

Rascal

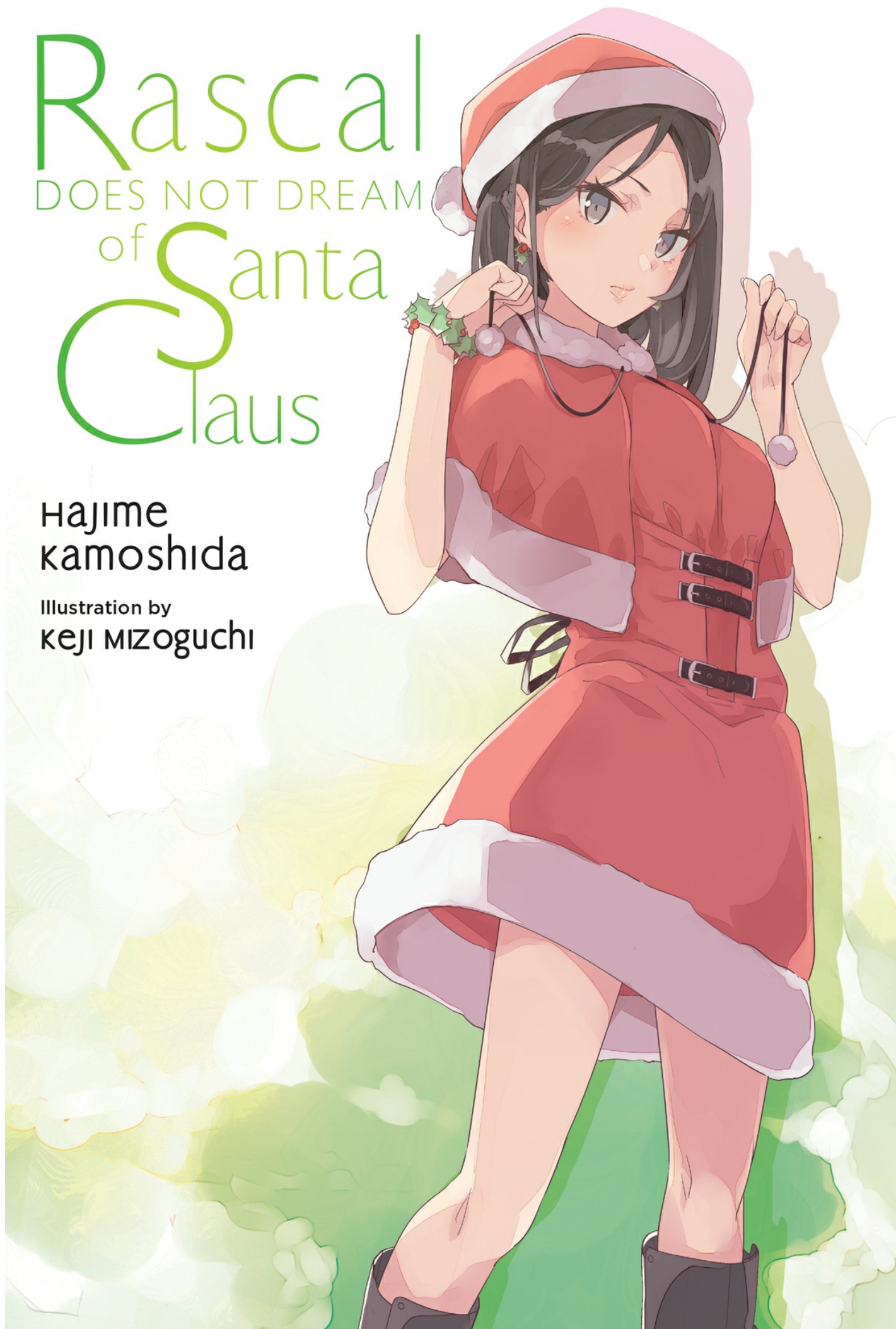
DOES NOT DREAM

of Santa

Claus

Hajime
kamoshida

Illustration by
KEJI MIZOGUCHI



Rascal

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The pair enjoyed a walk through the garden on that winter day.

They could hear a woodpecker in the distance.

“Where could it be?”

“Good question.”





It was a weekday, and there weren't many people on the Motomachi Shopping Street in Yokohama.

The miniskirt Santa walking around was glaringly out of place.

But of course, nobody paid Touko any attention.

No one noticed she was there.



Chapter 1 The World Dreams


Chapter 2 Reindeer's Work

Chapter 3 Someone

Chapter 4 No Dreams of Santa Claus

Last Chapter The Day Before





Rascal

DOES NOT DREAM

of

Santa

Claus

Hajime kamoshida

Illustration by
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New York

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Rascal Does Not Dream of Santa Claus Hajime Kamoshida

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SEISHUN BUTA YARO WA SANTA CLAUS NO YUME WO MINAI Vol. 13

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I want it, but I can't have it.

I'll never be the me I want to be.

I can't have it, but I still want it.

I'll never be the me I want to be.

Spin round and round. Dizzy lost child.

Ask a mirror, Who are you?

The answer is always, Who *are* you?

Only someone with no name knows for sure.

Touko Kirishima, "Someone"

Chapter

1

the world dreams



1

Sakuta Azusagawa found himself beneath a starry sky.

Regulus in Leo. Spica in Virgo. Arcturus in Boötes. The sun had only just set, and the evening stars in the spring sky gently watched over the crowds.

But no one here was looking up. An audience of ten thousand, but every eye on the same thing.

An outdoor stage by Yokohama's Red Brick Warehouse.

It had started as a simple seaside music festival.

Then a popular rock band had brought out a surprise guest vocalist.

All eyes were on her.

Sakuta's included.

Her voice was clear.

Soaring.

A strong, beautiful voice, rising up above the hard-rock accompaniment.

Sakuta knew the woman holding that microphone.

Everyone knew her.

Mai Sakurajima had started out as a child star, and to this day, she landed major roles in movies and on TV.

The crowd by the stage wasn't moving at all, as if time itself had stopped. No one cheered. Since Mai had stepped out, they'd been immobilized by shock.

Sakuta had heard this song before.

One of Touko Kirishima's biggest hits, it had been featured in a commercial.

And now Mai was singing it.

Like it was her own song.

Like she herself was Touko Kirishima.

Mai's voice reverberated from the stage.

Robbing the audience of speech. No one was rocking to the beat or clapping along. Just standing there, stunned.

The song finished before anyone could recover.

The red bricks were lit with orange lights, and the venue was as quiet as any other evening. The only sounds came from the wind and the lapping waves. But in that darkness, ten thousand people waited.

Holding their breath.

Ears straining to hear what Mai said next.

Patiently reining in the urge to rush the stage.

Mai could sense their expectation, hence her sheepish smile.

The crowd was hanging on her smallest gesture, the anticipation only growing—about to burst.

Mai took a breath.

And raised the mic to her lips again.

"I'd like to take this moment to share something with you all."

The crowd didn't react yet, watching intently.

"I imagine some of you have already worked it out."

Mai paused again, scanning the crowd.

Everyone there was champing at the bit. And Mai looked over the sea of faces, soaking it in.

Then she took another breath.

"I'm Touko Kirishima," she declared.

A full second of silence followed.

Then another.

Then all that built-up anticipation erupted. No longer holding back, time moved once again. A roar was unleashed, shaking the air like thunder. Completely altering the concert vibe.

No other sound could be heard. The cheers blanketed the venue. As powerful as the bellow of a gigantic beast. In that moment, in that location, the emotions of a crowd ten thousand strong brought forth something with a will of its own.

Only Sakuta was left behind.

Still standing, stunned.

Someone jumped, bumping his shoulder, startling him from his reverie.

“So let me just sing one more number.”

Mai snapped her fingers, and the drums kicked in.

The crowd surged forward, scrambling to be in the front row of this performance. Sakuta found himself pushed away from the stage.

Mai looked so small up there. She was forty or fifty yards away.

He watched her distant figure a moment longer, but at the song’s midpoint, he turned and walked away. The stage was brightly lit, but no lights illuminated his retreat. As he moved, Sakuta pulled something from his pocket.

In his hand was the faint heft of a smartphone.

The screen was almost blinding, but his fingers danced across it. Calling a number at the top of his address book—in the As.

He put the phone to his ear, and it rang three times.

“Akagi speaking.”

Ikumi’s voice was on the line.

“It’s Azusagawa.”

“I know. What?”

“Got a favor to ask.”

“You, asking me for help? That’s alarming.”

She was half-joking, half-serious.

“Can you meet up now?”

“That’s sudden.”

“We may not have much time.”

His eyes flicked back to Mai, who was singing onstage.

“.....Got it.”

She must have had questions. This was completely out of the blue. But Ikumi didn’t say another word. Taking into account the urgency of his phrasing.

“Where should I go?”

“I’m at the Red Brick Warehouse, so...Yokohama Station?”

“Okay. See you there.”

He hit the red button, ending the call.

His somber expression was reflected in the darkened screen. Looking at it, Sakuta whispered—to no one in particular: “The rest is up to you.”

Only then did Sakuta realize he was dreaming.

When his eyes opened, Mai’s grumpy face was looking down at him.

“Good morning, Mai.”

He attempted to greet his girlfriend but found it oddly hard to speak. Perhaps not that odd—Mai’s fingers were pulling hard on his cheek.

“Was I talking in my sleep?” he asked, guessing at the cause of her mood.

“What were you and Akagi up to?”

Obviously, he’d hit the nail on the head. He must have said her name.

“I had a smartphone, and I was calling her.”

It had been a very weird dream.

“You, with a phone?”

She looked incredulous.

“Exactly.”

“*Your* phone?”

“It came out of my pocket, so I’m assuming it was.”

“Huh. What an odd dream.”

Mai let go of his cheek. She looked puzzled. She clearly found the idea of him owning a phone every bit as uncanny as he did. The entire time they’d known each other, he’d never had one.

He sat up and leaned against the back of the couch. He looked around. It was an unfamiliar room, with an unfamiliar scent. It was apparent that no one lived here—it was too clean. This was a hot springs inn in Hakone. That’s why they were both in *yukata*.

“It was a very odd dream,” Sakuta elaborated. “There was a stage set up by the Red Brick Warehouse for a music festival. You were singing a Touko Kirishima number...and when the song ended, you told the crowd you were Touko Kirishima.”

“Even for a dream, that’s ridiculous.”

Mai laughed it off.

“...” But Sakuta wasn’t laughing.

Picking up on that, Mai looked him over.

“...Sakuta, you’re thinking this is one of those prophetic dreams?”

“Can’t say it wasn’t. It felt a bit too real.”

He could still feel the phone in his hand. His palm remembered the weight of it. Mai’s voice still echoed in his ears. In his mind.

“But I’ve got no plans to appear at any music festivals. It’s not my field.”

“I know.”

Mai Sakurajima was a movie and TV star. She did commercials, and she modeled. Her roles might require her to sing sometimes, but she did not

perform regularly.

“Even if an offer like that comes along, and you feel compelled to buy a phone...there’s no way I’d claim to be Touko Kirishima.”

“Because you aren’t Touko Kirishima.”

Mai was right. The festival offer itself wasn’t out of the question. And he might buy a phone one day. Those two points were well within the realm of possibility.

But like he’d just said, Mai wasn’t Touko Kirishima. That part of the dream made no sense at all.

“Guess I’m overthinking it.”

“There’s been a lot of weirdness lately.”

She could say that again. He was pretty sure they hadn’t seen the last of it, either.

“What about you, Mai? Any weird dreams?”

“None. Slept like a baby.”

“We’re on an overnight date, so I’m not sure I approve.”

“We’ve come all the way to Hakone. I want to relax. Perhaps you’d better let these hot springs heal you a little longer.”

Mai had a point there. This was a chance to unwind.

“Then I’ll go take a dip in the main bath.”

“Take a long walk around the inn, too. Stay away at least an hour.”

“Why?”

“I want to use this bath, too.”

Mai glanced through the glass door to the outdoor bath attached to their room.

“I’d love to join you.”

“Just go!”

Mai pointed at the front door.

Then—

“Oh, good morning.” Ryouko Hanawa, Mai’s manager, came down the stairs.

“Good morning, Ryouko.”

“Good morning, Ms. Hanawa.”

“Good morning to you both.”

A whole lot of greetings.

“Oh, Mai,” Ryouko said, as if she’d just remembered.

“Yes?” Mai responded, pushing Sakuta toward the door.

“I forgot to tell you yesterday, but we received an unusual offer.”

Ryouko glanced at Sakuta. This was work, and she wasn’t sure if she should talk about it in front of him.

“So not a movie or a TV show?” Mai asked.

“It’s music related,” Ryouko said, avoiding specifics.

But that was all they needed to hear. Sakuta glanced Mai’s way and found her looking at him.

“An appearance at a music festival?” Mai asked.

“Huh?” Ryouko blinked. “How’d you know?”

Mai and Sakuta exchanged glances again and smiled evasively.

2

Sakuta enjoyed an early soak in the main baths—he had them all to himself—and after a delightful breakfast in a private booth in the dining area, they relaxed in their room until checkout time.

They reached the parking lot at eleven.

Since Ryouko had arrived in a different vehicle, they split up there. She said she was going to tour the local bakeries before heading home—that was her thing now.

As she climbed into the driver's seat, she cautioned, "Don't let them take too many pictures."

"So we're allowed *some*?" Sakuta asked as she pulled away.

"I imagine so," Mai said, grinning back.

With that in mind, they climbed into her car.

They drove farther into the mountains, to Gora, the last stop on the Hakone Tozan Railway. From that point on, the rails were replaced with cable cars and ropeways.

There were a lot of couples in their twenties and thirties around the Gora Station shops. Chatting happily, buying gifts, and eating *dango*.

"Ryouko says that music festival is on April first."

"That's a ways off."

Today was December 25, Christmas, a beautiful day for a date. They had over three months until that festival.

"The offer came from the band that appeared in my last film. They wanted me to be a secret guest vocalist."

"You really nailed the hell out of their song."

"And people are still talking about it, hence the offer. It's a nice treat for the fans, so Ryouko and the agency are on board."

Doing a live re-creation of a scene from a movie would be a lot of fun for anyone who got the reference.

"So what are your thoughts, Mai?"

"Meaning?"

"Are you gonna take the offer?"

"I am. They did a lot for me, and it's nice to return the favor."

"Then we're one step closer to that dream becoming reality."

On April 1, Mai would be on that stage.

"Now I just have to sing a Touko Kirishima song and then reveal I am her."

“Suppose I’d better buy a cell phone.”

“That would do the trick.”

Neither had any such plans, so they laughed.

“Still, if the future really does turn out like your dream—that’s a relief, isn’t it?”

Mai spotted a sign for the Hakone Gardens and turned on her blinker, then changed lanes.

“What do you mean?”

“At the very least, I’m safe until then.”

“I suppose you’ve got a point.”

———*Find Touko Kirishima.*

———*Mai’s in danger.*

He’d yet to figure out what that message meant.

The car stopped in a parking lot between Gora and Sengokuhara. Mai had driven them to a garden that had been built into the natural landscape and was maintained by a foreign flower artist.

“With that in mind, only one thing to do,” Mai said, getting out and walking away.

“Yep. Enjoy our date!”

Their hands clasped together.

The walk through the winter flower garden was a pleasant one. Every now and then, they’d pass someone else, but mostly they heard only their own breath, their own footsteps. From time to time, they could hear a woodpecker in the distance.

“Where could it be?”

“Good question.”

They looked for it but never saw the bird itself. Just the *tap, tap, tap, tap* from somewhere far away.

They gave up their search and took a rest in the garden café. The staff told them the woodpecker was claiming its territory.

Just after one, they drove back to Gora Station and ate a late lunch nearby. They had a popular local specialty—firm tofu breaded and sliced to look like pork *katsu* and stewed in an earthen pot.

After blowing on the hot cutlets for a while, they wound back down the mountain roads to Hakone Yumoto, the last stop on the Romancecar line. They went shopping for souvenirs near the station.

Sakuta bought some *yosegi-zaiku* coasters and *yumochi*—thin slivers of red bean jelly in marshmallow-soft mochi. He and Mai had eaten some in the attached café, and he thought Kaede would like it, so he bought a box to take home.

They left Hakone Yumoto just after three. The traffic forecast had predicted jams in the evening, so they left before things got bad.

They made a stop in Odawara to order *kamaboko* for New Year's and were back home in Fujisawa before five.

"I'll be over just after six."

"Looking forward to it."

After agreeing to eat dinner together, they split up outside their respective buildings.

He made sure there was nothing in the mailbox, then boarded the elevator. He'd only been away for the night, but it sure felt like a homecoming.

That feeling only got stronger as he left the elevator and headed for his apartment door.

He unlocked it and stepped in.

As he did, he heard voices inside, likely from the TV. Kaede had spent the night with their parents in Yokohama, but the lights were on, and he could hear movement.

As Sakuta took off his shoes, Kaede came out, carrying their cat, Nasuno.

“You’re late!” she said.

Nasuno meowed. Sakuta took that for a welcome.

“I was on a date, so actually, I’m home early.”

Once his shoes were off, he stepped up into the room.

“But why are you here, Kaede? I thought you were staying with Mom and Dad.”

“I felt bad leaving Nasuno all alone, and I’ve got a shift at six. And I need to talk to you.”

Her voice grew smaller and smaller as he headed to the living room. Not because he was leaving her behind—she was just getting quiet. He could hear her footsteps right behind him.

“About what?” he asked, putting the souvenir bag on the dining room table.

“.....”

Kaede didn’t answer right away.

Sakuta turned toward her, and she avoided his gaze as she put Nasuno down.

The TV switched from commercials to the news.

“Continuing our discussion of the connectivity issues affecting all social media: Since early this morning, users on multiple services have reported difficulties accessing sites.”

The screen showed logos for text-and photo-based services—quite a few of them.

“About this,” Kaede said, pointing at the screen.

Sakuta had no clue what she meant.

“This?” he asked, turning his attention to the TV. The male announcer was starting to expand on the details.

“Sources say the issues may have been caused by a flood of users attempting to post under this #dreaming. So many users that the technical problems continue even hours later.”

Reading from the teleprompter, the man proceeded to explain the hashtag itself. Beginning with “Many of you have heard of it already...”

“Hashtag dreaming again...”

Sakuta had heard about this a lot lately and struggled with his own seemingly prophetic dreams it was related to. Directly or indirectly.

And it was not a good sign if the trend had grown visible enough to hit the news. Even if they were focused solely on the connectivity issues it caused.

“Kaede, can I borrow your laptop?”

“Oh, sure.”

He opened it and tried to load a short-post service. It took quite a while. He waited patiently, and eventually, the site loaded. Like the news said, the issues clearly had not been resolved yet.

He did a search for #dreaming.

Once again, it took nearly a full minute, but at least results showed up.

A whole list of dreams.

——I dreamed I broke up with my boyfriend. The reasons were so on point. That’s who he is! I had to laugh. #dreaming

——Please, no. I dreamed I got into college—argh! It was just a dream! I moved to Tokyo, started a new life, it was great—then I woke up! #dreaming

——Nighttime cherry blossom viewing. A college friend got drunk and puked everywhere. I’m not letting that dude touch booze again. #dreaming

——Dreamed my girlfriend dumped me. It sucked. She said a lot of things, but it boiled down to how I hold chopsticks. Gotta fix that quick. #dreaming

Every one described a brief moment of time, but with great specificity. Like they’d just happened yesterday. That felt a lot like the dream he’d had.

And the list of posts went on forever. More were added every second. Not a couple hundred or a couple thousand, but verging on six digits. That’s how many people had dreamed the night before and were inspired to post about it.

Assuming all these dreams really showed the future, what did that mean?

How would this affect what lay ahead?

The guy dumped for holding his chopsticks wrong might escape that fate by holding them properly. He might get dumped for something else. There was no telling until the moment arrived.

“.....”

Feeling eyes on him, he looked up. Kaede seemed like she had more to say.

“So what did you dream about?” he asked.

“Huh?”

She blinked at him.

“You wanted to talk about that, right? They say these dreams come true.”

“Yeah, but...”

She pursed her lips, appearing disgruntled. She was obviously of two minds. He could see her waffling.

“Is it embarrassing to talk about?” he asked, reaching for the souvenir.

“Not embarrassing, just...”

“Just?”

“.....I dreamed the other me came back.”

Sakuta’s hand stopped, hovering over the box.

He looked up and met her eyes, and she averted them, petting the cat.

Still crouching, she said, “She and Nasuno were waiting for you to get home.”

“.....”

Saying nothing, Sakuta picked up the box of mochi and opened it. He took out a piece—it felt ready to fall apart in his hands—and shoved it past his lips. It melted in his mouth before he could even chew.

Figuring he should make something to drink, he got the tanuki and panda mugs from the kitchen. He filled the electric kettle and hit the On switch.

“Is something bothering you? Anything that might retrigger the dissociative

disorder?”

He put instant coffee flakes in the tanuki cup and cocoa powder in the panda cup.

“I’m not you, Sakuta. I have problems.”

“Like?”

The water in the kettle was starting to bubble. Also, Sakuta had plenty of problems.

“My future,” Kaede admitted, clearly loath to do so.

“Well, that’s a healthy concern. Classic ‘winter of your second year of high school’ troubles.”

The water was boiling, so he poured some into each mug. The bitter scent of coffee and the sweet fragrance of cocoa mingled in the air.

“You didn’t worry about it at all.”

“I did! About what excuse to give Mai if I flunked the exams.”

He handed the panda mug to Kaede.

“But you passed.”

“I couldn’t think of an excuse she’d buy. Had to study my ass off.”

“.....”

Kaede took a long sip of cocoa.

“If you had failed, Sakuta—what do you think you’d have said?”

“Well, Mai’s the one who helped me study.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“So I’d probably have gone with ‘You didn’t teach me right.’”

“.....”

Kaede froze, mouth hanging open. Flabbergasted.

“Naturally, I’d make it sound like a joke!”

“Most people wouldn’t. Couldn’t!”

“Well, I didn’t.”

Kaede let out a long sigh, but she no longer looked nearly as downcast. He could see a smile playing near the corners of her mouth.

“Then if I fail my exams, it’s your fault,” she said.

“How is that?”

“I’m gonna go to college.”

“I thought you were struggling with your future plans.”

“And I just made up my mind. I’m still not great with crowds, but...yesterday, Komi said her top pick is the same school you go to.”

By *Komi*, Kaede meant her oldest friend, Kotomi Kano.

“I thought it would be nice if I could go there with her. Is that allowed?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I mean, it’s kind of a flimsy motivation.”

“My motivation was one hundred percent going to college with Mai.”

“You’re just doing what she tells you to do.”

“Is that what it looks like?”

It was true, but Kaede made him sound totally whipped.

“Kaede, in your case, going to college is also about your desire to get out more, to go farther away...right?”

“Yeah, but...it sounds cringe when you spell it out like that.”

“You should do what you want to do.”

“Mm. Thanks.”

“How are you on time? Your shift’s at six?”

He glanced at the clock; it was 5:40.

“Ack! Sakuta, say that sooner!”

Kaede hustled off to her room and emerged a moment later in the same clothes with a coat over them. She went straight to the front door.

“I’m outta here!” she yelled.

“Kay. Take care.”

“Lock the door for me!”

“Sure.”

He got up and went to the door, but Kaede was already gone. The door slammed shut, so he turned the latch and went back to the living room.

“She dreamed about the other Kaede, huh?”

The murmur escaped his lips.

If that dream was real, he could hardly just stand by. When she’d overcome her disorder and gone back to the original Kaede, the doctors had warned him there was every chance of a relapse. That’s how dissociative disorder worked.

But he’d consciously avoided tying that idea to the other Kaede. Even if his sister’s symptoms flared up again, it might not lead to the same outcome—so he’d avoided thinking about it.

Especially after Kaede got through high school admissions.

Now she was successfully taking online classes and working a part-time job.

Kaede was doing well, so well he didn’t need to worry about a relapse. She was leading a normal life.

“Guess we’ll just have to keep an eye on her,” he said, looking at Nasuno, who offered an encouraging meow.

Intending to rest a moment, he reached for his mug. The coffee was getting lukewarm, but he took a sip...and his eyes lit upon the phone.

“Oh, right.”

That reminded him of a question he had to ask.

He picked up the receiver and dug an eleven-digit number out of his memory. The one he’d dialed in his dream—Ikumi Akagi’s phone number.

Holding the phone to his ear, he could hear it ringing. The call had gone through. The number was in service.

It rang five times to no avail. No one answered.

He was sent to voice mail.

So he left a message.

“Is this Ikumi Akagi’s number? I’m Sakuta Azusagawa. If I’m right, I’d appreciate a call back. Thanks.”

With that, he hung up. If that actually was Ikumi’s number, he figured she’d call back quickly. She was diligent like that and would act on the message the moment she heard it.

That assessment of her proved accurate, and the phone rang less than a minute later.

The display showed the number he’d just dialed.

“Hello?”

Not sure it was actually Ikumi, he answered like a stranger was calling.

“This is Akagi,” she said, just as formally.

But the way she took this in stride was very Ikumi.

“Oh, it’s me. Azusagawa,” he said, switching to his normal tone.

“Mm-hmm,” she said, likely nodding.

“Sorry to spring this on you today.”

It was December 25. Christmas.

“It’s fine. We were just cleaning up after a Christmas party.”

“For the educational support volunteer thing?”

“Yeah. They all had a good time.”

“Then well worth doing.”

“You’ve got that lovely girlfriend, so should you really be calling me?”

“We already went on our date. And we’re eating dinner together later.”

“So? Who told you my number?”

Not interested in his bragging, Ikumi got to the point.

“Nobody.”

“Then how...?”

“I dreamed about it. Dreamed I was calling you.”

“And you remembered the number and decided to try it?”

“You sure saved me from spelling it all out.”

“That’s...really unsettling.”

“By which you mean the implications?”

“That’s half of it.”

“And the other half is my decision to call?”

“.....”

She answered with silence. Silence signaled agreement. He’d at least have liked her to say so out loud.

“You think the dream you had is part of what’s on the news?”

“Likely, yeah.”

“And since my number was real, it might actually show the future.”

This was an absurd conversation on the face of it, but Ikumi seemed unperturbed. That was so very like her, Sakuta thought. Ikumi had been through her own share of the weirdness Adolescence Syndrome brought, and that had made her flexible enough to roll with things like this.

“And I called you to confirm that, Akagi. I know it’s out of the blue.”

“No problem. I had something to share with you myself.”

“You had a dream, too?”

“I imagine it was about the same day and time. I dreamed you called me.”

“.....Oh.”

This was surprising, but he wasn’t sure what part of it he should be surprised by, which ironically helped him accept it.

“What did we talk about?”

“You rang me up out of nowhere and wanted to meet at Yokohama Station right away. Sounded like you needed my help with something serious. And it was from a cell phone number. After sunset.”

“That certainly matches my dream.”

The differences were down to perspective. Caller versus callee, Sakuta’s POV versus Akagi’s. Everything else lined up.

Was that coincidence? Possibly. But given what he’d seen on the news, it was hard to just dismiss it like that.

