



YOU LIKE  
**ME!**

NOT MY  
**DAUGHTER?!**

**6**

**Kota  
Nozomi**  
Illustrator: **Giuniu**





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(YOU LIKE  
ME,  
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# YOU LIKE ME, DON'T MY DAD FILTER?!



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Designer: SHINDOSHA



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# Prologue



Even now, I could recall that day clearly. It was the day that a new person was born into this world—the day I witnessed the mystical nature of life and realized how precious it was. *Though, I wasn't the one who gave birth...*

“Miwako!”

It was fifteen years ago. I was still a student at the time, and after receiving a call about the news, I'd rushed from my school to the maternity ward my sister was in. I flung the door open and saw her lying on the bed in her hospital robe.

“Oh, Ayako.” She tried to sit up, but I quickly stopped her.

“No, it's fine! Lie down, lie down. You must be tired.”

“Well, if you insist... You got here so quickly.”

“I rushed here as soon as school ended,” I explained.

“You didn't have to hurry like that.”

“Of course I had to,” I insisted.

She seemed a little exhausted, but my sister was wearing the same gentle smile she always had. *I'm glad. Mom told me over the phone that she and her baby were healthy, but actually seeing her is a relief.*

Miwako Niozaki was my, Ayako Katsuragi's, biological sister. She'd gotten married the previous year, and she'd changed her last name from “Katsuragi” to “Niozaki.”

Even though she'd said that she and her husband wanted to enjoy being newlyweds with just the two of them together for a while, she'd conceived a child just a few months into their marriage...which led us to this day. My sister had emerged victorious from the battle that was childbirth.

“Wow...”



Right next to her bed was a bassinet on wheels, and inside the clear, basketlike frame was a baby in a white undergarment. Her face was covered in wrinkles, and her hands were so incredibly tiny. Each time the baby moved her face, her fluffy, feathery hair swayed. The baby's eyes, blank with amazement, kept darting around the room. She was adorable, and she completely captured my heart.

"S-So cute!" *What is this?! She's adorable! Is it all right for such a cute creature to exist in this world?!* "Wow... Every part of her is so tiny... Cute, that's all I can say. So cute."

"All right, simmer down," my sister said with a chuckle.

"Oh, I forgot to ask if she's a girl."

"She sure is, just like the ultrasound predicted."

"A girl, huh? That makes sense—she *does* have a cute face after all. Oh, don't her eyes look just like yours?" My excitement hadn't abated at all.

"They all look the same when they're newborns." My sister let out a dry laugh.

"Hey, Miwako... C-Can I hold her?"

"Go ahead. Be careful—she can't hold her head up yet."

"I-I know..."

I cautiously reached forward. I had already practiced how to hold a baby. I slowly picked her up, making sure that her head wouldn't flop back. Fortunately, I was able to hold her without making her cry.





At first, she felt light—ever so small, ever so dainty. I couldn't believe that one person could weigh so little. But over time, as this child lay in my arms, her weight began to set in. The realization that an entire human existence was nestled against my chest made her feel more and more heavy. This was the life that my sister had nurtured inside her body for the past nine months...

"What's wrong?" my sister asked.

"I just can't believe it... She was inside of you until just several hours ago, right?"

"That's right... I just went through one hell of a time giving birth to her." The exhaustion on my sister's face grew more obvious in an instant.

"W-Was it as tough as you thought it would be?"

"I wouldn't say it was tough... Brutal. The word I'd go with is 'brutal.'"

"Brutal?!"

"It hurt, and it was painful... Just everything about it was brutal. It was a kind of pain only the people who've been through it could understand... The sheer anguish of my contractions continued forever... Not to mention the doctors sliced through me."

"Th-They sliced you?!"

"It's called an episiotomy... They sometimes cut open the exit beforehand so the baby can come out more easily. Apparently, it'll heal faster than if you force it and get a tear. But I didn't expect them to just start snipping with scissors, and there wasn't any anesthesia either..."

I let out a gasp of horror, and my sister continued.

"They said I wouldn't feel any pain, which was true for when they cut me, but... The stitches afterwards hurt... They actually still really hurt..." Miwako looked like she was dying as she spoke.

Just imagining the pain she was feeling made me unconsciously bring my knees together.

"B-But hey, Mr. Niozaki took the day off to be by your side, right? Wasn't it



reassuring to have your husband with you...?”

“I was grateful, but...in actuality, your husband is useless whether he’s there or not. I felt like I was dying, so everything he said made me think, ‘Bet you think this is easy, huh?!’ And when I asked him for a massage, he kept missing the right spot. On top of that, right after I finished giving birth, he pointed a camera at me, even though I wasn’t wearing any makeup and I was a complete mess...”

“Wh-Whoa...” My sister was usually kind and mellow, but she was pretty annoyed. *Labor is no joke.*

Giving birth wasn’t just a happy experience—it was a deadly struggle where one risked their own life to bring another into the world.

“But, you know...” my sister began again after taking a breath. She peacefully looked toward the baby in my arms. “No matter how painful and torturous it was...when I see her face, I just fall in love with all of it. It’s strange...”

“Miwako...” The blissful smile on her face warmed my heart as well. Labor was a battle that risked one’s life, and it wasn’t entirely a happy experience, but...there was no doubt that it was full of joy. “Oh, right, what about her name? Have you decided on it?”

“It’s written right there,” my sister said, pointing to a table in a corner of the hospital room. On the table was a traditional newborn name board, where parents would handwrite their child’s name in Japanese calligraphy. Miwako and her husband had used a calligraphy pen to write two characters.

“Is this read ‘Miu’...?”

“That’s right. Miu, written as ‘beautiful feathers.’”

“I see, that’s a cute name.” I looked back down at the baby in my arms—at Miu. “So, you’re Miu, huh? Miu. Miu! I’m Auntie Ayako! Hewwo!” Of course, she didn’t respond to me when I called her name. She had the same blank face from before. “Did you come up with the name?”

“Yup. We made a deal that he would pick the name if she were a boy, and I’d pick if she were a girl.”

“Is there any meaning to the name? Like, did you choose it because you wanted her to be a certain kind of child?”

“Technically, yes.”

“What is it? Tell me, tell me!”

“The meaning behind it is...” my sister began with a chuckle. She looked very happy, but at the same time, there was something mischievous about her expression, similar to when a child was planning a prank. She then told me the meaning behind the name she picked for her child.

To be honest...it was a little disappointing. But at the same time, it was the kind of thing my sister *would* say. For some reason, I felt like someone who could come up with her child’s name in such a way would make a good mother—I was certain she would be able to raise Miu into a wonderful adult.



# Chapter 1: The Bathroom and the Steamy Night



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. On my next birthday, which was next month, I was finally going to become thirty-[REDACTED]. 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. Several months had passed since this unexpected development, and after some twists and turns, we'd finally started dating. Then, after several more twists and turns, we were now living together in Tokyo.

It was a temporary arrangement—we would only be living together for three months. I was in Tokyo to work on tasks related to the anime adaptation of a project I was in charge of, and Takkun was here for an internship. We both had objectives and reasons to be here, and we weren't living together for fun...yet I couldn't hold back my excitement. We had just started dating—this was the most exciting time for a couple, and we were living together during it. How could I not be happy about it?! *Getting to be with your partner all day long, from morning till night, is amazing!*

Still, despite how elated I was, it wasn't like there was nothing but good times. An unexpected character had appeared at Takkun's internship: Arisa Odaki.

She was a youthful, cute college student, and she'd been a classmate of Takkun's when they were in high school. Most surprisingly, she and Takkun had pretended to be dating for a period, and she had even asked Takkun out and been rejected by him.

The appearance of a strong romantic rival had made me feel daunted for a

moment, but I'd riled myself up and steeled my resolve to fight her. I hadn't cared if it was going to become a messy love triangle—*I'll never make way, never grovel, and never look back! I won't let her have Takkun!* I'd thought.

I'd convinced myself it was going to be the start of a new chapter, the "Fury of the Fake Ex" arc, but...naturally, Arisa already had a boyfriend. She'd liked Takkun in the past, but she didn't have any lingering feelings. I'd made a fuss over nothing, and the new chapter never began.

Actually, there *had* been a different chapter taking shape, however. After confronting Arisa, we'd both reexamined our relationship, and I'd felt that we'd gotten closer.

However, as our hearts and bodies had grown nearer, we'd faced a new problem. I had been averting my eyes from it all this time, but I had to look it right in the eye—I wasn't a child anymore, and neither was he. We were two adults in a relationship, living under the same roof, which meant we couldn't keep running from a certain activity.

Now, we had an issue to resolve. It was something children didn't have to worry about, and teen magazines didn't have to depict...but as adults, we couldn't keep avoiding it—we had to take this step forward in our relationship.

Wait, um, explaining it like this could cause a misunderstanding. I don't mean I felt obligated to do it or that we had a responsibility to do it or anything. I wasn't driven by feelings of "We need to be X" or "We have to do Y." Simply by my very own will, I wanted to get even closer to him, unbearably so...

"I'm ready..."

I said it. I'd gone and said it. I said the thing that would bring me past the point of no return. I said it softly and tremblingly, but the bathroom made even the smallest sounds echo, so I heard my own voice once more. My heart was pounding incredibly fast and felt like it would burst at any moment.

"M-Miss Ayako..." Takkun responded in a high-pitched tone, sounding just as nervous.

He was seated...completely naked. *Well, of course he's nude—I barged in on*



*him bathing.* He'd quickly placed a towel over his lap, but that was the only thing covering him. I also only had a towel wrapped around me. There were no undergarments beneath that single piece of fabric—I was naked. Takkun and I were both in this cramped, closed room, basically naked...

*I fell silent. Uh, what should I do? Now that I'm thinking about it, I'm really nervous. Th-This is okay, right? Takkun isn't weirded out, is he?! Did I push it too far? Was it too bold of me to barge in on him in the bath? What if he thinks I'm a pervert? What if he thinks, "Women in their thirties really do have a high sex drive"?!*

However, if I hadn't taken such a sudden, bold step, I probably wouldn't have been able to move forward at all. I needed to press onward like I was putting the pedal to the metal—I had to treat it like a last-ditch effort, otherwise a wimp like me wouldn't have been able to make it this far...

*"I want to wait to do it until you feel you're ready."*

It'd been our first night living together. I had been nervous about the "first night," and Takkun had said that to me. I had been grateful for his consideration and kindness—it had really made me feel treasured, and I had been touched by that, but...at the same time, I'd felt a bit impatient and frustrated.

*What? I have to tell him when I feel ready? I have to say, "I'm ready"? That sounds so difficult! He's just on standby?* were the thoughts that had run through my head.

That said, I had probably felt that way because I'd been passive...so I decided I wouldn't sit back anymore. From Takkun's confession to when we'd started dating, I'd kept being passive and dragging things out, so this time, I wouldn't keep waiting for him to make a move—I'd take the plunge and take a step forward. Maybe one step wasn't going to be enough, but still, I mustered up the courage to take action, even if it was just a half step forward...

*"I'm going to start washing you..."* As various feelings swirled around inside my chest, I reached over Takkun's shoulder and placed several pumps of the bodywash in front of the mirror into my hand. I lathered the bodywash between my hands, then placed my soapy hands on his back.

Takkun made a sound and flinched slightly. I could feel his body heat on my

hands, and my face instantly became hot.

“I didn’t realize you’d be using your hands.”

“Y-Yeah. Did you not want me to?”

“No, it’s fine. If anything... Um, never mind...”

I moved my hands around and washed his back as we spoke intermittently. My hands slipped and slid about as I caressed him with bubbles, and I was becoming very familiar with his body. I could feel all of him—his skin, his muscles, his body heat—directly through the palms of my hands.

“H-How is it...? Am I applying too much pressure or anything?”

“It’s good. I-It, um...feels good.”

“I-It does?”

“Well, um, I’m not sure how to describe it, but...I feel really happy that I get to have my back washed by you like this.”

“Wh-What? Jeez, surely it’s not *that* great.” It felt like my body was getting hotter. His back was different from mine—it felt more manly. *Wow, this is the first time I’ve ever stared at a man’s back like this...* “Your back is so wide...”

“Is it?”

“You have broad, sturdy shoulders too. It really feels like a *man’s* back. Your skin is really taut... Huh? No way. Wh-What’s with your sides?!” I was stunned. When I moved my hands from his back to his sides, I felt an unbelievable sensation. “I-It’s hard! Why are your sides so hard?!”

“What...?”

“No way! You don’t have any love handles...! There’s only skin and muscle here! S-So this is the body of a twenty-year-old who works out...!”

“U-Um, Miss Ayako!”

I tried touching my own sides, and the difference in how they felt made me want to die. *U-Ugh, they feel completely different. No way. Why do you have such an ideal stomach, Takkun? Is this the power of youth? The difference between being in your twenties and being in your thirties? Or is this just a simple*



*difference in moderation and exercise?*

*Ugh, I'm jealous of his abs! Absolutely green with envy!*

"S-Stop, Miss Ayako...ha ha! It tickles when you squeeze my sides like that, ha ha ha!"

"Oh... S-Sorry Takkun... I'm just so jealous and resentful of how toned your sides are that I couldn't help myself."

"Jealous and resentful...?"

"Yeah. A-Anyways, I'll quit playing around now." I reset my mind and resumed washing his back.

The bubbles were starting to disappear, so I added more bodywash as I went. For better or worse, the little incident with his sides relieved some of the tension in the air.

"This kind of brings me back..." Takkun suddenly said.

"Huh? What brings you back?"

"There was a time in the past that you washed my back for me like this. It was ten years ago on a rainy day. I couldn't get into my house, and you let me take a bath at your place."

"Oh, that day." I thought back to the day when I dragged the embarrassed boy, slightly forcefully, into the bath. It was back when I hadn't been thinking of him as a man at all... "I thought you were still just a child, but you were totally looking at my naked body with a dirty mind, weren't you?"

"I-I couldn't help it. You barged in on me," Takkun quickly argued back, pouting slightly. "I was young, but I was already ten years old, yet you were treating me like a kindergartner washing my body like that..."

"Urgh..." *He's right, I was also at fault... Actually, I was entirely at fault. Taking a bath with the grade school boy who lives next door? On top of that, washing him? Thinking about it now, it feels slightly problematic. If I'd been a man, I probably would've been immediately arrested.* "I-I mean, unlike now, you were small and dainty back then... You were even really cute down there."

"Huh?! P-Please don't call that cute. It might have been small back then, but

that was appropriate for my age, and now it's..."

"Now it's...?"

"No, um..."

The conversation stopped there. We were both probably thinking about it. I was definitely, totally thinking about it—his nether regions, to be precise, and about how I was trying to start something that would have to involve said nether regions, no matter what.

I gulped. The tension that had dissipated was back, and nervousness filled the air at once.

The room felt hot. The more I thought about what would happen next, my body got hotter and hotter. It was already hot from the humidity in the bathroom, and I was sweating profusely.

I kept my hands moving, washing his back to try to take my mind off of things, but no matter how broad his back was, I couldn't keep washing it forever. Sure enough, after focusing for a bit, I quickly finished up.

"I-I'm going to rinse you off now..."

I used the shower head to rinse off the suds. No matter how slowly and thoroughly I tried to rinse him off, the white bubbles were gone in an instant.

*Wh-What do I do...? Now that his back is done, I have to do the front, right...? But the front would mean I'd totally see... Urgh...*

*Ugh, jeez, I thought I was prepared for this! No, I can't hesitate here! Takkun might have his hopes up! I'll definitely disappoint him if I end things after just washing his back!*

"Are you done...?"

"Y-Yes, I'm done."

"Then, next..." *Next! I knew it, he's expecting something! He's expecting what comes after the back! He must want me to wash his front side!* I was completely flustered, but Takkun's next words weren't what I'd expected. "Next, can I wash you?"



*“I want to wait to do it until you feel you’re ready.”*

That was what I’d said to Miss Ayako on our first night together. I’d thought I was being considerate, but looking back on it now, it’d been nothing more than an expedient stopgap. It’d sounded suave, but all I’d done was throw all the responsibility onto my partner. It’d seemed kind, but in reality, it hadn’t been—I’d just been shirking my duty to communicate. I’d been so afraid she would hate me that I’d stopped us moving forward, when truthfully, I’d wanted her more than anything. I’d wanted so badly for our hearts, our bodies, and everything else to melt into one that I’d used sincerity to mask my true feelings, settling for leaving things safe the way they were. I’d struggled so much to get us to the point of being in a relationship that I’d felt it too precious, too dear, to not place on a pedestal before everything else.

My actions brought us to the present moment, where, as I was pathetically standing still, Miss Ayako was taking a step toward me. I couldn’t imagine how much courage she’d had to muster up to surprise me in the bath wearing only a towel. At first, I’d been so surprised that my mind had gone blank, but as time passed, her bold actions felt endearing to me. Furthermore, I was angry at how cowardly I was.

*I’m not going to run anymore. I won’t use sincerity and kindness as a shield to validate my inaction.*

All that said, all that introspection might’ve sounded impressive, but resolving the actual problem wasn’t actually so difficult. My beloved girlfriend had made such an intense move on me, and I just needed to let myself lose all sense of reason. That’s all there was to it.

I wanted to touch her. It was undeniable—I wanted to touch my beloved girlfriend so badly I couldn’t stand it.

*“A-Are you really going to do it, Takkun...?”* Miss Ayako’s reflection asked me.

We’d switched places from our previous positions. She was sitting on a stool in front of me, and she seemed to still be hesitant, as she was still hiding her body with the towel wrapped around her.



“Yes. I’d like to, if it’s all right.”

“Really...?”

“Really. I want to return the favor and wash your back as well.”

“B-But it’s embarrassing...”

“I was pretty embarrassed too.”

“U-Urgh...” Miss Ayako agonized over her embarrassment, but she seemed to have made up her mind. “O-Okay, then... I guess it *would* be unfair.”

“All right... Please remove your towel.”

“Okay...” She silently nodded before reaching for the towel tied around her chest...and just like that, the white veil covering her body had been lifted.

“Wh-Whoa...” I was at a loss for words. Her back was breathtakingly beautiful, with flawless skin that was so fair as to be radiant. The gentle peaks and valleys of her shoulders and spine were dotted with small beads of sweat, as were the sexy hourglass curves of her waist and hips—curves deep enough to see her ample breasts peeking out from the front of her torso. My lone regret was that the mirror in front of her was too cloudy to see how she looked in its reflection.



“Your back is beautiful, Miss Ayako...”

“Wha— H-Hey, don’t stare too hard, Takkun!”

“I’m sorry, but the curves from your back to your butt are so beautiful—you’re like a work of art.”

“Do you think so...? Jeez, you’re complimenting me too much... Wait, huh? M-My butt?!” Miss Ayako then quickly reached for her backside. She overlapped her hands, covering her butt that sat atop the stool. “N-No way! My butt is pretty much exposed!”

It was a little late for her to be shocked by this. *I mean, if you’re sitting on top of a stool naked, of course your butt is going to show.* Atop the white bath stool sat her, um...slightly squished butt.

“Ugh... I-It’s embarrassing, so don’t look too closely, okay?”

“You say that, but I was completely exposed too...”

“You’re a guy, so you should be fine with being seen.”

“I feel like that’s a double standard.”

“Also, your butt is... It’s, like, slim and toned and firm, so it’s fine... Mine is, um, a bit on the larger side, so...”

“There’s nothing for you to be worried about. I think it’s very feminine and lovely.”

“So you don’t deny that it’s big...” Miss Ayako said, sounding a bit depressed.

It seemed that I’d picked the wrong response. *Urgh, young women are difficult.*

As we had that whirlwind of a back-and-forth, I lathered up the bodywash. I steeled my resolve and touched her snow-white skin with my soapy hands.

“Mm...”

When I touched her, she twitched and a sweet sound escaped her mouth. “Oh, did it hurt?”

“N-No, I’m all right... I-It just tickled a little.” Miss Ayako sounded like she was



desperately trying to keep her cool.

I listened to her and continued to slide my hands along her skin. *Wow, this is amazing... It's better than I imagined.* I could feel her soft, damp skin through my palms. The more I rubbed, the more I wanted to touch her. On top of that...

"Mm... Ah, mmph..."

...she must have been quite ticklish because, with each swipe of my hand, Miss Ayako let out a sweet sound. The way she was doing her best to keep her voice down was incredibly sensual.

I felt my heart pounding harder. It was maybe unusually fast, because I could really feel it.

"Takkun, I feel like the way you're washing me is kind of naughty..." Miss Ayako said, turning her head back. She glared at me with a pouty look.

"What? No, I'm just washing you normally..." I said, quickly clarifying. *Well, I probably couldn't deny groping an area or two a little more than I needed to.*

"You're lying. You're doing it kind of...persistently."

"You were washing me like this too. I felt like you were *really* massaging my muscles when you washed me..."

"I-I did it normally! I washed you normally!"

As we talked, I continued washing her back. Since she said I was being too persistent, I couldn't take my time washing her, so I tried to finish things as quickly as possible. Once I finished washing the top part of her back, I moved down to her sides...but then, in one swift motion, Miss Ayako brought her hands around her back and grabbed my arms. She was so quick that I hadn't even seen it happen.

"Huh...?"

"Not there." Her tone suggested I didn't have a say. "You don't have to wash that part."

"But, um..."

"That's not my back, that's part of my stomach. You can't wash someone's

stomach when you're washing their back. Yeah, that's not okay. That's not what we agreed on."

"You washed my sides too..."

"Urgh..."

"Not only that, but you rubbed them pretty hard."

"I-It's fine for you since you have a toned stomach! It's not okay for me... Mine is really squishy..."

"You're worrying about it too much. You're totally thin, Miss Ayako."

"No, you don't get it... It's been really bad these days. In the first week of us living together, I, um... I'm not sure if it's weight gain from being in a new relationship, but I've let my guard down, and it shows on my body. I've already been having trouble losing weight ever since I turned thirty..." Her tone gradually grew pained.

I'd thought that it was something we could laugh off. I didn't care at all about her sides being squishy, nor did I think she was fat in the first place...but even if this wasn't a big deal to me, to her it probably felt like an earnest issue.

"When I touched your stomach earlier, I was hit with the fact that I'm aging... Ha ha, my body was more toned back in my twenties..." Miss Ayako laughed as if she were trying to mask her sadness. It was a pained, self-deprecating laugh that made me sad just listening to it, and it made my chest tighten with pain. "If we were going to end up in this kind of relationship, maybe I should've had you sleep with me when I was younger." She sounded like she was joking, but I wasn't sure how serious she was about it.

