

1st
Date

You Were
Experienced,

I Was Not:

OUR DATING STORY

Makiko
Nagaoka

Artist / magako



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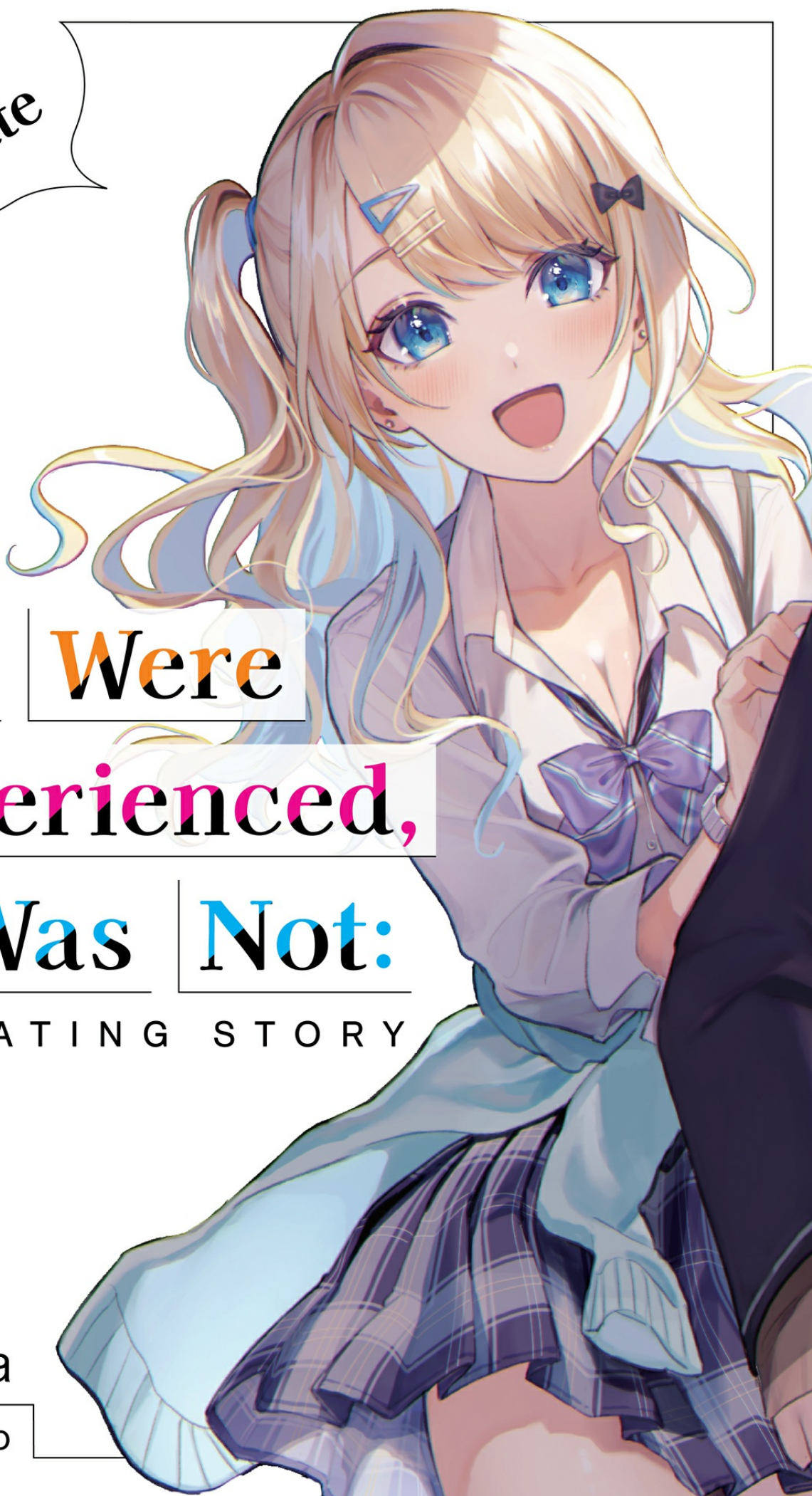


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Prologue

Shirakawa Runa was the most beautiful girl in my grade.

She had been the talk of the school since we were freshmen, and even a gloomy guy like me became conscious of her early on after hearing people talk about “the prettiest freshman.” That said, such titles were only used for convenience, as it’s not like anybody kept track of the looks of every girl around, so there was a good chance she wasn’t actually the prettiest girl at my school.

Furthermore, there were rumors about Shirakawa-san that made guys lust after her. People said she was a slut who loved sex so much that she swapped boyfriends like she changed her socks as she couldn’t be satisfied with just one. I’d heard she would stay with any one boyfriend for two or three months at the most before moving on. They also said her taste in guys was all over the place—some of her boyfriends were older than her while others were the same age, some were jocks while others were nerds, and so on.

Because of that, there was no shortage of guys excitedly thinking they had a shot with her. Whenever they heard she was “available,” even the dorks would start crowding around her like a pack of hyenas. It was so ludicrous to me.

That’s right—I knew my place. I never thought I could ever go out with her. It was enough for me to just feast my eyes on her every now and then. To me, she was like the sun—so bright you couldn’t look at her directly. If a gloomy guy like me were to get too close to her, I would surely turn to ash before I even had the chance to scream.

The brighter the sun shone, the darker the shadows it cast. The more radiant and beautiful Shirakawa-san looked, the more I became conscious of my own gloominess. How could I possibly ever talk to her?

I figured a guy like me should keep his longing for her to himself. That would be the best way for me to live a peaceful school life.

Chapter 1

The first thought I had when I began my second year of high school was, *“Hell yeah, I’m in the same class as Shirakawa-san now!”*

She was incredibly cute. If you asked me, she was even *more* beautiful than those teen actresses you saw on TV.

Large striking eyes; long eyelashes; a straight nose with small nostrils; lovely, upturned lips. All the elements of her petite face were in perfect harmony with one another.

Her figure was gorgeous too, and people mistook her for a model from a distance. It was amazing, let me tell you. That said, she wasn’t super skinny like a real model—she had moderately voluptuous thighs under her short skirt, and her ample bosom peeked out of her blouse as she always had the top two or so buttons unfastened. Gyarū like her—girls adhering to a nonconformist, girly-glam Japanese fashion style—weren’t really my type, but even so, that long, dirty-blond hair of hers in that loose, wavy style emphasized her sexiness in my eyes. It was something I didn’t get from other gyarū.

“If only I could go out with her...”

“If only I could go on a date with her...”

I think countless guys in my school fantasized about things like that. Some of them acted on their desires, seeing their place in the same class as her as a godsend and immediately starting to hang around her.

I, however, rigidly stuck to my ways. Going after her would be too pathetic for a guy like me, somebody she’d never even give the time of day. Shirakawa-san and I might have been in the same classroom, but there was an invisible wall between us thicker than an acrylic plate. A naturally occurring social distance, and one that would never shrink, no matter what.

With that in mind, I simply watched her from afar.

But then, without any warning, *that* day came.

It was just a few days after I ended up in the same class as her. We were in homeroom at the end of the school day when Shirakawa-san turned in a form that we'd all been given previously. If I remember correctly, it concerned a parent-teacher conference. We were supposed to turn it in the day before, and the students who'd forgotten to do so were getting summoned to the front of the classroom, one by one.

Since my name is Kashima Ryuto, and because our seats had been assigned in alphabetical order, mine was in the front row next to the teacher's desk.

It happened when I followed Shirakawa-san with my eyes, for no particular reason, as she walked up from the back of the classroom with her form in hand.

"Shirakawa-san, you forgot to write your name," the teacher said, gently giving the form back to her.

"Oh, you're right," she replied, noticing it herself. She then turned around, causing her short skirt to flutter.

And then I was caught off guard and couldn't look away in time before she spoke to me.

"Hey, can I borrow your pencil for a sec?"

It felt like my heart was going to leap out of my throat.

"Oh! Uh, sure..." was all I could muster in reply. I removed a mechanical pencil from my pencil case and handed it to her. While my voice sounded weird, I just barely managed to keep my hands from shaking as I moved.



Promptly taking the pencil, Shirakawa-san bent toward me. I was startled by the sight. I hadn't expected her to put her form on my desk to write on it. My heart pounded, and I was covered in sweat, but I was elated to have the opportunity to see her at such close range. Her long, downcast eyelashes were dazzling up close. I wanted to peek at her cleavage too, but even though she was bending over, the inopportune angle meant her blouse was in the way of that tantalizing sight.

But man, she was such a sunny, radiant girl. Too sunny, really. If I were her, I couldn't imagine prioritizing efficiency like this and casually borrowing a pencil from a classmate of the opposite sex whom I'd never talked to before—someone whose name I probably didn't even know. I wouldn't have done it even if my own seat were a hundred meters away. And I doubted I could ever understand such a mentality, be it in my next life or any of the following ones.

Through my observations of Shirakawa-san, I had noticed a lot of things like that about her. Despite the fact that she was one of the chosen ones who was always surrounded by crowds of cool friends, she would still talk casually to students who stayed out of the spotlight if the opportunity arose. Watching from a distance, I'd seen that happen several times during my time as a freshman.

Was she capable of such things because she was a genuinely sunny person? Perhaps it meant she didn't need to be like those people who were preoccupied with looking popular. She didn't *have* to avoid the gloomier types or worry about how people saw her, because she was so undeniably popular.

As I sat there, freaking out at her unexpected closeness and having all those thoughts run through my head, Shirakawa-san finished writing.

She looked up at me. "Thanks!"

That radiant, gorgeous smile. The lingering warmth on the pencil she gave back to me. They were powerful stimulants.

The encounter lasted half a minute at most, but it was enough to make me fall in love with her.

I want you to imagine it: a beauty like the ones you see on posters saying “Thanks!” with a smile to a guy. And I’d like you to take into account the fact that guy’s a gloomy sixteen-year-old who’s gone that same number of years without a girlfriend, but is highly interested in the opposite sex nonetheless. How could he *not* fall in love?

So yes, on that day, I had fallen in love with Shirakawa-san. While I’d admired her before that, I became even more conscious of her after that incident. Of course, that didn’t mean I wanted to actually go out with her. While I *was* at the age when a guy’s imagination ran wild at every opportunity, I wasn’t about to get *that* far ahead of myself, you know?

All I could maybe hope for was just a little bit of interaction. Like if she asked me to lend her something again at some point that year, while we were in the same class.

I went about my uneventful school life with just the hope for such a small happiness, and time went on without any notable opportunities to get close to Shirakawa-san until the middle of the first term of the year.

One day during lunch break, I was eating with my two friends in a corner of the classroom.

Even I had a few friends, though they were all guys. But if you were to ask me what friends I had other than those two, it would be a little hard for me to answer.

One of the two in front of me yawned. “Man, I can barely stay awake. Didn’t get much sleep last night,” he said as he munched on side dishes from his lunch. He was my classmate, Ijichi Yusuke, aka Icchi.

We’d been in the same class since our freshman days, and we’d become friends thanks to a shared interest. He lived the unhealthy life of a video game addict. He was also a little on the plump side, and given his build and his large height, Icchi’s appearance gave him a pretty big presence. Said presence, however, didn’t stop him from being depressingly gloomy—not that I was one to talk either. Incidentally, he had a face like a sumo wrestler’s, particularly the

former yokozuna Asashoryu.

“KEN was streaming in the middle of the night and I just couldn’t stop myself from watching,” Icchi continued. “After that, I was gaming until it started getting bright outside.”

The other guy eating from his lunch box beside me raised his head at those words.

“I didn’t get much sleep because of him either. Got woken up by a Twitter notification real early when he was looking for people to play with,” the second guy said. “I thought it was a rare opportunity and went for it, but the session was full, and I couldn’t join... I was frustrated, so I ended up playing with randoms until it was time to go to school.”

He was a guy from the next class over, Nishina Ren, aka Nisshi. We’d been in different classes the previous year too, but when Icchi had heard there was a guy into the same things as us, he’d reached out to Nisshi, and the three of us had been eating lunch together ever since.

If you only looked at his face, you might think that Nisshi was one of the sunny types, although his soft, round eyes and his baby face made him look more like a middle schooler. Also, in contrast to Icchi, he had a pretty small build.

As for me, I was sort of the middle ground between them—a guy with a medium height, a medium build, and a pretty generic face.

“Wow, guys. You’re amazing. I can barely keep up with his videos,” I said, speaking from the heart, and closed the lid of my now-empty lunch box.

Our shared interest was gaming—or more accurately, the popular YouTuber KEN. All three of us were fans.

KEN was a former pro gamer who uploaded gameplay videos of various types of games to his channel every day. He had become popular thanks to his high skill level and his lighthearted, humorous disposition. By this point, his constantly updated YouTube channel had over a million subscribers and counting.

His zealous fans were referred to as “KEN Kids.” KEN would personally reach

out to the best gamers among them to play together sometimes in his videos. That was a secret goal of both Icchi and Nisshi, and they kept working on improving their skill every day.

I, on the other hand, was a completely passive fan who only watched the four or five videos KEN uploaded per day. I'd leave comments on his videos too, and before I realized it, two or three hours would have already passed—it was a pretty good way of killing time. On the weekends, sometimes I'd play online with Icchi and Nisshi, and we'd chat, but since I couldn't play nearly as well as KEN, it was more fun for me to just watch his videos.

Still, there was something nice about being a passive fan. There was no need to get too deep into it, so you could enjoy the content while living your life at your own pace.

"Oh yeah, we should be getting results for midterms soon..." muttered Nisshi.

Icchi's face went stiff. "Don't bring that up, dude! I did horribly on those. Why did KEN have to recruit new active Kids when we had tests at school...?"

"I know, right? I worked so hard for it, and he *still* didn't let me join when I applied," replied Nisshi with a melancholic look. He sighed.

"What about you, Kasshi? How did you do on the tests?"

"Huh?" I said.

Suddenly, my friends' attention shifted to me. That's right—those two called me Kasshi.

"Well... I'm not confident I did well either. They were the first tests since we got new teachers, so they focused on different things from usual."

The three of us had grades that weren't all that bad. We were all probably in the top third of the cohort in terms of academic performance. This had been my second-choice high school, so as far as I was concerned, I was doing well enough academically.

"Really?! You mean it?! Don't go betraying us now!" exclaimed Icchi.

"Y-Yeah... Don't worry about it," I replied.

However, it seemed like the two of them had done really badly on these

particular tests. It wasn't my problem, but I was a little worried about them.

"This is bad, dude. My parents are gonna chew me out and tell me to quit gaming if my grades get any worse!" whined Icchi.

"Same here, man..." added Nisshi. "They've threatened to cancel my phone plan if I did poorly on the tests."

Icchi firmly grabbed his hand. "You too, yeah?! We're pals, right?!"

"That's right," replied Nisshi. "So how about this—out of us three, the guy with the best grades has to do anything the guy with the worst grades says."

"Why?!" I retorted, not expecting my complaint to do much.

I didn't think too much of it at the time and couldn't find it in me to put more effort into vetoing Nisshi's absurd proposal. Ultimately, I more or less accepted it.

The following week, we had our test results from every subject back. We were on lunch break.

"It's over... This is it for me..." Icchi lamented. In his hands sat his English test. A number was written on it in red marker—18.

Since he'd earned such a low grade, it was to be expected he had the lowest aggregate score in our group. And while Nisshi hadn't scored quite as badly, it was still terrible and below his usual levels. In the end, since I'd performed pretty much the same as usual, I'd ended up with the highest score out of the three of us.

"Cheer up, Icchi..." I told him. "I'm sure your mom will let you keep gaming if you promise to do better on finals. Right, Nisshi?"

Nisshi didn't reply and instead stood there, his face pale. He had a dazed look in his eyes. It seemed to me that my friends' parents must've scolded them pretty badly on a regular basis.

"Come on, guys... It's gonna be fine..." I continued, trying to console them.

Suddenly, Icchi grabbed my arms firmly. "Hey, you remember our agreement,

right?” he asked. His eyes were vacant and creepy like he was some kind of zombie.

“Huh...?”

“We all agreed the guy with the best results would do anything the guy with the worst results said.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess so...” I replied.

“In that case, Kasshi, I order you to confess to the girl you like.”

“What?!”

My involuntary shout in response to the absurd order momentarily drew the dreaded gazes of my classmates. I shuddered.

“Wh-Why? Why would you ask for something like that?” I stammered. “You could ask me to buy you lunch or be your errand boy for a day, that kind of thing. There are so many things you could make me do that would be beneficial to—”

“Dude, shut up! I’m at rock bottom now, okay?! So I’m gonna make *you* hit rock bottom as well!” yelled Icchi. “You’re as much of a gloomy guy as I am, and guys like us would only get shot down hard if we confessed to a girl! So go on ahead and fall down to where I am right now!”

“What the hell, man? That’s just horrible!”

I mean, I *did* think it would turn out the way he said, but having a good friend say it to my face was too depressing. I felt like crying.

“What the hell kind of order is that?! Look...”

“It’s fine, Kasshi,” said Nisshi, placing his hand on my shoulder as I began to protest. “I’ll pick up the pieces. It’s the least I can do.” He had a smile on his face that looked a bit too normal.

It was good that he had recovered so swiftly, unlike my other friend, but his face practically had the words “serves you right” written all over it.

“How can you guys be such jerks?!” I said. “You know it’s *your* fault you two did poorly, right?!”

“Yikes, dude! Showing your true colors, are you now?!” exclaimed Nisshi.

“This isn’t what we agreed upon, man! You promised! Aren’t we friends?!” Icchi firmly added, leaving me unable to think of what to say back.

I *had* promised them that. And we *were* friends. In fact, had these two not become my friends, I couldn’t imagine what my school life would’ve been like right about now. I might’ve been going to the bathroom during class breaks without any real need and counting the wrinkles on my hands while waiting for the next class to start...

It was thanks to Icchi and Nisshi that I was spared from such a fate. And now, in this very moment, they had their gazes fixed on me, as though our friendship were at stake...

“Fine!” I said. “I’ll go confess if that’s what you guys want!”

Goodbye, my faint love.

And that was how I ended up having to confess to the girl I liked—namely, to Shirakawa-san.

That being said, the mere idea of a guy like me confessing to the most beautiful girl in my year—or perhaps the whole school—had my knees knocking together.

Still...when I thought about it, no matter how much and how long I loved her, there wasn’t a chance in hell I could ever actually go out with her. In fact, if Lady Luck turned her back on me and Shirakawa-san ended up dating one of my classmates, I might’ve had to endure the sight of the two of them making out right in front of me or some other, similar torture.

Think of it this way: it was better to have her properly reject me before that happened. Then, I could enjoy the rest of my school days sublimating my unrequited love for her.

That was how I desperately psyched myself up in order to avoid losing heart and breaking the agreement I’d made with my friends.

Even if she rejected me, it wasn’t like my reputation would take a big hit from

that. Considering Shirakawa-san's personality, I couldn't imagine her going around telling all her friends how funny it was that a gloomy guy like me had confessed to her. She must've been used to guys approaching her like that. I figured she'd have completely forgotten about me by the next day too.

The Japanese saying "kinen juken" came to mind. It refers to when someone takes a difficult entrance exam for a school that's way, way out of their league, with no real hope of passing. Since there's no chance, you just do it for the memories.

To me, Shirakawa-san was like an elite school I dreamed of getting into but never could. I felt like it wasn't so bad to take her entrance exam for the purpose of making memories. If not for this situation, I was sure I'd never have decided to confess to her at all. That was how I reasoned with myself as I desperately braced myself for what was to come.

Okay. Yeah. Sure, let's give it a shot.

I wrote a message on a piece of loose-leaf paper during class. My hands trembled as I did.

That day, after classes, I prepared myself for my confession. I felt like I would get discouraged if I put it off. If I had to go through something unpleasant at some point, I wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. And it wasn't like it would be the end of the world if she rejected me. I would just go home and heal myself by watching KEN's new videos or something.

Calming myself with that, I slipped the note I had written into Shirakawa-san's shoe cubby after the day's classes were over.

There is something I must speak with you about. Once you have had the opportunity to see this note, please visit the staff parking lot behind the school.

2-A Kashima Ryuto

I wrote my name on the note—I thought she'd be creeped out if it was anonymous and wouldn't come. And I noted my class because if there was only the name, she could go, like, *"Who's this guy? I don't know him, so I'm not*

going.” So, I figured it would be easier to get her to show up if she instead thought, *“Dunno who this is, but it looks like he’s in my class, so I guess he wants something from me.”*

“What?! Dude, the girl you like is Shirakawa-san?!” exclaimed Icchi from behind me. He’d seen the name on the shoe box and was freaking out. “Of all people...”

“You *do* realize there’s such a thing as too much ambition, right?!” added Nisshi, just as shocked.

Seeing them react like that, I once again realized just how crazy this was, and my knees started shaking. If I could, I would just take the note back and leave...but I didn’t want to be seen as a guy who couldn’t even keep a promise to his friends.

Calm down, buddy. Calm down, I told myself. For the time being, I had to focus on my mission—professing my love. That was all I needed to think about.

Taking a deep breath and encouraging myself for the umpteenth time, I headed off for my destination.

The staff parking lot behind the school was, to my knowledge, the least visited place on the school’s grounds. At this time of day, when classes had just ended and students were busy with club activities, there weren’t any teachers coming here to drive home yet.

There were at least ten cars, all parked in a line. I stood there all alone, waiting for Shirakawa-san in silence. Icchi and Kasshi were supposed to be hiding behind one of the cars, watching from a distance.

It took some time for Shirakawa-san to show up. A girl like her, someone who lived a fulfilling offline life, never left the classroom before me when school was over. She was always busy chatting with her friends at that point. I had no idea how long it would take her to see my note in her shoe box.

I probably waited for twenty or thirty minutes. When she finally appeared from around the corner of the school, I was relieved, but it felt more demotivating than anything else. By that point, I was prepared for the possibility she’d never show, and I already felt a sense of accomplishment of

sorts, despite my confession still being ahead of me.

As she looked around and saw that nobody else was there, Shirakawa-san approached me.

“Did you write this?” she asked, lifting a white piece of paper to the side of her head—the very note I’d left for her.

“Y-Yes, that is correct,” I replied with a trembling voice.

“Hee hee.”

She laughed at me! The thought of it made my face burn with shame.

“Why’re you being so formal?” she asked. “Aren’t we in the same class? We’re the same age and all.”

However, it didn’t seem like she was making fun of me. It was more like she genuinely found my choice of words funny, rather than my wavering voice.

Although I was hit with slight relief, at the same time, I was saddened by the fact she really didn’t know who I was, even though I’d assumed as much. It was still mentally draining to take on challenges you knew you had no hopes of beating, even if you came prepared for them.

“Y-Yeah, we are,” I replied more casually for now, per her suggestion.

Shirakawa-san drew closer and stopped about two meters in front of me. “So...what’d you wanna talk about?”

She spoke in that clear voice of hers that revealed her good nature—she didn’t seem to find it creepy in the slightest to be called out here by some gloomy guy.

Ah, Shirakawa-san... I was too nervous to take a good look at her, but I was sure she looked unbelievably lovely, even at this moment. *Shirakawa-san, I really...*

Say it. I have to. If I just stand here looking at my feet and never saying a thing, even the good-natured Shirakawa-san will run out of patience.

With that in mind, I braced myself for the worst and raised my head. For a moment, I was dumbfounded by the sight of Shirakawa-san gazing straight at

me, my heart struck by her unbelievable beauty.

I opened my mouth, but I struggled to get the words out.

“I li...li-li-li...!”

Oh man... How could I mess up my confession so bad?! Still, since I'd come this far, there was no choice but to get it out there.

“I li-like you!”

Now I've done it. Man, I'm such a creep... So gloomy...

I hated myself so much. I wished the concrete under my feet would open up and swallow me to get me out of there.

“Huh?” she asked. ““Lilacs for you' ...?”



Shirakawa-san stared at me, her eyebrows knit. Then, as she glanced at the note in her hand, her frown only deepened.

Once again I realized how beautiful she was. Given her gyaru-like appearance, she was probably wearing makeup, but those charming shadows beneath her eyes and the lines going from her nose to her chin couldn't be faked with cosmetics.

Since I'd completely screwed up my confession, I felt like I couldn't bring any more shame to myself than I already had. Somehow, that gave me enough composure to look at her without worry. I stood there, anticipating my upcoming rejection.

"You have lilacs for me?" she asked me with a stern look on her face.

"What?"

I don't remember bringing lilacs... And then it hit me—she had taken my disgraceful confession as something else.

"No, I mean... I...like you..."

That time, I managed to say it properly, though haltingly. Perhaps it was easier now since I'd already failed. I didn't have anything to lose anymore.

At that, Shirakawa-san opened her eyes wide.

"Oh... That's what you meant," she said after a moment's pause.

Shirakawa-san looked away from me, seeming troubled. She was probably wondering how to reject a guy she didn't know at all.

"Why?" she then asked.

That question of hers must've come from her concern for me—something to soften the blow for what was to come.

"Huh...?"

"Why d'you like me?"

I hadn't expected her to ask something like that, so I had to think about it quickly. *What does she mean "why"? Isn't that obvious?*

“Because you’re...cute...” I replied, letting my voice trail off. I was afraid it would waver again.

Still... It didn’t matter how many mistakes I made here—she’d only reject me this once. Thinking of it that way made this situation a little easier for me.

Shirakawa-san remained silent for a moment, blinking at me. Her cheeks turned slightly pink, and she cast her eyes downward in apparent embarrassment.

“Huh...” she said at last.

That utterance seemed to be her way of masking her awkwardness. But when she looked at me again, she said something crazy.

“So, you wanna go out with me? I don’t have anyone right now.”

At first, I couldn’t understand what I’d just heard.

“Wanna,” “go,” “out”? “Don’t,” “have,” “anyone”? Go out? That kind of going out? With Shirakawa-san? Who? She can’t possibly be talking about me...right?!”

“Whaaat?!” I shrieked.

It felt like my knees might give out. I initially thought she was making fun of me, but that would’ve been way too terrible for her to do.

“Hey, whatcha getting all surprised about?” she asked. “You’re the one who confessed to me!”

Seeing me freak out like that, Shirakawa-san laughed. Was she being serious? Or was she just enjoying my reactions? I couldn’t understand what she was thinking.

“So, what’s it gonna be?” she then asked, putting on a serious look and taking a step toward me. “We gonna go out or what?”

Shirakawa-san looked at me again with those upturned eyes. It was so incredibly cute that I felt like my heart would stop.

How had it come to this? I hadn’t expected things to go this way at all. I

couldn't understand why, but I was about to get absurdly lucky. As a quiet, gloomy guy with no redeeming qualities, and whose only hobby was watching a gaming YouTuber, I didn't have the nerve to easily pass up this stroke of fortune.

Maybe she was teasing me. Or maybe it was all a dream. But it only made my answer even more clear.

"Yes..." I said, my face burning up.

"A'ight, then!" she replied with a satisfied smile.

It was adorable. But her cuteness wasn't limited to her smile, of course. Having Shirakawa-san so close to me like this, and smiling at me, I had to wonder if I was playing some kind of VR game. If this was a dream, I never wanted to wake up from it.

"Okay then. Let's go home together!" proposed Shirakawa-san. "I told my friends I had stuff to do, so we said our goodbyes already."

With that, the two of us started walking toward the school's back gate. As we crossed the parking lot, I spotted Icchi and Nisshi crouching behind a car and looking like speechless, frozen corpses. Apparently this *wasn't* some prank they'd set up for me.

What is this...? What's going on?! This isn't a dream, right?! I really am walking side by side with Shirakawa-san... Right?! How did things come to this? Was she serious about us going out?!

As my heart raced, I stayed silent. My legs moved on their own.

Shirakawa-san, meanwhile, was staring at the note I'd left in her shoe cubby. "How d'you read the kanji in your name?" she asked. "Kuwashima?"

"K-Kashima. Kashima Ryuto."

"Ryuto, eh? What a cool name!"

Shirakawa-san's eyes sparkled as she smiled. My pulse had been on the rise for some time now, and that smile and the word "cool" accelerated it even further.

Calm down, Ryuto. Calm down.

I couldn't properly talk to her if I was too ecstatic. She was totally going to dump me right away. I could practically see her saying "*I was kidding. Did you really think I'd go out with you?*" and laughing at me in just a few minutes' time.

That was what I told myself, trying to regain some presence of mind.

"Hey, Ryuto," began Shirakawa-san innocently. "Have we ever talked before?"

"Huh?! Umm... Uhh..."

For a moment, I considered telling her about that time I'd lent her my pencil, but that had been too trivial. I was worried she might be creeped out by the fact I viewed such an event as us *talking*.

"No, not really..." I said.

"Hmm, I see."

I had a question of my own that just wouldn't leave my mind.

"So, uh, Shirakawa-san... Why did you...offer to go out with me?"

After telling myself all those things to try to calm down, I really couldn't believe what was happening. Despite my rapid pulse, I could totally see our "going out" simply being us leaving the school grounds for the day. In fact, that possibility felt the most likely.

To be honest, I had a previous traumatic experience with a love confession.

When I'd been in my first year of middle school, an extremely cute girl had sat beside me in class. She'd talk to me with a smile time and time again, touch me often, and when I let her copy my homework, would blush and whisper things like "I think I like sweet guys like you."

Despite being the same gloomy guy I am now, I had still gotten ahead of myself. I had become convinced it hadn't been just my imagination, and she actually had a thing for me. In the end, I had mustered up a lifetime's worth of courage and confessed to her.

To my amazement, she'd completely shot me down. "I do think of you as a good friend, Kashima-kun..." Her troubled face as she muttered those words

was still burned into my retinas.

That overwhelmingly bitter experience had taught me something: girls, especially cute and popular girls, were not to be trusted.

In the first place, the fact they were popular made all the guys think “*Even I might stand a chance.*” Basically, these girls led you on, and if you assumed you were special to them, you’d end up getting hurt.

It hadn’t taken me much thought to realize there’d be no reason whatsoever that a cute, popular girl would come to like a generic, gloomy guy like me. That was why I’d been able to confess to Shirakawa-san. I’d been a hundred percent convinced I’d be getting rejected, so I hadn’t spared a single thought for a different outcome and what could follow.

That was why my current situation felt like I was on the receiving end of a prank. It was hard to accept.

“Huh...?” Shirakawa-san stared back at me in confusion. “You’re asking how I got the idea?”

“I mean, I’m sure you’re not in love with me, and you probably didn’t know me until today...”

We were in the same class, and she hadn’t even known how to read the kanji in my name.

Her reply was rather surprising: “Well, can’t I get to know you now and come to love you?”

“Huh?”

Looking her way, I noticed her tilting her head. She watched me with upturned eyes.

“Like, even *you* don’t know *me* well, right?”

I froze at her unexpected statement.

“We haven’t even talked, yeah?” she continued. “You like my looks, right?”

I had nothing to say back to that—what I’d said earlier had already answered her question. When she’d asked me why I liked her, I’d told her it was because

she was cute.

I liked her looks. It was true.

Still, I'd been watching her from afar ever since I was a freshman. I'd always thought she was so cute and admired her a lot. I'd always thought I loved her, but now, when she brought up the subject, I realized I barely knew anything about her.

"Sides, I do like you a little bit."

"What?!"

