



3

しめさば
イラスト/ぶーた

ひげを剃る。 そして女子高生を 拾う。

Office worker Yoshida has been crushing on his coworker, Airi Gotou, for five years. Despite finally scoring a date with her, his confession is promptly rejected. Drunk and disappointed, he stumbles home, only to find a high school girl sitting on the side of the road. The girl, needing a place to stay the night, attempts to seduce Yoshida. Despite rejecting her advances, he nevertheless invites her into his apartment.

The next morning, the girl, introducing herself as Sayu Ogiwara, reveals that she has run away from Hokkaido all the way to Tokyo. During her six-month spree, she continually traded sexual favors for a roof over her head. Yoshida, however, remains unswayed by her seduction. Instead, he has her do a different kind of work — one that entails washing dishes and doing laundry. And so, a touching relationship between a heartbroken adult and a runaway high school girl begins.

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VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 1

Translator: chelly ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

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It seems that there is such a thing as a “once-in-a-lifetime, intense love.”

I don’t know if I read it in a book or saw it in a movie or on TV. I don’t remember the details. But I think I heard of such a story a long time ago.

A once-in-a-lifetime, intense love.

It sounds good, but it doesn’t feel right for one simple reason.

Why does it have to be a “once-in-a-lifetime” thing? That’s what bothers me.

I think that love is all about doing your best every time. It’s hard to say that it’s the universal truth, but for me, it held somewhat true.

I’ve been in a relationship only *once*. I was a sophomore in high school and the person I dated was a senior of mine. At that time, I was in the baseball club and she was a pitcher for the softball club. I was attracted to her, and after a few months of agonizing about it, I confessed my feelings to her.

I remember her as being cheerful, yet she had a mysterious air about her.

I think I was attracted to that unscrupulous duality before and after my relationship with her.

Not to mention, she had no restraint when it came to sex. A few weeks after we started dating, she asked me if we could start having sex, as if it was a matter of course.

I was confused, but there's no way a high school boy could suppress his sexual desires when he was being pressed by a senior he's really in love with, so I just went ahead and did it.

Of course, I didn't think it was a bad thing. To be united with the person you love, both physically and mentally, is an incredibly joyful thing, and I was very excited about it at the time. My senior was really good-looking and quite popular at school, so many of my friends were jealous.

However, my relationship with her ended abruptly when she graduated from high school.

I stopped hearing from her. She didn't send me any messages, and she didn't reply to any messages I sent her.

I can't see her, and I can't contact her either. It's what's called "ghosting^[1]." As a high school student, I didn't have enough money or time to look for my senpai and chase after her, so I was left heartbroken.

A year after she graduated, I was often absorbed in my thoughts while I was thinking about her.

I really liked her, and I intended to continue our relationship even after she graduated. That's why I had gone far as to have sex with her. It was my way of proving to her that I was serious about our relationship going forward.

But whenever I thought about the fact that she must not have felt the same way about me, I felt empty. There was so much discrepancy in the way she and I viewed love, and I hadn't noticed it until the day our relationship ended.

Just like that, my first relationship ended with bitter memories. I spent my college years studying hard. I looked for a job, and then I met Gotou-san.

I don't need to remind myself of what happened from there.

I fell deeply in love again. Although it took me a long time to figure out how to approach her because of my work commitments, I continued to admire Gotou-san with the same intensity for the last five years.

Since this cannot be categorized as a love relationship, I don't feel comfortable calling my feelings for her a "once-in-a-lifetime, intense love."

If this "intense love" only happens once in a lifetime, wouldn't I have had it by now with my high school girlfriend or with Gotou-san?

In retrospect, I can't say which one was more intense.

In any case, this is the second time I've fallen in love in the same way. Aside from the fact that this love may or may not bear fruit, I can't imagine my answer to the question "Will I find love again?" In fact, I might even answer "No."

"So, what about *me*?"

I heard a voice behind me and turned around to see Sayu, the high school girl I was living with, standing there.

"What do you think of me?"

“What... I think?”

When she saw me stammering, Sayu smiled and tilted her head. Her hair, which had fallen to her shoulders, hung down smoothly as if succumbing to the effects of gravity.

Sayu was a sudden and unexpected presence in my life. I’m her temporary guardian.

The relationship between Sayu and I is obviously illegal, but it’s not the kind of relationship where sex is involved. It wasn’t my goal, nor was that kind of feeling awakened in me.

“But lately, you seem to be thinking more about me than Gotou-san.”

I can’t believe Sayu said that as if she had known what was in my heart.

“What are you talking about?”

“You had your chance when Gotou-san came over but you made me meet with her. It’s weird. If you had kicked me out, she would have been alone with you, and you could have done *lots of things*.”

“No, that’s...”

That’s what Mishima had told me before. But at that time I didn’t think of it that way. Instead, I thought that if Sayu was going to stay at my place from now on, I should make sure to explain all of it to Gotou-san.

“Does that mean...”

Again, Sayu said that as if she knew what was in my heart.

“That you want to be with me more than Gotou-san?”

“W-what? No way...”

“Hey, Yoshida-san.”

Sayu smirked as she called to me.

“What am I to you, Yoshida-san?”

*

“...shida-san. ...Hey. Yoshida-san!”

“Hmm?”

My body quivered and then I opened my eyes. I squinted as a considerable amount of bright light entered my vision.

As I moved my gaze, I saw a high school girl standing next to the bed.

“Good morning.”

It was Sayu, the girl who lives with me. In my blurry vision, I couldn’t see the details of her expression, but it seemed that she was smiling.

“...Good morning.”

“Somehow, you wouldn’t wake up at all today. You usually wake up in a few minutes after I nudge you.”

“...Is that how it is?”

“I tried calling out to you and nudging you, but you still wouldn’t wake up. I’m sorry, I had to shake you so much.”



“Nah, if you hadn’t woken me up, I’d be late...”

I guess I slept with my mouth open because my throat was dry, and my mouth felt unpleasantly sticky.

“Were you having a nightmare?”

“A nightmare?”

When I tilted my head at Sayu’s question, she nodded.

“You sounded like you were in pain.”

“Hmm... a nightmare, huh?”

I tried to remember what was it, but my mind’s a bit hazy.

I did have a strange feeling though that I had been having a conversation with someone just before I woke up. But I couldn’t remember what it was about.

“...I can’t remember anything.”

“I see. Oh... hurry up and get out of bed. If you don’t hurry, you won’t have time to eat breakfast.”

“Okay.”

As I was slowly getting up, Sayu gave me a small nod before making a short run to the kitchen. I could hear the sound of the pot on the stove being lit.

I got up from the bed and stretched widely.

The breakfast she had prepared was already on the table. I saw Sayu, who was stirring the pot of miso soup with a ladle while heating it, but she didn't notice that I'm looking at her.

Living together with Sayu has become so natural.

But she'll be gone soon, and she'll return to her normal life.

It's what's good for both of us, and at the same time, it's the right thing to do.

These thoughts spun around just moments after I got up. I shook my head.

What am I feeling guilty about now? This relationship was wrong from the start. I knew it was wrong, but I went along with it anyway.

I must help Sayu get back on the right track.

For her sake as well as my own.

I hurried to the bathroom and washed my face with tap water.

The cold water made me feel as if my consciousness, which had been foggy since I woke up, was finally clearing up.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 2

Translator: chelly ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

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“Tch. There it is, this format.”

During a break from our part-time job, Asami was studying with her textbook at the office table with me.

When Asami suddenly clicked her tongue, my attention left the math equation written on my notebook for a moment.

“Huh?”

“Here, take a look at this.”

Asami placed her reference book in front of me and then pointed at something on the page.

At a glance, it looked like a question about modern literature. I read the question out loud.

“Why did Toyotarou^[1] say what he said as underlined (A)? Choose the correct answer from the following choices. ...Well, isn’t it just an average question?”

“Yeah, it is, but...”

Asami pouted her lips.

She exhaled as she slid the reference book back towards her.

“I don’t think there’s any reason given in the text.”

“It’s a question of reading between the lines, right?”

“I know that. But something about it just annoys me.”

“Are you bad at these?”

Asami blinked several times at my question, then shook her head.

“Not at all. In fact, I think I’m rather good at them.”

“So, why are you complaining so much?”

Asami frowned for a moment and tapped her notebook with a pen.

“It’s not that I’m complaining ‘cause I can’t figure it out. I’m just pissed off about it. Look, it says here, ‘Choose the right one.’”

Asami hit the notebook particularly hard with the pen and then slowly, she continued.

“How am I supposed to know what’s the ‘correct’ answer if it wasn’t even written? You can’t possibly make the right answer out of non-existent words.”

Asami’s words suddenly seemed to come from another reason, turning it into a vague question. After putting on a surprised face when she realized it herself, she continued to talk as if to hide it.

“Well, I’d get it if the author of this work made the question, but...”

“Ah... the author probably didn’t. I don’t think the author was even interviewed.”

Looking at the source of the quote written in small letters after the question, it said clearly that the author had already died. Asami seemed to resent the fact that the author of the question, who was neither the original author nor the protagonist himself, had used such a definitive word as “correct” to describe the character’s feelings at that time.

“I bet the late author’s like, ‘Nah, that’s not what I intended at all^[2].’”

“I’m pretty sure the tone wouldn’t be like that, but you might be right.”

Asami giggled at my words and slammed her reference book shut.

“I’ve had enough of this. I’m gonna take a break.”

Asami said straightforwardly, grabbing the plastic bottle she kept beside her and gulped down the juice.

“The AC in this office is a piece of shit. It’s so damn hot. I can’t believe you’re not sweatin’ at all in this heat, Sayu-chaso.”

When Asami told me that, I looked at her forehead and noticed that she was sweating a little. The air conditioning in the office definitely isn’t as effective as the one installed in the store. On a day like this, when the temperature outside is extremely high, the air conditioner is often lukewarm, though not as hot as outside.



Speaking of the heat, it certainly was hot. I wiped my forehead and although it was kind of sticky, I didn't find any trace of sweat on my hand.

As I was rubbing my forehead with my mouth half-open, Asami suddenly giggled and said:

"Why did Sayu Ogiwara rub her forehead just now? Choose the correct answer from the followin' choices."

"Haha, what was that?"

Asami giggled again after clearly teasing me, which made me giggle too.

I looked at the time and saw that it was almost half an hour since we had started our break. It's a short shift for me today, and I've only been given a half-hour break.

"I should probably get going."

I closed my notebook and went to punch my time card.

"Hang in there."

As Asami opened her reference book and started studying again, I stole a glance at her. For some reason, I found the sight of her alluring.

I buttoned up my shirt and opened the office door. The cold air from the air conditioner in the store gave me goosebumps on my skin.

“That’s a total of 648 yen. ...Oh, a credit card. One moment, please. ...Yes, please swipe it here. Thank you very much. Do you need a receipt? Thank you very much.”

As I walked out of the office and into the store, I heard Yaguchi-san’s polite voice. His voice was a little higher than usual, and it sounded like it was coming through his nose. With a sideways glance, I confirmed that the customer was a woman, and I sighed. He only raises the tone of his voice like that when the female customer is his type.

The cooler interior of the store, in contrast to the office, was chilly enough for the employees wearing short-sleeved convenience store uniforms. Feeling a little cold, I quietly went about my work.

It was already summer.

I didn’t have summer vacation. Well, I guess for someone like me who doesn’t go to school anymore, I’m always on vacation.

As Asami took lots of morning and afternoon shifts, I realized that it was already summer vacation for students like her.

I see... Summer vacation, huh?

The summer vacation that I had looked forward to so much when I still attending school now seemed so far away from me.

Since it’s summer vacation, Asami came to visit me almost every day, and she would open her textbooks and study diligently. It’s not that surprising since she’s in her third year of high school and the college entrance exams were scheduled for winter. The exam for the literature department of the university Asami was aiming for is a

difficult one, to say the least. As she studied earnestly, I spent my time going over the reference book that Yoshida-san had bought for me.

Taking an entrance exam.

These words, like “summer vacation,” also started to feel far-off to me. Although, I’ve been studying. Since I didn’t have anything special to do outside of housework, I’m catching up with what’s being taught in the third year of high school through some commercially available reference books. I’m doing it this way since official textbooks can only be purchased through the school in Hokkaido. So if someone were to ask me if I had the same level of knowledge as the kids who went to school, the answer would of course be no. But I still thought it was better than not doing anything at all.

That said.

Would I take an exam? Would I go to college? I couldn’t say anything. Besides, I don’t even know the process for applying and taking the exam. Not only that but I also don’t have the motivation to look it up.

Although I told Yoshida-san that I would “think about the future,” I still need to be realistic.

I’ve thrown away my status as a high school student, so where do I go from here?

Going back home... to my parents’ house. That’s what I should be thinking about the most right now. But once I achieve it, what then? What should I do after that? My vision was shrouded with pure white.

“Ah.”

By the time I realized it, all the snacks had been put out on the shelves. I looked at the time and saw that it's about 10 AM.

It would have been fine if I did the toy shelves next. But I'd like to finish stocking the shelves of products that sell a lot during lunch, such as rice balls and sandwiches, before lunchtime.

As I got used to my part-time job, I increasingly became more efficient in organizing stuff and prioritizing the things that should be done.

As I walked up to the sandwich containers piled up near the cash register, Yaguchi-san, who was at the register, whispered, "Come here," and beckoned to me. I walked up to him, wondering why he needed to keep his voice down when it's only the two of us inside the store.

"You see that black luxury car parked outside?"

Yaguchi-san said quietly while his gaze was fixed outside. I looked outside and saw a black luxury car parked in the driveway in front of the convenience store and not in the parking lot.

"Yeah, I see it."

"It's been there everyday recently but no one's coming over to buy anything. Sometimes when I take a look, I have the impression that the scary-looking driver with sunglasses is looking back at me."

After saying that, Yaguchi-san grabbed me by the shoulders and made a quivering gesture.

"But if he's wearing sunglasses, you can't really tell where he's looking at, right?"

"Well, yeah, but I really feel that he's looking at me."

When I looked at the car again, I noticed that the backseat windows were tinted, so I couldn't see who's in the passenger seat. Then, sitting in the driver's seat was a bald man with sunglasses. He certainly looked intimidating.

As I stared at the driver, his head moved slightly. I couldn't tell where he was looking exactly because of the sunglasses, but for some reason, I felt as if my eyes were meeting his, so I hurriedly looked away.

"Maybe they're undercover police?"

"Police?"

"I mean, you've been picking up and throwing away girls left and right."

"Huh? So they're after me?"

Yaguchi-san looked scared for a moment, then suddenly he shook his head.

"No, fornication isn't a crime."

"Why do you sound so confident?"

"Besides, if it were an unmarked police car it would be a Toyota Crown or a Subaru Legacy or some other car that's more reasonable and maneuverable. That car's a Mercedes Benz." ^[3]

Yaguchi-san said. I can't tell the model and brand of a car at a glance since I don't really know much about cars.

"Well, it's not like the way they're parked is a bother to other cars, so I guess we can leave it be."

Just as Yaguchi-san finished what he was saying, the timer of the fryer behind the cash register went off. As he lifted the metal basket containing the fried chicken from the fryer, he muttered something to me.

“It’s distressing, isn’t it?”

I nodded vaguely as I stepped away from the cash register and went back to stocking up the sandwich containers.

I loosely thought of a reason to park in the same place every day.

The most obvious case is when you need to go to this convenience store. However, as far as Yaguchi-san knows, they never came over to buy anything.

There’s also the possibility that they have business elsewhere, but have to park near here. This convenience store is a perfect place for those cases. However, if that’s the case, I find it strange that they weren’t using the parking lot of this convenience store.

I thought I heard the sound of an engine, and when I turned around and looked outside, I saw the luxury car leaving.

“They left.”

“Huh? Ah... yeah.”

Although he had brought up the matter himself, the mysterious luxury car seemed to have slipped from Yaguchi-san’s mind. He looked outside and then shrugged his shoulders as if nothing happened.

“I wonder if they’ll be here again tomorrow.”

“If they’re not going to buy anything, then they shouldn’t come, right?”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

As soon as the conversation was over, my mind was completely focused on work. For some reason, time flies so fast when you’re talking to someone. When I looked at the time, 15 minutes had already passed.

I still need to finish stocking the sandwiches, rice balls, and bread before lunch.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 3

Translator: chelly ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

Editor/Proofreader: OD Dragon ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

Ah, a big yawn. Then gulped down a can of coffee.

Yoshida-senpai's never been the lively type of person, but today his eyes looked more dead than usual. He must be sleep-deprived.

Wait, is it even possible for someone like Yoshida-senpai, whose only hobby is sleeping, to be sleep-deprived? Looking back, it's extremely rare for Yoshida-senpai to look so sleepy in the morning.

I wondered if *something* happened last night. Speaking of something...

"Mishima-kun."

"Uh, yes?"

Suddenly, someone grabbed me by the shoulders which startled me. I turned around, careful not to let my annoyance at having my thoughts interrupted show on my face, and saw Chief Odagiri standing behind me.

"Did you finish what I asked you to do the other day?"

“Oh, I took care of it. I thought I’d email it once business hours start.”

When I replied, the Chief stared at me for a moment and then nodded several times.

“Oh, oh... I see I see.”

“What’s wrong, sir? Don’t you need it anymore?”

“Ah, no, it’s not like that.”

The Chief scratched his head and then continued to speak.

“I’ve noticed that you’ve been less irresponsible lately.”

“Irresponsible, sir?”

“That’s right... Before, when I asked you for similar tasks, you usually wouldn’t finish them yet.”

“Ah, yeah... I see.”

When he told me that, I couldn’t help but admit it.

Certainly, I was that kind of person who was deliberately playing the “incapable employee” card.

“Of course, I’m glad that you did a good job. Email it to me later.”

“Ah, yes, sir! Will do.”

The Chief smiled and went back to his seat.

Thinking back, I felt that the Chief had not completely given up on my “I can’t do it” attitude, but had acknowledged that I was like that and had come to remind me of what I needed to do.

I felt a little bad about what I've done before.

Although it wasn't yet time to start working, I opened up my company mail, quickly attached the documents, and started typing.

Since the day I first went to an *izakaya* with Yoshida-senpai and talked about our thoughts and opinions on work, he never allowed me to cut corners again. Yoshida-senpai used to take over my work as soon as he realizes that I couldn't do it. But after our talk, he stopped accepting it until I did it properly.

As a result, my workload increased, but it hasn't been as much of a burden on me as I thought it would be. In fact, I could say that it made me feel better mentally because I didn't have to make myself look so low.

I emailed the document to the Section Chief with a brief, polite statement.

I laughed in my mind, thinking that it would have been unthinkable in the past to do something related to work before the start of the day.

I raised my head and looked at Yoshida-senpai. I saw his gaze drop to the lower left.

He's fiddling with his smartphone again. For some reason, whenever he fiddles with his smartphone, he's doing it under his desk.

It's not like it's forbidden, but I wonder if he feels guilty about it.

Anyway, it's easy to tell when Yoshida-senpai is busy with his smartphone. Since his head is slightly protruding above the computer monitor, I can see if he's looking at the screen or not.

There's only one reason why he'd be so occupied with his smartphone. He's texting with someone. And there's an 80% chance that this "someone" is Sayu-chan.

That's right. I still don't have Yoshida-senpai's contact info. I know that not being able to get in touch with him outside of the office is a serious handicap when it comes to romance, but this is Yoshida-senpai. If I simply ask him "Could you give me your number?" he's the type of guy who would just say "Huh? There's no need for you to contact me outside of work."

If a woman asks for your number for no reason, don't you usually try to figure out the reason why she's asking for it or wonder if she's interested in you? A guy who misreads things too much is annoying, but a man who's clueless in that kind of situation is even more annoying. It's so annoying.

What I can say for sure is that, whether you realize it or not, it's easier to get close to people you interact with frequently. I feel like I'm stating the obvious here but I'm definitely behind Gotou-san and Sayu-chan in terms of intimacy. Especially compared to Sayu-chan.

They are always at home together, and when Yoshida-senpai's at work they text each other. They are undoubtedly very close. Even though they are not a family, they have built a relationship that closely resembles one.

At this rate, it will be somewhat inconvenient for me if he continues that kind of relationship with Sayu-chan. I need to get his number as soon as possible.

"Okay, let's start the morning assembly."

An imposing voice echoed in the office and interrupted my thoughts. It was Gotou-san.

She usually speaks slowly with a calm voice but raises her voice at times like this.

At the sound of her voice, all the people in the office stood up.

Morning assemblies are held only at the beginning of the week. They are quite simple. We go over monthly reports and important announcements are made.

I stood up properly, thinking it would be over quickly, but something wasn't right.

Among the representatives, there's a guy from the HR department who never showed up at our office before. Next to him was a woman whose face I had never seen before.

"Well, before we go on with the usual process, I'd like to introduce you to an employee who has just been transferred here."

The representative said in a relaxed tone, then whispered something to the woman standing next to him. He probably said, "Introduce yourself." The woman gave a small nod and stepped forward.

"My name is Ao Kanda and I've just been transferred from the Sendai branch. I've never been here before, even on a business trip, so I don't know the ins and outs. I'm hoping you can help me out. I look forward to working with you."

She had curly, black hair, a well-proportioned nose, and a small mouth. From a woman's perspective, she gave the impression of being creepily beautiful. And the way she spoke, she seemed to be completely comfortable with standing in front of people. I wondered if she had been transferred to a managerial position. But it's unlikely since she's too young.

“I’m going to join the Section Chief’s project as an assistant. Please don’t hesitate to ask for me if you need me.”

Her forthright self-introduction brought a small laugh to the office.

She didn’t seem to be in a managerial position but she was so confident. She was probably a person with great self-confidence but whatever the case, she felt like a strong woman.

I thought to myself, “I definitely don’t want to get involved with her,” while flashing a wry smile.

“Huh?!”

A high-pitched voice was heard and all eyes and ears were drawn to it.

It was none other than Yoshida-senpai. And then, the woman named Ao Kanda who was still standing in front also raised her voice.

“Huh...? Is that you, Yoshida?”