I felt so irritated and frustrated listening to this that, before I knew it, I was impulsively hugging her from behind. We were both naked, but that didn't matter—I had to hug her.

"T-Takkun?!"

"You don't get it..." I said as I held her in a tight embrace, feeling her soft skin with my entire body. "You don't get it. You don't get just how alluring you are, Miss Ayako."

“Huh...?”

“Do you know how hard I’ve worked to hold myself back for the week that we’ve been living together?”

“H-hold back...?”

“I wanted you so badly that I couldn’t stand it, but I held back the entire time.”

“Wh-What?!”

Yes. I’d held myself back because I’d wanted to treasure her. I’d thought that if I gave in to my desires, I might hurt her. However, I felt like if I’d known this was going to happen, it might’ve been better if I had come clean about my desires sooner. If she was going to feel inferior because of her age and our age gap—if she was going to doubt her own beauty—maybe I should have been stronger, more aggressive, and louder about how charming she was.

“You’re beautiful, Miss Ayako,” I said, voicing my honest feelings to the woman in my arms. “You’ve always been beautiful, both now and in the past—back when you were in your twenties, and now when you’re in your thirties.”

“Takkun... B-But, you only feel that way because you see me through a weird filter... The woman you see is more beautiful than the real thing.”

“Even if I truly were doing that...it doesn’t matter. To me, you’ll always be the most attractive woman in the entire world.” Miss Ayako fell silent. “If I can say a little more, to be honest...I actually think that you get more charming every year. I’m not sure if it’s sexiness or pheromones or what, but it feels like there’s more and more of something.”

“Wha— Ph-Pheromones? Surely I don’t have any...probably.” Though she jabbed back bashfully, Miss Ayako was smiling a bit, which made me smile too.

“Also, you said something about sleeping with you sooner just now, but I think that would’ve been a problem for different reasons. When you were in your twenties, I was a full-on minor.”

“W-Well, you’re not wrong...”

“So please...I don’t want you to be in denial about the past ten years.”



“What do you mean?”

“Ever since I started loving you, I’ve grown taller, my voice has deepened, and...I’ve slowly become an adult, one step at a time, and now you finally see me as a man.”

*Ten years. That’s right, it took ten years. After all that time, the person I loved the most no longer saw me as a child, but as a man. It had taken ten eternally long years...but I wanted to think that those years were necessary. I wanted to believe that I was sitting here now *because* of those ten years.*

“I think that now is the right time—no, now is the *only* time this could’ve happened. This is the only time that would’ve been right for us to come together.”

“Takkun...” She gently placed her hand on my arm. “Thank you. I’m sorry for being hard on myself again.”

“It’s okay.”

“I’m over it now. I feel better, thanks to you, but...” Miss Ayako’s tone suddenly became cold. “Setting that aside, I’d like to make my sides off-limits.”

“U-Understood.” Her earnest, firm tone left me with no choice but to nod in agreement.

*I guess the sides are a line that can’t be crossed for a woman. I won’t bring it up anymore, then.*

*Well... The way she’s so stubbornly stopping me makes me want to touch them even more. It’s kind of cute the way she’s refusing to let me touch them. They look soft and squishy...*

“Do you *really* understand, Takkun?”

“I-I do! I swear!” It seemed she’d read my nefarious thoughts. *That was close.*

“Jeez, Takkun... You really, really can’t, okay?”

“But, there was a time in the past when you let me touch your stomach...”

“That was back then! This is about now!” she said firmly before continuing. “Anyways, my stomach is strictly off-limits. Instead...”

While I was still hugging her, she grabbed my wrists with both her hands and slowly raised my arms along her torso. Naturally, my forearms ran into certain soft protrusions along the way—my palms were now resting on two incredibly soft mounds.

“You can touch these,” she said.

I let out a gasp—I was at a loss for words. My mind went completely blank. The sensation at my fingertips was pure, intense bliss. Her skin was soft and damp with sweat. It felt like my hands were going to sink in if I applied the slightest pressure. The exhilarating warmth made me want to feel her forever.

I couldn’t believe it. I was currently touching my girlfriend’s breasts from behind her. Not over her clothes, or even over a bra, but directly touching her chest...

“M-Miss Ayako...?!”

“Y-You’d rather touch these than my stomach, right?”

“Well... I-Is it really all right, though?”

“Yes...” she said quietly and bashfully, with a definite nod. “I mean...you’ve been holding back this whole time, right?”

She said what I needed to hear—I didn’t need to hold back anymore. The moment she did, the last thread tying me to my sense of reason snapped. I dragged her closer to me as I began fondling her breasts. I roughly turned her around to kiss her lips, then again, and again, gently at first and gradually more passionately...

“Mm, ah! Takkun...!”

“Miss Ayako...!”

Our bodies were pressed together without a scrap of clothing between them. We were driven by a zealous lust that overpowered any embarrassment we might have felt. Whatever plan I’d come up with when she’d barged into the bathroom, however Miss Ayako might have intended for things to go...at this point, none of it mattered anymore.

In this steam-filled bathroom, where damp skin met damp skin, we greedily

satiated our desires. Today, at last, we were finally going to take a step forward as a couple.

Or rather, that's what was supposed to have happened... That's right. We were *supposed* to have taken a step forward—but there was a certain issue that needed to be overcome before the two of us could join as one. All I could say was, I couldn't believe it. After getting here, after getting to this point...I couldn't believe I'd put a damper on things with this kind of mistake.



## Chapter 2: The Bedroom and the Sweet Night



Takkun and I both sat there, completely silent. The room was filled with an endlessly awkward atmosphere. We had moved from the bathroom to the bedroom, and we were now sitting on the bed in our pajamas, but...there was a bit of a distance between us. Or rather, Takkun wouldn't look my way. He'd been facing away from me this whole time. His shoulders drooped gloomily, like there was a heavy weight on them.

"I-It's okay, Takkun," I said, managing to somehow squeeze out the words after I couldn't take the silence. "You don't have to be so down on yourself... I'm not bothered by it at all, okay?"

Takkun didn't respond.

"Well, um, you know? You younger people are really something else... Yeah, you have a lot of energy! I'm impressed!"

Takkun still didn't say anything.

"A-Also, in nature, being fast could be seen as a biological advantage! You don't know when an adversary will attack when you're out in the wild, so the quicker you can finish things, the better chance you have at passing on your DNA—"

"Um, it's okay..." Takkun began. He sounded like he was going to die. "You don't have to force yourself to cheer me up. It's kind of making me feel worse." It seemed that my attempts to cheer him up were doing the complete opposite.

To sum things up...we hadn't completed the act. We'd gotten excited in the bathroom, and I'd thought we were definitely heading in that direction, but unfortunately, we hadn't been able to get to the end.

Takkun had, um...been the first to engage, and he'd ended up taking the lead. I'd considered surrendering myself to the flow of events, but...I suddenly felt a

sense of responsibility for some reason. It could've been my ego from being older than him, or perhaps it'd been my pride refusing the possibility of being seen as a woman who just lets things happen to her... Either way, I had thought it wasn't good to just be passive, so I'd choked down my embarrassment and reached my hand out to grab his nether regions. I'd tried to pleasure him despite my lack of experience, using all of my knowledge from the internet to make him feel good. Then an unexpected problem had occurred...

Takkun had...finished. He'd fired his shot by accident—abruptly, instantaneously. It had probably only been roughly ten seconds since I'd touched him.

"I'm really sorry..." Takkun apologized regretfully for the umpteenth time.

"I-It's okay! Don't worry about it!"

"But...so much got on you."

"It's fine, it's fine! I've already washed it off!"

I wasn't sure if it was due to his young age, but Takkun's *stuff* had been a sight to behold—both in terms of quantity and vigor. Of course, it'd been my first time dealing with a stuff eruption, so I'd ended up panicking. That'd led to things being chaotic and a big mess... The whole event had completely shifted the mood, so we'd left the bathroom, which brought us here, to where we were now.

*Wh-What should I do...?* This was completely unexpected. I'd simulated various situations in my mind before barging in on him in the bathroom, but I hadn't accounted for something like *that* happening. *What is a woman supposed to do when this happens?!* I was completely at a loss for how to cheer him up.

"Um, I don't mean to make excuses, but...it's been a week since we started living together, right?" Takkun mumbled uncomfortably.

"Y-Yeah."

"During that time, I...haven't done it, at all."

“Huh...? What do you mean?”

“Um, I mean that I haven’t done *it* by myself...”

“Wh-What?!”

*He hasn’t done that for a week?! Isn’t that a bit of a big deal for a young man like him?! I’m not very knowledgeable, but I feel like I’ve heard somewhere that men reach their limit after three days. If that’s the case, I can gauge how big of a deal it was for him to abstain for a whole week. If he’s been holding back all this time... He’s just been horny and pent-up!*

“I-I see. But why...?” It wasn’t like he hadn’t had alone time. There were plenty of times when I’d been at work while he was home alone doing chores.

“I can’t really give an answer why, but...I just couldn’t do it. It felt wrong to be doing something like that while you were out working. Also...it felt really dirty to do that in the space we’re living in together.” As usual, Takkun was a prude about the strangest things. “I had planned on doing it once before we took that step, but...today was kind of, um, sudden.” He sounded a bit embarrassed.

*Oh, I see. I’d been prepared in both mind and body for tonight, but Takkun hadn’t had time to prepare since I’d suddenly seduced him.*

“I’m sorry... These are all just excuses, and I’m being pathetic,” Takkun said with a laugh, trying to mask his frustration. “I’m sure you know this without me saying it, but...I don’t have any experience with women.”

I fell silent. It was something I knew. I hadn’t heard from anyone directly, but I had an idea. After all, Takkun had spent the last decade loving me. He’d never had a girlfriend, and he’d only had feelings for me, without straying.

“I’ve imagined things, or rather, simulated scenarios in my mind countless times, but the real you is so unbelievably beautiful... After touching you, I got so aroused I lost my mind, and...”

I stayed quiet so he could get everything off his mind. “I’m sorry...” he eventually muttered. “After the trouble you went through to seduce me, I ruined it.” He hadn’t been able to look at me the whole time he was talking. He sounded like he was desperately fighting back his humiliation. His back had looked so broad when I was washing it, but right now, it seemed ever so small.

Some people might see his repeating excuse-like apologies in a quiet voice as pathetic and weak, but to me, he was so incredibly endearing that I couldn't bear it. I wrapped my arms around him from behind and squeezed him in a hug.

"Huh...? M-Miss Ayako?" As he gasped with confusion, I squeezed even tighter this time.

*Ugh, what am I even doing? I said I'd be more open with him, but I got caught up in keeping up appearances again.* It was something I could've figured out if I'd just thought about it—just as I was nervous, Takkun was nervous too. *I'm so embarrassed. I can't believe I was still putting on airs after everything.*

"Um, Takkun..." I began. "The truth is, I don't have any experience either."

"Huh...?"

"Um, so... I-It's my first time." I said it. I somehow managed to say it.

After a short moment, Takkun's eyes widened with surprise. "Huh...? What?"

"H-Ha ha. Are you surprised?"

"W-Well, yes."

"It must be surprising to be inexperienced at my age... I have a daughter in high school, and I've been called 'mom' for a while, but...the truth is, I've never dated anyone besides you." Takkun looked like he wasn't sure what to say. "I'm sorry, I just couldn't bring it up. It felt like it'd be embarrassing to just come out and say it..."

"It's nothing to apologize for. I'm sorry too for being surprised," Takkun said. He was a bit flustered. "But still, I can't believe it... I thought there was no way men would leave a beautiful woman like you alone."

"I-I'm not that special. I... When I was a student, I had more fun spending time with my female friends, so nothing like that ever came up... And once I took in Miu, I had no time for dating."

I had been hoping to somehow trick him. I'd thought it would be okay to reveal the truth only if he'd noticed something was off after we got through the act, because...I'd been scared of him being put off. I'd thought it was embarrassing to be inexperienced at my age. *If this is how things were going to*

*turn out, I should've said something to him sooner. If I was putting him under pressure and making him feel inferior, I shouldn't have hidden things and should've just told him the truth.*

“That’s why, Takkun,” I said, still holding him tightly. “You don’t have to worry about what happened earlier at all.” He didn’t respond. “T-To be honest, I don’t really understand it... Um, well, I can tell it’s something that you’d be upset about, but I’ve never seen or even touched anyone else’s, so I don’t fully get it...”

Yes. The truth was, I didn’t really understand. It seemed that Takkun had, um, exploded, but I wasn’t sure how big of a failure that was in terms of sex. I didn’t know how much it hurt a man for that to happen, nor did I know how I was supposed to feel about it as a woman. Overall, I just didn’t really get it.

“My point is, I won’t dislike you or be disappointed over something like that, so don’t worry,” I reassured him.

“Miss Ayako...”

“If anything...I might like you even more.”

“What?”

“It’s like I got to see a new side to you... The way you reacted when I touched you was so cute.”

“Cute...? I’m not sure I want you to think *that* about me. Besides, you’re the one who’s cute, Miss Ayako.”

“Huh?”

“Your reactions and expressions were cute, and you were bolder and sexier than I’d expected.”

“W-Wait, stop! You’re not allowed to say those kinds of things!”

“You started it...”

We glared at each other, our faces right up in each other’s before...

“Pfft...”

“Ha ha ha...”



We both started laughing. It was a strange feeling. It seemed like the nervous tension in the room had finally relaxed.

“You know, it wasn’t like I cared about how many people you’d been with in the past. I thought that no matter what you did with whoever in the past, I wouldn’t care about it... Well, I guess deciding to not care about it is already caring about it in a sense...but knowing that you’re also inexperienced makes me feel a bit more relaxed.” His smile was natural, soft, and not tense in the slightest. I couldn’t help but feel happy and smile back.

“Yeah. There’s no need to feel like we have it all figured out. It’s the first time for both of us, so there’s nothing embarrassing about things not going perfectly.”

“You’re right. There’s no point in trying to look good.”

“Exactly. It’s not like today’s our last chance either. We’ll have plenty of opportunities, including tomorrow, the day after, and even past that...”

At that point, I noticed it. I was still hugging him from behind, and when I looked down over his shoulder...a certain thing entered my vision. It was a ferocious protrusion, pressing up against his pajama bottoms. The thing that had returned to a more moderate size after exploding was once again brilliantly showcasing its presence...

*What? N-No way. Huh? Didn’t he just empty that thing earlier?!*

“Huh...? O-Oh, um, this is...” Taking notice of where my gaze was directed, Takkun covered his crotch in a hurry. “I’m sorry... Once I relaxed, all my dirty thoughts came back in an instant.”

“O-Oh, I see...”

*What do I do?* I’d thought that bringing my benevolence and motherly instincts to bear would have things end on an “Even if we can’t today, we’ll have plenty of chances in the future” sort of note.

*Are we going for round two?! I thought that men didn’t recover for a while after doing it once... Oh, but I think I’ve heard somewhere that young men aren’t satisfied after just one time either.*

“Y-You really are young, Takkun.”

“Miss Ayako...” As I sat there flustered, Takkun turned to face me and looked right into my eyes. “Can I try again?” he asked solemnly. There was determination in his voice, but at the same time, there was something sweet about the way he’d said it... Basically, it felt very natural. He was appropriately nervous, but it didn’t seem like he was overly worked up—it was a normal, natural way to ask. Thus...

“Okay...”

...I nodded naturally in agreement in turn.

Takkun hugged me before slowly pushing me down on the bed. It was completely different from the overly excited atmosphere in the bath. Instead of getting drunk on the romantic mood and lusting after each other like beasts, we were savoring each step at our own pace, slowly and leisurely. We were facing each other as equals, making sure to pay attention to each other...

“Miss Ayako,” Takkun whispered after our lips gently parted. “I love you.”

“I love you too...”

After confirming our love for each other, our lips met once more. Then, though it took him some time to do so, he used his large hands to remove my pajamas.

Naturally, not everything went smoothly from here on out. Being that it was the first time for us both, there was confusion, and things took time, but we both did our best to reach the goal line. The night went at a sluggish pace, and I couldn’t say the mood was particularly romantic even to be charitable...but everything about it was endearing. With him, the failures, the confusion, and the struggles all left me feeling warm inside. By shedding all pride and pretenses alongside the clothes off our backs, we could bare ourselves to each other and become one—it felt like the ultimate form of happiness.

Our long night was beginning once more—a melty time just for the two of us that felt endlessly sweet and dear...

The next morning, I woke up and found myself naked. Takkun, who was

sleeping beside me, was naked as well.

I let out a gasp, surprised for a moment, but that only lasted for a second. My half asleep mind slowly began to remember the events that'd taken place the previous night. My body became hot with embarrassment, but soon after, I was filled with a calm, gentle, satisfied feeling.

*Oh, that's right. We really went all the way. It wasn't a dream or my imagination—we actually went all the way...*

"Mm... Miss Ayako..." As I stared at him sleeping, Takkun began to wake up. "H-Huh? Why are you naked...? Wait, I am too... Oh, right, yesterday..." Just like I had done, Takkun was surprised for a moment before remembering.

I covered my chest with the blanket and said, "Good morning, Takkun."

"Good morning..."

"It seems like we just fell asleep right after last night." I took a deep breath. "I feel strange... It's like I'm walking on air, but also like I lost this weight on my shoulders. I was so worried, but now that it's over, I feel like it wasn't such a big deal."

"I-I'm sorry I couldn't make it more of a big deal..."

"Huh? Oh! No, no! That's not what I meant!"

*This is bad! Takkun looks like he's lost his confidence as a man! He's making the same face he did when he had the accidental discharge!*

"I was worried about a lot of things since it was my first time..." I explained. "Like, if it was going to be incredibly painful, or if I'd make some weird mistake. Also, I was worried that my world would completely change." Takkun was listening intently. "But things didn't really change."

It'd all been firsts for me—a new experience. I'd made tons of new discoveries, and I'd gotten to see a new side of my partner, but...nothing had changed. The feelings deep down inside me hadn't changed. It was more like the feelings that had already been there were increasing and growing bigger.

"I felt like it wasn't the dramatic change I was expecting, but it was just one of the events that exists as an extension of love," I continued. Takkun was still

hearing me out attentively. “Th-That’s why it’s not like you weren’t a big deal or anything. If anything, it was the opposite. When it comes to that area, you were an incredibly big deal, to the point I was surprised. It was like an explosion of youth and manliness, and I have no complaints whatsoever.”

“In other words...?”

“In other words, I’m... I’m s-satis— Come on! J-Jeez! Don’t make me say it!”

“Ow.” I ended up hitting Takkun with my pillow repeatedly out of embarrassment. “I-I’m sorry, I got cocky... Ow! Wait, time out!” Eventually unable to bear the attacks, Takkun grabbed my wrist and stopped me. “I’m sorry! Please forgive me.”

“I mean, you know I’m...”

We both fell silent and stared at each other. We were both naked and in bed. It seemed like things could start again at any moment, but then...my eyes went to the clock hanging behind him on the wall.

“Wh-What?! I-It’s already eight o’clock?!” I screamed, erasing any possible tension.

I was completely shocked. *Eight?! It’s eight?! Technically it’s five before eight, but this is bad! It’s Monday! I have to go to work!*

“What?! Oh no, you’re right, it’s eight!” Takkun said with surprise after checking his phone. Now the possibility that the wall clock was off had disappeared.

“Wh-What do I do...? You have your internship today, right?”

“Yes. I’m cutting it really close...but you’re probably cutting it even closer.”

“Yeah... I have a company meeting at nine...”

I’d done it. Yesterday had been quite chaotic, so it seemed we’d both forgotten to set our alarms. On top of that, we’d slept deeply due to being exhausted.

“Shoot, I’m sorry... If we had just gone to bed sooner... It’s all because I kept asking over and over.”

“I-It’s okay, it’s not your fault, Takkun. If anything, toward the end it was me who was coaxing you— Wait, we don’t have time to be discussing this!” I tried to run out of bed, but another problem arose.

“Wait, Miss Ayako, you’re naked!”

*“Eek!” Shoot! I’m completely naked right now! Well, maybe it’s nothing to be embarrassed about since he saw me like this plenty of times last night, but it’s still embarrassing! Walking around the house naked makes it seem like I’m tossing away my womanhood, and I don’t like that!*

“Urgh... Give me the blanket, Takkun.” I decided to wrap myself in the blanket to go grab my change of clothes, but...

“Um, well...”

...to my surprise, Takkun refused. “I can’t right now.”

“Huh? Wh-What?!” It took me a few seconds to understand what he meant. “Wh-Why?! How come?!”

“I-It’s morning...”

“But yesterday, after so many times...”

“It’s been a whole night...”

“Wow... Young people really are impressive... Wait, that’s not the point! I don’t have time to be doing this! I’m going to be late!”

Despite the utter chaos, I somehow got out of bed and began getting ready. I didn’t have time to enjoy breakfast. I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and did my makeup before slipping into my suit in a hurry.

“S-See you, Takkun. Good luck with your internship!”

“See you!” As Takkun had begun picking up the clothes we’d strewn about last night, I’d somehow managed to finish getting myself ready and head to the entryway.

“Um...” Takkun called out hesitantly before I could leave.

“Hm?” I turned back to look at him after putting on my shoes.

“Have a good day,” he said with a truly natural smile. It was the same thing



he'd always tell me on my way out the door, but for some reason, it felt more special today.

"You too," I said, savoring his words as I ran out the door.

I usually walked to the station and took a train to work, but today I hailed a taxi and headed there directly. Thanks to the ride, I managed to get there just barely on time.

I ran into the office building and headed to the elevator. "Oh, hold the door! Hold the door!" The person inside kept the doors from shutting, and I was able to rush inside. Once I caught my breath and looked up, I finally noticed who it was inside the elevator. "Y-Yumemi?!"

"Morning, Ayako." The person inside was a beautiful woman in a pantsuit with an unpleasant look in her eyes—Yumemi Oinomori, the president of our company. "It's rare to see you coming into work so late," she said as she pressed the button for Light Ship's floor.

"Ha ha, I overslept a little..."

"Is that so? Takumi didn't wake you up?" Yumemi knew about us living together—or rather, she was the person who pulled the strings to facilitate our current cohabitation.

