



YOU LIKE  
**ME!**

NOT MY  
**DAUGHTER?!**

**4**





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





4

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ME,  
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DAUGHTER?!











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



## Prologue

Chapter 1: **The Kiss and the Wandering**

Chapter 2: **The Doctor and the Curtain**

Chapter 3: **The Parents' House and the Sprain**

Chapter 4: **The Confession and the Underwear**

Chapter 5: **The Separation and the Transfer**

Chapter 6: **Work and Love**

## Epilogue

Designer: SHINDOSHA



# Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Chapter 1: The Kiss and the Wandering](#)

[Chapter 2: The Doctor and the Curtain](#)

[Read it if you want! Love Kaiser Glossary 4](#)

[Chapter 3: The Parents' House and the Sprain](#)

[Chapter 4: The Confession and the Underwear](#)

[Chapter 5: The Separation and the Transfer](#)

[Chapter 6: Work and Love](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus High Res Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



# Prologue



“This isn’t good, Ms. Shirando,” I said to the person I was speaking to through the computer screen. I tried to choose my words carefully while avoiding muddying the faults I was pointing out. “The plot outline you sent over for volume 6 is essentially just the same plot as volume 5 all over again, and it doesn’t progress the story whatsoever. I don’t feel your usual spark from this.”

I was on a call with Hakushi Shirando, an author who mainly wrote light novels who was under my purview as an editor. She used to post to web novel sites, and I reached out to her about four years ago and helped her get published. I’ve been her editor ever since.

We’d already worked on several projects together, and currently, we were publishing a romantic comedy series called *KIMIOSA: I Want to Be Your Childhood Friend*. The story followed a college student who’d lived a dull, uneventful life as a teenager, but then he suddenly gained the ability to leap through time. He ended up deciding to use his powers to position himself as the childhood friend of a girl in his college club, altering history such that they’d been friends for years. However, his machinations produced an unintended side effect where his past self had also befriended a second girl during childhood. It was quite an innovative romantic comedy.

Presently, the series had been published up to its fifth volume. It had been popular since the release of its first volume, and there was already an anime adaptation in the works behind the scenes.

Although the name “Hakushi Shirando” was masculine, this author was a woman in her midtwenties. She was young. So young...

“Things were building up at the end of the previous volume, and it seemed like Reiji and Akina were finally going to get together, but if we follow this outline, we’ll be dragging things out instead. I can’t approve of volume 6 having a plot like this,” I said clearly and firmly. It was hard to say these things, but it



wasn't going to benefit anyone if I beat around the bush.

It was plain to see this outline was poorly written. *It's not like her usual work. I wonder what's going on...*

Thankfully, a short conversation with her helped me understand what had happened. "I see, so you were trying to make things work for the anime adaptation. I can't deny that it benefits us when a series lasts as long as possible after it receives an anime adaptation, and you're right that rapidly progressing the primary plot might jeopardize series longevity."

Next, Ms. Shirando was worried about whether readers would maintain interest in the series if the plot moved forward, so I explained, "To be perfectly honest, I can't guarantee that readers will stay excited for the series after Reiji and Akina get together. Today's readership for romantic comedies abhors conclusions, so people might drop off the series after you commit to one."

Although there were many aspects to enjoy in a romantic comedy, the curiosity and anticipation that come from not knowing how the story would conclude were certainly an indispensable part of the experience. In the case of harem rom-coms, the destination was usually the protagonist definitively choosing which love interest he wanted to pursue—even in series with a single love interest, the finish line was typically to resolve the question of how (or whether) the protagonist would fulfill their romance after all the twists and turns they and their partner had experienced.

Given all that, it wouldn't be wrong to say that what truly made romantic comedies enjoyable as stories was that they were processes by which conclusions were reached—the thrill emerged from the tension of watching a romance gradually become fully realized over time. It was analogous to attending a concert: so long as the end wasn't in sight, an onlooker could bask in the exhilaration, but after they'd reached the end of the show and had to acknowledge it'd finished—once the game of love had run its course—there was an undeniable risk that they would focus back on what they once had instead of on what might come next.

"Having them date before the anime begins airing might negatively affect the adaptation. Spoilers might get shared online, and some people might think, 'I



know how it's going to end, so I don't want to watch it,'" I explained. "All that said, however, the most important thing is that the original work is entertaining. The anime is an adaptation, while the book is the original work. There's no point in making the source worse to benefit the adaptation. Of course, it's not always wrong to put things off in the plot, but in this case, you clearly seem to be doing it begrudgingly."

I listened as Ms. Shirando responded to my points. "Of course I know that," I replied. "I've been your editor ever since you made your debut as a published author." After I listened to more of her concerns, I told her, "You should just write the novel the way you want to write it. You don't have to be concerned with the anime, Ms. Shirando. You don't have to think about extending the series or anything of the sort. I think it would be best if you just forget about logistical factors altogether and write what you feel is most natural and best for the series and its characters."

When Ms. Shirando brought up another point, I made sure to affirm her by saying, "That's right. Also, it's not like the series would end just because they started dating. I'm sure there are many readers who want to read about what happens once they go out. I believe there are ways to satisfy those readers with stories that continue on from that point."

She agreed with me, so I decided to reassure her further by saying, "Exactly. There's also the fact that readers will be disappointed if they *don't* get together when things were getting so intense at the end of the previous volume. They'll be annoyed with the characters dragging things out—they'll know that the characters love each other and be confused about why they keep twiddling their thumbs. Even for a slow burn, another volume without them going out would be excessive."

I watched Ms. Shirando nod, and, satisfied we'd settled things, I decided to wrap up our conversation. "So, yes, you should just prioritize trying to make the light novel the best it can be. Please leave the anime to our company. Light Ship will do its best to make sure the adaptation is something you'll be happy with. Right, Yumemi?"

"Of course. Leave it to us," Yumemi responded from her spot beside Ms. Shirando on my screen. This meeting today had actually been happening

between the three of us.

“Actually, I should apologize, Yumemi,” I said. “All three of us were supposed to have a discussion today, but Ms. Shirando and I sort of took over.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Yumemi said, shaking her head. “I’m the one who insisted on being here,” she responded with a smile. “*KIMIOSA* is a project we’ll be working very hard on here at Light Ship. I wanted to see how meetings usually go between you two, but from what I’ve seen today, I don’t foresee any problems. I hope you’ll be able to keep working together like this.”

“Ha ha, thank you.” After Ms. Shirando proceeded to compliment me, I added, “No, no, you’re giving me too much credit, Ms. Shirando! I haven’t done that much at all. It’s all thanks to your wonderful storytelling that the series is so successful and was greenlit for an anime adaptation.”

After that, we discussed a few details regarding the anime adaptation before Ms. Shirando left the meeting, leaving only Yumemi and me in the call.

“It seems like Ms. Shirando’s pretty excited about things,” Yumemi noted.

“Of course she is—it’s her first anime adaptation after all.” An anime adaptation was something special to light novel authors, and it was also exciting for us editors as well.

“I appreciate you being direct with her, but just be careful to not push her too hard.”

“I understand. I’ll do my best to prioritize the author’s health.”

“I could say the same thing about you too, Ayako. Sorry for making you accommodate me by holding this meeting while you’re visiting family.”

“It’s no problem. Ms. Shirando is also giving up her Obon holiday to work, so I can’t slack off,” I said, scanning my surroundings.

I wasn’t in my usual home, the one I shared with Miu, but instead in a room on the second floor of the house I’d spent my childhood in. It was the middle of August, during the first day of the Obon festival holiday. Miu and I were visiting my parents’ house in the north of our prefecture. We’d arrived here around noon, and we were planning to stay roughly two days. My parent’s house had



finally had Wi-Fi set up, so I was able to work with my laptop that I'd brought with me.

"I'm excited for the anime adaptation of *KIMIOSA*," I remarked earnestly.

"Oh, right, it's also a first for you, isn't it?"

"Yes. This is the first time a series I've been in charge of from the beginning has gotten an adaptation."