“Azusagawa...”

Ikumi’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Mm?”

“I think I’ve figured something out.”

“About the dreams?”

“About what they really are.”

“Yeah...?!”

His voice got a bit loud and Nasuno jumped.

“These dreams are actually...”

Staring at the buttons on the phone, Sakuta listened closely to what Ikumi said next. He wasn’t conscious of what he was looking at—his entire focus was on his ears alone, on Ikumi’s words.

What she said was something only Ikumi could have worked out. It rattled him. But more than that—it made *sense*. Her explanation lined up perfectly with what he knew about the dreams.

“Coming from you, Akagi, I’m inclined to believe it.”

3

With Christmas over, Santas, reindeer, and decorated trees vanished from the streets, replaced with end-of-year jitters that swept in on a cold front.

Everyone nervously began to wrap up unfinished business before the new year came. Hunched up against the cold, people walked briskly. There was a vague sense of panic in the air, like something was hot on their heels.

It was like this every year.

The only real difference this time was how much people were talking about the dreaming hashtag.

News reports on the connectivity issues had brought it into the limelight. Coverage shifted to the variety shows, with more stories rolling out on a daily basis.

Serious commentators discussed some high school girls' claims that their dreams had come true and made earnest inquiries into the seemingly occult.

Rational minds would call this silly, but whether they had nothing better to discuss or they simply found it earned them unexpected ratings, the shows were spending more and more time on the subject.

The hashtag was becoming more prominent around Sakuta as well. Not a day went by without him hearing someone talking about it.

Wednesday, December 28.

It was the last cram school lesson of the year, and the hashtag came up there, too.

No sooner had Sakuta stepped in than a voice called, "You're late, Sensei!"

One of his students was lurking in the free area, waiting to ambush him—Kento Yamada, a first-year from his alma mater, Minegahara High.

"You're never this early, Yamada."

Kento usually slipped in just before classes started and left the moment they ended. He hated studying far too much to take advantage of the self-study booths. Still, he'd never been late, so he was probably more serious about cram school than he seemed.

"Sakuta-sensei, over here."

He waved Sakuta over to the far wall. Sakuta obligingly went along with it.

“Can I skip today’s lesson?” Kento asked.

“Can I get a reason?”

It was an obvious question to ask. Kento immediately looked around to make sure no one could hear, then peered over the wall into the faculty area.

Once he was sure they were alone, he said, “Lend me your ear.”

“I’d rather not hunker down with another dude,” Sakuta said, but that wasn’t getting them anywhere, so he did as he was told.

“I had a dream Christmas Eve.”

“What about?”

“Well...I was on a date at Enoshima. With Yoshiwa.”

“That’s a nice dream.”

“They had raw whitebait, so it must have been open season again—late March, early April? We were trading bites of soft serve, holding hands...”

His voice had been very quiet to begin with, but embarrassment was stifling it even more. Eventually, his gaze dropped so low he became entirely inaudible.

But that had been enough for Sakuta to get the drift.

“In other words, seeing her now would be awkward, so you wanna bail on class.”

“Yes!”

“Avoiding her will make it worse.”

This was Sakuta’s honest opinion.

“Stop being right.”

“Everyone knows this much.”

“Still, please!”

Kento slapped his hands together, praying.

“Yamada, weren’t you *just* making eyes at Himeji?”

“Augh! Sensei, don’t say that out loud!”

“You’re louder than I am.”

Kento scanned their surroundings again, but there was no one else in the free-study area. There were people on the faculty side, but not close enough to overhear.

“Himeji, uh...drew lines in the sand.”

He looked a bit hurt but didn’t mince words.

“What went down?”

“I ran into her at Fujisawa Station, in the evening on Christmas Eve.”

Sara had been with Sakuta and Mai that day. They’d dropped her off at the station afterward, which must have been when she met Kento. Previously, Juri had reported a dream in which Sara rejected Kento on Christmas Eve...which may well have been this incident.

“She started right off with ‘Sorry if I gave you the wrong signals.’ Told me she was in love with someone else.”

“And what’d you do?”

“I said ‘Merry Christmas’ and got a laugh out of her.”

He might not have been aware of it, but that had likely been the best possible response from Sara’s perspective. She’d done her best to settle her mess, and arguably, it had gone very well.

“And then that very night you have a dream about Yoshiwa. You don’t waste time.”

“I just went to bed, and the dream came to me. Not my fault!”

“Still, nothing wrong with dreams. They’re just dreams. I thought you didn’t buy into this stuff about the hashtag?”

“I don’t! But what if she had the same dream?! Stuff like that happened to all kinds of people online!”

Kento was being unusually astute today. Sakuta’s and Ikumi’s dreams had lined up. She’d been in his dream, and he’d been in hers.

By the same logic, if Kento had dreamed about Juri, she might well have

dreamed about their Enoshima date, too. And that *would* be awkward.

“In that case, just act normal. Like you didn’t have a dream.”

“Sensei, do you think I’m capable of that?”

“I said it knowing you can’t.”

“Mean!”

“Assuming she did have the same dream as you...Yoshiwa’s way better at hiding stuff, so she’ll probably manage what you can’t. That might help you settle down.”

“Okay, yeah...”

Kento had almost bought into that idea when the door opened and someone else came in. The very girl they’d been talking about, Juri Yoshiwa, was back from her beach volleyball tournament in Okinawa and sporting a new tan.

She saw Sakuta and Kento talking, and she flinched visibly. Her eyes wandered, and she swiftly turned her back on them. On Kento. Then she moved quickly toward their classroom. Clearly fleeing the scene.

“Well, Yoshiwa definitely had the same dream,” Sakuta said.

Kento had turned bright red.

Naturally, that day’s lesson was singularly unproductive. Kento and Juri were both exceedingly conscious of the other’s every move, and that vibe dominated the entire eighty minutes.

The moment it was over, both dashed off, like it was a competition to see who could leave faster.

“Have a happy...and they’re gone.”

Next up, Sakuta had a meeting with Toranosuke. Sakuta was taking over for Rio as his teacher. This was less of a formal meeting and more of a quick chat while standing in the free study space.

“Kasai, you sure you want me teaching you?”

“Absolutely.”

Toranosuke bowed his head politely, shrinking his big body down. Respecting superiors was a hallmark of sports club culture.

“Don’t blame me if you don’t get into Futaba’s college.”

“On Christmas Eve, I dreamed my mock exam scores were awful.”

“Quantum physics tells us the future is not set in stone, so let’s do our best to avoid that.”

Sakuta would just have to make sure the kid passed. At the very least, make sure the subject he taught wasn’t what held Toranosuke back.

They briefly discussed the lesson dates for the new year, and the meeting adjourned. But on the way out, Toranosuke stopped him.

“Oh, right—Azusagawa-sensei.”

“Mm?”

“Thanks for helping Sara.”

“Did Himeji tell you something?”

“I saw her outside my house after practice yesterday. And...we talked.”

Sara had probably not mentioned Adolescence Syndrome or Touko Kirishima. Given Toranosuke’s phrasing, it had likely been a pretty wide-ranging conversation. They’d grown up together, so they’d probably gone on a few trips down memory lane. And it seemed to have been enough to ease his fears about her.

“Did she mention Futaba?”

“Uh, yeah. Said she’s gonna be taking Futaba-sensei’s lessons for a while.”

Sakuta had discussed things with Sara that same day, and they’d agreed she’d drop his class and switch to Rio’s instead. But that wasn’t what Sakuta had been asking about here.

“Not that. I meant...your romantic troubles.”

“Oh, uh, well...she did say something about not letting myself get rejected by the girl I rejected her for.”

“Typical Himeji.”

“You can say that again,” Toranosuke agreed, wincing.

That was the end of Sakuta’s cram school shift, so he saw the boy out, then left himself. It was long since dark; thin clouds drifted across the night sky. Stars peeped out among the gaps every now and then.

“Still, too many people are talking about their dreams.”

It was enough to make him grumble out loud.

There wasn’t much time left in the year. Maybe once the new one arrived, everyone would have forgotten about the dreaming hashtag.

Part of him hoped they would, and part of him knew they wouldn’t.

4

January 3, a whole new year.

Shortly after noon, Sakuta took Mai to his parents’ place in Yokohama.

The New Year’s programming on TV was starting to calm down a bit now, and they all watched that while eating his mother’s *zoni*—for the first time since the previous year. Kaede had stayed over the night before, so she was eating with them.

The *zoni* soup contained mochi, chicken, Chinese cabbage, carrots, and sliced red-and-white *kamaboko*. They’d placed an order for this last ingredient in Odawara on their way back from Hakone and arranged for it to be delivered on New Year’s.

“Mai, thanks for the *kamaboko*,” his mother said as Sakuta savored a bite of it.

“We sent that in my name!” he said.

“But we all know it was Mai’s idea.”

Mai said nothing, but her smile said everything.

“You can’t put anything past my mom.”

“This boy, I swear.”

Mai watched them bicker, grinning happily.

After lunch, Sakuta and his father did the dishes. Kaede, their mother, and Mai sat on the couch, watching the New Year's programming.

Then the MC said, "But first, an update from our news division," and the screen cut to an elderly anchor.

He bowed once and began delivering the news, his voice calm.

"Early this morning, in a residential area near Kanagawa Prefecture, Yokohama, a man was arrested for vandalizing license plates. The police responded to complaints from area citizens and caught him in the act. He appears to have used pliers to bend over a dozen plates. Police comments suggest the man claimed to have dreamed that he would remain unemployed after graduation in April and was lashing out. On a social media account believed to belong to the accused, there was a #dreaming post dated December twenty-fifth of last year. The police investigation will focus on how that led to this incident. That's all from the news desk."

He bowed again, and the brief update ended.

The screen went back to the New Year's programming, and cheery voices echoed from the speakers.

"Well, that was weird," their mother said.

"Mm-hmm." Mai nodded. She didn't know how else to answer.

It was a very weird story.

No ordinary person would get so angry about a dream that they'd take it out on other people's cars. But this outlandish incident had made it into an ordinary news report.

Everything about that felt wrong.

But this was a real-world case. Not an obscure article found online, but something the TV news was covering, something the police were investigating and giving interviews to reporters on.

The social media outage had made the dreaming hashtag public knowledge, and Sakuta's hopes had been dashed—even now, the world was still talking

about it. Rather than fade out, #dreaming was only making itself better known.

“What did you dream about, Mai?” Kaede asked absentmindedly. Just assuming she’d had a dream. Sakuta didn’t even think that was strange.

“I didn’t have one,” Mai said. A totally normal response. She’d said the same thing the morning after. Nothing weird about it.

But for some reason, it bothered him now.

“Oh yeah?” Kaede said, blinking. Proof that in her mind, everyone had had a dream.

Most young people had. Sakuta, Kaede, Kento, Juri, Toranosuke—all of them. Ikumi’s had even overlapped with Sakuta’s.

Mai was the only person Sakuta knew who hadn’t. This was likely true for Kaede as well. That was why she’d been taken aback by Mai’s answer.

Was this just coincidence?

“Live from Kanagawa Prefecture’s own Enoshima!”

The screen cut to a female announcer in a brightly colored long-sleeved kimono.

Sakuta’s mother seemed to be struck with an idea, and she turned to Mai.

“Mai, yours is coming up this year, yes? Your coming-of-age... Oh, we don’t call it that anymore. The gathering of twenty-year-olds, was it?”

“Oh, yes, that’s next week.”

“Do you have a kimono?”

“My mother showed up yesterday and dropped one off.”

She took out her phone and showed Kaede and Sakuta’s mother a picture of it.

“Wow, that’s lovely! Perfect for you, Mai.” Kaede sounded impressed.

“That is nice! I’m looking forward to you turning twenty, Kaede.”

“That’s a long way off.”

“Only three years.”

“That’s a long time.”

Sakuta kept one ear on their delightful conversation, but that nagging doubt was still with him.

Why hadn’t Mai dreamed?

As four o’clock rolled around, it began to get dark out, and Sakuta rose to his feet.

“Time we got going,” he said.

Mai stood up as well, reaching for her coat and purse.

“You could stay for dinner.”

“I’ve got work. We’ll come over next time we’re free.”

“Geez, didn’t you just have a shift yesterday? Take a holiday!”

“I’ve got shifts tomorrow and the day after, too.”

With that, he stepped out the door. Glancing up, Sakuta noticed that half the sky was dark. Orange to the west, shifting to a pale blue, then navy, then a night sky.

“Later!”

“Thanks for having us.”

His parents walked them down to ground level. Mai and Sakuta waved to Kaede, then headed to the lot where Mai’s car was parked.

She paid the three-hour lot fee and drove them away.

The navigator screen showed the roads back to Fujisawa.

“Mai, can I borrow your phone?” he asked when they stopped at a red light.

“Go ahead.”

Since she had her hands on the wheel, he grabbed her purse from the back seat and pulled out her phone. The phone case had bunny ears on it.

“It’s locked.”

“Point the screen at me.”

It registered her face and unlocked itself. A very diligent phone.

The light turned green, and as the car pulled out, Sakuta dialed a number.

It rang once and the call was answered.

“What’s up, Sis? What’s the news?” Nodoka seemed to be in very high spirits.

“It’s me,” Sakuta said.

“Oh. Why?”

His voice was enough to send her spirits plummeting. Possibly into the abyss below.

“You got a minute?”

“I’m at a dance lesson, but we’re on break. That’s why I picked up.”

She sounded disgruntled, obviously urging him to get to the point.

“It’s only the third, and you’re already back at work?”

“We’ve got a gig coming. So? What’s this about?”

“Did you have a dream on Christmas Eve?”

With her hands on the wheel, Mai glanced his way. Her focus was soon back on the road, but she was clearly listening.

“Huh? Where’s that coming from?”

“Just answer the question.”

“I did. We were doing a show at a hall in Yokohama. Uzuki...all of us had the same dream, same venue, same show.”

“That’s nuts.”

“We already have a gig booked there for April first, so none of us were all that surprised.”

“I feel like you should be.”

He figured Uzuki had just gone, “Like, wow! Destiny is on our side!” and ended the discussion.

“So, Sakuta? Why are you asking?”

“Just curious if you’d had one.”

So he was done here. It was a yes-or-no question. Nodoka, Uzuki, and the rest of Sweet Bullet had all had dreams. That was everything he needed to know.

“Sorry to interrupt your break. Bye.”

“Hey, don’t—”

Since he’d got what he wanted, he went ahead and hung up. Nodoka was still talking, so he thought maybe she’d call back. He waited a few seconds, but the phone didn’t ring. Maybe her break was wrapping up. Maybe she’d decided it wasn’t important. Sakuta was fine with it either way.

“Thanks for the phone, Mai.”

He put it back in her purse.

She’d definitely been waiting for that.

“Sakuta, is my lack of a dream bothering you?”

“You’re the only person I know who didn’t have one.”

“I’m more concerned about the weird one you did.”

“Can’t argue there.”

Mai’s point was valid. The people who’d had weird dreams should be the source of concern. Kaede, Ikumi, Nodoka, Uzuki, Kento, and Juri.

“And your parents didn’t dream, either.”

They’d said as much earlier. Neither had ever had a dream that felt especially real.

“But they’re grown-ups. Not exactly in the throes of adolescence.”

If these dreams were Adolescence Syndrome, then they were only affecting people in that age bracket. Where the upper limit on that lay was a mystery, though.

“Then I guess I’m no longer an adolescent,” Mai murmured, like it was simply a fact.

That carried more weight than her words alone.

“You’re very mature,” he said.

“High time you grew up, Sakuta.”

She smirked, teasing him.

“That sure would spare me all this worrying about Adolescence Syndrome.”

That was definitely the ideal solution. The problem lay in the definition of *grown-up*. Since Adolescence Syndrome derived from the mental instability of youth, it was likely not solved purely by the accumulation of time. Maturing within was the true definition of growing up. And by that standard, Mai was certainly qualified.

“.....Which means you’re right.”

“Hmm?”

“The people who *did* dream are the weird ones.”

“And you’re going around seeing this Santa Claus that I can’t.”

“That makes me sound pretty far gone.”

Objectively speaking, he truly was.

“Be grateful your wonderful girlfriend puts up with your mess.”

“My current goal is to hit up driving school after final exams so I can take a turn at the wheel.”

He hadn’t mentioned this before.

“So that’s why you’re taking all these holiday shifts!” Mai said, grinning.

5

Two days later, January 5. Sakuta’s restaurant shift started at five. It was his fourth straight day working there; all his earnings were meant to pay for driving school.

Hunched over against the winter cold, he stepped through the front doors.

“Welcome!”

At the chime, a bright, cheery voice called out. A small-statured waitress came

out to meet him. She was a high school girl he'd never seen here before, but one he knew only too well.

"I'm not a customer, so you'll wanna go with 'Good morning.'"

He was the veteran here, and Sara Himeji had an IN TRAINING badge on.

"You oughtta act surprised at least!" Sara protested, sulking. "'Why are you here?!' Or 'When did this happen?!' You know, like a normal person."

"You took the job, right? It's not a mystery."

"You're so boring!"

She seemed frustrated by his refusal to give her the reaction she'd wanted. Letting her vent in one ear, he headed to the back room. "Good morning," he said, offering the standard start-of-shift greeting—one used despite the hour. He passed the kitchen entrance on his way to the break room.

He could hear Sara's footsteps following him.

"Sensei, isn't this uniform cute?"

"You make it look good," he said, not even glancing back.

"Really? Great!"

She still clapped her hands with glee.

He stepped behind the lockers to change into his server uniform. First he took off both top and bottom, then he was down to his underwear.

"Oh yeah, Himeji...", he called over the lockers. He'd gotten his shirt on and was doing up the buttons, but he could still hear her out there.

"What?"

"Did you dream on Christmas Eve?"

"I did!"

"What about?"

"Was with a friend on Enoshima."

"Enoshima, huh?"

Same location as Kento's dream, and presumably Juri's.

"You didn't happen to see Yamada there?" he asked, putting one leg in his slacks.

"I totally did. On a date with Yoshiwa. So much for being in love with me! What a bastard."

"You drew a line in the sand, so he moved on."

He tightened his belt and donned his apron, then emerged from the lockers.

"Yamada told you, huh? Same day you rejected me."

This was a little dig at him; she pouted after she said it.

"Huh?"

A new voice, neither Sakuta's nor Sara's.

Tomoe was standing in the door, in uniform.

It was likely she'd entered just in time to hear Sara's last line—hence her shocked gasp.

"What's up, Koga?" he asked, as if nothing had happened.

"Er, um...I was gonna show Himeji how to work the register, but she wasn't on the floor."

She was looking for Sara.

"Then I'll have Sakuta-sensei show me!" Sara said, pointedly moving over to him and clutching his elbow.

Tomoe's eyes snapped to that hand. Reflexively.

"Senpai, what did you do?" she asked, glaring at him.

She was grumpy to the point of being sullen.

"Oh! Tomoe-senpai, are you jealous?" Sara asked, teasing her before Sakuta could answer.

"O-of course not!"

"But you're flummoxed. Did something happen between you two?"

Sara clearly knew it had. Until a few days earlier, she'd been able to read minds. She'd probably learned enough to put the pieces together and know *something* had gone down, if not the specifics of it.

"Nope. C'mon, let's hit the register."

Ending that subject, Tomoe turned to go.

"Oh, gimme one minute," Sara said. "Got something Sakuta-sensei needs to hear."

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and tapped the screen.

"This thing here...were you aware?"



Sara showed him her screen.

A social media service with short posts, filtered by the dreaming hashtag.

——**Mai Sakurajima reveals that she's Touko Kirishima. April 1. Red Brick Warehouse music festival. #dreaming**

——**The band's guest vocalist is Mai Sakurajima, sang a Touko Kirishima number, then announced she's been Touko Kirishima all along! #dreaming**

——**Seems like a lot of people had this dream. Well, so did I. Mai Sakurajima confirms she's Touko Kirishima at a music festival. #dreaming**

——**This settles it. Touko Kirishima and Mai Sakurajima are one and the same. #dreaming**

There were tons of posts just like these.

He scrolled down ten times without finding an end to it.

That made sense.

"There's, like, five thousand of them..." Sara said, looking creeped out by it. She was well aware of how ominous that was.

This was not something to be dismissed, and the look on her face made it clear she was taking it seriously.

"That is definitely too many," Sakuta said, voicing his honest opinion.

The whole time he was working, he couldn't get those five thousand posts out of his head.

Everyone had seen the same concert.

They'd been part of that crowd.

And they'd all seen Mai Sakurajima take that mic and claim she was Touko Kirishima. They'd dreamed it.

The same dream Sakuta himself had experienced. He imagined that the details all lined up—the only difference being where they stood.

Which meant all these posts came from members of that concert audience.

Just as Sakuta's and Ikumi's dreams had overlapped, these five thousand

posters had all dreamed of that same moment in the future.

At that point, it no longer qualified as just “weird.” Sakuta found it downright unnerving.

So anytime he had a moment to spare, his mind went back to those posts. His shift wound on.

And he racked up the hours worked.

At nine, high school staff—Tomoe and Sara—took off, leaving Sakuta, the manager, and one other college part-timer on the floor. It had been Sara’s first day on the job, but she left with a smile and a wave.

“I’m outta here, Sakuta-sensei!”

The hour after that went quick, and Sakuta’s shift ended. There hadn’t been much traffic that night, so around nine thirty, the manager had told him to clock out already.

Not one to argue, he excused himself at ten on the dot and headed to the back room while taking off his apron.

He stepped into the break room, intending to change behind the lockers. He’d assumed he’d find it empty, but there was a high school girl just hanging out. Tomoe, eyes on her phone.

“You still here, Koga?”

“Oh, Senpai.”

“Quit fiddling with your phone and get home.”

“I wanted to ask you something, so I was waiting for you.”

About Sara? He figured that would lead to grumbling. But what Tomoe said next was on a different subject entirely.

“You seemed concerned about the #dreaming posts, so I thought I’d share my dream.”

Tomoe was looking right at him, clearly taking this seriously. The fact that she’d waited a full hour for him got his attention. This seemed like something she couldn’t talk about during work, so she’d kept quiet until now. In which

case, he thought that they should take this outside.

“Lemme change quick, then. This isn’t the best place for it, so I’ll hear you out on the way.”

“Gotcha,” Tomoe said, nodding.

Outside, Sakuta and Tomoe headed toward Fujisawa Station.

“You had a Christmas Eve dream, then, Koga?”

“Seems like everyone did. Nana, my friends in class... Did anyone miss out? It’s feeling like a no.”

It was limited to their generation, but to Sakuta’s knowledge, Mai was the only one who hadn’t had a dream. If that was true for Tomoe’s circles, too, then the exceptions were rare indeed.

They passed the station and headed east. Foot traffic died down, and Sakuta got to the point.

“So did you see Mai’s big announcement?”

“I did not.”

“Then what?”

“My dream started a good deal earlier than April first.”

“How much earlier?”

“February fourth.”

A very specific date. And not one that rang a bell. It was the day after Setsubun...but that was all he could really say.

“What happened?”

“Sakurajima-senpai was working with Fujisawa PD, acting as police chief for a day.”

“She was?”

That was news to him.

“There was an accident during the event. In my dream, the news said she was seriously injured and had not regained consciousness.”

That was also a first.

“You mean it?”

“I wouldn’t make something like this up.”

“I know.”

“The news said some equipment fell on her, and she was rushed to the hospital.”

It was just a dream, but Tomoe’s tone was grim, like she’d witnessed this firsthand. The look on her face was every bit as dire.

Neither the police chief thing nor the equipment collapse had shown up in the dreaming hashtag posts. Everything Mai-related he’d seen was about the music festival on April 1 and her shocking announcement.

Sakuta’s own dream had been about that. Ikumi’s dream had been about the same day, the same time.

“What happened to Mai after she reached the hospital?”

“There was no news about her recovery. At least, not as of April ninth.”

“.....Huh?”

He uttered a very dull-witted noise. What had she just said?

“As of April ninth, there was no further news.”

Sakuta had not misheard her.

“I asked you, but you wouldn’t tell me much.”

Tomoe glared at him, holding him responsible for what he’d done in her dream.

That was hardly the only strange thing here.

What on earth was Tomoe talking about?

The specifics and extent of her dream were far beyond what Sakuta had seen or what any #dreaming post involved. This was a huge departure. And within that dream, she’d made a conscious effort to get in touch with him. As if she’d just been living a normal life...

“Uh, Koga.”

“What?”

“Your dream went on that long?”

He’d experienced something very similar once. With Tomoe. Summer of his second year in high school. Strange memories of looping through the same few days.

“I guess.” She looked away, clearly not wanting to say more.

Which told him all he needed to know.

“You saw everything from Christmas Eve until April ninth?”

“So what if I did?”

She made a face at him, practically admitting it.

This matched Tomoe’s previous Adolescence Syndrome symptoms. The future simulation. The return of Laplace’s demon.

“I didn’t loop through the same time on repeat or anything,” she said evasively.

“So you realized high school graduation was coming up and got nervous about whether you’d make friends in college?”

“Shut up.”

He’d definitely got it in one.

“How you doing?” she asked.

“Mm?”

“Did you make friends?”

A forced change of subject.

“Got one or two I talk to often.”

Takumi was probably safe to call a friend. Takumi would likely throw a fit if he said they weren’t.

There was also Miori, who’d described them as potential friends. That could

mean they still weren't friends. Sakuta himself would be perfectly fine with making that leap, though.

"But it's different from high school."

"Like, how?"

"We just kinda hang out. Without getting to know each other as well as I did Kunimi or Futaba."

In high school, everyone's lives overlapped, and that deepened the connections. Like, without even trying, you wound up with a good idea where people lived. They were that close.

But in college, everyone's active range expanded, and there was little to no overlap. Once you left campus, you had no clue what anyone else was up to. And that distance kept relationships thin.

That was neither good nor bad.

It was just how things worked.

And it let people keep a safer distance and avoid hurting each other.

"Huh, okay."

Tomoe took his word for it but also clearly didn't get it. It didn't feel real to her yet.

"Koga, just don't panic and try to join a group that's not right for you again."

"Well, if I do, I'll come to you to grumble."

"No more than once a week."

"Also, this is me."

They'd hit an intersection, and Tomoe paused in her tracks. She would have to turn left there, and Sakuta would go right.

"Thanks for sharing, Koga. It was a huge help."

He was mildly concerned by the reemergence of the petite devil, but he had learned something vital from it.

"Then treat me to a Mont Blanc that's only good for two hours."

“Is ten good?”

“One’s plenty!”

“No need to hold back.”

“If you wanna thank me, just be normal about it!”

“That’s asking a lot.”

“Suuuure. Later, Senpai.”

Tomoe waved and walked away. He watched her go, and she soon turned back.

“You’re making this weird!”

She pointed down the road, urging him to get moving. Then she ran off, trying to get out of his sight. He soon lost track of her.

“I never get bored watching her,” he muttered, then turned the opposite way down the road.

For a while, his footsteps echoed through the residential streets. His breathing was the only other sound.

All he’d done was show up for work, but he’d ended up hearing a lot of strange stories.

Sara’s news about all the people who’d shared his dream.

