

YOU LIKE
ME

NOT MY
DAUGHTER?!

3

Kota
Nozomi
Illustrator: Giuniu



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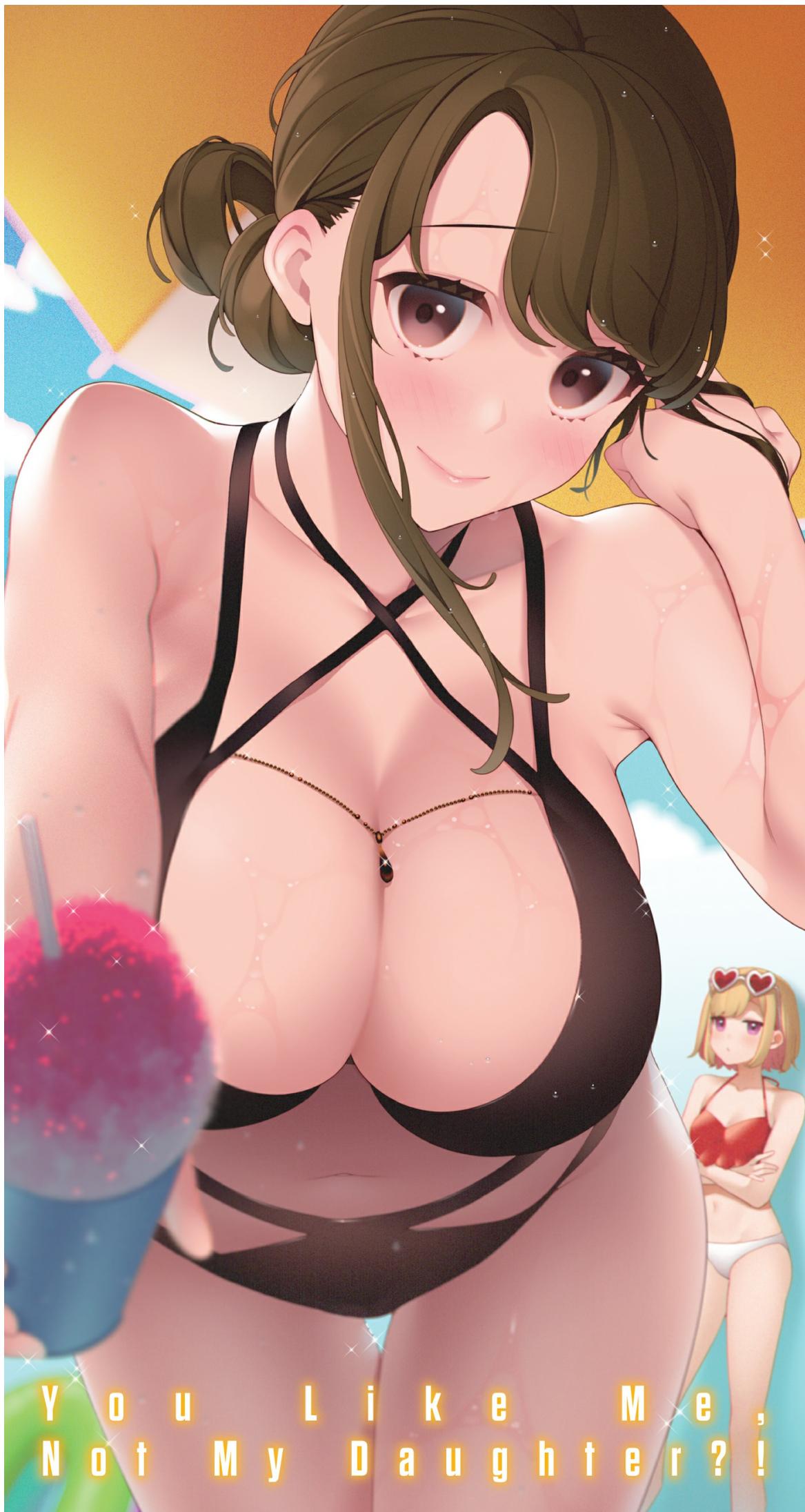
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3







Y O U L i k e M e ,
N o t M y D a u g h t e r ? !

WOW! KEE ME!

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Designer: SHINDOSHA

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Prologue



My mom and dad passed away when I was five. It was right around the time that I'd started understanding the world around me—just as I was becoming conscious that my mom was my mother and my dad was my father, and right as I was starting to form memories of them—that they'd departed for heaven.

I'd heard that it was a car accident. I'd heard that they'd died instantly. All the details I knew were just according to what other people had said—I was only five at the time, after all.

To be honest, I hadn't really understood it. I hadn't gotten what it meant when people said mom and dad were dead. It hadn't clicked at all. It was still a difficult topic to understand even now that I was fifteen, so there was no way my five-year-old self would have been able to comprehend it.

So, that explains why at the funeral, and at the banquet after it, I'd sat still without crying a single tear. The adults around me had been praising me for being a well-behaved child, but that wasn't the truth. I'd just been sitting there, head empty, unsure of what I should be doing. I hadn't been able to keep up with what was happening around me.

Well, that said, I'd still somehow managed to use my five-year-old brain to figure out the mood. I'd gathered that at the moment, we were supposed to be sad. The adults who'd come to the funeral repeatedly kept calling me "You poor thing," so I'd had no choice but to understand as much. *Oh, I see. I'm a "poor thing,"* I thought. Whether I'd wanted to realize it or not—whether it'd have hurt me to know or not—they'd forced me to see it.

During the banquet, my relatives' discussion about who would take me in had gradually turned into an argument. They'd been hashing it out in no uncertain terms, as though a five-year-old couldn't understand anything they were saying.

To be fair, just as they'd assumed, I hadn't quite been able to grasp what they

were going on about—but even as a child, I did still understand some things. I'd been able to tell that they were talking about me like I didn't belong, like I was just a burden.

An indescribable darkness had begun to fill my chest. It'd been getting harder and harder to breathe...and just when I'd shut my eyes and covered my ears, wishing I could disappear...

“I'll take care of her.”

...a woman emerged to save me from that tragic scene: Ayako Katsuragi. She was my mom's younger sister, my aunt.

Nowadays, she's the person I call “mom.”

And so, after that, mom took me in. Well...even though I say she “took me in,” she'd actually just moved into the house that I had been living in with my parents and become the new head of household, so it hadn't really felt like I'd been “taken in,” but anyway.

Fast forward a year after I'd started living with mom.

“Hey, Taku.”

It was early afternoon on a weekend, and we were in the living room of my house. Taku had come over to play that day. Mom had suddenly had some work to do, so she'd needed to go to her room and work for a little bit, which led to Taku watching over me.

This kind of thing had happened pretty often. Taku would play with me a lot. I'd had fun, but looking back on it now, it might not have been as fun for him. Most boys probably wouldn't have much fun playing with a girl five years younger than them. He'd probably wanted to play with his friends from school like other kids, or just play video games alone at home. Despite all that, he'd always seemed to have fun when he played with me, and he'd never shown any signs of being unhappy.

“What is it, Miu?” Taku replied. He was eleven at the time. In his hands was a beaded ring that he'd been in the process of putting together. Our activity of choice that day had been making beaded accessories.

"Um," my six-year-old self began. As I continued to string beads, without any hesitation, I asked, "Is there something wrong with me?"

Taku's face froze for a moment. "Why do you ask...?"

"Yesterday, at kindergarten, Haruto and Maachan looked sad. They said, 'Poor Miu, you have no mommy or daddy.'"

It'd only taken about a month after what'd happened for the news of my parents' death to spread not only to our neighbors, but to everyone involved in the kindergarten. Talk of the graphic accident had spread in the blink of an eye. Adding in the heartwarming element of the dead mother's younger sister taking in the orphaned daughter as her own child turned the story into the juiciest gossip.

Maybe I should say I'd been fortunate to be generally surrounded by people with common sense, which kept me from being openly mocked or bad-mouthed. But still, there was no way to stop gossip from spreading. Eventually, the rumors had spread from adults to their kids, and suddenly my classmates knew what had happened to my parents like it was no big deal.

"After that, the teacher got really mad at both of them," I continued. "She said, 'You can't say that!' Then Haruto and Maachan said they were really sorry...but I don't really get it."

It hadn't been as though anyone had done anything wrong. Of course, Haruto and Maachan hadn't had any ill intent behind what they'd said. They'd felt sorry for me since they'd heard that my parents had died, and they'd genuinely thought "Poor Miu." It was a shining example of childlike innocence.

But, at the time, I hadn't really understood that. I'd been confused about what they'd meant as well as why the teacher scolded them.

"Is there something wrong with me because my mommy and daddy died?" I asked.

Taku fell silent, and an extremely troubled look washed over his face.

Thinking back on it... Yeah. I'd asked him a pretty difficult question, and I slightly regret it. I mean, come on, that was a really heavy thing to ask, you know? It's not something an eleven-year-old child should have to consider.

Understandably, Taku got quite the troubled look on his face, but eventually, he said, "Miu, your mommy and daddy dying is...a really sad thing, I think. I think it's really sad, and a big deal." Both his face and voice were tinged with confusion and conflict, but he kept his gaze on me. "That's why some people in the world might say 'Poor Miu' when they see you—because a big thing happened to you. But...I don't think 'Poor Miu' when I see you. After all, you have Mommy Ayako."

I continued to watch him expectantly.

"Do you like Mommy Ayako?" he asked.

"Yeah, I love her!"

"Do you have fun with Mommy Ayako?"

"Yeah, she's fun!"

"Then everything's all right. How could anything be wrong when you're having so much fun with such a great mommy?"

"Oh, okay," I said.

Taku's words were by no means perfect. His voice was strained the whole way through his explanation, and his reasoning was pretty forced. It was childish, and he bumbled through it, but still...

"Yay! Everything's all right!"

...his explanation had deeply resonated with my young heart. I'd been able to feel his honesty and sincerity, and it'd been enough to comfort my young self. And even more than his words, I'd appreciated the way he'd looked straight into my eyes, and his serious attitude.

"I'm having a lot of fun right now," I began, suddenly talkative due to my good mood. "I was really sad that my real mommy and daddy died...but Auntie Ayako became my mommy, and kindergarten is fun, and you play with me a lot. I still feel a little sad, but I'm way more happy than sad!"

"I see..."

"I wonder if my mommy and daddy in heaven will be happy if I'm having fun."

“Yeah, they’ll definitely be happy. Of course they would.”

“Okay. Then I’m going to keep having fun from now on!” There I went, saying the kind of thing only a truly carefree six-year-old could manage. Then I put down my unfinished beaded ring and got up. “Oh, I just remembered.” I grabbed something from a small shelf in the corner of the living room and brought it back. “Hee hee hee, I wanted to show this to you today, Taku,” I said as I handed him a drawing. It was a single drawing, placed inside a small frame.

“This is... Did you draw this?”

“Yeah.”

“Are these two...you and me?”

“Mhmm,” I enthusiastically nodded.

The drawing had been something I was extremely proud of at the time, and I used to show it off to people, but... Looking at it now, it was a truly terrible drawing, to the point that even remembering it was embarrassing.

I’d drawn us smiling, the way a kindergartner typically would. I’d depicted us in that classically awkward face-forward pose, and the unnatural protrusions representing our arms overlapped at their ends in an unholy tangle of stringy fingers. The only reason Taku could tell who I’d intended to portray from such a terrible drawing was because I’d taken my dreadful art skills to their absolute limit and managed to make our faces completely true to life.

Nah, just kidding. Could you imagine? The real reason he could tell was because I’d written out our names: “Taku” by the boy and “Miu” by the girl.

“Wow, you drew us so well.” Taku complimented my picture with a smile. At the time, that was enough to put me on cloud nine.

“Mommy also said it was really good! She said we should hang it up and bought me the frame! I also wrote the letters with mommy’s help. I tried really hard!” I pointed to the “Miu” and “Taku” right by the boy and girl...

...and then I pointed to the sentence written at the top of the drawing. It read “I want to marry Taku when I’m older.”

“Marry’...?”

“Yeah!” I responded without any embarrassment, my smile beaming. This drawing was, for me, something like a cross between a wish on a star and a love letter to convey my overflowing feelings to him. “When I’m older, I’m going to marry you!”

That was me, Miu Katsuragi, age six. A lot had happened in my life—enough that people who didn’t understand a thing would call me “Poor Miu” and foist their pity on me—but I was living my days out happily, having fun with my new mom.

Also, I really, really loved the older boy from next door who would always play with me.

Chapter 1: The Declaration and the Triangle



Days start early when you're a single mother. My mornings would often begin with me rubbing my sleepy eyes and getting out of bed early since I had to pack a lunch for my high school daughter, and today was no different.

Well, once in a while I would oversleep and I wouldn't be able to pack her lunch, but generally, I tried to pack a lunch for her every morning, no matter what kind of day it was—even the times when something had happened between my daughter and me the night before.

"Morning." My daughter greeted me with a yawn as she came downstairs, just as I had finished preparing the breakfast I'd been making alongside her lunch. Miu often wouldn't get up if I didn't wake her up, but today, it seemed she'd gotten up all on her own.

The moment the door to the living room opened, I froze in the middle of cooking. Despite that, I managed to refocus and started moving my hands again.

"Good morning, Miu." I greeted her back, doing my best to sound the same as usual and desperately choking back the bubbling nervousness and anxiety within me.

Miu walked into the living room in her pajamas and pouted upon sitting at the table. "Whaaat? Ham and eggs for breakfast *again*?"

"What? You like them, don't you?"

"Yeah, but haven't you been making it a lot recently?"

"I have no choice since we still have those eggs we got from grandpa. They'll go bad if we don't eat them soon."

"I mean, I get that, but... Oh! Can you make eggs benedict for breakfast tomorrow? I saw on TV the other day that it's surprisingly easy to make."

"I don't want to be trying something new during my busy morning. If you have a problem with what I cook, then wake up early and make your own breakfast."

"Booo. That defeats the whole point of you making it."

And so, continuing our banter, we had breakfast together. It was the same as usual, almost to the point of being unnaturally ordinary. There was nothing different about the look on Miu's face or her attitude. It was as if that *incident* from yesterday had never happened.

Everything was so normal that I almost thought it had all been a dream. But I would immediately be reminded that wasn't the case—that what happened yesterday was undeniably real.

Right as we finished breakfast, the doorbell rang. I answered right away, and the young man from next door was standing there.

It was Takkun—Takumi Aterazawa, the twenty-year-old college student and our neighbor who, if you could believe it, was the strange boy who'd said he's in love with me, a woman more than a decade older than him. Currently, I was stalling giving him a definitive answer after he told me he wanted to pursue a romantic relationship, leaving his feelings for me in stasis.

"Good morning, Miss Ayak—" Takkun's eyes suddenly widened in the middle of his greeting. His face flushed as he averted his gaze in a panic.

"Wh-What's wrong, Takkun?"

"Um... I, uh, well... I-It's nothing."

"It's obviously not *nothing* with how flustered you are."

"Um..." He quickly glanced over at me, looking at how I was dressed, and uncomfortably continued. "For a second... I thought you were naked under the apron."

"Huh? Naked?!" I slowly looked down and understood what he meant. It had been getting hotter, so today I was quite dressed down, wearing only a white tank top and shorts beneath my apron.

How strange! I really do look like I could be naked under the apron if you see me from the front. "Wh-What are you thinking?! There's no way I would just

wear an apron and nothing else! See, I'm wearing clothes!" I lifted the apron and desperately tried to show him my shirt and shorts underneath.

"O-Of course, I apologize..."

"Jeez... Saying such weird things so early in the morning... I-It's probably because you're always thinking naughty things that you end up seeing regular outfits like that!"

"I-I'm sorry..." Takkun bowed his head apologetically to the harsh scolding I'd used to cover up my embarrassment.

Well, he *seemed* genuinely sorry, but the look on his face made him appear slightly unsatisfied. It was as if he wanted to say, "I'm not the only one at fault here. You're a little bit responsible for answering the door in such misleading and skimpy clothing."

The entryway fell uncomfortably silent.

"Um..." Takkun finally spoke up as he began searching for the right words. "Were you all right yesterday, after everything? Since, um...a lot happened, are you tired or anything?"

"I'm okay. I appreciate your concern."

Two days ago, we'd gone on our first date. The day at the amusement park that he had originally planned was unbelievably perfect, but we'd had several accidents afterward—namely, on the way home I'd gotten a flat tire, then because of sudden torrential rains, we'd had to spend a night at a...love hotel.

In spite of all the things we hadn't expected, I'd had fun. Even including the accidents, I could confidently say it was an amazing experience.

"Were *you* okay, Takkun? You said you didn't sleep much at the hotel."

"I'm perfectly fine. I'm young enough to stay up for a night with no problems."

"R-Right... You're still only twenty years old... You're ready to go out and party hearty even after staying up all night, unlike me..."

"N-No, that's not what I meant! I'm sorry! I didn't mean it like that!" Takkun panicked as I sank into depression at the unexpected blow.

Just when our conversation was wrapping up...

“Morning, Taku!” Miu exclaimed energetically as she came running out from behind me. Then she hugged him—indeed, she suddenly *hugged* Takkun, who was still standing in our doorway—out of nowhere, squeezing him tight.

“Huh...?”

“What...?”

Neither Takkun nor I could understand the situation. We were befuddled.

Despite the tense atmosphere, Miu smiled and said, “Hee hee, I missed you, Taku. You’re looking handsome, as usual.” She said it in a sweet tone I’d never heard before, eyes upturned like she was trying to endear himself to him. It was a side of her I’d never seen.

“Wh-What are you doing, Miu...?” Takkun asked.

“Huuuh? What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean...”

“Hee hee, it’s fine. This kinda thing isn’t so bad every once in a while, right?” Miu calmly replied before finally letting go of him. Takkun still seemed confused.

After she got her shoes on, she went to one side of him and tightly latched onto his arm. She held onto it the way couples would, pressing his arm against her chest.



“Hee hee, I really am so blessed. I get to have Taku all to myself every morning, and I can flirt to my heart’s content.”

“What are you—”

“Well, I think it would be frustrating to just play games and stuff, so I want to make it clear from the beginning... I’ve decided to compete against mom.”

“Compete’...?”

As Takkun stood there confused, Miu confidently declared, “We’re competing to see who will win you over: my mom, or me.”

Takkun and I were both stunned. Our jaws dropped and wouldn’t close.

“A mother and daughter fighting over one man... Hee hee. Sounds like it’ll be really messy,” Miu said, continuing to egg me on. In contrast to Takkun and my frozen selves, she was smiling as if things were going exactly the way she wanted. “Be ready, Taku. I’m gonna go on the offense and start making a bunch of plays. I’m gonna get you to say you like me more than my mom.”

“H-Hey, Miu...” I called out. I recovered more quickly than Takkun since I had been able to anticipate the situation after the incident yesterday. But just then, as if she had been waiting for the right moment...

“Oh, shoot, would you look at the time! I’m going to be late if I don’t get going!” she exclaimed contrivedly. Miu then turned to look at me, flashing me a defiant smile and an incendiary gaze. “I’m going, mom. See you.” After her cheery goodbye, she grabbed Takkun by the hand, still clinging to him as if she were rubbing it in my face, and headed out. Takkun continued to look just as dazed as ever.

I fell silent, my thoughts frozen over. I was endlessly perplexed by this onslaught of shocking developments, but I was now convinced of something from the bottom of my heart.

Oh, I guess it was true after all. The declaration of war from yesterday wasn’t a dream. It was reality.

“I’m going to date Taku.”

Those were Miu's words from last night, said to me when I was still basking in post-date bliss. The words she had said while looking straight through me with a penetrating gaze.

"Come to think of it, you always *were* saying that Taku and I should date. Your dream was for Taku and me to get married, right?"

I couldn't say anything back.

"Well, good for you, mom! Your dream will come true!"

It was all so sudden.

"Can I count on you, mom?"

Where was this coming from?

"You'll root for me, right?"

Upon receiving this news—no, this declaration of war—from my daughter, I...

"Yes, of course," I responded after a short pause, somehow managing to get the words out. My heart was greatly shaken up, but I said it, doing my best to sound calm as I desperately hid my emotional state. "As your mother...nothing would make me happier than if you were to date Takkun. Just like you said, I've always wanted you two to get together."

Miu listened intently.

"If you two want to date, I will root for you from the bottom of my heart." After getting to that point, I took a breath before adding on, "...if you're serious about him."

"If I'm serious...?"

"Yes, that's right. It's true that I've always wanted you two to end up together... But that was because I thought you had feelings for him." I'd always thought that they'd make a great couple, being childhood friends and all. I'd thought that Miu just couldn't be honest with herself and had liked Takkun for a long time. "Unfortunately... I recently found out that was all just a misunderstanding on my part."

Miu continued to listen silently.

"If it's like you just said, and you're only trying to date him because I won't...then I'm sorry, but I can't support you. It would be rude to him if you dated him for a reason like that."

"Hmm. I see..." Miu began in an insolent tone after hearing what I had to say. "That's a pretty good excuse you've come up with."

"A-An excuse...?"

"You should just admit it. Admit that you've fallen in love with Taku, so you don't want to give him to me."

"Wh—?! Th-That's not true! What are you talking about?!" I denied in a panic as Miu snickered.

"Well, I guess you aren't lying. You'd only wanted us to get together because you'd mistakenly thought that I liked him, and you'd also mistakenly thought that he liked me."

I'd thought he liked Miu... That's true, I had mistakenly thought that they probably had feelings for each other.

"But now you know how Taku really feels," Miu continued. "You know that it was you who he's liked this whole time, not me. I guess I can't blame you for not rooting for me then."

I didn't respond.

"Okay, got it. Then the deal is off."

"The deal'...?"

"Isn't it? I'm going to date Taku like I said I would earlier. I'm going to do a lot of things moving forward so *he'll* want to date *me*."

I listened silently as she continued. "I requested your support, but you turned me down. That's why our deal is off. There's nothing else I have to say to you."

"Wh-What are you talking about? What do you mean you're going to 'do things'? Just what are you planning to do, Miu?"

"I can't tell you that since you're not on my side, right?" I couldn't say anything back. "That's why it's a secret. I'm not telling my rival anything," she

said with a provocative smile.

“Y-Your rival?”

“Yep, we’re rivals since we’re going to fight over Taku from now on,” she declared with a fearless smile, then she turned her back to me and exited the living room.

“Hey, Miu... Hold on, Miu!” I repeatedly called out to her, but there was no point. She waved me off as if to say there was no use talking about this anymore and headed upstairs to her room.

And that was it. Flashback over. That was what’d happened last night—Miu’s declaration of war against me, my rebuttal, the deal that fell through, and the newfound rivalry left in its wake.

This morning, the day after, Miu had already begun taking action, ignoring my wishes of wanting everything to have just been a dream.

I was...completely lost. I called out to my daughter in my heart.

Just what are you thinking, Miu? How serious are you?

♠

“Hey, Miu...”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Knock it off already! Get off me,” I said, my tone betraying my impatience and irritation. It had been roughly ten minutes since we’d left her house. We were almost at the train station, but Miu was still wrapped around my arm. No matter how many times I tried to shake her off, she didn’t seem interested in letting go.

“Aww, why? Just a little longer, please?”

“No. Get off.”

“I know you’re secretly enjoying this.”

“I’m not.”

“Darn... I guess breasts like mine don’t turn you on a single bit. Only my

mom's monster boobs do the job for you, huh?"

"I'm not gonna fall for your loaded questions." *Also, don't call Miss Ayako's breasts "monster boobs." I mean, I get what you're going for, but I'm sure there's a nicer way to express it. Maybe...god-tier? Yeah, god-tier breasts. Or perhaps "a goddess's bosom"...* No, that's too much. Needs work.

"I think my chest's nothing to scoff at, but I guess I don't stand a chance against mom." Miu sighed. "I guess I just have to hope they'll grow moving forward. My mom and I aren't completely unrelated, so I might still have a chance."

