

7

NOT MY
DAUGHTER?!

YOU LIKE
ME

Kota
Nozomi
Illustrator: Giuniu



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Miu: Wow, the baby kicked!

Takkun: Ooh, let me feel...

Ayako: Come on, you two!



YOU LIKE ME, NOT MY DAUGHTER?!

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Prologue



“I’ll take care of her.” Just how long had it been since I’d said those words and taken in my five-year-old niece, Miu? It felt like ages ago, but at the same time, it felt like it’d happened just recently. At my sister and her husband’s funeral, I’d confidently declared that I would accept her as my own child to a room full of my adult relatives. I had talked big, letting my heightened, fierce emotions take over.

When I thought about how I must’ve looked, I could feel my face burning up from the embarrassment. I was a young woman who’d just barely entered her twenties, and I’d been quite cocky. I’d never been responsible for anyone else before, nor had I held a proper job. I’d had no idea how the world worked, yet I’d comported myself as such to a room full of adults who each successfully ran their own households.

Looking back on it now, my actions that day were reckless. But be that as it may...I didn’t regret what I’d done. I definitely could have handled the situation better, but Miu was the one thing I would never take back about it. No matter how many do-overs I got, I’d always make the same choice—I would take in Miu and become her mother. Without a doubt, I would become a mom—it was, in fact, probably the best decision I’d made in my entire life.

I was truly glad that Miu had become my daughter and that I’d become her mother. It felt like fate that I’d found the resolve to make that choice when I did—and actually, it felt fated in more ways than you’d expect. After all, it wasn’t just my relationship with Miu that’d begun that day; technically, that was also the first day I’d met *him*.

That said—although I felt really bad about it—I couldn’t remember much about him since my mind had been occupied with Miu that day. He, however, remembered it clearly. It was the day that he’d first seen me—the day that I’d first stolen his heart.

He'd told me all about it just yesterday. He'd seemed a little embarrassed yet somewhat proud as he passionately told me about the day he'd fallen for me. *Jeez, no matter how old you've gotten, you sure are the same, Takkun...*

I silently and slowly opened my eyes. Before me was a large mirror. I couldn't help but gulp when I saw my reflection.

In the mirror was a pure white dress. It was bright and sparkled beautifully. It was a garment of integrity and virtue—the kind of outfit a bride wore. I'd tried on countless types to figure out what I was going to wear, gone on a bit of a diet for this day, and even visited a beauty salon three days ago to get some body treatments done. There had been plenty of other things aside from the dress that we'd planned for together too, just for this very day.

"Hee hee..." I felt strange.

I never did think I'd be wearing a bridal gown. It wasn't that I'd steeled my resolve and prepared to be single for the rest of my life, but...the day that I took Miu in, I'd felt that I'd have to give up on all those kinds of things—I'd figured I'd never have a relationship, get married, or have a child of my own like a regular person. I'd decided to give up on all those things to raise my daughter into a successful adult...yet before I knew it, I'd gotten all those things that I'd given up on.

It was all thanks to Takkun. He'd gifted me with all the forms of happiness that I'd been okay with letting go of. He'd loved me for over a decade—since he was ten years old—and he'd given me more happiness than I knew what to do with.

When I closed my eyes, I could see all my memories popping into view. His sudden confession; our first date; Miu's feelings; all the tediousness that'd occurred up to the start of our relationship; our sudden long-distance status, which had ended up not happening, and our cohabitation that'd followed; the first night we'd shared together; then there was also that time, and the other time, and that other thing... I couldn't count them all. I couldn't hold them all. I'd made so many memories with him, and they filled up my chest to the brim.

They weren't all happy memories, and there were times when things hadn't gone so well, but I could now proudly say that every moment of our time

together had brought me happiness. Every memory marked a priceless day that I'd spent with him.

Well, um, because of what I was wearing, I couldn't help but feel mushy and emotional, and I couldn't help but feel like I was experiencing the ending credits of a movie, or the final volume of a novel, but...it wasn't like my life was ending today. Our lives were going to continue on for many more years. That's why today, this day, was just the beginning of a new chapter—a turning point in our lives that was just a little bit special when compared to our usual day-to-day lives.

Someone knocked on the door to the dressing room.

"Mom." My dear, beloved daughter popped her head out from behind the door.

Chapter 1: The Pregnancy and the Announcement



Days start early when you're a single mother. My mornings would often begin with me rubbing my sleepy eyes and getting out of bed early since I had to pack a lunch for my high school daughter. That was the normal, everyday thing for me—my daily routine as a thirtysomething-year-old. Or rather, it was supposed to be...

“Oh, good morning, mom.”

It was seven in the morning. I'd taken my time to wake up and head into the living room, where breakfast was already on the table. Miu was in the kitchen, already dressed in her school uniform. She had once again woken up before me and made us breakfast.

“You could've slept in a little more.”

“I can't just spend the whole day sleeping,” I said as I sat down.

It had already been two weeks since I'd returned from Tokyo, and Miu had been acting like this ever since, always waking up earlier than me and preparing breakfast for the two of us. Aside from cooking, she was also taking care of the laundry, cleaning, and shopping. She'd become proactive about helping around the house.

Miu had always been quite the capable girl who could handle chores and cooking no problem, but up till I'd come back home, she would never help around the house, no matter how many times I'd asked. Well, to be fair, she *would* actually help out if I wasn't feeling well, but by the same token, she completely lacked the initiative when I was doing fine. I wasn't sure whether it was laziness or if she just had no compunctions with letting me dote on her.

But now, despite all that, Miu was making herself useful in a way she'd never done before—and the reason for it was, to be honest, incredibly clear.

“They say that some people have trouble sleeping when they're pregnant. If

you're not feeling well, just sleep in and don't force yourself to get up. I can handle everything on my own."

"Don't worry, I've been fine so far. I slept a full eight hours last night."

"I see. That's nice," Miu said as she placed a cup of coffee on the table before me in a curt manner. It wasn't regular coffee, however, but rather an herbal tea known as "dandelion coffee" that was made from the root of the dandelion plant. Technically, since it lacked coffee beans, it wasn't actual coffee—and furthermore, it was also caffeine-free, meaning it was safe for children and pregnant people to drink.

Yes indeed...I'd been served a beverage specifically safe for pregnant individuals. As you might have guessed, I was currently with child. I'd officially confirmed it with an obstetrician, and at present, I was three months along. It wasn't that visible yet, but my stomach was slowly, very gradually, starting to grow.

"Hee hee..."

"What, mom? Why are you laughing out of nowhere?"

"No, it's nothing. I'm just happy," I said with a smile. "It's nice that you've suddenly got your act together."

Miu didn't say a word. "I wonder if it's because you're ready to be a big sister," I continued on. "That's fair. Now that you're going to have a younger sibling, you *need* to be able to keep up with your responsibilities—and if you ask me, you've got this, big sister!"

I meant it as a compliment, intending to praise her recent behavior...but Miu must have thought that I was teasing her.

"Well, I *had* to pull it together," Miu said, slightly pouting. "After all, a certain *someone* let living with their boyfriend turn their brain off and forced us down a road none of us had planned for. At least *one* person around here needs to have their act together."

"Urgh..." After she'd pointed it out, there was nothing I could say back. After all, she'd, well...more or less hit the nail on the head.

Ten years had already passed since I—Ayako Katsuragi, thirtysomething years old—took in my niece and began raising her as my own daughter after my sister and her husband had passed away in an accident. After some twists and turns, I'd started dating Takumi Aterazawa, the college student who lived next door and was a whole ten years younger than me. Several more twists and turns followed, and we'd ended up living together in Tokyo for three months. With two adults living under one roof, it wasn't like *nothing* was going to happen—and sure enough, in a manner of speaking, the two of us had ended up happily joining together as one. It'd been both his and my first time, so a lot had happened to get us there, but we'd somehow managed to progress our relationship.

And, well, um...because our relationship had taken that step forward, it'd led to us skipping over about ten steps at once.

"It's honestly pretty embarrassing," Miu said cuttingly while we were eating breakfast. Her words stabbed me right where it hurt. "What did you and Taku go to Tokyo to do?" I couldn't respond. "You went for work, right? For your job?! You said you wanted to be a part of the anime adaptation of the series you're in charge of, and Taku said he wanted to go both so he could support you and so he could gain work experience through an internship."

I didn't know what to say...

"And yeah, I know you two were riding high since you'd just started dating, and I can understand that you didn't want to be apart from each other. I'm sure Miss Yumemi understood those things too, and that's why she set things up for you two to live together."

I just sat there silently as Miu went on.

"She probably trusted you, you know? She must've believed that you wouldn't lose control just because you were excited about suddenly living with Taku—she probably figured you would balance your work and personal life and act with some forethought."

I could hardly say anything back to that...

"It was the same for me. I trusted you too," Miu carried on. "I thought that you would progress your career while Taku gained experience for his own

future... I believed you two would return from Tokyo having grown as adults, and as a couple too. I was waiting here alone because I honestly believed you would manage to carry yourselves forward."

Miu then gave me a look of deep exasperation as she let out a heavy sigh. "I *never* would have thought that, in spite of everything, you would do something as thoughtless as returning home knocked up." It felt like she was driving the knife she'd stabbed into me even deeper.

"You know, I'm in high school now, so I expected that two adults who were dating would end up doing *those* sorts of things..." Miu admitted. "Like, I knew that it would happen because you were living under one roof, but still...a child is a whole different thing, you know?"

"Urgh..."

"Not to be a boomer, but, I mean, isn't there an order to how these things should go? It's only been a few months since you officially started dating, and you haven't even started thinking about *marriage*, or even had a conversation about it for that matter...yet here you are with a bun in the oven."

"U-Urgh..."

"Was the whole 'work trip' thing just a cover for you to go honeymooning?!"

"W-W-Waaah! Stop it! Don't bully me anymore!" I couldn't take it any longer and crumbled to pieces. "It wasn't like that! We didn't go to Tokyo to have fun! I did my work! I did what I put my mind to!"

Miu fell silent to give me a chance to explain myself.

"But, um, it's just that...some of the things I put my mind to happened at night, so I just kind of landed on one of the possible outcomes of that..." *Th-This is rough! This excuse is terrible!*

"If your belly is anything to go by, what you put your mind to and what you were *supposed* to do clearly couldn't have been more different!"

"Hurgh!" She had completely destroyed my argument. My daughter, a high schooler, had thoroughly dismantled my excuse. I had nothing I could say back.

If one asked whether I'd made the maximum effort to be careful so I wouldn't

get pregnant...I wouldn't have been able to earnestly say that I had. I had to admit that there was a part of me that'd had my guard down and thought, "I probably won't get pregnant."

Huh. This is strange. Isn't this sort of sex ed usually something that the mom has to teach the daughter? How did we end up the other way around? Wow, my daughter sure has it together...

"U-Urgh... That's enough bullying, Miu... I've already had my ears lectured off by mom and dad..."

As soon as we'd returned from Tokyo, Takkun and I had both announced the pregnancy to our parents. We'd decided that we couldn't keep it a secret. As for how that'd gone over...let's just say the resulting commotion was so extraordinary that words failed to describe it. We probably should've expected as much, of course.

Takkun's parents had known about us dating, so their reaction wasn't as bad, but I had a particularly rough time telling my own parents. I had to explain how Takkun was my boyfriend—that is to say, their daughter, a single mother in her thirties, was dating a twenty-year-old college student, and said twenty-year-old was my baby daddy. It was much too shocking for them.

"It all ended up okay though, right?" Miu asked. "You'd been keeping Taku a secret, but now your relationship's out in the open."

"Well..." That might have been true, but there must've been a better way to deliver the news to them.

"It seems like grandma and grandpa made up their minds to support you two."

"Well, we *do* have a child on the way, so..."

Perhaps the shock of my pregnancy was too intense, as there wasn't much time spent digging into the "My boyfriend is a college student" part of the whole thing. It was as if it was too late to bother with, like now was no longer the time to worry about something like that. Though it wasn't my intention to announce my relationship under circumstances like this, perhaps I could say that things still turned out all right.

"Maybe in spite of everything grandma and grandpa were more happy than anything else."

"Huh?"

"They were probably worried about you, after all. You had a grown kid despite never being married... Their generation holds marriage as the be-all and end-all, right?"

I paused to consider it. It was probably true—they'd told me things like "We gave up on you giving birth," after all. They hadn't pestered me too much about it over the years, but they'd probably had some concerns about the fact that I hadn't yet settled down at my age. In the modern world, marriage wasn't everything, and there were plenty of people who didn't get married...but many people in my parents' generation seemed to believe that for a woman to be happy, she needed to get married and have children.

"You might've done things out of order, but at the end of the day, their daughter was finally able to conceive in her thirties—they might have some gripes about how it went down, but ultimately, they're probably happy and relieved."

"Miu..." A warm sensation filled my chest, but I still wanted to say something back to her. "You're exaggerating. I'm not so old that they'd need to worry about me."

"What are you talking about?!" Miu said, snapping back at my casual statement. "Having your first child at your age... You're practically having a full-on geriatric pregnancy!"

"Wha—" *G-Geriatric?! Ugh, what an awful-sounding word!*

Generally speaking, if you were having your first child when you were thirty-five or older, it would be called advanced maternal age. In other words, I—a thirty-[REDACTED]-year-old—was...um, yeah. Well, anyways, that bit can be left ambiguous.

"Y-You're wrong, Miu... I'm still plenty young... I'm barely on the edge of advanced maternal age—so on the border that it's basically a toss-up either way."

“How pathetic,” Miu said with a sharp glare. “You can’t run from your age, so you should just accept it. It’s undeniable that you’re at a higher risk than someone in their twenties, so you need to face the facts and deal with it.”

“O-Okay...”

“Also, even though you’re pregnant, you’re still in the first trimester, which means things aren’t stable yet. Don’t forget that your body isn’t just yours anymore, mom. You’ve been pretty careless, so get it together.”

“Okay...” I couldn’t do anything but nod in response.

Miu had really stepped up after my pregnancy. She had already become an impressive big sister...or rather, she was acting like a mother-in-law.



I had a friend named Satoya Ringo. He was a beautiful young man with an attractive face and a slender frame, and he was often mistaken for a girl—and as a matter of fact, he actually cross-dressed fairly often.

To be clear, though, according to him, he wasn’t cross-dressing, but rather he was just wearing what looked good on him. He didn’t specifically want to dress like a woman, nor did he want to become a girl, and he was only attracted to women—case in point, he currently had a girlfriend.

In a sense, he was a bit of a strange guy, but he was a dear friend of mine. I’d known him since I started college—we were in the same department, so we’d had lots of opportunities to do things together. If one were to ask who my closest friend was right now, I would probably say it was Satoya.

Satoya had also helped me out with Miss Ayako. He’d given me advice many times, both before and after we’d started dating. Though he’d say that he was just doing it for fun, making himself out to be some mean-spirited person, I felt that he’d been pretty empathetic about everything. At times he’d been kind, while at other times he’d been harsh, but he consistently supported my romantic endeavors.

I could say with all my heart that Satoya Ringo was a precious friend who I could trust. For that reason, the first person I wanted to talk to about what’d happened—outside of my family—was Satoya.

I was currently facing circumstances with an inevitable outcome—a situation that I *had* to face. Depending on the person, they might look upon my actions judgmentally, and no matter how much prejudice or contempt they sent my way, I wouldn't be able to complain. Satoya, however... I was sure he of all people would understand. I was positive he would sympathize with me. I knew for sure he would cheer me up and comfort me—

"What the hell, man?" Satoya said with a look that was beyond exasperation. There was a look in his eyes that suggested he couldn't be more contemptuous if he tried. "I can't believe you. What kind of college student gets his girlfriend pregnant? Jeez... I never expected you to be the sort of man to end up like this," Satoya said, his head resting in his hands.

"U-Urgh..." All I could do was sit there and take it as he ripped me to shreds.

We were at Satoya's place—I'd asked if we could come here because I'd wanted to avoid anyone else hearing us discuss the topic in question. When I'd announced Miss Ayako's pregnancy to him, rather than try to be encouraging, all he could manage was biting disapproval.

"I-Is that really what you say to a friend after he musters up the courage to tell you something...?" I demanded.

"I mean, what else can I say? You knocked up your girlfriend you haven't even been dating for six whole months," Satoya said between sighs. "I'm honestly shocked. I thought you were pretty good about that kind of stuff. I thought you would be the man most considerate of Miss Ayako."

"Urgh..."

"I thought that even if you two were to have a physical relationship, you'd be the kind of man who could hold himself back. Despite all that...you succumbed to your desires and said to heck with contraceptives."

"Y-You're wrong! That's not what happened!" I said, rushing to object. "We were using protection... We both knew that we weren't ready for her to conceive a child."

We had been well aware that it would be terrible if Miss Ayako were to get pregnant. She had her job, and I was still just a college student. Sure, I was old

enough to get married, but financially, I was nowhere near ready to support a partner. Getting my girlfriend pregnant at this stage of my life was nothing short of irresponsible. I knew it—I was more than aware of it—and yet...

“But, um, we...ran out.”

Satoya just stared at me silently, judging me and looking at me as if I were trash.

“Wait, I can explain!” I pleaded. “There’s more to it! There were certain circumstances! Circumstances that I couldn’t do anything about!”

“What circumstances...?”

“We only noticed that we were out after things had gotten pretty heated... O-Of course, I tried to put a stop to it. I tried to suppress my desires and did everything I could do to hold back. B-But, Miss Ayako said, ‘I should be fine today,’ so I...”

Ahhh! It’s no use! No matter how I try to excuse it, it’s not excusing anything! The more I try to explain what happened, the more I seem like a scumbag!

At the end of the day, I’d just taken her claim of it being a “safe day” at face value and hadn’t kept my lust in check. I’d lost to my desires and neglected to use a condom, plain and simple. It was pathetic, and I had no way to defend myself.

“I’m kind of disappointed,” Satoya said, still exasperated. “There are all kinds of things that make you attractive as a man, but...I’d always thought that your biggest draw was your integrity.”

“Oof...”

“You’d been pining after Miss Ayako for so many years. You’d only had eyes for her, and you were faithful to her to an utterly ridiculous degree... You might have been a bit foolish, but I still thought your dedication to your principles was an attractive quality... I never would’ve imagined you’d be the kind of guy to give in to your impulses at the absolute worst possible moment like this.”

“Urgh...” I truly had nothing I could say to that. I’d accidentally gotten my girlfriend pregnant—it was a big enough blunder that it instantly cast into doubt

the integrity I'd maintained over the years.

"What do her parents think? Have you told them already?"

"We have... We've told both my and her parents."

It wasn't something we could keep a secret. Since it was quite the significant situation, we'd sat down with our families as soon as we'd returned from Tokyo.

"How was that? Did her dad punch you? Did he say something like, 'I won't let some bozo like you have my daughter!'"

"No, it wasn't like that at all... It was more like, both of our parents got on their knees and apologized to one another..."

I didn't even want to remember it. It was the epitome of discomfort. Both Miss Ayako's and my parents had desperately bowed their heads in apology to one another, and we'd both apologized too, and everyone had just repeatedly apologized to one another. It'd been a very sad time.

"Miss Ayako had apparently kind of told them that she had a boyfriend, but she hadn't told them that I was in college..."

"Oh, I see... Yeah, that's a difficult thing to bring up." Satoya became lost in thought before he continued. "From your parents' perspective, they were probably sorry that their college-aged son had done something that lacked forethought, but as for Miss Ayako's parents, they were probably sorry that their thirtysomething-year-old daughter had gone after someone's young son..."

That was kind of how it'd seemed. Unlike my parents, whom I'd talked things over with a long time ago, things must've been quite shocking for Miss Ayako's parents. They'd found out that their daughter was dating a college student at the same time they'd learned she was pregnant.

Ugh, I feel so pathetic. How absolutely terrible. I'd wanted to meet her parents under better circumstances...

"But, if they weren't furious and things didn't turn into a bloodbath, does that mean they approve of you...?"

"I guess so... Her parents seemed like they felt that there's nothing that can be done at this point, so things wrapped up peacefully, with both families wanting to work together."

My impression of Miss Ayako's parents was that most of the anger they might've felt from something like this was mitigated by her age. If Miss Ayako had been, say, a college student like me and had gotten pregnant, I felt like they would've been unmistakably furious with me. However, Miss Ayako was a successful, independent adult—she was at an age where it was perfectly normal to have a baby.

In so many words, her parents had been quite shocked about the news, but at the same time, they'd seemed kind of happy about it. Perhaps that was just wishful thinking on my part.

"After we all talked, our dads went out to drink together. Apparently, they had fun well into the night."