And Tomoe’s simulation of the future.

Too much baffling information at once, but one piece of the puzzle had slotted into place.

Mai would be in a coma.

What Tomoe had seen could not line up better with the *Mai’s in danger* warning. And he was glad to know about it in advance. If she was bound to have equipment fall on her, it shouldn’t be that hard to prevent.

Most of this made no sense, but that alone seemed safe.

Not that he didn’t have concerns—he had no idea how this connected to the *other* part of the message: *Find Touko Kirishima*.

And why had he dreamed about Mai calling herself by that name? That still made no sense.

How did the pieces fit together? What parts of it weren't related at all?

Just thinking about it made his head spin.

"I'm so lost."

The words slipped out, but they were a clear reflection of his state of mind.

That evening, Mai called.

As they talked, she mentioned, "Oh, right. On February fourth, I'll be police chief for a day."

Straight from her own lips.

Exactly as Tomoe had promised.

6

Winter vacation ended, and college resumed the next day, January 6.

Sakuta got ready early and left in time for his first-period class. At Fujisawa Station, he boarded the Tokaido Line to Yokohama Station. From there, he switched to the Keikyu Line and disembarked at Kanazawa-hakkei Station. The whole commute from home took about an hour.

The platform was filled with students. All forming lines and shuffling through the gates. Sakuta was merely a part of that crowd.

This was the same thing he saw every morning, reminding him he was back on the college routine.

But something felt slightly off.

Different.

He felt more eyes on him than usual. More than he got by just being Mai Sakurajima's boyfriend.

Puzzling over that, he stepped through the gates and went down the stairs on the west side of the station. Feeling distinctly uncomfortable, he followed the road along the tracks—and heard footsteps running up behind him.

“Azusagawa, cheers to the new year, man.”

Pulling up alongside him was Takumi Fukuyama. Like Sakuta, he was a statistical science major. He wore a black down jacket with an eye-catching orange scarf.

“Happy New Year.”

“Wish ya a good one.”

“Let’s make it a good one.”

Sakuta elected to enunciate.

“You’re so formal.”

“The world’s cutest girlfriend trained me to take salutations seriously.”

“Now I’m jealous.”

Takumi took his joke seriously. Maybe it wasn’t really a joke.

“So, about the world’s cutest Sakurajima—is that shit legit?”

“Which shit?”

Mai was famous—there was always *something* to buzz about.

“Online, they’re saying she’s Touko Kirishima.”

“You can’t believe everything you see in dreams.”

“But word is, this mass precog thing does come true.”

Takumi showed Sakuta his screen. On it was an article from a news site. The headline had the phrase *mass precognition* in it—certainly not a thing you saw every day. According to the article, there had previously been similar phenomena observed overseas. It attempted to offer up a viable-sounding explanation for the Christmas Eve dreams so many young people had experienced. But the more Sakuta read, the less it made sense.

“Did you dream, Fukuyama?”

“I was in Hokkaido.”

“Why Hokkaido?”

“I’m from there,” Takumi said, grinning.

“First I’ve heard of it.”

“I swear I said it when I introduced myself!”

“Is coming here from Hokkaido a big deal?”

He knew someone else from there—Touko Kirishima. He’d seen that info on Nene Iwamizawa’s profile.

“What?” Takumi said, looking baffled. He didn’t know about her.

“I met someone else from there recently.”

“Knowing you, I bet she’s cute.”

Takumi was leaning in, a bit too eager. Sakuta backed away, maintaining distance.

“Not as cute as Mai.”

“Introduce us!”

He’d love to, but it was physically impossible. Only Sakuta could actually see her. But telling Takumi something that out-there would just make him sound crazy—naturally, he wasn’t about to say the truth here. Best to just change the subject.

“Fukuyama, why’d you choose this college?”

If you were just trying to get to the city, there were any number of options. It seemed probable that he had a specific reason for choosing one run by the City of Yokohama.

“Don’t just change the subject! She must be *real* cute.”

Sadly, Takumi was not that easily dissuaded. He was starved for love.

“Fine, if she’s cool with it, I’ll introduce you.”

“Seriously? Now I’m glad I’m your friend.”

Would he be as happy if he knew she was invisible?

Sakuta wondered about that as they passed through the college gates.

It had been a while since he'd been on campus.

The tree-lined row was entirely free of ginkgo leaves.

"Uh, Azusagawa..."

"Mm?"

"Why *did* I pick this school?"

"....."

Assuming Takumi was joking, he glanced at him—and found his brow furrowed.

"Uh, Fukuyama?"

"Mm?"

"Are you all right in the head?"

Why else would he forget something like that?

And with that, they reached the classroom building.

Sakuta felt eyes on him the entire day.

During class, in the halls, as he dug into his curry in the cafeteria...there was nearly always *someone* looking his way. A wordless question, asking him if Mai Sakurajima was actually Touko Kirishima.

Each time, he offered the silent cry "She isn't!" but his wail reached no one.

"That thing you mentioned this morning, Fukuyama? Looks like everyone knows."

"Well, they would."

Takumi shrugged it off, working through his own plate of curry. It was no big deal in his mind—just public knowledge. The idea had become so pervasive it'd be weird not to know.

It felt like what should have been rumor was being taken as fact.

The morning alone had been enough for him to realize how prevalent this topic was and how fast word had spread.

“Good thing Mai’s not here today.”

She was off to Kyoto for the week, filming a TV show.

Even Mai would likely get frustrated by this web of lies.

“Oh, right. Azusagawa.”

“You’ve got curry on your face.”

“My birthday’s the thirtieth. This month.”

Wiping his face, Takumi offered information nobody had asked for.

“Well, congrats.”

“So hook me up with this Hokkaido girl first.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

Sakuta was finally freed from the obnoxious looks during third period, a core curriculum class.

As the professor had warned, they had an exam.

Many standard classes wrapped things up with a report, but this class offered a test filled with essay questions.

The professor allowed notes and reference materials, but not phones. This was a rule that Sakuta had never encountered in high school.

For the first forty minutes, the only sound was mechanical pencils on paper, occasionally punctuated by Takumi making thinking noises.

Otherwise, silence.

A tense sort of silence, and Sakuta assumed that hush would continue until the exam ended—but not today.

There was a loud rattle from the back.

Someone had thrown open the sliding door.

Yet nobody turned around. Thirty students all stayed focused on their essays.

Sakuta himself kept on writing.

He assumed it was just a classmate running late.

Then he heard heels coming down the aisle, as if heading straight for him. They stopped right next to Sakuta. A shadow darkened his page.

“Join me a moment,” the intruder said.

Puzzled, Sakuta looked up.

A college girl stood there.

Touko Kirishima—actual name, Nene Iwamizawa.

“We need to talk,” she said, once she had his attention.

Everyone in class should have heard her speak, but not one student looked up, not even the white-haired professor killing time with a book.

No one reacted.

Not because they were focused on the exam. In the next seat over, Takumi was aimlessly flipping through a reference book, his concentration having long since run out. Quite a few students in front of them had finished up and were just vacantly staring into space. The rules said anyone who’d finished could start filing out after an hour, so they were presumably waiting for that time.

Either way, if someone had suddenly started talking, they’d have looked up. The professor would have done something.

This weird lack of reaction was only possible because they were unable to see Touko. Could not hear her voice.

———*I’m taking an exam.*

Unable to answer aloud, he scribbled this in his notes.

“Then I’ll wait till you’re done.”

Touko sat down sideways on the seat in front of his. Looking right at him. Watching his every move. Glaring pointedly at him.

This made it impossible for him to write.

It’d be best to take care of whatever she’d come for and finish the test afterward.

“Excuse me! My stomach hurts. I gotta run to the bathroom,” he announced,

standing up.

He bent over a bit, one hand rubbing his belly. A terrible performance—Mai would definitely have laughed at him.

But the professor just said, “Go ahead,” and pointed at the door.

So he headed for the exit.

Touko got up, looking pleased with herself. The chair squeaked, but nobody noticed. Then Touko saw that Takumi’s scarf had fallen to the floor. She bent down and picked it up, dusted it off, then put it back on his desk.

“.....”

Takumi didn’t react, and she gave him a long look. Waiting for him to thank her? To no avail—he didn’t notice.

It was no surprise that he couldn’t see her, and it didn’t look like Sakuta would be able to introduce them. He’d have to think of some other birthday present.

“Hmph,” Touko snorted, then turned and sailed out of the room. Sakuta trailed after her. Still pretending his stomach hurt.

Miori was seated near the back, and she caught his eye, shooting him an accusative glare. Did she think he was faking it? Probably.

Outside the exam room, Touko walked all the way down the long corridor and entered an empty classroom. Sakuta followed and closed the door behind him.

With just the two of them, it was even quieter than the exam hall.

“What did you want?” he asked, getting to the point. Hoping to get back to his essay.

“What’s your girlfriend up to?”

“Meaning?”

“Everyone’s saying she’s Touko Kirishima.”

“Somebody gave them all a weird dream.”

“She’s *your* girlfriend. Make her fix this.”

“That’s for her own good, so I’d love to. But if you’ve got a problem with it,

why not just come forward as the real Touko Kirishima?”

The central garden was right outside the window. That was where Touko had done her Christmas Eve live broadcast.

“You could stream right here and now. I’ll help.”

That seemed fastest.

“No use.”

“You’ve tried it?”

“Nobody can see anything that’s got my face in it. Best I can manage is a long shot of my back.”

Where they could only make out her silhouette.

“Then you’ve just gotta make yourself perceivable again.”

And to do that, he needed to know just why Touko had become invisible. He didn’t imagine she’d tell him that easily...and it was always possible she didn’t know, either.

“Kirishima, do you know why you’re like this?”

“Nope,” she snapped.

“Does Iwamizawa know why?”

“.....”

That earned him silence.

Silence signaled agreement.

“I’m taking that as a yes.”

He’d talked with her enough to realize she was bad at lying. And she had a habit of clamming up when he was right.

“Your girlfriend needs to deny it.”

“Once a rumor or mistake spreads this far, it’s pretty hard to refute.”

Some people believed it unquestioningly. Others didn’t care either way and the truth didn’t matter. Trying to passionately explain the truth to them would

likely not get much across. The truth was as they perceived it.

“And if you know that, you’ve got a plan, right?” Touko said, giving him a searching look.

“If I do, is there a reward?” he asked, meeting her eyes.

“Hmm,” she said, crossing her arms.

She thought of something soon and smirked.

Catching his eyes again, she said, “I’ll take you on a date.”

“If it’s not a sleepover date, I’m hardly tempted.”

“I wouldn’t mind. If you aren’t scared of that girlfriend of yours.”

The gleam in her eyes indicated that she was trying to wind him up. She was enjoying this.

“You win. I’ll do something.”

“Then it’s a deal.”

She offered up her hand, and he shook it.

If they could clear the air around Mai and learn more about Touko, that was two birds with one stone. Forget the joke about a sleepover.

“Get it done,” she said, turning to go.

“What dream did you have, Kirishima?” he asked.

He’d figured she’d just ignore it, but she paused at the door and turned back.

“I didn’t have one.”

A surprising answer, at this stage. Mai wasn’t the only one.

“Same as Mai,” he said.

Touko made a face.

“Do you have time for this? You’d better get back to class. You’re cutting it close.”

At that, the bell rang. End of the third period—and the end of his exam.

It was his turn to make a face. Clearly what she’d been after. Touko said

“Later,” fluttered a hand, and was gone.

By the time Sakuta got back to the core curriculum room, it was deserted. His answer sheet had been collected, and the only things left were his stuff—and a girl, sitting across the aisle from his belongings. He recognized that half-up, half-down hairstyle—Miori had taken the same exam.

She heard him coming and turned around.

“Welcome back, pukeface.”

“What is that, the title of a morning soap?”

“Nobody would watch that.”

She laughed, amused.

“Everyone took off already. Planning a new-term party or a post-exam kegger.”

Miori glanced around the empty room. Takumi had mentioned something like that. Sakuta had actually met Miori at one of these core curriculum parties.

“You didn’t join them, Mitou?”

“If I go, I’ll just get hit on.”

It was amazing how she managed to keep that from sounding spiteful.

“And I had a question for you, Azusagawa.”

“My type? It’s Mai.”

“Then who was the girl you left with?”

“.....”

This was the last question he’d expected, and it left him dumbfounded.

“Sneaking off for a tryst, mid-test? My word.”

It took him a minute to even register what he was hearing.

What was Miori saying?

“She dresses up like Santa sometimes, yes? Miniskirt and everything.”

She just kept mercilessly piling on.

And he could no longer reject the idea.

“.....You can see her, Mitou?”

“She marches right in like that, how could I miss it?”

“No, I mean, you could see her?”

“What do you mean by that?”

Miori looked baffled, obviously not following what he was saying.

“You and I are the only people who can see that woman.”

“.....”

Now it was her turn to freeze. She likely wasn't processing that at all. It didn't seem like she'd understood his words.

For a long moment, she simply blinked at him.

“.....”

“.....”

A very, very long silence passed.

Her lips didn't move again until the fourth-period bell rang.

“Azusagawa,” she said.

“What?”

“Are you insane?”

It had taken her a long time to reach that conclusion.

But it was by far the most appropriate one.

Chapter
2
reindeer's work



1

The whole time Sakuta was explaining Touko Kirishima's deal, Miori maintained a grave expression, which was occasionally punctuated by disbelief. But she never interrupted as she heard him out.

How he'd first met the miniskirt Santa.

How only he could perceive her.

How she'd called herself Touko Kirishima.

He left out her alleged involvement with #dreaming and the distribution of Adolescence Syndrome. Trying to explain that would force him to share Uzuki's and Ikumi's cases, and they'd be here all night.

Miori could probably only take so much of this, so he wrapped stuff up before they hit that point.

"That's about all I know."

"May I ask a question?" she asked, throwing up a hand. Like she'd been champing at the bit.

"Yes, go ahead," he said, playing along.

"Why the two of us?"

That was the obvious question. The first that came to mind. Anyone would ask the same.

"That's what I wanna know."

He'd have loved to tell her why, but he didn't have an answer, either. He would love to know why himself.

Why could he see her?

Why could Miori?



“Yikes.”

Miori’s response was sincere. The situation was objectively pretty scary, and you didn’t even need to be objective to think that. This was by no means a normal series of events.

Thanks to her, Sakuta had been able to get another perspective on this mess, but that didn’t exact make it any less alarming.

“But okay,” she said, oblivious to his turmoil. Her eyes were on the ceiling. “That explains why Manami gave me a weird look when I mentioned the campus Santa to her.”

She laughed, like that solved one mystery. It was a distinctly hollow laugh. The *ha* sounded more like a sigh.

“But she *is* alive, right? Not a ghost or anything?” Miori asked, looking dead serious.

“Yeah, well...I shook her hand earlier.”

“And it felt...?”

“As warm as you’d expect.”

“Then she’s no ghost.”

Sakuta felt like this hadn’t particularly proved anything, but he didn’t argue the point. It was a crazy story to begin with, so no use expecting tangible evidence.

“It’s less like people can’t see her and more like they can’t perceive her existence.”

“I guess I get that...?” Miori began, but then she shook her head. “Nope, I don’t think I do.”

“It’s not just her. Fukuyama was looking at the beauty contest home page, and he couldn’t see the part about Nene Iwamizawa.”

Which meant they couldn’t take in any information related to her. The most they could make out was a distant silhouette, too indistinct to identify. And her voice—which, on its own, didn’t narrow things down.

“The beauty contest website? I wonder if I can see that.”

“Take a look, and you’ll soon—” As he spoke, Sakuta remembered some key information. “Oh, right. Mitou, you don’t have a phone.”

“Gosh, Azusagawa. You are the one person who can’t sneer about that.”

Grumbling, Miori reached for her tote bag. She pulled out a flat dark-gray rectangle. It was a laptop with a logo shaped like a fruit on it.

She’d once mentioned using the internet on her computer at home.

“You carry that around with you?”

It was thin but not exactly small. The weight was hardly insignificant.

“My last class was third period, so I brought it planning to work on my report.”

She flashed him a triumphant smile and opened it, humming to herself.

It soon booted up.

He tried to lean in and look, and she half-closed the lid so he couldn’t. A subtle defense.

“No peeping at ladies’ desktops.”

“Why, is it covered in smut?”

“Well, yes.”

“Curiouser and curiouser.”

But he did back off.

Miori smoothly navigated to her online destination.

“Okay, here it is. The beauty contest page, last year’s grand prix. A second-year—at the time—with an international liberal arts major. From Hokkaido, five foot three, born March thirtieth.”

“That’s the one.”

“She’s got a social media account with tons of photos.”

Miori turned her laptop so he could see. He must be allowed now.

The screen was full of Nene Iwamizawa's photographs.

All were accompanied by short posts about her modeling, campus life, and current fashion trends.

It was a record of how dazzling her life had been.

The overall impression was that her life had been very fulfilling.

It was the kind of life everyone aspired to, that everyone wanted to lead. Bright and energetic.

"Mitou, anything you're seeing suggest she might want to disappear?"

Miori had been scrolling slowly down the feed, but she paused there.

"She stopped posting in April, so something must have happened then."

As she answered, Miori looked at him. She blinked twice, taking the measure of his response.

"For example?"

"Break ended, and Mai showed up on campus? And stole all the attention."

She spoke that name with undeniable purpose.

"Aha..."

He thought she'd hit the nail on the head.

"This girl was a model and a beauty queen. She must have really stood out on campus. Had lots of people fussing over her."

"I can imagine."

These posts definitely projected that.

"Nene Iwamizawa was princess of this college kingdom...until Mai arrived."

"But Mai Sakurajima is a *queen*."

"Go against her, and your kingdom falls."

Compared with your ordinary student, Nene Iwamizawa may have had regal qualities. She'd landed modeling gigs as a student and won that campus contest—and those had given her confidence. Convinced her she wasn't like these

other kids. Given her a sense of superiority.

She was different. Special. She was *someone* and proud of it.

And then Mai Sakurajima had invaded.

A genuine celebrity, a household name since she was six.

TV shows, movies, commercials, and magazine covers. She did it all, and there was no escaping her name and face. Her résumé and recognition were far beyond what Nene Iwamizawa had accrued.

It was never even a contest. Mai was instantly top dog on campus.

“With her beautiful tiara and dress snatched away, her rank dropped back to peasant. She likely couldn’t even manage to be the *second* most famous student.”

“Yeah, it takes more than this to put yourself in line behind Mai.”

Different scale, different stage—different *caliber*.

The same way Uzuki’s and Nodoka’s names had never been mentioned in the same breath as Mai’s.

“The arrival of a celebrity like Mai Sakurajima must have rocked her to the core.”

Everything she’d been proud of was instantly valueless.

“That’s why Nene Iwamizawa disappeared. She could no longer perceive her own worth.”

Men no longer gave her appreciative glances. Women no longer looked envious.

Her reputation had been fundamentally altered.

She was no longer special. That status was Mai Sakurajima’s alone.

Sakuta felt like he’d figured it out, but Miori shook her head.

“Hmm, I dunno about *that*,” she said.

“What have I got wrong?” he asked, not sure what she meant.

“Mai appeared, stole everyone’s attention, made her no longer special, made

her ordinary—and she knew her so-called friends were *laughing* at her for it. I bet that’s what made her want to hide.”

Her hands folded on top of the closed laptop, Miori’s tone never wavered—and once again, her take sounded right on the money.

“.....”

No response came to mind.

Sakuta felt sure Miori had accurately assessed Nene’s position and psychology.

“When someone who’s been lording it over everyone gets their ass handed to them, don’t *you* think, ‘Serves you right’?”

“Well, yeah.”

“People who self-describe as victims never imagine their actions will hurt anyone else.”

“Or they think they’ve got a right to.”

“The privilege of the downtrodden,” Miori chuckled, like she was joking. She kept it light, but her words cut deep.

And that discrepancy struck Sakuta as funny. He let out a wheezing laugh.

Their discussion trailed off.

“.....”

“.....”

But the smiles remained.

“Did you go through some stuff, Mitou?”

“Like what?”

“Sounds like you’re speaking from experience.”

“Well, I’ve certainly lived a life.”

She never let him get further than that.

And that was fine. He was more interested in Touko than Miori.

“Still, Mitou.”

“Mm-hmm?”

“She’s Touko Kirishima.”

He glanced down at Miori’s laptop. They’d only looked at Nene Iwamizawa’s account.

“With that name’s profile, she *could* rival Mai. To the point of drowning out the laughter of her so-called friends. Instead of disappearing, all she’d need to do is tell everyone she’s Touko Kirishima and climb back up the heap.”

This felt inconsistent.

“Then she *isn’t* Touko Kirishima.”

“.....Huh?”

There was a long delay before he responded. Unable to grasp her meaning.

“You said it yourself, Azusagawa. There’s no need for Touko Kirishima to disappear. If this girl has, that means she was never Touko Kirishima.”

A surprising perspective, but even more surprising—it made sense.

It was logical.

Just a rational exercise...?

“Is it that far-fetched?”

“No...”

“But you’re making a weird face.”

“I was born that way.”

Miori laughed harder than she had all day.

2

“Your friend makes an interesting point.”

The next day, Saturday, January 7.

Before his shift at the cram school, Sakuta had filled Rio in over lunch about

his conversation with Miori.

They were on the second floor of a sushi spot near Fujisawa Station's south gate, which was behind the department store, where a bunch of restaurants were. The two of them occupied a four-top.

"She's still calling us potential friends," he said, swallowing a mouthful of deep-fried *aji* and rice.

"That sounds obnoxious."

"She's neck and neck with you, Futaba."

"....."

Rio pointedly ignored this comment, taking a bite of salted *kinmedai*. Proximity to the water meant the seafood in the area was always fresh.

"So what's your take on it?"

"I think your potential friend's theory is worth bearing in mind."

"Mm-hmm."

That was Sakuta's problem. He'd met a miniskirt Santa claiming to be Touko Kirishima and, until yesterday, had never once doubted that she actually was.

But suddenly a theory arose that flipped that entire premise. An off-the-cuff remark from the only other person he knew who could actually see Touko.

"But the conversation that led you to that idea—in other words, why Touko Kirishima has turned invisible in the first place—is just the two of you speculating, right?"

"The whole 'Nene Iwamizawa was princess of our campus' thing? Well, yeah."

They'd just read a lot into her online presence. Taken the words *model* and *beauty contest winner* and spun a simplistic profile based on that.

They'd assumed she'd had her position stolen by Mai and found herself no longer special, with her peers laughing at her, mocking her. They'd assumed she'd lost her sense of self and disappeared—becoming an invisible girl.

"But since you're speculating, best not to get too hung up on it. If your premise proves wrong, then so will your conclusions."

“That’s very fair.”

He took a bite of fried shrimp. The breading made a satisfying crunch. The meat inside was juicy.

“I’m more concerned about this idea everyone’s got in their heads about Sakurajima. At my school, they’re talking like it’s a confirmed fact.”

Rio was going to a national college, specializing in the sciences. But it sounded like this rumor had traction with both STEM types and humanities majors.

“Same at ours.”

He’d even heard some high school girls discussing it on the train here: ——
“It’s so cool that Mai Sakurajima is Touko Kirishima.”

——*“She can do, like, everything.”*

“Still, Mai should clear that up in a couple of days.”

“Coming-of-Age Day?”

“Mai’s the most famous person turning twenty this year.”

“Ah,” Rio said, nodding. “She plans to refute the rumors in front of the cameras, then?”

An accurate prediction.

“They’re bound to ask her about Touko Kirishima.”

“Naturally.”

“And she’ll post an official comment to her social media accounts, too.”

Mai had called last night from the hotel near where she was filming on location. Her manager, Ryouko, and the upper brass at her agency had heard the rumors and were concerned. Mai had solid backing.

“So that’s what her post this morning was about.”

“Mm?”

Sakuta blinked, and Rio silently pulled it up and held the phone out to him.

It showed a photo-sharing site that the Mai Sakurajima official account ran in tandem with her agency.

The post was an official photo of her taken on set for the TV show she was filming, with a quick nod that she'd have a major announcement coming on the ninth.

"Very like Mai."

She left no stone unturned and knew exactly how to make word spread effectively.

"The problem comes if this doesn't nip the rumor in the bud," Rio said, eating the *chawanmushi* that had come with her lunch set.

Sakuta shared that concern. "Once people believe something, it's weirdly hard to convince them it was never true."

When their perceptions and opinions differed, people were reluctant to change their minds or were adamantly against it.

Mai and her agency staff were well aware of that and were acting accordingly. Preparing thoroughly.

"Anyone who saw the dream I had will likely believe that dream instead."

The music festival dream.

Where Mai told the world she was Touko Kirishima.

Her singing voice had been far too convincing.

They remembered it like it was real.

"If only the real one would show herself."

That was the best solution.

But not an option they had.

"She can't if she's invisible. You'll have to fix that first."

Rio was right.

"I'm doing what I can on that front."

He had a pseudo-date booked with her. Given what he knew about her, if he did his part of the bargain, she'd likely do hers.

"But, Futaba..."

“What?” she asked, setting her tea back down.

“If Nene Iwamizawa *isn’t* Touko Kirishima, what do I do then?”

They wanted the real Touko to deny these weird rumors, but if she was fake—that would ruin those plans.

“Cross that bridge when you come to it. Or just have her *become* Touko Kirishima.”

A bold plan, even from Rio.

“That’s the sort of scheme you come up with, Azusagawa,” she added when he looked baffled.

“Yeah, if it clears the air around Mai—I totally would try that.”

He still wasn’t sure what was going on with Nene Iwamizawa, but he also didn’t really know her well enough to get involved otherwise.

Once Sakuta and Rio finished their tasty meals, they settled the tab and left the shop. It was two PM.

Both had lessons to teach, so they headed toward the station’s northern exit.

“I dreamed I was dating Kunimi,” Rio said out of nowhere.

“Huh?” Sakuta blinked at her.

“We were eating together. Pretty sure it was a date.”

Rio didn’t look at him. She sounded calm.

“Legit?” he asked.

A silent nod. Eyes dead ahead.

“But that’s not possible,” she added. “Kunimi would never agree to it.”

Sadly, Sakuta agreed. Not that there was anything wrong with Rio herself, but because that was just Yuuma’s character.

“He’s totally in love with that mad-dog girlfriend of his.”

Even if Saki Kamisato and Yuuma’s relationship soured and they broke up, spring was far too soon for Yuuma to see anyone else.

Rio likely wouldn't agree to it, either. It was a bit late for that.

If quite a bit more time passed, maybe things would work out, but Sakuta couldn't imagine them getting together in the next year or two, at the least.

"So I don't think these dreams are the future."

Sakuta couldn't read any nuance from Rio's profile. On the surface, it looked like she had no strong feelings about this. But when she woke up from the dream, it must have rattled her.

But right now, she seemed like her usual self. To his eyes anyway.

"I'll take your word for it, Futaba."

"....."

She glanced at him. Not expecting him to accept that so easily.

The world at large believed those dreams were prophetic. Sakuta himself had found his dream coming true. Rio knew that—which was why she was surprised. Wondering why he'd been so ready to believe her.

