



YOU LIKE
ME

5

NOT MY
DAUGHTER?!

Kota
Nozomi
Illustrator: Giuniu



YOU LIKE

ME

5

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DAUGHTER?!

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YOU LIKE
ME,
NOT MY
DAUGHTER?!

Yo

Kota Nozomi
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Mo

5

No

Daughter?!

?!?





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Y O U L I K E M E
N O T M Y D A U G H T E R ? !



"W-Wait, hold on—these aren't YES or NO pillows, okay? They just say YES on both sides, that's all!"

You Like Me,
Not My
Daughter
?!

YOU LIKE ME, NOT MY DAUGHTER?!

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Designer: SHINDOSHA

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Prologue



This is probably old news by now, but I—Takumi Aterazawa—had been harboring unrequited feelings for the same woman since I was ten years old. She was my neighbor and childhood friend's...mother. She had taken in her sister's daughter and raised her, and I had been in love with her ever since.

This probably wasn't normal, objectively speaking. It was rare for a man to have a love like mine—to have spent every day since he was ten, effectively his entire teenage years, only thinking of one woman. But that's what I'd done, even after I'd entered middle and high school. My classmates and I had all been going through puberty, and they would often discuss the girls in our grade or the beautiful upperclassmen, but the only person I'd think about was the woman living next door.

When I become an adult, I'm going to confess my feelings to Miss Ayako. I'd made that decision when I was still ten years old, and I'd never had feelings for any other girls, let alone dated anyone. My eyes never wandered for a single second, and I'd continued to love Miss Ayako throughout the years.

To describe it positively, mine was a pure love...but on the other hand, I couldn't deny that my feelings were slightly stalkerish.

Regardless, because I had loved Miss Ayako so much—because I had fallen in love with someone I hadn't had a chance in hell with—I'd never had a girlfriend. To some, my teenage years might seem drab.

However, there was *one* thing. If I were to say there was absolutely nothing that'd happened back then, I'd be lying.

Of course, I had never fallen for any woman other than Miss Ayako, nor had I dated anyone else—I swear to God about this, and let the heavens and the earth strike me down otherwise. But I would be lying if I said I didn't have any regrets. Back when I was in high school, I naturally hadn't had a girlfriend,

but...the truth was, there was someone who had come close to being one.

“Hey, Aterazawa...”

It was my second year of high school, and classes had ended. The sun was setting, and we were walking alongside each other to the train station. It had been silent for a while after we’d passed through the school gates, and she was the first to speak up. She sounded a bit nervous. Perhaps the silence felt awkward, or she had broken it out of consideration for me.

“Have you walked home like this before...? Alone with someone?” she asked.

“No,” I said, slightly shaking my head. “This is my first time.”

“I see... It’s my first time too. Walking home with a boy, that is.” The girl, dressed in her school uniform, blushed as if she were slightly embarrassed. “I’ve gone home with boys as part of a large group before, but not alone like this. Ha ha, I feel a bit nervous.”

“That’s surprising,” I responded. “You seem like you’d be pretty popular, Odaki.”

“What? I’m not popular at all.”

“That’s what all the popular people say.”

“Then what do people who aren’t popular say?”

“Well... They’d probably say they’re not popular at all.”

“That’s the same thing,” she said, giggling jovially. It felt like the nervous tension on both sides had dissipated a bit.

This was Arisa Odaki, a girl in my class. She had big eyes and long, shiny hair that fell a little past her shoulders. She was always smiling, and there was a cheerful, classy air to her.

She was relatively friendly, and it felt like she got along with everyone in class, regardless of their gender. She was also quite popular among the boys in our grade.

Despite her seemingly affable nature, it felt like she had a boundary she never

crossed. She was friendly with everyone, but it seemed like she didn't let anyone get close to her past a certain point.

We'd become classmates in my second year, but we weren't particularly good friends. Our interactions had been minimal, and we'd only spoken to each other if we needed something. We were just classmates—nothing more, and nothing less. At least, we *had* been, until she'd discussed *that* with me...

"Speaking of, what should we call each other?"

"Call each other?" I asked.

"Like our names. Your last name is kind of a mouthful, Aterazawa, so can I call you by your first name?"

"You can do whatever you want."

"Wow, you really don't care, do you? Just so you know, you have to do the same... If I call you by your first name, you need to call me by mine."

"Why would I have to?"

"That's how these things work."

"I don't want to..."

"Why?"

"Because I don't," I said, bluntly rejecting her.

Looking back on it now, this was incredibly embarrassing of me, but there was a part of me back then that wouldn't let me get closer to other girls than I had to. I felt like I wasn't being loyal if I did that—I had feelings for Miss Ayako, so I didn't want to be the kind of man who got infatuated with other women while loving someone else. In hindsight, it was pretty creepy of me to think I needed to distance myself from other women like it would sanctify my feelings for Miss Ayako—talk about self-absorbed.

"Why does what we call each other even matter?" I asked.

"If it doesn't matter, then you can just call me by my first name... Hm, I feel like it's actually suspicious that you're getting so worked up over this," she said with a mischievous grin. "Oh, could it be that you're actually pretty into me?"

Maybe you're being so pouty to cover it up."

"Urgh..." I couldn't help but be a bit flustered.

It wasn't that I was into her; I just didn't like that she teased me. I was much more childish back then—I wasn't yet mature enough to treat a girl's teasing like water off a duck's back, so I ended up getting a little worked up.

"Arisa..." I said, calling her by her name.

Arisa Odaki gasped, obviously flustered. She stopped in her tracks, and her face, which was already flushed under the warm glow of the setting sun, grew even redder.



“What are you getting embarrassed for? You’re the one who told me to do it.”

“I-I’m not embarrassed! I’m just surprised because you caught me off guard!” she squeaked, obviously worked up. She cleared her throat before continuing. “It’s my turn next...” She looked like she was desperately trying to hide the fact that she was nervous as she stared right at me. “T-Takumi...”

“Okay...” I wasn’t sure how to respond, so I just said the first thing that popped into my head.

An awkward silence fell over us for a few moments.

“H-Ha ha, I guess it’s a bit weird after all. We never talked that much before, but now we’re suddenly calling each other by our first names.” She chuckled like she was trying to play off her nervousness, then she turned her back to me and walked off. “Takumi, Takumi... Hm, I guess I’ll have to work hard and get used to it,” she said to herself before turning back to face me. “After all, you’re my boyfriend starting today, Takumi,” she said, slightly embarrassed yet at the same time a bit excited.

Arisa Odaki was my classmate in high school, and for some time during our second year, she called me her “boyfriend.”

Chapter 1: Cohabitation and Circumstances



Ten years had already passed since I—Ayako Katsuragi, a thirty-something-year-old—had taken in my niece after my sister and her husband had passed away in an accident, and I’d begun raising her as my own daughter. I’d spent my days thinking it would be nice if my daughter married Takkun, the boy next door, but one day, he’d suddenly confessed that he had feelings for me—that is to say, he liked *me*, and not my daughter.

This news had been earth-shattering and had taken me completely by surprise—I’d been about ready to bug out when he’d told me! Wait... Is “bugging out” an old expression? Will young people not get it?! Can people tell I was born in the Showa period?! Oh no, I take that part back!

Getting back on topic, after I’d learned how he felt, our relationship had changed completely. We would never just be neighbors ever again.

Since then, we’d had so many experiences together—we’d be here all day if I talked about every one—and I was finally able to realize how I felt about him.

I liked him. I loved Takkun—not as someone I saw as a son or a younger brother, but as a member of the opposite sex. Once I’d come to terms with how I felt about him, it was all smooth sailing...

Or, at least, it would’ve been nice if that’d been the case. In the end, things became a dragged-out mess...but now, three months after Takkun confessed his feelings to me, we were dating.

This was my first time dating someone, despite being thirty-something years old. Having my first boyfriend made me feel so excited and bashful about all sorts of different things that I wasn’t sure what to do with myself. How could I not be elated though? If just the fact that we were now a couple made me this giddy, what was going to happen once we were actually going on dates together?!

Although I was nervous about things, my heart raced at the thrill of it all...but our relationship would face a large obstacle when it had only just begun.

“What do you think about working in Tokyo starting next month?”

It was a suggestion from my boss, Yumemi. She proposed that I live in Tokyo for just three months so I could give my all working on the anime adaptation of one of my projects.

It wasn't a mandatory assignment, so I could have turned it down, but...I accepted her offer. It was an opportunity for me to learn new skills as an editor, and more than anything, I wanted to see this adaptation through since it was for a project I had started from scratch.

But if I were to live in Tokyo, that meant I would be separated from Takkun. It was only three months, but it meant that we would be going long-distance when we'd just started dating—we wouldn't be together during the most fun period of a relationship!

I did have some hesitation, but Takkun encouraged me to go. He supported my dreams and my choice from the bottom of his heart, and he sent me out to Tokyo with good grace.

And so, my and Takumi Aterazawa's journey as a couple was going to begin as a long-distance relationship...or rather, it was supposed to have...

It was September, and I was at the condo in Tokyo that Yumemi had prepared for me to stay in. It was a one-bedroom unit that was more than spacious enough for someone to live alone in. With a full living room and dining room, it would be greedy to ask for any more than this in Tokyo.

The unit was quite empty, and there was minimal furniture. This condo was Yumemi's personal property that she had lent to friends in the past—the TV and refrigerator in the unit likely belonged to one of those previous tenants. I was told I could use everything freely, and also that I could also dispose of anything I didn't need.

Aside from the furniture, there was my suitcase in one corner of the room. I needed various items for daily use since I was going to be living here for three

months, so I'd brought a bunch of things with me. Everything else I'd had sent to be delivered at a later date.

There was also one more suitcase in the room. It looked like something a man would use, and it was mostly black...

Yes, it was Takkun's, and he was in this room right now sitting across from me at the table. My dear boyfriend, who I was supposed to be in a temporary long-distance relationship with, was right in front of me for some reason. When I arrived here today, it was Takkun who'd greeted me.

I'm going to miss Takkun, being apart from him for three months. Ugh, I wish he would be here when I opened the door, I'd thought to myself—and then he'd actually appeared.

No way! Am I hallucinating because I miss him so much?! Or...did God grant my wish? Various thoughts crossed my mind in an instant, but they were probably all wrong. The Takkun before me wasn't a hallucination, but real, and he wasn't there because God had granted a wish of mine—I had a hunch this was the work of a certain someone who was more akin to an evil spirit than anything heaven-sent.

Takkun had said some things earlier when he'd greeted me at the door.

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything until today... But, even if I wanted to, I couldn't. Miss Yumemi's conditions were that I keep it a secret from you."

"Um... I'm not sure where to begin. Basically, uh... Starting today, I'll be living here with you."

"A-An internship?" I asked in a flabbergasted tone after Takkun had given me an overview of the situation.

"Yes..." Takkun said apologetically with a nod.

"So, in other words, you're going to be an intern in Tokyo...?"

"That is the plan..."

I was completely stunned.

To put it simply, an internship was a system that allowed someone to

temporarily work at a company or organization. The specifics differed between countries, but in Japan, an internship was generally work experience for college students, where they could work at a company for a set period as a part of their job-hunting efforts.

Wow, how nostalgic. I remember agonizing over whether I should get an internship or not back when I was a college student. I'd wanted to, but I remember deciding not to because I was too lazy to go through the hassle.

"I'd been planning on getting an internship during my third year of college," Takkun began to explain. "I thought it would be good to get some real-world experience before I have to start job hunting seriously. You can't really get a trial job like this unless you're a college student, after all, so I started looking around for internships once I'd started my third year."

"Th-That's incredible, Takkun." He was a true self-starter. He wasn't the kind of person who spoke of lofty goals to seem ambitious, but someone who actually took action to grow and improve—a completely different kind of person from someone like me, who'd given up because it was too much work.

"It's not that big of a deal. It wasn't like I'd done a proper search, I was just sort of looking for things," Takkun said like he was trying to be humble. "But I just couldn't find something that fit what I was looking for locally... That's why I went to Miss Yumemi for help."

I fell silent. I'd heard that Takkun and Yumemi had been talking to each other every now and then. They'd exchanged their contact information when Yumemi had shown up at my house before the summer break. The three of us had had sushi together, and after being provoked by Yumemi, I'd put on Miu's uniform, and... Well, I didn't need to recall that part of the day. *I should seal that memory away for all eternity.*

Anyway, ever since then, the two of them would sometimes text or call each other. At first, it was just Yumemi teasing Takkun about his relationship with me, but eventually, they'd begun to talk about his future and his plans after graduating.

As Takkun's girlfriend, perhaps I should've been jealous that he was secretly talking to another woman, but to be honest, I didn't feel jealous at all. It'd

happened before we were dating, and besides...it was Yumemi that he was talking to. She was probably the one who'd aggressively reached out to him, and I could see why he'd want to talk about his future with her.

It was kind of like when alumni visited their former college to talk to the current students. Yumemi Oinomori was a great choice if a student wanted to get someone's opinion on breaking into the professional world. After achieving success at a top publishing firm, she'd left that company and founded her own. She was a spirited woman who continued to work on the front lines of her business. There was much insight to glean from her experiences and views on working—in fact, she had actually done quite a few lectures for college students.

I respected her greatly when it came to her professional life. When it came to how she was in her personal life, though, that respect was pretty much gone.

"I spoke to her, expecting there wasn't anything that could be done. It was more like venting than asking for advice... But then, Miss Yumemi found me an internship in no time."

"Wow..." Yumemi was as superhuman as always.

"It's a company run by an acquaintance of Miss Yumemi's, and they apparently just started their internship program this year. The only condition for getting me a spot was..."

"W-Was it...?" I decided to voice my guess. "Was the condition that you live with me...?"

"Yes..." Takkun responded, nodding apologetically. "When we were discussing the internship, Miss Yumemi mentioned that she was thinking about transferring you temporarily for an assignment, so she suggested we live together."

It appeared that Takkun had heard about my assignment to Tokyo even before I had—conspiracies had been in the works behind closed doors for a while, unbeknownst to me.

"Of course, I turned her down at first! We weren't even dating at the time, and I thought there was no way I could decide our living situation without

asking you how you felt, but..." Takkun had been speaking quickly, but he gradually grew quieter as he said, "Even if it's only three months, I didn't want to be apart from you."

"Takkun..."

"Also, Miss Yumemi said that if I turned her offer down, she would take you to host clubs and boys bars."

She said that?! What the heck?! What kind of threat is that?!

"J-Jeez... She's always so extreme! You're no better though, Takkun. Do you really think I'd go to those places?"

"You're not wrong, it's just... I couldn't help but think about the one-in-a-million chance that you would. Miss Yumemi kept getting me even more worried, saying things like, 'Pure, innocent types like her can't go back once they get a taste.'"

It seemed that Takkun had completely fallen for Yumemi's nonsense. *Well, Yumemi is good at manipulating people. I can't count how many times I've fallen for her smooth talk.*

"I just got really worried. I thought about what would happen if you fell for a host and fell into debt... What if you then had to work at a salacious establishment?"

"How deep does this imaginary scenario go?!"

That's three times more intricate and terrible than what I expected! Just how anxious did Yumemi make him?!

Just as I was getting riled up, my phone rang. I thought about ignoring the call since we were in the middle of an important discussion, but since the caller was the root of all this evil, I changed my mind.

"Excuse me for a moment," I said before getting up. I left the living room and shut the sliding door tight behind me before answering the call.

"Hey, Ayako," Yumemi said, sounding extremely pleased. I could imagine her grinning widely. We'd had a quick chat before I'd arrived at the condo, but it seemed she was waiting for the right moment to call again—she was waiting for

me to get over my initial shock. “Hee hee, so, how is it? Did you enjoy my surprise?”

“I sure did...” I said sarcastically.

“Ha ha, I’m glad to hear that.” She didn’t seem to be affected by my tone at all.

“You really went and did it this time, Yumemi. Not only does this affect me, but you got Takkun involved too... We’re not your toys.”

“You make me sound so terrible. I’d expect you to be grateful. I’ve done nothing to make you resent me,” she said nonchalantly. “You get to do the job you wanted to in Tokyo, and Takumi gets the internship he wants. On top of that, you two get to bypass the tragedy that is going long-distance right after becoming a couple. As for me, my scheme... I mean, my surprise for you was a success, which gives me great joy. I think it’s a wonderful outcome where no one loses.”

“Well...” I was about to be conned into believing her logic. *That was close! For a moment, I thought, “She’s right, no one’s lost”!*

“Besides, the condo is mine. You two get to live together in the big city for free. I think you could be a little bit more grateful.”

“I’m not ungrateful, but...that doesn’t mean you can just do whatever you want.”

“You’re not wrong—I may have gone a little bit far this time...” Yumemi’s tone softened as I argued with her. “But I want you to understand something. I didn’t do this with malicious intent... Well, it’s not that I didn’t have *any*, but it wasn’t out of completely malicious intent. It was partially because I was trying to be considerate about your relationship.” I didn’t know how to respond. “I’d been thinking for a while about having you temporarily live in Tokyo for the anime adaptation of *KIMIOSA*. I thought about what would be the most fun— I mean, what would be the best for you, and Takumi just happened to come to me for advice about his internship search.”

“So that’s when you came up with the idea of us living together...?”

“Exactly!” she said with a boastful grin. We were on the phone, so I couldn’t

see it, but I knew she was definitely grinning. “There were a lot of uncertainties, so I wasn’t sure if it would work out, but it looks like it was a great success. Not only that, but you two got together at just the right time.”

“Th-That’s so irresponsible! What were you going to do if we hadn’t started dating?” The cohabitation plan had been in the works since Takkun had gone to Yumemi for advice on his internship—in other words, it’d been in the works since before we’d started dating because we had only started dating a week ago. “We could’ve ended up living together when we weren’t even dating!”

“That would’ve been interesting too,” Yumemi said casually. “If you were going to continue dragging your feet, staying more than friends but less than lovers, I thought forcing you to live together would’ve been a way to get you two to move forward. You two were going to date sooner or later, so the only thing living together would’ve changed is how soon you got together.”

Sh-She says that like it’s a fact...! Maybe to people on the outside, it just seemed like a situation that makes you go, “Date already,” but...we had our own drama to get through!

“Let’s say that I was fine with the cohabitation since it’s true that it benefits me as well. Even if it’s fine, why did you keep it a secret from me?!” At the end of the day, that was what made me the most upset—the fact that things had been decided without me. “This was a really important decision, but you left me out of it, and you even dragged Takkun into it and made him sneak around and scheme with you... It’s distasteful. Do you know how hard it was for me to leave home and come to Tokyo...?”

“That’s exactly it,” Yumemi said in a sharp tone.

“It is?”

“That’s what I wanted. Those feelings, and that decision, are what I wanted. I didn’t surprise you just to shock you.” I listened silently as she continued. “If I’d told you about this plan beforehand—in other words, if you’d known that you would get to live with Takumi if you came to Tokyo—then it might’ve been easier to make this decision.”

I didn’t know what to say. She might’ve been right. This temporary assignment was an opportunity for me to do a job I’d wanted to do, but I’d had

reservations about leaving because of Miu...and Takkun. It was painful to have to go long-distance with the man I'd just started dating.

Despite those reservations, I'd made the decision to do this job that I'd wanted to do. I hadn't wanted to become a woman who neglected her work for love. I'd wanted to give this job everything I had as someone in the entertainment industry.

"I know I don't need to tell you this, but an anime is a large project. It's a huge undertaking that involves various industries. If the editor in charge of the source material is to get involved, they'll be at the center of the project, regardless of whether they want to be or not. It would be bad for us if you went into a job like that half-heartedly," she said, her words slowing smoothly. "I didn't want you to come to Tokyo in a giddy state, excited about living with your boyfriend. I wanted your decision to be absolute, firm, like you wanted this job so badly that you'd spend time apart from your dear boyfriend... I wanted a strong, intense, determination like that from you."

"So you were testing me...?"

"I guess so, but I believed in you," Yumemi said, her tone growing kind. "The Ayako Katsuragi I know is a total novice when it comes to love, but she's not a pathetic woman who can't do her job because of some man." I didn't know what to say. "If you had come here resolved to be away from home, I trusted you probably wouldn't neglect your work even after the incredibly exciting event of getting to live with your boyfriend happened. Just as I expected, you showed that I was right to trust you. I'm very pleased. I hope you'll spend the next three months working a ton, loving a ton, and enjoying a fulfilling home life with your boyfriend." With that, she ended the call, sounding just as pleased as she'd claimed to be.

I held my head in my hands. *Hmm... I feel kind of miserable. Like, she ended up just making things sound great. Jeez, Yumemi is so unfair.* Yumemi most definitely just wanted to surprise me and have some fun, but she'd used sound logic to justify her actions and made it sound good. She was truly skilled at manipulation. Depending on the state of the world, she could easily be an instigator who led people into revolution.

I let out a sigh, still racked with mixed feelings as I returned to the living room. Takkun, who was still seated, got up as soon as he saw me.

“Was that Miss Yumemi...?” he asked.

“Y-Yeah. I wanted to complain to her, but she ended up winning me over.”

“I see...” Takkun still seemed apologetic. “Um, Miss Ayako, you’re upset, aren’t you?”

“What...?”

“You must be upset that the decision we’d live together was made behind your back... I know that not telling you was a condition of me getting the internship, but it’s still such a big decision that we made without you, and I’m truly sorry for that.”

“I-It’s not anything *you* need to apologize for, Takkun. It’s all Yumemi’s fault.”

“Still, I’m basically an accomplice.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not mad at you, Takkun.” I quickly denied it, unable to endure the glum look on his face, but I fell silent for a moment. “That’s a lie,” I finally admitted. “The truth is, I’m a little upset...”

“Huh...?”

“I mean, you knew about all this from the beginning, right? That we’d live together in September? That we wouldn’t go long-distance, but we’d be cohabitating?”

“Th-That’s correct.”

“Then, how did you feel when we were being lovey-dovey for the past week?!” I yelled. I couldn’t help but raise my voice. All the various events that had taken place in the past week were running through my mind.

“H-How did I feel?”

“I thought that we’d be long-distance starting in September... I thought that we’d be separated... That’s why, um, I kind of didn’t hold back!”

A week ago, the day that I had told Takkun about the temporary assignment, I’d said something at the very end.

"I only have about a week until I go to Tokyo, so...I want to spend lots of time with you and be super lovey-dovey, Takkun..."

