

Kazuki Amamiya

ill. Gin

6

New Game +

START?

▶ Yes No

Haibara's Teenage

NEW GAME +

new game

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Prologue: Go Away

I can't deny it any longer. I know already. I'm hopelessly in love with Haibara Natsuki.

By the time I'd realized it, it was too late; I'd already encouraged Natsuki. As someone helping him with his crush, I wanted him to succeed. However, I'd also be lying if I claimed I'd never wished for him to fail.

I'd dreamed about it.

Hikari-chan would reject Natsuki, and, brokenhearted, he'd come back to me downcast. Seeing him grumble, I'd say, "You're so hopeless," and console him. I would go on to say, "I'll take responsibility," and the surprise on his face would make me giggle. We'd keep it a secret from the others and start dating, and Natsuki wouldn't seem all that unhappy either—it was so stupid.

That future would never come true, but part of me still hoped it would. In the end, Natsuki's confession to Hikari had succeeded, and now he blithely enjoyed each day. I should've been happy for him. I should've celebrated with him; instead, the pain felt like it would snap my heart in two, and I'd burst into tears. So I continued turning a blind eye to my own foolishness.

Anyone would do. I just wanted them to change my feelings. That's why Reita-kun had become my solace. I thought that if I fell for him, I wouldn't suffer anymore. With that pessimistic attitude, I'd begun spending more time with Reita-kun. He was sharp, so surely he knew what was going through my mind. Even so, he accepted me with open arms.

We ate lunch together, walked home together after practice, and hung out on our days off. Reita-kun was an extremely kind person. He was handsome, smart, athletic, considerate, fun to talk to, and he had a cute smile. I felt comfortable around him.

Dating Reita-kun also meant becoming the target of others' envy. However, my feelings didn't change. My eyes would still unwittingly follow my childhood

friend.

I shouldn't see Natsuki for a while to get rid of these feelings. That's what I'd thought, but because I was on the interclass sports meet committee, I'd been forced to interact with him. *I can talk to him now!* When the thought ran through my head, I was over the moon, and deep down, my heart secretly soared. I felt guilty towards Hikari-chan, but I kept telling myself there was no helping it since we were both committee members, and so, I returned to Natsuki's side once again. For me, it was an irresistible temptation.

To top it all off, I'd lied by claiming my legs were numb and hugged Natsuki. All the while, I knew that I was betraying Hikari-chan and Reita-kun... It was truly time to stop associating with Natsuki. My affections for him were running wild, and I didn't know what I was doing anymore.

I'm such a sneaky bitch. I'm the worst. I can't face everyone this way.

So I swore not to do anything like that again. Things were still salvageable right now. All I needed was to suppress those feelings. Just doing that would solve everything, but once I'd finally decided that...

"Someone saw you hug Haibara-kun. Is that true?"

I couldn't defend myself—I was completely in the wrong.

Chapter 1: Back to Normal

The day after the interclass sports meet.

It was already deep into the night. The chilly autumn wind swept through Maebashi Station's south exit. The only ones around were Serika, me, and one other person—a girl sporting a bob cut with the tips distinctively curled upward.

“Long time no see, Haibara-senpai! Yamano Saya here. It's a pleasure!”

The new band member candidate Serika had just introduced me to was someone I already knew.

“Huh? Long time no see? Do you know each other?” Serika asked in surprise.

Looks like she had no idea. Well, I'm shocked too. I don't have many old acquaintances, but I never imagined I'd run into one like this! Dang, it's a small world. I don't know if I can even call her my friend. I mean, I didn't have any friends... Man, I'm feeling down now.

“Yep! I went to the same middle school as Haibara-senpai!” Yamano replied with pep, in contrast to the way I was getting depressed.

“Ah, gotcha,” Serika said with a nod and then continued on. “That's a crazy coincidence.”

“Um, I've known that Haibara-senpai's the vocalist since your school festival concert, so it's not a coincidence. Sorry, I didn't mention that... Actually, him being in your band was like ten percent of why I wanted to join.”

“Really, only ten percent?” I managed to jump into their conversation after recovering from the shock.

I never thought I'd meet Yamano again here. In my first round of life, I didn't see her anymore after middle school. Though she spoke to me in a friendly tone, she treated everyone this way.

We weren't particularly close or anything. And she's got no reason to intentionally seek me out. She didn't attend Ryomei High the first time either,

probably. Though, I might just not have known... Did our concert cause Yamano's future to change? Where she goes for high school isn't set in stone yet, but it's possible. Well, no point thinking about this now.

Because I'd leaped through time, it only made sense that my actions would alter history. But my worries would be endless if I mulled over that, and I wouldn't be able to achieve my goal of repainting the color of my youth.

"Ah ha ha! Yep, and the other ninety percent is because Serika-senpai is here! Duh!" Yamano said, unabashedly affirming my gripe.

She hasn't changed one bit. She's always been like this. No matter the situation or who she's talking to, she never lies.

"Anyway, Haibara-senpai, when I saw you at the festival, I couldn't believe my eyes, or my ears. Like, the vocalist guy that obviously wasn't you introduced himself onstage as Haibara Natsuki. Talk about a makeover, am I right? Plus, you were hella good at singing. I was super surprised." Yamano gleefully smacked my back.

That hurts!

"Is he really so different?" Serika asked, puzzled.

Yamano nodded. "In the past he was more gloomy... I mean, it was like he exuded an aura of darkness."

Hey now... That was your best attempt at choosing the right phrasing? What do you mean by darkness? Was I a chuunibyou or something?

"I went through a glow up for my high school debut," I added with a sigh. *It's embarrassing to explain that, so please cut me some slack.*

"Come to think of it, Miori might've mentioned that before. Eh, whatever," Serika said. She clearly wasn't interested, as she promptly changed the topic. "Anyway, it's great that you know each other already. No need for introductions, then."

If you didn't care in the first place, then I didn't need to explain!

Serika didn't pick up on my grievances whatsoever. She continued speaking, blasé as always. "She'll join our next practice for a test run. You're fine with

that, yeah?”

“Yeah, of course.” I nodded. Despite my surprise, I didn’t have any objections. Besides, someone I knew was hands down better than a stranger. I was gradually gaining more friends, but I was still shy at heart. “I mean, if it’s someone you’re happy with, I’ve got no reason to oppose.” Serika’s judgment would be far better than mine or Mei’s.

“Well, it’s just a tryout. Saya should see what we’re like first before committing too.”

“That’s true. It’s possible that it won’t be what she expects.” *Even if she says she wants to join the band, she might be disappointed once she practices with us. Well, mainly with my guitar skills. My performance at the school festival was a miracle. Ha ha ha.*

Yamano glanced at her phone and then yelled in a panicked voice, “Oh, sorry! My train’s almost here!”

I checked my watch; my train was scheduled to arrive in three minutes too. *Right, Yamano and I went to the same middle school, so obviously we’re going home on the same train.*

“Then we’ll call it a day. See you guys later.” Serika waved goodbye.

“Yeah, see ya,” I said.

“Senpai, you’re catching the same train, right? Let’s go!”

Yamano and I left Serika and ran to our platform. Our train arrived right as we descended from the stairs. We rushed on, and the doors closed behind us.

“Phew.” I wiped the sweat off my forehead.

It was past rush hour, so the train was empty. Though, it wasn’t like the train we took from Takasaki Station was that crowded during rush hour either. When I rode the trains in Tokyo for university, I had experienced firsthand what true congestion was like.

“Sooo, let’s sit down,” Yamano suggested.

“Yeah,” I said in agreement and sat next to her.

Once I finished catching my breath, I felt awkward. After all, it wasn't like we were particularly close friends, but that didn't mean I should distance myself from her on our train ride home. And if everything went smoothly, we would be part of the same band in the future. I needed to be on good terms with her.

Is there anything we can chat about? It's safest to talk about the old days, right? I glanced at Yamano—she looked a little more mature than I remembered. The last time I'd seen her was ages ago, though, so my memories might've just been fuzzy.

"Senpai, so you went through a high school glow up?" Yamano questioned while I was still searching for a topic.

"Yeah. I wanted to have a fun high school life, so I changed myself," I replied.

"Never saw that coming. You didn't seem to care about stuff like that in middle school."

I certainly kept my distance from people back then. "I was just bitter back then. I was actually jealous of everyone else." I had hidden those feelings in my heart.

Well, forget about hiding anything. I didn't have anyone I could talk to about it. Basically, I wasn't a loner, but a proud lone wolf. It's not that I didn't have friends: I didn't make any on purpose. Yeah, I could've made friends whenever I wanted if I felt like it, but I like flying solo! That's what I kept telling myself! Those excuses quickly ran thin, though.

"Does that mean you hated the time you spent with me in middle school?" Yamano asked, her face falling.

"I don't remember spending that much time with you in the first place."

We'd gone to the same elementary school, so I'd known about her existence. She was a cute girl in the year below mine. That was all I knew about her. We had pretty much graduated from elementary school without ever interacting.

I hadn't carried on a real conversation with Yamano until my second year of middle school. Since I'd had no place in the classroom, I generally ate lunch on the roof. The staircase landing connected to the roof had a lot of unused desks and chairs. If you climbed over the stack, you'd find that the door wasn't locked.

But doing that was a pain, so most didn't go near it.

"Huh? There's someone else here... Oh, aren't you Haibara-senpai?" Yamano had been a foreign body suddenly intruding upon a space that used to be only mine. "I was looking for a place I could be alone... Oh well, it's fine if you're around."

I still remembered what she'd said that day. My presence was so nonexistent that she would essentially be alone. It was an incident that had corroborated the fact that it didn't matter whether I existed or not.

"Hello, senpai. You don't look so good today, as usual."

"Shut up."

At any rate, after that, sometimes we'd eat together on the roof. *Can I even call it eating together? It felt more like strangers sharing an area for lunch. I mean, there was enough space for a whole other person to lie down between us. We talked on occasion, but we normally ate in silence. Can we even say we were friends? We were just acquaintances. That's all it amounted to.*

"Yamano, I didn't know you played the drums," I said.

"I was in the light music club in middle school, remember? Though, I quit midway."

I had absolutely no idea. Maybe it's because we haven't seen each other in a while, but boy am I learning a lot of new info today... I've never asked her any questions, so I guess that's why. To be fair, I avoided human interaction as much as I could in middle school. My relationship with Yamano was shallow at best.

Unless directly asked, Yamano would never talk about herself, and neither would I. We only ever had silly conversations about trivial stuff, like the weather, how boring class was, or how annoying a teacher was. Our peculiar relationship felt just right that way, which was why it had continued until I'd graduated.

"I'm the one who's surprised. Did you pick up the guitar in high school? You were pretty good."

"Quit the flattery. If Serika hadn't covered for my mistakes, then it wouldn't

even have been palatable.”

“You’re being too modest. You sounded great, so have some confidence.”

“With Serika playing next to me, it’s outright impossible to be confident.” At Serika’s level, it sounded like she was playing a completely different instrument from me. I’d almost lost my motivation more than once or twice.

“Ah ha ha! Yeah, that’s probably true!” Yamano laughed loudly. She seemed more expressive than when I knew her in middle school.

I only ever saw Yamano on the roof... Who would’ve thought I’d reunite with her like this.

“How’s Miori-senpai doing these days? She goes to your high school, right?”

I hadn’t expected her to bring up Miori out of the blue. I blinked at her in surprise. “Huh, are you guys close?”

“Yep. We live near each other. Plus, our parents know each other too, so we go way back.”

“I see, but I don’t really know how to answer that.”

More often than not, I would catch Miori wearing a frown lately. I knew she was distressed about something, but I didn’t ask for the details. I was worried, but since I wasn’t her collaborator anymore, it might’ve only annoyed her if I had poked my nose in.

“Don’t tell me—did you two fight?” Yamano asked. Her expression grew serious.

“No, not really... We haven’t even talked much lately.” The last time we’d held a proper conversation was a few days before the sports meet, when we’d practiced basketball in the park. It felt like she was avoiding me now.

“You guys were so close in elementary school, though. It was always the four of you.”

Four of us, huh? The other two must be Takuro and Shuto. Back in elementary school, Miori, Takuro, Shuto, and I were always together. Miori had been our leader, and the three of us were constantly running after her.

"I'm surprised you remember. That was a long time ago," I said. *Then again, it was only four or five years ago for Yamano. I've got an additional seven years on top of that, so my memories of that time are hazy.*

The only period I recalled vividly was my first round of high school. Before that, I only remembered the impactful moments.

"Of course I'd remember. The four of you really stood out."

"But Miori and I barely talked in middle school. You knew that, yeah?"

"I heard from Miori-senpai that you guys patched things up, though."

Yeah... Guess we did. Although, our relationship has gotten dicey again.

I gave Yamano a quick rundown of how Miori and I had reconciled in high school. In short, it was all about how Miori had helped me with my high school debut.

"...And then our partnership ended. That's why we haven't been talking much lately. We're in different classes, and we're both going out with other people, so there's no reason for us to."

Yamano looked like she had mixed feelings after hearing my story. "Gotcha. So that's how it is... I see," she muttered to herself as though a light bulb had gone off in her head. All the while, she didn't take her eyes off me. "Boy, didn't see that coming."

"Didn't see what?"

"I thought you were into Miori-senpai," Yamano said without hesitation.

Me? Into Miori? I was about to laugh and say, "No way," but for some reason the words didn't come out. The night I had caught Miori in my arms suddenly flashed through my mind.

"Judging by that look, my guess wasn't too far off."

"I like her as a friend, obviously. But not romantically." I shook my head.

Is that true? I didn't have very much confidence in my own claim. What I felt for her was somewhat different from what I felt for my other friends. However, that was because we were childhood friends—she knew who I was at heart

extremely well, which was why I had a special sort of trust in her. Surely that's all it was.

"But at the very least, you used to crush on her, right?" Yamano's question dug up memories of the past that I had long forgotten.

That's right. Looking back on it now, there was a period where I was in love with Miori. Just think about it. She was a tomboy in spirit back then, but she was still cute. Of course I'd catch feelings when I'm close to a girl like that. Even if it's only a fleeting affection that'd naturally melt away.

"That's when we were little. I didn't even realize it back then," I said.

"Aha, so you admit it. Wow, I totally knew it!" Yamano smirked widely as she poked my shoulder.

Her face is annoying.

"I'll let you in on a secret. You were Miori-senpai's first love!" she whispered.

If the old me had heard that, I would've immediately thought she was lying, but I believed her now. Besides, it was a story of the past, when all was said and done. Truth or not, it wouldn't have any effect on the present.

"Doesn't matter. We're both different now," I said. Regardless of how we'd felt in the past, I loved Hikari now, while Miori loved Reita. So there was no reason to ruminate about irrelevant things. Reminiscing on what used to be was pointless now.

"Mmm, true that."

While we were chatting, the train reached our town's unmanned station. Although Yamano and I alighted together, we immediately went our separate ways.

"Welp, senpai, I'm this way."

"Uh-huh. See you. Though, we'll be meeting up pretty soon."

"Yep! I'll blow your mind with my glorious drumming!" Yamano's broad grin was suddenly replaced by a solemn expression. "Anyhoo, you've changed a lot."

"Hm? Yeah... I was really fat in middle school."

“I didn’t mean your looks—well, that’s part of it... I’m talking about your personality.”

Yamano knew the old me, so it made sense she’d feel that way.

“In middle school, you always avoided other people. You weren’t interested in them either. Compared to back then, you’re way easier to talk to now. Put in a bad light, you’re a weaker person now.”

“Did you have to spin it in a bad light?” I griped.

Yamano cackled loudly. She was right, though: I used to be quite difficult to talk to in middle school. I’d turned into a loner and misanthrope, and pushed other people away. I’d been convinced that I could live without friends as long as I had my otaku hobbies. But that was just bravado. What I had truly wished for was friends, and a youth full of laughter. That’s why I’d gone to a high school quite a ways away from my hometown and planned my high school debut.

“Back then, I was comfortable with how you were. That’s why I hung out with you on the roof. Because you weren’t interested in me.” Yamano stared off into the distance with a nostalgic look on her face.

Even I had realized Yamano was going through something back then. Why else would she have undertaken all the effort of maneuvering past a cluster of dusty desks to eat on the rooftop next to an upperclassman she wasn’t particularly close to during lunch break? I’d heard rumors that a girl was getting the cold shoulder in one of the first-year classes, but I had no idea whether that was Yamano or not.

“Senpai, you graduated without a word, so I missed my chance to tell you...” To my surprise, Yamano bowed to me deeply. “Thank you for everything. And I look forward to playing with you in the future.”

I hadn’t done much to deserve such earnest gratitude. In fact, I hadn’t done anything at all, even if she had felt moved back then.

“It’s too soon to be talking about the future,” I said.

“Ah ha ha! True that! I need to pass the tryout first!” Yamano flipped the switch on her mood and smiled brightly. “Welp, this time I’m going home for reals. See you later!”

I lightly waved goodbye, and she responded by vigorously waving her hand before turning away.

“Yamano, huh. What a throwback,” I murmured as I watched her go.

In my first round, I hadn’t met her again after graduating middle school. *Changing my actions can revive unexpected connections... Just like what happened with Miori.*

If I hadn’t happened to go for a jog, we wouldn’t have reunited before entering high school, and if I hadn’t accidentally joined Reita’s friend group, we wouldn’t have formed our partnership.

I was who I was right now thanks to Miori. Alone, my high school days would’ve remained a dull gray. The thought made me hate the idea of staying distant from Miori. After all, I’d received so much from her, but I hadn’t given anything back.

I had a shift at the café today. I’d somehow managed to keep my eyes open during a sleep-inducing class.

“Shall we go, Haibara-kun?” Nanase said.

“Right,” I replied.

We were working the same shift, so we left the classroom together.

“See you two later!” Hikari waved with a smile.

My girlfriend’s cute as ever today! For the record, Hikari had a literature club meeting today. Though she mainly spent her time working on her entry for a novel contest, the literature club’s activities were like a breath of fresh air to her. She seemed to enjoy chatting about it during lunch. *I want her to have a happy life.*

Nanase giggled and teasingly asked, “Hikari, are you sure? You’re okay that Haibara-kun and I are leaving together all alone?”

Well... Not gonna lie, but I was wondering about that too. Even though we’re part of the same friend group, is it still okay to be alone with a girl? But when we work at the same place, there’s no particular reason to purposefully head

over separately. Also, wouldn't it be pretty creepy if I told Nanase, "Since Hikari and I are dating now, we can't walk to work together anymore," out of nowhere? I mean, it'd be way too self-conscious of me. I guess it all depends on what Hikari thinks in the end.

"I wouldn't like it if it were someone else, but I'm fine with you, Yuino-chan. You both work at the same place, so there's no way around it," Hikari explained. She became somewhat abashed, and her voice fell to a whisper as she added, "Besides, I don't want to be too possessive."

I'm gonna get embarrassed too if you act like that. Daw heh heh.

"Really? Then I won't be shy." For some reason, Nanase grabbed my hand and started walking.

"Y-You can't do that!" Hikari yelled and stepped between us.

"Oh my. Weren't you trying not to be possessive?" Nanase questioned.

"Touching is forbidden! That includes you, Yuino-chan!"

"Are you suggesting that you're the only one who's allowed to touch Haibara-kun?"

"Yes... Yes, I am. Is there a problem? He's *my* boyfriend!" Though Hikari tried to counter Nanase's points, her face was so red that there was no weight behind her words.

"C'mon, Nanase. Stop teasing Hikari so much," I said.

"I'm sorry. Hikari's reactions are just too amusing lately."

"I can't disagree with that."

"But you're supposed to disagree with her! Hello, Natsuki-kun?!" Hikari looked shocked that even her boyfriend had betrayed her, which was cute.

"I'm joking. I won't snatch Haibara-kun away, so don't worry." While Hikari pouted, Nanase patted her hair.

"Maybe I should work at Café Mares too," Hikari muttered.

My eyes widened in surprise. *Working with Hikari? That's a good idea.*

"Would Sei-san give you permission?" Nanase asked.

“W-Well... I’ll just have to try and see.” Contrary to her words, Hikari sounded meek. Though her opinions were getting through to her father these days, that didn’t mean everything would pass.

“Unfortunately for you, the café is not looking to hire anyone right now.”

“Yeah, we’ve got enough people working the floor,” I added.

“Natsuki-kun, why didn’t you consider the possibility that I might apply to work in the kitchen?” Hikari pushed her face up close to mine. She was smiling, but she looked scary.

“Um, because... You know?” I said, evading her question. My eyes met Nanase’s.

“Hikari, he has no clue that you can cook.”

“Jeez, fine then. I was thinking of making Natsuki-kun a bento, but now I won’t.”

“Whaaat?!” I yelled. A homemade bento made by the girl I love?! That’s an event with a strong dose of vitamin youth, and I was going to get it?! I want to eat it. And if all goes well, I want to flirt with Hikari. Doesn’t matter what it tastes like. Awful, delicious, normal, who cares! What’s important is that Hikari makes it for me. I can’t let this opportunity get away from me, no matter what.

“I-I’m sorry! Please do! I’m begging you! By all means! Have mercy!” I was so gung ho about getting a homemade bento from Hikari that my pleas came out completely unfiltered.

“Wh-Why are you so desperate?” Hikari cringed away, taken aback by my sudden one-eighty.

My heart took massive damage from that. *My inner otaku accidentally slipped out. I normally keep him in check, though...*

“B-Because... I wanted to eat it,” I said.

Hikari giggled. “Gosh, you’re hopeless. Then I’ll make one for you next time,” she promised.

Whooooooo! I’m a winner!

“I hate to interrupt your flirting, but we’ll be late if we don’t leave now,” Nanase said, pouring cold water on us.

Crap, I completely lost sight of everything except for Hikari... Is this what people call a world of our own? It’s like we’re turning into a pair of stupid lovebirds! I’d better keep in mind the correct time, place, and occasion for flirting.

“G-Good point! All right, Nanase, let’s go to work!” I exclaimed.

“Y-Yeah! I’m off to my club meeting now! I’ll see you two next week!”

After exchanging awkward goodbyes, we parted ways with Hikari. Her face was flushed scarlet, and probably so was mine.

““See you next week’... Which means the two of you aren’t going out this weekend?” Nanase questioned.

“Yeah. I have band practice this weekend, and Hikari’s going to work on her novel at home,” I replied. *Plus, we don’t have enough money to go out and play every week. Reality is tough.*

“It’ll be a good break for Hikari. I don’t think her heart will hold out if she’s constantly around you.”

“I’d be the one in trouble if her heart didn’t hold out, though.” *Not like I’m one to talk. Being with the one you like... Being with your girlfriend or boyfriend can be a little tiring. I feel like I’m on cloud nine, but I’m cautious and get nervous around her because I treasure her. Besides, we only started dating recently, so we’re still trying to figure out each other’s boundaries. All I can think about is how far she’ll allow me to take it.*

“That shows how much she loves you. Be more aware of that.”

“I’m pretty sure I know that already.”

“You’d better not make Hikari sad, got it?” Nanase reminded me.

I nodded. “Of course I won’t; I’m gonna make her happy.”

“Good. I believe it, coming from you.” Nanase chuckled merrily. Evidently, her hobby these days was observing us.

I was on the clock from six to ten today. There were four people on shift. The manager and I were working the kitchen, while Mei and Nanase manned the front. I completed my work in silence, and before long it was past nine. Once dinnertime had ended and the stream of guests subsided, I took a breather. I washed dishes as I glanced at Mei from behind the counter.

“Come to think of it, it’s our first band practice in a long while tomorrow,” Mei said. Serika and I had shared our conversation from yesterday with him over RINE. We’d conveyed everything concisely, including the fact that Yamano and I knew each other.

“Though, it’s more like a tryout for Yamano than practice,” I remarked. Then again, she was guaranteed to join since she had Serika’s seal of approval. Mei must’ve known that as well, because he spoke under the assumption she would pass.

“What kind of person is Yamano-san?”

“She’s the cheerful type, I guess? I think she’s easy to talk to.” I didn’t know her well enough to properly describe her. She appeared vibrant on the surface, but I got the impression that she didn’t let others into her heart much.

“Ch-Cheerful? That’s a little scary.” I thought I’d described her innocuously, but Mei started getting the jitters.

“Would a gloomy person be better?”

“No... That would be difficult in its own way...”

Then what kind of person were you hoping for? Well, he’s probably being really shy is all. “No matter who we get, they’re going to make a better first impression than Iwano-senpai, right?” I said with a shrug.

Mei burst into laughter. “That’s no good, Natsuki! You can’t say that!”

“You laughed, which means you thought the same thing, right?”

“N-No, I’ve neever thought that.” Mei clumsily whistled and averted his eyes as though he hadn’t heard a thing.

“Are you talking about your band?” Nanase asked.

“Yeah. Serika found a new drummer. Though, she’s still in her third year of middle school,” I replied.

“I see. If Hondo-san found her, then she must be quite skilled.”

“The real issue is if she’ll get along with us... No, with me... What do I do if she says she doesn’t want to join us because our bassist is creepy? Will I be kicked out?” Mei muttered pessimistic delusions, as per usual.

Yamano’s not the type to say stuff like that, but this is funny, so I’ll keep that information to myself.

“Shinohara-kun, you certainly never change,” Nanase told him. “I thought you’d gain some backbone after getting a girlfriend.”

“I’m hopeless... It takes all my strength to merely hold her hand even now... And just sending her a message on RINE makes me extremely nervous... I never know if I’m doing the correct thing.” Mei let out a hollow laugh, and a gloomy aura enshrouded him.

I feel you, Mei. I’m the same. I nodded in agreement.

Nanase gave me the side-eye. “It’s about time *you* start getting used to it, understand?”

“Y-Yes...” *Apparently I’m not allowed to stay a romance newb forever...*

“Then again, you easily succeed at everything you do, so I’d actually feel irked if you weren’t at least atrocious at romance. But Hikari *is* a delusional otaku girl beyond help...”

That’s a mean thing to say. To me and Hikari both. Nanase’s the only person who’d call our school idol a delusional otaku girl. Well, there has been an unfortunate testimony that she’s a self-proclaimed idol in the first place.

While the three of us chatted, the bell rang—it was the sound of a customer opening the door. I glanced at the entrance; a girl wearing our school uniform had entered the café.

“Huh? Mei, it’s your girlfriend,” I said.

The black-haired girl wearing glasses bowed to us. It was Funayama-san.

“Wh-Whaaat?!” Mei exclaimed, his eyes as large as saucers.

“Don’t fall apart now—go seat her.” I pushed his back and forced him towards her.

“Wh-Why are you here?”

“Um, I wanted to see what you were like at work.”

I listened to their heartwarming exchange. *They’re both so nervous and awkward, but most importantly, they look like they’re getting along swimmingly. Although, just watching them is giving me secondhand embarrassment...*

“Do you understand what I feel when I watch you two now?” Nanase asked.

“Shut up. You didn’t have to say it out loud; I’m not that dense.” *So this is what everyone else feels when they watch us... That doesn’t sit great with me.*

“Those two look happy. I heard you helped get them together.”

“I didn’t do much. They were crushing on each other from the get-go.” They’d started dating on the day of the sports meet, so only two days had passed. It was still their honeymoon phase. I wasn’t one to talk, though, since Hikari and I had only been dating for two weeks.

“While we’re on the topic, what about you, Nanase? Is there someone you like?” I asked. She looked somewhat envious as she watched the new couple. *Come to think of it, I’ve never heard Nanase mention she’s into anyone or that she wants a boyfriend.*

“Good question... I wouldn’t go as far as to say I loved them, but there was someone who caught my eye.”

Nanase’s answer took me by surprise. From her nonchalant tone, she didn’t sound like she was joking.

“Was? So not anymore?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Unlike other girls, I didn’t know what true love was.”

I see... I don’t know how to react, though. How much should I push this sort of topic? Although I was the one who’d broached the subject, I was at a loss as to

what to say next. “I hope you find it one day. True love, I mean.” In the end, that was all I could muster—a hackneyed and naive response.

