

2nd
Date



You Were

Experienced,

I Was Not:

OUR DATING STORY

Makiko
Nagaoka

Artist / magako

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Prologue

I still dreamed about the time when Shirakawa-san and I hadn't been dating yet. In those dreams, she was surrounded by numerous friends while I gazed at her from a distance, keeping my admiration for her to myself as I thought how she was lovely as always.

And that only made sense—it had to be reality, right? After all, it was unthinkable for me to be going out with her unless it was a dream.

With that thought in the corner of my mind, I woke up and saw that I'd gotten a message on my phone from Shirakawa-san.

☆ **Luna** ☆: Morning! Check out my supercute makeup today!
♡

There was a selfie attached. In it, the stunning cutie Shirakawa-san was smiling at the camera as usual.

"Damn..." slipped from my mouth.

I'd just woken up and I was already taking a lethal dose of love on an empty stomach. It grew inside me and made me feel like I was either close to choking or like I wanted to cry from too much happiness.

While I couldn't shake the feeling that I was still dreaming, unbelievably, this was reality. I wished it would last forever.

I was well aware I'd already used up my lifetime's worth of luck. So I'd be fine borrowing my luck from my next life or the one after that. I wanted to be with Shirakawa-san forever.

My love for her grew by the day.

I was certain I would never meet anyone else in my life who would make me genuinely feel this way ever again.

Chapter 1

July came, and so did the first summer since I started going out with Shirakawa-san. The end of the rainy season hadn't been announced yet, but the weather was clear today and the temperature was said to be over thirty-five degrees Celsius. The air felt no different from how it was at the height of summer.

And yet, as the two of us left school and walked to the station together, Shirakawa-san had an expression as overcast as a rainy day.

"Man, finals start tomorrow... I'm so totally done for!" she exclaimed from beside me, scratching her head and looking up at the sky with despair in her eyes. "I'm done like a well-done steak!"

"Steak? Now you're making me hungry," I said.

"Oh, come on! And what about you, anyway? Are you, like, all prepared for it or something?"

"N-Not really..."

End-of-term tests would be starting the following day. The first day's exams were going to be English grammar, a science course of our choice, and home economics.

"There's nothing I can do about English grammar at this point other than look up some words, and the same goes for chemistry... I do plan to memorize some stuff for home economics tonight, though," I said.

"Oh, you're doing chemistry? I'm doing biology, but it's completely beyond me. Like seriously, I'm so finished I'm Finnish!"

"Do you have any Finnish relatives?"

"Huh? I don't know..." After looking puzzled for a moment, Shirakawa-san pouted. "So, like, are you one of those super smart guys? English grammar by itself is hell enough, but you already have it all down except for some words,

right?”

“Uh, no, not exactly...” I got flustered since I didn’t want her to expect too much of me.

She then stared at me with upturned eyes.

“Wh-What?” I asked.

“What was your English grammar midterm score?”

“Huh? Let me think...”

I recalled that I’d made a mistake in an important grammatical construction and got a lower score than I’d expected. Then again, it hadn’t been bad enough to keep it a secret, so I had no choice but to come clean.

“Seventy-eight or seventy-nine...I think,” I replied.

I still remembered how frustrating it had been not to hit the eighty-point mark.

However, when Shirakawa-san heard my confession, her eyes began to sparkle. “Wow, damn!”

For a moment I wondered how she meant it, but judging by the awe in her eyes, it didn’t seem to be negative.

“You really *are* smart, Ryuto! I only got a thirty-five... I worked pretty hard at it too...”

“Oh...”

I could tell her she’d still done better than Icchi the other day, but that would probably only confuse her.

“The stuff we’re getting tested on this time is completely beyond me,” said Shirakawa-san. “I’m totally getting a lower score on these than I did on the midterms...”

“What about vocabulary? That section always has ten questions, so if you study all the relevant words now, I think you’re guaranteed to raise your score by ten points.”

“Huh? How’s that even possible? I mean, weren’t there a hundred words?”

“Don’t you already know some of them, though? You could just focus on the ones you haven’t memorized...”

“Whaaat?! I really didn’t know anything, huh... Wow, Ryuto, you’re amazing...”

I’d meant to simply give her advice, but it seemed I ended up cornering her instead. Shirakawa-san slumped her shoulders and had a melancholic look on her face.

“Before an exam day, I always think how I should’ve studied better, or how I should put in more effort next time...” said Shirakawa-san. “But right after the tests are over, our classes start covering new topics. I’m lost and just sit there absent-minded from the very start. I can’t understand much because they continue from the previous material.”

“I see...”

“I’m sure if I was like you and actually learned something every time, tests would probably just be sort of an extension of the usual studies...”

I went silent at that. It wasn’t like I was trying to assert dominance by being better at studying because I was an introvert, but I’d still managed to completely bring down Shirakawa-san’s mood.

While it wasn’t for the sake of apologizing, I wondered if there was something I could do... Suddenly, it hit me.

“Oh, so... If you like, we could study together after this,” I suggested.

Finals began tomorrow, so we’d left school early today—before noon. We’d just been thinking of where to eat lunch, so my suggestion was a “while we’re at it” sort of thing.

“Huh?” Shirakawa-san opened her eyes wide, looking thoroughly astonished. “Study...together...?”

“Yeah. If you want, of course. I’m not perfect, but I think I more or less know all the material, so I might be able to teach you something.”

“Wait, you can study with other people? I can’t even teach you anything.”

“Don’t worry about it. You know what they say—you can only teach people if

you truly know the subject. By teaching you, I might find something I myself don't understand."

"Oh... I guess you can see it that way..." Shirakawa-san looked up at me. "I'd be really happy to. I can't focus when I'm alone because before I know it, I'm working on my nails or something. I think even *I'll* be able to study if it's with you!"

Her expression was full of expectations and joy, like that of a child about to head on a field trip.

However, thirty minutes later, a shadow was already forming on her face.

Shirakawa-san sighed. "What is this? I'm *totally* clueless about this stuff."

Sitting across the table from me at the McDonald's in front of Station A (the same one I'd gone to with Yamana-san recently), Shirakawa-san was holding her head. An open textbook sat in front of her.

"What part don't you get?" I asked.

"All of it. The whole thing. Like, this sentence—does it even make sense? What *is* this?"

Shirakawa-san pointed at an English sentence that read "He is the last man to tell a lie."

"Oh, this. Okay, so, do you know what 'tell a lie' means in English?"

"Uh... 'Teru a rie'? Oh, I got it—is it a phone call? My grandma often tells me to 'teru' her if I need something."

"Wow..."

The "teru" Shirakawa-san was talking about meant a phone call in Japanese. This was more serious than I'd thought.

"Okay, then do you get the part that comes before it?" I asked.

She read the first part of the English sentence again. "'He is the last man'...?"

"That's right. 'Tell a lie' means the same as not being truthful. A literal translation to Japanese would be like, 'He is the last person to tell a lie.'"

“But what does that mean...?”

“Say, for example, that all people in the world told lies. If we put them in order by how many lies they tell, he’d be at the end of that list. That’s what it means.”

“Huh, I see...?”

“Do you understand? Basically, in Japanese, that man would be described by a word that means honest and faithful.”

“Yeah. That’s totally you, though, right?”

Her words prompted me to look at her.

“Huh?”

Shirakawa-san smiled at me. “If all guys in the world cheated, I think you’d be the last one to do it. That’s what I believe.” With that, she cast her eyes down and smiled happily. “I’ve never dated anyone who made me feel this way before.”

“Shirakawa-san...”

I was embarrassed and scratched my chin for no particular reason. Of course, I had no intention of cheating on her whatsoever, but having her place so much trust in me felt ticklish.

“Anyway, that covers that. Do you understand that sentence now?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, let’s go to the next one.”

Since it was awkward, I tried to quickly advance things, but then...

“Hey, hold on a sec,” said Shirakawa-san. She got up, taking her notebook and a mechanical pencil in hand. Then, she got close and sat beside me.

We were at a table for two people, sitting face-to-face. Until now, Shirakawa-san had sat on a chair while I was sitting on a bench seat set up along a wall. My seat was connected to a nearby table, so there was, indeed, space for two people to sit.

“Huh...? Huh?!” I was flustered by her sudden approach.

Shirakawa-san grinned at me. “It’s easier to see like this, right?”

Just like she said, if we sat side by side, we wouldn’t need to go to the trouble of turning the textbook sideways and trying to read it like that.

“Y-Yeah. Okay, so the next one...”

I tried to move things along to hide my internal turmoil. However...

“Okay, I got it,” she would say and nod. Her hair beside me would then gently sway, and a floral-or-fruity scent would tickle my nostrils every time.

Focus, me!

Also... There was something I noticed earlier.

Other tables in our row had other pairs of guys and girls sitting together. I didn’t know if they were couples or just friends, but in everyone else’s case, the girl was sitting by the wall... That is, where we were sitting now.

Was this an unspoken rule? Like, that the girl had to sit by the wall? Or was it just that girls got priority on bench seats...? I couldn’t tell, but somehow, I started to feel uncomfortable.

“Um... So... And this is like...” I began, trying to refocus on English grammar.

But when I looked down, Shirakawa-san’s white thighs, peeking out from under her skirt, caught my attention.

I wanted to touch them...but a guy like me couldn’t do such a thing all of a sudden. I’d just be a pervert.

We’re studying here; stop getting all horny. Get a hold of yourself, me!

“What’s wrong, Ryuto?”

“Huh?! Oh, uh... So basically...”

In the end, Shirakawa-san asked, “Huh, what does that mean?” three times before we finally got through the page.

“Oh, so *that’s* what it meant,” said Shirakawa-san once I finished explaining everything. She looked a little more relieved than before. “I thought you were saying a lot of really difficult stuff. It was surprisingly simple, though. Huh.”

“Exactly. A sentence might look tough because of its length, but it’s just adjectives and adverbs being added to phrases, as well as prepositions.”

“‘Prepositions’?”

“Oh, uh... Like the English words ‘in’ or ‘at’—stuff that shows *where* something happened, for instance.”

“Oh...”

It was obvious that it didn’t really seem to click for Shirakawa-san, but it was cute anyway.

“Still, I’m really glad! I’m starting to see a little hope for myself! Thanks, Ryuto.” With that, she stood up. “Let’s go get some hamburgers! Taking a load off my mind made me hungry.”

“Yeah, let’s do that,” I replied.

We’d only sat here to study, but I’d originally started all this because I’d been worried about her, so we cheerfully made our way to the register downstairs.

Then, after getting our lunch and returning to our table, she was about to sit back down on the chair, but...

“Uh... Shirakawa-san,” I began.

“Mm?” Shirakawa-san’s hands froze before she placed her tray down and she looked at me. Her large eyes were so adorable and dazzling that I couldn’t help looking down.

“Um, you can sit there if you’d like...” I said, pointing at the couch seat by the wall.

“Huh?” She tilted her head in puzzlement.

“I mean, um...” I didn’t know how to explain it well, so my speech faltered. “I’m not used to doing things with girls... Sorry if I didn’t pay attention to a bunch of things. I just realized that seat is probably better, and so I thought I’d like you to sit there now...”

“Huh...?” A slight blush crept up her cheeks. “I-I don’t really care about such

things...” Saying that, she placed her tray before the couch seat and sat there. “Thanks, Ryuto.” Still blushing, she looked up at me and smiled.

“Sorry I’m not thoughtful...”

“It’s okay,” said Shirakawa-san, maintaining her smile and shaking her head. “I’m much happier about this than the textbook stuff other guys do on dates. I like that part of you.”

Her words startled me. My heart leaped in my chest, and I could no longer take my eyes off her.

An awkward smile appeared on Shirakawa-san’s face. “Come on, you sit down too,” she suggested in an unnaturally happy voice as though to hide her awkwardness. “We’ll still sit side by side again once we’re done eating!”

“Huh?!”

“I mean, aren’t you going to help me study some more?”

The way Shirakawa-san looked at me with those upturned eyes only served to intensify the pounding in my chest.

I get to study for finals with such a cute girlfriend of mine... I seriously thought I was the happiest guy in the world.

Finals began the next day, and Shirakawa-san and I continued studying together after school even while they went on.

The McDonald’s we kept going to was full of high school students busy with their studies every day—perhaps a nearby high school had finals approaching too.

On the third day of our study sessions, after we ate lunch as usual and studied for a bit, we decided to take a break and instead of sitting side by side, we sat facing each other, sipping at shakes.

“Gotta say, there’s a lotta high school couples here studying together,” said Shirakawa-san all of a sudden after looking around us.

Now that she mentioned it, there was a guy and a girl in school uniforms

sitting together diagonally a bit away from us, wordlessly moving their pens across their notebooks. It was hard for me to make eye contact with people I didn't know, so I couldn't look around too much, but perhaps Shirakawa-san had noticed even more pairs.

"Wow... To me, studying with a boyfriend was always like...really unconventional, you know?"

"Unconventional'..."

Thinking at the back of my mind that she'd probably wanted to say "fresh," I started to consider what she meant. I recalled how she'd acted the day before finals started, when I'd suggested we study together.

"Wait, you can study with other people?"

Perhaps this kind of date (if you could call it that) was a first for her. Had she never done this with her exes? I wondered why that was. It somehow felt safe to ask.

"Your ex-boyfriends didn't help you study?"

I recalled that she was said to have even dated college students. Setting aside the hazy feelings I had about them, I was genuinely curious.

When we'd first started dating, I'd hated even thinking about her exes... Had I, perhaps, started to develop a little bit of confidence as her boyfriend?

"Huh...?"

Shirakawa-san looked at me as though taken by surprise. When our eyes met, she timidly shook her head.

"No, never. I don't think any of them cared about how well I did in school... They'd say stuff like 'It's so nice to be a girl—you're cute, so you don't have to be good at studying.'"

I could tell by Shirakawa-san's tightly pursed lips how she felt about those words. The sight reignited my anger toward her ex-boyfriends.

"I see..." I replied.

It was clear to me that she didn't think it was okay for her to be bad at

academics. The fact she was here studying for finals with me served as proof. And they'd still said such things to her? How inconsiderate could they be?

As I went silent with those thoughts on my mind, Shirakawa-san gazed at me with a smile.

"You're the first one, Ryuto. The first guy trying to do something for me." Her eyes, slightly narrowed, were trembling. Her cheeks glowed pink. "So I'm feeling a lot of things for the first time too."

"Shirakawa-san..."

As I sat there, full of emotion and unable to say anything further, her smile became a bashful one.

"Well, let's study some more," Shirakawa-san then suggested, fanning her face with both hands and fussing with her hair. She did that whenever she felt awkward.

"Yeah."

I would never hurt such a cute girlfriend of mine.

When I made such a vow, I still hadn't the slightest idea of the sheer amount of trouble waiting for us this summer.

Finals proceeded quietly. During the end-of-day homeroom on the fourth day, we got our test results for the English grammar exam from the first day of testing.

"Wow! Check this out, Ryuto!" exclaimed Shirakawa-san, approaching my seat right after receiving her test paper. "Ta-da!"

Wondering what an amazing score she must've received, I knitted my brows at the sight of the number "42" to the side of her name.

"Mmm...?" I wondered how I should react, seeing Shirakawa-san's excitement. "Wow...?"

"Isn't it amazing? I was sure I'd get a lower score than last time, but it went

up instead! It's all thanks to you! Thank you!"

"Oh, uh, I didn't really do much..."

"What score did you get? Show me."

"Okay..."

I did as she asked, at which point she opened her large eyes wide.

"Woow! Are you a god or something?!"

"You're exaggerating!"

She was reacting as though I'd shown her a perfect score. Still, as it was an eighty-seven, I'd get embarrassed if my other classmates were to put me at the center of attention.

"I'm glad you got a better score than last time, Shirakawa-san," I said, forcefully bringing us back to the previous subject.

She nodded with a smile. "Yeah! Thanks, Ryuto!"

With that, she returned to her seat. I was a little shocked by what had just happened and was about to put my test paper away, but...

"Kashima-kun," came a voice from a seat beside me. Turning toward it, I saw Kurose-san looking at me.

Kurose-san... Shirakawa-san's younger twin sister and the girl who had rejected my confession back in my first year of middle school. She'd lived with her mother after their parents divorced and she resented Shirakawa-san for taking her father from her. That was why she'd initially spread bad rumors about Shirakawa-san right after she'd transferred to our school.

Ever since then, I'd almost never spoken to Kurose-san. We still greeted each other every morning, but she was always fidgeting, and I was being considerate too. It was no surprise that she'd find it awkward to deal with a guy who'd talked to her about her upbringing.

"What?" I replied, surprised that she'd start a conversation with me.

Kurose-san spoke timidly, her cheeks a little red. "You're smart, Kashima-kun."

“Huh?”

“I saw your score. Are you good at English?” she asked.

“Ah, well...”

I’d handed my test paper to Shirakawa-san and then got it back from her. It wasn’t like I’d wanted to show it off, but Kurose-san’s comment still made me embarrassed. I finally put my folded-up test paper into my bag.

“You’re giving me too much credit... I guess I’m just not bad at it,” I said.

“It must be so nice... I’m not so good at it myself. I’m worried about tomorrow’s English Conversation test too.” Kurose-san had a troubled smile on her face. Then, she added, a little shyly, “Hey... Could you help me with my studies?”

“Huh...?”

As I remained confused, Kurose-san hurriedly added, “Oh, I regret what I did back when you got angry at me. I know I was in the wrong. I’m kinda grateful that you scolded me... Anyway, I don’t have anything against you.”

“O-Oh.”

That’s good, then...

I myself still had some ill feelings about Kurose-san, since she’d caused trouble for Shirakawa-san. Still, Shirakawa-san herself didn’t seem to be bothered by it anymore, so it was probably best for her sake too that I forgave Kurose-san. After all, they *were* sisters.

As I contemplated my mixed feelings, Kurose-san cast her eyes down. “I’m still not used to this school... And I don’t have many friends... I’d be happy if you could tutor me.”

“R-Really...?”

Still, why me of all people? Was it not awkward for her? Then again, after what she did, our classmates were doing their best to stay away from her. That was a fact. There were a few kind girls and some guys who were only after her looks who seemed to still talk to her without issue, but it was true that she didn’t seem to be getting along particularly well with anyone.

Sure, she'd brought it on herself, but I still felt a little pity for her.

"Sorry. I've promised Shirakawa-san we'd study for finals together."

At that, Kurose-san hung her head and pursed her lips. "I see. Okay."

Her voice was calm, which was a relief. Then, she immediately raised her face to look at me again.

"Then what about over summer break? I'm bad at math too, so I was hoping you could help me with stuff I don't understand from our homework..."

I glanced behind me. "If you need help with math, you should ask Icchi... I mean, Ijichi-kun. He's better at it than me. Want me to introduce you to him?"

Even though his midterm scores had been terrible overall, he'd still gotten a high one in math. I figured he must really know his stuff on that front.

However, perhaps my kindness had gone unnoticed because Kurose-san immediately went stiff in the face.

"Never mind," she said in a stiff voice, then looked up at me again right after. "Th-Then... Can I ask for a LINE ID at least?"

"Huh? Icchi's LINE ID?"

"No! Yours!" she angrily replied.

I was stumped by her unreasonable behavior. "O-Okay... Just so you know—I'm not going to contact you myself."

I recalled the complicated reaction Shirakawa-san'd had upon seeing that Yamana-san had messaged me in LINE. Since I'd vowed not to make Shirakawa-san worry, I wanted to do my best to avoid getting in touch with other girls.

"That's okay. I want to message you myself," said Kurose-san. She had a dark expression that made me flinch.

"I-Is that so..."

Did she have *that* few friends...? At this point, I went from pitying her to being a little worried about her.

"Thanks," said Kurose-san with a slight blush after we friended each other in LINE under our desks, hiding our phones from the teacher.

Man, she really is cute...

Sure, I loved Shirakawa-san now, but seeing Kurose-san like this made me recall how I'd felt back when I'd had a crush on her.

But that was over, I told myself, feeling a little sad, then locked my phone.

On the morning of the last day of finals, the Japan Meteorological Agency announced the end of the rainy season.

"Yay! It's summer break!" exclaimed Shirakawa-san on our way back from school, looking genuinely relieved for the first time in a while. "But man, it's hot! I think I'm gonna melt!" She gazed up at the clear midsummer noontime sky with a few white clouds drifting across it, then stuck out her tongue as if to fight the heat.

Shirakawa-san fanned her chest, her cleavage almost exposed. I couldn't stop myself from looking, but it was making me flustered.

"I wanna go to the sea! I can't take it here on land," she said.

"Wait, you want to go underwater? Like diving?"

"Nah, I just wanna be on a beach. It's pretty refreshing to go into the water every now and then, no?"

"Oh, that's what you meant..."

Wouldn't a beach count as "land" too? Though I wondered that, I didn't want her to think of me as a guy who jumped on people's verbal mistakes. I decided to keep it to myself.

Then, Shirakawa-san looked me in the eye. "Hey, do you remember what day it is tomorrow?"

"Huh?"

As I struggled to recall what it might've been, Shirakawa-san pouted. "Come on! It's our one-month anniversary! We've been going out for almost a month now."

"Ah!"

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered that this was roughly when I'd confessed to her last month. Every day I spent with her felt fresh and exciting, so it felt like it had been a while already. In reality, it'd only been four weeks.

"Hey, wanna go to a beach for our anniversary?" she offered. "The rainy season's over too."

"Huh? Yeah, sure."

That said, my entire experience with swimming in the ocean amounted to once-a-year trips there with my parents back in primary school.

"Yay! Tomorrow it is, then!" exclaimed Shirakawa-san.

"Y-Yeah..."

Tomorrow. I had no time to check in advance where we should go.

And wait, we're going to a beach?! Could that mean I'll get to see Shirakawa-san in her swimsuit?! A whole day with Shirakawa-san in a bikini?! We'll fool around, forgetting ourselves, and then at some point, her bikini won't be able to contain her enormous assets anymore... Okay, I don't think that'll actually happen, but damn, I can't stop thinking these things!

"What's wrong, Ryuto? You're spacing out."

"N-Nothing! It's nothing."

This was no good. If I kept thinking about this stuff and leaning forward as I walked, she'd figure it out immediately.

"I-I'm looking forward to our trip," I said.

"Me too! It's gonna be great!"

Thus, we decided to go to a beach for our one-month anniversary date.

Chapter 1.5: Kurose Maria's Diary

Who does that Kashima Ryuto think he is?

Does he think it's okay to act like that when a girl as cute as me asks for his contact info? On top of that, his replies to my messages are so blunt.

How frustrating... It's frustrating, but I just can't get him out of my head.

I remember his earnest gaze when he scolded me. Other than my dad, he's the only guy who's ever confronted me head-on.

And yet, no matter how much I talk to him with a smile, his own is always directed at Runa...

Guess he's a bit like my dad.

My dad never looked at any women other than my mom. Maybe he could notice someone else for a moment, but he was devoted and loved my mom.

And yet she left him.

Watch out, Kashima-kun: Runa's trying to trick you. I'm sure she'll leave you before long. She's a lot like our mom.

That's why I'm a better match for you. Please notice it soon.

My heart is already yours...

Chapter 2

The skies were clear the next morning too.

“Morning! I’m super excited!” exclaimed Shirakawa-san when we met up at the station platform.

Her getup was fully suited for a midsummer beach visit. She was wearing a strange top that completely exposed both of her shoulders but somehow still had frills on her upper arms. There was some kind of southern plant all over it... Was this what you’d call a floral print? Anyway, her look totally inspired a feeling of eternal summer.

Her distressed jean shorts were on the short side, and I was worried they might gradually fall apart and put her underwear on display.

Between her outfit, her large bag, and the wide-brimmed straw hat on her head, it felt like she was going on a trip to Hawaii.

“I was so excited that I even went through all my summer clothes to pick out things that matched just right! And I got a new bikini!” reported Shirakawa-san in high spirits. “Hey, whatcha think?”

“Yeah, it suits you,” I replied.

A smile like a blooming sunflower appeared on Shirakawa-san’s face. “Yay!” Getting so happy that I could totally imagine her starting to jump around at any moment, she grabbed my arm. “Let’s go, let’s go! Let’s hurry on a train and go to that beach!”

At Shirakawa-san’s suggestion, we were headed to Enoshima today—an island southwest of Tokyo. Apparently she’d stopped there while on a car trip with her family when she was young and wanted to go there again after all this time.

“Shirakawa-san, do you often go to the beach in summer?” I asked.

We were lucky enough to immediately get to sit side by side on the train we boarded at Station A.

“Nah. I’ve only been going to pools recently...”

“Really? You look the type to be into that sort of thing,” I said.

“Yeah, I do like beaches... But when you go as just girls, it gets annoying how guys try to hit on you.”

“Huh...”

My face stiffened as I involuntarily imagined a good-looking surfer trying to pick her up. He’d totally be overly familiar and say something like “It’s fine, let’s go” or whatever and then wrap an arm around her bare waist... Just picturing it was way too draining.

Would she have gone out with such a guy if he confessed to her while she was “available”? And then she’d get cheated on...

“So I can’t go unless I have a boyfriend, and I’ve spent a lotta summers without one recently.”

I went silent at that.

“But this year, my uncle...” Shirakawa-san was going to continue, but she stopped upon seeing my face. “Ryuto?”

“Yeah?”

“Is something wrong...?”

“Huh?”

She knitted her brows a little. “Um, like, I’ve recently started to figure out, like, what you’re thinking, or how you feel, I think.” As I wondered what she was trying to say, Shirakawa-san stared at me. “When I talk about my exes, you look like you have a few mixed feelings, right?”

“Oh... Uh, well...” I began to panic, thinking she’d found me out.

“You have nothing to worry about,” said Shirakawa-san with a serious look on her face. “I don’t have any connection to any of them. I always delete my LINE account when I break up with someone—’cause that’s the only way they know

how to reach me. I get *soooooo* many complaints from my friends, though.”

“Y-Yeah... I know...”

It wasn't like I didn't believe her. This was just a matter of how I felt.

“Sorry I made you worry. It's not like I'm doubting you or anything,” I added.

“Really?”

“Yeah. It's my first time having a girlfriend, so there're a lot of things I'm not used to... I think I'll eventually be able to do stuff normally, after some time.”

“If you say so...?” She didn't seem fully convinced, but it appeared she decided to end the topic. “So, like... Wait, what were we talking about?”

“Huh? I dunno...” I replied.

“Oh well. Oh yeah, I started playing a new game last night...”

After that, Shirakawa-san started talking about a mobile puzzle game. I downloaded it too, and we played while sending each other lives, and before I knew it, we'd arrived at Fujisawa.

After transferring to the Enoden train line, we still had five more stations until we got to our destination. Thus, roughly an hour and a half after getting on a train at Station A back in Tokyo, we arrived at Enoshima.

And so, we arrived at a beach in Enoshima. It was full of people, and the sun was shining brightly from above. I saw gyaru in sunglasses and rough-looking older guys with undercuts striding around in swimsuits with loud, cheerful music playing in the background. It was enough to give a gloomy guy like me cold feet.

We somehow made our way to a beach hut and rented lockers to get ready. I got changed more quickly than Shirakawa-san, so I waited for her outside, feeling restless.

Her bikini... Her bikini... The mere thought of it was raising my blood pressure. This beach was already so hot that the soles of your feet could burn if your flip-flops came off, and thinking about getting to see Shirakawa-san in her

swimsuit...I was worried I might collapse with a heatstroke.

It's fine. I've done enough mental prep yesterday, so even a virgin like me should—

Then...

Lithe hands covered my eyes. “Guess who?” suddenly teased a cute, cheerful voice by my ear.

That fruity-or-floral scent filled the air.

“Sh-Shirakawa-san?” I was so shaken up that I ended up making it sound like a question. It obviously couldn't have been anyone else.

Sure, it was only her hands, but this was still unexpected contact with her skin. Between that and feeling her breath beside me, my brain felt like it could start boiling over.

“Bingo!” came the reply.

My vision became clear again, and I turned around. What I saw there—

“Ta-da! Whatcha think?”

—was Shirakawa-san in a bikini.

I'd planned to praise her swimsuit no matter what kind she wore, but I couldn't help going speechless at the sight. It was better than I'd imagined.

Her bikini had a flower pattern, and its outlines accentuated her shapely body. There were plenty of girls wearing hoodies and leggings to avoid sunburn, and Shirakawa-san's graceful figure in her bikini went past sexiness straight into the healthy territory.

I couldn't take my eyes off her bikini top supporting her heavy-looking breasts. I normally only got peeks of her cleavage in her school blouse, and those made me excited enough. Now, I could clearly see both her cleavage and the shape of her breasts. Below them, the lines going from her hips to her thighs were soft and wonderful.

A girl with such a divine body was my girlfriend... Our school didn't have a pool, so none of my classmates had probably seen this side of her.

My heart already raced on a regular basis just from being by her side, so if I got to spend an entire day with her looking like this...and if, by some chance, our skin came into contact... *Ah, damn it.* I was going mad from thinking so much. My swim trunks were thin, so I wanted to avoid getting too aroused.

“Huh? What? Is something weird?” asked Shirakawa-san, checking all over herself.

Seeing her like that, I set aside my internal celebration of her figure and shook my head in a hurry. “Not at all! It’s just, um...!”

“What? Go on, go on,” replied Shirakawa-san, drawing near without hesitation. She looked curious about what I was thinking.

I wouldn’t be able to keep looking away from her captivating, practically naked body.

Ah, she totally knows what she’s doing. She knows I’m too embarrassed to say anything. It’s frustrating, but there’s nothing I can do...

“Hey now! Is it fun to go on a beach date with a girl in a bikini?” Shirakawa-san continued to tease me, making me wonder if my reactions were really that funny.

“Sh-Shirakawa-san...!”

“Aha ha! Ryuto, you’re all red!” Saying that, she took my hand and pulled me toward the water’s edge. “C’mon, let’s go! The summer will end if you don’t hurry!”

“I-It’s only just begun!”

Still feeling embarrassed about my restless heartbeat and my burning cheeks due to the warmth of her hand, I somehow managed to say that much.

“Hey, Ryuto, could you rub sunscreen on me?” asked Shirakawa-san once we’d placed a blanket on the beach and put down our things. “I can’t reach my back... Could you help me?”

