

BREAKING FEARLESS



BY
ALESSA

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"I'm tired. I'm tired of... doing this," I said to Erin with a shaky voice. I meant every word of it.

It's been almost two months since we started "dating". And I said it like that because no one knew that we *had* been "dating". Except for my Mom, who knew I liked girls and was the only one who understood and supported me.

"What are you talking about, Yui?" she asked, her eyes narrowing slightly. We were at school, and by her rules, this was a no-contact zone. No talking, no touching, no smiling—no nothing at each other except for the slightest of glances.

"Of you being ashamed of me. Of us not being seen in public together because you're afraid of what your so-called friends might think of us. That you're a totally different, caring person only when we are alone together. That's what I'm talking about, and that's what I'm tired of." I gritted my teeth when she cast a sideways glance to make sure no one was listening in on our conversation. We were right by the cafeteria, as I had managed to find her there before lunch started.

She lowered her voice, and I felt a sudden tightening of my throat. "Can't we talk about this later?" She was practically whispering, trying not to move her mouth as she said the words.

I felt my eyes tearing up as I stared at her. Her wheat-coloured hair tickled her long eyelashes, the same ones that framed the most beautiful hazel eyes I had ever seen. My eyes traced the button nose that led to her full, pink lips. The same ones that I had kissed the night before. Her good looks and athletic abilities made her one of the "popular" girls in our high school.

And that's what she was ashamed of. That she was popular, with all the guys at our school drooling after her, but was dating me instead, a dorky, unpopular Japanese girl. I was pretty, but not gorgeous like her. I was this tiny, foreign-looking girl who looked much younger than my fourteen years. People often confuse me for a 6th grader. Having long, straight black hair, pale skin, and Asian eyes only added insult to injury, or at least that's how it made me feel.

And as I stared at Erin, every guy's dream girl in our high school, I realised just how much our relationship could never work. She was somebody, and I was nobody. She obviously didn't want it to be known that she had been infatuated with another girl for the past two months because it would embarrass her and ruin her social status. And I would never want to humiliate her in front of people whose opinions obviously mattered more to her than our relationship.

I felt tears sting my eyes as I thought back to the question she asked me—the same question I had yet to respond to.

'Can't we talk about this later?'

I found my voice and strength to answer her, "No. Because there is no later anymore." I looked into her eyes, which I loved so much, and saw them harden with conflicting emotions before I turned around, the tears already starting to spill. "I'm Sorry if I embarrassed you, Erin."

And then I started to walk away.

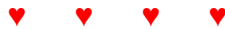
"Y—Yui..." I heard her call, her voice tight. I felt a flutter of hope in my chest, but it was crushed the moment I heard another girl's voice.

"Erin! I've been looking for you," the girl paused. "Who were you talking to?" Her voice sounded nonchalant, but I heard the underlying threat in her tone.

I slowed my steps a little in hope of hearing Erin's response. I still had faith that maybe she would confess everything to whoever the girl was. I was longing to hear her say something like, *'Her name's Yui, and she's my girlfriend'*.

But instead, I heard her sigh and mumble, "Nobody."

My heart shattered.



'I don't need her. I don't need a girlfriend. She's a total jerk, and I'm not in love with her.'

I'd been repeating this mantra in my head for over half an hour in a futile attempt to stop these stupid tears from falling. Three small pieces of a photograph lay before me. The picture was of us at her house; she had been trying to teach me how to play her favourite video game, but I kept dying. She looked so beautiful in it, while I looked like a small kid clinging to her arm.

I read somewhere that if you want to help your mind forget someone, then you should take a picture of that person and rip it up. Rip it piece by piece, and for every piece you should say something like, *'She's mean to everyone'* or *'She spreads rumours behind my back'*. The logic behind it being that by saying those things, you realise how wrong that person is for you.

In the same attempt to push her out of my head, I only managed to recite three pieces before I started thinking things like, *'She's a great kisser'* and *'I love her smile'*.

It obviously didn't work for me.

I did, however, manage *'She's selfish'* and *'She didn't appreciate me'* and lastly, *'I hate her. No, really, I do!'*

I heard a sigh from the doorway to my bedroom: "What are you doing, Yui?"

I sniffed, "Mourning."

My Mom came to sit next to me on the bed and placed her hand around me. I must have been a pretty pathetic sight. I was surrounded by pillows, cuddly toys, and my three pieces of the photograph.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" she asked attentively.

"I broke up with her, Mom. I don't want to be her dirty little secret any more."

"You did the right thing, sweetie," she soothed me. "If she can't accept being seen with you, then maybe she doesn't deserve to be your girlfriend."

It didn't really make me feel any better.

"Mom, I don't want to go to school tomorrow," I mumbled, leaning against her. I tugged nervously at the fibres of my stuffed bunny. "I mean, she said I was a nobody. How am I supposed to face her after that?" My chest constricted, and I gasped as more tears started to pour out.

"If you don't go, then she'll think you were affected by it," Mom said, brushing back my hair.