Her shocking words made me look her way. The number of sparks flying in my brain doubled, and I was smitten by the sight of her leaning at just the right adorable angle and gazing at me with upturned eyes.

Shirakawa-san was significantly shorter than me, so it wasn't surprising that she had to look up at me when standing by my side. People thought she looked like a model, but that was because of her small face and her well-proportioned figure—she wasn't as tall as one.

Also, I'd been smelling something nice for a while now—it seemed floral, or maybe fruity. Was it her scent? I wondered if she wore perfume.

Wait, that's not important right now. She said she liked me a little bit? That's impossible! She didn't even know me before this!

Shirakawa-san spoke up again, as though sensing my internal retort. "Didn't you just say you liked me?"

"Yeah," I replied after a pause.

"That's why."

"Huh...?"

"What? What's that 'huh' for?"

"I mean, uh... J-Just from that...?" I muttered in disbelief.

For some reason, Shirakawa-san took offense at my words. "Ahh! You think I'm some slut who'd fall for anyone? I have my tastes too, y'know. I would *never* go out with a guy with overgrown nails or a dude who walks around with

sweat under his nose!”

Those’re awfully specific! Wait, are those the only things she wouldn’t be okay with?!

As I stood there, astonished at her accurately rumored unfastidiousness, she gazed at me with a sullen look of lingering protest.

“But you’re neither of those, so I was happy when you confessed.”

It wasn’t like I couldn’t relate to what she’d said. If I had a girl I didn’t know at all confess to me, I would probably come to like her immediately unless she was really not my type.

However, that was because I was a thoroughly unpopular guy who’d never had anyone confess to him.

“But I’m sure you’re used to people saying they like you...” I said.

“Whaaat...?”

From the way she looked up at me, it was as though she were asking, *“What’re you talking about?”*

“Wouldn’t you be happy to hear ‘I like you’ at all, no matter who said it or how many times?” she asked.

While I *did* think what she said was true...I still had doubts.

“Would it make you happy enough to want to go out with that guy?” I countered.

I didn’t want to get hurt. Just thinking how she might say, *“Okay, I actually don’t like you that much to be honest, so forget the whole ‘going out’ thing!”* to me tomorrow was unbearable.

Like, if we really did start dating, I was certain I’d fall deeper and deeper in love with her with every passing day. Because no matter how unbelievable this situation was, it didn’t seem to be a joke.

“I mean... That feeling of ‘like’ you have for me...” I began, “isn’t it on the same level you’d ‘like’ a friend? It feels kinda...weak...”

I’d gone and said it. Here I was, having such an unbelievable beauty agree to

go out with me, and I'd knowingly said something that would make her hate me! I was *such* an idiot. A huge dumbass who didn't know his place.

Sure enough, Shirakawa-san went silent for a short while. I panicked, thinking I really *had* offended her, but she looked at me again.

"So what? Does it matter?" Her reply was nonchalant. "Even if it's just a flimsy feeling, if you think someone's nice and you wanna get to know them better, why not go out with them? And as you two date, even if you only like each other, won't you eventually come to love each other for real?" she said with a pretty smile. "Though I still haven't dated anyone long enough for that to happen..."

Seeing Shirakawa-san's smile change to a self-mocking one, I nervously asked, "Why...?"

Perhaps those rumors about her staying with any one boyfriend for two to three months at most were true. As I cautiously wondered the reason for it, Shirakawa-san went wide-eyed.

"Ahh! You think I get fed up and dump them? It's the opposite, okay?! I'm *super* devoted when dating someone! And I always turn down any other guy on the spot if one confesses to me."

"O-Okay." Though I'd replied in an agreeable way under pressure, my distrust of cute girls ran deep. "But judging by what you said earlier, if someone confessed to you, even if you had a boyfriend, wouldn't you come to like that second guy a little?"

"Huh? The hell you going on about?" she said. A huge frown appeared on her face.

Intimidated by a gyaru's displeased look, a gloomy guy like me could only clam up.

"It's just annoying if a guy I don't even like confesses to me, you know," Shirakawa-san continued. "It's so gross, actually."

I remained silent. *That's different from what she said a minute ago...* Still, it looked safe to believe she'd be devoted to her partner.

As our conversation went on, Shirakawa-san stopped all of a sudden.

“Which way’s your place?” she asked.

I realized we were already in front of the train station. The station closest to the school wasn’t a particularly large one, but the path ahead of us leading to the ticket gates was full of people coming and going, and it wasn’t even the evening rush hour yet.

We went to a private high school in the Tokyo metropolitan area, so many of the students took the train to school. The station we were at, Station O, had different entrances for the JR train lines and the subway. That was probably why Shirakawa-san had asked her question at this point.

“It’s, uh, by Station K,” I replied.

“Station K, huh. Mine’s by Station A.”

“I-I see... That’s pretty close.”

Station K, which was closest to where I lived, was three stations away from here on the train. Station A was two stations away, and the one just before you got to Station K.

“So like, we’re catching the same train, right?” she asked. “Let’s go, let’s go!”

“O-Okay...”

I ended up following her lead, and the two of us headed to the JR area.

When we rode the train, it didn’t take long for us to reach the station where Shirakawa-san would need to get off since it was only two stops away. This unbelievable situation was about to end, at least for the time being.

Until just a while ago, I’d been worried about whether I’d get through the day at all with how fast my heart was beating, but I was still reluctant to say goodbye to her, oddly enough.

“It’s almost your stop. So I guess...” I began.

I was about to see her off as we approached Station A, but Shirakawa-san looked at me with surprise.

“Huh? You’re not gonna walk me home?” she asked me.

“What?”

Since we were on our way home from school, the idea of walking her to her place hadn’t occurred to me. But she was right—it *was* something a boyfriend would do.

“O-Okay then...”

It looked like this unbelievable situation wasn’t over just yet.

Since I had a commuter pass, I wouldn’t need to pay to get on the train again later. So I also got off at Station A in order to see Shirakawa-san home.

Station A was a major terminal and there was a shopping district right outside of it. Shirakawa-san’s house was a fifteen-minute walk away once you got past said shopping district.

Frankly, I don’t remember what we talked about on our way there. The fact I was now going out with her hadn’t felt real at first, but that had suddenly changed once I had escaped my usual commute. Now, the overwhelming nature of the situation had my heart racing, and I was freaking out so much I didn’t have attention to spare for our conversation.

“Here’s my place!”

Shirakawa-san stopped in front of a wooden, two-story detached house. It looked pretty old, and the surrounding area was lined with similar houses—it was a quiet and plain residential neighborhood.

I didn’t know what to say about the structure in front of me—I couldn’t have expected Shirakawa-san to live in such a place, given her chic looks—so all I could come up with was something innocuous.

“It’s a nice house,” I said.

“Really? Thanks!” she replied with a happy smile.

She didn’t doubt me for a second and looked genuinely grateful, as though I had been sincere. I didn’t know what else to say. While that cute side of hers made my pulse race, I felt guilty. It made me want to get out of there as soon as possible.

“W-Well, I should be going...” I said, starting to turn around.

However, Shirakawa-san cheerfully called out to me. “Hey, wanna come in?”

I paused for a moment. “What?!” I replied at last.

“My folks aren’t home. Dad’s at work, and my grandma’s at her hula class so she’s not home either.”

So she lives with her grandmother... Wait, hula? Her grandmother must be young... Idle thoughts like those passed through my head for a moment, but there was something more important here: she’d invited me to come into her house. Her *empty* house.

Just the two of us.

“A-Are you sure that’s okay?” I asked, gulping from nervousness.

Shirakawa-san nodded without any hesitation. “Sure. You’re my boyfriend and all.”

Yeah, but like, I’m just some classmate of yours whose name you didn’t know until only a short while ago, I countered inside my mind. But since she’d said it was okay, I didn’t need to hold back...right?

I wondered if I was about to die—things like this had never been meant to happen in the course of my life.

“Uh, okay then... I’ll take you up on that...”

Thus I ended up visiting the house of my first-ever *girlfriend*, which she’d graciously invited me into only thirty minutes after we’d started going out.

While I still couldn’t shake off the feeling I was being taken for a ride here, I prepared to set foot into Shirakawa-san’s house. My legs wobbled as things stopped feeling real again.

“C-Coming in...” I stammered.

Once I set foot in the entranceway, an oddly nostalgic smell of another’s

home enveloped me. Sitting on the hard concrete floor were several gorgeous pairs of women's shoes that appeared to belong to Shirakawa-san, simply lying there in plain sight. The unadorned spectacle made my heartbeat rise involuntarily.

"Welcome, welcome. My room's on the second floor."

At Shirakawa-san's urging, I went up the narrow set of stairs that began right by the entrance. On the second floor, I noticed a sliding door, probably leading to a Japanese-style room, and a Western-style door. Shirakawa-san turned the knob on the latter.

"Come on in."

The room she led me to was, at last, a place that fit her image. It was roughly seven and a half square meters in area, and what immediately grabbed my attention was her curtains and her comforter—they were both a deep pink. While the white dresser and closet standing by the wall felt a little bit cheap, they had fashionable designs and were the kind of styles I imagined girls would be into. Between them was what appeared to be a writing desk, but it was completely buried under pouches and various small items, so I couldn't imagine it was any good for studying.

On the whole, the room had an overwhelming amount of various little things all over the place: small bottles of what appeared to be makeup, mascot-like stuffed toys, some glittering things that seemed to be accessories, and so on. Despite that, it wasn't as though things were chaotically scattered around. I could tell Shirakawa-san had put every single thing on display exactly where she wanted it.

In addition, that floral-or-fruity scent of hers was so thick in this room I could choke on it. It was even more of a "girl's room" than I had anticipated.

"What's wrong? Come in already," said Shirakawa-san from inside the room, watching me.

I was still standing outside, overwhelmed. I was too unaccustomed to seeing a girl's room.

"O-Oh, right..."

Realizing she'd find it weird if I kept standing there forever, I hurried inside.

"Sit wherever you like," she said in a lighthearted manner and casually placed her schoolbag on the floor. "I'll go get us something to drink. You okay with barley tea?"

"Oh, y-yeah, thanks..."

Shirakawa-san left the room. The rhythm of her light footsteps oddly matched the intense beating of my heart. How had things come to this...?

I'd only prepared myself for rejection, and yet here I was, in Shirakawa-san's home, as her *boyfriend*. I still couldn't completely accept this situation.

But a different thought dominated my mind. This room I was in belonged to none other than *her*, the Shirakawa-san I'd known all this time...

For now, I took a deep breath in through my nose. *This is her scent...* It overwhelmed me with emotion, but then I realized something.

How disgusting can I be?! What the hell am I doing?!

On the other hand, I was all by myself in the room of the girl I was in love with. I could barely control my impulses to do something unsavory. For instance...I wanted to open one of her drawers.

Call it good fortune or whatever, but there was a white chest of drawers next to the door—right by my side—and I couldn't take my eyes off it. It was very obvious that the chest held personal things... To put it bluntly, by the looks of it, her underwear must have been inside.

No, Ryuto! This is the last thing you should be doing as a man! As a human being!

But...I want to look...

After some internal conflict, the battle between the angel and devil on my shoulders was over. The devil stood victorious.

"Just a short peek...!"

Offering myself that excuse to ease my guilt, I quickly placed my hand on the drawer handle. After pulling it open a few centimeters, I couldn't contain my

marvel.

“Ohh...”

The white lace that came into view was much too divine, bringing me to a halt. *So these are...her private...garments...!*

Then, just as I looked up, savoring the happiness of getting to see such wonders...

“Sorry for the wait!”

“Whoa!”

She surprised me so much that I literally leaped several centimeters into the air. In the process, I banged my hand on the drawer I’d just opened.

“Oww...!”

Crap, she’s gonna see!

“Oh? That was open? Sorry!” When Shirakawa-san noticed the drawer, she looked at it without doubting me for even a second. “Aha!” Eyes sparkling, she placed the barley tea in her hands on top of the chest and pulled something from within made of white lace. “Hey, check this out!”

I was dumbfounded. Why was she showing me such things?! Frozen as I was at the sight, Shirakawa-san held out the item in her hands before me without a trace of hesitation.

“Ta-da! Isn’t this cami super nice? I bought it the other day! It would be nice to wear something with an open back.”

For a moment, I was struck mute again. An inexplicable fatigue came over me at the sight of the white lace cami dangling before my eyes.

“Y-Yeah, it’s nice...”

Of course, it was pretty amazing to see Shirakawa-san’s casual clothes, but since I’d assumed it was her lingerie, my disappointment was undeniable. It was a cami... Just a revealing cami...

You really shouldn’t go looking around other people’s rooms without permission, I thought to myself. I inwardly swore never to do such a thing again.

“A’ight, time to drink some tea!” announced Shirakawa-san, picking up the cups of barley tea again. “Sit down, sit down.”

“Ah, sure, thanks...”

Recollecting myself, I was about to follow her directions when a question presented itself in my mind: *where* was I supposed to sit?

There wasn’t anything like a couch or a legless chair in the room. The chair at the writing desk had a stole or something hanging on it. The only remaining options were sitting directly on the wooden floor or sitting on the bed.

The bed... Wait, the bed?!

Of course, it was normal to use a bed in place of a couch, and it was also normal to sit on a bed side by side and simply talk... But surely it wasn’t normal in *this* situation?!

This room belonged to the most beautiful girl in my school year, whom I’d always admired—and who, unbelievably, had just become my *girlfriend*. If we did something like sit together on a bed, I really couldn’t imagine keeping my sanity intact.

“Oh, *that’s* what’s on your mind?”

I didn’t know what Shirakawa-san thought when she noticed I wasn’t sitting down, but she looked strangely convinced of something.

“Sure,” she said. “Wanna go take a shower? The bath’s on the first floor. I can show you the way if you like.”

“What?!”

Wh-What’s going on? What’s she talking about now? Bringing up showering... That’s going to make me think of that even more...

Or...was she an extreme clean freak who didn’t want to let someone into her room unless they’d had a bath? Maybe she was indirectly saying I stank?

That can’t be right though. She was just inviting me to sit down a moment ago...

But as those thoughts ran through my mind, Shirakawa-san gave me that

same look of realization again.

“So you’re the type who doesn’t need to shower first?” she asked.

Huh? W-Wait, so she really is talking about that?

As I stood there, confused, I was even more flabbergasted by what she did next.

Shirakawa-san placed the cups of barley tea down once more and brought her hands up to the chest area of her uniform.

“We had PE today, so I might be sweaty. It’s embarrassing...”

As she said that, she undid another one of her blouse buttons. She kept the top two undone on an everyday basis, and opening a third made the sight even more revealing.

Her deep cleavage came into view along with glimpses of her lacy bra. I couldn’t keep myself from staring and gulping at the sight.

Th-This is Shirakawa-san’s real underwear that she’s wearing right now... Wait, cut it out, Ryuto; she’s gonna think you’re a pervert if you stare like that!

But despite my emotional turmoil, her fingers moved to the next button, and she was about to undo it without any hesitation.

“Sh-Shirakawa-san?!”

It was then that I became convinced of it—there was only one thing she could have in mind here. Having come this far, it could really only be about *that*. First there was the talk about showering, and then it was followed up by what she’d said afterward...

It was possible... No, it went so far beyond the realm of mere possibility that there was no doubt about it. As unbelievable as it was, she was thinking of having sex...with me.

What, for real?! Is it okay?!

Until that moment, I never could’ve imagined I might be saying goodbye to my dark life as a virgin. And of all people, my partner would be Shirakawa-san. I couldn’t believe how lucky I was...

But wait, just hold on! Is she seriously for real?!

“W-Wait a second!” I said.

Shirakawa-san stopped undoing the buttons at my astonished voice. “Hm? What’s up?” She seemed to find my reaction strange.

“Wh-What are you...doing?” I asked, gulping.

It was definitely too early for this. Even as a guy whose imagination tended to run wild, I hadn’t predicted such a rapid development. Frankly, I couldn’t keep up with what was going on. Maybe there was some mistake. So, before I acted rashly on a misunderstanding, I had to be sure of her intentions.

“What d’you mean? Aren’t we gonna have sex?”

Her ridiculously blunt answer left me frozen up with a face like a moai statue.

F-For real?! Seriously?! Is it really okay?!

As I stood there, panicking internally, Shirakawa-san looked at me with puzzlement.

“What?” she asked. “I mean, don’t you wanna do it?”

“It’s not like that, but... Huh? Huh?!”

It’s okay?! Uh, I mean, if she’s okay with it, then so am I—but wait, seriously?! Like, actually seriously?!

Seeing my total bewilderment, Shirakawa-san gave me a blank look.

“Um... I-Isn’t it a little early?” I continued. “You didn’t even know my name until a short while ago, right? Are you...sure you want to do it with someone like that...?”

I *really* wanted to have sex. I was at that age when guys craved it. What was more was that I’d be doing it with Shirakawa-san, the girl of my dreams. After all the things I’d done to her naked body inside my mind, the idea of getting to see it in *reality* was arousing in the extreme.

But *now*?! I still had a hard time accepting we were *going out* at all. Things were proceeding so terribly smoothly that my confusion had finally surpassed my lust. What was she even thinking? I was panicking.

“Yeah, but, aren’t you my boyfriend now?” She then gazed at me with those upturned eyes again.

Holy crap, she’s sooo cute!

“B-But even then... You don’t know what kinda guy I am yet, and you’re still okay with it? Wh-What if I turned out to be just a pile of trash?”

“What?”

“Or even worse, if I turned out to be a huge pervert or something...”

“Hey, Ryuto, whatcha talking about? *Are* you a pervert?”

“I-I’m not! Just talking about the possibilities. I mean, from your perspective, you can’t possibly know what kind of guy I am yet...”

“Whaaat? Are you talking philosophy?” Shirakawa-san looked confused. “It’s not like I have a choice though, right? You’re my boyfriend and all. If I really can’t do it with you, then we’ll break up—what else is there?”

So *that* was her way of thinking. For the time being, I realized the differences between our ideas of dating. Shirakawa-san thought of it as “let’s try going out for now and advancing our relationship.” *I*, however, saw our relationship as something I would...probably never get to experience again. I wanted to follow the proper steps in a relationship with the beautiful girl I’d always admired and nurture our love...

And I only realized that just now.

“Wait, you don’t wanna do it with me? Isn’t sex all a guy can think about when he’s alone with his girlfriend?” Shirakawa-san’s confused look had progressed to one of suspicion. Then it turned serious “Don’t tell me...”

Her eyes fixated on the area near the zipper of my uniform pants.

“No, it’s not what you think!”

It’s hard every morning, so please don’t worry about that!

“It’s just... I want to treasure our relationship...” I said. “You’re my...g-girlfriend, right?”

Here I was, stammering at an important moment again. I was ashamed of

how obvious it was that I wasn't used to saying such things.

"In that case, I'd kinda prefer to do things like that when the time is right, you know...?" I asked.

"When the time is right'?"

Shirakawa-san frowned.

Why?! Is this really the kind of situation where she should be making such a face?

And actually, wasn't the way girls and guys treated this usually the opposite? The girl would want to cherish the relationship while the guy just wanted to do it already. That was far too common, and that relationship dynamic felt right to me.

As I thought of that, a certain suspicion crossed my mind.

"Um... Shirakawa-san... Do you, uh...wanna do it that badly?" I asked.

The thought of her being more into sex than a guy fired up a flame in my chest. *Is my girlfriend a lustful gyaru? Oh, man... Can my body handle it...?* The thought of it nearly had me breathing hard through my nose.

However, as though putting a damper on my imagination, Shirakawa-san's frown became deeper.

"Huh? Hmm..." She seemed to be worrying about something. "I've never thought about if I wanted to do it or not. I dunno. I just thought it was my duty or something... Like, if you go out, you gotta do it. Couldn't a guy go to other girls if his girlfriend didn't let him do it?"

The moment I heard that, a small part of my arousal faded into dejection. I suddenly recalled what she'd said a minute ago.

"Isn't sex all a guy can think about when he's alone with his girlfriend?"

Then, I thought about what she'd said when we'd been walking together earlier.

"You think I get fed up and dump them? It's the opposite, okay?! I'm super devoted when dating someone! And I always turn down any other guy on the

spot if one confesses to me."

It had gone in one ear and out the other for me at the time, but didn't that mean her boyfriends had been dumping her after losing interest in her?

For a moment, I thought, *No way, right?*

But as a guy, it wasn't like I couldn't imagine how her ex-boyfriends had felt. I could see how they might quickly get fed up with her and be drawn to other girls if they got to do Shirakawa-san this easily the day they started going out. And since they'd confessed to her normally and not as some kind of punishment, unlike me, they must've been handsome, sunny types full of confidence.

I didn't know what to say, but I was getting kind of angry. Shirakawa-san wanted to have sex not because she was particularly into it, but because she was a girl who was considerate of her boyfriends. At the very least, that was how she had been until now.

They'd readily jumped on the opportunity, but quickly lost interest and dumped her—that'd nearly be the same as a one-night stand, wouldn't it?

"So...you don't wanna do it today?"

"Huh?" Her question suddenly pulled me out of my thoughts. "Well, uh..."

I wanted to. Honestly, I did. I *really* did.

But if we did it now...I'd be no different from her exes...

Still, though, I really wanted to! I might've never had another chance like this. What if she changed her mind and said "*Actually, let's break up,*" the very next day?

I wanna do it! I wanna have sex!

But I'd never done it before, and I didn't know if I could do well... If I were to go through with it anyway after hesitating and then give a poor performance, Shirakawa-san would totally compare me to her exes. She'd end up disappointed. I wouldn't be able to recover if she laughed at me in scorn or something...not that I thought she was the kind of girl to do such a thing...

Taking everything into consideration, I wasn't going to ask for too much now.

She could keep her clothes on, and maybe I'd just borrow her hand for a moment...

Wait, no! What the hell am I thinking?! My desire was taking over my mind, and I was having weird thoughts.

I was different from her ex-boyfriends. Didn't I want to prove it with my actions? In that case, wasn't there only one answer I could choose here...?

"Yeah... Let's...not do it...today..." I reluctantly said, inwardly shedding bitter tears.

"Huh..." Shirakawa-san said, tilting her head in confusion.

Once again, she looked way too cute like that, and I immediately ended up strongly regretting my decision.

Five minutes later, she and I were out on a walk. Back in her room, I couldn't stop being conscious of the fact that we were alone together, so I couldn't talk to Shirakawa-san normally as a result. To make it easier, I'd invited her outside.

"So I guess you're the earnest type," she suddenly muttered as we strolled around the outside of her house.

I looked at her face, trying to pick up on her feelings. I didn't see any hint of disillusionment or scorn, so I felt relieved for the time being. If I had to deal not only with my regret over passing up my chance to have sex but *also* with my girlfriend's chilly glares, that would be a hell of a string of bad luck.

"I don't think I've ever had a boyfriend like you before..." Once again, Shirakawa-san muttered things as if she were talking to herself.

"Do you mean that in a bad way?" I asked timidly after a moment's pause.

"Nah." She looked at me and shook her head. "I was just thinking there are guys like that too, huh?"

That smile of hers was lovely, even in the darkness of the evening. Looking at her now, I felt like my decision earlier hadn't been the wrong one. Not that I hadn't been crazy about the idea of doing it, of course...

“Um... Shirakawa-san? To be honest, I, uh...” I figured she’d eventually find out even if I kept quiet about it, so I decided to level with her. “I’ve never...dated anyone before.”

Shirakawa-san opened her eyes just a little wider at my words. Perhaps she really hadn’t ever dated someone like me.

I continued speaking. “I don’t have any good friends who are girls, and it’s definitely not like I’d...go to someone else if you didn’t let me do it or anything. So...” Given the subject matter and the fact we were outside, I ended up speaking quietly. “In the future, if we end up doing such things, I’d like you to actually think you *want* to do it with me, you know...?”

Maybe she’d laugh at the open display of my virginity, but I wanted us to be a couple who made out because we loved each other from the bottom of our hearts and were in a long-lasting relationship. I’d always dreamed of getting to that point with a girl I loved, wishing for it with all my heart.

Earlier, I’d almost lost control, but I felt like it was for the best that I’d stopped myself.

“At the very least, I’d like you not to think of it as a duty or anything like that,” I added.

I was able to say it at last—the thing I hadn’t managed to properly tell her back in her room.

“Oh, I see. So that was why,” Shirakawa-san said at last, her eyes on me. Her face looked much better now, indicating her pent-up feelings had been cleared away.

“S-Sorry...” I stuttered. “You were going out of your way...for my sake and all...”

“Don’t worry about it. I get now what you’re thinking,” she replied with good humor, before turning to face forward.

Immediately afterward, she said hello to an old woman approaching us with shopping bags in her grip. It seemed amazing to me—I’d never so much as taken a good look at my neighbors’ faces.

She was such a nice girl. I was sure she'd had a relaxed upbringing, being showered with love by both her parents and her grandmother. Admittedly, I was letting my imagination run wild, but the thought was comforting.

Ahh, I'd really wanted to have sex with this cute, wonderful girl... Well, there wouldn't be any point in continuing to regret my choice...

Her next words startled me.

"So like, if I feel like having sex with you..." she began, trailing off.

I had to check behind me—we'd only just passed the old woman.

"Chill out," said Shirakawa-san as she giggled, noticing what I did. She then looked at me with those upturned eyes again. "So if that happens, I should just tell you, right?"

"Y-Yeah, that's right..."

While I hoped that specific scenario wasn't waiting too far into the future, I couldn't say that now. If I did, I'd be rushing her and giving her another thing to worry about.

"Kay!" Her reply and smile were equally cheerful. "Y'know, maybe when it gets to that point, the flimsy feeling our relationship is built on might end up being love."

My heart fluttered at her words. I was more than sufficiently in love with her already, but if she grew to love me back, and if we could kiss and cuddle as a proper couple... Could I have faith that such a day would ever come?

I'm so glad to be alive. I never thought I'd live to see a day when Shirakawa-san would be saying such things to me! I'm really glad I was born!

After three laps around her house, I saw her to her door again.

"It might be nice not to have sex right away. I'm not sure I've ever felt this kinda excitement before," she said to me with a smile, standing in front of the entrance.

Then, as I stood speechless with a pounding heart, Shirakawa-san gave me an extra cute smile and waved at me.

“Later then, bae!”

I was on cloud nine as I made my way home. And once I got back...

“Damn it, I should’ve just gone for it! Agggggghhhhhh!!!”

The fact I agonized on my bed in overwhelming regret that evening would be something I’d keep a secret from Shirakawa-san.



Chapter 1.5: A Long Phone Call Between Runa and Nicole

“Hey, Nicole, hear this: I have a boyfriend now!”

“What?! Really?! Since when?!”

“Since today after school.”

“What?! Who is it?! Haruma? Kaisei?”

“Naaah! You’ll probably never guess.”

“No way! Seriously, who is it?! You never told me about this before!”

“Well, he just confessed to me all of a sudden today. Kashima Ryuto, from our class.”

“Huh... Who’s that? Did we have a guy like that?”

“Yeah, I didn’t really know him either, but he said he likes me. It sounded like fun, so I started dating him.”

“Okay, I *really* don’t get who you’re talking about! What club’s he in?”

“Dunno, haven’t asked yet. He seemed to be going home just fine after classes were over, so probably the going-home club?”

“Uh-huh... Is he hot?”

“Hmm... He’s normal, I guess? I’m fine with it, though.”

“Sorry, I’ve got no clue who you’re talking about. So, did you do it?”

“Not yet.”

“That’s pretty rare for you. Was somebody else home?”

“Nah. But he said he didn’t wanna do it today.”

“Really?! He said no?!”

“Uh-huh.”

“Isn’t that kinda impossible? What’s *up* with this guy?!”

“I dunno, he said he wants to ‘treasure our relationship.’”

“What? I don’t get it. Not like you’ve still got your cherry.”

“I know, right?”

After the two laughed a little, Runa looked down at her red nails. “He’s kinda a little weird,” she muttered. “So he’s kinda interesting, and I’m kinda curious about him, y’know?”

Chapter 2

Since yesterday, it had felt like I was living in a dream.

Still, no matter how much I pinched my cheek, I wouldn't wake up, and I even remembered having a *real* dream the night before. In that dream, I'd watched Shirakawa-san from afar...and since I'd woken up from that, this must've been reality.

Hard as it was to believe...I was going out with Shirakawa-san.

My heart raced as I went to school thinking about this development, and the second day of our...relationship had begun.

As I got to school and headed to class, Icchi was standing in the hallway in front of my classroom. He came rushing over once saw me.

"Heeeeeeeeeey!" He firmly grabbed my shoulders and looked at me with bloodshot eyes. "What the hell, dude?! What happened after that, huh?! How was I even supposed to sleep after I messaged you on LINE and all I got back was 'stuff happened'?!"

"R-Right... Sorry. Um... I went there... To Shirakawa-san's house."

"HER HOOOUUSE?!"

Icchi shouted with enough energy that you might've forgotten his gloomy nature. He looked so pale you'd think he might faint.

Then, I heard a deep voice from behind me. "Did you do her?"

As I turned around, I saw Nisshi standing there with a deadpan expression on his face.

"Whoa, you startled me," I said.

"Spit it out. I'm asking if you did her or not," continued Nisshi in a relentless voice. It felt like an interrogation. "Did you?"

“Answer us, and tell the truth!” added Icchi, drawing closer with an intense look. His fingers, large as caterpillars, dug into my shoulders—it actually hurt.

“I didn’t,” I finally replied.

“Why?!” exclaimed both of my friends at the same time before they started rapid-firing questions at me.

“Was her family home?!”

“No...” I said.

“Was it surprisingly tough to get her into bed?!”

“No, she seemed totally willing...”

As I gave my replies, the two bared their fangs at me with demonic faces.

“Then why?!” asked both of them in unison.

“W-Well, I needed to prepare...” I stammered.

“Dude, this is why I keep telling you even a gloomy guy like you should have at least one condom on him! Any gentleman would!” shouted Icchi, his massive body shaking as he did.

Our arriving classmates gave us strange looks as they entered the classroom.

“That’s not the kind of preparation I’m talking about,” I said. “I mean the mental kind...”

“The *mental* kind?!”

“Are you a maiden or something?!”

“How can a guy as unpopular as you decide to ignore such a rare chance?! One you might never get again?!”

Under the two’s persistent questioning, I shrank against the wall in the hallway. I already had my regrets over the fact I hadn’t had sex with Shirakawa-san, so having these two blame me certainly didn’t help.

“But like... You know. We’ll be going out from now on, so won’t I get more opportunities like that...?” I asked meekly.

Their expressions instantly turned grave.

“Kasshi...”

“Don’t tell me you *actually* expect to go out with her?”

“Huh?” I uttered in confusion, but they continued to look at me like I was some kind of pitiful creature.

“This is *Shirakawa Runa* we’re talking about. The girl at the very top of the school hierarchy. She’s obviously just playing around to make fun of a gloomy guy like you. A slut like her who’s been with lots of guys was about to choose you for a one-night stand on some kinda whim yesterday, and you got it into your head you were her boyfriend now and turned her down?”

“Huh? Whaaaaat?!” I yelled, bewildered.

Nisshi shook his head in disappointment. “Oh well. Let him dream some more, Icchi.”

“Yeah. I’m sure he’ll have to face reality right away.”