After she said that, the noise of people gossiping took over the office.

“What’s going on? Do you two know each other?”

When the representative asked Kanda-san with a smile, she nodded.

“He was my junior back in high school.”

“What are you doing here...?”

Yoshida-senpai said, visibly surprised.

“It’s nice to have someone you know, isn’t it? If you run into trouble, you can always ask for Yoshida-kun’s help.”

“Yes, it is. I’ll be sure to do that.”

After responding briefly to the representative’s words, Kanda-san looked again in the direction of Yoshida-senpai. She placed one hand on her waist and smiled sweetly. It made me cringe. I looked at Yoshida-senpai and he responded with a confused smile and a slight bow. It was kind of weird.

I knew she was a person he had long known in the past, but why is he that troubled? I’m getting a sense of déjà vu in Yoshida-senpai’s reaction.

It was just like that time when Gotou-san suddenly called him to her desk to talk...

As I recalled that, I suddenly remembered Gotou-san’s presence. She must be involved in human resources, too.

Did Gotou-san know about this?

Without changing the direction of my body, I moved my gaze towards Gotou-san’s desk and was surprised by what I saw.

There stood Gotou-san with an expression on her face that I had never seen before. I fought back the urge to laugh and averted my gaze from her.

I see. So she knew nothing about it either.

Honestly, give me a break.

Gotou-san, who’s built a relationship with Yoshida-senpai longer than me, and Sayu-chan, who suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

As if being caught in the middle of those two wasn't hard enough, suddenly a high school senior joins the fray.

I don't know what kind of relationship that woman had with Yoshida-senpai, but judging by her reaction it's clear that it wasn't a typical senior/junior relationship.

I just have one thing to say.

I don't want any more rivals.

I let out a small sigh. When I looked at Gotou-san again, she had the same soft, smiling face that she always had. That's how fast she can switch.

I laughed heartily, probably because I was able to see that expression on her face, if only for a moment.

And then when I turned to see Yoshida-senpai, I felt bad.

For some reason, I saw a "high school student who is drawn to his senior's voice" look on his face.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 4

Translator: FireHawk ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

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“Yoshida... Did you like it?”

After we did *that*, Kanda-senpai smiled, regained her lost breath, and asked.

“Very.”

I nodded, but she just chuckled.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not!”

“If you liked it, you would’ve cum right away.”

Chapter 4: Curly Hair



After these words, I shook my head.

“These things aren’t related to each other.”

I leaned back and got off Kanda-senpai. She moaned seductively.

“You know... It was my suggestion, so we could’ve done it without a rubber.”

Kanda-senpai said as she watched me remove the condom.

“You would’ve finished faster without it.”

“We shouldn’t do *it* without a condom. You never know what could happen.”

“I already told you that I’m on the pill.”

Kanda-senpai’s period was difficult. Tough and unstable. To regulate the cycle, she took pills, but that wasn’t enough for me.

There are times when a woman becomes pregnant, even though she’s taking contraception. I read this on my father’s computer when he wasn’t at home.

“You don’t love me.”

“I love you, that’s why I use condoms.”

As Kanda-senpai stood up, her curly hair tousled.

“I don’t understand you. If you love me, then cum inside.”

I didn’t get her train of thought, so just smiled uncertainly and shook my head.

“People cum inside when they want to have a baby, but I haven’t thought about it yet.”

I said, and Kanda-senpai’s eyebrow twitched, and then she gave out an indistinct “Um...”

“That’s why I take pills, so I won’t get pregnant.”

“If we’re not planning to have children, why cum inside?”

She sighed in annoyance, but then suddenly smiled as if she was trying to divert attention.

“I just think that you’ll like it this way more.”

“I like it anyway. I’m glad that I can do this with you, senpai.”

It’s true.

Although I didn’t say it openly, I was really happy that I could have sex with her, but perhaps it was all about simple pleasure. Maybe the opportunity to have sex with her was just giving me a feeling of superiority over others, a feeling that she’s mine, or was it some sort of joy from knowing that she acted like that only in front of me?

Hearing my words, Kanda-senpai smiled, but she definitely didn’t believe me.

“Yoshida, you sure you love me?”

“Of course I do. I love you.”

“Then next time, we’ll do *it* without a condom.”

I didn’t get why she wanted to do it so badly. Apparently, understanding my feelings, she laughed.

“I want to know how long it’ll take you to cum if we do it without a condom.”

“I won’t do *it* without one.”

Kanda-senpai sighed, bowing her head.

“Why?”

That’s my line.

I told her this already so many times, why didn’t she understand? I decided to say it a little differently.

“Then we’ll do it sometime.”

I muttered, and she bowed again.

“Someday? When exactly then?”

I didn’t have an answer.

My nose got a little itchy so I scratched it with my index finger.

“When I... I’ll be able to take responsibility for it.”

I said quietly, looking down at the bed. I was so embarrassed, and my face was burning.

Kanda-senpai didn’t say anything, so I looked up at her, and her expression... I haven’t seen her making that face before.

Surprised, scared, I didn’t know. The look was as if she met an unknown creature. When our gazes met, she immediately smiled. But it definitely was a forced smile.

“You’re difficult, Yoshida.”

She said it the way people say “The sky is blue.”

“But also cute.”

Kanda-senpai added as she smiled.

“Difficult?”

“Yeah, not in a bad way, rather impressive. It’s just...”

Kanda-senpai looked at the bed, trying to find the appropriate words.

“I wish you were more relaxed. Aren’t we dating for fun?”

“But ‘relationships’ are a very serious thing.”

After my words, she giggled, reached out to my head, and ruffled my hair.

“I’m happy.”

Patting me on the head, she added “But.”

I looked up, right into her eyes.

And my heart hurt.

She looked at me the way parents look at children. Not how a woman looks at her boyfriend.

“I don’t want to be treasured so much.”

I couldn’t forget the expression on senpai’s face when she said that.

*

I recognized her at a first glance.

I don't know how many years have passed, and yet...

Foxy eyes, chiseled nose. Compared to matured eyes and nose, a cute mouth. The confidence that came from her.

And the main feature — her curly black hair.

She hasn't changed at all.

Kanda-senpai.

My beloved high school senior.

The whole assembly I was in the clouds.

She also remembers me. The image of her raising a hand and smiling was spinning in my head.

Usually, morning assemblies dragged on for an incredibly long time, and when it came to an end, it felt like I wasted all my strength.

Sighing heavily, I dropped in a chair, and then I was poked in the shoulder by Hashimoto.

"Yoshida, you know that beauty?"

"You heard it yourself. She was my senior in high school."

"And... That's all?"

"What do you mean 'That's all'?"

I asked, and Hashimoto cracked an annoying smile.

“Well, I mean... Maybe you haven’t noticed, but you were acting strange there.”

“Huh?”

“As if you are not just a senior and junior, rather you look like a boy that was called by a precious senior.”

“N-no... It’s not like...”

I began to chew on the words. This is certainly true, but I couldn’t answer normally.

“Is she your first love?”

“Well, I’m not sure about the first...”

Come to think of it, it was really my first love. Before that, I hadn’t fallen in love with anyone. As a child, I was only thinking about games, and in high school, when all that romance approached me, I calmly accepted it.

“We... were dating... In high school.”

It was difficult to say anything else, and I also understood that he’d start teasing me, so I said the truth.

After that, Hashimoto stared at me.

“...Is that so?”

“Why would I lie to you?”

“Well... I just thought you had unrequited love, but to think that you were dating that beauty...”

“Hey, don’t you think that you’re being quite rude here?”

It somehow infuriated me that it seemed strange to him that I could date a pretty woman like her, although I could hardly believe it myself.

“Broke up because of an argument?”

“No, we just broke up.”

“Ah... Happens a lot in high school.”

“She was the first to graduate and that’s it.”

“I see.”

“Why are you smiling? It’s all in the past. What about the thing I asked you to do?”

I didn’t want to listen to his jokes anymore, plus the working day began, so I shifted the topic to work.

Hashimoto frowned and said “We didn’t finish though,” but shrugged and pointed to his monitor.

“You didn’t have to remind me, I was already preparing a letter.”

“Thank you. Send me a copy then.”

“I know, I know. No need to ask. Getting away from the topic...”

“Shut up. You’re teasing me too much.”

When I finished speaking, I looked at my monitor, checked my mail, launched the application, and began to prepare for the work routine, but Kanda-senpai was still in my head.

She worked for the same company, and also suddenly transferred to this office. It was surreal.

Feeling someone's gaze on me, I raised my head and met Mishima's eyes. She stared at me for a few seconds, and then looked back at her monitor. Then, I felt another gaze, coming from the other side, I looked there and saw Gotou-san turning away from me.

...I don't like this attention. Even though she's someone I knew, I shouldn't have raised my voice like that. Such an unnatural reaction only arouses unnecessary interest.

There will be no difficulties if you know how to control yourself. I was just surprised by her appearance.

I looked in the direction of Chief Odagiri, he was telling Kanda-senpai something. Looks like he was cracking jokes since she was giggling. Her shoulders trembled slightly. The way she laughs hasn't changed at all.

Kanda-senpai is *really* here.

I looked at them, and then she looked at me. Our gazes met. It was too late to look away, so I exchanged glances with her, while Kanda-senpai narrowed her eyes slightly and raised the corner of her mouth, making a puzzled expression. She pointed to the corridor, offering to go outside and talk. I nodded and got up.

"I'm going to the toilet."

"Yeah, yeah. To the toilet..."

I stared at the Hashimoto, he shrugged his shoulders and pointedly said.

“Take your time.”

I was waiting in the hallway, and soon Kanda-senpai appeared. Seeing me leaning against the wall, she quickly walked over.

“I was surprised. We meet again, Yoshida.”

“That’s my line... Senpai, you became a software developer?”

“Well, I wanted to become a systems engineer. I worked with programs and stuff and somehow ended up here. Are you a programmer, Yoshida?”

“Um... I do everything. In general, I am the project developer, but I can only dream of doing only one thing.”

“Wow... looks like you got it rough.”

Kanda-senpai nodded, looking at me.

“What?”

“No, nothing.”

Exhaling through her nose, she tilted her head and continued.

“You’ve changed, Yoshida...”

“Of course I have... How many years have passed? But on the contrary, you haven’t changed at all, senpai.”

“Is that so? But I think I’ve changed...”

“No, really. You haven’t... at all. I immediately realized that it was you.”

I said, and at first, she shot me a puzzled look, but then started laughing akin to the ringing of a bell.

“You haven’t changed at all in terms of...”

“In terms of wh—”

“By the way, I sure have changed in obvious places, haven’t you noticed?”

She was smiling, not letting me finish my question.

I began to look at her face, but it didn’t change much. I even looked at the mole below her lips.

“No, I haven’t noticed anything.”

“Hehe.”

Narrowing her eyes, she lifted the corner of her lips and then, like a child, stuck out her chest, emphasizing the breasts.

“They became one size larger.”

“Huh?”

“Come on... I’m talking about my chest.”

“Oh...”

I gave up indiscretion and looked down at her breasts. Even in the suit, they looked big. When I was in high school, her breasts attracted me very much...

And then I imagined her naked, but immediately shook the thought out of my head.

“I don’t remember your previous size.”

“Huh?! You meanie! You used to enjoy touching them so much.”

“Shh! What if someone hears us?”

“Well, what about it? But if it’s a secret, I won’t tell anyone.”

“No, it’s not like...”

I fell silent and bowed my head. I thought that she’d rather hide it, but it seems that it didn’t bother her.

“I just thought that you wouldn’t want to talk about the fact that we dated.”

After these words, her eyebrows twitched, and she grinned.

“...You haven’t changed either.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s get back to work. I’ll ask you if I have any questions.”

“Yeah, anytime.”

Kanda-senpai waved and headed to the office.

After following her, I leaned powerlessly against the wall.

“I’m tired...”

I sighed.

I thought we'd never see each other again, but she suddenly appeared and even spoke to me. This sure was exhausting. Even meetings with clients are not that stressful.

"I'll go to the toilet."

I said that I'll go to the toilet, and it'd definitely be strange if I didn't go there. So, I went to the bathroom.

But still.

I remembered Kanda-senpai's words.

You haven't changed at all.

The expression on her face.

Was it surprise or resignation? It was the same expression from that time in high school. Every time I saw it, I felt like I messed up somewhere.

"You haven't changed either, you know?"

I mumbled, opening the door.

My beloved senior has never spoken seriously.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 5

Translator: FireHawk ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

Editor: chelly ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

Proofreader: OD Dragon ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

It was already lunchtime, so I stood up.

“I’m out for lunch.”

I said, locking my computer. My colleague, without taking his eyes off the monitor, answered “Enjoy your meal.”

As usual.

Normally, I’d go to Yoshida-senpai’s desk and invite him. *But not today.*

I quickly walked over to Gotou-san’s desk.

I went up to her and before I even opened my mouth to talk to her, she looked at me.

“Ah, Mishima-san?”

She bowed her head in confusion as if she was saying “What’s wrong?”. Don’t “What’s wrong?” me.

Gotou-san should have also noticed. Something was wrong with Yoshida-senpai in the morning. There's no way it didn't bother her.

"Gotou-san... Would you like to have lunch together?"

I suggested this with a dead-serious expression on my face. She looked at the screen, nodded, and then said quietly.

"Go ahead. I'll send an email and catch up with you."

"Alright. I'll find a table for us then."

"Okay."

She smiled and looked at the monitor again. Seeing her typing on the keyboard, I quickly headed to the cafeteria.

I searched the cafeteria to find out where Yoshida-senpai was. While I was talking with Gotou-san a moment before, he and Hashimoto-senpai had already ordered food, sat at a table, and started eating.

Watching them out of the corner of my eye, I stood in front of the vending machine with my meal ticket^[1]. Usually, I take fried salmon, but today I wasn't in the mood. Actually, today I wasn't in the mood to order anything at all, so I was just staring at the machine.

As people began to gather behind me, I could hardly relax. I was thinking about taking udon or soba when one particular button caught my eye. I pressed on it as if I was drawn to it. I got the meal ticket and gave it to the counter.

"Oh, not going to order fried salmon today?"

"Nope, not in the mood."

“That happens sometimes... An order of Chinese noodles! Here’s your number.”

I’ve already become known as a “fried salmon girl,” which is actually pretty cute. I took the number and went to a table.

I chose a place away from Yoshida-senpai’s table, so he wouldn’t hear our conversation. While I was waiting, Gotou-san also came. When my order was ready, I picked it up at the counter, then met Gotou-san at the table.

“I brought my lunch.”

She said, showing the bag from a convenience store. There was only a salad inside.

“As usual.”

As I sat down, I pointed at Gotou-san’s bag.

“Is that really enough?”

The moment I asked, her eyes widened and she laughed.

“Hehe, so the junior’s acting like a senior?”

“Huh?”

“Don’t you think that’s enough?”

She asked. I always hate when someone answers a question with a question.

“No, I didn’t think so, that’s why I asked.”

“Hehe, exactly.”

Gotou-san took out a salad from the bag and tore open the package. She smiled as she was mixing it.

“Well, at least I’ll have a proper dinner then.”

“...I see.”

So this isn’t enough for her. I don’t understand. Is it that difficult to say “Not enough”? It’s just two words, why dance around it? Although I didn’t have any reason to ask her that question either, so I just agreed.

“Well then...”

Gotou-san shot me a puzzled look as she was splitting the chopsticks.

“What did you want to talk about?”

“...You already know, don’t you?”

“Hehe.”

She giggled and put some salad in her mouth. Chewing, she again gave me a puzzled look. She wanted *me* to say it.

“It’s about Yoshida-senpai. No, not him... rather about Kanda-san.”

“About Ao Kanda-san?”

She just swallowed the salad and nodded.

“I was surprised.”

“Did you know?”

“What?”

“That she knew Yoshida-senpai.”

I remembered the morning assembly. Everything was obvious.

“No, I didn’t know this either.”

Just as I thought. Gotou-san looked at the table and shook her head.

“To begin with, I had nothing to do with Kanda-san’s transfer. I only reviewed her documents that were passed to me.”

“So that’s how it was.”

While talking, I grabbed my bowl of Chinese noodles and began to eat. Thick and rather loose.

What an unexpected turn of events. It wasn’t easy for me even with Gotou-san alone, who Yoshida-senpai is in love with, then a high school girl that ran away from home appeared, and now there’s also a senior from his high school days.

Besides, he looks at her in a weird way. It feels like in that gaze there’s even more “love” than in the way he looks at Gotou-san.

“Hehe.”

She chuckled and again drew my attention.

“What?”

“Such a stern look.”

“Are you talking about me?”

“Of course about you.”

Her shoulders were shaking as she giggled. She looked at me, narrowing her eyes.

“Are you afraid that Yoshida-kun will be taken away?”

Her words pissed me off. Her self-confident attitude, to be precise.

“Aren’t you worried too, Gotou-san?”

I asked without even thinking. But I figured that until I ask her directly, she is not going to answer.

Her eyes widened in surprise for a moment, but then she recovered and tilted her head with her usual smile. Without saying anything, she continued to chew the salad, while I was eating noodles. It swelled even more.

After swallowing, she sighed.

“But...”

She said, looking away from me.

“Yoshida-kun’s reaction was really strange. This was the first time I saw him that interested in a woman.”

Well, of course... She didn’t answer my question, again.

Sighing, I nodded.

“Exactly. Me too... I haven’t seen it in a long time.”

“In a long time?”

I didn’t say “The first time,” so Gotou-san stared at me. In such moments, she reacts pretty quickly.

“...No, nothing. Forget about it.”

“Are you sure it’s nothing?”

“Yes, I am.”

Before Sayu-chan appeared, Yoshida-senpai also looked that way at Gotou-san. But I didn’t want to tell her that.

I ended the conversation and just stared at her.

“So what are we going to do? Just leave them be?”

“Leave them be... Neither you nor I are dating Yoshida-kun. So it’s up for him to decide.”

“That way, Kanda-san will really take him away.”

“Hehe.”

She laughed, but I frowned.

“What?”

“Nothing.”



Gotou-san fell silent again and looked straight into my eyes.

“Whatever will be, will be, right?”

“But...”

I couldn’t answer right away. As if she revealed her true self and her words suddenly hit home.

“Human feelings can’t be controlled.”

“Um...”

“Forcing him to fit the desired mold, even if you got the result you wanted...”

She stuck chopsticks into the salad and looked at them. It felt like she was squeezing my insides, and I was just waiting for her to continue.

“How long will it last?”

“W-Well...”

I barely brought myself to say anything.

“So, you are saying that there’s no point in trying?”

Gotou-san closed her eyes and shook her head.

“I’m not saying that there’s no point. It’s just...”

Lowering her head, she continued.

“Even if he accepts the mold initially, over time he’ll return to his original self.”

I realized that she really believes this, and that's why she says this to me.

It's usually hard to know what's on her mind, but here, Gotou-san exposed her feelings. I was surprised.

However.

At the same time, it gave me an unpleasant feeling in my heart.

"Why's that?"

I suddenly blurted it out.

Gotou-san looked at me.

"You're just afraid of the consequences."

She didn't answer me anything, yet I understood everything.

"You can make an effort, and maybe lose something sometimes, but you prefer to wait until everything becomes exactly the way you want it."

After I said that, Gotou-san frowned for the first time.

I didn't know why, but I was completely enraged. Perhaps because she likes Yoshida-san and doesn't do anything, or because I realized that I'm losing to her.

I was furious. So, I wanted to tell her everything.

"Whereas I'm more afraid that if I don't do anything, I'll lose what I can possibly get. Wait for everything to be as I need it? And who said that this moment will even come?"

“Mishima-san.”

“Isn’t it arrogant to just stand by and be chosen by someone who’s wanted by so many other people? Is this the *mold* you were talking about?!”

“Mishima-san!”

Gotou-san said louder than usual and I regained consciousness.

The dining room became quiet. I looked around as our colleagues looked at us with displeasure. Yoshida-senpai and Hashimoto-senpai from the far table also looked at us.

“...You’re making too much noise.”

Gotou-san said annoyingly.

I cleared my throat and bowed.

“...I’m sorry.”

My face was burning, but I understood. I overdid it.

Gotou-san smiled and shook her head.

“You have nothing to apologize for. You also need to speak out sometimes, Mishima-san.”

“No, I’m really sorry...”

“Hehe.”

Gotou-san put down her chopsticks and stretched her arms.

“Well, as for Kanda-san, you just have to observe.”

“Observe?”

“Yes, exactly.”

She nodded and raised her index finger.

“You shouldn’t do anything before we find out what kind of relationship they had and what he thinks about it.”

“Well, you’re right...”

“Until we find out, we’ll just observe. And if there’s something strange, then we’ll intervene.”

She smiled, picked up her chopsticks, grabbed the salad, and continued to eat. It seemed strange to me, so I said.

“You act like it doesn’t bother you.”

“It doesn’t.”

“But you like Yoshida-senpai, don’t you?”

I asked her that question and she blinked a few times.

“I do like him, that’s why I think that there’s no point in doing something.”

“Huh?”

I blurted out.

I didn’t get what she meant. But she said it seriously.

While I was just batting my eyes, Gotou-san pointed at my bowl.

“If you don’t eat, the noodles will get soggy.”

“Oh.”

I looked at the bowl, the Chinese noodles, which I hadn’t really eaten, were getting soggy.

Seeing me grabbing my chopsticks, Gotou-san started to giggle.

“You’re so cute, Mishima-san.”

I frowned in reply and retorted.

“And you’re weird, Gotou-san.”

Her eyes widened and she laughed.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 6

Translator: chelly ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

Editor/Proofreader: OD Dragon ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

His hands stopped moving again.

Tonight, Yoshida-san was moving his chopsticks less frequently, which I found rather strange.

“Hey.”

“Hmm?”

“The *shougayaki*^[1], I think it turned out good.”

“Yeah, it’s delicious.”

Yoshida-san nodded his head and placed a bite-sized piece of shougayaki into his mouth. Then, he gobbled up a mouthful of white rice and chewed it.

He’s staring blankly into space.

