



You

Are

My

Regret

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1

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You
Are
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Regret



“It’s not dramatic
at all. Ramen *is*
the universe.”

KAORU ODAJIMA





“D-do you want to...kiss?”

| AI MIZUNO |

“I wish we could stay here and watch the rain together forever, Yuzuru.”

“So do I.”

This was love.
I was in love with Ai.
I already knew that.
But right then, I became
intensely aware of it.
What should I do to stay
by her side?



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New York

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[Author] [Illustrator]
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Translation by Andria McKnight

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CHARACTERS

YUZURU ASADA

First-year high school student.
Height: 167 cm
A bookworm with a calm, gentle personality.



AI MIZUNO

First-year high school student.
Height: 165 cm
Childlike and full of curiosity.

SOUSUKE ANDOU

First-year high school student.
Height: 173 cm
Cheerful member of the soccer team.
Good-looking and has lots of friends.



KAORU ODAJIMA

First-year high school student.
Height: 155 cm
A laid-back girl who loves instant noodles.





[PROLOGUE]

YOU ARE
MY REGRET...

If I had to name one regret, it would be her.

We grew close very quickly in junior high, but in the end, we split up.

She would croon over and over again that she loved me.

And I loved her, so I always awkwardly accepted her declarations, despite never really knowing what she meant.

But I was wrong. About everything.

She was a free-spirited girl. Someone who always lived in the moment, never tied down by anything.

I wasn't prepared to be with a girl like that. Yes, I was woefully underprepared.

And as she flitted freely from one place to the next, I realized that, at some point, I'd let her go.

And when she left...her eyes were filled with profound sadness.

If I had to name one regret, it would be Ai Mizuno.

And...the fact that I, Yuzuru Asada, couldn't accept her.



[CHAPTER 1]

YOU ARE
MY REGRET...

The oppressive heat of the summer seemed to stretch on and on. The room still felt muggy despite having the run-down air conditioner cranked up to full blast. A thin veil of sweat stuck to my skin.

Kaoru Odajima was settled deep against the sofa cushions as she slurped from a steamy cup of instant ramen, seemingly oblivious to the surrounding temperature.

"Ramen's like the whole universe, y'know," she said between slurps. Her words seemed to hang in the air.

We were the only ones here, so I assumed she was speaking to me. I slipped a bookmark between the pages of my novel and then slammed it shut. "That's an awfully dramatic statement to make out of the blue." I narrowed my eyes at her.

Odajima pointed her chopsticks toward me. A drop of broth lingering on the tip of them dripped onto the floor. *Yeah, I'm definitely making her clean that up later.*

"It's not dramatic at all. Ramen *is* the universe," she muttered. She shoved her chopsticks back into the cup of ramen and started swirling them around, mixing up the contents. "What I mean is, it's infinite. Out of infinite possibilities, they chose the most unparalleled finite set of ingredients and stuffed them all into one vessel."

"Yeah, I don't get it," I replied vaguely. I thought about telling her, "You know, it's possible that the universe *isn't* infinite," but decided against it. That might be too insensitive.

She continued swirling her chopsticks around inside the cup as she went on, a hint of excitement in her voice, "They cut off a piece of infinity and refined it into this perfect form. That's why ramen is the universe."

"Okay..."

She wore a colorful cardigan that was definitely a violation of school rules over her wrinkled button-down shirt. She looked almost like one of those irreverent, trend-obsessed *gyaru* girls, so to hear her waxing philosophical made me snort a little to myself.

Now that she'd said her piece, she was back to slurping up her noodles. I cast a sidelong glance her way and opened my book to resume reading. But then a thought jumped into my head. "So is this the universe, too?" I held up my book and shook it in the air.

Odajima shrugged. "It is if you think it is, Yuzu."

"That seems awfully arbitrary."

"It's not. That's just how it is," she said simply, then resumed slurping. I caught myself thinking that she had real skill—at slurping noodles, that is.

Since she was once again absorbed in her ramen, I went back to reading.

We were currently attending our school's literature club. Obviously, our main club activity was reading, but I was the only one who actually read. The others were members in name only, including Odajima—the one currently slurping ramen on the sofa.

Technically, it was against the rules to eat any food not purchased directly from the school inside the classroom, but she seemed to have no intention of stopping despite my repeated warnings, and eventually I gave up.

Naturally, there wasn't any means of boiling water inside the school, so she had even smuggled an electric kettle into our club's room.

Though I knew she was only using the club to hide her crimes, I was just happy that someone else besides me had shown up to the meeting. I didn't want to say the wrong thing and have her stop coming, too.

"Oh! By the way...," she said, raising her voice as if just remembering something. Apparently, she'd finished her noodles and set the cup, still quite full of broth, down on the table. "Did you hear about the transfer student?"

I closed my book again. It made a louder sound than I'd intended, startling her. Her shoulders jerked, and she frowned at me. "Sorry, did I interrupt your reading?"

"No, it's fine. I'm sorry I startled you." I'd have to be more careful next time. I genuinely hadn't intended to intimidate her, but she'd taken it as my way of saying, "I'm trying to read here!"

I gently set my book down on the desk and turned to face her. “The transfer student. Class Three, right? I heard people gossiping about it this morning.”

“Yep, that’s the one! It’s totally weird for someone to transfer at this time of year, don’t you think? Not only that, but...” She paused dramatically, one corner of her mouth quirking up into a triumphant smile. “I heard she’s *really* pretty.”

“Oh yeah?” Honestly, I couldn’t care less. But I tried to sound interested anyway.

“You don’t sound very excited.”

“Yeah, well... If the transfer student is in another class, it’s not like we’ll get much chance to interact anyway.”

“Even if she’s pretty?”

“Do I really look like the type to go hit on pretty girls?” I asked.

She snorted and shrugged. Not saying anything in this case clearly meant “No.” The topic was so far outside my realm of interest, I naturally reached for my book again. I was at a particularly good part, so if she was done talking, I wanted to keep reading. But her voice once again interrupted my thoughts.

“I think her name is...Ai Mizuno or something like that.”

The sound of my chair clattering echoed through the room. Odajima’s eyes widened. I’d leaped out of my seat without even thinking.

“...What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I...” A cold sweat broke out over my body as I slowly leaned over to put my chair upright again. “I know someone with that name.”

“Ooh, really?” she asked, a friendly smile on her face. “What if it’s the same person?”

What if it’s the same person? Odajima’s words shot through my mind.

I certainly hadn’t expected to hear that name again, especially now, so I was completely flustered. The girl I dated in junior high was also named Ai Mizuno. She had to move away because of her parents. What were the odds that she had moved back and was now going to *my* high school, of all places? *Nah, it’s*

just a coincidence, I told myself.

I wanted to ask Odajima if the transfer student's name used the same characters as my ex-girlfriend's, but I knew that would sound a little too desperate. Odajima was extremely perceptive—she'd figure out this person was my ex in no time flat.

"Phew..." I exhaled deeply, trying to let out the heat that felt trapped inside me. Then I opened up my book again. I threw myself into the sea of words in an attempt to calm down my jumbled mind, but all I could see were markings on a page—the words meant nothing to me.

When I heard the final school bell ring, I closed my book. Odajima was on the sofa looking at her phone. She glanced up at the same time as I lifted my eyes from my book.

"Heading home?" I asked.

"Duh," she said, snorting. "That was the last bell; we have to." She shoved her phone into her cardigan pocket. Incidentally, it was also against the rules to use phones inside the school building. Then she lightly plodded out of the room.

I locked the windows and pulled the curtains closed, then followed her out into the hallway. I pushed the key into the lock and turned it with a click.

"You weren't focused," she said.

"On what?"

"Reading."

"Is that what it looked like?" I asked. She nodded with a mischievous smile.

"You've been a total space case ever since I told you about the transfer student."

"Oh...", I muttered coldly, pulling the key out of the lock. I pulled on the knob several times to make sure it was locked properly and then sighed. She was right; ever since she brought up the transfer student, I'd been remembering the girl from my past who shared the same name.

That was how much of a mark that girl had left on my heart.

Once I was done locking up, I started to return the key to the office, but Odajima tugged on my arm. “Hey. So what’s the deal with this Ai Mizuno girl? What is she to you?” Odajima usually wore a big smile on her face that was like a mask; she rarely showed her real emotions. But now she was peering earnestly into my eyes.

It threw me off a bit, to be honest.

I’d known Odajima for a long time, so I knew that face meant there was no use trying to hide anything from her. I thought for a minute about how to explain, and then I told it to her straight: “I don’t know.” She gave me a puzzled look. “But,” I added, “I do know that...I’ll never forget her.”

“Oh, I get it.” She giggled, nodding. “In that case, I hope it’s her.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because she was so important to you that you can’t forget her,” she replied casually. I didn’t know what to say to that. When I didn’t reply, she sniffed and leaped out in front of me, her indoor shoes smacking against the floor. “You’re gonna return the key, right?”

“Of course. Just like I always do.”

“Kay. Thanks.” She nodded and waved, calling out, “Bye!” and then heading for the entrance. I watched and sighed as she left.

She was so important to you that you can’t forget her. I reflected on Odajima’s words as I climbed the stairs toward the faculty office. Was that really true? Maybe I was just caught up in my own feelings of guilt. I’d carelessly gotten close to her, and then, without ever truly understanding how she felt, I’d pulled away. I always wondered if I had hurt her...but in the end, I didn’t even know *that* for sure.

“Excuse me.” I returned the key to the box in the back of the office and wrote my name on the log-in sheet. It was my usual routine, and once I’d finished, I headed toward the school entrance.

The hallway was dim as I stopped in front of the lockers to change back into

my outside shoes. I could hear the chatter of the sports teams in the fields as they cleaned up before going home.

I loved school at this time of day. The tiny measure of time called “today” had ended, and everyone was headed home. And in the process, we were all gradually moving toward “tomorrow.” With a sense of both loneliness and safety, we gradually carved out each day amid the endless flow of time.

Describing it like that made it sound trivial, but if I didn’t lock it into words, this time of day I loved so much would pass right by me, unnoticed and unappreciated.

Plus, whenever something dramatic happened, it tended to be right around now.

Normally, I didn’t pay much attention to the soccer field, but for some reason I looked over at it—and something strange caught my eye.

There was a girl lying on the ground with her arms and legs spread out, and she was wearing a school uniform. The soccer and baseball team members who were cleaning up after practice shot her weird looks, but the girl didn’t seem to care. And I recognized her.

My heart skipped a beat.

I slowly walked over to the field, as if led there by some force.

“What are you doing?” I asked the girl as she lay on the ground. Her gaze was fixed straight ahead as she answered.

“Looking at the sky.”

“But why are you doing that here?”

“If I’m going to be spending every day at this school from now on, I thought I better see how the sky looks from smack-dab in the center of it.”

“Why can’t you look at it while standing up?”

“Because I thought I’d get along with this school better if I lay down on the ground instead.”

The way she looked, her voice, even the things she said lined up perfectly

with a certain girl from my past.

I let out a hot breath.

My entire body was covered with sweat as I called her name. "It's time to go home now...Mizuno."

Suddenly she gasped and looked at me. And her eyes slowly widened. "...Yuzuru?"

"...Yeah. Long time no see, Mizuno," I answered with an awkward smile.

She had a strange look on her face as she repeated what I'd said in a murmur.

"Mizuno..."

She seemed confused for a split second by the way I'd addressed her. Her eyes swam around, and then she quickly hopped to her feet and brushed the dirt off the back of her skirt.



Once she was done, she ran over to me and clasped both of my hands. Her touch was warm and familiar.

“It’s been so long! I never thought I’d see you again, Yuzuru!”

“...Me neither.”

As I looked back into Ai Mizuno’s sparkling eyes, I wasn’t sure how to react, so I settled for a vague smile.

And that was how Ai Mizuno appeared before me once again. Her shadow had flitted through my mind so many times, and now she was right there in front of me. I was almost dazed by the reality of it.

I loved that time of day when the sunset would breathe life into my ordinary routine. But that day’s sunset had instead brought me something extraordinary.



[CHAPTER 2]

YOU ARE
MY REGRET...

“Hey. I think I love you.”

“...What?”

The way Ai first confessed to me in junior high was completely out of the blue. My eyes were probably bugging out of my head.

“Wh-when you say love, do you mean like...romantic love?”

Ai’s cheeks were slightly pink as she nodded. Her silky black hair swayed in sync with her movements. “Yeah... And I was hoping we could, you know...be together from now on.”

“Oh...”

My heart hammered like crazy in my chest. I was attracted to Ai, too. I loved the way she wandered around, free as a butterfly.

My throat suddenly went bone-dry, but I somehow managed to push out a reply. “So...should we go out, then?”

Her whole face lit up into a bright smile. “Yeah! I’d love that, Yuzuru!”

I still remember that day like it was yesterday.

“My dad’s job transferred him to Kansai when we were in junior high, but now we’re back here again.”

“Oh.”

“I registered here ’cause it was the closest high school to our new house, but I never thought you’d be going to the same place.”

“Oh... Yeah.”

Ai walked by my side, chatting away happily. As for me, I still wasn’t sure how to respond, so I just kept giving her noncommittal replies.

I hadn’t seen Ai in a long time, and although she seemed a bit different, the way she talked and her lively facial expressions were exactly how I remembered.

All of a sudden, she stopped and peered at my profile. “Is something wrong? Did you not want to see me again or something?”

The moment I saw her eyes waver anxiously, I tore my gaze away. “No, that’s not it...” Even as I spoke, I found myself secretly wondering if maybe she was right. Maybe I didn’t want to see her again.

I’d been dragging around my past all this time, and now it had suddenly appeared right in front of me. I was both confused and afraid. I honestly had no idea what to say to this girl who I had dumped, and yet who was chattering on happily, as if it didn’t bother her in the least.

“Mizuno, do...” But when I was finally able to speak, she suddenly placed her index finger over my lips. My heart skipped a beat.

The way she was always forward and quick to touch remained unchanged, too.

“Stop calling me that. Call me by my first name like you used to.”

“But...”

“It hasn’t been *that* long. Stop overthinking it,” she said matter-of-factly. But it wasn’t that simple for me.

Ai said that not much time had passed, but that wasn’t the only issue here; our relationship had completely changed. Or at least I thought it had.

And yet she wasn’t acting like that at all. Was I the only one bothered by it? Endless questions swam through my head, so I decided to give in for the time being and nodded.

“Okay...Ai.”

“Heh-heh. Yes?” Ai giggled.

I let out a little sigh and decided to ask her the question that was weighing on my mind the most. “Doesn’t it bother you?”

“What?” She tipped her head to the side, fixing her big round eyes on mine.

“Well, you know...” I trailed off. “The fact that I, um...broke up with you?” I was immediately fed up with myself for making my sentence into a question—sneakily trying to cushion the blow.

Her eyes widened. Then she casually shook her head. “No, it doesn’t bother

me at all! I mean, what else could you have done?”

Her answer stunned me. So I *was* the only one bothered by it. I felt my stomach drop. My past had left huge scars on my heart. Maybe, deep down inside, I’d always hoped that it bothered Ai, too.

I despised my own childishness.

“Oh... Well...that’s good, then,” I said, unsure what exactly was good about it even as the words came out of my mouth. I smiled at her, simultaneously chiding myself and wondering why I was smiling.

“Were you worried about that, Yuzuru? Is that why you’ve been so distant?”

“Yeah, I guess... Yeah.”

“Oh, okay. Well...I’m sorry.”

Her sudden apology caught me off guard. “Wh-why are you apologizing?”

“Because I moved away right after we broke up.”

“That was because of your dad’s job, though.”

“I know, but I could’ve at least told you about it.” For the first time, a sad look crossed her face.

She’d transferred schools immediately after we broke up. Ai never said another word to me after we parted ways; she just disappeared. She’d given me her new contact information, but I had no idea what I was supposed to say to her, so I never even sent a text message.

I heard from our teacher that she was moving because of her dad’s job, but it still left me with a bad feeling.

And yet a small part of me felt relieved that she had moved away. Looking back on it, I was exasperated with the person I was then...the person I still was now.

“I’m sorry. I just didn’t have the courage...,” she murmured.

“Huh?” I looked at her in surprise, but her face immediately changed into a smile.

“Anyway! I’m really glad to see you again!”

“Y-yeah...”

“I hope we can stay close!” Ai said with a cute grin, and then she ran off to the school gates.

Even this lined up perfectly with my memories of her, which only made me sadder.

Moments later, she had disappeared, and I was left standing there alone.

“Close, huh...?” I muttered, then slowly trudged toward the gates. “How are we supposed to do that?”

I doubted we would ever date again.

But could we go back to being friends? I wasn’t sure. The scars I still carried on my heart made me doubtful.

Once again, I grew fed up with myself as those thoughts ran through my head.

The sun had sunk almost completely below the horizon now. I cast it a sidelong glance, and as if to expel all the gloomy thoughts inside my head, I let out a long, deep sigh.



[CHAPTER 3]

YOU ARE
MY REGRET...

“Hey, Yuzuru. It’s gonna rain soon, isn’t it?”

After school one day in junior high, Ai was walking beside me when, all of a sudden, she spoke. I blinked a few times and looked at her, puzzled.

“The weather forecast said it’s only going to be cloudy all day.” I unconsciously reached for my book bag, where I had a folding umbrella. My mom had given it to me, telling me to “hold on to it just in case!”

“Weather forecast? Is that what it said? I didn’t check it.” Ai stared blankly at me for a few moments and then looked up at the sky. She sniffed. “I’ve been smelling rain for a while now,” she said with her eyes closed.

I was captivated by her profile.

Without opening her eyes, she drew in a deep breath, then released it.

Finally, she raised her eyelids and looked at me. Seeing her big round eyes trained on me all of a sudden caught me off guard, and I quickly looked away.

“You try to smell it, too, Yuzuru. The rain.”

“B-but what does rain smell like?”

“You’ll see when you smell it. Go on. Close your eyes and inhale really slowly through your nose.”

I did as Ai suggested and closed my eyes. My vision went dark, obscuring my view of the heavy, thick clouds overhead.

“Breathe in...,” Ai said next to me, sounding like a yoga instructor. I slowly inhaled through my nose. The air was moist.

What surprised me the most was how sharp my sense of smell was once I closed my eyes; I could now pick up something I hadn’t before.

It was a bit of a sharp fragrance, like the earth or plants...but at the same time, it was mellow. It reminded me of when it would suddenly rain during the monsoon season.

It was a very unique smell that I wouldn’t usually notice unless I was focusing on it.

“...Is this what rain smells like?” I asked after opening my eyes. She nodded

happily.

