

Chapter One

“The little things? The little moments? They aren't little.” by **Jon Kabat-Zinn**.
At least that's what was written on the board, yet I couldn't wrap my head around it.

A part of me always felt that something was missing from my life, although I had everything I ever needed. You see, my father created a well established empire from the bottom when I was only 12 years old, so now, in my early twenties, I had money, power and supposedly a bright future as the heir of my family.

I wasn't the only child, but being the eldest of 3 I was responsible for learning all the do's and don't's about the business. But did I want that? That's a million dollar question. Nevertheless, I had no say on it. I would finish University and go abroad to start my career on the company, living and breathing the rules about being a successful manager. At least that was my father's plan. If it were for me, I wouldn't mind buying a house on the countryside and have a peaceful life far away from the city where all the drama and problems are.

But who was I lying to? My future was planned like a movie script and all I had to do was follow whatever was written. That's why I decided to live by the moment while I could. That's why I was sitting here lost on my own thoughts instead of paying attention to Miss Anderson's lecture.

I looked around the classroom and everyone was laughing and chatting seemingly without a care in the world, and here I was, carrying the name of the Minamoto empire on my shoulders. I had no energy left to fight against that amount of pressure. Everyone around me seemed so sure about their lives, so happy...why couldn't I be happy too?

I leaned back on my chair and closed my eyes for a moment trying to clear my mind. Emptiness was all I could see, all the pain and suffering felt so weightless in this dark place, and the doubts I had about my life were getting further away from my mind.

Just when I became lost in my thoughts, a faint sound began tickling my ears. I couldn't quite figure what they were saying but the voice seemed so soft and perfect that I found myself opening my eyes and turning around to see where that sound was coming from.

A few students behind me stood this innocent looking girl sitting with a simple

yet beautiful smile on her face. Her soft voice and gentle figure took me aback for a moment but I quickly regained myself from the hypnotic effect she was having on me. Everything about her had me intrigued; she was different for some reason and didn't quite fit in with the rest of the students - and I liked that, that made her even more interesting, that made her special.

Our eyes met for a briefly moment but nothing I felt on that second felt brief. We connected and I felt a jolt of electricity running through me and warming my whole body. Her beautiful and light brown eyes irradiated from her delicate face. Her small rosy lips...oh she bit her lip while trying to avoid my gaze. My chest felt warm and cozy when I saw her doing that. I smiled hoping to put her at ease but that made her even more nervous. She finally smiled back and my heart skipped a beat, begging me to go there and stand closer to her.

I wished time froze right then and there with our eyes locked on each other, that way I could look at those warm eyes forever. My body was getting warmer and warmer when she suddenly broke our connection and faced away from me trying to hide herself among the other students. I briefly felt lost, intrigued and hopeful. What were those feelings I was having? Maybe I was getting sick, or maybe, for some reason I had no idea what, I was just fascinated by her.

I was eager to find more about her, who she was, why her shyness made her so...pretty; wait, just wait. Of course I wasn't going to ask her that, my mind was just playing silly tricks on me. I was probably just curious because I had never noticed her before, a perfectly plausible reason.



"Well class, that's all for today. Please don't forget to take the paper with your coursework on your way out and I will see you again next week." Miss Anderson said while closing her laptop. Finally it was time to leave.

Slowly, the previously filled room was getting empty, each student making their way down the stairs and leaving through the small door that fitted only two persons at a time.

When I saw the girl getting up from her place I quickly grabbed my backpack and headed towards her. My heart was racing. Was it because I was running? Each step pulling me closer to her, I should had stopped running because a strange sensation was building inside my stomach.

“Hey.” That was the only thing I could utter as soon as I reached her. “I haven’t seen you around here before.”

“That doesn’t surprise me, I’ve just transferred.” she replied with a shy smile on her face. “This is my first week.”

“Really?! And are you enjoying being here?” Her small eyes penetrated my soul.

“I think it’s still too soon to answer that question.” She giggled, a small shade of red covering her cheeks. “To be honest it hasn’t been easy changing places so suddenly. There’s a lot I still have to adapt and lectures I need to catch up.”

“I know the feeling, trust me. I’ve changed schools more than I could count when I was a kid. Makes you feel kinda lost”

“Exactly.” She said with glowing eyes. “New school, new friends, new everything.” She paused for a second. It felt like she was pondering whether or not she should continue.

I counted to 5 in my mind, - which seemed an eternity - giving her a few seconds to decide, but only silence came out of her mouth.

“Just give it time, I am sure in a few weeks you’ll adapted to everything including making friends.” I said awkwardly. “That being said, if you ever need someone to show you around I’m here. I know this place like my own hand.”

“I will.” A wide smile appeared on her lips. “I guess you’ve been here for longer than you’re willing to tell?”

“This is only my second year here, but a lot can happen in two years.”

“I guess. I need to go now.”

For some reason the **prospect** of her leaving bothered me. I tried to find words to make her stay a little longer and ended up saying the first thing that came to my mind.

“If you’re having lunch now you can come and eat with me and my friends. I am sure you will like them and they won’t mind.”

“I am actually going to the library. I need to prepare for the next lesson. But I do appreciate the invitation, thank you.”

“Well, the invitation still stands if you change your mind, so feel to join us whenever you want.”

“Great. I will be going now but it was nice meeting you.” She said as she started walking away from me. She left me with her adorable but shy smile and hopeful to see her again.



I always had lunch with Killian, my long and trusted friend. Whenever I had any issue he was there to help me through it. I was definitely a party goer so mostly had trouble with stupid situations - I know, typical young adult problems but please don't judge me, we need to make the best of life while we can right? - but my achilles heel was the relationship with my family and me consistently disappointing my parents. I had grown used to it by now but it wasn't always like that.

Growing up, our dynamic as a family was amazing. I remember going camping with my parents and my younger sisters, - fishing on the river, climbing trees, doing hikes, just learning basic survival skills - those were the days, but everything changed without any warning. My father expected so much of me and to be a totally different person, but I couldn't. I wasn't strong minded like him, I wasn't his best bet. Then the arguments began and I found myself spending less and less time with my them. I miss my family, I miss my sisters. Melody is still so young and she doesn't understand what is going on.

This whole situation affected our closeness in ways I can't even describe. I feel so sorry for my mother, she always cared for us very deeply and tried so hard to make everything ok again although it was all in vain, things were getting worst with each year.

University was an excuse, I moved out as soon as I could because I couldn't handle being there anymore. The sad looks, the disappointed faces, knowing I was the one that almost made our family break apart. They were better off without me, and although I missed them so much I did my best to go there as least as possible.

“Though day?” Killian asked pulling a chair for me next to him.

“What?” I was confused. My day was just fine, specially after that last lecture with Miss Anderson.

“Your face, you don't look so good.” He raised his left eyebrow at the same time a small but confident smirk showed up on his cheek.

“Am I that obvious?” I asked trying to laugh it off. Like I said, my day was going fine but I guess just thinking about the whole situation with my parents had completely changed my face expression.

“No, I just know you that well. Your eyes appear distant.” After saying that he grabbed a giant piece of steak from his lunch with his fork. “So, though day or what?”

He was right, I was there physically but my mind was vagueing on my thoughts. Sometimes I had so many things going on my head that I couldn't function properly. Killian again placed his arm on the chair and gestured for me to sit. I followed through with it and sat. Then I prepared my plate of mashed potatoes with gravy and steak.

I was about to put a spoonful of the mashed potatoes when he asked me if I needed to talk about it. I just answered I had a draining day and was a bit tired but I noticed from the wrinkles that formed near his eyebrows that he wasn't too convinced.

“Hey guys, I see you didn't wait for me today.” A voice echoed behind me and I instantly recognized the person talking to us. Nevertheless, I turned around to greet her.

It was Mei with her hair dangling in a ponytail. She was Killian's girlfriend and also a good friend of mine. I've met her after they started dating and ever since then the three of us were always together, they were like brother and sister to me.

She was an incredible person, ever very truthful and down-to-earth, and never making any unnecessary judgments. Most of the girls I knew around University were very superficial and only wanted to be around the cool guys, which in hindsight were the wealthiest. I had the feeling they only got near me because of the name I was carrying, but I also was to blame since it was so easy talking and flirting with them.

Mei was different, and the two of them were just perfect together. They had been dating for two years but gave the feeling they'd know each other for many more. I was very happy for them and always was a delight to be near them and see their complicity - yea, you can say I was a third wheel at times because I also felt that way, but it made me realize what I wanted to have when I found the one for me and sometimes, deep inside, I asked myself when I would get to live something like they had.

“We're just warming up the place. I don't you to get a cold.” Killian joked.

“Right. Are we still going to the cinema this Saturday?”

“Mei, you need to learn something about us, we never break a promise.”

Mei gave Killian a daring look, it was obvious that sentence didn't sit well with her. Just a week ago Killian had promised to take Mei on a day trip to the mountains but failed miserably to do it. His excuse? He was feeling a small pressure on his left ankle after playing basketball the day before. Normally, that would suffice as a pretty good reason but not for Mei, at least not that week. She told Killian how much she was anxious for their trip and that he should avoid anything that could ruin their weekend. I guess he didn't listen.

“I think she is still mad about last week. You better make amends today.”

I wasn't trying to make things easier for him, today I was on Mei's side. It was actually quite fun seeing him struggling with the whole situation.

