not good to get all worked up."

"Yeah, I guess... Hey! I said this was hypothetical."

"Oh, right. You did say that, didn't you?" He snapped the lid back on his lunch box. "Okay, see you later." Then he left the classroom.

His lunch had been twice the size of mine, and he'd finished it in a flash and headed out to lunchtime practice. Was his stomach made of steel?

I sighed, then set to work finishing my own food.

I had work for the second day in a row today.

As I parked my bike in the parking lot, I thought about the fall weather. I'd been pedaling at full speed and wasn't sweating nearly as much as I had back in August.

Later, as I made my way into the bookstore, the assistant manager called out to me.



“Asamura! You’re on register duty today.”

“Okay.”

I did as I was told and headed behind the register to start checking out customers.

I took a lot of care whenever I was on register duty. We didn’t have to enter the book prices, since we had a barcode scanner, but that didn’t mean our job was easy. We still had to prepare book covers in the correct sizes for each book and inform the customers about which bags were available, depending on the size of their purchase. The barcode scanner couldn’t help with any of that.



In addition, when I saw a customer with lots of bags and children, frazzled and about to drop their wallet, I always tried to smile and calm them down. I also endeavored to lay out each customer's change so it was easy to see on the change tray.

Payment methods had diversified in recent years, too, complicating a cashier's duties. In the past, people mostly paid with cash. But now there was a whole list of credit cards and smartphone apps we might encounter, and we had to know how to handle them all. It was no wonder more and more employees quailed at the thought of working the register.

Incidentally, *quail* is a verb that means to be visibly afraid. I saw it occasionally in books and liked the sound of it, but there weren't a lot of occasions to use it in daily life, so— "Hey, you can take a break now."

"What?! ...Oh, okay."

The assistant manager's voice broke me out of my musings. One good thing about humans is that once we get used to an activity, our bodies start moving on their own, even if it's something complicated. At some point, I'd begun to drift off into a mindless state behind the cash register. I was a little impressed with myself.

As a result, I'd managed to calm down and feel a little more positive about the issue that had been troubling me at lunch, even if I hadn't managed to resolve it.

Maru was right—maybe trying new things would help me move forward. And who should come along right then but someone who was bound to have lots of fresh ideas I'd never think of myself...

"Got a minute, Yuuta?"

"Oh, Yomiuri. What is it?"

Yomiuri clasped her hands behind her back and peered down at me from above.

"Do you want to go out and have a little fun with me after work today?"

"A little fun?"

“I thought I’d show you some new ways to spend your free time.”

“Sure!”

“That was quick. Were you always this gung ho?”

“Oh, um, I was just thinking about challenging myself to try new things. I hope that’s okay with you.”

“No problem. That’s great. Us old folks should cherish the youth’s pioneering spirit.”

“Glad to hear it.”

This was the second time Yomiuri had asked me out. Last time, she’d invited me to a film. If it hadn’t been for her suggestion that we catch a late showing, I would have missed it entirely.

It just went to show that college students had more experience than high school kids. Yomiuri was older than I was, and she had the extra knowledge to show it. She seemed to see right through me and understand what I was worried about.

“Then it’s decided!” she said.

“What do you have in mind? We won’t have that much time after work.”

“Heh-heh-heh. I’m going to show you how an adult parties, young man.”

With that, she went back to work. She refused to elaborate on our plans and only smiled when we passed each other.

*Adult fun, huh? What does that mean?*

“So this is how an adult parties...?”

*Really?*

“This is a compulsory subject for all working adults!”

“What are you, a middle-aged man from the 1970s?”

“Trust me, Yuuta.”

I was never sure how seriously to take what Yomiuri said.

I stared at her, then looked up at the building before us. There were signs for

billiards and darts—games I did indeed associate with adults—along with something called a “golf simulator.”

“I want to practice my golf skills!” she shouted excitedly.

“I knew you were secretly a middle-aged man.”

“Grrr. Are you insulting me?”

“So you’re after the golf simulator?”

“Follow me and find out.”

She led the way, and I trailed behind wordlessly.

We got on the elevator, and just as I’d expected, Yomiuri took us to an indoor golf facility. This was something I’d heard about but never seen or tried.

“It’s your first time at a place like this, isn’t it, Yuuta?”

“It is. I have a friend who’s into virtual games, so I’ve heard a little about it from him.”

The space was divided in box-shaped booths. At the far end of each, a golf course spread out into the distance. I could see green grass stretching out endlessly under a blue sky, with gentle sloping mountains far in the distance.

This lovely scenery was all just an image projected onto a screen, of course. We were still indoors in the middle of Shibuya.

“It’s great to be surrounded by nature,” exclaimed Yomiuri. “What beautiful shades of green!”

“I’m not sure I see the difference between this and watching nature programs on TV at home.”

“Yuuta!” shouted Yomiuri, as if she were scolding me. “Where’s your sense of romance?! Your imagination?! Your poetic sentiment?! You’re still young—stop acting like some tired old goat!”

“Um, okay.” I wasn’t quite sure how to react.

“Does this beautiful scenery not stir your heart? You make me sad.”

“Sorry.”

“Surrounded by greenery, one swings a club with all one’s might, and the white ball goes flying, sucked up into an endless blue sky. What a wonderful feeling! How utterly refreshing!”

“Huh. Is that what this is all about?”

“Yes, that’s exactly it. That’s why all tired old men rush off to the golf course.”

*Didn’t I just say this was a sport for old men?*

“Stop complaining,” she said. “You’re wasting our time.”

She made me pick up a golf club.

I’d never held one before, and I wasn’t sure what kind of grip to use. Should I grab it like a baseball bat?

Yomiuri put her hands over mine and adjusted my grip. *Wow, she has really pretty fingernails...*

“Mmm. Like this, I think,” she said. “Here, try it out.”

“Okay.”

She had me support the club with my left hand first, then place my right hand above it, so it overlapped my left thumb slightly. Apparently, this was the Yomiuri style of holding a golf club. She said there were other ways but that I could look those up later.

I was still a beginner, so I figured I’d just do as she said.

“Your shoulders are too tense,” she remarked, pressing them down hard. Apparently, I’d raised them, and she wanted them back down in a relaxed position. My shoulders *did* tend to go up when I tightened my grip.

“That’s it. Relax, then hit the ball toward the screen.”

*Oh? Wasn’t she just talking about being surrounded by greenery? Is it really okay for her to casually start calling the thing in front of us a screen?*

“This ball is tiny! Do you really think I can hit it on my first go?”

“Probably not. But that’s okay. You’ll gradually get better.”

As Yomiuri spoke, she backed up into the safety area. Just like with a baseball

bat, it was dangerous to swing a golf club with other people nearby. I double-checked to make sure no one was behind me before giving it a go.

I heard the club whoosh through the air. It was surprisingly heavy, and I felt it pull my arm along in its wake. As for the ball, I didn't even glance it.

"Strike!" shouted Yomiuri.

"It's...harder than I thought."

"No, it isn't. Give me that."

I handed her the club. Another ball was set in place automatically. She held the club and did a few practice swings; then she stood in front of the ball and swung hard.

I heard a sharp crack.

The ball struck a support rod mounted on the ground as it simultaneously appeared soaring into the air on the screen. A line tracing its trajectory formed a beautiful parabola, and the words "Nice shot!" appeared as the white ball rolled along the grass before finally coming to a stop.

After that, the screen displayed the distance the ball had supposedly traveled.

"Wow, that one really flew! Mmm, I feel great," Yomiuri said, holding the club like a rifle.

"What are you doing?"

"Just something I saw in an old movie. Wasn't that a great shot?!"

I could tell from her elated tone that she'd scored well, but I couldn't understand what the figures meant.

"And that's how it's done," she said. "Easy, huh?"

"It didn't look easy at all, but I did learn that it's possible for a human being to accomplish."

After that, Yomiuri and I took turns hitting ten balls at a time.

At first, I either missed the ball completely or hit it at a weird angle. But maybe Yomiuri was a good teacher, because I was eventually able to send it flying straight in front of me as Yomiuri had done.



“You’ve got a knack for golf,” she said.

Once I got the hang of it, it *was* refreshing. It felt similar to hitting the ball really far at a batting cage.

Yomiuri was right, it felt good. Though “Nice shot!” never appeared on-screen for me as it had for her.

Why was she so good? Was she a middle-aged man disguised as a college girl?

“Do you practice golf often, Yomiuri?”

“Hmm? Well, yeah. Sometimes.”

“Wow.”

“Surprised?”

Was I surprised? Though Yomiuri was a pretty girl on the outside, I already knew she had the hobbies and personality of an old man.

“Actually, I think it’s perfectly in character.”

“What do you mean?”

“Whatever else you are, you’re certainly older.”

“I’ve just realized we need to have a long, detailed talk about my gender one of these days.”

“I’m willing to change my mind if you can convince me that taking a high schooler along to play golf at midnight is a typical college girl activity.”

Yomiuri was pretty, interesting, and fun to talk to. You were guaranteed to have a good time with her. I’d never participated in any extracurriculars at school, but I had a feeling this was what it would feel like to hang out with an upperclassman in your club.

I couldn’t deny I had a lot of fun with Yomiuri.

“Yuuta.”

“Yeah?”

“Has this helped you clear your mind?” She grinned.

It was then that I finally realized she must have noticed that I was troubled

and invited me out here to distract me.

“Yes. I had a lot of fun.”

“Okay. Good,” she said, lightly patting my shoulder.

*Oh...*

*I like her.*

*I like people like her.*

Those were my true feelings.

But I could hear someone whispering in the back of my mind.

They were saying that this feeling was different from what I’d felt during summer break—that sense of longing so powerful, I wanted to scream—when I saw Ayase clasp her arms together and raise them toward the sky.

After about an hour of swinging the golf club, my arms began to feel tired.

I started missing more often, and when I did hit the ball, it didn’t go very far. I don’t remember who it was, but one of us finally suggested we call it a night. It was midnight, besides, and I had my parent-teacher conference the following day.

“I need to use the facilities before we go,” Yomiuri said.

“Okay, I’ll put these away.”

“Thanks.”



I tidied up the equipment we'd used and waited for Yomiuri to return.

As I felt the heaviness in my arms, I reflected on how much fun I'd had.

As an introvert and a homebody, I'd always seen golf as a pastime for cheerful, outdoorsy types. But it seemed even I could enjoy it when it was set up like a video game.

Just as Maru said, it seemed like trying new things was a pretty good way to clear my mind.

As I stood around waiting, lost in thought, someone walked in who caught my eye—a girl. Neither her hair nor her dress were particularly flashy, but she had one feature that really stood out—she was awfully tall.

"That girl...haven't I seen her somewhere before?"

I racked my brain and finally remembered.

It was the girl who'd sat next to me during my summer courses. That meant she was a second-year high school student like me.

She appeared to be alone. Was she practicing golf all by herself at this hour?

She glanced around, apparently looking for an open booth. The one Yomiuri and I were using had just become available, and the girl started walking right toward me.

As she passed in front of me, she suddenly noticed who I was.

"You..."

"Hi. Fancy meeting you here," I said, greeting her with a casual bow.

"Good evening. I guess it's been since summer break."

"Yeah."

"...Um, are you still going to that prep school?"

"Uh-huh. Only on Saturdays and Sundays, though."

I figured that wasn't giving away too much personal information. We'd met there, after all.

"Oh, you are? I've been going ever since attending the summer classes."

I was surprised to hear that. I hadn't seen her since summer break.

I said as much, and she explained that she didn't take classes on the weekends. Saturday and Sunday classes were packed, so she mainly stayed in the study hall.

"The study hall?" I asked.

"Uh-huh. It's open to students, and it's more convenient for me than the library."

"I see... Oh, my name's Yuuta Asamura."

"I'm Kaho Fujinami. My first name is spelled with the Japanese character for *summer* and the character for *sail*."

"Summer sale?"

"Not *sale*. *Sail*, like a sailboat. People can usually remember my name once I tell them that."

"Oh, I get it."

"See? You've already memorized it," she said and smiled.

"You're right."

I figured anyone would remember someone who introduced themselves as "Summer Sail Fujinami." She looked quiet, but I got the impression she had strong communication skills.

She bowed, bending at the waist, and said, "It's good to see you again."

I quickly bowed back.

Yomiuri returned during our exchange, and Fujinami saw us glance at each other and asked if we were on a date.

I quickly shook my head. "No, no, it isn't like that. She's my coworker."

"Oh, I see. Well, then." She gave a quick bow and entered the booth I'd used with Yomiuri.

I bowed again, then looked up to find Yomiuri right in front of me.

"Well, well," she said.

“Welcome back.”

“Who do you think you are, pretending nothing just happened? Who *was* that girl? I didn’t know you were such a playboy. Imagine! Flirting with another girl while on a date with me.”

“Huh? Oh, sorry...”

Yomiuri had just declared we were on a date, but I didn’t have the self-confidence to take her seriously. From a college girl’s perspective, a high schooler like me was nothing more than a cute kid. The way she teased me was proof enough of that.

The best thing to do was to apologize sincerely. I certainly couldn’t contradict her. She was a master at banter, and I’d just be getting her going.





“It isn’t any fun when you just apologize,” she said.

“Was I supposed to entertain you?”

“Well, it’s getting late, so I guess I’ll let you off the hook.”

“Spare me. I formally give up.”

She laughed and forgave me.

After paying for our time, we walked back in the direction of the train station. I accompanied Yomiuri to the parking lot, as I had when we went to the movies, then hopped on my bicycle and hurried home.

Speeding through Shibuya at night and enjoying the early autumn cool, I once again remembered Maru’s suggestion to try something new.

Now that I thought of it, despite attending the prep school, I wasn’t really making good use of their facilities.

“The study hall, huh...?”

I thought it over as I parked my bicycle in our apartment’s lot.

*I’ll have to check that out next weekend.*

## ● SEPTEMBER 24 (THURSDAY)—SAKI AYASE

I'm going someplace after work and won't be home till late.

*Why is it so hard to decide if I should mark his text message as read...?*

My heart started beating faster the moment Asamura's message popped up on my screen.

*He's with Yomiuri...*

I only had to read the first few words to know. He was going to hang out with her before coming home.

Marking the message as *read* would mean, obviously, that I had read it. And if I read it, it would seem like I was giving him permission. That was why I was staring at the message, one finger hovering in the air, debating whether to mark it as read.

How ridiculous was that?

We were second-year high school students. What kind of high school student worries about her brother's every move?

But if I marked his text as read, I wouldn't be able to make a sarcastic remark like "*You're home late*" when he got home or make excuses like "Sorry, I didn't read your message." That vexed me.

"I'm such an idiot."

Acting like that wasn't fair, either. I hated that kind of behavior. Did jealousy shrink your brain back to elementary school level?

It was wrong to feel this way. I was his sister.

I glanced at the dinner I had set on the table and sighed.

I'd chosen a meal that would help him get over his end of summer fatigue.

The main dish was keema curry, which used ground meat, along with ginger, garlic, red pepper, and cumin. The cumin was the real star. It had been used as a spice since the time of the pharaohs, and it was involved in many superstitions and spells. I'd even found a story online about mixing cumin into the rice shower at weddings, to prevent a lover from having a change of heart. I supposed it was like a kind of human bug spray to keep pests away from your marriage.

I warmed up a bowl of curry and stuck in my spoon. The spice was so strong, I had to blink a few times. Then I took a bite.

"That's hot...!"

What the heck was I doing? I didn't even like spicy food.

It was so hot that it made my eyes water.

I asked myself again: *What am I doing?*

My heart felt like it was being shredded.

I thought about the conversation I'd had with Maaya at school that day.

*"Maaya, how can you always be so happy-go-lucky? How do you forget about your problems?"*

I figured she had to have *some* worries, so I asked how she managed not to let it show.

Her answer was extremely straightforward.

*"Just take action!"*

*"And do what?"*

*"Anything. Something new!"*

She raised one finger, then another.

*"Or else you could try doing something you put off and never got around to!"*

According to Maaya, people with problems were stuck in a loop, like someone who kept stomping their feet in the same spot without getting anywhere.

*"So at times like that, I force myself to move forward!"*

Maaya was so amazing. She always stayed positive and took a constructive approach to everything.

Her argument was very convincing. *Something new, huh?*

I didn't want to keep going in circles like this. I decided to take Maaya's advice and try to break out of my shell that weekend.

*Well...it's almost time for Dad to come home.*

I looked at the wall clock. I should probably get Dad's dinner ready for him.

I put some salad in a bowl and reheated his portion of soup and curry.

Asamura said he'd be late. Would he eat out tonight? I'd only read the preview, so I wasn't sure what the rest of the message said.

I decided to prepare his dinner just in case. I'd leave a note as I always did, telling him to take a soft-boiled egg out of the fridge and add it to his curry if it was too hot.

Then I'd lock myself in my room.

I'd put on my headphones, turn up my music, and let the sounds fill my mind. I had to catch up with my studies, which I'd been falling behind on lately.

And then tomorrow, it would be time for my parent-teacher conference.

## ● SEPTEMBER 25 (FRIDAY)—YUUTA ASAMURA

Friday—the day of Ayase’s and my parent-teacher conferences.

We started the morning as we always did, with Ayase and me helping set out breakfast on the dining table. Dad was already seated, reading the news on his tablet.

“Here’s your miso soup, Dad.”

“Thanks, Saki.” Dad accepted the bowl, looking pleased.

Just then, we heard the door open and someone call out, “I’m home!”

All three of us turned toward the sound of Akiko’s voice.

Dad was the first to respond. “Welcome home, Akiko.” Ayase and I greeted her a beat later.

“Hi, Taichi,” she called back.