"Um, Takkun overslept too..." I left it at that. *This is bad—I can't tell her any more. It's all well and good to give her an excuse for almost being late since she's my boss, but if we go any further down this rabbit hole, there's a good chance she'll smell a rat.*

"I see..." Yumemi placed her hand on her chin and looked to be thinking deeply. Her gaze then switched to my neck, and a smile spread across her face. "Oho. I see..."

"Wh-What is it...?"

"I *was* wondering if you'd become the kind of woman who shows up to work with hickeys on her neck, and, well..."

"What?! N-No way! I told him my neck is off-limits! Oh—" I reflexively pressed

my hand to my neck and immediately realized I'd screwed up. *Shoot. I totally fell for it!*

"Huh. I see. So I was right after all?" Yumemi's plan had succeeded, leaving a jovial smile on her face as she stared at me. "Seems like somebody had fun last night." All I could do was let out a frustrated groan. "I guess after dragging your feet, you two have finally taken a step forward as a couple. Ha ha, I definitely need to hear all the details. Get ready to tell all next time we go drinking!"

"Th-This is sexual harassment, you know?" All I could do was respond weakly to Yumemi's unabashed joy at teasing me.

After living with my first-ever boyfriend for a week, I, Ayako Katsuragi, a thirty-something-year-old, had finally progressed my relationship a little further.

## Chapter 3: Maturity and Exercise



To the general public, having sex was perhaps considered a turning point in one's life—or, well, maybe it wasn't seen as something so dramatic, but it was definitely considered a special event. The fact that the word "virginity" existed to ostentatiously differentiate those who had experience from those who didn't made it clear that having sex was seen as something significant.

After experiencing it for myself, I'd discovered that the mere act of having sex hadn't changed my world. It'd definitely felt special, but it hadn't been such a big deal that it'd changed my values or how I felt about life.

Since I'd been inexperienced until now, there'd been a part of me that had raised the stakes for some reason. I'd put so much weight on having sex that I'd been fearful I would change to the point of becoming a different person, but nothing like that had happened. I was still me, and he was still him. Nothing had changed. What it had been was a precious act of confirming the feelings we'd already had for each other—our bodies had joined together as we'd shown each other what was in our hearts.

Well, with all that said, it wasn't entirely true to say that nothing at all had changed. Ever since that night, our relationship *had* begun to change—gradually, but clearly.

For example, when we were having breakfast...

"Good morning," Takkun said with a yawn.

"Good morning, Takkun. Breakfast will be ready soon—just give me a second."

I had woken up a little earlier than Takkun, so I was preparing breakfast by the time he came out of the bedroom. After greeting him, I returned my attention back to the sunny-side up eggs in the frying pan, when suddenly...he grabbed

onto me from behind, gently hugging me.

“Ah! Wh-What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just couldn’t help myself after looking at you from behind.” Though he sounded bashful and regretful at the same time, he continued hugging me. “I was just thinking how you’re beautiful as always.”

“J-Jeez, what are you talking about...? Come on, I’m cooking. Shoo.”

“Just a little longer,” he insisted.

“No. Aren’t you going to be late if you don’t hurry?”

“Fine,” Takkun said, slightly pouting as he let go of me.

I resumed making breakfast, but I couldn’t contain my happiness and let out a little hum.

For another example, after coming home from work...

“I’m home...”

“Welcome back, Miss Ayako.”

“Takkun!” I called out in a whining tone.

“Y-You seem tired.”

“I am... I’m so tired again. I had three back-to-back meetings about the anime today...” I said, venting while taking off my shoes. “I really am tired.” Just then, I thought of something, and said in a sweeter voice, “I’m beat. I have no energy left whatsoever. I’ll have to recharge as soon as possible...”

“Oh!” Takkun exclaimed, finally understanding what I was getting at. He smiled slightly as he said, “G-Go ahead.”

Takkun opened his arms, and I took a spirited leap into them. His warmth and scent surrounded me, seeping into my exhausted mind and body.

“You worked hard today,” Takkun said, kindly acknowledging all my hard effort as he patted my head. His large hands tickled as they gently rubbed against my hair, but they felt good at the same time. The sensation made me feel so indescribably happy.

“Does this really help you recharge?” he asked.

“It does. I’m totally rejuvenating,” I said, wrapping my arms around him and hugging him. It had been less than a minute since I’d gotten home, but we were hugging each other with such intensity that it was a bit comical.

“I feel kind of bad being the only one whose energy gets restored,” I added.

“It’s okay, it seems like this is a two-way charging system.”

“Oh, wow, that’s incredible. It’s almost like perpetual motion.”

“That’s true, it *is* like perpetual motion.”

“Hee hee. I guess we make the ideal system.”

We were both fixated on the embrace, and the frivolous conversation flowed freely while we continued to enjoy holding each other for a while.

Also, after we had dinner...

“The top three prefectures with the largest land area?” I pondered. “Huh, I’m stumped.” We were sitting on the couch watching a game show on TV. “The largest is definitely Hokkaido. Second is...maybe Iwate? Then third is—”

“Isn’t it Fukushima?”

“What? Is Fukushima that big? Isn’t Nagano a lot— Oh. Looks like Fukushima is correct! Impressive, Takkun.”

“Ha ha, I just remember it from elementary school.”

“That makes sense. Elementary school was only about a decade ago for you. For me, it’s already been over two decades...”

“Oh! P-Please don’t get down on yourself!”

“I-It’s okay, I’m fine. All right, I’m not going to lose on the next one! Um... ‘What is the structure depicted on the two-thousand-yen bill?’”

“The two-thousand-yen bill... What was it?”

“Oh, I know!” I exclaimed. “It’s Shuri Castle!”

“Whoa, looks like you got it right!”



“Hee hee, yay. The two-thousand-yen bill is so nostalgic. I got one as part of my allowance from my mom, but I could never bring myself to use it. How about you?”

“Um, about that... I wasn’t born yet.”

“Oh, that’s right... Two-thousand-yen bills are from over two decades ago... The current youth have never even touched one...”

“Ah, please don’t get down on yourself.” Our emotions were bouncing up and down like we were on a roller coaster as we enjoyed each other’s company.

We continued to watch the program when suddenly, Takkun put his arm around my shoulder and gently pulled me in closer.

I gasped, surprised for a moment as I turned to look at him.

“I-I can’t stop once I start watching these sorts of game shows,” Takkun said, still staring at the TV. Though he tried to act as if what he’d done wasn’t a big deal, it was obvious that he was a bit nervous.

I didn’t resist and just lay my head on his shoulder. “Y-Yeah... Game shows are lots of fun.”

“Y-Yes, they really are.”

“Let’s see, the next question is... ‘Today is Wednesday. What day is three days after two days prior to two days after tomorrow?’ Okay, okay. It’s one of *those* questions. We can figure it out if we just take it slow.”

“Yes, we just need to calmly think it over.”

“Yeah, that’s right. If we just think about each piece... W-Wait, huh?”

“Um...”

“Ha ha, it’s kind of difficult...”

“I feel like my brain short-circuited...” We both laughed nervously. We were sitting so close to each other that we could hear each other’s heartbeats. My heart was racing, but it was a strangely relaxing and fulfilling way to spend time together after dinner.

Then there was the time a happy accident happened...

“Eek!”

“Oh! I-I’m sorry.”

As I was getting ready to take a bath, Takkun accidentally opened the door to the changing area. I had gotten undressed, and I was in my underwear. It was quite the humiliating experience.

Until now, something like this would’ve definitely been a bit of a commotion. I would’ve turned bright red and screamed, and Takkun would’ve shut the door and fled in a panic. After that, we would’ve both felt awkward about it as our hearts raced... It definitely would’ve led to a storm of emotion—the kind of big scene that would call for an insert illustration if this were a light novel.

But now...

“Jeez, be careful...” I said with a nervous laugh. I didn’t get flustered, and I just covered my chest with my arms.

“Ha ha, I’m sorry.” Takkun also casually apologized without getting particularly flustered. He didn’t turn red and hurry out of the changing area either. Actually, he stayed for a while just silently staring at me in my underwear.

“Um... I-Is something wrong?”

“No, just, um... I think you look nice in your underwear.”

“Wha— Jeez, what are you even saying, Takkun?” Though I acted disapprovingly and pretended to hide my body, I didn’t get completely embarrassed like I had in the past. If anything, I was quite happy about the compliment. “Well, I *did* buy these to use while we’re living together.”

Takkun didn’t respond. “I-It’s not that deep though! It’s just that, when considering different situations, I thought I would need these,” I explained.

“Then...I should actually be taking a good look at them.”

“What?!”

“You went out of your way to buy new underwear, so it’d be rude of me not

to take a proper look at them. Yeah, I definitely think so.”

“W-Wait! Y-You can’t... I mean, I did buy them knowing you would look at them, and it would be sad if you didn’t look at them at all, but...that doesn’t mean you should stare like that! Not right now!”

“Not now...? Then when?”

“The point is, you can’t! Shoo, go away! I’m going to take a bath!”

Takkun seemed like he didn’t want to go as I pushed him away and kicked him out of the changing area. It was a fun exchange where we’d both goofed around.

Even when he’d see me in my underwear, now it ended as a regular conversation filled with jokes. Though it was a scene that would’ve gotten an illustration in a light novel, now it felt like a normal part of daily life that passed without needing to be drawn out.

And so, that was how things were. It wasn’t like anything in particular had changed, but something was different. *It’s like, ever since that night, we instantly got closer! We got a whole lot closer! We really seem like a couple now!*

Well, it wasn’t like we weren’t close before, and it wasn’t like we hadn’t seemed like a couple. Perhaps we’d even come across more like a couple before everything because of all the firsts—but that freshness probably made us seem like a student couple, whereas now our relationship had progressed into a stable relationship between adults! There was a lot more physical contact, and it all felt natural.

*I’m so happy! I feel so happy. Is it okay for me to be this happy?*

“It’s like... It feels really natural to be together. Oh, it’s not that we weren’t getting along before—but before, we would always be trying hard to be considerate of each other... Like, when conversations stalled before, it seemed like we would both be forcing ourselves to find a new topic, but now, we don’t worry about it! We’re relaxed and don’t have to force things. If anything, those quiet moments when we run out of things to say are when there’s more

physical contact... There are just some things that are communicated better without being put into words, you know? It feels like we understand how each other feels just through touch... Oh, but it's not like we don't need words though. We're both keeping the importance of saying what we think in mind... I-If anything, Takkun goes *overboard* with the compliments, since he always keeps telling me how much he likes me and loves me... I spend every day feeling really loved and happy... Ha ha, I don't know what I'm going to do with him. What do you think, Yumemi?"

"Oh, is that so...?"

It was a weekend night—Yumemi had invited me out, and we were drinking together. We were in a private room at the same izakaya she'd brought me to before. I'd gotten quite talkative after having a few drinks, and in contrast, Yumemi seemed to be in low spirits.

"Hey, what's wrong, Yumemi? You're being kind of a downer."

"Nothing's wrong..."

"You're the one who forced me to come out tonight. You declared you were going to hear about every little detail, so I mustered up the willpower to kindly tell you all about us."

"All right, then I guess I'll just come out and say this..." Yumemi took a swig of the sake she was holding before firmly declaring, "You go on for too long."





“Wha—”

“You’re right, I’m the one who invited you out, but...I hadn’t expected you to go on and on with the sappy stories about your love life for so long. Ha ha, it’s strange—I’ve never thrown up from drinking before, but I feel a bit of heartburn right now.”

“Sappy stories...? I just wanted to tell you about what a happy, fulfilling life Takkun and I are living together.”

“If those aren’t sappy stories, then what are they?!” Yumemi shouted. “Heh... Heh heh heh... I wonder how to describe this gnawing feeling. I should be happy that you’re enjoying your life without any issues, but...for some reason, I don’t actually feel all that pleased about it.” Yumemi’s chuckling and sighing made her seem deeply conflicted. “I’d wanted things to work out for you, so I gave you advice, and I even meddled when I didn’t need to. But now that I’m being forced to see you enjoy it...it’s just not fun!”

*“Hey!” She really said it! She said it’s not fun!*

“It was frustrating back when you were dragging your feet, and I wanted you to just get on with things, but now that your relationship is progressing smoothly, it’s kind of like, um... I want to see you struggle and be more pathetic.”

“How cruel...”

Yumemi let out a heavy sigh. “I guess it was the most fun when I could sit on the sidelines and tease you dorks while watching you step on every rake imaginable. I could squeeze so much joy out of offering you condescending advice while you were wet around the ears...”

“Aren’t you being a little too honest?”

“I’m well aware now that you’re doing well, so can you hurry up and have some issues again? Please tell me all this is just a preamble to the next pit you fall into. This is just a setup plot for an upcoming tragedy episode, right?”

“Don’t jinx me like that!” I said, fully jabbing back.

Yumemi took another swig before she continued. “Well, jokes aside,” she

said, collecting herself. “I really am glad that you’re enjoying living together to the fullest.”

*Was she really joking? It felt like she was serious.*

“Do you really think that?”

“I do, I do,” she insisted with a snicker. “I’m sorry. I got jealous seeing you so happy, and I couldn’t help but say something mean. I’ve been troubled by some things recently...”

“What...?”

“No, it’s nothing. Forget about it,” Yumemi said, waving her hand and ending the conversation.

The expression I saw on her face was rare for her. It seemed fragile, as if for a moment she was thinking hard about something difficult. It wasn’t characteristic of her at all—even when unbelievable issues came up at work, instead of getting upset, the Yumemi Oinomori I knew would enjoy the adversity and laugh in its face.

*I wonder what happened. What could possibly get Yumemi down?*

Yumemi ordered another bottle of sake. “All right, then. Now that it’s getting later into the night, why don’t we kick this conversation up a notch?” she suggested, ignoring that I was lost in thought and trying to reset the mood.

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m telling you to give me more details.”

“I already told you everything there is to tell. You’re the one who said I went on for too long.”

“Sure, sure. I heard all that. I’ve gotten my fill and then some about how your relationship has progressed forward and how your days are fulfilling and full of happiness. But, while I *am* tired of hearing your sappy stories, it’s a different story if you’re willing to go a little *deeper*.”

“Deeper?” I tilted my head in confusion, and Yumemi leaned forward.

“Be honest and specific. How are things with Takumi in bed?”

“What?!”

“I’m very interested. I want to know how people like you two, who were so new to everything, got down after crossing that line.”

“Wh-What are you saying?! Jeez! Why would I give you specifics about that?! This is sexual harassment!”

“I’m not asking as your boss, but as your friend.”

“I wouldn’t talk about such personal things with friends either...”

“What are you talking about? When women in their thirties get together and have some drinks, all they talk about is sex with their boyfriends and husbands.” *Really?! Is that what adult women do?! They all talk about these kinds of things?!* “So, how was it? How is Takumi in *that* area? Hm? Is he satisfying you?”

“Wha— Jeez, stop it... Like I’ve said before, I don’t like these sorts of conversations.”

“Come on, don’t be like that.”

“No means no.”

I refused to just go with the flow here. Most of all, this wasn’t personal just for me, but for Takkun as well, so I needed to uphold a boundary.

“I see...” Seeing me refuse firmly made Yumemi let out a small sigh. “I guess that’s that. I won’t force you. If I keep pushing, it really *will* be sexual harassment.”

“Th-That’s right,” I said, relieved.

“I can’t imagine there would be anything that interesting even if you told me,” Yumemi said mockingly. “You two are both earnest to a fault. You probably just do normal things in a normal way. It hardly even seems worth asking about.”

I fell silent.

“No doubt it was one of those cutesy events like you’d see in a shojo manga—something peaceful and pure, with flowers floating in the background,” she carried on. I didn’t know what to say. “You know, I’m starting to feel that I really

*was* in the wrong. It was horrible of me to ask about how things are in bed. Yeah, it's fine. Sex is different for everyone. Boring, normal, plain, spiceless sex is fine too, as long as you're both satisfied. It's not for the sake of other people anyways. Since you were both inexperienced, you deserve an award just for getting through it. Yeah, yeah. My bad. Let's shelve the adult topics for tonight."

"D-Don't make fun of me!" I finally responded, exclaiming as I leaned forward. She'd hit a nerve. Perhaps it was because I'd had some drinks as well, but my entire body was hot, and I felt blood rushing to my head. "You have no idea what you're talking about! I'll have you know, we have proper, adult sex! What we're doing wouldn't be in a shojo manga—it would be rated for those eighteen and older!"

"I see."

"Of course, we fumbled a bit in the beginning, but we're getting better and better with each time! It's not spiceless... We're well seasoned, you hear me? Perfectly spicy!"

"Wow."

"Takkun failed a bit at first, but now he's incredible! He's not just serious, he's like...a beast. Like an explosion of youthfulness... B-But, he's not *only* rough. He can be gentle too—almost too gentle, and proper, and I can't help but want more..."

"I see."

"I-I'm also doing my best... Yeah, I'm doing my best! I'm, you know, learning how to pleasure, or rather, service him. I'm learning what I can and having Takkun teaching me things too as I..."

"Hmm, is that really the case?"

"I-It really is! Even yesterday, Takkun asked, so I used my chest to..."

"Yeah? You used your chest to what?"

"I-I used my chest to, um, you know, do... Wait a second!" It was then that I finally realized I had been baited.

*I've done it! I fell for her leading questions! I've said a bunch of things I never*

wanted to say!

“Hmm, I see, I see. It seems that you’re spending pretty passionate nights together. I’m glad I got to hear the details.”

“U-Urgh!”

“Ha ha. You’re really cute, Ayako.” Yumemi seemed to be having a blast as she drank and watched me writhe with the pain of loss and humiliation. She was definitely relishing my embarrassment.

“You’re terrible. The worst... I hate you, Yumemi.”

“Heh heh, my bad. I won’t do it again,” she said, not sounding sorry in the slightest.

*That’s what she says, but she’s probably going to tease me again. I know it.*

“Still, I’m jealous. I’ve been experiencing a shortage of men these days. Isn’t there a good guy just lying around somewhere...?” she said between sighs.

“Maybe I should take a page from your book and go after a twenty-year-old.”

“Stop that. Someone your age going after a twenty-year-old seems like a crime.”

“Your situation isn’t so different. Once the age difference is over ten years, anything above that is a rounding error.”

“Th-That might be true, but...we’re in the clear. W-We love each other, and that surpasses things like an age difference...” *Wow, that’s so embarrassing. I can’t do this. I’m really off today. I keep finding new ways to humiliate myself.*

“Heh heh, that’s true. You two are probably fated to be together. I pray your relationship enjoys lasting success,” she said like she’d been enlightened. “Well, even so, take it easy on the nighttime fun. I’ll be in trouble if you keep tiring yourself out night after night and can’t focus on your work.”

“I-I already know that.”

“Do you? You’ve had terrible muscle aches for the past few days.”

“Urgh...” She hit me where it hurt.

*I really have.* Ever since the day after the first night, I’d had awful muscle pain

—I was unfortunately at an age where muscle aches were a little delayed. I was feeling the consequences of not exercising on a regular basis. *You know, it's really true. After experiencing it myself, I know that fun in bed is a full-body workout.* I could feel the soreness all over my body.

“You would maybe benefit from a little more exercise on a regular basis. For Takumi’s sake as well.”

“I-I know. I think about these things too, you know? Like how I should try some things to maintain my figure.” *Well, I think about it, but can't really bring myself to act on any of it.* The truth was, I’d planned to go on a diet during this assignment in Tokyo, thinking, “All right, while I’m gone, I’m going to become so beautiful that it’ll surprise him!” But then we’d ended up living together.

*It sucks. I could've been on a diet if I was here alone. I should've been losing weight for these three months and surprised him...*

“No, no. That’s not what I mean,” Yumemi said. “Of course, it’s important to exercise to maintain your figure and for your health, but a woman working out has a lot of benefits for her relationship.”

“For her relationship?” I asked, tilting my head.

Yumemi brought her face closer to mine and began whispering something. *What? She's whispering in my ear? We have a private room—that's why I've been talking about things so openly.*

I thought she was acting strangely, but I gasped when I heard what she had to say. I was stunned. It truly was something that should be whispered, even in a private room at an izakaya—it was also something I absolutely needed to hear.



After living together for two weeks, there were many things that I’d gradually gotten used to. The novelty had worn off—in a good way—and we were settling into spending our days together.

For example, when it came to coming home, we used to always make sure to greet each other. Even if we were in the middle of cooking, bathing, or cleaning, we would stop what we were doing to wash our hands and rush to the entryway just so we could say, “Welcome home.” Whichever one of us was

returning home would expect it to happen as well, so we would wait in the entryway until it happened.

Of course, it was nice to be greeted like that, and it was the kind of thing you can only do when you're living with your significant other, but...after two weeks, it'd slowly stopped happening. It wasn't that we'd gotten tired of it or that we became less excited to see each other than before—rather, we'd just both stopped trying so hard and switched to what felt natural.

I didn't think of it as a negative change. It was like we'd become family, where being together was the norm... Well, perhaps that was taking it a bit too far. *Yeah, it's too soon to become a family.*

"I'm home."

"Oh, Takkun. Welcome home."

It was around four in the afternoon. I'd returned home from my internship, and I heard Miss Ayako's voice coming from the living room. She didn't go out of her way to rush to the entryway—nor did I wait for her to come—and I began removing my shoes.

Miss Ayako had gotten home first today. She'd had an off-site meeting with people working on the anime, then she'd gone straight home afterwards.

"Huh...? What are you doing, Miss Ayako?"

She was dressed in an unfamiliar outfit—bike shorts and a tank top, both of which looked as if they were clinging to her body. Her forehead was lightly damp with sweat, and under her butt was...a large exercise ball. She squatted down onto the silver rubber ball with her arms extended to keep her balance.

"I'm doing a little exercise."

"Exercise...?"

"I actually had a lot of stuff prepared for my assignment in Tokyo, like workout clothes and this exercise ball. I was planning on exercising whenever I had the time."

"I see. Why did you suddenly start now?"

"Th-There's no reason in particular... I just sort of thought to do it," Miss



Ayako said, slightly flustered. “I’m getting up there in age, after all. I’ve also been thinking I should do some dieting.”

“The way I see it, you’re overthinking it. You’ve got a great figure already, Miss Ayako. You don’t need to force yourself to go on a diet.”

“Th-That may be true, but there’s another reason too...”

“A reason?”