“Isn’t it interesting? There’s so many mechanisms and rhythms in this world we can’t understand. Only the very tip of them reaches us, as a scent or something else.”

“Mechanisms...rhythms...,” I repeated the words back to her, not having a clue what she meant.

She looked up at the sky with sparkling eyes.

“It’s so fun how there are so many smells out there. Each season has its own scent... There’s the scent of rain, the scent of sunlight...” She closed her eyes again, then drew in another deep breath through her nose.

Drip.

And then a drop of water struck her face.

“Oh!” Her eyes flew open in surprise, and she turned toward me with a gasp.

Drip, drip. Raindrops were falling from the sky.

“Ah-ha-ha!”

She smiled gleefully and started skipping around on the spot. “See?! It’s raining!” She burst into laughter and stretched out both arms.

The rain grew stronger in the blink of an eye, and all of a sudden it was a complete downpour.

I hastily opened my book bag. *I’m so glad I brought this*, I thought as I opened up the umbrella.

“Hey, Ai! You’re gonna get wet!” I called out to her.

She was still skipping around with her arms outstretched. She shook her head with a smile. “I don’t have an umbrella!”

“Yeah, but I do! Get under here with me.”

When she saw me tilting my umbrella toward her, she smiled again. “If both of us get underneath that tiny thing, we’ll both get wet.”

“I don’t care. It’s better than you winding up completely soaked.”

“Hey, let’s wait out the rain somewhere. It’d be a waste to head home so soon.” I could tell by her smile that she was enjoying this.

She ignored my warnings and walked off ahead as I quickly jogged after her.

“Hurry up, Yuzuru!” She turned around and flashed me a carefree smile, her hand outstretched.

I nodded. It suddenly felt silly for me to be the only one using an umbrella, so I folded it back up and put it away in my bag before chasing after her.

It always felt like Ai lived in a totally different world from me. She wasn’t tied down by anything. She was free. And because of that, people whispered about her at school and called her a weirdo. But to me, those qualities were what made her so beautiful.

She accepted everything about the world head-on, and the way she described it seemed to give each element fresh life. It felt like I was internalizing bits and pieces of that mindset until my world started to sparkle, too.

Even though we were standing on the same ground, everything looked different when I was with her. She seemed blindingly bright...so much so that I unconsciously narrowed my eyes whenever I looked at her.

Ai was unbelievably beautiful, and she saw the world in so much more detail than I did. I wished I could experience the world as she felt it...with her by my side. I wanted to see the same things and smile the same way.

But every time I tried to get closer, her sparkle seemed to grow distant, and I found myself constantly trying to catch up to her.

And at some point...I stopped chasing.

× × ×

“Hm, so she *was* the same person? It’s destiny, then,” Odajima said. She was tapping on her phone in the classroom before school.

She’d muttered the word “destiny” as if she could care less, but I still found myself frowning.

“It’s not that romantic,” I said with a sigh.

Odajima stared at me for a few seconds and then snickered. "I can't believe you've been reunited with a beautiful girl, and you look like the world is ending."

"Stop exaggerating; that's not how I look. And by the way, we're not allowed to use cell phones at school."

"Everyone does it anyway."

"Nobody's as bold about it as you."

"They still use them!" she huffed in annoyance as she shoved the phone into her bag. Then she looked up at me. "So? What're you gonna do, Yuzu?"

"About what?"

"About the pretty transfer student, of course! Are you two gonna get back together or what?"

"Wh-what do you mean, get back together?" I couldn't hide how obviously flustered I was by her statement.

She smirked and pointed at me. "I was just trying to trick you into answering. So you *did* go out with her."

"....."

I pursed my lips and made a face. Odajima blinked. "Come on...," she said. "I'm sorry. Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad."

"I wasn't trying to make fun of you," she prefaced, before leaning across her desk and whispering, "But if you're serious...I can help you out."

"No, I don't want your help..." I frowned deeply and shook my head. "It's not like that."

"The look on your face says it is," Odajima muttered, frowning.

I suppressed the urge to click my tongue in frustration. "Why are you so on my case about this any...way..." I stopped in the middle of my complaint, my mouth hanging open like I'd forgotten to close it.

Odajima raised an eyebrow and followed my gaze. "Ah!"

Speak of the devil. Ai Mizuno stood behind her with a huge smile on her face. Odajima's shoulders jerked in surprise.

"Morning, Yuzuru. And...?" After Ai smiled at me, she turned toward Odajima in the seat behind mine.

"Kaoru Odajima. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, Odajima! I'm Ai Mizuno!"

Odajima had sounded a bit nervous as she introduced herself, but Ai shot her an easy smile, then looked back and forth between the two of us. "Are you guys friends?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah... I guess we are. We're in the same club," I answered, stealing a glance at Odajima.

I wondered if she was mad that I'd declared us friends without asking, but she didn't seem to mind. She was playing with the ends of her hair.

Ai leaned forward, her eyes sparkling. "Club?! I didn't know you were in a club, Yuzuru. Which one?"

"...The literature club."



“Ooh, right! You always did love reading!”

Odajima glanced over at me when Ai said that. I met her gaze only for her to quickly look away again.

“So? What are you doing here?” I asked impatiently, wondering why Ai had turned up all of a sudden and started talking to us. I could feel our other classmates staring. Honestly, it made me uncomfortable.

“What am I doing here...?” Ai repeated, then said casually, “I was walking down the hallway and I saw you, so I came to say hi.”

“...That’s all?”

“Yep, that’s all! I’m gonna go to my classroom now. See ya!” She smiled cheerfully and waved at both me and Odajima, then jogged out of the classroom. My classmates immediately started whispering.

Odajima turned back to me and said, “Why’d you two break up? She’s clearly crazy about you, Yuzu.”

“.....”

Without answering, I turned back toward my desk and started getting out my things for class.

“Hey, say something.” Odajima poked me from behind, but I ignored her.

Thankfully, the school bell rang.

...Back then, it was exactly the same.

Ai would be super friendly and wave or come over to talk to me every time she saw me. She was like a puppy clinging to its mother.

But at the same time, she was like a cat. She’d get really absorbed in something else all of a sudden and then forget all about me.

She did whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted to. Paying attention to me was just one of her whims. And every day, I was subject to those whims.

I believed her when she said she loved me, and that’s why we started dating. But at the same time, she always prioritized her momentary interests over spending time with me. After a while, I found it hard to keep up.

I do believe she had feelings for me. No—I'm certain she did.

It's just that, back then, there wasn't ever an opportunity for me to really *feel* that.

"...Are you mad, Yuzu?" I heard a meek voice from behind me and sighed.

Honestly, I found Odajima grilling me about Ai annoying, but I knew she didn't mean anything by it.

I turned around and shook my head. "I'm not mad."

"...Really?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry I asked you so many questions all at once." She bowed her head, a guilty look on her face.

"No, it's fine. I'm sorry, too." It wasn't nice of me to ignore her like that, so I apologized. She sighed in relief.

"Well...if you ever wanna talk about it, I'm here," she said quietly. That was really kind of her, so I smiled and nodded.

"I will, thanks."

Just as our conversation ended, the bell rang signaling the start of class, and Hirakazu Ogasawara, our Japanese and homeroom teacher, entered the classroom.

"Everyone, bow," he called out in a bored monotone.

The class president relayed the command. "Everyone, stand and bow."

Amid the relaxed atmosphere that accompanied the start of first period, Hirakazu carelessly plunked his textbook onto his desk. He barely paid attention to the students' lazy greetings.

"I was going to chat for a bit before we started, but I can't think of anything to say... So let's continue from where we left off last time."

The class booed him in unison, but he didn't seem to mind. I absently stared at the chalkboard as he covered it with a messy scrawl.

I was thinking about Ai again.

“Let’s see...,” Hirakazu began. “Last time we left off at the part where Toyotaro met Elis, who he found weeping at the old church in Klosterstrasse, so this time...”

Several years had passed, and yet it seemed like Ai hadn’t changed at all. She was still carefree and innocent. You could never tell what she was thinking.

At the same time, I thought maybe I hadn’t changed much, either.

“It makes you curious why Elis was crying, doesn’t it? Well, to be honest, I don’t really care, but you all should. It’s more interesting that way.”

I never said what I was thinking or showed it with my actions, yet I selfishly demanded those same things from others. I was behaving in the same childish way as I had back then.

What did I think about Ai’s reappearance? What did I want her to do, and what did I want to do?

If I didn’t even understand myself, how could I know what I wanted to do next?

“...da. Asada!”

“Yes?!”

I was so absorbed in my own thoughts that I didn’t realize Hirakazu was calling on me. I hastily stood up. My classmates all snickered at my reaction.

“Start reading from the third line on page 156. And stop spacing out.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry...” I felt my face flush as I flipped through my textbook and began to read.

““The coward in me was overcome by compassion and sympathy, and without thinking, I went to her side. “Why are you crying?” I asked. “Perhaps because I am a stranger here I may be able to help you all the more.” I was astounded by my audacity...””

Once I had started reading, my heart felt strangely calm. The flow of the words on the page seemed to comfort me.

At any rate, I decided to forget about Ai for the time being and focus on the task at hand.

After school, I walked to literature club like always. Normally, Odajima would only show up when she felt like it, but that day she went straight there with me.

“It’s unusual for you to come two days in a row,” I observed.

The moment I opened the door, she dived onto the sofa. Pouting, she looked at me and said, “Who cares? It’s not like there’s anything to do at home anyway. I might as well kill some time here.”

“Yeah, but if you’re just looking at your phone, what’s the difference?”

“Oh, stop being so picky and read your book!” Odajima shot back. She then began tapping on her phone screen as if to say the conversation was over.

I glanced at her, then took my novel out of my book bag and opened it up.

I’d loved reading ever since I was a child. Following the words on the page opened a door into a new world and taught me things I’d never known before.

Once I started reading, I began to drift along a sea of beautiful words, unbothered by anything else. I loved that comforting feeling.

Come to think of it, I believe I always struggled with uncertainties. But there were no lies in books.

There might be tricks designed to mislead the reader, such as those in a mystery book, but the truth was still there—it was just hidden. Even if the characters inside the story lied, the story didn’t lie to the readers.

Sometimes an error would later be discovered in an academic text, but for the most part, those were genuine mistakes and not an attempt by the author to deceive. And besides, the reader, too, bore a responsibility to verify the information contained in what they read.

But while I was afloat on the sea of words, all I had to do was surrender myself to their current. And to someone like me, who preferred that certainty, navigating social relationships was very difficult.

The way people felt and the things they said were ever-changing. It wasn't easy to figure out what lay deep down inside them. Especially when it came to free-spirited girls like Ai.

Though I loved certainty, somehow I'd ended up drawn to a girl who was like uncertainty incarnate.

How did it end up like this...?

Suddenly, I realized that I was just skimming the text and wasn't really reading it. I sighed.

Ever since the day before, all I'd been able to think about was Ai.

I set my book down on the desk just as the door opened with a rattle.

"Is this the literature club?!"

Odajima and I looked up, shocked. The person who had thrown open the door was Ai. She now stood there, panting.

"Y-yeah...", I said, nodding, and Ai smiled at me.

"Mind if I observe today?" she asked enthusiastically.

I automatically glanced over at Odajima on the sofa. She shrugged and said, "You're the president, you decide." *Great, she just left it up to me...*

I sighed and turned back to Ai. "There's really nothing to observe," I said, but Ai shook her head vehemently.

"Aren't you reading?"

"Well, yeah... But why would you want to watch us read?"

"That's exactly what I came here for! I'll just sit in the corner, so don't mind me and keep on reading!" Ai barged in and sat on the three-cushioned sofa at the opposite end from Odajima. She placed both hands on her knees and smiled brightly like a child.

"Do whatever you want, I guess."

"Okay!"

I nodded and opened my novel again, but now I was even less focused than

before. I had a feeling that if I tried to read now, I'd have to read it all over again later. Odajima looked a little uncomfortable, too, but she was still staring down at her phone.

It was quiet in the room for a while.

But then Ai, who had been sitting still, gradually began to fidget. Suddenly, she spoke. "Are you reading on your phone, Odajima?"

The other girl smiled awkwardly and showed Ai her phone screen. "Is that what it looks like?"

"Whoa, you're playing a game?"

"Yeah, it's a puzzle app."

"Do you like puzzles?"

"Not really. I'm just killing time."

Ai seemed confused by this answer, but then her usual carefree smile reappeared. "So you choose to come here to do things you could do anywhere?"

"Huh?"

"You must really like this room!" Ai said innocently.

Odajima didn't seem to know how to answer and said vaguely, "Um, not really..."

"Or is it because you like Yuzuru?"

"N-no!" Odajima cried loudly, leaping to her feet. Then she hastily looked at me and waved her hand from side to side. "Oh, sorry... It's just... It's not like that."

It seemed like she was worried that she'd hurt my feelings, but it wasn't some shocking revelation or anything.

"Don't worry. I already knew that," I said, grinning. I closed my book and set it on the desk.

I knew that Odajima was only here to kill time, and that was all. She didn't get along well with her parents, so she didn't have a good home environment. But

no one would bother her or make her feel uncomfortable at the club. In fact, I was usually the only one here.

“Ai, this isn’t a serious club,” I said. “I’m the only member who actually reads.” Ai looked baffled. I nodded and continued, “Everyone at this school is expected to join a club. Almost no one goes home right after class unless they have some kind of special circumstances.”

According to the current principal’s wishes, our school—Sagisawadai High School—greatly emphasized club activities. As I’d told Ai, unless you had some exceptional reason, you were expected to join a club. Because of that, everyone except very rebellious students participated.

“So even though everyone belongs to a club, most of them don’t really care and barely show up.”

“Oh, I see...” Ai nodded.

“But if you join a sports club, they have games and stuff, so it would be pretty obvious if you didn’t show up to those. The literature club doesn’t have matches or anything, and the only club activity is reading, which is pretty vague. Basically, this is a great club to join if you want to ghost.”

The more I talked, the more pathetic it sounded, but it was the truth.

What’s more, out of all the clubs in our school, our advisor, the notoriously irresponsible Hirakazu Ogasawara, was probably the least enthusiastic.

“Our advisor, Hirakazu Ogasawara...”

“Oh, isn’t that your homeroom teacher?”

“Yeah. He’s a huge slacker. Come to think of it, for some reason he’s also the guidance counselor.”

Personally, I thought it was a huge mistake assigning him that role, but nevertheless, he had it. And one of the counselor’s duties was to provide guidance for students who hadn’t joined a club.

“That guy keeps telling unaffiliated students to join the literature club, saying, ‘It’s fine if you don’t show up.’”

“Ah-ha-ha. What a joke.”

“Right? That’s how Odajima joined,” I said. The girl in question sniffed awkwardly. “And that’s why most of our members don’t show up. No one else besides Odajima and I come, and she’s just here to kill time until she goes home. But I don’t mind.”

Ai looked back at me. I still didn’t know if she understood or not. “Are you coming here to kill time, too?” she asked.

For a moment, I wasn’t sure how to answer. But then I nodded. “Yeah, I guess so. I mean, I read, but...I could do this at home, too.”

“Oh, I see.” It seemed like Ai had finally figured it out. But what she said next surprised both Odajima and me—“That’s wonderful.”

“Huh?” My voice came out a little funny, but Ai smiled softly at me as she continued.

“Well, you come here every day, and now and then Odajima joins you... You’re both living your lives right here.”

“I mean...I guess so...”

“So basically, this is the ‘living my life club’ for you two. And I think that’s really wonderful!” Ai nodded as she spoke.

I was at a complete loss. Odajima stopped playing her puzzle game and stared at Ai.

Meanwhile, Ai abruptly stood up from the sofa. “Well, sorry I bothered you!”

“Huh? You’re leaving?” I blurted out.

Ai looked at me mischievously. “Do you want me to stay?”

I felt my face flush. That wasn’t what I’d meant. “Not really...,” I replied, pouting. For a split second, Ai’s smile faltered. But then she grinned again.

“Okay. Well, I’m gonna go explore the school and then go home!” she said before bouncing out of the room. “Sorry again!”

She closed the door, and we heard the sound of her footsteps as she ran down the hallway. I stared after her until I couldn’t hear her footsteps anymore.

“You should’ve just told her you wanted her to stay,” Odajima muttered.

I turned and glared at her. “I didn’t want her to stay.”

“Oh?”

“She was interrupting club activities.”

“I thought we were both here just to kill time?”

“.....”

She’d caught me, and I fell silent.

Odajima snorted triumphantly, then looked back down at her phone. She tapped on her screen a few times and then said quietly, “She’s like a whirlwind, isn’t she?”

I inhaled slowly and nodded. “Yeah...” Then I exhaled.

Odajima was spot-on. Ai really was like a whirlwind.

My opinion of her hadn’t changed a bit. She was always so open with her feelings, but I was never sure how to take any of them. I still wasn’t.

At the same time, I was exasperated with my own lack of change.

I felt Odajima staring at me, so I looked over at her, and she made a show of averting her gaze.

“What?” I asked.

She pursed her lips grumpily and replied, “Nothing.”

It was clear she wanted to say something, but I didn’t feel like trying to pry it out of her just now.

I was full of all sorts of conflicting emotions as I picked up my book. I opened it, but just like the day before, nothing I read stuck in my head.

The background features a vertical grey bar on the right side. Scattered across the white background are various faint, light-grey geometric shapes, including squares, triangles, and polygons, some of which are slightly blurred or faded.

[CHAPTER 4]

YOU ARE
MY REGRET...

It was Saturday—the day when I could sleep in as late as I wanted, and no one would get mad at me.

I loved sleeping. I'd heard classmates say things like, "Don't you feel like sleeping is a waste of time?" but I could never think that.

I loved that feeling right before I fell asleep when I could feel my body grow heavy and sink into the bed as I drifted off toward a warm drowsiness. And I loved the comfortable calm when I woke up naturally without an alarm and blinked the sleep away, checking where I was, unsure if I was still dreaming.

That's why I loved weekend mornings, when no one would disturb me.

And yet for some reason, that day, my mom interrupted my favorite time of the week.

"Yuu! Wake up. I said, wake up!"

"Hmm...? What...?" I groaned grumpily as my mom shook me awake. "Were we going somewhere today?" *Please don't wake me up unless I have somewhere to be.* My eyes were still glued shut, but they flew open at the next thing Mom said.

"Your ex-girlfriend is here."

"What?!" My body shot up like a rocket. "What?!" I said again, looking at Mom. Helplessly, she gestured with her chin toward the window next to my bed. On autopilot, I threw the curtains back. Looking down from my second-story bedroom, I saw Ai there outside of my house. She must've seen the curtains open out of the corner of her eye, because she looked up. We made eye contact.

