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ALSO BY MIEKO KAWAKAMI

*Ms Ice Sandwich*

*Breasts and Eggs*

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*All the Lovers in the Night*

**SISTERS  
IN  
YELLOW**

**MIEKO  
KAWAKAMI**

Translated by Laurel Taylor and Hitomi Yoshio

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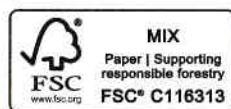
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## CONTENTS

1. Reunion	3
2. Fortunes	19
3. Grand Opening	51
4. Premonition	75
5. Springtime of Youth	103
6. Touchstone	123
7. One Big Happy Family	165
8. Initiation	225
9. Business Is Booming	257
10. Borderline	321
11. Blackout	345
12. Back to Square One	379
13. Yellow Falling	411

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**IN**

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## ONE

## REUNION

## 1.

I used to think I'd never forget her, no matter where I ended up, no matter how many years passed, no matter what happened to me.

But once I saw her name in that article on the web, I realized I'd forgotten everything about her—her name, her existence, the time we'd spent together, what we'd done, and of course the fact I'd believed I'd never forget her.

Kimiko Yoshikawa.

For a second, I wondered if maybe it was somebody with the same name, but I couldn't shake the feeling that it was the Kimiko I used to know.

Kimiko Yoshikawa, 60, an unemployed Shinjuku resident, appeared in Tokyo District Court on Dec. 23 for her first public hearing. Yoshikawa has been charged with blackmail, abduction, and battery. She allegedly confined the victim—a woman in her twenties from Ichikawa, Chiba—to a room in her Shinjuku apartment, where she battered the young woman over a 15-month period. During the arraignment, Yoshikawa invoked her right to remain silent. Her attorney entered a plea of not guilty on her behalf.

In opening remarks, the prosecution stated that the vic-

Kimiko moved in with Yoshikawa in 2017 after a period of prolonged housing instability. The two initially lived together without incident, but the defendant began to take control of the woman's personal belongings and social life, monitoring her movements. On multiple occasions, the defendant threatened the victim, telling her she'd 'never survive on her own' and subsequently breaking her will to escape. She was eventually locked in the apartment under the defendant's control and was repeatedly beaten and forced to follow the defendant's orders. The incident came to light last May, when the woman escaped and alerted the authorities.

I read the article three times, and once I had, I tried to exhale the huge lump that had formed deep in my chest. My fingers were trembling. It was her. Kimiko. It had to be her.

I searched the name "Kimiko Yoshikawa," which brought up one similar article, and another report just a few lines long, both detailed with only the bare minimum. My other returns were websites suggesting names for baby girls or offering fortune-telling based on the kanji in a given name. On the internet, my Kimiko didn't exist outside the information I'd already found.

I tried to put my thoughts in order. I went back to the page I'd first read and checked the date: January 10, 2020. Three months ago. And the article said the incident itself took place last year, in May 2019.

No matter how carefully I read, I couldn't wrap my head around that day, that year. I understood that it had been three months since Kimiko's first court date, but I didn't understand what that meant for the victim and the others involved. How had they been affected? How had everything unfolded in court? What would happen to Kimiko? Where could I go to find out?

I had no idea how police investigations or prisons worked. What came to mind were bleak gray cells, handcuffs, stone-faced judges, courtroom sketches—ham-fisted scenes I'd seen on crime shows or in the news.

And Kimiko's face.

Kimiko the way she looked those few years we'd lived together, back when I was young, some twenty years ago. The article said she was sixty. I couldn't believe it. Of course, two decades *had* passed. I was forty now, but attaching the number sixty to Kimiko's name seemed somehow unreal.

I closed my eyes and told myself I'd be okay. I had nothing to do with what had happened in Kimiko's Shinjuku apartment. There was nothing to worry about. I didn't know what Kimiko had been doing these past twenty years, we weren't in contact—in no sense did we have anything to do with each other. All that was long past, finished. Whatever else she'd done wasn't public knowledge—I couldn't find any articles on her besides the one about this incident. Not on the internet, at least. *It's okay*, I told myself over and over. *It'll be okay*.

When I finally looked up from my phone, I was surprised to find the room heavy with the deepening blue of evening, the shadows around me growing thicker. On my low table was a plate of spaghetti topped with boil-in-bag Bolognese—untouched. In the drawing gloom of night, the pasta no longer looked like food.

I kept waking up that night, and when morning came, I'd barely slept.

Backlit by the spring morning sunlight, my curtains looked like giant sheets of white construction paper. I closed my eyes against their brightness and watched colors appear and burst behind my eyelids. Dark blue, deep red, yellow—and then Kimiko's face appeared.

She gathered her long unruly hair in a black tail and said with a smile, I've got so much hair I bet I could hide a whole black cat in here. I laughed—we all did. That old house. Its small rooms, clutter everywhere except the entryway, which was always neat and tidy. The rule was you could only have two pairs of shoes out front because the entryway was where good luck entered and the bathroom was where it exited, which meant both of those parts of the house always had to be immaculate.