Undoubtedly, he’s thinking about something else.

It’s none of my business, but since it was unusual for Yoshida-san to be so absent-minded during dinner, I got curious.

“Yoshida-san.”

“Hmm?”

“Did something happen at work today?”

“Huh? Why are you asking me all of a sudden?”

Yoshida-san’s attention finally turned to me.

I tried to hold back a gasp. Just from his reaction, I could tell that something had happened at the company.

“You’ve been in a daze ever since you got home. I wondered if something had happened.”

“Oh... was I zoning out?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

I nodded visibly. Yoshida-san scratched the back of his neck and looked away from me.

“Well, nothing happened.”

“You don’t sound so confident about that.”

“No, well, it’s *nothing special*.”

Something’s not right about him.

The times when he quiets down like this are usually when he’s hesitating to tell me something or when he hasn’t gotten his feelings straight. It could be either case.

Also, he seemed nervous.

“Huh? Tell me what’s wrong.”

Yoshida-san’s childish attitude made me a little impatient. I was eager to hear what he had to say.

After scratching his nose, Yoshida-san spoke up.

“Well... today, an employee from another branch was transferred to ours.”

“Mm.”

“And that person is... well...”

Yoshida-san paused for a moment, then scratched his nose again. He dropped his gaze to the table and continued what he was saying.

“She was the one I dated back in high school.”

“...Huh?”

I accidentally let that expression out.

The one he dated back in high school. His words echoed through my ears, and it felt rather unimaginable.

“Her name’s Kanda-senpai.”

“*Senpai...*”

I guess she’s older than him. As I thought, Yoshida-san had always liked older women. No, that’s not important at this point. There was something else that bothered me.

“Yoshida-san, you’ve dated someone before, huh?”

I said it without thinking. Yoshida-san blinked a few times, and then I giggled.

“What? Is it strange?”

“No, no, it’s not like that! It’s just that, you know... I never heard about it until now.”

That’s right. It didn’t make me uncomfortable knowing that Yoshida-san had a girlfriend. I would have found it strange that a sincere man like him never dated anyone before.

That’s how I see it now but, somehow, I had always assumed that Yoshida-san had no such experience.

So he’s been in a relationship before. Did they kiss? *Did they go beyond that...?*

Bewildered, I shook my head as I imagined the details of Yoshida-san’s relationship with someone I didn’t know.

I remembered that I was eating, so I popped a piece of shougayaki into my mouth, but it didn’t taste very good. I felt strangely uneasy.

“That’s why you were so uptight.”

“Well... that may be the case. How should I put it? While I find it impressive that I ran into a person I knew back in high school, what surprised me most was that... it was my ex-girlfriend.”

Yoshida-san said that sincerely then took a sip of miso soup. Again, his gaze was lost somewhere far away. He must be remembering this Kanda-san.

“Yu— And what did Yuzuha-san say?”

I really wanted to interrupt Yoshida-san's thoughts so I thought I would ask that question.

"Mishima? What's Mishima got to do with it?"

"Just tell me. Did she say anything?"

Yoshida-san tilted his head.

"Nothing particular. I mean, we haven't talked at all today. Oh, but..."

Yoshida-san put the chopsticks down, looking surprised.

"Now that you mention it, she had some sort of argument with Gotou-san during lunch."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I didn't hear the details, but she was incredibly hostile towards Gotou-san."

"...Is that so?"

It's just a hunch, but I think they were initially talking about something related to this Kanda-san. It's obvious that the two of them have different principles but I don't know why Yuzuha-san would be so aggressive with Gotou-san. From what Yoshida-san told me, Yuzuha-san isn't the kind of person who gets heated in work-related interactions. I suspect that the two of them shifted the topic to Yoshida-san.

"But I don't think that it has anything to do with Kanda-senpai. Mishima isn't the type to care about newcomers."

"...Oh, okay."

When I looked disapprovingly at Yoshida-san, he tilted his head in confusion.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

I wanted to tell Yoshida-san that she’s concerned about him, not this Kanda-senpai, but... I didn’t do it for reasons I didn’t know how to explain.

The silence lasted for a few seconds.

I glanced over at Yoshida-san, who was still in a daze, continuing to eat.

Whatever he was thinking, he was free to do as he pleased. It’s just that, it made me very uncomfortable to see him like that while thinking about another woman right in front of me. No, it was more than uncomfortable, it was vexing.

“This Kanda-san...”

When I spoke, Yoshida-san turned his attention to me.

I realized that I hadn’t decided what I was going to ask him, so I paused for a moment. Then, a question suddenly occurred to me.

“Is she cute?”

When I asked, Yoshida-san raised an eyebrow.

“What are you on about?”

“Well, I was just curious.”

I'm indeed curious. However, I realized it was a mistake to ask that question.

Yoshida-san scratched his nose. Just from that movement, I could somehow predict the answer.

"Well, she's more than cute."

When Yoshida-san said that, his eyes started wandering all over the place. He continued to speak, mumbling.

"She's... a beauty."

Upon hearing those words, I felt a little bit of pain in my chest. I'm not sure what I hate so much about it.

"Oh, wow..."

Even though I was the one who asked the question, I couldn't help but give a half-assed response. To keep him from realizing how I felt, I took a sip of miso soup, which tasted a little off.

"Gotou-san and this Kanda-san... Yoshida-san, you really like *older, beautiful women*, huh?"

When I made a smiling face and said it in a teasing way, Yoshida-san blushed a little.

"...Shut up."

My chest hurt again at his reaction.

"W-What are you embarrassed about? I'm just teasing you."

"Why do I have to be teased by a brat?"

“Haha... oops. Sorry.”

I laughed and then I quickly got up.

Yoshida-san looked at me with a rather surprised expression.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m going to use the bathroom.”

“Oh... okay.”

Yoshida-san nodded and dropped his gaze to the table again. I walked a little towards the bathroom, then turned around.

“You know what?”

“Hmm?”

My eyes met with Yoshida-san’s, who raised his head at the sound of my voice.

“Me, too...”

That’s all I said. Then, I took a closer look at Yoshida-san’s expression.

What I meant was that I’m beautiful too. That’s what I was trying to say. I felt like I made a fool of myself after I said that.

The way he looked at me was so normal. It was such a common response that it seemed like someone in his family had said it. It was the kind of look you get when your family calls you and you respond in the usual way.

“Nevermind.”

“...Hmm?”

“I-I’m going to use the bathroom now.”

“Right...”

For some reason, I felt embarrassed. I rushed into the bathroom and left the confused Yoshida-san to his dinner. I didn’t really need to use the bathroom, so I left the lid down and sat down on the toilet seat.

What did I want to do?

I was deeply bothered with my conversation with Yoshida-san a few moments ago. And his comments made me feel miserable.

I let out a sigh.

I don’t know what’s stirring me up so much. I’m confused.

Regardless of the appearance of his ex-girlfriend, I’m sure that Yoshida-san will continue to have feelings for Gotou-san. And I’m sure that soon enough I won’t have anything to do with him.

So why do I care so much about it? Not only am I bothered by it, but I don’t even like it.

“...I don’t know.”

I’ve been thinking about this ever since I moved away from home.

I don’t know what to do with myself.

Again, I let out a sigh.

I felt bad about wasting money, but I couldn’t leave the bathroom without flushing, so I pulled the lever and flushed the toilet.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 7

Translator: CJYH ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

Editor : chelly ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

Proofreader: Scarlet ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

5 minutes until business hour ends.

It looks like I can finish my tasks and go home on time today as well.

Hashimoto is already packing his stuff, seemingly ready to stand up and leave as soon as office hour ends.

“This week is fantastic. We get to go home on time every day.”

Hashimoto said that as if he noticed me looking.

“You’re right, it’s always better to go home on time.”

“Man, I want to let last year’s Yoshida hear you say that.”

“Shut up...”

Until Sayu showed up, I had no reason to go home on time. I took the initiative to help other colleagues with large amounts of work left.

“Got to thank Sayu-chan... That Yoshida, who overworked no matter what I said...”

“Just shut up... You just want to tease me by saying that...”

“Who’s Sayu-chan?”

Both Hashimoto and I jumped at suddenly being asked and looked behind us.

Standing behind us was Kanda-senpai. Looking and comparing our startled expressions, she giggled.

“Aren’t you guys too surprised?”

“Well... we didn’t notice you were coming...”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She giggled once more as we nodded.

“What are you doing over here?”

Kanda-senpai was responsible for another project and was seated further away from us. She wouldn’t be here if she didn’t have any purpose.

Hearing my question, she nodded and pointed a finger at me.

“Yoshida, do you plan to go home on time today?”

“Um... As you can see.”

I nodded and said as I pointed at the PC which was already shut down. She glanced at my desk.

“Your desk is messy.”

“Pfft!”

I lightly kicked Hashimoto, who let out a laugh. I looked again at Kanda-senpai.

“Well, you didn’t come here to talk about my desk, did you?”

“Yeah, sorry, sorry! It just caught my eye.”

Kanda-senpai glanced around my desk and showed a smirk. Is my desk that messy?

“I was just wondering if you’re leaving on time since I am too. Maybe we can grab some dinner?”

“Huh...? Dinner?”

My mind blanked out at the sudden invitation. Then, I looked towards Hashimoto before I thought any further.

“What about you?”

“Huh?”

Hashimoto opened his mouth in surprise and shook his head.

“Well, my wife’s preparing dinner... Wait, did you just invite me?”

Hashimoto said as he laughed half-heartedly and looked towards Kanda-senpai, who showed a vague smile.

“Are you not coming?”

“Haha... I’ll pass.”

Hashimoto moved his arm strangely as he purposefully looked down at his watch.

“Time to leave. I’m going home...”

He announced in a loud voice as he waved to me and left the office.

“Thank you for your work...”

As I watched him leaving, I slouched on my chair and relaxed.

“So, what about you?”

Kanda-senpai asked as she looked at me and tilted her head.

“Um...”

I scratched the back of my neck even though it wasn’t itchy. Getting invited to dinner by an ex-girlfriend. What exactly does this mean? I felt troubled but I immediately thought about Sayu. She must be preparing to make dinner around this time. I’d feel a little bad for her.

“It’s been a while. How about a little chat over dinner?”

Kanda-senpai attempted to persuade me over my thoughts.

“We can go another day if you have other business to attend to...”

“No, it’s not like I have anything I need to do...”

“You don’t want to have dinner with me?”

“No, it’s not like that...”

I finally let out a sigh.

“Alright... I’ll go since I don’t have anything I need to do. I also want to talk too.”

“Yeah? Then let’s go. Let me go get my stuff.”

Kanda-senpai grinned and returned to her desk.

Letting out a sigh, I took out my smartphone. I messaged Sayu that I wouldn’t need dinner since I’ll have dinner outside, and added a few words of apology.

“I’m going home.”

I announced to my colleagues and walked towards the exit. I met Mishima’s gaze on the way out, but she turned away quickly. It’s rare for Mishima to stay after business hours end.

As I waited in the corridor, Kanda-senpai came out within a minute.

“Okay, shall we go then? Are you fine with any place?”

“Yeah... Um... I think we should find a quiet place without any noisy college students.”

“That should be fine as long as it’s not some super cheap izakaya.”

Kanda-senpai chuckled and walked ahead first. The way she doesn’t match the pace of other people hasn’t changed.

As I absentmindedly gazed at her profile, the elevator chimed, signaling its arrival.

*

“Oh yeah, Murouchi, the ace batter of the baseball club, I heard that he’s a father of 3 already. 3, you know, 3! It’s amazing how he’s the same age as me. Heard he married at 23.”

“Hmm... Marriage at 23 and a father of 3 at 27...”

“His wife sure is healthy, huh? I can’t even imagine giving birth once... Not much time between births too...”

Kanda-senpai, aided by alcohol, talked non-stop about what her high school classmates are up to. I’m struggling to give responses, as it seemed like there’s a lot of talk about marriage and giving birth. The beer decreased fast as I took a drink whenever I tried to evade response.

“Excuse me, give me another glass of beer.”

“Me too, Yamazaki^[1] on the rocks.”

We added on after passing our glasses to the waiter who passed by. I glanced sideways at the waiter walking away and opened my mouth.

“Your choice of alcohol... How should I say it... is cultured...”

“What? Really? I just like whiskey.”

Kanda-senpai let out a carefree laugh before picking up a grilled miso chicken heart with her chopsticks and eating it. Her eyes wandered as she chewed. This habit of hers hadn’t changed either since last time.

The Kanda-senpai in front of me resembles my memory of Kanda-senpai from high school too much. It felt so surreal.

As I look at her while having these thoughts, our gazes match up.

“Yes?”

Kanda-senpai tilted her head. The sight of her captivated my eyes. I promptly looked away.

“Nothing... Why... did you invite me today?”

At my question, Kanda-senpai exhaled through her nose, and lightly shook her head.

“There’s no particular reason. It’s just that it’s funny to meet an ex again at work, and I thought why not meet up to chat... Aren’t you the same, Yoshida?”

“...Well, I guess so.”

As I nodded, Kanda-senpai giggled as she playfully tilted her head again.

“So... *after that*, did you fall in love with anyone else?”

“Huh?”

At the sudden question, my mouth was left open. Kanda-senpai smiled and repeated the question.

“After we stopped seeing each other, did you fall in love with anyone?”

“Why are you asking me that question?”

“Why not? I’m just curious.”

Kanda-senpai looked excited as she waited for my answer. I didn’t get it. Letting our relationship evaporate in thin air, and getting curious about what happened afterward. I looked at her eyes, hoping to find her intention, but she kept her head tilted and waited for me to answer. I don’t think I’ll get anything.

“Thank you for waiting. Here’s your beer and Yamazaki on the rocks.”

“T-Thank you.”

The waiter left the drinks on the table. I put the glass of whiskey in front of Kanda-senpai, and let out a sigh.

“I did. Or I should say, I am.”

“Hmm... Someone from the company?”

“Well...”

“So it is someone from the company! Hmm... I wonder who...?”

Kanda-senpai continued asking some sharp questions. I know it's useless to continue hiding against someone asking like this, as the truth will eventually come out. I let out a sigh and drank my beer. Then, I said it clearly.

“It's Gotou-san.”

“...Oh, Gotou-san.”

Hearing my answer, Kanda-senpai showed a smile that had some hidden meaning and drank her whiskey.

“...What's up with that reaction?”

“Hmm? Nothing. She's a pretty woman, Gotou-san.”

Kanda-senpai smirked and grabbed a heart with her chopsticks.

“I see. That's your type huh, Yoshida.”

“My type?”

Kanda-senpai ate the heart and chewed it, letting out an “Mmm...” Swallowing down her food, she shrugged.

“It’s like... Someone who exacerbates her cowardice... She’s pretty but highly defensive...”

“Cowardice... is it...”

“Well, I think maybe guys won’t get it.”

Kanda-senpai giggled as she said so.

“I see, I see. So it’s Gotou-san, huh?”

She said again, then looked up and stared at me.

“Are you already dating?”

“N-No... We’re not dating.”

“Not dating... huh?”

Kanda-senpai had a mysterious look on her face as she repeated my words. She then picked up the glass of whiskey with about 1 centimeter left and gulped it down in one go as she tilted her head backward.

“...Glug.”

“That’s a surprising way to drink...”

“I really like this feeling of pain in my throat... ugh.”

“Aren’t you choking though?”

Kanda-senpai had her hand on her throat, showing a smile while looking like she was in pain. She picked up the glass of water provided and drank, then let out a deep breath.

“Ha... So, Yoshida.”

“Yes?”

Kanda-senpai looked up and stared at me. I felt like getting sucked into those deep eyes of hers.

“Let’s go to a hotel together.”

For a moment, I sat there stunned, not perceiving her words. Immediately after, along with a sigh I said.

“What?”

“‘What?’ I said, let’s go to a hotel.”

“Huh? I mean, why?”

“What do you mean why?”

Kanda-senpai looked surprised at my question as if she was saying “Why are you asking such an obvious question?”

“Because it’s been a while and I feel like *doing it with you*?”

“No, no, no.”

I adamantly waved my hand. Kanda-senpai looked at me with a vacant expression. She was obviously drunk.

“You’re drunk. You surprised me when you said that all of a sudden.”

“Well... I’m definitely drunk, but...”

Kanda-senpai smiled loosely as put her elbow on the table and rested her head on her hands.

“Even if I wasn’t drunk, I think I still would’ve invited you.”

“No, no, no...”

“You aren’t dating anyone right now, right? So isn’t it okay?”

“No, I can’t do that with someone who isn’t my girlfriend.”

“Then should we date?”

At those words that came out of Kanda-senpai, I felt my blood boil.

“That’s enough.”

Hearing that, Kanda-senpai tilted her head while still resting on her hands.

“Don’t talk about dating like it’s some light thing. Besides, you don’t even like me that much.”

“It’s alright... We’ll fall in love with each other after we started dating.”

“N-No... What if we don’t fall in love? If you offer your body to me so easily, and then we break up, you’ll be filled with regret. You should value yourself more.”

“Ahaha... There it is, Yoshida’s specialty.”

Kanda-senpai chuckled at my words. Then, with a cold look in her eyes, she looked towards me.

“That thing of yours... it hasn’t changed as well.”

“...W-What do you mean?”

“All I’m saying is, I want to have sex with you, that’s all.”

Kanda-senpai asserted as she slid her index finger across the glass in front of her.

“If you were really thinking about me as your number one, you just have to follow your instinct and take me, without restraint.”

“No, that’s...”

“I didn’t say a thing about taking care of me in the future.”

Kanda-senpai said that and smiled.

“You don’t have to worry about responsibilities. So let’s have sex.”

“...No.”

Kanda-senpai’s voice bewitchingly reverberates in my mind.

“Even if you don’t love me, I think my body isn’t bad. Remember?”

I remember. Her seductive voice, and her unbelievably soft skin.

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“...Coward.”

I felt something snap in my head at her provocation.

“So I really won’t take any responsibility?”

“I don’t mind.”

Kanda-senpai continued her provocative stare.

In my mind, past images of her naked body floated around. It might just be the alcohol. But, I was excited.

She's saying it's alright, so I thought, it's fine for things like this to happen.

"Then..."

Let's go.

As I was about to say that, what appeared in my mind, was Sayu's face.

I left Sayu, who was probably preparing dinner, at home and came here. Usually, if I couldn't eat the dinner she made, I tried to eat it the next morning, but if I stayed overnight, I wouldn't be able to do that either.

Of course, preparing meals is one of the conditions for Sayu to stay at my place, and doing so is for her own good. But rather than her doing it out of obligation, I feel that she may be doing it for my sake. I don't think I'm misunderstanding this.

Not appreciating something made for me like that is definitely not a good thing.

My heated-up thoughts slowly cooled down.

"No... Let's not do it."

As I said that, Kanda-senpai's face showed a disappointed expression.

"...In the end, you're a coward."

“No, I don’t plan to stay overnight today. I don’t like to do it quickly in 1 or 2 hours.”

I explained my feelings, hiding my true reason, yet not telling a total lie.

Recently, I feel like I’ve become good at hiding what I don’t want to stay while not telling lies.

I think that’s not a bad thing.

Hearing my explanation, Kanda-senpai lets out a sigh and nods.

“Well, I guess if you don’t plan to stay, it’s too hurried.”

“Yes, plus...”

I slowly breathed in and spoke my thoughts.

“I can’t have sex with someone I’m not dating either. Plus, if I were to date, I want it to be with someone who can think all the way to marriage.”

Kanda-senpai listened to my words with a vague expression.

“So, even in the future, I won’t do it with you, Kanda-senpai. If you really want to do it, please find someone else.”

After I finished saying that. Kanda-senpai looked at me with her mouth opened for a few seconds. Then she laughed.

“Ahaha... Really, you haven’t changed.”

Kanda-senpai giggled, lowered her tone, and continued.

“That’s right, you’re... Right...”

Kanda-senpai looked away, with an expression as if she was looking at someplace far away. Her profile looked familiar, yet, I couldn't recall when it was that I had seen it before.

"I got a little carried away."

"What?"

"Nothing. Alright, let's go home."

Kanda-senpai swiftly changed her expression and smiled. She took the bill.

"Let me pay the bill today. I took your time anyway."

"N-No, that's not right."

"It's fine. I'm saying that I want to pay the bill."

"But..."

I still feel bad, letting a senior I haven't met in a while pay the bill. While I argued, she let out a chuckle.

"Yoshida, you've changed in many places. But at the core, you really haven't changed."

"W-What do you mean?"

"Um..."

Kanda-senpai looked up towards the ceiling, scratching her nose.

"How you seem to pretend to care for someone, but in reality, your motive for action is prioritized above all else."

Contrary to how she hesitated at first, she continued clearly.

“Well, but I’m not exactly saying that’s a bad thing.”

She waved her hands in a hurry.

“Having a motive for action, and sticking with it, is very important. But...”

She took a breath and looked away from me.

“In the end, you’re just taking action based on your thoughts, but you’re believing that it’s ‘for the other party’s good’. I think that’s your bad habit.”

I wanted to say something back, but the words wouldn’t come out.

I’m not taking action ‘for the other party’s good’. That’s what I wanted to say, but thinking back about my response, the words stuck. In the end, I didn’t want to have that kind of relationship with Kanda-senpai right now. But what was it that I said earlier?

You should value yourself more.

That’s what I said.

I was, subconsciously, believing that my choices were made ‘out of consideration for the other party.’ Was I choosing words that satisfy both myself and the other party?

Thinking up to that, I suddenly felt strongly that I was a person filled with hypocrisy.

“Yoshida.”

Hearing my name, I was startled.

Kanda-senpai, who was sitting in front of me, was calling me.

She smiled and tilted her head.

“I’m not criticizing you for anything.”

Holding the bill, she stood up.

“So, let me pay the bill today.”

“...I understand. Thanks for the food.”

“Hehe, you’re welcome.”

The sound of her heels rung as I watched her back. I let a sigh and got up to follow her.

*

“Oh, right.”

Leaving the izakaya, we made small talk as we walked to the nearest train station. Passing the entrance, Kanda-senpai exclaimed as if she remembered something.