Nanase flicked my forehead for some reason.

“Ouch!”

“Instead of worrying about me, you’d better cherish Hikari,” she said, and smiled.



“You don’t need to tell me that. I was already planning on it.” I strengthened my resolve as I watched Mei and Funayama-san’s heartwarming spectacle.

While we chatted idly like that, night fell upon Café Mares.

The next day was Saturday. I woke up early, so I went for a run and worked out to kill time. *Why is it that when I want to spend a day loafing around, I always wake up early?*

“Onii-chan, what about breakfast?”

“Just toast some bread.”

After I dealt with Namika’s pestering, I took a shower. When I returned to the living room, my mom was there with Namika. In the end, she had made Namika’s breakfast.

Mom noticed me come in and asked, “Natsuki, do you want some too? It’s nothing crazy, though.”

I nodded.

“Onii-chan, you wouldn’t make me breakfast, so I asked mama instead.”

“Does it not occur to you to make it yourself?”

“I can’t cook!” Namika declared proudly. She was eating bread, sausages, fried eggs, and a salad. Forget about cooking—besides the salad, all she would’ve had to do was heat the food up. “Onii-chan, whatcha got planned today?”

“I’m meeting up with the band, so I’ve gotta go soon.” On top of practice, it was also Yamano’s tryout day. We were supposed to meet up at ten.

“Huh? Didn’t you guys break up?”

“We took a temporary break and decided to start up again.”

“Didn’t your drummer leave because of entrance exams?”

“Yeah, so we found a new one. Though, it’s not set in stone yet.”

“Hmmm... Good for you. Not that I care,” Namika said indifferently as she

stared at her phone.

Doesn't sound like you don't care, but if I point that out, you'll probably flip out... Are we gonna pretend like you weren't waving penlights in the audience? "Our new drummer's a year younger than me. She's your senpai."

"She's from our middle school? Come to think of it, we do have a light music club."

"Have you heard of Yamano Saya?"

"Ohhh yeah... I've heard the name." She sounded like she was hiding something.

"Just the name? So you've never talked to her before?"

"Nope. No reason to. She's older, and we're in different clubs." Namika finished off her breakfast and brought her hands together, saying, "Thanks for the food." Then she gazed out the window and whispered, "I see. So *she's* joining your band."

She looked like she was brooding over something, so I asked, "Something bothering you?"

"Mmm, not really. Welp, don't run yourself into the ground," she said, then vanished into her room.

Hey, clean up your dishes! "I'll clean this up, mom." I bit the bullet and offered to help my mom with the housework.

"Go right ahead, thanks a bunch. I'll leave you to it."

In my first life, I'd depended on my mom for everything, so I tried to help with housework as much as I could this time. *In return, it feels like Namika is rapidly becoming lazier and lazier, though... That's weird; she was a hundred times more put together than me last round, but these days she's more like a deadbeat... Wait, is that my fault? Am I turning Namika into a deadbeat?*

I fretted over that unanswerable question as I washed the dishes, and finished just in time. I tidied up my appearance, then left the house. It was fifteen degrees Celsius outside, a little cold but not enough that I needed to wear a coat.

I got on the train and headed to the music studio that Serika had reserved. It was only a short walk from Takasaki Station. Apparently, she used this place often.

“Oh, Natsuki! Good morning!” When Mei spotted me, his eyes twinkled.

He and Serika were already inside the room, setting up their instruments. Serika didn’t react. She was too focused on her guitar.

“You two are early,” I said.

“We haven’t practiced in so long! I’m pumped!” Mei cheerfully exclaimed as he haphazardly strummed on his bass.

“No Yamano yet?”

“I messaged her just now, and she said she’s almost here.” Serika showed me her phone screen. Displayed was her chat with Yamano. In response to Yamano’s message of “I’m almost there! I’m sorry!” Serika had sent a barrage of stickers of an angry anime character that said, “When?”

Hey, stop that!

“Senpai! Good morning! I’m sorry for being late!”

The door flung open with a bang as Yamano arrived. She was out of breath and seemed panicked because of Serika’s stickers.

“Morning.”

“Hey.”

Serika and I greeted her naturally, but Mei was taken aback.

“G-Good morning...”

“Nice to meet you! You’re Shinohara-senpai, right?! I’m Yamano Saya!” She grabbed Mei’s hand and vigorously shook it up and down. Apparently, that was her attempt at shaking hands.

“N-Nice to meet...you?”

“Yep, nice to meetcha! Your bass was wicked! It really hit me in the feels!”

Mei flinched back as Yamano drew close to him with a big smile. I couldn’t tell

who was the older one here.

“Okay, okay. We don’t have a lot of time, so let’s get started. Get ready.” Serika clapped her hands and brought the situation under control.

I’d better set up my guitar and mic too.

“I-It’s an extrovert... I can feel that sunny aura... But I’m happy...” Mei muttered. His delight at Yamano’s compliment had made an objectively creepy smile spread across his face, but I decided not to point it out.

“Hm, this should be good...” Yamano finished adjusting the drum set provided by the studio and skillfully twirled her drumsticks. Then she suddenly slammed the crash cymbal. A high-pitched noise reverberated throughout the room, signaling the start of her drum solo.

I didn’t know the song she was pounding out, but just by listening, I could tell she had a superb sense of rhythm. *She’s really good. And she looks like she’s having a blast when she’s playing... I wasn’t concerned, since Serika recommended her, but damn she’s good!*

After Yamano finished her drum solo, Serika suggested, “If everyone’s ready, then let’s start with ‘Black Witch.’ Saya, you can play it, right?”

“Of course! I know all of Mishle’s songs by heart!” Yamano replied proudly.

“It’s been a while, so I’m worried my fingers won’t move properly,” Mei muttered insecurely, holding his bass at the ready.

“Okay, I’ll kick us off with a three count. Does that work, senpai?” she asked.

We nodded. Evidently, we were going to play through the whole thing. The song began, and intense rock music filled the studio. *It’s been a long time.* I felt my voice and the timbre of my guitar intertwine with the song.

Yamano’s drumming was aggressive. She beat out expressive and belligerent notes that violently transformed the melody. At any rate, it was a huge contrast to Iwano-senpai’s precise, mechanical drumming. Her drums ran rampant, like the wind pushing at our backs, but never threw us into disarray.

It was so different from playing with Iwano-senpai that I didn’t feel like I was playing an existing song. The tune was turning into a completely new “Black

Witch.” The phrase “off-the-wall” would’ve been a good way to describe it. For all that, I wasn’t perfectly in rhythm with Yamano at the moment. I wouldn’t have said that the quality of the song was higher than when Iwano-senpai was our drummer, but I could sense the potential. I was confident that we could put on an even better performance.

“H-How was it? I know I made a bunch of mistakes...” Yamano asked after the song, exhibiting a rare show of unease. She had hammered out beats like she was having the time of her life during the song, so it was an amusing contrast.

“Hey! Wh-Why’re you smiling?! I’m serious! I practiced super hard for this tryout! Or did I suck that bad?!” she exclaimed in a fluster.

Serika looked at us. “Mei, Natsuki, what do you think? I like her drumming.”

I glanced at Mei, and he met my gaze. We were both silent. Yamano looked like she was waiting for fate to take the wheel.

“Um, well, there’s not much to say,” Mei said.

“Yeah, pretty much that,” I agreed. We nodded to each other.

I could practically see the word “shock” painted across Yamano’s face as she hung her head. “N-No way...”

“What’s with the dumb look? Of course you passed,” I said.

“It’s strange that you would even consider failure as a possibility after showing us that,” Mei said.

Yamano’s eyes widened. “Huuuh?!” she yelled.

“You shouldn’t tease your junior too much, you two.” The corners of Serika’s mouth quirked up slightly, and she shrugged.

I mean, she looked at us so seriously that I just couldn’t help it...

“D-Don’t scare me like that!” Relieved, Yamano straightened herself in her seat.

In the first place, I’m not in a position where I can act snobby towards Yamano for passing. If anything, wouldn’t I be the reject? I can see that being a valid point. I wanna get better at the guitar...

“Then with Saya joining us, we’ll restart as a band of four,” Serika said.

“Are we going to stick with Mishle as our band name? Or should we change it?” I asked.

“Hm. We’re a different band without Iwano-senpai, so let’s think of a new name,” she replied.

We’re not a makeshift bag of mixed leftovers anymore. It’s for the best.



“Our current goal is performing at the music club where I work,” Serika said.

“A... A music club? That’s intimidating...” Mei said.

“But that’s what we gotta aim for. The school festival’s a thing of the past now,” I added. Besides, if we didn’t have a goal, we would lose sight of what we were practicing for. Jamming out together was fun enough, but the thrill of performing live was on a different level. I wanted to taste the sensation of becoming one with the audience that I’d experienced during the school festival.

“No way, senpai, you’re all dreaming too small! Let’s play at the Rock in Japan Festival! Rock in!” Yamano shouted something absurd with a big smile.

She’s really feeling herself.

“It’s good to dream big, but we’ve gotta polish our skills first,” Serika reasoned with Yamano in a matter-of-fact tone.

Yeah, we hyped up the crowd at the festival, but our band is still inexperienced. Serika’s the exception, but my guitar skills are so crap that I can’t even joke about it. It was a miracle that I played just about everything smoothly at the festival. Miracles like that won’t happen every time.

“Yamano, are you gonna be okay for your entrance exams?” I asked.

“I’m probably getting in by recommendation!” she answered.

“Wow, so you’re a smart kid.”

Ryomei’s academic standard scores were fairly high, and there were a lot of aspiring applicants. Getting in by recommendation meant maintaining top grades for your year.

“Looks like I don’t need to worry, then.”

Yamano shot me a peace sign in response.

“Now that Saya’s with us, we’ll start practicing for real next week,” Serika said.

“Okey dokey!” Yamano exclaimed.

“Understood!” Mei said.

“Yeah, time to do our best again,” I said.

We all nodded to each other. And so, our band activities resumed. That was one more thing to look forward to in my high school life. It was already shining like a rainbow, but now those rays were even brighter. This new band would surely add a fresh color to my youth.

“Oh yeah... Natsuki,” Serika said, suddenly remembering something. “Miori was absent from school yesterday. Have you heard from her?”

“Huh? No, not really... Is she sick?”

“That’s what our teacher said, but she hasn’t responded to my texts.” Serika stared at her phone with her head tilted to the side.

“Who would’ve thought she could catch colds too.” Since we were kids, she’d always been the picture-perfect image of good health. Idiots don’t catch colds, after all. And as far as I knew, Miori had never been stuck in bed with a cold before. Though, I didn’t know much about how she’d fared in middle school.

“I hope it’s just a cold,” Serika said after a slight pause.

“Flu season is starting around now.” *Still, I am a little worried.*

“Yeah, guess so,” she said with an uncertain nod.

Serika didn’t bring up Miori again, and we resumed practice. *It’s just one day off. I don’t need to worry about her too much. More importantly, I need to focus on practice. I’m the worst one here; Yamano will look down on me if I don’t improve. Well, it might be too late for that already...*

After our practice session ended, with a break sandwiched in between, it was already evening. Yamano and I parted ways from Serika and Mei at Takasaki Station, and boarded our train home together. Yamano absentmindedly stared out the window, likely exhausted from her first day of practice.

“Come to think of it, senpai, you’re going out with Hoshimiya-senpai, right?” she said after a while.

“Yeah. You know Hikari?” I asked.

“Cause she’s famous on Minsta. My friends all think she’s a model. She’s hella cute, stylish, cheerful, and she seems nice... Argh, I’m sooo jealous of you!” She flailed her legs around, vexed.

Serika said the same thing before, and it looks like she was right: Hikari really is famous in my town.

“Why the heck did she choose you?”

“Hey, quit it! I ask myself that all the time.”

“Hey, you *are* handsomer than you used to be.”

Whether it was Miori or Yamano, all the people who knew the old me reacted the same way. They were overestimating me more and more these days, which was kinda concerning.

“Miori helped me out a bunch when I was trying to get close to Hikari,” I said.

“Tell me about it,” Yamano muttered for some reason and covered her face with her hands. “By the way, what’s Miori-senpai like with that Shiratori-senpai guy?”

“They look like they’re close. I saw them going home together too.”

“Is that so...” Yamano frowned skeptically.

“Haven’t you heard the details from Miori?”

“Mmm, well, we chat but... Y’know,” she replied evasively.

Then again, when you go to different schools, you get fewer chances to talk.

“Do you have a pic of Shiratori-senpai? I wanna see.”

I dug through my picture folder on my phone. The only one I had was the group photo of us when we’d gone on that trip together over the summer. *The girls snapped pictures at every opportunity, but us guys don’t take pictures often. I’m finally living the rainbow-colored youth of my dreams. Maybe I should try to be more proactive and take pictures a little more often to preserve these memories.*

“Whoa, he’s hot! He’s in a different league from you, Haibara-senpai.”

“Do you have to put me down every single time? You have a terrible

personality.”

“I mean, Miori-senpai claims she’s only into hot guys, sooo... Though, it’s still just a claim in the end,” Yamano grumbled as she stared at the picture.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

She lightly shook her head. “No, it’s not like anything’s wrong with you. Don’t sweat it.”

The moment I was about to say, “Even if you tell me that, it’s still going to weigh on my mind,” the train came to a halt. We had arrived at our stop.

“Why are you so worried about Miori anyway?” I asked, suddenly curious, as we alighted from the train. *I knew they were close, but I feel like Miori’s all she ever talks about.*

“Oh, you know, she’s just been asking me for some advice,” Yamano answered vaguely, implying that she couldn’t say anything more than that.

Advice, huh? Miori doesn’t come to me for advice anymore. And I noticed that something was bothering her too. She must’ve confided it all to Yamano. I’m a little jealous.

“See you, senpai. Let’s hammer away together in the band!” Yamano said goodbye as though she were ending the conversation, and waved to me as she left.

The week after our band resumed practice went by smoothly. I’d had work on Monday, band practice on Tuesday, and now it was lunch break on Wednesday. One week had passed since the interclass sports meet.

“Huh? Miori’s absent?”

“Yeah. Apparently, she’s been out since after the sports meet.”

We were gathered near the classroom windows. Our usual group of six, together as always, exchanged glances.

“Reita, have you heard anything?” I asked.

“I messaged her on RINE, but she didn’t respond.” He gazed at his phone, face

full of concern.

“I heard from a teacher that she has a cold,” Uta said.

“This feels much too long for only a cold,” Nanase replied.

We were all worried about Miori.

Maybe Serika will know more since they're in the same class. “I'll go ask Serika,” I said. While I was out searching for her, I passed by the girls' bathroom. I heard voices coming from inside.

“Is that rumor about Motomiya true? Is she really flirting with Shiratori-kun *and* Haibara-kun?”

“Apparently someone saw it all. She was hugging Haibara-kun in the park.”

“Ew, that's seriously low! She acts like she's all that just because she's a little cute.”

“Remember how she always insisted Haibara-kun was just a childhood friend? It felt like she was bragging. She's such a bitch. I feel bad for Shiratori-kun and Hoshimiya-san!”

My legs instinctively stopped moving. *What are they talking about?* I couldn't process what I'd just heard. However, worried that they would leave the bathroom, I hastily moved on. I walked a little bit away, pretending as though I'd heard nothing, before looking behind me.

The ones gossiping had been a group of girls from class one. Standing in the middle of them was a girl named Hasegawa. She was someone who stood out in class one. I remembered her because when the guys had debated who the cutest first-year girl was, her name had come up a lot together with Hikari's and Miori's. But people said she had a nasty personality.

“What do I do?” My mind was a mess. *What should I even do? Calm down. I need to sort out the situation first.*

If it was a baseless lie, then I could just deny it, but the worst-case scenario came to mind. The rumor that Miori was flirting with both me and Reita was, of course, false. However, I recalled what had happened a few days before the sports meet. If someone had seen me catch Miori when she was about to fall

that night in the park, misunderstandings likely would have arisen.

It must've looked like Miori was hugging me. That's why the rumor going around is that Miori made a move on me, not that I made a move on her. In that case, how do I behave to clear up the misunderstanding? Ugh, I'm starting to sweat. Based on my past experiences, it's hard to stop these sorta rumors.

Anyway, the first step is collecting info. I need to figure out how far the rumor has spread and who's spreading it. This might also be related to why Miori's been absent.

"Yo, Natsuki, lunch is almost over," someone called out to me from far away.

I looked up. Tatsuya and the others beckoned to me.

"Yeah, I know." There's a lot of stuff on my mind now, but I can't skip class. Let's just quietly go back.

As I walked through the hallway on my way back, I felt an awful lot of gazes on me. I scanned my surroundings out of the corner of my eyes—it felt like I was being watched, mainly by the class one girls. *Looks like the rumor's already spread to all the girls in class one.*

For better or for worse, we stood out. Me and Hikari, Reita and Miori—apparently, people called us the two biggest couples of our year. If two of us got involved in a scandal, everyone would obviously be curious. The vicious gazes on me made that explicitly apparent.

I entered the classroom and took my seat. The teacher came in, and class began. I observed my surroundings for a while but didn't feel any unpleasant stares coming from the class two students.

Looks like the rumor hasn't reached class two yet. But it's just a matter of time now. Once this rumor picks up speed, it'll spread through the whole school and become even more exaggerated. It's completely groundless, though. So I want to deal with it as soon as possible before that happens.

"Natsuki-kun, something wrong?" Hikari whispered from the seat next to mine. She looked concerned.

I must've been frowning, and she picked up on it. I'm not sure what to say.

Should I tell her or keep quiet? If I clue her in, then what and how much do I say? I don't have a clear picture of the entire situation yet either.

"Kind of. I'll tell you later," I said after some deliberation.

Hikari was my girlfriend. Even if I didn't know everything, it was better to share the news with her. If the rumors reached her ears, she might feel insecure. But it was a long story, and we were in the middle of class now. I needed to find somewhere we could talk calmly.

Before long, it was after school. Tatsuya and the others went to club practice, and Nanase had piano lessons today, so it was just Hikari and me.

"Can you tell me about it now?" she asked.

The go home club students were still hanging around the classroom chatting.

"Yeah. Can we move somewhere else?" I didn't want other people to overhear if possible. I led her to an empty staircase landing. When I looked behind me, Hikari appeared uneasy. *Right, I haven't explained anything yet.*

"So, what happened?"

"Apparently, a nasty rumor is going around. Mainly among the class one girls," I answered.

She blinked at me. "What kind of rumor?"

"That Miori...flirted with me while dating Reita." It was hard to say aloud, but the conversation wouldn't get anywhere if I didn't spit it out.

"Oh... I see." Hikari's expression was unreadable.

"It's not true, of course." *I need to make that clear first. To dispel any of her unease.*

"I don't doubt that...but what started those rumors?"

That was a reasonable question. It would've been easy if someone had started a baseless rumor out of malice, but we were in a tricky situation because there was a base for the rumor to stand on.

In all honesty, I was terrified that Hikari would misunderstand. At the time, I

truly had caught Miori in my arms on the spur of the moment because she was about to trip, but what Hikari would think after hearing about it a week later was another story. That was why her question made the words stick in my throat.

“Because someone saw Miori hug Natsuki.” The one who answered her wasn’t me, but a voice from behind us. I turned around—standing there was Serika.

“Why are you here?” The question spilled out of me before I could ask if she’d been listening the whole time.

“I was looking for you. We talked about ironing out our practice schedule after school, remember?”

Oh... Now that she mentions it, we did. I completely forgot about that.

“Though, now’s probably not the time to be discussing that.” Serika let out a dejected sigh. She always wore a deadpan expression and only ever showed emotion when it came to music, so this was a rare sight.

“Um, what does she mean by that?” Hikari asked again.

I needed to give her a proper answer. “I think it’s about what happened a few days before the sports meet.” I was making Hikari feel insecure right now. And that was precisely why I had to honestly tell her everything. “That day after school, I was practicing basketball with Mei. He was also playing basketball in the sports meet, so I was giving him some pointers. Miori happened to pass by, so she joined us for practice. After we finished, we took a break and chatted, and when we were about to go home, Miori suddenly tripped, and I caught her.”

Hikari and Serika silently listened to my story.

“If someone saw that, I wouldn’t be surprised if they thought Miori was hugging me. I think if there’s any basis for the rumors going around, it’s that.”

“I see.” Serika nodded understandingly.

“Do you think that rumor is related to why Miori-chan has been absent?” Hikari questioned.

"I don't know. I overheard it by accident, and I'm still investigating." I shook my head.

"I see," she murmured.

"How about I tell you what I know to start," Serika said after taking in our expressions. "Like Natsuki said, the girls in class one are spreading that rumor. It won't be long until it reaches your class too. Everyone loves this sort of gossip."

Serika confirmed the conjecture that I'd hoped wasn't true.

"The one who claims to have seen it is a girl from class one, Minase."

"Oh, the quiet girl with glasses?" Hikari asked.

I had no idea who that was. She must not have been the type to stand out in class.

"Yep. But Minase isn't the one spreading the rumors; it's Hasegawa's groupies."

"I knew it. When I overheard the rumors, Hasegawa was the one telling other people," I said.

"Well... Hasegawa-san doesn't get along very well with Miori-chan, right?" Hikari pointed out.

Really? That was news to me, but Serika nodded as if it were obvious. Evidently, this was common knowledge among the girls. *I'm way too clueless about interpersonal relationships between girls...*

"Miori's cute, the girls' basketball team's star player, an excellent student, dating Reita-kun—the most popular guy in our year—and childhood friends with the second-most popular guy in our year, Natsuki. She's got a lot of enemies. She's got people on her side too, but Miori's headstrong. She's not like Hikari-chan, who can get along with anyone, so haters despise her. Eh... I'm sure it's just jealousy, though."

I mean, she keeps up a mature appearance on the surface, but she hasn't changed one bit at heart since elementary school. She's really strong-willed, and she doesn't mesh with everyone.

"Class one was already split between Hasegawa's group and Miori's group

before this,” Serika continued. “Though, they never fought openly.”

“R-Really? I had no idea,” I said.

“Well, girls have a lot going on. Most boys probably don’t know about it,” Hikari added.

The world of girls...is kinda scary.

“Now that Hasegawa-san’s found Miori-chan’s weakness, she must be happily spreading the rumors,” Hikari said.

“In reality, when I asked Minase about it, apparently she’d just told her friends that it looked like Miori had hugged you. But Hasegawa was eavesdropping and grilled her for more details. Minase didn’t even know if that was actually what happened, and she didn’t expect it to blow up like this, so she feels bad.”

Thanks to Serika, I could roughly see the full picture of the situation. *It’s my fault. If I had pulled away from Miori immediately, this misunderstanding might not have happened. Instead, I ended up holding her for a few seconds. I mean, she couldn’t move, after all.*

“What would you do...if I told you I love you?”

The scene from that moment flashed through my mind. She had sounded awfully close to tearing up.

“Natsuki-kun?”

Next thing I knew, Hikari was staring me in the face. “Oh, sorry. It’s nothing.” I’d accidentally gotten lost in my thoughts. I hastily shook my head.

“You mean it? It’s really nothing?” she asked as though she were looking for reconfirmation. “If the rumor was baseless, I think Miori-chan would deny it.”

“I agree. Once she’s pissed, she’s quick to pick a fight.”

Serika and Hikari nodded at each other. I agreed with them. Miori wasn’t a timid person who’d lose to a stupid rumor.

“The only thing I can think of is what I explained earlier.” Although there was something else sitting on my mind, that was all I could tell them. Anything else

would've been mere speculation. I didn't know how Miori felt.

"I don't know what's going through Miori's head. She's been absent since the sports meet, and I haven't had the chance to ask her. 'Cause of that, the rumor's gaining credibility," Serika said, summarizing the situation.

Wearing a serious expression, Hikari nodded, urging Serika to continue.

"Our group wants to defend Miori, but because she's been gone and no one can get in touch, we can't come out strong against this rumor... Some girls even doubt Miori." Serika sighed. "It's such a pain." She didn't have much interest in anything besides music, so she must've found this whole debacle annoying. "But I can't leave Miori alone. We're friends, after all."

"That's right," Hikari said in agreement. "The biggest problem is that we can't get in touch with Miori, right?"

"Yep. If she just has a cold, then she should be able to reply. Sure, she's not the most responsive, but it's weird that she isn't replying to her boyfriend either, not just us."

Hearing it phrased like that made the situation feel even more severe.

"Natsuki-kun, don't you live close to her?" Hikari asked.

"Yeah, I'm about a fifteen-minute walk away."

"I'm worried about Miori-chan; do you think you could visit her?" She put her hands together and earnestly said, "Please."

"Are you sure you're okay with that?"

"I trust you." She gazed into my eyes and slowly nodded.

"We *do* need to check whether she's actually in terrible shape...or if something else is going on," Serika murmured.

True, that's an important job. All of this revolves around Miori. Without her opinion, we'll hesitate over how to handle the rumor. "Got it. I'll check on her."

Not gonna lie, I've got a bad feeling. If she was just really sick, then she's bound to have at least sent a message over RINE. So no doubt, something must've happened.

Before I got on my train home, I sent Miori a message. However, even after an hour had passed, she hadn't so much as read it. *Looks like I've got no choice but to visit her in person.* But my body felt awfully heavy. I had a bad feeling about this, because I had a vague foreboding about the situation. I could only pray that I was wrong.

I got off the train and picked up a get well gift from the convenience store. After walking about twenty minutes, I reached Miori's house. It was a large, old Japanese-style house located in the residential area. In the spacious and beautifully well-kept garden, there was a basketball hoop that stuck out like a sore thumb. A white Alphard minivan was parked in the nearby lot.

Nothing had changed from when I used to come here in the past.

A gray-haired lady with a crooked back sat outside on the engawa-style porch. She noticed me at the entrance and slowly stood up. "What's this? Is that you, Natsuki-kun? You've grown up."

"Hello, granny. Long time no see."

Miori's grandma came up to me, cane in hand. I hadn't visited their home in four or five years, so I hadn't expected her to remember me.

"Miori talks about you often. Just as she said, you've become quite the handsome young man." Granny gazed at me with a cheerful smile.

"Miori...talks about me?"

"Of course! She talks about how you did this or you did that every chance she gets. Though, a large portion of it is filled with complaints about how you try to show off, or calling you stupid or a moron. But she seems to enjoy talking about you."

I laughed wryly in response. *That sounds like Miori.*

"She must be beside herself with joy that you two are good friends again."

"I hope she is. She's not honest with me, so I can never tell. By the way," I said, steering our small talk to the reason I was here, "is Miori all right? She's been absent from school for a while now."

Granny answered my question with her own: “Did you come to visit her?”

I nodded.

Her expression darkened. “Her health is in a sorry state. She’s shut herself in her room and won’t come out.”

“I see. May I go inside for a bit? I want to talk to her.”

“Of course, come on in. Miori will be delighted. Please drink some tea while you’re here too.”

I took off my shoes and stepped into the house. Granny led me to the tatami-floored living room first. There was a long table lined with a few floor cushions. A plate of mikan oranges and Japanese sweets sat on top of it, as well as a cup of tea at the end of the table, most likely granny’s.

“Wait here for a bit,” she said.

I obeyed and sat down on one of the cushions. She brought out a cup of tea for me. *I’m so sorry! I gave her the get well present, but I’m visiting without prior notice, so I’m just a bother, aren’t I... Visiting a sick friend is standard in manga and anime, but there’s actually not much to do in reality. You just give more work to whoever’s sick, and if you catch their cold, then that defeats the whole purpose of the visit. Well, maybe bringing food is helpful if they live alone... It’s a special case this time, though, so please forgive me.*

I looked around as I drank my tea. A travel program was playing on the TV. It rested on a stand that also had a picture of a young Miori with her parents decorating the edge. Both of her parents worked, so they probably weren’t home yet. Miori and granny were the only ones here right now, as I’d heard that her grandpa had passed away.