“You must be tired. Do you want breakfast?”

“Yes, please. I came home as quickly as I could to make sure I’d have time to sleep, so I didn’t eat anything after work.”

“Gotcha. But are you sure you can wake up in time?”

“I think so. Hey, Yuuta? Saki? What time are your conferences again?”

Ayase and I pulled out our phones and checked our schedules.

“Mine is from four twenty PM to four forty,” I said.

“And mine is right after that, from four forty to five o’clock. Our classrooms are next door to each other, so it won’t take you any time to get there.”

Akiko took a hard look at her phone and repeated back what we’d said. “Mmm. Looks like I have all the times right.”

“You won’t be getting much sleep if you go to bed now,” said Dad.

“I’m planning on taking a cab to the school, so I don’t need to leave until a little before four. I just have to get up, take a shower, eat, brush my teeth, get changed, put on makeup... Hmm, I should be okay if I get up at two.”

“It’s seven now, so you’ll be able to get six hours if you go to bed at eight,” Dad said, adding that it would be less than she usually got. That was true—she was usually able to sleep until early evening.

“I’ve taken the day off, so I can just go back to bed when I get home. The only problem is that neither Saki nor Yuuta will be here when I’m supposed to wake up.”

Akiko wasn’t very good at getting out of bed.

“Taichi. Please give me a wake-up call at two!” she said, placing her hands together like she was praying.

“Mom, Dad has to work,” said Ayase.

“I know, but...”

“Ha-ha-ha. Okay, Akiko, leave it to me,” said Dad. “It’s easy enough to make a quick call. It shouldn’t interfere with my work.”

Akiko beamed, while Ayase sighed.

I usually thought of Dad as a loser, but his generosity made him seem more mature.

Akiko seemed to brighten up at first, but then she lowered her brows and started looking worried again.

“I wonder if I’ll really be able to get up. And if the teachers will think I’m a strange mother.”

“No one would say that about you,” said Dad.

“Y-you think so?” A shy look appeared on Akiko’s face.

“Of course I do.”

*Is it really necessary to stare into each other’s eyes like that?*

Ayase and I grimaced internally at our parents' lovey-dovey little scene, then reassured Akiko that everything would be fine.

"Hey, Mom?" said Ayase. "You're getting in the way. Sit down if you're going to have breakfast."

"Okay, okay."

"How are you on time, Dad?"

Dad glanced at the wall clock. "Oh... You're right. I'd better be on my way."

Dad watched Akiko as she headed to the bathroom to remove her makeup, then grabbed his bag and stood.

"Okay, guys. Take care of Akiko for me."

Ayase and I nodded. *But aren't you the one who has to call her?* I thought.

A little while later, Akiko returned to the living room, sat down, and began eating her breakfast.

"Mom," said Ayase. "What do you want to do about lunch when you wake up? I've put some leftover curry in the refrigerator if you'd like that. The spiciness might help you wake up."

"I don't want to eat anything too spicy before I see your teachers, so I'll just have the leftovers from breakfast. We still have an egg or two in the fridge, right?"

"Yeah...we do."

"I'll manage something. Now, isn't it time for you to head out?" She was right. Ayase usually left around this time. "And, Yuuta, don't bother cleaning up. I'll take care of it after I finish eating."

"Okay. Thanks."

As usual, Ayase left first, then I grabbed my bag and headed out shortly after.

As I slipped on my shoes and walked out the door, I heard Akiko say, "All right! Time to put my all into sleeping so I can wake up on time!"

The bell rang, and fourth period came to an end.

Parent-teacher conferences would begin in the afternoon, but it was still a little over four hours until mine was scheduled to begin.

As I ate lunch with Maru, I wondered what I could do to fill all that time.

“Okay, Asamura, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see you!”

Maru finished eating first, then grabbed his bag and shot out of the classroom. He might complain, but he was amazingly conscientious about baseball practice.

Inevitably, I wound up all alone.

At times like this, when the classrooms were being used for conferences, people who didn’t participate in clubs wound up with no place to go.

I considered the library. You’d think a booklover like me would head straight there, but the library didn’t have a lot of the types of books I read, so I didn’t use it very often.

I hadn’t been there in a while, but it couldn’t hurt to check it out. I picked up my bag and made my way to the library.

Suisei High School’s library was located in a separate two-story building accessible via a covered, outdoor walkway. The first floor contained the music room, with the library above. You might expect it to be called “the music wing” or something, but there was probably some historical reason for calling it the library.

As I approached, I could hear the brass band practicing. Our high school conducted parent-teacher conferences for all three grades at once, which was typical for an elite school like ours. But the fact that no one had classes in the afternoon meant club activities had started up quite early in the school day, which paradoxically felt odd.

I climbed the stairs and opened the door to the library. As soon as I stepped inside, the scent of old books hit me. It was the same characteristic smell you’d find in an old used bookstore in the Jinbocho district—that famous mecca for booklovers. Some people didn’t like the feel of an old volume that had been



thumbed through by strangers over the years and always bought new, but I didn't mind it at all. To me, this was the smell of wisdom handed down through the generations.

The library tended to fill up before exams, but it wasn't nearly that crowded now. Looking around, I saw that not even a third of the tables were occupied.

Ayase's image popped into my mind, and I wondered what she was doing to pass the time. I glanced at the shelves but didn't spot the familiar girl with her light-colored hair. Instead, I saw— "Huh? What are you doing here?"

—Maaya Narasaka.

"Just killing time," I said. "I have my conference today."

"Oh, you too?"

"I guess that makes two of us."

She gestured for me to take a seat, and I plopped down next to her. If we sat any farther apart, it would be hard to talk quietly. Fortunately, she was the only person at her table, and the bookshelves around it served as a barrier.

"When's yours?" she asked.

"Four twenty."

"Oh, mine's at four, right before yours."

It seemed we both had a lot of time to kill. But I couldn't figure out why she wasn't with Ayase, since her conference was also at a similar time.

I asked Narasaka about it, and she said Ayase had decided to go home temporarily.

It was true that we had plenty of time to leave school and come back. Maybe I should have done the same. What if I left now...?

I searched for a clock but couldn't find one, and I pulled out my phone instead. It wasn't even one o'clock yet. *What should I do? Should I go home?*

*If I start now...* But Ayase was there, and it'd be awkward if we wound up alone together. *No, wait*—we wouldn't be alone. Akiko was home sleeping, and it was almost time for her to get up. Then I remembered what she'd said that

morning.

*“The only problem is that neither Saki nor Yuuta will be here when I’m supposed to wake up.”*

*Is that why Ayase went home...?*

“What’s the matter, Asamura? Your brow’s all wrinkled up like you’ve got a big problem!”

“Oh, nothing.”

If I went home now, I might disturb Akiko and cut down on her sleep time.

“Are you that worried about your conference?”

“That’s not what I’m concerned about. It’s—”

I had just come very close to admitting to Narasaka that I had a problem. Had that been a highly sophisticated leading question?

“—Never mind that. Couldn’t you have gone home, too?”

“Nah, I thought I’d take a day off from caring for my brothers,” she said, laughing.

Apparently, her mom had stayed home from work to attend her conference, and her grandmother had come over to take care of the boys while she was away.

“They must keep you guys pretty busy.”

“They’re really sweet, but sometimes, I want some time to myself. To let my hair down, you know? But forget about that,” she said, lowering her voice.

She put her head down so close to the table that it almost touched the surface, and then she looked up at me. “Asamura. You have a crush on Saki, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t.”

I probably shouldn’t have answered so quickly. Narasaka might look as sweet as candy, but she was extremely sharp.

“Really?”

“You know we’re siblings. That’s absurd.”

“Hmm. But you know...”

“What?”

“You *do* still call her *Ayase*.”

*Thump!* My heart nearly burst out of my chest. *Was that what gave it away?*

Narasaka lowered her head even further and rested her cheek against the table’s surface.

“You may be siblings, but you’re *stepsiblings*. And you’ve only been stepsiblings for a few months. You’re basically still strangers. And from my perspective, you guys look like you’re both in love with each other.” She spoke into the table like she was talking to herself.

“It isn’t like that.”

“Hmm. So I was wrong?” She continued mumbling into the table, and I wondered if her forehead didn’t hurt. Then she suddenly raised her head, lifted her arms toward the ceiling, and stretched. “Okay. In that case, can I cheer on another guy?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m asking if it’s okay for me to root for another boy who might have a crush on Saki.”

*So there’s another boy with a crush on Ayase?*



“You don’t need my permission for that.”

“Hmm. No? Hmm.” Narasaka hummed a few more times at me, her arms crossed.

Leaving her to her thoughts, I set out to look for something to read while I was killing time. I still had more than three hours left, so I could probably read at least two thin books.

I looked around and found a few works of foreign literature that were translated into Japanese earlier in the century.

*Immensee* by Theodor Storm, 142 pages.

*A Doll’s House*, Henrik Ibsen, 148 pages.

These two seemed about right. I took them off the shelf and returned to the table.

Narasaka wasn’t there, but her bag was. She must have gone around to look for books, too. I started reading, and after a while, I noticed that she had returned and was reading next to me.

We barely spoke. We just sat there next to each other and read quietly.

“I’m off!”

Narasaka was already standing with her bag in hand by the time I realized she was talking to me.

*It must be time for her conference.* That meant I had twenty more minutes.

I rushed through the remaining pages in my book, then got to my feet.

That was when my phone, which I had put on silent, vibrated.

It was a text message from Akiko. She said she would arrive soon and to meet her at the front entrance.

I put my books away and left the library.

Akiko showed up at the entrance to the school at 4:10 PM on the dot.

“Hi, Yuuta. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“It’s no problem. I just got here myself.”

My stepmother looked different from when she went to work. She was wearing a well-fitted suit with a solid color jacket over a scoop-neck shirt. Though she usually wore skirts, today she had on dark blue pants. Slung over her shoulder was a two-tone bag. To me, it looked like casual office wear. Not too formal, but still serious. It was my first time seeing her dressed like that.

I handed her a pair of slippers the school had made available for visiting parents, and she thanked me and put them on.

“Will you lead the way?” she asked.

“Of course.”

Our classrooms were on the second floor. As I walked her to the staircase, I gave her a brief rundown of the school’s layout.

“Your classroom is next to Saki’s, right?”

“Right.”

“Had you two really never met before we became a family? You would have had so many chances.”

“You’d think so, but...” It would have been easy for us to run into each other during PE or while walking down the hall. “...I don’t remember ever seeing her.”

“Oh my, what a gentleman. I guess you never get distracted and stare at cute girls, huh?”

“Well, it’s probably better that I don’t. These days, you could be accused of harassment just for looking, after all.”

“You worry too much. As long as your intentions are pure, no one will care.”

“Do you think it’s possible to tell something like that?”

“Of course.”

“You seem awfully confident.”

Akiko easily made statements that she could never prove and I could never verify. In that way, she was the complete opposite of Ayase. But Akiko was the kind of person who could say something ridiculous and make it sound completely reasonable. For a moment, I was almost convinced she really could

read someone's intentions at a glance.

"It's okay to act confident," she said. "If you're wrong, you can just say you're sorry."

"What an attitude..."

I'd been *this* close to believing her, and then she'd laughed the whole thing off with a playful remark. It seemed the suit hadn't changed her personality.

It didn't really bother me, though. I'd thought it would feel weird to come to school with a mother who had been a stranger to me only a few months earlier, but seeing Akiko just as silly and cheerful as she was at home helped me relax.

My biological mother was the type to act like a totally different person in public. Back in elementary school, I'd found it downright creepy. Something in her life had probably made her that way, but I had a hard time trusting people who changed that much from one situation to the next. Seeing Akiko act the same way she always did warmed my heart.

"Oh, here we are," I said.

"Thanks, Yuuta. I'll do my best."

I wasn't sure how much effort a parent needed to put into these conferences...but I supposed it couldn't hurt.

I checked the time, then knocked on the door and waited for the teacher to invite us in.

"Welcome. Please have a seat."

Akiko and I sat on one side of a desk, facing the teacher.

This wasn't my first parent-teacher conference. I'd had one during junior high, and here at Suisei, they had them every year. But today was my first time attending one with my mother, so I was nervous all the same.

Based on the questionnaire I'd filled out, the teacher gave us a quick overview of my performance.

My teacher was a man with no real outstanding traits. Even his name—Suzuki—was extremely common. Ayase's teacher was a woman named Satou,

another extremely common Japanese last name.

Ayase and I had laughed about this while discussing our conferences. Statistically, it wasn't that surprising, since Satou and Suzuki were both among the top three most common names in the country. Still, it was a weird coincidence.

"So the way I see it...", Mr. Suzuki said, bringing me out of my thoughts.

I didn't really want to hear what my homeroom teacher had to say about me, so I had been purposely directing my attention elsewhere. But now it seemed we were moving on to the main topic—what I wanted to do in the future.

"I think Yuuta has a chance at being accepted by a famous college in Tokyo if he keeps up his good work."

He thought more highly of me than I'd expected. I casually glanced over at Akiko and saw that she was smiling. She seemed pleased. But the next moment, her expression froze.

"You must have brought him up well—"

The teacher had started to give her the standard compliment, then stopped midsentence, remembering that Akiko had only recently married my dad.

"Yes, sir," I said, without missing a beat. "I'm truly grateful to my mother."

I stared straight into my teacher's eyes as I spoke, so I didn't get a good look at Akiko's reaction. But from what I could see, her eyes were wide with surprise.

Mr. Suzuki stumbled a little and repeated that he would support my application to any college of my choice as long as I kept up my good work. Then he wrapped up our conference.

After thanking Mr. Suzuki, Akiko and I left the classroom.

The students scheduled to come in next were already waiting in the hall, and they entered as we left. We seemed to have used up most of our allocated time. I checked my phone and saw that it was 4:38 PM—only two minutes left.

"Ayase's class is over here," I said.

"I'd better hurry! And, Yuuta, thank you. I'm so happy you see me as your



mother. What you said brought tears to my eyes,” she said, smiling. It warmed my heart to think that a single comment from me had made her so happy. “I’m so, so glad!”

“H-hey, don’t pull my arm like that.”

I hadn’t expected her to hug me. But to my surprise, I enjoyed how affectionate she was.

My only relation to her was as Taichi Asamura’s son, yet she’d accepted me as family from the very beginning. I don’t remember my birth mother ever hugging me—at least not once I was old enough to know what was happening. Somewhere inside, I felt a younger version of myself finally wipe his tears and put on a smile.

*I’m so glad Dad married a woman like Akiko...*

We headed a little ways down the hallway but found the chairs outside Ayase’s classroom unoccupied. For a moment, I was confused, but in no time Ayase appeared from the direction of the entrance. Akiko called to her and trotted over.

As the two of them headed toward the classroom door, I passed by them. Ayase turned toward me, and I thought about what I should say.

The words caught in my throat for a moment, but at last, I said, “Good luck with your conference.” It was generic, but I couldn’t think of anything else.

“Yeah. See you later, Big Brother,” Ayase said, as the two of them disappeared into the classroom.

Now that my conference was over, I was done for the day. I didn’t have work, either.

“I guess I’ll head home and get some rest...”

I started toward the building’s entrance, but the moment I rounded the first corner, right before I reached the stairs, someone called out to me.

I looked up and saw a boy in tennis clothes holding a racket.

“You’re Asamura, right?”

“...Yeah.”

*Who is he? I feel like I've seen him before.*

“Don't you remember me? My name is Keisuke Shinjou.”

Once I heard his name, I remembered who he was. “Oh. We met over summer break.”

“Right.”

He was one of the people I'd gone to the pool with—Ayase's and Narasaka's classmate. Thanks to Narasaka's personalized introductions, I was able to remember him as soon as I heard his name.

“Um, first let me apologize,” he said. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean to spy on you.”

“Huh?” I tilted my head to one side, wondering what he was talking about.

*Wait a minute. Did he see Akiko...?*

“I saw you leave your classroom with your mom, and then I saw her go straight to Ayase... What's up with that?”

For a minute, I didn't want to tell him. Then I remembered Akiko's smile when she'd hugged me. It wouldn't be right to keep pretending.

“Ayase and I are siblings,” I said. “I don't see any reason to tell the whole world about it, though.”

“Huh? But your name is Asamura, and hers is, uh...”

“Our parents got married.”

“So you're saying...?”

“They got married recently. Ayase is my stepsister.” As soon as I said those words, a bitter taste filled my mouth.

“Oh,” he said. “I totally assumed...”

*Assumed what?*

“Well then, I'm gonna head out,” I said, cutting him off.

Later, on my way home, I let my thoughts run as I pedaled my bike.

First, I remembered the warmth I'd felt when I saw Akiko smile. Then I thought of the bitter taste in my mouth when I admitted that Ayase was my sister. I reflected on each sensation in turn, over and over again.

## ● SEPTEMBER 25 (FRIDAY)—SAKI AYASE

I ran into Maaya at the school's entrance.

"Oh, hi, Saki! Good luck! I'll catch you later!"

"...Leaving already?" I asked.

"Yeah, though I'm not going home just yet. I want to enjoy myself a bit more today."

*Oh, right. She said she had the day off from taking care of her brothers. I guess that's why she didn't go home with her mom after her conference.*

"That must mean you're all finished."

"And you're just about to start, right? Is your mom already here?"

"Yeah. She's at Asamura's meeting now."

A strange expression crossed Maaya's face. "Come to think of it, I hung out with Asamura in the library while I was waiting," she said.

"Yeah?"

*So he was killing time in the library. He must really love reading.*

"Yep. He reads really fast. I only finished half the book I picked out, but I think he got through two! He must read at the speed of light!"

*He reads at three hundred thousand kilometers per second? What the heck is she even saying?*

"Sure, sure," I said with a wry smile.