Killian gave a nervous laugh while raising his arm and wrapping it around the back of his neck making a motion from left to right. “I promise I will compensate you, ask me whatever you want and we'll do it.”

Mei put her index finger on her lips, her face slightly tilted to the left. “Sure, I'll think about it first.” She gave a malicious smile before sitting next to Killian. I could feel the panic on his face after being faced with the uncertainty. Knowing him so much, he would do whatever Mei asked just like he promised however, Mei could follow one of two paths, preparing something very special for both of them or punish him for last week.



We went for a comedy movie since we had a heavy week, and we had a blast. One full hour and twenty minutes of crazy pranks and good humor. I didn't know how much I needed it until it had finished.

We chose the last session of the day, so when the movie ended the streets were already very dark and the weather was extremely cold, but for us the night was still a child. We didn't had many opportunities during the week and the area near the University was considerable safe so we had no rush.

I think I still seemed very distant because when Mei went to grab a hot chocolate for the three of us and Killian used that opportunity to ask me if something was wrong. I won't deny, I spent all week thinking about the girl that I saw in the lecture, and although very short I kept reenacting our conversation, her sweet voice and the way she was nervous talking to me but she kept her cool and was very polite and nice during our interaction. So

when Killian looked at me with that worried face I decided the best I could do was to share everything with him. He always gave me good advise and I was sure he could help me comprehend what was happening on my head.

I took a big breath and forced the words out of my mouth. "I've met a girl."

"A girl? Kousei you know lots of girls."

"I know but I had never seen her before." After saying that I paused for a second. I waited for Killian to say something but he looked lost, trying to find the meaning behind what I was telling him.

"You need to give more context. Is she causing you any problem?" His eyes seemingly worried.

"No. I mean, I haven't stopped thinking about her ever since we talked. She was so kind and had this cute smile that keeps repeating on my head."

"Oh, Kousei. Have you been struck by the lovebug?" His face completely changed from worried to mocking.

"What? Of course not." I brushed it off. I was being honest, she seemed really nice and sweet and that was a combination I wasn't used to find on a person. I took an interest in her personality that's all it was, so why was I beating myself up on the inside?

It was cold outside, so cold I could see smoke like structures forming from my breath, but talking about her was increasing my temperature.

"You had never seen her before?"

"No."

"And ever since that day you're constantly thinking about her?"

"Well yea, but not in a creepy way." I realized where the conversation was heading and immediately tried to make an excuse for everything. "Guess I'm just curious."

Killian let out a sigh. He crossed his arms and asked me whether I only wanted to share what was bothering me or if I wanted his honest advice. I chose the later and he asked me to be completely honest with him. There was no point in hiding what I was feeling from him if I wanted his help.

“What do you think about her? Better yet, how do you feel when you think about her?”

I won't lie, I wasn't expecting this question and him to be so straightforward. If not sad, thinking about her made me happy. Just picturing her smile made my day brighter. But I wasn't ready to be that open so soon, and it took a big effort from me to do it.

“My heart beats faster and I feel a cozy sensation building on my chest.” Once I started explaining to him everything felt even easier and in a way freer. I told him how I found myself thinking about her many times during the day and everytime I did it made me happy. I also told him how much I was feeling down for not having another interaction with her since that day even though I made myself available to show her around. “I'm getting the impression she isn't interested as much as I am, and while I am not trying to force any situation it has been hard for me.”

Killian listened attentively to everything I said, and when I finished, he gave me a reassuring pat on the back. “It sounds like you have a crush on her, buddy. And there's nothing wrong with that.” Those words penetrated my soul. His eyes staring directly at mine while enunciated them but I couldn't read his face. Was he happy for me or was he feeling sorry? He put his hand on my shoulder and told me about the time he started dating Mei, he was always awkward on their dates telling unnecessary things at the most inappropriate times because being around her made him so nervous that he sometimes was lost for words, other times his throat would get so dry he had to constantly drink something when she was around, but the best part was feeling so well and free of worries when they were together.

“I also felt so peaceful when we were talking. You know all the stuff I'm going through but that day I didn't even care, I was feeling like a feather and nothing could destroy my day. But it doesn't matter, she didn't felt the same way and this is driving me nuts.” I realized on emotional I was getting from the drop on my voice.

“Maybe she's just shy. It wouldn't surprise me from what you said. Why don't you try talking to her again?”

“Do you think it will be a good idea? Last thing I want is for her to see me as intrusive.”

“It doesn't hurt to try. What did you say her name was?”

“I never said her name.”

“Ok, but you do know her name right?” Killian was intrigued by my answer and so was I. I never got her name and she didn’t get mine either. Our campus could hold no less than 20000 football fields, it was very unlikely we would cross paths again, - we had dorms, libraries, laboratories, sports fields, you name it, we had it - assuming she wanted, how could she find me around the whole place if she didn’t even know who I was?

Chapter Two

“Any luck?” Killian asked as soon as he saw me.

“No, nothing.”

“Did you check near the lake?”

“Yes.”

“What about the library.”

“Same thing.”

“You will find her eventually.”

I sat on the bench near Killian and placed my elbows on top of my knees so that I could rest my face on my hands. It was a sunny day and we were standing in front of the soccer field watching the training. Our team would be playing next month against the Black Bears from Crystal Stars University. Both Universities had a long history of friendly matches but last year a player from their team purposefully injured one of our top players so badly that he was unable to continue playing; his knee had been severely injured and putting more stress on it could cause unrepairable damage. Of course this strained our relationship with them and left a sour taste with us. This match was very personal and we felt pressured to win more than ever.

I grabbed the bottle of water near Killian and drank half of it pouring the other half on my head. It felt refreshing.

“Are you watching the game next month?” I asked him.

“Of course. Somebody has to tell them a few things.”

“Just be careful with what you say.” I replied. “It was horrible what Larson did during the last game, James hasn’t been the same ever since.”

“Soccer was everything to him and he had his professionally contract revoked after the injury, that completely destroyed him.” He glanced at James sitting near the field after saying that. “I don’t know if he will ever recover from that blow.”

“Enough of this, for now our priority is you and the mysterious girl.” He turned his body around to face me. “Tell me how she looks like and maybe I can help you find her.”

I gave my best to remember her but our brief interaction was slowly fading from my head.

“Well, I remember she has bright brown eyes and a darker brown for her hair. She must be about the same height as Mei and she seemed very shy and simple, but that what was beautiful about her.” Just thinking about her brought a small smile to my face, all I could think of was how badly I wanted to see her again. “But what I remember very clearly was her soft voice, it felt like an angel was talking to me.”

“And that my friend, doesn’t help me in any way.” His left hand began patting my back trying to give me some comfort.

“I know, I know,” I said with a sigh. “I just can’t stop thinking about her. It’s like she’s always on my mind, and I can’t get her out.”

“Well, maybe that’s a good thing. I think it means you really like her,” he said “I have never seen you like this before.”

“Like her? Maybe, but not in a romantic way. No way! I just found her interesting that’s all.” I rushed in to correct his words, but I couldn’t help to wonder whether he was right and I was just too afraid to admit it.

“Are you sure? Then why are you blushing?”

“I am not!” I got up as fast as I could

“Now where are you going?” He began laughing so hard I couldn’t hold myself and walked away.

“Instead of teasing, maybe you should help.” And with that I went away. I walked for as long as it took to calm myself down, I was feeling a sudden urge to run and scream but I did control myself, no point in looking like an idiot right? People could start talking and that eventually could get to my father; no way I would let that happen.

I just needed a quiet place to relax and regain control of my emotions, a place no one could disturb me. When I finally got composed I realized my feet had taken me to the Lake.

I wanted to believe faith led me there for a reason so I made my way to the bench and sat alone. The place wasn't very popular among most of the students I knew, I wasn't worried about meeting someone there.

As the afternoon sun began its descent, the sky was painted in hues of pink, orange, and gold. The clouds seemed to be ablaze with fiery colors, while the blue sky peeked through, creating a breathtaking contrast. The warm breeze carried the sweet scent of blooming flowers, and the leaves rustled gently, as if whispering secrets to one another. It was a perfect moment to get lost in the beauty of the world, to let go of worries, and to simply enjoy the present moment.

Suddenly, a ringtone echoed through the air, a sharp and piercing sound that demanded attention. I took my phone out of the pocket and saw the name appear on the screen, my heart sank immediately. I didn't want to answer. The weight of sadness settled on my chest like a heavy stone, making it hard to breathe. I closed my eyes, trying to hold back the feelings that threatened to spill over. Each ring felt like a painful reminder of my mistakes, and I couldn't bear to hear his voice, at least not now. The ringing finally stopped, and I was left with a profound emptiness, as if the call had taken a piece of me with it. I knew I couldn't keep avoiding him forever, but in that moment, all I could do was keep hiding behind the screen until I found the strength to face everything I had done.

"This isn't healthy" I said to myself. *"But I can't avoid it. I am sure they're better off without me."* The hole inside my chest I had carried all these years began feeling deeper and deeper. I had a bitter on my mouth that threatened to fill my entire body. The pounding on my head had become almost unbearable, a sharp pain that seemed to radiate from my temples. I just sat there, feeling the sadness consume my body, as the world around me continued to spin.

That same ringtone echoed again on the air. I gathered all the courage I could before dragging the green option to the left of the screen.

"Hey, Dad," my voice quivered as I answered the phone.