“What is it?”

“Well, I don’t know anyone from this branch yet, so if I have any problems, I’ve no one to rely on. So if it’s alright, can you give me your contact info?”

“Ah, I see. Sure.”

“Really? Thanks!”

Kanda-senpai let out an innocent smile as I nodded, and took out her smartphone. She opened the messaging app that I use as well.

“Yoshida, do you use this?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Oh, you do? That’s kind of unexpected...”

I felt like I got a rude response even though she was the one who asked. Paying it no heed, I opened my messenger app. Having experienced the process of exchanging contact via QR code with Asami before, I smoothly opened the QR scan page, to which Kanda-senpai widened her eyes.

“I imagined you’d be unfamiliar with stuff like this, I guess people do change.”

“Well, I started using things like this just recently too.”

“I see... Was there some kind of reason?”

“No, not really. Just naturally, I guess.”

“Naturally, huh? Pfft, what’s this? ‘*yoshida-man*’?”

“I just picked it at random... Yours is normal...”

We exchanged contact quickly, and the name “Ao” was added to my Friends list.

However, her icon didn’t show a picture of her, but a man wearing a white shirt taken from behind. I felt like I’d seen it before, and tapped on the icon to enlarge the picture. Then, I was stunned.

“What...”

I unconsciously let out a word. Kanda-senpai tilted her head beside me.

“What’s the matter?”

“N-No... it’s nothing.”

I hurriedly closed the messaging app and put my smartphone in my pocket.

“Well, as long as I’m not asleep I think I can reply any time. So don’t hesitate if you have any problems.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Kanda-senpai smiled and turned towards the stairs leading to the platform opposite my platform.

“You’re going the opposite way, right?”

“Yep.”

“Well then, that’s it for today. Thanks for accompanying me.”

“You’re welcome. See you at work.”

Bidding farewell, I walk towards the stairs leading to the platform. It’s only been a few hours since I was invited to the dinner, but I was exhausted as if it had been a lot longer than that. I wanted to sleep as soon as I reached home.

Thinking along those lines, I walk up the steps.

“Yoshida!”

“Whoa, what?!”

Kanda-senpai stood right behind me, without a sound from her heels. I almost missed the step.

I looked down at her feet, then at her hands, confirming that she was holding her heels.

“W-What are you doing?”

“Hehe, were you surprised?”

“Of course I’m surprised. Getting sneaked upon without any footsteps...”

“My heels are too loud, getting noticed isn’t fun.”

Kanda-senpai looked satisfied at my reaction, nodding in delight at herself.

“Even so... You don’t have to go as far as to take them off...”

I pointed at the heels in her hand, and she smiled as she shook her head.

“You really don’t get it, Yoshida. I wanted to go that far, just to surprise you.”

“Hmm...”

“You really should listen more to what the other person is saying.”

“I’m listening. I listened, and what I want to say is whether surprising me is something important enough to take off your heels.”



“No.”

Kanda-senpai dropped her heels to the ground and tried to drill her foot in.

“That’s what I call not listening. I wanted to surprise you. For that, I had to get rid of the sound of my heels. That’s why I took them off. From what I said, you should already know the reason I had to ‘go to that extent.’”

Having worn her heels, Kanda-senpai stuck out her tongue.

“Yoshida Filter, always on! Right.”

“Yoshida Filter...”

“Well, in the end, we’re only ourselves. It’s impossible to listen to people without the filter all the time.”

Kanda-senpai slapped my shoulders. Even though it was forceful, it wasn’t painful at all.

“Yoshida Filter is thick with a strange shape!”

“What does that eve—”

“Exactly what it means. You should make it thinner, that’s what I think. Alright, see you!”

Saying what she wanted to say, she walked away with one hand up. This time, I watched her as she started climbing the stairs to the platform. It didn’t look like she would come to surprise me again.

A let out a big sigh.

Yoshida Filter, huh?

I recalled the words Kanda-senpai said.

Humans, more or less, have values that are shaped and built by all the experiences and thoughts they have had since they were born. And these values cause them to be unable to listen to other people flatly. Is that what she was trying to say?

As she said, I think there's a problem with the way I listen. But still, Kanda-senpai's words sound like jokes in the first place.

Taking off her heels outdoors and sneaking up on me, just to scare me. I can't imagine someone serious doing that.

"Yoshida!"

"Whoa, what?!"

"Surprised?"

"That's enough!"

I never imagined. That she would do it twice.

Looking back even as I almost stumbled, Kanda-senpai had her heels in her hands again, laughing hysterically.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 8

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“Sigh...”

“You’re sighing a lot today, aren’t ya? Did somethin’ happen?”

I was startled as Asami, who was standing idly beside me, suddenly spoke.

“Huh?”

“Whadya mean ‘Huh?’ You were just sighing dramatically again.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Yeah, you were. You doin’ it unconsciously?”

Asami brushed the hair on her shoulders back with an annoyed expression, tilted her head, and asked again.

“Did somethin’ happen?”

“No... Well, it’s not like something happened...”

I said as I recalled yesterday’s events.

Yesterday, Yoshida-san came back home after having dinner out. On top of that, he came home quite late.

He didn't mention who he had dinner with, so I casually asked him when he got back. I found out it was Yoshida-san's ex-girlfriend from high school.

When he got home, Yoshida-san apologized repeatedly for missing dinner and immediately went to take a shower, something he rarely does. After showering, he laid on the bed deep in thought for a while before going to sleep.

A sudden dinner out. Coming home late. Behaving unusually.

Individually, each wouldn't be that out of the ordinary. But collectively it raises some suspicion.

Did he really just eat dinner? Or, if not, what else did he do?

It was agonizing to consider the possibilities.

"Well, whatever Yoshida-san does elsewhere, it's not something I should ask about."

I told Asami about yesterday's events, including how I felt uneasy for some reason. Even as I spoke, no one came into the store. It's not like this is a store that would be busy in the first place, but it seemed slower than usual today.

Suddenly realizing that the usually talkative Asami wasn't responding, I looked towards her and found her looking at me with her mouth open.

"W-What's wrong?"

"Sayu-chaso... Isn't that..."

Asami furrowed her brows, seemingly trying to say something difficult.

As I tilted my head, the door to the office opened and Yaguchi-san came out.

“I’m off break now.”

Yaguchi-san looked like he just woke up, talking in a voice that had no energy behind it.

“Hmm... Looks like it’s not busy. Asami-chan, you should take this chance and go on your break.”

“Alright, I’ll take my break.”

Asami nodded and waved before entering the office.

I was wondering what she was about to say but decided I could ask her again later.

“I’m surprised. My nap was so good.”

Yaguchi-san said as he stretched.

“Well, you looked really sleepy before the break.”

“When it gets humid I get sleepy...”

“Huh? How does that work?”

“I don’t know but it’s been like this since a long time ago. But I’m wide awake now so I should be able to last until the end of my shift.”

Yaguchi-san nodded with his arms on his hips and looked towards me.

“Are there any tasks left to do?”

“No... We finished most of it already.”

“As expected... You two are hard-working so you wouldn’t be talking behind the counter if you had tasks left to do huh.”

Yaguchi-san chuckled and looked outside, before tapping on my shoulder.

“It’s here again.”

“Huh?”

“Look, the luxury car.”

I looked outside and saw the usual luxury car coming in to park.

“Oh, you’re right. I think it’s the first time seeing the moment the car arrives.”

“Yeah, that’s right... Oh?”

Yaguchi-san raised his voice. The reason was clear.

The rear door of the luxury car, which always just parked there, opened.

“Will they come in to buy something today?”

Yaguchi-san said jokingly, while I also stared at the rear door. I wondered what kind of person would come out.

A man in a suit slowly got out of the car. A white shirt with a blue tie. A black hair with a tinge of brown...

The instant I set my eyes on his face, I felt the blood drain from my body.

When the man closed the rear door and took a step towards the store, I instinctively squatted down to hide behind the counter.

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

Yaguchi-san looked down towards me, confused. I couldn’t say anything, so I just sat there cowering and trembling.

Looking back and forth between me and the man outside, Yaguchi-san tilted his head.

“You know him?”

I answered with a small nod.

“You don’t want to see him?”

Another nod.

Yaguchi-san quickly walked to the office door, opened it casually, and spoke in a hushed voice.

“Stay down and get into the office.”

I looked at Yaguchi-san’s face, surprised. He didn’t look down and just said “Hurry up.” I realized that he was trying not to alert the man to my presence, and hurriedly crawled into the office.

Asami, who was sitting inside, looked at me, stunned.

“H-Huh? What’s up?”

“W-Well...”

Momentarily in a safe place, I was finally able to speak. I was surprised at how fast my heart was beating, and my breath was shallow too.

Why?

I thought about the man who got out of the car and broke out in a cold sweat.

What's my older brother doing here?

*

"Welcome!"

With a dull voice, I greeted the man in the suit who walked into the shop.

It's good if he just came to buy something, I thought. Observing the man from the corner of my eye, he walked towards the counter without hesitation.

"Welcome."

I smiled towards the man in front of the counter. There was a similar fake smile plastered on his face.

"Apologies for bothering you during work. I'll hand you my business card."

He reached into his inner suit pocket and brought out a business card holder before handing me a single card from within. At this point, it was clear that he didn't come to buy anything.

"Hmm..."

Nodding awkwardly, I took the card with one hand¹⁴. I'm simply a convenience store employee. I don't care about business etiquette.

『 Ogiwara Foods Co. Ltd. Chief Executive Officer Issa Ogiwara
』

His card was written plainly in a simple font.

I tried to keep my face expressionless, but internally I was a bit agitated. Ogiwara Foods. It was a frozen food company anyone would know without needing to think hard. A CEO of such a company, showing his business card in such a remote convenience store. What kind of situation was this?

Even though I was confused, I felt like I already knew the answer. The hint was Sayu-chan hiding in the office behind me.

“I'd like to ask you a question.”

CEO Ogiwara said, still maintaining his fake smile.

“I'm looking for a girl named Sayu Ogiwara. Does she work here?”

Just as I assumed. I let out a sigh.

I thought it was weird for a high schooler to be on the run for months without anyone searching. It turns out they were searching for her after all.

Though at this point, this had nothing to do with me. What's more, I don't like the aura of the man in front of me.

“I haven't heard that name before. Maybe it's a different convenience store.”

As I said that, CEO Ogiwara raised an eyebrow.

“We did some investigating and confirmed that she works here...”

“I think you made a mistake with your investigation.”

“Where’s the store manager?”

It was an expected question. Conveniently, the store manager was on leave today. He said that “We did some investigating,” but the fact that he didn’t come on a day where the store manager was present showed carelessness. It didn’t seem like they were used to this sort of thing.

“He’s on leave today. If you want to tell him something I can help you...”

I replied without changing my expression. He stared at me like he wanted to say something, then let out a forced sigh.

“I see. If that’s the case, tell him I’ll come again another day.”

“No matter how many times you come, our store doesn’t have a girl like that.”

“I’ll confirm that with the store manager. I’ll be leaving, then.”

The CEO hid a sense of displeasure beneath his smile as he said farewell.

“...Not even buying anything.”

I muttered, watching his back as he left.

The luxury car departed as soon as he got in. All the times it was parked there so far must have been to confirm that Sayu-chan was

working here. It's hard to imagine the CEO personally coming here all the time. It could have been his secretary coming here to observe while he worked.

I was surprised that Sayu-chan is related to the CEO of Ogiwara Foods. He looked quite young. Could he be her father? If he was the father, it might be a complicated family. Thinking along those lines, I remembered the expression on his face.

Behaving unassumingly, yet carrying on with an air of confidence that he would win. That's what I hated the most.

The more the person succeeds in all other areas, the more I want to make them fail somewhere. I'm rotten to the core, so I get annoyed when I see people in the upper class like him.

"Oh, yeah..."

I suddenly remembered that Sayu-chan was still hiding in the office. I walked to the store entrance and went outside. Looking around, I confirmed that the luxury car was completely gone before going back into the store.

Opening the office door and taking a peek, my eyes met with those of Sayu-chan, who was sitting against the wall and hugging her legs. She looked completely terrified.

"You can come out now."

"I-Is he gone?"

"Yeah."

"I-I see..."

I looked sideways and saw Sayu-chan breathe a sigh of relief. I went back to the counter.

This has become a big deal now, I thought.

Being searched for and having her location pretty much known, she doesn't have much time left.

Plus, that guy who's letting her stay... I forgot his name, the serious guy. Depending on what happens, he might not make it out without some trouble.

I wondered about what might happen...

Then I thought, this has nothing to do with me.

*

"Big bro?"

"Yeah, my older brother."

I spoke with Asami quietly in the office.

"So, your big bro's out there?"

"Yeah..."

"T-To look for you?"

"I-I think so."

Seeing me nod, Asami groaned while wrapping her hair around her finger.

"If your family's lookin' for ya... you better go back home."

Asami glanced over after she said that.

“...You still don’t wanna go back, right?”

“That’s right... How should I say it? I’m not ready yet.”

“I see.”

Asami nodded and remained silent. Then, she reached out to hold my hand. Her hands were warm.

Amidst the silence, I could hear the voices of both Yaguchi-san and my older brother through the other side of the wall. Though no words could be made out.

It seems that my older brother came here looking for me. He’s here.

Throwing my phone away wasn’t a good idea after all. He was already worried about me, and more so after not being able to contact me anymore.

At the time, I couldn’t withstand the repeated “Come home” messages from my older brother. I didn’t have any resentment towards him, but I just didn’t want to go back to that house under any circumstance.

The office door opened and Yaguchi-san’s face appeared.

“You can come out now.”

I felt a weird sense of security, seeing Yaguchi-san’s smiling face as he said that.

“I-Is he gone?”

“Yeah.”

“I-I see...”

I confirmed, just in case, then felt relieved but powerless. I let out a sigh immediately. Yaguchi-san looked at me with a neutral expression then left without saying a word.

“Ah, I need to go back too. I-It’s like I skipped work, sorry...”

“Why are you sayin’ sorry? Plus, even if ya go we’ll just end up chatting since it’s not busy today.”

“Y-Yeah, you might be right...”

“It’s fine, just go. Go. I’m gonna study right until break time’s over so don’t bother me.”

Asami said as she pointed at her textbooks spread out on the table. I felt guilty for disturbing her.

“I’m sorry I disturbed you.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine!”

“Thanks... for keeping me company.”

Asami grinned at my words.

I left the office and returned to the store. Even though I knew he already left, I can’t help but look around.

“That person... is he family? Is he your father?”

Yaguchi-san asked in a casual tone as he stood in front of the cash register. I didn’t want to hide the details since he did help me, so I answered honestly.

“No... he’s my older brother.”

“I see, you older brother. I thought he looked too young to be your father.”

After nodding a few times, Yaguchi-san showed a playful expression.

“He’s a handsome man, isn’t he? I guess it’s in the blood. Is everyone in your family good-looking?”

I looked away, embarrassed at Yaguchi-san’s teasing tone.

“Please don’t tease me!”

After saying that, I remembered something more important that I should be saying instead.

“T-Thanks for helping me just now.”

Yaguchi-san raised his eyebrows at my words, showing a fake look of surprise.

“Nah, it’s not like I helped you.”

“But you hid me from my brother.”

“Well, as a result, yeah.”

Yaguchi-san chuckled.

“I hate guys *like that*, you know?”

“What do you mean... ‘Like that’?”

Yaguchi-san thought over what he was going to say.

“People with power, who think they can get other people to do whatever they want. I think.”

Yaguchi-san showed a helpless smile.

“I’m too much of a pleasure-seeker. I think everyone should just live according to what they find pleasure in. That’s why, if he wants to forcefully take away Sayu-chan, who doesn’t want to go back yet, I won’t cooperate.”

Yaguchi-san rarely said something so clearly. Then, his face darkened.

“Still, it’s not like I can help you with anything. Feigning ignorance is the best I can do.”

Yaguchi-san looked at me sideways. His eyes didn’t seem as calm as usual.

“He’s serious. A serious adult is scary.”

“...You’re right.”

“It’s only a matter of time before you have to run away.”

Yaguchi-san became silent after he said that. Then, he showed a sudden grin.

“Well, it has nothing to do with me though.”

Yaguchi-san said as he tapped my shoulder while passing by. He went to the beverage refrigerator. Watching his back, my thoughts swirled.

It’s only a matter of time before you have to run away.

As Yaguchi-san said, I don't think I have much time left after my older brother appeared here today.

At last, this endless flight has come to an end. Yoshida-san and I thought that I would be the one to decide the moment to go back home. But reality wasn't as simple as that.

It seemed like I was underestimating the gravity of the situation.

Even as I reproached myself, it wasn't easy for me to sort out my feelings. The end of my escape from home will be over sooner than I thought, and part of me found it impossible to bear it.

The cold air from the air conditioner blew on me, giving me goosebumps.

For some reason, I felt very cold.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 9

Translator: CJYH ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

Editor : chelly ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

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“Yoshida-senpai, you’ve been fiddling with your smartphone a lot lately.”

Mishima said, poking at her fried salmon lunch with her chopsticks.

I held my breath as I dreaded the topic. The memory of Gotou-san asking me the same thing was still fresh in my mind.

“Gotou-san told me the same thing.”

As I replied with a slight frown, Mishima pouted. She seemed to be in a bad mood.

“That means you fiddle with your smartphone so much that even your boss knows about it.”

“Well, it’s not like it’s banned or something. I’m not even hiding it in the first place.”

“Hmph, is that so?”

Mishima snorted, then took a mouthful of rice and salmon. After chewing for a while and swallowing the food in her mouth, she spoke again. Speaking of which, Mishima hasn’t been talking while chewing as much recently. Is she being conscious about it now?

“Are you texting with Sayu-chan?”

“Well, it’s almost always with Sayu.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I exchanged contact info with a few others, but I hardly talk to them.”

“Oh, really?”

Mishima squinted then stretched her hands out to me with her palms up.

“What?”

“Show me.”

“Huh?”

“Your contact list. I’m curious who you’re chatting with.”

“Huh...? What’s the point of looking at something like that?”

I said that but thought there wasn’t really a reason to hide it either, so I got my smartphone out of my pocket. Rather, it’d be more bothersome for this topic to continue any further.

I opened the messaging app and selected the 'Friends' tab before handing it to Mishima. Mishima took the smartphone and looked stunned.

"So few!"

"That's what I said."

"No, it's so much fewer than I imagined. Don't you have any friends from your school days...?"

"I contact them through email. There's no one that I'd chat with on a messaging app."

"I see... Gotou-san, Sayu-chan, and...?"

Mishima suddenly furrowed her brows.

"Who is this 'Ao'?"

"It's Kanda-senpai."

"...Hmm."

Mishima stared sharply at me and spat out.

"You sure work fast, huh?!"

"What are you talking about?!"

"You didn't even ask for my contact info..."

"Well, I don't need it."

"Oh, does that mean you need Kanda-senpai's contact info?! What do you need it for when you're not even in the same department?!"

“Shut up! It’s not like I asked for it! What’s wrong with you?!”

Since Mishima raised her voice, I raised mine too. If Hashimoto was here, he’d surely be laughing.

Since Hashimoto was invited to lunch by a boss today, only the two of us were eating.

“Since you look pitiful with such few friends, I’ll add my contact info for you.”

“It’s fine. I don’t want it.”

“What’s wrong with you? Saying that you don’t want it or need it! Aren’t you being rude?!”

“It’s ruder to say I look pitiful with such few friends!”

With her cheeks puffed, Mishima tapped away on my smartphone before showing me the screen. On my ‘Friends’ list, there’s a new name ‘Yu’ registered.

“Why ‘Yu’?”

“It’s ‘Yu’ for ‘Yuzuha.’ What’s up with ‘yoshida-man,’ senpai?”

“Every last one of you pointing that out...”

I never thought that the username ‘yoshida-man’ that I barely gave any thought to would get teased by everyone to this extent.

“Here you go.”

Mishima handed my smartphone back and picked up her chopsticks. I placed the smartphone back into my pocket and slurped my

Chinese noodles. The Chinese noodles got soggy quicker than usual. But surprisingly, I didn't mind these slightly soggy noodles.

"Um... senpai."

Mishima called out in a small voice. She had her gaze down at the table, looking much different from before in a downhearted manner.

"...What?"

I was so surprised by the sudden change in Mishima's mood that I stopped eating and looked at her.

"I... I think I've been working with you for quite a while already."

"I guess so."

"We eat out together a lot. We also went to a movie together."

"Yeah, we did."

Mishima glared at me but dropped her gaze again immediately.

"...As it is, I think we're rather close already. You saying that you don't want my contact info... It hurts my feelings."

I quivered as I didn't know how to respond to what Mishima had said.

"Is there anything wrong with seeing me as something more than a junior?"

"Well..."

"Am I such an unimportant existence to you...?"

“Hang on.”

I interrupted Mishima and waved my hands.

“How did it turn out like this? I didn’t say anything like that.”

“If I matter at all, wouldn’t you at least exchange contact info with me? Even if it wasn’t necessary? I think this is more about if you want to or not, rather than if there’s a need to or not.”

“No, it’s not like that...”

It seems like there’s some misunderstanding here. It wasn’t like I was refusing because I don’t feel any charm from Mishima.

“That... It’s...”

I tried to explain my feelings, but I couldn’t find the right words. I was speechless.

“It’s not something you did or anything like that. I think of you like Hashimoto or Endou, much closer than other colleagues, but...”

It’s not like I thought Mishima was unattractive. In fact, it’s the opposite.

“I just thought, what would we even talk about after exchanging contact info?”

“Huh?”

Mishima looked surprised at my words. I continued, thinking that if I stopped now the message I wanted to explain would become ambiguous, and it would be impossible to recreate this situation again.

“What I’m saying is, I’m a boring and uninteresting person. Exchanging contact info with a person like me, you wouldn’t have any fun conversations. Also, I’m a person who avoids talking to many people... I won’t send a message without any purpose, and even if someone sends me one, I wouldn’t be able to reply with anything fun and nifty.”