After a short wait, granny came back into the room once more. “I’m sorry, Natsuki-kun. She doesn’t want to see anyone right now... Her health should’ve recovered considerably by now, though. I find it unlikely you’d catch her cold.”

“I...see.” *Thought so—she wasn’t out sick.*

“Perhaps something happened at school. Natsuki-kun, would you happen to know anything?”

“I might, but I need to ask her if that’s really why she’s been absent.” My eyes met granny’s, and without averting my gaze, I said, “Can I go stand outside of Miori’s room?” I knew she didn’t want to see me, but the situation wouldn’t change if I obediently turned back.

Granny smiled widely and, in a gentle voice, said, “I’ll leave that girl to you.”

I stood in front of Miori’s room, when I heard the soft pitter-patter of footsteps as her dog approached me. *I think its name is Ku. Is that right?* Ku sniffed my toes and nuzzled against my leg. After that, it fixed its eyes on the closed door.

“You’re worried about her too, huh.” I petted Ku on the head and then knocked on the door. “Miori, it’s me. You okay?”

I heard what sounded like blankets rustling around. However, she didn’t reply.

“We’re all worried about you. At least reply to us on RINE.” There was no response, but I continued talking anyway. “Are you feeling all right? I brought some stuff that’ll make you feel better, so can you open up? Oh, Serika gave me some handouts too. She said it’s the homework and info that you missed.”

I tried to keep my tone bright, but all I got in return was frigid radio silence. *Should I bring up the rumor or not?*

While I hesitated, a voice came from inside the room. “Tell everyone I’m sorry.”

Miori still didn’t open the door, but I could sense her presence through it. She stood on the other side and spoke to me from there. “I don’t want to see anyone right now...and that includes you. So...go home,” she said, her voice a faint whisper.

No matter how you slice it, she’s clearly not acting like herself. “If you don’t want to see me, then let’s talk like this. But could you tell me what’s going on?” I sat down cross-legged in front of her door. I was determined to stay until I got an explanation. “You didn’t just catch any old cold, right? What happened?”

“Didn’t you come here because you already know what’s going on?” she

murmured softly.

“If you’re talking about the rumor spreading around class one, then yeah, I heard about it.”

Miori breathed in sharply. Her reaction confirmed my theory—the rumor was related to why she’d been skipping school.

“Sure,” I began, “it might’ve looked like you did that on purpose, but that was just an accident. Just be confident and quash the rumor. I’ll deny it too. It’s not like you to give up without a fight.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“I heard that the Hasegawa girl who’s spreading this rumor doesn’t like you. That’s why the story is getting twisted. At this rate, if we leave it be, it’s only going to get more and more exaggerated.”

“It’s not really twisted.”

Her reply made me furrow my brow. I didn’t know what she was getting at.

“Hasegawa-san and her friends asked me about it directly. The rumor going around is just the plain truth.”

“What do you mean it’s the truth? What the heck are you say—”

“Don’t pretend you don’t understand. You’re not that thickheaded,” Miori interrupted.

I had no rebuttal, but I did have an inkling as to what she meant. I merely prayed that my premonition was wrong. On that day, what had gone through my head after I’d caught Miori?

“S-Sorry... My legs won’t listen to me.”

“What would you do...if I told you I love you?”

“I’m going home! If we don’t hurry, we’ll miss the last train!”

Miori had been unsteady on her feet due to exhaustion, and that’s why I’d caught her. I’d assumed she didn’t pull away and stayed in my arms for a while because she was waiting for her legs to recover. However, immediately after that, she had become worried about the last train and hastily ran off.

“Her legs are completely fine.”

At the time, I'd thought, *“What if...”* An absurd, all too convenient delusion had flashed through my mind.

“It was all on purpose,” Miori continued, confirming that very delusion. “That’s why I couldn’t make any excuses. I’m dating Reita-kun, but I still hugged you. I thought it would be fine if I tripped, even though it couldn’t possibly be okay... Stupid, right? I failed. I was supposed to keep these feelings sealed up.” Her voice was laced with sobs.

I couldn’t get a word in. I didn’t know what to say. *There’s so much I want to ask, but is it okay to pry? Because if she’s telling the truth, then Miori is in love with me.*

“Tell everyone else that I’m sorry for making them worry. But the rumor is true, so don’t try to stop it or deny it... Don’t go after Hasegawa-san and her friends either.”

I didn’t remember what happened after that very well. Unable to find the right words to offer her, I left as though I had something to run away from.

(Motomiya Miori)

“Are you sure you wanna do that?” Saya asked after confirming Natsuki had left.

“What else can I do? It’s all my fault.”

I sat on my bed hugging my knees while she stood by the window. The reason for her presence was simple: she had come in through the window without asking.

Saya was my childhood friend who lived two houses down. Though she was a year younger than me, we’d been good friends for a long time. She often sneaked in through the window like she’d done today, and I let her.

“You could just say your legs were wobbly and it’d all be fine. What happened wasn’t that big a deal anyway. No one would put you on blast for sneaking a little hug in,” Saya suggested in a light tone.

I'd be lying if I said that idea hadn't run through my head before. "I can't. I could never forgive myself if I did." I couldn't lie to protect myself when I'd already done something so horrible.

"You're surprisingly fussy." She shrugged and sighed.

"Sorry. I asked you for advice, but it turned into this mess."

"I don't really care." She paused. "But don't torture yourself over this too much."

I'd been consulting Saya for all sorts of advice since a few days before the sports meet, explaining how I had a boyfriend, how I liked someone else—and how that someone was my childhood friend. I told her how I wanted to fall in love with my current boyfriend, but I just couldn't, and it pained me.

I only confided my worries to people I didn't interact with on a daily basis. Though I'd been good friends with Saya since we were young, we usually spent our time with different people, so she was the perfect person to go to.

"On the flip side, you could say Haibara-senpai's at fault here for not rejecting you."

"Stop. Natsuki trusted me." *And I betrayed his trust. I'm causing him trouble because of that.*

"I don't think that's the only reason he didn't let go of you immediately," Saya murmured as she gazed out the window.

I didn't understand what she was implying. I knit my brows in confusion, and she smiled dryly.

"Welp, at any rate, endlessly moping around isn't going to help anything," she said.

"Yeah, you're right. I know. I need to go back to school soon."

Logically, I understood that. I couldn't stay locked inside my room forever; I needed to go back to school. But no matter how much I tried, my feet refused to carry me there. It wasn't because of the rumor Hasegawa-san and her groupies were spreading. It was because I couldn't face Natsuki and my friends.

"Saya, what would you do?" I asked.

She hummed in thought for a moment. “I’m not as sensitive as you are, so I’d apologize pronto and be done with it.”

Yeah... She’s right. In the end, I’m just running if I keep this up. First things first, I need to apologize to the people I’ve troubled.

First Interlude

The sun set, dyeing the sky crimson. It was evening on the third day of the school festival. No one else remained in class one's classroom. All of the stalls had closed up by now, and the only event left was the light music club's concert on the courtyard stage. When I looked out the window, I could see the audience going wild already.

I think Natsuki and Serika's band is up next. Despite that, there was a reason I hadn't headed to the courtyard and stayed in this empty classroom instead.

"I see everyone from class one is gone too," said a voice.

I turned around to see that someone had opened the door and entered the room. It was Reita-kun. He was the most popular boy in our year...and the boy that had caught my eye. The reason I had stayed behind was because he'd asked me to.

"Does that mean class two is empty too?" I asked.

"Everyone went to watch Natsuki's band perform. Though, we're not quite finished cleaning up yet."

"Aren't you going to watch?"

"I will, but after I talk to you." Reita-kun came to the window where I was standing and stopped two steps away from me. My gaze met his. I couldn't take my eyes off of him because of the serious look on his face. "Miori, I have something important to tell you, though I'm sure you've guessed what this is about."

"Huh?" I was at a loss for words. I didn't have a guess—I had no idea why he'd called me here. "Reita-kun?" I tilted my head to the side.

He stared at me intently. He always wore a gentle smile, but right now he was looking at me with utmost sincerity.

Reita-kun stayed silent for a while. I soon picked up on the mood too. We

were a boy and girl, alone in an empty classroom. Not to mention, we were considerably close friends too. *Don't tell me...* The moment the thought ran through my mind, Reita-kun broke the temporary silence.

"Right, time for the direct approach," he muttered and nodded to himself. He held his hand out towards me. "I love you, Miori. Will you go out with me?"

He wasn't lying or joking. Reita-kun's expression, tone, and atmosphere all told me he meant every word. They were the words I should've wanted to hear. After all, I'd come up with all sorts of schemes to date him. I was finally being rewarded for my efforts.

And yet, my heart didn't soar. All I had to do was nod my head, but I couldn't. The fluctuations of my feelings only reconfirmed...what I'd feared.

I truly had been interested in Reita-kun. When I first saw him on the day of the entrance ceremony, I really had thought he was good-looking. He was handsome, calm, and clever. *Oh, he must be popular*, I'd thought.

That had been my first impression of him. Curious what kind of person he was, I devised a plan to talk to him more through Natsuki. In the beginning, I'd taken a conservative approach. I had a feeling he was used to sidestepping girls that tried to get close to him like me. He was also a kind and considerate person. However, I couldn't discern his true feelings.

But as we became friends, I began to see the sides of him that suited his age, and I found those parts of him cute. I had no doubt that I was into him.

I was the one who'd always initiated conversation at first, but somewhere along the way, our positions swapped. Reita-kun became the one to invite me out at every opportunity. Both of us must have noticed that change.

It wasn't as if I'd come to dislike him. It was just...a different presence that had been dwelling in my heart first had rapidly grown, and before long, *he* was all I thought about. It had been growing all this time, and even continued right this moment.

Perhaps I used to love Reita-kun. There might've been moments where my feelings had swelled to be more than mere interest. But it was different now. There was someone else in my heart.

“I’m really sorry.” I wrung out an apology from my throat. “I know my behavior suggested otherwise. Initially I approached you because I was into you...but there’s someone else I love, so... I’m sorry.” Addled as I was, all that came out was a poor excuse.

Reita-kun kept his eyes fixed on me. Even now, his composure never crumbled. No, if anything...he seemed like he’d known this would happen.

“Is the one you love Natsuki?”

I thought I’d stopped breathing. *How did he know? I’ve been hiding it this whole time. In the first place, isn’t it a preposterous idea that I’d love Natsuki when I’ve been helping him with his own crush? No one would do that unless they were a huge moron... Then again, I am doing that. I’m feeling very down now.*

“What makes you think that?” I asked hesitantly. I kept the conversation going with a question as I hastily tried to think of a way to fool him. *But it’d be insincere of me to lie when he confessed to me... Right? Then I should tell him the truth.*

While I brooded over such worries, Reita-kun furrowed his brows. “Well, anyone could tell by watching you... Did you think no one knew?”

“Huuuh?! R-Really?!” Having caught me off guard, his sharp words cut like a knife, and I took critical damage. My reaction accidentally confirmed his assertion, but it didn’t seem like he’d been trying to trick confirmation out of me to begin with. Reita-kun had been extremely confident that I was in love with Natsuki.

“Can... Can you really tell just by looking?” I felt my cheeks heat up. My voice even trembled a little. *This isn’t like me. I need to pull myself together, but I just can’t. I’m so embarrassed I want to disappear.*

“You’re always watching Natsuki, which might be unintentional, but he’s all you ever talk about, even when you’re with me. Plus, he’s the only one you’re chummy with, so it’d be hard not to notice.” Reita-kun chuckled, amused for some reason.

Why is he laughing? Seriously. “Um... Then does that mean, uh, everyone else

has also noticed?" *If they have, then I'm beyond embarrassed!*

"Hm, I'm not sure. None of them seem to have, at least."

I felt a wash of relief. *Y-Yeah! I'm not so obvious that everyone can tell by watching me. Reita-kun is just too observant; he's way sharper compared to the others. Thank god...*

"To be fair, I observe you much more than the others do," he explained matter-of-factly.

I'm impressed he can say that without any hesitation. If it were Natsuki, he'd be so smug right now. I can see it already... He'd have that "I'm the man" expression on.

"Well, I already knew that you loved Natsuki. I came in assuming that."

"Y-You assumed that?" I parroted his words, unable to follow what he was saying. *I don't understand what's going on. Reita-kun confessed to me, and I rejected him. I have someone else I love, and he knew that. But he's smiling calmly. "W-Wait... Then why did you confess to me? Didn't you know I'd reject you?"*

"I simply wanted to tell you how I felt. Is that so wrong?" He smiled cheerfully, flashing his pearly whites at me.

My heart quickened a little as I floundered around. In contrast to my fluster, Reita-kun breezily added, "That was a joke."

H-Huuuh? This is why he's so— Argh! I know why he's so popular with girls. But unfortunately, I'm Natsuki devoted, so I won't be swayed. No, wait, wait, wait. What does "Natsuki devoted" even mean? I'm not like that, though. It's totally not like that. It's not like I love that dummy or anything, okay? Don't misunderstand! Who the heck am I arguing with... Ahhh! Jeez, this is all so convoluted!

"You're funny when romance is involved. Or maybe it's when Natsuki's involved," Reita-kun said, observing me closely as I cycled through a hundred expressions.

"Is that bad? I'm a beginner when it comes to romance!" I'd come to learn

that it was pointless to act tough in front of Reita-kun these days (because he was too observant and would instantly see through my act), so I behaved defiantly instead. *Oh, whatever. I don't care anymore!*

“In that case, will you go out with me to learn about romance?”

An absurd proposition reached my ears just when I was starting to despair.

“Of course, you can continue loving Natsuki. I won't criticize you if you spend time with him. I don't mind if you treat dating me like a practice run either.”

His offer was too good for me. I thought it was another joke, but the look in his eyes was serious.

“However, I'll work hard to make you look my way.” His words permeated deep into my heart.

Reita-kun's straightforward feelings, and his offer—dazzling like the light—sunk my heart deeper into darkness. If I fell in love with him, I could become happy.

Even if I continued to love Natsuki, I would only suffer. Right now, his heart was undecided between Uta and Hikari-chan, but there was no room for me. Of course there wasn't: I hadn't thrown down my gauntlet in the battle of love. I didn't have the courage to butt in this late into the game.

Besides, I had cooperated with Natsuki in order to go out with Reita-kun. At least, that's how it was in the beginning. So if I took Reita-kun up on his offer, I could naturally end my partnership with Natsuki. If I achieved my goal, he would have no reason to help me anymore.

I could distance myself from him and pray that my love for him would disappear. Reita-kun would date me while tolerating my feelings, and I would also work hard to fall in love with him. It was the best option for me at the moment. At least, that was what I'd thought at the time.

“I won't be able to let go of these feelings immediately, you know.”

“I know, and I don't mind.” Reita-kun nodded, wearing a gentle smile. “Even so, that's how much I want to go out with you—and how much I love you.”

A part of me was genuinely happy that he loved someone like me. So I

accepted his proposal.

When I think back on it now, I shouldn't have done that. I was being overly reliant on Reita-kun's kindness. I'd prioritized my own feelings too much...and made a grave miscalculation—I'd misjudged the size of my affections. I was wrong to think they were something that could be immediately discarded. That was my greatest mistake.

And of course, I would be punished for the crime I'd committed.

Chapter 2: Relationship Responsibilities

The day after I visited Miori's house.

I messaged Serika—apparently, Miori was absent again. Including today, she'd been out for a whole week now. *Is she never going to come back to school? Her voice was shaking when we talked yesterday. Her train of thought is turning pretty self-flagellating. I'm worried. I want to do something for her...but I couldn't find the right words to tell her then.*

"Natsuki, can I have a sec?" Tatsuya's voice snapped me out of my ruminations.

"What's up?" I asked. He wore an oddly serious expression.

"Can we talk outside?" He pointed to the veranda and walked out. I followed after him.

Because I'd been so lost in thought earlier, I hadn't noticed how the gazes on me felt different than normal. I figured out what he wanted to discuss immediately.

Once we were on the veranda, Tatsuya leaned his arms against the railing and said, "It's about Motomiya. There's a weird rumor going around about her."

Reita also stood on the narrow veranda with his arms crossed. Uncharacteristically, his expression was dark.

"Apparently, it came from the girls in class one... Have you heard anything?" Tatsuya asked.

I explained what I'd learned yesterday: how I'd heard about the rumor, my discussion with Serika and Hikari, and that I'd visited Miori's house.

"Got it... So it was just a load of crap in the end, right?" Tatsuya said and let out an annoyed sigh.

"Yeah, I mentioned it earlier, but it was just an accident that might've looked otherwise." It hadn't been an accident, but I couldn't reveal that now. If I told

them the truth, I'd have to go into the topic of Miori's feelings. And above all, Reita was here. I hesitated over voluntarily breaking the news myself.

Even after listening to my story, Reita said nothing. He kept his eyes directed up at the cloudy sky.

"Uta's depressed," Tatsuya said bitterly.

I followed Tatsuya's gaze and looked inside the classroom through the window. Uta, who was usually cheerful, stared emptily at the blackboard from her seat.

"If I heard about it, then obviously she would've too."

Well, the class one girls started the rumor. It makes sense that the girls would hear about it before it reached the boys in class two. "Yeah, plus Uta and Miori are both on the girls' basketball team."

"Her best friend on the team has been out for a whole week. I'm sure she's looked into why on her own. When she found out, she couldn't say anything about it, and now she's crestfallen," Reita said, finally speaking up. "It's Uta we're talking about. She'd normally make a bigger fuss that Miori's been absent. The reason she hasn't is because the rumor that's supposedly keeping Miori out of school is related to us. She's worried, but she hasn't brought it up since it's a sensitive topic. I'm sure that's what she's thinking."

He's observing people closely, as per usual.



“So no one can get in touch with Motomiya?”

“Seems like it. After she said, ‘Sorry. I’m fine,’ I haven’t heard a word.”

“If we got nothing from Natsuki’s visit, then she must be in a real jam.”

Tatsuya groaned and frowned deeply.

“I asked Serika and Uta,” Reita said, “but no one can get in touch with her. The longer Miori stays absent, the faster the rumor will spread. I tried to keep it in check, but it’s difficult.”

Thought so. Serika said the same thing.

“Can’t we do anything? Isn’t it just a bunch of baloney in the end?” Tatsuya cracked his knuckles with a grim expression.

Hey, what’re you gonna do?

“It’s hard to stop a rumor being spread out of malice.” Reita started with his conclusion before continuing. “Natsuki, Hoshimiya-san, and I are all related parties. But if we deny the rumor, it’ll look like we’re defending Miori. The people spreading it will use that against us. In the meantime, the rumor is steadily blowing out of proportion. And it’s all just to bring Miori down... I can’t bear to listen to it.”

“What the hell do they even want? Do they hate her?” Tatsuya asked, unable to compute their motives.

I repeated what I’d heard secondhand to him. “Serika told me there’s a group of girls that antagonize Miori. Apparently, they’re the ones spreading the rumor. She said someone named Hasegawa especially hates Miori.”

The moment I mentioned Hasegawa’s name, Reita’s face clouded over. “I knew it: it was Yoko.”

“You know her?” I asked.

“We went to the same middle school. So you could say that.”

Compared to Reita’s distressed expression, Tatsuya’s face looked irritated. “Uh-huh. If this is all Hasegawa, then can’t you just talk to her?”

“It probably won’t be that easy, though I might be able to persuade her on

the surface.” After that, Reita clammed up, ruminating on something.

“Sorry, Reita. It’s all my fault.” I couldn’t help but apologize. I was the one who’d created this mess.

“It’s not your fault. If we get down to it...it’s mine,” Reita muttered regretfully. He lightly shook his head to change gears.

It’s his fault? Before I could ask what he meant by that, Reita continued on.

“First things first, I’ll try visiting Miori.” Funnily enough, he’d reached the same conclusion that I had yesterday.

I couldn’t do anything and just ran away, but maybe Reita can pull something off... Even if Miori has feelings for me, it doesn’t change the fact that he’s still her boyfriend.

(Shiratori Reita)

When I heard about the rumor, I had a bad premonition. Based on the knowledge that Miori had been absent, a terrible conjecture unfolded in my mind. In all honesty, I hoped I was wrong. But my guesses rarely miss the mark.

When Miori and I had agreed to date with strings attached, I’d known the risks that accompanied a contract relationship. Regardless of the actual state of our relationship, we were officially dating in the eyes of outsiders.

I was the only one who knew she loved Natsuki. I was the only one who wouldn’t criticize her for hanging out with him. Common sense dictated that nobody else would feel the same. If she spent time with Natsuki while dating me, her social circle would not hold her in high regard. And if she became unable to suppress her feelings for him and did something, everyone would immediately think she was cheating on me. After all, who’d ever think that I would permit it?

I’d be lying if I said generating pressure via the people around her hadn’t been one of my goals. Sure, I said I’d let her do as she pleased, but it doesn’t feel great to see the person you like with someone else. Now, we’d gotten here as a result of my despicable idea. This whole debacle had come about because I’d

pressured Miori, persuaded her to enter a contractual relationship with me, and just *had* to flaunt that I could make her fall for me eventually.

I'd done all that even though I knew it would make her suffer. Regret filled my mind as I walked towards Miori's house. I'd never gone inside, but she'd shown me around her town before, so I knew where she lived.

I'd come after practice, when the sun was already sinking. Few streetlights lined the dimly lit road, and there was no one around. Only an occasional car would pass by.

It turned out I didn't need to go to her house. I spotted Miori in the nearby park. I headed towards the bench where she sat, her head hung in a daze. There was no one in the park besides her, only a single streetlight. Her feet were surrounded by heaps of fallen leaves. Evidently, all the trees had completely shed their foliage. I could feel the chill in the air.

Hearing my footsteps, Miori raised her head. Her face contorted when she saw me. "Reita-kun."

"Miori. You didn't reply, so I came to see you." I stopped in front of her. On closer inspection, I noticed she had her uniform on. Perhaps she'd been on her way to school. Her bag was close by as well. "How long have you been here?"

She didn't answer my question. Her breath was white, and she shivered slightly. I took off my blazer and placed it around her shoulders. Then, I bought hot tea from the nearby vending machine and sat next to her. I took her hand and forced the drink into it.

"Thanks." Miori's head drooped apologetically, and she took a sip of tea. "It's warm."

"Sit here for too long, and you'll get the chills. You should go home, take a hot bath, and sleep with plenty of warm blankets. You just recovered from a cold, right? What'll you do if you catch another one?" My tone turned somewhat critical in spite of myself.

"I'll be fine. I didn't actually have a cold."

"My point still stands."

The dry wind caressed our hair. *What should I start with?* While I fretted over what to say, Miori spoke first.

“I need to apologize to you for something.”

“If it’s about the rumor, then I already heard about it. I know where it came from too. I’ll shut it down without fail, so—”

“You don’t have to. It’s the truth anyway, so I can’t refute it.” She interrupted me, her voice firm.

“Natsuki said the incident that the rumor originated from was an accident.”

“I pretended to trip and hugged him. I’m telling you I did it on purpose.”

That had been my hypothesis. I’d been almost sure that was what had happened. And yet, now that she’d confirmed it herself, the truth weighed heavily on my mind.

“The rumor that I hugged him, that I made a move on him, it’s all true. Hasegawa-san and her friends are just telling the truth, so they haven’t done anything wrong... I’m the only one in the wrong here. I’m sorry for betraying you.”

“I told you that I don’t mind if you stay in love with Natsuki. I said you could spend time with him too. So you have nothing to apologize for. We’re not a couple in the proper sense, after all.”

“Still, I wanted to love you and be a good girlfriend to you. I thought that was the lowest bar of sincerity I could show while we were dating. But I succumbed to my desires in the end,” she said. “I really wanted to fall in love with you...but it looks like I can’t.”

“Won’t you give me a little more time?” I asked. I knew where our conversation was heading, but I couldn’t help but resist.

“There’s a much better fit for you out there than a terrible person like me.” Miori slowly shook her head. Tears welled up in the corner of her eyes. “I’m sorry. Please break up with me.” The tears traced her cheek and dripped down to the ground.

It doesn’t look like I can convince her otherwise. There’s nothing I can do. This

was meant to be from the very beginning. I'm the one who warped our relationship into this. Now that we're in this mess, we can't keep it up.

I let out a heavy sigh and sluggishly nodded. "Will you come back to school?"

"I plan to show up tomorrow. I can't cut class forever."

She'd probably intended to go today as well. But her feet wouldn't take her, and she remained in place here. Perhaps the same thing had happened yesterday too. Miori had taken a considerable amount of mental damage. I could tell just by looking at her.

However, apparently, I couldn't save Miori.

"How are you going to handle the rumor?" I asked.

"I won't. I did something bad, so I have to accept my punishment. I might lose some friends, but it is what it is... I need to apologize to Hikari-chan too," Miori replied in a seemingly brave tone.

Her cursory determination looked to me like a house built on sand that would collapse at any moment. *If Natsuki were here, what would he say to her?* Unable to add anything else, I felt that question swirling around my heart. *Nevertheless...there must be something more I can do.*

The day after Reita visited Miori's house.

I rode the same train as always and arrived in front of the school. A ponytail swayed in the corner of my eye. It belonged to someone I hadn't seen in a while. Miori had come to school. I almost instinctively called her name and ran up to her, but my legs stopped in place.

I shouldn't talk to Miori right now. It'll probably aggravate the rumor. I guess Reita pulled something off, huh. Whereas I'd been unable to say anything, whatever he had said must've resonated with Miori. *As her childhood friend, I feel sorta frustrated, but I'm more relieved that she came to school. I'm glad she's back.*

Deliberately keeping my distance from Miori, I changed into my indoor shoes at the entrance, went up the stairs, and started down the hallway.

“Huh? Isn’t that Motomiya-san?”

“Yikes. The one from the rumors... I thought she’d be absent forever.”

Miori attracted attention, especially the curious gazes of the girls.

“How can she just show up like nothing’s wrong? Didn’t it come out that she’s been flirting with tons of boys?”

“You’re so right. Know how she’s on the basketball team? I heard she seduced one of her senpai’s boyfriends.”

The rumor had become even more embellished. Now the story wasn’t just about Miori hitting on me; somehow, her feud with Wakamura-senpai had been maliciously touched up and incorporated too.

“Apparently she goes after guys who have girlfriends for fun.”

“No way, what a bitch! She *does* have the face of one. Keep her away from me.”

I felt nauseous. The only ones who held malice for Miori were the girls creating the rumors. I knew the people talking about it now were chiefly doing so out of curiosity, but I still wanted to grab their mouths and shut them up this instant.

The gossip reached my ears even though I was only watching from afar. Miori must’ve felt like she was on a bed of nails. She walked with her eyes solemnly cast down and went into her classroom.

“Haibara-kun, may I have a moment of your time?” Nanase asked me while I was watching Miori. Her tone was cold. I could tell she was not in a good mood.

“Sure.” I followed after her. We stopped at a deserted space that connected the class building with the gym.

Nanase turned to face me with a hard scowl. “Now, listen. Are you aware that you’re Hikari’s boyfriend?” The first thing she sprang on me was an unexpected question.

“Well, of course I am... At least, I thought I was.”

“Then I hope you’ll show a little more consideration for her feelings,” she said

accusingly. “I know about the rumors, and that it was a mere accident. Hikari informed me.”

Then what’s the problem? “I thought I explained the situation, though...”

“I’m not faulting you for worrying about Motomiya-san, but don’t you see that Hikari is uneasy too? Even if she doesn’t think you’re lying, this whole debacle shows that there’s a girl who’s intimate with you on enough of a regular basis that this sort of accident can happen. In the first place, Hikari told me she didn’t even know you’d met up with Motomiya-san that day.”

She’s right. I didn’t tell Hikari about that night. But that’s because I bumped into Miori by coincidence, and by the same logic, all we did was play basketball late into the night. Besides, she’s my childhood friend, not a target for romance...right? Is that really true? I don’t know. At the very least, that’s not what Miori thought.

“What if you were in Hikari’s position? How would you feel?”