It's so embarrassing I could die just remembering it!

To be fair, I had said that because I hadn't wanted to waste time playing it cool. I'd thought there was no point in getting embarrassed because I'd wanted to spend as much quality time with him as possible. And, just as I had requested, we'd spent the week being very lovey-dovey. We'd spent a rich honeymoon period together, like we were trying to get an advance on the three months we wouldn't see each other.

To be honest, I'd even done some things that were pretty embarrassing. I'd let myself be spoiled by him, throwing away any pride I had as an older woman, because I'd thought that it would be my only chance for a while. I'd thought that shameless coupley acts were acceptable in this special time we'd had before we went long-distance. But, despite all of that...

"You knew the whole time, Takkun... I looked like an idiot, getting all worked up over nothing!"

"M-Miss Ayako..."

"You were probably laughing at me in your head, weren't you?" I whined.

"I-I never laughed at you!"

"You're lying," I pouted.

"I'm not," Takkun said, seeming panicked. "Why would I laugh at you? I was so happy that you treasured our time together... I felt so bad about it. The guilt almost won over, and I was on the verge of telling you about the cohabitation, but I'd promised Miss Yumemi, so... Also..."

"Also?"

"It was so cute how you were being so flirty with me..."

"What?!"

"You were letting me pamper you so much, which was unimaginable based on how you usually are... I was so thrilled to see that you're the type to get really sweet and fawn over someone when you date them." All I could respond with

was a shocked whine. “You casually let me feed you, and I got to carry you around the house on my back when you’d ask me to give you piggyback rides.”

“N-Nooo!” I screamed. *It’s so embarrassing! It’s so embarrassing I could die! What was I doing?! I know I thought I wouldn’t see him for three months, but isn’t that going a little too off the rails?! “I-It’s not what you think. It’s not... That was, um...”*

“It was an amazing week for me, getting to spend time enjoying this new side of you. Especially when you wore nothing but an apron yesterday. That’s a memory I’ll treasure forever.” Takkun, enraptured as he was with reminiscing about everything we’d gotten up to, was ignoring how I was becoming an incoherent mess.

That last thing he’d brought up hit me the hardest. *That’s right, I remember now. The last day of our lovey-dovey week—in other words, yesterday—I invited Takkun over and...wore nothing but an apron! Because it was the end! The last day!*

I’d wanted to do something impactful to make sure Takkun didn’t cheat while we couldn’t see each other, and what I’d landed on was wearing nothing but an apron. It was what I’d come up with, and there was no changing that now.

Of course, I hadn’t actually been wearing nothing but the apron. I’d had my underwear on, so it’d only looked like I was naked underneath it from the front, but still...it was still quite embarrassing.

After doing something so obscene, I’d had no idea how I’d face him the next day, but I’d figured I wouldn’t have to see him, so I’d thought it was okay for me to let loose. That line of thinking had given me the courage to be bold.

Despite all that...here we were, seeing each other! We were already seeing each other the very next day!

“F-Forget that! Delete the thing with the apron from your memories right away!”

“I can’t... Even if I wanted to, I could never forget about something so wonderful.”

“It’s not wonderful! It’s nothing but humiliating! Oh... Actually, you took a

picture, didn't you?!" As soon as I remembered this very important fact, he averted his gaze. "I'd said no because it was embarrassing, but you said, "We won't be able to see each other starting tomorrow, so I want one last memory" and took so, so many pictures..."

"W-Well..."

"You looked like you were going to cry, so I gave you special permission to take my picture..."

"Um..."

"But you knew that we would be seeing each other again, today, didn't you...?"

"I'm sorry..." Takkun finally said, admitting defeat after I glared him down. "I just wanted to keep a record of you in the apron, and I couldn't help myself..."

"I knew it...! Jeez, that's so mean, Takkun!" I went up to him and hit him in the chest softly with both hands. "Delete them! Delete them right now!"

"Not the poor, innocent photos! I was going to treasure those pictures for the rest of my life."

"You don't have to treasure those! Delete them right now!"

"B-But, they're backed up at home, so there wouldn't be a point to deleting them right now..."

"You have them backed up?!"

"I have all my pictures of you backed up. I have copies both in the cloud and on a hard drive... Also, I have an album with printed copies, just in case all my electronics stop working."

"Why are you so prepared?!" *Are my pictures some kind of historically valuable cultural artifacts?! It's like he's trying to pass them onto future generations!*

I continued complaining to him, still hitting him gently, before giving up. "Ugh... You're so mean, Takkun..." I said, burying my face in his chest. "I was really sad we were going to be apart..."

“Miss Ayako...”

“I thought you felt the same way... I never imagined you were living it up secretly knowing we’d be sharing a condo.”

“I-I’m sorry...” Takkun apologized, slowly wrapping his arms around me in a tender hug. “I’ll make up for all the sad feelings by spending every day with you, starting today.”

“Yeah...” I still had a thing or two on my mind about all this, but before I knew it, I was nodding and hugging him back.

Ugh, I’m so easy.

I could’ve gotten more upset with Yumemi and Takkun for planning such a ridiculous surprise—especially with Yumemi. I should’ve been angry for a while and resented her for this for some time...but my flames of fury quickly died down as a different flame grew larger.

I was suddenly living with my boyfriend. We would be together both during the day and at night. We’d be together for the entire three months. I was filled with so much excitement, confusion, and nervousness that there was no space for anger in my heart, and I felt like it could explode at any moment.

If I were to somehow describe this indescribable pounding in my chest...it was like if you took the best of both worlds of having your heart race and getting butterflies in your stomach. My heart couldn’t help but go a mile a minute thinking about our daily life from here on out.

Chapter 2: The Naked Body and the Apron



The expected thing to do here would be to continue to the next part of the story. There's so much of my and Miss Ayako's first day living together left to see, after all, like how we'll handle shopping for dinner and sharing the same bath. The thing I'm most excited to see, personally, is our first night together—our first night *living* together, not the traditional first night as a married couple, I mean.

Sure enough, this first night of ours will soon commence. However, before the story of our first night, there's something I desperately want to talk about first. Even if it messes up the chronological order of the book, there's a flashback that I want to squeeze in here—a flashback regarding Miss Ayako wearing nothing but an apron.

Yes, this flashback concerns the outfit that was vaguely referenced in the previous chapter. I feel that it wasn't discussed enough, or rather, the details given were overly fragmented. If the story were to continue from this point without setting the record straight, I fear that people will think Miss Ayako just randomly wore a risqué outfit like some pervert who got carried away.

That wasn't the case at all. There's a perfectly rational explanation for why Miss Ayako wore something so humiliating. There was a very Miss Ayako-like reason for it. I desperately want to share that—to annotate that experience. I don't mind being misunderstood, but I can't bear to see Miss Ayako be misunderstood. If you would be so kind, I'd like you to come with me on this journey, just like I asked you to when I told the tale of the Santa-themed bikini.

It was before Miss Ayako knew about us living together—the last day of our lovey-dovey week. In other words...it was yesterday.

It was a little after noon on Sunday. I stood before the front door to the Katsuragi house and sighed. I was about to see Miss Ayako at her house—we

were having what was known as a “stay-at-home date.”

Usually, I would’ve been ecstatic to even just be able to see Miss Ayako, let alone go on a date with her, and I never would’ve been sighing, but...recently, I’d been troubled by a complicated situation.

Of course, I was still happy to see Miss Ayako. Not only that, but this was her last day here before she headed out to Tokyo—it was our last day together before we would be in a long-distance relationship.

Given that information, it’d only make sense for me to put special effort into today’s stay-at-home date. It seemed obvious I should do everything I could to spend quality time with her to make up for the time we wouldn’t be seeing each other in advance.

However, I couldn’t get too excited about our date. I’d been trying to psych myself up, but I couldn’t help but feel remorseful because...the truth was that we weren’t actually going to be long-distance. In fact, the complete opposite was going to happen—starting tomorrow, we were going to be living together. Rather than having to be apart from each other, we were actually going to become pretty close together. Miss Ayako didn’t know about this yet, only I did. *Man, I feel so guilty...*

There’d been a painful tightening in my chest for the entire past week. I almost hadn’t been able to bear seeing Miss Ayako so sadly believing we were going to be apart soon. I’d honestly had several moments of weakness where I’d almost broken down and told her everything...but I couldn’t break my promise to Miss Yumemi.

I didn’t know Miss Yumemi that well, but I had a bad feeling about breaking my promise to her. It was an instinctual feeling—I just knew that something terrifying would happen if I did. That wasn’t a bad thing though, because at the end of the day, she took Miss Ayako’s happiness seriously, and she was even helping me out with my internship. It wasn’t right for me to be unfaithful to our agreement.

“All right...” I psyched myself up and prepared to go in. I suppressed the guilt and made sure my face wasn’t showing it. Today I had to play the role of a boyfriend who was going to be apart from his girlfriend very soon after she

moved to Tokyo. *I have to do my best.*

Having steeled my resolve, I pressed the button on the intercom. “H-Hello?” I heard Miss Ayako’s voice coming from inside. “Takkun? Is that you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad it’s you... Come in. The door is unlocked,” she said, sounding slightly flustered.

Huh. She usually opens the door to greet me—I wonder why she wants me to let myself in, I wondered as I opened the door and removed my shoes. I headed to the living room, where my questions instantly flew out the window. *I see. No wonder why she couldn’t open the door to greet me...*

Miss Ayako was wearing nothing but an apron. That’s right, she was naked except for an apron—there wasn’t much else to say about it besides that. She had no extra clothing covering her—it was just her naked body with a white apron atop. With her shoulders, cleavage, and thighs exposed, it was a quite revealing and suggestive outfit.



After witnessing something so impactful, I was stunned silent for several seconds. You could say that I was captivated by her. Miss Ayako in nothing but her apron was just that incredibly and violently alluring.

“Huh...? What are you doing, Miss Ayako...?” I somehow managed to ask.

“What do you mean? I-I’m wearing nothing but an apron, obviously,” Miss Ayako bashfully answered. Her face was bright red, and she seemed like she wanted to run away from this situation, but she held her ground, firmly standing there and showing off her outfit to me. She was putting that classic manifestation of male desire on full display all for my sake.

“I’m not very familiar with these things, but men like this kind of stuff, right? Isn’t this what excites men?”

“W-Well...” *It does! It’s one of the most exciting things you could do!*

I had imagined Miss Ayako in nothing but an apron countless times over the past ten years. To be honest, when Miss Ayako dressed lightly in the summer and wore an apron, it sometimes looked like the apron was all she had on, and I’d gotten excited over that several times.

“D-Don’t worry! I said it’s just the apron, but I’m not actually wearing *just* the apron! I have underwear on!” Miss Ayako yelled, unable to take the embarrassment. She pulled down a shoulder strap on the apron, which exposed her bra strap.

It seemed that she wasn’t actually naked, but that she had her underwear on. I was slightly relieved, but at the same time a bit disappointed. *This is also kind of hot in its own way...*

“I-I’m not some pervert who actually wears nothing but an apron in broad daylight, so...” Miss Ayako mumbled, trying to explain her behavior. Truthfully, I felt it was still pretty bold of her to pretend to be wearing nothing but an apron in the middle of the day, but I wasn’t going to tell her that. “That’s why, um... I’m not really naked, so don’t look too closely from different angles. You can only look from the front, but I hope you’ll enjoy it...” I didn’t know what to say to that.

“Oh, never mind, I take it back! Don’t look too closely from the front either... I

feel like I'm going to die of embarrassment," Miss Ayako said, writhing around bashfully. Her movements were making some tantalizing areas like her inner thighs and underarms peek out from under the apron, which made me feel just as restless as she was. "Ugh... Are you weirded out by this, Takkun? Are you put off by me? Are you thinking, 'What is this old lady doing?'"

"I-I'm not thinking that!" I said, quickly trying to comfort Miss Ayako as she started to get anxious. "But I'm wondering why you suddenly decided to dress like this..."

"B-Because today's our last day..." she said. She sounded like she was on the verge of tears. "I wanted to do something memorable... I wanted to do something aggressive and impactful, so you don't forget about me—so your memories of me stay fresh even while we're apart. Once I had that thought, I thought that wearing nothing but an apron was maybe my only option..."

"Miss Ayako..."

It appeared that Miss Ayako had dressed like this for my sake. It was our last day before we were going long-distance, so she'd taken action, albeit in a slightly crazy way. It was all for me, which made me really happy, but at the same time, my chest tightened with immense pain. *Ugh, I feel so guilty. I mean...we're not actually going to be apart from each other.*

"I'm so sad... I don't want to go to Tokyo," Miss Ayako whined in a truly saddened voice. "We won't be able to see each other this easily after tomorrow."

We will though—starting tomorrow, we're going to see each other every day for the next three months.

"I-I'll try to come back as much as I can, but once a week is the most frequently I can travel back... After tomorrow, it's going to take me multiple trains and two hours to see you!"

It won't—we're going to be able to see each other in under a second.

"We won't be able to talk face-to-face either. I know we can talk on the phone, but hearing your voice in person is different!"

We'll be able to talk in person as much as you'd like.

“We won’t be able to hug or...k-kiss either...”

We will. We can probably do those more frequently than we do now. I’m actually thinking of asking for goodbye kisses whenever I head out for the day.

“You should just come to Tokyo and live with me...”

I will. I’m going to be living with you starting tomorrow.

Miss Ayako sighed. “I’m sorry for complaining so much, Takkun.”

“I-It’s fine,” I said. *M-My heart hurts!* I felt like I was going to drown in my own guilt. What was I doing, lying to my beloved girlfriend and making her sad?

“I can’t keep whining like this, though,” Miss Ayako said. “This is the last day we get to spend together like this, so I want to make it fun...”

“Y-Yes, let’s have fun today,” I agreed.

“Yeah, let’s have a fun stay-at-home date. I’m going to go get changed, so give me a second.”

“Huh...?” I couldn’t help but interject after Miss Ayako had said it like it was no big deal. “You’re changing?”

“O-Of course I’m changing... You’ve already seen it, so the bit is over...”

I mean, I guess the surprise is gone since I’ve seen it, but it feels a bit self-deprecating for her to say it’s already lost its value at this point.

“I can’t stay in such a humiliating state for too long. Who knows when Miu will come home?” Miss Ayako pointed out. She was suddenly being rational about things.

If that’s how she feels, I have to wonder how she committed to this idea for even a second. But setting that aside, is she really going to get changed? I guess this naked apron bit really is already over.

“Um...” I felt like I was going to regret it if I didn’t say anything, so I couldn’t help but open my mouth. “Can I take a picture before you get changed?”

“A picture? O-Of me in the apron?”

“Yes.”

“N-No way! Definitely not!” Miss Ayako yelled, outright refusing.

“Please?”

“No way! I can’t do that! No way!”

“You let me take pictures of you in the maid costume, though...”

“Th-This is different from the maid costume! That was a proper cosplay outfit. If someone were to see those, I could just barely pass cosplay off as my hobby, but if someone saw me wearing nothing but an apron... They’d think only cringey women with their heads in the clouds because they got a boyfriend would dress like this... Like I’m doing right now...” Miss Ayako explained while enduring self-inflicted damage.

“Is there really no way you’d allow it?” I asked.

“N-No way... Even if you show me those puppy dog eyes, you can’t... No matter how much you ask, no means no, after all...”

Words would fail to describe the excitement overtaking me as I noticed Miss Ayako’s refusals gradually weakening. *Urgh, what is this? I feel like if I push just a little more, she’ll say yes! I know it’s wrong of me to press her, but I don’t think what Miss Ayako’s doing is right either! I can’t help but push when she’s being this wishy-washy! I mean, it seems like she’ll say yes if I keep going!*

“Please...” I asked, both because I was a little obsessed with the sight of her in the apron and also because the way she was refusing made it seem like she was trying to lead me on. The combination of the two factors awakened a mischievous demon within me. “We won’t be able to see each other starting tomorrow, so I want one last memory—something to help me get through our long-distance period.”

“Takkun, I...” Miss Ayako seemed embarrassed and troubled. My guilt was making my chest twinge with pain, but it didn’t outweigh the allure of the demon—the chance that I could record the beautiful sight before my eyes! “Y-You’re right, we won’t be able to see each other starting tomorrow... I guess it’s... But, ugh, hmm...” Miss Ayako whined. She deliberated in torment for a bit before looking up at me. “A-Are you really okay with this being your last memory of me?”

“Yes.”

“You want to take a picture of me dressed like this and look back on it again and again?”

“Yes.”

“Jeez, Takkun...” Miss Ayako blushed and continued. “Just a couple pictures, okay?” she said, sounding not completely unwilling.

After that, I took a bunch of embarrassing pictures of her. I apologized to her countless times in my heart, and I ended up taking more than “just a couple” of pictures.

Thus ends the flashback, and also where we’ll be wrapping up stories about our lovey-dovey week for the time being.

How do I say this...? I’d planned to explain the complex circumstances around why Miss Ayako had ended up dressed in nothing but an apron, but I guess the reasons weren’t so complicated after all.

Actually, now that I’m looking back on it, I feel like I’d acted kind of terrible. I’d lost to my own desires and lied to her, taking advantage of her kindness...

Miss Ayako had been a little out of control, and I hadn’t been able to keep myself in check... It might not have been a flashback worth telling for anyone involved. Well, I’ve already told the story, so there’s nothing that I can do about it now...

In any case, the flashback unrelated to the main plot is now over. Thank you very much for listening. Please enjoy the main story—in other words, the tale of our first night together—from here on out!

Chapter 3: Cohabitation and the First Night



The current situation still hadn't fully registered in my mind, but I couldn't keep being confused. Starting today—in fact, starting immediately—we were going to be living together. We were going to have to spend our days together, eating and sleeping under the same roof.

Though my confusion hadn't settled, for now I decided I'd organize my belongings. I put my clothes away in the closet and stored the dinnerware I'd brought in the kitchen cabinets. I had only brought enough things for one person, utterly convinced as I was that I would be alone, so I would have to buy things for Takkun.

After taking care of various tasks, it quickly became evening. Now that my clothes and general items had been taken care of, I needed to figure out what we'd be eating. There was a refrigerator in the unit, but it was naturally empty at the moment, so Takkun and I headed out to buy groceries for dinner together.

“Wow, you're going to be interning at Lilystart?”

We were chatting as we walked along the unfamiliar roads together. Our destination was the closest grocery store in the area—it was the first place that'd popped up when I looked up stores in the area, and it was roughly a ten-minute walk away from the condo. Of course, it was our first time going, but it wasn't too complicated of a route to get there, so I didn't think we'd get lost even if we were a bit distracted by our conversation.

“You know the company, Miss Ayako?”

“Yeah, we work a lot with them too.”

Lilystart was an up-and-coming startup that provided web and app services. In recent years, they'd launched a manga app, which led to them working closely with Light Ship.

Oh, right, I remember hearing that it was founded by Yumemi's friend.

"I didn't know that was the kind of industry you were trying to get into," I said.

"It's not like I was going for this exactly, but I did have a vague idea about wanting to work in something web-related."

"Is it okay for you to take several months off from college though?"

"It's no problem. I get credits from this internship, and I've already gotten most of my credits for this academic year during first term. I do have to go back for exams during my internship for some reason though."

Oh, that's right. Some colleges give credit for internships. Takkun had also been taking school seriously since his first year and had been taking all the courses he'd needed to, so skipping some lectures for a bit would probably be no big deal for him.

"I'm impressed, Takkun."

"It's nothing—this is normal."

Our little chat ended as we arrived at the grocery store. Takkun grabbed a shopping cart for us, and I slotted a basket into the opening. If this had been our local grocery store, I could have let my skills as a longtime homemaker shine and shopped efficiently, but there was no way for me to take the lead somewhere I'd never been before.

We slowly made our way through the store as we looked around. "We'll have to buy things for breakfast. Do you have any requests, Takkun? Like, do you prefer bread or rice?"

"I don't mind either."

"I see. Um..."

"Oh, I'm sorry. That wasn't a very helpful response. Um, then... If I had to choose, I prefer bread."

"Okay. I prefer bread for breakfast too, so let's do that. We'll have to get something to spread on the bread too. We have a toaster in the condo, and I brought my favorite frying pan, so..."

“What about laundry detergent?” Takkun asked.

“Oh, I don’t have any. We should buy some later.”

And so, we discussed the various things we might need as we continued shopping. It was a strange feeling to be discussing future meals with Takkun. We had gone shopping together a few times in the past, but this was different from those times—today we were buying the things we needed for our life together. *It’s like we’re—*

“We’re kind of like newlyweds,” Takkun said bashfully. It felt like he had read my mind, and my heart skipped a beat.

“J-Jeez, what are you even saying, Takkun?”

“Sorry, the thought just popped into my mind.”

“You’re moving so fast! We only just started dating... Oh, that’s not what I meant though! I don’t mean that you’re moving fast because we’re definitely getting married in the future or anything like that, but it’s not like I’m saying I’m against that either, just...”

“I-It’s okay. I get what you’re trying to say.”

We both stood still, completely red in the face. Eventually, I cleared my throat to get things back on track. “Regardless of whether we seem like newlyweds, it’s nice to casually go out like this together,” I said. “I don’t think we could just go to the local grocery store together back home like this.”

“Yeah, I would feel kind of self-conscious back home,” Takkun said, nodding with a nervous chuckle.

We weren’t dating openly yet. It wasn’t like we were doing everything we could to keep it under wraps, but I couldn’t help but worry about what our neighbors might think.

Takkun was of course already twenty, so there was nothing illegal about us dating. Still, it didn’t feel right to be announcing it. After all, it wasn’t normal for a single mother in her thirties like me to be dating a twenty-year-old college student. No matter what, people would think we’re strange.

I understood that this couldn’t be kept a secret forever, but for now, we had

decided to avoid doing anything that would make us needlessly stand out. Even during our week together before I'd come to Tokyo, we hadn't flirted in public.

We'd gone on a date to see the *Love Kaiser* summer film, but that had been our local movie theater. I hadn't known who might be watching, so we'd ended up acting a bit like strangers on that date. *Well, a woman in her thirties being lovey-dovey with her boyfriend in public is pretty cringey in and of itself...*

"Oh, Takkun, eggs are on a special discount today! We get one pack per person. Yay, we're so lucky!"

"Yes, we are..."