"How long are you going to talk about boobs for?"

"But hope still remains! For I possess the most precious status a woman can attain: I'm a high school girl! My body is a temple most sacred, a sanctuary all men yearn to know yet one they may not profane! Surely, my tantalizing allure as forbidden fruit can surmount the wall that is my mother's rack!"

"Unfortunately, I'm not the kind of guy who thinks being a high schooler is anything special."

"*What...? You don't care about high school girls? I should have expected as much from you, Taku. You're a lover of mature women, through and through.*"

"I don't have a thing for mature women, and Miss Ayako isn't that old."

"Whoa there, Taku. You shouldn't be saying embarrassing things like 'mature women' in public."

"You're the one who said it first!"

Just like that, we'd landed ourselves in a socially unacceptable conversation. If someone were to overhear, they definitely would have been put off by us. Thankfully, the path we took wasn't too busy.

"Ha ha, that's true," Miu laughed flippantly before finally letting go of me.

I let out a sigh of relief after finally having my arm freed.

"So, what was that all about, even?"

"Well, nothing really."

"It isn't nothing, obviously... Also, what about what happened back there? Talking about competing against your mom, and...making plays for me."

"The truth is," Miu began, her voice lowering. "I had a *tiny* argument with my mom yesterday. So...I said a bunch of stuff. Like that if she kept dragging her feet, I would date you instead."

"You wha—"

"Don't worry, it's okay. I know what you want to say, you don't have to spell it out for me," she said, shoving her hands before me and interrupting my thought. "It's all a lie."

"A lie...?"

"Yup, a complete lie. It's made up—a plan to get the two of you together. I have no intention of dating you, so there's nothing to worry about. I don't really think anything of you as a guy," Miu said in a nonchalant tone that was unnaturally cheerful.

"Why would you make something like this up...?"

"Well, how should I explain it? I just got frustrated seeing my mom refuse to make up her mind for so long... I was, like, taken over by a sense of responsibility to do something about it already, I guess?" I could only listen on in disbelief. "Now that I've declared war on her, I think my mom will start making some moves," Miu conjectured. "I don't think she'll be able to leave things alone any longer. I'm basically acting like a shot in the arm for you two."

I don't get it. What the hell is she thinking?

"Jeez, don't glare at me like that. I know it's none of my business," she said sulkily before letting out a sigh. "You know, I'm not trying to get in your way. In fact, it's the opposite. I want to support the two of you with everything I've got. You can just keep trying to get my mom to fall for you the way you have been this whole time. I'm just going to...do what I want, of my own accord."

"What you want...?"

"Don't worry about it. I promise not to do anything that would be bad for you," Miu said before taking a step closer to me. With a serious look in her

eyes, she raised her gaze to meet mine. “Just trust me a little.” I stayed silent. “Trust me—as both your childhood friend and probably your future stepdaughter.”

“It’s hard to trust you because you mess with me like that,” I said after a short pause.

“Ha ha, that’s fair,” she laughed. Miu’s serious look shifted into a flippant smile once again. “Either way, the plan’s already been set into motion, so it can’t be stopped now. You’ll have to play along with it whether you like it or not.” I didn’t respond. “Also, everything we talked about just now has to be a secret from my mom. I’m going to be acting like I’m into you in front of my mom...but don’t misunderstand what’s going on here and fall for me, okay?”

Miu ended the conversation with that facetious line before splitting up with me to head toward the train station. All I could do was stand there, lost in thought as I watched her walk away.

Before long, it was my lunch break at school. After eating at the cafeteria, I headed to a playing field on campus with my friend, Satoya Ringo. After doing some light stretching, we put some distance between us and tossed a flying disc back and forth.

Satoya and I were both in an “ultimate” club. Despite its grand name, it was relatively unknown in Japan. To explain it in simple terms, it was basically a combination of American football and basketball that was played using a flying disc in place of a ball. You passed the flying disc to your teammates, trying to keep the opposing team from catching it, and if you caught it in the opposing team’s end zone, you would score a point.

Many players in Japan started when they entered university, and I wasn’t any different. What’s more is that I only found out about ultimate after starting college too. During a welcome event for new students, the club invited me to join, and I decided to take them up on it because I liked their vibe.

Actual club activities were pretty lax, with practice once a week if it even happened in the first place. I didn’t have any interest in seriously pursuing a sport in college, but I still wanted to be able to move my body around once a

week, so it was the perfect club for me.

“I see. Miu said all that, huh...” Satoya responded thoughtfully after I explained what had happened this morning while we tossed the ball—nay, disc—around.

I know Miu said to keep the plan a secret, but...just asking Satoya for advice probably isn't against the rules. Probably.

“What do you think, Satoya?”

“What do I think about what?”

“What do you suppose Miu’s thinking?”

“How would I know?” he scoffed wryly, then he tossed the disc with a forehand throw.

The disc flew toward me in a clean line. I caught it and nodded. “You’re right.” I threw the disc back with a backhand throw.

“I could count how many times I’ve met Miu on one hand. There’s no way I could know what she’s thinking when you, who’s been by her side for over ten years, don’t even know.”

“You’re not wrong, but...”

“Well...I get it. There might be some things that you can’t see *because* you’re so close,” Satoya said, seeming like he somewhat understood. I couldn’t say anything back.

Miu Katsuragi—my next-door neighbor who was five years younger than me—and I had known each other for over ten years now. You wouldn’t be mistaken to think we had a pretty close relationship.

“I wonder what it is...” Satoya pondered. “Just looking at the current situation, it’s a very romantic-comedy-like problem to suddenly have no idea how your longtime childhood friend is feeling... But in your case, there are a lot of complicating factors.” Satoya suddenly looked a bit dismayed. “I feel like I’m talking to a tired office-worker dad with a teen daughter who’s telling me ‘I just don’t get her anymore.’”

“Who are you calling a tired office worker?” I jabbed back, but I couldn’t

really deny it in the end.

Hm, I guess he's right. Assuming Miu will become my stepdaughter in the future, I really am talking to my friend about my (future) teenage daughter. I-I don't know how to feel about that... What exactly am I looking for advice on?

"Hmm, let's see... If you don't mind me giving you advice that's completely my own opinion," Satoya began before taking a huge swing and vigorously throwing the disc upward with a hammer throw. The disc drew a parabola in the air and headed toward me. "I think you should just let Miu do what she wants."

"What she wants...?" I asked back, somehow catching the disc after it just narrowly missed me.

Satoya nodded. "I've only met Miu like two or three times, and I'm not sure I'd even be comfortable calling her an acquaintance, but...even so, I could really tell how much she cares about you and Miss Ayako." I fell silent and listened to him. "I think Miu is probably really smart. I don't mean book smart, but, like, in terms of understanding people. She can read the room and she has great social skills. Even though it doesn't seem like she's thinking about much, she actually considers what she says very carefully... She's unbelievably grounded for a high schooler."

"That's some high praise."

"Actually, I was just saying what I figured you thought of her."

"Then you're overdoing the compliments..."

"If Miu, who you think is so smart, thought up a plan and is acting on it, I don't think things could turn out too badly."

"Is that how these things work...?" I tossed the disc back to Satoya with slight dissatisfaction. He easily caught it, even though I'd ended up throwing a little too hard.

His expression slightly clouded over before he continued. "But, because she's so sharp, I'm actually a little worried. Despite the fact that she's talkative and smiles a lot...there's something kind of chilling about her, like she's overly detached from things. If you look at it positively, she just has everything

together, but looking at it negatively...you might suspect she's forcing herself to act like an adult."

I didn't know what to say. "I could just be overthinking it, though," Satoya said with a deep sigh before preparing the disc for another throw. "At the end of the day, it's about how open-minded you can be. I think you should just stand tall and not panic about it. No matter what Miu's planning and how it turns out, just accept it all with your generous heart." Satoya twisted his body and pulled the disc far back. He then threw it with a sharp backhand throw that used his entire body as a spring. "Good luck, dad."

"Who are you calling dad?!" I casually jabbed back. Then I caught the strongest throw of the day firmly with both my hands.



"I'm home." It was the evening, and Miu had come home from school. "Mom, I'm hungry. Do we have anything? Something light I can snack on before dinner. Did you maybe make some pound cake or flan with the leftover eggs?"

Why would I just conveniently have made something like that? I would usually respond exasperatedly with something like that, but today...

"Miu, sit down," I instructed as Miu walked into the living room, ignoring her request and failing to even welcome her home. "I need to talk to you, so sit there."

Miu silently did as I said and sat across from me. I was trying my best to be strict, but Miu didn't seem surprised at all—in fact, she seemed to understand why I was being like this.

"What is it? Maybe I don't need to ask though—I think I have a pretty good idea," she said with a dry laugh.

"What was that all about this morning?" I began, determined.

"What do you mean by 'that'?"

"That means...*that*. You know, how do I say this... Like how you suddenly grabbed Takkun's arm in front of me and said that you were competing against me." *Ugh, this is kind of embarrassing... I wanted to have a serious*

conversation, but I can't help but get embarrassed because of the topic. "The two of you didn't just keep walking like that...did you? You have to be careful of what the neighbors might think, so you can't be doing anything too strange—"

"Mom, are you...jealous?"

"What?"

"Like, are you thinking, 'I can't believe you locked arms with Takkun on your way to school! I haven't even gotten to do that yet,' or something?"

"N-Not at all! What are you talking about?!" *It's true that I've only held hands with Takkun, and I haven't held his arm in a romantic fashion like that yet... Wait, that's not the point!* "I'm not jealous... I'm warning you as your parent. Even Takkun seemed troubled, didn't he? I don't know what you're planning, but you shouldn't bother him in order to do it."

"As a parent,' huh...?" Miu said, repeating my words meaningfully. "Well, I do think you're right, but I don't really want you getting in the way of my love life with that cookie-cutter logic."

"Y-Your love life...?"

"Yeah, my love life. Didn't I tell you yesterday? I'm going to date Taku," Miu said. "It probably wouldn't work out if I suddenly asked him out, so for now, I'm going to start with working hard to get him to see me as a member of the opposite sex. Since Taku only thinks of me like a little sister, I think I need to be bold and go on the offense, you know?"

"Cut it out," I warned her after a moment of silence. I couldn't stop my tone from sounding cold and low—in order to choke back how flustered I felt, I had to force myself to have an icy attitude. "I already know what you're thinking."

"Huh...?"

"The truth is, you're just doing this all to provoke me, aren't you?" Miu fell silent. "You're just pretending to go after Takkun so that I'll panic, since I've been putting my response to Takkun on hold and being indecisive, right? Am I wrong?"

Even I wasn't so stupid. I wasn't so naive as to take what my daughter had

said at face value. I'd spent the day calmly thinking things over, and I finally came to a realization: it was possible that my daughter was playing the villain, pretending to like him in order to get us together.

Miu looked down without saying anything, possibly signaling that my theory was right on the mark.

"You know, Miu... I appreciate it, but you don't have to work so hard for us. What's going on between Takkun and me is our own problem. I-It's not like I'm just carelessly putting off my decision... I'm not sure how to really explain it, but these kinds of things just need a lot of time—"

"Bzzt! Wrong answer," Miu fired back, crossing her arms into an x in front of her chest like she was mocking my attempt at trying to be considerate and explaining things kindly despite my embarrassment. "Too bad. I award you no points. How could you be *this* wrong?" I was stunned. "There's no way I would work so hard for you. Jeez mom, way to be self-centered. Just how much do you think I love you?"

"Huh...?"

"Just like I said yesterday, I feel bad for Taku having to be the victim of your indecisiveness, so I'm going to date him in your place. That's all there is to it—no more, no less, no other intentions," Miu said, denying all of my assumptions with a smile just as cheery as her usual one.

Her attitude, which it felt like she was only putting on to confuse and make fun of me, made me anxious...and eventually, irritated.

Ugh! What's wrong with this girl?! Why...Why does she have to treat me this way?!

"You know, mom...maybe you're actually scared?"

"S-Scared'...?"

"Maybe you're scared that you might lose if you fight me for Taku."

"What?!" I couldn't help but falter a bit at her cocky provocation. "F-Fight you? What are you talking about? Takkun isn't some trophy."

"Well, I guess you can't help but be scared," Miu continued, ignoring my

protest and putting on an irritating smile, trying to provoke me with everything she had. “No matter how young you look, you’re already thirtysomething years old. Generally speaking, you’re a full-fledged old lady.”

“Old lady...?”

“On the other hand, I’m a youthful teenager! I’m a high school girl! The winner was decided before the battle’s even begun, right?”

“Heh... Heh heh heh...” I laughed. With the anger I was feeling, all I could do was laugh. I’d wanted to settle things as peacefully as possible, but I had no obligation to stay quiet after taking all that! I had to fight back for all the women in their thirties around the world! “Y-You really don’t get it, Miu. Younger doesn’t always mean better when it comes to women. There’s a certain composure and magnanimity that only women of a certain age can exude. There are probably a lot of men nowadays who are exhausted looking for those qualities in a woman.”

“Composure...? M-Magnanimity...?”

“Don’t act like you’re genuinely confused!” I exclaimed. Her expression practically screamed, “Huh? What part of you exudes any of that? Do you have any self-awareness at all?” and it was leaving me on the verge of tears. *M-Maybe it’s true that I’m lacking those things! Maybe I have lacked composure and elegance since Takkun told me how he felt, and I’ve been panicking the entire time!*

“If we’re only talking about how you are romantically... You don’t have any of the composure of a woman in her thirties,” Miu said bluntly. Rather than sounding accusatory, it was more like...she felt bad for me. “You aren’t doing anything to maintain the relationship, and you’re dragging out your response to being asked out, yet despite that, you’re annoyed when he’s with another woman. There’s being annoying, and then there’s *that*. You’ve surpassed high-school-level childishness and entered middle-schooler territory. Well, that might be rude to actual middle schoolers. At this point you’re just... To put it simply, you’re being embarrassing as a woman.”

“U-Urgh...” I-I can’t say anything back. Her takedown feels like a knife to the gut, but she’s so right I don’t feel like I have the grounds to defend myself... Ugh,

I really am such an annoying woman. It's rough having the truth laid out before me so objectively...

"You must understand by now who the better woman for Taku is."

"I-It's true... I may just be an annoying woman who doesn't have any composure or magnanimity despite being in her thirties... I can't deny that possibility, but...Takkun said that he likes me, despite all that!" I yelled loudly, letting my riled up emotions take control. "I'm the one Takkun likes! Just because you're making some moves doesn't mean he'll go your way! Because...Takkun really loves me, and really cares about me... Um, so, that's why... Yeah!" As I went on, I started feeling more and more embarrassed.

Hold on. What am I even saying?! Aren't I kind of...being extremely embarrassing right now?!

"Well, yeah... That's true..." In contrast to how I was about to die of shame, Miu spoke calmly. "Taku himself is head over heels for you, so you do have quite the advantage in this competition. I'm totally at a disadvantage there. I've known that from the start...but I still think I can win because of the way you've been acting. That's why..." Miu glared at me, an inflammatory glint in her eyes. "At the end of the day, we have no choice but to compete. We'll have to fight with our gloves off to see who will win Taku's heart."

I couldn't say anything back to her. "Just so you know," Miu went on, "you can't say no. Well, it's more like whether you reject the competition or not, it won't change what I do. I'm going to give everything I've got to making Taku fall for me. If you don't want that to happen, you should make your own moves on him. Simple enough, right?" I still didn't respond. "Or maybe...you *are* afraid you'll lose to me after all?" Miu asked, unsurprisingly trying to rile me up again while I was too frazzled to say anything back. "Do you still have no confidence despite your huge advantage in this competition? Wouldn't you lose your dignity as a mother if you lost against me, your daughter, in womanly charm?"

"Ugh... You sure aren't mincing your words," I finally managed to say. Miu gave me a taunting look, and I glared straight back at her. "Fine then. You're on. I don't know what you're thinking, but I'll take the bait."

I knew that I was saying something ridiculous, falling for my daughter's

provocation and agreeing to such a silly competition...but I didn't know what else I could do. If Miu would do what she was going to do regardless of my participation, then at this point, any further arguing would be pointless—and more than that, as a mother, I couldn't back down after having my daughter so blatantly pick a fight with me.

"I won't let you have Takkun, no matter what," I declared.

"Nice, that's more like it." Miu smiled happily. "Heh heh, I'm excited. A no-holds-barred battle between mother and daughter over Taku... I wonder how exactly this bloodbath will shake out," Miu said carefreely as she stood up. She walked across the living room to the calendar on the wall. "Summer's given us the perfect opportunity for our little showdown too," she said, pointing at a date at the end of July on the calendar. It was a day most schools were closed for summer break.

The writing on the date Miu pointed out read, "Aterazawa and Katsuragi family trip to Hawaiian Z!"

"Heh heh, I wonder what kind of swimsuit I should wear to seduce Taku?"

In contrast to Miu, who was all laughs, I was stunned. *Oh, that's right. I completely forgot. Once summer break starts...we have our annual family trip!*

Chapter 2: The Visit to Tokyo and the Swimsuit



We'd reached the end of July, three days away from the family vacation at a spa resort. I had taken the bullet train to Tokyo for work that day.

Light Ship, the company I worked for, was a corporation Yumemi had started after leaving her position as a highly skilled editor at a major publication. What the company actually did was extremely difficult to pin down: it took on a wide variety of projects, but more or less, we were engaged in creating various entertainment media such as video games, animation, and light novels.

The main office for Light Ship was in Tokyo. I usually worked remotely from home, but I would be called out to the main office or to our clients' offices about once every few months. Despite the popularity of remote work in the current world, there were still a multitude of tasks that could only be handled in person.

"I think we're done with greeting clients for now," Yumemi said, groaning as she stretched after we left the building where our clients were headquartered.

She was dressed in a pantsuit as usual, while I was in a suit for the first time in a while. I usually worked in loungewear, or even in my pajamas at times when working from home, but there was something about wearing a suit that made me feel like I was rolling up my sleeves and going, "All right, let's do this!"

"I'm sorry for dragging you all over the city," Yumemi apologized. "It's been a while since you've come over here, so there are a lot of new people and companies I've been wanting to introduce you to."

"No worries, it's all right," I said, shaking my head slightly.

After we'd finished up some tasks at the main office, Yumemi had been taking me around to introduce me to companies and creators we'd recently started working with. She was apologizing for dragging me every which way, but I was honestly grateful that she was helping me network like this. The fact that I was

allowed to work from home made my case a particularly special exception to begin with—I had no right to be complaining about getting dragged around the city by my boss on one of my occasional visits to Tokyo.

“Man... It’s really started to get hot,” Yumemi complained as we walked through the crowds of the big city. It was now past four in the evening, so we’d managed to get through the worst of the hot temperatures, but the summer heat seemed to still be trapped in the asphalt. “Isn’t this heat hard for you to deal with since you live in the Tohoku area?”

“Not at all. I live in the southern part of the region that’s in a valley—maybe it’s because we don’t get much wind, but the summers are surprisingly hot.”

“I see. Does it not snow there then?”

“We still get snow...” The area I lived in was hot despite being a northern region, but we were still in the north all the same—snow would pile up in no time during the winter. It pains me to say it about my own home turf, but I lived in quite a burdensome locale.

“Remind me, were you staying in the city tonight?”

“I am. I’ve already booked a room since I wanted to get some more work done at the main office tomorrow.”

When Miu was younger, I did my best to get back on the same day, but around the time she entered middle school, I started allowing myself to stay out for work. Miu herself had told me, “You worry too much. It’s just one day—I’ll be fine alone.”

“I see. You should enjoy your first night that you’ve had alone in a while. Want me to escort you around? Why don’t we go out to Kabukicho or something?”

“K-Kabukicho...? Where are you planning on taking me?”

“A host club I frequent, of course.”

“I’m not going.”

“What about a boys bar?”

“No thank you!” I exclaimed, fully turning her down.

"You don't have to be so against it... It's not a shady place or anything, just a place where you can drink good alcohol while beautiful men entertain you. It's something proper ladies enjoy."

Despite Yumemi's argument, I couldn't do what I couldn't do. Going to Kabukicho, going to host clubs, and going to boys bars were all out of the question for me. I knew I was just basing my feelings on conjecture because I'd never been to places like those, but...I just couldn't handle places like that. It just wasn't me!

"Good grief, you're so *pure*, Ayako. This might be your last chance to do something like this, you know?"

"My last chance...?"

"If you end up dating Takumi, you wouldn't be able to go out and have fun at night, would you? If you want to go wild, this is your only chance. Right now, no matter what you do, it wouldn't count as cheating."

"Please don't say things like a boss man trying to take his employee out for a night on the town on his final day as a single guy..." I responded exasperatedly.

"Well, I won't force you," Yumemi chuckled. "Let me at least treat you to dinner though."

"If it's just a meal, I'd love to."

"Got it. But let's see... What should we do now? It's still a little early for dinner, but it's not like we have enough time to go back to the office and get something done."

"Um, Yumemi..." I began. "Since we have the time...would you come shopping with me?"

Yumemi led me through the streets of Tokyo. We hailed a taxi and rode it to the nearest train station, then snaked through the station building, going up and down stairwell after stairwell as we walked around.

The streets of Tokyo are just as complicated as ever, I sighed internally. The retail spaces within the station and the surrounding buildings felt like mazes. If

Yumemi hadn't been here, I definitely would've gotten lost. There was no way I could've done my own shopping.

"I see, an overnight family trip to a spa resort, huh?" Yumemi said after I'd explained the gist of the situation. We were headed toward a department store near the station. "On top of that, it's a group trip with your neighbors, the Aterazawas."

"My father holds stock in a company that gives him special tickets to the resort every year. He gives us enough for about two nights every year, so I once gave our tickets to the Aterazawas as a way to thank them for always helping me out. Then it came up that we should all go together, and suddenly it became an annual summer trip..."

"I see. It sounds like fun, but you don't seem so happy about it."

"Things are a bit different this year... Since it's a popular resort, the facilities get super busy during summer break. We booked our hotel rooms about six months ago, but...something came up out of nowhere with Takkun's father's job," I explained between sighs.

We tried to reschedule our reservation, but everything was filled up for the summer break season. With no other choice, Takkun's father wouldn't be joining us. Takkun's mother then said she felt bad about leaving her husband at home alone, so she decided to stay home as well.

"Since his parents can't come, Takkun also wasn't sure if he should still come...but I sort of gave him a strong push to join us..." I said.

"What? You urged him to come?"

"Yes..."

"Wow, what a bold move," Yumemi said with a deep exhale.

"I-It's not like that! He still hadn't asked me out when we'd made those plans!"

It was probably around the beginning of April. I'd strongly urged Takkun to come with us even though he was hesitant about an overnight trip with just the three of us. I'd said something like, "Come on, let's all go together, Takkun! We

only make this special trip once a year. Both Miu and I would have more fun if you were there with us.”

“Back then, I still had no idea that Takkun had feelings for me... I’d basically treated it like I was egging on my son or my younger brother to come along.”

“I’m sure Takumi felt like he couldn’t refuse when you were so persistent about it.”

“On top of that, with the way things have worked out, we’re going to be staying in the same hotel room...”

“What...? You and Takumi are...?”

“Yes... Of course, Miu will be there with us, but...this was also something I suggested.”

“Whew... When did you become such a man-eater?”

“I-I didn’t! I wasn’t thinking about things that deeply back then! It was all before Takkun had asked me out...”

Since we’d originally booked two rooms, Takkun insisted that he stay alone in the room that the Aterazawas had booked for their family, but I’d strongly urged against that, saying something like, “No, Takkun. Let’s cancel the reservation since it would be a waste of money. We’re only going to use the room to sleep in, so you can just stay with Miu and me. It’d be excessive to stay in a room meant for a family all by yourself... Also, if you cancel your reservation, a group on the wait-list will be able to get in.” He’d hesitated until the very end, but I’d ended up getting him to agree by sheer force of will.