I closed my eyes and tossed and turned, trying to shake off the

images in my head. But things I'd long forgotten to even remember came back to me one by one, as if linked hand in hand. The squeak of the warped hallway floors became our laughter and the swirl of the familiar woodgrain on the ceiling became someone's cigarette smoke. My memories were whispering to me.

Makeup left scattered in front of the mirror, cheap particle board furniture stuffed with clothes and underthings in the closet, baskets stacked full of cup ramen in our little kitchen. The images awoke even the scent of the days when we'd lived there.

I lay curled in bed worrying for about half an hour before I finally sent a message to our work group chat.

*—Good morning, everyone. This is Ito. I've had a cough since yesterday. I don't have a fever, but just to be on the safe side, I think I'd better take the day off. I hope that's okay.*

The person in charge of scheduling wrote back right away.

*—Understood. We'll be deciding on COVID policies at the beginning of next week, so I'll keep you updated. Given everything that's going on, I also need to let management know you're not feeling well. Feel better soon!*

*—Thank you! I think it's probably a normal cold, but if I get a fever, I'll let you know right away. Thanks again.*

Until the middle of last month, people still didn't quite believe how quickly the virus might spread. There were a lot of opinions flying around, and most people said it was basically the flu, so there was no need to be scared, no need to wear a mask. It felt like the world was suspended between nerves and bizarre excitement, but life was still well within the bounds of normalcy.

But between the end of February and beginning of March, as news from overseas grew more and more terrifying, rumors of Japan's own lockdown finally started flying.

And then five days ago, the government declared a national state of emergency, and the tension that had been gradually building burst. The virus was no longer just a story on the news—there was panic-buying in the supermarkets. Masks,

hand sanitizer, disinfectants, and toilet paper vanished from the drugstore shelves, and soon after, people disappeared from the streets. All kinds of new measures were put in place where I worked. I had a part-time job as a salesclerk at a take-out deli run by a major supermarket. We had locations throughout the city, but my branch was in the shopping district a few minutes' walk from my apartment.

Ours was a small shop, with about thirty sides and salads in lines across the counter and in the cold case. Customers could choose what they wanted, and we'd pack their choices into plastic containers for carryout. We only sold the food—everything was made fresh off-site at a central facility each morning, so we didn't even have a galley kitchen, and the deli space itself was so small it couldn't fit more than four people at a time. In the three years I'd worked there, the menu had never once changed, and I began to wonder if the people who stopped by day in and day out—we had a lot of regulars—ever got tired of our food, but in fact, the monotony seemed to give them a sense of comfort. Our sales were good, and our shop was so popular we always had a line out the door at lunch- and dinnertime. By late last month, though, you could tell something was off: most of our customers disappeared, and when they did show up, they got into arguments about whether to wear masks—we even got phone calls complaining that we weren't taking enough measures to protect customers in the store.

Tucked into my futon, I thought about how maybe I shouldn't have messaged my coworkers that I had a cough. Why had I lied? What was I thinking, saying I had a cough at a time like this? I had no idea.

After a moment, I picked up my phone again, went back to the article about Kimiko, and slowly reread the whole thing. My mood grew even darker, and my limbs felt heavy. I decided I was glad I'd taken the day off, even if I hadn't used the best excuse. In my current state, I didn't think I could manage even something as simple as standing behind the sales counter.

I climbed out of bed, grabbed a bottle of barley tea from the fridge, and drank it down. Then I went to the closet and pulled a large shoebox down from the shelf.

The corners of the box were squished, and its lid was slightly torn; it was filled with old letters, notebooks, and datebooks.

Long ago, it had contained a pair of high heels my mother bought somewhere or other, but its sides, once dark blue, were now completely faded. I remembered my mother putting on those spotless white shoes and prancing around in them, not a care for the tatami mats. She was so happy that she kept wearing them, even once we sat down on the floor for our meal of instant ramen. I asked her for the empty shoebox and filled it with notes from school friends, clippings from manga and magazines, and stickers. Any time I found something I wanted to hold on to, I put it in the box. I'd moved a lot over the years, leaving things behind, losing them, but somehow the box remained. I didn't normally take it down to look through its contents, though. Seeing it now, I felt like it wasn't mine, that I'd inherited it from someone else, but something had compelled me to keep it all these years.

I opened the lid and found my navy flip phone and its charger in one corner of the box. The phone was what I was looking for, but seeing it made my heart skip a beat. Wondering if it would still work, I connected it to the charger and plugged the charger into an outlet. I waited thirty minutes and then held the power button. Slowly, the little screen brightened, coming back to life, and the phone chimed.

I'd changed my phone number and cut my old ties in the hopes that no one would find me, but I'd left my old friends' contact information in here. Maybe somehow I'd known that I might need them again.

There were only seventeen people in the address book.