Just as I was about to excitedly make my way to where the eggs were, I suddenly felt a squeeze on my hand. Takkun, who had one hand on the cart, was using his free hand to hold mine.

"Huh?" I turned to look at him, shocked, and he looked away from me as if nothing had happened. Despite his demeanor, his hand was firmly grasping mine and wouldn't let go.



“Hey, Takkun... We can’t do this here.”

“It would be bad if we got separated.”

“I don’t think we’ll get separated... It’s not that busy.”

“It’s fine. It’s not like there’s anyone we know here.”

Takkun seemed to have a “What happens on vacation stays on vacation” kind of mindset about it. *It’s true that there probably isn’t anyone here who knows us, but still...*

“This is a grocery store, you know?” I pointed out. It was one thing if we were on a date somewhere far from home, but holding hands during a normal activity like this?! “If we hold hands while grocery shopping, we’ll seem like a couple who are excited that they just started living together!”

“That *is* exactly what we are,” Takkun said, completely calm. *Th-That’s right! We’re a couple that just started living together! I’m on cloud nine right now!*

“But if you really don’t want me to, I’ll stop.”

“I-It’s not like I don’t want to...”

“Then let’s keep holding hands,” Takkun said, smiling as if he had won. He maintained his grip and began walking again.

I felt a bit defeated, like I had been talked into going along with him. *It’s so unfair... It’s really unfair of him to say “I’ll stop if you want me to.” I mean, of course I don’t want him to...*

“You’re a surprisingly skilled manipulator, Takkun...”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing!”

And so, we continued shopping for groceries and daily necessities. Although our hands separated at times, we’d go back to holding hands whenever we had a chance. Even on the walk home after we’d finished shopping, we kept holding hands. *I really do have my head in the clouds... How embarrassing.*

Since it was our special first day living together, I had considered preparing a

complicated meal, but after we'd bought the things we'd needed along with our groceries, it had gotten pretty late. Because of that, our dinner was a simple meal of prepared side dishes from the grocery store.

Later on, when Takkun was taking a bath, I called Miu. I wanted to check in on her, and I also had some news to report of my own.

"No way! So you're going to live with Taku?!" Miu yelled in shock after I explained the situation to her. I'd had a baseless hunch that she might've been in cahoots with Yumemi and had known about the plan, but it seemed that she had also been in the dark. "Huh, I see... That's so funny. I'd expect no less from Miss Yumemi. She operates on a completely different level." Miu started to sound less shocked and more impressed. "Taku's pretty incredible too. I was worried about you two myself, you know? You finally started dating, and then you were suddenly going long-distance. I'd thought it would be really difficult and I'd have to come up with ways to step up as your daughter and be a bridge that'd keep you two connected, but..." Miu chuckled. "I guess that was unnecessary!" Miu sounded like she was genuinely having fun with my situation. "You're so lucky. Living with your boyfriend sounds so fun."

"Don't be ridiculous..."

"What? Aren't you happy about this?"

"I-It's not that I'm not happy, it's just... It's so sudden that I couldn't mentally prepare for it."

"You're always such a handful, you know that, mom? You should just be excited that you get to experience newlywed life early."

"N-Newlywed?!" *Jeez, Miu and Takkun keep bringing the conversation in that direction!* "It's too early to think about that. We've only just started dating."

"I mean, if this were a college-aged couple living together, sure I'd say it's too soon, but...do you know how old you are, mom?"

"Urgh."

"You're thirty-[REDACTED], right?"

"U-Urgh..."

“You’re going to be thirty-[REDACTED] next year.” All I could do was keep groaning in response. “It’s not too early. In fact, you’re at an age where it would be fine if you just got married tomorrow.”

“Enough! It’s fine! Leave me alone!” I aggressively put an end to that topic of conversation, even though my daughter was being extremely realistic. It was pathetic of me. I collected myself and asked, “How are you doing? Did you go to school? Did you have dinner already?”

“I went to school and I ate a proper dinner. You worry too much.”

“I can’t help it. I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine! Grandma’s here,” Miu said, sounding exasperated. While I was on assignment in Tokyo, Miu’s grandmother—my mother—was watching her. Currently, she was living with Miu in our house. “Is mom near you, by any chance?”

“You’re in the clear, I’m in my room right now. Grandma’s downstairs watching a K-drama.”

“I see, that’s good,” I said, letting out a sigh of relief. “In case I needed to make it clear, the fact that I’m living with Takkun has to be a secret. You can’t tell mom, okay?”

“I won’t—you didn’t have to tell me.”

“Okay, that’s good to hear.”

“How long are you going to keep it a secret? You’re going to have to tell her eventually. Isn’t this just putting things off for the future?”

“I-I know, you’re right. I’ll find the right time to tell her.” I knew I was just prolonging the issue, but I couldn’t do it right now. It was already a big deal that I was dating a college student, but I couldn’t add on that one thing leading to another had caused us to start living together. *I need to keep quiet about this. I’m sure there’ll be a better opportunity for me to bring it up.*

“Speaking of which, have you told Taku’s parents that you’re dating?”

“I have...”

It was just three days ago that I’d reported to Tomomi that Takkun and I were

going to date. Tomomi had been giving me advice for a while, so I couldn't not tell her. I wanted to be formal and tell Takkun's father face-to-face too, but Tomomi casually said, "Oh no, it's fine. There's no need to be so formal about it. It's not like you're getting married." Thanks to that, even though I hadn't done the usual "meeting the parents" thing, I figured Takkun's father probably learned the news through Tomomi.

I imagined he wouldn't be against it since Takkun had apparently already sought his parents' approval to date me. Though I hadn't been directly told so, I was probably a family-approved girlfriend.

"I see," Miu said. "I guess Taku's family already approved of him dating you. So, about you two living together now..."

"Takkun had already discussed it with them ahead of time..."

"Ha ha, I wouldn't expect any less from Taku." Miu seemed so impressed that she was maybe even a bit put off by how well prepared Takkun was.

According to Takkun, he had already told his parents about us living together ahead of time and had received their approval. Surely some parents wouldn't be happy with their child immediately moving in with their significant other after they had just started dating, but apparently, the Aterazawas felt that rather than have their son be in Tokyo all alone, they'd feel better if he was with me. *They trust me so much! I should probably call them...* Although it would be after the fact, as an adult and as a proper member of society, I wanted to be sure I eventually sat down with my boyfriend's parents and discussed my living with their son.

"So, what's Taku up to right now?"

"He's taking a bath."

"A bath, huh?" Miu fell silent for a moment before adding, "It all feels so real now." She sounded a bit sentimental.

"Wh-What do you mean by that?"

"I just mean that it really feels like you're living together."

"Ugh..."

“You’re going to be living together for three whole months. Two people who just started dating living under one roof, spending each and every day together...”

“Wh-What are you trying to get at?”

“Hey mom,” Miu began, her tone extremely serious. “Can I name your child?”

“You’re skipping way ahead!” *Suddenly she wants naming rights?! I think some very important steps are being skipped over!*

“I mean, that kind of stuff *will* happen, won’t it?” Miu was completely calm, in contrast to my completely flustered self. She was really gutsy, like she was prepared for all kinds of things. “If you time it right, maybe you’ll find out that you’re pregnant after you come home in three months!”

“Why would I do something like that?! Jeez, none of that stuff is going to happen... We’re not here to have fun.”

“You say that, but children are a gift from God, right? Who knows what might happen? With two young people living together... Oh, my bad, it’s not *two* young people.”

“Don’t apologize for that! It’s more painful for you to correct yourself!” I complained, jabbing back. “A-Anyways, you don’t have to think about unnecessary things. We haven’t discussed things like children at all yet.”

“I see—so you just wanna spend your time together lovey-doveying it up for now.”

“I didn’t say that!” After yelling a good night at her, I hung up on Miu. I had called out of concern for *her*, but we’d ended up talking about me for most of the call.

Jeez, Miu really is something. It’s way too soon to think about kids... N-Not that I don’t want them—I’m sure my and Takkun’s child would be cute. Considering my age, it would be better to have a baby sooner than later. They say it’s difficult to have your first child past thirty... No, wait. It’s too early to be thinking about this! We haven’t even discussed marriage, let alone children. We’ve never even done that thing that makes babies even once...

“Miss Ayako.”

“Eek!” I had been lost in thought, so Takkun’s voice surprised me and made me jump up.

“A-Are you okay...?”

“Takkun...? I-I’m fine, it’s nothing!” I turned around and gulped. The moment I saw him, my heart skipped a beat.

“Thank you for letting me use the bath first.”

“I-It’s fine. I’m the one who said you should go first since I wanted to make a phone call...” I couldn’t look him in the eye. Since he had just taken a bath, Takkun looked like...someone who had just gotten out of the bath. His hair was damp, and his face was slightly flushed. He was dressed in simple pajamas. He wasn’t even naked, but for some reason I couldn’t help but feel extremely aware of his presence, of his body...

“Agh!” Jeez, it’s all Miu’s fault for bringing up strange things! She kept talking about pregnancy and children, so my head is in that space right now and I keep looking at him like that! Ugh! “I-I’m going to go wash up then!” I quickly grabbed a change of clothes and my bath towel before running to the living room, then the bathroom.

But once I got to the bathroom, there wasn’t anywhere else for me to run to. After talking with Takkun today, it had been in the back of my mind. We were cohabitating—living together. We were a couple, eating and sleeping under the same roof. In other words, Takkun and I would be sleeping in the same room together tonight. I wasn’t so naive as to not know what that meant—after all, I was at an age where it wouldn’t have been strange for me to have a child or two.

During our lovey-dovey week before I’d come to Tokyo, we’d spent a lot of quality time together to make up for the time we’d be apart in advance, but we’d never taken that final step.

It wasn’t like there was a specific reason that’d kept us from doing so—it’d just never seemed like we were heading in that direction. Though our week

together had been very lovey-dovey, we'd met up during the day for most of it, and all that'd happen was Takkun would come over to my house and we'd spend time together. And, I mean, *that* wasn't really something to be done in broad daylight, you know?

We had gone on a date out somewhere just once, but all we'd done was watch the *Love Kaiser* summer movie and come home. We'd left in the morning and come home before dinner—it was like a date that middle schoolers would go on. That's why my relationship with Takkun was still clean...

"Th-Thanks for waiting," I said. I had finished bathing and drying my hair before returning to the living room. Takkun was sitting on the couch, and he blushed a little upon seeing me. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing, just... It's nice seeing you in your pajamas."

"Urgh..." As usual, Takkun very honestly complimented me, even though it embarrassed him to do so. "D-Don't tease me. Jeez..."

"I'm not teasing you. You look nice. Really cute."

All I could let out was a whine. His compliments were too much, and I was speechless. *Urgh... Do I really look cute in my pajamas? These are an old set that I always wear at home. If I'd known we'd be living together, I would've bought some cute new ones!*

It wasn't just my pajamas. If I had known we would be living together, I'd have been able to prepare some nice underwear too...

Ugh, what should I do...? I was completely under the impression that I was going to be living alone, so I only have my boring underwear that I usually wear. I do have nice ones at home, like the special lingerie that I secretly bought when I started thinking about Takkun romantically, but I left them behind!

"Um, what would you like to do?" Takkun asked, snapping me out of my internal agonizing. He sounded a bit troubled. "We could watch some TV."

"Th-That sounds good. Let's watch something," I said, nodding as I sat on the couch, leaving about a person's worth of space between us.

During our lovey-dovey week, I had been very cuddly and touchy with him,

but I couldn't do it today. I couldn't get any closer to him. After all, we were both in our pajamas—outfits that signified that all there was left to do was sleep. I couldn't keep my thoughts from running wild in this situation.

Some serialized show was playing on the screen, but I wasn't paying attention to what was going on. My head was filled with various thoughts. *I-It's fine. If it comes to it, I'm sure things will work out! I prepped myself in the bath, and as long as the lights are off, he shouldn't see my underwear. I didn't bring any of those, but with how serious Takkun is, I'm sure he has some. Yeah, that's right. It's not something I need to think so deeply about. It's nothing weird, and it's not bad. Everyone does it. I mean, that's how I was brought into this world. I mean, it's one thing if we were in high school, but there's no reason for a woman in her thirties like me to turn him down after everything's been set up.*

"...yako. Miss Ayako."

"What? Huh? Wh-What is it?!" I quickly turned to see Takkun looking at me with concern.

"The show ended."

"Huh...? Oh, yeah, you're right."

"Are you okay? You seemed a little out of it."

"I-I'm okay, I'm fine! Ha ha, maybe I'm just tired. Today was a bit hectic."

"Oh, that's true," Takkun said with a nervous smile before quickly getting up off the couch. "Well then, it's a bit early, but why don't we head to bed?"

I felt my heart beating loudly in my chest. "Y-Yes, let's go to bed."

"You start working tomorrow, so it's probably best that we don't stay up too late," Takkun pointed out.

Don't stay up too late?! Does he mean he wants to start early and end early to make sure we get enough sleep?! H-He's really planned this out!

"I prepared the bed while you were in the bath," Takkun said.

He's already prepared the bed?! I knew it! He's so well prepared! Takkun totally wants to do it!

I was about to overheat from excitement and nervousness, but Takkun seemed completely calm as he opened the door to the bedroom. Inside the room were a twin bed and a futon mattress. The futon had been laid out right next to the bed.

I had checked the bedroom when organizing my belongings earlier, so I knew that there was a bed here. *But why is there a futon laid out? I thought we were going to share the bed... Wait, is this...? Is Takkun the type of guy who wants to sleep separately after the deed is done?*

“Miss Ayako...” Takkun called out to me as I stood frozen in the doorway. “You’re wary of me, aren’t you?”

“W-Wary?” I asked back.

“You probably think that I might try to move our relationship forward today...” he said with a worried look.

“What?! N-Not at all...”

Takkun fell silent.

“It’s not that I was worried about that... Well, that’s not totally true, well um... I was a little worried about it, maybe...” I reflexively tried to come up with an excuse, but his straightforward stare overwhelmed me, and I couldn’t help but admit the truth. It seemed pointless to try to keep up a front—his quiet stare felt like it was piercing the depths of my heart.

“I knew it. You’ve been acting strange since earlier.”

“I-I’m sorry... But, it’s not that I don’t want to! It’s just... I’m really nervous...” I said, stumbling over my words.

“You don’t have to worry,” Takkun said with a gentle smile. “I have no intention of doing that today.”

“Huh...?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to, but...I don’t want to undermine the significance of it.”

“Undermine...?”

“When couples move in together, it might be considered normal to do those sorts of things, but our situation isn’t exactly normal.” I was listening intently as Takkun gave his reasoning. “This wasn’t a mutual decision, and you basically agreed to it after the fact. I don’t think it’s right for me to use this situation and the current flow of things to push for that.”

“Takkun...”

“I want it to be the best it can be and for it to be a nice memory. That’s why I want to wait to do it until you feel you’re ready,” he said with a kind smile, staring right into my eyes. His words had soothed me, and I felt like I was being wrapped up in his kindness. Just like that, my heart was filled with warmth—I’d been panicking, with all kinds of thoughts racing through my mind, but now my worries were all melting away.

“Okay... Thank you, Takkun.”

After that, we began getting ready for bed, preparing to sleep in our separate places. Takkun was going to sleep on the futon, and I would take the bed.

“Miss Ayako, do you prefer sleeping in complete darkness, or do you prefer having a little bit of light on?”

“I prefer having some light.”

“Me too. Apparently, having a small light on makes for better sleep quality.” As we talked, Takkun turned the light down to the dimmest setting. Now that the room was dim, we each climbed onto our mattresses.

“Good night then, Miss Ayako.”

“Good night, Takkun.” After exchanging our good nights, I closed my eyes.

But...I couldn’t fall asleep that easily. I was going to start working tomorrow. It would be my first time going to the office, so I couldn’t be late. I had an important meeting in the afternoon as well, so I needed my rest. Yet despite all of that...I couldn’t fall asleep.

Various thoughts swirled around in my mind. I was grateful for Takkun’s consideration, and truthfully, I’d been relieved to hear him say he didn’t want to do *it* today. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to, but having no experience, I

couldn't help but feel scared and anxious. Because of that, I'd been a little wary of Takkun...but he'd sensed that in me and had been very kind about it. *He's so nice, and he really cares for me. He takes our relationship really seriously.* After seeing his kindness and sincerity on display again, my feelings for him grew even stronger.

All of that said, for some reason...even though there was happiness filling my chest, there was a small, very tiny part of me that twinged with sadness.

Chapter 4: Work and Jealousy



When I woke up, I was in Takkun's arms, and he was naked.

"Huh...? What is... Whaaat?!" The moment my half-awake mind understood the situation I was in, I let out a scream and shot up.

I rubbed my eyes and took another look. *Okay, it looks like I wasn't just seeing things.* Sure enough, those were his wide shoulders, his muscular chest, and his faintly visible six-pack—his nude torso. If the covers slipped off of him, I figured I'd be able to see all the parts I shouldn't.

There was no mistaking it: Takkun was naked, and he was asleep next to me. Also, by all accounts, we seemed to have been sleeping together until just moments ago.

"Wh-Why?! Why are we both in the bed...? Why is Takkun naked...? Wait, huh?! I-I'm naked too?!" I'd been so stuck on Takkun's nude body peeking out of the covers that it'd taken me a while to notice that I was naked myself.

We're not wearing anything! We don't have anything covering us! We're completely nude! Both Takkun and I are in our birthday suits!

"Wh-What is this? What's going on...?"

"Mm... Miss Ayako?" Takkun woke up amidst my extreme confusion. He sat up, making his entire upper body visible. I reflexively covered my chest with the covers. "You're awake already?" he asked. "Good morning."

"G-Good morning... Wait, that's not what I wanted to say! What is this? Wh-What's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"Wh-Why are we sleeping together?! Not only that, but why are we naked?" I asked, flustered.

"It just kind of happened last night," Takkun said, completely composed.

“It ‘just kind of happened’?!” Are you kidding me?! After how things ended, this happened?! What was the point of that conversation we had before going to bed?! After discussing it, things “just kind of happened” in the end?!

“You were so cute, Miss Ayako.”

“Wh—?!”

“At first, you were so embarrassed you were beet red, but once things got going you became so passionate... By the end, you were proactively—”

“R-Really?! Was I really like that...?” I still couldn’t fully grasp what had happened. Suddenly, Takkun embraced me, pressing his naked body against mine. Various parts of our bodies were coming into contact, and things were heading in a dangerous direction. *“Huh? Wh-Whaaat?!”*

“I’m sorry. I just can’t hold back after looking at you, Miss Ayako.”

“H-Hold on, wait... W-We can’t, Takkun! I need to go to work today, we can’t be doing this so early in the morning— Mm! W-We can’t...”

Takkun ignored my resistance, and his hand began softly rubbing against my skin. Each time he kissed my neck, it felt like there was electricity running through my body, making me go limp and unable to resist. His large, muscular hands made their way around my body, and...

It was at that point that I woke up—for real this time. I was filled with so much shame and self-loathing that I wanted to die. *Wh-What kind of dream was that?! I yelled internally as I let out a pained groan. That was embarrassing! So extremely embarrassing! I can’t believe I’d have such a lewd dream... I-It’s like I’m sexually frustrated or something!*

What was most embarrassing, though, was the fact that the entire dream was pretty ambiguous. It was supposed to have been a dirty dream, but the details were all vague. None of the important events had actually played out—all the parts where things would’ve actually happened had been cut from view, like a film for teenagers.

I-I mean, I can’t help it! I’ve never done it before! I’ve never seen it before! I’ve never even seen Takkun’s... Well, technically I have. We took a bath together in

the past! But what I saw back then was like a little flower bud. Takkun's is probably a lot more manly now...

"Hold on! What am I even thinking about?! Jeez!" I shook my head and took my train of thought to task. "That's right, nothing could've happened. We slept separately..."

"Mm... Miss Ayako...?" As I mumbled to myself in bed, trying to shake away the intense imagery stuck in my mind, Takkun woke up and slowly sat up on his futon beside the bed. I was worried for a moment, but he was of course in his pajamas. There was no way he could've been naked.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did I wake you up, Takkun?"

"It's all right. Now's a good time to be getting up," Takkun said as he checked his phone, which he had left next to his pillow.

I checked the time as well and saw that it was 6:50. I had set my alarm for seven, so just as he'd said, it was a good time to be getting up.

"Sorry for being noisy, I just had a weird dream..."

"A weird dream?"

"Oh..."

"You seemed really flustered. What kind of dream was it?"

"I-It's nothing! No big deal! It really wasn't anything... I-I already forgot what happened in my dream. It's all gone," I said, desperately feigning a lack of memory as I got out of bed. We got ready and prepared breakfast together. We made a simple meal comprising toast, sunny-side up eggs, and yogurt.



We sat across from each other at the table and began eating together. This was the breakfast of a couple that lived together.

“You like soy sauce on your eggs, right, Takkun?”

“Yes. You do too, right?”

“Yup,” I responded. We each took turns pouring soy sauce onto our eggs.

We hadn’t been dating for that long, but we had known each other for a very long time. We’d eaten together many times, and each of us somewhat understood what the other liked. For some reason, however, something felt different from our past meals.

“There’s something that feels so new about having breakfast with you like this...”

“I feel the same way. We’ve eaten breakfast together a few times, but usually Miu was with us.”

“I think this is our first time having breakfast together alone,” I said.

Takkun nodded in agreement. “It could be that there’s something special about having breakfast with your significant other,” he said.

“Something special?”

“It’s normal for a couple who just started dating to eat lunch or dinner together, and most people even go out to lunch or dinner with people they aren’t dating. But breakfast is something you rarely eat with people other than your family, and even for couples, it’s not something you usually do until your relationship reaches a certain point...”

“I see what you mean,” I said with a nod. I related to what he was describing. “Eating breakfast together means you spent the night together. A couple spending the night together means... Oh!” I stopped in the middle of what I was saying, but it was already too late. Takkun was blushing, and my own face was probably pretty red as well.

“I’m sorry for bringing up a weird topic this early,” Takkun apologized.

“N-No, no, it’s fine! I-I’m sorry too...” *I really fumbled that one... Takkun had*

skillfully beat around the bush to describe things in a romantic way, and I totally just put it in no uncertain terms and made it vulgar...

Despite the mild awkwardness, we enjoyed our first slightly special breakfast since becoming a couple.