Ugh, oh my god! What were you doing, April me?! I can’t believe you suggested you should stay in the same room as Takkun!

“Good grief, what an ironic tale. You merely trusted him like you would family, and now you’re paying the price for never having thought of him as a man at all. It was precisely *because* you were so unaware of his feelings that you were able to invite him on an overnight trip without any hesitation.” Yumemi shrugged her shoulders in exasperation. “For ten long years, you’ve strung Takumi along with your wiles while remaining completely unaware of it. I can’t help but feel sympathy for him.”

All I could do was groan in response. In the end, it was all my past self's fault that our family trip this year would see my daughter and me sleeping in the same room as Takkun.

Ugh, how did this happen...? My carefree past self's choices have come back to haunt me... Well, we've already spent a night together in a love hotel, but that doesn't mean I'm used to being with him through the night. Just thinking about it is making me nervous and filling me with anxiety.

So, not only had that happened, but now an additional concern plagued this year's trip that was already leaving me full of worry.

"I see, I think I get the picture. Well then, I, Yumemi Oinomori, will pick out a swimsuit befitting this inauspicious family trip."

"Thank you..."

I'd wanted Yumemi to accompany me to buy a swimsuit. I thought that she would know stores that sold swimsuits that would look good on me, since she was used to wearing items from luxury brands. I had planned to ask for her help on this trip to Tokyo if there was time.

"I'm surprised that you'd ask me for help with something like this."

"Huh...?"

"Didn't you say that you usually go shopping with Miu?"

"Well, I do..." For the past few years, it had become increasingly common for Miu to style me along with herself. I used to pick out all her clothes when she was younger, but now Miu was much more knowledgeable than I was when it came to fashion. I was supposed to go shopping for a new swimsuit with Miu too. "It's just... It's kind of hard to ask for her help right now."

"Really? That's unusual for you two. Did you fight or something?"

"Well...it wasn't really a fight." It might've been better if it had been a fight. Perhaps I would've felt better if we could have just shared what we were really thinking with each other and had a heated argument where we butted heads. But now I was left with a constant gloom that hadn't gone away. "I can't tell what Miu's thinking these days..."

“I see. That sounds pretty healthy.”

“What?” I was stunned at the unexpected response. *What does she mean by “healthy”?*

“You don’t know what your high-school-aged child is thinking... That sounds like a very typical, motherly problem. It’s completely normal for a parent to have no idea what their teenager is thinking.” I listened to Yumemi silently. “I think it’s reasonable and healthy that you have a problem like that. If anything, I think it’s *unreasonable* for a parent to think that they know everything about their child and that they understand their child more than anyone else in the world. Those kinds of parents are the ones who *seem* like they’re engaging with their kids, but they really aren’t.” She spoke swiftly with no hesitation. “I’ve only met Miu a few times, but...I thought she seemed like she was *too* good of a kid. A girl like that entering her rebellious phase...? Heh heh. That’s a good sign. It’s precisely because she accepts you as her mother from the bottom of her heart that she’s willing to lean on your patience.”

“I wonder if that’s what it is...” Was that really it? I didn’t feel like that was what was going on.

“Well, that’s just what I’m assuming, so don’t take what I say as the truth. I’m just a woman who’s never raised a child, spouting nonsense based on anecdotes as if I know anything about the topic. Don’t take what I say so seriously.” Yumemi’s words were unusually—very unusually—phrased in a way that made it seem like she lacked confidence. She had her usual fearless, sarcastic smile, but something about it seemed a little sad.

After entering the department store, we took an elevator to a floor lined with luxury brand outlets. I followed behind Yumemi as she walked swiftly through the intimidatingly opulent premises until she finally entered a store that she seemed to be familiar with.

“Y-Yumemi...? This is it? We’re going to get a swimsuit in a place like *this*?”

“That’s the plan.”

“It’s kind of...really expensive looking.”

The store had a chic, tranquil atmosphere, and it felt unmistakably like the

storefront of a luxury brand. There was an elegance to it that made it seem impossible for a teenager or a woman in her twenties to ever step foot inside.

There was a swimsuit section in one corner of the outlet, but it was completely different from any other swimsuit section I'd shopped in in my entire life. The swimsuits all managed to look dazzling, yet they didn't seem gaudy. Each garment had a calm classiness to it. I imagined they were designed with adult women in mind, rather than girls. Actually, not just adult women —*rich* adult women.

"These swimsuits all seem like something some famous foreigner would wear..."

"Good eye. This brand is very popular with models and celebrities abroad."

"I don't think I'm so well-off that I can spend celebrity money on a swimsuit..."

"Fear not—it may be true that the expensive things can get pretty pricey here, but this store has some relatively reasonably priced items as well. You should be able to buy a quality swimsuit at a price that works for you."

"But it's sort of...too fashionable for me. I'm all right shopping somewhere a bit more ordinary."

"What are you talking about? When I asked you what kind of swimsuit you wanted, you said you wanted something more grown-up."

"I-I *did* say that..."

"You're a fully grown adult woman, Ayako. You're at an age where you should have a nice swimsuit or two."

"But..." I said, hesitating.

"Also," Yumemi began. She gave me a good look up and down, then her gaze honed in on my chest. "In your case, if you don't come to a place like this...well, you're not going to find something in your size, right?"

I was stunned. *She's right! They don't carry my size anywhere! Both for bras and swimsuits... Anytime I see something cute and want it, it almost always doesn't come in my size!*

“Anyway, there’s no harm in just looking,” Yumemi explained. “You can decide if you actually want to buy something after trying things on.”

Convinced, I let out a sigh and began looking through the swimsuits in the store. There were so many fashionable swimsuits with intricate, grown-up designs. It all felt...a little naughty, but in a classy way. Just as Yumemi had said, the prices weren’t too bad either.

I might want to wear something like this one... Though I was nervous at first, I was beginning to come around to the idea of wearing swimsuits like these.

“Hey, Ayako,” Yumemi said, tapping my shoulder. I turned to see her holding several swimsuits. “I found some good ones, so why don’t you go try them on?”

“Huh? That was quick... H-Hold on, I’m still looking...”

“It’s fine, come on.”

“W-Wait... Maybe we should recon—”

“Don’t worry about it, you’ll be fine.”

Yumemi forcefully took my hand and threw me into a changing room with the swimsuits she’d handed me. As one would expect from a high-end store, the changing room was pretty spacious. There was a large, full-length mirror and a basket to put my belongings in...and also the various things a woman needed when trying on a swimsuit.

“Jeez, she’s always so pushy...” I sighed as I began undressing. *It’s too tiring to fight her on every little thing, so it’s probably best to just do as she says,* I thought as I continued changing.

Then, roughly five minutes later, I tried on one of the several swimsuits Yumemi had picked out. I tried it on, but... *Um... Wh-What is this...? Is she sure about this? Isn’t this kind of...too much? Isn’t it too naughty?*

“Are you done?!”

“Eeeek!” The curtain behind me was flung open, and I let out a scream in confusion.



“J-Jeez! You can’t just open it without asking!”

Yumemi paid no attention to my desperate protesting, and she stared curiously at me in the swimsuit—or, more precisely, at me with all my flesh laid bare with a swimsuit on top.

“Wow, seems good. It looks pretty nice on you.”

“No, it doesn’t! What’s with this perverted swimsuit?!”

If I had to describe the swimsuit I was wearing as succinctly as possible, I’d just go with “V.” V, as in, the letter V. The whole thing was just two strips of fabric stretching down from my shoulders till they connected at my crotch, all my private areas covered merely by those two slim bands.

Really, to say they were “covered” is an overstatement. My crotch was just barely hidden, and basically the entirety of my breasts were exposed. As for my butt...the fabric was totally digging in between the cheeks. The reflection in the mirror behind me made me look like I was completely nude.

“It *does* look good, but... Yeah. It’s about ten times more obscene than I’d expected.”

“Of course it is! This swimsuit is basically the same as being naked!”

“Hmm, now that I’m looking at it... You have a violently erotic body, Ayako. Your boobs are particularly evil. They’re massive, yet they look plump and full, and also soft... Even as a woman, the sight of them feels like it could drive me mad... Not to mention your butt is—”

“Stop waxing poetic about my body!” I protested, stomping my foot in frustration—a fatal mistake. The V-shaped swimsuit wasn’t enough to contain my breasts, so the moment I slammed my foot down...the swimsuit slipped, making my breasts shoot out and jiggle as they decompressed.

“Whoa?!”

“Wha— Eeeek!”

Yumemi fell backward as I covered my chest in a panic. *Ugh... I don’t want this anymore. Why did this happen?*

"Well... What a sight I've just seen. I thought there was an explosion or something," Yumemi said with a slightly troubled, slightly embarrassed look. "Jeez, there's no use in having a happy accident like that around me."

"I-It's not like I wanted this to happen!"

"You should be doing these kinds of things in front of Takumi."

"I will be doing *no* such thing!" I yelled with tears in my eyes. While glaring at Yumemi, I quickly fixed the swimsuit. "Ugh... I'm gonna go home now."

"Hey, there's no need to sulk."

"I'm not sulking. I'm just...over it." I was done. I was over it all in an instant. I'd tried to be brave and buy a new swimsuit, but...after that embarrassing accident, what little drive I'd had was gone. "At the end of the day...a swimsuit from a fashionable brand like this just isn't for me," I explained. "It's just degrading for a commoner like myself to be overreaching like this. Also, I'm not at an age where I should be trying so hard at the pool. Getting all dressed up in a fancy swimsuit at my age is just...kind of pathetic."

Yumemi listened intently as I dug in my heels. "We went to the pool last year, and the year before that, but I didn't change into a swimsuit. I just watched from the poolside as Miu and the others played...so I can just do the same this year too."

She continued to let me ramble. "The pool at the resort is super crowded during summer break anyways, so you can't even really swim. Yeah, there's no reason to buy a new swimsuit after all—"

"Ayako," Yumemi said in a sharp tone. She had been wearing a grin this entire time, but that smile was gone as she stared at me. Her gaze was disapproving and exasperated, and there was a quiet anger behind her eyes. "Why did you decide to buy a new swimsuit today?"

"What...?"

"You just said that you didn't change into a swimsuit for the past two years. Then why do you want to wear a swimsuit this year?"

"Well, I..."

"It's because you want to wear it for Takumi, isn't it?" Yumemi said before I could respond. "You want to wear a swimsuit at the pool for the boy who likes you. You thought that since you'd be showing him your body, you wanted to do what you could to present it beautifully. Am I wrong?"

"No, that's right..." I nodded defeatedly, overwhelmed by her assertive tone and sharp gaze. It was exactly as she'd said. It's not like I wasn't feeling competitive toward Miu after she'd challenged me, but the biggest reason was that I had someone I wanted to show off a swimsuit to... "I-It's not that I wanted to wear it for him, but...I just thought that maybe he would want to see me in one."

Does Takkun want to see me in a swimsuit? Is he hoping for something like that since we're going to a pool? I'd never had thoughts like these up until last year because I'd never thought that Takkun would have feelings for me. I'd thought there wasn't anyone interested in seeing me in a swimsuit. But this year...

"I-If Takkun wants to see it, there's a part of me that wants to meet those expectations of his... Oh, but, um, I know I'm being really self-centered."

"It's not self-centered at all. Wanting to present yourself more beautifully is a perfectly normal instinct to have as a woman—especially in front of someone who has feelings for you and who's thinking of you as a member of the opposite sex. It's only natural. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

I didn't know what to say. "Also, it's just a waste of time to worry about your age," Yumemi tacked on. "There isn't anything more stupid than that."

"S-Stupid? I'm thinking pretty seriously about things—"

"Listen up, Ayako," Yumemi said, interrupting me with a firm tone. "It's true that you might not be so young anymore. Maybe you have reached an age where some people will call you an old lady. Society may expect you to act in a way that shows an age-appropriate composure. But understand this: at any given moment, the youngest you're going to be for the rest of your life is *right now.*"

I gasped. It felt like she had said something really profound, and her words resonated deep in my chest. It felt like she had reached the deepest part of my

heart with incredible precision.

“You, and I, and everyone else in the world age every day. Once you’re past thirty, growing older isn’t growth, it’s just aging. Tomorrow we’ll be older, and the day after that as well. Everyone continues aging.” Thinking about how these words were coming from a woman who’d been on this earth longer than me gave a different weight to what she was saying.

Her tone gradually grew warmer. “You’re embarrassed to be getting dressed up in a fancy swimsuit now that you’re in your thirties? If you’re saying that now, it’s only going to get more embarrassing with every year that passes. If you put a curse on yourself like that...you won’t ever be able to wear a swimsuit in public again.”

I contemplated her words as she continued. “No matter the reason, you wanted Takumi to see you in a swimsuit, right? You want him to see you in a state where you’re as beautiful as you can be. Then why don’t you honor those feelings you’re having right now?”

A grin spread across her face. “You should go and dress up in a fancy swimsuit and not be embarrassed by anyone. Go and show Takumi the youngest body you’ll ever have for the rest of your life, without holding anything back,” she said sweetly.

“Yumemi...” Her scolding had moved me. I felt a warmth in my chest—my eyes welled up with tears as I got increasingly emotional. “I’m sorry... I’ve used my age as an excuse again,” I said, slightly bowing my head to her. “I’d like to be brave...and wear a nice swimsuit, so I can show him the version of me that’s the youngest it’ll ever be.”

“Good, you do that.”

“But...” Things had wrapped up nicely, but there was still one problem that couldn’t be swept away in this touching moment. I looked down at my body—my body that was still basically naked because of the V-shaped swimsuit. “With that said...I don’t want to wear this swimsuit, no matter what.”

“Don’t worry, I just picked this one as a joke. I’ll take this seriously from here on out.”

It'd apparently been a joke. If she was going to start making serious choices now, by extension, her choices before hadn't been serious at all...

I should punch her.

Chapter 3: The Vacation and the Trip



It was the end of July, and the time of year when many students entered summer break. Every year around this time, it had become tradition for the Aterazawa and Katsuragi families to visit Spa Resort Hawaiian Z, a resort facility in the south of the prefecture.

It was a two-day and one-night family trip. Due to some unavoidable circumstances, my parents wouldn't be coming, so it'd turned into a three-person trip comprising the Katsuragi mother-daughter duo and myself.

On the day of the trip, we met up early at the Katsuragis' carport and all got into the car. We took Miss Ayako's car, but after some discussion, it was decided that I would drive. We took the highway south, and after roughly two hours, we reached our destination.

"We're finally here!" Miu exclaimed after getting out of the back seat. She stood in the parking lot of Hawaiian Z as she stretched, letting out a loud groan. "Man, I'm exhausted."

"All you did was sit in the car, Miu," Miss Ayako said between sighs as she exited the passenger seat.

"Just sitting is also tiring," Miu complained. She then exhaled and said, "This area is really nice though. There's a breeze since the beach is close, and even though it's hot, it's not humid at all. I like it."

"Jeez..." Miss Ayako said before turning to me. "I'm sorry you ended up driving the whole way, Takkun."

"It's totally all right. This distance was no sweat," I replied as I got out of the driver's seat and adjusted my bag's strap. As for the rest of our luggage, we'd dropped off the larger items with hotel staff when we drove up to the hotel entrance.

I looked up and saw a clear, blue sky above me. It was brilliantly sunny—but

like Miu said, it didn't feel too hot. There were palm trees all around the parking lot and hotel that gave the place a tropical impression, and they swayed softly with the ocean breeze.

Spa Resort Hawaiian Z was a conglomeration of basically every vacation attraction you could think of—it had pools, hot springs, a hotel, a golf range, and so on and so forth. It had a Hawaiian theme and was the largest water park in the Tohoku region. There were creative details implemented all across the facilities to make things feel tropical, like the palm trees spread throughout the grounds and the Hawaiian shirts the staff wore. They also boasted extensive heated indoor pools, so many people visited the resort not only in the summer but the winter as well. It was truly the Hawaii of the Tohoku region.

Commercials for the resort aired frequently within the prefecture, and it was such a popular destination that almost anyone from our prefecture could sing the theme song. As someone who was born and raised in Tohoku, I'd been to the resort many times since I was a child, and I'd been coming once a year for the past few years for our family trip, so you might think I'd tired of it...but no, even now that I was twenty, I still got excited being here.

On top of that, this year's trip meant something completely different from the previous year. Not only were my parents not here, leaving just Miss Ayako, Miu, and me, but the biggest change of all was that I'd told Miss Ayako how I felt. Now that my feelings were out in the open, our overnight trip was going to be very different from last year, when we'd just come as friendly neighbors. It was different for me, and likely also for her...

"Let's go already, mom, Taku." Miu walked on ahead, and Miss Ayako and I followed.

We got to the hotel and finished checking in at the lobby. Led by hotel staff who pushed our luggage on a cart, we headed to the room we were staying in.

"Wow...it's incredible," Miss Ayako said, admiring the room as she looked around.

The room was a modernly styled traditional Japanese room, with square-shaped Ryukyu-tatami mats. There was a monochromatic rectangular table in the middle of the room, complete with floor chairs that had back support.

“It’s such a nice, spacious room,” Miss Ayako said.

“It really is,” I responded.

“It would’ve been nice if your parents could’ve joined us.”

“My father was disappointed as well, especially since he decided to treat himself to a more expensive room this year.”

“I feel bad since we ended up getting to stay in the room your family reserved. Not only that, but you’re paying for half of it too.”

“It’s all right, don’t worry about it.”

In our initial plans, our families had booked separate rooms...but since my father had to cancel due to work, Miss Ayako had planned for the three of us to stay in the same room. That meant there would only be three people total staying at the hotel, and the room my parents had booked for our family ended up being more convenient for several reasons. As a result, the three of us decided to stay in the room my parents had booked for three adults.

“I’m sure my parents would be happier if you enjoyed it to its fullest extent,” I said.

“That’s true,” Miss Ayako nodded. She then walked across the room and opened the sliding door with a good push. “Wow, the view’s as beautiful as you’d expect from the high price. You can see the ocean... Huh?” Miss Ayako suddenly froze in the middle of her amazement.

Just as she had said, beyond the sliding doors was a beautiful view—the cool blue of the sky met the ocean’s aquatic hue on the horizon, and the dark green palm trees swayed in the wind. It was a beautiful, summery visage that anyone would be pleased to see. However, Miss Ayako’s gaze was locked on the sight directly before the scenery.

“Th-This is...”

“Whoa! There’s a hot spring bath!” Miu exclaimed excitedly after looking out from beside Miss Ayako, who was standing there confused.

Outside our room was a small bathing area. The space was enclosed by a bamboo fence, and it included a slightly small washing area as well as a square

bathtub made of Japanese cypress. Hot water was flowing out of a spout, and white steam rose from the basin.

"This is incredible! I can't believe the room comes with a bath!" Miu then turned to me. "Hey Taku, can we use this whenever we want?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Wow, it's kind of amazing. I've never had something like this. I'm gonna go give it a look!" Miu then ran off toward the changing area, overjoyed.

On the other hand, there was Miss Ayako, who seemed quite taken aback. "I-I didn't realize it was the kind of room that came with a private open-air bath..."

"Yeah...that's what we got. The hotel calls it a 'family bath.'" In accordance with my father's wishes of wanting to drink while soaking in a hot spring, this year we had booked the slightly expensive room that came with a private open-air bath. "I'm sorry... I should have told you beforehand."

"N-No, it's all right. I'm just a little surprised since it's my first time staying somewhere like this." Though she said she was fine, from the look on her face, I could tell she was extremely nervous and flustered. "Since it's called a family bath...that must mean it's a bath your whole family can use together?"

"Y-Yes. It's basically like a private hot spring for families and couples."

"So...that would mean it's a mixed-gender bath?"

"Well, it's not that it's mixed, but there's no problem if men and women use it together since it's private."

"Men and women..." Miss Ayako then looked my way. Her face was red from embarrassment, and her gaze felt hot. I reflexively stared back. We stood there for several seconds staring at each other before we both turned bright red and quickly looked in different directions. "Th-That just means it's *okay* for men and women to use it together! Th-That doesn't mean that they *have* to use it together!" she pointed out.

"Y-Yes, that's right! We don't even have to use it at all! This place is filled with a bunch of other hot springs!"

"Y-You're right! There's no reason to force ourselves to use the bath in our

room!" Miss Ayako said, nodding vigorously. "Th-There's no way I could take a bath with you in the first place, since Miu's here with us... Huh? Wait, n-no, that's not what I meant! I'm not saying that we would take a bath together if Miu wasn't here! It was a slip of the tongue!"

"I-It's all right, I understand!"

After our intense back and forth, we were both taking deep breaths. I turned away from Miss Ayako and heaved a deep sigh. *At this rate, I don't know if things are actually going to be okay.*

Tonight, the three of us were going to stay in this room. I was going to spend a night with the woman I loved, as well as her daughter, in the same room. Of course I was excited, but I was equally worried and nervous. *I hope there isn't some unfortunate accident.*

Though I'd prayed for that in my heart, based on the way things ended up turning out, my prayer hadn't been heard. My bad feeling had been spot on: I shouldn't have let myself get so caught up with Miss Ayako, and I should have paid more attention to Miu.

I would later realize that Miu, who hadn't come back this whole time after going to check out the family bath, had already come up with a plan.

After organizing our luggage in the room, we decided to head straight to the pool. We split up in front of the changing rooms, and I quickly finished changing on my own. Once I stepped out into the indoor pool area, I was immediately surrounded by noise and heat.

The indoor pool was part of a large-scale water park. It had a dome roof so it could operate even in bad weather. There were plenty of places to dip into the water, including the large open pool, a lazy river, a kids' pool, and a massive water slide that snaked through the air. There was even a food court where you could eat in your swimsuit, as well as a stage where guests could enjoy hula and fire dancing performances.

Since it was summer break, the pool area was completely crowded. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the aquatic resort, elated by the summer heat.

I walked down the stairs from the changing area and headed to the food court where we had decided to meet up. After waiting a few minutes...

"Whoa, there's a ton of people this year too," Miu noted. She and Miss Ayako had just arrived. "Yo, sorry to keep you waiting, Taku," she said, holding her hand up.

Miu was dressed in a brightly colored bikini. Her body was toned and slender, as if she didn't have a single ounce of excess body fat...yet she did still have some where it counted. There was a healthy, wholesome beauty to her. "How's my swimsuit? It's new. Does it look good?"

"Yeah, it looks nice."

"Boo, you're too apathetic... It's boring if you don't get flustered or blush or anything."

"What are you expecting from me...?"

"Whatever, it's fine," Miu sighed. "I figured you'd have a tame reaction like that toward me," she complained with a childish tone. "Anyway, get this, Taku." She was watching Miss Ayako, who was standing beside her, from the corner of her eye as she said, "My mom won't take off her hoodie at all."

"M-Miu!" Miss Ayako said in a panic, dressed in a thin zip-up hoodie. It was bright white and long-sleeved. It seemed like it was covering up a swimsuit, and her thick thighs were peeking out from underneath its hem.

"She went out of her way to buy a new swimsuit, but she's chickening out at the last minute. How pathetic."

"I-I'm not chickening out! I just... When I looked around, I saw that there were a lot of people wearing hoodies or some other outerwear, so I'm trying not to stand out..."

"Yeah, that's what chickening out means. Well... I guess I understand how you feel," Miu said exasperatedly. "Your swimsuit *is* pretty out there."

"Wh—?!"

"I had no idea what kind of swimsuit you'd bought until today, and... I know we're competing, but I didn't think you'd show up with something so

aggressive,” Miu asserted. Miss Ayako let out a pained whine. “If you hadn’t covered yourself up, I might’ve had to stop you... I don’t think I could stand seeing my own mother walk around the pool dressed like *that*.”

“I-It’s not like that, Takkun! It’s not that intense! It’s really normal...with just a little bit, just a *teensy* bit of grown-up flair,” Miss Ayako said, trying to come up with excuses as Miu stood there looking like she was done with her.