"Kousei, my son, how are you doing?" his voice sounded unamused on the other end of the line.

My heart sank. I knew the answer to that question, but I didn't want to burden him with my problems.

"I'm okay, Dad," I replied, trying to sound as cheerful as possible.

"Good to hear it," he said. "I was wondering if you had any plans for this weekend. Your mother and I were hoping you might come home for a visit."

I hesitated for a moment before answering, "I don't think that's a good idea, Dad. I." I quickly tried to think in an excuse. "I have a report due next week that I really need to focus on."

"Can't you finish it before the weekend?" His reply made me realize that excuse wasn't going to work.

"I can, but it will be a full week. I also have a soccer match need to attend during the week and that will steal me a lot of time."

"Is your soccer match more important than your family?"

"Uhm, of course not."

"It doesn't sound like." I could hear the disappointment on his voice.

"It just a busy week. I promise I will come around and visit as soon as I have time for it, I am focusing so much on my grades right now because I want to have a good score." That wasn't a lie, I could consider myself irresponsible in many aspects but I always worked hard to maintain my grades.

There was a long pause on the other end of the line before my father spoke again. "I understand that you want to do well in school, Kousei, but you have to remember what's important in life. Family comes first."

I felt a pang of guilt in my chest. He was right, but it was hard to pretend everything was fine.

"I know, Dad," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry, I'll try to come home soon."

"That's all I ask," he said before ending the call.

I sat there for a moment, staring at my phone in my hand. The weight of guilt and shame settled even heavier on my chest. I knew I had been distant from my family for too long, but it was hard to face them after all I had done. The thought of opening up about my

struggles and mistakes made my stomach twist into knots. But I couldn't keep running away forever. I needed to find the courage to face my demons and make things right. I took a deep breath and looked up. The sun had already set, and the sky was painted with shades of purple and navy blue. The stars twinkled in the sky like diamonds, and the world was quiet except for the distant sound of crickets chirping.

Just when I closed my eyes to absorb every feeling I was having I heard a noise from someone approaching but the strange presence didn't made me feel uneasy. I wasn't expecting anyone, it surely was just a student leaving the place because of the time. To my surprise, a soft voice barely above a whisper greeted me.

“Hi. Can I join you?”

Chapter Three

I slowly opened my eyes to face the person standing there and immediately felt stunned with the figure in front of me. Could it really be? The girl I had been searching for all this time was right there in front of me. She had a certain aura around her, a mix of mystery and beauty that left me speechless.

I felt my heart skip a beat. "Hi," I replied but my voice was trembling slightly. I had hoped she wouldn't noticed.

She gave me a small smile and stepped closer. "Hi," she replied, her voice soft and melodic. "I'm sorry for surprising you like this. I saw you sitting here and decided to say hi." I felt a flutter in my chest at her words.

"It's okay," I managed to say, trying to keep my voice steady. "I'm just surprised to see you."

She laughed softly, the sound like music to my ears. "I understand. It's been a while since we last saw each other. I was even wondering if you would remember me" I nodded, feeling a rush of memories flood back.

I nodded, feeling a rush of memories flood back. "Of course I remember you," I said, unable to hide the affection in my voice. "I've been looking for you."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Really? Why?" I immediately regretted saying that out loud. What would she think now? That I was some kind of stalker?

I took a deep breath. "Because I was worried you could feel overwhelmed since everything here is new for you." I lied.

She tilted her head slightly, studying me for a moment before a small smile formed on her lips. "That's sweet of you," she said, her voice soft. "But I'm doing okay, really."

I let out a small sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear that." There was a moment of silence between us before I spoke up again.

"Do you wanna me some company?"

"Sure. So, what have you been up to lately?" she asked, taking a seat beside

me on the bench.

I shrugged, suddenly feeling self-conscious. "Not much, really. Just studying and hanging out with friends. How about you?"

"Honestly, not much. I've been too scared of getting lost so for now my routine is class, library and my room." Her smile faded a little after she said that.

"We need to change that. That's no way of spending your time."

She laughed.

"I know, I know," she said, shaking her head. "I just need to get out of my comfort zone a bit more."

"Why didn't you hit me up then? I told you I could've show you around." I asked despite already knowing the answer.

"I really could have used your help but I didn't know how to find you." she replied, looking down at her hands.

"That was actually my fault, I forgot to give you my name or number." I felt regretful reminding myself of that. "Well, you found me now," I said, smiling at her. "And I'm here to help you whenever you need it."

"Thanks, that means a lot," she said, her smile returning.

"Let me introduce myself correctly this time. My name is Kousei Minamoto." I lifted my hand midway and offered it to her hoping she would do the same.

She followed my gesture and offered me her hand in return. "I am Tomoko Kimura."

"Nice to meet you Tomoko."

"It's nice to meet you too, Kousei," Tomoko said, shaking my hand. There was a warmth in her touch that sent shivers down my spine. I wondered if she felt the same way.

We sat there for a few minutes, talking about our classes and interests. I couldn't help but notice how much I enjoyed being around her. Her smile, her laughter, and the way she talked about her passions were all things that drew me to her.

As we talked, I couldn't help but think about how I had been searching for her for so long. I had never felt this way about anyone before.

I knew I didn't want to end that moment there, but I was nervous about how she would respond. I didn't want to ruin our everything or make things awkward between us. I wanted to ask her out but couldn't risk doing it too soon.

After a few moments of silence, I finally gathered the courage to do it without sounding too pretentious. "What about we go and grab some milkshake while I show you around?"

Tomoko looked at Kousei and smiled. "That sounds like a great idea. I'd love to see more of the campus."

A wave of relief washed over me. "Great! There's a place just off campus that makes the best milkshakes in town. Have you ever tried them?"

She shook her head. "No, I haven't. I haven't left the campus yet." She smiled awkwardly.

"It's been what? Two weeks since we met?" I asked.

"Three weeks." She replied.

I was surprise she knew that so precisely, maybe she also was interested in me.

I stood up and offered my hand to Tomoko to help her up. She took it and stood up, and we started walking towards the milkshake place.



As we walked together, I felt my nerves starting to settle. Being around Tomoko was making me feel more confident and comfortable. I wanted to get to know her better and see where this could go.

We arrived at the café and I held the door open for her. Tomoko thanked me and we took a seat at a cozy corner booth.

The café was a cozy, rustic haven tucked away on a quiet street. As soon as you walked in, you were greeted by the warm glow of string lights that adorned the walls and ceiling, casting a soft yellow light over the space. The walls were painted a rich burgundy

color that contrasted beautifully with the exposed brick. The tables were made of dark wood and were scattered around the room, each with a vase of fresh wildflowers in the center.

The décor was eclectic, with an assortment of vintage and modern furnishings that came together to create a cozy and inviting space. Large, comfortable chairs were clustered around small tables, with dimly-lit lamps providing a soft, warm glow.

One of the standout features of the café was the unique artwork that adorned the walls. Paintings and photographs from local artists were on display, adding a touch of whimsy and creativity to the space.

The music that played softly in the background was a mix of soft jazz, with a slight twang of country. It perfectly complemented the laid-back atmosphere of the café, making you feel like you were hanging out in your best friend's cozy living room.

I scanned the menu, trying to decide what to order. "Have you decided what you want?" I asked Tomoko, who was busy taking in the surroundings.

"I think I'll go with a vanilla milkshake," she said, closing the menu and looking at me with a smile. "What about you?"

"I'll have also go with the vanilla," I said, placing my order with the waiter who had just arrived at our table.

As we waited for our milkshakes, we continued our conversation. Tomoko told me more about her interests and hobbies, and I found myself getting more and more drawn to her. She was smart, funny, and had a unique perspective on things.

Before I knew it, our milkshakes arrived in a tall, frosted glass. It was a dreamy concoction that tasted like heaven in a glass. It was made with the creamiest vanilla ice cream, blended with generous portions of fresh strawberries and a dash of honey. With each sip, you could taste the sweetness of the strawberries and the subtle undertones of honey, all perfectly balanced with the creaminess of the ice cream. The texture was smooth and velvety, with just the right amount of thickness that made it easy to drink without feeling too heavy. And to top it off, it was garnished with a dollop of whipped cream and a fresh strawberry, making it almost too beautiful to drink.

We took a sip of our milkshakes at the same time and both let out a satisfied sigh. "This is amazing," Tomoko said, licking a bit of whipped cream off her upper lip.

"I'm glad you like it," I said, feeling a sense of satisfaction.

As we sipped on our milkshakes, we continued talking about ourselves. I found out that Tomoko was a talented artist and loved to draw and paint in her free time. I was impressed by her skills and told her so. She blushed at my compliment. "Thanks, Kousei. You're too kind."

I smiled at her and took another sip of my milkshake. We continued to talk and laugh, our conversation flowing easily. I couldn't help but feel like we had known each other for much longer than just a few hours.

"So, how did you end up here." I asked, trying to get to know her better.

"Uhm?" Tomoko seemed a little taken aback.

"In this University I mean. You told me you were transferred."

"I get it. I actually won a scholarship." She said, looking down.

"Wow. You must be incredible smart, not many get to win a scholarship here." I said, trying to boost her confidence.

"Right," she said with a hint of sadness. " I don't feel like I belong here. Everyone's parents here have achieved so much I can't even compare to them." She let out a deep breath. "And what about you?"

