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YOU ARE MY REGRET

You Are My Regret

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You Are My Regret [Author] Author] Ui Shigure

Translation by Andria McKnight

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CHARACTERS





CHARACTERS



RISA NAGOSHI

Second-year high school student. Often skips class and hangs out on the roof.

Former manager of the soccer team.

[PROLOGUE]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... If I had to name one regret, it would be you.

My mom always told me, "Never settle for second best." She said it so often it was like her motto, and it drove me nuts. "You have to be number one. Anything less is unbearable."

Whenever she started up, I'd get so irritated that I'd cover my ears and just wait for it to pass.

There was no need for me to be number one. Besides, it wasn't something you could become just by wishing.

I knew that.

And I had a whole universe of my own, that belonged only to me.

That's what I wanted to believe, anyway.

I had a universe where I could be free, that no one else could violate. And I lived there without fear or anxiety.

As long as I didn't become deeply involved with anyone else, I would never be betrayed or disappointed.

And I thought I was fine with that.

I floated along in my personal universe, not speaking, not accepting any communication from outside—simply living in sweet solitude.

But then, you intercepted the SOS I never sent, that I'd kept locked up deep inside my heart.

"... We're both members of the same club, right?"

There was a certain allure to those words that confused me.

I hadn't wanted to discover other universes outside my own, or to learn that interacting with them would subject me to an unspoken *ranking*.

You were the one who so carelessly touched my universe. And yet, before I realized, you were already on your way to another.

"You have to be number one."

I hadn't wanted to discover my own stupid desire to be your number one.

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

And...the fact that I took the hand you reached out to me.

[CHAPTER 1]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... I was sitting in the club room after school. It was muggy, and I could hear the hustle and bustle of students outside.

The window was open a crack, and when I closed it, I felt the chill of the air conditioner as the scents of summer abruptly faded.

For some reason, I decided to throw the window back open. A breeze floated into the room, carrying with it the essence of summer—humidity, the scent of soil, and the heat of the sun all mingled together.

I filled my lungs with these one more time and then closed the window again, wondering why scents disappear so quickly.

Although I felt a sense of lingering regret, I knew that if I left the window open, I'd just end up drenched in sweat and unable to concentrate on my reading. So in the end, I shut and locked it, and then settled in my usual spot on the chair.

The only sounds in the room were the rustling of pages and the old AC struggling to push out cold air.

This was a special time for me—when I could immerse myself in a story. I quietly read a chapter, then, when I'd finished it, my attention turned back to the room itself. I glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that there was an hour left before it was time to go home.

Summer was in full swing now, and the days were long. Despite the time, it was still bright outside.

... Maybe she won't show up today.

But just as that thought passed through my mind, the door rattled as if on cue. I gazed toward the sound with anticipation, but the person who came in wasn't who I'd expected.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" the girl teased.

I struggled to maintain a straight face so she wouldn't pick up on my disappointment. "I'm not looking at you like anything. What's up?"

"I just wanted to stop by and see you before I went home for the day."

The person who'd come into the room was Ai. Ai Mizuno. She was my first love, and the one who'd broken my heart. Well, maybe that wasn't exactly the right phrase. But due to communication issues, our relationship had once come to an end.

And yet now we were attending the same high school and back to conversing with each other like it was nothing. It felt like some miracle of fate had brought us back together.

"Are you exploring the school again?" I asked. I knew Ai liked to spend time at school after hours. Her interests were too varied, and so, rather than join a club, she just wandered around the building after class.

Personally, I wondered how she could find walking through the hallways day in and day out so entertaining, but she seemed to enjoy it.

"Yep," she replied, nodding earnestly. "School is so fun in the evening."

"I see," I said, smiling back at her.

She passed by my side and plopped down on the sofa, which happened to be someone else's favorite seat.

"Kaoru isn't here today, huh?" she asked, and I shook my head.

She was right—the other member of the literature club, Kaoru Odajima, still wasn't here. Normally, she was the one who sat on the sofa where Ai was now, slurping up ramen noodles and playing puzzle games on her phone.

"But you were waiting for her." Ai narrowed her eyes at me.

She was right again, but having it pointed out was embarrassing. I deflected by answering her question with one of my own. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you looked disappointed when you saw it was me at the door."

"I wasn't disappointed."

"You looked like you were," she insisted, puffing out her cheeks.

"S-sorry...," I apologized, thinking I'd upset her. But instead she flashed me a mischievous smile.

"I'm only joking. It's sad when the person you were waiting for doesn't show

up, isn't it?"

I wasn't sure what to say.

Kaoru hadn't come to a club meeting in days, but that in and of itself wasn't terribly unusual. At least, it wouldn't have been before.

The literature club had always been a gathering place for students who didn't want to participate in club activities—the only one who bothered to show up regularly was me.

One of the girls in my class, Kaoru, also showed up every so often. Then Ai transferred to our school and my relationships with other people began to shift. At that point, Kaoru had a change of heart and declared she would start coming every day.

She'd kept her word and done just that until this week. Today was the third day she'd missed without telling me.

She seemed like her usual self in class, but I was worried. I'd asked her earlier, "Hey, are you coming to the club meeting today?" and she'd answered, "I think so," but then never showed up.

"Did you two have a fight or something?" Ai asked, and I shook my head. She gave me a sidelong glance and muttered, "You two are pretty much always fighting, though..."

I chose not to confirm or deny that statement.

It was true that Kaoru and I often got into arguments about trivial things, but then it'd be like nothing had happened the next day. That was just how we acknowledged our differing opinions.

And that was exactly why the current situation bothered me. If there was some reason she couldn't come to club meetings, then what was it? I thought I'd finally found a fellow regular member, and the idea of her ghosting the club again made me sad.

"I'll ask her next time I see her," Ai offered.

"Thanks. I'd appreciate that," I responded quietly.

Ai went over and opened the window, oblivious to the fact that I'd just closed

it. A soft breeze caressed her cheek, causing her hair to billow around her.

"Summer's finally here, huh?" she murmured. I silently listened to her talk. "I like it here. It's quiet, but you can smell all the scents of the season." She had a peaceful look on her face as she gazed out the window.

We could hear all the rhythms of summer as well—the shouts of sports teams practicing outside, the rush of the wind, the rustling of the leaves in the trees, the endless refrain of cicadas.

But amid all those sensations, the absence of Kaoru's presence filled me with an indescribable sense of unease.

I was just beginning to feel a little sentimental when the door suddenly rattled open again. I turned in surprise to see Kaoru standing there, frowning.

"Kaoru...!" I blurted out. She glared at me and then turned her attention to Ai, who still stood by the window.

"Ai, close that thing. I came here to cool off."

"Huh? But the breeze feels nice."

"Come on, hurry it up," Kaoru grumbled as she entered the room. "When the window's open, the AC doesn't work at all."

"What? You really want me to close it?"

"If you've got a problem with that, you can leave. You're not even a member of this club," Kaoru said, dealing the finishing blow.

"Ugh... Well, I don't know what to say to that." Ai pouted and scooted over to one edge of the sofa, relinquishing her window rights to the other girl.

Kaoru marched straight to the sofa and, leaning over it, slammed the window shut. She fanned herself as she looked up at the groaning air conditioner unit. "It's way too hot in here. Is this piece of junk even putting out cool air?"

"Maybe the poor thing is struggling in the heat."

"It's literally an air conditioner's job to work in the heat. Don't you think it'd be kinda pointless if it couldn't take it?" Kaoru dismissed Ai's comment—which might have been a joke, but could just as well have been dead serious—and

leaned back against the sofa.

For some reason, I felt a deep sense of relief at the gesture.

"...What?" she asked, suddenly lifting her gaze to meet mine. She narrowed her eyes into a glare, and I hastily looked away.

"Nothing," I said, then heard Ai snort lightly. She looked at me and sighed like she was my mother.

"He said he was sad without you here, Kaoru," she explained.

"I didn't say that."

Although Ai's voice was gentle, I could tell she wasn't going to let me weasel my way out of this.

I was embarrassed to have my feelings summed up with a simple word like "sad." But on the other hand, I wasn't sure how else to explain them. Kaoru looked back and forth between me and Ai and then snorted.

"Don't you think that's being a bit dramatic? I was only gone for two days." Apparently, Kaoru felt no remorse.

I was used to this attitude from her, and a few words wouldn't usually get to me...but for some reason, I found her response irritating.

"But you said you'd come every day." I intended my voice to sound lighthearted, but it came out much harsher, surprising even me.

Ai's mouth hung open in shock, and Kaoru toyed with her bangs awkwardly. "Well...I was dealing with, you know...stuff...," she mumbled as she played with her hair.

Seeing her act like that only made my anxiety grow. I already knew she was dealing with "stuff." Otherwise, I wouldn't be so worried about her missing club for a measly two days.

"Hey, Kaoru," I said. She looked up at me, and I stared back at her. Her eyes wavered for a split-second. "Is there something going on?" I left it at that.

I figured Ai didn't know about Kaoru's problems outside of school. It was a delicate topic, and this was the only way I could ask about it without tipping her

off.

Ai had been staring at me, but she must've sensed something was up because she soon directed her gaze out the window. *She really has matured,* I thought to myself.

Kaoru stared at me awkwardly for a few seconds, but then snorted and slowly shook her head. "No, it's nothing like that," she said, sounding like her usual self. I looked deep into her eyes, but I couldn't tell how she was feeling.

I sighed. "Okay, if you say so."

"I just had something to do, that's all. Sorry I didn't let you know."

"Well, I wish you would have. Then I wouldn't have been so worried."

"What are you, my dad?" she scoffed. "Why would you be worried about me not showing up for a couple of days when I barely showed up in the first place?"

I shrugged. "Because you said you'd start coming every day, remember?"

She looked away awkwardly, not sure what to say. "Y-yeah, well..."

"...?" Why is she making that face? I wondered, and then suddenly I realized Ai was staring at me.

"You really love it when Kaoru comes to club meetings, don't you, Yuzuru?" she said.

Kaoru whipped her head around toward Ai and smacked her hands against her lap.

"Yeah, right! Yuzu doesn't give a crap whether I'm here or not!" she said forcefully. "He spends the whole time reading anyway!"

Ai nodded and hummed in agreement. "Mm-hmm, mm-hmm." Then, once Kaoru was done talking, she said, "But the fact that you're both so comfortable doing different things is proof of how close you are, isn't it?"

"Well, um..." Kaoru opened and closed her mouth repeatedly, struggling to find the right words.

Ai, at least, was smiling, but an uncomfortable atmosphere lingered in the classroom.

I cleared my throat and remembered a lesson I'd learned from the "misunderstandings" I had with Ai. I knew now just how important it was to clearly express my own thoughts. And simple as it sounded, it was surprisingly challenging. Even now, attempting to speak my mind felt embarrassing.

"I find your presence relaxing," I told Kaoru, who stared back at me with wide eyes.

Ai observed us curiously, still smiling as she gazed back and forth between Kaoru and me.

"Lately...I feel even more at ease with you than I do alone," I confessed. Seeing Kaoru lazing around on the sofa eating ramen or playing games on her phone had become a part of my everyday life.

Before she started coming to the club, I spent my afternoons alone, immersed in books. But it seemed that solitude didn't satisfy me anymore.

Kaoru blinked a few times and then scoffed. "Don't say such embarrassing things with a straight face."

She was obviously trying to cover up her discomfort, but she was right—what I'd just said was totally embarrassing. I sighed and left it at that.

Ai's gaze flitted back and forth between us as she watched our interaction. Then she stood up restlessly and came over to me. In a soft voice, she said, "What...does it feel like when you're with me?"

I was speechless. Her sudden proximity, the innocent question, her sweet scent as she drew near, the way her big eyes sparkled as she looked at me—everything about the situation made my heart race. But of course, I couldn't tell her that.

"......Um, well..." I trailed off. Her curious gaze only intensified when she saw me hesitate, and then I heard an exasperated sigh from the sofa.

"I'm gonna fill the kettle," Kaoru said, releasing me from the difficult task of finding the right words.

"Oh, it's already full," I told her.

She paused as she was about to get up from the sofa and looked at me in

surprise. Then she glanced over at the electric kettle tucked away in the corner of the room.

I'd filled it earlier, and it already had five hundred milliliters of water in it. Kaoru's gaze wandered back over to me questioningly.

"Well," I said, "I figured you'd want hot water when you showed up..." As I spoke, she pursed her lips and made an expression I'd never seen before—I wasn't sure if she was happy or sad.

"Ooh, someone looks happy," Ai teased.

Kaoru shot her a look, saying, "Shut up." Then she went over to the kettle, pressed a button, and muttered, "Thanks."

"You're welcome," I replied, nodding even though she wasn't looking at me.

"...I'm kinda jealous," Ai murmured, narrowing her eyes at me. I wasn't sure what to say to that, and she giggled. "I guess you two spent a lot of time together before I transferred here, huh?" She plopped down on the sofa, and Kaoru came back and sat next to her.

"It's really not that serious," Kaoru said.

Ai shook her head. "Spending time together in the same place is really meaningful. You form a bond, even if you don't realize it. Something important takes shape in your hearts. I'm sure of it," she insisted.

Kaoru's lips curved slightly. "You seem to be looking at things a lot more deeply than us."

"Huh? No way!"

"Sure you are. Is it really fun spending time with some immature kid like me?" Kaoru asked, and Ai's expression froze. Kaoru looked like she regretted what she'd said, but before she could add anything else, Ai nudged her with her elbow.

"Of course it is! Why else would I come here to talk to you two?"

"You just wanna talk to Yuzuru."

"Not true." Ai shook her head and fixed her gaze on me. "I come here to talk

to both of you."

Kaoru made a little noise and looked away, lowering her gaze. "Sorry, that was really insensitive of me."

"No worries. You're a kind person, Kaoru." Ai patted her shoulder comfortingly, and Kaoru gave her a faint smile. After that, the two of them began chatting, their expressions calm and gentle.

I had nothing else to say, so I decided to pick up my book and resume reading.

The kettle beeped to let us know the water was finished boiling, and Kaoru took out a cup of instant noodles from a plastic bag and went over to fill it up.

"How can you eat ramen when it's this hot outside?" Ai asked.

I suppressed a laugh. It was amusing that she shared my opinion.

"People still get hungry when it's hot, y'know," Kaoru pointed out.

"You don't have to eat ramen, though."

"That's what I eat when I come here."

"Hmm..."

In the corner of my vision, I noticed Ai staring at Kaoru as she poured the hot water. She looked genuinely curious as she observed the other girl, almost like a little kid. But despite her childlike nature, Ai had a profound philosophical impulse that seemed strange for a girl only in high school...

The more I got to know her, the more mysterious she became.

And Kaoru, who sat next to her, closing the lid on her cup of noodles, was equally obscure.

She seemed difficult to approach, and yet once you got to know her, she had an inexplicable warmth. Her ability to guess at what lay in others' hearts, and the kindness that came with that insight, seemed to conflict with her tendency to reject the rest of the world.

I was proud of the fact that she had chosen this club as her sanctuary.

Having Ai around every day again and having Kaoru with me in this room were both recent developments in my life, and both meant the world to me.

A few minutes later, Kaoru flipped up the lid of her ramen and stirred it with her chopsticks.

"Hasn't it been less than three minutes?" Ai asked, tipping her head to the side like a bird.

Kaoru snorted. "Yeah, but this is the perfect amount of time. The noodles will get softer as I eat."

Ai accepted her answer and stared at the cup. Then she asked innocently, "Hey, can I have a bite?"

"Sorry, it's against school rules," Kaoru replied sarcastically.

"I've been keeping quiet for you, you know."

Kaoru looked surprised. "I see you're just as willing to bend the rules."

"That's not a very nice way to put it."

"Heh-heh. I'm only kidding." Kaoru chuckled and handed Ai the cup and chopsticks. Ai's face immediately brightened.

"Thanks!" She took the cup and blew on the noodles. Then, once they cooled, she slurped them down. Chewing silently, she glanced at Kaoru. "Hmm..."

"What?"

"These are still hard."

"They taste better that way."

"Do they?"

"If you've got a problem with it, give them back."

"Hey, I was gonna take another bite!"

"You said you only wanted one!"

They bantered back and forth.

As I focused on my book, their voices turned into a sort of background music—the soothing melody of two friends chatting. I loved losing myself in a book here, in this room filled with the mundane happiness of the present. There was nothing else like it.

I was so comfortable, in fact, that I remained completely oblivious to the possibility that I might lose all of it. That it might fall victim to the anger, sadness, and loneliness deep in Kaoru's heart...to the regret buried within her.

[CHAPTER 2]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... As morning classes ended and lunch break began, the classroom took on a uniquely relaxed atmosphere.

The air filled with sighs of relief over making it through the morning and the cheerful voices of students grateful that it was finally time to eat. Exposed to this mood, the tension I'd unconsciously built up in class melted away and I was able to relax.

I heard Kaoru scoot out her chair from the desk behind me, and my body reflexively moved as well. I turned around and asked, "Gonna buy lunch?"

Her eyes darted around for a moment and then she nodded. "Yeah. Did you bring yours?"

"I did, but..." I trailed off hesitantly, then decided to go for it. "Wanna eat lunch together today?"

Her mouth opened slightly, and I heard her take a sharp breath. I couldn't read her expression.

Lately, the moment lunch break began, she would disappear. Coupled with the fact that she hadn't been showing up to club meetings, it made me really worried.

She'd come the day before, but I was still concerned. I'd asked her then if there was something going on, and it had looked like she was struggling to maintain her composure.

I studied her face for a while before she shook her head. "No, thanks. Not today."

"You have something to do?"

"No, I just want to eat alone."

"...Okay."

Well, if she says she wants to eat alone, there's not much I do.

I gave up and started unwrapping my lunch. Just then, I heard Kaoru call out from behind me.

"Hey, Yuzu. Um... I won't be coming to the club today."

"...What?"

I turned around in surprise and saw her force a smile, like she was trying to hide something. Then she picked up her wallet and left the classroom. All I could do was stare at her back as she left.

Kaoru had always arrived at the club room suddenly and without warning. She never said whether she would be coming or not; she just kind of showed up whenever she felt like it. But then she announced that she would "come every day," only to abruptly stop showing up... And now she'd told me clearly that she'd be skipping again.

It was one new experience after another, and it left my head swimming.

She must have felt self-conscious after my question the day before and thought she was worrying me unnecessarily. Maybe that was why she decided to let me know ahead of time that she wouldn't be coming.

However...

Unease spread inside me. It felt like she'd been purposely avoiding me these past few days. And yet judging by the way she'd acted at the club, it didn't seem like I'd done anything in particular to make her dislike me. It was just a hunch, so I could very well be wrong... But my gut told me that she didn't hate me.

So why was she trying to keep me at arm's length?

"What's this, trouble in paradise for the happy couple?" All of a sudden, a voice from the seat in front of mine interrupted my thoughts.

I quickly whirled back around in my chair. There was Sousuke, slurping on a carton of strawberry milk, an easy grin on his face. For some reason, seeing him like that relaxed me.

"We're not a couple," I replied.

Sousuke took the straw out of his mouth and chuckled wryly. "But there is trouble? So you two fighting, or what?"

"No, we're not."

"Hmm. It's just unusual for you to be so worked up over Odajima, so I was curious if something happened."

I frowned. "Is that how it looks?"

"Usually, she's the one staring at you all the time," he said matter-of-factly.

It was true that Kaoru looked at me a lot, but I didn't think she was *staring* like she was concerned about me or anything.

"That's not true," I said.

"Ha-haah..." Sousuke laughed awkwardly and looked like he wanted to say something. I didn't know why, but his reaction pissed me off.

Then Sousuke turned his body completely around to face me. "Lately, Odajima's been going up to the roof during lunch."

How do you know that? I wondered briefly. But Sousuke had way more friends outside our class than I did, so he probably had a wide network from which to glean such information.

"Hmm... So she's eating alone on the roof? Maybe she's worried about something."

A strange expression passed over Sousuke's face. "I doubt she's alone up there."

"Huh?"

He glanced around and then lowered his voice to a whisper. "Don't you know about Roof Girl?"

"Who the heck is that?" I asked in confusion.

Sousuke heaved a dramatic sigh. "You really don't know anything, do you? I'm talking about Risa! She's always up on the roof. During lunch, after school, and sometimes even during class. Everybody knows that."

The name sounded familiar. "Risa... You mean Risa Nagoshi?"

Sousuke nodded, his face grave. "Yep. She used to be the manager of the soccer team."

"She's in the literature club now."

"Huh?! For real?!" Sousuke said, raising his voice.

I wondered why he was so surprised and nodded, bewildered. "Only on paper, though."

"Oh, so she's another ghoster."

"Yep. She's never even come to a meeting."

"Hmm..." Sousuke got a faraway look in his eyes.

As he fell silent, I thought back to a few months prior, when I'd first met Nagoshi.

One day, our club advisor Hirakazu Ogasawara called me over and said, "Oh, by the way, Nagoshi's joining the literature club," and introduced us.

She had dazzling blond hair and a surprising number of piercings in her ears. She was slender with a friendly face, but I found it difficult to tell what she was thinking.

"You're the club president?" she asked. "Wow, that's impressive for a first year. Nice to meet you. I'll probably never come to a meeting, though."