Her eyes were clearly asking for an explanation.

"Akagi said the same thing. Those dreams don't show the future, but a glimpse at the other potential world."

Ikumi had said as much on the phone, on December 25 of last year, right after the trip to Hakone. He'd been pretty shocked when she told him her theory but, at the same time, felt it explained a lot.

More than anything, if she was right—that explained why he had a cell phone.

For the simple reason that when Sakuta had visited that other world...the other Sakuta had owned one.

"She spent more than six months in another possible world, so she should know."

"Still, that doesn't really change much. Even if the dreams are really showing us another world, that doesn't mean the same thing won't happen in this one."

"Yeah. Whether they show the future or another world, we won't know what's going to happen until it happens."

“They just give us headaches.”

Left them flailing about.

“Indeed,” Rio said, a hint of sadness in her voice. It was obvious she was feeling that one.

That told him the dream had definitely rattled her—but she’d come to terms with it in her own way.

“I learned one thing from this mess with Kasai,” she muttered.

“Mm?”

“Not being able to reciprocate is stifling. Did I make Kunimi feel this way?”

A faint smile played around her lips. It sent Sakuta off into memories of that summer.

Their second year of high school.

The three of them had gone to see the fireworks.

Watching those colorful blooms, Rio had smiled. Just like she was now.

Two and a half years later, those were distant memories. Time flowed ever onward.

3

January 9. Coming-of-Age Day. Mai Sakurajima’s name was trending.

Crews from every TV station converged on Fujisawa. All were there to cover Mai Sakurajima in a long-sleeved kimono. It was a once-in-a-lifetime photo op.

The gathering of the twenty-year-olds was held near the civic hall and was packed with media crowds—the news was even covering how much attention she was drawing.

Sakuta watched the whole thing on TV.

Mai stood before a sea of cameras, delivering a speech—representing everyone there turning twenty. When she finished, the applause was thunderous.

One task down, but her real labors lay ahead.

After the ceremony, she moved to the venue lobby, where she was surrounded by the press.

The first questions she got asked how it felt to be twenty:

“Do you feel like an adult?”

“Have you had your first drink yet?”

Standard stuff.

Mai answered each politely, with a smile.

The question on everyone’s minds showed up after each crew got their first question in, when it looped back to the initial speaker.

Fumika Nanjou, an assistant announcer on an afternoon variety show.

“Social media is buzzing with claims that you’re the online singer Touko Kirishima. Mai, what is the truth behind these rumors?”

Mai faced the forest of microphones.

“That would be neat, right? Unfortunately, I am not Touko Kirishima. Sorry to disappoint.”

She flashed a smile, speaking softly but firmly.

“You’re aware of the dreaming hashtag?” someone else asked.

“Yes, it’s quite a hot topic.”

“There are a ton of posts under that tag saying you’ll claim to be Touko Kirishima.”

“Should I have my manager show you my schedule? I’m afraid I simply don’t have time for a music career.”

That was clearly a joke, and they all laughed.

Then their eyes turned to Ryouko.

“I can’t show them without approval!” she said, looking flustered. She crossed her arms, making an X. This got another laugh.

And with that cheery vibe, the Q and A session went on, regardless of her identity.

“What do you think of Touko Kirishima?”

“Do you believe dreams can come true?”

Lots of the inquiries were tangentially connected to the rumors.

After a while, Ryouko said, “Time for one more question.”

She seemed certain they’d managed to clear the air.

Fumika Nanjou’s hand shot up again, and Ryouko pointed at her.

“Are things going well with your boyfriend?”

A new angle. Mai smiled.

“I’ll leave that to your imaginations,” she said, placing her right hand on her chest. Her ring finger gleamed—with the ring Sakuta had bought her.

That got a flurry of shutter clicks from the cameras.

So many flashes were going off, he couldn’t even make Mai out.

Mai bowed her head low to the assembled press.

“Thank you all for coming today.”

With that, Ryouko led Mai out.

The whole conference was shown on the noon news, on the afternoon variety shows, and again on the evening and late-night news, over and over, on every channel, from every angle—Mai’s kimono.

Mai Sakurajima’s official social media accounts also refuted the rumors.

Her two-front strategy produced the desired results, Sakuta thought. From that day on, the media ceased to cover the rumors about her.

But on personal social media accounts?

——**Too late to deny it.**

——**Her agencies are putting out fires.**

——**She should just admit it. This is a farce.**

Posts like those abounded.

Perhaps the only way to end the stories for good would be for the real one to emerge.

A week after Coming-of-Age Day, college was back to normal. There were still eyes on Sakuta sometimes, but they were standard issue “Oh, that’s Mai Sakurajima’s boyfriend” looks.

Arguably, he’d kept his promise to Touko.

Monday, January 16.

Only a few days left in the term.

The last week in January was reserved for makeup lectures, so this was the final week of classes. He only had to attend until Friday; then it was time for a long spring vacation.

When college started back up two months later, in April, Sakuta would be a sophomore.

Plenty of students were already in vacation mode, and the vibe was quite a bit like the end of the actual year. Like sports teams playing a dead rubber match. No one could really put their hearts into it.

Sakuta wasn’t any better; he headed through the morning gates at a leisurely stroll. Most final exams were done, and he’d written all his reports, so there was no need to panic.

Yawning, he moved just fast enough to get to class on time.

He sensed someone beside him.

“Morning.”

He glanced over and was surprised to find Touko Kirishima there.

She was wearing boots, a skirt, and a high-necked sweater with a coat over it. Typical college girl attire, blending in with the crowds. Had she not spoken to him, he would likely never have noticed her.

“Good morning,” he said, figuring he should start there. “What brings you to campus at this hour?”

“I’ve got classes.”

She made that sound normal.

“Even though you’re invisible?”

“I’m paying for them. Seems like a waste not to attend.”

A very solid argument.

That made him wonder.

“Wait, have you been coming to classes every day?”

“That’s a stupid question,” Touko laughed. Her mocking tone was all the answer he needed.

Sakuta hadn’t noticed because she was in a different year and major. Their classes would never overlap. And she’d been dressed like she was today. Without the miniskirt Santa duds, Touko didn’t exactly stand out from the sea of college kids around her.

“Keep January thirtieth open,” she said, interrupting his thoughts. “I’ll let you have that date.”

“Looking forward to it.”

“You two-timing swine.”

Jeering at his answer, she vanished off toward the research building. Her retreating back blended right in with the crowd. Were it not for the fact that no one else could see her, she’d be a perfectly normal college girl.

Later that day, after his fourth-period class wrapped up, Sakuta went to the platform at Kanazawa-hakkei Station, where he found a blond college girl sitting on a bench. She was waiting for a train, listening to music on her wireless earphones.

He approached and sat down next to her.

“Sup, Toyohama.”

“I’m clearly listening to something,” Nodoka grumbled, but she took the earphones out and pressed stop on her phone’s music player. “So? What is it?”

“What would you think if the most famous idol in the country started attending our college tomorrow?”

“Wouldn’t know till it happened.”

A very Nodoka answer.

“Fair enough.”

“Wouldn’t exactly be thrilled, though.”

Nodoka put her earphones back in their case. On closer examination, they were the same kind Uzuki had done a commercial for.

“Even if it doesn’t bug me, everyone else’ll lump us together—we’re both idols—and start comparing and contrasting.”

“Sneering at you on the inside, giving you looks of pity?”

“You trying to start shit?”

“Don’t worry, you’ve got your upsides.”

“Take this hypothetical and shove it.”

Nodoka had reached her boiling point already, but she didn’t stay there long. A moment later, she’d cooled down enough to sigh dramatically.

“This about my sister, then?” she asked, refocusing. She crossed her legs and propped an elbow on them and her cheek on her palm.

“You’re way ahead of me, Toyohama.”

“Literally everything you do is about her, Sakuta.”

Her long lashes fluttered as she stared at the far side of the station.

“Well, yeah,” he said.

“So, what? You wanna make her out to be the baddie?”

Nodoka glared up at him.

“Do you think I’d do that?”

“It sure sounded like it.”

She sounded cross, and her narrowed eyes confirmed it.

“Mai’s, you know...special? That’s not the most intelligent-sounding phrasing, but everyone knows her; everyone loves her; just having her around *changes* things.”

“.....”

Nodoka looked rather taken aback. She blinked at him.

“What’s with that look?”

“I just assumed you didn’t realize how special she is. You always act so normal around her, I figured you were oblivious.”

“She’s special to me, too.”

“Spare me.”

Cut down. Nodoka turned to face the tracks again. There were students on the far side, waiting for a train to take them the other direction.

“But I get what you’re trying to say, Sakuta.”

“You do?”

“When we first started here, I ran across plenty of girls of that ilk.”

“What ilk?”

“They were the hottest girl in high school. But in college, my sister was here, and they lost sight of their identity, their status, their self-worth, everything.”

He hadn’t specified any of that, but Nodoka really did know what he was talking about. With pinpoint accuracy.

“Why do you look surprised?”

“Well, it’s surprising.”

“I’m an idol? We’re all about status and identity.”

Nodoka kicked him. Not too hard.

“Idols shouldn’t kick fans.”

“You never even come to our shows.”

“I’ll be there once you land the Budokan.”

“I’m not putting you on the list. Buy your own ticket.”

“Cool, I’ll ask Zukki instead.”

He’d tossed that out, but it got a note of genuine irritation from Nodoka. She made a point of getting to her feet just so she could kick him harder.

“Ow!”

The blow to his calf made an audible thwack.

“Where’d you learn to kick like that?”

“I’m taking kickboxing to improve my stamina.”

Nodoka struck a fighting pose, showing off. It looked very good. Alarming. Perhaps he should consider teasing her less often. He didn’t wanna be her sandbag.

“The girls you deemed ‘that ilk’—what are they up to now?” he asked, rubbing his injury.

“It’s been a year. They’ve settled down.”

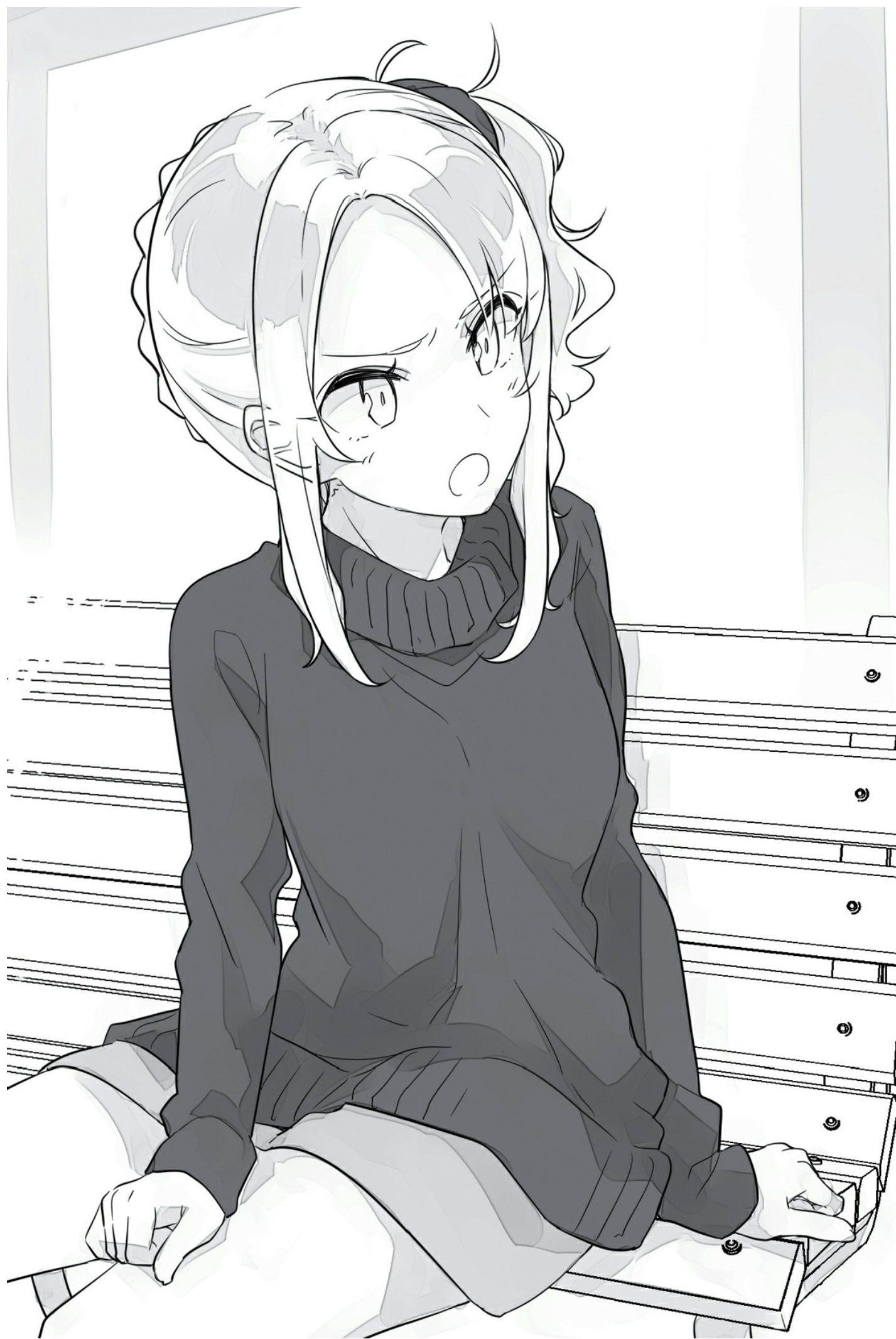
She flopped back onto the bench, sounding uninterested.

“Fair enough.”

“Either they got over it, gave up, or found some other way to measure their worth.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”



“You’re the club president of Mai’s casualties.”

“Don’t go founding weird clubs on me.”

Nodoka punched his shoulder. They should probably make her quit kickboxing before she got herself arrested.

“But having Mai in your life has definitely changed you, Toyohama.”

In the fall of their second year of high school, her half sister—Mai—had triggered Nodoka’s Adolescence Syndrome. She’d been closer to Mai than anyone and was influenced accordingly.

“I...,” she began, and then her lips stilled.

When they moved again, she was talking to herself.

“She’s just so far away,” she whispered, eyes on the tracks. “No matter how hard I work, I’ll never catch up. I still don’t get how the world looks through her eyes. Her TV shows and movies are expected to be hits, and if they flop, she takes the blame for it, but—have you ever heard her complain? I can’t even imagine how that must feel.”

That did feel like distance.

“So, Sakuta...,” Nodoka said, turning to him.

She looked him right in the eyes, very intensely.

“Mm?”

“You’d better take my sister’s side.”

Nothing she’d said really answered his question.

But this last line was what mattered to him most.

The train pulled in. An express bound for Haneda Airport. They’d both be taking that to Yokohama Station.

“I will,” he said, standing up.

And once on his feet, he repeated those words inside his head.

Monday, January 30.

On a frigid morning, Sakuta got ready to go out and headed all the way to Kanazawa-hakkei Station—despite having no classes. It was just past ten. About the time he'd arrive for a second-period class.

A week ago, the station had been packed with students, but now it was deserted, in spring vacation mode.

It was quiet enough that he could hear his own footsteps.

It certainly made it easier to move around the station—he got up the stairs without anyone in his way and was out the gate without waiting in line.

The station roof gave way to a clear blue sky.

Down the stairs to the west was the two-to three-minute walk to campus. But today Sakuta went down the other set of stairs.

The Seaside Line ran on the bridge above. He passed beneath that, waited for walk lights twice to get across Route 16, then turned toward the water.

He followed the road until he saw the blue sign of a convenience store, at which point he turned right onto a side street.

Before him lay a pilgrim's path across the waters. A torii gate appeared to greet him. The asphalt became gravel.

With each step, the noise of the main road grew distant, and the feel of the ocean grew stronger.

The path itself was four, five yards wide. Evergreen trees were on either side, marking the path.

It ran to the ocean, then across a little bridge with red railings. The bridge was so short it only took a few steps to cross.

On the other side, Sakuta found himself on an equally small island. Maybe ten paces across.

Nothing on it but Biwajima Shrine.

That would draw the eye on a normal day, but Sakuta's attention lay elsewhere.

On the island's shore.

A woman in a striking red outfit.

She hadn't worn that miniskirt Santa outfit much recently.

The very girl who'd summoned him here.

Standing there, staring out at the sea.

His footsteps crunching on the gravel, Sakuta moved closer.

"This shrine was built by Hojo Masako," Touko said. "The Kamakura period was eight hundred years ago. Amazing it's still standing, when you think about it."

"Your songs will last a long time, too, Kirishima."

He pulled up next to her, admiring the view. The Seaside Line filled his vision, running across the horizon. A sight no one in the Kamakura period could have imagined.

"Does music really last that long?" she asked, clearly dubious.

"Some does. Classical music is, what, three, four hundred years old?"

Didn't seem like people were gonna just stop listening to that in a decade or two. A decade or two from now, people would probably be thinking this exact same thing. In which case, eight hundred years was totally viable. Even a cool thousand.

"Did you call me out here to talk about that?"

"Of course not. We're picking up a car nearby."

At last, Touko looked at him. But only for a second.

"Come," she said. "I'll let you be Santa's little helper."

With that, she headed back up the pilgrim path.

"If you'd warned me, I'd have brought a reindeer costume," he said, following after.

Ten minutes later, Sakuta was in a car.

Specifically, he was in the passenger seat of a compact car that Touko was

driving, having borrowed it from a car-share service.

“And here I thought Santa Claus drove a sleigh pulled by reindeer.”

They were headed north on Route 16.

“Do you have a license?” she asked.

“I’m starting driving school the day after tomorrow,” he said, eyes on oncoming traffic.

“What are you looking at?”

“Wondering what this looks like from the outside.”

“Like Mai Sakurajima’s boyfriend is having a secret tryst with another woman,” Touko said with a smirk. Clearly enjoying this.

“Possibly. If they can actually see *you*.”

But so far, only Sakuta and Miori could actually perceive her.

“A car driving without anyone in the driver’s seat must be pretty spooky.”

He’d definitely do a double take.

Like in a horror movie.

“This is how the world’s urban legends are born,” Touko said, like this didn’t affect her.

A driverless car on Route 16. A ghostmobile, hauling a passenger along. When he got home, he’d have to check online to see if anyone was talking about it.

“Oh yeah, is this bothering you?”

“How so?”

“Being alone with me. Aren’t you seeing anyone yourself?”

“Do I look single?”

“Not really.”

Sakuta had gone with his gut when he asked that question. The way Touko acted around him suggested she had a significant other. She wasn’t self-conscious around Sakuta the way most girls her age were around men. She

carried herself in a way that spoke of experience. That applied here, too, with just the two of them in the car. None of that awkward tension as you tested the waters.

“I’m afraid you’re not quite right. I had one until spring arrived.”

“You broke up?”

“You may have noticed, but nobody can see me. My boyfriend included.”

He looked at her profile but saw no signs of emotion. Miniskirt Santa was just driving.

“How long were you together?”

“Since summer of the second year of high school.”

“So since you were back in Hokkaido?”

He knew she’d moved down here at the start of university.

“Right.”

“So before Nene Iwamizawa started calling herself Touko Kirishima.”

“.....”

That, Touko didn’t answer.

Her face was emotionless.

It was probably best for him to try a different angle.

“If he’s from Hokkaido, it must have turned into a long-distance relationship after you graduated, right?”

“We both took the exams here, but he flunked them.”

Touko pulled up behind the car in front of her, at a red light.

“That sure hits close to home.”

That may well have been Sakuta’s fate.

“Two years in a row.”

Even worse.

“Where is he now?”

At the very least, they'd still been together last spring. Touko had said so herself.

"He passed on the third try and enrolled here in the spring."

The light turned green, and she followed the other car out.

"He finally caught up with you and then couldn't perceive you anymore?"

"Exactly."

Her voice was calm. Her attention was on the road.

"If I were him, I'd be flirting like mad. Making up for lost time."

"....."

Touko said nothing. Her mind seemed to be on what had gone down.

"Were you happy when he told you he'd passed?"

"Less happy than relieved. I'm the one who wanted to come down here...and he followed my lead."

"What's his major?"

"Statistical science."

Same as Sakuta.

"Do I know him?"

He searched her profile. He didn't know everyone in his major, but he did know at least one boy from Hokkaido.

"....."

She didn't answer. But she didn't deny it, either. And that was all the answer he needed.

"Fukuyama, huh?"

He'd meant that as a simple confirmation, but his voice broke. It was an unexpected reveal, and he was a little worked up about it. He was surprised to find himself reacting that way.

"....."

Touko didn't point that out. Or answer him one way or the other. She just kept driving.

"Does Fukuyama know Touko Kirishima is Nene Iwamizawa?"

"He does not."

"Why didn't you tell him?"

"Does your girlfriend share everything about her job?"

"Well, no, not everything."

But was it possible to go out that long without him having any clue? Could Nene have avoided letting anything slip?

As Nene Iwamizawa, she'd boasted online about her modeling work, about the beauty contest. Gathering likes and followers.

Could a girl like that have kept Touko Kirishima under wraps?

Why would she need to keep it hidden from her own boyfriend?

That seemed like a major contradiction.

"Fukuyama knows about Touko Kirishima."

"Seems like."

"So why can't he see *you*?"

"Because he doesn't know I'm Touko Kirishima."

If he'd connected that name to Nene Iwamizawa, Takumi should have been able to perceive Nene. Just like he could perceive the internet singer Touko Kirishima.

Sakuta got that logic. But was that all there was to it?

"Or is it because in his mind, you're Nene Iwamizawa?"

"So what?"

Should he say this? Honestly, Sakuta wasn't sure.

But he felt like not saying it would get them nowhere. He had to be sure.

"Are you really Touko Kirishima?"

He kept it simple.

And the answer came quick.

“I am Touko Kirishima.”

Like it was a statement of fact.

No hesitation.

No need for hesitation.

Because it was *true*.

Her attitude and tone sold that.

She wasn't lying.

And to prove her words, Touko began to sing.

The song she'd live streamed on Christmas Eve.

The one he'd been too late to see.

A beautiful voice, echoing through the gate, proving beyond all doubt that she was Touko Kirishima.

At the time, Sakuta thought so. Felt it. And yet—it didn't clear the air. There was still a shroud over things. An unseen truth, hidden in that fog. He found himself all the more convinced of it.

The car's navigation system said, “*Arriving at your destination.*”

The map on-screen showed Yokohama's Motomachi.

5

“Santa buys presents in Motomachi?”

Miniskirt Santa was walking in front of Sakuta, the heels of her boots clicking.

They were in a shopping area in Motomachi, Yokohama. No arcade overhead, just open skies. When the Port of Yokohama had first opened to international ships, the nearby areas—Yamashita and Yamate—had been converted into foreign residences, bringing business to Motomachi.

For that reason, many of the buildings here still showed traces of period

Western architecture.

The shopping area retained that old-timey vibe, playing up the blending of cultures that took place then.

Here, you'd find ancient shops in business since Motomachi was founded right next to shops that had only just opened. The new mingling with the old. In a sense, this town had always been a cultural melting pot.

This place would be teeming on a weekend, but at noon on a weekday, crowds were sparse.

The miniskirt Santa walking around was glaringly out of place.

But of course, no one paid Touko any attention. No one noticed she was there.

The girl herself was way past caring. If she found a promising shop, she waltzed right in.

Her first choice sold casual clothing and household goods. She followed that up with a place that sold alligator-mark sportswear. Then two American fashion boutiques, followed by three menswear stores.

She looked at one thing in each place.

Men's scarves.

Sometimes she turned Sakuta into her mannequin, testing one out, checking the color against his clothes. A smile playing around her lips, like she was a little carried away. Like she was picking out a gift for her boyfriend.

After an hour and a half of this, she went back to one of the American boutiques and purchased a bright-orange scarf.

"Buy this for me," she said, handing it to him.

"Is that the end of Santa Claus's demands?"

"I've got one more place to visit, so get a move on."

Sakuta took the scarf from her.

"You want it gift wrapped?"

“Please,” Touko said, her back already to him.

The scarf purchased, Sakuta went outside to find her sitting on a bench across the street, legs crossed. The winter air and Motomachi’s vibe worked weirdly well with the Santa Claus outfit.

“Here,” he said, handing Touko the scarf.

“Thanks,” she said, standing up as she took it from him. “Next.”

With that, she walked away, going one block off the main drag. She moved past a French restaurant famous for their *fondant au chocolat*. Farther down the road was a bakery so old they’d been the first in the area to start selling bread by the loaf.

Turning left there would take them back to the main street, but Touko went right, into the hills of Yamate.

They went up a gentle flight of stairs, along the foreign cemetery, moving steadily uphill. They passed the Yokohama Local Meteorological Observatory and beyond. There were lots of Western-style buildings in this area.

“How far are we going?”

“Almost there.”

“You say that, but we’ve been walking a good ten minutes.”

“Only seven or eight.”

“That’s basically ten.”

“Look! We’re here.”

She spun around, directing his attention to the white manor beside them. The exterior was decked out like a storefront, the decorations and vibe screaming Christmastime. There was a large white dog in the garden next door, but no signs of any reindeer.

“Looks like the house where Santa lives.”

It was exactly that sort of store. There was even a board hanging by the entrance showing a countdown to Christmas Day. It was only January, but clearly they couldn’t wait.

“You might be half-right,” Touko said, opening the door and stepping inside. It looked like a store—and seemed like one. Sakuta followed her in, unsure why they were here.

His first impression—

Well, probably everyone thought the same thing.

It was like stepping into a winter wonderland.

Santa Claus dolls, stuffed reindeer, snow globes with Christmas trees inside. Snowmen wearing Santa outfits. Christmas cards all over the walls. Left, right, on the floors and ceiling—everything was coated in Christmas.

In this one place, Touko’s miniskirt Santa outfit looked like *normal* attire. Sakuta’s clothes felt wrong.

“We’re looking for a tin reindeer. Palm size.”

That wasn’t *quite* finding a needle in a haystack, but finding one reindeer in a Christmas forest was still a tall order.

“In here?” he asked, aghast.

Touko ignored him, diligently searching, herself.

“Reindeer...reindeer...tin reindeer...,” Sakuta muttered, scanning the vast array of Christmas merch.

“Looking for anything in particular?”

A staff member had emerged from the back.

“Do you have any tin reindeer?”

“Oh, I think I know what you mean.”

That was easier than he’d thought. The man waved Sakuta farther in.

“Quite a few people have come here for these lately.”

He plucked a reindeer from the shelf and deposited it on Sakuta’s palm.

“Are they trending?” Sakuta asked.

“You tell me,” the man said, shrugging.

There was an awkward silence.

Sakuta showed Touko the reindeer, and she nodded.

"I'll take it," he said.

"The register's this way."

He left Touko there, following the man. He paid for the reindeer and had them wrap it. Would this be another of Santa's presents?

"Come by again!" the man said, seeing him out of the shop with a smile.

What a warm, welcoming place.

"Here's your reindeer," he said, holding out the bag. Touko took it but offered him the bag with the scarf in it.

"Is that for me?"

"Give it to Takumi."