Wh-What?!

“S-Sure.” I gulped and nodded.

She wanted me to rub sunscreen on her...which naturally meant I'd be touching her skin.

"Thanks! Here, use this," replied Shirakawa-san, handing me a bottle of sunscreen and lying on her stomach on the towel.

Unlike the front of her bikini top, which had some cloth, the back of it only had a single string. Saying that her upper body was practically naked before my eyes wasn't an exaggeration at all.

Her fair, delicate back... Her hips, somewhat small but still curved and raised in all the right places... Damn. My brain is totally going to boil...

"O-Okay, I'll get started, then..." I said.

"Great! Please do!"

In contrast with me freezing up from nervousness, Shirakawa-san spoke in a relaxed, cheerful voice.

As I touched her back with my hand with sunscreen on it, it smoothly slid over her light skin. Obviously, it was a little bit warm. The feel of it made me want to rub sunscreen on her forever... Of course, Shirakawa-san would find it creepy if she knew I was thinking such things, so I pretended I was only doing my job and wordlessly put sunscreen on her.

"Oh, rub it under my top too! Just move the string out of the way," said Shirakawa-san, appearing to have noticed the fact I was somehow avoiding that area.

"Wha... Hwat?! Okay, got it." I ended up making a weird sound since I was so flustered—I hoped she didn't notice.

My heart racing, I pulled up the string on her back with my left hand and stuck my sunscreen-covered right one under it. It was still just her back, so why was my pulse rising so much?

"Ngh!"

Hearing Shirakawa-san's sudden muffled laugh, I stopped moving my hands.



“Wh-What’s wrong?” I asked.

“It felt kinda ticklish, the way you touched me.”

“Oh, sorry...”

I thought I shouldn’t run my hands all over her, so I was reserved in my movements. That was probably why.

Still, that sound she made was so hot...

If I let the memory of it keep troubling me, the blood in my body was likely to flow into one spot, so after that, I devoted myself to being a sunscreen-rubbing machine as I thought about the thirteenth row of the multiplication table.

“Thanks, Ryuto!” Shirakawa-san said cheerfully once I was done. Then, she got up.

“Actually, I should be the one thanking you...”

“Huh? For what?”

“Uh?! Never mind, it’s nothing,” I said.

Damn. My thoughts leaked.

Simply rubbing sunscreen on her had mentally exhausted me. I had a newfound respect for boyfriends around the world who were just fine going on beach dates.

Man, I’m so creepy... It’s so obvious I’m a virgin.

Seeing the guys around us who’d come here with their girlfriends and were carrying themselves so confidently... It was crushing.

All of the guys already had slightly tanned skin—perhaps many of them were locals. Even if they were slim, they were still muscular, and their hairstyles seemed fashionable. Of course they’d be like that—they were guys leading lives satisfying enough that they could come up with the idea of going on beach dates with their girlfriends.

Seeing a guy who appeared to be a high schooler like me walk around with his hand wrapped around his bikini-wearing girlfriend’s waist, I felt an impulse to ask, “Hey, how many times have you played this ‘life’ game before?” I was so

gloomy that it was simply amazing.

I was sure Shirakawa-san's exes had been like that too... And unlike them, I...

These thoughts caused me to get embarrassed. My skin was light and pale, which made it all too clear I was the indoor type. Even my trunks were just old ones I'd bought back in my third year of middle school when my guy friends invited me to a pool for some reason to relieve some stress after studying for tests.

It was just weird for a guy like me to be here, together with such a cute girl, right...?

"Ryuto!"

At that moment, a pink orb came flying in front of my eyes, and I caught it with both hands on reflex. It was a beach ball—Shirakawa-san had thrown it at me after having made her way over to the water at some point.

"Let's get in the water already! Come on, let's go!"

When I saw her gushing smile, the things I'd been thinking a moment ago started to feel a little irrelevant.

"I'm coming!" I replied and headed over.

Thus, we were both in the water and tossing a beach ball to each other at close range.

"Here I go, Ryuto!"

"Okay!"

"Here goes!"

"There!"

"Agh, you got water on me!"

We weren't very far from each other, so it appeared that when I hit the ball, water splashed up on Shirakawa-san's face.

"Oh, sorry!" I said.

Then, a mischievous smile appeared on Shirakawa-san's face. "Well then, I'll have my revenge!"

"Whoa!"

Water suddenly hit my face, and a fishy, salty taste filled my mouth.

"You really did it, Shirakawa-san."

"Ehe he." She was looking my way like a mischievous child.

"All right..."

"Agh!"

I tried to splash her a bit, but Shirakawa-san dodged it. Immediately afterward, she scooped up some water and threw it at me.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed.

Not willing to lose, I threw more at her. I kept my attacks light at first since I was sure she had makeup on and I didn't want to get her face wet, but since she wasn't holding back, my attacks gradually got bolder too.

"Aha ha, stop it, Ryuto!"

"I could say the same to you!"

Under the noontime sun on this midsummer day, we played in the water, shouting cheerfully like children.

I wondered how long we'd been playing for. After splashing each other, we'd rented floats and tried sinking one another, and then we simply chased each other in the water. At some point, the sun above had significantly changed positions.

Shirakawa-san was a genius when it came to making people enjoy themselves. I'd used to think beaches were only for normies, and before I had started going out with Shirakawa-san, I'd wondered what there'd even be for me to do if I went to one now that I was in high school. And yet here I was, starting to fully enjoy what a beach had to offer before I knew it.

"Wow, my hair is all drenched..." said Shirakawa-san with a smile, wringing

her hair while we were taking a break back on the beach. “Man, that was fun...”

She’d bound her hair before going into the water, but it was still sopping wet, along with the rest of her body. It made sense, since she’d fallen from a float.

“You hungry?” asked Shirakawa-san.

“Yeah. Wanna go eat something?”

After that, we went to a beach hut and bought yakisoba, takoyaki, and some other things. We ate it all on the blanket we’d spread out on the beach. Once our stomachs were sated, Shirakawa-san looked up at the sky and sighed.

“It’s so nice that the weather’s good today!” she said.

“Yeah. They said a typhoon was on a rapid approach—wonder if it veered off...”

A typhoon coming together with the end of the rainy season... Japan has some really abnormal weather nowadays.

“It must be because I behaved myself! You should be grateful, Ryuto.”

I didn’t have any objections to that, so I simply said, “Yeah,” and smiled before taking a gulp of my ramune.

While I’d gotten fairly used to seeing Shirakawa-san in her bikini, the thought that she was sitting so close to me at a distance where our skin might touch if one of us stirred a bit still made my heart pound.

Speaking of bikinis...

“Shirakawa-san, I didn’t get to say it earlier, but...”

There was something that somehow had been staying in the back of my mind this entire time and I wanted to tell her about it, even if it was late.

“Mm-hmm?” Shirakawa-san gave me a quizzical look.

“Your pik...er, bikini...”

Damn. I fumbled my words. Still, now that I’d started to say it, she’d find me weird if I stopped here.

“Huh? What about my bikini?” asked Shirakawa-san, looking at me and

waiting for me to speak.

Flustered under the pressure of it, I continued. “Your bikini...s-suits you.”

As I finally managed to get it out, Shirakawa-san’s cheeks turned red.

“Ryuto...” Her large eyes glistened, and she added, as though flustered, “Y-You’re saying that now?! That’s no fair?!”

“Huh?! What do you mean?!”

“I didn’t expect you to say something like that!”

After kicking up a fuss as though hiding her embarrassment, Shirakawa-san smiled. “But thanks. It’s a cute bikini, right? I went with Nicole to buy it last month! Though because I tried on like thirty of them, even *she* kinda got angry with me at the end. She was like, ‘Why’s it so hard for you to decide?’”

“Yeah, I totally get her...”

Yamana-san is really devoted to her friends, huh...

“So anyway, after I told Nicole we were going to the beach, she came to my house yesterday after work and did my nails! Look!” With that, she spread out her hands before me. “The design matches my bikini! Isn’t it just godlike? It’s super cute, right?!”

“Yeah, they’re incredible.”

I’d been sure she’d had a professional in a nail salon work on them. To me, a guy who was indifferent to fashion, they’d looked perfect.

“I asked her to make them sculpted since it’s summer break,” said Shirakawa-san.

“‘Sculpted’?”

“It’s, like, making them longer, I guess? You use artificial extensions to make short nails long! They’re more durable than natural nails, and they let you do a bigger range of designs.”

“Huh...”

“Since it makes your nails flashy, it’s perfect for summer breaks!”

“Oh, but don’t we still have school next week?”

There was one day in the upcoming week when we had to go in for the end-of-term ceremony. There, we’d get any test results we hadn’t received yet, as well as our report cards, and then it would be officially summer break.

“Well, think of it as a bit of a false start,” said Shirakawa-san, giving me a wink. “Anyway, I’m a *huge* fan of these nails! Oh yeah—I should take some photos with the sea in view and put them on Instagram!”

With that, Shirakawa-san grabbed her phone and started snapping picture after picture in various poses, like holding out a hand toward the water or bending her fingers.

I watched her in silence. Even though her face was out of the frame and only her hands were in the photos, she naturally made a cute expression for a moment every time she pressed the shutter button. It was charming, and I wondered if it was a conditioned reflex for her.

Then, suddenly, our eyes met when Shirakawa-san made a sidelong glance in my direction.

“Oh, sorry!” she exclaimed, hurriedly putting down her phone. “I’m done now. You were bored, right?”

“No, not at all.” I shook my head and pointed at Shirakawa-san’s nails. “Is that an ‘L’ on your ring finger? Is it part of your initials?”

Upon hearing my question, Shirakawa-san’s face lit up.

“That’s right! Nicole herself chose to write it like that! My name’s actually Runa with an ‘R,’ but she made it Luna—she said it’s like the moon goddess!”

“Yeah, I thought it might be something like that.”

I hadn’t known about the moon goddess, but I *had* known that the word “luna” had some connection to the moon.

“I’m surprised you noticed! Wow! I’m so happy!” exclaimed Shirakawa-san in admiration before suddenly knitting her brows. “You’re not gonna say something like ‘Aren’t your claws just getting in the way?’ huh?”

“What...?” I had no idea what she was talking about.

Shirakawa-san continued with a dark expression on her face. “You don’t think stuff like ‘How can you even do chores with those?’ or ‘Can you wash your hands properly?’ or ‘Why do you get nails like that if guys aren’t even into that sort of thing?’ or ‘It’s totally gonna hurt if those touch me, so I don’t like them’?”

“Huh?”

At first, I pondered what had made her so eloquent about this, but then it hit me: those, perhaps, were things her exes had said to her. That was probably it.

In that case, I wanted to tell her my honest feelings on the matter.

“I don’t think those things,” I replied. “And actually, even if I did, I wouldn’t say them out loud. I mean, you like getting your nails done, right? Don’t you have them like that because they make you feel great enough that it’s worth giving up a bit of convenience?”

“Y-Yeah. That’s right. That’s exactly right,” replied Shirakawa-san. She was confused, but she nodded at me.

“Then I think it’s fine.”

At the very least, I didn’t think I had a right to find fault with how she wore her nails.

I would be upset too if someone told me to stop watching KEN’s videos because it was creepy and it wouldn’t make me popular. Even if the one saying it was my beloved girlfriend.

I didn’t want to do things to others that I wouldn’t want done to me. I didn’t know much about nails, but to Shirakawa-san, they were probably a wonderful thing.

“Besides... You always look so alive when you talk about things you like,” I added.

It was easy to say these things inside my mind, but when I tried actually saying them out loud, I ended up speaking hesitantly because it was awkward.

“A-And cute too,” I managed to quietly add, then looked at Shirakawa-san.

With reddened cheeks, she bashfully pursed her lips. “Oh, come on... You’re

too nice, Ryuto,” she said from beside me as though she were angry. She hugged her barefoot legs, rested her face on her knees, and gazed at me with upturned eyes. Her cheeks were still flushed. “If you spoil me like that I’ll eventually become a selfish girl. Are you okay with that?”

H-How cute...

She’s so cute I’m shaking.

“S-Sure, sure... I mean, I am,” I replied.

Enduring her cuteness had been no easy task.

“And, actually, you can get away with becoming a little selfish,” I added.

After all, she was a really nice girl. Too nice—to the point where she put other people’s feelings before her own.

“At the very least, you can be a little selfish with me. I may not be very dependable, but...I’m your b-boyfriend.”

Wow, that was so smug of me! I had no idea I could say stuff like that!

My inner voice immediately lashed out at me and my own cheeks heated right up. Still, this was the result of me trying to share my honest feelings.

“I see...” Shirakawa-san suddenly made a face as though she smelled something unpleasant. She turned her head away from me and rested her cheek on her knees again. “So that’s how boyfriends should be... I never knew.” Her voice sounded a bit nasally.

“Shirakawa-san...?” I asked, worried she might be crying. “Shirakawa-sa—”

“Hey, Ryuto,” she said in a tear-choked voice.

“Yeah?”

“Then... Can I ask for something selfish now?”

“What is it?”

As I wondered what she had in mind, Shirakawa-san turned back my way, rubbing her reddened eyes with both hands.

“Buy me another ramune? It’s so hot, I’m really getting dehydrated!” she said in a jokingly fawning voice.

“I don’t know about ‘selfish’—you’re just making me your errand boy here,” I retorted with a smile.

Shirakawa-san looked flustered. “Oh, wait, I’ll give you money.”

“It’s fine; it’s just two hundred yen,” I replied, getting up, then headed to a beach hut.

She really was crying...

Contemplating the scars left by Shirakawa-san’s past relationships, I once again swore to myself that I’d treasure her.

After that, we played in the water for a while. When we were done, we took showers in the beach hut, got changed, and left the beach before sunset.

“The weather got bad, huh,” remarked Shirakawa-san.

It occurred to me that at some point, the sky above had become fully overcast. The wind felt a little cool too, and it was so humid that it seemed that a storm was on the way.

“Still, since we’ve come all this way, we might as well go climb to the top!” she suggested.

“Yeah,” I replied.

After the beach, our plan was to go up the mountains on Enoshima until we got to a lighthouse, eat some seafood, and then go home.

I *was* concerned about the weather, but since it wasn’t like it was raining, we decided to proceed with our plans. We climbed hundreds of steps to get to the top and took a few pictures at the bottom of the lighthouse. Then, we then stepped into a restaurant with raw whitebait on the menu.

The waitstaff led us to our seats.

“Sorry, we don’t have raw whitebait today,” they said after we’d tried to

order it.

“Did you sell out?”

“No, we just had a poor catch this morning because of the typhoon. We can only serve them raw on the day they’re caught.”

“I see. Okay, then I’ll have a nishoku don with red caviar and kamaage whitebait,” said Shirakawa-san.

“And I’ll have a nishoku don with tuna and kamaage whitebait.”

After we ordered, I happened to look outside the window. That’s when I noticed...

“Oh, it’s starting to rain,” I remarked, prompting Shirakawa-san to look outside too.

“For real...? I don’t have an umbrella,” she said.

“Me neither...”

“And the weather was just fine for a while this afternoon... Guess there really was a typhoon out there.”

“But hey, at least the skies were clear while we were at the beach.”

“Yeah, no kidding! We sure got lucky there.”

However, by the time our meals arrived and we finished eating, the rain was coming down so hard that we couldn’t afford to be so carefree anymore.

“Hey, isn’t this pretty bad?” asked Shirakawa-san with a gulp, standing just outside the restaurant.

The rain was pounding on the ground with such force that I could see steam rising about fifty centimeters high.

“Still, no point in standing around here... We have to make it to the station somehow,” I said.

After waiting for the rain to abate a little, we stuck close to stores and restaurant fronts to take shelter from the rain as we walked. Eventually, we somehow made it to the station.

However...

“Line suspended...?!”

Due to the heavy rainfall, parts of the railway line were submerged, and the train we were about to board was announced to be suspended. This wasn't just affecting Enoshima—apparently all ground lines in the Greater Tokyo Area were experiencing disruptions.

“Man, what do we do...?”

There'd been so many people at the beach during the broad daylight earlier, but at some point, even the area in front of the station had become completely deserted. People who had come here, getting wet on the way, were now climbing into taxis waiting at the station and disappearing off somewhere after learning about the service suspension.

“Should we get a taxi too?” I suggested.

“What? No way! That'd be disgustingly expensive. We're almost as far as Saitama,” replied Shirakawa-san.

“Yeah...”

I looked it up on my phone and went pale. The estimated cost was roughly thirty thousand yen.

We decided to place the last of our hopes on the rain tapering off and we waited at the station for a while. Unfortunately, it only got stronger and showed no signs of weakening.

“It's already six, huh...” I remarked.

We'd planned to start heading back at four, but due to these unforeseen circumstances, this was the situation we'd found ourselves in.

Would trains start moving again today at all?

Every time I checked the train status, it said different things. Even if we took a taxi to some other station where trains were still running, there was no guarantee we'd be able to transfer in a way that'd get us home.

I asked Shirakawa-san how much she had on her, and it turned out we had

roughly nine thousand yen between the two of us. We had to be careful about how we used our money.

We gave it some thought and decided that we'd both call our parents and claim that we were with friends. In the end, after talking with them, we honorably accepted our fate and went looking for a place to stay. Fortunately, the following day was Sunday, and neither of us had any real plans.

We left the station, but the torrential downpour made it difficult to go very far. By the time we finally got to a suitable-looking inn after finding one on our phones, we were already completely drenched. The female receptionist even hurried to bring us a towel as soon as she saw us.

"A night for two will be six thousand yen. Breakfast is included," she said.

Hearing that, Shirakawa-san and I looked at each other. We'd be able to stay here.

"Okay, we'll go with that," I replied.

"One room for both, yes? Individual rooms would cost five thousand each," added the receptionist.

Shirakawa-san and I looked at each other again.

"Uh..."

Five thousand per person would mean ten thousand combined, which would put us over our budget. We *could* go looking for a cheaper place to stay, but that would mean walking through the heavy rain, and there was no guarantee we'd find one.

"I'm okay with it," uttered Shirakawa-san, looking away from me.

Thus, it was decided we would be spending a stormy night together in a room at an Enoshima ryokan.

What is this development?! What's going on here?!

I'm about to spend a night in the same room with Shirakawa-san... So...could

that mean... Could it mean... Is it possible?!

The mere thought of it heated up a certain part of my body that shall go unspecified.

“Oh hey, it’s a nicer room than I expected,” said Shirakawa-san.

The room we’d been taken to was Japanese-style and roughly 16.5 square meters in size. There was no external corridor by the window, so it had a nostalgic feeling to it, like your grandmother’s room in the countryside.

“Shirakawa-san, would you like to take a bath?” I suggested. “You’re cold, right?”

“Huh? But what about you?”

“I’ll get changed for now, so don’t worry.”

There was a large bath at the inn, so we agreed to take turns going in and I saw Shirakawa-san off as she left the room.

Then, after changing out of my completely drenched clothes into the yukata prepared for me, I collapsed on top of the tatami flooring in the room.

I’m not okay at all!!!

What is this? Seriously, what were those words she said back there?

“I’m okay with it.”

“Okay”? “Okay” with what?

Did she simply mean us staying in the same room...or what could follow?!

I’d visited her room right after we’d started going out and given up a rare chance to have my first experience—it had been a month since then. Could it somehow, somehow, be that Shirakawa-san had come to want to have sex with me? And she couldn’t find a good time to say it, which was why she’d said what she’d said back in the lobby?

I couldn’t tell. I wasn’t her, after all.

But wait... No, but still... Will I get to become one with Shirakawa-san

tonight...?

I'd come into this world sixteen years ago. My time as a virgin was finally coming to an end.

I wondered what it would be like not to be a virgin anymore. Would I become more composed, and maybe mature as a person...?

Thinking about these things, I couldn't sit still. As I waited for Shirakawa-san to get out of the bath, for whatever reason, I started doing sit-ups. Perhaps it was my jealousy at play, particularly of those slim, muscular guys I'd seen at the beach this afternoon.

"Sorry for the wait, Ryuto," said Shirakawa-san. She returned to the room in a yukata.

By that point, I was already dripping with sweat.

"What's wrong? Is the AC not working?" she asked.

"Nah, I was just doing sit-ups for a bit..."

"Wow, that's unexpected! You do stuff like that? Let me touch your belly!" she innocently asked and started to approach me.

"Oh, uh...!"

I was just a gloomy guy exercising on a whim—I didn't have a stomach buff enough for people to touch. And above all, if Shirakawa-san were to touch me now, in this room... I decided to dodge her advance.

Her hands stopped. I wondered what she thought of my reaction.

"Oh... Sorry," she said, doing a one-eighty from being in high spirits to looking awkward. She retracted the hands she'd been holding out and looked at me with a seemingly artificial smile. "You should go in next. It's one of those 'iwaburo' places, I guess? It felt pretty good."

"Y-Yeah... I'll do that."

I headed to the bath to escape the awkward air that had appeared in the room.

What was that? What's going on this time? Just what did she mean by that "sorry"...?

Did I make it look like I was against her touching me? Or was it like "I don't want to have sex today, so I'm sorry for acting in a way that suggests otherwise"...? But wait, if that's the case, then what's up with that "I'm okay with it" earlier...?

I got into the bath with these thoughts coursing through my head over and over. Because I was so distracted, I couldn't really tell if I'd washed my head or only gotten it wet, so it felt like I shampooed it two or three times. I noticed it because of how squeaky the skin of my head was when I last rinsed it down.

Incidentally, the "iwaburo" that Shirakawa-san had mentioned—a bath or onsen made of rocks—turned out to be a normal bathtub that was only slightly larger than what you'd find in an ordinary household. It was just surrounded by walls decorated like rocks. It was a fair kind of place where even two high schoolers could afford to stay out of a sudden necessity, so I had no complaints.

When I returned to our room, Shirakawa-san was drinking tea and watching TV.

"They say the typhoon will pass overnight. Great, right? We can go home tomorrow," she said.

"I-I see... That's great."

I'd completely forgotten about the typhoon despite the fact that even indoors, I could tell how strong the rain and wind were outside. The windows shook violently every now and then, which I found pretty scary for a brief moment whenever it happened.

At that point, I stepped inside the room and my eyes were drawn to the two futons lined up beside each other on the floor.

"Oh, a staff member came by earlier. When I said we ate already, they got these beds ready."

"Huh..."

Of course they'd put them next to each other—we'll be sleeping in the same

room...

“Ryuto, want some tea?”

“Yeah, sure...” I nodded ambiguously to that and sat beside Shirakawa-san at the square table.

There was a teapot and some other items on the table. She opened the small teapot and the lid of a cylinder with a hole near it. Then, she removed used tea leaves from the teapot and threw them into the cylinder. Finally, she put new tea leaves into the small teapot and poured water from an electric kettle into it. Shirakawa-san was skillfully using tools I probably wouldn’t have known my way around, had it been just me.

A gyaru proficient at making tea... It was quite a gap, and I liked it.

“Here you go, Ryuto.”

“Thanks...”

As I took the cup of green tea from her, I stared at Shirakawa-san with surprise.

“What, Ryuto?” asked Shirakawa-san. She looked at me but quickly got embarrassed and turned away. “And actually, don’t look at me too much. I don’t have any makeup on.”

“Huh...?”

Now that she mentioned it, she *had* taken a bath. I hadn’t noticed she wasn’t wearing makeup since she looked mostly the same. When I inspected her face, there were just a few minor differences. I could tell that the ends of her eyebrows were slightly shorter, and her face appeared younger than usual.

When I carefully observed the bare-faced Shirakawa-san like this, she resembled Kurose-san a bit—an impression I didn’t normally get. You would certainly have been hard-pressed to find someone who could tell they were twins from the way they normally looked, but it didn’t feel so out of the question now.

Speaking of Kurose-san, ever since we’d exchanged LINE IDs, she’d been sending me messages frequently. Just like she’d said at first, she’d asked me to

help with her studies. I'd figured I'd do it "at some point," but when she'd asked to study on specific days, I would refuse with answers like "I have stuff to do that day" or "I'm taking summer courses during the break" (which hadn't been a lie). But at that point, she'd started pressing me for an answer on when I *did* have time. I'd been holding out on replying for a bit.

Was it okay for me to see Kurose-san in private? I didn't want to be cruel to Shirakawa-san's blood-related sister, but she was still someone of the opposite sex. It also didn't look like she and Shirakawa-san had completely fixed their relationship, so it would've been weird to invite Shirakawa-san and meet up as three. And while it had been in the past, I'd used to have a thing for Kurose-san—but Shirakawa-san didn't know that, and explaining it would probably take a while. Speaking about it honestly might actually create misunderstandings... Thinking about it all made me not want to bother with the whole thing, so I ended up being vague in how I dealt with Kurose-san.

"I-Is my face that bad without makeup? Don't look at me so much!" exclaimed Shirakawa-san, getting embarrassed from my absentmindedly staring at her while thinking about Kurose-san.

"Huh? Oh, uh... Not at all. It's barely any different. Still..."

"Still?"

"You look a bit younger... It's c-cute."

I decided to keep quiet about her resemblance to Kurose-san for now.

"Whaaat? For real?" Shirakawa-san blushed and gave me a highly skeptical look. "That's kinda embarrassing! Don't look at me after all."

"Huh? I think it's good, though."

"No, stop! Come on, let's watch the news on the typhoon!"

Thus, Shirakawa-san and I watched TV for a while, drinking tea. Eventually, by 10 p.m., we were tired of the fully repeating information on the typhoon, so we brushed our teeth and started getting ready to go to bed.

I still didn't know what Shirakawa-san had planned for tonight.

"Well, I'm killing the lights," I said.

“Okay.”

Since we were ready for bed, I pulled on the string and switched the overhead light to night-light mode. Getting into the futon beside Shirakawa-san’s, I stared at the ceiling’s texture in the dim light.

I can’t sleep...

How could I possibly get any rest with my heart pounding and in such an aroused state?

“Hey, Ryuto,” suddenly came a voice from the bed beside mine.

“Y-Yeah?”

“Are you okay? Will you be able to sleep like that?”

As I looked beside me, wondering what she meant, I found Shirakawa-san with her face half under her blanket, giving me a worried look. Then, she sat up all of a sudden and swiveled her knees toward me.

“Wh-What?!”

“Also, sorry about earlier,” said Shirakawa-san. “That rain was really strong and my head got super wet, my makeup was running, and I was tired of walking... I don’t have much money, so I thought we could walk around and look for another place to stay, but I really didn’t have the energy for it, so I wanted to relax already and agreed to stay in one room...”

“Right...”

So that was what she meant earlier. There was no deeper, sexual meaning behind her words, I guess...

I was ashamed of getting ahead of myself. My arousal waned.

It seemed like this was going to take a while, so I sat up in bed too.

“But after I took a bath and calmed down, I thought—there’s no way you’d be okay, right? I mean, you’re a guy and my boyfriend.”

As I kept silent, wondering what she meant, Shirakawa-san drew even closer. There, in this dim room, her large upturned eyes were looking right at me.

“Wanna...have sex?”

I was shocked by her words.

She was wearing a yukata from the inn, and it was falling open a little bit, letting her cleavage peek through. Her slim waist was wrapped in a deep blue sash, and the lines of her body leading down to her rounded hips were beautiful and sexy. She almost looked like some kind of mermaid. The flame in my chest had settled down before, but now it flared up with renewed vigor. I could tell my body was quickly growing hot and stiff.

“A-Are you okay with it?” I managed to get out in a hoarse voice out of my parched throat. “You yourself didn’t want to have sex yet, right...?”

I was already eighty percent set on doing it, but since I’d taken the moral high ground with her at the start, I had to make sure of this one thing.

“Yeah...” timidly replied Shirakawa-san, nodding. “But I’d feel bad making you put up with it.”

“But if we did it, wouldn’t that just make *you* the one putting up with things?”

“Well, I’m not sure I’d call it that... I love you, so I’m not really against doing it with you.”

Hell yeah!!! Another version of me inside my mind shouted in joy. I was perfectly ready on the physical front too.

I gulped and started to prepare myself, but...

“It’s just...” began Shirakawa-san, casting her eyes down and smiling. “Before going out with you, I never really felt like touching my boyfriends. But when we rode that boat the other day... It was the first time in my life that I wanted to kiss someone. And I wanted to hold hands before that too... I definitely like you more than I did a month ago.”

“Shirakawa-san...”

So this is how she’s been thinking of me... I’m so happy, I’m moved.

“And when I thought that, I started looking forward to things a bit,” continued Shirakawa-san. “I imagined how I’ll grow to love you more and want to touch you more... And if we had sex when I really wanted to go all the way, maybe I’d actually feel good both in mind and body, for the first time in my life,” she said

with a happy smile on her face.

“I see...”

While I was elated, the ferocity inside me was gradually fading.

Damn it... If she says stuff like that, then...

I won't be able to do it tonight...

Damn iiiit!!!

Shouting and crying tears of blood inside my mind, I was forced to step on the brakes.

“Okay. Then let's go to sleep now,” I said, showing off and swallowing my tears, desperately trying to fake composure. “We got up early and traveled far, and then all that stuff happened. I'm sure you're tired.”

“Huh...?” Shirakawa-san looked up at me in surprise. “Really? You don't wanna have sex?”

“It's fine; we can do it another time... When you feel like doing it.”

“Ryuto...” She looked at me with glistening eyes and a worried expression. “Why are you so kind?”

“Huh...?”

Did this count as kindness? I thought anyone would have to do the same in my shoes...

Still, if it looked like kindness, then I only acted that way because I was thinking of Shirakawa-san. Because I...

“Because I love you.”

As I said those words, Shirakawa-san's eyes sparkled. Immediately afterward, she covered her face with both hands and her shoulders started going up and down.

“Shirakawa-san?”

Is she crying...?

She sniffled. “Uugh...” Sounds escaped her pursed lips as she couldn’t contain her sobbing. “Sorry... I was just so happy...” she said as though defending herself, sobbing convulsively.

“Huh...? Y-You okay?” Naturally, I was getting flustered.

“Yeah, sorry...”

After a while, she calmed down, wiped her tears, and smiled awkwardly.