"Um... Okay. Nice to meet you, too..."

That was the first and only time we ever spoke.

I hadn't heard very good things about her, to be honest. People said she smoked and did drugs. Some said she had a lot of "bad boys" for friends. And since she never denied it, the rumors kept getting crazier. Not that I believed any of them. But at the same time, I didn't know enough to prove them wrong, either.

Even though she was a member of the same club as me, she was essentially a stranger.

"So? What's Nagoshi doing up on the roof?" I asked.

Sousuke stared at me for a moment. He looked confused, as if he'd just come back from a daydream. Then he shook his head.

"Heck if I know. Someone said she goes up there to smoke, but I never smell it on her."

"When do you smell her?" I asked, and he shot me a brief, awkward look.

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"J-just when I pass by her in the hallway or something."
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His eyes were darting around suspiciously, and he looked uncomfortable as he shook his head again.

"We talked a lot back when she managed the soccer team. She was a good senior. But I don't know what's been going on with her since she quit." His eyes seemed full of conflicting emotions, but I wasn't sure what any of them were.

"Didn't she quit pretty recently, though? It hasn't even been six months since school started."

"It was around two months ago. At the beginning of May."

"So you only talked to her for like two months?"

"Yeah. That's all, but..." He trailed off and then went silent.

"But what?"

He shook his head, a bitter look on his face. "It's nothing."

Apparently, he really didn't want to talk about it. I slowly wrapped my lunch back up.

"Hey, where are you goin'?" Sousuke asked.

"The roof."

"To do what?"

"Nothing, I just wanna see if Kaoru's up there."

"Oh...," he said half-heartedly, still watching me.

I wasn't in the mood for a staring contest, so I sighed and stood up. I was just about to step out into the hallway when Sousuke called after me.

"Hey, if...if you see Risa up there, check and see if she's smoking."

Again, there was that conflicted look on his face. I could tell his feelings were

[&]quot;Is there something going on between you and Nagoshi?"

[&]quot;Like what?"

[&]quot;I dunno. Do you talk to her a lot?"

sincere, whatever they were.

"Okay." I nodded and headed for the stairs at the end of the hallway that led up to the roof.

[CHAPTER 3]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... I'd always known the school roof was open to students. At the beginning of my first year, I'd seen it just once during a tour of the building. Since the roof had a tall fence around its perimeter, the school administration had deemed it safe.

However, though I knew about it, it had totally slipped my mind and I never thought about going up there. It was probably just the place for when you wanted to be alone.

I gulped and reached for the doorknob, then twisted it. As soon as I'd cracked open the door, I could hear the girls chatting outside.

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"Do you know that song Getting Down in the Morning?"

"No."

"It's really good. The melody's pretty average, but the lyrics are sooo dirty."

"Oh, I see."

"Are you not interested in music?"

"Not really."

"Hm. Well, if you don't listen to music, what do you do in your free time?"

"Play games and stuff."

"Huh..."
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I didn't have to go any further to know who was talking. I recognized both of their voices.

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"You seem cranky today, Odajima."

"I'm not."

"Should I not talk, then?"

"I don't care."

"You're so cold."
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Nagoshi was chatting away while Kaoru gave minimal feedback. It seemed like it was just the two of them—I couldn't hear anyone else.

Now I just had Sousuke's request to take care of. I slowly opened the door wider so I could see the two of them...

"Buh!"

"Whoa!!"

I didn't expect Nagoshi to be so close to the door, and I let out a startled cry.

She was similarly surprised and shrieked, throwing both hands up in the air.

"Oh, it's just you, Asada. I saw someone peeking through the door all sneaky and freaked out." Nagoshi chuckled and then threw the door open. "What do you want? Oh, I bet you're here to see Odajima." She turned toward Kaoru.

Kaoru was sitting on the ground with her back against the fence, staring at me impassively. Then her expression grew progressively grumpier.

"What?" she asked, sounding angry.

I hesitated, not sure what to say. But I had to say *something*. "I-I thought you said you wanted to eat alone..."

Kaoru must've picked up on what I was trying to say and sighed.

"This is basically alone. Risa just talks to herself the whole time even if I don't respond."

"Hey, I'm standing right here!" the other girl cut in.

"Sometimes I just wanna eat my lunch without having to talk to someone all the time."

"And you don't have to talk to me, huh?" Nagoshi joked, but Kaoru ignored her. The older girl wore an easygoing smile the entire time. "Hey, since we're all up here, why don't we eat together? A little lit club lunch, y'know?"

"You don't even come to the meetings...," said Kaoru.

"Oh, don't be picky. Hm? Where's your lunch, Asada?" She tilted her head to the side when she saw I was empty-handed.

"I just came up here to check on Kaoru."

"Oh yeah? Wow, Odajima. It sounds like he's really worried about you."

"That's his problem." Kaoru scowled and turned away in a huff.

Nagoshi looked back at me and shrugged. "Talk about your classic tsundere."

"Um, I'll just go back to class," I said.

It was clear Kaoru didn't want me there, so staying would only be awkward. But just as I started to turn around, Nagoshi grabbed me by the arm.

"No need. I can give you some food." She handed me a box of Calorie Mate energy bars. "I only ate one. You can have the rest."

Each box contained two packs, and true to her word, the other one was still sealed. Not only that, but the open pack still had one bar left, so she'd only eaten one out of four in the box.

"I'm not going to eat your food, Nagoshi...," I said.

"I'm full, though."

I wasn't really sure that anyone could be "full" after one Calorie Mate bar. That was barely anything. As I hesitated, Nagoshi walked over to Kaoru. Now that I took a closer look at her, she seemed unnaturally thin. Since she wore a skirt, her bare legs were visible and I thought they looked way too skinny, especially considering she didn't do any exercise.

Even though it was summer, she was wearing her long-sleeved uniform shirt, with the sleeves rolled up to three-quarter length. Her wrists and arms looked bony and unhealthy.

I wondered if she tended to undereat.

As I mulled this over, I reluctantly walked out onto the roof.

I sniffed around but couldn't detect any cigarette smoke. In fact, Nagoshi had left a sweet fragrance in her wake as she walked away. It must have been her perfume or shampoo or something. At any rate, it was a feminine scent.

I was relieved that I wouldn't have to be the bearer of bad news for Sousuke. I didn't know what was going on between him and Nagoshi, but at the very least I knew that he was worried about her.

I sat down a short distance away from Kaoru and she began to fidget, looking

visibly uncomfortable.

"The roof's really hopping lately," Nagoshi commented as she leaned against the fence. "Normally, I'm the only one up here."

"No one else ever joins you?" I asked, and she smiled and struck a victory pose.

"Nobody wants to associate with the bad girl who smokes!"

"...But you don't smoke, do you?"

"What do you think?" She cocked her head to the side teasingly.

I wasn't sure what to say, so I simply smiled back at her.

"Cigarettes are expensive, you know. I don't wanna spend the money," she said with a snort.

"Weren't all those piercings expensive, too?" Kaoru asked quietly.

"Exactly. I spent all my money on those," Nagoshi said, letting Kaoru's dig roll off her.

I wasn't sure what to talk about. At a loss, I thought for a moment and then said, "Doesn't it hurt to get your ears pierced?"

Nagoshi smiled and lightly traced her piercings as she spoke. "The ones near my cartilage hurt. But..." She trailed off and leaned farther back to look up at the sky. "Who cares if it hurts, though? Pain makes me feel alive."

I had no idea how to respond to that.

I wasn't sure if she was serious or joking. But I got the feeling she truly felt that way.

Then I heard the sound of a plastic bag being balled up. I looked over at Kaoru and saw that she was holding the wrapper of a bread snack from the school store.



"I'm finished eating, so I'm going back downstairs." She bowed in Nagoshi's direction.

"Oh, okay. See ya." The older girl waved back at her.

Kaoru glanced briefly at me and then left. It felt like there was a cold light in her eyes, as if she were saying, "Don't follow me."

But her hostile look only made me curious. What did it mean? I stood up to go after her.

"You know...," Nagoshi suddenly piped up. "Everyone has things they want to keep private... Their own space they don't want anyone else to intrude on." She looked right at me as she spoke. I didn't understand the look in her eyes, but it felt like she was reading my mind. A cold sweat ran down my back. "You two aren't dating or anything, right?"

"No, but..."

"Then just leave her alone already." Her tone of voice was forceful as she sank back against the fence. The metal creaked in response. "The roof is a place for people to come when they wanna be alone, or be alone with someone else. That's what it's for." There was an oddly threatening tone to her words.

"...Do you want to be alone, Nagoshi?" I asked, and she smiled at me faintly.

"Nah, I don't care about that. I'm stupid, so I like to be up high. That's all." A lonely aura radiated out from her as she spoke.

I walked over to her and shoved the Calorie Mate box into her hands. "You can have this back."

"I told you, I'm full."

"Eat it anyway," I said, and she widened her eyes with surprise.

She stared at me for a few minutes, stunned, and then she burst out laughing. "That could be taken as sexual harassment, you know."

"Okay, well, I'm leaving now."

"Hey! Asada," she called out to me just as I was about to go. Then she smiled. "Don't come here again."

I hesitated for a moment, then said, "I'll come back if I ever want to be alone."

She shrugged. "That won't work, since I'll be here."

Just then, a bell rang, signaling that lunch break was over.

[CHAPTER 4]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... Once school was over, I heard Kaoru start packing up her things and automatically turned around to face her.

"Why aren't you coming to the club today?" I asked.

She froze, but then resumed getting ready to go home.

"I'm busy."

"Busy with what?"

She frowned, annoyed. "Why do I have to tell you, Yuzu?"

"Because you haven't been coming lately."

"I was never an active member to begin with."

"Yeah, but you said you'd start coming every day!" I pressed.

For a split second, there was a pained look on her face, but then she frowned again and shook her head. "I'll go when I can."

"Will you come tomorrow?"

"If I can," she answered carelessly. Then she slung her backpack over her shoulder, waved, and left the classroom.

I rose from my chair but just stood there, unable to go after her. She was clearly hiding her real reasons, but I didn't know why. And if she wouldn't tell me, I had no way of finding out.

"Another lovers' spat?"

"We're not fighting."

"Oh, so you're not denying you're a couple?"

I turned around and glared at Sousuke, who shot me an exasperated look in return. He put on his backpack, then hoisted his sports bag over his shoulder. He was obviously headed to club practice.

"You gotta go, right?" I said. "Hurry up, then."

"Okay, but..." He awkwardly moved closer to me and then whispered into my ear. "Did you check on Risa earlier?"

"Oh, right."

By the time I'd gotten back from the roof afternoon classes were about to start, so I never got the chance to report my findings to him.

"It didn't seem like she was smoking. She was just killing time up there."

"Oh, okay... Good..." He breathed a sigh of relief, and I looked at him suspiciously.

"There's something going on between you two, isn't there?"

"N-no, not really."

"Let me rephrase that. There was something going on between you two."

Sousuke started to fidget and looked like he didn't know what to say. He stood up straighter and readjusted his sports bag on his shoulder. Then he said "I gotta go to practice!" and fled the classroom.

I watched him go and sighed.

Clearly something had happened between him and Nagoshi, but I didn't know if I should pry any further.

I thought of what Risa had said earlier: "Everyone has things they want to keep private... Their own space they don't want anyone else to intrude on."

Something private, huh?

Maybe I was just an intruder to Kaoru.

But I couldn't help it. I felt the anxiety inside me growing bigger and bigger. I thought back to the first real conversation she and I had with each other.

"Don't ask, okay?!"

She'd been soaking wet, her body trembling. *Don't ask.* Despite her attitude, she'd been curled up in a little ball, shaking.

"But if I don't ask, you won't tell me anything," I murmured to myself.

I understood that there were things people didn't want to share. But...Kaoru

never wanted to share *anything*. I was worried about her, but maybe it was wrong of me to try to convince her to open up.

As I thought this over, I walked through the school with heavy steps.

Later, I was reading in the club room when I heard the rumble of thunder outside. I closed my book and hesitantly opened the window. I caught a glimpse of lightning between thick clouds, but nothing was coming down yet.

"It smells like rain..."

The air was humid, and the earth gave off that unique moist scent it always did just before a rainstorm. Every time Ai would say, "It's gonna rain soon," it smelled exactly like this. I decided to leave the window open and continued reading.

Something unsettled me, though.

A few minutes later I heard a rush of water outside and then shouts from the sports club members.

"...Guess it's finally coming down," I muttered, walking back over to the window to look at the sky. The thick clouds completely blocked out the sunlight. Sheets of rain poured down mercilessly onto the dark athletic fields.

I slowly closed the window and sighed. Plopping down on the sofa, I stared at the door. It remained firmly shut.

Listening to the heavy downpour outside, I couldn't help thinking back to that day Kaoru had raced into the club room. It had started pouring right around sunset then, just like today.

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I'd gotten used to being all alone, reading by myself in the club room. Back then, the only time the door opened was when Hirakazu came in with some minor thing he had to tell me.

So when the door opened with a click that day, I remember saying "What is it, Mr. Ogasawara?" without even glancing away from my book. I thought it was

strange when I didn't hear anything in response, so I looked up. Instead of the teacher, I found my classmate standing there, looking like a drowned rat.

".....Odajima?"

Kaoru didn't answer. She closed the door, then leaned up against it, sliding down to the floor. She had her skirt rolled up so far that everything beneath it was on full display.

I did my best to look away, and said, "What's up? This is the first time you've ever come to literature club."

She silently looked down. Water dripped from the ends of her curled hair. I quickly took out a towel from my bag and held it out to her.

"You'll get sick," I said.

"I'm fine." When she finally spoke, her voice was quiet.

"You're not fine."

"Just leave me alone." Kaoru was always unfriendly and stood out a bit in class. My impression of her hadn't changed now that we were talking one-on-one.

But she was completely soaked, and I couldn't just leave her alone.

"At least dry off your hair." I took the towel and moved it toward her head.

"Don't touch me!" she yelled.

Her arm struck mine and I dropped the towel in surprise. Kaoru's eyes wavered when she saw it hit the floor.

"Ah, sorry... I didn't mean to do that." She seemed flustered and fell silent again.

"No, I'm sorry. You barely know me, and I tried to touch your head. I don't blame you for your reaction." I tried to sound as friendly as I could and stooped to pick up the towel. Then I tried to hand it to her again. "You'll get sick."

"…"

Without speaking, she hesitantly gazed into my eyes. After a few seconds, she nodded and took the towel from me. Then she quietly started drying her hair.

I was relieved. Slowly, I moved back to my chair and sat down.

The silence continued.

She told me to leave her alone, and maybe that's what I should do, I thought as I opened my book back up. But I couldn't focus. I was too preoccupied with Kaoru, who seemed completely out of sorts.

After a while, I sensed her standing up. I closed my book and glanced over at her. She hesitantly walked toward me and bowed.

I noticed her eyes were red, and my breath caught in my throat.

"...I'm sorry," she said. "Thanks for the towel."

"No, uh... It's okay."

"I'll wash it and give it back to you tomorrow."

"No rush."

"I'll give it back tomorrow," she repeated and then walked to the door. As she picked up her backpack and hooked it over her shoulder, she looked so feeble...

"Hey!" I got up the courage to call out to her again.

Her shoulders jerked a bit.

"What happened...? Why did you come here?" I asked.

I couldn't read her expression.

"I'm a club member," she said. "Is there a reason why I shouldn't come?"

There was a sharpness in her voice. But somehow, I knew her tone didn't reflect how she really felt.

"You can come here whenever you want," I said. "It's just, you never have before. So I thought maybe there was something wrong."

"No. It started raining, and I wanted to dry off somewhere. This was the closest room on the first floor. I didn't think there'd actually be anyone here reading."

I figured she was lying.

"If you'd come in as soon as the rain started, you wouldn't be that soaked," I

said, pointing at her uniform.

I heard her grit her teeth. "It's none of your business."

It felt like she was saying, "Stop asking me about it!" I sensed clear rejection from her. But I couldn't back down. Not when she looked so weak and vulnerable.

"It is my business, though." I stood up and slowly walked over to her.

She backed up, looking a little scared.

"You just said it yourself," I pointed out. "...We're both members of the same club, right?"

She slowly widened her eyes. They began to fill with tears, which then spilled down her face. "Huh? Are you stupid or something...? I'm not even an active member..."

"Yeah, but you're the first person to actually show up."

"Who cares? This is the worst... What's wrong with me..."

I realized she was talking about the tears that refused to stop flowing from her eyes.

She crouched on the floor and covered her face with both hands. "Nngh...sniff.....nngh..." I could tell she was clenching her jaw to try to stop herself from sobbing out loud.

I hesitantly crouched down beside her and began to rub her back. This time, she didn't tell me not to touch her.

"Um... I don't know anything about you, so..." I tried to speak as gently as I could. "So no matter what you say, I won't judge you... I'll just sit here and listen to you until it stops raining."

When she came into the club room, she was clearly bursting with emotion—but whether it was anger or sadness, I couldn't tell. The only thing I knew was that she was really worked up about something. I hoped she would talk about it, so she could get it off her chest.

"Like I said, it's none of your business."

"I'll still listen."

She gradually looked up at me. Her tears had smeared her light makeup.

"But why?" she asked.

I wasn't really sure how to answer. My eyes darted back and forth around the classroom as I tried to come up with a reason.

"Because I'm president of the literature club..."

"So what?"

"So...I like stories," I said out of desperation.

She stared at me for a few seconds and then giggled.

"What? That's the dumbest reason," she said, smiling.

For some reason, seeing her smile for the first time filled me with relief.

Kaoru sat on the three-person sofa that no one but me had ever used. It was a strangely expensive sofa to be stuffed in a club room like this. I'd sat on it many times, but it was so soft and deep I could never get comfortable on it, so I preferred my usual chair.

"I don't belong at home," Kaoru suddenly said.

"What?" I cast her a sidelong glance and scoffed in disbelief.

"You said you were just going to listen."

"Oh! Yeah... You're right, I'll shut up."

She'd been crying quietly for a while now. I thought she wasn't going to talk, so when she finally did, it startled me a bit. I turned my chair around to face her.

"My mom's a single parent... I live with her, but...she's the kind of person who always needs a man around."

"A-a man?"

"You know, like a lover."

"L-lover." All I could do was just parrot back what she said. She giggled.

Obviously, I knew what she meant. I just hadn't expected the conversation to go that way, so I was slightly bewildered.

"Anyway, she just moves from one guy to the next. It's like every time I go home, there's a different man there."

"Oh..." I couldn't even imagine a situation like that—going home and finding a stranger there. Not to mention one who was sleeping with my mom.

"When I went home today..." She stopped and looked down before finishing in a quiet voice. "They were doing it...in the entryway."

"D-doing what?"

"Don't make me say it."

I finally understood.

"M-my mom's... My mom's just the worst." She was trying not to cry again. "I don't even like hearing it from my room, so to see her doing it right there in front of me when I wasn't prepared... I didn't know what to do."

"So...you came back to school?"

"...Yeah. I kept walking, but I couldn't calm down. Then it started raining. I just wanted to go somewhere I could be alone and not have to see anyone. That's why I came here."

".....I'm really sorry."

I bowed my head and she looked at me with surprise, then realized what she'd just said and gasped.

"Oh no, I didn't mean it like that! I mean, I'm the one who just showed up here."

"But because of me, you weren't able to be alone."

"Yeah, but you don't have to apologize," she said, then looked down again. "Ever since my dad left, my mom's been a total mess. She doesn't do anything around the house. She couldn't survive without me. That's why I have to go home every day... But..."

I could hear the tears in her voice.

I'd never felt like I didn't belong in my own home. I couldn't even imagine how that must feel. I wasn't sure what to say, and then Kaoru started crying again.

"I don't wanna go home."

I could tell those were her true feelings. I felt a sudden heat bloom in my chest, right where my heart was. I knew that I couldn't solve Kaoru's family troubles, and I didn't intend to try. But she was a member of the literature club, and this was our club room.

"So then, don't go home."

"What?" she looked up at me, her mouth agape.

"Stay here tonight."

She opened her eyes wide and stared at me, flustered. Then her gaze began swimming around the room. "Wh-what are you talking about?"

"Don't worry. I'll pretend like I locked up and return the key. If you turn off the lights, no one will know you're here."

"Like I said, what are you talking about?" She seemed truly bewildered.

My suggestion did sort of come out of the blue, so I tried to find some excuse to explain myself. I sighed and picked up two books from the table, then showed them to Kaoru.

"These are the first and second parts of a series. It's really good. And I really wanna finish them both today."

"Huh?"

"The club room is the most comfortable place for me to read. So I'm gonna stay the night here."

"Are you for real?"

"I'm for real. I've actually done it before."

That was a lie. But I couldn't just let her go home. I felt a strange sense of duty. And I couldn't suppress that warm feeling bubbling up inside me.

"So...you can just do whatever you want here. You can sleep on the sofa if you get tired."

Kaoru silently nodded and then looked back and forth between my eyes. She looked weak, like a frightened little animal.

"But why?" she asked.

"Huh?"

She gazed at me suspiciously.

"Why would you go that far for me?"

"I just wanna read my books."

"Enough about that!" She raised her voice, making me jump. The scared expression on her face vanished, and now she looked angry. "You have nothing to do with me! You have no obligation to do me any favors!"