Her words sank in, and I imagined how I’d feel if Hikari had a male childhood friend that she was close to—if she met him without my knowing, even though I was her boyfriend. *Nanase’s right. I’d feel anxious. I would feel insecure about whether or not Hikari actually liked me.*

“Because of that rumor, Hikari has been receiving some ill-bred comments too. People are telling her that she’s better off breaking up with you, or that you’re a frivolous man. Every time they do, though, Hikari refutes them.”

I knew it... There are nasty rumors going around about me too. Although Hasegawa’s target was Miori, her rumors were branching off.

“I’m sure this is all a considerable mental burden on you, but what infuriates me is your attitude—you’re ignorant to what Hikari is going through, and all you worry about is Motomiya-san’s absence.”

I had no rebuttal. Nanase was entirely correct. I had thought Hikari would be fine, but that was sheerly my own assumption. I had no idea what kind of feelings she’d been hiding beneath her brave demeanor.

“I understand you meant no ill will. I’m worried about Motomiya-san as well. You’re very kind, so I’m sure showing concern for her comes naturally to

you...but don't forget to look after Hikari too," Nanase urged.

"I got it. Thanks for telling me, Nanase."

Seeing that I was Hikari's boyfriend, I needed to prioritize her above all else. That was the responsibility that came with dating. At last, I realized the weight of being someone's boyfriend.

(Motomiya Miori)

The classroom had become my enemy. It was fitting punishment. Not even the friends I used to be close to would talk to me. I took my seat and sat still; I could feel many gazes on me. There was nothing I could do about the unpleasant sensation of my skin being prodded—all I could do was endure. After all, I couldn't deny the rumor.

"Oh my, it's Motomiya. So you came to school." Someone spoke to me, wearing a thin smile all the while. Of course, she wasn't my friend. Her mocking tone attested to that.

"Do you need something, Hasegawa-san?"

"I was worried about you because you've been out for so long. I thought something might've happened. Right, girls?"

Hasegawa-san's followers echoed her in agreement.

"If you're worried about my health, I'm fine now," I said. I hadn't actually caught a cold, but I didn't disclose that. *I could tell them how my legs were shaking and couldn't move...but no one would believe me. Besides, they'd probably think I'm trying to play victim, so I don't really want to admit it.*

"Oh, allso, there's a strange rumor about you going around, so I wanted to fact-check with you. It's just a rumor, and I can't imagine it's true, but just in case, okay?" she asked, giggling with her groupies. She then raised her voice so that those paying attention around us could hear. "Is it true you cheated on Reita-kun with Haibara-kun?"

What should I do? It's hard to answer. This isn't what I thought she'd ask me. If I agree, then it'll drag Natsuki down. "No, that's not true," I said weakly.

“Huh? But someone saw you. You and Haibara-kun were caught hugging each other.”

I’d known that the rumor would blow out of proportion, but it was going in a direction I needed to deny. I didn’t mind being accused, but I didn’t want to put Natsuki in a tight spot. “Well, I—”

“Miori, can I have a sec?”

I heard the voice of someone who shouldn’t have been in my classroom. Reita-kun from class two opened the door and walked over to where we were, with Serika following behind. *Did she call him here?*

The classroom stirred with anticipation, and we garnered even more attention.

“I was worried about you. You were out with a high fever for quite a long time.”

He must’ve been doing this on purpose. Reita-kun sounded like he was acting out a play, his voice so clear that it echoed throughout the entire room. Such poise was charming on him and suited him well.

“Apparently, there’s a baseless fabrication about you circulating the school. It’s only a rumor, but I think we should properly quash it before it spreads any further. Of course I know the truth,” Reita-kun said with a gentle smile. His lips were curved up, but there was a strange intensity to him.

Hasegawa-san, overwhelmed by his demeanor, interjected. “Wh... What? Someone saw it happen, so are you implying they lied?”

“That’s not it. I’m simply saying that what that person saw only looked like Miori and Natsuki were hugging. In reality, what they saw was Miori tripping and Natsuki quickly catching her. That’s all that happened.” Reita-kun paused and singled out a girl who was lingering in the back of the classroom. “Isn’t that right, Minase-san?”

She was the person who had seen Natsuki and me hugging.

Nervous, Minase-san timidly agreed with him. “Y-Yes... I only saw them from far away, so I said it looked like a hug at first. But when I thought back on it

calmly, it looked more like she tripped.”

Minase-san isn't the type who can speak this articulately when she's suddenly thrown into a conversation. Reita-kun planned for this to happen from the very beginning; I'm sure of it.

“And you believe that, Reita-kun? Miori might be fooling you,” Hasegawa-san objected, shooting him a bloodcurdling glare.

“I trust Miori over a mere rumor,” he replied with a smile.

“Um, Reita-kun, I—”

“You don't want to trouble Natsuki, right?” I wanted to stop the conversation from heading where it was going, but Reita-kun whispered into my ear. “Then this is the optimal way. It's best if you don't try anything strange like punishing yourself.” He knew that if he told me that, I wouldn't be able to divulge the truth.

He's probably right. When you deal with rumors, it's hard to only validate one part of it. People would just exaggerate and gossip more. The most effective way to handle one is to deny everything completely.

“Y'know, it was just an accident, but some other story got mixed in with the rumor. What was it, that Miori flirted with her senpai's man or something? Like, when'd that ever happen? Sheesh. Who the heck made that up? Pretty nasty of them. Can't believe they'd spread random lies while someone's out sick,” Serika said in her usual languid tone.

Though she'd questioned who started the rumor, her eyes were glued to Hasegawa-san. She didn't need to say it outright to make it clear who she was referring to.

“Maybe they did it because they were jealous. Miori *is* dating Reita-kun, after all.” Serika's mocking words rang throughout the classroom.

“Wha—” Hasegawa-san flushed bright red, but she couldn't retort. If she did, she would be admitting that she had been the one spreading lies.

I sensed the ambience in the room changing.

“What the heck? That scared the hell out of me.”

“Eh, I figured it was just nonsense.”

“Hey man, no fair! I did too. Besides, Motomiya’s not that kinda person in the first place.”

“Shiratori-kun is defending her, so it looks like it was all bogus.”

“Riiight? I mean, if she really cheated on him, why would he stick up for her?”

“So all of it was made-up? That’s awful, then! This entire thing happened while Motomiya-san was absent.”

The atmosphere that had previously painted me a villain shifted. Then, as if the whole scene had been perfectly calculated, the start-of-class bell rang.

“Oops, gotta go. See you later, Miori.” Reita-kun theatrically shrugged his shoulders and left class one.

Hasegawa-san and her friends uncomfortably dispersed from my desk. *I didn’t really care if people pointed fingers at me, though...* I felt almost disappointed.

“If someone who wants to be attacked gets attacked, it’s not much of a punishment, you know.” Serika gently placed her hand on my shoulder.

True, that’s a good point.

“Welp,” she sighed and whispered, “honestly, I don’t think this was a big deal. A little hug is normal. I gave Natsuki a tight squeeze after the concert too.”

“No, it was... Unlike you, I hugged him with the wrong kind of intentions.” To begin with, when Serika had hugged him, Natsuki and Hikari-chan weren’t even a couple yet.

“I see... If you understand that, then make sure to reflect on yourself.” She patted my back.

I nodded. Everyone’s kindness felt so warm.

With the class mood returned to normal, our first period began. The students were abuzz more than usual, but I didn’t feel any unpleasant gazes on me. Our lessons ended while I was in a daze, and my close friends gathered around me.

“I’m sorry for doubting you, Miori.”

You don’t need to apologize. You were right to doubt me. But I couldn’t tell

them that now. If I did, I'd be wasting Reita-kun's, Serika's, and Minase-san's efforts. Turning that day into a lie was the only thing I could do now.

"Don't worry about it. I can see how the circumstances made it look that way," I replied, adopting a hollow smile. I couldn't even tell the truth to my good friends.

"Anyway, doesn't that piss you off? They just said whatever they wanted." One of my friends glowered at Hasegawa-san's group.

"Right? No matter how much she hates you, how could she go that far? That's so messed up!" another girl said, loud enough for Hasegawa-san's group to hear.

I instantly felt the classroom come alive with chatter. *This isn't good. I don't want to go after Hasegawa-san and her friends.*

However, I couldn't change the atmosphere in the classroom by myself. The hostile gazes that had been directed towards me were now directed towards Hasegawa-san and her friends. She crossed her arms, adopting a confident attitude, but I could tell Hasegawa-san was uncomfortable. Her groupies were also clearly unsure what to do.

"They're reaping what they sowed. It's a fact that they told random lies about you, so you don't need to worry about them," Serika whispered into my ear.

But I also lied. I did something terrible, but my friends defended me.

Amid that ambience, Uta appeared in class one.

"Mioriiin!" She waved at me from outside the room. Serika beckoned her in. Overflowing with energy, Uta rushed over and threw her arms around me. "Gosh! I was so worried! I couldn't get in touch with you at all!" She was happy one moment, and then her cheeks puffed up angrily the next. She was expressive as always.

"Sorry. Um, I was stuck in bed." I hadn't spoken to her in a long time, so the corners of my mouth reflexively lifted.

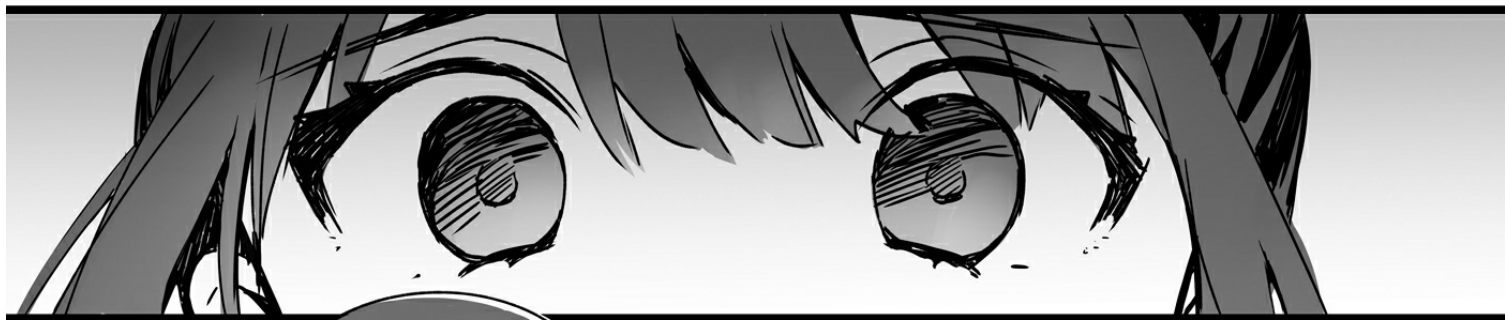
"But I'm glad! Those bad rumors about you were cleared up too, right?!" Uta asked, beaming at me.

I nodded. The rumors weren't completely cleared up yet, but we'd reached a cursory conclusion. Reita-kun's intervention had saved me—so perfectly that it left me no room to refute.

“Still, those were some terrible rumors!” Uta huffed, putting her anger on blatant display.

I had a bad feeling, and didn't want to hear what she was about to say. But before I could cover my ears, Uta spoke.

“I know Miorin would never do something like that!”



I thought I had stopped breathing. Uta's innocent trust hurt. It felt like my heart would be torn to pieces. *I don't deserve to be here. I'm not the person she believes me to be.*

"You're right. Miori wouldn't ever do that. She's too nice."

"In the first place, why would anyone ever cheat on *that* Reita-kun and dump him?"

Everyone around me nodded in agreement—everyone except for Serika.

"Miori and Hoshimiya-san are good friends too. She wouldn't steal her friend's boyfriend."

"Exactly! I know Miorin loves Reita. She's been into him since way before they started dating! And she always says Natsu's just a childhood friend she can't seem to get rid of too!"

As they all shared a giggle, I was the only one frozen in place. I had no idea whether I was doing a good job blending in or not.

"The rumor should lose steam now," Reita said absentmindedly.

It was lunchtime. In our search for an empty place, we'd ended up on the roof. We didn't want anyone overhearing our conversation, after all. Gathered here was the usual group of six: Reita, Tatsuya, Nanase, Hikari, Uta, and me.

"I'd expect nothing less from you, Shiratori-kun," Nanase said.

"I heard how you handled the run-in from the hallway. You were very cool, Reita-kun!" Hikari praised him, applauding.

A gloomy twinge crossed my heart when she called him cool. *I'm such a narrow-minded guy.* At the very least, I tried not to let those feelings show on my face and agreed with them. "That was flawless. Wait, you planned all that, right?" I asked.

Like Hikari, I'd been listening to the events from the hallway. Reita had conducted himself perfectly, so perfectly that I couldn't have imagined it going any better.

“I asked Serika for help and spoke with Minase-san, the girl who saw you and Miori. She hadn’t expected the rumor to blow up like this, so she enthusiastically cooperated with me.”

Miori’s back at school, and the nasty rumor is gone too. Everything’s settled now... It should be, but what’s this foreboding feeling? Is it really okay to just wrap it all up like this? Could there be something I missed?

“And that Hasegawa chick? She and her groupies couldn’t get a word in edgewise. Serves her right,” Tatsuya remarked.

“Ah ha ha! It felt kind of good to see how uncomfortable she looked after that!” Uta crowed.

“Considering the terrible thing she did, that much punishment is called for,” Nanase said.

Everyone chattered happily. Tatsuya and I ate the bread we’d bought from the school store while everyone else ate their bento.

“Natsuki-kun, something wrong?” Hikari peered at me with worried eyes since I’d been quiet the whole time.

Crap! I need to focus on the conversation right now. I’m Hikari’s boyfriend, after all. “Oh, it’s nothing. Your tamagoyaki just looked really tasty.”

“Want a bite? I didn’t make it, though; my mom did.”

“Huh, can I? Then, don’t mind if I do.”

Hikari picked up a tamagoyaki with her chopsticks and brought it up to my mouth. “Here, say, ‘Ahhh.’”

“Huh?” I uttered in surprise. “In front of everyone?” I wondered whether she felt embarrassed, but her face was extremely red.

The others watched us with smirks spread from ear to ear.

“Who cares? Hurry up and eat it,” Tatsuya said.

Oh whatever! I bit into the tamagoyaki in front of me. *Hey, this is good. That’s Hikari’s mom for you. Hm? Wait a sec, isn’t this an indirect kiss... Nah, we’re dating. What am I getting nervous about now? Though, we haven’t kissed yet...*

“You two are so passionate,” Uta jeered, enjoying herself.

Hikari laughed shyly. “I wanted to try that.”

Nanase regarded me with frigid eyes. *I know; you don't need to tell me.*

We were in front of all our friends—not to mention Uta, who I was still on thin ice with—so it wasn't like Hikari to flirt with me. Well, Uta did seem like she was over me now, but setting that aside, Hikari and I usually acted the same as we always had when we were with the others. We had an unspoken understanding that our relationship could destroy the group. At least, we should've.

“Natsuki-kun, do you want to try this too?” Hikari asked.

“No, it's okay. I'm full already,” I replied.

On the surface, she seemed the same as always, but she was paying an undue amount of attention to me. I knew why: she was anxious because I'd been so preoccupied with Miori. I gently shook my head and drove all thoughts of my childhood friend out of my mind.

“Hikari,” I said. It was time to fulfill my duty as her boyfriend.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Let's go home together today. And let's stop by somewhere on our way,” I whispered quietly so the others couldn't hear.

“Okay!” She smiled, cheering up remarkably.

This is fine. I don't need to think about anything else right now.

(Motomiya Miori)

The bucket hit the ground with a loud thunk. My vision blurred. Rivulets trickled down my body. I was soaked from head to toe. The autumn wind blew, and I shivered in the cold. When I looked up, Hasegawa-san, who had dumped water on me, glared at me with the mien of a demon.

“Why... Why am I taking all the blame?!” She grabbed my collar and pulled me towards her. I couldn't breathe well.

Hasegawa-san brought her face up close to mine. Rather than animosity, she radiated murder. She despised me. The emotion pent up in her hand as it gripped my collar was terrifying.

“I’m not the one who lied—it was you!” Her shrill voice pierced my ears.

As a matter of fact, she was right. I was the one who’d lied. “I’m sorry.” All I could do was apologize. At this point, I couldn’t do anything about the situation. If I raised hell about the truth, Reita-kun and Natsuki would get caught in the backlash.

A smack exploded in the air. I felt a stinging pain, and the next thing I knew, I was on the ground. My cheek throbbed. Perhaps I’d hit my head when I collapsed on the ground, because my vision was fuzzy.

“Why is Reita-kun protecting you when you *cheated* on him?!”

Tears flowed. And they weren’t mine. Hasegawa-san was crying.



On the day of the interclass sports meet.

After Natsuki and his class had won the basketball finals, Hasegawa-san had called me out. With her were her groupies and Minase-san. Surrounded by all those flashy girls, the quiet Minase-san appeared uncomfortable.

“Apparently, she saw you hug Haibara-kun.” Her two groupies were smirking, but Hasegawa-san was furious. *“Right, Minase? You saw her, right?”*

Startled that the conversation was suddenly on her, Minase-san spoke fearfully as her shoulders trembled. *“I... I did see that... I’m sorry.”*

“Was that at the park south of the school?” I asked.

She nodded.

Ah, I see now. Someone saw that.

“Based on your reaction, it looks like she’s telling the truth,” Hasegawa-san sharply pointed out.

I had no room for rebuttal.

“Aren’t you dating Reita-kun? Then isn’t that cheating?” She turned her gaze, filled with rage, on me.

“Yeah. You’re right,” I replied slowly.

“What’s with you? Not even gonna deny it?” Seeing me hold my silence, her eyes narrowed further. *“I won’t forgive you! You’re just playing with Reita-kun’s feelings. You’re the worst.”*

Hasegawa-san was in love with Reita-kun. I’d known that fact for quite a long time now.

“I’m going to give you hell for this.” Her expression, full of fury and yet on the brink of tears, showed how much she loved him. She eyed me with wholehearted disappointment and then left. That was the moment when I became aware of the gravity of the sin I’d committed.

“I’m...sorry. I didn’t want to start a rumor... I’m sorry...” Minase-san apologized to me profusely.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m to blame, so you don’t need to apologize.”

I'd been dishonest about everything. No matter what I said, it would only be a paltry excuse.

After that day, I couldn't go to school. It wasn't like I was sick, and I wasn't afraid of Hasegawa-san's threat either. It was because I'd realized just how low of a human being I was. I didn't deserve to live. And so, I didn't even feel like going to school. I thought the world would be better off if I died.

I learned from Serika's RINE messages that a nasty rumor about me was spreading throughout the school. My friends showered me with worried messages asking about my health, even though I wasn't someone who warranted their concern.

Then Natsuki came to my house, and I bumped into Reita-kun. I confessed my sins. Kind as they were, they both forgave me, but I wished they'd rebuked me instead. I wanted to be punished, just like Hasegawa-san and her friends had said.

I didn't care what sort of vile rumors were circulating the school. I thought that would be better for me than doing nothing and being forgiven. But now... I'm not the one crying—Hasegawa-san is. She wasn't the one who lied. I was. I gave everyone trouble, but they all defended me.

"Then this is the optimal way. It's best if you don't try anything strange like punishing yourself."

Even Reita-kun, the one who had been hurt the most by my actions, protected me.

"I know Miorin would never do something like that!"

Going forward, I would have to continue deceiving all my friends who believed in me. Everyone's kindness hurt me more than anything else. I felt like I was being crushed by guilt.

"Die..." Hasegawa-san muttered, her feeble hand still clutching my collar. "Die! You bitch! Someone like you should just disappear!" The resentment in her voice, intense enough to reach the depths of the earth, shook the core of my heart.

She's right. Someone like me should just disappear. At the very least, I can't

stay with everyone else. With the way I am right now, I don't deserve to spend time with Natsuki and the others anymore. I was in no position to say this, but I felt like I'd been saved.

"Okay... I understand." But I can't disappear yet. There's still someone I want to apologize to. So...not until I see her.

"What are you doing?" a voice brimming with surprise asked from behind us. I swiftly turned my head—standing there was the girl I'd been searching for.

Second Interlude

“You don’t want to have any regrets, right?” After I said that, my lips involuntarily curled up into a self-deprecating smile. “Welp, it’s weird to hear that from me when I’m full of regrets.”

I was trying to give Natsuki advice, but my words completely recoiled back on me. Who was I to talk when the past was all I sought after. *But I don’t want you to become like me. The goal you first aimed for—that rainbow-colored youth—I want you to continue moving towards it. Even if my youth is stained gray as a result.*

“Can I ask what happened?” Natsuki asked, studying my complexion.

I was a bit surprised. For a thickheaded boy, he’d actually managed to pick up that I was behaving strangely. But he still didn’t notice the reason why. *It’s all your fault, I wanted to say. Because I love you, because I can’t stop loving you, being around you hurts. After all, there’s already a girl—a girl who’s not me—by your side... It’s too late to tell you how I feel now.*

“You’re the only person I won’t tell. But I’ll have you know, it’s your fault.”

“What?!” Natsuki’s eyes widened in surprise. Evidently, he hadn’t expected it to be his fault.

That’s what you get! I hope you reflect on your behavior a little. I didn’t want to fall in love with you either. That’s why it’s all your fault I’m like this now.

“We’d better head home now.”

“Yeah. Any later and we’ll miss the last train.”

“But I’m too tired to stand up.” *I almost got depressed there, but I managed to cover it up.*

I got up as I gazed at the night sky above us. It was clear, unlike my spirits. Suddenly, Natsuki’s face came into view. He looked at me, his expression pinning me for a hopeless troublemaker. I couldn’t help it; it felt like my chest was being crushed. I didn’t want to part with him here. *I wish you’d look at me*

like this forever... I don't want you to go to her.

"Huh?" I uttered, so unnaturally that I couldn't believe that it had come from my own mouth. *I'll pretend I tripped. That'll be my justification.*

I leaped into Natsuki's chest and wrapped my arms around his back. I thought I'd already known, but it dawned on me just how much he'd grown. He had been smaller than me when we were children.

I held him tightly. He was tense and his chest hard. There was no trace of his soft belly from middle school. I felt how striking his body, the fruits of his efforts, had become. Natsuki extended his arms behind me. Even though I knew he was simply supporting me because I'd almost fallen, my heart jumped for joy. My pulse raced like it was dancing.

"S-Sorry... My legs won't listen to me." I couldn't suppress my swelling feelings.

"I told you we should've stopped sooner."

"No way, I'd hate that. I can't end on a loss."

"You're still the sore loser I remember."

I'm begging you. Please forgive me. I'll go back to my usual self straightaway, so just for now...

"Uh, Miori?"

...I wish this moment would last forever.

"Is something wrong?" He patted my hair.

Why did you do that? You're usually completely dense, so why do you only pick up on what I want during times like this? Seriously... So unforgivable.

"Hey, Natsuki." *Stupid. Blockhead! You're cocky for someone who had a high school debut.* Although I came up with dozens of insults, the words that left my mouth differed. "What would you do...if I told you I love you?"

I could tell because I was hugging him—Natsuki froze in shock. Silence blanketed over us for a moment. My heart was the only one pounding loudly; he was merely bewildered. As time passed, my mind cooled. I quickly went pale.

What the hell am I doing?

“Ah ha ha! Why’re you taking that so seriously? It was obviously a joke!” I pulled myself away from him and instantly spat something out in a teasing tone.

“Shut up! Joke or not, what was I supposed to say there?!” Natsuki appeared relieved.

“I’m going home! If we don’t hurry, we’ll miss the last train!”

I ran. I headed towards the station. I couldn’t face him right now. No matter how little it was, I wanted to put distance between us, all so I couldn’t pull anything like this anymore.

I need to keep a tighter lid on my affections. God, why do I have these feelings for him? I never should’ve fallen in love. If not for love, I wouldn’t need to suffer. I would’ve been able to congratulate him on his happiness from the bottom of my heart.

I never wanted to think about going back to those days.

I continued running towards the station so that Natsuki wouldn’t see the tears spilling down my cheeks.

Chapter 3: Promise of a Distant Day

I lay in bed, zoning out at the ceiling. It was Saturday. Miori's face flashed through my head. If I let my mind wander, she was all that occupied my thoughts. That was just how shocking her words had been. I'd never imagined that she was in love with me. Now that I looked back on the time we'd spent together, I realized there had been many opportunities for me to pick up on her feelings.

"You'd better decide soon too, okay?"

"You're Hikari-chan's boyfriend, and I'm Reita-kun's girlfriend. We've both hit our marks."

"What would you do...if I told you I love you?"

"Miori-san, you love Haibara-kun, right?"

But even so, I had remained unaware due to my unconscious assumptions. As my childhood friend, Miori knew the true me very well. She knew that I was an unreliable coward. That was why I'd believed she was the only person who definitely *wouldn't* fall in love with me.

"I'm such a dumbass," I muttered.

I'd gone to Miori for love advice all this time. She'd helped me make my love for Hikari come true. And after we'd gotten together, I'd continued turning to Miori for advice.

How did she feel? The person she loved talked to her about someone else he loved and asked her to give him a hand. What emotions was she hiding underneath her smile? We've cleared up the nasty rumors, but I don't have a clue what's going through her head. It wasn't the rumor that drove her to skip school for multiple days. If you trace the problem back to its roots, it's my fault.

I thought she wanted to date Reita, so I tried to help with her schemes to get closer to him. I'm sure she was serious about him in the beginning. And she got closer to him by leaps and bounds. But after summer ended, Miori's offensive

slowed. I knew Reita was interested in Miori too, so that should've been the perfect time for her to close the gap.

I should've noticed her change of heart. I'm the closest one to her, after all. Instead, I remained ignorant and forced her to continue when she'd already come to a stop. I completely missed what her true desire was.

“Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan,’ my ass.”

I cornered the person who helped me the most. That can never be called a success. But even if I push my way in now, I doubt I can help Miori. I can't conduct myself brilliantly like Reita either. He was like a hero at that moment. I could go my entire life and never be able to copy that. Why does Miori love someone like me and not him?

No... There's no point thinking about that. This is another result of my change. Miori fell for me because I changed myself in my second round. That in and of itself is something to be thrilled about. If I weren't dating Hikari, and Miori weren't dating Reita, that is.

Suddenly, a memory from the past—or rather, the future—rekindled in my mind. In my first round, whenever I caught sight of Miori, she seemed to be enjoying her youth. What if her life changed and she's suffering now because I leaped through time? Wouldn't it be my responsibility to save her?

While I was at the mercy of that problem without any answer, my phone buzzed.

Hoshimiya Hikari: Getting on the train now!

A DM from Hikari. We had a date today. Since she wanted to hear me sing, after some shopping and lunch near Takasaki Station, we planned to go do karaoke. I wanted to practice singing too, so it was perfect.

Let's switch gears. I need to enjoy my date with Hikari. As things are, I shouldn't make her feel insecure, shouldn't let it show that Miori's on my mind.

Natsuki: Okay! Me too!

I sent her a quick reply, left the house, and got on my train. It was dark and cloudy today. The weather report had predicted rain too. I had a folding umbrella in my bag, just in case. When I arrived at Takasaki Station, Hikari was already waiting for me in front of the gates.

“Sorry I’m late,” I said.

“It’s fine. I just got here too,” she said.

It was ten minutes before our meeting time. I wasn’t actually late, but normally I waited for her, so I felt a little bad. I grasped her hand; it was colder than usual.

“Let’s go.”

Hand in hand with Hikari, I set off. We went to the nearby mall first and browsed through clothes and accessories. It was the weekend, so the shops were somewhat crowded. The two of us walked amid the noisy hustle and bustle. I glanced to my side—Hikari wore a somber expression, her head hanging down.

“Hikari?”

“Oh, sorry. Did you say something?”

“No, I didn’t, but, uh...” *Something’s off about her. She’s been really out of it.*
“You didn’t catch a cold or anything, right?”

“I’m fine. Anyway, let’s hurry up!”