Giving me pitying looks, this pair with strikingly different builds walked away down the hallway, arms on each other’s shoulders.

I stood there, speechless.

Huh? I-Is that how it is? But wait, she’s not making fun of me, right? We’re going...out...right?

My friends’ sudden words were making me anxious. It was then that I felt my smartphone vibrate in my pocket.

“Hm?”

As I took it out, my eyes fell on a LINE pop-up. It was from Shirakawa-san.

☆ **Luna** ☆: I slept in... Sob sob... (´;ω;`)

Seeing it reaffirmed the idea that what had happened the day before had been no dream or fantasy. She wouldn’t have texted me like that if we weren’t dating, and we couldn’t have exchanged our contact info in the first place had that been the case. And if she was just looking to tease me a little to enjoy how

a gloomy guy would react, I couldn't imagine she would go this far. It was way too much effort.

These thoughts helped me set my mind at ease. She'd texted me several times after dinner the previous night—as she was about to go to bed—after I'd gone home.

Ryuto: If you hurry and bike to the station, you can still make it to the first period. Don't give up!

I could only reply with boring texts like that, but she'd send an immediate reply every time. Like now, as my smartphone vibrated again.

☆ **Luna** ☆: Y so srs, sob sob... (´;ω;`) I'll try... (´;ω;`)

“Y so srs’...”

I'm sorry that I can only say boring things.

But I just really couldn't give her anything *but* serious replies. If I tried to crack her up and my joke bombed, I'd never be able to tell jokes again.

I thought of writing her another reply, but she was probably busy getting ready. Instead, I sent her a sticker that said “*You can do it!*” and put my smartphone away. My phone vibrated again the next moment, and the chat had a sticker with a panicking rabbit that wasn't very cute.

“Oh, I need to hurry up and get ready for class.” With an involuntary chuckle, I put my smartphone away for good this time.

Shirakawa-san arrived at school close to the end of the first period. As always, the curls in her hair and the shine of her lips were spot-on—it was just like her not to sacrifice the time she spent grooming herself.

Seeing her looking so lovely, I recalled the dreamlike time I'd spent with her

the previous day. The regret over not having had sex with her gnawed at me again.

Then, once it was break time, Shirakawa-san suddenly approached my seat.

“Morning!”

“M-Morning,” I said.

Minding who might be looking, I couldn’t keep from checking my surroundings like I was involved in something shady.

“You’re pretty late,” I added right away, hoping to bring our conversation to a close sooner.

“Yeah... I overslept.”

“Something happen? Did you go to bed late?”

As I tried to rush through our conversation, a meek look came over Shirakawa-san’s face. “I was thinking about you, and I kinda couldn’t sleep.”

“Huh?” My heart began to flutter, and I even forgot to keep checking my surroundings. I could only gaze at her.

“I’ve never had a boyfriend like you, so it’s kinda strange.”

“Oh... Really...?”

Sad as it was to admit, I thought of myself as a pretty generic, gloomy guy... Even so, I supposed it was safe to say Shirakawa-san had never had someone like me around her before.

“Ruuunaaa!” suddenly called out a fashionable girl from the back of the classroom.

She was a legit gyaru who stood out quite a bit even among the good-looking girls, and was also the one Shirakawa-san got along with the best.

Feeling like she’d thrown me a sharp glance, I kept silent and ducked my head, trying to fade into the background.

“Hmm?” Shirakawa-san didn’t seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. “Later,” she quietly said to me as she walked away.

After that, Shirakawa-san kept coming over to talk to me every break. While I was happy about it, I couldn't help thinking about all the eyes on us, and especially those of that super gyaru who seemed to be staring daggers at me.

After glare after glare, I couldn't deal with it anymore. "Um, Shirakawa-san," I said in a low voice, "you haven't told anyone we're going out, right?"

"Huh?"

Her eyes seemed to be saying, "*Why are you asking me something like that?*"

"I've told my best friend Nicole," she said.

I was dumbfounded. I wasn't totally certain, but I was pretty sure that super gyaru girl's name was Yamana Nicole. She'd been hanging out with Shirakawa-san a lot ever since we were freshmen.

"Why? Was that bad? You haven't even told your good friends about us?" Shirakawa-san asked innocently.

"Well... Two of my friends know."

"See?" she said.

Instantly finding myself at a disadvantage, I realized I couldn't say anything to her—it wasn't like I'd asked her to keep it a secret either. Icchi and Nisshi were the ones who'd created the opportunity for me to go out with Shirakawa-san to begin with, though it wasn't as though it had been me who'd told them we were now going out. Oh well.

"It's just, when we talk to each other, we kinda stand out, you know...?" I said, glancing around me.

Between classes, the room would be busy. Everyone would be having their own conversations, and we could use that situation to cover our conversation. However, if a girl like Shirakawa-san kept talking to a gloomy guy like me multiple times in a day, the "Shirakawa-san watchers" (I was sure there were some since I had been one myself) would *definitely* find it strange.

"So...you don't want me to talk to you much at school, and you want me to keep our relationship a secret?" she quietly asked.

I awkwardly nodded. "Hm... Uhh, yeah, that's right. That would help, I

guess...”

You might be asking whether a guy like me was even in a position to make such a request, but it was beyond my position to even be going out with her in the first place.

“Okay,” she said after a moment’s pause. She seemed reluctant. “Sooo, when *can* I talk to you?”

“Huh?” I was taken aback by the unexpected question. “W-Well, we could see each other on the weekend or something?”

Was it too forward of me to suddenly ask that? There was another me that lectured me inside my mind. *Who do you think you are, trying to have Shirakawa-san all to yourself on a weekend? A gloomy guy like you?* However, that had been the only thing I could come up with on the spot.

“So like...a date?” she asked.

“Bhuh?!”

Shirakawa-san had unexpectedly gone back to speaking at a regular volume as she asked her question, causing me to reply in a weird voice. Fortunately, our previous class had been held in the science room and not many students had come back here to our regular classroom yet—there weren’t any classmates nearby who could be listening in on us.

“Y-Yeah... That’s right.” My heart raced at the word “date,” and I couldn’t keep my eyes from wandering around restlessly. “If that won’t work, though, it’s perfectly fine...” I added.

Actually, I might not have been fit to be Shirakawa-san’s boyfriend, but even so, it would’ve been pretty shocking if she rejected my invitation.

“Not at all. Sure thing,” she immediately replied. “I have plans on Sunday, but I’m free on Saturday. Where we going?”

At that point, the first bell rang.

“L-Later, then...” I said and moved away from her. As I prepared my textbooks and other stuff for class at my desk, my heart still pounded. Eventually, I somewhat came back to reality and unconsciously muttered, “Wait...Saturday?”

That's tomorrow."

My first date was, unbelievably, just one day away—and I hadn't planned anything. Had I forgotten I was going out with *Shirakawa-san*?!

I couldn't focus on my classes after that. Still, no matter how much thought I gave to the subject, an unpopular, gloomy guy like me couldn't possibly come up with a brilliant date plan that would satisfy Shirakawa-san. I hid my phone in my desk and snuck peeks at it here and there, doing searches online for date spots. Unfortunately, the top results only showed everyday suggestions.

As I kept at it, I started to feel sick with worry, so I decided to temporarily forget about the date.

When classes were over for the day, Shirakawa-san was cheerfully talking to her best friend Nicole as usual, so I left the classroom together with Icchi, my manner somewhat fidgety.

After I got home and rested for a bit in my room, I took my smartphone in hand and thought about watching KEN's new videos or something, but...

A LINE notification from Shirakawa-san had just come in.

"Huh?!"

It wasn't a message, but an incoming call. A *video* call, at that.

After checking that there was nothing behind me that I wouldn't want people to see, I sat in the seiza position on my bed and pressed the answer button.

"Uhh... Whoa!" I exclaimed. "H-Hello?!"

Shirakawa-san appeared on the screen. "Yay, it's Ryuto!" she said, waving at me with a happy look on her face.

As I looked behind her, it appeared that she was in her room too. That meant she must've gone home shortly after I had.

"Wh-What's up?" I asked.

Her appearance startled me—she was wearing a fluffy pink hoodie (amply unzipped, and sure enough, giving a view of her cleavage), which seemed to be

what she wore for comfort at home.

Shirakawa-san pouted a little. “Just wanted to talk about our date tomorrow. You invited me yourself! Don’t tell me you forgot.”

“Ah... The d—”

Date. No matter how many times I heard the word, it didn’t lose its impact. *Wait, did that count as me inviting her...? I’m kinda grateful for that, if so.*

“Yeah, our date!” said Shirakawa-san. “Where we going?”

“Uhh...” The results of my online search in class came to mind first. “Since it’s our first d-date...maybe we could watch a movie...?”

“Hmm?” she asked, slowly tilting her cute face to the side. “You sure that’s what you want? Is there a movie you wanna see or something? Are you into movies?”

“Oh, uh, no...”

I only went to the cinema once a year, and I didn’t have a good idea of what movies were currently playing.

“What do you want to do together?” asked Shirakawa-san. “Why’d you invite me on a date?”

It felt like her eyes were drawing me in. Flustered by the fact, I replied, “Because I...want to get to know you better.”

“*What* do you want to know about me?” she asked, shifting her position. She pressed her chest together with her arms even further, deepening her cleavage and making me gulp. “It’s okay. I’ll do whatever you want to do together, you know?”

Shirakawa-san had a gentle look on her face, and her divine smile practically said that she would immediately grant the wish any man craved. However, if I’d had it in me to say, “*Okay, let’s go to a hotel, then!*” here, I wouldn’t have been so gloomy for the past sixteen years!

Besides, I genuinely wanted to carefully nurture my relationship with her. I would wait until she said *she* wanted to do it with me. And I... I wouldn’t waver on that point.

Her appealing to my lust like that did make me lose a bit of confidence in the matter, though. I was just glad Shirakawa-san wasn't right in front of me at the moment.

Finding myself at a loss for words, I decided to shoot the question back to her. "What about you?" I asked. "What do you like to do on your days off?"

"Huh...?" She looked a little amazed at my question. "Me? Why?"

"I was just wondering how you like to spend your time," I said.

"Hmm... Let's see..." A mildly cheerful smile appeared on her face as she looked diagonally upward. "I like clothes, so of course I go shopping! And I also like to try out makeup, go to lovely cafés..."

"Okay, why don't we do those things?"

"What...?" Shirakawa-san went wide-eyed in apparent surprise. "You want to do what I want to do...?"

"Yeah. There isn't really anything I want to do out in the city...so I figure I might as well go along with you, if you have something in mind."

Spending time with Shirakawa-san was by itself a major event in my life. Trying to think of what I wanted to do on top of that? I had a hard time coming up with anything.

Shirakawa-san blinked at me for a moment, then smiled a little. "You know, Ryuto, you really are kinda weird. That's the first time I had a boyfriend say something like that to me."

At that moment, I became convinced: Shirakawa-san wasn't some wanton slut. She always went along with what her boyfriends wanted to do, and because she'd gone too far in doing so until this point, she had ended up as just a convenient woman for them rather than a girlfriend. Those boyfriends had lost interest in her and moved on to other girls. She was simply an unfortunate beauty.

"I gotta say, you're *definitely* kinda weird..." she continued, muttering softly.

As I watched her, I told myself I was different from her exes.

After that, we quickly agreed where and when to meet, and then it was time

to hang up.

“A’ight, see you tomorrow!” exclaimed Shirakawa-san.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

When her face vanished from the screen, I was part relieved and part reluctant. Then, the feeling that overcame me was...

“HOLY CRAAAP!!!”

I just had a video call with such a cute girl! And better-freaking-yet, she’s my girlfriend!

“NO FREAKING WAY!!!”

Since this was my room, I rolled around on my bed as much as I wanted. I could’ve just about died from excitement.

“Ahh, Shirakawa-san...”

She looked amazing in her hoodie too: cute and a little sexy. Nobody at school knew what she looked like when she was in her room.

Her room... It smelled so nice.

Recalling the time I had visited her house and the arousal I had felt back then, I was beset by regret again.

“Why didn’t I do it back then...?”

Now that things had come to this, perhaps she’d never casually invite me to her room again. Still, I didn’t want to be like her ex-boyfriends...though that would be pretty difficult, given they were surely handsome, sunny types.

“Okay, enough of this!” I told myself at last.

As these thoughts ran around my head in circles, the evening turned into night.

The first girl I’d properly fallen in love with in my life had been a feminine beauty with long black hair. She had been the one I’d confessed to in my first year of middle school, and was the source of my trauma.

Originally, that kind of girl had been my type. Even in anime and games, I absolutely preferred pure girls over sexy ones. That was why it felt a little strange to be walking around with a flamboyant kind of beauty who was the direct opposite. And she was even my...girlfriend on top of that.

Thinking about this, I couldn't stop being nervous at my lack of experience.

What if someone were to see us? There *was* a part of me that maybe wanted that to happen, but I was scared of people talking me down, saying things like "Why a gloomy guy like him...?"

It was our Saturday date. Thoughts like that kept popping into my head as I walked around with Shirakawa-san, and my heart was pounding for various reasons.

"OMG! Isn't this sooooo cute?!" she would exclaim every so often.

We were in one of the malls inside Shinjuku Station and on a floor filled with fashionable shops. I watched the excited Shirakawa-san browse here and there.

"This is so super cute!!! It's way too cute for real! This is *totally* the sort of thing I'd buy in a few different colors!"

Frankly, I couldn't tell what was so good about the things she praised so highly. There were tops with wide-open backs that I had no idea how someone would even put on, and then there was that bold, red lipstick she'd looked at too. Shirakawa-san picked up thing after thing and got excited about every one, but all of them were beyond my comprehension.

Another thing that I couldn't understand was Shirakawa-san's getup today. It sure was *something*.

She wore a white top that exposed her shoulders, a tight black miniskirt that seemed to be made of something leatherlike, and black sandals with a rather high heel—and on top of *that*, she had a bag with what looked like a snakeskin pattern.

She was a gyaru, all right. It was presumptuous of a generic high schooler like me to even walk beside her. Nobody would dare say she was anything less than a splendid fashionista—and she really was so, so cute.

I even overheard two girls exchanging whispers as they looked at Shirakawa-san. They looked like they were probably university students.

“Oh hey, isn’t that girl super cute?”

“Is she some model? I don’t know much about gyaru fashion, so I can’t really tell...”

I knew it—Shirakawa-san’s cute enough to stand out even here in the middle of the city.

With that in mind, the fact I walked with such a girl as her *boyfriend* was awe-inspiring, but it also made me happy and made my heart beat faster.

Ah, I really should’ve had sex with her... No, no, I’m different from her exes. Those two thoughts kept coming back to me, clashing over and over.

Meanwhile, Shirakawa-san was beside me, absorbed in the merch.

“Oh, damn! This is super cute! I dig it!”

Though she’d kept reusing almost completely the same vocabulary for a while now, her excitement seemed to be genuine. Her large, seemingly un-Japanese eyes with their distinct double eyelids sparkled, while her eyelashes, extra thick with mascara today, trembled in her joy. I found those glossy lips of hers stimulating too, imagining the sound they might make if I were to touch them.

Have I actually been into gyaru all along...? No, it’s just Shirakawa-san being cute. And while I wasn’t drawn to gyaru makeup or fashion in the slightest, they really suited her, so I thought that was why I was able to accept those parts of her looks.

I thought about all this as I spent about two hours watching her browse, looking at clothes and makeup. After that, we went to an Instagrammable café. As Shirakawa-san enjoyed a drink with so many toppings that it looked more like a parfait, she asked me a question.

“Hey, Ryuto...” she began, her tone noticeably lower than earlier when she was in a constant state of excitement. “Are you okay? Isn’t this kind of date pretty boring for you?”

“It’s not, really.”

While I meant what I said, Shirakawa-san knitted her brown, parallel eyebrows. “That’s a lie. You didn’t look at the stuff in the stores at all, did you?”

“Wh-What?” I stammered. “Well, uhh, what can I say...?”

She *was* right about that. How were shops full of trendy women’s clothes supposed to pique a guy’s interest? And it would be one thing if we’d been looking at unisex clothes, but everything had been completely oriented toward gyaru. I couldn’t keep up appearances here.

“Still,” I continued after a brief silence, “it wasn’t boring.” A moment later, I nervously added the truth, despite worrying she might be creeped out. “Because I...could watch you.”

Shirakawa-san looked surprised at my reply. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Huh?!” I was a little flustered, not expecting her to dig so deeply. “I mean, uh... I was just seeing what kinda clothes you like, and thinking how cute you look when you’re happy... Wow, sorry, that must be creepy of me...”

I shifted into self-disparagement, unable to put up with myself anymore.

However, Shirakawa-san shook her head with a serious look on her face. “Watching me shopping...was fun for you?” she asked.

I nodded. “Watching you have fun... I don’t know, it kinda made it fun for me too.”

Shirakawa-san went silent, appearing to be taken aback. As I watched her, wondering if I’d said something bad, her cheeks took on a pink shade.

“What the hell...?” she finally said. “That’s kinda embarrassing.”

This time it was my turn to go silent. *H-How cute! Shirakawa-san, of all people, is blushing?*

“You really are kinda weird,” she added. Her bashful smile was innocent and lovely, like that of a little girl.

Oh boy. I loved Shirakawa-san. I mean, I’d always admired her, but ever since I’d started going out with her, I’d been falling deeper and deeper in love.

At that point, her smartphone vibrated on the table.

“Oh, it’s from Nicole,” said Shirakawa-san, seeing the previously dark screen light up. It had numerous message notifications. “Gimme a minute,” she told me, taking the smartphone in hand and beginning to swipe at it in silence—probably typing a reply.

Left with nothing to do, I looked around the café to pass the time. Shirakawa-san had taken me to a terrace café with a beach-resort theme. The aisles were like beachside wood decks, and there were even zones covered with white sand. It was the kind of café obviously meant for sunny types, where a gloomy guy like me could surely never have set foot alone.

I worried about whether someone like me should even be in such a place. Unable to relax, I returned my gaze to Shirakawa-san in front of me.

No matter what angle I looked at her from, she was really adorable. It had really sunk in after I’d been walking around with her today.

And as for me? People might’ve thought I was an idiot, or a dork, no matter what angle they looked at *me* from. I could only hope that they weren’t thinking such things...

It was a little unsettling.

Oh well, not like there was any point in dwelling on it further. It was an immutable fact that I wasn’t some handsome guy who was a good match for Shirakawa-san, so I needed to at least keep it together on the inside... Not that I was sure I could do that.

Shirakawa-san was still typing away on her smartphone. She seemed really close with this Nicole. I always found it too much of a bother to type out messages, so I rarely talked to Icchi or Nisshi over LINE. Even when I did, we’d only send each other a message or two.



Apparently, Shirakawa-san had been on the phone with Nicole until late at night the previous day too. She had told me it was her routine before weekends and holidays, which was why she had asked that we meet up in the afternoon—and because of that, it was already past four.

If they'd talked over the phone the previous day, what in the world could they be in such a hurry to tell each other now? Even so, Shirakawa-san seemed to be in chatting mode, looking at how she wouldn't let go of her smartphone at all.

Wait, she's not complaining about me, is she? It was unsettling to think about. *Okay, cut it out, Ryuto! Being paranoid won't do you any good.*

I only arrived at such thoughts because I lacked confidence. I had to change... It might've been impossible to do right away, but I had to do it to whatever degree I could. I wanted to stop losing my confidence all on my own, without Shirakawa-san even saying anything to me. I really did.

Unless I managed to get over my trauma that prevented me from believing cute girls, I couldn't keep going out with my supercute girlfriend.

Still... Even though I thought of Shirakawa-san as a nice, honest girl, I wondered why her face would sometimes overlap with that of the beauty who had rejected me. It was really strange—they weren't alike at all.

Shirakawa-san had been silently using her phone all this time, but she suddenly tapped the screen and brought the phone to her ear. "Oh, come on, Nicole!" she exclaimed. "I just told you, I'm on a date with Ryuto!"

A girl's high-pitched voice came from the phone's speaker. "I know! That's why I called you!"

"Huh...? Ah, there's no need for that now, I'll tell you later!" Shirakawa-san sounded slightly tired. Maybe the girl on the other end of the phone was persistently asking her something. "Like I said, we went to Lumine, looked at some clothes at Cécile, checked out makeup at Etu House, then we went to a beach café... Yeah, that's right, they were all places I said I wanted to go." She was a lot more cheerful now. "I know, right? I've never had a date like this before."

As Shirakawa-san gazed at her sweet-looking drink on the table, she had a

childlike smile on her face, the kind one would only show to someone they fully trusted. When I saw that expression of hers, my chest felt so tight that I stopped caring about all the things I'd been thinking up to that point.

This cute girl was my girlfriend. Shirakawa-san had accumulated various experiences with her previous boyfriends, but now she was here, sitting in front of me, as my girlfriend. While that *was* a bitter pill to swallow...

Had her previous relationships been happy ones, she might not have been here with me at this moment. The guys she'd dated had taken advantage of her and then tossed her aside. I wasn't going to do what they'd done to her. I wanted to make her happy...but what I didn't know was *how*. I had the motivation, but that wasn't getting me anywhere.

It seemed that my lack of confidence as her boyfriend really was a product of my negative thinking. Unfortunately, that knowledge didn't give me any ideas on what to do instead.

"What's wrong, Ryuto?" asked Shirakawa-san, gazing at me with curiosity. She had ended the call with her friend at some point.

"Oh, uh... I was just remembering we have a kanji test next week and going, like, 'damn'..."

An enormous frown appeared on Shirakawa-san's face. "Oh, yeah, no kidding! Man, what a bummer... And after I finally managed to completely forget about it too!"

"Isn't it good that I reminded you, then?"

"I wanted to forgeeet!" she exclaimed, holding her head.

"But then you couldn't study for it," I retorted, laughing.

A black coffee sat in front of me, which I had ordered for the sake of acting like a grown-up. Its bitter taste wasn't the only kind of bitterness I was experiencing at this moment.

Chapter 2.5: A Long Phone Call Between Runa and Nicole

“Ah, Nicole! Thanks for looking out for me today.”

“So, how did your date go?”

“Well... Didn’t I tell you over the phone just a bit ago? We did some shopping, went to a café, then went home.”

“What? You didn’t go anywhere else?”

“Nope.”

“You *seriously* didn’t do anything today either?”

“Nope.”

“And he didn’t lay a finger on you?”

“Nope.”

“Interesting...”

“...What? What’s wrong?”

“I’ve sorta been thinking...”

“Hm? About what?”

“About what kinda guy would be a good match for you. Been thinking about it forever now.”

“Whaaat? That’s the first I’ve heard of this!”

“You really don’t have an eye for guys, you know. I’m worried, as your friend.”

“Nicooole!”

“And so, I’ve kept thinking about it in secret.”

“...And?”

“Well... While I’m still not confident about it...”

“Okay?”

“That Ryuto guy? I think he might actually be...pretty close to what kinda guy I thought would be a good match for you.”

“...”

“What?”

“Nothing. I just didn’t expect you to say something like that.”

“Whaat? What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“I mean, isn’t Ryuto pretty weird?”

“Well... I don’t really know much about him yet, but he might be better than the guys you’ve had before, if nothing else.”

“Aha ha! You really are harsh!”

“Of course I am. I don’t wanna see you crying anymore.”

“...”

“Anyway, I still don’t know a lot about him, but I hope it goes well for you.”

“Yeah, me too. I’ll keep at it.”

“Still, if you don’t think it’s gonna work out, you don’t need to force yourself to keep trying. Though I *know* you’re too nice to just come out and say it to him.”

“Mmm... Anyway, for now, I wanna keep dating him.”

“Okay.”

“I mean, it feels kinda comfortable when I’m with him. It’s like I can be myself.”

“That’s good, then.”

“I wonder if this is what they mean when they say a girl’s ‘being treasured’? I still don’t really get it, though.” As Runa held her smartphone to her ear and stared at the ceiling in her room, a tiny smile appeared on her face. “I hope it keeps going well between the two of us.”

Chapter 3

Shirakawa-san was popular with all our classmates, both guys and girls, which naturally meant she often spoke with guys as well.

The sight of it used to make me feel like I was watching a different world, one I hadn't thought much about—but now that I was Shirakawa-san's *boyfriend*, seeing her act like that on breaks between classes considerably unsettled me. Not to mention the person she was talking to was a good-looking, sunny guy—a regular member of the soccer club.

Still, I had no right to tell her whom she could and couldn't talk to. Maybe some overbearing handsome guy from a shojo manga could say "*Don't look at other men,*" but that was inconceivable for me to do.

And besides, it wasn't like I wanted Shirakawa-san to change.

When I gave it more thought, I realized that the Shirakawa-san I'd fallen in love with was a popular girl surrounded by numerous friends of both sexes. I most definitely didn't want her to become gloomy like me and only keep a few girl friends just because we were dating.

"Gotta say, though, that guy from the soccer club has been coming to talk to her really often these days..." I remarked.

Having been a Shirakawa-san-watcher since before I started going out with her, I more or less knew the faces of those who hung around in her orbit. The soccer guy was a newcomer who had suddenly started approaching her over the past week or two.

Then, as Shirakawa-san talked to him, she turned her head my way all of a sudden. Her eyes met mine.

"Ah, Ryu—" she began with a smile, before noticing the gaze of the soccer guy.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

“It’s nothing,” she replied, lightly shaking her head. Then, she flashed a small smile again and looked away from me.

Shirakawa-san was doing as I’d asked her—not talking to me at school—so I had no complaints about her attitude. Still, at times like these, I couldn’t help but wonder—would this slightly hazy feeling disappear if I could say “*Shirakawa-san is my girlfriend*” in front of everyone?

As I ate lunch with my usual crew, I decided to voice the question on my mind. “Hey... I should keep it a secret, right?”

“What’s that, bro?” asked Icchi, looking at me.

“You mean the fact you’re a KEN Kid?” anxiously added Nisshi. “Of course you should. KEN may be a god to us, but to normies, he’s not just obscure—he’s a former pro player of games where you shoot people. He’s barely any different from a hit man to them. You’re just gonna creep out everyone in class if you RR like that.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Also, don’t bring out Mafia terms,” I replied.

Nisshi was KEN’s most ardent follower, even among the three of us, but that didn’t stop him from saying awful things about his god.

“I mean the fact I’m going out with Shirakawa-san,” I explained, lowering my voice.

The two of them were taken aback and their shoulders jerked up. They looked at me, then at each other, and finally lowered their eyebrows in pity.

“Kasshi... You’re *still* saying that?”

“Well, what can you do? That’s a virgin for you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? And you guys are virgins too,” I replied.

Paying no heed to my retort, the two shrugged in exasperation.

“Look, man, she accepted your confession because it was her idea of a joke.”

“Exactly. And you took a sunny girl’s joke seriously, and you still think you’re

dating her? Kasshi, that's beyond pitiful—it's downright ridiculous."

"Wh-Whaaat?!"

I wanted to argue back, telling them how Shirakawa-san messaged me on LINE every day and that we'd even gone on a date on Saturday, but it didn't look like they'd be willing to listen.

"If you've got time for such nonsensical daydreams, don't you think it's a lot more productive to be like us and gun for a top spot among the Kids?"

"What he said. IRL girls stop calling and texting you right away, but KEN uploads new videos every day instead of betraying us, right?"

Tempted as I was to ask my friend if *he* had ever called or texted an IRL girl, I was pretty sure those two would only look at me with pity if I said anything here, so my only option was to keep quiet.

"Whatever, guys," I muttered, refocusing on my lunch box.

They said good friends were great blessings, but since mine didn't even believe I was dating a girl, I couldn't ask them for advice.

The reason I'd suddenly started to mind the soccer guy and was considering going public about dating Shirakawa-san had to do with a minor event that had occurred on Sunday.

On Sunday—so the day following our date—Shirakawa-san had sent me her usual morning greeting over LINE.

I'd sent her a reply, but unlike always, it had taken some time for the "Read" marker to appear. Naturally, I hadn't gotten a reply from her either, and it had remained that way for a few hours. My message had only been marked "Read," and she'd sent one of her own four hours later.

Moreover, she hadn't said anything about what had happened during that time period. I couldn't find it in me to ask, but I also couldn't help remembering what she'd said the other day.

"I have plans on Sunday, but I'm free on Saturday."

She'd definitely said that when I'd asked her out on a date. What plans had those been, exactly...? Just what had she been doing that would prevent her from replying to me for four hours when she'd always replied right away, no matter the circumstances?

Once it had started bugging me, the thought wouldn't leave me alone.

Even after coming home from school, I found myself agonizing over the subject as I lay on my bed.

Let's say, for the sake of the argument, that she had gone somewhere on Sunday with a male friend. I wouldn't mind. Okay, to be honest, it *would* bother me a little... More than a little, really. The point is, I wished she'd been open with me about it.

It would've been much better than doing a bad job of keeping it a secret like she was doing now, and it would've at least let me think she put me—her boyfriend—above other guys.

"Here I go again," I remarked.

How pathetic. I really couldn't be confident in myself—couldn't be sure Shirakawa-san liked me as her boyfriend.

I'd known from the very start that my feelings for her were much stronger than hers were for me. She hadn't even known me at all! And she had only grown to "like me a little bit" because I'd confessed to her.

Still, since she'd made me her *boyfriend*, she must've thought of me as more special than only a *male friend*. Even so, it just wouldn't sink into my brain.

And this was solely due to my lack of confidence...

"Agh, damn it! But how could a guy like me act like a boyfriend and ask Shirakawa-san what she did on Sunday?!" I exclaimed.

Then...

My smartphone buzzed by my pillow. Looking at the screen, I saw a LINE notification.

☆ Luna ☆: Can you come to the station right now?

“Huh?”

Right now? What’s this about...? I wondered, startled.

“She’s not gonna say ‘Let’s break up after all,’ right...?”

Once I’d nervously made my way to Station K, I found Shirakawa-san at the ticket gates. She seemed to have gone home at some point as she was in her casual clothes now—a miniskirt and a top that exposed her shoulders.

Going inside with my commuter pass, I approached her.

“Shirakawa-san, what did you—”

“Ta-da!”

Before I could finish, she held out something to me that looked like a smartphone.

“Huh...?”

Upon closer inspection, it seemed to be a phone case. I recognized the character inlaid over its entire surface—it was that rabbit with a weird face that Shirakawa-san frequently used stickers of in LINE.

“A Mabbit phone case!” she exclaimed. “A character shop in Harajuku sold only a few of these after it opened, and each person could only buy one.”

“‘Mabbit’...?” I asked.

“You don’t know? ‘Middle-Aged Rabbit.’ Don’t you think it’s super cute?”

“Cute...?” Its face looked more like Golgo 13’s to me. “Well, if you wanted it, I’m glad you got one,” I said.

“Uh-huh! Here!” Shirakawa-san pressed the case against me without hesitation.

“What?”

“Take it. It’s for you.”

“Huh? Why...?”

Hadn't she gone all the way to buy this thing that was one per customer? As I stood at a loss, Shirakawa-san took something else out and showed it to me.

“Check this out! It's a matching case!” She was holding her own smartphone in the exact same case. “I asked Nicole to stand in line with me. We were playing games since morning, so my phone ran out of battery before the shop opened and I couldn't message you.”

“Oh...”