“Sorry...” she said. “It looks like I cry easily when I’m with you. Sorry.”

“That’s not a problem... Not at all.” There was no need for her to apologize so much.

“Sorry,” said Shirakawa-san, again. “But, like, isn’t it just annoying? We were just talking normally and all. Doesn’t it bother you? You don’t think I’m not right in the head or something?”

“I don’t.”

Why was she saying these things? Was it because of her exes? I didn’t know if these were things they had actually said to her or something she’d picked up on from their attitudes. Either way, it made me want to free her from these chains as soon as I could.

A clear realization had finally hit me: I wasn’t the only one shackled by her ex-boyfriends.

“I don’t think that at all. I’m happy, actually,” I added.

“Why? Are you a cinnamon roll?”

“‘A cinnamon roll’...”

A person too good for this world.

High school girls use internet slang in regular speech nowadays, huh. Granted, I was a high schooler of current times myself, but I was on the otaku side of things, so it was surprising to hear it so normally.

I cracked an amused smile. “No,” I replied. “That means your heart moves a lot when you’re with me, right? I think that’s because you’re coming close to

that ‘like’ you feel for me turning into ‘love.’”

Shirakawa-san’s eyes shook again. “Ryuto...” Then, her cheeks flushed a little. “Hey, Ryuto. Can I ask for something selfish again?”

“Hm? Sure.”

As I nodded...

“Could you hold me?” she awkwardly asked.

“Huh...?”

“Is that okay?”

“Well...”

I wasn’t against it, but to be in such close contact with her in a room with just the two of us, in a situation where I’d already decided not to do anything tonight...

“C’mere!” said Shirakawa-san, smiling at me and spreading her arms.

“Okay...”

Nervous, I gently brought my arms around her body for our first hug.

She was softer and warmer than I’d imagined. Her hair smelled like the shampoo from the inn, just like mine did—perhaps she wasn’t wearing her usual perfume. I could directly feel her soft, springy breasts through her thin yukata, which in turn raised my pulse.

“You’re warm, Ryuto... It’s calming.” Her soft voice by my ear made my heart beat so fast it gave me the chills.

This was dangerous. If I clung to her any longer, the fire deep inside me was at risk of reigniting.

“Hey, can we sleep like this?” said Shirakawa-san, startling me.

“‘Like this’...? Wait, what?! Like *this*?!”

Did she mean holding each other in bed until morning?! I was flustered, but then...

“Aha ha! I’m kidding!” she said and moved away from me. “Ah, but hey, how

about sleeping while holding hands?”

“Oh, sure...”

I might be able to handle that somehow.

Thus, Shirakawa-san and I lay down in our beds and linked hands. The hand I was holding was warm, soft, and delicate... It was Shirakawa-san’s hand.

“Hey, Ryuto.”

“Yeah?”

No reply came. As I looked her way, I found her gazing at me...but for some reason, she looked worried.



“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s nothing,” she said, shaking her head. There was a smile on her face, but it seemed forced. “We’ll still be together like this on our two-month anniversary, right?”

“Like this...? I’d rather not get stuck somewhere because of a typhoon again.”

“Aha ha, yeah, good point.”

My reply hadn’t really been funny, but she laughed anyway.

I ended up being nitpicky about her words, but perhaps I should’ve given her a proper answer. At that moment, I had no idea that later on, I’d come to regret what I’d said tonight.

Chapter 2.5: Kurose Maria's Diary

Of all people, why did it have to be Kashima Ryuto...?

In truth, I have a rough idea as to why—he has no interest in someone like me. Even an idiot could tell that based on his replies to me on LINE.

But why Runa? What's so good about that slut?

Sure, she has bigger breasts than me—I'll give her that. But that's all. Her only redeeming feature is her body...

Right, so it's the body.

Boys sure are honest with their desires. Even all the guys who approach me have "I wanna have sex" written all over their faces.

I'm sure Kashima-kun isn't showing any interest in me because Runa's satisfying his desires. That slut is using her body to make him hers.

Does that mean...I have a chance if I become like Runa?

But wait, Maria. Is Kashima-kun really worth going that far?

Hey, Maria. Aren't you just being stubborn because you lost to Runa again? Just like when she took your dad from you...

I don't know. Maybe I am. Or maybe not.

But either way, I can't fight it.

Just from us greeting each other every morning and me sitting next to him in class, my feelings for him are growing stronger by the day.

I want him to scold me again with that serious look in his eye, just like he did that day—for him to say, "You're a bad girl, Maria." Or "You seduced guys without ever letting them touch you, and used them like tools—such a naughty girl."

Just imagining it makes my body feel so hot. I want him to fuck me.

I've never felt this way before in my whole life.

Hey, Kashima-kun. I'm a bad girl who wants her sister's boyfriend. A very, very bad girl who's planning something very nasty...

Let's do bad things together. Let's both tumble down into hell.

Kashima-kun is a faithful guy, so I'll trap him.

Since he's faithful, even if things start with a trap, I'm sure he'll treasure me once we're in that sort of relationship.

Then he'll understand I'm a better woman than Runa.

There's a storm raging tonight.

What are you up to, Kashima-kun...?

Chapter 3

Come morning, the typhoon was gone.

Between our joined hands and thinking about how Shirakawa-san was sleeping beside me, I hadn't been able to sleep much during the night.

We ate the very typical Japanese breakfast that an inn employee brought to our room, put on our clothes which had dried overnight, and then headed home a day late.

As trains heading to Tokyo on a Sunday morning typically were, the one we took was pretty empty. We talked about nothing in particular and dozed off here and there until we got to Station A.

"Okay, I'll see you in two days," I said.

There weren't any tests waiting for us tomorrow, so we didn't have to go to school. We only needed to attend the ceremony that marked the end of the first term on Tuesday.

Shirakawa-san and I said our goodbyes in front of her house.

"Yeah. See you later, Ryuto." She'd said that and waved her hand, but then a serious look appeared on her face all of a sudden. "Let's keep it up for month two, okay?"

"Yeah, sure thing."

As I gave my reply, a smile returned to Shirakawa-san's face. Relieved, I waved back at her.

After seeing Shirakawa-san go inside, I returned to Station A by myself. As it was the middle of a Sunday, the square in front of the station had people standing around looking at their smartphones, appearing to be waiting for others. While walking around, you often ran into people handing out leaflets and tissues.

There were a bunch of people like that on my way at present.

“Izakaya ‘Bacchus.’ Come get a lunch coupon!” called a female voice.

While I wasn’t very interested in going to a Japanese bar, I reflexively reached for the paper thrust before my eyes. However...

“Ah!” The person handing out those coupons made a surprised noise.

As I looked at her face, wide-eyed wonder appeared on mine. “Yamana-san?!”

Sure enough, the young woman standing there was Shirakawa-san’s close friend, Yamana Nicole-san. I avoided looking at people’s faces when walking around outside, so she had noticed me first.

Yamana-san was wearing an outfit that looked like a deep-blue samue and an apron that only covered her hips and upper thighs.

“Are you working?” I asked.

“Can’t you tell?” she curtly replied, offering me that coupon I’d meant to take earlier again. “Heading back after walking Runa home? Good timing. Come to my bar.”

“Huh?”

“I wanted to talk to you about Runa. She’d probably get worried if we met in private, so it’s convenient if we can do it while I’m working.”

“B-But isn’t it an izakaya...?”

The coupon I’d just received recommended the all-you-can-drink menu option even though it was daytime. It felt like a rather hardcore kind of place.

“Getting cold feet, are you? Just don’t order drinks and there’ll be no problem. We get quite a lotta customers with children, you know?”

Oh... So sunny types can go to an izakaya while they’re still minors, huh. The bar was set too high for a guy like me—I’d never eaten out anywhere except family restaurants and donburi places.

“And you want me to come alone?” I asked.

What was I supposed to do by myself at an izakaya? Yamana-san was at work,

so I was sure she wouldn't be with me all the time.

"Well, why don't you bring friends?" suggested Yamana-san with annoyance. "Or what, you don't have any?"

"I-I do."

"Then bring 'em. I'm on shift until night today," Yamana-san said quickly. She then went back to handing out coupons. "Come get a lunch coupon!"

Somehow, it had been decided I'd show up there today.

I didn't want to go alone or for Yamana-san to think I had no friends, so I called Icchi while heading home.

"Hey, Icchi."

"What?"

"You free today?"

"Hell no, I've been playing with Nisshi," he replied. "Oh yeah, it's Kasshi calling."

Sure enough, I could hear game music and someone talking on the other side of the phone.

"Wait, why didn't you call me?" I asked.

"Didn't you go to the beach with Shirakawa-san yesterday? Sheesh, man! Go to hell, normie! I just thought you'd be tired."

I wondered if I'd heard his true thoughts leak out just now or if it had been my imagination.

"Say, have you eaten yet?" I asked.

"Huh? I had lunch. An extra large cheese beef bowl. Takeout."

"Then how about we have dinner together? I want you to invite Nisshi too."

"Huh? Why?"

"Yamana-san invited me to eat at the izakaya where she works."

"Yamana...? Yamana Nicole from our class? Dude, you talk to that demon gyaru?!"

“We have some connection through Shirakawa-san. Yamana-san’s her best friend.”

After my brief explanation, I could hear a deep sigh on the other end of the phone.

“Kasshi... You’ve changed.”

“You’re not coming?” I asked, thinking this was just as I’d expected.

“Of *course* I am!” came the instant reply.

Straining my ears, I could also hear Nisshi in the distance, saying, “I’m coming! I’m coming!”

“Wait, really?!” I asked, surprised.

The flow of the conversation had made me assume I was about to be turned down.

“I can’t have you leaving us any further behind! Screw the gloomy-guy pride! The summer of the second year of high school is our last chance at youth! I’m gonna become a normie this summer too! Eating at an izakaya where a classmate works is *totally* what sunny types do! Right, Nisshi?!”

“Yeah! Yeah!” he cried out from the other end of the line.

I sighed. Well, at least they were coming.

Thus, I ended up arranging to have dinner with Icchi and Nisshi at Yamana-san’s workplace tonight.

The izakaya “Bacchus” was located on that busy street in front of Station A. It was on the third floor of a five-story building, all floors of which had restaurants and the like.

“Welcome!” called an energetic izakaya employee once I stepped through the curtain at the entrance.

It was only approaching six in the evening, but the place was already lively with numerous customers—probably because it was Sunday.

“Um, we’re friends of Yamana-san who works here...” I said to the male

employee who had come to show us in.

“Ah!” he said and nodded. “A table for three, yes? Please follow me.”

He took us to a sunken kotatsu table where you had to take off your shoes first. There was a solid wall on one side of the table and partitions on two sides parallel to the seats. On the side of the aisle, there was something like a shoji-style sliding door. It was practically a private room. I’d messaged Yamana-san over LINE earlier, saying when we’d been planning to show up, so perhaps she’d reserved this table for us.

“Your server will be here soon,” said the employee and left.

Feeling a little nervous, we sat down. Icchi and Nisshi sat on a four-person bench seat, and I sat facing them.

“By the way, have you seen KEN’s videos from today?”

“Oh, nah, not yet,” I replied. “I haven’t seen yesterday’s videos yet either, so I’ve been catching up on those first.”

“Bah. Damn normies...”

“Was Shirakawa-san in a bikini?”

“Huh? Yeah...”

“Gah!!!”

“You gotta be freaking kidding me! Go die already! Sounds like you had a lot of fun, huh!”

“Dude, I can hear your thoughts leaking!” I said.

“Just show us a picture of her!”

“You think I would after you said that?!”

Then, as the conversation kept going that way...

“Welcome!” came the voice of a female employee who sounded proficient at her job before two beer mugs were placed on the table in front of my eyes.

When I looked up, I saw it was Yamana-san.

“Wait, we haven’t ordered anything yet...” said Nisshi, confused.

Yamana-san gave us a meaningful wink. “It’s on the house. ≡ Thanks for coming.”

In that instant, I witnessed Nisshi’s and Icchi’s eyes actually turn into hearts.

“Caplis Soda. Made it *real* concentrated for you. ≡ You can’t have stuff like this at home!” said Yamana-san.

“Wait. None for me...?” I asked.

“Oh, you can order one yourself. If you use the touch panel over there, it’ll send an order to the kitchen.”

None of that “on the house” stuff for me, huh?! And wait, isn’t she acting really differently with these two compared to me?!

“It’s not fair...” I complained.

While I was busy using the touch panel to order myself a cola, Icchi and Nisshi happily brought their beer mugs of Caplis Soda to their lips.

“Man, demon gyaru are the best!”

“It’s all about demon gyaru these days!”

“She looks scary, but is actually kind on the inside—the gap moe is too strong!”

“She’s like a mountain—you can’t help but love her!”

“Yeah, dude! She’s really living up to the ‘yama’ in her name!”

The two showered Yamana-san with high praise as they drank down large gulps.

“Holy shit, this taste!”

“I’ve never had something so flavorful!”

“Huh? What, really? Let me...” I began, reaching for one of their mugs for a taste, but Icchi and Nisshi guarded them.

“No! This strong Caplis was given to us by a demon gyaru.”

“Demon gyaru are friends of those who aren’t normies! You can’t have iiiit!!!”

Seemingly overjoyed at Yamana-san's favoritism, the two inhaled their drinks with such enthusiasm that they could've emptied their mugs in one go.

"Oh well. I'll order food, then," I said, sulking a bit. Looking at the touch panel, I picked out some stuff that looked delicious. "I guess this will do for now? Take a look, guys...eh?!"

When I looked up to get Icchi's and Nisshi's input on my order...

"Wh-What's wrong?!" I exclaimed.

"Whaaat?"

"Whassit, Kasshiii?"

Something was clearly off about Icchi and Nisshi. Their faces were beet red, their eyes were vacant, and both of them were slurring their speech.

"Ah!"

Realizing what was going on, I picked up Nisshi's mug from in front of me. Taking a gulp, I was astonished.

"Ugh... What *is* this?!"

It certainly tasted like Caplis, and I could sense a rather concentrated, thick sweetness... At the same time, however, there was a strong, nearly choking scent of ethanol that couldn't be disguised by the faintly carbonated water.

Ethanol... Of course...!

"You guys okay? How do you feel?" I asked.

"Whaaat? If anything, I feel pretty great..."

"Yeah... Demon gyaru are the best..."

With those last words, Icchi's and Nisshi's heads landed on the table. Both of them fell asleep, just like that.

"Zzz..."

"Snore..."

For real?

Actually, I was surprised they could drink stuff like that. They must've been

really ecstatic. Their mugs were almost empty.

But as I wondered how in the world their drinks ended up like that...

“Oh, they’re asleep already,” said Yamana-san, standing beside me. “Here, your cola.” She placed a glass of cola in front of me. “And french fries too, on the house,” she added, placing down a basket piled with them. She then sat beside me and closed the shoji-style sliding door. “My coworker said I can take a break when she’s on duty.”

Overwhelmed, I couldn’t help distancing myself from her. I practically pressed myself against the wall. “Um, what was this about...?”

“Like, weren’t they gonna get in the way? I wanted to talk about Runa in private.”

“Huh? I-Is that why you...?”

“It’s fine,” she insisted. “They seem to be having a nice nap. And everybody makes mistakes.”

“M-Mistakes...?”

So basically, she made a mistake preparing drinks and put something unnecessary into their mugs...? No, that can’t be... Okay, I can’t completely write it off, but from the way she’s acting now, I’m convinced she’s done it on purpose.

“B-But even if it’s a mistake, wouldn’t you get in trouble if your management found out you gave something like that to high schoolers...?”

“Maybe. But I know the owner’s secret.” With that, Yamana-san made a gesture with her hand by raising her pinkie. I’d seen that kind of thing a long time ago when a relative of mine, an old guy, had used it—he’d meant “women.”

Was the owner cheating on his wife...? Did she plan to threaten him with that information?

“Y-You’re amazing, Yamana-san...”

“Really? Despite how I look, I’ve mellowed out a fair bit. When people heard ‘Nicole from North Central’ around these parts, even delinquents’ balls would

retract.”

Wh-What had you been up to, Yamana-san?!

“So... What did you want to talk about?” I asked.

As I got scared and urged her to get to the main topic, Yamana-san suddenly put on a serious look.

“How is it, after dating Runa for a month?” she asked.

“Huh...?”

As I wondered what she meant, Yamana-san placed an elbow on the table and rested her chin in her hand.

“You know how Runa’s clingier than you’d think from her looks?” Yamana-san had a distant look in her eyes. “I talked to her the first time the day of the school entrance ceremony. I was spacing out in line and she called out to me. Said my nails were cute.”

I’d known they’d gotten along well since our first year of high school, but I hadn’t known their friendship had started that early.

“The next day, Runa showed me these brand-new earrings. Said they looked like they’d suit me, so she bought a pair for me too. And when she gave them to me, she asked me to become BFFs with her.” Smiling as she evidently recalled the scene, Yamana-san then shifted her gaze toward me. “Isn’t it pretty weird? It’s too clingy, right? Somebody’d normally be put off by that.”

I thought this story was just like Shirakawa-san, recalling how she’d bought matching phone cases for our one-week anniversary.

“But Runa’s super cute, right? And she’s social. So I figured I was happy and that I wanted to be BFFs with her too,” said Yamana-san with a slightly awkward smile. She then lifted her chin from her hand. “People talk about clinginess like it’s a bad thing, but if you trust someone with your internal baggage and they do the same thing in return, with baggage of equal weight, the scales don’t tip in either direction. Neither of you will feel that one of you’s clingy. That’s what makes relationships go well, right? ‘Mutual love’ is ‘mutual clinginess.’ You feel me?”

“Y-Yeah...”

It was surprising to me that Yamana-san was the type of person to speak about such things.

“You say some fancy stuff...” I remarked.

““Nicole from North Central’ is a poet, among other things,” she said with a grin before returning to a serious expression.



“Still, as much as we love each other, she likes guys and so do I. So Runa and I can’t go above being best friends. It’s frustrating...and that’s why I want her to find a good match already. A guy she’ll be able to trust with all her heart and who makes her feel calm. A guy she can be with forever. What Runa wants isn’t a hot guy she can brag about to her friends, but one she can really connect with.”

At some point, I found myself quietly and intently listening to Yamana-san like a good boy.

“It might be because of her home environment that she’s looking for a guy like that,” she said, raising her eyebrows. “And yet she’s only ever dated hot, sociable idiots until now with nothing else going for them. You know how she always messages you on LINE every morning and every night?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t hate that or anything, right?”

“No,” I said. “It means she’s thinking about me, which makes me happy.”

Yamana-san gave me a satisfied nod at my reply. “Doesn’t that prove you’re really dating?”

Really? I couldn’t tell since my own dating experience amounted to a month, but if that was what Yamana-san had said, it must’ve been the case.

“Because her ex-boyfriends were trash, there were of course nights and mornings when she couldn’t get in touch with them. And when she started to worry because of that, they’d call her ‘clingy’ and ‘annoying,’ acting like they were the victims. Those guys should *really* just die already,” said Yamana-san, spitting out that last part in particular.

She followed that up by immediately reaching out to the heap of french fries and bringing one to her mouth.

I thought those were on the house for me...?

“But Runa doesn’t say anything bad about her exes, right? And not just her exes—I’ve never heard her speak poorly about anyone,” added Yamana-san.

“Yeah...”

I was hungry, so I started eating some french fries too.

“Runa likes people, see? She thinks everyone’s a good person and that there’s nobody out there who’s bad deep down. That’s why she believed it when her exes claimed to like her. She went out with them, got betrayed, and got hurt every time.” At that point, Yamana-san paused her french-fry-moving hands for a moment. “Runa has this jinx called ‘the two-month barrier.’”

“‘The two-month barrier’...?”

“Until now, a lot of the guys she dated were cheating on her before they were together for two months. Even when that wasn’t the case, guys would start to gradually get cold toward her during the second month of their relationship, and they’d break up in the third month.”

I see... So that’s why it’s called “the two-month barrier.”

“I think Runa’s worried now, even if she trusts you. She’ll stay that way until you’re past the two-month mark.” With that, Yamana-san looked right at me. “Can you promise me you’ll absolutely avoid doing anything to make Runa worried?”

I gave her a deep nod, and not because I was overwhelmed by her sharp look. “I promise. I won’t do anything to make Shirakawa-san worry,” I said, firmly looking back at her.

Yamana-san stared fixedly at me for a while. “I see,” she eventually said. “That’s a relief.” A broad smile appeared on her face.

Seeing such a childlike, carefree grin on Yamana-san, I felt like it was the first time I had really seen her smile.

Thus, Yamana-san had said what she wanted to me. However, when she got up...

“What do we do about this?” she asked.

She was pointing at Icchi and Nisshi, sprawled out on the table harmoniously beside each other, right in front of us.

“You’re asking me...?”

I want to ask you the same question. You put them in this state, so you take responsibility—but, of course, that was too scary to say out loud.

“Well, it’s looking like they might not wake up until tomorrow,” commented Yamana-san.

“That’s a problem for me!”

“Well...since part of the blame does lie with me ‘making a mistake with the drinks,’ I’ll do something about them after this. They should wake up on their own and go home if I let them sleep for two or three hours.”

“Really...? Okay, I leave them in your care, then.”

I didn’t like the idea of eating or drinking alone in front of two dead-drunk friends, so I entrusted them to Yamana-san and left the izakaya. In the end, I’d only had cola and some french fries.

I *was* worried about their health, but they were together instead of alone, and they were just sleeping. Plus, Yamana-san was our classmate, so I figured she’d take care of them if something happened.

As I thought about these things while walking down some stairs, my legs started to wobble. I instantly clutched the handrail. My field of view felt narrower than usual, and it was like the world had suddenly grown distant. My chest felt lighter, and I couldn’t tell why, but things felt fun.

Could it be...? Is this because I took a gulp out of Nisshi’s mug earlier?

“Damn...”

And, actually, just how crazy a “mistake” did Yamana-san make with those drinks...?

If I’d gotten this from just a gulp, I couldn’t really say Icchi and Nisshi were bad at holding their drink. Though it was also possible I was just extraordinarily bad at it myself...

Oh well. I’m going home, getting into a bath, and then going to bed after this, so as long as my parents don’t find out, it should be fine.

As I thought that, my phone vibrated in my pocket. When I checked it, I saw there was an incoming LINE call from Kurose-san.

“What’s this about...?”

Is she calling me because I’ve kept her hanging for an answer? But what do I tell her...?

I felt bolder than usual, so I ended up pressing the answer button without thinking too much.

“Hello?” I asked.

“Ah, hello. Ryuto?!”

Hearing the voice coming from the other side, I pulled the phone away from my ear to look at the screen again.

“Shirakawa-san?!”

“Aha ha. Surprised? I’m at my mom’s place and my phone ran out of battery. I borrowed Maria’s.”

It was *definitely* Shirakawa-san. She hadn’t mentioned such plans today.

“Oh, right, we did use up your phone battery yesterday,” I said. “Sorry I borrowed your phone too. You didn’t get to charge it in time?”

“Mm? Oh, nah. It’s fine, though, since I got to call you like this.”

“Did you manage to talk to Kurose-san?” I asked.

“Yeah. Don’t worry about it. Thanks.”

She *did* get to visit her home and borrow her phone. I figured their relationship must be slowly headed toward its original state.

“So anyway, Ryuto...” Shirakawa-san’s voice sounded a bit nervous. “I wanna talk to you a little. To see you...alone.”

“Talk to me?”

As I wondered what she meant, I remembered what Yamana-san had just told me.

“I think Runa’s worried now, even if she trusts you. She’ll stay that way until you’re past the two-month mark.”

Come to think of it, Shirakawa-san *had* acted a little unusual on Enoshima

too...

"We'll still be together like this on our two-month anniversary, right?"

I wondered why she'd said something like that. Was this what she wanted to talk about?

"Okay. Are you heading home, Shirakawa-san? I'm at Station A right now. Want me to go to your place?"

"Huh? No... Um, I'm still not ready to go home. So I'd like to see you at school."

"At school?" I asked.

"I wanna meet you in private..."

"But at school...? Can we even go there at this time on a Sunday? And I'm not in my uniform, you know...?"

When I'd checked my phone before leaving the izakaya, it had already been past seven at night. The streets were getting dark too, and it was the kind of time when high schoolers worried about the eyes around them.

"It's okay, I'll take care of that somehow... So can you go there?"

Before I realized it, Shirakawa-san's voice sounded feeble and thin, as though she were someone else. It made me worried—I felt like I had to see her as soon as possible.

"All right. I'm heading to the school for now."

"Okay," she said. "If something comes up, call this phone... I mean, Maria's LINE."

"Got it."

Something about her words gave me pause, but my head was fuzzy, and I couldn't give it much thought. I ended the call.

"I wonder what happened to Shirakawa-san..."

I felt uneasy for some reason.

"Can you promise me you'll absolutely avoid doing anything to make Runa

worried?”

“I promise. I won’t do anything to make Shirakawa-san worry.”

Recalling my earlier conversation with Yamana-san, I cut through the crowd in front of the station and briskly walked to the ticket gates.

When I got to the school, the campus’s side gate was unlocked. I could see lights on in the staff room through its window, so either the gate was open because a teacher was around, or Shirakawa-san had gotten here before me and somehow opened it, as promised.

Ryuto: I’m here.

Maria: Come to the gym storage room.

“The gym storage room?”

Was she referring to where stuff like mats and vaulting boxes were stored inside the gym? I wondered why she’d picked such a place, but having come this far, I had no choice but to do as she said.

It was dark in the gym, but it was unlocked. The heavy sliding door of the storage room opened without trouble as well.

“Shirakawa-san...?”

There was only one window in the storage room, and it seemed to be far from any streetlights outside. Very little light was coming into the room. My eyes hadn’t adjusted to the dark yet, so looking around the room, I could see the silhouette of a person sitting far in the back.

“Ryuto,” came Shirakawa-san’s voice. “Come here, Ryuto.”

I did as asked, approaching the silhouette.

“What are you doing in such a...?”

As I began asking that, Shirakawa-san forcefully leaped at me, pressing herself against my chest.

“Sh-Shirakawa-san?”

“Hey, Ryuto,” she whispered into my ear, draping her arms around my neck.
“I wanna have sex with you...”

“Huh?!”

What?!

“I imagined how I’ll grow to love you more and want to touch you more... And if we had sex when I really wanted to go all the way, maybe I’d actually feel good both in mind and body, for the first time in my life.”

She said all that yesterday, but already came to feel differently in just a day? Okay, well, if that’s the case... But wait, in this kind of a place?!

While my mind raced, my body was already responding. My lust was accelerated by my lingering horniness from the previous day.

My head felt light and happy, and even though it sensed that something was weird, I embraced Shirakawa-san’s delicate body.

“Is it really okay, Shirakawa-san?” I asked.

When I buried my nose in the nape of her neck, I could sense a sweet, girlish, vanilla-like scent.

“Sure...” she replied.

I could feel her hot breath against my ear as she sighed.

“Shirakawa-san...”

Embracing her again, I ran my hands over her body as if to check her contours. Her wavy, dirty-blond hair seductively tickled my nostrils.

“Ah...”

Shirakawa-san moaned quietly, as though unable to hold it in anymore. It was extremely hot and aroused me enough to send chills down my spine.



I was a complete beginner at this, so I'd always been convinced I'd get all flustered when I actually ended up having sex. However, my head felt fuzzy, like there was a mist surrounding it. At this moment, my mind was pulling my attention away from minor things that would normally bother me, so I was able to act on instinct.

Slipping my fingers under the bottom hem of Shirakawa-san's uniform blouse, my fingertips traced lines over her smooth, slightly sweaty skin.

"Aah...!" Shirakawa-san arched her back and clung to me from the recoil of it.

Finding it sweet, I held her tighter, wanting to feel more of her.

But something suddenly felt particularly off to me.

"Could you hold me?"

My whole body still vividly remembered the sensation of Shirakawa-san's body against mine from when I'd hugged her the day before. And no matter how much I held her now, it just didn't feel like her large, soft mounds had that same springiness.

Were Shirakawa-san's breasts this small?

At the same time, several other questions welled up inside me.

Was Shirakawa-san this petite? Sure, she was slender and delicate, but she felt noticeably smaller in my arms now than I remembered.

She didn't smell like Shirakawa-san always did either.

I could no longer turn a blind eye to all the little things that had been feeling strange to me for a while now.

And the very first thing that had bothered me started to gain clarity in my hazy mind.

If Shirakawa-san had visited Kurose-san's house, why had she borrowed Kurose-san's phone? If her battery ran out, wouldn't it have been faster to borrow a charger since she was at someone's house? Besides, how could she have gone outside, alone, with Kurose-san's phone...? Would Kurose-san have allowed such a thing?

As I thought about it, Shirakawa-san's chest vibrated unnaturally as I held her. Feeling that, I pulled away.

"Ah!" she cried out, as though startled, and then pulled her phone out of her chest pocket.

The screen read "Saito-kun." Shirakawa-san clumsily pressed the answer button and tried to press it again.

"Kurose-san? I locked the storage room as you told me to! Kurose-sa—"

At that point, the voice coming from the phone was cut off. It seemed like it took her some time to press the "end call" button due to panicking too much.

I was certain that the voice I heard belonged to Saito from my class. Previously, when Kurose-san and I had ended up on class duty together, he was the one who carried Kurose-san's files to the staff room for her.

Since Shirakawa-san had Kurose-san's phone, it wasn't really strange for her to get a call meant for Kurose-san.

However...I had seen it.

The face illuminated by the light of the phone screen was subtly different from Shirakawa-san's face as I knew it.

"Kurose...san...?!" I was so astonished that my voice was hoarse.

What's the meaning of this?

Kurose-san didn't usually wear makeup, but she was right now, and she certainly did resemble Shirakawa-san a bit. Her long wavy dirty-blonde hair was similar too.

"Why are you...?" I began.

My head was in a state of total panic—I was unable to comprehend the situation.

Standing in front of me, Kurose-san watched me and remained frozen for a while.

“Where’s Shirakawa-san?” I asked.

Hearing me, she quietly sighed. She took off her wig and freed her usual glossy, black hair.

“I don’t care what Runa’s up to. She’s probably at home right about now, eating dinner her grandma made,” replied Kurose-san.