Is this my fault? No, I don’t think so. What’s she worried about? Well, she’s trying to hide it, so I shouldn’t point it out, right? It’s fairly likely that I’m the cause of whatever she’s brooding over.

“Let’s go look over there.”

“Sounds good.”

I pretended not to notice and picked out a few pieces of winter clothing for Hikari to try on. We kept ourselves entertained doing various things like that, and before long, it was time for lunch.

“I’m hungry. Want to eat now?”

Right as Hikari asked that, her phone and mine buzzed simultaneously. We’d both received a message.

“Who is it?” I pulled my phone out of my pocket and glanced at the screen. It was a message to “Natsuki’s Fam,” a group chat for the six of us.

Uta: Does anyone know where Miorin is right now?

A message from Uta... About Miori’s whereabouts. This fires up the bad hunch I’ve been having.

Natsuki: Was she absent from practice?

Uta: Yeah. She skipped without telling anyone and she’s not picking up any calls. Our coach called her house, but they said she vanished without them knowing

Tatsuya: So she’s missing?

Reita: Sorry. I haven’t heard anything either. I’ll look into it now

Nanase Yuino: I’m worried. A lot has happened to her recently.

Uta: I hope it’s nothing... I’ll ask Seri too!

After that quick exchange, the group chat died down. I looked up from my phone and made eye contact with Hikari. The two of us had stopped in the middle of all the people coming and going through the mall.

“Where the heck did she go?” I said.

Since our childhood, Miori would often run away from home whenever she was mentally driven to a corner. This time might’ve been the same as well, but that wasn’t necessarily the case either. It was possible that she’d been abducted or gotten into an accident. Or perhaps she’d collapsed somewhere.

“Miori-chan...” The color drained from Hikari’s face; she was immensely shaken. “A-Are you going to look for her?”

Of course I want to look for her. I’m so worried that I’m ready to go right now! However, I’ve got no info, and there are too many places to search. I doubt I’d

be any help if I rushed out in a panic. Besides, there's a potential that the police might get involved. It's better to leave this to Miori's parents and the teachers.

"No," I said. "We don't have enough information. Randomly searching for her won't help."

Honestly, I know a bunch of places that Miori might go during times like this. But I have no proof that she'd be there. Before all else, I'd be abandoning my responsibility to Hikari as her boyfriend if I left her here to go search for Miori. I only recently made my resolution to cherish Hikari.

"Information..." Hikari whispered, her eyes roaming aimlessly. "Actually, I saw Miori-chan yesterday after school."

What? My eyes shot open in surprise.

Wearing a dark expression, Hikari hung her head. Then she slowly recounted the events of yesterday after school.

(Hoshimiya Hikari)

"What are you doing?"

It was Friday after school. A teacher had asked me to fetch some materials from the storeroom. Hearing voices from behind the building, I took a quick peek to see Miori-chan and Hasegawa-san from class one. Upon closer inspection, I saw that Miori-chan was drenched, and there was an empty bucket by her feet.

At the sound of my voice, Hasegawa-san looked over her shoulder with a start. She blanched, turned around, and ran away.

Miori-chan, still expressionless, set her eyes on me. "Hikari-chan..." Her demeanor reminded me of a broken machine.

"A-Are you okay?!" Now wasn't the time for me to be surprised. I dashed over to her in a panic. It was late autumn; being soaked this time of year could easily lead to a cold. "Did Hasegawa-san do this?"

"No, she didn't. I just doused myself with water," Miori-chan said quietly, gently shaking her head.

She's definitely lying. I mean, if that were true, why would Hasegawa-san run away? The two never liked each other, and I know about this morning's racket. I can't point that out, though. Miori-chan's voice sounds too full of sorrow.

"A-Anyway," I began, "you should get changed quickly. Are your gym clothes in your classroom?"

"I'll change later. More importantly, I want to talk to you."

What's more important than changing clothes in her condition? Despite thinking that, I felt it would be tricky to convince her otherwise. "What is it? If it's about the rumor, don't worry about it. I heard everything from Natsuki-kun. I get that it was all a misunderstanding. Besides, you have Reita-kun."

"You're wrong, Hikari-chan. It wasn't a misunderstanding."

Hearing Miori-chan's guileless tone caused my brain to freeze. *It wasn't a misunderstanding? What does she mean? I don't follow. It sounds like she's saying part of the story wasn't a misunderstanding. I don't really want to know which part.*

"It wasn't an accident. I hugged Natsuki on purpose."

"Wh... Why? What do you mean?" I asked, but somewhere in my heart, I put two and two together.

When the rumor first reached my ears, I'd had a feeling that was what had happened. It wasn't based on anything logical, just my intuition, so I'd brushed it off as purely my imagination.

"Because I love Natsuki," Miori-chan said, her tone matter-of-fact, as though she were merely stating the truth.

The thought had crossed my mind multiple times. *What if she loves him?* But because she'd said she loved Reita-kun, I figured the intimacy they shared was more characteristic of childhood friends... However, I knew I was wrong. She looked like a girl in love.

"So... I'm sorry. Though, I don't expect your forgiveness from just an apology." Miori-chan bent over and lowered her head.

My emotions couldn't keep up. I hadn't a clue what to respond with. No,

she'd apologized to me, so forgiving her would've been the correct thing to do.

"There's something I don't understand... Then why are you dating Reita-kun?" Although I'd decided to forgive her, something different came out of my mouth.

She paused. "Because I wanted to fall in love with him."

"And you're still dating him now, even though you haven't fallen in love with him?"

"Yeah... That's right."

In contrast to the sorrow evident in Miori-chan's downcast eyes, hideous emotions overflowed from within me. "And you made a move on Natsuki-kun while carrying that baggage with you?" The voice spilling from my mouth was colder than I'd intended.

If she did, then I feel terrible for Reita-kun. And now Natsuki-kun is in hot water because he's suspected of cheating... No, stop making excuses for yourself. I'm the one angry at Miori-chan.

All this time, I'd been anxious. Even after the two of us had started dating, Miori-chan was always near Natsuki-kun. However, I'd trusted them both. I *wanted* to trust their assurances that they were only childhood friends. They clearly held a special sort of trust for each other that differed from their other friendships, but even still, I averted my eyes.

I didn't want to go as far as regulating Natsuki-kun's friendships. I didn't want him to think I was clingy; I didn't want him to realize just how deep my jealousy ran. But whenever he was with Miori-chan, he always wore a silly smile. His expression was different from when he was with me: with her, he was relaxed.

I was jealous of that—I was green with envy. There, supporting Natsuki-kun's heart, was always Miori-chan. Not me. Even if it wasn't anything romantic, I was still terrified. Natsuki-kun was surely unaware of the breadth of his feelings for Miori-chan.

And perhaps, one day, those feelings would transform into love.

"If so...I might not be able to forgive you, Miori-chan." *I know. This is jealousy. I'm sheerly forcing my dark feelings onto her. I'm scared. Scared that Natsuki-*

kun will be snatched away by her.

“I know... I’m sorry. Really.”

Water dripped to the ground. I didn’t know if the drops were from her damp clothes or tears.

I shouldn’t have said that. All too late, I regretted letting my emotions take control of my words. What do I mean ‘I can’t forgive her’? The thing I can’t forgive isn’t that Miori-chan hugged Natsuki-kun—I can’t stand that he places a special sort of trust in her. Knowing that, it’s misguided to criticize her.

My emotions cooled off, and I suddenly regained my presence of mind. I’d said something awful. Venting my frustrations at Miori-chan was wrong.

“Um... Miori-chan. Sorry. I didn’t mean to say that, so—”

“Don’t apologize. I’m the only one at fault here.” She interrupted before I could finish making amends and shook her head. “So because of that, I’ll disappear soon.” She turned away, about to leave.

“Where are you going?” I asked. I had a feeling she wasn’t simply “disappearing” to her home.

“I’m sorry. Goodbye.”

Miori-chan didn’t answer my question.

Miori had disappeared of her own volition. I was sure about that after listening to Hikari’s story. *In that case... Now isn’t the time to take things easy. I doubt this is a simple case of running away from home. It’s possible she’s thinking about suicide.*

“It’s all my fault.” Hikari crouched on the ground, hands covering her face.

The people around us shot curious glances our way. They probably thought we were having a lovers’ quarrel. But I didn’t care about that right now.

“I knew. I knew if I just watched her go, she might vanish for good. Despite realizing that, I didn’t do anything. Somewhere in my heart, I thought that if she was out of the picture, I wouldn’t need to worry about you being taken away...

Even though I like Miori-chan... So I'm to blame. If I'd stopped her yesterday, then she wouldn't have disappeared," she said through sobs. "I'm the one who drove Miori-chan to do that."

"Don't torment yourself that way. Hikari, you didn't do anything wrong."
Right, Miori's in the wrong here, and she understands that better than anyone. And that's exactly why I can't leave her be. It'll be too late if she does something that can't be undone.

"Hikari, I'm going to search for Miori." I was certain I understood what responsibilities I had as a boyfriend. And I knew that I should've left the situation to the police rather than haphazardly searching for her. "Don't worry. I'll bring her back for sure, so relax and wait for me."

Even so, I knew I was bound to regret it if I ignored the issue at hand.

"I promise." *This isn't just for Miori. I'll definitely keep this promise for Hikari's sake too.*

"Thank you, Natsuki-kun." Hikari wiped her tears with her hand and nodded. "I'd help too, of course...but I have a feeling you have an idea where she is."

"Leave her to me. Finding her when we played hide-and-seek has been my job since we were kids," I said and turned away.

I was about to run off, but Hikari grabbed my sleeve. She gaped down at her own hand, surprised she'd done that too. "I'm terrible. I end up wishing that you wouldn't go, even in this sort of situation."

Hikari was markedly anxious, and I knew what I was about to do would hurt her. Wanting to assuage her unease, even if it was only a little, I hugged her tightly.

"Um, Natsuki-kun, we're in public!" she exclaimed, flustered.

"I'll come back without fail," I swore to her.



(Motomiya Miori)

When I was a child, I didn't stop to think about anything. All I did was throw my whole self into doing whatever I wanted each day. Fortunately, I was blessed with friends who would go along with my recklessness. Truth be told, I didn't get along with girls: I had more fun with boys. Because I liked to be active, I naturally spent my time with them.

"Hey, Miori! Battle me again! One more time!"

My first friend was a boy who would haphazardly challenge me to all different kinds of competitions. His name was Yano Shuto. He was tall, spirited, and confident in his reflexes. Soccer, basketball, baseball—I beat him at everything. Nonetheless, Shuto never relented and continued challenging me. He was hostile at first, but with every contest, we gradually became closer and closer. And...as we grew up, soccer became the only sport I couldn't beat him at anymore.

"Ha ha ha! You guys are still at it? Always energetic!"

The second was a boy with an excessively loud laugh. His name was Midorikawa Takuro. In spite of his plump physique, sports were his forte. Thinking back on it now, he'd been oddly mature since we were kids. He often watched Shuto and I compete because he found it amusing. Of course he joined in and played with us too, but Takuro liked to watch us from one step behind. He always kept me in check since I had a tendency to act rashly. Actually...he probably let me run wild more often than not because he thought it was funny.

"Why do you play with someone like me?"

The third was...Haibara Natsuki. He was always alone, huddled in a corner of the classroom. During lunch, he would enviously gaze at those of us playing in the schoolyard from the classroom window. That's why I'd taken his hand, and forced him into my circle of friends. Natsuki was afraid in the beginning, but once he got used to us, he laughed cheerfully. He was quiet but kind.

The four of us always hung out together from morning until evening.

“Let’s play soccer! Two-on-two!” I’d say.

“You’re on! I’ll bring you down this time!” Shuto would reply.

“Ah ha ha! Shuto, it’s a hundred years too early for you to beat me!”

“Hey, say that again, I dare you!”

“Hold on, you two. Calm down!” Natsuki would say.

“Ha ha ha! Let ’em be, Natsuki! Which side’ll you take?” Takuro would say.

“H-Huuuh?!”

“Natsuki, you’re obviously on my side, right?” I’d say.

I’d go on a rampage, Shuto would compete against me, Natsuki would get flustered and try to stop us, and Takuro would clutch his stomach in laughter. We spent our days like that time and again. Every one of them was so very vibrant. Out of all the things we did, I especially enjoyed building our secret base and goofing around in it.

“There’s a building that looks like a hut out here!”

It had all started when we ventured deep into the mountains near our neighborhood. Shuto pointed to one side of an animal trail, so I looked over there too.

Takuro inched towards the dilapidated hut and studied its surroundings. “It’s probably a deserted house. No one uses it anymore,” he concluded.

“Forget about that. Should we even be here? Shouldn’t we go back?” Natsuki trailed behind us, his expression uneasy.

“I’ve got it! Let’s make this place our secret base!” Thanks to my idea, we often visited that little hut.

I want to go back to that time.

“Let’s go! C’mon, guys! Let’s race to the sun!” I’d yell.

Our days were filled with fun, though sometimes we messed up, or it rained.

“You can’t do things like that! Go stand in the hallway and think about what you’ve done!”

I had a habit of running away when things didn't go my way. I'd go somewhere no one knew of, ball up on the ground, and cry all alone. I was strong, so I didn't want anyone to see me in tears. I could quickly start feeling like normal again after sobbing by myself for a little while. That's why I was fine on my own.

And yet...

"Found you."

You were the only person who wouldn't let me cry all alone.

"Miori, you lose this game of hide-and-seek."

You pretended not to notice my tears, cracked a joke, and stayed by my side the whole time. It was always like that. When I wanted you to find me, you always did without fail.

When I think back on it now, by that time, I was already—

"Miori. I love you."

In our sixth year of elementary school, Shuto confessed to me. It was the first time anyone had ever told me they loved me like that, and I was a little scared.

"I don't get that sort of stuff... Hey, you'll still be friends with me, though, right?"

So I didn't consider his feelings and only cared about us remaining friends. Now, I knew just how cruel my request had been.

"Sorry... That's impossible for me."

Our tight-knit group of four fell apart.

"Sorry for bringing this up now, but I have to transfer schools because of my parents." Takuro disappeared due to a circumstance that children like us could do nothing about.

Only Natsuki and I were left. And the other kids teased us. Awkward and self-conscious because of them, I put a little distance between the two of us. By the time I tried to reconnect with him, it was already too late.

"You shouldn't be with someone like me."

Just like that, I became alone. It was all my fault. Now and in the past, nothing had changed. I still hurt the people precious to me.

Somebody like me is better off gone.

(Sakura Uta)

I couldn't focus on basketball practice today. Miorin was missing, which was all I could think about. My teammates seemed equally preoccupied, so our practice ended early. As it stood, Miorin hadn't attended practice for the past week. She'd come to school on Friday, but went home because she felt ill. We were all worried about her.

"Uta. Any updates?"

Tatsu, who'd been practicing on the adjacent court, ran over. The boys' basketball team had wrapped up as well.

"No... Nothing. Maybe she went somewhere by herself."

The two of us were talking like that when Wakamura-senpai called out to me.

"Uta! Your friends are asking for you," she said, pointing to the entrance of the gym.

Standing there was Seri and another girl I didn't recognize.

"Maybe they learned something," I said.

"Let's check it out," Tatsu said, and we headed over.

Seri's expression was uncharacteristically grim when she began to speak. "It's about Miori. I've got new info from Reita."

"Huh?! What is it?!" I exclaimed.

"He questioned Hasegawa from class one, and she confessed that she said something awful to Miori yesterday."

"Something awful...?"

"Mm-hmm, stuff like 'die' or 'disappear.' She also slapped her face and dumped cold water on her head... If Miori were in her usual state, she'd flip and

retaliate, but she's emotionally vulnerable right now. We think that might be why she up and vanished."

"She did all that? That's just bullying." *I knew Miorin and Hasegawa-san were on bad terms, but I didn't think it was that bad...*

"Her lie was outed, and the situation reversed, so she went straight for violence?" Tatsu said irritably, furrowing his brows.

"How much of it was a lie?" The words spilled out of me in spite of myself.

A troubled expression spread across Tatsu's face. Our eyes met. That was a secret only he and I knew. It had happened on the day of the sports meet: the two of us had eavesdropped on Rei and Miorin.

"Do you still like Natsuki?"

We hadn't meant to, but we'd accidentally overheard them talking. They didn't appear to be joking at the time; both of them looked serious. Miorin was in love with Natsu. Rei knew that and was okay with it. That didn't sound like something we could casually ask about, so Tatsu and I had kept it a secret between us.

Knowing that information, how much of the rumor was a lie?

"I know Miorin would never do something like that!"

I remembered it very well. At the time, I had been genuinely concerned about her. However, her expression had clearly frozen for a moment. It was the look of someone who'd told a lie.

"Judging by your faces, you two know something too, don't you? Let's share info with each other," Seri suggested. "I invited Hikari-chan and Natsuki too, so let's gather at a family restaurant. Even if we do search for Miori, just blindly checking places won't help anyone. Let's straighten out the details and figure out what exactly happened."

Seri must be really worried about Miorin too. She's normally laid-back, but now she's acting more impatient than usual.

The girl next to Seri spoke up. "Senpai, can I get an introduction?"

"Oh right. This girl's Yamano Saya. She's in her third year of middle school,

and she recently joined my band.”

Yamano-san bowed. I hastily bowed back.

“Nice to meet you, senpai.”

“She went to the same middle school as Natsuki and Miori, so I figured she might be helpful.”

“Miori-senpai and I are tight, so please let me chip in. I think I’ll be pretty helpful.” Yamano-san wore an earnest expression.

I could tell she truly was worried about Miorin. And so, just as Seri had said, everyone who was close to Miorin convened in one place.

(Hondo Serika)

I rounded everyone up at a family restaurant near Takasaki Station. We were quiet for a group of high schoolers, so we probably seemed uncanny to outsiders. Uta, Tatsuya, Yuino, Hikari, and Saya were here, which, including me, made six of us. I couldn’t get in touch with Reita and Natsuki. The last thing Reita had said to me on our phone call was “I’m going to look for Miori.” Apparently, Natsuki had also told Hikari something similar before running off.

I’d miscalculated—the two people who probably knew the most about the situation hadn’t attended. I first introduced Saya to the others before diving into the main topic. “All right, let’s organize what we know. We’re missing the two most important people, but nothing we can do about that.”

Hikari timidly raised her hand, so we all focused on her. “Um, I’m not sure how much I can say,” she said, trailing off.

“I’m sure you’ve kept some things to yourself for Miori’s sake, but forget about that now.” I directed those words not only at her, but everyone else too. *It’s Miori’s own fault for vanishing, anyway. If exposing her secrets will lead us to where she went, then she better let us off the hook.*

“You’re right... Then I’ll start from what happened yesterday after school...” Hikari recounted the conversation she’d had with Miori yesterday after school. She seemed immensely regretful, her usual cheer nowhere to be found. Her

voice trembled too.

“Well shit... With the way Motomiya’s been acting, that hit her hard for sure,” Tatsuya said with a frown.

That’s a blunt way to put it, but he’s right. That must’ve shook Miori harder than whatever verbal abuse Hasegawa dished out.

“Um... Tatsu and I know something too,” Uta began in an apologetic tone. Though she was reluctant to bring it up, she knew she had no choice. “We kept quiet because we accidentally overheard it, but it’s an emergency right now.”

She exchanged a look with Tatsuya, who picked up from there. “Apparently, Reita and Motomiya aren’t in a normal relationship.” According to what they’d heard, Reita had known that Miori was in love with Natsuki from the very beginning.

Shock painted Hikari’s face. Her story hadn’t mentioned anything of the sort. And Miori wouldn’t have told her. Knowing Miori, she probably thought that whatever she said would’ve just sounded like an excuse.

“Figures. I thought their relationship was progressing too slowly.” A sigh inadvertently slipped out of me; I’d had a feeling it was something like that.

Reita was well-versed with handling girls, and Miori had been aggressively closing the distance between them up until a little while ago. In spite of all that, it felt weird that their relationship was so wholesome.

“Miori never seemed too happy when Reita came up in a conversation, so I figured something was up,” I remarked.

“Thinking back, he didn’t talk about Motomiya much either. He’s secretive by nature, so I didn’t think twice, but normally he’d gush about her more, right?” Tatsuya said.

“That’s right,” Yuino replied with a serious expression. “Look at the facts: for a good while, all Hikari did was go on and on about her boyfriend.”

“Ahem.” Hikari cleared her throat. “Yuino-chan, that was unnecessary information.”

“When do you think she had a change of heart?” There was a distant look in

Uta's eyes, as though she was recalling the past. "I wish I'd noticed."

She must be thinking about a lot. She used to be in a similar position to Miori's. Though, there's a difference between someone who wasn't chosen versus someone who couldn't even step into the ring.

Uta continued. "But, you know, hearing that Miorin loves Natsu feels... I dunno. It doesn't feel weird, and actually makes sense, even though I never picked up on her feelings."

Yuino rested her chin on her hand and replied, "They got along extremely well, after all. It's actually almost outlandish how much they trust each other."

I added my own two cents as well: "As much as they claim it, they aren't mere childhood friends who can't get rid of each other. That much is certain." No matter how you sliced it, the two of them shared a special bond.

"It's only a guess...but she probably didn't have a change of heart. She just never realized her own feelings," Saya solemnly chimed in.

Everyone shifted their attention to her, urging her to continue. Out of all of us, she was the only one who knew about their past.

"Let's take a little trip down memory lane..."

Where did Miori used to go during times like this? I'd dropped by her house again, but I didn't find her there. Her family was also taking the situation seriously, as the police had already arrived at their house. The officers asked me some questions, and I told them everything I knew.

It had been more than half a day by now. With each passing hour, my impatience grew. The sun gradually set, dyeing the sky crimson and shrouding the world in darkness.

She's not around our town station. And she's not in the neighborhood park. She's not near the riverbank by our elementary school either... Miori, where are you? Where did you go?

"I want to return to those days." Suddenly, what she had said flashed through my mind.

Let's say that's what she still wants right now; just when is "those days"? I flipped through memories of my past. She probably means the period that shined the most. When it was the four of us, with Shuto and Takuro, and all we did was play every day. Come to think of it, I remember that the funnest thing we ever did as kids was...

"...when the four of us made a secret base."

I walked into the mountains near our town shrine. It seemed much more overgrown than when I was young. The foliage and plants whacked my body all over, dirtying my date outfit. If I used some common sense, there was no way she would be somewhere like this. However, the police were already searching for her in all the normal places that would come to mind. Thus, I would search the places only I'd think of.

After all these years, the animal trail that had once paved an easy path to our secret base was now gone. I pushed onward over the trackless ground, double-checking I was heading in the right direction with each step.

"Hm?" *Something's off here.* There were signs that something had knocked over the vegetation a little to the right. I went down that way; those traces were bound for the direction I'd been going. And above all, there were footsteps left in the dirt.

These aren't animal footprints; they're from a human. Plus, whoever left these was wearing loafers. And since they're so distinct, they must be fresh. I've got a hunch, or rather, I'm sure of it now—Miori is up ahead.

Unable to contain myself, I was about to break into a sprint.

"Natsuki," a voice called from behind me.

"Reita." When I turned around, Reita was there.

It looked like he'd trekked the same path as me; his uniform was dirty, and there was mud on his face. His expression was uncharacteristically grim. He was giving off an air unlike his usual self. He didn't look composed whatsoever. But his girlfriend was missing, so it wasn't strange for him to be this way.

"I figured you'd probably find where Miori is," Reita said as he eyed the footprints I'd discovered.

“What the heck? Did you follow my tracks?” *What’s the point in doing that? We could’ve just looked for her together.* I knit my brows together.

Sensing my question, Reita explained himself. “I was searching for Miori on my own when I spotted you.”

“Anyway, let’s hurry. She should be up ahead. I think she’s likely emotionally unstable right now. I want to find her before anything happens.” I turned my back to him once more.

“Wait,” he said. “I’ll go on from here. You go home.”

I couldn’t process what he’d said. “Huh?”

Reita stared at me, emotionless as though he were wearing a mask.

“Finding Miori is our highest priority. Shouldn’t we look for her together?” The secret base was up ahead, but that didn’t necessarily mean she was inside. The mountains were vast, so it’d be better if we split up and searched for her together.

However, Reita shook his head. “Even if we split up, I’m certain you’d be the one to find Miori.”

“So what? Finding her is the important bit here.” *Of course I’m more likely to find her. I’m familiar with the area. I don’t get what Reita’s been trying to get at. He’s never been like this before.* Reita normally stayed one step ahead in a conversation, but his intentions were unclear right now.

“I’d hate that... I want to be the first person to find Miori!” he shouted in a bloodcurdling tone, his expression suddenly morphing.

I was overwhelmed by his intensity. I’d never seen him show his raw emotions before.

Reita must’ve been agonizing over this too. Of course he was. After everything that happened to his girlfriend, now she’s gone missing. It makes sense he’s feeling insecure. I knew that, but I never worried about him once. I just figured he would be fine since he’s, well, Reita.

“I know Miori loves you. If you find her, she won’t have eyes for anyone but you. I’d hate that... I have to be the one who helps her!”

I had admired Reita. He was the ideal image I strove for. I'd assumed that I didn't need to be concerned about him, the perfect superhuman.

"Even if it's only temporary, I'm Miori's boyfriend. It's my job to find her!"

But I'd been wrong. I'd been looking at the ideal person in my head, not Reita himself. I hadn't been properly seeing my friends. In front of me right now was a normal high school boy. He was simply more brilliant than others, not someone who had leaped through time like me.

"And that's why I should go home...?"

"Sorry. I really am. I'll definitely repay you for this," he said, his face twisted in pain. "So let me take over from here."

You're her boyfriend; you want to be the first person to find Miori. That much I can understand. But I won't accept that. You're prioritizing the wrong thing.

"That's bullshit." My voice reflected the rage that had welled up from the pit of my stomach. I knew he wasn't acting like himself. But even so, I refused to back down here.

"I know...but this is my only chance! Miori's only ever had eyes for you, so what if I can make her look my way?! I love her! And that's why I won't let you go!" Reita desperately pleaded, trying to convince me.

I drew close to him and grabbed his collar. Overtaken by anger, I yelled, "You —"

"What are you unhappy about?! Isn't Hoshimiya-san your girlfriend?!"

Reita and I held each other's gazes at point-blank range. He looked like he was suffering a lot.

"That's not what this is about! Don't you get it?!"

"I do—I get it! But no matter what, I still... Tch!"

I was in no position to say I understood his feelings. But I could tell that Reita really loved Miori.



I knew Reita didn't want me to go to Miori. After all, she was in love with me. If it weren't for our current situation, I would've wanted to yield to him.

"No, you don't get anything at all." That's right; if it weren't for our current situation, that is. "Reita, haven't you realized?" I asked.

His brows furrowed. "Realized what?"

Knew it: you haven't noticed. That would never happen if you were your usual self.

"All you've been talking about is yourself."

We're in a crisis where we don't even know whether Miori's alive or not, and you're only thinking about yourself. I don't care if you're her boyfriend or whatever, but I can't trust someone like that and yield here.

"What do you mean?" Reita's eyes widened in shock. He gazed down at his palm, replaying everything he'd said. "I..."

I let go of his collar, and he crumpled to his knees.

"Sorry, but I'm not listening to you. I'm going." I turned away from him. Part of me wanted to tend to Reita, since he was behaving out of the ordinary. But finding Miori took the utmost priority right now.

Wait for me, Miori. Please, don't think of doing anything stupid.

I ran into the mountains, letting my memories from childhood guide me as I pushed my way through the foliage.

"There it is."

A tattered storage shed was up ahead. It was more run-down than I remembered. Ivy coiled around it, rust peppered the exterior, and a part of it was straight up rotting. The whole place was falling apart; the door was gone too. It looked like it was about to collapse at any moment.

"Miori!" I peered into the dilapidated structure, but no one was there.