I'd taken on projects during the middle of production multiple times, but this was going to be the first time that a series that I'd been in charge of from the very beginning was getting an anime adaptation. That was why I was excited—I felt highly motivated, as though it were my own series.

"I want to give my all in every aspect of the project I can, but I guess there's not much that can be done when I live in the Tohoku region," I commented.

These days, even rural areas like where my parents lived were able to accommodate Wi-Fi, and working remotely was being recommended all over—even I myself had managed to stay in a provincial city and get work as an editor in the entertainment industry. However, things were going to be different when it came to an anime adaptation. Unlike book publishing, a wide variety of industries were involved with anime adaptations; each one represented a large project where professionals from various areas, including the publishing industry, voice acting industry, live performance industry, and (naturally) the anime industry itself combined their strengths to sell content. Despite the advanced communication technologies of the current age, being at the center of such a huge project was hard when you weren't living in Tokyo, or at the very least somewhere in the Kanto region.

"I've been thinking about all the different sales promotions I want to do alongside the anime adaptation, but it seems like it'll be difficult for me to run point on things from where I am," I explained. "I'll send over the proposals, so if you could decide whether to roll with them or not, that would be great, Yumemi. For the time being, I'll continue focusing on the light novel with Ms. Shirando as I've been doing, and I'll leave the anime adaptation to you and the team."

"Hmm... Well, I guess that's the only option you have with how things are

right now,” Yumemi said after thinking silently for a moment. The way she said that seemed like she was trying to hint at something else, but before I could ask her about it, she segued. “Anyways,” she began, “how have things been with Takumi?”

I couldn’t say anything to her. I felt my every movement suddenly become clunky and awkward.

“W-Well...”

“You sure did suddenly go stiff out of nowhere. You’re so eloquent when you’re working, and you seemed like such a reliable editor just a few moments ago,” she said with a wry laugh. “I was thinking about how you’ve become so incredible at your job in these past ten years, yet you suddenly become a bit pathetic when it comes to the topic of romance.” I just grumbled in response.

“I guess that means that things are still awkward with Takumi?” she asked.

“Yes...” I nodded—that was the only response I could give.

“I can’t believe you impulsively kissed him yet you’re still not dating... Jeez, what are you doing, Ayako?” she chided me insultingly. “It’s like... Oh, I know. Let me borrow your phrasing: don’t you think you’re dragging things out a bit too long here?”

I gulped.

“I mean, you’ve built up all this excitement, yet you’re not together? Talk about a mood killer,” Yumemi said mockingly. “I’m starting to get annoyed with you guys dragging your feet, twiddling your thumbs... We know you two like each other, but this is excessive, even for a slow burn.”

“C-Come on...” The things that I’d said so haughtily were now coming back to bite me. “That’s unfair, Yumemi. You shouldn’t be mixing fiction with reality like that... Not every author or editor working on a romantic comedy is skilled in romance.”

“Ha ha ha, you’re not wrong,” Yumemi said with a boisterous laugh. “That goes for everybody, not just authors and editors. Fictional romantic comedies, the affairs of celebrities, and the love lives of friends...when it comes to all those things, anyone can say whatever they want as if they’re an authority. But



when you actually become an involved party, nothing goes how you want it to. That's just how dating is."

I didn't know how to respond. I hated how right she was.

As an editor, and even as a reader, it was possible to inspect a situation with a detached point of view and provide clear advice. You could point out how the protagonist isn't really acting in a way that's believable for a male character, or say you think the female lead isn't aggressive enough and makes the story stressful to read, or explain how readers will end up upset with the way the plot is developing. Even outside of romance fiction, it was easy to say whatever you wanted about the affairs and divorces of celebrities.

However, once it was actually about you, it was surprisingly difficult to take action. It was impossible to decide what the best choice was, and even when you could, it was difficult to actually execute. Your mind and body would become completely disconnected, and you'd drag your feet at difficult points in your relationship—so much so that you started hating yourself for it.

"Why don't you try to be objective about this? You should look at your life from the point of view of an editor. How is Ayako the editor going to make Ayako the female lead into a charming character in the age-gap romantic comedy of her life?"

"I'm not the female lead... I mean, it would be pretty cringey for the female lead to be a single mom in her thirties." *If an author I'm in charge of proposed a story like that to me, I'd definitely reject it. I'd convince them by saying, "You know, there are older readers these days, but the main target audience for light novels is middle and high schoolers."*

"Well, maybe it would be a little cringey. Maybe it could be a good story for a publisher that handles adult titles."

"Are you saying that I'm the female lead in an adult title?"

"I mean, you have the boobs for it."

"M-My boobs have nothing to do with this!" *Well, maybe just a little bit! It might be true that in both content for adults and for middle and high schoolers,*

*boob size is an important factor that can affect sales!*

“Well, that’s enough joking around,” Yumemi said. “It’s great that you have this opportunity to temporarily put some distance between you two. Why don’t you use your visit home to calm down and think things through? Think about him, but yourself too.”

I silently nodded as I thought back to the events that took place between my impulsive kiss and my trip back to my parents’ home—to how awkward things had gotten with Takkun. We were supposed to have overcome various obstacles and finally gotten together, but our love story was going to drag out an unbelievable amount, to the point it couldn’t possibly drag out any further.



# Chapter 1: The Kiss and the Wandering



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

This news was earth-shattering and took me by complete surprise, like thunder on a sunny day. Once I'd learned how he felt, our relationship completely changed. We weren't able to just be neighbors anymore.

After various complications, I had landed on holding off on deciding whether I would date Takkun or not. It was a completely pathetic response to being asked out, but the kindhearted Takkun had accepted that decision.

Since then, we'd had several experiences together. There was the time that Takkun had caught a cold and I'd taken care of him, the time that we'd gone on a date, and the time that we'd had no choice but to stay one night at a love hotel together.

Over time, I'd begun to see him as a man and had become attracted to him as a member of the opposite sex.

After that came Miu's declaration of war with me, which had ended with me learning about the true kindness that was hidden behind her plotting. Thanks to my daughter, I was finally able to realize how I felt: I liked Takkun. I *loved* Takkun.

There was no way I could think of him as the neighbors' boy anymore. I'd seen him as a man and fallen for him. Once I just admitted it to myself, it felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest. I couldn't believe that I'd been so troubled for so long over his feelings for me.

What had I even been afraid of? Our age gap? The fact that I had a daughter? It was all ridiculous. There was no point in worrying over such things when Takkun had been screaming his love for me despite already knowing all those things.

If there had been any obstacles keeping us from being together, they were all things that I'd just made up. There was nothing to be afraid of—I had nothing to worry about anymore. He liked me, and I liked him, which meant there was only one thing for me to do here.

*Things will turn out all right if I just follow my instincts. It's all right. There's nothing to worry about. We don't need any words...*is what I'd been thinking after we'd come home from our family trip, two days before the Obon festival holiday had begun, when I'd kissed Takkun in the entryway of my house when he'd come over to tutor Miu. There hadn't been any words exchanged between us—it'd been a complete surprise attack.

If I were to try to explain why I'd done that, I'd say that I had realized my feelings and acknowledged them, which made me feel like everything had come to an end... It was like finishing all the work you had piled up and diving into a long break—an overwhelming sense of freedom. All of my feelings that I'd suppressed until then had exploded, and I had expressed my love in an extreme way despite us having one huge step to clear first.

Takkun had finished tutoring for the day and had headed home. I was in the kitchen, happily washing dishes while humming.

"Hey, mom..." Miu said, walking into the living room. "Taku was totally acting weird today... He was spaced out the whole time, and no matter how many times I called out to him, his mind seemed to be somewhere else," she explained. "Did something happen between you two?"

"Hmm? Well, I guess..." I said, answering ambiguously. I couldn't help but smile. "I guess you could say something happened."

"Wh-What's with that answer? Are you trying to insinuate something?"