As for myself...I was desperately trying to hide how flustered I was. *Is that true? Is Miss Ayako wearing a swimsuit that incredible? I wanna see it. I really wanna see it. But I can’t force her hand... Ugh, what should I do?*

“Whatever. Well then, we’ll be doing things separately from here on out,” Miu said as if to reset things, ignoring me as I stood there in agony.

“Separately?” I asked.

“Yeah. I talked about it briefly with my mom as we came over here, but we’re competing over you, right? So... I thought we should each take turns getting alone time with you. It’s like the one-on-ones they have in reality dating shows.”

“A ‘one-on-one’?” It appeared that another one of Miu’s untoward plans had been set into motion. I turned to look at Miss Ayako.

“I-I’m against this. But Miu wouldn’t listen and said this is what she’s going to do, so...” she responded with a troubled look. It appeared to be solely Miu’s decision after all.

“Okay, no complaining about what’s a done deal,” Miu chastised her. “Anyway, I’ve got dibs.” Miu suddenly drew close to me and latched her arm around mine. It was similar to what she’d done before, holding my arm the way a lover would. “Come on, Taku. Let’s leave this buzzkill behind so us young people can go have fun.”

“H-Hey...” I responded.

“Ooh, the water slide is looking a little less crowded right now! Perfect! Let’s get in line, Taku!” Miu pulled me by the hand and tried to walk off.

“M-Miu, come on...”

“Sorry, mom! First come, first serve,” she said in a mischievous tone. “Hmm, I wonder what I’ll let you get away with once we’re alone together,” she said to me, obviously taunting Miss Ayako as she pulled me away.

Left by her lonesome, Miss Ayako had an incredibly troubled look on her face, like she was racked with panic and sadness.

Even though it was less crowded than usual, the waterslide was the most popular attraction in the pool area. There was a long line on the stairs leading up to the entrance.

“Hee hee, did you see my mom’s face? She looked super panicked,” Miu said as we were standing in line, sounding quite pleased. “It’s fun to play the heel when she has such good reactions.”

“Are you still sticking to that scheme of yours?”

It was a simple plan where Miu would pretend to go after me and flirt heavily to set off Miss Ayako. Parts of this plan, which had begun before summer break, had been executed here and there—Miu would cling onto me constantly, of course during our morning commute to school, but also when I would look over her studies as her tutor as well. Naturally, she’d only do it when Miss Ayako was looking.

“Of course, I’m gonna keep it going.”

“Why are you doing something like this? It’s like you’re tricking her.”

“I’m not tricking her. This is a game of love,” she said triumphantly, as if she were trying to convince me.

A game, huh?

“I’m sure she’s burning with jealousy right about now,” Miu asserted.

“I wonder...”

“Of course she is,” she said assertively. “Oh, that’s right. During my mom’s upcoming one-on-one time, can you do something to take her hoodie off?”

“Huh?” *Take her hoodie off? Why would I...?*”

“Why? I mean...don’t you want to see my mom in her swimsuit?”

“I don’t *not* want to see it...”

“I really can’t stand how pathetic my mom is sometimes. She bought a fancy new swimsuit, but she was trying too hard when she did it, so now she’s embarrassed and doesn’t want to show it anymore... That totally defeats the whole purpose,” she complained haughtily before looking straight at me. “She’s being weirdly stubborn, and it doesn’t seem like she’ll take her hoodie off in front of me, so try to convince her to take it off during your one-on-one time. She went out of her way to buy a new swimsuit for you, so at the very least you should get a peek at it.”

“For me...”

“Of course. I mean, I know you can be dense, but you must’ve realized what it meant for my mom to suddenly buy a new swimsuit this year. It’s not just that she’s being competitive with me.”

Just as Miu had said, I *had* taken notice. I thought it would be nice if showing off to me really had been the reason—if I was even a little bit related to why Miss Ayako had bought a new swimsuit, if it really had been the result of her thinking of me as a man, there wouldn’t have been anything that would make me happier.

“So, that’s why you have an obligation to see my mom in her swimsuit. I’m counting on you, okay?”

“I’ll do my best...”

“That’s the spirit.”

As we had that conversation, the line continued to move forward, and we reached the top. We did as the water park staff instructed and each sat in the front and back of the two-person pool float.

“Hey, Taku,” Miu said, turning her head back since she was sitting in the front. “Though I plan to do everything I can for you two during this trip, I’m still planning on enjoying the resort as much as I can, so don’t forget about that.”

“Aye aye, princess.” I nodded wryly.

“Very well then. Godspeed,” she said with a satisfied laugh.

The pool float carrying us then slid down at high speed.

After getting off the waterslide, we continued to go around the park together, and Miu’s one-on-one time ended after roughly thirty minutes. Miss Ayako’s turn was next.

“Well then, good luck, mom. I don’t think anything you do will hold up against the decadent one-on-one I had with Taku though.” And with that small-time-villain-like line, Miu went off somewhere alone.

“Jeez, that girl is really something,” Miss Ayako said exasperatedly before giving me a quick bow. “I’m sorry, Takkun, for getting you mixed up in all this.”

“It’s all right. I’m fine.”

Miss Ayako then paused for a moment, as though she were hesitating, until at last she asked, “So...how was it?”

“Huh?”

“How was your one-on-one with Miu? I was wondering how you felt about it... It’s not like I’m that interested or anything though...”

“It was... Well, it was pretty normal. We went on the waterslide together, then we just swam together in the pool...”

“Really...? She didn’t do anything extreme?”

“No, no. Not at all.”

“I see...” Miss Ayako nodded as if she were relieved. “I-It’s not like it really matters. I was just a little curious... Y-Yeah! I was just worried as her parent whether she did anything weird,” she said, coming up with an excuse in a panic.

Is this...jealousy? I thought to myself silently. Is she feeling some sort of emotional disturbance at Miu’s flirting (as an act) with me? Is Miu’s simple plan actually working?

No, there’s still a chance that she’s just worried as a mother about her daughter doing something strange. Hmm...

“Um, Miss Ayako,” I began. I choked back my embarrassment and carried on, determined. “I’ll say this just in case, but...I only have eyes for you.”

“Wha—”

“No matter what Miu does, no matter what kind of moves she makes, that won’t change.”

“I-I get it already...” Miss Ayako whined, her face bright red as she darted her eyes around. “Jeez, I can’t believe you’d say something like that in public.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“You should say things like that when we’re alone... Huh? W-Wait, no, let me rephrase that! I’m not saying I *want* you to say stuff like that! I’m just saying that, generally speaking, you should only be saying sweet nothings like that when you’re alone with someone...”

“Y-Yes, I understand.”

We were causing quite a commotion. Though we were surrounded by noise from the crowds, there was a strange atmosphere just between the two of us. It was awkward, but kind of comfortable at the same time—a pleasant contradiction.

“Um...well then, would you like to just go around together?”

“S-Sure.”

“Would you like to ride the waterslide as well, Miss Ayako?”

“I’ll pass... To tell you the truth, I’m not very good with these sorts of things. I’m really scared of the turns in the waterslide. I can’t help but think of what would happen if I were to fall out...”

“L-Let’s not do that then. There’s absolutely no need to force yourself. Um, then...” I looked around, trying to come up with a plan.

According to Miu, this was Miss Ayako’s chance to have one-on-one time with me, but from my perspective, this was also my chance to get closer to her. I wanted to do what I could to help Miss Ayako have a good time, but...

Oh, that’s right, Miu asked me to deal with the hoodie. But how would I get

her to take it off...? The easiest way would be to just splash her with water, but this hoodie looks like it's made to handle the water—it's the kind you can wear while swimming. Just getting a little wet wouldn't be a guarantee that she'd take it off... Also, more than anything, I don't want to do something rude like getting her wet on purpose. Then...should I just be honest? Should I just say that I want to see her in her swimsuit and ask her to show it to me? Things would be easier if I could just say that...

“H-Hey, Takkun,” Miss Ayako spoke up amid my pondering. Her gaze was trembling with unease and nervousness, but there seemed to be a certain determination behind her eyes. “Can you come with me really quick?”

“Huh...? Sure, but where are we going?”

“Um, well actually...” The words that followed showed me that Miss Ayako wasn’t pathetic like Miu had said, not at all. There hadn’t been any reason for Miu or me to do anything, as she had stayed in her hoodie by her own choice, a decision she’d come to after thinking about it the best she could. “I want you to see my swimsuit.”



It felt like now or never. I had to use my one-on-one time to take off my hoodie—I definitely couldn’t wait for Miu to be around again. It may have partially been because I was being stubborn after she’d teased me, but more than anything...I really didn’t want to get undressed within view of her young, slim body.

What’s her problem?! Why does she have the figure of a model?!

Although I wasn’t brave enough to walk around in my swimsuit while she and her perfect body were tagging along, it didn’t feel right to leave my brand-new outfit hidden the entire time. The thought of that made me feel sad and hopeless, and I was sure I would regret it, so...I decided to muster up the courage to show it at some point today, and that time was now.

“Okay, I think we’ll be fine here,” I said once we’d arrived at an area surrounded by lockers.

Despite the pool area of the resort being crowded, it wasn’t as if you were

elbow to elbow with vacationers everywhere you went. There were a handful of places with hardly anyone around most of the time—for example, the lockers, which were tucked away in a corner of the pool area. Poolgoers would naturally crowd around the lockers before lunch and during the evening to collect their valuables, but there weren't many people using them during other times of day.

"There shouldn't be a lot of people coming by here at the moment..." I muttered. "Yeah, this should work."

"Um, Miss Ayako... There's no need to force yourself to take your hoodie off if you're that embarrassed..."

"I-I'm not forcing myself," I said, gripping the sleeve of my hoodie. "At first, I was planning to walk around in my swimsuit, without wearing something like this, but...there were a lot of people, and I ended up hesitating... Also..."

"Also?"

"L-Like Miu said, it's a pretty intense design... I got embarrassed at the last moment."

"I-I see..." Takkun said, the awkwardness he must have been feeling showing on his face.

"That's why, um, I thought...I would show my swimsuit to just you."

"What?"

"I-I don't mean it in a weird way! I just thought that before I show it to other people, you could, um, vet it first!"

"Vet your swimsuit...?"

"Yeah, you'll evaluate it to see if I can be seen in public in it. Miu won't take it seriously, so...I want you to decide whether this swimsuit is okay or not, Takkun..."

Ugh, what am I doing? "Vetting the swimsuit"? I'm the one who suggested it and even I think it sounds silly.

I know it's embarrassing to take off my hoodie in front of other people, but I can't believe I brought Takkun somewhere so isolated to have him secretly look at my swimsuit. Actually, isn't this more embarrassing than it would've been to

just wear the swimsuit normally in the first place?! No, it's not like that! I don't have any other intentions! I'm just asking Takkun because he seems like he'd answer me honestly... It's not like he's the only one I want to see me in my swimsuit—

"I-If that's the case, then I understand," Takkun responded with an embarrassed yet serious look. "If you're all right with me being the judge, I will offer my assessment."

"Th-Thanks. There's no need for you to be so formal about it though..." I wanted him to take it casually, because the more serious it got, the more I hated myself for doing something so ridiculous. I took a deep breath before continuing. "H-Here I go."

I steeled myself and gripped the metal zipper of my hoodie. I knew I wouldn't be able to go through with it if I hesitated, so I pulled the zipper down and took off my hoodie in one quick motion.

Takkun's eyes widened as he gulped. He didn't look away though—of course he didn't, considering I had asked him to look at my swimsuit.



My swimsuit was a black bikini. Its coverage was...quite minimal. The black strings crossing around my body accentuated my light skin and my voluptuousness. Perhaps it goes without saying when your swimsuit is from a luxury brand like this one was, but it was a grown-up, sexy little number.

One aspect of our pool trip this year was my competition with Miu. When it came to age, I was naturally no match for her. Trying to compete head-on with her young, fit body in a swimsuit was completely ridiculous. That's why I'd decided to go a different route—the answer to my dilemma was using my maturity.

My plan was to wear a swimsuit that a teenager couldn't pull off and show Takkun a kind of beauty that only an adult woman could exude. It was unmistakably a revealing swimsuit, but it was still tasteful...or, at least, I'd hoped so.

I-I wonder if it's actually tasteful... It looked really sexy and classy on the mannequin, but what if it doesn't look as tasteful on me?

"H-How do I look?"

"You're really beautiful." Takkun complimented me directly, although he was extremely bashful nonetheless. I felt my temperature rise instantly at his all-too-straightforward praise.

"R-Really?"

"Really. You're beautiful, and mesmerizing... I feel like I could look at you forever."

"J-Jeez, stop it. You're complimenting me too much... You're also staring a bit too much! You don't have to get so into it!"

"Oh, I-I'm sorry, I just couldn't help it..."

"You couldn't help it? Jeez..." My heart was beating fast. I felt feverish. I couldn't tell if I was happy or embarrassed. "I-I know I'm not much to write home about... I mean, just look at my stomach... You know, I made an effort to look good for today, but I just can't stop worrying about it..."

"You're overthinking it. Your body isn't fat by any standard."

“But compared to Miu...”

“There’s no need to compare yourself to Miu. You’re overflowing with your own beauty and charm, Miss Ayako...”

“Takkun...”

“But, um... Actually, never mind.”

“Huh? What? Wh-What is it?! Now I want to know!”

“Um, how should I say this...” Takkun began, struggling to get the words out. “I heard it was intense, so I had mentally prepared myself, but your swimsuit is a lot more than I was expecting...”

I gasped in shock.

“I-It’s, well... Isn’t it a bit too erotic?” Takkun suggested.

“Wha?! Y-You’ve got it all wrong! There’s a reason for this!” I couldn’t help but defend myself. “I bought this swimsuit with Yumemi... At first, she was messing around and made me try on this incredibly obscene swimsuit, and after I’d worn that one, my sense of modesty got miscalibrated...”

That V was what had started this nightmare. Because I had gotten used to the sight of that perverted getup, no matter how intense of a swimsuit Yumemi had me try on, I would just think, “Well, it’s better than that V.” As a result, both Yumemi and my choices became more extreme, and the fact that I’d already wanted a more grown-up swimsuit exacerbated things... In the end, I’d bought quite a daring bikini.

“That’s how I ended up buying this without using proper judgment... It’s basically like I got caught up in a scam—”

“Y-You tried on an incredibly obscene swimsuit...?”

“That’s what you’re fixating on?!”

“Do you have any pictures of it...?”

“Of course not! Even if I did, I’d never show them to you!”

“Oh, I see...” Takkun said, obviously disappointed.

D-Did he really want to see me in an obscene swimsuit that badly? I guess a

little wouldn't hurt...

Wait, no! That V can never be seen! I'm never going to wear anything like that ever again!

"Jeez, you're really perverted sometimes, Takkun..."

"I can't deny that, but it's your fault, Miss Ayako... You're always unwittingly tempting me..."

"What...? I-I'm not trying to tempt you!"

"Come on, how did you think I'd react to such an intense, extreme swimsuit like that..."

"I'm telling you, this purchase was out of my control! I-It's not even that extreme! It's a swimsuit from an established brand, and it's designed to display a woman's body more beautifully... It's just a little revealing, that's all. This swimsuit only looks erotic because you're looking at it with those kinds of thoughts..."

"I understand all of that, but..." Takkun sounded embarrassed and slightly sulky. "I can't help it... The woman I love is standing before me in such a provocative swimsuit... Of course I'm going to end up having *those* kinds of thoughts."

"Th-The woman you love..." I echoed with a whine. His straightforward expression of love and his declaration that he was having *those* kinds of thoughts made me feel like I was taking a one-two punch from his love and his lust, rendering me speechless.

After a short, awkward silence, Takkun took the hoodie I was holding.

"Excuse me..." he said as he swiftly put the hoodie over my shoulders, covering up my swimsuit.

"Huh...?"

"You asked me to vet your swimsuit, right? You asked me to decide whether you could wear that in front of other people..."

"I-I did..."

"Then...I've made my decision. You can't," Takkun said. "I think you should wear the hoodie."

There was a twinge of pain in my chest. "H-Ha ha, of course..." I tried to play off my flusteredness with a laugh. I was embarrassed at the shock I felt—it was as if I'd expected something different even though I already knew what would happen. "I get it. An old lady like me wearing a swimsuit like this is trying too hard, and it's just cringey. I'm sure you and Miu would feel embarrassed just being seen with me. Thanks for making things clear, Takkun..." I desperately held back the tears I was seconds away from crying as I tried to appear collected.

"What...? No, that's not what I meant!" Takkun said, panicked. "It's not about you. It's about me."

"What do you mean?"

"Um, it's kind of... I-I don't want other guys to see you dressed like that."

I didn't know what to say.

"That swimsuit is really great, but...it's pretty revealing, so there might be guys who give you weird stares," Takkun explained. "I'm sorry, I know I'm being selfish when I'm not even your boyfriend... But still, I don't want that to happen. I just can't stand the idea of some other guy staring at your body."

Huh? Wh-Whaaat?! That's what you meant when you said I can't wear this?! That's what you meant when you said I should wear the hoodie?! You meant it like a boyfriend who's watching out for his girlfriend in a short skirt?!

I had never expected Takkun to say something like that. It was a form of jealousy covered in possessiveness. Objectively speaking, there were women who would probably be uncomfortable with a guy they weren't even dating saying something like that to them. Even if they *were* dating, some women likely wouldn't be too happy with their boyfriends commenting on their fashion choices.

However, I didn't feel a single ounce of discomfort. If anything, an indescribable embarrassment and happiness filled my chest as my heart began racing. This boy proclaiming his love and how he wanted me all to himself with

everything he had was...so incredibly, unbearably endearing.

“I-Is that so?” I said, desperately keeping the corners of my mouth from turning up. “Hee hee, you’re surprisingly possessive, Takkun.”

“That seems to be the case... I’m surprised myself.”

“Jeez... Maybe it’s because you keep your mind in the gutter that you get so worried about stuff like this. I don’t think other men are looking at me.”

“You’re too unaware of your own charm, Miss Ayako... You have no idea how mind-blowing your body is to men.”

“What...? St-Stop that, you’re making me sound like some kind of enchantress...” After taking a breath, I began putting on the hoodie Takkun had draped on my shoulders. “Okay then, I’ll wear this for today.” I pulled the zipper up all the way to the top.

“I’m sorry...”

“No, it’s all right. It’s just like you said... I think I’m showing a little bit too much skin. I couldn’t call myself a mother walking around in something like this,” I said with a wry laugh. “Unlike our previous date, Miu’s with us. I’m here today as a mother, as a guardian, so I need to be mindful to a certain extent.”

I had one more thing to say. “Also...that was enough.” The words had effortlessly left my mouth.

“Enough’...?”

“Hmm? Oh, it’s nothing, don’t worry about it! Ha ha,” I said, playing dumb with a panicked laugh. There was no way I could admit it—that I was satisfied because I’d been able to show my swimsuit to the person whom I’d wanted to see it most.

After leaving the lockers, we took a stroll around the pool area before our one-on-one came to an end. We then headed to the predetermined meeting spot to regroup with Miu.

“Hmm... Planning the one-on-ones and having us take turns sounded good, but in practice, it’s annoying to keep having to do things separately... It’s also

boring," Miu complained. "It's a waste of time when we came all the way here for vacation."

"Why point out something we were well aware of from the beginning?" Takkun jabbed.

"Ha ha, let's just do stuff together from here on out then," I laughed, unconcernedly.

After that, we headed to the lazy river per Miu's request.

"Hmm," Miu mumbled as she quickly got closer to me while we were walking. She looked me up and down and seemed to want to say something.

"Wh-What is it?"

"So, you didn't take off your hoodie even after spending time alone together?"

"Of course not...I'm not taking it off for today."

"That's what you say, but maybe you secretly showed your swimsuit to Taku."

"I-I wouldn't do that! No way! Not in a million years! I wouldn't show him my swimsuit in an isolated locker room or anything like that!"

"I see. Your hoodie's zipped up all the way though."

"Wh—?!"

"Your collarbone was showing earlier. It's like you took your hoodie off and put it back on."

"Th-That's..." Her evidence wasn't very strong, and I probably could have made excuses, but because I was completely flustered, all I could do was walk along silently, unable to argue back.

"Heh heh, I knew it," Miu said with a boastful, mocking smile. "I can't believe you showed it to him behind my back... That's quite the move you made there. A play befitting of my rival."

"Who are you calling your rival...?" My daughter had seen right through everything, and all I could do was feel humbled as we moved along.

Chapter 4: The Night Sky and the Mixed Bath



After fully enjoying ourselves at the pool and the hot springs—the hot springs allowed guests to wear their swimsuits in the water—we returned to our room and changed into the yukata-like resort gowns. After that, we had fun at the arcade and watched a hula performance, and before we knew it, it was time for dinner.

The cost of dinner was included in our hotel reservation, and our dining time and location were predetermined. We enjoyed a rare hotel-quality meal at their restaurant.

“Man, I sure ate a lot. I’m so full,” Miu said, satisfied as we walked back to our room. “I always end up eating too much at buffets. You weren’t eating that much, but are you feeling okay, mom?”

“I ate my fill,” Miss Ayako replied.

“Really? You only had one slice of cake even though it was all-you-can-eat.”

“Miu... You’ll understand one day. The older you get, the less exciting buffets become...” Miss Ayako said in a heartfelt tone. “Even if you can have as much delicious food as you want, you’ll keep worrying about how you’ll get fat, or about how you’ll be feeling the aftereffects the next day... Eventually, you reach a state of enlightenment where you realize that eating an appropriate amount of delicious food is the best...”

“So, what should we do now?” Miu said, completely ignoring her mother’s woes. “I guess the hot springs would be next?”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” I responded.

Hawaiian Z had two hot spring areas. The first was the one we had visited earlier, which men and women could enjoy together in swimsuits. The second was one where men and women bathed separately in the nude. The first was more like a pool, while the second had proper hot spring baths. Since we were

staying overnight, I wanted to enjoy them both.

"I think going to the hot springs sounds great," Miss Ayako agreed. "I want to relax in the bath and rest a little."

"Okay, hot springs it is." Miu nodded, satisfied.

After returning to our room, we each began preparing to go to the baths. I quickly prepared a change of clothes and my towel, then stood idly as I waited.

"You can go ahead if you're ready, Taku," Miu said while she rummaged through her suitcase.

"I'll wait. It's not like we need to rush."

"That's not what I meant..." Miu sighed. "You're so tactless. Women have a lot of things they need to prepare, including things they don't want men to see. Right, mom?"

"Huh? Um... W-Well, I guess so. There are a few things like that."

"You're sharing a room with women tonight, so you need to be considerate of those kinds of things," Miu said.

"G-Got it..." *She's right, that was poor judgment on my part. Of course they can't get ready with me here—they need to prepare things like underwear since they're going to be taking a bath.*

We came up with the rough plan of meeting up back at our room after enjoying the hot springs, then I left and leisurely headed toward the hot spring area.

I let out a sigh during my first moment alone since this trip had started. I wasn't having a hard time being around the Katsuragis—if anything, I was having an unbelievable amount of fun—but I couldn't help but get nervous and stay on edge. Just the fact that I was constantly with Miss Ayako kept me on guard with all the happiness and embarrassment I was feeling. Not only that, but...

"What am I going to do about Miu...?" I mumbled to myself.

Satoya had said that there was no need to worry since Miu was smart. He'd told me to accept everything with my generous heart, no matter what she was

planning. I was trying to follow his advice and do exactly that. Positively speaking, I was waiting and seeing how things would turn out. Negatively speaking, I was being a passive observer—I was just riding the wave of Miu's plans to get Miss Ayako and I together.

Nothing bad had happened until now, and there were even some nice moments, so I wasn't entirely ungrateful, but...there was a part of me that wasn't sure if it was okay to let things go on like this. There was a part of me that couldn't tell what Miu's true intentions were.

