One Take Only

by NewHamsterdam

Summary

Kyoko finds herself in a challenging situation when a certain someone makes a guest appearance on Box "R" and forces her to deal with unwelcome and overwhelming feelings. (Takes place shortly after the Guam arc)
Scripted Surprise

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The director...was late.

The entire cast of Box "R" was on-set, in full costume and makeup, ready to shoot the final scenes of the episode they'd been working on for the last week and a half, and the director had yet to make an appearance. They were already an hour behind schedule.

Did something happen? Mogami Kyoko wondered, worried. Even though Director Anna was by far the most lenient—one might even say careless—director she'd ever worked for, he had never just not shown up. Maybe there was an accident?

To her right, Amamiya Chiori was struggling to maintain the "cute girl" front she always used in polite company. The muscles in her face were twitching as she fought to keep a tolerant smile on her face, and she was itching to go back to her dressing room and vent her feelings into one of her poison notebooks.

Do you think we have nothing better to do than to stand around waiting for you to show up? Just because I don't have any other steady work besides this job yet! This kind of director makes me sick!

"He's here!" One of the stage crew called out, coming in from the parking lot. "His car just rolled up."

The assistant director heaved a sigh of relief. He had just spent the last half hour reassuring the cast and their various managers and calling the director's cell phone as often as possible, and he was more than happy to relinquish his responsibilities. "Okay, why don't we have makeup do a quick check to see if anybody needs a touch-up, and then we should meet back here to start rolling on scene 52."

Director Anna strolled in with a very self-satisfied smirk on his face. When his entrance was met with glares from a number of managers, who could afford to be more upfront about their feelings than the actors they worked for, he coughed, and schooled his expression into something more apologetic.

"Ahem," he said. "I apologize for the delay in filming today. I received news this morning that a meeting I'd been hoping for had been confirmed, but only for a limited window of time. I wasn't sure how long it would take, and I'm afraid I had to turn off my phone once I entered the meeting." He smiled in what he seemed to think was a soothing manner. "But I'm here now, and once we've wrapped for the day I have a very exciting announcement for everyone!"

And with that, he strolled over to the set and plopped into his chair, whistling all the way.

After we've wrapped? And just whose fault is it that we're behind schedule? Chiori screamed internally.

Kyoko, whose demons were of a similar opinion, simply sighed. At least he's okay.

After several hours of girl-on-girl bullying, Kyoko and company were finally given the okay to stand down. Although her character, Natsu, had been having the time of her life, Kyoko was relieved. The current storyline was taking a particularly dark turn, and it was starting to wear on her.

All season, Natsu and the other girls in her group had been bullying a number of different girls,
among them the lead character, Chitose. But recently, as they started to ramp up the action leading into the season finale, Natsu was focusing more and more of her attention on just Chitose. The episode they had just finished filming centered around the group pressuring Chitose's friends to stop spending time with her, effectively isolating her from everyone in the class. Of course, some of the girls resisted at first, but the final scene involved them cornering the last of Chitose's friends and breaking her once and for all.

Of course, it made for a very impactful episode, but it was seriously depressing, and what's worse, it made Kyoko remember her own solitary school life. Even those that might not have cared that she was close to Shotaro (a demon popped up from her shoulder, but she patted it back into place) didn't dare befriend her when she was the target of so many bullies. She wished, just once, that she could play a nice girl. Not necessarily the main protagonist, just someone sweet—one who didn't take pleasure in forcing a girl to betray her closest friend. She sighed.

"Something wrong?" Chiori asked curiously, interrupting her thoughts.

"Ah, no," she shook her head. **I should be glad just to have this job!** She reminded herself. **I can't be so picky.**

"Well, it seems the director is ready to give his announcement," she said, pointing at the lunch area where everyone was gathering.

"Oh, thanks," she said with a quick smile. **What now?**

"As you may know," the director began once all the cast and crew had been assembled, "we've been having some trouble finding the actor to play Chitose's love interest in the upcoming arc. Although we had a number of talented actors audition, so far we haven't found anyone who fits the image we're looking for.

"Well, thanks to the meeting I had this morning, we've finally got ourselves a 'Sagara-sempai,'" he said proudly. "He's a perfect fit for the role, and he agreed to do it even though he's extremely busy at the moment." He stopped, looking around at everyone expectantly. They stared silently back at him. His face fell as realized no one was going to ask him about what had happened that morning, or about who the actor in question was. It had been a full day of filming, and no one was in a particularly curious mood.

Sullenly, he continued, "that said, he'll be tied up with work starting the week after next, so we're moving up filming on this season's final episode to next week. We'll be starting to rehearse on Monday. Luckily, since summer break has started for those of you still in school, we should be able to get all the scenes he'll be involved in filmed within that time frame."

"Um, but..." Rumi, the lead actress, said, "we haven't gotten the pages for that episode yet."

"And we weren't due to film that episode for another three weeks!" Chiori said under her breath. "Just how busy could this guy be?"

"Oh, that," the director waved carelessly to the crew member in charge of scripts, who, looking rather flustered, began distributing packets to the various cast members. "I know it's a little sudden, but I'm counting on you as professionals," he stressed, "to be fully prepared and ready for rehearsal on Monday. We're going to be on a really tight schedule, so we can't afford any delays."

Chiori practically burst into flames at this pronouncement. Us **cause delays?!!**

As the worker tried to hand Kyoko her script, it slipped out of his hands and fell open on the floor in
front of her. He apologized profusely, but she assured him everything was fine, and bent to pick it up, her eyes happened to fall on the page to which the script had opened. What she saw there made her straighten up so suddenly that she barely missed knocking heads with the crew member who was still bowing his apologies.

"Excuse me, Director?" Her hand shot up, ramrod stiff, and her face darkened. The director looked at her oddly, wondering what could have caused her to scowl like that, then said, "Er-yes, Kyouko-chan?"

"If this 'Sagara' guy is supposed to be Chitose's love interest, " she demanded, "why is Natsu the one kissing him?!"
"Mo, so what's so important that I had to come all the way here?" Kotonami Kanae demanded. "If it's just an acting problem, we could have talked about it in the Love Me Department. Or better yet, over the phone." She glared at her self-proclaimed best friend, who had insisted on meeting in a karaoke box for secrecy purposes. She was half-convinced it was just a ploy to spend time together.

"No, Moko-san," Kyoko said, shaking her head dejectedly. "It's...worse than an acting problem." Sorrowful tears pooled in her eyes, and she clasped her hands together as if in prayer. "It's the worse thing that could possibly happen to anyone, ever."

"Stop being so overdramatic," Kanae snapped irritably. "Just tell me what happened. And stop slouching!"

Kyoko sat up obediently, and launched into a breathless account of what had taken place on set that day.

"...And then I saw the script and it says that Natsu—my character, I mean—has to kiss this guest character and when I wanted to know why it turns out I—Natsu, I mean—have to steal the main character's love interest and kiss him in front of her so that she feels like she's all alone in the world and like I've taken everything from her and Moko-san I don't know the first thing about kissing!"

"So that's it," her friend said finally, tired herself just from listening. "What's to know? You put your lips up against his lips. Didn't you learn about it in acting class?"

Kyoko shook her head. "These days I'm lucky to get to class once a month," she said sadly, thinking of all the money she had spent on something she hardly went to. "And anyway it's more than that, see?" She pulled out the script and opened it to a dog-eared page, pointing to the offending line of direction:

"NATSU, noticing CHITOSE'S presence, pulls SAGARA in for a long, sensuous kiss."

"Long and sensuous, Moko-san! An adult-type kiss! And knowing Nacchan, probably even a" she shuddered "DEEP kiss. Plus, she's the one who has to initiate it!"

"Huh," Kanae said, choosing to ignore the fact that Kyoko had a nickname for her own character, "That could be a problem. Girls usually just have to be kissed, not the other way around. And tongue-kisses can be disgusting when done wrong," she said, thinking back to the annoying couples she had followed when researching for her side job. "Even I haven't learned how to do that yet, and I've been studying acting for way longer than you have." Not that you'd know it from watching her act, she thought, mildly irked.

"RIGHT?" Kyoko said. "What do I do?!"

"Well, you need to learn how to kiss someone," she said matter-of-factly. "Go to the acting school and ask for special tutoring or something."

"But Moko-san, I only have two days!" She half-cried. "And the school isn't in session over the weekend!"

"Did you discuss this with the director? Tell him you can't do it? Maybe he'll give you extra time to...y'know, get some practice in."
Kyoko flushed. "But...well...I can't just say, 'I can't do it,' when I'm supposed to be a professional," she said quietly, remembering the director's announcement regarding the upcoming filming. "And besides, we only have about four full days with this..." she flinched, "guest actor. I have to show up completely prepared on Monday. We can't afford any delays."

"Professional or not, you have to be able to say when you need help with doing something," she pointed out. "If they were asking you to perform a stunt or play an instrument it would be the same thing, and you could just ask for the kiss scene to be one of the later ones—" Suddenly something registered.

That flinch.

Kyoko was caught up in her own world of despair, so it took her a moment to realize the temperature in the room had dropped considerably. She looked up at her friend and saw the dark, angry face of a demon.

"You're hiding something from me!"

Kyoko flung herself to the floor in a dogeza and cried, "I'm sorry, Moko-san! Really! I didn't mean to! It's just..."

"Tell me!" She ordered.

A minute later, both girls were seated at the table once again, and Kanae was glaring expectantly at a shamefaced Kyoko.

"So?" She prodded.

"I was going to tell you," Kyoko asserted. "I just...it's so awful, and I don't even know what to do about the kiss in the first place, so who it is doesn't matter so much, I thought..."

"Just spit it out."

"Fuwa Sho," she said finally. "I have to kiss Fuwa Sho."

Kanae burst out laughing.

Suddenly, their roles were reversed as Kyoko scowled angrily at her best friend.

"It's not funny!" She yelled.

"I—I'm sorry," Kanae said, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. "It's not...funny, but...I mean, he's not even an actor. How? How does this keep happening to you? With the PV, it's understandable, but how does he end up with a guest spot on your drama?" She giggled.

Kyoko tried to keep her glower in place, but couldn't. "It's stupid, isn't it?" she admitted, with a weak chuckle. "I keep trying to distance myself from him, and all that happens is he ends up right back in my life. He was Bridge Rock's first guest, he was at TBM when I went there for Japponet Scoop, then in Karuizawa when I went to film on location... then he shows up on the Dark Moon set on Valentine's Day. I couldn't even escape him when I was working at a gas station. It's like we're tied together by some cruel, unbreakable string of fate. " She sat back on her heels, face suddenly thoughtful. "That's probably it. Valentine's Day," she said with a sigh.

"What do you mean?" Kanae asked.

"You know, when he stole my first kiss? Now the bastard probably sees this as an opportunity to screw with me even more by taking my first onscreen kiss, too." She clenched her fists. "I can just
imagine him rolling around on the ground, laughing his ass off, thinking about how much I don't wanna kiss him and knowing I can't refuse." She growled. "And he probably thinks it's hilarious that I'm supposed to seduce him when I'm just this plain, boring girl who wouldn't know the meaning of sensuous if -"

"You never told me he stole your first kiss," Kanae accused her. "You just told me Tsuruga Ren was 'overly thankful!'"

Kyoko looked at her, surprised. "I didn't?"

"Mo! We're supposed to be friends, and you never tell me about these things!" She said, trying to mask her hurt feelings with another glare. Tsuruga Ren would know about it, of course—it had been his drama they were filming.

"Sorry, sorry," she said mildly, with a flap of her hand, "it's not...important, that's all. I would tell you if it's something important."

"Your first kiss isn't important?" Kanae asked, incredulous.

"Well, it wasn't really my first kiss," she explained. "It was more like...an anteater siphoning off food. I completely forgot about it afterward, I promise," she said, flushing as she thought of what had happened later on that day.

"An anteater...?" Kanae echoed. Is Fuwa Sho that bad a kisser?

"Well if it wasn't a big deal then, then why is it a big deal now? You've worked with the guy before without killing him."

 Barely, Kyoko thought. "This is different! First of all, I have to kiss him! And pretend I like him! And not just for a four-minute PV, for a whole extended season finale episode of a drama!" She stood up, one leg on the table, demons flaring up around her.

"Not to mention he's probably not a very good actor," Kanae pointed out. "Which mean it'll take twice as long as usual." In that respect, Kanae wasn't even slightly envious. Having to work with a complete amateur was the worst. "What was your director thinking?"

Kyoko's rage deflated, and she sighed. "Apparently, he thought it would be a good idea to have a sort of...cross-promotional setup. He approached Akatoki weeks ago about having Shotaro do an original song for the season finale episode, with a promise that he'll air the premiere of the corresponding PV directly after the episode. Box "R" is first in its time slot and third overall for the season," she said with a sudden burst of pride, then allowed, "mostly because of how popular Maruyama Marumi is, and Shotaro's got about a gajillion fans. It would be good exposure for both the show and him. Supposedly it's not that uncommon," she said.

"But Shotaro, being the egotistical, self-serving bastard that he is, didn't answer the offer until this morning, and insisted he be given an opportunity to act on the show in addition to airing his PV. And my director just...agreed. Since the character actually fits really well with Sho's public persona, he'll 'hardly even have to act,' he says, and..."

"He figures the hype from having Fuwa Sho in the episode will help the ratings?" Kanae suggested.

Kyoko nodded. "He's the type to pick an actor for their image just as much as for their actual talent," she said, thinking back to her own recruitment. All that had mattered then was that she was scary; all that mattered now was that Sho was cool.

"That...sucks," Kanae said. "All the work we go through to improve as actors, and he just has to throw a tantrum to get a prominent role."
"Worse, he's probably only doing it to spite me," she responded. "He doesn't have the slightest interest in acting."

"Tch." Her friend clicked her tongue thoughtfully, looking for a solution. She would have to kiss him, that much was clear. No matter how much of a jerk someone was, a professional actress couldn't refuse to work with him. Especially not someone as famous as Fuwa Sho, who'd been brought in specially by the director. But to not know how to kiss him! It would be humiliating! And as the experienced one, it would be her fault if something went wrong. It killed her to think that someone like him, who didn't take responsibility for anything he did, could just waltz in and ruin her friend's life all over again.

There was one option she could think of, but...she was loath to suggest anything that would help that man. Still...She realized that Kyoko was still talking.

"—just the sort of thing he'd do, too. I mean, he bribed one of the girls at my school to keep track of when I showed up," Kyoko continued, "All so he could yell at me for how I was dressed at the Dark Moon party! Some nonsense about letting men give me clothes leading to those clothes being taken off..."

A vein throbbed in Kanae's head. This bastard...doing whatever he wants, and then trying to give her advice about her love life? As if he had any right-?

"You know what?" she said, making her decision in favor of what was definitely the lesser of two evils, "I think I have an idea."
A Simple Request

"Ask Tsuruga Ren to teach you," she said triumphantly. "He's helped you before, right?"

"Ts-Ts-Tsuruga-san? Ask him?" Kyoko turned bright red. "I couldn't! I can't!"

"Do you want to lose to Fuwa Sho?" Kanae asked.

"Of course not!" She said quickly. "It's just...asking Tsuruga-san something like that...for him to kiss someone he doesn't even care about!"

"Mo! He's an actor! He kisses women he doesn't care about for a living!" She shot back. Not to mention he's totally in love with you, she thought, frustrated. "He's experienced, which means he can help you with technique, and he's a guy, which means he knows how to initiate a kiss, plus he can help you figure out the height difference issue. And he'll love every minute of it. I hate helping the enemy, but he's the best man for the job, and I know he'll say yes.

"Height difference? Technique?" She sputtered. Who knew kissing could be so confusing? "Couldn't I just...research it? You can find tutorials on anything online," she reasoned.

"Knowing how to do it in theory and actually doing it are different things," Kanae said. "Just because you've read instructions on how to do something, it doesn't mean you can actually do it without practicing beforehand."

"But—I..." she twiddled her fingers shyly, avoiding Kanae's gaze. "Well, I don't want Tsuruga-san to know about this."

"Why not?" She asked, one eyebrow raised.

"He really doesn't like Fuwa Sho," she explained. "And if he knew I was going to kiss him—the actor's "rule of heart" would be in play, true, but this is Shotaro, after all. Even if it's just an act, for him to know that I was kissing my most hated enemy...

"You realize this is going to be on TV, right?" Kanae said.

"Wh-what?" Kyoko asked, startled by the odd question. "Of course."

"And it'll be Fuwa Sho's first acting role? Even more, Fuwa Sho's first onscreen kiss? What do you think's gonna happen?"

Kyouko's eyes grew to the size of dinner plates. "You...you're right!" She whimpered. "It'll be all over the entertainment news! Talk shows will be begging to interview him!" And me, too, probably, she realized. For the inside scoop on "kissing Fuwa Sho." She shuddered. "There's no way he won't find out!"

"So, it would be better if you told him yourself first, right?" Kanae said, coaxing her along.

"Well, yes..." she admitted. "I have to tell him, as soon as possible, but...as for teaching me to kiss, I just don't know."

"Okay. It's your choice," her friend responded, with a lofty tone that said she was washing her hands of the whole thing. "Go do your research, show up on set without any practical experience, and see what happens. Just remember that when you keep getting NG'ed, you'll have to kiss Fuwa Sho...over
and over again."

All the color drained from Kyoko's face, and Kanae could even swear there were cracks splitting across her skin. In her most dramatic fashion, she screamed, "Nooooooooooo!"

"Then I guess the decision is made." Kanae said with a grim smile. "Now, get up, get on the phone and tell Tsuruga Ren you need his help."
With a sigh, Kyoko stepped out into the hallway, staring at her cell phone. Her contact list was open, with Tsuruga-san's name and information highlighted.

Of course, it would a lie to say that this brilliant idea of Kanae's hadn't occurred to Kyoko already. It was, in fact, one of the first things she thought of. Tsuruga-san had been there for her whenever she'd had trouble before, after all, and as confusing as his stance on her kissing people was, even he would see the necessity for her, as an actress, to learn how to properly kiss someone. But she had dismissed it in the hopes that Kanae would come up with something better—or at least, something safer. She wouldn't be able to hide behind a character this time—not like she had with Setsu, and not like she had with that priestess she'd made up on the spot. She would have to, as Kyoko, ask Ren to kiss her. The thought both thrilled and terrified her.

If they kissed, and she was just her, it might mean the end of her secret feelings. He would find out that she loved him, how helpless she was, that she'd fallen back into the pit that had almost destroyed her the first time around. And he would hate her for it.

Even if he didn't figure out what she was hiding...it was dangerous, to let herself touch what she wanted most. Just that one moment of real, uncontrollable happiness might be enough to send her over the edge. He might not have to figure it out; she might just tell him.

But...to let Fuwa Sho have another victory. To let him insinuate himself into her life over and over, to let him beat her on her own turf! She couldn't let that happen. She couldn't let him continue to toy with her like that. And Moko-san was right; Tsuruga-san was her best chance. She had to at least try.

So. That was that. She took a deep, decisive breath and hit send.

_Besides, a small part of her whispered, _it would be really nice to kiss Tsuruga-san._
The next night, she made her way over to Tsuruga Ren's apartment complex and knocked on the familiar door.

"Ah, Mogami-san. Please come in."

Kyoko bowed. "I'm sorry to trouble you."

Ren smiled, gesturing for her to sit on the couch. "It's no trouble. I'm glad to be of help."

"You may not think that after I tell you what I need help with," she said sadly.

"Well, you were pretty tight-lipped about it on the phone," he allowed, "but if there's anything I can do, I will."

"It's about a kiss," she said suddenly.
Ren froze. "A kiss?" he said, trying to hide his nervousness. Did she figure it out?

"Yes. I...have to kiss someone." When she saw how he looked at her, she clarified, "for work. I have to kiss someone as part of my role on Box "R"."

"The bully?" He asked, surprised. From what he knew about it, it wasn't exactly a romantic role. It came as something of a shock; he thought it would be a long time before she would have to have an onscreen kiss. He'd even hoped, somewhere in the back of his mind, that it might be with him. But...well, you knew it would happen someday, he said to himself, trying to keep his face as calm as possible. It's her job.

She nodded, and explained in as flat a voice as possible, "I'm basically supposed to be seducing this guy away from a girl I'm messing with. I've seen enough flirting in real life to know how to seem flirtatious, but a kiss is a little outside of my comfort zone. Plus," she muttered under her breath, flushed, "it has to be 'sensuous'—which I think is code for 'with tongue'." She glanced up at Ren's face, half-expecting to see him disgusted at the idea. Instead, he just seemed...thoughtful.

What she couldn't know was that there was a war being waged inside Tsuruga Ren's head. True, for her to so tamely ask for his help meant she probably didn't see him as a man, but-I could kiss her. She's even asking me to. No one would blame me. But—it's dangerous. What if she realizes it's more than practice for me? What if I get carried away and she despises me for it? Or-what if she realizes I'm Corn? He shook his head. No, she wouldn't figure it out. It would make sense for the kisses to be the same if the two used the same body. Wouldn't it?

"O-okay," Kyoko said softly. "I understand."

"Understand? Understand what?" Ren asked. "I'm sorry, I was...thinking about something."

"I—just thought, since you shook your head." She stared at her feet. "I would understand if this is asking too much of you," she said. "We're only sempai and kouhai, after all. Something like kissing is—"

"No, that's not..." Ren started. "Um, it's just...maybe if you told me more about the part, I could have a better idea what you need help with?" He said, stalling for time as he weighed his options.

She looked at him oddly, and then let out a long, deep sigh.

"Mogami-san? What's wrong?"

"There's something else," she admitted. "Beyond the kissing."

"Oh?" He asked, confused.

"It's...who I'm kissing."

"Okay?" It's just acting, he thought, pushing away his jealous pangs. Who she's kissing doesn't really matter.

"It's—Fuwa Sho!" She said, ducking her head, as if expecting an explosion.

What she expected wasn't far removed from what she got. A darkness fell over Ren and he felt that familiar anger that surged through him whenever he heard that name multiplied exponentially by the context of 'kissing'. She would be kissing him...again?!

He was the absolute last person Ren was worried about when it came to Kyoko's first onscreen kiss.
He was a singer, for chrissakes! How? How did he keep forcing his way back in?

"How?" was all he managed to choke out. The cowering Kyoko looked up, winced at what she saw, and explained at top speed what had transpired the previous morning.

"That...bastard," he muttered. To think he would have to teach her how to kiss for his benefit! Except... He ran a hand through his hair, then forced himself to calm down. It wasn't really, was it? If she can't kiss him properly, she'll be embarrassed in front of him. Worse, he thought, coming to the same conclusion reached by Kanae the day before, she'll have to keep kissing him until she does get it right. Which, if he has his way, will probably take forever.

He let out a long breath of air, as if releasing all his anger in one go. For now, we'll put aside that it's Fuwa, he thought. I'm doing this for her sake, and no one else's. Well, mostly, anyway, he found himself admitting sheepishly. He had a definite self-interest.

"So. You have to learn how to kiss."

She nodded nervously, wondering just how angry he would get.

"All right," he said with a tone of finality as he settled down next to her on the couch. "Let's get started, then."
"Right now?" Kyoko panicked. "Uh—I thought, maybe I could come back tomorrow, or..." She backed up on the couch until she was pressed up against its arm. *I never thought he'd say yes!* She realized. *I'm not prepared for this!*

"Unfortunately, I'll be working most of the day tomorrow," he said, fighting a small smile at her reaction. She wouldn't appreciate being laughed at, he knew. "And since you're already here, wouldn't it make the most sense to do it now? You only have until Monday, right?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Mogami-san," he said gently, "I won't bite."

"I-" she reddened, suddenly inexplicably reminded of Setsu's first attempts at making a kiss mark. "I know. It's just, this is all so sudden." *Come on Kyoko, you asked him for help,* she reminded herself. "But I'm very grateful, of course. For your help." She bowed jerkily.

"I haven't done anything to be thanked for, yet," he teased her. He patted the seat next to him on the couch, encouraging her to come closer.

She inched over to where he was and took in a deep breath. "I'm ready," she said stiffly.

It was all he could do not to kiss her right then, the way she looked with her "determined to be brave" face on, cheeks still completely flushed. He slipped and accidentally treated her to one of his brightest smiles, and her lip actually started to quiver.

*I can take this!* She insisted, eyes watering as forced herself not to look away. *I have to!*

"Ahem," he coughed. "So, uh...first things first. You're shorter than me."

"I've noticed," she said weakly.

"Well, yes. Right. That means you're going to have to figure out how to get my face and your face within kissing distance of each other in a way that isn't overly awkward. Of course, Fuwa isn't as tall as I am," he said, face darkening momentarily, "but it'll be good practice anyway. In the script, are you standing or-?" He was trying to make the whole process as businesslike as possible.

She nodded. "I corner him against a wall."

"A wall. Okay." He stood and made his way over to the nearest bare wall, leaning up against it in a pose he usually reserved for modeling shoots. When she just sort of stared at him, he raised an eyebrow to hurry her along. "Mogami-san?"

"R-right," she nodded, and followed him to where he was standing. She looked up at him and realized just how gigantic that height difference was. It seemed insurmountable. And, she suddenly understood, bridging that gap would involve more physical contact than she was comfortable with. "So—um, I could, grab your collar," she said. "Or, I think the boys' uniform on the show has a necktie." Most of the male characters on the show were extras, so she had never paid much attention.

"That's one way," he nodded.

She stood there, staring at him blankly. "Um, so, now?"
He smiled. "Please do."

She took a deep breath, then put on her best Natsu face, gripped his collar, and with a sort of forceful jerk, dragged him down to meet her. It was, unfortunately, very similar to what Shotaro had done to her when he'd stolen that not-first kiss, and not altogether the most romantic means of bringing someone closer.

"That...wasn't very good, was it?" She said, automatically NGing herself, Natsu falling away.

"Well, our faces are near each other," he said with a chuckle. She squeaked and let him go. "But I think it might be better to move more slowly. Less pulling and more...guiding. Well," he straightened up, "sort of like this."

With a few smooth steps, he flipped the situation around, nudging Kyoko up against the wall. He used his superior arm span to trap her, and while not actually touching her, she could feel the heat of his closeness. He reached down, stroking her cheek, and gently pulled her face more towards his own. He placed one finger under her chin, tipping it up so that they were looking directly into each other's eyes, and then—

"I-I think I get it!" stammered a red-faced Kyoko, pulling back. "Could we switch again?"

Patience, Ren thought to himself, keeping his smile in place. "Of course."

This time, Natsu took over more readily, and with the benefit of confidence, leaned into Ren. She wasn't bigger than he was, so trapping him that way was impossible; instead she teased him by letting her body almost touch his, mere centimeters separating them in some places. Ren's breath caught in his throat as she used a maneuver much like his own—reaching up to stroke his cheek, and then letting that hand fall to the collar of his shirt. Gently, she tugged him—with both hands this time, so that the force was both smoother and more irresistible—down to meet her own face, where she tilted to one side, leaned in, and asked in a small, breathy voice, "Was that better?"

Ren nodded. "Much better," he managed. "So—um, the height shouldn't be an issue," he said, with the air of someone checking things off a list. "Which means we should move on to the kiss itself," he said, very aware of how close Kyoko's face still was.

"Yes," Kyoko agreed, staring absentmindedly into her sempai's eyes. He expected her to back away, ask for more time, say she wasn't ready, but she just continued to steadfastly meet his gaze.

"So...I'll demonstrate," he said awkwardly. He cupped her cheek in his hand once again and said, just for the sake of sounding instructional, "tilting your head is a good idea, because you don't want to bump noses," he said. "Then you...allow your lips to meet." He pressed his lips softly against her own slightly parted lips. It was a soft, sweet kiss, not unlike the one they'd shared in Guam. Not wanting to push his luck, he pulled back fairly quickly.

Kyoko was trying very hard to keep the blush that always seemed to show up whenever Ren was around in check. We're acting, remember? It's all fake, just an exercise. Just keep your Natsu face on. If he thinks you're enjoying this too much...

"So?" Ren prodded, straightening back up.

"That was...nice," she breathed without thinking. Ren stared openly, fighting to keep a grin off of his face. Nice, huh?

"I mean—" she tried to correct herself. He wasn't asking for a review! "I think, what I'll be doing, won't be quite that nice," she said by way of explanation, twirling a stray hair unconsciously. "I think
it has to be more adult."

"More adult?"

"And longer," she added, nodding. She saw the surprise on his face and quickly added, "but if you're not comfortable with that, I'm sure I can figure it out from what you've already shown me."

Uncomfortable? Me? He shook his head. "I think I can handle it, Mogami-san," he said, half-teasingly. She frowned at his laughing tone, cheeks puffed up in irritation.

"So...an adult kiss?" he continued, launching back into teaching mode. "That's not as simple. You have to worry about how your lips are positioned in regards to the other person's lips. They shouldn't be pressed flush against each other, but more stacked in between," he explained. "Like this," he said suddenly, not giving her a chance to hesitate.

He leaned in again, this time allowing his fingers to twist themselves into her hair as he brought her face closer. He started with the simple kiss he'd used at first, then gently nudged her mouth further open, sucking on her bottom lip and deepening the pull of his lips on hers. Her arms, which had been awkwardly half-raised when he'd pressed in, seemed to naturally settle into place on his shoulders, her hands clasped just behind his neck.

She was much more responsive than he could have hoped, and was kissing him back nearly as intensely as she slowly became acclimated, synchronizing her own movements with his. It wasn't so long ago that even the touching of lips terrified her, and yet she was pulling him closer. Of course, for an acting role, that was how it was for her, he reminded himself. She put all her effort into getting it right, and it was scary sometimes how deeply she fell into character. This probably wasn't even Kyoko he was kissing, he thought sadly.

For her part, Kyoko was trying desperately to regain some sense of the character she was meant to be playing. This feels, she thought, shocked, really good. She found herself leaning into the kiss, all other thoughts floating away. No! She commanded herself internally. What's wrong with me? I'm not some idiotic girl who lives only for love! I'm here for a reason. She needed to do something, anything, to put herself back on track and reestablish the safe distance playing a role provided. Natsu, I'm supposed to be Natsu.

Ren received what was possibly the biggest shock of his life when, in the midst of this long, deep kiss, this girl—who for him was the symbol of all that was pure, innocent and modest—slipped her tongue into his mouth.
Promise Me


Kyoko had stuck her tongue into his mouth as if it were nothing. And it was still there! Flitting in and around and—what? The movements themselves were rather clumsy, but that didn't make the experience any less shocking—or less pleasant. He was vaguely aware that his hands were of their own volition wandering down to clutch her lower back and press her closer. Do I just keep going? Do I pull back? How far is too far? Dammit, how am I supposed to keep my composure with her doing things like this?!

Sensing something was off, Kyoko pulled away, disentangling herself from what had become a surprisingly tight embrace and looking slightly ashamed. "I'm sorry, Tsuruga-san, I think I got carried away."

He stared at her, eyes lingering on the disarray of her hair and the swelling of her lips. It was a look he'd like to see more often, he thought absentmindedly. Finally, what she'd said seemed to register.

"Carried away?" Tsuruga echoed, bemused.

"With the character," she explained.

"Oh," Ren tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice. "The character likes to-?"

She nodded. "With girls, Nacchan likes to use her influence as the leader of a popular group, but with boys, she definitely likes controlling them with her..." she blushed, "her charisma, let's say."

This was the innocent Kyoko he knew, Ren thought, finally back in familiar territory. "Okay, so you were trying to control the situation by taking the initiative." A little warning might have been nice, he thought, running a hand through his hair.

"Exactly," she said, agreeing, twiddling her fingers uncomfortably, "And because she knew you weren't expecting it, she thought she could use the suddenness of more intimate contact to toy with and confuse you."

Nothing was said for a moment, and she wondered if he was disgusted by her forwardness. She decided to offer another apology, just in case.

When she looked up to address him, the soothing expression Ren had been wearing all night in an attempt to make her feel less skittish had disappeared to be replaced with his most charming gentlemanly smile.

"I see, so I was being toyed with," Ren said slowly, definitely pissed. Do you have any idea what you've put me through? He thought, a vein throbbing at his temple.

"By Nacchan," Kyoko insisted, trying to deflect his anger. "She—"

"Well, then you can tell 'Nacchan' that it was a good effort," he said irritably, and to Kyoko's astonishment, he reached forward and reclaimed his hold on her face, drawing her close once again. "but that if she really wants to 'toy' with someone, then it should go more like this—"
By the end of the night, both Kyoko and Ren were collapsed on the couch, tired, out of breath, and frankly, dehydrated.

"I think...you have the basics down," Ren said, still huffing slightly. "You should be fine for...the scene."

"Right...the scene," Kyoko echoed vaguely. Somewhere along the way, she had lost track of the purpose of all this. She sat up suddenly, realizing that she'd have to do this sort of thing with Shotaro in only a couple of days—maybe even less than that. She sort of wished she had the courage to ask the director to make that scene last so she could prepare herself mentally, but it would kill her to admit to Shotaro that she wasn't ready. And anyway, she couldn't use not knowing how as an excuse anymore.

Ren watched her curiously. It was always interesting to see the expressions she made when she was thinking; they always changed so quickly. If he wasn't mistaken, one of those was the look she reserved for Fuwa. It bothered him to see it, but—he thought with pleasure—he hadn't seen it on her face all night. Until he reminded her of the scene, Fuwa wasn't even an afterthought for her.

More importantly, she didn't seem to be eager to get away from him and all that he had done—after that second kiss, it had become kind of...extreme. He had definitely overstepped the bounds of what was expected when disinterestedly teaching someone how to kiss, but she didn't seem to have noticed. *She is pretty inexperienced, he thought, maybe she thought that was normal?*

He sat up as well. "So, I guess I should take you home, now," he said, offering a hand to help her get up from the couch.

"Uh...well, it's pretty late," Kyoko said, surprised.

"Hmm?" Ren asked.

"Nothing, never mind. I'd be very grateful for a ride home," she said, wondering at her own foolishness. This late, he would usually invite her to stay the night, and after they'd spent so much time together in that hotel room as the Heel siblings, she'd just assumed...but, he said he had a lot of work the next day, she remembered. *I shouldn't be so presumptuous just because he's been kind in the past. And anyway, she admitted to herself, maybe it's not the best idea to stay in the same apartment after...everything. I'm not sure I'd be able to sleep knowing he was in the next room."

Color bloomed in her cheeks for what must have been the thousandth time that night. She was sure that once she had a chance to calmly think about all that happened, about kissing Tsuruga Ren over and over until he finally said that she'd gotten it right—and he wasn't easily satisfied—it wouldn't just be her face that was red. She wasn't sure how she should handle it, but tired as she was...for tonight, at least, she wouldn't dwell on it too much. She might die from embarrassment otherwise.

The ride home was a quiet one, both lost in their own thoughts, wondering just how the other felt about the night's events.

Kyoko glanced over at Ren, whose eyes were firmly aimed ahead. He wasn't mad anymore, she could tell. She probably shouldn't have repeated Nacchan's thoughts out loud, but the truth was, she was sort of glad she had. Making Tsuruga-san mad was usually a terrible idea, but tonight she felt sure that it was the only thing that had kept her safe. Even before he'd kissed her the first time, she'd been half-mesmerized. He didn't seem to have noticed how she felt, though; thanks to her little slip, he was too busy teaching her proper etiquette. And...other things.

*Kissing is complicated,* she thought, flushing. *Just how much practice has Tsuruga-san had?* She
wondered. All the things he could do with just the right touch—she shivered—honestly, even at home I still might not be able to get to sleep. I'm sure I won't need half of that for the scene, anyway. She shook her head. No, I'm going to keep it simple. No way am I kissing Shotaro like that.

She sneaked another peek at Tsuruga-san's impassive face. I swear, it's like he just wanted to show off. He's definitely a playboy, she thought, reaching her inevitable conclusion, scrunching up her nose and folding her arms against her chest.

For all that he was focused on the road, the gesture was not lost on him. This girl, he thought, exhausted. She has no idea how cute she is. Worse, he thought, there seemed to be no limit to her learning curve. A single night was all it had taken for her to learn how to walk like a runway model, and only a few hours of admittedly intense practice had led to her giving just as good as she got in the kissing department. And people call me a monster, he marveled. He needed to get her home and away from him before he gave in and did something that couldn't be explained away as an acting exercise.

They made it to the Daruma-ya, and Kyoko bowed her thanks. "I learned a lot," she said, blushing ferociously.

"I'm happy to have been helpful," he said, as he escorted her to the door.

She turned to head in for the night when he placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Tsuruga-san?" She asked, looking up at him.

"I just wanted to say...good luck on Monday," he said, smiling softly. "And don't you dare lose to the likes of Fuwa Sho."

She grinned. "Never." She stretched out her hand, pinky raised. "One take only," she said firmly.

He was startled for a moment, then recognized what she wanted. He held out his own hand and interlocked his pinky with hers.

"One take only," he agreed.
"Again," Ren said, face so close to hers she could feel the vibration of his voice against her skin. She stared at him, through him, not really hearing what he'd said. "Mogami-san," he said, softer this time. "Don't look away. Look me in the eyes, take control, and kiss me again."

She nodded obediently. Surely this time—how many times has it been? she wondered—it wouldn't pull her under. That feeling...she was used to it now, wasn't she? She must be. She shook her head, trying to clear her mind and focus on the matter at hand. He was waiting.

She called up Natsu's soul, stepped into his space...possessed him. He was hers, to do with what she wished. She grasped his cheek with one hand, curled her fingers into his silk-smooth hair with the other, and—

"Kyoko-chan?" The Okami-san called from somewhere downstairs. "Is everything all right? You don't want to be late for work!"

Kyoko sat up, bleary-eyed, hair a tousled mess. It felt like she had only just gotten to sleep, only just managed to shut out her thoughts about him, but somehow, he had invaded even her dreams, giving her the second night of restless sleep in as many days.

"It's Monday," she said out loud, as if to motivate herself. What was the significance of Monday again?

Oh, right, she thought, glancing at the much-abused poster on her bedroom wall. Well, let's get this over with.

"All right," the director was announcing. "Now, Fuwa-san should be joining us shortly after lunch, so we should start working on the scenes that don't involve him. Remember, we want this episode to be particularly dark because it's Chitose's final turning point. She realizes just how far Natsu is willing to go to hurt her and finally understands that she needs to fight back, which is how we'll lead into the more uplifting, empowering arc that will begin next season. Now, Kyouko-chan," he said, turning to address the chestnut-haired actress, "I'm counting on you to bring out the full extent of Natsu's joy at finally getting to Chitose. Remember, you've been trying all season to wipe that cheerful smile off her face and you're beginning to succeed."

"Yes, sir," Kyoko said dutifully. Maybe someday she could pretend to be happy for less psychotic reasons, she thought wistfully. Still, there was something nice about being able to leave behind Kyoko's thoughts for a while, she admitted to herself.

"And, just a quick reminder, when Fuwa-san comes," he resumed talking to the cast as a whole, "I know he's a bit famous, but we need to treat him like any other performer—respectfully. And try not to ask for autographs. He's not an actor, but like all celebrities, he has some experience with creating a certain image, so it shouldn't be too difficult to work with him."

"Well, Kyouko-san worked with him before, right?" Chiori asked. "What is he like?" She smiled sweetly, hiding the rage that was bubbling up inside of her. To think we have to work with a complete amateur! And the worst kind of amateur, who thinks it's okay to just be famous and show up whenever he likes. Are you looking down on those of us who've actually worked to become
"Kyouko-chan, you've worked with him?" The director asked, surprised. "You didn't mention that."

Realizing everyone was now looking at her, Kyoko sighed. "Yes. I appeared as the killer angel in
the PV for his song Prisoner," she admitted.

"That was you?" Came the familiar cry from a number of the crew, including, unfortunately, the
director. He's the one who scouted me for this project, she seethed. Didn't he even look at my work
history? Or did he only care about Mio?

She nodded. "With the help of makeup, a wig, color contacts and CG effects," she said, as
dismissively as possible, not even slightly in the mood to discuss how different she looked. As sleep-
deprived as she was now, she was finding it hard to dredge up anything resembling enthusiasm for
what was to come.

"So, what was he like?" The director asked.

Kyoko stiffened, and a long pause followed as she considered the question.

"Kyouko-chan? Did you hear me?" He asked when she still hadn't answered.

Finally, she smiled her best professional smile. "I'm probably not the best person to ask. He and I
didn't exactly get along," she said diplomatically.

"You mean he didn't like you?"

Her smile twitched a bit, but stayed in place. "And vice versa. But I can assure you that as a
professional, I have no intention of letting my personal feelings get in the way of my work."

There was a moment as everyone considered that statement. That the polite-to-a-fault Kyouko-san
could openly dislike someone was a foreign concept to them. She hadn't gotten mad when the other
actresses had spent the first days of shooting bullying her at every turn, or even, Chiori thought,
when I pushed her down the stairs. Just what had Fuwa Sho done to piss her off?

"Of course not," the director said cheerily, trying to lighten the mood, "I have faith that you'll
perform your role just as admirably as always." He wondered for the first time if he had made a
mistake in hiring the famous musician.

The musician in question was in a car on the way to the shoot.

"Sho? Are you listening to me?" His manager, Aki Shoko, demanded. "You're the one who insisted
on taking this guest spot and I haven't seen you prepare at all. You should have been trying to learn
about the storyline, or the characters, or tried to get a feel for the show's atmosphere. Didn't you do
any research?"

Sho shrugged. "What for? The guy said himself all I have to is know my lines and act cool. And
anyway, isn't research your job, Shoko-san?"

Shoko practically growled. "Normally, yes, but you gave me two days to reschedule a week's worth
of pre-tour promotion around a drama schedule, all while we still had a full workload. I had to call in
about a dozen favors just to get it done without offending anyone. What were you thinking when
you accepted this job?"

"What's the big deal?" He asked lazily. "You said yourself that making the crossover to acting would be a good career move."

"At some point in the future, yes, it's a great way to expand your fan base," she allowed. "But the most acting you've done has been in four-minute-long music videos. You've never had to learn lines, or blocking, or really create a character. It takes time and practice to develop those skills." For goodness' sake, he couldn't even close his eyes on cue!

"I've had to memorize lyrics, and I've had to dance onstage. I don't really see a difference."

"Sho—"

"Just leave it alone, Shoko-san," he snapped. "I know what I'm doing."

And the rest of the trip was completed in silence.

When Sho finally appeared on set, Kyoko was just wrapping up a scene in which Natsu was detailing her plans for how to finally break Chitose's spirit in the utmost. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him enter.

He had on his usual infuriating smirk and was basking in the gasps of appreciation that accompanied his arrival. He seemed to direct a question to one of the stage hands, who pointed directly at Kyoko. His smirk grew wider, and Kyoko bristled internally, but managed to keep her Natsu-face smooth and impassive. As much as it pissed her off to see him, she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of making her look unprofessional, she swore. Aside from a slight demonic flare-up on her part, the shoot continued as usual.

After greeting the director and the cast as a group, he made an effort to specifically talk to Rumi, but completely avoided Kyoko's gaze, and didn't even seem to register her presence. Sho was shown to a dressing room where he could change into the school uniform and prepare for that day's scenes.

So, he's ignoring me! She thought angrily. He thinks he can get to me that way? Two can play at that game.