"Hee hee. Well, it might be something a little difficult for you to understand. It's something between adults."



“You’re being extremely annoying right now,” Miu complained in a deeply irritated tone. Still, she seemed unable to hide her curiosity, as she asked, “So... What happened?” She was trying to act like she couldn’t care less, but I could tell she was interested.

“Well, you know... There was something. Something memorable.”

*I can’t tell her. No way! It would be embarrassing to tell my daughter about my first kiss with the man I love. Though, to be honest, there’s a small part of me that wants to tell her... I actually want to boast about it!*

“C-Could it be...?” Miu seemed to pick up on what I was suggesting from how I was acting, and she couldn’t wait for an answer. “Did you finally decide to date Takkun?!”

“I guess that’s what’s going to happen...” I said bashfully, and Miu’s eyes glimmered with excitement.

*Yes, that’s right. Takkun and I are finally going out! We’re dating! We’ve become a couple!*

A lot had happened until now, but looking back on it, everything felt like it was just leading up to here. Perhaps all the obstacles and accidents we’d run into were set up to build up excitement for our forbidden love, like in *Romeo and Juliet*!

*Ah, what is this feeling? It’s like I’m invincible! I feel like I could do anything right now! Maybe I should cosplay Hiyumin, since I haven’t done that in a while!*

“Huh... Uh-huh... I see. Hmm... I see.” Miu nodded exaggeratedly, her shock lingering. It seemed like she was experiencing a mixture of surprise and joy. “Finally, huh? I guess you guys are finally tying the knot.”

“T-Tying the knot? Come on... It’s not like we’re getting married yet. It’s too soon for that, silly.”

“Wow, you sure seem happy thinking about it though,” Miu said, exasperated at my embarrassment. “Man, I’m really surprised. You’ve been dragging your feet for so long, but I guess once you’ve made up your mind, you just go for things. I’m impressed, mom.”

“Hee hee.”

“Well, this is all thanks to me setting things up to be perfect for you.”

“That’s, um... Yeah, I’m grateful for that,” I admitted. “It’s all thanks to my brilliant daughter pushing me to move forward.”

“Good, good. Very well, then.” After that playful back-and-forth, a smile came across Miu’s face that looked like she was relieved from the bottom of her heart. “I’m happy for you, Mom.”

“Miu... Thank you. I’m truly grateful.” We both smiled at each other.

*Wow, I’m truly blessed. It’s like the whole world has a rose-colored filter on it.*

My daughter was supporting my happiness, and our little two-person family could dream of the same form of happiness. That was something truly fortunate—a small little miracle, if you will.

*Well, I guess our family might become three people soon... Just kidding, just kidding! I’m moving too fast. It’s too soon for that!*

“So, Mom,” Miu began. Her curiosity wasn’t satisfied, and she had more questions. “What did you say to Taku to make the relationship official?”

“Huh...?” *What did I say...?*

“What do you mean, ‘Huh?’ I’m sure there was something, like a confession of your feelings to him.”

“Oh, *that’s* what you’re talking about,” I said, nodding dramatically with a grin. “You’re so young and naive, Miu... I can’t believe you’re talking about something as low-level as confessing your feelings. Listen up. When two adults love each other, you don’t need to exchange words.”

*That’s right. In romance between adults, there aren’t any words needed. It’s the mature thing to not use many words. Confessing your feelings to someone to ask them out is something that you should graduate from along with school!*





*That kiss was surely enough to communicate my burning hot feelings! One kiss has to be an expression of love worth more than a thousand words!*

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Miu said, kicking my mature, romantic reasoning to the curb.

*Kids these days aren’t very respectful of others’ feelings.*

“Did you say something that led you two to decide that you would date? Like, ‘Sorry for making you wait for my response, I’m looking forward to our relationship,’ or something like that?”

“There wasn’t anything like that...”

“Huh...?” Miu’s cheery demeanor made a sudden sea change to obvious suspicion. “What? You didn’t say anything?”

“No, I didn’t say anything...”

“Did Taku ask you out again, then...?”

“No, that didn’t happen either... Takkun didn’t say anything either...”

“Huh...?” Miu had surpassed suspicion and was now clearly worrying. She seemed like she had been completely bamboozled. “Hey mom,” she hesitantly began, uncertainty in her voice. “Are you actually dating Taku?”

I fell silent.

*Huh?*

“No, you’re not dating.”

The next day, I’d turned to Yumemi for advice, desperate for help. Her response was clear. She had given me a flat-out “No.”

I’d been much too embarrassed to directly ask her for advice, so I had tried to preface things with, “This is about a friend of mine,” but it hadn’t worked.

*Well, I guess I’ve bared my heart to her before and asked for advice, so there’s no need to be embarrassed in front of her after all this time... Still, this time is different. There’s embarrassing, and then there’s this. I mean, how are you supposed to discuss impulsively kissing someone who asked you out, and ask if*

*that means you're dating now?*

"W-We're *not* dating...?"

"Yeah."

"R-Really?"

"Yup, really."

"And you're sure?"

"One hundred percent."

It seemed I was really not dating Takkun, with one-hundred-percent certainty.

"Wh-Whaaat? N-No, I can't believe this..." I fell to my knees and almost dropped my phone.

"*I'm* the one who can't believe this, to be honest," Yumemi said, sounding deeply exasperated. "I actually want to ask why you even thought you were dating in the first place."

"I-I mean, I... Um, you know... Takkun asked me out, and I put off my answer to whether I'd date him or not..."

"You mean you conveniently put him on hold, right?"

"Watch your phrasing!" *I mean, she's not wrong! That's what ended up happening!* "A-Anyways, I was basically keeping him waiting for an answer, so then I kissed him. That's basically like saying, 'Yes, I'll date you,' right? Isn't a kiss a much more eloquent response than any words I could've used?"

"Oh... I see now," Yumemi said, sounding troubled. "I don't fully understand what you're saying, but I think I get the point you're trying to make. Basically, the kiss was your way of saying yes to whether you'll date him."

"Th-That's right." *Of course it's a "Yes." Why would I kiss him if I wasn't going to date him? Well, I guess I hadn't actually thought about it that thoroughly, and it's more like I kissed him because all my emotions just exploded and I got carried away.* "Adults don't bother with confessing their feelings to each other, do they...? Don't you figure things out from the mood and vibe of things...? Like, you just gradually enter into a relationship, right...?" *I feel like that's what adult*

*relationships are supposed to be like. I think I've read something that said so in a book or online.*

“Well, I guess it’s true that you don’t usually formally confess your feelings like a student would, but you still wouldn’t suddenly kiss someone... Honestly, I’m still not even sure I should treat your relationship like an adult relationship, though...” Yumemi explained while waffling a bit. “I guess what’s important is how Takumi reacted, right?”

“Takkun’s reaction...?”

“If your feelings got through to him, then there aren’t any issues, even if it was pretty cringey—I’m sorry, I mean, *overly romantic*—to respond to someone asking you out by kissing them.”

“You corrected yourself too late...” I pointed out. I had fully heard her say it was “pretty cringey.” In fact, she had probably intended for me to hear her say that.

“At the end of the day, your love life is between you two. There’s no clear method to doing things, so as long as you two are happy, that’s all that matters. Indeed, as long as *both* of you are happy.”

I fell silent as I thought over what she said.

“Can you explain what happened in a little more detail?” Yumemi asked. “What did you talk about after the kiss? Be as specific as possible, and try to hold back the lovey-dovey feelings.”

“Umm...” I took a deep breath and thought back to the kiss. I reflected on my rose-colored, glimmering memories of bliss—the exchange we’d had when I’d become in love with love and reached ecstasy—and tried to remove all the subjective elements and be as objective as possible.

Our lips made contact for roughly a full ten seconds. Takkun had become completely frozen, perhaps from surprise. As for me, I took advantage of the fact that he was standing still, wrapping my arms around his neck and...aggressively pressing my lips against his.

It was passionate, intense, and ferocious. I hungrily devoured the softness of

his lips, enjoying the sensation to the fullest.