"Hm..." I groaned to myself as my thoughts stirred. Before I knew it, however, I had arrived at the hot spring area. *Whatever. For now, I'll just get in the hot springs and relax.*

Just as I was about to pass through the curtains hanging in front of the changing area, my smartphone rang. It was Miu.

"Taku?"

"What's up?"

"Did you already get in the bath?"

"Not yet."

"Good, I made it in time! So, Taku, do you have any special attachments to the hot springs here? Like, do you want to or need to bathe in these hot springs no matter what?"

"What's all this about...? Um, no, I don't have any special attachments..." I liked the hot springs here, but I'd been here last year and the year before that. Since I'd always bathed in them on our annual trips, I wasn't particularly concerned with missing out.

"Why don't we use the family bath then instead of the regular hot springs?"

"What...?"

"I mean, since we get to stay in such an expensive room, isn't it a waste to not use that bath? I was talking about it with mom on our way over to the hot springs."

I didn't know what to say. "Oh, but we're going to be bathing separately, of

course,” Miu added. “I’ll go in with my mom, but you’ll be bathing alone. It won’t be a mixed bath, so don’t get any weird ideas.”

“Isn’t that obvious?” I replied firmly. The truth was that for just one second, I *did* think she’d meant that all three of us would bathe together.

“So, I have a favor to ask... Would you mind using the bath first, Taku?”

“Me first?”

“The thing is, the family bath has a great view, but that also means you can be seen by others, right?”

“It has a fence, and I’m sure that the hotel has also considered that. I doubt there’s anything to worry about.”

“There’s still a one in a million chance that someone could see though. Are you okay with someone seeing me naked, Taku?”

“Well, I guess I’m not...”

“Someone might even see my mom naked.”

“What?! Okay, got it. Leave it to me. I’ll go in first and inspect it thoroughly!”

“Talk about a double standard...” Miu said, completely put off by my response. I’d meant it as a joke, but she seemed to have taken me seriously. “A- Anyways, I’m counting on you. I wanna get in soon, so do it as ASAP as possible.”

“What’s with that phrasing?” *Well, I get what she means.*

After our call, I made a U-turn and headed back to our room as as-soon-as-possible as possible. When I returned to the room, it was empty—Miss Ayako and Miu hadn’t gotten back yet. *Well... I guess I’ll just get in and do what I have to do.* I entered the changing area and got undressed before heading to the family bath with a towel in hand.

“Whoa.” As I stepped out, a cool night breeze washed over me, and when I looked up, the sky was filled with stars. Across the fence was a view of the ocean, giving the whole area an indescribable quality. “I guess I made the right decision,” I mumbled to myself. It was truly luxurious to be enjoying this view and space all by myself. *I guess this is the joy of a private bath.* “Oh, that’s

right... I have to check things out.”

I got close to the bamboo fencing that surrounded our bath and gave it a thorough inspection. *Hm, it looks good. There aren't any gaps, and it's a good height. As long as you don't get too close to the fence, there shouldn't be anyone who can look in from below.*

“Jeez, Miu sure is anxious about the strangest things.” After inspecting the fence, I gave myself a quick rinse before entering the wooden tub. I couldn't help but let out a sigh of relaxation once I was up to my shoulders in the water.

This is nice... Hot springs sure are nice...

It wasn't that spacious, but there was enough room for one person to stretch out their legs. I could understand why my father wanted to relax in here with some alcohol now that I was enjoying the night sky and the view all to myself.

What a luxury. This is amazing. Despite that feeling, there was a part of me that felt like something was missing. It was definitely nice to enjoy a hot spring bath all to myself without holding back, but it probably also would've been a pretty fun and happy experience to enjoy this bath together with someone I was close to—like family, or perhaps a girlfriend.

“Agh...” I groaned. *I want to get in a private bath like this with Miss Ayako one day. I could die happily if that dream came true.*

As my thoughts began to run wild while I soaked in the hot spring, an unbelievable occurrence—or rather, a fortune so great that one would think I had traded my life for it—came my way.

“Wow, it's incredible. The stars are so beautiful.”

I heard a voice, one that I knew very well, and the sound of the door opening echo behind me.

I reflexively turned back and was left speechless. Beyond the steam was none other than Miss Ayako. And, obviously, she was naked. All she had was the towel she was holding in one hand draped in front of her body. It was covering her chest and her crotch, but it was *just* those areas—only her private areas were barely covered.

Her smooth, snow-white skin; her neckline accentuated by her hair tied up high; the graceful curves from her shoulders to her chest, from her chest to her hips, and from her hips to her thighs, leaving nothing to the imagination; her ample breasts left partially exposed by her narrow towel... She had the body of a fully blossomed woman, her tender flesh only barely obscured by the thin cloth she held.



With such a seductive, sensual sight before me, I was left completely speechless—all I could do was stare. My male instincts had magnetized my gaze irresistibly to her overwhelmingly alluring body.

“How’s the water, Miu?” Miss Ayako asked as she stepped into the bathing area with no hesitation, walking across the stone flooring. Her weighty breasts swung wildly with even the slightest movements. The towel covering her private areas was fluttering in the wind, and it appeared as if it could be blown off at any moment. “Miu? Are you listening? Mi— Huh?” Possibly concerned about the lack of response, Miss Ayako shifted her gaze from the night sky to the tub, and she instantly froze. I was still staring, captivated, and her eyes met mine. “T-Takkun...?”

“Miss Ayako...”

We stared at each other for a few seconds as if time had stopped.

“Eeek!” Miss Ayako suddenly screamed, and she squatted down right where she was. I also panicked and averted my gaze. “Why...Wh-Why are you here?”

“I-I’m sorry! I’m really sorry!”

“Huh? What? Why are you in the bath, Takkun? Where’s Miu?”

“M-Miu? She isn’t here.”

“A-Are you serious...?” Miss Ayako then began explaining, mumbling in a voice tinged with confusion and humiliation. “Miu said that she wanted to use the family bath. She suddenly ran back on her own when we were on our way to the hot spring area, saying that she’d go in first... That’s why I thought she would be in here... So why are you here, Takkun?”

“I-I’m also here because of Miu. She said she wanted to use the family bath, but she was worried about being seen from the outside. That’s why she asked me to use it first and inspect the bath...”

“What...? You too...?”

I knew it. Miu was behind this after all. I’m not sure of the details, but this is definitely something she secretly planned. Miu...what the hell were you thinking? Isn’t this too far, making us bump into each other in the bath like this?

“I’m sorry, Miss Ayako...”

“Y-You don’t have to apologize, it’s not your fault.”

“But, I...I kind of stared for a while...”

“Huh?! J-Jeez, Takkun, you’re too honest! In a situation like this, you should say you didn’t see anything, even if it’s a lie!”

“I-I’m sorry... Um, I’m going to get out right away.” It wasn’t fair to Miss Ayako to stay here any longer. I grabbed my towel and somehow managed to hide my crotch, and I quickly got up to leave the tub, but...

“W-Wait!” Miss Ayako exclaimed, just before I could fully stand up. “I-It’s okay... You didn’t do anything wrong, Takkun. You don’t have to leave. It’s all Miu’s fault...” Her voice trembled with nervousness as she spoke. She then slowly stood up. “I’m sorry for getting surprised and yelling like that.”

“It’s all right...”

“Hey, Takkun...” Miss Ayako began. “This is a family bath...right?” She seemed to be trying her best to speak in a calm, composed manner, but it was obvious that she was having a hard time. Her voice was still trembling, and her face was unbelievably flushed. Even so, she didn’t stop, staring straight into my eyes while she was basically naked. “It’s completely private to the room, and men and women can use it together, right?”

“M-Miss Ayako...?”

“That’s why, um... If you’re okay with it, and only if you’re okay with it...” Though her tone was awkward, her determination was clear as she said something I couldn’t believe: “Shall we bathe together?”



I didn’t know why I’d decided to make such a bold move. Sure, it was partly because I was panicking at this situation I was suddenly in, and partly because I didn’t want to seem like I was kicking Takkun out when he hadn’t done anything wrong...but more than anything, as a mother, I was driven by stubbornness toward my daughter.

I knew Miu was behind this incident. *I can’t believe that girl, making fun of her*

mother like this! If either Takkun or I panicked and ran out of the bath, she would probably gleefully snicker at her devious plan succeeding. In fact, that was probably exactly how she'd expected things to turn out.

Hmph! Like I'm going to let that happen! I'm not going to give you the reaction you're expecting! I'm going to get through this incredibly embarrassing experience of bumping into Takkun in the bath as if it's no big deal! This is my time to show off the composure and magnanimity of an adult woman!

A grown-up woman with composure wouldn't panic just because she ran into a guy she's friends with at the bath—she would casually share the bath with him without getting nervous or hurting him. That's how an adult would handle things.

When I see Miu later, I'm going to be super calm about this. I'll be like, "Oh yeah, Takkun was there, so we took a bath together. What about it?"

Well, that's what I was thinking when I made the on-the-spot decision that we could bathe together, but...once we actually got in the bath, an inconceivably tall wave of embarrassment washed over me. I was deeply regretting how I had gotten swept up in the moment and let my stubbornness win.

Ugh, jeez... What am I even doing?

"I-I have to say, the water's really nice..." I said hesitantly.

"Y-Yes, it really is..." Takkun replied.

"Yeah, it's so nice..."

"Yes... It's very nice..."

We kept talking about the water. I wasn't sure how many times we'd said "nice" at this point, but I had no choice but to keep it going—the moment I went quiet, there wouldn't be anything to pass the time, leaving me to be crushed by humiliation.

The bath is so much more cramped than I thought it would be...

Takkun and I were seated diagonally across from each other, trying to take up as little space as possible as we bathed in the spring. I wasn't fully nude, of course—I was covering the front of my body with a towel. It wasn't good

etiquette to bring a towel into the water, but hopefully it could be overlooked since this was a private bath. Takkun was also covering up his important bits with a towel laid across his thighs.

But that was all that was covered. It was really just that. We were basically naked together in a small basin, only a thin cloth apiece to cover each of our private areas.

It was quite difficult to cover one's private parts with a single towel as a woman. The wet towel was also sticking to my skin, outlining my body clearly... It felt like it made for quite the suggestive scene.

It's impossible not to overthink things in a situation like this, I thought as I let out a whine. Th-This is embarrassing! What did I get myself into?! This was definitely a mistake! Ugh, I should've just gone back to the room! We could've just written this off as a one-off happy accident and quickly moved on to the next chapter! Why did I delve deeper into things?!

Come to think of it, I'd suggested we bathe together because I'd wanted to act like a composed, grown-up woman...but aren't I just acting like a nympho?! Only a nymphomaniac would casually suggest joining in on a bath a guy was in the middle of taking, right?!

“Oh...” While I was internally agonizing, I looked toward Takkun, who looked extremely cramped keeping his legs folded on the opposite end of the cypress basin. He was probably trying to be considerate of me and trying to avoid accidentally touching me. “Takkun, your legs... That looks pretty uncomfortable.”

“Huh...? Oh, no, I’m all right. This is nothing. Aren’t you in an uncomfortable position yourself, Miss Ayako?”

“I-I’m fine. You have longer legs than me, so it must be rough. You should stretch out more this way.”

“No, I’ll be okay. You should...”

We kept insisting the other person should take up more space, which led to an awkward silence.

“Well then,” I began after making up my mind. “W-We should both stretch

our legs out.”

“What...?”

“Yeah, let’s do that. Then it won’t be unfair to anyone. It’s a private bath after all—it’s a waste to feel cramped up and not fully enjoy it.”

“But if we do that, our legs...”

“Our legs touching a little isn’t a big deal,” I insisted.

“Okay then...” Takkun nodded.

We slowly felt out the space and stretched out our legs toward each other. Though we were hesitant, we eventually fully stretched our legs out, and I ended up resting mine on top of Takkun’s. In short, our bodies were now touching.

We both let out a small gasp. All it was was that our bare legs were touching—but still, it made me feel alert, like electricity was coursing through me. My heart began racing.

Ugh, why is this happening? Our legs are just touching a little. Why is it making me feel so strange...?

“S-See, isn’t it nice when you’re stretched out like this?” I said, desperately trying to appear calm.

“I-It is...” Takkun replied absentmindedly. His gaze was locked onto my legs atop his.

“What’s wrong...? Oh, are my legs heavy? I’m sorry.”

“Huh? Oh, no, that’s not it...” Takkun said uncomfortably. “I was just thinking that even your legs are pretty.”

“Wh—? Wh-What are you talking about?! Jeez...”

“I-I’m sorry...”

“They’re not pretty at all. My legs are... They’re a little fat, especially my thighs.”

“They’re not fat. They just have a good amount of meat on them.”

“Don’t say there’s meat on my body!” *That aside, what does he even mean by “Even your legs are pretty”? “Even” my legs... Agh, ugh... Jeez, what’s his deal? Why does Takkun keep complimenting me? If he keeps showering me with compliments like this, I’ll...*

I silently glanced over at him, and he nervously averted his gaze. He’d been like this ever since I got into the bath with him. He wasn’t just looking at my legs—he’d been sneaking glances at my body this whole time. He was trying to hide it, but there was no way I wouldn’t notice when we were so close.

He was looking. Takkun was *looking* at me. He was trying to thoroughly behold the embarrassing state I was in. It felt like my exposed skin was going to burn from his heated staring.

Ugh, this is unbelievably embarrassing... Getting checked out like this is embarrassing, of course, but I’m most embarrassed at myself for being kind of happy about it. If things keep up like this, I’m going to lose my mind...

“U-Um, Miss Ayako...!” Takkun suddenly exclaimed. He leaned forward, his face bright red like he was at a boil.

“What? Wh-What’s wrong...?”

“I’m sorry, is it all right if I...?”

“If you what?”

“I can’t take it anymore...”

“Can’t take what...?” *Hmm? Take it? What does he mean?*

I decided to analyze the situation objectively. A man and a woman were across from each other, in a state incredibly close to being nude. Then the man claimed he had reached some sort of limit. His face was red, his breathing was heavy, and he looked somewhat desperate, yet his demeanor was serious. What he couldn’t take anymore in this situation would be...

“Wh—?!” Wh-Whaaat?! Does he mean he can’t hold back anymore?! Is he saying that his sense of reason suppressing his sexual desire is about to fall apart?! “N-No, you can’t, Takkun! Wh-What are you even saying...?!”

“I’m sorry! I’ve been trying to grin and bear it, but I just can’t anymore... I’m

just really at my limit. I can't tolerate this any longer!" Takkun admitted desperately, looking into my eyes feverishly.

"What can't you can't tolerate...?" I asked anxiously.

I was on the verge of being overcome with panic at this bomb he was dropping out of nowhere, but there was a part of me that felt guilty as well. This was my fault—I'd been acting unnecessarily stubborn by pushing for us to bathe together, and it had ended up hurting Takkun—we were man and woman, after all, and on top of that, I was, well, the person Takkun had feelings for. It was only natural for his willpower to reach its limit after bathing together with the object of his affection. I couldn't blame him if he couldn't hold back anymore. It was only natural for a man his age to turn into a beast.

But wait, hold on. I logically understand what's going on, but just wait. I'm not mentally there yet...!

"I'm sorry, Miss Ayako..."

"D-Don't apologize, it's not your fault... There's no avoiding it—anyone would feel the same way in a situation like this, right?"

"Yes... I think so." H-He admitted it! You're really admitting it, Takkun?! "So, is it okay then?" And now he's flat-out saying he wants to do it?! He's so aggressive! He's backing me into a corner!

"W-Wait, Takkun... L-Let's just calm down a little..."

"I'm sorry, I can't wait any longer..."

"Wh-What...?"

"I'm really sorry, I just can't take it anymore. I need to do something about this right away."

"R-Right away?!" Does he mean...he wants to do it here?! Wait, hold on, I can't! I mean, we don't have anything prepared to—

"I'm sorry, Miss Ayako. I..."

"Huh, wait... Y-You can't, I mean... This is..." I let out a whining moan, completely flustered.

Then, as things were coming to a head, we both spoke out at once:

“I-If you’re going to insist, let’s at least lock the door!”

“I’d like to get out of the bath before you!”

Just as my panicking brain reflexively brought up the unlocked door to the bath area, Takkun had started yelling about leaving. *Huh? Get out before me?*

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“Huh? I mean... It’s so hot that I feel like I’m going to pass out... I can’t take the heat anymore, so I just want to get out of the bath first...”

I fell silent for a moment, then I finally exclaimed, “That’s what you meant?!” *That’s what he meant when he was talking about hitting his limit and not being able to stand it?! He just wanted to get out of the bath before he fainted?!*

“What else would I have meant...?”

“Huh? U-Um... Nothing, it’s nothing! Y-You’re right, that’s the only meaning! Of course I totally understood what you were saying from the beginning!”

I-I’m so embarrassed. What in the world was I thinking?! Of course that’s what he meant... Takkun would never do something like some sex-crazed monster! And yet, I misread the situation and panicked, and I even said we should lock the door first as if I was accepting his desires... U-Ugh!

“Um... Well, you should get out then, Takkun. It would be bad if you got woozy.” I choked back the self-hatred I was feeling and did my best to act composed. “You don’t have to ask about things like this... You should’ve just gotten up if it was too hot.”

“Th-That’s true, but...” Takkun struggled to get the words out as he continued. “Um, I wanted you to close your eyes when I got up...”

“What?”

“I-I, um, how should I say this... I don’t want you to see anything unsavory.”

Something unsavory? What could that be? His important bits are covered up by the towel, so...

“Do you mean your butt?”

"Huh...? U-Uh, yes. Th-That's right. My butt isn't very nice to look at, so I wanted to ask you to close your eyes!" Takkun said, suddenly talking quickly.

"S-Sure." I didn't think he had to worry about his butt, but he seemed pretty serious, so I decided to respect his wishes. I closed my eyes, and I also turned around.

"I'll be going then..."

I could hear the splash of him getting up from the basin. He then walked to the door, his feet making a wet sound across the stone as he left the bathing area.

Now left alone, there was something bugging me.

"What was he talking about?"

I'd thought he had meant his butt, but for guys, wrapping a towel around the waist would cover both the front and butt. *Maybe it wasn't his butt after all... What's something he wouldn't be able to hide with just a towel wrapped around his waist...? It would be something that would stick out of the towel, and also something he wouldn't want me to see...*

I let out a loud gasp upon realizing what Takkun was trying to hide—after quite some time, I realized he was trying to hide *that*. My temperature rose in an instant while I was still in the bath, leaving me dangerously close to passing out.

Chapter 5: The Mother, the Daughter, and the Young Man



After somehow managing to escape the exciting yet embarrassing family bath, I was lying in our room and resting. I hadn't passed out, but I'd come quite close. My body felt hot, making my mind go blank. The biggest reason for this was probably having stayed in the water for so long, but...what I'd seen had probably affected me quite a bit as well.

It'd been incredible. The sight of Miss Ayako bathing had been truly magnificent. The way her face looked when she was flushed from bathing in the hot spring was several times sexier than usual, and her alluring body with the wet towel stuck to it was tremendously sensual. I'd thought I could die happy after seeing her in the revealing swimsuit several hours ago—I never thought I would experience something even more shameless than that...

I'd known I shouldn't look too much, but I couldn't suppress my instinctive desires and I'd kept looking at her over and over.

She definitely knows I kept glancing over at her. I sighed. I wonder if she hates me. Also, I think she might actually know what the "unsavory" thing I didn't want her to see was. Ugh, she totally hates me, doesn't she...? My sexual desires had made themselves too apparent. I lay there, depressed and worried about what to do with my feverish mind.

"Uh-oh, what's wrong, Taku?" Miu said, having returned. She noticed me lying on the floor and came closer, sitting nearby. There was a mischievous smile spread across her face. "You seem pretty exhausted."

"And whose fault is that...?"

"Ha ha, I take it that you enjoyed the little incident I planned out? A heaping helping of once-in-a-lifetime with the subtlest dash of eroticism, all plated by yours truly," she said with a carefree laugh. "Did you bump into each other? I

bet my mom's naked body was insane, even if you only saw it for a second.”

“Yeah...”

Just as I thought, Miu had planned for Miss Ayako and I to run into each other in the bath. I would go in first, then Miss Ayako would come in and bump into me, the end. She probably wouldn't have ever expected that we'd actually bathed together, so I thought that there was no need to reveal the truth to her —actually, maybe it was just that it was too embarrassing to say I got woozy from the experience.

“So, where's my mom?”

“She went to get me something to drink.”

“I see...”

“Hey, Miu—”

“Taku,” Miu said, deliberately cutting me off and trying to talk over me. “Lift your head up a bit.”

“My head?” Though puzzled, I did as she instructed.

“Yeah, like that... Lift your head up just a bit more. Okay, nice.” Miu slid her legs under my raised head, making my head rest on her thighs.

“What are you doing...?”

“I'm letting you use my thighs as a pillow, of course,” Miu said, grinning at me teasingly.

“I know that. I'm asking why you're doing it.”

“Come on, this kind of thing's not so bad once in a while.”

I didn't know what to say to her.

“Don't be so uptight,” she insisted. “Why don't you enjoy this a little? You're getting to use a high school girl's thighs as a pillow, you know? I think this is a priceless experience.”

“I've told you that I'm not into high schoolers...”

“That's right,” she sighed. “I guess you won't be satisfied with anything but

my mom's pudgy thighs."

"Don't call them pudgy..." *I mean, it's true. Miss Ayako's thighs are pretty thick, but still!*

I recalled the sight of Miss Ayako's beautiful legs stretched out in the bath. Her incredible, perfectly plump thighs were by no means too wide, but still nowhere close to thin. Our legs had only barely touched, but the sensation of her soft, smooth skin was still fresh in my mind.

"I'm sorry," Miu said, bringing me back to reality before I drowned in my obscene fantasies. Her tone was soft, completely unlike her nonchalant attitude until now. "I do think I took it a little too far this time."

"You..." I let out a deep sigh. "Why are you apologizing before I've even said anything? Now I can't be mad at you."

"Maybe that's what I was hoping would happen."

I stared at her.

"I'm kidding, sorry. I really do feel bad," she relented.

"Don't worry about me and just apologize to your mom."

"Okay, I will."

After that, we fell silent. It was quiet, but there was something solemn about the atmosphere...and I had missed my chance to get my head off her thighs.

"Hey, Taku," Miu began from above. "Do you remember that promise?"

"Promise...?"

"I think it was ten, no, maybe nine years ago..." Miu looked up from me and seemed to be gazing into the distance, as if she were recalling a memory from a very happy time in her life. "We were playing together and making beaded accessories because my mom was holed up in her room working... Do you remember me showing you a drawing of mine? It was a drawing of you and me that my mom had framed."

"Do I remember? I would never forget that." There was no way I could ever forget it—it was a memory that was very special and dear to me. Admitting that

was slightly embarrassing, though, and I couldn't keep myself from responding a bit coldly.

"I see, so you do remember..." Miu seemed caught off guard for a moment, before smiling satisfactorily. "I thought you must have already forgotten about a promise you made so long ago."

"I thought that *you* would've forgotten about it," I said. "You were only like six back then, right?"

"A six-year-old could remember something like that." She gave me a small smile as she said that children can remember the important things, then she pushed me off her thighs and got up. "Okay, your special treat is over," she said jokingly before leaving the room.



I left the room and closed the door behind me.

"Heh heh..." *Oh no, I can't stop myself. I can't let anyone see me smiling like this.* "Taku didn't forget... He remembers the promise we made..."

Back when we were kids, we'd made a vow to "get married when we're older." It'd probably looked like child's play from the outside—just some children playing house, nothing binding. If anything, it definitely would've been cringey to still uphold such a promise close to ten years afterward...

...but Taku remembered it. He remembered our promise of "marriage." That was more than enough for me—I didn't want anything more. Now I could fully support Taku and my mom without any lingering feelings or regrets.