"He's really something."

"Okay, already."

I knew this was just Maaya's usual banter, but I couldn't help feeling pleased

when I heard her compliment Asamura. It was difficult to keep my lips from curling into a smile.

“Okay, I’d better be on my way,” she said. “And I think it’s almost time for your meeting.”

I gasped and checked my watch. I had less than five minutes left.

“See you!” Maaya said, practically singing.

“Yeah, see you,” I said and took off toward my classroom.

I’d gone home thinking I had plenty of time, so it would be embarrassing if I wound up arriving late. If I didn’t make it, there would have been no point going home to wake up Mom.

I ran up the stairs, rounded the corner, and saw Mom and Asamura leaving his classroom.

They were talking. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but seeing Mom’s happy smile made me happy, too. Mom only looked like that when she felt joy from the bottom of her heart. I remembered seeing her make the same expression when I got into Suisei High.

*Asamura is amazing. I’m so glad my new brother turned out to be someone like him... Wait, what’s going on? Why is Mom hugging him? They might be mother and son now, but isn’t that going a little too far?* I panicked for a moment, then remembered how quick Mom was to hug me all the time. *Maybe that’s just how mothers are... Maybe.*

At that point, Mom noticed me and came running over.

As she reached me, I cast a sidelong glance at a posted notice that read NO RUNNING IN THE HALL.

As soon as our meeting began, my teacher, Ms. Satou, announced that she had something to say before we got into our discussion.

“To be honest with you,” she began, “I was a little concerned about your daughter, Saki, during the first semester.”

Ms. Satou was a veteran teacher and not the type to mince words. She got right to the point and admitted she had been worried about the rumors

concerning my fashion choices and how I behaved.

I preferred straightforward people like her to those who beat around the bush. But I wasn't sure how Mom felt. I stole a glance at her as the teacher continued.

She was sitting up straight, listening to Ms. Satou without interrupting.

"But recently my opinion has changed," the teacher said. I looked up at her. "Saki is doing better in Japanese, which had been a problem subject for her, and I no longer hear troubling rumors. I still have to warn her about the way she dresses, but I can understand her desire to be fashionable."

Mom nodded.

"I'd like her to exercise restraint and act and dress appropriately for a high school student," Ms. Satou continued. "Though this isn't part of the conference, I'd like to ask you to watch over her as well, as her mother."

"I do," Mom said clearly and left it at that.

Ms. Satou looked into Mom's eyes, nodded, and took out my questionnaire.

"Now, about Saki's choice of college..."

After going over my grades during the previous semester, Ms. Satou said my success would depend on how much I improved in Japanese, but that if I continued to work hard, I could aim for even better colleges. Then she named two famous universities anyone would recognize as examples.

"It's my daughter's choice," Mom said. She glanced my way, prompting me to speak up.

Ms. Satou followed her gaze. I felt a little nervous.

"I... I want to attend a college that isn't too expensive and will help me find a job."

Mom had a look on her face that said, "Are you sure that's all you want?" But I wasn't willing to negotiate on those two points. If I was aiming to enter an academic field, things might have been different. But as it stood, I didn't have any particular interest I wanted to pursue.

Since that was the case, I didn't want to burden Mom with fees for a top-tier university. But I still wanted to go to a decent college that would help me get a good job.

Ms. Satou tapped the bottom of her pen against the desk and said, "Well, then. How about Tsukinomiya Women's University?"

"Huh? Tsukinomiya?"

Tsukinomiya Women's University was a prestigious institution in Tokyo for girls. Anyone in the country would recognize the name, and to be honest, I was a bit intimidated.

"Based on your current performance, I think you can aim for Tsukinomiya if you put in the work. The institution has strong ties in lots of areas that will help you find jobs, and the tuition fees are low, since it's a public university. They also have scholarships available. If you aren't able to get one of those, they have interest-free student loans. I believe that fits your criteria."

"I...hadn't ever considered it."

I'd never imagined she would suggest trying for Tsukinomiya Women's University.

Ms. Satou smiled. She told me the university was hosting an open campus that weekend and suggested I go take a look.

"An open campus...", I muttered.

"You should go see for yourself what a real college is like."

"I suppose...you're right."

I could probably make it for one of those days, at least.

*"So at times like that, I force myself to move forward!"*

Maaya's words echoed in my mind like a trumpet signaling the charge.

It was time to push myself and try something new.

I had to forget my feelings for Asamura and make sure I was prepared for what the future held. Maybe this would help me do both.

As soon as the conference was over and we left the classroom, I made my

decision.

Tomorrow—I'd go to the open campus tomorrow.

On the way home, Mom began to mumble. "That woman has no idea. If Saki starts trying to act restrained, she'll only get carried away and overdo it..."

In the end, I pretended not to hear her.



## ● SEPTEMBER 26 (SATURDAY)—SAKI AYASE

Tsukinomiya Women's University was located within the perimeter of the JR Yamanote Line, a ring of train stations connecting most of Tokyo's major urban centers.

To get there from Shibuya Station, you would travel northward along the loop and get off at Ikebukuro Station, then transfer onto a private train line and go another two stations. From there, you would be within walking distance of the school.

After getting off at the closest station, I walked along the main road and arrived at the front gate.

"It's huge..."

The first thing I noticed about the campus was its size. I wondered just how many buildings were contained within its walls. How had the school managed to secure this much land in the city center? I supposed that was the power of a historical, government-run institution.

Tall trees flanked the path stretching out from the gates, and mixed in among them were a line of square buildings of similar height. According to the map I'd brought up on my phone, the buildings to my right and left were an elementary school and a high school attached to the college. A little ways away was a junior high.

I was at a loss for words. I couldn't believe they had fit every grade, as well as a college, on the same grounds.

I followed the flow of people heading through the entrance and proceeded inside.

It was Saturday, so there were no classes in session. Did that mean all these

people were here for the open campus?

An older girl in a primary color T-shirt handed me a program as soon as I entered the property. Apparently, she was staffing the event. *Right. Of course it's not just high schoolers here today.*

As I took a closer look at those around me, I noticed several older girls and women and realized they must have been university students and faculty.

In the distance, I heard the enthusiastic shouts of people playing sports. I saw shadows in the windows, too. *Do college students not take days off? Are the people here so serious, they come to school even when there aren't any classes?* I couldn't believe it.

I proceeded farther along the cobblestone path. My destination was the faculty of humanities, where they were hosting a trial lecture, and it was all the way at the back. To get there, I would have to first make my way around the large building in front of me.

As I proceeded around it, I noticed a courtyard to my right, which sloped gently upward. The grass was a beautiful green...and someone was lying down on it.

I couldn't believe my eyes. A woman in a white lab coat was sprawled out on the lawn. *Is that allowed? Oh, someone's coming... Looks like she's in trouble. I'm not surprised, though I bet it feels really good to lie out there in the sun.*

*Does this mean students aren't always serious but take breaks now and then, too? Though I think maybe that woman was taking it a little too easy.*

It seemed all sorts of people could be found at universities.

I reached my destination and checked the sign in front of the building. *Yep, this is it.*

I was about to enter when I thought I heard someone call my name. *No way. I don't know anyone here.*

"Saki! I didn't know you were coming to my university!"

*Huh?*

"Yomiuri?"

It was Shiori Yomiuri, an older girl I worked with at the bookstore. She was sitting behind what appeared to be a reception table.

*Does that mean...?*

“Do you go to this college?” I asked.

“Yeah, I guess maybe I do.”

*“Maybe”? “I guess”? When she’s sitting behind the reception table?*

I took a look around and noticed that each department had a reception area in a different location. Yomiuri was sitting at the one for the Humanities Department.

“I would have given you a hearty welcome if you’d told me you were coming.”

“It was a last-minute decision.” How could I have told Yomiuri I was coming when I didn’t even know she went to school here?

“Oh, okay. Well, I guess you’re here to attend the trial lecture, huh?”

“...I guess so,” I answered, moving to the side to make way for other students.

I wasn’t here for any particular department. I’d picked the lecture based on what sounded most interesting, but I probably didn’t need to tell Yomiuri that. Besides, she was smart, and I figured it wasn’t a bad idea to hear a lecture from her department.

“We still have time, so I’ll show you around.”

“I... Are you sure?”

I looked back at the reception table. Someone new was already sitting in Yomiuri’s chair, handing out flyers to passersby. She noticed that I hadn’t received one and gave me a copy. It appeared to be an overview of the day’s lectures.

“Shiori, you’re in the way. Go away if you aren’t going to work.”

“Okay, thanks,” she said, then turned to me. “Come on, follow me.”

“But...”

“Oh? Is that a friend you’re with, Yomiuri?” said someone else.

I turned toward the voice and saw a woman clearly too old to be a student. Was she a professor? She looked to be somewhere between her late twenties and early thirties. If she really was a professor, she was probably a little older than she looked. She wore a light purple suit and had a mature look about her, but her beauty was marred somewhat by the slight bags under her eyes. Perhaps she hadn't gotten enough sleep? *Wait, haven't I seen her somewhere before?*

I imagined a white lab coat over her suit.

"Oh."

She was the lady who was lying on the grass earlier.

"Hmm?" The woman looked at me questioningly.

"Oh? Saki, do you know my professor?" asked Yomiuri.

"U-um, no. But, I, uh...saw her...on the grass..."

I couldn't bring myself to say to Yomiuri that I'd seen the older woman lying down on the lawn, but she seemed to figure it out immediately.

"Professor Kudou...were you at it again? Aren't you wearing an expensive brand-name suit for the open campus? You're going to ruin it..."

"I wore a lab coat over it."

"That's no excuse..."

"Whether something is a sufficient excuse is subjective. Life is too short to discuss the pros and cons of mistreating expensive clothes. Forget about that, Yomiuri, and tell me about the pretty young lady standing next to you."

Yomiuri looked like she wanted to say more, but in the end, she gave up and introduced me.

"...This is Saki Ayase. We work at the same bookstore."

"Nice to meet you," I said. "I'm, uh, Saki Ayase." I then bowed to the woman in the light purple suit.

"Mm, perfect," she muttered.

*Perfect?* For what?

“Nice to meet you, Saki,” she continued. “I’m Eiha Kudou. I’m an associate professor here, and I study general ethics. You look like a high school student. Is that correct?”

“Yes... I’m a second-year.”

“Perfect. Wonderful. Absolutely perfect. I have a serious question for you.”

The words seemed to flow out of her mouth. I could tell that she was smart. She was a university professor, after all.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. “Go ahead.”

“How many people have you done it with?”

“Huh?”

For a moment, I didn’t understand what she meant. *Done it with...? Like done in? How many people I’ve killed? ...She couldn’t possibly mean that, right?*



“Um, I don’t understand what you mean...”

*Actually, maybe I do understand, but I kind of wish I didn’t.*

“Professor!” Yomiuri exclaimed. “What kind of question is that to ask a minor you’ve just met?” She stood in front of me, as if to protect me, and went into attack mode.

“Huh?” Kudou looked confused.

“That’s not an appropriate question.”

“Hmmm? Well, of course it isn’t. That’s why I tried to keep it vague. Well, now that I think of it, maybe there’s no need for euphemisms. It’s a basic human function, after all... What’s more, I’ve always thought that keeping something hidden and using euphemisms only highlights it and makes it leave a stronger impression... Anyway, to be clear, what I wanted to ask was how many males you’ve had a sexual experience with. Oh, or females, of course.”

“Professor,” Yomiuri said again.

“Hmm? Why do you look so upset? Yomiuri, you’ve got to maintain your pretty face. You don’t want to wind up like me, with people calling you a sleep-deprived vampire all the time. Please understand, this is part of my research. It’s a rare opportunity for me to speak directly with a real high school student.”

“As an academic, I assume you don’t need me to remind you that a person has to consent before you can use them as a subject for your research, right?”

Kudou widened her eyes for a moment, then grinned. “Oh-ho. Good point. You’re in excellent form today, Yomiuri.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay, uh, Saki—or would you prefer Ayase?”

“Either way is fine...,” I replied.

“Then Saki. It’s much cuter,” Kudou said, looking totally serious.

I found her difficult to read, and I began to wonder if all university professors were as strange as she was.

“My main topic of research is ethics in male-female relationships and family

dynamics,” she continued.

“Family dynamics...”

“That’s right. According to the dictionary definition, ethics is the branch of knowledge that concerns moral principles and order in human lives... In other words, social norms. That’s my area of research.”

“Can you research things like that?”

“Of course you can. Now, there are various kinds of ethical standards at work within society. For example, things people are expected to do and things that are forbidden—in other words, taboos. But none of those things are fixed across time and space. One example is the idea that close family members, such as a brother and sister, can’t be in love with each other.”

I knew I shouldn’t respond to that, but I could feel my expression stiffen slightly.

“Ethics aren’t science,” she continued. “Or at least, they aren’t decided based on scientific fact.”

“You may be right, but I think science is needed for research,” Yomiuri interjected.

“That’s off topic, Yomiuri, and we can discuss it later. What’s important here is that while ethics emerged out of necessity, necessities are in a constant state of change. And there’s always a gap between the changing needs of society and changes in our awareness. And because of that, we...” Kudou looked around her and finally seemed to realize where she was standing as she made this impassioned speech. “Anyway... Saki, if you have time, can you come to my lab?”

“There she goes, picking up girls again,” Yomiuri mumbled.

Pretending she hadn’t heard her student’s remark, Kudou continued. “Saki. There’s something bothering you, isn’t there?” I flinched. “I may be able to offer you a solution to your problem.”

“Huh? Well...” To be honest, I was somewhat interested in what she had to say. I figured a person smart enough to be an associate professor at a famous



university might indeed have an answer for me. “As long as it won’t take that long.”

“Then it’s decided. Come with me.”

“She’s trying to fill your head with naughty ideas!” Yomiuri said, trying to follow us.

But Kudou sent her away, saying, “Haven’t you got a job to be doing for the open campus?”

“I was going to show Saki around. I’ve gotten permission from everyone else —”

“Didn’t I give you three extra days to finish your report?”

“Ngh!”

“You’re still not done, are you?”

“Urgh...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll bring her back before the lecture. Okay, we’re off.” She turned to me. “This way, Saki. Follow me. You want to see what a college lab is like, don’t you?”

Eiha Kudou began walking, and I trotted after her.

“Which do you prefer, coffee or tea?”

“Oh, um, tea,” I answered, looking around the room.

The place was probably over twelve square meters, but it seemed half that size because of all the books. They weren’t just covering the steel rack against the wall—books were piled up on every flat surface, and towers of them rose from the floor. You had to weave through them to reach the desk at the far end of the room.

The only available space was a little open area around that big desk. A low table and a couple of sofas were set up in front of it. I figured that was where visitors were supposed to sit.

Kudou prompted me to take a seat on one of the sofas, then switched on her electric kettle. She pulled a teapot and two cups from a shelf and opened a can

of tea leaves.

“Is Nilgiri okay?” she asked.

“Oh, sure. Anything is fine—but Nilgiri? I don’t need anything that nice.”

“I see you know your tea.”

“...I suppose so.”

“Tell me what you know about it.”

I thought she sounded like a schoolteacher, but just as that idea occurred to me, I realized none of my teachers had ever asked me a question like the one Kudou had just posed. Most of my teachers’ questions were an attempt to get their students to provide the correct answer. But Kudou wasn’t asking me for a model reply. She was trying to see if I could speak about what I knew in my own words.

“It’s a generic term for tea leaves grown in Southern India,” I said, “often called *Blue Mountain tea*.”

“Oh. You’re well-informed.”

“That kind of information is easy to find on the internet.”

“Have you had it before?”

“No.”

Blue Mountain tea was expensive, as was Blue Mountain coffee. I might know about Nilgiri tea, but I’d never had it. Back when it was just me and Mom, we made do with the kind of tea that costs five hundred yen per fifty bags (or ten yen a cup).

“So this will be your *first experience*,” she said, putting a weird emphasis on those last two words.

I heard a click as the electric kettle turned off. Kudou poured a small amount of boiled water into the pot to warm it, then turned on the kettle to boil the water again.

Once it was ready, she emptied the hot water into the pot, quickly added the tea leaves, and covered the pot with its lid. Then she flipped the hourglass on

the table.

“In books on serving tea, it says to pour boiled water from the kettle into your pot without removing it from the stove so the water doesn’t cool. Unfortunately, I don’t have a stove here. Forgive me if the water isn’t piping hot.”

“It’s fine.”

*Would she actually use a traditional kettle if she had access to a stove? Wasn’t that going a little far?*

“A friend who went to India sent me this tea,” she said.

“Were they sightseeing?”

“They were there on fieldwork.”

“Oh, for work, huh?”

“No, for research. My friend is a researcher.”

I didn’t understand. If they were a researcher, wasn’t research their work?

“Oh, I see,” she said. “Yes, I suppose most people would view it that way. I don’t think many of us see our research as work, though. I’m the same.”

“Is that so? Then, um, what is it that you do?”

“I live.”

What?

“As far as I’m concerned, that’s all I do. I’m just a researcher.”

“...I’m not sure I follow.”

“I guess you wouldn’t. It’s tough to explain, and few people understand.”

Once the leaves were finished steeping, she took the cups and poured out the hot water she’d used to warm them, then refilled them with tea. A pleasant fragrance wafted up from the white cups to my nose.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have any sweets to go with the tea,” she said. “I usually have something, but I’m fresh out...”

“That’s okay. Thank you.”

“Well, we don’t have much time before your trial lecture anyway.”

We sat facing each other on the sofas and quietly drank our tea for a while.