Eventually, that time of ultimate bliss came to an end. I slowly pulled my lips away from his, reluctant to end the physical contact.

“M-Miss Ayako...?” As I stood there, basking in the afterglow of our kiss, Takkun seemed terribly confused. “Wh-What was that just now...?” he asked, bright red as he asked a perfectly natural question.

I placed my pointer finger on his lips and stopped him from speaking. The spot where my lips had just been touching was now brushing against my finger. It was like I was trying to say there was no need for such a question.

“Mm...”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to say anything, Takkun,” I said in a gentle voice, as if I had become enlightened to all the mysteries of the world. I thought that we didn’t need to exchange any words—that these burning, overflowing feelings couldn’t ever be described to their full extent with language. I thought that one passionate kiss had told him everything I was feeling—that the two of us had finally been brought together...

“Uh... I, um...”

“Go on now. Miu is waiting for you. Good luck with your tutoring.”

“Th-Thank you...” Takkun had seemed confused from start to finish.

He’d seemed like he wanted to say something, to ask something, but in the end, he’d headed up to the second floor where Miu awaited him without getting anything out—without us specifically discussing anything related to dating...

“Wait... We really aren’t dating!” I exclaimed wildly after going over my memories objectively.

*Wait, huh? We’re, like, completely not dating! I wasn’t able to say anything important! I was acting like everything had wrapped up, but all I did was leave him confused without us figuring anything out. How did this happen...?*

From my point of view, I’d thought that the flames of our passion were burning white-hot beneath words unsaid and I’d stuck the landing at the peak



of their intensity, like in the climax of a black-and-white movie...but objectively, nothing had actually happened except the kiss.

*At no point in the entire exchange did I ask how he felt whatsoever!*

“I see. It seems like Takumi had a completely normal reaction. He tried to ask a question when he was suddenly kissed out of nowhere. In a situation like this, that’s where the conversation would usually steer into discussing whether you’ll date...but you completely stopped that from happening.”

*I gasped. Nooo! Wh-What was I thinking?! Why, why?! Why did I interrupt Takkun?! I stopped him, as if to say there was no need for such a question! There totally was a need! It was a really important question!*

*“It’s okay, you don’t have to say anything, Takkun”?! Really?! Why did I act like someone with dating experience?!*

“Jeez, what were you thinking?” Yumemi asked, exasperated. For someone whose words were usually coated in sarcasm or nastiness, it was rare for her to just be purely exasperated. It probably meant that my current situation was just that bad.

“Look, Yumemi... I-I didn’t have any ill intentions, I just got excited and a bit delirious...It felt like I’d overcome every obstacle and finally reached the goal...”

“Well, I get that,” Yumemi said. “I don’t think it was easy for you to acknowledge your feelings for Takumi. There’s your age difference, your daughter, actually thinking of the boy next door as a man, and then your life moving forward... You had to consider a lot of factors, so you needed some time, along with some courage, to make your decision.” I didn’t know what to say. “You were finally able to come to a decision after Miu pushed you to, but... It’s because you spent so long mulling things over that you got so ecstatic and overeager once you finally made your decision.”

“U-Urgh...” She was right. I thought she was spot on.

All the obstacles that’d been keeping Takkun and me from getting together were just things I was worrying about—in other words, everything was solved the instant I’d made up my mind.

In the end, I’d reached the conclusion that I was in love with him. More

specifically, I'd decided I wanted to date him even if it meant taking him from my daughter...but as it turned out, she'd wanted me to be with him too.

After all that worrying was said and done, I'd felt so free, so accomplished. No matter how I'd looked at it, it'd seemed like it was going to be a happily ever after, and that'd filled my heart with joy. As a result, I'd impulsively kissed him and, for some strange reason, tried to act like a cool woman who knew what she was talking about with my "You don't have to say anything" line.

"How do I describe this..." Yumemi pondered. "I guess it's like a college graduate who really struggled with finding a job finally getting an offer from a company they want to work at, but they drank too much celebrating and went a bit crazy, which led to the job offer being rescinded."

"That sounds awful..." That *did* sound horrible—that would be a blunder big enough to dramatically change someone's life. It would just destroy all the hard work they'd done.

"Well, I guess you couldn't help but go crazy. This is your first boyfriend in ten years, right? You've been in a dry spell when it comes to men for the ten years since you took in Miu. It wouldn't be strange for a car you haven't driven in ten years to have issues after you suddenly start the engine."

"Forget ten years, I've never even..."

"Huh...?"

"Oh, no, I..."

"Ayako... Could it be that you—"

"Y-Yes, that's right, I haven't! Is that a problem?! I've never had a boyfriend before!" I yelled angrily, interrupting her before she could say anything. "I-I can't help it, I just haven't been lucky when it comes to meeting people. Both my high school and college had more female than male students, and after I took in Miu, I had other things on my mind..."

"I see," Yumemi replied, sounding like she understood. "I'm sorry for acting surprised. You have nothing to be ashamed of. I don't think it's even that uncommon for people to be in your situation these days. It just means your standards were that high."

*I don't think it's anything like that... I just didn't really meet anyone, nor did I put in the effort to do so.*

"I get it now. So it's not that it's been ten years, but it's your first time going through all of this in general. Knowing that, I can better see why you waffled on your decision and went crazy," she said, neatly summarizing things.

After a moment's consideration, Yumemi had a new question for me. "Now that you mention it, Ayako, if you've never had a boyfriend before...does that mean kissing Takumi was your first time kissing someone?"

"Th-That would be the case, yes."

"I see," Yumemi said with a sigh. "I don't even know what to say to that... You really went off the rails thanks to having your first kiss, huh?"

All I could do was groan in response.

*Really, what in the world was I thinking?! It was my special first kiss! Why did I go crazy like that?!*

"Wh-What should I do...?"

"Haaah, I mean...all you can do is tell him how you feel in words," she said with a sigh. "You have to simply use your words to tell him that you like him and you want to date him."

"Of course..." That was my only option—I had to talk to him like a regular human being and tell him how I felt. I'd gotten carried away and said we didn't need words, but of course we did. How could we not? I knew that. I knew it in my head, but...

"Urgh... Agh... Erm... How am I supposed to face him and say that, though?" *How do I do that after I've kissed him? I'm supposed to go back to the step where we discuss if we'll date? I-It's so awkward... It's totally my own fault, but it's still uncomfortable.*

"You'll just have to do your best to try to explain that you got carried away and gave your answer to him in the form of a kiss."

I couldn't respond. *Doesn't that sound pretty cringey? Wouldn't I come off like someone who has to explain a joke they made?*

“I know it’s uncomfortable, but you should deal with this sooner than later. It’s not fair to Takumi to just leave him in the dark.”

“Urgh... Y-You’re right.”

I kept thinking about how I was feeling, but Takkun was the one who really deserved my attention. Even if I knew what I’d meant to say by kissing him, Takkun was still just fumbling around in the dark right now wondering what was going on.

*Aaah, aaaagh!*

“Takkun definitely must be confused...”

“Yeah, probably...”

“I wonder if he thinks I’m a cringey person...”

“More than that, he might just be put off by you after all this,” Yumemi said, sounding as if she herself were put off by me. “If you just look at the facts objectively, a woman in her thirties suddenly kissed the neighbor’s boy without his consent... It’s not as bad as it could’ve been because he’s twenty, but if he’d been a minor, it could’ve been an actual legal issue...”

I fell silent. It felt like my soul was going to leave my body. I’d gotten so carried away thinking our love was now requited that I’d abandoned traditional communication methods and kind of sort of done something criminal...

*I need to do something about this, but what do I do?*

The following day, all I could think about was how I needed to fix things. I knew that there was only one thing for me to do, but...it was uncomfortable. It was incredibly awkward. I had no idea how to face him.