"I see. I guess if all your parents approve, I shouldn't be giving you such a hard time about it," Satoya said with a wry chuckle. "I've gotten the chance to say how I felt about it as your friend, but I totally forgot to say one important thing." Satoya slightly fixed his posture, and a bit stiffly, he added, "I guess I can say, 'Congratulations'?"

"Yeah..." I replied, giving a faint but firm nod. I definitely wanted to live up to the weight accepting his congratulations carried—that is to say, I wanted to work to create a life for Miss Ayako and I that was worth acknowledging as fortunate. The timing might not have been what I'd wanted, but what had happened itself *was* something I'd wanted. I'd been resolved to marry Miss Ayako and have a child with her ever since we began dating; even though my mistakes had caused things to come as a surprise, this was something incredibly joyous that should be celebrated by all.

"Man..." Satoya began with a sigh and a faint smile. "When it came to your romantic life, I was always giving advice to you, acting like I was your senior when it came to relationships...but now it feels like you've suddenly gone ahead of me. In fact, you've left me in the dust. Even *I* haven't gotten a girlfriend pregnant before."

"Ha ha..." All I could do was laugh at the irony.

"It's only going to get harder from here, mind you," Satoya said with a serious look on his face. "I'm sure Miss Ayako will be dealing with a lot, with this being her first pregnancy and all, and you're about to start giving your all to job hunting, right?"

I fell silent. He was absolutely right—the original plan was that after my three-month internship in Tokyo, I was going to use that experience to fully commit to looking for a job.

At this point, I only had a vague idea of what kind of job I wanted. Starting with this winter, my plan was to take the time to do an inventory of my capabilities and interview alumni to maximize my chances of landing a stable career. I wanted to find a good job and become a successful working adult, both for my own sake and for Miss Ayako—but just as I was about to start all of that, this pregnancy happened. I had to admit, I truly had acted without any foresight...

I sat there, looking down silently as I contemplated, but...

"Well, let me know if you need anything. If there's anything I can do, I want to help," Satoya offered with a cheery tone.

"Yeah, thanks..."

"Don't rely on me *too* much though. I'm a complete novice when it comes to both pregnancy and job hunting. Just think of me as someone who can cheer you on."

"That's more than enough. I'm really grateful." I was more than happy just to have someone rooting for me. The biggest thing was the feelings behind it—I was happy to have him on my side. He might have teased me and said some harsh things, but at the end of it all, he'd given me some kind support. Just as I'd predicted, Satoya was a friend I could trust.



"Hm, I see. So your meeting with both families ended peacefully."

I was on my usual call with Yumemi. After we discussed work, the topic

naturally shifted to my life. “I’m just glad it didn’t break out into a fight,” she added.

“Thank god for that,” I agreed.

“Well, the whole thing turning into a bloodbath would’ve been fun in its own way, so I *am* a little disappointed. It’s such a classic rom-com trope for the parents to oppose the main character’s relationship, you know? Just think of all the character development you two missed out on.”

“No, thank you, I’m perfectly content with our current character arcs. It’s a blessing no one has any hard feelings—I prefer to live my life without ruffling anyone’s feathers.”

“That so? I’m pretty curious how you square that with the whole ‘randomly getting pregnant a few weeks into your relationship’ thing.”

“Please don’t point that out...”

“Ha ha, I’m just teasing you,” Yumemi said, brushing off my sadness with a lighthearted laugh. “Timing is but a small detail. It doesn’t change the fact that this is a joyous occasion. Why don’t we celebrate it?”

“Okay...” I replied with a nod.

I’d already told Yumemi about my pregnancy. The truth was...I’d told her before my family, even including Miu. I’d heard that a lot of people didn’t tell their jobs until they reached the second trimester, but I had circumstances that prevented me from waiting.

Since the pregnancy wasn’t planned, there was a good chance it could affect my work—and most of all, I’d wanted to visit an obstetrician while I was in Tokyo. Since I’d wanted her advice on all those things, I’d decided I should break the news to her.

“If you’ve introduced your families to each other, does that mean you’ll be discussing marriage next?”

“Well... That’s just not a priority right now. We’ve decided to wait until things settle down a bit more. Takkun is also going to start job hunting soon.”

“I see, that’s fair. There’s no need to rush,” Yumemi said. “Fortunately, work

relating to the anime adaptation has wrapped up for now, so you can take some time to prioritize your health and personal life.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry for any trouble I may cause.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said in a carefree tone. “Hee hee...”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I just remembered something,” Yumemi said jovially. “I was thinking about how something similar happened ten years ago.”

“Ten years ago...?”

“One of our new hires, without any warning, said, ‘I’m sorry, I have a child now.’ Talk about a bolt from the blue.”

“Urgh...” I couldn’t say anything back. I probably didn’t need to clarify, but...she was talking about me.

Ten years ago, I’d just been hired at Light Ship, and several months into the job, I’d decided to take in Miu, which had required me to return to my home prefecture and work remotely. The situation had been unprecedented, to say the least. Of course, if I had been at a normal company, I definitely would’ve been fired—or barring that, they would’ve put me out to pasture and treated me in a manner that would’ve made me resign.

“I-I apologize for all the trouble I caused back then...” I wasn’t sure what else to do besides bow my head in apology.

I’m only just now realizing that this is my second time reporting that I have a child—both times while unmarried and at completely unexpected times. My career sure has had its share of strange circumstances...

“Hee hee, it’s fine. Nowadays it’s just a fun story, after all,” Yumemi said. She really sounded like she was enjoying reminiscing. “Working remotely itself wasn’t a common practice back then, so I can’t deny there were some inconveniences. Despite all of that, you grew immensely over the past decade and generated a considerable profit for the company. I can confidently say that it was the right choice to keep you.”

“Yumemi...”

“I’m not just talking about profits and your performance either. While working at our company, you’ve been able to balance your home and work lives. You’ve furthered your career while brilliantly raising your daughter. As the president of your company, and as a woman, I am incredibly proud of you for that.” After saying all that, Yumemi’s cheery demeanor dialed down. “Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to balance the two so well...” she added.

Oh, that’s right. I’d always found it strange that Yumemi hadn’t fired me ten years ago. I’d wondered why she would keep on a new hire who wanted such ridiculous things—and why she would take such a person under her wing, to boot.

I’d only found this out recently, but Yumemi had had a child. Due to various circumstances, they’d begun living apart from each other before he’d turned two. Yumemi’s in-laws hadn’t taken too kindly to the fact that she’d wanted to keep working after having a child, and her husband had taken his parents’ side. As a result, the two had gotten divorced, and her ex-husband had taken custody of their child.

Yumemi hadn’t had a chance to be a mother and raise her child. Perhaps because of that experience, she felt a certain way about my situation—maybe she respected my reckless decision and determination, and wanted to support me.

“Oops, sorry about that. We aren’t talking about my feelings at the moment,” Yumemi offered apologetically.

“I’m truly grateful... I don’t know where I would be without you, Yumemi.”

“Aw, come on. I just projected myself onto you and hoped you’d accomplish what I couldn’t.” I could sense the self-loathing in her voice as she so readily admitted to her past weakness. “If I’m being honest, I supported you for my own self-satisfaction. It was a form of atonement—or rather, maybe it was stubbornness. I just didn’t want there to be a woman within my reach who ended up unhappy after she had a child.” Then her voice took on a quiet determination as she added, “Well, I don’t intend to ask you to pay me back with some line like ‘Find enough happiness for the both of us.’ You should live your life the best you can, and as a company, we’ll do everything in our power

to support your first childbirth and second round of child-rearing.”

“Thank you very much,” I said, bowing deeply one more time. Once again, I found myself feeling blessed I was able to work under Yumemi.

After shopping for dinner and returning home, I ran into Takkun right as I was getting out of my car. He’d told me he was going to tell Satoya about the pregnancy, and it seemed he’d just gotten home from that.

As soon as he found out that I was returning from shopping, he said, “I’ll carry those,” then he started bringing all my groceries inside.

“Thanks, Takkun.”

“It’s no problem. Don’t push yourself, Miss Ayako. I’ll go shopping for you whenever you need.”

“I’m fine. I can handle driving to the store.”

Jeez, Miu and Takkun have gotten so overprotective these days.

Since we’d run into each other, we decided to have some tea and talk. Takkun decided to have whatever I was having, so we both had some dandelion coffee.

“At first, I thought this stuff had a strong taste, but it’s pretty easy to drink once you get used to it,” Takkun noted.

“Yeah, I’ve had so much of it I’ve even started to like it now. I do still miss regular coffee though.”

After some more small talk, I finally asked, “So, Takkun... H-How did Satoya react?”

To be honest, I was curious. *Really* curious. I wanted to know how Takkun’s friend, a regular college student, would take this news. *How could I make it up to Takkun if I’ve created a rift in their friendship?*

“Please, relax. It went fine... There was nothing special about it—he was just supportive. He said things would surely be tough, but he was cheering me on.”

“I-I see...”

“He did say some harsh things too, to be fair. He said he was disappointed,

and that I'd lacked integrity when it'd counted the most," Takkun admitted with a nervous chuckle.

"What...?" Takkun might've seemed fine, but I couldn't help but feel hurt. "You didn't do anything wrong... You tried to stop things when we ran out, but I... I was the one who said, 'I should be fine today'..."

To be honest, I'd said that without really thinking about it. It wasn't like I'd been taking my basal temperature every day or anything like that, so I wasn't sure what state my body was in nor how easily I could get pregnant... I'd just counted backward from my last period and thought, "It's probably fine."

Urgh... I really wasn't thinking—experts say there isn't even really such a thing as a "safe day" in the first place. No matter how fine a day might seem, having intercourse without contraceptives carries the risk of pregnancy, and I know that... But, well, in that situation, I would've lost my mind if we'd had to suddenly stop when things had gotten so heated.

"Maybe you did, but I'm far from blameless here. As a man, I should've shown more restraint."

"No, no. It's not your fault, Takkun. You tried to hold back, but I kept pressing you on..."

After we apologized to each other, we both fell silent. It was a bit awkward, and the topic had us feeling a bit bashful.

"U-Um, why don't we just stop saying either one of us is at fault?" Takkun suggested, finally breaking the silence. "We did something careless, and I think we should avoid any unplanned events like this in the future...but this is a happy occasion."

"Yeah... You're right," I said, quietly and firmly nodding.

A warm sensation began spreading throughout my heart. This really was something worth celebrating, and knowing Takkun felt that way about it was pleasant and reassuring.

I thought back to the day I found out I was pregnant...

My three-month business trip to Tokyo was reaching its end. At first, I'd just thought that my period was a little late, but as the days passed, my suspicions grew. After all, I had a reason to be suspicious. In fact, it was more than a reason—it was something I remembered so clearly that I could point out the specific day.

I figured it wasn't something I should keep to myself, so I immediately told Takkun my concerns, and I decided I should take a pregnancy test. I bought one at a drugstore, then went home and straight to the bathroom to use it, and...two lines clearly popped up. It was positive.

I took another just to be sure, and the results were the same. I was pregnant. Though the tests on the market weren't completely reliable, the chances were high—I was carrying my and Takkun's child.

"Urgh..."

My feelings at the moment were hard to describe. It wasn't like I had absolutely no positive feelings...but more than anything, an immense sense of anxiety filled my chest, and I felt my vision darkening.

What do I do? What am I supposed to do from now on? I'm going to be a mother? Me? Now?

Actually...I guess it's too late to worry about that, huh?

In a sense, I was already a mother, but this was a bit different from being Miu's mother. For the first time in my life, I was pregnant. If things went well, I would be giving birth to a baby.

What do I do? What do I do? Like, where do I even start? Am I supposed to go to an obstetrician and get a baby book...? Actually, what about work? If I'm pregnant now, when do I take my maternity leave? I need to talk to Yumemi...

All those thoughts aside, my biggest concern was Takkun. What would he think? There was no way he wanted me to be pregnant now, of all times. He was just a college student, and he was probably going to start job hunting soon—and beyond that, he was at an age where he ought to be spending more time out with his friends and enjoying his youth. A student his age was much too young to have to be a father and handle so much responsibility.

Since both I and our eventual child would get in the way of him leading his life, I needed to seriously think about raising our child by myself... I even needed to consider getting an abortion as an option.

I sat there silently, and the more I thought, the darker the thoughts became. It felt like I was about to be crushed by the weight of my worries—I don't know how I managed to drag myself out of the restroom.

"Miss Ayako...?" Takkun had been waiting in the living room, and he worriedly ran over to me. "Wh-What did it say?"

I couldn't respond right away, but I couldn't keep it hidden either. I choked back the desire to run and said, "It... It was positive." I couldn't keep my voice from trembling. "I guess I'm pregnant..." Takkun fell silent. "But nothing is guaranteed yet... These sorts of tests aren't perfect, so when I get tested at the doctor's office, they might tell us differently" I kept desperately suggesting fantasies I knew wouldn't be true.

What if he's upset? What if he hates me? What if this ruins his life? What if he doesn't want to have anything to do with it? Various negative thoughts circled my mind. I was scared of looking him in the face, and I shut my eyes, and...

"That's great," Takkun said, the words effortlessly spilling out.



My eyes widened with shock. Takkun seemed entirely blissful about hearing the news.

“Huh?”

“O-Oh, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t say it like that. This is going to be a lot for you to deal with...not to mention it’s my fault that you’re pregnant, since I didn’t use a condom...” he rattled on anxiously. However, with a truly, deeply happy look, he added, “But, in spite of everything, I’m still happy. It’s like a dream come true. I get to have a baby with you.”

I fell silent.

“I’d say it’s like a dream come true, but really, it *is* a dream come true—all I’ve wanted for the last decade is to marry you and start a family together,” he continued. I was still at a loss for words. “Well, things ended up happening a bit out of order, so I should apologize for that, but... Well, what should we do now? We need to tell our parents— Oh, no, first we should first go to the hospital. The hospital! Please, let me take you there!”

I was speechless. While I’d been completely hung up on deciding how to handle the situation, Takkun had already made up his mind that we’d go through with it together, and he was thinking about our next steps. I noticed that the dark fears that had welled up in my chest had disappeared without a trace.

Ah... What can I even say? I guess even after all this time, I underestimated Takkun. I’m embarrassed I even considered an abortion.

I was certain some part of Takkun was terrified about embracing my pregnancy, but he’d chosen to push those negative feelings aside and first and foremost be happy. To him, our conceiving a child was a precious joy...and knowing he felt that way set my heart aflame. The timing might not have been the best, but the pregnancy itself wasn’t unwanted—I knew I could believe that for a fact thanks to Takkun’s unhesitating acceptance.

Before I knew it, my chat with Takkun had turned into a vent session for me. “Miu’s been so annoying these days,” I groaned. “She’s like an in-law.”

“She’s just that worried about you.”

“She said I’ve ‘been a little careless.’”

“Well, I don’t think she’s entirely wrong there.”

“What? You’re agreeing with her?”

“Ha ha.”

“Jeez, just who do you think is responsible for that?”

“What?”

“Never mind, it’s nothing,” I said as I took a sip of my dandelion coffee. I *had* been a bit careless. It was true, and I couldn’t deny it—and yet, I was surprised at how composed I was about everything. Not only was this pregnancy unplanned, I’d never had one before, and I was over thirty to boot. There were a mountain of things I needed to worry about...but for some reason, none of them weighed down my happiness and excitement at all. To me, this all felt like an occasion to celebrate, and I was even beginning to think things had been destined to be this way. Of course, the reason I was able to be so calmly optimistic was quite obvious—it was all thanks to having Takkun here for me.

“By the way, we need to decide on a name for a child,” I segued.

“That’s right. Do you care about how difficult it is to write?” Takkun asked.

“I don’t know... Should I care about that?”

“I don’t think it matters, but if you’ve decided not to care about it, you should just ignore all those kinds of details, no matter what. I’ve heard that if you consider length and whatnot even a little, you’ll end up having second thoughts.”

“Oh, that’s fair!”

“There are some people who also wait to see the baby’s face after they’re born.”

“Really? That seems difficult. I can’t imagine we’d have the time to think about it after they’re born.”

From an outsider’s perspective, our conversation was nothing out of the

ordinary, but for the two of us, it was an important conversation about our future—there were probably going to be plenty of difficulties ahead of us, but with Takkun as my partner, I felt like I could overcome anything.

Well, our discussion wrapped up with all those positive thoughts, but we would soon come to some jarring realizations—pregnancy and childbirth wouldn't be all happy times, for one, and becoming a father as a college student was no simple task.

Chapter 2: The Symptoms and the Decision



It was the middle of December, and our town in the Tohoku region was experiencing our first light snowfall of this winter. It had snowed a bit the previous night, so there was a thin layer of less than a centimeter piled up outside, but it would probably melt away in a few hours since it was sunny out.

I stepped into the thin blanket of snow to head to my neighbors, the Aterazawas, to pass on the neighborhood notice...and Tomomi greeted me at the door.

“Oh, hello, Ayako.”

“Good morning.”

“Are you all right, walking around on a day like this?”

“It’s fine—it barely snowed.”

“Be careful, now. It would be really bad if you tripped and fell, dear. I could’ve picked up the notice if you called.”

“That’s really not necessary,” I said with a nervous chuckle as I shook my head.

“I still can’t believe it,” Tomomi said with a sigh, her tone emotional. “Next year, I’m going to have a grandchild.” I didn’t know how to respond. “I’ve known for a *long* time that Takumi liked you, and I wasn’t surprised about you two getting together, but I never would’ve thought that you two would have a child so quickly.”

“I-I’m truly, deeply sorry about that.” I bowed my head deeply. I nearly began to prostrate myself to demonstrate my intense contrition, but Tomomi rushed to stop me.

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean it like that! I’m not upset or anything—it’s just that I haven’t processed it all, you know...”

“But...”

“You don’t have to apologize anymore. Everyone apologized plenty at that meeting we had with our families,” Tomomi said in a kind voice. “Both my husband and I are basically your family now, so don’t hesitate to ask if you need anything. This is going to be our first grandchild, so we’re going to be spoiling them rotten once they’re born.”

“O-Of course...”

I’m so grateful! I’m so grateful I could cry! I’m so lucky that such a saint is going to be my mother-in-law.

“How are you feeling? Have you had any symptoms yet...?”

“Actually, I’ve been completely fine! I’m feeling great.”

“Oh, really?”

“They say some people don’t experience any symptoms at all, so maybe I’m just one of those people!”

“That’s great to hear.”

“I really am lucky!”

We both then giggled to each other—and yet, three days after that casual conversation with Tomomi, I ended up experiencing hell itself...

“Huuuuurgh...” There came the vomit. I was hunched over the toilet, emptying out the contents of my stomach. “Blargh, blaaargh... Huuurgh... H-Huff...” Even after emptying my stomach, I continued to futilely retch and gag. After catching my breath, I managed to drag myself out of the restroom and headed to the living room, walking like a zombie before crashing into the couch.

“Urgh...” I felt awful. Just absolutely awful. I was nauseous, my stomach felt ready to explode at any moment, and I was unusually sleepy. I knew the reason, of course: these were the symptoms surrounding morning sickness. It began around the fifth or sixth week and often included things like nausea, vomiting, a loss in appetite, and an increase in sleepiness.

There was plenty of variation between people, from completely different

symptoms to completely different intervals said symptoms were suffered. Even modern medicine had yet to decipher what caused such manifold outcomes.

I'd known that I could end up having some symptoms, but I had never imagined they'd feel so awful. Just three days ago I had considered myself lucky and believed I wouldn't experience any issues...but then they suddenly emerged out of nowhere.

"Ugh, urgh..." As I lay there on the couch, I groped around for my phone like a zombie and mustered everything I could to call my mother.

"Hello?"

"Hi, mom..."

"Ayako? Are you okay?"

"I can't do it. I feel awful. What should I do about this? I feel so terrible I'm going to die."

"Well, you're experiencing the symptoms of the first trimester."

"My stomach feels really empty and I feel awful... My stomach feels so weird..."

"That's a classic case of empty-stomach morning sickness."

"What's that now...? You're telling me there are morning sickness categories?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"What? Ugh, morning sickness is such an evil condition... First you tell me it doesn't even only happen in the morning, now this..."

"Why are you complaining about it to me?"

I'd ended up trying to take my mind off how gross I felt by pointing out something that didn't matter at all...

"Anyways, just make sure you're eating plenty. If you avoid getting hungry, you should feel a little better."

"B-But, I get nauseous when I eat..."

“Just find something nice and light to eat.”

“Also, the doctor said not to eat too much. It wouldn’t be good if I gained too much weight either.”

“Naturally.”

“Huh...?”