Kimiko's name was in the K's. I scrolled down from there until I found Ran Kato and selected her name to see the phone number. Next, I went to the M's—Momoko. Momoko Tamamori. I made a memo of both numbers in my smartphone.

I didn't know where Ran Kato and Momoko Tamamori were or what they were doing now.

The last time I saw them was when they were leaving that house. We'd all been twenty, or thereabouts. I hadn't contacted either of them even once since then. If I hadn't stumbled across the article about Kimiko yesterday, I might not have even remembered they existed.

The time we'd spent together in that house came back to life, the voices and faces playing out on the screen of my mind, a mess of clips spliced together, dropping in and out of focus. I didn't think either of their phone numbers would still be working, and I didn't actually want to speak to either of them. But they were the only ones I could talk to about Kimiko. Only they could share the unease I was now feeling.

Because I was afraid that Kimiko might have blabbed about our time with her.

Maybe during the police investigation of Kimiko's apartment, they'd found evidence from back when we lived together, and even now, behind closed doors, they were making inquiries about Ran, Momoko, and me. The thought of it made me antsy. Nobody had come for me yet, but there was a chance they'd contacted Ran and Momoko for questioning first.

Logically, what we had done was probably already outside the statute of limitations. The punishment might not be all that severe. The three of us had been young, and we'd been acting under Kimiko's orders. But then what about Kotomi? Whose fault was it that she was dead? Could we really say we had nothing to do with her death?

The more I thought about it, the more an elusive, uneasy fear weighed down on me. Dread pressed silently down on me, like a giant sheet of iron, until tears threatened. What should I do? Should I pretend I never saw the article in the first place, lose Ran's and Momoko's numbers, and keep my mouth shut? Or should I maybe tell the police what I knew?

My imagination ballooned with worse and worse scenarios,

blotting out everything in sight. How were Ran and Momoko? What were they even doing now, and where? I knew their old phone numbers wouldn't work. But since they wouldn't work, there was no harm in calling . . . I set my phone down next to me and covered my head with the duvet as though that would erase everything. With the afternoon light blocked out, I blinked dimly, studying the humid, dark warmth of spring. And then I nodded off.

I know I dreamed, but the contents escape me—all I know is that it was a bad dream. Why is it, I wonder, that I always know it's a bad dream, even when I don't remember who I saw or what I did and only know that I dreamed. Like a dark, unstoppable wave, the nightmare chased me down. When I woke up, my chest and back were drenched in sweat. And then I called Ran Kato.

The phone rang six times before she answered with a bright "Hello?" I could feel my jaw trembling with nerves.

"Yes, hello. Is this . . . Ran Kato?"

"Yes," she replied in a voice that had grown deeper. It was Ran. I couldn't believe it.

"Oh, uh, this is Hana."

"Hana?"

"Yes, um, Hana Ito? We lived together, a long time ago."

After a shocked silence, Ran said, "Hana? *That* Hana?"

"Yes, *that* Hana. Sorry to call you out of the blue like this." I switched my phone to my other hand and pressed it hard against my ear. "I honestly didn't think the number would work. I really am sorry."

"What's happened? How did you get my number?"

"I had a copy of it in my old phone."

"Oh."

I heard her sigh.

"I'm sure this is a surprise to you. Sorry about that."

"No, it's not that . . . I just can't quite believe it. It's been so long."

"It has. Sorry. I'm actually calling you about Kimiko."

I could hear children laughing raucously beyond Ran. The sound of women chatting, too. The noises grew more distant, and I knew Ran was moving away from them.

"When you say Kimiko, you mean *that* Kimiko?"

"Yeah."

"What about her?"

"I found an article about an incident involving her yesterday."

"What?"

"On the internet."

"What exactly do you mean by 'incident'?"

"She was arrested. I was shocked, too. The trial's already begun, and I know it's a long shot, but I was worried it might have something to do with us, so I wanted to talk with you—"

"Hold on a minute," Ran interrupted. "What is this? I don't understand what you're talking about. Why was she arrested? And how would that have anything to do with us? Did she talk?"

"No, nothing like that, but Kimiko, apparently she was keeping a girl locked in her apartment, and she hurt the girl, and that's why she was arrested. It's probably . . . the same as back then, but this time she got caught. And if they start poking into her past, all of that might, you know, might come out. I don't know if that's actually going to happen, but it freaked me out." I bit the bullet and asked her, "Has anyone . . . contacted you? The police, or anyone like that?"

"Of course not." Ran laughed like she thought I'd said something stupid, but her tone was also faintly uneasy.

"I've been worried about it since yesterday, and I've been wondering if maybe I should go in and talk to the police."

"What?" Ran sounded surprised. "Talk to the police? About what?"

"About back then, about the things I know about Kimiko."

"You've got to be kidding me." Ran had lowered her voice, but somehow her tone was more forceful. But then I heard someone call Ran's name, and she called back "Okay!" in a cheery voice.

"Listen, I've got a guest who's just showed up."