*Ugh, why did I have to go and kiss him? I feel like if I just hadn’t kissed him, things would’ve been fine. We only have a happily ever after awaiting us, but I made this situation more annoying than it needed to be. It’s like I was on a straightforward path and arbitrarily decided I’d turn it into a maze...*

I couldn’t keep worrying about what to do like this. Even now, Takkun was probably confused and troubled. I needed to deal with this as soon as possible,



but...yeah, it was still uncomfortable.

*I can't just tell him straight out, so I need to come up with a plan... Agh, no, it's no use! I'm probably just going to create another maze for myself anyways. I should just power through it...*

*Come to think of it, I'm the kind of woman who just kisses someone without asking when I'm powering through things and being impulsive anyway. Whether I come up with a proper plan or just go for a forceful attack, I self-destruct either way... Just what kind of woman am I? Ugh, what do I do...*

And so it was that I continued to worry about what to do in agony. However, it turned out that God wasn't so kind that he would give a pathetic woman like me plenty of time to think about what to do.

"Uh..."

"Oh."

I ran into Takkun in front of my house. We were neighbors, so even without trying to, we would always see each other at least once a week—I'd never failed to run into him when I'd come home from buying groceries for dinner. Today he was in a sporty tracksuit and carrying a bag on his shoulder, so he was likely attending a club gathering or something.

"Miss Ayako..." He seemed somewhat bashful and awkward. As for myself... I was way past feeling uncomfortable. "Um, about yesterday..."

*I let out a gasp and quickly looked away from him. Huh? Wait? Wh-Why am I looking away from him? No, this is bad, I shouldn't be doing this. I know I shouldn't, but... My body won't listen to me. I can't look at him.*

Along with an intense nervousness and shame, I was feeling anxiety and guilt over what'd happened yesterday. On top of that, seeing him before me made me feel my love for him all over again. Too many emotions were bubbling up inside me, and my mind went blank. It was all too much.

"Miss Aya—" Takkun said, trying to take a step toward me.

"D-Don't!" I exclaimed, raising my arms to stop him. I reflexively responded in a way that seemed like I was rejecting him. "Hold on... P-Please, just give me a

second...”

I was completely panicking. I had no idea what to say—my mind just wasn’t working. Still, I had to say something... I had to honestly explain that my cringey kiss-based response to him asking me out was just a lapse of judgment due to heightened emotions...

“I-It’s not what you think... What happened yesterday, it was, um... It was a lapse in judgment! That’s why I want you to forget about it...”

“Huh...?” Takkun sounded flustered at me desperately trying to explain things. “It was...a lapse in judgment?”

“Y-Yes, a lapse of judgment, or more like, a spur-of-the-moment thing...”

“It was just...in the spur of the moment...?” Takkun sounded like he was falling into a deep despair.

*Hm? Huh? Wait, hold on. Doesn’t this sound like I’m saying the kiss itself was due to a lapse of judgment?! No, no, no! The lapse in judgment was responding to him with a kiss! It was the fact that I did something cringey mistaking it for a romantic act! That’s the part I want you to forget. The kiss itself, the fact that I wanted to kiss you, wasn’t a lapse in judgment!*

*Th-This is bad... I need to tell him how I actually feel. Otherwise, I come off like a terrible woman who just kissed him for fun then says, “Forget about it.” I’ll be a villain who’s toying with a purehearted young man! It was probably Takkun’s first kiss too...*

“Miss Ayako, were you really being so shallow?”

“N-No, that’s not it! That’s not what I meant... It’s not...” I tried to come up with an excuse, but my brain wasn’t working. The more I panicked, the more my mouth and thoughts stopped working. “It wasn’t careless at all, but... There were some parts of my actions that were driven by impulsiveness... That’s why it was a mistake... Oh! But I don’t mean that I regret it... I mean, I guess I do, but... Agh! This is all wrong... Ugh...” My words were getting so mixed up. My thoughts were a complete tangle.

Regret, irritation, nervousness, guilt, shame... My heart was filled to the brim with various emotions, and it was starting to overflow. I wanted to just run

away, but I couldn't turn back here. If I left now, I would just create a bigger misunderstanding. More than anything, I would hurt Takkun deeply.

I had already left him confused with the kiss. He must've been quite troubled and mixed-up. I couldn't drag things out any further and cause any more confusion. That was the one thing I wanted to avoid.

"J-Just give me a second, Takkun..." I said before taking deep breaths in and out to give myself a mental reset.

*All right. I can do this. I'm going to explain everything right here, right now, even if it's embarrassing, I'm going to put it into actual words. I'm going to tell him how things got to this point and how I feel. I won't say something stupid like "We don't need words." I'm going to properly communicate with him.*

"U-Um, Takkun..." I somehow came up with the determination to open my mouth at the last moment, but the very next second, God decided to give me another challenge.

Indeed, it appeared that God really didn't like me. Perhaps this was my divine punishment for making Takkun wait all this time and dragging him along.

"Oh, hello, you two."

I let out a gasp and jolted.





After I'd gone to all the trouble to stabilize my breathing with deep breaths, I started hyperventilating again.

It was Takkun's mother, Tomomi Aterazawa. She appeared before us, carrying a reusable shopping bag over one arm, as her son and I were facing each other. It was probably just a coincidence—after all, we were neighbors! Next-door neighbors! Even without trying to, we would see each other at least once a week. That didn't only apply to Takkun.

It was the time of day when people began to prepare dinner, and she appeared to be on her way home from grocery shopping, just as I had been. As such, there was absolutely nothing strange about running into her here. It was a coincidence, but still one with a high chance of occurring. Be that as it may, there was no need for this coincidence to happen now!

"Why are you two just standing here?" Tomomi casually asked.

"Um, uh, no reason."

"U-Um..."

Perhaps it was to be expected, but Takkun and I were both completely flustered. We both looked away from Tomomi, and the atmosphere became incredibly uncomfortable.

"Oh...? Could it be?" After her eyes widened for a moment, an awkward smile appeared on her face. "Were you two in the middle of something?"

"M-Mom..." Takkun said, while all I could do was gulp.

We both trembled. Tomomi already knew a bit about our relationship, so she was able to come to some kind of conclusion from the indescribable awkwardness she saw the two of us enveloped in.

"Oh my, I'm sorry... I just called out since I saw you two. I'll get out of your hair, then, so you two can go ahead and continue—"

"Th-There's nothing to continue!" I suddenly yelled, unable to bear any more embarrassment and discomfort. "It's really nothing! We just ran into each other so we were talking... Um, well... I have to start getting dinner ready, so goodbye!"

With that, I left the scene like I was fleeing from some horrifying creature, unable to properly explain anything to Takkun. I was filled with guilt, but I couldn't take it anymore.

*That was too much! I was trying my best because I didn't want to cause any more trouble for Takkun. I was determined, I'd made up my mind, I'd taken my deep breaths, and I'd even mustered up the courage to tell him—but I couldn't handle that! No matter how hard I try, I can't muster up enough courage to tell him how I feel in front of his mother!*

That was everything that'd led up to things being incredibly awkward between the two of us. It was completely my fault, and Takkun hadn't done anything wrong. It was all on me. On top of everything, the timing couldn't have been worse because the following day was the beginning of the Obon holiday. I had plans to visit my parents with Miu, which meant I would be physically away from my home, where the encounter rate with my neighbors was much higher.

"Do you have everything you need, Miu?"

"Yeah."

Early the next morning, we packed everything we needed to stay over at my parents' before getting into the car.

"You brought your summer homework, right?"

"I didn't, but it's fine."

"How is it fine...? I don't think you've done any of your homework yet." I couldn't help but voice my concerns as her parent.

I recalled seeing her take care of some work that Takkun had given her as her tutor, but it seemed like she'd barely made any progress on her homework from school. *Is she really okay? We're already halfway through summer break.*

"I've made my own plan calculating backward from the last day of break, so it's fine. As long as I try after the Obon holiday, I've set things up so I'll definitely finish in time. My math is sound."

"If you can plan that much, why don't you just finish it earlier?"