The moment our eyes met, her face lit up, and she waved at me.

I hastily closed the curtains. Unconsciously, I reached up to touch my head. My hair wasn't mussed up from sleeping, was it?

"What should we do? Should I let her in?" Mom asked, but I shook my head.

"No! I'll get dressed and go out there!"

Mom watched, chuckling with amusement, as I scrambled out of bed.

“What were you thinking, showing up here out of the blue?!”

I’d taken a quick shower and gotten dressed—the bare minimum—before I stepped out the front door. Seeing her waiting there, the first thing I did was complain.

But when she saw I was mad, she only chuckled. “I thought I’d surprise you.”

“Well, you sure did!” I said.

She chuckled again, adding as an afterthought, “Plus, I knew if I asked permission, you’d just say no.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond, because she was right. But did that mean she’d felt like I was rejecting her lately?

“So? What are you doing here?” I changed the subject.

“Well, it’s Saturday, so I wanted to hang out with you!” she said airily.

“Hang out and do what?”

“Show me around town! I’m sure it’s changed in the past two years.”

I sighed and shook my head. “It’s pretty much the same.”

“Oh, come on! You don’t have anything else to do, right?”

“I guess I don’t have any plans...”



“Then show me around town!” Ai was being pretty forceful, and it didn’t seem like she would give in. At last, I sighed deeply and relented.

“Hang on. Let me go get my wallet and phone.”

“...Okay!” Her eyes sparkled with pure happiness, and once again, I was filled with conflicting emotions.

My house was about two train stops away from the school. If you really wanted to, you could walk there in thirty minutes, but I always took the train. Mom was the kind of person to say, “Rather than spend time getting to school, you might as well grab a few more minutes of sleep,” so she’d bought me a train pass and let me commute. Most of the students who lived in my neighborhood rode their bikes to school, however.

The area around my house was a ways removed from the city center. You could call it a nice, quiet neighborhood, though some might say it was out in the sticks.

There was a shopping district by the station, but it was modest compared to what you might find in the city.

Even though it was the weekend, there weren’t many people in the area. The street was lined with old-fashioned independently owned electronics stores, small bakeries, and other shops. I didn’t hate this area or anything—it had its own charm. But at the same time, it wasn’t the kind of place you’d see a lot of high-schoolers hanging out on the weekends.

And yet Ai’s eyes seemed to sparkle as we walked.

“Oh, the arcade’s still here! We played *Extreme Fighter* there once together, remember? We were both beginners and it was a total mess, but it was so fun!”

I gazed at Ai as she chatted away happily, matching her pace.

Back when we were dating, we would come here occasionally together. She had even come over to my house to hang out. That was why Mom had recognized her. So you could say this place held some memories for us. But that was all, really.

Just memories, nothing more. We didn't have anywhere to go together, so why were we walking around like this? Those thoughts kept circling through my head as I walked a step behind her. Unlike me, she seemed so energetic. This was pretty much exactly how it was back in junior high.

She was always happy and carefree...and I was hardly even in her field of vis—
“Hey, Yuzuru?”

All of a sudden, she turned around, startling me.

“Wh-what?”

“Why are you walking behind me? It's hard to talk to you when you're back there.” She trotted over to my side and peered into my face.

She was so close that I began to feel embarrassed. I didn't really like people being this physically close to me.

“It's just... I dunno.”

“It's just what?” She didn't seem satisfied by my vague answer and leaned in even closer. I turned away, blushing.

“I was just thinking you look the same from behind as before.”

All of a sudden, her face brightened.

“You think so? Okay, then, see if I look the same from the side.”

“.....”

That wasn't the point. I started walking without answering so I wouldn't get caught up in whatever this was.

She fell into step beside me.

“You said I look the same from behind.” She glanced at me as she spoke. “But you haven't changed, either.”

I felt a throbbing sensation in my chest. *You haven't changed.* I knew she was right, but for some reason it sounded insulting.

“Why do you say that?” I asked, and she cocked her head to the side thoughtfully, then answered with a smile.

“Because you’re not pushing me away.”

“...What?” My eyes went wide, and for the first time, Ai frowned a little.

“I did something pretty amazing today, you know?” she said. “I showed up at a classmate’s house uninvited and asked them to hang out. And it wasn’t just any old classmate, either. It was my ex-boyfriend.”

“...Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

“It’s kinda creepy that I still had my ex’s address memorized, huh?” she said with a giggle. But it didn’t seem like she was gauging my reaction. It was as if she was simply stating a fact.

That, too, matched my memories of her.

“But you agreed to come with me anyway,” she said, “even if you did complain a bit.”

“It was kind of hard to say no...”

“Hmm. That’s not true.” She shut me down, and I wasn’t sure what else to say. She stared right into my eyes and spoke plainly. “If you really didn’t want to come, you wouldn’t have.” Her eyes crinkled into a smile. “So I’m relieved that you don’t hate me or anything.”

She said this in such a carefree manner that I felt a hot sensation suddenly well up inside me. “Well, you...!” I blurted out. I spoke louder than I’d meant to, startling her. “Well, you don’t hate me, either.”

She blinked several times and nodded. “Is that what you were worried about? You didn’t have to yell, you know.”

“Well...it was so hard for me to keep up with you... I didn’t understand you... and I broke up with you without even asking how you really felt.”

“That’s true.”

“You’re not mad?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I love you, Yuzuru.”

“.....What?”

At those casual words, my mind went blank. She saw that I’d frozen up and shot me a puzzled look. “What?”

“What did you just say...?”

“Hm? I said I love you, Yuzuru.”

“But why...?”

“What’s with all the questions? I love what I love! So I’m relieved you don’t hate me.” She didn’t seem to care about my reaction at all and was satisfied to simply tell me how she felt.

I was so overwhelmed that I just stood there with my mouth hanging open. “But I...”

“Yuzuru.”

Here I was, still stuck in the past, and Ai said those words to me like it was nothing.

“I love you.”

It was like she was repeating it for good measure. I was completely paralyzed.

She cracked up laughing when she saw me. “Hey, stop making that face,” she said, and reached over to gently touch my cheek. I was sweaty from standing in the hot summer sun, but her hand felt so smooth and dry. I could feel the warmth of her skin even in the heat.

“Now smile.”

“Oww!”

Suddenly, she grabbed both of my cheeks and pulled them in opposite directions. The corners of my mouth rose, but the feeling of her pinching the thin skin hurt.

She let go of me once she saw I was in pain, and then cackled.

I rubbed my cheeks as she started walking again, still laughing. “It’s the weekend, so we might as well have fun!”

“Y-yeah...” Once again, I’d gotten swept away by her energy. I jogged to catch up to her.

Even though we broke up two years ago, Ai had just told me she loved me.

I had no idea why.

Even so, a part of me was a little happy about it, which just made me feel even more conflicted.

It seemed like, even two years later, my heart was still unsure.

“There are some shops that are different, but this place is pretty much the same.”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you...”

Ai happily offered up her opinion as we strolled down the main street. Since this area was so sleepy, only chain stores with strict sales quotas tended to be replaced, and the atmosphere of the town wasn’t likely to change much in only two years.

It was a fact I’d taken for granted, but it seemed to thrill Ai. The way we saw the same things so differently made me aware once again of the uncrossable divide between us. Plus, as I watched her walk smiling through the deserted shopping district, it annoyed me that Ai could find even a place like this so spellbinding.

So much time had passed, but I could tell I was still attracted to Ai. Yet I also knew that those feelings would only tear us apart. Before I knew it, she and I were in front of a steep slope that stretched up from the edge of the shopping district. She stopped and looked at me.

“Is the park still there?”

I knew exactly which park she meant without having to ask. But I hesitated to answer. That was where Ai had confessed her feelings to me, and it was also the place where I’d broken up with her.

“Well? Is it?” she pressed.

Reluctantly, I nodded. “...Yeah, it’s still there.”

“Then I wanna go see it,” she said breezily, and once again I didn’t know what to say.

Honestly, it wasn’t somewhere I wanted to go with her. But she started climbing the slope without waiting for my answer.

“Let’s go, Yuzuru!”

“.....Okay.” I nodded warily.

She grinned at me and continued climbing up the hill. I followed close behind her. She didn’t tell me to walk beside her this time, so I stared at her back the whole way up.

The place we were headed now held a lot more sentimental value than the shopping district we’d been wandering around in. But it was also the place that had put an end to those shared memories—that had killed them.

What would the two of us talk about, going to such a place together? Was there something she wanted to say to me there? My thoughts wandered as we both silently climbed the hill, heading toward the huge park at its summit.

The background is white with scattered, faint, grey geometric shapes (squares, triangles, diamonds) that look like confetti or falling paper. A solid grey vertical line runs down the right side of the page, with a thin black line parallel to it on its right.

[CHAPTER 5]

YOU ARE
MY REGRET...

We turned off onto a side street and climbed a steep hill. At the top, we found the park.

“Wow, nothing has changed at all!” Ai exclaimed excitedly once we’d reached it. Her gaze danced from side to side.

She was right; not a thing had changed about the park in two years. I hadn’t been there once since we broke up, but it looked exactly the same as in my memory.

“The elephant slide is still there!”

“Yeah.”

Ai pointed toward a slide in the shape of a pink elephant. The paint was peeling here and there, and a few spots were rusting. It was the place we had sat together at both the beginning and the end of our relationship.

I felt an overwhelming pressure in my chest as I followed Ai, who cheerfully ran over to the slide.

A staircase with no railing was carved into the elephant’s back. Ai climbed it easily and smiled down at me from the top of the slide. “Brings back memories, doesn’t it?”

“...Yeah.”

She looked unbelievably relaxed in this place so intimately connected to our past. Meanwhile, that same past weighed me down and I couldn’t muster a smile.

“This park is so big and has so much playground equipment, but no one’s ever here. Even though there’s a school nearby.”

“It’s not that close. You’d have to walk twenty minutes from the school to get here. Plus, it’s up a huge hill.”

“A twenty-minute walk isn’t that bad. I was just thinking how kids these days don’t really play at parks anymore.”

“Aren’t we ‘kids these days’?”

All of a sudden Ai was talking like an old lady, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

She looked at me, eyes wide, pointed, and smiled. “Ah! You finally laughed! That’s the first time you’ve smiled all day, Yuzuru.”

“Really?”

Come to think of it, she was probably right. This whole time I’d just been watching her smile, thinking about old times.

“Yeah! You have a great smile, Yuzuru,” she said with a nod, then slid down the slide. I quickly averted my gaze when I saw her skirt was pushed up slightly over her thighs.

“Every time I come to this park...,” she said after reaching the bottom of the slide, “I just feel so free.”

Her gaze seemed far-off. She must have been thinking about that time two years ago, too.

“...You’re always free, Ai,” I replied.

She smiled a little strangely. “You think so?”

“That’s how it looks to me.”

“Oh. Hmm, okay...” She nodded a few times in her usual noncommittal way. “I guess I just live my life...doing whatever I want to do,” she murmured.

I nodded. “I know.”

That had made her stand out in a bad way back in junior high. I had known about her even before we became friends, through rumors.

She was the prettiest girl in our grade, but her behavior was so erratic that she would disrupt group activities. Because of that, everyone assumed she was hopelessly self-absorbed. Those were the rumors I’d heard—both negative and positive, but mostly negative.

“But you know, living that way just looks like being selfish to other people.” She narrowed her eyes as she spoke. “Everyone lives within this vast set of constraints, following all these rules so that they don’t invade other people’s territory. They’re living their lives walking on eggshells, careful not to cause trouble or to make others dislike them. They live according to all these unspoken rules.”

Ai, normally so relaxed, suddenly began to wax philosophical, and I looked on, eyes wide, unable to speak.

“But I’m different,” she continued. “I neglect all that stuff in order to protect my own philosophy. I live selfishly.”

“That’s one of your strengths, though,” I said.

She giggled and nodded. “Yeah, thanks. I love that you think that about me.”

My heart skipped a beat when she said the word “love” again.

Meanwhile, Ai continued, as if she were sorting through her feelings out loud. “But other people are different. They look at me like I’m disgusting. No matter how freely I try to live my life, I won’t be able to escape the way they look at me.”

She smiled faintly as she spoke, though the topic seemed almost too heavy for such an expression.

Thinking back to our days in junior high, I remembered how she never seemed to get along with other girls.

As for the guys, they’d put up with almost anything, saying, “Yeah, but Mizuno’s cute.” And even if she did cause trouble for them, they’d brush it off with a smile and say, “Well, that’s just how she is...” They overlooked her behavior because of her physical beauty and because they knew she didn’t mean any harm.

But the girls were different. The way the guys let Ai get away with everything upset them. I’d seen them complaining about her several times, saying, “Just because she’s pretty, she thinks she can do anything she wants.”

Ai always seemed to laugh it off, but apparently, it had bothered her.

“I thought I had to give up on making friends,” she said, “that I didn’t need anyone who understood me. I didn’t care what other people thought as long as I could live my life the way I’d chosen.”

I couldn’t say anything.

I had no idea Ai felt that way back when we were just junior high school kids. After all, we still weren’t fully in control of our emotions back then. I just

thought she was a free spirit who did as she pleased.

She looked up at me, and her round eyes met mine.

“But then I met you, Yuzuru.”

My body trembled when she said my name all of a sudden.

“You didn’t look at me like everyone else did.” She stared at me as she spoke.

“Do you remember the day we first met?”

“...Vaguely.”

“What? Only vaguely? I could never forget it,” she said with a giggle.

To be honest, I remembered it vividly. I couldn’t forget it, either.

After school one day, she had suddenly appeared in the classroom and caught my eye.

“You were holding a vase the first time we met.”

“...That’s right.”

At Ai’s words, my mind slowly drifted back to that day.

I was alone in the classroom, on cleanup duty.

It was approaching autumn, and the school had grown chilly. The sun setting in the western sky out the window looked somehow clear and crisp and made me forget the muggy heat of the summer.

I finished erasing the chalkboard and sprayed cleaner on it. I quite enjoyed those kinds of simple, repeated tasks.

Once I’d finished wiping down the chalkboard, I started writing the names of whoever was on cleanup duty tomorrow in the bottom right-hand corner.

I snorted as I wrote the names “Ashida” and “Andou” on the board. They were both slackers. I was sure they’d each try to make the other do everything, and it would start a rock-paper-scissors match, just like what had happened to me that day.

I’d lost, and that’s why I was cleaning alone.

The chores were over in a flash if you had someone else to help, but even if you had to do them alone, it wasn't that big a deal.

I was slowly finishing up when all of a sudden I saw a butterfly flying around inside the classroom. It flapped its wings and flew toward the wall, landing there.

"....."

It seemed like the butterfly was in trouble. It had probably wandered in through an open window after school and was now stuck inside since I'd closed them all.

"I opened the window for you. Look, it's over there."

I tried shooing the butterfly toward an open window with a broom from the cleaning closet. I wanted to guide it outside, but it just kept avoiding the broom handle and wouldn't go where I wanted it to.

I suppose from the butterfly's perspective, it seemed like some giant human was attacking it.

"...Hmm."

I leaned the broom against the wall and looked around the classroom. Then, on the windowsill, I spotted a clear vase. The students in charge of the class plants hadn't changed the water frequently enough, and the flowers inside had dried out in no time. I carefully removed the dead plant matter and then picked up the vase.

Opening up my book bag, I removed my math notebook and tore out a page.

I looked over at the wall and saw that the butterfly was still fluttering around nearby. Slowly, I walked over to it and gently placed the vase over the butterfly.

"I'm sorry..."

The butterfly flew frantically around inside the vase. It must've been scared, suddenly finding itself trapped. I was carefully sliding the piece of notebook paper in my left hand toward the opening of the vase...when I suddenly felt someone watching me from the hallway. I abruptly looked over and saw a girl with black hair standing there. She was staring at me with wide eyes.

It was Ai Mizuno.

We both stared at each other silently for a few seconds.

Reddish-orange sunlight shone through the hallway windows, illuminating her. It almost looked like her silhouette was glowing.

“Wh-what are you doing?” she asked, as if she couldn’t bear the silence anymore.

I suddenly came back to myself and looked down at the vase I was holding. The butterfly was still flying around frantically inside it.

“Oh, this butterfly flew into the classroom.” I remembered what I’d been trying to do and slipped the notebook paper through the gap between the opening of the vase and the wall. Then I carried it over to the window. Leaning out, I pointed the opening away from me and removed the notebook paper. The butterfly flapped its wings and flew back outside.

This time it didn’t try to come back in and flew off freely.

I stared at it, captivated. The tiny butterfly had white wings—it was very beautiful.

After I watched it go, I carefully closed the window again.

“...You let it go?”

“Whoa!” At some point Ai had come into the classroom, and finding her right next to me, I jumped.

“Ah-ha-ha! You don’t need to act so surprised!”

“Oh, uh... Sorry.” My eyes darted around nervously, then I nodded. “As for the butterfly...I felt sorry for it.”

“You felt sorry for it?” She cocked her head to the side. I didn’t think I’d ever seen someone make that gesture in such a pretty way before.

“Yeah. I’m sure it wanted to fly around freely, but it was trapped in here. It looked like it was in trouble.”

“A bug? A bug was in trouble?” Her eyes widened as she looked at me.

I started to feel awkward with such a beautiful girl staring at me like that, but

I somehow managed to nod in response. "Yeah."

She watched me nod, and then a few seconds later she burst out laughing. "That's so weird!"

"Is it...?"

"It's totally weird. I've never heard someone say they thought a bug was in trouble before."

"Oh."

Well, I can't help it. That's really what it looked like, I muttered inwardly. She didn't seem to care about my reaction and turned her gaze out the window.

"It's gone now, huh?"

"Yeah. I'm sure it flew off to wherever it wanted to go."

"I guess so. I'm happy for it." Her face crinkled into a smile.

I felt myself flush as I stared at her profile. I wondered how anyone could be so beautiful. I'd heard rumors about Ai Mizuno before. People said she was way too carefree and that it was a waste because she was so beautiful.

Both boys and girls gossiped about her, and I'd heard the rumors even though she was in another class.

I'd passed by her several times in the hallway, but I'd never had the chance to look at her this closely before. And now that we were talking, I discovered she really was as beautiful and free-spirited as people said.

"Hm?" She turned toward me, and our eyes met.

I realized I'd been staring at her. I quickly looked away and shook my head.

"Sorry, I was staring."

"It's okay. What is it?"