I held my cup with both hands and sipped the red liquid. I’d gotten chilled from the room’s air-conditioning, and the hot tea warmed my body. I sighed as the heat reached my belly.

“Yomiuri told me about you,” Kudou said.

“She did?”

“To be accurate, she told me about the two of you. You and...what was it?”

“Are you talking about Asamura?”

“Ah, so that’s his name.”

“...You didn’t know.”

“Bingo,” she said, not appearing the least bit guilty.

She had pretended to forget so I would tell her his name. *I’ve been had.*

“I didn’t know his name. All Yomiuri told me was that there was an interesting kid at work. I think it was around the summer when she said another one came along. She wouldn’t tell me either of your names, though. You might not think it, but she’s pretty fussy about privacy.”

“Why wouldn’t I think that...? As far as I’m concerned, Yomiuri is a good person with solid morals and a good role model.”

“Oh, already thinking of her as your senior? Pretty confident, considering you’re not a student here yet.”

“...I meant at work,” I said grumpily. She must have known that. Why pretend to misunderstand?

“Ha-ha. Take it easy. I was just teasing you. You two are even more interesting than I expected.”

“Have you also met Asamura?”

“Of course not. But Yomiuri says he’s interesting, and if *you’re* this fun, he must be, too. I would love to chat with him.”

I frowned, attempting to demonstrate my resistance to that idea. I got the feeling I shouldn't let this person near Asamura.

"Okay, let's get down to business."

"Business...?"

An exaggerated look of surprise appeared on Kudou's face. "Have you forgotten? I said I might be able to offer you a solution to your problem, didn't I?"

"Oh, right." I had forgotten.

"I'm going to be straightforward. You've fallen in love with this Asamura boy, haven't you? And those feelings are contrary to society's ethical norms."

"Why do you think that?"

"Your question suggests I'm right."

"...I don't like you very much."

"Ha-ha-ha. I like honest kids," she said, chuckling. "My imagination has been running wild since hearing about how you guys act at work. You're obviously interested in each other, but you try to keep your distance. I thought about why you would behave that way and figured your feelings might be in violation of a taboo. For instance, if the two of you were stepsiblings."

She really was frank. Her pitches were so direct, I was having trouble fielding them.

"I see you've taken care to specify that you're talking about *stepsiblings*."

"I figured if you were blood related, you wouldn't be wavering. So...you love Asamura, don't you?"

"...He's a good brother."

"That's not what I mean. I'm asking if you have romantic feelings for him."

"...He's my brother."

"But he's a stranger."

"He may be my stepbrother, but he's still my brother."

“Only as of three months ago.”

She'd even figured out when we became siblings. The way she put together such limited pieces of information to arrive at the correct answer annoyed me.

“But we *are* family. So what you're saying isn't possible. Mom is so happy when Asamura relies on her. I'm sure it's because he's the precious son of the man she loves.”

“I don't care about the other people in your family. I'm asking how *you* feel, Saki.”

“How I feel...?”

I wasn't sure what to do. Was it okay to tell this eccentric weirdo how I really felt? Besides, she was Yomiuri's teacher. Kudou might pass whatever I said on to her, and then...

All those thoughts passed through my mind, and yet I couldn't stop myself.

“I don't understand it, either. But I can tell I'm overly conscious of him...” Before I realized it, I was talking about everything I'd gone through over the last three months. Once I finished, I drank the rest of my tea. It was cold and tasted a little bitter. “Is this what it feels like to fall in love...?”

“Hmm. I see.”

Kudou leaned back on the sofa and looked up at the ceiling. Then she closed her eyes. Folding her arms across her chest and rhythmically tapping her pointer finger against her left arm, she thought for a moment.

“Hmm,” she said again, then opened her eyes and looked out the window. “I think you're mistaken.”

...*Huh?* “What do you mean?”

“What if I said these feelings of yours aren't romantic?”

“I...”

These painful feelings—were all a misunderstanding? Was that possible?

“Take it easy. Let's consider this one step at a time.”

Kudou unfolded her arms and held up one finger. Then she started to analyze

me.

She began by noting things about my appearance and how it related to what I felt inside.

“You came in your school uniform today.”

“My teacher told me to.”

Suisei High School was known for being laid-back, but when attending events related to postsecondary education and job hunting, we were told to stick to a rigid dress code—either a suit or our uniform. Most students didn’t own a suit, which left the uniform as our only option.

“Yomiuri told me about the way you usually dress. I hear you wear—how should I put it?—clothes that indicate you’re on the offensive.”

“I guess you could say that.”

Kudou seemed to understand my belief that fashion was a kind of armor. Maaya never knew what I was talking about, no matter how I explained it to her. She seemed to have more fun dressing up her brothers anyway.

“Do you get a free second attack? Or perhaps an AoE?”

“Is that a joke that’s going around?” I thought I remembered Asamura saying something similar.

“No need to get worked up. I’m guessing most people assume you’re just having fun with fashion.”

Kudou’s words reminded me of what Ms. Satou, my teacher, had said the day before. She was worried about how I dressed, and it was true that people seemed to think I was the type of girl who spent all her time fooling around in downtown Shibuya. Not that I’d done much to dissuade them. It seemed like too much trouble to bother.

“But your clothes are a statement, aren’t they?”

“A statement...”

“You’re conveying your sense of style to those around you.”

“Oh...”

Now that she mentioned it, maybe she was right. I had no intention of hiding anything, at any rate.

*"All she does is study; she has no idea how to look good."*

*"She's cute, but she's an airhead."*

I didn't want to hear either of those comments, and I didn't want to fall short in either category.

I'd said something to that effect to Asamura before. I respected my mom for raising me, but a lot of people looked at her appearance and educational background and decided that she wasn't worthy of their respect. I wanted to shut those people up.

"Your appearance is something you've consciously created," Kudou said.

"I guess so."

"As to who you are inside... I can tell that you're fairly conscientious. You've come to our open campus when you're still only a second-year, after all. This university is fairly prestigious, too."

"My teacher suggested it at my parent-teacher conference."

"Doesn't matter; that isn't what I'm getting at. The sort of person you dress as wouldn't show up just because her teacher told her to."

*Really?* I...wasn't so sure.

"That isn't true," I contested, and Kudou exhaled, looking amused.

"Okay, give me your argument."

"I'm not trying to look like a party girl. That isn't what I want people to think. All I want is to make sure people know I can dress myself and be 'pretty' and 'cute.' That's it." *Just like my mom.*

"Is that so? And?"

"I didn't come here today because I'm conscientious. I came because I wanted to prove that I'm smart. This is one way to do that."

"Are you saying you went around telling people that you were coming to our open campus?"



“No, I didn’t do anything like that. But I thought I could improve my chances at success by coming here. I wanted to prove that to myself. Maybe no one else would notice if I slacked off, but I would.” I spoke clearly and firmly.

Kudou stared into my eyes, and I stared back. I felt that if I averted my gaze, I’d lose to her.

I’m not sure who looked away first, but eventually, we both stopped staring. Kudou finished her tea and stood up.

“I see. So you’re saying that your appearance and who you are inside, which seem to contradict one another, are both things you consciously created. But there’s another way to describe that.”

“Oh?”

“You’re the type who is determined not to show others her weaknesses.”

I gasped.

“You just said something very important,” she went on. “The behavior you show others and what you think inside both function according to the same logic. The key point is that you *don’t want to lose*.”

I silently waited for her to continue.

“You’re constantly on the offensive, and you’re all alone. You’re fighting when you’re out in public *and* when you’re at home. You don’t want to show anyone your weakness, and you don’t want to lose. But you know, people like that are more starved for love and validation than anyone else, and they latch on to anybody who gives them a little bit of support.”

“Latch on to...?”

I imagined a puppy wagging its tail and jumping up on its owner. *What is she saying—that I’m a dog?* I decided not to think about the fact I’d imagined Asamura as my owner.

“I see this kind of case a lot in my work.”

“And what kind of case is that?”

“Where someone suddenly winds up living with a stranger of the opposite

sex, like with stepsiblings or stepparents. If someone is starved for approval from the opposite sex, then suddenly has a lot more opportunities to come into contact with one of them, they are more susceptible to feelings that resemble falling in love.”

*...Is she saying that's what's happening to me?*

For a moment, I thought my brain might explode. I took a few deep breaths and forced my heart to calm down.

“I have an objection,” I said.

“Go ahead.”

“You make it sound like approval from the opposite sex is indispensable for a person’s growth, and that without it, they’ll begin to develop special feelings over the littlest things, beyond what is normal.”

“Do you disagree?”

I figured that meant “Keep going.”

“Is that really a safe assumption? Either way, it seems inappropriate in a modern context. You’d be denying the legitimacy of same-sex marriages and single parents. Also, you can see from historical examples that boys and girls were not always brought up in proximity to the opposite gender.”

“Give me an example.”

“According to Confucian tradition, boys and girls are not supposed to mingle after age seven.”

“Oh yes, that’s true. Though I think it’s a rather old-fashioned sentiment.”

“But that’s how people thought in the old days, isn’t it? That’s why we have all-girls boarding schools...and women’s colleges.”

“Touché.”

*Did I score a point?*

“According to your reasoning, anyone brought up in such an environment would start falling in love with the first member of the opposite sex they came across.”

“Uh-huh. And?” She seemed to be enjoying this.

“As I said previously, I’d like to see the research you’re basing this argument on. Otherwise, I think considering it is pointless. Not to mention, your reasoning denies the legitimacy of my own upbringing.”

How could I possibly remain quiet when she was insinuating that being raised by a single mother had made me boy crazy?

“Our biological instincts don’t necessarily work according to reason,” she said.

“Actually, I think we have logic and reason in order to bring our instincts in line with social norms.”

“Oh, I suppose that’s one way to look at it. And?”

“Since you have no supporting evidence, the assertion that without approval from the opposite sex during one’s upbringing, one’s romantic feelings are likely to go haywire is nothing more than an opinion. It’s basically just rebranding the old social norm that children need a mother and a father. I can’t agree with that.”

“So you’re saying social norms today have changed?”

“I believe they have.”

“Simply believing won’t resolve anything.”

“But even if we assume that there *are* requirements for a child’s upbringing, I think focusing on instinctual reactions is a denial of reason and intellect. To fulfill those requirements, we should adjust and rewrite social norms instead. Blindly following conventional morality—such as shouting pickup lines like ‘Your child needs a father!’ without thinking—is ridiculous.”

I spoke like I was issuing Kudou a challenge, and she nodded, standing behind her sofa with both arms on the backrest.

“And that is the type of thing we think about in ethics,” she said.

*Huh?! All the strength left my body at once. So that’s what this was about.*

“Evidence, grounds for argument...I can give you any number of relevant quotes. Endless amounts of research are available to support the hypothesis I

gave you, all from essays on biology and psychology. But those are nothing but general tendencies. None of that will give you a satisfying answer. This is your personal problem, and it has nothing to do with anyone but you.”

“...I feel like I’ve been made to dance for your entertainment.” I leaned back on the sofa and relaxed. I felt like my body was turning into a jellyfish or a sea cucumber as I looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “Does Yomiuri go through this every day...?”

Kudou plopped down on the opposite sofa—I began to worry about how many wrinkles she was getting in her good suit—and said, “Not really. Only two or three times a week, at most.”

“...That’s plenty.”

I felt tired—genuinely tired. I didn’t want to think about anything for another week.

“Professor, doesn’t this exhaust you...?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m bad at not thinking. Ideas like what we just discussed swirl around in my head all the time, except when I’m asleep... Though I sometimes think in my dreams, too.”

“Don’t you ever rest?”

“I can’t. I’ve tried it a number of times, but I just couldn’t. I figure I’ll stop thinking when I die.”

She reminded me of a fish that had to keep swimming to stay alive. I was starting to understand what she’d meant when she said she was just a researcher.

“Anyway, based on our discussion, here’s some grandmotherly advice,” she said.

“Um, yes?”

“You say you’re in love with this Asamura guy, but you don’t know any other boys that well, do you?”

“Ngh... Well, not really.”

The only guys I knew besides Asamura were my father as he appeared in childhood memories and my stepfather, who I'd only known for three months.

"Can you say with absolute certainty that you haven't fallen in love with him because he's the only boy you're close with?" she asked, before adding, "Sorry if that sounds mean."

Based on our interactions so far, I hadn't expected her to apologize.

"Of course I can't say that with absolute certainty."

"Then you should try to form relationships with more people. You're still young. You may come to realize there are other appealing boys around and stop tearing yourself apart over your stepbrother."

"Other boys?"

"I don't mean you need to start dating other boys; just spend some time with them. A narrow frame of reference is the enemy of reason and intellect."

"That's true... I agree with you."

"You don't have to listen to me, though. I'm not saying this as a professor of ethics. This is just advice from a woman with a little more experience under her belt. But if you do spend time around other boys and your feelings stay the same, then those emotions are genuine, and I think you should cherish them."

At that, Kudou rose from her seat. She extended an arm to me, still sitting on her couch like a perfect jellyfish. I glanced at the clock on her wall and saw it was almost time for the trial lecture, then took her hand and stood up.

"Yes, just like that. Sometimes it's important to accept the hand someone's offering you, Saki."

"...Can you call me Ayase instead?"

I saw true regret on her face.

When Yomiuri came to get me, she seemed genuinely worried. I must have looked really exhausted. Instead of joking around as usual, she was extra nice to me.

The trial lecture was very interesting. It was about romantic love between

brothers and sisters.

Beginning with the premise that ethics change with the times, the speaker asserted that the reason people found romantic relationships between stepsiblings unacceptable was merely because society's current set of ethical beliefs dictated that it was wrong and that it had nothing to do with individual values.

According to the lecture, society worked like this: Whenever individuals broke social norms as an expression of free will, society's code of ethics was then updated after the fact.

The lecturer was, of course, Associate Professor Kudou. She stood at the front of the classroom, moving first left and then right, writing keywords on the whiteboard and speaking with such passion, she was practically foaming at the mouth.

Despite a ten-minute question-and-answer session provided at the end of the lecture, not a single person raised their hand.

Kudou left the room looking disappointed.

I would have asked a few questions if I'd had the strength and energy to do so, but I was pooped. I'd like to ask my questions someday, in the not so distant future. I had a feeling I'd have the chance, too.

First, I'd take a good look at the other people around me, besides Asamura.

As I headed home, I recalled what Kudou had said about a narrow frame of reference being the enemy of reason and intellect.

I felt the wind push me forward as I made my way toward the train station. The autumn breeze felt cool against my cheeks.

## ● SEPTEMBER 26 (SATURDAY)—YUUTA ASAMURA

I left home as soon as I finished breakfast and rode through the Omotesando area on my bicycle.

Lots of people were out, and though it wasn't yet nine in the morning, when I glanced over at the sidewalk, it was so packed, the pedestrians were shoulder to shoulder.

*I never want to be walking through here on the weekend, I thought as I pedaled. Man, I sound like a total introvert.*

It felt like the wind was gradually losing its summer heat. I no longer smelled the asphalt burning in the sun, and my arms no longer stung like they were slowly burning. Soon, autumn would bring still cooler weather.

I parked my bike in the lot and looked up at my prep school building.

Almost a month had gone by since I decided to attend weekend classes here. I told my parents that since I'd gotten markedly better scores on my exams after summer break, I wanted to start attending regularly.

That wasn't a lie. But the real reason was that I wanted something to focus on to help me forget my feelings for Ayase. I'd have to spend a large portion of the money I made working at the bookstore on my tuition, but there wasn't anything I could do about that.

Besides, when you were really determined to avoid the truth, that energy could be harnessed to achieve major results, and if I kept getting better grades, it looked like I could start aiming for better colleges. My teacher had even said as much during my parent-teacher conference the other day.

I stepped inside the building, then immediately came to a halt. Usually, I would have headed directly to class, but something occurred to me. I checked

the prep school's map and began heading in a slightly different direction.

I arrived in front of a door and checked the sign—it read STUDY HALL.

So it was really here. I'd never noticed this place before.

Quietly, I opened the door.

There were a number of desks lined up with partitions around them to help block out distractions, though very few people were using them. That made sense to me, of course. Most people probably saw prep school as a place to listen to lectures. If they wanted to study by themselves, they could visit a library or go to a café. A fair number, like me, probably didn't even know this place existed.

In the very back, I spotted the person I'd been looking for: Summer Sail—or rather, Kaho—Fujinami.

Her row happened to be vacant. *Oh, I see. I bet the back row is the best place to concentrate, since there isn't anyone sitting behind you.*

Fujinami suddenly looked up and noticed me. I greeted her with a light bow, and she put a finger to her lips, as if to remind me that there was no talking in the study hall. That was fine—that wasn't why I was here.

I took a seat in the back row and pulled out my notebook and writing utensils. Without saying a word (of course), I began studying.

After solving a few problems, I noticed how comfortable it was in the study hall. The room was air-conditioned, and thanks to the partitions to my right and left, I could focus without fear of distraction. Plus, the fact that everyone else in the room was studying helped motivate me. In that sense, it was much better than a library or a coffee shop, where anyone might drop in for any number of reasons.

Eventually, my concentration wore off, and I realized it was past noon. My stomach grumbled. I looked around and saw that many of the other students had left. They'd probably gone out to get lunch. I tidied up my desk and stood, planning to head to a convenience store to pick up something to eat.

Almost at the same time, Fujinami got up and started walking in my direction.



I was curious but didn't say anything until we'd left the room so I wouldn't distract the students still studying. Once we were in the hallway, I approached her.

"Are you going out to lunch, too?" I asked.

"Yes. Oh, and..."

"Yeah?"

"I was wondering if you wanted to talk to me, since you came all the way to the back to sit down."