Then, she shook her head. No, it wouldn't do to play into his childish trap. She needed to do the mature, professional thing, and greet him properly. If nothing else, they could get their usual fight out of the way before filming started. For some inexplicable reason, whenever people saw her fighting with him, they assumed the two of them were dating. She was willing to do whatever it took to avoid that misunderstanding.

With a defeated shrug, she told Chiori not to wait for her to start eating and made her way over to Shotaro's dressing room. She was about to knock on the slightly ajar door when she realized the singer and his manager were in the middle of a heated discussion. Well, I'll come back later, she decided. Or better yet, not at all, said the part of her that wasn't too pleased with this sudden turn for mature behavior where Shotaro was involved.

"Sho, please tell me you've at least read the script," Shoko was saying. Kyoko paused to listen to the answer. If he didn't even do that much...she thought, furious.

"Of course," he said irritably. "I had to, to know what kind of song to write, remember?"

"And you know your lines?"
"More or less."

*More or less?* Kyoko thought. *This jackass-!*

"Sho, this is a job like any other. If you're unprofessional, word will get around, and no one will want to take a chance on you acting in the future."

"I know my lines, okay?" He barked.

"And I still don't get why you were so adamant about doing this when you don't even seem to care about this job!"

*Because he lives to make my life miserable, of course,* Kyoko thought darkly. *Why else?*

"Because that bastard director pissed me off, that's why," he finally burst out.

"What?" Shoko asked.

*What?* Kyoko thought.

"You heard him. When he found out I was going on tour, he was gonna take back the collaboration proposal and give it to those damn Beagles, saying 'you probably won't have the time to get the job done!'"

"Sho, that's called negotiating. He said that on purpose just to get you to sign on," Shoko sigh, exasperated.

*And you totally fell for it, of course.* Kyoko shook her head wonderingly. *The size of your ego...*

"You think I don't know that? The fact that he thought I was so easy to screw with is what pissed me off!" He raged. "So I thought I'd screw around with him a right back, and make him really work for the privilege of having the top musician in Japan write a song for his stupid drama. I never thought he'd actually offer me an acting job, though," he laughed derisively.

*Is this kind of director really okay?* Kyoko asked herself, not for the first time.

"And then," he continued, glowering, "he said that I 'won't even have to act.'"

"I thought you were happy about that," Shoko said, confused. "Because it means less effort for you."

*And you're incredibly lazy,* Kyoko agreed silently.

"Happy? That he thinks I don't know how to act? That he thinks it's too hard for me?" He snapped. "Like I can't do everything that Tsuruga bastard can do?" He kicked a long leg out, knocking over one of the chairs.

"Sho—" Shoko tried to calm him down. "Nobody said you can't act, just that maybe...well, you don't have much experience," she said soothingly.

"So now I'm getting experience." He said, sitting down in one of the remaining upright chairs and leaning it back so that it was on the verge of tipping over. "At least the chick I have to kiss isn't half bad to look at. Not much of a chest, but way better than that Rumi girl—too cutesy. I might not be bored out of my mind the whole time I'm here."

"You have to kiss someone?" Shoko frowned, frustrated. "Sho, you realize that's the kind of thing your manager should know about, so I can handle the publicity that goes with it. If I'd had time to
prepare, like I should have, I could have read the script myself-

The rest of the conversation sort of faded into the distance as Kyoko managed to glean the most important information from the overheard exchange. One, she was not the reason for which Sho had forced his way onto this drama—he had done it out of some twisted sense of pride. Two, he was probably actually going to try and do a decent job, no matter how uninterested he pretended to be, all because he saw it as him somehow competing with Tsuruga-san.

And three, and most importantly, either because they didn't care enough to check the cast list, or just hadn't found the time with the seriously abbreviated schedule they were all on, neither he nor his manager knew she was Natsu.
A Stroke of Luck

He doesn't know, Kyoko thought, skipping down the hall. He has no idea it's me! As she passed a member of the technical staff on the way to the lunchroom, she remembered herself, smoothed out her skirt, and returned to her usual staid gait. The moment the man was gone, though, she burst into a grin and performed a gleeful pirouette.

She wouldn't have to endure insults, yelling, or his arrogant, condescending attitude. For the next week, he would maintain his aloof, cool-guy image—and since to him, she was just another actress he'd be working with, he wouldn't so much as glance at her outside of filming. Sure, she'd still have to kiss him, but the kiss itself was nothing compared to a week of shooting with a Shotaro that was aiming to annoy her.

Of course, Kyoko knew that at some point the truth would come out, and she'd probably be the recipient of more angry, accusatory phone calls, but there was no point in thinking about that now.

Best of all, she thought happily, no one will think we're dating each other. Everyone will just see us former co-workers who don't get along.

Wait! It suddenly occurred to her. Everyone! The last thing she needed was to have the cast and crew expose her before the cameras even started rolling. She needed to take precautions—last time she'd been in this position, she'd had the advantage that only Mimori knew who she was, but this time, everyone on set was a risk.

This revelation taken into account, she rushed back to the dining area. The director was heavily immersed in a discussion with his assistant director and the more protagonistic members of the cast, but pushing her natural unassuming tendencies aside, she marched up to his table, bowed suddenly and sharply, and cutting the man off midsentence, said, "Excuse me, Director, but there's something I need to discuss with you."

The director openly stared at her, mouth gaping in surprise. Of all the people to interrupt him, especially in such a public way! "Um...of course, Kyouko-chan. How can I help you?"

"I want...rather, I would like..." she stuttered, head still lowered.

"Yes?" the man prompted.

"If it's no inconvenience..." she continued vaguely, clearly losing her nerve.

"Kyouko-chan, if we need to discuss this in private—"

She finally jerked up, shaking her head violently. "No, everyone should hear," she said. "I would appreciate it if, for the remainder of filming for this week, everyone could please refer to me as Natsu."

Director Annaka took a moment to absorb the odd request, then responded,

"...can I ask why?"

Kyoko paled. Of course he'd need a reason! Think!

"Um...well..." she said, avoiding his gaze. I can't tell him the truth; that would defeat the whole purpose! If they know that we're more than co-workers there's no way they won't read something
romantic into our relationship.

Romantic...As abruptly as if a light bulb had lit up over her head, she found the answer.

"I—I didn't want to mention this," she said diffidently, managing with some small effort to bring a blush to her cheeks, "but I'm a little uncomfortable with the flirting in some of the scenes. I can do it, of course," she asserted quickly, not wanting to give the wrong idea. The whole point of the intensive training over the weekend was to make sure she seemed capable and prepared, and she didn't want to negate those benefits by playing up her naïveté too much. "But I feel like I would be better able to handle everything if I stay in character as much as possible. Natsu has no problem with" she tossed in a stammer for good measure, "k-kissing. And if everyone," she gave an appealing glance to her fellow actresses, "would be so kind as to play along, then I don't think I should have any problems."

It seemed to work well enough. The older staff members smiled indulgently at her innocence, and Rumi even caught her eyes to give her a sympathetic look. But, she knew, it would all come down to the director.

"Well, okay," he said easily. "If that's what you need to deliver a compelling performance. I'll make sure everyone knows." She let out a relieved sigh on the inside. He was, after all, the same man who had allowed Chiori to dump nail polish remover all over a girl's head for the sake of an impactful scene, so something like this wouldn't seem too extreme to him. If it were any other director—

"But, Kyouko-chan," he said, bringing her back down to earth. "In the future, if there's something you're uncomfortable with doing, or if something's troubling you about a scene, please feel free to talk to me about it."

Kyoko blinked, surprised by the suddenly serious expression on the man's face. Maybe she'd laid it on a little too thick. "Um...of course, Director. Thank you for your concern." She gave another bow and retreated to the lunch table where Chiori had saved her a seat.

Okay, she thought. Now all I have to do is stay in character whenever he's around, hope no one else slips and that he doesn't happen to somehow figure it out on his own, and I should have a peaceful week. I can do this.

"Kyouko-san?" Oops, she thought, jerking her head back up to turn her attention toward Chiori, who must have been speaking to her for some time if her confused tone was anything to go by.

"Yes?" She asked. "Sorry, I was thinking about something."

"Did something happen when you went to greet Fuwa-san?" Chiori asked. For her to suddenly make an announcement like that..."You seem...off."

"No, nothing," she said quickly. "It was a normal greeting. Really."

Chiori looked at her oddly. "He didn't say anything rude, then? He didn't seem very polite earlier. He only took the time to greet the lead actress, and he didn't even acknowledge you when you've worked together before. Of course, maybe when you're that famous, you think the rules of common courtesy don't apply to you," she concluded angrily, gripping her chopsticks so tightly that one snapped in half. She schooled her expression, re-donned her cute girl façade and turned back to her sempai. "But everything was fine?"

"Well," she admitted. "He actually didn't recog—remember me," she corrected quickly. "I shouldn't be surprised," she said with a self-deprecating laugh, "everyone says I look so different from one role
to the next, and we really had very little screen time together."

"Still, that's got to be annoying," her friend said, "to think he could forget you so easily."

"It's fine," Kyoko shrugged helplessly. "Honestly, I'd be just as happy if he never remembered."

Ah, Chiori thought. *Is that the real reason for the name change? She doesn't seem like the type to have trouble with doing unpleasant things for the sake of acting.* As a fellow member of the LoveMe section, Chiori understood the aversion to onscreen romance—case in point, her description of such activities as "unpleasant"—but this was the first time she'd seen any actual proof that her perpetually cheerful sempai had those same hangups, probably because she'd been working to get over them for longer. As soon as Fuwa Sho showed up, though, the issues had reappeared. *What exactly is that guy to her?* She wondered.

*Well, if you never ask...* she thought. *Because you 'didn't exactly get along'?* she quoted, hoping to nudge the girl into some explanation of her feelings toward the Visual Kei singer.

Another shrug, even more noncommittal than the last. A few moments passed in relative silence as Kyoko unwrapped her bento and pulled apart her chopsticks, frustrating Chiori's curiosity.

"If you don't mind me asking, Kyouko-san, just what did Fuwa Sho do that bothers you so much?"

She finally said, opting for the direct route.

Kyoko stiffened again, clearly uncomfortable with the topic. She tamped down the explosive anger she usually felt when asked to recount the story of her time with Shotaro—the one that would take three full days to relate—and once again pulled out her professional smile.

"If it's all the same to you, Amamiya-san, I'd just as soon talk about something else." The oddly dark aura that seemed to swirl just behind the smile was enough to dissuade Chiori from asking further, and she obediently changed the subject.

"Um... Oh!" She said, landing on something she'd been wanting to ask before. "I noticed that you weren't wearing your necklace in the scene, but I'm sure I saw you wearing it when you came in. Did the chain break again?"

"Hmm?" Kyoko absentmindedly touched her neck where Princess Rosa should be hanging. "No, she's fine," she said, shaking her head. "The writers asked if they could use her as a plot point."

Chiori was used to her co-worker's bizarre tendency to refer to the necklace as if it were a person, and was unfazed by the out-of-place pronoun. "How do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, it's supposed to be one of the early warning signs that Natsu is becoming too obsessed with Chitose," she began. "Before, she always had a number of girls she would pick on, but Chitose is the first to have lasted so long, showing a cheerful face even after everything that's happened. So, Natsu gets interested in just her and eventually starts to lose control in other aspects of her life."

"The first major sign is that she forgets to be as attentive to her appearance as she used to," she continued. "Things like her uniform being not as neat, or forgetting to keep up her good-girl act in front of teachers. But this is really just foreshadowing. We won't be starting that as much until next season, when Chitose starts to stand up for herself and Natsu starts falling apart, until even the girls in her bullying group lose respect for her."

"Except for Kaori," Chiori tacked on. Kyoko nodded. "So they asked you not to wear it? Then why bring it in?"
"They want to shoot a small scene where Natsu is getting ready, and Princess Rosa is laying on her
dresser, forgotten. They figure not many people will be able to understand the significance, but they
thought it would be a fun scene to add—kind of like an Easter egg for really dedicated fans." She
smiled. "I thought it was an interesting idea, so I gave them the okay."

Chiori smiled in return, glad to have gotten Kyoko out of her strange mood. She moved to start
eating from her bento again when it finally registered that one of her chopsticks was in pieces.
"Again?" She muttered. "Excuse me, Kyouko-san," she said, standing up from the table. "I need to
get a new set of chopsticks."

"Please do," Kyoko said politely. She opened her own bento and was poised to put the first piece of
fried chicken into her mouth when she felt the presence of someone else. Wondering if Chiori had
forgotten something—although what she could have forgotten on a trip to get utensils was hard to
imagine—she looked up to see the all-too-familiar face of her childhood friend as he stood over her.

"Mind if I sit here?" He asked casually.

He was outfitted in the show's school uniform of suit and tie, although the color was different from
her own to indicate his status as an upperclassman, and he carried one of the bentos provided by the
show. The overall effect reminded her rather forcibly of their junior high years, and she found herself
momentarily stunned, unable to respond.

Then, her demons screamed to be released on his smug, smug face, and she remembered where she
was. She took it as a sign that her acting had improved when even in spite of her surprise she
managed to make an almost immediate switch into her Natsu persona. A sly smile spread across her
face, and she said equally as casually, "Why not?"

"I'm Sho," he said, settling into the seat next to her. Unspoken were the words, but of course you
know that already.

"What's your name?"

"Just call me Natsu," she said. Egotistical bastard.

She then turned back to her lunch, projecting an
air of total indifference as she picked up a small clump of rice, examined it, placed it in her mouth,
and chewed slowly.

The apparent lack of interest didn't seem to bother him; he only raised an eyebrow and smirked. "I
hope you don't mind me eating with you. This whole 'acting' thing is still pretty new to me," he said
lazily, as if her profession was merely a hobby he'd decided to dabble in, "and since we're going to
be spending a lot of time together on set, I figured we could get to know each other a little better."
He leaned in until she could feel the heat radiating off of his body.

"Why bother?" She asked, still not looking at him. "Technically, you're Chitose's love interest," she
pointed out breezily, "shouldn't you be getting to know Rumi?"

"True," he said with a chuckle, "but, Natsu-san, I noticed that you especially were looking at me
pretty intensely earlier." Glaring at you, she corrected mentally. "So I figured, if there are any
questions you're burning to ask me," his voice got low and rough, "well, I've never been one to
disappoint a fan." This prompted a mental eye-roll on Kyoko's part, but Natsu's face remained
impassive.

"Besides, you're the one I'll be kissing," he added matter-of-factly. He moved in further, lips almost
touching her ear, and whispered, "I could give you a few pointers, if you want."

Kyoko wanted very badly to back away and get as much distance from him as possible, utterly
bewildered by his attitude towards her, but instead chose to leave the reaction to Natsu.
The charismatic high school girl held a hand out in front of her, idly examining her manicure, then threw him a questioning glance with one perfectly-plucked eyebrow arched above the other. "Pointers?" She echoed coolly. A small, condescending smile appeared on her face and she gave an artful giggle. "As if I—" Suddenly, before she could finish her thought, she spotted movement out of the corner of her eye.

A camera tech had approached the table where the two performers were sitting and, with a quick bow, started to say something.

"Excuse me, Kyou—" She sprung from her chair, letting the scrape of its legs on the linoleum floor cover the last syllable. The man was slightly taken aback at the quick response and stopped speaking altogether.

"May I help you?" She asked, the smile she directed at him making it very clear how displeased she was. Obviously, not everyone had heard her special announcement. She just hoped Shotaro hadn't noticed.

"Um, well," he said, cowed, "sorry to interrupt, but as soon as you're done with lunch you're needed back on set to do a re-take of the last scene. We were running through the footage, and it seems there was some kind of strange interference with the camera...almost like there was this dark shadow over everything—"

"I'll be right there," she said briskly, collecting her lunch up again. She hadn't even touched the thing, but better to get away as soon as possible. She readied herself to follow the tech, who was further characterizing the interference as "a bunch of tiny, scary-looking faces," when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

Looking up, she met Sho's eyes full force. There was no sign of recognition, thankfully, but he did grace her with a cocksure smile and and the parting words, "see you around."

*This may be harder than I thought*, she realized.
Across town, in the parking structure at TBM, Tsuruga Ren was in his car, his head laid against the steering wheel. A tapping sound came on the window, and he looked up to find Yashiro had returned.

He flicked the switch to unlock the passenger side door and sat up in his seat, pulling his usual professional mask back into place. His manager slid into the car, handing over a packet for Ren's perusal.

"These are all the schedule changes," he said. Ren nodded, skimming the pages for relevant information. "We shouldn't have any conflicts."

"Ren..." Yashiro said slowly. "Were you just asleep?"

Ren straightened the papers and handed them back to his manager. "Why would you think that?" He asked, keeping his voice as neutral as possible.

"I was knocking on that window for almost five minutes." He replied simply.

The actor sighed. "Yes, I dozed off for a little while," he admitted. "I had a small bout of insomnia last night and I'm still somewhat tired."

"You can usually get by on only a few hours of sleep," Yashiro said, concerned. "You're not coming down with something, are you?"

"I'm fine," Ren said quickly. "It was just one night." Well, two, but who's counting? He thought guiltily.

"Ren," Yashiro scolded, "you can't always just ignore health issues like this. It could be a sign that there's something wrong. Besides, if you're that tired, you should hardly be driving."

"But it's not like you could take over for me," Ren reminded him. "And it's really not that bad. It's just that I had a free moment, and I took a second to rest."

"So it was on purpose?" The older man asked.

"Of course," Ren asserted confidently.

Yashiro nodded. "Uh-huh," he said.

Ren glanced at him, irritated. "What does 'uh-huh' mean?" He asked with his most polite-looking smile.

"There's no point looking at me like that," his manager said. "I know you're lying. After all, if you'd meant to take a nap, you'd have pulled out that ridiculous pillow of yours."
Ren glared at him pointedly. Yashiro, sensing the source of the problem, amended his statement. "That...totally normal and appropriate for a grown man pillow, I mean," he said.

The actor held the scowl for another moment, then slumped in his seat. "Okay, fine. I didn't mean to fall asleep, and I'm actually very tired. But I'm not sick, I promise."

"You may not think you are, but you don't exactly have the best track record at recognizing illness," Yashiro pointed out. "Wouldn't it be better if, just to be safe, you went in for a check-up?"

Ren buried his face in his hands, and let out a sigh that seemed to last for an eternity. If he didn't give Yashiro a reasonable explanation, he'd end up missing work for a doctor's visit he didn't need. But if he told the truth—the idea was almost too horrible to fathom. He could lie. No, he shot himself down. Tired as he was, his manager would spot it a mile away. If he got caught in yet another lie, he'd definitely end up at the hospital for an overbearing doctor visit.

Fine, he made his decision. The story's probably bound to come out eventually. Better to tell him now and get it over with.

He straightened up, and turned to face Yashiro. "I'm telling you this in confidence and I am asking you to please be as mature as possible."

"Okay," Yashiro said, now thoroughly bewildered.

"This weekend, I gave Mogami-san kissing lessons."

"..."

Yashiro froze, his hair standing absolutely on end. Then, he opened his mouth, but no sound came out. His lips flapped pointlessly for a few moments more, and he seemed to be struggling to express himself through a kind of sign language known only to him. Finally, both hands and mouth stilled, and his whole body, from head to toe, took on a brilliant shade of crimson.

Ren, who was at this point seriously worried that he might have broken his manager with this revelation, waved a hand in front of his face, checking to see if there was any response. "Yukihito-san?" he ventured.

Suddenly he became aware of strange, high-pitched whistling that seemed to be coming from Yashiro's closed mouth. It was like watching a kettle come to a boil—when the pressure became too much to contain, it burst out of him in a long, joyful shriek.

"YOU KISSED KYOKO-CHAN?"

"Yashiro-san—"

"THIS IS WONDERFUL!"

"Please, calm down—"

"TELL ME EVERYTHING!"

"Yashiro-san!" He said sternly, grabbing him by the shoulders. "People are staring." True enough, a number of people in various stages of parking had stopped what they were doing to try and locate the source of the noise.

Always concerned with his star's image, Yashiro managed to calm himself. He nodded solemnly,
then said, "Maybe it would be best if we continued this conversation on the road."

"Only if you promise not to start screaming again," Ren responded. "Otherwise I might accidentally drive us off of a bridge."

"No more screaming," he promised, then frowned. "You really should have given me more warning than that, you know. You and Kyoko-chan sharing your first kiss is...monumental."

"Teaching someone to kiss and kissing someone for real are two very different things," he said as he pulled the car out of its spot and headed for the exit. "It was a favor, nothing more. And I'm actually not sure it was such a good idea."

"Because it wasn't the real thing?" Yashiro asked.

He sighed. That was definitely part of it. "It's not like she kissed me because she has feelings for me. In the end it's all because of him."

"Him?" The older man asked, confused.

"Who else?" Ren said bitterly. "Fuwa."

"Um...I don't follow." Yashiro said blankly. "Why on Earth would you teach Kyoko-chan how to kiss Fuwa Sho?"

"Because she asked me to," he said simply. Yashiro just stared at him, and he relented. "It was work-related. Fuwa somehow managed to get a guest role on her current drama and their characters are slated to kiss each other. Maybe even as soon as today, he lamented.

"Oh," his manager said. "...and that's why you're sleep deprived? Because you know she has to kiss him?"

"Well, that doesn't help either," he admitted. "But it's more..." he sighed, forcing himself to say it, "that I'm scared. I think I may have gone too far and risked pushing Mogami-san away."

"What do you mean?" Yashiro asked, surprised to hear Ren speak so honestly about his feelings. He must really be tired, he mused.

"I...lost control. During the lessons."

Yashiro gasped. "You didn't! Ren, that's illegal!"

"What?" he asked, startled. "No, not like that—it didn't go anywhere near that far," he said, wondering how it was that he was supposed to be the playboy and yet Yashiro's mind always made that sudden leap to less-than-savory thoughts. "I just...I insisted that we practice far more than we possibly needed to—even with the sort of kissing you would almost never see on a teen drama—and I was definitely too hands-on. I wanted to make sure there was nothing Fuwa could surprise her with, no other first he could take away. That...and I just couldn't seem to stop myself."

"And she didn't seem bothered by it right then, but...the more I think about it, the more I'm sure that she was just too worn out or maybe even too scared to say anything. I thought for a while that maybe she just couldn't tell what I was doing was wrong, but..." he shook his head, thinking, if there's anything I've learned from all this, it's that she's not nearly as naïve as she appears to be. Or is it just "Nacchan" that isn't naïve? He wondered. Either way the knowledge is in there somewhere.

"I'm sure everything will be fine, Ren," Yashiro said suddenly, stirring him from his reverie. "After
all, you're her trusted sempai. She puts up with all your demands, tantrums, and mood swings without ever questioning your motives. She probably thinks you were just being thorough.”

"You...may be right," Ren admitted, feeling his mood lift somewhat in spite of being accused of having tantrums. Kyoko had kept the completely unreasonable promise to "stay pure" that he'd extorted from her all this time without a second thought. Naïve or not, he realized, she was still one of the densest people he'd ever met when it came to romance. He knew from experience the convoluted ways in which she avoided seeing love even when it was right in front of her—she still didn't seem to realize that Fuwa Sho was interested in more than just a rivalry with her.

*Which makes it that much more dangerous for them to be together,* he knew.

"Of course," Yashiro apparently felt the need to add, "if she didn't figure out how you felt about her even after you 'lost control,' maybe she never will."

"Thanks for that," Ren said flatly.

"Anytime!" Came the cheerful answer.
He's a Princess

"Oi, Shoko-san...how old is this show again?" Sho suddenly asked during a momentary break between takes as his make-up was retouched.

The manager had only just got off the phone with a talk show host who was trying to negotiate a pre-taping time that wouldn't clash with Sho's new schedule, and was understandably frazzled. "What?" She said.

"How long has it been on?" The musician pressed.

"Um...I think the director said that the third episode is airing this week. Why?"

"So I probably haven't seen it, then..." He mused.

"Sho, what are you talking about?" Shoko asked, confused.

He scratched his head thoughtfully. "That actress...the one playing the main bully? I keep getting this weird feeling I've seen her somewhere. So I thought maybe I'd watched the show before without realizing it or something."

"Well, maybe she's been in something else you've seen," she said. "What was her name again?"

"Natsu, apparently."

"But...isn't that the character name?" Shoko pointed out. She'd finally had a chance to flip through the script earlier, and the kiss scene was fresh in her mind. She pulled the packet out of her tote and flipped to a dog-eared page. "See? It says it right here."

"Huh," he said.

"I doubt that's her real name," Shoko said. "You probably misunderstood."

"Everybody else calls her Natsu, too, though," Sho said with a shrug. "Maybe it's just something she does to 'stay in character' or whatever. You know how weird actors can be. Either way, I don't really care. It's not like I need to know her name."

"Really? I thought you were interested in her. " She looked at him oddly. "You've been talking to her every chance you get, after all."

"Yeah, 'cause it's hilarious," he said, tossing her a lazy grin that made the make-up artist 'tsk' when the brush was jostled.

"Stay still," she ordered irritably, dabbing at the foundation that had escaped its boundaries. He rolled his eyes, but complied.

"I mean," he continued as if the woman was no longer there, "she obviously has a thing for me. She watches me every chance she gets, whenever she thinks I'm not looking. Like now, for instance," he said, with the tiniest jerk of his head in Kyoko's direction. Shoko glanced over at the seemingly aloof girl and was surprised to see her gaze locked intently on Sho, just as he'd said. When she noticed Shoko looking, though, her eyes darted away to rest on something else.

For her part, the make-up artist practically growled and grabbed his head between her hands, stabilizing it. "I'm doing your eyes next, so if you don't want to lose one of them you'd better stop
moving," she advised with a dangerous undertone.

"So?" Shoko said finally. "You have plenty of fangirls who stare at you non-stop. In fact, you've told me how annoying it is. What makes her so interesting?"

"She's more my type than them, for one," he said simply. "She's mature, knows how to dress, doesn't get overexcited. And none of this little-girl nonsense like talking about herself in the third person," alluding to Rumi's childish way of speaking, which was obviously meant to be cute but mostly just got on his nerves. "Hell, even the way she walks is kind of sexy."

"But mostly it's the fact that, even though she's so clearly into me, she doesn't want to admit it." He explained. "I go over there to talk to her, maybe have a little fun, and she plays it cool. Like she doesn't care if I'm here or not."

So she's a tsundere? Thought Shoko. "And?"

"And it's been a long time since a girl has resisted my charms, let alone outright rejected me." A certain young woman's face popped into his head, but he shook away the thought before he could dwell on any similarities. "But now, I think I might actually have found a way to have some fun with this acting thing. I mean, it's not like the work's challenging at all," he laughed, while the make-up artist glared at him. "Why anybody thinks it's hard to play pretend all day is beyond me."

"You're done," the woman said tersely, whipping off the smock he had on to protect his clothes. He stood up without so much as a thank-you and continued his conversation with Shoko.

"So I asked the director if he could leave the kissing scene till later," he said, smirking. "Give me some time to work. By the time the last day rolls around, I'll have her begging me to kiss her."

She had played up her worries too much. The director had decided to leave the kissing scene until later in the week so that she would "have time to prepare herself." This is exactly what she'd been trying to avoid with the emergency weekend lessons—having to admit that she wasn't ready for something the role required. She'd even told the director she was fine, but he just gave her this infuriatingly sympathetic smile and told her it was "no trouble."

Dammit. It was one thing when she'd spent the whole weekend dreading the kiss, and another when every moment wasted before that scene made it that much more likely that he'd figure her identity out. She'd spent the entire day so far on edge, watching his every move for some sign that a crewmember had slipped and said her real name, or that he'd somehow figured it out. The whole thing was exhausting. And while she wasn't the principal character in any of today's scenes, she was meant to be visible in the background of many of them, reacting to the budding relationship, so she couldn't even leave early to reduce the risk of exposure.

Worst of all, that jackass came over and talked to her every chance got. For some reason, he'd got it into his head that she was a fan of his, and now he wouldn't leave her alone. Every time she tried brushing him off, he just seemed to take it as an invitation.

They'd call cut, and seconds later he'd be next to her, asking "when she'd started acting" and "if she had any tips for a newbie like him...because he'd love to have her tutor him." She ignored him for the most part, or told him to get back to his mark. It was actually out of character for Natsu, who was begging to be let loose on this arrogant newcomer, but as the whole point of this exercise was to avoid fights, Kyoko had been forcing her to hold back. Maybe if she were ruder, he'd back off, but
she'd end up causing everyone else trouble, and she definitely didn't want that.

Trying to keep an eye on him and keep her own character under control was more than she'd bargained for, though, and that combined with her lack of sleep made the whole ordeal about ten times more exhausting than a normal day of shooting.

"Kyouko-san?" Chiori ventured at one point. She turned her head so fast to glare at her fellow LoveMe girl that she was sure she'd given herself whiplash.


"It's just that the schedule's so hectic," Kyoko said. "I have a show I have to tape after this, and we have to deal with a new actor and all. But I'm fine."

"It's going much faster than I expected," Chiori said cheerfully. "He's actually not terrible at this, for all that he's a complete amateur."

Having watched him act, Kyoko was forced to grudgingly agree with her. Shotaro was actually doing a decent job. He knew his lines, took direction with minimal whining, and after a few slight issues with the unnatural positioning needed to show the actors' faces at all times, he seemed to be handling the blocking pretty well.

It didn't hurt that the character he was playing was one he was familiar with. Even the director couldn't have known how right he'd been when he said Sho wouldn't need to act; as Sagara, he was acting the way he'd done almost his entire school career, using the mature, cool image he'd started cultivating back in the third grade. The way he'd flash a smile at any girl who admired him. The way he'd never show too much emotion and just be passively pleasant. The way he'd speak in short, vague sentences that made him seem to be saying something meaningful without actually revealing anything about him. It kept giving her unpleasant junior high flashbacks. She knew that in-universe, Sagara was meant to be a sincerely nice guy, but she couldn't help wanting to warn Chitose that she was being tricked.

She shook off those thoughts and responded to the waiting Chiori, "Yeah, he's doing pretty well, I guess." She kept her tone carefully neutral.

"Of course, it's not like the character is really all that complex," Chiori continued, disdain creeping into her voice. "All he has to do is play the stereotypical nice sempai and pick up a few books, toss in a charming smile. But he's doing well," she said, adopting a tone of magnanimity.

She glanced over at her sempai, as if hoping to see some kind of response from her on the subject, but Kyoko just nodded. Although his name would be mentioned in the episodes leading up to this one, accompanied by a well-placed blush on Chitose's part, Sagara-sempai would only actually appear in the finale, making him a one-episode love interest and about as shallow a character as ever existed in a drama.

"He'll probably be praised for it, too." Her coworker plowed ahead. "Everyone will talk about how wonderful an actor he is, even though he hasn't put in a fraction of the work that we have." It was obvious now that she was trying to provoke Kyoko into some kind of outburst, but for the most part, Chiori had managed to make herself angry.

"And he'll probably start bragging about easily it all came to him. Like acting isn't anything difficult at all, when all he did was play some empty character—who, by the way, isn't even really a character."
"Amamiya-san, maybe you should calm d—"

"You know what he is? He's...Princess Rosa!" She declared.

"What?" Kyoko asked, bewildered.

"No, see, listen," Chiori said quickly. "What I mean is, he's just a plot point. There's no background story, no real personality, just this guy who gets stolen from Chitose to move the story along. Which is great for an amateur like Fuwa Sho, since no one will care if his acting doesn't have any depth! It...sucks." She said finally, slumping over with a sigh. She glanced over at Kyoko to see if her rant had had any effect, but the girl retained her impassive mask.

On the inside, of course, her demons were seething. Chiori was right; Shotaro had lucked into a completely two-dimensional character, and now he could claim acting as one of his skills. And he would, too. He'd probably try to compare himself with Tsuruga-san on top of everything else—as if they were even on the same planet in terms of skill!

But any show of these emotions would just increase the risk of being found out, and so she kept them bottled up. She was glad, though, that Chiori hadn't been charmed by the likes of Shotaro, and she resolved to invite her out for ice cream sometime as a thanks for saying all the things she couldn't.

"Well, it looks like I'm needed on set," Chiori said, sighing at yet another failure to unravel the mystery. "I have to go spy on the lovebirds for a while."

It would probably be another 20 minutes before she would be called back, Kyoko realized. And with Shotaro occupied with filming, she shouldn't have to worry about any slip-ups. The tension drained out of her for the first time since he showed up, and she felt her lids grow heavier...

She couldn't remember how they'd ended up on the couch, but she was glad for it. At some point, she felt as if the bones in her legs had melted away, and she wasn't sure how long she could manage to stay upright.

He'd sat down first, tugging her along with him—she knew that much, mostly because she was practically sitting on top of him. It wasn't like with Setsu, straddling his torso, but more like she was in his lap, with her thighs hugging his hips. She felt the warmth of his breath against her neck and shuddered.

He was looking at her, eyes dark and full of...something she didn't quite want to identify—the Emperor of the Night, she thought to herself. That look should have sent her screaming, made her freeze in place, made her do something to stop what would happen next for the sake of protecting her heart.

But this was necessary, she reminded herself. For...she couldn't remember why she needed to do this so badly, she realized. She just knew that Ren was looking at her, waiting for her to kiss him, prompting her wordlessly to continue, and so she moved in closer, vaguely registering that his hands had fallen to her hips, and with the smoothness of practice, captured his lips with her own. Their tongues met, and a tiny moan escaped unbidden from her throat. The sound seemed to urge him on, and he hungrily pressed her body closer to his own. A feeling of warmth washed over her whole body, radiating from each point of contact and driving away any and all thoughts of what she should or shouldn't do.

Suddenly, he grasped her by the wrists, and gently but firmly pushed her off of his lap. She sat there, dazed for a moment. Had she done something wrong?
"I think...you have the basics down," he said with a tone of finality.

She jerked herself awake. Dammit, dammit, dammit! She thought. She knew she shouldn't be allowing herself to sleep. Now the images were swimming around in her head almost as clearly as when they were fresh in her mind the night of the lessons, the last thing she needed when trying to stay as emotionless as possible.

Looking around, she hoped that no one had noticed her sleeping—or guessed at the contents of her dream. When she confirmed that no one seemed to be looking at her, she surreptitiously checked for drool, straightened her hair and clothes, and forced herself to focus on the scene that was playing out in front of her.

Chitose had tripped (with a little help from Yumika) and accidentally knocked into Sagara-sempai, spilling a can of juice on him. She was apologizing for being clumsy when Sagara smiled smoothly and said, "It's okay. I'm just glad I was here to catch you. Besides, I think a little clumsiness is cute."

Chitose blushed radiantly, and Kyoko found herself thinking, Chiori's right. He is Princess Rosa.

As she packed up her things, getting ready to go Bridge Rock, she heard footsteps in the hallway behind her.

"Hello again," came that annoyingly familiar voice, now with an added tone of flirtation that was gradually becoming almost as familiar.

She froze, then realized that she'd forgotten to change the nameplate on her dressing room door, which read KYOUKO for all the world to see. She turned quickly, hiding the sign behind her back as she thought about how to get the paper out without him noticing.

"Can I help you?" She asked languidly. "I'm on my way out."

Sho was back in his rocker getup. He leaned against the wall behind him in a cross-legged slouch he was convinced made him look irresistible—she knew because he'd practiced it a million times over when they were still living together.

"If you're not too busy, I was thinking about giving you those pointers I mentioned earlier."

"Pointers," she said vaguely, as if she couldn't quite recall what he was talking about.

"For the kiss scene, remember?" He said. "You may be my sempai in all things acting, but I'm pretty sure I have a leg up in the kissing department."

"Oh? What makes you say that?" She asked. Maybe if I hear him out he'll leave sooner.

"Well," he licked his lower lip slowly. "I am a singer—being skilled with my mouth is kind of a requirement."

She fought the urge to roll her eyes...and lost. "Uh-huh."

He just smiled. "Oh, you'll see. If you come with me, I mean." He uncrossed his legs and walked over to stand directly in front of her, one arm propped against the door above her head. She didn't dare move now, not when he was so close to seeing that. Her hand snaked up behind her, trying to somehow pull the damn thing out.
While she was distracted he'd invaded her space even further. He tucked a stray hair behind her ear, traced the contour of her cheek with a slim finger, and let it rest just under her chin, tipping her head up to look him directly in the eye.

"So what do you say?" he asked.

"I'm busy," she said in a flat tone of voice, as if his closeness didn't affect her at all. Inside, Kyoko was completely flustered. She had no idea why Shotaro was suddenly showing this kind of interest in her. She knew from experience that she lacked two very important attributes that would usually draw his attention, and while the magic of make-up was in full force, it couldn't change that.

Besides, she'd thought, once again touching the space where Princess Rosa should be, without the help of the necklace only the pure of heart should find her more appealing than usual, and he definitely didn't fall into that category.

Maybe, she'd wondered, it was all a trick, and he'd really already figured out who she was. And after everything he'd laugh and say, "did you really think you were attractive?" or something like that.

Whatever it was, it was driving her crazy. She didn't want him on her show making her job twice as hard, and she sure as hell didn't want him messing with her head like this. Not when it was already so muddled thanks to a certain actor. Something had to be done—but first:

With a tiny jerk she finally slid the paper sign out of its proper place and stuffed it into the back pocket of her jeans. Fortunately, he didn't seem to notice, because he just said, "Come on," then pressed his lips to the shell of her ear and whispered,

"I could teach you everything."

Even if it weren't for the worldly knowledge that was somehow stored exclusively in Natsu's brain, Kyoko would have recognized the implications of that phrase. And it pissed her off. What kind of a girl did this bastard think she was, anyway?

So, she did it. Against her better judgment, she let Natsu have a free rein.

The girl smiled sensually, lips slightly parted, eyes softening. She grasped his hand in her own, then pulled him closer, letting the warmth of her breath play out across his neck. He seemed startled, but only for a moment, before a triumphant grin spread across his face. Natsu mirrored his expression and splayed one hand flat against his chest. Suddenly, she fisted her hand in the front of his shirt and pushed him up against the wall, sliding one leg in between his in a move that was at once intimate and threatening. She jerked his head closer, not bothering to make the movement smooth, and, cocking her head to one side, bit his ear sharply.

He let out a yelp mostly of pain, but a small note of pleasure crept in, too, as much to his surprise as to anyone else's. "W-what?" He managed to say, trying to push Natsu away so he could look her in the eyes, but she held fast, her knee pressing dangerously close to the place where his legs split. "Why did you—?"

This time, it was her whispering into his ear. "Little boy, don't you dare presume to be able to teach me anything," she said. "I eat immature brats like you for breakfast."

And with that, she slammed him back against the wall, unclenching her hand from his shirt and disentangling herself from him.

"See you tomorrow," she said sweetly, leaving a confused and—if her eyes weren't deceiving her—blushing Shotaro standing there, mouth agape.
Chicken Nightmares

Mogami Kyoko's thigh muscles screamed at her as she wobbled into the TBM station. She'd made the trip in record time, pushing harder every time an unwelcome thought crept into her head. As a result, she was nearly 20 minutes early for her next job, which unfortunately, she realized, gave her plenty of time to think.

What did I do? What did I do? WHAT DID I—

"Kyouko-chan?" She raised her head out of the cradle of her hands to see Ishbiashi Hikaru looking at her with no small amount of concern. "Are you all right?"

Quickly, she pasted a smile on her face and bowed her greeting—this was not something she could discuss with him, after all. She could barely stand to discuss it with herself. If some part of her noticed the surprised flush of pink in her coworker's cheeks, she ignored it.

"I'm fine," she assured him. "Just a little tired, is all. I had a busy morning."

"Oh? What happened?" He asked.

She stared at him blankly for a moment, then, pushing aside the image that popped up in response to his question, she managed to keep her tone light as she said, "Oh, just a guest star on set. You know how it is."

"Actually, I don't really," he said with a teasing chuckle, "All I do is work with guests, remember?"

Kyoko crinkled her nose as she realized he was right. "Well, it can be tiring if you're not used to it, I guess," she said defensively. "And this guest was...he..." She couldn't bring herself to elaborate. "It was just a long day on set," she finished lamely.

"Is that why you're still..." he searched for a tactful way to say it, "Natsu-ish?" He avoided looking her in the eye and willed his face to show an expression of polite interest.

"What?" She asked, confused. "Oh!" Although her hair had been somewhat mussed by her trip there, thanks to surprisingly strong hair products, it had for the most part settled back into place in that elegant, sideswept style that Natsu favored. And since she couldn't risk being seen in Kyoko-form anywhere near the Box-R set, she hadn't yet taken off her makeup. Only her clothes were her usual fare. "Uh, yeah," she said. "I was in a hurry, so I didn't have time to go back to normal."

Hikaru looked at her oddly. "But you're really early," he pointed out.

"Right, well, after I left, someone offered me a ride," she explained. "So I guess I didn't need to rush so much after all, huh?" She offered up a sheepish laugh, hoping he'd let the matter drop.

"I guess," he said, smiling kindly. "Shall we head in?" He opened the door to the Bridge Rock studio. "After you."

"Thank you," Kyoko replied, relieved. And now, to work, she thought happily. It was exactly what she needed. If she could just focus on being Bou, she would be fine. She knew it.
It was a disaster. Being in a giant chicken suit was hot. And being the mascot meant there was a lot
of waiting for her cue to go on, and very little actual acting. Even though she was on her feet the
whole show, she'd fallen asleep three times. Each time, her dreams had gone back to the events of
Saturday night. Only now...

She pulled away from the kiss, head fuzzy and mouth somewhat dry. By now they must be in double-
digits, and he still wasn't satisfied. "Mogami-san, it needs to be more natural," he'd said. Whatever
that meant. His criticisms got less and less specific as they went along, but she couldn't find the
willpower to ask for clarification.

She looked up at him, waiting for the comment that was forthcoming. The eyes she met weren't the
deep brown she was accustomed to, though, but a lighter gray color. Shotaro smirked at her, licking
his lips. "That was better," he allowed, his gaze traveling the length of her body, his grin widening to
wolfish proportions. "But...I think you need a little more practice." He draped an arm over one of
her shoulders, put a possessive hand on her waist, and, lowering his face down to her level, huskily
said, "I could teach you everything."

NO! She'd thought each time Shotaro invaded her dreams, and it was all she could do to stop herself
screaming just that in the middle of the taping. As it was, she was absolutely drenched in sweat and
had been told rather pointedly to take the costume to be cleaned.

Kyoko sighed as she trundled down the hallway with the deconstructed chicken suit in a cart. She
found herself wishing for the return of the original dreams—at least those weren't nightmares. And at
least they didn't keep bringing her mind back to that same question that looped in her mind over and
over.

What did I do?

She wouldn't feel the slightest bit of shame about hitting Shotaro. Or about strangling him. Or about
sicking her inner demons on him and watching him writhe in fear and pain. But this...this was
shameful. I should have known better than to let Nacchan take over, she thought. The girl has no
sense of propriety. And the things she thinks of...

But of course, Natsu only had those thoughts because of Kyoko. That was the problem, really.
Kyoko felt as if her purity was being slowly leached away, turning her into somebody else. The kind
of girl who thinks about kissing her sempai all day, who knows exactly how to toy with an annoying
flirt, and who has inappropriate dreams at the drop of a hat... I'm becoming a pervert, she realized.

And it's all Shotaro's fault! She wailed inside her head.