I was dumbfounded. So, basically, Shirakawa-san was completely uninvolved in this. It was a little relieving to hear it wasn’t like Kurose-san had done something to her.

“How did you...?” I began, flabbergasted.

Kurose-san gave me a pleasant smile. My eyes had now adjusted to the darkness in the storage room, and I could see things in a bit more detail.

“Runa and I don’t look like each other, but we *do* have the same voice. Ever since we were young, even our parents would mistake us over the phone... Right? Ryuto!”

For a moment, it really felt like Shirakawa-san had called for me. Even though I knew where the voice had come from, I ended up looking behind me, just in case.

How hadn’t I noticed? It wasn’t just me, in fact, but *nobody* in class had ever mentioned such a thing about them sounding similar. It was probably because the two of them spoke in completely different tones and used completely different words.

Because I hadn’t known it, I hadn’t doubted for a second that it had been Shirakawa-san who’d called me, and that was why I’d ended up coming here.

“Why did you do such a thing?”

“I told you. ‘I wanna have sex with you,’” she said with a smile, mimicking Shirakawa-san’s voice again.

My heart skipped a beat when I remembered our earlier situation.

So I’ve gone and done all that with Kurose-san, huh...

Even I didn’t have a good idea of what emotion was now causing my heart to

pound and cold sweat to appear on my skin.

But what I *did* know was that I shouldn't stay here.

"A-Anyway, I'm going," I said, turning around and heading to the exit.

The metal sliding door didn't budge, however.

"I had someone lock the door from the outside," she said. "You heard it earlier, right?"

So Saito locked us here.

"Why...?" I asked. I felt my strength leaving me as I sat down, letting my back slide against the door on my way to the floor.

"Saito-kun is in the judo club, so he often has the key to the gym storage room. I asked him to find an opportunity to sneak it out tonight."

I could understand Saito becoming completely submissive to Kurose-san due to having a thing for her. It wasn't surprising, since Kurose-san was as beautiful as an idol.

Still...

"I can get out through that window. Either that or I can call the staff room since there still seems to be a teacher here..."

"You're okay with Runa finding out?" Kurose-san asked.

"Huh?"

"Do that, and I'll tell her what you did earlier."

"But that's...!"

I was about to argue back when Kurose-san kneeled before me and clung to me. I was shocked.

"But..." she whispered as I remained petrified. "If you go all the way with me, I won't tell anyone."

What...?

I recalled Yamana-san's words.

"Can you promise me you'll absolutely avoid doing anything to make Runa

worried?”

I'd held Kurose-san earlier and felt like doing it with her because I'd thought she was Shirakawa-san.

But since she was actually Kurose-san... I could make excuses, such as saying that her voice was similar or that I wasn't sober, but it didn't change the fact she and I had embraced each other in this place, all alone.

If Shirakawa-san were to find out what happened here...

Even while these thoughts coursed through my head over and over, Kurose-san was still holding on to me tightly. The closeness of her soft body brought back the sensation from earlier. I still loved Shirakawa-san even now, but despite how I felt in my heart, my body was starting to slowly heat up on its own.

“Will you keep quiet if I go all the way?” I timidly asked.

Kurose-san nodded. “Yeah. I won't tell anyone. Even Saito-kun doesn't know I'm here, so it definitely won't get out,” she whispered into my ear. With her arms still around me, she moved her hands up and down my back, rubbing it.

“If you like Runa so much, I'll act like her. Right, Ryuto?”

I knew the truth in my head, but I still fell under the illusion.

My horniness from last night returned to me in a flashback, and before I knew it, I was pushing Kurose-san down on the floor.

“Shirakawa-san...”

“Come, Ryuto...” Kurose-san's hand slid into my shirt.

My head was hazy and hot.

If only Kurose-san didn't speak...

But it still didn't change the fact I was betraying Shirakawa-san. The thought of it brought a bit of my composure back.

Then again, rather than her finding out it almost happened and making her worried, would it be better to just...?

But still, a betrayal was a betrayal.

The angel and demon on my shoulders kept whispering things to me over and over.

“Ryuto...”

When she whispered that by my ear, I came to my senses.

“You’re warm, Ryuto... It’s calming.”

Shirakawa-san’s happy voice from the night before echoed in my ears.

That voice, that warmth... They were certainly similar. But...

The girl here with me *wasn’t* Shirakawa-san.

“Kurose-san,” I said, finally snapping out of it. I got up and put some distance between us. “Can I ask you one thing?”

Something else had felt slightly off for some time now. Since I hadn’t been able to think clearly, it had taken me a while to pinpoint it, but I’d finally done so.

“I thought you called me here and acted like Shirakawa-san to take revenge on her...”

When Kurose-san’s parents had divorced, her beloved dad had chosen to take Shirakawa-san in his care instead of her, and she resented Shirakawa-san for it. That was why, earlier, she’d spread bad rumors about her and tried to harass her. I figured what was happening here was an extension of that.

“But then, if you and I got into a...physical relationship, isn’t there nothing in it for you if nobody knew?” I continued.

Kurose-san sat up and looked at me with upturned eyes. “Why do you think so? Are you saying I plan to tell Runa either way?”

“I mean, if you don’t do that... What do you get out of it? Why would you even be doing it...?”

Why seduce a guy she doesn’t even like?

As I thought that...

“I like you,” she quietly responded. “I just wanted to do it with you because I like you.”

“Whaaat?!”

As I looked at her, thinking it impossible, she was trembling and casting her eyes downward. Her cheeks were so red that I could even tell in this darkness, and she was biting her lip so hard it was turning white.

It didn’t look like she was acting.

“I like you...” she repeated. “Ever since you scolded me for spreading rumors about Runa.”

“Wh-Why...?”

“I don’t know... Maybe I thought you were kind to me. You heard me out...” she awkwardly replied. Tensing up, she looked up at me. “Even then, it’s not important to you, right?” she said as though becoming defiant, and she twisted her lips into a smile. “You just need to get me to keep quiet to Runa.”

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. At this point, I’d fully recovered my reasoning and clarity of thought. “I still can’t take things any further—I’d be betraying Shirakawa-san. And also...” I briefly paused as Kurose-san stared up at me. “I feel sorry for you too.”

When Kurose-san heard that, she opened her eyes wide in surprise.

Then...

“Is someone there?! I heard people talking,” came a voice from the direction of the gym.

The sliding door was unlocked and opened. A security guard, seemingly in the middle of making his rounds, stood there with his flashlight on.

“What are you doing here? What class are you from?” he demanded. “I need to tell the teachers...”

As soon as she heard that, Kurose-san bolted.

“Hey, stop!” called out the guard.

While he was making up his mind whether to give chase, I followed Kurose-

san's example.

"Wait, you two!"

If he told the teachers about us, Shirakawa-san wouldn't be the only one finding out that Kurose-san and I were alone together in that place—the whole *school* would know.

Kurose-san waited for me outside the gym. "I'll leave through the back gate. You take the side gate," she said.

"O-Okay."

"See you..." She began to leave, but then turned back to look at me. "Anyway, I like you," she added with a smile and started running.

Left by myself, I started spacing out for a moment.

"Oh, crap." I remembered the security guard and ran toward the side gate.

It had been a long day.

Looking back on everything that had happened since the previous night, when I hadn't gotten any real sleep due to holding hands with Shirakawa-san, it didn't feel like all of it had taken place on the same day.

When I got home and lay down on the bed in my room, a wave of fatigue washed over me.

I gazed at the ceiling absentmindedly and the one on my mind was Kurose-san from earlier.

"Anyway, I like you."

Did that count as a confession? And if so, did I need to give her a reply?

I'd told her in the storage room that I couldn't go all the way with her, but since we'd been chased by that security guard, we'd both left without really making things clear. It felt like I hadn't given her a proper reply, which didn't sit right with me.

Kurose-san...

As I recalled the events in that storage room, my heartbeat sped up.

Kurose-san sure was cute. She could probably have sex with any guy she wanted, so why me?

Even I used to like her in my first year of middle school. And if I weren't dating Shirakawa-san now... Wait, there's no point in what-ifs like that. I can't think of being with anyone other than Shirakawa-san now.

I should make things clear to Kurose-san.

With that in mind, I opened up LINE.

For some reason, I didn't want to keep lying down. I got up and sat in a seiza position instead before pressing the call button. It felt rude to reject her through mere text.

Kurose-san immediately picked up. "Hello?" came her voice.

"Hello, Kurose-san? Did you manage to get back without trouble?"

"Yeah."

"Great... Um, about what you said earlier..."

"Kashima-kun," she forcefully called out, stopping me. "I know your answer. But I want to see your face while you say it."

"Huh...?"

"I can't give up if you say it over the phone. I won't cause trouble for you anymore. It'll be the last time... Could you just meet me once more?"

She was speaking like herself now, but her voice was certainly similar to Shirakawa-san's. The thought of it made it even harder for me to disregard her request, which was troubling.

"Okay. But it'll have to be outside," I warned, wary of something like the earlier events happening.

Kurose-san laughed a bit on the other side of the phone. "I know. We can meet in a park or something."

"It's late today. How about tomorrow?"

“Okay. Tomorrow while it’s bright outside.”

After deciding exactly where and when, we ended the call.

The next day was hot, humid, and overcast.

Even when it got close to noon, Icchi and Nisshi hadn’t been online on Discord, so I called Icchi over LINE out of worry.

I’d been so exhausted the day before that I’d ended up falling asleep even though I was worried about those two.

The call connected, but no sound came from the other end.

“Hello? Icchi? Are you okay?” I asked, since no voice was coming from the other end, even after the call had connected.

In the next moment, a voice came through my phone so loudly that I felt like it might crack.

“OF *COURSE* NOOOOOT!!!”

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

Something seemed to have happened, but I was relieved to know that he was at least safe.

“That bitch! Like *hell* that was Caplis Soda! If it was, there’s no way I’d have this splitting pain in my head!”

“Yeah, seriously! She toyed with the pure hearts of gloomy virgins!” came Nisshi’s voice from very close by.

“Is Nisshi there too?” I asked.

“Of course I am! I *live* here!”

“Huh?” I was confused.

“I asked Nisshi to let me stay...” explained Icchi in a sorrowful voice. “My dad was like, ‘You’re in high school and you dare come home with a red face at such an hour?’ He hit me hard and kicked me out of the house.”

“My parents lost their cool too, but when I said that some rotten waitress

made a mistake with our orders, I somehow got them to let me and Icchi in,” added Nisshi.

To be sure, a waitress who served high schoolers such a drink, intentionally or not, had to be rotten...

“So I slept and all, but ever since I woke up I’ve had the runs, I vomited, and my head hurts.”

“I’ve decided I’m never having a drop again in my entire life!”

“That demon gyaru bitch!”

“And *you* disappeared at some point, Kasshi!”

“Oh, about that—I’m really sorry...” I said in a hurry as their resentment turned to me. “You fell asleep and I had nothing to do. Yamana-san said she’d look after you afterward...”

“‘Look after us’?! *That* bitch?! All she said was ‘I’m going home now; you should do the same.’ Then, she threw two bottles of water at us and threw us out!”

“Forget a demon gyaru! She’s just a demon!”

“I’m gonna cut her head off with a Nichirin sword!”

I’d somehow expected it, but it seemed like Yamana-san really hadn’t shown them much kindness.

I felt sorry for making their izakaya debut so terrible, though mine hadn’t been much better. As I thought that...

“Man, forget izakayas.”

“Yeah. If you wanna become a normie, you should go to the beach with a girl, like Kasshi did.”

“We don’t have girls, but maybe things will work out if we just go there anyway.”

“Yeah, we’ll just start with a beach.”

“Next summer’s gonna be dark ’cause we have to study for university entrance exams. We better look at gyaru in bikinis this year while we can.”

Ichii and Nisshi talked about their aspirations for the future as though to escape reality.

“Yamana-san was worried about you two, though,” I said. At this rate, I was concerned they would get the worst possible impression of her.

I wasn’t even lying. She’d sent me a message last night: “They left just fine. If it looks bad afterward, buy them turmeric or something.”

“Huh? For real?” asked Ichii, his tone now radically different. “Even a demon gyaru has a human heart...”

“She brings you up, then down, then up again? Isn’t she too good at this gap moe thing?”

“Man, it really is all about demon gyaru these days.”

“I can’t escape from the carrot-and-stick loop!”

Such was my friends’ frustrated exchange. I was glad they were so indomitable.

Thus, I learned that my two friends were fine, and after some trifling conversation, I cut the call.

After that, I started changing out of my sweats that I wore at home to go see Kurose-san.

I’d agreed to meet Kurose-san in a large park near Station K. We’d originally gone to the same public middle school, so we lived close by. She lived at her grandpa’s house again now, and it was still in the same place as before.

After walking for about ten minutes from my place, I arrived at the park. It was still a few minutes before our agreed time, but Kurose-san was already there.

“Kashima-kun,” she said, smiling happily once she noticed me.

Her face was cute, which was hard on me, considering what I was about to say.

I’d once had a thing for her, and she was my type as far as looks went, which

made this even harder to bear. But I had to say it clearly to her, also in part to avoid giving Shirakawa-san a reason to worry.

“Thanks for coming, Kashima-kun.”

So that’s how soft her smile is, I thought.

She wasn’t wearing the flirtatious smile she showed guys in our class or the malicious one she’d had when she’d spread bad rumors. Instead, Kurose-san had a natural smile, like you’d show to your loved one or friends.

A loved one... She really does have feelings for me, huh...

“Wanna walk and talk?”

At her suggestion, we decided to walk along the park’s promenade. In this park, the sunlight filtered through the trees beautifully on clear days, but on a cloudy day like today, it simply felt dim. Considering that there weren’t many places you could comfortably spend time outdoors during midsummer, this area of the park was cool and nice, especially thanks to the artificial stream running beside it.

“I thought maybe the guard got you,” said Kurose-san.

“It was fine. Looks like he was all talk and didn’t chase after us.”

“I see. I guess that’s because he’s old.”

The park was located above a railway track, and our conversation was occasionally interrupted by the sound of passing trains and planes flying overhead.

After one such interruption, I finally made up my mind to speak.

“Kurose-san.”

She suddenly halted. “Kashima-kun, I...” she began. She gazed forward at first, then looked down at her feet and gently smiled. “I had fun before I came here. It felt like I was going on a date, so I had trouble making up my mind about what to wear. I also did my hair...”

For some reason, I was taken aback and looked Kurose-san over from head to toe. She was wearing a black-and-pink gingham dress with black shoes and a

black handbag. While her style wasn't quite goth loli, her entire outfit was girly in taste.

"I'll still get rejected, though, right? I knew that, but it's still painful..."

Drops of liquid fell around her feet. I was about to look up at the sky, thinking it had finally started to rain, but my eyes stopped on hers before they got that far.

Kurose-san was crying. Her lips were pursed, and she kept her eyes narrow as though she were enduring something. Large teardrops kept flowing out of them, over and over.

"The guys who've confessed to me until now...and you—was this how you felt? I'm sorry I made you suffer, Kashima-kun..."

"Sorry, Kurose-san..." I said, as though repeating her own words.

At that, her shoulders heaved up and down in broad motion.

I'd come here planning to make my rejection clear...but it felt cruel to say any more to her now. I was sure that my feelings were more than clear enough to her.

I'd always thought of myself as a gloomy guy with a generic face who was unpopular because of that, and who'd get rejected by the girl he liked. But love was about fate and timing. That was how even a beauty like Kurose-san could wind up getting rejected by a dork like me. Even a cute, sweet girl like Shirakawa-san could have guys making her cry all the time. And even a guy like me could date a wonderful girl like her.

I realized now that stuff like introverts being unpopular and cute girls automatically being winners in life was all just bias.

While I didn't for a moment think that this was my revenge for Kurose-san rejecting me back in the day— *"I do think of you as a good friend, Kashima-kun..."*

—it felt like the heavy weight I'd been carrying inside me ever since then had finally been lifted off me.

"Kurose-san, what do you say we sit down for a bit?"

There were benches in various places along the promenade. As I suggested this, minding people's eyes, Kurose-san sprung at me.

Startled, I immediately stiffened and tried to push her away from me, but...

"Sniff... Uugh..."

When I saw her sobbing like a little girl, my chest hurt, and I couldn't do it.

"Kashima-ku...n..." While crying, Kurose-san earnestly got the words out of the back of her throat. "I'll go soon, so...let me stay like this...a little longer..."

"Okay."

Kurose-san buried her face in my chest and wrapped her hands around me. She clung to me as she cried.

While I couldn't embrace her delicate body in return, I wanted—only in this moment—to empathize with her feelings.

Chapter 3.5: A Long Phone Call between Runa and Nicole

“Nicole, congrats on getting off work!”

“Oh, Runa. How was the beach? Shame about that typhoon.”

“Yeah, tell me about it! It was fun, though. And I got to sleep holding Ryuto’s hand.”

“Yeah, you told me over LINE. He’s really something, that guy.”

“He’s earnest, so.”

“Yeah, I’ll give him that, if nothing else. But there’s no guarantee even an earnest guy won’t cheat, y’know?”

“Mm... Maybe, but Ryuto’s still ‘the last man.’”

“Huh? What’s that, a movie? Something from *The Avengers*?”

“Heh heh. Anyway, what I mean is I’m not worried about Ryuto.”

“You’re just saying that. Aren’t you worried until you get past the two-month mark?”

“...Yeah. I wonder why.”

“Isn’t that because of your dad?”

“...Mm-hmm. Ever since I was little, my mom told me that there weren’t any guys who didn’t cheat and that girls had to put up with it. Those words stuck with me ever since then.”

“But your mom finally couldn’t put up with it and left, right?”

“Mm-hmm... I think my dad really loved my mom more than anyone, though.”

“Whaaat? Then why’d he cheat? My dad’s like that too, though. Is sex with other women so good you’d be okay with hurting the one you love just to do it?”

“...I dunno.”

“I don’t even wanna know. And there’s no need to.”

“...When I dated my previous boyfriends, I always had that thought in the back of my head from the start. That they might cheat on me.”

“That’s why I always told you that when you started seeing somebody. But you wanted to believe them.”

“Yeah. I wanted to believe, and then I got betrayed... But because it was just as I’d expected, I guess that in some way, I was satisfied with that outcome... It was a level of shock I could deal with, even if only a little.”

“You still cried a lot, Runa...”

“Yeah... But some part of me trusts Ryuto from the bottom of my heart. I think that’s why it’s scary...”

“You mean if, somehow, he does cheat on you?”

“Mm-hmm... I wonder if I’ll be able to bear it when it happens... Though I’m sure that of all people, Ryuto would never.”

“Yeah. Well, time’ll take care of that. You’ll be smiling when you look back on it a month from now, thinking how there really was no need to worry.”

“Yeah. I’m sure it’ll be like that.”

Runa’s phone, currently on speaker mode, sat on her bed. She looked at it with a smile on her face. Its case matched the one on her loved one’s phone, and she happily narrowed her eyes as she gazed at it.

Chapter 4

There was a strange feeling in the air on the last day of the first term at school.

“Oh, look...”

“Huh... Impressive for a plain-looking guy like him...”

When I showed up at school, some classmates I’d never talked to before were looking my way and whispering.

Was this related to Shirakawa-san? Still, I’d revealed my relationship with her a while ago, so why now?

I entered the classroom and proceeded to head to my seat. Icchi was already at his desk, but his face changed once he saw me.

“Kasshi!” he exclaimed. He hurriedly got up and came over to me, swinging his massive body.

“Morning, Icchi...”

“The hell are you doing, dude?!”

“Huh?”

“Just come!”

He led me outside the classroom and to a corner of the hallway.

I looked at my friend’s face in confusion. “Wh-What happened, Icchi?”

“What happened to *you*?! They say you’re cheating with Kurose-san!” he shot back.

“What...?!”

My head went blank. Of course I hadn’t cheated...at least not as far as I was concerned. However...

“Who said such a thing?” I asked.

“Everyone’s saying it! When I got to school, everyone was talking about it, and even *I’ve* had some sunny types walking up to me and asking if it’s true.”

“Why...?”

“Looks like something’s coming to your mind, yeah?”

Ichii glared at me with narrow eyes, and I couldn’t help but look away.

“Well, I didn’t cheat, but...”

It *was* true that I’d met with Kurose-san for personal reasons several times over the course of two days. If someone saw us together and misunderstood things... But still, was such flimsy circumstantial evidence enough to determine I was cheating?

Could it be...?

“Ah, hey! Wait, Kasshi!”

Not hearing Ichii’s attempts at stopping me, I headed back to the classroom.

“Did you do her?! Did you sleep with such a beauty while you already had Shirakawa-san?! Damn it, you bastard! You’re such a fake introvert!”

As I left the hallway where Ichii was throwing a loud fit and came back into the classroom, my classmates’ gazes quickly gathered on me. In the next instant, the looks dispersed.

Shirakawa-san wasn’t here yet.

I headed to my seat and placed my bag down.

I turned to the girl in the seat next to me. “Kurose-san, can I talk to you for a second?”

Her shoulders trembled and she looked at me. She seemed to have expected me to talk to her.

“Sure,” she replied, looking surprisingly dispirited.

We went to an empty classroom nearby. No sooner had I closed the door than Kurose-san began to speak.

“It wasn’t me.”

She really did wear a melancholic expression. The area around her eyes seemed faintly swollen, and there were signs that she had cried until late at night the day before.

“But then...” I began.

“Getting revenge on Runa was a low priority for me. I just wanted to be loved by you...” she said, lamenting. “I wouldn’t do such a futile thing as spreading rumors when I didn’t get what I wanted. Even I have my pride.”

Seeing her like that, I couldn’t imagine she was lying.

“Okay. Sorry,” I apologized after a moment’s pause.

A limp smile appeared on Kurose-san’s face. “Sorry I caused trouble for you. I’ll block you on LINE.”

“Okay...” I figured that was necessary now that things had come to this. “Well... Let’s go, then,” I said, reaching for the door in order to return to our classroom.

“Hey, Kashima-kun.”

As I turned around at the sound of her voice, I saw Kurose-san smiling. Unlike moments earlier, her face had joy written on it now, even amidst dejection.

“If I’d accepted your confession back in the day...would I be the one by your side now instead of Runa?”

Kurose-san...

As I remained silent, unsure of what to say to her, her smile once again changed to a dark one.

“Just kidding. There’s no point in thinking such things. Let’s go.”

“Yeah...” I replied and opened the door.

Then...

“Ahh!!!”

Someone in front of me shouted, and something fell near my feet, making a

loud noise as it hit the ground. It was a phone case I knew very well, which caught me by surprise. I looked up.

The one standing there was Shirakawa-san. And behind her was Yamana-san, with a terrifying look on her face.

“Ryuto...” uttered Shirakawa-san. She wore a look of disbelief and lightly shook her head. “So the girl who rejected you in the past...was Maria...?”

Oh. She heard us. I hadn't told her yet...

“Why... Why didn't you tell me...?”

“Sorry, that's...” I began.

“Why are you apologizing?” Shirakawa-san had a look of sorrow on her face. Her lips were trembling. “Did you do something you need to apologize to me for...?”

“No, I just...”

“I don't wanna hear it!”

As I heard Shirakawa-san raise her voice for the first time, my body froze up and I couldn't move. She looked stricken as she gazed at me. Something glistening welled up in her eyes.

“Why, Ryuto...? I can't take it... It's too much.”

With that, she turned around.

“Shirakawa-san!” I called out.

She went running down the hallway, never looking back.

I wanted to chase after her, but I reached out for the phone she'd dropped in front of me first. My hand froze in the process.

Displayed across the whole phone screen, now cracked like a spider's web, was a picture of Kurose-san and I embracing each other. The screen had probably broken from the impact of the fall.

I was stunned by the sight. It was a photo of us in the park yesterday, taken from diagonally behind me and zoomed in. At this angle, you couldn't tell that Kurose-san had been crying and that I hadn't had my hands on her.

As I came to my senses and tried to pick up the phone, someone snatched it away right in front of my eyes.

It was Yamana-san. Glaring at me with the face of a demon, she swapped the phone to her left hand and raised her right one high into the air.

“You asshole!!!”

With a *smack*, a sharp pain ran through my cheek. My face turned to the side all by itself, and that was when I realized I’d been slapped.



“What a scumbag...”

After shooting me another glare, Yamana-san ran after Shirakawa-san.

“Are you okay, Kashima-kun?” came a voice from behind me.

Turning around, I saw Kurose-san looking at me with worry.

“Yeah...”

“I should be going now,” she said. “You don’t want people to get any more wrong ideas, right?”

And with that, Kurose-san walked past me and outside the classroom.

Left alone, I came to my senses and stepped into the hallway. I had no way of running after Shirakawa-san since she was nowhere to be seen. Instead, I went back to my classroom, but neither Shirakawa-san nor Yamana-san were there.

As I touched my smarting cheek, there were traces of blood on my finger. Yamana-san’s long nails must’ve scratched me.

How did this happen...? What should I have done differently...?

My head was occupied with those thoughts for the duration of the end-of-term ceremony.

According to what I overheard my classmates talking about, the image displayed on Shirakawa-san’s phone had been taken by someone in a different class in our cohort. Apparently, that person had gone to a different middle school in City K, and yesterday, they had been visiting their local park with a friend from that same middle school. That had been when they’d seen me and Kurose-san from a distance and had taken a picture. They’d sent it to their friends, thinking of it as a scoop since they knew I was dating Shirakawa-san, and the news had instantly spread through our whole grade.

Photos leave an impact. I could imagine that even if people didn’t know what kind of relationship Kurose-san and I had and how we’d ended up like that, the sight of that photo made people think we were probably in *that* sort of relationship.

Shirakawa-san must’ve been hurt. I felt terrible about it. I needed to quickly

explain things and fix this misunderstanding.

That said, it was true that I'd never told her that Kurose-san had been the girl who'd rejected me in my first year of middle school. I'd never meant to keep it a secret, but there was no changing the fact that I'd never actually told Shirakawa-san about it.

Yeah... I should've said that the day Kurose-san transferred here.

But Kurose-san ended up sitting next to me by coincidence, and we happened to be on class duty together and otherwise had plenty of opportunities to talk... I'd unconsciously thought I should avoid causing Shirakawa-san any needless worry, and that had been why I didn't say anything. To think it would cause things to turn out like this...

Had it only been that photo, perhaps Shirakawa-san would still have heard me out. But due to the fact I'd also hid my past with Kurose-san, she must've thought I might be keeping something else from her.

I'd been trying to act with consideration for Shirakawa-san in my own way, which was why I'd done that and why I'd met with Kurose-san in a public place. But everything had backfired.

I wanted to talk to her soon. I hadn't cheated on her, but I wanted to apologize for never telling her about Kurose-san.

However, Shirakawa-san wasn't coming back.

At last, the end-of-term ceremony came to an end, and even after school, Shirakawa-san hadn't returned.

Thus began my gray summer break.

The next day, I was attending summer courses at a cram school. I wanted to go to that cram school once I became a senior, so I'd asked my parents, in part as a test, to let me take two weeks of courses here on all the main subjects.

I'd applied for it back in May, so I'd never expected things to end up like that with Shirakawa-san... Back when I'd decided to come here, I couldn't even imagine I'd be dating a girl at all during this time. It was too late to do anything

about it now.

Unfortunately, over half of what I heard in my summer classes went in one ear and out the other. I figured I'd at least copy down what was written on the blackboard into my notebooks as I thought about Shirakawa-san.

She had disappeared along with Yamana-san the day prior and had even left her bag in the classroom. I'd been sure they were together. I had wanted to talk to her and had waited in the classroom for a while even after everyone had left, but there'd been no sign of her coming back. I'd ended up leaving school while keeping an eye out for her.

After that, I'd waited near her house for her to go home. If I'd stayed in one place, the neighbors might've gotten suspicious, so I'd walked back and forth on the road as well as around her house as I waited until it got dark. Around 8 p.m., I'd spotted a man in his forties with a shapely face enter her house—he must've been her father. It felt like he had similar eyes to those of Kurose-san too. But by 9 p.m., Shirakawa-san hadn't shown up yet, so I'd given up and went home. I'd considered the possibility that I'd missed her, but the window of her room on the second floor had remained dark until the end.

No matter how much I'd messaged her in LINE, no "Read" markers had ever appeared. When I'd tried calling her, the ringing had never stopped.

I'd sent a message to Yamana-san too, just in case, but similarly, I didn't see a "Read" marker there either.

It was the first time in our relationship that I hadn't heard from Shirakawa-san for so long. I was even starting to worry about her well-being, but I had to believe she was safe as long as Yamana-san was with her.

At the cram school, I had three classes in the mornings and three in the afternoons. Those would continue nonstop for two weeks.

When my classes had ended for the day, I'd do my homework in the study room, and by the time I left the cram school, it would already be somewhat dark outside. I would take the train home, get off at Station A, and walk to Shirakawa-san's house. Then, upon seeing that her room was dark, I would droop my shoulders and return to the station.

That was how my life went for more than ten days that followed.

Then came the afternoon of the last day of my summer courses.

My fatigue had finally built up and I had a can of coffee on my desk, sipping it little by little to keep the post-lunch sleepiness at bay. I was practically a machine, copying things from the blackboard to my notebook, when...

The phone in my pocket vibrated, giving me a start. I had been acting like that every time it went off over these past two weeks, though it had typically been just app notifications...

Wondering if there were still any apps whose notifications I hadn't disabled, I pulled out my phone and opened my eyes wide.

Displayed on it was a LINE message from Icchi.

Ijichi Yusuke: Hey, your girlfriend's cheating on you!

Image sent.

His words startled me.

What was this about? He seemed to have sent me a picture, so I unlocked the phone and opened LINE. What I saw in that image—

—was, without a doubt, Shirakawa-san.

She was in a bikini, smiling happily and holding the arm of the person beside her. As for who it was...

He was a tall, good-looking guy with invigoratingly tanned skin. This grown-up, who would look good in an aloha shirt, was gazing at Shirakawa-san with a loving smile.

"No way..." I said involuntarily.

A student beside me shot me a glance.

Ryuto: When was this taken?

Ijichi Yusuke: Just now!