I was startled to realize she was talking about Sunday. Shirakawa-san continued smiling as she watched me.

“If I was gonna buy one anyway, I wanted us to have matching cases,” she explained. “D'you remember? Today's our one-week anniversary since we started going out.”

“Ah...”

Now that she mentioned it, I noticed it *had* been exactly a week since my confession. Not that I could relate to treating our one-week mark as an anniversary.

“Th-Thank you...” I stammered.

I couldn't express my gratitude very well—I was so touched that I found myself in a daze. The hazy feeling I'd had until this point was dissipating little by little.

“Sounds like you troubled Yamana-san,” I said. “I would've lined up with you if you'd let me know.”

“Outta the question! I wanted to give it to you today as a surprise,” she replied, then smiled again. “You had no idea, right? Did my surprise work?”

Seeing her happy smile, I felt love for her well up deep inside me.

“Yeah, it sure did...”

Her unnatural behavior sure had made me worry. She had gone silent when the battery on her phone had run out, and she hadn't told me why either—but

after seeing her carefree smile, it felt like there'd been nothing I needed to be anxious about.

When our relationship had started a week ago, I was still afraid Shirakawa-san might've only been making fun of me by accepting my confession. I'd thought that she might've been about to do the same thing as that girl who had rejected me a long time ago. The reason I'd gotten worried about the soccer guy, as well as why I hadn't been able to insist to Icchi and Nisshi that Shirakawa-san and I really *were* going out despite their refusals, was my lack of confidence as her boyfriend.

However...

"If I was gonna buy one anyway, I wanted us to have matching cases."

Perhaps Shirakawa-san cherished me more than I'd realized. The moment I'd seen her smile as she said that had been the first time I'd had such a thought.

"What's wrong, Ryuto?"

I was taken aback when she called out to me. Despite the fact that I was standing right in front of her, I'd been so deeply moved that I'd gotten lost in my thoughts instead.

"Not a fan of the phone case? You don't wanna use something like that?" she asked with a worried look.

I shook my head in haste. "No, I'm happy with it. Thanks. I'll treasure it."

Setting aside whether this Mabbit was cute or not, the fact that Shirakawa-san had given me a matching item as a present for our anniversary(?) genuinely left me supremely happy.

"Really? That's great!" she replied, a happy smile on her face. "So why were you spacing out just now?"

"Huh? Uhh..." I searched my thoughts from a moment ago for something I could tell her. "A long time ago...I...confessed to a girl..."

"What? That's sudden! When was that?"

In a moment, her eyes lit up and she pressed me for answers. Shirakawa-san seemed to be into love talk.

“In my first year of middle school.”

“What was she like? Was she like me?”

“Not really...” I said. “She was quiet and had black hair.”

“Ah, so the feminine type. That’s not like me at all,” she immediately agreed. “So, what happened with her?”

“She rejected me. She was really nice to me before that and said things that made it seem like she liked me, so I was convinced she actually did... But then it turned out I had the wrong idea.”

Shirakawa-san listened to me in silence.

“Ever since then, I haven’t had confidence when dealing with girls,” I continued. “It’s not even like I had much to begin with. So it was just hard to believe that a cute girl like you had really made me your boyfriend.”

She blinked in apparent surprise. “Huh? What’s that supposed to mean? *You* confessed to *me*!”

“I did, but...I kind of didn’t really think I stood a chance with you...” I had yet to tell her that my friends had made me confess to her as a punishment—I thought it might be rude. “So even now that it’s been a week, it was still hard to believe... Which is why I was really happy you prepared this kind of surprise for me.”

After I finished speaking, Shirakawa-san stared at me for some time.

“I see,” she said at last, a gentle smile on her face. And when she smiled, her beautiful face looked angelic, like that of a little girl. It made her all the more adorable.

“So you *have* confessed to a girl before, Ryuto.” Her expression turned into a lightly teasing grin. “I thought *I* was your first.”

“It’s really just something I’d rather forget.”

“Still, it’s thanks to that girl that we can date now. I should be grateful to her.”

“Huh?” I asked.

As I watched her and wondered what she meant, Shirakawa-san smiled at me

again. “Cause like, if she said yes and you two were still going out even now, you would’ve never confessed to me, right?”

“Well, I guess... But love in the first year of middle school doesn’t last that long.”

“That’s not true! It’s when my mom and dad started going out!”

“What? For real?!” I asked in surprise.

Shirakawa-san gave me a deep nod. “It was the first relationship for both of them. When my mom was in her third year of high school, she got pregnant with my big sister. My parents got married right after graduating.”

“Huh...”

Wow... Even her parents lived satisfying lives... Wait, Shirakawa-san has an older sister? She must be beautiful.

“I thought I’d end up like that too...” she suddenly muttered, looking up at the ceiling.

Since it was rush hour, the station was overflowing with people hurrying up from the platforms and through the ticket gates to get home. In the midst of this chaos, Shirakawa-san and I stood by the wall. I had to wonder how we were able to have such a long conversation at all in such a place.

She continued, “My dad confessed to my mom in their first year of middle school, and she said she didn’t know what dating was about, but she accepted it anyway ‘cause she was glad to have a boyfriend. So when I had a guy confess to me before summer break of my first year in middle school, I wondered if I’d be marrying him.”

“I see...”

“That was why I accepted his confession...”

It wasn’t hard to guess how that story ended.

I went silent for some time. Thinking about her ex-boyfriends was still unsettling for me, which was a problem I needed to do something about.

Now that a week had passed, I was gradually coming to accept our

relationship as reality, but I still couldn't help but wonder if she was okay with me.

I had to man up. Shirakawa-san was going out with *me*.

"Guess I should be grateful to your ex-boyfriends," I quietly said to encourage myself.

"Ah! You stole that from me!" she quipped, looking up at me with a soft smile.

I smiled back at her. "I just thought it was well said."

"Sheesh... I should've copyrighted it." She acted bitter in jest.

Even though I'd said it, I didn't mean it. However, until the day came when I really could express my heartfelt gratitude to her exes without any mixed feelings, maybe I could live with that.

By that point, my heart would surely be full of confidence that Shirakawa-san loved me, and I could proudly call myself her boyfriend.

I hoped that such a day would be in store for me.

"Still, though..." Shirakawa-san suddenly began, "my mom and dad split up too, in the end."

"Eh? Oh..."

There was still much I didn't know about her family situation. Sure, maybe it was only natural, since that wasn't the sort of thing you'd go telling friends you're not particularly close with, but I hadn't heard any rumors about her family at all.

That being said... Since she deliberately came back to this topic after we'd already moved on...had she been considering whether to tell me about her current family circumstances or not while I'd thought about her ex-boyfriends in silence? The thought of it made her even dearer to me.

"So you live with your mom now?" I asked.

"Nope. With my dad and grandma. My big sister lived with us until two years ago, but she's now living with her boyfriend."

“I see.”

I wondered what the right thing was to say at times like this, since I came from an unremarkable nuclear family. My birth parents lived together, and they weren't on bad terms or anything either.

“Still, at least you didn't get separated from your sister, right?” I asked.

Shirakawa-san's expression shifted. “Huh...?” As she looked at me, she seemed caught off guard in a way that could be taken as either good or bad.

“Huh?” I was surprised in return.

Did I say something bad? I thought it was a rather innocuous remark... As those thoughts passed through my head, Shirakawa-san looked away from me and nodded with a smile.

“Ah, yeah. I guess so...” she said.

Something felt off about her attitude, and I wondered what that was. It wouldn't be long before I found out.

Ever since that day, I used the matching phone case I got from Shirakawa-san. However, that also marked the beginning of a chapter of my school life where I couldn't take my smartphone out so easily.

And then, something even *more* absurd happened to me.

One morning during homeroom, the teacher in charge of our class said, “A new student will be joining this class today.”

Those words sent the whole classroom into feverish excitement.

“For real?! A transfer student?!”

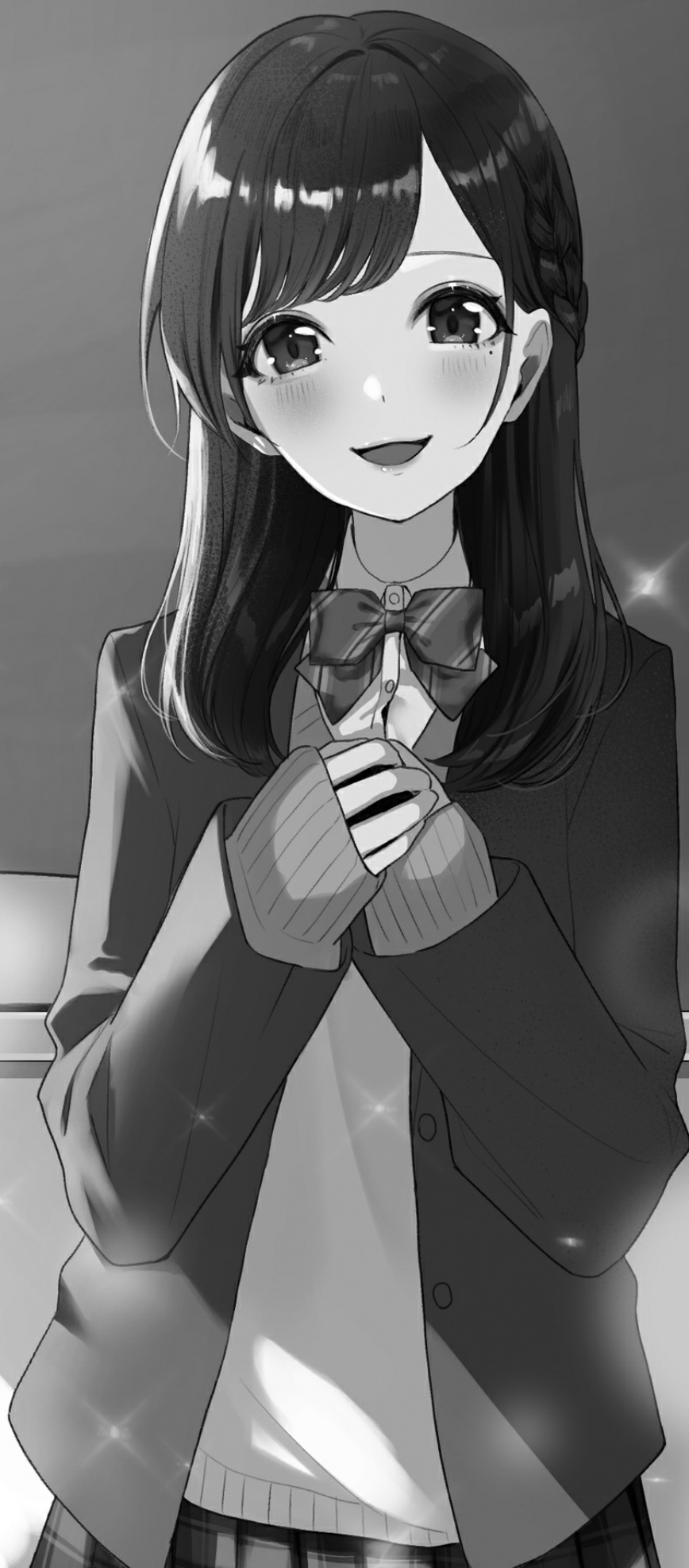
“A guy? A girl? Which is it?!”

Instead of answering my classmates' questions, our homeroom teacher opened the classroom door and beckoned someone in the hallway to come inside. Everyone held their breath for an instant as the person came into view.

She was a striking beauty. Large, glistening eyes accentuated by her puffy eye

bags; round, rosy cheeks; upturned, shapely lips... On top of that, her glossy, straight, shoulder-length hair enhanced her flawlessly lovely features even more.

黒瀬
海愛



As she was short and seemed delicate, her entire body emanated an aura that made a guy want to protect her.

“Damn...”

“She’s not some celebrity, right? Because I can totally see her in a Sakamichi idol group.”

“She’s way too cute!”

While the classroom was abuzz with comments, there was one other thing that took me by surprise.

“Kurose...Maria...” I muttered the name our homeroom teacher had written on the blackboard, as if to check whether I was seeing things.

I knew her. As for why...

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that...”

Even now, I could hear her seemingly hesitant voice ringing in my ears.

“I do think of you as a good friend, Kashima-kun...”

There was no doubt about it. The transfer student was the girl who had rejected me in my first year of middle school—Kurose Maria.

“Kurose-san moved away from here three years ago, but now she’s back due to family circumstances and has transferred to our school. Be nice to her,” said the teacher.

“Of course!” exclaimed a frivolous, sunny guy, breathing hard through his nose as he raised his hand.

And he wasn’t the only one. I could tell that all the guys in my class couldn’t wait to talk to her.

All except for me.

“Introduce yourself, Kurose-san,” said the teacher.

“Yes, sir,” she replied. “I’ve moved back to this area after three years. I still don’t know much about this school, so please tell me about it later.”

“You got it!” exclaimed a classmate.

This time, not only was that same frivolous guy raising his hand, but several others were as well.

“Thank you. Please take good care of me,” said Kurose-san.

With a slightly bashful look on her face, she scanned the classroom...and as she did, her eyes met mine.

We stared at each other in silence for a moment. All expression instantly vanished from her face and she stood with her mouth slightly agape.

I immediately averted my gaze and looked down, but she seemed to have noticed me anyway. It was way too awkward.

The girl who had rejected my confession a long time ago had just transferred into my class. Back then, I'd been convinced she liked me, had gotten so excited that I'd ended up confessing to her, and in the end, had been pathetically turned down.

Then again, I now had a girlfriend by the name of Shirakawa-san who was too wonderful to be with me, so my trauma had already healed to some extent.

To Kurose-san, I was probably just someone from her past whom she didn't have any particular reason to remember, so I figured I'd try to keep away from her as much as I could.

And yet...

“Do you mind if Kurose-san sits here?” asked the teacher. “I'd like her to be somewhere she can easily ask teachers questions until she gets used to the class.”

Our teacher had Kurose-san sit in front of the teachers' podium, and each of the students who sat in the row beside me moved one seat back to make room. That meant she would sit right next to me.

When she settled into her desk, she first spoke to the guy sitting on the other side of her. “Nice to meet you.”

“Y-Yeah... Nice to meet you,” he replied. He was blushing slightly and gazing at Kurose-san with vacant eyes.

I had a good idea of how he felt. After all, her beauty put idols to shame. Had I

not gone through what I'd gone through, I would probably have reacted that way too.

After greeting him, Kurose-san then turned her head my way.

Here it goes... I said inwardly, bracing myself while keeping my eyes down and pretending not to notice.

She stared at me in silence for a few seconds. I didn't look, but I could sense it.

"Um... You're Kashima-kun, right?"

At that point, left with no other choice, I looked up at her. *Wow, she's really, really cute...* Though of course, I was now committed to Shirakawa-san.

"Y-Yeah," I replied. It wasn't like I could just ignore her.

Then, she gave me a pleasant smile. Had this been my old self from two weeks ago, I would surely have fallen in love all over again on the spot. Hers was a killer smile—it was way too cute.

"What a coincidence that we get to sit beside each other again, huh? I'm looking forward to it."

"Yeah... Same." Keeping my replies short, I cast my eyes down once more.

As Kurose-san faced forward again, the girl sitting right behind her immediately poked her back and said something to her.

"Yeah, that's right. We went to the same middle school," Kurose-san replied. Apparently the girl had asked her about me.

I hadn't been wrong about her—everyone wanted to get closer to this beautiful transfer student. There was a risk that it'd come up in conversation that I had confessed to her in the past, which was why I thought it was best to keep as much distance from her as possible.

However, she kept talking to me again and again after that.

"Good morning, Kashima-kun," she would say with a smile every single morning. Occasionally, she would lightly touch my arm too.

One day, she shared a cookie with me from her plastic container, saying, “Kashima-kun, you can have one if you want. I made these yesterday.”

Another day, she told me, “Sorry, I forgot my textbook. Could you show me yours?” The two of us ended up sharing my textbook in math class, our desks side by side.

“Hey, Kashima-kun,” said Kurose-san, leaning in close to me when the teacher left to get class materials from the staff room and the classroom got noisy. Her faint soapy scent tickled my nostrils.

“Wh-What?” I asked, startled.

She gave me a slightly apologetic look. “Sorry about back then,” she whispered.

“Huh...?”

Was she talking about the time she’d rejected my confession? As I watched her, she continued.

“It’s not that I disliked you. But back then, I still didn’t really know what dating was even about...” She got even closer to me, and still whispering, said, “Now I might understand what’s good about you.”

“What...?”

I moved back slightly in surprise, getting away from her on impulse. What did she mean? She couldn’t possibly be in love with me, right...? *But wait, Ryuto, think well about this.* She had only said she “understood what was good about me,” with insurance in the form of “might.” If I got the wrong idea here, I’d be repeating my mistake from my first year of middle school.

Actually, it didn’t even matter if I misunderstood her or not, because I had Shirakawa-san now. There was no need to waver here.

Kurose-san gazed at me with glistening eyes. She probably had no makeup on.

To suppress my desires, I spoke up with a face as empty of expression as possible. “Thanks. But I already have a girlfriend.”

At that moment, the light disappeared from the large pupils of Kurose-san’s eyes and her face went stiff. Immediately afterward, she put on a smile again

and leaned toward me.

“Oh, really? Who is it? Is she from this school?” she asked.

“Uhh, well, that’s...” I began, looking away and racking my brains in vain on how to reply. I hadn’t expected her to press the subject.

“Come on, why not tell me? I won’t tell anyone!” she pressed.

I thought this over silently. It was true that Kurose-san had only just transferred to my school and didn’t particularly get along with anyone yet. I felt like there wasn’t anyone she’d go telling about this.

If she learned that my girlfriend was the stunning gyaru Shirakawa-san, perhaps she’d refrain from talking to me in the future. But as I wavered on the subject of keeping my relationship a secret, considering telling only Kurose-san about it...

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” said the math teacher upon returning to the classroom, putting an end to all the chatting.

Then, come break time, I felt Kurose-san’s stare from beside me. And as I wondered whether I should tell her or not, in case she asked me again...

“Hey, you’re Kashima Ryuto, right?” came an intimidating female voice.

I didn’t remember doing anything wrong, but it still gave me a fright. Looking behind me, I saw a girl in an imposing stance diagonally to the rear of my seat.

“Y-Yes...” I replied.

I knew her. In fact, she was Shirakawa-san’s best friend, the super gyaru Yamana Nicole.

“I need a word with you.”

“What...?!”

What could she possibly want with me...?

That day after school, I was drinking a shake in a fast-food café in front of the train station, with Yamana Nicole across the table. She’d been eating french

fries without a word for some time now, scrutinizing me the whole time.

Fashionwise, she was a gyaru. Her brown-dyed hair was even closer to blonde than Shirakawa-san's. A necklace sat on her open chest, earrings hung from her ears, and she had flashy nails—but other qualities, like the sharp look in her eyes, gave the slight impression that she was a delinquent. So when she'd told me to come with her alone, I couldn't help fearing she was going to challenge me to a one-on-one or something.

She hadn't said anything even after I'd stayed silent for a while, so I finally spoke up, no longer able to put up with the weird mood.

"Um, uhh... I'm very sorry... Did I...do something...?" I knew she was my classmate, but I unintentionally spoke with undue politeness.

Yamana-san furrowed her brows and glared at me. "Huh?"

The menacing nature of her glare made me shudder. I felt like grabbing my bag and hightailing it out of there.

But then she said, "Just so you know, I'm not mad at you or anything. I was born with these eyes."

"What...?"

Now that she mentioned it, the look in her eyes may have been sharp, but I couldn't really call her expression grim. In Japanese, Nicole's name was written in a cutesy way that could be interpreted as "to smile"—so much for that.

"French fries taste like shit when they're cold, so I'll talk after I eat, okay?" she said.

"Oh, okay..."

In contrast with her french fries, my shake needed to be left alone for a while before I could even drink it—it was frozen stiff. I tried to sip at it anyway while I waited for Yamana-san to finish eating her meal.

Then, once her sleeve of french fries was finally empty, Yamana-san wiped her fingertips with a paper napkin and looked at me again.

"So, like, didja know Runa's birthday is Sunday next week?"

Her words left me speechless all of a sudden. “Huh...?”

“You serious? Guess you really didn’t know,” she said, looking at me with mild astonishment on her face. “Aren’t birthdays one of the first things you wonder about right after you start dating? Then again, this is *you* we’re talking about, so I figured you probably didn’t ask her.”

“Huh? What do you mean...?”

In response to my question, Yamana-san shot me a glance. While she probably wasn’t actually angry, that sharp look of hers was nothing but a source of fear for me.

“You don’t look the smart type.”

I didn’t know how to reply to that.

“Ah, I’m not trash-talking you here or anything. It’s the smart guys that cheat, so.”

Judging by what she was saying, Yamana-san saw me as a guy who wouldn’t cheat. I supposed it wasn’t bad to hear that, if that was what she meant...

“So, didja get that? Do something for her birthday,” she said.

I nodded. “O-Okay...”

“Anyway, that’s all I’ve got for you. Just wanted to talk about it without Runa around.”

Yamana-san was moving to leave, but I hurriedly called out to her. “Um...!”

She looked at me, standing with her tray in her hands. “What?”

Her sharp gaze made me nervous. “Could you tell me what Shirakawa-san likes?” I asked. “I want to know what to give her for her birthday.”

Yamana-san frowned a little. “Why don’t you ask her yourself? You’re her boyfriend and all. Isn’t it faster that way?”

“I guess, but...” Casting my eyes down, I gazed at my Mabbit-encased smartphone on the table. “Shirakawa-san gave me this phone case.”

“I know. I went with her to get it,” Yamana-san curtly replied.

I bowed deeply. “She didn’t say a word about it to me until the one-week anniversary of our relationship. She gave it to me as a surprise, so I thought I should surprise *her* this time.”

Hearing that, Yamana-san gave me a worried look. “Can you, though? You don’t look the type who’s good at that sorta thing. Runa will be happy even if you don’t try too hard and just do something normal.”

“I don’t know if I *can*, but I want to *try*. I think Shirakawa-san is a girl who always tries to make her boyfriend happy.”

She’d consistently been like that ever since she’d attempted to have sex with me on the first day of our relationship.

“She was trying to please me when she got me this phone case too...” I continued. “I think that’s because she herself is the type who’d be happy to get something as a surprise.”

Yamana-san’s expression softened once she heard my words. Instead, she directed a probing look at me.

“Maybe Runa was right,” she uttered after a pause. “You *are* a little weird. I thought you had your head stuck in the clouds, but some of the stuff you say...”

I wasn’t sure whether she was complimenting or disparaging me, but she seemed to be smiling just a little.

“Fine,” she said, placing her tray on the table and sitting down again. “I’ll tell you about Runa, so you *better* make her birthday a good one.”

“I-I will!”

Thus, Yamana-san and I held a secret meeting where I got a lecture on what Shirakawa-san liked.

The next day, as I was heading to school in the morning, I ran into Shirakawa-san at Station K’s ticket gates.

“Morning, Ryuto.”

“Huh?! Morning... Wait, what are you...?”

“I can’t talk to you at school, right?” Keeping her greetings short, Shirakawa-san showed me her smartphone. “Is this true?”

It seemed like there was a LINE chat window up on the screen.

Runa, Yuna, Akari (3)

Yuna: Nicole was on a date in McDonalds with some plain guy from our class lol

Akari: For real? Lmao

Upon seeing the photo this Yuna person had then sent, I let out a small shriek. It showed me and Yamana-san from a distance as we talked at McDonalds the previous day.

“You saw Nicole?” asked Shirakawa-san.

“Ah, yeah...”

It appeared Yamana-san really hadn’t told her anything.

“Shirakawa-san,” I continued, “are you free Sunday next week?”

“Huh? Why do you ask?” She seemed taken aback. “H-Hey, answer me first. What did you and Nicole talk about?” Shirakawa-san started to look anxious.

“No, seriously, are you free Sunday next week?” I asked again. I was desperate to advance the conversation too.

“Huh? Sunday? Sure, I still don’t have any plans. Why?”

“Then would you mind letting me do something for your birthday?”

She opened her eyes wide at those words.

“Yamana-san told me your birthday’s coming up,” I explained.

For a while, Shirakawa-san stood silent with her mouth agape. In the next instant, her face brightened up.

“Oh, so *that’s* what it was!” Her anxiety had vanished without a trace. “Man, you should’ve just told me sooner.”

“Ah, sorry... I just thought I should invite you *before* talking about your birthday.”

Being an introvert, this was a bad quirk of mine—I couldn’t have a conversation if it wasn’t going the way I’d planned beforehand.

“Oh well,” said Shirakawa-san, looking completely back to normal.

I bowed to her. “Sorry I didn’t give it more thought... I never even asked you when your birthday was.”

“It’s okay, I’m the one who should be sorry for ambushing you like this.” With that, Shirakawa-san readjusted her grip on her school bag and turned toward the escalator. “Well, I’ll get going to school ahead of you. It would be bad if people saw us together, right?”

“Ah... Yeah. Thanks,” I replied in a hurry.

She lightly waved at me, then disappeared into the crowd at the station.

“What was that all about...?” I wondered, heading to the platform by myself.

I thought about her face from when she’d pulled up the LINE chat. She hadn’t seemed like her usual self, and she’d looked anxious when she’d thought I was trying to change the subject. I wouldn’t exactly say Shirakawa-san had looked angry, but her face had said that something didn’t sit right with her.

“You saw Nicole?”

“H-Hey, answer me first. What did you and Nicole talk about?”

Was it...jealousy?

“Yeah, there’s no way,” I concluded.

Shirakawa-san couldn’t possibly get jealous because of me. Although I *would* be happy if she eventually came to like me enough to get jealous.

I was going to steadily deepen our relationship without getting impatient. That was one of the reasons I wanted to please Shirakawa-san on our upcoming birthday date. And I would use the week’s time I had before that to prepare a perfect date itinerary.

Secretly burning with enthusiasm, I got on the train that had stopped at the

platform together with a large crowd.

And then it was Shirakawa-san's birthday.

I'd done everything I could over the past week. Using what Yamana-san had told me about Shirakawa-san's preferences, I'd gone around the city practically every day after school, by myself, to scout out where I would take her on our date. I'd even said "Happy Birthday" over LINE at exactly midnight the previous day.

Since I'd let Shirakawa-san decide where we would go on our first date, this was my first time bringing her somewhere.

"Morning, Ryuto!" exclaimed Shirakawa-san as we met up inside Station A.

We'd agreed to meet at 11 a.m. to make sure she got enough sleep, even if she'd talked to Yamana-san until late the previous night.

She was cute as always. Her tight pink minidress had a bold, sexy design: while it was high-necked, a rhomboid cutout revealed her cleavage. Her thick-soled, high-heeled sandals and silver-colored handbag were very gyaru-like too.

"Where we going today?" asked Shirakawa-san as we headed to the platform.

"Well, I was thinking of heading to Harajuku. Does that sound good?"

As she heard my reply, her eyes began to sparkle. "For real?! Hell *yeah* I wanna go! I *love* Harajuku!"

Seeing her joy, I recalled what Yamana-san had told me.

"It's all about Harajuku with Runa. If you don't know where to take her, just head there or to Shibuya and watch her get all fired up."

She hadn't been kidding...

I could already feel that things were going well on this date.

As we arrived in Harajuku, I first took Shirakawa-san to a particular café. It was a place with a small storefront in a back alley off Takeshita Street—a street full of young people.

“Here you go,” I said, handing her a bubble tea outside the café. It was their specialty.

“Thanks!” She took a big sip, then said, eyes sparkling, “I love it!”

“Runa loves bubble tea. She says there’s no limit to how much of it she can drink. We don’t have much money though, so she can only afford to drink one every time.”

“Man, there’s nothing like bubble tea! Thanks, Ryuto!”

Just like Yamana-san had said, Shirakawa-san was really enjoying herself.

“How much was it? I’ll pay for mine,” said Shirakawa-san.

As she reached for her wallet in her bag, I motioned for her to stop.

“Oh, no, that’s fine. I’ll treat you,” I replied.

“Huh? But...”

“It’s your birthday, so...consider it a present.”

Creases formed between Shirakawa-san’s brows and she looked troubled for a while at my words. Eventually, she said, “Okay, I’ll take you up on that, then! Thank you, Ryuto!” with a happy smile.

Seeing her like that, I produced a piece of paper from my shoulder bag.

“Hm? What’s that?” she asked.

“Shirakawa-san, how was the bubble tea you had just now?”

“What do you mean? It tasted great, of course.”

I unfolded the paper. It was a printed map of Harajuku with bubble tea cafés circled in red. Written in the margins were my impressions after I’d actually gone to a given café and tried the bubble tea it had to offer, as well as my analysis of the taste of each. I could’ve done all this on my smartphone, but doing it on paper felt like doing independent research at school. That made it all the more fulfilling.

“Wow! What is this map? It’s amazing!” exclaimed Shirakawa-san in surprise, looking at the fruits of my labor.

It was difficult to say how much bubble tea I'd had over the past week. The fare to Harajuku hadn't been covered by my commuter pass, and I'd had to pay for the drinks themselves, so in the end, I'd used up a substantial amount of the money I'd gotten on New Year's. I'd brought the remainder of it to use today.

"The bubble tea you had just now has not only a high concentration of milk, but a fairly strong tea aroma as well. Also, the size and the chewiness of the boba are just right, so overall, it's the most balanced one around. That's why I had you try it first."