I desperately tried to convey my feelings. As I voiced my feelings, I was strangely objective. I wondered if I had been thinking such things.

However, Mishima gradually showed a stern look as she listened. When I finished, she opened her mouth impatiently.

“No, no, no... Hah... What do you mean? I don’t get it.”

Mishima spoke with a quiver in her voice. She scratched her head, looking confused.

“So, that’s what you’re saying.”

Mishima looked me straight in the eye.

“You’re trying to say that you aren’t interesting enough to exchange contact info without a good reason, is that it?”

“W-Well... To put it simply, yeah.”

“Hah... Really?”

Mishima sighed dramatically.

“I think you’re stupid.”

“What?”

“No, not ‘think.’ I *believe* you’re stupid. Yoshida-senpai’s stupid.”

“Huh? Why are you so hostile all of a sudden?”

I was surprised and confused at the same time at Mishima’s sudden outburst. She looked even angrier at my response.

“It’s either you’re stupid or arrogant! You decide on everything based on your own personal values. Sometimes I thought that was a good thing, but now it’s the worst thing.”

Mishima spoke faster and faster. But what she was saying pierced my heart. Kanda-senpai just told me the same thing yesterday.

“Yoshida-senpai, you might be satisfied with that, but what about my feelings?”

“What do you mean your feelings?”

“That’s because... tch.”

Mishima widened her eyes. She was obviously infuriated. She inhaled deeply, dropped her shoulders, and then breathed out slowly. She looked like she was about to shout, but stopped.

“...I suppose I wanted to exchange contact info with you, Yoshida-senpai.”

“Well, I guess... You did forcefully exchange it just now.”

“If I didn’t want to trade contact info, do you think I would have taken your phone just now?”

“...I guess not.”

“Of course not.”

Mishima sighed and spoke in a soft voice.

“Even me. It’s not like I exchange contact info with everyone. In fact, you’re the only one I asked within the company.”

She glanced at me but quickly looked away. I thought her cheeks looked redder than usual.

“I asked because I like you, Yoshida-senpai.”

Mishima said that and after a brief pause, she continued.

“...To some extent.”

“To some extent, huh?”

As I repeated her words, Mishima puffed with an unsatisfied expression and sighed.

“Anyway, I wanted your contact info, that’s why I forcefully exchanged it. Are you satisfied with that?”

“Well... if you say so, I’ve no choice but to be satisfied.”

I nodded, which caused Mishima to sign again before picking up her chopsticks as if suddenly remembering them. That reminded me that we were still in the middle of a meal. I looked at the bowl in front of me. The noodles were clearly soggy. I hurriedly took a mouthful of the soft noodles. They were soggy to such an extent that they didn’t even feel like noodles anymore. They tasted bad.

For a few minutes, we ate in silence, until Mishima finished her salmon and talked.

“...If it’s not a bother, I’ll invite you to a movie again.”

Mishima said that and sipped her clam miso soup as if to hide her embarrassment.

“Okay...”

I gave a short reply and finished my noodles.

What I think and what others want.

I can only look using my own views. Still, I was reminded exactly just how much I have been looking at everything using my own views, by Kanda-senpai yesterday and Mishima today.

I always thought that “it’s hard to talk to women because I can’t catch their pace.” Maybe, I was someone hard to communicate with as well.

I feel like this is a very difficult situation.

Even though I know the world doesn’t revolve around me, no matter how much I try, the place I stand is still the center of my world.

The smartphone in my pocket suddenly vibrated, so I quickly took it out. It was a message from ‘Yu.’

『 Your noodles went soggy, right? Looks terrible. 』

When I saw the message, I frowned. *It’s your fault.* I wanted to say it out loud but I held back.

Mishima could’ve just spoken directly, instead of messaging me in the app. This probably means I should reply in the messaging app too.

『 These are the worst Chinese noodles I’ve ever eaten. 』

I replied, to which Mishima giggled. Then she looked at me.

“Yoshida-senpai, you’re honest like a child.”

Mishima giggled again.

“That’s also something I like about you.”

Mishima said amidst her laughter. Seeing that, I smiled along.

I wondered how I should understand her words. I snuck a glance at her expression, but it only seemed like she was saying it casually. In the end, I didn’t find out anything.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 10

Translator: **FireHawk** ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

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Kanda-senpai's transfer... The strange conversation in the canteen with Mishima... This mentally draining week came to an end.

So, I completely surrendered to the power of laziness. On weekdays, Sayu always wakes me up. But on weekends, she doesn't do that.

That's why I went to bed for the second time and then for the third time, accumulating all the energy to finally wake up until I noticed that it was already past 3 PM. Since I went to bed after midnight, it means that I slept for almost the whole 15 hours. After that, my sleepiness disappeared. I shook my still-sluggish head, and my consciousness cleared up.

Looking sideways, I saw Sayu curled up on the carpet like a caterpillar.

“Good morning, Sayu...”

“Good morning.”

She said, looking at me. Her voice felt somewhat empty.

“When did you wake up?”

“Huh?”

“Did you sleep at all?”

“Um...”

I asked a few questions and realized that something was wrong with her. It’s as if she was lost in her own thoughts.

Sighing, I called her louder.

“Sayu!”

“Whoa!”

She flinched and turned to me.

“Good morning...”

“G-Good morning.”

“Did you sleep?”

“N-No, I’m sorry... Did I wake you up? It’s just that... I had my head in the clouds.”

Sayu flashed a strange smile. She looked kind of lost.

“Are you worried about something?”

I asked, getting up from the bed. Sayu also got up. There was an unreadable expression on her face accompanied by a sad smile.

“Nope... nothing.”

“...Okay then.”

There’s definitely something wrong. But she still insisted that everything was all right. So I decided not to pry further.

Instead, I thought of changing the subject. But nothing came to my mind, so I just sat down, in Indian-style, on the bed and leaned against the wall. Sayu stood up and just stared at the floor. I looked at her since she was lying on one side, her hair stuck to her cheek. At first, I decided to remove them with a finger, but my body seemed so heavy that all my strength was gone even before I got out of bed.

Sayu raised her head and our gazes met. We looked at each other for a few seconds. But even though we stared at each other, it still seemed like she was thinking about something of her own.

“About when I’ll decide to return to Hokkaido...”

I was startled. At first, I even wondered if she was talking to me, but there were only the two of us.

“Well, I don’t want to go back yet.”

She grinned. Then, she dropped her gaze again.

“I don’t want to go home, that’s why I don’t want to return to Hokkaido. Or...”

She muttered those words and looked at me again.

“Or maybe because I don’t want to part with you...”

Her voice was weak. As if to confirm this, she looked at the floor again.

“I don’t understand...”

She said and immediately fell silent.

Me too... I couldn’t say anything and just sat with my mouth open.

During the rainy season, Sayu told me that she would think about her future. It meant that she was getting ready to return to where she belongs. It was an important promise... for both of us.

Although she tried her best, I still felt weakness in her voice when she said “I don’t want to go back.”

I wasn’t going to blame her for that. She ran away from home after all, so I understood her reluctance. But the fact that she said it surprised me.

As far as I know, she always puts others first. She even promised me that she would return home, and yet, she said that she didn’t want to. But what for? Did she want me to perceive it as naivety or to frankly show unwillingness?

And the words “I don’t want to part with you” astonished me.

During all this cohabitation, we started to trust each other. But am I really that important?

“That’s...”

Thinking about it, I shook my head. Kanda-senpai’s and Mishima’s words came to mind again.

“That’s something only you would know.”

I knew that that wasn't the answer she expected, but I couldn't say anything else.

Hearing my words, Sayu shot me a puzzled look and chuckled.

"Well, yeah. I'm sorry for bringing up such a strange topic."

She smiled helplessly.

"No, that's not it... You're free to say whatever you want."

As soon as I said it, Sayu smiled with guilt and nodded.

"...Yes. I... thought about it all the time you were sleeping."

"I know it's hard for you..."

"Indeed."

She replied with sorrow but then raised her head and went to the kitchen.

I watched Sayu as she poured water into a cup and returned.

"Here."

"Huh?"

"Water. You just woke up, so take a drink to develop your stomach and gain some strength."

"What? Does it really work like that?"

"I read it on the Internet."

"Sounds like nonsense... But thanks."

I drank the water. The liquid spread in the throat and dissolved in the body. Following the first sip, I drank everything.

“Oh, right. You like to get drunk.”

“Shut up.”

I put the mug in the sink. And then I heard a low sound as if something exploded. I looked at Sayu.

“Did you hear that?”

“Huh?”

She looked confused.

“No, I didn’t hear anything.”

Judging by her puzzled expression, it seems like she really didn’t hear anything.

“I guess I misheard it then.”

When I said that, something exploded outdoors.

“Wow.”

“Well, so I didn’t mishear it.”

This time, Sayu also heard it and nodded at me.

We remained silent for a few seconds and we heard a loud noise outside again.

Sayu tilted her head and asked me.

“Is that fireworks?”

“No, it’s too early for them.”

It was a little over 3 PM. The sun had already begun to drop, but it was still too bright to watch the fireworks.

“Oh...”

Realizing, I sat on the bed and turned on the laptop.

“What’s the matter?”

Sayu looked at the screen with interest.

I opened the Internet, entered the name of the nearest station, and added the word “festival” in the search bar. That confirmed my assumptions.

There was a Shinto shrine within a ten-minute walk, where the shopping district was hosting a summer festival.

“The weather’s good and this is the signal for the start of the festival.”

“I see.”

Sayu nodded and then looked into the distance.

“A summer festival, huh?”

Her voice was full of nostalgia and something unrelated to me.

“Do you want to go?”

“Huh?”

She looked at me in surprise and didn't answer my question.

"Do you want to go to the summer festival?"

I asked again. She blinked and then looked away from me.

"Um... summer festival... yeah."

Her eyes were darting back and forth across the floor, she spoke in embarrassment.

"T-That was unexpected..."

"What?"

"I've never been to a summer festival in high school"

"I see."

I also didn't expect that. High schoolers often go to such events with friends or a lover.

"Yeah, that's true. I had no friends with whom I could go, so I didn't think about it."

"...So that's how it is."

Sayu answered calmly, but I was overwhelmed with strange feelings.

Caring, kind, and pretty... A girl that cares about others... I just can't imagine why she didn't have any friends. I thought about the reason, but nothing came to mind.

So I shook these thoughts out of my head. Sayu looked at me.

“That’s why... Yeah... I’d like to go to the summer festival with you, Yoshida-san.”

She smiled softly.

I’d already slept enough, so it would be possible to go out and take a walk in the evening.

Thinking that I need to change into casual clothes, something suddenly came into my head.

“It’s a summer festival, right? So you have to wear a yukata.”

“Yukata?”

Sayu’s eyes shone. I guess she really wanted it.

“Wait, do you have one?”

“No, I don’t. Why do you think a lonely man would keep a yukata?”

“Oh... Fair enough... But why did you suggest it then?”

“We can rent one. There seems to be a shop near the station.”

I checked on the Internet, and there really was a shop near the station where we could rent a yukata.

“It looks like you can rent one for about 3,000 yen. Since you’ve got a part-time job, you can rent it with your salary.”

If we go now, considering the time she’ll take getting dressed, we’ll get to the temple just in time.

After my proposal, Sayu hesitated a little. But then she embarrassedly agreed.

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“Who would’ve thought that there would be such a queue.”

“Well, the festival’s taking place near the station, so it’s not surprising that the store here’s so busy.”

After the station, we went straight to the temple.

The store was surprisingly lively, we left the house and reached it at almost 4 PM. Sayu finished changing at 6 PM.

Even though the days are longer during summer, it’s still really dark after 6 PM.

I heard the patter of Sayu’s shoes. She was wearing a yukata and geta.

I couldn’t look at her.

“Oh, looks like it’s starting.”

Ahead of us, there was a place illuminated by lanterns. The shopping district to be precise. I heard the festival music.

“So it’s really a festival...”

Sayu looked excited. I chuckled.

“Well, of course, it is. This is why you came here in yukata after all.”

“It all seemed unreal...”

Sayu laughed.

“We decided to go to the festival, I put on a yukata... But I just couldn’t believe that we’re going to the festival.”

“Really? But aren’t we already here.”

“Yeah. Indeed...”

Sayu agreed and her shoulders started to tremble. I didn’t look at her, so it was impossible to be sure, but she was probably laughing.

The music grew louder, we went around the corner, right into the shopping district.

And then it suddenly became very bright and noisy.

“Wow...”

Sayu’s voice was full of excitement.

“Haha...”

With her mouth open, Sayu quickened her pace and walked in front of me. She was looking around with her eyes glittering. She looked like a child taken to an amusement park for the first time. Seeing her like that, I realized that she really hadn’t been to a festival in high school.

Turning around, Sayu suddenly looked at me and smiled widely.

“It’s amazing!”

That’s when I saw Sayu in a yukata right in front of me.

In the lights of the shopping district, it looked bright orange. Usually, loose hair was gathered with a hairpin. There wasn’t much makeup, but under the bright light, Sayu literally shone.

“Y-Yeah... Amazing.”

I replied, looking away from Sayu.

“Hey, Yoshida-san.”

Sayu stopped in front of me and looked into my eyes.

“How do you like the yukata?”

She asked... I avoided this question from the moment she came out of the store.

To be honest, it really suits her.

She looked more like an adult rather than a “high school girl in a yukata,” but at the same time felt childishly young. The bright orange color harmonized with Sayu’s natural beauty. I felt uncomfortable.

“Hey! You’re not even looking at me at all.”

She pouted, so I looked at her. Sayu raised her sleeves and asked me again.

“So what do you think?”

I looked at her. The landscape seemed to focus on Sayu, and it seemed as if all the lights around were deliberately illuminating her.

“You’re beautiful.”

Sayu looked at me with her mouth open. I realized what I just said.

And got embarrassed by my own words.

What did I just say to a high school student? Why didn't I just say that she was cute? It looked like Sayu didn't expect that answer either and got flustered. But she continued to look at me, even though I turned away. Although I didn't see it, I felt her glare on my cheek.

"Um... I mean..."

Her voice was pretty quiet, but I still heard everything clearly.

"Even more beautiful than... Gotou-san?"

"Huh?"

I looked at Sayu in surprise. She was blushing as red as a tomato.

I didn't get why she wanted me to compare her to Gotou-san, but then I heard a child screaming.

"Hey, Mom! They're playing drums there!"

The woman who followed this kid behind said, "Really? Let's hurry then," and quickened the pace.

"...It looks like there are drummers. Shall we go take a look?"

I asked, and Sayu's eyes flickered for a moment. Then she suddenly closed them.

And when she opened them again, she smiled at me.

"Yeah, I'd like to see!"

"Well, let's go then. I think they should be in the center of the square."

“Okay, let’s go.”

I followed Sayu, who was walking in front.

My heart began to beat faster.

I was able to evade her question. The girl in front of me or Gotou-san. I was at a loss who to choose and how to say it. To be precise, it wasn’t that difficult, but I just didn’t want to choose.

Although not long ago, I would’ve immediately answered, “Of course, Gotou-san.” I was confused by my own feelings.

Am I starting to see Sayu as a “woman” and not just a “high school girl”?

Before, I perceived high school students as children. But it seems that this no longer applied to Sayu.

“Yoshida-san, w-wait.”

A voice sounded from behind and I turned around. She was standing far from me. It looks like while I was lost in thoughts, I sped up my pace.

“I’m sorry...”

“So many people...”

She looked around and smiled embarrassedly. There were really a lot of people near the square, and it was difficult to walk around. Also, Sayu’s wearing geta, so I needed to adjust my pace.

When I thought about it, I felt a warmth on my right wrist. Sayu held my hand.

Surprised, I looked at her. She blushed slightly and looked at the ground.

“W-With that... We won’t get lost.”

“Y-Yeah. Of course.”

I was embarrassed and scratched my nose with my left hand.

The sound of drums came from the square. Even though we were still far enough, the sound seemed loud.

“Looks like it has already begun.”

“It has.”

“Let’s go.”

Together with Sayu, who was holding onto me, we walked through the crowd.

It was really crowded, but I didn’t pay attention to it.

My face was burning.



Two men banged on big drums, and two women on small ones.

The sound of unpausing bangs was echoing inside the drums. The audience was joyfully shouting.

Watching the performance, I thought that this happens here every year. And looking back, every time I heard that noise, I thought to myself, "Looks like there's a festival nearby."

I've been living here for 5 years, but I've never been to the festival. What a boring person. I don't show any interest in anything but myself.

But it turned out to be very interesting. The people gathered here were having fun. I haven't felt anything like this since high school.

Out of the corner of my eye, I looked at Sayu. She was fascinated looking at the drummers.

If not for her, I wouldn't have come here.

Her appearance changed my life. I began to eat 3 times a day. On weekends, I often leave the house and communicate more. I used to live with my job, but now I've begun to learn the taste of life.

Perhaps if I hadn't picked her up that day, I'd still be living by walking from home to work. If I started dating Gotou-san, my life would've become more enjoyable, but we haven't started dating yet.

If I hadn't met Sayu.

Thinking about it, I noticed.

The drums began to beat more intensely. The musicians were preparing to end their performance. The audience too became even more excited, and I was overwhelmed by only one feeling.

If I hadn't met Sayu.

As soon as I thought about it, I understood.

I can't even imagine it.

I can't even imagine how I would've lived without her. She has already become a part of my life.

As soon as I thought about the fact that Sayu would be taken out of my life, I was scared.

"...shida-san... Hey!"

"Huh? What?"

Through the sound of drums, I heard Sayu's voice and looked at her. My heart jumped.

She wasn't here.

"Huh?"

I began to turn around. Surrounded by strangers, I couldn't find Sayu among them.

"Sayu?!"

I walked through the crowd and finally got out in the open. I walked through the shopping district and looked around, but Sayu was nowhere to be found. I looked into the distance, but I never saw her yukata.

"Bang bang!" I heard the sound of drums, blended with applause, coming from the square. The show has come to an end. People began to scatter around the district. What terrible timing.

Making my way through the advancing crowd, I looked for Sayu, but couldn't find her.

Where did she go? I saw her during the show, and then, she was gone. In such a short time, she couldn't go far... What if someone took her away?

A chill ran down my spine. I remembered the last time she left home without notice. I was scared that she had been kidnapped, and set out to search, but now everything was much more complicated.

I walked quickly. My gaze wandered, I was looking for Sayu. And then, I noticed an orange yukata and blackish-brown collected hair.

"Sayu!!"

I immediately called and grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Huh?"

However, the woman who turned around wasn't Sayu. She stared at me with wide eyes. Looking closely, the yukata she was wearing was different.

"Ah... Sorry... I mistook you for someone."

I quickly let her go. The woman smiled and disappeared into the crowd.

Sighing, I continued the search. For starters, I needed to get out of the crowd.

I went where there were fewer people, but I couldn't find Sayu. I haven't moved that much for a long time, so I was out of breath.

"Ah, Yoshida-san! Found you!"

A voice sounded from behind. I turned around and saw Sayu. I blinked at first and didn't notice how I began to shout.

"Where were you?!"

"Huh? I told you that I need to go to the bathroom."

"...Bathroom?"

She looked at me in puzzlement.

"Why are you out of breath?"

"I see... bathroom..."

So that's probably what she told me that time when she called me, I just didn't hear it. Most likely, she said something like "I'll go to the toilet," and when I turned around, she was already gone.

I sighed.

"W-Were you looking for me?"

"...Yeah."

"I-I'm sorry. And here I thought that it was you who had gone somewhere. It turns out that we were both looking for each other."

Sayu came closer and looked into my face.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah."

"But you can hardly breathe."

“Everything’s alright. After all, I’m not some old fart.”

I turned away, desperately avoiding her gaze. Sayu started to giggle.

“The moment I disappeared, you rushed looking for me.”

She said that while standing next to me. She began to poke me with her elbow and said “I still remember how you were out of breath that time when you found me with Yuzuha-san at the park.”

“...Shut up.”

I recalled it as if it were yesterday.

Sayu looked at me again. Then she mockingly smiled at me.

“Are you that worried about me being lost?”

After those words, my heart began to pound faster.

Yes, there’s no better wording.

When Sayu disappeared, I thought she had been kidnapped. But I wasn’t scared because “Sayu’s in trouble or she was kidnapped,” rather because of the fear that “I won’t see her again.”

“Yeah, if you disappear... I-I’ll worry.”

I said looking at her. Her eyes flickered. She immediately lowered her head.

“Is that so? I’m sorry.”

She said quietly and grabbed my hand.

“I won’t go anywhere... anymore.”

I felt how she squeezed my hand. Not understanding what she was thinking about, my lips moved of their own accord.

“Hey... Are you really going to return?”

“...Huh?”

Sayu opened her eyes wide and made a puzzled look.

I was even more confused.

“Ah... no—”

Why did I ask her that? I don’t understand myself.

Sayu will return home. I gave her time to make up her mind. She finally made a decision and told me about it, and yet I asked her that.

“No, nothing... Forget it.”

“O-Okay...”

She nodded and fell silent. I didn’t say anything else either.

“Um...”

Unable to withstand the silence, I looked towards the shopping district.

“They sell a lot of tasty things there. Wanna go take a look?”

I suggested. She also looked there and nodded.

“I’ll buy whatever you want.”

“T-Thanks.”

Together, we went to the stalls. There were fried soba, sausages, takoyaki, chocolate-covered bananas, and more. Everything typical for a summer festival.

“Wow.”

Sayu stopped in front of a cotton candy stall.

The stall owner poured granulated sugar into a candy maker that looked like a donut. To the smiles of the children, he rolled candy on sticks.

“Cotton candy...”

Sayu muttered.

“Do you want it?”

“Yes, I always wanted to. I once was at a festival when I was a little kid, but that time, I didn’t get to try it. Since then, I’ve always wished for it.”

As if remembering the past, Sayu narrowed her eyes.

“Then let’s buy it.”

The moment I said it, she was already opening her wallet. But I stopped her.

“I already told you that it’s my treat.”

“B-But I can buy it myself.”

