Road to Nowhere

#  Chapter one

##  March 30th, 2013

The train ride from Tokyo lasted the equivalent to days (in my mind) instead of a measly five hours. All I could do was listen to music and play with my phone as the train traveled through the plains and farmlands, a clear sign that I was getting closer to my destination: Okayama Prefecture. Then I would be in Yakage, a town located within what is known as the Oda district. Moving back to once familiar ground is a very nerve-wracking and relatively new feeling; “Call me as soon as you get there and tell me what it’s like!” Is the text message my friend Harima Sadashi sent the moment she and I parted ways. It feels so weird to think of her as my “friend from home” now that I am back here.

I bounced my knee and played with my fish tail braided hair, as I thought about the faces that I would have to force myself to remember after leaving four years ago. I looked the same: the usual pale skin, light brown eyes and freckles that rest on my cheeks. Today I was wearing a daffodil yellow sundress, white leggings and matching yellow flats—my mom insisted I wore a sunhat when there was in actuality no chance of its bright rays giving me some tanned advantage here. The only person I managed to stay in contact with in Yakage was my old friend, Midori Risatani and just barely if I must admit. *I hope nothing has changed too much*, I thought as my train came to a stop. Here goes nothing;

I scan the areas of the station, which is semi-crowded and chilly, as I zip up my brown jacket. I clumsily shove pass the unfamiliar strangers-who were also looking for someone just as much as I was. I remembered it like this just as how I left it. It has been four years since I’ve been here so I thought I could recognize Midori easily. Even though we’ve sent each other pictures, it doesn’t compare to actually *seeing* the person I suppose. “Akane?” a familiar voice asks from the opposite direction as I reflexively turn to see. There she was, Midori in the flesh just as “cute” (that was how she was seen) as she had been four years prior-just slightly older. She was wearing a shorter flamingo pink sundress with the shiny matching pink flats complementing her flawless beige skin.

 Okay, I was a bit jealous, but Midori didn’t need to know that. Midori was always the cuter one and I was the plain side kick by comparison. Being the one I closely grew up with since she and I were kids, I couldn’t help but hug her. I only have one little brother back (who is 12) and that made Midori basically my sister. After she and I exchanged our greetings, we got my bags (which weren’t many) and rode together in her mom’s four door Sedan. I didn’t have a driver’s license since I would always take the train everywhere in Tokyo, but Midori having one made me feel lame. Although, since everything is close by and usually within walking distance here in Okayama it wasn’t uncommon for most sixteen-year-holds like me to not have a license.

“Naoki knows that you’re coming back today.” Midori says, sneaking her dark brown eye off the road to look at me. “I would’ve invited him to come along but word tends to get around fast anyways,” she teases as my cheeks blushed pink. It was as though she was reading my mind, just as she did back then. And yes, word does travel fast in a small town like this one. The name *Naoki Shigeru* belonged to the one person I hated leaving the most; I left here because my dad made us relocate to where his job promoted him. I’ve only returned now because my mom thought it would be a *fun* idea to ship me off here for my second year of high school, which started in just a few days. We rode along the extended asphalt road that made my stomach churn-as my heart picks up in beats. It wasn’t just Naoki I was nervous to see, it was who I’d also meet here, that came along after I left. “I hope so,” I mutter as I avert Midori; who pulls in front of her house, which was now my new home as well. Most likely she and I will have our own rooms but, when we had sleepovers, I would sleep next to her in her room-just as sisterly as it gets. The town itself was pretty crowded, but I suppose that’s because of the specials at the restaurant nearby.

If memory serves me right, Midori has one older sister (Miho, 22) and one younger sister (Miaki, 11). Her mother and father still run the family restaurant next door (which is really popular in the Yakage townscape compared to others in the area) and by the smell of the teriyaki fumes, I was right. The Risatani Family ran the *Risu Gril*, where I would go every day and even at times help out. It was already a big and spacious, cozy house and the restaurant matched the exact same atmosphere-delicious fumes included. Just down the street from Naoki. My old house is actually on another block from Midori’s in this complicated series of streets in Oda. I may have lived down the street across from *him*-but my old house is now nothing more than another thing left behind, like everything else.