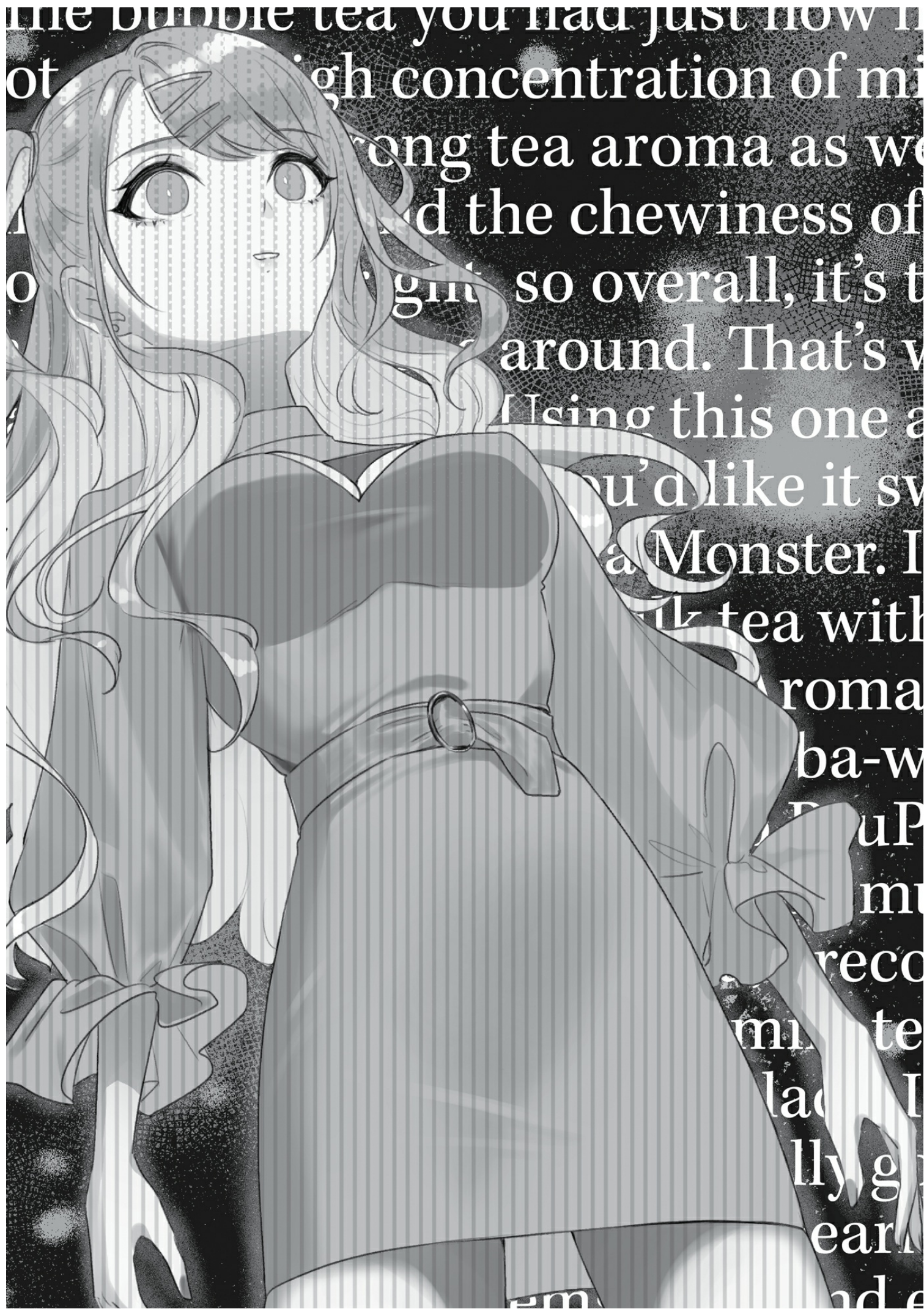
Eager to show the results of my hard work over the past week, I couldn't help talking rapidly. I wanted to stop since it might creep Shirakawa-san out, but thinking about it only made my speech faster and faster.

"Using this one as a point of reference, if you'd like it sweeter, I recommend Tapioca Monster. If you prefer more of a plain milk tea with a richer tea flavor, we'll go to Aroma Tea House. Or, if you like chewy boba—well, it's a bit far, but we can go to PruPru. Otherwise, if you don't care too much about it tasting like milk tea, I recommend the rich brown sugar milk tea from Tiger Café."

Crap. I was in gloomy nerd mode. I knew I was being cringe and wanted to stop myself, but having come this far, my desire to put all of my knowledge on display was too strong.

"In the first place, I have to wonder if milk tea really goes best with tapioca pearls. The pearls have no flavor by themselves, and even if you give them one by soaking them in brown sugar syrup or something, it's still hard to get it to permeate to the center of the pearls, right? And you know how you have to chew them for a while on top of that? What that means is that, inevitably, there will be a moment when the pearls lose their taste in your mouth. I think the reason tapioca pearls are served in a liquid—milk tea—is to make up for that, but like, isn't there only so much milk tea can do? I mean, milk tea by itself is already a complete, delicious beverage, right? You can make it a little sweeter or raise the concentration of the milk, but you kinda can't make it fully escape its original form—at the end of the day, bubble tea is still only 'something tasty even if you drink it as milk tea.' After all, pearl milk tea is called 'milk tea' for a reason, and it has its pride to protect as such. Still, I think the best drink to go with tapioca pearls should be something sugary with a more viscous texture. In

that sense, I think the coconut milk drink with tapioca pearls that was popular in the nineties was a more complete dessert. When I learned about it the other day, I looked for it in supermarkets and gave it a try. I found that since coconut milk is rich in flavor and sweetness, and because the tapioca pearls are smaller, the pearls do a good job of accentuating the taste of the milk. They're like croutons in soup. Those are almost flavorless too, but if you eat them when you're tired of the soup's homogeneous taste, they neutralize the saltiness. And they're fun to eat because they're firm, right? In comparison, I think it's hard to call milk tea and tapioca pearls a match made in heaven in almost any kind of pearl milk tea. If you ask me, brown sugar milk tea is the most delicious among the currently trending bubble tea flavors. It's overwhelmingly sweet thanks to the brown sugar dissolved in fresh milk, but when you chew the pearls soaked in brown sugar syrup, they still eventually lose their flavor, so in the end, that's the best you can do. Either way, that's my top recommendation today."



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I talked up a storm as I looked at my own cup of bubble tea, but I came to my senses with a start. When I looked up at last, I saw Shirakawa-san with her mouth agape.

“Ah...” came out of my mouth.

Now I've done it. Damn... This went beyond “too creepy.” She must've been recoiling so hard that she would practically be on the other side of the planet by now...

As I stood there turning pale with such thoughts running through my head, Shirakawa-san smiled in a way that looked forced.

“W-Wow, Ryuto. You like bubble tea that much?”

“Huh? Y-Yeah... Ah, no.” It wasn't worth lying about, so I decided to reply honestly. “I heard you like bubble tea...so I did my research for today. There are way too many bubble tea cafés in this area, and I wanted to take you somewhere you'd like...”

“What? So...you did it for me?”

I swore I noticed her eyes sparkle for a moment there.

“Y-Yeah... But I guess I went overboard...”

“You really did!”

I flinched at her words, but when I looked at her face, she was smiling.

“That's hilarious, though. I mean, you're an actual bubble tea critic now! Would someone normally go that far?” She laughed as she looked between the map and my face.

“S-Still, it's not like I went to *all* of the marked cafés,” I countered. “I relied on reviews and blog posts for some of them, you know?”

“That doesn't change the fact it's a lot of work, right? You didn't have to go that far,” she said, traces of a smile still on her face.

I smiled too. “Y-Yeah, I think so too. Although...” What had motivated me to go to such lengths was something more pure. “I wanted to come to like at least one of the things that you like.”

Even if I went a little too far, I added inwardly, casting my eyes down as I reflected on my actions.

After some time passed without Shirakawa-san reacting in any way, I looked up again. My next thought was, *Oh, crap.*

She stood there and stared at me, frozen. With her mouth slightly agape, her face said she was dumbfounded in shock, or maybe simply surprised, depending on how you wanted to interpret it.

Now what...? Maybe she's creeped out by my cringey line that made it all too obvious I'm a virgin. Was what I said really so heavy...? Should I pass it off as a joke, even now that some time has passed?

As I nervously looked at her with these thoughts coursing through my head, Shirakawa-san's expression finally changed. Her cheeks flushed, and her lips curled up into a smile.

"Huh...?" I uttered in reaction.

My words *hadn't* creeped her out?

As my internal turmoil continued, Shirakawa-san spoke bashfully with a happy expression on her face. "For real? That's...the first time someone's said something like that to me."

At this moment, Shirakawa-san looked so pure and sweet that it didn't match her loud, fashionable appearance.

"Thank you, Ryuto," she whispered.

The sight of her reaction made my heart swell, ridding it of my worries.

Shirakawa-san gave me her best smile. "I feel like today's bubble tea was the best I've ever had!"

After that, we went around Harajuku's bubble tea cafés in succession. Shirakawa-san proved to be truly insatiable when it came to bubble tea and fully downed her cup at every single café we went to.

"Hey, Ryuto, you're not gonna have more?" she asked me.

“I had a cup at the last place, so...”

“But this one’s great too, you know?”

“My stomach is all sloshy already...”

I wondered how she was fine drinking so much despite wearing a tight dress. She’d had so much bubble tea already, so where had all the water from it gone?

“Hm... Oh well. Here, have a sip of mine,” said Shirakawa-san, holding out her plastic cup to me.

The straw sticking out of her drink had red lip gloss with fine sparkles on it. My heartbeat shot up at the unexpected opportunity for an indirect kiss.

“You don’t want it? Are you *that* full?” she asked, since I was frozen up.

“N-No... I-I’ll take a sip. Thanks,” I said, hurriedly taking the cup and bringing my mouth to the straw.

“How is it? Isn’t cheese foam and rock salt just *crazy* good? They’re really the best toppings!”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right,” I replied after a pause.

Honestly, I couldn’t really tell the taste due to how fast my heart was pounding. Shirakawa-san took the cup back from me and started sipping on the straw again.

Wow, a mutual indirect kiss...

Then again, I was probably the only one thinking that way. Maybe Shirakawa-san unconsciously did this even with her male friends. But just as the thought of it made me a little dejected...

Shirakawa-san looked at me and smirked. “We just had an indirect kiss.”

“What...? What?!”

How dirty of you to bring that up after a delay, Shirakawa-san!

“Wow, look at you, Ryuto! You’re red as a tomato!” she added, teasing me with a grin as I suddenly got embarrassed.

Perhaps the pairing of a plain guy and a true gyaru straight out of a fashion

magazine looked mismatched to the people around us, but at this moment, I was incredibly happy to spend time with Shirakawa-san.

Before I knew it, we'd ended up skipping both lunch and snacks, hitting bubble tea café after café. We visited six of them in all. And to my surprise, Shirakawa-san had ordered a bubble tea for herself at each one—and had drunk every last drop.

"Man, I'm so bubble-full now! Thanks, Ryuto!" she exclaimed.

"You're done with bubble tea now?" I asked.

"Yeah, after *this* much. I've never been so satisfied before!" Her pleased smile served as proof of her words.

By now, it was nearly six in the evening. Naturally, buying bubble tea hadn't been without its difficulties, and we'd had to line up for it at every café—and at some for longer than at others. We'd even had to walk close to Shibuya at one point, so it all seemed to have taken quite a long time.

"Well, then..." I began.

Just like on our previous date, I'd decided beforehand that we'd go home before it got too late. We were both still high school students and minors, and I thought of this as one way of treasuring Shirakawa-san.

Regrets continued to gnaw at me. *To be honest, I want to have sex, though... Man, I should've done it back then in her room...*

Still, this was Shirakawa-san's birthday, and I wanted her to do only things she liked. First, I'd treat her to bubble tea...

"Ah!" I exclaimed, recalling something.

"What's wrong, Ryuto?" asked Shirakawa-san.

I silently thought for a while, remembering that I'd yet to buy her a present.

"You should ask Runa on your date what she wants for her present. People have different tastes in accessories and stuff like that, so even between girls, it's hard to pick something someone else will like. That is, unless you have a ton of

confidence in your taste.”

I didn't have any, of course, which was why I'd planned to follow Yamana-san's advice and have Shirakawa-san choose her own gift. And I'd intended to let her have her fill of bubble tea first...but I'd never expected we'd be going around bubble tea cafés until such a late hour.

And that wasn't the end of it. As I opened my wallet in Shirakawa-san's blind spot to check how much money I had left, I saw just barely over a thousand yen.

“No way...” I said.

I'd left home with ten thousand, so how had things ended up like this...? Bubble tea was way too expensive.

“Um... Shirakawa-san,” I timidly began. “I'm sorry... I wanted to let you choose your birthday present, but I only have a thousand yen left. If there's anything you want that I can buy with that...”

I knew it wouldn't make me look good, but I was honest anyway.

“Huh?” Shirakawa-san opened her eyes wide in apparent surprise. “But you already gave me a present. You treated me to bubble tea.”

“No, I mean, I wanted to give you something lasting as well...”

“Then how about this? *This* is what I want.”

With that, Shirakawa-san took the paper from my hands—my homemade bubble tea map, which we'd used the whole day as we walked around.

“This is *amazing*. There's no other map like this in the entire world. All the bubble tea I had today was super tasty. And it was all thanks to your research,” continued Shirakawa-san with a happy smile, looking at the folded map.

“Nobody's ever done something like this for me before, so...I want this map as a keepsake. Isn't it basically a proof of your love, showing how far you went for me?”

Her words moved me deeply. “Shirakawa-san...”

“I'll take good care of this map, so maybe we can go on another bubble tea date sometime?” she asked with upturned eyes.

I gave a deep nod. “Of course... Oh, but I’ll update it when the time comes. There might be new cafés by then,” I happily replied, prompting a laugh from Shirakawa-san.

“Thanks, Ryuto.” She directed a dazzling smile at me. “This was the best seventeenth birthday I could’ve ever had!”

With that, the birthday date came to a successful end.

When Monday came, my head was even more full of Shirakawa-san than usual. I recalled her ecstatic smile as she’d said, “It’s great!” after sipping on bubble tea, her slightly bashful smile, and all the other expressions she’d shown only to me...

She smelled so nice too. It was that same smell as in her room... Ah, I really should’ve done it with her back then...

At some point while I was absentmindedly thinking things over, class had ended and break time had started. *I’ve gotta stop daydreaming so much. I’ve never gone this far before.* But as I fretted over the subject all by myself, sitting at my desk...

“Hey, Kashima-kun,” came a voice from a seat beside me.

Turning to the source of it, I saw Kurose-san looking my way. Both of her hands were tucked under her chin, which made the too-long sleeves of the cardigan she had on top of her summer uniform stand out in an aggressively cute way. Perhaps it was because she was so tiny.

“What?” I asked.

Kurose-san gave me a knowing smile. “Who’s your girlfriend?” she asked. “I’m really curious. Could you tell me?”

“Oh...”

That topic again. I’d never told her because the teacher had come back just as I was about to say it last time.

“To tell the truth...” I began—but then suddenly recalled the LINE chat Shirakawa-san had shown me and went silent.

Yuna: Nicole was on a date in McDonalds with some plain guy from our class lol

Akari: For real? Lmao

It seemed those girls had found it funny that a guy like me was getting along with a good-looking girl. That meant that if people found out... If it became clear that Shirakawa-san and I were dating, they'd laugh at her. That was harder for me to bear than people telling me I was a poor match for her.

"I really can't tell you after all. Sorry," I finally said, and got up from my seat.

If I didn't want everyone to know something, I shouldn't tell Kurose-san either. I couldn't cause trouble for Shirakawa-san for the sake of showing off. That was my reasoning.

Chapter 3.5: Kurose Maria's Diary

Kashima Ryuto is so annoying.

I've made almost all the guys in this class mine over my first week at this school. Only he stubbornly refuses to bow to me. Maybe he's on guard since I've rejected him before, but this development is throwing a wrench in my plans.

Who does he think he is? I know he doesn't have a girlfriend—he can't even tell me who she is. It's really pissing me off how some gloomy guy nobody likes is acting full of himself like he's hot shit! You should stay quiet and fall for me over and over again.

Speaking of things that piss me off... There's that bitch too.

I overheard some guys chatting in a corner of the classroom today.

"Kurose-san is cute, but there's no one I want to date more than Shirakawa-san." The hell is wrong with that guy?! What does he see in that slut? But a lot of other guys prefer her too...

I'm sick of you standing in my way, Shirakawa Runa. *I* need to be the first. The most loved.

It was like that at my previous school, and at my middle school too.

"There's no one I want to date more than Kurose Maria." Now *that's* what I'll make all the guys say.

And for that... Watch me, Shirakawa Runa. This time, *I'll* be taking things from you. I'm not the girl I once was.

Chapter 4

For some time after having gotten through Shirakawa-san's birthday date without incident, I led a satisfactory school life while happily recalling how pleased she'd been on the aforementioned date.

However, I began to notice a slight change in the air around her one day.

As I'd been a Shirakawa-san watcher since before going out with her, I'd follow her with my eyes without even realizing I was doing it. As a result, I was sensitive to the mood around her.

While she was sociable and liked by everyone, there were, of course, people in my class who didn't have the courage to strike up a conversation with her—just like I had been until a short while ago.

Anyway, the first change I noticed was that such classmates of mine had become more conscious of Shirakawa-san than usual.

"Have you heard what they say about Shirakawa-san?"

"Ah, yeah."

"I wonder if it's true."

"Who knows...?"

They began to whisper behind her back even more than before, saying things like that.

The next difference I noticed had to do with people in the middle of the class hierarchy—those who could talk to Shirakawa-san normally but weren't particularly close with her. They were starting to stare at her curiously.

"Hey, have you heard?"

"Yeah. Go ask her if it's true."

"There's no way I could ask Shirakawa-san herself, you know."

"Yeah, no argument there..."

What in the world were they talking about?

With that question on my mind, I found myself keeping watch over her surroundings more than usual. It was then that my eyes landed on a certain guy—the same member of the soccer club who'd been frequently talking to Shirakawa-san as of late.

"Can I talk to you for a sec?" he asked her during a long break one day, inviting her to chat outside the classroom.

"Huh? What is it?" While Shirakawa-san seemed to find it strange, she followed him anyway.

The two of them headed to an empty classroom nearby.

I chased them in a hurry and peeked through a gap in the door. I was mentally prepared to jump out at any time if the soccer guy did something funny—not that I knew what I'd even do after that.

"So, what's up?" asked Shirakawa-san, her smile free from tension.

I found the fact that she behaved the same way around both guys and girls to be a wonderful side of hers. Observing my other classmates, I'd noticed that there were surprisingly few people like that.

"Wanna go out with me?" asked the soccer guy.

I was so shocked that my vision turned white. I *had* suspected his sights were set on Shirakawa-san, but still...

I held my breath, wondering how she would reply.

"Sorry, but I already have a boyfriend," she uttered nonchalantly.

"Huh?!" The soccer guy was taken aback. "Akari said you were single, though."

"Oh... Yeah, I haven't told Akari," said Shirakawa-san with an uneasy smile.

"Who's your boyfriend, anyway? Is he from this school?" asked the guy after a moment, looking even more uncomfortable than her.

His questions startled me.

"Ah..." awkwardly began Shirakawa-san, her expression turning stiff. "It's a

secret.”

Shirakawa-san, that's as good as telling him your boyfriend goes to this school!

“Who is it? What club's he from?” As I expected, the soccer guy began to press her.

“Come on, it doesn't matter.” Shirakawa-san was trying to dodge his questioning, but it wasn't working at all.



“Why can’t you tell me? Can I take it he’s not the kinda guy you want to tell people about?”

His words shook me up once again.

Of course, the real reason Shirakawa-san wasn’t talking about me was because I’d asked her not to. But...perhaps, deep inside, she might’ve felt embarrassed to tell people that *I* was her boyfriend. From an outsider’s perspective, a sunny guy like the one she was currently talking to would certainly look like a better match for her...

I’d almost started to feel a little down again, but then...

“No,” replied Shirakawa-san. “I’d be completely fine talking about him, but he’s super shy. He’d rather people didn’t know that we’re dating.”

“The hell is *that* supposed to mean?” The soccer guy wasn’t satisfied with her answer. “Runa, is there seriously a guy out there who wouldn’t want to say he’s dating you? He’s not one of the total dorks in our class by any chance, is he?”

I was shocked by the fact he’d hit the nail right on the head.

“Ah, what am I saying?” he then said. “There’s no way a guy like that would be going out with you... Hey, at least tell me what club he’s in. He’s not in mine, right?”

“Nope, he’s not in the soccer club.”

“Basketball club, then?”

“No.”

“Tennis club?”

“Nuh-uh.”

Come on, Shirakawa-san, I know exactly where this is going! You’re going to say “It’s a secret” when he guesses correctly and it’ll be completely obvious! Please notice!

“What, is he not in any club at all?” asked the guy.

“Hmm... Maybe? It’s a secret!” she said.

“So he is...”

See?!

The soccer guy had splendidly found the correct answer.

“You realize only losers don’t join any clubs, right?” he said. “What’s so good about a guy like that?”

I’d join a Gameplay Video Club if there were one or something similar, all right?

Anyway, it was maddening to hear someone speak as though club activities were everything in life.

“Still, now I get why you don’t want to say who he is,” continued the guy. “You must be too embarrassed to tell people you’re going out with someone so boring.”

Wow, he’s really ripping into me...

Maybe he was getting back at me because Shirakawa-san had turned him down, but everything he was saying was making me really angry. At the same time, however, I was slipping into self-loathing—with my lack of self-confidence, I couldn’t completely deny his words.

I could tell a guy like him would’ve been more suitable to be her boyfriend. As painful as it was to admit it, the two of them struck me as a good match.

Perhaps even Shirakawa-san thought the same—I was sure all of her previous boyfriends had been handsome, sunny guys like him... It was a distressing thought.

“That’s not true. Like I said, I’d be fine with talking about him if it were up to me,” Shirakawa-san calmly replied. “I think he’s a nice guy even if he’s not in any clubs. Besides, neither am I.”

“Oh, uh...” It looked like the soccer guy was searching for an excuse so Shirakawa-san wouldn’t think he’d disparaged her.

She cut him off before he could. “I don’t think my boyfriend is boring—I chose to go out with him. But he doesn’t want people to know, and I want to respect his wishes.” She wore a kind, considerate smile as she explained herself. “I

wouldn't be embarrassed even if the whole world knew we were going out."

Shirakawa-san...

Her words made my love for her wash over me. She was such an amazing girlfriend—the most wonderful girl in the world and way too good for me. I was ashamed of myself for being swayed by this guy's words for even a moment and suspecting Shirakawa-san really didn't want to tell people she was going out with me.

It was hard to believe she would talk that way about me to other people—especially to a guy who'd just confessed to her. Perhaps I could afford to be more confident as her boyfriend—more confident in the fact she'd chosen me.

As those thoughts passed through my mind...

"Fine... Then pick me when you're done with him," said the soccer guy with a mean smile. "You're gonna make him spend a lot of money and then move on once he's broke, right?"

"Huh? What're you talking about?" asked Shirakawa-san.

"That's what everyone says. No wonder you chose a guy who's not in any clubs—he can have a part-time job. He's probably got money."

"What?!"

Anger appeared on Shirakawa-san's face, but the soccer guy gave her a nasty grin and left the classroom. I hurried away from the door and pretended to be coincidentally passing by, but then I started listening to what my classmates gathered in the hallway were talking about.

"Did you hear about Shirakawa Runa?"

"Oh, yeah. She's a manipulative slut who makes her boyfriends spend money on her and then dumps them, right?"

"Hot girls can get away with anything, I guess."

"I wish a girl would smash and dash on me too!" shouted a guy in jest, prompting the other guys to laugh.

There was a group of girls talking about Shirakawa-san as well.

“Is Shirakawa-san’s boyfriend that rich?”

“I was in her class last year, but I didn’t know who she was going out with either. She seemed to date guys from other schools and college students.”

“Huh... None of them ever lasted more than two or three months though, yeah?”

“She’s got such good looks, but she still only sees any one guy for a few months at most. Doesn’t that mean...?”

“Yeah, makes you think *those* rumors are probably true...”

“Oh, crap.”

At that point, one of those girls looked my way and got flustered. The next moment, the whole group filed back into our classroom.

Looking behind me, I saw that Shirakawa-san had just entered the hallway. She stood there in blank amazement—perhaps she had overheard what people were saying about her.

I impulsively went up to her. “Shirakawa-san...”

Upon noticing me, she smiled. “Ryuto.” I started to open my mouth, but before I could speak, she added, “I wonder what that’s all about. It looks like there’s some weird rumor going around.”

“Yeah... Who could’ve spread something like that...?”

“But it’s okay!” she quickly replied with a cheerful smile, interrupting me. “It’s just a rumor. It doesn’t bother me at all.”

With that, she walked past me and returned to our classroom. The sight of her made my chest hurt—she looked uncharacteristically weak from behind.

“What the hell is this rumor? Who’s behind all this...?” I wondered.

Claiming that Shirakawa-san made her boyfriends spend as much money on her as they could before moving on to the next one once her current one was broke?

“Yeah, like hell,” I said. I knew better than anyone that this rumor couldn’t be further from the truth.

“Then how about this? This is what I want.”

Shirakawa-san had smiled happily when I'd given her my homemade map with zero monetary value as her birthday present.

“Take it. It's for you.”

And she'd spent her own allowance to get me a phone case matching hers.

Claiming that she was just dating guys for their money? Ridiculous.

If she really were doing that, there was no way she'd be going out with a gloomy guy like me in the first place. Sad as it was to say about myself, I really didn't look like somebody with much in his wallet.

Who could've spread this completely unfounded rumor? I promised myself I'd never let them get away with it.

While this rumor was spreading, Kurose-san's popularity in my class was shooting through the roof.

“Man, Kurose-san is so nice...”

Guys in my class would say things like that, talking about her in our classroom during breaks. And as I kept my eye on Kurose-san here and there, I could clearly see the reason for it.

When one of our classes ended and break began, Kurose-san dropped her notebook. A guy sitting diagonally behind her picked it up and tried to return it to her. Kurose-san herself had gotten up from her seat to pick up the notebook as well, and at that point, she touched the guy's arm.

“Ah, sorry. Thank you,” she said, bending over slightly and gazing up at him with upturned eyes.

“Oh, i-it's no problem,” the guy stammered back. He went beet red and looked away from her.

Then, on another day...

Kurose-san and I both ended up on class duty due to where our seats were. After morning homeroom, the teacher asked us to take all of the students'

health reports to the staff room.

“Let’s carry half each,” I suggested.

While we were bringing reports for all the students in our class there, they were simply paper files with a few sheets inside each one. They weren’t all that heavy. Since there were more guys overall, I thought we’d be just fine if I carried the boys’ files and Kurose-san carried those that were about the girls.

“Man, these are heavy...” Kurose-san uttered with a troubled look on her face. She tottered as she began to take a few steps.

“Huh? Really?” I asked.

Since she was petite, she *did* look like she was struggling with the load in her hands, but I still had trouble believing it. And then...

“I’ll carry them for you,” piped up a guy from my class, taking the files from her. “Huh? They’re not heavy at all.”

“Oh, really?” asked Kurose-san, making a surprised face. “You’re so strong, Saito-kun. It’s too heavy for a girl!”

“Really...?” Saito looked much more satisfied than his reply would suggest, after which he carried the files for her.

He left the staff room once his hands were empty. Then, after Kurose-san and I had reported to the teacher and were heading back to our classroom...

“You have to fill out the class journal when you’re on class duty, right?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Oh, I have a few things to do after school today... What do I do...?” she said, looking troubled.

“You don’t need to put in that much effort. It’ll only take two minutes.”

Had this been me in my first year of high school, I’d totally have enthusiastically offered to do it for her. Just like the guy who’d picked up her notebook, and Saito too.

However, there was no doubt that Kurose-san was *that* sort of girl. She kind

of unconsciously took on an attitude that made guys want to protect her and made them interested in her... It wasn't like I was special to her.

Since she'd already made me taste the bitterness of rejection once and I was gradually falling deeper and deeper in love with Shirakawa-san, I could now find it in me to keep a presence of mind when dealing with Kurose-san.

She hung her head in silence for a short while. "Tsk."

What?! Did she just click her tongue?! I-I must've imagined it...

As I thought that, she looked up again.

"Kashima-kun, you have a grudge against me, don't you...?"

Her large eyes glistened like those of a Chihuahua, unexpectedly making me flustered.

"Huh?! What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Are you being mean to me because I didn't return your feelings back then?"

"Hey, I'm not being mean to you at all!"

Why was she saying such things to me all of a sudden? Was it because I'd refused to take on the responsibility of filling out the class journal?

"Okay, I'll take care of the journal," I hastily added. It was safer to do that than to risk the guys in my class ganging up on me if people started saying I'd made her cry.

Her face brightened up and she flashed me a pure smile. "Really? You're so sweet..." She blinked at me in a nearly suggestive way, then gazed at me with upturned eyes. "I like sweet guys like you."

"Huh...?"

What caused me to make a surprised noise was the fact that *this* time, she said those words without insurance in the form of "I think."

Calm down, Ryuto. You know what she's like, and you already have Shirakawa-san.

Kurose-san smiled in satisfaction, as though taking pleasure in my internal turmoil. "It's okay, though. I'll do the journal too."

“Eh?”

“See you later,” she added before briskly walking away.

All I could do was follow her with my eyes in confusion.

“What was that all about...?” I wondered.

At that point, I felt someone’s eyes on me. Turning around, I saw Shirakawa-san standing there.

“Ah, Ryuto...” she said with an unusually serious expression, then checked her surroundings. Once she’d made sure nobody was paying attention to us, she took a step toward me. “Are you on class duty?”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“With Kurose...san?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Did it go okay? No problems?” she asked.

“Huh?”

As I wondered what she meant, Shirakawa-san took another step toward me. She then lowered her voice. “There’s something I need to tell you...”

“Hm? What is it?”

But the moment I asked...

“Ah, there you are, Runa!”

“We’ve been looking for you! What are you doing?”

A group of good-looking girls called out to her from across the hallway, catching her by surprise.

“Ah... I’m coming!” After responding to the girls, she gave me an apologetic look. “Sorry, Ryuto. I’ll tell you next time.”

“It’s okay, go on ahead.”

Once I’d sent her off, I was alone again.

“There’s something I need to tell you...”

“What was she going to talk about...?” I wondered aloud.

I felt like I’d never seen her make such a face before. Did this have something to do with the bad rumor going around lately?

Curious as to what she’d meant to tell me, I found myself absorbed in thought for a while, even after the next class had started.

That day after school, while almost all of my classmates were still idling in the classroom, Kurose-san handed me the class journal.

“Here you go, Kashima-kun,” she said from beside me.

Checking it, I saw that exactly half of today’s entry was completed, with everything written in a concise way. To my surprise, she’d done a perfect job.

“Okay, I’ll turn it in once I’m done filling out my part. You can go now if you want,” I said. I remembered that she’d mentioned she had things to do.

“That aside, have you heard?” she began, leaning toward me.

“Eh? Heard what?”

“What Shirakawa-san is really like.”

“Huh...?” I froze up in shock.

Shirakawa-san was still in the classroom, pleasantly chatting with Yamana-san and others. Was Kurose-san talking about the recent rumor?

As I remained silent, she leaned in close to me, all smiles. “You see, my sister’s junior at her school used to date Shirakawa-san.”

My chest quickly began to ache. I’d done my best to avoid thinking about Shirakawa-san’s exes, so having her dating history come up so nonchalantly in a conversation showed that it was an undeniable fact of her past.

“And? What about it?” I asked after a moment’s pause, just barely maintaining my composure.

Kurose-san smiled, apparently satisfied that I was showing interest. “He said it was exhausting to date her. She twists guys around her finger, thinks it only natural that the guy pays for everything on their dates, and is just plain selfish.”

My first reaction to those words was a large question mark appearing in my mind.

“Was he *really* talking about Shirakawa-san?” I asked.

Kurose-san deeply nodded. “Of course. Her ex-boyfriend said it, so there’s no doubt.”

I went silent at that. If Kurose-san was telling the truth, then the ex-boyfriend in question must’ve been lying. After all, there was no way Shirakawa-san could act like that.

“How much was it? I’ll pay for mine.”

Even when I’d taken her on a date for her birthday, she’d tried to pay for her bubble tea as a matter of course. I couldn’t imagine her thinking the guy was supposed to cover all the date expenses.

Also, *selfish*? Shirakawa-san was considerate even of a boyfriend like me, trying her best to please me.

That said, I now knew the source of the recent disgraceful rumors surrounding Shirakawa-san.

“Kurose-san...” I began.

“Hm? What is it?” she asked, still looking at me cheerfully. She didn’t seem to have noticed the anger in my tone.

“Have you told others about this too?”