"Oh, um..." I *did* want to talk to her. I'd wanted to since we ran into each other at the golf simulator. But... "Yeah, but I don't have anything in particular I want to discuss with you..."

"Oh. Okay."

"...And if you're planning to eat lunch, maybe you should hurry and do that first."

"I was just going to buy something at a convenience store," she said.

"Oh. Me too."

"Then let's go together. We can eat in the lounge."

"Come to think of it, I've never been to the lounge. Okay, let's go."

"All right."

According to Fujinami, the lounge was a break room that anyone could use. You could eat there, though there were a few stipulations. For example, soft drinks were allowed, but dishes like noodles that included bowls of soup and foods with strong smells weren't. It was basically no different from the break room at the bookstore.

We went to a convenience store next to the prep school to buy our food. I got a bread roll with a savory filling and a bottle of tea. Fujinami reached for a rice ball, then decided against it and settled on a sweet sandwich filled with fruit and whipped cream, and a bottle of vegetable juice.

We took our purchases to the lounge, sat at the same table, and struck up a

conversation.

I had wanted to talk with her, but I didn't have anything in particular I wanted to say. Pretty soon, we ran out of topics.

"So you weren't lying," said Fujinami. "You really *didn't* have anything you wanted to talk about." She looked surprised, and I felt a little bad. She was right. *What the heck am I doing?*

"I guess not."

"I thought about sending you away, saying, 'I'm here to study, so I'm not really interested in that kind of thing...'"

*Oh. She thought I was trying to pick her up.*

"That really wasn't my intention. It's just, we ran into each other a few days ago, and I was a bit curious about you."

"That's a standard pickup line, you know. 'You just caught my interest,' and so on."

"...Is it?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry. I apologize if I made you feel uncomfortable." I offered her a sincere bow.

"It's okay. I can see that's not what you intended. I'm just tired of being seen as *that type of girl*."

"What type of girl?"

"One who's easy to pick up. I don't go to school, so people tend to think I'm a party girl. The sad thing is, they aren't entirely wrong."

"You don't go to school? Oh, I don't mean to pry or anything."

"It's fine. To be more precise, I don't go to school during the day."

"Oh, so you go to a night school?"

"My daily schedule is different from that of kids who go to school during the day, so people often think I don't go to school at all. Hey, Asamura... What do

you think about girls who go to school in the evening and show up at arcades in the middle of the night?”

I had a feeling I’d heard something similar once before.

“I think they’re girls who go to school in the evening and show up at arcades in the middle of the night.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Really? You don’t think I’m strange? Or that I have behavioral issues? Or that I’m the kind of girl who fools around and goes with any guy who asks?”

*Aha. So that’s why she thought I was trying to pick her up.*

“Sorry. I don’t know anyone else who goes to night school, so I don’t really have an impression of what those people are like. I hope I’m not being offensive, but I really haven’t been looking at you like that.”

“Hmm. Well...if you’re being honest, then that’s very fair of you. I appreciate it.”

“Actually, what I was really curious about...” This was a kind of prejudice, too, of course. “...was whether you really liked golf that much.”

Her eyes widened, and she stared at me. “*That’s* what you were wondering?”

“It’s kind of unexpected, right? A girl going to a golf simulator so late at night. It makes you wonder.”

“I don’t *want* to go that late. I can’t help it. That’s just what time it is after I’m done with work and school.”

“Yeah, I figured as much when you told me you go to night school.”

The night school system was set up to give people who worked a chance to receive a high school education. If Fujinami went to night school after work, she wouldn’t finish studying until late. In that case, it made sense for her to show up at that hour. But why she would go to so much trouble to practice golf was still a mystery.

“Everyone in my family loves golf,” she said. “I thought they’d like it if I could play with them...”

“Oh.”

“My family isn’t so well-off anymore, but those people—my parents—met at their university’s golf club, and they still love the sport. I thought we could go to a golf course together if I improved my skills.”

“Ah. That sounds nice,” I said, though I wasn’t sure why she’d called her parents “those people.” That was none of my business, however, so I decided not to mention it.

Seeing her up close now, I was reminded of how tall she was. She had to be at least 180 centimeters. It was the weekend, but she was dressed simply and didn’t wear any jewelry. She chose her words carefully when she spoke, and though she said guys often tried to pick her up, I wouldn’t have been surprised if she said she was an honor student at Suisei High School. I could tell she was intelligent just from our casual chat.

Then I noticed that her ears were pierced.

*“People tend to think I’m a party girl. The sad thing is, they aren’t entirely wrong.”*

It seemed odd that she had her ears pierced but wore no earrings. I wondered if there was a story there.

“Do you judge everything that impartially, Asamura?”

“I try, but I’m not sure...”

After reading a lot of books, I started consciously trying to avoid having tunnel vision and being arrogant or narcissistic.

“I see. Well, you seem like a very fair person, from my point of view.”

“Thanks. That’s how I’d like to be,” I said, and she smiled a little.

“I figured I wouldn’t bother talking to any of the other students at this prep school, but I enjoy talking to you, Asamura.”

“Yeah?”

“Will you be at the study hall again tomorrow?”

“I have classes in the afternoon on Saturdays and Sundays, but I can be there

in the morning.”

“Then let’s have lunch together again.” She looked a bit more relaxed now.

“Okay,” I said.

She finished eating, gathered up her garbage, and stood.

I followed her out the door and said, “Hey, there’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“Oh? ...What?”

“That rice ball at the convenience store. Did they not have any fillings you liked?”

“You were watching me?”

“Well, sort of.”

“Oh yeah. At first, I considered getting a rice ball, but you know...”

*Hmm?*

“The seaweed sticks to your teeth, right?” she continued. “That’s why I decided against it.”

“Oh.”

“Well then, I’ll see you tomorrow!” She headed quickly back to the study hall. It almost felt like she was fleeing.



As I watched her go, I began to think it might be pretty efficient to spend my mornings in the study hall and attend classes in the afternoon.

By evening, the air had cooled.

I got on my bicycle again and raced to work.

Once there, I changed into my uniform, stepped out onto the sales floor, and received the day's orders from the store manager. He wanted me to work the cash registers with him, which was pretty unusual.

"Yomiuri and Ayase are both out today, so unfortunately, you'll be stuck behind the register with me."

"There's nothing to be sorry about, sir. So neither of them are coming in today?"

I knew that Ayase would be absent, but I hadn't realized Yomiuri would be out, too.

"Yeah. Yomiuri had to do something at her college."

"Oh?"

"She's helping with their open campus event."

"Oh, I see."

"She was originally planning to come in after it was over, but... Now, I didn't hear this directly from her, but it seems she said, 'There's this professor who really tires me out, and I don't think I'm gonna have the strength to work after dealing with her.'"

*Sir, there's no reason to mimic her voice, too.*

I considered who she might have been talking about and wondered if it could be the woman I'd seen her with at that pancake house a month or so ago.

Come to think of it, Ayase said she was going to an open campus somewhere today, too. What a coincidence she and Yomiuri were attending the same kind of event on the same day. But then again, all universities would have to hold events like that on weekends or holidays, so maybe it was inevitable.

With our capable colleagues both out, work went a lot less efficiently. Once a

line formed at the register, I had to stop thinking about private matters and focus on my job.

In the end, I was kept busy at the register the whole time.

After work, I headed home. When I entered the living room, I could tell someone else was there. At first, I thought it was Dad.

“Hi, Big Brother.”

“...Hey, there. Oh, haven’t you eaten yet?”

“Not yet. You still need dinner, too, right?”

Ayase poured miso soup into a bowl as she spoke.

I went to the kitchen and took some salad out of the refrigerator, then set it out on the dining table along with a bottle of dressing. The movements came naturally, since I did this often when following the instructions in Ayase’s notes. Next, I’d get out the natto, and then...

“I’ve grilled mackerel pike,” said Ayase.

“Then we need grated radish to go with it.”

I didn’t want to spend time grating radish, so I decided to use the kind that came in a tube.

“Want some rice?” she asked.

“A small bowl, please.”

I took chopsticks and plates for two to the table and asked Ayase, “What do you want to drink?”

“Hot tea is fine for me. It’s getting chilly.”

“Okay.”

I put some tea leaves into a pot and filled it with hot water from a dispenser. Then I let it steep while I brought over two teacups.

“Thanks,” said Ayase.

“You did the cooking,” I replied. “And you must have been tired after going to that open campus.”



“Probably not as tired as you are from working.”

We got set up and began our late dinner.

I’m not sure who spoke first, but we began telling each other about what we’d done that day.

I told Ayase about my prep school, explaining the study hall I hadn’t known about and how it seemed like a really good place to study.

“Oh. They have a study hall at your prep school?” she asked.

“Have you ever been to a prep school?”

“No. It’s a little too expensive.”

After that, she told me about her experience at the open campus event.

“You’re kidding! So you really were at the same one?!”

Ayase nodded. “What do you mean ‘really’?”

“The store manager told me that Yomiuri was out helping with her school’s open campus, so I knew you were both out doing the same thing.”

“Oh, that’s why...”

“So how was the college?”

“It left me totally exhausted.”

“Really?”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. The event itself was interesting. It gave me an idea of the things people learn there. Or maybe ‘learn’ is the wrong word.”

“What do you mean?”

I thought college was a place where people learned stuff.

“I mean... How do I put it? I got the impression it was more of a place *to think*. And not just a place where people tell you to think—you have to start by finding something to think about by yourself.”

To be honest, I didn’t really get what Ayase was talking about at first. There seemed to be a difference between the schools I was familiar with and the university she visited that day.

“There was this really strange professor there,” she continued.

“Strange how?”

“‘Strange’ is the only way I can describe her... And we got into a bit of an argument.”

*What?! Ayase got into an argument with someone she’d just met?*

I was stunned. Ayase was always fighting against the things she saw as unreasonable in society, but she didn’t seem like the type to get into a heated, in-person argument with someone.

“It got intense, and by the time we finished, I was pooped.”

“But...it sounds like you had fun.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Huh? Oh yeah. Yeah...but...can you tell?”

“You said you were exhausted, but you looked kind of happy.”

“...Oh, so you *can* tell,” she muttered, looking away.

“Did it make you want to attend Tsukinomiya?”

“I don’t know if I’ll be accepted, but...maybe I’ll give it a shot.”

*Good.* I was glad that Ayase had tried something new and met someone who intrigued her. A fresh encounter. Though I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious about her meeting someone I didn’t know in a place I’d never been.

“So, uh...will you continue going to the study hall at your prep school?” she asked.

“Yeah...I guess so. I already promised to come again tomorrow.”

“You promised?”

“Hmm? Yeah. I promised the person who told me about it that I’d be there. We’ll both be studying, so we agreed to have lunch together.”

“Oh. Good for you.”

Yes, this was supposed to be something good.

Ayase met someone who made her interested in attending Tsukinomiya University. And similarly, I met someone at my prep school I could talk to. We

were both broadening our horizons. That was how things should be.

“I won’t be able to make dinner tomorrow,” said Ayase. Apparently, she would be studying with some of her classmates.

“Okay. I’ll be busy tomorrow, too... Why don’t we both heat up something from the freezer?”

I was going to my prep school again, and I had work after that.

We both had our own things to do the following day and wouldn’t be seeing each other. Gradually, we were becoming more and more like regular sixteen-year-old siblings.

## ● SEPTEMBER 27 (SUNDAY)—YUUTA ASAMURA

The summer heat seemed to be making one last desperate comeback. Temperatures kept going up as the sun rose in the sky, and by the time I reached my prep school, it must have been upward of thirty degrees Celsius.

I practically ran inside, fleeing from the heat. Behind me, the automatic doors closed, shutting out the hot air, and I was finally able to breathe. I let out a big sigh and proceeded down the hall.

Farther into the building, I opened the door marked STUDY HALL. I arrived at about the same time as yesterday, but now the place was packed.

I turned around and saw Fujinami seated in the same spot where I'd found her the day before. The space next to hers was fortunately unoccupied, so I grabbed it and sat down. Her books were already open, and she was hard at work.

Wordlessly, I opened my notebook and drill book and prepared to tackle physics—the subject I'd scored worst in on my final exams. To be precise, I'd gotten a seventy.

It wasn't that I didn't understand what we'd been taught. Or I didn't think so, at least. If the test was accurate, my score meant that I'd understood about 70 percent of the material. The problem was that I was bad at putting together formulas and doing calculations.

The phenomena we studied in high school physics were the type of thing you often came across in books, so I had already known about most of it before taking the class. But when it came to calculations, if you didn't move your hands and do lots of practice problems, you'd never get any faster at them.

*Anyway... Hmm. "Give the magnitude of acceleration acting on an object placed on a smooth, inclined plane," huh?*

This applies to exam questions in all subjects, but the first order of business is always to read the question carefully.

For example, take this “smooth, inclined plane.” This description often means “a plane where you don’t need to worry about friction.” In real life, cardboard boxes sitting on a slope don’t often start tumbling down, because there is too much friction with the ground. But we get few practical problems like that in high school physics.

I wondered what it was like in college and thought about the conversation I’d had with Ayase the previous day.

*“It’s not just a place where people tell you to think—you have to start by finding something to think about by yourself.”*

Did she mean that in college, you could think up your own problems to solve? For example, I could think about what would happen if there *was* friction on the slope or what would happen if the slope was somewhere other than on Earth. That sounded fun.

I remembered a passage in a science fiction novel I once read that described how the gravity on the surface of the moon was less than that on Earth, and therefore droplets of water would take longer to slide down a person’s skin. *If that’s true, it would make animating a shower scene on the moon a lot more troublesome.*

*...Acceleration, huh? Acceleration. Um...*

I could hear the sounds of a pencil scratching against a notebook and of pages being turned at the desk beside mine. As I finished my drills and turned the page, I’d hear a page being flipped to my side, as though we were competing. I felt a strange sense of solidarity well up inside me.

For a while, I sat there in the study hall next to Fujinami, fully focused on my drills.

Eventually, I heard a clatter beside me. I gasped, then looked up and saw that Fujinami had stood and was looking at me. Without a word, she picked up her bag and pointed to the door.

*What? Already?*

I checked the time on my phone and saw that it was past twelve. I'd been so focused that I hadn't noticed it was already lunchtime.

Once we were out in the hallway, Fujinami said, "Instead of hitting that convenience store today, how about going to a diner?"

"A diner?"

"I know one with reasonable prices."

"Okay." I figured it might be good to eat out now and again. "Yeah, let's go."

The heat washed over us as we left the building.

"It sure is hot out here," I said.

"Yeah, but fall is here. It's about time for the heat to disappear for good."

We talked about the weather as we walked, and before long, we had arrived at the diner. As Fujinami had said, it was an affordable Italian food chain frequented by students.

We were shown inside, where the air conditioner was on full blast, and taken to a booth by the window facing the street. Fujinami and I sat across from each other.

We ordered quickly, since we didn't have much time. I asked for carbonara, and she ordered spaghetti with peperoncino sauce.

"I like ordering spicy food and then drizzling lots of olive oil on top," she said.

"I like spicy food, too, but...I'm starving after all that concentration."

"Yeah, it took you forever to notice."

"Huh?"

"I was watching you for a while...waiting for you to notice."

*Was she?*

I thought I'd heard her stand up. But maybe I'd actually felt her looking at me.

"You should have said something."

"I didn't want to distract the people around us."

“So why did you want to come to a diner today?”

“While I was watching you, I got a little curious, and I wanted to have a real talk with you. There are too many people in the lounge, so it’s hard to be open. Oh, I’ll get us some water. It’s self-service.”

“I’ll get it.”

“No, you stay here.”

“I can get my share, at least.”

To avoid an argument, we both went to get water. We also grabbed some napkins, then returned to our booth.

It took a while for our pasta to arrive.

When it came, Fujinami got the olive oil and poured a good amount over her food. Then she ground the creaky little pepper mill over it as well, twirled the pasta around with her fork, and began eating. She looked like she was used to this routine, and I wondered if she came here often.

*What made her curious about me? Did I do something weird?* Then it occurred to me that if I wanted to keep up this new relationship, I needed to put in some effort, too.

“Fujinami, do you like books?” I asked.

“Are you asking if I read? I don’t mind it.”

That was a strange way to answer my question.

“Do you mean...you aren’t all that enthusiastic about it?”

“Oh no. I enjoy reading. It’s a very cost-effective pastime. I think I mentioned to you before that I’m not too well-off, so it’s hard to do things that cost money.”

“I see...”

“You know that golf place? It’s cheap to go there on weekday nights. I can get in a lot of practice for the price of two paperbacks.”

Plus, it sounded like she’d make her family happy if she improved her skills.

“What kind of books do you read, Asamura?” she asked.

“Well...I guess I like to read all sorts of things. I’m not really picky. I read everything from popular fiction to foreign novels, science fiction, and light novels.”

“Light novels? That’s not really a genre, is it?”

I couldn’t help smiling. It seemed she knew her stuff.

“You’re right. Light novels include science fiction and mystery stories, dramas about young people, war stories, and even sports stories... It really isn’t a single genre. I heard it used to be called ‘juvenile fiction’ back before we were born.”

“Is that true?”

“A juvenile is a young person, and that’s the target audience of those books.”

In other words, the term covered anything written for young people. My understanding was that light novels were supposed to be light, easy reads—though there were other varying opinions.

“Are you good at physics because you like science fiction?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m good at it... In fact, my grades aren’t all that high.”

“Really? You were doing physics drills this morning, right? Judging by the rate you were going, I thought you must be good at them.”

That was a surprise. It sounded like she’d been watching me pretty closely.

“I do like the subject, though.”

“Have you read any interesting novels lately?”