I had been relaxed, thinking that I didn't need to rush since I had woken up early, but I ended up getting ready at the last minute—it was that classic trope where you weren't actually fine when you thought you were.

Shoot, this is bad. I can't be late on my first day. I'd been planning to leave early since it's my first time going to the office from the condo and I'd expected to get lost, and yet...

I changed into my suit and did my makeup in the bathroom, then popped back into the kitchen. Takkun appeared to have finished doing the dishes, and he was drying his hands.

"Sorry for leaving the dishes for you, Takkun."

"It's no problem. I don't have any plans today, so this is the least I could do," he said with a smile. Takkun's internship wasn't starting until tomorrow. "I'll do what I can in terms of chores and organizing our things. Also, I'm going to go buy things we need, so please let me know if there's anything you want."

"Thank you. I really appreciate that," I said as I trotted to the entryway, where I put on my pumps. Takkun also followed to see me off. "I'll be heading out then."

"See you later," Takkun said.

"Hee hee..." I couldn't help but giggle.

"Is something wrong?"

"It's just strange. I never thought that you'd be seeing me off like this one day."

"That's true. It is a bit strange," Takkun said, nodding and laughing as well.

It really is something. I wonder if this is going to eventually feel normal after three months of living together, or maybe after we start actually living together.

This slightly embarrassing situation will one day become my daily routine...

“Um, Miss Ayako...” Takkun stopped laughing and suddenly had a serious look on his face. “Can we do what couples who live together usually do in the morning?”

“What couples do in the morning...?” I tilted my head in confusion, but after thinking for a moment I quickly realized what it was. “Y-You mean...?”

“Well, um, like a goodbye kiss...” His voice grew quieter as he spoke, but I clearly heard the important part. My face felt like it was on fire.

“Oh, um... I-I didn’t know you were interested in doing those sorts of things, Takkun...”

“I guess if I had to pick whether I was interested or not, I’d say that I have a normal amount of interest.”

“I-I see... I didn’t know that... So, you have a normal amount of interest...”

“Do you not want to, Miss Ayako?”

“I-It’s not that I don’t want to...”

“Then...”

“W-Wait! Hold on! I-Isn’t it embarrassing?! It’s like we’re extremely in love or something. Doesn’t it make us seem a little overeager?”

“I think it’s fine if we seem that way,” Takkun said. He added that no one was looking, then grasped my shoulders and slowly brought his face closer to mine. It felt a bit aggressive, but I couldn’t really complain about it... I stood there, not resisting a single bit as I closed my eyes. Eventually, our lips came into contact.

This wasn’t the first time we’d kissed. The first time was when I’d lost control, and we had kissed a few times during our lovey-dovey week. Despite all that, I still wasn’t used to it. My heart would beat like crazy, like it had lost control, and my chest would fill with a sugary sweet sensation that made my whole body feel like it was melting into a puddle.

Our eyes met after the kiss, and we both looked away from each other.

“You’re right, it *is* a bit embarrassing. It feels like we’re up to no good.”

“I-I told you!”

“Ha ha, I’m sorry,” Takkun chuckled before looking straight at me again.
“Have a good day.”

“Thanks, you too.”

After we said goodbye to each other, I headed out. My face was still hot, and the sensation of his lips lingered, making me space out. *Can I really do my job after experiencing so much happiness this early in the day?* I thought with an internal sigh.

I was on cloud nine after the lovey-dovey morning I’d had, but after getting onto a crowded train, my mind quickly switched into corporate slave mode.

It’s so crowded... It’s so uncomfortable in a crowded train... The train was both physically and mentally uncomfortable. As someone from the Tohoku region who rarely took the train and mostly traveled by car, the crowded commuter trains of Tokyo were truly uncomfortable.

The peak rush hour for commuters had passed, however, so it wasn’t so crowded that I was being crushed by the other passengers. If an office worker who commuted on an actually completely full train every day saw me complaining about the train I was on, they might laugh, but I couldn’t help it—it was torture.

After my blissful send-off and hellish commute by train, I finally arrived at work. Light Ship was on the fifth floor of an office building shared with multiple other businesses. I’d been here several times before, but it was my first time coming to the office in the morning like this. *I wonder what my days will be like for the next three months.*

“Okay then...” I steeled my resolve and stepped into the building. It was time to start working.

First, I had to say hello to people. It was my first day working in a new place, so I had to make sure to follow social etiquette. I greeted people I knew, introduced myself to new people, and said hello to those I’d been in virtual meetings with but had never met in person.

By the time I'd finished, my morning was already over. And just as I was thinking about going out for lunch...

"Hey, Ayako." I ran into Yumemi, who'd arrived late since she was an executive. Well, I say she was late, but our company was quite lax when it came to what time you arrived at the office. It has to be said, though, that this woman right here, our president, was probably the person who took advantage of this freedom-filled work culture the most. "Are you heading out to lunch?" she asked.

"Yes."

"All right then. Let's go together."

"If you're treating me, then I'd love to."

And so, it was quickly decided that we'd have lunch together. It was strange of Yumemi to go out to lunch immediately after showing up to work, but I was happy that she was paying for my meal, so I decided not to bring it up.

"How have you been doing?" Yumemi asked while we took the elevator down to the first floor.

"I haven't done much work yet, so I'm fine. Just saying hello to people took up my morning."

"I'm not asking about work. How's your romantic life living together with Takumi?"

Her question almost made me do a spit take, and I wasn't even drinking anything. She looked at me like she was having the time of her life.

"I would love to hear your thoughts now that you've gotten to spend a night with your young boyfriend," she continued. "Despite all the experience I have, I've never been with a man ten years younger than me."

"I have nothing to say! It was normal!"

"Come on. There's no way nothing happened after a new couple spent a night together in the same room."

"Nothing happened, and even if something did, I wouldn't tell you."

“Wow! Are you sure you want to take that attitude with your landlord?”

“Even landlords don’t have the right to intrude on a tenant’s privacy.”

“Okay, fine then. I guess it’s more of an after-dark topic anyway. One of these days we’ll go out for drinks and I’ll have you tell me all the details.”

Her horrifying statement sent a shiver down my spine. The moment the elevator reached the first floor, I hurried out like I was running from her. Yumemi just chuckled as she followed behind me.

“Speaking of Takumi, what’s he up to today?”

“He’s at home. He said he’ll be taking care of chores and going shopping.”

“Wow, what a useful man. Maybe I should have him come to my place sometime.”

“Not a chance. Takkun isn’t a housekeeper.”

“Come on. Why don’t you let me rent his services every now and then? It’s been such a pain to clean and do laundry on my own these days.”

“No means no. Jeez, you really are something, Yumemi...” I was about to lecture my boss for her negligent lifestyle, but something she said was stuck in my mind. *Cleaning and...laundry? Takkun is going to take care of all the chores on his own today, which means...* “Ah!” I let out a strange squeak and stopped in place upon making a terrible realization. I ignored Yumemi, who seemed surprised, and quickly pulled out my smartphone.

“Hello? Is something wrong, Miss Ayako?”

“T-Takkun?! Where are you right now?”

“Where...? I’m at home. I’ve finished most of the things I wanted to do here, so I was thinking about going out to get lunch and shop.”

“Y-You finished...? Does that mean you did laundry?”

“Yes. I just finished putting everything out to dry,” he quickly responded. I felt my face tensing up. “The weather’s great today, so I wanted to get everything out early.”

“Um, Takkun... I’m really glad that you did the laundry and I’m grateful for all

your hard work, but, um...what did you do with my underwear?"

"W-Well..." Takkun sounded clearly troubled. After a moment of silence, he responded. "Um, I washed it."

I felt like I was going to fall to the ground. It was over—it was all over for me. I'd realized it too late—the underwear I had worn all day yesterday was still in the laundry basket in the changing area. When I'd thrown it in there, I'd been so focused on it being our first night living together that I hadn't considered who might be doing the laundry.

Wh-What do I do? Takkun washed my underwear. He washed it, which means he's totally seen the bra and panties I was wearing all day yesterday, and he's touched them...

"I-I'm sorry. I thought a lot about what I should do. I considered it might not be right for me to wash them without asking, but it felt weird to wash everything else and just avoid your underwear. It felt like if I didn't wash it, it'd seem like I was thinking too hard about it and that would've been creepy in its own way."

I wasn't sure how to react. "I-I promise I didn't do anything weird!" he insisted. "I tried my best to avoid looking at it too much, and I minimized contact as much as I could! I looked up the right way to wash delicates too—I made sure to put your bra in a mesh laundry bag so it didn't get deformed. I was also mindful about how I hung them up so passersby can't see them..."

"O-Okay, it's fine..." I tried to seem composed, but I was taking quite a bit of mental damage. It was embarrassing enough that he saw my underwear, but he'd even washed it. There was a complicated mixture of embarrassment and regret swirling inside of me. "I'm sorry you had to wash my underwear. You probably didn't want to."

"No way! I wouldn't be against something like that! I would happily wash your underwear every day, Miss Ayako!"

I fell silent. *Um. What does he mean by that? No, never mind, it's probably not that deep. It would be normal for your boyfriend to wash your underwear if you lived together. That's probably what he means.*

I let out a heavy sigh after hanging up the phone, completely exhausted.

“Aww, what a pure and sweet home life you two have going,” Yumemi teased. “It brings back memories. It’s been ages since I was getting embarrassed over little things like my underwear.”

“Leave me alone...” I snapped back, but Yumemi just laughed.

“Well, you’re clearly enjoying all the fun and awkwardness of living with your boyfriend, but it’s about time we switch gears.” Her tone suddenly changed. It was like she was trying to drive her point home, even trying to taunt me a bit. “After lunch will be our first scenario reading.”

“Understood,” I said, nodding. My mind had been unfocused due to my embarrassment from earlier, but it went sharp in an instant.

Yumemi was right. First thing this afternoon, we had a meeting about the anime. It was time for the work I’d come all the way to Tokyo for.

KIMIOSA: I Want to Be Your Childhood Friend, often shortened to *KIMIOSA*, was a light novel written by Hakushi Shirando, an author I was in charge of. It was a romantic comedy, and the series currently had five volumes published. It’d been quite popular since it began, and an anime adaptation was already in the works. That information wasn’t going to be public for a while, but anime was usually being planned years before the public got any information.

The reason I’d been sent to Tokyo on my own—or rather, with my boyfriend—on temporary transfer was to give my everything to the *KIMIOSA* anime adaptation as the editor in charge of the series.

My task for today was to participate in the scenario reading. This was a meeting where all kinds of people involved in the anime, including the production supervisor, the scriptwriter, the producer, the director, and the editors and rights holders from the publishers of the source material would gather and discuss the current draft of the script.

When an anime adaptation was greenlit and the project fully got going, these scenario readings would take place almost every week. To put it simply, these meetings were incredibly important—they were serious events that greatly

affected the quality of an anime.

For an anime with a light novel as its source material, like with *KIMIOSA*, the role of the editor in charge—namely, me—at the scenario reading was to represent the publisher and speak on behalf of the author. Ms. Shirando, the author of the source material, lived in a rural area and couldn't participate in these weekly meetings, so it was up to me to advocate for the interests of the original work and Ms. Shirando herself. I had to propose various ideas, hear out others' proposals, and at times even fight back against the people on the anime side of the production.

Having representatives from all the various industries gather and argue in this way was a means of ensuring this large-scale project was ultimately successful. These meetings allowed people in all kinds of positions to put forward the ideas they believed would work best and fight for them, and they also allowed these same people to cooperate to solve problems that currently had no solution.

It was no wonder, then, that scenario readings were very heated and very exciting. They were worth participating in—they felt fulfilling, and I really felt like I was doing work being involved in them.

Despite my enthusiasm, scenario readings were also, of course, incredibly exhausting.

"I-I'm home..." It was past seven in the evening. I had finally gotten home, and I was completely fatigued.

"Welcome back. A-Are you okay?" Takkun seemed worried as he greeted me at the door.

"Yeah, somehow..." I took off my shoes and headed inside.

The scenario reading had started at two in the afternoon. At first, I'd anticipated it would take around two hours, but before I knew it, the meeting had been extended another two hours. The meeting had ended up going for four hours straight, until it'd finally ended at six in the evening. We had planned for a laid-back meeting where we'd just introduce ourselves since it was the first meeting of the project, but once it'd gotten started, the discussions became quite intense.

I'd been in the thick of the meeting as the representative for the source material, so I had basically talked for four hours straight with my mind working at full capacity the entire time. *I'm tired. I'm just...so tired.*

"Sorry for getting back so late... You must be hungry. I'll make something right away."

"I've already prepared dinner."

"What...?" I turned my attention back to Takkun and realized that he was wearing an apron. I headed to the living room and saw food laid out on the table. There was pasta carbonara and a salad topped with tofu. I'd messaged him when I would be getting back when I'd gotten on the train, so he must've timed things for the food to be ready as soon as I got home.

"Wow, dinner's already made!" I was deeply touched. *This is incredible. I never thought I could come home to dinner being ready after a long, exhausting day!*

"The bath's ready too, if you'd prefer to wash up first." *He's even prepared the bath?!*

"U-Um, I'll eat first then..."

"Okay, I'll get the soup going." Takkun headed back to the kitchen and began preparing the soup.

"I'm sorry for making you do everything."

"Why are you apologizing? I had the whole day off, so it's only natural I take care of things," Takkun said with a ladle in his hand. "I came to Tokyo thinking I would support you."

"Support me...?"

"Even though I have my internship, I won't have to work overtime or weekends. I definitely have more free time than you, so I'll do chores and run errands. I'll take care of whatever you need if it helps you focus on your work even a little bit more."

"Takkun..." I felt like I was going to cry because of how dependable and kind my boyfriend was.

I changed out of my suit into loungewear, then we began our meal.

“Wow, this carbonara is delicious.” After taking a bite, I couldn’t help but express how impressed I was.

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s really good. Wasn’t this difficult to make?”

“Not at all. I used an easy recipe I found on social media—all I had to do was follow a video.”

“You’re really incredible, Takkun. You can do chores and even cook. I’d never peg you for a college student who lives with his parents.”

“You’re giving me too much credit. Anyone can do that. Also, if we’re comparing things here, you’re much more incredible than me—you can do chores and cook much better than I can.”

“Wh-What? No, not at all. I’m just average.”

We just couldn’t help but compliment each other and reject each other’s praise out of modesty.

After enjoying Takkun’s cooking and doing the dishes, we sat down on the couch together.

“Is work busy?” Takkun asked with concern.

“Oh, well... Yeah, today was pretty busy,” I said with a chuckle. “We had a scenario meeting—er, it’s a meeting where we discuss the script for the anime. Things got pretty heated, so it dragged on...”

“You had to argue with people?”

“I guess we *were* arguing in a sense. It’s difficult to describe—no one there wants the anime to fail, but we also all have our own interests to protect.”

The anime staff, the publisher, and the author of the source material all had their own ideas about what was right, as well as their own circumstances to consider. No single party was the correct one—everyone was entitled to their

seat at the table. That was why it was so important for everyone to bring up their thoughts and discuss them with everyone during the scenario reading.

“I’ve heard about these meetings before, and they sounded fun, so I’ve always wanted to participate...but hearing about it and actually doing it are completely different. Then, in two days, I have another meeting called a marketing meeting where everyone discusses the sales strategy...”

Now that I’d actually participated in a meeting, I realized that my responsibilities were much bigger than I’d initially expected. There was no way I would’ve been able to do this job if I was back in the Tohoku region.

“It sounds really busy...”

“Yeah... Oh, but there are a lot of fun things too. Because we have these discussions, we’re able to come up with things I never would’ve thought of on my own.” It felt like I was just venting, so I added on something positive to say about my work. Considering Takkun was just about to start interning, it felt like I’d discourage him if I only talked about the difficult parts of my job. “The main scriptwriter for this project is going to be Hisashi Sugisawa, who’s an experienced writer. I’ve liked his scripts for a long time, so I’m super excited to be working with him.”

“I see.”

“This was my first time ever talking to him, but he was such a nice person. He has such an impressive resume, but he’s so humble and gentle with his words. Even with the script for our project, he really brought out what was charming about the source material while making changes that take advantage of anime as a medium... Working with him made me become an even bigger fan.”

“Is that so...?” Takkun didn’t seem very receptive to my passionate praise for Mr. Sugisawa. He’d seemed excited to listen to me talk about work at first, but his expression was slowly clouding over.

Huh? What’s wrong? Maybe he isn’t too interested in hearing about this industry?

“Just to be clear, you’ve been saying ‘him,’ so this person is a man, right?”

“Huh? Y-Yes, that’s right. I’m pretty sure Hisashi Sugisawa isn’t a pseudonym

either.” Takkun grimaced when I answered. He seemed kind of annoyed and pouty.

Hm? Why does he care about Mr. Sugisawa’s gender? Is Takkun the kind of nerd who has biases based on the author’s gender? Otherwise, why would he care about his gender...

“Oh. Could it be...?” I suddenly had a revelation and had to ask. “Are you jealous, Takkun?”

Takkun froze up and looked like he was caught red-handed. “I-I’m not jealous... It’s just that you were praising him so much that the story wasn’t that fun anymore...”

“I think that people generally refer to that as jealousy...” It seemed he was jealous after all.

So he’s upset that I praised another man? Wow. What should I do? It feels so strange to have someone get jealous over the way I feel... It might not be right for me to say this, but I’m kind of happy. Also, Takkun getting all pouty is kind of cute.

“Jeez, you’re so silly,” I said with a giggle. I reached out across the couch and gently grasped his hand. “I just respect Mr. Sugisawa as a writer. I don’t think of him like that. Also, he’s married.”

“Huh? I-I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, he has three kids,” I added, hoping to quell Takkun’s worries. “Also, Mr. Sugisawa is a pretty experienced writer, and he’s about ten years older than me. He’s totally not someone I’d consider dating.”

“I didn’t realize he was so much older than you.”

“That’s a whole decade. We’re in totally different generations—how could I be interested in him?”

“You’re right. If you have that much of an age gap, you probably won’t be interested in talking about the same things, and you might have different values.”

“That’s right. Even if we dated, it probably wouldn’t work out.”

“Sounds like it would be pretty complicated.”

“Yeah, it’d totally be compli—” I cut myself off, and we both fell silent, stewing in intense despair. It seemed like we had made the realization at the same time—while trying to casually laugh off Takkun’s jealousy, we had totally talked down our own relationship.

Shoot, we’re ten years apart! We’re an age-gap couple from different generations who’d want to talk about different things and whose values might not align! I’ve really done it... I said things like “It wouldn’t work out,” and “It’s complicated”! Wow, that really backfired...

“It’ll be okay,” Takkun said as I continued to wallow. He gently squeezed my hand. “I’m sure we’ll work out. A ten-year age gap is no big deal.”

“Yeah, you’re right...” His words seeped into my heart.

If anyone else had said that it wasn’t a big deal, it probably wouldn’t have resonated with me at all—I would’ve just thought that they were half-heartedly trying to root for me, not understanding my situation. But when Takkun was the one to say it, I could believe it. No one had thought longer and harder about our age gap than he had. He’d spent ten whole years agonizing over the decade between our ages. If Takkun, who was all too aware of what our age gap meant, could say it wasn’t a big deal, it genuinely reassured me and made me feel happy.

“Hey, Takkun... Is there anything you want me to do for you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You made me food and prepared a bath for me, right? So I want to do something for you in return, like a reward.”

“You don’t have to do that... I didn’t do anything special.”

“Come on. I won’t be satisfied unless I do something in return.”

“In that case...” Takkun said after thinking for some time. “Can I hug you?”

“Huh?”

“I want to hug you tight, Miss Ayako,” Takkun answered, clearly yet bashfully. It appeared that I hadn’t misheard him.

I could feel my cheeks get warm. *What is he saying? Jeez.* “Y-You mean you want to hold me in your arms?”

“Y-Yes. If possible, a little tighter than usual.”

“Uh... Um... R-Really?”

“Yes.”

“That’s really all you want for your reward?”

“That is exactly what I want.”

“N-No, you shouldn’t. I’m talking about a reward for *you*, Takkun. If you hug me, then...that would be a reward for *me*.” I felt so embarrassed my true feelings just spilled out.

Takkun fell silent for a moment before he leaped toward me and embraced me, hugging me tightly. Just as he said, he was squeezing me a little tighter than usual.

“Huh? Huh?!”

“You can’t just say such cute things, Miss Ayako!”

“C-Cute...? I-I didn’t... Jeez, Takkun!” I couldn’t help but act like I didn’t like it, but I also couldn’t stop the corners of my mouth from turning up.

It was my first work day since I’d come to Tokyo. There were so many things I hadn’t been used to, which had made for a busy, difficult day, but thanks to my kind boyfriend, all my fatigue was blown away.

Chapter 5: The Past and the Reunion



It was my third morning in Tokyo. When I woke up, Miss Ayako wasn't in the bed beside me. It was ten minutes till seven in the morning. I had woken up before my alarm would go off, yet it appeared that Miss Ayako had gotten up and started getting ready even earlier than that.

I felt bad for some reason, so I quickly got up and folded up my futon. Just as I was about to rush to the living room, a thought crossed my mind. *Hold on, maybe I shouldn't hurry without stopping to think first.* After all, we were living in a one-bedroom condo. It was a little cramped for two people, and there was virtually no personal space. If I were to go about my day without being considerate of Miss Ayako, it would only be a matter of time before I invaded her privacy.

For example, if I wasn't careful, I could walk in on her changing, in the restroom, or in the bath. There was a risk of coincidentally being in the same place in sensitive situations. Fortunately, such events hadn't happened thus far, and I wanted to keep it that way moving forward.

Well...I would be lying if I said there wasn't a small part of me that was hoping for a happy accident. I was a man after all—if I was being honest, I wanted to see the person I loved in embarrassing situations. Ever since I'd learned we would be living together, I'd imagined such things happening plenty of times. If I said I had no hopes of coincidentally walking in on Miss Ayako in the bath or when she was changing, that would be a lie.

But still...I couldn't let those improper thoughts control me. Living together meant that the most important thing was being considerate of one another. We had to respect each other's privacy as much as possible. It was better to avoid any happy accidents that we could.

I exhaled deeply and made sure my mind was fully awake, and then I got my gears turning. *In our present situation, the events with a non-negligible chance*

of occurring are running into each other either in the restroom or while one of us is changing clothes. For the restroom, as long as I knock before I enter, it should be fine. For changing... As long as I'm mindful of the changing area, it shouldn't be an issue either.