I was overflowing with happiness, acting uncharacteristically unguarded—yeah, I know, "*You would say that,*" but seriously—and letting my emotions show. That's why...

"Miu...?"

...I'd failed to notice my mom, sports drinks in hand, coming right around the corner.



I called out to Miu, who was standing outside the room, and she looked

surprised.

“Mom...”

“What’s wrong, Miu? Why are you standing there?”

“Oh, no reason...” Miu said awkwardly, averting her gaze for a moment before staring at me probingly. “Hey, mom... Did you hear that, just now?”

“Huh? Hear what?”

“Never mind, it’s nothing. If you didn’t hear anything, then there’s nothing to worry about.” Miu sounded like she couldn’t care less, yet she also seemed slightly relieved. “Are those drinks for Taku?”

“Yeah, they are. I might’ve gone a little overboard and bought too many though.”

“You should go give them to him. He seems pretty exhausted.”

“Whose fault do you think that is?”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” She didn’t sound especially remorseful, but she did bow her head in apology. “I went a little too far, getting you two to bathe together.”

“I didn’t expect you to apologize so easily,” I sighed. “It’s fine. I-It wasn’t a big deal anyway. I’m an adult, so running into a man in the bath wouldn’t spook me.”

“Huh, I see...”

“You should apologize to Takkun, not me.”

“Taku said the same thing about you,” Miu said exasperatedly.

“Miu... Just what are you trying to accomplish here?” I asked, determined to face her. “You keep flirting with Takkun in front of me, as if you’re trying to rub it in my face. You keep trying to agitate me... Now you’re suddenly pulling pranks like with the bath, as if you’re just toying with us... Honestly, I have no idea what you’re thinking.”

My true feelings spilled out. Part of me was just exhausted, but this was also me crying for help; I was tired of being thrown for a loop by her incoherent

actions, and I also felt bad—I was ashamed that I couldn't understand my daughter's feelings.

"Please, Miu, just tell me..." I pleaded, trying to appeal to her. "What are you thinking? What is your goal here?"

"You really don't get it, do you?" she responded in a cold, careless voice. It was as if she was beyond exasperation—as though she'd lost all hope. "You don't get it at all, mom." She shot me a piercing gaze. Her chilling glare was tinged with frustration.

"I don't get it! That's exactly why I'm asking you. I'm not a mind reader. I can't tell how you're feeling unless you tell me."

"That's not what I... Ugh, never mind, whatever," Miu said, as if she were throwing in the towel. She reached toward the bag I was holding. "I don't want to make things awkward when we're on vacation, so let's continue this conversation when we get home. In the meantime, I'll be taking one of these." She grabbed a sports drink from the bag then walked off.

"Miu..." I just stood there and watched her leave. Miu. Just what are you trying to do? Why won't you tell me how you feel? Also...

"I see... Taku remembers the promise we made..."

The truth was, I *had* heard Miu—I'd heard what she'd muttered to herself in front of the door. When she'd said it, she'd had a very blissful look to her. Her smile looked so natural and unforced, as if the happiness deep in her heart had poured out. Seeing that smile of hers confused me even more.

Miu...what's going on inside your head? What don't I get? What am I not understanding? What is the promise you made with Takkun?

Things were normal after that. Miu was cheerful as always when she returned to the room, and I matched her energy and acted normal. The three of us talked while the TV played in the background, and the night went on.

By the time it hit eleven o'clock, it was late enough that we should've been getting ready for bed, but there was still one issue we needed to sort out before heading to sleep. The problem lay in our positioning—in other words, we had to

decide who would be sleeping where.

"Hey, Taku, since we're here together, why don't we share a futon?" Miu said with a mischievous smile.

There were three futons laid out before us, lined up parallel to each other.

"Why would we...?" Takkun said, looking like he was at his wit's end.

"Come onnn, why not? We used to sleep together all the time in the past."

"And how long ago do you think that was?"

"Miu, that's enough fooling around," I scolded. "I wouldn't allow that."

"Hmph," Miu pouted. "This has nothing to do with you, mom. You should just sleep in the corner by yourself."

"I don't know what you might get up to, so you'll be sleeping next to me. I'll be between you two and protect Takkun."

"That's what you say, but maybe you're just trying to sneak into his futon yourself."

"Wha—?! I-I would never do that!"

We noisily went back and forth, until finally, we settled on having Takkun sleep in the middle. That was probably the best option.

We each climbed into our futons and turned off the lights. There was a little bit of a commotion because Miu tried to sneak into Takkun's futon once the lights were off, but that only lasted for five minutes. The dark room quickly fell silent.

No one was talking. It seemed like Miu and Takkun had both fallen asleep. As for me...shut-eye wasn't coming so easily. I was definitely nervous about having Takkun sleeping beside me, but something was troubling me even more than that.

I couldn't stop thinking about Miu. I kept wondering what'd been going through my daughter's mind. I'd been acting like nothing had happened, just as Miu had been doing, when we were spending time together, but now that things were quiet, my mind had become restless.

My thoughts just kept getting messier and messier, and it didn't seem like I was going to fall asleep any time soon, so I climbed out of my futon and snuck out of the room, being careful to not make any noise. I walked down the hotel's dimly lit hallway aimlessly, with only the faint fluorescence illuminating the path below me as a guide, until the light of a vending machine caught my eye. I purchased a bottle of decaf tea and leaned against the wall as I took a sip.

I had a great view before me—beyond the window lay the sparkling night sky dotted by all the summer stars. I lost myself gazing into that beautiful, ephemeral celestial sea, until suddenly...

"Miss Ayako," a voice called for me. I turned around to see Takkun walking toward me. He seemed a little worried.

"Takkun..."

"What are you doing, walking around so late at night?"

"I was having trouble falling asleep... Did you maybe have the same problem? Oh, did I wake you up? I'm sorry..."

"No, I couldn't sleep either, so I was awake the whole time. I noticed that you stepped out, so I kind of followed you..."

Oh, Takkun couldn't sleep either...

"I feel like a child, not being able to sleep during my vacation," I joked.

"I get that," Takkun remarked with a dry laugh. He then suddenly turned to look at the night sky before us. I followed his gaze and began staring at the stars again. "The stars are beautiful tonight," he said.

"They are. I thought so when I was in the bath too, but they're really beautiful..."

"The bath..."

"Yeah, the outdoor bath in our room. The view there was really incredib—"

I was suddenly overcome by a searing wave of embarrassment in the middle of talking. *Shoot, I messed up! Why am I bringing up our shared bath?!*

Just as I expected, Takkun's face was flushed, and he looked uncomfortable.

He was probably remembering our bath. I was too...and I felt so embarrassed I could die. *I can't believe I would self-destruct like that.*

Amidst the awkward atmosphere, Takkun spoke up as if to recalibrate things. "Um, Miss Ayako... You seemed a little down earlier. Are you okay?"

"Did I...?"

"Yeah. Actually, not really just a little," he said. He seemed uncomfortable, but his words were firm.

After a short pause, I let out a sigh, as if to give in to him. "Yeah... To tell you the truth, there *has* been something on my mind...maybe."

"Is it about Miu...?"

"Oof, is it that obvious?"

"It is, given how she's been acting recently."

I grimaced—it appeared that Miu's sudden change in behavior as of late had been on Takkun's mind as well.

"Well, actually... We were alone together earlier, and we had a little argument," I explained.

"An argument...?"

"Oh, but it really wasn't a big deal. It's not like we fought or anything... It's more like our gears aren't fitting into place. We're not on the same page."

Yes, it was like we were on different pages. Even though my daughter and I were supposedly both facing each other, for some reason, it felt like neither of us was truly able to perceive the other. It was like we were standing on completely separate planes when exchanging words—I felt inexplicably estranged from her.

"I don't know what Miu's thinking," I continued. "I asked her to explain herself, but she wouldn't tell me anything... This is the first time something like this has happened, so I'm a little lost about what to do."

I didn't understand. I just wasn't sure how Miu felt. When I'd mustered up the courage to ask her, she'd pushed me away. Before the trip, Yumemi had tried to

cheer me up by saying it was “healthy” for her to act like this, but that wasn’t enough for me to feel optimistic about things.

“Maybe...” I began. My thoughts gradually headed in a dark direction, and pointless conjecture began crossing my mind. I couldn’t help but wonder about things that there was no use wondering about. “Maybe if I was her real mom, I would be able to do better...”

Maybe her real parents could have understood how she feels. Maybe if she’d had a parent connected by blood here with her, they’d have known what she was thinking. Maybe if my late sister were still around, she could have caught on to what’s going on with her daughter—or, even if my sister weren’t sure, maybe she wouldn’t have gotten as anxious as me and would have calmly stood tall.

“If I were her *real* mother, maybe I could have—”

“Miss Ayako.” Takkun’s firm, sharp voice reached my heart that was on the verge of being swallowed by a dark abyss. I quickly looked up, and Takkun was giving me a stern look. “Even if you’re just joking, I’m going to be upset if you say things like that.”

“What...?”

“How could you *not* be her real mother?” Takkun sounded intensely sincere, as though he was crying out to me directly from his heart. “For the past ten years, you’ve been at Miu’s side more than anyone else. You’ve given her tons of love and raised her well... If those feelings aren’t real, what is?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Miu definitely feels that way too,” he continued. “I won’t put up with *anyone* trying to say you aren’t her real mother, and that includes you, Miss Ayako.”

“Takkun...”

His voice had carried a quiet anger, yet a mountain of kindness had been hidden underneath his admonishment. Having such intense feelings directed at me made my chest grow warm. Although my heart was racing, I felt very calm, like I was at peace...it was an unusual sensation, but one that made me feel at ease.

"You're right... I'm sorry for saying something so shameful," I admitted. I was truly ashamed. I'd let myself entertain such an empty, unproductive train of thought in a moment of frustration. Thinking about what a "real" mother would do sounded like I was worrying, but the truth was that I was just running away from my problems by putting myself down.

"I'm sorry, too, for getting so carried away."

"No, don't be. Thank you, Takkun. I'm feeling a little better thanks to you." I chuckled. "It's strange... The things you say always feel like they just sink right in." His words always seemed to resonate in my heart deeper than anything anyone else would say to me. I hadn't known why I'd felt this way, but I thought I was starting to see why—Takkun was always earnestly thinking about me and feeling for me. His overflowing emotions were able to drive his words into the depths of my heart.

"I think you're special to me, Takkun..."

"In what sort of way...?" he asked, obviously flustered. He looked at me expectantly. Only then did I realize that I had said something quite intense and suggestive without realizing.

"Huh...? Oh, no, um... I-I don't mean 'special' in a weird way! J-Just... How should I say this..." I desperately tried to string together an excuse. "I-It just goes to show that how long we've known each other really makes a difference. You've seen me through so many things up till now, so I can probably believe what you say without any trouble. That's all. I didn't mean anything that deep by it..."

"It's not just 'up till now,'" he said, stepping closer to me as I continued to make excuses. He then grabbed my shoulders with both hands.

"Huh...?!" Everything was happening so suddenly, and my heart began beating out of my chest.

His large hands were rugged and manly, yet they felt incredibly gentle as they trembled slightly. It was just the two of us under the faint lighting of the dim hallway. His gaze was tinged with nervousness and anxiety as he looked me directly in the eyes, but so too was there an unmistakable passion and determination overriding all that apprehension.



“If you would allow it, I’d like to be with you from now on as well... I want to continue being with you for as long as possible...”

“Takkun...” His unwavering gaze was drawing me in, and his sweet, aggressive words melted my heart. All of it made my mind go blank, as if I had gotten tipsy.

“Miss Ayako...” Takkun slightly strengthened his grip as he brought me closer.

There was nothing left in me that I could use to resist. We stared at each other silently. A second passed...then two, then three... The passage of time around us felt strange, as though it were standing still yet racing by at the same time. We weren’t speaking, but I felt like we understood how each other felt.

There was no one else there. The only witness was the summer night’s sky. *Since we’re alone... Maybe for just this moment, I can let go of appearances and excuses and just surrender everything to the young man before me...*

Takkun’s face slowly got closer to mine. I didn’t stop him or resist. I just closed my eyes...

Suddenly, the slapping sound of people walking in indoor slippers came down the hall.

We reflexively let go of each other, stepping back to create distance between us. Coming down the hall was a couple who looked to be in their forties—it was no one we knew. They were probably staying at the hotel as well. They whispered to each other as they walked by.

I held my breath, waiting for them to pass. My heart was thumping loudly at an unbelievable rate, and my fuzzy mind instantly came back into focus.

Wait. Hold on. Just now... What was I about to do?! What was Takkun about to do to me?!

Th-This is bad! That was definitely headed somewhere bad... It all felt so normal that I’d just unconsciously let that happen. I wasn’t in my right mind—I was acting like a drunkard. I even thought, “I don’t care what happens,” at one point! What is this?! What just happened?! Is this some kind of vacation-induced high?!

“Miss Ayako...”

“Y-Yes?” I unintentionally flinched as I turned to look at Takkun, but his almost-terrifying passion had disappeared from his eyes.

“It’s pretty late already,” he said awkwardly while sounding incredibly disappointed. “We should head back.”

“Yeah, that sounds good...” I said, giving a lifeless nod.

We began walking back to our room. I was feeling terribly mixed up, like I was relieved yet disappointed at the same time. My initial worries had cleared up, but it seemed like a new worry would be keeping me up tonight.

Chapter 6: The Truth and the Trump Card



The day after we returned from our vacation, Miu left the house early to hang out with her friends. She may have made those plans in order to avoid talking to me, but I might have just been overthinking things.

As a working adult and homemaker, I didn't have a summer break. There were a ton of things on my to-do list, including work and chores, but...there I was at my dining table, letting out a deep sigh as I lay my head down.

In my hands was my prized possession that I had brought out from my room. It was a colorful gun with flashy decorations. Even though it was a toy gun, it was a premium item that cost well over fifty thousand yen.

Love Kaiser Joker was the fourth title in the *Love Kaiser* franchise, and it had become its most ambitious and problematic series. One of the Love Kaisers in *Joker* was Hiyumi Kuinajima, and the replica I was holding was of her transformation machine gun, the Exciting Heart-Throb Magnum, the item she used to transform into Love Kaiser Solitaire.

This specific item was not one of the toys sold for children while the show was airing, but rather a product sold by Premium Danbai for the older fans who enjoyed the show. The fine details of the gun were replicated very well—it felt like the item from the show had been brought directly into the real world. It was incredibly satisfying. On top of that, pushing the buttons on the gun would play famous lines from the show as well as songs from its soundtrack, including the theme song.

I pressed one of the buttons, and the transformation gun played the famous line from episode thirty-six, “My trump card is reversible!” The line had been read by Hiyumi’s actual voice actress, Maria Tsunagi, recorded just for this item—despite the premium toy being launched several years after the show had ended, she returned to recreate several lines from the show for the gun.

“She’s so precious,” I sighed. “Hiyumin, you’re too precious...” The scenes from episode thirty-six replayed in my mind, filling me with euphoria.

Playing the song that actually played during that scene made it feel like I was actually there, like I was actually Hiyumin herself—and playing the song was what I was currently doing to escape from reality.

I let out another sigh as I placed the gun down. My stress and worries were typically wiped away after I played with this transformation machine gun that cost me over fifty thousand yen, but it wasn’t working today. No matter how much I played with it, I just didn’t feel better. I repeatedly reaffirmed Hiyumi’s preciousness in my mind, but there was still something deep in my chest that felt cloudy.

“Miu...” I muttered.

Even after we’d returned from the trip, things were awkward with Miu. She didn’t seem to be bothered by anything and was acting normal, which made things feel even worse. Thanks to Yumemi and Takkun, I was able to not get too down on myself or get too worried, but I still didn’t feel great about things.

What in the world am I supposed to do? How does Miu feel right now?

“Oh no, it’s so late already,” I said, shocked at the time after my eyes wandered toward the clock on the wall.

Half of my morning had already passed away while I was sitting around worrying and running from my responsibilities by playing with the transformation machine gun.

Shoot, this is bad. I have so many things I need to do! I haven’t finished doing the laundry, and I haven’t washed the dishes, and I have to work. I also made plans to go over to the Aterazawas’ this afternoon to bring them souvenirs...

“I need to pull it together,” I said to myself as I got up.

First was laundry. The load I’d put in this morning had finished, so I took it out of the washer and brought it outside to dry. I then took the laundry I’d finished folding yesterday and went to put it away in Miu’s and my rooms.

After putting my clothes away, I just had Miu’s left. I stood before her door

and knocked—I knew she wasn’t home, but I knocked out of habit before entering.

Some high schoolers probably didn’t want their parents going into their rooms without asking, but Miu didn’t care about those sorts of things. According to her, I was welcome to come in whenever I liked to clean her room. She apparently prioritized the merit of having her room cleaned for her over her own privacy. She was really something...

I entered her room and began putting away her underwear and stuffing her clothes into her drawers, like I usually did. I scanned the room, deciding to give it a quick clean while I was there.

“Hm...?” Suddenly, something caught my eye. There was something forcibly shoved into the bookshelf above her desk, obviously wider than the textbooks next to it. “What is this...?”

Curious, I pulled it out and saw it was a frame. Inside was...

“Wha—?!”

...a drawing of Miu’s. It was something she’d drawn when she was around six years old, and it depicted her and Takkun holding hands. In the remaining blank space, she had written, “I want to marry Taku when I’m older.”

An indescribable feeling began building up inside of me, and I couldn’t breathe. Memories buried deep in my mind began pouring out like a flood.

Oh, this brings me back... I think I taught her how to write this. She wanted to write, so I taught her the letters.

“Wow, this is amazing! This is you and Takkun, right? It’s drawn so well!”

“Yeah, it’s us.”

“I’m so impressed! You might be a genius! Maybe you can become a painter or illustrator!”

“Mom, I’m gonna write a wish here, so can you teach me letters?”

“A wish? This is a drawing, right? You don’t usually write wishes on drawings.”

“It’s fine! I wanna write my wish!” Miu whined. “I’m gonna write the wish and then show Taku!”

“Okay, okay.”

Miu’s strong will won out, and I taught her how to write the letters.

Maybe I was only impressed because it was something my daughter had made, but I thought the drawing was so nice that I framed it and wanted to display it.

Several days after she had made the drawing, Miu said she wanted to show it to Takkun. It was a day that I had some work that I suddenly needed to take care of, so I asked Takkun to watch Miu while I holed up in my room.

“Mom, are you done with work?” Miu asked in the evening afterward.

“I’m mostly done,” I said, looking away from my computer as I petted her head.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t play with you today, Miu.”

“It’s okay, Taku played with me.”

“He did? That’s great. I really should thank Takkun. Hold on, I’ll go downstairs in a second. We can all have some snacks.”

“Okay!”

“Oh...?” I finally noticed the drawing that Miu was holding. “Did you show Takkun your drawing?”

“Yeah. He said it was really good!”

“Aw, isn’t that nice?”

“Also, I made a promise with Taku!” Miu’s eyes sparkled as she spoke, as if she couldn’t contain her happiness. She tightly and lovingly gripped the frame in her hands.

“You made a promise?”

“We made a promise that when we’re bigger, Taku’s going to marry... Oh no, I messed up!” Her happy expression flipped into one of immense regret. “This was supposed to be a secret! We said we wouldn’t tell anyone, not even you.

Taku and I said..."

"Oh, really? Hee hee, don't worry. I actually didn't hear what you said just now."

"R-Really?!"

"Yeah, my ears just happened to ring right when you said it."

"Oh, okay, that's good."

The relief that came across Miu's face as she believed my silly lie was heartwarming.

I recalled that day fondly.

That's right. I remember now. That was why I was always rooting for Miu and Takkun to get together... That's why I'd been hoping they would get together and get married until I found out how Takkun felt—because it was Miu's wish when she was a little girl. That explains it...

My hands began shaking, and I almost dropped the drawing. I quickly gripped the frame tightly. In the drawing, Miu and Takkun were smiling. They looked very happy as they held hands.

Oh, I see. That's what it was. Everything makes sense now. All of the strange feelings I hadn't been able to fully process clicked now. I finally got what Miu was thinking.

During our trip, when she was standing outside of the door, she had said something about a "promise." Miu had looked very happy in that moment—when she'd been thinking about her "promise" with Takkun that they'd marry each other.

"I see. That's what this was about..." A feeling of loss washed over me, and it felt like I had lost my footing. My mind felt fuzzy, as if this wasn't reality, but the stabbing pain in my heart was forcing me to accept that this was undeniably real.

Miu liked Takkun. Ever since she was a little girl, she'd liked him. She'd continued to like him for all this time.

Read it if you want! *Love Kaiser* Glossary 3

“My trump card is reversible!”

The line that Hiyumi Kuinajima, aka Love Kaiser Solitaire, a sub-Kaiser in *Love Kaiser Joker*, says at the end of episode thirty-six.

During the midpoint of the series, Hiyumi realizes that she was brainwashed into believing she was the Joker, the root of all evil, and temporarily leaves the battlefield. She then reunites with Love Kaiser Kitty, who she killed in episode one, in Elysium, the world between the lands of the living and the dead. She receives the power of the Ace of Hearts from Kitty and returns to the battlefield upon awakening into a new form—Love Kaiser Solitaire: Empress Form.

However, Empress Form is a forbidden power that forcibly combines the Ace of Hearts and Queen of Spades—each use shortens the user’s lifespan. As the battle between the Kaisers to kill one another reaches its climax, the Empress Form eats away at Hiyumi’s body and soul.

The final boss, Joker, appears in episode thirty-five and attacks the Kaisers. Hiyumi stands up against Joker using the Empress Form, but she loses. In the aftermath, Hiyumi receives a warning: “If you transform again, you won’t survive.” However, at the end of the next episode, Hiyumi declares “My trump card is reversible!” before transforming one last time to protect a town from the clone army that Joker unleashed. Notably, this final transformation, which burns away the last of her life, wasn’t to take down her archnemesis, Joker, nor was it to win the battle royale between Kaisers—rather, she transformed entirely to save civilians from basic clone soldiers.

In episode thirty-seven, after having fought to the death to save the town, Hiyumi has surpassed her limits, and, in exchange for her using a forbidden power, her entire body turns into ash and disappears. Despite experiencing such a horrific death, Hiyumi seems blissful, even satisfied, in her final moments.

Hiyumi preferred to be alone and didn't like getting friendly with others, and she'd been known to mention how sacrificing others for her own survival was only natural. However, at the height of mortal combat, she recalled her childhood dream of wanting to become a hero, and as her dying act, she sacrificed her own life for strangers. This touched many viewers deeply.

Incidentally, the Empress Form that appeared at the end of episodes thirty-six and in episode thirty-seven is different from the usual Empress Form, uniquely featuring an animation that appears to show eight wings sprouting from Hiyumi's back. On places like the official website, this is called the "Neo Empress Form." The eight wings showed how much of Hiyumi's life remained, and as time passed, she lost them one at a time. When the final wing faded away, Hiyumi's life came to an end.

At the time, there was no plan to give Hiyumi Kuinajima, a sub-Kaiser, an entire form that would only appear once, but because of her unexpected popularity, they created the episode and form at the last minute. Because of that, the toys sold during the show's airing do not include the special voice line from when she transforms into Neo Empress Form. However, that special line is included in the item made for adults sold by Premium Danbai after the show finished airing.

Maria Tsunagi

A voice and screen actor from Japan. Her debut role was voicing Love Kaiser Solitaire, a sub-Kaiser in *Love Kaiser Joker*.

Maria became a hot topic after she proved to have incredible skill doing her very first role, but she herself had originally wanted to be a screen actress, only pursuing voice acting work because her agency had insisted. Maria hadn't wanted to audition for *Love Kaiser Joker*, but her agency had demanded it—she'd even gone as far as declaring "I don't have any interest in anime" during her audition. However, her blunt, cold attitude caught the director's attention, and she was cast as Hiyumi Kuinajima.