Ryuto: Where is this?

Ijichi Yusuke: Chiba! A beach in Sotobo!

“Chiba...?”

Why would she be there? And what is Shirakawa-san doing with that man?

I had a lot of questions, but my head was such a mess that I didn’t know where to start.

And as I remained like that, the class continued. It was half past one in the afternoon, and I still had more than two hours’ worth of classes left. But sitting through them was out of the question now.

Downing the remainder of my canned coffee, I shoved my textbook and notebook into my bag and got up.

The lecturer at the teacher’s podium glanced at me as I headed for the exit but didn’t say anything, probably because it was a lecture hall with over a hundred people.

On my way out of the cram school, I called Icchi.

“Hello. Icchi?”

“Kasshi? Don’t you have classes?”

“Did you talk to Shirakawa-san?” I asked.

“N-No. We just saw her from a distance. She didn’t notice us.”

“We? Us?”

As I asked my question, an “I’m here too!” came from the other side of the phone nearby. It was Nisshi’s voice.

“What are you two doing out there?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Swimming in the ocean.”

“Places like Shonan are kinda scary, so we went to Boso!”

“Chiba might welcome even us!”

“So where’s Shirakawa-san?” I asked. I couldn’t take my mind off her.

“She’s still here. Flirting with that handsome guy at the beach hut.”

I went silent at that.

“Hey, did you guys break up already?”

“Huh...?” I felt a pang at Icchi’s slightly reserved tone. “We haven’t.”

At the very least, I didn’t consider us to have done so. However...

*After what happened, and the fact I haven’t heard from her for two weeks...
Perhaps Shirakawa-san has already...*

The thought of it left me unable to sit still.

“I’m heading there now, so tell me the name of the place.”

“Huh?! Are you for real, Kasshi?! Don’t you have cram school?!”

Icchi’s words didn’t stop my legs from heading to the station.

Well, here I am.

About two hours later, I arrived at the station Icchi had told me about. I’d never been to Chiba except for the bay area, and it had a surprisingly rustic feel.

As I headed to the beach, I saw new messages in our LINE group chat.

KEN Kids Team (3)

Ijichi Yusuke: Sorry, my sunburn hurts too much, so I’m pulling out...

Ijichi Yusuke: Even my skin was gloomy smh

Your Nishina Ren: Same...

Your Nishina Ren: You’ll find Shirakawa-san at the beach hut named “Luna Marine”

“Luna...Marine...?”

Something about that name seemed fateful. I had a bad feeling about this.

After a short walk away from the station, the beach they’d told me about came into view. It was already nearing four in the afternoon, and I noticed how

many people were leaving the beach. Perhaps that was why it didn't feel congested compared to Enoshima.

The beach here was spacious, spreading far and wide. I felt out of place in my full-length pants and sneakers—I was totally dressed for a town environment. My backpack with my cram school textbooks was heavy too.

I calmly walked along the beach, trying not to get sand in my sneakers and looking at the beach huts lining the road in the meantime.

Luna Marine was the very last beach hut, located at the end of the beach.

I didn't have the courage to approach it right away, so I stopped for a while in between it and the beach hut closest to it, but...

When I saw a certain silhouette leaving its rear entrance, I opened my eyes wide.

"Hey, can I go play in the water for a bit?"

Slender arms and legs, tied-up dirty-blond hair, a familiar bikini adorning a glamorous cleavage... That cheerful voice too...

There was no doubt whatsoever: it was Shirakawa-san.

For the past two weeks, I'd constantly wanted to see her and to talk to her. I'd been worried about her since I couldn't get in touch with her.

And now she was right in front of my eyes.

"Shirakawa-sa—" I began, starting to approach on impulse, but the back door opened again.

"Sure. Go ahead, Runa."

That good-looking guy I'd seen in Icchi's photo stepped out of it.

He seemed young, but I didn't sense anything childlike about him at all, so perhaps he was in his thirties. His permed hairstyle, dyed brown and with long bangs, felt gaudy. He was tall, and I could tell he was slim and muscular even through his clothes. His sinewy long arms and legs made me jealous.

This man was different from me in every way.

And when Shirakawa-san looked at him, her eyes sparkled.

“Hey, why don’t you come too, Mao-kun?” she asked, taking the man’s arm.
“Come on, let’s go!”

“You know I can’t. We’re still open,” he replied.

“Oh, come on! There’s nobody around.”

Seeing Shirakawa-san fawn over him as she held the man’s arm, I felt a weight as heavy as a stone press down on my heart.

“It’s fine, it’s fine!” she continued.

“Nope. Go play with Nicole-chan.”

What?

Then, someone else approached them from the beach.

“Come on, let’s go, Runa! Don’t bother Mao-kun too much.”

Saying that with a smile was, surprisingly, Yamana-san. Her black tube top bikini suited her slender body and tanned skin well.

“I’ve noticed it before, but you really like Mao-kun, don’t you?” she asked, as though she were amazed.

Shirakawa-san smiled happily at that. “Well, I rarely get to see him. He always goes off again somewhere right away,” she said, pouting.

Looking at her now, anyone would see a lovely maiden in love.

“What do you mean ‘somewhere’? I have work,” said the man whom the two called “Mao-kun” with a faint, troubled smile on his face.



To an outsider, this might be a heartwarming scene of a guy and a girl on a beach, but I saw it in a twisted light. It seemed more like a nightmare.

Putting together everything I'd just seen and heard...

From the very beginning, Shirakawa-san had already had a *real* boyfriend—this “Mao-kun.” However, she couldn't see him much because of his work, so she'd filled in the void with other boyfriends...and thus she'd ended up dating me. It was the only way I could make sense of it.

And Yamana-san knew about it.

And yet...

“Can you promise me you'll absolutely avoid doing anything to make Runa worried?”

She'd said such a thing to me...

But she was in on it. She knew everything and was teasing me.

It's too much...

Does a gloomy guy like me really have no right to date Shirakawa-san after all...? Does she like handsome grown-ups instead...?

Up until now, I'd chased thoughts of Shirakawa-san's boyfriends out of my head when something prompted me to imagine them. However, now that I was faced with such a cruel sight before me, I had no choice but to accept it as reality.

I really *had* forgotten my place. I'd thought a guy like me could become a real boyfriend for a girl like Shirakawa-san.

But I'd really loved Shirakawa-san... I still loved her even now.

Even in this moment, watching her flirt with another guy in front of my eyes.

It was hard to accept it as reality—unbearable, even.

With the midsummer sun mercilessly shining on me, I felt a splitting pain in my head and even felt like throwing up.

“I like that part of you.”

Those words, that smile—were they all lies?

Was she just playing with me all along...?

I was so shocked that I stood there, dumbfounded. And just when I felt like I'd hit the bottom of a pit...

"You know I can't! See? I have a customer," replied the man Shirakawa-san had called "Mao-kun" before suddenly looking my way. "Welcome! Are you about to head into the water?"

I froze up as he called out to me in a friendly way. At the same time, Shirakawa-san and Yamana-san looked my way too...

"Huh?!"

"What?!"

The girls went speechless, as though having seen something unbelievable.

"Ryuto...?!" exclaimed Shirakawa-san.

Seeing how we were acting, the look on "Mao-kun's" face went from a confused one to an understanding one.

"Oh... Would you happen to be the boyfriend Runa mentioned?"

I didn't know if he was asking this with a smile because he was Shirakawa-san's real boyfriend, but I glared back at him without saying a word.

What a daring guy... I couldn't believe he could boldly date Shirakawa-san while knowing she had other guys, unlike me...

"That makes sense, then!"

And on top of that—

"Did you come on a train? From somewhere far, right? This heat's crazy..."

—he even had the presence of mind to make small talk with me while wearing a cheerful smile.

Wait, is he just playing around with Shirakawa-san?

He was her real boyfriend, but he didn't think much of her... I couldn't forgive him for it. What did Shirakawa-san see in a frivolous guy like this?

Sure, maybe he had the looks, and maybe also the financial stability and the broad-mindedness of a grown-up... Unlike me...

Damn it.

No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't find any areas where I had the upper hand compared to him. The more I looked at the guy in front of me, the more my mood sank.

This is it. Is my only option to back down, resigning myself to being Shirakawa-san's second...? And if I don't like it, I have to break up with her...?

Those are the only options left for me.

As I thought that, I started to feel like crying, but...

"We haven't met before, so I should introduce myself," said the man, drawing near me and taking something like a card case out of his pocket. "Will this business card do? Nice to meet you!"

When I looked at the card he'd given me, my eyes opened wide.

Travel Writer

Kurose Mao

Kurose?!

As I looked up in surprise, the man said, with the most handsome of smiles, “Runa’s uncle, at your service! Sounds like you’ve been taking care of my niece!”

Un... Uncle...?! But isn’t he kinda frivolous for that...?

However, according to the business card, it must’ve been the truth. Judging by his name and apparent age, perhaps he was Shirakawa-san’s mother’s younger brother.

He was completely different from my own uncles. They were the types to get utterly drunk during the New Year holidays and shoot off one dirty joke after another, shaking their beer bellies.

As I stood dumbfounded at the anticlimax...

“Hey. You,” called out Yamana-san, giving me a hot-blooded glare. “I don’t know who told you, but how *dare* you show your face here?”

“Don’t, Nicole,” said Shirakawa-san, confronting her. “Maybe things are different.”

“Different? Different how? He *obviously* cheated on you.”

“Maybe you’d be right if it was someone else... But since it’s Ryuto, maybe it really wasn’t what we thought it was,” Shirakawa-san said, as though giving the matter deep thought. She then looked at me before turning her eyes away again. “I kept worrying about it a lot since then...and I’m finally able to think that way now.”

Shirakawa-san...

“Come on, Mr. Boyfriend. I’m sure you’re tired after coming this far in such

heat. Have some cola or something and take a rest!” Mao-san cheerfully said upon seeing us like that.

“Ah... Call me Kashima,” I hurriedly said, realizing I’d forgotten to give him my name.

Mao-san flashed an amicable smile back at me. “Gotcha! Kashima Ryuto-kun, then.”

His smile certainly did resemble that of Shirakawa-san a fair bit.

After I was shown into Mao-san’s beach hut, Shirakawa-san and I sat at a table in a raised area that was closer to the sea, facing each other in silence. There were two bottles of cola on the table, which Mao-san had said were on the house.

Yamana-san had left earlier, saying she had work starting at six.

“I’m sorry I never told you that Kurose-san was the one who rejected me in my first year of middle school,” I began.

Shirakawa-san gave a small nod to that.

“I didn’t know you were related to her, and I thought I might make you worry if I mentioned it, so at first, I thought there was no need to bring up something that was already in the past... But when I found out you were twins, I felt it was too late to say anything.”

Shirakawa-san nodded again. With that as my only saving grace, I continued.

“The day you and I came back from the beach together, Kurose-san confessed to me.”

Shirakawa-san had been looking down, but now she looked at me with surprise. “Were you on good terms with Maria?”

“No.” I shook my head. “She asked for my LINE, but we haven’t talked much. It sounds like she fell for me when I talked to her about how she spread rumors about you. Said she thought I was kind to her.”

It felt awkward to say this myself, so I kept things brief.

“I wanted to reject her over the phone, but she said she wouldn’t be able to give up that way, so we met in a park... And then she cried and asked me to let her stay like that for a bit. I think that’s when that photo was taken.”

I summarized only the facts, doing my best to avoid making any of it sound like an excuse.

“Still, you didn’t know about that, so I think you were surprised...and hurt. I’m really sorry.”

Shirakawa-san immediately shook her head. “I’m the one who should be sorry. You didn’t do anything wrong, right?” With that, she showed me just a bit of a smile. “It’s not like Maria was in the wrong either... It was just bad timing, right?”

“Maybe... But it’s a fact that I hurt you,” I said. “If I’d really thought about you, I shouldn’t have gone to see Kurose-san at all, no matter what she said. I’ve been regretting it all along.”

Whenever I woke up in the morning, during my summer classes, whenever I took a train home, before going to bed... I didn’t know how many times I’d wished I could turn back time over the past two weeks.

“No, you’re not in the wrong,” Shirakawa-san said calmly. “You’re kind, so I’m sure that’s why you did what you did. The fact that you were kind to Maria, just like you’re kind to me... It makes me happy. As her sister.” Shirakawa-san looked at me and smiled. “Thank you, Ryuto.”

“Shirakawa-san...”

The load was lifted off my chest, and I felt warm.

Though, at the same time...

“B-But Shirakawa-san, weren’t you angry with me? You ignored me on LINE...”

“Ah, it’s not like that! Sorry!” she said in a hurry, looking surprised.

“Remember how I dropped my phone in the hallway that time? The screen cracked really badly and I couldn’t use my phone at all anymore. I took it to a shop to get it fixed, but they said it might be broken on the inside too since the screen was so cracked. They suggested I buy a new one instead, but that costs a

ton, though, right? I've only had this phone for a year. I'd have to talk to my dad about it. I couldn't decide quick enough, and when I came here, it turned out there weren't any phone stores around, so I couldn't do anything."

"Oh..."

Her phone, huh. I didn't even think about that. After all...

"Doesn't LINE work on computers too?" I asked.

"What? Really? Can you log in with the same account as on your phone?"

"Yeah, probably..."

"Huh..." said Shirakawa-san, sounding impressed, then turned to look at the sea.

The sun was already starting to sink behind the mountains, so the beach was getting a bit dark and it was starting to feel like evening. Watching the surfers in the distance ride waves and disappear out of the corner of my eye, I looked at Shirakawa-san's face from the side.

Then, she shifted her gaze from the water to down in front of her.

"To tell you the truth, I was scared to check. So maybe I was glad my phone was broken." Saying that and looking at me again, Shirakawa-san lowered her eyes once more. "I wanted to trust you... I meant to trust you, but before I realized I should ask because maybe you had your reasons, I instead ended up thinking that I didn't want to get hurt. After all, nothing in this world is fully certain, right? I thought there was a ninety-nine percent chance you wouldn't cheat...but what if that remaining one percent was at play this time? When I thought that you might've cheated on me with Maria, who turned out to be your first love...I didn't think I could come to grips with something like that."

After saying all that with a sunken expression, she smiled gently. "Ever since we started dating, I've been so happy. You're earnest, and you said you didn't have any previous girlfriends or girls you hung out with often... That was a first for me... And I was able to believe you, from the bottom of my heart."

While I was happy to hear that, I myself felt conflicted when I thought about her exes.

“So I never thought about the possibility of getting betrayed...and when I thought how my heart, which I’d laid bare, might get hurt, I was afraid to find out the truth,” she quietly added. Then, she lifted her face. “But I realized I couldn’t go on like that. No matter what you’ve done, I still want to keep dating you. So I thought I had to face reality...which is why I asked Mao-kun yesterday to take my phone to a repair shop in a nearby town.”

“I see...”

It appeared that while I’d spent the past two weeks agonizing over my inability to contact Shirakawa-san, she’d thought about a lot of things herself and had a change of heart. That must’ve been why she’d been so quick to accept my apology.

“Sorry I caused you trouble,” she said.

I shook my head. “It’s fine. We got to see each other like this now.”

“How did you know I was here? Did someone in my family tell you?”

“No, it looks like my friend happened to be at this beach by pure chance. He told me he saw you.”

“Huh? Seriously?!” she asked. “Your friend...? Could it be that large guy you’re always with? Ichiji-kun, was it?”

“Ah, yeah. Ichiji-kun.”

So Shirakawa-san knows Ichiji? I guess it’s no surprise. Ichiji and Nisshi were the only people I could call my friends... Whenever Shirakawa-san came to me while I was talking to Ichiji in class, he would immediately say “Don’t mind me!” and distance himself in a hurry, so I’d yet to be able to introduce him.

“Wait, is he still here?” asked Shirakawa-san.

“Nah, he’s already left. Said his sunburn hurt.”

“Oh, that’s pretty bad. I got way too much sun too.” Shirakawa-san brought her hand to a shoulder strap of her bikini. “See what it’s like?”

Sure enough, the skin beneath the strap she’d moved out of the way was a little lighter than its surroundings. Her entire body still looked light, though, so she must’ve been really fair-skinned before.

“You’re not that tanned,” I said, looking away. I could feel my heart pounding.

“Ehh, really?” asked Shirakawa-san, letting go of her shoulder strap. “That’s good, then! I’m aiming to be a shiro gyaru, so I apply a lotta sunscreen, but I still get a tan because I’m here every day.”

“You’ve been here all this time?”

Come to think of it, I’d yet to ask her what she was doing here. Though I did understand that her uncle Mao-kun managed this beach hut.

“Ah, oh yeah...” began Shirakawa-san, as though saying she’d forgotten to explain. “Ever since my parents got divorced, I visit my great-grandma’s house every summer break. She’s my mom’s grandma and lives near here. Thinking about my dad, I feel awkward seeing my mom, but I figure it’s fine to see my great-grandma. It’s pretty fun—my mom and Mao-kun show up sometimes too.”

“So you’ll be here all summer?”

“Nah. There’ll be fireworks and a festival in the middle of August, so I come here for a week or two for those. When I heard Mao-kun was running a beach hut here this year, I figured I’d come help a bit, but obviously it’s draining to help *all* summer, so we’d agreed that maybe I’d help starting in August...”

At that point, she looked down.

“After stuff happened between us, things kinda got hard to deal with... Nicole has work, so she can’t be with me all the time... So, I came here on a whim the same day of the end-of-term ceremony. I got here at night, still in my school uniform.”

That explains things. So that’s why she never went home that day, no matter how long I waited.

“Were you at school until then?” I asked. “The day of the ceremony.”

“Hm?” Shirakawa-san lifted her face at that. “Yeah. Nicole was comforting me in the chemistry classroom. She offered to skip work to be with me too, but I figured I couldn’t depend on her that much.”

As I thought that Yamana-san probably *would* have gone that far for her,

Shirakawa-san gave me a serious look.

“Nicole dreams of becoming a nail technician.”

“A nail technician...? Like, someone who does manicures for people?”

“It’s all about gel nails these days. Nicole and I both prefer them. It’s gel nails or nothing!”

“I-Is that so?”

I didn’t really get it, but Shirakawa-san was happily looking at her manicure. The design matched her bikini. Her natural nails had grown quite a bit since the last time I’d seen them.

“Nicole plans to go to a nail tech school and get qualified as a nail technician once she graduates. But her mom’s on her own, so she doesn’t want to rely on her to pay her tuition. That’s why she works so many part-time jobs—to save up as much as possible for the enrollment fee and tuition while she’s still in high school.”

So that’s why... Guess she’s working hard, despite how she may seem...

“What about you, Ryuto? What did you do for the past two weeks?”

“Huh? Oh, my summer courses...”

“Oh yeah, you did mention those.”

My last class should’ve been ending right about now. After hearing about Yamana-san, I felt guilty—my parents had paid for those classes, and I had skipped almost an entire session.

“Everyone’s giving their future serious thought, huh...” uttered Shirakawa-san, putting her elbow on the table and resting her chin on her palm. She looked off into the distance at the ocean, and as I watched her from the side, she looked somehow uneasy.

“What do *you* plan to do after you graduate?” I asked.

She’d said she wanted to become a YouTuber the last time it had come up, but that must’ve been a joke.

“Mm? Well...” Removing her chin from her hand, Shirakawa-san looked at

me. "I'm a bit of an empty shell right now."

"Huh?"

As I wondered what she meant, Shirakawa-san smiled. "I've already reached my high school goal."

"What goal is that?"

In response to my question, Shirakawa-san started to look bashful.

"To fall in love with somebody who loves me back, and who I can see myself being together forever with."

A sea breeze blew by us, making Shirakawa-san's long hair flutter gently in the wind. She smiled, narrowing her eyes as though to shield them from the sun, and the sea behind her gradually darkened into an indigo blue. At this moment, she looked even more beautiful than she usually did.

"It was painful, these past two weeks," she said, lowering her eyes. "But I figured that if we can get through this, I'll be able to trust you even more, and love you even more." As a smile appeared on her face, Shirakawa-san looked at me again. "When you explained things to me earlier, I quickly believed you from the start. Like, 'Oh, sure, of course it was like that.' Even I'm surprised how easy it made sense to me. I didn't feel like doubting anything, and I think that's because you really told me only the truth."

She bit her lip as though digesting a bit of bitterness.

"I've fought with boyfriends plenty of times, but this was a first for me. And when I realized that, it felt like I could suddenly see our future, even after the second or third month..."

Shirakawa-san...

"I've always been looking for a place to settle down," she added all of a sudden in a quiet voice. "My current life isn't bad either, but I liked living with everyone—with my mom, my dad, and Maria. But then, when my mom and dad split up and my family was torn apart, I realized something—it was my mom

and dad who made the Shirakawa family. And that broke because they didn't want to be together anymore. So I figured I needed to find someone important to me, myself, and make my own family."

"Family..." I said, repeating that grand word that had appeared all of a sudden.

Shirakawa-san looked at me, flustered. "Wait, was that clingy? It totally was, right...?"

"No, it wasn't."

Judging by her reaction... By "family," did she, perhaps, mean that sort of thing? That is...she's even thinking of her future with me...?

The thought of it suddenly made my face heat up, and it put me in high spirits.

"I-I...!" I began in an unintentionally forceful tone, prompting a puzzled gaze from Shirakawa-san. "I...want to...be with you forever too... Been thinking that all along..."

As I squeaked that out in a high-pitched tone, Shirakawa-san blushed too.

"Ryuto..." But suddenly, she looked as if something had just occurred to her. "Ah! Of course, I'm not planning to have you provide for me right after high school, okay?! I'll either work or go to college."

"Y-Yeah, I know."

What is going on? Is this reality?

Dreams felt much more real than this.

Shirakawa-san let out a sigh, and I grabbed my cold bottle of cola and drank some. The back of my throat felt way too hot.

"I'll have to study for college exams..." she said, looking at the backpack I'd left off to the side.

Even our school had several students who would manage to get into high-level universities every year. I'd planned to simply get into some decent university through an admissions process, but now, I wanted to study so I could

hope to get into somewhere better through regular entrance exams.

I felt like I could put in any amount of effort if there was a future with Shirakawa-san waiting for me on the other side.

“You’re smart, so you can probably get into a real good university.”
Shirakawa-san’s comment caused me to get flustered.

“Ehh? Nah, definitely not the way I am now... I need to study more.”

“Ah, then I guess I should go to college too. At this rate, the gap between us’ll widen, and some smart girl from your school might take you from me,” she said with a cute, grumpy look.

“That won’t happen.”

“Huh? Then why are you smiling, Ryuto?”

“I was just happy that you got jealous over me...”

Shirakawa-san blushed at my words. “Come on! I was seriously thinking about what to do after graduating!”

“Sorry, I couldn’t help it.”

Then, as we smiled at each other...

“Hey, you two!” Mao-san was calling to us from the kitchen. “I’m closing up soon!”

I realized that the sea had now completely lost its daytime shine. It was still five, so the sun hadn’t completely set yet, but there were only a few people left on the beach.

“Ah, wait! I’m gonna go take a shower,” said Shirakawa-san, hurrying to her feet.

“Huh? Isn’t it simpler to just change at home?” asked Mao-san.

“But I have to see Ryuto off to the station...”

“Wait, he’s leaving? If he doesn’t have stuff to do, why not just have him stay at Grandma’s place?”

“Oh, that’s a good idea! Hey Ryuto, wanna come say hi to Granny Sayo?” she

asked.

“What?!”

“You don’t wanna?”

But when she gazed at me with those sparkling eyes, my only remaining option was to go.

“Okay, if I won’t be a bother...”

“Yay!”

What a day. First, I hear that Shirakawa-san’s cheating on me after I hadn’t talked to her in forever, so I come running here. Then, I see her flirt with a good-looking guy right in front of me and fall into despair...but that guy turns out to be her uncle. After Shirakawa-san and I reunite, she even starts thinking about her distant future with me...and now she’s inviting me to her great-grandma’s place.

This day’s like a roller coaster, I thought, looking at Shirakawa-san. She was happy, in high spirits, and still in her bikini.

After that, I got into Mao-san’s minivan together with Shirakawa-san. After a shaky, five-minute-long ride toward the mountains, we arrived at the house belonging to Shirakawa-san’s great-grandmother.

Located on a gently sloped mountain road, her home was a detached house that somehow felt nostalgic. The building had two floors, a tiled roof, and a spacious garden with thick undergrowth. Even with Mao-san’s car parked here, there was still enough space to play tag.

“Granny Sayo, I’m home!” exclaimed Shirakawa-san, stepping inside the house without waiting for a response. She was now wearing a fairly large T-shirt over her bikini.

I stood at the entrance, thinking I couldn’t just go in without the permission of the owner of the house, but...

“It’s okay, go on in,” said Mao-san. He placed an arm over my shoulder and pushed me forward.

I was then led into what appeared to be a Japanese-style sitting room.

“Oh my.” There was a small old woman sitting on a legless chair with surprise and confusion on her face.

She seemed to have heard about me from Shirakawa-san in advance, and there was no end to her “oh mys.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “Shirakawa...Runa-san has been kind enough to date me. My name is Kashima Ryuto.”

“My...”

Since she was Shirakawa-san’s great-grandmother, she naturally looked old—probably in her eighties or nineties. Her face had many deep wrinkles and there was no trace of makeup on it. Her gray hair was tied back and she wore simple clothing. Seeing her flustered state made me feel even more sorry for barging in on her all of a sudden.

“Oh my, so you’re taking care of Ruu-chan... There’s nothing here, but would you care for some tea?” Shirakawa-san’s great-grandmother asked me, half-rising to her feet and reaching for the tray on the table.

On it was a small teapot, a tea caddy, and a mysterious cylinder with a hole. At that point, it occurred to me that the reason Shirakawa-san had skillfully used the tea set at that inn to make tea must’ve been that she’d learned to use it here.

“Oh, it’s okay! I’ll get the barley tea from the fridge,” said Shirakawa-san. She nimbly moved to her destination and opened the fridge in the kitchen.

“Ah, you’re right. Young’uns prefer cold drinks...”

“Wait, Granny, did you turn off the AC again?” asked Mao-san, fanning his neck and picking up the remote on the table. “This year is hot like always, so don’t go kicking the bucket from heatstroke, okay?”

“It’s okay, I have an electric fan. Though we can turn on the AC if all of us here feel hot...”

Looking over, I noticed a worn-looking electric fan in a corner of the room, blowing just enough air to give some ventilation. There was also an uchiwa fan

lying on the table with a phone number printed on it. It appeared Shirakawa-san's great-grandmother had used it to stave off the heat.

Mao-san turned on the AC and a slightly cool air blew into the hot, humid room. As the temperature in the room began to fall, Shirakawa-san brought a tray with four glasses of barley tea.

"Here. You should drink too, Granny Sayo. It's good to stay hydrated," said Shirakawa-san.

"It's okay, I was drinking tea all this time," replied her great-grandmother. Even so, she reached for a glass, probably because her great-granddaughter had gone to the trouble of preparing it.

"Do you have any sweets to go with tea, Granny Sayo?" asked Mao-san.

"Yes, there are peanuts next to the fridge."

"Hah hah, that's so Chiba!"

"Well, people give them to me."

"It's fine, I like peanuts," said Shirakawa-san with a smile. She brought a wooden container of them into the room. "C'mon, Ryuto, sit down, sit down."

"Oh, okay, thanks..."

Thus, Shirakawa-san, her great-grandmother, Mao-san, and I chatted for a while as four.

Shirakawa-san's great-grandmother, Watanabe Sayo, lived alone here at the age of ninety. Thanks in part to her neighbors' assistance, she was apparently in good health and didn't really have any inconveniences in her life.

However, her daughter—meaning Shirakawa-san's maternal grandmother—had gotten worried upon seeing the yearly statistics of the elderly perishing from heatstroke. As a result, she had apparently talked to others and it had been decided that Mao-san would live here as well for the duration of this summer while managing a beach hut.

Mao-san was thirty-eight and single. He claimed that his primary occupation was being a travel writer and that he normally traveled around the world and published his books. He said he'd originally wanted to become a photographer,

so travel writing was perfect for utilizing his photography skills. According to Mao-san, he hadn't had any fixed "home" for a long time now, but he did keep this house on his resident record.

When Shirakawa-san was little, he had apparently been a freeloader at her house at one point when he had worked in Tokyo, which seemed to have made her adore him like an older brother. I *had* been thinking they got along too well for an uncle and a niece, so that explained things.

"...And so when I woke up in the morning, someone had taken my wallet, my camera, and my laptop—like, I was *totally* screwed. You could say my only consolation was that I'd slept with my passport fastened to my chest," said Mao-san.

"It sure is scary abroad..." replied Shirakawa-san.

After we'd all introduced ourselves, Mao-san had started talking about his experiences in other countries. Shirakawa-san was making practiced interjections in the process—perhaps she'd heard this story several times before.

"Oh, Mao-kun, Mao-kun, tell that story! The one where you confronted a swindler at a casino in Macao! It seemed so cool!" said Shirakawa-san. She was excited—her interest in his stories knew no bounds.

As for me, I'd been minding the clock on top of the lintel in the room for a while now.

"Huh? That one's long. Let's see... It happened eight years ago..." began Mao-san.

I had to interrupt him. "U-Um, excuse me."

It was almost half past six. My parents thought I was still at cram school, and considering the time it would take for me to get home, I had to take my leave at once.

"I have to go soon..." I said.

"Ah..." uttered Shirakawa-san, looking at the clock. "I see. So it's that late already..."

She didn't hide her dejection on her face, and I was reluctant to part too.

Mao-san noticed our expressions. "I'll take you to the station if you're leaving," he suggested with a bit of reserve.

"Oh, yes, please... Thank you," I replied.

I looked at Shirakawa-san and was about to get up when...

"Since you're here, you can stay the night, you know," suggested her great-grandmother—or Sayo-san, rather—looking right at us. "If you leave now, it will be late by the time you get back to Tokyo, right? Why not stay the night and go home tomorrow when it's bright outside?"

"Huh...?"

As I stood there, confused by the unexpected suggestion, Shirakawa-san's face began to shine.

"Hey, that's a good idea! What do you say?" she asked me.