 “You know you can come out, right?” Midori chuckles as I forget that I was still in the car, while she knocked on the window of my side. “My bad I was out of it,” I nod as I hop out. I have to get that spacing out under control. After greeting Midori’s mother, she thought I should go meet a certain someone. I agreed and take a walk around (alone) to search for a certain someone I was not only nervous to see but was hoping to talk to the most. I know it’s stupid of me to walk around a place that I wasn’t *fully* familiar with after my years away, but I needed to see him.

I did live here before, so it’s not like I’m in a completely new town. I closed my eyes and sighed as I looked at the familiar playground where he and I would go to talk that had been long abandoned, even when we were kids. *Here come the chest tingles*. My eyes widened as I saw him, but he was looking down and playing with some rocks until his eyes met mine. His brown eyes squinted and walked closer to the short metal fence that separated us placing each of his hands on it: spreading them apart and gripping its metal structure. *There he is.* He was wearing a jam red t-shirt and matching pair of sneakers. Kind of made me feel silly for wearing a long sundress while he looked so casual. He did like to wear them even when he would get in trouble at school but that’s just one of the things I liked about him. “I heard you came back, but I thought you’d at least lose the freckles,” he said with a blank gaze. *Really? He says that out of anything else? Not an “I missed you” or “how have you been?”* come to think of it, neither of us stayed in contact with the other, not that he made the effort to either like I thought he would.

 I stick my tongue out at him and cross my arms. “I see you haven’t lost that smug attitude either,” I also contort while taking a slight step back. “Well, what should I say? That *I missed you, or how have you been?*” I look away as I feet the blush return to my cheeks and lie with a “No" in response. “Well, what if I told you that you should have stayed where you were?” He asks sharply-which I in return look at him, raising my eyebrows. *Huh?*

 “Why would you say that?” I cautiously ask.

 “Because I think it was for the best that you had,” He answers calmly as he points at me, cueing that I come closer. I sternly (but nervously) did so by walking forward as he brings his lips closer to my ear while he maintained his posture-still gripping the metal with his free hand. “You don’t get to come back here thinking that everything will be just as you left it, okay? Not after what you did, so I’m just letting you know now.” Naoki whispers as he storms off, his red sneakers stomping the dirt. I didn’t even have a chance to speak, not that I could with how dumbstruck and off guard I am-with the now painful ting in my chest added to this. *What did I do?* *Is he seriously holding a grudge because I left? Or is it more than that?* I clenched my chest where my heart was supposed to be and became nervous as to what I should expect next; because my first day back, I was already beginning to hate. And the rest of the week I dreaded even more than before.

“So, did you see Naoki?” Midori asks as I had returned to the house the two of us now in the guest room, where I was to sleep for the next year or so. “Yeah,” I said in a dreadful tone. “Well?” Midori claps excitedly with her light brown eyes practically shimmering eagerly. “How’d it go? Tell me girl!” *oh Midori, please not now.* I couldn’t quite get the words out.

Instead I look down, my eyes wet with tears and shake my head. “He hates me, Midori. He says I shouldn’t have come back!” My voice quaked.

Midori’s excited expression turns serious as she hugs me. “I think he needs time. He did miss you Akane, I think he’s just nervous since you both haven’t seen each other.”

*Is that really it? Are you kidding me? That’s a funny way of showing it…*

“There’s something else I forgot to tell you.” Midori mentions, just when I thought this day couldn’t get any worse. I remained quiet, teary eyed and shaking while Midori hugged me tighter. “Naoki has a girlfriend, but I think you coming back could make him realize that you two are right, *together*.”

*How can Midori say that? I won’t get in his way, but things should be less intense…*

 I had only just gotten here in this once familiar place, where I somewhat assumed things hadn’t changed too drastically. But the boy I cared deeply about was unknowingly (to me) upset and didn’t even say why. Now, he’s going out with someone else on top of acting like a jerk to me. Even though my heart tossed inside of my chest, I knew what needed to happen next; setting things straight with Naoki while also getting re-familiar with this town. I won’t get in the way of him and his girlfriend, but I damn for sure needed to fix our friendship if anything. Only the upcoming changes happening soon, wouldn’t be so familiar at all.

#  Chapter two

##  April 1st, 2013

It’s warmer out today. The sun’s brightening rays shimmered across Yakage. I think I want to leave even though I had only been here for literally an hour or so. Midori’s mom Mina made us bentos to eat but I had hardly touched mine. I had to stop crying and put on a brave face when Mina had