"Shouldn't you be there with me?"

"....."

She stopped in her tracks.

"It's Fukuyama's birthday, right?"

"....."

"That's why you picked this date?"

"No point in me going. Takumi can't see me."

"Maybe he will today."

"I've tried several times."

"Today might be different."

"It's none of your business," she snapped, getting annoyed.

"It is. You've made it mine."

"You asked for it."

Touko's glare was pushing him away.

He didn't let her.

"I want you to quit this whole invisible thing and tell the world you're Touko Kirishima," he said, getting a bit worked up himself.

"For your girlfriend's sake?"

"You know there's still people out there who believe Mai is Touko Kirishima."

"So why should I have to do anything for you and your girlfriend?"

"Because being Touko Kirishima is what you most want."

"....."

"Our goals are aligned."

Touko pursed her lips. No answer, again. That showed she was wavering. Proved she hadn't yet given up.

"Lend me your phone. You've got Fukuyama's number, right?"

"....."

"You bought a present because you've still got hope."

"....."

"The scarf he's wearing now is one you gave him, right?"

The new one was a similar color.

"The first birthday present I gave him after we started dating. It's all worn out. He should just replace it."

"It's a gift from his girlfriend, so it's important to him."

"He can't even see me."

"Save your gripes for the man himself."

Sakuta held out his hand, waiting for her phone.

"....."

Touko's eyes were on his palm. Wavering. Part of her wanted to hope, but that was balanced against fears of having those hopes dashed again.

She hovered like that for a solid thirty seconds.

“...Fine,” she said.

He could barely hear her.

But she plopped her phone on his hand.

Sakuta opened the address book.

And dialed the number under *Takumi*.

He held the phone to his ear, listening to it ring.

The first call didn't go through.

“.....”

Takumi still didn't pick up on the second.

“.....”

Touko's eyes were on him, expectant, tense.

He finally got a different result on his third attempt. A crackle on the line, and a moment later, “Yes?”

Takumi sounded dubious.

He couldn't perceive Nene, so he wouldn't know this was her number. He likely had no clue who was calling.

“Ah, Fukuyama? It's me, Azusagawa.”

“Huh? Hah? Why?!”

Why was he calling from a cell phone?

Why did he know Takumi's number?

He could imagine both questions swirling through the man's mind.

But if he tried explaining that, the sun would set before they got to the point.

“Not important.”

“It is, though?!”

“Fukuyama, you out and about? I'm hearing crowd noise.”

“I'm at Kamata Station. Keikyu Line.”

The PA announced the arrival of a train bound for Sengakuji.

“Why Kamata?”

“Cause I’m transferring to a train heading to Haneda. I’m going to the airport.”

“Back to Hokkaido?”

“Yep. I’ve got some stuff going on.”

He clearly didn’t wanna talk about it.

“So what do you want, Azusagawa?” he asked, before Sakuta could pry.

“You got time left?”

“I’m running early, so I have an hour till my flight.”

“Then wait in the airport. Got something for you.”

“Huh? What the—? You’re scaring me here, man!”

“Fukuyama, you said it’s your birthday, right?”

“It is.”

This seemed to rattle Takumi even more. Sakuta understood that. Had their positions been reversed, he probably would have felt the same.

“I’m actually a stickler for these things, so I got you a present.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll hang out in the airport departure lounge. Terminal 2.”

“I’ll be there. See ya later.”

There was no time to waste, so he hung up.

“Haneda Airport,” he said, and Touko returned a soft nod.

6

The car entered the Bayshore Route from the Shinyamashita tollbooth.

“.....”

“.....”

Neither Sakuta nor Touko said a word at first. The tension in the car was so thick you could cut it.

Honestly, Sakuta thought going to see Takumi was a huge gamble. He had no way of knowing how this would turn out.

If the birthday scarf provided the impetus to make Takumi perceive Nana again, great. But the opposite was equally likely, and this might end with her sight unseen.

The first outcome naturally presented no issues.

But if the latter happened? The one possible solution he'd finally hit on might well go up in smoke. Betray Sakuta's and Nene's hopes. He couldn't imagine what that would do to her. Maybe nothing...maybe it would make things far worse.

It was risky.

But he'd decided to bet on Takumi anyway.

Sakuta had no way to save Nene himself.

This wasn't like when he'd declared his love for Mai before the whole school. To Nene Iwamizawa, Sakuta was nothing but a bystander. He was not part of *her* life.

If there was anyone who could really reach her, it was Takumi.

Sakuta *had* to bet on him.

The car was smoothly running across reclaimed land, down the Bayshore Route.

"Tell me about Fukuyama."

"Like what?"

"Who asked out who?" Sakuta asked, his eyes on the car in front.

"Takumi never quite worked up the nerve, so I goaded him into it."

"How?"

"I mentioned a third-year boy had asked me out. That lit a fire under him."

Out the corner of his eye, he saw no smile on her face. Her voice was flat.

“I can see him sweating that.”

“It still took him a while.”

“That shows how much he meant it.”

“Is that how it works?” Touko glanced his way.

“I mean, *I’d* say something right away.”

Outside the left window, he saw a huge building—the steelworks.

“You even tell her how much you adore her on campus.”

“I usually just stick with *love*.”

“You’re very odd.”

This, he let pass.

He asked a different question instead.

“You and he went to the same high school?”

“Yeah, same junior high, too.”

“Were you aware of him then?”

“I knew he liked me.”

“What made you like him?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

Clearly, she wanted a break.

But Sakuta kept pushing.

“I like how you don’t have to watch what you say around him, and he doesn’t watch what he says to you.”

“For example?”

“When college started up, Fukuyama was the first one to just outright ask if it was true about me and Mai.”

Word got around almost immediately that he was dating Mai Sakurajima, and

lots of people were curious. But no one dared come over and ask. They were letting sleeping dogs lie.

Takumi had pointedly ignored that tacit understanding and laid the question out there.

———“*You really dating Mai Sakurajima?*”

That moment right there had forever changed Sakuta’s standing on campus. His relationship with Mai went from rumor to fact. From supposition to reality.

That was a bigger sea change than you’d think.

“For a man who can’t work up the nerve to ask a girl out, he was always good at that.”

“Like how?”

“In junior high, a boy moved from Tokyo to our area. A transfer student. He’d been avoiding school for a while, and rumors about that preceded him—everyone wound up waiting for someone else to talk to him first.”

Her hands were on the wheel, and her profile suggested she was taking a trip down memory lane.

“And Takumi was the first to talk to him, as if he hadn’t noticed any of that.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

“I guess I owe that transfer student. That’s when I started noticing Takumi.”

“He’s been going to a lot of mixers, so you’ve got a right to be mad at him.”

“If he can see me, I will be.”

There was a hint of a smile on her lips.

“Still, never imagined Fukuyama was older than me.”

He was turning twenty-one today. Two years older than Sakuta.

“I’m gonna have to call him senpai.”

“Takumi will *hate* that.”

“Fitting punishment for a man who forgot his girlfriend.”

“You are a strange one.”

“I’m totally normal.”

He checked the navigator, and Haneda was only a couple of miles out. To Sakuta, it seemed like they could get to Takumi before his flight left. But given boarding procedures and baggage checks, they wouldn’t have much wiggle room.

Maybe five, ten minutes tops.

Not much to work with. It was unclear if that tiny window would be enough to make him perceive Nene Iwamizawa.

Knowing they were short on time was making things tense.

They could see the airport now.

A plane was taking off from it.

Finding parking took a bit of time, but they still made it into the airport proper a few minutes before the navigator had predicted.

But that was just the airport at large.

The entrance before them was one of the largest in the nation. Out of the car, they still had to get to Terminal 2, where Takumi was waiting.

Sakuta was definitely rushing on the way to the elevator.

“Fukuyama said Terminal 2.”

Touko pressed the button, calling the elevator. The down button.

It arrived promptly.

They jumped on, and Sakuta slammed the close-door button, then the button for the second floor—where the departures lobby was listed.

The elevator descended in silence.

Only Sakuta and Touko were on board.

“.....”

“.....”

Neither said a word. A hush filled the space. Seconds stretched to far longer.

At last, there was a ding.

There was an agonizing delay as the doors slowly opened, and then they were out in the departure lobby.

It stretched out wide in either direction. He looked left, then right, and he could barely see the far walls. The ceiling soared overhead.

In the lobby, there were service desks for the respective airlines, machines for processing checkins, and security gates beyond those.

Across from those were gift shops, airport eateries, and vending machines.

It was a regular weekday, so not that busy, but it still felt far too large to successfully locate any one dude.

“Gimme your phone. I’ll call him,” Sakuta said, but Touko’s eyes were looking past him.

“There he is.”

She pointed at a clock with a giant 2 at the top.

The man on the bench next to it was definitely Takumi. Jeans, a bulky coat, that old orange scarf around his neck, phone in his hand.

Sakuta took a deep breath and approached.

“Fukuyama,” he said.

Takumi jumped.

“You actually came.”

“I said I would.”

“Outta nowhere? I figured you were pulling my leg.”

He smiled, shaking his head. Very Takumi.

At the least, they were here in time.

Now for the hard part.

Sakuta had yet to work out how to broach the subject. There was no right

answer. He didn't think giving him the whole rundown on Nene Iwamizawa would do the trick. Takumi couldn't see her. Could no longer perceive her. To him, she didn't exist.

Still lost, Sakuta looked at Touko. She was standing to his side, a few steps back.

She took one step closer, her lips moving.

"Takumi," she said. Her boyfriend's name.

"Well, it's nice that you're here, but I'm pressed for time," Takumi said, eyes on Sakuta alone. Never once glancing Touko's way. Only talking to Sakuta.

Sakuta could see Touko's hands tightening around the present.

"Listen, Takumi. Look at me," she said, but he didn't respond.

"I gotta put my bags through security, or I won't make it."

Their interaction involved no interaction. So Sakuta spoke up.

"Fukuyama."

"Mm?"

"Your scarf."

"This?" Takumi grabbed the dangling end.

"Do you remember who gave it to you?"

"Who...? Uh. Huh."

Takumi tried to answer, then froze.

"....."

His expression filled with doubt. He frowned, as if unsure why he didn't know. His lips were pursed.

"What the—? Why don't I...?"

He was talking to himself, but thinking didn't get him anywhere. He had no answers.

"You've forgotten someone important."

“...Huh? What do you mean?”

Takumi’s bafflement increased.

“That scarf was a present from your high school girlfriend.”

“Nah, man, no way!”

Takumi cackled, taking it as a joke.

“.....”

But Sakuta was dead serious. Didn’t smirk or chuckle.

“You really got that from your girlfriend, Fukuyama,” he insisted.

“.....”

This time Takumi reacted with silence.

His smile was still frozen—but slowly fading.

“.....Sorry, man. I dunno what you’re talking about,” he managed, a full ten seconds later.

“You’ve forgotten her, Fukuyama. More accurately—you can no longer perceive her.”

“.....”

Takumi gave him a long look, blinking.

“You can’t remember who gave you the scarf, right?”

“.....Well, no.”

“.....”

Touko was standing right next to him, watching their conversation, lips taut.

“Cross my heart and hope to die—you had a girlfriend in high school.”

“.....”

Takumi’s expression didn’t change. It was stiff with doubt and confusion.

“You went to junior high together, and you asked her out in your second year of high school.”

“.....”

No matter what he said, Takumi just kept staring at Sakuta. He was listening seriously but understanding none of this. He must’ve been baffled by how outlandish this story was, but he was still hearing Sakuta out.

“Her name’s Nene Iwamizawa.”

He heard Touko gasp at the name.

But Takumi just said, “Sorry, never heard of her before.”

Nene froze. All emotion drained from her eyes.

“Did I really date her?”

“The scarf proves it.”

Takumi looked down at it.

“.....”

For a long moment, he just stared. No emotion on his face.

The silence was stifling.

“Azusagawa, sorry, but...”

He’d never seen Takumi this thoroughly at a loss.

“...I don’t get it.”

This whole thing seemed to be wearing him out.

Takumi mustered a weak smile. He seemed to be trying to wrap up this conversation he could not even begin to understand.

“Think again,” Sakuta started to say—

—but before the words left his mouth, an announcement echoed from the lobby speakers.

“Passengers on Flight 555 for New Chitose Airport, please make your way to baggage inspection.”

“Augh, crap, gotta go.”

Takumi grabbed his suitcase and got up.

“Wait, Fukuyama!”

“We’ll talk more when I’ve got time. Sorry, seriously in a rush.”

They headed toward security, but Sakuta wasn’t letting go.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but I’m not lying!”

“I know you well enough, Azusagawa. I believe that much.”

“This is real!”

“I hear you!”

And that was all the time he had. Takumi tapped his phone to the entrance gate and was through to security. Sakuta didn’t have a ticket and couldn’t follow him farther.

Takumi turned back once to wave.

Sakuta raised a hand in acknowledgment.

“Thanks for seeing me off!” Takumi said—and vanished through the metal gate.

There was nothing else Sakuta could do.

He’d known this was possible.

But he had hoped it would not end this way.

He couldn’t help but be disappointed.

And Touko must feel even worse.

Sakuta turned back to the bench they’d started on.

“Kirishima...?”

No sign of her.

No miniskirt Santas anywhere.

All he found was a wrapped present.

A gift from Santa Claus, left behind where Touko had been standing.

Chapter
3
someone



1

“That’s all for today.”

Sakuta’s check sheet received a red stamp from the round-headed instructor at the driving school. It was their first day, so they’d learned the principles of safe driving and done some basic practice on a driving simulator. They’d be in a real car next time.

He was taking driving lessons in Ofuna, one station down the Tokaido Line from Fujisawa. A white Kannon statue overlooked the station itself, and the school was a five-minute walk north from there. The address was in Yokohama City, but the school’s name said Kamakura. The station was Ofuna, the address Yokohama, and the school itself Kamakura—a veritable smorgasbord of place-names.

“See you next time. Work hard, drive safe.”

“Thank you,” he said, bobbing his head to the instructor, and he headed to the lobby.

At the reception desk, he reserved his next lesson and was done there.

He must have been a bit nervous; once it was all over, he found himself letting out a long breath.

Then he muttered, “Now what?”

Not about the driving school. His mind was already veering toward other things.

To the major headache in his life.

Touko Kirishima...aka Nene Iwamizawa.

Finding out she'd been dating Takumi had been huge, but the results disastrous. Not one good thing had come of their trip to Haneda Airport two days back.

Perhaps it was best to admit he'd blown it.

He'd rushed back to the parking lot, but the compact Touko had driven was already gone, and the girl with it.

She'd ditched him and gone home alone.

He'd been forced to take the train home, carrying Takumi's birthday present with him. It was now sitting in his apartment.

This was far from ideal.

Still, Takumi remained his one real hope. Sakuta could not see any other means by which to cure Nene Iwamizawa's Adolescence Syndrome. Even if one existed, he didn't have time to hunt for it. It was February 1. Mai would be put in a coma on February 4—too close for comfort.

What could he say to prod Takumi into action? Sakuta was coming up empty. No matter how true his words were, it would likely be a repeat of the debacle at the airport.

Even if Takumi believed what he said, that meant nothing if he couldn't actually see Nene. Nothing mattered unless he could perceive her again.

Restoring Takumi's memories of Nene Iwamizawa was the first order of business.

But where would he even begin?

That's what he didn't know.

He didn't have the first clue.

And that had prompted his earlier *"Now what?"*

"You've got the cutest girlfriend in the world, yet you don't look too happy."

The voice came from right next to him.

He looked up and found a familiar face.

Miori, with a smile on her lips.

“You’re at this driving school, Mitou?”

“Already got my learner’s permit. You?”

“First day.”

“Aha! Feel free to ask me anything.”

She slapped his shoulder, acting like a helpful senpai.

“What’s your take on the miniskirt Santa?” he asked.

“I meant about cars.”

Miori shot him her “You know better” face. Naturally, he did. And had chosen to ask what he really wanted to know instead.

“You said *anything*, Mitou.”

“Fine, be that way. I had something to show you on that subject anyway.”

He had not expected that.

“Something to show me?”

No clue what this could be.

“You have time?” she asked, head tipped slightly to the side. Most men would take one look at that face and go anywhere with her, and Sakuta was no exception.

“I’m not working today, so I have all the time in the world.”

“Then onward!” Miori said, waving her hand as if it were a banner in battle. Like magic—the driving school doors slid open.

“Here.”

Miori took him to the south gate of Ofuna Station. They were outside a *tonkatsu* shop on the first floor of the building opposite.

“Why *tonkatsu*?”

“I’ve got you with me, Azusagawa. Figured I’d try a place that’s hard to enter on my own.”

That was a very college-girl sentiment.

“Hellooo!” she cried, stepping in.

“Clearly not that hard,” he muttered to no one in particular, then followed her in.

“Welcome!” the waitress said cheerily. She led them to a four-top, and they settled in. It was only just past five, so the place was still pretty empty—just a pair of suits in the corner. Likely salesman wrapping up their shift. They looked the type.

Since he was here, he’d have to order something. Sakuta glanced over the menu and went with the classic pork loin *katsu*. Miori dithered for ages and then ordered something called the Black Katsu Curry.

“So what did you wanna talk about, Mitou?” he asked, after taking a sip of water.

“Gimme a sec.”

Miori reached for her tote bag. Pulled out the laptop with the fruit logo. She booted it up on the table next to them.

Tapped a few keys and turned it sideways so he could see.

“This,” she said.

She had a video-streaming site pulled up, with a triangular play button in the center.

The still frame showed only darkness.

“I can’t see anything?”

“You’re about to,” Miori said, hitting the play button.

The video opened on a smallish indoor venue. The stage was being filmed vertically from someone’s phone. The stage reminded him of something.

“Isn’t that our college?”

“Yep. This is the beauty contest from last year—or I guess the year before last, now.”

She had the volume turned down low, so he leaned in to listen. There was a crowd murmur, like a theater before the movie. Everyone waited with bated breath.

“There, see?”

Miori pointed at the screen just as a college girl entered from the wings. She wore a pure-white dress, her back ramrod straight, her heels clicking on the floor. Nene Iwamizawa, doing a classic model walk.

The MC said, “Entry number one, Nene Iwamizawa. Demonstrating her talent.”

To a round of applause, Nene sat down before the piano.

She took a deep breath.

And the noise of the crowd died away.

A moment later, Nene’s fingers danced across the keys, playing a melody he’d heard before.

“That one of Touko Kirishima’s songs?” he asked, glancing at Miori.

She nodded wordlessly, eyes on the screen.

The long intro ended.

Nene closed her eyes, and her voice softly rippled out across the room. An invisible wave of song, washing through him.

The feel of it lapping at him came after, a rush of emotion rising up from his feet and cresting at the top of his head.

The crowd was rendered speechless. Everyone there had likely meant to cheer, to clap, to go wild...to get themselves hyped up. Instead, they were overwhelmed.

Her voice was just that powerful.

Sakuta’s own jaw dropped and stayed that way for the duration of the video.

Nene’s song ended, her talons still in the heart of everyone present.

The piano part ended shortly after.

But still the hall stayed silent.

Only when Nene rose to her feet did they erupt. Excitement was evident in their roars.

“Wow!”

“Amazing!”

“Like the real thing!”

Call after call. People whistled.

The applause went on and on.

Their enthusiasm showed no signs of fading.

It seemed ready to last forever.

The video ended first.

It cut to black while the crowd was still at a fever pitch.

“The replay number is nuts,” Miori said, pointing to the stats.

“Two million...”

That’s what it said.

“And these comments,” Miori said, scrolling down.

———**So good.**

———**She’s legit great.**

———**And sounds just like Touko Kirishima.**

———**Their voices are identical.**

———**Is she the real deal?**

———**Someone prove it!**

———**She’s *clearly* Touko Kirishima.**

“The last comment was left in April. Ten months ago.”

“After that, no one could perceive her?”

That was probably an accurate guess.

“Do we have Touko Kirishima singing this same song?”

“Right over here.”

Miori had the URL ready. She must have known he’d ask.

She pressed play.

A music video started playing. A tin reindeer toy sat on a swing in a children’s park. He’d seen that toy before.

“That reindeer...”

The one Nene had him buy on their trip to Motomachi, in the Yamate Santa house.

As he was distracted by that, the prelude ended, and the verse began. The first syllable alone grabbed his attention. That’s how similar it sounded to Nene Iwamizawa’s own performance. The first and second verses, the chorus, even the bridge—none of it sounded any different.

If he hadn’t known better, he’d never even have suspected they weren’t the same singer. He’d have simply assumed they were.

It was plain as day why those comments had been full of people claiming Nene was the real deal.

“Based on this alone, I’m inclined to think she *is* Touko Kirishima.”

“Lots of people online thought so, too.”

Comparing the two videos had only made it more convincing.

“Nene Iwamizawa’s account got a lot of posts asking if it was true.”

“You sure looked into this, Mitou.”

“I mean, if only you and I can see her—that’s pretty scary.”

A very valid point.

“So what’s your take?”

“On what?”

“Whether they sound alike.”

“They do?”

But that sounded like a question.

“You don’t think she’s the real thing?”

“See, I also found *this*.”

Miori reached out and switched to a new tab.

This showed a whole list of posted videos. She scrolled down, and it went on for a while—there were easily over a hundred of them.

Every thumbnail had Touko Kirishima’s name.

Miori clicked one at random.

The song playing was the same one they’d just heard in two separate versions. On-screen was what looked like a recording studio, and the girl singing was in her early twenties, with long hair. The camera was placed directly to her side.

Her voice sounded just like Nene’s. Or just like Touko Kirishima’s.

At the least, a single listen was not enough to declare it different.

“What is this?” he asked, giving Miori a baffled look.

“Totally normal videos you find when searching Touko Kirishima’s name online. There’s hundreds of them.”

“And they’re all just like her?”

“Mm-hmm.”

She nodded emphatically.

“And the comments are sure they’ve found the real one.”

Miori’s finger slid down the track pad.

———**This one’s real!**

———**We found Touko Kirishima!**

———**We’ve got her this time!**

More or less the same things as on Nene’s video.

“Play count is roughly the same.”

Miori didn’t seem to know what to make of this.

“Two million?”

She nodded.

“The upload dates are all over the place, but on every video—the comments abruptly die off. Just like they do with Nene Iwamizawa.”

Miori was even less sure what to make of that information.

Sakuta was starting to get her point—but also didn’t know what to do with it. If he’d looked in a mirror, he would’ve seen that his expression was the spitting image of Miori’s.

“I find this hard to believe...but do we think nobody can see these people, either?” Miori asked.

A strained smile appeared on her face.

“I sure hope not...”

Not wanting to finish that thought, Sakuta trailed off.

It felt possible.

And that was why Miori was asking.

And why he could only answer with an awkward wince.

The silence was excruciating.

“Yikes.”

“Yikes, indeed.”

Nothing they could say would alleviate their concern.

All they could do was give each other forced smiles.

At which point...

“Here you are,” the waitress said, setting two trays down.

One had Sakuta’s pork loin *katsu* set.

And the other had Miori’s Black Katsu Curry.

“Uh, excuse me...,” he said, catching the waitress’s attention before she turned away.

“Yes? What is it?” she asked, smiling.

“Mind watching this video for a moment?”

He glanced at Miori, who held up the laptop for the lady to see. The video was already running.

It showed the same twentysomething girl they’d been watching.

“Video? Sorry, I’m not seeing anything.”

“Do you hear any music?” he asked. Miori turned the volume up.

Loud enough to be heard throughout the shop.

“I might not be young enough,” the lady laughed. “Is this the mosquito-alarm thing? Oh dear, I’m not ready to be old!”

“Thanks,” he said. “Bit of a weird ask, but it helped.”

“Oh? Well, enjoy.”

She saw someone new come in and went off to welcome them.

Miori quietly closed the laptop and put it back in her bag.

“Extra yikes.”

Her smile was very strained.

He imagined his was, too.

He really meant it when he said, “*Yikes* is the word.”

Miori lost half her smile.

Sakuta’s was surely faltering just as much.

“Guess we should eat.”

The one salvation here—the pork loin *katsu* and the Black Katsu Curry both looked very good.

“Yeah. Let’s do that.”

“Let’s.”

“Super-duper yikes.”

Sakuta had split up with Miori at Ofuna Station and taken the train back to Fujisawa. On his usual walk home, he found himself saying that word over and over.

“Yiiiiikes.”

On the gentle slope.

As he passed the park.

As he peered into his mailbox.

And on the elevator up.

He said “Yikes” again as he turned the key in the door.

He’d lost count of how many times he’d said it.

Because Nene Iwamizawa wasn’t the only invisible woman?

Or because he’d found that out?

Likely the latter.

If only he’d remained blissfully ignorant.

“Seriously, yikes,” he said, stepping inside.

As he took off his shoes, the phone rang.

“Yes, yes, coming,” he said, hustling down the hall.

The number on the display looked vaguely familiar.

He went ahead and answered.

“Hello?”

Proper manners.

He heard someone gulp. They seemed tense.

“Is this the Azusagawa residence?”

That voice told him at once who this was. No wonder the number had looked familiar.

The caller added, "This is Fukuyama speaking."

"It's me. What's up?"

"Whew! Azusagawa! Get a cell phone, man. It was hard as hell digging up your number. I started with Asuka from the mixer..."

"The future nurse?"

There'd been a couple of girls from the nursing program at that mixer. Asuka and Chiharu.

"Yep, yep. That got me to Kamisato, then to her boyfriend, and finally to you."

"Surprised Kunimi told you."

Personal information was sensitive these days.

"I told him it was an emergency, and he hooked me up."

Since he'd gone through Saki, the couple had known who Takumi was. That had probably done the trick.

"So what's going on?"

"First, sorry about the airport thing."

"You did nothing wrong."

"I didn't really listen. I had no idea what you were getting at."

"Don't worry about it."

Nene was the one who'd taken that hard. Sakuta had no clue what she'd been up to since. He'd called a few times, but she hadn't picked up.

"I said a lot at once, Fukuyama. How you handling it?"

"Uh, well, that's why I'm calling."

Just as it had at the airport, his tone dropped a notch. He seemed to be talking slower than usual, and that was likely the case. Before he spoke again, Takumi let out a long sigh—probably entirely unconscious.

“I got called back to Hokkaido.”

“That sounds like bad news?”

“Yeah, it was. Classmate of mine from junior high got hit by a car, passed away.”

His voice sounded distant. As though he was talking to himself.

“You were close?”

“Different high schools, hadn’t seen each other since we graduated...but we talked a lot in junior high. He’d transferred in from Tokyo in our second year.”

This must be the transfer student Nene had told Sakuta about. The same one who’d first made her notice Takumi.

“I was headed to his funeral, couldn’t really think about anything else.”

“I sure picked the worst timing, then.”

“But rushing back home was the right choice. They say funerals are for the living, and I get why.”

There was a wistful note in Takumi’s voice, like he was talking to the skies above.

“So you said your good-byes?”

“I did. Bawled my eyes out. Old classmates laughed at me.”

He chuckled, trying to cheer himself up.

But the emotions were flooding back, and his voice had choked up.

“You called to share that?”