I was silent for a few seconds as I thought that over. She was right. We were just in the same club, and the connection between us was very thin. But the story she'd told had gotten me thinking.

"I imagined it."

I imagined my mom being with someone other than my dad. Or no, even if it was my dad. There's no way I could keep my cool if I walked in on a scene like that. And there was no way I'd be able to go back home the same day with a smile on my face. When I thought about the anguish she must feel, I couldn't just leave her.

"I wouldn't want to go back home, either," I said. Slowly, she widened her eyes. "Plus," I added, "we're both members of the same club."

Her eyes darted around, and she laughed. "You're really obsessed with that idea. I'm not even an active member."

"Still."

"How many members are there?"

"Ten, maybe?"

"And how many show up?"

"Just me."

"That's ridiculous. So, if one of the other members showed up, would you stick your nose into their business, too?" she asked.

I tried to imagine it. I smiled shyly at her and then said, "...If they were in trouble, I'd want to help them."

She slowly exhaled. ".....You're a real idiot, you know that?" Then she slung her bag over her shoulder and stood up.

"...Are you going home?" I asked as she walked toward the door.

She turned around and pursed her lips. "I'm going to go buy dinner, stupid."

That day was the first time I ever broke school rules.

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The rain was only getting worse. I heard a loud crash of thunder, which drew my consciousness back to the present.

I'd been remembering that day. Kaoru's small frame, her eyes wet with tears. I'd only seen Kaoru cry two times—back then, and the day when she got mad because I wouldn't listen to her about Ai.

She'd probably cried the second time because her pent-up emotions had reached a boiling point. She was really worried about me, and so she started crying.

But that rainy day had been different. Those tears were an expression of the anger and sadness she couldn't keep inside anymore. If she had another problem at home, I doubted she'd come to me again.

Everyone had things they wanted to keep private. I knew that. But she was a fellow member of my club, and I couldn't just sit around watching her be sad.

All of a sudden, the door opened with a loud thud. My shoulders jolted, and I

turned around to find Ai standing in the doorway.

"Yuzuru. Let's go home." She was wearing her usual friendly smile.

I glanced over at the clock.

"It's not time to go home yet."

"The rain's just going to get worse. The lightning, too. We should leave before it gets too bad."

"But..."

What about Kaoru?

I trailed off, and Ai slowly shook her head.

"I don't think Kaoru's gonna show up today," she said.

"Huh?"

"I saw her changing her shoes right after school near the entrance. She looked like she was in a hurry." Ai tilted her head to the side. "Come on. Let's go home, okay?"

Kaoru had left school way before the storm had started. In that case, she wouldn't be back.

"All right. I gotta go return the key."

"Okay. I'll meet you near the entrance."

She stood quietly by the door, waiting for me to lock up. I stuffed my books in my bag and left the room.

There was another crash of thunder. It was loud, so it had to be close by.

"Wow. Somebody must be angry up there," Ai joked as she glanced at the hallway window.

[CHAPTER 5]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... The rain was so intense that I ended up getting soaked from the knees down even with an umbrella. Water invaded my loafers and soaked my socks, leaving me with a very unpleasant feeling. I grimaced with each squishy step, but Ai was in high spirits next to me.

"Whoo! The rain's coming down so hard! It's amazing! If only I didn't have to keep my stuff dry, I could've gotten *totally* soaked!" She looked cheerfully up at the sky through her see-through plastic umbrella.

"Knock it off. You'll get sick."

"Not if I get into the bath as soon as I get home."

"There's still no reason to get all wet." I laughed wryly, but she didn't seem to mind and kept smiling.

"This kind of rain is unusual, though! Doesn't it feel like the gods are taking out their anger on the earth? It's so exciting! If you let it pelt your body, you might awaken some kind of amazing power, you know?"

"That sounds pretty amazing, all right..."

I was sure that last part was a joke, but I knew Ai really would let herself get soaked unless I stopped her. It seemed like her love of rain hadn't changed since junior high.

Still, she understood that her textbooks and notes would get ruined if she stepped out into the rain. She wasn't reckless, and despite what she said, she was still holding firmly onto her umbrella.

"It's chilling my thighs. It feels so good!" she said, and my eyes automatically dropped to her legs.

The rain striking the ground mercilessly splashed up onto her bare thighs and calves. I quickly averted my gaze, feeling like I'd seen something I shouldn't have.

"Skirts are great at times like this. I bet it's a pain to dry your school uniform pants once they're soaked. All I have to do is just dry off my skin and I'm good as new!"

"Your skirt is wet, too," I observed.

"Huh? Hey, you're right! I wonder if my panties are wet...," she mused innocently.

I guffawed and glared at her. "You really shouldn't say that stuff in front of a guy, you know."

"Ew, I didn't mean it like that!"

"I know! Just don't talk about panties!"

"Why? Because it excites you?"

She stared at me with her big, round eyes and I felt my face heat up. I quickly turned away and sighed.

"...Yeah."

Her eyes lit up. "Then who cares? I'm happy that I excite you, Yuzuru."

"Well, I'm not..."

I wished she wouldn't be so open about her feelings. That made my heart pound more than anything else.

As I thought this over, there was a sudden flash in the sky followed by a loud, explosive *BOOM!*

The vibration was so intense it felt like I'd gotten punched in the gut. The lightning must've struck somewhere close.

Ai and I exchanged glances.

"See? The gods are angry!" she said and started laughing.

I cracked a wry smile. I was amazed that rather than fear, that had been her first thought.

I didn't know whether my heart was pounding from the shock of the thunder and lightning, or because of Ai.

"What are the gods angry about, I wonder?" she went on. "Maybe they're fighting with each other."

"Well, I'd appreciate it if they kept us mortals out of it."

"Ooh, maybe they're having a contest to see how many people they can

scare!"

"What an awful contest."

We were passing through the shopping district. Before long, we'd reach the split in the road, one way headed toward my house and the other toward hers.

"Hey, Yuzuru. Can you hold this for me?"

"Hm? What?"

Ai didn't wait for me to answer; she just shoved her backpack at me. I was caught off guard and left confused. She took that opportunity to fold up her wet umbrella.

"Hey, wait! Ai?!"

"Yaaaaaaaay! This feels *amaaaazing*!" She thrust both hands up into the air and welcomed the rain with her whole body. In an instant, the water soaked her hair and clung to her face.

"You're gonna get sick!" I shouted, but Ai looked like she was truly enjoying herself.

"Don't worry! Plus, don't you think it's a waste not to get soaked by the gods' rainstorm?!"

"I'm telling you, the gods have nothing to do with it!"

"If they're really having a scaring contest, doesn't that tick you off a little? I bet when they see one of us enjoying it, they'll be shocked!"

She was so innocent and carefree, letting the rain pour down over her as she played and splashed in it.

Before long, her entire body was soaked. Her white shirt became transparent, and I could clearly see the outline of her bra through the material.

"Haah... You're so... You're just so..."

I always felt depressed on rainy days. The humidity made my throat clog up; it was hard to breathe, and my head felt heavy.

But when I saw Ai playing in the downpour, I felt my spirits lift.

I thought, Yeah, the gods probably would be shocked to see a mortal like her.

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"So...that's why I brought her here..."

My mom glanced back and forth between me and a thoroughly drenched Ai, her eyes narrowed.

I bowed over and over again, trying to express how sorry I was.

Mom sighed and nodded. "Fine, fine. The bath is already filled. Here's a towel. Ai, you should really think twice about letting yourself get soaking wet in front of a boy."

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Asada! But Yuzuru said it excited him when I get wet!"

"He did, did he...?" Mom's eyes narrowed even more as she trained her stare on me.

"I didn't mean it like that, I promise!" I waved both my hands in the air and shook my head wildly.

Mom just snorted and led Ai to the bathroom. Once she was done, she came back to me.

"You really need to stop her before she gets like this." She put her hands on her hips and heaved a deep sigh.

"I tried! I swear, I tried to stop her!" I said, and then both of us sighed.

"Haah. She's really something," Mom said. "Though I suppose that makes her perfect for you."



"What's that supposed to mean?"

Mom ignored me, tossed over a towel, then stomped off down the hallway. "And wipe up that wet floor, too!"

"...Yes, Mom."

With that, my mother fled into the living room.

I let out another deep sigh and started wiping off my wet feet and pants. I'd brought Ai home with me because I couldn't very well send her back to her place soaked to the bone. It took twenty more minutes to get to her house from the fork in the road. Even though it was summer, the temperature was pretty low thanks to the rain. If she'd walked twenty more minutes in that state, she definitely would've gotten sick.

"Rain from the gods, huh...?" I muttered as I went upstairs to my room.

I hung up my wet pants and changed into sweats. Then I looked out the window. It was raining just as hard, or maybe even harder. Though my window was closed, I could still hear the raindrops striking the roof and the ground.

...I couldn't help but wonder what Kaoru was doing at that moment.

If she didn't want to be at home, where would she go in this weather? I thought it over as I sat down on my bed and stared out at the rainy landscape beyond my window.

"Yuzuru. The bath is free."

More time must've passed than I realized, because Ai came into my room, her hair still wet. Her skin was slightly pink, giving her a sensual look.

"O-oh! Thanks. I'll go take a soak, then."

"Yeah, you should get warmed up. Sorry I went ahead of you."

"You were a lot wetter than I was..."

If I'd taken a bath first, there would've been no point in bringing her home with me.

I smiled wryly and got off the bed. I was just about to leave the room when I realized something. "...You took a bath, right?"

"Huh? Yeah." She blinked at me.

"What about the water?"

"It's still in there. I figured you were going to take one, too."

"Y-yeah, well... Yeah, but..." I stammered and frowned. Then it finally dawned on her.

"Ohhh! Don't worry! I rinsed off my feet first and didn't get any dirt or anything in the tub."

"No, no... I wasn't worried about that..."

"Then what?" A mischievous look came over her face. "Are you thinking something naughty?"

"...I'm gonna go take a shower."

I blushed and heard Ai giggling behind me as I left the room.

If she'd learned to pick up on stuff like that, she would prove a formidable enemy.

After showering, I still felt chilly, so in the end I had no choice but to take a soak in the bathtub. Clearing my mind of all thought, I sat in the water for only about a minute.

When I got back to my bedroom, Ai was lying in my bed, facing the window. Her stomach was moving up and down with her deep, even breaths.

Is she asleep? I wondered, and hesitantly approached her. But once I got close, she rolled over and hooked her arm around my neck. My heart skipped a beat.

"Gotcha," she said.

"...Don't scare me like that."

"But that's exactly what I was trying to do."

We were now face to face and she giggled again, her breath grazing against my skin. Then she let go of me and scooted back toward the window. She patted the empty side of the bed.

"Wanna lie down with me, Yuzuru?"

"... No suddenly getting close like you did just now, okay?"

"Why not? 'Cause it makes your heart pound?"

"Yes."

"Hee-hee. Okay." She patted the bed again.

I obeyed and lay down next to her. It was still pouring outside.

"It's still raining," Ai said calmly, like she was just accepting whatever came her way.

I nodded. "Guess the contest is still on," I said, and she laughed.

"Maybe it's raining this hard because a mortal was having so much fun in it."

"That's right. And when she was satisfied, she barged into someone else's house and hogged their bath. This is punishment."

"Ah-ha-ha. Uh-oh, maybe I did something bad!" She didn't sound the least bit remorseful.

Her hair shifted and the scent of shampoo wafted over to me, making my heart race. My hair smelled the same, so why was it so much more exciting on the girl I liked?

Both of us stared out the window at the rain for a while.

"Hey, Yuzuru?"

Ai turned to me. She was close enough that I could feel her breath again. I wanted to tell her to stop, but the expression on her face was so serious the words died in my throat. She was gazing deep into my eyes.

"Are you worried about Kaoru?" she asked.

Hearing Kaoru's name all of a sudden startled me and I didn't know what to say. Ai looked at my expression and then lowered her gaze.

"You are, aren't you?" she said slowly. "Remember I told you I saw her near the entrance after school?"

"Yeah."

"I actually talked to her a little."

"What?"

Ai hesitantly looked up at me and then said, "I told her you were worried about her. And then she said..." Her eyes wavered. "'There's nothing for Yuzu to worry about.' And then, 'Tell him he should worry about you, instead.'" Ai exhaled slowly. "Kaoru's a really kind person. She's playing down her own troubles because she knows what's going on between us." Ai looked out the window again. In her mind, she was probably seeing Kaoru out there.

I suspected she was right. Kaoru had started distancing herself after she found out about me and Ai.

"Kaoru doesn't let anyone into her heart, because she's trying to protect herself. But at the same time, not letting anyone in is painful for her." Ai reached out and squeezed my arm. "That's why you need to help her, Yuzuru."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I can't do it. I'm not that smart, and I can't say things like you do. If I tried to save Kaoru, I'd just make it worse."

I wasn't sure what to say. I felt like I was making things worse, too. "I feel the same way, though."

"No, you're different." Ai slowly shook her head and stared at me. When she narrowed her eyes like that, I couldn't look away from her. "You know the right words to say to get close to people."

"I do?"

"Yes. Your words helped me."

I didn't remember ever helping Ai. In fact, she was the one who opened my eyes to what was important. But at the same time, if she felt that way, then it must be true. She wasn't the kind of person who would lie about her feelings.

"I don't know what's going on with Kaoru... But I do know that it's something she can't deal with alone. I've never seen her look so desperate." She narrowed her eyes, as if recalling a scene she'd burned into her memory. Then she turned

her body toward mine.

"Face this way, Yuzuru."

"Huh? Why?"

"Just do it."



I didn't know what she was after, but I hesitantly did as she asked. She reached both hands out toward my face and cradled it.

"You can do it, Yuzuru. You're the only one who can."

"You really think so?"

"I know so." Her face was deadly serious. "She's our precious friend. Help her, Yuzuru."

My breath caught in my throat.

A precious friend.

Come to think of it, I couldn't imagine any better way to describe Kaoru. I wanted to help her solve her problems, so she could go back to being her old self again. But I'd thought I was the only one who felt that way. Now, however, I realized that Kaoru was Ai's friend, too. She meant a lot to both of us.

I thought back to the two of them having fun and chatting in the club room. I cherished those peaceful days, and I had a feeling Ai and Kaoru felt the same way. And now, Ai was entrusting her to me.

Suddenly, my mouth went dry. "I—" I slowly began to speak. "I'll do the best I—" I was about to say "I'll do the best I can" when the door opened.

"I'm going to take Ai home soon, so you need to..."

I quickly flipped over in bed and saw Mom was frozen in the doorway, staring at us.

"Goodness...... Ahem. Should I take Ai home in a couple of hours, then?"

"No, you can take her home now. Ai, get up. Let's get ready." I leaped out of bed and stomped out into the hallway, closing the door on my way so Ai could change.

Mom looked astonished, then whispered to me so Ai wouldn't hear, "Did you wuss out?"

"I swear, we weren't doing anything!"

"But you were about to kiss her!"

"No, we were having a serious conversation!"

"Centimeters away from each other's faces?!"

"Yes! And if you care so much, can you remember to knock next time?!"

"Sorry, force of habit..."

Seriously, Mom...

[INTERLUDE]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... "I mean it this time. I think I can make this one work."

I listened to my mother with a scowl on my face.

"He has a real job, a career! And he really cares about the future..."

When I didn't say anything, she started listing off the guy's pros like she was making excuses for him. It was pathetic. I knew I wasn't supposed to think that about my own mother, and honestly it made me sad.

"He said he'd even take care of you, Kaoru, so..."

"Hey," I interrupted. "Do you think he really loves you?"

She widened her eyes. I knew she would get mad, but I couldn't help asking.

"Of course he does!" she said. "Why would you ask that?!"

"You really don't know?! Because every time I come home, there's a different guy here! He screws you for a few weeks, and then he dumps you! How many times are you gonna go through that?!"

"Kaoru, don't you dare use that dirty language with me!"

"Pretty words won't change the truth. It's disgusting..."

I figured it was pointless to continue with this topic. I put one foot on the stairs, intending to go up to my room.

"Hey, I'm not done talking to you yet, young lady! You wait right there!" Her voice was like a dagger slicing into my back.

I turned around and stared at her coldly as she looked up at me.

"If you're just gonna lecture me, I don't want to hear it," I said. "You're gonna get dumped either way, so do whatever you want. Don't worry," I spat, "I'll still do all the household chores for you."

She was speechless. I knew I'd hurt her. I'd chosen my words to do just that.

I went upstairs to my room and could already hear her sobbing.

Why did it always end up like this?

I closed my door and gritted my teeth to stop my own tears from falling.

Ever since my real dad disappeared, my mom told me repeatedly, "You have to be number one." She said the words like a prayer, but they sounded like a curse to me, because the person who said them was *never* number one.

Men jerked her around, used her for sex, and yet she never learned her lesson and fell for every single one of them.

I was tired of watching my mother engage in this pathetic behavior.

We could have had a happy life together without any men in her life. And yet Mom chose not to take that route. She was my only family, yet she made it clear over and over again that I wasn't number one in her life, and that made me sadder than anything else.

It was true that the guy Mom had brought around this time was different from the others. The rest had all clearly been players and degenerates from the start. This one was tall and had a handsome face with a kind smile. No tattoos as far as I could see.

"Your mother and I are serious about this relationship," he said. "I look forward to getting to know you better."

He held out his hand for a handshake, and I had to do my best not to scowl at him. Meanwhile, Mom was fidgeting restlessly behind him as she watched our interaction.

I didn't want to shake this guy's hand, and I couldn't pretend to be friendly. Still, I thought, I have to make my mother look good... and those feelings won out in the end.

"I'm Kaoru, her daughter. It's nice to meet you," I said politely, and bowed.

The man frowned uncomfortably at my reaction. "You don't have to be so formal... You can speak to me like I'm family."

I got goosebumps when he said the word "family." What the hell was he talking about? I'd just met him; there was no way I was going to treat him like family.

"Don't mind me," I said before heading up to my room.

He did seem better than the other lowlifes my mom had brought around. But that was it. He still had the same thin, placating smile as the rest of them. Trying to get close to me right off the bat signaled that he wasn't interested in respecting my boundaries and communicating with me politely.

It was all such a pain.

I lay down on my bed and picked up the new book on my nightstand.

How the Universe Was Born

I'd borrowed this book from the president of the literature club. I traced the cover with my fingers and then held it to my chest as I curled up into a ball. I lived in my own universe. And I wouldn't let anyone else trespass.

As long as I kept everyone out, no one would disappoint me. I would continue taking care of my mother and live a stable life. And after she passed away, I didn't care what happened.

I wouldn't expect anything from anyone. I wouldn't rely on anyone. It didn't matter if I was number one, or two, or three.

The one thing I didn't want to lose was the confidence that I was living my own life. I wanted to believe that I, and I alone, made up my universe.

I thought that was what I wanted... But when I let my guard down, a name slipped from my lips.

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".....Yuzu."
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My eyes felt hot, and tears spilled down my cheeks. I curled up as small as my body would go and felt myself tremble.

"We're both members of the same club, right?"

That kind, gentle voice echoed in my head once again.

"Stop...," I said.

His hand reaching toward me with a towel.

His kind expression.

Those images flashed through my mind, one after the other.

"I'll listen to you until it stops raining."

Ever since that day, it felt like the rain had never stopped falling in my heart.

A tempting voice in my mind whispered sweetly, "Maybe while the rain falls, you can be forgiven."

I didn't want anyone to listen to me.

That nosy club president had destroyed my universe. And now he was touching on an even larger universe—the one of the girl he loved—and it was causing his heart to tremble.

I had no right to stay inside his universe.

"What should I do..."

Every night, I asked myself that same question. What should I do? Over and over again, but I couldn't find the answer.

I knew there wasn't anything I could do. I'd put earplugs in my ears so I couldn't hear what went on downstairs, and curl up in my bed. Before I knew it, I'd fall asleep, and the next day would come.

I didn't like being at home with my mother and her strangers.

And at school, Yuzu's presence caused a sweet ache in my heart.

Now there was no place for me to go.

A chance interaction planted the first seeds of concern.

It was a few days after the new guy showed up at my house. I was in the entryway putting on my shoes so I could go grocery shopping when he suddenly came inside.

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"Oh, hi there," he said.

"...Hello."

"Is your mom home?"

"Of course she is."
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"Ha-ha. Right." The man responded with a soft expression despite my cold demeanor.

"I'm going grocery shopping."

"Thanks for always taking care of that."

"Yeah."

I was walking past him to go outside when I smelled something sweet. It was that cloying kind of sweetness that hit the back of your nostrils—the scent of perfume.

I automatically whirled back around.

"What is it?" He looked at me, puzzled.

"...Nothing."

I rushed out of the house.

He was a handsome man. One that would wear cologne. But the scent I'd picked up didn't smell like something a man would wear. It was *perfume*.

My concern began to grow.

He was going to dump Mom just like all the others. I had resigned myself to that from the start, but now that I had proof my heart raced out of control.

I couldn't sleep. I woke up in the middle of the night, wide awake. I closed my eyes again, but I had an unsettling feeling in my lower belly. I had to pee.

"Ugh, I'm so tired..."

I couldn't ignore the call of nature. I left my room and went down the stairs. On my way to the bathroom, I heard noises coming from Mom's bedroom.