What? Isn’t that contradictory? I had to eat, otherwise I’d feel awful, but whenever I ate, I became nauseous. If I wanted to eliminate my empty-stomach morning sickness, I needed to always be eating something and making sure I wasn’t hungry, but I wasn’t allowed to gain excessive weight either? This... This sounds impossible! How am I supposed to stay standing on this wacky balance beam?!

“I was completely underestimating pregnancy symptoms... I’m sorry for thinking I was one of the lucky few who wouldn’t experience them... Please, have mercy...”

“Who are you apologizing to?” my mother asked exasperatedly.

“Everyone who’s gone through with being pregnant is incredible... I can’t believe they’ve all overcome this hell...”

“There’s a big difference from person to person on how bad their symptoms are. Some people don’t have any problems, while some people only have symptoms late into their pregnancy.”

That’s possible? No way. I might actually die if this continues for another six months...

“The symptoms also vary between people. Some people’s taste in food changes, while others suddenly can’t stand specific smells. Also, some people are tired no matter how much they sleep.”

“Oh, that might be happening to me.”

I was *sleepy*. I’d been terribly tired since yesterday. I’d been getting enough sleep, but I didn’t feel rested at all. I was fatigued, and my mind was foggy. I was just sleepy...

“Just pray that it ends soon and find ways to distract yourself to get through

it."

"It looks like that's my only choice..." I wasn't sick, nor could I take any medications for it. I had no choice but to just find ways to deal with it.

"Let me know if you're really having a hard time though. I'll be there right away to help."

"Okay, I'll be counting on you, then..."

Our call ended, and I slackened the arm I'd been holding up my phone with.

Truthfully, I wanted my mother to come right away, but she had just spent several months at my house while I was on my business trip to Tokyo, so I would've felt bad asking her again.

Tomomi would've probably come over to help if I'd asked, but I felt like I was going to ask her and my mother for even more help once the baby was born, so I didn't want to rely on them too much beforehand.

Fortunately, my symptoms weren't too terrible. It was true that I wasn't feeling great, but looking it up online, there were people who experienced much worse. *I shouldn't be lying around all day just because I'm nauseous and sleepy, but...this is pretty awful.*

I hadn't been able to do any chores since yesterday. Miu had her finals coming up, so I had told her to shift her focus onto school, which meant I had to find a way to handle things myself, but...I was sleepy. I was *so* sleepy.

As I lay there, unable to move from the couch, my phone buzzed in my hand. It was a message from Takkun.

Takkun: Would it be all right if I came over right now?

I mustered up my energy to manage a reply.

Ayako: Feel free. The door's unlocked, so let yourself in.

My reply had been a bit curt, but that was the best I could do.

Several minutes later, I heard the door open. Surely it was rude as his girlfriend to not get up to go greet him—and for all I knew, it wasn't Takkun, but rather some burglar at the door—but I had no energy to get up. I just stayed there on the couch, and...

"M-Miss Ayako?!" Takkun entered the living room, and he ran over to me in a rush as he saw me lying there like I was dead. "Are you okay...?"

"Yeah, somehow..."

"You don't look very okay..."

"I-I'm fine, I'm fine... It's just morning sickness and stuff. What's up with you? You're in a suit."

Takkun had come over in a suit today, apparently. It was the same suit he'd worn on just his first day at his internship in Tokyo. He'd worn it to make sure he didn't fall for the plain clothes pitfall, but the company was not that kind of place at all, and he'd ended up wearing his regular clothes every day after that.

"I'm attending a job-hunting seminar after this."

"Oh, right... You mentioned that."

"I heard from Miu that you weren't feeling well, so I wanted to stop by before I headed to the university... I didn't realize things had gotten this bad." Takkun seemed truly worried. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I mean, I didn't want to worry you... I know that you're going to be busy now that you're starting to job hunt."

"Still..."

"There's nothing that can be done about my symptoms anyways. It's not like they'll go away just because you came over."

"Urgh..." Takkun had a pained look on his face.

Oh no. I said something terrible, but I needed to. If I don't say it clearly, Takkun might never leave my side and try to help me feel better. I had no idea how long these symptoms were going to last, and if I made Takkun stick with

me through them, it would completely get in the way of his job hunting.

“I’ll be fine...” I insisted. “I’m just a little nauseous, and I feel a little gross, and I’m a little fatigued, and I’m maybe abnormally sleepy. That’s all...”

“You don’t seem fine at all...”

“I-I’ll be fine. Miu’s here too.”

“Despite that, the house seems...” Takkun looked around dubiously at the living room and kitchen.

There was unfolded laundry, dust piled up all over, a table that hadn’t been cleared of our plates from breakfast, a sink full of dishes, and a garbage bag that I’d forgotten to take out. My house was in a miserable state that would make anyone want to look away.

“Well, that’s because Miu needs to study, and I told her to focus on school.”

Takkun fell silent.

“E-Either way, it’s fine,” I reiterated. “I’ll take care of it all.”

“Miss Ayako...”

“There are plenty of people having a rougher time than I am, so I can’t be complaining in my state...” I tried to act tough and sit up, but I didn’t have the energy. An intense wave of fatigue and sleepiness washed over me. I thought my consciousness was going to be washed away. “Oh, I’m sorry, I think... I might not be able to do it right now. Just give me thirty minutes... I’ll take care of everything once I wake up...”

“P-Please sleep. You should definitely rest.”

“I’m sorry, Takkun... Good luck at your seminar... Also, if you could lock the door on your way out, that would be great. You have the spare key, right...?” My eyelids gradually shut, and then I couldn’t see Takkun’s worried face anymore. “See you later...then...” No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t maintain my consciousness, and I fell asleep.

“Mm...” I opened my eyes and slowly sat myself up. There was a thin blanket draped over me. Takkun had probably put it there before he left for his seminar.

I lifted my arms and stretched out. *Yeah, my mind feels so much clearer.* I wasn't feeling a hundred percent yet, but I was definitely doing better compared to before my nap.

I used my phone to check what time it was. *No way... It's been five hours? That's a bit too long for a nap.* It might have helped me feel better, but I felt guilty—or rather, like I had wasted time. *I'm going to go another day without doing anything! I still haven't taken care of the chores. Miu should be coming home soon, so I need to make dinner, but at this rate I'm going to serve a full course of frozen foods again. I should at least make some rice—*

Various thoughts ran through my freshly awakened mind before I noticed something. "Huh...?" The room was clean. All the clothes I'd left strewn about and the garbage I'd forgotten to take out were gone. The table, which I'd yet to clear after breakfast, was now cleaned up.

Beyond the table, in the kitchen, a familiar silhouette was working.

"T-Takkun?!" I called out in surprise, and he turned to look at me. He was holding chopsticks and a frying pan.

"Oh, you're awake, Miss Ayako." He asked me to wait a moment, then turned his attention back to the frying pan. He turned off the burner and plated what he had cooked, then made his way toward me. He was still wearing the suit I'd seen him in earlier, with an apron on top. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling a lot better...but what are you doing, Takkun?"

"I was making dinner just now. Sorry for using your kitchen without asking." He glanced back at the kitchen. "I tried making some other things too so you can have them in the freezer. I figured it would be nice if you had side dishes you could just heat up when you're not feeling well...but I had to look the recipes up, so it's not my best work, unfortunately."

I didn't know what to say. "Also, I went ahead and cleaned the room," he added. "I didn't vacuum since it would be too loud, but I tried to do what I could to make things look neater..." He was speaking quickly, as if he felt like he'd let me down.

I honestly couldn't have cared less about him cleaning or using the kitchen

without asking, and I never would've taken it as an invasion of my privacy. I was well aware that Takkun was more than competent at handling household chores—his skills had helped out a lot when we were living together. Nor was I surprised by the fact that he knew where the cooking utensils and cleaning supplies were, considering he'd been going in and out of my house for the past decade and was plenty familiar with everything. None of that concerned me at all. Rather, there was a separate, all too pressing issue weighing on my mind...

“Takkun, don’t tell me... Were you doing chores this *whole* time?” *Ever since I fell asleep?*

“Yes...” He said, nodding with hesitation.

If he’s been here the whole time, then...

“What about the job-hunting seminar...?” It was mostly a rhetorical question. He obviously hadn’t attended the seminar, and the fact he was still wearing his suit proved it.

“Um, I skipped it, ha ha.” He laughed it off.

“Why?”

“I-It’s fine. The seminar today was really like the first part of the first step for the first session. It won’t really affect anything if I miss it.”

I fell silent. I’d gone through the job hunting process, so I knew—the initial seminars weren’t really necessary to attend, and you could do well without them. There wasn’t much to lose from not attending the first few sessions, nor would it eventually affect you down the line. Of course, there weren’t many individual seminars that were important to attend, and you wouldn’t gain some extraordinary advantage by attending any of them in particular.

All that said, it didn’t really make sense to reduce the experience to that. If I were to try to explain it...I’d say successful job hunting had less to do with attending on particular days and more to do with giving yourself as many opportunities as possible to accrue information and make connections.

“I’m sorry...” Takkun said, bowing his head as if he couldn’t take it anymore. Perhaps it was my silence that’d prompted him to do so. “I thought it would be better for me to go, and I knew it wouldn’t make you happy if I did all this

instead..." He grimaced. "But when I saw you struggling, I couldn't just leave you alone... I hoped that if I took care of the chores, you might feel a little better..."

I didn't know what to say. "After all," he added, "the child you're carrying is mine, and you're working so hard to bring a life into this world... I can't just go off and do my own thing while leaving you on your own..."

"Takkun..." My chest tightened with pain. His feelings and his consideration made me so happy that it hurt. After a few moments of silence, I finally said, "Thank you. I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused you."

"Th-There's nothing you need to apologize for, Miss Ayako. I chose to be here, and you can't help the symptoms you're experiencing."

"I'm thankful, but..." My hand tightened into a fist, and I forced myself to speak a hard truth. "If I'm being honest, I didn't ask for this."

Takkun gasped.

"I appreciate that you were being considerate of me, and I'm truly grateful for that, but it's not right for you to ignore your own needs for my sake."

Ugh, this is painful. I don't actually want to say these things. I want to shower him with praise for being a wonderful father who's caring for the mother's health. I want to just say, "I'm so happy, I love you," and kiss him and be done with this before going off to spend lovey-dovey time together. But I need to be firm here. If I don't, the same thing will happen again.

"You sacrificing your life for my sake won't bring me happiness."

"'Sacrificing' is a bit of an exaggeration... It was really just an initial session that didn't matter."

"Is that so? Whether it's a seminar that doesn't matter or an important interview or test, I feel like the current you would prioritize me." I was all that mattered to him—as his pregnant girlfriend, he was keeping me as his constant priority.

"W-Well..." Takkun was at a loss for what to say.

It may sound conceited, but I was genuinely sure it was his thought process.

Though we'd only been officially dating for a few months, Takkun and I had had a relationship that'd spanned over ten years, so I knew what kind of person he was. He'd always treasured me more than anyone else, including himself, and that'd only intensified after we'd found out I was pregnant.

"I mean, I can't help it..." Takkun said with a pained look. "Right now, you and the child you're carrying are more important to me than anything else—you're far and away on my mind more than any job hunt... I can't waste time worrying about myself when you're enduring all these things on your own."

"I know... Look, what I'm trying to ask is that you try to strike a balance."

"I see..."

"If I'm facing a life-and-death crisis, then sure, I'd want you to prioritize me over your job search—but if it's something on the level of today, I think it's fine for you to prioritize your job hunting," I explained. *Well, the whole thing started because my pregnancy symptoms kept me from taking care of the chores sooner, but let's ignore that for now.* "Children are certainly extremely important, but so is your future. Your life is a truly precious thing."

"My life...?"

"Takkun, I want you to know that I'm really happy right now," I said, placing my hand on my belly. "The pregnancy came out of nowhere, but I still feel happy. It feels like a long-awaited dream has come true. That's all thanks to you."

"Huh...?"

"Since I know you're genuinely excited about this pregnancy and that you want to be here for me, I'm able to feel secure and comfortable."

"Of course I'm excited..."

"Exactly—it's the fact you feel that way that makes me so happy," I fired back, hoping I could get him to stop being so humble. I laid out just how grateful I was for him. "I want you to care about yourself as much as you care about me."

"Care about myself..."

"There's going to be plenty of hardship from now until this baby is born.

Things will probably get even more difficult after the baby's here. I definitely won't be able to do this without your full cooperation."

Takkun fell silent. "But, even so, I don't want you to sacrifice your own life because of that," I pleaded. "I don't want you to ignore this really important chapter of your life where you're preparing for your career then end up unable to work at a company you want to or unable to enter the industry you want to... If you end up failing with your search like that, I would be frustrated. It would be like I held you back by getting pregnant."

"Y-You could never."

"Takkun," I began, "please, prioritize yourself more." That was what I wished for from the bottom of my heart. It was what I truly desired for the man who always put me first. In a sense, it was love, but it was also my own selfish desire. "Of course, there will be times I really need your help. I'll ask for it if I need it, so otherwise, I want you to take this time that's so important for your future and put your all into focusing on your life."

Takkun was twenty, in college, and preparing for his future career. He was in the middle of quite a significant period of his life, and I was putting a burden on him with my pregnancy—that's why I wanted to do what I could for him. I didn't have much to offer, and I was probably going to rely on him a lot, but I wanted to be sure he made time to focus on his job search, at the very least.

"I want you to do what *you* want," I insisted. "I want you to make choices you won't regret."

I didn't care what kind of job he ended up in, I just wanted him to end up in a career he wanted. There was no guarantee that his job search would succeed, nor that he would end up in a job he wanted, but I still wanted him to do everything he could. I wanted him to have the *chance* to try everything, at least.

"Well, I sure am being pretty condescending for someone who was on death's door from her pregnancy symptoms... Still, don't hold yourself back. You should believe in me a little more and rely on me more."

Takkun didn't respond. "Don't worry. Like I said, I'll ask you for help when I really need it," I reassured him. "I'll rely on you too. So don't push your own needs aside, and rely on me too."

Takkun remained quiet for a while before finally saying, “Thank you very much.” He bowed his head. “You’re absolutely right. This current situation where I’m not fully committing to my job search isn’t good.” He lifted his head and looked me right in the eyes. “I’ll take some time to think about it—about my life, and my future.”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” I said, relieved.

I’m so glad. Hopefully Takkun will focus on his job hunting now. Such thoughts had put my mind at ease, but seeing how things ended up, I had been naive to think our discussion was enough. I thought I knew him, but it seemed that I wasn’t fully aware of just what kind of man Takkun was.

Three days later, Takkun came over, saying we needed to talk. My pregnancy symptoms weren’t so bad today, so I sat up in a chair at the table, and Takkun sat across from me. Our conversation here was about to leave me dumbfounded.

“Y-You’re going to give up on job hunting?!” I was completely flabbergasted.

“Yes,” Takkun confirmed with a firm nod. There wasn’t a single iota of hesitation behind his eyes. He seemed completely at peace.

“What will this entail exactly?”

“I’m going to stop searching, period.”

I didn’t know what to say...

“I still plan on graduating, but I’m giving up on getting a job right out of college.”

“Wh-What...?” I couldn’t hide my confusion. I couldn’t process what was going on. “Th-Then...what are you going to do after you graduate?” I asked without thinking.

“I’m committing to being a stay-at-home dad!” Takkun replied unwaveringly.

“A stay-at-home dad?!” I was so thoroughly stunned I ended up raising my voice again.

“I want to stay at home so I can take care of our child and the house, and of

course you too."



I felt too surprised to speak yet, but before long, Takkun clarified, “Oh, but I don’t mean I want to be one forever, of course. After I spend a few years focusing on homemaking and our kid has grown up a little, I can find a job then. I think that would be ideal.”

I was still totally shocked, but Takkun cheerfully added, “Thanks to you, I was finally able to figure out what I want to do.”

“Huh...?” I at last replied. *Me? It’s thanks to me?*

“After what you said three days ago, I gave my life and my future serious thought. I figured out what it is I truly want to do.” Takkun had a determined look, as if he’d come to some sort of profound revelation. “What I want is to support you, Miss Ayako!”

“What?!” *Really?!* That’s *the direction you went in, Takkun?!* “N-No, no!” I shook my head. “This isn’t right! I told you, you don’t have to worry about me. I wanted you to stop thinking of me so much and do *what you* really want to do...”

“I genuinely thought this through from a completely selfish perspective. Ultimately, what I want regardless of anyone else is to be here for you.”

Rather than try to argue, I waited to hear him out. “First of all, I don’t think I can really focus on job hunting right now,” he continued. “No matter how much you tell me I shouldn’t worry, I’m still going to... Knowing myself like that, I thought it might be better to just stop trying to make job hunting work and focus on being a househusband.”

That’s such a bold decision! His decisiveness is incredible! “U-Um, well...” I finally said.

What do I do? I wasn’t expecting this at all! I was hoping Takkun would focus on finding a job in a field he wanted—this is all too sudden. I never thought he’d quit searching! I didn’t think he’d want to work in our home!

“I like seeing you work too, Miss Ayako,” Takkun added, seeing as I’d clammed up again from being so flustered. “After living with you for three months, seeing you work so hard, I came to learn just how much you love your current job and how important it is to you. That’s why I would feel awful if the

pregnancy were to affect your work..."

I'd taken it for granted that having a baby would pull me away from my job. Of course, it goes without saying that pregnancy and child-rearing will demand a certain amount of attention that you can no longer dedicate to your job—and although I knew modern workplaces like mine wouldn't treat me differently because I was pregnant or had a newborn (and Yumemi especially wouldn't), there were limits to such tolerance. On top of that, when I factored in Takkun's job hunting and eventual career, I fully expected I would end up being the one primarily responsible for caring for our child. Considering it seemed inevitable, I'd been ready to accept it...

"That sounds a lot like you're actually doing it for my sake," I pointed out.

"You're wrong. It's for me," Takkun insisted. "I love that you love your job, so I want you to be able to continue giving it your all, even after you have our child. I want to be by your side to support you and watch you succeed." Then he added something pivotal: "I don't want any regrets either."

"Regrets." I brought that up the last time we spoke about this.

"If I don't do everything I can for you and our child during this critical, important time, I'll regret it for the rest of my life..." His eyes were burning with determination. "Please, let me support you, Miss Ayako."

I was at a loss for words. You could say I was overcome with emotion. *Ah, what is this? I've known Takkun for so long, and now that we've been dating, I figured I knew him better than anyone else...but that was arrogant of me. I don't even know the first thing about just how deeply this man loves me...*

"You really don't change, do you, Takkun?"

"Are you praising me, or are you over me?"

"Both, I think," I said with a chuckle. "A househusband, huh? It feels like it came out of nowhere, but if it's truly what you want, then we should take it under serious consideration."

"Right... I have to stress, though, if you're against it, I can go back to the drawing board. I made it sound noble, but in reality, I'm basically saying, 'I won't work, so please provide for me'..."

“These days, there’s more ways for fathers to provide for the family than being a breadwinner. Doing chores and taking care of a child are hard work—you’re no worse a parent for not bringing in income,” I explained. If it was true for stay-at-home moms, it was true for stay-at-home dads too.

Hm. This isn’t a future I would’ve ever imagined, but it might not be so bad.

My sister and her husband had bought this house, but the mortgage had been paid off using the money from their life insurance. As for Miu’s college fund, I’d slowly been growing a savings account over the years. I actually had quite a bit in my regular savings as well.

If both of us working meant that Takkun and I would be killing ourselves to work full time while raising a baby for the first time, perhaps Takkun becoming my dependent and focusing on homemaking would keep us both mentally and physically healthy.

Also, I’d heard that it was harder to get your child into day care when you worked from home like I did... I’d thought that in the worst-case scenario I would quit my job if our child couldn’t get in, but if Takkun was going to be a house husband, all of those concerns wouldn’t be an issue.

Yeah, it’s an option. In fact, it might even be for the best. We’d both raise our child together, and I’d focus on my job while Takkun does housework. Miu could even help us out sometimes too... Hold on. This is good! Doesn’t this actually sound really good?! I feel like I just imagined the ideal family! I feel like it’s totally perfect!

I calmed myself down a bit and got back on track by clearing my throat. “I understand your wishes. I think we should actively consider you becoming a househusband as a real option. There’s a lot we need to think about.”

“I understand. We’ll discuss it all.”

“Yeah, but before we talk about it, we need to get your parents on board. Who knows how they’ll react when they hear you want to stop looking for a job and be a stay-at-home dad?”

Takkun’s parents had managed to get their son through college, but now he wanted to stop job hunting? Being a new graduate was the ultimate advantage

for a jobseeker, yet their son was ready to throw that away to become a househusband? They'd doubtlessly oppose his idea—were I in their shoes, I would've definitely been against it too.