She continued to accept voice roles during the show's run, and she even had steady work as a voice actress after the show ended. However, five years after

Love Kaiser Joker ended, she suddenly announced that she was retiring as a voice actress. Her accompanying statement clearly specified that she “never wanted to be a voice actress” and that she “didn’t become an actress to work on a bishoujo series like *Love Kaiser*,” earning the ire of fans everywhere. After finishing recording lines for a transformation item being sold for adults by Premium Danbai, she retired from voice acting work and moved overseas to pursue screen acting.

After leaving Japan, Maria saw dramatic success as an actress and no longer lent her voice acting skills to the *Love Kaiser* franchise. Hiyumi Kuinajima always appeared in the annual movie specials, but because of voicing issues, she never had any lines.

However, in last year’s annual crossover summer movie *Love Kaiser: Forever Memories*, Maria Tsunagi appeared to voice Hiyumi Kuinajima. Since she had become an established screen actress—alongside the fact that it was generally thought that she considered her role in the *Love Kaiser* franchise a dark spot on her past—her role in this movie was a complete surprise with no prior notice, astonishing fans.

Though some fans of the franchise weren’t happy about her return after she called *Love Kaiser* a bishoujo series, many were happy to see Hiyumi Kuinajima return. At the end of the movie, Maria Tsunagi positively commented, “Hiyumi Kuinajima is a very special character to me, and I love her.” As for how she currently feels about her voice acting debut having been in the *Love Kaiser* franchise...that is something only Maria herself knows.

Chapter 7: The Gift and the Decision



I felt like I finally understood why Miu had been acting so strange recently.

“I’m going to date Taku.”

The only reason she’d said that and started to compete with me was probably to egg me on. She’d wanted to push me, to goad me, because I’d been hesitating for so long. She’d wanted me to stop putting off my answer to Takkun and take a step forward. I felt like Miu was probably only acting out of her desire to root for Takkun and I—but she’d needed to crush her own romantic desires before things got too far.

The truth was that Miu liked Takkun, but she had set aside those feelings to try to support me. At least, once I supposed it *was* the truth, a lot of things started to make sense. It’d only made sense for her to have been frustrated with my indecisiveness and wishy-washiness toward my decision—I was getting involved with the man she loved, after all.

That was exactly what it was: The man she loved was fervently going after another woman, but that woman wouldn’t date him or turn him down. Instead, that woman was holding off her response to his feelings and trying to maintain a vague, convenient relationship. Of course Miu would be unhappy with that.

I wonder how Miu felt watching Takkun go after me. How did she feel watching me enjoy myself while I continued to waffle on my decision? How much sadness did she have to bury to cheer on our relationship?

I hadn’t been able to notice anything—I hadn’t realized what she’d been going through. I hadn’t known what kind of cruelty I was putting her through...

“Yes, of course.”

I suddenly remembered my response to Miu when she asked if I would root for her and Takkun.

“As your mother...nothing would make me happier than if you were to date Takkun. Just like you said, I’ve always wanted you two to get together. If you two want to date, I will root for you from the bottom of my heart...if you’re serious about him.”

Miu had been serious. She’d been earnestly asking me what I would do. Despite her countless machinations, what had lain deep beneath it all were her feelings for Takkun. She genuinely loved Takkun, and she probably had for a long time. She’d continued loving him for years and years, almost like how Takkun had loved me for a decade. And if that was the case, then I...

“Ayako?” A voice called out to me, and I snapped back to reality after having been lost in my thoughts.

“Huh...?”

“Are you all right? You seemed to be a little dazed.”

“Oh... Y-Yes, I’m fine. I’m sorry, I was just thinking about something.”

“As long as you’re okay,” Takkun’s mother, Tomomi, smiled as she placed a cup of tea in front of me.

I was in the Aterazawas’ living room. It was past noon, and Tomomi had invited me in so I could give her family some souvenirs from Hawaiian Z. I was also staying for tea at her request.

“Thank you again, Ayako,” Tomomi said, staring at her gift after she’d taken a seat. “Even though we’d ended up needing to cancel last minute, you still went out of your way to get us a gift.”

“It’s no problem. Actually, I should be thanking you for paying for half of our hotel costs. Our room was very nice, and I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it,” she said with a smile. “Anyways, how was the family bath? Did you use it?”

“Y-Yes, it was lovely...” For a split second, the various happenings during the mixed bath replayed in my mind, but I quickly shook those thoughts away.

Tomomi then opened the gift, which we both enjoyed. I had bought her a box of pineapple dacquoise, which was one of the most common souvenirs to get

from Hawaiian Z. Tomomi and I had both eaten these dozens of times, but a gift like this was more about the thought than the gift itself. Also, the flavor never got old.

A dacquoise, incidentally, was a traditional French dessert made from an almond meringue. This particular variation included pineapple jam sandwiched between the crisp cookies, giving the dessert a tropical twist.

“So, Ayako...” After eating a dacquoise, Tomomi began hesitantly. “How are, um, things with Takumi...?”

“Hm...?”

“It’s been about two months since he told you how he felt, right? I was wondering if there’s been any developments. You two went on a date once, didn’t you? What exactly is going on between you two?” She seemed to feel bad for asking, but she was still surprisingly aggressive with her questions.

It didn’t seem like a case of a mother overly interfering with her son’s life or anything of the sort. If anything, I felt like it was natural for her to be curious. After all, her only son was trying to date me, a single mother who was more than a decade older than him. It made sense for a mother to wonder how a relationship like that was going.

“Um, I’m sorry... The truth is, there haven’t been any developments. I’ve held off on deciding whether I’ll actually go out with him. I-It’s true that we went on a date, but, um... Right now, we’re more than friends but less than lovers, I guess.”

As the words left my mouth, I was becoming painfully aware of how the truth of the matter hurt to admit. Having to actually explain the situation to someone made me realize how ridiculous things had gotten.

I wonder how she feels as a mother hearing a woman in her thirties say that she’s “more than friends but less than lovers” with her twenty-year-old son...

“I see...” Tomomi’s reaction felt mixed—it was like she was surprised by how anticlimactic my response was, yet she was also relieved. “I’m sorry for being so intrusive.”

“N-No, you don’t have to apologize. I should be apologizing for being so

indecisive..." I bowed my head deeply.

"Oh, that's all right. I'm not trying to judge you at all," Tomomi said, panicked. "You have your reasons, and there's no need to hurry with a decision. You have to consider Miu as well, so it's only fair that you consider the circumstances carefully," she said sincerely before letting out a wry laugh. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious as to how things will turn out, but...you shouldn't rush your decision out of concern for me and my family."

I listened intently as she made to explain her sudden reassurance. "I asked today because I couldn't help myself, but you don't have to worry about me at all," she insisted. "I don't intend to judge you. If anything, I'm glad that you're giving such serious thought to my son's feelings."

"Tomomi..." Her kindness was so touching, I could almost cry.

She's such a good mother. I was being so pathetic, but she wasn't judging me at all—in fact, she was giving me warm words of encouragement. I was so grateful for her kindness that I didn't feel deserving of it.

"Why...?" Before I knew it, the words were leaving my mouth. "Why are you okay with Takumi and I entering a relationship, Tomomi?"

"What...?"

"Oh, um... I guess it's not that you're okay with it, considering we haven't even decided whether we'll be a couple or not, but...it doesn't seem like you're against us." Though I stumbled, I was gradually managing to find the right words. "I think most parents would be against their child dating someone like me, a single parent who's more than a decade older..."

"Well," Tomomi said, looking lost in thought, "I might have mentioned this before, but I *was* against it at first. But I've been right by his side, watching him work hard these past ten years to become a man worthy of being your partner... Seeing him try so hard gradually made me want to cheer him on."

"Oh, I just realized something," she said, stopping in the middle of her train of thought. "I might have been against him *and* started supporting him for the same reason."

"The same reason...?"

"I just want my child to be happy," Tomomi said. "At the end of the day, that's all a parent wants for their child." I didn't know what to say. "The parents who support their children's hopes and dreams and the parents who refuse to approve of them all probably want the same thing deep down," she continued to explain. "In both cases, they just want their child to be happy."

She was right. If their child were headed down an uncertain path where many troubles awaited them, neither type of parent would take their kid's decision lightly. Neither type of parent would want their child to tread a treacherous road because both types, more than anyone else in the world, want their children to be happy. That was the case for any consideration, in fact, whether it was education, careers, or even who their children were dating.

"Happiness comes in a lot of forms, but getting to be with someone you love with all your heart is probably one of the top forms of happiness, right?" Tomomi wondered aloud. "If that's the case, I can't get in the way of my child experiencing that kind of happiness. At least, that's what I've come to think." She didn't seem especially confident about the last part, however.

"That's such a beautiful sentiment," I said. "I can always trust you to have a way with words, Tomomi."

"What? Aw, geez. You're too sweet, Ayako—you'll make me blush," she laughed bashfully. "It's really nothing," she said, adding that there wasn't a parent in the world who didn't want their child to be happy. As I listened to her continue to attempt to be modest in the face of my praise, I tried my best to maintain a smile and hide the stinging pain in my chest.

Eventually, I emerged the victor in my desperate struggle to keep my internal strife concealed behind friendly grinning, and I left the Aterazawa house.

By the time I got to the entryway of my own house, I had made up my mind. I let out a small sigh as I took my shoes off.

That's it. I've made up my mind. I won't date Takkun.

I was going to definitively turn him down. There was no way I could date him. It wasn't right for a mother to date the person her daughter had feelings for. I had only started seeing him as a man recently—I had no right to take him from

Miu, who'd been in love with him for years.

That was why I wasn't going to date Takkun: I was going to root for Miu. I was going to do everything I could do to support her so she could date Takkun. It was time to make good on my word. If Miu was serious, then this was the only thing for me to do.

It wasn't a big deal—things would just return to how they used to be before Takkun had told me how he felt. I figured it would probably take some time, but we could surely return to the way things were. Even if we couldn't, it would be my fault for taking so long to give him my answer, and I would simply have to live with that for the rest of my life.

It's fine. I can do this. I'll be all right. We'll just turn back time a little bit. We're just going to go back to before I had any idea about Takkun's feelings for me. Just like any other mother out there, my job here is to watch over my daughter's romance with her childhood friend. I'll say things like, "Aww, it must be nice to be young."

This was nothing more than an odd little love story getting back on its rightful path—the kind of story where a boy of course dated his childhood friend, not her mother. Takkun and I would go from being more than friends but less than lovers back to just being neighbors.

It's a simple course correction. I'm fine. I'll be fine. If Takkun and Miu end up together, I'll be able to genuinely be happy about it because I'm Miu's mother. I didn't give birth to her myself, but I'm her real mother. I'm someone who has to want and pray for my daughter's happiness more than anyone else in this world. I can bear anything if it means my child would be happy—there's no place in this world for parents who don't want their children to be happy, after all.

Chapter 8: The Mother and the Daughter



Tick, tock. The sound of the second hand echoed throughout the empty living room, where I was sitting alone.

It was past six in the evening, and Miu had let me know she would be home late. She mentioned that she would be having dinner with her friends.

As for myself, I was just sitting there waiting for Miu, not having eaten anything. I didn't have an appetite. I couldn't really get anything down right now.

Tick, tock. Time continued to move forward as the second hand turned.

It was a strange feeling. Even though I was anxious for Miu to get home, a part of me wished time would just stop. That part of me was afraid of her getting home and afraid of having to confront her...but I couldn't run anymore. I needed to face her and finally end everything...

“I’m hooome,” a languid voice called out after the door opened.

“Welcome home, Miu,” I said, greeting her at the entryway as usual. “I want to talk to you about something. Do you mind?”

Miu silently headed to the living room and sat down on the couch. I sat down at the table. I needed to talk to her face to face, but I was afraid that my determination would waver if I actually faced her.

For a few moments, we endured a painful silence before Miu finally spoke up.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” she said impatiently and slightly combatively. “I mean, I can guess what it’s about. We’re going to continue our conversation from the trip, right?”

“I don’t care about that anymore,” I said, shaking my head. “I understand everything now.”

“What...?”

“I finally understand what you were trying to do, Miu,” I said. “All your recent actions have been to get Takkun and I together, right...? It’s just like I initially thought. You pretended to want to date Takkun, to egg me on...”

“Like I said, that’s—”

“But,” I said, interrupting her response. “That wasn’t all, was it?” I knew it wasn’t—still, even though I wasn’t completely off, I was far from the full picture. “You’ve always been rooting for Takkun and I, that’s never changed. You only started to pretend to take him from me because you were trying to push me forward, trying to get me to stop being indecisive and to stop taking advantage of Takkun’s kindness. Setting aside your methods, you did it all wanting to support me, right? But...”

My voice began shaking, and I couldn’t breathe, but I kept working to squeeze the words out. If I stopped now, I knew I might never be able to say what I wanted to say. There was no other choice for me. Once I got the words out, I knew I wouldn’t be able to go back...but I had to say them.

“...the truth is, you like Takkun, right? You’ve loved him since you were a little girl, right?” I asked.

In that moment, I had stepped over a line I could never uncross. It felt like the escape route that should’ve been behind me had quietly shattered, like a layer of thin ice that had suddenly melted.

“Recently, you started saying that you’ll date Takkun and acting like you have feelings for him,” I continued. “I’d thought it was all an act to goad me, but it wasn’t, was it? When you were really acting was before all this started...”

After that, she’d been acting twice over, pretending to pretend that she had feelings for Takumi Aterazawa. It hadn’t been a cover for not liking him, it’d been a cover for liking him—a double-layered facade I’d completely fallen for. I hadn’t been able to realize that she was lying.

“I’m sorry, Miu... I’m sorry I never realized how you felt.”

“So what...?” Miu said, so emotionlessly that I felt a chill run down my spine. “So what if I like Takkun, like you say...? What would you do about that?” she asked coldly, totally stone-faced. She slowly turned to me and shot me a

piercing glare. Her belligerent gaze stabbed deep into my heart. “Would you root for me?”

It was the same thing she’d asked me several weeks ago, but now the situation was different. I now knew how Miu truly felt. I had to make a decision knowing the whole truth.

“Miu, listen very carefully...”

I took a deep breath before I began. The truth was, I wanted to run away—it felt like some unknown pressure was crushing me, and my body cried out for escape...but I had crossed a line I could never return from. There was no turning back.

“I’m your mother,” I said firmly as I got up from my chair and walked toward her. I was now in front of her, facing her head-on as she sat on the couch. “I may not have given birth to you, but I think of you as my real daughter. It might sound pushy and patronizing, but I believe that I wish for your happiness more than anyone else in this world.”

“There isn’t a parent in this world who doesn’t want their child to be happy.” Tomomi’s words ran through my mind. *She’s right. That’s exactly right. Of course a parent wishes for their child’s happiness. A parent who doesn’t want that isn’t a parent at all.*

“I want you to be happy,” I continued. “I would do anything for you to be happy. That’s why I can’t go over your head and date the man you love.”

I couldn’t. There was no way I could. How could a mother take the man her daughter loved? There was no way that could be allowed.

“I’m truly happy that you wanted me to be happy, so much so that you pushed aside your own feelings and rooted for Takkun and I. I’m really grateful for that. But, Miu... I can’t accept that kindness from you because...I’m your mother. Because I want to stay your mother.”

Ten years ago, I had decided to become a mother. I’d skipped all the steps a mother usually experienced, like love, marriage, pregnancy, and giving birth, yet I’d still suddenly become Miu’s mother. Since I hadn’t given birth to her myself, I wasn’t her real mother in a biological sense, but I’d wanted to at least be her

real mother on an emotional level—and so, I'd decided to raise her and give her genuine love just like my sister and her husband had. And that's why I couldn't do it—I couldn't put my feelings as a woman before my feelings as a mother.

"So you're saying that you'll turn Taku down for my sake...?"

"Not exactly... It's more about what kind of parent I want to be. It's all my own problem."

"So, what? Now you're going to root for my relationship with him?"

"Well... Yes. That's what I plan on doing..." My chest tightened with pain, and it became harder to breathe. I clenched my fist as I desperately strung together the words in my mind. "It's how things are supposed to be... No matter how you look at it, it's more natural for you to end up with Takkun."

They were childhood friends that had a slight age gap. Theirs was a regular, classic love story of two friends falling in love. There was no room for the girl's mother to show up. I just wanted to watch over them and say things like, "Aww, it must be nice to be young." Cooing over my daughter's romance had been my role until just two months ago, after all.

It's no big deal. We're just going back to how things used to be. We're just going back to before Takkun told me how he felt. That's normal. That's what's natural. That's what's right...

"That's why I want to cheer you two on... Or...that's what I was *going* to say." My voice was barely there, but I somehow got the words out. "I wanted to cheer you on. That's what I was planning to do. I really, truly felt that way... I was going to turn him down and forget about these last two months, like nothing had ever happened... I wanted to do that and root for you two, but... But..."

The tears I'd been holding back slowly began pouring out. I couldn't keep standing, so I fell to my knees.

Several hours ago, after I had returned from the Aterazawas', at the very moment I had decided to clear the air with Miu—the moment I had decided to tell her that I wasn't going to date Takkun, that I would absolutely be turning

him down—I felt a stinging pain in my heart.

It kept stinging, over and over. My chest was in unbelievable pain, like it had been wrapped tightly in a thin, metal wire. It was an intense, sharp pain.

Why? Why does it hurt this much? Why does my chest hurt so badly? We're just going back in time a little. We're just going back two months, to when I had no idea about Takkun's feelings. That's all it is, so why, why, why...? Why do I hate it so much? I can't be like this. I have to handle things properly because I'm Miu's mother...

“Huh...?” As I was overcome by this unknown pain, I noticed a message on my phone. It was from Takkun.

Takumi: I’m sending you the photos from our trip.

The album folder updated, and photos were added. The photos showed the three of us smiling. It was the pictures we’d taken all over the resort facilities—the pool, the hot springs, the arcade, the restaurant, and even the room we’d stayed in.

Maybe it was because they were photos that Takkun took, but there were slightly more photos of me than the rest of us. On top of that, there were even some photos of just him and me.

The photo album in our messaging app had the photos from our amusement park date stored in a separate folder as well.

“These are...!” As I looked through all the pictures, all my feelings began to boil up.

In the two months since Takkun had told me how he felt, the way I saw him had completely changed. The boy that I had only ever seen as a son or a younger brother was now a man in my eyes.

Thinking back on that time burst the mental dam that was keeping all my memories of the past ten years from flowing out. Even the days when I’d just thought of him as the neighbors’ boy suddenly seemed to have vivid new color as they became part of my precious memories.

My phone buzzed with more messages.

Takumi: I hope we can continue to have joint family trips together every year.

Takumi: Also...

Takumi: If we have the chance, I'd like to go to a pool or a hot spring together sometime, just the two of us.

The moment I saw his message, I broke down crying with my phone in my hand. I finally realized what that stabbing pain in my heart was.

"I'm sorry, Miu... I like Takkun." I finally said it, my hands on the floor supporting my body as I bawled face down. Even though I looked so pathetic, I'd still managed to get the words out. I'd finally come up with an answer for the dilemma I'd been ignoring because I couldn't make up my mind—I was finally acknowledging the feelings I'd been making excuses for this whole time. "I like him... I like him so much I can't stand it!"

I finally admitted it. I'd had to. It was such an ironic, pathetic thing. It'd taken me till the very moment I was going to step back for my daughter's sake to realize how I felt. I couldn't believe I'd needed to be pushed so far to finally confront how I really felt...

"I can't go back to how things were..." I continued. "I can't just smile like I did back when I didn't know anything, because...now I do know. I know how earnestly Takkun thinks about me..."

There was a part of me that wanted to respond to those feelings of his—to reward him. That's not to say my own feelings were just out of obligation, however. I was simply happy. He made me so unbelievably happy with everything he did, and he was so endearing...

"When he first said he liked me, I was confused, and I even panicked... I ran from it, afraid to face him... But Takkun said he would wait for me to come up with an answer, as pathetic as I was. He said he would keep liking me, even

while he waited. How could I not fall for him after all of that?!"

I like him. I love him. I love Takkun.

Once I admitted my feelings, an incredible wave of emotion came over me.

"I'm sorry. I know I'm being selfish. I... I hadn't even realized how he felt until he told me himself... I'd only ever thought of him as my daughter's friend... You've had feelings for him for much, much longer than I have..."

Just as Takkun had loved me for ten years, Miu had likely had feelings for him for the past ten years as well. She'd liked him for so long that she remembered a promise they'd made when they were young. I knew in my head I shouldn't be allowed to steal a move on her and just take him for myself when she'd loved him for so long—it was too selfish of a thing to do. I knew that in my head...but my heart just wouldn't listen anymore.

"I've only started to think of Takkun as a man in the past two months since he confessed his feelings to me... It's a much shorter time than you, Miu... I know, I know, but...even so, I can't help it! It's only been two months, but I'm so unbelievably in love with Takkun, so much that it even makes me laugh...how much I love him..."

My chest tightened as my feelings heightened, and it made it hard to say anything. Even though I couldn't speak properly, it didn't stop the tears from continuing to pour out.

"That's why," I continued, "I can't root for you and Takkun... I don't want to give him to you... I can't give up on these feelings...no matter what." Teardrops rolled down my face onto the floor as I squeezed out the bare truth between gasps. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry, Miu. I'm sorry for being a bad mom... I'm sorry I can't put you first even though I'm your mother..."

Ugh. I can't do this. I'm such a bad mom... I need to give Miu my undivided attention and offer her a heartfelt apology, but I can't stop thinking about Takkun.

Takkun's face when he smiled, when he was angry, when he was sad, when he was a child, his current handsome face... All of them were popping up in my mind and filling my chest with warmth. My heart was overflowing with my

feelings for him, and I couldn't stop it.

"I like Takkun... I love him. I want to date him, and I want to be with him forever... I don't want to lose him, no matter what... That's why, Miu, I'm sorry... I'm really sorry. Please give up on Takkun."

I told her my true feelings as they were, without shame or regard for my own dignity, throwing off my masks as a mother and as an adult. I cried, whining for what I wanted like a young child.

After shouting like I was squeezing my soul out, I felt limp and almost totally lost my balance as I took a small tumble. However, a soft presence caught me gently and wrapped around me—like how a mother would hug her crying child.



“Okay,” a light, gentle voice said by my ear. It was a beautiful voice, as light as a feather. “I have no other choice when you ask me like that. You can have Takkun,” she said in a truly carefree tone before slowly letting go of me. I could finally see my daughter’s face for the first time since I’d burst into tears.

“Jeez, you cried so much. You’re like a kid, mom,” Miu said as she wiped my tears away. She was smiling—it made her look satisfied and blissful. “I’m glad you finally realized how you really feel.”

After I cried a ridiculous amount, Miu and I sat on the couch together until I calmed down. I’d tired myself out crying so much that I was in a daze and leaning on Miu. Despite how pathetic I was being, Miu gently petted my head, as if she were the mother and I was the daughter.

“Hey, Mom...” Miu began in a soft voice. Her tone was kind and calm, like that of a mother reading her daughter a bedtime story. “Do you remember the day I first called you ‘mom’?”

“I remember...” There was no way I could ever forget it. In fact, Miu had just recently scolded me about telling this story. According to her, whenever I got drunk I would bring it up then bawl my eyes out.

“I think it was about a month after my parents died. I woke up in the middle of the night, and I was just sobbing really hard. I’d had a dream about my parents, and everything got really confusing, which made me cry...”

“That’s right...” The memory of that night was so clear, it was like it had happened yesterday. Miu had woken up in the middle of the night and was just crying out of nowhere. The little girl who hadn’t shed a single tear at her parent’s funeral was suddenly bawling.

“I can’t remember the details of the dream, but it must’ve been a really happy one. I’d probably dreamed about having lots of fun and playing with my parents. When I woke up, I realized that it was all a dream. That felt like I was forced to face the fact that they were gone all over again... It made me so sad that I cried.”