"...I hate this..."

I heard panting and the creak of bedsprings. Of course this was the one night I'd forgotten to put in my earplugs.

I finished my business and started back up the staircase. But then I realized my throat was dry as a bone. It was hot and humid, so it was no wonder I was

thirsty. I clicked my tongue and went back out into the living room, which opened right into the kitchen.

I got a cup and filled it with water, then drank it thirstily. When I was done, I rinsed off the cup, set it in the sink, and took a deep breath. Just then I heard the click of my mother's door opening.

I froze. I thought about hiding, but there was nowhere to go. I thought about racing up the stairs to my bedroom, but I was too flustered, and my body refused to move.

Then the man appeared, wearing nothing but his underwear.

"Oh, you're awake?" He stared at me with surprise.

"...Sorry."

"It's nothing to apologize for. Were we too loud?"

I felt like scowling at the question. He knew they were being loud enough for a child to hear them, yet didn't seem to care at all. Our values couldn't have been more different.

"I'm going back to my room." I walked past him. But just as I started up the stairs, I paused. "Um..."

"Hm?"

He must've been thirsty too, because he got out a clean cup from the cupboard and was filling it with water. He turned toward me, surprised.

"Can I ask you a stupid question?" I said.

He smiled at me. "Of course. Ask me anything."

Wipe that happy look off your face, I said inwardly.

He must've thought I was trying to open up to him, and that made him happy. I felt incredibly uncomfortable. There was only one thing I wanted to ask.

"Do you wear cologne?"

He stared at me blankly and then lifted up his arm and sniffed his own armpit.

"No... Ha-ha. I'm not really into fancy stuff. Do I stink? Sorry, I'm sure you

don't want to smell some old guy."

"No, I was just curious. Sorry. Good night."

I spoke in a rush and then raced up the stairs. My heart was hammering in my chest. He said he didn't wear cologne. So then, that fragrance really was...

I slammed my door shut and leaned against it, sinking to the floor.

"I told you so..." I imagined my mother lying in bed feeling satisfied and suddenly felt powerless. "I hate this...... I hate it so much......!"

Frustrated tears spilled down my face.

I knew it. He was just toying with her.

The moment I found out the truth, I felt a deep sadness rise up inside me... sadness and anger.

And then a thought popped into my head. That day, he'd arrived home in the evening, smelling like another woman. Mom had said he had a real job, a "career." But if that were true, what kind of job would leave him reeking of perfume at the end of the day?

He had to be lying about it.

And if that was the case, then he was probably lying to Mom about everything.

I couldn't let him get away with that.

".....I have to find out for sure."

Climbing back into bed, I vowed to do just that.

[CHAPTER 6]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... "Odajima... Odajima? Hm? Not here? She didn't call in sick, so she must be late."

We were in morning homeroom.

Hirakazu was unenthusiastically calling roll when I felt an icy sensation in the pit of my stomach.

Kaoru was either absent without an excuse, or she was late. Although she was pretty lax when it came to school rules, she'd never been absent like this before.

My heart was racing. I figured something must have happened at home. And once I got that idea in my head, I couldn't relax. I was anxious throughout homeroom. When it was finally over, during the short break before first period, I rushed into the bathroom and texted Kaoru.

What's up? Are you okay?

Several minutes passed, but the message stayed on "Delivered."

Hey, if there's something going on, you can talk to me about it. If I can help, I will.

After leaving those two brief messages, I went back to the classroom. I was still anxious, but there was nothing I could do. I had to sit through my morning classes with frazzled nerves. I took notes robotically, but didn't absorb anything that was said.

Unfortunately, the teacher called on me, and I had to admit I didn't know the answer. He looked at me suspiciously and asked, "Are you feeling okay?"

All I could do was smile vaguely back at him. No, I wasn't feeling okay at all. I had a terrible lump in the pit of my stomach. And there was nothing I could do about it.

Kaoru still hadn't shown up by the time morning classes were over. I checked my texts again at lunchtime. She hadn't read any of my messages. Maybe she intended to come to afternoon classes and was eating lunch up on the roof. I left my own lunch in my bag and went straight up to see.

I climbed the steps and opened the door. On the roof, I saw Nagoshi leaning against the fence. She seemed surprised to see me. She was holding a box cutter with the blade out.

I stared at her silently for a few seconds.

Her usual soft smile came over her face, and she clicked the blade of the box cutter back inside.

"Already decided you wanna be alone?" she asked. She sounded a little fed up.

I was panting from my jog up the steps. "Um...Nagoshi... Is..."

"Odajima isn't here."

"What?"

"I've been up here since this morning. No one else came by," she said, as if reading my mind.

Something about her answer nagged at me, though.

"You've been here the whole day skipping classes?"

"Yeah. I didn't feel like going."

"Oh..."

As usual, I couldn't read her expression. *If she's just going to skip class, why bother coming to school at all?* I wondered.

But I didn't have the energy to ask her about any of that. My concern for Kaoru pushed all questions about Nagoshi out of my mind.

"But you and Kaoru have been talking up here every day lately, right?" I asked.

She nodded. "Mm, yeah. Pretty much. But it's mostly just me talking at her."

"She hasn't said anything? Told you about any problems?" I asked.

Nagoshi snorted. "Getting nosy again, huh?"

She slipped the box cutter into the front pocket of her blouse and slowly came over to me. Something about the way she moved was strangely intimidating, and I suppressed the urge to back away.

"Why are you putting in all this effort?" she asked. "You got a crush on Odajima or something?"

"No, it's not like that."

"Why, then?"

She walked right over to me and stopped. She had a smile on her face, but there was a cold light in her eyes. Nagoshi was a tall girl, and she was looking down at me. Her gaze was intimidating as she waited for me to speak.

I felt anxiety course through my body. But that didn't change my answer.

"Because we're in the same club," I said plainly.

She laughed. "Ha-ha. Give me a break. You're the only one who even goes to meetings."

"I don't care."

"So, if I was having problems and came to you crying and said 'Help me!' you'd help me?" She narrowed her eyes and glared at me. When she moved her head, I could smell the sweet fragrance of citrus wafting through the air.

It felt like she was testing me.

"I'd do everything I could to help," I said, planting my feet firmly on the ground as she narrowed her eyes at me even more.

"Uh-huh."

She took the box cutter out of her pocket and handed it to me.

Huh? I glanced between the box cutter and her.

Casually, she said, "In that case... I want you to cut me with that box cutter."

"......What?"

"Doesn't matter where. Just do it."

There was amusement in her voice as I stared at her, bewildered. I had absolutely no idea what she was thinking.

"Wh-why would I do that?"

"Because I'm in trouble. You can't do it?"

"N-no."

"Even though I'm part of your club, too? Why not?"

"Well, that's..."

"I hope you're not going to say it'd be 'hurting me." Her voice was full of hostility. Yet she still had a faint smile plastered on her face. "Aren't you being a little self-righteous? You say you want to help people, but then you don't listen to what they want."

"…"

I didn't say anything.

Her argument didn't make sense to me. But I couldn't think of the right words to refute it, either.

"Odajima keeps telling you to leave her alone in every way possible. That's what she wants. But you don't care. You just keep trying to shove your nose into her business."

I was fully aware of that.

And yet...I just couldn't believe that was what Kaoru really wanted. That's why I was scrambling.

And in the end, I felt the same way about the girl in front of me.

"...I can imagine," I said.

"Huh?" She cocked her head to the side.

"I can imagine her feelings... Ones she can't express in words." I looked right into Nagoshi's eyes as I spoke and saw them waver for a split second. I didn't want to lose my chance, so I kept talking. "Why are you walking around with a

box cutter, Nagoshi?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"You asked me to cut you with it," I pointed out. She'd been sitting here blaming me this whole time, leaving me puzzled and anxious. But I could sense that she was flustered now. Another question sprang to mind. "And you wear long sleeves even in the summer."

Her gaze naturally dropped down to her left arm.

I knew it.

I felt a little bad about it, but I reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Ow!" Her face twisted in pain.

I could clearly feel a bandage beneath her sleeve. I looked up and stared into her eyes. She was glancing nervously back and forth.

"...You said you like pain. That it makes you feel alive."

".....Asada."

"What does it feel like to hurt yourself? Tell me. Because if it will really help you, then I'll cut you with that box cutter. But I highly doubt it will, and that's why I said I can't do it."

She clicked her tongue, and the corner of her mouth lifted up into a crooked smile. I got the feeling she made that expression a lot—it was a mask she put on, so people couldn't tell what she was thinking.

".......Why do you have to be so cocky?"

"Everyone has feelings that are difficult to talk about. I did, too. Feelings I didn't even know I had."

As I said those words, Kaoru's face flashed into my mind. I could see her crying—crying for my sake.

"Why...why weren't you more selfish with her?!"

... You're doing the same thing. Why won't you be more selfish?

"Kaoru is my precious friend, and she's the one who opened my eyes to those feelings. So..." I narrowed my eyes.

Nagoshi's mouth was hanging open as she met my gaze for a few seconds. Then she looked down and sighed. She shook her head and put the box cutter back in her pocket.

"You're.....a real pain, you know that?" she said. Then she stalked back over to her place by the fence and slowly leaned back against the metal. "I feel for Odajima, having someone like you on her case."

"I know she doesn't like it. But..."

"All right, all right. I get it, already. Do whatever you want." She laughed bitterly and waved at me. "Nagoshi thought she was lecturing a naive boy, only to be put in her place. Poor Nagoshi," she joked, casting me a sidelong glance before continuing. "She mentioned she had problems at home."

"What?"

"One day, she showed up pretty upset, and I tried asking her if she wanted to talk about it. That's all she said. Nothing else." She cocked her head to the side and glanced at me. "Does that help you, Mr. Superhero?"

Her tone was teasing, but she'd passed on that information because she knew it was important to me.

"...! Thank you!" I bowed, and she started to shoo me off with her hands.

"Go on, then. I don't have any food for you today."

"Oh, Nagoshi..." I was going to leave the roof right away, but there was something else I needed to do first, so I ran over to her.

She looked at me and widened her eyes. When I reached into her pocket, she froze. I took out the box cutter, then slipped it into my own pocket. She was beyond confused and kept glancing between me and my pocket.

"I'm borrowing this," I said firmly.

"Huh?" She looked flabbergasted.

"I'll give it back someday. Bye." And with that, I turned on my heel.

"Jeez..." I heard a wry chuckle behind me. "Hey, Asada!" she called out just as I reached the stairs.

I turned around, and she flashed me a crooked smile, then waved. "If you don't give it back to me tomorrow, I'll just buy a new one." It didn't sound like she was joking.

I gulped and nodded. "Then...I'll come and borrow that one, too," I answered.

She stared at me blankly for a few seconds, then burst out laughing.

"Ah-ha-ha! Seriously. You.....are *such* a pain," she said, smiling. She sounded amused, but at the same time...she sounded kind of sad, too.

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Kaoru didn't come to afternoon classes, either. Once school was over, I went straight to the faculty office, and headed right over to my homeroom teacher, Hirakazu.

"Hm? What's up?" He gave me a suspicious look and then set his coffee cup back down on his desk.

"Um..... Did you ever hear from Ka—er, Odajima?"

"Oh...," he said in a low voice, then shook his head. "Nope, nothing. I think she'd be more likely to tell the other students, don't you? What do you kids call it, texting? Hasn't someone texted you or something?"

His calm attitude pissed me off.

"If I had, why would I come all this way to ask you about it?" I said, not even bothering to hide my irritation.

"Ooh, scary," he muttered, then shrugged. "You've got a point. But I mean, it's pretty common for kids your age to skip school, isn't it?"

"Are you really a teacher?"

"I'm saying this because I'm a teacher. Don't you think it would be irritating if I went and made a big deal about it and called a student's family every time they were absent for one day?"

I understood what he meant, but I hadn't come here to listen to his opinions. I clenched my fist, feeling incredibly irritated.

If he didn't know, then he didn't know. It didn't seem like he was lying.

"Can you tell me if you hear anything?" I said, and he raised an eyebrow.

"Why would I tell you?"

"Because I'm worried," I answered, and he laughed.

"What, you got a thing for Odajima?" That question pushed my irritation to the limit.

"This isn't a joke!" I yelled, and suddenly you could hear a pin drop in the faculty office.

All the teachers and visiting students turned around and stared at us. Hirakazu made a face and lowered his voice.

"Idiot, don't yell like that!!"

"It's because you're not taking me seriously, Hirakazu."

"I am taking you seriously, dummy."

I wondered how on earth this counted as "taking me seriously" and scowled at him. He relented and waved his hand dismissively.

"Fine, fine. If I hear anything, I'll tell you. Just go home for the day and cool your head."

"...Excuse me," I said, then bowed and left the office.

As I hurried down the hall, I pulled my phone out of my backpack. When I checked my texts, it was just as I'd thought: Kaoru still hadn't read my messages.

Had she not seen them, or was she purposely ignoring them? Either way, I felt depressed.

As I lay on the sofa in the club room, my thoughts raced. From what Nagoshi had said, I had to conclude Kaoru was having problems at home again.

I knew that she and I lived near the same train station, but I didn't know her address, so I couldn't go see her.

I vowed that if she came to school the following day, I'd drag the story out of her whether she liked it or not.

But...she didn't come. She was absent the next day, and the day after that, too.

[CHAPTER 7]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... Three days had passed since Kaoru last came to school.

That morning before homeroom, I turned around to look at the seat behind me. It was empty.

"Hm? Odajima's absent again, huh? ...All right, I think it's about time I called her family," Hirakazu said, his voice relaxed. "So, no need for the rest of you to worry." He was staring right at me with narrowed eyes.

Sousuke turned around and looked at me, too.

I glanced down and sighed.

Homeroom continued, but I couldn't absorb a word of what Hirakazu was saying. Before I knew it, it was time for morning classes.

School seemed like an entirely different place without Kaoru. It wasn't like I didn't have any other friends to talk to, and there wasn't anything I really needed her for. It just felt like something was missing, like there was some void in my life without her.

I missed her kicking my chair over trivial things. I missed turning around and seeing her, and chatting with her about nothing in particular.

I'd taken all that for granted.

I spaced out entirely during morning classes. The minute we broke for lunch, Sousuke turned around to face me.

"Hey... You think Odajima's okay? Sometimes she breaks the rules, but she always comes to school." Sousuke was the kind of guy who was always smiling, but now, he looked meek and quiet.

"Yeah... I'm worried about her, too." I nodded.

Sousuke exhaled slowly. After a few moments of silence, he said "Oh!" as if just remembering something. "Don't you two live near the same station?" he asked, and I stared at him blankly.

"Yeah, so what?" I shot him a puzzled look, and he leaned across my desk.

"So, why don't you offer to bring her the homework she missed, and go check on her after school?"

I blinked at him.

We did live close to each other...but that was all. What he was proposing was completely out of left field.

"What? Yeah, but...I don't know her address...," I replied.

"Huh?" He gawked at me. "Just ask Hirakazu. Tell him you're delivering her make-up assignments, and he'll give it to you."

It felt like a lightbulb went off in my head. Why hadn't I thought of that myself?

"Oh...right. Right!" I nodded again and again, then leaped out of my chair and bowed to Sousuke. I was about to run out of the classroom, but he caught me by the arm.

"Hey, hey!"

"What?"

"Didn't you hear what Hirakazu said during homeroom? He had something to do at lunch today, so he said if we needed anything from him to wait until after school."

"O-oh... Right."

Deflated, I trudged back to my seat. Now that he mentioned it, I did remember Hirakazu saying something like that. I'd been really spacing out during homeroom that day.

Sousuke stared at me and then chuckled wryly. "I thought you liked Mizuno, anyway."

"This is different. Kaoru's...my precious friend, okay?"

Sousuke's expression changed. "Your friend, huh?" He nodded a few times. "Well, go and ask Hirakazu for her address after school." Then he turned back around.

...It was true. Kaoru was my precious friend.

And those feelings had only grown stronger as I passed these last few days without her. I missed her presence in the seat behind me.

I would go see Hirakazu after school and tell him I was going to deliver her homework. Then I'd go to her house and talk to her. I'd made my decision.

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School was over in no time. I went straight to the faculty office without even grabbing my backpack. I wanted to ask Hirakazu for Kaoru's address as soon as possible. As I hurried down the hallway, I glanced out the window. Thick clouds covered the sky. It might rain soon.

Just as I was about to reach the office, a familiar girl appeared in front of me down the hall.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

".......Kaoru," I called out, and she shot me a sour look, then gestured toward the stairs with her thumb.

What was that supposed to mean? Why had she come to school so late? What had she been doing all those days she'd been absent?

I had so many questions I wanted to ask her, but for now I just nodded and followed her lead. She was headed up to the roof.

We silently climbed up the stairs together and went out onto the roof.

I looked around, but Nagoshi was nowhere to be seen.

Kaoru had been walking quietly in front of me, but at last, she turned around.

I couldn't hold back anymore, and I blurted out, "Kaoru, I texted you. Where have you be—?!"

"Here." She interrupted me and handed me an envelope. "Give this to Hirakazu."

I looked down at it, and my heart leaped into my throat.

The words "Withdrawal from Club Activities" were written in round letters across the paper.

".....But why?" I whispered weakly.

Her eyebrow twitched, but then her expression grew serious again. "No

reason. I just don't have time for it anymore."

"You're lying."

"I'm not lying. I have a lot to do at home."

The word "home" caught my attention.

"Are you sure there's nothing troubling you at home?"

The moment those words left my mouth, I saw her face tense up. And then I was sure of it. Something *had* happened with her family.

"Hey," I said, "if you're going through something, tell me about it."

"I'm not."

"Then why haven't you come to club meetings, and why are you skipping school? You told me you'd come every day, and then all of a sudden you stopped showing up, without even giving me a reason!" I raised my voice. "It doesn't make sense!"

The whole time I spoke she was gritting her teeth, and when I was done, she finally said in a cold voice, "I changed my mind, that's all. Actually, it was more like I just changed my mind temporarily. I saw you and Ai having fun, and I got a little excited. That's all it was."

She spoke so carefully—it was like she was reciting something she'd rehearsed, and that pissed me off.

"Don't lie to me!" I realized I was shouting.

She flinched and drew away from me. I was mad at her for lying about her feelings, but sad at the same time.

"Don't lie to me with that look on your face," I said.

I heard a distant rumble of thunder from above.

Her expression filled with pain. "Just make sure Hirakazu gets the envelope."

She was about to walk past me to go back downstairs, but I grabbed her by the arm.

"Wait."

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"Let go of me."
"No."
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"I said, let go of me!" She yanked her arm away and glared at me. "I told you to leave me alone. Didn't you hear me?!"

"I know that's what you said. But when I see you like this, I can't just abandon you. Can't you see I'm worried about you?"

"Did I ask you to worry about me? Right now, you're totally preoccupied with Ai, right? So just leave me alone and worry about yourself instead!"

"Ai's got nothing to do with this. You—"

"What, I'm in the same club as you? Well, I'm not anymore. I quit!"

"No, you're not out yet. I still haven't accepted this envelope."

"Will you stop being so irritating? I'm not going anymore!"

My heart ached. Why was she saying all this? And if she really meant it, why did it look like she was in so much pain? I felt helpless.

"Why.....? Why won't you just talk to me?" My voice trembled.

Her gaze wavered. She stared at me, her expression tense.

Please don't give me that look.

"I just...want to help you," I said.

"I never asked you to help—!"

"Because you can't ask me!" I roared back, interrupting her. I couldn't stop the force behind my voice. "Because if you ask me, it'll destroy the universe you've built up around yourself. So you decided to say nothing and run away instead!"

She opened her eyes wide. I watched as they began to burn with anger.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Her lips trembled as she spoke. "My universe.....my universe was *already* destroyed!!" she shouted.

At the exact same time, lightning flashed somewhere, and thunder rolled.

Then it started to rain.

I stared at her without blinking. She looked like she was about to burst into tears.

She stomped toward me, then angrily grabbed me by my collar. Startled, I let out a high-pitched noise from my throat.

"And you're the one who destroyed it!" she screamed, glaring at me.

"M-me?"

"Yes!" she shouted. "If you really wanna know, then I'll tell you! Mom brought another new guy home! Not that it's anything new, but she swore this time she was serious, and she really thinks she's gonna marry him! But I'm pretty sure he's already cheating on her, and there's no way he's gonna make her happy, so I'm trying to get him the hell away from her!!"

She was shaking my body with every word.

"Now I've said it! I've said it...so what are you going to do about it?"

Her words were like electric shocks.

It began to rain harder, and countless drops struck the surface of the roof.

My face started to feel cold. The chill seemed to penetrate my skin until even my heart felt like ice.

"Now that I've told you, are you gonna magically solve my family's problems? Are you gonna make my mom happy?! No, you can't!!" She kept screaming, shaking me as she held me by the collar.

And I couldn't say anything.

When she finally released me, her eyes were red. But I couldn't tell if the drops running down her cheeks were teardrops or raindrops.

"You can't do a thing to help me... So stop looking at me with those kind eyes!!" she howled, letting her anger take over.

Another flash of lightning.

"Stop reaching out to me... Don't destroy my universe any more than you already have..." Her voice grew weak as she finished speaking. She glared at me, her entire body shaking.