I'm already throwing Takkun's life off track—if I end up capsizing his postgraduation plans too, they'd totally be in their rights to resent me for it. We need to take our time and carefully convince them. “If your parents are firmly against it, then we'll have to start this discussion all over,” I added. “You know, this kind of stuff involves your parents, so...”

“You might be right...” Takkun nodded with a pensive look. “I want to argue that my decisions around this issue don't require their approval, but thinking that way might be unreasonably childish and naive of me. After all, my parents are paying for my college education, and I do care about them—I don't want to disappoint them.”

“So you understand then. That's great!” *Hm? Wait, I feel like we've done this before.* I felt a disorienting wave of *déjà vu*.

“But you don't have to worry about that!” Takkun balled his hand into a fist and began chattering excitedly. “I thought you would worry about something like that, Miss Ayako, and that's why I already convinced my parents ahead of time!”

“Again?!” This was exactly how things had gone when Takkun had gotten prior approval from his parents before he'd confessed his feelings to me.

I should've expected as much—he'd come well prepared, as usual. Takkun becoming a househusband was looking like a sure thing.

Chapter 3: The Last Chance and the Reverse Bunny



By the time we were nearing the end of December, my pregnancy symptoms had gotten quite better. They weren't fully gone, but I was feeling a lot better than when they were in full force. It seemed that my body wasn't going to keep me suffering for long—I was just going to experience all the symptoms at once then be done with it.

Another thing that had probably helped was figuring out how to manage my symptoms, like knowing when was a bad time to eat, or that I shouldn't force myself to stay awake when I was sleepy. I was slowly understanding the various cues from my body.

Now that I was feeling better, there was plenty to do. For example, I had several medical things to take care of. I'd decided on which obstetrician to visit as soon as I had returned from Tokyo, but there were still many more decisions to make. There were a ton of options available surrounding childbirth compared to the past—I had to research things like pain management and home births.

Another thing was baby items. Though I was nowhere near my due date, I probably needed to start buying things ahead of time. Also, since both Takkun and my parents were still around, we had to figure out who was buying what, like, "the dad's side gets to buy the stroller, and the mom's side gets to buy the car seat." We needed to decide who was going to gift what to their grandchild ahead of time.

There were also work-related adjustments to make.

"Ha ha, I see. A stay-at-home dad, huh? He really got you with that one," Yumemi said over the phone with a boisterous and amused laugh.

Since I was feeling better, I had called her hoping to discuss my work going forward, and the conversation had naturally steered toward Takkun's future. I wasn't the one who had brought it up—Yumemi had asked about it. Since she

had gotten Takkun his internship, it made sense that she was curious about his future, especially with this pregnancy.

“I have to say, I’d expect no less from him. Takumi always makes decisions that blow my expectations out of the water. He’s so fun.”

“He sure is.”

“I admire how deep his love for you is.”

“Ha ha, well...”

“Hee hee. I thought you might never reach the point where you’re genuinely happy to hear something like that without feeling embarrassed or trying to play it down. It seems like you’ve settled down—gotten domestic, in a sense.”

“I *am* having a child, so...” I couldn’t keep being the bashful woman I’d been for so long. My and Takkun’s time to be a naive couple was coming to an end. We needed to settle down and start thinking about the family we were starting.

“My, my. I guess that means I won’t get to tease you for having a middle-schoolesque relationship in your thirties anymore. How sad.”

“I hate to disappoint...”

“Takumi as a stay-at-home dad, huh? I didn’t expect it at all, but... Hm. Now that I think about it, it does seem like it’s the best option. To be honest, it’s pretty difficult to balance child-rearing and job hunting.”

“I-It probably is, isn’t it?”

“You’ve raised Miu for ten years, but this will be the first time you’ve ever given birth and cared for a newborn, right? The whole experience is... Well, it’s a battle.” Yumemi’s tone was that of someone who obviously had experience.

Yumemi had raised a child for some time. She’d been separated from Ayumu before he turned two, but that also meant that he’d been in her care until then.

“From the day you give birth, while you’re still drained, you enter a hell where you’d be lucky to get three hours of sleep a day... Even if your husband helps you, you have to teach him how to feed or change the baby, so it’s faster to just do it yourself. You start getting irritated at every little innocuous statement. Also, once it occurs to you his role somehow became to ‘help’ at some point, it

makes you want to argue, ‘What do you mean *help*? Isn’t this *our* child?’ On top of that, when I was doing it over a decade ago, my ex’s parents were very old-fashioned, so they always told me, ‘You’re making a man raise the child? And you call yourself a mother?’ Ugh, that was so tiring...”

“O-Oof...” What else could I say? It sounded like Yumemi had had quite the hard time raising Ayumu when he was an infant. I’d thought I had an idea of how hard it was because I’d seen my sister’s struggles when she was raising Miu, but now that I was actually going to actually be in that position, I was realizing there would probably be difficulties I couldn’t even imagine waiting for me.

“I’d been worried about you, but hearing that Takumi’s going to be at home and supporting you makes me feel better. He’s a dedicated, well-organized guy. I’m sure he’d do well as a stay-at-home dad.”

“That’s very true. Ever since he decided on being a househusband, he’s been really motivated. He’s started learning how to cook, and he’s been practicing how to manage a household budget.”

His budgeting was particularly impressive. I’d always done it without much thought, but Takkun used a new app to do a bunch of things with the finances. He simulated our income and expenses, and he even looked over things like insurance plans and utility costs.

“So, you’re going to have a studious, intelligent young husband supporting you every step of the way. I’m jealous. That’s the ideal marriage every working woman dreams of.”

“Eh heh heh. It really is...” I couldn’t help but chuckle. “That’s why I feel a little bad about it. It’s like I’m the only one who gets to do what I want. I’m sure Takkun would contribute a lot to society if he was out working.”

“He’s the one who said he wanted to stay at home, right?”

“Well, yes.”

“I understand how you feel, but I don’t think you need to worry too much. Not getting a job right out of college doesn’t mean you’ll never have any opportunities to join the workforce in the future. If he wants to work once your

child is a bit older, he'll be able to."

Takkun had mentioned the same thing—he wanted to consider going back to work once our child was a bit older.

"Things aren't like they were in the past. New graduates don't always have an advantage. Takumi would be able to succeed anywhere he goes. He could even come work with us—I'd gladly welcome him."

"There you go again, treating the company like your personal property..."

"I believe I'm making a composed decision as the president. Hiring a skilled person has nothing but benefits." It seemed that Yumemi thought quite highly of him.

Hmm... Usually, I'm the one to talk her down when she starts acting like she's the sole decision-maker at the company, but I'm actually pretty happy about this, so I won't say anything.

Hee hee, yeah, Takkun is amazing! Yumemi really gets it! Hee hee hee.

"Most of all, I'm glad that you'll continue to work hard after having your child. I'm really grateful for Takumi," Yumemi said, sounding satisfied.



After discussing various things about the future, Yumemi suddenly asked, “So, Ayako, how are *other* things going with Takumi?”

“Other things?”

“Your nightly activities, of course.”

“Pft...” I would’ve done a spit take had I been drinking something. “Wh-Why are you asking about that so suddenly?” I felt embarrassed.

“It’s a serious topic. It’s actually surprisingly serious,” she insisted. Then she calmly asked again, “Really, how are things? How have things been in bed since finding out that you’re pregnant?”

“We haven’t been up to anything, of course.” During the three months we’d lived together, Takkun and I had taken that step forward in our relationship, but ever since we found out I was pregnant, we’d stopped. It wasn’t like either one of us had decided we shouldn’t—things just came to a halt naturally. Nothing ever seemed to take us in that direction anymore.

“First of all, things won’t be stable until I’m out of the first trimester, so it’s off the table till then. Takkun understands that too, so he doesn’t try to initiate things either...”

“I knew it. This is exactly what I expected...” Yumemi let out a deep sigh of disappointment. “They say that a wife is most likely to be cheated on when she’s pregnant! Did you know that, Ayako?”

“What?!” I was shocked. “H-Huh? No way... Why is that?” Pregnancy was one of the most difficult things someone could go through—why would someone do something so awful as cheat on their pregnant wife?!

“I’m sure everyone has different circumstances, but one of the reasons is probably that the couple’s bedroom activities are put on pause. While pregnant, wives deal with their symptoms and anxieties, so they don’t have much capacity to be sexual. Husbands whose wives are out of commission sometimes end up going to another woman.”

“Ugh...”

“If you haven’t slept together since finding out that you’re pregnant, that

means Takumi has been abstinent for over a month, right? For a man in his twenties who knows the pleasures of a woman, that's rough. I wouldn't be surprised if his eyes started wandering."

"W-We're fine! Takkun would be the last person to cheat... I-I trust him!"

We're fine. Takkun is definitely okay. He would never cheat. I believe in him!

"That's true. You probably don't have to worry about *Takumi*," Yumemi said, hinting at something more with her tone. "Takumi Aterazawa isn't the kind of scum who would cheat on his pregnant partner. I don't think you're wrong about that. No matter what kind of person tried to seduce him, his pure love for you would win out." I fell silent. "No matter what kind of young, trendy girl, or voluptuous, mature woman tries to seduce him, he would never waver. Oh, come to think of it, 'voluptuous, mature woman' describes you to a T, doesn't it?"

Who are you calling a voluptuous, mature woman?

"Even if he were drugged with an aphrodisiac that increases his virility three thousand times over and came face-to-face with the ultimate beauty, all while at his limits from being abstinent for a month, he probably wouldn't sleep with any woman aside from you."

Just what the heck is going on in that hypothetical?! Clearly she thinks he's trustworthy, but how would he ever end up having to prove himself in a situation like that?

"Ayako," Yumemi said, her tone formal. "Are you okay with letting Takumi wait like this?"

"Wait..."

"He's had feelings for you for over a decade, and he'd never paid attention to any other women. He's remained chaste all that time, and after he finally got to take that step with you, now he has to wait a while to enjoy things again because you're pregnant. I feel bad for him. He's imagined what it would be like for so long, and after finally getting a taste of the flesh that has tantalized him so, he's back to a life of abstinence..."

"Wh-What am I supposed to do about it now?" *Do I just have to accept it if he*

cheats on me? Or do I give him permission to go to a brothel? I don't like either option.

"It's easy. You just have to take care of him."

"Huh? B-But, until I'm out of the first trimester, I..."

"There's only one kind of intercourse you have to worry about when you're pregnant, right? There are plenty of other ways to satisfy a man."

"Huh?!" Once I understood what she had meant, my face turned bright red. "Wh-What?! Do you mean... What?!" In other words, she was talking about "servicing" a man—doing "this and that" to satisfy Takkun. "Well, I... That's... Huh?"

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about. It's an important thing. We're just talking about a very important form of communication for a couple." Yumemi's tone of voice indicated she was telling me all this with utmost seriousness. "I don't mean to defend a cheater at all, but if you tell a man that you can't have sex because you're pregnant, and also that you don't have the energy to be with him yet you don't want him to cheat, then I'd feel a bit sympathetic toward the man. I can understand why a guy in that spot would want to deal with their needs by cheating or going to a brothel."

"I-I get what you're trying to say." I got the gist of it. It was true that I had perhaps neglected *that* form of communication ever since I'd gotten pregnant. "Even so, doing something like that out of nowhere is... Things haven't been headed in that direction recently..."

We'd been very lovey-dovey while living together, but ever since we'd found out I was pregnant, Takkun had become very considerate of my body. Though I appreciated it, I was a bit sad that we weren't cuddling as much.

"Don't worry. I figured that was the case, so I prepared a secret weapon for you."

"A-A secret weapon?!"

"I sent it yesterday, so it should arrive tomorrow."

"You've already sent it?! W-Wait, I don't need anything like that."

A secret weapon from Yumemi... I don't need it. I definitely don't! I have nothing but bad feelings about this! I'm familiar with this pattern of events!

"Has this whole conversation been a ploy to rile me up and get me in an embarrassing outfit again?! You won't get me this time!"

"Hm, well, I won't deny anything, but let me say this, Ayako..." Yumemi paused for a moment, then she continued in a solemn tone. "This is your last chance."

"Huh...?"

"This is truly your last chance," she repeated, as if she were trying to get it through my head.

"M-My last chance for what?"

"What do you mean 'for what?' This is your last chance to have an embarrassing yet fun, lovey-dovey event with Takumi. You won't have the time to do things like this after you give birth. You won't just be a couple anymore—you'll have to be parents."

Oh, that's what she means. I thought she was going in a different direction, like we were sending off a seven-volume light novel series. To think I was worried about what she was going to say next...

"Think of it as your last chance to make memories. It wouldn't be so bad to act totally silly while you two can still just be a couple, right?"

I wasn't sure whether or not to agree.

"You might never get an opportunity like this again," she reiterated. "This is your last chance."

I was stunned. The fact that I was seriously considering it now perhaps meant that I had already let Yumemi talk me into this. *Yeah, she really does have me convinced this is my last chance, doesn't she?*

Well...I guess I was used to this by now—or rather, I wasn't as embarrassed by it anymore. I'd been talked into wearing embarrassing outfits countless times, but I was realizing that this would probably be the last time it would ever happen. At long last, Ayako Katsuragi would don her final embarrassing outfit.



Miss Ayako had asked me to come over to her house. She wouldn't tell me why she wanted me there. I was to just come over without asking any questions.

What should I do? I have a bad feeling about this... My experiences until now had taught me that whenever Miss Ayako acted like this, she was going to do something weird.

Miss Ayako was generally someone with common sense who thought before she acted...but sometimes, every once in a while, she would step on the gas and head in a strange direction. Today was probably going to be one of those times.

On top of that, I had been staring outside the window in my room this morning, and I noticed something get delivered to Miss Ayako's house. The very afternoon afterward, Miss Ayako was inviting me over under mysterious circumstances?

Yeah... I have a bad feeling about this.

"Well, I have no choice but to go," I mumbled to myself.

Declining her invitation wasn't an option. It was possible that this was about something important, so I would show up no matter what.

I steeled myself and headed for the house next door. I rang the bell and got a message in response—the door was unlocked and I was to let myself in, it said, so I headed inside.

It was a weekday, and Miu was at school. My winter break had started a bit early—since I'd decided to stop job hunting and become a stay-at-home dad instead, my schedule was suddenly wide open. Of course, I wasn't spending my free time just fooling around; I was studying to become a househusband, and I was working part-time at a temporary position.

I walked down the hallway and headed to the living room. "I'm coming in," I announced before opening the door. "Miss Ayako—"

The moment I entered, time stopped. The first thing I noticed was the slightly high temperature of the room. It was winter, but the space still felt hot. It felt

like she had set the heat to twenty-eight degrees C. The curtains were drawn as well, which made the room feel a bit oppressive. Then the reason for these oddities became immediately clear.

“Wha—”

I was rendered speechless. The visual impact of what I was beholding was much too powerful. I wondered if what I was seeing had affected the speech center of my brain. You see, Miss Ayako, the person I loved more than anyone else, was in the living room dressed like—

“I-It’s me, Ayako. Hop, hop,” she said. She looked so embarrassed she could die. Along with adding her own sound effects, she curled her hands atop her head to mimic rabbit ears, and she even lightly hopped around.

I was stunned. She was in...something like a bunny suit? Atop her head was a bunny-ears headband, a bow tie adorned her neck, and she was clad in white gloves and black stockings. The various elements were in line with the standard bunny suit...but it wasn’t one. This was definitely a whole different animal from what I was familiar with.

The thing is, the getup was sort of...in reverse. It was backward. Everything about it was the opposite of what you’d expect. What was reversed? Well, the parts that the outfit was supposed to hide.

A regular bunny suit was a high-cut, formfitting corset teddy. It showed plenty of skin, and it was unmistakably risqué. Meanwhile, Miss Ayako’s costume had long sleeves and stockings, but lacked a torso. The parts of her body that would usually be covered were exposed. Of course, she wasn’t completely naked—her most private areas were hidden, but precariously so: her crotch was just barely covered by a stringlike swimsuit, and as for her chest...all she had on were stickers. Two X-shaped pasties were all that stood between me and a full view of her breasts.

I gasped from the surprise of it all. *This is insane. It’s too much! What’s with this outfit? It’s so erotic, it’s like the only reason it exists is to get into men’s pants!*

“Wh-What do you think, Takkun...?” Miss Ayako asked as I stood stock-still, unable to move a single muscle. She was speaking like she usually did—I

guessed she gave up on doing the sound effects. “Do you like this sort of thing?”

Do I like it...? We're way beyond asking questions like that—I feel like just looking at is going to make me lose my mind to lust.

“Wh-What are you doing, Miss Ayako?” I said, barely managing to squeeze the words out. “What's with this outfit? It looks more humiliating than just being naked...”

“U-Um...”

“I mean, it's the middle of winter...”

“Urgh...”

“...and it's the middle of the day...”

“Hurgh...”

“...and also, you're with child.”

“W-Well...” Miss Ayako began to whine, and she was on the verge of tears.

I was so flustered that I'd ended up speaking without thinking, and she seemed quite hurt—she collapsed on the spot, perhaps out of shock.

“Th-There's a reason for all of this...”

We moved to the couch and sat beside each other. I had Miss Ayako drape one of the blankets in the living room across her lap—I thought it would be bad if she got cold while practically naked. *Well, she has the heat on, so I probably don't have to worry about her feeling cold. She probably turned it on to wear this outfit, actually...*

“In other words, Miss Yumemi talked you into it?”

“Yeah...” Miss Ayako said, nodding.

After hearing her explanation, it was revealed that there was a mastermind behind all of this, which I should have expected. I wasn't surprised at all.

“Well, it could've happened to anybody. Yumemi could win a gold medal in smooth-talking, after all.” *Still, it's an insane outfit to wear.*

I'd seen Miss Ayako dress up several times in the past, but this outfit was on a whole different level to the previous costumes. It was much more erotic than her previous outfits.

"Apparently, this is called a 'reverse bunny suit,'" Miss Ayako said.

A reverse bunny suit... I see. Since the parts that are exposed are reversed, it's an apt name.

"It's a bit popular right now in otaku and adult spaces, and Yumemi sent it to me," she explained further.

This crazy costume is popular? Wow, humans can make some incredible things. I guess men's desires have no limit.

"I-I also thought that a reverse bunny suit would be too much. I mean, this just makes me look like a pervert!"

So she does have some self-awareness.

"Yumemi said this was my last chance, though..."

"What did she mean by that?"

"We won't have time to relax when the baby's born, so this is our last chance to be lovey-dovey together."

Oh, I see. It was true that there was something different about Miss Ayako today. She had a sense of determination, like she was locked on to her objective. It was as if she were ready to self-destruct and say, "If this is going to be my last chance, I don't mind doing something extreme! Let's light some huge fireworks and leave a mark! It's the last volume, so the editor will forgive me!"

"Jeez, Miss Yumemi is so mean..." I let out a heavy sigh. "This is all so I won't cheat? You don't have to worry about that."

From what I'd heard, that topic was what had gotten Miss Ayako all riled up—that there was a higher chance of a man cheating when his partner was pregnant. "I would never cheat on you during such an important time as this. Oh, um— Of course, I wouldn't cheat on you regardless of the period of our lives we're in! But I would be extra careful not to— No, it's not that I need to be careful, as I wouldn't even consider cheating, so, um—"

“I know...” Miss Ayako said, interrupting me as I searched for the right words. “I know you wouldn’t cheat. I’m well aware of that, and I trust you. But, even so, I didn’t think it was right for me to keep exploiting your kindness.” I wasn’t sure what to say. “After all, you’re holding back, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

“We haven’t done anything ever since we found out I was pregnant...”

“W-Well...”

If pressed to answer, I suppose I probably *was* holding myself back. I was a young man, and I wanted to do things with the person I loved. On top of all that, we had started dating not too long ago, and things had only recently become physical.

So, the truth was, I *did* want to do it. I’d wanted to do it every day. I’d been wanting to do it multiple times a day, but...

“I *am* holding back, but...it’s normal to hold back in a situation like this.”

“Yeah... I expected as much. I would’ve probably been disappointed if you’d ignored how I was feeling and tried to pressure me into things...but even so, I don’t think it’s right for me to take that for granted and exploit your kindness. I might’ve let Yumemi talk me into this because I felt that way, in fact...” I wasn’t sure how to react. “Of course, we can’t go all the way, but, um...I think I can satisfy you in other ways.”

“Hmm?!”

In other ways?! I reflexively stared at her body, clad in the reverse bunny suit—at all the different parts that would come into play with these “other ways.”

“You’re the only person I’ve ever been with, so I don’t know how much I could do...but if I’m capable of something you want, I want to do it for you. I want you to enjoy it. That would make me happy.”