There was a bamboo broom, a cleaning rag, a metal bat, a bike pump, a bunch of magazines from a dozen or so years ago, and other knickknacks inside. All these dusty items had been crammed into the little shed that could fit, at most,

six tatami mats. The sign that Miori had written “Secret Base” on still remained as well.

There was also a bag on top of a wooden box.

That’s the only new thing here. I’m sure of it. Miori must’ve put it here. So she left her bag in our secret base, but where did she go after that? At any rate, she’s close. The moment relief washed over me, I saw it. There was a white piece of paper next to her bag.

“Thank you for everything up until now. I’m really sorry.”

When I read the note, the blood drained from my body. Cold sweat trickled down my back.

I sprinted outside and searched for her with all my might. I pushed my way through the undergrowth and shouted Miori’s name. My vision was growing dim in the darkness, but I continued advancing deeper and deeper into the mountains nonetheless. I didn’t know where I was anymore. Even so, I refused to go home until I’d found her.

It’ll be fine. I’m sure of it. I know I can figure out where Miori is. After all...

It’s always been my job to find her when she’s crying.

(Hoshimiya Hikari)

“In elementary school, those two were the center of attention,” Yamano-san began, describing Natsuki-kun and Miori-chan’s past. “I’m a year younger than them, so I don’t know what they were like in class, but they stood out whenever they did anything. They were the popular kids. Well, actually, it’s more like they were famous.”

The beginning of her tale was surprising. Natsuki-kun had told us about the reason behind his high school debut, so I was under the impression that he’d always been one of the quiet kids. But I’d been wrong. Miori-chan was just as I’d imagined, though.

“Strictly speaking, there were actually four of them. There were two other people along with Miori-senpai and Haibara-senpai: Takuro-senpai and Shuto-

senpai. The four of them were always together. They seemed like they were having the time of their lives every day, and I also looked up to them. I wished I could be like them.”

We all listened to Yamano-san speak with great interest.

Come to think of it, it's common knowledge that they're childhood friends, but we've never really heard any anecdotes of their old days. I thought Natsuki-kun was too embarrassed because it was before his high school debut, but now I'm not so sure that's why.

“The heck...? That’s surprising. He said he was a loner in middle school. That’s why he went through a high school debut, right? But now you’re telling me he was popular in elementary school?” Tatsuya-kun asked the same question I’d been thinking.

“Miori-senpai was the popular one, for the most part. It was just kinda like Haibara-senpai and the others were there on the side,” Yamano-san replied.

“Oh,” he said. “I can imagine that. But how’d he turn into a loner after that?”

“Their group fell apart. Miori-senpai and Haibara-senpai quit being friends at some point too. That’s how Haibara-senpai ended up all alone.” Yamano-san spoke slowly, as though she were reminiscing on memories of the past. “I heard this from Miori-senpai... Apparently, when I was in my fifth year of elementary school—which is when they were in their sixth year—Shuto-senpai confessed to Miori-senpai, but she shot him down. They were really tight, but she couldn’t imagine him in a romantic light.”

We’d plunged into a story that was hard to react to. I couldn’t help but envision what came next. Love was the first cause that came to mind when discussing a close-knit group of friends being destroyed.

“Miori-senpai wanted to treat him as a good friend, just like she always had...but Shuto-senpai broke away first. Then they turned into a group of three, and right when things were awkward, Takuro-senpai was suddenly forced to transfer schools because of his family. Nothing they could do about that one, though.”

“So their group of four turned into a pair of two,” Uta-chan said, wearing a

conflicted look. Our eyes met, but we quickly looked away.

“With only Haibara-senpai and Miori-senpai left, well, they were a boy and a girl, get it? Kids started making fun of them, so she distanced herself.”

It was a normal reaction for a child around that age. Back then, merely hanging out with the opposite gender earned you a teasing.

“Then they graduated. I was still in elementary school, so I only heard what happened after that from Miori-senpai... When they entered middle school, she made new friends. But on the flip side, Haibara-senpai didn’t make a single one. I wouldn’t say he unwillingly ended up alone: he wanted that to happen. The reason’s a mystery, though.”

I had a guess as to why Natsuki-kun hadn’t tried to make new friends. He must’ve been hurt that his close friends had split up. And knowing him, he would’ve been convinced that it had all been his fault.

“Miori-senpai tried to reach out to Haibara-senpai when she saw him alone, but he refused... Eh, she’s the one who reneged first, so it was too late by that point.”

I didn’t know something like that happened to them. I took a peek at everyone else’s expressions—it didn’t look like the others had heard about this either.

“That’s what I got from Miori-senpai,” Yamano-san said. She took a short pause. “And now I’ll tell you what I heard from Haibara-senpai.”

(Motomiya Miori)

I had no idea why I’d come here. My memories were a blur. I was unsure what sequence of events had led me to this place, and I couldn’t think about anything. Was I walking steadily with my own two legs?

In fifth grade, I’d built this secret base with Takuro, Shuto, and Natsuki. I say “built,” but all we did was modify a dilapidated shed we’d found deep in the mountains. We had filled it with various things to play with and decorated the hut with a sign that said “Secret Base.” We’d cut the grass around the entrance to create a clearing to mess around in, but there was no trace of our work now.

It was overgrown with plants. The inside of the little shack had fallen apart considerably, and it was rusted everywhere.

But I'd missed this place dearly. The broken water gun, the fractured wooden sword, and the deflated soccer ball too—they were all things we'd brought here. We'd played here for hours on end until we ran out of energy.

When did I stop coming here? Right... After Shuto confessed to me and I turned him down. Those fun-filled days had shattered to pieces like glass. Although I never said it out loud, I held a grudge against Shuto. He'd shown just how much he valued our friendship. If he couldn't date me, then he didn't care about me anymore.

I didn't have the right to complain about that, though. I understood his feelings very well now.

I know. I'm currently fleeing from reality. All I'm doing is clinging to that radiant past. I want to go back to when I didn't know what love was. I want to return to those days. I want to redo it all one more time.

Then I could be friends with those three even now. Then I wouldn't fall in love with Natsuki, and we'd be good friends. Then I'd be someone who supports Natsuki's love from the bottom of my heart...

No, that's not true. Those are all empty words. Come on, right? If I really could redo my life again, I'd try to date Natsuki before he fell in love with Hikari-chan. I mean, I've loved him for a long time now. I just never realized that this feeling was love. That's why I was over the moon when we mended our friendship before the entrance ceremony.

I wanted to help Natsuki with his high school debut. And I really was interested in Reita-kun, but Natsuki was my primary motive. He depended on me at every turn, and that made me happier than anything else. But every time I saw him get closer to other girls, my heart clouded over.

I more or less realized why, but I denied those emotions. And I was able to keep them down. At least, in the beginning I could. But as I helped him with his crush, my feelings grew too much, and I was forced to acknowledge the truth... By the time I did, though, it was already too late.

I couldn't even join the stage, and yet I made a move on him. I did that, unnoticed by all, backstage after the curtains had closed on their happily ever after.

I'm such a bitch! The worst of the worst.

I don't even have the right to wish I could return to the past or get a redo on my life. I can't be here anymore. At the very least, I don't deserve to exist until this love fades away. But suppose these affections never fade; doesn't that mean my only choice is to disappear?

"Thank you for everything up until now. I'm really sorry..." I took out a piece of loose-leaf paper from my bag and left behind my suicide note.

Then, following my memories of childhood, I climbed the mountain. If I ascended high enough, I would reach a place with a beautiful lookout point. It was our favorite spot. Okay, well, actually it was only my favorite spot. I remembered Natsuki saying "Idiots like high places," every time we went there.

I pushed onward through the foliage, and at some point it started to rain. At first it was just a light drizzle, but it gradually turned into a deafening downpour. Frigid raindrops weaved through the leaves to hit me. I shivered from the cold. Nevertheless, I continued my advance. Although the muddy ground ensnared my feet, I persisted up the mountain.

Suddenly, the expanse of trees came to an end, and a cliff entered my vision.

"I can't see a thing."

The view was obscured because it was nighttime and raining. I walked up to the edge of the cliff and peered down. In the depths of the darkness, I could faintly make out a river. *I'll die if I fall from here.* The thought passed through my head as though it had nothing to do with me.

It doesn't seem real. That's why I don't feel any terror. Even though I'm one mere step away from death. But this is fine. I'll go just like this. If my emotions come back, the unnecessary ones will follow. Before it hits me that this is reality, I should step forward and...

"Miori!"

Someone threw their arms around me from behind. I knew who it was just by his voice. He was the person I didn't want to see most of all right now. But at the same time, he was also the one I *did* want to see most of all. He pulled me back without hesitation, moving me away from the cliff I should've fallen from.

Natsuki had hauled me back in a panic, and the momentum caused him to fall on his butt while still holding me tight. With my back against his chest, I went down with him. I ended up sitting on the ground while he hugged me from behind. His arms were wrapped around me with so much force that I couldn't move.

His breathing was ragged. I could tell he had run here as fast as he could. As I listened to him breathe, the reality that I'd disregarded caught up to me.

What was I about to do? I instantly went white as a sheet. All too late, my body shook. *I'm scared. My heart is pounding. The rain pelting me is cold. I'm freezing.* I gave my surroundings a proper look—illuminated by the moon, the darkness wasn't actually that deep.

"Thank god. I made it in time... Thank fucking god," Natsuki said near my ear. His voice trembled a little.

I angled my head up and looked at his face. He was covered in mud. I was probably just as dirty. It only made sense, since we'd traversed a forest while getting bombarded by heavy rain.

"Why...are you here?"

"I was looking for you, obviously."

"Why did you think I'd be here?"

"I suddenly recalled that you said you wanted to return to the past."

"You found me with that as your only clue?"

"It's always been my job to find you during hide-and-seek," Natsuki replied with a strained smile.

He was still as perplexingly good at finding me as ever. Whenever I'd go off to cry by myself, he would always find me and stay by my side. I loved that about him so much. How could I not fall for him? And that was exactly why I couldn't

remain in this position.

“Let go. It hurts.” I slowly shook out of his grasp and stood up.

“Are you okay now?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t in my right mind earlier.” I was feeling engulfed by the gravity of what I’d attempted. I couldn’t follow through now. I didn’t have the nerve to.

“I can’t claim to understand how you feel right now. Maybe you want to escape from reality. But stop trying to die. People are worried about you. I’m not talking about just me—everyone is worried about you.”

My family and friends flashed through my mind. They were all so kind; surely they were concerned about me.

“Let’s go home, Miori. Let’s go back to everyone else.” Natsuki held his hand out. He knew what kind of person I was and accepted me as I was.

“I can’t... It’s too late now.”

Please stop it. Seriously. My heart sways when you do that. Look, I’ll end up getting my hopes up a tiny bit. I’ll harbor unrealistic expectations. I’ll only be disappointed in myself for being despicable enough to think that I have a chance, for even a second, in a situation like this... But that isn’t what I truly want. It’s something else. I don’t want my love to bear fruit.

“Miori.”

Don’t call my name so gently. Please, I want you to reject me. I want closure.
“Because I can’t forgive myself.”

(Hoshimiya Hikari)

“When I entered middle school, Haibara-senpai was already a loner. He’d lost his cheerfulness from elementary school, wore glasses, and was chubbier, so I almost thought he was a different person. Anyway, I’ll spare you guys the details,” Yamano-san continued. “A bunch happened on my end, and I wound up talking to Haibara-senpai sometimes. What I heard from him was a little different from what I’d heard from Miori-senpai. I’ll tell you about that now.”

Everyone was already deeply absorbed in her story. I wasn't the only one: we were all simply curious about their past. Plus, it might give us clues on Miori-chan's whereabouts.

"Haibara-senpai was hurt that the four of them had split up, and especially so when Miori-senpai distanced herself. That's why he kept away from other people when he started middle school."

It began to gently drizzle outside the window. It was quiet inside the empty restaurant, so Yamano-san's voice carried well.

"Miori-senpai reached out to Haibara-senpai. She hoped their friendship could go back to what it used to be. But the short-haired tomboy who would often get mistaken for a boy was already gone. She'd transformed into a beautiful girl. And basically the most popular girl in the school."

I see what happened. With her looks, the people around her wouldn't leave her be.

"The most popular boy in her class had a crush on Miori-senpai. He was jealous that Miori-senpai paid extra attention to Haibara-senpai. It's a common story, but he took Haibara-senpai, who already had no friends, and isolated him completely. I don't think Haibara-senpai cared, though: he'd never had anyone in the first place... But Miori-senpai started losing friends little by little, because she fussed over him even though he was hated. She was slowly being excluded from her class."

Miori-chan didn't care that she was losing friends and prioritized Natsuki-kun anyway. In response, it weighed heavily on his heart that her reputation was worsening because of him. I could vividly picture that scene, and it made my heart sting.

"That's why Haibara-senpai pushed her away. He didn't want to put her in a bad spot because she was spending time with him. Well, he'll claim otherwise, though."

"I see. Miori told me they didn't get along in middle school," Serika remarked.

"I've been pretty jittery about all this. Miori-senpai asked me for advice all the time, and I chatted with Haibara-senpai on occasion, so the whole situation has

been a huge pain. Those two only ever worry about each other, but they never try to talk it out.” Yamano-san sighed and shrugged. “They definitely love each other—they’ve just never realized it.”

Yeah, I think so too. And it’s not a story of the past either. They’ve felt that way all this time, even up until now... I’m sure that the affection he holds for her is much greater than what he feels for me.

Miori was crying.

I’d seen her like this many times when we were children. Surprisingly, she was quite the crybaby. It was hard to believe, because of how confident she normally acted, so I’d just be called a liar if I told anyone. Besides, she only ever cried in front of me.

“Then what’re you gonna do? Stay here forever?” I asked.

“I don’t know... But I don’t deserve to go back,” she said through sobs and shook her head.

“You’ll catch a cold if you stay here. I’ll take you home by force if I have to.”

“Why do you care about me so much? Why go so far, until you’re all battered up? Isn’t Hikari-chan the one you love? Just leave someone like me alone.”

“You’re my precious friend. I can’t leave you alone...even if this is all my fault.” I couldn’t give Miori the reply she wanted to hear. Even so, I wanted her usual self to come back.

“It’s not your fault. Only mine. That’s why I wanted to disappear.”

Just imagining her gone terrified me. “Stop it. It doesn’t matter whose fault it was. I’m begging you, come back to us.” I knew those words would hurt her, but this was how I truly felt. I wanted her to be with me forever. I didn’t want to lose her ever again.

“It’s already too late. I couldn’t get on the stage.”

The downpour intensified. Raindrops pounded the ground. Miori’s tears mixed with the rivulets, seemingly vanishing.

“But I’ll say it out loud so I can put an end to it.” Miori inhaled slowly, steadied her breath, and then said, “I love you a lot—I love you the most in the world.”

My chest throbbed when I saw her smile as she wept. *I know. As dense as I am, even I was aware. What I feel towards Miori is clearly different from what I feel for my other friends. It’s an affection more dear and special.* The feelings I’d pretended not to notice and had locked away began to overflow.

Since when?

Miori was my first love, but I’d fallen in love with Hikari at first sight in high school. Then, seven years had passed. My affections for Miori had faded in that time span. She was a former close childhood friend—that was all I’d thought about her when my second chance at life had begun. On that account, there was no doubt that these feelings stirring within me had been born after I’d jumped through time.

“Natsuki?”

I went through my memories.

“Listen carefully. I like you.”

At the start, Miori had been my partner for my “Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan.”

“No! I’d never—!”

As my childhood friend, she knew the real me, so I was comfortable being myself in front of her.

“Thanks for walking me home.”

She’d been by my side supporting me all this time, and before I knew it, I was dependent on her.

“Didn’t you say I could depend on you? A man doesn’t go back on his word, right?”

I didn’t want to see Miori miserable.

“Never, ever. Okay? You won’t abandon me again, right?”

Recollections of my first love were brought back little by little.

"I'm going to confess to Reita-kun. I've been acting cautious lately, but that's not very me... I'll end this battle lickety-split and secure my happiness!"

I wanted Miori to be happy.

"From now on, Hikari-chan will be there to help you."

I never thought my actions would backfire instead.

"What would you do...if I told you I love you?"

Because I love you too.

I loved Motomiya Miori as much as I loved Hoshimiya Hikari, my girlfriend. And that was precisely why I had to give her confession a proper response.

"Sorry. There's someone I have my heart set on. I can't answer your feelings." As Miori said, I've already made my decision. I'm determined to bring Hoshimiya Hikari happiness. For sure. I won't waver now. As long as Hikari's heart doesn't drift away from me, I won't. When I told her I loved her, I went in with that much commitment.

"Thanks for giving me an answer," she said after a beat.

"That's all I can offer in response, but still, I want you to go back home with me."

I thought for a bit. I'm someone who got to redo his life. If my actions rewrote the happiness in Miori's life into unhappiness, then it's my responsibility to save her. But there's no point in thinking that way. I can't pull off anything so impressive. Even if I told her I loved her back, she probably doesn't wish for that anymore. In the end, this is the only thing I can do. I'll just have to live my best life so I don't ever regret this moment.

"Don't think about dumb things like whether you deserve it or not," I said, purposefully maintaining an easygoing and teasing tone. "Don't worry. Even if you love me, there won't be any issues as long as my heart never wavers, right? Worry all you like; Hikari is the one I love. So don't torment yourself so much."

“H-Huh? I know that, but that’s not the problem here...”

“Yeah it is. If Hikari’s what you’re worried about, I’ll firmly shoot everything down going forward. I’ve been wishy-washy about where we stand, but I’ll draw the line in our friendship now.”

I couldn’t do anything about other people’s affections. That’s why it was irrelevant whether Miori loved me or not when it came to her “deserving” to come back.

“Really? I can keep loving you?” she asked as though she were searching for the light within the darkness.

“Yeah.” I couldn’t reciprocate her feelings. But she could continue to love me, and I could acknowledge how she felt. “Relax. I won’t fall in love with you.” I decided to stick to this lie until the day I died. Haibara Natsuki did not love Motomiya Miori. And he would not love her in the future either.

“Thank you.” Miori’s expression softened with relief despite the awful declaration I’d made.

I offered her my hand once more. “Let’s head back to our secret base first. I’m cold. It’s freezing here!”

Our friends have a lot on their minds, but we still manage to get along. There’s no cause for concern, much less to agonize so hard that death’s up for consideration. Sure, she might’ve done something bad, but she’s apologized. So that’s the end of that.

“Hey, Natsuki.” Miori’s swollen eyes curved into a smiling expression. “Once my feelings fade away, do you think we can go back to being friends?”

“Sucks for you, but I’m not going to stop being your friend. Do something about your feelings on your own.”



“You’re terrible. Are you telling me to be your friend while I’m still crushing on you?”

“I need you for my rainbow-colored youth, you know.” I’d been forcing whatever I wanted on her.

Hearing my self-centered demand, she grinned. “Guess I’ll just have to deal with it... All right. Then you better wait for me. Just until my lie stops being a lie.” Hiding how her legs shook, Miori moved past me. “Oh, that’s right. Can I ask you for a favor?”

We walked home in the torrential shower.

“What? If you whine about dying again, I’ll drag you home by force.”

“I... I wasn’t whining... You were just as selfish as I was, anyway.”

She was right. I’d said some pretty absurd stuff to convince her.

“Do you remember our old promise?”

“The one about listening to one of your requests whenever you cry?” That was the first thing that came to mind when she brought up a promise. It was a promise I’d hatched after much trial and error to stop Miori’s tears. Thinking back on it now, I felt it was quite unreasonable. There was way too much responsibility on my end.

“Wow, you actually remember. I could cry in front of you because you said that. I hardly ever cried in front of other people.”

I didn’t need to know that. I wish she hadn’t told me that now... A conflicted look spread across my face, but she continued on.

“So go along with my request for just one day.”

(Hoshimiya Hikari)

We consolidated everything we’d talked about and got a better grasp on Miori-chan’s situation. She’d dated Reita-kun while still being in love with Natsuki-kun, and Reita-kun knew about her feelings all the while. She’d tried to fall in love with Reita-kun after he’d confessed to her, but she had succumbed

to her feelings for a moment.

She'd already been distressed about what she had done, but to make matters worse, rumors started spreading. Plus Hasegawa-san had treated her cruelly, and what I'd unloaded on her had just poured salt into the wound. It was understandable that she wanted to run away.

"Anyway, we need to hurry up and look for her," Uta-chan murmured.

I nodded. *I'm worried about Miori-chan's mental state. Reita-kun and Natsuki-kun are already out searching for her, but they haven't contacted us yet.*

"Let's pick some places we think she might be at and split up," Serika-chan said decisively.

The most reliable ones for that job were Yamano-san, Serika-chan, and Uta-chan, who were especially close to Miori-chan. The three of them discussed things while looking at their map applications on their phones, each suggesting possible locations.

We don't have any concrete clues in the end... I'll do my best to look for her, of course, but if she went somewhere far away, then none of us would have any ideas. I've no doubt Natsuki-kun can find her, though.

"Please, Natsuki-kun." *You don't need to worry about me. Just for now, I want you to be at Miori-chan's side.*

We returned to our abandoned shed of a secret base. We ducked inside and caught our breath. It was still storming outside. Our clothes were soaked through and covered in mud. *My outfit might be done for, even after going through the wash.* The sopping wet sensation was unpleasant on my skin, and more importantly, I was freezing, so I took off my shirt.

"Hey! Don't strip without warning!" Miori backed away from me in shock.

"It's just my shirt. I'll be colder if I keep it on."

"Well, I guess so... Okay. I'm not gonna look over there." She faced away from me and sat on top of a wooden box with her knees to her chest. Her uniform was just as filthy and wet as mine. She trembled ever so slightly.

Knew it—she's cold. It was around ten degrees Celsius; winter was approaching. However, we didn't have anything to start a fire. Our only choice was to hold out here until the downpour let up.

"Think it'll stop raining?" Miori asked.

"Looks like it's going to keep coming down for a while," I said after checking the weather on my phone.

The signal was weak. We were deep in the mountains, so I only had one bar. Thankfully, I was still barely connected and could contact the others.

"Miori, get in touch with your family. The police are looking for you, and it's turned into a huge deal."

"What? R-Really? I'm sorry... Right, of course they are... Makes sense." She must've been so caught up in her head that she hadn't considered the obvious consequence to her actions. "Okay. I'll call my mom."

"I'll let the other guys know we're safe. You can apologize for making them worry later."

She nodded meekly and then called her mother. I sent a text to our group chat that consisted of the usual six, saying, "I found Miori. She's all right." I sent the same thing to Serika in a separate private chat. The message was read instantly, and Hikari called me.

"Hello," I answered.

"Natsuki-kun?! Did you really find Miori-chan?!"

"Yeah, really. She's right next to me. She's on the phone with her family."

"Th-Thank god... Where are you now?"

"It's kinda hard to explain, but we're in the mountains near our town."

"The... The mountains? Why are you two out there?"

"I don't know why either. Ask Miori. Hey, at least we're safe and sound. It's coming down in buckets, so we can't move from where we're at, but we'll go home once the rain lets up. You can tell the others—"

"We're all together right now. Don't worry; they heard."

I could hear multiple people say, “Thank god,” over the line: Uta’s and Serika’s voices.

Guess everyone assembled in the same place. They must’ve been worried about Miori.

“How’s Miori-chan doing?”

“She was in a bad state, but she’s calmed down now. You don’t need to worry about her anymore.” My gaze met Miori’s as I said that. She’d finished talking to her mom.

“Can I talk to her?” Miori asked.

“Sure. Hikari, I’m passing you over to Miori.” I handed my phone to her. Her hands were shaking, and it probably wasn’t from the cold. I smacked her on the back and said, “It’ll be okay.”

“Ow!” she yelped in surprise.

“M-Miori-chan?! What happened?!” Hikari yelled, panicked.

Miori sent me a reproachful glare, but I just shrugged.

“Hurry up and answer her,” I said.

“You don’t need to tell me that.” She took a deep breath. “Um, everyone’s with you there, right?”

“Yeah, we are! I’m so glad... Miori-chan, I’m sorry. Yesterday, I—”

“Wait, Hikari-chan. Let me go first.” They were talking over the phone, so the others couldn’t see her, but Miori lowered her head anyway. “Guys, I’m sorry for worrying you all,” she said in a timid tone, and waited for their response.

Silence fell for a split second.

“You better be! Stupid Miorin! You wannabe cool psycho girl!”

“H-Hey, Uta. Don’t you think that’s a bit much?” Tatsuya said.

“I have to get that much off my chest, or else I won’t be able to calm down!”

“Miori, I’m glad you’re safe. Don’t catch a cold,” Serika said.

Nanase laughed. “Though Hondo-san is acting composed now, she was the

most worried about you.”

“Yuino... She didn’t need to know that.”

“Miori-chan, I’ll apologize to you properly later, so please come back,” Hikari said.

Miori was overwhelmed by the chaotic voices coming through the phone. It was amusing how absurd Uta was being, so I inadvertently smiled. Miori was still as stone for a while, but then her expression suddenly relaxed.

Looks like I’ve got nothing to worry about anymore. I checked outside. The rain had let up. *It’s still cloudy, so this is probably only temporary... Now’s our chance to go home.* I waited for Miori and the others to stop chatting and then spoke up. “Let’s go while we can, Miori.”

“Yeah. Well then, guys... I’ll see you at school.”

Third Interlude

This was a story from over ten years ago to me. That was why my memories were hazy, and I only partially remembered what had happened. Nevertheless, there were moments that vividly stuck with me. One of those moments was when Miori had distanced herself from me.

If memory served, it was during the summer of our sixth year in elementary school. Takuro had transferred out a few months ago, and Shuto had started hanging out with his other friends. Neither Shuto nor Miori had told me anything, but I knew he had a crush on her, so I had an idea of what had transpired between them. At the time, I hated love.

I couldn't do anything about Takuro transferring schools, but Shuto had left us because of romance. Despite all the fun times we'd shared, our group fell apart, leaving only Miori and me with each other to play with. That was enjoyable in itself, but it wasn't as fun as when the four of us had been together.

For better or for worse, our group used to stand out. So when it became only the two of us, the other kids in our year started teasing us. They would whistle, call us "passionate," ask us if we were dating, and so on. Even though I knew they were joking, it made me uncomfortable.

We're not like that. We'll never date. We're going to be friends forever. Our future will be topped out on fun that way. Though that was how I'd felt, Miori drifted away. She didn't say a word to me and began hanging out with other girls. I was the only one left behind.

At the time, I felt an indescribable shock. And so, I stopped expecting anything out of friendships. I didn't feel like hanging out with other people. My relationship with Miori remained uncertain until we graduated from elementary school, and then we entered middle school.

I didn't make any friends and spent all my time by myself. However, I frequently caught sight of Miori. She was popular. Before, I'd been too close to her to notice, but she was actually cute too. She seemed to enjoy having all

those people around her.

Being alone had been my desire, and yet I was jealous of Miori. I had probably been in love with her; I'd just never realized it. But because I despised love, I denied those feelings.

Shortly after that, Miori tried to reach out to me. I was actually happy she did, but I also felt that she'd come too late. Plus, I'd grown embittered, so although I could respond when she spoke to me, I never initiated conversation with her. I acted like I was a proud lone wolf.

And as expected, I became the school outcast. Miori's reputation took a hit each time she interacted with me.

"You shouldn't hang out with someone like me!"

So I pushed her away, thinking that I was doing it for her sake—at least, that was my pretense. But that wasn't true. I pushed her away because I was envious of Miori and how bright she shone in the spotlight, surrounded by people. Even though I'd chosen to be estranged. I was the worst of the worst. I didn't want to turn out this way.

Then, I finally understood what my true desire was. I wanted my youth to be just as radiant as Miori's. Claiming I was satisfied alone was, to me at the very least, a mere facade. So I decided to make my high school debut. I would change myself and obtain that rainbow-colored youth. Though, in the end, that had been a disaster, and my high school days were a dull gray. Back then, the rainbow-colored youth of my dreams had been based on Miori's life.

I had yearned to be like Motomiya Miori.