Then, as if suddenly realizing where she was, she gasped. After that, she took off. She threw open the door to the roof and ran down the stairs.

I couldn't go after her. My body wouldn't move. I just stood there, completely stunned.

She was right.

I'd wanted her to talk to me about it, thinking it might make her feel a little better. That was my intention. But...in the end, I was powerless to do anything that mattered.

Kaoru was worried sick over a very serious problem, and having someone who couldn't give her anything but kind words wasn't helpful at all.

I knew that.

The rain pounded mercilessly down on my cheeks. Thunder rumbled.

I sank to the ground, fully aware of my own helplessness, and let myself get soaked by the rain.

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I choked back my sobs as I ran down the stairs.

I knew I'd just used him to vent. But I couldn't help it.

I was embarrassed that Yuzuru knew about the universe I'd created for myself.

His kind words had felt warm. Yuzuru had quietly embraced the loneliness I imposed upon myself in order to avoid taking risks, and he'd filled my overflowing void of solitude.

But that still meant letting someone else into my universe. That meant I'd been unable to protect it, and it hurt.

If I'd known things would end up like this, I never would've let him in. If I'd known I would end up saying those things to hurt him, I never would've gotten him involved.

My heart was filled with regret.

Just as I reached the fourth-floor landing, I heard a voice.

"Kaoru?"

What horrible timing.

Ai's eyes were round as she stared at me.

"...Ai."

"I thought you were with Yuzuru?" She cocked her head to the side like a little bird. Her black hair moved in the breeze. She looked so otherworldly I had to squint at her.

"How did you know?"

"I was in the hallway and saw you two go up to the roof. I was going to walk home with him..."

I snorted. I knew it was rude, but I couldn't help myself. "Really. Well then, go home with him already. I'm not going to join you."

"...Okay." She smiled sadly at me and nodded. "Be careful, all right?"

She didn't ask me anything. She probably wanted to, but she was kind and decided it was best not to pry. It made me feel pathetic.

The sound of thunder echoed through the hallway. The whole building shook —lightning must have struck close by.

"This thunder's crazy, huh?" Ai murmured.

That was when I realized something: Yuzuru didn't have an umbrella. He was probably soaked by now.

"Here. Take this." I took a folding umbrella out of my bag and handed it to Ai. She stared at me blankly.

"Huh? I already have an umbrella."

"Give it to Yuzuru," I said.

She stared at the umbrella for a few seconds and then shook her head. "No. Give it to him yourself." Her voice was quiet, but surprisingly forceful.

There was no way I was going back up to the roof just to give him an

umbrella. I shoved it against her chest.

"I'm in a hurry."

Then I raced past her.

She called after me, "Kaoru!"

I didn't know if I should ignore her or not, and I ended up pausing.

"What?"

I turned around, and the moment I looked at her, my heart ached. There was a stern light shining in her eyes. She wasn't wearing her usual kind smile, and there was a serious look on her face as she spoke.

"Feelings don't just disappear. And if you don't talk about them, the pain will never go away."

It was like she saw straight through me. Hot tears stung my eyes, though whether from sadness or frustration I couldn't tell. I desperately held them back as I turned on my heel and continued down the stairs. This time, she didn't try to stop me.

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I didn't know how long I sat there in the rain.

Despite the chilly dampness soaking me, my body felt hot. But that cold feeling from before still lingered in the pit of my stomach, throbbing.

All those feelings I hadn't put into words kept swirling around inside me. But the main one I was able to recognize was "helplessness."

In the end, I'd stuck my nose in Kaoru's business and invaded her personal space, and that had hurt her. My own actions frustrated, saddened, and angered me.

"Yuzuru."

The rain was so loud I didn't even hear the sound of the door opening. I slowly turned around and saw Ai standing there with her usual gentle smile. I let out a little sigh. She was the last person I wanted to see me right now.

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".....Ai."
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"You're drenched. Aren't you the one who always tells *me* to stay out of the rain?"

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".....It's fine."
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"You'll get sick."

She was holding a plastic umbrella as she walked over to me. I heard a rustling noise above my head, and then the rain stopped hitting my cheek.

"Are you crying?" she asked in a gentle voice.

I shook my head. "I'm not."

"...You are," she said and touched my cheek. A tear ran over her finger. "The rain isn't that warm."

"I'm sorry, Ai. But can you just leave me alone today...?"

"No." She quietly shook her head.

My eyes stung with tears. I suspected she wouldn't ask me anything. Instead, she'd just say a bunch of kind words. But right now...now, more than ever—I didn't want that.

"Please, Ai."

"No. You'll get wet without an umbrella."

"I'm already wet," I said as I shed another pitiful tear.

She smiled faintly at me. "Okay, then."

The next moment, I heard a light splashing sound, and once again the rain began to pound my cheeks.

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"Huh...?"
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I looked up to see that Ai had cast the umbrella aside. "If you're going to get soaked, then I will, too," she declared.

"Y-you'll get sick."

"Then we'll both be sick together," she said with a smile.

"Y-you can't, Ai..." I hastily took a step forward to scoop up the umbrella.

At the same time, she grabbed my arm and pulled me toward her. Before I knew it, I was surrounded by her warmth. It took me a few seconds to comprehend what had just happened. Then I realized her face was right next to mine. I looked down and saw that she was standing on her tiptoes.

She was hugging me.

"I'm warm, aren't I?" she said, still embracing me.

"......Yes," I answered softly, and she tightened her arms around me. It hurt a little bit. But she was so warm.

"Doesn't it make you feel better when someone hugs you tight like this?"

".....Maybe."

I felt her hot breath against my ear.

"I feel the same way," she whispered. Her gentle words seemed to flow into me. "When I hug you, I think about how warm you are. And it makes me feel safe when I hold you tight, because I know you're right here with me."

She slowly let go of me, then she looked up hesitantly and stroked my cheek.

"But...when I let you go, it's a little cold, isn't it?" She giggled softly. "I bet... you've been thinking about all the things you've done, and the things people have done for you...mulling them all over...and feeling bad about everything." She spoke in a gentle voice, looking right into my eyes. "But all you've done is try to get close to others and be kind to them...and I love that about you."



Her hand stroked my cheek again and again. It was so warm.

Every place she touched seemed to glow with warmth until I finally realized how hot my body felt. I could feel my heart pumping blood all throughout my body.

The cold feeling in the pit of my stomach dissipated. But now, my heart ached. I was conflicted—Ai's kind words reassured me, but at the same time, I couldn't forgive myself for feeling reassured.

"I think everyone must feel the same. They're struck by the warmth of your words, and...I'm sure some of them are afraid of losing them."

"What do you mean?" I asked, even though it had finally dawned on me what Ai was getting at. She was talking about Kaoru.

"Not everyone is good with words the way you are, Yuzuru. I'm not. So please don't cry over the things you said." She wrapped her arms around me once again. And then she said with a sigh, "You're so warm."

I felt the tears well back up at her words. The feeling she'd just described was taking hold of my whole body. Warmth.

".....You're warm, too," I answered honestly, and I felt her body shake slightly as she giggled.

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"Heh-heh. I know, right?"
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"Yeah."

"Don't forget... When you hug someone, both of you are warm."

"...Okay."

"Your words are just as warm. Don't forget how they can warm a person's heart, okay?"

"......Okay." I nodded tearfully and then slowly let go of Ai.

I looked at her. She was gazing back and me and smiling happily.

"I think...you'll be fine, now."

I nodded. "Yeah. I think I will."

She smiled brightly again and then took out a black folding umbrella from her bag and handed it to me. "She told me to give this to you."

I stared at the umbrella and nodded. I didn't ask her who.

"I'm leaving now," I said.

"Okay."

I quickly scooped up the clear plastic umbrella and handed it to Ai. "Hurry home and take a hot bath, all right?"

"Of course. I know if I get sick, you'll just lecture me," she said with a grin. I was finally able to flash her a stiff smile in return.

I took a deep breath and then left the roof.

I wouldn't hesitate anymore.

"Whoa! What happened to you?" Hirakazu frowned grumpily when I showed up completely drenched. "Don't come into the faculty office soaking wet! Go change into your gym clothes! Hurry up!"

"I don't have time for that. Could you please tell me Kaoru's address?"

"What are you, a stalker?"

"No. She's missing a bunch of homework. I live by the same station as her, so I'll bring it to her."

"You sure that's not just an excuse so you can get her address?" He eyed me suspiciously, but I stared right back at him.

"No, it's not," I said firmly, and he sighed.

"Fine," said Hirakazu. "That saves me the trouble anyway. I've been calling and calling, and no one picks up." He took the class register off his shelf, copied Kaoru's address onto a piece of paper, and handed it to me. "Let me know if there's any trouble."

"I will. Thank you." I took the paper and turned around.

Just as I was leaving the office, I heard Hirakazu sigh and say, "Ah, to be young



[CHAPTER 8]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... I walked down the road from the station holding the small folding umbrella over my head. I wasn't headed home, though. Not today.

It had been a while since I'd left school without going to the club room, and it felt odd to be walking this way while it was still light out. That said, the thick rainclouds covering the sky made my surroundings dim and gloomy.

Before, I always thought of Ai when it rained, because she was my regret. But now, heavy rain made me think of Kaoru. I remembered the day she'd run into the club room, soaked to the bone.

If I couldn't help her right now, I knew that I would always regret it. I typed the address Hirakazu had given me into the map application on my phone and let it guide me. After about fifteen more minutes, I reached Kaoru's house. It was a western-style single family home.

I took a deep breath and pressed the intercom button. I waited a few seconds, but there was no answer, so I pressed it again. No answer.

Maybe no one's home, I thought, but I had no other way of finding Kaoru. Refusing to give up, I pressed the button again. I rang it four, then five times with no answer. But then, at last, the front door opened with a click. I drew in a sharp breath.

A serious-looking man emerged, wearing a suit. "...What?" he said, eyeing me suspiciously.

Now faced with a strange man, I began to feel extremely nervous. But I couldn't back down now.

I mustered up all my courage and squeezed out, "Um, I'm a classmate of Kaoru Odajima's... She's been absent from school for several days, so I came to give her the homework she missed..."

The man turned around toward the inside of the house and said quietly, "Is that true?"

It was then that I knew for sure that Kaoru was inside, and my body moved automatically. I opened the chest-high iron gate and walked up to the entryway.

"Hey, wait...!"

I peeked through the gap in the door into the house and saw Kaoru standing there, wide-eyed. Further back, another woman was staring at me, looking equally surprised. She must have been Kaoru's mother.

"Kaoru," I called out. "I came to give you your homework, and to return your umbrella."

Kaoru's voice was faint. ".......How did you...?"

"Hirakazu gave me your address and asked me to deliver your homework."

"Hey. C'mon, kid." As I kept desperately talking to Kaoru, the man poked me in the shoulder. He did it with enough force to throw me off balance. "Don't you think it's pretty rude to peek into someone's house and talk to their daughter without permission?" His warm demeanor from before was completely gone, and he was clearly irritated.

"I-I'm sorry, but—"

"But nothing. We're in the middle of an important discussion. What was it, homework and an umbrella? I'll take 'em." He held out his hand. His body language screamed, "Get lost, kid."

But if I let that intimidate me, coming here would've been completely pointless.

"I want to give it to her directly," I said.

"What's the difference?"

"I just want to," I said clearly.

The man heaved a big sigh and looked at Kaoru. "Hurry up and take it already," he urged. Kaoru hesitated for a few seconds, but then the man said, "Hurry up!" again, so she put on her shoes and stepped outside.

I took the homework from my bag and handed it to her. "If you don't come back to school, you'll have even more homework than this. And then I'll have to come give it to you again," I said.

She looked completely bewildered. "Yuzu..... Why...?"

"And here's your umbrella."

This wasn't the time for a Q&A. The man's sharp gaze was stabbing into us. I could feel it on my skin.

I held out the umbrella.

"Thank you for leaving it for me," I said.

"…"

She still seemed confused, and she glanced back and forth between the umbrella and me.

"Can you hurry it up already or what?" the man asked, nearing his limit.

Kaoru came back to herself and gathered the homework and umbrella up in her arms.

I narrowed my eyes and stared at the man. I'd only talked to him for a few minutes, but I could already tell that he didn't respect Kaoru in the slightest. And I imagined he probably didn't treat Kaoru's mother well, either.

If he loved Kaoru's mother from the bottom of his heart, and he wanted to build a family with her, then he would treat Kaoru well, too.

"Excuse me." My mouth was moving before I even realized what I was doing. "Are you Kaoru's mother's boyfriend?" I asked.

The man narrowed his eyes cautiously. "Yeah, what about it? You dating Kaoru or something?"

"No, I'm her classmate. We're in the same club."

"That so? ... I didn't know Kaoru was in a club."

"You didn't?"

"No. She doesn't tell me anything." He turned a reproachful gaze on her, and she quickly averted her eyes.

Their interactions made me uncomfortable. I couldn't help feeling like he was pinning her down with his words.

I made my voice firmer. "And why do you think it is that she doesn't tell you

anything?"

"Huh?" His face grew stern. The sharp look in his eyes scared me for a moment. But I knew I couldn't back down.

"It's because you're not opening up to her, either," I said.

At that, the man looked blatantly offended. "Why should I be lectured by some high school kid, huh?"

"Because Kaoru won't open her heart to someone who's hiding important things from her."

"...What's that supposed to mean?" His face grew even more severe. He was clearly angry.

I gulped and said, "Are you sure you're not seeing another woman besides Kaoru's mom?"

Both the man and Kaoru stared at me in shock.

"Hey, Yuzu..." Kaoru grabbed my arm just as the man raised his voice.

"What the hell, Kaoru? So you won't talk to me, but you'll bad-mouth me to this kid, huh?"

"…"

Kaoru looked nervous and didn't answer.

"Maybe you just don't like me, and that's why you're spreading lies about me, huh? And I bet you're saying the same things to her, too, aren't you?!" He was really riled up now. By "her" I was sure he meant Kaoru's mother. He stared at Kaoru and snorted. "Ah, I see. So when you said you had something important to talk to us about, you were gonna say that in front of her, weren't you? So, you're a coward who wanted to run me off without even trying to open up to me, huh?" he said, picking up steam.

Kaoru's mom came into the entryway, too. "Hey, that's enough. Don't yell like that out where everybody can hear."

"You shut up!" He violently shook off her grip.

I saw Kaoru start to tremble at that. I was about to tell the man to stop, but

Kaoru spoke first.

"...Who the hell do you think you are?" she muttered in a low voice, but the man heard her anyway.

"Huh? What did you say?"

Kaoru looked up and glared at him. I could only see her profile, but I could tell she was furious. Then she spoke in a voice as cold as ice, as if she was forcing all the anger out from the pit of her stomach and putting it into words. "You're nothing but a leech."

The man opened his eyes wide. Then he started shaking. His eyes were filled with rage. "...Try saying that one more time."

"I'll say it as many times as you want. You're nothing but a two-timing leech!! You meet up with tons of different women every day and live off their money!!" Kaoru screamed.

The man's body jerked, and then he stomped over and got right in her face.

I immediately thought, Crap!

"You little bitch!!" He swung his right arm back and curled his hand into a fist. Kaoru's body froze.

I sprang into action and shoved Kaoru out of the way, putting myself between her and the man.

The next moment, my vision went white. I heard a low thud on impact, then a high-pitched *crack* that seemed to reverberate directly through my head.

It felt like my brain was shaking. Then a sharp pain belatedly raced through my right cheek.

He'd punched me. I'd managed to get Kaoru out of the way just in time. I'd intended to catch the man's fist with my hand, but I was too slow.

There was no doubt, however, that his violent outburst had been aimed at Kaoru. A shiver ran down my spine when I thought about what would've happened if she'd taken the brunt of that forceful punch.

I shook my head, trying to clear the dizziness in my brain, and then I glared at

the man.

"You'd punch the daughter of the woman you love?"

"She was asking for it, talking to me like that!"

"That's enough! Please, stop!" Kaoru's mother clung to the man's arm.

At the same time, Kaoru reached out and grabbed my hand.

"Yuzu, let's go."

"Huh? But..."

"Just come on!!" She tugged on my arm and pulled me out the gate and away, then took off running.

"Kaoru?!"

I could hear her mother screaming after us, but Kaoru didn't stop.

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The sun had set, and night was approaching. The rain had stopped completely.

As we walked through the shopping district by the station, Kaoru glanced over at me. "Your face is all swollen. We need to buy some ice."

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. If you don't get some ice on that ASAP, it'll bruise."

"I don't care. I'm not that handsome anyway," I joked, and she came to a halt and glared at me.

There were tears in her eyes. "Why did you come to my house?"

"I told you...to bring you your homework."

"That's not what I mean!" she shouted. Then her voice dropped, and it sounded like she was holding back sobs. "I mean, why did you come after I said all those things to you....."

I didn't know how to answer that. Ai had said that some people weren't good with words. Kaoru had chosen to push me away because she thought that was

the best thing to do. That was why she'd said those things to me. She'd felt cornered, as if she didn't have a choice.

"You're a kind person, Kaoru... You said all that because you didn't want to get me involved," I said.

She frowned. I could tell she was holding back tears. "That's really self-absorbed of you..."

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"I know."
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".....Why do you care so much about me?" Kaoru asked. Rather than accusatory, she sounded curious.

I sighed and tipped my head to the side. "Why did you get angry when all that stuff was going on between me and Ai?" I asked, and I heard her gasp. "What happened between me and Ai had nothing to do with you. But you cried and got angry on my behalf. That kindness really helped me." A pained look came over Kaoru's face as I spoke. "Is it so bad to want to do something for my friend who was kind to me when I needed help?"

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".....Idiot."
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"Why did you have to barge into my world...!" She started crying.

I decided to come clean because I couldn't think of any other answer. "If I'd just let you go...I would've regretted it," I said.

Her wet eyes wavered.

"And I don't want to have any more regrets...not about anyone."

She listened to me wordlessly, crying and sniffling. Then she wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her cardigan and said, "Yuzu."

[&]quot;I quit the club."

[&]quot;Sorry, but the form got all ruined in the rain. I didn't turn it in."

[&]quot;Sorry."

[&]quot;I kept telling you to stop."

[&]quot;I know."

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"What?"

"I don't want to go home."

"Okay."

"......I wanna go to the beach."

"Let's go, then."
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After that simple conversation, we started walking again. We didn't say another word to each other, even as we boarded the train that would take us to the beach.

[CHAPTER 9]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... By the time we switched trains and arrived at the station nearest the beach, it was already dark out. It was summer, though, and there were still people here and there along the ocean, including some kids playing with fireworks and yelling.

Kaoru and I walked leisurely over the sand, heading away from the other people. Even though it had stopped raining, the smell of it still lingered in the air. The sand was wet and hard, so it was actually easier to keep our shoes on.

We reached the end of the beach, but there were still people there. Luckily, they were all just enjoying the ocean quietly.

Kaoru sat down on the ground right at the edge of the sea, where the waves met the sand. I was concerned that her butt would get wet, but then I realized that was a pretty silly thing to be worried about after coming all the way to the beach.

I sat down next to her.

There was a gentle breeze. I could hear the water lightly lapping against the shore and the distant clamor of young people, as well as the rumble of the passing cars on the nearby road.

As we sat there quietly, the sounds all washed over me.

The salty sea air stung my cheek. Perturbed, I tongued the spot I'd been punched from inside my mouth, and a throbbing pain raced through it.

The briny scent of the air combined with the pain made me feel sad for some reason. I wondered what Kaoru was thinking as she stared out at the sea by my side. Then she spoke, interrupting my thoughts.

"When I look at the ocean, I think..."

She paused, staring into the distance toward the vague horizon, hidden by the night. We could now see stars in between the clouds, and I figured the spot where they stopped being visible was probably where the sea met the sky.

"It's so vast and endless...," she continued. "You can't see where it goes, but there it is, right in front of you. Unlike the universe, you can reach out and touch it. It's reassuring, but at the same time it makes me feel empty." Her voice sounded calm, but it was filled with a deep loneliness.

"I wanted to become my own universe. Then, I'd forget about how small I was. I could leave behind all my sadness—it would melt away and become insignificant. I'd just be there, and that'd be it. But..." She stopped talking and then gave a self-deprecating chuckle. "But when I see the ocean or the starry sky, it makes me realize that I'm not even close to being a universe. I'm just a human. A girl. A child... I'm powerless and empty...and my existence is insignificant."

I silently listened to her. I'd never heard her talk about herself like this before.

"So, at the very least, I thought I'd build a universe inside my heart. I wouldn't let anyone else in. It would be a place just for me... That was the only way I could carry on, I thought." She paused and looked at me, and I stared back at her. "It's stupid, isn't it? It's just words, that's all." She gave another self-deprecating laugh. But I shook my head.

"No, those words helped me, Kaoru. It's not stupid at all." I looked up at the sky. "I truly believe there's a universe inside of you. And only you know how vast it is... But I'm certain it's very beautiful."

She scoffed and then looked up at the sky, too. "You know... You really threw off my calculations."

"Your calculations?"

"Yep."

She nodded and then lay on her back. The sky blanketed her field of vision. The clouds were moving so fast I could see the breeze carrying them away. The wind must be a lot stronger up there.