“Miss Ayako...” A warm feeling filled my chest. Her feelings and her consideration made me so happy. “Thank you,” I said, bowing my head deeply. “But it’s fine. You can keep exploiting my kindness. It’s fine for me to hold back and for you to rely on me—it’s fine to take that for granted.”

“Huh...?”

“This is a time where you should prioritize your own body the most. I don’t want you to hold back. Put yourself first, and no matter what, just don’t force yourself to do anything.”

“Takkun...”

“Your considerateness toward me is more than enough.”

“Y-You’re right...” Miss Ayako seemed relieved, but at the same time, she seemed a little disappointed. “Jeez, I went and got myself all worked up again. Ugh, how embarrassing.” She fanned herself with her hand. “I should hurry up and change out of these—”

The moment she got up, she suddenly froze. It was because I had grabbed her hand, squeezing it a little tightly.

“Huh...?” she gasped. I didn’t say anything. “T-Takkun...?”

“Th-There’s no need for you to change, though, is there?” I said. I sounded so nervous that even I was surprised. “You went through the trouble of putting it on, so there’s no need to rush and change out of it.”

“What...?”

“I want to enjoy the sight of you in this outfit a bit more, or rather...I’d like to spend some time with you while you’re dressed like that.”

“Wh-What?!” Miss Ayako seemed to finally understand what I was trying to vaguely get at, and her face turned bright red as she raised her voice, flabbergasted. “Huh? B-But you said that my feelings were more than enough...”

“They are—but you look lovely in that outfit.”

“Y-You said you didn’t want me to force myself...”

“I don’t want you to force yourself—but I’d like you to stay like that, as long as it’s comfortable.”

“O-Oh, I see. I understand now...” Miss Ayako said bashfully. I was also so embarrassed I could die. After all the noble things I’d said, in the end, I wanted

her. "Do you like the reverse bunny suit?"

"It's so sexy I could die."

"G-Gosh... You're too much, Takkun." Though she seemed embarrassed, she smiled and seemed somewhat pleased.

I was more than aware by now that holding back wasn't the only way to treasure your partner. Trusting your partner and letting them spoil you from time to time was one way of respecting them. That's why...today, I was going to let her spoil me!

To be honest, I can't take it anymore! I'm at my limit! I can't keep acting like a gentleman after all this!

"You're so naughty, Takkun."

"That's not much coming from someone dressed like a pervert."

"D-Don't call me a pervert!"

"It's okay. I love your perverted side too, Miss Ayako."

"Huh? Is that supposed to have been a compliment?"

While talking about nothing, our fingers slowly intertwined, and our bodies inched closer. I gently brushed against the skin exposed by her reverse bunny suit as I brought my face closer to hers and we locked lips.

Thinking about it now, we probably hadn't even kissed in a while. We'd kissed practically every day while we were living together, but we hadn't for a while since we'd found out Miss Ayako was pregnant.

Since we were having a child, we couldn't keep being a silly, lovey-dovey couple. We needed to steel ourselves for parenthood. Even so, we probably didn't have to throw away *every* aspect of being a couple.

"I love you, Takkun..."

"I love you too."

After that, we spent some adult time together for the first time in a while. Of course, we couldn't go all the way, so I was basically on the receiving end the whole time. I had more than my fill enjoying Miss Ayako and her reverse bunny

suit.

Chapter 4: The Holy Night and the Vow



Snow descended from the sky, painting the town white. Tonight was a holy night—the annual event known as Christmas Eve.

The Katsuragi family didn't have any traditions for Christmas Eve. In the past, I'd celebrated with just Miu at home, gone out to dinner with Miu, been invited to parties at Miu's friends' houses, and even gone to Takkun's house to celebrate. I'd enjoyed all sorts of Christmas Eve festivities.

However, as for this year, we wouldn't be going out to dinner since I was pregnant. I didn't want to get too cold by going out, and considering all the snowfall outside, I could slip and fall, which would be quite dangerous.

And so, we'd decided on hosting a party at my home for Miu, Takkun, and me. Takkun was obviously invited. Not inviting him wasn't an option—he was just that important to Miu and I.

"Um, okay then, insert something thoughtful here... Merry Christmas!"

After Miu's half-hearted toast, we all clinked our glasses.

"Ah, so good," Miu swooned. "I know it's just a soft drink, but for some reason, it tastes better around Christmastime." She happily downed her sparkling juice, then poured herself another glass. All three of us were sticking to nonalcoholic beverages today.

"You could've had a drink if you wanted, Takkun. There's no need to match what I'm doing," I insisted.

"No, it's fine," he replied. "It's no fun drinking by myself anyways."

"Hey, Taku, do you want me to just tear off a drumstick, or what?"

"All right, hold your horses. I'll carve it."

Takkun had roasted a whole chicken in the oven, and now it was sitting in the middle of the table, surrounded by all the various other dishes he'd prepared

for our party tonight. It was a very Christmassy meal.

Takkun skillfully carved the chicken and served it to us.

“Mmm! This is so good!” Miu exclaimed.

“Wow, it really is,” I agreed.

I wasn’t trying to be polite—the chicken was genuinely really good. The skin was crispy, and the meat was juicy. Both Miu and I were in awe at how delicious it’d turned out.

“That’s good to hear. I’m glad I practiced,” Takkun said with a content smile.

“You’re amazing, Taku. When did you learn to make something like this? You might be a better cook than mom at this point.”

“C-Cut it out, Miu,” Takkun said before turning to me. “I-I’ve still got a long way to go. I just followed a recipe I found online for this chicken. I’m still working on my cooking skills, so it took me a while to prepare it.” He seemed flustered as he tried to be modest.

I just smiled, acting like I was completely fine, but internally...my heart was racing. *Miu might have a point...* Ever since his declaration that he wanted to become a househusband, Takkun had started diligently studying how to cook, and his skills had been rapidly improving. Even for our dinner tonight, he’d made everything up to and including the roast chicken—from the salad, to the quiche, even the pasta...he’d handled the whole feast. His skills must’ve been on par with mine, or perhaps he had already surpassed me...

Agh, I feel conflicted. This might make me seem old-fashioned, but my boyfriend being a better cook than me makes me feel a little pathetic...

“You should just move in with us already, Taku,” Miu suggested. “That way, I won’t have to cook or clean anymore.”

“I have no plans on becoming a servant...” Takkun said candidly. “Though, hm, on that note...” Takkun thought for a moment. “I do want to move in as soon as possible.”

“You do?” Miu asked, and Takkun nodded.

“I’m planning on moving here once we enter the new year and it starts to

warm up.”

“Wow, that’s pretty soon.”

“Well, it’s not really worth calling a ‘move.’ I’m right next door, so it’s more like I’m going to be slowly bringing my things over.”

“Ugh, I can’t believe we’re gonna have a *man* in the house now. Gross! Didn’t you see the ‘girls only’ sign out front?” Miu jokingly complained.

“Sorry—good luck dodging the cooties,” Takkun said with a laugh.

Of course, Miu had no objections to Takkun moving here. She’d accepted that it would happen, and that he’d become her father.

“Are you sure you’re okay with moving in so soon, Takkun?” I asked. “There’s no need to rush.”

“It’s not a problem. I’m going to be living here one day, so I feel like the earlier I get it done, the better off we’ll be.”

“I’m sure your parents will be sad once you move out...”

“They’re right next door, so I can see them whenever I want. If anything, these days they’ve been saying, ‘You should move in already so you can help Miss Ayako,’” Takkun said with a dry chuckle.

We’d had several conversations about this with Takkun’s parents, and after considering various options, we decided it’d be best for Takkun to live with us in this house. The next thing was deciding on when he would move.

Everything had been going surprisingly smoothly. Takkun and everyone we knew had been prioritizing me since I was pregnant, and I had so many things to be grateful for. I was truly blessed and happy, but...there were moments where I’d suddenly feel scared. I couldn’t describe it that well, but things had been progressing so well that it was scary. There was an intangible sense of fear within me, like I couldn’t feel my feet on the ground. It’s not like I had any complaints—I was well aware everyone was caring for me and making the decisions they felt would be best for me—but ever since I’d found out I was pregnant, it felt like each day was passing by at a dizzying speed, and my feelings hadn’t caught up to it all.

First of all, we are getting married, right...? Once we'd found out I was pregnant and we'd talked to our parents, everyone had operated under the presumption that Takkun and I would be getting married...but before I knew it, we were discussing where we'd live. It was like things were going so smoothly that we'd passed a bunch of things over in one large stride. We hadn't had a wedding, nor had we filed any marriage forms. All that we'd discussed were things that would happen after the baby was born.

On top of that, Takkun hasn't actually proposed either... Well, maybe that's on us for doing things out of order and accidentally getting pregnant.

It wasn't like I could hold off on giving birth, so we needed to settle any issues we had before the baby was due. I was well aware of that, but...

What do I do? What if Takkun suddenly says he doesn't want to get married? What if he starts being difficult and says things like "Let's just have a common-law marriage," or "In this day and age, is there any point to the institution of marriage?"

I-It's fine, we'll be fine. Of course we'll get married! I'm overthinking things.

Is this what they call wedding blues? Or maybe it's maternity blues...?

"I think you might be eating a little too much, mom..." Miu suddenly told me. It was only then that I realized that I'd been scarfing down everything in front of me. "I know Taku's food is good, but it's a bit much..."

"N-No, I'm, uh..." Shoot. I ate too much because I was lost in thought! The food tasted so good, I couldn't help myself!

"You've been gaining too much weight these days, so you need to be more careful," Miu chastised me. "Didn't the obstetrician tell you to cut back a little?"

That had happened... People used to believe it was best to eat as much as possible for the sake of the child...but now it's known that becoming overweight while pregnant could trigger various health complications. Nowadays, pregnant people have to maintain a healthy weight during their pregnancy...and every time I'd go in for a regular checkup, we'd discuss weight management among our other topics.

As for where that left me... When my symptoms were at their worst, I'd feel

awful if my stomach was empty, so I had been continuously eating. As a result, I'd surpassed my healthy weight. Just a little bit, though—I'd only gone over it by a little!

"S-Stop it, Miu. Don't talk about my weight in front of Takkun..."

"Doesn't Takkun know already?" Miu coldly pointed out. "He goes to all your appointments with you." Takkun just laughed with a nervous look.

That's right! Takkun had tagged along with me to every appointment. I was really glad he'd go, and it was reassuring to have him there...but I had mixed feelings about him listening in on sensitive topics like my weight.

We were going to be husband and wife, not just a couple, so I knew logically that it was normal to gradually become more open about those sorts of things, but... No, it just didn't feel real yet. Maybe I had a desire to stay a couple, rather than become husband and wife—maybe some part of me just wanted us to be a man and woman who could be lovey-dovey, rather than a father and mother.

No, no, I thought to myself with an internal sigh. I shouldn't be thinking like that. The two of us need to become a proper husband and wife.

As the night went on, we continued to enjoy all the food, we gave Miu her Christmas gift, and we even had some cake as a dessert. Presently, I was snacking on some leftover crackers and nuts with one hand while holding a glass of juice in the other.

Miu suddenly let out a large yawn. "I'm kinda tired," she said, then she left the room. I heard her go up the stairs, so she probably headed to her room.

"Jeez, Miu..." I grumbled. She was acting as carefree as usual. *Hm? Didn't something like this happen before?* "She just ate her fill then left to sleep... She's probably avoiding having to help clean up."

"...I think." Takkun had said something quietly, and I hadn't quite caught it.

"Huh?" *Did he say something about trying to be considerate?*

"No, it's nothing. Anyways, why don't we drink a little more?"

"Yeah, good idea..."

“Even though it’s just sparkling juice.”

“It sure is.”

We both giggled and poured each other another glass. Though it wasn’t alcohol, it didn’t bother me since we were sharing it. It reminded me that drinking was more about the company, rather than the alcohol.

During our chat, Takkun suddenly said, “Drinking together like this takes me back...”

“To what?”

“My birthday.”

“Oh, right...” *That’s right, I remember now.*

I must’ve been feeling nostalgic because we were in a similar situation as Takkun’s birthday. The same thing had happened, where Miu had left during the festivities and Takkun and I had been left alone.

“Our celebration for your twentieth birthday—that was a good time. We were actually drinking wine that time, weren’t we?” My memories of the night began pouring out like I’d uncorked a barrel. “We were drinking a slightly expensive vintage that I’d got as a gift, and it spilled onto you.”

“Oh yeah, I remember that.”

“I accidentally walked in on you changing in the bathroom...”

“Now that we’re together, I can tell you how cute you were when you got flustered seeing me shirtless.”

“Wha—”

“I was surprised that you got so embarrassed over just seeing my top half bare.”

“S-Stop, that was so long ago...”

“Well, I guess seeing me naked isn’t enough to get you embarrassed anymore, since you’re used to it.”

“That’s right, I’ve seen you naked plenty of— Hey, why’d you make me say that?!” I jabbed back, and Takkun snickered.

"It's a birthday I'll never forget for the rest of my life..." he quietly continued. A somber look came over his face, and he sounded like he was savoring all his memories. "After all, it's the day I told you how I feel." I fell silent. "I was finally able to tell the mother next door who I'd been crushing on for over a decade how I felt. I might have only managed to pull it off because I'd been drinking, but it was the first time I'd ever told someone I had feelings for them."

"I'll never forget it either..." I remembered that moment. It was still fresh in my mind, really—it was something I would probably never forget. "I was so surprised. I never would've imagined in a million years that *you* would tell me you had feelings for me." It was completely beyond my expectations. In fact, at the time, I'd hoped he would marry my daughter. "So much has happened since then..."

"You said it."

Everything between us had started on that day. Our love story, which was full of twists and turns, had begun.

"I totally rejected you in the beginning, didn't I...?"

"Well, no surprises there. I think that was what any rational adult would've done."

"I was so indecisive and dragging everything out being a 'rational adult'... I even followed you once."

"Right, that happened. You thought that Satoya was my new girlfriend."

"Yeah, that time." *That takes me back. Satoya really was cute. I haven't seen him recently. I wonder if he still cross-dresses— Oh, that's right, he doesn't cross-dress, he just wears what looks good on him, as I recall?*

"I had my fair share of fumbles too. I got all worked up for our first date and ended up catching a cold... That was really pathetic of me."

"I-It's all in the past. Besides, we got to go on a date after that. I had so much fun at the amusement park."

"We had so much trouble getting home though. We got a flat tire, it rained, and then..."

“We spent the night at a hotel...”

“Yes, we did...”

“Looking back on it, I’m impressed with your strength, holding back like that. You didn’t try anything, even though we were at a love hotel.”

“I would never. We weren’t even a couple then.”

That takes me back. Takkun really didn’t make any moves. If he had...I wonder how our story would’ve gone.

“Then we went to Hawaiian Z in the summer,” Takkun recalled.

“It’s the Aterazawas’ and Katsuragis’ yearly tradition, after all. I wonder if we’ll be able to go next year.”

“I’m not sure. It might be right around the time you’re giving birth...”

“It would be nice if we could make it work.”

“I agree. Hawaiian Z is the best. They have both pools and hot springs.”

“Hot springs... That reminds me, we took a bath together this year, didn’t we?”

“Oh, right, that happened...”

“I went in and you were already there. I was so embarrassed...”

“Now we can take a bath together no problem.”

“W-Well, we’ve lived together, so it’s only natural.”

“We haven’t taken a bath together in a while, though. I miss it...”

“It would be too hard right now...”

What a trip that was. I mistakenly thought that Miu had feelings for Takkun, but it was all part of Miu’s machinations—and thanks to her, I was able to confirm my feelings for Takkun. After that, I managed to steel my resolve and commit to the fact I wanted to be with him, even if my daughter loved him.

“It was right after we got back from Hawaiian Z that you kissed me, right?” Takkun asked.

“Urgh...”

“That was my first kiss...”

“Um...”

“You hadn’t even told me if you wanted to date me, but you kissed me out of nowhere, then suddenly started avoiding me.”

“I’m sorry for all the trouble I caused...”

“Then, when we finally officially became a couple, you weren’t wearing a bra for some reason.”

“Wha— J-Jeez, forget about that already!”

“I can’t forget.” *That really is how it went down, huh? I finally realized how I felt thanks to Miu, but then I dragged things out even more by getting ahead of myself and kissing him. Eventually, we were able to actually become a couple, but when I told him how I felt, I wasn’t wearing a bra... Ugh, I hate that. It should be an incredibly romantic memory, but every time I think back to it, I’m also reminded that I was braless.*

“Then, right after we started dating, we were going to be long-distance.”

“Or so I thought, but then we started living together because you and Yumemi conspired to make it happen. I was really surprised.”

“I’m sorry I kept it from you...”

“Well, it ended up being a good thing.”

“It was fun, living together in Tokyo.”

“It really was. We even got to run into your ex-girlfriend there.”

“Hey, she isn’t my ex-girlfriend. She’s just a former classmate that I pretended to date.”

“Do you still talk to Arisa?”

“Sometimes.”

“I see...”

“Th-There’s nothing between us. She has a boyfriend anyways. Since we were interns at the same company, I just thought I should tell her I wasn’t job hunting

anymore.”

“Hee hee, I’m kidding. I don’t mind. I’m not *that* petty.”

What a roller coaster that was. It seemed like we’d be apart, but then we were suddenly living together. There were so many new things to learn that it was hard to adjust, and then Arisa showing up threw a wrench in the works—not that she herself did anything wrong, rather than Takkun and I getting worked up over nothing. Now it’s just a fond memory, and thanks to what happened, Takkun and I were able to take a step forward in our relationship.

“What else happened...? Oh, it was pretty surprising that Miss Yumemi had a child.”

“Right? I never would’ve thought she had a child, let alone one that old.”

“I wonder if things are going well with Ayumu.”

“From what I’ve heard, they’re having fun together. We were on the phone the other day, and she told me they’ve gone on trips together.”

“Wow.”

“Ayumu’s birthday was last month, and she apparently gifted him a pretty pricey gaming PC... It took a while, but I think she’s in that period where she wants to spoil her kid.”

“Ha ha, sounds all well and good.”

“Yeah, but that’s not all... She’s started teaching him about the entertainment industry and asset management. I’m not sure if she’s serious or if she’s joking, but she’s started saying things like, ‘I’m going to retire in ten years, so I’ll let Ayumu handle things from then on.’ What am I going to do? I might be working for Ayumu in ten years...”

“Hmm, maybe that part’s not so well and good...”

I remembered it like it was yesterday—well, it *did* happen pretty recently, but anyway—I’d been so surprised that Yumemi, someone I’d always taken to be a career-focused free spirit, was actually a mother.

As shocking as it was to learn Yumemi is a mother, it felt like I got to see a weaker, human side to the person I always thought was a perfect superhuman,

so I was kind of happy to learn it about her. I've been working for her for ten years, but I feel like we've gotten a lot closer than ever in the past few months. I want to continue working for her, even if that means working under CEO Ayumu in ten years.

"Our three months living together passed in a blink of an eye..." I mused. "It felt both long and short at the same time. Toward the end, we found out I was pregnant, which brings us here." After wrapping things up, I let out a sigh. "A lot really *has* happened..."

Thinking about everything made me feel sentimental. *So much* had happened, after all. Ever since Takkun had confessed his feelings to me in May, things had been quite chaotic. I couldn't believe that it hadn't even been a year since then. Every day since then had been rich and full of memories.

"There might have been a lot of difficulties, but looking back on it now, they're all pleasant memories," I said, oversimplifying things.

"They really are," Takkun agreed with a deep nod. He closed his eyes, and a deeply emotional look washed over his face. "Ever since I told you how I felt in May, I feel like things finally came into motion. All my feelings had just been stewing inside me, and it was like I was a loose gear—admitting my feelings sort of locked things into place and got our wheels turning."

Oh, I see. For me, it felt like our story had begun in May, but it wasn't the same for Takkun. For him, our love story had begun a decade ago—probably on the day he'd first laid eyes on me, on the day of the funeral, where I'd decided to take care of Miu. That day had been a beginning for me as the start of my motherhood...and at the same time, it was the day my love story with Takkun had begun, though I hadn't been aware of it.

"Of course, things didn't go well at first, and I had plenty of regrets and worries. But now that you feel the same way, and we'll even be raising a child together, I'm so, so happy. It feels like a dream." He straightened his posture and looked me directly in the eye.

"Is something up, Takkun? You're being very intense all of a sudden."

"It's because I have something important to say to you," he declared. His determined gaze made my heart skip a beat. "I want to continue experiencing

this dreamlike happiness with you. In the six months since I told you I'm in love with you, a lot has changed for us, and things have been hectic, but one thing that's stayed consistent is my feelings for you—and actually, I fall more and more in love with you every day. I really do love you, Miss Ayako..."