"Nothing." I would have rather died than told her I was staring at her because she was so beautiful. "What are you doing at school at this time of day, Mizuno?" I asked, unsure of what else to say to her.

"Oh," she murmured, then casually explained, "I was just exploring the

school. There's never anyone here at this time."

"What?"

"Isn't the school so nice and quiet when everyone's gone? I love it." She cast a sidelong glance at me, a mischievous look on her face. "Plus, sometimes I see interesting things like this happen."

I guessed the "interesting thing" she was talking about was me freeing the butterfly. I suddenly felt embarrassed and looked away from her again.

"The rumors are right. You really are free-spirited," I said with a sheepish smile. I saw her flinch briefly. Her soft hair swayed as she moved.

"Ah..." Even though it was my honest opinion, I realized I shouldn't have said it and instantly felt regret wash over me. "The rumors weren't anything bad," I said, but it was obvious I was just trying to make her feel better.

She smiled wryly at me and shook her head. "It's fine. I'm used to it." She wore a calm expression, but I thought it looked slightly sad.

Up until now, she'd been smiling cheerfully, and I began to panic that I'd caused her expression to cloud over, even a little.

I wondered what I should do, and then I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "You're like a butterfly, Mizuno."

Her eyes slowly widened, like she was shocked. "...What?" was all she said.

I was panicking again. I felt like I'd said something really dumb. "Oh, sorry. I don't mean you're like a bug or something..." My eyes darted around as I searched for the right words. "The way they fly around so freely is really beautiful. And they always seem so out of reach... That's what I mean when I say you're like a butterfly..."

Ai's mouth hung open as she stared at me.

Suddenly I realized that it must sound like I was flirting with her, and I started panicking all over again. "Oh, sorry! I didn't mean it like that..."

"Pfft! Ah-ha-ha!" Suddenly Ai burst out laughing and doubled over, clutching her stomach. I was completely baffled.

“No one’s ever told me I’m like a butterfly before!” She wiped away the tears in the corners of her eyes and smiled softly at me. “Thanks.”

“Oh, um... Sorry...”

“Why are you apologizing when I thanked you? That’s weird.” She giggled again and then suddenly threw open the window I’d closed. Her hair billowed in the dry autumn breeze that gusted in.

I watched as she narrowed her eyes happily. I was right... She was beautiful.

“You said they were out of reach,” she said.

“What?”

“Butterflies.”

“Oh yeah.”

Her hair swayed in the wind as she stared at me. Her gaze was so warm and intense, it gave me goose bumps.

“But you caught it,” she said, pointing to the vase I still held in my hand.

“Yeah, because I wanted to help it get back outside.”

“Yeah. And I think that’s fine. You caught it, but it became free again *because* you caught it,” she said, her face lighting up with an unbelievably beautiful smile. “I bet you made it really happy.”

The light of the setting sun illuminated Ai as her hair blew in the breeze. She looked so otherworldly and gorgeous, I couldn’t help but stare.

“I...I hope so.”

“I’m sure of it!” she said cheerfully, grabbing my hand. “Hey, what’s your name?”

“My name?”

“Yeah! Tell me your name!” She looked me right in the eyes, and I felt my heart hammering in my chest.

“Yuzuru...Asada,” I answered.

“Yuzuru... That’s a nice name,” she said in a singsong voice and grinned.

“Yuzuru, let’s be friends!”

Let’s be friends.

When was the last time someone said something to me so straightforwardly? I had goose bumps all over my body as I nodded. “Sure. If that’s what you want.”

That was how Ai and I met.

It was also the beginning of our love story.

“You found me, Yuzuru,” she said as she sat on the end of the slide. “I was trapped in the classroom and helpless, and you set me free.”

“But I didn’t...”

I didn’t set you free.

I tried to trap you again.

But before I could speak, she said firmly, “And that’s why I love you.” Her tone was so forceful, I flinched. My heart throbbed painfully.



“No matter how much I fly around...I’ll always come back to you, Yuzuru. Because...” She stared at me with heat in her eyes.

Stop it! my heart screamed. *Please don’t say anything else!*

“Because...you caught me, Yuzuru.”

I felt chills run through my whole body.

“No!!” I shouted without even realizing what I was doing.

She jumped, and her eyes went wide.

“I’m not...I’m not the kind of person you think I am,” I said.

“Wh-what do you mean...?” She looked baffled. I knew what I said had confused her.

I suppressed the tears welling up in my eyes and forced the words out from deep inside.

“I loved that you were a free spirit. I loved that about you! So I started dating you without thinking it through and...”

My chest hurt. There was a hot lump in the back of my throat. At that very moment, I was trying to end our relationship completely.

But I had to say it. Because if I didn’t, I knew I would make the same mistake again.

“But then...I hated you for it.”

I saw the sadness take over her eyes in a split second. She always had such a beautiful smile on her face, and now I was the person who had taken it away.

“You can’t be with me, Ai. Because...” It felt like I was expelling all the pain inside my chest. “You’re freer than anyone, and I would only tie you down!”

Ai was speechless at my confession. She opened and closed her mouth a few times without saying a word.

I felt like my tears were about to overflow, so I turned my back to her. “I’m going home.”

“Ah, Yuzuru...”

“I’m sorry, Ai,” I said before jogging away from the park.

I checked to make sure she wasn’t following me, and then I started to run faster. I ran as fast as I could down the hill.

I regretted it.

So many times, I had regretted dating her.

Because even though I loved how free-spirited she was, I’d wanted her all to myself.

This was the second time I’d pathetically turned my back and run away from her. And there wouldn’t be a third. I wasn’t there in the classroom with the open window anymore. And that meant she’d never be able to come back to me.

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[CHAPTER 6]

YOU ARE
MY REGRET...

“Asada. How far have you gone with Mizuno?”

I remember being so irritated every time a boy in my class would ask me that.

After being friends for a while, Ai confessed her feelings to me, and I happily accepted.

I loved her free-spirited nature, and I felt like I alone was able to recognize and accept it. I knew that was the reason why she had trusted me enough to open up her heart.

But as our relationship went on, I started to feel my own heart clouding over. The reason was that even after we started dating, nothing had changed about our relationship.

“You’ve at least kissed her, right?”

Even though all the guys in my class gossiped about how Ai was a “troublemaker,” they all fantasized about her because of her looks. That was why they kept asking me the same questions over and over again, trying to pry intimate information about her out of me.

When they did, I could only respond vaguely and brush them off. Nothing was happening, so there was nothing to tell. Since we started dating, surprisingly little had changed from when we were friends.

We hung out as friends and did things friends did together.

Even when we went on dates, it was common for the planned activity to totally change when the actual day rolled around, and sometimes she would call me at the last minute and say, “Sorry! I have something else I wanna do today!”

At first, I simply wrote it off as the way she was and put up with it. She was that kind of person, and I was the type of guy who could accept her. That was what I kept telling myself anyway, and how I ignored my own dissatisfaction at the fact that Ai wasn’t giving me any special treatment.

But at the same time, I was only in junior high and not emotionally mature yet. So eventually, I reached my breaking point.

“I’m really looking forward to the movie.”

Ai and I had plans to go see a movie one day. We were killing time at the park, sitting atop the elephant slide until it was time to go. I told her I was looking forward to it, and she looked at me and smiled a little awkwardly.

“Oh, right... About that.” The moment she started, I sighed. I knew she was going to cancel on me again, and I was incredibly disappointed. “There’s supposed to be a meteor shower visible tonight about thirty minutes after the movie starts.”

“Okay.”

“I was thinking maybe we could go watch it!”

“What about the movie?” I asked.

She flinched. My voice had come out lower than I’d meant it to, and I’d scared her. I found I didn’t really care. Her eyes darted around as she chose her words carefully. “We can go see that movie anytime. But the meteor shower...”

“Listen!” I raised my voice. She flinched again and looked at me. “Do you not care about the promises we make?” I asked, my voice still low. Her mouth opened with surprise, and she shook her head.

“It’s not that at all! I like spending time with you and—”

“Then why do you keep breaking all the promises you’ve made with me?!” I couldn’t take it anymore and started shouting at her. “I always look forward to hanging out with you. The day before our dates, my heart always pounds just thinking about it, and I get so excited when it’s finally time. But I guess you don’t feel that way!”

“Yuzuru? No, I...”

“I’m right, aren’t I?!” I yelled. She stared at me, speechless, her eyes round and wavering like she didn’t know what to do.

I had all this resentment built up inside me, and I just continued venting it. “You only wanted a friend, didn’t you? You wanted a friend who understood you. And I just happened to show up at a convenient time, and you have fun being with me, but that’s all.”

“That’s not it!”

“Then tell me so I can understand! You just keep jerking me around... I’m sick of you being the only one having fun...”

That was how I honestly felt. But my words became a knife that stabbed right into her heart. She looked like she was going to cry.

“N-no... Yuzuru, I...”

“Let’s just break up, Ai.”

I’d been thinking about it for a while now. We’d both be much happier if we broke up. She wouldn’t have to walk on eggshells around me anymore, and it’d be a lot less stressful for me, too.

I’d thought about it a lot, but my love for her kept getting in the way.

When Ai heard me say those words, she froze and stared at me, looking astonished.

My eyes filled with tears. “We should never have gone out. We should’ve just stayed friends...”

She weakly shook her head. “Yuzuru, please wait... I had no idea that I’d hurt you. So I’m sor—”

“You don’t have to apologize!” I yelled, interrupting her. She let out an audible, high-pitched gasp. “There’s no need for that, Ai.” My tears overflowed, and I didn’t even bother wiping them away as I spoke. “You’re a butterfly who wants to fly around and be free, right?”

Her face crumpled. I was being childish, mercilessly trampling Ai’s heart. I knew I was hurting her, but I couldn’t stop.

That was how much pain I’d gradually built up, being in this relationship with her.

“Don’t worry about me and live your life how you want...,” I said. “I’m sorry, too.”

“Yuzuru, you’re wrong... I’m telling you, you’ve misunderstood.”

“Goodbye, Ai.”

“Yuzuru!!”

I didn't stay to hear Ai out. I simply ran away from her and left the park.

My love was so selfish. I'd been drawn to her because of her free-spirited nature, but once I became the one closest to her, I'd started to despise it.

I should have been happy to be the one who understood her the best, but at some point, I realized that I was tired of understanding her.

Ultimately, I'd been drawn to her dazzling sparkle because it was something I didn't have, and all I'd done was reach for it. Our relationship only gave me a sense of powerlessness, and then it ended.

After that, if I saw Ai in the hallway, I didn't talk to her and tried to avoid her whenever possible. At some point, I heard she had transferred schools because of her dad's job. *Good. I'll just forget her*, I thought.

I figured that as time passed, she'd forget me, too. She'd go off to some new place and live freely there.

And so I tried to move on, tried to forget her so many times. But then she showed up again, as free-spirited as ever, and insisted that she still loved me...

"Yuzu, that's my seat."

I was lying sprawled out on the sofa, thinking about Ai.

Abruptly, I realized Odajima was standing next to me, staring down into my face. *Oh, she's here again today.*

"This sofa doesn't belong to you," I said, and she clicked her tongue.

"Yeah, well, it's not your bed, either. When you lie on it like that, there's no room for me to sit down. You're totally in my way."

"Is that any way to talk to the club president...?"

"Ahhh, you're so annoying! Get out of the way! Come on, get up!" Odajima lost her patience with me and shoved her arms in between my body and the sofa, wrenching my back off the cushions as she tried to force me to get up.

When she leaned over, her chest was directly level with my eyes. Her shirt was unbuttoned down to the second button, and I could see her cleavage and bra. I awkwardly averted my eyes and decided to get up on my own.

“You should really fasten that second button,” I said, still looking away.

She glared at me suspiciously and then looked down at her chest, hastily trying to cover it up. “...Scumbag.”

“I’m not the one walking around with my shirt unbuttoned.”

“I’m not even wearing a cute bra today...”

“That’s not the point.”

She shot me a defiant look as she plopped down beside me.

Even though the sofa was big enough for three people, once both of us were sitting on it, she felt much closer than I’d anticipated, and I started to feel uncomfortable.

I ended up standing and moving to my usual chair.

Odajima pouted and then sat back down on the middle cushion, her arms crossed. “So?”

“What?”

“What are you depressed about?” She hesitantly glanced over at me.

I sighed and shook my head. “I’m tired, so I lay down. That’s all.”

“No one sleeps with their eyes wide open like that.” She tapped her foot impatiently as she glared at me. “Sure it’s not about Mizuno?”

“Why do you think that?” I knew it was annoying to answer a question with a question, but Odajima was prying into my private life, so I went ahead.

Her eyes darted around awkwardly in response. I wondered why. “...I saw you two together yesterday.”

“What?” I blurted out, confused.

Odajima waved her hand in front of her face nervously. “W-well, you know how we both live near the same station?”

“Yeah...”

Ai and I had been walking around in the shopping district right next to that station the day before. I hadn’t even considered that someone might see us,

since it had been the weekend.

“Well, I was wandering around the shops yesterday, and I just happened to see you two.”

“Oh.”

I knew that Odajima didn't like being at home on the weekends. She seemed to feel sorry about seeing us, but there was no reason for me to be mad at her for something like that.

The problem was that Odajima was curious now. And to be honest, I didn't want her to ask me a bunch of questions.

“Looked like you two were having a fun date.”

I frowned. “It's not like that.”

“Then, did something happen afterward?”

“Why are you asking me this?” My voice sounded colder than I'd intended.

Odajima hesitated for a moment but then pouted and raised her voice. “Because you're making that face, obviously!”

“Making what face?”

“Like the world's gonna end!” she yelled at me angrily, pointing.

What was she so mad about?

“You always look so calm, and no matter what I do in the clubroom, you never even raise an eyebrow, but now you're totally different!”

“Yeah, but who cares what you do in here?”

“Wh-who cares...?”

Her mouth flapped open and closed for a moment, then she fell silent again.

It wasn't like we were actually conducting club activities here. If someone felt like they belonged, I honestly didn't care what they did. I was just here because I loved reading. If someone asked me if I was really serious about the literature club, I'd probably say no.

Odajima was speechless for a few seconds and looked around helplessly.

When she finally spoke, her eyes flashed with anger again. “Th-then I’m right! That means now you *do* care what’s happening to you!”

“.....”

She’d hit me where it hurt, and I fell silent.

The day before, I’d told Ai how I felt and very clearly rejected her. And I thought by doing that, I would finally be free of our shared past. And yet a day had gone by, and I was still thinking about her.

“Unlike you, I can’t stand it when someone is in the same space with me looking upset!” Odajima jabbed a finger at me.

I angrily stood up from my chair. “Maybe I’ll just go home, then!”

“That’s not what I meant!”

Her yelling just confused me. I didn’t understand why she was angry.

“Listen, I’m sorry if I did something to upset you,” I said. “But I’ll probably be like this all day... So I think I’ll just go home.”

She shook her head vehemently. “No. That’s not what I’m talking about.” She seemed frantic now as she looked at me. She was clearly mad about something, but it didn’t seem like it was just my expression. “What I’m trying to say is that if you care about her so much that it affects your mood like this, then maybe you should try harder to fix whatever’s going on!”

For the first time, I realized what she was trying to say. And simultaneously, I thought, *Why did Odajima have to be the one to tell me this?*

I was in a lot more pain than she thought I was. I couldn’t change the past, and yet I’d been dragging it around ever since. And just when enough time passed that I finally thought I could forget about Ai, she had showed up in front of me again.

At first, I was confused, but I was finally able to cleanly break off our relationship. I was sure the pain I now felt in my heart would disappear with time.

But Odajima was poking at my wounds with her bare hands and telling me I had to do something about the pain right that instant. It wasn’t a pleasant

feeling, and I wanted to make that clear to her. "...You've got no right to tell me that, Odajima."

Her eyes widened. "Ah, um...", she stammered quietly. The anger faded from her face, replaced with sadness.

I'd hurt her.

It was hard to watch the change in her expression.

But that sadness lasted only a moment. Anger flared once again, as if she'd just remembered it.

"Fine, I see how it is! Stay here and mope around forever for all I care! You can have the sofa back, too!" She spoke quickly before grabbing her backpack and standing up. Then she stormed out of the room. "Yuzu..." She glared at me from just outside, her hand on the doorknob. I looked away. "Lately you're being *reeeeally* uncool, you know?" And with that, she violently slammed the door and stomped off into the hallway.

I sighed.

My anger had been an honest reaction to what she'd said, but at the same time, I'd acted really immature. I was just sulking and returning tit for tat.

Normally I didn't care what others said about me, but I became completely useless when Ai was involved. It was like I couldn't control my emotions.

"Haah..." Now that I was alone in the room, I trudged over to the sofa and flopped back down on it.

"Maybe you should try harder to fix whatever's going on!"

Odajima's words ran through my head.

"Yeah, but how?" I muttered childishly to no one in particular. "What am I supposed to do?"

How was I supposed to solve the problem?

The idea of finding a solution sounded good, but I wasn't sure what that might look like in this situation. Because in the end, it was a matter of my and Ai's feelings.

And she probably hated me after what I'd said to her the day before. In fact, I hoped she did. Because if she acted like nothing had happened the next time I saw her, I would have no idea what to say.

How was I supposed to react to someone who kept trying to leap into my arms after I told them that I'd been the one to trap them?

I didn't understand anything anymore.

"...I'll just go home." I stood up from the sofa, locked up, and headed toward the faculty office.

There were still a few hours left before club activities were over. And since it was summer, it was still light outside.

I changed my shoes near the entrance and absently glanced out at the field where the baseball team was practicing. Their enthusiasm for the sport and drive to win seemed so dazzling to me. *If I had something like that to devote myself to, maybe I wouldn't have time to worry about stuff like this*, I thought. I shook my head and started walking. I didn't want to linger here any longer—I'd be in trouble if I bumped into Ai.

After all, the school after hours was like her playground.

".....You're doing it again," I muttered with a sigh. I was angry at myself for thinking about Ai. I quickened my steps and headed for the school gates. Just as I got close, my phone vibrated inside my pocket. It was unusual for anyone to contact me at this time of day. Surprised, I took it out.

There was a notification from a messaging app on the screen. I'd gotten a text from Odajima.

This is just a rumor, but I heard that Andou from our class is totally crazy about Mizuno.

I read her message and snorted. If she was so pissed, why go to all the trouble of sending me something like this? I couldn't be sure, but maybe it was her way of showing she cared. Still, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say in response.

Oh.

That was all I wrote. I started to put my phone back in my pocket, but it vibrated again.

Jerk.

Indecisive idiot.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

She texted me a bunch of times in succession. I picked out a picture of a weird cat giving a thumbs-up sign—Odajima had sent it to me before—pressed send, and put my phone back in my pocket.