“Huh?” She appeared to have finally taken notice of the change in my attitude—her face went a little stiff. “Why do you ask? Hmm... I don’t remember. But it’s the truth, so don’t you think everyone should know?”

I went silent again. Kurose-san had probably fed bullshit like this to my classmates the exact same way, making it sound plausible.

I didn’t know who exactly was lying—whether it was her or the ex-boyfriend she’d mentioned—but I was angry with her for merrily going around and spreading such shameful rumors.

Having no way of knowing about the irritation brewing inside me, Kurose-san

tried to continue. “You know how popular she is, yeah? I hear she takes stock of several guys who she might date next. She moves on to one of them when her current boyfriend doesn’t have any money anymore. Scary, right?”

Kurose-san shot a frightened glance behind her. In that direction was Shirakawa-san, still happily chatting with her friends.

Looking at Shirakawa-san’s cute, carefree smile, the flames of anger inside me rapidly grew in intensity.

“There’re actually other things they say about her,” Kurose-san continued. “For instance...”

“Stop bad-mouthing Shirakawa-san,” I said.

All the chatting in the classroom died down in an instant. Evidently, I had spoken more loudly than I’d meant to. Or perhaps everybody was surprised that a gloomy guy like me had even uttered that name.

“Oh my... What’s the matter, Kashima-kun?” asked Kurose-san, a flustered look on her face.

“What you’re saying is just plain wrong. Shirakawa-san is nothing like that.”

At my words, Kurose-san replied with unconcealed annoyance. “It’s *not* wrong. I really heard it from her ex.”

“Then that ‘ex’ is lying.”

My classmates were observing our argument with curiosity in their eyes. But in this moment, I didn’t care about that. All that was on my mind was protecting Shirakawa-san’s reputation from Kurose-san’s slander.

“Shirakawa-san is nothing like what you said,” I continued. “She’s a kind girl who’s extremely affectionate toward her boyfriends. She acts with their happiness in mind, more than her own.”

Kurose-san’s lips curled up in a sneer. I’d never seen such a look on her face before...but it felt like I was seeing her true nature. It sent a shiver up my spine.

“Are you imagining things or something? You realize I know her ex-boyfriend, right?”

“And I know her current one.”

It was too late for me to back down, and I didn't want to either. I wanted to clear up this misunderstanding. To correct Shirakawa-san's groundless bad rep.

With that single desire occupying my mind, I continued. “Shirakawa-san is a nice girl. She gave her boyfriend a matching item as a surprise for their anniversary, and even when her boyfriend didn't have enough money to buy her a birthday present, she was happy to receive a simple homemade café map.” It was deeply touching to recall our date. “Shirakawa-san isn't selfish. She's a wonderful girlfriend who's always thinking of her boyfriend.”

Hearing my words, Kurose-san narrowed her eyes. “Excuse me? And just who *is* that boyfriend? Does he even exist? Go on, let's hear it if you've got something to say.” Noting my silence, she added, “See, you can't even—”

“I *can* say it.”

My thudding heart pounded in my ears.

“*I'm* Shirakawa-san's boyfriend.”

The classroom quieted down in an instant.

I've said it now. After being so afraid of people finding out, this is how I've gone public with our relationship...

After the kind of silence that could make my ears hurt, a commotion began to slowly develop in the class.

“What...?”

“The hell is he talking about?”

“Hey, is it true? What he said?” The majority seemed to not believe me, and a frivolous guy among them asked Shirakawa-san for the fun of it. “Is he really your boyfriend?”

“Huh...?”

Hearing that astonished voice, I turned around. There was Shirakawa-san,

looking at me with surprise written all over her face. It appeared she, too, had heard what I'd just said, given how much attention my argument with Kurose-san had drawn.

Bewildered though she was, she nodded. "Yeah."

"What?!" replied that same guy in astonishment, despite being the one who'd asked her. "You gotta be kidding me. There's no way, right?"

"I'm serious," Shirakawa-san uttered quietly, facing my dumbfounded classmates. "I'm going out with him."

"Whaaaaaaaaaat?!" At last, the commotion of my classmates developed into a full-blown cacophony.

"How's that even possible?! Why are you going out with a plain guy like Kashima?!"

"You'll even date guys like him?!"

Everyone took turns expressing their surprise.

"I never saw this coming... It's just too unexpected."

"But why? What could've possibly brought you together...?"

After the initial shock was over, some of my classmates became weirdly excited—mainly the guys.

"If even Kashima is good enough, does that mean I am too?!"

"I always thought she only dated good-looking guys who ticked all the boxes and I didn't stand a chance with her."

"Man, she's such a nice girl! I like her even more now."

"Maybe I should go for it and confess to her next time she's available?! What's the harm, right?!"

"Do I have a shot with her too?!"

While this was going on, people showered Kurose-san with chilly looks.

“If she’s so nice even to a boyfriend like Kashima, I guess that means what Kurose-san was saying was a load of crap.”

“Maybe that ex-boyfriend is just trying to slander Shirakawa-san to get back at her for dumping him?”

“Actually, she might’ve made up that whole story to begin with...”

“You’re right... It’s not even like I’ve ever heard that kind of thing about Shirakawa-san before.”

“Wh-What...?” uttered Kurose-san. Sweat appeared on her forehead as she realized she was suddenly at a disadvantage. Our classmates were staring her down. She tried to appeal to them, clenching her fists tight. “That’s really what I heard, okay...?”

However, upon realizing that insistence wouldn’t get her out of this one, she launched out of her seat.

“How terrible of you all! I’m not lying about anything!” she shouted. An overabundance of tears welled up in her large eyes and she sped away into the hallway.

“H-Hey!” I called out.

I still had something to ask Kurose-san. I had to know why she had spread such a false rumor, and why it was about Shirakawa-san in the first place.

With that in mind, I dashed into the hallway after her, away from all my classmates’ still-curious stares.

Kurose-san ran down the hallway and eventually stopped on a narrow flight of stairs leading to the roof.

“Sniff... Sniff...”

Her shoulders trembled as she sobbed convulsively and wiped her eyes with both hands. It appeared she was crying for real, rather than as a pretense.

“Kurose-sa—”

“Stay away from me!”

As I began to approach her, she lashed out in rejection.

“Why’d you come after me...?” she continued. “I know you don’t like me... Why don’t you go back to that bitch?”

What the hell is this about...?



I was on the stairs below her, and after her crying had died down, I called out to her. “Could you tell me why you did something like that?”

She sat down on the stairs, still covering her face. “What ‘thing’?” she asked.

“Spreading bad rumors about Shirakawa-san.”

Kurose-san started wailing again. “Uaaagh! Could you stop that already? Shirakawa-san this, Shirakawa-san that... All you talk about is her. You liked *me* back in the day!”

Wh-What’s she going on about?

“Of course I’d be talking about her. I’m going out with her now,” I replied.

“And I can’t stand that!” Kurose-san shouted back. She sounded like a spoiled child. “I want everyone to like me. *I* should be everyone’s favorite!”

“B-But...” I began, a little intimidated by her outburst. “Even if everyone liked you, you still couldn’t date more than one guy, right? There’s no point in—”

“I’m not gonna date anyone!” exclaimed Kurose-san, interrupting me. “All I want is to make everyone like me. That’s why I’ve never even gone out with anyone.” Tears began to well up in her eyes again. “I want to be number one... Only the best girl gets chosen. I don’t want her to take anything from me ever again...”

“What are you talking about?” I asked after being quiet for a moment. “Do you know Shirakawa-san from before...?”

As I asked this, large tears streamed down Kurose-san’s face. She hung her head as though she were ashamed of them, then calmly said...

“Shirakawa Runa...is my twin sister. She’s just a bit older.”

Her words sent a lightning bolt of shock through my entire body.

“Whaaat?!” I exclaimed. As I looked at her, wondering if she was joking, all she did was stare back at me with a resentful look on her face. “You’re kidding, right? I mean...”

Their looks and personalities are completely different. Sure, they're both cute, but...

As I thought that, Kurose-san gave me a self-deprecating smile. "We don't look alike, right? That's because we're fraternal. I take after our dad, and she looks more like our mom."

I wasn't sure what to say for a moment. "Seriously?"

"You think I'd want to lie about something so sickening as being related by blood to that slut?"

"But your surnames..."

"Our parents got divorced when we were in our fifth year of elementary school. I took on my mom's surname, and that bitch kept my dad's. You just didn't know me from when I was Shirakawa Maria because we met in middle school. When I moved to my mom's home, I ended up in a different school district, and none of my classmates knew me as Shirakawa."

What she was saying seemed to make sense—I *had* heard a rumor that Kurose-san was being raised by a single mother back when we'd been in the same class. Several other classmates had been in the same situation, so I hadn't thought much of it.

If memory served me right, they'd said that she lived with her mom, gramps, and grandma. I still vaguely remembered it because I'd liked her at one point.

And then, in our second year of middle school, I'd overheard my classmates saying that Kurose-san had changed schools. We hadn't been in the same class anymore, but apparently her mother had gotten remarried and they'd ended up moving to Chiba due to her new father's circumstances.

"Wait..." I said.

Hold on... Her surname is still Kurose, just like back then. I tried to avoid thinking about her, so I never questioned this before...

"My mom split up with her husband last month. That's why we moved back to my grandpa's house," said Kurose-san, as though she anticipated where my train of thought was headed.

I gazed at her once again. “You’re really...Shirakawa-san’s sister...?”

“I just told you I am,” she replied with apparent reluctance.

Then, I recalled something.

“There’s something I need to tell you...”

Perhaps this was what Shirakawa-san had wanted to say.

Also, when she’d mentioned her family before...

“Still, at least you didn’t get separated from your sister, right?”

“Huh...?”

Shirakawa-san had looked surprised at the time.

“Ah, yeah. I guess so...”

Her reply after that had seemed unnatural too. Perhaps she’d been thinking about Kurose-san.

“So your father took custody of Shirakawa-san and your older sister, and your mother took you?”

Kurose-san bit her lip at my words. “I...wanted to live with my dad,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes again. A moment later, a tear streamed down her face, ultimately being absorbed in the fabric of her skirt at her lap. “Runa and I both loved our dad. But one of us had to leave together with our mom. Our older sister was in her third year of high school and had a job lined up already, so they told her to do as she liked. But since we still needed our parents to raise and financially support us, that’s what they decided on, after talking it out.”

After saying that, Kurose-san wiped her tears and sniffled. “I wanted to be with my dad. But...he chose Runa,” she continued. Her face contorted as tears spilled from her eyes. “She knew how to get the rest of my family to pamper her. My dad too—he liked her more than me...” As she spoke, her face made it clear that she couldn’t contain her sorrow. “I was a quiet girl...so I had a hard time letting people know how I felt or getting them to like me. But I thought I had to change.” She hung her head, a brooding look on her face. “Girls who aren’t loved can’t become happy. I *have* to be at the top. Only the best girl gets chosen.”

Her eyelids were puffy and her eyelashes were wet with tears. The tip of her nose was all red as well. But even in such a state, she was still perfectly cute. While that wasn't exactly the reason for it, I found myself sympathizing with her more and more and felt like I couldn't abandon her here.

"Is that...why you spread bad rumors about Shirakawa-san? Stealing her popularity in class?"

Kurose-san nodded at my question without saying a word.

"I see..."

I didn't think her reasons justified her actions. However, I also didn't think there'd be any redemption awaiting her in the future with the way things were going.

The Kurose-san I'd fallen in love with back in my first year of middle school and the Kurose-san who was before me now were like two completely different people. And yet, the latter somehow felt like her true self.

Since she'd been striving for everyone to like her, she'd probably never talked about these things with anyone before. I doubted she'd ever done anything that might reveal an unpleasant side of hers.

And that was why now, when she was laying her true nature bare before me, I thought I had to use this opportunity to say something to her. I needed to give her a reason to genuinely reflect on her actions. Some food for thought.

"Have you ever asked your dad why he chose Shirakawa-san?"

Kurose-san gave me a small nod. "I have. All he said was that it was something he and Mom had decided, and he wouldn't say any more on the subject." She narrowed her eyes in a sulking manner. "I could tell, though. Runa was both Mom and Dad's favorite. They'd argued over who would take her."

"That's..." I began—but being the complete stranger I was, I couldn't write it off as impossible. "I'm sure your parents had their reasons, and I doubt your father chose Shirakawa-san just because he liked her more."

Kurose-san stared at her lap without uttering a word, looking unconvinced.

"And besides, you're going about this the wrong way," I added.

She looked up. Her eyes were asking me, *“What are you talking about?”*

“I get what made you want to become everyone’s favorite now. But don’t you just want your father—someone special to you—to choose you? How would the things you’re doing now help with that?”

Kurose-san looked like she’d suddenly hit upon a realization as she listened to me.

“You’ve never gone out with anyone because you’ve never liked anyone, right? Would affection from people you don’t even like heal the wound left by your father—the person you liked—when he didn’t choose you?”

She cast her eyes down and bit her lip. Judging by the look on her face, she was suppressing feelings surging up inside of her.

“Wouldn’t it be better if, instead of trying to become a girl loved by everyone, you focused on becoming one that the guy you’ll one day fall in love with will love back?”

Kurose-san hung her head in silence for a while, but eventually, she glared up at me. “You talk like you know something about me.”

“I don’t, really... I just get the feeling we’re similar.”

“Excuse me?!”

“S-Sorry... But would you hear me out?” Well aware of her anger, I continued. “Shirakawa-san isn’t trying to get everyone to like her. She’s the kind of girl who leaves a good impression on a lot of people just by saying what comes to her mind and acting naturally. I think she owes her popularity not only to her looks, but also to her temperament—her natural disposition.”

Looking at Shirakawa-san, I was often surprised by just how different we were. I felt she was a good person by nature.

“Before you say something, you probably wonder how others around you will react, right?” I continued. “I imagine you’re the type to watch people’s eyes and overthink things before acting. I’m like that too.” Which was precisely why... “I think it’s tough for people like that to force themselves to try to become like Shirakawa-san. They’d constantly have to put in effort.”

While I couldn't begin to imagine what reservations Kurose-san had about Shirakawa-san, I was sure there were some, given that they were family. Things like "Why are we so different even though we're twins?" or "I could've become like that too."

She had a sulky look on her face as she began to argue back. "What would a guy like you know about—"

"But still," I said, interrupting her. "I think there's plenty of people out there who would prefer you over Shirakawa-san."

Kurose-san went silent at that, looking surprised.

"I think you can become happy if you find a guy you like among people like that."

She didn't say anything for a while.

"If I managed to convince you with all this...I'd like you to apologize to Shirakawa-san for what you did," I said.

Kurose-san remained silent. I thought about saying something else to her, but she began to speak with her head still lowered.

"Fine, I get it. Leave me alone already." Her voice was dark and filled with melancholy.

"Kurose-san..." I called out to her. It was difficult for me to simply leave.

"What? Are you trying to cheer me up?" When she looked up at me, she had a nasty smile on her face. "Cut it out. You don't even like me. Shouldn't you be consoling Runa?"

"But..."

"It's fine. I haven't fallen low enough to have her boyfriend console me. Go!"

I had no reply to that. With the way she was now, it seemed like it would only have the opposite effect if I tried to say anything further.

Presented with no other option, I turned around and left.

Which was why I couldn't hear what Kurose-san said once she was all alone

on the stairwell, hugging her knees.

“Looks like I won’t be able to find happiness again this time either. Of all people, why did it have to be a guy who chose *her* who makes me feel this way...?”

The cheeks on her sulking face were tinged with red.

“I wish you’d left me alone if you didn’t like me...”

As I neared my classroom, Shirakawa-san came running out of the doorway.

“Ryuto!” she exclaimed.

Looking inside, I saw that many of my classmates were still there, staring at me with immense curiosity now that I’d returned.

“L-Let’s head home for now,” I suggested.

I went inside and hastily grabbed my bag and the class journal. Then, after dropping by the staff room, Shirakawa-san and I headed to the entrance together. I’d only managed to write a few words in the journal entry for today, but it would probably be fine—Kurose-san had done her part properly.

“Sorry... I never told you about Maria,” said Shirakawa-san, broaching the subject the moment we were alone. “She hated the fact we’re twins. I’ve got no idea why she’d transfer to our school...”

To be sure, even I didn’t know what Kurose-san had intended by coming here. Maybe she’d wanted to harass Shirakawa-san, or perhaps...

“Maybe she wanted to be close to you,” I suggested.

“What...?”

As Shirakawa-san looked surprised, I continued. “If she really hated you so much that she didn’t even want to see your face, I don’t think she’d want to be in the same room with you, not even if it meant she could get back at you.”

After hanging her head for a short while in silence, Shirakawa-san said, as though digesting the idea, “That makes sense...” She raised her face and looked at me. “Thanks, Ryuto,” she said with a cute smile. Looking at her face now, I

could see a bit of a resemblance between her and Kurose-san.

“But Ryuto, is it okay?” she asked anxiously once we’d put our shoes on and left the school building. “Weren’t you against everyone finding out about us?”

“Well... I was, but...” Even I had never thought I’d be revealing our relationship like that. “More than that, I just didn’t want people to have the wrong idea about you forever.”

Shirakawa-san opened her eyes wide at my answer. “You did that...for me...?”

A faint flicker of something welled up in her eyes as she gazed at me—tears. I was taken aback, and Shirakawa-san became flustered. She suddenly wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“H-Huh? I wonder what that was about.” She looked the other way and smiled cheerfully, feigning ignorance. “I’m an idiot, so I thought I didn’t really care about bad rumors or things like that... But I guess maybe they were bothering me a little after all.”

I thought Shirakawa-san was a strong girl, but it must’ve been hard, even for her, to endure the curious stares of her classmates from day to day due to some groundless bad rep.

“Still, I wonder where that rumor came from,” said Shirakawa-san. “Did Maria misunderstand something my ex said about me?”

“Huh?” I uttered after a pause.

I was stunned. *Could it be...?* Had Shirakawa-san not realized that Kurose-san had made up that story and spread it just to harass her?

Just how nice a girl *was* Shirakawa-san...? She was so trusting that it made me a little worried. For the time being, I decided that I shouldn’t tell such a nice girl any more.

Since they were sisters, it would be better if they sorted this out between themselves. I was sure that Kurose-san would apologize to Shirakawa-san soon.

I hadn’t told her that the girl who’d rejected me back in the day was Kurose-san either. Since we were classmates and sat next to each other, it was kinda awkward to talk about... But now that I knew that they were sisters, I figured I’d

reveal it one day as a funny anecdote once the two of them had repaired their relationship and could smile together again.

“Yeah, you’re right. That rumor was weird,” I said.

“You didn’t believe it?”

“I didn’t.”

It took Shirakawa-san a moment to reply. “But you don’t know what I was like before we started dating, right?” she asked.

I gave it some thought. “I guess not... Still, I like you the way you are now. So I figured...the past doesn’t matter.”

I said that, in part, to persuade myself. In truth, it wasn’t like I was fully satisfied with taking that stance. Thinking about her exes was still painful.

But.

“Even if you really used to act as that rumor said, you’re completely different now. I couldn’t let bygones like that hurt your good name in the present.”

Shirakawa-san gave my serious reply a slightly forced smile. “Well, it’s not like I ever did any of that, anyway.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so either,” I said, smiling too.

At that point, the smile disappeared from her face and was replaced with what appeared to be a slight blush on her cheeks.

“You really are weird, Ryuto.”

I knew she didn’t mean it in a bad way. I didn’t even need to ask—the happy grin that appeared on her face proved it.

“Thanks, Ryuto!”

Seeing her smile that was even lovelier than usual, I got the urge to hug her.

Then, it suddenly occurred to me: I hadn’t even laid a finger on her since we’d started dating. Even as we currently walked side by side, so close that our shoulders were almost touching, I still didn’t know her warmth.

As I became aware of that fact, the love for her that was welling up within me

became mixed with a very faint pain in my chest.

Chapter 4.5: A Long Phone Call Between Runa and Nicole

“That was kinda crazy today... You okay, Runa?”

“Yeah, I’m perfectly fine. I never wanted to hide it in the first place.”

“Not that—I mean your sister. Did she admit to spreading false rumors about you?”

“Ah... Actually, she called my house earlier and apologized. So it’s fine now.”

“Huh? You’ll forgive her so easily after everything she said?”

“Yeah. I’m sure she just misunderstood something.”

“Well, that’s just like you, I guess... So, you’re still gonna keep it a secret that you two’re twins?”

“Mhm. She might not want people to know. I’ll keep quiet about it to my friends besides you until I can talk to Maria normally again.”

“So she really won’t be able to get along with you in a normal way?”

“Well... It is what it is. Maria was a daddy’s girl. She probably still has a grudge against me.”

“I hear you... But anyway, everyone was freaking out today ’cause it’s really hard to imagine you together with the guy you’re dating now.”

“I wonder why that is... Ryuto’s nice, you know?”

“Yeah, I guess. I think he’s a good match for you.”

“For real? That’s great to hear!”

“For now, anyway.”

“...Oh, right. Nicole?”

“Mhm?”

“From now on, could you tell me when you meet up with Ryuto? I was *really* surprised when I saw the photo Yuna sent.”

“Huh? You mean us at McDonalds?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah. She should’ve said something to me if she was there.”

“She said she held back because you were with a guy. And she was with her boyfriend.”

“Come on, it *obviously* didn’t look like we were on a date. And if he turned out to be a weakling, I was totally gonna beat him up.”

“R-Really...?”

“...Huh? Runa, don’t tell me you’re jealous.”

“What?!”

“You realize there’s no way I’d take your guy, right? I know you two are going out.”

“Wait, it’s not like that! It’s just...”

“Mm?”

“I was thinking if you told me ahead of time, I wouldn’t have been surprised. That’s all.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Sorry. I just wanted to act as soon as I got the idea.”

“I know what you mean! It’s okay, I’m like that too.”

“Though I don’t think someone who’s really okay with it would bother saying stuff like that...”

“Huh? How d’you mean?”

“Runa, aren’t you more in love with your boyfriend than you realize?”

“Wh-What makes you say that?”

“You got a hazy feeling when you found out I met up with Ryuto without telling you, right?”

“...”

“That’s pretty rare for you. It’s not like this is the first time I called a boyfriend of yours somewhere to lecture him.”

“Oh... Now that you mention it...”

“I hope it’ll last this time. It doesn’t look like that guy’s gonna cheat on you or anything, at least.”

“Yeah, I have faith in that too.”

“And actually, if he *does* cheat on you, I’ll seriously beat him to death! So don’t worry.”

“Aha ha, it’s okay, he won’t. Wait, how can I *not* worry if you’d do that?”

Saying that with a laugh, Runa then went silent for a short while. She sat on her bed and held her knees as she looked toward her desk. On top of it was a folded-up map of bubble tea cafés.

“...Unlike how it was before, when I’m with Ryuto, my heart starts beating fast sometimes. Maybe this is what they call real love...?”

Chapter 5

Until just a short while ago, I'd thought it would be terrible if people were to find out Shirakawa-san and I were dating. I'd expected them to stare at me curiously, or point their fingers at me and laugh... Hell, I'd even imagined them showering me with abuse when I walked past them.

That was why, on the day following my revelation, it was anticlimactic how surprisingly normal everything was in my class.

If I had to mention *some* kind of change, there was only a minor one...

"Good morning, Kashima-kun."

As we passed each other, several girls from my class whom I'd never talked to before greeted me.

"G-Good morning..." I replied to them.

As I stood there in confusion, the group of girls went to a corner of the room and started whispering to each other.

"I never cared since he doesn't stand out, but Kashima-kun isn't so bad, right?"

"He looks kind. It's not like he's ugly either."

"Yeah, he must be nice if Shirakawa-san of all people chose him!"

From the scraps of their conversation that I could hear, it didn't sound like they were bad-mouthing me.

As I got to my desk, Kurose-san glanced at me from her adjacent seat.

"Ah... Good morning," I said, since our eyes met.

It was still awkward after what had happened the previous day, and I thought she might ignore me, but...

"G-Good morning," she replied quietly. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes swayed to and fro in apparent embarrassment.

I assumed it was awkward for her too and decided against trying to talk to her further.

However, during the end-of-day homeroom...

The class had to submit our classwork, so everyone started passing their papers forward from the rear seats to the front. Once we collected them, we'd need to put them on the teacher's desk. After I had all the papers from my row, I looked toward Kurose-san, who was still waiting for people to pass them.

"Kurose-san," I addressed her, planning to hand her the papers from my row.

She was looking away from me, and her shoulders trembled. However, it didn't seem like she would be turning around. I assumed she hadn't heard me, so I tapped her shoulder.

"Agh!" Letting out a quiet shriek, she then turned my way. Her face was bright red, and she looked so put off that you'd think she was dealing with a molester. "Hey! D-Don't touch me all of a sudden!"

"Huh? S-Sorry."

"I hate you!"

I went silent at that. It seemed she really couldn't stand me now.

No wonder, I guess... After I talked the way I did yesterday, like I was lecturing her...

Those thoughts lingered in my head as we finished submitting the papers. After that, the teacher started handing out printed notices and the class became noisier.

"Hey." Kurose-san was starting a conversation with me this time, taking me by surprise.

"Yeah?"

As I looked at her, wondering what she wanted, she shot me a few glances and her earlobes went red.

"I...feel bad about what I did," she finally said. "I called and apologized last

night.”

“Huh?” I needed a moment to process what she was talking about. “You mean you called Shirakawa-san?”

Kurose-san nodded. “So... Could you not come to hate me...?” Her voice trailed off at the end.

Since she spoke with embarrassment, with a red face and lowered eyes—
“What...?”

—for the briefest of moments, I couldn’t help finding her cute.

I was dumbstruck. *Why is she asking me that? Didn’t she just say she hates me...?*

I pondered that for a while, but then it hit me: she’d been making an effort to get people to like her. It must’ve been hard for her to bear the thought of me hating her after what had happened the day before.

That was how I interpreted her attitude, and it was a satisfying explanation.

“It’s okay; I don’t hate you.”

As I gave my reply, Kurose-san looked at me like she was about to cry. But the next moment, she turned away from me without a word, facing forward but hanging her head.

“Huh...?” I uttered, wondering if I’d given the wrong reply.

Either way, there was nothing more I could say to her. I decided to leave her alone for a while. Perhaps, with time, the awkwardness between us would disappear and we’d be able to act like normal classmates.

With that wish on my mind, I put the handout from the teacher into my bag and got ready to go home.

Something I realized over the next few days at school was that people didn’t concern themselves with others as much as I’d used to think.

One day, during break time, Shirakawa-san unexpectedly came to my seat.

“Morning, Ryuto!”

“M-Morning...”

I supposed she’d assumed it was okay now that everybody knew. Since I’d almost never talked to her at school before, I was nervous, minding the eyes around us.

“Hey, check out my nails. I did them myself yesterday!”

Shirakawa-san showed off her flashy nails to me—which were totally against the school rules—but I found myself too worried about who might be watching us.

Contrary to my expectations, however, people didn’t care as much as I’d thought they would. Sure, some of them stole glances at us from far away, but the vast majority of my classmates were preoccupied with themselves instead.

“That’s how it is, I guess,” I said.

What was I even afraid of? This is how it goes with people who aren’t involved.

“Come on, look at them!” urged Shirakawa-san, persistent in her efforts to show me the results of her hard work. She thrust her hands in front of my eyes while I was distracted.

“Oh, right, sorry,” I replied, looking at her once again.

“Aren’t they cute? Whatcha think?”

Hers were the delicate, pretty hands of a girl, with fingers and nails on the long side.

If I were an experienced flirt, this would probably be the part where I’d skillfully take her hand and say, “*You’re right, they’re beautiful,*” or something. I wouldn’t be fazed by physical contact either.

Obviously, however, that wouldn’t be like me. I didn’t feel like I could act that way, and I didn’t want to either.

“What’s wrong? You don’t like nails like these?”

I’d been staring at Shirakawa-san’s hands with such a stern expression on my face that a dubious look appeared on hers too.

“Ah, no, I think they’re nice. They suit you.”

At my hurried reply, Shirakawa-san smiled like a blooming flower. “Glad you like them! I did a pretty good job, right? Nicole complimented them too.”

After saying that with pride, Shirakawa-san must’ve been satisfied, because she returned to her group of good-looking girls.

At the same time, even the few classmates who had been glancing our way seemed to lose interest and averted their eyes.

With that, I learned that people hadn’t started talking about us as much as I’d feared. However, that still left the problem of not having touched Shirakawa-san at all unresolved, giving me a pent-up feeling.

Nothing had changed about my desire to treasure her, so it wasn’t like I was suddenly getting wild ideas such as wanting to have sex with her. Not that I *didn’t* want to, of course.

Instead, if Shirakawa-san now liked me more than she’d used to, I wanted us to have a corresponding level of physical intimacy.

But that would be putting it in a roundabout way. To put it bluntly, I wanted to kiss her! The mere thought of it had me feeling like a nosebleed was coming on.

I wanna do it... I wanna kiss her! But I haven’t the slightest idea how to make it happen!

What technique could I use to bring about such a development? If this were a soap opera, two people’s eyes would’ve suddenly met, and they’d be drawn to each other, moving closer until they ultimately kissed...but I didn’t expect such a scenario to be in store for me.

For a few days now, I had thought about this constantly, barely getting any sleep at night. I’d agonized over the subject so much that I could see myself collapsing.

I couldn’t possibly express such a desire to Shirakawa-san directly. Having put on airs by telling her I wanted to treasure her, I didn’t want to do something

that would make her think I was actually only after her body.

How did couples around the world make physical contact naturally? What kind of opportunities led to it? How did they decide to take action?

I wondered whom I could ask for advice at times like these—and then I realized that in the end, I could only turn to *them*.

During lunch break, I was eating from my lunch box alongside the other two-thirds of my usual trio.

Ichhi put his chopsticks down all of a sudden. “Kasshi.”

“Huh? What is it?” I asked.

This was Ichhi we were talking about—a guy who’d never let go of his bowl once he’d started digging in until it was empty. He was totally obsessed with food. And he, of all people, had just interrupted his meal while his lunch box was still more than half full.

I watched him as I thought about this, and Ichhi suddenly bowed before me.

“I’m sorry! I should’ve believed you when you said you were going out with Shirakawa-san.” Speaking with integrity, he let his shoulders droop. “I was so frustrated that I didn’t want to believe it. But I realized I *had* to when I saw what you and Shirakawa-san were like the other day. We’re friends and all. You two really *are* dating, I guess. I’m happy for you. Hard to believe it started from me forcing you to confess.”

“Ichhi...”

Had this been weighing on Ichhi these past few days since that incident in class?

I started to feel moved, but Nisshi, sitting beside him, folded his arms. “Well, I’m not gonna apologize,” he said with the air of a stubborn father, shooting me a glare. “So what if we’re harsh on you? You still get to have a good time with Shirakawa-san on weekends. Go to hell, normie!”

“Nisshi...”

But then again, I couldn't be sure I wouldn't have been just as spiteful had I been in Nisshi's shoes. Icchi was just too nice a guy.

Suddenly, Icchi drew closer to me. "So, did you do it? You *must've* done it by now. Come on, out with it!"

"Huh? What's with you?!" I asked.

Dude, your eyes are all bloodshot! I thought you were a nice guy!

"Yeah, about that..." I began. I explained my current troubles to the two.