If he hadn't forced his way onto her show, she'd never have had to ask Tsuruga-san for kissing
lessons, and that man wouldn't be occupying her thoughts at every moment, waking or sleeping. And
if he'd just recognized her off the bat, she wouldn't have to go such lengths to keep her identity
hidden! With all the stress of preserving her anonymity, she'd had half a mind to just tell him and get
it over with, but after that encounter...it would be humiliating.

She turned down that familiar hallway where she'd met Ren in her guise as Bou twice in the past and
had to do a double-take. There was her sempai, in all his long-limbed glory, sitting in that very same
spot. Luckily for her, he had his head in his hands, and she was able to back the cart around the
corner before he had a chance to see her.

Kyoko was contemplating alternate routes to get to the laundry room—she really should delete this
hallway from her repertoire, she knew—when the image of Ren, head bowed in despair, assaulted her mind's eye. She couldn't just leave him like that! He could need her help! Or, rather, the chicken's help.

Pulling the cart back to a safe distance from the hallway in case he came around the corner, she changed back into the sweat-scented costume as speedily as possible. It was a lengthy process, and she half-expected him to be gone by the time she got back. But no, there he was, just sitting there, a dark cloud hanging over him.

"Hell—" she started to say, then coughed, and this time pitched her voice lower to sound more masculine. "Hello, Tsuruga-kun," she said jovially.

Ren looked up at her, and two things registered: one, even with the less-than-perfect vision of a person in a giant mascot costume, she could see that he had concealer under his eyes—the skin was whiter even than it usually was—and two, she really wanted to kiss him. It was this weird, overwhelming desire that struck her all of a sudden, made even more ridiculous by the fact that, in her current form, she was both male and lipless.

And that, in a nutshell, was what bothered Kyoko so much in the aftermath of the kissing lessons. She'd enjoyed kissing Tsuruga Ren. She hadn't wanted to stop, and when they did, it had been completely without warning. There was no closure. She'd had the last kiss she'd probably ever get from the man she loved, and she hadn't known that it was her last. Maybe, she thought, if I just had one more...

But what was she thinking? The actress realized. If she loved him half as much as she thought she did, the last thing she should be thinking about when he looked exhausted is what she wanted. She shoved her selfish thoughts away and turned her attention back to the beleaguered actor.

To her rather unpleasant surprise, he was beaming at her.

"I hoped I'd run into you today," he said, smile devastatingly sparkly. "Please, sit with me."

Dubious, she obeyed. What was going on?

"I'm not keeping you from anything, am I?" Ren asked, the picture of consideration.

"Uh, no," she said. "I'm done for the day."

"Then, if you don't mind, could we talk for a bit?" He asked. "For some reason, I can speak openly with you, and I need some advice."

"Advice?" She echoed. "About what?"

"Love," he said simply.
"Love?" Kyoko repeated, her voice jumping up an octave. Ren's strange look brought her back to herself and she faked a cough, giving her a chance to quiet the sudden surge in her heartbeat. "Ahem. Sorry, must have something in my throat," she said, making her voice low and even once more. "Are you sure I'm the person you should ask about this?" The last thing she wanted was to hear more stories of him and another girl.

"You're the best possible choice," he insisted. "After all, you're the one who helped me figure out my own feelings in the first place. If it weren't for you, I might never have realized what Mo—what that girl means to me."

Kyoko felt a sharp, prickling sensation in the vicinity of her chest, as if she'd just been stabbed. Glad for the security that wearing a chicken head afforded her, and managing to at least keep her voice steady, she ventured, "So it is love, then?"

"Definitely." Stab. "It's exactly like you said—every time I look at her, I just can't help but think how adorable she is." Stab. "And when she's happy, it's like my whole world lights up," he said, an almost beatific smile spread across his face. Stab.

"I'm...glad that everything worked out," she managed, shielding her eyes with one wing. "But I don't really see where I come in. If the two of you are happy together, then..."

"Hm? Oh, we're not together." Ren corrected quickly, with a small, wistful smile. "I haven't even told her how I feel yet."

"But—" she found herself blurting out, "it's been almost six months since then!"

He raised an eyebrow at his chicken-suited comrade. "She's still in high school, remember, and seventeen isn't really much better than sixteen."

"Well, yeah," Kyoko admitted, "but do you really need to wait until she's legal just to tell her you like her?" I mean, the age of consent only really matters if he wants to...With a squawk, she shook her head so violently that she managed to turn the suit's head around a full 180 degrees and was surprised to find herself in complete darkness when she opened her eyes.

"Um...are you all right?" The actor asked her from somewhere beyond the gloom. "Do you need help with—" She could sense his hands reaching toward her and jerked back to avoid them, managing to slam her head into the wall behind her. The beak softened the blow somewhat, but not enough to keep a number of stars from twinkling brightly in her vision.

"I'm fine," she assured the now bewildered Ren quickly, blinking away the tears that had welled up in her eyes, and, with her clumsy cloth-covered hands managed to locate her beak and return it to its proper place with a sharp twist. Light of a more natural variety peeked in through the eyeholes, and she turned to face Ren again. "I was thinking, and something...unpleasant came to mind." She said, with a wave of her hand. It seems, she mused, there are unfortunate side effects from spending a day in Natsu's headspace. After all, Mogami Kyoko's mind would never wander in that direction all on its own, right? "What were we talking about again?"

He looked at her oddly, the concern for her well-being clear on his face, but shrugged and continued. "We were talking about the age gap issue," he said. "But the problem isn't just that I'm older than she is. That's actually what I need to talk to you about." He ran a hand through his hair, and with a small
flush in his cheeks, half-muttered, "This is my first love," before clearing his throat and adding, "and there are things—feelings I haven't really had to deal with before. And since you're kind of my 'sempai' in this, I thought you'd be able to give me some advice."

Somewhat shocked at being called a sempai by Tsuruga Ren of all people, she prompted, "What feelings, exactly?"

"Well, this girl...without going into too much intimate detail," he said, leery of saying too much about Mogami-san's personal affairs to a man whose name he didn't even know, "she got out of a bad relationship not long ago. You might even call it abusive. And the breakup did a number on her—she's basically sworn off romance."

Kyoko felt an unwelcome surge of sympathy for this mystery girl. Though she and Shotaro had never actually dated, she could certainly understand how one especially cruel guy could sour the idea of love for someone. "Okay, so you don't want to rush her." But it was Ren. Ren! There's no way she'd be able to resist.

He nodded. "And I've been approaching her as gently as possible, trying to show her I care for her without pressuring her into anything, but...well, it's her ex. He keeps worming his way back into her life at every turn."

"Wow, I have more in common with this girl than I thought!" Kyoko marveled. "Jerks like him usually do," she said irritably. "They think they can do whatever they want to you. That they own you."

Ren blinked, surprised. "Exactly...The thing is, I know she can't stand him. But it doesn't stop me from feeling hopeless whenever he comes back into the picture. He can catch her attention like nobody else can and make her act completely on impulse. With me, she's always on her guard, and no matter what I do she's completely oblivious to how I feel about her."

"Maybe she's on her guard because she knows and she's not sure how to handle it," Kyoko suggested gently. "I mean, for her not to notice after six months—she'd have to be pretty oblivious."

He sighed. "I've thought of that, but...well, recent events have made it pretty clear she doesn't think of me as a romantic possibility." Or even as a man, he thought.

The prickling in her chest eased a little bit, and she restrained the sudden upturn of her lips, even knowing he couldn't possibly see it. It wasn't right to be happy over his romantic misadventures, she knew. Still...

"The problem is, I can tell myself a million times over not to move too quickly or push too hard, but when he shows up I just..." He clenched a fist, grimacing. "Before, when a woman told me she was interested in someone else, I could tell her to do whatever would make her happy with a smile. I thought I was so incredibly mature. But when this girl even mentions that bastard, I get so angry I want to make her promise never to see him again. I know that I don't have the right—she's not the one trying to see him in the first place, and the two of us are just colleagues, nothing more."

"That's what love is like," Kyoko said with a shrug. "It's not just the giddy feeling you get when you look at that person. It's the stupid, irrational feeling of betrayal you get whenever they talk about another girl—guy," she corrected quickly, "or that overwhelming urge to do something whenever they're close enough to touch." His eyes locked with hers, widening as her words seemed to resonate with something within him, and she felt that selfsame desire wash over her. She turned away, staring instead at the blank studio wall opposite them, and focused on the still-throbbing pain in the back of her head. She'd probably have a bump to deal with tomorrow.
"So what do you do? How do you control it?" He asked. "I haven't been able to so far, and I think I may have done something I can't take back."

"Like what?" She asked, still avoiding his gaze.

"It's difficult to explain." Ren said slowly. "This guy...he's in love with her even now. But the way his mind works...he tells her she's ugly so she won't realize how attracted to her he really is, tells her no guy could want her so she won't date someone else, and makes her miserable every chance he gets so all she can think about is him. Whenever they're together, all he does is belittle her. So when she asked me to help her with something to do with him, I wanted to make sure there was nothing he could fault her for."

He looked over at Bou, surprised to see the chicken's unmoving face trained on his own once again. The rooster's head was tilted every so slightly to the side, as if he were trying to puzzle something out. He seemed to realize that Ren was waiting for a response and gave a quick, encouraging nod.

"Anyway, that's what I told myself," Ren said. "Really, I just wanted to do something with her before he could and...I don't know, sort of make sure her mind was on me instead of him. I was trying so hard to make the experience memorable, that I forgot to hold back." He was making his account of the past weekend's events as vague as possible, and he was acutely aware that it was sounding more and more suspicious. He could only guess at what explanations his feathered friend was thinking up.

But once again, his mind seemed to be somewhere else. It took a long moment before he noticed that Ren had stopped talking, and finally he said, "You're an excellent actor."

"Excuse me?"

"What I mean to say is, you're skilled at concealing your feelings. More than most people, and most people are sure that everyone can tell how they feel, from the way they blush and stammer to the way their hearts pound too loudly. The truth is, most people don't notice when a normal person is in love," Kyoko explained. "But you're a good actor. One of the best, if not the best, in Japan. If you don't want her to know, and she hasn't caught on in the past six months, she probably hasn't figured it out. Some people just can't tell when the person who's in love with them is staring right at them," and before she could stop it, the note of bitterness had crept into her voice. He didn't notice, of course.

"Honestly, I wouldn't worry about it," she continued with a forcedly cheerful tone. "And as for jealousy...it's just a part of love. You should do your best to keep it from controlling you, but chances are it's gonna be there for as long as you're in love with this girl."

"That's it?" Ren asked, slightly put out.

"What can I say?" She shrugged. "I may have more experience with love, but that doesn't mean I'm any good at it. Maybe you should ask someone else."

Ren thought of his other options and shook his head. "If there was anyone else I could ask...but the only sane person I can think of besides you is my manager, and he's just too..."

"Squealy?" She offered.

"Yeah," he said absentmindedly. "Besides, you're pretty much my only non-work friend."

"Really?" Came the astounded reply. "That's...nice," the girl tacked on quickly. Even through the costume, though, Ren could tell that the chicken was pitying him. He scowled, looked at his watch,
and declared that he should get going. He was not so irritated that he forgot to give his friend a heartfelt "thanks for listening" as he left, though.

As soon as she saw the tall actor round the corner, she slumped back in a heap. Worn out as she was, the conspicuous scent of sweat in her nostrils reminded her of her mission, and she forced herself back onto her feet, and went to locate the cart she needed to take her costume to the studio laundry.

"So, how was it?" Kanae's asked, her voice made somewhat tinny by the cell phone.

"How was what?" Kyoko asked, so tired she could hardly think straight. She wanted very badly to go to bed, but she could never turn down an opportunity to talk to her best friend.

"You know, the first day with Fuwa. Have you kissed him yet?"

"No," she said with a sigh. "Unfortunately."

"What? What do you mean?" Kanae demanded. "You want to kiss that jackass?"

"No, but I'd really like to get it over with," she explained. "I've spent the whole day being everybody but Kyoko and it's a little...absolutely exhausting."

Obviously, this did little to clear up Kanae's confusion, because she responded with total silence, followed by a "Huh?"

"Although, now that you mention it," Kyoko said slowly, mind going back to the conversation she'd had with Ren earlier, "I think...I think Shotaro might want to kiss me."

"Huh?!!"
"Okay, you're going to need to back up for a moment," Kanae said. "You're not making a whole lot of sense."

"I think Shotaro might be...attracted...to me," Kyoko squeezed out with some difficulty.

"YOU THINK??!" She wanted to scream at her oblivious friend. *He forces a kiss on you, keeps tabs on you, and warns you away from other guys...Mo! This girl!* At the same time, she felt a strange, irrational burst of joy, complete with the sudden appearance of a smile on her face. Thank god they were only talking over the phone. *It's not that I care about her self-esteem or anything,* she rationalized, *it's just that her ridiculous modesty has gotten old.*

"Moko-san?" She heard her friend ask, confused by her lack of response. "I know it seems arrogant of me to say something like this, but—"

'It's fine!' Kanae snapped irritably. *Don't backslide already!* "So what made you come to this" painfuly obvious "conclusion?"

"Well...today I was talking to a colleague of mine, someone I really respect," she recounted carefully. "He mentioned that a girl he knew had just gotten out of a toxic relationship, and that even now, her ex-boyfriend is involving himself in her life just so he can put her down, all because he still has feelings for her and can't stand to see her moving on without him."

*Sounds like an example tailor-made for you,* Kanae thought.

"Anyway, even though that bastard and I were never actually together, there are some definite similarities—whenever I see him, he makes a point of insulting my looks or my status...my lack of fame. Which was one thing when it was me trying to sabotage his career, but lately, he's been the one initiating contact," she explained. "What happened on Valentine's Day, for instance, or just a little while back when he called me late at night just to tell me that the way I look with makeup on is deceptive. Him being the one to seek *me* out...it's something he never would have done when we were still friends. It's like he's deliberately setting aside time in his busy schedule just to bully me, and I'm starting to think there's a deeper reason for it."


"What do you mean?" Kyoko asked blankly.

"You know, when a little boy likes a little girl, but either doesn't know how to show it or doesn't want to admit it, so he picks on her?" She said. "Pulling pigtails, calling names...one especially annoying brat in the fifth grade actually flipped my skirt." Chuckling, she added, "he didn't like me as much after I punched him in the face."

"Oh...I wouldn't know," her friend responded. "The ones who bullied me were always girls who wanted me to stay away from Shotaro. I hardly ever talked to the boys at school."

*They probably assumed you were taken,* Kanae mused.

"But it's no surprise boys would go after someone like you, Moko-san," she continued cheerfully. "I mean, you're so beaut—"

"SO!" Kanae cut her off, irritated that she was now blushing slightly. "You were saying?"
"Well, it just sounded like this other guy's behavior was a lot like Shotaro's, and I know the last thing
Shotaro would want to do is admit that he actually found anything about me appealing." Kyoko said.
"Is it really that common?"

"For kids," Kanae said tersely. "For adults it's just pathetic. But that's all it took to convince you?"
She asked, surprised. *Usually she'd be denying anything romantic up and down by now. "Just one
similar story and you realized he's in love with you?"

"In—?!" Kyoko yelped. "No, not...I mean, a little bit attracted on a, y'know," she muttered,
"physical level, but...there's no way he thinks of me like *that*. I'm not even sure he's capable of that
kind of feeling."

Kanae's eyebrows shot straight up. Mogami Kyoko of all people saying someone was only into her
for her body—this was a serious breakthrough in terms of awareness as well as confidence, and it
came completely out of nowhere. "Okay, so no love connection," she conceded, "but what made
you think he was interested in you and not just being a jerk?" A thought occurred to her. "Did he
come on to you or something while the two of you were on set together?"

The silence on the other end of the line spoke volumes. "He *did!" She accused.

"Um..."

"Come on, you said you'd tell me if something like this happened again," Kanae urged. "What
happened?"

"Well, he did and he didn't," she sputtered lamely.

"MO!" Came the unamused response.

Kyoko sighed. "He didn't know it was me," she said finally.

"What?" Now Kanae was officially confused.

"Apparently he had no idea I was part of the show when he accepted the role, and he never bothered
to look at a cast list. And since I was in full Natsu-mode when he first arrived on set...he couldn't tell
it was me. So I've been in character as Natsu all day trying to keep him from figuring it out and
dragging out the filming process even more."

"But...you grew up together," Kanae pointed out. "You've known each other your whole lives. How
the hell could he not recognize you?"

"Well," Kyoko said, nonchalant, "it's not the first time. When you're as self-centered as he is, I guess
you don't pick up on things that aren't directly spelled out for you. He only ever gets a clue when I let
slip something I know about him that no one else does...like how bad he is at badminton, or that he
hates sweet eggs."

"Uh-huh." *Just how many times has this happened?* Kanae wondered.

"And obviously, I wasn't going to take any chances, so I tried to talk to him as little as possible. But
he kept coming over to chat in between takes, and then, after shooting finally wrapped for the day,
he cornered me in front of my dressing room and..." She wasn't sure what to call it. "He said he
wanted to practice kissing, and that he could teach me things."

*That reminds me...* Kanae realized. *What ever happened with the "kissing lessons?"*
"At first," Kyoko continued without any prompting, "I thought maybe it was a joke, but the way he was so persistent, and the way he approached me and touched me, it was just like..." She trailed off, lost in thought for a moment. "Well, let's just say it would take a very good actor to be as convincing as he was, and after watching his performance as Sagara-sempai, it's not hard to tell he was being genuine."

The pause did not go unnoticed by the older actress, who filed it away for later. "So he's into you."

"Well..." she seemed ready to waffle, but finally uttered a firm "yes."

"And you're positive?"

"I wasn't wearing Princess Rosa," Kyoko said simply. "Which means the only thing that could've confused him was makeup, and...the way he was looking me over, it didn't seem like he cared about my face all that much. Or that he had anything that remotely resembled a pure heart.

"Huh," Kanae said softly. Something was different, she knew. For Kyoko to speak so directly about something that would've made her scream with embarrassment not so long ago...something had changed. The thought made her stomach sink a little, until she realized that part of the girl's foolproof logic was the magical powers of a gem she'd found in a giant rose. Her innocence was not yet gone, it appeared.

Still, she had to wonder what had caused the transformation.

A strange noise sounded in her ear. It took a second to identify it as a yawn.

"Sorry, Moko-san," Kyoko said. "I'm kind of tired. I think I should probably go to bed now."

\textit{Please, please, let the dreams be over}, she prayed silently. \textit{I can't keep going like this.}

"Okay, but just one more thing before I let you go," Kanae said. "When that jerk made a move on you, what did you do? You must have been pissed off. How did you not let him know who you were?"

"..." Kyoko had turned beet-red from head to toe. "I...um..." she stuttered, "I pinned him to the wall, put my knee against his crotch, bit him on the ear, and then told him to leave me alone."

"Oh." Kanae's voice came out half-strangled as she said, "Well, that's all I wanted to know. Good night."

"'Night," she mumbled back.

The moment Kanae heard the click that told her the other girl had hung up, she collapsed into a fit of giggles. "She—oh my god, I can't even imagine—" When the laughter finally petered out, she was lying down, somewhat winded, on her bed, and staring up at her ceiling fan, idly trying to catch each blade with her eyes as it crossed her line of vision.

When her breathing had slowed to its normal pace, she got up to change into her pajamas and brush her teeth. As she looked into the mirror on her medicine cabinet, her gaze touched on her own ear for all of an instant, and before she could even blink, she had spit her toothbrush onto the floor and was doubled over laughing.

\textit{Well, she thought, no one could ever accuse Kyoko of being predictable.}
"Well, it looks like you made it through today. God only knows how." Yashiro said with a sigh as he buckled himself in next to his charge. "I pushed back the morning assignments for tomorrow until just before lunchtime, so try to get some sleep, okay?"

"I told you, I'm fine," Ren insisted. "You don't need to change my schedule." And the last thing I need right now is free time. All I can think about is the two of them together, and if I don't have something to do, I might end up crashing the studio and trying to stop it.

"With the amount of complaints I heard in the makeup trailer today? Are you kidding?" His manager harrumphed. "No, you're on bed rest until I say otherwise. And you'd better put ice on your eyes while you're at it."

"Anything else, boss?" the actor asked sardonically.

But the older man seemed immune to his snark, and, after looking him over, said, "I think a few eye drops wouldn't hurt, either."

Ren let out a small, exasperated puff of air, but decided to leave it alone, and the two settled into companionable silence. The road slipped away in front of him, and the dashes blurred into one, solid line, and he welcomed the rare moment of peaceful emptiness.

"So..." Yashiro broke into his reverie, with an air of expectation.

"Yes, Yashiro-san?"

"Have you talked to Kyouko-chan yet?"

"You've been right beside me all day," Ren reminded him. "When do you think I had time to call her?"

"Did you really think I wouldn't notice when you sneaked off during lunch?" He asked with a sly grin. "With the way you were acting distracted all morning, I figured you were trying to clear the air with your favorite kouhai."

"Well, you figured wrong," Ren said with a shrug. "I just needed a minute to think, that's all."

"And miss lunch," his manager accused. "If you're worried about whether or not Kyouko-chan's mad at you, the last thing you should be doing is skipping your meals." His voice dropped a bit, and he added, "All I'd have to do is give her a call, and she'd be on your doorstep to read you the riot act."

"Yashiro-san," Ren said dangerously, a radiant gentlemanly smile in display on his face, "I'd thank you not to interfere in my personal matters. I will talk to Mogami-san in my own time."

"But Ren," Yashiro pouted, "If every time you make the tiniest bit of progress you jump back for fear of what may happen, nothing's ever going to change. I mean, it's no wonder she has no idea how you feel about her, what with you avoiding her like the plague!"

"I'm not avoiding her," he said, chastened. "I'm just trying to give her space."

"Maybe she doesn't want space," Yashiro suggested. "Maybe she wants you to sweep her off her feet, whisk her off to someplace remote and intimate, and give her a real, romantic kiss," he said, eyes sparkling as he envisioned the scene in question. His joy was apparently too much to contain,
because he let out an excited cry.

*Ugh, Ren thought. This is exactly why I don't talk to him about these things. He's just so...*

"Squealy?"

The chicken's response came floating back from somewhere in his subconscious. He'd accepted it without a second thought when he'd first heard it—it was an apt descriptor, after all—but now that he thought about it, it was a little strange. When describing a manager, that was hardly the first adjective that came to mind. Even more so if he had seen Yashiro before—to the casual observer, Yashiro Yukihito appeared mature and reserved. It would take someone who really knew the man to...

"And really, you can only blame her being obtuse for so much," Yashiro continued ranting. "I mean, if you really want her to know how you feel, stop hinting and just tell her. If you never even try, how can you know—"

"Yashiro-san, do you know the chicken?" He found himself asking suddenly.

"The...chicken?" The manager was more than a little bewildered by the sudden change of topic. "What do you mean?"

"The one at TBM," Ren said.

Yashiro pondered the question, searching his memories for some mention of a chicken at TBM. "Oh!" He realized. "You mean the man in the mascot suit?"

"That's him," The actor confirmed.

"I remember him from the time he visited you in your dressing room," Yashiro said thoughtfully. "And how he seemed kind of strange, because his head didn't really match his body."

"So you've never met him since then?" Ren inquired.

"Not that I can think of," the manager shook his head. "Why?"

"No reason," he said casually.

"Ren—"

"Here we are," the actor said quickly, as they rolled to a stop in front of Yashiro's apartment building. "Have a good night, and I'll see you at 8?"

"No, I told you, we aren't meeting until 11!" Yashiro protested, almost banging his head into the roof of the car while trying to disembark. "And when I see you tomorrow, you had better look every bit the part of a dashing movie star."

"Yes, sir," Ren said with a grin, glad to have successfully distracted him, and even gladder to have something to do.

He had a mystery to solve.
Shoko barged into Shotaro's bedroom for the third time that morning, wasting no more than a moment on a perfunctory knock. "Sho!" She barked. "We were supposed to have left ten minutes ago!"

The teen idol sensation had barely moved since her last visit. He was sitting at the foot of his bed, hair an absolute mess, a toothbrush hanging out of his mouth, and only one leg successfully contained in his jeans. A variety show played on the television set, but the volume was barely more than a hum and though his eyes were pointed in the general direction of the screen, it was clear that his thoughts were elsewhere.

"For the love of—" she seethed. She turned off the set with a huff, and when he showed no response, she waved a hand in front of his face.

Sho gave a small start, and finally seemed to register her presence. Bleary-eyed, he asked, "Shoko-san? When did you get here?"

The toothbrush wagged as he spoke, muffling each word. Without a second thought, she snatched it out of his mouth, saying, "Give me that!" She pulled it so violently that she managed to splatter herself with little droplets of foamy moisture, and was about ready to scream. Instead, she dropped the toothbrush on the table with a thunk, pulled out a handkerchief, and, quickly wiping her face, forced herself to calm down and adopt her proper professional manner.

In a softer, more restrained tone of voice, she asked, "Sho, is there something wrong? You've been acting strange since yesterday."

He blinked. "I'm fine."

"Did something happen at the studio?" His manager pressed. "Maybe something with Kyoko-chan?"

His head snapped up at the mention of the young actress. "What? What the hell does she have to do with anything?" He demanded. "Why would I care what she does?"

"I didn't mean...I just assumed," she said, backtracking quickly. "Whenever you meet up with her, you always..." *act like you've lost your mind,* she wanted to say, but wisely thought better of it. "Never mind. So, it's something else," she posited. "Is this about Box 'R'?"

Feeling his face heat up ever so slightly, Sho elected to ignore the question in favor of looking studiously at his own feet, where he seemed a little surprised to see the half-clothed state of his legs.

"It's understandable, you know," Shoko said soothingly. "Everyone gets nervous when they try to branch out for the first time."

Sho was busy awkwardly trying to pull his pants on without standing up, and refused to meet her eyes or even acknowledge what she had said.

"And if you're too uncomfortable, or you think this is all going too fast, we can stop," she continued. "We haven't made any public announcements about the guest appearance, and there's still plenty of time for the director to find a replacement. You don't have to be on the show."
Finally resorting to an odd little hop to pull the pants up to his waist, he zipped up triumphantly, and, after adopting a cross-legged devil-may-care pose (that really wasn't doable in boxers) he plastered his trademark smirk onto his face.

"So what, you want me to quit?" he asked lazily. "Please. It's not like there's anything difficult about acting. Give me a minute to get dressed and we'll go."

"Are you sure?" Shoko asked.

"I don't need you to babysit me, Shoko-san," Sho insisted. "I said I wanted to act and I'm going to. Now drop it."

She shrugged. "I'll give you five," she said. "After that I'll just have to dress you myself."

He raised an eyebrow suggestively and said, "You promise?"

She rolled her eyes and left, shutting the door behind her. At least he's acting more like himself.

See? He thought, shoving on a pair of boots, and, realizing he'd dripped toothpaste on his shirt, going to his closet to pull out a clean one. It makes sense. It's predictable. I come on to her, she waves it off as a childish joke—but she never actually says she doesn't like it. And with a girl like Mimori, he went on, she'd squeal a little, blush, maybe smack me and say, "Oh you," he imagined in a high-pitched voice, but she'd want me to keep going, maybe even ask me for a kiss.

But that Natsu girl...

Fuwa Sho was very familiar with women. It was only natural, really, considering how talented, handsome and famous he was. And he knew from experience that whatever anyone says, women can be just as aggressive as men when it came to flirtation—in fact, he was pretty sure that fangirls set the bar for going on the offensive. If the woman in question was an immature little girl who called him cutesy nicknames and professed to love him forever, there was nothing more obnoxious. If she was a mature, experienced woman who knew how to play the game and gave as good as she got, there was nothing sexier. He'd seen both ends of the spectrum and every variation in between, and it had been years since any woman (a certain anomalous childhood friend excluded) had managed to catch him off-guard.

Now, though, it seemed like Natsu could give even the fairy-tale obsessed Kyoko a run for her money in terms of surprises. He'd been so sure he had her pegged from that first meeting; a secret fan who wanted to seem aloof in front of the object of her admiration—it was playing hard-to-get 101. All he'd have to do is chase her a little bit, let her think her act was working, and then turn on the charm at the right moment and watch hercrumble. Instead, he hadn't even gotten to break out his moves. He'd been trying to bait the trap by giving her an opportunity to spend time with him on his own without making her admit how much she wanted to. They'd kiss, she'd melt, and it would be one more notch on his belt.

But somehow, he'd misread the whole situation. She seemed genuinely apathetic about his suggestion—at the time, he'd put it down to her actually being a decent actress—and then, when he cranked it up a notch...

Well, it was safe to say that no woman had ever touched him quite like that.

Still, he thought, putting the finishing touches on his look with a few swipes of a comb and a dab of gel, I can't just back down. So what if it's a little harder than I thought it would be? If anything, it makes things more interesting. No, I'll just have to step up my game a little bit, that's all.
Just as Shoko raised her hand to knock on the singer's door once again, he opened it, tossing her a languid smile. "Let's go," he said.

It had taken Ren all of one Google search to find out what show the chicken was part of. He knew that a chicken mascot had to belong to either a talk show or a kids' show, and he'd taken a shot on the first one—for some reason he just couldn't see the outspoken and often erratic rooster on children's programming.

He was almost disappointed when the chicken—who, as it turned out, was named Bou—popped up as the first result. The actor, who was fully recharged on six hours' sleep and seriously bored with sitting on his thumbs all morning (he'd gotten up at six, as per usual), had hoped for more of a challenge.

As if hearing his unspoken wish, the info page for the show listed the chicken's actor as "undisclosed." For a moment, he balked at digging any further. It may be, after all, that the man in the suit had never told him his name or any personal information for a reason, and of all people, Tsuruga Ren should recognize the importance of respecting someone else's secrets.

Then, it occurred to him just how many of his own secrets he'd been spilling to the chicken each time they met, and he brushed off the nagging feeling of guilt. He wasn't going to make the actor's identity public, just find out for himself. Whoever it was had to be someone close to him, anyway.

Naturally, there was a thread on the site's forum devoted to fan guesses about Bou's true identity. Ideas ranged from the absurd to the drearily realistic, with some posters even suggesting that it was Ren himself (they've never been seen together in one place, they claimed) no matter how often time-stamped photos proved the theory impossible, and other posters pointing out that it was probably some newbie actor with no other roles whose name they wouldn't recognize anyway, and who was embarrassed about having people know he played a giant chicken.

Ren read through the thread for a while, but he figured pretty early on that no one actually had any idea who was behind the mask. About to close out of the site and pursue other avenues of investigation—Bridge Rock was an LME vehicle, so he might be able to make some discreet inquiries through his contacts at the agency—he happened across a post that seemed to have inspired a lot of negative comments. The person had written that maybe the character was played by a bunch of different people based on availability, and so the show's producers just thought it was easier not to credit the role at all. Playing a giant chicken was hardly something that required specialized skills, he said.

Fans of Bou immediately shot the idea down, saying that the character was obviously played by the same person continuously, and that anybody could see that the actor had a very specific and interesting style. One commenter even posted a link to an article where the director had discussed the early issues there were with casting Bou.

Curious, Ren followed the link to an entertainment news website and a headline that read "Original Bou Brought Back by Popular Demand."

"Brought back," he mouthed as he read the title. That's right, he remembered. The first time he'd met the chicken, he'd been complaining about how he'd been fired on his first day.
Apparently, the director had chosen to replace the actor after he'd taken it upon himself to expand his role. The chicken was meant to be little more than an assistant to the main cast, signaling transitions and bringing guests to their seats. But on the very first episode, Bou changed the cues around as he pleased and challenged the featured guest to an unabashedly intense game of badminton. *No wonder he was fired*, Ren thought with a chuckle. *It does sound like him, though.*

So, for the second episode, the director had opted for a more experienced (*So it was a newbie*, Ren noted) actor who was willing to stay in the background and follow direction to a T. To his surprise, fans went out of their way to ask why Bou had changed, saying that the previous wacky and unpredictable incarnation was more fun to watch. Against his better judgment, the director had relented and asked the original actor to reprise the role.

"I'm glad I did," he admitted in the interview. "The character created by the original actor appealed to people for a reason. He makes the show more dynamic and interesting because you're never really sure what he's going to do. Although these days," he added, "the surprises tend to be scripted ahead of time."

"Still," the interviewer joked in the article's conclusion, "knowing that the original Bou is on set and ready for a rematch might make pop star Fuwa Sho reluctant to make a return appearance."

Ren felt the urge to hit something. How was it, he wondered, that Fuwa Sho seemed to pop up wherever he looked, no matter how much he wanted to forget that the spoiled idol even existed? Especially now, when Kyoko was being forced to put up with his ridiculous whims for almost a week and all the actor could do was try not to think about it.

Irritated, he moused over one of the sources listed at the bottom of the article and found the recap of that very first episode. According to the writer, who had been in the live studio audience, there was a palpable tension in the air between Bou and Fuwa, and the star even appeared to try to remove the man's head on more than one occasion. Even stranger, there seemed to be a point where the two began to wrestle with one another—although some members of the audience thought it was more like enthusiastic hugging. The tussle/brace was not broadcast, though, thanks to the show's playing a clip from one of Fuwa's PVs at the time, and so the debate could never truly be resolved.

Well, at least now he knew that his secret friend was no more a fan of Fuwa Sho than he was, he thought, smiling. It was funny, though, to think that he would find himself connected to the singer through someone other than Kyoko—or that Fuwa would be so foolish as to let himself be seen getting into a fight in public. From the few times he'd met him, Ren had noticed that the teenager had experience keeping his cool in front of others. The only time he seemed to lose control of his persona was in front of his childhood friend, just as she seemed to let her walls down only in front of him. That openness bothered him; it made him feel as if all the history between them would keep them bonded together somehow, and that the only way that there would ever be room in Kyoko's life for Ren would be to break through that connection.

But maybe that wasn't the case. If Fuwa was capable of acting in the same immature manner with a man he'd never even met before, then maybe their bond wasn't as profound as he thought. Mulling over the possibility, he decided to see if there were any clips from that episode. Sure enough, the badminton scene was ready to load.

Ren generally didn't watch variety shows, partly because he didn't find them very interesting and partly because he didn't have the time to watch any television at all. Even he had to admit, though, that this scene was pure comedy gold, with the chicken getting incredibly fired up about the match and Fuwa mostly on the defensive the whole way. The more difficult the game got, the less composed the singer was, and the more determined the chicken seemed to be. The heated exchange
struck a familiar chord somewhere in Ren's mind, and as he tried to place it, Bou launched the birdie into the recording studio's ceiling, where it got stuck. When the shortest of the Bridge Rock hosts, all of whom were completely overshadowed in this video, announced that Bou had lost, the chicken sank down onto the floor under a dark, gloomy cloud.

And it hit him.

Bou acted like Kyoko did whenever Sho was around. Easily angered, ready for a fight, determined to win at all costs, and devastated if he got the better of her. And Sho acted just the same way he did around her, petty and childish and willing even to discard his laid-back mask just to make her feel inferior. The dynamic was exactly the same.

But it couldn't be...could it?

As he thought about it, he realized that he'd seen Kyoko at TBM dozens of times without ever knowing what she was doing there. He assumed she was doing LoveMe work, but most of the time she wasn't even wearing the uniform. And that first time he'd met the chicken, it had told him how much he hated him. He'd thought that it was just another up-and-coming actor jealous of his success, but...back then, Kyoko did hate him. He couldn't blame her; the feeling had been mutual. And when he'd needed help figuring out his character, the chicken had gone the extra mile to seek him out and give him advice, just when Kyoko had made a point of saying how much she wanted to be of assistance to him. True, there were a few strange points...bits of advice that seemed like they couldn't have possibly come from a girl so pure, but...

"I may have more experience with love, but that doesn't mean I'm any good at it."

That quote had the #1 LoveMe member's name written all over it. And no one knew better than Kyoko just how "squealy" Yashiro could be.

It was her. The chicken was Kyoko.

And he'd been confiding in her about his love life for over six months.

Mogami Kyoko awoke at 7 a.m. sharp and shut off her Daruma alarm clock. Last night had been better than the two previous ones, thanks in no small part to the okami-san lending her a bottle of sake to bring sleep on more quickly. If she had any dreams, she couldn't remember them, and she had enough time now that she wasn't running late for a change to take the bath she'd skipped last night.

After a nice, relaxing rinse she picked out her most fashionable clothes and did full Nacchan-style makeup. She tested her best evil smile in the mirror and pushed out the negative thoughts of the day before. No more dwelling on how she felt about Ren, or how he felt about that other girl. No more wondering why Shotaro was looking at her the way he had been, either. Surely after what she'd allowed Natsu to do to him, he'd think twice before bothering her again, anyway. She was a professional actress, and whatever came her way, she would face it and she would do whatever she had to do to get the job done, she thought, determined.

At the very least, she knew that today would be a much better day than yesterday.
Well, that's not ominous at all.
The first crack in Kyoko's better day came when she ran into a major traffic jam on her usual route to work. After asking around, she found out that a foreign dignitary had come to Japan to meet with the prime minister, and even though the scores of pedestrians and bicyclists she was sharing the road with had no idea who he was or what he was here for (the reigning theory was "oil" because "isn't it always about oil?"), he was apparently important enough that six straight blocks of Main Street and all its side streets were tied up by barricades and SUVs with tinted windows.

Even Kyoko's considerable cycling skills couldn't help her when traffic cops were forcing her to go miles out of her way. She'd managed to leave the Darumaya with nearly twenty minutes to spare, but thanks to the mess the politician's visit had made, she was a full half-hour late—the worst delay she'd had since her first day working on Box 'R', when the happy afterglow of her birthday had made her forget her responsibilities.

Still, it wasn't a big deal. Yes, her heart was about to leap out of chest at the thought of having to apologize to the director for her tardiness—and who knew what someone might let slip to Shotaro when she wasn't around to run interference?—but according to the schedule, she wouldn't be needed for any scenes until after lunchtime. Today was meant to be another shoot focused mainly on Chitose and Sagara's courtship dance, but if they maintained a decent pace, the director expected them to get into the larger group scenes and at least some of the one-on-one flirting scenes between Sagara and Natsu in the afternoon. Of course, nothing was set in stone, and Kyoko's character as just vital enough that she'd been told to be on call for the whole day of shooting, just in case.

"You don't have any other projects going on right now, do you?" The director had asked around the pen between his teeth, not even bothering to look up from the heavily annotated schedule he was in the middle of amending. "We need to get in all the scenes with Fuwa-san as quickly as possible, and there's no telling what could happen."

On any other day she'd have rankled at even the memory of her boss stating point-blank that her time was practically worthless compared to Shotaro's, or the reminder that she was still far less successful than him, but today she was determined to stay positive. If she let herself think about how furious he made her, it would be that much harder to flirt convincingly when the time came.

With an ear-splitting squeal of rubber as she screeched to a stop in front of the studio, she took a moment to smooth down her clothes, pat her hair back into place, and release Natsu's soul from its vessel, allowing it to fill her from head to toe with the cool complacence of a spoiled teenage sociopath. No matter what, she would stay in control.

To her surprise, the moment she walked on set, she heard the director exclaim, "Oh, thank god, it's her!" He was sitting in his chair, surrounded by a crowd of anxious-looking techs and production staff, and his sentence was met with a collective sigh of relief. "Now that our Natsu-san is finally here, we might actually be able to salvage something from this mess."

More than a little unnerved to suddenly have all eyes on her (a feeling that didn't really bode well for her chosen career, she realized) she stopped dead in her tracks. "Sir?" She ventured, in a tone as close to meek as Nacchan could manage, which mostly came out as bored.

If the man was offended, he didn't show it. "Well, don't just stand there," he said briskly, "Get to makeup. We need to get things rolling, or we'll never make it in time."

Before she could say anything, a disembodied hand shot out of the throng and latched itself on her
wrist, tugging her forcefully through the press of bodies, around a corner, and depositing her unceremoniously in front of a well-lit mirror.

"You're late," the hand's owner purred into her ear. "It's not very professional, making all of us wait like this." Registering the voice, her first instinct was to jerk away. But around-the-clock training as Setsu had made her a much more adaptable actress, and she ceded the decision to the part of her brain that belonged to Nacchan—with a warning that the rest of her had veto power over anything too extreme.

Instead, she leaned into his touch where his fingers lingered on her arm, brushing over the bare flesh of her wrist and her knuckles. She shrugged, and pitching her voice low to match his, said, "I didn't see any real reason to hurry. There's almost nothing for me to do today—and all of it dull." She affected a careless yawn, letting her slim fingers splay out over her face and graze her lips. She smirked internally when she saw the way his eyes immediately locked on her mouth. With his attention diverted she captured his hand in her own, digging her well-manicured nails into his wrist.

"Besides, Fuwa-san," she said, the tightness of her grip and sudden sharpness of her smile belying the seductive tone of her voice, "I don't remember asking for your opinion. In fact," she gave an extra squeeze, "I thought I had made it pretty clear just how little I care for these... talks...we've been having." She relinquished her hold on him, pleased to see her nails had made an impression. Nothing that would show up on camera, of course—they would fade in a matter of minutes.

Shotaro pulled back and made a move to massage his wrist, then thought better of it. He pulled the edge of his sleeve down over the marks and gave her his trademark grin.

"Please," he said, "Call me Sho."

With that baffling pronouncement, he swept out of the room, pausing only to give a rakish nod to the scandalized makeup technician who had been made an unwitting audience to the whole exchange.

"I was just—"

"Shh!"

Kyoko heaved an exasperated sigh. Covered in a frock with her hair pulled back and all her self-applied cosmetics wiped away, she couldn't risk stepping outside to flag someone down. Shotaro could, for all she knew, be lurking outside waiting for her to come out. Even as dense as he was, he couldn't fail to recognize her like this.

But she needed information; she had no idea what was going on or why she was suddenly so necessary. The only thing she could think of was that one of the other actresses had gotten stuck in traffic, too, but...that still wouldn't explain why they appeared to waiting specifically for her and not the other girl as well. Maybe there had been an accident? With all the chaos of people trying to figure out a way to weave through the crowd, a crash was pretty much inevitable. If she could just know what had happened, instead of having to guess... With Shotaro's incomprehensible behavior in the mix—for God's sake, she had bitten the man! What more could she possibly do?—it would be nice to have one less thing to worry about.
Unfortunately, every time she opened her mouth to ask the woman working on her makeup, she got shushed and told not to move. Which was odd. She knew that some of the work required her to stay still, but most the time she was allowed to talk, even back when she was playing Mio and had to wait through two hours of layering to put on the scar each day. As long as you didn't move too much, you were usually fine. Which meant the woman probably just didn't want to talk to her, which was almost odder.

Makeup techs loved Kyoko. She had such an overwhelming reverence for their craft and her face was so easily transformed that many of them looked forward to working on her. And this tech, a roundish sort of woman in her mid-40s with a soft smile and a fondness for hoop earrings, had never been an exception before. But every time Kyoko went to speak, her cheeks took on a reddish hue, she shook her head and hissed another "Shh!"

"Kyou—Natsu-san!" Wonder of wonders, Amamiya Chiori burst into the room. "There you are. What took you so long? It's not like you to be late."

"I was caught in traffic," she explained quickly, before she could be shushed again. "There was this huge blockade on Main, and..."

"Right, the South Korean president's in town," Chiori cut her off. "It's been all over the news for days—you were supposed to avoid the main roads, everybody knew that."