After what she had told me, I couldn't tell her I was one the lucky ones that got to be there because of my parents' status. She might have cut me off completely afterwards. "Like you, I'm on a scholarship," I said, hoping to make her feel better.

"Really? Wow, it's so good knowing I'm not the only one," she replied, sounding more cheerful.

I lowered my voice after seeing her enthusiasm. "Honestly, that shouldn't bother you."

"Kousei, people can make you feel unwelcome when you don't fit in. Trust me." She said, with a hint of pain in her voice.

I knew exactly how she felt. Even though I've been here for a couple of years, I still felt like I didn't belong. But being with Tomoko made me feel like I had found a kindred

spirit. "Well, you have me now. We can navigate this together," I said, offering her a reassuring smile.

I could sense that Tomoko was feeling a bit down about not fitting in. I wanted to cheer her up, so I continued the conversation.

"Tomoko, you're amazing. You won a scholarship to this university, which means you have the talent and potential to succeed. Don't worry about comparing yourself to others. Everyone has their own path and journey to follow," I said, trying to encourage her.

Tomoko looked at me and smiled. "Thanks, Kousei. You already know how to make me feel better," she said, taking another sip of her milkshake.

As the night drew on, I offered to walk her back to her dorm. She graciously accepted, and we headed out of the café. We arrived at her dorm, and I walked her up to her door. I wanted to ask her out on another date, but I didn't want to come on too strong.

"Well, thanks for a great time, Kousei," she said, turning to face me. "I had a lot of fun today."

"I did too," I replied, smiling. "I still haven't shown you around but if you want we can do that on another date."

Tomoko smiled back at me. "I would love that," she said.

"Great, how about next tomorrow?" I asked. "Is it too soon?"

"Tomorrow sounds perfect," she replied, still smiling.

I felt a sense of relief and excitement wash over me. I had really enjoyed spending time with Tomoko, and I couldn't wait to see her again.

"Alright then, I'll call you," I said, feeling more confident now.

"Sounds good, see you then," she replied, as she entered her dorm.

As I turned to leave, Tomoko called out to me. "Kousei, I had a wonderful time tonight. Thank you for everything," she said, smiling at me.

I smiled back at her. "Anytime. I had a great time too."

Chapter Four

"TRIMMM TRIMMMM!" The alarm buzzed off. I slowly opened my eyes, heavier than a stone, to look at the time shown on the screen. It marked 8:20am. I was so late to class and had to rush out if I didn't want to miss the first period.

Yesterday had been so magical and I had some trouble sleeping because I was over thinking. I couldn't shake her out of my mind. Our entire interaction replaying on my head like a warm movie scene on repeat.

I spent most of the dawn thinking about our next date and what to tell her next. I know, yesterday wasn't a proper date but for me it meant a lot. Her presence simply had the power to shake my whole world around. I wasn't used to this feeling, the embracing warmth that came simply from her existence.

In the few hours we spent together I forgot every worry I had, every mistake I made in the past and I just felt free, I felt right and that that's where I wanted to be.

Unfortunately I had almost no sleep time last night, when I felt my mind easing and relaxing, the clock was already marking 4:00am and my first class was at 9:00am. This was definitely a torture! No one should be obliged to attend classes after going through a day full of emotions.

The first period was History - it's an amazing topic for people that are interested in literature and stuff but honestly that wasn't my cup of tea - and I knew that due to my sleep-deprivation it would put me to sleep in record time, but sometimes sacrifices are needed and I wouldn't change anything about yesterday.



I was exhausted from the lack of sleep but I couldn't contain my excitement for my upcoming date with Tomoko. During class, my mind kept wandering to our next adventure together. I spent my break time planning what we could do and imagining the smile on her face when we finally met. As soon as classes ended, I rushed back to my dorm to get ready.

I took my time to get dressed, wanting to look presentable. I chose a clean shirt and jeans, making sure to have my phone and wallet with me. As I walked out the door, I felt a mix of nervousness and excitement.

It took me some time to build up the courage to call her, but after pondering for more than I should had I eventually dialed her number on my cellphone.

The beeping sound felt like an eternity, and I grew increasingly anxious about whether she would even pick up the phone. We had exchanged numbers the night before, but I couldn't help worrying that she might not want to speak to me. Thankfully, my fears were allayed the moment she answered.

"Hi," she said, and I could sense the smile in her voice.

"Hi Tomoko, it's Kousei."

"I know, I have your number." She replied.

"Right. I hope I am not interrupting you or anything."

"It's actually a good time now, I had my last lecture of the day."

"Great. How was it?" I asked, trying to make small talk.

"I had chemistry, so it was actually interesting. We got to do some experimentations that didn't end up as expected," she giggled.

"Should I be worried about you?" I joked.

"I am fine, don't worry. Can't say the same about my some of classmates though."

A wave of relief washed over me as her voice floated through the phone, vibrant and alive. Just that small interaction already made my day completely better. But I couldn't shake the feeling of nervousness as I prepared to ask her the crucial question. She could say no to my request, and if she did I wouldn't know what to think about it. I swallowed a bit of saliva to hydrate my throat that felt so dry due to my anxiety.

"So I was wondering if maybe we could continue where we left off yesterday and I'd walk you around the rest of the places."

"You mean now?" She asked.

"If you're available, yeah."

“Actually, now isn’t a good time.” She said, and my heart sank. Had I misread her signals? Was she not as interested in me as I was in her?

"It's okay," I said, trying to hide my disappointment. "If you need to go, you know how to find me."

“Kousei, now isn’t a good time because I have a group meeting in 15 minutes, but we can meet after that if you don’t mind.” She said, and my heart leapt with joy.

“As long as you’re comfortable with that, I am too.” I said.

"Then I'll call you as soon as we finish," she said, and I couldn't help but feel hopeful about the rest of the day. The anticipation was killing me, but I couldn't wait to see her again and continue to learn more about her.

As soon as we hung up the phone, I paced around my dorm room, my mind racing with excitement. I had a few hours to kill before meeting Tomoko, so I decided to take a walk around campus to clear my head.



The sun was setting and the campus was quiet. I could hear birds chirping in the trees and the sound of leaves rustling in the wind. As I walked, I couldn't help but think about Tomoko and how much I wanted to make a good impression on her.

I did check my phone several times, waiting for her call, but each time I was disappointed. It felt like time was standing still, and I was becoming increasingly anxious.

Finally, my phone rang, and I answered it on the first ring. "Hey Tomoko, how did the meeting go?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

“Tomoko? Is she the girl you’ve been looking for?” The voice on the other side replied. It was Killian.

My heart sank as I realized my mistake. I was so anxious about her call that I answered without checking the caller ID and had assumed it was Tomoko. "Oh, hi Killian," I said, trying to sound nonchalant. "Sorry, I thought you were someone else."

"No worries, man," Killian replied. "What's up? You sound like you're on edge."

"Yeah, I guess I am a bit on edge," I admitted to Killian, keeping my tone casual.

"Just a lot on my mind lately."

Killian changed his tone, sensing my evasiveness. "You sure it's just that? You seem pretty distracted. Is there something you're not telling me?"

I hesitated for a moment, unsure of how much to reveal. Killian was my friend, but I wasn't quite ready to share the details of my budding connection with Tomoko. "Nah, it's nothing serious. Just some personal stuff I'm sorting through."

Killian exhaled, respecting my boundaries. "Alright, man, I get it. You don't seem yourself lately and I am beginning to worry about you. I think our talk yesterday didn't sit well with you and I really don't wanna make things even more difficult than they need to be." He stopped for a second to reevaluate what he wanted to convey. "I am still available if you need help searching for the girl, but please be careful and don't get too deep into this. The chances of you finding her are pretty dim and seeing how entangled you are on this it can really hit you hard if things don't go well."

"I can take care of myself."

"Kousei." He said.

"Look, I appreciate your help but I am fine. I am actually waiting for a call so let's talk back later alright?" And with that I ended the call. I stood there for a moment, my mind swirling with conflicting emotions. Killian's words struck a chord within me, igniting a spark of doubt that I had been desperately trying to suppress. Was I foolishly chasing after an elusive fantasy? Was I just another student in Tomoko's life, someone who was easily replaceable.

As I stared at my phone, waiting for Tomoko's call, I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease creeping in. The weight of uncertainty settled heavily upon my shoulders, and I couldn't shake off the nagging feeling that I was setting myself up for disappointment.

The minutes ticked by, each second stretching into an eternity. The silence on the other end of the line intensified my growing apprehension. What if Tomoko had changed her mind? What if I had misinterpreted her interest in me?

Lost in my thoughts, I found myself at the edge of a the lake. The water shimmered under the light, mirroring my own reflection back at me. I gazed into the depths, searching for answers, but all I found were ripples of uncertainty staring back at me.

Unable to resist the pull any longer, I reached for my phone and dialed Tomoko's number once again. It rang, and I held my breath, desperately hoping for her voice on the other end. But all I received was the soulless tone of voicemail.

I left a brief message, my voice betraying a hint of disappointment. "Hey, Tomoko. It's Kousei. Just wanted to check in and see how you're doing. Give me a call back when you get a chance, okay? Take care."

As I hung up, a wave of desolation washed over me. The reality of the situation began to sink in, and I couldn't help but question my own naivety. Maybe Killian was right. Maybe I had let my hopes get the better of me, diving headfirst into a whirlpool of uncertainty.