“N-Nothing! It’s nothing! Anyway, there’s nothing wrong with exercising! Once you hit your thirties, you need to be more conscious about exercising, yeah!” Her tone was remarkably assertive.

*Hm, well, I guess there isn’t anything bad about exercising. I personally had no complaints about Miss Ayako’s figure. Actually, I’m kind of into how she’s not as lean as she could be— No, it’d be wrong of me to make this about me and my preferences.*

Regardless, I couldn’t deny that Miss Ayako didn’t exercise quite enough, objectively speaking. Her job had her at a desk for most of the day as well. As her boyfriend, I wanted to recommend training her body for her own health.

“Would you like to join me?” Miss Ayako asked.

“Sure,” I immediately and happily answered, since I had no reason to turn down the offer. I went to go change into clothes that were easier to move around in and returned to the living room. “What should we do?”

“Hmm, do you want to try this too, Takkun?” Miss Ayako sat on the exercise ball, then she lifted both her legs in the air while maintaining her balance by extending her arms. “Hm, ngh, nnh... Aaah!” After keeping her balance for roughly five seconds, she fell onto the ground. “Phew... That was pretty good. How was it?”

“Huh? What?” I wasn’t sure how to respond to the slightly proud look Miss Ayako was giving me.

“Wasn’t that pretty impressive? I practiced for about an hour, and now I can finally stay balanced for this long.”

I didn’t know what to say...

“All right, it’s your turn. Hee hee. It’s normal to not be great when you’re just starting, so don’t worry if you can’t do it. I’ll teach you until you can.”

Still not having said a word, I sat on the exercise ball. I lifted my legs, extended my arms, and steadily maintained my balance. Five seconds passed, then ten, then twenty. I was fine even after thirty seconds had passed, but Miss Ayako looked more and more flabbergasted as time passed, so I decided to stop there for now.

“Huh...? Wh-Why are you so good at this?!”

“Well, this isn’t too hard... I have one at home too.”

“O-Oh, I see. You’ve practiced a lot back home. Of course—there’s no other way you’d be able to do it. You have no idea how many times I rolled onto the living room floor when I first started...”

“Well, no. My mom bought the exercise ball, so I’ve only done it once or twice before.”

“I-I see...” Miss Ayako was obviously depressed. “It’s fine... I’m well aware—our basic stats are different. I’m a woman in her thirties who has a desk job and doesn’t get enough exercise, and you’re a twenty-year-old boy who plays a sport in college. You know how our torsos are completely different? It’s like that...”

“Th-There’s no need to sulk.”

And so, I began working out with Miss Ayako. Though we were working out, we didn’t have much exercise equipment since Miss Ayako hadn’t prepared anything aside from the exercise ball. *It should be fine. If her goal is just to exercise more rather than any serious bodybuilding, calisthenics are plenty effective.*

First we started with the abs.

“Okay, I’m doing it.”

“Huh...?”

“Mmmph, mnn...”

“Hold on...”

As she lay on the floor, Miss Ayako kept trying to lift her upper body with her hands behind her head.

“Mnnngh! One...” Eventually, she put all her might into rebounding her back off the floor and managed to force herself up once, to the point she’d fully sat up.

*Sh-She can’t be serious...*

“This is good. I can feel it working,” she said as she panted.

“Um, Miss Ayako...” I couldn’t take it and had to speak up. I suppressed the desire to joke and tease her for being so tired after one sit-up—I needed to point out something much more important. “You’re not working your abs correctly.”

“Huh...?”

“It’s not good to fully raise your upper body.”

“No way... I-Isn’t this the standard way to exercise your abs, though?”

“It is, but for a long time now, it’s been recommended not to bring your torso to a complete right angle to avoid causing back pain.”

“R-Really?!”

“A proper way to do it would be like this...” I lay on my back and bent my knees. I put my hands behind my head and concentrated on my abdominal muscles as I slightly lifted my upper body without fully sitting up, then I lay back down. That was one rep.

“That’s as far as you need to go?”

“You should watch your belly button and exhale as you lift your upper body. Rather than using the buildup of the motion to get multiple reps in, you should concentrate on the load to your abdomen and make sure each rep is done properly.”

“Wow, you’re so knowledgeable, Takkun.”

“This is nothing. It’s just what I learned from my club at school.”

“I see... That was something you just learned while in a club...” Miss Ayako

looked troubled. “This happens a lot—things that were common sense and normal in one generation are discovered to be wrong in the following generations.”

“That’s true.”

“In my generation, the kind of exercise I did earlier was the norm. Everyone who played a sport spent rainy days in the hallways doing that exercise with everything they had. I never would’ve thought that it was a bad exercise that could hurt your back...” I wasn’t sure how to respond. “I know it’s just how things are, but it makes me a little sad.”

“I understand. Wasn’t your generation also told not to drink water while exercising?”

“No...” Miss Ayako responded after a short pause. “We all hydrated properly. The generation told not to drink water while exercising was a much, much older generation—people who grew up in the Showa period. I was just barely born in the Showa period, but I grew up in the Heisei era, so...”

“Oh. I-I’m sorry.”

Miss Ayako looked a bit unsatisfied and became gloomy. It seemed I’d put my foot in my mouth.

Next up were squats.

“If you’re going to work out at home, you should definitely do squats. They’re simple, don’t require much space, and are really effective.”

Squats were so great that people called them the king of lower body exercises. Though it was an exercise that mainly targeted your lower body, it was a full-body exercise that also worked your abdominal and back muscles. It burned a lot of calories too, so both those who built muscle and people who wanted to lose weight would say, “If you don’t know what to do, just do squats.”

“Is there a proper way to do a squat too?”

“There are various kinds you can do, but the main thing is to make sure your

knees don't go farther forward than your toes."

"My knees..."

"If your knees go too far forward and you lift the heels of your feet while squatting, you run the risk of hurting your knees."

"Okay, I see."

After giving her various tips on what to watch out for, Miss Ayako did a squat.

"Yes, good... Your feet should be spread out to shoulder width. Watch that your knees don't travel too forward... If anything, you should try to stick your butt out more."

"My butt...? L-Like this?"



“That’s right.”

“I-It’s kind of embarrassing... Is this really correct?”

“You’re doing it right. Just engage your abdomen and keep your heels on the floor.”

“Ah, this might be a little tough...!” Miss Ayako did the squat with the proper form. Perhaps it was because she didn’t exercise on a regular basis, but it seemed pretty difficult for her. It was only her first rep, and her thighs were already trembling. “One... Ah, that was hard.”

“You can do it! Let’s keep going until you finish ten.”

“T-Ten?! Eek...!”

“You don’t have to force yourself, though.”

“No, I’ll do my best,” Miss Ayako said, sounding like she’d made up her mind. “Yumemi said the same thing, that squats work the best.”

“Miss Yumemi said that?”

“Um...”

“Was she giving you advice on working out?”

“Um... Y-Yeah, that’s right! That’s it!” I didn’t know what to make of this. “O-Okay, let’s keep going! Two!” Miss Ayako suspiciously changed the topic and resumed squatting. I was a bit curious what she meant, but immediately after that, she stuck her butt out too far and fell backward while screaming, and my suspicions disappeared.

Next on the menu was the “HandClap” dance.

“What about this sort of thing, Miss Ayako?”

“What is it?”

I showed her a video on my smartphone. On the screen were several dancers jauntily dancing to music.

“I was trying to find workouts that were good for couples, and this popped



up.”

“Huh, interesting.”

“It’s called the ‘HandClap’ dance. Have you heard of it?”

“Oh, I think I have...”

To put it simply, the “HandClap” dance involved moving your arms and legs in wide motions and jumping around to the song “HandClap.” Besides the available beginner-friendly choreographies, performing the dances burned a lot of calories. It had become viral for some time as a fun exercise you could do easily at home.

“Do you think I could do it? I’ve never danced before.”

“The choreography is simple, so I think you’ll be fine.”

“Okay, then... I’ll give it a shot.”

I put my smartphone on the table and played the video. There were all kinds of “HandClap” exercise videos, so I picked one that was simple and for beginners. We both began dancing, following the movements of the dancers on the screen.

“Mnn...” Miss Ayako grunted between pants.

We jumped around to the music, then bent down to touch each foot. After touching our feet from the front, we bent back down to touch them from behind. We stood back up and swung our arms in a wide motion, then began jumping again.

“If it’s this simple, I should be able to do it,” Miss Ayako said between heavy breaths. She looked to be having fun as she jumped around. “But still, doing it for too long might be difficult.” She continued jumping. “Urgh... I-I need to do my best!”

Miss Ayako was working hard to keep dancing, but my movements gradually slowed down. I needed to look at the screen and follow the dancer’s instructions, but before I knew it, I couldn’t take my eyes off Miss Ayako.

“H-Huh? What’s wrong, Takkun?”

“Let’s take a break for now, Miss Ayako...”

“Why? Are you tired?”

“No, it’s just that...” I choked down my embarrassment. “Y-Your boobs are going all over the place...”

“What?!”

“They’re swinging like crazy, and it’s hard for me to watch—or rather, it’s hard for me *not* to watch...”

Her breasts had been thrashing at a level that had been nothing if not extraordinary. They’d swayed with such vigor that I could almost hear them going *boing-boing*.

*That was crazy! I could practically feel all the neurons firing in my brain. Nothing was exposed, but that was clearly NSFW.*

It seemed that there was an unexpected hurdle to overcome when dancing to “HandClap” if you were a woman with an exquisite figure like Miss Ayako.

“O-Oh no...” Miss Ayako bashfully pressed down her chest. “I’m sorry. I didn’t notice at all.”

“It’s fine...” It wasn’t something she had to apologize for—in fact, I wanted to thank her. I wasn’t going to, though.

“I have a sports bra on, but I guess one isn’t enough. If I’m going to move with this much intensity, I need to bind my chest a bit.”

“That sounds rough...”

“It is. I’ve always had trouble when it comes to exercising... They’re heavy, and it can hurt when they sway too much.” Miss Ayako let out a melancholic sigh. “I wish I could just have someone hold them while I work out.”

“What?”

“Huh?” We both looked at each other, surprised by the statement that had slipped out of her mouth. “T-Takkun, what’s with that serious look on your face...?”

“Well then, please allow me to...”

“No, no! I didn’t mean it! It was a joke! Don’t actually try to hold them.”

“But it’s for your own good.”

“No, no! Jeez, come on...”

After we had our fun back-and-forth, we resumed dancing—this time with Miss Ayako’s chest bound. I couldn’t help but feel happy for her yet sad at the same time.

And so, we spent about an hour having fun working out.

“Phew, I’m exhausted...” Miss Ayako said as she wiped her sweat off with a towel.

“You did well.”

“Thanks... You seem totally fine, Takkun.”

“It wasn’t too much for me.”

“You really are young... So young...”

“Please don’t sulk,” I said, hurrying to cheer Miss Ayako up as she shrank. *I think it’s because of how much I exercise on a daily basis, and not my age... Well, I’ll keep that to myself.* “By the way, what would you like to do for dinner tonight?”

“Oh, I don’t think I have the energy to cook...”

“Would you like to go out to eat?”

“I don’t think I have the energy to go out either...” She seemed quite exhausted. “Let’s see... What if we get pizza delivered?”

“Are you sure? Do you really want a dinner that’s going to wipe out all the hard work you just did?”

“I-It’s fine! It’ll be okay if I pick a pizza with relatively few calories!”

With that, it was decided we would have pizza for dinner. I ordered a seafood pizza on the phone. It probably wasn’t all that low-calorie, but it would be fine. Since we’d be drinking oolong tea with it, I was willing to consider it a balanced meal.

“We should change before the pizza gets here,” Miss Ayako suggested.

“We should, but before that, Miss Ayako...” I suddenly remembered a question I had. “Why did you suddenly decide to start exercising?”

“Huh? I-I don’t really have a reason, I just thought I should... Haven’t I always been saying I want to exercise more?”

“You have, but it was always all talk, and you’d never actually go through with it.”

“Urgh...”

“Even when I’d casually suggest it, you would respond positively in the moment, but I never remember you actually doing anything.”

“U-Urgh...”

“Well, it’s fine. It’s good to exercise.”

I’d been concerned about Miss Ayako’s lack of exercise for a while. I’d never thought she should lose weight or anything, but since she had a desk job, I’d thought she should be thinking about her health a bit more—it’d made me happy that she’d started working out on her own today. But...

“I was just curious about why you started so suddenly.” I was curious, and I wanted to know. I figured I could get her to keep this up if I understood her motivation.

“What? The reason why...?” Miss Ayako was obviously flustered. “D-Do I have to tell you?”

“You don’t have to, but... Wait. Is it something you can’t tell me?”

“N-Not necessarily.”

“You said something about Miss Yumemi earlier. Did she say something to you?”

“Y-Yeah... I guess in a sense, she said something to me,” she said, blushing as she twiddled her thumbs. “Yumemi said I should work out for my boyfriend’s sake too...”

“For me?”

“Yeah—that if I work out, it’ll make you happy...”

“I appreciate the thought, but there’s no need to force yourself for my sake. I’ve said it before, but I’ve never thought you were fat. I do think that you should exercise for your health though.”

“Oh, not like that... Of course, I think I should work out both for my figure and for my health, but... Yumemi meant it in a different way.”

“A different way?”

“U-Um, well...” Miss Ayako was struggling to get the words out. I couldn’t help but feel like I was being kept in suspense.

“It only makes me more curious when you pause like that.”

“What? Y-You want to know?”

“I do.”

“How badly?”

“Quite badly.”

“You won’t laugh...?”

“Probably not.”

“You won’t be weirded out...?”

“Most likely not... Come on, just please tell me! I won’t know until I hear it!”

“U-Urgh, fine...” Miss Ayako covered her bright red face with her hands and continued in a quiet voice. “Y-Yumemi told me that if a woman exercises... If a woman works her abs and her lower body, then...” She sounded like she was going to die of embarrassment. “...she’ll get tighter.”

At first, I didn’t understand what she meant.

“‘Tighter’? What? What do you mean by that?”

“T-Tight is tight... I can’t say anything more than that.”

“Um... *What* gets tighter?”

“Uh, um... Ugh... D-Down there...”

“There...?”

Miss Ayako had been writhing in embarrassment while she explained, and it still wasn't clicking for me. Still, I racked my brain, and I thought and thought...and it finally clicked.

*“What?!” That's what she meant?! Down there, like, down there?! She was talking about that tightness?!*

“Wait, Miss Ayako... What...? What?!”

“D-Don't be weirded out, Takkun! Jeez! Th-That's why I didn't want to tell you!” Miss Ayako was beet red, and she looked like she was going to burst into tears.

*I mean, how could I not be surprised?* It was much too unexpected of a motivation to work out.

“M-Miss Yumemi said that to you?”

“Yeah, when we went out for drinks the other day...”

“S-So you *do* talk about those kinds of things after all...”

“N-No! She just said it on her own! What do you mean, ‘after all’?!”

I'd heard before that women could get much raunchier than men when discussing dirty topics. *Man, I guess they really do talk about that stuff when drinking...*

*Hmm, I guess when I calm down and think about it, that makes sense. I'm pretty sure exercises for that purpose were popular at some point.*

“Yumemi said you'd enjoy it if I worked out... I'm sure she was partially joking, but I started getting curious.” Miss Ayako seemed a little sad to admit all this, and for my part, I was stunned silent. “I-I don't have any prior experience, and I can't tell how I am on my own... I knew I needed to exercise more, so I got worried that you might not be enjoying things that much...”

“Miss Ayako...” *Ah, shoot. Why did I react like I was weirded out? I'm pathetic.*

Miss Ayako wasn't fooling around—she was serious about this, and seriously thinking about me. She was just as inexperienced as me, which made her worry

about the things she didn't know and made her want to work hard to overcome them.

Her courageousness and sweetness made me feel bad for making her worry, but at the same time, it was incredibly endearing. I followed my heart, which was racing, and hugged her tightly.

"Huh? T-Takkun?" I kept hugging her. "H-Hold on, I'm covered in sweat right now..."

"Thank you, Miss Ayako." I paid no mind to the sweat on our bodies as I held her tightly. "Thank you for thinking about me so much."

"It's nothing you have to thank me for... I was just doing it on a whim..."

"You're fine," I said. It was a bit embarrassing, so my tone ended up a bit assertive. "You're fine, Miss Ayako."

"What? What do you mean...?"

"You're fine."

"Do you mean my, um, tightness...?"

"I-I mean you're fine." *God. What in the world are we talking about?*

"O-Oh, I see... I'm fine..."

"Yes, completely. You're totally fine. If anything, you're *too* fine."

"H-Huh... I'm *too* fine..."

We both got completely quiet for a moment.

"H-Hold on, Takkun. I'm scared... This silent hug is scaring me..."

I continued not to speak.

"Wait, could it be that...?"

"Yes... I don't think I can hold back." Frankly speaking, a certain switch had turned on.

I couldn't help it though. My beloved girlfriend had been thinking about me so earnestly, and the context of her consideration had been highly suggestive. On top of that, perhaps because we had just exercised, the warmth I felt from her

through the hug felt hotter than usual, and perhaps because of the sweat, it felt like there were more pheromones in the air. Was there a man out there who could hold back in a situation like this?

“W-Wait, Takkun! I-It’s too early. We haven’t even had dinner yet.”

“But I can’t hold back.”

“I’m so sweaty, and I haven’t showered yet.”

“That’s actually...”

“Actually what?!”

“So we can’t?”

“N-No, I mean... Ugh, jeez, don’t look at me like that...” Though she was refusing, she didn’t seem like she was entirely against it either. I just needed one more push, but... “C-Come on, the pizza will arrive!”

That one statement brought me back to my senses. “Oh... Oh!” *That’s right. I ordered a pizza.* It was going to arrive in about twenty minutes. *Agh, why did I order a pizza? Dammit!*

“Right? So let’s calm down a little.”

“Okay...”

Miss Ayako soothed me as she escaped from my embrace. I couldn’t keep standing, so I fell to the ground. Things had been getting incredibly heated, so it was a bit tough.

*But if I have twenty minutes, I could...*

Despite the thoughts crossing my mind, I figured it wasn’t right. *If I were to try to get things done haphazardly and as quickly as possible, it would be like I was just trying to take care of my urges, and I’d just end up feeling bad. It would be incredibly pathetic as a man.*

*Ugh, but still, ugh...*

“I’m going to go shower, then.”

“Okay...”



“Can you take care of the pizza when it gets here? You can take the money from the wallet with our money for living expenses.”

“Okay...”

“Th-There’s no need to be so sad...” Miss Ayako seemed a little put off by me as I sat on the floor, hugging my knees. “Jeez...”

However, after a slightly exasperated sigh, she crouched down next to me to whisper in my ear. “I’ll work hard tonight.”



Her voice was so quiet it felt like it could dissipate into the air, but she'd spoken clearly.

"What...?"

"O-Okay, then! I'm going to go shower!"

By the time I looked up, Miss Ayako had fled from the living room.

I silently toppled over onto the floor and looked up at the ceiling. Various emotions were stirring inside me, and I was struggling to put them into words, but...

"Ha ha..."

...it was clear that I was so overjoyed I couldn't help but laugh.

*What is this feeling? I don't know how to describe it, but if I had to try, I'd say... Living together is the best! There's no other way to explain it.*

## Chapter 4: The Release and the Reunion



It was the first week of October. The last of summer's warmth had faded, and the weather had gotten quite comfortable. It'd already been a month since I'd unexpectedly started living with my boyfriend.

The time had gone by quickly. It'd felt like it was over in the blink of an eye, but it was a month rich—*extremely* rich—with experience. Not only had a lot happened between Takkun and me while we'd been living together, but my work had been extremely fulfilling as well, so I'd spent my days busy.

*I really have been busy... I've truly been doing my job the best I can. I've been working almost every weekday, and I've worked on a lot of weekends too. I didn't come here for fun, after all! I didn't come to Tokyo just to be lovey-dovey with Takkun! I steeled my resolve to be here and make the anime adaptation of my project successful!*

Though I had many other tasks to handle as well, my main focus right now was my responsibilities relative to the anime adaptation of *KIMIOSA: I Want to Be Your Childhood Friend*, also just known as *KIMIOSA*. I'd participated in scenario readings, which were meetings where we discussed the script with the anime staff, and I'd also helped create sales promotions to go along with the release of the anime.

There was a lot I wasn't familiar with since I'd mostly been working from home before this, but it was all work that I'd wanted to do for a long time. It might seem like I'm bragging, but I was currently doing everything I wanted to, both in my work life and my love life. My days were really fulfilling.

"Using that plan, I'd like to try to increase light novel sales in time with the manga adaptation," I explained. "What do you think?"

"That sounds fun. I like it." It was Friday afternoon, and we were in one of the conference rooms at the Light Ship office. Yumemi and I were coming up with a

plan to increase *KIMIOSA*'s sales. "Just be careful of the two points I mentioned earlier, and there shouldn't be any issues," Yumemi said. "You can go ahead with your proposal."

"Understood. I'll let their editing department know." I took notes about what we discussed on my laptop.

Yumemi put down the papers in her hands and shot me a dispirited look. "You have a scenario reading to attend after this meeting, right?"

"Yes, it starts at three."

"That's tough. Aren't you overworking yourself?"

"I'm fine. The scenario readings were a bit difficult at first, but I've gotten used to them. It really helps that everyone on the project is on the ball. Also..."

"Also?"

"I'm busy, but I'm having fun. I'm getting to put everything I have into my work," I explained. "Until now, there have been a lot of projects I've wanted to work on that I refrained from pursuing so I could prioritize being a mother to Miu while she was young." Yumemi didn't say anything, so I quickly clarified, "Oh, but it's not like I'm unhappy about that! It was my own decision to become Miu's mother, and I have no regrets, it's just..."

"It's okay, I understand what you're trying to say," Yumemi reassured me, a faint smile tinged with irony and loneliness appearing on her face. "Choosing between work and your child... It's always a difficult decision for women," she said, looking off into the distance. "Well, I'm glad you're having fun. Keep working to your heart's content." It seemed like she'd collected herself, and her usual cynical smile returned. "Yeah, I'm really glad that both your personal and work lives seem to be going well. You get to do the work you want to, and you get to be madly in love with your boyfriend... Could this all be thanks to my scheming?"

I didn't want to respond to that, so I silently looked away.