"This house does have plenty of rooms... In fact, why not ask to stay until Runa leaves?" jokingly added Mao-san.

At that, Shirakawa-san only looked happier. "Oh, that's even better! That's right—you should come to the summer festival too, Ryuto! We even have fireworks!"

"Whaaat?!" I replied.

Staying for a night is one thing, but spending several at the house of a person you've only just met?!

"Wh-When's that summer festival, anyway?" I added.

"It's the Bon Festival in August... Um, when's it again?"

"In about two weeks," said Mao-san.

I was taken aback even more. "Two weeks?!"

This time of the year was hard to bear even at a real "grandma's house." And besides...

"But wait, if I stayed that long, I'd feel sorry for eating your food and stuff."

“Oh, don’t worry about it. This house is full of things I get from people,” replied Sayo-san.

“Granny here is such a good person that people cover almost all of her food expenses,” Mao-san said teasingly.

Sayo-san waved her hand and denied it. “It’s just because this is the countryside. Everyone has more than they can eat themselves, so they give it to me.”

Now that she mentioned it, I *had* noticed a cardboard box full of turnips at the entrance.

“Of course, I’m not forcing you... I’m sure you have your circumstances,” said Sayo-san. “I was just thinking Ruu-chan would be happier that way. It looks like Nico-chan can’t come very often.”

Nico-chan...? She must’ve meant Yamana-san. I guessed Sayo-san had even met her too.

“Um... Ummm...” I said, thinking it over.

“No good?” asked Shirakawa-san, teary-eyed.

If I got to spend two weeks under the same roof with Shirakawa-san...

Of course, even I would be...

Happy...

“I need to call my parents,” I said, taking out my phone.

“Yay!” exclaimed Shirakawa-san. She looked so happy, like things had already been decided.

What a day, seriously.

And that was how I ended up staying for about two weeks at Shirakawa-san’s great-grandmother’s house.

Chapter 4.5: Kurose Maria's Diary

Guess you got rejected, Maria.

Since I was in primary school, I've had all kinds of boys confess to me. If I had felt like it, I should've been able to get a boyfriend whenever I liked.

Runa's an idiot, so she lets them take her for a ride. She agrees to date them and then they break up when it doesn't work out. That's how she earned herself the badge of a slut.

But I wouldn't make such a mistake.

I know my value as a woman. I'm not about to sell myself short.

I should give my first time to a perfect guy who's right for me. *That's* what I believed as I protected my chastity until now.

But...

When I fell in love for the first time for real, such a thing didn't matter anymore.

Kashima-kun isn't perfect at all. And yet I was going to give him my everything. *Wanted* to do so.

It was my last chance to turn things around for myself. A gamble.

But I was completely rejected. Branded as a girl who wasn't even worth having sex with. Or so I thought as I felt down, at first.

However, now that some time has passed, I've started thinking that maybe that wasn't the case.

At the very least, Kashima-kun didn't use me to fulfill his desires.

Remembering how he was that night, I can tell he wanted to do it with *me*. Even now, I can vividly recall his sweaty skin, his rough breathing, and the parts of his body that grew hot...

And even after he found out I wasn't Runa, he still hesitated for a moment.

So, in his mind, there was an option of going all the way with me. And that means he didn't find me unsatisfactory, right?

If, to Kashima-kun, I was a girl he could have sex with, he would've definitely done so. In fact, I think he might've even kept a relationship going with me after that, until he lost interest in me. I'm sure a lot of guys would've done that in his shoes.

But he didn't.

Does he love Runa that much?

When I think about that, it frustrates me, but those words he said to me back then are my source of comfort now.

"I feel sorry for you too," he'd said.

He held back for my sake. I can think of it that way, right?

Either way, I'm hurt. Is this better than having him have sex with me until he lost interest and then threw me aside? I have no way of knowing that as I am now.

But... While it's painful now, and I can't think that way at all...

If, one day, I meet a guy I can fall in love with as much as I love Kashima-kun...

And if that time, I can get him to love me back...

Then maybe, when that time comes, I'll be grateful for Kashima-kun's decision.

If I'm able to give my first everything to the person I love from the bottom of my heart and who loves me back the same way...

"You fell in love with a nice guy, Maria."

"Your first love was a good experience, right?"

Perhaps I'll be able to tell myself that.

But right now, it still hurts so much.

Chapter 5

The next morning...

“It’s morning, Ryuto!” came Shirakawa-san’s voice from somewhere distant.

I heard the door open and light footsteps come in. That was followed by the sound of curtains opening.

Guess I’m dreaming.

Pretty nice dream today, huh? A dream where I’m living under the same roof as Shirakawa-san...

Mm? Under the same roof?!

“Ryuto! How long you gonna sleep for?”

“Whoa!”

As I got out of my futon, I was startled to find Shirakawa-san’s face extremely close and right in front of me. Being so near to her that we were practically kissing right after I woke up made it feel like my heart could stop.

Large eyes... How cute...

My vocabulary had taken a nosedive, likely because I’d just woken up.

Shirakawa-san was on her knees, staring at my face and evidently in the process of trying to wake me up.

“Ryu—” she began, her cheeks flushing. She then turned her face away in a hurry. “Ryuto, it’s morning, you know...” she then said, still self-conscious and taking peeks at me.

“Y-yeah, sorry...”

Checking my phone by my pillow, I saw that it was seven. If this was the kind of summer break where I had no plans, I’d totally be going back to sleep now, but today was different.

Starting today, I was going to be helping Mao-san with the beach hut together with Shirakawa-san. I'd volunteered to do so, wanting to help at least a little since I was staying with them. The three of us were going to ride together in Mao-san's car to get to the beach before nine when the hut opened.

Shirakawa-san was dressed more casually than usual in a T-shirt and shorts. Upon closer inspection, there was a bikini string peeking out from under the collar of her T-shirt—she seemed to be wearing one underneath.

"Let's hurry down! Breakfast is ready," said Shirakawa-san.

I followed her downstairs, and when we got to the first floor, I saw that breakfast was already laid out on the table in the sitting-slash-dining room.

"Oh, sorry..." I said, heading to the kitchen.

There, Mao-san was putting rice in bowls for everyone.

"Morning! Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"Ah, yes..." I replied.

After everything that'd happened yesterday, Sayo-san had ordered sushi from a place run by her acquaintance—"since she had a guest," as she'd put it. My welcome party had dragged on while we ate sushi made with delicious, fresh ingredients, and by the time I'd been taken to an empty room on the second floor, laid out a futon there, and gotten inside it, it had already gotten to be about eleven in the evening. That night, I'd looked back on the events of the day—of which there had been way too many—and had trouble falling asleep. Then, my alarm hadn't managed to wake me up, and that brought us back to the present.

"Good morning, Ryu-kun," said Sayo-san, who had just left the bathroom. It seemed like she had been doing laundry.

"Good morning," I replied. "Sorry I couldn't help with breakfast..."

"It's all right. Breakfast is all things we have on hand. Ruu-chan made the miso soup."

I turned to look at Shirakawa-san behind me and she giggled.

"That's right!" she said.

“Ruu-chan is usually a late riser too, but she said she wanted to do something today since you’re here,” said Sayo-san.

“Granny!” exclaimed Shirakawa-san, getting red in the face.

Shirakawa-san made miso soup for me...

The thought of it naturally made a smile appear on my face.

“Granny Sayo is healthy and good at cooking, so when I was little, I only carried the plates and let her take care of everything else. But she’s ninety now, so I want to do what I can,” said Shirakawa-san as though making excuses, then fanned her red cheeks with her hands.

When the two of us were alone together, she was honest in her displays of affection. However, she seemed embarrassed about her relatives finding out how devoted she was.

Thus, the four of us sat at a square table and got to eating breakfast. The side dishes were simple—Sayo-san’s homemade pickles, dried fish, and natto—but to me, who was used to only having bread or cereal at home, it was fresh and novel.

Shirakawa-san had made miso soup with turnips and wakame. The thickness of the turnips was uneven and you needed to chew pretty hard to get through the thicker pieces, but that somehow felt endearing to me too.

“How is it?” asked Shirakawa-san from beside me as I drank the miso soup. There was mild worry written on her face.

“It’s great,” I replied, which prompted her to smile back.

“Thank goodness...” She beamed with apparent relief, and it was as dazzling as the morning sun.

Just like it had done the day before, the midsummer sun showered its light down on the beach.

“I’d like to rent a locker.”

“Absolutely! A locker plus a warm shower is a thousand yen per person,” said

Shirakawa-san. She was dealing with a customer who had come to the Luna Marine beach hut. Perhaps she looked so experienced doing this because she'd been helping out here for the past two weeks.

Watching her out of the corner of my eye, I wiped down the tables, moved the stands for disposable chopsticks, and otherwise made myself busy without really having anything to do.

In the morning, most customers came here to get changed, but by noon, more and more of them were looking to buy food. The tables in the beach hut gradually filled up.

Things settled down around 2 p.m., and that was when Mao-san called out to us.

"I'm gonna go restock and check on Granny while I'm at it. Can I leave the hut to you?" he asked.

"Sure! Take care!" replied Shirakawa-san.

"You can take breaks when you want. If you get hungry, feel free to eat whatever."

"Okaaay!"

I gave him a slight bow.

"Ryuto, you can have lunch ahead of me," offered Shirakawa-san. "I had ice cream in the back earlier."

"Really? Thanks," I replied.

Taking Shirakawa-san up on her offer, I started eating some takoyaki alone in a corner of the parlor. That was when...

"Ah, Runa-chaaan!"

"She's here again!"

Startled by some flirtatious voices, I looked toward the entrance of the hut. Two young guys were coming in, wearing their trunks low and making obscene smiles at Shirakawa-san. In broad terms, their skin was beyond "well toasted." In fact, they looked burnt.

“Wel...come...” Shirakawa-san said slowly, her smile seeming to become kinda forced.

“Runa-chan, you alone today?”

“You’re really cute as usual. Where d’you live? Somewhere in the neighborhood?”

Shirakawa-san tried to dodge the guys’ questions with a smile and an awkward laugh. I sensed her SOS in the glance she gave me.

I wanted to help her out too. But...

It was scary! Those guys looked older than me, and they were very obviously not only sunny types, but rowdy ones. You’d be hard-pressed to find a kind of person that I had more trouble dealing with.

While I hesitated, the two kept persistently talking to Shirakawa-san.

“Would you rather have a one-night stand with me or him?”



“Huh...?” replied Shirakawa-san.

“One night! Just one night, okay?”

Their spirits still high, the two kept making advances despite her obvious discomfort. Perhaps they were drunk.

“By the way, this guy’s a two-pump chump.”

“Uh, I’m hung, though.”

It was a shocking, horrible sight. They were making undisguised dirty jokes.

Even Shirakawa-san looked like she was at the end of her rope. Something snapped inside me when I saw her like that.

“Um!” I called out, getting up from the tatami floor.

The two guys looked at me with a start. It appeared they hadn’t even noticed I was there.

“A-Are you in need of a locker? Or a meal, perhaps?” I asked.

That was my way of saying “Get out if you don’t have any business here.”

At that, the guys smirked as though to hide their awkwardness and looked at each other.

“Ah...”

“You working here? You weren’t a customer, huh.”

“We’ll come again later, Runa-chan.”

They turned around and were about to leave the hut, but...

“By the way,” one of them addressed Shirakawa-san again. “Just as a ‘by the way’ thing. Who’d you rather spend the night with: me, this guy, or your coworker over there?”

What? Why is he including me...?

I didn’t know if they were trying to harass or make fun of me, but the two guys were grinning at me.

Figuring it was okay to ignore such cretins, I pursed my lips. And then...

“Him,” Shirakawa-san said firmly. “He’s my boyfriend, so.”

Raising her eyebrows, as well as the outer corners of her eyes, she glared at the two.

It was my first time seeing Shirakawa-san’s actual angry face.

“Huh?”

“Seriously?”

The two guys looked taken aback.

“That’s surprising...”

“Wait, you’re into guys like *that*?”

Looking like they were losing interest, the two left the hut for real this time.

“Man, what a pain in the ass...”

“Any cute girls around here...?”

Raising their voices in an affected manner—perhaps because of the awkwardness after Shirakawa-san shot them down—they disappeared.

“Shirakawa-san, are you okay?” I immediately asked, checking up on her. “Sorry I couldn’t help you out before they started saying weird stuff to you...”

“It’s okay,” she replied, shaking her head. “I should be sorry for getting you involved. They’ve been coming a lot since last week. Apparently, they go to college around here.”

“Are they always so persistent?”

“Nope, this was the first time. Probably because Mao-kun isn’t here.”

It made sense. To be sure, if a good-looking adult like Mao-san was keeping watch, I doubted they could’ve acted so self-assured. It was frustrating to think that they had looked down on me because it was *me*, but on the other hand, a smile appeared on my face when I recalled what Shirakawa-san had just said.

“Him. He’s my boyfriend, so.”

She'd confidently said that, even in front of sunny types. That made me happy.

Was it okay for me to be her boyfriend?

Little by little... While it was only little by little, I'd come to be able to think that way.

"You know, I was thinking..." began Shirakawa-san suddenly, with a serious look on her face. "It's always guys like that who call out to me. I wonder why that is," she said, as though asking herself, and folded her arms. "My exes were pretty much like that too, and even Mao-kun is on that side of things if anything. I never really gave it much thought before...but I'm mostly just talking to you these days, so it feels really weird now."

I stared back at her. "You don't like those kinds of guys?"

To be fair, the guys we'd dealt with just now were a little too horrible, but I still couldn't shake off the feeling that only good-looking, sunny types with that kind of energy would look right beside a beautiful gyaru like Shirakawa-san.

"Huh? Not at all," she easily replied. "Actually, I don't really have much of a preference... Sometimes when I watch TV, I'll see a performer and think he's handsome, but love's all about communication, right? It can't start if the guy doesn't like me."

"Makes sense..."

It seemed there were plenty of ways that girls approached romance. While some of them were like Shirakawa-san and generally agreed to date guys who confessed to them, wanting to gradually come to know those guys and fall in love with them, others were more like Kurose-san, who let their feelings grow on the inside.

"Is that any different from preferring guys who already like you?" I asked.

Shirakawa-san looked up at the ceiling with a serious look on her face. "Hmm..." After thinking for a while, she started looking a little bashful. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm into guys like you..." she quietly said, then gazed at me. "And, actually, I love you," she said with flushed cheeks and a smile. It was so cute.

“Ngh...” I groaned. My heart had leaped so much inside of me that I involuntarily held my chest.

Shirakawa-san stared at my face. “What about you?”

“Mm?”

“Aren’t you actually into girls like Maria?”

Since I’d just been thinking about Kurose-san, her words startled me.

My chest hurt when I remembered Kurose-san. But as I looked at Shirakawa-san in front of me, I realized once again that I couldn’t betray my girlfriend.

“Come on, answer me,” urged Shirakawa-san, pouting a little and lowering her eyebrows. She tilted her head as she looked at me, seeming worried.

Seeing her like that, I felt my love for her overflowing inside my chest.

Even I could be certain here—she was jealous.

Cute...

“Mmm...” I groaned, prompting Shirakawa-san to look panicked.

How cute. She’s so cute I could die...

“If we’re talking about girls that are my type, it’s true that I prefer pure and proper girls over gyaru...” I said.

Shirakawa-san looked downcast at that.

Cute.

I wanted to see more of her like that, so I had the urge to trouble her further, but I’d feel bad if I was mean to her like that.

“Shirakawa...Runa-san is my type, I think.”

Her cheeks flushed at my words.

“Why’re you using my full name?!” she exclaimed. Her whole face turned as red as a tomato in an instant.

“I-I dunno. I thought it would come across better that way...”

Shirakawa-san was really shaken up, so I got flustered too, feeling like I’d said

something embarrassing.

“You’re sneaky, you know. You’re not a flirt at all, but you still say stuff like that seriously,” she said, her cheeks still a little flushed. “And at the end of the day, you’re saying the same thing I did.”

After a moment of thought, I said, “You’re right.”

“Oh well.” With that, Shirakawa-san gave me a small smile. “That means we’re both each other’s types, right?”

“Yeah, I guess...”

If that really was the case, I would be extremely happy.

It was awkward when our eyes met, so I looked down and giggled. When I shot another glance at Shirakawa-san, she was acting like that too.

It was embarrassing, but being together like this made me happy.

“Excuse me, I’d like to get a drink.”

Looking over at the entrance where the voice came from, I saw a customer in front of the icebox that held bottled drinks soaked in ice water.

“Oh...”

“Coming!” Moving before I could, Shirakawa-san ran toward the entrance. “Your takoyaki will go cold, right? You should hurry up and eat,” she then said, looking over her shoulder at me and winking.

She was so dazzling that I thought to myself that I wouldn’t mind if this summer lasted forever.

After Mao-san returned, we got a break and used it to play in the water. As I’d expected, Shirakawa-san frolicked about like a child, which was fun for me to watch too.

Then, when business hours were over and we were riding the car back home...

“Oh, Mao-kun,” called out Shirakawa-san in the back seat beside me, seeming like she remembered something. “Did you buy the thing I asked for?”

“Ah, yeah. You wanted beef—was shaved beef good?” replied Mao-san, looking at her through the rearview mirror.

“Huh? Shaved?”

“What do you plan to use it for?” he asked.

At that point, Shirakawa-san glanced at me and then averted her eyes. “Um, uhh...”

“Well, if it’s not for something like meat-wrapped onigiri, you should be able to use it for most kinds of cooking.”

Shirakawa-san looked relieved to hear that from Mao-san. “Great, thank you!”

I wondered what she was up to. Was she going to cook something?

When we got home, Shirakawa-san quickly took a shower and got changed. Then, she started excitedly preparing something in the kitchen all of a sudden.

“Oh, Ruu-chan. What’s the matter?” asked Sayo-san.

“I’ll make dinner today!” Shirakawa-san replied, her smile full of enthusiasm.

“Oh my...” Sayo-san smiled and signaled to me with her eyes. “Thank you. I’m looking forward to it.”

“I-I’ll help too,” I said.

I tried to join Shirakawa-san in the kitchen since I would’ve had nothing to do by myself, but she stopped me with her hand.

“It’s okay! Go sit and play games or something.”

“Huh...? O-Okay...”

Since she’d said it so strongly, I couldn’t help but think I’d better stay away from the kitchen.

Then, as I fiddled with my phone in a corner of the sitting room while waiting for her...

“Huh? Hey, Granny Sayo...” called Shirakawa-san.

“Mm?” replied Sayo-san. She had been watching TV and drinking tea at the table. She got up and headed to the kitchen.

“Where are the potatoes?”

“Potatoes? I don’t think we have any at the moment.”

“Huh? Weren’t there some the other day?!”

“We made croquettes with them two days ago, remember?”

“Aah!” shouted Shirakawa-san as though having forgotten until now. “Are there any more? You haven’t gotten more?”

“I don’t get potatoes from people,” Sayo-san told her. “Nobody in this area grows them.”

“Ehh...?”

“Do they have to be regular potatoes? What about sweet potatoes?” suggested Sayo-san.

“That won’t work...”

“What are you making?”

“...ku...”

“Huh?”

“...ga.”

“What? Nikujaga?”

“Don’t say it out loud!”

Hearing Shirakawa-san’s shout, I couldn’t stop myself from getting up and peeking into the kitchen.

“Ah...” uttered Shirakawa-san. When her eyes met mine, she looked just about ready to cry. “I wanted to make it a surprise...”

“A surprise? You were keeping it a secret from Ryu-kun? I’m sorry, Ruu-chan,” said Sayo-san. She looked flustered, seeing Shirakawa-san upset. “But is it really a surprise if you’re making it a stone’s throw away from him...?”

Sayo-san seemed to be asking for me to agree, to which I could only give an

awkward smile.

“Shirakawa-san... You wanted to make nikujaga for me? Thank you.”

“But there aren’t any potatoes...” she said dejectedly.

“How about I go buy some?” I offered.

Shirakawa-san’s face shot up. “I’ll go!”

Seeing us like that, Sayo-san smiled. “Then why don’t you go together? Ishidaya is nearby; you can walk there.”

Thus, Shirakawa-san and I ended up going shopping for potatoes so she could make nikujaga—a stewed dish consisting of beef and potatoes.

There was apparently a small store called Ishidaya about eight minutes away. You could get there by walking uphill along the highway that ran in front of Sayo-san’s house.

It was still bright outside as it wasn’t even six in the evening and it was the beginning of August. The temperature wasn’t going down, and I felt sweat permeate my clothing as I went up the gentle slope.

Shirakawa-san was walking beside me and looked up at me. “You like nikujaga, Ryuto?” she suddenly asked.

“Huh...? Yeah, I do,” I replied.

I never went out of my way to choose it when eating out, but I was a bit happy when I got it as a side dish for dinner. That was the extent to which I liked it.

Shirakawa-san smiled at my answer. “Great! I thought it was maybe too corny, but that’s the first thing that comes to mind when you think about things guys would want their girlfriends to cook for them, right? I spent a lotta time looking for recipes last night before bed, hoping to make something you’d like,” she explained. A hint of blush crept up her cheeks. “The surprise didn’t work out, though,” she then added with a forced smile.

I smiled back. “I’m happy even if it’s not a surprise,” I said to give her peace of

mind. “I’m...always happy when you do something...for me...”

“Ryuto...” Her eyes glistened as she gazed at me. Then, she smiled again, as though to hide her awkwardness. “Isn’t it only natural I’d do stuff for you? I’m your girlfriend.”

“It’s not ‘only natural’ to me, though... And I don’t want to think of it that way.”

This was the first time in my life that I’d had a girlfriend. And moreover, said girlfriend was the wonderful Shirakawa-san...

I would surely incur divine punishment if I started taking her for granted.

If I spent the next year, or five years, or ten with Shirakawa-san, and if at some point it actually became natural for us to be together...

“Um, to me, it’s always special when you do something for my sake...” I had to say it out loud, even if it was embarrassing and I faltered in my speech and looked bad saying it. “I want to...always, always have this feeling.”

Hearing that, Shirakawa-san smiled happily. “I see. Maybe I want to do stuff for you *because* you’re like that,” she said, casting her eyes down. “Hey, can I hold your hand?”

“Huh?”

“It’s hot so you don’t wanna?” asked Shirakawa-san, gazing at me with upturned eyes.

Shaking my head, I replied, “I do.” I hurriedly wiped my hand that was closest to Shirakawa-san against my pants to get rid of any sweat. “Here...”

As I held out my hand, Shirakawa-san placed her slender, fairer one against it. Her slim fingers twined around mine, and I was taken aback.

I-Is this, perhaps...the famous way that lovers hold hands?!

Back on our date in the park, we’d held hands the normal way, so this caught me by surprise. My pulse quickened, and my body temperature was shooting up too.

“Heh heh,” Shirakawa-san giggled embarrassedly and nudged my shoulder

with her head. “It really is hot...”

“I-It’s summer, so...”

“Wanna stop?”

“N-No! It’s okay.”

Thus, until we got to the store, we continued up the summer mountain road while tightly holding each other’s hands.

The Ishidaya place that Sayo-san had told us about was a small store—something between a convenience store and a supermarket, though sizewise it was closer to the former. It offered a wide selection of nonperishables such as drinks and sweets, but there were also a few shelves stocked with vegetables and packs of meat.

“Ah, they have potatoes!” Shirakawa-san exclaimed upon spotting the vegetable shelf. She ran up to it and put as many potatoes as she needed into her shopping basket.

After that, we headed to the register operated by an old man who seemed to have nothing to do other than sit, but a shelf of drinks caught Shirakawa-san’s eye.

“Ah... Maybe we should buy cola too,” she said, probably because Sayo-san had given her a thousand yen and told her to buy something else if she wanted it. “Hey, Ryuto, what do you wanna eat tomorrow?”

“Huh? I’d be fine with anything...”

I was staying at someone else’s house and couldn’t cook, so I thought it was the right thing for me to say, but Shirakawa-san puffed out her cheeks.

“Come on! You know wives hate it the most when he says ‘anything’s fine,’ right? Haven’t you seen it blowing up on social media?”

“What?!” While I was startled by the sudden mention of wives, I reflected on what she said and hurriedly racked my brains. “Um...then... Hamburg steak?” I suggested.

“Hamburg steak? How do you make that?”

“Hmm... Want me to look into it?”

“I’ll look it up!” replied Shirakawa-san, getting right to it. “Says you need minced meat and onions!”

We returned to the vegetable shelves, put onions into the basket, and then headed to the area with processed meat.

“Minced meat... Ah, there it is,” said Shirakawa-san and took a pack. However, she frowned upon seeing the price tag. “Wow, it’s expensive! This much for two hundred grams...? I can’t buy it if we don’t put something back.”

“Is it because that one’s all beef? It looks like they’re out of packages of mixed ground beef and pork.”

I didn’t go shopping on a regular basis, so I couldn’t be sure, but it might’ve been because of where we were. It felt like there wasn’t a wide selection of meat here, and it was all on the expensive side.

“It’s fine, then. It doesn’t have to be hamburg steak,” I said.

“Are you sure? Got any other candidates?”

“Um... Curry or something, maybe?”

“Oh, that’s a good choice! Then let’s get more potatoes! Are you okay with pork for the meat? We have some of it frozen.”

“Sure.”

“I’m good at curry! We’ll still need the onions, and we already have plenty of carrots...”

Shirakawa-san suddenly became very animated in her shopping.

Thus, after almost fully using up our thousand yen at the register, we left Ishidaya.

“I’ll carry that,” offered Shirakawa-san as we started heading down the highway we’d walked along to come here. She reached for a bag I was carrying.

We’d bought a box of tissues from in front of the register too since Sayo-san had requested them. Because of that, I was carrying a shopping bag with food

in one hand and said box in the other.

“It’s okay, it’s light,” I replied, trying to show off my manly side.

Shirakawa-san made a long face, however. “Mmm...” As I wondered what was up, she looked at me with upturned eyes and quietly said, “But we can’t hold hands like this, right?”

“Oh...”

Right. So that’s what she had in mind...

As I agonized over her cuteness while reflecting on my behavior, Shirakawa-san snatched the tissues out of my hand. Then, she linked her free hand with mine.

“*That’s* more like it!” she happily announced.

It made her even cuter, and I came close to grinning shamelessly.

As night rapidly approached, we went down the evening mountain road, holding hands. Both of us had a hand holding something else—a bag of food in my case, and tissues in Shirakawa-san’s.

“It’s kinda like we’re a married couple,” Shirakawa-san said awkwardly.

“Y-Yeah...”

I felt bashful. The evening was sultry enough already, so I was starting to get worried about the sweat on my hands.

“I really didn’t know the first thing about this before. About going out,” Shirakawa-san quietly said all of a sudden, seeming to be giving the matter serious thought. “Going out with someone...was such a wonderful thing all along.”

When she said those words and looked up at me, her eyes were absolutely sparkling—and that’s not an exaggeration.

“Yeah.”

I firmly gripped her hand, and as I did, I wished I could one day fully overwrite all the memories Shirakawa-san had of other guys holding this hand before I had.

The thought of it made my grip firm yet gentle.

After we got back to Sayo-san's house, Shirakawa-san eagerly got into the kitchen again.

"All right, time to quickly make that nikujaga!"

"Ah, I'll...help," I offered.

"Huh? It's okay..." she began, but then she tilted her head and thought for a bit. "Actually, could you peel the potatoes for me?"

"Sure thing."

I figured I could do that much. As I went to go wash my hands, Shirakawa-san smiled at me.

"It's just like how I was earlier," she said.

"Hm?"

"Just like how it was with sharing the load after we went shopping... We can spend more time together by cooking together too, right?"

Hearing that, I recalled how Shirakawa-san had carried the tissues so we could hold hands.

"Ah, yeah, I...guess," I replied.

It made me happy to think she might've noticed how I'd felt awkward alone in the sitting room.

Shirakawa-san was always thinking of my feelings. Always trying to do something for me. She was really considerate. And because she was like that, I sincerely wanted to treasure her.

Unlike Shirakawa-san, I was dating someone for the first time, so I couldn't say for sure...but if this was what it meant to date a person, then it was an extremely wonderful thing.

Until recently, I'd had considerable faith in things that people would say, like how girls were a pain to deal with and that it was more comfortable to be alone. I now wondered if those were traps meant to further dissuade people

who were already leading unsatisfying lives from pursuing romance.

That idea came to me because the time I spent with Shirakawa-san was just that fun and comfortable.

“Did you get the potatoes peeled, Ryuto?” she asked me.

“Yeah. This good enough?”

“Ah, looks nice! Thanks.”

When I handed her the potatoes, our hands touched for a moment, and Shirakawa-san pleasantly smiled. At times like these, I forgot that this was Sayo-san’s house and that Mao-san was setting the table right next to us, and I’d start dreaming of living together with Shirakawa-san—just us and nobody else.

“Sh-Should I peel another one?” I offered.

“Ah, yeah, thanks!”

Giving her reply, Shirakawa-san clumsily held the potatoes she got from me against the cutting board and cut them with a knife. She looked cute doing that too.

“Say, uh... Is it okay if I help with the cooking like this...from now on...?” I timidly asked.

“Huh?” Shirakawa-san raised her head and stared at me for a while. “Ah, yeah... Sure thing.” The smile she gave me reminded me of a sunflower. “Thank you, Ryuto.”

I’ll get to see Shirakawa-san like this every day for another two weeks? My heart utterly fluttered at the thought.

That night, we had Shirakawa-san’s nikujaga for dinner, which I’d helped with. Sayo-san had made a cucumber and tomato salad along with miso soup, while Mao-san had prepared finely chopped horse mackerel. It appeared that Sayo-san and Mao-san had made those side dishes while we were out shopping.

The nikujaga Shirakawa-san had made was delicious in an everyday way. In contrast to the turnips we’d had that morning, the potatoes were too soft and didn’t maintain their shape very well, but in exchange, you could really notice

their taste.

“This is great,” I said to Shirakawa-san.

She happily smiled at that. “Hooray! I’m glad I went with the most popular recipe!”

Her carefree smile was so cute that I involuntarily imagined Shirakawa-san as a newlywed wife, and it got me all worked up.

Thus began my fulfilling summer break with Shirakawa-san.