"I see," said Icchi, though he looked exhausted. "You want to kiss Shirakawa-san, but you don't know how to go about it. And so you'd like to start by holding hands with her and need some ideas."

"Are we really the right people to talk to about this...?" added Nisshi, looking like a boxer completely burnt out after a bout.

"S-Sorry. I just don't have anyone else to turn to..." I hurriedly explained.

Icchi and Nisshi exchanged glances and sighed. Then, they looked at me with resolve written on their faces.

"Fine. Might as well use our brains to make Kasshi a man."

"Yeah. Let's think of a plan that will not only get him to hold hands with her, but bring them closer too."

You guys...!

"Thanks! You two are a huge help."

That said, my friends were hardly any better off than me in terms of experience. Three virgins wouldn't have the insight of a playboy.

"How about saying you can read palms?"

"That would be a straight-up lie. It's not like I could read anything if she showed me her hand," I replied.

"You could just make something up—how would she know?"

"I don't want to lie to her."

"Then how about going like, 'Man, it's so cold! My hands are gonna freeze!' or

something?”

“That’s so roundabout that it’s annoying! She’d think I was just playing up being sensitive to the cold!”

“At this point, why not just directly ask her to hold hands?”

“If I could, I wouldn’t be asking you guys for help...”

“Man, you’re hard to please.”

After giving me as many ideas as they could on the spot, the two were stumped.

Nisshi was the first to throw in the towel. “Man, screw this!”

Next, Icchi looked up and tossed his hands in the air, totally fed up. “Yeah, this is totally beyond us! It’s not even like *I* can hold hands with a girl.” He then heaved a huge sigh.

“Come on, guys,” I pleaded. “I need your help...”

“Dude, seriously, forget it. Go worry about it all by yourself.”

“I know I tried to sound cool earlier, but I’ve been this close to dying of jealousy and crying tears of blood this entire time.”

The two had utterly haggard looks on their faces and started to back away from me.

“Let’s leave this normie alone and go watch KEN’s new videos or something,” said Nisshi.

As I heard his words—

“KEN’s videos...”

—an idea sprang to mind.

“Of course! I should’ve thought about KEN,” I said. *Maybe even I can pull this off.* “Thanks, guys!”

As Icchi and Nisshi sat there with their mouths hanging open, I got up from my seat—I wanted to gather my thoughts somewhere quiet.

I couldn’t think of anywhere else to go, so I headed to the bathroom. On the

way, I thought about the idea I'd gotten from KEN's playstyle.

In battle royale shooters, KEN often lured opposing players along a path of his choice before attacking them. Since he was a former pro gamer, his aim was extremely accurate—as long as he could make an opponent walk into an area with no obstacles, he would hit every shot.

Couldn't I do the same thing? That is, rather than taking the initiative to hold hands with Shirakawa-san myself, I could create a situation where she would reach her hand out to me of her own accord. But how?

The first thought that came to me was a haunted house, but I shook it away immediately. Shirakawa-san seemed to be okay with ghosts and such. She'd mentioned watching a foreign horror movie over LINE the night before.

That left the physical approach—specifically, taking her to a place with unsteady footing. Something like a suspended bridge would've been ideal, but I didn't think there were any in my area. That wasn't a realistic date location either. A large pool of water that blocked your path would work too, but I had even *less* of an idea where to find one of those. It wasn't like I could search for one online.

Then, after all the thinking, it finally occurred to me.

"A pond."

We could take a boat out on a pond. Getting on and off would be ideal for creating moments of unsteadiness. And most importantly, boat rides were fitting and natural for dates.

It was *perfect*.

"All riiiiight!!!"

After impulsively shouting from within a stall in the boys' bathroom, I quickly came to my senses and got embarrassed. A few minutes would pass before I could finally leave.

That day after school, Shirakawa-san walked up to me.

"Hey, Ryuto! Let's go home together!" she said.

“Huh?!”

While I was taken aback, Shirakawa-san looked at my face with upturned eyes.

“We can’t...? People know now that we’re going out, so why not do it every now and then from now on?”

“Y-Yeah, okay, I guess...” I said, relenting.

“Great!” Shirakawa-san said cheerfully.

Thus, we ended up leaving school together.

“What about Yamana-san? You’re not leaving together?” I asked.

“Nicole has to work today. It’s fiiine; we’ll talk on the phone at night.”

“She has a job? Where?”

“A bar.”

“Huh. That kinda suits her.”

“She said she had an interview at a family restaurant first, but they turned her away because of her nails and hair color. Said it was demotivating,” she explained.

“I see.”

“Nicole gets home late when she has work, so we end up calling each other late at night.”

That explained their long phone conversations before weekends.

“What about you? You don’t have a job?” I asked.

“Nah, I’ll pass on that. Nicole tells me about some real bad customers sometimes, and that sounds stressful. I get by with the allowance my grandma gives me here and there.”

“I hear you.”

Then, Shirakawa-san stared at my face. “Wait, should I be working somewhere too?”

“Nah, that’s not it...”

I'd simply imagined her in a work uniform for a moment.

"I just thought about how a uniform from a cake shop would suit you."

Hearing that, Shirakawa-san opened her eyes very wide. "Oh, that? And hold on—a cake shop?! You're into cutesy stuff, I see."



“N-Not at all!” I said, panicking. Her teasing was making me embarrassed. “I-It’s not like I’m into that stuff or anything!”

“Let me guess—frilly aprons? Like maid outfits? You’re so obvious!”

“Th-That’s not...!”

“I get it now!” she exclaimed. “So *that’s* why you didn’t care about gyaru-style clothes!”

Shirakawa-san was totally enjoying herself at my expense.

“It’s not like...!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine; you don’t have to be so shy about it.”

“I-It’s not just me, okay?!” I protested. “That’s what any guy dreams about!”

“Oh? You’re finally coming clean!” she said in an exaggerated manner, giving me a self-satisfied smile. “I see. Heh heh heh.”

Shirakawa-san spoke as though she now knew my weak spot. My face was burning up and I looked away from her, going silent in shame.

It was embarrassing to have her find out my preferences. However, when I got to talk to her about silly things like that, I could feel that we really were boyfriend and girlfriend, which made me happy.

Recently I’d become a lot less nervous in her presence compared to before. In the beginning, I’d thought I couldn’t possibly have anything in common with someone as popular as Shirakawa-san, so being able to talk to her like this now felt strange.

Not that I was satisfied with her totally teasing me like that—which was why I looked for a different topic to divert the conversation.

Suddenly, I remembered how Kurose-san had been that morning.

“By the way...Kurose-san called you?” I asked.

Shirakawa-san’s face went a little stiff. “She did... She apologized. I’m not holding it against her, though. I just hope we can get along again someday...”

“Yeah...”

It would surely take some time for that to happen.

“I hope such a day comes soon,” I added, feeling that way with all my heart.

We got to the train station, boarded the same train, and got off together at the station closest to Shirakawa-san’s house as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Ryuto, do you have some time today?”

I nodded. “Sure.” I was about to add that I’d walk her home, but Shirakawa-san pulled me by the arm. “Huh...?”

While I was startled, she gave me a cute smile. “Let’s take a little detour!”

She’d only touched my arm for a moment, and it had been over my school uniform, but the fact that she’d touched me still made my cheeks burn and left my arm feeling hot.

My heart pounded for a while after that.

Shirakawa-san took me to a shopping mall by the station. It was typical as far as these places went. The first floor had chain restaurants, and the space in the upper ones housed stores selling daily necessities, clothes, accessories, and similar things.

She stopped after leading me to a section of the fifth floor—the top one.

“Here we are!” she said.

Shirakawa-san was pointing at a glass wall that seemed like a showcase. The area inside was divided vertically and horizontally into numerous compartments of equal size, each holding an animal or two.

“A pet shop?” I asked.

“Yep!” Her eyes sparkling, Shirakawa-san ran up to a compartment with a cat inside. “It’s so cute, right?! Man, I feel so much better when I look at cats! I’d get one myself if my grandma wasn’t allergic...”

There were dogs on display too, but Shirakawa-san wasn’t straying from the

cats.

“Shirakawa-san, you like cats more than dogs?”

“Yeah! Though I do think dogs are cute too!” After answering my question, she pressed up against the glass again. “Look at this one! Isn’t it cute? It’s going away soon, so I’ve been coming to look at it a lot recently.”

Shirakawa-san was pointing at a gray Munchkin kitten directly in front of her. The price tag had a sign saying “I found a home!” pasted over it.

“You come here often?” I asked.

“Yep, it’s my favorite place! Coming here’s kinda like a routine for me, I guess? So I wanted to come here with you sometime.” Shirakawa-san looked my way, keeping both her hands on the glass. “You said you wanted to come to like something I like, right? I was kinda happy to hear that!”

“Huh...?”

She was talking about what I’d said on our birthday date, when I’d gone the extra mile researching bubble tea cafés. *She remembered that.*

“So...I kinda figured I should tell you a lot about the stuff I like.” With that, a slightly bashful smile appeared on Shirakawa-san’s face.

I was happy enough to hear she remembered what I’d told her, and to have her say something like that now? It was deeply moving.

“This one’s such a good kitty!” said Shirakawa-san.

Moving her fingers with her showy nails in circles like a cat teaser to play with the animal on the other side of the glass, she looked even cuter than usual. I’d somehow had the preconception that gyaru and animals didn’t have much of an affinity, so this scene was unexpectedly novel.

“Shirakawa-san, could it be that you’re an animal lover?” I figured I’d try asking.

She looked at me and nodded. “Yep. But I love cats! Oh, but now that you mention it, maybe I like all animals...? Aren’t lions a lot like house cats? Or wait, was that tigers?”

“So...” My heart pounded at the fact I’d managed to direct the conversation in a way that’d just occurred to me a short time ago. “How about we go to a zoo sometime soon?”

“Huh?” Shirakawa-san looked surprised for a moment. “Sure!” she replied with enthusiasm. “Man, it’s been so long since I’ve been to a zoo. The last time might’ve been when we went on a field trip back in my first year of middle school. I’m kinda hyped now!”

Seeing her so excited and with her eyes sparkling, I internally pumped my fist. Things were unexpectedly starting to go the way I wanted.

I had an ulterior motive for inviting Shirakawa-san to a zoo.

I was going to hold hands with her on our next date. Doing that much felt appropriate by now. And for that to happen, we would need to get on a boat, just like I’d planned.

While I *could* invite her for a boat ride directly, it was too plain to be the main focus of a date, so there was a high chance she would go like, “Why a boat?” And simply inviting her to a large park wasn’t sure to work either, since I didn’t know if she’d be interested in a nature walk for a date. I’d been racking my brains on how to go about this and I hadn’t come up with any good ideas, but the flow of our conversation had allowed me to invite her to a zoo.

The first zoo that came to your mind in this area was the Ueno Zoo. It was located inside Ueno Park, which had a large pond—anyone could pay to ride a boat on it. I could naturally invite her to do that after we’d visited the zoo.

It was *perfect*.

Anyway, once we got to that point, I would just need to gently take Shirakawa-san’s hand when she started getting on the boat. She’d become unsteady on her feet and would try to hold on to me.

As I thought that...

“Hey, Ryuto, what sorta stuff do *you* like?” asked Shirakawa-san. She appeared satisfied after having her fill of observing the cats and was looking at me with a face more charming than those of the animals.

“Huh?”

As I stared back at her, wondering what she meant, Shirakawa-san averted her eyes from me and started to look a little bashful. “I got curious too, about what you like. Could you tell me?” she asked again, wearing a self-conscious smile. “I want to come to like the stuff you like too.”

What...?

“Shirakawa-san...”

Deeply touched, I felt love for her welling up inside me. But at the same time, I grew extremely ashamed of myself—I didn’t have interests strong enough that I could speak of them with pride.

“What’re you into?” asked Shirakawa-san.

“Huh...? Mmm...”

“You said you don’t really have anything you wanna do when going out, right?” Shirakawa-san pressed, seeming to find my hesitation strange. “So what do you do on your days off?”

“Well... Nothing really worth mentioning...”

How could I just tell her my hobby was watching gameplay videos? It was embarrassingly fitting for an introverted, gloomy guy.

These worries ran through my head, and a frown appeared on Shirakawa-san’s face.

“Do you do something you can’t tell people about? It’s not like you do something bad though, right?”

“Huh? O-Of course not,” I hurriedly replied.

Shirakawa-san probingly peered at my face. “Then why not just tell me?”

“But...”

“I get it! It’s something pervy, right?”

“N-No it’s not!” I said in a fluster. At that point, I resigned myself to my fate and decided to tell her the truth. “I like watching gameplay videos.”

Hearing that, Shirakawa-san stared at me in round-eyed wonder. “‘Gameplay videos’? Not, like, playing games yourself?”

“They’re recordings of other people playing them,” I explained.

“Is that fun?” asked Shirakawa-san with a puzzled look on her face. Rather than making light of me, she seemed to be genuinely confused.

“Y-Yeah. It’s pretty fun to watch people play games if they’re much more skilled than you, or if they’re entertaining to listen to.”

“Ah, I think I sorta get that! It’s like when you watch some amazing players at arcades. It *is* pretty fun.”

This was just the level of communication skill I should’ve expected from a conversationalist like Shirakawa-san. The current topic was completely out of her wheelhouse, but she’d found a way to relate to me in no time at all. Being the simple guy that I was, even that much made me happy.

“Yeah, it’s like that,” I replied. “And if someone is good at games and also good at talking, it’s really interesting, and I end up watching their videos forever.”

“Huh... Is there anybody you particularly like that makes those kinds of videos?”

“Yeah, there’s a guy named KEN. He’s a former pro gamer, so he’s incredibly good at games.”

“Mhm.”

Since Shirakawa-san was listening earnestly, words started pouring out of my mouth as though somebody had flipped a switch inside me.

“What’s amazing about KEN is that he’s good at all sorts of games,” I began. “He was only a pro in shooters, but he’s also good at games with crafting and building, as well as games like Mafia.”

“‘Mafia’...?” Shirakawa-san asked vacantly.

I promptly began to explain. “Mafia is a game where members of a mafia hide among innocent people. It’s about finding out who’s lying. Originally it was a party game. Each player is handed a random card at the start of the game that

says what their role is—such as being part of the mafia, a detective, or an ordinary person. If you're in the mafia, you have to keep it a secret from other people and act like you're innocent. If people suspect you, they'll start a vote to eliminate you. So, what's amazing about KEN is that he doesn't rely on theory or tried-and-true ways of playing that game. Of course, he still follows the rules, but outside of that, he has a completely liberal approach. He always uses his head to do what he thinks is best in every situation and convinces other players as the game goes on. It's pretty hard to pull off. If you try playing Mafia yourself, you'll quickly find out that your head gets filled with things you have to do and you kinda can't spare the attention for strategizing. Ah, by 'things you have to do,' I mean, if you're the mafia, for instance, you have to lie to other people, but that makes you feel guilty, so it's rather—"

Then, I came to my senses with a start—I'd spent too long on a one-sided ramble. This was just like that time with the bubble tea cafés. Recalling how I'd reflected on my actions that time, my only consolation was that *this* time, I'd managed to stop myself a little earlier.

"Ah, sorry... That didn't make much sense, right?" I asked.

"Hmm..." An ambiguous smile appeared on Shirakawa-san's face. "I wanna actually see one of those gameplay videos you like. Maybe I'll understand then. Could you show me?"

"O-Of course!"

At that point, we left the pet shop, sat on a bench inside the mall, and started watching one of KEN's videos.

"Wow, this is amazing!" exclaimed Shirakawa-san. "Is the guy talking now also the one shooting?"

"That's right."

"He's really hitting those shots! This game looks pretty fun!"

"Yeah, but when you try playing it yourself, it rarely goes like that," I explained.

"Really? It looks easy, though."

“That’s why KEN is so amazing.”

“I see!”

As we talked about it, I went through KEN’s videos in my head, picked out a few that would be interesting to people new to his channel, and then watched them together with Shirakawa-san.

After that, as I walked her home...

“You know a lot, huh, Ryuto,” said Shirakawa-san on the way all of a sudden. “That guy in the video used a lotta fancy terms, right? I take it you know them all.”

“Well, I guess... Still, they’re not that difficult, really. Like ‘hacker’ is another word for ‘cheater.’ And ‘stream sniping’ is watching the stream of someone you’re playing against to learn things you’re not supposed to know.”

“Huh... It was hard for me, though. You’re amazing.”

“Thanks. But I only know these things because it’s what interests me. You know a lot of fashion terms, right? Like what was that fancy word for those shirts with open shoulders that you’re always wearing?”

“Ah, you mean a bardot top?”

“Also, there was that lipstick that was kind of sticky...”

“You mean lip tint?”

“Yeah, that. You explained it to me when you were shopping that day, but I couldn’t memorize it at all. I think that’s because I just can’t take an interest in women’s fashion... Isn’t it okay for both of us to have interests that we don’t share, even if we’re going out?” I asked.

“Ehh?” Shirakawa-san sounded reluctant. “But didn’t you meet me halfway? You looked into bubble tea cafés so much that you knew more about them than I did.”

“That’s because I liked the taste of bubble tea. If I’d hated it, I wouldn’t have been motivated to go that far.”

“Still, though, that’s why I wanna meet you halfway in something too, at least a little. I wanna understand what you like.”

Shirakawa-san said that with her cheeks puffed out. The sight of it made my chest grow tight, nearly swooning like I was some kind of maiden.

“Thanks...” I said.

I was the happiest guy in the world to have Shirakawa-san of all people say such things to me.

“It’s enough for me that you feel that way,” I added. “I was really happy that you watched videos I like with me.”

As our eyes met, a smile appeared on Shirakawa-san’s face as though the one on mine was contagious. However...

“Hmm...”

She looked somehow downcast even after that until we reached her house.

Then, the next day...

“Ryuto!”

When I stepped into my class in the morning, Shirakawa-san was already there. She quickly made her way over to me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Hey, have you seen KEN’s ‘cheating games’ videos? They’re really fun! I was so curious about what was next that I ended up watching until it was past 3 a.m.!”

“What...?”

Since KEN was a professional YouTuber who made a living purely on videos, he uploaded different kinds of videos to avoid being a one-trick pony. These “cheating games” videos Shirakawa-san had brought up were Let’s Plays of romance visual novels where your girlfriend acted suspiciously and you had to find proof of her cheating and confront her with it. I’d rather enjoyed watching them myself at one point too.

“Those were uploaded pretty long ago. I’m surprised you found them,” I said.

Shirakawa-san smiled with pride. “I checked the older videos for something with a game that even I could understand. It was hard! KEN has way too many videos!”

“Yeah, he uploads four or five a day.”

“Wow... Sounds like a full-time job at that point!”

“It is,” I replied with a smile.

“I see,” said Shirakawa-san with one too. “I’m jealous! He must be living the high life like that. I wish I could be a YouTuber who just talks about her favorite makeup...”

“I feel like you could actually make it happen.”

“Yeah, like I totally wouldn’t get zero views...”

“Don’t worry, I’d watch you, so you’d get at least a thousand.”

“Huh? You’d watch me that much? I’m so happy!”

The sight of Shirakawa-san speaking with such a smile made me happy too and warmed my heart. I was so moved that I felt like I was about to cry.

Out of KEN’s enormous collection of gameplay videos, Shirakawa-san had found ones that appealed to her and gotten hooked on them. Since KEN no longer uploaded those “cheating games” videos anymore, I was sure Shirakawa-san would stop being crazy about him in just a few days.

However, I was glad that I’d gotten an opportunity to talk to Shirakawa-san about KEN like this. It was like a dream.

Man, what am I gonna do...?

I was falling deeper and deeper in love with Shirakawa-san by the day. But at the same time, the desire to touch her was driving me crazy. It was painful to endure.

I can barely wait for our weekend date, I thought from the bottom of my heart.

Thus, the following Sunday, Shirakawa-san and I went to a zoo.

“Whoa, this owl’s neck is freaky! It’s not broken?!”

She was suddenly distressed by the sight of an owl turning its head over a hundred and eighty degrees near the entrance of the zoo.

“Pandas! Let’s look at the pandas! Wow! They seem to be really popular!”

Shirakawa-san made a big fuss upon seeing the line of people wanting to see the pandas, but...

“Those pandas were kinda dirty... Also, weren’t they huge? They weren’t babies...”

Her excitement waned a little after she actually saw them, since they’d proved to be different from her expectations.

She also shared some peculiar thoughts as she was glued to the Bengal tiger’s enclosure.

“Wow, this tiger is cute! Hey, isn’t it a lot like a house cat after all?! And those stripes are seriously great! I think I wanna wear a dress with that kinda design!”

Shirakawa-san then seemed to regret her choice of clothing.

“Man, I really should’ve worn something with an animal print today! Maybe they would’ve thought I was one of them and we’d get along! I could totally wear something like that if it was autumn!”

Just like always, her look today was totally gyaru in style. She wore her usual top that showed off her exposed shoulders, some pretty beaten-up jean shorts, and a faux leather backpack with long straps that hung down from her shoulders. As expected, she was wearing shoes with heels, but the jean shorts and the backpack made her overall look more casual. Perhaps she’d been, in her own way, mindful of the fact we were visiting a zoo today.

As we walked around looking at animals, an hour passed, and I started to get hungry. We’d met up at eleven at Station A, and it was currently past one in the afternoon. Between that and the fact there were a lot of people here on a Sunday, the places where we could eat were still filled with people having lunch.

“What do you want to eat?” I asked Shirakawa-san. “It looks like they sell different foods at different parts of the zoo...”

“Huh?” She averted her gaze.

“Hm?”

She silently looked at me again, then cast her eyes downward.

“What’s wrong? You’re still not hungry?” I asked her.

“No, it’s just...” uttered Shirakawa-san. She awkwardly shrank and started fidgeting without another word.

I didn’t understand what she was getting at, and since she wasn’t acting like her usual self, the question marks kept piling up in my head.

“So, uh... You wanna keep going around looking at the animals?” I offered. “We’ve already seen most in the East Garden, so we can go to the West one...”

“Um... Um, uhh!” Shirakawa-san finally cut in. Her face was a little red.

“Yeah? What is it?”

Shirakawa-san grew even redder. “Um...” she nervously began. “I reeeeeally couldn’t decide if I should show this to you, but since I got up early and did my best, I just thought you could...maybe just a little...”

“Huh?”

“Okay, just look!” With that, Shirakawa-san put down her backpack in apparent desperation and took something out of it. “Here! I made you lunch!”

“What...? Whaaaaat?!”

I couldn’t process what had just happened. *A boxed lunch?! That Shirakawa-san made?!*

Looking at the object she was holding out, I saw that it was indeed a lunch box. Its cold white plastic exterior was simple in a way I wouldn’t’ve expected from Shirakawa-san. Perhaps she’d borrowed the container from her family.

“*You* made this?! A boxed lunch?!” I was so shocked I didn’t realize I was shouting.

“Yeah...” replied Shirakawa-san, her voice trailing off. She was hanging her head and blushing. “You talked about me working at a cake shop the other day, so I figured you might be into corny stuff like this... I’ve never cooked before, so I thought maybe I shouldn’t... But then I thought it might make you happy, so I kinda...wanted to make it anyway...”

“Shirakawa-san...”

I gazed at her once again. With her curly, dirty-blond hair and her long, flashy nails, her image was the complete opposite of that of a family-oriented girl. It did seem like she actually wasn’t good at cooking.

And yet she’d made a boxed lunch for me anyway... It was scary how happy I was.

“Y-You don’t have to eat it, okay?! I’ll have it all myself if you don’t want it!” blurted out Shirakawa-san. It was taking me a while to accept it, so she seemed like she was about to try. Still blushing, she started to look embarrassed and lowered her hands.

“Wait, I want it! Thanks, Shirakawa-san,” I hurriedly replied and accepted the lunch box.

Since there was no longer any need to buy lunch, we decided to eat in a nearby rest area. While it was still outdoors, there was a decent roof overhead, and there were plenty of simple chairs and tables.

“Seriously, don’t get your hopes up, okay...? It was the first time in my entire life that I made lunch by myself,” Shirakawa-san said bashfully.

Her words, however, had the exact opposite effect on me—the more she said, the more my expectations shot through the roof. In fact, I honestly didn’t even care what kind of food was inside. This was the first lunch box she’d ever made... I’d just received the privilege of eating her cooking—something none of her ex-boyfriends had ever gotten to do.

My heart was beating so fast that my hands shook as I removed the lid.

“Well then...” I said, solemnly opening the lid.

Time to see what treasures this box holds.

And once its contents were in full view, what I saw was...

“Wow...”

Omurice. There was no doubt about it—everything was wrapped in thin, fried scrambled eggs.

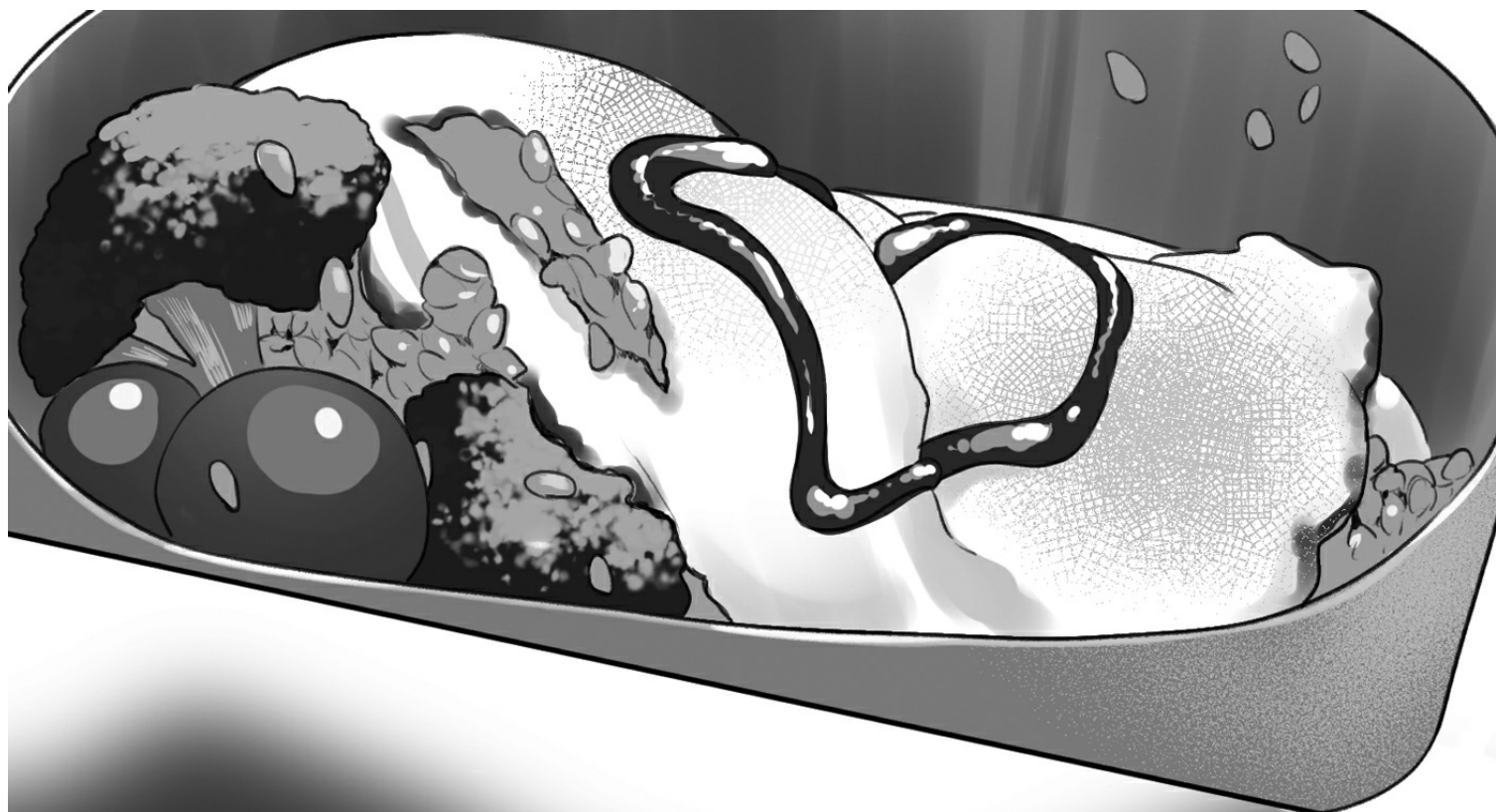
However, that yellowness was broken in a few places, revealing fried rice with chicken and ketchup underneath. A number of spots were browned from being burned. There were broccoli and cherry tomatoes added as a garnish, painfully smushed into a corner from the pressure of the uneven omurice.

Instead of being an obviously gross boxed lunch, like one with blackened, charred croquettes, this was a true-to-life, yet slightly awkward one—the kind made in a panic by a person not used to cooking but nonetheless putting in their best effort.

It was so praiseworthy that my love for Shirakawa-san was threatening to pierce the heavens.

“What?! No way! It’s so uneven! Man... It looked a bit better right after I made it, okay?!” exclaimed Shirakawa-san. Seeing the state of her cooking inside the box, she was totally flustered.

“It’s okay, I’ll help myself.”



I was about to stick the spoon into the omurice, but my phone vibrated irregularly twice in a row. I was curious, so I took it out of my pocket and looked at the screen.

Nicole: Did you eat all your lunch?

Nicole: If you left any, I'll punch you.

"Eek!"

It was a LINE message from Yamana-san.

"What's wrong?" asked Shirakawa-san. Seeing the stiff look on my face, she took a casual peek at my phone. "Oh, isn't that Nicole?" she said, her eyes opening wide as she gazed at the notifications.

"Did you tell Yamana-san about the lunch?" I asked.

"More like I had her call me over and over this morning until I woke up. I *had* to get up early to make this... My dad sleeps all day on weekends and my grandma is on a trip with her hula friends."

"Huh? Don't you have an alarm clock? Or what about the alarm on your phone?"

"How's it even possible to wake up like that? I just immediately silence them and go back to sleep. But Nicole? She talks to me until I wake up."

I didn't know what to say. Shirakawa-san was really amazing. If it were me, I would prefer to sleep with alarm clocks wrapped around my stomach like dynamite rather than get someone else involved with something as extremely personal as waking up.

"Is Yamana-san a morning person?" I asked.

"Nuh-uh. She worked until late yesterday, so she was *super* angry with me when I asked. She was all like, 'That's such a pain in the ass! It's not my problem!'"

That explained the angry LINE messages I'd just received.

“Wait a sec, you chat with Nicole over LINE?” asked Shirakawa-san, blinking in surprise.

It’s just like the other day, I thought. She was wearing that same mildly uncertain look that she’d had when she’d asked me about my meeting with Yamana-san at McDonald’s.

“Yeah... Um, back when she told me about your birthday, she also told me how to get in touch with her in case I wanted to ask her something about you. This is the first time she’s messaged me since then.”

It somehow sounded like I was making excuses, but it was hard to imagine Shirakawa-san being jealous, so I ended up saying that in a half-hearted tone.

“Huh... I see!” As expected, Shirakawa-san’s expression immediately returned to normal.

But in the next moment, she hung her head and quietly said, “Maybe I really am more in love with you than I realize...”

“What?”