*How do I describe this? What she's saying is true—I'm having fun at work, and my relationship with Takkun is going great. There's no doubt that I'm overall very happy. There would've been a lot more issues if we were long-distance. I*

*guess you could say it's thanks to Yumemi's mischief, and maybe I should be thanking her, but...I don't really want to thank her outright. Something about it doesn't feel right.*

"Well then, I have to get ready for the scenario reading," I said.

"Wait, hold on just a moment," Yumemi said, stopping me before I left the conference room. She then pulled out a small, beautifully wrapped box from her bag. "It's your birthday tomorrow, right? I won't be seeing you tomorrow, so I wanted to give this to you now. Happy birthday."

"Wow, thank you so much!" I said, accepting the small box. I, Ayako Katsuragi, a thirty-[REDACTED]-year-old, was going to turn a whole thirty-[REDACTED] years old on my birthday tomorrow.

"I think it's been a while since I've been able to personally hand you your gift," Yumemi remarked.

"That's true. I wonder how many years it's been... Wow, these chocolates look so fancy. They're amazing... Thank you for always getting me a gift."

Yumemi always gave birthday gifts to her employees—including me, despite my working remotely from the Tohoku region. I always had premium sweets delivered to my house every year. She was a great president. *Yeah, she's a good person, I think... She's a good person at heart, yeah...*

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

"Please don't say it out loud like that... Birthdays aren't something to be that happy about at this age." That was especially true once I'd hit thirty.

Birthdays were something I'd looked forward to so much as a child, but now they weren't something I could be blindly excited about. It wasn't that I wasn't happy to be celebrating my birthday, but there was a sense of gloom and fatigue that came with the special day. I couldn't help but think, "Oh, I've aged another year..."

"I'd completely forgotten that it's my birthday tomorrow," I admitted with a sheepish smile. "I never forget Miu's birthday, though."

"Sounds very like you. But this year's different from the previous ones, no?"

Yumemi pointed out. “After all, you have a boyfriend this year.”

I fell silent. *Oh, that’s right. This year’s birthday is different from the past years. It’s my first birthday where I have a boyfriend...*

“It’s a special day, so you should let him spoil you rotten,” Yumemi said. “A birthday is the one day a year a girl gets to be the princess.”

“I’m not at an age where I can be referred to as a ‘girl’ or ‘princess’ anymore...”

“It’s fine—don’t worry about that,” Yumemi said jovially.

I sighed, but deep down, I felt myself getting excited. How long had it been since I’d felt like this about my own birthday?



I had come to Tokyo to live with Miss Ayako and support her during her temporary assignment, but that wasn’t the only reason I was here. I had something I needed to do for myself—for my own future and my career.

Lilystart was an up-and-coming start-up that mainly provided web and app services. It was run by Miss Yumemi’s acquaintance, and I was set to intern there for three months.

My hours and workload were nothing compared to the full-time employees, but work was still work—I was receiving pay and college credits for this. Most pressing, I’d basically used my connections to force my way into this internship, so I felt like I ought to work harder than everyone else so I didn’t reflect badly on Miss Yumemi for having given me the opportunity.

Well, I said harder than “everyone else,” but there was only one other intern at Lilystart. Also, by an incredible coincidence, the other intern had been a classmate of mine back in high school.

“Don’t you think it’s unbelievable, Takumi?”

It was Friday, and it was another work day for my internship. I was out to lunch with the other intern at a café since we’d finished our morning work and were on break.

“Y-Yeah, I guess so...” I replied vaguely to her question.

The other intern was Arisa Odaki. We'd been classmates in high school, and she'd come to Tokyo for college. She was currently interning at Lilystart, just like me. She wasn't just a former classmate, but she wasn't my ex either... We had pretended to date for some time, then she'd confessed to me—our relationship was quite difficult to describe. But that was all in the past.

Miss Ayako knew all about my history with her, and everything surrounding it was water under the bridge. Now Arisa and I were just friends and coworkers at our internship. Despite everything having been settled, I still wondered if I should be avoiding having lunch with her alone like this...but I decided to not worry about things like that too much.

*Besides, I told Miss Ayako about it. I sent her a message saying Arisa invited me to lunch, so we'll be eating together.*

Miss Ayako didn't seem to mind this sort of thing, for her part. She seemed to have felt at ease after finding out that Arisa had a boyfriend. Incidentally, the reason Arisa had invited me to lunch was to get my advice about said boyfriend.

"It's unbelievable. Just completely unbelievable," she fumed, not knowing what to do with her anger. "First of all, it's unbelievable that he doesn't shut the door to the restroom. He says he does, but he always leaves it slightly ajar. There's always a tiny crack between the door and frame. Isn't that unbelievable? You usually shut the door when you use the restroom, right?"

"Y-Yeah."

"There's more! There's more on top of that! I always thought he was unusually fast coming out of the restroom—it turns out that he only washes his right hand! Just the one! I asked him about it and he said, 'My right hand is the only one that touches anything dirty.' No, no. That's wrong. Washing your hands doesn't mean just the dirty ones. Do all men think that way? Do you only wash your right hand too, Takumi?"

"No, I wash both my hands..." I was starting to become unsure how to reply as Arisa tore through her list of grievances. Also, although we'd finished eating, this was still a restaurant, so it probably wasn't best to be loudly discussing restroom habits—given the current atmosphere, I couldn't point that out, however.



Arisa had been dating her boyfriend for roughly two years. They'd started thinking about living together, but as they'd begun to spend nights at each other's homes, a lot of things had come up.

"He's just such a slob. The other day when he stayed at my place, it was trash day, so I asked him to take the trash out... He literally just took the garbage bag out of the can, set it outside, and that was it. Usually taking out the trash includes adding a new bag, right? That's part of the whole task, isn't it?"

"I-It is."

"I pointed that out, and he said, 'I did what you asked. If you want me to put a new garbage bag in, then tell me that. Then I'll do it.' Ugh, he's so irritating! Are all men like this? Are you also like that?"

"No, I'd put in a new garbage bag too. If anything, Miss Ayako sometimes forgets, so I put in a new one if I notice it's missing."

"What? Really?" Arisa let out a dramatic sigh. "You're perfect, Takumi. You're such a good boyfriend. Maybe I should just date you."

"Hey," I scolded.

"Ha ha, I'm just kidding. You have a lovely girlfriend after all." After laughing, frustration and anxiousness returned to her face. "I'm starting to get worried though. We're looking for an apartment to move in to together, but...will we make it with the way things are?"

"I'm sure it'll be fine," I said. I didn't have any basis for that opinion, but I just felt that way. "I'm sure it'll work out once you're actually living together. I'm actually a bit jealous."

"Of what?"

"It seems like you guys are able to be yourselves around each other," I explained. Arisa seemed intrigued, so she sat back and quietly heard me out. "Miss Ayako and I were the complete opposite... In the beginning, we were being overly considerate of each other. We each pushed ourselves to act like the perfect boyfriend and girlfriend, and we couldn't really let our guard down with each other."

*A good part of that was probably because we started living together right after we started dating. Things were still new, and we were both nervous about the situation. We were both terrified of earning each other's resentment, so we kept holding back, not telling each other the things we felt.*

"Well, we're both a bit more comfortable now," I added. "Things feel a lot more natural nowadays."

"Hm, I see. I guess different couples have different problems."

What Arisa said was really true. Not only had Miss Ayako and I just gotten together, but we were more than ten years apart in age. Our relationship was probably quite rare, generally speaking. Standard values and views on relationships wouldn't always apply to us—we just needed to take our time and find what was right for us.

After finishing the water in her glass, Arisa looked like she'd just remembered something. "Oh, speaking of your girlfriend... Miss Ayako's birthday is coming up, right?"

"It's tomorrow."

"I see. Are you planning something?"

"Of course," I said. "I actually have a little surprise prepared for her."



"I-I'm exhausted..."

It was past seven in the evening, and I entered the condo building and dragged myself to our unit. I was drained—today had been another tiring day. I thought I'd gotten used to scenario readings, but they were still a lot of work. Once again, the meeting had gone on for an hour longer than the projected end time, which was, in a sense, within expectations. Still, long meetings were incredibly mentally exhausting.

"So tired... So hungry..." I whined as I got off the elevator.

Takkun had had his internship today, but he was already home. According to his message, he'd already made dinner. He was, as always, a wonderful boyfriend—so much so that I felt a little bad about how much he did for me. /

*should stop feeling bad about it, though. Holding back will make both of us exhausted. I should rely on Takkun's kindness.*

*Not only that, but...tomorrow is my birthday! Maybe it's okay if I let him spoil me! Yumemi said I should, and also, we can only be touchy-feely and lovey-dovey like this while we're living together in Tokyo. Once we go home, we're definitely going to be seeing less of each other.*

*"All right..." I steeled my resolve and reached for the door. I'm going to let him spoil me! I'm going to let him spoil me rotten this birthday weekend! I won't think about my age—while it's my birthday, I'm going to be a princess!*

*"Takkun, I'm hooome! Your dear Ayako has returned!" From the moment I opened the door, my attitude completely changed. This kind of thing is most embarrassing if you do it half-heartedly! If I'm going to act needy, I'm going to go whole hog! If I'm going to be affectionate, I'm going to get all over him! It's important to strike a contrast between when I'm doing those things and when I'm not!*

*"Ugh, I'm sooo tired. Your dear Ayako worked too hard and she's so exhausted. I can't move anymooore!" I spoke coquettishly, lying in the entryway without removing my shoes. "I can't do anything anymore! I don't even have the energy to take my shoes off! Take them off for me, Takkun! Take them offffff! You can take off everything, including my stockings!" I thrashed my arms around. "I'm done! I don't want to do anything anymooore! I've decided! Ayako won't do anything else today! I want you to do it all, Takkun! Carry me! Pick me up! Carry me bridal style!"*

*Maybe I'm taking it too far? No! No way! Today is special! It's my birthday tomorrow! This weekend, I'm a princess!*

*"Ayako can't take her clothes off on her own," I continued. "Take them off for me, Takkun! Take off my suit and my underwear—I need you to strip me from top to bottom! Hee hee, are you excited? You must want to take them off. I know you're actually pretty naughty, Takkun. Naughty, naughty!"*

*Ah, this feels nice. The embarrassment is slowly disappearing. I'm having fun! Acting like a princess is a blast!*

*"Hee hee, wanna take a bath together again? Ayako can't wash herself on her*

own. Can you wash me, Takkun? Maybe you can wash *everything* for me. Then I'll wash you too! I'll wash every *inch* of you!"

*I feel like maybe I lost the thread on the whole princess thing, but whatever—it's fine! We're alone! It's not like anyone's watching!*

"Jeez, what are you doing, Takkun? Come here! Welcome me home! Pay attention to me! Play with me! Carry me! I want to cuddle a bunch. I wanna be lovey-dovey!"

I was getting impatient with Takkun since he was taking a while to appear. I kicked my feet like a five-year-old throwing a tantrum because their mom wouldn't buy the candy they wanted.

Finally, I heard a sound from farther inside the condo. The sound of footsteps drew closer. *He's here!* My excitement was at its peak. I couldn't wait to see what kind of reaction Takkun would have to seeing me be so affectionate. I knew that he would accept me and my needy demands and spoil me as much as I wanted.

However, the moment I looked up, my heart sunk from cloud nine down to the pits of perdition in no time flat.

"Mom..."



I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I couldn't fathom it, nor did I want to. Every bone in my body cried out that I should reject the reality I was facing. Perhaps, I supposed, I was dreaming—oh, the relief I'd have felt if this had been a nightmare I could awaken from! I would've taken on a debt of five hundred million yen if it would've turned this situation into a figment of my imagination. But no matter how many times I blinked or rubbed my eyes, the face above me didn't change.

"M-Mi... M-Miu?"

It was Miu. The person who'd come out to the entryway was my dear, beloved daughter. Her expression would be best described as if all the despair and sorrow in the world had been reduced down into one concentrated glare, and it was presently directed at me as I lay face up by the door, my shoes still on my feet.

What was Miu feeling right now? I'd been referring to myself in the third person and rolling around on the floor, thrashing around as I'd gone on and on about how I wanted to do naughty things in the bath with my boyfriend. What did this adolescent girl think seeing her mother like that?

I froze up like I was experiencing sleep paralysis. I felt like I was going to pass out. After not having seen my beloved daughter for a month, our reunion was straight out of hell.

The atmosphere in the room felt horrendous. It was like the epitome of discomfort. Miu and I were sitting across from each other at the kitchen table, but we were both avoiding making eye contact with each other.

"Well, so...yeah. Taku invited me here, and I secretly came to Tokyo. Since it's your birthday tomorrow, he wanted the three of us to spend it together."

"I-I see..."

"I wanted to give you guys your space, but Taku said it would be better if I was here too. He wanted to surprise you, so he told me not to tell you."

"I-Is that so...?"

“Also, Taku is out right now because you’re out of salad dressing. He went to go buy some.”

“O-Okay...”

We were both hanging our heads as the awkward conversation went on. At the very least, I now knew why Miu was here. It seemed to be something Takkun had planned—a birthday surprise for me.

*I guess he thought it was best for Miu to be with me for my birthday. He probably thought I wanted all of us to spend it together—how very like him. But Takkun... I want to say just one thing. I know it’s not your fault, but can I just say one thing? Why in the world did you have to go and do that, huh?!*

After Miu had explained the gist of things, neither of us said another word. *This is rough. It’s so awkward that I feel like I might throw up. How did this happen?! Could things be any worse?! This is the most humiliating mistake I’ve ever made in my entire life! I can’t believe my daughter saw me like that! I want to die... I’m so humiliated I could die. How am I supposed to parent her after she saw me like that?*

“Um, Mom...?” Miu began at last, perhaps unable to bear the silence. “N-No matter what happens, you’ll always be my mom.” She smiled at me...and it was so forced I felt like I could hear her muscles straining.

*“Don’t look at me like that!” She’s doing her best to be considerate! She’s trying to be as kind as she can to me!*

“I-It’s okay...” Miu continued. “I’ll forget everything I saw today. Yeah... I’ll pretend I never saw it. We’ll be able to keep having a normal parent-child relationship on the surface, for sure.”

*“What do you mean by ‘on the surface’?! So our relationship isn’t actually fine?! We can’t return to what we had before?! Was it really so bad that everything we’ve built up in the past decade was reset?!”* “Urgh, don’t force yourself to be nice to me, Miu... You should tease me, bully me... Make fun of me and laugh at me like you always do...”

“No way... That was too much, even for me. I can’t even pretend to find it funny.” Miu’s forced smile gave way to a look of deep disappointment. “I don’t

know how to process seeing my mother do something so shameful...”

“‘Sh-Shameful’?”

“Like, if anyone gets to cry about this, it’d be me. Between the two of us, I’m more of a victim here. This is going to traumatize me for life.”

“Urgh...” I didn’t have anything to say back to that.

*That’s fair. Miu’s probably the one who has it worst. If I walked in on my mother acting like that in the entryway, I think I’d want to demand my family reassess how we behave around each other.*

“I never expected that you and Taku would be the cringiest of cringey couples, enjoying your time living together in such a creepy manner...”

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong! We’re not always like that! Today was just, um... T-Tomorrow’s my birthday, so...”

“So what?”

“It’s my birthday, so I thought I’d spend the weekend acting spoiled. I let loose, which led me to...my inconsiderate behavior...” *I-It’s no use. I can’t excuse my way out of this. It being my birthday doesn’t cut it. I even unconsciously started apologizing at the end there when I saw her staring daggers!*

*Ah, why did this happen...? The scorn and pity in her eyes are so painful.*

*Maybe this will be what annihilates my dignity as her mother for the rest of all eternity. No matter what kind of mistake Miu makes in the future, if I call her out on it and she brings up what happened today, I won’t be able to stand my ground! It’s over. It’s over for me as a mother...*

As I sat there in the depths of despair, Miu let out a dramatic, heavy sigh.

“Whatever, it’s fine.”

“Huh?”

“That might have been the most depressing, exasperating, cringiest, scariest thing I’ve ever seen, and it might have made me pity you, and I might have felt so ashamed seeing it that I wanted to die...but I feel like my mind’s at ease.”



“D-Do you?”

“Yeah. I’m glad that you and Taku seem to be getting along well,” Miu said with a smile. It wasn’t the same awkward smile from earlier, but something more natural. “With the way you two are, I was worried that even after a month of living together you’d still be acting like overly polite roommates. I guess my concern was completely unnecessary.” I didn’t know what to say. “That said, getting along *too* well is something to think about too. Going so hard on the spoiled princess act that you start speaking in the third person is... Well...”

“Ugh! L-Like I said, that was only for today! I’m not always like that! I’m really not! I’m usually acting natural, and we’re a nice, adult couple...”

“Sure, sure. Whatever.” Miu didn’t seem to care about my desperate attempt to explain myself. She smiled with a satisfied look. “You’ll have to live separately once you return home, so you should enjoy your little bubble together here while you can.”

“Miu...”

Her capacity for being considerate and broad-minded left me speechless. Just as always, she was mature and composed—she had a great head on her shoulders, and as her parent, I felt ashamed that I’d acted the way I had.

“Not to mention you’ll have your hands full attending to me the moment you get back,” Miu tacked on.

“Don’t get too carried away... How have things been back home? You’re not letting your grandmother do all the chores, are you? Are you helping?”

“I am, I am.”

“Are you studying?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Really?”

“Really, really.”

“Can I check with grandma to see if that’s true?”

Miu fell silent.

“Why are you suddenly quiet?!”

Then, right in the middle of our usual familial exchange...

“I’m home. Oh, you’re back, Miss Ayako.”

...Takkun returned home from shopping.

We all talked about how we’d been doing as we ate dinner together. It had been a while since the three of us had eaten dinner together like this. Back home, Takkun would often stay for dinner after tutoring Miu since he was already there.

“Jeez, I was really surprised,” I said with a sigh while doing the dishes with Takkun. Since Miu was technically our guest, she wasn’t participating in the chores. Instead, she was lying on the couch using her smartphone. *She’s already lounging around like it’s her own home...* “I never expected you to secretly invite Miu here.”

“I’m sorry, I just wanted to surprise you,” Takkun said with a nervous chuckle. At the same time, he seemed a bit happy. He probably thought his surprise had been a success.

*Well, I guess it’s a success in some ways. It’s a surprise I’ll never forget for the rest of my life. I feel like it’s a memory etched into our brains that’ll stay there until we die.*

“I thought you would want to spend your birthday with Miu,” Takkun explained.

*“Th-That’s fair...” I really appreciate the thought! If I hadn’t done anything extra and had just come home normally, it would’ve been a peaceful, happy surprise! Ugh, why did I have to do that? It’s definitely Yumemi’s fault. It’s all her fault!*

“Um, did you not like it?” Takkun seemed worried, surely because I looked pretty down after remembering the tragedy that had taken place less than an hour ago. “It’s your first birthday since we’ve started dating, so maybe you

wanted to spend it alone with me? I'm sorry, I thought a lot about it, but..."

"N-No, no. That's not it," I quickly reassured him. "It's just... Sure, I was a bit surprised when I opened the door and saw Miu, but..." *It wasn't a bit—I was so shocked I thought I would die! I'm deeply traumatized now, but the more we talk...* "I'm kind of relieved."

I was relieved. At first, I was worried about how awkward it was going to be, but after we calmed down, talked, and had dinner, I felt at peace.

"I think there was a part of me that regretted leaving my child and coming to Tokyo," I explained. "I'm throwing myself into my work, and I even get to live with my boyfriend, but..."

The more satisfied I felt living with Takkun, the more I felt something cloudy within me. I felt bad for leaving Miu alone and doing whatever I wanted—I felt bad as her mother. There was this gnawing feeling in my heart that I'd shirked my responsibilities.

"It's just how I'm feeling though—Miu supported my coming to Tokyo, after all. I can't help but wonder if I should've made a different choice as a parent, that's all... I guess I can't let go of my daughter," I said with a wry chuckle. "That's why I'm really glad you invited her. Now that she's here, I feel like I'll be able to enjoy my birthday to the fullest without any reservations."

In both a positive and negative sense, I felt that I was truly a mother to my core. It wasn't narcissism or pride—it was my sincere self-assessment. No matter what, I couldn't think about things without considering my child. It was how I'd lived for the ten years since I'd taken in Miu. I was far from being able to let go of my child.

Perhaps a woman who felt similarly even after getting into a relationship wouldn't be popular with men...and yet the person who chose me, who I also chose, understood these complicated feelings more than anyone else.

"I'm glad you liked the surprise," Takkun said, sounding happy. "Oh, but..." He brought his face closer to mine and whispered in my ear. "I have a celebration for just the two of us planned after Miu leaves."

"What...?"

*Something separate?! Just the two of us?!*

"I agonized over whether I should invite Miu and celebrate your birthday with all three of us, or if we should do something special on our own since we're living together, so I came to the conclusion that we could just celebrate twice."

"H-Huh? Is that okay...? Is it okay for me to celebrate my birthday twice?"

"I think it's fine. There's no harm that could come from it."

"I mean, I'm not young enough to do that sort of thing..."

"Age doesn't matter. We're doing it because I want to," Takkun said with a smile.

*Ugh, what's with my boyfriend? He's too perfect! Is it okay for me to be pampered like this? Now that I think about it, I shouldn't have tried so hard to act needy since it's my birthday. I mean, Takkun's going to spoil me whether I ask him to or not! He always treats me like a princess! I'm so happy.*

"Why are you grinning like that?"

"Wha—" A cold voice coming from beside me brought me back to reality. Miu had suddenly appeared in the kitchen, and she was shooting me a cold look.

"M-Miu..."

"You guys have surpassed the realm of being a couple. You're acting like newlyweds. You should get married already."

"H-Hey, don't be like that! Jeez!"

"Oh, by the way, Taku..." Miu ignored me and turned to Takkun. "You made reservations for a nice dinner tomorrow night, right?"

"Yeah— Hey, wait. I told you not to say anything about that yet..."

"In that case, I get *my* turn during the day. I'll be looking forward to you two showing me around Tokyo." She smiled jovially, brushing off Takkun's complaint just like mine. "Since I'm here, I have to make the most of it. I wanna go to Shibuya. There's a huge display for the boy band I like in a big music store there. I wanna go and take pictures."

"Hold on, Miu," I interjected.

“What is it?”

“You can’t go to Shibuya.”

“Why not?”

“Shibuya is a den for young party animals... It’s too soon for you.”

“Don’t you think you’re being a bit extreme? You’re letting your country bumpkin side show.”