I looked at her and sniffed some more. "But I *am* affected by it."

She glanced down briefly at the photograph and the wet spots on my pillow, and I flushed with embarrassment. "The key is to be strong and act as indifferent to her as she is to you. Make her feel like she means nothing to you. Hurt her ego a little."

"But Mom... I—I still love her!" I sobbed as I buried my face in a pillow. Then I remembered that Erin never said she loved me. My chest constricted again when I remembered telling her how much I loved her after our first kiss in her bedroom where we were doing our homework, and she hadn't said anything back.

"I know, sweetheart, I know," Mom said, sighing. "Let's just try not to think about her." She paused. "There are other girls beside Erin. Eventually you will find the right one, the one who will love you back just as much as you love her, and then you'll forget everything about Erin."

Her words only prompted more tears from me.



Erin looked like a mess the next day. Her school uniform was wrinkled, her hair stuck up in every direction, and her eyes were bloodshot and puffy as if she had spent the night crying.

I, on the other hand, had woken up half an hour early to ensure that I looked just like I did any other day. I decided to take Mom's advice and act as indifferent as possible around her. I wanted to show her that I was not affected by this whole ordeal and that it was her loss, not mine.

When she walked into first period, late, I might add, whispers immediately started spreading among students caught by her scruffy appearance. As she locked her eyes with mine, I looked away quickly

because we were at school and I was still unwittingly following her no-contact rules. And when she seemed to hesitate beside my desk while moving to her seat, I turned my head away and focused my eyes on the textbook instead, while trying hard to steady my heartbeat. Indifference was the key.

The rest of the week went by in pretty much the same fashion. Erin managed to get back into the swing of things by Friday, but her eyes still looked as if she had spent the nights fighting off tears. Seeing her this way made me feel pathetic, and I wanted to comfort her and ask her if she was all right, but I persevered and continued ignoring her, however hard it was for both of us. I think what hurt me the most was that she hadn't even tried to talk to me or call me all this time, though she had made it clear on a few occasions that she wanted to.

On Friday, when lunch started and the hallways were still pretty full, the partner I was assigned to in English class came up to me at my locker to talk to me about our project and the assignment we were given. His name was Brandon, and one thing I liked about him was the cute dimple in his right cheek.

I briefly registered that Erin was a little ways down the hallway, one of her popular friends goofing off while the others laughed. I noticed that Erin was the only one who wasn't laughing; her face was blank and withdrawn, as if she were somewhere away in her own private world.

My mind switched back to Brandon. "Whenever you want to start, I'll be fine with it. I'm not doing anything today," I said with a small smile.

"So, would tonight be okay for you? You could come over to my place, and we can go from—" He never finished because suddenly he was slammed into the locker next to mine, an angry Erin bunching up the front of his shirt.

"What the fuck, Yui?" Erin spoke through clenched teeth.

Shock registered in my mind. "Let go of him!" I exclaimed weakly.

"Jesus, Erin, what are you doing?" One of her friends called. I realised the entire hallway seemed to get very quiet. Everyone's eyes were now turned to us.

Erin's cheeks were flushed red, and her hazel eyes glared dangerously. I found my voice again, and I managed to make it sound composed: "Erin, let go of him."

"No, Yui! This asshole has the nerve to ask you out when you and I just broke up?" Startled whispers began, and a glance towards Erin's group of friends confirmed that they were just as surprised as the entire crowded hallway.

"You and I were never together," I lied. I couldn't believe the situation we found ourselves in. I mean, what on earth was she doing? Right here in front of the entire school. This was what Erin had wanted to prevent so hard all this time, and here she was, just recklessly throwing away everything that we had concealed and hidden away under the carpet.

"What do you mean we were never together? We were together for two months, Yui!" she said incredulously.

That set me off. "How would you know, Erin? How was anyone else supposed to know? You never cared about *us* and you certainly didn't think that we were together since you never even wanted to talk to me at school. I was just a nobody to you in public. You even said so yourself. And that's why I broke up with you. I finally realised that you were too shallow. You were too ashamed to be seen with me. And you know what? I don't care anymore, because I realised that I don't need someone like you in my life, and I was better off without you anyway."

Erin's jaw was clenching and unclenching, looking as if she wanted to interrupt me, but she knew better. I was angry—angry that she would do something like this to me, angry that she turned us into a spectacle for the entire school to laugh at, angry that she was slipping away even further by every single thing she had said or done. I wanted to open my mouth and say more, but the sound of silence in the hallway was deafening. I just wanted to get away from there so I could cry my eyes out without being gawked at by every single kid at school.

I glanced towards Brandon, who was looking both confused and scared. His eyes snapped back to me.

"Sorry, Brandon, tonight won't be a good time to start on our project." I gave one last glare towards Erin, shock coming over her face, and then turned on my heel towards the toilets.



'I don't need her. I don't need a girlfriend. She's a total jerk, and I'm not in love with her.'

No, it still wasn't working.