With a heavy heart, I began to walk back to my dorm, the once vibrant campus now shrouded in an eerie stillness. The chirping of birds and the rustling of leaves that had once provided solace now felt like mocking whispers, reminding me of my own vulnerability.

As I trudged along the path, I couldn't shake off the gnawing feeling of regret. Had I let myself become too invested, too emotionally entangled in a connection that may not even exist? The weight of the unknown pressed upon me, suffocating my once buoyant spirit.

Arriving at my dorm room, I slumped onto my bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. The room seemed suffused with a sense of melancholy, mirroring my own state of mind. Doubt and disappointment hung in the air, casting a shadow over my heart.

In that moment, I realized that I had allowed myself to become vulnerable, opening up to the possibility of heartache. The uncertainty of whether Tomoko would call or not lingered like a specter, a constant reminder of my own fragility.

As I lay there, enveloped in silence, I couldn't help but wonder if I had made a mistake. But deep down, a flicker of hope remained, a tiny ember that refused to be extinguished. Despite the doubts and the fear of potential rejection, I knew that I had to hold on to that glimmer of hope, for it was the only thing keeping me from succumbing to the darkness of self-doubt.

Just as I was about to give in to the heaviness of disappointment and let the shadows consume me, my phone finally buzzed, breaking the stillness of the evening. I

hastily grabbed it, my heart pounding in my chest, and saw Tomoko's name on the screen. With trembling hands, I answered the call, trying to sound composed. "Hey, Tomoko, how did the meeting go?"

There was a momentary pause on the other end, and I held my breath, waiting for her response. When her voice finally came through, it was filled with warmth and a hint of excitement. "Hey, Kousei. I'm sorry I couldn't call earlier. The meeting ran longer than I anticipated."

"No worries," I replied, trying to sound understanding. "I suppose you're tired and in need of rest. If that's the case, please don't trouble yourself. We can always reschedule for another time."

"Well," she hesitated, her reply tinged with uncertainty, "I will have plenty of time to rest later. Actually, I need to unwind after such a stressful day, that is, if you're still available, of course."

A mixture of relief and embarrassment washed over me. "Of course! I wouldn't miss this opportunity. You're truly a joy to be around," I admitted, inwardly cringing at my own awkwardness.

"Can we meet near the lake?" Tomoko suggested.

A surge of anticipation coursed through me. "Absolutely. I'm on my way," I responded, eager to embrace the chance for connection and the possibility of dispelling the lingering shadows of doubt.

Chapter Five

As I approached the lake, my heart raced with anticipation. The path ahead seemed to stretch endlessly, each step bringing me closer to the meeting spot. My senses heightened, focusing solely on the possibility of seeing Tomoko.

The surrounding scenery blurred, my attention fixated on the image of her in my mind. The world around me became a mere backdrop, insignificant compared to the prospect of being in her presence. Every beat of my heart echoed with excitement, urging me forward.

And then I saw her, standing near the water's edge, bathed in the soft glow of the setting sun. Time slowed as our eyes met, a silent connection forming between us. Her smile, radiant and inviting, tugged at my soul, drawing me in with an irresistible charm.

I quickened my pace, driven by an exhilarating mix of nerves and elation. With each stride, the distance between us diminished, and the gravity of the moment intensified. Tomoko's presence filled the air with an enchanting aura, capturing my attention completely.

Approaching her, I took in the scene that unfolded before me. The tranquil lake mirrored my own emotions, reflecting a sense of hope and possibility. The gentle breeze whispered sweet promises in my ear, heightening the anticipation coursing through my veins.

In order to break the ice between us, I mustered the courage to speak. "You've been rare today," I said, my words hanging in the air between us.

"It has been a busy day," she replied, her voice carrying a hint of weariness. I sensed that something was amiss.

"A good busy day?" I asked, searching for reassurance. Her lowered head spoke volumes, revealing that things were not as positive as they seemed.

"These weeks haven't been easy," she admitted, a trace of vulnerability creeping into her voice. "I think I might be falling behind, and I'm afraid the school will revoke my scholarship."

My heart sank at her confession, understanding the weight of her words. "You just need time to adapt," I offered, hoping to provide some solace. "I'm sure things will begin to workout."

"Kousei, I can't lose this scholarship," she pleaded, her voice tinged with desperation. "My family needs..." Her voice trailed off, the unspoken burden hanging heavily in the air.

Concern etched my face as I pressed further, determined to unravel her worries. "Is there something wrong?" I asked gently, encouraging her to open up, assuring her that she could trust me.

"No, nothing," she replied hastily, her words lacking conviction. But her eyes betrayed her, revealing the turmoil within.

"You can trust me," I assured her, sincerity ringing in my voice. I wanted her to understand that I was there for her, that she didn't have to face her fears alone.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she mustered the courage to reveal her fears. "Life hasn't been easy on my parents, and winning this scholarship took a tremendous financial burden off their shoulders. One I can't afford to lose. I am not sure I will be able to keep up with the expectations people have for me," she confessed, shame emanating from her as she raised her hands to cover her face.

"Tomoko, you earned your place here," I reassured her, my voice filled with conviction. "No one is doing you a favor. All you need is some time to adapt, and someone to guide you during the first weeks, maybe months. I remember I had a hard time when I first got here too. It was all so unfamiliar, and what got me through those early days was having my friend Killian around. I can be that person for you."

She looked at me, her eyes filled with a mix of longing and vulnerability, searching for solace. "I don't know what to do anymore," she admitted, her voice heavy with a sense of loss. "I feel so lost. When I asked if you could come here, I wasn't thinking about a tour. I just needed someone I could talk to. It may sound strange, but being with you yesterday brought me such peace, and I need that feeling today as well."

"You don't have to apologize," I responded, my voice filled with empathy. Unable to resist the urge to offer comfort, I gently placed my hand on top of hers, a gesture of solidarity and support. In that moment, I wanted her to know that I was here for her, ready to be the guiding presence she needed.

As our hands touched, a flicker of warmth spread between us. I could feel her tension slowly easing, as if my touch carried a soothing energy that reached deep within her.

I leaned in closer, mindful of her boundaries, and offered her a reassuring smile. She mirrored my smile, with a glimmer of hope in her eyes. Though no words were spoken, the silent exchange conveyed a powerful message of mutual support and appreciation. She mouthed the words "thank you," and I nodded in response, assuring her that she was not alone.

"What if we create a study group?" I suggested, maintaining the tender tone in my voice. "We can meet daily and go through our lessons together."

Her concern was evident as she questioned, "Wouldn't that be taking up a lot of your time? I don't want to burden you."

With a genuine smile, I reassured her, "You won't be a burden at all. I would be glad if I can help even a little. Let's make it work."

"Only as long as it doesn't interfere with your life," she added, still worried about inconveniencing me.

"We start tomorrow then," I confirmed, radiating enthusiasm. "We can text each other when we're free during the day and find a time that works for both of us."

"I can't express how much this means to me." She said. "I've been meaning to ask," she continued hesitantly. "How did you navigate through your own challenges when you first arrived here?"

"I had my fair share of challenges when I first arrived," I admitted. "It took time to adjust to the new environment, the workload, and the expectations." A flicker of vulnerability flashed in my eyes, but I swiftly pushed it aside. "But hey, you'll find out that I'm actually very easygoing and don't take myself too seriously," I lightened the mood with a playful grin. "Besides, I came here with a friend, as I mentioned before, and we always find ways to entertain ourselves."

Curiosity sparkled in her gaze as she asked, "Is he on a scholarship as well?"

Caught in the web of my own fabrication, I froze, grappling with the weight of my falsehood. Honesty tugged at my conscience, but I feared jeopardizing the trust we had established. With a deep breath, I mustered the nerve to respond, "Yes, he is," my voice tinged with anxiety.

"Wow, you were really lucky," she remarked, impressed by the seemingly

extraordinary coincidence. "Both winning scholarships to the same place? What were the odds?"

A mixture of guilt and relief swirled within me as her words hung in the air. "I know," I replied softly, a subtle reminder of the lie that lingered between us. In that moment, I vowed to myself that I would find a way to rectify the situation, to build our relationship on a foundation of truth and trust, I just needed to figure how.



Over the next few weeks, our study group became a cornerstone of support and friendship. We met regularly, diligently going through our lessons, discussing challenging topics, and helping each other understand complex concepts. Our study sessions weren't just about academics; they became a space where we could share our thoughts, fears, and triumphs.

As time went on, I noticed a remarkable transformation in Tomoko. Her confidence grew, and she embraced the challenges of her scholarship with newfound strength. She started to recognize her own worth and capabilities, understanding that she deserved her place in that esteemed institution as much as anyone else. Witnessing her growth filled me with a sense of pride and admiration.

The more time I spent with Tomoko, the more I realized that she, in fact, became my guiding light. Though she believed I helped her navigate through her struggles, it was she who unwittingly helped me overcome my own fears. The worries that once consumed me seemed to dissipate in her presence, or perhaps I had simply forgotten them amidst the genuine connection we had formed.

However, beneath the surface, a weight burdened my conscience. I grappled with the knowledge that I had constructed our relationship on a lie. Instead of confessing the truth, I allowed the lie to fester and expand, perpetuating a deception that ate away at my integrity. Each time Tomoko asked a question related to my supposed scholarship, I found myself weaving a web of falsehoods, oblivious to the deepening pit I was digging for myself.