That wasn’t the point, I just wanted to treat her.

While I was thinking... Ah... I get it now.

Kanda-senpai and Mishima talked about it. I felt irritated.

“It’s okay.”

I said, looking at the happy children who received their cotton candies from the stall owner.

“I want to treat you.”

After saying this, I went to the stall owner.

“One cotton candy, please.”

“Sure. One hundred yen.”

I took a hundred yen out of my wallet and handed it to him.

Then I called Sayu, who was watching from a distance.

“Come on. Don’t you want to take a closer look at how it’s made?”

“Uh... yes.”

She came closer.

The owner was rotating a stick, and cotton candy gathered around it. It looked very funny.

“Hey.”

Sayu called me and I looked at her. She didn’t take her eyes off the sugar wool and continued.

“The thing you asked me.”

Remembering my last question, my stomach tightened.

I fell silent, and Sayu looked at me and continued.

“You don’t want me to go back?”

The question was asked, but I couldn’t answer. Sayu didn’t reproach me for anything. She just wanted me to honestly tell her about my feelings, which was incredibly difficult for me. After all, I still can’t express my feelings properly.

I also looked at how cotton candy was made.

The stick was already covered with cotton, and it almost disappeared. Although the cotton candy threads were winding around it with each turn, it seemed to me like the roll was building up by itself. Now, it was a large sugary mass with a strange shape.

“Y-you... have to go back.”

I muttered.

“...Yeah, of course.”

Sayu nodded.

She didn’t complain that I didn’t give her a proper answer.

“And... it’s done.”

The owner handed Sayu a cotton candy the size of a soccer ball.

“Wow, so big... Thank you.”

A joyful Sayu opened her mouth and took the candy.

“A real cotton wool...”

Sayu smiled, indicating the cotton's sweetness. Now she looks like a high schooler. It's very cute.

"Good."

"Yup! Thanks, Yoshida-san!"

She thanked me, but I was embarrassed and silently scratched my nose.

Carefully pinching the cotton wool, Sayu exclaimed, "Wow..."

"So sticky."

"Of course it is. It's granulated sugar after all."

I grinned. She agreed and put a piece in her mouth. Her eyes widened.

"It melted right away!"

"Haha, again. It's granulated sugar."

The reaction was funny. Seeing me laugh, Sayu pouted.

"Don't laugh! This is my first time trying it."

"Sorry, sorry."

Sayu clucked again and pinched another piece of cotton candy again.

"It's so sticky, but the moment you put it in your mouth, it immediately melts."

When the piece melted in her mouth, she spoke.

“If I hadn’t met you, Yoshida-san, I certainly wouldn’t have found out about it...”

And I wouldn’t have gone to the summer festival without you. Before I could say that, Sayu turned to me and tore off another piece.

“Yoshida-san, here. Say ‘Aaaa.’”

“What?”

““Aaaa...”

She held out a piece to my mouth. I didn’t want it, but just couldn’t resist, so I opened my mouth. When she put the cotton candy into my mouth, I felt her fingers touching my lips.

Sayu removed her hand and smiled.

“Cotton candy is so tasty.”

It melted on the tip of my tongue.

“Yeah...”

Surprisingly tasty.

“Delicious.”

I said.

Sayu began to giggle and her geta were clapping.

We enjoyed our first summer festival until the very end.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 11

Translator: **FireHawk** ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

Editor: **chelly** ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

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The day after the summer festival, we were completely exhausted.

We were just lying in the living room.

Lying on the futon, Sayu let out a sigh.

“My feet hurt...”

I lost track of how many times I smiled today.

“If they hurt, why don’t you get some ointment or an ice pack?”

“...I don’t want to move.”

We’ve already talked about it for the umpteenth time.

She was walking in geta yesterday, so she got calluses on her feet, and her leg muscles ached.

In any other situation, I would’ve gone and bought it myself, but today, I was also tired and didn’t want to move at all.

I’m not used to large crowds. Being downtown itself is a real challenge for me. Yesterday the summer festival felt as crowded as

downtown. On second thought, there were probably even more people at the summer festival.

The next day, I was mentally and physically drained and overwhelmed with fatigue.

“I wonder, do high school girls who constantly party also suffer that much?”

“Who knows... It’s unlikely that someone, going to a festival only once a year, could get used to wearing geta.”

“But they’re pros. There’s no way I could keep up with them.”

Rolling on the floor, Sayu pouted.

I frowned at Sayu who was definitely tired.

The main question was what to do about dinner? We skipped breakfast, shifting it to lunch. We finished the rice that was left in the rice cooker and ate the side dish that was in the refrigerator. But that was the end of our leftovers. There was nothing left for dinner.

And I don’t want to force already tired Sayu to cook something in the kitchen. I was already starting to think about what to order for dinner when my phone vibrated.

“Huh?”

I said in an annoyed voice. I have no one who would message me on my phone on my day off. Maybe unnecessary spam from the store or someone made a mistake. I didn’t want to read any of those, so the vibration only irritated me.

However, if there’s something important there, and I don’t check, it’ll be bad. That’s why I grabbed the phone and looked at the screen.

The sender's name surprised me.

“What?”

Tapping on the screen, I opened the message.

「Yoshida, I'm sorry it's so sudden.」

Kanda-senpai sent a long message that began with this sentence. On her profile picture, there was the back of a guy in a white shirt.

After reading it, it turned out that she had forgotten something in the office.

On weekends and holidays, the office is closed. If you need to get inside, you have to go to office security with your employee ID, then they will register you and let you inside. Security in the building is good, there's not a single door you can enter without an ID.

And since Kanda-senpai had just transferred, she hadn't received her new ID yet. She's using a visitor's ID during workdays.

In other words, she had no way of entering the office on a day off. Therefore, she contacted me and asked for help.

Of course, I wouldn't say that I didn't want to help. It's just that my body still felt heavy. I honestly didn't want to leave the house unless it's an emergency.

「I get it. But tomorrow's a working day. Can't you wait?」

I answered and threw the smartphone on the bed. But after a few seconds, it vibrated again.

“That was fast.”

I muttered and picked up my smartphone again.

「 I forgot my wallet. 」

She wrote, surprising me.

「 And you noticed it only now? You could've told me about it yesterday. 」

I replied, and a few seconds later, a new message arrived.

「 I slept all day yesterday, so I didn't need my wallet. 」

How old are you?

I was amazed by this, but I remembered yesterday. If I hadn't gone to the festival, I wouldn't have left the house either.

「 So what? 」

「 I don't have anything to eat. 」

She replied. And before I could respond, she added 「 You just don't want to leave the house, do you? 」

That's not the way a person asking for help should speak. However, I didn't want to turn my back on her either. And Kanda-senpai didn't know that I was tired.

I let out a sigh and got out of bed.

I didn't want to, but she said that she had nothing to eat, so I had to go.

「 I'll be at the office in an hour. 」

I sent and threw the smartphone on the bed again.

“Sorry. I have to go out.”

I said, and Sayu gave me a puzzled look.

“Huh? Why? You didn't even want to move a moment ago.”

“Got some stuff to do. I'll go to the office.”

“Isn't it called a 'day off' because there's basically no work?”

“Not for work, just to help. A colleague forgot something.”

I replied, and Sayu frowned.

“Do you really have to go?”

“I'm not sure about it myself.”

I thought so too. I shouldn't have given her my contact info.

“But there's no one else to help besides me.”

I said and scratched my chin. Even before doing that, I knew I'd hear the rustle from my stubble. I sighed.

Thinking about having to shave on a weekend, I headed to the bathroom. I grabbed the electric razor and froze. Wait, I wasn't called for work. So, if I show up with a beard, no one will get angry.

Putting the electric razor back in its container, I looked at it for a few seconds.

I'd better shave.

I turned on the switch and started to shave. The sound of buzzing and the blade cutting the hair vibrated in the walls of the bathroom. When I first used it, I thought about how noisy it was, but I got used to it already.

After Sayu said that it doesn't suit me to head out unshaved, I started to shave every day before I go to work. I'm used to it now, and it even bothers me when I don't do it.

Although there was no need to shave, since I wasn't going to work, I somehow felt uneasy about the fact that I'd meet with Kanda-senpai unshaven. It seemed like a waste of time and you might think I needed a shave, but that wasn't the case.

When I finished, I took my clothes out of the closet. It's the weekend, so there's no need to go in a suit. But I also couldn't go there in a sleeveless T-shirt and shorts, so I put on jeans and a striped polo shirt, which is sort of a casual work outfit.

After changing my clothes, I took out my wallet and office ID from my bag. Sayu looked at me.

"How long will it take?"

"Not long. I'll only help to pick up something."

"I see. Be careful."

Sayu said and dropped her gaze on the floor. Seeing her like that, I chuckled. This is the first time I've seen her so tired.

"I'm off."

"Have a safe trip!"

She said, flashing a bitter smile.

I opened the door and left the house.

My body felt so heavy. I didn't want to leave the house at all.

I'd sort things out quickly and return right away. That's what I thought to myself.

*

"Kanda-senpai..."

There's no one left at home, and I, lying on the floor, was muttering everything that was in my head.

"Even though he's not going for work, he still shaved. He acted as if he didn't want to do anything, and yet..."

As I let out my frustration, I felt a bit better.

"He said that it won't take long, but that definitely won't be the case. They'll surely go have dinner together!"

Lying on my back, I spoke quite loudly and then sighed.

"What... am I doing?"

I was amazed by this childish behavior.

Something's wrong with me since yesterday. Saying things that I wouldn't normally say and asking him things that I wouldn't normally ask.

"“You're beautiful.”"

I remembered how Yoshida-san said that and shook my head.

He has always loved Gotou-san. He still does. Gotou-san loves Yoshida-san too. No one should come between them.

Because of my strange thoughts, I forgot about the pain in my feet and finally got up.

And when I stood up, it felt like common sense returned to me.

“Well, whether Yoshida-san’s going to have dinner at home or not, I still have to cook something.”

I looked inside the fridge even though I already knew what was in there.

“As expected, nothing.”

There was nothing from which I could cook dinner. Several cans of beer and condiments needed to be kept refrigerated.

“I can’t make dinner out of this...”

I closed the fridge.

If Yoshida-san won’t eat dinner at home, then I probably won’t either. But even so, there’d be nothing for breakfast the next morning. And he has work tomorrow, so it’s necessary to prepare both breakfast and lunch.

I thought about asking him to buy groceries on the way back, but he already had business to attend to. I didn’t want to trouble him with carrying groceries as well.

“What to buy...”

Looking at my sore feet, I pouted.

“I had too much fun...”

I said to myself and took off my loungewear. Staying in my underwear, I grabbed my smartphone and decided to send a message to Yoshida-san.

「 There’s nothing to cook with at home, so I’m off to buy groceries. I think I’ll be back before you, but I’m sending you this message just in case. 」

I quickly typed the message and sent it. He’s probably already on the train since he immediately noticed that a message came from me, and I saw the status “Read.”

After a few seconds, I got a reply.

「 Got it. Thanks. 」

After reading it, I placed my smartphone on the table.

Opening the closet, I took out a pair of skinny jeans and a thin white tunic. To prevent the bra from showing through, I put on a white undershirt and then slid the tunic over my head.

Yoshida-san bought me all these clothes except for the underwear. Every time the season changed before I had time to ask, he was already asking what I needed. Because of this, I felt both guilty and grateful.

I thought about my life with Yoshida-san and how my older brother showed up at the convenience store. It pains me from the inside.

He gave me so much and taught me so much. I have no idea how to repay him.

I wanted to do something for him, but now my older brother is here.

I don't have much time left.

I don't know how long we'll be together, but I want to do something at least.

"For starters..."

I muttered, putting my smartphone back into my pocket.

"I'll prepare a delicious dinner!"

I'll do the housework that Yoshida-san originally asked me to do.

Forgetting about the pain in my feet, I headed into the hallway with unusual enthusiasm.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 12

Translator: **FireHawk** ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

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“You’re a lifesaver. Thanks.”

Kanda-senpai said. Smiling, I nodded.

“It’s nothing, you don’t have an employee ID after all.”

“Yeah. They said that they’d give it to me next week.”

She said, pouting.

“Well, it’s completely my fault that I forgot my wallet.”

“I’m still surprised that you didn’t notice it right away.”

“It’s just that I don’t put my wallet inside my bag.”

She spoke as if it didn’t concern her, then sighed. I looked at her and then raised my hand.

“Well, I guess that’s it.”

I wanted to hurry back home and go to bed. Sayu should've left to buy groceries by now, so there's no need to worry about dinner. Although she looked sluggish before I left... Perhaps, she had enough strength to go to the store. However, she's unlikely to buy anything other than groceries, so I thought of buying some sweets.

Thinking about it, I started walking. Suddenly, someone grabbed me by the collar.

"Ugh."

Someone muttered.

I turned around and saw Kanda-senpai frowning at me.

"What?"

"Leaving already?"

"Well, of course. There's nothing else to do."

"Let me at least treat you."

I let out a sigh. I understand that she wants to treat me as a sign of gratitude, but I'd be more grateful if she let me go home.

Kanda-senpai examined my face skeptically and then burst out laughing.

"Hahaha! This is the first time I've seen such an unhappy reaction from someone after being invited and treated to dinner."

Giggling, she poked me in the side.

“Come on, let’s go. Or do you want me to become a woman who calls a junior for help on a day off and lets him go home without even repaying him?”

I sighed.

“I assumed it’d turn out this way.”

“Oh, you’ve become much more clever...”

This kind of provoking behavior.

Did she call me on purpose for help with the intention of inviting me to dinner? Because it looks like she took advantage of the situation to create a debt that she wanted to pay. Usually, Kanda-senpai is straightforward and I find it hard to believe that she could’ve planned something like that.

In any case, I couldn’t find a justification to decline, so I just agreed.

“Alright. I’ll take you up on your offer.”

Hearing my answer, Kanda-senpai nodded happily and started walking.

I took out my smartphone and messaged Sayu. I felt guilty because she even went out to buy groceries. But for some reason, I was strangely confident that she’d understand the situation.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Um... Doesn’t matter. You choose.”

“It’s my ‘Thanks’ to you, so I’d like you to choose.”

“Are you sure you didn’t set up this situation?”

“How rude. I just want to show you my gratitude.”

Kanda-senpai pouted.

“Besides... If a rigged situation wasn't successful, then it wasn't rigged after all.”

She added quietly in a joking manner.

I looked at her suspiciously but couldn't read anything from her expression.

“So, where are we going?”

Noticing my gaze, she turned to me and smiled.

“At a time like this, meat would be the best choice.”

“Yeah, sure. It'd be nice to eat meat cooked over charcoal.”

“Then it's settled. Is there a *yakiniku* restaurant somewhere nearby?”

“Ah, yeah. There's a place I often go to.”

When I said that, Kanda-senpai laughed mockingly and tilted her head.

“With whom?”

“None of your business.”

It was hard to tell her to her face that I went there with Gotou-san. Kanda-senpai has a terrible personality. She'd already realized it herself but still asked me that question.

“Let’s go then.”

“It’s in the opposite direction.”

I stopped her since she was going in the wrong direction and showed her the right one.

I felt my smartphone vibrating in my pocket, so I took it out. It was a message from Sayu.

「 Have fun. 」

Reading the message, I chuckled.

She’s definitely angry. I’ll hurry home as soon as possible.

“Yoshida.”

Putting my smartphone back in my pocket, I turned around, and Kanda-senpai was staring right at me.

I waited for her to say something, but she was silent and just stared at me.

“Uh... you called?”

I asked, and at first she just opened her mouth. Then, after a few moments she finally spoke.

“So, how far away is it?”

“Oh, yeah...”

That question was too insignificant for such a tense pause.

“We’re almost there. About five more minutes.”

“I see.”

Kanda-senpai gave a half-assed response. Slightly quickening her pace, she walked next to me.

“Let’s go then.”

“There’s no need to rush. We’ll get there in no time.”

“Also...”

She said, ignoring my words.

“Don’t talk to *anyone* but me.”

“Huh?”

I felt anger in her voice. Kanda-senpai raised her head and stared at me.

“I’m spending time with you right now, and I’ll be paying for the food. It isn’t nice if your mind’s somewhere else.”

“S-Sorry.”

She didn’t hide her obvious dissatisfaction, so I apologized.

Looks like she didn’t like that I was messaging Sayu. After all, it’s really rude to think about other things when you’re alone with someone.

Believing that I was wrong, I couldn’t find a new topic for conversation, so we just silently walked to the restaurant.

*

“You can already eat this slice. Oh, and that one... It’s good.”

“Thanks.”

Using her chopsticks, Kanda-senpai took the meat off the grill and put it onto a plate. Then she placed more meat on the grill.

I dipped the slice in the sauce and put it in my mouth. The fat spread in my mouth while I chewed. It was pure bliss. What delicious meat. Since I was really tired, I wanted to return home as soon as possible. But after eating the meat, even though I was so tired, no, actually because I was so tired, it tasted especially good.

“Senpai, please have some too.”

I told Kanda-senpai, who did nothing but grill the meat using the tongs. When I go with Gotou-san or other higher-ups, I’m usually the one grilling the meat. Since she’s taken over that responsibility, I was a little bored because I had nothing to do. Somehow, I felt embarrassed that she was grilling everything.

“Also, there’s no need to do it with both hands.”

Kanda-senpai held tongs in each hand. She was overwhelmed with enthusiasm, but it was obvious that she couldn’t grab the meat with her left tongs.

“You can do it with one hand. Besides, there are two tongs so you don’t have to do it by yourself.”

When I reached out for the other one, Kanda-senpai shook her head dismissively.

“I’m doing pretty well with both.”

“No, you’re definitely struggling to grab the meat with your left.”

“That’s not true.”

Kanda-senpai tried to turn the meat over with her left hand, but her hand trembled. After ten seconds of painstaking effort, she finally turned a piece over. Then, she looked at me with a smug face.

“But with the dominant hand, you can turn it over in a second.”

“With the right hand in a second and with the left in five, a total of six pieces can be turned over in five seconds!”

“I would turn ten slices in five seconds using only one hand.”

“You’ve always been good at such trivial things.”

Kanda-senpai sighed and put the tongs in front of me. Then she placed the other one down too and began to take the meat from the grill, dipping it in the sauce and putting it in the mouth.

After chewing and swallowing it, she looked down and spoke in a low voice.

“Also... you’ve changed...”

“Huh?”

Kanda-senpai raised her head and looked at me. A faint smile crossed her face.

“As compared to before, you’ve become more... confident...”

“Confident?”

“Yeah, confident. Before, you seemed to live without any specific reason... But now... you have a goal. It seems like you’ve found *your purpose*.”

She said as she took another piece of meat from the grill. I watched her as she dipped it in the sauce and ate it.

She said that I had changed, and I began to notice that she had changed too.

Her whimsical and mysterious nature hadn't changed. But now she looks calmer and more mature. I can't explain it thoroughly, but time definitely has changed her as it did to me. The way she smiles makes it impossible to read what's on her mind.

Kanda-senpai chewed and swallowed the meat.

"Just as I thought..."

She said in a hushed tone.

"I didn't give you anything when you were dating me."

Her words confused me, so I shook my head.

"That's not true."

"It is."

"Not at all. You just don't know how important you were to me."

I answered, and Kanda-senpai nodded.

"I know..."

"Huh?"

"I know."

She smiled, but her face looked grim.

“I’m fully aware of the fact.”

“Then why?”

Why didn’t you say anything to me and just disappeared?! I can’t bring myself to say that to her. But another thing suddenly popped into my head. No, it didn’t suddenly pop, rather it lingered for a long time. It’s just that now I had the opportunity to ask.

“Your profile picture... that’s *me*, right?”

I was referring to her profile picture in the messaging app. It’s likely a picture of me from high school.

She smiled and nodded.

“Did you finally notice it?”

“I noticed it from the beginning. It’s just that... I was taken aback and didn’t ask right away.”

When we exchanged contact info, I instantly recognized that it was me who’s in the profile picture. However, I had no idea why she used that particular picture. I couldn’t ask her then, but I could now.

“Why use my picture?”

“I took the picture with an old phone. I had to copy the data from the SD card to the PC, then onto the smartphone, and set it as my profile picture. Oh, you can’t even imagine how hard it was.”

Kanda-senpai said in a lively voice, but she didn’t answer my question. Then she looked at me, and our gazes met.

She sighed and then nodded as if she had made up her mind.

“The reason is... Oh, the ice. The ice is melting.”

She stuck out her tongue, then wet her throat with whiskey. Then she continued.

“It’s my *only* romantic memory.”

“Huh?”

I was stunned when she said the word “only.” Seeing my reaction, Kanda-senpai frowned.

“Don’t ‘Huh?’ me!”

“Well, you said ‘only.’”

As far as I knew, Kanda-senpai was really popular at school and had dated several guys before me. I found it hard to believe that such a beautiful woman didn’t go out with anyone after we broke up.

“After I broke up with you, I haven’t dated anyone else. There were no suitable guys... or more precisely, I lost interest.”

“I-Interest?”

“What’s up with that face? We’re talking about relationships here. I lost interest in dating guys.”

She took another sip of her whiskey.

“Before you, all the relationships I had were just for the sake of dating. No one really loved me. They dated me but they were thinking more about their school life and status. Well, that’s why...”

Her eyes grew cold.

“I couldn’t love them either.”

Without saying anything, I looked at Kanda-senpai. During our time together in high school, she never talked to me that openly.

“That’s why... I was so happy when you confessed to me, and it surprised me.”

“Surprised?”

“Yeah, I was surprised... that there was actually one person who really loved me.”

Kanda-senpai smiled with embarrassment.

“And because of that, I saw myself falling in love with you.”

I had no idea how to react to what she was saying, so I just stared at the table.

“Of all the guys I had met, you were the kindest and the most thoughtful. You were quite popular.”

“What?!”

I yelled in surprise. Kanda-senpai giggled.

“I don’t think you noticed it, but you were quite popular back then.”

“Huh?”

“After all, you look decent. You’re kind to everyone and good at sports. How could you not be popular?”