When Miu had been younger, she probably hadn’t been able to immediately wrap her head around the fact that her parents had passed away. It’d explain

why she hadn't cried at the funeral and why she'd so easily transitioned to living together with me. However, the dissonance had probably been unhealthy for her—instead of having been able to accept her parents' deaths, her heart had gone numb. Her dream had probably kick-started the emotions her stress had left stalled out.

"That night, you held me the whole time and comforted me..." Miu continued. "But that didn't help me resolve my feelings. That's why I ran away the next night."

I could still recall the regret and fear I'd felt back then. I had been busy with preparing dinner when I'd suddenly realized Miu was nowhere to be found. When I saw her shoes were missing from the entryway, I realized she'd run away.

"There'd been a lot of adults who would try to sugarcoat what'd happened to my parents. Instead of saying they'd 'died,' people would say things like 'They went somewhere far away' or 'They're up in the sky now.' Since I was only five, those things made me have a little hope that my parents were out there somewhere... That's why I decided to go find them. I thought that they might be looking for me too, so we might run into each other. It's really stupid..."

I shook my head. I could never laugh off such earnest feelings of a five-year-old and call them "stupid."

"Well, it's still a childish thought," Miu continued. "About ten minutes after I ran away, I started feeling lonely, but it was dark and I couldn't figure out the way home. Then I panicked and tripped, and I ended up hurting myself... Like most kids who try to run away from home, I ended up curled up in a play structure at a nearby park, crying." Miu told the story like it was a funny memory, but this had probably been a painful, lonely experience for her five-year-old self.

"It was only getting darker, and my skinned knee was hurting... I was so scared that I couldn't stop crying and calling out for my dead parents. That's when..." Miu then turned to me, and looked me right in the eye. "You found me, mom." I didn't know what to say. "You'd gone looking for me, and you found me when I was crying and at my wit's end."

"It's not like I did it on my own... Takkun and Tomomi helped me look for you too."

All in all, Miu probably hadn't even been gone for an hour...but I couldn't imagine how terrifying that had to have been for a small child. I still regretted the fact that I hadn't found her sooner.

"When you found me, you were so mad at first, but then you immediately started crying and hugging me. And then I started crying too..."

"Right, I did do that..." Even though it had been nighttime, I had loudly sobbed without any concern for the people around us.

"That day was when I started accepting the fact that my parents were gone. It was also the day that I started feeling like I wasn't alone in the world. That's why I wanted to stop calling you 'Auntie Ayako' and start calling you 'mom.'" I was stunned to hear her explain it that way.

"Ever since that day, you've been my real mom." Miu closed her eyes for a moment before slowly opening them back up, then she switched gears from the past to the present. "Having lost my parents at a young age, society might pity me for the life I lead, but...in the past ten years, I've never felt alone. I've made tons of good memories, and I've led a fun life. All of it, every single bit of it, is thanks to you, mom. That's why you're not a bad mom."

"Miu..."

"I've said it before, but I consider you to be my real mother. Just like you want me to be happy, I want you to be happy too. That's why you don't have to hold back for my sake. I've always wanted you to just think about what you want."

"What I want...?" When I echoed her statement, Miu puffed up her cheeks in feigned anger.

"You always put me before yourself, mom. Even with everything that's been happening! I guess I'm at fault for starting this, but you only think about how I'm feeling. You always ignore your own feelings," she said, complaining that I never tried to understand myself.

Oh, I see. That's what she meant when she said I don't "get it." I was trying so hard to understand her feelings and what she was thinking that I've been

avoiding thinking about my own feelings. I never tried to confront my own heart until the last possible moment.

“I’d been wanting to hear how you really, truly feel,” Miu explained. “I wanted to know what you were feeling when you took out any concern for me—instead of your feelings as my mother, I wanted to know about Ayako Katsuragi, the woman. So I’m really happy I got to hear your passionate cries of love.”

“Wh—”

“Man, that was really something. I wasn’t sure how many times you were going to say you liked Takkun. It was a little much. I thought I was going to die from secondhand embarrassment,” Miu teased.

“D-Don’t make fun of me!” I exclaimed, feeling incredibly embarrassed.

Miu snickered, but then she took on a calm tone. “You know, you said that you only started thinking of him as a man two months ago, but I don’t think that’s true.”

“What...?”

“I think you just never noticed how you’ve felt about him because he’s always been by your side and you didn’t have to think about it. I think Taku’s confession just helped you realize what you’ve been doing. I mean, it’s *because* you have ten years of memories with him that you’ve totally fallen for him, right?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“It’s exactly like a romance between childhood friends,” Miu said with a laugh.

A romance between childhood friends... Not being able to realize how precious someone is to you because they’ve always been by your side and it just became your normal...

“I think your love for him is real, so you should proudly scream from the mountaintops that you love him without any reservations and without being ashamed.”

“But Miu...are you really all right with this?” The anxiety and hesitation I just couldn’t get rid of slipped out. “Haven’t you liked Takkun this whole time...?”

“Oh, about that...” Miu began, scratching her head. “I don’t like him or anything,” she said awkwardly, looking away.

“Huh...?”

“You were kind of going on and on about it, so I never really found a good moment to deny it, but...I really don’t like him or anything. I’ve said it before, but as a man, I have no feelings for him whatsoever.”

“Huh...? What? Huh?”

“Just like you said, everything I’ve been doing recently was just to egg you on. I really don’t care about Taku in a romantic sense,” she said blankly.

I was completely lost. “Th-Then what about your promise?”

“Promise’...?”

“You said it during our trip, when you were outside the room. You sounded really happy and said, ‘Taku remembers the promise we made.’”

Miu thought for a moment before letting out an “Ohhh...” She seemed uncomfortable as she averted her gaze and looked up at the ceiling. “I guess you heard that after all.”

“Isn’t your promise the one you made with Takkun when you were younger to get married? The one you said you made when you showed him that drawing that we framed...”

“Oh, did you see that drawing in my room?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“I see now... I’d recently dug up that picture, then I randomly put it away somewhere afterward. No wonder you saw it...” Miu looked really troubled. “Um, well. It’s true that Taku and I made a promise based on that drawing, and it *was* a promise related to marriage. I was just really happy that Taku remembered our promise, and I couldn’t help but smile... But that drawing is actually, well... Hmm. I’m not sure how to say this...”

After groaning a bit trying to bring an answer to mind, Miu got up from the couch and bolted around the house, her eyes darting about like she was looking for something. “Aha!” At last, something seemed to catch her eye.

Miu walked over to the table and picked something up. It was the transformation machine gun, the Exciting Heart-Throb Magnum. I had totally forgotten to put it away after playing with it on the table earlier in the day. Miu let out a dry laugh as she posed with the gun, then she pressed the button. The famous line from episode thirty-six played in Hiyumin’s voice.

“My trump card is reversible!”

Chapter 9: The Promise and the Fulfillment



The day after my mom and I had our talk, Satoya invited me out. We were meeting at the café by the train station, which was somewhere we'd met before. According to him, he wanted to see me because he was worried about me.

Taku had apparently asked Satoya for some advice about me, to which he'd said to just trust me or something like that. After thinking about it, Satoya had felt that he hadn't handled the situation very well and got worried about what he'd said, which led to him inviting me out for tea and to check up on me.

What a dutiful guy.

Considering what had already happened, he was a little late to the party. My plans and shenanigans had already wrapped up cleanly.

"I see, so everything's already over," Satoya said wryly after a sip of coffee. I had just finished explaining everything that had taken place. "So, everything worked out exactly how you wanted it to, huh? You're a terrifying high schooler, Miu."

"Ha ha, you're giving me too much credit," I said, laughing him off as I mixed my coffee frappé with my straw. "It didn't go as planned at all. Looking back on it, it was a pretty sloppy plan. My mom and Taku kept doing things that I wasn't expecting... How things actually worked out was pretty messy, so I'm just lucky that the result is exactly what I wanted."

"That being...Miss Ayako realizing how she feels?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I see. I kind of get it, but I kind of don't." Satoya seemed puzzled. "If that was really all you wanted, I'm sure there were plenty of other methods that would've more easily gotten you there. Why did you decide on playing the villain and trying to nudge them closer? It's so roundabout."

“I mean, it wasn’t right.” I explained. “It didn’t seem fair.”

“Fair?”

“Taku has been professing his love for her with everything he’s got, working really hard to go out with my mom. If they were to just date because he wore her down with his persistence, it wouldn’t be fair.”

I knew that these feelings were self-indulgent, but I still couldn’t accept it. I was incredibly frustrated when my mom returned from her first date with Taku and was acting like his showing her affection was something to take for granted.

“That’s why I thought my mom should do her best for this romance as well,” I continued. “I thought I could, for example, make her ruthlessly pursue a man with no regard to the fact that he may be her daughter’s first and longtime love. I wanted her to take this romance that seriously... I wanted her to honestly profess her love for Taku from the bottom of her heart.”

“So that’s why you pretended to like Takumi. You made yourself Miss Ayako’s rival and goaded her.”

“That’s pretty much it. My mom’s been wading in safe waters without a rival up until now, so I thought I needed her to throw her into the deep end and make her feel some urgency and jealousy.”

The result of my plans was...not so great. My mom wasn’t as easy to fool as I’d thought she would be, and she quickly figured me out, realizing that it was all an act. All in all, things just turned out okay.

“Thankfully, I’m all done playing that role. I’m glad it’s over.”

“Are you really?” Satoya asked. The faint smile he’d had on this whole time disappeared, and his gaze sharpened into a serious one. “Are you really happy with how things turned out?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, don’t you *actually* like Takumi, Miu?”

I was stunned by the suggestion. “You pretended to like Takumi as a way to support them, but was that really an act?” Satoya pressed. “Maybe you’re so persistently trying to get them to progress their relationship so you can finally

deal with your feelings and give up on Takumi—”

“You’re completely wrong,” I interrupted, continuing in a casual tone with an exasperated laugh. “You’re so off the mark, Satoya. My goal has always been for them to get together, that’s it. I really don’t think anything of Taku in a romantic sense.” Satoya seemed doubtful, so I took a breath and carried on. “I mean, I am a girl with feelings. If I said I’d *never* looked at Taku as a member of the opposite sex, I’d be lying, but...I love him like family and pretty much don’t have any romantic feelings for him at this point.” I lightly shrugged. “After all, he already turned me down a long time ago.”

It was nine years ago.

“When I’m older, I’m going to marry you!” I said, confessing my feelings to the older boy I loved. I was six years old, so I shared those feelings extremely seriously, without any embarrassment and without trying to show off.

Most adults would have come up with something to appease the child and let it go. It was often considered best to give an innocuous, affirmative answer so as to not upset the child in situations like these. It would of course be strange to take such a statement from a child seriously. But Taku was different.

“I-I’m sorry, Miu!” Taku said, earnestly bowing his eleven-year-old head in apology to a six-year-old’s innocent marriage proposal. “Thank you for saying you want to marry me. That makes me really happy, but...I’m sorry, I can’t marry you.” Taku sounded sincerely sorry. “I like Mommy Ayako,” he declared in all seriousness, his cheeks bashfully turning red.

I blinked in surprise. “You like my mom, Taku...?”

“Yeah...”

“I see...”

“Yeah... I want to marry Mommy Ayako one day.” He continued sharing his embarrassing feelings of love as if he couldn’t contain them. “I can’t be with Mommy Ayako right now, but I’m going to get older, and one day I’ll be an accomplished adult who can. Then I’m going to tell her I like her.”

After he finished detailing his grand plan, he looked me in the eye once more.

“That’s why I have to apologize... I really appreciate your feelings, but I can’t marry you, Miu...” He was so sincere that it was almost funny. He had put his all into considerably turning down the marriage proposal of a six-year-old.

As for myself, I wasn’t actually that shocked. I was mostly surprised because my young self had never expected this. But the gears began to turn, and I gradually started understanding what he was saying.

“You’re going to marry my mom, Taku?”

“I’d like to if I can... I don’t know how Mommy Ayako feels though. I’m younger than her, so she might not pay any attention to me even ten years from now...”

“So, if you marry my mom...would you become my dad?!” I asked, unable to contain my excitement.

“Y-Yeah, I would,” Taku bashfully nodded. “If Mommy Ayako and I get married, I’ll become your new dad, and the three of us would live together as a family. That’s what I want.”

“I want that!” I screamed, overjoyed and excited. “I want that instead! I like you becoming my dad more than marrying you!” That was how I truly felt. It was a scream of happiness from the bottom of my six-year-old heart, exclaiming how I really felt at the time.

Instead of a future where I married Taku, a future where my mom and Taku got married and I was their daughter seemed much more wonderful to me. The older boy I loved and my mom whom I loved would be my parents, and I would get to have the best parents in the world all to myself. That sort of future seemed so much happier to me.

“Good luck, Taku! You have to marry my mom! I’m going to cheer you on lots!”

“Thanks. W-Well, it’s something that’s far in the future though. I probably need to turn twenty at the very least before Mommy Ayako will pay any attention to me...”

“Oh! I need to rewrite my wish!” I grabbed the frame that was on the table. “Taku, help me take this off! I’m going to draw a new one!”

“What...? B-But you drew this one so well...”

“It’s okay! I’m gonna draw it on the back!”

“Wait, um... H-Hold on, Miu! This has to be a secret from your mom, okay?”

“Huh? Why?”

“It just has to, so please keep it a secret. It’ll be a secret between the two of us.”

“Between the two of us... Okay, got it! I won’t tell my mom!”

“It’s a promise, okay?”

“Okay, promise! You promise too, Taku! You have to marry my mom when you’re older!”

“Okay, I promise.”

And so, we made a promise—a promise of marriage, just between the two of us, that he would marry my mom.

After that, we opened up the frame and took out the drawing. I drew a new picture on the back, and wrote a new wish with Taku helping me and teaching me letters. My wish was updated with my dreams for my future. It was a pure wish that my and Taku’s promise would bear fruit.

I made sure that the original drawing was facing forward to hide the drawing on the back, then I put it back in the frame to make sure that my mom wouldn’t find it.



I had said goodbye to Satoya, and was walking home from the café. I took out my phone and made a call.

“Hello? Taku?”

“What’s up?”

“Nothing really, I thought I should just update you on stuff,” I said. “I’m ending the plan where I pretend to like you to goad my mom.” Taku didn’t respond. “It didn’t work out as well as I’d hoped, so I’m just kind of over it. That’s that.”

“This sure is sudden...”

“You don’t seem too excited. I thought you’d be happy to hear it. Oh, are you sad that it’s over now? Maybe you were happy that a high school girl liked you after all, even if it *was* just acting.”

“No, I’m just worn out from all your selfishness,” he responded.

“Ha ha, I see, I see.” After letting out a chuckle, I waited a moment to continue. “Taku... Thank you.”

“I don’t remember doing anything worth thanking me for.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly it. Thank you for not doing anything.”

Recently, Taku had stayed out of things, so much so that it had been unnatural. I’d been acting pretty unhinged with my plan this time, even by my own standards. Everything I was doing had probably been worrying my mom and him, but he hadn’t stopped me. He hadn’t tried to convince me to do something else, or interrogate me either. He’d just silently watched as I thought for myself and acted on those ideas.

“You watched over me because you trusted me, right?”

“Not really... It’s just annoying to deal with you, so I left you alone.”

“Come on, be honest,” I laughed. “Well, either way, the plan’s done with,” I said, trying to wrap the ordeal up. “I won’t do anything weird anymore, so you can relax.”

“That’s a relief.”

"I mean, I probably don't need to anymore..." I added on quietly.

"Huh? What?"

"Nothing. Don't worry about it." I took a deep breath. "It'd be nice if you could marry my mom soon."

"You... Um, well, yeah." He sounded embarrassed, but he couldn't deny that.

"You promised that you would, so you better do it."

"I'll do my best..."

"Hee hee. Good luck then, future dad," I said jokingly before ending the call. My heart felt at peace, like I was refreshed and fully satisfied.

As I walked home, a light breeze washed over me. The wind was slightly warm, yet it felt cool as it passed over me. I looked up and saw a never-ending blue sky, typical of summer.

I'm not sure if heaven actually exists, but if it's there, I'm sure my parents are watching me right now, smiling with relief.

I, Miu Katsuragi, a fifteen-year-old girl, lost my parents at a young age, and society often thought of me as someone unfortunate or pitiful, but...I had a mother I loved, and I also knew a man who loved my mother from the bottom of his heart. He loved me too, and he was doing his best to love me like a daughter.

That's right: I had a dad and mom who loved me, and I loved them too, which probably made me the happiest daughter in the world.



No one was there, but once again, I was knocking on Miu's door out of habit. I went inside and began putting away her clothes in her drawers. As I was about to leave, a picture hanging on her wall caught my eye. I couldn't help but smile at it—happiness felt like it was going to overflow and pour out of me.

It was the back of that drawing from the past that Miu had shown me yesterday. It was the side that had hidden her true wish all these years—the one promise that a young Miu had wished from the bottom of her heart would be fulfilled, the one promise she'd held on to all this time.

The drawing was now displayed with the right side out, since Miu said there was no need to hide it anymore. Indeed, it was, in a sense, a trump card that was reversible.

“I wish that mom and Taku get married and we all become a family.”

That was the wish she’d written on her drawing of me and Takkun smiling with her small self between the two of us. All three of us were happily holding hands. This was what she’d wanted, the promise that she’d held dear all these years.

Looking at the drawing brought up several different feelings for me. I was happy, but also embarrassed, but also feeling like I’d had the rug pulled out from under me. Miu and Takkun had kept this secret promise they’d made as children in their hearts, caring for it like it was a precious treasure. Thinking of my daughter holding that in all these years, my feelings got tangled up, and I felt slightly sad, but more than anything...

“Thank you, Miu.” What came out on top was feelings of gratitude.

Thank you, Miu. Thank you for being my child. Thank you for wishing for my happiness.

Epilogue



Takkun was supposed to come over tonight to tutor Miu. Miu was in her room upstairs, scrambling to finish her homework that she'd barely started—apparently, she'd forgotten that she was told to have it finished by today. I was sitting on the couch in the living room waiting for Takkun to arrive.

"I hope he'll be here soon," I mumbled to myself.

It was strange—my heart was racing, but I felt calm. My mind was in the clouds, but my feet felt firmly on the ground.

It was probably because I had finally figured out my feelings. They wouldn't waver anymore. Thanks to my meddling daughter, I was able to finally realize how I felt about Takkun. After having her push me like that, I couldn't drag my feet any longer.

I closed my eyes, and everything that had happened in the ten years since Takkun and I had met—including everything during the two months since he had asked me out—replayed in my head. There were various Takkuns in my memories, at different ages and making different faces. All of those memories of him sparkled in my mind's eye, but what shone the brightest was how he'd looked recently.

Nowadays, Takkun had the face of a strong young man—the face of the man who said he liked *me*. And...I liked him back. I loved Takkun. It was really strange—once I let myself admit my feelings were romantic, things felt right. I couldn't believe I'd been desperately trying to hide these feelings all this time.

Maybe I've actually liked Takkun for a long time and I just never realized it. Maybe I'd always seen this boy who's ten years younger than me as a man, as someone I could fall in love with from the start...

"Well, that would be a crime," I said, jabbing at my own thoughts. I was starting to get embarrassed at how obviously elated I was. I was excited and in a

good mood, and I felt like I was soaring.

Ah, I want to see him. I want to see him already. Hurry, Takkun. Hurry!

Just then, the bell rang.

“Ah!” *He’s here.*

I leapt up from the couch and ran to the entryway.

“Good evening, Miss Ayako.”

The moment I saw his face, it felt like my heart was going to explode.

Oh, Takkun! I like you. I like you—I like you so much. I love you! What have I been worrying over all this time? What was I so afraid of?

I couldn’t believe that it’d taken me so long to respond to the feelings of such a wonderful man when my answer should’ve been immediately obvious. But it was fine, because now I’d found my answer. Thanks to my daughter, I was able to realize how I really felt.

“Takkun...” I took a step forward.

I’m not going to worry anymore. I won’t be afraid. I love him, and he loves me. That’s all there is to it, and there’s nothing else. There’s nothing stopping us.

All I had to do now was let these feelings burning in my chest take over. Things would turn out all right if I just followed my instincts.

It’s all right, there’s nothing to worry about. We don’t need any words...



And so...with me feeling unusually excited because of everything that had happened with Miu, I ended up going completely mad and skipping a few steps on the road ahead of me, jumping straight into a kiss out of nowhere.

I wasn't sure if it was the kickback from having suppressed my feelings all this time, but both my mind and heart had completely shifted into love mode, and my foot was all the way down on the gas pedal.

Naturally, because of my premature action—because I had skipped multiple firsts and expressed my love to him in such a way—things were going to get a bit hectic before they would settle down. At the end of it all, I became all too aware of how important it was to use your words.

Afterword

When people say that children don't understand how their parents feel, most people are trying to say that children can't comprehend how deeply their parents love them—but I think there are plenty of cases where a child does understand just how much their parents love them, but their parents don't realize that their child understands.

Just like how one might get worried when they send a text and it doesn't get marked as read, if parents don't get a read receipt for the love they send their children, they get worried that their love isn't being communicated. It would be convenient if you could get read receipts for feelings, but unfortunately, such a thing doesn't exist... That's why I think it's important for people to be direct with each other. Whether it's the bond between a parent and child or any other relationship, there's probably no other way to confirm that your love has reached the other than to continuously communicate with them.

With all that said, I'm Kota Nozomi. This is the third volume in this thirty-year-old-single-mother romantic comedy. This time, her daughter joins the fray for a love triangle...or so it seems, then it ends up being that all three of them want the same form of happiness.

I'd planned up to this third volume when I was writing the first volume, so if sales weren't great, I was planning to wrap things up here, but...to my surprise, sales were even better than I'd hoped, so the series will continue on! From here on out is unknown territory, so please be excited for what my future self has in store! I'm also excited to see how things go for these two!

Further, regarding Hawaiian Z, which made an appearance this volume... I don't think it needs to be said, but it's based off of Spa Resort Hawaiians in Fukushima prefecture. However, it's only *based* off of it, so of course there are many differences from the real facility.

At this point, I'd like to make a sudden announcement. The comic adaptation of *You Like Me, Not My Daughter?!* will start releasing soon on the manga app

Manga Park! It'll be available to read on desktop as well, so please give it a read!

And now for my acknowledgements.

To my editor, the great Miyazaki, thank you very much for another great volume. You're always listening to my various selfish complaints, and I'm grateful for that.

To the amazing Giuniu, thank you for another volume of wonderful illustrations. The swimsuit illustrations are really incredible. Also, I apologize for joking about VTuber videos in the bonus story...

And to you, the reader who picked up this book, I give my greatest thanks. I hope to see you all again in volume 4.

Kota Nozomi

You Like Me, Not My Daughter?!

This is the third volume. The editor invited me to write an afterword, so I've been given this page.

This time was all about the mother and daughter! My imagination was running wild coming up with various emotional moments, so I drew this illustration that wasn't particularly asked for when doing the rough draft of the cover. Then, a miracle occurred: a scene depicting something similar was written into the book.

I mean, come on!
What an opportunity!!!
Getting to draw a mommy with a younger boy is awesome, but a mommy with a younger girl is great too!!!

This is why I can't stop coming up with various scenarios in my mind. Thank you, Kota Nozomi, for always creating wonderful stories.

Now that the comic adaptation is underway, it's looking like I'll be able to enjoy even more fun times working on this series.

I hope you all continue to support Mommy Ayako and the rest of the characters.

Giunju

YOU LIKE
ME

NOT MY
DAUGHTER?!

3

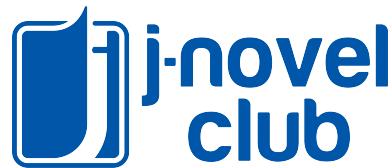
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You Like Me, Not My Daughter?! Volume 3

by Kota Nozomi

Translated by sachisalehi Edited by Zubonjin

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