Since we were living together in a one-bedroom condo, the typical spot for someone to get dressed would be in the bedroom or the changing area in the bathroom. I was in the bedroom, which meant that Miss Ayako had no choice but to use the changing area to get dressed—in other words, as long as I knocked on the doors to the restroom and the bathroom, I could one hundred percent prevent any happy accidents from happening. *Yeah, there's no doubt about it.*

Wait... I thought after a short pause. *Why am I so desperately trying to avoid these happy accidents? I'm Miss Ayako's boyfriend, which means it might be acceptable for me to accidentally see her changing... But, um... Erm... Never mind, I'll just avoid them. Yeah, I'll try to avoid them.* We'd only been dating for a short time, so I wanted to do my best to be a gentleman.

With that determination in mind, I opened the bedroom door and saw...Miss Ayako changing in the living room.

Right in front of the door, right before my eyes, was Miss Ayako. She was standing quite close to me, and indeed, she was in the middle of getting dressed. She was quite a ways into it—I wasn't sure whether to call this good timing or bad timing on my part, but she had already half finished stripping her pajamas, having already removed her pants and exposing the black underwear covering her hips and her striking snow-white thighs.

Despite the impact of her lower half, I was even more entranced by her upper body. The top half of her pajama shirt wasn't buttoned, so her deep cleavage was peeking out from underneath. Her bountiful chest had an overwhelming presence and heft to it—usually, it would be restrained by her underwear, but at the moment, there was not a bra in sight to contain it, leaving each voluptuous mound to sway to and fro according to gravity's whims. Were her top to have slipped in the slightest, I could've probably seen everything, even the tips of...

“Eek!”



“Oh!” Miss Ayako’s scream snapped me back to reality, and I quickly shut the door. “I-I’m sorry.” My heart was racing—the suggestive sight of Miss Ayako had burned into my mind, and blood was rushing to my head from the excitement. At the same time, I felt slightly exhausted. “So, there was a third option, changing in the living room...” I mumbled to myself with a heavy sigh. I hadn’t expected that possibility. It seemed that avoiding happy accidents was quite difficult when living under the same roof.

There was still some awkwardness while we were eating breakfast.

“Um, Miss Ayako... I’m really sorry about earlier.”

“I-It’s fine. You don’t have to keep apologizing,” Miss Ayako said. She was sitting across from me at the table as she waved her hand to signal that things were fine. “I’m sorry too. I should’ve just gotten dressed in the changing area, but... Um... I kind of got lazy, and thought it would be fine since you were sleeping,” Miss Ayako said bashfully with a hint of regret in her tone.

I’d thought that that would be the end of this, but then she added, “S-Speaking of which, I don’t want you to have any misunderstandings about this, so I want to clear something up,” Miss Ayako continued with a determined look. “Just so you know, I don’t usually sleep without a bra!” It sounded like this was one thing she wouldn’t let go.

Huh? We’re still talking about this? I thought we could finally relax and have our breakfast.

I’ve gotta say, though, Miss Ayako sure does talk about being braless a lot! She wasn’t wearing a bra when we officially became a couple either...

“I usually go to sleep with a sleep bra on.”

“I-I see...” *I’m pretty sure that’s a bra that women wear to bed.*

“I just happened to take mine off last night in the middle of the night because it was uncomfortable, and in no way is it that I usually sleep without a bra on. I’m not that careless of a woman,” Miss Ayako insisted at rapid-fire speed, like she was really trying to drive her point home.

I personally didn't feel that a woman was being careless if she slept without a bra on, and if anything, I wanted to push for her sleeping braless, but...it seemed that this was something she couldn't back down on as a woman.

"I-It sounds rough to be a woman, having to wear a bra even while sleeping."

"Yeah... There are apparently a lot of people who don't either, but, um...when you're my size, they can get deformed while you're sleeping, so..." She sounded uncomfortable explaining it, and my gaze almost unconsciously went to her chest, but I used my steely willpower to desperately avert my gaze.

That's right—the bigger your chest is, the more recommended a sleep bra is. That would mean... Yeah, Miss Ayako should probably wear one. If she could get away with not doing it, I can't imagine who the advice would even be for.

"It's really not fun having big ones either," Miss Ayako said with a sigh. "They're heavy, my shoulders get stiff, and I have a hard time buying swimsuits and bras because I have no choice but to buy expensive ones."

"Oh, now that you mention it, your bras *are* from a pretty expensive brand."

"Exactly. It's not like I'm buying a luxury brand because I want to, you know? Other brands just don't have my size—" At first Miss Ayako was nodding along, but she suddenly had a pondering look. "H-Hey, Takkun... Why do you know what brand my bras are?" she asked, clearly suspicious.

I gasped. *Shoot, I said too much!* "Um, well, that's because..." Miss Ayako silently waited for an answer. "Th-The other day, when I did laundry, I saw the tag and looked it up online." I lost to the pressure of her stare and answered honestly, which made Miss Ayako turn red.

"Y-You went out of your way to look it up...?"

"No, it's not like that! It wasn't for any weird reason—I just wanted to look up how to wash it! I thought it would be bad if I washed it improperly and ruined it, so I thought I should look up the brand's official recommendations on how to wash it... That's all it was, I swear!" Despite my desperate explanation, Miss Ayako was glaring at me.

"You said you washed my underwear without looking at it as much as possible..."

“I-It was just the tag. I only looked at the tag. I have no memory of what anything aside from the tag looked like.”

“Even if that was the case, you got a good look at the tag, right?” I didn’t know how to respond to that. “That must mean you saw my bra size...”

“I-It may have entered my field of vision, but it’s not in my memory. I really wanted to look up the brand just to find out how to wash it.”

“You’re lying! You definitely saw it. You must know that I’m a...G cup.”

“Huh? You’re not a G cup. Aren’t you several sizes above— Oh.” By the time I realized that I had fallen for her trap, it was too late. Miss Ayako’s face grew even redder and flames of shame and anger burned behind her eyes.

“I knew it!”

“No, um... I’m sorry.”

“Jeez... You’re so naughty, Takkun,” Miss Ayako said in a tone that was both sulky and exasperated.

If I had said this, it probably would’ve only made her angrier, but the way she was bashfully upset was incredibly adorable.

After our hectic breakfast, I hurried to get ready for work. Miss Ayako was going into the office in the afternoon, which meant I was the only one who had to get ready.

“Wow...” Miss Ayako’s eyes lit up when she saw me exit the bedroom after I finished getting dressed. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen you in a suit, Takkun.”

“I haven’t worn one since my coming-of-age ceremony, after all,” I replied. I smiled awkwardly as I looked myself over. My suit had been bought for me for my college entrance ceremony—it was a plain design chosen with the intention that I could reuse it when I eventually began applying for jobs. “I’m not really used to wearing things like this, so it feels a little embarrassing.”

“Don’t worry, it looks great on you, what with your broad shoulders and how tall you are. Yeah... Yeah, I definitely approve of you in a suit, Takkun...”

“Ha ha, I’m glad you think so.” She may have just been trying to make me feel

better, but I was happy to accept the compliment.

“But I wonder...do you really need to wear a suit for this job? I wouldn’t have pegged Lilystart as being so strict.”

“Well, they told me I could wear whatever I wanted, but I figure I should probably go with a suit for at least the first day. Not to mention I wouldn’t want to fall into the plainclothes pitfall.”

“The...plainclothes pitfall?”

“Yeah, you know, when a company invites you to an interview or whatever and says, ‘Wear whatever you find comfortable,’ but then once you arrive in your normal clothes you end up being embarrassingly underdressed.”

I’d never been in that situation myself, but the question of whether or not to wear your usual clothes to an interview that specifies you can wear whatever would show up every once in a while if you read enough jobseekers’ guides. Ultimately, such directions were actually just companies’ attempts to seem modest, and the proper thing to do was to understand the underlying intention and show up in a suit or some other form of business-appropriate attire. It was an incredibly annoying thing, but if that was how society worked, then I had no choice but to acquiesce.

“I don’t think Lilystart would be like that, but...you’re right that wearing a suit is a safe bet.” Miss Ayako then looked over my suit again, stopping at my neck. “Oh? Your tie’s a little crooked, Takkun.”

“Huh, really...?”

“Yeah, it’s only a little bit, though.”

I tried checking it with my hands, but I couldn’t really tell. It’d been a while since I’d put on a tie, and there was no mirror in the bedroom, so I ended up not doing a very good job tying it.

“Here, let me,” Miss Ayako said.



As I was fumbling with trying to fix my tie, Miss Ayako reached out to my chest. It was a bit embarrassing, but I lifted my chin slightly up and let her take the reins. Our faces naturally came closer as she began to adjust it with her graceful fingers, and I felt strangely bashful.

“I’ve fixed your tie like this before, haven’t I?”

“You have. I think it was when I’d just started high school.”

“I don’t think I thought much of it when I fixed it back then.”

I remembered that time. Back then, Miss Ayako had just thought of me as a kid in her neighborhood, so it’d been perfectly normal to help me with my tie—it was much like how someone would help their much younger brother or a relative’s child. She’d handled it at the time with the normalcy and naturalness of an adult helping a child.

Back then, that kindness of hers had been a bit painful for me. It’d been so incredibly frustrating that she’d been treating me like a child and wouldn’t see me as a man. But now, even though the same person was doing the same thing for me, my heart was filled with happiness.

“Is there anything you’re thinking about right now?”

“Huh...?” Miss Ayako blushed at my question. “N-No, I’m not thinking about anything in particular...”

“We’re kind of like newlyweds, aren’t we?”

“D-Don’t ask a question you know the answer to!” she pouted as she pulled the knot taut a bit more forcefully than before.

Even though it was the same action she’d done so many years before, now it meant something completely different—since then, our relationship and the ways we felt about each other had changed. It made me unbelievably happy.

I was on cloud nine after the incredibly blissful morning I’d had, to the point I was worried it’d affect how well I’d do at my internship today, but...my elated mind was quickly calmed down by the crowded train. *This is so uncomfortable. Crowded trains in Tokyo are so uncomfortable! But I shouldn’t be complaining*

over something as small as this when Miss Ayako has a similar commute every day.

I got off the train and followed the crowd spewing out of the station as I headed to my destination. The company I was interning at, Lilystart, was on the third and fourth floors of a building occupied by multiple businesses. Incidentally, the company Miss Ayako worked at, Light Ship, was itself in a similar type of building—I imagined most start-ups in Tokyo shared their office building with other companies.

I took the elevator up to the third floor, where I was greeted by the person in charge.

“Oh, hi there. Welcome,” the light-haired man said with a friendly smile. The employee badge hanging off his neck had the last name “Yoshino” on it. “You’re Takumi, right? It’s nice to meet you. I’m Yoshino.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Takumi Aterazawa,” I said before bowing deeply.

I’d spoken to Mr. Yoshino over the phone several times, but it was my first time meeting him in person. He had brown permed hair and pierced ears. He was wearing a graphic T-shirt from a luxury brand along with a pair of jeans. He said he was in his early thirties, but he looked quite young, perhaps because of the way he dressed. He could have just barely passed for a college student.

“I’m looking forward to working with you!” I said.

“Wow, aren’t you energetic? That’s what I like to see—college students *should* be full of energy,” he said with a chuckle as he patted me on the shoulder. “All right then, follow me. First, I’ll be going over some stuff in the conference room.”

“Very well, thank you!”

“Ha ha, you don’t have to be so nervous. We’re a pretty chill company,” Mr. Yoshino said, seeing right through my nervousness and laughing it away. “Is this your first time interning, Takumi?”

“Yes, it was an honor that this prestigious company selected me for my first internship.”

“You really don’t have to talk like that. Pfft, ‘prestigious’... This isn’t an interview, you know?” He chuckled once more.

Erm... I’d been preparing to be on my guard all day since Miss Yumemi helped me get this job and I didn’t want to do anything rude that might reflect poorly on her, but... This isn’t what I was expecting.

“This is our first year having interns, so, naturally, it’s my first time being in charge of interns,” Mr. Yoshino explained. “There’s no reason to be so formal—let’s just take things easy.”

“Understood...”

“You don’t have to wear a suit either. You can totally just show up in your street clothes. Actually, didn’t I tell you that you could wear whatever?”

“Y-You did, but...I thought that wearing a suit even after being told that was the proper adult thing to do.”

“Ha ha, that’s what the other one said too.”

“Huh?”

“She came in a suit too. I see now, I guess serious types show up in a suit when you tell them they can wear anything. I’ll have to be careful of that next year.”

“Um, what do you mean by ‘other one?’”

“The other intern. There’s one other intern from a university in Tokyo. Did I not tell you?”

This was the first I was hearing of this. *I guess it’s not that crazy once you think about it. It’s probably stranger to only have one intern.*

“She arrived about five minutes ago. It’s a bit early, but since you’re both here, maybe we can just get started.”

I continued to follow Mr. Yoshino, and we eventually got to the conference room, where he urged me inside. A woman appeared to be waiting for us there. Her hair was in that neat ponytail that most job-hunting students wore, and her suit used a muted shade of fabric—she was probably the other intern. I couldn’t see her face from the doorway, but I could tell how nervous she was from her

bolt upright posture.

“Sorry for making you wait by yourself,” Mr. Yoshino said as we entered.

“I-It’s no problem, I was fine...” She shot up from her seat and turned toward us when Mr. Yoshino called out to her. Her movements were awkward with anxiety. Then, the moment our eyes met... “Huh...?” Her eyes widened with surprise, and I gulped. “T-Takumi?!” she said, flabbergasted.

She said my name, just like she did back in high school. That was probably why I couldn’t help but respond in kind, just like I had back then.

“A-Arisa...?” It seemed unbelievable, but there was no doubt about it. Everything about her—from her hairstyle, to her makeup, to how she dressed—was different, but the way she sounded and the face she made when she was surprised were exactly the same as they used to be.

The woman standing before me was the woman known as my “girlfriend” in high school, Arisa Odaki.



“Yes, yes... I’m truly sorry that I ended up notifying you after the fact. Once I’m back, I’ll stop by so we can talk about this face-to-face like I should have beforehand... Yes, thank you very much... No, Takku— I mean, Takumi is treating me very well. If anything, it’s like he’s looking after me... Yes, yes... All right, goodbye then.”

Even though I couldn’t see her face because we were speaking on the phone, I kept bowing my head. This behavior was apparently unique to Japanese people, but I felt like I had no other choice but to act apologetic.

I let out a sigh and sat on the couch after the phone call ended. I’d been talking to Takkun’s—in other words, my boyfriend’s—mother, Tomomi. It was just over the phone, but I wanted to talk to her about us living together.

Takkun had already talked to his parents beforehand and gotten their approval, but as his girlfriend, and as an adult, I wanted to say something to them myself. *Now that I think about it, I feel like I totally flouted a social rule by getting her approval after we started living together, even though it’s only for three months.*

On the phone, Tomomi told me, “It’s fine—you don’t have to worry about that sort of thing. Good luck with your work. If Takumi gives you any trouble, you can just kick him out.” She was quite casual about the whole thing, but I couldn’t help but feel bad about it all and wondered if she was just being nice about it.

Well, living together is a decision made between a couple, so some may say that parental approval isn’t necessary at all. Takkun’s already an adult too, so... Well, even if he’s an adult, he’s technically a college student whose parents are providing for him, so it feels like the right thing to do is discuss it with his parents before doing anything... Oh, but, does that make it seem like I’m treating him like a child? I can’t tell. I don’t know what the correct thing to do is at all. What do I do, and how do I do it in a socially acceptable way?

“Well, there probably isn’t a right answer...” I muttered to myself.

There probably were no right answers in general when it came to romance between a man and a woman. Everyone had their own definition of what love was, and similarly, the way any given couple interacted with their families and society was probably just as different.

Sure, there were established methods and guidelines of how to do things, but following those wasn’t always the correct thing to do. After all, we were a couple with an age gap of over a decade. I was a single mother in her thirties, and Takkun was a twenty-year-old college student. It was a bit of a rare coupling, so it probably wouldn’t work for us to follow what was generally considered to be correct—we had to find our own answers for how to handle things in our relationship.

“Oh no, it’s so late already.” I switched gears and quickly started taking care of chores. I had work in the afternoon, so I had to do what I could in the morning.

First, I started taking care of the laundry. I headed to the changing area in the bathroom and put all the clothes in the laundry basket into the washing machine. As I was doing that, I suddenly froze—I’d just grabbed the shirt Takkun was wearing under his jacket yesterday...

“Ah!” I realized that I’d been staring at the shirt and snapped back to reality.

No. No, no, no. Wh-What was I thinking?! What am I trying to do with Takkun's shirt?! No, I can't do that... Even if I'm his girlfriend, there are still some things that are off-limits!

B-But, Takkun washed my underwear—both my bra and underwear. He even got a good look at the tags. In that case...I won't get in trouble for being a little naughty, will I? He had his way with my underwear, so a shirt is no big deal...

After desperately trying to come up with an excuse for what I wanted to do, I looked back at his shirt. I checked my surroundings out of an abundance of caution even though no one was there. Then...I slowly buried my face into his white shirt.

Wow... It's faint, but it smells like Takkun. Whenever we'd walk past each other or hug, this is the aroma he'd always have. Ever since we'd started living together, it felt like I'd experienced his scent more and more often. It was strange—even though his smell had gotten my heart racing, I felt incredibly calm. It was like I was wrapped up in his embrace.

What do I do? Is it okay to put this on? That's a thing, right? Wearing your boyfriend's shirt...

Suddenly, my phone, which I had placed on the sink, was vibrating.

"Agh?!" I was so surprised that I thought my heart was going to pop out of my chest. I quickly threw the shirt into the washing machine before hurrying to pick up the phone.

"Yes... Yes, that's fine. Please deliver it at the scheduled time. Yes..." The call was to confirm a delivery. I'd had Miu send over some things that I realized I needed after living here, and it appeared that they were going to arrive soon.

I heaved a deep sigh and sat down right where I was standing. *Ugh, that was bad for my heart. Actually...what was I even doing? Falling into a trance after smelling my boyfriend's shirt like that... What am I, some kind of sexually frustrated pervert?*

I fell silent. I'd begun living with my boyfriend out of the blue, and now we were spending more time together than we had before, and it was so much fun I couldn't take it. Despite that—no, because of that—because we had gotten so

much closer...my yearning was growing ever more intense. I found myself wanting him more and more...

“I want to see Takkun already...” It had only been a couple of hours since we’d said goodbye, but the words spilled out of my mouth. I was in agony...but I was also a bit clueless, unaware of the trials that awaited me.

Chapter 6: Dating and the Secret



Back in high school, after the various incidents surrounding Arisa Odaki had been resolved, she'd asked me out. She'd said she liked me, so she'd wanted me to date her and become her actual boyfriend. When she'd told me how she felt, I could tell she was being incredibly sincere—she'd seriously wanted me to accept, and she'd done her very best to convey her feelings.

It hadn't been the first time a girl had told me she liked me—after I'd participated in a prefecture-level swimming competition, a bunch of underclassmen who I'd never really talked to had asked me out and given me love letters. But Arisa's confession carried more weight than those other girls'.

From the look on her face and her choice of words, it'd been painfully clear how serious this was to her...and yet, regardless of how genuine her feelings were, my answer was going to be the same.

"I'm sorry," I replied, clearly and decisively. "Thank you for telling me how you feel. I really appreciate your feelings, but...I'm sorry. I can't be your boyfriend."

"Ha ha..." Arisa laughed as if to obfuscate her reaction. "O-Of course. I totally knew that. I'm sorry too, for asking you out." Her tone was unnaturally cheerful. She was doing her best to make things seem casual, but it seemed like she was on the verge of tears. "You just played that role because I'd asked you to. You were kind to me just because you're a kind guy... Ha ha, wow, I really misread things. I totally thought that I might have a shot."

I wasn't sure what else I could say to her. "By the way...would you mind telling me why you're turning me down?" she asked. "I'd like to try and improve on anything I can fix..." She looked like she was going to cry at any moment, and my chest twinged with pain.

"It's not about you..." I said clearly. I wanted to respond to her earnest confession with my own sincerity in kind. "I like someone else."

It was past five in the evening. After finishing the first day of my internship, I was walking to the station with Arisa Odaki. We were leaving through the same station, so things naturally ended up this way.

“Man, I really am surprised,” Arisa said jovially as she walked beside me. “I never would’ve thought I’d be reunited with you like this, Takumi. I guess the world is surprisingly small.”

“I didn’t know you went to school in Tokyo...” I remarked.

“Yeah, I live alone right now. You go to a local university, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m surprised you considered coming out here for your internship.”

“It’s a long story, but...I was basically referred here by someone I know.”

“Oh, me too. One of my seniors in the club I’m in got a job with Lilystart, so I got the internship through that connection.”

It was an incredible coincidence—to leave my hometown and intern at a company in Tokyo, only to reunite with an acquaintance who’d moved to Tokyo for university. *Well, no matter how you look at it, it’s stranger for me to be here.* Arisa had gotten the internship through someone she knew from school, which was a pretty common type of networking, while my inroad had been a lot more complicated.

“Hey, so what are you going to wear tomorrow?” she asked me.

“Just regular clothes. I’ll still pick something more on the formal side.”

“I’ll do the same,” Arisa said before sighing. “I really messed up today. I was worried that it was one of those plainclothes pitfalls, so I thought as long as I wore a suit I’d be fine... I never thought I’d get laughed at so much.”

“Ha ha, I wore a suit for the exact same reason.”

“Right? That’s totally the normal thing to think. Mr. Yoshino doesn’t understand the vulnerable position us job-hunting college students are in!”

We both laughed at our mistakes. It was a strange feeling—I never thought I’d

be talking with Arisa like this again. To be honest, I'd thought high school was the last I'd see of her. I'd never thought of reaching out to her, and she'd probably never thought to do so either. After all, the way our relationship had ended...

"It's kind of nostalgic..." Arisa said, her expression suddenly clouding over. "Walking with you like this reminds me of high school. We'd walk to the station together after school, remember?"

I fell silent. "I'm sorry about back then," she added. "I got you involved in something weird for my sake."

"You don't have to apologize..."