"Oh," was Kyoko's only response. She rarely watched TV as it was, and the last few days she'd had so much on her mind...She took it as a slight comfort that the people she'd polled for information this morning were only marginally better informed than she was.

"You picked a bad day for it, too," her friend continued, not bothering to take in her response, "what with Rumi being out for pretty much the whole day. The director is freaking out. He thought you might not show—you weren't picking up your phone."

"I didn't hear it go off," Kyoko protested. "Besides, I didn't think anybody would need me for hours! Why's Rumi-san out? Did something happen?"

"Yeah," Chiori said impressively. "Something happened. She got asked to be a guest on Entertainment Today to promote the show."

When the besmocked girl merely blinked in response, Chiori raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Y'know? One of the biggest talk shows in the country? Guaranteed to give a ratings bump to any show that gets featured on it? The director's been trying to get Rumi on it for weeks. You must have heard of it."

"I think I might have seen it once or twice," Kyoko said slowly, "but I don't really follow variety shows these days." They had always been more Sho's speed, after all. And one was so like another that it was hard not to let them all kind of blur together in her mind. "The only one I watch regularly is Bridge Rock."

Chiori wrinkled her nose at that. "The one with the giant chicken?" Before Kyoko could answer, she waved her off. "Anyway, this morning, Rumi gets a call saying they had to bump the guest they were planning to have on because his latest single seriously bombed, and would she like to step in? And since the whole point of this Fuwa Sho stunt is ratings," she scowled, "and since the chance might not come up again anytime soon, he figured she should go for it, and we'd just flip the schedule."

"Okay, so straight into the major flirting scenes," Kyoko confirmed.
Chiori nodded.

"Ugh, this is going to be a pain in the ass," she groaned.

Both her fellow actress and the makeup technician stared at her; they had never heard her utter so much as a "Shoot!" or a "Dang it!" before.

"Um...sorry!" She said quickly. "It just sort of...slipped out. And I guess I'm tired...you know...from the traffic. Are we done here?" She asked the tech, who nodded dumbly.

"Wow, you really don't like Fuwa Sho, do you?" Chiori asked mildly as she took off the smock and readjusted her clothes. Behind her, the makeup tech snorted back a laugh and helped her put her hair to rights.

*Now if only I could get him not to like me,* she thought despairingly.

Today was not going the way she wanted it to.

"Okay, everyone. That's a wrap for lunch!" The assistant director called out. "We'll see you back here in thirty."

Kyoko was exhausted. In the last hour alone, she'd had to hook her arm into his "for support" when she lost her footing, whisper "alluringly" into his ear, and fix his tie for him when it had gone crooked, each time trying to create sexual tension in the smallest of movements. How this was supposed to be the work of one episode, she couldn't begin to understand, but so far the only NGs had been on him for forgetting his lines, so she must be doing a decent job of it. Although why he was skipping whole chunks of dialogue only on their shared scenes was beyond her; it was like he *wanted* the scenes to drag on.

Only, at the same time, he seemed impatient to finish each scene. Every time the director called for a set change or a break, Shotaro was by her side, invading her space and muttering in her ear. She could not take a whole lunch's worth of that treatment, so she was making her escape. While Shotaro was distracted by his manager, who'd been trying to get his attention all morning, she snuck over to snatch one of the bentos off of the staff supply table and darted into one of the back hallways, where she opened the first door she came to.

"Natsu-san? Where are you going?" Chiori's voice stopped her. "The lunchroom's back that way."

Kyoko's shoulders slumped. "I know," she confessed, apologetic, "I was just hoping to get a little alone time. It's been a pretty busy morning, and I'm kind of beat." She finally had someone she could eat lunch with on a daily basis, and she felt bad just leaving her alone.

"Uh...okay," Chiori said slowly. "But why in a janitor's closet?"

Kyoko glanced at the sign on the room she was about to duck into. "Oh...right. Well, I figured I'd be out of the way in here, that's all."

"You'd be just as out of the way in your dressing room," Chiori pointed out.

"No!" She said quickly. "I mean...this is better. Quieter."
Her friend just looked at her oddly, then shrugged. "Okay, whatever floats your boat." She opened the door to the closet and walked in, gesturing for Kyoko to follow.

They both managed to squeeze in, with Chiori perching on top of a crate and Kyoko settling on an overturned bucket. They ate their lunches in silence for a minute or two before Chiori abandoned her campaign of pointed glances and opted for a direct question.

"Hiding from Fuwa Sho?" She said it casually, as if asking about the weather.

Kyoko considered how best to answer without letting out her secret, but as she looked across at the girl who had crammed herself into a closet that smelled like a combination of bleach and mildew just to talk to her, she decided to just be honest. "Yes. He's driving me insane."

"Was this what he was like the last time you worked together? Flirting with you every chance he got?"

"No," Kyoko shook her head. "He was just a jerk, like always."

"Like always?" Chiori echoed. "You've met him before?"

"Well..." she said hesitantly. "Look, you can't let this get out, okay? I don't want anyone to know about it."

For a moment, Kyoko could have sworn her friend actually looked touched before she plastered on a sly grin. "Are you kidding? After the secrets you've kept for me? No problem."

"He's sort of...my childhood friend. His parents pretty much raised me."

Whatever Chiori was expecting, it was not that. Her eyebrows disappeared into her hairline and stayed there. For the next few minutes, she told Chiori an abbreviated version of her time in Kyoto, and how she came to be in Tokyo almost two and half years prior.

"We had a fight about a year after he started his music career. He was..." she cleared her throat, "using me. I was working three jobs to support him while he climbed his way up, and he just took it for granted."

Chiori had no idea what to say. She knew that, as a friend, she really should say something, but truth be told she was very nearly as new to friendship as Kyoko, and everything that came to mind seemed too shallow to match the mixture of grief and anger that was so out of place on the girl's usually cheerful face.

Luckily, Kyoko managed to think of something that lifted her spirits, because the look was replaced with a beatific smile and the brisk addendum, "Anyway, we really don't get along anymore. Every time we run into each other these days it just turns into a shouting match."

A little confused by the mood whiplash, Chiori blinked. Then, casting back to the conversation they'd had yesterday, she said, "But...he didn't remember you from your last job."

Kyoko nodded. "Exactly. Or rather, he didn't recognize me from...well, our whole lives."

Chiori just shook her head wonderingly. "That's..."

"Pathetic?" Kyoko suggested caustically.
Her friend laughed. "I was going to say 'amazing', but yeah."

"I figured it wouldn't do anyone any good if we acted the way we usually do around each other, so I've kept up the whole 'Natsu' act, but it's getting tougher. I have no idea why he's being like this."

"Because he's attracted to you," Chiori pointed out simply. "And all guys get annoying when they're attracted to you. Especially when you tell them you're not interested; they take it as a challenge."

*It must tiresome, being beautiful,* Kyoko found herself thinking. *Both Amamiya-san and Moko-san have to deal with this kind of behavior all the time. Me, I'm perfectly fine with being plain if this is what beauty gets you.* "So what do I do?" She asked helplessly.

Chiori pondered the question. "Kicking usually works for me," she said finally.

"I'm honestly not sure that'd be enough," Kyoko said.

"I'd still give it a shot," Chiori said. "If nothing else, it always makes you feel better." She slurped up a noodle and added, "You know what I can't believe, though?"

"What?"

"That the same people raised you and him," Chiori said, pointing her chopsticks first at Kyoko, and then jabbing them vaguely at the world beyond the closet door. "It just doesn't make any sense."

When they had both polished off their lunchboxes and tossed their trash away into the giant bin on the janitor's cart, Chiori dusted herself off and offered a hand to help Kyoko up.

"Oh, thanks," she said, "But you go ahead."

"We have to be back on set in five," the other actress reminded her. "And you can't hide forever."

"No, I know," Kyoko assured her. "I just realized my phone's been off since last night—that's why I didn't get any of the director's calls. I want to go through and make sure I haven't missed any important messages, then I'll be right out."

"Okay," She said, heading out.

"Oh, and uh...thanks for listening," Kyoko said shyly.

"No, thank you," Chiori smiled. "You gave me one more good reason to hate that self-important jerk. And you know how much I love to hate."

Kyoko scrolled through her list of missed calls, but it looked like they were all from the director that morning. He really *had* panicked—the man called her twelve times and didn't leave a single message explaining why.

There was one voicemail, though, according to the counter. She went back through her calls again, skipping past the ones from her director. Her heart thrilled a little when she saw the call she'd missed the first time through. It was from this morning, too, a little before she left for work, but most importantly, it was from Tsuruga Ren. She checked her watch real quick—she had time to listen to it, if it wasn't too long. She dialed in her voicemail code and pressed 'send.'

"Mogami-san," his voice, deep and rich, and, these days, evocative of memories that made her look
like the sun was setting on her face, played over the tinny speaker of her cell phone. "I—there's something I need to talk to you about. Sometime this week, could you—if you're available, I'd like it if you could come to my apartment for dinner. I'll let you cook, of course," he said, with a laugh that sounded slightly put-on, like he was nervous. "I just...want to talk to you. Please call me back at your earliest convenience."

She stared blankly at the phone until the sounds of movement in the hallway made her remember that she didn't want to be late a second time in one day. Clutching the cellphone in her hand, she followed aimlessly after the herd of people all shuffling back to the set as one organism.

Truth be told, she wasn't sure if the message was something she should be happy over; the idea of Tsuruga-san needing to talk to her brought forth images of being called into the principal's office—not that she ever had been, of course. But...a feeling of warmth washed over her...she'd get to see him. Eat dinner with him and talk to him, too, maybe even about how well she'd used his lessons. She could say something about how good a teacher he was—no, that was silly, she scolded herself, blushing.

But she'd get to see him. And she wouldn't even need a mascot suit to do it.

Fuwa Sho rolled his eyes through yet another lecture courtesy of Aki Shoko.

"We aren't here just so you can play around, Sho," she said angrily. "This is work, remember? Just yesterday you were saying the girl looked halfway decent and now you're draping yourself all over her. People are already starting to talk, you know?"

"I'm just having a little fun, Shoko-san," he said idly, huffing a breath against his palm to make sure his mints were doing their job.

"Because forgetting your lines, missing your marks, and speeding through the dialogue like there's something chasing you, that's all just good fun?" Shoko massaged a temple, trying vainly to get through to her charge, who was now looking his most mulish and avoiding her gaze. "Look, I may not be an expert on acting, but I do know what it looks like when a strong actor overwhelms a weak one, and right now, Sho? You're the weak one. She's manipulating you to make the take work out—it's like you're a toy she's playing with, and everyone can see it." When he continued to stare pointedly in the opposite direction, she grabbed his ear and pulled his face towards hers. "Do you want it getting out to the press that Fuwa Sho is such a poor actor that he needs to be led around by the hand? Or that he lets his need to get laid get in the way of doing his job?"

The out-of-place vulgarity seemed to shake him out of his childish temper for a second. "I'm sorry, okay?" He snapped. "I thought I had my lines down, it's just..." His eyes wandered away again to find their target. Natsu, who for him was nothing but ice and hostility was standing up against the wall, waiting to be called onto the set, with a pink flush in her cheeks and a small smile he could only think of as "sweet." Ever since they'd gotten back from lunch, she'd been floating off into her own little world the moment the cameras stopped rolling, and even his most aggressive tactics couldn't break through to her. It was...distracting, for some reason. Why did he care if she blushed for something that wasn't him?

Pride, he reasoned. He didn't like the idea that he couldn't make her produce that same expression. What's more, the feeling that she was familiar to him was suddenly overwhelming. Every time he
looked at her, he got a flash of déjà vu. He knew her, somehow. Knew that look on her face.

He really had learned his lines. It was part of his plan, to force her to acknowledge his skill as an actor. But when he was actually meant to deliver them, with her invading his space and smiling that seductive smile that he knew she'd never use on him for real, he'd just...stumbled, that's all. And if he missed his mark a few times, well, she steered him back into place, almost as if by instinct. The job got done, didn't it? The director said the scenes were good enough.

Next to him, Shoko just adopted her usual world-weary tone of voice. "Look," she said, trying in vain to get his eyes back on her, "It's not like you, making a fool of yourself over a girl." At least, not over a girl who isn't Kyoko, anyway, she thought. "Just—be careful, okay?" When he didn't respond, she barked a sharp, "Sho!"

"Yeah, yeah," he said irritably, still looking away, "I get it."

She traced his line of sight to its inevitable conclusion and sighed. Looking at the young girl blushing prettily in the corner of the room, even she had to admit that while she had definitely seen more classically attractive women in her day—herself included—there was something about her—a kind of magnetism that pulled the eye to her. The first thing she'd do when they wrapped for the day, she decided, would be to look up this Natsu girl and see just who she really was.

Director Anna called everyone to gather 'round. "Okay," he said. "I just got a call from Rumi-san's manager, and it looks like she definitely won't be coming in today, since we only have a few hours left in the studio and it'll take her half that just to get through the traffic on Main. So it looks like we're going ahead with the kiss scene."

Kyoko's head shot up as she shook herself out of the hold her wayward thoughts had on her. The kiss scene? Now?

"I know you were hoping to film it later in the week," he continued, directing the apology not to the actress but to the idol, much to her confusion. He wanted to postpone the kiss? She thought. "And to be honest, I wanted to have Rumi react to the kiss live, but we lost a whole day of shooting with our protagonist and we'll need all the time we can get." He nodded to one of his producers. "We'll just have to cut in her reaction to the scene later. It shouldn't pose a problem." He seemed to remember something, then said in what he clearly thought was a kind tone, "Unless Natsu-san would rather we wait?"

"Natsu-san" was not in the building at the moment. Kyoko had been behind the controls for nearly the whole afternoon, thanks to the way Ren's phone call had rattled her composure. And Kyoko's brain was screaming one thing and one thing only: Finally! No more worrying about whether he'd find out beforehand. They were in the home stretch! Even if her secret got out after today, it wouldn't really matter. All they'd have to share after this were some group scenes where the focus would be on Rumi instead of her.

Apparently, her thoughts didn't translate to her face, because the director took her expression as a confirmation of her reluctance. "If you feel you're not ready, I'm sure we could find some way to put it off a little longer," he said.

Her eyes snapped to his, and in true Kyoko fashion, her sweet smile stayed in place while her grudge spirits rose out of the darkest part of her soul, wound their way around him and whispered in his ear in unison, "DO IT. NOW." A shiver passed down the man's spine and he was petrified in place while the kinder (and more corporeal) side of the young actress voiced the same sentiment in gentler terms.
"I assure you, Director-san, I am fully prepared for this scene. But thank you for your concern."

"Uh, r-right," he stuttered, jerking his head to gesture at the set when he found himself unable to lift his arms, "then, let's get started."

Kyoko's gaze darted over to where Shotaro was standing, and she prayed she didn't just expose herself in her eagerness to get this over with. He was looking at her, but not in an accusatory way. It was more...thoughtful, she guessed. Like he was trying to figure her out. All the more reason to finish this.

She shoved Ren's dinner invitation out of her mind and forced Natsu back into the driver's seat. She'd need every bit of separation she could get for this scene. Calm, composed, and cold once again, she found the little black "x" in masking tape that marked her spot and stood there at the ready.

Slowly, as if in a daze, Shotaro made his way to his own mark and awaited direction.

The tether now severed by the reinstatement of Natsu's soul, Director Anna's face regained some of its color, and he sat up straight in his foldable chair. "All right. Now, remember, Sagara-san, you're torn in this scene. You've had a crush on Chitose for months, and now that it seems to be going somewhere you don't want to lose your chance to be with her. Still, it's moving slowly and you only have so long left at this school—you're worried that you'll graduate and nothing will have happened. You'll give her your second button and maybe confess, but it'll be too late to have a real relationship.

"At the same time, you have Natsu suddenly paying attention to you, making her intentions very clear. She's pretty, popular, and for all you know, kind—there's a part of you that thinks it would just be easier to give in. This scene, for you, is the culmination of those feelings. When she kisses you, that's the moment when you think about resisting but ultimately choose to give yourself over to her control. It's a short scene, so it might take us a while to get the nuance just right, but I want to be able to see the struggle you're going through in your body language."

Turning to Natsu, he continued, "For Natsu, this is nothing but a game, but she wants him to think she's sincere. I want her to appear as if she really wants to kiss him, as if she really is drawn to him, but I want the kiss itself to be punctuated by a taunting look at Chitose—" he pointed to the double who would be standing in for the over-the-shoulder shot, "—and, if you can, try to underlie everything you say with a mocking tone. Make it clear to the viewers that your sincerity is nothing but a mask. And remember," he said, reverting once more to his kindly avuncular voice, "it's meant to be a sensual kiss. Don't worry if it takes a few times to get it right, okay?"

Natsu rolled her eyes at the suggestion that anything sensual wouldn't come naturally to her and stifled a snicker when "Sagara" squared his shoulders and tensed, waiting for his cue.

"Episode 22, Scene 41, Take One," one of the techs called out mechanically. "We're rolling."

"And...Action!" Director Anna said.

Natsu smirked, tilting her head to one side as Sagara turned the corner, stopping just short of bumping into her. "Sagara-sempai, what a pleasant surprise. We hardly ever get to see you in this wing of the school."

He smiled distantly, looking past her to the hallway beyond before answering, "Yes, I'm supposed to be meeting with...someone," he hedged. "But it doesn't look like she's here yet."

A thin, expertly penciled eyebrow rose on Natsu's forehead, her face the picture of mild distress.
"She? It isn't your girlfriend, is it?" She pouted, stepping further into his comfort zone, hand hovering over the collar of his suit jacket as if she longed to put it right. "And here I thought we had a connection, sempai." Her smile carried a hint of melancholy, but the cold clarity of her eyes left no doubt as to its artificiality.

"Uh, well," he said, flustered now, but trying to regain his smooth persona, "She's just a friend, really," he said before he could really think about what he was saying. "I'm not seeing anyone just now."

Natsu's smile quirked up fractionally. His eyes were on her now, not on the passage behind her where, if the muffled tap of indoor shoes on carpet were to be believed, Chitose had just arrived in time to hear him deny their relationship.

"But you like her?" She pressed earnestly. "More than you like me?"

"Well," he started again, "she's my kouhai. Of course I care about her."

Her hand ceased hovering and made contact, flattening down the edge of his collar and tracing it up to his shoulder. "Well, I'm your kouhai, too, aren't I?" She pointed out. "Don't you care about me?"

"Of course," he said with a soft smile, reaching up to kindly, but firmly, pull her hand away from his body. "I care about all my cute underclassmen."

She mirrored his smile and took advantage of his hand on hers to pull him even closer, and, when he loosened his grip, startled, she laced his fingers through his. Always alert, she had no trouble hearing the soft gasp at her back, though it didn't seem to reach Sagara's ears.

Natsu pulled his captive hand up to her lips, and, said, punctuating her words with a soft kiss to the tips of his fingers, "Am I not good enough?"

He swallowed nervously. "Look, Kitazawa-san—"

"Natsu," she corrected, "please."

"You're very nice, and smart, and pretty, it's just..." he trailed off looking into her hopeful eyes.

"It's just...?" she echoed sweetly. When he couldn't seem to find his voice, she cast a sharp, triumphant sidelong glance back at the girl watching the whole exchange, not even bothering to see her reaction, just letting her know that she knew. She could practically feel the despair rolling off her prey in waves, and it delighted her. Time for the final touch.

She released his hand and placed her own on his collar once again, the other on his tie. He was somewhat shorter than her practice partner, so she took her time pulling him down toward her, making it last. His eyes widened, then closed as her nose brushed his. Their lips met, and for a moment he resisted the push of her tongue against his mouth, but she stroked her fingers through his hair and his lips parted for her. All control gone, he melted into the kiss, their tongues sliding and twisting together, his arms reflexively wrapping themselves around her. She didn't melt, though, but stayed in control, guiding his head by means of her fingers twisted into his bleach-blonde hair, crushing him closer, until he was trying to pull away, gasping against her lips.

Finally, she seemed to decide she made her point, and with a smile that carried no trace of kindness or affection, that could only be described as cruelly, viciously satisfied, she let him up for air, letting a single nail drag along his cheek, leaving a long, faint red scratch as it went.

"So, sempai?" She purred. "Am I good enough?"
Breathless, he put the final nail in his coffin and answered, "You-you're amazing."

The camera ran for a few more beats before the Director called out, "Cut!"

As Kyoko sucked air back into her deprived lungs now that she was no longer required to be stoic, she couldn't help but smile. She'd gotten through it! Somehow, she'd managed to force herself to kiss Shotaro without so much as a single slip. Behind her back, she crossed her fingers, waiting for the director's verdict on the scene.

"I think we have a wrap, everyone," he said, sounding thoroughly impressed. "I don't usually like adlibs, Fuwa-san, but the way you delivered that last line—I think it fit quite well."

That's right, Kyoko realized, the last line was supposed to be a simple "yes." He screwed up his lines again. Right now, though, she found she didn't really care. It was a wrap—it was really over!

One Take Only! She crowed gleefully to herself. She'd kept her promise to Tsuruga-san.

"And Kyouko-chan, I have to say, that kiss was well beyond anything I would have expected from you," the director continued. "I mean, when I said 'sensual' I just meant that it should more than some chaste little peck, but you—wow!" He actually started to clap for her, with more than a few of the stunned production staff joining in.

"Excuse me," a rough, cold voice rang out over the din, "but just who here is 'Kyoko-chan'?"

The director paused in his applause, and with a bemused, "Um...her?" he turned his traitorous index finger in Kyoko's direction, singling her out for the attention of a completely livid Fuwa Sho.
"Um, Ren..." Yashiro started hesitantly, "are you-?"

"Hmm?" Ren asked absently, sparkling gentlemanly smile firmly in place as he re-read the script for the commercial a third time. "Something bothering you, Yashiro-san?"

Yes! Yashiro wanted to scream. *You! Why are you being so—so—*weird*?!*

The script was barely two pages long, and consisted of his character—the oh-so-complex "young business man"—suggesting that his companion in the scene, "young secretary," drink a particular brand of tea, both for its calming and restorative properties and for its elegant and subtle flavor. It was hardly Oscar material, but for whatever reason the actor couldn't seem to focus on the script long enough to actually absorb what he was reading.

Stranger still was the *way* he was reading it. When he first got a script, Tsuruga Ren always, without fail, made a point of slinking off into a hallway or another room to read it. Yashiro didn't really understand why—maybe he needed quiet to concentrate?—but he'd come to view it as one of his character's less troublesome habits, far more manageable than his refusal to eat properly, his strangely charged smiles, and his inability to do his job without leaving besotted actresses in his wake. But the moment he'd been given his pages for the day's shoot, he plunked down—*plunked*, no grace at all!—into one of the canvas chairs along the studio wall and began reading, or rather, looking at, the script with that frightening, pasted-on smile that a layman might misread as genuine. In fact, Yashiro had already heard three different people comment on how cheerful the young man seemed today.

"I wonder if something good happened to him this morning," one of the set technicians mused aloud.

Yashiro knew better, of course. He knew that the question should be if something had upset the younger man. For a moment, he considered that Ren was still having trouble sleeping and was simply out of it because he was running on fumes. But there were no shadows under his eyes, no sudden naps, planned or otherwise, no uncharacteristic confessions. He was just...off.

Which is why Yashiro finally said, as gently as he could manage, "Are you angry for some reason?"

The look Ren gave him was half genuine surprise, half confused recognition—as if he only just now realized to whom he was talking, or even where he was. "Angry?" He repeated blankly. "Why would you think that?"

"Well..." The manager couldn't think of a delicate way to put his thoughts into words. "You just seem a little distracted, that's all," he said slowly.

"Oh," Ren said, "that." His hands crumpled the already somewhat worn out pages of his script as he searched for a response. "Right, um...sorry," he said, still sounding detached from the conversation. "I—" a loud buzzing interrupted him, and he practically jumped at the sound, hand flying to his pocket to check if—but no, the actress sitting nearby flipped open her phone with a cheerful, "Moshi moshi," and he settled back in his seat.

His body language screamed that he was disappointed, but, as he turned his attention back to his concerned manager, saying, "I'm fine, Yashiro. I'll be ready in just a moment," his face was still lit up by that blinding gentlemanly smile.

Okay, now that was just downright creepy.
Well, shit, Kyoko thought.

After five days of agonizing over this stupid kiss and two days of full-on method acting as Nacchan, she'd finally done it. In that sweet, sweet moment, as she soaked up the applause of her coworkers and let all the tension drain out of her, she'd even begun to plan a miniature celebration for herself. She'd call Tsuruga-san to cement their dinner plans for tomorrow night, head home for a quick night shift at Darumaya and a tasty dinner of whatever the kitchen had left, and bask in the glow of a job well done—maybe even call Moko-san to give her an update. First, though, she'd stop off at a pharmacy on the way home and grab a very large bottle of mouthwash.

And then that director...that director! He just had to open his mouth. Now, Shotaro was glaring right at her. Gone were the lustful looks of nigh-on fifteen seconds ago; he knew, and he wasn't happy.

Okay, plan, plan, plan...I swear I had a plan for this! Except she didn't, not really. She'd assumed that if the singer were to find her out it would be...well, maybe not private, exactly, but at least not on set in front of God and everybody. And the only plan she'd really formed was to stay calm, be the mature one, and take her lumps. It wasn't as if Shotaro could be reasoned with, after all, until he got his tantrum out of the way. And a tantrum was definitely in the works.

"You-! You—" His face was a brilliant shade of red that did not mesh well with his bleach-blond hair, and the accusatory finger he jabbed in her face was actually shaking. The muscles in his jaw were working double-time as he tried and failed to vocalize his displeasure.

Bitch, witch, siren, she started guessing in her head. Nothing she hadn't heard before, and she had plenty of retorts in her arsenal. But maturity was her watchword. The way she saw it, this whole experience was a test of her professional ability. Just last year she wouldn't have been able to hold herself back half as well as she had so far—a scratch or a bite was nothing, really, compared to a chokehold or two. Whatever he said, she would just let it wash over her.

"You're...Kyoko!" He finally choked out. She blinked. Well, duh, she wanted to say. Did he really not have any clue at all? As insults went, it was far from his best work.

With a carefully flat expression, she tilted her head ever-so-slightly and said in a tone that indicated little more than polite interest, "My name is 'Kyouko,' yes. Were you unaware, Fuwa-san?" The crew knew from her own admission that she didn't really like the idol, and if she kept things formal and distant, they might not draw the usual conclusions. At this point, a little discretion about their shared past might be all she could hope for.

For his part, Fuwa Sho was very confused. Last week, he'd agreed on a whim that was as much spite as it was genuine curiosity to make a guest appearance on a fairly popular drama. How on earth had he gotten from that well-lit boardroom at Akatoki to unknowingly kissing his childhood friend on camera?

And it was her, wasn't it? He looked her over, ignoring the overall effect created by a model's posture, a professional makeup job, and a well-fitted uniform, and began parsing her body into discrete, recognizable parts. Short, brown hair—check. Golden eyes—check. A slender frame that lent itself less to low-cut blouses and more to short skirts—not that he ever thought about the length of Kyoko's skirts, of course—check. And then there was the name. Why would she go to so much trouble to hide it unless it was her?
At the same time, the way she walked, talked, and acted—the Kyoko of his formative years was relentlessly pure, naïve, and dull. The girl in front of him knew exactly what buttons to push, and every move she made seemed designed to draw the male gaze. Her swollen pink lips parted just so, the narrow set to her eyes, the calculating smirk. The way her head was canted to one side to show off the graceful curve of her neck. And her posture had none of the rigidity born of her work at his family's ryokan. When did she learn to stand like a normal teenage girl?

How the hell was she doing this?

As he puzzled his way through her identity and the fact that she'd managed to keep it hidden, he kept up his intense stare. If Natsu had a self-conscious bone in her body, she might've blushed at the way his eyes slid up and down her figure. Safely barricaded in the back of her own mind, Kyoko was toying with the idea of shouting, "Pervert!" and giving him a good, sharp, slap across the face, just for the hell of it. If manga clichés told her anything, no one would blame her. But...mature, calm, restrained, she reminded herself.

"Well, Fuwa-san, if that's all—" she began, about to make good her escape, when he discovered his voice once again.

"You two-faced, soul-sucking, shapeshifting demon," he shouted, voice trembling with rage. "You tricked me!"

Aaaand there it was. Kyoko's grudges rose to the challenge, ready, willing and able to live up at least to the demonic part of the charges he'd levelled against her, but Nacchan kept them contained. With a lazy shrug, she said, "As I recall, I never told you that I wasn't Kyoko. Your conclusions were your own."

"Oh, really?" He spat angrily. "Fuwa-san this, Fuwa-san that. When the hell have you ever called me Fuwa anything you—" he searched for an unused epithet, "you witch!"

The bystanders, who were mostly only mildly confused by the sudden shift in the atmosphere, were now well and truly shocked by his violent outbursts. The director who'd caused the whole mess was especially thrown, his mouth gaping uselessly. His assistant director went into damage control mode, and, stepping forward, said in a low, soothing voice, "Fuwa-san, if there's something non-work related you need to discuss with Kyouko-san, wouldn't it be better to do it somewhere more private?"

Yes, private, Kyoko thought, private is good. Aloud, Natsu prepared to relay her agreement with the sentiment when Shotaro turned on him, saying, "And you were all in on it, weren't you? What, you thought it'd be funny, is that it? Making me kiss a plain, boring girl like her!"

The tiniest of cracks opened up in her resolve as a vein began to throb at her temple. Nobody had made Shotaro do anything—he was the one who butted in, and he sure as hell didn't seem to mind kissing her a second ago.

The bewildered assistant director backed away, waving his hands in a clear negative. "Fuwa-san, I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. We would never presume to try to deceive you. If you'd just calm down..." But Shotaro glared at him, making him back away completely before returning his attention to the true target of his anger.

"And you! Don't think that just because I," he hesitated, "paid attention to you, that that means anything! I was just toying with you, that's all."

The crack widened and gave birth to new, smaller cracks that spidered out in every direction. Behind her, Kyoko was vaguely aware of the assistant director suggesting that someone find Fuwa-san's
manager while giving the go-ahead to start packing everything away for the day.

"A girl like you, who needs a ton of makeup and a whole new wardrobe just to look halfway
decent," he continued, his nose high in the air, "how could it be any other way?"

This bastard...

Chiori, who had been on break, walked up and asked one of her fellow actresses, all of whom were
watching the bizarre scene in fascination, "What's with all the screaming? I could hear it from all the
way in my dressing room."

"Well, I'm not really sure," Makino Honami, the actress for Kaori, said. "But it looks like Kyokosan
and Fuwa Sho are having some kind of lover's quarrel."

Kyoko's eyebrows shot up. What was that?

Sudo Yuka, who played Tsugumi, nodded and added, "I don't really get it either. They were being
lovey-dovey all day, but after the kiss scene ended, he got really mad for some reason and started
saying he's been tricked."

"Well, she sort of tricked all of us, didn't she?" Honami said with laugh. "To think she could kiss like
that! And here I was sure she was the pure and innocent type."

"With a boyfriend like him, she probably gets plenty of practice," Yuka replied, grinning.

Chiori, who had a much clearer grasp of the situation than either of her costars, cast a look of
sympathy at Kyoko's back. Well, it looks like the cat's out of the bag, she thought, but at least
Kyokosan's keeping a cool head about it. If I were her...

But with that last little tap—the keyword being "boyfriend," of course—Kyoko's resolve shattered.
Natsu fell away and all the dark, hateful little spirits that kept house inside her heart burst forward in
every direction, leaving impact craters in the walls and ceiling and making the lights flicker and dim.

"SHOTAROOOOO!" The scream echoed throughout the studio, and suddenly everyone was frozen
in place, heads slowly turning to look at the well-mannered young actress who mere moments ago
had been the picture of passivity, and who now seemed to be overflowing with unabated wrath.

And with all the grace of Godzilla flattening downtown Tokyo, she advanced on her prey.

"YOU absolute BASTARD!" She said through clenched teeth. "I tricked you? I tricked you?" She
seized him by the collar of his uniform and stabbed a finger at his chest. "I'm not the self-centered
jackass who forced my way onto a show without even checking the cast list first!" He winced visibly
as she withdrew her hand to jab a second time, "I'm not the rude jerk who didn't even bother to have
a proper introduction to the other actors when he showed up on the first day," and jerking her hand
back to wind up for a third, and particularly painful poke, she said, "And I am most definitely not the
complete and utter moron who can't recognize the girl he's known since he was four years old
because her hair's a little different!"

Her chest heaved as she let that final pronouncement hit home. Sho glared at her defiantly at first, but
for some incomprehensible reason, his face flushed when their eyes met and he jerked his head
away, roughly shoving her hands off of his jacket. "It's not my fault you're not very memorable," he
spat back. "Maybe if you put half as much effort into your appearance as you do into..."

But she wasn't listening. She had turned his back to him to face her fellow actresses. They were all—
Chiori included—sporting pale faces and wide, terrified eyes.
"Makino-san, Sudo-san," she began, the sweetness of her voice not at all matching the anger written
plainly on her own face, "Why is it, exactly, that you think Shotaro and I are a couple?"

"Er...pardon me, Mio-sa—I mean, Kyouko-san?" Honami managed. "What made you think that he"
Kyoko pointed at the now neglected Sho, who was wearing an expression that could only really be
described as a pout, "and I" she gestured rather unnecessarily at herself, "were dating? We haven't
fought this whole time."

"Well, yeah," Honami said slowly, "he was flirting with you non-stop. And one of the makeup artists
saw the two of you fooling around in the hallway after the shoot ended yesterday."

Kyoko tossed another angry look in Sho's direction, and saw his face flare up again. What was with
him?

"We all thought you were getting along pretty well," Yuka added. "We figured that whole thing
where you said you didn't like him was just you trying to be discreet or something. Y'know, so the
media doesn't find out?"

If there were a wall nearby, Kyoko would have been banging her head against it right then. As it
was, she settled with grabbing her face with both hands and saying, "We fight and people say we're
dating. We get along and people say we're dating." She let out a howl of frustration. "For God's
sake, can't two people just hate each other?"

Hear, hear, Chiori thought with a grin.

She let her hands fall from her face, and deflated. All of the grudges, their energy expended, flowed
back into her and settled in for a nice, long nap. Looking around, she suddenly became aware of just
how many people had witnessed her little episode—and just how much destruction she'd caused.
Chairs and tables were upended, script pages were strewn all over the place, and every single face
that was turned towards hers was white with fear. Only a few of them had discovered that the forces
that bound them were no longer in play and had begun to rub the feeling back into their limbs.

Oops, she thought. Well, at least none of the cameras are damaged. That's a plus, right?

She glared at her unrepentant childhood friend, who was still studiously avoiding her gaze, and said,
"This is all your fault, you know."

At that moment, Aki Shoko was practically pulled into the studio by a breathless P.A. She'd figured
the kiss scene would take a few tries, what with Sho screwing up his lines all day, and had stepped
out to take a phone call. As she picked her way through the wreckage and tried to shake off the
strange and oddly familiar feeling of lethargy that threatened to overtake her with every step, she
traced the damage to its epicenter—the bickering non-couple still standing in the middle of the set—
and her eyes widened in recognition.

"And just how is it my fault that you're a soulless demon?" He tossed back.

"Oh? I thought it was 'soul-sucking,'" Kyoko (and it was Kyoko, wasn't it?) said coolly.

"Obviously, it's both."

Well, Shoko thought, that certainly answers a lot of questions.
Halfway across town, Tsuruga Ren was sitting in the middle of a giant traffic jam.

"You know, Ren," Yashiro said tentatively, "the fact that Main Street would be blocked off today has been on the news all week."

"Yes," Ren said with a sigh, resisting the urge to bash his forehead into the steering wheel and maybe put himself out of the misery that the next two hours promised to bring, "yes, I do know that."
Kyoko sat, head hanging, in front of the director's desk in his personal office. Next to her, Sho lounged, legs crossed, looking purposely in the opposite direction. Shoko stood at his side, her face kept carefully neutral.

When Director Anna finally entered, looking more at sea than angry, Sho barely seemed to register it. For her part, Kyoko jumped up to offer an apology.

"Director, sir, I'm so sorry to have caused so much trouble for everyone," she started, preparing to fling herself into a full-on dogeza, but he waved her off.

"Please, Kyouko-chan, just sit." He said, and she complied, still shamefacedly bowing her head. "I...have to say that I'm confused. I don't really understand what just happened. The two of you seemed to be working together well enough, and then...well, I guess what I'm saying is that I'm hoping for an explanation."

Sho snorted. "As if you don't know," he sneered at the older man, while still directing his gaze at the blank wall that had captured his interest.

Shoko smiled sweetly on behalf of her charge. "What my client means to say is that he feels as if the staff here has been deliberately deceiving him as to the identity of this young lady," she said, tone smooth and official. Her hand, however, was not so restrained, and had found its way to the crown of Shotaro's head, where it took a tight grip and forcibly turned his face to meet the director's. If the loud crack that issued from the idol's neck as she did so was at all troubling to her, her expression certainly did not reflect it. "And if that is the case, then while his reaction may have been...exaggerated, his displeasure is warranted, is it not?"

Sho attempted to back this up with a meaningful scowl while surreptitiously blinking away the tears of pain that had sprung to his eyes.

Anna began to reply, saying, "Well, as the assistant director tried to tell Fuwa-san, none of us were trying to conceal anything of the sort—"

"Then why did all of you go out of your way to call her Natsu?" Sho snapped. "How do you explain that?"

"Director, sir, if I may—?" Kyoko interjected before he could respond. He nodded. She turned to direct her attention to the pop star.

"Nobody was trying to lie to you, you moron." She said simply. "I asked them to call me Natsu, and they did. That's all. They didn't know anything about us." She turned back to the director to add, "By which I mean two very different people who shared a platonic childhood friendship that has since deteriorated, sir. Nothing romantic."

"And why the hell would they just do that, huh? They had to know something was up, and they just went along with it!" He spat.

"No, Shotaro," she said, with the air of talking to a very slow child. "I said it would help me to stay in character. It's an acting technique. Something you wouldn't know anything about."

"What?!" He demanded, jerking his head around to look at her so fast that another, even louder crack was heard. "Last I checked, I walked on set two days ago with no experience outside of a handful of
PVs, and I've been doing just as well as all you jumped-up 'actors.'"

"Us, jumped-up?" She retorted, shooting up from her chair. "You egotistical—"

But all the director had to do was say, "Excuse me," and she settled back into her seat, posture pristine, hands folded in her lap, and all her attention on the man who could very well decide the fate of her career.

"Now, from what I understand, the two of you know each other outside of work..." ("This guy's a genius," Sho said drily, and Kyoko immediately stepped on his foot.) "Which makes this conflict between you personal, and not professional."

"Yes, sir," Kyoko said earnestly. "When he first arrived, this idiot," Sho glowered, "didn't seem to recognize me, and knowing how much trouble it is for us to work together from past experience, I felt it would be in everyone's best interest, professionally, if that didn't change. But I should never have gotten the crew involved without their knowing it, I realize now. I'm very sorry." And she bowed as low as she could while still seated. "I hope we haven't inconvenienced everyone too much."

The director mulled it over for a moment, before saying, "Well, it was at the end of the day's shooting, luckily. There will be some added cleanup, not that I really know why, he thought to himself. What the hell even happened in there? "But that shouldn't get in the way of us getting finished on time. As long as the two of you can work together in spite of... y'know," he said, gesturing at them indistinctly, just the tiniest bit terrified of what might happen if he said the word "relationship" to describe their...relationship.

"Oh, we can," she said quickly. "There are hardly any scenes left where we'll have to interact directly, after all."

Sho shrugged. "As if she could get in the way of me doing anything I wanted."

But Kyoko ignored the barb; she was just happy to know her job was still secure.

"Well, if that's settled," Anna said, standing up. A small "ahem" stopped him.

"There is... one other matter," Shoko said softly. "This collaboration will likely bring both your show and my client a great deal of media attention. I would appreciate it if you could speak to your staff and ensure that none of what happened leaves this studio. Particularly the nature of Sho and Kyoko-chan's relationship."

Kyoko flared a bit at that last word, and though her demons were still fatigued, they managed to dim the lights momentarily, prompting the director to put a protective hand over a stack of script changes he had on his desk.

"Uh, sure, no problem," he said, eying the young actress like she was a bomb about to go off. "I'll let everyone know."

"And it might be a good idea to collect any cellphones and go through them, in case one of them got footage of the incident." She added.

"Um... I don't know..." Anna said. "I can assure you that my staff is extremely trustworthy. Confiscating their phones would be an invasion of privacy."

"Besides," Kyoko said cheerfully, "Nobody could have recorded our fight. There was too much interference."
"I—interference?" The director asked, sweating a little. *From what? Are you some kind of ghost?* He had always figured she was just a talented actress—it never occurred to him to think she might be scary herself.

"Very well," Shoko said, with the air of someone closing things off. "I suppose that's all right. Just so long as none of this ends up on the internet." The last thing she needed was for there to be footage of Fuwa Sho yelling at a girl the same age as many of his fans out in the world. She tapped on Sho's shoulder as a sign that they were done, and the idol got up to leave.

"Oh, also," Anna said, getting up himself to follow them out, "I would like to say that, whatever happened in your private interactions with one another, I don't think that the way Fuwa-san behaved toward Kyouko-chan is in any way acceptable. It had better not happen again." He said this last sentence with a very pointed glare at Sho. The idol looked a little taken aback at being scolded, but finally shrugged.

"It won't, I promise," Shoko said, gripping him tightly on the shoulder to stop him mouthing off, and pushing him out of the office ahead of herself.

The director made a point of holding the door for Kyoko, who blinked in surprise. No one had ever told Shotaro off before—at least, not that she could remember.

Maybe being airheaded and impulsive wasn't all bad after all.

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Kyoko finished up changing into her normal clothes—although, as she'd picked them out to make herself seem more Natsu-ish, they were actually about as well-suited to bike-riding as her costume—took off her makeup at work for the first time in two days, and combed her hair back into the perky, flared style she preferred. She took a deep breath, crossed her fingers, and tossed in a heel-click for good luck, hoping beyond hope that her run-ins with Shotaro had met their quota for the day.

She peeked out of her dressing room, messenger bag slung over her shoulder, and when she was satisfied that the coast was clear, she stepped into the hallway and carefully pulled the door to. *Oh,* she noticed as she did so, I'll need to ask for a new nameplate tomorrow. She still had the old one crumpled up in the back pocket of a pair of jeans somewhere.

Creeping down the hall on the balls of her feet, she was drawing a strange look from more than one passerby, but the earlier...incident, as Shoko had called it, was causing most everyone to give her a wide berth. She pumped her fist victoriously when she broke out into the open air, her bike in her sights, when she heard,

"I think you gave me whiplash, Shoko-san."

She looked around to see her onetime friend standing out on the curb, rubbing his neck and whining obnoxiously. Shoko was barely paying any attention to him, and stood pressing buttons on her smartphone furiously.

"Where is that car?" She muttered, harried. "It was supposed to be here fifteen minutes—" something squawked, and she held the phone to her ear. "Yes, hello? This is Aki Shoko, with the musical division. I ordered a car, and..." She put a finger in the unoccupied ear and started pacing down the sidewalk.
Now clearly bored and deprived of anyone to take it out on, Sho left off massaging himself and started looking around for something to do. He was about to resort to his own smart phone when he spotted Kyoko, now halfway to her bicycle, trying desperately to escape unnoticed.