“Well...” I frowned and let out a deep sigh. “It’s none of my business.”

That’s right. It had nothing to do with me.

For a moment, I imagined Ai walking side by side with someone else, then I shook my head to get rid of the image and began trudging home.

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[CHAPTER 7]

YOU ARE
MY REGRET...

“Asada, there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

The next day before class, Sousuke Andou showed up in front of my desk. I heard someone sipping on a nearly empty juice box from the seat behind me.

Andou was a cheerful guy and easily one of the most popular kids in class. He was on the soccer team and really energetic. That was why most everyone in our grade liked him.

But he only ever talked to me about school stuff. I got along well enough in class, and the two of us sat near each other, so we’d talk if we needed to, but he’d never gone out of his way to come over and chat with me before.

I already knew what he was going to say, though. I was certain it had to do with the text that Odajima had sent me the day before.

Andou was fidgeting as he stood in front of me.

“Do you know Mizuno? She’s in Class Three.”

I knew it.

I wasn’t expecting this to happen so soon, but since Ai had come into the classroom the other day to talk to me, perhaps it was inevitable.

“Yeah, we met in junior high.” I nodded, and Andou hummed vaguely and shot me a sidelong glance.

“So you two aren’t dating or anything, right?” he asked directly.

I smiled wryly and shook my head. “No, we’re not dating.”

The moment those words left my mouth, someone kicked the back of my chair. It was clearly Odajima, who sat behind me, but I ignored her.

Andou looked restless as he leaned over and whispered to me, “Mizuno’s supercute, right? If she doesn’t have a boyfriend, I think I’m gonna go after her.”

“Oh.”

“I’ve seen her talking to you several times, though, so I wanted to check first.”

“Yeah. There’s...nothing going on between us.”

As I spoke, Odajima kicked my chair twice. I frowned and turned to face her. “What?” I glared at her, but not to be outdone, she glared right back at me.

“...Tch.” It seemed like she wanted to say something, but instead she just clicked her tongue.

I sighed and turned back to Andou. “There’s nothing going on between us, but I think you’ll have a hard time trying to date her,” I said.

Maybe he could handle it, but I had a hard time picturing the two of them together. Then again, maybe people thought the same thing when they saw the two of us.

Andou’s eyes widened. “Why?” he asked simply.

I’d said something pretty cocky, but he didn’t seem to care about that. He appeared genuinely interested in what I meant.

“Because I don’t think...Mizuno’s really that interested in dating,” I said, feeling a lump in my throat. *Am I sure about that?* Doubt ran through my head.

The Ai I knew was free-spirited and always acted on her feelings.

“I love you, Yuzuru.”

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I could almost hear her voice saying those words in my ear again. Goose bumps popped up on my skin.

That’s right—she always did exactly what she wanted. But didn’t that make everything she did, everything she said, her truth?

Because in that case...

“Hm? What’s up?”

My gaze had fallen down to my desk, and Andou waved his hand in front of my face, bringing me back to reality.

“Oh, um. I’m fine,” I said. “Anyway, I think it’ll be tough to have a romantic relationship with Mizuno.” At last, I remembered what I’d wanted to say.

He said, “Oh...,” and then smiled. “But it’s kinda thrilling and fun to make a girl

who's hard to get fall for you, right?"

My jaw dropped. There was a kind of sparkle in what he was saying—something I lacked. And the intensity of it was overwhelming.

"O-oh. Well, good luck."

"Yeah, thanks!" Andou grinned at me and then walked away. I leaned back in my chair and sighed deeply.

If only I were as optimistic as he was. Maybe then things between Ai and me would've turned out differently.

"...You're such an idiot," Odajima muttered behind me. I pretended not to hear her.

I felt so pathetic.

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Before I knew it, school was over for the day.

I'd taken notes in class but barely remembered anything about what we'd covered. I copied down what was written on the board and answered questions that were asked of me, but I'd been spacing out the whole day.

Andou was the kind of guy who always followed through on what he said. I had a feeling he'd ask Ai out on a date fairly soon and start trying to get closer to her.

I wondered what Ai would do.

Of course, it wasn't any of my business.

The day before, I'd kept telling myself that over and over again, and now it weighed heavily on my heart.

Ai and I had dated in the past, but we wouldn't have a relationship in the future. I felt like my past with her was a burden I wanted to escape from. That was why I'd rejected her—why I'd turned down a relationship with her.

I thought that I'd feel better afterward. But now I was fixated on how I'd broken up with her. I was just going around in circles. Despite everything I said, I

probably still loved her. And there was nothing more pathetic than that.

I shoved my textbooks and notebooks into my book bag and stood up.

On days like this, I wanted to forget about everything and lose myself in a book in some quiet room. I knew I probably wouldn't be able to focus on my reading, but it was better than sitting there helplessly thinking about the same thing over and over.

I was just about to leave the classroom when Odajima, who was also packing up her bag, tugged on my sleeve. "Wait. I'm coming with you."

I felt my face stiffen. I just knew she was going to nag me again.

When she saw my expression, she looked hurt and pursed her lips.

I sighed and shook my head. "Sorry. I'll wait for you."

What kind of club president was rude to a member wanting to attend the club?

Odajima shook her head and looked down at the floor. "I won't yell at you like I did yesterday."

"It's fine. You were probably right anyway."

I was unable to look at myself objectively, so the things she said to me had probably been correct. I just didn't have the guts to admit it before.

We finished packing, and as soon as Odajima stood up, I headed out of the classroom. She hesitantly followed after me.

Out in the hallway, I spotted two classmates walking side by side.

"Ah..."

One of the students stopped and looked at me.

It was Ai.

Andou stood next to her.

"Odajima and...Yuzuru." She hesitantly lifted a hand and smiled awkwardly at us.

"...Mizuno," I said quietly in response.

She flinched and looked down with a conflicted expression. I could've called her Ai like she wanted me to, but for some reason I didn't.

"A-are you two going to your club now?" she asked after looking up again.

"Yeah." I nodded.

She gave us a stiff smile and nodded back. "Oh. I'm—"

"She's going on a date with me. Aren't you?" Andou interrupted her.

A date. I felt a throbbing pain in my chest at Andou's words.

Ai hastily waved her hand. "N-no, it's not a date... But I said we could hang out. He promised to go anywhere with me, so..."

"Yeah, we can go wherever you want, Mizuno. Anywhere's fun with a cute girl like you," he said cheerfully. It was a pretty cheesy line, but it sounded strangely fine coming from him. It seemed natural.

Anywhere would be fun with Ai.

I remembered there was a time when I thought the same thing. And if I hadn't had all those unnecessary feelings, then maybe we could've stayed together forever.

"Well, we'll see ya then." Andou waved and winked at me. As he walked past, he whispered, "I'll take you out to eat sometime." Then he continued down the hallway.

Ai turned back once to look at me, then awkwardly glanced away.

I stared absently after them until I felt an elbow jab into my side, right into my rib. I yelped out in pain.

"Ow! What'd you do that for?!"

"Are you stupid or something? You're *really* okay with this?" Odajima was glaring at me.

See, she is mad.

I pursed my lips and shook my head. "It doesn't matter if I'm okay with it. It's none of my—"

“That’s not the look someone gets on their face when it’s none of their business!” Odajima yelled. It felt like the air around us had completely frozen.

Our classmates, who had been chatting inside the classroom, glanced toward us in surprise. Odajima noticed and awkwardly cleared her throat. “I’m going to the club room,” she said.

I frowned. “I don’t like being yelled at.”

“I said I wasn’t gonna yell at you!” Odajima yelled.

I knew that I was being pathetic. But I thought that Odajima was being a little too impatient as well.

“Lately you really irritate me, you know that, Yuzu?” Odajima said as soon as we reached the club room. She glanced over at me as she spoke.

The room had been closed up during the school day, so it was muggy, but not hot enough to turn on the air conditioner. I listened to Odajima as I opened the windows. The humid summer breeze blew inside, and it felt a little easier to breathe for a moment.

The wind tousled Odajima’s wavy hair. She pushed it out of her face with irritation and sat down on the sofa.

“Yuzu,” she said, her gaze on the floor. She spoke quietly, but since the room was so small, I could hear her loud and clear. “You always seem so calm and objective... You’re different from other guys.”

I looked at her with wide eyes and shook my head. “That’s not true—”

“You don’t get it at all, Yuzu!” She raised her voice, her words overlapping with mine. Then she gasped and covered her mouth with a hand. “...I’m sorry.”

She was apologizing because she’d promised not to yell at me.

“It’s fine. I know you’re mad,” I said, and she nodded. But then she shook her head.

“No, I’m not mad. I’m irritated.”

“Because you found out I’m not the person you thought I was?” My voice

came out sounding cold again. It seemed like I couldn't control my emotions at all.

She was speechless for a moment but then shook her head. "...No, I just didn't know. This is who you are, too, right? And that's fine." She looked down at the floor again.

Her eyes seemed restless as she spoke, and I got the feeling she was carefully choosing her words.

"Before, I said you didn't get it at all. But...I could say the same thing about myself." She looked up at me. "So please...tell me about you and Mizuno."

She was staring so intently at me that I felt flustered, like I didn't have anywhere to run. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't.

Odajima had never asked me for anything before. She was always laid-back, showing up now and then like a stray cat. That was the kind of girl she was.

Yet lately, she'd started raising her voice at me, and that voice, along with her eyes, seemed desperate to tell me something.

And now she was asking to hear my pathetic story.

"Why...?" I tried to squeeze out a reply, but the only thing I managed to express was my desire to run away. "Why do you want to know about that?"

Odajima, her face still serious, replied, "Because you're worried about it."

"But it's...", I started to say, then stopped myself when I saw Odajima getting angrier.

"Don't say it's none of my business!"

That was exactly what I'd been about to say. I was going to push her away, and she stopped me before I could. And for some reason, she looked like she was going to cry.

Why are you making that face?

"I don't blame you for thinking that. If I were a complete stranger, it'd be none of my business, but..." She forced the words out as tears welled up in her eyes. "A-aren't we...in this club...together, Yuzu?"

I gasped.

She was right.

There was a time when Odajima never showed up to club meetings. But one day, she ran into the room soaked through with rain and said, “Don’t ask, okay?!” Back then, I’d said basically the same thing to her and got her to open up to me.

This was no different.

It wasn’t my business, but I’d wanted to know.

I’d thought that if I could scoop up even a little bit of the sadness she was feeling as she sat there, drenched from the rain, I might lessen the sense of hopelessness she seemed to radiate.

“...You’re right.” I nodded.

At first, I’d thought Odajima was just asking me about Mizuno out of pure curiosity. But that wasn’t it at all.

Apparently, I’d really worried her without realizing it. It took her frantic words to make me understand that.

“All right. I’ll tell you. But it’s not a fun story.”

“I can tell... But I still want to hear it.”

“Okay, then.” I slowly sat down in my chair.

For a while, I simply stared at the table.

But then, bit by bit, I began to tell Odajima the story of my past with Ai.

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“And that’s why she and I broke up. Then a few weeks later, her dad got transferred and they had to move.”

By the time I finished telling Odajima everything, it had gotten dark outside, and the weather had soured. We could hear the rain striking the ground beyond the window. I glanced outside and saw big fat drops falling from the sky.

“Then she transferred back here, and we had a surprise reunion.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And she said she still loves me.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Odajima had listened to my story quietly, giving me only occasional feedback to let me know she was still listening. Sometimes her expression would change, but she didn’t seem particularly surprised by any of it.

“I...” After I’d finished, I added in a hoarse voice more like a sigh, “I don’t have the right to be with her.”

Odajima put on an unreadable expression but didn’t respond.

“Ai said her philosophy is to live freely. I know that. But I get in the way of her freedom,” I said, looking down. “And I can’t bear it.”

Her eyebrow quirked up at that, and she finally spoke. “...So that’s how you really feel, then.”

“...What?”

After listening to my whole story, she’d finally expressed her opinion on the matter.

“You can’t bear it. That’s how you really feel, right?”

“Well, yeah...”

“So what was the deal with that biiiiiig long story?”

“Huh? What do you...?” I was confused.

Her words grew more impassioned as she spoke. “You know, all that stuff about how she likes being free, and how that’s her life or whatever. You kept saying stuff like that and glossing over your real feelings.”

She stood up from the sofa and came closer to me, staring at me head-on.

“You wanted Mizuno all to yourself, didn’t you?”

I drew in a sharp breath.

She was right. I couldn’t hold back my arrogant, selfish desires. *That’s why—*

“And what’s wrong with that?” she asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“...Huh?” I blurted out.

She took a deep breath, this time not bothering to conceal her anger. “I said, what’s wrong with that?!”

I didn’t say a word. I just stared at her with wide eyes.

She continued impatiently. “Mizuno really loved you. But she also wanted to live freely. That’s all it was, right? What’s so surprising about you two still having feelings for each other?”

“But if I get in the way of her freedom, she’ll—”

“Noooo, that’s not what I’m talking about!” Odajima yelled, kicking the leg of my chair as hard as she could. She used more force than I’d expected, and I let out a yelp as the chair tumbled to the floor, and I fell along with it.

Odajima kicked the chair aside and grabbed me by my collar. Once again, she had her first two buttons undone, and I got another eyeful of her chest.

“What I’m trying to tell you is that both you and Mizuno chose to be together!!” she shouted.

I forgot to breathe as I stared at Odajima, astonished.

We chose to be together.

That’s what dating was, right? We chose that. And then I regretted my decision.

Tears filled Odajima’s eyes as she frantically continued, “You both have your own universes and your own sparkle! If you combine two universes into one, does that mean one loses its sparkle?! Of course not!”

Her eyes were incredibly serious.

She was mad. But it wasn’t ordinary anger. I knew that she was really admonishing me. I sat there listening to her, unable to say anything. It felt like she was a parent lecturing her child.

“Mizuno was selfish, right? She jerked you around and assumed that because she was happy, you would be, too!”

“That’s because I couldn’t understand her and—”

“No! That’s wrong! Ugh, you’re so stupid!”

Still holding my collar, she shook me.

“You should’ve been selfish, too!” she yelled. “Why...why weren’t you more selfish with her?!”

And then it hit me.

It was true... I’d never said anything to Ai until the moment I hit my limit.

All my resentment had kept building up, and I’d kept brushing it away, telling myself, *That’s just part of her charm*, until I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Why didn’t you say, ‘I want you to pay more attention to me,’ or ‘You need to consider my feelings more’? You *wimp*!” Odajima continued.

I wasn’t sure where all this passion was coming from. But her words stabbed me like a knife. And being called a wimp revived the anger that had dissipated earlier.

I was sure she was right. But she had no idea how much pain I’d been in. So how could she talk like that?

“No!” Before I knew it, I was shouting, too. Odajima’s eyes went wide. “No matter how much I love someone, I don’t want to be with them if it means they have to change their way of life!”

She hesitated for a moment and gritted her teeth, but then she shook her head and yelled back at me. “There you go again, making all the decisions yourself!”

“.....!”

I wanted to yell at her and tell her she was wrong, but I couldn’t.

“That’s how *you* feel,” she said, “but what about Mizuno?”

“A-Ai...” I felt my tone growing weaker.

I wanted Ai to live freely. It wasn’t good for her to be shut up in a cage, unable to do the things she wanted.

But how did Ai feel?

Come to think of it, I didn't even know what she thought of me. She'd only ever told me she loved me. That simple phrase was all I'd ever heard.

"Did she ever say anything like 'Don't tell me how to live my life!' or 'I want you to keep encouraging me to be free forever!'?"

"Well, no..."

"Everything, every single thing, was your own selfish assumption! You pushed her away assuming you knew how she felt! What do you think that was like for Mizuno?" Odajima had been running on the heat of her anger, and suddenly her face crumpled. Her eyes were filled with tears. "There's no way...that made her happy."

Her grip on my collar loosened. She let me go, and I lightly thumped my head against the floor.

Odajima was crying. Tears streamed down her face as she collapsed, sobbing.

I was completely flustered. I hadn't seen her cry like that since the day she'd been caught in the pouring rain.

"Wh-why are you crying?"

"...Don't look, idiot."

She turned her back to me and wiped her tears away with the sleeve of her cardigan. I listened to her sniffing, still lying on the floor in a daze.

I thought that part of being kind was staying out of people's business.

My parents had a very hands-off approach. As long as I kept up my grades, they didn't interfere with my life. When I reached junior high, I really appreciated that about them. I think it saved me a lot of day-to-day stress. I never really went through a rebellious phase.

Since I grew up in such a relaxed environment, I always felt bad for my classmates who complained about their controlling parents, and I thought I was lucky that mine didn't try to tell me how to live my life.

That's why I always thought it wasn't my place to tell others how to live theirs. And I still felt that way.

When I read, every time I came across a character who accepted others exactly as they were, I'd see them as exceptionally mature, and hope I could be like them.

But Odajima's words really hit home.

The moment Ai and I had made the decision to date, we shared everything, and her life was no longer "none of my business."

We'd started as friends, but the bond between us was more than that. Ai wanted a deeper relationship, and that's why she had confessed her feelings to me.

The days I spent with Ai were so fun. Even though the scenery around me was the same, it felt like there were fresh surprises around every corner—like I was in a whole new world.

Maybe Ai felt the same way.

I was so caught up in society's idea of love that I resented our relationship not progressing, and those feelings built up inside me.

But at the same time, I loved the way she defied convention, and that was why I'd started dating her. I felt strongly, almost obsessively, that I shouldn't say anything about the way she lived.

But Ai and I had been boyfriend and girlfriend. I hadn't needed to put up with anything. All we'd had to do was make time to share each other's perspectives and values and try to reach a compromise.

But I was the one who turned away from that and ran, all the while telling myself that I was the one making concessions.

Really, I just wasn't ready to participate in someone else's life.

I inhaled deeply, like I was finally remembering to breathe, and my focus gradually drifted back to the room and the situation at hand.

Slowly, I stood up. Odajima flinched in surprise and hesitantly went back to the sofa.

"...You two got the chance to see each other again," she said softly, before letting out a big sniffle. "So you need to talk it over. You shouldn't just bottle up

your emotions and be sad every day.”

“...Yeah.” I nodded.

After that, both Odajima and I were quiet for a long time.

I could hear rain falling outside the window. Soon, the room was filled with the unique, nostalgic smell of dry, hot earth suddenly soaked with rain.

“...Yuzu,” Odajima murmured weakly. “...I’m sorry I yelled at you and grabbed you like that.”

“...It’s okay. I’m sorry, too.” I shook my head and bowed.