I wanted to change myself and become someone who could stand by her side with my head held high. That had been the very first wish that kindled my longing for a vibrant youth. However, my reality was gray, so my heart broke, and I gave up. I tucked that desire away, deep in the depths of my heart. Only regret remained, and as time passed, the feelings those aspirations had originated from faded and disappeared.

However, by some turn of fate, I was given the chance to redo my youth. But how could I reach my goal when I'd forgotten what I'd originally been aiming

for? Motomiya Miori was essential to my rainbow-colored youth.

After all, I had pointed to the place where Miori was and dubbed it my rainbow-colored youth.

Chapter 4: Just One Day

When I woke up and glanced at the clock, it was past ten in the morning. I normally got up early to go for jogs on the weekend, so this was a rare occurrence for me. I was much more exhausted than I'd anticipated because of searching for Miori yesterday.

After the rain died down, we had gone to her home, where the police had grilled us for details. I told them that I had looked for her because my friend was missing and that I didn't know the specifics. I had no idea what explanation Miori had offered her parents and the police, but she'd likely avoided name-dropping Hasegawa and her friends. She would take on all the blame for this incident until the bitter end.

One thing led to another, and by the time I was released, it was nighttime. I had returned home, left my soiled clothes to my parents, taken a bath, and slept like a log.

I wonder if my clothes will be okay after a deep clean... I'm worried. I bought those for dates, so they were pretty pricey! Oh well, now's not the time to be fretting over that. I should get up first. Thinking as much, I was about to throw my blanket off of me. *Huh? My body feels kinda heavy.*

I was struck by a ringing headache and a wave of fatigue. It was a familiar sensation—I had caught a cold. I put my hand on my forehead; it was burning up. I stuck a thermometer under my armpit and waited for a bit. Once it was done reading, it displayed thirty-seven degrees Celsius. That wasn't a super high temperature, but it still constituted a bona fide cold.

Mom's out today, so I'll ask Namika to go shopping for me.

"You're sick because you came home soaking wet! Onii-chan, you're such a moron." Though Namika acted exasperated and fumed angrily, she still went out and bought me supplies such as cold medicine and cooling gel sheets.

She's actually more worried than her attitude lets on. She's always like this.

Well, it's a good thing it's Sunday. I should recover after resting for a day and be healthy enough to go to school tomorrow.

My vision was unsteady, and I felt completely drained. *I'll sleep the day away.* Right as I was about to burrow back into my covers, my phone rang from beside my pillow. The culprit behind my affliction was calling.

"Hello?"

"Is it just me, or does your voice sound weird?" Miori asked apprehensively when she heard my rasp.

"Whose fault do you think that is?"

"Sorry... Do you have a fever?"

"Thirty-seven point five degrees. Just a minor one. I'll get better soon."

"Do you want anything? I can bring stuff over."

"Namika bought stuff for me, so I'm fine."

"Oh right. I don't need to worry if Namika-chan's there."

"Speaking of which, are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fit as a fiddle. I don't really catch colds."

"I see. Makes sense: idiots don't catch colds."

"What're you trying to say?"

I was about to crack a joke, but a fit of coughing came out instead.

"A-Are you okay? I wanted to ask about my request, but we can talk about it some other time. Take it easy and rest well today," Miori said before hanging up.

Finally...back to sleep... I closed my eyes, but my phone went off again. *What is it now?* I glanced at the screen. It was a call from Hikari this time, so my annoyance vanished without a trace. *If anything, my cold is cured (big, whopping lie). Wow, today's a great day.*

"Natsuki-kun? I heard you caught a cold. How are you feeling?"

"I think I'll be better after I rest today. Wait, who'd you hear that from?"

“Namika-chan told me. ‘Hoshimiya-senpai, my brother caught a cold,’” she quoted.

Dang it, Namika, I didn’t want Hikari to fuss over me! You just had to blab, didn’t you?

“Can I come check up on you?”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I might give you my cold.”

“I still want to come, though. But if you don’t want me to nurse you, I won’t go.”

She’s really learned how to be hard to refuse... I’m thrilled, of course. “Then please do. Just so you know, Namika-chan is home, but my parents aren’t.”

“That’s fine. She told me that already.”

Since when did she get info through my sister without my knowledge? Her network is scary.

“I’ll head over with Miori-chan, so take it easy until we get there.”

My mind wasn’t functioning well. It was becoming increasingly hard to stay awake. “Okay,” I replied. Our call ended with that.

Let’s sleep. I’ll think about what comes next after I feel better. I shut my eyelids, pulled up my blanket, and lay there for a while, until it hit me. *“I’ll head over with Miori-chan”? That’s what she said, right? So they’re both coming here? Wh-Why?*

I could hear people talking.

My mind roused slowly, as though I were rising from the bottom of the sea to the water’s surface. When I opened my eyes, the same old ceiling of my room filled my vision. My forehead felt pleasantly chilly. There was a cooling sheet stuck on my head.

“Hm? Are you awake?” asked a voice as refreshing to listen to as a bell.

I turned towards the source to see Hikari staring at me. We were close enough that our noses were almost touching. Her porcelain skin was beautiful.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Morning, Natsuki-kun. Though, it’s already three.”

“You’ll catch my cold if you’re this close.”

“Fine... I’ll show some self-control,” she said sulkily and pulled away.

Argh! Too darn cute! She’s got so much destructive power that it blew away my drowsiness. If anything, my cold’s cured (big, whopping lie).

As a preventative measure, Hikari wore a white mask. “Thanks, Natsuki-kun. You kept our promise.”

“It’s nothing to thank me for.” *Really, I mean it. If you scrutinize my actions objectively, I abandoned my girlfriend in the middle of our date to go search for another woman... Huh? When I put it like that, doesn’t that make me sound like trash?* “I should actually apologize. I’m sorry for ditching you, Hikari.”

“No, it’s fine. That part of you is why I fell in love with you.” She smiled at me gently.

Is she an angel? She’s the cutest in the whole wide world.

We continued peering into each other’s eyes, until someone else cleared their throat.

“How are you feeling?” The question didn’t come from Hikari.

I shifted my gaze to where Miori sat in my chair with her eyes on us. Hikari’s cheeks rapidly flushed scarlet, and she hastily moved away from me.

Oh yeah, she mentioned that Miori was coming too. I can’t believe they actually came together. “Well, I feel better than I did this morning... I’m lethargic, but my fever’s dropped.” I tried to keep my voice natural, but my nerves showed through slightly.

This situation is baffling. Why did Miori and Hikari visit me together? Not gonna lie, this feels super awkward. I mean, I’m with my girlfriend and our friend that I just rejected yesterday. How could this not be awkward? What the heck am I supposed to do?

“I made porridge. Do you want some?” Miori asked.

“O-Oh... Thanks, I’ll have some,” I replied.

“I’ll bring it up.” She got up and noisily left the room.

Hikari and I made eye contact. *I want to ask her why she came with Miori. But I’m not sure if I should. A lot’s happened. What should I do? But isn’t it weird if I don’t ask her too?*

“You’re wondering why Miori-chan made you porridge and not me, aren’t you?” she asked suspiciously.

You’re a bit off the mark there. In fact, you’re way off the mark. Don’t look so displeased! What am I supposed to do? It’s a misunderstanding! I didn’t think anything of it until you brought it up!

“It’s because I’m still practicing. Yep. Going forward, I’m going to become a home-oriented woman. But you know, this is Miori-chan we’re talking about. Why is she a good cook, given her persona? Isn’t that strange?!”

“Both her parents work, so she and her grandma have taken turns cooking since she was a kid. But, uh, I’m not sure making porridge could really be considered cooking...”

“La-la-la! Can’t hear you! Not listening. Can’t hear a word!” Hikari covered her ears and shook her head like a spoiled kid throwing a tantrum. “I see the whole picture. Miori-chan upped her cooking skills so she could be a man magnet.” She nodded to herself in agreement. “Yeah, that’s gotta be it.”

“Is that what she is?” *That’s not something that I’d ever call Miori.*

“That’s right. Otherwise, it’s just unfair. A tomboy that’s good at household chores? She must be aiming for that contrast!” Hikari declared, fully convinced. She failed to notice that Miori was behind her.

She was just grabbing porridge, not a particularly time-consuming activity.

“Hikari-chan. Quit saying stupid things and move aside.” Miori wore a dry smile as she set up a foldable table. She placed the porridge and a spoon on top of it, and moved the makeshift surface towards my bed.

“N-No way! I won’t hand over this position to you, Miori-chan!” Hikari said defiantly, misunderstanding what she meant, and grabbed my hand.

“Hikari... I want to eat porridge, though...”

She realized she’d misinterpreted what Miori had meant and hurriedly moved away. *Huh? Was my girlfriend always this dumb?*

Miori placed the table where Hikari had been seconds before. I sat up cross-legged and began spooning porridge into my mouth. *Nice and salty, yum.*

“Where did you find that table?” Hikari asked.

“Hm? He always keeps it under his bed. It’s for when he has guests over,” Miori replied. Then, with a start, she clarified herself. “Oh, um... I can explain. I may know where he keeps it, but summer vacation was the last time I was here. I haven’t visited him since. Really.”

Though she’d heard Miori’s explanation, Hikari still gave her the side-eye.

I feel awkward. I feel reeeally awkward, guys, so please don’t butt heads. I already felt sick, and now my stomach hurts too. Objectively speaking, the cutest and second-cutest girl in my school are fighting over who can nurse me, and yet why do I feel exhausted? I’m starting to understand why light novel protagonists don’t seem so happy when they’ve got a harem. I used to not get it.

“I can’t trust you. You *did* hug Natsuki-kun behind my back.”

“W-Well... I have no defense there. I’m sorry. Really, I’m sorry... I’m in the wrong here. I mean it. Hikari-chan, you have all the right to criticize me.” Miori’s expression instantly darkened, and she hung her head.

“D-Don’t feel bad! I was joking! I’ve forgiven you for that already, so let bygones be bygones!” Flustered, Hikari tried to console Miori.

My... My stomach hurts. This is too much for me. I can’t handle being here. I silently ate my porridge, hoping that they would at least pretend I wasn’t there.

“In the first place, this was half Natsuki-kun’s fault.”

Say what? Is it just me, or is the conversation heading in a weird direction?

“Natsuki-kun, you led Miori-chan on! Even though you have me!”

I felt a knife stab my heart. *I wasn’t trying to, but I can see how it looked that way.*

“H-Hikari-chan? That’s not true. I explained it to you before, but I did that on my own. I put Natsuki in a tough spot, and he didn’t know what to do. Don’t blame him.”

Looks like they talked about a lot while I slept. They’ve been inordinately friendly with each other this whole time, so I’m curious what they talked about, but I definitely shouldn’t ask. At any rate, I’m glad they reconciled.

“Miori-chan filled me in on the details that led up to today. Natsuki-kun, I’m outraged over how you always try to look good! Of course she’d fall head over heels for you when you act like that!”

Did I really do that? Isn’t Miori just glorifying her memories of me?

“Um, Hikari-chan... That’s embarrassing, so please cut it out...” Miori’s face was uncharacteristically bright red. She shook Hikari’s shoulders.

“I will not!” Hikari shot a displeased frown at me.

It’s just a feeling I have, but Hikari’s in a weird mood today. I can’t argue if anyone tells me that it’s my fault she’s feeling insecure, though.

“To begin with, Natsuki-kun, you’re always like that! You’re normally so thickheaded, but you instantly notice when something’s on our minds, and you stick your nose in to help us... You dirty womanizer!”

“Gah...” Another knife joined the one already sticking out of my heart. *They didn’t come here to nurse me, did they? They’re here to finish me off!* “I’m... I’m sorry.”

Right, then, I’m just gonna pretend like my condition has worsened and sleep.

The next time I woke up, my body felt considerably lighter. I sat up and looked out the window. The sky was dyed scarlet. I checked the time; it was already five in the evening. Miori sat on the chair in my room. Though she’d been absentmindedly staring at her phone, she still noticed that I was up.

“Where’s Hikari?” I asked.

“Went home. She said she ended up being a nuisance instead of nursing you.”

Well... That's true. Not gonna lie. Yep, no objections there. “Miori, should you still be here?”

“She told me to stay here until you woke up. Hikari-chan's a strong one.”

Yeah, she's implying that she trusts Miori.

“How are you feeling?”

“Much better. I could go to school tomorrow at this rate.”

“Great, I'll head home, then. You don't want anything else, right?”

“Nah. Thanks for the porridge.”

Miori grabbed her bag that she'd left on top of my desk and placed her hand on the door. “About my request, I told Hikari-chan about it, so we're good to go. When should we do it?”

“Next weekend should be fine, right?”

“Hmmm... I've got plans next weekend, so I'd rather do it tomorrow if possible.”

“Tomorrow? But tomorrow's a Monday. That's a weekday.”

“I figured it must've slipped your mind. Tomorrow's a holiday.”

Seriously? I completely forgot. I glanced at the calendar, and sure enough, tomorrow was labeled as a national holiday. “In any case, isn't that too sudden? I'm still recuperating, you know.”

“I'll wait if you're feeling sick, of course. It's up to you.”

Pushy as ever. I'm always weak to her when she talks like that. “All right, I'll go.”

“Yay! But I mean it: tell me if you feel under the weather,” she said and promptly left.

You know... I don't mind if you move the conversation along as you please, but stop assuming that I've got nothing going on! Fine, I was free today...and tomorrow too.

The next morning.

We'd agreed to meet up at our town's train station at nine. *I feel like I'm in perfect condition. I should be good to go!* I got ready for our trip and left home. Miori was already waiting for me in front of the station when I got there.

"Morning. Were you waiting long?" I said.

"Nope. Let's go," she answered.

I walked beside her and boarded the train. Though we didn't get closer than necessary, we also didn't distance ourselves either. We were friends, after all.

"Where are we meeting up with Shuto?" I asked.

"I told him yesterday that we'd meet up at Takasaki Station," she replied.

"And you got in touch with Takuro?"

"Yeah. I asked some old friends and found his Minsta account."

"Nice job finding that."

"It was pretty tough," she said with a shrug.

Our goal for the day was to hang out with our former close friends again. Miori had asked me for the favor, and I had no reason to decline since Hikari had given me her approval.

Miori and I regretted the way those fun-filled days had come to an end. That was why we wanted to relive them one more time, even if years had already passed.

"I'm surprised Shuto and Takuro agreed to show up today when they had basically zero notice." *Talk about a late invite. I guess that's normal when it comes to Miori, though.*

"Don't you think they both feel the same way we do?" She had a faraway look in her eyes. "I'm done wishing I could go back to those days, but I still have my regrets, so why not start over now? Now's the time to do it, after how long it's been."

Live your best life so you don't have any regrets. And if you do have any, give it a retry. If it's possible, that is. I can strongly relate to Miori's modus operandi.

“Besides, it’s been forever, so I bet we all miss each other,” she said with a smile, driving away any need to analyze the minor details.

“True.” *No point muddling over it. It’ll be like a class reunion. I want to meet up with old friends and hang out. That’s our only motive. That’s why we’re going to where Takuro lives in Osaka with Shuto.* “What’s on the itinerary for today?” I asked.

“We’ll get there around noon, meet up with Takuro, and eat lunch. I haven’t thought about what we’ll do after that, but we’ve got school tomorrow, so we’ll need to take the evening bullet train back.”

Feels a bit rushed, but no way around it. Gunma and Osaka are pretty far apart. It’ll take around three and a half hours to get there, and the train back only doubles the travel time. The cost is nothing to sneeze at either, but in our view, this trip will be more than worth it.

“We’re getting off, Natsuki.”

Having reached Takasaki Station, the two of us alighted the train. We waited for Shuto, and soon a voice called to us from behind.

“Yo! It’s been a while.” It was an arrogant voice, brimming with confidence.

I turned around to see a well-built young man. He had short black hair and a pleasant face. A few traces of his childish features still remained. He was dressed plainly, in a white shirt and jeans. He gave off the air of an athlete.

“Shuto, how’ve you been?” I asked.

“Good, and it looks like you’ve both been just as good.” He shot us a friendly grin, but there was a hint of awkwardness in his smile.

He’s probably nervous. I’m the same; my shoulders are tense. Let’s be real—he left the group on a bad note. It’s been so long that I don’t know if we can hold a conversation. “I’m surprised you recognized us so quickly.”

Though I could see the vestiges of what he’d looked like as a kid now that I knew he was Shuto, I wasn’t sure I could’ve picked him out from among the countless people in Takasaki Station. However, he had come up to us without hesitation.

Since I'd driven the conversation in that direction, Shuto explained. "Course I could. I see pictures of Miori on Minsta every now and then, and you played at your school festival. I was there watching, y'know. That was a sweet concert."

"What?! You were there?! Why didn't you tell me?!" I exclaimed in shock.
Shuto was somewhere in the audience too?

"I thought about going up to you...but you've got your own crew around you now, so I didn't think you'd be happy if I called out to you after all these years."

Looks like we've been weighing on his mind too. Kinda makes me feel better.

"I'm glad you guys invited me out. This seriously came out of nowhere, though."

"I know, right. I also only heard from Miori yesterday that we were going today. Boy, was I surprised."

"Once she makes up her mind, she does something straightaway. That's super Miori."

"Yeah, tell me about it! She's been like this since we were kids."

Shuto and I shared a smile. Miori watched us with a conflicted look.

"I'm sorry about what happened when we were kids. I couldn't see you as just a friend." Shuto apologized to Miori as he scratched his head.

"What about now?" she asked.

"Don't worry: I've got a girlfriend now." He gave her a thumbs-up and flashed his pearly whites.

"Does that mean we can be friends again?"

"If you want to, then I'm down." His smile showed he had no hard feelings about the past—problems that stemmed from feelings could sometimes be solved with time.

"All right. Then you better wait for me. Just until my lie stops being a lie."

Miori's words from back then must've been hoping for that.

After Shuto's apology, the awkward atmosphere cleared up—no, things returned to how they used to be. The mood became amicable, just as it had

been in our childhood, and we laughed together.

We took the bullet train from Takasaki Station. The three of us sat in a row, and our long journey began. We shared old stories and chatted about the time we'd spent apart. Shuto had gone to a different middle school than us and now attended Higashi High in Takasaki. He'd been skilled at soccer since elementary school and was part of his school's team even now. The three and a half hours on the train flew by in the blink of an eye.

"Hey, guys! Long time no see!" When we reached Shin-Osaka Station, Takuro ran up to us, vigorously waving hello. "Thanks for coming all the way here. I was surprised when you told me you were coming today."

His overall appearance hadn't changed much. However, he had grown horizontally. To put it bluntly, he'd gained *a lot* of weight.

"Shucks, I've been thinking about going on a diet." He smacked his belly and guffawed loudly.

He was a little chubby when we were kids, but I never thought he'd get this big...

"You've all changed quite a bit. Shuto looks like a real athlete, Miori's drop-dead gorgeous, and Natsuki... How do I put it? You're handsome, but more importantly, you look more confident. Man, you used to run after Miori all panicky in the past," Takuro said, affectionately reminiscing about our childhood.

Though his appearance hadn't changed drastically, he seemed calmer now. It only made sense that he would've matured during all the years we'd been apart like we had.

"So, what now? You guys haven't had lunch yet, right?" he asked.

"Yeah. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse. I'm down for anything! Let's eat," Shuto replied as he rubbed his stomach.

"Miori, what's the plan?" I asked, leaving the decision to her. Just as we used to, the three of us turned to her with expectant eyes.

"Don't you guys remember? We promised we'd eat yakiniku together when

we got older,” she said.

Taken aback by her unexpected declaration, I glanced at Shuto and Takuro. They didn’t seem to have any recollection of that either and shook their heads. So I stepped up to the plate for the three of us. “Who’d remember every single one of those stupid promises!”

“Huh?! Now I’m pissed! None of you remember?! Jerks! I’m so done with you guys!” She stomped off, her shoulders shaking with rage.

“Uh, where is she going?” I asked.

“Who knows. She probably thinks we’ll find a yakiniku restaurant if we wander around.” Shuto shrugged.

“Oh, I know a great place for yakiniku. Follow me,” Takuro said in an easygoing tone.

“That’s great and all, but we need to get Miori back here first.” Shuto ran after her, leaving me and Takuro behind.

We shared a moment of silence. People came and went, and amid the noisy hustle and bustle flying around us, Takuro was the first to speak. “I’m guessing the three of you didn’t hang out after I transferred schools.”

“That’s right. The last time I saw Shuto was our elementary school graduation,” I replied.

“We stopped hanging out just before I transferred, so I figured as much,” he said. “What about you and Miori?”

“Miori and I went to the same middle school. We didn’t talk much then, but we also ended up at the same high school, so we became friends again. A bunch happened, and we talked about wanting to get together with the old squad, if possible. And now we’re all here thanks to Miori’s bold initiative.” *A lot more happened than just that, but that should be enough for a summary.*

“I wanted to see you guys too. But things were so awkward when I transferred, and I didn’t know what you were all up to now, so I hesitated to reach out. Not to mention, we didn’t have phones back in elementary school, so it’s not like I could’ve casually contacted you guys without searching high and

low,” he said. “That’s why I was so happy to hear from you guys. Actually, I wanted to be the one doing the visiting, since all three of you are in Gunma, but I’m strapped for cash right now.”

“Miori’s the one who suddenly decided we’d travel to you, so don’t worry about that.”

Shuto and Miori returned somewhere in the middle of our conversation. He’d somehow managed to persuade her despite her sulking.

After that, we went to the yakiniku place Takuro recommended. We merrily chatted about the old days as we kept the grill filled with meat. Shuto and Takuro downed every last scrap. *The appetites of a chubster and an athlete are nothing to laugh at. Miori and I are eating quite a lot, but we’re no match for them.*

“...Anyway, I wanted you to sympathize with my feelings. I just got rejected and was close to crying, and all this girl cares about is whether I’ll stay friends with her!” Shuto said, grabbing a piece of beef with a pair of tongs.

There are some things you can talk about once enough time has passed.

“I... I said I’m sorry. How many times do I need to apologize? I didn’t really understand love back then,” Miori replied.

“She always says stuff like that, right?” Shuto turned to Takuro for backup.

He nodded in agreement. “Definitely.”

Shuto turned back to Miori. “Besides, you obviously loved Natsuki.”

“What?!” She went red as a tomato, speechless.

It was a timely subject for us. Her reaction caused the air to become tinged with awkwardness.

“Is that true? Miori’s been crushing on me since we were kids?” I asked.

“She never realized it, but I’m sure of it. Whatever she did, she always went to you first. I was there the whole time watching it happen—put yourself in my shoes. It sucked ass!”

“From my standpoint, I fully understand why Shuto would want to distance

himself,” Takuro said.

The two of them continued bobbing their heads at each other. I flicked my gaze over to Miori. Her face was extremely red. She was even tearing up.

“Guys, can you just give it to me straight? Are you two dating now?” Shuto asked, determined to hear the truth.

Well, we do go to the same high school, and we’re on good terms now. I see where the suspicion is coming from. “No, we’re not dating. Plus, I’ve got a girlfriend.”

“You’re kidding me! You’re telling me it’s not just Shuto, but Natsuki’s got a girl too? The whole world’s against me,” Takuro lamented, shoveling down more white rice.

“Ah, thought so. That song you dedicated to the girl you like at your school festival concert was for someone else, yeah? The lyrics didn’t sound like they were meant for Miori... Of course not,” Shuto said, fully convinced.

“Huh? What school festival concert? That sounds fun.” Curious, Takuro pounced on the subject.

Shuto recounted what he’d seen at our school festival. *I’m super embarrassed, so I wish he wouldn’t. I’m getting self-conscious about how much I tried to show off!*

“Natsuki, nice going. I’m jealous; you’re really living out your youth!” Takuro wore a wide smirk as he smacked my shoulders.

“Hey, show me a pic of your girlfriend,” Shuto said.

I reluctantly pulled out my phone, opened my photo gallery, and showed him a picture of Hikari and me.

“What?! She’s hot with a capital H!” he exclaimed.

“Unforgivable. Natsuki, I’m never letting this go.”

“T-Takuro, calm down. Looming over me with that huge bod of yours is scary even if you’re just joking!”

“But I’m surprised,” Shuto grumbled after our bantering. “I was so sure you

two would become an item.”

“Yeah, same here. Natsuki, didn’t you love Miori back?” Takuro asked.

“I guess... Thinking back on it now, probably. She was my first love, and I wasn’t really aware of it,” I answered.

“Then again, we were only in elementary school,” Takuro concluded.

Miori fidgeted uncomfortably next to me.

“That was so long ago. ’Course a puppy love like that wouldn’t last until now,” Shuto remarked.

“This isn’t a manga or a TV drama, after all. That wouldn’t be realistic. It’d actually be too overbearing if you carried those feelings all the way until now.”

Shuto and Takuro chuckled together.

Unable to hold back any longer, Miori, who’d been silent the whole time, spoke up. “He rejected me, so what?”

Their eyes went round with shock, and their mouths hung open.

“I’ve loved him since we were kids, but I didn’t realize until recently. It didn’t hit me until Natsuki got a girlfriend. Then I confessed how I felt, and he shot me down. Got a problem with that?! And by the way, this happened two days ago!” she shouted miserably. She sounded like she’d downed a beer.

It’s noisy inside yakiniku places, but I still wish she’d keep her volume just a teeeeeny bit lower.

The two boys suddenly snapped out of their petrification and clutched their stomachs as they burst into laughter.

“Ha ha ha! I see! So that’s what happened! Ha ha ha! I sensed something weird going on between you guys! Of course you’d feel awkward when you got rejected just the other day!” Takuro roared.

“Dude, how did you not end up with him when you were so close to him? Damn, you suck at romance!”

“Shut up. I know already,” Miori griped.

“Even if you did miss the right timing, why the hell did you confess when he

has a girlfriend? Of course it wouldn't go well. They started dating after the school festival, which means they're still madly in love!" Shuto reasoned all too logically.

"I wanted to get some proper closure and put an end to my feelings! I wanted to go back to being friends!" she yelled like a petulant child.

I feel awkward. Extremely. I'm right here. I have no flipping clue what to say!

"So, think you guys can be friends again?" Shuto asked in all seriousness.

"Urgh..." Miori groaned. "It's a work in progress."