“‘Bumpkin’?! Anyway, you’re not allowed. Even *I’ve* only gone two or three times in my entire life.”

It wasn’t really that I didn’t want to let Miu go there, but rather...I was a little scared to. Shibuya was the town where young people partied, and that scared me. It frightened me about as much as letting her go to Kabukicho late at night. *Yeah, I guess I really am being a bit of a country bumpkin about this...*

“The three of us can discuss where we’re going. Well, we’ll discuss it, but tomorrow’s *my* birthday, so I would like some preferential treatment—”

“‘Your dear Ayako,’” Miu mumbled with a dissatisfied look.

I gasped, and I felt myself going pale in an instant. “H-Hey... M-Miu...”

“What do you mean by that, Miu?” Takkun asked.

“Let me tell you all about it, Taku. Earlier, mom was—”

“Ahhhhh!” I grabbed onto Miu in a panic and covered her mouth before desperately pleading with her in a quiet voice. “Y-You can’t, Miu... It’s a secret. You have to keep it a secret!”

“I want Shibuya, then.”

“O-Okay, I’ll take you.”

“I want new clothes too.”

“I’ll buy them for you.”

“I want to whale on my mobile games.”

“Y-You can have some money.”

“Woo-hoo! I love you, mom!” Miu proclaimed joyously as she left my side.

She had secured complete victory in our negotiations. I felt completely drained and almost fell to the floor, but I managed to stay standing.

“I-I don’t really understand what’s going on, but does that mean we’re going to Shibuya tomorrow?” Takkun asked.

“Yes, please...” I nodded limply.

*Good grief. Perhaps a mother really can’t win against her child.*

## Chapter 5: The Day Off and Shibuya



Today was my thirty-[REDACTED] birthday. It was Saturday morning, and as expected, Shibuya was bustling with young people. Whether I was in the train station or outside, all I saw was people, people, and more people.

“Wow, this is insane! There’s so many people here,” Miu said, her surprise toward her first time in Shibuya apparent. It was an innocent but predictable reaction for a girl from the Tohoku region. *I used to react like that every time I came to Tokyo, didn’t I?*

*Well, maybe I’m used to Tokyo by now, but I guess it’s been a while since I’ve been to Shibuya in particular. It actually seems more peaceful than I assumed it’d be.*

In my mind, Shibuya was a place where young people loitered on the streets and drank alcohol in the middle of the day, but perhaps that was the bias of a country bumpkin after all.

“Do you want to go to the music store first, Miu?” Takkun asked.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Miu said with a nod. The three of us thus headed into the bustling street. Miu hummed a tune as she said, “I can’t help but feel excited. Tokyo is really nice. Maybe I should come here for college.”

“In Tokyo?” I asked. “Are you serious?”

“As can be,” she said. I was a bit shocked—she was only in her first year of high school, but she was already thinking about college. “I’ve always wanted to go to college somewhere far from home. Even if I choose somewhere in our prefecture, I still want to live on my own.”

“Why? You could just commute from home if you stay in the prefecture,” I pointed out.

“Well...” Miu looked back and forth between our faces, then sighed. “I don’t

want to get in the way of your life together as newlyweds.”

“What?!” I was stunned, and Takkun flushed red.

“You’ll probably be getting married around the time I start college. As your daughter, I think I should be considerate of that.”

“H-Hey...”

“Oh, don’t worry though. I’ll be coming home regularly to check in on my little brother or sister.”

“Jeez, you’re getting way ahead of yourself!” I snapped.

*A little brother or sister? I mean, with the way things are progressing between us, by the time Miu goes to college... Wait, no! That wouldn’t happen! She’s definitely getting ahead of herself!*

“It would be awkward for you two if I were there, right?”

“I-It wouldn’t be awkward,” I insisted. “Nothing would change between the two of us regardless of if you’re there or not. We wouldn’t let loose just because you’re not there...”

“Heh...” Miu scoffed.

*She laughed! My own daughter laughed at me! Ugh, maybe my dignity as a mother really is gone. She totally knows how lovey-dovey we are when we’re alone...*

“Jeez, you don’t have to put on an act for me. If you’re gonna be a cringey couple, you should just own up to it. I don’t care if you want to hold hands when you’re around me.”

“What? Hold hands...?”

“Would you like to?” Takkun asked, holding his hand out. He didn’t seem entirely against it.

“I would not!” I immediately snapped back. “Why do you seem into it, Takkun?!”

*No. No way. We only just started holding hands in public—I can’t hold his hand in front of my daughter! How cringey would we be? We’d look like a*



*married couple!*

“Oh, I see the music store,” Miu said. She’d had her fun with us, so now she was doing what she came for. “Whoa, it’s huge! That’s Shibuya for you!”

I followed her gaze and saw a large building with signage for a major music store chain.

We took pictures in front of the large display of the boy band Miu was currently obsessed with, had lunch at a café running a collaboration with an incredibly popular manga series, then walked around and explored the store. We enjoyed everything that the building in Shibuya had to offer.

“I’m so glad we came,” Miu said with a sigh of relief. “That was the best. That display is going away next week, so I really wanted to see it.”

“Those idols were really popular,” I said. “So many young people were taking pictures of them.”

“They’re not idols...” Miu corrected. “They’re a dance and vocal unit, which makes them *artists*, not idols.”

“What? They’re not idols? I thought when young boys join together to sing and dance, they’re idols...”

“Good grief. You really don’t get it. I guess it’s not your fault—I’m sure it’s difficult for an old lady born in the Showa period to understand. You grew up in a time where everyone who could sing and dance was an idol.”

“How dare you! Hmph, they’re all the same thing, aren’t they?” I huffed. “Yeah, all those boy band members look the same anyways! You can’t tell them apart!”

“Okay, now you listen here...”

“What?”

“How would you feel if someone said that all the *Love Kaiser* series are the same? That they can’t believe the series repeats the same thing year after year? That all the Kaisers have the same face and you can’t tell them apart?”

“I’d be upset, of course! They’re different—completely different! The theme

completely changes between *Love Kaiser* series! The characters and stories are completely different! They're properly differentiated, and every lead has her own, unique charm to her! I could easily spend an hour lecturing someone who claims they're all the same when they don't even know the series!"

"Now you know how what you just said sounds to me."

I fell silent for a moment. "I'm sorry..."

"That was a quick apology..." Takkun said, looking at me sadly after I'd been out-argued by my daughter.

*Yeah, that was my bad. I admit to it. If I start believing aspects of youth culture are all the same, that'll really be the end for me. I was going straight down the path of old-hagdom—I need to be careful and maintain youthful sensibilities!*

"Okay, next, let's go shopping for clothes!" Miu suggested.

"N-Nothing too expensive, okay?" I warned her.

"I know, I know."

We exited the building and headed to a mall dedicated to clothing and accessories. On the way there...

"Huh?" I stopped in my tracks. I saw an all too familiar face in the crowd—Yumemi was on the opposite side of the street, and she hadn't noticed me. She wasn't in her usual suit, instead sporting dark-toned slacks and a longline blazer. The jacket really complimented her height and slender figure. *It's been a while since I've seen her wear something other than a suit.*

*Hm. What should I do? She hasn't noticed me, so maybe I should leave her be. It's our day off anyways. Yeah, that would be for the best.*

After deciding not to bother her, I resumed walking, but something shocked me to the point that I froze up again. "What...?!"

*Huh? No way... Huh? Wait, hold on— Hold on just a minute!*

"Hm? Miss Ayako?"

"What's wrong, mom?"

Takkun and Miu had been walking ahead of me, but they noticed I was standing still.

“Hold on... Come over here...” I called the two of them over, and the three of us hid between two buildings and watched the opposite side of the street.

“Wh-What? What is it, mom?”

“Look over there...” I said, pointing.

“Oh, it’s Miss Yumemi.”

“Oh, yeah, Miss Yumemi’s there.”

“I haven’t seen her in a while, but she’s so stylish,” Miu remarked. “She has such great taste in fashion. I think she might even look younger than you, mom.”

“Do you want to say hello?” Takkun asked.

“You two are missing the point...” I complained. Miu had said something very concerning, and I was a bit sad that Takkun hadn’t tried to defend me, so for a moment I was worried that everyone thought Yumemi looked younger than me...but I had to set all that aside for now.

“Next to her. Look at who’s next to her.”

Yumemi wasn’t alone—right beside her was a young man. He was a little shorter than Yumemi, so he was below average height for a man. He was wearing a white T-shirt and slim-fitting jeans, along with a baseball cap that was pulled down so far that I couldn’t see his face.

“Oh, she’s with a man,” Miu said. “I wonder if it’s her boyfriend.”

“Isn’t he a little young to be her boyfriend?” Takkun observed. “I can’t really see his face, but judging from his outfit, he seems pretty young.”

“That’s not her boyfriend,” I said. “She’s probably... N-No, she’s definitely...” I hesitantly strung the words together. “Yumemi is his sugar mama!”

Being a sugar mama was the female version of being a sugar daddy, and it had become more common in recent years. Essentially, middle-aged women would pay young men for companionship—sometimes it would just be a social

relationship, like someone to dine and shop with, and sometimes there would also be a physical component.

“Sugar mama...? No way,” Takkun objected. “Miss Yumemi’s the last person to do that.”

“It’s not entirely impossible. Yumemi was complaining about how she wanted a man not too long ago...”

I recalled the conversation we had when we went out drinking together. She said she was envious of my relationship with Takkun—how she might go after a young man herself. *That doesn’t mean she should become a sugar mama though!*

“This is a massive deal! The president of our company can’t be a sugar mama—what if it got out she was paying for something like this?”

“Even if they have that sort of relationship, it doesn’t necessarily mean it’s because she’s his sugar mama,” Miu pointed out. “They could be genuinely going out, and on a date.”

“No way,” I said. “The guy looks really young. He’s at least a decade younger than her.”

“They could be in a relationship with an age gap,” Takkun remarked.

“No way. A woman would only see a man ten years younger than her as a child. There’s no way a woman could be in a relationship like that.”

Takkun fell silent.

“You really cut Taku to the quick, mom.”

“Oh...! I-I’m sorry, Takkun! That’s not what I meant! You’re special! Our relationship is the exception!”

As things got hectic between the three of us, Yumemi and the young man were about to take off.

“Oh, they’re leaving... Let’s follow them!”

“What? You want to follow them?” Miu asked.

Miu and Takkun didn’t seem very up to it, but I took the lead, and we began

tailoring them. I couldn't just let this be—after all, the fate of our company was in my hands. If Yumemi was actually his sugar mama, I had to put a stop to it.

I blended into the crowd and headed to the opposite side of the street, keeping a distance of several meters as I followed Yumemi and her man. Thanks to all the people, it didn't seem like we would get caught.

"I wonder where they're headed," Takkun said quietly.

"I'm not sure..." I whispered back.

*Wh-What should I do...? I didn't think before following after her. What do I do if they head into a love hotel? It would be pretty bad to see something like that with Miu here.*

"Hey, mom," Miu said, sounding suspicious of the situation. "Don't you think that guy's *way* too young?"

"Huh?"

"He looks more like he's in his teens, not his twenties."

Now that Miu had pointed it out, I took a closer look. I still couldn't see his face with the baseball cap in the way, but each time he turned to the side to talk to Yumemi, I caught a glimpse. Just as Miu suspected, he looked quite young—or rather, like a child. He was clearly a teenager, maybe even a preteen. I'd thought he was small for a man, but perhaps he just hadn't finished growing yet.

"N-No way... I know she wanted a younger man, but she can't be going after a teenager!" I was so stunned that I couldn't help but pick up the pace. I tried to stay blended into the crowd as I got close enough to hear their conversation and listen in.

"Like I said, it's fine. I'll go off on my own," he said. "Just leave me alone. That'll make things easier for the both of us."

"I can't do that," Yumemi said.

"Don't worry. I'll tell dad and grandma that you took me out and we had lots of fun."

"Th-That's not the problem here..." she replied. He didn't bother responding

to that, and eventually Yumemi added, “H-Hold on, Ayumu... You need to stop looking at your phone while you walk. It’s dangerous.”

“There’s an event going on—I have to be playing right now.”

“Still...”

He went quiet once more.

“H-Hey, is there anything you want?” Yumemi asked. “I’ll buy it for you.”

“Money.”

“I can’t just give you money...”

“Then a gift card. Let me spend money on my game. That’s what I want the most.”

“Ayumu...”

Their conversation was completely outside my expectations. The young man—no, the boy—was on his phone the whole time. He seemed to be playing a game of some sort. He would sometimes turn to his side to speak to her, but he was mainly focused on the screen in his hand.

There was something piercingly cold about his demeanor. As for Yumemi...she seemed quite troubled. She was doing her best to smile and get him to pay attention to her, but it wasn’t working, so she seemed at a loss for what to do. It was like she was putting herself in a lower position to make him like her.

I couldn’t believe it. Where was her usual confidence and sarcasm? I’d always known Yumemi to be arrogance personified—she would never act in this sort of way. *I’ve never seen Yumemi like this before...*

“Wh— Ah!” I had been too focused on their conversation, so I tripped over a sign placed in front of a restaurant with a *thud*. “Ow...”

“A-Are you all right, Miss Ayako?”

“Jeez, what are you doing, mom?”

Takkun was overly worried, while Miu was as cold as ever. Just as I managed to stand up...

“Ayako...?” Yumemi, who’d been walking ahead of us, turned around and saw

me. It seemed she'd noticed me. "Even Takumi and Miu are here..."

"H-Ha ha, hello..." I tried to smile in an effort to mitigate the awkwardness.

"O-Oh..." Yumemi had an uncomfortable look on her face. I'd never seen her make such an expression before. She looked back and forth between us and the boy next to her. "Oh, this woman is Ayako Katsuragi. She's an employee at my company... The two behind her are, um... It's a long story, so I'll tell you later." After quickly introducing us to the boy, she then turned to me. "This is Ayumu Aramachi. He's turning thirteen this year, and he's..." Yumemi paused for a moment, then, with an indescribable look of discomfort, admitted, "He's my son..."

I was stunned. *Huh...? Her son?*





## Chapter 6: Mother and Son



By some sort of coincidence, I'd recently discussed Yumemi's marriages with her. It was during our recent outing where we'd had drinks together. After we'd gotten a good buzz going, Yumemi was teasing me about when I was going to marry Takkun, and I'd snapped a little.

"Jeez! Shut up already! Why don't you worry about yourself first?! I don't want someone with three failed marriages nitpicking my relationship! Especially since they failed because you cheated every time!"

"Ha ha ha, that's fair," Yumemi said with a boisterous laugh. She then let out a melancholic sigh. "Because I cheated every time, huh...? I forgot that that's how I explained it to you..."

"What? That's not what happened?"

"I usually just say that because it's a pain to explain, but it's not quite the truth... I only got divorced because I cheated in my last two marriages. The first one was just a regular split."

"A regular split...?"

"I didn't get along with his family," Yumemi said with a grim look. "As you know, I love working. Whether I'm asleep or awake, I'm thinking about work at all hours of the day, and I'm happy to do it. I'm the kind of person who finds it more efficient to pay professionals to cook and clean for me. I'd rather work on something I care about than spend my time on chores."

I nodded along as she continued her story. "I had no intention of changing how I lived after getting married—even if I had a child, I didn't want to change myself. Together with my husband, I'd planned to use everything I could, from nannies to day cares, to maintain a balance between raising a child and working, but...his family hated that way of thinking. 'A woman's job is to take care of the home,' 'It's normal to stop working after getting married,' 'With a

mother like that, your child won't grow up right,' and so on and so forth... They really ran their mouths."

I still didn't have anything to add, but I could understand why that happened. Yumemi's first marriage was probably more than a decade ago—those sorts of values were normal in her parents' generation. I doubted they had any ill intentions, and they'd probably said it thinking they were helping—they must have genuinely thought that a woman should be in the home after settling down.

"Well, I didn't pay any mind to his parents, and my husband respected my wishes. I married him because he understood, but..." Her tone grew frustrated, weary, and blue. "But once we got married, he started to say the same things as his parents. Things like, 'Why don't you just do *some* chores?' 'What kind of wife doesn't prepare her husband's meals?'"

"What...?"

"I thought I'd made it perfectly clear before we got married that I had no intention of changing the way I lived, but he'd thought that I wasn't serious. He told me countless times, 'I know what you said, but I thought you'd change once we got married.' I spent my days being nagged by my husband and my in-laws."

I didn't know how to respond to that. "Eventually, my husband and my in-laws colluded and asked me for a divorce. I had no sympathy left for my husband at that point, so I had no reason to stay. After discussing how we'd split things up, we quickly finalized our divorce." Yumemi shook her head. "I don't like discussing this kind of thing. When I tell the story from my point of view, it always ends up sounding like I'm a victim. I'm sure he has his own side to tell, and it's true that I wasn't what most people would consider to be a 'good wife.' I'm sure that he saw me as a good-for-nothing woman."

"That sounds like it was difficult for you..." I wasn't sure what to say, and all I could muster was that basic line.

"My two marriages after that were impulsive decisions made in the heat of the moment. But my first marriage is a little bit special to me... I don't have any lingering feelings, nor do I think it was wrong for us to get divorced, but I do

have regrets... I just wish I could've handled things better..." There was a tinge of sadness behind Yumemi's eyes. Just looking at her made my chest ache.

Now I knew what she meant when she said she had regrets. The hypothetical child she'd brought up that night while we were drinking hadn't been hypothetical at all.

After that...

"I guess I've let you see me at a low point," Yumemi said with a somber expression.

We were in a café along the street. After Yumemi had caught us tailing her, we decided we should talk, so the five of us ended up at a nearby café—the two of us were waiting for our party's drinks at the pickup counter while Takkun, Miu, and Ayumu stayed seated at a table on the patio. Considering the topic, it wasn't something we wanted to broadcast to the other patrons, but luckily the café was busy, so no one was paying attention to our discussion.

"I was surprised. I didn't know you had a child, let alone one that age."

"That's fair—I never did tell you."

"Did you have him with the ex you were telling me about before...?"

"Yup. He's my first husband's," Yumemi said matter-of-factly. "I didn't mean to keep him a secret, but...I just never saw the point in bringing him up. I haven't seen him for about ten years anyway."

"T-Ten years?"

I was shocked. *Ten years?* She mentioned that Ayumu was turning thirteen, which meant that she'd barely seen him since she'd given birth to him and gotten divorced from his father.

"His father has custody, and neither his father nor his grandparents like me. They don't want someone like me acting like Ayumu's mother."

"What...?"

"I'm sure that if I'd tried to exercise my rights, I would've gotten to see him, but it was just too much for me... After all, I'd had a nanny taking care of him

most of the time as soon as he was born. I also decided it was in his best interest that I not see him.” I fell silent. “I’ve never really done anything motherly for him. All I did was give birth.”

All she did was give birth—for some reason, those words felt incredibly sorrowful.

“In that case...how did you end up spending time with him today?”

“Well, things changed recently,” Yumemi continued, sighing in between her statements. “My ex *had* said in exchange for not asking for child support, he wanted me to stay away from Ayumu... But now he wants child support.”

“I see...”

“This is just what I’ve heard from other people, but his business isn’t going well. I had a lot of things I wanted to say to him, but I just decided to pay him right away, thinking it’d be what’s best for Ayumu. I’m fortunate enough to have the money, after all. Then...” Yumemi took one deep breath before she continued. “He suddenly said I could see his son.”

“Huh...?”

“It’s probably his pride. He probably felt like the child support would be a handout if he didn’t do anything in exchange, so he opted to do something for me.”

*So he made it seem like an equal exchange by trading visitation for child support. I see, that makes sense.*

“Isn’t that good, though? You get to see your son.”

“Yeah, it was... It was supposed to be good,” Yumemi said, her statement vague as she wore a troubled smile. “It’s not that I didn’t want to see him, but now that I’ve met him, I honestly don’t know how to interact with him. We’ve been apart for over a decade. My ex and I got divorced when Ayumu was only two, and my relationship with his father’s family is nonexistent.”

She’d left him before he was old enough to remember things, and he hadn’t seen his mother in over a decade. They were perhaps no different from strangers. Even if they were related by blood, the relationship they had was

much too flimsy.

“This is the third time we’ve met, but... Ha ha, it’s just really not going well. I do my best to act like a mother, but nothing I do is working. He won’t even call me ‘mom.’”

I thought back to how they were earlier. Even though I’d only listened in on a short snippet of their conversation, I could tell how badly things weren’t working. Yumemi was doing her best to please Ayumu, and he was coldly rejecting her efforts. It was nowhere near a good relationship.

“Are you disappointed in me?” Yumemi asked.

“What?”

“I mean, I’ve gone on and on to you about how men and women should be like I know it all, yet I can’t even maintain a relationship with my own child.”

“No, not at all...” I couldn’t come up with more to say than that. I honestly wasn’t disappointed—just surprised and concerned. After all, I’d never seen Yumemi look so unconfident.

Eventually, our drinks were ready, so we took them back to the patio where the other three were waiting for us. Incidentally, the drinks were Yumemi’s treat.

Back at the table...

“Um, that game is *Twilight Master*, right, Ayumu?” Takkun asked.

“Yeah...”

“I heard it’s popular right now. I’ve seen a bunch of commercials for it. Is it fun?”

“I wouldn’t play it if it weren’t fun.”

“Ha ha, right. That’s true...”

The atmosphere wasn’t too friendly. Takkun was doing his best to talk to Ayumu, but he wasn’t having it at all. As for Miu...she was also on her phone. It seemed she wasn’t going to force a conversation with him.

*Hm... I suppose kids these days are like this. Even when close friends are*

*spending time together, they're often on their phones.*

Yumemi and I set the drinks on the table and sat down.

"Ayumu, take your hat off when you're inside," Yumemi said.

"We're outside."

"We're *in* a restaurant—don't split hairs with me. Also, enough with the game already."

"I need to grind the event."

"I understand, but..."

"U-Um, we don't mind, so it's okay," I said, quickly trying to help smooth things over. "Limited-time events are important after all!" Now I'd even ended up taking Ayumu's side—perhaps I wasn't helpful after all.

*This is hard...*

With the mood having grown so indescribably awkward, it was all the five of us could do to have basic surface-level conversations. Ayumu kept playing his game the entire time, and Miu also kept her eyes glued to her phone.

After five minutes of this, Yumemi suddenly received a phone call. She got up and turned around before picking up.