*Why would you calculate backward from the last day? You should know that your plan will completely fall apart if you get sick for even one day. Well, some of the authors I manage are like that too. They're the type of people who don't get motivated until they're under pressure. Those kinds of people usually catch up with incredible speed after missing their first deadline—the one that it wouldn't destroy the project to miss.*

“Forget about me, are you sure *you* have everything, mom?”

“Me? I’m fine. I made sure to bring my laptop too. Oh right, I meant to tell you, I might have a meeting this afternoon, so you’ll have to go with grandpa and—”

“Not that,” Miu said, interrupting me. “Aren’t you forgetting something mentally? Not physically.”

“Something mentally...?” I echoed, unsure of what she meant.

Miu then turned to look out the passenger’s side window. At the end of her gaze was our next-door neighbors’ house—in other words, the Aterazawas’ home.

“Oh, it’s Taku,” she said suddenly.

I gasped and reflexively hid myself as best I could in the driver’s seat. I tried to curl up so my head couldn’t be seen from outside the car.

“Just kidding,” Miu said nonchalantly after several seconds had passed.

“Huh...? Y-You were kidding?”

“It does seem like you’re forgetting something quite big,” Miu said exasperatedly with a deep sigh.

*Forgetting something mentally...* I finally understood what she meant by that.

“Jeez, why did you hide?” she asked.

“Well... I-I don’t really have a reason. I just feel uncomfortable seeing him right now.”

I wasn’t trying to avoid him, but things were awkward... I wasn’t sure how I was going to face him. I needed to mentally prepare myself first, otherwise I

wouldn't know where to begin to explain things. Because of my internal agonizing, my reflexive response was to hide.

"I can't believe you," Miu said with a deep sigh, sounding truly done with me. "First I think you're dating, but then it's just that you misunderstood things after getting carried away, and then it turns out you're not actually dating yet. Just how badly do you have to mess up to create such a complicated situation?"

"Sh-Shut up..."

"You even got the chance to see Taku yesterday, yet nothing progressed, right?"

"I-It's not my fault! I didn't have a choice... I couldn't just keep talking once Takkun's mother showed up. That's why... Urgh..."

"So, that's how you entered the holiday, leaving things uncomfortable," Miu said, dramatically shrugging her shoulders. "Why don't you just go and take care of things real quick right now?"

"What? N-Now...?"

"Taku's probably at home. Why don't you just deal with it before we leave?" she calmly suggested.

"H-Hold on, Miu... It's not something you just handle so easily." *She's talking about it like it's going to the bathroom before a road trip. They're not the same thing!* "I-It's something very important to the two of us, so we need to set aside time to discuss it properly when we're both ready."

"Isn't the reason things keep dragging on because you're saying things like that?"

"Urgh..."

"Why don't you consider how Taku must feel?" Miu said with a cold gaze. "He's just left hanging. He probably doesn't know what to do right now."

"I know..." I said, nodding while enduring her sharp glare. "I know I'm doing something terrible to Takkun... I won't make him wait any longer, no matter what," I said. I'd made up my mind. "When we get back, I'll meet with Takkun and really talk things out."

After I visited my parents' house and the Obon holiday was over—in other words, in three days—I was going to tell Takkun how I felt. I was going to answer his feelings that had been put on hold for so long by properly communicating how I felt.

“Really?”

“R-Really. I won't put it off any longer. I'm going to message him about it too.”

I pulled out my phone and began typing a message to him. First, an apology about what happened yesterday, followed by an explanation that I was going to be visiting my parents' house, then...

**Ayako:** After I return from visiting my family, I'd like to meet up with you.

**Ayako:** I have something important to tell you.

**Ayako:** So, please... I'd like you to give me just a bit more time.

The moment I went to press the “send” button, I hesitated. Still... I pressed it. I had no other choice but to send the message.

I knew I was being pathetic. Asking for more time after everything that had happened was ridiculous. All the more reason, then, for me to reach out to him—to at least tell him that I was asking him to wait.

“I sent it...”

“Okay,” Miu said, nodding as if she didn't care.

I then started the car and began driving, glancing at the Aterazawas' house as we passed by it.



## Chapter 2: The Doctor and the Curtain



“Man, I just have no idea what’s going on...” I said, venting profusely with a whiskey and soda in hand.

Satoya, who was sitting beside me, snickered at me as I pathetically complained.

It was nighttime on the first day of the Obon holiday, and I was drinking at Satoya’s place. In other words, rather than at a bar, we opted for drinking at home, as college students often chose to do.

Satoya’s parents’ house was out-of-prefecture, so he lived alone in a student apartment. This year, he’d gotten his trip home out of the way in early August to avoid the traffic around the Obon holiday. He’d told me that he would be free during the holiday since his girlfriend would be visiting her parents, so I asked if we could hang out, which led to us drinking at his place.

Neither Satoya nor I were the type to drink often, but I was just in the mood for it today.

“Damn, why am I being kept in suspense like this...?”

“Hee hee, it’s rare to see you come so unglued,” Satoya said as he laughed, probably reveling in the knowledge that he didn’t have to deal with any of this.



Satoya was drinking a canned cocktail. He apparently liked sweet drinks that tasted like juice.

“I’m surprised that you’re drinking out of frustration like this, Takumi.”

“I mean, wouldn’t you want to drink too, if you were me?” I said as I refilled my empty glass with more whiskey and a splash of club soda. I usually tried to balance the alcohol and mixer when I made a whiskey and soda, but I couldn’t care less about the flavor today—whatever got me drunk would be enough. “I really don’t understand Miss Ayako...” Maybe it was because of the alcohol, but words I wouldn’t normally dare to speak just flowed out. “First she kisses me out of nowhere, then she acts all uncomfortable the next day. I thought she would say something, but then my mom suddenly pops up... What the hell is up with that? How’re you gonna lead a guy on this hard? What the hell am I supposed to do?”

For the past few days, all I’d been able to think about was my kiss with Miss Ayako. It was my first kiss ever, and it’d happened like a surprise attack. Not only that, but it was a kiss with someone I’d had unrequited feelings for for several years.

There was no way I couldn’t be happy about it. I’d imagined kissing Miss Ayako countless times over the past ten years, playing out more creepy scenarios in my head than you could shake a stick at. Despite it all, though, this was one scenario I’d never seen coming—not only did *she* suddenly kiss *me*, she started avoiding me immediately after.

“Come on, you’re still able to talk to her, aren’t you?” Satoya said. “She says she wants to see you when she gets back, so you just have to wait a couple more days.”

“Well, that’s true...”

Miss Ayako had messaged me this morning, saying she wanted to meet up with me when she got back and that she wanted some more time. There was no other choice for me but to say yes.

I just had to wait two more days until the Obon holiday was over. Considering that I’d waited ten years to be with her, it was only a short amount of time in

comparison, but still...

“Right now, even a couple days feels so long that I might just die...”

*What does she want to talk about? What is she thinking right now?*

I couldn't help but think of various possibilities, and I just wanted to see if I was correct. The mere three-daylong holiday felt like an eternity.

“Miss Ayako just doesn't get it...” I grumbled. “She doesn't understand how a single casual word or a simple look in passing makes my heart race and throws me for a loop. She's always been like this...”

In the ten years that I'd been in love with her, she'd made my heart pound countless times with her clueless gestures. Miss Ayako had only ever thought of me as a young boy, which had left her defenseless and completely unguarded against my watchful eyes, causing me to end up in quite a few ever so slightly raunchy events.

*Honestly, I've caught a glimpse of her underwear so many times...*

“I've gotten that impression, yeah. I do think Miss Ayako's in the wrong this time,” Satoya said, deeply agreeing with me. “The first time you told me you've spent ten years being in love with a woman who's more than a decade older than you, I wondered what kind of wonderful mature woman could've captured your heart, but...Miss Ayako doesn't really act like an adult.” Satoya laughed wryly before he continued. “I'm sure she's an upstanding member of society and a great mother, but when it comes to romance... I'm not sure if she's just shy or inexperienced, but it feels like she's lacking tact... To be honest, she seems like the annoying type.”