One afternoon bathed by the golden glow of the sun, I found solace in the serene park. The delicate scent of freshly cut grass wafted through the air, intertwining with the

melodic symphony of birdsong. Amidst this idyllic scene, my solitude was interrupted when Mei gracefully made her way towards me.

"I know Killian won't say anything because he doesn't want to bother you, but I have a feeling you've been avoiding us." Mei inquired, her eyes filled with concern. "Did something happen?"

Startled by her observation, I quickly denied, "No, why would you say that?"

Mei's eyes reflected a sense of longing. "You haven't spent much time with us lately. It's not like you."

I paused, realizing that my absence hadn't gone unnoticed. The truth weighed heavily on my heart, but I hesitated to share the real reason behind my recent behavior. "I've just been busy, that's all." I offered, hoping to deflect her concerns.

A flicker of disappointment crossed Mei's face as she probed further, her voice filled with vulnerability. "So busy that you don't have time for us anymore?"

Feeling the weight of her words, I met her gaze. "Mei, it's not like that..."

Her expression turned questioning, and her voice laced with a hint of uncertainty. "Did we do something wrong?"

"No, absolutely not!" I exclaimed, trying to portray a tinge of reassurance in my voice.

"Then what happened?"

I sighed, realizing I couldn't hide it any longer. "It's just... I've been seeing someone."

A mixture of surprise and curiosity flickered in Mei's eyes. She leaned closer, encouraging me to share more.

"There's nothing wrong with that, why didn't you just tell us something?" Mei questioned.

I hesitated for a moment, gathering my thoughts before opening up further. "Because, honestly, I'm not sure how she feels about me," I admitted. Recognizing Mei's insight into matters of the heart, I decided to seek her advice. "I'm also not entirely sure

about my own feelings for her."

Mei leaned in, her eyes attentive. "What do you mean by that?" she asked, eager to understand the complexity of my emotions.

With sincerity, I shared the story of how we met and the profound impact she had on me. I described how our connection grew over the past weeks, how I found myself constantly thinking about her, and how being with her felt undeniably right.

Mei processed my words, drawing a conclusion from my narrative. "And now you're uncertain about what all of this means," she surmised.

"Exactly," I replied, acknowledging her understanding.

With a warm smile, Mei inquired, "Have you ever been in love before?"

I paused, reflecting on my past experiences. "I've never felt this way about a girl before, if that's what you're asking," I confessed.

"I think you've fallen for her," Mei remarked, her joy evident. "And I'm genuinely happy for you. Killian will be too."

My insecurities surfaced once again, and I voiced my fear. "But what if she doesn't feel the same? What if she runs away the moment I reveal my true feelings?"

Mei placed a comforting hand on my shoulder, her voice gentle yet reassuring. "When it comes to love, it's about taking risks and embracing chances. You'll never know unless you try."

She stood by my side silently, allowing me time to process her words. It dawned on me that she was right—I couldn't keep dwelling on my uncertainties forever. If I wanted something to happen, I had to take action.

"Why don't you ask her to join us for a group outing?" Mei suggested, her eyes brimming with encouragement.

"A date? Am I trying to scare her off?" I quipped, attempting to lighten the mood.

Mei chuckled, clarifying her intention. "No, I meant a casual night out as friends. You could invite her to join us, the four of us, so that she can meet your friends and we can get to know her better. We'll be there to support you and share our thoughts."

"That's actually not a bad idea," I admitted, feeling a glimmer of hope.

"Of course it isn't," Mei responded, a hint of pride in her voice. "Just talk to her and don't worry about Killian. I'll fill him in on everything."

Chapter Six

Kousei's in love," Killian playfully blurted out, unable to contain his excitement.

"Could you please keep it down?" I requested, feeling a mix of embarrassment and anticipation.

"Why? Afraid she might overhear?" Killian teased, raising an eyebrow.

"Let's not make this any harder for him," Mei interjected, her tone pleading Killian to stop.

Agreeing with Mei, Killian relented. "Alright, alright. But you have to admit, he's been keeping this from us for a while."

Shaking off their playful banter, Mei turned her attention to the matter at hand. "So, have you told her yet, Kousei?"

"Not yet, but I plan on doing it today," I replied, a mix of excitement and nervousness filling my voice. "Remind me where we're going again?"

"We're going to grab some food at Jensen's Diner," Mei reminded me with a sparkle of enthusiasm in her eyes. "They have live music and karaoke—it'll be a fun night."

Nervousness crept into my voice as I responded, "Got it."

Killian, ever the supportive friend, chimed in. "Just tell her you'd like her to meet your friends. I'm sure she'll be cool with it."

I nodded, considering his advice. "She's a bit shy though, so I'm not sure how she'll respond."

Killian draped his arm over my shoulder, offering support. "And pass up the opportunity to spend time with us? Trust me, Kousei, she'll come around."

Mei chimed in with reassurance, her smile comforting. "Don't worry, Kousei. Just try to convince her and let her know it'll be a great opportunity to meet new people. We'll make her feel welcome."



Tomoko's presence was a sight to behold as she sat gracefully on the grass reading a book, beneath the gentle sway of a tree's branches. The interplay of sunlight filtering through the leaves adorned her face, enhancing her natural beauty with an ethereal glow.

I couldn't help but smile as I approached her, careful not to disrupt the enchantment she unknowingly cast upon me. She looked breathtaking in her red floral dress, every detail accentuating her elegance. Her captivating brown eyes seemed to hold a world of secrets for those who dared to gaze deeply into them.

"How was your day?" I asked while joining her on the grass.

She pondered for a moment before responding, "Slow. But I must admit, I've been curious ever since you mentioned you had something to ask me. Why did you keep me waiting for so long?"

I nodded, feeling a tinge of guilt. "Yeah, sorry. I wanted to ask you in person."

Curiosity gleamed in her eyes as she inquired, "So, what was it?"

Just as I summoned the courage to broach the topic of going out with Killian and Mei, two figures gradually made their way towards us. I turned my gaze to them and recognized Nicole and Duncan, acquaintances whom I now felt a sense of shame to face. While we hadn't been particularly close, we had spent considerable time together before the recent weeks unfolded.

"Well, look who we have here," the tall and athletic young man chimed in, stepping closer to us.

As they came nearer, I could clearly recognize their faces. Duncan, approached with a wide grin. His dark hair and eyes complemented the casual ensemble of a denim jacket, white T-shirt, and jeans. Her choice of attire—a black knee-length skirt paired with a pink blouse—highlighted her features and her deep blue eyes held a hint of trouble, although not quite as captivating as Tomoko's.

"It's not right to dismiss your friends the way you did, Kousei," Nicole's voice resonated with a touch of reproach. "You might hurt their feelings."

Duncan chimed in, his eyes fixated on Tomoko, as he remarked, "Seems like you've found yourself a new friend. She's quite cute."

My blood boiled with anger upon hearing his words. Tomoko possessed a beautiful soul and certainly did not deserve any judgment.

Tomoko looked at me, seeking solace in my gaze, silently pleading for reassurance in that uncomfortable moment. Her expression asked if there was a problem.

Stepping forward, I insisted that they had no business interfering with her and should leave her alone.

Nicole's smile remained intact as she responded, "We're not doing anything wrong, Kousei. Or are we?" Her gaze shifted towards Tomoko, attempting to provoke a reaction.

Tomoko, maintaining her composure, replied, "I don't think so."

"See? She's fine with us being here," Nicole insisted. "However, I must ask, I've heard you're here on a scholarship, so clearly, you're not one of us."

Sensing the urgency to intervene and halt Nicole's line of questioning, I opened my mouth to speak, but Duncan interrupted me. Tomoko's discomfort and confusion were evident, and Nicole's words had reopened a wound she had once experienced when she first arrived.

Undeterred, Nicole pressed on, her tone edged with skepticism, "How does it feel being so close to the heir of the Minamoto empire?"

Confusion etched across Tomoko's face as she replied, "I don't understand. There must be some misunderstanding."

"Don't you recognize the person beside you? Or are you just pretending to win him over?" Nicole's words dripped with insinuation.

"I think you're mistaken. Kousei is also on a scholarship," Tomoko calmly clarified.

Surprise flashed across Nicole and Duncan's faces as they exchanged glances, a sense of victory gleaming in their eyes.

"Let's not interrupt them any longer, Nicole. I'm sure Kousei has a lot of explaining to do," Duncan laughed, and with that, they departed.

Chapter Seven

I couldn't bear to meet Tomoko's gaze now. How would she react after what Nicola had insinuated? I had been meaning to tell her, but each time, my courage faltered, leaving me lost in a sea of embarrassment.

Taking a deep breath, I turned around to face her, realizing the look of disbelief etched on her face. She sought comfort in me, longing for an explanation of what had just transpired, but at that moment, words escaped me.

Sensing her confusion, I reached out and gently took her hands in mine. "Tomoko," I whispered, my voice filled with sincerity. She startled slightly, her eyes searching mine for answers. Disappointment and hurt lingered in her gaze.

"A heir?" she questioned, her voice trembling.

"I wanted to tell you," I confessed, my voice filled with regret.

"A heir, Kousei. You told me you were here on a scholarship," she pointed out, her tone tinged with hurt.