"Hello. What...? Huh? Why do you...?" I couldn't see her face, but her tone was becoming agitated. "Then we should immediately... What? No, today I'm..." She turned around for a moment to check on Ayumu. It was clear from the way she was looking at him that she was agonizing. "Okay, then... For now, just gather their complaints and send them to me. I'll deal with it somehow." She let out a heavy sigh before hanging up the call.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"A project's in a little trouble..."

"If there's anything I can do, I'd be happy to help."

"No, it's okay. It's not a project you're involved in, so it would take too much time to try to explain things to you. I just need to handle it..." Yumemi turned to Ayumu with a regretful look. "Ayumu, I, um..."

“It’s fine. You can go,” Ayumu said without a care, his eyes still fixed on his phone. “I’ll be fine. You don’t even have to come back.” His words were cold, like he didn’t expect anything from her.

“I’m sorry... I’ll be back as soon as possible,” Yumemi said, her voice tinged with pain. She then turned to me. “I’m sorry, Ayako, but would you mind looking after Ayumu? I’ll be back in thirty—no, twenty minutes.”

“S-Sure.”

Yumemi grabbed her bag and dialed a number on her phone as she ran out of the café. Unfortunately, the café didn’t offer free Wi-Fi, so she was probably going to go somewhere that did so she could deal with the problem on her tablet.

Ayumu, who’d been left behind, continued staring at his smartphone without batting an eye.

“Um... Y-Yumemi really has it rough. She’s the president of the company, after all,” I explained.

Ayumu didn’t say anything back.

“She’s really important and super competent. She’s an incredible person. That’s why everyone relies on her and calls on her to handle things on her days off.”

“Yeah, I get it... It seems like it was difficult for her to make time today.”

“Y-Yeah. She probably wants to prioritize her time with you—”

“Not like I asked her to,” Ayumu said with complete disregard for her. “If she’d just focus on the work she wants to do and leave me be, I could relax at home.”

“Th-There’s no need to say that... I’m sure that Yumemi’s thinking of you and what she can do as your mother.”

“‘Mother’?” he scoffed, twisting his youthful features into a grimace. “We were apart for over a decade after she gave birth to me. We’re basically strangers—I didn’t even remember what she looked like. I don’t need someone like that acting like they’re my mother after all this time.” I didn’t know what to

say to that. “How I feel doesn’t matter to anyone. For the longest time, my dad and grandma wouldn’t tell me about my mom, no matter how many times I asked...but now, suddenly, they say I should meet with her? Everything boils down to what’s best for *them*. They don’t take me seriously just because I’m a kid.”

Rather than get upset with cynical statements, I just felt sad. I understood where he was coming from. His father’s side was probably keeping quiet about Yumemi and needing child support, but Ayumu was surely able to pick up on some things. Kids were much more observant than adults realized, and they could understand what adults were talking about. Ayumu probably had his own opinions about his position and environment, and there were probably plenty of things about his life that weren’t fun. It was natural to feel unsatisfied or that things were unfair when your life was being swayed by adults’ circumstances.

I didn’t know what else to do or say, and I looked to Takkun for help, but he just returned the same look to me. The awkward silence persisted for a while, but it was eventually broken by Miu sighing dramatically.

“I can’t do it. I’ve been trying to follow everyone’s lead and stay quiet, but I can’t do it.” Miu, apparently frustrated past her limit, finally looked up from her phone and made direct eye contact with Ayumu. “Hey, you’re playing *TM*, right? *Twilight Master*?”

“So what...?”

“I play it too. You know as well as I do that *TM* doesn’t have a limited-time event running right now,” Miu declared. Ayumu froze. “You might think that you can fool the adults by saying you need to grind for an event or whatever, but unfortunately for you, I’m *really* into *TM* too. Actually, my favorite part is that they don’t have too many events that force you to play during certain days to see all the content.”

“Urgh...”

“I don’t know if it’s that you don’t want to talk to Miss Yumemi, or that you’re simply not great at talking to people, or that maybe you just want attention... Whatever it is, I’m tired of seeing it. Do you really need to act up like this in front of a bunch of strangers?” Miu said, her frustration apparent. Her words



were matter-of-fact and merciless. “You seem upset they won’t take you seriously since you’re young, but evidently, you don’t find it beneath you to take advantage of being a kid—you sulk on purpose to walk all over the adults around you. As a middle schooler, you’re plenty old enough to be more considerate.”

“Sh-Shut up!” Ayumu slammed his phone onto the table and stood up. He shot a glare at Miu, his face bright red with humiliation. “Wh-Who the hell do you think you are?! This has nothing to do with you!”

“It doesn’t. I couldn’t care less about you either. It’s just unpleasant to watch you knowingly make things harder for Miss Yumemi—she’s someone who’s helped my mom a lot, and I respect her as a working woman.”

“Wh-Who cares about her?!” His voice cracked as he yelled. “I’ve had enough of her! She suddenly showed up and said she’s my mom... How am I *supposed* to react?! No one asked her to take time off to come see me! Does she want me to be grateful or something?!” Rather than anger, he sounded like he was in pain, and he was putting everything he could into making his feelings clear through his changing voice. “She probably just meets with me out of obligation! She wants to get rid of the guilt she feels for not raising me! That’s what it is! Can you imagine how I feel having to play along with her just so she can feel better about herself? It’s that woman’s fault that—”

With a *splash*, Ayumu was suddenly covered from head to toe in ice water. It was Miu who’d done it—she’d grabbed one of the cups on the table and thrown its contents onto him.

“G-Guh, it’s cold...” Ayumu quickly wiped his face, and as he did, the baseball cap he’d been wearing the entire time fell off.

“H-Hey, Miu...” I reflexively turned to her, but she was glaring straight at him. Though her face didn’t show it, there was an intense anger burning behind her eyes.

“Don’t refer to your own mother as ‘that woman.’” She had a level tone of voice, but it clearly didn’t allow any room for disagreement. She was obviously upset. I’d never seen her fuming with such anger before.

“How dare you! Who the hell even are you?! Dammit...!” Ayumu ran off

through the patio's exit looking humiliated.

"A-Ayumu!" I quickly stood up, but the boy disappeared in no time. "I can't believe this is happening! What should I do...?"

"I'll go after him," Takkun said, getting up as I stood there flustered.

"Takkun..."

"You should wait here with Miu for Miss Yumemi," Takkun said in a calm tone. He seemed a little flustered, but he was much more composed than I was.

"Thanks, Taku..." Miu mumbled. She looked regretful. It was like I'd dreamed up the way she'd boiled over earlier. "Sorry, I got kinda upset..."

"I know," Takkun said, lightly patting Miu on the head. He then grabbed the baseball cap Ayumu dropped and took off.



To my surprise, I found Ayumu pretty quickly. Maybe it'd been rude to think this, but I'd had a feeling he wouldn't go too far. I'd figured he'd hide somewhere nearby—close enough that if someone ran after him, they would be able to find him.

Sure enough, I was spot on. When I reached him, he was crouched down between two buildings not even fifty meters from the café, in an alley that was remarkably dark despite it being midday.

"Found you," I said. I let out a sigh of relief and made my way toward him.

He glanced over at me, and he didn't seem like he was going to run away. Since he wasn't wearing his baseball cap, I could see his face clearly. His face was so childlike that it made me feel all the more that he was still just a kid.

I left a space of about a meter between us as I crouched down near him. "Um, sorry about that, Ayumu. Are you okay?"

"Why are *you* apologizing?"

"Uh, well, just because." I couldn't bring myself to say it was because the real perpetrator might become my stepdaughter.

"I don't get it... What's that bitch's deal?" Ayumu's youthful features twisted

with frustration. “She could never understand how I feel... I bet her mom’s nice and she grew up loved! I bet she’s lived a peaceful life!”

I was about to vehemently object to his assumption, but I managed to keep it in. I wasn’t sure if it was okay for me to divulge Miu’s personal information without her consent...but then, after giving it a bit of thought, I decided to tell him. I imagined that when Miu thanked me earlier, it was probably her way of relying on me to help Ayumu, including in moments like this.

“Miu, that girl, hasn’t lived that peaceful of a life,” I explained. “When she was little, she lost her parents.”

“What...?”

“It’s been ten years since then. When Miu was in kindergarten, her mother and father got into an accident and passed away.”

Ayumu’s eyes widened with shock, and he gulped. He looked like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Wh-Who’s that big-boobed old lady, then?”

*I guess with Ayumu’s sensibilities and vocabulary, when trying to refer to Miss Ayako by her features, he comes up with “big-boobed old lady.” There’s a lot I’d like to say about that, but considering the gravity of the topic at hand, I’ll just ignore it.*

“Miss Ayako is Miu’s mother’s younger sister. In other words, she’s biologically her aunt—but a lot’s happened, and now she’s legally her mother.”

“What the heck?”

“Yeah, you must be wondering what that has to do with anything... I just wanted you to know that she hasn’t lived a peaceful life without any problems like you thought she has.”

“S-So what?! I don’t care what’s happened to her—it has nothing to do with me!” Though he argued back fiercely, his voice was trembling terribly. Some part of what I’d said must have rattled him.

“You’re right. It doesn’t have anything to do with you. No matter what happened to her in the past, it doesn’t excuse her throwing water on you. But I

just want you to try to understand her—to consider why she might’ve gotten upset.”

“W-Well...” The boy’s voice grew meek. “She probably got annoyed at me for being such a brat to my mom.”

“That might be part of it, but I don’t think that’s the full reason. I think she thought it was a waste.”

“A waste?”

“I think she thought it was a waste that you—both of you, actually—can’t treasure the time you’re spending together as mother and child.”

To Miu, they must’ve seemed like they didn’t appreciate what they had. Whether Ayumu was putting up some kind of front or he was too proud to let Miss Yumemi into his life, he was pretending to play his game just to avoid talking to his mother, and watching that probably irritated Miu to no end.

“S-So what?” he said curtly. “Actually, who the hell even are you?”

“Hm...?”

“You’re here acting like you know everything, but how are you even related to those people? You’re not her brother or anything, right?”

*Oh, right. A lot was happening, so I only told him my name.*

I hesitated a bit, but I decided to go with the truth. “Oh, well, I guess you could say I’m the person who might become that girl’s father one day.”

“Huh...? What?” Ayumu was completely shocked. He turned to get another good look at me. “D-Does that mean that you and the big-boobed old lady are...?”

“That’s right... We’re sort of dating...”

“Dude, how old are you?”

“I’m twenty...”

“How about the old lady?”

“Let’s just say she’s over thirty.”

“D-Damn, dude,” he said in a tone of admiration. I decided not to press him on what was so admirable about my relationship.

“Anyways, everyone has a lot of stuff going on, and they’re all worrying about a bunch of things. That goes for both adults and kids. Everyone is going through one thing or another, whether they’re in their teens, their twenties, their thirties, or even their forties...”

Ayumu just looked at me blankly. “Um, sorry. I’m not trying to lecture you or anything,” I said as I handed his baseball cap back to him. “The thing is, only you and your mother can decide what to do about your problems. We outsiders can’t do anything about it, but...it’s probably not right to keep playing games and avoid confronting her.”

“Yeah...” Ayumu grabbed his cap and gave a small but firm nod.

“I don’t think you have to force yourself to be friendly or get along with her just because she’s your biological mother. If you really think it’s an annoyance to spend time with her, you should properly communicate—”

“Y-You’re wrong!” he shouted practically on reflex. “I-I don’t think it’s annoying... I just said I’d had enough of her because I got upset when that girl kept saying all those things to me...” He sounded like he was going to burst into tears at any moment. “I don’t know... I don’t know what to do... I suddenly have a mom, and I don’t know how to act around her... I don’t know how she feels about me, and I don’t know what to talk about with her... That’s why, even though I know it’s wrong, I keep avoiding looking at her and just play my games...”

I didn’t know how to respond to that.

“The truth is, I’ve wanted to meet her all this time,” he continued. “I’ve always wondered what kind of person my mom is... At first, I was happy to find out she’s so pretty and confident and that she’s the president of a company. But then I started wondering if someone so incredible would be interested in someone like me, and I got scared... I know she gave birth to me, but she hasn’t seen me for over a decade, so she probably doesn’t feel any bond with me...”

Just like that, Ayumu had managed to mumble out the way he actually felt. He had been doing his best to act tough and more mature than he was, but now he

was finally wearing his heart on his sleeve and expressing his age-appropriate feelings. What had seemed like a cold attitude had really been his attempt at running from reality and his way of protecting himself. It'd been easier for him to give up on communicating instead of trying and failing to get along with Miss Yumemi—it'd been less painful to act in a way that would make her dislike him, rather than try to be friendly and be disliked. Though his actions contradicted his feelings, it must've been the best he could come up with to cope with the situation.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this..." he mumbled. "The truth is, I want... I want to..." His voice faded away, and he covered his face with his baseball cap. I simply sat there silently and patted his head.



Takkun had already messaged me to say he'd found Ayumu when, just as she'd said, Yumemi returned twenty minutes later. She'd only given me a basic overview of what'd happened, but it'd sounded like something that couldn't have been handled in just twenty minutes, no matter how skilled of an executive she was. She'd probably done everything she could to temporarily fix things.

After I'd explained what'd happened while she was gone, Yumemi, Miu, and I immediately headed to where Ayumu was. However, we hadn't shown our faces right away—we'd hid and listened to them talk because of a message Takkun had sent me.

**Takumi:** Please wait a moment. I want to try talking to him man-to-man.

"I really am pathetic," Yumemi said in a listless voice after overhearing Takkun and Ayumu's conversation. She squatted down on the spot. "I just thought that he didn't care for me... It seemed natural for him to hate a woman who'd neglected him for a decade. I'd have had no room to complain if he'd resented me. I'd been determined to communicate with him as his mother, no matter how much he hated me, but... Good grief. It looks like I didn't understand

anything about him.” Yumemi smiled like she was relieved, but also like she was disappointed in herself.

Ayumu didn’t hate Yumemi—rather, he’d been so distant with her as a way of handling his feelings. She was probably relieved to find that out, but at the same time, she probably felt ashamed that she hadn’t been able to see past the front her child had put up.

“I’m a failure as a mother.”

“That’s not true,” I said. A slightly mean-spirited smile spread on my face. “You’re not even at the point where you could fail. I’d say you haven’t even made your way to the starting line.” Yumemi didn’t respond. “Just being related by blood doesn’t make someone a good mother... On the same note, not being a child’s biological parent doesn’t prevent someone from being a good mother either.”

Being blood-related—whether someone had gone through the pain of giving birth—was probably important, but it wasn’t everything. It wasn’t something that determined the kind of relationship a parent and child would have.

“I don’t think being the person who gave birth to someone or being the person who legally adopted someone is what makes someone a mother in a parent-child relationship...”

The past ten years played back in my mind—the days I’d spent with Miu. I hadn’t experienced marriage or birth, but I’d suddenly become a mother one day, and I’d somehow made it through the past decade despite all the struggle and being at a total loss for how to navigate parenthood. All of it had been the process of Miu and I becoming mother and daughter...

“I think that the relationship between a parent and child is something that’s built by experiencing various things together, overcoming all sorts of troubles together, and slowly, gradually collecting memories...” I told Yumemi, not as an employee talking to her company president, but as a mother speaking to a new mom. “You’re just starting. I think that it’s from here on out that you’ll gradually become a mother, Yumemi.”

“From here on out, huh?” Yumemi chuckled. “Heh heh, feels strange. I never thought the day would come that *you’d* be lecturing *me*.”

“I-I didn’t mean to lecture you...”

“I see... I guess when it comes to motherhood, you’re ten years my senior.” I fell silent. “I’ll gratefully take my grand senior’s advice to heart,” she said with a gentle smile, and I smiled back.

“Wow, don’t you sound cool, mom?” Miu said in a sarcastic tone. “You’re suddenly acting like you knew everything all along, but you reacted so horribly at first. You were in such a frenzy when you first saw Miss Yumemi with Ayumu, back when you thought she was his sugar mama.”

“Hey! M-Miu!”

“*That’s* what you thought, Ayako?”

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong, Yumemi... I just jumped to conclusions, because of how you usually are— Wait, no, um...”

With both Miu and Yumemi glaring at me, I shrank down.

“Heh heh, it’s fine. I guess the part where I’m trying to be his mom isn’t wrong.” Yumemi then stood up, flashing her usual audacious smile to me in profile. “It’s time to start actually trying this motherhood thing.”



Miss Yumemi appeared out of nowhere, confidently looking down at us in the alley. Ayumu and I both reflexively stood up. Miss Yumemi almost felt like she’d grown taller since I’d last seen her—it was probably because she was standing tall with better posture.

Ever since we’d run into her today, she’d seemed kind of unconfident and smaller than usual, but that was all gone. I’d only met Miss Yumemi a handful of times, but the gallant attitude she always had was back. With an arrogant and majestic presence, she walked past me with long strides and made her way toward Ayumu.

“U-Um, I...”

“Ayumu,” Miss Yumemi began as if she were speaking to herself. “Your name is made up of the characters ‘walk’ and ‘dream,’ as in ‘person who walks toward their dreams.’ I don’t know what your father has told you about it, but it’s a



name that I chose.”

“Huh...?”

“I quite like my own name, Yumemi. I’ve always thought it was so cool that I had the character for ‘dream’ in my name. That’s why I decided long ago that if I had a child, I’d use the same character in their name.”

Ayumu listened to his mother intently.

“I did my best to come up with your name—to come up with the name of the son I’d raise with love,” she continued. “I’ve never really cared for things like fortune-telling, but I bought several books on the fortune of names and studied how the stroke counts of characters could affect things...” She hung her head and smiled faintly. “Regrettably, I wasn’t able to raise you at all, let alone raise you with love. All I’ve given you as your parent is that name.”

Ayumu remained silent.

“That’s why I want to give you what I can from now on.” Miss Yumemi then bent down a little to bring her head to Ayumu’s height, and she made eye contact with him. “I also want you to give me plenty of things from now on, Ayumu.”

“You want *me* to give *you* things?”

“That’s right. That means in a sense, we’ll be on equal footing,” she said with a confident smile. It was a fierce, smug smile, fitting of her personality. “Yeah, that’s right. We’ll be equal. That makes things better,” she asserted, satisfied with her own logic. “Before, I think I wasn’t acting like myself because I felt an unnecessary obligation to act like a normal parent. It wasn’t really in my nature, and to boot, I’m sure it was annoying for you that I suddenly started acting like your mom when we hadn’t met for a decade. Let’s see...”

Miss Yumemi paused for a moment and looked off to the side. I followed her gaze and saw Miss Ayako and Miu, who were peeking into the alley. Her smile grew a little wider as she looked at them. “For now, why don’t you just think of me as a relative of yours?” she suggested.

I understood exactly what she meant by that. A relative—that was exactly what Miss Ayako had been to Miu. Miu had known her first as her mother’s

younger sister—her aunt—but Miss Ayako eventually became a mother to her. Over the course of a decade, the two of them had become a true parent and child.

“You don’t have to force yourself to think of me as your mother, and you don’t even have to call me ‘mom’ if you don’t want to. That said, we were able to meet thanks to some twist of fate, so let’s treasure the opportunity that’s fallen into our laps and have fun.”

“Okay...” Ayumu gave a small, bashful nod. “Th-That works for me...”

“Heh heh. Glad to hear it.” Miss Yumemi wore a satisfied smile, then opened her arms wide. “Okay then, get over here.”

“Huh?”

“What’s wrong? Isn’t the standard thing to give each other a big hug in moments like these?”

“U-Uh, but...”

“Whatever, I can’t keep waiting.”

“Wh-Whoa!” Ayumu was hesitant out of embarrassment, so Miss Yumemi forcefully pulled him into a hug.

“Ha ha! How’s that?”

“S-Stop... Stop it! What the heck?!”

“My bad. This is just the kind of person I am.”

“L-Let go of me! You can’t just do whatever you want! We’re equals, right?!”

“Being on equal footing means you’re able to do whatever you want.”

“I don’t think that’s how that works!”

“Jeez, enough already. Kids should just shut up and listen to their moms.”

“You’re totally acting like my mother!”

“Ha ha ha!”

As Ayumu thrashed around, Miss Yumemi kept forcefully and tightly hugging him.

“You’ve gotten so big, Ayumu...” she mumbled sentimentally. The smile on her face was incredibly gentle, warm, and overflowing with motherliness.

## Chapter 7: The Biological Mother and the Adoptive Mother



It was over a decade ago, around the time Miu was still just two years old, back when she still had her real mother and I was just her relative...

"She's finally asleep," I said, taking a break as I drank some barley tea at the table. I was at my sister and her husband's house—the one that I would eventually move into and still lived in.

A small futon had been laid out on the living room floor, and baby Miu was sleeping there. She had a light blanket covering her stomach as she peacefully napped. The way she looked when she slept was incredibly adorable—she was like an angel.

"It's too bad. I thought I could definitely get her to sleep today," I grumbled. Miu was just so unbearably cute that I'd visit my sister to play with her whenever I had the chance. She was still at the age where she needed daily naps, so she would get sleepy after eating—but being the one to put her to sleep was no simple task. She'd happily play with me for as long as she was in a good mood, but once she got sleepy and cranky, she'd always run straight to her mother, crying out, "Mama! Mama!" Sure enough, my sister had once again been the one to skillfully put Miu to sleep this time, having held her while lying beside her until she'd dozed off. "I guess I'm no match for her mom."

"I've got way more experience than you after all," my sister said with a proud smile as she sat across from me.

"It's just two years..."

"Even two years is a lot. It's been so difficult, you have no idea..." There was a deep look of exhaustion on her face. "There've been so many painful things that I couldn't describe them all in one sentence, but...everything comes back to a lack of sleep. Crying in the middle of the night, diaper changes, sudden fevers,

sudden vomiting, waking up at three in the morning for some unknown reason... There are too many days where I couldn't get proper rest. Having to handle everything, from raising her to doing chores, under the 'no sleep' debuff was really the most difficult part of it all... The fact that now she's finally sleeping well is my one saving grace."

"Y-You really did seem to have a hard time..."

"Well, there are also certain feelings that grow thanks to all the struggle..." My sister let out a sigh as she watched Miu dozing peacefully. Her feelings culminated in a gentle smile. "You know how they sometimes have news stories about babies that are switched at birth? It's also a common plot point for movies and manga."

"Yeah."