"I kind of just figured we'd never see each other again... I wasn't sure how to face you, and I thought it would just be awkward if we met up." Suddenly, she put on the same brilliant smile she had back in high school. "But... I'm glad I got to see you today, Takumi." Her smile was truly bright, like it was coming from the bottom of her heart. "It's kind of like, you know, um... Like shock therapy? I never could've reached out to you myself, but thanks to the way we bumped into each other today, I was too shocked to feel awkward."

While I pondered her idea, she added, "I guess it's true when they say fear is often worse than the danger itself. I guess I should thank God for this fateful meeting. Maybe he was being considerate toward us."

"You've gotten a lot more cheerful, Arisa..." I finally pointed out.

"Huh? Really? Well...maybe that's true. I'm having lots of fun at my school here. I'm different from when I was a country bumpkin from the Tohoku region," she said in a joking tone with a mischievous chuckle.

She probably was different—we had both changed since then. Everything was different, from our ages, our schools, our positions, the worlds we lived in, and...the people we were dating.

"Hey, since we've reunited like this, wanna celebrate with a drink?" Arisa mimicked drinking out of a glass as she casually invited me out. "I know lots of good affordable places."

"I'll pass..." I said, slightly shaking my head.

“What? Why not? I know we have to come in tomorrow, but it should be fine as long as we’re not out too late. Is it that you’re a lightweight?”

“It’s not that,” I insisted. “I’m dating someone.” Arisa fell silent. Her eyes widened, and she stopped walking for just a moment. I knew she’d stopped, but I continued walking, not adjusting for her hesitation. “That’s why I don’t really want to go out drinking alone with a girl.”

“Huh... I see.” After hanging back for just a moment, Arisa began catching up to me. “When did you start dating?”

“We just got together recently.”

“Someone from your school?”

“No... But she’s from around there.”

“Hm, I see. I guess that’s not so strange.” Arisa still seemed a bit surprised. “But isn’t it fine to get a drink with a friend you haven’t seen in a while? Or, what, is your girlfriend really strict? Is she the super possessive type?”

“It’s not because she’s told me not to. It’s about how *I* want to act.”

“Wow, aren’t you a gentleman?” she said teasingly. Then, a somber smile appeared on her face. It was a mature expression, one I’d never seen her make back in high school. “You’re the same as always, Takumi. Even back in high school, I thought whoever got to date you would be really lucky.”

I wasn’t sure how to react to that. “Okay, understood—we’ll steer clear of that kind of thing,” she said affirmingly. “We can go drinking some other time...when it won’t be just the two of us.”

As the conversation neared its end, we arrived at the station. “Well, I’m taking this line,” she told me.

“Okay.”

“See you tomorrow.” She waved goodbye before disappearing into the crowd.

After seeing her off, I headed to the platform for my train. My head had clouded over with an indescribable dreariness. *Well then...what do I do about this situation?*

Even after I got home, I was thinking about Arisa Odaki—about whether I should tell Miss Ayako about her or not. *I don't think I have to tell her...*

All Arisa was to me at this point was a former classmate whom I'd run into by coincidence—nothing more and nothing less. It felt strange to go out of my way to tell Miss Ayako about her. It reminded me of a cheating husband who only told his wife his detailed schedule on the days he was with another woman... It could seem unnatural to tell her.

Still, even though it did seem suspicious to tell her every little thing, at the same time, not telling her felt dishonest as well. If I didn't feel guilty about it, then it would just be better to let her know what happened, but in that case, I would have to decide just how much I wanted to tell her. *Should I explain everything that happened between Arisa and me back in high school?*

If I was being honest, I didn't want to. It wasn't really a fun story to tell, nor would I expect Miss Ayako to enjoy hearing it. What happened between us in high school was...

"...kun, Takkun, can you hear me?"

"Huh? Y-Yes." I'd been thinking through all this over dinner, and when I realized Miss Ayako had been calling my name, I looked over at her. She was staring at me worriedly. "Um... I'm sorry. What were we talking about?"

"I was asking if you wanted me to refill your glass..."

"Oh, yes, please." I quickly handed her my cup. *How pathetic of me. I can't believe I ignored Miss Ayako. Not only that, I can't believe I was thinking about something else while eating her cooking!*

"Are you all right? You seem like you're spacing out." Miss Ayako handed me a cup filled with barley tea as I sat wallowing in self-hatred.

"I'm sorry, I was just thinking about something..."

"Did you have a rough day at your internship?"

"No, my internship itself isn't too bad... I spent the day just learning about the job and greeting people."

“Really? You seem really troubled despite that.”

“It’s not that I’m troubled...”

“Well, if something happens, you can come to me. You can talk to me about anything,” Miss Ayako said with a gentle smile. Her smile was warm and beautiful, like that of a goddess. “I’m a bit more experienced when it comes to working, so if you’re ever in trouble, I think I can be of help.”

“Miss Ayako...”

“Well, I say a bit, but I’ve got quite a lot of experience, actually. It’s been ten years since I joined the workforce... Instead of being an upperclassman, I’m basically an alumnus... My youthful college days are *far* behind me...”

“O-Oh no, there’s no reason to feel down,” I said, comforting her before responding. “Thank you very much... If I ever have any issues with my internship, I’ll be sure to ask for your advice.” The moment I said that, my chest twinged with pain. I scarfed down the rest of my rice, trying to mask it. Then I grabbed my empty bowl and stood up. “I’m going to get seconds.”

“Really? I’m surprised you can still eat—I gave you an extra-large serving.”

“Your cooking is so good, I just can’t help but overeat.”

“Jeez. Compliments won’t get you anywhere.”

We both chuckled, but a small shadow was lurking in my heart.

I ended up not talking about Arisa Odaki that day. It wasn’t a logical decision I’d come to after thinking about it—I mainly just hadn’t wanted to cause Miss Ayako any unnecessary concern...actually, I was probably just scared.

Oh, this is scary. I’m scared... This time we were spending together was so full of happiness that I was afraid to lose it. I was currently living the dream I’d been praying would come true for ten years. There was a small part of me that didn’t want to allow even the slightest amount of disturbance into our all-too-blissful world.

Chapter 7: Desires and Frustrations



“Takumi is acting strange...?” Yumemi asked, repeating what I’d said.

“Yes...” I said with a slight nod. I picked up my glass and took a sip of my lemon shochu highball.

It had been several days since I’d started living with Takkun, and this was my first Friday in Tokyo. Yumemi had brought me to an izakaya—one a bit on the pricier side—and we were drinking in a private room.

Even though it was just the two of us, this was supposed to be a company get-together to celebrate my temporary assignment in Tokyo. Yumemi had originally planned a welcome party on a much bigger scale with all my coworkers, but I’d been absolutely against such an affair, so I’d brought the guest list down to just her and me. *I’d feel bad gathering a large group together to celebrate my arrival when I’ll be leaving in just three months. I mean...it’d be embarrassing...*

It had been around thirty minutes since we’d started drinking. We’d started off talking about work, but once we’d both gotten to our second drinks, the topic had gradually shifted toward my current cohabitation situation.

“When you say ‘strange,’ what do you mean specifically?” Yumemi asked.

I recalled his recent behavior. “Um... It’s not like there’s anything dramatically different. He seems normal when we’re talking, but...there are times when he makes this really somber face and seems like he’s worrying about something. It started on the same day as his internship.”

Yumemi said, “I see” so she didn’t leave me hanging, then she stopped to take a swig of her whiskey on the rocks before adding, “I actually had the opportunity to meet with someone from Lilystart the other day, so I decided to ask about Takumi... As far as they know, he’s doing perfectly fine there. They said he’s a quick learner, polite, and the kind of nice young man they don’t

make anymore—a real rave review.”

I guess Takkun isn't worrying about something work-related then. If that's the case, what does he have on his mind? Or am I just imagining things? I'd prefer that to be the case.

“If it's not about work, then maybe it's about your life together?” Yumemi suggested.

“I was afraid that might be it...” Takumi was leading a new life in a new environment. Not only that, but this was his first time living in Tokyo. Perhaps all these new experiences were much more of a burden to him compared to me, as I'd been here several times on business trips already. *Maybe he's been building up stress without me knowing...*

“Yeah, I could definitely see him worrying about your sex life together,” Yumemi said.

“I think you added in an extra word that time...” Suddenly she'd completely changed tack. I glared at Yumemi, but she just snickered.

“No, I'm being serious,” she insisted. “It's not like teenagers are the only ones who worry about sex in their relationships. Adults think about it plenty.” I didn't know what to say. “So, be honest, how are things? It's been about a week since you've started living together. Are your nighttime activities going well? It wouldn't be strange if you've run into any issues or inconveniences, seeing as you're both inexperienced...”

“I can't believe you're asking me about this! Let me assure you, you don't need to worry about any issues or inconveniences. It's not like we've even—”

Yumemi gaped at me for a second before blurting out “What?” with obvious surprise. She seemed like she had surpassed shock and was just weirded out.

“You haven't *done it* yet?”

I fell completely silent.

“Not even once...?”

I still couldn't answer.

“Surely you've done some heavy petting at the very least—”

“We haven’t! We haven’t done anything!” I shouted, failing to stay calm because of the embarrassment. “Jeez, it’s not a big deal! We’re comfortable doing things at our own pace!”

“I’m not trying to criticize you... I’m just surprised. I definitely wouldn’t have expected a couple who’ve just gotten together could live under the same roof and not get up to anything after an entire week. It would be one thing if you two were both students, but you’re already adults.” Yumemi strained a smile. “Wasn’t there at least one time where things seemed like they might head in that direction?”

“O-On the first night, it seemed like it would for just one moment, but...”

“But?”

“Takkun said he didn’t want to ‘undermine the significance of it’ since we didn’t start living together based on a mutual decision.”

Yumemi suddenly burst into laughter. “Pfft, ha ha ha! Takumi’s a real endless font of virtuousness and integrity, isn’t he? Well, maybe there’s a part of him that feels like he needs to hold back on account of him and me tricking you, but even so, I think he’s being a bit extreme.”

“I think you could afford to learn a thing or two from him...”

“All right, I think I’ve figured it all out. You’re sexually frustrated because your beloved boyfriend won’t make a move on you.”

“A-As if! I’m not frustrated about anything... I’m very happy that Takkun is a perfect gentleman!”

“Really?” Yumemi asked in a teasing manner, her face slightly flushed. Perhaps it was because she’d had a couple drinks, but she was three times more persistent than usual. “Come on, we’re drinking. Throw away your pride and be real with me. Let’s have a crotch-to-crotch between us women.”

“It’s a *heart-to-heart*! And I’m good on any and all crotch-related conversation, thanks!” *Ugh, she’s coming on so strong with the dirty jokes! Going out for drinks is basically like signing on for a nightmare!* “Jeez, that’s enough already... I don’t really like being this anything-goes. It’s not like alcohol is a pass for us to spill our guts,” I said, clearly and firmly. “You can’t get me to

cut loose and go crazy just because I've had a few drinks."

One hour had passed since my declaration, or rather, the setup my past self had so nicely prepared for me. I'd downed about four lemon shochu highballs.

"Yeah, I'll admit it... I'm sexually frustrated. Is that so wrong?! And I don't know what to do about it either!" I said, sobbing and whining.

I'd gotten completely drunk and cut loose. Everything was out in the open—my emotions had taken over and left me a sad sack resting her head on the table. *Ugh, this is bad. My head feels fuzzy.* It felt like the part of my brain that controlled my sense of reason and decision-making ability had gone completely numb.

"There, there. It's all right."

"Yumemi..." I whimpered. I couldn't tell if I was sad-drunk or angry-drunk. *I think I'm still lucid enough to hold off from this conversation if I want to...but whatever. I'll just let the alcohol take control.*

Yumemi wasn't acting too much differently from earlier. Unlike the way I'd stuck to one type of drink, she was having a variety of different ones, and she was currently sipping some sake from a sake cup.

"It's like... Takkun's being so unfair, you know? How can I push back after he trots out cool lines like 'I want it to be a nice memory' and 'I want to wait to do it until you feel you're ready'?"

"Yeah, yeah," Yumemi nodded.

"I mean, what even *is* 'feeling ready'?! Huh? Am I supposed to go up to him and tell him that I'm ready when I feel ready?! That sounds so difficult!"

"Mm-hmm, yeah."

"O-Of course, it's not like I'm trying to say Takkun is at fault. I'm really happy that he's being considerate of me... But, um, Takkun is so nice and perfect that I feel like I must be some kind of pervert for getting so hot and bothered all the time." Once I'd started, I couldn't stop venting.

"I see, I see," Yumemi replied attentively. And her summary of the situation?

“So basically, you want him to hurry up and sleep with you.”

“Is that all you got out of this?!”

“Am I wrong?”

“Y-You might not be wrong, but...I’d like you to be more careful with your word choice...” From my perspective, my circumstances and my agonizing couldn’t be summed up so simply...but at the end of the day, perhaps that really was what it came down to. *Jeez, this is so embarrassing... Does all my anxiety really boil down to feeling sexually frustrated over my boyfriend not sleeping with me?!*

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Women have sexual urges as well. It’s inevitable that you’d be in agony after living together with your beloved boyfriend.”

“R-Really?”

“Yeah, it’s normal.”

“W-Well, I’ve been having dirty dreams every night for the past three days... Is that normal too?!”

“That might not be so normal...”

It’s not?! She baited me! I accidentally admitted something super embarrassing!

“Don’t worry about it,” she reassured me. “I’m sure you’re not the only one who’s suffering. I bet Takumi’s just as sexually frustrated.”

“Do you think so...?”

“He might even be taking matters into his own hands back at home right now.”

“H-Huh?! Wh-What do you mean by that?!”

“It’s completely normal—it’s how men deal with their sexual urges. Takumi’s been in love with you for ten years. Who knows how many times he’s thought of you while pleasuring himself?”

Y-You mean... He’s imagining me while he’s— H-Huh?! Really?! Wait, hold

on... Huh?!

“Good grief, it must be difficult to be in a relationship where both people are inexperienced,” she said with a pitying chuckle. “Takumi isn’t blameless here. He seems to believe that not making a move is the kind and honorable thing to do.” I didn’t know what to say to that, and Yumemi continued to think aloud, adding, “Or maybe it’s simpler than that. Maybe he’s just scared.”

“Scared...?”

“He’s been in love with you for the entirety of the past decade, right? To him, Ayako Katsuragi is not merely a woman, but perhaps more like a goddess... While you may be his romantic interest, you might also be someone he reveres and worships.”

“A-A goddess?”

“He might not want to disappoint his dearly beloved goddess in any way at all.” I fell silent. “Still, don’t forget this problem is a two-way street. You’ve got your own hurdles to overcome here.”

“Maybe I do...”

“If you’re unhappy and frustrated by the fact that he won’t sleep with you, you should seduce him by wearing an outfit so sexy he won’t be able to hold back any longer.”

“Wha—?!”

“Or maybe you could make the first move yourself.”

“Th-That would be impossible.”

“Why’s that?”

“I mean, it’s embarrassing, and...I’m scared too.”

I admitted it—I was scared. I was curious and had my own desires, but for all those feelings, I had fear in equal measure. I was afraid of the act itself, but more than that...

“Takkun compliments me so much, both on my looks and my personality... He says that he loves everything about me. That makes me really happy, but at the

same time, that's exactly why I'm scared of letting him down..."

Calling me a goddess was an exaggeration, but it was very possible that Takkun had put me up on a pedestal and saw me through rose-colored glasses. He'd showered me with compliments that were wasted on a woman past thirty like me. I was of course happy to hear the nice things he said to me...but because of how much he loved me, I wanted to reciprocate and give him what he wanted. I was terrified of not being able to meet his expectations. I was afraid of disappointing him.

"I don't think Takkun sees me as the ball of sexual desire that I am..."

"Is that what you are, now?"

"I can't help but think about what would happen if I were to make a move on him and he became disillusioned..."

"It's fine if he feels disillusioned," Yumemi said, tilting her sake cup. "Disillusioned means the illusion is disappearing. An illusion smeared with bias and assumptions *should* hurry up and disappear. Ayako Katsuragi isn't a goddess or some kind of mirage. She's a living, breathing human. Of course, the same goes for Takumi—since you're both living, breathing humans, you should face each other with bare hearts and openness."

I wasn't sure what to say. Her words resonated strongly with my intoxicated mind.

"Jeez, you really know how to make something so simple so complicated. I'm impressed," Yumemi said, her tone drenched with exasperation and irony. Then it seemed like she had suddenly thought of something. "You know... They say that men reach their sexual peaks in their late teens, while women reach theirs in their early thirties... You guys slot into those age brackets perfectly." Then, with an all-too-serious voice, she added, "Maybe if you do it once, it'll be really insane because of how much you've both been pent up until now."

"Ugh!" I didn't know how to respond anymore, so I chugged down the rest of my drink.

We left the izakaya at a little past nine.

“Are you all right, Ayako?”

“I-I’m fine, I’m not that drunk...” Though I was trying to act tough, I was actually quite intoxicated. It wasn’t so bad that I was going to lose consciousness, but I was in a bit of a daze. “It’s been a while, so I forgot how to pace myself...”

“Hee hee. It’s not like there was any other way you were gonna get that kind of stuff off your chest, after all.” Yumemi had had twice as much to drink as me, but she seemed perfectly fine. In fact, she said she hadn’t had enough to drink yet and was going to go out on her own after this. I couldn’t remember how many years it had been since we’d had a drink together, but it seemed like she was just as heavy of a drinker even after entering her forties.

“Well then...thank you for tonight, Yumemi,” I said, trying to head out.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?” Yumemi said as she stopped me.

“Huh...? Aren’t you going out to drink more after this?”

“Yeah, but, were you trying to go home on your own? With how much you’re stumbling?”

“I-I’ll be fine. I can catch a taxi on my own.”

“I’ve called someone to pick you up, so just wait a bit.”

“You did?”

At almost the same exact second I’d replied...

“Miss Ayako!”

...Takkun came running through the crowd in the bustling street.

“Huh?! Takkun? Wh-Why are you...?”

“I called him,” Yumemi said as if it were no big deal. “I didn’t feel comfortable letting you walk these busy streets alone at night,” she declared proudly before turning to Takkun. “Well then, Takumi. I’ll leave the rest to you. I’m going to go have a bit more fun with the city.” With that snappy line, Yumemi walked off and disappeared into the night.

Unlike back home, the bright lights on the Tokyo streets made it hard to see the stars in the night sky—such was the view overhead as we headed for the taxi stand at the station.

“I’m sorry for making you come all this way just to pick me up, Takkun.”

“You don’t have to worry about it. This is kind of my responsibility as your boyfriend,” he replied. He seemed somewhat happy about it. “I couldn’t stand it if I had to wait alone anyway. The thought of you drunk and walking the streets of Tokyo alone... You’d probably get hit on every ten steps.”

“Y-You sure have a strong bias against Tokyo...” And, as always, he had an absurdly high opinion of me. He must have thought I was the most beautiful woman in the world or something.

“Miss Ayako, let me know if you have any trouble walking.”

“I-I’m fine, I’m fine. I’m not that drunk.”

“That’s usually what drunk people say.”

“People who aren’t drunk also say it,” I firmly argued back.

Ugh, how embarrassing. Takkun said not to worry about it, but I can’t help but feel a little pathetic. I’m a full-grown adult—I can’t believe I had to have someone come get me.

On top of that, I couldn’t help but think about this and that because of my conversation with Yumemi earlier. My body was burning hot, and my mind was dizzy. I wasn’t sure if it was because of the alcohol, but I kept having the strangest ideas pop into my head.

“We’re almost there, Miss Ayako.”

We were gradually nearing the station. I stared at his back in a daze as he slightly quickened his pace. *Hey, Takkun. If I took the reins and made a move on you, how would you react? Would you be surprised? Would you be put off? Or...would you actually be happy?*

Oh, maybe if I try something now, I could blame everything on the alcohol. No matter what I do or how messy things get, I can blame everything on the alcohol...

My imagination was running wild, and suddenly...

“Oh, I knew it. It’s pretty packed since it’s Friday—”

Takkun suddenly stopped in his tracks after we got close to the crowded taxi stand. His eyes were wide with shock, and he froze up.

“What’s wrong, Takkun...?”

“Takumi...?” A woman with a cheery voice drew close to us. “Wow, I knew it was you. What a coincidence.” She called out to Takkun in a friendly manner.

“Arisa...” Takkun also responded.

Her name was apparently Arisa. It was a strange feeling—it was probably the first time that I’d ever heard Takkun refer to a girl other than Miu by her first name.

I took another look at her. She looked to be about the same age as Takkun—in her twenties—and some of her hair was stylishly braided on either side of her head. She had on a thin, white blouse and a brightly colored skirt. It was the kind of outfit that practically screamed “young woman,” the sort only a college student could pull off. Perhaps she was on her way home from drinking with others, because her face was flushed.

“We seem to keep bumping into each other these days,” she said.

“Y-Yeah...”

“Were you out drinking too?”

“No, I just came to get someone...” Takkun seemed obviously flustered, and his eyes kept darting back between Arisa and me. “Um, Miss Ayako, this is an acquaintance of mine...” Takkun struggled to get the words out as he tried to introduce her to me.

“Ha ha, why are you panicking, Takumi?” she interjected warmly—perhaps she was too drunk to think anything of doing so. “There’s nothing to get so worked up about. I’m not your girlfriend anymore.”

“Huh?” I couldn’t help but loudly express my surprise. After all, I’d heard something unbelievable leave her mouth. She then turned to me, like she was reacting to my piping up.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Arisa Odaki.” She slightly bowed her head, then, sounding a bit put on the spot, she added, “I’ve known Takumi since high school. If you were to summarize our relationship in one word, well... Let’s see... I guess you could say I’m like his ex-girlfriend.” Again, maybe it was because she was drunk, but the way she spoke struck me as so carefree.



My mind went completely blank.

Chapter 8: Hesitation and Consideration



The next day was Saturday, but I still had work. We were going to be running sales promotions of the light novel concurrently with the announcement of the anime adaptation, and they would require plenty of preparation—along with putting together promotional videos with line reads from the anime voice actors, we needed to coordinate with the manga adaptation staff, not to mention all manner of other considerations. There was a lot of work to be done.

To be honest, there was a part of me that felt relieved I wouldn't have to spend the day at home—Takkun was going to be there all day since he was off on Saturdays, and after yesterday, it still felt a bit uncomfortable to face him. I didn't manage to shake the feeling by the time I left the condo either.

"Oh, I see. You ran into Arisa, huh?"