Takkun was being so forthright that even I was starting to feel self-conscious...but his eyes were firmly fixed on mine.

Suddenly, he put his hand in his pocket and said, "I vow to love you for the rest of my life." He presented the thing he'd palmed—a small box—and opened it to reveal a sparkling ring. "Will you marry me?"

I was at a loss for words. I couldn't process what was going on. "Y-You're—Wh— Huh...?" I was just sitting there, flustered. "Wh-Where did you get this...?"

"I bought it."

"Huh? But, it looks so expensive..."

"It's embarrassing to admit, but it's not as pricey as it seems...but I *did* buy it all with money I earned myself."

He paid for this himself? Takkun had started working part-time as a tutor once he'd started college, and I'd heard before that he'd had students aside from Miu. He'd also been paid for his three months at his internship, and ever since he'd decided to become a househusband, he'd started working part-time. I'd always thought he had no reason to rush to make money—I never would've expected he was doing it all just to...

"I wanted to make sure I did this right," Takkun said with a nervous smile. I was still awash with shock. "Since the pregnancy came out of nowhere, we ended up getting our families together without even fully discussing marriage first, and everyone's left it on the back burner this whole time...but I still wanted to propose to you the way a good boyfriend should." I didn't know what to say. "I didn't want to keep you waiting, but I didn't want to do it halfway either..."

I continued to sit there speechlessly. *Wow, I'm so stupid. I can't believe I was worried we might not get married! Why did I get myself all wound up when I*

know I have such a lovely partner?

Eventually, I managed to eke out, “Jeez, you’re so dumb, Takkun,” trying my best to put on a strong face. I knew if I started crying now, I was never going to stop. I knew that...but the tears came streaming down my face anyway, despite my best efforts. How could I have possibly held them back?

I took the ring box from him and stared at it. The band was set with a small but beautiful diamond. I could tell that it wasn’t cheap.

“You should’ve spent your hard-earned money on something for yourself. Who cares about something like a ring...?”

“I care. Also, I *did* spend money on something for myself.”

“Jeez, there you go again, saying things like that.”

“I mean, this isn’t really much in the grand scheme of things...” Takkun sounded like he felt bad. “I wanted to do something a lot bigger, like take you out to a restaurant with a flash mob set up, but I didn’t want to take you out when it’s snowing... I thought about waiting until it got warmer, but that didn’t feel right either, so my proposal ended up being pretty low-budget.”

“No, no. It’s more than enough.”



It was more than enough. There wasn't any proposal that would've been better than this. After all, we were in the same exact place where he'd told me how he felt—the same place as that day in May when I'd found out about his feelings for me.

Proposing in the same place, in a similar situation as to when he'd confessed his feelings, felt incredibly romantic and wonderful. I wasn't sure how much of this was what Takkun had intended, but to me, this was the ultimate proposal.

"Um, so... What's your answer?" Takkun asked concernedly.

I'd gotten so worked up I'd never come back down to earth to respond to him. *Oh no, I messed up! I completely forgot to answer—well, not that there's any real need to.*

I wasn't sure what the right way to respond was, but I decided to follow my overflowing feelings and stand up. I got closer to Takkun and let my emotions take over, hugging him with all my might—while being sure to stay careful about my stomach, of course.

"I'd love to!"

As I laid my head on his chest, Takkun hugged me back, wrapping his arms around me. Christmas Eve this year had become a truly special night.



After I proposed, Miss Ayako was on cloud nine. When she wasn't staring at the ring, she was putting it on and taking photos with me to remember the occasion. She ate more food, drank more sparkling juice, and partied like she was drunk despite only having nonalcoholic drinks all night.

Eventually, she laid her head on the table and fell asleep. She had a look of bliss on her face that made me happy just looking at her. *Jeez, she knows it's not good for her to sleep here. I'll carry her to her room later.*

"Huh? Did mom fall asleep?" Miu said, arriving downstairs just as I was placing a blanket over Miss Ayako's shoulders.

"Yeah, she just fell asleep."

"I see. So...did you propose?"

“Yup.”

“I see. I would ask how it went, but I have a pretty good idea already,” Miu said, laughing as she shrugged her shoulders.

I’d told Miu about my plan to propose today in advance. I’d asked her to find the right moment to leave and give Miss Ayako and I some alone time.

“Man, I was so nervous,” I said. “I’m so glad she didn’t say no.”

“Why would she? You had the most guaranteed of guaranteed victories.”

“You never know. Maybe she could’ve suddenly become against the idea of a man who doesn’t have a stable job...”

“You’ve already discussed that though.”

“The ring wasn’t that expensive either.”

“It was plenty expensive. You scheduled a bunch of part-time shifts to get it in time for today, right?”

“If I could’ve, I would’ve bought both the engagement ring and a wedding band... I wanted to do a more extravagant proposal too... Also, if it were possible, I would’ve wanted to have a wedding.”

“You’re fine. Mom’s definitely happy. I don’t think she has a single complaint.” Miu sighed. “You really don’t think highly of yourself, do you, Taku? You’ve surpassed humility and become self-deprecating. All for the sake of some old lady in her thirties, you’ve pulled off stunt after debonair stunt that any girl your own age would dream of a guy doing for them, yet somehow you’ve come out on the other side of it all completely lacking confidence.”

“I can’t help it...” I said as I slowly sat down. “I *don’t* have any confidence. I’m always just doing my best. It’s not like we’re playing a video game here—there’s no clear answer...”

Games would have a proper way for you to win. If you continued to pick the correct choices in a game, you could reach the good ending...but reality wasn’t like that. I had no idea what the correct choices were, whether you asked me about my decision to become a househusband or about my proposal. I’d just racked my brain and tried to make the most appropriate choice, but no one

could ever say if I'd truly embraced the right answer.

"I see..." Miu nodded somberly as she also sat down. She then poured herself some of the leftover sparkling juice. "Well, if we're discussing right and wrong, getting mom pregnant at this point was definitely wrong."

"Urgh..." *W-Well, there's no arguing with that...*

Miu laughed over making me squirm. "Hey, Taku, do you remember how this May, during your birthday party, I left midway through?"

"Yeah."

I could never forget. Miu had said she was sleepy and left, leaving Miss Ayako and I alone. I couldn't forget because that was when I'd decided to just go for it and tell Miss Ayako how I felt.

"About that... The truth is, I actually left on purpose."

"What...?"

"I wasn't sleepy or anything, but I decided to leave. I thought I should give you and mom some alone time." I didn't know what to say. "Ha ha, I mean, come on. Did you really think I'd gotten sleepy that early in the night? Please don't tell me you thought I'd gotten drunk off the smell of alcohol."

Miu revealed it all so nonchalantly, and all I could do was just sit there stunned. It was a complete surprise to me.

"I was well aware that you had feelings for mom, so I was trying to be considerate. I'd thought it would be fun if your time alone led to something happening. I never expected you'd just go and confess your feelings out of nowhere though."

"Urgh..."

"The whole fiasco ended up with you getting rejected... I felt a bit responsible, you know? It was like I'd meddled with things and ruined your relationship."

"Miu, it's not—" I wanted to tell her it wasn't something she should feel responsible for, but before I could...

"But!" Miu said energetically. "At this point, I think you should be thanking

me! You owe everything to my machinations! My genius planning brought you two together, making me the VIP of your relationship—you may as well call me Cupid! What grand results my efforts have borne! In fact, it's only fair that you should compensate me for my services!"

I couldn't keep up with the roller coaster Miu was on, so I had nothing to say.

Miu exhaled and took a sip of her sparkling juice before continuing. "Well, my point is, you never know what the right choice was until after you've made a decision." I continued to listen silently. "Though I'd regretted it and thought I'd made the wrong choice at the time, now I'm really glad I put on that little act during your birthday. I think you'd be surprised how many things are like that when it comes to whether you made the right choice or not."

"You may be right..."

"Also, the most important thing is how *you* feel—the fact that you're trying to do the right thing is what's most important, and as long as you feel that way, even if you make the wrong decision, you can turn it into the right decision in the future. Maybe."

"You don't sound very sure..." Though she didn't wrap things up too confidently, I understood what she meant. I'd made all kinds of decisions until now, and at this point, I didn't know which were right and which were wrong. It was possible there weren't any decisions that would trigger some kind of video-game-esque good ending.

"Basically, it's about what I do from here on out," I said.

The future was important—but I was just getting started. I was feeling like I'd reached an ending because my proposal was a success, but Miss Ayako's and my story was just beginning. I was going to be spending the rest of my life with her, and it was only well into that future that I'll ever learn whether the decisions I'd made were right.

"Whether someone made the right choice or not can change based on future circumstances," I continued. "When you can look back on your past choices and feel they were right...that may be what people call fate."

Things like finding your soulmate and having a serendipitous meeting were all

assessments made with hindsight. When you're able to live happily with the person you love the most, it'll naturally feel like everything in your past with that person had been predetermined by fate.

I felt like I'd said something pretty deep, but...

"That's kinda corny, Taku. Do you hear yourself?" Miu seemed like she was cringing a bit.

Hey. You can't be cringing after everything we talked about. It was totally the right mood to wax philosophical.

"Well, it does feel that way," Miu said with a wry laugh. "If everyone's living happily, that would mean all the choices you made were right. Even if you're getting married because of an accidental pregnancy, if everyone's laughing together in ten years, then it'll feel like it was better that it happened this way." Miu then held up her glass. "I'm looking forward to your future with my slightly older mom, Taku."



“Thanks.”

“Also, I hope things work out with your incredibly adorable daughter and your future little baby.”

“But of course,” I said, picking up my glass and clinking it with Miu’s. The soft sound reverberated through the room.

I vow to my reliable daughter and my dear beloved who’s sleeping blissfully that I’ll spend the rest of my life making this family happy—and that promise includes my own happiness too. I’ll keep this family happy so we can feel that everything in our past was based on fate and the right decisions.

Chapter 5: The Afterglow and Daily Life



Time passed in the blink of an eye, and the new year had arrived. The snow had melted, the trees' leaves were sprouting, and the flowers were beginning to bud as the warm season settled in.

Indeed, as time marched ever forward, the hustle and bustle of our daily lives had served as our guiding line through it. Takkun had proposed to me four months ago on Christmas Eve, and since then, we'd been through all manner of activities keeping me quite busy—naturally, we'd celebrated holidays like New Year's, Valentine's Day, and White Day, but there were also things like the student events surrounding the start of new terms at Miu's and Takkun's schools. As for me personally, my belly had been growing, and I'd entered my third trimester. My pregnancy symptoms had completely subsided, and I'd been living a relatively peaceful life as a pregnant woman.

"Huh? No way! It ends there?!"

It was Sunday morning, and I was yelling in front of the TV in shock. Takkun was sitting beside me.

"Urgh, *Love Kaiser* really loves its cliff-hangers..." I lamented.

"This week's episode was full of twists and turns," Takkun said.

"It really was... I never thought the cryptocurrency she was holding would crash at this point! I thought she'd made an easy profit..."

We were watching *Love Kaiser*, of course. This was the new series in the franchise that had started in February, *Love Kaiser Meta*.

On a side note, Takkun and I had submitted our marriage forms in March, and we were now officially husband and wife. March 15 was our anniversary—also, that day was the birthday of my beloved Love Kaiser Solitaire, also known as Hiyumi Kuinajima. I mean, it's not like I *needed* to have our anniversary be that day or anything; it's just that we'd decided to get married around March, so I'd

thought, “Why *not* do it on Hiyumin’s birthday?” That’s all...

After we got married, Takkun used his spring break from college to move in to our house. Thanks to that, we were spending a lot more time together. Every Sunday, we made sure to watch *Love Kaiser* when it aired.

“I have to say, I’m really surprised by this year’s series. I never thought they’d come up with something that revolves around the metaverse and cryptocurrency.”

“They’ve really incorporated the newest trends.”

“Literally burning cryptocurrency in the metaverse to transform... I have to tip my hat to them for coming up with that. It’s so interesting that their high-impact battles to stop the villain from hacking their cryptocurrencies double as crypto mining in their metaverse...”

“And the financial group the girls think has their backs is actually making a bunch of money by setting up these battles... It’s so complex and layered this year.”

“I wasn’t sure about it at first considering it’s a children’s program, but this is something that children *need* to see. I *want* all children of this generation to see it.”

“You really learn a lot from it,” Takkun agreed. “I didn’t understand blockchains or NFTs before, but I’ve learned a lot from *Love Kaiser Meta*.”

“The protagonist this year is great. I like that she’s a bit of a scrooge who won’t transform unless it’ll pad her bank account. She also makes sure to seek compensation from everyone she rescues.”

“She’s pretty different from the standard hero character. She’s actually more like what *Love Kaiser* normally writes for a villain.”

“Yeah! That antihero vibe is what’s good! Typically, a hero should save people for free, and it would be evil for them to chase profits, but she’s paving the way for a new kind of character!”

“It’s very modern... Even if she’s a hero, she’s a person with her own life. Maybe calling her a scrooge is simplifying it too much since she’s worried about

the risk of her work going unrewarded in the market—that if she fights for free or really cheap, she's normalizing the devaluing of her labor."

"That's how the world is under capitalism—the market rules over all."

"Watching this show makes me feel like my financial literacy is growing."

"Me too," I said, nodding. "Until now, I just saw investing in stocks as something akin to gambling, but my views have completely changed. I guess the times are long gone where you could live comfortably simply saving your money..."

Man, this is so fun! Getting to watch Sunday morning anime with my husband in real time... This is bliss!

"Well then, I should get on some chores—"

"What? You can sit for a bit more," I said, grabbing Takkun's hand as he tried to get up. "Let's have a little more *Love Kaiser* time."

"What? It just finished, though."

"We can watch the other series on streaming services!" Without waiting for him to respond, I used the remote to change the TV from a cable channel to a streaming service and selected *Love Kaiser*, which I'd had in my favorites. "Which one should we watch?" I said to myself while humming. "Yeah, we should go with the timeless masterpiece, *Love Kaiser Joker*! We stopped midway through the series last time."

"You have *Joker* on Blu-ray, don't you?"

"You've still got a lot to learn, Takkun. By watching a series I have a physical copy of on a streaming service, I contribute to its view count. That's the true way to support your faves! By doing this and showing Danbai that *Joker* is still popular, they might come out with new toys!"

"Impressive dedication..." Takkun said, cringing slightly.

Well, there's also the fact that I'm just too lazy to keep switching out the Blu-ray discs while watching.

I can't believe that most of the older, popular series are available to watch as much as I want on monthly subscription services. We really live in some

incredible times.

“I’m sure the baby’s enjoying it too,” I added, rubbing my enlarged belly. “Getting to watch *Love Kaiser* while in the womb must be nice.”

“If it were one of the more normal series, I would maybe say it’s fine, but I don’t think *Joker* is good for the baby... It’s the most savage and grisly story of the bunch, what with all the Love Kaisers killing one another. It wouldn’t make it to broadcast today...”

“I-It’s fine! Our baby will build character by getting through shows like this!” I protested while continuing to rub my belly.

*Maybe I should hold back a little once you’re born, though. We’ll start with more peaceful, cheery series, and you can watch *Joker* once you’re twelve— No, fifteen.*

“I have to say...” Takkun began, staring at me. “Your belly really has grown.” He reached out and gently rubbed it.

“I know, right? You can tell with one look that I’m pregnant.”

My belly had hit a growth spike. I’d started using creams to combat the stretch marks.

“It kind of feels like the baby’s really here...”

“Hee hee. What does that even mean?”

Just as Takkun was gently rubbing my stomach, there was a little *knock*—a soft impact coming from inside.

“Oh, just now...!”

“Yeah, the baby kicked,” I said, nodding as Takkun’s eyes glimmered.

“Wow, that’s incredible! I finally got to feel a kick!” He smiled, looking truly happy.

The baby had kicked several times before now, but this was the first time that it had happened while Takkun was touching my belly. Whenever I told him I felt the baby kick, he’d always come running over in a hurry to feel it, but it’d be over before he made it. Because of his bad luck, he seemed extra happy that

he'd finally gotten the opportunity.

"Hee hee, I wonder if the baby can tell that daddy's hand is there."

"I'm curious too. Hey, it's your dad!"

We both laughed. *Maybe this is what true happiness feels like.*

"I'm glad that the baby is growing, but the bigger it gets, the harder everyday tasks become," I said with a sigh.

It had gotten difficult to cut my toenails and put on my socks. Takkun had actually been helping out with those things for a while at this point—it was embarrassing at first, but I'd gradually gotten used to it.

"It's not just my stomach. My chest has gotten a bit bigger too..."

"Wha—" Takkun froze upon hearing what I'd let spill. "I-I knew it."

"You noticed...?"

"Well, of course."

"Of course'?" *I should've expected no less from him.* "Apparently, it's normal for your chest to grow when you're pregnant because your body is getting ready to breastfeed." *Ugh, I hate it. My breasts don't need to get any bigger.*

"Right, breastfeeding..."

"Are you having weird thoughts?" I eyed him down.

"I-I'm not!" Takkun said, shaking his head. "It's just, you'll be breastfeeding once the baby is born."

"Yeah."

"Since you'll be breastfeeding the baby, um...they won't be just for me anymore, and I'm a little sad about that."

"Pfft... Ha ha ha! Really?" I couldn't help but burst into laughter. Though there was a part of me that was rolling my eyes at his statement, it was very like him to be possessive like that, and it made me a little happy. "Jeez, they were never just for you to begin with."

"Maybe not, but still."

“Good grief... Hee hee, want to enjoy them while you can, then?”

“Huh?”

“Just kidding... Huh?” I’d meant it as a joke, but Takkun seemed way more interested than I’d expected. He was staring at me, evidently having taken the offer seriously.

“Well, if you insist...”

“No, wait! Hold on!” I quickly stopped him as he leaned forward. “Wh-What are you thinking? It’s a Sunday morning, you can’t just...”

“What...? But you’re the one who suggested it, Miss Ayako.”

“It wasn’t a suggestion! Jeez...you have too much energy these days, Takkun. Even yesterday...”

“Well, um, that’s because things are finally stable now that you’re in the third trimester.”

“Well, yeah, but...”

As we went back and forth, Takkun continued to close the distance between us. I might have been resisting, but... Well, it wasn’t like I was just pretending we shouldn’t, but I was aware my hesitancy was just me keeping up appearances. The longer we’d spent time together, the more certain things became clearer—and one of those things was being able to recognize that the mood right now was for getting lovey-dovey! Knowing as much, I was ready to enjoy it to the fullest. I figured that once the baby was born, we probably wouldn’t have the time for such things, after all.

We silently stared at each other, slowly bringing our faces together, and—“Morning,” came a voice accompanied by a yawn.

We both gasped and pulled apart. Miu entered the living room while yawning. She’d finally woken up now that it was late enough for the Sunday morning shows to have already ended.

“G-Good morning, Miu.”

“Why are you two acting so panicky?” she asked.

“N-Nothing. There’s nothing wrong. Right, Takkun?”

“Th-That’s right.”

“This week’s episode of *Love Kaiser* was just so fun! We were getting really into talking about it. That’s all.”

Th-That was close! I totally forgot that Miu’s here!

“Oh, right, it’s Sunday,” Miu said with an exasperated tone. “Good for you, getting up so early on a Sunday.”

“It’s not early at all. You sleep too much, Miu,” I scolded her.

“Don’t you record every episode anyway?”

“Even if I do, I want to watch them while they’re airing!”

“Right, of course,” Miu said, clearly disinterested in my passion for *Love Kaiser*.

“Why don’t you watch this year’s series with us? It’s only a few episodes in, so you can catch up. I feel like this one is really going to be a masterpiece—you definitely won’t regret it.”

“You say that every year, mom.”

“Every year they make a masterpiece! It’s worth watching every year!”

Love Kaiser was always good. Even whenever I’d think, “Hm, maybe this is an off year,” at the beginning of the year’s series, by the end, it was usually good. Sometimes I’d think, “No, no, they’re trying too hard with the designs this year,” then after a month or so I’d get used to the art direction, and by the final arc, I’d have grown attached to it. No matter how old I got, I’d have a good time—that was how good *Love Kaiser* was.

“Spoken like a woman who’s probably gonna make the baby watch a bunch of *Love Kaiser* and saddle them with a bunch of *LK* toys they won’t even like.”

“Urgh...”

“You’ll probably make them cosplay before they’ve even begun to establish a self-image. I bet by the time they’re two, you’ll be dragging them to an *LK* movie and annoying everyone at the theater with their crying and spilling

popcorn.”