“Hey, stop that! Don't speak badly of Miss Ayako,” I snapped.

“Come on...” Satoya whined, looking as if he'd been betrayed. “I was just trying to cheer you up... You cast the first stone, you know.”

“It's irritating when someone else does it,” I said, taking a glug of my drink. “The truth is, I've thought it too—that Miss Ayako can be a little annoying. I've wondered if she's really in her thirties, but... There's nothing I can do about it. I've fallen for every aspect of her, including her slightly annoying side!”

*Ah, it's no use. I might be a little frustrated by her incomprehensible actions leading me on, but the joy of her kissing me completely outweighs that.*

My anger began to subside, and my feelings for her just welled up.

“Dammit... It’s no use. I love her. No matter how many times she throws me for a loop, I just love her... What is she, some kind of enchantress? She must be a master of romance, driving me crazy like this.”

“No, no. Definitely not that,” Satoya said, completely denying that possibility. “Neither you nor Miss Ayako are anything close to a master of romance... Watching the two of you work toward going out with each other is like spectating a slap fight between two amateurs who don’t really even understand the rules. It’s the dating equivalent of two kids scooping up mud to throw at each other.”

“Urgh...” I couldn’t refute him, so I just took a sip of my drink. It felt like he’d said something pretty horrible, but at the same time, it felt pretty spot on, which left me speechless.

*Amateurs having a slap fight, huh? Maybe that’s true.*

Having been in love with the same person for ten years, I was obviously an amateur when it came to romance. I wasn’t sure about the details of Miss Ayako’s dating history, but at the very least, in the ten years since she’d met me, it didn’t seem like she’d dated anyone, and Miu corroborated that.

We were both probably complete novices when it came to dating. Two amateurs like us desperately hashing things out was probably quite comical to those watching from the outside. It wasn’t such a big surprise for it to seem as compelling as a playground scuffle.

“Going back a bit,” Satoya began in a calm tone. “Just like you said earlier, I think she’s unconsciously had you at her mercy for these past ten years. I mean, she had no idea about how you felt at all. But I don’t think that’s the case anymore. Miss Ayako knows how you feel now, so I think she’s aware of what she’s doing. I think she’s aware of how she’s troubling you—of how much agony she’s putting you through.”

I wasn’t sure what to say—it did make sense.



The day after the kiss, when I'd run into Miss Ayako in front of my house, she'd seemed obviously uncomfortable and acted like she was trying to avoid me. It'd been, generally speaking, rude of her. That said, as she'd stumbled with her words and repeatedly made excuses, she'd seemed panicked and apologetic. I could tell just how desperate and serious she was.

Miss Ayako probably hadn't been avoiding me because she hadn't wanted to see me. She'd probably been struggling with and agonizing over what she should say.

"I understand that it's frustrating and that you want to get a conclusion to things as soon as possible, but I don't think it's anything you should be flustered about," Satoya said. "I think you'll hear the answer you want if you just wait for two more days."

"You never know... There's a chance that she'll turn me down."

"That won't happen... Or at least that's what I think. I guess there's no use in me trying to declare what will or won't happen, since it's all up to Miss Ayako," Satoya said with a wry laugh. "Either way, all you can do is hope for the best and wait. It seems like things were progressing pretty quickly recently, so maybe it's the perfect time for a quick breather between you two."

"Is that how these things work?"

"I think she'll be able to use this time to compose herself a bit too. If Miu's with her, I'm sure her thoughts won't sway negative and run out of control." The way he spoke about her didn't do a whole lot to indicate it, but somehow I got the feeling he trusted Miu.

*Hm. I heard that he met with Miu alone after we got back from the family vacation... I wonder what happened. I guess it was something to make Satoya think Miu was someone worth trusting.*

"I guess it's just a matter of time then," Satoya said.

"Do you mean that as in 'It's only a matter of time!' or as in 'This is gonna need time to get better'?"

"Hm, I guess both."

“Both?” I echoed.

“I think it’ll only be a bit more time until things are resolved, but this short amount of time is probably important to have.” It sounded like he was just being indecisive, but I was willing to take his answer for what it was.

It would only be a short wait, but that wait was necessary. It seemed insignificant, but it was time that couldn’t be skipped. That’s why, in more ways than one, it was a matter of time.

As I sat there slightly impressed by his rhetorical sleight of hand, Satoya ruined everything by adding, “It’s not like I’d know though.” It was like he was trying to shirk responsibility.

“Come on, give me *something* to hang on to!”

“Ha ha, let me give you some advice, Takumi. There’s nothing to gain from conversations had while drunk. It might seem like we’re having a passionate discussion, but we’re just riled up by temporary excitement. Taking anything seriously will just leave you in trouble.”

“You’re right,” I said with a heavy sigh before taking another swig of my drink.

We continued to have unproductive conversations as we enjoyed drinking together, and the hour hand eventually passed nine.

“Hm...? Isn’t the rain kind of loud?”

“You’re right... Whoa, it’s raining a lot harder than I thought,” Satoya said.

We opened the curtains and saw that it was quite the downpour outside. We’d been drinking in a closed room with the TV on, so we hadn’t realized how hard it was raining until it became a severe downpour.

“Damn... The weather report didn’t say it would rain...”

“What do you want to do, Takumi? I can lend you an umbrella if you want.”

“I don’t think an umbrella is going to do much for me in this rain.”

“Why don’t you stay over, then?”

“Ah, yeah. I’ll take you up on that, thanks.”

And so, as college students were wont to do, we decided I’d be staying over at

Satoya's place for the night.

"Hee hee, it's been a while since you've stayed over. I'm getting kind of excited," Satoya said after I finished letting my mother know I'd be staying here. He seemed jovial. "I'm gonna make sure neither of us sleeps a wink."

"You said something like that last time, then fell asleep right away."

"What do you want to do? Do you want to finally take the plunge and try on some makeup?"

"Definitely not."

"Aw, why not? It's fun. Nowadays, even men wear makeup. You shouldn't knock it before you try it."

"I'm sure it would look good on someone with a baby face like yours, but a more rugged guy like me would just look creepy with makeup."

"That's discriminatory. There are cross-dressers who are tall."

"Either way, I'm not doing it."

"Boo! Whatever, there's no point in trying to force you," Satoya said, pouting. "Why don't you share a fun story instead, then?"

"It's not like I can just pull a story out of a hat for you..."

"It's not that hard. Come on, it can be a story about Miss Ayako."

"Miss Ayako?"

"Yeah, her. Surely you've got a tale or two up there in that head of yours. Regale me with a Raunchy Story to Tell in the Dark."

"For the record, you narrowing it down hasn't made it any easier," I said with a sigh.

I wasn't sure if it was because of the alcohol, but Satoya seemed unusually hyper. *It's hard to tell if Satoya's drunk just from looking at him...*

*Man, "a raunchy story to tell in the dark," he says? I mean, if I'm being honest, I do have some of those! I have a bunch of raunchy stories about Miss Ayako! I've made sure to never forget every single standout experience I've had in the past ten years.*

Miss Ayako had only ever thought of me as a young boy, which had left her defenseless, completely unguarded against my watchful eyes, opening the door for lots of happy accidents that were like the icing on the cake for all the years I was able to spend by her side. Her demeanor had given me many stories, to the point that it was difficult to choose.

One story did come to mind, however. It was roughly ten years ago, back when I wasn't so masculine with the way I spoke—back when I called Miss Ayako “Mommy Ayako.” It was a day just like today, where the weather report was wrong and it'd unexpectedly rained.



“So...we had a very fun family barbecue with the Aterazawas and Katsuragis planned for today, but unfortunately, the weather report was wrong and it's started raining,” Mommy Ayako explained disappointedly. We were in the living room of the Katsuragi house. “There's nothing we can really do about the rain, so the barbecue has been rescheduled for next week. But just because we can't cook doesn't mean we can't have lots of fun inside! Woo-hoo!”