I thought about that for a few moments and then told her about a sci-fi novel I’d recently gotten into. It was a translation of a global bestseller, and I’d heard that even a former US president had read it. That had nothing to do with my enjoyment, of course. I found the depictions of the alien civilization odd and thrilling...and they made it an exciting read.

“I’ve seen that one at the bookstore,” she said. “But it’s a hardcover, and the price is way too high for me...”

“Yeah, it’s kind of expensive.”



I'd read it because Yomiuri recommended it to me. If she hadn't, I probably wouldn't have splurged. A hardcover book was challenging, price-wise, for a high school student, even if I *did* have a part-time job.

"Do you have any cheaper recommendations?"

"How about a book that was recently made into a movie? This one has a paperback edition. It's a story about a cat that goes looking for summer."

"Oh, I've read that one. It was originally a classic science fiction novel overseas, wasn't it? Even I know that much. The cat was cute. I saw a video clip of the trailer. The cat was really cute."

She'd repeated herself. I wondered if she liked cats.

"Speaking of cats, there's also a story where one disappears."

"Oh yeah..."

We spoke animatedly for a while about books featuring cats. Then I recalled that Yomiuri liked mysteries and had told me about a novel with a cat detective. I mentioned this to Fujinami, and she asked if it was any good. I told her I'd read a little and found it entertaining.

It was about a very smart cat who helped the hopeless humans around it solve crimes swiftly and skillfully. How could a story like that be boring? Fujinami seemed interested.

She and I had similar tastes in books, and we thought similarly. I felt as comfortable with her as when I was talking with Ayase.

I gazed out the window and thought, *It's nice to meet new people.*

And there she was—Ayase.

She was alone with a boy. They were both standing in the shade next to a convenience store, trying to keep out of the sun. She looked like she was having a good time talking with him.

What was she doing here? And who was that boy she was with?

I reflexively turned away. They were some distance from the window, and it was hard to make out his face. But I had a feeling I'd seen him somewhere

before.

I recalled Ayase telling me that she had a study session that day. What was she doing? Why were there only the two of them? Where were her other classmates?

I sighed, then realized what I was doing and looked up. "Oh...sorry. What were we talking about?"

"We weren't talking about anything just now."

*Ngh... This is getting awkward.*

I couldn't exactly tell her I'd seen Ayase outside and gotten distracted.

I tried to continue our conversation. "Oh yeah. Well, um..."

"You don't have to force yourself to find a topic. That's actually what I was curious about. It's true that I was the one who mentioned the study hall when we met at the golf simulator. But when I saw you there yesterday..." For a split second, she looked unsure if she should go on. In the end, she went ahead. "... You looked like you were running from something."

*Like I was running...?*

I felt my chest constrict.

"That's what you thought?"

"Yes."

The way she was looking at me now seemed different from before. Her brownish-black eyes gazed into mine as if she could see straight into my soul. I felt like I was being subjected to an X-ray or an MRI.

"Your expression was one I know well, and that made me curious. You were studying hard, and I could tell you were a serious person. When I realized you weren't trying to pick me up, I figured you must be trying to escape from something."

"I wonder if that's true."

I hadn't been consciously running away. But now that she mentioned it, I couldn't deny that she was right.

I thought I'd taken a step forward and found something new. But it seemed I'd actually been going backward. And if that were true, then I was being very rude to Fujinami, using her as an escape from my problems.

"Sorry," I said.

"No need to apologize. You haven't done anything wrong yet, and I can understand how you feel."

*What does she mean by that?*

"I, too, have sought out others as an escape... Oh, hey. Mind if I order a flan for dessert? The flan here is great." She'd already picked up the electronic tablet and started punching in her order. "This is my one joy in life. It's one of the few luxuries I can afford on my meager salary. I should really pack my lunch each day, but considering how tired I am after work, it's important to make sure that I get plenty of sleep. And it's less of a burden if I insist on eating out every day."

I was about to ask, "Less of a burden on whom?" And then I remembered something.

Yesterday, she'd referred to her parents as "those people." It had seemed strange to me and stuck out in my mind. I got the impression from her dismissive language that Fujinami and her parents weren't very close. But it didn't seem like she hated them or anything. She seemed almost...*shy*.



It reminded me of the way I felt about Akiko. “Those people,” as she put it, were probably happy to pack lunches for her if she asked. Just as Akiko was willing to go out of her way to be at both Ayase’s and my conferences. But Fujinami didn’t want her parents to do that for her, despite the fact that she didn’t have time to pack lunches for herself. That was probably why she insisted on eating out and had become a regular at this diner.

Fujinami’s flan arrived, and she scooped a spoonful into her mouth, then squinted like a happy cat. Despite her large frame, I found she suddenly reminded me of a kitten.

“Mmm,” she said. “This is the taste of happiness. And it only costs 250 yen.”

It appeared Fujinami was serious about getting good value for her money.

She finished eating and straightened up.

“So going back to what we were discussing, does your problem have to do with a romantic relationship?”

She looked me straight in the eye, making it very hard for me to lie.

“Why do you—?”

“Why do I think that? Well, you chose me, a girl, as your escape. It’s a cliché that people look for a new relationship when the one they’re in gets tough.”

“But that would mean I was trying to pick you up.”

“Exactly. If you were aware of what you were doing, that’s what it would be. But few people realize they’re running away. Understanding that would only make them more depressed, after all. Of course, me telling you all this will make you aware of what you’re doing, whether you like it or not.” She spoke with a gentle smile, which made her words seem less like accusations and easier to swallow. “I’m not particularly nice, you see,” she said.

I thought of Ayase as someone who dealt with others dispassionately, but Fujinami was on another level.

Ayase’s bluntness reminded me of my own. Neither of us expected anything from others—particularly from members of the opposite sex. We didn’t like to force our views on other people, and we didn’t go along with whatever they

said, either.

When we first met, Ayase tried to gauge my character, and I denied every point she made. But instead of getting angry, she just brushed off my response with a smile. That was when I realized that she was like me.

But Fujinami's smile was different. She was denouncing me.

"...To begin with," I said, "I fell in love with someone I shouldn't have."

"Typical."

"Ruthless, aren't you?"

"Your expression says that's what you want."

I rubbed my cheeks. *Was she for real?*

Fujinami *was* denouncing me. Blaming me. She was like a surgeon plunging her scalpel into a patient. It was like she was saying, "This is what's wrong with you, and that's why I'm going to remove it."

...Not that I'd seen a surgeon at work outside of TV dramas, of course. But I had a feeling that Fujinami's expression was that of a top surgeon whose operations always succeeded.

"If I insist on having things my way, I'll hurt my family. I should forget about how I feel, but it seems impossible..."

I kept talking, even though she hadn't asked.

"You're in deep, huh?"

All I could do was chuckle. Yeah, I *was* in deep.

Fujinami kept staring at me with her arms crossed. "Hmmm. Do you have time after prep school today?"

"I have to work."

"Then let's meet up after you get off work."

"Okay... But can I ask why?"

"Let's go out on the town together. Are you in?"

I had just done the same thing with Yomiuri, and I wasn't sure if I should go

out again so soon. But the moment I started to turn her down, I saw Ayase in my mind's eye, talking with that boy. An uncomfortable feeling welled up from my chest into my throat and made me change my mind.

"If you need an excuse...", she said, "how about saying you're making up for using me as an escape?"

"...When you put it that way, I don't think I can refuse."

"Then it's decided."

We exchanged contact information and headed back to our prep school.

It was past nine when I got off work.

Even at that hour, Shibuya was full of life. Streetlights were on everywhere, and people's shadows danced across the pavement.

I agreed to meet Fujinami not in front of the famous Hachiko statue but across the street at the entrance to the bookstore where I worked.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I said.

I figured she hadn't waited long, since we'd been texting back and forth to decide when and where to meet.

"I just got here myself," she said.

"So where to?"

"Don't rush it, Asamura. The night is young."

"I'm not pulling an all-nighter, okay?" I said, a little shocked. She laughed, and I realized she'd been joking.

"Is this the bookstore where you work?"

"Oh yeah, it is. You come here often as a customer, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. You should have told me you worked here."

I hadn't been trying to hide it. But back then, we hadn't been very close.

"I often drop by on my way to work, just after the store opens."

"Oh, so that's why I never see you."

I was at school then, so there was no chance we'd meet.

"Why don't we walk around a bit?" she suggested. "Don't worry—we won't go anywhere too dangerous."

"Good. I'm not that confident in a fight."

"I like that you're honest," Fujinami said. Then she took off walking.

We turned around and headed back toward the train station. That marked the beginning of Kaho Fujinami's night tour of Shibuya.

"I suppose a wholesome high school boy like you is used to hitting up all the karaoke places."

*Is karaoke wholesome?* I wondered. *Then where do the less wholesome boys go?*

"Actually, I don't go very often..."

I went with Maru about once every three months. Why three months, you ask? Well, that was when Maru would start saying he needed to practice that season's anime theme songs. He always came with them memorized and wanted me to listen to him, to see how well he'd done. He was actually a good singer with a powerful voice. He probably got a lot of practice shouting, as our baseball team's catcher.

"You're a real honor student, aren't you? Then how about one of *those*. Ever been to one?" she asked, pointing to a building glowing brightly in the darkness.

"A bowling alley?"

"It's not just bowling. They have all sorts of things, from bowling and billiards to karaoke, ping-pong, and an arcade."

Once we were standing in front of it, I saw that it was abuzz with activity, with crowds of people flowing in and out. I had walked past this place before but had never been inside. I gazed up at the soaring structure.

"It's huge," I said.

"This place is all wholesome entertainment, though I heard bowling and billiards used to be considered adult pastimes. There was a bowling boom in the



seventies and a billiards boom a decade later.”

“Uh, wait a sec.” I thought about what she’d just said. In particular, the dates. “That’s half a century ago. Wouldn’t people who got into those games back then be older than my dad?”

“Yes, they would be. We were born in the twenty-first century, so from our standpoint, that would be our grandparents’ era. This facility is pretty new, though. Plus, it’s conveniently located near the train station. It’s a good place to remember. They’re open until the first trains leave in the morning, so you can come here if you miss the last train.”

“I’ll remember that.”

I usually walked or rode my bike home, of course, so I doubted I’d be making much use of it.

From there, we headed back toward the train station and detoured around the Shibuya Hikarie Shopping Mall.

It was now 9:27 PM. Business was in full swing at the conveyor belt sushi places and curry shops, and new customers were still pouring in.

I used to eat dinner around here back before Dad got married and Akiko and Ayase were at home waiting for us. In that sense, it was a familiar area. And yet Fujinami kept pointing out places I’d never been.

“As a high school student, you can’t go into bars and nightclubs, so we can only take a look at them from outside,” she said.

“Aren’t we around the same age?”

“Roughly. Asamura, just because we’re the same age doesn’t mean we have the same level of experience.”

She sounded like a character from one of those stories where the protagonist has lived multiple lives. I’d never expected someone to say something like that to me for real.

We circled the station (going from Shibuya Station’s east exit toward its south exit). Then Fujinami veered off Tamagawa Street—the main road—and headed down a narrow alley.

“When you live in Shibuya, you almost forget how quiet it can get at night. Out in the country, a lot of shopping districts go dark as early as seven.”

“Have you been to a place like that?”

“Don’t you ever feel like going somewhere no one knows you?”

I could see what she meant. But would I do that? The closest I’d ever gotten was going to a park in the middle of the night and kicking around an empty can. And then, once my mood improved, I made sure to toss the can into the correct recycling bin next to the vending machine. That was the extent of my sense of adventure.

“I don’t think you need to feel down on yourself,” she said. “You weren’t doing anything wrong.”

“I think maybe I’m just a coward.”

“Having the courage to do something immoral isn’t going to help you in life, you know. Oh, here we are. This is a good place to remember, if you like books,” Fujinami said, pointing to the third floor of a plain-looking building.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The Library.”

“What?”

“That’s the name of the establishment. It’s a place where you can have a drink while you read—where booklovers can relax. Check it out once you’re old enough.”

“...Not to repeat myself, but you’re a minor, too, right?”

“Of course I am. I’ve never been inside; I only know about it.”

For a minor, she seemed exceptionally well-informed about this area’s nighttime entertainment. Still, I was relieved she didn’t try to go inside any of the places she told me about. (They all looked too expensive for me to afford.) She continued to lead me all around the entertainment district, and I realized I had no idea what we were supposed to be doing.

When Fujinami said we were going out on the town, I’d figured she had a

destination in mind. But we simply walked around to various places without stopping anywhere.

Of course, it was fun to walk around Shibuya and people watch, even if we weren't doing anything in particular. There were a lot of interesting shops to see, too.

The two of us were like a couple of fish on our seasonal migration, swimming through a sea filled with bright, colorful lights.

Entertainment districts aren't exactly the safest part of any town, and it was the same for Shibuya. Even if you were just walking, you had to be careful.

Fujinami continued at a brisk pace, seemingly unconcerned. But one wrong step in a back alley, and we could wind up in quite the scary situation. Stuff like that happened all the time, even on the main road.

I could see a guy about my dad's age with a girl no older than I was clinging to his arm as they walked down the street. I was sure she was underage, but I could see her cheeks flushed from drinking and hear her slurred voice as she pleaded with the man.

Elsewhere, I caught sight of a businessman with his tie undone, lying on his back and dozing in the middle of the road. Nearby, a woman was crouched down, throwing up.

"They all seem like failures, don't they?" Fujinami said. "But even these people have a serious side."

"That's true. My dad used to hit a few bars before coming home, too."

Her remark triggered a memory. Dad had told me that he met Akiko when his boss took him to a bar and he got hammered.

"When you walk down the back alleys of Shibuya, you can start to think the world is full of people messing up and doing the wrong things. But sometimes, I find myself wondering what it really means to be right or wrong."

"I'm not sure about women dating men for money, though," I said. Not that I thought it was any better if the genders were reversed, of course.

"But that's the only way some people can survive," Fujinami said. "When I

was in junior high, I..." I followed her gaze and saw a girl turning off the main road into a narrow side street. "...I used to hang out with a bunch of failures. I may look serious now, going to work during the day and attending school at night, but I wasn't always like that."

"...Uh..."

I felt my world lurch.

In other words, what Fujinami wanted to show me wasn't a bunch of nighttime tourist spots—it was the people walking aimlessly under the bright lights of the city.

"I'm aware such people can't be called 'typical' or 'normal,'" she continued. "But how you see someone depends entirely on what aspect of them you're looking at and what their situation is at the time. No one can be said to be absolutely 'right.'"

I got what she was saying. What I didn't get was—

"Why are you saying this to me?"

"Looking at you was like looking at my past self, and it irritated me."

"You used to be like me?"

"With people like them," Fujinami said, pointing to the people on the street, and I took another look at them.

I saw red-cheeked adults, drunk and staggering; a young man in a bold-colored *happi* coat shouting at them, trying to coax them into his bar; a bare-shouldered woman pushing out her chest as she handed out flyers to passersby.

"You grew up without expecting things from others—specifically from women—right?" she said, and I flinched. "You look at things with a neutral eye. That may be your strength, but when you consider why you think that way, it's also your weakness."

"My weakness...?"

"Do you remember when I asked you what you'd think about a girl who goes to school in the evenings and shows up at arcades in the middle of the night?"

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Back then, you said you’d simply accept everything at face value. That’s a strength—an ability to see things without bias. But if I were to guess what made you like that...” Fujinami paused there. She seemed to be searching for the right words. She kept her gaze straight ahead and continued walking without slowing down. Without looking at me, she said at last, “...I’d say it’s because you grew up without expecting anything from women.”

A memory from my childhood surfaced—my mother’s face. There wasn’t a single picture of her smiling in our old family album, and I hadn’t opened it in years.

Fujinami was saying my neutral stance had come from growing up around worthless people—specifically women. She said she could tell because she had been the same.

“But in my case,” she said, “it wasn’t men or women specifically. It was everyone.”

Impassively, she began to speak about her past.

Her story started just after she entered junior high.

Both her parents died in an accident. People should have felt sorry for her, but they didn’t. Instead, those around her had only cold gazes and cruel words.

Apparently, her relatives had all opposed her parents’ marriage, and even at their funeral, rather than condolences, Fujinami heard only jeering. They said the deceased had gotten what they deserved.

Now an orphan, Fujinami went to live with one of her aunts. The woman offered her no affection and only continued to ridicule her parents on a daily basis. She wasn’t direct about it, of course. Instead, she’d make nasty, roundabout comments.

“That’s terrible...,” I said.

“Well, yes. Wouldn’t you expect me to become a delinquent in a situation like that? Of course you would. But at the time, I wasn’t angry with my aunt. Instead, I just felt a hopeless sense of resignation.”

According to Fujinami, that was what had caused her to stop expecting anything from other people. After that, she would repeatedly run away from home and wander the streets at night, fooling around as if to rebel against her aunt. Perhaps due to psychological reasons, she grew physically weak and started skipping school.

I understood some of what she was saying. I didn't have any big tragedy in my past like she did. But like her aunt, my mother hadn't given me anything.

As I walked alongside Fujinami, I began telling her about my past, too. It paled in comparison to hers, but I told her anyway.

Before I knew it, we had circled Shibuya and returned to Dogenzaka. The clock was about to strike midnight.

Hands in her pockets, Fujinami looked up at the sky.

She was taller than I was, and standing up straight like that, she caught the attention of passersby. They would turn back and gasp, and I saw several of them eyeing me suspiciously. They seemed to think I was the one leading her around the city late at night, when the truth was that she was leading *me* around.

"Oh, darn," she said suddenly.

"What's the matter?"

"Today was supposed to be the mid-autumn moon."