“No, well, yeah, but...this is something I heard at the wake.”

“What?”

“About the dreaming hashtag.”

Sakuta hadn’t paid that phrase much attention the last couple of weeks. After Coming-of-Age Day, the media had largely dropped the topic, so it had been out of sight, out of mind.

It felt like a thing of the past already.

“Is that still big up in Hokkaido?”

“Still is in Tokyo, too. Comes up at every mixer.”

“First I’ve heard of it.”

“You ain’t on social media much, huh?”

“So what’s the hashtag got to do with it, Senpai?”

“The friend who died? He didn’t have a Christmas Eve dream.”

“Yeah?”

Most grown-ups hadn’t experienced these freakishly real dreams. Even in his own generation, there were exceptions—like Mai and Touko.

“People think they show the future, right?”

“That’s a widely held view.”

Sakuta had them pegged as something else, though.

“So our old classmates are thinking if you didn’t dream, it’s because you’ll be dead.”

“.....”

This had not occurred to him.

If you didn’t exist in the future, how could you dream about it?

The equation added up.

The logic was sound.

“I know it’s far-fetched, but I feel like you mentioned Sakurajima not having one of those dreams, so...”

So he’d felt the need to call.

“I agree it’s far-fetched, but I do appreciate the heads-up.”

Nothing revealed here was set in stone.

But Takumi had helped him put several pieces together.

Tomoe's dream.

Mai's lack thereof.

If Mai really did wind up in a coma after being police chief for a day, and she was still unconscious by the date of so many other dreams—April 1—then that *would* explain why she hadn't dreamed.

But there were still contradictions. In those same April 1 dreams, Mai had been up and about, onstage telling everyone she was Touko Kirishima.

If she was in a coma, how was she onstage, showing off her singing chops?

Did that bring Ikumi's theory into play? That these dreams weren't the future, but a glimpse of another world? Another potential reality?

The truth seemed to be leaning in that direction, but it would never do to assume.

Takumi had helped him find more possibilities. But he felt like this was only the tip of the iceberg.

"Also, Azusagawa."

"What, Senpai?"

"That right there!"

"What right there?"

"Why'd you start calling me that?!"

"I respect my elders."

"....."

Takumi seemed dumbfounded.

"Turns out, you're two years older than me."

"How do you know that?! I never told anyone!"

His voice was almost a yelp.

"Heard about it from someone who knows you well, Senpai."

"You mean...the girlfriend you were talking about at the airport?"

“Yep.”

“Then I really did forget about her.”

He sounded convinced. More than Sakuta had expected.

“You’re buying into my ravings?”

“I’ve had this nagging feeling I’m forgetting something. Like that time you asked me why I’d picked this college.”

Sakuta hadn’t read much into it, but Takumi had certainly seemed rather confused.

“Like, I should know this...so why don’t I?”

That made sense now.

Sakuta knew exactly why Takumi couldn’t remember the motive behind his choice of higher education.

He’d only taken these exams to be with Nene Iwamizawa. But he could no longer perceive her. With Nene at the heart of his motivation, her absence removed his very reason to be here.

“And what you said at the airport—about the scarf? I started thinking, Maybe *that’s* why.”

“If you’re taking my word for it, try to remember her.”

“I’ll *try*, sure.”

“Try harder! She didn’t dream, either.”

“.....”

He heard Takumi gulp.

“She might be in trouble.”

“That bad?”

“That bad.”

“.....”

“I’ve got my hands full with Mai, so she’s all yours, Senpai.”

“If I pull it off, will you promise to stop calling me that?”

“Sure thing, Senpai.”

“Consider me motivated.”

Takumi chuckled.

Sakuta found himself relaxing a bit, too.

“Might be for the best you’re back home. Try looking through your yearbooks. Maybe it’ll trigger something.”

“Got it. Worth a shot. I’ll call if I get anywhere.”

“Same.”

“Then this is good-bye.”

The call ended.

Sakuta put the phone down but picked it back up immediately.

He dialed Mai’s number.

It rang several times before she answered.

“Sakuta? What is it?”

That alone prompted a sigh of relief.

He could only reply with one word.

“Mai.”

“Yes?”

“Can I see you right now?”

“You have excellent timing.”

“Oh?”

The intercom rang.

Hoping, he pressed the answer button.

Mai was on the display.

“It’s cold out. Let me in.”

“Right away.”

He pressed the unlock button and hung up the phone.

Unable to wait for her to reach his floor, Sakuta moved to the door, put sandals on, and stepped outside.

He heard the elevator doors open down the hall.

And a moment later, he saw her.

“Mai,” he called.

She looked a bit taken aback, but that soon softened.

“What’s wrong?” she said, approaching him.

Sakuta moved toward her.

The distance between them was five yards.

With each step, that shrank. Four yards. Then three.

Finally, Mai stopped a step away from him.

Sakuta didn’t stop—he swept her into his arms.

“Seriously, what’s the matter?”

Mai’s tone didn’t change at all.

But she could feel his arms shaking.

“What’s wrong?” she asked again, gently.

He had only one answer.

“I’ll keep you safe,” he said.

That didn’t tell her much.

She didn’t know what he did.

But she knew *something* had happened.

And that was enough for them.

“Then I’ll keep *you* safe, Sakuta.”

With that, her arms closed around him.

Back inside, the phone was ringing.

Nasuno looked up at the sound, and it went to the answering machine.

“I need your help with something. On February third, be at the following address: Yokohama City, Kanazawa—”

It was Touko Kirishima calling.

3

February 3. Setsubun.

By three thirty, the sun was already pretty low in the west.

Sakuta was outside a three-story apartment building about ten minutes on foot from Kanazawa-hakkei Station.

“This the place?”

The lot number on the utility pole matched the address he’d scribbled on a Post-it Note.

He’d taken that from the message Touko had left on his answering machine two nights earlier. He’d called back to see what was up, but she hadn’t answered.

With no other option, he’d gone where she told him to.

He had to talk to Touko, either way.

The note specified room 201.

He went up the stairs and checked the door. Number 201 was at the far end.

No name on the tag.

Just a blank, utilitarian door.

He had no clue who lived here.

If he rang the intercom, he might find himself face-to-face with a total stranger.

But hovering around outside a random apartment just made him look suspicious. He quit dithering and pressed the button.

He heard a bell ring inside.

The button worked, at least.

“Hope I’m not stepping into the lion’s den.”

Sakuta perked up when he heard footsteps inside coming toward him. They stopped at the door, and he heard the lock turn. The door swung open.

A familiar face popped out.

Touko, in her miniskirt Santa duds.

The very girl who’d called him here.

“I came like you said.”

“Drop these in the dumpster below,” she said, handing him two very full bags in lieu of a greeting.

“What are they?” he asked. They were both very heavy.

“Go on,” she said, not answering. The door closed.

Standing outside with two bags of trash made him look so sketchy. He didn’t want a neighbor calling the cops on him. Nene was invisible and would not be able to vouch for him.

That left him carrying the trash back down the stairs he’d just come up. The plastic was transparent enough that he could tell it was mostly clothing.

Quite a lot of it.

A few years’ worth.

This that decluttering thing?

He reached the bottom of the stairs, located the metal container where the residents disposed of their trash, and opened the lid.

He picked one bag up and tossed it in. As he threw the second in, he heard a clunk.

“Hmm?”

He was unaware of the contents, and curiosity got the better of him.

This might not be something that should go in the regular trash. She'd asked him to do this, but he was the one dropping it here; best to sort it properly.

He yanked the bag back out of the dumpster and checked the bottom. Something gleamed through the bag. By the sound of it, not anything plastic. Glass or at least plexiglass.

He opened the bag to double-check.

And soon identified the object.

"Her beauty contest trophy."

The name of the contest was carved into the side.

And no surprise, the winner's name was Nene Iwamizawa.

Was this something you threw away?

Presumably, she thought so, or she wouldn't have put it in the bag.

Sakuta thought about it for a minute, then tossed the bag of clothes back in the dumpster. If he threw the trophy out here, that would make it his fault.

He went back up the stairs, inspecting the trophy for any damage. Outside her door, he rang the bell again.

"Took you long enough," she said grumpily.

"Most people would say thank you first."

"Thank you, you were such a help."

"And did you mean to throw this out?"

He showed Touko the trophy.

She looked down at his hands. Right at it.

"Do you often put things in the trash you don't mean to throw away?" she asked.

"I don't."

"Good! We're the same."

"Isn't this important, though? To Nene Iwamizawa?"

He gave the name on the trophy a pointed glance.

“Who’s that?” she asked, like it wasn’t her.

“Your name.”

“What are you talking about? I’m Touko Kirishima.”

Touko was acting entirely natural. Reacting to his words. No interest in the trophy at all. She’d barely glanced at it. Didn’t seem to be feigning indifference. Just didn’t care, like it wasn’t hers to begin with. Touko didn’t seem to have any attachment to the trophy at all.

On Nene Iwamizawa’s social media, she’d sounded beyond thrilled to win the competition. Expressed her delight, thanked everyone who’d made it possible...

This trophy was proof of that accomplishment. Would she really just toss it out?

Touko’s attitude was all too clear, and that’s what bothered him. Something felt wrong. Unsettling.

She’d said “Who’s that?” like they were talking about a stranger.

He’d picked up on nothing like this on their trip to Motomachi.

But Sakuta wasn’t really sure what the nature of this oddity was.

He knew something was wrong, but not what.

Arguably, Touko had always been kinda weird about this stuff.

“Come on in,” she said, opening the door all the way.

“Thanks,” he said, putting his doubts aside. He stepped through the door, figuring she hadn’t called him all the way here just to take out her trash.

“Use those slippers.”

The doormat had a Christmas tree on it, and the slippers were adorned with reindeer. Certainly matching the miniskirt Santa theme.

It didn’t seem weird yet.

He just figured it was her thing.

Just past the entrance was a small kitchen, with three doors leading out. Two

were likely to the bath and the toilet. Touko opened the third door, which led to the main room. A decent-sized studio.

“Make yourself at home,” she said, moving on in.

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Sakuta started to follow her—but soon ground to a halt.

“.....”

The moment he caught a glimpse of the room beyond, surprise ripped through him, and he stopped on pure reflex.

For the simple reason that the interior was beyond his wildest imaginings.

The object in the center first drew his eye—a Christmas tree, decked out in gold and silver ornaments. It was about the same height as Sakuta himself.

On the shelves by the wall were pine cone trees, snow globes, and Santa dolls. Among these was the tin reindeer she’d had him buy in Motomachi. There was a little sled filled with gift boxes.

The only normal objects in the room were the sleeper sofa and a work desk, on which sat a laptop with a fruit logo. Everything else was coated in Santa Claus and Christmas.

Definitely not your typical college-girl pad. He could have dealt with this if it had actually been that time of year and she was having friends over for a Christmas party. But it was February 3. Setsubun—a completely different holiday.

“Don’t just stand there. Come.”

“A very unique room,” he said.

Arguably, this was the kind of place a miniskirt Santa *would* live.

From the description alone, it might even sound festive. Children might like it! But after seeing it with his own eyes, fear was winning out.

Sakuta looked around again, and a stuffed Santa looked back at him. Beady little eyes, staring. He wanted to turn around and go home. Prolonged exposure to this place might drive him mad.

“Put this together.”

Oblivious to his state of mind, Touko moved a folding table from the corner to the floor by the tree.

On the table were toy blocks made by a Danish company. Pieces were everywhere, and the set was only half-assembled.

“Boys are good at these things, yes?”

“I imagine not all of us.”

“But you?”

“I do all right.”

She put down a snowman cushion for him, and he sat on it, looking over the instructions. The complete version would be a lodge with a very pointy snow-capped roof. There were people living inside, and a Santa figure, so clearly this was a scene depicting a visit from Santa. It was pretty nifty.

All she had done was the ground and foundations.

“I’ll get to work.”

First, he sorted the blocks by color. Gray chimney bits, brown lodge walls, white and blue for the roof. Once that was done, he started building the walls.

Touko sat across the table, watching him work.

That alone was sort of like a date. If this had been his house and Mai were across the table, he’d have enjoyed it. But this was not his house, and he was not with Mai. It was Santa’s house, and a miniskirt Santa was watching him build. What was the point?

Wondering, he plugged away at the task before him. When he couldn’t bear it any longer, he decided to broach the topic at hand—the reason he’d come over when she called.

“Remember that #dreaming thing around Christmas last year?”

“What about it?”

“A lot of young people got presents from you and had dreams of the future.”

“So?”

Touko’s eyes were on his fingers as he rummaged through the blocks.

“There’s a sinister rumor going around.”

“I really don’t care.”

She was brushing him off.

He didn’t let that stop him.

“They say if you didn’t dream on Christmas Eve, it means you have no future to dream about.”

“Meaning...?”

Touko looked up, her eyes shooting him a question.

“Because you’re dead.”

He didn’t mince words.

This was something that needed to be clear.

“.....”

“Kirishima, you said you didn’t dream.”

He slotted a window into the wall.

“Like your girlfriend,” Touko said, testing the waters.

“And this isn’t just rumors. Someone actually did die.”

“Someone you know?”

“Someone *you* know.”

“.....”

A momentary silence.

Filled with the sound of blocks clicking into place.

“I’m afraid I don’t know anyone dead.”

“The boy who transferred from Tokyo in junior high.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Touko’s tone never wavered. She didn’t bat an eye at the news of a dead acquaintance. There was not a shred of surprise, or even a hint of sadness. Given what he’d just said, this was not nearly a strong enough reaction, and it bothered him.

“.....”

His doubts about her attitude must have shown on his face. This conversation wasn’t adding up. It was like he was trying to slot a block into the wrong place.

“What’s that look for?”

“Fukuyama was rushing back to Hokkaido to be at that boy’s funeral.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What are *you* talking about, Kirishima?”

This was weird. Touko had been acting weird since he got here. There was a disconnect. He was sure of that but not sure where it was.

As he searched for words, Touko spoke first.

“Who the hell is Fukuyama?”

That caught him off guard.

That was more than weird. Way beyond a simple disconnect. Sakuta locked up completely, not believing his ears. She did not just say that.

“Takumi Fukuyama, your boyfriend!”

He got a bit loud, leaning in.

“Never heard of him,” Touko said, leaning back, resting on her hand.

She had a baffled look on her face. She blinked twice.

“You’ve been dating since Hokkaido!”

“News to me!”

This could not be taken as a joke.

“Do you really not know this?!”

He’d completely forgotten about the set he was building.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said, looking actively annoyed.

“Fukuyama! The boy Nene Iwamizawa was dating!”

He looked her right in the eyes, pleading, hoping for any sign of recognition.

But got none.

He’d braced himself for another denial.

But Touko blew right past his expectations.

In the worst way.

“That’s another name I don’t know,” she sighed.

“Huh?”

“Who’s this Iwamizawa?”

A very basic query.

She’d drawn a blank.

Asking because she genuinely didn’t know.

That was not a performance.

This was real, and he didn’t know why and could not understand how.

A shiver ran through him. Like his heart had frozen over.

The Christmas and Santa Claus decorations no longer seemed nearly as freakish. Touko herself was far more unsettling.

“Recognize this trophy?” he croaked.

“No. That’s why I threw it out. And then you brought it back.”

“You really don’t recognize it?”

“I do not. That’s what I said.”

“Cross your heart and hope to die?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“.....”

Was Sakuta in the wrong? Touko was so consistent it was starting to feel that way.

She didn't know what she didn't know.

She was being perfectly clear.

“That's good enough. Go home,” Touko said, exasperated.

She got to her feet, glaring down at him.

Looking up at her, he asked one last question.

“You don't even know that *you're* Nene Iwamizawa?”

How was that possible?

A few days before, she'd definitely remembered that. She'd talked about her time with Takumi back in Hokkaido, told him how they'd first met.

No way she'd forget that unless she, like, had amnesia.

And yet this was actually happening, right in front of him.

“I don't know a Nene Iwamizawa. I've never heard the name. Satisfied?”

She overenunciated each syllable, pounding her point home. Very certain of her stance, no signs of hesitation—why dither about what you didn't know?

She genuinely didn't know she was Nene Iwamizawa.

“Like I keep saying, I'm Touko Kirishima.”

All she had left was *this* identity.

“.....”

Sakuta got to his feet, unable to say another word.

“Throw that away on your way out,” Touko said, glancing at the trophy on the table with complete indifference.

Nothing he could say would get through to her.

So he reached out and grabbed the trophy.

“I'll be going, then. All you have left is the roof and chimney,” he said, looking

at the blocks.

“I can handle that much. Thanks.”

This last word felt entirely hollow.

Had he done *anything* for her?

Pondering that, he moved to the door. Took off the reindeer slippers on the Christmas doormat. Put on his shoes and went outside without even looking back.

On the way down the stairs, he felt eyes on his back, but he neither paused nor turned around.

Sakuta kept moving until he reached the dumpster.

He looked down at the clear trophy in his hand.

The prize for winning the beauty contest one school year back.

Nene Iwamizawa’s name engraved upon it.

Proof she’d existed.

But if the girl herself was no longer aware of that fact, did this name hold any meaning?

If she’d forgotten, and Takumi—and the rest of the world—could not perceive her, then was Nene Iwamizawa even alive?

“Maybe that’s why she didn’t dream.”

If existence was defined by your own perceptions and those of others, then Nene Iwamizawa might as well be dead.

All that remained was for Sakuta to forget her and Miori to stop perceiving her—and then perhaps she really would die.

He raised the lid and looked down at the two bags she’d asked him to throw out.

“She was throwing away Nene Iwamizawa’s life?”

The trophy in his hand also belonged to Nene Iwamizawa.

Touko Kirishima had no need of it.

“At least throw it out yourself,” he growled, and he let the lid fall.

He shoved the trophy in his pocket.

And turned toward the station.

4

Sakuta’s feet took him to Kanazawa-hakkei Station, but instead of heading through the gates, he turned to the pay phones. He took all the change out of his pocket and stacked it on top of the phone. Receiver in hand, he dropped in the first ten-yen coin and punched in eleven digits he used a lot.

The sound of a phone ringing assured him he’d got it right.

The call connected after the third ring.

“Futaba? You got time?” he asked, speaking first.

“I’ve got class with Himeji, so make it quick.”

Rio did not seem surprised, and her answer wasted no time.

He heard another voice behind her.

“Is that Sakuta-sensei? I don’t mind waiting for him.”

That was Sara’s voice.

If she was with Rio, they must be at the cram school, possibly discussing the direction of her lessons in the free area.

“I don’t wanna disrupt Himeji’s lessons, so I’ll keep it short.”

Reining in his emotions, he gave Rio a rundown of the day’s events.

When he finished, Rio’s first response was a long, drawn-out sigh.

“Well, this just keeps getting weirder,” she said.

“That’s why I’m calling you, Futaba.”

“Let’s start with the Santa room.”

“It was very unnerving.”

“Sounds like that’s a Touko Kirishima thing.”

“How so?”

And why was her response phrased like this was secondhand information?

“I’ll let her explain.”

“Her?”

Even as he asked, a different voice cut in.

“Me, Sakuta-sensei!”

“Himeji, you’re still there? You shouldn’t sneak around listening to other people talk.”

“I was listening in plain sight!”

Her penchant for eavesdropping had clearly not gone away with her Adolescence Syndrome.

“Being cute about it doesn’t help.”

“I bet you stop griping once you hear what I have to say.”

Sara sounded supremely confident.

“Then lay it on me.”

“Touko Kirishima’s videos always have something Christmassy in them. Santa, reindeer, trees, you name it. You should really know this, Sensei.”

There was a laugh in her voice, like everyone else knew that.

“.....”

Come to think of it, the tin reindeer had been in the video he watched with Miori at the *tonkatsu* shop. If Sara was right, and the other videos also had Christmas stuff, then...what did that mean?

“I didn’t know that, but thanks for telling me. Can you put Futaba back on the line?”

He kept his tone professional.

“Not until you do a better job praising me.”

“Next time there’s a new donut at the station café, I’ll buy you one.”

“Really? Rad! Okay, switching you to Rio-sensei.”

Sara’s cheery voice vanished from the line.

“That’s about it for the Santa room,” “Rio-sensei” said. Her voice was much calmer.

“But what does it mean?”

“Exactly what you think, Azusagawa. Nene Iwamizawa picked up on the trend in her videos and started buying up everything that appeared in them. You said she made you help her shop.”

“Yeah, but...what for?”

“So she could become Touko Kirishima.”

Rio made that sound all too obvious.

So obvious he found it hard to follow.

His brain wasn’t keeping up here.

What conclusion was Rio trying to make?

“When you first told me about her, I just assumed no one else could perceive her,” Rio said.

“Given Mai’s case, we had precedent.”

But that wasn’t actually true. Their cases were different. Today the girl herself could no longer remember her original name—which had not happened with Mai.

“It’s not that Nene Iwamizawa is disappearing—it’s that she’s *becoming* Touko Kirishima.”

“Back up, Futaba. If Nene Iwamizawa was Touko Kirishima, why would she need to eliminate Nene Iwamizawa? They’re both her.”

“I’m saying your potential friend’s theory is right.”

“.....”

Only now did he remember Miori’s words.

She’d argued Nene Iwamizawa *wasn’t* actually Touko Kirishima.

And Rio was saying that same thing. With all the confidence of someone completing a proof. Sakuta attempted to catch up.

“Since she’s not real, she had to go buy all the Santas and reindeer that were in the real Touko Kirishima’s videos?”

“That’s what I think. If she was actually Touko Kirishima, why didn’t she already have that stuff?”

“I get your point, just...”

He was still balking at the idea. Just a whole new concept rearing up before him.

“Is that a thing?”

Those words sprang from a feeling he could not put a name to.

“I’m not sure, so I can’t speak for her. It’s possible she’s not even aware of it.”

“I guess, yeah.”

People often didn’t understand themselves. Probably most people didn’t.

“What we know right now is that the world does not yet perceive her as Touko Kirishima.”

“Agreed.”

“And if she’s really that obsessed with becoming Touko Kirishima, Sakurajima might actually be in danger.”

The introduction of Mai’s name into the conversation made his heart skip a beat.

“What does that mean, Futaba?”

What was Rio trying to say?

“The Coming-of-Age Day broadcast stopped the media from pursuing that story, but online, Mai Sakurajima is still the leading candidate for Touko Kirishima’s secret identity.”

“.....I’m aware.”

“And if that doesn’t change, the world at large will think she *is* Touko

Kirishima.”

He was finally catching up to her.

“So Mai’s preventing Nene Iwamizawa from becoming Touko Kirishima.”

“At the moment, yes. Azusagawa, you said Sakurajima will have an accident tomorrow, while she’s police chief for a day?”

“Yeah, in Koga’s dream...which was likely a future simulation.”

“I might be overthinking it, but any chance Nene Iwamizawa’s involved?”

“.....”

He couldn’t dismiss the notion.

“She’s invisible,” Rio said. “Arguably, she can do whatever she wants.”

“I sure didn’t read any threats from her today.”

But Sakuta couldn’t completely rule them out, either. There was a lot about her he didn’t get, which made it hard to make any declarations. He didn’t know her well enough to trust her, or enough to be suspicious.

“I’m planning on attending the event tomorrow,” Rio said. “I can’t see her, though, so I doubt I’ll be much help.”

“At least we know what’ll happen then—it’s what comes after that’s really worrying.”

Even if they averted this specific threat, the real problem was ongoing.

No one could perceive Nene.

She could commit a crime and not get caught.

No one could see what she’d done.

“Yeah.”

“So we’ve gotta settle this for good. And to do that...”

“I’ve gotta cure her Adolescence Syndrome.”

Back to that.

Their first solution remained the best one.

They were running out of time.

They had until tomorrow afternoon, when Mai arrived at the police event. Less than twenty-four hours remained.

And only one real move to make.

He had to bet on Takumi.

Sakuta's words would never reach her.

He could try force, but that would only be a temporary measure.

"Futaba..."

"What?"

"Can you buy airplane tickets the day of the flight?"

"I never have, but I think you can."

With that, Sakuta ended his call to Rio.

He still had a couple of coins left.

He looked up, and it was already getting dark. The wind getting chilly. His hands numb, he dialed another number—not the same one, but his home phone.

The moment it picked up, he said, "Kaede? It's me."

"What?"

"Sorry, won't be back tonight. Look after Nasuno."

"What? Why? Where are you going?"

"Hokkaido."

"What? Why?"

The exact same response two times running.

"Well, fine, just buy me something. Wait, no! Mai's here making dinner! I'll put her on. Mai, it's Sakuta!"

Kaede was gone before he could answer.

Two, three seconds later...

“Sakuta?” Mai’s voice on the line.

“Sorry, Mai. Gotta go meet Fukuyama in Hokkaido. Look after Kaede. I’ll be back before the event tomorrow.”

“Okay. I’ll be staying here tonight.”

“Now I wanna come home.”

“If you do, I won’t be staying.”

“Aww.”

“Take care. Call me when you get there.”

“I will. Oh, and, Mai...”

“Mm?”

“I love you.”

“The hamburg steaks are burning, so here’s Kaede.”

There was laughter in her voice, and a moment later Kaede was back on the line. She grumbled a bit more, urged him to buy something again, and then hung up.

He put the phone down.

But kept his hand on it.

He had one last place to call.

But here his hands froze.

The stack of coins on the green box was gone. He’d used his last ten-yen coin.

His gaze turned toward the vending machines. They might let him make change.

But then a voice called his name.

“Azusagawa?”

Surprised, he swung around—and found Ikumi, frowning at him.

“There’s no classes,” she said. “Why are you here?”

“Running an errand.”

She glanced at the phone behind him.

“You doing the volunteer thing?” he asked.

“Yep. Setsubun, too.”

Likely involving an *oni* mask and thrown beans. Ikumi took these things seriously. He could see her going all out.

“Akagi, I hate to impose, but can I borrow your phone or some change?”

She raised an eyebrow but held out her phone without asking why.

He called Takumi in Hokkaido.

5

The train to Haneda Airport was empty. There was maybe one group per long bench. It was past eight, so the rush had long since died down.

In that quiet car, Sakuta was using Ikumi’s phone to watch Touko Kirishima videos. One after another, with the volume all the way off.

With the intent of confirming Sara’s theory.

The first video had a Santa doll.

The second a Christmas Tree.

The third a snow globe.

Later videos had sleds pulled by reindeer, stockings stuffed with presents, heaps of ornaments... Like Sara had said, they all had something Christmassy in them. And Sakuta recognized every last piece.

They’d all been somewhere in Nene’s room.

The video he was on now had a toy block lodge with a chimney on top and Santa about to climb down it to deliver presents.

That was no coincidence.

There was a clear intent.

And with that confirmed, he was done watching videos.

“Thanks for the phone,” he said, handing it back. Ikumi was sitting next to

him.

“Had enough?”

“Yep.”

“Okay.”

“You sure you wanna come, Akagi?”

Their train left Keikyu Kamata Station, already bound for the airport itself. Ikumi should have disembarked all the way back at Yokohama Station.

“If it’s related to messages from the other world, I wanna know.”

That’s why she’d offered to come along back at Kanazawa-hakkei Station.