"I used to think about what I'd do if I was in that sort of position, but now I can answer confidently," she said. "If a doctor were to kneel before me in apology saying, 'I'm sorry. Your baby got switched. This isn't really your child. We'll return your actual child to you,' I would probably turn them down. I'd say, 'No. I want this one.'"

"Miwako..."

"Hee hee."

"That sounds nice and all, but if your baby were actually switched, the other family would get involved too. I don't think it would be your decision to make."

"Hey, Ayako, you don't have to take it so seriously. It's just a hypothetical," she said wearily.

I giggled. "So basically, even if you weren't related by blood, you'd choose Miu."

"Exactly. I want *this* Miu. I'm glad I have her. Being a parent isn't just about the biological ties, and I'm reminded of that every day. I'm not a parent just because I gave birth—I've spent every day calling Miu's name countless times as I've raised her, and it's all of that togetherness that's gradually turned me into a parent."

“I see...” I suddenly remembered something. “You said something similar before.”

“Hm?”

“Remember, back at the hospital when Miu was born? I asked what the meaning behind her name was.” Just remembering it made me laugh. Back then, my sister had responded...

*“There’s no meaning behind her name—it just sounds good. That’s all.”*

“I never thought it’d be such a simple reason.”

“Who cares, right? The meaning behind someone’s name is usually an afterthought,” she said between sighs. “I won’t give any specific examples, but usually, when you ask about the meaning behind someone’s name, you get stuff like ‘I wanted them to sparkle like an X’ or ‘I wanted them to grow big like a Y.’ Most of the time, it totally sounds like they came up with the meaning after the fact.”

“I guess it does...” I understood what she meant, though I wasn’t going to point any fingers.

“How a name sounds is the most important thing, probably. It’s a name that they’re going to be called over and over again for a long time. Isn’t it best to have a name that feels good to say?” I didn’t know how to respond to that. “I’m going to be saying her name a lot more than anyone else as her parent—so it makes sense I chose a name that feels good for me to say, no?”

“I get your point.”

“Well, I’m not going to complain about the names other people give their children. I just know the direction I took.” Miwako then returned her gaze to her sleeping daughter. “Hee hee. I wonder what kind of kid Miu’s going to grow up into.” Her smile seemed truly full of happiness.

Just watching my sister beam at her daughter made my chest fill with happiness. I had no basis for it, but I felt like my sister would be a very good mother, and that she and her daughter would live a long, happy life, always getting along.

But, unfortunately, my baseless feeling had been completely off. Because of a cruel prank played by a mean god, the time that Miwako got to spend as Miu's mother had been truly, incredibly short. Before I knew it, I'd spent more time as her mother than my sister had. That pleasant-sounding name of "Miu" was one I'd perhaps said many more times than Miwako had, since her count ended ten years ago...

After we'd met up in the alley, Ayumu bought some clothes at a nearby store and changed out of his wet ones, and Miu bowed her head and apologized. With matters now settled, we decided to part ways.

"What are you doing after this?" I asked Yumemi. I was wondering what kind of fun plans the two had now that they'd reconciled.

"I'm going to the office," Yumemi said without hesitation.

"Huh? Th-The office? Right now?"

"Yeah. It's the problem from earlier... The truth is, even though I said I was able to solve things in the moment, nothing's actually been fixed. I really need to go deal with it. And here's another shocking reveal: my phone's been ringing this entire time."

"So after all that, you have to go to work," Ayumu said, inhaling sharply as he sulked. "I guess I'll forgive you... You can't help it if it's work... N-Next time we meet—"

"What are you talking about?" Even though Ayumu was being kind of sweet for once, Yumemi interrupted him. "You're coming with me."

"Huh?"

"While I'm working, I'll have someone give you a tour of the office. I'll quickly get things settled, and we'll decide what to do after that."

"A-Are you even allowed to bring a kid into the office...?"

"It's my company. I won't let anyone complain about it," she said with an arrogant smile. Ayumu was completely stunned.

After saying goodbye, the pair took off. As they walked, Yumemi forcefully

took Ayumu's hand and held it.

"L-Let go, it's embarrassing..."

"Oh, right, Ayumu. I wanted to tell you something about that game you play —*Twilight Master*."

"Are you even listening to me?!"

"My company actually makes that game."

"Whaaat?!"

"Well, technically, we don't develop the game itself, but we're in charge of the stories and the character designs, and we basically supervise the production. We have a mountain of merchandise sent to the office, so if there's anything you want, feel free to take it with you." Ayumu fell silent. "Also, the development team wants honest feedback from middle and high schoolers, so I'd like you to come by sometime for an interview."

"Wh-Whoa... I didn't know you were so incredible, mom..."

"Hm?"

"Oh."

"Did you just call me 'mom'?"

"I-I didn't, I did not! That wasn't— It was a mistake!"

"You don't have to object so intensely."

"I mean... I-I don't want it to slip out like that... If I'm gonna say it, it has to be in the right moment, where it would be really meaningful..."

"Ha ha, that's my kid! Seems like you have the potential to be an entertainer. I'm looking forward to your future."

Though things were still a bit awkward between them, they seemed to be having fun as they spoke and disappeared into the crowd.

"I'm happy for them," Takkun said.

"Me too," I said with a nod.

"It seems like things will go well for them."



“Yeah. Yumemi’s finally back to her usual self too.”

“I thought Miss Yumemi was a perfect superhuman, but I guess she loses herself when it comes to her kid,” Miu suddenly chimed in, shrugging her shoulders. “I guess a child is just something that special and priceless...” Miu sounded somewhat impressed as she let out a sigh. “I kind of want a kid now.”

“Pft...” I couldn’t help but laugh. “Wh-What are you talking about, Miu? You’re ten years too young to be thinking about children.”

“Who knows, maybe I’ll unexpectedly get knocked up while in college.”

“No. No way I’m allowing that. Accidentally getting pregnant? Not if I have anything to say about it!”

“Okay, okay. I get it. You don’t have to worry. I’ll just use your kid with Taku to tide myself over.”

“Wh-What?! Jeez! W-We’re still far from something like that.”

“Hey, let’s go already,” Miu complained, brushing me off. “We spent a hot minute on that little detour. There’s less than two hours until our dinner reservations! I’m losing my precious shopping time.” She started walking off. *Urgh... She’s as carefree as usual! Is there any way I can get her back?* Suddenly, I came up with a plan.

“Takkun, Takkun,” I called out, waving at him to come over to me. I then whispered my plan into his ear.

Takkun looked surprised for a moment before he said, “That’s a good idea.”

“Hee hee, isn’t it?”

“What are you two doing?” Miu asked with a look of suspicion.

“Hey, Miu. You said we should hold hands earlier, right?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, I think I did.”

“Then we’ll take you up on it...and hold hands.”

“Huh?”

“Right, Takkun?”

“Yes, let’s, Miss Ayako.”

We smiled at each other, and Miu looked clearly troubled.

“O-Oh, okay... Do whatever you want, just keep your distance from me.” Miu turned back around to face forward and began creating distance between us.

I caught up to Miu and grabbed a hand—not Takkun’s, but hers.

“Huh? What? Wh-What are you doing, mom?”

“I told you. We’re holding hands.”

Miu seemed confused—then immediately after I took her hand, Takkun caught her other one.

“Wha—?”

“Stuff like this is nice once in a while, right?”

Miu was sandwiched between us, hand in hand with us both. It was like when a small child held both their mother and father’s hands.



“N-No way. I don’t think so. Be serious! Come on, let go already...” Miu seemed completely put off as she tried to shake our hands away, but Takkun and I both maintained a firm grasp and kept her from escaping. “I can’t believe this...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. It’s nice to do something familial like this once in a while.”

“You know I’m in high school, right? I’m going to die if anyone I know sees me.”

“We’re in Tokyo, so you’ll be all right,” I reassured her.

“That’s right. What happens in Tokyo stays in Tokyo,” Takkun chimed in.

“That implies we’re up to something embarrassing I wouldn’t want to bring back with me...” Miu grumbled. As we walked on either side of her, she begrudgingly walked with us.

“Ugh, this is the worst...” Her face was red, and she seemed truly annoyed, but... “I bet there’s no other mom and dad in the world who are this annoying.” The corners of her mouth had slightly turned up, and she seemed to be having fun.

The three of us walked along, all holding hands. We were like any ordinary family, but at the same time, there was no family like ours.

# Epilogue



The three of us enjoyed a delicious dinner together, I got excited over a surprise birthday cake that had my name on it, and I even got presents from Miu and Takkun. We had plenty of fun, and it was an amazing thirty-[REDACTED] birthday.

The next day, Miu left in the early afternoon, so Takkun and I were alone once again. That night, we celebrated my birthday with just the two of us.

“Happy birthday, Miss Ayako.”

“Thank you...again, since this is the second time you’ve said it.”

“It’s okay. We can celebrate your birthday as many times as we want.”

Takkun seemed to be having fun, but I was a bit embarrassed. I was definitely happy, but there was something about it that kept me from fully enjoying it. *I can’t believe I’m celebrating my birthday twice at my age.*

On the table were crackers and other classic party hors d’oeuvres. At my request, there was overall less food, since I’d eaten a lot at the restaurant last night and I needed to keep things balanced. On that note, our cake for the evening was so small it only had room for a single candle, its flame gently swaying from side to side.

“Go ahead and blow out the candle,” Takkun said.

“Okay, okay... Hey, wait! Why are you recording this?”

“It’s a special occasion.”

“S-Stop that, jeez... I’m definitely going to make a weird face while blowing it out... Didn’t you also take a video at the restaurant yesterday when I blew out the candles?”

“It’s a special occasion,” he repeated.

“Really...? Jeez, fine...” I then blew out the flame.

“Whoa! Nicely done!”

“This isn’t as exciting as you’re making it out to be!”

With the candle extinguished amid our fun little banter, we were able to slice into the small cake and have our party officially begin. That said, it was just the two of us, so the atmosphere didn’t particularly change—nevertheless, this time together was filled with more than enough happiness.

“Um, I guess it’s time...”

It had been around thirty minutes since we’d started eating, and Takkun got up. He left and returned with a beautifully wrapped pouch.

“What?! I-Is that...?”

“It’s your birthday gift.”

“You didn’t have to! You already gave me a present yesterday...” At the restaurant the day before, he’d pulled out a nice aromatherapy essential oil he must’ve stashed there ahead of time. It was an elegant gift I’d been overjoyed to receive.

“That was kind of an...outside gift, if you will.”

“‘Outside gift’?”

“I was going to give it to you at a restaurant, where other people could see, including Miu. I couldn’t gift you anything strange, so I made sure it was something a bit fancy.” I wasn’t sure what to say to that. “If anything, the present I have for you today is your real gift.”

“I-Is it...something naughty?” I blurted out unthinkingly.

Takkun seemed like he was about to fall over. “Wh-Why would you think that?”

“Well, because...” *You said it was something you couldn’t give me in front of Miu, so my mind headed in that direction!*

*Ugh, this is bad. I feel like my thoughts these days keep turning dirty. I need to be better.*

“It’s nothing naughty, so don’t worry. Please accept it,” Takkun reassured me.

“Th-Thank you,” I said, taking the present from him. “Should I open it now?”

“Of course. Oh, but, um, even though I might have raised the bar for myself by saying it’s your ‘real’ gift, it’s nothing that expensive, so please don’t get your hopes up.”

Though Takkun was starting to sound nervous, I paid no mind to that and unwrapped the gift. Inside was...

“Wow, are these pajamas?” It was a pajama set with a top and bottom, and they looked similar to sweats. The colors were a bit muted, but the design was very cute.

“Yes, they’re pajamas...”

“Huh, wow. I’m surprised. I didn’t expect something like this.” I’d had a feeling that it would be a gift befitting an adult, so I ended up reacting with a bit of shock. It wasn’t unexpected in a bad way at all, but perhaps my word choice hadn’t been the best since Takkun seemed worried.

“I thought a lot about it... I thought that I should try hard since it’s the first birthday of yours we’ve celebrated since we started dating. I thought about getting some jewelry that could last a long time or something, but I thought if I went out of my way to get something expensive, it would just make you concerned about how much I’d spent.” Takkun seemed to be regaining his composure little by little as he explained his gift. “I couldn’t get something that expensive, but I thought it would be nice if I could get you something you’d use every day... After thinking hard about it, I settled on these pajamas.”

Then he headed into the bedroom before returning with something in his hands: a brand-new pair of men’s pajamas. The color and design were exactly the same as the ones he’d just gifted me.

“A-Are they...?”

“Yes... I got us matching pajamas.”

“Oh. Huh. Wow. I-I see...” *Matching pajamas! What the heck?! I...I love that!*

“It’s a bit difficult for us to wear matching outfits in public, so I thought we

could do it at home.”

“Takkun...”

“Also, we only get to live under the same roof like this for one more month. Once we return home, it’ll be a lot more difficult to sleep together like we do now...so I thought it would be nice if it could feel like we’re sleeping together every day, even after we leave Tokyo. Oh, but, um, I don’t mean anything improper when I say ‘sleeping together.’”

I was so happy. I was rejoicing from the bottom of my heart. Of course I enjoyed the gift itself, but more than anything, it made me happy that he was thinking so much about me—about *us*. I could feel how truly and deeply he loved me. *Is it okay for me to be this happy?*

“Um... Do you like it?” In response to his question, I jumped onto him and squeezed tight, then even tighter, hugging him with all of my strength. “Um...”

“That’s my answer.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Do you understand?”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Yeah, thank you. I love you, Takkun.”

“*I love you*”—it used to feel embarrassing to say, but it was starting to feel quite natural. That wasn’t to say the words felt cheap, though, nor did I feel they carried any less weight than before. If anything, my love for Takkun had grown.

No matter how many times I told him I loved him, and no matter how tightly I hugged him, I probably couldn’t show him just how deeply I felt about him—so, in that case, I was going to hug him as much as possible, and I was going to tell him I loved him as many times as I could, all while praying that even a small percentage of my boundless feelings would get through to him.

“Hey, Takkun. Can we start wearing these pajamas tonight?”

“O-Oh, that’s fine...”



“Huh? What’s with that reaction?”

“Um, well, since they’re brand-new, I didn’t want to dirty them with sweat or anything yet...”

“Are we going to sweat? We’re just going to sleep—” It was at that point that I understood what he’d meant. I had mixed feelings—my face was getting hot, but I was also a little ruffled. “Jeez, Takkun...”

“Ha ha...”

“I think you have a little too much energy for your own good...”

“Well, it’s your birthday, so...”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

We both laughed while making silly jokes, and then we shared another tight embrace. My birthday this year was undoubtedly amazing. I was just so happy—that was the best way to put it. I was glad from the bottom of my heart that we were able to live together like this.

Well... That was why, I, um, probably got a little overly excited. I was exultant. Elated. On cloud nine...and the same went for Takkun. We felt like we were at the height of bliss, like the world not only revolved around our happiness, but we had the whole planet to ourselves.

That ultimate happiness was what caused the next incident in my life. A completely unexpected event occurred—one that would greatly affect the course of my life moving forward.

# Prelude



It was now December, so three months had passed since my mom's temporary assignment, where she was sent to live alone in Tokyo—well, she'd ended up sharing a condo with Taku, so she hadn't *really* been alone. It'd somehow felt long and short at the same time.

Mom was finally coming home today. I'd felt restless since the moment I'd woken up. Honestly...I guess I was a little happy about it. I hadn't been by myself since my grandma had come to our house to stay with me, but still, there had been plenty of times when I'd felt lonely with my mom out of the house for three months. Of course, I'd never let her know I felt that way...

"I'm home!" a voice called out. "I'm home, Miu!"

She arrived in the evening. I wanted to run over to the entryway right away, but it would be embarrassing to act like I'd been waiting for her, so...

"Welcome back," I flatly responded from the living room.

"Phew, it's gotten so cold here... Tokyo was still warm," my mom said, commenting on the temperature differences between the Kanto and Tohoku regions as she made her way to the living room. "It's so nice to be home," she said with a sigh. "It somehow feels...nostalgic. I feel so emotional."

"You're so dramatic. It's only been three months."

"It's been a *whole* three months! You missed me, didn't you?"

"Not really. I wouldn't have minded if you stayed in Tokyo longer."

"Gosh, you're so mean!" my mom said, puffing her cheeks as she took off her coat. It seemed she'd left her suitcase in the entryway. She was holding a paper bag, which looked like it might be some sort of gift, and a plastic bag.

"You got back later than I expected," I said.

"Yeah, I stopped by a drugstore to buy something," she said, holding up the

plastic bag.

“I see... Oh, that’s right.” I remembered something I’d been asked to take care of, and I headed to the kitchen. I picked up an almost-two-liter bottle of sake and showed it to my mom while she took things out of the plastic bag and put them on the table. “Here you go. It’s alcohol.”

“What...? Where did you get this?”

“It’s from grandma and grandpa. They got it at some festival in their hometown or something. It’s apparently really expensive and high quality, but grandpa doesn’t like it.”

“Oh, right. Dad only drinks beer and shochu.” Mom took the bottle and scanned the label. “Oh, I think I’ve heard of this kind before. It’s pretty famous.”

“I see. That’s nice.” I had no interest in alcohol whatsoever, so I just responded without much thought. I then pulled out some barley tea from the fridge and poured some into a cup.

“I wish I could’ve had some,” my mom said with a sigh. She sounded a bit disappointed, and I tilted my head in confusion.

“Hm? What’s stopping you?”

“Oh, um, I, uh... I can’t drink for a while.”

“Why? Are you on a diet?”

“N-No, I’m not... It’s just that, well, with the situation that’s going on, it’s common sense to refrain from drinking alcohol. That’s what the doctor told me too...”

“Th-The doctor? Are you sick, mom?”

“N-No, not exactly...”

She was being super vague. *Mom’s acting weird*, I thought as I glanced at what she’d put on the table. It looked like what she’d bought at the drug store was Sunflower coffee—a caffeine-free coffee alternative—and some folic acid supplements.

*Hmm.* I obviously had no personal experience with it, but I’d heard and read

about this sort of thing in TV shows and manga. Suddenly avoiding caffeine, taking folic acid...these were things that women would often do when they were in a specific situation. Not to mention she was refraining from alcohol and she'd been to the doctor...

I gasped loudly and turned to look at mom. I was giving her a full-on staredown.

"H-Huh...? M-Mom, are you...? Huh? What?" I was so shocked that I couldn't properly speak.

Maybe my flustered attitude gave away that I understood what was going on, but my mom now seemed incredibly uncomfortable too. We both stood there silently for a few seconds, then she slowly placed her arm on her stomach. She rubbed her belly gently, as if to caress it.

"I'm pregnant... Tee-hee." She stuck out her tongue playfully.

*This* was the moment my mother had chosen to muster up all the silliness within her. I imagined she probably couldn't bear to announce it with any amount of seriousness.

I was speechless. I felt like my soul had left my body. I was so flustered that I dropped my cup. Luckily, we used cups famous for being tough to break, so it only amounted to a spill.

*What do I even say...?* There were so many thoughts running through my mind that I couldn't possibly say them all, but there was a clear winner among them—something I wanted to ask more than anything else. *Mom...my dear, beloved mother...what the heck did you go to Tokyo to do?!*

## Afterword

Generally speaking, it's "normal" for a parent and child to be related by blood—but really, what even is a blood relation? Of course, it's not something that can be observed with the naked eye, and humans can't confirm one without specialized testing. That said, I don't think that means people ought to simply dismiss the concept either... I just think it may not be something that's absolutely necessary for a parent-child connection. For one thing, if people can't be a real family without blood ties, where does that leave husbands and wives, right?

In so many words, I don't think there are any requirements to being a family. Lacking blood relation doesn't mean people can't be a family, and in the same vein, simply being related by blood doesn't automatically make people a family either.

With all that said, I'm Kota Nozomi.

This is the sixth installment in the romantic comedy series featuring a mom in her thirties. This volume featured the climax of the cohabitation arc. I got to go all out writing the raw adult romantic comedy that I wanted to make, and I'm very satisfied. Just as I said in the afterword of the previous volume, I fought Dengeki Bunko's editing department and did my best! I fought very hard! Also, regarding Yumemi, who's supported Mommy Ayako since volume one—I'm glad I got to give her a little more depth this volume.

I have a sudden announcement to make. You might have guessed this from the prelude, which had some incredible developments, but...the next volume will be the final volume. I'm planning to include everything that I wanted to have in this series. It's set to go on sale in April of 2022! Please look forward to the conclusion of this romance between a couple who could never stop stumbling from one problem to the next.

I have an additional announcement. Around roughly the same time as this very volume goes on sale, the second volume of the manga will also be

available! It's a wonderful adaptation overflowing with charm unique to manga, so please check it out!


And finally, my acknowledgments.

To my editor, the great Miyazaki, I thank you as always. Even though I got carried away and said things like "I'm so bored. I have nothing to do. Please give me some work," I ended up turning things in at the very last second, which I'm very sorry about...

To the amazing Giuniu, thank you for another volume of lovely illustrations. I love how the cover art is just barely acceptable. It's awesome.

And to you, the readers of this book, I give my greatest thanks. I hope to see you again in the next volume.

Kota Nozomi



Were you  
honeymooning  
instead of  
working?!

This is volume 6 of Work Trip Honeymoon.

Just kidding...

It's volume 6 of You Like Me?!

There've been some incredible developments, haven't there? I can't help but feel that, with every volume, this series pushes the limits of what Dengeki Bunko will allow.

By the way, the scene with Yumemi's son Ayumu was very nice. While this volume had plenty of Mommy Ayako and Takkun being lovey-dovey, it also showcased never-before-seen sides of less featured characters, which made it very fun to illustrate.

But wait, the series is ending with the next volume?! You're kidding, right?! But there are still so many scenes (aka illustrations for the front of the book I've imagined up) that I want to read and draw! Well, still, I'm very happy that Mommy Ayako is expecting.

I'll do my best to depict the climax Kota Nozomi writes as beautifully as possible! Please look forward to my work in the next volume!

#"  
Giuniu





YOU LIKE  
**ME,**

NOT MY  
**DAUGHTER?!**

**6**

**Kota  
Nozomi**  
Illustrator: **Giuniu**



Kota Nozomi  
Illustrator: Giuniu

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♡













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You Like Me, Not My Daughter?! Volume 6

by Kota Nozomi

Translated by sachi salehi Edited by Zubonjin

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