I’d never seen her so angry before, but I was keenly aware that she’d acted like that precisely because she was so worried about me.

“This is just how I get when I lose my temper.” She hung her head dejectedly.

First she was furious, and now she was depressed. I wasn’t sure what to say to her.

After thinking about it for a while, I hesitantly pointed at her shirt. “You should really button that up,” I said.

She gasped a little and looked down at her chest. Then she sniffled. “...It’s fine. Today I’m wearing a cute bra.” That was all she said.





[CHAPTER 8]

YOU ARE
MY REGRET...

By the time club activities had ended and we were ready to head home, a downpour had started. It was a hard, muggy rain, typical of summer.

“Ah, geez. It’s really pouring.” Odajima took her small folding umbrella from her bag and looked at me. “Wanna share it?”

I shook my head and gestured to one side of the entrance.

“No, I’m going the other way once we get to the station. I’ll just borrow an umbrella from here.”

We had a bunch of umbrellas in a box near the school entrance that had been there for ages. No one knew who they belonged to, so anyone was free to borrow one in case there was a surprise rainstorm on the way home from school.

When Odajima saw me take an umbrella from the box, she pouted and said, “Fine, then. It’s your loss. You could’ve shared a tiny umbrella with a beautiful girl.”

“You’re right.” I nodded.

She frowned and then blushed.

“You were supposed to make a joke.”

“Was I? I’m sorry.” She was the one teasing me, so I wished she wouldn’t get embarrassed.

We’d just had our first major fight, and she’d been quiet ever since. I took a good look at her and—yeah, she was definitely attractive.

She wore *gyaru* fashion and had a kind of unapproachable vibe, so I didn’t think she was all that popular, but I’d heard several guys from our class saying how much they liked her.

“I bet all the boys would be after you if you joined a sports team,” I said.

She raised an eyebrow and kicked the floor. The sound of her shoe smacking the tile produced an echo.

“Stop teasing me already! I’m done talking about that!”

“Ha-ha. Okay, then.” I chuckled and was about to open my umbrella when I

remembered there was still something I hadn't told her. "Odajima."

"Yeah?"

"...Thanks."

Her eyes widened, and she turned away in a huff. "Huh? Thanks for what?"

You know what, I thought, but I didn't say anything else and just opened my umbrella.

The rain showed no signs of slowing down as Odajima and I went home together for the first time in a while.

We parted ways at the station, and I headed down the familiar streets toward my house.

The rain had only grown stronger. I walked slowly, listening to the sound of the raindrops striking my plastic umbrella.

My feet were soaking wet, and my socks were squishy with water.

I suddenly thought about Ai.

I passed the post office. It was already closed for the day, and its shutters were down. The eaves of its roof extended farther than the other buildings nearby, and I remembered the time Ai and I had run beneath them.

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It was a hot day at the beginning of summer.

We'd spent it having fun at the park together, laughing and talking. On the way home, it suddenly began pouring rain.

"It was supposed to be sunny all day today! Wow, it's really raining hard!" Ai laughed happily as the rain soaked her. I couldn't help but laugh, too. After all, it was raining buckets. What else could we do but laugh?

"Let's shelter from the rain over there!" Ai pointed to the post office and started running, cracking up laughing the whole way. I chased after her, and we ran beneath the eaves.

“I have a towel. It might be a little sweaty, though.” My parents had given it to me to wipe off my sweat on particularly hot days. I took it out of my backpack and handed it to Ai.

“Are you sure? Thanks for letting me use it.”

She took it from me and quickly dried off her face.

Even though I told her it might be sweaty, she didn’t care. It made me a little happy to see her wipe off her face with it.

I looked down and saw that her wet shirt was clinging to her body, transparent from the rain. I could see her pale skin and the straps of her bra across her shoulders. I quickly averted my eyes.

“Rain is fun, isn’t it?” she said, excitement in her voice.

“Fun?”

“Yeah. And a surprise rainstorm is even better!” She looked up at the rainclouds mercilessly pouring down on us and said, “It makes you feel like you can’t win.”

Her words melted into the sound of the rain. They were natural and simple.

“No matter how hard we try, we don’t stand a chance against nature.” Her eyes narrowed as she spoke. “A day like this reminds you of that.”

I’d never had much sentimental attachment to rain. I didn’t hate rainy days. I just thought getting soaked was irritating, and that was all.

But Ai was thinking about it on a much larger scale, and she enjoyed it. Even though we were soaked, she still had a bright smile on her face. I stole a glance at her and thought, *I can’t win against you, either.*

“It’s hard to see stuff like that while the sun is shining. That’s why rainy days are so fun.”

She looked over at me. Suddenly our eyes met, and I quickly averted my gaze.

“What about you, Yuzuru? Do you like rainy days?” she asked.

I thought about what I should say, then decided to simply tell the truth. “I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it before.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I don’t love them or hate them. I just think, ‘Oh, it’s raining.’”

“Ha-ha. Oh.” She giggled and then looked back up at the sky. “You just accept things how they are, don’t you, Yuzuru?”

“Huh?”

“I think that rain has a way of making everyone feel something. People who hate getting wet in the rain get grumpy, and people who love the rain like me feel excited,” she said happily, glancing at my profile. Her gaze was very gentle. “But you just think, ‘Oh, it’s raining,’ right? Ah-ha-ha. You sound like a god or something!” she said with a laugh.

You’re the one who’s like a god, I thought.

She accepted everything and enjoyed it, and I had a feeling she thought about things much more deeply than I did.

That’s why I could hang out with her every day and never get bored. She was interested in so many different things that she was always moving on to the next one. I was so enthralled with her—all I did was bathe in the light that she gave off. I didn’t warm her like the sun or cloud her heart like the rain; I just stood beside her.

“Yuzuru.”

Suddenly she was resting her head on my shoulder, like a friendly kitten rubbing her cheek against her owner.

“I’m glad it rained today,” she said.

I gazed at her silently.

“Because...” She looked up at me with those big round eyes of hers, and I saw them soften. “I was able to tell you how much I love the rain.”

I felt a squeezing sensation in my chest.

This was love.

I was in love with Ai. I already knew that. But right then, I became intensely aware of it.

What should I do to stay by her side?

And just then she murmured, as if offering up a prayer, “I wish we could stay here and watch the rain together forever, Yuzuru.”

My heart pounded as I pressed my shoulder into hers.

“So do I.”

The roar of the rain suddenly swelled, bringing me back to my senses.

I realized I was still standing outside the post office.

“...Really takes me back,” I murmured as I started walking again.

In the end, I was still in the same place. The longer I stood next to her, the less I could imagine anything different for us. And unable to come up with anything else, I’d run away. How did she feel as she watched me leave that day? Did she think I’d betrayed her...?

These thoughts circled in my head as I walked through the shopping district. Then, all of a sudden, I spotted someone halfway up the hill to the park.

It was pouring rain, and they were standing there with no umbrella. It was so unusual, I couldn’t help but stare. And when I realized who it was, my heart skipped a beat.

“M-Mizuno...,” I called out quietly. But she seemed to be spacing out and didn’t hear me.

“Mi—”

I started to call her name again, then stopped myself. When I opened my mouth a third time, I yelled much louder.

“Ai!”

She flinched and turned toward me. Her eyes opened wide in disbelief. “Yuzuru...? But why...?”

Why...? Because this is the way I go home. I was about to blurt out the obvious answer, but I stopped myself and ran over to her. Even from far away, I could tell she was soaked. This was no time to be chatting about things that didn’t matter.

“What are you doing?! You’re soaking wet!” I held my umbrella out toward her, but she weakly shook her head.

“I wanted to get wet. It’s fine.”

“You’re more than wet; you’re soaked to the bone! You’ll get sick.”

“You’ll get wet, too.”

“I don’t care!” I got irritated with Ai for stubbornly refusing my umbrella and grabbed her, pulling her in out of the rain.

She looked at me with a weak smile. “Ha-ha... You’re so kind, Yuzuru.”

“What in the world are you doing here? Where’s Andou?”

“He left a long time ago.”

“Well, then, what are you still doing...?” Our gazes met in the middle of my sentence, and I realized that her eyes were red and swollen from crying. “What’s wrong?”

She’d been standing in the rain without an umbrella, crying.

She looked at the ground. “Andou got angry with me.”

“A-angry? Why?” I asked.

She kept her eyes down and said, “Because...all I did...was talk about you.”

I breathed in sharply. *Why?* I wanted to ask, but I stopped myself.

Why would you talk about me on a date with a good-looking guy like Andou? I wanted to ask her why, but she looked so pitiful, I wasn’t sure if there was any point.

“I...,” she started quietly, her voice falling toward the ground along with the rain. “I thought I loved this town.”

She looked up toward the post office. We could hear the sound of the rain pounding on its eaves.

“So when I found out my dad was being transferred here again, I was so happy. This place sparkled in my memories.”

Her eyes were trembling slightly. They were filled with tears, and although I

could see the lights from town reflected on their moist surface, they lacked her usual sparkle.

“Andou said he’d take me wherever I wanted to go, so I walked around the shopping district with him. Because I like this place.”

Ai and Andou had walked side by side here. Just imagining it made me uncomfortable. I could picture the scene, but the image was fuzzy in my head.

She smiled a little hopelessly and said, “Andou is a really friendly, nice guy. It was fun talking to him. But...it was shockingly different.”

“Different?”

She nodded. “Yeah... I mean the town. Nothing felt fresh. It was like I’d wandered into a place I didn’t even know.” Her shoulders shook slightly. Her voice was trembling, too. “I—I...” I saw tears form in her eyes again. Light glinted off them here and there. “I thought even if I was alone, I wouldn’t have a care in the world. If I was all by myself, I could do the things I wanted and not have anyone bother me. And everything I gained would be mine, like a precious treasure. But...but...!”

She suddenly lifted her face. She stared at me, her eyes brimming with tears. “This town is filled with memories of you, Yuzuru...!” She had to squeeze out the words, and they made my heart ache.

I felt the same way.

After she moved, memories I shared with her would suddenly hit me when I walked around town. And every time I saw this hill—the one we were now standing on—I’d think of the park that lay at its summit and remember the times I spent with her there.

I’d tortured myself with those memories for years.

“The town didn’t sparkle like it does when I’m with you. Suddenly I realized all I was doing was talking about things we did together. I—I realized I didn’t love the town, I just loved you!” she said, sobbing.

“You didn’t push me away, Yuzuru,” she continued. “I hated dealing with other people and just liked being alone, and you accepted that about me. You

walked side by side with me and listened and acknowledged the things I said with a smile. B-but now I realize...I can't be alone anymore...!"

She didn't try to wipe her tears. She just stared at me with red eyes as she continued.

My heart hurt, and my vision started to blur.

"Breaking up with you...hurt so much...!" she shouted.

But even her shouts were obscured by the noise of the rain, so only I was able to hear them.

She reached out and grabbed my sleeve.

"Hey, Yuzuru..."

Her wet eyes sparkled, tinged with sadness and pain as she looked at me. "Do...do you really hate me now...?"

I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

Hot emotions swirled inside me, along with everything I wanted to say. But all I managed was a weak sigh.

"I know that I hurt you a lot. I really regret how I acted when we broke up... So this time I told myself I'd tell you exactly how I felt..." Tears streamed out of her eyes, one after the other.

Ai was always so mysterious and impassive, yet she always seemed so happy. And from my point of view, she always looked so strong.

But right now she stood in front of me, crying.

"But back at the park, you said you'd started to hate me. Wh-when I thought you might really hate me, I...!" I couldn't believe how hard she was crying. "I felt so sad, I thought my heart might break...!"

"Ai... N-no..."

"Yuzuru... I—I'm sorry... I'll fix myself... I'll do anything to make you love me again!" she sobbed as she clung even tighter to my sleeve. "Please don't hate me...!"

She sounded like a pleading child. She wasn't trying to persuade me; she was

just being honest, telling me what she wanted. But at the same time, I knew that it had taken everything she had to say those words.

I accepted them head-on. It felt like my vision was wavering. And before I realized what I was doing, I'd grabbed her by the shoulders and yelled, "I don't hate you!"

My umbrella dropped to the ground with a splash. "I—I don't hate you, Ai... I'm sorry... I could...never hate you."

I'd wished so many times that I could hate her. Especially right after we broke up, when I'd tried so hard to forget her. But after spending so long regretting, there was something I knew all too well.

I could never hate her. I loved her.

I loved her smile—the one that felt like being bathed in a warm sunbeam. I loved how she could find the slightest joy in everyday life. I loved how she seemed so mysterious and yet so innocent at the same time.

I was confident that I knew her better than anyone.

That's right. I loved her. And that was why...

"But..." I finally said the words that had been weighing on my heart—that I'd been unable to suppress.

"It hurt..."

× × ×



I'd wanted to say that for so long. I'd wanted someone to listen. But I couldn't say it.

Even when Odajima had asked me to tell her, I armed myself with logic to hide the way I felt. Odajima saw through that and kindly urged me to open up, but I still missed the opportunity to express my feelings exactly as they were.

My true feelings were simple, and maybe they were illogical, but they had put down roots deep in my heart and kept a tight hold on me.

And it hurt.

"Dating you...was really...painful for me...!" The words just flowed out.

I loved Ai.

She was the most free-spirited person I'd ever known, and she was beautiful like a butterfly. And I loved her.

But every time the desire to become special to her welled up inside me, it was painful. Even though I knew it was just because of my own ego, it still hurt.

I wanted to be important to her. I wanted her to realize how I felt, even a little bit, without my having to say it.

"I'm sorry, Yuzuru, I'm sorry..." Ai sobbed like a child pleading with her parents for forgiveness.

I shook my head. "No, Ai. No..."

Hearing her words made me understand. The thing I wanted—to be special to her—was already there inside her, just in a different form.

She was way more mature than me and had simply cherished our time together. I hadn't realized that. I'd never looked any further than the promises she'd broken.

"I didn't tell you that I was hurting," I said. "I didn't tell you...! So..." *I ran away without hearing you out.*

Not only that; I did it without telling her how I really felt. I just left her.

I hadn't been able to open up to her and tell her that I was hurting. I'd blamed everything on her and fled.

I was a coward.

And that was why I had to tell her now. I couldn't run away this time.

"It's not your fault, Ai," I said.

Being with her was painful for me. And that pain had covered up the joy and happiness she'd given me until I felt paralyzed by it. And when that happened, I'd run.

And when she watched me walk away without saying any of the things that mattered, she'd been in pain, too.

It was so ridiculous and pitiful. The epitome of a junior high romance—a childish love.

But to us, it was everything. That's all there was to it.

"...You..." Ai stared at me, her eyes wavering. "You don't hate me?"

"No, I don't hate you."

"So then, can we be friends again?"

"...Yeah. Let's start over. From the very beginning." I nodded, and her eyes widened.

"I'm so..." I couldn't tell if she was smiling or crying as she spoke. "I'm so happy!" Then she burst into tears again.

"A-Ai!"

When I saw her crumple to the ground, I finally came back to myself. My umbrella had rolled down the hill, and I hastily went to pick it up and came back. I held it over her until she stopped crying.

It poured the whole time. Water ran down the hill like a river.

But that same water had washed away our muddled relationship and let us start over from zero...

For the first time in my life, I felt truly happy that it was raining.

“Welcome home! It’s really coming down outside... Whoa! What happened to you?! Why are you soaked?!”

The moment I got home, my mom ran off to the bathroom in shock.

There was no way I could send Ai home in that state, so I’d brought her home with me.

“We need to get you into the bath! Yuzuru, yours can wait. Here’s a towel. Wipe yourself off. Ai, you come with me. I just filled up the bathtub, so you can get right in!”

“I—I’m sorry for coming over unannounced...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! Hurry up now or you’ll catch a cold!” Mom ushered Ai to the bathroom.

I watched as I toweled off my wet hair.

Though my mom was pretty laid-back about most things, I was grateful for how she took charge of the situation at times like this.

“Enjoy your bath!” Mom came back out into the hallway after she’d pushed Ai into the bathroom. She sighed and looked at me. “Yuzuru...”

“I’m sorry I brought her here without calling first.”

“That’s fine, but...” She fell silent for a few seconds and then asked me directly, “Did you two get back together?”

“...No.”

“I see,” she said plainly and didn’t ask anything else. “Make sure you wipe yourself off *before* you come inside the house. The floor’s soaking wet.”

“Okay.” I nodded and pressed the towel against my drenched school uniform. Mom was about to go back into the living room when I called out to her from behind. “Um, but...”

“Yes?” She turned around and gave me a curious look.

I felt myself blush as I spoke. “...We did make up.”

Mom’s eyes widened as she looked at me in surprise. “...I see.” This time she gave me a faint smile and nodded.

“The rain just won’t stop, huh?” Ai murmured as she looked out my window, sitting on my bed.

“Yeah.” I nodded, feeling a little uncomfortable.

We had both turned up looking like drowned rats, and after taking turns in the bath, we were killing time in my room until the rain stopped.

“Mom said if it doesn’t let up by nightfall, she’ll drive you home.”

“What? No, I’d feel bad...”

“Don’t worry. My mom doesn’t care about little stuff like that.”

“...Oh. Well, I guess she’s *your* mom, after all.” She nodded with a smile.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what I said!” She giggled and looked out the window.

We could hear the clothes dryer going on the first floor. I figured Mom had thrown Ai’s uniform in the dryer. *I should probably thank her later.*

I stole a glance at Ai. She was wearing some clean sweats of mine. I wasn’t in great shape or anything, but I was still taller and bigger. Naturally, my sweats were baggy on her, and the sleeves of the shirt and the pant legs were way too long. But I could still see the outline of her body. I felt my insides heating up as I looked at her, so I averted my gaze.

I was a teenage boy after all. Obviously, I’d thought about Ai’s body.

When we were dating, she’d let herself get wet in the rain, and when she wasn’t wearing her uniform, she tended to choose shorts and tank tops, which only drew my attention to the shape of her body even more.

And it looked like she’d grown quite a lot in the years we’d spent apart. Her face had gotten more mature, and her chest and hips were clearly more developed than before...

Come to think of it, we’d gotten so wet that surely her bra and underwear had gotten soaked, too. Obviously, I didn’t have any spare women’s underwear for her, and I wondered what she was wearing now.

I looked at her again and felt my heart beating much harder than necessary. I shook my head to snap out of it.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Nothing...”

Things had gotten so serious earlier with the two of us opening up about our feelings, and I was exasperated at myself for thinking all kinds of naughty thoughts just because we were alone in my room together.

This was why I always lost sight of the important things—I let myself get carried away by my hormones.