"I thought if I closed off my heart and was cold to everyone, no one would be kind to me. And as long as no one tried to come close, I wouldn't have to think about anyone else's universe. But..." She watched the sky as she continued. "That day when you were in the club room, I tried to push you away, but you listened to me... And after that, everything changed."

"It did ...?"

"Yes. I realized that I'd been lonely the whole time." She laughed as if something about that were funny. "I thought I wanted to be a universe, that I just wanted to be there, my own thing. But really, I'm just a human...and I'm lonely all by myself. Realizing that destroyed my universe. Ever since then, it's been ruined."

She turned her head and looked at me. "It's all your fault, Yuzu. How are you gonna make it up to me?"

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"......I'm sorry."
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"...Don't apologize. I'm just taking it out on you."

She'd said it was my fault, but when I apologized, she shook her head. Both things were probably true.

I sighed. "You....... You wanted to solve it all on your own, didn't you? In order to get back your universe."

She nodded. "That's right. I decided to stop relying on you. I was gonna quit the club, and go back to being alone."

"Why would you want to be alone if it makes you sad?" I asked, curious.

Her face tensed. "...Because."

"Because why?"

"Because I just do!" She raised her voice, then quickly sat up and looked at me. "Because who knows when you won't be there anymore!" Her voice was shaking. "If I keep relying on you more and more, I won't be able to live without you. Then what?!"

"Huh? I mean...eventually our paths will split off, and we won't be together forever, but that doesn't mean we need to stop being friends..."

"That's not what I mean!!" she shouted. "I mean you'll choose Ai!"

I was speechless. "What ...?"

"You love her, don't you? You love Ai."

"Well, yeah..."

"That means...that eventually, we won't be able to see each other anymore."

"That's not true..."

"It is......!" Tears fell from her eyes. Her voice caught in her throat, but she kept trying to force it out. "It's too painful to be number two...," she said, then glanced up at me. Her face was twisted with pain. I was baffled. I didn't understand why she was bringing up Ai all of a sudden. And what did she mean, "number two"? I was filled with questions.

"I know I can never be number one to you, so I can't be by your side..."

"Kaoru, what are you saying?" I asked, flustered.

She sniffled and glared at me. "...I guess this is the one thing you have trouble imagining, huh?" She reached out, grabbed me by the collar, and pulled me toward her.

And then she pressed her lips against mine.

"...! ...?!"

I was stunned.

Her soft lips lingered on mine for several seconds, refusing to let go. Then she slowly pulled away. We stared at each other. I could see my reflection in her wet, narrowed eyes.

Oh...

I felt a pain like someone had reached out and grabbed my heart with their bare hands.

The look on Kaoru's face was exactly the same as the one I'd seen Ai make before. Slightly narrowed, moist eyes. Flushed cheeks. Softly upturned lips.

"You caught me, Yuzuru."

Her face looked exactly like Ai's had that day at the park, when she said those words to me.

And now, I understood what that expression was.

...Love.

It was the face of someone in love.

Kaoru's mouth moved in slow motion as she spoke.

"I love you, so let's just say goodbye."

I made a raspy sound in my throat. I couldn't exhale. She looked at me and chuckled softly. Then she slowly stood up and dusted the sand off her skirt and back, as if she'd said all she needed to say. She glanced at me one last time, then started to walk away.

She kept moving farther and farther from me, but I couldn't go after her. All I could do was watch her in utter confusion.

Kaoru loved me, and not as a friend. She was in love with me.

When she realized she couldn't become a universe, she'd understood she was just a human—just a girl. That was what she'd told me only moments ago.

And now, I finally understood what she'd meant.

When she'd realized everything else, she'd understood that she was in love with me, and that had changed all the feelings inside of her. When I reached out to her, I'd claimed a piece of her heart, much bigger than I'd ever imagined.



And yet...I'd taken Ai Mizuno's hand instead.

And once she realized Ai and I were only going to get closer, Kaoru couldn't bear to be around me anymore.

It all made sense now...but I didn't know what to do about it.

I thought of Kaoru as a precious friend. But she thought of me as more, and there was nothing I could do about it. Maybe it was better for her if I just let her go without a struggle.

The more I put everything into words in my mind, the less I felt I could chase after her.

So, why did my heart hurt so much? Why did I want to scream out, "Don't go!"

She was...the first friend I'd truly opened up to. Once I acknowledged those feelings clearly in my heart, her words from before flashed through my mind.

"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!"

"Why weren't you more selfish with her?!"

"There you go again, making all the decisions yourself!"

"What do you think that was like for Mizuno?"

...Of course. I remembered now how those words had encouraged me.

... Aren't you the same?

Before I knew it, I'd stood up. I started running, forgetting even to brush the sand off my clothes. I could still see Kaoru's back up ahead.

"Kaoru!!!"

I shouted, and she froze for a moment. But then she started walking again. I ran as fast as I could. All sorts of feelings swirled intensely inside me. It wasn't sadness or panic... I was angry.

Kaoru glanced over her shoulder. When she realized I was coming after her, she started running, too.

But I was faster. Eventually, I caught up to her and grabbed her by the arm. My voice was hot in my throat as I gasped for air.

"Kaoru! Wait!"

"No! Let go of me."

"I won't!" I pulled on her arm as hard as I could. She couldn't escape and fell toward me. I grabbed her by the shoulders. Big, fat tears filled her eyes. Her face was a mess. She was crying.

My heart ached. But I squeezed the words out anyway.

"You're always like this!"

"L-like what...?"

"You always turn your back on me when you're crying!"

"Well, that's because..."

"Don't make excuses! How can I not chase after someone who's crying?"

"I told you not to come after me!"

"I'm telling you, I can't help it!!" I screamed. I hadn't sorted through what I wanted to say yet, but I couldn't stop myself. "What about my feelings, huh?"

She drew in a sharp breath. Her eyes wavered.

"You lectured me before, right? You told me I kept making selfish decisions and didn't consider the other person's feelings, remember? Yeah, maybe you'll forget all about me, and that'll make you feel better someday. But then, what about me?!"

She glared at me, undeterred. "Just forget about me! Go spend your time with Ai and live happily ever after with her!"

My heart stung. It felt like it was ripping in two. I couldn't express how I was feeling. This wasn't right. This wasn't what I was trying to tell her.

I had a space I could only share with her. There were things I could only talk to her about.

Before she came to literature club, that sofa was just a piece of furniture. If I hadn't met her, I never would've thought twice about instant ramen. I would've thought the universe was just some faraway place hanging in the sky, out of reach. I wouldn't have thought twice about whether someone had their second button undone.

There was so much I wanted to say, but in the end, it all clumped together. There was a heat to it, accompanied by a searing pain in my chest, and together it tumbled out of my mouth.

"I'm lonely when you don't come to the club!" I screamed.

She gasped, and a sharp, raspy sound came from her throat.

I loved reading. I loved learning new things, losing myself in a story, forgetting about my own existence. Things were easier that way.

I knew I didn't exist in those stories. But I wanted someone to acknowledge me as I read, to validate me. I wanted someone to talk to about the things I read.

But I'd given up on all that, because I associated reading with being alone.

"I love that room...when you're there with me," I said.

She shook her head as if to say, "Don't," and backed away from me.

I remembered what Ai said earlier. "Don't forget, when you hug someone, both of you are warm."

I was certain that in our hearts, Kaoru and I were hugging each other. We were filling in each other's loneliness.

She kept shaking her head, over and over again. "...You're being selfish."

"I know. You told me to be more selfish, and so I am!"

Kaoru regretted letting me into her universe. I knew that. But I couldn't just stand there and watch her go. Because...

"If your universe expanded when you met me, then so did mine," I said, and she widened her eyes. "So don't tell me to expand my universe, then chicken out and run away...!"

She screwed up her face and started crying. "That's unfair, Yuzu! ...So what are you saying, I have to suck it up and stay with you forever...?"

"You're the one who's being unfair... You became my friend, and now you're saying I have to give up on you because of who I love?"

"Yes! I told you to stay out of it, but you kept reaching out to me...and getting my hopes up! ...And now you're going to leave me!"

"You're the one who took my hand!!"

"I wouldn't have taken it if you hadn't reached out to me!" We'd started arguing like children. "So take responsibility! Take responsibility for ruining my universe!"

"And how am I supposed to do that?!"

"I don't know!"

We were both screaming at each other. I realized I was crying, too. I saw Kaoru look down through my blurred vision.

"Waaah.....waaaaah..." She wept as she slid to the ground.

Her body was trembling. She sobbed and sniffled out loud. When I saw her like that, I felt heat rise up inside me, too. Intense feelings I couldn't suppress. Tears I couldn't hold back.

Both of us sat on the sand and cried, trying to purge all the heat from our chests.

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".....This sucks."

"..... It's your fault."

"No, it's your fault, Yuzu."

"No, it's yours."

We argued, sitting cross-legged on the beach. It was a meaningless exchange, but it was better than sitting in silence. Both of our voices were hoarse from all the crying. Kaoru was tracing something in the sand with a stick. I looked over her shoulder, but I couldn't tell what it was supposed to be. She probably didn't know, either.

I listened to the scratchy sound of moving sand for a while. For some reason, it calmed me down.

".....You're still not dating Ai, are you?" she asked me suddenly.

It was abrupt, but at least I was feeling much calmer now. Slowly, I nodded.

"...Not yet. Once we understand each other a little better I was thinking of asking her out again."

Kaoru sniffed. "...Oh." She threw the stick into the sea. It wasn't much bigger than her finger, and once the waves caught it, they dragged it away and it vanished into the ocean. She sighed. ".....Then I'll be selfish, too."

"...What?"

"...I want you to try to understand me, too." She looked at me. I could see the reflection of the moonlight and the stars sparkling in her wet eyes. "Get to know me better...and..." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Fall in love with me," she said quietly, but firmly.

Of course...I couldn't just say "Okay" to a request like that. I wasn't sure how to answer. I couldn't just sit in silence, either. Finally, I said vaguely, "I don't know what to say to that."

"I guess not." She smiled wryly and looked out at the sea. "But you don't want me to leave, right?"

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".....Yeah. I don't."
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"Then I'll work hard...if you do, too," she said, staring out at the waves. "...I guess we're both selfish."

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"Yeah, I guess so."
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"But in my case...this might be the first time." She laughed softly and poked my arm with her elbow. "And it's all your fault."

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I chuckled. "...Maybe it is."
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"It definitely is."
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I stole a glance at her profile as she turned back toward the ocean. She had a small face, and her curly hair suited her. Though her tears had now messed it all up, she normally wore light, tasteful makeup. She was a good-looking girl.

Although she usually put on a sour expression to keep people away, deep down she was really kind.

It felt unreal that someone like her had said she was in love with me.

If I hadn't run into Ai again... And if Kaoru and I had spent more time together in the club room, then maybe...maybe I would've developed feelings for her. The very fact that I was considering that was proof of how big a place she had in my heart. Even if our feelings were a little different, that didn't change the fact that she was important to me.

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"...Okay," I said, and she stared blankly at me.
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"I'm talking about what you said before."

It was embarrassing to say it out loud. But she'd been open and honest with me, so she deserved the same courtesy. Otherwise, I'd just be a coward.

"I'll try to figure out if I can see you that way—romantically, that is. I mean...
I'll keep spending time with you, and if I start to love you even more than Ai...
then..." I got that far before I noticed that Kaoru's cheeks were flushed, visible

[&]quot;Huh?"

even in the darkness.

She quickly looked away from me. "Th-that's enough. End of discussion," she said forcefully.

That only made me more embarrassed. I looked away from her and stared at the ocean. The clouds had drifted away now, and moonlight shone on the water's surface.

An awkward silence continued between us. The sound of the waves crashing against the shore seemed louder than before.

"Yuzu."

"Yeah?"

Kaoru gently placed her hand over mine. "About my family..."

"...Hm?"

"I really do think I could've taken care of it by myself. Honest."

"...Oh. Okay. I'm sorry that I—"

"No, that's not what I mean." She squeezed my hand to stop me from apologizing. Then she continued in a gentle voice. "I know I worried you. I knew you'd texted me, but I purposely didn't read them."

She was still squeezing my hand tightly. I could feel her warmth.

"I thought of solving it on my own and then distancing myself from you."

"...Yeah."

"But..." She paused and looked over at me. She was smiling gently. "I was......so happy when you showed up. Thank you." She let go of my hand and slowly stood up. Then she brushed the sand off her skirt and took a deep breath.

"I'll figure out how to clean up the mess at home. So..." She turned to me with a look of contentment and reached out her hand. "Don't worry anymore."

I could tell from how refreshed she looked that she was well on her way to figuring out a solution.

"Okay... I get it." I nodded and took her hand.

She smiled and tugged on my arm to help me up. But the moment I started to lift off the ground, I heard a slipping noise. She'd tripped in the wet sand.

"Ah!" Kaoru fell backward still holding onto my hand, and we both tumbled down onto the sand together.

"...!"

I managed to put both of my hands down to brace my fall, but I ended up on top of her. Our faces were centimeters apart. "Ah, sorr—"

I was flustered, but she stared into my eyes and smirked. "Wanna kiss again?"

"Of course not..."

The first one had nearly given me a heart attack. There was no way I could do it again. Plus, I'd only just started considering Kaoru in that light...

I sat up on my knees and was about to stand when she flashed me a mischievous grin. "You sure about that? Ha-ha. Fine, then."

"....?<u>!</u>"

She wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me close.

Then she kissed me again.

My mind went completely blank.

"!! ...!!!"

But this time, I was able to react properly. I pushed against her shoulders and pulled away.

"Stop it already!!" I protested, and she laughed. It sounded like the tinkling of bells.

"Ah-ha-ha. Damn, you must be a player if you're kissing a girl twice before even going out with her!"

"You're the one who kissed me!!"

"I'm allowed to, because I love you."

Hearing her say that to my face left me speechless. My cheeks felt hot.

"Come on and stand up already."

Kaoru lay on the sand, laughing like an idiot... For someone who had just gotten over a crisis, she seemed to be in a mischievous mood. I silently cursed her and stood up, then grabbed her hand. This time, I managed to pull her to her feet.

Just then, we heard someone yell, "Hey! You over there!" I turned around and saw a police officer walking toward us, flashlight in hand. "Aren't you two high schoolers? What are you doing out here at this time of night?"

I immediately looked down.

I'd completely forgotten that I'd gone directly from school to Kaoru's house, and then we'd gone straight to the beach. In other words...we were both still wearing our uniforms.

Crap! I thought and quickly pulled out my phone. The display read 10:15 PM.

"Ack!" I felt the color drain from my face.

"Ah-ha-ha!" Kaoru burst out laughing again and pointed at me. "You're a delinquent!"

"This is all your fault!!"

And so, for the first time in my life, I got lectured by a police officer.

[CHAPTER 10]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... After the police officer gave us a good talking-to, he called my parents and cautioned us harshly to take "absolutely no detours on the way home." After that, we headed back to the train station.

He'd called Kaoru's house, too, but no one had picked up.

We didn't say anything to each other as we stood on the platform.

A little later, we sat on the train as it moved steadily away from the ocean, and the time we had just spent alone together began to seem like something from another world, far removed from our everyday lives.

But when I glanced over at Kaoru, I saw bits of sand still stuck to her pink cardigan, and I knew that it had all been real.

There weren't many people on the train, so we sat down and stared absently out the window. The nighttime city scenery that flew by was all unfamiliar to me. But gradually, as we neared home, things began to look familiar.

I was sure I'd go to all kinds of places in the future. But I'd always return home eventually.

In the same way, could Kaoru and I return to how we'd been before?

Just then, I felt Kaoru's shoulder push against mine. She was staring out the window, too.

I looked over and made eye contact with her reflection in the glass.

She smiled faintly and then looked away. But her shoulder remained pressed against mine.

No. We couldn't go back to how we'd been before.

Our relationship had clearly changed.

I looked down and let out a deep sigh. But that's fine, I thought.

When Ai and I had broken up in junior high school, I'd regretted it. I wasn't able to tell her my feelings or confirm hers. I simply ran away without talking to her, and that little thorn in my heart had festered and made me miserable. I didn't ever want to cut someone off again without first talking it out.

If something inside Kaoru had changed, then I had to change, too.

And if, after both of us had thought about it long and hard, we ultimately decided to go our separate ways... Then at least we could both accept it.

I pushed back with my own shoulder and heard her chuckle.

The train was returning us to our everyday lives, signaling that even if things had changed between us, life as we knew it would go on.

"I'm this way," Kaoru said, sounding like her old self, as we stepped off the platform. She raised a hand to wave at me.

"Okay. See ya later." I nodded, watching her.

She giggled and then started off wordlessly in the other direction. I watched her go for a few seconds and then started home. Honestly, I wanted to go with her, but she'd insisted that she would take care of it on her own. If I tagged along, I'd just be getting in the way.

"Yuzu!"

Suddenly, I heard her voice behind me.

I turned around and saw her standing in the distance, looking at me.

"What?!"

There was no one else at the station this late at night, so our voices echoed loudly in the emptiness.

She shoved her hands in her cardigan pockets and leaned forward slightly. "Call me by my name!"

"Oh!" I blurted out softly.

I remembered her saying that to me once before.

Club activities had ended, and I'd locked the door. The hallway had been filled with the colors of the setting sun.

I remembered how lonely Kaoru had looked that day. I bet...that's when things had started going bad for her at home again. She'd been struggling ever since...all alone.

My heart ached as I waved at her.

"Kaoru!" I'd say her name as many times as she wanted me to if that made her feel better. "See you tomorrow!" I shouted.

Even though she was far away, I could still clearly see the happy smile on her face.

"See you tomorrow, Yuzu!" She waved enthusiastically back at me.

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 \times \times

"I can't believe you had a run-in with the police."

"Ow, ow! Can't you be a little gentler?!"

"If I don't stick it on properly, it'll just fall off."

I'd been sure Mom would be furious with me, but when I finally got home, she'd welcomed me back in such a casual tone it threw me for a loop.

She was currently bandaging up my face. However, she was going about it quite roughly, and for some reason, once she was done, she gave her work a firm smack. *Ouch*.

"So, what's with the cuts and bruises? Did you get into a fight?" She crossed her arms and stared at me, one eyebrow raised.

"No, it wasn't a fight..."

"You just let someone punch you, then? You need to stand up for yourself."

"Mom..."

I was grateful that she wasn't mad at me, but I wasn't sure that was solid parental advice.

"Well? What happened?" Her eyes were boring into me. She clearly expected me to explain myself.

I supposed I owed her that much. Not only had I been lectured by a police officer, but I'd gotten punched in the face.

"Well..." And so I told Mom everything that had happened that day.

"I see. So that's why you got punched."

"...Yes."

"Well, it's your own fault," she said succinctly as she got up from the table. She went to the kettle, filled it with water, and put it on to boil.

All I could do was hang my head in shame.

"You stuck your nose in someone else's family affairs. It's no wonder you ended up getting punched."

"I know."

"Not that I'm excusing a grown man punching a child, of course. But you're at fault here for meddling in the first place. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I couldn't argue with my mom. I bowed to show her I was remorseful.

She looked at me and sighed, then walked over and tousled my hair. "That was my opinion as an adult."

"Huh?"

"But my feelings as a mother...are that you did a good job today," she said firmly, briskly stroking my hair and smiling. "I'm proud to say that I raised my son to stick up for his friends in their time of need. You remind me of your father."

"But...I wasn't able to solve anything," I said dejectedly.

Mom frowned and shook her head. "You don't have to solve anything. That stuff is none of your business."

"Yeah, but I stuck my nose in knowing I couldn't fix the problem."

"Here I thought you were acting like a man, and now you're getting stuck on nonsense, Yuu." She snorted in exasperation and then said definitively, "Normally, when people are having family problems, *no one* comes to help them."

She sat back down across from me.

"But you did. And—what was her name—Kaoru? You have no idea how much that probably meant to her." She tapped on the table with a fingertip and smiled at me. "You know I don't get along with my parents, right?"

For a second, I didn't know what she was talking about.

"Well... I guess you've never gone back to visit them that I can remember."

"I never told you the reason, did I?" She seemed strangely excited. "Actually..."

She propped her elbows up on the table. But just as she leaned toward me, the kettle started whistling.

"Talk about bad timing." She clicked her tongue and walked over to the stove to turn it off. Then she poured the water into two teacups and came back over to the table, setting one in front of me.

She took a deep breath.

"They were against me marrying your father," she said.

"What?! I didn't know that!" I stared at her in surprise, and she nodded happily.

"Yes. Like I said, this is the first time I'm telling you. When your father went to meet them at my house for the first time, my old man was vehemently opposed to the whole thing. At the time, your dad was in a band, working part-time jobs.... He was hardly the picture of financial stability, so it's no wonder." She sounded like she was enjoying reminiscing about the past. "And so then, your father said to mine, 'I didn't come here to get your permission to marry your daughter. I came to tell you it was happening.""

"Are you serious?"

"Deadly. Then he said, 'I'm going to make Touko happy, so don't worry about her.' And then the two of us left!"

...I couldn't imagine any of what she was describing, so it took me a long time to reply. As far back as I could remember, my dad had been a workaholic. He often spent long stints in another city, and only came home occasionally. And when he was home, he'd spend his time reading quietly or napping with my

mom. They never did anything too exciting.

My dad was gentle and smart, and I loved him, but now that I thought of it, I'd never heard one thing about his past.

