



Summer

BEFORE

Petals fall from the sky as the train doors open, letting me onto the platform. The summer heat hits me like a wall. I spin around, taking in all the foreign signs. I'm supposed to meet Daniel back at the hotel, but I seem to have gotten lost along the way again. We're on the annual school trip to Japan. It's our last day in Tokyo before we head to our next stop. I woke up early this morning to film some shots of the city for my senior project. Jasmine mentioned this café by the river I needed to see before I left. I must have taken the wrong train on my way back. I pull out my phone again, trying to make sense of where I am.

There's a new message from Daniel.

where did you go?

I send him a quick response.

sorry. ran out to grab some
shots. be back soon!

Daniel has a surprise planned for us later today. We're supposed to take a ferry across the water to a place he hasn't told me about yet. But it leaves in a few hours and I still need to get back to the hotel and change. It's been almost a year since our kiss on the rooftop. I thought our friendship would have blossomed into something new. At least, I wanted it to. But we haven't really acknowledged it since the night it happened. I was hoping this trip would bring us closer. There's something romantic about exploring a new city together.

I wipe sweat from my brow and make my way out of the station. The streets are crowded with people. I keep glancing at my phone, confused by the map. None of the buildings look familiar. As I turn my head, someone from the crowd makes me go still. He's taller than everyone else, with waves of black hair falling past his ears. His shoulders are broad, framed nicely in a billowy blue-striped shirt. I take in the rest of this stranger as he comes toward me. For a moment, I forget I'm lost.

The light must have turned green because the crowd starts moving again. I snap back to myself as my phone vibrates in my hand, telling me to cross the street. Another text message from Daniel pops up, asking me where I am.

Maybe it's the glare from the sun that blocks my vision. Or the fact that I'm distracted by the notifications on my phone. Because I don't see the delivery bike coming. It's one of those moments that happens in slow motion. A bell rings as I step off the sidewalk, oblivious to the incoming crash . . . when someone appears from the side, grabbing the handle-

bar. He must have *squeezed* the brakes, because the bike halts abruptly as the driver flips forward, flying out of his seat—but the stranger catches him by the back of his hoodie, helping him land on his feet.

It takes my brain a second to process the scene. Then relief floods through me as I look around, blinking wildly. The bicycle bell still rings in my ear as his face comes into focus. The guy in the blue-striped shirt stares back at me. The one I noticed a moment ago, standing half a head taller than me, waves of black hair blowing in the breeze of traffic. He says something to the driver, gesturing my way.

The driver nods at me and says, “Gomen’nasai.” I practiced enough Japanese last semester to make out the word *sorry*. Then he grabs his bicycle and rides off again. Before I can breathe out a *thank you for saving me*, the guy in blue stripes turns to me and says something else I don’t understand.

“What was that?” I ask.

“You should watch out for bicycles,” he says.

I let out a breath, nodding graciously. “Yeah, right. I mean, *thank you*. Sorry, I just got lost and wasn’t paying attention to—”

“Where are you going?”

“Oh—” I pull up the address on my phone. “Just back to my hotel. It should be around here somewhere.”

“Want me to take a look?” He holds out a hand.

“Okay,” I say, handing him my phone.

He glances at the screen. “The Asakusa Hotel in Taitō?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“You really are lost,” he says, handing me back my phone.
“That’s in the other direction.”

“Wait, seriously?”

He nods. “Taitō is east from here. You’re in Asagaya.”

“*Asagaya*? I don’t even know where that is!” I stare at the map again, wondering how I ended up here.

“Sounds like you took the wrong train.”

“How do I get back now?”

“I can take you there,” he says.

I look up. “Really?”

He smiles. “I’m actually heading the same way.”

“What a coincidence,” I say, adjusting the bag over my shoulder. “I would really appreciate that.”

“I have a few stops to make first,” he adds. “It shouldn’t take long, though. You can come with me if you’d like.”

“Oh—”

“Unless you have somewhere important to be.”

I take him in again. His shirt hangs loosely from his shoulders, sunlight partially seeping through it. I know Daniel is waiting for me at the hotel. But I don’t want to go off on my own and get lost again. “No, I have time,” I decide.

“Then let’s get going.”

He turns around, sliding his hands into his pockets. Then he walks off without another word. I hesitate on the sidewalk for a moment. Then I put my phone away and follow him through the crowd. As we cross the street, he glances over his shoulder and says, “I’m Haru, by the way.”

“I’m Eric.”

“Where are you from?”

“Chicago.”

“How long have you been visiting Tokyo?”

“About two weeks.”

“Welcome,” he says.

We walk another block before Haru turns the corner, leading us into a shopping street. Lanterns hang from canopies of mom-and-pop storefronts. Looks like a festival is taking place. Paper stars have been tied to electrical poles, stirring in the air like parade floats. I take in all the decorations and say, “Is today a holiday?”

“It’s the Star Festival.”

“What’s that?”

Haru glances to the right, where a man is sitting on a wooden stool, painting in the middle of the street. He gestures at him and whispers, “See what he’s painting there?” A man and woman in long robes are floating in a starry sky, their hands outstretched toward each other, the moon glowing behind them. “That’s Princess Orihime and her husband, Hikoboshi. The two were forbidden to see each other, separated by the stars. Orihime was so heartbroken that her father, god of the heavens, allowed them to meet once every year. It happens on the seventh day of the seventh month. So the festival celebrates their reunion.”

“Why were they separated?”

“The two spent so much time together, they forgot their duties to the world. So the gods forced them apart,” he explains. “But it’s only a story.”

I stare at the painting. “Well, I’m glad they get to meet again.”