"Oi," he called. "Kyoko."

She was considering just getting on her bike and leaving, not even giving him the satisfaction of acknowledging him. But then he said, "I had no idea you wanted to kiss me so bad."

Kyoko stiffened where she stood. Slowly, agonizingly so, she turned her head to face him. "What," she asked in a low, dangerous voice, "did you say?"

"You heard me," he grinned, hands in pockets, that artful slouch of his back in full force. "I mean, you lied to everybody, pretended to be someone else, and even got all dressed up," he nodded at her current outfit, a pair of dark skinny jeans, the high heels she'd gotten for her birthday, and a tunic-like top with a snakeskin belt across it. "All so you could have another shot with me?"

"You...you," and it was her turn to tremble and stutter with rage. "I would never—!

His grin just widened. This was his wheelhouse. Natsu might have been a girl of endless surprises, but Kyoko—the real Kyoko—who but Sho knew better which buttons to push? And maybe he could get her back for some of the humiliation she'd put him through. "You coulda just asked, y'know," he said lazily. "I mean, I would have said no," he admitted with open palms, "you're not exactly in my league, but then all this could have been avoided."

'In my league.' Something clicked within Kyoko. Because she, too, recognized this pattern. A lifetime together at school and at home had made both of them know the other as intimately as the average pair of fraternal twins. Which would normally put them on equal footing in verbal sparring, but...well, Sho simply had more experience than she did when it came to using that knowledge to hurt. But when she was Natsu...When she stood tall and had all her mother's cold composure, he was putty in her hands.

Beneath that realization was the fairly recent revelation: "I think Shotaro might be...attracted...to me," she'd told Moko-san. And when she'd told Chiori that she had no idea why he was being so clingy on set, her friend had echoed her conclusion. "Because he's attracted to you...all guys get annoying when they're attracted to you." And even this, his strange need to dog her steps and belittle her like a love-struck grade schooler, to tell her that "[he] was just toying with [her], that's all," it all came back to that one, inconceivable truth.

And Natsu knew just how to use it.

Her posture shifted, her eyes narrowed, and she smirked in the way she now knew drove Shotaro crazy. "Right," she said. "Because I was the one begging for kissing lessons."

He reddened, but forced his voice to come out steady. "I only offered to teach you to kiss because I could tell just by looking at you that you had almost no experience," he said bitingly. "I mean, who'd want to kiss you?"

"Other than you, you mean?" She asked, cocking one eyebrow. "As I recall, you're the one who felt the need to try to steal my first kiss. And really, how anyone would want an encore performance on that," she let out a tinkling laugh. "Well, for all that you claim to be such a playboy, you're not exactly very good at it, are you?"

"What?" Sho demanded. "What the hell do you mean by that?"
"Kissing," she said, pressing a finger to her puckered lips with a soft smooching sound. "Oh, come on, you didn't think all those people were applauding for you, did you?" His eyes widened. "No, it was all for me, wasn't it? It seems I'm not the one in need of lessons."

With him standing there speechless, she turned on her heel and prepared to leave him behind, when something vibrated in her pocket. She paused just long enough for Sho to grab her arm and twirl her around to look at him.

"You know, it just occurred to me," he said, voice suddenly soft and smooth. "How did you learn to kiss? In acting school?" He searched her impassive face for any betrayal of emotion. "I doubt it. Not unless the LME acting school is a lot more lowbrow than I thought. That wasn't some peck on the lips—that was foreplay." And he'd gotten it, with his crass comment. The mask broke, and she flushed, pulling out of his grip, but he held tight. She can pretend to be a vamp all she likes, he thought. But underneath she's the same naïve Kyoko.

"It wasn't—we didn't—" Kyoko said, feeling the need to rush to her sempai's defense, before she remembered that Shotaro had no way of knowing that Tsuruga-san was involved at all. He just smirked at her, awaiting her answer.

"Not everyone is as immature as you are, Shotaro," she said finally, trying to regain some of her Natsu calm. "Some of us can actually behave like professionals," Not me, she admitted to herself, I was all over him and work barely entered my mind at all, but... "and we do what we need to—learn whatever we need to learn—to get the job done."

"Uh-huh," he said, pulling her closer, leaning down to put his face directly in front of hers. "And just who taught you what you needed to learn?" His eyes traveled down the curve of her neck just as it had done when she was Natsu, Natsu and not the girl he knew better than anyone, who was his. The tunic had a low-cut neck, and hastily put on, puffed out just enough that he could see a flash of lace. If some part of him recognized that he was proving her point, that he was the one pursuing her, he shoved it aside. The closeness of her lips made him think of that kiss again, and how nice it was...Amazing, really...And how could this girl, boring and plain and clueless be amazing?

He had to know. He had to find the truth. But...that need was sort of losing out to another, more immediate desire. Sho was about to lean forward that last little bit, when suddenly Kyoko started to vibrate violently.

"Let go!" She said, shaking him off. "That's the second time he's called, now! I have to get it!"

"Called—?" He asked. "That's from your phone?" But his mind picked out another, more pertinent detail. "He?"

"This is Mogami," she said, having flipped her phone open. "Yes, Tsuruga-san, I got your message. I was just going to call you back, but I was...detained," she said delicately. "No, nothing too bad. Just a small annoyance." The man on the other end said something that made the actress laugh. "Yes, that's the one. But I know how to handle it, don't worry."

Sho could guess at what Ren had said, and, fuming, reached for the phone, but she jerked it away. With a glare, she aimed a well-placed kick at his shin that had him rolling on the ground.

"Yes, I'd love to," she said, picking her words carefully with Shotaro nearby. "Tomorrow night? Great. I wanted to see—I mean, thank you. For...y'know," she said, face burning. "Right. Well—Tsuruga-san, is that honking I hear? Are you talking to me while driving?" She frowned, concerned. "Well, if you're at a stop light, I guess it's okay, but you really should focus on the road. And watch out around Main, there's a terrible traffic jam because of the—oh, what am I saying," she laughed,
"you're not like me, who doesn't pay close enough attention. You already know."

"Oi!" Sho barked angrily, pushing himself up from the ground. "What the hell do you think you're doing—"

"Uh, I should probably go now," she said quickly. "See you then, Tsuruga-san." And she hung up. All the good cheer that had been present during the phone call drained away, and she looked at him and said, voice icy, "You're the one who tried to take my phone away. I won't have you bothering Tsuruga-san."

"Me, bother that air-headed pretty boy?" He snapped. "Why do care so much about him, anyway? Just because he's your 'sempai'..." and a horrible thought flashed through him. If he was her sempai, she probably badgered him for advice nonstop. And now she wanted to "thank" him for something. If there was anyone she'd trust to teach her...

"It was him, wasn't it?" He spat. "He's the one who taught you." That bastard, taking advantage of someone like Kyoko, who doesn't know any better. He snatched at her arm again, to make her stop and force her to listen, but she moved too quickly for him.

"Why does it matter who taught me?" She asked, angry that he'd tried to force his way between them again. Angry that he was here at all, messing with her life, all over some minor attraction and a petty need to control her. Natsu, waiting in the wings, was more than happy to help her with that final dig.

She smirked, pressing to her cheek the phone that only moments ago had Tsuruga's name prominently displayed on the screen. "I will say this, though: there's a lot to be said for maturity."

At this, which was as close to a confirmation as he could stand to hear, Sho became solid stone. Kyoko hardly noticed, tucking her phone away into her bag, mounting her bike, and heading out.

When Shoko came looking for her client, having secured the wayward company vehicle, she sighed to see the Deva King where a handsome teenage boy had once been.

"How am I supposed to get him into the car?" She wondered aloud.

That night, at about 8 o'clock, Rumi's interview came on Entertainment Today, and Director Anna was watching, patting himself on the back for having made at least one good decision. Fuwa Sho might be more trouble than he'd bargained for, but an appearance on this talk show was well worth it.

"And I understand you're working alongside the same Kyouko who appeared in Dark Moon. What is that like? Is she as frightening in person as her characters make her seem?"

Rumi waved a hand. "No, no, she's actually very kind and polite. I don't know how she manages to be so scary onscreen. Though," she laughed in self-effacing way, "when we first started shooting, and the director was still considering having her be more like Mio, I was terrified. I couldn't go on set without an omamori."

Huh, the director thought. Maybe I should get myself an omamori...he shuddered, thinking of what had happened that day. Just in case.
In another part of Tokyo, in a high-class apartment, the interview had not been allowed to get so far. As soon as Kyouko was mentioned, Fuwa Sho had sent the remote flying into the screen, where it was now lodged, sparks fizzling up around it.

"Goddamit! Why the hell couldn’t you tell me that yesterday?" He shouted at the very broken television.
"MOKOOO-SAN~" Kyoko called. "We're over here!" She stood up, waving her hands wildly and drawing stares from the café's other customers.

Kanae thanked her lucky stars she'd thought to wear a hat and pulled the brim down over her face, swinging her head from side to side as if still looking for her friend. No way was she going to acknowledge such an embarrassing invitation. Finally, when she sure the muttering had stopped, she surreptitiously claimed her seat next to Kyoko. On the other side of her sat Chiori, who was doing everything she could to hold back a fit of giggles.

"MO! Can't you learn to be a little quieter?" Kanae griped.

"Sorry, Moko-san," Kyoko said, looking contrite. "It's just that we haven't see each other in so long, and I got excited."

"We met for" she coughed, casting an aside glance at Chiori, "'karaoke' just last Friday. And we talk on the phone all the time! If you can't learn some self-control, I won't be meeting you in public again."

Her pronouncement drove Kyoko to immediately don the face of a kicked puppy, her eyes shining with tears on the verge of spilling out. Knowing she wouldn't be able to resist caving for long with that look trained on her, Kanae uttered a quick, "Oh, calm down. I was kidding," and turned her attention to Chiori.

"So, why is it we can meet this morning, anyway? I thought your show was on a tight schedule this week," she pointed out.

"Well, we're the villains, so we're not as necessary," Chiori said. "And thanks to a mishap with our lead actress yesterday, we ended up shooting most of the bullying scenes. So the director decided to give us the morning free while they play catch-up on the main storyline." She grinned suddenly. "Plus, in light of certain events, he wanted to give everyone a cooling off period."

"And since I'd promised to treat Amamiya-san to ice cream, I figured now was as good a time as any," a recovered Kyoko chimed in cheerfully.

Kanae felt a rather small pang she refused to identify. She didn't realize they had gotten so close. (For her part, Chiori couldn't remember Kyoko making any promise of the kind, but she wasn't one to turn down free food.) Shrugging off the niggling feeling that she'd lost something, she deigned to look at Kyoko once again, and asked,

"He found out, didn't he?"

Kyoko's smile dimmed a little, and she sighed. "Yeah. The director accidentally let it slip. It's for the best that I stay off the set for a little bit."

"He's not edging you out of your own job, is he?" Kanae demanded. "I mean, they can't blame you for his behavior."

"Well, to be honest, I behaved pretty badly myself," she said, shame clear on her face. "I'm sure everyone sees me as a complete amateur now," she lamented.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that," Chiori said, waving a hand dismissively. "He went off on you
first, remember? He made a serious ass out of himself," she said to Kanae conspiratorially, "And I
heard some of the crew members say this whole experience has opened their eyes to Fuwa's real
character. He lost more than a few fans."

"As for how they feel about Kyouko-san..." Chiori shrugged. "They don't think you're
unprofessional so much as 'really, really scary.' Oh, and 'weirdly well-connected for a newbie
actress,' that's another one."

"They're welcome to take my connections for themselves anytime," the chestnut-haired actress said
darkly.

"Even Tsuruga Ren?" Chiori said. "You'd be fine with him being some other girl's sempai?"

Kyoko flushed. "I—um...of course!" She stammered. "I would never dare to suggest that Tsuruga-san
should only mentor me. I'm sure there are much worthier actresses—and actors, too—who would
benefit from Tsuruga-san's attention."

"Uh-huh," Chiori just smiled.

"And he can teach all of them to kiss, too?" Kanae asked casually. When Chiori's eyebrows shot into
her hairline, she felt a strange surge of satisfaction.

"You kissed Tsuruga Ren?" The third LoveMe girl practically squawked.

"It wasn't a real kiss, it was a teaching kiss," Kyoko said, sending Kanae a sharp be quiet! look. "He
was just helping me prepare for the scene with Shotaro, since he knew how tough it would be for
me."

"So he knows about all the stuff that happened between the two of you?" Chiori asked, waggling her
eyebrows suggestively. "You guys are pretty close, huh?"

Kanae blinked. All the stuff? Shotaro? And Chiori not so much as batting an eye? She told her! We'd been "best friends" for months before she told me, and I had to threaten to cut all ties just to get it
out of her! That stupid, irrational pain was back in full force. Kyoko had spilled her most closely
guarded secret to a co-worker like it was nothing! She found her irritation building, until a scowl that
refused to be quelled rose to her face. Her tablemates, still immersed in their conversation, didn't
notice, but the unfortunate waitress on her way to take their order turned a faint shade of pink and
elected to refill coffee at the table next to them instead before retreating behind the counter.

"We're a sempai and kohai, that's all," Kyoko insisted. "To even imagine that Tsuruga-san would
want anything more than a working relationship with someone like me is absurd!"

"I hate to break it to you, Kyouko-san, but most people don't consider kissing part of the mentoring
experience," Chiori teased. "Are you sure there isn't something more going on?"

"Of course not!" she responded heatedly, her language growing more and more stilted with every
scandalized tone. "Tsuruga-san is a consummate professional! I would never besmirch his reputation
by suggesting—"

"Okay, okay, I understand," Chiori said, chuckling, placing a hand on her friend's shoulder. "Chill.
I'm just messing with you."

"Oh," Kyoko said, deflating a little. "Sorry. It's just, well, you're not the first person to make this kind
of assumption. I respect Tsuruga-san very much, and the last thing I want is for some ridiculous
rumor about us ending up in the tabloids and ruining his good name."
"So everyone else can see it, too?" Chiori said slyly.

"Amamiya-san!" she scolded.

"That was the last one, I promise," she laughed. "Although—I have to ask—what was it like kissing him? Are you really saying you didn't feel anything?"

Kyoko blushed. "No! I mean, he's certainly skilled from a purely technical point of view," she allowed, "but that's it. It was strictly—"

"Professional, yeah, I got it," she said, shaking her head. "You really like that word, don't you?" But finally, with the air of someone changing the subject, she looked around and asked, "I wonder where the waitress is. I thought I saw her coming over."

"Maybe if we close our menus?" Kyoko suggested. "She may think we're still trying to decide." She smiled and turned to Kanae, saying, "I think I'll get the green tea flavor this time. What are you going to get, Moko-sa—?" The question died in her throat when she finally took in the fierce expression on her best friend's face.

"I don't know," Kanae said stonily. "Something big. Like this triple-decker sundae, maybe," she said, staring intently at the descriptions that accompanied the colorful pictures of the café's offerings—even though she'd memorized them all in a matter of seconds.

"Is something wrong, Moko-san?" Kyoko asked timidly. "Did I do something else to embarrass you? I'll be quieter, I promise."

"What are you talking about? You're fine. Everything's fine. I'm just hungry, that's all." The long-haired beauty glanced over at the counter and gave a curt nod to the waitress there to signal that she was ready. "We should hurry up and order," she said. "Unlike you two, I don't have all morning."

When the waitress came, though, she regretted her decision, because the young woman took the menus away with her. Which meant she had no place to look but towards her companions until their food came out.

Spurred on by desperation, she seized a sachet of artificial sweetener and made a show of reading the ingredients on the back. Anything to avoid meeting Kyoko's eyes and admitting that right now, she was feeling a lot like a third wheel.

"You're mad," Kyoko said, more firmly this time.

"No, I'm not," she said.

"Moko-san, I know for a fact that you can recite everything that goes into a packet of Sweet N' Low by heart. " She pointed out. "What's the matter?" She gasped as if struck by an idea. "Is someone bothering you at work again? If you need help, just tell me. That's what friends are for."

This kindhearted offer hit home in an entirely unintended way. Kanae jerked her head up to glare at her friend. "Right, because you're so open and honest with your friends, these days. You don't have anything to hide anymore."

Kyoko was taken aback by her friend's biting words. "W-what are you saying?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just that I thought friendship was supposed to mean something."

Chiori, the unwitting cause of conflict, was about as lost as a person could be while listening to this
conversation. Still, she sensed that now might be a good time for her to visit the restroom to "freshen up," but as she got up to excuse herself, Kanae put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her back down.

"No, you should stay," Kanae said, voice cold. "I'll go."

"Um, I was just going to—" Chiori tried to say, but the young woman stood with the scrape of chair on tile and, flipping a lock of hair back, prepared to leave.

"Wait, Moko-san, what about your ice cream?" Kyoko said hastily, trying to find any reason to get her to stay and talk things through.

"I don't need the empty calories," she said curtly. "We've already paid, so why don't you two just share it?"

"Moko-san!" Kyoko said. "Stop! Can't we talk about this?"

Her pleas fell on deaf ears, and Kanae was mere steps from the entrance, the bell tingling as someone passed through and held the door open for her, when Kyoko let out an anguished cry.

"I'M SORRY, MOKO-SAN!" She said. "YOU'RE RIGHT! I LIED! I'M SO SORRY!"

Kanae stopped in her tracks, now rather bewildered herself. She turned to see Kyoko splayed out on the floor by her table, chair flung haphazardly out of the way as she executed a dogeza.

If everyone in the café was staring before, it was nothing to how they were gazing at the three girls now. The manager of the shop, a middle-aged man wearing a spotless white apron, came over and said in a low, concerned voice, "Miss customers, is there something I can help you with? Is everything okay?"

"Um, yeah, sorry," Chiori told him. "I've recently learned that she can be a little overdramatic." It was hard to believe she'd seen her sempai in the LoveMe group as so calm and reserved a few days prior.

With a huff, Kanae stalked over to Kyoko and pulled her forcibly up out of her bow. "Come on. Let's go somewhere where it's harder for us to embarrass ourselves." And with that, she dragged her out of the café without a backward glance.

"Um...and maybe make our orders to go," Chiori said awkwardly.

"Cut!" Director Anna called.

Sho let out a growl of frustration. They hadn't even gotten halfway through the scene! "What's wrong this time" he snapped, tacking on a hasty "sir?" when Shoko shook her head at him.

"I can't really put my finger on it," the director said. "But it just isn't working. The scene keeps falling flat."

"I'm doing the same as I've done every other time," Sho pointed out. "How can it suddenly not be working anymore?"
Rumi, opposite him, agreed, saying, "Rumi doesn't see any difference either. For a beginner, Fuwasan is doing very well. And Rumi's not uncomfortable with any part of the scene, either—but doing it over and over again isn't helping."

"I know, I know," he said. "I can't explain it. What do you think?" He asked his assistant director. "Am I overthinking this?"

His colleague shook his head. "The scene doesn't flow as well as it should. For some reason, I'm having trouble believing what the two of them are saying."

"What's there to believe?" Sho demanded irritably. "She brings me a lunch and thanks me for being so nice 'the other day,' I tell her I'm sure it'll be delicious, but that there's really no need, it's a pleasure to be around her, she blushes, I suggest we eat together on the roof, end scene. We both know all our lines, we've done the blocking exactly the way you've asked, what more is there?"

The crew as a whole rankled a little bit at his flippant attitude about his work, but it was Rumi, surprisingly enough, who spoke up.

"There's more to acting than just saying your lines and standing on your mark, you know," she said, frowning in a way that on her could only be described as adorable, her nose crinkling, her bottom lip protruding in a prominent pout. "There's how you carry yourself, how you internalize the character's feelings to properly express them, there's the chemistry between you and the other actors—"

"That's it!" Director Anna crowed. "That's the problem!" And without explaining himself any further, he leapt off of his foldable chair and disappeared into the viewing room where the production staff was going over the dailies from the previous day's shoot.

When no one made any move to follow him, he darted his head out a made a come-hither motion with his hand. "Come on, come on, I'll show you."

Sho, Rumi, and the rest of the direction staff crowded into the darkened room filled with television screens.

"Cue one of the scenes from yesterday," the director was saying, "I don't care which one, any of the scenes with major interaction between Sagara and Natsu."

"We were working on the kiss—" One of the post-production editors started to say.

"Fine, fine," the director cut him off. "And you," he told a camera tech, "bring up the first take of the lunch invitation scene from today. I want to compare the two." The woman nodded, and ran out to grab the footage.

When everything was set up, the two scenes set up side-by-side on the display panel, he said, "Okay, play the Natsu scene. Watch," he said to his actors.

Rumi, who hadn't had a chance to see the kissing scene yet, let out a gasp and promptly transformed into a very cute tomato when the characters' lips met. "Oh, my," she said. "I had no idea Kyouko-san was so—"

"Yeah, yeah, we get it," Sho said, cutting her off. "She's a decent kisser. What does this have to do with the scene we're shooting now?"

Everyone else in the room was already sold, murmuring their agreement with the director's point, but he decided to humor Sho anyway. "Roll today's scene," he said.
That take didn't look any different from the first day's work that Sho had done with Rumi. He still looked cool but not too difficult to attain. He still smiled just as charmingly, and Rumi still mustered up that same, sweet blush on command. The two seemed to like each other well enough, but...

With Natsu and Sagara's scene still fresh in their minds, it was hard not to see the difference. His smile was somehow warmer, more genuine, and the way he reacted to her advances—he wasn't in control of himself, the way he was with Chitose. In fact, what he supposedly felt for Chitose paled in comparison to what he appeared to feel for the impeccably coiffed bully.

"Now do you understand?" Anna asked.

Sho just shrugged. The scene looked fine to him. Sure, Chitose's part wasn't nearly as interesting, but the character wasn't a type he liked, anyway.

"There's no chemistry between you and Rumi," he explained. "The whole concept driving the storyline is that Sagara and Chitose are in love, but that, against his better judgment, he lets himself be taken in by Natsu, whom he finds attractive but doesn't truly love. This," he waved at the display, "does not tell that story. This says that two mildly smitten high school kids have their potential relationship derailed when Sagara meets someone he has passionate feelings for. Of course, the feelings aren't reciprocated," he said, "but the point is, your character is meant to be in love with Chitose. Not Natsu. And the way the two of you are acting right now, the audience will never believe the narrative we're trying to sell them."

"If it's so hard to believe, then why were you greenlighting our scenes left and right on Monday?" Sho asked.

"We didn't have anything to compare it to," Anna responded. "You were doing well enough, and we were angling for a shy, understated kind of love. But now that we have this," he indicated the kiss scene, which was frozen on the moment just after the characters broke apart (To his dismay, Sho could practically hear himself saying "You're amazing."), "it's obvious that the love isn't so much understated as not there. Not yet, anyway."

"Rumi does feel like there's a spark missing," the actress confessed. "But what can we do about it? Chemistry isn't something you can just turn on."

"That's the problem," the director said. "All we have is today and part of the day tomorrow. That was fine when we were on schedule and tomorrow was there to give us some wiggle room, but now we're looking at possibly reshooting some of the earlier scenes. Unless Fuwa-san could get out of some of his engagements for tomorrow and Friday, we simply don't have the time to re-do all the Chitose and Sagara scenes. Even if we did, there's no guarantee that we would be able to find that missing spark."

"Then there's the other option," he continued. "If we get rid of the point of comparison, the audience will only ever see the sweet, more ordinary love story. But that would mean scrapping and reshooting some of the Natsu scenes to make them less powerful—starting with the kiss scene."
Kanae gripped a still-quivering Kyoko by the hand like a disobedient child as she stood at the city bus stop. If she saw the strange looks being sent her way, she didn't show it. Instead, she was focused on figuring out the best way to get from here to their favorite covert meeting place. The karaoke box was a good twenty minutes away even without traffic, and as the Korean president was spending the next three days in town, the bus was sure to take a more roundabout route.

"Kotonoami...-san," Someone huffed from just behind her. She whirled around to glare at the person who dared interrupt her brainstorming and saw a red-faced Chiori holding out an already misshapen ice cream sundae to her like an offering.

"Amamiya-san," she said stiffly. "Thank you for bringing that all this way, but I believe I already said I have no attention of eating it. Feel free to partake yourself, of course." And she went back to calculating the time it would take, allowing for at least twenty minutes' conversation, maybe thirty-five minutes' travel either direction...It would be a tight squeeze, but she should have time to get back, swing by LME, and head out in time for her job at 1 p.m.

"Kotonomi-san," Chiori said again, this time more firmly. When no response was forthcoming, she grabbed the taller girl by her shoulder, forced her to turn around, and shoved the sweaty mess of ice cream into her face. "You're the one who ordered this calorie-bomb monstrosity, not me. There's no point in throwing money away."

Kanae cringed at the idea of wasting money, and finally relinquished her hold on Kyoko to receive the ice cream. "Fine. Thank you. Is that all?" She managed to say, coldly, in between rapid bites. Grabbing Kyoko's arm, Chiori thrust the simpler green tea cone into the downcast girl's hands. "No, of course not," she said, making sure Kyoko had a proper grip on it before turning back to look Kanae in the eye. "I just got a text from the director. He's pushed up the schedule on us again."

Kyoko pulled herself out of her funk now, asking, "What? We have to go in now?"

"Hurry up and eat that!" Kanae scolded, her own sundae having been efficiently decimated in a matter of seconds. She tossed the cup in a nearby trashcan and pulled out a handkerchief to try and maintain some semblance of elegance—plus there was a liberal splotch of chocolate sauce on her lips.

Kyoko dutifully set to licking away at her ice cream as Chiori shook her head. "No, not right away, we've still got about an hour. And when I say me, I mostly mean you. Apparently there's been another glitch in production or something." Kyoko's free hand started scrabbling away at the clasp of her messenger bag to get at her phone, but Chiori stopped her. "I already told him you're with me and you've got the message. You're okay. But," she said, with a glance at Kanae, "it's probably not a good idea to travel too far away right now. We should be heading that way in about a half-hour."

"Sorry, Moko-san," Kyoko said for about the tenth time that morning. "I guess we won't be able to talk after all." Her green-stained lips pulled into an apologetic pout.

"You were getting on a bus just to talk?" Chiori said incredulously.

"We like to take precautions to avoid being overheard," Kanae replied.
"By who?" Chiori asked. "It's not like there are paparazzi after any of us," she pointed out, gesturing at the three of them standing on a fairly public street corner, with no one paying the slightest attention to them now that they looked like any other high school girls waiting for the bus.

"No," Kanae admitted through gritted teeth, "but the first thing you need to know about the LoveMe section is that the president knows things—things he couldn't possibly know by normal means." She shrugged. "I'm not taking any chances."

Chiori cast a questioning look at Kyoko, who was caught in the throes of what looked like a very painful brain freeze. She'd managed to down the last of her cone and was now clamping her hands down over her temples. When she opened her eyes again, tears welling up in the corners, she managed an affirmative nod. "He's got ways," she squeezed out. "And this is definitely the sort of thing I don't want him hearing."

Kanae quirked an eyebrow at that, but said nothing.

"Well, if you're really that worried about it..." Chiori said slowly, "my house is right nearby. We could still be back in time for work. I've already told my manager to come get us in the car. It wouldn't be any trouble for her to pick us up from my place, instead."

Kyoko immediately perked up at this, eyes sparkling. "You're inviting us to your house?!" she crowed. Next to her, Kanae scowled her displeasure.

"Well, my mom's not home right now, so it'd be pretty safe. And it's only a few blocks away—that's the whole reason I picked this ice cream shop."

Kanae was about ready to fold her arms over her chest and say, "No thank you, we can wait," but Kyoko beamed at Chiori and said, "That's a great idea!" and the decision was made.

Chiori's house was a simple, western-style affair. They slipped off their shoes and padded into the sitting room to kneel around the small square table at its center.

Kanae was debating how rude it would be to demand that Chiori leave so that she could hear Kyoko's confession alone when, as if there had been no interruption whatsoever, her best friend once again pitched herself onto the floor and cried, "I am so sorry!"

Chiori was obviously not used to her sudden transformations and almost smacked her head against a nearby bookshelf, it surprised her so much.

Kanae sighed. For better or worse, Chiori was in this now.

"What did you lie about?" She asked brusquely, knowing that gentleness would go nowhere in hurrying this process along.

"Tsuruga-san."

Okay...Not the answer she was expecting. "What about him?" An unpleasant thought struck her. "He didn't try to pull anything with you, did he?" If that bastard took advantage of her after she told Kyoko to go to him for help...
But Kyoko shook her head. "It's not him. It's me. About him...about...about how I feel about him."

"How you feel?" Kanae's brow knitted as she tried to puzzle out her friend's meaning. It was Kyoko, after all. The LoveMe section's number one. There was no way she could...

"I—I'm not...the way I feel about him isn't just..." She flailed helplessly. "I'm in love with him," Kyoko mumbled.

"Come again?" Kanae choked out.

"I didn't...not feel anything when I kissed him," she said carefully. "I liked it. A lot. And not just as an acting exercise. Because I'm in...love...with him." She seemed to have real trouble enunciating that one particular word, and she refused to look either of her fellow LoveMe members in the eyes.

"Wait," Kanae said quickly, "just because you liked kissing the guy doesn't automatically make you in love with him. He's a good-looking man, and he's certainly had enough practice to be a decent kisser—not that you have much to compare it with. Couldn't it just be that you liked the experience?"

But Kyoko was already shaking her head again, gaze trained carefully on her hands clasped in front of her on the table. "No...no, that's not really...I think I said it wrong. I've been in," she breathed deep, "love with Tsuruga-san since...well, since we worked together on Dark Moon," she admitted. "So I guess that's another lie. I just...when I said I didn't like kissing him, I knew even before it happened that I would like it. And I did. And now I can't stop thinking about it, 'cause I'm a total pervert, and a weakling, and it's all Shotaro's fault, and..."

Before Kanae, who was officially in a state of shock, could say anything, Chiori piped up.

"Wait, okay, what?" Chiori asked. "You're in love with Tsuruga Ren. And you've been lying about it because...?"

"Because I shouldn't! Because loving someone after everything that's happened—and he's going to hate me for this, I just know it—is like letting Shotaro in all over again. It's weak, and silly, and stupid." She swiped at the frustrated tears that threatened to spill down her face. "And everybody already seems to know about it without me telling them, anyway. I thought if I ignored it..." she shrugged. "Maybe it'd go away."

"Why would Tsuruga Ren hate you for liking him?" Chiori said reasonably. "Tons of actresses fall for him on set. He's gotta be used to it by now."

When Kyoko's response was to snuffle and rub at her eyes even harder, she realized that may not have been the best tack.

"I mean, not that you don't have a chance with him or anything," she said quickly. "You do. He's your mentor, right? So you actually know him. You have more reason than any of those other actresses to love him. I mean, they just like him 'cause he's hot and a good actor."

"I don't want to do anything with him," Kyoko said. "It's not like he'd ever want to date someone like me, anyway. Especially since I'm not supposed to love anybody, including him."

"But why aren't you supposed to—" Chiori tried again, throwing up hands helplessly. "I mean, isn't that the whole point of being in this section?" Obviously Kyoko logic was not really tracking for her. With a groan of exasperation, she turned a desperate glare on the still-frozen Kanae that said as clear as day, She's your best friend, do something already. She had not signed on for this level of drama.

The tall, beautiful, generally aloof young woman was having something of an internal crisis. Kyoko
was in love. Now, she wasn't stupid. She knew Kyoko liked Tsuruga Ren, and she was pretty sure that the actor was head over heels for her friend. This shouldn't have come as this much of a surprise. But the fact was, Kyoko was her first real female friend—in fact, her first real friend, period. She was the first person outside of her family that she actually felt close to. And for all that Kanae had never had a female friend before, she did still know perfectly well what happened when girls got boyfriends.

And maybe that's exactly why she didn't see this coming. She didn't want it to come. In the average friendship, one girl starting a relationship would mean, at least at first, that she wouldn't have time for anybody but her new guy. Even when things got out of the honeymoon phase, she'd still have less time to spend with friends. But in their case, it was even worse. The second Kyoko demonstrated her ability to be a part of a genuinely loving relationship, she would graduate the LoveMe section. Right now, Kanae was teetering on the edge of being left alone, all because of Tsuruga Ren.

As she looked at Kyoko, sitting in a perfect seiza with her fists clenched so tightly that the knuckles were turning white and her nose began to take on that unfortunate shade of red that all noses got after they've been running awhile, she realized something. Kyoko was still being held back by her fear of love. She was wrapped up in misconceptions and low self-esteem like a security blanket—or a suit of armor. And, a small, dark part of Kanae whispered, if she played on that, helped her along the path of self-doubt, she could keep her. Crush her budding feelings and stop her from leaving.

But she couldn't really, could she?

With a glance at Chiori out of a corner of her eye, she couldn't deny that having a friend like Chiori at her job probably made Kyoko feel more comfortable, especially when Fuwa was around. And the way she gushed about Tsuruga sometimes made it clear that she enjoyed spending time with him. These people made Kyoko happy. What kind of a friend would she be to take that away from her?

So, Kanae squared her shoulders, tamped down all her painfully prickly feelings and snapped, in a voice like icy steel, "Kyoko!"

The girl's eyes shot up to meet hers at the rarely-heard sound of her first name issuing from Kanae's mouth.

"Stop crying." She said firmly. "Do you want your face to be puffy for the shoot today, or are you a professional?"

As if a tap had been shut off, Kyoko complied, leaving nothing but a few dried tears and that quickly fading flush in the tip of her nose.

"Now, let's get one thing straight. There is nothing wrong with you being in love with a guy. It is not weak, or stupid. It just is." She said flat-out. "Right, Amamiya-san?"

Chiori snapped to with a jolt. "Yes, of course. I mean, it's not my particular cup of tea, but..." A throat-clear from Kanae brought her back on track. "Yes. There's nothing wrong with being in love."

"Now, I don't know who told you it wasn't allowed," Kyoko opened her mouth to answer, but Kanae cut her off, "and I don't care. I'm telling you it's fine. You trust me, don't you, Kyoko?"

"Second of all, just because he's a good actor does not mean that Tsuruga Ren is above you," she added. "You're an excellent actress in your own right with considerably less experience, and he'd be lucky to have you."
Kyoko made a move to refute that statement, and Kanae just shook her head.

"He would. End of story. And don't tell anyone I said that, because I will deny it until the end of time. We're supposed to be rivals, after all." She let a small smile slip onto her face.

"Finally, liking to kiss someone does not make you a pervert. You're a grown woman; it kind of comes with the territory," Kanae pointed out. "Your...um...guardians?" She said, tentatively, unsure of what to call Fuwa's parents in relation to her friend, "they must have told you about the birds and the bees, right?"

Kyoko blushed all the way to the tips of her bleached brown hair.

"I'm going to take that as a yes," Kanae said. "If not, just...um..."

"Google it?" Chiori suggested.

"Yes. That." Kanae said. "But keep it on safesearch mode. And don't look at the images section."

What naïveté Kyoko had left would be gone in an instant.

Kyoko fiddled with her fingers for a few minutes before finally looking up at her friends and asking, voice soft, "So you don't think I'm being—I don't know—frivolous? To be thinking about something like love instead of focusing on my career? If I want to be a serious actress, I can't afford to spend my time on trivial things like this...can I?"

"You've been in the business for all of a year and a half, and you think you know what makes a serious actress?" Kanae scoffed. "A serious actress tries to experience everything she can so she can use it to build richer, more believable characters. You say you don't want to get stuck playing bullies forever? This is the kind of thing that'll make it happen."

"Besides, aren't we all in LoveMe so we can learn to love, anyway?" Chiori reminded her. "If you ever want to graduate, you'll have to try to do the things that freak you out. I did that stupid game show, remember?"

Kyoko chuckled weakly. "I shouldn't have kept this a secret for so long. I—for some reason I thought you'd hate me for it. I know," she said in response to Kanae's glower. "I'm an idiot."

Chiori's phone buzzed. "Oh, my manager's here," she said. "We'd better get going. Kotonami-san, is there somewhere we can drop you off?"

To her surprise, the animosity that had threatened to bubble every time the other girl spoke that day had subsided to a dull throb, and she managed to respond with as much civility as she ever used (which, honestly, wasn't much), "No thanks, I can pick up the metro near here. I've still got a little bit of time."

"Suit yourself," Chiori shrugged. All three reclaimed their shoes at the front entrance, and Chiori moved to lock up behind them.

When Chiori's back was turned, with absolutely no warning, Kyoko surged forward and caught Kanae up in a tight hug. "Thank you," she said softly. "You're a great friend, Kanae."

She pulled back almost as quickly, and betrayed no sign of what she'd done by the time Chiori was facing them again, ready to lead her to the black car parked at the curb.

A blush spread across Kanae's face, and just as Kyoko was settling into the backseat, she called out, "Hey! I never said you could call me that!"
When Kyoko walked on set that day, she felt lighter than she had in months. She'd told Kanae—actually told her, not had the truth dragged out of her by an unscrupulous man in a costume—and she'd been okay with it. She'd been supportive. And with the kiss behind her and a chance to see Tsuruga later on, it was shaping up to be a great day.

"Ah! Good, you're here," the assistant director said, herding both girls over to where the makeup artists were waiting. "We're still figuring out which scenes to re-take, so you can stay here until we call for you."

"Scenes?" Chiori asked. "As in plural? What kind of glitch was this?"

"Glitch?" The man echoed blankly. "Oh, that's what he—" he shook his head. "There was no glitch. We noticed something of a mismatch in the romantic scenes and we're working to correct it."

Kyoko's eyes widened. "We're re-taking the romantic scenes? The ones with me in them?"

"Yes," he said with a sigh. "It's a little disappointing, I know, having to do so much of yesterday's work over again, but it does happen sometimes. The point is to get the best finished product possible, no matter what!" Then he shrugged, "or the best product that time allows, anyway. We'll probably start with the kiss scene, since that's the freshest one, but go ahead and brush up on the scripts for the other scenes, too, okay? We'll let you know when we're ready."

The stricken expression on Kyoko's face would have been transparent to even the densest of people (even Director Anna would have picked up on it).

"Is something wrong?" The assistant director asked, not unkindly.

"It's just that...well, I thought everybody really liked the kiss scene," she said, trying not to sound arrogant. "I don't understand why we have to retake it."

"It was a great scene," Chiori said quickly, trying to back Kyoko up, "everybody said so."

"No, it was," he said quickly, "really, it was very well done. But sometimes a good take just doesn't work out, through no fault of the actress," he said gently. "We'll just redo it, you'll knock it out of the park again, and everything will be fine."

He thought she needed a pep talk to soothe her bruised ego. Well, fine, let him think that. She couldn't very well explain that she'd made a pinky promise not to do the scene more than once. She couldn't even imagine the look on his face if she were to try.

Chiori looked over at her sympathetically as she was bibbed in preparation for being made up. "Sorry," she said. "I know you the last thing you want to do is kiss him again. But I'm sure you'll do fine this time, too."

"Unless he screws up just to spite me," Kyoko said bitterly. "It doesn't matter how well I'm doing if he's sabotaging me."

"You think he will?" Chiori asked. "I mean, he does still have a reputation to uphold. Wouldn't a
screw-up look just as bad on him?"

The chestnut-haired girl blinked, then sighed. "Maybe you're right. I think I'm just nervous. I was really ready to be done with all this."

"If he pulls anything like he did yesterday, I'll make sure he falls flat on his face in front of everyone," Chiori offered. "I'm good at that, remember?"

It was the first time the topic of the staircase incident had come up between them since it first happened, and Kyoko, in spite of herself, was sincerely touched by the proposition.

Some thirty minutes later a crewmember finally called them out (they'd since gone to costuming as well), and the girls stepped onto the set. Trailing after them were a rather harried-looking Honami and Yuka, who didn't seem too pleased to be standing so close to Kyoko—or Sho, for that matter. They eyed the pair like a bomb about to go off and treaded lightly around the sound stage.

Sho, on the other hand, was keeping his feelings on the situation locked up tight; his cool-guy mask was out in full force. He could have been wearing sunglasses for all the emotion he showed when Kyoko came out.

"Okay," Director Anna said. "I know we all thought that yesterday was a solid wrap, and we were hoping to finish up in a decent amount of time today, but chances are pretty high that we'll be staying late. The lovely Aki-san has managed to clear Fuwa-san's evening, however, so we should be able to get everything squared away tonight and go back to our regular shooting schedule by tomorrow—though of course we'll miss our guest," he nodded to Sho. Before yesterday, this would have been met with applause and a few well-placed whistles, but now there was nothing more than barest of polite claps and unintelligible murmurings.

For Kyoko's part, she was seething. Of course. Of course it would have to be tonight! Leave it to Shotaro to ruin her chance to have dinner with Tsuruga-san! If she didn't know any better, she'd swear he planned this. But it wasn't Shotaro's fault that the director was unsatisfied with the scenes. Director Anna was just that kind of boss. He changed his mind on a dime. And anyway, it's not like Shotaro knew about the dinner.

"...with that in mind, I say we start as quickly as possible. Now, the main issue we've been having," the director was saying, and Kyoko realized he was addressing her personally, "is an imbalance of chemistry."

Kyoko stared at him blankly, a sudden image of all of them clothed in lab coats and carrying beakers filled with glowing green liquid springing up in her mind's eye. "Um, okay?" She said, not really understanding.

"So you'll have to be careful about how you approach the scene as Natsu, okay? Try to dial it back a little bit. We need Sagara's reluctance to be more obvious."

Kyoko nodded, still pretty fuzzy. What did Sagara's reluctance have to do with her? Did this mean it was Shotaro's fault, after all?

"Now, everybody to their marks," he said. "We're starting on page 57, scene 41."
She found herself fighting back a determined scowl. So she wouldn't get her "one take only". Fine. But there was no way in hell she was letting Fuwa Shotaro's crappy acting keep her from seeing the man she...um...well...loved...tonight.

She really needed to work on that.
"CUT!"

A groan rippled through the cast and crew watching the scene. Even the director, who was oblivious to others' feelings at the best of times, could sense that moral was getting dangerously low.

"Let's have a short break," he announced. "Be back on set in fifteen minutes, and we'll try again." With a sigh of relief, the various workers dispersed and began dazedly wandering off in the direction of vending machines and restrooms.

Kyoko collapsed into the chair next to Chiori, pale and sweating. "10 NGs," she huffed. "10 NGs in a row and we haven't even gotten to the damned kiss yet." She ignored the strange look her use of profanity elicited from those around her—she was tired, dammit, and she was in no mood to police her language. "I don't even know what it is I'm supposed to do!" At first, each time he'd interrupted the scene, all the director's specific notes had been for Shotaro—

"Now, I know I said to show less obvious interest, Fuwa-san, but you do still need to look her in the eyes,"

"Closer, Fuwa-san, pulling away like that makes you seem disgusted rather than reluctant to be caught up in her pace,"

"No, no, when she says 'am I not good enough,' you need to show a drop in resistance, a sort of 'melting' feeling—scowling like that doesn't fit at all."

Which was all very fitting advice, really, because Shotaro, who had obviously not gotten over the embarrassment of having spent two whole days of shooting flirting with the girl he'd claimed had no appeal whatever, was trying to make up for his past behavior by being as standoffish as possible. He barely made an effort to pretend at being smitten on camera, and the moment the filming stopped, he wouldn't so much as look at or acknowledge her until the clapperboard came up and the director called action.