"That's...amazing," I said at last, and Mom started laughing.

"Isn't it? And of course, he did make me happy, because we had you, Yuzuru," Mom said, her eyes softening with affection. "And that was when I knew that everything would be okay if I stuck with him, even though I had nothing to prove it."

She stared right into my eyes. "As for the problems themselves, someone who can will solve them when they're able to. What really counts is if that person feels supported. So..." She leaned over the table and tousled my hair again. "You did a good job today."

I felt hot tears sting my eyes as Mom gently stroked my head.

"...Okay," I said, my voice a little nasal. I nodded, and Mom giggled.

After that, she took the teabag out of her cup and sipped her tea. "But I never imagined my old man would still hold a grudge after all these years. Even now, if I send a letter, I never get a response. Mom will call me now and then, but Dad hasn't spoken to me since. Even when I ask her to pass the phone to him, he refuses. Of course, if I ever hear he's on his deathbed, I'll go straight to see him whether he's forgiven me or not."

"That sounds rough."

"It is. But it's okay, because I'm happy."

Despite all that, she did sound happy when she talked about her family. I looked at her, wondering absently if I would have a family of my own someday. And if I did, would I be able to sit back and say I was happy, too?

"By the way...," Mom said, narrowing her eyes. "Where were you, and what did you get up to after that? You must've been walking around somewhere after curfew to get noticed by the police."

My eyes darted around. "Huh? W-well..."

"Um... We went to the beach."

"Mm-hmm. And then?"

"That's it." I pulled the tea bag out of my cup and took a sip to try and escape this line of questioning. Maybe if I had my mouth full she would leave me alone.

"Well, I hope you used a condom."

"Pffffft!" I spat out my tea.

"Whoa! Eww! You wipe that up yourself."

"We didn't do anything like that!"

The corners of Mom's mouth lifted when she saw my flustered reaction, and she said, "Oh, please," with a laugh. I wished she'd stop making that vulgar expression. "You expect me to believe you took a girl to the beach late at night and didn't do anything sexual?"

"Mom, I really can't stand it when you get like this."

"You at least kissed her, though, right?"

"K-ki- Well..."

"You did! Hmmm. So you bring Ai here, then take another girl to the beach and kiss her? Talk about greedy."

"N-no, I..."

"Well, it's never serious in high school. Do whatever you want." With that, Mom picked up a dish towel and started wiping up my mess, despite what she'd said. "I'm relieved, though. For the longest time, I thought you weren't interested in girls at all."

"Mom! It's not like that!" I protested, but she wouldn't listen.

Despite our teasing back and forth, I felt my heart warm as we talked. I was really lucky to have the parents I had. Meanwhile...I wondered what was going on back at Kaoru's house.

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When I got home, Mom and her boyfriend were in the living room. I could feel

the man's rude glare as soon as I walked inside. He had a nasty smile on his face.

"What were you out doing so late? Getting it on with that brat?"

"...This is who you really are, isn't it?" I asked, and his expression changed.

He was the kind of guy who liked to provoke others, but got mad when they turned the tables. What a loser.

"Hah... Whatever. So, what was it you wanted to say, anyway? You called me a leech and a two-timer earlier," he said in an accusatory tone.

He was on the offensive, trying to get the best of me.

To be honest, it scared me when a man his size raised his voice and started hurling abuse, no matter how tough I tried to seem. The fear would spread through my body and make my muscles freeze... Under normal circumstances, anyway.

I took another deep breath.

Don't worry. You can do this.

Don't worry. You have someone on your side.

I'd had no idea how reassuring it was to have someone I could rely on no matter what.

"If you're gonna make rude accusations, you'd better have proof to back it—"

"I have proof," I interrupted him firmly.

".....You what?"

"I said, I have proof," I repeated, and I saw the color begin to drain from his face. I could tell he was thinking, "There's no way."

Why did Mom choose such a transparent man? I wondered, but then stopped myself.

I opened up the photo app on my phone, then walked over to the table and held it out so both of them could see it.

"This is a photo from July 10," I said. It was a picture of my mom's boyfriend

and a very young woman wearing skimpy clothes. They were embracing each other outside an apartment building.

"This is a photo from July 11." Here he was again, walking with the same woman, his arm around her shoulders.

"July 12." Another picture of him, this time with a different woman who appeared to be an office worker. He was accepting money from her.

He looked alarmed when he saw the pictures. Mom stared at them for a few moments and then slowly looked up at the man.

I spoke deliberately, calmly laying out the truth. "They're all your lovers, aren't they? You find vulnerable, lonely women like Mom and take advantage of them, then take their money. All that stuff about your career was a lie. You might show up in the evening wearing a suit, but you spend your day messing around with other women like this."

"Wh-when were those photos taken...?" A cold sweat had broken out on his forehead. I couldn't help but snort with laughter. He hadn't listened to a word I'd said.

"Remember what my friend told you? I skipped school for three days."

He widened his eyes. "Y-you took those photos?"

"Yep."

"Why? You skipped school...for that? But how...? Why?"

He couldn't figure out how I'd seen through him. I heaved a big sigh. He'd lost all his momentum now, and he flinched at the sound. What a useless person.

I wanted to put an end to this whole thing. I cast a cold glance at the man and said, "...You reek of perfume."

He was quiet for a few seconds and then a look of recognition came over him. "That question...!"

The night I couldn't sleep. I'd gone to get some water and asked him if he wore cologne. He'd told me he didn't bother with stuff like that. That was all it took to make me doubt him.

He took the time to put on a suit, but that was as far as it went. The fact he'd expended so little effort and still thought he wouldn't get caught made me furious.

I looked over at Mom, and she quickly averted her gaze.

... I knew it. She'd figured it out a long time ago...

"You were sloppy. You came here reeking of other women," I said, delivering the finishing blow.

I shot him a reproachful glare. Mom looked at me with an indecipherable expression as the man stood up from his chair, shaking.

"You think it's fun making a fool out of a grown man?" He swayed slightly to one side as he approached me.

Goosebumps pricked up all over my skin.

"I wasn't trying to make a fool out of you. I was just..." My voice trembled as I backed away from him.

But then the man raised his voice and lunged at me. "Stop nitpicking, you little brat!"

Before I knew it, he'd grabbed me by the collar. My throat clenched up and I watched in slow motion as the man wound up his right arm. My mind flashed back to earlier that evening, when Yuzu protected me and took a punch to the face. His cheek was swollen and bruised, but he'd brushed it off with a smile.

He was so tall and slender he looked like he might snap in half...but he'd protected me. It reminded me that, when it came down to it, he was a man.

But Yuzu wasn't here right now.

And if I let myself get punched, then it would make his efforts to protect me meaningless. If I showed up at school tomorrow with my face bruised and swollen...I was sure Yuzu would cry for me. So I did the first thing that came to mind. I shouted.

"If you try to punch me again, I'm calling the police!!"

The man's body froze at the word "police."

"Hah... The police...? Go ahead and call 'em! A little brat like you shouldn't be threatening a grown man!" He glared at me with bloodshot eyes. His fist had relaxed, but he clenched it again.

Suddenly, there was a clatter. It was the sound of my mom's chair toppling over. And then a loud *smack!* echoed through the room.

Mom had stood up from her chair and slapped the man across the face. She glared at him, trembling. Then, quietly, she said, "...Get out."

"What?" He looked at her blankly.

This time she shouted, rage glowing in her eyes. "I said, get out!! Or I'm calling the police!!"

His body jerked, and he let go of me. "What the hell... Goddammit..." The man's voice shook as he cursed, and he started walking toward my mother.

"You old bitch, I took pity on you and screwed you so many times... Once you lose me, you'll never—"

"That's enough... Just get out. *Now*." Mom's voice was quiet again. The man gritted his teeth, stomped across the living room, grabbed his bag, and left the house.

When he slammed the front door, all the tension seemed to leave Mom's body. She inhaled deeply and staggered back to her chair.

"...Ngh!" She began to weep, letting out all the tears she'd been suppressing.

I hesitantly walked over to her. "Mom..."

"...Kaoru, don't you want me to be happy?" she asked tearfully.

I felt like she'd stabbed me in the chest. How could she think that?

"Mom, of course I do, but..."

"Then why did you go and do that?!" she screamed. Sadness was written all over her face. That was when I realized that she was blaming me for this.

Why... Why did it have to end up like this?

I didn't expect her to thank me. Anyone would be sad if the person they loved left them, even if that person didn't really love them back. But why was she

mad at me for chasing off a man who was clearly just using her?

Why was she crying like that?

All kinds of feelings began to build up inside me. "Do you *like* being with people who don't even love you?" I shot back aggressively, my voice cold.

Mom looked hurt as she gazed at me, shaking her head. "No. You just don't understand. He truly..."

"He didn't care about you! Why can't you understand that?!"

"What do you know about it?!"

You're the one who doesn't understand, Mom!

"All you did was have sex with him! You kept going at it like animals, over and over! You really think that means he *loved* you?!"

"Oh, I see. So that upset you, and you decided to punish me."

"No!!!" I screamed.

Mom looked startled and fell silent.

After that, I couldn't say anything else. I was too much of a mess inside. It was true that it upset me to see my mom having sex with a bunch of strangers. It was hard for me to see my mom as a sexual being—she was my *mom*, after all.

But that wasn't what made me sad, and that wasn't what made me angry, either.

What could I say to get my mom to understand my feelings?

Suddenly, I thought of Yuzu. He always seemed to know what I was feeling inside, and somehow managed to put it into words. His kindness had helped me...so many times.

I was angry right now, and just as sad as I was angry... But all I had were my words.

I'd watched my mom do this for so long. I had to figure out a way to identify her feelings and find words to express them. I felt the tangle of emotions inside of my heart slowly unraveling.

I knew that Mom was lonely. I knew that all she wanted was someone to accept her, to help fill in the void of her loneliness... But I also knew that things couldn't go on like this.

"I know the reason why you can't find a man who loves you, Mom."

"What?" She looked up at me weakly and stared into my eyes.

"It's because you aren't in love, either," I said quietly.

She opened her eyes wide and froze. Then her tears began to flow again.

"Dad was the only person you ever loved. And you've been searching for someone to replace him this whole time. That's why you'll only ever be someone else's replacement, yourself."

"That's not... It's not..."

"I've been watching you all along, Mom. Even if you don't watch me, I watch you. Because..."

I wanted to speak calmly and evenly. But the more I spoke, the more those hot, intense feelings I'd been suppressing pushed their way out, and before I knew it, I was speaking through tears.

"Because I love you, Mom..."

I saw my mother stand up from her chair, but my eyes were too blurry to make out her expression.

"Kaoru...?"

Tears kept spilling from my eyes, no matter how much I wiped them away with the sleeve of my cardigan.

All I'd done today was cry. Even when I thought I'd run out of tears, my emotions would flare up and it'd start all over again. Human bodies were so annoying.

"You always told me to be number one, to never settle for second best. I know you say that because Dad left. But... But..." My voice shook as I finally said the words I'd been holding in for so long.

"But.....you have me!"

Mom had changed.

When Dad was around, I remember she always had a gentle smile on her face. I recalled the soft touch of her hand as she stroked my hair.

But after he was gone, Mom desperately tried to fill the hole he'd left with one lover after another. And with each one, her heart grew more distant.

But I never forgot about the tender, loving mother I had when I was little. I always loved her, and I always wanted her to be happy.

"Is being with me not enough...? You're number one in my life, Mom... Can't I be number one in yours?" I couldn't stop talking or crying.

Mom looked bewildered and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Kaoru, I..."

"Just stop already. Stop the mixers and the dating apps. Just live your life normally and fall in love in a normal way. And then if you meet someone who *truly* loves you, I swear I'll be supportive..."

"Kaoru...!" She threw her arms around me and hugged me tightly. I heard her gasp.

Her body was cold, but for some reason, I felt warm in her embrace. She used to hug me all the time when I was little.

She sobbed loudly, "I'm sorry, Kaoru, I...!"

"I know you were lonely. And I wasn't enough to fill that void. I'm sorry, but...
Mom..."

"You never tell me anything, so I thought you hated me... That you looked down on me and didn't want anything to do with me anymore. So..."

"I don't hate you! I could never hate you, Mom!"

My mother and I hugged each other and wept openly.

I'd never, ever been able to say these things before. But once I put them into words, it was so easy.

I let all my feelings spill out...and the tears washed over us like a purifying rain. I held my mother, and she held me, and we kept crying until all our tears dried up.

For the first time in a long while, I slept without earplugs.

The following morning, I headed down the stairs, ready to make breakfast like I always did.

"Huh...?"

But something was different.

I could smell the aroma of food already made. I raced down the rest of the steps and saw that breakfast was on the table.

Mom sat there, fidgeting restlessly. "Oh, Kaoru... Morning."

"...Morning." I hesitantly walked over to the table.

There was white rice and miso soup with wakame in it, slightly burnt ham, and some clumsily made tamagoyaki.

I stared at it and then looked at Mom. "Did you make all this?"

".....Yeah."

"How long has it been?"

"I...honestly don't know anymore." She smiled a little awkwardly, and I returned the expression.

Then I sat down and pressed my hands together. "Thank you for the food. Let's eat."

"Okay."

I was strangely nervous as I plucked up some of the tamagoyaki with my chopsticks. Slowly, I chewed the egg.

"...How is it?" she asked hesitantly.

The outside was dry and stiff. There wasn't much flavoring, and as I continued to chew, I felt something hard in my mouth, like a foreign object. When I bit

down, I was overwhelmed by the flavor of salt. I grimaced and shook my head. "...This is way too salty. It's pretty bad."

Mom looked deflated. I'd probably been too honest.

"Right... Of course it is," she said, her shoulders slumping.

I couldn't help but smile a little at her reaction, though I made sure she didn't see it.

"Just keep practicing," I said, looking down at my plate. "Make it again sometime."

Her face gradually brightened. "I will...!"

"Come on, let's eat."

"Okay."

I wondered how many years it had been since we sat down and ate breakfast together... It felt so normal, and it filled me with joy.

[CHAPTER 11]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... The next day, I heard the familiar sound of someone plopping into the seat behind me.

"Morning," I said. Her wavy hair shook as she took a seat.

"Morning," Kaoru answered shyly. She glanced at me, then quickly looked away.

"I'm glad I didn't have to start delivering your homework every day," I said as I opened my backpack.

I felt Kaoru kick my chair in response. The exchange felt so nostalgic I couldn't help laughing out loud. I took an envelope out of my bag along with my textbook.

"...Kaoru." I turned around and placed it on her desk. Written across the envelope were the words "Withdrawal from Club Activities." The writing had been smeared by the rain. "Do you still need this?"

She stared at it for a few moments and sighed. Then she picked it up with both hands and tore it in half. "I can't turn in a form that's all soggy."

I smiled with relief. "Good."

"But if I feel like quitting again, I'll hand it to Hirakazu directly. If I give it to you, you won't turn it in."

"That's right."

Just talking with Kaoru put me at ease. These past few days without her had been stifling. Some things had changed, but other things stayed the same. Either way, I was extremely glad that the two of us were able to talk like this again.

Just as I was savoring that feeling, I heard light footsteps outside in the hallway. I knew who it was before I even looked up.

"Yuzuru! Morning!"

"Morning, Ai."

As usual, she leaned in through the hallway window and smiled at me. Then she shifted her gaze and said loudly, "Oh! Good morning, Kaoru!"

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"...Morning."

"How are you?"

"Fine, I guess."

"Hmm, that's good!"
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I wasn't sure this counted as a real conversation, but Ai was grinning like a maniac and Kaoru was playing with her hair as if she didn't really mind.

Seeing them talk like this brought back memories, too.

"Oh, that's right." Ai clapped her hands together. "Do either of you have a Math I textbook?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Did you forget yours?"

"No, um..." she trailed off awkwardly.

"What?"

It was unusual for her to beat around the bush, and I eyed her suspiciously. Ai kept glancing back and forth between Kaoru and me.

"Well, my backpack got soaking wet, so..."

I heaved a deep sigh.

I'd completely forgotten that when I left Ai up on the roof, I hadn't been carrying anything, but she'd been on her way home and thus had her backpack. She'd thrown down the umbrella and let herself get wet in the rain with me.

".......I'm sorry, it's all my fault," I said, but she shook her head.

"No, it's actually Kaoru's fault."

Kaoru frowned and stared at us blankly for a few seconds, then seemed to realize what was going on and sighed. "Ai, I thought you said you had an umbrella?"

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"Well, I did, but..."
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"Then why didn't you use it?"

"Well, Yuzuru was getting soaked, so I thought I would, too..."

"So then it's your fault," Kaoru said.

"Ohhh!" Ai raised her voice and nodded, looking happy for some reason. "Come to think of it, I guess you're right! But anyway, I came to borrow a textbook that isn't waterlogged, so..." Ai turned to me, looking hopeful. That expression of hers always made my heart race.

I scratched the back of my neck and said, "Well, in that case, of course I'll—"

"You can borrow mine," Kaoru interrupted. "Do you need any other books today?"

"Modern Lit and Writing. I think that's it."

Kaoru nodded and took three books out of her bag. "Here you go. Give them back after class."

"Okay! Thanks!" Ai accepted the books from Kaoru and bowed politely. "I'd like to stay and chat more, but the warning bell's gonna ring soon. Bye!" Ai waved and then jogged back to her classroom.

I watched her leave and then turned around to face Kaoru, narrowing my eyes at her. "We have Modern Lit first period," I said.

Kaoru sniffed. "It's fine. I can get a high enough score on the tests just by taking notes in Modern Lit."

"What if he asks you to read out loud?"

"Then I'll look at yours."

"…"

I didn't have a comeback for that.

Kaoru looked at me and smirked. "I thought I'd take full advantage of sitting next to you in class."

When she saw I didn't know how to respond, she chuckled wryly.

"Sharing a textbook isn't going to make my heart race," I shot back.

"Have you heard of the mere-exposure effect, Yuzu?"

"Yes..."

"Exactly." She flashed me a triumphant smile, took her phone out of her cardigan, then started typing something on it.

I sighed and turned back around.

Some things never change, I thought.

That said, I felt like our time together was moving in a different direction now.

...I knew that I loved Ai. Just little conversations with her made me happy, and I wanted to stay with her as long as possible.

Those feelings hadn't changed.

At the same time, I felt it was necessary to be honest about my feelings toward Kaoru. I had promised her, after all.

Just then, the bell rang, and Hirakazu entered the classroom. He looked around for a minute, squinting.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Odajima's here today!" Then he grinned at me. "Did Prince Charming bring her back to us?"

All our classmates looked thoroughly confused except for Sousuke, who turned around and smirked at me.

I sighed.

Finally, I can focus on class again.

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"Yu-zu-ru!"

At lunchtime, Ai flung open the hallway window to our classroom and called out to me. It was unusual for her to come see me right after morning classes, so I was startled.

"Let's eat lunch together!" she said innocently.

"Okay... You're not going to explore the school today?"

"I'd rather eat lunch with you," she insisted. Then she leaned close to me and whispered, "Plus, it seems like you've solved your problem with Kaoru."

I didn't answer.

Ai just smiled. "Let's go eat on the roof! The weather's great today. I'll meet you there!" And with that, she jogged off down the hallway.

...She'd caught me off guard, but Ai was right—things with Kaoru had calmed down now, so I had no reason to turn down an invitation to have a pleasant lunch with her. I happily took my lunch bag out of my backpack and was just about to stand up when I felt someone poke me in the back.

"Huh?" I turned and saw Kaoru looking at me with a disappointed expression.

"Did you tell Ai?" she asked, staring at me.

"Tell her what?"

"About, you know...us..."

There was a lot of meaning packed in that word.

I shook my head. "No, I didn't tell her anything."

"Nothing?"

"No, nothing. But she does know I was worried because you weren't coming to club meetings..."

"Hmph," she said vaguely. I knew what she was getting at.

From the way Ai was acting, I had a feeling she'd figured out what happened, and Kaoru probably thought the same.

All I'd told Ai was that I was worried about Kaoru, and yet she'd seemed to know exactly how I was feeling and what advice I needed.

I bet Kaoru had heard what Ai whispered to me earlier, too. It was no wonder she thought I might've told her.

Kaoru toyed with her hair thoughtfully. "I wonder what she's thinking," she murmured.

I heaved a long sigh. Even though I'd known Ai for a long time, I had no idea, either.

"I couldn't say. She's a mystery to me, too. Like a goddess or something."

For a few seconds, Kaoru stared at me, and then she burst out laughing. "So, I have to compete with a goddess? That doesn't sound very fair!" Then she stood up. "I'm gonna go buy lunch."

"Okay. Have fun."

She waved and walked out into the hallway, then I grabbed my lunch and headed up to the roof.

[CHAPTER 12]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... I opened the door and stepped out onto the roof. It was so sunny I had to squint. The sky was a clear blue, without a single cloud.

"Hey, Asada." Someone called my name, and I shielded my eyes with my hand to see their face. Nagoshi was leaning against the fence, looking my way. She waved and smirked at me. "I thought you wanted a piece of Odajima's ass, but now you're having lunch with another girl, huh?"

I frowned at her. She was being awfully rude. The more I spoke to Nagoshi, the more I felt like she brought out the worst in me.