"I was afraid. Afraid that if you knew the truth, you would see me differently, treat me differently." I pleaded, my voice filled with remorse.

"Why would I do that?" Her question hung in the air, laden with confusion.

"Because you said how you felt that everyone here views you differently, with a sense of superiority. If I had revealed who I truly was, would you have been as open and accepting?" I asked, attempting to explain.

For a brief moment, understanding flickered in her eyes, as if she grasped my concerns. However, it quickly gave way to her initial state. "That wasn't for you to decide. Who do you think I am?"

"I never wanted to lie to you, but I also couldn't bear the thought of losing you," I reasoned desperately. "I didn't intend for this charade to last this long, but every time I mustered the courage to tell you the truth, fear consumed me, and I became afraid of losing you."

"Losing me? I am not your possession," she retorted, her voice filled with

frustration.

"That's not what I meant, Tomoko. Ever since I met you, my life has gained more clarity. Being with you has changed me in ways I can't express," I admitted, my voice sincere.

"You should have been honest with me Kousei, I opened my heart to you, told you about my worries hoping you would understand because we were similar and I find out by others it was all a lie?" Her voice trembled with a mix of hurt and anger.

"But I did understand you Tomoko, we don't need to be the same to help each other." I said. "I knew you would see me that way but that's not how it is."

"I can't believe you're trying to make excuses for yourself." Tomoko remorsefully told me.

"They're not excuses. Would you take the time to know me as you did if you knew who I was?" I tried to look into her soul through her eyes. "We have so much in common and created some wonderful memories, Tomoko. I wouldn't change it for anything."

"Kousei, maybe your intentions were good, but everything was built on a lie," she said with her voice filled with sadness. Slowly, she released my hand from hers. "How can I even trust you from now on?" Tears streamed down her face.

She gathered her things, stood up, and left me there without a word.

I watched as she walked away, my heart heavy with regret. I knew I had hurt her deeply, and the consequences of my actions were now painfully clear.



The weight of my mistakes bore down on my soul, the pain seeping into every fiber of my being. The last thing I wanted was to hurt Tomoko, yet I had done just that. After she left, I walked back to my dorm, my mind consumed with the turmoil of the situation. The heaviness of my emotions was evident on my face, prompting concerned questions from those I passed. I couldn't bring myself to engage with anyone, choosing instead to ignore their inquiries.

I was already close to my door when I found Killian standing in the corridor. His

room was right next to mine and unfortunately he was outside in the worst possible moment for me. I could hide a lot from many people but not from him, he knew me better than I knew myself.

"Did you talk to her?" he asked as I neared him.

"I'm not in the mood right now. We can talk later," I replied, my voice devoid of energy.

"Just wait, Kousei. Did something happen?"

I stood there for a moment, my hand resting on the doorknob, contemplating my response. My eyes welled up with tears, and I couldn't bear to meet his gaze. It wasn't the right time for me to share.

"I'll tell you later," I managed to say, trying to sound composed. With that, I opened my door and entered my room, locking it behind me.

Finally, I found solace in my refuge, a place where I could be myself without the burden of maintaining a facade. I walked over to my bed and collapsed onto it. Though the mattress was soft, its comfort failed to alleviate the stiffness that had taken hold of my entire body, the physical manifestation of the emotional pain I had inflicted upon myself.

Tears streamed down my face, my nose became congested, and everything felt wrong in that moment. The weight on my chest intensified, a suffocating pressure that made me fear for my very existence.

Then, I felt a vibration in my pocket—a notification from my phone. I instinctively reached for it, secretly hoping to see Tomoko's name on the screen. However, it was Killian calling. I never imagined that loving someone could cause this much pain, but it did.

For the first time, I admitted to myself that I loved Tomoko, but only after losing her. This only made me see how pathetic I was, proving how unworthy I was and that my parents were right for doubting me. I would forever remain nothing more than my father's heir. I would never forge my own path, and most agonizingly, I would never live the life I yearned for.

With the phone still on my hand I decided to send Tomoko a message. I knew she didn't want to speak to me at the moment, which is why I refrained from calling her, but I wanted her to know the truth. If she never forgave me, at least she deserved to know the

truth.

Tomoko,

I'm truly sorry for everything. I'm sorry for lying to you.

I just wanted to make you feel more comfortable around me, to be someone you could trust. I know that's not an excuse, but when I saw you crying that night at the lake, all I wanted was to comfort you and become a person you could rely on.

I know I went about it the wrong way, and again, I apologize. Being with you has always brought out the best in me, and I've never felt this way before.

I hope someday you can find it in your heart to forgive me and we can start all over.

Sincerely,

Kousei.

I read the message once more before summoning the courage to press send. The text was clear and honest, and for the first time I opened myself to her about my feelings, I just hoped that she could understand why I did what I did now.

My eyelids felt heavy, weighed down by the burden of my emotions, when I heard a knock on the door.

"Kousei," a familiar voice called out. "Come on, I know something is troubling you." It was Killian. "Please, just open the door and let's talk."

I had never felt so vulnerable before, not even when dealing with my family issues. It was embarrassing to be in this situation, but I couldn't bear it alone. I rose from the bed, contemplating whether I should open the door. Everything seemed difficult and distant.

"I promise I won't judge," Killian assured me, his voice filled with concern.

I walked towards the door and unlocked it, allowing him to enter. When I opened the door, he looked at me with a sad expression. I'm sure he could see the redness in my eyes, evidence of the deep sadness consuming me. He made his way inside the room, and we both settled on the blue sofa positioned in front of the television.

After a moment of silence, he walked over to the fridge and retrieved a glass of water, adding a spoonful of sugar. "Here, drink this. It will help you calm down."

I accepted the glass from his hand and took a small sip of the drink he had prepared for me. Although it was meant to soothe me, I felt no immediate relief. The pain within me ran deep, seemingly immune to any remedy.

"Tell me what happened," Killian gently urged.

"I lied to her," I began, my voice laden with remorse.

"What do you mean?" he inquired, attempting to follow my train of thought.

"Do you remember how we initially met in class, and how I spent days searching for her afterwards?" I asked, seeking confirmation.

"Yeah," he replied, nodding, trying to grasp the situation.

"Well, after reconnecting, we went out together to get to know each other better, and it was magical. Being in her presence felt incredible, and I wanted that feeling to last," I explained, my gaze fixated on the drink resting on the table. I took another sip, uncertain if it was the drink or simply opening up to Killian that began to alleviate the weight in my chest.

"But then, a day later, I saw the sadness in her eyes, and she tearfully confided in me about not feeling like she belonged here. She believed she was different from us," I continued.

"Different how?" Killian asked, intrigued by the unfolding story.

"She came here on a scholarship and felt she didn't deserve to be here. That's what she thought, at least. People treated her with superiority, making her feel out of place. However, she felt trapped because having this scholarship took a financial weight from her parents and she didn't dare losing it."

"It must have been incredibly difficult for her," Killian empathized.

"I thought the same. I couldn't bear to see her like that and do nothing. So, in that moment, I did the stupidest thing I could've done. I told her that I, too, was on a scholarship," I confessed, glancing at Killian to gauge his reaction. His face reflected understanding and empathy, as if he comprehended the pain and reasoning behind my actions.

"I wanted to make her feel better, that's all. I didn't want her to see me any differently and I'm sure she would if I told her who I really was."

"Did you ever consider telling her the truth?" he asked.

"Every single day. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. I feared losing her, and as time went on, the lies only grew more consuming," I admitted.

"And what happened today?" Killian inquired.

"I was in the middle of talking to her, about to ask her if she wanted to go out with you, Mei, and me, as we had planned. But just before that, Duncan and Nicola showed up," Killian's expression grew frustrated at the mention of their names, as if he knew they had caused trouble. "And things took a turn for the worse. To sum it up, Tomoko now knows the truth about what I did and who I really am, and it devastated her that I lied to her."

"Did you try explaining it to her?" Killian inquired, concerned.

"I did, but I think it only made things worse," I replied with a heavy sigh.

"Kousei, she just needs time to process everything. You have to give her that space," Killian advised, his voice filled with understanding.

"How long should I wait?" I asked, attempting to conceal my pain.

"I don't know. Every person needs their own time to heal. Just don't give up. I'm sure she will eventually understand what happened and why you felt pressured to lie," he reassured me.

"But what if she doesn't?" I questioned, my anxiety seeping through.

"Then I'll be here for you, no matter what. Try talking to Mei as well. Being a girl, she might provide better insights and advice regarding Tomoko," Killian suggested.

As I absorbed his words, the pressure I had been feeling inside me began to dissipate gradually. Although the weight of the day's events still lingered, opening up about my mistake made it feel less burdensome and more like a problem I could work to fix.

Chapter Eight

I stood nervously in the bustling university hallway, my eyes locked on the door that led to the classroom where Tomoko's last lecture had just ended. Every passing second felt like an eternity, my heart pounding in my chest. I had made up my mind to wait for her, hoping for a chance to talk and make things right after the lies I had told.

The cacophony of voices filled the air as students spilled out of the classroom, but my focus remained solely on that doorway. I couldn't help but pace back and forth, my palms growing clammy with anxiety. Would she even come out? Would she be willing to listen to me? The weight of my mistakes bore down on me, and the thought of losing her was unbearable.

Finally, I caught a glimpse of her emerging from the crowd, her expression guarded, her eyes betraying a mix of hurt and uncertainty. My heart skipped a beat, and I took a deep breath, mustering the courage to face the difficult conversation ahead.