Kyoko had made a point of immersing herself in Natsu as deeply as possible in order to distance herself from what her lips would be doing, and was getting very tired of having to slip in and out over and over again. So, after about the third cut, she let her less restrained self take over. Suddenly everything was clicking again—when it came down to it, Shotaro was an amateur actor at best, and it took only a moderate amount of pressure to make him bend to her acting. And yet, still there were cuts. This time, though, the directions were distinctly vague—

"That was very powerful, Kyouko-chan, but if you could just dial it back a little? We need the chemistry to be more understated."

In addition to that one, there was "tone it down," "keep it simple," and "just a little...less, okay?"

If she held off on being seductive, Shotaro kept up his childish pout through the whole scene. if she let Natsu behave as she liked, she was scolded. And all the time she found herself glancing at her watch, her stomach sinking with every passing minute. If it took this long just to complete this one scene, how would she possibly finish in time to see Tsuruga-san?

"I should call him," she resolved with a sigh.

"Call who?" Chiori asked, looking up from a particularly darkly inked section of her poison
notebook. On the page closest to her, Kyoko thought she could make out a surprisingly good sketch of a certain blond singer with some sort of sharply pointed implement skewered through his torso.

"Um..." she flushed. "I sort of have to meet somebody after work today."

Chiori tilted her head to one side appraisingly. "Him him?" She asked, without even a hint of teasing.

Kyoko nodded. "It's...he asked me yesterday, and I said I could meet up, but with the way things are going it doesn't look like I'll be able to make it. So I think I should call him and let him know we'll have to postpone." It was silly, getting so upset over a few days' wait, but the more she came to understand her feelings for him, the greedier she seemed to get. The last time she'd seen him (as Kyoko, anyway) seemed so long ago.

"Yeah, you probably should," Chiori agreed, "just to be safe. Just remember to be back in time."

She nodded, walked into a back hallway where her cellphone call wouldn't bother anybody, and called Tsuruga-san's phone. As she listened absently to the phone ringing, it occurred to her that, if she could talk to the veteran actor he could probably tell her where she was going wrong with her scene. So far all she understood was that chemistry meant something very different in the acting world, and that she was expected to know what it was. She also wondered how she was meant to "tone it down". She found herself making a list of the things she wanted to ask him, and it was only when there was a sharp beep in her ear that she realized he hadn't picked up—the call had gone to voicemail and she, like the genius she was, had been silent throughout the whole time she was supposed to be recording a message. "Dammit," she swore. Of course he was on set! And she knew that Moko would be at her job by now, too.

Just who could she ask for advice, then? She didn't want to admit to the director that she had no idea what he wanted her to do, but she didn't know who else to ask—

Of course! She realized. Chiori had been in the acting industry longer than any of her other friends. She was a true veteran, and could probably help her figure out what was going wrong.

"Um, Amamiya-san?" She asked, drawing Chiori's attention away from her ever-more-violent scribbling. "Could I ask you something?"

"Hm? Uh, sure," Chiori said, "What's up?" Noticing the reddish tinge to Kyoko's cheeks, she gulped. What if the girl wanted more love advice? Chiori was hardly the person to ask.

Kyoko looked down at the ground and shuffled her feet a little. "What's...chemistry?" She managed to ask.

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Chiori pulled Kyoko into her dressing room, closed the door, and burst out into raucous laughter. "Are you kidding me? The director's been on you about it all day and you don't even know what it means?"

Kyoko pouted, her face puffing up like a chipmunks'. "It's not that funny," she muttered. "I'm still just a newbie, after all."

"Right, right," she said, still chuckling. "I keep forgetting. But haven't you...I don't know, gone to an acting class? Studied acting terminology? It's kind of an important concept."
The chestnut-haired actress sighed. "I'm enrolled in LME's acting school, but I'm too busy these days to keep up with it. Apart from speaking practice and a few nonverbal exercises, most of my acting skills I picked up on the job, thanks to my sempais. There are a lot of gaps in my education, still."

Chiori fought the urge to glare at her. How ridiculously lucky did you have to be to have the people around you put up with training you on the job as a complete amateur? And just why did her career take off so much faster than Chiori's? She should still be stuck doing the occasional ad spot and maybe a few background parts in dramas. But there was nothing to be done about it now, and she knew as well as anyone how skilled Kyoko was. She should just be glad the girl trusted her enough to ask for help, or this shoot would drag on forever.

"Okay," she said. Kyoko perked up, ready to listen. "Well, there's a certain natural dynamic between actors, called chemistry, that comes into play when those two people perform together. It's usually about romance—if the two characters seem compatible, or if there's a sense that they're really attracted to each other. But, it can mean any kind of relationship—familial, friendly—just so long as it feels like the actors are in sync and comfortable with each other. It's hard to define, but when there's a lack of chemistry, the audience finds it difficult to believe in a romance between the actors' characters. Because of this, when introducing a love interest directors sometimes do a chemistry test to see if the actors are compatible."

"But they didn't do that for us," Kyoko said.

"Exactly. They just tossed that singer in with us and hoped for the best," she said angrily. "If they'd bothered to actually take the time to do the casting correctly, this wouldn't be happening and I'd be able to go home before midnight."

"So, if the problem is that Shotaro and I don't have good chemistry, what exactly am I supposed to do about it? How does someone change their chemistry?"

"Well, that's not actually the problem," Chiori said. "From where I'm sitting, you and Fuwa have really good chemistry—" the angry look on Kyoko's face made her backtrack, "I mean—it just feels natural, how you two act around each other. Probably because you grew up together. It doesn't mean anything in real life," she said quickly. Kyoko calmed down, and she felt the tension drain from the room as the hairs on the back of her neck lay back down.

"Then why does he keep making us redo the scene?" She asked, bewildered. "I thought the whole point was for it to seem believable that he would give in to Natsu's attentions. If we have chemistry, then doesn't that mean it should be working?"

"The thing is—and I got most of this secondhand, so I'm not sure how accurate it is—the director thinks you have too much chemistry. It's overshadowing the relationship with Chitose, but since increasing chemistry isn't something that can be done on a whim, they're trying to calm Natsu and Sagara's down so that the Chitose/Sagara relationship will seem stronger by comparison."

"Then, when he says 'dial it back'..."

"He means that he wants your Natsu to be less aggressive, more subtle. Fuwa follows your lead completely when you take control, so if you make Natsu less over-the-top, then he's hoping it won't be as obvious how into you Fuwa—er, I mean, Sagara—really is," Chiori watched her forehead become even more knitted. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Kyoko nodded, still half-lost in thought. "Yeah, I get it, it's just..."

"What?"
"Nothing...I'll just have to do my best, I guess."

"Everybody, back in position!" They heard a muffled voice filter in from the hallway. "We're starting up again in three!"

A knock came on the door, and then a female crew member poked her head in. "Hey, guys, we're gonna need for everybody to come back to set, okay?"

As Kyoko got up to follow, she glanced at her phone to check the time.

"CRAP!" She swore. "I forgot to tell Tsuruga-san I couldn't make it!"

Ten seconds into the next take, Director Anna had called "cut" again. Kyoko just stood there, semi-paralyzed. She hadn't even reacted to her cue, and seemed to have her eyes focused on some distant image visible only to her.

"Um, Kyouko-chan?" the director asked. "What's the matter? You haven't moved at all."

"..." Kyoko just stood there, spacing out. In reality, she was flipping through her rolodex of souls to find one that might temper Natsu enough to make her less obvious in her approach, but her lack of experience was hurting her again. She couldn't add in a dash of Mio—that would just scare people away, and after yesterday she wasn't keen to let that particular side of her get loose. There was Setsu, sure, and for a second she thought that might work—blending Setsu's lack of interest with Natsu's seductiveness could even things out, but then...in her own way, Setsu could be even more aggressive than Natsu. She'd straddled a half-naked man and left a kiss mark on his neck that had lasted for days. Plus, the last time she'd let Setsu leak over into Box "R," she'd been made to do it over again because it simply didn't fit. Just how was she supposed to be in-character and out-of-character at the same time?

"Oi! Kyoko!" Sho snapped, deigning to address her with all his usual arrogance. "Would you hurry up already?"

"Hmm?" Kyoko looked up, dazed, and met Shotaro's eyes with her own.

Her, sleepy, half-lidded gaze was apparently enough to make Sho squirm again, because he flushed a deep red and turned his own gaze elsewhere. "Did you not hear the director calling you, moron?" He said, looking off somewhere into the set storage area.

"Oh? OH!" She bowed in apology so quickly that the audible crack of her spine made everyone wince. "I'm so sorry, director, I've just been thinking about character creation and I must have missed my cue. It won't happen again!"

"Character creation?" The director echoed. "Why would you be thinking about that? I know it's been a difficult day, but this is no place to be thinking about some other job."

"Other job?" She asked blankly. "What? Oh, no! That's not—I don't have—it's for this job, sir!"

"How so?" He asked, starting to get irritated.

"Well, you told me to back down from Natsu being seductive, right?" She asked. "Make her more
"subtle, less aggressive?"

"Yes, to help fix the imbalance of chemistry," he confirmed.

"Right!" She said, glad to hear that she was finally on the right track. "So I figured, since that doesn't fit with Natsu at all, you must want me to alter her character a little bit. So I've been thinking of how I could make her less...Natsu-ish, I guess you could say?"

"What?! No, I don't want you to change Natsu, I want you to have her be a bit less overwhelming, that's all."

"But..." and now her brow was furrowed again. "The whole point of Natsu is to be overwhelming, isn't it? She puts up a good-girl front, but she does really outrageous things and doesn't care about the consequences. She loves to manipulate people and she's never been all that subtle about it. She just goes for what she wants and she gets it, right?"

"Um..." the director had to admit that her logic held some truth to it. "Well, yes, but for this one episode..."

"You want her to be out-of-character, right? More subdued, less powerful? So that's what I'm trying to figure out."

"I..." he hesitated, then started over. "'Out-of-character' is a little strong, don't you think? But then, who would know better than Kyouko-chan?" he realized. She'd practically rewritten the character all on her own during the early days of shooting. The current Natsu didn't resemble his horror-story-esque creation that was meant to be along the lines of Hongo Mio—just less oujo-sama-ish. Maybe he was asking for something that didn't fit in with Natsu's character.

"Look, I want Natsu to be Natsu," he said. "It's just that Chitose and Sagara don't have chemistry at the same level, and we really need for them to outshine Natsu's fake love play. If we could just make it seem like Sagara was more interested in Chitose, then..."

"I understand," she assured him, "that would never work. Chitose's Sh-Fuwa-san's least favorite type."

"She is?" The director asked, shocked. A similar cry rippled its way through the onlooking set workers, and Sho's flush deepened.

"Oi!" He said angrily. "You can't tell people that! You don't even know what you're talking about!"

"He doesn't like cutesy, make-you-take-care-of-them types," she explained, talking over him with vindictive glee. "That gets in the way of everybody taking care of him, the brat. "He prefers the mature type." Her eyes flicked over to where Shoko stood, and the manager shifted uncomfortably at the implication. "So it makes sense that he wouldn't fit well with a sempai-kouhai relationship."

"Yeah, well, at least I don't live in fairy-tale land waiting around for some lame prince to whisk me away," Sho shot back. "Although it explains why it's so easy for you to act like you're head-over-heels for me—I am naturally princely, after all."

"You? A prince?" She scoffed, whirling around to tower over him. "Please. You couldn't be further away!"

"The hell is that supposed to mean?" He snarled. "This from the girl who called me a prince up until high school!"
"Yeah, well, I've already thrown that stupid, blind part of me away, and now I see you for who you really are!"

"Um, sir?" The assistant director said to Director Anna. "Maybe we should separate them until we come up with a suitable plan?"

"Yes," the director said, rubbing his temples with his knuckles, trying to ease the sudden onset of what was sure to be a rather obstinate headache. "Yes, I think that may be for the best."

The assistant director, producers, and the staff writers that were on location all joined Director Anna in his office. He waved for them to sit down.

"So," he began. "It's difficult for me to say this, but maybe the idea to bring on Fuwa-san as a guest star wasn't the best I've ever had. I would like to open the floor to suggestions on how best to go forward."

"Well," one of the producers said, "according to everything we've been hearing from the executive reports, criticism, and monitoring fan sites, a lot of viewers think of Natsu as the second lead. And Kyouko-san is correct, to have her suddenly start acting more demure or subdued, for an entire episode without warning, could turn our more loyal viewers away. They won't like it if they think we aren't staying true to the character. Even those who hate Natsu would prefer for her to stay the way she is—otherwise she's not as strong of a villain. The criticism we'd receive might be evened out by the bump we'd get from having Fuwa Sho on the show, but I don't know if we should sacrifice a central character just for publicity's sake."

"So, you're saying we should drop Fuwa Sho and find a more experienced actor, someone who has the necessary chemistry?" The director asked.

Another producer piped up, shaking his head violently. "It's one thing to say we'll find someone new, it's another thing entirely to do it. Remember how well casting that part went the first time around? We'll have that, only worse, because not as many actors will be free on such short notice. Besides, think of how much money has gone into this already. We hired him to write a song—which, if you'll recall, is contingent upon him getting to act—we paid him to take on the role as Sagara, and we spent a week's worth of filming on him. If we terminate the contract, we don't get that back—in fact, we end up paying a 'convenience charge' since he had to move his schedule around to make time for us. That's a lot of money down the drain with nothing to show for it."

"So what, we keep him in and hope he doesn't screw the finale up any worse than he already has?" Demanded one particularly irritable writer. "This guy has got to be the rudest guest actor we've ever had, and he's not even talented enough to make it worth it."

"Could we have him act a different part? Something smaller? We could at least not cancel the contract and still get a song out of it that way." Suggested a producer.

"He'd never go for it," Anna said, shaking his head. "Believe me, if there's anything I've learned from this, it's how swelled a head the guy has."

"So we're keeping him, no matter what? But then how do we deal with his scenes? Do we leave them as is, with Natsu in character and his and Chitose's romance lackluster or do we force Natsu's characterization to change to meet the needs of a one-off guest character?" The assistant director
"Well—if you don’t mind hearing me out—I might have a third option," the head writer, a woman in her late forties, spoke up.

"Please," said the director.

"One of the earlier versions of this episode's script might work with a few quick edits. It has a different approach that wouldn't rely on Fuwa to change his acting at all, but would still allow Natsu to remain as is. It means shooting an extra scene or two, and it doesn't have the exact same endgame as the current version, but I think it could fit our needs."

"Right now, I'm open to just about anything," he said.

"A rewrite?" Kyoko repeated. She was carefully positioned on the opposite side of the room from her childhood friend with Chiori acting as a wall preventing the two of them from making eye contact. Shoko was holding on tightly to the collar Sho's uniform. It had taken her, three techs, and Rumi's manager/bodyguard to break up the fight this time, and no one was interested in seeing a repeat performance—especially after a very cold wind had suddenly and inexplicably whistled its way through the studio, leaving everybody ducking for cover.

"Yes. We'll be changing the dynamic between Chitose and Sagara to one of unrequited love," Anna explained. "That way, Fuwa can continue to portray Sagara in the same manner, and you can continue to act out Natsu as you always have. The only change will be with Rumi-chan, who will be showing overt attraction that Sagara will seem oblivious to. The focus of the episode will not be one where Natsu steals away Chitose's budding romance, but even the potential for such a romance. Instead of seeing Chitose as a potential girlfriend, Sagara will unwittingly ignore her feelings in favor of the flashier Natsu-san."

"So what does that mean in terms of reshooting the scenes?" Kyoko asked, silently adding, the kiss in particular?

"Well, we think we'll be able to keep most of them as they are," the director said. "But for right now we'll be shooting the Chitose/Sagara scenes with the new focus while production looks over the previous scenes to see if any need to be retooled, and the writing team goes over the additional scenes from the alternate script. Whatever scenes are left with the Sagara character in them when we finish with the couple scenes, we'll tape before we leave tonight."

A large sweat drop materialized on Kyoko's face. So we still have to stay late, no matter what, huh? At least now she'd have the time to call Tsuruga-san and leave him a proper message.

"Um...Natsu-san?" A P.A. asked her timidly.

"You can go back to calling me 'Kyouko,'Takagi-san," she said without looking up as she dug through her tote, "there's no point to my staying in character anymore."

"Sorry, Kyouko-san," he amended. "Um, I'm supposed to pass these along for you to look at," he said.

She stopped blindly grasping at whatever rectangular objects her fingers tripped across long enough
to notice that the man was offering her new pages.

"I thought they were still being edited," she said, trying to keep the complaint out of her voice.

"Some of them are," Takagi said, "but the writers have already okayed these. They want you to be prepared as soon as possible—they say the rest should be done by the time you've finished reading through those."

"Oh..." Kyoko said. "Um...that's great. Thank you very much, Takagi-san." She bowed, accepting the script pages with a smooth, professional smile.

He smiled back nervously—he didn't used to do that, she lamented—and went about his work distributing pages to all the secondary bullying characters.

She started flipping through, noting the length of each scene and the number of characters to put them in order—once she had an idea of the story down, she liked to work her way through from most difficult to least. As she did so, she heard the director begin to speak again, and automatically began to split her attention between the two.

"Right," he was saying, "So, here's the motivation for this scene, and for most of the scenes we'll be filming today. Rumi-chan, Chitose has been secretly pining for Sagara-senpai for years, but he only sees her as a kouhai, or at best, a friend. But he's about to graduate soon, and as down as she is right now, she knows for a fact she'll regret not telling him how she feels, even if it leads to rejection. She's thinking of ways to tell him, and has settled on putting a love letter in his shoe locker. Sagara isn't only vaguely aware that she might have feelings for him, and is the type to be nice to everyone. He doesn't view her as a romantic possibility and isn't even entertaining the idea that she might confess. Instead, his thoughts are about Natsu, the smart and popular girl whose true nature he doesn't know and who has been stringing him along just to spite Chitose. We'll need you, Fuwa-san, to be smooth and cool, and Rumi-chan, you need to stutter, blush, and just generally show a lack of confidence in your feelings."

Thinking that was the last of it, Kyoko was about to return to her task when he suddenly exclaimed, "Oh!" Her ears perked up once again.

"Fuwa-san, I just realized—the song will have to change," he said.

"What was that?" Sho demanded roughly—which was as much due to his current mood as as it was to the fact that Kyoko had attempted with some success to strangle him—"what do you mean, change my song?"

"Well, it was written to fit the episode," the director pointed out, completely not reading the slightly dangerous atmosphere. "And the episode has changed. Surely you'll want to change the song as well? It's not as if you've begun recording, is it?"

Sho glared at him, prompted only by the firm tapping of Shoko's pump to answer. "No, I haven't. But the song is already written. It's all the same, anyway. Girl likes guy, guy gets led astray by someone he shouldn't like. What's there to change?"

"There's a nuance," he said. "Originally, Sagara was aware of Chitose's feelings and reciprocated them. In this version, the girl who best fit him was standing in front of him the whole time, waiting for him to see her, and instead he goes for a relationship with a girl he considers to be his ideal 'type'. When he finally turns back toward her—and he will—he'll realize that his relationship with Natsu was devoid of meaning and that, thanks to his own mistakes and inattention, he's lost his chance at being with the girl he was meant to be with. In a way," he said, clearly starting to get carried away
now, "it's even sweeter and more poignant than the original concept, because the two will miss each other by the barest gap, and Sagara will earnestly be seeking Natsu's attention to begin with rather than being seduced away—he's more active in his own destruction, you see?" His eyes were completely lit up as he watched a scene only he could see play off in the distance, smiling and tearing up in turn. Everyone in the studio watched him, wondering not for anywhere close to the first time if this kind of director was okay.

When he came down to earth, his voice took on a more businesslike tone. "So you'll need to adjust the song to reflect that pain and sorrow, okay?"

For some reason Kyoko couldn't fathom, Sho's angry face had dropped, leaving his face pale and expressionless. He stood there, motionless, until Shoko began to move toward him.

"Sho—? Are you all right?" She asked.

He snapped out of whatever mental state he was in, shaking his head like a wet dog trying to rid himself of excess water, and waved her off. "I'm fine," he sniped at her. "Leave me alone. I don't see why we need to bother with a rewrite in the first place—"

You, the entire room thought in unison, it's because of you!

"—but I'm a professional. I'll rewrite the song as many times as I need to for it to be perfect, like I always do." He managed to say this with some veneer of his usual long-nosed arrogance, but Kyoko could tell something was off. Little bits of irritation and anxiety were slipping through the cracks in his mask, just as they had done when he was being copied by the Beagles (and before that, when she proved herself to be the consistently better badminton player). She had no idea what might have caused his change in demeanor, but if it meant the scene would be filmed sooner, she didn't really care.

"Okay, then. Now, in this scene, Chitose and Sagara are chatting outside her classroom, and—"

It was just the setup for a scene she wasn't in, so Kyoko turned her attention back to the script, visualizing the scenes and her delivery of each line as she read.

Natsu watched as Chitose crept up to the shoe locker she knew to be Sagara's and slipped a pink envelope sealed with a sticker in the shape of a heart (really? Kyoko thought) through a slit in the door. She smirks slyly to herself, and gives a significant nod to her underlings, who mirror her expression.

A quick cut, and Sagara was approaching his locker while other students milled around, gathering their things to leave. Chitose is not present, as her class is on the other side of the school. Waiting just until he's finished entering the combination and cracking the locker door open just a bit, Natsu dons her most charming smile and is pleased to see the reflexive flush on Sagara's cheeks as she approaches him. She draws his attention away from his open locker, taking the time to laugh at some poorly delivered joke. Behind his back, Yumika (being the shortest and least conspicuous) darts forward, grabs the letter, and lifts the sticker that acts as the seal, tearing it off in the process. She snaps a picture, noticing with pleasure that the note has no confession of love and simply denotes a meeting place, slips the letter back into its envelope, and returns it to its perch on top of Sagara-sempai's shoes. She then texts Natsu the okay, giving her an excuse to check her phone and claim to have forgotten to do cleaning duty. "Oh, I'm just so distracted these days," she says, eyes traveling the length of Sagara's body. "I can't seem to do anything right."

She pauses to let him firmly assert her flawlessness, smiles in her closest approximation of humility, and goes on her way, looking intently at the photo on her cell phone screen. Cut scene. Insert kiss
scene following. Next, a short follow-up scene where Natsu implies she has some interest in a relationship and Sagara reciprocates that interest, causing Chitose to run away in tears. Cut scene.

Sagara approaches Chitose, confused. Natsu watches gleefully from around a corner. "Why didn't you show up yesterday? And why haven't you been answering my emails?" He asks, brandishing her letter. "You asked me to meet you, remember?" He notices the tears in her eyes and asks what's wrong with her.

"Nothing," she says, shaking her head, "Nothing I wasn't expecting, anyway. I'm sorry for wasting your time." She turns to go, and he grabs her hand.

"Someone's bullying you again," he insists. "Who is it? Tell me, and I'll make sure they never hurt you again."

She smiles a sad, significant smile. Dense though he is, Sagara seems not to notice the hidden meaning in her gaze. Then, she grips his hand in her own, pulls it to her cheek, and closes her eyes as she enjoys the sensation of his warmth on her face. (Kyoko barely restrained herself from gagging.) "No, I wouldn't dare. I care for this person, even if they hurt me sometimes. I would much rather see them smiling happily." (This time, Kyoko did gag.) "But thank you. It means a lot to me that you care." She releases his hand, and he watches her go with a quizzical look on his face, absently tightening and uncurling his fist where her hand was moments ago, trying to place what he was feeling. The bell rings, he forces himself to shake it off and hurries to class.

Kyoko began sorting them—although the third scene had the most dialogue, none of it was hers. All she would do is show a few brief reaction shots. That put it on par with the first scene—that one was shorter, but also involved more activity on her part. She placed it second to last in the lineup. The third least difficult was—

A second sheaf of papers found its way into her hands, and she sighed. "Thank you, Takagi-san," she said mechanically. She glanced over at the set, where Rumi and Shotaro's last scene must have gone well, because they were now inside the classroom rather than outside. At least there was some progress, she thought with a shrug. But on to work.

Open on the lunchroom. Natsu sits perched on the edge of a table, so that she's sitting just above her underlings—all but Kaori, who sits beside her. Sagara comes in, frowning at his hand, where he holds the pink envelope. He spots Natsu and brightens, but as he approaches them, a mean-spirited giggle makes the rounds in her posse. In spite of his confusion, he goes to greet Natsu, who immediately looks down her nose at him and answers his questions only terse, monosyllabic words. When he asks why she's being so cold after what happened between them, she laughs and asks, "what happened?"

He reminds her of the kiss, and she shrugs. "Oh, that. Did you really think that meant something?" The girls around her giggle again, and this time he doesn't miss the meaning. "Why kiss me just to toy with me?" He demands. "What did I ever do to you?"

"Oh, please," Natsu says, smirking. "Whoever said you were worthy of being my toy when there are so many more interesting toys to play with?" She nods at the letter he's holding, and it clicks, with him thinking (voiceover style) "what have I done?". Fade out. Then insert scene where Sagara goes to Chitose's house, emailing her repeatedly, but Chitose is in her bedroom, in the dark, thinking, her phone turned to silent. The display keeps lighting up with each new apologetic message. A montage of all she's lost because of Natsu plays, with the final sequence being scenes from that same episode where she and Sagara are spending time together. (At this point is where the musical cue for Fuwa Sho's song comes into play). The episode ends with sad music playing as Sagara walks away, having given up, and a quick pan to Chitose's face as she transitions from sad and broken to angry
Okay, Kyoko thought to herself, the chronological outline fixed firmly in her mind. Now, from the top—!

Tsuruga Ren was nervous.

It was a strange feeling for him, even now. After five years of climbing his way to the position of Japan's leading man, he was used to projecting and feeling confidence in his work. Nervousness, it seemed, only ever cropped up when Kyoko was involved. And as much as he loved her—and he did love her—he could do without the nervousness, given the choice.

Especially on a day like today, when the always punctual Kyoko was late. He kept checking his phone, over and over, hoping for some sign that she'd remembered and was on her way. He'd already listened to her empty message from earlier in the day ten times over. After the tenth time searching for a hidden meaning, though, he realized he was only listening to a teenage girl breathing over and over, and the singular creepiness of that suddenly struck him very deeply. He'd stopped listening to it immediately (he did not, however, erase it), and resigned himself to waiting patiently for fresh contact. He considered calling her herself, but for some reason the idea that she might reject his call or admit to having forgotten and made other plans kept rising to the surface. The rational part of him said that Kyoko would never do such a thing, but the irrational part pointed out that he was sure Kyoko would never dress as a chicken to anonymously give him advice. There wasn't really much he could say to that.

A loud noise dragged him out of his thoughts, and he jumped up, grabbing at his cell phone. He fumbled it, accidentally letting it bounce back and forth between his hands before he could properly unlock it. "Y-yes?" He asked, cursing himself for not sounding smoother. The voice on the other end of the line, however, put his to shame.

"I'm...sorry," she said, panting heavily, "only...just...finished...ran...late...be...there...soon..."

"Ah," he said quickly, "that's all right. If you tell me where you are, I can come pick you up?" But the line was silent; she'd hung up.

Okay, Ren thought. So she's coming. The thought didn't, surprisingly enough, make him any less nervous. She was coming, and no matter how many times he practiced, he had yet to come up with a casual way to bring up the Chicken. But he had time; the Box "R" studio was a good forty minutes away by bike. She would cook, he would calm down, and he would just sort of move the conversation in that direction—maybe something he overheard?

Suddenly, his doorbell buzzed. His heart shot into his throat, but he calmed himself. It had barely been ten minutes—there was no way it was Kyoko. Though who it could be at this time of night—

He walked over and looked through the peephole just in time to see an exhausted Kyoko start sliding down the door (which she was, apparently, using to support her weight), fingernails digging in to slow her descent. Quickly, he opened the door and she fell in, steam rolling off of her in waves.

"I...did...it," she managed to say. He helped her up, and slowly escorted her over to the couch to help her lay down.

As he went, he kept up a steady stream of scolding. "Yes, you made it here in a quarter of the time,"
he said, trying to sound disapproving as his most brilliant smile forced itself onto his face, "when you could have just let me come pick you up. Biking like that—" *so fast, and all so she could see me sooner,* "it can't be legal, and what if you'd gotten hurt? An actress shouldn't behave like that—" *no, don't be fooled. She just doesn't like being late, that's all. She's not treating you as special,* "—especially not when she has to work the very next day. You could have seriously damaged your career, no matter how good a biker you are!" *Right, right, it doesn't matter why she did it, it's just nice to see her here.*

Instead of responding to his admonishments, she pushed herself up on the arm of the couch and shook her head. "That's...not...'it,'" she said, shielding her eyes from the sudden brightness.

"Not it?" he repeated, clearly not understanding.

She shook her head again, and raised her pinky into the air. She looked at him pointedly, as if expecting the gesture to mean something to him.

"Tea?" he asked, saying the first thing that came to mind. "Do you want me to make you some?"

"No," another shake. She raised the pinky again, and said very clearly, "one!"

"One tea?" He guessed, cocking an eyebrow.

"One!" She repeated. "...Take...one..." She tried to shake her head again, and her eyes started to spin. She lost her grip on the armrest and started to fall back. He reached for her, and found himself pulled after her by merit of pure dead weight dragging him down. He managed to keep his face as straight as possible and his hands—barring the one that was firmly clasped around her forearm—at his sides in spite of the unexpected proximity. Once she caught her breath, he was prepared for her to start scrabbling to get away and screaming at the intrusion, so he started to strategize the least offensive way to extricate himself from the situation.

Before he could make his move—a quick, over the back of the couch flip that would give him leverage to pull his hand away without placing it anywhere untoward—her eyes flew open and she saw his face mere inches from hers. Rather than shrieking or pulling away, though, she leaned forward without warning, pressed her lips against his for a brief moment, and said, with a happy sigh, "One!" before promptly losing consciousness.

And even Ren, great actor though he was, couldn't prevent an expression of pure shock from appearing on his face.
Time to Wake Up

Kyoko blinked awake slowly. *That's odd,* she thought. *I don't remember going to bed last night.* Then, she realized that it was still pitch black in her bedroom. *Or tonight, I guess.*

She considered rolling over and going back to sleep, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off. For one thing, it was far warmer than it should be. She tossed off the comforter and immediately felt better. Sitting up, she started when her hand brushed against the futon, which, it seemed wasn’t a futon at all. Or at the very least, not *her* futon—the buttery smoothness of leather against her fingertips was proof enough of that.

Okay...so, not in her bedroom. Not in her bed. And she couldn't remember anything about falling asleep. Kyoko felt a tiny frisson of fear run through her, but tamped it down quickly. *Light,* she thought. *Light will help.*

With that resolution, she swung her legs over the side—a couch, she registered absently—and immediately felt a soft something under her feet. Groping hands connected with it, and with a little cry of joy that she stifled—wherever she was, it was nighttime, after all—she recognized it as her tote.

Her cell phone was exactly where she left it, in the inner side pocket, and as soon as she touched it, the screen lit up with a sudden flare that left her slightly dazed for a moment. 12:19, it said. After midnight.

Using it as an impromptu flashlight, she swept the phone in a semicircle, trying to make out her surroundings...and it clicked. The coffee table. The flatscreen. And of course, the leather couch that had recently been featuring in her dreams.

*Tsuruga-san's apartment,* she thought, relieved. She blushed as she realized he must have gotten out the comforter from the guest bedroom just for her. It had been a little warm, though, because he’d tucked her in fully clothed.

She still wasn't entirely clear on why she was sleeping on his couch in the first place. If she'd stayed over, he would certainly have offered the guest bed itself, rather than just the blanket. But either way, there was no need to worry about waking him, because he rarely slept before 2 a.m.

The light switch was next to the front door, as always, and she quickly took a peek at the hand mirror in her purse to make sure she didn't look too rumpled. *Oh, no! I fell asleep with my makeup on,* she thought. Handkerchief in hand, she went to work trying to fix her raccoon eyes.

A door creaked open. Footsteps. Kyoko shoved her mirror and handkerchief back into her bag, straightening up.

"Mogami-san," Ren said. "You're awake."

"Er, yes," she replied, turning to bow to him properly. "Thank you for your hospitality. I hope I didn't cause you any inconvenience."

When she saw his face, he was smiling gently. "It was no trouble," he said. "Though I think you would have been more comfortable in a bed."
"Oh, no," she assured him, "I was very comfortable."

The conversation petered out for a moment. Ren seemed to be waiting for Kyoko to say something more, and Kyoko was trying desperately to remember how she'd gotten there in the first place. *I can't just say, "Why I am here, by the way?"* she thought anxiously.

"You must have been tired, after working with...Fuwa...all day," observed Ren finally.

*With Shotaro?* Kyoko thought. *Oh!* The last traces of grogginess faded away, and the activities of the past 24 hours filtered back into focus. A grin spread across her face.

"I did it!" she said cheerfully. "I can't believe it, but I did it!"

"And what is 'it,' exactly?" he asked, amused.

"The kiss," she said, as if it were obvious. "I got it done in one take!"

Ren blinked. *Ah.* "One..." he murmured. "So that's what it meant."

Kyoko was expecting some kind of acknowledgement—a smile, a nod...a "good work," if she was lucky. Instead, she was treated to the sight of Ren bursting into laughter.

*This girl,* he thought, shoulders shaking, *how confusing can you be? Kissing me for something like that. I'd think she was deliberately messing with me if it were anybody else.*

When he'd wiped away the tears prickling his eyes and looked at his kouhai again, she was glaring at him angrily. She didn't say anything, but he could almost hear her thinking, *Are you making fun of me?!*

"Sorry, sorry," he said, quickly. "I was just...thinking. About something funny. Not you, of course."

*So he wasn't even listening to me?* She fumed.

"But that's great," he said, "that you were able to manage it in one take."

She looked at him suspiciously, obviously thinking he was only humoring her. *How could a girl like her have any secrets?* He wondered. *Everything's written on her face.*

"I mean it," he said. "It's very impressive. To be able to manage a single take is always admirable, of course, but with someone like him bothering you every step of the way—" And he could just imagine it, the little squabbles that would spring up at every moment. Him insisting that he didn't want anything to do with kissing her and her saying the same. How they'd managed to film a PV together was still something of a mystery to him.

"It was one of the most annoying experiences of my life," she agreed, apparently mollified. "But to be honest, it wasn't because of skill so much as luck."

"Oh?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "How so?"

"He didn't know it was me, then," Kyoko said, tapping a finger on her upper lip, "so he didn't start any fights. Of course, after he found out..."

"What do you mean, he didn't know it was you?" Ren asked, confused.

Her face darkened. "He's an idiot who didn't bother to learn anything about the cast. And since I was in character as Natsu, he didn't recognize me." She felt the familiar burn of irritation at this indignity,
but let it fizzle. Shrugging, she added, "So really, it's less a stroke of luck and more a stroke of colossal laziness."

"And you just didn't tell him?" Ren said. When Kyoko's head shot up, surprised, he realized he'd said that with more heat than he meant to.

"Um, no," she said, "I thought it would be easier that way."

"Easier for whom?" He said, trying to keep the anger out of his voice.

"...everyone?" Kyoko was now thoroughly bewildered. "We don't get along, and the fighting would—and did—disrupt our work. I was just trying to make the show run smoothly."

Ren knew he was being ridiculous. For god's sake, he was currently living a double life as Tsuruga Ren, and not more than a month ago, he'd played at being a fairy prince. By all rights, he had no room to complain...especially not on behalf of Fuwa!

But the things he'd said to Bo...confessions he'd made to a stranger, thinking it could never come back to anyone he knew, were echoing in his mind.

"...and it's his fault anyway, for not recognizing me," she was saying. "With as long as we've known each other."

"But you pretended to be someone else. You stayed in character, even though you knew it was dishonest," he said, bristling at the words "his fault".

"I was doing my job!" She said, half-trembling with anger, half with fear. "I did what I had to do to get him to work with me without ruining everything. The moment he found out, he threw a tantrum and spent every take needling me and acting like a child." The very real guilt she felt for not letting her director or other cast members know about it head of time, causing conflict between them and Shotaro was drowned out by her outrage at how unfair Tsuruga-san was being. "I was just trying to do my job!"

The matching harshness in her voice brought him back to himself. He shook his head like a dog. "Sorry," he said. "I ..." she waited for an explanation, but he shook his head again. "Sorry."

She just watched him, brow knitted. Why would he blow up like that? She wondered. He dislikes Shotaro almost as much as I do. He knows what he's like.

"I know that you were only doing what you thought was best," he continued. "When you don't get along with someone—" And even that was the same, that first time he'd met Bo. He'd been the same way—teasing her, poking at her wounds. They hadn't got along at all, then. And she'd just been fired. The last thing she would want to admit to Tsuruga Ren then was that she failed at playing a mascot character. But after...?

"So," he said, forcing his tone to be calm, "You were able to do the take. And now you're done working with him?"

"Essentially," she said slowly. "He'll be in for a half day tomorrow, and they might ask me in to touch up a scene after they get a look at the dailies with fresh eyes. But I think they'll be trying to keep us apart as much as possible."

"It got pretty bad, then?"

"Uh-huh," Kyoko said, "he accused me of conspiring to make him kiss me."
Ren snorted at that. If Fuwa had seen how uncomfortable she was with the idea on Saturday...even he couldn't delude himself into thinking she was interested in him. And if he'd seen what else had happened on Saturday...the thought filled him with a warm surge of satisfaction.

"Though to be honest, I think...I think a lot of it might be because he was embarrassed," she said.

"Sorry?" He asked, half-lost in pleasant thoughts.

"The fits and the yelling," Kyoko explained. "I mean, he usually starts fights, but this time was even worse. I think he was embarrassed about what...what happened." She said the last part hesitantly, not sure if it was something she wanted to discuss with her sempai.

"The kiss, you mean?" He asked evenly, but the way he narrowed his eyes told her he knew it was more than that.

"Not just the kiss," she shook her head. "He flirted with me—or Natsu, anyway. And I can't imagine knowing it's me sits well with his pride..."

Ren wasn't sure what he had expected, but it wasn't that. For one, from his point of view, Fuwa flirted with her near-constantly. For another, Kyoko never saw it as flirting. That she should say something like that, as if it were news—it left him speechless.

She cocked her head to the side. He was surprised. Of course he was. Shotaro hated her, after all, and certainly shouldn't find her attractive. "I know it's hard to believe," she said, "but—"

"No, it's not," he said, cutting her off.

"It's really, really not."

She frowned. Moko-san had behaved the same way when she told her, treating the whole thing as matter-of-fact. This is kind of a big deal to me, you know! She wanted to say. Instead, she opted for, "Then why do you look so shocked?" She said, letting a little bit of irritation creep into her voice.

"Because," the actor said reasonably, "you never notice when guys are flirting with you."

She stared at him blankly. "What?" Never? Guys? With an 's'?

"Kijima rented you a dress and asked for your mail address, and you thought he was joking around," he pointed out.

"He was just being friendly," she said, "an adult like him would never be—"

"And Reino of Vie Ghoul is obviously interested in you, but you..." he shook his head, "you think he's just an enemy, trying to mess with you."

"Because he's a denizen of Hell," she insisted, "he wouldn't see me like—"

"And then..." he said, and there really was a full-throated laugh struggling to find its way out of his mouth now, forcing him to stop looking at her pouty face, and the adorable way her nose scrunched up whenever she argued with him.

How could he ever think she would connect the dots? He'd gone out of his way to be cryptic, not naming names, or places, or jobs. And she'd seen him work with other teenage girls before—Momose-san, for one. A perfectly placed 17-year-old, just waiting to misdirect her. No, she'd used Bo to help him every chance she got, even when she didn't like him very much. That was all it was for her. It was just like Yashiro had said. There was no chance she saw him that way, and no way she ever would unless he was direct about it. Bo or no Bo, he was safe.
"And then...?" She prompted, arms folded across her chest, defying him to come up with another example.

He turned to look at her, fighting back a smile still, and said, "And then..." her eyes narrowed, still convinced that there was no one who could see her that way but for the rare exception of Fuwa Sho. He had found his way, somehow, to yet another of her firsts, hadn't he?

"And then," said Ren, "there's me."
"Tell the Truth"

"Sho."

"Sho!"

"SHO!"

"What?!” Fuwa Sho snapped, glaring at his manager, stilling his fingers mid-strum. He was perched on the edge of his bed, guitar in hand, still dressed in his day clothes.

Shoko didn't so much as flinch, in spite of the fact that his current glare had a certain demonic quality to it. He wasn't quite a Deva King, but his expression was not that of a proper teen heartthrob.

"Well, we need to talk," She said plainly. "You're obviously not in a very good mood."

"My mood is fine," the visual kei singer said, waving her off. "In fact, I'm in a great mood. Ecstatic. Now leave me alone."

"You're about to go on tour," Shoko said. "No matter how well you sing, you aren't going to make very many fans happy looking the way you do."

Sho ignored her and, pulling a nub of pencil out from behind his ear, wrote something down on a sheet of paper lying on the nightstand.

She pulled the sheet away, leaving a long mark through the scribbles on the page.

"Hey!" He demanded, "Give it back!"

"Music? Sho, are you writing now?" She asked. "It's after midnight, and you still have a morning of shooting before we leave tomorrow. This is no time to miss out on sleep."

"I don't remember asking for permission," he said, snatching it back, and scrubbing furiously with a barely-there eraser at the accidental streak. It ended up making the whole page look like a giant smudge, and he balled it up in frustration and tossed it across the room, where it kept company with a number of earlier drafts.

Before Shoko could say anything, though, he had ripped another sheet out of a notebook and gone to work rewriting what had been lost. He played a few more notes, and then the eraser was back in play. Unfortunately, it had been worn down to the metal end and his efforts tore a hole in the page. Both pencil and paper made their way to the wastebasket.

"Dammit," he said. "Dammit, dammit, dammit." He pulled out the top drawer of the nightstand and started scrawling around, looking for another pencil.

The manager sighed. He wasn't going to give up anytime soon. "Sho, wouldn't you rather use your computer?" She asked wearily.

He shook his head. "This is better."

"It's never been a problem before," she pointed out. "Come on, this is what your laptop is for."

He found a pen, swore, and tossed it on the bed. "Don't we have any more pencils?" He asked.
"Honestly, I'm surprised you found the first one," Shoko said.

He shoved the drawer closed and threw himself back on the bed again. "Whatever. It doesn't matter."

He set his guitar down against the wall and turned his back to her.

Shoko was beyond tired, and desperately wanted to go to bed, but she heaved another sigh and sat down next to the young man.

"Sho, you've been acting strange lately. And I think we both know why," she said.

He grunted. "'M fine."

"You're not. You're wired, and irritable, and just...well, strange," she said, struggling to find a better word. "And today, the way you acted on set—Sho, you know you can't behave that way. The reason people put up with you is because, at the end of the day, the job gets done."

He scowled over his shoulder at her. "Yeah, and it got done."

"After extensive rewrites," Shoko said. "After Kyoko basically had to hold your hand through the scene. You think I don't know you were acting against the grain on purpose? I thought your career meant more to you than this."

"It does!" Sho sat up angrily. "Nothing else matters!"

"Except making things more difficult for Kyoko?" she asked.

"I can't—she deserved it, after what she did," he insisted hotly. "She tricked me!"