Although she said all of that, the truth is, apart from Kanda-senpai I wasn’t on good terms with the other girls at school. I don’t

remember anyone having an interest in me. No one even confessed to me.

Despite my visible confusion, Kanda-senpai kept on talking.

“That’s why I became so selfish.”

“Selfish?”

“Yeah. I wanted to do something I didn’t do with others.”

Kanda-senpai ran her finger over the glass.

“I wanted to be special for you.”

Her words filled my mind, and I felt a little pain.

“You treasured me so much, but you would’ve done the same with any other girl. So you treasured me, as if there was no other choice.”

“No, that’s...”

“Yoshida, you’re kind to everyone without any exceptions. For you, everyone close is special.”

“Well...”

I couldn’t find the right words to say. Kanda-senpai continued talking.

“That’s why I wanted you to answer all my whims. So you wouldn’t just cherish me, but desire me passionately.”

I cherished her. I respected her. That’s why she started distancing herself from me. Listening to Kanda-senpai, I realized the huge misunderstanding we both had in the past.

Well, it looks like I haven't changed after all. I remembered what Mishima had told me before.

In the end, what are your priorities, Yoshida-senpai?

They essentially said the same thing. Concerned about this, concerned about that. After all, everything I do, I do without any hesitation and for no particular reason. I just hammered this "had to take care of everything" idea into my head.

"But you've changed, Yoshida."

Kanda-senpai said, interrupting my thoughts. Startled, I looked at her and our eyes met.

"Looks like you found something very important."

"Huh?"

"Someone at home. Someone you care about so much."

Her words confused me. What did she mean by that?

"Hahaha. Bullseye, huh?"

"No..."

"Trust me, I know. If I invited you for dinner a couple years ago, you wouldn't be that unhappy. Also, when you accepted my invitation, you messaged someone right away. That made it obvious to me that someone's waiting for you at home."

"I see..."

Well, I did say right away that I'm leaving. When I changed my mind, I immediately typed a message, so it was quite easy to deduce that

someone was waiting for me at home. She guessed it right. From now on, I have to be more careful.

If many people find out, I won't be able to avoid questions. While I was thinking about how to explain the situation, she chuckled.

"Well... I won't ask for details."

"Really?"

"What? Do you want me to?"

"No... I'd rather you didn't..."

"See?"

Laughing, she finished her whiskey.

"Serious Yoshida is much better. Better than he once was."

Kanda-senpai looked me in the eyes and grinned.

"Thanks for keeping me company."

"Ah, sure..."

"Since someone's waiting for you at home, it's not good that you're here eating with me. I called and even dragged you here... Oh, excuse me!"

Without waiting for my response, Kanda-senpai called out to the passing waiter and ordered more meat. Watching the waiter leave, she sighed and spoke in a low voice.

"Well... It's over..."

Maybe she intentionally said it so that I could hear or maybe not. Anyway, I heard everything clearly.

I didn't know whether I should ask about it or not, but my lips moved on their own accord.

"What's over?"

Her eyes widened. It looked like she didn't think that I could hear her, or maybe she thought that even if I could hear, I wouldn't ask about it. In any case, the question surprised her.

She just blinked and then grinned.

"You're really clueless, Yoshida."

I'm indeed clueless. But she kept smiling, and then looked at me with a sly expression.

"My first unrequited love, silly. I'm finally over it."

Unrequited love. These words echoed in my mind.

"Um..."

"Sorry for the wait. Here's your liver, cheek, ribs... and miso soup."

"Ah, thanks."

As if intentionally interrupting me, the waiter brought a whole bunch of meat ordered by Kanda-senpai and put it on the table.

"Well, let's start grilling!"

"Um... Senpai..."

“If you’re not going to grill, Yoshida, give me the tongs. I’ll do it with both hands.”

“No, I’ll do it. So please stop using both hands.”

Smiling like a child, she placed the meat on the grill. I felt the “no more questions” aura around her, so I silently concentrated on the cooking.

There was only one thing that bothered me.

From the way she said it, her “unrequited love” was me. It was hard to believe, but since she said so, I just had to accept it.

Since she said that it was over just now, does it mean that the last time she invited me, she wasn’t just talking about a desire? But that they were her real feelings?

It was wrong of me to say, “You don’t even like me that much.”

If she hadn’t said that, I wouldn’t even know. And now I felt that I was acting insensitive, because I actually implied something like, “I don’t feel anything towards you, so I won’t do this.”

“Yoshida, the liver’s ready.”

“Huh? Isn’t it too early?”

“It tastes much better when slightly undercooked.”

She picked up a slice and put it on my plate.

“Try it.”

She suggested, so I took the soft looking liver and carefully put it in my mouth.

It was slightly burnt on top, and when I bit through, it was bitter.

I wondered if the liver has always tasted this bitter. But it wasn't disgusting.

Soft, jelly-like meat with a bitter taste spread on my tongue.

"It's bitter... and yet delicious."

After I said that, Kanda-senpai nodded and smiled.

"Told you."

If I had gone to the hotel with her that day, a completely different future could've awaited me.

Just thinking about it, I felt like an idiot.

I already made a choice. I can't change my mind anymore, and Kanda-senpai doesn't want to change anything either.

No matter how much I regret it, everything has already been decided, and there's no turning back.

"I didn't like bitter food before... But recently, I began to like it."

Kanda-senpai said, as she ate the undercooked liver.

I looked at her again and thought about how beautiful she is.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 13

Translator: CJYH ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

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It wasn't bad, but it wasn't good either. That was my impression.

Exiting the movie theater, I stretched and nodded.

Well, the movie did match the tone from the trailer, so it didn't feel like I wasted money. I was able to empathize with the characters, and it did make me cry, so I guess I got my money's worth.

I've been working more seriously nowadays, visiting the movie theater less after work. So, watching movies has completely become an off-day activity.

I entered the cinema before sunset, but now it's completely dark.

"...I'm hungry."

It's a chore to go home and prepare something to eat, so I looked around thinking I'd get dinner near the train station. Come to think of it, the only time I've been to this station was when I watched a

movie after I followed Yoshida-senpai, so I'm not familiar with any restaurants in the area.

Trying to decide what to eat, I walked around looking at restaurants. Suddenly, I saw someone familiar.

It was a *young girl* walking towards me with a shopping bag. It was my first time seeing her in plain clothes, but there's no doubt it's Sayu-chan. She was looking downwards, and when she raised her head, her eyes met mine.

"Oh."

She mouthed but was too far away for me to hear her.

Then, she quickly walked over to me.

"Yuzuha-san, good evening."

"Good evening. Went shopping?"

She was wearing skinny jeans, along with a thin white tunic. The outfit emphasized Sayu-chan's sleek look. I wondered whether these clothes were bought by Yoshida-senpai, but I immediately stopped myself. Even if they were, what's wrong with that?

"Yeah. The fridge was empty."

She said with a wry smile. Sayu-chan looked completely natural holding a grocery bag. Looks like she's already used to doing the housework for Yoshida-senpai.

"Doing the housework every day, huh? That's admirable."

"No... It's not much."

Sayu-chan looked embarrassed. It didn't seem like she was acting humble. I guess she's just a modest girl.

"Why are you here, Yuzuha-san?"

"Ah, I was watching a movie until now."

"Do you like movies?"

Now that I think about it, I haven't had much of a conversation with Sayu-chan before, much less about casual topics like this. Because I'm always conscious of Yoshida-senpai, in the back of my mind I've always been conscious of Sayu-chan too. But I don't know much about her, and she doesn't know much about me either.

"Yeah, I do. I often come to movie theaters around here."

"I see... That's why."

Sayu-chan nodded several times as if something popped into her head. She looked up and was about to say something when her expression froze. She stopped moving with her gaze somewhere further behind me.

As I tried to turn back and see what she was looking at, Sayu-chan stepped forward and moved closer to me.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

When I asked her, Sayu-chan continued to unnaturally hide her face and spoke with a quivering voice.

"Someone's looking for me. They're out there, Yuzuha-san."

"Is it *someone* you know?"

“...Yes.”

I was about to ask her “You don’t want to be found right?” but stopped. From her reaction alone the answer was obvious.

It’s best to get out of here, but if she goes back to Yoshida-senpai’s house now and gets followed all the way there, it would be bad.

“Did they notice you already?”

“No... They’re not looking over here.”

Sayu-chan said after glancing over my shoulder. I sighed and tapped on Sayu-chan’s shoulder.

“Alright, I’ll hide you for the time being.”

“Huh?”

“For now, we need to move before they see us. Use me to hide from his line of sight. Try to walk naturally but lower your face.”

I described a scene from a movie I watched before, where a criminal tried to escape from the police. Well, the criminal gets caught in the end, but that doesn’t matter right now.

Walking in silence, we passed the train station entrance before I asked Sayu-chan.

“We didn’t get noticed, right?”

“Yeah, probably. It doesn’t look like they chased after us.”

“Well, that’s a relief. My house is just two stations away. We can take shelter there for a bit.”

“T-That’s...”

While walking to the platform, Sayu-chan suddenly stopped.

After hesitating a little, Sayu-chan finally spoke in a low voice.

“Thank you...”

Hearing her gratitude with an apologetic look on her face, I let out a sigh.

“It’s alright.”

I went over to Sayu-chan and patted her on the shoulder.

It seems like she has some childish tendencies. Like when she instinctively hid behind me when she saw the person pursuing her, but once she calmed down, she became considerate of others again.

“But... this has nothing to do with you, Yuzuha-san...”

“Hahaha, you’re right about that.”

I thought so too. Honestly, even if Sayu-chan was taken away by whoever it was for whatever reason, it had nothing to do with me. On the contrary, it might even be better for me if Yoshida-senpai’s main concern were to disappear... Huh? *Why did I save this girl?* That thought popped into my head but I shrugged it off immediately.

I had something I wanted to say.

“This really has nothing to do with me. I’m helping you with a clear conscience, but I make no promises. If that results in Sayu-chan being safe for the time being, then that’s good.”

After saying that, Sayu-chan looked at me with her mouth open for a few seconds before nodding repeatedly.

“O-Oh, thank you.”

Shyly, she put on a smiling face and thanked me again.

What I meant was “Don’t mention it” and that I won’t be responsible for anything that happens after.

I believe she understood both meanings, and it was easier for her to accept that.

After all, I had no obligation nor intention to take responsibility for Sayu-chan. If saying so would make it easier for both of us, there’s no harm in saying it.

Thinking along those lines, I felt stupid.

Who the hell am I explaining myself to?

I flashed a bitter smile and looked sideways at Sayu-chan. She had her smartphone out. She looked troubled as she stared at the screen.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ah, no... It’s just...”

Sayu-chan fidgeted and looked around, before holding up her phone.

“I thought about contacting Yoshida-san, but...”

“Hmm? You should.”

“No, I mean... I was wondering what I should tell him.”

I didn't get it. I racked my brain but I didn't get it. I tilted my head in confusion.

"Can't you just tell him what happened? You bumped into me by chance, noticed someone looking for you, and you're hiding at her house for now."

"That's..."

Seeing that Sayu-chan was troubled even after I said that, I finally realized.

She probably wants to hide the fact that she's being pursued from Yoshida-senpai. I didn't know why she'd want to hide it, but I couldn't think of any other reason she'd hesitate to contact Yoshida-senpai.

In any case, it's Sayu-chan. I don't think she would have any selfish reason not to contact Yoshida-senpai.

Sighing, I took out my smartphone. Sayu-chan watched with her mouth open.

"If we don't contact him, he'd end up searching around for you again, Sayu-chan."

"That's true..."

"So, I'll just..."

After typing the message, I showed it to Sayu-chan.

「 I'm going to borrow Sayu-chan for a bit. If you want her back, come to my house and pick her up. 」

Reading the message, Sayu-chan widened her eyes.

“I’ll let him know. At least he won’t be as worried if you’re with me. We’re both girls after all.”

Sayu-chan let out a troubled laugh.

“Thank you so much.”

Sighing, I sent the message.

It’s just as Yoshida-senpai said. Even though she’s the one in trouble, she keeps thinking about others. She does it instinctively, something even adults don’t usually do. I’m neither praising nor criticizing her.

After an announcement on the loudspeaker, the train rolled up to the platform.

The doors opened. After waiting for the exiting passengers, I boarded the train before Sayu-chan. Then, I turned back and held out my hand.

“Come on, *princess*.”

For the first time that day, Sayu-chan showed a genuine smile as she took my hand.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 14

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“Do you like coffee?”

When we arrived, I let Sayu-chan sit on the couch before I filled up the kettle and turned on the stove.

Sayu-chan shook her head at my question.

“I’m not good with bitter stuff.”

“I see... How about some hot milk? In the meantime, you should drink something warm and calm down.”

Sayu-chan nodded, so I took out the milk from the fridge and poured it into an insulated glass cup. I put it inside the microwave then pressed the “beverage” button.

Even though I said it's better to drink something warm, I noticed the room has felt humid since we just came back. Drinking something warm in here would just make her sweat. I picked up the remote from the table and switched the air conditioner to "dry" mode.

I glanced at Sayu-chan, who looked uncomfortable sitting at the edge of the couch with her shoulders tensed. She really is a worrywart.

When the microwave beeped, I took the cup out and shouted "Hot!" One side of the cup was really hot.

"A-Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. It's a cheap microwave."

I answered as I gestured to Sayu-chan, who had stood up from the couch, to sit down. She sat back down reluctantly.

I waited for a while before touching the cup to check the temperature. It was already safe to hold.

I brought the cup of hot milk to the table in front of the couch.

"Here you go."

"T-Thank you."

Sayu-chan nodded a few times and put on a restrained smile. Suddenly, the kettle started whistling. Perfect timing.

After watching a movie, I always feel like drinking coffee. I took out my favorite ground coffee, set the filter paper into the dripper, and poured the coffee into the filter.

Placing the dripper over the coffee pot, I poured some hot water in for pre-infusion. After that, I slowly poured more hot water. I loved the aroma that drifted out at that moment.

“Ah~”

Even Sayu-chan, who was sitting on the couch, let out a sound and looked over.

“That’s a nice smell.”

“Right?”

“I don’t like the taste... But I like this smell.”

“That’s great.”

With that, the conversation died again. However, it wasn’t an awkward kind of silence—just one where we both were quietly unwinding. Glancing at Sayu-chan, her expression looked more relaxed compared to a few minutes earlier.

Once the pot was filled, I moved the dripper to the sink and poured the coffee into my mug. As the white steam rose above the mug, the rich smell of coffee appealed to my senses once again.

I breathed in and out.

I brought my mug and sat down next to Sayu-chan. This might be the first time this couch has had more than one person sitting on it at a time. I thought it was too big a couch for a person who lives alone, but with two people it feels slightly cramped.

We both sipped our hot milk and coffee in silence for a few minutes.

Finally, I spoke up.

“Seems like you’re being pursued.”

Sayu-chan forced a smile at my words.

“Looks like it.”

“I’ll ask just to be sure.”

I tried to adjust the tone of my voice to avoid coming off as stern.

“You’re not running away because you committed a crime or anything, right?”

Sayu-chan shook her head wildly at my question.

“I’ve never done anything against the law! It’s just...”

Her words came to a sudden halt, and her gaze wandered across the floor as if looking for the words to say. I waited for her to continue, but she remained silent. Seeing the clearly troubled Sayu-chan, I let out a sigh. It wasn’t like I wanted to bully her.

“I won’t ask for details. I heard the gist of the situation from Yoshida-senpai.”

I gently stroked her head as I said that. Sayu-chan sighed as if she had calmed down a little, and said “Thank you...” in a fading voice.

I’ve gotten a rough account from Yoshida-senpai. She ran away from home somewhere far away and hasn’t gone back in months. Currently, she’s staying at Yoshida-senpai’s place.

Now, she’s being pursued by either her family or someone close. I think the reason she didn’t want to talk about why she ran away is that Yoshida-senpai probably doesn’t know about it either.

“Well, no matter what the circumstances are...”

I said while still stroking Sayu-chan’s head.

“You can no longer ignore the fact that someone is looking for you.”

From an adult’s perspective, that much was obvious. However, Sayu-chan likely doesn’t understand the real meaning behind it.

Judging from how Sayu-chan quickly noticed her pursuer, she’s probably already aware that she’s being tracked. If not, there’s no way she would have noticed the pursuer before they found her.

Even with someone chasing her, she was still leisurely grocery shopping like that. Plus, she’s hiding the fact that someone’s on her heels from Yoshida-senpai.

She’s being way too nonchalant.

Sayu-chan responded, but with her eyes closed.

“I know.”

“Huh?”

I couldn’t help but let out that expression. Seemingly confused, Sayu-chan raised her head and looked at me.

“Do you really understand?”

“Yes.”

“...Well, you say you understand but you sure took your time shopping for groceries.”

I noticed that there were clear hints of annoyance within my words, but it couldn't be helped. I'm annoyed.

"Doing the housework was Yoshida-san's condition to live in his house... No matter the situation, I can't neglect that."

"No, this clearly isn't the time for that."

I got even more annoyed at her answer. It's not like Yoshida-senpai would die, or she'd get kicked out if she didn't do the housework. I don't understand why she's still thinking about her "public facade^[1]" now.

"Then, what do you plan to do about your relationship with Yoshida-senpai?"

"R-Relationship?"

I could feel myself talking faster and faster.

"A relationship is a relationship. You already know what that means, right? You've already come to rely on each other mentally. Getting torn apart suddenly, no way you two can be oka—"

What am I saying? Saying all these things to Sayu-chan... What am I trying to pull off? I wasn't supposed to say anything unnecessary. Even though I knew that, I couldn't stop. It was just annoying that she was so oblivious.

"That's..."

As Sayu-chan stuttered, I continued to press on.

"What do you really think of Yoshida-senpai? Is he just your benefactor? Or is he a potential love interest?"

As I let out a sigh, the smartphone that I had left on the table suddenly vibrated. I clicked my tongue and picked it up. It was a message from Yoshida-senpai.

「 Huh? What's this all about? Also, I don't know where you live. 」

I'm sure you don't. You weren't interested in knowing after all.

I opened the messaging app, typed in my home address, and sent it to Yoshida-senpai. I put the smartphone back on the table after that.

During all that time, Sayu-chan was quiet.

“In any case, you had a goal when you ran away from home and ended up in Yoshida-senpai's house. Were you able to achieve that goal? If they drag you away before you do, then what's the meaning of everything you did — for your life, and for all the people who spent their time with you?”

I was surprised at how critical I am to Sayu-chan.

This is just self-righteousness disguised as a lecture. I knew that. I knew, yet I couldn't stop. I couldn't find it in myself to forgive this “oblivious girl” in front of me.

Sayu-chan was left speechless. She looked troubled, and it seemed that she was seriously looking for an answer.

There's no need to answer, I thought. I was just asking questions I already knew the answer to. The fact that she's still at Yoshida-senpai's place, made it clear to me that she has no answers and that she isn't ready to answer yet.

As I thought about it, I felt like an idiot.

I really am a shitty adult.

“Sorry... You don’t have to answer.”

Sayu-chan looked at me with a curious expression as if trying to figure out my intentions.

I smiled bitterly and shook my head.

“I was a little mean to you.”

Sayu-chan showed a surprised expression, saying “Oh, that’s...” before closing her mouth like she just thought of something.

She must have thought that I was asking her with kind intentions.

She’s really an honest, good girl. Also, pitiful.

Was Yoshida-senpai charmed by this pitiful nature? When I thought about that, I was even more disgusted with myself.

The smartphone on the table vibrated, but it’s probably just Yoshida-senpai responding “I’m on my way.” I ignored it and took a sip of my coffee. The bitter taste and the slightly sweet smell calmed me.

“...You should drink it before it gets cold.”

I pointed to the cup of hot milk on the table in front of Sayu-chan. She nodded and picked up the cup. Personally, I don’t think there’s anything worse than hot milk that has gone cold.

For a while, we sipped on our drinks in silence.

With a slightly calmer mind, I decided to contemplate.

Ever since I fell in love with Yoshida-senpai, I’ve constantly thought about him. I don’t believe this feeling will fade away anytime soon. Something that’s born will continue to live unless it dies.

I think Sayu-chan and Yoshida-senpai are tied by a “special bond,” something that never existed between me and Yoshida-senpai. Whether that’s friendship, affection, or even romantic feelings, I can’t really tell.

However, they are both oblivious to the “special bond” they’ve developed. Also, they’re not trying to desperately resist nor escape from the situation, even as the relationship is about to end. It makes me mad just thinking about it.

Compared to a few minutes ago when I was enraged without even knowing why, I felt much calmer as I slowly organized my feelings.

“If you find out later, it’ll be too late.”

When I broke the silence, Sayu-chan turned and looked at me.

“Although, telling this to a high school girl... I doubt it would make sense.”

I think that if I had been told something like this in high school, I probably wouldn’t get it. Even though I’m aware of that, I wanted to say it, so I did.

“There are people you can only meet now, and there are things you can only do now.”

When I said that, Sayu-chan slightly opened her mouth as if something just occurred to her. I continued talking.

“Even if you get to meet them again, you might not be able to do what you wanted to do anymore.”

I think the reason we’re unable to picture the future well is that our perception of time is always the “present.” The “present” flows continuously, and before you know it, a lot of time had passed. We

don't know how long our current feelings will last, and neither do we know how long we can continue seeing the people we see every day. Later, even if you lament the "things you didn't do then," there's nothing you can do.

I glared at Sayu-chan.

"You resisted, Sayu-chan. You couldn't cope with the status quo. You gave up on staying there and ran away with all your might."

All the way here.

Come to think of it, it takes great determination and strength for a high school girl to be away from home for more than half a year. It meant there was a reality she wanted to run away from, no matter how taxing it would be physically and mentally.

Many people sink into a state of resignation. They feel hopeless but can't bring themselves to solve their problems nor find the will to escape from them. I know lots of people like that my age. I'd say Sayu-chan's way ahead of them.

I don't think it's right to end such a desperate escape with a complacent ending.

"You're the only one who knows what you want to do right now."

Sayu-chan's eyes started to well up.