“Never mind; it’s nothing!”

With that, I finally started eating. Her cooking was nowhere near as dangerous as I’d braced myself for.

“Yeah, it’s great!”

I wasn’t even lying—it tasted like a completely normal omurice made at home.

To be honest, even if Shirakawa-san’s lunch had tasted terrible, like if she’d made a mistake and mixed up salt and sugar or something similar, I’d still have been as happy to eat it as if it were something made at a three-star restaurant.

It was all because this was a homemade boxed lunch made by the girl I’d once admired from a distance.

“Really?! Yay!” She rejoiced innocently, like a little girl. “If the first thing I ever cooked is great, I guess I’m a genius! Maybe I should become a chef in the future...”

“A chef? Didn’t you want to be a YouTuber?”

“Hmm... There’s a lotta things I wanna be, so it’s hard to choose!”

Shirakawa-san smiled a lot today. She’d been a cheerful girl from the start, but compared with how things had been in the beginning, I was seeing her smile more often when we were together.

Had she really come to like me more than before? If so, would she allow just a little bit of physical intimacy...?

Whenever I thought about how lovely she was, it was difficult to fight the urge to touch her. In the beginning, I’d used to be happy just being together with her, but it seemed like I’d gotten greedy at some point.

After lunch, we walked around looking at animals for another hour or so. We left once we’d completed a lap around the zoo.

It was finally time for my primary objective. I could focus on my mission to get on a boat with Shirakawa-san and take her hand when she involuntarily held one out because she was unsteady while getting on and off it. And for that to happen, I needed to come up with a good way of inviting her onto a boat.

I kept my nervousness carefully hidden as I walked down a road outside the zoo with Shirakawa-san by my side.

The western part of the zoo was adjacent to the Shinobazu Pond in Ueno Park. Leaving through the zoo’s gate, you would inevitably walk alongside it.

“What a huge pond!” exclaimed Shirakawa-san upon seeing it.

“Yeah, no kidding,” I replied.

The weather was good, so even though it was almost three and the sun was starting to set, there were many boats out on the water. What caught my eye were the numerous swan-shaped paddle boats, though I’d made sure beforehand that ordinary boats were available too.

“Ah!” Shirakawa-san pointed toward the pond. “There are boats! They look pretty comfy!”

“Wanna go for a ride?” I asked after a brief pause. Her assist was way too helpful, which caused my voice to rise in pitch from nervousness.

“Yeah, totes!” Shirakawa-san readily agreed. Her eyes were sparkling with joy. “I think my last time on a boat was back in primary school! I wonder if I’ll even be able to row it!”

“Oh, I’ll do it.”

“Huh? Doesn’t everybody on the boat need to row?”

“Only in a canoe!” I said.

“Whaaat?!”

We both laughed at Shirakawa-san’s ditziness as we made our way to the pier. There was a line of boats moored there. It looked like you needed to buy tickets at a ticket machine and then head to the boarding area farther away at the pier.

“Ah, but wait, won’t it be hot out on a boat?” asked Shirakawa-san.

With her concern in mind, I decided to buy a ticket for a paddle boat with a roof instead. You could say it was similar to the swan ones but without the swan on the prow—and you had to move your legs to use something akin to bicycle pedals to propel the boat.

“We can ride for thirty minutes? Sounds fun!” Shirakawa-san exclaimed.

We made our way to the boat designated by the attendant.

“Watch your step...” I said.

Shirakawa-san was about to get on the boat, still wearing her shoes with a heel that I thought must’ve been ten centimeters tall.

“Agh!” she exclaimed, feeling her footing become unsteady.

But as I nearly extended my hand, thinking this was my chance—

“Wow! Look at this view!”

—she immediately regained her balance, and before I knew it, she was safely on board.

“Yeah, sure is...” I replied.

My mistake had probably been letting her get on first. When somebody became unsteady on their feet, they generally extended their hands forward—had I already been on board, perhaps I could’ve helped her in naturally.

Calm down, Ryuto. You’ll still get a chance when it’s time to get off, I told myself to keep my composure.

“What’s wrong, Ryuto?” asked Shirakawa-san right after we started paddling.

“Huh?” I looked at her beside me. “What do you mean?”

It was cramped in the boat. Seeing her excessively beautiful face from close-up while our shoulders were touching made my heart beat even faster. I felt myself sweating.

I’m trying to hold hands with such a cute girl... Is this really going to work?

Still, if she refused to so much as hold hands with me, it was safe to assume the chances of her ever saying she wanted to have sex with me were pretty low. The thought of it made me even more nervous.

“You’re kinda spacing out. Are you tired?” asked Shirakawa-san.

“Huh? I’m not...”

I wondered if I should be honest here before she thought something weird was going on, though it wasn’t like I was about to reveal my scheme to hold hands with her later.

“I was looking at you and thinking how you’re just too cute, and before I knew it, my mind was somewhere else...” I replied, stifling my embarrassment.

“Huh?” uttered Shirakawa-san, gazing at me. Her cheeks instantly flushed pink. “You dummy.” Her bashful frown looked so adorable that I wished I could take a picture. “Ah!” Suddenly, she pulled her phone out of a pocket of her backpack. “Let’s take a picture!”

“Huh?! O-Okay.” I was startled, thinking she’d read my mind.

People think that gyaru take selfies all the time, but Shirakawa-san wasn’t that much into photos. She almost never took selfies when we were together,

and we'd yet to take a picture together on a date.

"Oh, looking pretty good!" uttered Shirakawa-san, activating the front camera in her photo app and checking the angle. "Come a little closer," she said, leaning toward me.

Her long, curly hair had a floral-or-fruity scent, and it tickled my nose as it wafted over. Mixed in with the mature perfume she always wore was a feminine scent that was hard to describe.

"C'mon, look at the camera!" exclaimed Shirakawa-san with a smile as I kept pointing my eyes somewhere else entirely due to my nervousness. "Okay, here goes!"

Then, she rested her head on my shoulder, shocking me. The next moment, she pressed the shutter button.

"Oh, it came out good!"

Shirakawa-san showed me her phone's screen. Displayed on it was my face, on the verge of stiffness from surprise.

"Wanna put it on your lock screen?" she asked, looking at me with those upturned eyes and an impish smile.

"Oh, uh... It's...too embarrassing..." I said falteringly, my face red.

"Yeah, true..." She smiled. "Maybe I'll put it on my home screen, then."

With that, Shirakawa-san went into her phone's settings and quickly tapped away.

"Hey, isn't this pretty nice?" she said.

As she showed me the screen with app icons over our photo, I got embarrassed all over again.

"C'mon, you should do it too!" she coyly urged.

My heart pounding, I replied, "Okay."

Once Shirakawa-san sent me the image over LINE and I set it as my wallpaper too, I showed it to her.

She smiled at me happily. "Heh heh, that's another matching thing we have

now.”

The dazzling nature of her grin had to do with more than just the reflection of the afternoon sunlight on the water.

Feeling Shirakawa-san’s presence closer to me than usual in that cramped boat, I wished I could stay there forever.

Time, however, waited for no one, and thirty minutes had passed in the blink of an eye. With reluctance, I steered us back to the pier and stopped the boat. I got off first and waited for Shirakawa-san to follow me.

That’s right—it was so that *this time* I’d get to hold hands with her.

“There we go!” uttered Shirakawa-san.

To my astonishment, she nimbly got up and disembarked without losing her balance.

Unlike getting on board, getting *off* a boat involved moving from unstable ground to the stable variety. Perhaps she didn’t need help if she had a good sense of balance.

My plan had failed.

“That was a pretty fun ride! It felt great!” exclaimed Shirakawa-san.

“Yeah...” I replied.

She was in a good mood, but I had been dealt a crushing blow of defeat.

“What do we do now?” asked Shirakawa-san.

“Good question...”

“Wanna go home?”

“Hmm... Nah.”

It wasn’t even four yet. Unable to give up, I half-heartedly shook my head.

I wished we could go on another boat ride for another attempt, but I was

afraid she'd find it strange if I voiced such a request.

"Wanna walk for a bit?" I asked instead, settling on that after a good deal of worrying.

Perhaps I had an awfully brooding look on my face, because Shirakawa-san's expression changed in an instant.

"Okay..." The smile was gone from her shapely face, and she started to look just a little nervous.

We walked along a path running alongside the pond for a while after that, neither of us saying a word.

I loved Shirakawa-san. I suspected she liked me too. After all, she was so nice to me and was still going out with me.

However, she'd yet to say she wanted to have sex with me.

That thought made me lose my nerve. I really couldn't just go and ask her to hold hands directly.

But I wanted to touch her. To me, liking a girl also meant having the urge to touch her. However, that didn't seem to necessarily be the case for Shirakawa-san when she liked a guy. I couldn't understand it, and it was painful.

I didn't want to hurt her, but it had finally gotten hard for me to bear—my love for her had grown too much.

Not that it meant I was okay with becoming like one of her ex-boyfriends who made her think that sex was a duty, however. I was cautious about physical intimacy with her because, after all, she was a considerate girl. If she were to notice my desires, I suspected she would set her feelings aside and let me do anything I wanted.

As I thought about all this, Shirakawa-san came to a sudden stop beside me. "Hey, Ryuto."

"Hm?" I returned, having come to my senses.

She gave me an earnest gaze. "If you have something to say, say it."

"Huh...?"

Had she realized what I'd been trying to do?

But as I thought there was no way I could simply tell her about it, Shirakawa-san spoke up with a grim look on her face.

"I can tell these things," she said, pausing for a moment. "At some point, everyone starts acting like that on a normal date, and then that's followed by *those words*."

"What...?" I frowned, confused as to what she was talking about.

Shirakawa-san looked heartbroken. "Honestly, I don't wanna break up. I wanted to become closer to you... I liked you. I'm not that smart, so maybe I didn't make it clear...but I was quickly coming to like you more and more, you know?"

"Hey, wait a moment, what're you talking about?" I asked.

She seemed to be saying something unrelated to what I'd assumed, so I stopped her upon realizing it.

"Huh?" uttered Shirakawa-san, looking confused. "Aren't you gonna say you wanna break up with me?"

"Whaaat?! It's not like that at all!" I replied, utterly panicked. I'd never thought about that for even a second. "Wh-Why would you assume that?!"

"You were looking all glum and were aimlessly walking around without a word."

"Huh?! Well, that's, uh..."

Then, I recalled what she'd just said.

"I can tell these things. At some point, everyone starts acting like that on a normal date, and then that's followed by those words."

Ah, so that's what she meant, I thought. Was this how her exes had been dumping her until now?

It was painful to have someone cut ties with you. I'd merely *confessed* to Kurose-san and her rejection had hurt enough to leave me traumatized. The simple fact she hadn't accepted my confession had made me feel like my entire

self had been deemed unworthy.

Shirakawa-san had gone through an even more painful experience, and it had happened again and again. Guys would accept her and she'd come to trust them, but then they'd suddenly cast her aside.

Perhaps it had been her protective instinct that had led her to push and urge me to speak up in order to lessen the blow, even if only a little, because she subconsciously wanted to avoid getting hurt again.

"I don't want to break up with you, not in the slightest," I said.

I was different from her exes. And while I didn't want to think about it even for a second right now... If this love were to come to an end someday, I definitely wouldn't be the one to end things between us.

"I was just thinking..." I began.

Compared to Shirakawa-san's emotional wounds, the problem that was stumping me felt trivial and inconsequential.

"I wanted to ride on a boat again," I admitted.

"Huh? A boat? That's it?" She looked taken aback.

I nodded. "Yeah. I thought it might be weird since we only just went for a ride in one."

A smile returned to Shirakawa-san's face. "You like boats that much? Oh well! Let's go ride one again! It *was* pretty nice!"

Seeing her carefree smile, love for her surged inside me all over again.

Okay, time to change my tactics.

I decided to stop waiting for Shirakawa-san to extend her hand. I would summon my courage and reach out first.

I want to touch you, I thought. And if she looked displeased, I would gracefully apologize and wait for the right moment.

That would be for the best.

Thus, we made our way back to the ticket machine at the pier.

“Since we’re going for round two, wanna go with a normal boat this time?” suggested Shirakawa-san.

“Sure. Are you okay with the sunlight, though?”

“Yeah. The sun’s lower than it was earlier, so.”

With that out of the way, we bought a ticket for a rowboat and headed to the boarding area.

Due to the way they were made, rowboats were less stable than paddle boats, like the one we’d ridden earlier.

I got on board first and held out my hand to Shirakawa-san, who was standing on the pier.

I mustered up what little courage I had, leaving me with none to look her in the eye. “Take my hand, if you like,” I said.

There was silence for a moment, so I looked up in worry. That was when I saw that Shirakawa-san had surprise and bashfulness written on her face.

“Oh, thanks...” she uttered, timidly extending her pretty hand.

I could feel the soft, damp touch of her warm skin. Gently holding her hand, I felt deeply moved.

Once she’d taken my hand, Shirakawa-san got on board. “How kind of you, Ryuto,” she quietly said. Her eyes seemed to glisten somewhat.

However, our hands were only linked for a moment. We let go at the same time and sat facing each other in the boat. I had no time to relish my first bit of physical intimacy with Shirakawa-san since I needed to take hold of the coarse oars now. I didn’t have a choice either, since rowing was the only means of getting away from the pier.

We were silent for a while after I’d begun to row. It was a comfortable silence.

The park’s greenery sprouted alongside the pond, and the city’s high-rises were towering beyond it. The water was muddy and I couldn’t see any fish nearby, but a group of ducks were swimming some distance away.

Admiring such a scene around me, I rowed the boat, feeling content.

“Maybe it was right to choose this boat after all,” Shirakawa-san eventually muttered.

“Hm?”

As I looked at her, wondering what she meant, she smiled at me.

“I got to hold hands with you,” she said, her cheeks tinged with red.

“Huh...?”

“I’ve been thinking about it all the time recently—that I wanted to hold hands with you,” Shirakawa-san told me. “That’s why I’ve been trying to stick closer to you than usual. You didn’t notice?”

Her words made me recall how she’d suddenly touched my arm when we’d left school together, as well as when she’d placed her head on my shoulder when we took a picture on the paddle boat.

So those were signals...

“I couldn’t just say it ‘cause I thought it’d be wrong to do that. Like, I still don’t feel like having sex with you, so how could I ask to hold hands? That’d be so selfish, right? Don’t guys want to go all the way after the first touch?”

“Huh? Uh, I don’t know about that...”

I might have been a virgin, but even *my* sex drive wasn’t so strong that I’d go wild simply from holding hands with a girl. This mix of knowledge and misconceptions Shirakawa-san had about guys was cute but dangerous at the same time. It made me feel like I had a duty to protect her.

“I wanted to hold hands with you too,” I confessed.

Shirakawa-san raised her chin and looked at me. “For real?”

“Yeah,” I replied and nodded.

A smile adorned her face. “Huh... I see...” Her expression seemed to indicate she was plotting something...and all of a sudden, she stood up.

“Shirakawa-san? Be careful—”

As I wondered what she was doing, she bent over and placed her hands on the hull, starting to shake it vigorously on purpose.

“Huh?!” I exclaimed.

The boat began to rock violently, causing water to splash inside.

“Wh-What are you doing?! Cut it out, it’s dangerous!” I cried.

Then suddenly...

Shirakawa-san drew nearer to me and brought her pretty face close to mine. Without any time to prepare myself, I felt a soft, warm touch on my lips.

She kissed me.

By the time I realized what had happened, our lips had already separated.

She sat down again with a grin on her face. “Gotcha!”

I had no idea what to even say. Rowing was now the furthest thing from my mind as I sat there in a daze. I felt like my spirit had left my body.

A kiss with Shirakawa-san... A kiss with Shirakawa-san...

That one phrase kept repeating in my mind. Merely holding hands had been a big deal to me, but getting to kiss her? It was unbelievable! I was so touched that my head was full of Shirakawa-san.

Ah, I really love her so, so much.

“We were thinking about the same things, right?” she asked with an embarrassed smile. Casting her eyes downward, she said, “I wanna get closer to you. To come to like you more. To...” She then looked up at me again. “...become a couple who love each other for real.”

Her words took me by surprise as I recalled the conversation we’d had on the day we’d started dating. I’d had no idea she’d been thinking along those lines...

I sat there, overcome with deep emotion, and Shirakawa-san looked back at

me.

She fanned her flushed cheeks with her hands. “Man, this is the first time I went in for a kiss. It’s so embarrassing!” She spoke as though she was angry, but her pouty lips were so cute.

Then, our eyes met and we lightly smiled at each other.

When it was time to get off the boat back at the pier, I held out my hand to Shirakawa-san again.

“Here.”

“Thank you,” she replied, shyly taking my hand.

As she disembarked and I was about to let go, she tightened her grip.

“Sh-Shirakawa-san...?”

When I looked at her, startled, she gave me a playful smile. “Wanna stay like this for a little?”

“Huh...? S-Sure.”

The two of us then began to walk around the park, holding hands.

“By the way, would you stop with the ‘Shirakawa-san’ already?” she proposed all of a sudden.

“What?!” I looked at her. “Then...what should I call you...?”

Shirakawa-san seemed to sulk a little. “You *know* my name’s Runa, right?”

“Oh...”

S-So that’s what she meant...

“Well, uh, so...” I began.

I’d never called a girl by her given name before—I’d only ever used someone’s surname with “-san” attached. Changing that up would take me some time to mentally prepare myself. How could I have known a day would come when I’d be calling Shirakawa-san, of all people, by her given name—and without an honorific, at that?

“Ru... Ru-ru-ru...” I stammered.

Damn it, not again! I was freaking out the exact same way I had during my confession.

“Ruu-ru-ru...”

I most certainly wasn’t singing. My only source of comfort was that Shirakawa-san was patiently waiting for me to say it and not bursting into laughter.

“Runa...”

I finally managed to say it properly. Uttering her name for the first time felt strange, like it wasn’t me speaking—even though the voice was mine.

“Yees?” Shirakawa-san said in a deliberately exaggerated way, bending over a little to look at me with those upturned eyes of hers.

“Oh, uh...” I was at a loss on how to reply, since it wasn’t like I’d called her name to tell her something. “A-Are you tired, Shirakawa-san? Do you wanna sit down somewhere?”

“It’s fiiine; I was just sitting on a boat.”

“Oh...”

Right.

“Also, you’re back to using ‘Shirakawa-san’ again,” she added.

“Oh, sorry!”

Man, what am I doing...? As I started to feel down over my behavior, Shirakawa-san giggled.

“It’s okay. I can wait until calling me that comes naturally to you.”

Then, she gripped my hand as though to reassure me.

“Shirakawa-san...”

I was overcome with emotion—she really was such a wonderful girl. I wanted to become a good match for my charming girlfriend as soon as I could.

“Ryuto, your hand’s cold,” Shirakawa-san said all of a sudden.

“Really? S-Sorry, I was just nervous...”

She giggled, seeming to find it funny how I’d been constantly apologizing for a while now.

“It’s okay, and it’s already summer anyway. I’ll warm you up.” She then blushed a little, a bashful smile appearing on her face. “Hey, this is kinda embarrassing.”

While I was blushing too, things seemed to have gotten so awkward for Shirakawa-san that she looked up at the sky to hide that fact.

“Man... If we had sex at the very start, I’m sure it wouldn’t have been so embarrassing now...” she said, still looking up. “Holding hands, kissing—it’s all so awkward. I think I’m coming to like you more and more whenever I feel you by my side.” Then, she faced my way. “I’ve never had this happen to me before,” she said with a sulking expression and blushing cheeks. “Will you take responsibility?”

Startled by Shirakawa-san’s words, which could be taken as a proposal, I stiffly nodded under her gaze.

“If you’ll have me... G-Gladly.”

She softly smiled. “Gosh, this is really kinda embarrassing,” she said, tightening her grip on my hand.

The height of summer was approaching us, and the evening air had a hint of the warm season to it. A refreshing breeze blew over from the pond, carrying the heat away.

Shirakawa-san was by my side, and I wanted to treasure her, to protect her smile forever. I wouldn’t be like her ex-boyfriends. I didn’t want to let her wear a sad look ever again.

To express those feelings, I gently squeezed her warm, delicate hand in return.

Chapter 5.5: Kurose Maria's Diary

How frustrating... I lost to Runa.

How could I have known she was going out with Kashima Ryuto?

What's up with that? What's the point? Or what, is he actually a great guy despite his looks?

Sure, I did think he was a little cool when he heard me out. I'd never talked to anyone about my family like that, not since my parents' divorce. I don't even really know why I told him about all that.

What I understand even less, though...is why I've been thinking about him all the time since then. It's just, it was the first time. The first time a guy ever confronted me like that and heard me out as a human being.

That's because I've only ever had guys around me who looked like idiots while they vacantly stared at my fake smiles. Even *he* was like that four years ago.

"Wouldn't it be better if, instead of trying to become a girl loved by everyone, you focused on becoming one that the guy you'll one day fall in love with will love back?"

That's what he said to me. But what if I'm falling for a guy who's already looking at a different girl? What am I supposed to do then?

And as if that weren't enough, that "different girl" is Runa, of all people...

Oh, I know.

I should just take him from her.

It's not like I've forgiven her yet. I do feel bad about spreading rumors about her, and I apologized for that. But...this all started because she took my dad from me. Runa is worse than me.

I'll take Kashima Ryuto from her. I'll make her taste the same sadness I felt

when she took the person dearest to me in the whole world.

That will be my revenge. Today, it begins for real.

Look forward to it, Runa.

Epilogue

We'd left the park and briefly stopped at a café on a busy street. Now, we were heading to Ueno Station on our way back from our date.

"Ryuto, you don't have something like a small bandage on you by any chance, do you?"

"Huh? Is something wrong?" I asked, turning to look at her.

"My foot hurts..." Shirakawa-san said awkwardly. "I think I popped a blister on my heel."

"What?! Are you okay? Did you get it from your shoes?"

"Yeah... It's my first time wearing these."

While the thought of her wearing new shoes for our date made me happy, I *was* worried about her getting blisters.

"I'll go look for something at that convenience store. Wait here for a bit," I said, heading to a store we just happened to be passing by.

"Now, where do they have those here...?"

I didn't really remember ever buying them before, so I searched for the section of the store where they might be.

"There they are," I said upon finding the familiar packaging in a section with first aid and personal care items on display.

As I was about to reach out for what I wanted, I suddenly noticed a row of other boxes beside it that were roughly the same size but with more stylish designs. Figuring those matched Shirakawa-san better, I reached out for one of them instead.

I suddenly froze. Upon closer inspection, I realized those were boxes of contraceptives for men... Condoms. Seeing how much the writing on the boxes stressed the thinness of their contents, it was crystal clear that was what they were.

“Did you find anything?”

I heard Shirakawa-san’s voice from right beside me at that point, causing me to vigorously jump aside.

“Eh, huh?! Wh-Why didn’t you just wait? Your foot hurts, right?” I asked.

“It’s fine; it’s not like I can’t walk at all.”

Upon replying, Shirakawa-san looked at the shelf I’d just reached out for. Next, she smirked at me.

“Ah, is this what you were looking at?” she asked, pointing at the box of condoms I’d been about to take. “Did you think these were bandages?”

“N-No! Not at all!”

“Weren’t you gonna grab one, though?”

She saw me!

“So what did you think they were if you were gonna get one?” asked Shirakawa-san.

“W-Well...”

I’d briefly mistaken them for something else, but it was too embarrassing to explain that to Shirakawa-san. I’d be exposing myself as an utterly unpopular guy who’d never needed those things.

Seeing me look all confused, she burst out laughing. “Ryuto, you’re so cute! Your face is red like a tomato.”

“Ugh...”

I really was no match for Shirakawa-san.

Afterword

Hello, my name is Makiko Nagaoka. Thank you for giving this book a read.

Now then, this time it's a rom-com with a bit of a shocking title.

I originally started writing light novels for a male audience because I was obsessed with virgins, so I never thought I'd end up writing one with a heroine of this type... I think if you told me from ten years ago that she'd write such a book, she'd fall down on the floor!

After finishing my last series, *Isekai de Rori ni Amayakasareru no wa Machigatteiru darou ka* (*Is It Wrong to be Pampered by a Loli in Another World?*), I talked at length with my editor regarding my next work. I ended up choosing to write an orthodox rom-com in a school setting, which I hadn't done in a while. But we decided to go with a new approach while we were at it, and after more discussion, we'd settled on a story with this kind of protagonist and heroine before I knew it.

Back when I was a student, I was, if anything, more like Ryuto, so I drew inspiration for Shirakawa-san from some of the girls around me whom I had admired—they were gorgeous, a little on the mature side, and dazzling like the sun.

When it came to writing a heroine like this, I felt somewhat conflicted on the inside, just like Ryuto. But since Shirakawa-san is a very cute girl, I'm hoping my readers will come to love her as much as I do.

Kurose-san is so cute too! Come to think of it, I've never really given main roles to the kind of girls you'd find in a shojo manga before—girls like Kurose-san—so it was really fun to write her. I hope she'll fight harder in the second volume! She has a lot of potential, so as the author, I have hopes for her in the future.

I also like Nicole. Female best friends in my works tend to be kind and devoted to their friends. My own best friend is like that too, so maybe I'm just

unconsciously projecting. Not that she's ever read any of my books...

It was fun to write Ryuto's friends as well. It's been a while since I last had male characters in my stories who were anything like that friend archetype, and it made me once again think: guys who goof around with their male friends are so interesting!

Ryuto is me, so I don't really have anything to say there...

As for writing the love between Ryuto and Shirakawa-san from the point of view of the former, I took it as a thought experiment: if I got lucky enough to date a beautiful voice actress I admired, would I give up on the idea if I found out she wasn't a virgin? There's no way I would...

So basically that's what this story is about. Some of you might be put off by the title, but if you're reading this book and I've made you want to follow the love story between Ryuto and Shirakawa-san in the future, that would make me happy.

To my illustrator magako-sama—thank you for the numerous lovely illustrations, and plenty that feature the fashionable Runa! I'm always shouting in joy all by myself whenever my editor sends me your work because it's too wonderful.

To my former editor, Suzuki-sama, who gave me little bits of advice here and there while I was coming up with the plot—thank you for working with me over the past three years. I'm thoroughly indebted to you.

And to my current editor Matsubayashi-sama—I'm already thoroughly indebted to you too. I'm always grateful for the thoroughness of your work and I look forward to our continued collaboration!

And K*N-sama, whom I've used as a model for KEN without permission—I offer you my quiet gratitude, love, and respect.

Lastly, to everyone who found the time to read this book—thank you so much from the very bottom of my heart.

Let us meet again in the second volume!

You | Were
Experienced,
I | Was | Not:
OUR DATING STORY



KUROSE MARIA

A transfer student making her entrance in the middle of this work. Beloved by all, this black-haired beauty has a bit of a connection to Ryuto...and to Runa too?!



KASHIMA RYUTO

A high-school boy who's a little on the gloomy side. Likes watching videos online. Ends up confessing to his crush as punishment, expecting to be rejected.



SHIRAKAWA RUNA

A beauty appearing to be at the top of the school pecking order. Her countless romances have inspired rumors and fantasies among many boys.





"Gotcha!"



1st
Date

You Were

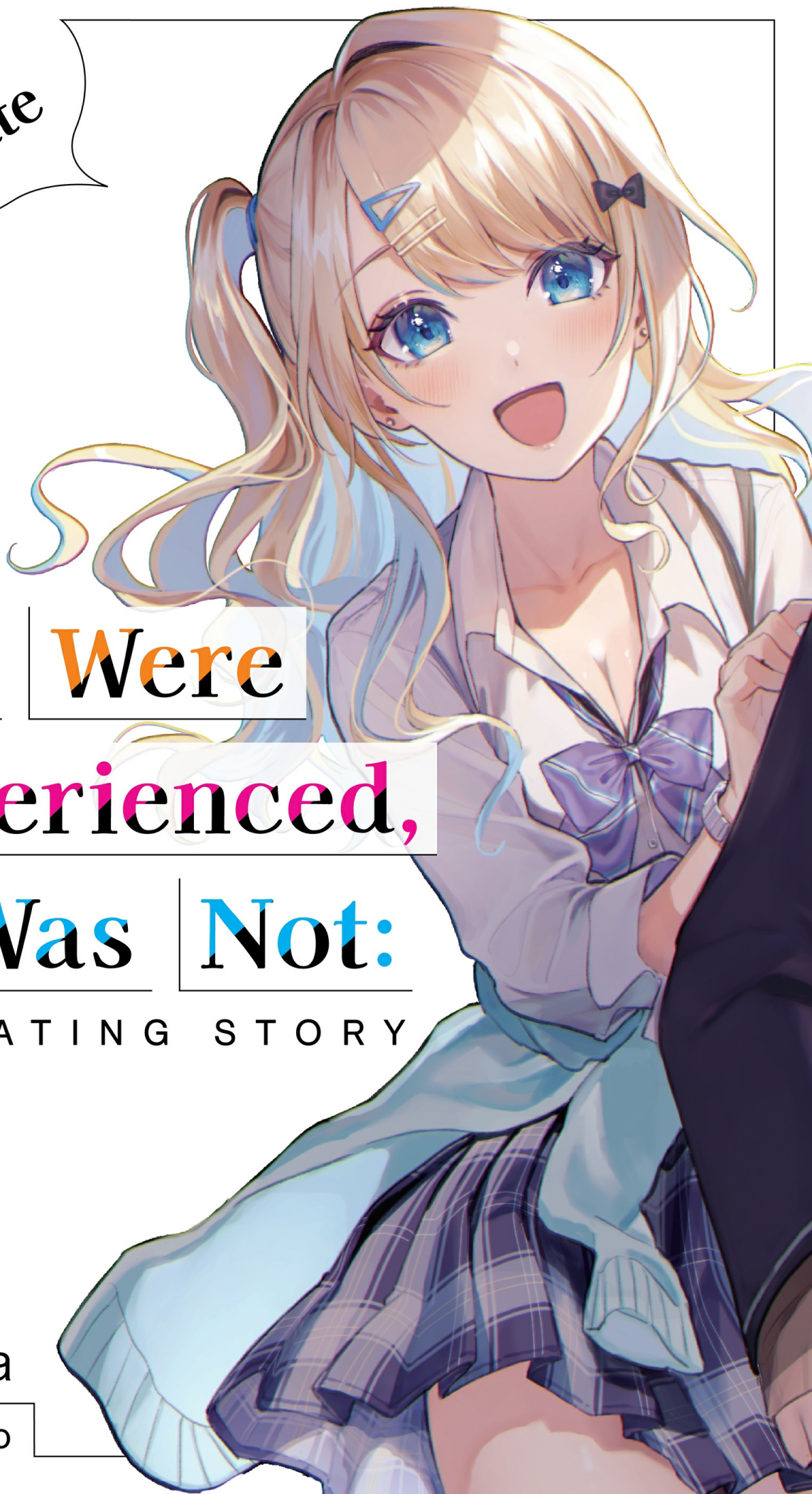
Experienced,

I Was Not:

OUR DATING STORY

Makiko
Nagaoka

Artist / magako



You | Were
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“Oh, *that’s* what’s on
your mind? Sure.”

"Gotcha!"





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You Were Experienced, I Was Not: Our Dating Story 1st Date by Makiko Nagaoka

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