"I know, but it isn't as if it's the first time. And you seemed to be able to get past that."

"It's different," the singer said. "The things I did—"

"The kiss, you mean?" Shoko guessed. "Was it really so bad, kissing her?"

"Yes!" He exclaimed. "The way she—and with that bastard! You just don't get it!"

Garbled though it may have been, Shoko was an expert in the language of Fuwa Sho, and knew without a doubt what "that bastard" referred to.

"What does Tsuruga Ren have to do with anything?" Came her bewildered question. "He was nowhere near the set."

"He taught her!" Sho said angrily. "He taught her how!"

"How to what?" When he refused to respond, it clicked for her. "How to kiss?"

Sho got up, grabbed his guitar by the neck, and snagged his coat off the back of a chair. "I'm going out," he said.

"Sho, stop this," Shoko said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You're being irrational. Why would you even think that? It's not as if Tsuruga Ren has time to give acting lessons to every kouhai with his schedule."

"She told me so," he snarled, shrugging her off.

She stopped in her tracks, surprised. It was strange to think of Kyoko saying anything of the kind.
The actress was unrelentingly innocent, even if she was sometimes more violent than the average schoolgirl. It almost seemed like something designed to hurt her childhood friend, but the only way that would work is if Kyoko realized how Sho felt for her. And if even Sho didn't know, someone as oblivious to love as Kyoko...It didn't make sense.

But it certainly put Sho's behavior into perspective. His stonelike demeanor last night. His fidgety attempts at acting today. And his flighty behavior now. He was trying to distract himself. Well, she could help with that.

"So?" She asked, in an altogether different tone, more businesslike than scolding. "What song are you working on?"

He clenched his free fist reflexively, then rolled his shoulders. "The rewrite," he said shortly. "I want to get it done before we leave tomorrow, while the story's till fresh."

That seemed like an odd choice for a distraction, but then, he could be professional about some things.

"Oh? So you're not just changing the lyrics?" She asked. "It was a pretty minor change in the overall storyline," she echoed his own complaints from earlier that day.

He scoffed. "Of course. The mood is completely different." His fingers skittered across the fretboard, making a discordant jangling noise. "Look, Shoko-san, I really want to get to work on this," he said.

"Can't it wait a little longer?" She asked. "Things might look better after a good night's sleep."

"Yeah, right," he said under his breath. "If you can sleep, that is."

"What?"

"I'm going," he said, hand on the door now. "Don't wait up."

"At least keep your cellphone—" she trailed off as he left. Distantly, the front door closed.

"Where is he even going to go?" She wondered.

Outside, in the cool night air, the singer savagely stubbed his foot into the ground. All he could think about was Kyoko cozying up to that bastard, and it was driving him insane.

She'd promised him that she would never develop feelings for the man, but he knew the way she thought about love. How many times, when they were kids, did he hear her gush over the kiss that brought a princess back to life, or woke her up from a long, deep sleep? It wasn't something she would take on lightly, whether it was part of her job or not.

It's not as if he cared who she kissed. She could do whatever she wanted with whomever she wanted. Why should it matter to him? It's just that it was Tsuruga, that's all. That no-talent pretty boy taking what was his—

He shook his head. Kyoko wouldn't break that promise, not if she could help it. And even if she did, there was no way Tsuruga could ever get through to her. He'd seen the two of them together, with Tsuruga trying to make his interest plain, and it all went over the girl's head. There was still plenty of time.
"And then," said Tsuruga-san, "there's me."

The words echoed oddly in Kyoko's ears. **What?** She thought. **What does that mean?**

Part of her jumped at the words, ready to take them for what they seemed to be: a declaration of romantic interest. A very, very small part. The rest of her, ruled as ever by her own Kyoko-esque brand of logic, rejected it however it could.

**A joke? He was laughing at me not too long ago.**

**Some kind of test? As an actress, I should recognize when I'm being tricked.**

**Maybe he misspoke? It seems...unlikely. This is Tsuruga-san, after all, but...how could he possibly have meant such a thing?**

Ren watched her face intently. His biggest fear was that she would reject him out of hand, or worse, cut ties between them completely. Instead, she stood stock still, her expression frozen, and only the occasional twitch of a muscle betrayed the fact that she was still functioning on some level. Oddly enough, it made him feel...relieved.

Of course, the dream response would be a cute flush in her cheeks, a small smile, and an acceptance of his affections, but he wasn't quite that naïve. He knew Kyoko, and he knew how she responded to any hint of romance. She was searching for a reason to dismiss what he had said, and once she'd found it, she'd rejoin the conversation.

A disruption was in order.

"Mogami-san," he said. She was startled out of her mental deliberations and looked up at him, her face still blank.

"I flirt with you," he said.

Her eyes widened. "Wh-what?" She asked.

"Often, actually," he added, keeping his face pleasant but serious at the same time. He wouldn't give her the chance to misinterpret his meaning.

"Tsuruga-san, what are you saying?" And there was the beginnings of a blush. "You're not making any sense."

"Oh?" He said. "Am I not being clear? I thought I said it plainly enough."

"Is this some kind of joke?" she asked, confused. "Because I don't think I understand it. Why would someone like Tsuruga-san—?"

"'Someone like' me?" He repeated. "So, it's believable that Fuwa Sho might be interested in you, but I'm out of the question? Am I so objectionable?" He managed with some difficulty to keep the jealousy out of his voice. Just a calm, simple question.

"Objectionable?!!" She squeaked. "No, no, of course not!" Kyoko began shaking her head violently. "I wouldn't...ever! Shotaro and you are—how could I?"

"So I'm not objectionable?" He asked, a little taken aback by how flustered the suggestion had made her. A smile was tugging at his lips.
"No! Tsuruga-san is my most respected, most admired—" She caught sight of his face, and glowered. "You are teasing me!"

"Dammit. "Of course not, Mogami-san. I mean every word." He said, smoothing out his expression.

"You're laughing at me!" She accused.

"I would never joke about this," Ren insisted.

"Oh?" She arched a brow. "What about at the Dark Moon party, when you became the Emperor of the Night?"

Emperor of the Night? He thought, bemused. Is that how she thinks of me?

"Or when you kissed my cheek on Valentine's?" She demanded. "Or when I helped you practice your Katsuki? You say these things without thinking, Tsuruga-san, and they might not mean anything serious to you, but to someone like me—"

"I'm not—I don't say these things without thinking," he said, surprised to find himself on the defensive. But she wasn't wrong, really. Each of those instances had been a time when he'd lost control of his desire—and each time he'd covered it up so she wouldn't leave his side.

"I knew you were a playboy," Kyoko said, folding her arms across her chest. "But I'm not someone you should be saying such things to, not when you have someone you—" She stopped herself with a jolt, course-correcting to, "not when you don't mean it."

"Ah."

She really didn't know. Even with Bo in her back pocket, she'd never realized about whom he was talking. She thought that this, right here, was him being unfaithful to the girl he really loved. The girl who couldn't possibly be her.

"I—" should he leave it here? A quick apology, and she would brush it off as another instance of his messing with her head and nothing more. He could wait for a better time, when he had planned ahead, when he could combat all her insecurities and misconceptions.

But no, he wouldn't wait any longer. He'd opened the door, and closing it would make it that much harder to take the leap a second time. Besides, he wasn't sure he could stand to turn back now.

"I have a confession to make," The actor said finally.

Kyoko looked at him, still visibly irritated, but her face softened when she saw the way he was looking at her. He'd thrown away his impassive mask and was allowing his raw emotion to be on full display. It was a strange mix of longing, sadness, and affection. Up till now, she'd only seen that face through the gauzy eyes of a chicken costume.

"There's a girl—a woman, really—for whom I have feelings," he said.

"No, Kyoko thought. Please, don't make me listen to this again.

"She's only in high school, 17 years old. And every time I look at her, I can't help but think how cute she is."

Her heart sank. She knew all this already. She knew there was never really a chance...

"Even though our relationship didn't start out very well, we grew close. She knows things about me
no one else does, and she helps me in ways no one else ever could."

Someone who knew him better than she did. Someone who could be of use to him, not a newbie like her. Kyoko could never hope to compete with a girl like that.

"She stood by me when I caught a cold for the very first time, when I had trouble figuring out a difficult role, and when I needed daily support in keeping my identity a secret."

...What? She was with him all those times. There was no girl. Or rather, there were girls, actresses who worked with him, but never the same one.

"But I haven't always been fair to her. Even though I know I have no right, I get angry when she gives attention to other men. Someone recently told me that jealousy's just a part of love like any other, but that I shouldn't let it control me. I'm working on that."

The fact that he was repeating her words back to her didn't seem to register with Kyoko. She was staring at him baldly now, making no secret of her confusion.

"And I've made light of my feelings whenever I've felt like they've gotten out of hand so as not to scare her away. I've done things—taken advantage of her trust for me—because I wanted so badly for her to see me as a man.

"Just a few days ago, in fact, she approached me for help learning how to..." and he hesitated, still worried about taking that final step, "learning how to kiss. Even though she learned very quickly, and the task itself wasn't a complicated one, I kept asking for more and more. I pretended it was because she needed the practice, but the truth is...I liked it far too much to stop."

The young actress was staring down at her feet now, face in shadow, eyes covered by her bangs. She didn't talk, or move, or even breathe, it seemed.

Ren, at that moment, felt as if his chest had been sliced open, his innards left in full view of everyone. He had made his intentions clear. He had stopped just short of telling her he loved her. He wondered wildly if she would still manage to find some excuse for all that he had said. And, more sadly now, if she would ever speak to him again.

"...too."

His heart skipped a beat. She'd said something, a tiny, unintelligible something, and he'd missed it.

As gently as he could, hoping that another push wouldn't send her screaming from the room, he asked, "Could you repeat that?"

"I said," she started, still training her gaze on the floor, "I liked it, too."

Something burst in the vicinity of Ren's heart, and he could feel his face redden. She...she liked it? The kissing. The adult kissing. The sensuous kissing.

He knew she hadn't hated it, at the very least, but that she would like it? It brought to mind that moment, with Setsu straddling his chest, when he realized that Kyoko wasn't just some innocent little girl. That she was capable of more mature things, he knew. That she enjoyed them—and more importantly, that she enjoyed them with him—was a surprise he simply wasn't prepared for.

"I...I don't really know what to say, now." Kyoko said, quietly. "I've never...I don't know how to do this."
"Neither do I," Ren admitted, choosing not to analyze what "this" meant. "I'm settling for being honest, for now."

"Being honest," she repeated, shuffling her feet. She said the phrase with a lilt reminiscent of children who ask, Do I have to?

"If you'd rather not answer—if you need time," he said kindly, ignoring his burning desire to hear what she had to say, "I understand. It doesn't have to be now."

His kouhai stood there, hands clasped just below at her waist, spine straight, head bowed. She didn't say a word.

She knew what his speech meant. Even she could understand it when it was that direct. How he could like her—how anyone could like her—but she knew those words. Knew them as Bo, his confidant, the one he had no reason to lie to. Knew the way he felt about that girl. How it could be her—it made no sense. Nobody saw her that way.

Except...

He looked at his watch, and realized it was nearly 1 a.m. He'd ask her to spend the night, but the way things were right now...no doubt she'd be uncomfortable staying in his apartment knowing how he felt.

"If you like, I can drive you home." Even just voicing it aloud made his stomach turn. How would it feel, dropping her off at the curb of the Darumaya after a long, silent car ride? But he couldn't pressure her.

Turning on his heel, he said, "I'll just go get my keys and we can—"

Ren felt a strange tug at his back. Stopping, he turned back to see her small hand gripping the tail of his shirt. The moment he looked, though, she pulled her hand away and returned it to its proper place in her traditional stance.

"Just...just give me another minute," she said. "Just one more."

He looked at her, wishing for once that he was closer to average height so that he could bend to see what her face looked like without drawing too much attention to himself. And while he might be able to get there by going down on one knee, that might send a message scarier than anything else he'd said that night.

Looking at the way her hair draped over her neck and eyes, he suddenly noticed that her ears were a brilliant red color. Before he could process what that meant, though, he was treated to a view of her whole face as she finally turned her head up to see him.

Kyoko was a lobster. A cute lobster, but a lobster. Tiny tears were pricking at her golden eyes, and she scrubbed them away before saying,

"I, Mogami Kyoko, also have feelings of a romantic nature for you." Her voice was comically stiff and formal, and her face turned a full shade darker in the process, but she said it.

As soon as Ren's brain had translated the strange sentence into its basic meaning, a smile forced its way onto his face. There wasn't a hint of sparkle or sadness, but it did have all the strength of a floodlight.

"Ow," said Kyoko weakly, holding a hand over her chest.
"'Ow?' Are you okay?" He asked in a voice that contradicted his expression entirely, his smile refusing to be extinguished.

She nodded. "I'm fine," she said absently, the pain gone as soon as it came. It seemed even the smile couldn't hurt her as much as it once did. What she couldn't know was that her grudges had been struck so strongly that even the most resilient among them was knocked senseless.

She stared at him for a long moment, taking in that radiant smile, saw how open—almost childlike in his joy—he was.

"You're...really happy?" she asked wonderingly.

"The girl I like just told me she liked me back," Ren pointed out matter-of-factly. "How else would I feel?"

She moved to hide her face again, but he put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Her chin having stopped its downward trajectory, he took advantage, tipping her head up with a long, slim finger.

Kyoko's eyes widened, and he tilted his head to one side in a silent question. She gave a short, jerky nod, and stared up at him, transfixed. He leaned forward, moving his hand to cup her cheek, to finger the tendrils of hair splayed over her ears, and pressed his lips to hers. She strained to reach him, to pull him closer, poised on the balls of her feet, hands locked on the bends of his elbows. The heady feeling of breathlessness was quick to come over them, but neither saw fit to stop, reveling in the touch that, just a few hours ago, each thought they'd never feel again.

When they finally pulled away, she was wearing a soft smile of her own, and they just looked at each other silently for a minute, content to stay in each others' arms. Even after all the kisses they had shared, this one felt different.

It felt real.
A hotel? No, this time of night, the only place that might let him in without a reservation was a love hotel, and the last thing he needed on the eve of his summer tour was for some clerk to snap a picture of him in the red light district.

He could go back...Shoko would be happy. But then he'd spend another night sitting wide-eyed in bed, waiting for the morning to come.

Work was the only option. If he could just find someplace to focus on the song, he would at least be getting something done.

A neon sign caught his eye, and he smirked.

"Perfect."

"So..." Ren said, seated at the coffee table across from Kyoko.

"So," she agreed.

What is this? He wanted to ask. Where do we go from here? But then, he knew she had no more sense of that than he did. He found himself staring at her intently, and when she squirmed under his gaze, flushing, he felt the usual impulse. To hug. To touch. And for once, he didn't resist.

Reaching forward, he caught her hand in his. "Mogami-san, am I right to think that we should be together?"

"Together?" She squeaked. "As in...as in dating?"

"That was my plan, yes." He chuckled warmly. "Two people who care for each other the way we do generally do something of the kind."

She frowned. "I'm not a child, Tsuruga-san," she said. "It's just..."

"What? Do you not want to?" He asked, still smiling, stroking a thumb across the back of her hand.

"I...of course, I do," Kyoko said. "I'm just concerned...about the president," she said slowly.

"The president?" He asked, a little incredulous. "What—why?"

"Well, I'd rather he didn't know," she said. "Or anybody, really."

"Are you embarrassed to be seen with me?" He teased, the overwhelming happiness he felt after the evening's events bubbling up inside him, refusing to be tempered.

She laughed at that. "Of course not! If anything, you're the one who should be."

The actor twitched an eyebrow. "And why would that be? Why should I be embarrassed of being seen with someone as beautiful and talented—"
"Tsuruga-san!" She cut him off, reddening. For him to say such things while wearing that smile—just how was she supposed to stay calm? "What I mean is, I'm a high school student."

"I was aware."

"And you're an adult," she said. "A very famous, accomplished adult. I can't imagine the media would let that pass them by. Especially since there's hardly been any news of your being in a relationship with anyone up till now. They'll want to know why you've decided to be with a newbie actress over all the other options you might have had."

"You're the only option I care about," he said, smiling.

"I—this is serious, Tsuruga-san!" Kyoko said. Her heart couldn't take much more of this.

"I know," he said, and finally, with a sigh, he released her hand and sat back. "I suppose you're right. It would be better for us to be discreet." The last thing he wanted was for their budding relationship to be plastered across the tabloids.

His fans had largely been quiet throughout his career—he'd had a few brushes with the crazier element, a death threat or two, a stalker—but he remembered a short-lived rumor of some years back now, when he wasn't even as big as he was now, when a story had forged a link between him and one of his costars. The sudden rush of hate against her on the shows' message boards, the letters, the phone calls, had been put to rest only when he'd personally confirmed that the story was completely false. He'd never wish that kind of vitriol on Kyoko.

And as for the president—well, that would be its own kind of horrible. Ren could just imagine the triumphant smirk and the prodding questions, and a vein throbbed in his temple.

For her part, Kyoko was consumed not only with the damage that could be done to Tsuruga-san's reputation were he to date someone as young and green as she was, but with the way it would eclipse her career. She would forever be known as the talento who dated Tsuruga Ren, and not as an actress in her own right. She would never have the opportunity to be considered his equal, either, because any fame she achieved would be attributed to him and to their relationship.

Besides, there was a very particular person she'd rather not find out. She could only imagine the nasty voicemails she'd get if Shotaro knew. And then there was that ridiculous wager…

Their eyes met, matching expressions of irritation on their faces, and it all melted away.

"So, we keep it under wraps," he said.

She nodded. "Except for Mo-Kotonami-san," she said. "I can't keep it from her." She'd cut ties with me on principle!

"Hmmm," he considered his own options. "Should I tell Yashiro-san?"

Both flew away into their silent musings.

On the one hand, having Yashiro in on the secret would allow them to openly enlist his help in shifting schedules and managing the potential for leaks.

On the other hand, Ren realized, he'd help them anyway, believing the whole time that he was helping bring about their relationship. He would tease, perhaps, but he was a very good manager, and he would happily and efficiently do what Ren asked, particularly if it involved spending time with Kyoko.
Kyoko knew from the Tragic Marker experiment that Yashiro took discretion seriously when it was expected of him. The man could keep a secret. But…well, there was his enthusiasm to be considered. He seemed to have no filter when it came to hints of romance between the two actors. And it's much easier to keep a secret you don't know.

And there was another little thought, floating in the back of both their heads, refusing to be ignored: How long? How long could it possibly last, between them? Their relationship, if it could even be called that at this stage, was only very newly born. Would it withstand the teasing and scrutiny that would come with letting others know about it?

As wonderful as it was to realize that their feelings were shared, it didn't erase years of troubles in the arena of romance.

Kyoko's longtime first crush had been rewarded with contempt. Love was something that, to her, rarely went both ways. And where every one of Ren's relationships started out well enough, they had a nasty habit of ending with the abrupt declaration that being with him was its own brand of loneliness.

*And wouldn't he get bored?* Kyoko wondered.

*And wouldn't she get tired of me?* Ren thought.

So it might not last for very long at all. Should they really invite even more pressure?

Ren felt Kyoko's hand slip into his again, and he blinked back into consciousness. She squeezed his hand tighter, as if trying to reassure him. He smiled, and returning the squeeze, pulled her into a hug.

She huffed in surprise, and her warm breath ghosted over his neck, where her nose was now nestled.

"No Yashiro?" She asked quietly.

"Not yet, anyway," he said with a short laugh.

Feeling the rumble of his voice against her chest, she pressed closer, and his arms tightened around her automatically.

And again, they shared a thought at almost the very same moment.

_This time, they thought, it'll be different. This time, I'll fight._

It was at 4 a.m. that Fuwa Sho left the karaoke box. He'd spent a solid three hours working through that song, one of which was after the late-night shop was already meant to be closed. The owner's daughter, a woman in her thirties, was more than happy to stay late for such a handsome young man.

She'd been plying him with free drinks yet again, when her mother, a slightly less permissive old lady arrived, demanding to know why the shop hadn't been closed up properly.

And so, he was out on the streets again, stumbling like a drunkard thanks to a mix of sleep deprivation and having sat still for far too long. But the box had been perfect. Open late, cheap, with soundproof walls and a manager who had been only too willing to find him a writing utensil. And so the song was done. Or very nearly, anyway.

But now, at 4 in the morning, there were even fewer things open, and Shoko was sure to be asleep. She would send a driver if he called, but he had a better idea.
Working his way through the song had energized Sho, in a way. Given him a sense of direction. He was Fuwa Sho! A musical genius! And he would not back down for anyone, least of all a certain lift-wearing bastard.

He pulled out his phone, gauged the distance, and, leaning against the wall of a convenience store, settled in to wait for a taxi to happen by.

"Um…" Kyoko started reluctantly, "It's…well, it's getting kind of late, Tsuruga-san."

He turned around to look at the blinking digital numbers on the cable box. 4:30? Where had the time gone?

Kyoko squinted at him thoughtfully. He was still wearing his watch, wasn't he? Why-?

"You're right," Ren said, quietly, sad to see the moment finally broken. "We should probably go to bed."

When Kyoko's eyebrows shot into her hairline, he realized what he had said.

"We should get some sleep, I mean," he said quickly. "Separately. I believe I'm correct in assuming we both have work tomorrow?"

"Er, yes," Kyoko said, nodding mechanically. "Work. Tomorrow." Kimagure Rock, to be specific. But that won't be until the afternoon, thank God.

For a moment, Ren considering offering her the use of his guest room. He'd done it plenty of times before. And they'd shared a hotel room for weeks. But—No,—he thought, shaking his head. It meant something different now. He'd have to start watching what he said a little more closely from here on out.

"My keys," he said, patting his pockets reflexively, then remembered they were in the small dish by the door, along with his wallet.

A step ahead, she held them out to him with a little smile that made him want to pull her close all over again. She was his. How the hell did that happen?

He contented himself with brushing his fingers against hers as he took the keys, and chuckled to himself when her face heated up again.

He leaned in and whispered into her ear, so close she had to fight off a shiver, "Let's go."

Sho sat in the shadows of Darumaya, watching with one eye cracked for the first sign of life. It was nearing 5 a.m. now, and he was bored with waiting. He figured restaurants would open pretty early, so he shouldn't have to wait too much longer, and with any luck, he'd get a free meal out of it.

And most importantly, he'd let Kyoko know once and for all how little power her games had over him. Maybe give her a taste of his latest work to let her know just how beneath him she really was. It might give her the right kind of kick to get her back to where she needed to be—trying above all else to beat him.

When a sleek, high-end car rolled up to the restaurant's front entrance, it didn't occur to him to take note. Sure, it seemed a little fancy for a delivery service, but maybe it was some guy looking for a place to have breakfast. He'd see the place was still closed and be on his merry way.
So when the driver's side door opened to reveal Tsuruga Ren, he was a little surprised. And irritated. Really, really irritated. What did that bastard think he was doing here? Probably going to worm him way into Kyoko's day by offering her a ride or something.

He was happy, too, the jackass. Smiling wider than Sho had ever seen him smile on T.V. There was someone else in the car—his manager, maybe?—that he was talking to. The actor rounded the front of the car and opened the passenger's door, which struck him as an odd thing for a talent to do for his manager.

Then, a long, slender, and strangely familiar leg slipped out of the car. Ren offered a hand to the leg's owner, and his childhood friend popped into view, recognizable even in the weak light of predawn and the orange-tinged streetlamps.

His mind went blank, unable to conjure up even the tamest expletive.

…

…

**What?**

What was she doing coming home at 5 in the morning, courtesy of the Tsuruga express?
What was going on?

Was he dreaming this? Had he fallen asleep without realizing?

The scene before him was not unlike something out of his nightmares, after all.

And the final, nightmarish touch came when the actor, towering over Kyoko, leaned over and pressed his lips against hers. She didn't pull away, didn't shove at the older man, didn't even seem surprised. In fact, she seemed more than happy to *keep* kissing him.

When the two finally pulled apart, Tsuruga brushed her hair behind one ear, smiled one more creepily large smile, and watched as she went to the door, turned the key, and went in, before getting back in his car and driving away.

Sho stood there, gaping, wondering if what he'd seen could possibly be real. But he didn't wake up. A vicious pinch to his forearm made the truth even clearer.

He looked at Darumaya, still dark in the early morning, trying absently to make out Kyoko's shadow moving through the building. He couldn't see a thing.

Gripping his phone, Sho very nearly tossed it against the sidewalk, but thought better of it, and, punching Shoko's picture on his smartphone's screen far harder than was necessary, he wedged it in between his ear and shoulder while it rang. This left his hands free to slowly and deliberately shred the scraps of paper he'd used to write his song revisions not an hour ago.

"Sho?" A sleepy voice asked. "Are you still out? What are you doing?"

When he didn't answer, too intent on making each strip as tiny as possible, worry crept into Shoko's voice.

"Sho, are you okay?"

He paused, thought briefly about giving an honest answer, then, schooling his face into its usual
smirk, said, "I'm fine. Just like always. Could use a ride home, though."

"Um… alright, I can put in a request. What's the address?"

He gave a cross-street two blocks away from where he stood. No way was he waiting out here.

"Did you get some good work done, at least?" Shoko asked, scribbling the information on her hand haphazardly.

Sho looked down at the remnants of this morning's efforts, little curls of paper falling into a pile, erasing all evidence of that ridiculous, naïve, self-indulgent tripe—

He laughed, unable to keep it from sounding harsh, even to his ears.

"'Course. I'm Fuwa Sho, after all."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Kinda flippy back and forth-y, but I hope it worked out okay. Some lovey-dovey stuff, some serious stuff, and some Sho stuff. Anybody feel bad for him yet? Anyyyyybodyyyyy? (He brought it on himself, remember.)

Thanks to all who read, commented, bookmarked, subscribed and left kudos. :)
Three months later

Wish I could say we weren't meant to be,
Those days when we were side by side,
Hand in hand, your lips slid-
-ing 'cross my cheek, a fond memory
That makes me happier than sad,
Content to have just what we had…
Those little lies we tell to sound healthy.

But those aren't the memories we made.
Instead, every time I saw your eyes
Lingering as I said, "goodbye," I
Ignored the warmth I felt in your gaze.
Convinced myself I needed her,
That she was safer, better, worth
the love I know you starved for every day.

And now
I'm alone,
Got no one to call my own,
You pass by without a look
The love you gave, I never took
Can't blame you for moving on,
Can't blame anyone,
but me,
alone.
"Um, excuse me?"

*Here and there, we would share a passing glance—*

The music was cut off with the *snick* of a radio dial.

"Yes, miss?" The driver asked dutifully.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm just a little nervous, and I was hoping we could keep the radio off? Just so I could think?"

"Of course, miss," came the impassive reply. When she didn't seem to want anything else, he returned his attention to the road.

She hoped it didn't bother him too much. He was an older man with hints of gray at his temples and a strong Tokyo accent; somehow he didn't strike her as a Fuwa Sho fan.

But damn, was that song everywhere! She hardly ever listened to the radio, and made a point of avoiding his songs in particular, but that hadn't stopped her from hearing it three times this week alone. And the verse that was playing next she both knew by heart and hated with a passion. She wasn't sure she could stand to hear it again.

Hearing him singing his latest hit song—"Top of the charts! The most moving song he's ever performed! Surpassed all his previous tracks by a mile," they trotted out the same tired phrases every time—was not something she enjoyed doing on the best of days. And today was certainly not the best of days.

She sat in the back of a long, sleek, black limo, courtesy of LME. She was wearing a nice but modest dress borrowed from the wardrobe department. Jelly had even been roped into doing her makeup, though she snorted at the fact that her hard work might be undone by the studio's artists.

In a way, what she'd told the driver wasn't entirely a lie. She *would* be nervous…if she weren't so damn irritated.

"You're a hot topic right now," Sawara-san had said yesterday, handing her a stack of messages. "Three more requests for phone interviews, and you've been invited back to Nipponet Scoop. Kimagure Rock would like to have you, too—they put in an internal request and everything, guess they'd have to get someone else to fill in for you—and last but not least," he grinned, fluffing his mustache proudly, "Entertainment Today!"

"Oh?" was all the actress could muster. She glanced at the slips of paper, shrugged, and stuck them into her tote. "I'll look through them and get back to you," she promised. "Is there anything else?"

"Mogami-kun, this is one of the most-watched talk shows in the country!" He said. "We're talking exposure like you've never had before. You shouldn't have to even think about it."

She looked at him dully. "But they're about Fuwa Sho, right?"

"Well, yes," the manager said, as if it were obvious. "Everyone wants to know more about the kiss, the song, the whole working experience. It's a great opportunity to get your name out there!"
"Yes, I know," Kyoko said with a sigh.

"Honestly, I thought you'd be happy!" He said, a truly perplexed frown on his face. "Wasn't the whole reason you joined LME to catch up to Fuwa Sho? And now you've gotten to work with him not only once, but twice!"

She squirmed where she stood. Twice. Twice she'd worked with him. And this time would definitely stick in the public eye for a while. Plus, some of the questions she'd gotten—

"And I've already spoken with your director. He says he's ecstatic, and that he'd like to meet with you to discuss the approach for the interview—points to hit for the promotion of the show. And, if you're feeling uncomfortable, he's prepared to help talk you through how to conduct yourself in an interview on a major platform like this one."

"Uncomfortable is kind of mild," she muttered, but when Sawara looked at her curiously, she pasted on a professional smile and said, "Thank you for your hard work. I have to be going now." She bowed and walked away at a stiff clip.

Sawara shook his head. I can never tell what that girl's thinking.

Kyoko walked into the locker room and immediately perked up. "Moko-san!" she squealed happily.

Before her flailing arms could make contact, Kanae managed to land a hand on her forehead and push her back like an older brother playing a determined game of keep-away.

"Mo! Every time we see each other, you embarrass me," she growled.

"Eehhh? There's no one here," Kyoko pointed out, pouting. "You could let me hug you once. Who would know?"

"I would know," Kanae said without missing a beat. She turned back to her locker, reorganizing the bag that she'd dropped on the floor when she saw Kyoko charging at her.

Kyoko harrumphed and opened her own locker, unceremoniously shoving the proposals she'd gotten from Sawara-san into the back, where they found plenty of crumpled friends.

"So," Kanae said, looking at her out of the corner of her eye, "more interviews?"

"Yes," Kyoko said drearily.

"You said the last few went alright," her friend reminded her.

"Yeah, but they were phone interviews. And one email one," Kyoko said. "It's easy to lie with just your voice." In fact, it seemed to be a particular talent of hers. Note to self: look into voice acting opportunities. "But these are going to be actual talk shows. All talking about him and the kiss."

"And the song, too?" Kanae asked innocently.

"Not yet, luckily. I mean, one reporter asked if I liked it, but that's as far as it went."

"So they haven't made the connection." Kanae said, still looking sidelong at her.

"How could they? It's not like he said my name," she pointed out. "Only people who know me and
know our history have any chance of figuring it out."

"That's good. We wouldn't want everybody to realize the song's actually just him confessing his feelings for you," she said, finally taking the plunge.

Kyoko jumped a foot in the air and yelped, stricken, "Moko-san! Don't say things like that." She was suddenly so pale she actually look physically ill. "It's not funny."

"Have you heard the song?"

"How could I avoid it?" The talento asked. "It's everywhere."

"And the third verse, the one right after the chorus, that doesn't give you a hint?"

Kyoko glared at her mutinously. Of course she noticed that verse. "It tells me he's just as committed as ever to making fun of me, that's all."

"Really?" Kanae raised an eyebrow, looking at her friend full in the face. "That's your takeaway?"

"That's what it means," Kyoko insisted. "If you really think that Shotaro could have those kinds of feelings about me..." She shook her head.

And now

I'm alone,

The music swelled, filling the room. Kyoko jumped again, looking around wildly for the source, then realized where it was coming from.

Kanae held up her phone defiantly, where the music video was playing on the screen. She saw the now-familiar sight of Sho spotlit against a stark black stage.

Got no one to call my own,

You pass by without a look

The screen cut to the scene where Chitose holds Sagara's hand to her face before walking away without looking back.

The love you gave, I never took

Can't blame you for moving on,

Sagara watched, concerned as Chitose leaves, and the screen fades to black again before returning to the shot of Sho on an empty stage.

Can't blame anyone,

but me,

alone.

He performed an odd sort of self-hug that Kyoko knew was usually meant to be sensual, but that in this case made him look more as if he were starving for warmth.

The chorus ended, the slow plaintive tone fading as the song went back to the faster-paced, more
percussive verse.

*Here and there, we would share a passing glance,*

Kyoko winced. She really did despise this verse.

*We never had a true love's kiss,*

*A fairy tale it was not, this,*

She could feel Kanae's gaze on her, significant and pointed. She chose instead to focus on the music video, where Chitose was blushing as Sagara handed her back the textbooks that had fallen to the ground.

*I thought some day I'd have another chance.*

A shot of Chitose ignoring his phone call followed by a quick cut back to the stage, Sho holding the microphone close and reaching out one long arm as if grasping for something beyond his reach.

*Never thought that you would see*

*Your way to anyone but me.*

He pulled the arm back in, letting the hand slide down his face as he looked away from the camera.

…*Well, you're no stranger to my arrogance.*

The music paused mid-note, and Kanae asked, "Should I play it again?"

"No!" Kyoko said immediately, clapping her hands over her ears.

"Fairy tales, true love's kiss?" Kanae repeated. "You know that's about you."

"Yes, but it doesn't mean—"

"The whole song is about loving someone you've never been with."

"But he couldn't—"

"He calls himself arrogant! That's basically him saying you were right about everything! Have you ever known him to admit to his flaws?"

"It's a song, Moko-san," Kyoko said fiercely. "Just a song. He's trying to remind me how I felt about him because it happens to fit in with the narrative he was hired to tell, that's all. He's saying I'm a weak, vulnerable Chitose who's only ever thought about him when he couldn't care less about me!"

"It's a love song!" Kanae shot back. "A love song where he casts you as the heroine, where he says he was wrong for ignoring you! You know he has a thing for you, you told me! Why do you have such a hard time believing it when he's telling you so himself?!"

"Because he can't love me!" She said, angry. "The way he trea-has treated me, that's not love!"

Kyoko glared at Kanae, who looked surprised at her outburst, for once. *Beside, it says, "never thought that you would see/ your way to anyone but me," she thought. And there's no way he could know about that. There just isn't. "Now can we drop it?"*

Kanae watched her thoughtfully, tucking the phone back into her purse. Kyoko slammed her locker
door shut and slung her tote back over her shoulder. Her phone buzzed loudly, enough to make her whole body tremble, but she ignored it, opting to glare at the floor instead.

"You were going to say 'treats,'" Kanae said.

Kyoko looked up. "What?"

"You were going to say, 'the way he treats me.'" The young woman repeated. "I thought you said you haven't heard from him since you wrapped on the Box 'R' finale, almost three months ago."

"That's why I corrected myself," Kyoko said briskly, not meeting her eyes. "Because he doesn't treat me like anything, these days."

"No, he just writes songs about you and gives cryptic hints that the two of you might be dating in interviews." Kanae said. When Kyoko's eyes snapped to hers, she said, "Yes, I saw that, too."

"Great," Kyoko said, looking for a moment like she was absolutely exhausted. "That means Tsuruga-san probably saw it. That's going to be a fun conversation."

"He can't still be jealous," Kanae said, surprised. "Doesn't he trust you?"

"Of course he does," Kyoko said defensively, "but he just…it's hard for him, hearing about Shotaro. All the rumors that have been going around, and now Sho says that he 'really liked working with me' and that he had 'a lot of fun on and off set'… I think it just bothers him that he can't put it to rest, you know?"

"He could, if the two of you wanted to go public," she glanced at the talento, "but I'm guessing that's still off the table?"

"Yeah, and then I could be the newbie actress who's romantically linked to two A-List celebrities. That sounds like a wonderful idea. Not like I get enough hate mail already, or anything," Kyoko said drily.

"Oh, come on, those things are hilarious," Kanae said. "You can't say that the misspelled ones written all in hiragana don't make you laugh."

Kyoko smiled a little. "True," she allowed, "they do make me feel lucky to almost be done with school. It's like I'm having flashbacks to junior high. And some of them make excellent voodoo fodder."

Her phone buzzed again, and the smile slipped. Kanae looked at her shrewdly. She seemed to be ready to say something when the door opened, and Chiori came in.


"What?" Kanae said, concentration shattered. "You're going on ET? You didn't tell me that!"

"I haven't accepted yet," Kyoko said, confused. "How did you find out, Amamiya-san? I only just got the proposal."

Chiori waved a hand. "The director called my manager. I think he called the entire cast, actually. He's really excited."

"Great," Kyoko moaned. "That means I don't have a choice, do I?"

"Don't you want to go?" She asked. "I mean, it doesn't get much bigger than ET, especially for
people like us."

Kanae nodded. "I would kill to get on ET. You can't say no!"

"But it's not going to be about me, or my work, or the show, it's just gonna be about Shotaro," she said, sullen. "I want people to care about me for me."

"Oh, boo hoo," Kanae said. "Beggars can't be choosers. Go on the show, answer some questions, and then make it about you. That's the whole point."

"Exactly," Chiori said. "This is your chance to let people see you outside of your roles. So you have to answer a few annoying questions. You made me go on that comedy show, and look where it got me? I'm filming another drama and I've got an ad spot. This is the same thing."

"I know, I know. I'd be an idiot to pass this up. A good actress takes every opportunity to stand out," Kyoko said dutifully. "I just…I guess I'm worried something might…slip out, you know?"

"Definitely," Chiori said. "I've seen what happens when you try to bottle up you feelings about Fuwa. It's not suitable for national television."

"So go prepared," Kanae said. "Practice for what you think she's going to ask you, prepare a few anecdotes. It's just like learning a new part, only now you're playing media-friendly Kyouko instead of a bully. Or a bully. Or a bully," she teased.

Kyoko stuck her tongue out at her best friend. "Meanie."

"Believe me, it's not that hard," Chiori said. "You just have to pretend to be cute and personable for a few minutes. Some of us have spent years doing it." She winked, and Kyoko giggled. "Besides, the director said he was going to prep you."

"Yeah, but..." Kyoko shrugged. "I don't know if I trust the director all that much, you know? Not with something like this."

"So go ask your boyfriend," Kanae said glibly, "Hasn't he been to a million of these? And without ever losing that stupid smile."

Kyoko stared at her, eyes wide and panicked. Kanae blinked. "What?"

Chiori looked back and forth between them, then burst out laughing. "It's okay, it's okay," she said, tearing up a little. "We know the two of you have a purely professional relationship, Kyouko-san. Nothing untoward between you!"

Oh, Kanae thought. She watched as Kyoko breathed a sigh of relief before putting on a pouty face. "Mo, Moko-san. I can't believe you'd tease me like that!"

"Sorry," she said, still a little confused. "I couldn't help myself."

"You two crack me up," Chiori said, shaking her head. She hitched up her bag on her shoulder. "I have to head out now, got to be on set in twenty, but I just wanted to say congratulations in person." She bowed, still chuckling, and left.

"You haven't told her?" Kanae said, the moment the door had shut.

"I told you, I promised I'd only tell you, remember?" Kyoko said.

If a little spark of happiness surged in her chest, Kanae would never admit it. "I mean, yeah. But it
wouldn't be so bad for her to know, too, right?" She was surprised to find she meant it. "We are stuck in this thing together, after all. It's nice to be able to be open with each other."

Kyoko smiled at her. "True. But I think before I can tell her, Yashiro should at least be in on the secret, and that's up to Tsuruga-san, not me."

"So?"

"So, what?" Kyoko asked, a little wary. She didn't want Kanae to get back to her earlier line of questioning.

"So are you going to go ask your boyfriend to help you prepare? I'm sure he'd be happy to do it."

"Don't call him that," Kyoko said, blushing.

"Is he not your boyfriend?" her friend asked, incredulous. "Three months together and still no labels?"

"No, he is," Kyoko said. "I mean, we're official and everything. It's just weird, is all. 'Boyfriend' doesn't really fit Tsuruga-san."

"I guess," Kanae shrugged.

"I'll ask him, when I meet up with him tonight," she said shyly. "I don't want to bother him, but it would really help."

"I'm pretty sure he wouldn't consider it a bother," said Kanae. "But whatever."

Kyoko's phone buzzed a third time, and a third time her smile dimmed. When she saw Kanae looking at her, she glanced at her watch and gave a big, "Oh, no! I'm late!"

Kanae just looked at her blankly. Like Kyoko was ever late.

"I have to go, sorry Moko-san, byyyyye—" she said as she slammed the door on her way out.

Outside the room, she leaned against the wall, letting a long stream of air flow out of her nose. She gripped the offending cell phone in her hand and swore.

"Dammit, Shotaro."

Riding her bike over to Tsuruga-san's apartment, Kyoko couldn't help but get lost in the worries that had plagued her for the past week or so.

It started the day the episode aired. She had been going around with the rest of the cast, doing promo work. He was doing the same for the premiere of his song and the music video. She hadn't heard from him in months. It was as if that last fight before she went to see Tsuruga-san that fateful night had flipped a switch. Total radio silence.

At first, she was a little on edge, waiting for the other shoe to drop. But weeks passed and nothing happened. It was nice, but also weirdly…empty. All the nervous energy and anger boiling up inside her had no place to go. She couldn't vent her frustrations. True, she could call him, but that wouldn't make any sense after all she'd done to get him to leave her alone. And she knew it would upset Ren to know she was going out of her way to talk to him.
So she decided to put it out of her mind and focus on living her life Shotaro-free. It had some definite upsides. No yelling in her ear, no constant badgering. No kidnappings. She was starting to really get used to it.

And then the finale aired. That night, she got a text from an unknown number.

**Did you listen to it?**

She thought it was strange, and chose not to answer, deleting it instead. The next day, she opened her phone to see another text in her inbox.

**Did you listen to it?**

*Hmm, I must not have erased it like I thought,* Kyoko mused, and quickly corrected her mistake.

Every day for the next three days, she received an identical text at least a few times a day. Finally, getting frustrated, she wrote back an all-caps, flashing, multicolored, "**NO!**"

A day went by, and no response. She thought that she'd finally gotten rid of him. She knew who it was now, she thought. There was only one person with a blocked number who was so intent on annoying her.

It had to be Shotaro, right?

There were other, more frightening thoughts. The Beagle. Someone else entirely, a stranger who was messing with her. But how would they get her number? No, it had to be Shotaro.

The next morning, she woke up to a new text, and she was sure. It was blank except for an MP3 attachment with a copy of the new song, *Me Alone.* For whatever reason, Shotaro was obsessed with getting her to hear it.

And now, the texts were arriving with no logic or order. It seemed like he sent them anytime he felt like it, whenever he got a free moment. More "Did you listen to it?"s, some "You should hear it"s, and "I mean what I say"s, even the occasional, "Kyoko. Please."

There was no way for her not to hear the song, he must have realized that. He wanted her to react. He wanted the satisfaction of hearing her annoyed voice yelling at him over the phone. He wanted proof that he was getting under her skin.

Kyoko pumped the pedals viciously. Well, he wasn't going to get it. Not from her.

She skidded to a stop in front of Ren's apartment building. Taking a deep breath, she smoothed out the frown lines in her face and allowed a relaxed smile to take hold instead. Before she forgot, she switched off her phone entirely. It was one thing for Moko-san to find out what was going on. It was another thing entirely for Tsuruga-san to find out.