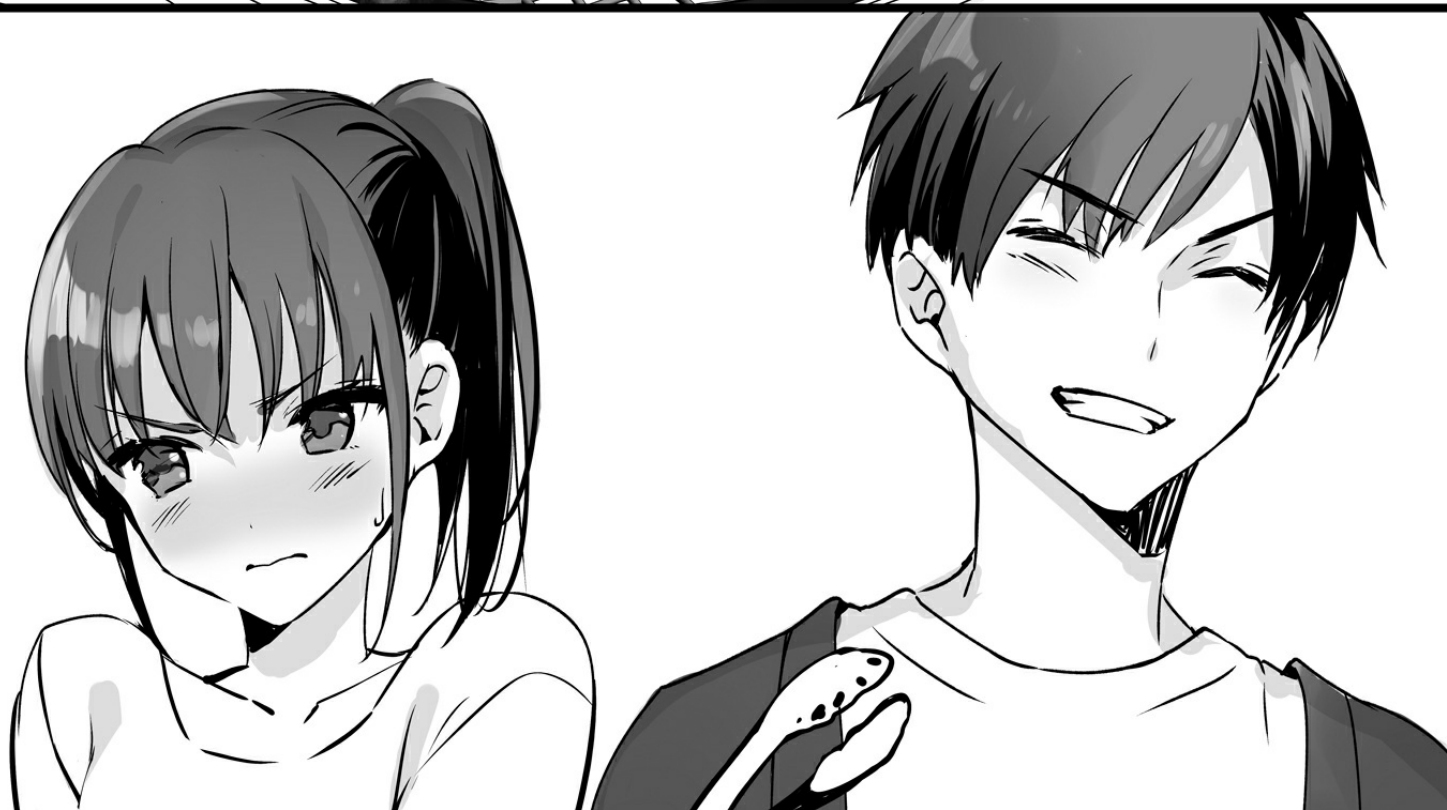
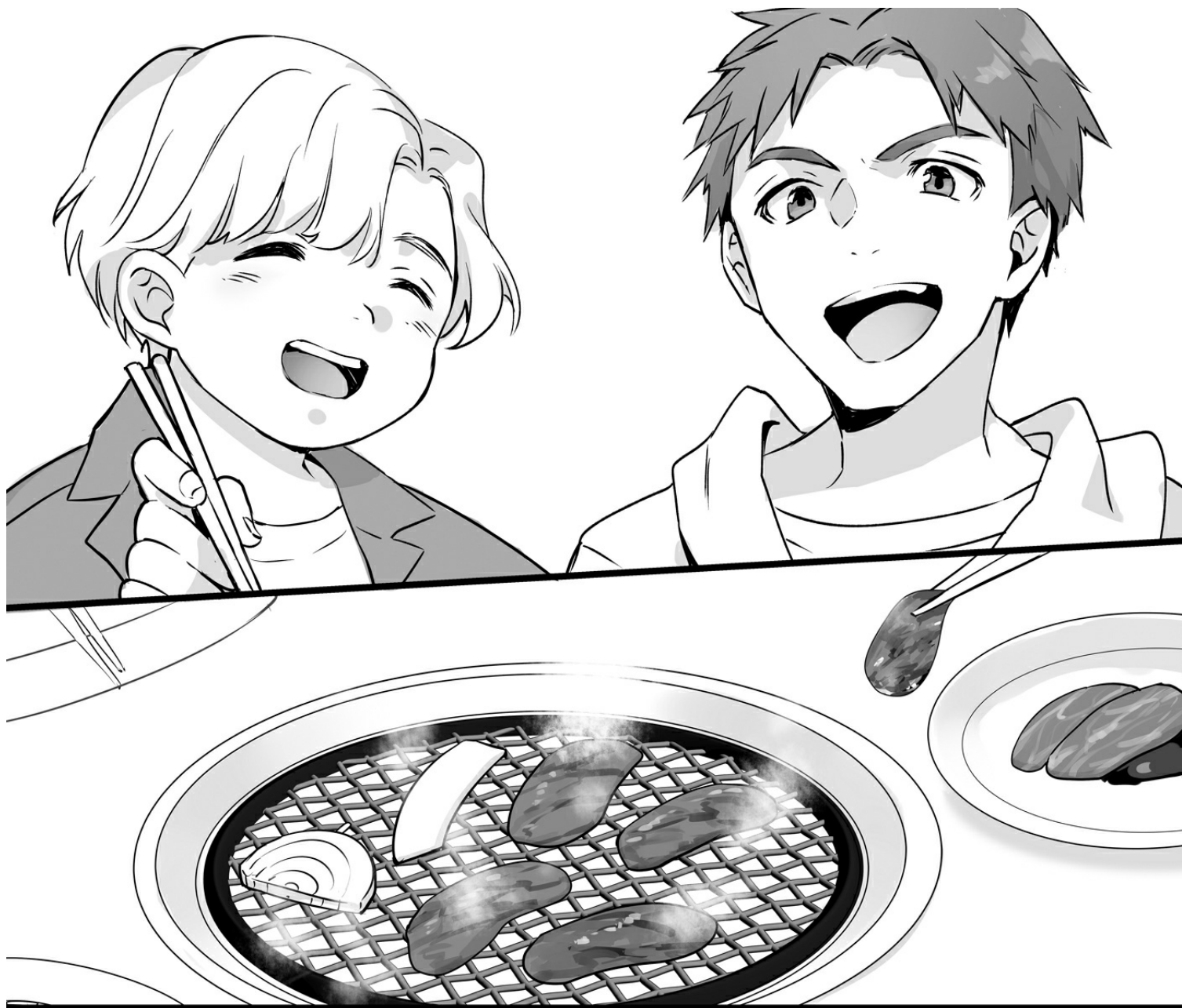
"Your answer doesn't exactly inspire confidence. Ah well, time will solve it. That's what happened to me."

"Really? If enough time passes, will these feelings disappear?" she asked him, apprehension coloring her face.

Takuro gazed at me with tepid eyes and mouthed, *"What a sinful man you are."*

Shut up. I get it! At least, I do now.

"They'll disappear if you guys stay apart from each other for a while, but that'd be rough since you go to the same school."



“Sorry. Keeping our distance isn’t on the table right now,” Miori said.

“Huh, really?” Shuto asked in surprise.

“Natsuki said he’s not going to stop being my friend...and he told me to do something about my feelings on my own.”

Shuto and Takuro shot me a look that screamed, “Dude...!”

I know I said some absurd stuff, but what else was I supposed to do? Being friends with Miori is directly related to fulfilling my Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan (egocentric).

“You fell for one savage guy,” Shuto said.

“Ha ha ha! But that sort of selfishness is just what I’d expect from Natsuki!” Takuro bellowed.

After we left the yakiniku restaurant, we found a random café and continued chatting there. We laughed together as though we were trying to reclaim the time we had lost.

Despite his appearances, Takuro attended a distinguished school that competed for best high school in Osaka. His belly had swelled this much due to all the stress from studying. His goal was to get into the University of Tokyo. “If I pass the exams, it’ll be easier for us to meet up,” he said with a laugh.

We each had our own paths. After this day came to an end, we would each walk towards our own futures. However, it would be nice if we could veer off that path every now and then and, just like we had today, renew our old friendships.

The time for farewells crept up on us quickly—our bullet train home drew nearer by the second. The three of us faced Takuro at the station. Unwilling to part, we were all quiet.

“Next time, I’ll go visit you guys,” Takuro said, dispelling the somber mood, and flashed his pearly whites. “Let’s meet up again and hang out, all four of us.”

“Yeah. Today was so out of nowhere that we didn’t get enough time. Let’s iron out a real plan next time,” Shuto said.

“We can go on a trip together or something,” I suggested.

Watching us discuss the future put a gentle smile on Miori’s face. “It’s a promise, then. We’ll definitely hang out one more time... No, we’re gonna hang out a lot more!”

With that, our former friendships were restored. The three of us boarded our bullet train home and passed the ride back listening to Shuto give us tips on romance. Apparently, he couldn’t overlook how clumsy Miori was when it came to love. When he learned that she had been the one feeding me romance advice, he spent a good bit of time laughing his head off until he settled into puzzlement.

“Listen, you, what did you even base your advice to Natsuki on?” he asked.

“On stuff I read from the internet or manga, or what I heard from friends...” Miori replied.

“You get it, don’t you, Shuto? She always bluffs and tries to show off,” I said.

“You knew that, and you still came crawling to me for help!”

“That’s ’cause I thought you’d at least know better than me!”

We chatted like that all the way until we reached Takasaki Station.

“Welp, see you guys next time. Miori, you better find a new love,” Shuto said.

“I was going to do that without you telling me to!”

He waved his hand in the air and left. I was happy that we were parting ways not with “goodbye,” but with “see you later.”

“Let’s head home too,” I said.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Today was a blast! The world looks vibrant. I’m sure this is what a rainbow-colored youth should be like... But I’m beat after a seven-hour round trip by bullet train. Let’s hurry home and hit the hay. I only recently recovered from a cold, after all.

It was already past 8 p.m. Though this was the evening of a national holiday, the train was quite empty. Miori absentmindedly gazed out the window. I didn’t

speaking either. Our train rocked all the way to our hometown. From the station, it was a ten-minute walk to our respective homes.

Miori, who was walking ahead, stopped and turned around to face me. "I'm going to swing by the convenience store. Let's split here." That was her way of drawing a line between us; even I could pick up on that much.

"Okay... See you tomorrow at school." I moved past her and went on my way.

"Natsuki!"

Hearing my name, I looked over my shoulder. Miori was smiling—it was the same smile that had lit up like the sun when she'd take my hands when we were kids.

"I'll find a new love. That might be Reita-kun or someone else, but I'll do everything I can to be happy, so... Next time I won't have any regrets."

That's reassuring to hear. I don't think I'll need to worry about her anymore.
"You got this, Miori. There are tons of guys out there better than me."

"That's right." She nodded and then shrugged. "You know, I feel like I've woken up. When I really think about it, why did I even fall for you? You're a good friend, but you're so undependable as a guy."

"Hey, no need to get realistic all of a sudden. My heart's made of glass!" I shot back quickly.

"Stuuupid!" She stuck her tongue out, and then her expression went calm. "I don't love you anymore," she asserted. Her tone carried so much authority that I believed her for more than a fleeting moment.

"Looks like I've got nothing to worry about, then. We can stay friends." We would stand by this lie until it was a lie no longer. If Miori was prepared to stick with it, then I would also continue being deceived, until the untruth came to an end.

"Yeah. We're going to be friends forever." She gave me a big wave with her hand. "See you."

I returned with a small wave of my own and turned away for good this time. I couldn't hear her footsteps. However, I walked all the way home without

looking back.

It was a bit warmer than usual today. The gentle breeze blew past my shoulders.



Final Chapter: Gray Winter

It dropped to freezing the next day, as though the warmth from yesterday had been an illusion. The weather forecast announced that winter had come. Starting today, the temperature would be in the single digits. I clad myself in a coat and scarf and arrived at school. I headed up to my classroom but found everyone gathered in the hallway for some odd reason.

“Hey, Natsuki,” Tatsuya called out when he saw me.

Miori uncomfortably stood in the center of the group with her head hanging down.

“What’re you guys up to?” I asked.

Nanase, who was in unusually high spirits, replied, “Motomiya-san gave us a very detailed breakdown of what happened. Isn’t that right?”

“Well, I worried you all a lot, so the least I could do is explain what happened... So, yes...”

“You’re acting weird. What kind of mood is this?” *Miori’s being excessively subservient.*

“Excuse my phrasing, but she just outed all the skeletons in her closet,” Serika said bluntly.

Hey, you could phrase things nicer, then! Just because you preface yourself with “excuse me” doesn’t mean you’ll be in the clear! Look, Miori’s about to keel over! Her mental health is in a fragile state!

“Miorin, you’re going to attend practice again starting today, right?” Uta’s mouth was curved up, but her eyes weren’t smiling.

“Y-Yes,” Miori responded timidly. “That’s the plan... I’m sorry...”

Dang, this is a bizarre sight.

“I think you should give all the girls on the basketball team a proper explanation too, but what do you want to do? Wakamura-senpai and the others

would gladly listen!” Uta said with a smile.

Boy, oh boy, can I picture that... Those upperclassmen will gleefully tease Miori until she drops. I thought this when we were all on the phone too, but Uta’s furious.

“Uta-chan, it’s time to forgive and forget,” Hikari said with a wry smile, trying to pacify her.

“But Miorin didn’t ask me for help at all. I went to her for all sorts of stuff, and I thought we were best friends, but she went and drove herself into a corner!” Uta complained with a pout. “Now I sort of understand why she couldn’t come to me for advice, though.” She sighed and then hugged Miori tightly, burying her head in Miori’s chest. “But I was so worried! Really!”

A gentle smile crept across Miori’s face, and she caressed Uta’s hair. “Sorry, Uta. I won’t do it again.”

“That goes for me too!” Hikari threw her arms around Miori from behind.

Miori sandwich. I’m jealous. Oops, my true feelings leaked a bit there! That looks suffocating, mm-hmm. I watched the heartwarming sight from a step away. I was aware that other students were also observing us. We were causing quite the commotion first thing in the morning, so naturally we would draw attention.

“Look, it’s Motomiya-san.”

“I’m glad she’s safe.”

I heard two girls make comments.

News of Miori’s disappearance had spread somewhat. After we found her, we’d wanted to keep the incident between our group, but we couldn’t completely suppress all the gossip, since the police had reached out to our homeroom teacher and the girls’ basketball coach.

Eh, that’s all resolved now, so the rumor will quiet down on its own soon. My optimism was quickly dashed by what I heard next, and I couldn’t believe my ears.

“I feel so bad for Motomiya-san.”

“Yeah. She went out with Shiratori-kun because he threatened her, right?”

I couldn’t process what they were saying.

“Apparently, she loved someone else, but he forced her to date him.”

“Makes sense: she didn’t look all that happy.”

They whispered to each other as they stared at Miori. It sounded like they were sympathizing with her and condemning Shiratori Reita at the same time.

“Man, I always thought that guy was kinda shady.”

“Same! It was way too suspicious how there wasn’t a single bad rumor about him, but now it all makes sense.”

Some boys from class one were joking with each other and laughed. By no means were there scores of people involved, but there were enough students talking about a similar rumor.

“Is it actually true? I didn’t think he was that kind of guy, though.”

“Check this out. This was getting passed around yesterday night. It’s messed up!”

Oh, is something trending on social media? Right when the thought occurred to me, my phone vibrated. It was a DM from Yamano.

Yamano: Look at this right now. There’s a post about Shiratori-senpai going viral

I clicked on the link she’d sent me, and it launched Minsta. The post was a video, with Reita clearly in it. Someone had secretly filmed it from the shadows, and it looked like he was in some sort of back alley. There was a group of rowdy-looking delinquents gathered in that narrow street, and for some reason, Reita sat right in the middle of them.

“Reita-san, what happened to your latest girl?”

“We broke up. We were only dating because I threatened her, anyway, so no regrets here.”

The video cut off several seconds after that conversation.

The person who had published the video commented, “Caught some nasty stuff on tape.” The post already had tons of other comments that were criticizing Reita. The fact that it had popped up yesterday night and blown up to this degree already made me feel like someone had a hand in this matter.

“That dumbass...” I recalled my conversation with Reita from two days ago. He obviously wasn’t being himself at the time. I’d been concerned about him on my way to school. It felt like we’d split up after a big argument, so I was contemplating how to reconcile with him. Nevertheless, I’d optimistically thought things would somehow turn out all right.

“Is it me, or is the mood around here weird?” Hikari said, taking stock of our surroundings.

“You’re right. Are they gawking at us? We’re not even doin’ anything.” Perplexed, Tatsuya furrowed his brow.

“I see what happened...” Serika’s expression twisted into a frown as she stared at her phone. She’d likely gotten the same message from Yamano.

“Guys, what’s wrong?” Miori looked confused, but I didn’t know how to respond.

The morning bell rang just then. *No time to explain now.* The students loitering around the hallway trickled into their classrooms, and we had no choice but to go with the flow. I took my seat. Our classroom was aflutter with more chatter than usual. Reita was nowhere to be seen; everyone’s attention was on his empty seat.

Our homeroom teacher entered the room. “We have a morning assembly today, but before that, I have an announcement.” Our teacher stood in front of the podium and enunciated each word with an impassive tone. “Shiratori-kun has been suspended for a week due to an infraction of violence.”

The teacher’s statement added credibility to the post I’d seen. It was the worst news I could possibly hear...

The cold had gradually become more and more severe, bringing winter along with it. My breath was white, and the wind was frigid. The leaves had fallen from the trees, leaving only the branches. Winter erased a myriad of colors, and

before I knew it, the world had transformed into a gray landscape.

Afterword

The season within the book and the actual publication season have finally overlapped.

Anyway, long time no see. I'm Amamiya Kazuki.

This volume was a story about Motomiya Miori. To be honest, the way her character would be handled wasn't set in stone at the beginning of the series, but I'd decided the direction I would take her by the fourth volume.

The sixth volume depicted regret and love. How did you find it? In it, we have a boy who wanted to redo his past that had ended up drab and gray, and a girl who wanted to return to her past that shone like a rainbow. I believe they are similar yet different wishes.

Moreover, the difference in attitude between Miori, who lives in a present contiguous to her past, and Natsuki, who came from the future by leaping through time, was difficult to bridge. He remembers his childhood days with her to be full of sunshine and rainbows precisely *because* he doesn't remember the minor details.

In the end, Natsuki is motivated by his past regrets.

"For the cover, I think Miori in the rain would be absolutely horrible, but also super great!" is what I suggested, which gave birth to this awful (awesome) cover. Miori, drenched by the rain, is so beautiful... So wonderful...

This time, I have a lot of space for the afterword. Honestly, I've slowly run out of things to talk about, but since I have the space, I'll go over my current status.

I always wish I could make a living off of creating stories. My main job is completely unrelated to writing, and I spend my days moonlighting as an author on the side, but that still means that about eighty percent of my day is taken up by my full-time position. I have so many tales that I want to write, and yet I don't have the time to do so. Since I'm on the topic, there's also plenty of games I want to play, manga and light novels I want to read, and anime I want

to watch... Anyway, I don't have enough time.

Lately, I feel terrified of wasting time. Because time is so limited, I want to be as efficient as possible when I use it. Though I feel like my days are fulfilling, I also feel like they are lacking in blank space. I think time that may seem to be wasted at a glance actually adds color to the prose in a novel. In a way, optimizing your life can also mean reducing your sensitivity. I find that sad.


To tell the truth, moonlighting as an author helps stabilize my income considerably. If I continue working like this, I doubt I'll have financial concerns in the future. However, whenever people ask me, "Are you okay doing that forever?" I'm not sure how to answer. I ask myself, "Isn't it about time I decide what path I want to go down?" Regardless of what I choose, I want to live without any regrets.

Now it's time for acknowledgments. To my manager, N-san, I made headway as though I had no deadlines again this time, and I'm truly, sincerely sorry about that... I'm always, always causing you trouble. Also, I'd like to thank Gin-san, the illustrator, for the marvelous art, as always. The cover was perfect and complete. I especially appreciate how it contrasts the cover of volume one...

I'd like to give an enormous thank-you to everyone involved in this novel's publication as well. It would be my pleasure as an author if this story resonated with you even a little bit.

Well then, that's all for now. I look forward to seeing you again in the next volume, or in another one of my series.

My life is filled with the desire to write teen rom-coms, isekai fantasy, and supernatural battles that take place in modern times.

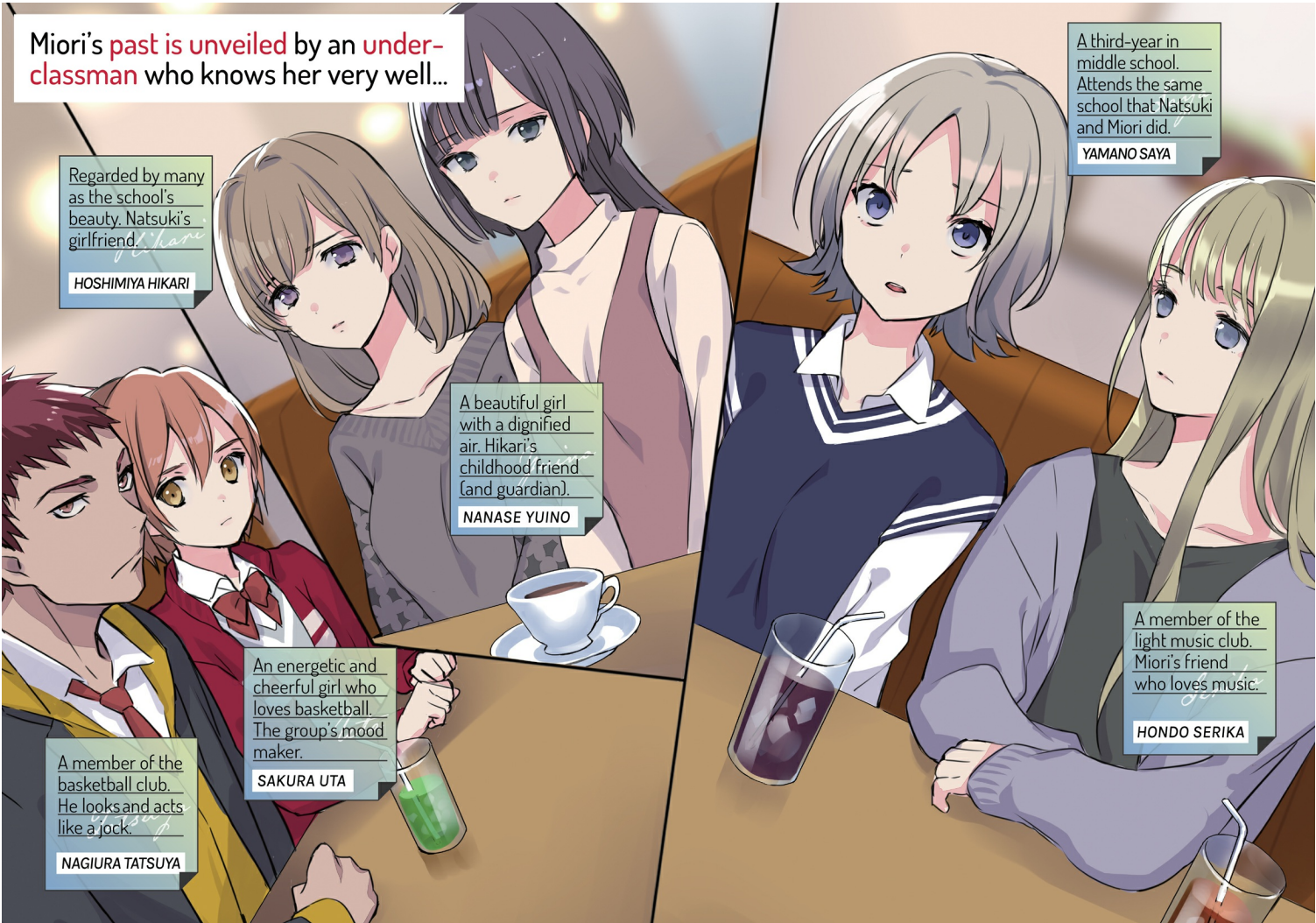


“Oh my. Weren’t
you trying not to
be possessive?”
Nanase questioned.

Haibara’s Teenage

NEW GAME+

“Touching is
forbidden! That
includes you,
Yuino-chan!”



Miori's past is unveiled by an under-classman who knows her very well...

Regarded by many as the school's beauty. Natsuki's girlfriend.

HOSHIMIYA HIKARI

A beautiful girl with a dignified air. Hikari's childhood friend (and guardian).

NANASE YUINO

An energetic and cheerful girl who loves basketball. The group's mood maker.

SAKURA UTA

A member of the basketball club. He looks and acts like a jock.

NAGIURA TATSUYA

A third-year in middle school. Attends the same school that Natsuki and Miori did.

YAMANO SAYA

A member of the light music club. Miori's friend who loves music.

HONDO SERIKA

Someone threw their arms around me from behind. I knew who it was just by his voice. He was the person I didn't want to see most of all right now. But at the same time, he was also the one I did want to see most of all.



“Miori!”

Bonus Short Story

A Summer Vacation Moment with Motomiya Miori

The end of summer vacation was nearing. Miori had way too much time on her hands recently and often hung out at my house.

My parents know that we were close as kids, so they welcome her with open arms. Plus Namika is ecstatic whenever Miori comes over, but she also knows that Hikari came over only a short while ago, so Namika's been giving me the cold shoulder. I already explained to her that Miori and I aren't like that, though...

I poured us some barley tea and returned to my room. Miori sat on a floor cushion with her back leaned against my bed. She was reading a long-running action manga that she'd picked out from my bookshelf, the same as always.

"Is it interesting?"

"Yeah. Action manga is where it's at—it gets me pumped up." Miori had been absorbed in that series since yesterday, and she'd read around twenty volumes in two days. "How long have you been following this manga?"

"Uhhh, since second year of middle school. That's around when I got hooked on manga and started collecting them."

"I see. So that's when you turned into an otaku."

"Well, I got into manga, light novels, and anime too... So it just sorta happened."

It felt like we'd returned to how things used to be, and that made for a good time.

"I wonder if it would've been any fun if we'd talked back then," Miori said nonchalantly.

Hearing that made me suddenly overcome with guilt. *I feel sorta bad...* "Who

knows. You might've gagged, called me a gross otaku, and pulled away." The mood had taken an unfortunate, gloomy turn, so I cracked a joke.

She giggled. "True. I had zero interest in indoor hobbies back then."

"I know, right. You're the same old brat commander gallivanting about outside."

"Can you quit calling me brat commander? How can you say that to such a cute girl!"

"Meh, people who don't know what you're actually like would just call me a liar."

"Are you telling old stories about me to people who don't even know me?! Hey, you better stop that!"

"Uh, but they ask me all the time. The boys want to hear all about you."

Puzzled, Miori tilted her head. "Why?"

She's thickheaded about this sort of stuff, despite knowing she's cute. "Isn't it 'cause they want to get to know you better?"

She blinked at me. "O-Oh, gotcha," she mumbled. "Wait, they're asking *you*?"

"Yeah, because it's common knowledge that you and I are childhood friends. They're always telling me how jealous they are: 'Can't believe you've got a cute childhood friend like you're living in a manga, you bastard...' You know, stuff like that." *Well, reality isn't gonna go like a rom-com.*

"'A cute childhood friend,' huh... Do you think that too?"

"Uh, well, popular opinion dictates that you look nice on the outside."

"I don't mean popular opinion. I want to know what *you* think." Miori pushed her face up to mine.

Don't come near me! Stop it! If you're this close to me, I'll have to acknowledge it—that you're actually a cute girl. Not to mention that you look a little upset, so I'm gonna get the wrong idea. I know it could never, ever happen, but I'll end up fantasizing that it will! My heart raced.

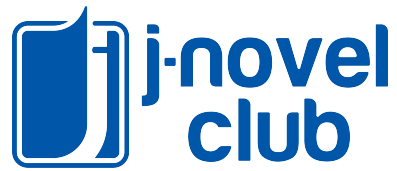
"Do you have a problem with it if I *do* agree with them?" I managed to wring

out, keeping my eyes averted.

Miori hastily pulled away for some reason and threw herself on my bed without asking permission. *Why're you clamming up now?! I'm the one who's embarrassed here!* I shot her a spiteful scowl. I couldn't see her expression since she was facing the wall, but her ears were bright red. Evidently, she was feeling shy.

"Don't ask for my opinion if you're going to get flustered."

"Shut up, Natsuki. How dare you get sassy with me!"



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Haibara's Teenage New Game+ Volume 6

by Kazuki Amamiya

Translated by Esther Sun Edited by Casey Pritt

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