"No one can tell you what's in your heart but you."

"...Yes."

Sayu-chan nodded as she said that in a low voice.

“You don’t have much time... You have to think seriously about what you want to do right now.”

As I finished talking, Sayu-chan got all teary-eyed. She looked downwards and nodded again.

“Yes...!”

Sayu-chan replied in a nasal voice. I stroked her head again.

She had her head down for quite a while, but then she suddenly looked at me.

“It was just as Yoshida-san had said.”

“Huh?”

When Yoshida-senpai’s name was suddenly mentioned, I accidentally let that expression out.

With an embarrassed look on her face, Sayu-chan tried to mimic Yoshida-senpai.

“‘She’s really good at living her life, you know? It’s amazing how she looks at everything as it is in life and thinks before she acts...’ That’s what he said to me the other day.”

“I-Is that so...?”

I blushed at what Sayu-chan had just said. I didn’t know that Yoshida-senpai saw me that way.

As I felt a gaze on me, I looked over at Sayu-chan and was startled.

She was looking at me with an expression that seemed to suggest something like “I’m glad.” Yet, there was a hint of sadness in her slightly furrowed brows.

When I saw the look on her face, I realized something.

I heard that Sayu-chan had also met Gotou-san. If so, she may have noticed that Gotou-san likes Yoshida-senpai. Furthermore, Sayu-chan and I had confessed both of our feelings at the park, without knowing we were talking about the same person. In other words, she’s aware of my feelings towards Yoshida-senpai as well.

If that’s the case, then Sayu-chan isn’t unaware of her own feelings.

In fact, she’s aware of her feelings for Yoshida-senpai...

“Sayu-chan.”

“Yes?”

As I called out to her, she naturally tilted her head. The unique expression on her face a moment ago has somehow disappeared.

“Perhaps, you...”

When I started talking, the intercom buzzed.

I looked at my smartphone and the screen suddenly lit up.

「 I’m here. 」

I got the message from Yoshida-senpai.

“...That was quick.”

He probably ran all the way here. I walked over to open the door.

“...Hey.”

“You’re quick.”

As expected, Yoshida-senpai was out of breath as he stood in front of my door. Looking impatient, he asked me.

“Where’s Sayu?”

I sighed.

“...She’s here. We coincidentally met in front of the station. Since it’s weird chatting while standing there, I asked her to come to my place. Isn’t that right, Sayu-chan?”

As I turned back and said that out loud, Sayu-chan suddenly popped out in the corner and said, “Y-Yes, that’s right!” I was relieved that Sayu-chan could naturally match my excuse without any signal, unlike Yoshida-senpai. Even though she’s honest by nature, it seems like she’s used to this stuff.

I looked back to Yoshida-senpai and immediately regretted it.

The expression on Yoshida-senpai’s face was something I’ve seen in movies before. It’s the expression of “the protagonist reuniting with his beloved after a long time.” From Yoshida-senpai’s actions, I could tell that Sayu-chan’s existence had become increasingly important to him. But this display of great resolve in front of me hit home.

“...Do you want to come in for a bit?”

I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

“Nah, I just came to pick her up.”

“Right.”

I answered wryly and looked over at Sayu-chan.

“Did you finish your hot milk?”

“Ah, yes. It was delicious. Thank you.”

“It’s nothing... Well, now that Yoshida-senpai’s here, I guess you should go.”

“Yes, um...”

Sayu-chan stood up and lowered her head to me.

“Thank you very much for today.”

Sayu-chan’s words made my heart ache.

Why was she thanking me? I only brought her here on a whim, and then spouted some nonsense. It made me feel more and more miserable.

“It’s nothing... Hang in there, okay?”

Those were the only words I could squeeze out of my brain.

Sayu-chan tried to put her shoes on while holding the groceries with one hand. Yoshida-senpai saw that and took the shopping bag from her without a word.

“T-Thank you.”

“Hurry up and put on your shoes.”

I instinctively looked away from that interaction. It was all too natural. Sayu-chan finished putting on her shoes and stood up.

“Thank you for having me.”

“No problem. See you soon.”

I doubted that we would see each other again, but I still said it. Sayu-chan nodded, and with a smiling face said, “See you soon.”

“Alright then, see you tomorrow.”

Yoshida-senpai waved goodbye as he looked at me.

“Ah, I gave you my address, but you’re not allowed to use it to stalk me.”

“I won’t, idiot.”

“Hehe, good night then.”

I made a short remark as I tried to escape his line of sight and then closed the door.

I could hear their footsteps through the door as they walked away.

After a few seconds, when the sound of their footsteps was gone, my legs gave way. I fell to the ground and sat near the doorway.

“...It’s unfair.”

I found myself mumbling.

“...Why is it so unfair?”

I felt my eyes slowly warming up, and before I knew it, tears were rolling down my cheeks. My vision blurred.

When I started liking Yoshida-senpai, he was already in love with Gotou-san for a long time. There was nothing I could do. They already knew each other and spent time together way before I joined the company. I can't go back in time and get in between them. Because of the difference in time spent together, I had no choice but to try another approach. I was finally convinced.

The encounter was nothing but a "coincidence," then suddenly, they started living together. Now, Yoshida-senpai's only concern is Sayu-chan. He's worried about Sayu-chan's future while also keeping his love for Gotou-san ambiguous. I could tell from his expression that his feelings for Sayu-chan are just a hair's breadth away from being romantic.

An acquaintance from high school named Kanda-san showed up, and the way Yoshida-senpai looked at her was completely different from the way he looked at me. His gaze was one of yearning.

Why is that?

"You're all unfair... Really unfair."

It's unfair.

Those words filled my heart.

"I love Yoshida-senpai too. I love him as much as anybody..."

I wanted to show my burning passion in a way that everyone could see.

Yoshida-senpai's feelings were moving, without a care for my feelings, in a place that has nothing to do with me. I'm always watching him, but at the core of his feelings, I'm nonexistent.

That doesn't make any sense.

“If it isn’t a matter of who he met first... Why am I not ‘one of them’?”

As I said it, my throat burned, and the tears flowed. I was sobbing, and it was painful.

Truth is stranger than fiction, as they say.

When it comes to meetings in life, there’s no detailed “foreshadowing” and “trigger” like those in romance novels. There’s no clear reason involved. We’re naturally attracted and connected.

To someone unaccepting of that fact, the reality is cruel.

I cried while sitting on the ground.

I thought, “I’ve never cried so much in my life.”



VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 15

Translator: FireHawk (Fully Booked TLS)

Editor: chelly (Fully Booked TLS)

Proofreader: OD Dragon (Fully Booked TLS)

We were walking home from the station. Sayu, who had been silent almost the whole way, suddenly spoke.

“Yoshida-san, is there anything you really want to do right now?”

That sudden question made me tilt my head in confusion.

“What are you talking about?”

“Come on, think of something.”

Something I really want to do... The question was too vague. I already told her that I have no interests or hobbies, and there’s nothing specific that I want to buy. I like my current job as it is, so I don’t have much desire to move up any further.

No matter how much I thought about it, nothing came to my mind.

“Nothing in particular.”

When I answered, Sayu chuckled and said, “I see...”

“Ah.”

I said as if remembering something.

“I’d like to sleep for a week.”

Sayu laughed. It reminded me of how much I like the way she laughs.

“Did you really come up with something that stupid?”

“Well, excuse me for having such stupid desires.”

When she finished laughing, Sayu pointed ahead.

“Over there.”

“Huh?”

Sayu ran and stopped by a telephone pole, then turned to me. Wondering what this was about, I looked closely at the telephone pole and realized.

“This is where I met you, Yoshida-san.”

“...Yeah, that’s right.”

That’s right. This is the place where I first met Sayu and picked her up. I closed my eyes and recalled that event. Although it happened only a few months ago, my memories were quite hazy. But come to think of it, I was really drunk at the time. All I remembered was her smile and black panties.

“So much time has passed already.”

When I said that, Sayu smiled and nodded several times.

After standing silently under the telephone pole, she spoke.

“I gave everyone else a different name, except you, Yoshida-san.”

Not understanding her train of thought, I tilted my head in confusion. Sayu smiled gently and continued.

“Each time I moved to a new place to stay... I gave them a fake name.”

Ah, I see. I remembered that altercation with “Kyouya Yaguchi.” He called her “Miyuki.” So that’s the name she used with him.

“But for some reason, when you asked for my name... it really surprised me, and my real name slipped out. I wonder why...”

Sayu closed her eyes as if reminiscing about that moment. I just looked at her and remained quiet.

“After giving you my real name, I thought I might not be able to run away anymore... At first, I was really negative about it.”

She paused and looked at me. Illuminated by the light from the street light directly above her, Sayu looked somewhat amazing.

“Thanks to you, Yoshida-san, I won’t need to run away anymore.”

What Sayu said sounded strangely powerful, even though she didn’t mean for it to be that way. I can’t put it exactly into words, but I felt a lot of determination in what she said and it sounded uplifting.

She’s definitely trying to move forward. I could feel it, and it made me happy. But at the same time, it made my heart ache a little. Perhaps she meant that she had made up her mind and was ready to leave. While I was thinking about it, Sayu suddenly looked at me sideways.

“Yoshida-san, if I weren’t a JK, and you saw me out here, would you still have picked me up?”

“Huh?”



That question caught me off guard.

If Sayu wasn't a high school girl. I tried to imagine it, but it didn't work out. While I was thinking, she continued to speak.

"You probably would have. If I were an OL¹¹, would we have had sex?"

She smiled and laughed.

"Probably not."

She said that before I could say anything.

Even if I'm desperate, I wouldn't have sex with a woman I don't love. I even refused an invitation from Kanda-senpai. So, I'm sure of it.

"And in the same way..."

Sayu said in a hushed tone.

"Even if you weren't a bearded salaryman..."

She suddenly stopped talking and just stood there with her mouth open.

"Um... what's the matter?"

I tilted my head in confusion. Sayu waved her hand and smiled embarrassedly.

"No, it's nothing."

Then she grabbed me by the shirt and slightly pulled.

"Let's go home."

“Yeah.”

That was an unexpected detour. But it wasn't that far from this pole to the house after all.

Walking away, I looked at it again.

I thought to myself, “So, this was the place where I met Sayu.” It's such an important place, and yet, I just walk past it every day.

When I glanced at Sayu, I saw that she appeared to be deep in thought while walking, but with a slight smile on her face. Something about it didn't feel right.

“Hey, you're acting a little strange today.”

I said to Sayu as she was putting the food she bought into the fridge. She looked at me in surprise but then shook her head.

“That's not true. I'm acting as usual.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Something must've happened. But I couldn't put my finger on it, so I didn't pry any further.

“Putting that aside...”

Sayu looked at me mockingly.

“Was your dinner with *Kanda-senpai* fun?”

“H-How did you know it was Kanda-senpai...?”

Hearing my response, she pressed her lips together.

“As I thought... It really was Kanda-senpai.”

“Wha— You tricked me?”

“It wouldn’t be fun if I just asked you. You really like her, huh?”

“It’s not like that.”

I frowned at Sayu’s obvious teasing. She chuckled and closed the fridge.

“What should I eat?”

“Huh? Oh, right... So, you went grocery shopping and then went straight to Mishima’s house.”

She could have at least served her dinner.

As if reading my mind, Sayu spoke.

“Well, Yuzuha-san did give me hot milk to drink, but that only allowed me to hold back the hunger a bit. If I don’t eat anything, I’m going to starve. Do you mind if I prepare something?”

“You think I’d say no? You should eat properly.”

I replied. Sayu smiled and went to the bathroom to wash her hands.

She barely moved before, but now she was unusually active. It was unlikely that she could recover that quickly, so her legs are probably still sore. Although this was barely noticeable from the way she acted. That could only mean that she had some kind of emotional shock.

The more I thought about it, the more irritated I felt.

It would've been fine if the changes were good. But I didn't like the fact that something had changed in her, and I couldn't even tell what. However, the most annoying out of all this was the realization that I am too concerned about it. I don't know why I'm feeling this way.

Sayu came out of the washroom and asked me.

"If I make miso soup, will you have some? Are you full?"

"Ah, no... I think I'll have some. I've eaten too much fatty food."

"Mmm, got it."

She nodded and began to fill the pot with water.

I couldn't help but feel a sense of discomfort as I watched Sayu preparing to skillfully make miso soup.

Unable to figure out what had changed within Sayu, I felt somewhat bored. So, I went out to the balcony and had a smoke.

[1] An office lady, often abbreviated OL (オーエル), is a female office worker in Japan who performs generally pink-collar tasks such as secretarial or clerical work.

VOLUME 3 – CHAPTER 16

Translator: chelly ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

Editor: OD Dragon ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

Proofreader: Scarlet ([Fully Booked TLS](#))

It felt like the intercom was beeping.

The electronic sound that faintly echoed in my head made me feel uncomfortable. It wasn't loud, but it felt awfully irritating.

The intercom beeped again. This time, I realized it wasn't just a feeling.

It sounded louder than before. It was so annoying.

When the intercom beeped for the third time, my eyes snapped open.

"What the...?"

I searched for the alarm clock with my blurry vision. Squinting, I looked at the clock and saw that it was 7 AM.

"...Tch. Who the hell is it?"

It's way too early for someone to ring the intercom. It's so out of the ordinary.

Sayu, who was next to me, groaned as she got up.

"Maybe a delivery?"

When she said that, I couldn't hold back my laughter.

"I don't think it's a delivery, especially not at this hour. ...Besides, I didn't order anything."

I mumbled back and then scratched my head.

I figured if it was a solicitation or something, they would just go away if I keep ignoring them. As I lay dazed on my bed, the intercom rang again.

I was annoyed.

"I'll go out for a bit."

I walked to the door to give them a piece of my mind.

"Who is it...? Do you know what time it is?"

I opened the door while complaining and was mortified by what I saw.

Standing in front of me was *a young man dressed in a suit* and behind him was a well-built man with dark glasses. It was obvious from his attire that he was a bodyguard.

"...Huh? What is it?"

The two men, clearly dressed in unusual outfits, made me wary.

"Excuse me for coming so early in the morning. I thought this would be a good time to have a quiet conversation."

Saying that in an extremely polite tone, the young man took a business card out from his pocket and held it out to me.

“My name is Issa Ogiwara, CEO of Ogiwara Foods.”

“Huh...?”

I took the card and was even more confused. Ogiwara Foods... I think that’s a famous frozen food manufacturer. Why is the CEO of that company standing at my front door?

As I absentmindedly stared at the business card, something occurred to me.

“Ogiwara...”

The moment I read the name, I realized everything. When I looked up, my eyes met the young CEO’s. He had a creepy smile on his face.

“I’m Sayu Ogiwara’s older brother.”

The CEO said. Suddenly, his expression changed. He glared at me and continued.

“I’m here to pick up Sayu.”

When I turned around, I saw Sayu standing behind me completely petrified with a dumbfounded expression on her face. That was enough for me to know that this person was indeed Sayu’s older brother.

The time has come, I thought.

The young CEO in front of me was a clear personification of Sayu’s “time limit for a life on the run.”

For some reason, the image of Sayu’s “bitter” smile appeared in my mind, and then it disappeared.

VOLUME 3 – SHORT STORY

Translator : chelly (Fully Booked TLS)

Editor / Proofreader : OD Dragon (Fully Booked TLS)

“High school was great...”

The words just slipped out from my mouth.

I feel like I’ve been going back and forth between the closet and the mirror for about half an hour now.

When I was in high school, I wore only black clothes, believing my classmates when they said “Ao looks good in black.”

When I was in college, I would buy fashion magazines even though I wasn’t particularly interested in them. I would buy clothes worn by models with a similar hairstyle as mine.

That’s why I’ve never been worried about being fashionable.

But that’s not the case right now.

“It was great because I could just wear my uniform.”

I was tempted to wear my school uniform, but after thinking about it, I remembered that I left my it at my parents’ house. Also, as a 27-year-old woman who’s neither an actress nor a model, it would be unreasonable for me to wear a high school uniform.

Sighing, I sat back down on my bed.

Of course, there's a reason why I'm so worried about what to wear.

If I were going out alone, I could just put on something casual. But since I'm meeting up with someone, I should be conscious about what I wear. On top of that, *I'm meeting my first love*.

I woke up in the early afternoon, taking advantage of the fact that it was a day off. I was about to go to the convenience store to buy some food when I realized that I had left my wallet at work.

Someone who had lived comfortably in her parents' house until she entered the workforce wouldn't suddenly start cooking for herself just because she started living alone. I only cook when I feel like it, and the contents of my fridge were no good.

On the second day off, I realized that I was in a helpless situation, with no food and no wallet.

While I was stunned at realizing how negligent my lifestyle was, something wicked occurred to me.

The idea was to use this as an excuse to call up Yoshida, whom I had exchanged contact info with at the office, and have dinner with him as well.

I thought it was a good idea, but if I was going to meet Yoshida, I couldn't just go out without dressing appropriately.

Perhaps, in Yoshida's mind, I'm still the "senior that he admired in high school." He's someone dear to me, so I wouldn't want his image of me to get ruined by not dressing up.

In short, I wanted to look good for my first love—*my junior*.

However, I had never cared about fashion before. I always walked down the streets without care, thinking "Well, this is how it is."

That's why I had no idea which clothes were popular with the opposite sex.

On top of that, my partner was "that" Yoshida.

When we were in high school, every time we went out on a date, he'd always tell me I looked "cute" whether I was wearing a uniform or plain clothes. When he saw the large mole on my butt, he still called me "cute."

But I guess he just thought everything looked cute because we were in a relationship at the time.

"Stupid Yoshida..."

I tried to shift the blame and complained, but it didn't help me decide what to wear.

To begin with, I haven't even contacted Yoshida yet.

Well, if I do, he'd definitely come if he's free. For some reason, I was confident about it.

However, if I push through with this, there's a good chance that I'd be rejected. So, I guess I should contact him first before choosing an outfit. I don't think Yoshida has any plans for the day, but...

I picked up my smartphone and sent a message to Yoshida.

Yoshida immediately replied, but he didn't seem to be keen on the idea. However, if he had business to attend to, he would have said "I have a business to attend to" from the start. I wondered if he was reluctant even though he had nothing to do. That's cheeky.

After a few more exchanges, Yoshida was still clearly reluctant to meet me at the office, so I finally played the “I have nothing to eat” card. Well, it wasn’t a lie since I actually had nothing to eat.

As expected, Yoshida broke down and replied that he would come.

I took advantage of my opponent’s character to win, but a victory is a victory.

Now.

Back to the initial problem. What to wear?

I can’t go back in time to find out what Yoshida’s likes and dislikes are, and I can’t send a message now asking, “What should I wear?” If I asked him, he’d probably say, “Just wear whatever you like.”

We were no longer in a relationship where he could say, “You look cute no matter what you’re wearing.”

My heart ached a little at the thought of it.

Now, he has another love in his heart.

I knew I had let him go, and I understand the fact that the biggest fish I ever caught was the one that got away^[1].

That’s why I got up from the bed with unnecessary vigor as if to push back the dull pain crawling into my chest.

Then, I picked up an unopened magazine which I bought last week out of impulse off the floor next to the bed.

On the front cover, in large letters, there’s a sign that reads, “Tunic blouses are the way to go for Fall!”

“Ah, I have a tunic blouse.”

I flipped through the magazine and headed for the closet.

Just the other day, I went to a clothing store to buy a few clothes for Fall. I couldn't be bothered to pick them out myself, so I grabbed a sales clerk and asked her, “What do you think would look good on me?”

This was the answer.

I took a tunic blouse of a gray color close to black and stood in front of the mirror.

The clerk said in a high-pitched voice, “In addition to its calmness, the garment has a light and neat impression. I think it will look great with your beautiful black hair!” I remember her saying something like that.

Indeed, it's calm and neat.

When I looked down at the magazine, I saw that the model was wearing a tunic blouse with capris.

I nodded and then pulled a pair of white capris out of the closet.

I took off my clothes, and changed into the blouse and capris, and found myself dressed more suitably than I had expected.

“This is nice.”

When I bought magazines, I thought to myself, “I'm buying this stuff I'm not going to read,” and when I bought clothes, I thought, “I'm only going to wear it a few times anyway,” but I never thought it would come in handy here.

I chuckled to myself, thinking that this habit is sometimes useful.

I checked myself thoroughly in the bathroom mirror to make sure that my hair wasn't messy and put on a light amount of makeup.

After that, I opened the shoe cabinet in the entrance hall and looked for shoes that would best match my current outfit. At the edge of the cabinet, I found an unopened shoe box.

"Ah..."

I didn't need to open it to know what's inside. I forced a smile on my face.

"I can't believe I'm seeing this at this time."

I reached out and picked up the box.

When I was in high school, I begged my parents to buy me a pair of shoes which were a bit more mature for me at the time.

It's a pair of black ankle strap heeled sandals.

I asked my parents to buy them for me because... I was planning to wear them on my next date.

In the end, there was no "next date" because of me.

"Is this a date?"

I muttered, staring at the sandals.

"...I guess I'll consider this as a date."

Saying that, I removed the wrapping paper and placed the sandals on the doorstep.

The size of my feet hadn't changed at all since I was a high school student, and my feet fit snugly into my sandals.

"Hehehe."

I chuckled.

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to wear you, okay?"

I said, starting at the sandals. There was no response, of course. I just thought of saying that since finding these sandals was a lifesaver.

"I'm wearing fancy clothes and a new pair of sandals. I'm beautiful in my own way."

I wanted to say it out loud, so I did.

"If this doesn't make Yoshida's heart flutter, then he has bad taste."

I muttered to myself and laughed.

I opened the door.

Having said those words to compliment my appearance at least a little bit, I left the house in good spirits.

Maybe because I never get compliments on my attire or even a comment about it.

[1] *Translator's Note*: Derived from the Japanese proverb '*Nigashita sakana wa ooki*' (逃がした魚は大きい). '*Nigashita*' (逃がした) means "got away," '*sakana*' (魚) means "fish," and '*ookii*' (大きい) means "big," so the literal meaning of this proverb is "the fish that got away was big."