The entire school knew about us because news like that spread fast. We were now officially proclaimed the only two dykes at our entire school. I was even more shunned by everyone than before the incident. Great achievement, Yui; I despaired. Erin is such an idiot. How did I ever fall in love with someone like her?

It was Friday night, and I was at home once again, listening to the pitter-patter of rain falling against the window glass. I was surrounded by my stuffed toys, and the pillow clenched in my hands I held to my face in a futile attempt to stop these tears from falling. I tried to distract myself by reading one of my favourite books, but it wasn't working as I hoped.

A knock sounded at my door, and I figured it was just my Mom checking on me to make sure I hadn't killed myself yet.

But it most definitely wasn't my Mom.

I sat there with my eyes wide and mouth agape as Erin shut the door behind her. I almost glared at the door as if it were at fault for her being in here. Her eyes took in my pathetic situation, and I blushed as I saw a hint of remorse come across her face.

"What are you doing here?" I mumbled miserably. Erin's hand fiddled with the expensive bracelet she'd been given by her parents on her fourteenth birthday, a nervous habit I'd grown used to.

"I wanted to apologise, Yui. For today..." she met my eyes, "For everything."

"You're forgiven then. Now leave," I snapped, not wanting her to see me like this, all vulnerable and uglier than usual.

"Yui... I love you," she said almost immediately, as if expecting my forgiveness.

My breath hitched, and I faltered for a second, my indifference collapsing into the dust that it had been all along. But I fought it and did my best not to give in to her charms that easily.

"W—what? You think you can just walk in here and expect everything to be back to normal?"

"No, I don't. But I wish you'd give me a chance to explain myself before you decide if I deserve to be your girlfriend." She sat slowly on the bed next to me and faced me, but she restrained herself from any contact.

"Fine," I told her coldly, preparing myself for even more heartbreak.

"I know that I made mistakes. I made the mistake of keeping you a secret. I embarrassed you, and ignored you, and expected you to follow my rules at school. I made a lot of mistakes that I wish I could undo. But I can't."

I was studying her, still not believing what I was hearing. She shifted a little closer to me, moving the pillows between us out of the way.

"You were right that I worried about what other kids thought about us. I was afraid of what my friends would say. I was afraid my parents would find out and punish me because they're not like your Mom. You're lucky to have her, Yui, but you don't understand what it's like to live with people who would hurt me because I'm in love with a girl. But when you broke up with me, I was so scared and hurt. And I realised that it was really low of me to care about other people's opinions because the only one that I cared about the most was you. I never wanted to hurt you, Yui. It took losing you to make me see it," she took a breath and sniffled. "I don't want to lose you because I love you," she admitted finally.

Listening to her confession left a bitter taste in my mouth. It wasn't until now that I realised just how much turmoil she was going through within herself. And with the threatening situation at home, it only put her in a more perilous position. But still, I just stared at her and her teary eyes, not quite sure what to make of all this.

"Yui..." she said.

"Yes?" I managed in a whisper. My mind was blank, but my heart ached for her.

"I, uh, I... I want us to be together again." She started rushing her words out, as if afraid I would reject her again without her having finished explaining what was on her mind. "I mean, I understand if you don't want to because of what I did and with the project-guy thing today, but I promise that I will do

anything if we can be together again. I don't care what others say or do. I don't want to hide any more. I'll do anything to have you back. Please?" she finished awkwardly.

I couldn't believe it.

She loved me. I didn't think; I just asked, "No more school rules?"

She looked at me, her eyes widening and glittering with hope, recognising the playful tone of my voice. "No more school rules, Yui. I'll hold your hand, I'll hug you, I'll kiss you. In front of everyone."

"Will you really?" I asked teasingly. My walls were crumbling down again as I watched a slow, hesitant smile cross her face.

"I promise to make you happy."

I rose to my knees on the bed and looked at her. "Okay."

"Okay?" she tested.

I gave her a quick glance before tackling her to the bed. A second later, her lips touched mine, and as I reached for her blond hair, the pillow I had been holding onto slid from my hands.

"I think I like the new, brave Erin," I mumbled against her lips.

"I'm tired of being scared, Yui." Her hand rose under my shirt to the hollow of my stomach. For some reason, that was always where she liked to touch me. I moaned into her mouth, goosebumps travelling along my arms.

A knock sounded at the door, and I broke away from her mouth. "You two better not be doing anything funny in there," came the warning from my Mom.

"Mom!!" I wailed, embarrassed, throwing a pillow at her and hiding my burning face in the crook of Erin's neck. Mom shot me a quick smile and closed the door.

"I'm sorry, Erin. My Mom can be really annoying sometimes."

"Your Mom is cool," she chuckled. Hesitantly, she added, "I love you, Yui. More than you think is possible."

I returned her smile and, for a moment, lost myself in her hazel eyes. "I love you more for finding the courage to say it," I leaned in to kiss her again.



Monday came, and with it, the new school day. But this time, nothing mattered any more. Being shunned by everyone felt like a victory because there was Erin, and she was walking beside me, holding my hand, our fingers laced as we faced the crowd of students with smiles on our faces.

The End