“I-I won’t do that!” *Probably.* “I’m not going to force *Love Kaiser* onto the child or anything. I don’t want to be that kind of parent—but, well, if the baby wants that year’s toys, I’d of course buy them... Also, you know, *Love Kaiser* is probably really good educational content! So if I gently nudge the baby toward watching it, they might choose to...”

“Taku, I’m counting on you to keep this baby from drowning in anime merch.”

She ignored me!

Takkun nodded at her with a heavy head. “Don’t worry, I’ll protect them.”

Huh? You’re on her side, Takkun? Even you’re worried that I’m going to buy our kid a bunch of Love Kaiser merch?

I was feeling a bit down, but Miu ignored my gloom and came closer before gently placing her hand on my belly.

“I want my adorable baby sister to be born already,” Miu said.

“Careful what you wish for—a premature birth is its own challenge,” I reminded her.

“I know, I know... Wait, it’s not for certain if the baby is a girl yet, right?”

“No, but it’s probably a girl.”

After looking at several pictures of the sonogram, I was told that we were probably having a girl since the doctor couldn’t see one of *those*. Apparently, a baby’s sex was determined by whether they had a visible “thing” or not—if you were having a boy, you would know as soon as you saw the telltale sign between his legs, so those determinations were usually accurate. On the other hand, when the doctor suspects you’re having a girl, it’s based on a lack of evidence otherwise, so it was possible the disconfirmation just wasn’t visible. In such cases, people would sometimes find out after giving birth that they were actually having a boy.

“Huh, I see. Which do you want, mom?”

“I don’t care either way as long as the baby is healthy.”

"Whew, that's a real bold position to take, mom."

"Shut up..."

Miu then turned to Takkun while still rubbing my belly. "What about you, Taku?"

"I guess, between the two, I'd say a girl. It's really only if I had to choose, though."

"You'd totally date on a girl," Miu said.

"He really would," I agreed.

"You know, you *could* just date on your sixteen-year-old daughter who's here right now," Miu contended. "You know, with money?"

"Yeah, yeah," Takkun replied, laughing off Miu's joke.

Seeing them like this was heartwarming. They were my precious husband and daughter—my dear, dear family. The three of us were preparing to welcome our fourth member, and that felt incredibly blissful. If I wasn't careful, I could cry just thinking about it.

"Oh, by the way, did you decide on a name already?" Miu asked.

"We have one, right, Takkun?"

"We somehow decided on one," he said.

"Oh wow. Is that okay? You're not sure about the sex yet, right?"

"It's fine since we picked a name that would work either way."

After racking our brains, the two of us had finally come up with something we were happy with. We'd wanted something that wasn't too unexpected, but not too typical—something not too new, but not too old. We'd tried to avoid anything that was just unique for the sake of uniqueness, and we'd also stayed away from names that felt overdone. All the superstitions we knew of hadn't seemed to disfavor our choice, and it'd seemed like it had a good meaning behind it. On top of all of that, it was a unisex name. The path to getting everything right had been no easy feat.

"It was hard work, wasn't it, Takkun?"

“Yes, it really was...”

“Our biggest mistake was looking up superstitions...”

“That was the entrance to hell...”

If you chose a name and decided to look up the superstitions around it, only to find out they weren’t good, you couldn’t help but worry about your choice afterward. Even if you told yourself, “Don’t worry about it. None of that has any basis in reality,” the anxiety would remain in the depths of your heart, gnawing at you. You couldn’t help but sometimes think, “What if my child decides to look up whether their name is blessed or not?” I was worried that I’d blame every misfortune in the future on myself for picking an unlucky name.

Ugh, it was really hard work! When my sister picked Miu’s name, she said there was no deep meaning behind it, and it just sounded good... I really respect her ability to make a decision and stick to it.

“So you already decided? That sucks... I wanted to decide her name.” Miu seemed a little unhappy, but also satisfied at the same time. “So, what’d you go with?”

“Um...”

“It’s not a *Love Kaiser* character’s name, is it?”

“O-Of course not!” I objected, tensing up. I’d seriously considered it though! Like, I’d thought it might be fun to use one of my favorite characters’ names or go with a name that means the same thing as one of theirs. I won’t deny I’d given it some thought, but I’d somehow held myself back.

“Her name is going to be— Hmm, well, maybe I should wait to say until after she’s born,” I suggested.

“Just tell me already,” Miu complained.

“Jeez, fine.” I rubbed my belly as I said, “Her name is...”

Chapter 6: Marriage and the Wedding



“Tsubasa,” I said, calling out my daughter’s name as I turned around. I was in the dressing room, and she’d popped her head out from behind the door. She was dressed in a gown for today’s wedding, and above her big, bright eyes, she had white flowers decorating her straight, chestnut hair. This endearing, beloved angel of mine was already five years old now.

“Mom!” Tsubasa’s face lit up upon seeing me, and she ran over.

“Hold it right there.”

“Augh,” Tsubasa said as her arms were grabbed from behind, stopping her in place. The culprit was my other beloved daughter, Miu.

“Not now, Tsubasa. Mom just got dressed.”

“What? Why not?” Tsubasa whined.

“Mom’s dress is *very* expensive, and a rental, so it would be really bad if it got dirty or torn, right?”

“I’ll get in trouble?”

“You won’t get in trouble, but...they’ll take away lots of money from us.”

“Oh, I see,” Tsubasa said, nodding. I couldn’t tell if she actually understood or not.

As I watched them go back and forth, I slowly stood up. I wasn’t used to wearing these sorts of dresses, so just getting up required a bit of effort.

I took in Miu’s outfit once more. She was wearing a gorgeous blue cocktail dress with adorable lace details. Since the waistline sat higher up on her body, it emphasized her slender figure. She looked a lot more mature than usual—well, she *was* technically an adult now. She’d graduated high school and was currently attending a university in the city of Sendai. She had moved out to live on her own, and she’d just turned twenty as well. Adult though she might have

been, she was still a child in some ways—it was a complicated age to be at.

“You look pretty,” Miu said out of nowhere. “Your dress looks really good on you, Mom.”

“R-Really?”

“They say fine feathers make fine birds.”

“I don’t think that’s something a daughter should be saying to her mother...”

“Ha ha, I’m just kidding,” Miu said with a chuckle. “It really looks good on you. I’m glad you finally get to wear a wedding dress.”

“It’s a little embarrassing, though—to be my age and having a wedding after all this time, and wearing such an extravagant wedding gown to boot.”

Yes, five years had already passed since I’d given birth to Tsubasa. I’d complained for a long time about being in my thirties, but I was at an age where that wouldn’t be possible for much longer. I was definitely closer to forty now. I had a lot of hesitation toward wearing a white gown at this age, but...

“Your age doesn’t matter,” Miu said. “No matter what anyone says, you’re the star today, mom. This is a once-in-a-lifetime event, so it would be a waste to be ashamed about it.” Miu then turned to Tsubasa. “Hey, Tsubasa, mom looks pretty, right?”

“Yeah. She looks super pretty! Like a princess!” Tsubasa said with a beaming smile.

“I agree, she *does* look like a princess,” Miu said. “You’ve spent so long working hard for us, so you should let yourself be a princess for at least one day.”

“Miu...” I felt something filling up my chest, and the corners of my eyes felt hot. “N-Nnh, Miu... Thank you, thank you so much...”

“Hey! Hold on, it’s too soon!” Miu quickly grabbed a tissue. “Jeez, what are you doing...? You’ll ruin your makeup.”

“I-I can’t help it...”

“If you’re already crying this early, I’m worried about how you’ll handle the

rest of the day.”

I held up my head and had Miu wipe my tears for me. She folded the tissue so she could gently dab my tears without disturbing my makeup.

“I wanna do the tap tap too!”

“You can’t. Just wait there, Tsubasa.”

Just as Miu finished wiping away my tears, there was a knock on the door. I gave the okay and heard a familiar voice as the door opened.

“Ayako...”

A young man dressed in a white tuxedo appeared. He was tall and quite muscular despite his slender frame—a build overflowing with masculine charm. He’d been a househusband for a while, yet he was just as in shape as he was in his twenties.

Why hasn’t he changed...? I gained [REDACTED] kilograms in the past five years, and I had to work really hard to fit into my dress...!

Though he’d maintained his physique, his face had changed a bit. Compared to his still youthful, twenty-year-old self, he now had strong features—he’d fully become a man. He was my dear, beloved husband.

“Dad!” Tsubasa ran over to him.

“Whoa there. Ha ha.” After catching her, he picked Tsubasa up like he was accustomed to it. “I didn’t know you were here too, Tsubasa.”

“Yeah, big sis brought me.”

“She wanted to see mom and wouldn’t take no for an answer,” Miu explained.

“I see. Where are dad and the others?”

“Everyone’s already here.”

Before the ceremony, we had some family face time scheduled. Of course, the Katsuragi and Aterazawa families had already met face-to-face multiple times, and we celebrated holidays like Obon and New Year’s together, so this wasn’t anything too significant—we were basically just gathering to take family

wedding photos.

“Takk—” I was about to call him the name I used to use, but I stopped myself. *That was close. I said I wasn’t going to call him that anymore.*

I’d been reminiscing not too long ago, so I almost slipped up. I’d been calling him Takkun since he was ten, and I’d had a hard time finding the right moment to switch things up, so I’d continued calling him “Takkun” while he called me “Miss Ayako” for a while. Those early days of our relationship felt nostalgic now.

“Takumi...” Once I called his name, Takumi turned to face me while still holding Tsubasa. His eyes widened a bit, like he was surprised.

He stood there, silent for a moment before responding, “You look really beautiful. That dress looks great on you.” He seemed a bit bashful, but he managed to say it to me straight in the end.

“What? Really?”

“Really.”

“Thanks. You look great in your tux too, Takumi.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Thanks, ha ha.”

“Hee hee.”

We stood there, basking in the heartwarming atmosphere.

“Why are you two acting like newlyweds?” Miu said in a disgusted tone. “You’ve already been married for five years... How long are you going to keep acting like a new couple?” She let out a heavy sigh before she continued. “Also, Taku, since you had to go dress shopping with mom, aren’t you tired of seeing her in dresses?”

“Not at all. It’s fun to see her in a dress, no matter how many times I’ve seen her in the same one. It fills me with happiness each time,” my husband said confidently. It was a nice sentiment, but also embarrassing.

He sure doesn't hesitate to say these things, even in front of our kids.

"I truly am grateful to you, Takumi... I never thought I'd get to wear a wedding dress."

When I'd taken Miu in, I'd made up my mind to become a mother. I'd chosen to dedicate my life to Miu instead of having a normal romance, becoming a mother without getting married or having a wedding. Down the line, I'd ended up dating a college student after some twists and turns, and then...there was an unplanned pregnancy.

After I'd given birth, we'd had a child to raise. There hadn't been time to have a wedding. Though I'd felt a bit disappointed, I'd given up, thinking there wasn't any helping it. However, once Tsubasa turned five and things were settling down with her, Takumi proposed the idea that we should have a wedding. He'd spent the days since working even harder than me putting everything he had into planning for it.

"Thank you, Takumi."

"There's no need to thank me. It's just something I wanted to do. I always regretted that we didn't have a wedding," he said with a nervous smile.

Though Takumi had grown up, his face crinkled into a childlike grin whenever he smiled. There was still a shadow of his ten-year-old self.

"I want to thank you too," Takumi said. "I'm so happy I get to have a wedding with you, Ayako."

"Takumi..."

"Ugh, someone get these two a room," Miu said in a deeply exasperated voice. "Jeez, how long are you two going to act so cheesy? It's like you're in a romantic comedy."

"It's not like it's hurting anyone," Takumi said with a pout. He then looked down at Tsubasa, who was in his arms. "You like it when mom and dad get along, right, Tsubasa?"

"Yeah! I like getting along!"

"See?" Takumi said with a confident smirk.

“Yeah, sure. You win,” Miu said with a shrug before checking her watch. “You have to meet with the wedding planner after this, right?”

“Yeah, we have some final things to go over really quick,” Takumi said.

Miu reached out to grab Tsubasa. “We should get going then. Come on, Tsubasa.” After taking her out of Takumi’s arms, Miu gently put her down.

“What? I wanna be with mom and dad...”

“They’ll be out soon. Let’s wait over there with gam-gam and the others, okay?”

“Okay...” Tsubasa said, nodding obediently. “Bye, mom. Bye, dad. Come soon.” Tsubasa looked incredibly adorable as she said goodbye, then she turned around and walked off with Miu.

For a moment, her silhouette looked the way Miu’s had back when she was still five years old...



“Oh...” I was about to say something, but the door quickly closed behind them.

“What’s wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing...” I said, shaking my head. “I was just thinking about the past—about when Miu was Tsubasa’s age.”

“Oh, yeah... Miu was about as old as Tsubasa is now when you took her in.”

“Yeah.”

I’d become a single mother when Miu was just five years old. To think I now had a husband and I’d given birth to a child who had grown to the same age she was back then... It was kind of amusing. It made it abundantly clear how much time had passed.

“I’d decided to become a mother when Miu was Tsubasa’s age, and I was a single mother for about ten years, but...you know...” I closed my eyes and reflected on the past five years. “I didn’t think the first five years of raising a child would be so difficult.”

“Me neither...”

It was so difficult! It was so, so hard! From pumping breast milk to feeding, diapers, and bathing...we were hard at work twenty-four seven, caring for an infant who couldn’t do anything for herself and was at risk if we ever took our eyes off her.

There was fear, because there was no room for failure. There was the heavy responsibility that came with caring for a life. On top of that, infants didn’t understand the emotional and physical labor you were going through and just pushed their needs onto you. She would at times refuse to eat or drink, and at others eat or drink too much and throw up. She wouldn’t sleep when we wanted her to, and she slept when we needed her awake. That was the reality of caring for an infant.

Of course, it wasn’t without its fun times—there’d been plenty of happiness to be had as well. The first time she was able to roll herself over, the first time she said “mom” and “dad,” the first time she crawled, the first time she stood

up on her own, and her first steps were all priceless, treasured memories. Still...it was still difficult! *I'm so glad Takumi became a househusband!*

If Takumi had been busy job hunting like he'd originally planned to right after I'd given birth, which was the most difficult period, I definitely would've gotten depressed. I had nothing but gratitude toward the fact that he decided to be a stay-at-home dad.

"It was difficult to raise her with the two of us—no, the three of us, including Miu. Single mothers who have no choice but to raise an infant alone must truly have a difficult time..."

"I hope they're able to benefit from government programs..."

"I'm starting to feel bad that I confidently called myself a single mother without experiencing the struggles that come after childbirth..."

"Why? You successfully raised Miu, so you should feel confident about that," Takumi said with a smile.

I let out a heavy sigh. "Miu used to be so small, but now she's in college and living on her own... Tsubasa was just a baby, but now she's a whole five years old... She can walk and talk, and she even goes to preschool... Time passes so quickly..." The years that had passed were incredibly rich. So much had happened, and that time was chock-full of memories. I couldn't forget even if I wanted to. "I've really become an old lady."

"You're not an old lady, Ayako."

"Come on, at my age, I definitely am." If I were still in my early thirties, I maybe could've argued otherwise, but now that I was nearly forty, there was no hiding it. There was nothing to object to—I was totally an old lady. Living with Takumi, who was in his midtwenties, I really felt how I was aging. I'd basically reached a form of enlightenment, and by now it didn't upset me at all even if someone called me a hag, but...

Takumi was staring straight into my eyes. "You might have aged, but you've always been beautiful, Ayako. You've been beautiful all this time, and in this moment, you're the most gorgeous you've ever been." I didn't know what to say. "My feelings haven't changed since we first met. You're the person who's

dearest to me, the person I love most in the entire world..."

There he went, saying such embarrassing things again. He seemed a bit embarrassed himself, but he never broke eye contact when he told me how he felt. It probably wasn't just because today was our wedding either—Takumi was always like this. Of course, it would be a bit much if he said things like this every day, but he never failed to communicate his earnest love to me. He'd always have the words and feelings I wanted to hear when I wanted them.

"I see," I said with a smile. "Well, you *are* into mature women after all. I guess you'll like me more as I age."

"No, that's not— Also, like I've said multiple times, I don't have a thing for mature women."

"I'm just kidding," I said. I knew—I was well aware by now. This man loved me. He wasn't just trying to be nice, and he truly thought that I was beautiful. Though it felt embarrassing, by now I was able to accept his adoring compliments. I truly felt loved. "I love you too," I added. "Probably since I met you."

I wasn't lying. When we'd first met, I'd only thought of him as a boy in the neighborhood, but memories were an interesting thing... When I looked back on that time now, it felt like I'd sensed we were somehow connected by fate since the moment we'd met. It made me feel like it had been love at first sight. Well, if it'd actually been love at first sight, that would mean I'd fallen for a ten-year-old boy, which would be its own issue, but...

Even though that line of thinking came with its problems, I didn't mind. I wanted to feel fate in all the moments I'd had with him since we'd met. The fact that I felt as much was in fact proof positive we'd been destined for each other.

"Ha ha..." After staring into each other's eyes for a while, I couldn't take it anymore and started giggling. "We're acting cheesy like we're in a rom-com, again. Miu *just* warned us."

"Who cares if we are?" Takumi asked. "I want to be cheesy with you for the rest of my life. Even when we're old and wrinkled, I want to act like I'm in a rom-com with you." He gave me a smile, and those words he so effortlessly strung together made my heart race. It was more unexpected than his usual

sincere words of love, and it struck a deeper chord.

Being cheesy for the rest of our lives sounded like true bliss. Even when we were old and wrinkled after getting married and having a child, even if we got grandchildren or great-grandchildren, we'd be in love like in a romantic comedy for the rest of our lives...

"Well..." I paused for a moment. "Takkun."

"Pft." I'd mustered up the nerve to call him that, but all I got was a stifled laugh. "Wh-Where did that come from?"

"Hee hee, you don't mind, do you?"

"It's been a while, so it's really embarrassing."

"You say that, but that used to be what was normal, you know?" *Actually, looking at my whole life, I've called him "Takkun" for much longer. It's only been five years since I've started calling him "Takumi."* "It's nice once in a while, right, Takkun?"

"S-Stop! It's embarrassing."

"Takkun! Takkun!"

"Urgh..."

"Hee hee. Hey, you should use the old name with me too."

"What? You really want that?"

"I do," I said, which made him blush.

He finally seemed to have steeled his resolve and said, "M-Mommy Ayako."

"Pft!" I couldn't contain it and erupted into laughter. I was worried I was ruining my makeup. "W-Wait, hold on, Takkun! Why?!"

"Huh? Did I mess up?"

"You could've just gone with 'Miss Ayako'!"

"Oh, you meant that one."

"Of course I did! Jeez..." *Gosh, that really surprised me. "Mommy Ayako"? I didn't think I'd be hearing that after all this time.*

“You’re right. It’s kind of a lot to be calling you ‘Mommy Ayako’ now...”

“Yeah... We’re both too old for that. If someone were to have heard that...”

“They’ll think we’re *that* kind of couple...”

“Yeah...” We both went pale for a moment, but then quickly laughed it off.

“Hee hee...”

“Ha ha.”

Ah, jeez. We need to really get it together today, but things just keep becoming comical. Maybe this is fine, though—maybe this rom-com-like behavior fits us.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. The wedding planner came in, and we went over the schedule for the day one last time. After going over things, the wedding planner left, and we needed to get going as well.

First up, we were meeting with both our families.

“Let’s go, Ayako.”

“Okay.”

Our wedding was about to start.

The family meeting went off without a hitch, and the photo session was perfect. After that was the ceremony. Our relatives, aside from my father, all headed over to the chapel, and the other guests who had arrived at the venue sat down, one after another. It was finally time.

The planner greeted everyone, then it was time for the groom to enter. Takumi headed to the chapel. I was to enter after with my father.

Before the doors opened, my father was crying a bit. He said something about how he didn’t think he’d ever get to walk me down the aisle. The wedding was probably making him think about all sorts of things: my sister, who’d passed away and left Miu behind; his other daughter, me, who’d taken in and raised Miu; how Takumi and I worked hard to raise Tsubasa...

His tears almost triggered my own, but I desperately fought them back. If I

cried now, who knew how many times I'd end up crying today?

The chapel doors opened up, and a grand melody played as my father walked me down the wedding aisle. We walked slowly and carefully. The chapel wasn't large by any means, and the wedding wasn't on that large of a scale, but it was fine. It was enough to just have those who were important to me there.