I looked up at the sky and saw a bright glow hidden behind the thin clouds. The moon must be full behind them. It reminded me of the time I'd walked home with Ayase under the moon.

"It'll start rising higher from now on," I said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. In summer, the sun rises high and the moon stays low. That's just for full moons, though. In winter, it's the opposite. The winter moon rises high. At this time of the year, the moon starts rising back up, aiming for its winter spot."

"Spoken like a true physics enthusiast."

“That’s really more astronomy. And it’s just something I enjoy.”

Fujinami stopped looking up at the sky and stared straight at me. I wasn’t sure why she was so interested in me.

“You say you don’t expect anything from women, but I think that’s probably a lie.”

“It’s not—”

“You don’t think it’s a lie. I know,” she said, interrupting me. “I didn’t think so, either. I didn’t realize I was lying until my auntie told me so. She said I’d been fooling myself.”

“Your auntie...?”

“She’s my family now. Not the aunt I lived with before—I was put up for adoption.”

Fujinami said her “auntie” had taken her in and looked out for her. The woman had managed an illegal brothel in the past, and she was a caring person who worked to protect girls who fell through the cracks of society from getting involved in crime. After hearing about Fujinami’s complicated background, she’d decided she had to help her out.

Apparently, the woman had spoken with Fujinami’s aunt, her other relatives, and with various experts and finally adopted her.

And on the first day they began living together, she’d told Fujinami, “*You need to find a way to be at peace with yourself.*”

“At peace with yourself?” I asked.

“I needed to compromise and find some middle ground with my feelings, rather than trying to ignore them. She asked if I was being honest when I said that I didn’t expect anything from my aunt, that I wasn’t angry, and that I thought everything that happened to me was inevitable.”

As I listened, a thought crossed my mind. Was Fujinami leaning against a streetlight because she needed support to remain standing?

“She asked me if I hadn’t originally wanted to rely on others and then felt betrayed and angry when I wasn’t able to. I denied it all.”

“...And?”

“And then she asked me why, if all that were true, I was acting like a juvenile delinquent. That was when the tears started. I must have cried all night.”

A streetlight blinked and went out. Maybe it had reached the end of its life. By some coincidence, the clouds above parted at that exact same moment, and I saw the moon directly above.

It was a beautiful autumn moon.

“Asamura, aren’t you also forcing yourself to put a lid on your feelings and pretend they don’t exist?”

I was speechless.

The brilliant lights of Shibuya were all artificial—put there by humans. I was sure it was the lights from the shop windows across the street illuminating Fujinami’s face. But it seemed as if she was lit up by the glow of the moon.

“But...I can’t reveal how I feel... Can I?”

“It would be great if repressed feelings eventually disappeared, but... It’s been, what—five years?—since I lost my parents. I thought those emotions had gone away, but that night I realized that they had been driving me the whole time.”

“Five years...”

“Feelings don’t disappear. Starting that night, I left my real aunt’s place behind and began living with my auntie. I couldn’t believe how much better I felt. That was when I finally realized that I hadn’t forgiven my aunt or any of my other relatives. I’d been terribly upset all that time.”

The moon slid back behind the clouds, and Fujinami’s face was once again lit by the city lights alone.

“I think your ability to look at others without preconceptions is a rare gift,” she said. “But being neutral toward others is not the same as having no expectations. In the end, we’re all human, and humans can’t help having expectations.”

Was she trying to say that we’d feel hurt if we didn’t get what we truly



desired, even if we told ourselves and the world around us that we didn't want it? That those feelings were part of our nature as humans?

I thought of my conversation with Ayase when we first met. Once we were alone, she'd said, *"I won't expect anything from you, and I don't want you to expect anything from me."* I remembered the probing look on her face as she said that. I'd been so relieved, because I thought she sounded like the same type of person as me.

Depending on how you looked at it, it was an extremely rude thing for a person to say to someone they were meeting for the first time. Yet Ayase had said it anyway. What had she really meant...?

Had I genuinely understood what she was saying? Had she really expected nothing from me? Then I asked the same question to myself. Had I really expected nothing from her?

I'd figured it was just a matter of Dad getting married, and that was it. Or that was what I'd told myself anyway. But had I really had no expectations?

"Listen, Asamura. If someone's genuinely neutral, they don't tell themselves to expect nothing from women. Emphasizing that point proves they're far from neutral. It's just more evidence that they're paying a lot of attention to the issue and wavering."

There was nothing I could say back to Fujinami at that point.

"I'm sorry our discussion became so gloomy," she said. "I was just looking at you and thinking that you're the type of person who puts other people's needs ahead of their own. Am I right? You let common sense and ethics dictate your every move."

"I think that, as humans, it's a good thing to have some common sense."

"See? That's what I mean." Fujinami sighed. "You really are hopeless."

She went on to say that no matter how hard we tried to convince ourselves that it was normal not to expect anything from others—no matter how much we lied to ourselves—we couldn't stop holding out hope. And when those hopes weren't met, we'd feel hurt and get mad.

“And so you end up blaming the other person for getting your hopes up,” said Fujinami.

“But isn’t that selfish?”

“Human emotions *are* selfish.”

That, she said, was why I should be truthful about my romantic feelings. Lies can only cover things up for so long, after all.

After that, Fujinami waved and said good night.

I stood under the darkened streetlamp and watched her go.

I wasn’t able to contradict her. My silence was my answer.

Even in the middle of the night, the hustle and bustle of Shibuya went on... And all the while I stood there, unable to move.

I had a feeling that the moon was laughing at me.

## ● SEPTEMBER 27 (SUNDAY)—SAKI AYASE

“Saki! Over here!”

Maaya was waving at me from past the train station ticket gate as I made my way over to her. She was surrounded by our classmates, and I picked up my pace, thinking I might be the last one to arrive. As I walked, I counted how many people were there: Two boys and three girls, including Maaya. I was the sixth and final member, as I’d thought.

“Sorry. Have I kept you waiting?” I asked.

“Not at all! In fact, you’re early!” Maaya smiled, but I wasn’t sure whether to believe her.

Today, we were having a study session at Maaya’s place. She lived in an apartment building nearby, but she seldom invited anyone over.

She had several younger brothers at home whom she was always taking care of, and if she had friends over, she wouldn’t be able to look after them. Today, however, her parents had taken the boys out. In the meantime, we could all use her family’s huge living room—the whole reason for holding the study session there.

After a short walk from the train station, we arrived at her apartment.

“Oh, it’s huge!” said one of our classmates.

“It’s enormous!” said another.

Maaya replied, “I did my best!”

To which I shot back, “It’s not like you built the place, Maaya.”

“Hey, now! No need to be rude, Saki!”

Maaya was good at keeping everyone laughing, unlike me.

I thought about what Professor Kudou said the day before as I glanced at the five other students. There were four girls, including Maaya and me, and two boys, including Shinjou, who suggested the study session. I was determined to take the time to get to know them.

We walked through the apartment's lobby and got on an elevator. It was small, considering the size of the building, and the six of us could barely fit. In the end, the two boys said they'd wait for the next one.

Soon, we heard a rush of air as the elevator doors opened, and we stepped out.

We approached the door to Maaya's apartment. A wooden sign with the word WELCOME written in cute letters hung beneath the suite number. The family's names, including their last name, weren't listed anywhere, however. I figured this was due to security concerns.

We walked inside, and Maaya led us to the living room, which was at least fifteen square meters in size. Everyone was impressed.

"It's so big..."

"It's certainly large enough to fit all of us."

"Lucky you."

"Okay, guys," said Maaya, "sit wherever you want!"

She gestured toward a large table big enough for six people, and we all took our seats. At that point, I noticed our host had gone to the kitchen, so I put down my bag and followed her.

"Oh, Saki? This isn't the way to the bathroom."

"I'm not looking for the bathroom, dummy. Give me that."

I grabbed three liter-sized bottles of tea from her arms and carried them to the table.

"Thanks, Saki. Hey, everyone! Hurry up and get your tea!" said a girl Maaya called Yumi. Shinjou stood up hastily and started helping out.

Glasses and coasters were already set on the table.

“You can use tissues to wipe the moisture from your glass if you like,” said Maaya.

“Maaya, just sit down, okay? You’re making everyone anxious.”

“You’re too kind, Saki. The snacks are over here. They’re the kind you can eat without getting your fingers dirty.”

“...We’re having a study session, right?” asked another girl.

“Of course! That means sweets are mandatory!”

“Maaya, I think your idea of a study session is a little different from mine...”

Everyone laughed. I didn’t think the girl had been joking, though. At this rate, we were going to end up having a tea party rather than a study session. Considering my goal here, that wouldn’t be all bad—or wait...

“Now, let’s decide how we’re going to do this,” Maaya said.

“Is there a particular subject you want to cover?” I asked.

“Anything is fine with me!”

“Narasaka’s at the top of the class, after all,” said someone else.

“She doesn’t understand our woes!” added another.

“Heh-heh. Feel free to keep singing my praises. But jokes aside, how about tackling each person’s worst subject?”

“Huh? Our worst subject?” said Yumi, pronouncing each syllable like she hadn’t understood the words.

“I’m guessing your worst subject is Japanese, huh, Yumi?”

Yumi puffed out her cheeks and sulked. It was a cute expression on her.

“And yes,” Maaya continued. “We have six people, and each one has a subject they’re good at. That means we can all serve as a coach for someone else.”

That made sense to me.

Most of the time, the difference between being good at a subject or having trouble with it wasn’t about knowing the right answer but about knowing *how* to *find* the right answer. If a person was good at a subject, even if they didn’t

know the answer immediately, they knew where to look or how to think about the problem.

On the other hand, when it came to subjects a person was less confident in, they often didn't even know how to check a dictionary, find a similar problem in a workbook, or even track down information online.

What should you do in a situation like that? A few months ago, I probably wouldn't have known. But now I knew the answer: You should ask someone to help you.

It was the same as how you could see farther into the distance atop someone else's shoulders.

A study session with my classmates where we all shared our knowledge... This was definitely a new experience for me. Though Asamura—I mean, my brother—had helped me study once before.

This situation would require us all to reveal our deficiencies and ask for help. And in return, we'd hear someone else out about their own weaknesses and try to mentor them if we could. It was based on give-and-take—a familiar principle, and yet it was something I hadn't been able to do before.

But I got it now.

Asking others for help was a skill, and you had to practice to get better at it.

I hated relying on others and having them rely on me. But that was because I didn't know what other people wanted or what would make them happy. I always thought that since we couldn't see into other people's minds, there was no way to know what they were looking for unless they spoke up. It was unfair for someone to expect me to read their mind, after all.

If someone wanted something, it was my opinion that they should just say so. And if there was something they didn't want me to do, they should say that, too. If we could just be honest with one another and talk things out, we could all be happy.

I still mostly agreed with that line of thought, and I didn't think I was wrong. But...here I was, violating my own policy. I couldn't even share my true feelings with the person I most needed to discuss them with.

I thought about my mom and my birth father. All Mom had done was start working to support him after he failed. And when she happened to succeed, he started resenting her. I always thought that was incredibly unfair and cruel of him.

I hadn't forgiven him for making my mom sad, but I might understand him a little better now. He wasn't able to show her his vulnerabilities or depend on her. He and Mom didn't have a give-and-take relationship. He didn't know *how* to depend on her.

Wasn't I the same? I could admit that I struggled with Modern Japanese, but I still couldn't reveal the feelings hidden in my heart. I kept telling myself it was because I couldn't let Asamura find out, but was that really all there was to it?

"...ki! Saki!"

"Huh?!"

I gasped and looked up. Maaya was waving a hand in front of my face.

"Aren't you hungry?"

As soon as I heard those words, I realized I *was* pretty hungry. I glanced at my phone and saw that it was three minutes to twelve.

"Oh! Is it already noon?"

"Yep. What do you want to do? Do you want to order something? Or should I make us lunch?"

Maaya was offering to cook, but it seemed like too much trouble to prepare food for six people. That said, having something delivered would cost too much.

"I'll go and buy something at a convenience store," I said.

"Mmm. Why don't we all go together?"

"We'd be a nuisance to the store if all of us went. If there's something you want, just tell me, and I'll buy it."

"I'd rather not sit on my hands while you do all the work. Why don't I make something simple to go with the stuff you buy?"

I jotted down everyone's order on my phone, and it wound up being pretty

big—particularly the drinks. But I wasn't too worried, since I was used to going shopping and buying heavy items like rice.

"That's a lot for one person to carry," said Shinjou. "I'll go with you and help bring everything back."

"Oh yeah... I think I'll take you up on that."

I agreed to let Shinjou come along, and the two of us set out for the convenience store.

The others would follow Maaya's instructions and cook up something simple while they waited.

There was a convenience store near the apartment, facing the main road. I could see a chain restaurant serving Italian food that was popular with students across the intersection.

Come to think of it, I'd seen a sign for a big prep school on my way. *Wouldn't it be funny if that was Asamura's prep school?* There weren't many places like that in the area, so it wouldn't be surprising.

*...Oops. I should stop thinking about Asamura.* Hadn't I just decided to focus on forming new relationships?

Shinjou and I stepped inside the convenience store with its bold red-and-green sign and picked up some bread, rice balls, and sandwiches. We decided to buy three extra drink bottles, since we were running low on tea.

While I was waiting for the clerk to ring up the order, Shinjou casually pulled over the heavier bag containing the drinks and picked it up.

"I can take some of that," I said.

"In that case, here," he said, adding a bulky but light container of potato chips into my bag.

That was sneaky of him. It felt even sneakier than if he'd insisted on carrying everything.

"I see," I said.

"Hmm?"



I watched Shinjou's smiling face and recalled my classmates gossiping about how all the girls loved him. It was no wonder. He was a real gentleman.

"Thanks for carrying all that."

"You've got a bag, too," he pointed out.

"That's true, but..."

Maybe I was being cynical or jaded, but it was easier on me mentally to take the heavier load than to make someone else carry it. I couldn't help thinking, *You don't need to be so nice*. I'd rather carry my own weight.

But as we left the store, I wound up totally embarrassing myself by nearly tripping on the curb. Shinjou grabbed my shoulder, and I managed not to fall.

"Th-thanks."

"It's nothing."

It wasn't nothing. He was holding heavy bags in both hands and had still managed to keep me from falling.

"I wouldn't mind if you relied on me more," he mumbled.

Personally, I wanted to be able to carry the heavier bag *and* manage not to fall without any help. If I couldn't do that, how could I become independent?

Instead, because I kept having to rely on him, all I felt was doubt. Was living independently even possible for me?

"Hey, Ayase?" When he called my name, I stopped thinking and raised my head. "You and Asamura are siblings, right?"

I flinched. "Oh... I guess a bunch of people already know, huh?"

"I'm not sure. I heard from Asamura."

"What...?!"

"I happened to see your mom go from his conference to yours the other day, so I asked him about it."

"Oh... I see."

I was a little relieved. I didn't think Asamura was the type to go around telling

everyone our private business. But in a situation like that, he would have had no other choice.

Perhaps sensing that I didn't want to say more, Shinjou changed the subject.

"You seem like you've really got your stuff together. I actually thought you might have a younger brother, rather than an older one."

"Oh no, that's not true at all."

I didn't have anything together. I was a mess inside.

"Well, you look that way to me," he said.

"You give me too much credit. I bet you're way more reliable and put-together than me. You seem like an older brother."

"Well, I do have a younger sister."

"I see. Do the two of you...get along?"

"I suppose so. About as well as you'd expect for siblings."

"Do you carry heavy things for her?"

"Yeah, I guess I do."

"Do you hold her hand so she doesn't fall?"

"I used to when she was younger."

I was teasing him a little. I enjoyed imagining his younger sister bragging about her reliable older brother.

"You take good care of your sister, don't you? I think that's really nice."

"Any brother would," he said easily, and I silently agreed.

*Yeah, you're right. Any brother would.*

I thought about the various things Asamura had done for me—like helping me look for a part-time job and thinking of ways to improve my grades in Modern Japanese—and wondered if those were typical things a brother might do for his younger sister.

Once again, I got lost in my thoughts.

The next time I raised my head, we were back at Maaya's apartment building.

Our study session ended a little before six in the evening.

Since it was the end of September, the sun had already begun to set by five thirty, though it was still light outside. It would be dark soon, so it was a good time to call it a day. Plus, Maaya's parents had called and said they'd be home a little after six.

There were a lot of distractions, but I thought we got a fair amount of studying done, too. At least as far as I was concerned, it had been a meaningful and productive day.

When we left Maaya's apartment, the eastern sky was already dark, with a tinge of bloodred sunset to the west.

Maaya said she'd walk us to the train station, but we insisted she stay behind to welcome her brothers home. Then the rest of us set off together.

Today was the first time since our summer trip to the pool that I had walked with my classmates and chatted with them, and I was surprised at how much I enjoyed it.

"Hey, Ayase?" Shinjou called out to me, and I stopped.

"What's up, Shinjou?"

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Something about his tone felt strange. The others kept walking, but I didn't think we'd have any trouble catching up.

"As long as you don't mind falling behind."

"I wanted to talk to you."

"About what?"

"Well...how do I put it? Uh..."

Shinjou casually moved to my side and slowly started walking again. *Is he trying to make sure we don't lose the others while still keeping our distance?*

"What is it?" I asked.

“I was just thinking about how hot it still is.”

“Yeah, it’s really sticking around this year. The cicadas have all gone quiet, but it still feels like the middle of the summer.”

Despite the lingering heat, however, the season was slowly changing. The morning weather report always showed a heatstroke warning, and it seemed like it had been bright red all across the country for ages. But as of today, it was all yellow and green.

The sunflowers growing along the roads had withered, and the sky over the highway, dyed rosy pink in the sunset, was now filled with the altocumulus clouds of autumn instead of the cumulonimbus clouds typical of summer.