“.....”

I suddenly realized that Ai was staring at me.

My heart skipped a beat. I wondered if she had sensed I was looking at her in a dirty way.

“Hey, Yuzuru?” All of a sudden, she called my name. Her voice echoed quietly in my small bedroom, making me nervous.

“Wh-what?”

She blushed a little and fidgeted. I wondered what she was thinking.

“D-do you want to...kiss?”

“Huh?!” I blurted out loudly, shocked by her sudden question. Then I pressed a hand over my mouth.

The sound of the dryer on the first floor had stopped. But then it started up again. I was certain they had heard me downstairs.

“...You don’t want to?”

“N-no, it’s not that..... It’s just, um...why?” I was completely flustered. My face felt hot.

Back in junior high, if she she’d asked me something like that, I would’ve been over the moon with happiness. But now my mind was completely blank.

I never imagined she’d say such a thing.

She pursed her lips and pouted a bit. “Well... We never did it, so...”

I exhaled slowly, trying to calm myself down. My breath felt surprisingly hot. It was strange how taking a few deep breaths could have such an effect. I slowly inhaled and then let the air back out. That action alone helped my body and mind relax and helped me regain my composure.

“That’s true, but...I just thought you weren’t interested in that kind of thing,” I told her honestly.

Her eyes darted around awkwardly for a few moments, then she nodded. “Well, yeah... Back then I didn’t really understand kissing and stuff.”

That made sense to me.

“But after I transferred schools and told everyone how I had a boyfriend before, they would all ask me.”

“Ask you what?”

“If I kissed you. And if we, you know...had se—”

“That’s okay, you don’t have to say it,” I hastily interrupted her before she could blurt out something wild. If I heard her say that word, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to keep my cool anymore.

She blushed and continued, “A-anyway. You wanted to do that before, didn’t you?”

“Huh?” I blushed, too, and let out a silly noise of surprise.

“I heard that guys want to do that kind of stuff with girls when they start dating.”

Who in the world was filling Ai’s head with such ideas? I mean, it was true, but still...

“So I thought that maybe if I didn’t do that with you, you’d start hating me again...” She looked around the room.

It was clear to me that she was pushing herself. “Ai.” She sat up straight when I called her name.

“Y-yes? So do you want to do it...?”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” I tried not to make another weird noise and shook my head. I had to speak clearly. “We’re not dating yet.”

Her eyes went wide, and she sighed. “Oh! R-right, yeah, of course...” She must’ve been so relieved that we made up that she was thinking a million miles ahead.

I was inwardly relieved that I’d been able to make myself understood and that she’d calmed down.

“Okay, then, Yuzuru. Will you go out with me?”

“W-w-wait!”

Never mind; she wasn’t calm at all.

I held up my hand to stop her. My mind couldn’t catch up. It was true that we liked each other. We both knew that. But...

I drew in a slow breath and closed my eyes to try to sort through my thoughts. Then, when I opened them again, I told her how I honestly felt. “Listen, Ai.”

“What?”

“Right now...I don’t want to go out with you.”

Her eyes went wide, and her mouth hung open. She was so shocked, I could almost hear a sound effect like out of a cartoon.

When I saw her eyes filling with tears again, I hastily continued, “But I don’t hate you! I swear!”

“Th-then, why...?”

She looked really shaken up. Since Ai and I hadn’t communicated properly with words, we’d misunderstood each other’s feelings.

Ai had thought she could be herself completely when she was with me. She had believed I fully supported her free-spirited ways, and she’d loved that about me.

And since I’d fallen in love with her as she was, I’d felt trapped, like I had to continue enabling and supporting whatever she did.

The misunderstandings we had about each other continued until our relationship collapsed. I never wanted to break up with someone like that ever again.

“If we go out now, we’ll just end up the same way we did before.”

Ai drew in a sharp breath, her face solemn.

I wanted to be able to tell her that this time things would go smoothly. If I could do the things I couldn’t back then, I wouldn’t struggle.

We needed time. And we had plenty it.

“I want to spend more time with you as friends. Then we can find out what we like and what we don’t like.” She listened seriously as I spoke. “I think we should take it slow and be friends first. And then...” My voice was shaking with nerves, but I kept going. “And then if we feel like we still need each other, then...” My face felt hot.

For the first time in a long while, I remembered how much courage it took to tell someone something so important.

“...Then we can start dating again.”

When I’d finished, Ai stared absently at me for a while. But gradually her face lit up. She jumped off my bed with a bright, cheerful smile. “Okay!”

“Oof!” She tackled me with a hug and squeezed me tightly. “A-are you sure you understand this time?” I asked.

She whispered into my ear, “I understand! And I can tell that you cherish our relationship!” My body stiffened when I felt her hot breath on my ear.

The feeling of her breasts pushing against my chest was so soft, I thought maybe she wasn’t wearing underwear after all.

“Yuzuru...I love you,” she whispered, making my heart skip a beat. “I need you. I’m totally useless without you.”

I just nodded silently, my face flushing.

Hearing her admit her feelings in such a straightforward manner was testing my self-control.

Even though I'd just told her I wanted to take it slow and start over as friends, my heart was full of a typical teenage boy's desires. I wanted to pull her close and kiss her right away.

But for the time being, I needed to get her off me and calm her down. Just as that thought crossed my mind, Ai suddenly let go and looked at me. "So I want you to feel the same way, Yuzuru!" A smile bloomed on her face.

"I really love you and I want you to love me back, okay?"

".....!"

Her simple words shot straight through my heart.

I'd always found her whimsical actions so mysterious. But now that we'd reunited, I'd begun to wonder if she was simply pure and innocent. Unlike me, she faced her feelings head-on and cherished each one of them. And I loved that about her.

"Okay." I looked into her eyes and nodded. I wished I could be like her.

She was as free as a butterfly and as bright as the sun. At some point, I had stopped looking at her as a girl and started worshipping her. And the fact that I couldn't make that goddess completely mine had hurt me.

I wanted to see her flitting around freely. But at the same time, I wanted her to look at me. I wanted that passionate gaze of hers to point at me alone. And the flame of that desire had consumed my heart.

It was a complete contradiction. And this time, I couldn't make the same mistake.

I needed to stand side by side with Ai—the girl, not the goddess—listen to her words, and tell her how I felt.

I wanted us to look at the same scenery and make memories together.

I wanted us to build a relationship where we simply valued our time together.

So I murmured my next words like a vow.

"This time I'll love you back the right way."

Her eyes grew round and wavered. Tears spilled out and ran down her

cheeks.

“Okay... It’s a promise, then.” She nodded and smiled, wiping her tears away.

“Oh...” I noticed a dark red light outside the window behind Ai. It was the light of the setting sun seeping through the clouds, which had faded from black to soft gray.

Ai flung open the window. “The rain stopped!” She smiled cheerfully and turned toward me.

I moved closer to her and looked outside.

The gap in the clouds was tiny. The whole sky was covered with gray, but the rain clouds had parted just enough to let the sun shine through.

Its red light reflected off the puddles on the road and made them sparkle. It was very beautiful.

“That’s our first one,” Ai whispered from beside me.

“Hm?”

“The first scenery we saw together since making up,” she said with a giggle.

I laughed and narrowed my eyes as I looked outside at the glimmering pavement.

Would we continue sharing moments like this as we grew closer?

I hoped so.

“Don’t move, Yuzuru.”

“Huh?”

Ai spoke suddenly, and I was just about to turn toward her when—

—I felt something hot and soft on my cheek.

Her face was right next to mine, pressing against it.

She slowly pulled away from me.

I looked at her in surprise and saw that she was blushing.

“Th-that’s just a friend kiss,” she said.

“F-friend kiss...”

“Yeah... A friend kiss.”

Don't you think that was a little sudden and forward? I thought, but that seemed insensitive, so I didn't say it.

“...Haah!” Ai let out a breath. Her face, which was already tinted red by the setting sun, had turned a deep crimson. “It feels like my heart's going to explode.”

“...Then you shouldn't have done it,” I said.

That seemed to ease her nerves because she started laughing. But then she blushed again. “When we do the kind of kiss that's not for friends, my heart might pound so hard, I'll die!”

I thought about the meaning of what she'd said, and I felt my face blush, too. I brushed it off with a laugh. “Don't die. I'll be there with you...with my heart pounding, too.”

Her eyes widened.

And then she laughed, full of joy. “Okay!”

The light of the setting sun outside the window was beginning to dim again. It seemed the gap in the clouds was closing. The rain would pick back up.



But I thought it would probably be okay. Because I was sure Ai would say, “This is our first rainstorm together.”

Just then, I heard a click as my bedroom door opened. “Hey, you two. It stopped raining, so hurry up and get Ai home! You can use our umbrella and... Oh, sorry—did I interrupt something?”

“No, it’s fine.” I chuckled wryly and got off the bed. “We’re done now.”

Mom burst out laughing. “I see.”



[CHAPTER 9]

YOU ARE
MY REGRET...

The next day, when I went to school, someone was waiting at my seat for me, not even bothering to hide the surly look on his face.

“...Andou.”

“...Morning.”

“Yeah, good morning.”

Sousuke Andou was sitting in my seat.

Odajima sat in the seat behind him, looking at her phone, paying no mind to the grumpy boy in front of her.

Andou slowly stood up and gestured to my seat with his chin as if to say, *Sit down*.

I let out a little sigh and nodded.

I already knew what he was here to say. I'd heard from Ai that their date the day before had been a complete disaster.

I sat down, and Andou began to speak. He looked very serious. “You two aren't dating, right?”

I didn't have to ask who he meant, because I already knew. I thought back to the previous day and shook my head. Ai and I were starting over as friends. “No, we aren't.”

“Are you telling the truth?”

“Yeah. Why would I lie about that?” I asked.

He stared at me for a few seconds, studying my face. “All right, then...” His grumpy look disappeared, and he collapsed on top of my desk.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I reached down to grab the desk, so it wouldn't fall over. Apparently, just lying on top of my desk wasn't enough—he started thrashing about.

“I let myself get way too carried away when you told me that!” he said with a groan as he writhed around.

I stared at him in shock, then heard a snort of laughter from behind my desk.

What are you laughing about, Odajima?

“Mizuno loves you way too much...!” Andou cried.

“I heard that all she did was talk about me, and that made you mad.”

“Ugh, she told you? Guess she didn’t waste any time. I’m so embarrassed...” He turned bright red and finally stood up. “It’s true. For real, no matter where we went, her eyes would get all sparkly and she’d say ‘Yuzuru and I played games together here’ or ‘One time a bird landed here and then Yuzuru...’ and just wouldn’t shut up about you!” Andou rambled sulkily for a moment, then looked at me and sighed.

“It was so uncool of me to get mad about it, though... I can’t believe I acted like that... I’m so narrow-minded... I just wanna die...”

“No, Ai was wrong, too. That was rude of her.”

“Ahhh, that confident attitude of yours pisses me off! It’s like you’re apologizing for your girlfriend!”

“I didn’t mean it like that...”

“Haah... Sorry, sorry. I didn’t come here to blame you.”

Andou let out a deep sigh as if he were expelling all the breath in his lungs and then crouched down next to my desk. “So why aren’t you dating her?” he asked.

My eyes darted around. That was really hard to explain.

“It’s complicated.”

“Why? Because you’re dating Odajima or something?” Andou asked, and I heard the chair behind me clatter onto the floor.

“What?!” Odajima exclaimed loudly. “We’re not dating!!” Her shouts echoed throughout the classroom, and all eyes suddenly focused on us.

“O-okay. You don’t have to get so mad about it...,” Andou said, flashing her a wry grin.

She made a face at him and hesitantly fixed her chair. Then she grumbled again, “We’re not dating...”

“I get it already.”

“It’s not like I hate him or anything... But we’re just friends, okay?”

“Yeah, right, you’re just friends.” Andou didn’t seem to want to poke the bear again, so he nodded and agreed with her, then waited for her to look back down at her phone.

Once she fell quiet, Andou turned back to me and whispered, “So you really don’t have feelings for Mizuno?”

I thought about how to answer that for a few seconds. But saying I didn’t would be a lie, so I decided to be honest. “No, I like her.”

“Huh?” Andou let out a surprised noise, and then I heard a slamming sound from behind us.

I turned around in shock and saw that Odajima had dropped her phone and was frantically trying to scoop it up.

“So then why aren’t you going out with her?!” Andou exclaimed. I didn’t want our other classmates staring at us again, so I put my finger over my lips and shushed him.

“I told you, it’s complicated,” I hissed back.

Andou glanced at me and said, “Hmph.” He sounded unimpressed. “So then I can still try for her?” he asked.

I didn’t know what to say.

Ai had made it clear that she still had feelings for me. But what if while we were taking things slow as friends, her feelings started to drift toward Andou?

After all, he was kind, cheerful, energetic, and an attractive guy.

And if Ai and I were just friends, then I didn’t have any right to stand in the way of her developing a relationship with someone else.

“I don’t have any right to stop you,” I answered.

Andou grinned at me and leaped to his feet. “Yeah? Well, then, I’m definitely gonna go on the attack! Don’t come crying to me when I steal her away from ya!”

“Okay, then,” I said, nodding. Then I looked him straight in the eyes. “But I’m gonna do my best to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Once again, I heard a smacking noise from behind me.

I turned around and saw that Odajima had once again dropped her phone. “What the heck are you doing?” I asked.

“What? My hand slipped. You got a problem? I’ll punch your lights out.”

“You in a bad mood?”

“No, I’m not. Why? I mean it, I’ll knock you to the ground.”

“Don’t punch me.”

“Wow, you two really are close, huh— Whoa!” Andou, who was watching us with narrowed eyes, looked behind me and stopped speaking mid-sentence. I turned around to see what he was looking at.

“Whoa!” I said as well.

Ai was watching us from the window in the hallway. “That’s not very nice. You’re acting like you just saw a monster or something,” she said with a chuckle as she leaned against the window and waved. “Morning, Yuzuru! And Odajima and Andou!” She greeted us cheerfully, then looked hesitantly at Andou. He seemed a little nervous, which was unusual for him; his eyes were darting all around.

“Um, Andou...,” she said.

“Huh? Wh-what?”

“About yesterday—”

“Ah, wait!” Andou held up his hand, interrupting her. “I’m sorry about yesterday!”

“Huh?” Ai’s eyes widened as Andou bowed to her.

He slowly lifted his face and said solemnly, “I’m sorry for getting mad yesterday. It was totally uncool of me.” He glanced at me, then turned back to Ai. “I understand now that your memories with Asada are really precious to you. It frustrated me and made me mad yesterday, but...” His voice trembled

slightly as he spoke. "I won't discount the things that are important to you anymore. So..." He gave her a shy, boyish smile. "Can we be friends?"

Ai stared at him in surprise, blinking repeatedly. Then she smiled. "Yes, thank you! Let's be friends, Andou!"

She grinned and held out her right hand toward him. They exchanged a shy handshake, then Ai straightened up. "Now it's my turn to say I'm sorry." She bowed.

Andou shook his head awkwardly. "No, it's fine."

"It was really rude of me to talk about another person when I was hanging out with you. I'm sorry," she said, smiling apologetically.

Watching them had made me a little nervous at first, and I exhaled, releasing the tension. Their exchange made me realize that if you simply discussed something with Ai, she was fully capable of correcting her behavior. I was also relieved that the previous day's incident hadn't negatively impacted their friendship.

Those two emotions softly mingled together in my heart.

"Let's hang out again!" Ai said with a smile. "Next time we can go somewhere we've both never been before!"

Andou's face brightened, and he nodded. "Yeah, definitely!"

"Okay, see ya!" Ai smiled cheerfully and then bounded down the hallway.

Andou watched her go and then turned to look at me. "...I think I've got a chance."

"Maybe you do. You're a good guy, Andou," I said, nodding.

Andou grinned brightly and nodded back. "People tell me that a lot!"

I wished he'd give me some of that optimism. I was glad that we had settled all this amicably, but just then Ai ran back down the hallway.

I looked up and saw her coming our way. She leaned into our classroom through the hallway window. "Sorry, I forgot to say something!" she called out to Andou. He stared at her blankly. She smiled cheerfully and said, "If any of our

plans ever overlap with ones I made with Yuzuru, he comes first!”

“Huh?”

“‘Cause Yuzuru and I are such good friends, we even kissed!”

“What?!”

“See ya later!” That was all Ai said before she ran back down the hallway.

Andou, Odajima, and I all stared after her in astonishment.

“...Asada.”

“...What?”

Andou slowly turned toward me. His face was something else. “Did you...kiss her?”

“.....No.”

“Then what was that all about?! Did you?!”

“I—I told you, I didn’t kiss her! Ow!! Why’d you just hit me?!”

“Because I’m pissed off!” Odajima had whacked me upside the head while Andou interrogated me. It was a huge mess.

The bell rang, signaling the start of class. Our homeroom teacher, Hirakazu, arrived right on time. “Stand up,” he said with a yawn, and all the students stood up.

Andou kept glancing back and forth between me and Hirakazu. “You’re gonna tell me all the details later!” he hissed, then went back to his seat.

“Everyone, bow!”

“Good morniiiiing!” the class said in unison as we all bowed and took our seats.

Hirakazu started homeroom, sounding as unenthusiastic as usual.

I felt someone poke my shoulder and turned around to see Odajima looking at me with a sour expression.

“What?” I asked.

“...You kissed her?”

“I didn’t kiss her.”

She kissed me.

Plus, it was just a friend kiss. That’s what I kept telling myself. It wasn’t what the two of them were imagining.

“Hmph.” Odajima looked at me grumpily and nodded. “...Did you make up, though?” she asked brusquely.

I inhaled deeply. I’d almost forgotten. Odajima was the one who gave me the idea to rethink things with Ai. If we hadn’t had that conversation, I wouldn’t have been able to be honest about my feelings when I spotted Ai out in the rain, and we probably wouldn’t have made up.

Even now, Odajima was concerned about me.

“Yeah, thanks to you,” I said, bowing.

She snorted. “I see. Good for you.” Then she glanced at me again. “...But you two aren’t dating?”

“No, we’re just friends.”

“And you didn’t kiss?”

“I told you, I didn’t kiss her. Give it up already.”

“Okay,” she said simply, then she toyed with her hair. “Maybe I’ll stop being an inactive member of the club.”

“What?” I felt a lurching sensation in my stomach like when you fall from a high place. “You’re gonna quit?” I asked.

She stared at me for a moment and then clicked her tongue. Then she kicked my chair. “No! I mean...” She scowled and then looked down at her desk. “I mean I’ll start coming every day,” she said grumpily.