I would wake up in the morning, let Mao-san drive us in his car to the beach hut, work, come home, make and eat dinner, and then sleep in my single room on the second floor while Shirakawa-san would sleep in Sayo-san’s room.

Such a life went on for several days.

One day, Shirakawa-san and I had been inside the house since morning. Mao-san had said the Bon Festival season would begin the following week and things would get busy as a result, which was why we should take a weekday off to rest now, at the very least.

Sayo-san’s house had an external corridor on the first floor. Perhaps it faced the east, because it was conveniently in the sun’s shadow at noon, so Shirakawa-san and I put the electric fan there and we hung out, chatting and playing phone games.

Some time after we had somen noodles for lunch, Shirakawa-san popped up in a good mood and with a spoon in her hand.

“Ryuto, let’s have a snack!” she said, then handed me a plastic cup she had in her other hand.

It had ice-cold jelly inside.

“Wow, it’s cold!” I exclaimed.

“It’s one your mom sent!” she said. “I had it in the freezer for a bit! Granny Sayo said we can eat them if we want.”

“Right...”

A large cardboard box had arrived from my parents a few days prior. Inside were some spare clothes I'd asked for, an assortment of fancy fruit jelly for Sayo-san, and a letter of gratitude from my parents for letting their son stay over.

“Mm, it's great! That's Sembikiya's jelly for you!” exclaimed Shirakawa-san. She made a happy face and held her cheeks as we sat side by side on the edge of the external corridor and started eating our jelly. “Peaches are the best! How's your La France pear?”

“It's juicy and delicious,” I replied.

“Must be nice! Can I have a bite?” asked Shirakawa-san and she opened her mouth wide.

“Huh?!”

Wait, is this the kind of event where I'm supposed to feed her?!

Shirakawa-san had opened her mouth so naturally that I didn't have time to mentally prepare myself.

My hands immediately started to shake from nervousness, but I somehow managed to scoop up some jelly with my spoon. However, at that point, I noticed I hadn't gotten any pulp—which was the important part—so I tried again. It took me a while, but eventually, I got a spoonful ready.

“Here goes...” I said.

“Aah.”

Shirakawa-san was holding her mouth open. Placing her hands on the floor in front of her, she leaned toward me. This position let her breasts fill the gap between her arms, and they were pushed forward in a way that emphasized her cleavage.

What a tremendous angle! This is great!

Perhaps Shirakawa-san didn't notice what was going on, but it was bad for my heart—I wanted her to stop. Of course, I was happy about the sight, but she'd notice if I got horny while being so close to her. I couldn't stare much, so it was

hard for me.

Today, Shirakawa-san was wearing a tank top with frilly straps and a pair of shorts. Compared to what she wore in public, it was a casual getup. Also, I found the way she was dressed, like her guard was down, to be highly suggestive. It was great.

And as my head was full of these worldly thoughts, Shirakawa-san innocently took the spoonful I was holding into her mouth.

“Yeah, your jelly’s great too!” she exclaimed, holding her cheeks again with the excitement of a TV persona reporting on fine foods. “How about I feed you too?” she mischievously suggested.

I was startled. “I-Is that okay?”

“Of course! I’d feel bad only being on the receiving side, you know,” she said in an upright manner and then scooped up a spoonful of her own jelly. “Say ‘aah.’”

I’d never opened my mouth wide toward someone else except at an appointment with a dentist or an otolaryngologist, but I timidly did so for Shirakawa-san.

“Ah!” she then exclaimed. Her hands froze once she looked into my mouth.

“Huh?”

I hurriedly closed my mouth, wondering if I had green onions stuck between my teeth or something. However, Shirakawa-san said something unexpected.

“Ryuto, your teeth are cute.”

“M-My teeth?!”

I’d never been told such a thing before. My lower jaw was narrow and my row of teeth there was a little jagged. I’d even had a bit of a complex over it.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s kinda like your teeth are saying hi to their neighbors. It’s cute.”

Huh... I guess that’s one way of looking at it.

“Ah...” she then said, as I admired her imagination. She went silent for a

moment. “Was that weird? Sorry.”

“Not at all.”

“I didn’t mean it in a bad way...” she began, as though making excuses, then blushed a little. “I just got happy because I found another thing I like about you.”

Shirakawa-san...

I was happy and embarrassed at the same time to hear such a thing. Shirakawa-san could even turn my complexes into things to love.

“Sorry. Here, I’ll give you some jelly,” she said, collecting herself.

I said “aah” again as she put a spoonful into my mouth.

The only difference from mine was the type of fruit, but the bit she gave me seemed exceptionally sweet.

When I went back to my own jelly, using the spoon I’d fed Shirakawa-san with, it felt kind of awkward and made my heart skip a beat.

I could clearly hear a talk show on the TV in the sitting room beyond the closed shoji-style sliding door. Sayo-san seemed to have slightly poor hearing, so she’d set the volume a little high.

“Man, that was delish!” exclaimed Shirakawa-san, raising her empty cup into the air. She’d finished her jelly before me. “I wish we could serve these at Luna Marine...”

“Sembikiya jelly at a beach hut? Could we sell something like that?”

“I dunno. Maybe I should ask Mao-kun,” said Shirakawa-san with a smile. “Either that or maybe I should ask my mom to bring some jelly as a present when she comes here...”

Shirakawa-san’s mother was apparently going to visit at some point during her stay here. The mere thought of meeting Shirakawa-san’s mother was already making me nervous in a different way from meeting her great-grandmother or her uncle.

“Has she decided when she’ll come?” I asked.

“No, she hasn’t told me yet. And I heard that Maria said she wasn’t planning to come this year either, though.”

“I see...”

Some part of me was relieved to hear that.

“The name ‘Luna Marine’ is based on our names,” Shirakawa-san suddenly said. “At first, Mao-kun wanted to make it ‘Luna Maria,’ but Maria said she didn’t like the sea and insisted he go with something else. That’s why he changed it to how it is now.”

Interesting... So the original concept came directly from the sisters’ names, huh. So much for Maria’s name being spelled with the kanji for “sea” and “love,” though.

“But doesn’t the name ‘Maria’ come from ‘Marine’? Though I feel like the current name works well enough,” I said.

“Yeah, pretty much. Mao-kun doted on both me and Maria, so apparently that’s why he wanted to use our names. Back when we lived together, Maria was really fond of Mao-kun too, I think...but after we started living apart, I heard she’s been kinda distant toward him. Mao-kun often complains about how Maria’s been cold to him.”

“Huh.”

I thought Mao-san was an easily likable kind of person just like Shirakawa-san, so I maybe could understand why Kurose-san would act a bit tsundere toward him.

“Since Maria lives with our mom, she gets to see Mao-kun a lot more than I do. I’m a little jelly of her.” Her smile felt a little sad as she said that. “But in exchange, I get to be with our dad, so what can you do...? You have to make choices, because you can’t have everything.”

“Yeah...you’re right,” I replied after a pause.

Shirakawa-san was always so cheerful and it could look like she had everything at her disposal, so I’d never expected her to look at things philosophically like that.

“It looks like Maria has always liked things she *wasn’t* given more than the things she has,” calmly continued Shirakawa-san, not appearing to notice my surprise. “So I kinda understand why she ended up in love with you.”

“Huh...?”

“She kinda doubts people’s goodwill for her, I guess? She pulls away when people say they like her, and instead, she’ll look at things and people outside of her reach. Sometimes, I wonder if it’s not hard on her.”

Hearing Shirakawa-san’s explanation, I felt like I could understand Kurose-san’s temperament better than before. She really was the complete opposite of Shirakawa-san.

“We’ve been totally different for ages. But...I liked her,” Shirakawa-san added quietly. She had the smile of a person thinking about someone dear to them—she must’ve had her sister on her mind, who was far away. “Maria’s cute, right?”

I waited for a little while, but Shirakawa-san didn’t say anything else, so I had no choice but to nod. “Yeah,” I said.

At that, Shirakawa-san opened her eyes very wide. “Aah, you really *do* like her?!”

“Whaaat?!”

No way! How could she lay a trap for me like that?!

“Just kidding.” The smile on her face was like that of a mischievous boy in primary school—it was a relief for me.

“I-It happened long ago. Before I met you...” I said as though making an excuse, and Shirakawa-san nodded.

“Yeah, it was a long time ago...” she said as if to persuade herself. “I *know* in my head that you like me now and not Maria, but...” She looked up at me. “You know how I said before that you look like you have a few mixed feelings when I talk about my exes?”

“Ah, yeah.”

I recalled that we’d talked about it on the train while heading to Enoshima.

“I feel like I now understand why,” she said and smiled. “I’m probably the same. I love you as you are now, so maybe I want to go back into the past and monopolize your old self as well...” she said as though talking to herself, looking up at the sky. Suddenly, she turned to look at me again. “How do you keep your feelings in check?”

“Huh?”

“Like, the thing with me having many ex-boyfriends... If I were you, I’m sure I’d get jealous. I’d be wondering if you dated cuter girls than me before, for example.”

“I don’t know if I’d call it ‘keeping my feelings in check’...” I’d been thinking about that topic ever since I’d started going out with Shirakawa-san, so I already had my answer on the subject. “I think I get a hazy feeling because I lack confidence. But I’m sure time will take care of that. If I’m with you for a long time and our bonds grow deep, I have no doubt that one day, I’ll stop caring about your exes at all, even if they come to my mind... And at the moment, I’m waiting for that time to come.”

After staying silent for a while, Shirakawa-san said, “I see.”

As I searched for something to say, she spoke up again.

“Yeah, you’re right. With time, we’ll surely both be okay with it,” she cheerfully said and smiled. Then, she suddenly took on a serious expression and stared at me. “Hey, Ryuto.”

“Mm?”

“I think it’s probably weird in a lot of ways if I ask you this, but...” After a short pause, Shirakawa-san continued. “If it’s possible...could you become friends with Maria? Together, with me?”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

As I looked at her, not understanding her intentions, she watched me in earnest.

“I’m thinking of becoming friends with her,” she said.

“What?!”

“Even if I go with a direct approach, she’ll reject me. But we’re classmates, right? Nobody at school knows we’re related. So even if I’m all pushy and ask to be her friend, I don’t think Maria can just shrug me off.”

“So you want to become friends with her like ordinary classmates, keeping the fact that you’re sisters a secret from everyone...?”

“Yeah. And I want your help with that,” Shirakawa-san said with a deep nod. “Of course, I think it’ll be difficult to do right away. And Maria probably needs time to sort her feelings for you.”

I couldn’t fight my speechlessness at that. It was such a pushy strategy...

However, Shirakawa-san seemed to be serious. On this sultry midsummer afternoon, with beads of sweat on her forehead, she narrowed her eyes, as though sending her heart out to a distant sky.

“Autumn will come and go, and by the time winter starts, I want to be able to be by Maria’s side again. I want to once again go halvesies on papico ice cream with her as we watch TV under the kotatsu together.”

“Wait, by winter?” I asked without thinking. I was surprised to hear that—after all, she was talking about a crunchy type of ice cream that made you think of the summertime.

Shirakawa-san looked at me with surprise. “What, you’ve never done it?! Papico is the *best* in winter when you have it after getting out of the bath and sitting at a kotatsu!”

“Well... If anything, I’m a Yukimi kinda guy.”

“Ah, that. Those are delicious too.”

“Isn’t creamy ice cream best for winter?” I asked.

“Yeah, now that you mention it! But I just like papico!”

“So that’s how it is...”

We laughed things off at the end, so I still couldn’t tell how serious Shirakawa-san was about her plan. However, I could understand her feelings toward Kurose-san well. Her love was far deeper, stronger, and purer than anything Kurose-san’s groupies felt for her. They couldn’t begin to compare.

I really wished that Kurose-san wouldn't take long to notice just how much Shirakawa-san loved her.

As the Bon Festival approached, the beach hut was seeing good business even on weekdays. Then, one day after dinner...

"Ryuto! Let's set off fireworks!" suggested Shirakawa-san after I'd gotten out of the bath. She showed me a plastic bundle—a variety pack of handheld fireworks. "I got these from Mao-kun! He said I should light them with you."

Mao-san had also shown up. "Got them from my supplier! Apparently they're old stock, though, so they might be damp," he said. He brought a bucket and a lighter to the courtyard next to the external corridor. "Oh, and here, Runa."

He handed Shirakawa-san a smartphone. The screen looked perfect and the phone looked shiny and new.

"Just got it back earlier. They said it was pretty difficult to repair, so it took a while because they sent it to a store in Tokyo," Mao-san explained.

"Huh? It just needed a new screen?" asked Shirakawa-san.

"Probably? It was cheap. Though they said they won't offer a warranty on it even if it breaks later because they're not an official retailer."

"Hooray!" happily cheered Shirakawa-san, quickly heading to her room and then returning to the courtyard. "Ta-da! It's back to its full glory!" She showed me her phone with its matching Mabbit case. It appeared the case hadn't suffered any damage. "I can take pictures of fireworks with this! Yay!"

"Will those pictures come out okay?" I asked. "Light is hard to photograph."

Shirakawa-san and I continued to prepare things as we talked, and then we started lighting the fireworks in the garden. Sayo-san and Mao-san watched us from the sitting room through the glass in the shoji-style door.

"Huh...? It's kinda tough to light these..." said Shirakawa-san.

Some of the fireworks were hard to ignite. Perhaps they really were damp.

"Let me see..." I said.

But just as I got close to the firework in Shirakawa-san's hands...

Whizzz!

Light from the firework came spurting out of the thin tube.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed.

"That caught me by surprise!" added Shirakawa-san.

After watching it immediately start burning normally as though nothing were wrong, we exchanged glances.

"Gotta say though, you were *super* surprised just now," Shirakawa-san said. She followed that up with a laugh, evidently finding the way I'd just acted very funny.

"Yeah, well, it was scary just now."

"Aha ha! That's hilarious!" Laughing more, she waved the firework toward me. "Think fast!"

"Hey, watch that thing!"

"It's okay; it's only this close."

"Play with fire like that and you'll wet your bed."

Hearing that, Shirakawa-san put on a serious expression. "What? Really?"

"It's what my grandma always said. Probably just a superstition, though."

"Oh, that's all it is..." A relieved smile appeared on Shirakawa-san's face. It was cute how she seemed to have believed it for a moment. "That's good to hear... It would be way too much if I wet my bed at this age!"

"You're gonna jinx it."

"Oh, crap! Okay, let's stop!"

We played with the fireworks as we had this silly conversation.

Once the regular handheld fireworks had all burnt out, we moved on to the sparklers—the only ones left.

“Sparklers have a funny shape,” uttered Shirakawa-san, sitting with her hands around her knees and watching the burning sparkler in her hand. “Isn’t its flame like a snowflake? Even though it’s hot.”

“Oh, now that you mention it... I was thinking it looked like a spiderweb. Though a regular firework is more like a broom.”

“Ah... I was thinking regular ones were like lilacs.” A little while after saying that, Shirakawa-san giggled. “Speaking of lilacs...” Her sparkler then burnt out and she reached for a new one. “I still remember your confession. I thought you said ‘lilacs for you’ back then. I wondered where they were.”

“Aah...”

I wanted to forget that had ever happened.

Shirakawa-san smiled when she saw the sour look on my face.

“I thought you were interesting,” she said. “You were so nervous, but you still confessed to me.”

“That’s...”

Maybe I should tell her before it becomes difficult to say later, like the thing with Kurose-san. I don’t want to hide things from Shirakawa-san anymore.

“I did it as a punishment,” I confessed.

Shirakawa-san was about to light a sparkler with a candle, but her hands froze at my words. “Punishment? Punishment for what?” she asked.

“For having good scores on midterms after talking with my friends like we all did poorly.”

I simplified things for clarity’s sake, but that’s accurate enough.

“Huh? Wait, hold on.” Shirakawa-san suddenly got flustered. “So that means you *didn’t* like me at all?”

“No, that’s not it,” I quickly added. “My punishment was to confess to the girl I liked.”

Shirakawa-san looked relieved to hear that. “Oh... Actually, when did you come to like me anyway?”

“Huh? Um...”

The spark for my unrequited love had been that time I’d lent her my pencil, but I’d watched and admired her since long before that.

“From when we were freshmen,” I said.

“Huh? Even though we weren’t in the same class?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

I paused for a moment. “Because you’re cute.”

“Eh...? Aren’t there plenty of cute girls around?” But even though she said that, she looked happy anyway. “You should’ve confessed to me sooner.”

“Well...” I forced a smile, thinking about how I’d been before we’d started dating. “I never planned to confess to you. Had it not been for my friends punishing me, I probably...still wouldn’t have told you.”

In fact, it was pretty much safe to say I would’ve gone all the way until graduation without telling her.

“Huh...? Why?” she asked.

“I didn’t have confidence... I didn’t think there was any chance you’d accept, even if I confessed to you.”

“I accepted, though.”

“That’s what surprised me.”

The events of that day had had as much impact on me in my sixteen years of life as Christ’s birth had had on human history.

“Eh...?” Shirakawa-san uttered quietly in apparent disbelief. She then hugged her knees even closer with her free hand. “But I guess you really treasure your friends, then,” she said and smiled at me.

That confused me. “Huh?”

“You thought you’d get rejected, but you still confessed to me because you’d made a promise to your friends, right?”

“Yeah...”

“That’s amazing. I think that means you *really* value your friends,” Shirakawa-san told me. “Also, it shows that you’re earnest. What you did put your whole personality on display.”

I didn’t expect to get complimented for such a thing, so I scratched my face in embarrassment. “Well...”

“I’m sure that’s the case,” said Shirakawa-san. She seemed convinced for some reason and nodded deeply. “You had deep love and consideration in you right from the start. I’m sure you’ve been sharing that with your friends, family, and people close to you in general. It just so happened that there was no girl on the receiving end of it.” As she said this, she lit another sparkler. “No matter how much I wished for real love, no guy like you had ever confessed to me. It looks like I’ve been wrong about everything, like how to go about relationships.”

She said all that as she gazed at the sparkler lighting up her hands, the flame of which looked like both a spiderweb and a snowflake. Then, Shirakawa-san lifted her face and looked up at me.

“Thank you for choosing me, Ryuto.” Her eyes, illuminated by the sparkler, glistened and shook.

“Shirakawa-san...”

I want to hold her. Hold her, and then...kiss her.

With those thoughts on my mind, I reached out for her shoulders, then looked behind me just in case—I was startled to see Sayo-san and Mao-san through the glass of the shoji-style door. They averted their eyes with incredible speed.

Yeah, of course they’d be curious. Their cute great-granddaughter and niece is alone with a guy in his second year of high school who’s brimming with lust.

“Ah, it burnt out,” said Shirakawa-san, sounding disappointed.

Looking back at her, I saw that the sparkler in her hand had gone out.

“Oh, looks like that was the last one. Wanna go back inside?” she suggested.

The sky had gotten dark a while ago, but the weather was still sultry. On hot days when the temperature reached over thirty-five degrees Celsius, even nights were difficult to call comfortable.

“I guess...”

I didn't have any reason or excuse for us to stay outside any longer.

I wanted to kiss her, though...

In fact, we hadn't done that at all since the first time on the boat, though we *had* gotten to a point where we held hands on a more or less regular basis.

Is this really okay? Sure, I want to treasure Shirakawa-san, but am I being too cautious?

While I worried about that, all I could do was put the used-up fireworks and sparklers in the bucket and go inside the house.

That night...

Perhaps it was because I had some stuff troubling me or because I was afraid of wetting my bed after we'd played with fire, but I woke up in the middle of the night for a trip to the bathroom.

Sayo-san's place was a typical Japanese-style house, so walking through it in the dark was kind of scary. It almost felt like something out of a horror game. To make things worse, the only toilet was on the first floor, and since I slept on the second one, I had to go downstairs.

I fought my fears, got to the bathroom, finished my business there, and then on my way back to the second floor...

“Huh?”

I noticed that the paper sliding door in the sitting room leading to the external corridor was partially open. Had the last person to go to bed forgotten to close it?

Sure, this is a peaceful rural town, but these are troubled times, I thought, so I figured I'd go close it just in case...

Then, I saw a silhouette of a person in the external corridor. I almost cried out in surprise, but upon closer inspection, I realized it was Shirakawa-san. She was sitting on the edge of the corridor in her usual casual home clothes.

My heart started to pound. When I'd checked the time before leaving my room, it'd been past 1 a.m. Sayo-san and Mao-san must've been asleep already since they woke up early.

Thinking wicked things—such as how the mood might get good and I'd be able to kiss her—I approached. However...

My ulterior motive vanished without a trace when I caught a glimpse of her face. She looked clearly dispirited.

“Shirakawa-san?”

“Ryuto,” she said, looking my way once she noticed me. She really didn't seem to have any of her usual pep.

“What are you doing here, Shirakawa-san?”

“Well...” She hung her head, her gaze directed at her phone in her lap. “Mom said she can't come this time after all.”

“Huh...?”



“She used a lot of time off when moving earlier this year... And she’s with a temp agency, so she feels awkward about taking a vacation in summer while the regular employees want to rest too.”

I sat down beside her as I listened.

Shirakawa-san’s mother was apparently working in a department store in Tokyo. Since she worked shifts, she rarely got consecutive days off, and it would’ve been difficult to come here on a day trip when she had work the next day. Shirakawa-san told me that her mother would get in touch once she managed to get enough days off lined up.

“How about seeing her after you go back to Tokyo?” I suggested, sympathizing with her.

Shirakawa-san tilted her head. “I dunno. If I go back there first, she’d have to get in touch with my dad to see me, you know? She said she just split up with her new man, so it’d be awkward to call my dad now.”

“I see...”

They have their circumstances, huh.

“It’s tricky, I guess,” I added.

“Yeah. It’s such a pain.” Heaving a sigh, Shirakawa-san went silent for a while.

“After she started going out with my dad in their first year of middle school, my mom was so devoted to him, right until they divorced,” she said, after some time. “She gave birth to my big sister, then to me and Maria... It was then that Mom found out Dad had cheated on her. But she forgave him. She loved him, and because she’d never dated anyone except for him, she wasn’t confident she could have a relationship with another man now even if they got a divorce. She was worried about living alone.”

I listened without a word, only nodding here and there. I’d almost never had someone tell me about their intricate family circumstances before, so I wasn’t sure about what to say.

“Maybe that was why... She always repeated the same thing to us, like a mantra. That guys cheat.” As Shirakawa-san gazed up at the sky, her eyes

looked distant, like she was recalling the past. “But it seems like she couldn’t take it the second time she found out Dad’d had an affair. When she remembered how much he’d sworn that he’d never do it again after that first time, she couldn’t believe anything he said anymore... And so she told me that she could no longer be with him.”

I doubted anyone could blame her mother for leaving, though it pained me to think that her decision had torn Shirakawa-san’s family apart.

“I don’t think Dad was serious about his affairs. It looks like he still loves Mom,” she said, then looked at me and smiled. Even though that expression should’ve been a happy one, she looked pained. “I think he chose to take care of me because I took after Mom. He says that a lot to me recently—that I’m coming to resemble Mom more and more. He looks really happy when he says it... It’s so stupid, right?”

Seeing Shirakawa-san like this hurt, so I considered how I could shift the conversation from her past, if only a little.

“Is your dad dating anyone at the moment?” I asked.

Shirakawa-san thought for a bit and shook her head. “Well... I don’t think there’s anyone these days. He used to disappear sometimes on his days off, though. Maybe they broke up.”

“I see...”

“He has me, after all. Wouldn’t a daughter in high school be the last thing a girlfriend would want to see?” Her usual cheerful tone resounded sorrowfully through the external corridor in the dead of night. “Maybe my dad can’t have a relationship go well while I’m home. I do feel guilty...but hey, he’s getting his just deserts, I guess.” Shirakawa-san curled her lips into a smile, but her brows were still knit.

Though she barely said much in that regard at all, this was my first time hearing her speak ill of someone. She had mixed feelings about her dad, who had caused her parents’ divorce. When I thought about it, my heart ached for her.

“So, what’s up, Ryuto? Don’t tell me you wet your bed,” Shirakawa-san said,

teasing me in a joking tone.

Perhaps my face had looked melancholic.

“D-Don’t worry,” I said. “I made it in time.”

No matter what I said here, it would be nothing more than irresponsible words from an outsider. With that in mind, I knew I couldn’t return to the previous topic. My only option was to follow her lead and joke around.

“Okay. Guess I’ll visit the bathroom too and go back to my room,” said Shirakawa-san. She then smiled, stood up, and waved at me.

I got up too...and, making up my mind, took her hand.

“Ryuto?” she asked, gazing at me in apparent surprise.

As I recalled the kiss I’d missed back when we’d played with the fireworks, a fire lit up in me.

Nobody was watching now. But while that was true...

“Mom said she can’t come this time after all.”

Recalling how sad Shirakawa-san had looked moments earlier was painful. It was so painful and hard to bear that I felt an impulse to hold her. But...was this not the right time for her?

But in the end, I reluctantly let go of her hand. “Good night, Shirakawa-san. See you tomorrow,” I said.

Returning my gaze, she smiled a little. Then, she turned her back toward me.

“Yeah. Good night, Ryuto.”

As she headed toward the hallway, it struck me that her voice seemed a bit choked with tears.

I felt like I constantly had something troubling me this summer.

Was this summer going to end without me ever kissing Shirakawa-san a second time?

But since I was at the beach hut during the day, and in a house with Sayo-san

and Mao-san during the nighttime, I naturally couldn't do anything bold...

And so, at last, the day of the summer festival came.

Even that morning, I went to the beach hut like usual. This would be my last day working here, as after tomorrow's breakfast, it'd be time to go to the train station.

Once the afternoon peak hours had ended, Shirakawa-san had Mao-san take her back to Sayo-san's house for the time being. Apparently, she had to put on a yukata and do her hair in preparation for the summer festival, which started in the evening.

As I tended to the beach hut alone, Mao-san came by and handed me an envelope.

"Good work. Thanks for the past two-plus weeks," he told me. "You can go now, Ryuto-kun."

"Huh...?"

It's only past three, I thought, but Mao-san lightly poked my shoulder.

"It's your two-month anniversary today, I hear. Why don't you go find something nice for Runa? She likes surprises, so I think she'd be real excited to get a little something."

"Ah...!"

Now that he mentions it...

My head had been full of thoughts about stuff like our upcoming festival date as well as how Shirakawa-san would look in a yukata, but now I realized that exactly one month had passed since our trip to Enoshima.

"Make good use of that!" exclaimed Mao-san, pointing at the envelope in my hands.

I thought it wouldn't be right for me to get pocket money from my girlfriend's uncle, but when I checked the contents to make sure it was actually money and not something else, I was astonished. My eyes suddenly met Fukuzawa Yukichi's on the several ten-thousand-yen bills that were inside.

“What the...?!”

“It’s your pay! You’ve been working for five hours a day, you know,” replied Mao-san.

“I earned that much...?!”

Sure, I *had* worked from morning till evening each day, but I’d played in the water when there’d been nothing going on, and even at the beach hut there’d been a lot of times when I was just chatting with Shirakawa-san.

“Well, that’s how much you worked.”

“But wait... Sayo-san let me stay for two whole weeks,” I countered.

Considering the cost of letting me stay, I’d naturally assumed I was working for free. And calling this “work” might not’ve even been appropriate—this had been more like running a café at a school festival. I’d only been hoping to help in what little way I could...

But as I told Mao-san all that, and not very coherently either, he gave me a gentle smile.

“Since I had you working here, I could restock and prepare things during work hours. In turn, that gave me more time to help Granny and stuff. So, what you did helped everyone. This is compensation for that.”

His usual joking attitude was nowhere to be seen and he’d spoken with sincerity in his voice.

It was a little shocking to see him like that. I felt like I understood now why Shirakawa-san adored him so much. Even being a guy myself, I couldn’t help but be charmed.

I was glad Mao-san was her uncle. Had he been my rival in love, I couldn’t imagine ever winning against him.

“Th-Thank you very much!” I exclaimed, since I had no other option, and lowered my head.

Mao-san waved at me with a smile. “Go give her a great surprise! Take care of Runa!”

After changing and leaving the beach hut, I headed to the festival.

The summer festival was to be held at a Shinto shrine at a slightly higher elevation near the mountains. There were already stalls set up along the coast, perhaps because the fireworks would be launched at the beach.

“‘Surprise’... Easy for him to say...”

Could I really find something in such a place that would make a girl in high school happy?

Not all of the stalls were managed by professionals—some of them had locals selling things like a flea market.

There weren’t many people here yet since it was the hottest part of the day. But as I browsed the stalls without buying anything, one stall at a street corner caught my eye.

When the blazing heat had significantly died down around five, Shirakawa-san messaged me that she was ready and I headed by foot to Sayo-san’s house.

“What do you think, Ryuto?”

When Shirakawa-san appeared at the entrance, I fell speechless.

She was cute... Utterly, extremely cute.

Shirakawa-san was wearing a purple-pink yukata with a flower pattern. The sash around her waist was a similar color, but deeper. She had a smile on her face and was carrying a small basket bag. Her upswept hair had a gyaru-like showiness to it. However, instead of her look being reminiscent of an oiran—a high-ranking courtesan in the Japan of yore—which was one of the patterns I’d expected, Shirakawa-san’s appearance was fairly orthodox. Perhaps it was because Sayo-san had helped her get dressed.

“Y-You look...cute,” I managed to stammer out, utterly bashful as usual.

“Aah!” whined Shirakawa-san, pouting. “Your reaction to my bikini was better! You perv! You don’t like yukatas?”

“Th-That’s not true! I-I said you’re cute.”

“I don’t know if you mean it...”

“I mean it!” I insisted.

When Sayo-san came out from deeper into the house, we stopped joking around. We said goodbye to her and left.

Though both the shrine and Sayo-san’s house were near the mountains, you had to head in a different direction to reach each place, so we decided to go down to the beach first and follow the line of stalls up to the shrine. We would need to come down to the shore again later to see the fireworks, but this was the only way we could see the whole festival.

We walked down the road slower than usual in consideration for Shirakawa-san, who was wearing geta sandals.

“Are your feet okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said. “You’ve been asking the same thing for a while now,” she then added with a laugh.