“This isn’t on you, Akagi.”

“Sorry, I was born this way.”

“I know, and it’s not something to apologize for.”

“You prefer ‘Thank you,’ right?” Ikumi looked sheepish.

“Someone I know taught me that the best things to hear are ‘Nice work’ and ‘I love you.’”

“.....”

Izumi caught what he meant, and her gaze fell. But then she managed, “Thank you for letting me invite myself along. That better?”

“Much better.”

The next stop was the end of the line—the domestic flights terminal.

The last flight that night to New Chitose Airport took Sakuta and Ikumi into the air at nine thirty.

It rose up through the night clouds.

The lights of the ground faded, and the night sky stretched out above.

At last they reached cruising altitude at thirty-three thousand feet, flying at five hundred miles an hour. The air pressure shift made his ears pop. When that eased, the seat belt light went off, but an announcement warned them to keep

their belts on when seated.

Just as things settled down again, a cabin attendant started wheeling a cart around, offering drinks. Sakuta lowered his tray and took a hot onion soup. There was a bear's face staring back from the side of the paper cup. Ikumi saw that and smiled.

"The bear's not smiling."

"I like to think it is."

It was past ten, and the cabin was sleepily still.

The hum of the engines, the occasional turbulence.

Other passengers were watching movies on their phones or sleeping with blankets wrapped around them.

Sakuta kept one eye on the display showing the distance remaining and their flight speed, thinking.

About Touko Kirishima.

No, about Nene Iwamizawa.

A college junior. Majoring in international liberal arts.

From Hokkaido. Born March 30.

Played the piano, sang.

Started modeling back in high school, in Hokkaido.

Moved to Tokyo for college.

Landed a modeling agency, launched her career.

Crowned Miss Campus at a beauty contest in her sophomore year, becoming very recognizable. Her social media accounts picked up steam.

But then that spring, she stopped posting.

He imagined that's when other people stopped perceiving her. If Rio was correct, she'd tried to stop being Nene Iwamizawa and become Touko Kirishima.

Perhaps her awareness of her original identity had already begun to fade.

Sakuta had met her last year, at the end of October.

Right after Uzuki dropped out of college.

She'd been dressed as a miniskirt Santa and introduced herself as Touko Kirishima.

“.....”

That was about all Sakuta knew.

He didn't know how she felt about the move to Tokyo.

What she'd dreamed of, how her life on campus had gone.

He could only speculate about why she'd started vanishing.

There was no use thinking about any of that.

He could well ponder it for hours, days, and not reach the right answer. He would only be Sakuta and could never be Nene Iwamizawa.

He knew that—yet could not stop the wheels in his brain turning.

The dim lights in the cabin led him there.

Sakuta's thoughts were still going in circles when the captain warned them they'd be landing soon.

An hour and a half after takeoff.

Through the window, he could see Hokkaido at night.

“We look forward to serving you again.”

The flight attendants bowed the passengers off the plane, and Sakuta joined the flow, absently walking down the long corridors of the airport. Ikumi tagged along behind.

It was now past eleven, and the relatively empty airport was weirdly stressful.

They kept walking.

At last, they spied the arrivals lobby.

People waited outside the gates, scanning the crowds. Maybe thirty of them.

Mothers welcoming their sons with a smile, men looking relieved to see their

girls back home.

And in that crowd, Sakuta found a man in an orange scarf.

Takumi.

He'd seen Sakuta, too, and raised a hand, smiling to welcome his friend. That smile soon gave way to surprise, his eyes shifting to one side—he'd spotted Ikumi.

His jaw was still hanging open when they reached the lobby.

"I didn't think you'd actually come."

The same sentiment, that same smile.

"I said I would."

"Most people would be joking. And..." His gaze turned to Ikumi.

"Sorry to impose," she said, bobbing her head.

"Oh, that's totally fine. I just wondered why."

As they continued talking, they moved to the side of the room, out of the flow of traffic.

"So what's the plan? You got a place to stay?" Takumi asked, settling down on a bench.

"Hang on, I wanna touch base first."

With that, Ikumi stepped away. Clearly giving them a chance to talk.

Best he got to the point, then. Sakuta was pressed for time.

He sat down next to Takumi, a comfortable gap between them. This made the head of the trophy pop out of his coat pocket, and both their eyes lit on it.

"What is that?"

"Here."

Sakuta pulled the trophy out and showed it to Takumi.

A trophy proving that Nene had won the beauty contest.

"Seen this before?"

“.....”

Takumi frowned. His expression was tense.

That reaction alone didn't tell Sakuta much. Was that surprise? Bafflement? It could be read either way.

The only thing he was sure of—Takumi *was* looking at the trophy. Not taking his eyes off it.

He waited—and Takumi reached out, brushed his fingers against it, then took a firm hold on it.

Sakuta let go, and Takumi pulled the trophy to him, cradling it in his arms.

His fingers ran over the engraving.

Over the name *Nene Iwamizawa*.

Tenderly, again and again.

Takumi's lips fluttered.

No words emerged.

He should know her name, but he did not say it. Perhaps he couldn't.

“Azusagawa,” he said, at length.

“Fukuyama, relax. Remember.”

This trophy was clearly triggering *something*.

But Takumi shook his head.

Again and again, rejecting Sakuta's words.

“No, Azusagawa,” he said, his voice shaking. Hoarse.

“...Fukuyama?”

“I mean, this is...,” Takumi croaked. “She was overjoyed.”

A burst of emotion.

“I'd never seen Nene happier than when she won this contest!”

At last, her name crossed his lips. Tears were in his eyes.

Big drops fell, landing on the trophy. Pooling in Nene's name.

"How could I have forgotten that?!"

Takumi was staring at her name, a tender look in his eyes.

"Worth the trip to Hokkaido, then," Sakuta said, patting Takumi on the back.

Chapter

4

no dreams of santa claus



1

New Chitose Airport boasted an inn with hot springs.

It was well past one AM, and everyone was fast asleep.

This place was open all night, and they were killing time here before an early flight to Tokyo.

The indoor and outdoor baths were equally large. It had a restaurant, break rooms, even a hot stone spa.

Sakuta took a nice bath, donned the provided *jinbei*, and sat down on a recliner in the relaxation room.

He flipped through a volume from the room's manga shelf.

After a while, Takumi joined him in the next chair over. He was wearing the same gray *jinbei*.

"Word from Akagi. She booked the first flight back in the morning."

"What time?"

"Seven thirty. Should reach Haneda a bit after nine."

Takumi's eyes were on his phone, reading what Ikumi had sent through a messaging app.

"Where's she?"

"Resting in the girls' relaxation room."

"Thank her for me."

"Hell no. Do that yourself."

With that, Takumi tossed the phone to him. Sakuta had to drop the manga to catch it, losing his place. He'd only been skimming it, so no big whoop.

He put the manga aside and glanced at the screen. The message app was still up and running. The other side was labeled **Ikumi Akagi**.

He wrote:

———**Thanks for getting the tickets, from Azusagawa.**

It was soon marked read.

———**You're welcome.**

How polite.

Very Ikumi. He let out a wheezy laugh.

"Thanks for the phone," he said, tossing it back.

Takumi let out a surprised yelp but easily caught it.

"Yo, Azusagawa."

"Mm?"

"Sakurajima know you're here with Akagi?"

"I called and let her know before we popped in here."

"What'd you tell her?"

"Somehow Akagi ended up tagging along."

"What'd she say?"

"She said, 'Hmm.'"

Takumi gave him a horrified look.

"So she's super pissed?" he asked, attempting a smile and failing.

"Don't worry, I'll blame you for everything."

"Sounds like I *should* be worried."

"It's the truth, though."

"Oh, right."

Takumi gave up and flopped back against his seat.

The conversation died down.

“.....”

“.....”

Silence reigned.

Sakuta didn't reach for the manga, and Takumi didn't look at his phone.

Both just sat there like they were waiting for something.

It was a full minute before Takumi said anything else.

“Uh, Azusagawa...”

“What?”

“What's gonna happen to Nene?”

That long silence had been leading up to this.

“Right now, she's lost track of Nene Iwamizawa. If you and I forget her, she might as well no longer exist.”

Miori had also been able to see her, but he didn't bother bringing that up.

“What should I do?” Takumi asked, his voice the same as with the first question.

Serious but not desperate.

“The power of your love is the only thing that can save her.”

“A man who forgot her for most of a year? Where do I get off talking about love?”

“If not you, then...there's no one else who can. Get it together.”

Sakuta kept his eyes forward, saying what had to be said.

Takumi seemed taken aback.

But then he laughed out loud.

“Ah-ha-ha, been a while since anyone clapped back that hard.”

“Get your girlfriend back so *she* can clap you back.”

“Nene’s super scary when she’s mad.”

But he was speaking with real warmth and affection.

Takumi and Nene. He could feel the time they’d spent together.

“She was pissed when I asked her out, too. ‘Took you long enough!’ she said.”

“And when you failed exams?”

“First time she cried. ‘Why?!’ Second time she was supportive. ‘Don’t push yourself too hard.’”

Takumi laughed, like that was worse.

“And the third time was the charm?”

“She cried again, saying, ‘I’m so glad.’ She’d been in shambles.”

“.....”

“Thinking back, I bet she was already going through some stuff.”

“.....”

“She was legit famous back home. Going off to Tokyo for modeling jobs. No one but Nene did anything like that. They even knew her name at other high schools—people would roll past just to scope her out. May not sound like much to *you*, but...”

Takumi smiled awkwardly because he was referring to Mai. No one could really compete with her in the “famous” category. She wasn’t a local celebrity, but a national one.

“But coming to Tokyo, it didn’t seem like she got as many jobs as she’d hoped. Not that Nene ever wanted to talk about *that*.”

“She won the beauty contest.”

“That’s *why* she was so thrilled. The song she did struck a chord. And so she started filming videos of herself singing. Happy to be recognized for something. People saying she sounded just like Touko Kirishima, like the real deal—Nene was enjoying that.”

“Was that what she’d wanted to do?”

“She told me she was hoping to be an announcer for a Tokyo TV station. Another reason why she was so pumped about the beauty contest victory. I’d known she could sing from karaoke, but...”

“Now she’s claiming to actually be Touko Kirishima. And seems like she genuinely believes that.”

“What went wrong?”

“A lot of things, with her and with you. But you can still fix it.”

“.....”

Takumi just stared at him.

Sakuta ignored that.

“Maybe I can,” Takumi muttered.

“You can,” Sakuta said, nodding.

“Azusagawa...,” Takumi said, not looking at him.

“Mm?”

“I *do* love Nene.”

A confession out of nowhere. Though perhaps it wasn’t so out of the blue for Takumi. Talking about her had likely brought those feelings back up, along with all his memories of her.

“I love Nene,” he said again.

“Tell her that tomorrow.”

Sakuta hopped up off the recliner and headed to the door.

“Where you going?”

“Toilet.”

“Make it a good one.”

“You get some sleep, Fukuyama.”

“Like that’s possible?”

Sakuta didn't dignify that with a response, just sailed out of the room.

As advertised, he hit up the toilet, but instead of heading back to Takumi afterward, he went downstairs. One flight down was the hot springs, and two flights down was the restaurant.

The latter was closed for the night; there was a light on by the free-drinks counter, but the rest was dark.

He poured himself some hot *houjicha*.

A voice called from behind.

"Azusagawa?"

He turned to find a woman in a yukata sitting on the edge of the raised tatami floor.

Ikumi.

She must have swung by for a drink, too. She had a mug in one hand.

Sakuta took a seat a respectable distance from her.

"Thanks for reserving the flight back."

"You said that already."

"Akagi, you've been a huge help."

"That one's new."

Ikumi took a sip of tea, not showing much emotion.

"You even did the research and found this place."

She'd been the one who'd suggested they kill time here. Before their flight at Haneda, she'd also said, "We'll be arriving late. Better buy a change of clothes here."



“Well, that benefits me,” she said now.

“Still helped.”

“Mm.”

Ikumi sipped her tea again, looking uncomfortable. For all her work helping people, she wasn't getting any better at taking a compliment.

“.....”

“.....”

There was no one else here this late, so if they weren't talking, nothing broke the silence. Except maybe the hum of the AC.

“Akagi...”

“What?”

“What's your take on Fukuyama's girlfriend?”

It was an easy question to ask. Simple to put it in words.

But extremely hard to answer. A really thorny problem.

To his surprise, Ikumi didn't have to think about it. Never even looked lost. She answered like she'd had her remarks prepared.

“I think it's pretty typical.”

She didn't look at all rattled. Wasn't hesitating. Just being rational.

A bit too unflustered.

“You think?” Sakuta asked, voicing that doubt.

Her words had not been enough to convey her intent.

“Has that never happened to you, Azusagawa? You never lost yourself, had to find yourself again?”

That question made him wince. This time she'd gotten through loud and clear.

“I sure have,” she said. “Nothing went right, or I was just going with the flow... and in my case, I wound up in another world entirely.”

“I've done that, too. Totally lost myself.”

It felt right. Ikumi's words allowed him to grasp the enigma that was Nene Iwamizawa at last. They made her situation feel familiar.

"With Fukuyama's girlfriend, she let that flow turn her into Touko Kirishima."

Things hadn't worked out in Tokyo, and it had felt like a rejection of everything she was. Then *the* Mai Sakurajima had shown up. She'd struggled, fought...and gotten nowhere. And she'd lost her way. Didn't know who she was anymore.

And floundering, she'd seized on those words.

"People said she might be the real Touko Kirishima, and that struck a nerve when she was most vulnerable."

"I've got something like that," Ikumi said. "In kindergarten, a friend's mom said, 'You're such a good girl, Ikumi.'"

"....."

"That made me so happy, I tried to be an even better girl so people would praise me more."

"That's very you, Akagi."

"The upshot—everyone in junior high laughed at me for being too serious."

"I noticed."

"You did not."

"I did."

"Really?"

"Well, I was reminded of it. You cleaned the chalkboard better than anyone else, right? Made those erasers like new. Used a cleaner that inhaled the chalk dust—no one else had ever done that."

"My one accomplishment."

She laughed at herself. Not at Sakuta, but at her own past.

"But at the time, I thought that was *me*. It didn't feel hard at all."

"And that all started with a single 'Good girl.'"

“Yeah.”

“Maybe Nene Iwamizawa had people say she was like Touko Kirishima, and she thought that would help her find herself.”

It was at least a ray of hope.

She’d mistaken that for a path forward.

“That ever happen to you, Azusagawa?”

“Someone told me I was capable of kindness. And I felt like that was worth trying out.”

“You still believe that, huh?”

“Which means you might well be right.”

“Mm?”

“This is pretty typical.”

Singing Touko Kirishima’s songs had gotten Nene the attention she craved. A taste of her goals. What she’d always wanted. The person she wanted to be.

Her ideal self.

It must have felt good.

In Nene’s case, that just happened to be Touko Kirishima. Being someone worthy of attention was more important than being Nene Iwamizawa.

“Once again, Akagi, I’m glad you came.”

He put the empty mug down and flopped over backward onto the tatami. The tall ceilings of the inn stared back at him.

“Best you go upstairs if you’re gonna nap,” she said.

“I know.”

But his eyes were already closed.

2

The next morning, New Chitose Airport had far more snow than the weather forecast had predicted.

Enough that Sakuta woke up, saw the snow, and feared their flight would not take off.

“That’ll be fine. Might be a bit of a delay, though.”

Sakuta and Ikumi had been staring out the window in horror, but Takumi was from Hokkaido—he was used to snow.

It took a while to clear the runways, but Takumi was right—the flight took off after an hour delay.

They left New Chitose Airport at eight thirty.

The flight itself was approximately an hour and a half, and they landed at Haneda Airport just after ten AM.

A bus took them to the arrivals lobby, and by the time they reached the gates of the Keikyu Line, it was past ten thirty.

They boarded an express bound for Yokohama and sat down together.

The ride ended at their usual station—Kanazawa-hakkei.

From the roundabout outside, they hailed a cab and gave the driver Nene’s address.

It had been a ten-minute walk.

So the taxi got them there in less than five.

They looked up at the three-story building where Nene lived.

Sakuta had been here just yesterday.

“You two go on ahead. I’ll pay the driver,” Ikumi said.

Sakuta and Takumi were out the doors the moment the car stopped.

Up the stairs to the second floor.

Room 201.

Sakuta hit the intercom button at full speed.

The bell rang inside.

But they heard nothing else.

No one answered.

Didn't sound like anyone was home.

"Azusagawa, move."

One hand in his pocket, Takumi gave Sakuta's shoulder a shove with the other. Sakuta ceded the ground, and Takumi pulled out a thin metal object. Two keys on one key holder—and one went in the lock on the door.

"You had a spare?"

"I'm her boyfriend."

"Jealous."

"Is this the time?"

Takumi turned the key and opened the door.

"Nene, it's me. Can I come in?"

Paying lip service to courtesy, Takumi stepped right on into the room.

Sakuta followed.

The doormat hadn't changed.

But the place felt empty.

No sounds came from within.

The lights were off.

"Nene? Are you home?" Takumi said, opening the door at the back of the kitchen. "Huh? Ha?!"

He made some very odd noises.

Takumi seemed to be stuck in the doorway, staring at the room beyond in disbelief.

Mind blown by the overwhelming Christmasness inside it.

Sakuta had been just as shocked.

But they didn't have time for this.

"She'll likely be wearing a miniskirt Santa outfit, so don't let that freak you

out.”

Best to warn about these things.

“That, I’m looking forward to.”

“My man.”

As they talked, they were looking around. The toy block lodge was on the folding table, completed. She’d finished Sakuta’s work.

“It did not look like this the last time I was here,” Takumi said, moving a tiny tree on her desk. “This is where she kept the trophy,” he added, pulling out the trophy and putting it back in the seat of honor.

As he did, his sleeve brushed the open laptop. This shook the screen and woke it from sleep. There was a whir of the fan, and the screen lit up.

“Uh, Azusagawa...”

Takumi pointed at the laptop.

It was open to the Fujisawa official account—and the post about Mai Sakurajima serving as police chief for the day.

The event would be held in the outdoor space by the mall in Tsujido. Same place Sweet Bullet had once given a concert. Today, at two PM.

“Like Futaba said.”

“Nene’s not really gonna do anything to Sakurajima, is she?”

“We can’t be sure, so we’ve gotta find her.”

“Do we stake out the venue?”

Sakuta had been hoping they could catch her here.

If only the flight hadn’t been delayed, he thought, heading for the door. Then his eyes caught the drying rack in the kitchen. There was a mug on it, and it was still visibly wet.

He glanced at the electric kettle by the stove.

The lid was open.

The water inside still steaming.

“This means...”

Sakuta and Takumi exchanged glances.

“She’s not far off,” Sakuta said.

Takumi nodded. “If she’s headed to Tsujido—the station?”

“She borrowed a car to get to Motomachi. Might be doing that again.”

“There’s a car-share place by the station!” Takumi said. “Nene would totally borrow one!”

They threw their shoes on and ran out the door.

Down the stairs, they found Ikumi giving them a searching look. But Sakuta’s eyes were on the cab they’d taken here—which was caught at a red light.

“Give us another ride!” he yelled, waving both arms.

The light turned green.

The taxi’s blinker went on, and it pulled over.

3

With a quick word to Ikumi, Sakuta hopped back in the cab and told the driver to take them to the parking garage by the station.

The taxi drove them back the way they’d come.

“That the garage you mean?” the driver asked, pointing at a five-or six-story building up ahead.

“Yeah, stop in front of that.”

The car pulled over.

“Akagi, I *will* pay you back.”

“I know.”

Even as she spoke, Sakuta and Takumi were out the door. They ran into the garage, hit the button for the elevator, and jumped aboard.

They rode that all the way to the roof.

“You went to Motomachi on my birthday?”

“She made me shop for your present.”

“Jealous.”

“Go yourself next time.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Takumi nodded firmly—and a ding signaled their arrival.

As the doors opened, they saw the rooftop lot.

There were four or five cars belonging to the car-share service.

Lights on one of them flashed.

It was the same compact Nene had used the last time.

The engine was on, and it was pulling out.

Nene Iwamizawa was in the driver’s seat, dressed in her miniskirt Santa outfit.

“There!”

But the car was already on its way out.

They’d blown it. They’d arrived a moment too late.

As Sakuta’s spirits sagged—Takumi took off running.

“Nene!” he yelled, chasing the car down the ramp.

He called her name again, closing the distance—and catching up with the car.

“Wait, Nene!”

When the car didn’t stop, he jumped out in front of it.

Arms outstretched.

Not a rational action.

“Fukuyama, don’t!” Sakuta yelled, scared.

Expecting an impact, he looked away.

And the brake lights flashed red.

The car stopped an inch away.

Too close for comfort.

Oblivious to Sakuta's palpitations, Takumi was still blocking the car's passage.

"Nene, hear me out!"

Pleading with the driver, remorse in his voice.

Her door opened.

The Santa boots appeared first. Then her legs, her knees. Takumi followed the line up.

Then her red-and-white-clad body appeared. Takumi's gaze continued to rise. He was clearly seeing all of her.

Nene was studying his face intently.

The door slammed shut.

Sakuta moved past and stood next to Takumi. Nene shot him an irritated look.

But only for a second.

Her eyes were soon back on Takumi.

"I'm surprised anyone else can see me," she said.

"I'm not just anyone else! It's me, Takumi!"

"And you would be...?" Nene asked, her face blank.

That made Takumi freeze. His eyes were wide with shock. Sakuta had warned him of this; he'd tried to steel himself. But coming face-to-face with it still shook him. Part of him had hoped she would still remember. He hadn't managed to let go of that vain wish—but now those hopes were dashed.

".....You really don't know me," Takumi said, looking crestfallen.

Nene looked at Sakuta. "You know this guy?" she asked. "What's he talking about?"

"This is Takumi Fukuyama. Nene Iwamizawa's boyfriend."

"Nothing you're saying makes sense. I don't know who this is."

She was looking at Takumi again.

“And like I keep asking, who is Nene Iwamizawa? I’m Touko Kirishima.”

She declared this in no uncertain terms.

How were they supposed to take her denials?

Sakuta had not dealt with anything like this and couldn’t figure out what to say to either one of them.

Takumi was the first to break the silence.

“.....Fine,” he said. It was unclear what part of this was fine. “If you say so, Nene, I believe you.”

His head shot back up, and he looked her right in the eye. Nene might not recognize him, but he wasn’t running from that.

“.....”

Takumi’s behavior seemed to rattle her a bit.

“Do you have a minute to chat?” he asked, sounding like his usual self.

“Not really,” she said, but she wasn’t saying no.

“Thanks,” Takumi said, taking that as a yes.

His fingers toyed with the end of his scarf.

“Nene gave me this,” he said. “My first birthday after we started dating.”

“It’s a mess.”

“I’ve been wearing it for five winters straight.”

“That’s a long time.”

They were having a conversation, but with wildly different enthusiasm levels. Takumi was speaking with emotion, and Nene with indifference.

“Nene gave it to me, so it matters. Like a good luck charm—I can’t bring myself to replace it. I wore this to my exams.”

“Did it pay off?”

“I failed the first try. Went *ronin* for a year, failed the second, too.”

Takumi winced at the memory.

“Nene started saying the scarf was bad luck and I should throw it out. That might’ve been the biggest fight we’ve ever had.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But I guess talking about old times doesn’t mean much to you.”

“We’re talking about *your* girlfriend, yes?”

Nene didn’t bat an eye. No emotional response.

“You don’t remember me staying over for a few days while I was sitting exams?”

“Nope.”

“Or how I found the scarf in the garbage when I woke up?”

“Nope.”

“Or how we had another fight when I fished it out?”

“Nope.”

No matter what he said or how he said it, Nene repeated the same words, in the same tone, like a prerecorded message. She didn’t know what he was talking about, didn’t care what he said, and didn’t remember him. Her cheeks, and brows, stayed put. Nene Iwamizawa was nowhere inside her. This was all too obvious. Takumi heard the message loud and clear. But he didn’t give up.

“So you wouldn’t know I wore the scarf to the third set of exams without telling Nene.”

“And the result?”

“I passed.”

“Congrats.”

The least emotional utterance of that word Sakuta had ever heard.

Takumi’s lips curled, and he laughed at himself despite it all.

“Azusagawa told me...”

“What?”

“You bought me a new scarf.”

“News to me.”

“And you came to the airport to give it to me. Sorry I couldn’t see you.”

“.....”

“I don’t care if you don’t know me. I forgot you for most of the year, Nene. Serves me right you forget me, too.”

“.....”

“But I won’t forget you again. I won’t give up until you remember me. However long it takes.”

“So?” Nene asked, meeting his eye.

No more emotions than she’d started with.

“Huh?” Takumi replied, lost.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, checking her phone. Bored. “Sorry, I’m out of time.”

She turned toward the car.

“It’s simple,” Takumi said.

Nene grabbed the door handle.

“I, Takumi Fukuyama, love Nene Iwamizawa.”

Nene’s hand stopped, not pulling the handle.

“I forgot you all year long, so maybe you’ve already dumped me. If you have—then let me ask you out again.”

“.....”

She didn’t respond.

She just stood there, grasping the handle.

“If you haven’t dumped me, then...let’s keep this thing going.”

“.....”

Only silence answered.

“.....”

Then she turned to look at him.

Her lips quivered.

“Why...?”

Her whisper almost inaudible.

“Why...?”

This one a bit louder, but still awfully quiet.

“Because I love you, Nene.”

Takumi put his feelings in words, speaking softly, slowly, but with infinite warmth. It sounded like he was feeling out his own emotions.

“Don’t...you lie to me,” Nene said, her head down. Was her voice shaking?

“I’m not.”

“You don’t mean that...!”

This time her voice definitely shook. Her shoulders, too—and probably her heart.

“I mean it!” Takumi insisted.

“How can you love me? I’m a disaster!”

A sudden burst of anger.

Her voice so loud it echoed.

A cry that grabbed your heart and squeezed it tight.

“I was so sure about my move to Tokyo! But I didn’t get any extra jobs! I’ve just got my name on the agency rolls, a model in name alone!”

“.....”

This outpouring of emotion took Takumi’s words away.

And Sakuta’s.

It felt like Nene’s gloom was pressing down upon them.

She was a different person.

Same face, but someone he didn't know was wearing that miniskirt Santa outfit.

"I thought I could do it! I thought I could be someone! But look at me. Look at the mess I made! I failed so hard that the best I could be was a fake Touko Kirishima!"

"...You're Nene, right?" Takumi said. "Nene!"

She looked up, smiling feebly.

"Go on—laugh at me. I'm nobody!"

"I'd never do that!"

Takumi sounded legit mad himself. Not at Nene, of course. At himself, for not being there for her, at everything that drove her to this.

".....Just leave me alone."

"I'll laugh at anyone who laughs at you, Nene. Deal?"

"Sorry, Takumi. Nene Iwamizawa's got nothing! My only option is to become Touko Kirishima."

"I'm in love with you, Nene. Stay who you are!"

"But who *am* I?!"

"....."

That made him hesitate.

"If I knew who I was, none of this would have happened!"

"Still!"