My eyes widened. The sensation in my stomach disappeared instantly. “O-oh...”

Odajima came to the literature club only to kill time. She was like a stray cat. There was something fleeting about her presence there, and I always wondered

if she would just stop coming one day.

But now she said she would start attending regularly.

That was great news to me. “Really? That’d make me happy,” I told her honestly. Her eyes shot open, and she turned away in a huff.

“It won’t be that big a change. It’s just a pain to keep finding different places to kill time every day, that’s all.”

“I know. But I’m still happy,” I said.

Odajima’s eyes darted around as if she was embarrassed. “Okay, then,” she said simply.

“Asadaaaa?” Hirakazu’s voice echoed through the classroom.

Whoops, I thought.

I slowly turned around to face the teacher’s desk. “Yes?”

“Were you listening to me?”

“I wasn’t listening. I’m sorry.”

“Well, I can’t say that I blame you. I’m sure gossiping with the cutest girl in class is much more interesting than staring at an old guy’s face.”

Laughter spread throughout the room.

It was embarrassing being teased by the teacher, but it was my own fault. I clearly had my back turned and was talking instead of listening.

“I’m sorry...”

“You can do the classroom chores after school today.”

“Okay...” I nodded.

Andou, who was supposed to be doing the chores today, shot me a victory sign and said, “All right!”

Once again, the classroom filled with laughter.

“Ha-ha... Idiot,” Odajima muttered from behind me. I gritted my teeth. “It’s ‘cause you got carried away.” She went on saying whatever she wanted, knowing I couldn’t turn around.

I wasn't carried away. That's what I wanted to say back to her. But maybe she was right.

I never thought the day would come when Ai and I would smile at each other again. And I never thought Odajima would start attending regular club meetings, either.

And...I hadn't known that Andou's feelings for Ai were serious.

All of those developments made me really happy.

It seemed to me that back in junior high, Ai gave up on spending time with her classmates so she could do as she pleased. She was cute but weird. That was what everyone thought about her and why, in her own words, she was "trapped in the classroom."

But things were different now.

She and I had become friends. And I had a feeling she'd become friends with Andou, too. And they might even start dating. Of course, I didn't want that to happen, but that would all depend on my own efforts.

I also had a feeling that Odajima would get close to Ai, too.

Then maybe Ai would see school differently, and she'd start to have fun here. And in the process, I hoped that she'd start to like me more, too.

I knew, as we spent time at school together, that my feelings for her would grow.

I imagined a future like that and let out a throaty chuckle.

Odajima was right. I was getting carried away.

"Asada?" Hirakazu narrowed his eyes.

Even though homeroom had started, his attention was still focused on me. "Were you really that happy that Odajima paid attention to you?" he teased me, grinning.

I nodded before he could say anything else. "I'll carry all the notebooks, too," I said, and everyone laughed again.

"That's wonderful. Now, please pay attention to class," he said. I chuckled

again and nodded.

It was a relaxing morning at school—the first one in a long time.

The background features a vertical grey bar on the right side. Scattered across the white background are various faint, semi-transparent geometric shapes, including squares, triangles, and polygons, some of which are slightly blurred.

[EPILOGUE]

YOU ARE
MY REGRET...

The sound of someone slurping noodles echoed throughout the room. I wiped the sweat dripping down my neck.

We were in the throes of summer now, and the air inside the classroom was hot and sticky. We had the air conditioner on, but it was in the corner of the classroom and incredibly run-down, so it didn't do much to lower the temperature.

It was better than nothing, though.

I shot Odajima a sidelong glance as she ate her instant noodles, and I muttered, "How the heck can you eat ramen in this heat?"

She looked up at me and raised an eyebrow. "What are you talking about? It's even more delicious on hot days like this."

"Okay, then..." I didn't understand what she meant, but I knew she had her own stubborn way of thinking about things. It seemed insensitive to argue with her about it.

Still, seeing her all sweaty, slurping up that steaming broth, just made me feel even hotter.

I looked away and picked up my book. The dust jacket was slick with sweat from my hand.

"How can you sit there and read every day in this heat without getting sick of it?" she asked.

I looked at her, puzzled, and snorted. "What does the heat have to do with reading?"

"Maybe nothing. But how do you have the motivation to do anything when it's this hot out?" she said, and then promptly began slurping her noodles again. "So hot...", she muttered.

I snorted. "You've got a point. But reading is kind of comforting, you know?" I looked down at my book.

Losing myself in the story and knowledge packed inside these little rectangles was part of my daily schedule, my everyday routine.

Doing the same things was comforting to me.

"I go to class, come to literature club, read. See you sitting there on the sofa..." I touched the book's cover as I spoke. "All of that's comforting to me."

I looked over to see her staring absently at me. When our eyes met, she hastily looked away.

"...Okay, then," she said brusquely, and then started mixing her noodles around with her chopsticks. It was a habit of hers to stir her noodles when she didn't know what else to say or do. "So I'm...in your universe, too."

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing." She looked at me again and jabbed a finger in my direction. "Kaoru."

"Huh?"

"How long are you gonna call me by my last name? Just call me Kaoru already."

"O-okay, then..."

Come to think of it, a long time had passed since we met, but I was still calling her by her last name. At first, she called me by my last name, too, but at some point, she jumped right past my first name and started calling me "Yuzu" instead. It had happened so naturally, I didn't even remember when she started it.

"Ka...", I began, but abruptly felt embarrassed. "I-it's awfully sudden," I said.

She pouted. "What's wrong? We're not kids. What's there to be embarrassed about?"

"It takes courage for a guy to call a girl by her first name, all right?"

"Please. You call Mizuno by her first name."

"Yeah, but I've known her since junior high..."

"Stop making excuses and just call me by my name!" she insisted.

I felt my cheeks flush, and I dropped my gaze to the floor. "Ka-Ka..." I started to say it but closed my mouth again.

If she was going to ask me to do something so embarrassing, then she needed to meet me in the middle. I tried to think of some excuse to buy time and pointed to her chest. “Once you button up your shirt, Odajima.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll call you by your first name if you button up your shirt.”

She stared at me blankly for a few seconds. And then she grinned. “Are you sure?”

“About what?”

“Then you won’t be able to see my bra.”

My face turned red, and I raised my voice. “I’m not looking at it because I want to!”

“Hmm, are you sure about that?” She giggled mischievously and set her chopsticks on top of her instant ramen cup, then used both hands to slowly button up her shirt.

Her vibe seemed to instantly change, even though she’d only fastened a single button. I stared at her, my mouth hanging open, and she looked at me with a heated gaze. “Now, hurry up and call me by my name, perv.”

“Who are you callin’ a perv?”

“Hurry up!” she urged me, clapping her hands.

I’d assumed that she wouldn’t want to button up her shirt, but she’d betrayed my expectations and done it right away.

I couldn’t go back on my word now.

I nervously opened my mouth, my throat feeling dry as a bone. “Ka...,” I said. I could tell I was blushing. “Kaoru...”

When I’d finished saying her name, her eyes went round, and she drew in a sharp breath. Then she exhaled, blushing. “...You really said it.”

“W-well, you buttoned up your shirt...”

“I mean, yeah, but...”

“You’re the one who asked me to do it, so stop being embarrassed.”

“Shut up!” she said roughly, raising both her hands like an animal showing its claws. She was wearing a baggy cardigan, as usual. “Haah... Oh well,” Kaoru said and then unbuttoned her second button again.

I looked at her, exasperated. “Huh?”

“What?”

“Your button.”

“I never said I’d leave it buttoned.”

“That’s not fair!” I shouted. She giggled and shot me a wicked grin, then picked up her chopsticks again.

She looked triumphant. “Before you play a game, you should always double-check the rules.”

“Unlike you, I don’t like playing games...,” I said.

She held her chopsticks and looked at me, her eyes wide. I stared back at her, wondering what was going on, and she burst out laughing. “Ah-ha-ha!”

“Wh-what?”

“It’s nothing. Pfft...” For some reason she suddenly seemed like she was in a really great mood as she stirred up her noodles and then plucked up a bite with her chopsticks. “Sometimes you can be really unfair, you know that?”

“What are you even talking about?”

“Just forget about it, idiot.” She laughed and then started slurping her noodles again.

“What the heck...?” The only thing this conversation had accomplished was embarrassing me. I sighed and cast a glance at her, but she seemed done with our conversation and wholly focused on eating her ramen.

I reached for my book so I could start reading again.

“Oh!”

But just then, the bell rang, signaling it was time to go home.

“I didn’t realize it was that late...”

I’d lost myself in my book for a long time that day, but I felt like the minutes had flown by while Kaoru and I were talking, too.

She’d kept the promise she made back then and come to every club meeting since. Of course, she only sat on the sofa playing with her phone or reading manga, but I was still happy that she was there.

“I’ll lock up,” I said. “Hurry and finish your ramen.”

“Mm. I’m done.” Kaoru tipped her cup and drank the broth. I always thought to myself that it wasn’t healthy to drink it all like that, but since she was sneaking it in here in the first place, there was no good way for her to dispose of it. She drank all of it down, then put her empty cup and trash inside a plastic bag from the convenience store and tied it up tightly. “Okay.” She stood up from the sofa and nodded.

I nodded back and locked the windows, then we left the room. I pushed the key into the doorknob and was about to lock it when I heard Kaoru say softly, “...I don’t wanna go home.” I didn’t know if she was talking directly to me, and it wasn’t like there was anything I could do about it anyway, so I pretended not to hear her.

“I’m gonna go return the key. Wanna ride the train home together?” I asked. For a moment she looked around thoughtfully, but then she shook her head.

“No, I’ll go home by myself today.”

“Are you sure? It’s still light outside, but be careful on your way home,” I said.

She smiled a little sadly and nodded. “See you tomorrow...Yuzuru.”

I was shocked. Normally all I got from her was a half-hearted “See ya.”

Her sudden, polite goodbye surprised me. The more I thought about it, the more I figured she was probably just in a weird mood, and I shouldn’t be so surprised.

“Yeah. See you tomorrow,” I said back.

Kaoru nodded and headed for the entrance.

I started walking up the stairs to the faculty office.

“Yuzu!” Suddenly, she called out to me. I turned around in surprise. She was standing in the middle of the hallway, staring at me.

“What?”

“Say it again!” she said.

“Say what?”

“Say my name again!”

“O-okay...” I didn’t know why she wanted me to do that. “See you tomorrow, Kaoru.” But I didn’t want to stand here arguing with her all night, so I went ahead and said her name and waved.

For a second, she wore an indescribable expression. “Yeah. Tomorrow,” she said at last, then waved back to me. This time she headed off for real.

“...What was that all about?” I muttered as I watched her go. Then I pulled myself together and went to the faculty office. I returned the key as usual and then headed back down to the entrance to change shoes.

It was already seven PM, but since it was summer, the sun hadn’t set yet. It probably wouldn’t get dark until I reached the train station by my house.

I breathed in deeply. I smelled damp earth and the grass outside. I heard the sounds of the sports clubs cleaning up on the fields.

I loved this time of day.

I looked toward the gates but didn’t see Kaoru. She was small, but she walked surprisingly fast. She must’ve already left the grounds and been on her way home.

“...Guess I’ll go home, too,” I murmured to myself as I started walking. My thoughts wandered to what we’d talked about in the club room that day—my everyday routine.

I went to class, then I headed to literature club after school and read books. Kaoru would sit on the sofa, and once the bell rang, we’d leave. Then I’d hear the sports clubs wrapping up their practices, and it would feel like the day was

ending... And then I'd go home.

The rhythm of my everyday life was simple yet comforting.

It was breezy in the spring and hot and sticky in the summer. Autumn brought a chilly breeze, and in winter your own breath felt warm.

I took all of it for granted.

If I didn't stop to listen for it, I wouldn't hear the rhythm. But I had a feeling the reason I was able to notice those subtle things about my daily life and grow fond of them was...

"Yu-zu-ru!"

Someone whacked me on the back.

I jumped in surprise and turned around.

Ai stood there, a broad smile on her face.

"Ai."

"Going home?"

"Of course. The bell rang."

"So it did. Let's go home together!" She fell into step beside me as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

I laughed to myself that the exact person I'd been thinking about had shown up. Perhaps one of the reasons I had fallen for her was her knack for perfect timing.

I'd finally found the sparkle in my everyday life thanks to her.

Ever since I was little, I'd devoted myself to my studies. I was always so focused on imagining the beautiful sceneries and stories I read about in books that I never thought to look for them in my own life.

But Ai accepted the world with a sparkle in her eyes and told me all about it.

I listened, responding casually, and gradually my world seemed to open up, too.

"Did you have fun at literature club today, Yuzuru?" Ai leaned close to me and

studied my face.

I chuckled wryly and nodded. “Yeah. I just read my book, though.”

“But Kaoru was also there, right?”

“Yeah. She was looking at her phone and eating ramen.”

“Ah-ha-ha. So the same as usual.”

Ai had opened up to Kaoru more than I thought she would. Sometimes Ai would wander into the club room and chat with her. At first, Kaoru seemed annoyed by it, but gradually she warmed up to the other girl, and lately they seemed like friends.

Ai tipped her head to the side like a baby bird and looked at my book bag. “What were you reading today?” Although she was looking at my bag, she was asking about the novel I had inside of it.

I took it out and removed the worn-out dust jacket to show her the cover. *“How the Universe Was Born.”*

“Another book that sounds complicated.”

“I’ve been interested in this kind of stuff lately,” I said.

Her eyes widened, and this time her head tipped to the other side. “Why? Why are you interested in the universe all of a sudden?” I had to laugh. She was like a little kid asking her parents “But why?” and learning things little by little.

“Well, because it’s interesting, isn’t it?” I answered.

Actually, I’d become interested in the universe after talking to Kaoru. She always managed to work the topic into her conversations. Sometimes I felt like she was blowing things out of proportion, but other times it really hit home and made me feel strange.

The universe.

It seemed silly to say, but no one really understood how big it was. And that’s why every time Kaoru said the word “universe,” the scope of it changed, altering my impression.

Naturally, I’d developed an interest in it.

As I thought about this, Ai suddenly puffed out her cheeks. “I’ll be the judge of that!” she said, putting her hands on her hips. “But even if it isn’t interesting, I still want to hear about everything you have to say, Yuzuru!”

As I looked at her, I remembered once again.

That’s right.

Ai and I growing our relationship was another part of my daily rhythm. No matter how silly I thought something was, she might think the opposite. And even if it *was* silly, hopefully the day would come when we could laugh about how silly it was together.

In the process of telling someone else how you felt, you built a relationship with them.

“That’s right. Sorry,” I apologized, and turned toward the school gate. I was thinking of Kaoru. “Kaoru likes to talk about the universe a lot.”

“Oh, right! Now that you mention it, I remember her bringing it up a bunch.”

“I know. And...” I started telling her why I’d gotten interested in the topic. *If you combine two universes into one, does that mean one loses its sparkle?!*

That’s what Kaoru had said in the club room that day.

If I had any sparkle to me, it was because of the path I’d walked down thus far and because I’d discovered things I was interested in.

And Ai’s sparkle was the same.

We shared those things with each other, one by one, slowly coming to understand them, in the hopes that one day we’d be able to share the same universe.

Ai had been my regret.

But Ai was also the one who had melted that regret, which had stayed frozen in my heart. Her earnest shouts had finally brought out the emotions screaming inside my chest.

That was why, this time, we would communicate with each other slowly, little

by little, so that neither of us had to scream again. I imagined a relationship where we shared this ordinary yet special rhythm and smiled together, wrapped up in its comfort.

In the light of the setting sun, the regret between me and Ai had gradually become a vision of the future.

I heard the sounds of our loafers hitting the pavement. They overlapped with my words and Ai's comments, her voice like a bouncing ball.

That comfortable rhythm etched itself into my heart.

It was simple, but it was so full of happiness that it made me want to cry.

AFTERWORD

Hello, this is Shimesaba.

I like writing stories on the internet. This is my second story for Dash X Bunko. I'm very thankful for my relationship with them.

I know this is a sudden change of subject, but I'm going to be talking about Chinese fried rice.

It's delicious, isn't it? And it's so simple to make. I love it.

It has few ingredients, too. Worst-case scenario, you can make it with white rice, oil, and an egg in a frying pan. Back when I was a student, that's all I used to make it.

Now on to my main point. Until recently, I'd assumed I was quite good at making Chinese fried rice. And honestly, I don't think I was *bad* at it.

I'd whip up a batch in my frying pan, and sometimes, when I lived at home, my mom would ask me to make her some, so I was pretty confident that mine tasted good. (By the way, my mom's a really great cook.)

However, once I started living on my own, I tried some garlic fried rice at the Chinese place in my neighborhood, and it completely shattered my confidence.

The rice was so fluffy, it melted in your mouth. And even though there were chunks of garlic in it (like a clove cut in half), it was cooked so well, it was aromatic, not smelly. It was shockingly delicious.

I'd been just throwing the ingredients together, so I didn't even know it was possible to achieve both a fluffy and crumbly texture.

I'd been living under a rock...

Ever since then, every time I make fried rice, I try to come as close as I can to the one I had at that Chinese restaurant, and although I haven't been able to

make an exact copy, I've gradually gotten to the point where I think I'm almost there.

Now, I'm talking about fried rice here, but it's fun to take something you're confident at, have that confidence shattered, and then challenge yourself by taking it up a notch, isn't it?

I'm going to keep researching the ideal fried rice.

Now I'd like to give some special thanks.

First, thank you to my editor, Kajiwara, for reaching out to me, even though I had only one story under my belt, and for taking care of me until this book was published. And thank you for coming with me to the hookah bar; that was really great for my mental health.

Next, I'd like to thank Ui Shigure for the lovely illustrations that breathed life into my characters. Every time I saw an illustration, my editor and I would share our opinions on them. I think they perfectly capture Ai, the heroine.

I'd like to thank the proofreader, who probably read my book more carefully than I did, and to everyone else who had a hand in its publishing, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Finally, I'd like to thank you for reading this book. I usually write depressing stories, so I hope you enjoyed this more lighthearted romantic comedy.

I'll end the afterword here in the hopes that you'll read another one of my stories someday.

Shimesaba

About the Author

Shimesaba

An otaku who loves seafood.

Has recently been studying the game Othello because they think it would be cool to be a good player, but they still can't manage to win... Their goal is to be able to say "an author whose specialty is Othello" by next year.

About the Illustrator Ui Shigure

An otaku who loves high school girls.

Has terrible grip. Often drops things and is unable to open lids. It was starting to make life difficult, but recently she learned how to open lids with pliers, so she won't be getting stronger anytime soon.

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