After lunch, I sat on a park bench near the office and called Miu. There was something I wanted to confirm with her.

"Yeah, I know her," Miu informed me. "Arisa is my friend's older sister. Long story short, Taku pretended to date her in high school."

"I knew you'd know all about it..."

"Well, I was the one who'd asked Taku to do it. Just so you know, I didn't keep that from you to hurt you or anything. I just didn't see the need to tell you."

I wasn't sure how to respond.

Last night, after we'd gotten home, Takkun had given me an overview of the situation. He'd explained how Arisa Odaki was his classmate in high school, how they'd reunited at Lilystart by coincidence, and how they were now interning there together. He'd also explained how, for a period in high school, she'd been his "girlfriend" even though they didn't actually date.

“Back in high school, Arisa was having a hard time with a stalker,” Miu explained. “She’d turned this guy down after he’d asked her out, but then he started following her home and things like that. That’s why I asked Taku for a favor: pretend to be Arisa’s boyfriend. I’d thought that would make the stalker stop bothering her.”

“Wh-Why did you ask Takkun to do that...? Was there no one else you could’ve asked?”

“He was convenient since they went to the same school and were in the same class. Also, Arisa’s cute, isn’t she?”

I fell silent. Miu was right, she was cute. She was young and energetic, and she had an allure to her that I didn’t.

“Look, the whole idea would’ve only worked if the guy pretending to date her wouldn’t take advantage of the position to try to make a move on Arisa, right? So I thought I should ask someone who didn’t have even a one-in-a-million chance of falling for her.”

“Th-That’s why you chose Takkun...?”

“Yeah. I mean, there was no way Taku would fall for someone other than you,” Miu said as if it were a definitive truth. The way she declared it so confidently made me feel a bit embarrassed. “Taku waffled a bit about agreeing to it, but in the end, he decided to help out. At the end of the day, he’s a good guy. Of course, things got crazy once he got involved. He was so obsessed with being her boyfriend for the shortest amount of time possible that he took charge and resolved the stalking issue in no time flat.” Miu sounded both impressed and exasperated at the same time.

“H-He got the guy to stop?!”

“Yeah. He did a bunch of research and then showed the stalker he had proof the guy was stalking her. Actually, once Taku drove him into a corner, he ended up hearing the dude out and managed to settle things smoothly...”

“That’s incredible...” Maybe it was because he hadn’t wanted to sound boastful, but Takkun hadn’t talked about that part of the story.

I had no idea he’d done something so cool. What’s up with that? He’s totally

like the protagonist of a manga or something. Were you always off acting like some kind of heartthrob unbeknownst to me, Takkun?

“Taku is honestly the complete package. He’s smart and athletic, his face isn’t half bad, and he’s good-natured and caring... If he weren’t smitten with you, girls would be all over him—maybe even like the protagonist of a harem romantic comedy.”

“D-Don’t describe him like that...”

That makes me sound like a villain! It’s like I seduced him down a different path instead of letting him take the harem route he was supposed to be on!

I guess I tricked him into the “friend’s mom” route. That would definitely be fan-made DLC, not included in the official game...

“Anyway, there was another issue after all the stalker stuff was settled,” Miu said to bring us back on topic. I waited silently for her reveal. “Arisa actually fell for Taku.”

That part of the story I *had* heard yesterday. Takkun hadn’t hidden anything about that and had told me everything.

“I’d picked Taku because I hadn’t wanted the guy playing the part of her boyfriend to fall for her, but then she turned around and did the reverse... It was completely unexpected, even to me.”

That wasn’t surprising. Takkun had probably seemed like a hero to her at the time. I couldn’t blame her for falling for him.

“Of course, Taku immediately turned her down,” Miu said. “And that’s where the story ends—or, at least, as far as I know hearing about it from her sister.” Miu took a deep breath. “That’s really all there is to it, so you have nothing to worry about.”

While I was thinking about what Miu said, she added, “I don’t think Taku kept quiet about it because he has regrets or anything like that. He probably just didn’t mention it because it’s not a fun story for you to hear how, you know, someone else had asked him out.”

“I know...” I wasn’t blaming Takkun for anything. He hadn’t done anything

wrong—in fact, he'd been helping someone, like a hero would. It would've been strange to be jealous just because someone had asked him out in the past... And even if Takkun *had* had a real ex-girlfriend, it would've been weird to be bothered by an ex from so many years ago. But...

“B-But, there's still a part of me that feels uneasy... There's someone so young and cute who asked Takkun out in the past, and now he's interning with her...”

Running into your ex at your workplace was a plot point straight out of some trendy TV show. *What do I do? What do I do if the old flames of their relationship are rekindled?*

“Wh-What if that girl still has regrets and makes a move on Taku during their internship?!”

“Taku probably didn't say anything because you'd have needless concerns like that.”

“Urgh...” I groaned in pain from the critical blow she'd landed on me.

“You worry too much,” Miu continued in a carefree tone. “Even if Arisa were to do something like that, there's no way Taku's feelings would waver. Didn't he introduce you to her yesterday and everything?”

“W-Well...”

“Hm?”

“T-Takkun *did* try to introduce me, but, um...” I began recalling the events of the previous night.

“I guess you could say I'm like his ex-girlfriend.”

Right after those words had left Arisa's mouth and my mind went blank...

“H-Hey, Arisa,” Takkun said in a panic, quickly correcting her. “What are you talking about? You're not my ex-girlfriend.”

“Ha ha, come on. I am *technically*, right?”

“It's not fine, it's completely different...” Takkun seemed troubled and

frustrated. He then turned to me with an anxious look on his face. “Miss Ayako... Arisa is a friend from high school. We’re currently interning together... First of all, she’s not my ex. I’ll explain it to you in detail later.” He was having some difficulty finding the right words, but Takkun was firmly denying she was his ex. It was still too much for my intoxicated mind to keep up with.

“By the way, Takumi, who’s this?” Arisa asked, looking at me. She looked truly confused as she asked that simple question, like she couldn’t imagine what kind of relationship we had—like she didn’t consider it a possibility that we were a couple at all.

“This is—” Takkun started with a serious look.

I knew what he was going to say. He was going to introduce me to her. He was going to tell her that I was his girlfriend and we were a couple in a serious relationship. The moment that clicked for me, I interrupted him. “I-I’m just a relative of his!” I blurted out for some reason. “I’m a relative from Takkun’s mom’s side. I’m taking care of him while he’s in Tokyo for his internship.”

“Huh... M-Miss Ayako?”

“Oh, I see. It’s nice to meet you.” Arisa seemed to believe the lie that I’d come up with on the spot.

“I was out drinking with someone from work,” I began explaining. “I got a little drunk, so I had Takkun come pick me up. Boys are so dependable.”

“Ha ha, they really are,” Arisa agreed. “Takumi is a really dependable guy.”

“You’re right about that. I hope you continue to be friends with Takkun.”

“Of course, it’s my pleasure.”

I did my best to play the part of a relative and kept up the small talk. I had no idea what kind of face Takkun was making while I did that—I was too scared to look his way.

“Jeez, what the heck?” Miu seemed deeply exasperated. “Why would you lie like that?”

“I-I don’t know. I just... I was so embarrassed. I was embarrassed to claim I

was his girlfriend in that moment.”

It’d probably been panic. I already hadn’t been thinking properly because of the alcohol, then came the insane addition of an “ex-girlfriend.” It was before I had heard about the plan with Takkun pretending to date her, so there’d been a part of me that’d worried about her truly being his ex—that perhaps Takkun had liked this girl in the past. That thought had jumped into my mind in an instant, and I’d ended up acting in a way even I myself didn’t understand as a result.

“I’d suddenly heard she was his ex, and she was this young, cute, fashionable college student...meanwhile, I’m an old lady in her thirties. On top of that, I was in the pathetic state of being helped home after getting too drunk... It was difficult to say ‘I’m his current girlfriend’ given all that...”

“I see—so you ran from it.”

“I-I didn’t run...”

“You ran. You thought that you were no match for her as a woman or something, right?”

Miu’s pressing left me unable to answer. I probably *had* run. I’d run from various things and had ended up coming up with a lie to get out of facing my feelings. It was a surprise attack, and I’d responded by fleeing from the enemy. I hadn’t thought I could win, so I’d chosen not to fight, even though I’d known that it wasn’t about “winning” or “losing.”

“Taku was probably hurt by that.”

“Urgh... Y-You’re probably right.”

I really did something awful to him. I’d thought I was prepared for this before we started dating, yet I ended up totally flustered just because an ex appeared. Even for me, that was pathetic.

“Even if Arisa was actually his ex-girlfriend, there would still be no reason for you to be flustered. You’re his girlfriend now.”

“Yeah...”

“Well, Taku having an ex-girlfriend is impossible in the first place. He’s only

had eyes for you to the point that it's kind of funny. He's the man that's loved you and only you for all this time." Miu chuckled nervously, then with a sense of pride in her tone, she added, "Look at it from his perspective. Taku is so charmed by you that he's been in love with you for ten straight years. Be more confident! Feel inflammable!"



“Yeah... Thanks, Miu...for what it’s worth, though, the way you used ‘inflammable’ just now was wrong. I think you meant ‘invincible’—the former means things like ‘quick to anger.’”

“Ugh, save the editing for work, mom!” Miu fired back, sounding a bit embarrassed. She probably didn’t like that I’d corrected her when she was trying to stick the landing—I could’ve just let it slide, but the editor in me couldn’t resist. “I guess you’re back on your feet again,” Miu said with a sigh.

“Ha ha, talking to you made me feel better.” My mood had improved, and I also remembered something—the resolve I’d had before Takkun and I started dating when I’d come clean to Miu.

Several weeks ago, during summer break, back when I’d mistakenly thought Miu liked Takkun... I’d still wanted to date him whether she’d had feelings for him or not. Even if he was the person my daughter loved, I’d made up my mind that I didn’t want to give him up. It’d ended up being a misunderstanding, but my resolve from back then was surely real.

I’m being pathetic. I need to get it together. I need to remember my resolve from back then and carry it with me. I have to.

Yeah, that’s right—I’m the woman who was willing to fight her daughter for Takkun. That’s why there’s no way that I’d lose to the likes of a fake girlfriend.



“How would I know?” A voice coldly responded over the phone. “You should do whatever you want.”

I was at the condo in Tokyo. I’d finished eating a simple lunch I’d put together, and I’d decided to call my friend Satoya before I took care of the remaining chores. I’d wanted to ask for his advice about Miss Ayako since I was incredibly desperate, but his response was unexpectedly harsh.

“Why are you acting like that?”

“I don’t have time for this right now. I have a report I need to resubmit soon... Ugh, this is all your fault for going to Tokyo,” Satoya exaggeratedly lamented. “I figured I could be independent and work on a report on my own after you left in

September...but I immediately got hit with a resubmission. Until now, all I had to do was take the same courses as you, study together with you, and do our reports together, and I was fine!”

“I don’t think that’s my fault,” I said. It felt a bit egregious for him to pin the blame on me. *Well, maybe I do have some responsibility here for spoiling him all this time.*

“Anyway, I’m busy, so don’t call me over ridiculous things.”

“R-Ridiculous? I’m seriously—”

“It *is* ridiculous. I have no idea why you’re calling. What exactly is your concern?”

“Like I said... I’m worried that I made Miss Ayako feel bad.” I couldn’t forget it—I couldn’t forget the face Miss Ayako had made last night when Arisa said she was my ex-girlfriend. *Jeez, what am I doing here? I should’ve just told her everything about Arisa if this was going to happen.* Because I’d gotten weirdly indecisive about whether I should tell her or not, things had ended up coming to light in the worst way possible. I felt terrible about it all, but...

“Who cares?” Satoya said, sounding truly annoyed as he dismissed my concerns. “You didn’t do anything wrong, so you have nothing to be worried about. So what if you ran into your fake ex-girlfriend? Unless you have some regrets about it, you should stand tall and be unbothered.”

“Well, it’s not like I’m not at fault. In the end, I made Miss Ayako feel bad because I didn’t handle things properly—”

“I’m telling you to stop thinking that way,” Satoya said firmly. “You’re not doing Miss Ayako any favors by treating her like some fragile object.”

I didn’t know what to say. “It’s not like you got caught cheating or something, so what are you getting so flustered over?” he spat exasperatedly. “You might be thinking ‘I always want to avoid Miss Ayako getting hurt, even if it’s only a one in a million chance,’ but if you keep trying to be overly considerate like that, you’re just going to make her life harder. That’s not kindness, it’s just cowardice.”

Perhaps it was because he was on edge with his report being due soon, but

Satoya seemed even more merciless than usual. Either that, or I was just being so pathetic that he needed to bring down the hammer and drive the advice straight into my heart. “Well, I understand how you feel... She’s the woman you’ve been in love with for so many years. I can see why you would want to be extra careful to not upset her in any way now that you’re finally dating—you want to work tirelessly to serve her, like a knight to a princess. But...Miss Ayako isn’t someone unattainable. She’s by your side now, isn’t she? She’s not some princess locked in a high tower, she’s your housemate. You need to graduate from your unrequited mindset.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said, nodding in agreement. “You’re right about everything. Sorry for taking up your time with this ridiculous nonsense.”

“Don’t worry about it. I mean, if you really want to thank me, then maybe you can help me with my report...?”

“I can’t help you with a report for a class I haven’t taken,” I pointed out.

“I knew it. Well, pray for me, then.”

“Yeah, I’ll pray with everything I’ve got.”

After ending the call, I sunk into the couch and sighed as I looked up at the ceiling. “Treating her like a fragile object, huh?”

I’d never had any intention of doing such a thing, but perhaps to an outsider, it seemed like I was. I’d thought I was treating her right, but maybe I wasn’t actually accepting her for who she was. I hadn’t fully trusted her as my girlfriend.

“Dammit... What am I doing?”

Maybe I really have been dragging my unrequited feelings into the relationship without realizing it. I had confessed my feelings to her because I couldn’t take things being one-sided any longer—I hadn’t wanted anyone else to have her, and I had spent all these years wanting her to be mine. Despite that, now that we were actually dating, I was too scared to do anything but treat her like a fragile object. I worshiped her, and in the process of doing so, I’d abased myself, putting her on a pedestal and considering her to be above me. *This is no different from back when I was harboring unrequited feelings for her.*

Miss Ayako was no longer the person I'd one-sidedly crushed on. She wasn't a goddess or a princess—she was my partner, and I had to walk alongside her in life as her equal.

"I need to graduate." I needed to grow up from this—I was going to break away from my ten years of unrequited feelings.



That night, we set some time aside to talk before dinner. It wasn't like one of us had decided to do so, but it'd naturally just happened. We sat across from each other at the living room table awkwardly for a while...then we both broke the silence.

"Uh," Takkun began.

"Um," I said at the same time.

"Oh, sorry. Go ahead, Miss Ayako."

"N-No, it's okay. You go ahead, Takkun."

After we'd both tried to let the other go first, there was another short moment of silence.

"Well... I'll start then," Takkun said, readjusting his position. "Miss Ayako... I'm sorry I didn't say anything about Arisa," he said, bowing his head in apology. "I should've told you everything from the start... I fretted about it by myself without saying anything to you, and in the end, I made you distrust me."

"I-It's okay. I know that you were trying to be considerate in your own way."

"You're wrong..." Takkun said. He looked like he was enduring pain as he continued. "It's true that I thought I was doing what was best for you, but...at the end of the day, I was just afraid."

"You were afraid...?"

"I was afraid of you disliking me even the slightest amount."

I wasn't sure what to say. "After loving you for so long, we're finally dating, and I'm so happy...so I wanted to avoid anything that was even a little bit negative," Takkun admitted. "I didn't want you to lose even a gram of affection

for me. That's why I ran instead of saying what I should have, both to you and to her."

I silently thought back on the week I'd spent with Takkun. He'd been so kind—almost too kind—and perfect. He'd go to his internship, which he hadn't yet gotten used to, yet he still did chores and made food. He would do his best to support me so I could focus on my work. He'd probably been the spitting image of what most women would dream of as their ideal boyfriend.

But maybe that perfection had been a manifestation of his anxieties. He'd been so afraid of me disliking him that he'd acted overly perfect.

"We're finally dating, but I haven't changed from when I had one-sided feelings for you. I'd thought that I had to deal with it all by myself, but I'm going to stop doing that." Takkun looked me right in the eyes. "Miss Ayako. Arisa Odaki is a friend from high school. A lot happened in the past, from me being asked to pretend to date her to her actually asking me out, but now...I don't think anything of her. From back then and to this very day, you've always been the only person I love, Miss Ayako." Takkun spoke so clearly that it was refreshing. His passionate, loving declaration was enough to make me blush just listening to it. "I will be working with Arisa at my internship, but I won't have any untoward feelings for her. There's no way that I could. Please believe me."

"Okay... I believe you." I said it before I'd even realized it. I wasn't trying to act tough, or be considerate—I was able to believe him from the bottom of my heart. His confident attitude made me feel safe.

Takkun flashed a relieved smile. "I really should've just told you from the start... Then we wouldn't have gotten in this mess."

"You're right... I might've preferred that as well."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize—I'm hardly one to talk. Well... I guess it's my turn now." I readjusted my position in my seat. "I'm sorry for lying to Arisa and saying I was your relative."

Takkun didn't have anything to immediately add, so I continued my apology. "I didn't know what to think when I suddenly heard she was your ex...but that

isn't really an excuse. I was scared—I was afraid of going up against a young girl like her.”

Arisa was a cute college student who was ten years younger than me, and she'd seemed like she had something going on with Takkun. I hadn't been able to work up the nerve to confidently declare I was his girlfriend while I'd had her in front of me, so I'd made up an excuse and tried to ride out the situation.

“I thought that I'd never win against her, that I didn't want to be compared to her... It's silly, isn't it? It's not something where you can win or lose.”

“Miss Ayako...”

“You must've been hurt too, right?”

“Well, I...” Takkun was about to reflexively back me up, but then he stopped to think for a moment. “Yes, you're right,” he said, nodding as he looked down. “I'd wanted you to tell the truth. I'd wanted to properly introduce you as the woman I'm dating.”

“I understand. I'm sorry—next time, I won't run away. No matter who asks, I'll proudly tell them, ‘I'm Takkun's girlfriend,’” I declared, being sure to look him in the eye. “I'm going to be more confident in myself.”

To be honest, I didn't have any confidence. I was quite old to be experiencing my first relationship, and I was a bit of a klutz even when it counted. But I wasn't going to keep falling into self-deprecation anymore.

“Despite how I am, this is the person that you fell in love with, so I should trust in you.” I wasn't going to believe in myself, but in Takkun. I was going to believe in the man who'd continued to love me for ten years. If I did that, I might be able to believe in myself one day.

“That's right,” Takkun said. “I've continued to love you for ten years because...well, it's not entirely untrue that I have some stalker-like tendencies, but...more than that, it's because you're just that wonderful of a woman.” His response caught me off guard. “I had unrequited feelings for a decade because you're truly charming, Miss Ayako.”

My heart was burning hot and felt like it was filling up. *Jeez, Takkun is always like this. He doesn't think highly of himself, he's modest, and sometimes he*

worries too much...but when it comes to his feelings for me, he's so certain it feels embarrassing.

"You're complimenting me too much..."

"No, it's not too much."

"I-I'll have you know, the same goes for you. If I'm as wonderful as you say, then you're handsome and charming enough to make this wonderful woman fall for you."

"N-Not at all, I'm not that special."

"You are, you are very special."

"Then that means that you're so cute and beautiful that you've made this handsome guy fall for you."

"Th-Then you're so sincere and manly that you made this cute and beautiful woman smitten with you!"

After going back and forth, we both fell silent and came to our senses at the same time. We realized just how cringey we were being.

"I wonder what we were trying to compete over..." Takkun said.

"You said it... That was pretty gross of us."

"Pfft..."

"Ha ha."

After a moment of awkwardness, we both started laughing. All our tension gave way to a sense of warm relief.

After taking a breath, I added, "We were both probably hesitating a little too much."

This was the first relationship either of us had been in, and we'd suddenly started living together as soon as it'd begun, so we'd both ended up holding back and getting nervous...but the fact of the matter was, we were living *together*. There was no reason we needed to make sense of all this without relying on each other.

"We shouldn't hesitate to tell each other what's on our minds."

We had to make sure we didn't put ourselves down more than necessary, and we also couldn't let ourselves idolize each other too much. We needed to face each other as equals. After all, it was only for three months, but we were going to live together, and we could even become a family in the future—there was no way this relationship was going to continue if we were only in love with the idea of it.

“I'm really happy that you've been trying to do everything for me since we've started living together, but...don't push yourself too much, okay?”

“I've never thought I was pushing myself... I did things because I wanted to. It was never a pain at all—in fact, it all felt worth doing.”

“Th-That's not what I meant... Um, what I'm trying to say is...” It was embarrassing, but I'd made up my mind and decided to say what was on it. “I-I want you to let me take care of you more!” Takkun's eyes were wide with surprise, and he was stunned. I endured the embarrassment and continued. “It's not fair, Takkun... You always take care of me... I want to take care of you too.”

I want him to rely on me more. I want to spoil him. I want him to be more selfish. I want him to want me more—much, much more.

“It might be my fault for not being a very caring person, but...you really don't have any openings, Takkun. You don't leave your clothes on the floor, and you clean the bathtub drain, and you replace the toilet paper right away... Why are you such a handsome, competent man?! You can afford to show me a bit of your slobbish side!”

“Um, well...” Takkun seemed troubled, which wasn't a surprise. I was pretty much criticizing him for not doing enough things wrong. “I would like you to take care of me too, b-but...isn't it uncool for a guy to be too clingy and spoiled?”

“N-Not at all... In fact, it makes a woman's heart skip a beat when men unexpectedly show their weak side to them. Women enjoy thinking things like, ‘Jeez, where would this man be without me?’” *Actually...what am I even saying? Maybe I'm being a little too honest.* “A-Anyways, there's no reason you have to force yourself to act tough. You can rely on me more. That would make

me happier...”

“U-Understood,” Takkun said, nodding uncomfortably. “I’ll do my best to rely on you more.”

“It’s not something you have to do your best at...” I said, nervously smiling at his earnestness.

“That same goes for you, though, Miss Ayako. You shouldn’t push yourself, and if there’s anything you want me to do, please tell me.”

“Yeah, I know...” I continued. “Well then...could I ask for something right away?”