As the streetlamps came on that evening, the scenery was calming, rather than hot and oppressive. Shinjou slowed down so much, I thought our long, long shadows might even catch up with us. Finally, he came to a complete stop, and I was forced to stop, too.

Before I knew it, he had turned in my direction. For some reason, his gaze made me restless.

“I’m in love with you,” he said.

Stunned, I almost cried out, but I managed to swallow the sound.

As I stood there silently, Shinjou began to look uncertain.

“Ayase, I’m in love with you,” he said again, as if making sure I’d heard.

“Oh, you are?”

*Oops. What the heck is he supposed to say to that?*

We both clammed up, and things started to feel awkward.

“...Um, thanks. I’m flattered, but...” I searched for the right words.

*He’s...confessing to me, right? What should I do? I had no idea he felt that way about me.*

*What can I say to turn him down...?*

*Wait, what am I thinking?* I was astonished at my own thoughts. Why was I determined to say no to him right from the outset...?

Shinjou was an attractive guy. Everyone thought so. And after spending the day with him, I could tell he was a good person. I knew several girls in our class were very fond of him. Logically, he should have been a good catch.

He was kind and attentive. It would be great to have an older brother like him.

I thought about the discomfort I'd felt when he called out to me earlier. I'd probably sensed that this was coming and pretended not to notice.

"I'm sorry," I said and bowed. "I don't think I can see you that way..."

"But you aren't going out with anyone else, right?"

"Huh? Well... No, I guess not."

"Then I want you to spend some time with me. Maybe it would change your mind."

*Is that how these things work?*

"Or do you have feelings for someone else and you just haven't told them yet?"

"N-no, I don't."

"And your answer is still no?"

"It's still no."

I didn't know why, but I couldn't imagine a future where I fell in love with Shinjou. Even though I knew he was a good person and a great brother.

"Is it because of Asamura?"

"What?"

"Never mind. Okay...I understand. I'll stop pushing you. I'd like it if we could stay close as classmates."

"...Shinjou."

"I know. Maybe I'll make friends with Asamura."

That surprised me.

"Why?" What did Asamura have to do with this?

“You’re in love with your stepbrother, aren’t you?” he asked.

“I...”

I hesitated.

“Ha-ha-ha. So you won’t deny it. You were pretty quick to turn me down, though.”

“I love him as a brother.”

“Hmm. Well, whatever you say. Maybe if I figure out what kind of guy you like, I’ll have a shot.”

I could tell he was joking, but I couldn’t understand his logic. If he tried to act like Asamura, wouldn’t I just see him as a brother, too? Though I found his logic flawed, he didn’t seem like a bad person, and I thought it would be nice if Asamura had another friend.

Just then, I heard voices calling our names. Our classmates had stopped and were waiting for us to catch up.

The night sky had almost chased away the sunset. Once the curtain of darkness fell, we would be yet another day into the new season.

By the time we arrived at the station, the sky was fully black, and it was night.

As I reached out to push the button for our apartment elevator, I realized I had a text message from Asamura. He said he had somewhere to go after work and would be home late.

The thought of him spending more time with *her* made something in my chest twist, but another part of me was relieved. *What a delinquent*, I thought, chuckling to myself.

My face felt hot. It would be better if I didn’t see him tonight.

I thought of Professor Kudou’s advice.

*“But if you do spend time around other boys and your feelings stay the same, then those emotions are genuine, and I think you should cherish them.”*

That strange woman seemed to know all sorts of hidden truths, and her words felt somehow magical. She seemed to be urging me forward, even if the

path before me wasn't strictly moral.

I needed time to calm down. If I could spend a day without seeing Asamura, I thought I could manage it. But what if tomorrow, after I'd calmed down, my conclusion remained the same?

"Um, excuse me..."





“Huh? Oh! Sorry, go ahead!”

Another resident of our apartment building was waiting to get on the elevator. I realized I’d been standing in front of the button, zoning out.

The other resident got on the elevator and eyed me suspiciously as they went up and up. I waved, then sighed.

*I really have it bad.*

## ● SEPTEMBER 28 (MONDAY)—YUUTA ASAMURA

I noticed the air conditioner was making less noise than before.

The temperature must have been going down a little each day, but there was always a particular moment when you suddenly realized the season had changed.

Dad left for work earlier than usual in the morning. It seemed he still had lots to do, and he took off without eating breakfast. Akiko wasn't home yet, which meant Ayase and I were the only ones in the apartment.

I opened the lid of the rice cooker and couldn't stop myself from commenting. "Wow, that looks good."

Among the sea of white rice, I saw little islands of yellow. A sweet aroma rose from the mixture. *Could those be...?*

"Oh, we're having rice with chestnuts for breakfast," Ayase said over her shoulder. She was at the stove, heating the miso soup.

"Chestnuts...It's already that time of year, huh?"

This, too, was a minor change. But once all those little things added up, you'd suddenly think, *Ah, a new season has begun.*

"I felt like eating together this morning," she said. "Is that okay?"

"Of course."

I'd gotten the impression she was avoiding me lately, so her suggestion came as a surprise. But I felt the same way, so this was perfect. There was something I wanted to talk about, too.

It had been a while since we last set the table and got things ready together. When we were done, we sat down and began eating.

“Oh, you know what?” she said. “I also picked up ginkgo nuts and shiitake mushrooms when I bought the chestnuts.”

“Ginkgo nuts and shiitake mushrooms? ...Are you planning to make *chawanmushi*?”

“Bingo. I don’t think I’ll have time to make it in the morning, but I thought I’d make it for dinner.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

We chatted for a while about trivial things, then began filling each other in on our lives over the past month, as if making up for all the conversations we hadn’t had lately.

“Oh. Didn’t you say you were having lunch with someone recently?” Ayase asked.

“Yeah. We ate at an Italian restaurant near our prep school. Their prices were low, just like everyone says.” Hesitantly, I added, “I thought I saw you while I was there. Did you go shopping at a convenience store across the street?”

“Huh?” Her eyes widened. “Oh yeah. I remember seeing an Italian place across the intersection. Is that where you went?”

“So it *was* you. I knew it. You were with a classmate, weren’t you?”

“That must have been when we went to buy lunch for everyone. I was with Shinjou. We were all over at Maaya’s apartment. You remember Shinjou, right? He went to the pool with us back during summer vacation.”

Once she said the name, I remembered him. It was the same guy who had approached me after my parent-teacher conference, holding a tennis racket in his hand.

I felt a lump in my throat. I didn’t have a right to feel that way, of course. I was being selfish.

“We needed lunch, drinks, and snacks, so we split up into two groups. The others stayed behind to make a little something with Maaya, while Shinjou and I picked up food and drinks at the convenience store.”

“Oh, that’s why.”

“Yep. I was going to go alone, but Shinjou wound up helping me out.”

That made sense. Now I understood why she’d been there.

“Can I ask a question, too?” she said.

“Of course.”

“You were pretty late getting home last night. You sent me a message but didn’t say what you were doing. Where were you, exactly?”

It was unusual for Ayase to ask for details like that.

“I walked around Shibuya after work.”

“What? You just walked? Were you with Yomiuri?”

“No. Remember I told you I was having lunch with someone? They invited me on an evening walk, and—”

“Wait a minute,” she said, and I stopped. “Are we talking about a girl?”

“Um...” Was that what she was concerned about? “Well, yeah.”

“Hmm... I see. And?”

I got the feeling she was a little angry, but maybe that was just wishful thinking. I thought back to what she’d said to me when we first met.

*“I won’t expect anything from you, and I don’t want you to expect anything from me.”*

I thought of that probing look she’d given me. Had she really not expected anything from me?

Then I asked myself the same question. I...*had* expected something from her. I was hoping she’d have special feelings, just for me.

I recalled what Fujinami had said to me about facing my feelings and how lies could only cover things up for so long. When you suppress your emotions, they continue to grow inside you, and they never go away.

In that case...

“I’d like to talk something over with you.”

My voice was loud and clear.

“Talk what over?” Ayase asked.

“I, uh...how do I put this? I think I have special feelings for you.”

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t regret speaking the moment the words were out of my mouth. But now that I’d said them, I couldn’t take them back. I was resolved to move forward, but that didn’t mean I had no reservations.

When she heard me, Ayase’s reaction was dramatic. “Huh...? What? Um, uh... you’re kidding.”

“I’m not kidding.”

“...Are you making fun of me?”

“I would never say something like that to make fun of you.”

“No, I guess you wouldn’t... You aren’t like that, Asamura.”

*Oh.*

“You just called me Asamura.”

“Huh? Oh.”

“That’s okay, forget about that right now.”

“Yeah, okay. So...feelings, huh?”

“I think I love you.”

She gasped. Her lips started to curve into a smile; then she pressed them tightly together.

“Do you mean you’re *in* love with me? Or that you love me as a sister?”

“Huh?” I hadn’t expected her to respond to my confession with a question.

“Do you mean you want to touch me and hold me? That you’d get jealous if you saw me with another guy? Is that the type of feeling you mean?”

I nodded. That was exactly what I was feeling.

It had started that summer, when I first thought, *Oh. I love her.* I couldn’t imagine a guy feeling that way about his sister.

Then yesterday, I’d felt my chest tighten when I saw her with another boy. If

that wasn't jealousy, then what was?

That was why I felt certain I loved her as a woman, not as my sister.

I explained all of that honestly.

"But feelings of love can exist between siblings," said Ayase.

Now I was really surprised. But at the same time, I remembered how her mother, Akiko, had acted at my parent-teacher conference. My words had moved her, and she'd been so happy that she hugged me tight. Was that level of affection normal for them?

"Ayase, wait a minute."

"Someone recently told me that...when a person has been starved of contact and approval from members of the opposite sex, then suddenly starts living in close proximity to one, they're more susceptible to developing something similar to romantic feelings for them."

I thought about this for a moment.

Was she saying that because my relationship with my mother had been so rocky, I'd developed something similar to romantic feelings for Ayase simply because we were living under the same roof?

"That's just one possibility, right?" I asked.

"We can't say for sure that isn't what's happening here."

"Well, I guess not."

"Is there a chance this is just an exaggeration of your brotherly feelings toward me?"

*No, that couldn't be—could it?*

But Ayase's insistence made my certainty of a few moments earlier melt away like a heat haze.

"When you put it that way...I guess I'm not sure."

What I did know was that these feelings were uncharted territory for me.

Ayase's face lost all expression, and she turned away.

After that, we awkwardly continued eating, barely speaking to each other.

Over the past month, I'd been trying to ignore my emotions. After all, I was Ayase's older brother. That was why I started talking with other girls and trying to see their good points. But in the end, my feelings for Ayase didn't change.

And yet now she was suggesting that it was all just brotherly affection.

Ayase finished breakfast, tidied up after herself, and got ready to leave for school, as usual.

I immediately followed her.

If things remained as they were, we'd be avoiding each other for another month.

I caught up to her at the door, where she was putting on her shoes. When she finished, she stood up and froze.

"Ayase."

"Let me tell you something," she said, still facing away from me. "I don't mind at all."

*What?*

I was about to ask what she meant, but before I could, she turned around, kicked off her shoes, grabbed my hand, and pulled me down the hall with unbelievable strength.

Stunned, I let her drag me into her room.

She closed the door, locked it, then glanced at the windows to make sure the curtains were closed. Then she turned to face me again. And...

"Huh?"

Time stopped.

I knew right away what she was doing, but it took a while for my brain to process it.

I felt warm.

What was this feeling? I couldn't explain it well, but one word popped into my

brain as it quickly turned to mush. Yes, a word so simple, it was almost funny.

I felt *happy*.

Our bodies were touching and overlapping, and I felt them melting into one.

Her arms wrapped tightly around my back. Though this gesture was symbolic of the kind of possessiveness we both hated, I was so happy she wanted me that I unconsciously moved to embrace her in return.

But Ayase was already moving away from me.

“Do you feel relieved?” she asked.

“Um...”

“Thank you for having the courage to say all that. It must have been tough thinking about it all on your own. I’m sure it was...a heavy burden.”

“Well... Yeah, maybe.”

“But don’t worry. I can probably take on some of it for you.”

In all honesty, I was more relieved than I was happy.

My confession was a risky move. It could have destroyed my entire relationship with Ayase. I wasn’t especially attractive, and Shinjou was a lot more popular than I was. And the two of us were family, which was a big constraint.





I could have lost everything the moment I told her the truth. And that was why her embrace felt like a pardon.

“I don’t mind at all if your feelings are those of a brother or something else. I’ll be happy either way.”

“Ayase...don’t tell me you feel the same...?”

“I don’t know. I can’t tell if I feel this way because I’m your sister or if this is something different.”

“Ayase...”

“But I know one thing for sure. I want to hug you like this and take the weight off your shoulders. That feeling is real. And I’d like it if you hugged me when I’m having a tough time, too. That’s what my feelings are like in words, without labeling them one thing or another.”

“...Okay.”

I thought I probably felt the same.

“So let’s talk this out. I don’t want to cause trouble for Mom and Dad. Are you with me on that?”

“Yeah. I want Akiko and Dad to be happy together without any regrets.”

“Moving on. I get jealous when you’re around other girls, and I feel restless inside. How about you?”

“I feel the same way when you’re with other boys. I don’t want to tie you down, but I was a little upset about the study session.”

“Okay. Similarly, I didn’t like it very much when you told me you were walking around Shibuya with a girl.”

“Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. We both have other relationships. But...I think these feelings of jealousy might exist between siblings, too, not just people in love.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

I was starting to see what she was getting at.

“Mom and Dad would be shocked if we suddenly told them we were interested in dating. That’s why I’ll call you Asamura in public and refer to you as Big Brother in front of them. We’ll get to know each other better as siblings... No, wait.” Ayase shook her head. “As stepsiblings who are extra close... What do you think?”

“Behind our parents’ backs?”

“...It isn’t right, is it?”

I didn’t think we could let our parents know about our feelings or see us embrace. That had to mean those things weren’t right, either.

But if I insisted on always doing what was right, I could never be honest about my emotions. To resolve this dilemma, I had to insist on being selfish, even if I knew it wasn’t right.

“I don’t care what we are,” I said. “Just having you accept me like this is more than enough.”

“...I feel the same way.”

I was starting a secret life with my stepsister, using the excuse that it was merely an extension of our sibling relationship. I honestly wasn’t sure how long we could keep it up. Right now, I was still satisfied with just being able to hug her. But if my feelings grew stronger, I wasn’t sure how far I’d want to go.

The two of us stepped out of our apartment building, and the cold autumn breeze hit our cheeks. Despite it, I felt warm to my very core. Even without a jacket, I couldn’t feel the chill.

## AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading Volume 4 of the novel version of *Days with My Stepsister*. I'm Ghost Mikawa, the author of this story and of the original YouTube version. Volume 3 was a little tense, so I made this volume relatively sweet. I think it's a good volume for readers who want to see the characters happy. I hope you will continue to watch over them and the changes in their relationship as it wavers between that of siblings and that of a girl and a boy in love. Where will the story take them?

I have one piece of information to share. This book was awarded third place in the *This Light Novel Is Amazing! 2022 Awards*. I extend my deepest appreciation to all the fans who voted for it. I hope you'll continue rooting for me as I do my best to keep creating quality work that lives up to this prestigious award.

Now for the acknowledgments. Thank you to Hiten, the illustrator; to Yuki Nakashima, who plays Saki; to Kouhei Amasaki, who plays Yuuta; to Ayu Suzuki, who plays Maaya; to Daiki Hamano, who plays Maru; to Minori Suzuki, who plays Shiori; to the video director, Yuusuke Ochiai; and to the staff members of the YouTube version; as well as to everyone who has been a part of this project. And most of all, to my readers—thank you, always.

I don't have a lot of space here, but I want to express my utmost thanks to you all.

How will Saki's and Yuuta's lives gradually shift...



Yuuta and Saki have begun a secret life they must keep from everyone around them. Together, they pursue a relationship that they can't name, which is both like siblings and like a boy and girl in love.

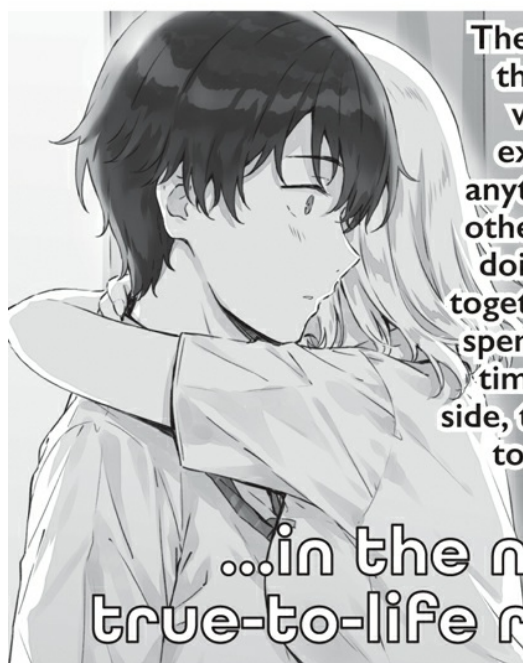
They set out to be ideal partners, neither forcing their way nor holding in their feelings, and rely on each other when needed.



Going on their first date, getting into fashion, attending a friend's birthday party, volunteering, celebrating Halloween.



They've lived their lives without expecting anything from others, but by doing things together and by spending their time side by side, things begin to change.



And gradually, the people around them start to notice...



...in the next installment of this true-to-life romance between siblings?

*DAYS WITH MY STEPSISTER, Vol. 5*  
ON SALE IN SPRING 2025!



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