Takumi started to respond emotionally.

But she just glared at him.

"I need to think I have it better than most," she spat. "I might be a mess, but I still want to be someone!"

"....."

That shut Takumi down.

There was a very weighty silence.

But it did not last long.

Sakuta spoke up.

“See? You *do* know.”

“.....”

Nene’s glare was like daggers.

“You know yourself perfectly well.”

“.....”

“That was very Nene Iwamizawa. If you wanna be someone, go out and do it. Announce it or whatever.”

“Is that all you’ve got to say?” she asked with a scowl.

“I’m not done yet, no.”

“.....”

Nene frowned. Clearly finding it hard to believe he could be so blunt. Sakuta pretended not to notice.

“You said you’ve got nothing, but that is some conceited bullshit.”

That one rattled even Takumi.

“...What are you driving at?” Nene snapped, not even concealing her irritation.

Being called conceited generally evokes that response.

“Iwamizawa, you’ve got Fukuyama,” Sakuta said, looking her right in the eye. “You’ve got someone you love who loves you back.”

He never broke eye contact.

And neither did she.

“.....”

She didn’t reject his words. Didn’t take issue with them. Just listened.

“You can’t call a life like that a failure. You’ve got *love*.”

“...Is that all you’ve got to say?”

“Yep!”

He said this so cheerily Nene’s shoulders quivered. She wasn’t stifling her fury—but choking back a chuckle. She failed and a peal of laughter escaped.

“You, of all people? Going on about love?!”

Nene clapped her hands, clutched her stomach, and doubled over with laughter.

Takumi’s smile was rather forced.

When she recovered, Nene sniffed.

“Coming from you, that’s just sheer spite!”

Takumi nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, you’re just rubbing it in, man.”

“But fair enough. Look at things that way, and life would be a lot more fun.”

Nene wasn’t speaking to either of them, really. It was more like she was exploring her own feelings.

“So I guess I’ll put up with Takumi a while longer.”

This was almost a whisper.

But Sakuta heard it.

And so did Takumi.

“Whew!” he said, slumping to the ground.

“Oh, get up,” Nene said, holding out both hands. Takumi took them, and she pulled him upright.

“Things worked out?” Ikumi asked. She was right next to Sakuta.

“Can you see her, Akagi?”

“I can. A smiling miniskirt Santa.”

“Then that settles it.”

Sakuta was surprised by the relief in his voice. The threat to Mai should be gone now. The trip to Hokkaido had paid off. Happy endings.

“Wait,” Nene said, turning toward him, her expression grave. “I don’t think this is over.”

“What do you mean?”

They’d just solved the whole “Nene Iwamizawa calling herself Touko Kirishima” thing.

What else was there?

“I’m not the only one.”

“Huh?”

“There are more Touko Kirishimas.”

That was the last thing he’d expected to hear.

He understood her words.

But not what she meant by them. His mind wasn’t keeping up.

But he didn’t hesitate.

There were other Touko Kirishimas.

Mai was still in danger.

The moment he fully comprehended that, he turned and ran for the elevator.

“Azusagawa!” Takumi yelled.

“Sorry, in a hurry!” he said, not turning back.

“Where you going?”

“To Mai!”

“Then get in!” Nene yelled. “I’ll drive you!”

He stopped.

And turned around. Nene was getting into the car. Takumi was half in the passenger seat.

“Thanks!” he said and grabbed the back door.

He saw Ikumi hovering on the far side and said “Akagi, you come, too” as he climbed in.

She sat down a second later. Their doors closed as one. By the time they had their seat belts on, the car was pulling out.

“Tsujido, right?”

“Yeah.”

The navigator already had the destination plugged in.

4

The car came to a stop in front of Tsujido Station, one stop away from Fujisawa. The impressive size of the crowd was already obvious.

“Real fame,” Nene said, her bitterness directed inward.

“We here in time?” Takumi muttered.

The clock in the car said 1:55.

“Takumi and I will find parking, so you get out here,” Nene said, pulling into the bus stop.

“Thanks,” Sakuta said. He and Ikumi hopped out.

The shopping mall was on the far side of the street, so they first had to cross.

No nearby crosswalks. Too much traffic to jaywalk. Sakuta was already headed for the stairs to the pedestrian overpass that connected the mall and the station. A handy bridge, both letting foot traffic cross the road and leading them to the second-floor entrance to the mall itself.

A lot of people were pouring out of the station gates. Couples with kids in tow, pairs of high school girls—people from all walks of life. Some of them were definitely talking about Mai Sakurajima.

He pushed forward, slipping through the crowds. Ikumi was on his heels.

The police-chief-for-a-day event was already in progress, and as they approached, they could hear a female announcer’s voice through the speakers.

“Be mindful of the people around you as you watch the event unfold. Please

refrain from taking pictures or videos. If you do, officers on patrol will have words for you.”

This was certainly a police-sponsored event. Security was handled by real cops. Few events could be safer.

With that thought, Sakuta and Ikumi cleared the overpass and were out the station’s north exit. The towering mall greeted them.

A lot of people were standing in the elevated passage leading to the entrance.

The side of it was packed, not a gap in the crowd.

Everyone was leaning over the railing, looking down.

All trying to see the stage set up in the open area between the mall and the traffic circle. There was a huge crowd in front of that stage, too. Not just a few hundred, but well over a thousand. If you added in the crowd on the walkway, possibly double that number.

“She really *is* that popular,” Ikumi whispered, peering through a gap in the crowd.

Her voice reached Sakuta’s ears, but he was past the point of responding.

His eyes were locked on the crowd by the stage, incapable of registering anything else.

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

Red hats, scattered through the crowd.

Not five or six. Not ten or twenty. Far more than that.

“Holy shit,” he muttered.

“Azusagawa? You okay?” Ikumi put a hand on his shoulder, sensing something amiss.

“Can you see them, Akagi?”

“See what?”

“The crowd by the stage is full of Santas.”

“Huh? Where?”

That proved she couldn't see them.

"There, there, there, and there."

They were just standing in the crowd. Five or six in the front row alone. Another five or six in the crowd right behind. Ten more behind them.

He pulled his eyes up and found more young Santas scattered along the walkway. Men and women, nearly all within a few years of twenty.

They weren't doing anything strange.

Just watching the stage.

With interest.

But that alone was unnatural. Bizarre.

"There's that many?"

He didn't know the exact number.

"Easily a hundred."

"....."

Ikumi gulped.

She looked around, unnerved by what she couldn't see.

"Are they *all*...?"

The announcer drowned her out.

"And now the moment you've all been waiting for! We're told she's almost here!"

The speaker was a policewoman standing onstage, directing the event. The crowd's anticipation rose.

"And here she is!" the MC said, looking at the traffic circle stage right. A black sedan pulled in, followed by a patrol car. They neared the clearing and stopped.

First, a male officer got out and opened the back door of the patrol car.

A uniformed policewoman stepped out—Mai Sakurajima, wearing a sash that read *Police Chief for a Day*.

The crowd applauded.

Mai beamed at them and followed the officer onto the stage.

“I’m sure she needs no introduction! Our police chief for a day, the one and only—Mai Sakurajima!”

The applause got even louder, welcoming Mai. The Santas were clapping with the crowd. No one was doing anything odd. But Sakuta found that terrifying. Everything about this was fanning the flames of his fears. He had no clue what was about to happen or if he could do anything about it. He was up against one hundred Santas.

His mouth went dry. His throat felt parched.

“Chief Sakurajima, are you ready to speak?”



“I am!”

Mai moved to the center of the stage and stood before the mic. She took a breath and began her speech.

“My name is Mai Sakurajima, and I’m serving as police chief for a day to help promote traffic safety.”

As Mai started speaking, the crowd felt silent, listening. The Santas with them.

“Last year, I got my driver’s license. Studying for that was a great review of practices for safety on the roads and the importance of accident prevention.”

“I’m gonna head downstairs,” Sakuta whispered to Ikumi.

He got on the down escalator. From up here, he couldn’t do much; if he wasn’t close to Mai, he couldn’t keep her safe.

“I hope this event will serve as a reminder that the obvious—yet oft forgotten—traffic rules exist for a reason. It’s an honor to help reinforce that fact.”

The escalator took him behind the stage, onto the ground below the walkway.

By this point, he was already seeing warning signs.

The crowd was pushing forward, trying to get a closer look at Mai. No one could see the Santas, so it looked like there were gaps ahead. “Close in!” “Move up!” The crowd in back surging toward the front.

There were even more Santas near the stage, and things were already approaching the breaking point. Pressed from behind, the front-row Santas were up against the metal barriers around the stage.

But the policemen working security didn’t register the problem.

With a scraping sound, the fencing was pushed toward the stage.

The cops finally noticed and started holding their palms up to stop the crowd. But they weren’t stressing it—why would they? The Santas were invisible, and to their eyes, there was still room. Nothing about this looked dangerous. Only Sakuta could tell how dire the situation was.

“And while we must make every effort to avoid accidents, I’d also like to remind people that if the worst does happen, being an organ donor could

mean you save someone else's life."

The dams were about to burst. He could see no other outcome.

"And that's all I'm here to say."

Applause ran out.

The starting gun for disaster.

"Stop! Stop pushing!" someone yelled.

A moment later, there was a crash. The fence between the stage and the crowd had toppled over. The crowd spilled forward, the Santas with them. Thirty or forty people, all at once, the surge unstoppable. Tumbling, stumbling, like an avalanche.

"Mai!" Sakuta yelled, jumping up onstage.

Her eyes met his.

Confused, worried.

A Santa Claus was shoved into the giant speaker on the side of the stage.

The momentum of that caused the speaker to lean toward Mai.

Shouting something, Sakuta put everything he had into a run and then leaped in front of her.

He threw both hands up to catch the toppling speaker.

He couldn't quite manage it. It struck his head.

"Sakuta!"

There was a thud.

He wasn't sure what had happened to him.

He opened his eyes and saw the speaker lying next to him.

Beyond it, the crowd's faces, registering shock. Mouths wide open. The Santas just as surprised.

Sakuta wasn't thinking straight.

So he didn't really consider his next action carefully.

He just got up like nothing had happened.

“I’m fine. Everyone, stay calm,” he said, addressing the crowd.

“Everything’s gonna be okay,” he added, looking at the Santas.

No one said a word.

Everyone just stared at Sakuta.

The Santas stared at him, too.

All looking like they were about to shriek.

Feeling was coming back to him.

Something unpleasant and wet was covering half his face.

Curious, he put his hand up, and his fingers came away red.

“Don’t move, Sakuta,” Mai said, concerned.

He turned her way to offer reassurance, and his head spun. He felt dizzy. His vision blurred. As he registered that, he landed on his backside.

Unable to even maintain a seated posture, he went flat on his back on the hard ground.

But he didn’t feel how hard it was, or how cold.

Something soft was there to catch him.

Mai had put her arms around Sakuta before he fell.

Relieved, he let himself slip into unconsciousness.

“Call an ambulance!” Mai said, sounding every inch the police chief.

Sakuta didn’t hear her.

“Why are there so many Santas?!”

“Was this a Christmas event?!”

“Santas everywhere! What for?!”

He didn’t hear confusion spreading through the crowd, either.

5

When he regained consciousness, he felt his body rocking.

He must be in a vehicle.

Then he heard the sirens.

They didn't seem to be getting closer or farther away.

Sakuta opened his eyes.

A cramped interior.

Walls and ceiling close at hand.

"He's awake," someone said. He knew that voice.

Rio was sitting next to the bed.

"It's likely a concussion. Doesn't seem serious, but head injuries are always worth a closer look once we reach the hospital," explained an EMT who had checked his pupils and taken his pulse.

The man looked to be in his early thirties.

Only then did Sakuta realize he was in an ambulance.

"Why are you here, Futaba?"

This was the first question that came to mind.

"I told you yesterday that I'd be at the event."

"Oh yeah."

He finally remembered just why he'd needed an ambulance.

"Mai?"

"She's fine."

This came from Ikumi, who was sitting next to Rio.

"A curious pairing."

"Oh, there's more," Rio said, looking ahead at the driver's seat.

“Sakuta, don’t scare me like this.”

From where he lay, Sakuta couldn’t see, but he knew that voice. His friend from high school, Yuuma Kunimi.

He was now working for the fire department.

“Didn’t think I’d need your services so soon, Kunimi.”

“Don’t let it happen again.”

He was laughing, but he also clearly meant it.

“I’ll try.”

“Please do!”

The ambulance stopped at a light, blinker on. It turned right.

“What happened to the Santas?” he asked, looking at Ikumi, then Rio.

“The police are interviewing them,” Rio said.

“Sakurajima said she’d catch up after the cops fill her in,” Ikumi added.

“Makes sense. She’s their chief today!”

“Almost there. Prep,” Yuuma said in the deeply reassuring tone of a professional.

And the ambulance reached the hospital.

He was taken straight to an exam room, where the wound on his head was stitched up. Once that was done, they checked his cognitive functions again. Asked if he felt nauseated or dizzy, any numbness in his hands or feet.

“I feel fine.”

“You’re walking straight, but let’s do a CT scan just to be sure.”

“Okay.”

“This way.”

A nurse led him to a whole other section of the hospital. The CT room had a machine in it that looked like it would send him back in time.

The room was filled with a mysterious hum, and he was laid down on a cold

bed, following instructions delivered from a doctor in the room next door. The exam finished without his really being sure what was going on.

“Stay in the waiting room until the results are in,” the nurse said, and she sent him on his way.

He went back down the hall alone.

His head turned this way and that, as he tried not to get himself lost—and he found the waiting room successfully. And even more familiar faces within.

“Oh, Azusagawa, you okay?” Takumi asked, jumping up.

“You don’t *look* okay,” Nene said, eyes on his head. He had a dramatic bandage wrap.

“I’m waiting on the final results, but the doctor who did the CT scan said I’d be fine,” he said.

His gaze settled on Nene’s clothes. She must have changed after they’d split up at Tsujido Station. She was no longer a miniskirt Santa.

That wasn’t really an outfit meant for wandering around town, especially now that everyone could see her.

“If you’re fine, then we’re in the way. Let’s go,” Nene said, poking Takumi.

“Huh? We just got here?”

“It’s a hospital.”

She wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“Uh, okay, then. Azusagawa, see you on campus.”

“Yep.”

He waved them out.

They were soon out of sight around the corner.

“I’m going, too. I’ve got a lesson to teach,” Rio said.

“Oh, sorry. Thanks. Kunimi’s...?”

“Already off to the next job.”

With that, Rio left.

Leaving just Sakuta and Ikumi.

“You don’t have to stick around, either,” he said.

“Are you okay alone?”

“I should be. My sister’s here.”

Rio and Kaede had bumped into each other at the corner, and Rio was pointing the way.

Their eyes met down the hall. Kaede gave him a look that was only half-angry, and she walked quickly his way.

“What were you thinking?” she demanded, lips screwed up.

“Sorry about this,” he said, meaning it.

“You should be!”

Kaede was not placated that easily.

“Sounds like everything’s fine, at least,” he said.

“If you’re at a hospital at all, nothing is fine.”

He couldn’t argue with that. Over Kaede’s shoulder, he saw Ikumi break into a laugh.

Ten minutes later, Sakuta was called in to hear the results of the CT scan. Ikumi took that opportunity to go, “You do seem fine,” and make her exit smoothly.

Kaede insisted she wanted to be there with him.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” the doctor said. “You’re free to leave.”

That was it.

Sakuta left feeling slightly underwhelmed, and he found two policemen waiting for them.

He knew why.

They’d come to ask about today’s events.

They talked for about half an hour.

Not wanting to get in the way of other patients or the staff, they found a break room with a couch and a vending machine.

All he really said was that he saw the crowd surging and thought Mai was in trouble, so he jumped out.

Their questions covered his actions today, when he reached the venue, and his relationship with Mai Sakurajima... They tackled several angles.

One of them wrote down everything he said, but Sakuta didn't think he'd mentioned anything that would impact their investigation.

Sakuta would rather like someone to explain those Santas to him.

As things wrapped up, he actually asked, "So what was the deal with all the Santas?"

The officers exchanged glances.

"We're looking into that. Thanks for sparing us some time despite your injuries."

They bowed their heads and left.

Sakuta glanced at the window. It was already dark. The clock said it was almost five thirty. He'd flown back from Hokkaido that morning—what a long day.

"Is it over, Sakuta?" Kaede asked. She'd been waiting nearby.

He hadn't done anything wrong, but she was clearly uncomfortable with having her brother talk to the cops.

"It is. It was fine. Maybe getting questioned by the cops at all isn't fine, though."

"Very true."

"Oh, there he is! Sakuta-sensei!"

This cheery girl's voice sounded very out of place in a hospital.

He recognized it right away—only a select few called him that.

“Why are you here, Himeji?”

“Paying you a visit, of course!”

“I was just leaving...and how’d you know?”

“Tomoe told me.”

Sara turned, glancing back down the hall.

Tomoe was behind her, looking uncomfortable.

“How’d you know, Koga?”

“I heard from Kaede. Told Himeji. We decided to swing by on break.”

“Makes sense.”

They both had their server uniforms on under their coats.

“Sakuta, you owe Tomoe one,” Kaede said. “I was supposed to be working, and she swapped in for me last minute.”

“I wasn’t doing anything else,” Tomoe said, before Sakuta could respond.

“Shame to steal that from you,” he said.

“Sensei, how you doing?”

“I’m fine. You two might not be—you only have an hour break.”

It was almost time for the dinner rush, and the restaurant would be getting busy. They’d never handle that with two waitresses gone.

“Oh crap! Himeji, we gotta go!”

“Ew, already?”

“We agreed to just get a look-see!”

“That’s what *you* said.”

“I said that’s all we’d have time for. Don’t believe her, Senpai!” Tomoe snapped.

She took Sara’s arm and pried her away.

Such a reliable mentor.

Sakuta watched them go with a warm smile.

“We oughtta leave, too,” he said.

“Oh, wait!” Kaede said, jamming a hand into her coat pocket. She pulled out her phone and checked the screen. “Mai’s on her way here.”

“Then I’d better wait.”

“I’ll head home, though—to Yokohama. Let Mom and Dad know you’re okay.”

“Oof, good idea. Tell ’em there’s nothing to worry about.”

“You call them yourself later!”

“I will.”

“Good.”

Kaede put her phone away and huffed off.

This got another warm smile from him.

Mai reached the hospital about twenty minutes after Kaede left.

She’d changed into normal clothes and found him waiting in the lobby.

“Does it hurt?” she asked, looking at his head.

“Not as much.”

“Your whole face was red. It was rather alarming.”

“You caught me and spared me from hitting my head on the ground, too.”

“I said I’d keep you safe.”

They were already headed for the doors.

“The police uniform made you look badass, Mai,” he said, giving her street clothes a baleful look. He’d have rather she kept the uniform on.

“If you’re joking, you’re fine.”

At the door, they passed the nurse who’d helped with the CT scan. “Take care!” “Thanks for your help.”

And with that, they were outside.

Sakuta wanted to talk about Mai's police uniform for a while longer, but he let it be for now. They had other things to discuss.

On the way to the parking lot, he asked the first question on his mind.

"Learn anything about the Santas?"

"The police aren't finished questioning everyone, so they're not talking."

"Oh."

"But they asked a few basic questions where I could hear, and everyone said the same thing."

"What?"

"They thought they were Touko Kirishima."

"....."

That left him dumbfounded. He forgot to take his next step. Mai's news was just that stunning.

It was hard to believe.

But after seeing all those Santas there, how could he not?

Sakuta knew exactly what had happened with Nene, so had to accept it.

"They'd all heard rumors that I was Touko Kirishima, which is why they were there. None of them had any intention of doing anything to me, though."

"And they didn't talk to each other?"

"Nope."

Nene had just been one of many.

Was that what this meant?

Nene had said she was just headed to the event. She swore she'd had no plans beyond that.

He didn't know much more.

Thinking about it here wouldn't get him anywhere.

But he knew one thing for sure.

The most important thing of all.

“Well, I’m glad you’re safe, Mai.”

That fact alone was cause for celebration.

“That’s my line,” she said.

“Then it goes for both of us.”

“Oh, Nodoka said she wanted to talk to you.”

“Do I have to?”

Mai forced her phone into his hand. She’d already dialed Nodoka’s number. He gave up and put it to his ear.

“Sis?” Nodoka said brightly.

“It’s me.”

“Don’t make her worry,” she growled.

“You weren’t worried, Toyohama?”

“I was!”

This was a different voice—Uzuki’s.

“I was *so, so* worried that I could only eat three *onigiri* before our concert.”

“That sounds like plenty, Zukki.”

Her mouth sounded full, like she was eating something else on the phone.

“Anyway! Thanks for keeping her safe, Sakuta,” Nodoka said. She hung up immediately.

Sakuta stared down at the phone.

“What is with today?” he muttered, and he handed it back to Mai.

“Meaning?”

“It feels like I met everyone I know.”

Takumi, Nene, and Ikumi, then Rio, Yuuma, Tomoe, and Sara. Kaede had been there, and now he’d talked to Nodoka and Uzuki. And Mai was here with him.

“Getting injured is never good, but if you see all your friends, it’s a good day,” Mai said.

That seemed convincing. Words to live by.

“Maybe it was,” he said.

As they walked, they took each other’s hands.

Last Chapter

the Day before



Friday, March 31.

Some two hundred people were standing before a digital signboard with RESULTS INCOMING on the screen.

Most were young, around twenty. A few were in their thirties and forties, but there were far fewer with each subsequent decade.

Sakuta was staring at the same sign from the back of the crowd.

Waiting for results was always agonizing.

He just wanted confirmation that he'd passed.

His feet felt antsy.

It said incoming, but when, exactly?

Barely had the thought crossed his mind when the message vanished.

Replaced with a bunch of three-digit numbers.

The first was 001, and the last, 246. A few numbers were skipped, but they appeared in numerical order.

Sakuta hunted for 134.

He found 130 and 131. No 132. There was a 133—and a 134 after that.

He took a deep breath.

And let it all back out. A sigh of relief.

If his number was up there, he'd passed.

He'd achieved the goal that had gotten him out of bed early and here to the Futamatagawa Licensing Center.

"Those who passed, complete the processing in order by number."

That divided the crowd in two. Maybe 80 to 90 percent were making "Of course I passed" faces and started moving. They'd likely been nervous as hell a moment ago.

The remaining 10 to 20 percent had sadly failed.

Sakuta followed the first crowd—and a surprising voice called out to him.

“Azusagawa, you passed, too?”

He found a familiar face walking next to him. Miori Mitou, a potential friend from college.

“You took your test today, too?”

“I spotted you during the test itself. You were up front.”

“You could have said something earlier.”

“I figure it would be awkward if you ended up failing.”

“And worse if *you* failed.”

“I passed, though?”

“Congrats.”

“Same to you.”

Two months of driving lessons were now complete.

The paperwork went smoothly enough: photos taken, license printed. The whole process took about an hour, and Sakuta had his driver’s license in hand just past noon.

Receiving this was just part of a well-oiled machine, and it didn’t really feel like an accomplishment. Miori got her license, looking equally unimpressed, and they left the center together.

Side by side, they walked down a gentle slope, headed for the nearest station—Futamatagawa. Sakuta had never been here before. Miori said she hadn’t, either.

The walk took just over ten minutes, and he matched Miori’s pace.

She was making noises.

Staring at her new license, from above, from below, clearly not pleased with it.

“Got a bone to pick?”

“This is the worst picture anyone has ever taken of me.”

She’d been scowling at the ID photo.

“It does make you look pale and sickly,” he said, glancing at it.

It hardly captured her appeal.

“Right?”

“The wrong kind of ennui.”

“How’s yours?”

He took it out of his wallet. Miori leaned in, inspecting it.

“Yikes, your eyes look dead!”

This seemed to please her immensely.

“Mine isn’t nearly that bad!”

She’d used him as a launchpad to cheer herself up.

“Manami’s was pretty bad, too... Does anyone get a good one?”

“Mai’s license is pretty much ‘Why, yes, I’m Mai Sakurajima, charmed.’”

Totally different aura.

She’d gotten her picture taken at the exact same licensing center, too.

But the outcome was so different it was hard to imagine it being from the same camera.

“I guess getting a good photo taken is an acquired skill,” Miori grumbled. “Oh, speaking of Mai...tomorrow’s the big day, right?”

“Mm?”

“Mai’s appearance at that music festival.”

“That’s still technically a secret. Her name’s not on the roster.”

“But thanks to #dreaming, everyone already knows. They’re awaiting her big announcement online.”

“Even though she denied it on Coming-of-Age Day.”

“The rumor mill started grinding again.”

“Well, we know why.”

“The Santa Incident?”

“That wiped out all the wannabe Touko Kirishimas.”

Incident or accident, call it what you will—Sakuta did wind up hearing more about it from the police later on. They didn’t share much more than he’d heard that day; every Santa had said the same thing.

While he had the opportunity, Sakuta asked the cops a few questions of his own. They couldn’t share details of an ongoing investigation, but they did answer some things.

Every Santa Claus present had said they came to the event believing they were Touko Kirishima. Men and women. This much had already leaked to the press, but hearing it direct from the detectives lent it further credence.

One of the officers had personally interviewed several of the Santas. “It didn’t seem like they were all lying, and they said they hadn’t coordinated the event attendance... Honestly, it’s just very creepy.”

But every Santa who’d been there had wound up like Nene—remembering who they really were. Most of them said the trigger for the memory recovery had been a man with blood all over his face telling them to stay calm. This was a departure from Nene’s situation, so he had to assume the shock had just made them snap out of it.

Either way, they knew who they were, and the people around them could perceive them again—which was a good thing.

But it was also true this had less fortunate consequences.

With no one around claiming to be Touko Kirishima, that also removed all other candidates. That meant the rumor mill had turned their sights back to Mai.

The fact that Santas calling themselves Touko Kirishima had all come to see Mai that day also added fuel to the online fires. It was hard to discredit the connection.

“She’s gonna deny it again at the music festival.”

“Okay.”

They hit a red light and stopped.

Cars streamed past.

“Who is Touko Kirishima?” Sakuta wondered aloud.

Once he knew Nene Iwamizawa wasn’t her, he was out of clues.

All he knew was that she was an internet singer, active on video-sharing sites.

“What do you think she’s like, Azusagawa?”

“I think she’s good at singing.”

“You are a riot!”

Miori cackled. She hadn’t been looking for a serious answer. Sakuta hadn’t been trying to give one. That was fine. That was how friends—or potential friends—talked about things.

The light turned green.

Still chuckling, Sakuta stepped forward.

The next day was April 1. The day so many young people had dreamed about.

Afterword

If you're reading this afterword, the movie version of *Rascal Does Not Dream of a Sister Going Out* has already opened in theaters.

I believe the manga versions of *Siscon Idol*, *Sister Home Alone*, and *Dreaming Girl* are launching in turn.

Are you enjoying all the different versions of the series? I'm thrilled if you are.

The movie of *Rascal Does Not Dream of a Knapsack Kid* is coming this winter, so look forward to even more pleasures.

PS: Rascal's final chapter is swiftly approaching.

Hajime Kamoshida

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