As she drew nearer, I stepped forward, my voice catching in my throat. I called out her name, desperately hoping she would stop, that she would give me a chance to explain. The world around us faded into the background as my attention focused solely on her.

Our eyes met, and I could see the turmoil reflected in her gaze. The hallway became a silent witness to the emotional distance between us, a stark reminder of the trust I had shattered. All I wanted was a chance to make things right, to bridge the gap that had formed between us.

With a mix of apprehension and determination, I reached out, my hand trembling slightly, silently pleading for her to stay, to hear me out. Time seemed to stand still as I anxiously awaited her response, my heart pounding in my chest, desperately hoping that she would grant me the opportunity to express my remorse and prove my sincerity.

I watched as Tomoko's expression hardened, her eyes cold and distant. It was clear that she had made up her mind, and no amount of pleading or explanation would sway her. As she took a step back, her voice carried a mix of hurt and resolve.

"I can't do this right now, Kousei," she said, her voice filled with a sadness that pierced my heart.

"Please, just let me explain," I pleaded, desperation creeping into my voice.

"There's nothing left to explain," she shook her head, pain painted over her face. "You're just another liar that pretended to be my friend so that you could use me."

The accusation stung, and I felt the weight of her words crash down upon me. How could she think I was using her?

"Why would I do that?" I asked, my voice trembling with a mix of hurt and confusion.

"Only you can answer that question." she replied, her voice laced with disappointment. She turned away from me, her steps heavy with the weight of betrayal.

I stood there, feeling a whirlwind of emotions crashing within me. Regret, sorrow, and a deep ache of loss engulfed my being.

As I watched her disappear from sight, a profound sense of helplessness washed over me. I took a deep breath and asked myself to calm down. As Killian said, she needed her time to heal, and so did I. With a heavy heart, I turned away from the hallway, determined to give her the space she needed.

But as I redirected my focus, I was confronted with the worst sight I could have encountered in that moment. Duncan, wearing a mad smile on his face, was walking towards me.

"That's what happens when you put a girl above your friends," he taunted.

"After what you've done, you're still foolish enough to come near me?" I retorted, my anger seething.

"Me? You're the liar, not me," he continued smirking. "I did you a favor. She has no standards like us, she's just a low life that got lucky. It would be a disgrace for you to have your name stained by her."

"How dare you?"

"You know what? I decided I will try my shot with her, after all defenseless girls tend to be quite a catch."

My blood boiled, and I clenched my fist, unable to contain my fury any longer. I

was ready to strike him, to make him pay for his spiteful words. But before I could act, something held me back. It was a firm grip on my arm. I turned around and saw Killian standing there, his gaze filled with warning.

"Don't waste your time with him, he's not worthy," Killian reprimanded me, his voice filled with authority.

I gritted my teeth, my anger still raging. "I don't care," I muttered defiantly.

"But we do," Mei interjected, her voice filled with genuine concern. "Let's focus on what really matters right now."

Reluctantly, I released my clenched fist and took a step back. Their words resonated with me, reminding me of the bigger picture. Engaging in a fight with Duncan would only lead to more trouble. With a heavy sigh, I turned my back on Duncan, disregarding his smug expression.



"Ignore him, he means trouble," Killian suggested as we descended the stairs leading to the cafeteria. Each step felt like a burden, weighing me down with the weight of the world. The hushed whispers and sympathetic glances from fellow students only added to the unease that consumed me.

"I can't stand him anymore," I muttered through gritted teeth. "Why did I ever waste my time with them?"

Mei placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder, locking her gaze with mine. "We all have things we're embarrassed about, Kousei."

As we entered the cafeteria, the vibrant hum of conversation and the clatter of trays filled the space, creating an illusion of normalcy that clashed harshly with the storm raging inside me. My heart pounded in my chest, and a knot tightened in my stomach, making the thought of food unappealing.

We found an empty table tucked away in a corner, seeking solace in its relative seclusion. The atmosphere was suffocating, as if the walls themselves were closing in on us. The sound of our footsteps seemed to echo in the silence, a stark contrast to the bustling activity around us.

Silently, we took our seats, the weight of the situation palpable in the air. Mei's eyes bore into mine, filled with unwavering support, while Killian's expression revealed a mix of concern and determination.

"Arrrrgh!" Mei suddenly exclaimed, her outburst shattering the silence that enveloped us. Startled, Killian and I turned to her, our eyes wide with surprise. "Can you at least tell us who she is?" she demanded, with evident frustration.

A heavy sigh escaped my lips as I contemplated her question. Finally, I mustered the courage to respond, my voice laced with regret. "Her name is Tomoko," I began, my words trembling slightly. "She's... someone I care about deeply."

"You mean someone you like?" Mei interjected. I could see from the side of my eye Killian make a sign for her that she shouldn't have said that.

Mei interjected, her tone brimming with curiosity, "You mean someone you like?"

Caught off guard, I glimpsed Killian discreetly signaling to Mei, a silent plea for her to refrain from pressing further, knowing that delving deeper into my feelings for Tomoko could complicate an already complex situation. I returned my attention to Mei and replied cautiously, "It's... more complicated than you think."

Mei's persistence didn't waver as she pressed on, her voice filled with genuine curiosity, "Why are you so scared of admitting it?"

My heart tightened, burdened by the weight of my past mistakes. I hesitated for a moment, searching for the right words to convey my fears. "Because... because she deserves better," I declared, the sincerity in my voice evident.

Both Mei and Killian stood there, their silence urging me to continue, to shed light on the depths of my apprehension. I took a deep breath, steeling myself to reveal the painful truth. "I've always hurt people I love."

Mei's eyes widened, her expression mirroring her surprise at my confession. "Kousei," she began gently, "You can let your past mistakes dictate your future."

That wasn't something I was ready to talk about. My sister could have been emotionally scarred for life because of me and that wasn't something I could easily forget, luckily she was too young to remember it. "Let's not let the food go to waste." I replied trying to change the subject.



We decided to go for a walk around the campus after lunch. The sun radiated its warmth, casting a golden hue across the sky, while fluffy clouds meandered lazily, intermittently obscuring its brilliance. The air carried a refreshing crispness, invigorating my senses and rejuvenating my spirit.

As we stepped outside, the bustling sounds of the cafeteria gradually faded away, replaced by the gentle rustling of leaves and the distant laughter of students enjoying the day. The campus seemed to come alive with a vibrant energy, as if it had its own heartbeat, synchronized with our footsteps.

“So,” Mei, always brimming with curiosity, broke the silence, “Any plans for the weekend?”

“We could go karting.” Killian chimed in with a mischievous grin. “I still can’t believe I came third last time.”

Mei shot him a playful glance. “A sore loser, huh? I was thinking more along the lines of a camping trip. It’s been too long since we last did that.”

Killian grinned, his eyes lighting up with anticipation. “I’m all for it! Camping under the stars, sitting around a campfire, and sharing stories—it sounds like the perfect way to unwind.”

“Hate to break it but we actually, we have the game this weekend, remember?” I interjected, reminding them of our upcoming game against the Black Bears on Saturday.

Killian’s expression turned thoughtful. “Right, I almost forgot. Camping will have to wait. We can plan it for the following weekend.”

“Well, I won’t be available the next weekend either. I’ll be visiting my parents.”

“Wait, can you repeat that?” Mei asked astonished.

“What? It’s been a while and I promised them I would do it more often.” I replied.

“Have you told them about it?”

I shook my head. “No, not yet.”

She raised an eyebrow, curious. "Do you intend to tell them?"

I hesitated for a moment. "Not really. I mean, is it really necessary? I can visit them anytime you know that right?"

Mei's eyebrows raised. "Wow, they'll be in for quite a surprise." Her astonishment was evident in her voice.

"It hasn't been that long."

Mei interrupted, with her tone more serious now. "Isn't more than three months considered a long time?"

I rolled my eyes at her question. "Fine, but I had my reasons. Can we just change subject?"

Mei, undeterred, continued with a mischievous smile. "Can I meet Tomoko?"

I furrowed my brow, taken aback by her request. "You're being quite insensitive today, aren't you?"

She giggled, shrugging off my comment. "I'm serious. I want to get to know her."

"Why do you even need my permission?"

"Because I want to."

"You can do whatever you want with your time. But you will be probably better off if you left out my name."

"Anyway," Killian chimed in, breaking the tension, "Are we ready for Saturday?"

A flicker of annoyance flashed across my face. "Knowing Duncan will be there is honestly getting on my nerves."

"I get it," Killian nodded sympathetically, "But let's focus on the game, I'm sure it will help relieve some pressure."

"Why did you have to mention him?" Mei interrupted, her tone tinged with concern.

Confused, we turned to Mei, and she gestured for us to look ahead. There he was, Duncan, always with his sneaky ways and a smug smile, trying to convey a sense of superiority. Leaning against a tree, arms crossed, he watched us approach. Standing near him was someone, and from a distance, I recognized her as Nicole, who was often seen with him.

However, as we got closer, my heart sank. It wasn't Nicole beside Duncan, it was Tomoko. I couldn't believe my eyes. What was she doing near him?

My expression couldn't have been more obvious, reflecting my concern. Duncan was the last person I wanted her to be associated with. He was a troublemaker, and this situation spelled trouble.