He answered on the first knock, beaming. "Kyoko-san," he said, "good evening."

"Good evening, Ren-san," Kyoko replied, bowing. Her smile became a little more genuine as their eyes met, and she felt the tension of the day melt away.

They got seated at the table in his living room after a chaste kiss hello and a one-armed hug. A minute passed, the two just looking at one another in silence. It was comfortable, nice. But Kyoko had come here for a reason.
"So…" she said, twisting her fingers awkwardly.

"So…?" He replied, teasingly. Forcing her to make the first move. He seemed to delight in that, for some reason.

"So it happened. The big, national interview. I've been asked on Entertainment Today."

"Ah," he said, and if the smile dimmed a bit, it was cranked back up to full wattage too quickly for any but the most accomplished Tsuruga scholars to notice. "About the kiss?"

She nodded. "I've been featured before—Nipponet Scoop, promotion for the Box "R" premiere, the Dark Moon wrap party. But this is bigger. Not just a profile or some basic info about the show. People care what I say now."

"I'm sure your fans cared before," Ren said lightly. "They know a good actress when they see one." Another annoying habit of his, always complimenting her.

Kyoko shook her head. "It's different now. I've been reading all these articles about the kiss, and suddenly there's whole strings of comments about Natsu's actress and what else she's been in. People have been making the connection to my role as the angel in his PV and now there's all this speculation…” She stopped herself. That's not something Ren needed to hear about.

Still, the actor could guess what kind of rumors would be circulating. And he was not happy. That little niggling thought in the back of his head that wanted everyone to know about their relationship seemed to be getting stronger and stronger lately.

"I've been getting weird messages at the office," she continued. "And the last time I went in to school I found a picture of Natsu with an X over her face taped to my shoe locker."

And the thought died. Tsuruga Ren wasn't an arrogant man, but had a reasonable sense of his popularity relative to Fuwa Sho's. It could be so much worse for her if he was the one she was tied to.

"How have the phone interviews been going?" He asked, eager to change the subject.

"Well, I think. They're short, and they hit all the same notes."

"You haven't been letting your temper show?"

"No, I've been keeping it to myself. No flare-ups. But it's easier when they can't see my face."

Ren tapped his top lip with his middle finger. "True. A television show is a different animal altogether."

"And, since you're so experienced with talk shows, I was hoping you might be able to teach me a few tricks," Kyoko said.

He grinned. He liked teaching her.

A few hours later, he walked her to her door and wrapped her up in his arms for a kiss that was far from chaste. She lingered, her lips against his, looked up at him breathlessly. "Thanks," she said. For everything.

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and looked at her, curious.

"Nervous?" He asked.
She shrugged. "A little, maybe. It's a big step for me."

"Well," he said, "I won't tell you that everything's going to be easy, but," he dropped a kiss on her forehead, "I do know that you're going to be amazing."

"As long as I listen to my sempai, right?" She asked archly.

He laughed. "Exactly." He pulled her close, squeezing. "Have a good night, Kyoko-san. Sweet dreams."

She chuckled, "Good night, Ren-san," and went inside the dark, empty restaurant, sagging against the door once it was closed.

She turned on her phone, and 5 more messages sat in her inbox.

*I'll certainly try.*

And so, here she was, in a limo, on her way to her first major solo appearance on a national talk show. Thinking, yet again, about Shotaro. Which was probably his intention.

The fact that he was willing to refer to their relationship in his song and tease that there might be something between them worried her. The fact that he was so intent on her knowing about it worried her even more. What was he trying to do? Maybe it was sabotage. He knew how poorly she was treated because of their relationship when they were younger. Was this an attempt at revenge for the kiss? Letting people think they were involved to turn his fangirls against her? Or was it to remind her how small she was next to him, how easy it would be for him to eclipse her career? One episode together, and she was "the actress who kissed Fuwa Sho," or maybe even "the actress who dated Fuwa Sho."

But Kyoko couldn't turn down the publicity. It would seem strange, for one, and, as always, "professional" was her watchword. A professional actress did whatever she could to get herself recognized; you could be the best actor in the world, but if you didn't have a job, it didn't amount to much. A professional actress worked the promotion tour for her shows to engage viewers; every new show was a new opportunity to raise a project's ratings. A professional actress didn't let personal feelings get in the way of her doing her job, no matter how justified those feelings were.

And she deserved this. She did. Kyoko had spent a year working three jobs to help Shotaro find his dream, something he never could've managed on his own. Without her, he would have been just one more starving wannabe artist in Tokyo, waiting for his big break while working for minimum wage and living in the cheapest apartment he could find. He didn't know how to do laundry, or cook, or clean, let alone how to work a part-time job—she wondered, if she had said no to going with him, would he even have attempted it? Did he love music enough for that?

Kyoko loved acting. And she wanted it to be her life. It was only fair that she get to use him the way he used her. She deserved this publicity.

But she still wasn't sure if she wanted it.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: What's Sho trying to do? Will Kyoko do well in her interview? What has Ren been teaching her? Find out next time on One Take Only!

I hope you enjoyed this installment. And I hope you didn't have to suspend your disbelief too much to believe that the "song" at the beginning was a chart-topper. I am not a particularly poetic person. I am, in fact, primarily a proponent of prose. And I know absolutely nothing about music. Thanks to all who read, comment, leave kudos and subscribe.
Kyoko shuffled to and fro nervously backstage. It was quiet shuffling, of course. It wouldn't do to shuffle loudly. A man in dark clothes stood near the entrance to the soundstage, listening attentively to something on his headset and flipping through the pages on his clipboard for the millionth time. She was supposed to look to him for her cue.

Until then, she shuffled. There was a monitor that showed what was being filmed, including a feed from the camera facing the audience. She found herself counting teenage girls, wondering how many were Fuwa Sho fans. They seemed so harmless, chatting amongst themselves, laughing and snapping selfies, but she knew how vicious they could be.

Finally, the house lights came up and the audience started clapping and screaming. The hostess, Ayame, an elegantly dressed woman in her early forties, glided out on very high heels that Kyoko sincerely hoped would never be a part of her own wardrobe. The announcer, an unseen man with a low, deep voice, introduced her as she strode in and sat down. As if a switch had been flipped, the audience went silent.

"Tonight, we have the pleasure of introducing someone many of you will not have heard of before, but whom I can say with confidence that you have seen at least once. A relative unknown in the industry—my favorite." She leaned forward and pitched her voice into a stage whisper, "With your help, we will surely be able to say that it was my little show that put her on the map when she becomes famous!" A wink, and the audience chuckled, happy to collude with her. "But first, let's see some samples of her work."

The monitor that had displayed the overlaid graphics of the opening credit sequence flickered to life again, and Kyoko saw a familiar face that made her feel fiercely happy. Beautiful long black hair streamed on a floral background advertising Curara soda. Her own face, happy and free, popped up next, and she deflated a bit. Before she could recover, the scene switched to a clip from her PV with Shotaro—the moment she dropped him over the cliff and her wings turned black—and again, almost as quickly, Mio standing tall and defiant in front of her mother. Finally, it settled on Natsu smiling blissfully as a fellow student begged her to stop before going blank again.

"Whew!" Ayame said cheerily. "That made me tired just watching. Can you believe it's all the same person behind those characters?" The surprised murmuring that came from the studio audience suggested that they, in fact, could not believe it. For the most part, Kyoko couldn't make individual words out, but a shouted, "No way!" did find its way to her ears. Naturally the hostess heard as well, and laughed. "I guess not!"

"But she is indeed the same actress. And now you'll all get to meet her. Please welcome Kyouko!" The man with the headset waved at Kyoko and music—the opening theme to Box "R"—swelled as she walked out.
She was almost disappointed when none of the mishaps that pervaded her nightmares of the night before took place. Walking onto the stage, she didn't trip, freeze up, or fall on her face. Instead, she bowed smoothly and sat down in the plush seat next to the host's desk.

"Thank you for having me," Kyoko said to the cheery woman. She was carefully positioned, per her director's instructions, in three-quarter profile, so as to seem attentive to the host while also allowing the audience to feel as if she were accessible to them.

Ayame smiled broadly. "Of course, it's my pleasure. So, Kyouko-san, you've been getting quite a lot of attention lately, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Kyoko with her own, polite smile. It was also well-rehearsed—less stiff than her usual professional expression but not over-the-top or too familiar. It made her mouth hurt. "It's been kind of a whirlwind since the season finale premiered. Not that I'm complaining," she said with a chuckle. Not to you, anyway, she thought.

"I'll bet you have people coming up to you on the street," Ayame said, "wanting to know all about you and your…experiences on set."

Just ask, lady, she wanted to say. Get it over with. Aloud, she said, "Not really, no. I've actually never had anyone recognize me in real life. I'm afraid I just don't stand out very much."

When Ayame just blinked at her, she cringed internally. Oops, she thought. I hope that didn't sound like I was feeling sorry for myself. Maybe I should have just gone along with what she was saying?

"Oh, is that so?" The host said, changing tacks. "I guess that would make sense. You're such a chameleon. Honestly, I can't even imagine how you managed to change so much from one role to the next."

"Makeup, mostly," Kyoko said automatically. Ayame seemed a little taken aback, but the audience burst into laughter, and she followed a step behind. "Makeup makes me look like a different person sometimes, too, especially lately," she pressed a hand to her forehead as if to smooth out nonexistent wrinkles there. "I'm not getting any younger, no matter how I try," she sighed. She waited out a few supportive cries from the audience, mostly awws and noes, with a few "You look great"s and a "We love you, Ya-chan!" thrown in for good measure.

"Thank you, thank you," she said dramatically, "but my youthful days are behind me. My lovely guest, on the other hand, is still so young. It must be nice." She looked at the actress pointedly.

"Um…I suppose it is," Kyoko said, feeling like she had to say something, though she couldn't think of anything to support the statement.

"I still remember my days as a high school student—my first kiss, my first love. Ah, to be young again," she said dreamily. She turned to her guest once again. "Of course, as an actress, your kisses tend to be a little more public," she continued. "I can't imagine what that's like."

But I'm sure you'd love to hear all about it, Kyoko thought irritably.

"In fact, as most of you will know, Kyouko-san here has made such a splash in part because of a very special kiss," and the audience began to hoot and cheer, "which I am ecstatic to say I have a clip of."

What? Kyoko thought, panicked, her stupid, painful smile frozen on her face. Nobody mentioned a
clip! She'd made a point of not watching that ridiculous scene and had no intention of doing it in now on national television. But before she could protest—and really, what would she say?—the monitor next to Ayame turned on.

The clip opened on a generic school hallway as Sagara rounded the corner and nearly ran into Natsu, who said, "Sagara-sempai, what a pleasant surprise. We hardly ever get to see you in this wing of the school."

Kyoko wanted so very badly to bury her head in her hands or plug her ears, but she was very conscious of all the eyes, both real and artificial, that watched her every move. She reminded herself of what Tsuruga-san told her.

"Be polite. If a question makes you uncomfortable, deflect. It's your job as an actress to maintain a certain public persona and to keep your personal feelings private. Be calm, keep a straight face. Even if you're surprised, don't show it. The host may try to shock you into a reaction; don't allow her to."

And so she sat, face turned toward the screen with a pleasant smile on her face, pretending to follow the scene along with everyone else. In reality, she stared through the screen, the image blurry and distant, and focused on the sound of her own breathing rather than the lines.

One thing shocked her out of her careful ignorance, though. A squeal. A loud, mass squeal from at least twenty of the girls in the audience. Suddenly, she was on alert again, just in time to see herself locked in a passionate, "sensuous" kiss with Shotaro.

Now she wanted to hurl.

In this version, the fully realized, edited version, the scene didn't end with the kiss, but with Chitose's shocked face, eyes welling up with tears. Unlike the graphics or the clips from earlier, the clip paused on that final image and stayed on the monitor.

Once the audience had calmed down again, Ayame said in her jocular voice, "I think there are some of us who can relate to that young lady." Cries of agreement rang out along with smatterings of laughter. "I'm sure many in our audience today have dreamed of being the one to kiss Fuwa Sho."

*There's no "one" about it,* thought Kyoko.

"But today, we must to admit the truth: Kyouko-san here has beaten us all to the punch." Ayame heaved an affected sigh. "Oh, well. I suppose we'll have to settle for a second-hand account." She turned to Kyoko expectantly.

The young talento sat stock-still, unsure of what she should say. "*Be honest when you can,*" Tsuruga-san's voice reminded her, "*so you don't have to work as hard to seem genuine. Save the outright lies for when you really need them.*"

"Um…well, it was kind of embarrassing, to be honest," Kyoko said, allowing her very real discomfort to shine through her talk-show façade. "*Having to kiss someone in front of all my coworkers, my sempais, and, of course,*" she nodded at the camera, "*everyone at home. Luckily for me, Nacchan isn't really capable of being embarrassed, so it went smoothly enough.*"

"Nacchan?" The host echoed, surprised. "*Do you mean Natsu?*

"Oh, sorry," Kyoko said with a shy laugh, "*did I say Nacchan? I sometimes get into the habit of calling my characters by nickname.* *Take the bait,* she thought, *change topics.*
"How interesting," Ayame said, but her voice was polite and distant at best. "And how did Nacchan feel about the kiss, if not embarrassed?"

"Hmm?" Kyoko pondered the question for a moment. "…triumphant, I guess?"

"Is that right?" The host practically purred. "So she was happy she finally got to kiss Fuwa-san's character?" She leaned forward eagerly.

"Oh, yes, she was very happy," Kyoko said, still thoughtful. "She was proud that she'd timed the kiss perfectly so as to maximize Chitose's pain and make Sagara feel as if he were really liked, to better crush him later."

The entire studio went quiet then. "How…interesting," Ayame said again, after a moment's pause. This time, her tone was awkward rather than aloof.

"Be careful to create a separation between yourself and the character. Viewers have a tendency to conflate an actor and his role, especially if the actor isn't as well-known." It seemed Tsuruga-san knew what he was talking about, if their reactions were anything to go by.

"Ah, yes," Kyoko said quickly, "she's such a cruel character, the way she thinks. I love working on Box "R", of course, but sometimes I get tired of playing bullies. Mio was the same way." Mio, there, she was even better known than Natsu; there's no way you can pass that up.

"Yes, you do have a tendency to play crueler characters, don't you?" Ayame rallied. "I've heard from one of your co-stars that you're much kinder in real life. Though I suppose it would be hard not to be!"

"I'd certainly like to think so," the actress said, relaxing a little. "But that's what's fun about acting—you get to explore thoughts and feelings you'd never have yourself," she emphasized, trying her best to look earnest.

"Considering the role of Natsu as an unrepentant bully, did you ever imagine you would end up having a love interest?"

Kyoko imagined turning to face the fake painted-on wood of the backdrop and ramming her head into it repeatedly. How could this woman have such a one-track mind?

"No, not at all," she said, keeping her smile pasted firmly in place no matter how much she wanted to grit her teeth. "In fact, it came as a total shock to me. But my director, Anna-san, can be so unpredictable. Every day's a new surprise with him."

"Oh?" Was she just imagining it, or did Ayame's eyes narrow? "How interesting," she said, for the third time that night. It was amazing how much inflection could change the meaning of a phrase; this time, she almost made it sound like a threat. "But what I was really wondering about was the experience of filming the kiss itself. Did you get to practice much?" She raised a suggestive eyebrow.

Kyoko blushed. She couldn't help it—she had practiced. "Some," she said, when a general "Ooh" sound rose from the crowd, "on my own time, not with Fuwa-san. We did do a quick table read and some basic blocking together, but for the kiss, well,"

and she said this with an obvious touch of pride, "I managed to do the official scene in only one take."

"But I'm sure you were tempted to make a few mistakes," Ayame said conspiratorially, "for the chance to do the scene over again?"
"Yeah, right," Kyoko snorted.

If she thought it had gotten quiet before, it was nothing compared to the silence that descended on the studio now. She was sure she could even make out the whirring of the camera across the soundstage.

*It just slipped out,* the actress imagined saying to Anna-san. *I really did try,* she'd tell Tsuruga-san. *She caught me off guard,* she'd say to Sawara-san. Not that it would help. She'd done it. An audience could get past an actress being a little bitter about not being recognized, or being a bit more sadistic than they'd like. But an audience of teen girls with posters of Fuwa Sho pinned up on their walls and in their lockers? The very same demographic that tended to watch her show? They'd never forgive her for snubbing their idol.

"Um…what?" Ayame asked flatly. A confused rumbling started somewhere in the crowd.

"Ah…that is to say..." she wished Tsuruga-san had covered how to fix a screw-up. All his lessons had been more on the preventative side of things, probably because a mistake like this was simply outside the realm of possibility for him. "…I didn't want to do it over?"

"Why not?" Suddenly, the host's eyes were shrewd and calculating. "By all accounts, the two of you got along well enough." *What accounts could you possibly have gotten that from?* Kyoko wondered, bewildered at the assertion. "You'd worked together before, and there are even rumors that you were considering making the onscreen relationship a reality." *Oh, yeah, a completely empty relationship built on lies and manipulation, that sounds like a blast,* she thought, wanting very badly to roll her eyes. *…actually, that sounds like the relationship we already have.* "Is there some reason you didn't want to kiss *Fuwa Sho?*" Ayame said the name almost reverently, but her eyes glittered at the promise of drama.

"It's not—I didn't mean—" she fumbled. *And of course,* of course, *she had to mention those stupid rumors, too.* If she dared to admit how little she liked him when there was speculation about their relationship, her career was essentially forfeit. "I just wanted to say—"

"Was there a fight?" Ayame pressed, "did he offend you somehow? Is he a different person behind the scenes?"

*Yes, yes and yes,* Kyoko thought, panicking, *but there's no way I can say that! And I have to say something!*

"*Don't let her control the conversation too much,*" came a gentle cautioning voice, "*Remember that audiences will assume whatever you don't deny is the tru—*" Ren-san, she shouted in her head, *I love you and all, but shut up!* The voice faded. *Conference. Everyone. Now!*
"Tell them how annoying he is."

"How many texts she gets in a day."

"How entitled and selfish he is."

"How hard she worked while he got to goof off and do whatever he wanted."

"Tell them the long, dark story of how he used her and broke her heart."

"NO!" The head grudge slammed a tiny fist on the table. "This is our interview, about our work. We may have gotten here because these people are obsessed with a stupid—"

"disgusting!"

"nightmarish!"

"grotesque!"

"—kiss," the grudge continued, "but it is supposed to be about us! And we will not give that bastard—"

"asshole!"

"jerk!"

"brat!"

"—the satisfaction of taking over our interview. We will say what we need to say to move on, and then we will make sure that they hear us. Is that clear?"

"Okay~" the grudges grumbled as a group. "Spoilsport," someone added. "Now, let's get to work."

Kyoko blinked. Ayame was still looking at her, eyes aglow, waiting for confirmation of some lurid affair, but it didn't worry her the way it had. She breathed in deep, straightened her posture, and smiled. A real smile, soft and warm, like she was looking at a friend.

"I'm sorry, I guess I'm still a little nervous," she said, "I'm not really used to these kinds of interviews yet. But I don't want to give you the wrong idea. Fuwa-san and I don't have that kind of relationship," Ayame's eyes narrowed again; how dare Kyoko rob her of her scoop? "in fact, we really don't have any relationship."

"Is that right?" The host asked sharply. "Even though this is the second time you've worked together? And even with what he's been saying in his own interviews? Just yesterday, when he went on Nipponet Scoop to celebrate hitting the number one spot, he said that the song wasn't just a song, and that he found his inspiration on set."

"Maybe he meant Rumi-san? She was his real love interest, after all." Kyoko said. "I'm afraid I barely know him. We did work together on his PV, but," she shrugged, "I was a secondary character. We had less than a minute of screen time together."

"He said the kiss was one he would remember for the rest of his life," Ayame insisted.
"I'll remember it, too. It was my first onscreen kiss," Kyoko pointed out. "I doubt he meant anything else by what he said."

"Then why were you so against kissing him more than once?" The host demanded.

"I wasn't," Kyoko lied through her teeth. "I just meant I didn't think of making mistakes. You have to understand," she explained, "we were on a very tight schedule. He was only able to film for a few days. Any delays would have been catastrophic. I would never disrupt production intentionally. I'm sure," she said, pushing through the pain of what she was about to say, "I'm sure that Fuwa Sho is a perfectly nice person. But there's nothing between us, good or bad." With this line, she stared directly into the camera, willing anyone—and maybe even a particular someone—to understand how strongly she felt the truth of that statement.

"Nothing?" Ayame said, a bit deflated now. "Well, you must have some opinion. Did he work well with others on set?"

"He completed his job admirably," said Kyoko.

"And the kiss? Was it good?"

"It was a convincing stage kiss."

"What about the song? Did you like it?"

"It fit the director's needs very well."

"I don't suppose there's anything interesting you could say about him?" Her voice was raised in exasperation.

"I'm sorry," Kyoko said, stopping just short of borrowing the pointedly obnoxious shrug Tsuruga-san had once used on Bou. "I just don't know him. I'd be happy to talk about the other actors I've worked with, on Box "R" and other projects."

"Just one word. Anything." She was practically begging now.

"Well—" Don't. You've come this far. Deny, deny, deny. Just say no. Stop, drop and roll. Whatever you do, don't engage. "If it's just one..." Dammit, Kyoko.

"Yes?" Ayame leaned in again.

"He's...cute," she said, the corners of her mouth creeping up a bit.

"Isn't he, though?" The host gushed, relieved. "He's the mysterious bad-boy type, of course, but there's something so very adorable about him."

"Like a puppy," her guest suggested.

"Oh, yes. I certainly could never hope to compete with him, I must say. So young and energetic."

"Oh, I don't know, Ayame-san," Kyoko said pleasantly. "I think there's a lot to be said for maturity."

With the help of a commercial break and a subsequent change in topic—hints for the next season, working with the likes of Tsuruga Ren, how she came to be an actress—Kyoko felt that she could honestly say she finished her interview successfully. It was like she'd gotten over an immense hill. The rumors, the kiss...they were behind her. She would give a few more interviews, but with what
she'd said today she had a feeling they'd taper off pretty soon. In a few weeks she'd start work on the second season of Box "R" and a new project where she'd get to play a ninja.

Time was marching on, and she was more than happy to let it.

As she got off work, she silenced her phone without a second thought. This was her night and she intended to enjoy it.

She knocked at a familiar door, and shielded her eyes instinctively from the smile that greeted her. The pain that came was a faint prickle, the grudges' having retreated safely to their bunker once again.

"Hello," He said.

"Hello, Ren-san," Kyoko bowed. She wobbled a bit as she straightened up.

"Tired?" He asked, concerned.

"A bit," she admitted. "I had a half day of LoveMe work over at TBM after the taping." He offered her his arm and she flushed. "I can still walk on my own!"

"Of course you can," he laughed, "but you must admit this would be more fun."

Kyoko frowned and stalked past him, ignoring the proffered limb, and flounced down on the couch. She couldn't stop a satisfied sigh from escaping, and his face was all concern again.

"You know, if you're that tired, you didn't have to come over. We could have had dinner some other night," Ren said kindly.

"Of course I had to come over," she said, astonished. "I had to know what you thought of the interview. If you had time to watch it," she amended hastily.

"I wouldn't have missed it," Ren said gently. "You did well. But I could have told you that over the phone just as easily. You're an actress, remember—"

"And I have to take care of my health, I know," Kyoko said, smiling. "I'm just a tad worn-out. Believe me, I've had worse, some of it at your hands." She gripped his hand in hers now. "Besides, I wanted to see you."

"Well," his face softened, and as she tugged at his hand, he sat down next to her, pulling her close. "If you insist. I am a little curious about a few of your answers."

"Is that right?" She asked, smirking.

"You told that woman I was a 'demon king'," Ren said slowly. "And the scariest man you've ever met."

"You told me to tell the truth as much as possible," Kyoko teased. "I was just following your advice."

"And what about me" he put his lips to her ear, whispering, "exactly" the lips traveled down the soft flesh of her neck, sucking tenderly, "is so scary?" they settled just above her collarbone. He could feel her shiver against his chest.

Kyoko tilted her head up to meet his eyes with her own. There was a glimmer there, but not one of fear. "Everything," she said, a lazy smile crossing her face.
Later that night, Ren was once again dropping Kyoko off at her home. They sat outside the
restaurant in silence for a while, before Kyoko cleared her throat.

"Ren-san?" She asked. "Is there something on your mind? You've been quiet the whole drive."

He thought about just shrugging it off, but her concerned expression made him think twice. "I was
thinking about how we're going to talk about" he gestured at the two of them collectively, "this. You
seemed okay with poking fun at me in the interview, and you even sort of hinted at us with that
'mature' comment."

She looked mildly discomfited. "I didn't think it was that obvious. I'm sorry. I think a little bit of
Setsu seeped in."

"It's okay, I didn't bother me. I'm just wondering what the next step is. And when it is." He paused,
pensively rubbing his neck. "I guess I'd just like to know how long it'll be before I get to call you
my girlfriend in public."

Kyoko's face flushed in that fetching way he loved, and he wondered if it was the word "girlfriend"
that had set her off. "It's no rush, and I'm all for discretion," he added preemptively, "really, I don't
mind keeping things quiet. And I like having you all to myself. But I can't deny it would be nice to
be able to say the word."

"It's embarrassing," she said quietly, avoiding his eyes.

"Talking about our relationship?" Ren asked. He was feeling embarrassingly unmanly himself, with
this "where are we headed?" speech.

"No. Well, yes," she admitted. "But…well, it's silly. I sort of have this idea…" She played with seat
belt hanging by her side.

"Oh?"

"About when we'd say it. You know, when we'd tell the president or when we'd tell the truth if
someone asked."

"So you have thought about it?" Ren said, interested.

"Of course," the actress responded. "But it's…I don't want to say it. You'll laugh."

"I won't," he said firmly, grasping her hand. "Please, tell me."

"You know, when I was a kid…" She twisted the belt around her wrist, then unwound it again,
looking everywhere but at him, "for a while, I thought it was me they hated. 'Cause I was close to Sh
—to him," she course-corrected. "But then I realized it wasn't just me. I saw so many other girls—
classmates and yearmates and even upperclassmen—confess their feelings and get bullied for it.

"But there was one girl, Mika, who asked him out and nobody got mad at her. They grumbled,
some, because they liked him, too, but they didn't steal her slippers or put flowers on her desk. She
was rich, and pretty, and she'd even started a modeling career. In middle school, that pretty much
made her royalty. Everybody said things like, 'if it's her, it's okay,' or 'we can't compete with that.'
And that's the thing, isn't it?"

"Fans want to be able to imagine themselves with their idol. If he's dating someone, it ruins the
illusion, but especially if it's someone ordinary. If it's just anybody, they can't help but think, 'why not
me? Aren't I just as good?' But with Mika, it made sense to them. They saw her as worthy. It
balanced out. And she never got picked on, not once."

Kyoko finally turned to meet his eyes again. "I want to be a great actress. I want to be able to do nothing but act, all day long. No other jobs, no LoveMe stuff. I want to have interviews that are about my work, directors who want me for their projects for me, and my pick of characters and scripts." Her eyes lit up with passion. "And...I want to get to a point where I can stand by your side and no one can say that I don't deserve to be where I am." She sighed and flicked a strand of hair out of her face. "Does that sound silly?" She asked, but before he could answer, she plowed on. "I know it'll probably be a really long time, if it ever happens, and I know it makes me sound conceited, to think that I'd ever be as great as—"

Ren put a finger to her lips, quieting her. His heart swelled with pride as he looked at this beautiful, amazing young woman who seemed for a moment to be filled with a kind of irresistible power. He couldn't look away, she shined so brightly.

"You'll get there," he said softly. "And I'll be right here waiting when you do."

Elsewhere, Fuwa Sho paced around his bedroom, seething. Shoko's eyes followed along as he traced one figure eight after another. It was like watching a bee dance, right down to the shock of yellow hair and the black clothes.

"Sho," she said, tired, "she was just trying to quell the rumors. You had to know it would bother her, the things you've been saying. Kyouko-chan's not the type to want that kind of attention. I know you meant well, but—"

"I got her more publicity than that boring girl could ever get by herself," he said, "and then she turns around and acts like we don't even know each other." Nothing, her voice echoed in his head. Nothing? Is that what she called ten years together?

Shoko sighed. "Isn't that what you two agreed on? You've always made a point of pretending you aren't affiliated."

"No, she did," he snapped. "I didn't care one way or the other."

"Well, her career is just starting off," she reasoned. "I'm sure she wants to be known on her own merits."

"She had no problem being 'affiliated' with Tsuruga Ren," he retorted, kicking the leg of his bed, then wincing. His boots were fashionable, but protective footwear they were not. Maybe he should invest in something with a steel toe.

"He's her sempai. That's different. What's between the two of you is personal, not professional."

"Oh yeah, he's so professional," Shotaro spat. "And anyway, we've worked together twice, more than those two have."

"One episode and an entire drama aren't exactly on the same level," Shoko said. For about the fifth time since the interview aired. "Why are you so bothered by this, anyway? I thought you didn't care what Kyouko-chan does. You're just childhood friends, remember?"

"Of course I don't care," he snapped. "I can have any girl I want. I don't give a damn what she does or who she kisses."

Shoko blinked. That almost sounded like a confession of love, if you spoke fluent Fuwa Sho. "Are
you still hung up on that? So he taught her how to kiss. So what? Honestly, Sho, you're sounding like a dog in manger."

Sho stopped his apian dance and stared openly at her. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You know, the Aesop's fable?" More staring. I forget sometimes, he hasn't even finished high school, she thought. And it's not as if he's a great reader to start with. "The dog in the manger. It's about a little dog who stands in a manger and barks whenever the cows get close."

"And a manger is—?" He prompted.

"It's a box with hay in it," Shoko barked impatiently. "Cows eat hay. Dogs don't."

"Okay?" Sho looked at her like she had two heads. "So? What's your point?"

She resisted the suddenly rising urge to snap his pretty-boy neck. "The dog can't and won't eat the hay because he's a dog, but he won't let the cows, who do want to eat it, come anywhere near it. He doesn't care that the hay is going to waste and the cows aren't getting what they need; all he cares about is marking his territory." When his furrowed brow refused to unknit, she put it in even plainer terms. "You're the dog. You say over and over that you don't want Kyouko-chan for yourself, but if anybody else gets anywhere close to her, even if it's totally innocent—"

"Innocent?" He snorted. "There's nothing innocent —"

"—you stand there and whine and growl over it. If you want the hay so badly, just eat it yourself!" She raised her voice over his protestations.

"You think I wouldn't if I could?" Shotaro yelled suddenly. Her mouth snapped shut. Did he seriously just—? "But I can't, can I? I'm just a friggin' puppy, right?" And he stormed out, slamming the door behind him. Distantly, she heard the outer door to the apartment slam, too.

Puppy? Shoko thought, confused. I called him a dog.

In the elevator, Sho started pacing all over again, swearing under his breath. He pulled out his phone and dialed her number, determined to give her a piece of his mind, when the phone beeped to tell him he was out of range. He shouldn't call her, anyway, he realized. That would just let her know she'd gotten to him. He shoved the phone back in his pocket. No, better to let her think it hadn't bothered him at all.

That's why she said that stuff, he knew. To bug him. Which meant she was thinking about him. In fact, she was probably thinking about him right now. Between the song, the interviews, and the texts, there was no way she could ignore him. She could pretend she didn't care, that there was nothing between them, but at the end of the day, he had the biggest part of her heart.

Didn't he?
The End

Chapter End Notes

Read on for omakes :)
Great Minds

Chiori and Kanae sat in the LoveMe room, chairs pulled up in front of a laptop borrowed from the managers' desk. They were having an impromptu viewing party; neither had been free to watch Kyoko's interview the night before and they knew she would ask their opinion first thing the next time they met.

Both girls rolled their eyes all the way through the host trying to bait Kyoko into talking about the kiss or the so-called "relationship" she had with Fuwa Sho. After watching an ad for paper towels they were able to click on to the next segment, where the host finally got it into her head to ask Kyoko about herself. It was easy to see from the way she sat and talked how much more comfortable she was with this topic, but then the conversation hit something of a stumbling block.

"No," Ayame said, "I don't think you understood my question. I asked when you knew you wanted to become an actress."

"Yes, I know," Kyoko replied lightly. "And as I said, it was about a year and a half ago."

"I don't mean when you debuted, Kyouko-san," the host contended. "I mean when you first got it into your head to try acting as a career. Like for instance, many actors caught the bug when they had to perform in school plays, something like that?"

"Oh, no," Kyoko said. "I was always behind the scenes for plays and festivals. I mostly just helped with the costumes."

"Did you maybe see an actor that inspired you?" Ayame asked. "In a movie or a television show? Or was there an idol you looked up to as a child? What was it that made you want to take up acting?"

"A childhood friend of mine made…a suggestion," she said carefully. "He told me to go into show business, and I decided it was something I was interested in."

"And when was this?" The host asked, her goal in arm's reach.

"About a year and a half ago," Kyoko said.

Sweat started beading on Ayame's forehead. "Why don't we move on?" She suggested. "So you helped with costumes as a child. Do you have any interest in clothing design?"

"Not especially," Kyoko said. "I just happened to be the best in my class at sewing." She fidgeted sheepishly. "This is going to make me sound so old-fashioned," she said awkwardly, "but I'm quite proud of my skills when it comes to crafts and cooking."
"Well, there's nothing wrong with being a little old-fashioned," came the response. "And a good Japanese girl should have some household skills, I think. Do you have a specialty? What kind of dishes are you best at?"

Kyoko brightened at the question. "Well, I'm rather good at traditional Kyoto cuisine, even the high-class type, and I also do fairly well with western pastries. But I think what I'm proudest of would have to be the Katsura technique."

"I'm sorry…what?" Ayame asked, floored. "The Katsura technique? You don't mean the advanced knife technique used to cut a vegetable into an unbroken, paper-thin sheet?"

"Yes," Kyoko nodded eagerly. "It took me a long time to master. I started as a young girl. It's actually part of the reason I made it into LME."

"I…" The host seemed lost for words. "Well, that's…" She trailed off, mouth gaping uselessly. "You know, I think we're nearly out of time, so…um…do you have anything you can tell us about the next season of Box "R", which will begin airing in October?"

As Kyoko dutifully reported whatever pre-approved information the director told her to pass along, they clicked out of the window and each started gathering up their things.

"Huh," Chiori said, in a tone of mild surprise, and closed the laptop with a click.

"Yes, Amamiya-san?" Her fellow LoveMe member asked.

"Hmm? Nothing important. Just thinking about how I kind of hate Kyouko-san right now."

"Oh, that." Kanae shrugged. "You get used to it."

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**This Director…**

"Kyouko-chan!" Director Anna waved wildly at the young woman, who was seated at a cafeteria table flipping through a stack of paper.

"Anna-san!" Kyoko jumped up and bowed. "Good afternoon."

"I'm glad you could come by and meet me," he said cheerfully, pulling out a chair. "I watched the interview. You did great!"

Kyoko blushed. "Thank you, sir. I took your advice to heart."

"And lied. Like, a lot," he laughed. "You'll be a top-notch actress, I'd bet on it."

The blush intensified. "I was trying to be delicate," she said. "It's unprofessional to—"

He waved a hand, cutting her off. "Hey, we all do it. We might be in the public eye, but our business is our business, you know?"

"Yes, sir," she nodded, shocked to find that she agreed with him. _Every so often, he does say something sensible, doesn't he?_

"And it was all worth it, too. Have you seen the ratings?" Kyoko shook her head. She'd been kind of busy lately. "They exploded! Having Fuwa-san on the show and being the first place anybody heard his latest single? People are streaming the episode left and right! The song is playing on practically every radio station, and the network's already re-run the episode a couple of times. We might get
even get a special out of the deal." He was charged with energy, throwing his hands up in big, sweeping gestures with every sentence. "I have to say, this was one of the best ideas I've ever had."

Kyoko wasn't sure if she agreed with that. "Well, Box "R" is a good show, and I know people will enjoy it once they give it a chance. I'm glad it's worked out so well," she said diplomatically.

"And I was thinking," he said, even more excited now, "we could do it again. Not with Fuwa Sho, mind you," he backtracked a little, "'cause I don't think anybody wants another go-round with him, but a partnership with a band or singer. It just makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Um—"

"Pop groups and school dramas, you know?" He went on, "we hit the same demographics. We could get a reputation for having the latest music, spice up the show."

"Well—"

"So I was looking around, trying to find out what groups are popular with our audience right now, and I came across a band with sort of the same vibe as Fuwa Sho, still visual kei but more mysterious and spooky," he expounded.

"Sir—"

"You might have heard of them, Vie Ghoul? What am I saying, you're a teenage girl, too, of course you have. I've already put in a call with their agency. We're only in talks for the song deal right now, but who knows? A cameo or two—"

"Director Anna!" Kyoko said sharply. He finally actually looked at the girl to whom he was talking, her face dark and stern. "Do you remember when you told me to come to you if anything was troubling me?"

"Yes, of course," he said, confused at her expression. "I want you to be able to talk to me, Kyouko-chan. This relationship only works—"

"Then hear me now," she interrupted, grudges rising at her back, the lights flickering around them. "Song deal or not, I don't care, but if you bring those Beagles on set," and she rose out of her seat to tower over the director, enunciating clearly, with plain malice in each drawn-out syllable, "It. Would. Trouble. Me."

He shrunk back in his chair, forehead pouring down sweat. "Um…okay. So…no cameos." Anna-san nodded. "Got it."

Kyoko's face brightened, and she sat back down. "I really am glad the show's doing so well," she said. "And I've already gotten several new requests," she fanned out the papers she had piled on the table. "It feels like I'm moving forward, you know?"

When she looked at the director, waiting for him to continue the conversation, he started and nearly toppled sideways out of his seat. "Oh, is that so? How nice."

As she kept talking, looking every bit the sweet schoolgirl, he couldn't help but think that he would be needing that omamori, after all.

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Date Night
"So, Ren, I was thinking," Yashiro said, as they got in the elevator, leaning in with a sly smile and a lowered voice. "I checked with Sawara-san, and Kyouko-chan has a free night tonight."

"Oh?" Ren asked mildly. "That must be nice for her."

"Re~n," his manager practically whined. "You have tonight free, too, remember?"

"So I do," said Ren, still pointedly uninterested.

"So if I ask, I bet I could get Kyouko-chan to come over and cook you dinner." He grew exasperated at his charge's lack of enthusiasm. "Kyouko-chan! The girl you're in love with!" His voice rose until Ren glared at him.

"I thought we agreed you'd stop bringing that up," he growled dangerously. "After the last time. What if that reporter had overheard you?"

"I know, I know," Yashiro said, shamefaced. "But you keep passing up all the opportunities I've tried to give you! Last week, I shifted half your schedule around figuring you'd at least talk to her, but when I asked she said she'd never heard from you. It's exhausting."

"Well, I'm sorry, Yashiro-san," the actor said. "But I do have other things—and people—in my life than Mogami-san, as does she. And I'm not going to disturb her just to fulfill your fantasies. Our lives aren't a Dating Sim."

"I just..." the manager sighed, fiddling with the latch on his briefcase. "I want you to be happy, that's all, Ren."

Ren looked conflicted for a moment, almost as if he wanted to say something, and then he nodded. "I know you do," said tersely.

"So? Do you think you'll see her tonight? I'm sure I can arrange it." Yashiro continued, the elevator shuddering to a stop and announcing, with a ding, that they'd arrived at the parking garage.

"I can't," Ren said immediately. "I already have plans."

"Again? With who?"

"A friend. From school."

"You dropped out of school at fifteen," said Yashiro. "I haven't heard you mention a single friend before."

"We reconnected," said Ren. "…online. It's amazing the people you meet on...er...Facebook."

"You have a Facebook account?" The older man asked, shocked. "Since when?"

"Oh, look, there's Mogami-san," he said quickly.

The young actress was bending over the bike rack near the garage's stairs. "Oh, hello, Tsuruga-san," she bowed. "Yashiro-san. I hope you're well."

"Hi, Kyouko-chan," said Yashiro, looking at Ren oddly. Since when did they speak to each other so formally? "Do you have a busy night tonight?"
"No," said Kyoko cheerfully. "I'll be done early."

"Any chance you'd care to help me out with this guy here?" He asked, jabbing a thumb at Ren. "The way he eats, it's a tragedy."

"Oh, I'd love to," she said, "but I'm afraid I already made plans to help out at the restaurant tonight."

"Oh," Yashiro said. "So you have a night off and you…work?"

"Yes," she nodded. "I haven't helped the couple I live with in such a long time. I felt it was only proper."

"Okay…" he sighed again. And now she's talking like that to me, too. It's like I can't win. "Come on, Ren," he said, leading the way to the car.

Ren nodded and followed him to the silver doors before pausing for a moment, "actually, I'm sorry, but could you go ahead? I think I left something in the office."

"Hmm?" Yashiro asked, surprised. "If you want. I could just come with you—"

"No, that's okay. I'll just be a moment."

"All right," said Yashiro. "I guess I'll go, then?" He walk off as the actors looked in opposite directions, as if unaware the other existed. It's so strange. A few months back they'd be happy to spend time together. Now it's like they would rather be anywhere but with each other.

Maybe it's just not going to happen, he thought glumly. And here I thought those two were meant to be.

The moment the manager was out of earshot, Kyoko and Ren turned to face each other.

"I feel bad," Kyoko confessed. "He's trying so hard."

"But it's the fact that he tries so hard that's the problem," Ren reminded her. "If we let him in on it—"

"I know," she said, "but maybe he'll surprise us. He's discreet about so much. If we just ask…"

"I want to, believe me," Ren said. "I just don't think it's time yet."

"Yet," she repeated. "So eventually?"

"Eventually, yes. I need time to think of the best way to frame it. I don't want the poor guy to explode," he said, smirking.


"I think we're doing okay," Ren disagreed. "Working at the Darumaya makes sense."

"Yeah, but last week when he asked I told him I was going to Disneyland." She shook her head ruefully. "At eight o'clock at night. It made no sense, and he looked at me like I was insane."

"…Okay, it is getting a little harder," Ren admitted, thinking of his own excuse. "But I'm about to start this new project, and I'll have to film on location—" Kyoko looked amused. "I'll figure it out. I promise."
"I know you will," she said, laughing, before stretching up to plant a kiss on his cheek. "7 p.m., your place?"

"See you then," he said, and watched her ride off on her bike before heading back to his car.

Yashiro looked at him oddly when he arrived. "Where is it?"

"Where is what?" Ren asked.

"You said you forgot something. Where is it?"

"Oh…" The actor glanced down at his empty hands. "Um…I was wrong." He said lamely. "I didn't forget it after all."

"Okay…" his manager said slowly. "Well, I guess we'd better get going. You wouldn't want to keep your Facebook friend waiting."

"Right." Ren said, shifting around, feeling for his keys. "Um, here they are."

Yahsiro just stared.

He got in the car and revved the engine. Soon, he thought, I have to tell him soon. This is going to make me crazy. Yashiro continued to watch him, a bemused look on his face. Or at least make him think I am.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone who read this. I hope you enjoyed One Take Only, that the ending met your expectations, and that I did the learning-to-kiss fic justice. I especially hope that I managed to surprise you once or twice along the way.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!