The chairs lining the nave were filled with the familiar faces of our guests. There were people from Light Ship, the company I'd worked at for over fifteen years—some were people I'd worked with since I started there, and there were some I'd just recently gotten to know. Among the Light Ship guests was, of course, Yumemi, the person who'd done more for me than anyone else and who continued to take care of me. It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to call her my savior, but it was too embarrassing to say out loud. As usual, she was rocking a stylish outfit—namely, she was in a black ensemble with dress pants. She was nearing fifty, yet she still looked youthful.

Seriously, why doesn't she age...? She totally looks like she's in her early thirties.

Speaking of Yumemi, right around the time Ayumu entered high school, they'd started living together. He joined the gaming club at his high school, and he was now competing in world championships. He would pop into Light Ship as well and talk to people in the video game industry... It seemed that Yumemi's plans to make him her successor were going smoothly.

I turned my attention to the opposite side, where Takumi's guests were. His guests were mostly his friends from college. I'd never met some of them before, but I'd heard stories—

Hold on. Who's that drop-dead gorgeous woman?!

She was adorned in a classy cocktail dress. Its hemline was a bit short, and her beautiful, slender legs extended from beneath it. Her makeup was perfect, and she looked absolutely lovely. She was the kind of stunningly beautiful woman who had both a young girl's innocence and an older woman's charms.

She's sitting on the groom's side, so she's a friend of Takumi's, right? Did we invite someone so pretty...? Who invites a female friend to a wedding in the first place— No...complaining about that would be old-fashioned of me. Men and

women can be friends...

I felt uneasy for a moment before I quickly realized. *Wait...that's Satoya! Whoa, oh my gosh, whoa! He's gotten so pretty! He's still dressing in what looks good on him, I see. I heard he got a job after graduating and got married last year. Apparently his wife is pregnant too—and nevertheless, he's still dressing like that. Wow, the world is full of all sorts of people...*

I then turned my attention to the seats reserved for family. Both my and Takumi's families, who'd just greeted one another earlier, were sitting together. Both the Katsuragi and Aterazawa families had helped a lot with raising Tsubasa, especially the Aterazawas, who lived next door. They'd truly, *truly* helped me. I'd been reliant on them for the whole fifteen years since I'd started living next door—even if it was only bit by bit, I hoped I could start paying the favors back.

On the Katsuragi side were my parents and relatives, as well as Miu and Tsubasa. My dear, adorable daughters—my treasures, and my family.

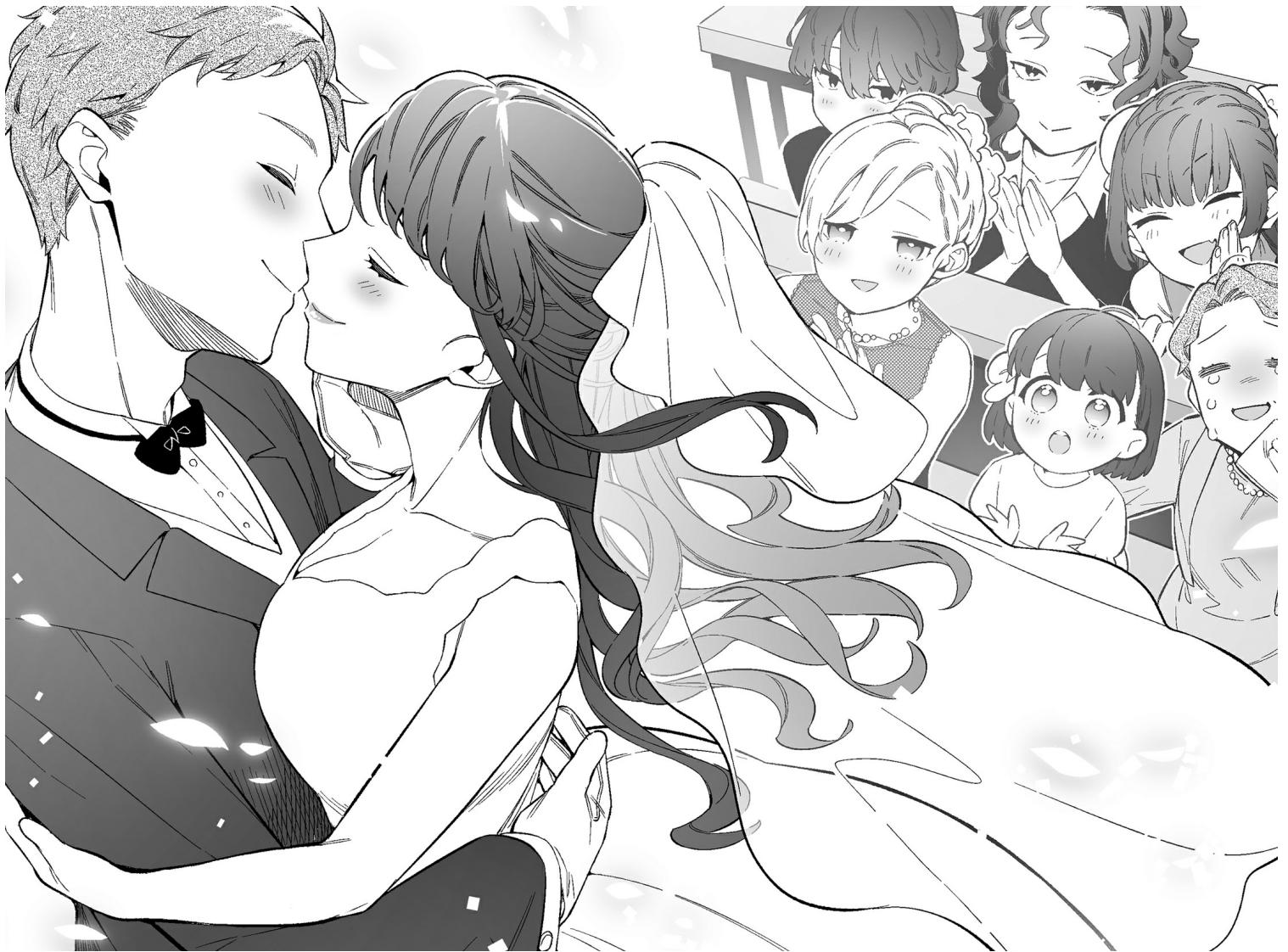
Eventually, I reached my husband, who was on the step above me. I'd taken my time and walked slowly, but it had gone so quickly.

Before me was Takumi. Takumi Aterazawa. Takkun. Dad. He was a dear member of my family, and the most important person to me in the entire world. My father let go of my hand and placed it in his. I stood beside him, and we began reciting our vows.

This wedding wasn't religious, so we weren't making vows to god—we were making vows to people. We were vowing to all our dear friends and family, to all the people who'd taken care of us, that we were getting married and we would spend the rest of our lives together as husband and wife—as family.

Of course, we'd actually gotten married quite a while ago, so there weren't going to be any drastic changes after today. We were just finally having a wedding after five years of marriage. Nothing would change, and tomorrow we would continue walking down the path we'd been on...and yet, it still felt like we'd reached a milestone in life—the start of a new chapter. Those feelings made me sentimental. If I were to describe it without using stuffy language, I would say...I was super-duper happy!

After reciting our vows, we shared a kiss.



It was unbearably embarrassing to kiss in front of others, but it somehow felt natural in the moment. It felt like kissing him here was the most inevitable part of the day.

I, Katsuragi Ayako, was a single mother in her thirties with a daughter in high school—no, not anymore. I was now a very happy mother with one daughter in college, and another who was just five, as well as a husband who I loved dearly. I was going to live happily ever after with everyone, now and forever.

Epilogue



I'm Tsubasa! I'm five! Five means I'm five years old! I was four before, but now I'm five! Next I'm going to be six! Days start early when you're five!

"Wake up, mom! Wake up!" I woke up, so now I had to wake up mom, who was sleeping next to me.

"Mmm, nnh..." Mom slowly opened her eyes.

"Good morning, mom!"

"Tsubasa... Good morning."

"Wake up! It's morning!"

"Mmm, it's only seven... It's Sunday..." mom said in a sleepy voice as she looked at the smart fone beside her pillow. "Let me sleep a little longer... I went to bed late last night because I was busy with work... This author took so long to deliver their manuscript..."

"What? No way! Wake up!"

"Just one more hour... I'll definitely be up by the time *Love Kaiser* starts."

"No, no! Wake! Up!" I kept shaking her.

"O-Okay, okay..." She finally got up! She got out of bed and stretched. "Mmm, okay. Let's do our best today."

"Your boob is going to fall out, mom."

"Oh no!"

Mom quickly put her boob back inside her pj's. My mom has really big boobs. They're bigger than the other moms'. *I wonder if mine will be big too.*

"Carry me, mom!"

"Okay, okay. Jeez, you're so clingy no matter how old you get."

Mom picked me up, and we headed downstairs. We got to the kitchen, and dad was already awake. He was making something. Mom put me down, and I headed over to dad.

“Good morning, dad!”

“Oh, hey, Tsubasa. Good morning.” Dad picked me up. He was strong, so it was like *swoop!* Whenever mom picked me up, she needed a moment to go “Okay...” first.

“Good morning, Takumi.”

“Good morning, Ayako. You’re up early.”

“Tsubasa woke me up.”

“Weren’t you up late last night? You can go back to bed. I’ll wake you up when it’s time for *Love Kaiser*.”

“I’m fine,” mom said with a smile. “I already said I was going to spend today playing a bunch with Tsubasa. I’ve been so busy with work this past week we haven’t gotten to have any fun.” Mom then looked at me. “We’re going to have lots of fun today, Tsubasa.”

“Yeah, we’re gonna play!”

“Got it. I’ll finish making breakfast—just give me a second.” Dad put me down, and then he started cooking again.

At my house, dad made food most of the time. He was apparently a “stay home.” That’s what you called a dad who didn’t work outside and did a bunch of stuff at home. But moms who do that are also called stay home, so I wasn’t sure I got it. Anyway, dad also went to work at “part time” when I was at preschool, and he also started doing “job haunting,” so he might not be a stay home anymore. Hmm... It was all too much for me to understand.

I waited for breakfast, and big sis woke up.

“Good morning,” she said, yawning while she came into the living room.

“Good morning, big sis!”

“Morning, Tsubasa.”

“Good morning, Miu. I’m surprised you’re awake so early on a Sunday.”

“I promised Tsubasa I would play with her before I go back to Sendai. Right, Tsubasa?”

“Yeah, I’m gonna play lots with big sis too!”

Big sis slept over last night. She was usually in Sendai by herself, but when she had a break, she would come home. She said it’s because she wanted to see me. Big sis loved me, and I loved her too. I don’t think I’m all she comes home for though...

“Can I get a coffee, Taku?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Jeez, Miu. You can get your own coffee,” mom scolded her.

“It’s fine. It’s not like I’m home all the time.”

“You come back pretty often...” mom said back. “Also, enough with the ‘Taku’ already.”

“But that’s his name to me. I can’t call him ‘dad’ after all this time.”

“I can’t believe you...”

“On that note, I still find it creepy that you call each other by your names now. It doesn’t feel right at all...”

“Wh-Why not?!”

“I just think it suits you to call him ‘Takkun.’”

“I won’t! I stopped doing that!”

“That’s what you say, but you might be calling him that when you’re alone.”

“I-I do not!”

Mom got all red, and big sis looked like she was having fun. I could tell—big sis probably missed everyone, and that’s why she came home. It’s because big sis loved mom and dad too. She came home a lot to see me *and* mom and dad. She came home to see her family she loved.

“Breakfast is ready.”

The four of us ate the breakfast dad made together. I could eat all by myself now. I could even use chopsticks!

“After we eat, what do you want to do while we’re waiting for *Love Kaiser*, Tsubasa?” mom asked.

“So it’s a given that you’re watching *Love Kaiser*...” big sis whispered.

“Um, um, I want to see the wedding video!”

“The wedding video?” big sis asked, her eyes wide. “You want to see *that*?”

“Yeah! It was lots of fun!”

“You really love watching the wedding video, don’t you, Tsubasa?” mom asked.

“I can’t count how many times she’s seen it by now,” dad said.

“I see, I guess that’s fine...” big sis said. “It’s embarrassing, though.”

“You were crying, big sis.”

“Shut up!” Her face turned red.

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, Miu,” Mom told her. “I can’t count how many times I cried during the reception.”

“Yeah... Especially when the voice actress of *Love Kaiser Solitaire* showed up as a surprise guest entertainer,” big sis said. Mom gasped. “Mom got super excited and started bawling her eyes out...”

“I knew about it beforehand, but I didn’t think things would get so hectic...” dad added.

“I think she cried over that more than the letter I wrote and read aloud... As her daughter, I don’t know how I feel about that.”

“I-I couldn’t help it! I-I mean, *the Maria Tsunagi* showed up! She’s already a successful actress, and she’s not working as a voice actress anymore, but she sang Hiyumin’s character song for *me*! How could I stay calm in the face of that?!”

At the “resepshun,” a person from an old *Love Kaiser* came as a “surprise guest.” Mom’s friend Yumemi invited her. Mom really liked that person, and she

cried so much! She cried, but she was really happy. Mom was being more of a five-year-old then than I was now, and I didn't know how to feel about it.

"I want one too!" I said. "Tsubasa wants a wedding too." You got to wear pretty clothes, and everyone celebrated. Mom and dad's wedding seemed really fun.

"I think it'll be a while before you have a wedding," big sis said, laughing.

"What? Why?"

"You have to find someone to marry first."

"I already did." Big sis looked confused, so I got down from my chair and ran over to dad. I grabbed his arm and squeezed tightly. "I'm going to marry dad!" Everyone looked surprised. It was weird. Why were they surprised? I didn't say anything weird. "That's okay, right, dad?"

"Um..."

"I love you, dad. You love me too, right?"

"I-I do, I love you, but..."

"Okay, then we'll get married!"

Dad had a weird look on his face. Mom had the same look.

"U-Um, Tsubasa, listen. I know how you feel, but dad is—"

"I think it's fine."

Dad was saying something, but big sis interrupted her. She made a face like she was going to pull a prank.

"You should marry him, Tsubasa," big sis said.

"Yeah, I will!"

"Oh, but the thing is, I love Taku too..." Big sis got up from her chair and grabbed dad's other arm. "So I think I'll marry him too." Big sis grinned, and dad's eyes got really big.

"H-Hey, what are you even saying, Miu?"

"It's fine, right? Or do you hate me, Taku?"

“I-I don’t hate you.”

“Then, do you like me?”

“W-Well, I do...”

“Then there’s no problem here. I’m going to marry Taku.” Big sis then squeezed dad’s arm. She looked at me like she was bragging.

“Sorry, Tsubasa. Dad’s going to marry me.”

“No! Dad is marrying me!”

“No, no. He’s marrying me.”

“No! He’s marrying me!”

Big sis and I pulled at dad’s arms from opposite sides.

“C-Calm down, you two...” Dad sounded troubled, but he also seemed kind of happy.

“Y-You can’t!” mom yelled as she stood up. Her face was bright red. “There’s no way! Dad can’t marry you two!” After yelling, mom walked over toward us. “It’s true that dad loves you two, but that’s um... It’s a different *kind* of love! He loves you as family! It’s different from a marrying kind of love!”

Mom sounded serious. She then hugged dad, pulling him away from me and big sis. She then gave him a big squeeze, hugging him super tight. I was surprised.

“Miu, Tsubasa, listen carefully... Dad, well... He likes me, not my daughters!”

The End

Afterword

You'll often find romantic comedies ending with the main characters getting together or having their wedding...but when you step back to consider their lives as a whole, the majority of their stories will usually take place in the time that comes after those moments. The unfortunate truth of modern life is that the time one spends elderly will surely eclipse the time they spend young—and by extension, the story of their life will go on for much longer than the tale of how they got together with or married their partner. When one approaches the genre with that perspective, romantic comedies are by their nature fleeting glimpses of characters' lifelong love stories—brilliant flashes of light given form as pieces of media.

Well, when I put it that way, maybe it sounds like I believe what comes after is lacking in splendor...but rest assured, I hope the couple from this story will continue to experience the glitters of romantic comedy for the rest of their lives.

Anyway, I'm Kota Nozomi. This is the seventh and final installment in the romantic comedy series about experiencing pure love with the mom next door! We finally made it here. This series put my tastes in full view—I got to do everything I wanted to, even including a reverse bunny suit, and now it's over. I have no regrets.

Now, since it's the final volume, I'd like to discuss the characters!

Ayako Katsuragi is our female lead and main character. She possessed the extremely rare combination of being a single mother while having no relationship experience. As I'm someone who likes older women, you could say that she's everything I love boiled down into one character. If I may be so bold, I believe I've done something unique with her relative to your typical female leads in the light novel industry. Perhaps because of my own desire for older female leads who have a bit of an annoying side, she ended up being quite a pain at times. I love that even though she's constantly slamming the brakes,

when she does put her foot on the gas, she goes pedal to the metal. I've kept her age ambiguous, saying that she's just in her thirties, but with the epilogue in this volume, she's finally nearing her forties... Well, Mommy Ayako will be Mommy Ayako no matter what. Also, it was really fun to write all the *Love Kaiser* stuff!

Takumi Aterazawa is our male lead and the other main character. I wrote him thinking, "If I were a single mother in my thirties, what kind of college student would I want to hit on me?" He is sincere, loyal, tall, and muscular. He doesn't have many faults—and if you had to pick one, it would be that toward the end of the series, he gave in to his desires more... He might have strange tastes because Mommy Ayako had been unintentionally seducing him since he was ten years old, but that's its own form of happiness, and perhaps it was his fate. I'd wanted to get into how he played ultimate, but it didn't seem worth it to put too much effort into it, so I ended up not touching on it much...

Miu Katsuragi was Mommy Ayako's only daughter, but in the final volume, she became an older sister. Throughout the series, she seemed composed and mature, but at the end of the day, she was a teenage girl. This story probably wouldn't have worked if Miu hadn't played the straight man. In the beginning, I'd considered having her actually be a romantic rival and making a nasty love triangle between mother, daughter, and male lead, but the editing department was incredibly against it, which resulted in the third volume turning out the way it did. She's gotten a bit independent in this final volume and moved out, but I feel like she's the type who'll end up getting a job in her hometown and living with her parents.

Yumemi Oinomori is Mommy Ayako's boss and a female CEO. She's proud and does whatever she wants, yet despite that, her employees respect her as a company president. Her attitude might make her seem inconsiderate, but she can really pinpoint your insecurities. I feel like having this kind of character really rounded out the story. I didn't think about her background too much in the beginning, but as the series went on, it slowly built up, which led to the events in the sixth volume. She's similar to Mommy Ayako in some ways while being a different kind of mother. Side note, this probably goes without saying, but Light Ship is modeled after the similarly Tokyo-based media company

Straight Edge Inc.

Satoya Ringo is Takumi's friend and a cross-dresser—or rather, he just dresses in clothes that look good on him. He's a character born from the fact that I like having the main character's best friend be a handsome guy. In *Slightly Older Girlfriend*, which was published under a different label, I already wrote a standard handsome best friend, so I decided to try something different this time: a handsome best friend who could also turn into a beautiful girl. Truthfully, I wanted to write a character like him without getting too deep into it and just acknowledge it as normal. We live in a world where it's not so strange for a man to wear a skirt, use makeup, and paint his nails—it's simply an aspect of the current era.

That's all!

This series is wrapped up for now, but the comic adaptation is still ongoing, so please check it out. The latest installment, volume three, is planned to go on sale on April 27!

Finally, my acknowledgments.

To the great Miyazaki, I thank you for all you've done. I thought that this project might not work as a light novel, but it's because you gave it a rave review and said, "That sounds really interesting!" that I thought about putting this series out in the world. I don't think it would've been made if it weren't for you.

To the amazing Giuniu, thank you for everything you've done. You illustrated the Mommy Ayako that I pictured— No, in fact, you made her even better. I'm truly grateful for all the wonderful illustrations you've done of her. I could tell how much you loved Mommy Ayako through your art, and it was a huge motivator for me to write.

And to you, the reader of this book who stuck with me to the seventh volume, I give my greatest thanks. I hope to see you again somewhere.

Kota Nozomi



To Kota Nozomi, MiyaP,
and all the fans,

Thank you for
everything.

Miu is going to
make a great
big sister! ❤

7

NOT MY
DAUGHTER?!

YOU LIKE
ME

Kota
Nozomi
Illustrator: Giuniu

Kota Nozomi
Illustrator: Giuniu

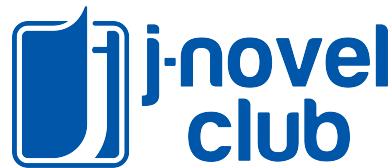
YOU LIKE
ME,
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7









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You Like Me, Not My Daughter?! Volume 7

by Kota Nozomi

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