"Aren't you the one who said people come to the roof to be alone with someone else?" I said, referring to her words from a few days ago.

"I already know I can't out-argue you," Nagoshi said, walking leisurely toward me. She leaned over and whispered in my ear, "So? Did you become Odajima's superhero after that? Hm?" She had a teasing tone in her voice. I felt like she was always trying to provoke me.

"...I wasn't trying to be a superhero. Just her friend," I answered, and Nagoshi laughed.

"You're such a bore."

"I'm serious."

"Yeah, and I'm saying you're a bore!" she said, pouting. She peered down at me. "Whatever. You tried really hard, though. She rejected you over and over again, but you kept forcing your way in." Her eyes softened. Then she placed both of her hands on my head.

"Wha...?" I looked at her, baffled, and she grinned.

"What a good boy you are!" she said, tousling my hair as roughly as she could with both hands.

"Wh-what's your problem?!"

"I'm petting you."

"I think you just wanna mess up my hair!"

"This is just how your teacher, Ms. Risalina, shows her affection. Good boy,

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good boy!"

"S-stop! Stop it!!"
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"Aha-ha-ha-la!!" Nagoshi started cracking up laughing as she pulled her hands away.

I could tell without even touching it that my hair was a complete mess. Nothing could be more annoying.

I glanced over at Ai, and she flashed me a wry smile.

"Are you satisfied now?" I asked Nagoshi.

"Yep. And I have the sudden urge to adopt a big dog."

"…"

As usual, I couldn't tell whether she was joking or not. I sighed in exasperation. And then I noticed there was a new box cutter in her front pocket.

I stared at it and said, "Can I borrow your box cutter again, Nagoshi?"

She flashed me surprised smile and then shook her head. "Nah, you won't give it back. I don't lend my things out to people who don't return them."

"Fine, I'll buy it off you. How much do you want?"

"One million yen!" She cackled, then made her way to the door.

"Huh? Where are you going?"

"Why does it matter? You two wanna be alone, right? Be grateful, because I'm making your wish come true," Nagoshi said, winking at me clumsily. She took a deep breath, and then she said, "Hey, Asada."



"...Yes?"

"You told me that sometimes people have feelings they can't express in words, right?"

I felt my body tense up.

She was smiling, but for some reason, her demeanor felt cold. "You're good at drawing those hard-to-express emotions out of people with your kind words. But..."

She narrowed her eyes as they bored into me. "I think you should know that there are people out there who don't want anyone to understand them. And those kind words of yours can really screw them up."

As I listened to her speak, I thought about a certain classmate of mine.

"Is that...how you pushed Sousuke away?" I asked.

Her eyes glinted. "What did he tell you?" she asked sharply.

I shook my head in response.

She snorted and put on an ominous smile. "I get it now. That's the reason you asked me if I smoked."

"…"

She took my silence as affirmation.

"There's nothing between me and Andou. There wasn't before, either. But...I guess he still cares about me." She spoke so flatly I honestly couldn't tell what she was feeling.

I'd never seen Sousuke act so suspiciously about anyone except for Ai, so there must have been something between the two of them. But she insisted there wasn't, and her tone said that if there had been something, it was trivial at best.

I stared at her profile in silence. Then she turned and made eye contact with me.

"You really like to think up stories, don't you?"

"Huh?"

"You think everyone has a story with emotions that drive the narrative forward, and that it's all so precious."

She slowly narrowed her eyes and fixed me with a sharp gaze. It felt like someone was grabbing hold of my heart.

"I don't have a story," she said firmly. She stared at me with a faint smile and that cold look in her eyes. "So, would you please leave me alone already?"

She gave off an indescribable pressure that left me speechless.

My mouth opened and closed fruitlessly—I couldn't think of a response. I knew that whatever I said wouldn't make a difference to her anyway.

After a few seconds of silence, she clapped her hands together and smiled. "Just kidding!" In the blink of an eye, she was back to her usual persona.

Heading back into the building again, she reached for the doorknob and said, "Next time I see you, give me back the box cutter you took from me. It doesn't belong to you."

And with that, she waved and left the roof.

I could never tell what she was thinking.

She'd said that some people didn't want anyone to understand them and that my words could screw them up. I wasn't really sure what she was trying to say, but at the same time, her words filled me with fear.

I didn't understand a thing about what was going on between her and Sousuke.

"Yuzuru!" The sound of Ai calling my name brought me back to my senses.

I turned and saw her giving me a look.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "I got caught up in that conversation."

"It's fine. C'mere!" She beckoned to me, and I nodded and walked over.

The two of us sat side by side, leaning against the fence.

"...Do you know that girl?" she asked, and although she had a smile on her

face, it looked kind of awkward.

"Yeah. She's a member of the literature club, though she's never been to a meeting."

"Oh..." Ai nodded vaguely and looked over at the door, as if staring at Nagoshi's now-absent back. "She's kinda...scary."

"Huh?" I'd never heard Ai talk like that before, so I was surprised.

She gasped, as if just now realizing she'd said that out loud. Then she unwrapped her lunch on her lap. "Anyway, let's eat!"

"O-okay..." I nodded and unwrapped my lunch, too.

We both clapped our hands together and then dug in.

She picked up some white rice with her chopsticks and put it in her mouth. It seemed like a pretty big bite, but she shoved it in anyway. She looked like a cute little chipmunk.

Eating like that, she inevitably got some grains of rice stuck to the side of her mouth.

"You've got rice on your mouth," I pointed out.

"Do I?!" she exclaimed and started chewing faster. "Where is it?" She turned toward me.

She could've just felt around with her finger. Hesitantly, I reached out toward the corner of her mouth.

"There."

She cocked her head to the side like a little bird. "Where...?"

"I said, there."

"Will you get it for me?"

"Huh?" I drew back my hand. I had reservations about doing stuff like this. Not because I thought it was gross, but because...it made my heart pound just thinking about it.

Ai didn't like my reaction and pouted. This brought the grain of rice lower on

her face, and the sight of it was so funny I burst out laughing.

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"What?! Why are you laughing?!"

"Because the rice... Ha-ha-ha..."

"Get it already!"

"F-fine!"
```

I could tell that she wasn't going to let me off the hook, so I hesitantly reached toward her mouth. I touched the grain of rice, and it stuck to my fingertip. My fingers were trembling because my heart was pounding so hard.

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"There, I got it."
"Mmph."
"Wha—?!"
```

Before I could move, she'd eaten the rice right off my finger. I was so startled, I made a weird noise. The soft feeling of her lips lingered on my finger, and I felt my face flush red.

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"Hee-hee. Thanks!"

"...Ai."

"Did I make your heart race?"

"...Haah." I sighed, and she laughed.
```

This exchange made me realize she was no longer the innocent girl I'd known before. Now, she used that innocence to go on the attack. Some part of me wished I could be as open with my feelings...but after trying to imagine it, I realized it was impossible for me.

If I was as bold as she was and acted on every impulse I had, we would already be dating.

...I remembered my conversation with Kaoru before I came up to the roof. I was definitely attracted to Ai. The feelings I had for her were almost certainly romantic. But at the same time...I barely knew anything about her.

Simply saying she was mysterious didn't cover it. She had a kind of deep

spirituality that couldn't be dismissed with such a basic word.

I didn't want to make another mistake and get close to her again without understanding that part of her... I wanted us to take the time to get to know each other better before we gave our relationship another chance.

As those thoughts ran through my head, I noticed Ai was looking up. I followed suit and felt like the clear, cloudless sky was swallowing me up into a field of blue.

"I'm glad Kaoru came back to school again," Ai said quietly.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"I hope she starts coming to club meetings again, too."

"Yeah."

Her words shot up toward the sky, and as they fell back down toward me, I nodded in response. It felt kind of like a game of catch, and I liked it.

"Yuzuru?"

"Yeah?"

She tilted her head toward me. I looked back at her, and she narrowed her eyes gently. "Did Kaoru say she loved you?"

"...What?"

She giggled when she saw how clearly flustered I was. "She did, didn't she?"

"No, she..."

"Good," Ai said plainly.

I widened my eyes. "What do you mean, 'good'?" I asked, and she gazed up at the sky again.

"She seemed like she was really hurting." Ai was calm as she spoke. "It's really painful to part ways with someone without expressing your feelings and then come to regret it. I know how that feels..." She turned toward me again. "I didn't want Kaoru to regret anything." She closed her eyes and shook her head. "But if I told her that...she'd only clam up more."

I stared at her wordlessly.

It seemed like she saw things much, much clearer than I did.

"Follow your heart, Yuzuru," she said.

"Huh?" I stared at her, not understanding. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"Well..." She reached over and took my hand. Her palm was warm. "I mean, make sure to date the person you really love." She squeezed my fingers.

I didn't know how to respond. I never imagined she'd say that to me.

"I really love you and I want you to love me back, okay?"

She'd said that to me before. At the time, I'd thought it came from a kind of innocent confidence, like she was *certain* I'd love her back.

But did this mean that Ai had considered I might fall in love with Kaoru?

"Promise me, okay?" She turned her whole body toward me this time and wrapped both hands around mine, like she was praying. "I don't want you to regret anything again, either."

I inhaled deeply.

...She felt the same. She felt the same as I did.

I didn't want to have regrets over anyone else ever again. Not over Ai, and not over Kaoru.

And Ai felt the same way.

If I decided to be with her while harboring regrets over someone else, she'd regret it, too.

Since we'd started talking again...I had to be honest with her about my feelings until the very end.

I nodded. "Okay, I understand."

She flashed me a satisfied smile. Then she took a lemon-colored tamagoyaki from her lunchbox and held it out to me with her chopsticks. "Here you go,

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Yuzuru."

"Huh?"

"Say 'ah'!"

I froze and she pouted, shoving the tamagoyaki toward me again. "Ahhh!"

"O-okay. Aahhh..."

"Hee-hee. Is it good?"

"I-it's sweet."

"You don't like them sweet?"

"I don't hate it, but..."

"You prefer them savory?"

"Y-yeah, if I had to choose."

"Okay. Next time I'll make you a savory one."
```

The entire time we were talking, my heart was pounding like crazy.

When I broke up with Ai in junior high, I never would've imagined this day would come.

"About what I said before..." Ai smiled. "Make sure you fall in love with me, okay?"

She was always so straightforward. I smiled shyly and scratched my nose. "I'm not sure how I should respond, considering the conversation we just had." I chuckled wryly, and she smiled at me.

Life with Ai beside me and club meetings with Kaoru were both things I'd come to take for granted. But at some point, I'd have to choose between them. And the thought of that made my heart ache a little.

A tinge of bittersweet pain had seeped into the sweetness of my daily life.

I thought, This must be love...

[EPILOGUE]

YOU ARE MY REGRET... "It's so hot..."

Kaoru glared at the air conditioner as she plopped down on the sofa.

I looked up from my book and over at the AC.

"I feel like it's really struggling this year. They should just get a new one," I said, and Kaoru sniffed.

"This club only has one active member in it. They're not gonna fix it."

She took out a red, plastic pencil board from her bag and started fanning herself with it. She leaned forward a little as she did, and since she had her second button undone as usual, I could see her cleavage.

I quickly averted my eyes and looked back down at my book.

"Yuzu," Kaoru called to me.

I glanced back up at her, and she smirked. "...You saw, didn't you?"

I gazed around the room, and immediately I knew I'd messed up. But it was too late.

"You did see."

"Well..."

"Pervert."

"Button up your shirt, then!"

"No, it's hot."

"Everyone's hot, but we still button up our shirts. Even Nagoshi does."

"Ew, you're checking out her boobs, too? Gross."

"Am not!!!" I raised my voice, and she started cracking up.

She was teasing me.

I was exasperated and knew I'd only get burned if I joined in her banter.

She leaned back against the sofa and started fanning herself again. "Ah, now I'm even hotter because I was laughing. What are you gonna do to make it up to me?"

"That one's definitely on you, Kaoru."

"Hee-hee." She laughed, trying to dodge responsibility.

It didn't seem like she was going to apologize, and I didn't have the energy to make her, so I just let it go. I could hear the characteristic sound of the plastic pencil board slicing through the air as she waved it.

"By the way..." I realized something. "You haven't eaten any ramen in here lately," I said, and she stared at me.

A week had passed since she'd started coming to the club again. But now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen her eating ramen once.

"Oh..." That was all she said before averting her eyes. Then she added shyly, "I...have dinner waiting for me when I get home now. So...I don't need to eat it anymore."

Warmth bloomed in my chest.

The corners of my lips gradually drew upward. "Ah, I see. Now I get it..." I nodded over and over, and she glared at me.

"What?"

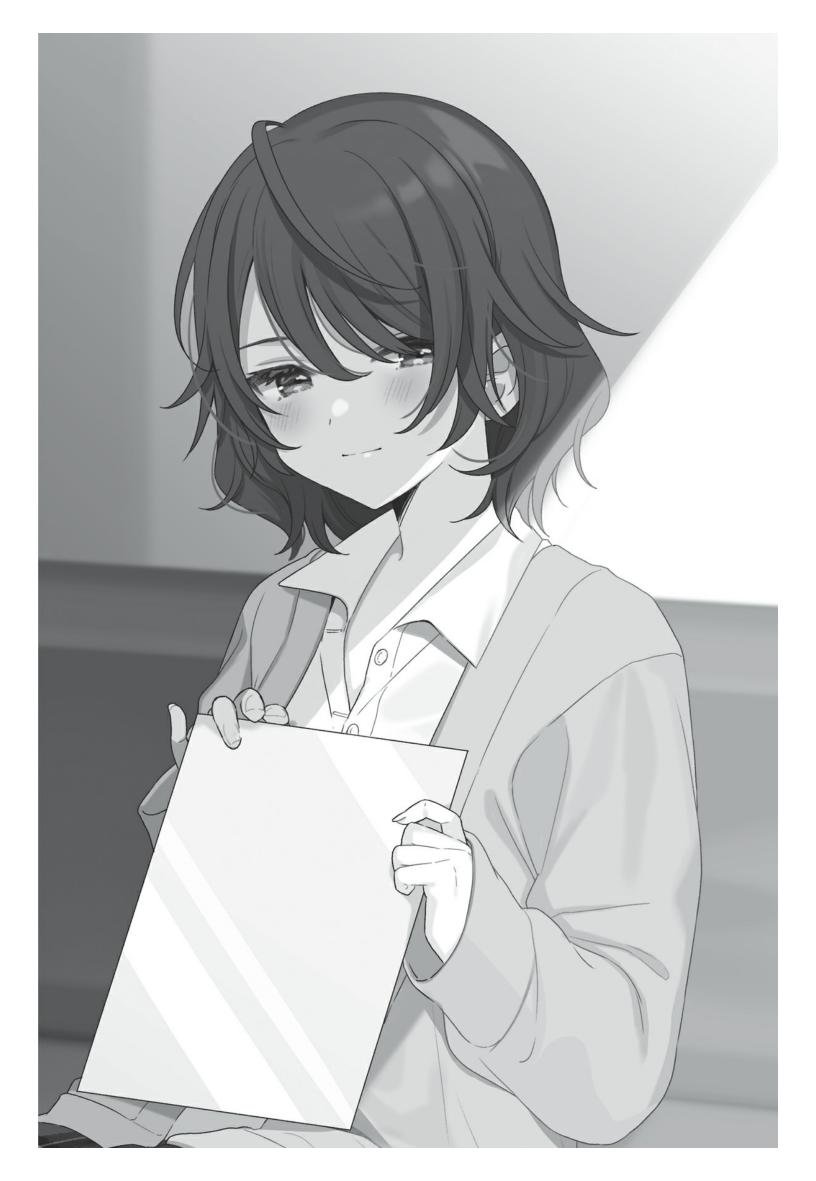
"Nothing. I'm just happy for you."

She sniffed bashfully.

It seemed like things at home were changing little by little for Kaoru. There was nothing else for me to ask. If she wanted to talk about it, I knew she would.

"Hellooooooo!" The door burst open.

It was Ai, of course. She was the only one who would come into the room in such a dramatic fashion. She strode in and plopped right down next to Kaoru.



"Oof, it's so hot today!" She grinned, her bangs plastered to her forehead with sweat.

"Ew, you're sweaty. Wipe it off," Kaoru said, scooting away from her.

"I forgot my towel, today of all days."

"But why are you sweating so much?"

"Oh, I was participating in the track team's interval training."

"Huh? But why?"

"Oh, because it's fun to run on a hot day! I asked if I could join in, and they said sure!"

"You're not a little kid playing in the park, you know..." Kaoru muttered, taking her own towel out of her bag and handing it to Ai.

"Wait, are you sure I can use this?"

"Yes. Wash it and give it back to me."

"What?! Am I that stinky?"

"That's not the point." Kaoru scowled, but Ai smiled back with her usual enthusiasm.

Kaoru never said a word when Ai showed up unannounced to the club room. In fact, the two of them often had conversations together without me.

I had a feeling they had naturally become a part of each other's lives. And that made me happy.

"Your shirt is literally sticking to you," said Kaoru.

"I'm sweaty. I can't help it."

"There's a limit to this stuff, you know. Your shirt's gone completely transparent."

"Yeah, but I have a bra on underneath, so it's fine."

"Guys are still going to ogle you!"

I felt like their conversation was drifting off into dangerous territory, so I

casually repositioned myself so they weren't in my line of sight.

"See, you're making Yuzu uncomfortable."

"I don't care if Yuzuru sees."

"That's not the point!" Kaoru always sounded like a mom when Ai was around.

I felt a little uncomfortable listening to their conversation, so I did my best to focus on my book.

I could hear all sorts of things. The hustle and bustle of the school building after classes were over. The humid club room. The cicadas chirping outside. The sound of the air conditioner puttering as it spat out cold air. The rustling of pages as I read my book. And last but not least, the happy voices of my two precious friends chatting.

Each sound added another layer to the rhythm of my everyday life.

Before, I'd felt like my world was locked up inside books. But now, it was slowly opening up.

The words I'd been piling up in my heart were being shared with others and spreading out, little by little.

I was finding words of my own.

Would those words help me to speak without regrets one day? Would I be able to openly return the feelings I'd received?

Sitting in the club room—now hotter and noisier than it had ever been before—I thought about what was to come and felt a twinge of excitement.

The rainy season had passed, and summer was about to begin in earnest.

AFTERWORD

Hello, this is Shimesaba. I write little things here and there on the internet. I'm really grateful that I got to work with such a wonderful team on the second volume of this series. However, just like my afterword in the first volume, I want to change subjects completely and talk about something else: water dispensers.

I recently moved, and when I did, I had a water dispenser put in my room. It's so convenient...! You see, I drink a lot of water compared to the average person—this is just based on my impression, not a statistical survey or anything. I drink about an average of three liters per day.

This time, I moved into a rental house, and my room is on the second floor, while the kitchen with the tap is on the first floor. It's kind of a hassle to go down to the living room every time I need a drink of water, so I thought, why not get a water dispenser put in my room?

Did you know that nowadays, water dispensers can also dispense hot water?! It's a slightly more complicated process for safety reasons, but it's still way less of a hassle than boiling the water yourself.

It's super convenient to have water anytime you want it, but the hot water feature is especially handy. I've been drinking regular and herbal tea a lot more lately.

But now with my increased tea consumption, I find myself frequently having to go downstairs to the first-floor bathroom and then back up to my room... Wait, doesn't that cancel out the convenience of not having to go down to the kitchen for water?

...Anyway, it's still pretty handy.

It's overwhelmingly more expensive than drinking regular tap water, but for those who drink a lot of water, it's convenient and surprisingly cost-effective. If any of you are interested in water dispensers after reading this afterword, I encourage you to check them out.

Also, although this might seem unrelated, even if you feel like you're hydrating yourself by drinking tea or coffee, apparently the body uses its own fluids to extract the water from them, so they're not actually that hydrating. So if you regularly drink a lot of tea or coffee, be sure to drink plenty of water, too.

Now it's time for me to express my gratitude to those who helped me with this book.

First, to my editor Kajiwara, who dealt with my consistently crazy schedule with a smile, thank you! You always help me so much. I'm eternally grateful for the care with which you handle interactions with the illustrator.

Next, to Ui Shigure, who finished these beautiful illustrations despite being extremely busy and battling health issues (please take care of yourself), thank you so much. Kajiwara and I were so excited when we received the rough draft of the cover that we did a little dance. I could tell you drew each character with great care, and I was genuinely happy. Ai and Kaoru wouldn't have become such impressive heroines without your illustrations.

And to the proofreader, who almost certainly read the text more seriously than I did—I'm always happy to receive your detailed suggestions.

To everyone else involved in the publication of this book, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

And finally, thank you to everyone who picked up a copy of Volume 2. I'm so happy you continued reading after the first volume.

Now this afterword has come to an end. I hope that you and my stories will meet again someday!

Shimesaba

About the Author

Shimesaba

An otaku who loves seafood.

Still hasn't gotten any better at Othello... Somebody please teach me...

Moved into a new house and the cat's room (the living room) has gotten bigger!

About the Illustrator

Ui Shigure

An otaku who loves high school girls.

Suddenly remembered that one of the events in the school sports competition was Othello and belatedly began wondering what exactly constitutes a sport. Apparently, the key is to not flip too many disks in the early stages. (Smirk.) (I learned that from the internet.)

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