Chapter 9: The Declaration and the Misunderstanding



Early afternoon on Sunday, Takkun and I arrived at a café near the train station. We chose to sit at the back of the shop, where we wouldn't be as visible to the other customers and our conversation wouldn't be easily overheard.

Several minutes later, the person we were meeting up with arrived. Arisa Odaki was once again dressed in an outfit typical of a college student—something fitting for someone her age and much too youthful for me to pull off. Compared to Friday night, she seemed much more polite and composed. It seemed like she'd been a bit drunk and overexcited back then, just as I'd thought.

"Um... R-Really?" Arisa's surprise was apparent after she'd heard us explain everything. She kept looking back and forth between Takkun's face and mine as if she couldn't believe it. "You're really Takumi's current girlfriend...?"

"It's true," I said, my hands balled into fists under the table as I maintained proper eye contact with her. I desperately choked down my desire to make something up and flee this situation. I wasn't going to let her look, which practically screamed "Is he really dating this old lady?" bother me. After all, I was probably mistaken about her reaction.

I'm all right. I'm not scared anymore. After all, I have my boyfriend, whom I trust, beside me.

"It's nice to meet you. My name is Ayako Katsuragi. I'm a single mother with a child in high school, and I'm thirty-[REDACTED] this year." Arisa's eyes widened a bit more as I introduced myself without lying about a single detail. She was probably surprised about the fact that I had a child. "I'm in a serious relationship with Takkun— I mean, with Takumi."

She didn't say anything, so I added, "I'm sorry for lying the other night."

"It's fine..." Arisa responded, shaking her head slightly. It seemed that the surprise hadn't worn off yet. "I-I'm sorry as well... I'm just so surprised... It's rude of me to be surprised, isn't it?"

"No, no. It's fine. That's the normal reaction to have."

"So, about you being his relative..."

"That was a lie. We're neighbors, but we're not related."

"What about you two living together right now?"

"That's actually true. We're both working in Tokyo temporarily, so we're living together."

"I see..." Arisa seemed a bit stunned, but her expression suddenly clouded over with guilt. "U-Um, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have joked about being his ex-girlfriend. I didn't know about you two... When I said I was his ex, it wasn't true. We never really dated... Ugh, why did I even say that?"

"I-It's all right," I said quickly, trying to soothe her. She seemed like she felt truly bad about it. "You don't have to worry about anything. Takumi explained everything to me." I looked at Takkun, who nodded.

Takkun turned to Arisa and bowed his head slightly. "Sorry, I've already told Miss Ayako about us."

"It's okay, you don't have to apologize," Arisa said. "I'm the one who's at fault for saying such a weird thing. I should be thanking you for explaining what happened." Arisa then began staring at the both of us. "Ha ha, it's strange. I was surprised at first, but now everything makes sense." She exhaled before putting on a gentle smile. "I thought things were a bit strange when I met you the other night. You two seemed pretty close for relatives."

"Hey, Takumi, do you remember?" Arisa suddenly asked, her faint smile still on her face as she turned to look at him. "When I asked you out, you rejected me because you liked someone else."

"Yeah," Takkun answered.

"Was that person Miss Katsuragi?"

“That would be the case...” he said, slightly bashful. “I’ve liked Miss Ayako since back then.”

“I see. So you were telling the truth,” Arisa said with an awkward, nervous laugh. “To be honest...I didn’t believe you. I’d just thought that you used a cliché phrase to reject me. I mean, at school you didn’t seem to be interested in girls at all. I’d rarely ever seen you even talk to any. I thought you’d just used a standard line to make me get over you.”

“That’s what you thought of me?”

“But it was true... You really did like someone,” Arisa said with a cheerful smile. “Ha ha, I’m kind of glad to hear that I was rejected for a sincere reason and it wasn’t some half-hearted thing. I feel like it’s become a nicer memory.” It was a calm, satisfied smile. She seemed like she was truly happy to hear the truth behind her heartbreak.

“Hey, Arisa...” I needed to ask her something. It was probably going to rub salt into her wound, but I needed to steel myself and ask her. “Do you still like Takumi?”

“What...?” Arisa seemed confused.

“Oh, I’m sorry for asking such a mean question. You don’t have to answer. No matter what your answer is, what I want to say won’t change.”

“Um—”

“Arisa!” I shouted loudly. She was about to say something, but I was quicker, fueled by the burning feelings in my chest. This was one of the reasons I’d asked Takkun to set this meeting with Arisa today—the first had been to properly introduce myself, and the second was to say... “I won’t let you have Takkun, no matter what!”

I wanted to declare war—to face her and tell her my resolve. “No matter what you’re thinking, or what you may try to do, I’m going to continue dating Takkun... I won’t let anyone else have my spot. I’m going to hold on to it with everything I’ve got, plant my feet here, and protect my position as his girlfriend.”

Arisa fell silent, like she was taken aback.

Takkun seemed flustered. “Um, Miss Ayako—”

“You stay out of this, Takkun,” I said, quickly stopping him from interjecting. “This is between us women.” I wasn’t going to stop. *Now that I’ve steeled myself, no one can stop me!* “I’ve heard about what happened in high school. Seems like Takkun was being quite the cool guy, unbeknownst to me. I can understand why you wouldn’t be able to give up on him after being rejected once. I can understand *very* well why you would continue crushing on him even after years have passed.”

“Um...”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to say anything. I know what you’re trying to get at. It’s true, I’m an old lady in my thirties, and I was born during the Showa period, and I have a child in high school, and I’m at an age where I’m starting to worry about my physique... But you, you’re a young college student in your prime. Going by general societal standards, you have a much higher market value as a woman than I do. I think ten out of ten men would pick you over me. That’s normal. If I was a man, I’d rather date a young college student than an old lady with a kid.”

“Uh...”

“But, despite all of that, Takkun picked me!” I shouted out my love for him, just as the passion in my heart had demanded I do—I was allowing the intense emotions within me to take over. *My infinite fountain of love power is an undefeatable source of strength propelling me forward!* “No matter how passionately you make a move on him, Takkun’s feelings won’t waver. I believe in him. Even in the one in a million, no, one in a billion chance that his feelings do waver a bit...I’ll seduce him with even more amazing moves and take him back!”

I’m going to fight. Relationships aren’t done once you enter into them. The story continues once you get together, and the story of love needs to be maintained through effort. People need to put in the work to be good partners—to be partners that walk alongside each other for their whole lives. You can’t relax and take the miracle of being with someone you love so much for granted.

“I’m Takkun’s girlfriend, and I want to continue spending my life with him.

That's why...I won't lose to you, no matter what!"

I said it. I said everything I wanted to say. I declared war with everything I had, and I did it by launching a surprise attack. This is probably the first chapter of the love triangle between the three of us. It could maybe be dubbed the "Fury of the Fake Ex" arc—a messy love triangle where the current girlfriend and the fake ex-girlfriend fight over one man. No matter how messy it gets, I won't lose! Even if I end up covered in mud, I'm going to fight with everything I have and continue being Takkun's girlfriend!

After hearing Takkun's girlfriend declare war on her, flames of love began burning hot behind Arisa's eyes...or, that was what I'd thought would happen, but...

"H-Ha ha..." Arisa laughed, a strained smile on her face as she looked at me awkwardly.

As for Takkun...he was staring toward the ground and had his forehead buried in his palm. He was bright red and seemed quite embarrassed.

H-Huh...? Why do things seem so awkward? It's as if a joke I told bombed big time...

"Um," Arisa finally began. She seemed like she was having a hard time getting the words out. "I have a boyfriend..."

"Yes, I met this upperclassman at a welcome party for new students, and we just ended up dating... I think we've been dating for about two years now."

"I was out drinking with him on Friday night. I actually ran into you two just as he left to go to the restroom."

"We fight sometimes, but...generally, we get along. He's graduated and working, so we're talking about moving in together soon."

"So...I don't really have any intention of chasing after Takumi after all this time..."

"O-Of course, I truly liked him back then. He saved me, which made him seem so cool, and I was hurt when he rejected me, but...that was so long ago... I

haven't dragged that crush on for this long."

"Um... I don't think anything of Takumi now, so please don't worry. He's really just a boy I liked in the past."

After going over everything, Arisa left the café. I paid for her drink, since it was the least I could do. I felt like I *had* to pay her way after calling her out here and getting her involved in this silliness.

The remaining two of us sat in silence. It was uncomfortable, to say the least. All I could do was cover my face with both hands and look down.

"W-Well," Takkun began as if he couldn't take the awkward silence any longer. "It's kind of like I got rejected." I didn't respond. "I have to go back to interning with Arisa tomorrow, but...how do I face her?"

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

Aaagh, I'm so embarrassed! What did I just do?! My fighting spirit was all for nothing! My resolve went out of control for no reason! I'm so embarrassed! I feel like disappearing!

"Talk about jumping to conclusions..." Takumi said.

"I-I mean... I totally thought that she still had feelings for you..." *Well, I guess that's textbook conclusion-jumping, isn't it?*

It seemed that Arisa had gotten over Takkun long ago. She was doing well with her current boyfriend, and she had no intention of getting between Takkun and me. There was nothing to trigger a love triangle. The "Fury of the Fake Ex" arc would never get past the proposal phase.

"Actually...did you know, Takkun? That she had a boyfriend?"

"Well, she told me on the first day of our internship."

"Why didn't you tell me?!"

"I-I didn't think it was something you needed to know... At first, I hadn't told you about Arisa at all, and yesterday and today we were talking about other things, so..."

He hadn't failed to tell me out of any sense of malice. I knew that. *I know it,*

but... I wish he'd told me! My mindset would've been totally different if I'd known she has a boyfriend! Takkun is so sincere, but...he's a bit off. He doesn't fully understand how women think!

"Ugh, I'm so embarrassed. I'm so embarrassed I could die. Arisa was clearly put off by me. She's definitely thinking 'That old lady is crazy.'"

What in the world am I doing? I can't believe I thought of her as a rival when she was so far from it. I was so hostile that I even declared war on her! I feel so bad. I did something bad to Arisa, Takkun, and, at this point, the entire world!

"Ch-Cheer up," Takkun said, unable to watch me as I was hit with a lethal dose of humiliation. "Um... It was embarrassing, but it made me happy that you so clearly declared that you're my girlfriend."

"Takkun..."

"I'd prefer it if you held back a little from now on though."

"Yeah... I'm sorry. I won't ever do it again."

After I apologized again, Takkun began chuckling. The redness in his face died down, and he took a sip of his drink. "It's a bit unfortunate," he said with a light sigh.

"What's unfortunate?"

"That Arisa doesn't like me."

"What...?"

"If she'd still liked me and she'd tried to steal me from you...that might've been better."

"Wh-What?" *No way.* My anxiety began to accelerate. *Why would he say that? Does Takkun still like—*

"Because," he began with a slightly mischievous look, "if that'd happened, you'd have pulled out all the stops to seduce me, right?"

I fell silent, completely stunned. It took me a moment to realize that he was teasing me.

"I really wanted to see what amazing moves you'd seduce me with..."

“Wh-What are you talking about? Jeez, I’d never do something like that! I said that in the heat of the moment—you’re taking it the wrong way!”

“I see... What a shame.”

“I mean, even if I *were* to seduce you, I’m running out of new things. I’ve already hit so many milestones, like wearing a swimsuit and a maid outfit... I’ve even worn nothing but an apron. What more do you expect from me?”

“I guess a bunny girl costume is all that’s left.”

“Ugh! I-I refuse! Why would I dress like a bunny girl?!”

“Are you setting up a bit?”

“I’m not! This is *not* one of those ‘Title Card: Ayako Wears a Bunny Outfit’ situations!” After that comedic jab, I let out a heavy sigh.

Takkun then grabbed the check and stood up. “Let’s get going, then.”

“Yeah...” I said, nodding as I thought about what he said. *Let’s go...to our home. To the home Takkun and I live together in...*

After we left the café, we held hands naturally, neither of us initiating it.

“We should probably shop for dinner on the way home,” Takkun said.

“That’s a good idea. Um...did we decide on who’s cooking tonight?”

“I was thinking: would you like to try making dinner together?”

“Oh, that’s good! Sounds like fun!”

“All right, it’s decided. Now we need to figure out what we’re making...”

“What about gyoza? I think I saw on a TV show or something that it’s fun for couples to make together.”

“Gyoza sounds good.”

“It’s decided then. Hee hee, what should we put in them?”

“Oh, I want to do the crispy skirt thing.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. Very good. We should definitely do that.”

We walked the streets of Tokyo as we had a normal, everyday conversation,

holding hands along the way. I didn't know how we appeared to others, but my heart was filled with a warm happiness. It truly felt like we were living together.

Epilogue



It was nighttime, and we'd finished our very fun two-person gyoza party.

"Phew..." I was soaking in the bathtub. Miss Ayako said she had something to take care of, so I took her up on her offer to let me get in first. Now that all the issues surrounding Arisa had been settled and my mind was free of worry, I could enjoy this first bath in peace...or so I would've liked.

Truth be told, my mind was the complete opposite of worry-free. I was agonizing, in fact—because one problem had been solved, another problem I'd been avoiding was once again rearing its head.

"Is it okay now...?"

I was agonizing over my and Ayako's, well...physical relationship. Was it okay to seduce her now? Was it okay to make a move on her? I was spending my solitude trying to come to an answer.

It wouldn't have been an understatement to say I'd been ready for action from the moment we'd started living together. The various sides of Miss Ayako I'd seen during our time living together had all been so alluring and sexy that, as a man, I couldn't help but desire her. I wanted to sleep with her so badly—I wanted to become one with the woman I loved. And yet, for all this time, I'd had no idea what to do with this overwhelming feeling.

"Ugh, dammit... Why did I say those things?"

The first night of our cohabitation, I'd said that I would wait until Miss Ayako felt ready. I didn't regret saying it since it was the truth, not to mention I couldn't aggressively pursue Miss Ayako when she'd seemed so scared...but, because of that, things were going to be much more difficult. *I've done it. Because I said those things, I can't make a move on her for a while... If I do, she'll think "What? After he said all that, this is how he acts?"*

Because of what I'd said, I'd spent every day since then holding back. The way

she looked when she got out of the bath, when she was in her pajamas, when I'd accidentally seen her changing that one time, when I'd catch all those unexpected glimpses of this and that... I'd fought off all manner of temptation. Even with Miss Ayako's ultimate, alluring body, I choked down my boiling desire along with my spit.

After running into Arisa at my internship, those feelings had ended up taking a back seat...but now that everything with Arisa had been settled, I had to face this problem once again.

Actually, after everything that'd happened with Arisa, there was a part of me that wanted to rethink things. *Miss Ayako said she didn't want me to push myself—that I should rely on her more.* Because I'd been holding back, things had ended up becoming unnecessarily uncomfortable. I wanted to fix my bad habit of restraining my feelings out of excessive respect for her.

With that said...was my holding myself back to blame for our lack of a physical relationship? She was the most important woman in the world to me, so I wanted to treasure this sort of thing. I didn't want to undermine its significance. I wanted it to be sincere. Those feelings were true, but...perhaps I was using those feelings to restrain myself in a new way. Perhaps I thought I was being considerate, but it was all for my own satisfaction. Maybe Miss Ayako also wanted to become one with me as soon as possible...

"No, that couldn't be. That can't be...right?"

Miss Ayako wouldn't... Well, women have sexual urges too, and they say a woman's libido only really gets started in her thirties.

Now that I'm thinking about it, we didn't add any garlic to the gyoza tonight because Miss Ayako said we didn't need it. Could it be that she was expecting something physical to happen and wanted to be mindful of how her breath smells?

"Ugh, I don't know." *I don't know. I have no idea at all.* I didn't have enough relationship experience to understand a woman on this level. For someone who'd spent this long being a virgin, it was much too difficult an issue.

With my thoughts at a dead end, I decided to get out of the tub. I might've overheated myself if I'd stayed in any longer. I sat on a stool and began washing

my body. Just then...

Outside the door to the bathing area, I heard the door to the bathroom open and shut. I turned around and saw the faint outline of Miss Ayako's body on the other side of the frosted glass—she'd come into the bathroom.

Did she come to get something? Contrary to my guess, Miss Ayako just stood still there for a while. *I wonder what's going on,* I thought as I watched...then she began rustling around. I couldn't make out what she was doing from just her silhouette, and I thought it would be rude to stare for too long, so I turned back around and reached for the shampoo since I liked to start from the top.

"T-Takkun..." Just before I pushed down the nozzle, Miss Ayako called out to me from the other side of the door.

"Yes?" I responded.

Though she spoke with a high-pitched voice tinged with nervousness and embarrassment, her words were clear. "C-Can I come in?"

I didn't understand what was happening. I thought I'd misheard her. After all, Miss Ayako would never have asked for something like that. *She wants to join me? No way. Only in my dreams.* "Huh? Wh-What? Um, just now, what did you...?"

"I'm coming in..." Miss Ayako said, without waiting for me to answer. The folding door to the bathing area opened up, and I gulped.

Miss Ayako had taken her clothes off, but she wasn't completely naked. She had a towel wrapped around her body covering her private areas. Still, one small, thin strip of cloth was hardly enough to dampen the impact of her captivating body. Her voluptuous breasts looked no less massive beneath the towel—if anything, it emphasized her deep cleavage. Her curvy hips and prominent butt drew a sultry line through the steamy air, leading the eye to her daisy-white thighs peeking out from under her towel.

"Wha— Wh-What are you doing, Miss Ayako?!" I turned around in my seat in a panic. I'd thought it wouldn't be right to keep staring at her scantily clad body, and more than anything, I was fully naked, so I couldn't let her see me from the front...but then I immediately realized that since this was the bathing area,

there was a mirror right in front of me. It was a little blurry from the steam, but I could still make out the reflection of her face clearly.

“I-I thought I’d wash your back for you.”

“My back...?”

“Maybe I need more time before I can wear a bunny costume...but I haven’t done this for you yet, right?”

Even in the blurry mirror, it was easy to see she was beet red. She was probably trying desperately to seem composed, but I was sure she was choking back an incredible amount of embarrassment. And yet, behind her nervous eyes was a bright light. It was a light of determination, like she’d made up her mind.

“I won’t run anymore...” she said. “I won’t run, and I won’t hold back. If I want to do anything, and if I want you to do anything, I won’t just expect you to pick up on it—I’ll say I want it, in no uncertain terms. Even if it’s difficult...I’ll make it work.” Miss Ayako then slowly made her way closer to my back and bent to match my eye level. “Takkun,” she whispered in my ear, sending a chill down my spine. Her voice was tense with anxiousness, yet ridiculously smooth. “I’m ready...”

I thought my mind was going to melt. My heart felt like it was going to explode.

I said I wouldn’t do anything until she felt she was ready—a self-serving declaration that mistook cowardice for kindness—and now Miss Ayako was putting it to rest. She was fighting off her embarrassment to put her feelings into clear terms.

As I sat there stunned, Miss Ayako reached for the body wash, pressed the nozzle a couple times, then began lathering the soap in her hands. Our long night had begun.

Afterword

Cohabitation—that is to say, living together. I think it's difficult for two people who've been living in different environments with different ideas about what constitutes common sense to start living together. Since you're no longer living alone, it's important to be considerate of the other person and work with their values and what they believe to be normal.

However, it's not good to only follow what the other person deems to be right—thinking “I'm fine with whatever, so I'll do what you want” will only end up hurting your partner in the end. It might seem like you're being considerate, but you're basically throwing away your own responsibility for making the relationship work. Letting your partner decide on everything can be just as selfish as deciding on everything on your own.

Ultimately, there is no right answer for how couples, married or not, should behave, so it's important to voice your opinions and compromise together.

With all that said, I'm Kota Nozomi. This is the fifth installment in the romantic comedy series where a guy and the mother who lives next door experience a pure age-gap romance. Several spoilers follow below.

Our two leads finally started dating, but now they're suddenly going long-distance...except they're not, as they're actually starting a lovey-dovey life of living together in this fifth volume. I think the (fake) ex-girlfriend showing up and making it seem like she was going to stir things up only to not do anything directly while our leads got worked up over nothing was a fitting turn of events for this series.

For now, the plan is for the cohabitation arc to end and for the couple to return back home in the next volume. Also, I mentioned this in the afterword of the previous volume, but the bits about the anime industry contain a lot of fiction, so please don't take them too seriously.

Additionally, as you can tell from the events in the epilogue...*it* is finally

happening in the next volume. With two people over twenty living together, this was inevitable. I don't know how it'll work out, but I'd like to take it as far as Dengeki Bunko's editing department will let me.

I have a sudden announcement to make. At roughly the same time as this fifth volume, the first volume of the manga adaptation will be going on sale! It's a wonderful work that illustrates the events of the original series while overflowing with its own charm unique to manga. There's also a short story I've written for the release, so please pick up a copy!

And now for my acknowledgments.

To the great Miyazaki, thank you again as always. I'm sure working to finish everything before the Golden Week holiday is difficult...

To the amazing Giuniu, thank you for another volume of wonderful illustrations. They're all incredible, but I think that Mommy Ayako wearing her boyfriend's shirt was particularly great.

And to you, the reader who picked up this book, I give my greatest thanks. I hope to see you all again in the next volume.

Kota Nozomi

You Like Me, Not My Daughter?!

This is the fifth volume, and the beginning of the exciting cohabitation arc.

I wrote my usual ramble where I go "What's going to happen next?!" in my blurb on the dust jacket flap, so I'd like to focus on Miu, who's been home all this time, for this volume's afterword.

I think it would be nice if Miu enjoys the rest of the summer while her mother is away, being lazy and eating ice cream as her grandmother spoils her.

I went with a suggestion from the editor for this illustration. I drew Miu in a tomboyish outfit and made it seem like she's out with her friends on a food tour.

One day, I'd like to do a full-color illustration where she's all dressed up.

Giuniu 



YOU LIKE
ME,
NOT MY
DAUGHTER?!

Yo

Kota Nozomi
Illustrator: Giuniu

Mo

5

No

Daughter?!





You I

Me

Not

D

er?!

You My Like Me
Not My Daughter?!



"W-Wait, hold on—these aren't YES or NO pillows, okay? They just say YES on both sides, that's all!"

You Like Me,
Not My
Daughter
?!



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You Like Me, Not My Daughter?! Volume 5

by Kota Nozomi

Translated by sachi salehi Edited by Zubonjin

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