Apparently, I really had been doing that.

“Sorry... It’s my first time walking with a girl in a yukata.”

She’d gotten blisters on one of our previous dates. I didn’t know exactly how hard geta were to walk in, so I’d ended up bringing up my worries too much.

“Heh heh, thank you,” Shirakawa-san replied with a happy smile.

I wondered how many years had it been since my last time going to a festival. I felt like I’d gone to local ones a bunch of times with friends in primary school when they’d invited me, but that had only been when we were a lot younger.

As the two of us made our way all the way down by the water, there were more people walking alongside the stalls than I’d noticed earlier. This was a rural town that—save for the beach—normally looked deserted. Where had they all come from?

“What’s a ‘cheese hattogu’? A lot of places have them,” I asked as we started

walking between the stalls and looking around us. I'd been wondering about it since I'd browsed earlier.

"Huh? You don't know? It's a Korean snack. There's cheese in the middle and you can get a good cheese pull! It looks super cool!"

"Like a cheese corn dog?"

"Ah, yeah, those. It's deep-fried, though."

"A deep-fried cheese corn dog looks great?"

"Yeah! Sometimes they've even got rainbow-colored cheese," Shirakawa-san explained.

"Huh... I never knew."

"They've been a staple at stalls for a while now!"

"Really..."

It appeared that festival stall trends had changed while I'd been away. Some stalls even had Shirakawa-san's favorite bubble tea too.

"There's bubble tea too," I pointed out.

"Oh, that's nice! I'm thirsty."

"Want me to buy you some?"

"I can buy it myself. But I wanna eat a candy apple too, so I'm really torn between the two..."

"I'll buy you both," I offered.

"Huh? What happened, Ryuto? Did you win the lottery?" asked Shirakawa-san in surprise.

She'd said it like I was a cheapskate normally...

I cracked a smile. "Mao-san gave me my pay for working at the beach hut."

"For real? No way! That must be nice!"

"He didn't pay you?"

"No... But he paid to fix my phone, so. I should try asking him when I go

home.”

“I imagine he plans to pay you too.”

As we talked, I bought both a bubble tea and a candy apple for Shirakawa-san since I had money to spare.

“Wow, I’m so happy! It feels like I’ve got everything in the world! Thanks, Ryuto!” she exclaimed in an exaggeratedly happy way, then bit into her candy apple. “Apparently, the first thing my dad ever bought for my mom was a candy apple. It was at a local festival,” added Shirakawa-san, as though having suddenly remembered it. “What about us? Was it bubble tea?”

“Yeah, guess so,” I said and recalled her birthday date.

“I looked up to my mom and dad. They split up in the end...but when nothing was going on, they got along really well and were a great match for each other,” Shirakawa-san said haltingly, biting her candy apple. “Like I said before, I admired the idea of marrying the first guy I dated, like how my mom did.”

Then, she lowered her head further than it had before as she sunk her teeth into the candy apple again. Her pace became slower and slower, and eventually, she stopped.

“Shirakawa-san?”

As I looked at her face, wondering what was wrong, I was startled to see tears in her eyes.

“A-Are you okay?” I asked, worrying she might’ve remembered something about her parents that was hard to bear.

“Why can’t it be my first time...?” she quietly began, sorrow in her voice. “When I saw how you weren’t used to all sorts of things, I got kinda sad.”

“Huh...?”

I panicked, feeling unable to do anything, and Shirakawa-san looked up at me.

“It’s not my first time. It wasn’t at a festival around here, but walking like this in a yukata with a guy by my side? And watching fireworks together...” As she spoke, her face contorted in pain. “I wish it was my first time...”

Tears gushed from her eyes.

As I stood there, astonished to the point I couldn't get a word out, Shirakawa-san covered her face with both hands as though to hide from the glances of passersby.

"I wish I had all my firsts with you... I wanna wipe my memory..."



Her shoulders twitched as she cried.

“You give me so many firsts... And I’m really happy about them...but I can’t give you mine...”

I didn’t expect the normally cheerful Shirakawa-san to cry on and on like this. As I watched her, dumbfounded, something occurred to me.

“You’ve given me plenty,” I replied on an impulse. “Even if it’s not your first time going on dates to places like this... If the things you feel when you’re with me are different from what you’ve felt before, then that makes me happy.”

There was no turning back time. You couldn’t erase the past... But I didn’t want Shirakawa-san to trouble herself so much by regretting bygones.

And that was because I really loved her just the way she was as she stood before me at this moment.

“Ryuto...” Shirakawa-san uttered, her eyes glistening and quivering.

“I’ll carry that for you,” I said, taking her bubble tea cup and linking hands with her.

We walked in silence for a while.

Most of the okonomiyaki stalls had seemed to be taking a break earlier, but now, the chefs were busily flipping their spatulas to serve lines of customers. A loud *pop!* came from a puffed cereal stall somewhere, causing a stir in the crowd around us for a moment.

Shirakawa-san stopped biting into her candy apple. “Even I think I’m contradicting myself...” she began, “but some part of me is glad I only got to date you now.”

As I waited for her to continue, wondering what she meant, she gave me a small smile.

“Had you been my first boyfriend...I think I would’ve assumed this is only natural and overlooked lots of wonderful things about you,” she said quietly and giggled. “In fact, I might’ve complained to my friends, like ‘My boyfriend is taking his sweet time making a move on me. Does he even love me?’ or something.”

“Wow, that’s rough...” I said, mimicking Shirakawa-san’s usual tone, which prompted a laugh from her.

“Until I started dating you, it gave me peace of mind when my boyfriends wanted me. Made me think I was loved. That I belonged by their side.” She then narrowed her eyes, as though lamenting the pain she’d experienced long ago. “Thinking back on it now, I realize it was the opposite—I couldn’t feel their love except for when we had sex.”

As she smiled in self-deprecation, I listened carefully to what she had to say.

“I think I only understand it now because of what I’ve been through. How...strong your feelings are for me.” She lowered her gaze a little, at which point a happy smile appeared on her face. “And when I think that way... All my previous relationships, and all the heartbreak... It feels like, maybe, it wasn’t in vain.”

“Shirakawa-san...”

My first girlfriend had previous experience.

I thought only a guy would feel conflicted about such a fact. But to think that Shirakawa-san had been thinking such things too...

That’s enough for me. It’s about time I got over her exes.

“Shirakawa-san, have you ever played airsoft before?” I asked.

“Huh? Where’d that come from?”

Since I unexpectedly changed the topic, Shirakawa-san had an amazed look on her face.

She shook her head. “I haven’t. What is it again? A game where people shoot each other in the forest, yeah?”

“That’s right. Icchi— Er, two of my friends always say they want to play it, but you need a minimum of six people to go to the place we’re looking at, so we need three more... Would you like to come with us? You, Yamana-san, and maybe her boyfriend?”

“Ah, Nicole doesn’t have one right now.”

“Huh...”

“I wanna go, though!” she said. “Can I invite Akari? She’s from our class!”

“Y-Yeah, sure.”

Though I agreed, it felt like I’d just said something that could backfire later. Icchi and Nisshi froze up around sunny girls, and it didn’t help that they had a love-hate relationship with Yamana-san after the events at her izakaya. Despite the heat, when I imagined how they might say “You were just showing off how nice things are between you and Shirakawa-san, you fake nerd!” after playing airsoft, I broke out in a cold sweat.

Still, I wanted to invite Shirakawa-san to a place she couldn’t possibly have ever been to before.

“Let’s do a lot of things for the first time together, Shirakawa-san,” I enthusiastically said, and she stared at me with wide eyes. “We must’ve lived in completely different worlds until we started going out...so I think we can still have as many new experiences together as we want if we put our minds to it.”

“Ryuto...” Her eyes started to glisten again. “Yeah, you’re right. Let’s do a lotta things together for the first time.”

Squeezing my hand, Shirakawa-san leaned in close to me. I heard her wooden geta clunk against the ground.

“I love you, Ryuto,” she softly whispered into my ear.

Thoroughly savoring those sweet words as her floral-or-fruity scent became stronger, I hoped I’d always remember this moment, even when I became an adult.

After a long walk on the mountain road lined with stalls, we came upon a certain conspicuous vendor by a street corner.

“Wow, they’re so cute!”

The stall had accessories like rings, earrings, and similar things with stones of various colors fitted into them. They were all lying on a tray on top of a stand covered in white cloth. The vendor was a fashionable woman with two-tone

hair. She totally looked the type to be very particular about her merchandise.

“These accessories are made with natural stones,” she said to Shirakawa-san, who’d shown interest and came closer to her. “I go to Turkey to buy the materials to make these, so they’re much cheaper than market price. Each one’s handmade and one of a kind.”

“Wow, that’s fantastic! I don’t know the first thing about gems, though.”

“Many people start with birthstones,” the woman suggested. “What month were you born in?”

“Um... June.”

“Yours is moonstone, then.”

“Like a stone from the moon...”

It seemed that the connection between Shirakawa-san’s nickname “Luna” and that of the stone had piqued her interest.

“This is a moonstone,” said the woman, and she showed her a sample gemstone.

Shirakawa-san’s eyes began to sparkle. “Wow, it’s so pretty!”

The milk-white stone, transparent like someone had poured milk into hot water, shone a bit like a pearl. It looked mysterious and did seem like a stone that might’ve come from the moon.

“What kind of items have this stone?” asked Shirakawa-san.

“How about these clip-ons?”

“Clip-ons, huh...”

“They’re specifically ear cuffs, so you can wear them alongside pierced earrings too.”

“Hmm... Might as well go with a bigger stone. Do you have any rings?”

“Rings...? Ah, someone bought the one I had with a moonstone earlier... Wait. Huh?”

At that point, the woman’s eyes met mine and she opened hers wide.

“Oh...” I let out.

The conversation between her and Shirakawa-san had gone on without pause and I hadn't found a moment to speak up. I figured I'd say something now, but...

“Well, that's unfortunate. And I thought it would be perfect for you...” said the woman for some reason. She then signaled to me with her eyes.

“Yeah, that's too bad... I'll have to come again...” replied Shirakawa-san.

“Sorry. I'll probably be here again next year!”

With the woman sending her off, Shirakawa-san reluctantly started walking once again.

“So those were called moonstones, huh. I'd never heard of them before. They were so pretty... I wanted a ring if she had one...” With that, she brought her hands in front of her face and spread her fingers. “My nails have grown quite a bit, but these decorations? They're called ‘crushed shells,’ but the color is similar to moonstones. I was sure they'd be a great match...”

“I-I hear you.”

My heart was pounding. As a matter of fact, I had been the one who'd bought the moonstone ring from the earlier stall.

Of course, I hadn't chosen it because it was Shirakawa-san's birthstone or because of its connection to the moon. It would've been nerve-racking to talk to the fashionable woman managing the stall too, so I'd walked past it several times, taking peeks from a distance and checking the price. It'd been labeled as a one-size-fits-all ring, and I'd decided on the spot simply because of that.

Since I'd bought the ring just a bit earlier, I had no plans at all as to when I'd tell Shirakawa-san about it or give it to her.

“Oh well. Oh hey, check that out!” It seemed that Shirakawa-san's interest had shifted to something else.

After that, she talked to me about various things while sipping on her bubble tea and nibbling on her candy apple. While I gave brief replies, the ring kept coming to the front of my mind. It made me restless.

“But man, that stone was *really* cute...” she said, bringing up the gemstone accessory again after we’d gone through several other topics. “Maybe I should check out those ear cuffs when we pass by that stall on our way back? They were a bit expensive, though... Five thousand yen, it said. I still have to pay for getting my phone fixed... If only it was five hundred instead...”

“Yeah...”

As we chatted, we went up the mountain road, climbed a steep set of stone steps, and reached the grounds of a small shrine. I could just picture it being a quiet place normally, but at the moment, there were stalls here too and the place was bustling with people.

“Why don’t we make a shrine visit while we’re at it?”

At Shirakawa-san’s suggestion, I tossed a coin into a saisen box in front of the oratory and offered up a prayer.

“What did you pray for?” asked Shirakawa-san.

“Mm? Uh...”

There was only one wish on my mind.

To be with Shirakawa-san forever.

But that would be too greedy, so I ended up making a slightly safer wish this time.

“To spend a good two-month anniversary with you,” I replied.

Shirakawa-san looked surprised. “You remembered...”

“Sorry. I wanted to give you a proper present...”

She shook her head as I was halfway through my line.

“It’s okay, your feelings are enough.” She then gazed at me with sparkling eyes. “Meeting you was the best present I could ever have.” Shirakawa-san’s smile was like a sunflower. “Hey, would you like to know what I wished for?”

“Huh? S-Sure.”

“To be with you forever.”

“Ah...”

It was touching that she’d been thinking the same thing.

Shirakawa-san smiled as she gazed at me. “Thank you for confessing to me back then, even if it was a punishment.”

“Shirakawa-san...”

I should be the one thanking you. For coming to the staff parking lot back then and accepting the confession of a classmate you’d never talked to before. That was the beginning of the happy miracle that’s continued to this day.

“Oh, Shirakawa-san,” I said, suddenly remembering to check my pockets. “I should apologize. It’s not actually like I *don’t* have a present...”

“Huh?” she asked, surprised.

I handed her the small felt jewelry pouch. Shirakawa-san removed the ring with a milk-white stone and held it in her palm. She went speechless at the sight.

“This...!” She opened and closed her mouth over and over, her eyes wide in amazement, and looked at me. “No way! Whaaat?! When did you buy this?!”

“Earlier... Before meeting up with you.”

“How...did you choose this...?”

“I thought it might go well with your current nails... Somehow, anyway. I didn’t know anything about the ‘crushed shells’ or whatever, though.”

As I spoke, something flickered in Shirakawa-san’s eyes. Because of that, I hastily continued.

“To be honest, I wanted to buy something more expensive, and at the kind of place that would put it in a proper... I guess that’s rude to that woman, but I mean with a proper box with a ribbon or something, and in a glossy bag...”

I figured that since I’d gotten paid—and adding in the fact it had been some time since her birthday when I couldn’t buy her a present—I might as well... However, my online search hadn’t turned up any stores like that in this small

seaside town. So I'd meant to have made do with this choice.

But to think it would make Shirakawa-san so happy...

"No, it's more than enough," she said, shaking her head with tears still in her eyes. "For now, I'd rather have this." A bashful smile appeared on her face.

"I want to save the pleasure of receiving something like that for the distant future..." she added.

The distant future...?

Inside my mind, a Shirakawa-san clad in a wedding dress was smiling at me.

But as I stood there dumbfounded...

"Hey, could you put it on my finger?" Shirakawa-san asked, pulling me back to my senses.

"Ah, sure."

I took the ring from her hand and looked at her, unsure of which finger to put it on.

"Hmm... This one, then!"

Shirakawa-san stuck out her right hand and wiggled her ring finger.

"Okay."

I was a little disappointed it wasn't her left hand, but she smiled at me.

"It's still early for that, you know..."

"Yeah."

My heart grew warm and a broad smile appeared on my face all on its own.

Is it really okay for me to believe such a future is waiting for us? A future where I can be with Shirakawa-san forever...

Had it been only *my* wish, I couldn't be sure. But if Shirakawa-san... If such a nice girl made a wish like that too, perhaps the gods would grant it.

"Wow, it's so pretty!" exclaimed Shirakawa-san, her cheeks flushed as she

raised her right hand with the moonstone ring on it toward the sky. “It’s like there’re two moons now...” she said quietly and happily with rosy cheeks. She was comparing the stone to the round object rising in the evening sky.

Then...

Bang!

A crackling explosion resounded through our surroundings. At the same time, a large flower of light sparkled in the still slightly brightened sky.

“What?! It’s already time for fireworks?!” exclaimed Shirakawa-san, her eyes open wide.

We’d planned to watch the fireworks from the beach, but we were still up at the shrine. Hoping to at least find a spot where they’d be easier to see, we walked around, looking for a place where trees wouldn’t be in the way.

After leaving the shrine and going up even more stairs which had split into two walkways, we came upon a clearing with an open view in the middle of a path. Waves of people were headed toward either the shrine or the beach, so things were calm here with nobody else around.

“Hooray! A nice place nobody knows about,” said Shirakawa-san.

“Yeah,” I replied.

The launched fireworks bloomed in the sky at exactly our eye level. It was nice that we didn’t need to look up.

“Ryuto,” said Shirakawa-san, suddenly leaning in close. Taking my arm, she twined hers around it.

The soft sensation of her upper arm caused my pulse to spike.

“Can we stay like this until the fireworks are over?” she asked in a coy but nasal voice.



I timidly nodded. “Y-Yeah.”

A giggle came from beside me. “I guess as your hearts grow closer, you naturally want to get closer to your loved one too. I never knew that before I started dating you,” said Shirakawa-san.

The fireworks slowly shot up without interruption. Shirakawa-san’s voice rang comfortably in my ears amid the rapidly darkening sky.

“I love you. If I keep feeling this way...I’m sure one day I’ll want to have sex with you,” she added.

Shirakawa-san...

My heart pounded as I looked at her beside me. Our eyes met as she gazed at me with her own upturned ones. She freed her arm from mine and we shifted to face each other, our eyes locked, before Shirakawa-san bashfully averted hers.

When we looked at each other again, I said, “I love you, Runa.”

Her eyes rapidly began to glisten and well up, and a tear ran down her cheek.

“Me too,” she said as though enduring the surging feelings. “I love you too, Ryuto.”

After wiping away the tear on Shirakawa-san’s cheek, I brought my face closer to hers. Seeing her close her large, charming eyes, I softly sealed her lips with mine.

The sound of fireworks.

The warmth of my beloved girlfriend.

Right now, this was my everything.

Chapter 5.5: A Long Phone Call between Runa and Nicole

“Hi, Nicole!”

“Hi, Runa! You come back here tomorrow, right? Sorry I could barely visit you.”

“It’s okay, one time was enough! I had Ryuto here with me too.”

“Oh yeah, speaking of that guy. How’d it go after that? Did he shape up?”

“Aha ha, ‘shape up,’ she says.”

“Well, if he does something bad again, I’m gonna make him sleep with the fishes. Tell me as soon as you suspect something.”

“I’m not worried about Ryuto.”

“But like you said the other day, didn’t he actually see your sister in secret?”

“He had his reasons, and it turned out he didn’t cheat on me. I told you that, remember?”

“Well, I guess...”

“I’m happy that you’re worried about me. Thank you.”

“...I mean, even I don’t think he’s the kinda guy who could cheat and not get found out.”

“Yeah. Ryuto wouldn’t do such a bad thing.”

“Having a change of heart isn’t the same as being bad at heart, though. Not that I *don’t* think it’s ridiculous to do that just a month after you start dating.”

“Ah, there goes Nicole-sensei’s poem for today.”

“‘A change o’ heart don’t mean a man’s damn bad at heart.’ By NiCo.”

“Aha ha, language, sensei!”

“Still, even if he did have a change of heart, it’d be really cruel of him to go for your twin.”

“Like I said before, it was just bad timing in a lot of ways.”

“I guess... I *am* convinced, more or less.”

“...With all my previous boyfriends I was always worried when we were apart. Like, what’s he doing right now? Is he with another girl?”

“And you did actually get cheated on.”

“...It’s different with Ryuto, though.”

“Isn’t that ’cause you were always together for the past two weeks? Can’t worry if he’s within eyeshot.”

“True, but I feel like it’s different from before even now that I’m back in Tokyo.”

“How so?”

“In the end, I was weak that time. I kept saying I believed Ryuto, but couldn’t really. I was scared to face reality, so I ran away... If I’d faced Ryuto then and there, I could’ve avoided spending two weeks worrying about stuff.”

“Do you think you’re stronger now?”

“Yeah. Probably... I don’t think I’ll run away even if something happens again between me and Ryuto in the future.”

“...I see.”

“We talked about all sorts of stuff these past two weeks. About my mom and dad... About Maria. About my ex-boyfriends too.”

“Mm-hmm...”

“I think he knows me better now than before... I also got to hear a lot about how he feels toward me. So it’s fine.”

As she spoke, Runa’s gaze was fixed on the shiny milk-white ring on the ring finger of her left hand.

“I feel like, from now on, our hearts are connected even when we’re not by

each other's side."

Epilogue

“Man, this homework is taking forEVER!” shouted Runa from the other side of a folding table from me in my room.

It was the last week of August. The late summer heat was still intense, and we had the AC on in the room.

On the table was a mountain of English homework that still needed doing.

Our two-week stay at Chiba had ensured that our parents recognized our relationship, so we were spending every day this week studying together to finish our piled-up homework.

Since I lived in an apartment building, our combined kitchen-living-room was on the other side of the wall, and my mother was there too. It wasn't like we could do anything naughty.

“It sure was fun in Chiba...” said Runa with a sigh, trying to escape from reality. “Granny Sayo said we can come again next year if we want.”

“Me too?”

“Yeah. Said we should come take a breather in summer at least, even while we're preparing for university exams.”

“I see...”

I was grateful for Sayo-san's consideration. It also made me happy to think that perhaps she'd approved of the idea of me dating her great-granddaughter even a year from now.

“Next year, huh...” uttered Runa.

I sighed too as I pictured in my mind next year's dark summer of intense studying—it would be a crucial time to prepare for university exams.

“When that time comes...I'm sure we'll already be...” Runa said quietly all of a sudden. She peeked at me with upturned eyes as if checking my reaction. Her cheeks were pink. “...much closer than we are now, right?”

“Huh...? Y-Yeah.”

I'd ended up imagining something lewd, but taking what she'd said literally, there was nothing to be embarrassed about.

However, Runa didn't let my state of discomposure slide. “Ah, you're all red, Ryuto! What were you thinking just now?”

“Come on... I'm sure you thought it too, Shirakawa-san!”

“Aah! You're calling me by my surname again!”

“S-Sorry, Shirak— Ah, Runa.”

“Now you're practically using my full name,” she quipped with a smile.

“W-Well, setting that aside... Come on, let's get back to our homework.”

“But I just don't get it... Oh! I get this, though!” Runa cheerfully said, starting to write something smoothly with her pen all of a sudden. “Wow, it's amazing!”

I took a look at her homework to check it. Written there, in English, was...

He is the last man to tell a lie.

“It's about you, so I wouldn't forget it.”

Runa was smiling happily in front of me.

“Runa...”

My girlfriend had previous romantic experiences.

But such a thing wasn't all that important.

Bit by bit, I was slowly coming to think that way from the bottom of my heart.

“Ah, but I don't get this part, though,” she said.

“Which one?”

Runa pointed at a different problem and I looked at her homework again. Then...

“Gotcha!”

As Runa leaned over the table, something warm touched my cheek and I heard the sound of her lips making contact with my skin.

“Ehe he. I love you, Ryuto.”

Seeing my girlfriend smiling like a successful prankster, I went red in the face and had no comeback.

It seemed the end of my summer homework was still far away.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Makiko Nagaoka. Thank you for reading volume 2 as well!

Summer! The beach! It's obviously extremely early considering this is getting published in March, but I'm hoping you can enjoy these summery feelings ahead of time.

When writing volume 2, I had the motif of “emo(tion) and ero(tic)” in mind (they go together like R&B). I'm hoping you can set aside reality a bit and perhaps feel like you've experienced these kinds of youthful events.

Ah, this brings back memories... I remember a summer like this... I don't, actually—I had gone to an all-girls school.

Personally, I find that scene with Maria in the park moving. It's like when a maiden knows in her heart what's about to happen, but she's still happy to see the one she loves.

Another episode was completely based on personal experience.

Until about ten years ago, I'd worked as a part-time lecturer at a cram school, mainly teaching English to high school students. When one of my students had mistakenly said “teru a rie,” it was so despairing and so funny that it left a strong impression on me. I wonder what that student had meant by “teru.”

Setting that aside, summers sure are moving. And erotic too.

Right now, it's hard to hold festivals, launch fireworks, or go swimming in the ocean, so my longing for summer continues to grow.

Once again, I cannot thank my illustrator magako-sama enough for so many absurdly wonderful illustrations! Thank you for including even minor details from the text in your work! (To the readers: please look at Runa's nails on the cover image!)

To my editor Matsubayashi-sama, thank you for everything you've done for

me once again! Thanks to you managing my schedule and all the other things, I can have peace of mind and focus on my work. I'd like to keep going at this pace! Please, let me!

Lastly, I'm thoroughly grateful to my readers who've been supporting me since the first volume and have read this one too.

I so, so hope that we'll meet again...!

February 2021, Makiko Nagaoka

You Were
Experienced,
I Was Not:
OUR DATING STORY

2nd
Date





“I guess as your hearts
grow closer, you naturally
want to get closer to your
loved one too.”

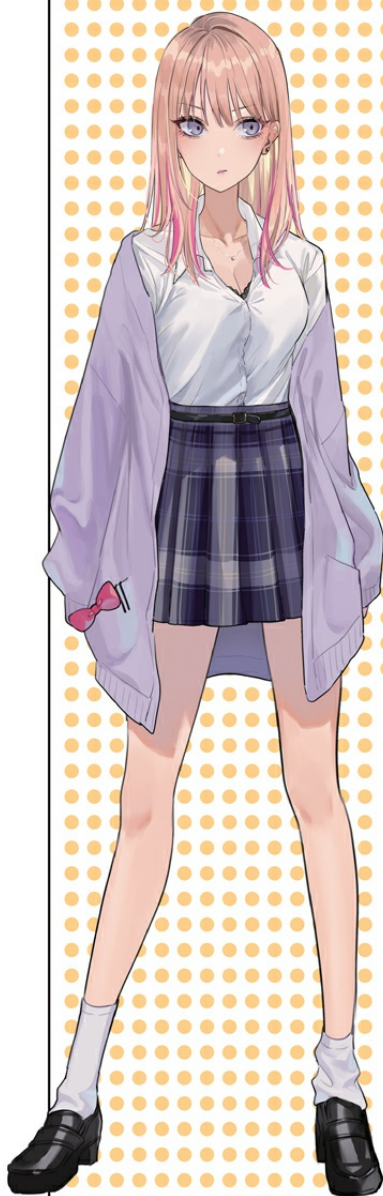
SHIRAKAWA RUNA

A beauty appearing to be at the top of the school pecking order and living the life of a sunny type without giving things much thought. Her dating Ryuto shocked everyone around them.



KASHIMA RYUTO

A high school boy who's a little on the gloomy side. Likes watching videos online. Ends up confessing to his crush Runa as punishment. To his surprise, they start dating.



YAMANA NICOLE

Runa's BFF. Worries about her friend's bad luck with boys. Apparently used to be famous in her neighborhood and was known as "Nicole from North Central." Dreams of becoming a nail tech.

KUROSE MARIA

Ryuto's first love. Transfers to Ryuto and Runa's school and develops an interest in him. Is actually Runa's younger twin, though they live separately due to circumstances.



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You Were

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Makiko
Nagaoka

Artist / magako



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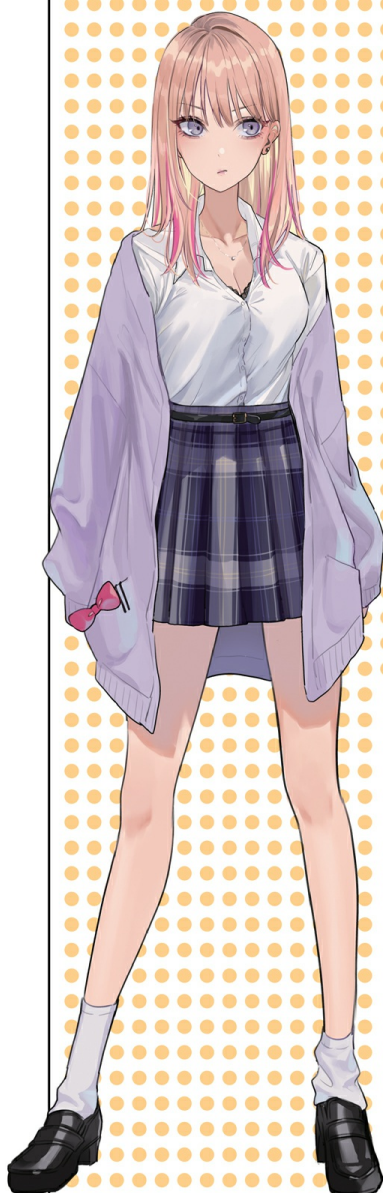
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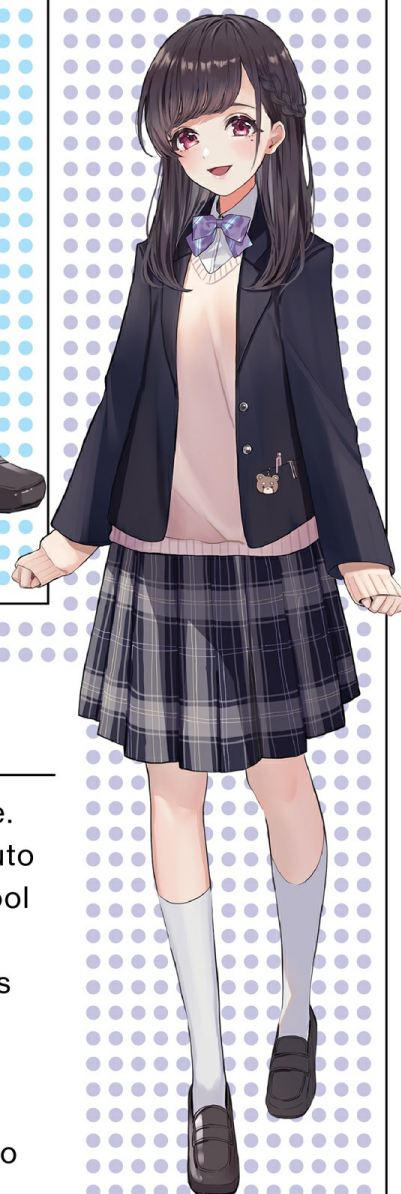


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You Were Experienced, I Was Not: Our Dating Story 2nd Date by Makiko Nagaoka

Translated by Adam Edited by T. Burke

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KEIKEN ZUMI NA KIMI TO, KEIKEN ZERO NA ORE GA, OTSUKIAI SURU HANASHI. Vol. 2

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