“Woo-hoo!” Miu yelled back with her arms in the air, full of energy as a six-year-old.

“W-Woo...” I responded as well, slightly embarrassed as an eleven-year-old.

Just as Mommy Ayako had announced, the Katsuragis and my family were supposed to have a barbecue together. Despite our families' thorough planning, it began raining pretty hard the day of. With no other choice, our parents decided to postpone it.

The news had left Miu extremely disappointed since she was so excited for the barbecue, so Mommy Ayako and I were making a point of playing with her at the Katsuragi home to cheer her up.

“Is there anything you want to do, Takkun?” Mommy Ayako asked.

“Me...? I don't know.”

“We can do anything you want. We can play house, or play with blocks.”

“U-Um...” *Hm... It seems like Mommy Ayako does think of me as if I'm a*

*kindergartner like Miu sometimes. I'm already eleven though! I'm at an age where I spend time on my PlayStation or DS. "There's nothing in particular I want to do, so we can do whatever Miu wants to do."*

"Wow, you're such a good boy for letting the younger person choose, Takkun. I'm so proud of you," Mommy Ayako said. She seemed impressed as she petted my head.

*Urgh... She's definitely treating me like a child.*

"Is there anything *you* want to do then, Miu?" Mommy Ayako asked.

"Ummm..." Miu thought for a moment before answering, "I want to play doctor!"

"D-Doctor?" I echoed.

"Yeah! Did you know that the new Love Kaisers are doctors?" Miu asked.

"I did know that..."

"It's true! This year's *Love Kaiser* series is a medical story!" Mommy Ayako said, taking an intense interest in the topic. "Boy, *Love Kaiser White*... I thought nothing would surprise me after last year's ambitious and problematic *Love Kaiser Joker*, but along comes a Sunday morning cartoon willing to dip its toes into the medical drama genre! I feel like they really got us this time."

I didn't have anything to add, but Mommy Ayako was happy to keep talking about it, so I continued to listen to her. "The main character, who's a doctor, transforms into a Love Kaiser to fight pathogens. Most of the overarching plot points are your typical franchise staples, but beneath the surface, there's a nasty political drama in the series's university hospital. There's cover-ups for medical mistakes, plagiarism of thesis papers, misogyny—as usual—and fierce, gruesome warring between factions... Within the walls of the rotten university hospital, only the scalpel of our genius lone wolf surgeon shines immaculate!"

I was stunned by how hard of a sell she was making, but little did I know she wasn't even finished. "Each series in the franchise goes through the stage in the story where all the ally Love Kaisers need to come together, but in *Love Kaiser White*, they set it up so that the Kaisers need to form a team to perform a difficult surgery. I thought that was really well done. In this week's episode, the

OR nurse who happens to be another loner and medical prodigy finally joins the team, and next week, the master anesthesiologist who always flies solo is apparently going to show up— Oh!”

In the midst of her fervent speech, Mommy Ayako’s mind seemed to snap back to reality, perhaps because she noticed I had such a shocked look on my face. “Th-That’s apparently what the story’s like, anyway,” she added meekly. “I’ve just seen it in passing, so I don’t know that much. Miu likes to watch it, so I just glance over sometimes. Oh, man, the truth is I’d actually like to sleep in on Sunday mornings...”

“Huh? What are you talking about, mom? I said I wouldn’t mind recording it, but you said we have to watch it live no matter— Mmph?”

“Shh, Miu. Shh,” Mommy Ayako said, quickly covering Miu’s mouth when she began sharing the truth.

It appeared that Mommy Ayako was into *Love Kaiser*, the Sunday morning cartoon beloved nationwide. I’d figured that was the case when we went shopping together for Miu’s present last Christmas, but Mommy Ayako seemed to think she was hiding it from me.

*I don’t think there’s anything to be embarrassed about. I guess she must have a sense of pride about it as an adult that I just don’t understand.*

Either way, I didn’t think it was right for me to hurt Mommy Ayako’s dignity, so I decided to take a hint and pretend I didn’t notice.

“Okay then, let’s play doctor like Miu wanted,” Mommy Ayako said. She then headed up to the second floor to get some toys. She brought back a doctor’s play set, which included things like a toy syringe and stethoscope.

“Here you go, Taku!” Miu said, handing me a toy. “You be the doctor.”

“Huh? You want me to do it? Shouldn’t you be the doctor?”

“It’s okay, I’m going to be Jinko and tell you off when you make a mistake.”

“What...?” I said, confused.

“Oh, she’s talking about last week,” Mommy Ayako said, nodding understandingly. “The main character, Jinko, used her genius-level



observational skills to catch a disease that the physician missed. That was such a cool scene. Even though she's a surgeon, she's even better at examining patients than her hospital's physician. I suppose it's just a matter of course when you're working with the genius lone wolf surgeon, Jinko Utouzaka. Then, when the physician who made a mistake comes to see her later and thank her, all she has to say is 'Incompetent doctors are an affront to humanity.' That arrogance and utter intolerance for failure of hers... I can't get enough of that queen-bee personality! You really get it, don't you Miu? Picking a scene like that."

I decided to refrain from adding anything to that conversation, but it did get me thinking, *Right. I remember a scene like that. I had to wonder if it's okay for the protagonist of a kid's show to say something like that.* Even for as young as I was, that scene had given me pause.

In any case, it appeared that I was to play the background physician who was there to make the genius surgeon protagonist look good.

"Takkun's the physician, and Miu's Jinko, so... I guess I'll be the patient who gets misdiagnosed."

Now that our roles were decided, we took our places. I put the stethoscope around my neck and sat on the floor, and Mommy Ayako sat in front of me. Miu was standing at a distance from us—the position where the protagonist would be to walk by right as the examination was wrapping up. Now that we were prepared, it was time to start playing doctor.

"Umm..." I wasn't sure what to do now.

"Takkun, you can just make things up here. The beginning of the exam isn't in the show, so don't worry about it too much. Don't be afraid to improvise for now," Mommy Ayako whispered to me.

Though it felt like she was kindly giving me advice, it also felt like she was threatening me by saying she wouldn't let me off the hook for messing up anything that was a scene in the actual show, and I was a bit afraid.

"Uh, so, Miss Katsuragi," I began. "What brings you in today?"

"Cough, cough. I haven't stopped coughing since yesterday."

“A cough? That sounds like it must have been rough.”

“Cough, cough. Please help me get better, doctor.”

Miss Ayako and I went back and forth, playing doctor. *We’re doing this for Miu, but she’s pretty much completely left out*, I thought, but I decided not to worry about it too much.

“Let me take a listen then,” I said, making a half-hearted effort to try to sound like a doctor. But then, I realized what I’d set up. *Wait. Huh? That would mean listening to her chest...*

“Go ahead, doctor,” Mommy Ayako said, leaning forward, completely unaware I was growing flustered. She then pretended to pull her T-shirt up.

I felt relieved she didn’t actually pull it up, but all the same, Mommy Ayako was now totally sticking her chest out toward me.

I gulped. *Th-They’re big... Mommy Ayako’s chest is huge...*

Mommy Ayako had thrust out her large breasts, which were perhaps as big as my own head, without any hesitation at all. I was overwhelmed by the massiveness.

“What’s wrong, Takkun...?” Mommy Ayako asked, probably confused as to why I’d frozen up. “Come on, hurry up and tap me with the stethoscope.”

All I could do was groan in response.

*So, that’s what’s going to happen after all?! Does that mean I can touch Mommy Ayako’s chest with this toy stethoscope?! Wh-What do I do...?*

*I would just be pressing the stethoscope against her, so I technically won’t actually be touching her, but... If I touch her using a small toy like this, I might be able to tell how it would feel. It wouldn’t be too different from having used my hand.*

*Agh, Mommy Ayako’s large chest... If I had to choose between wanting to touch it and not wanting to, well... Well, I want to, but... N-No, no! I definitely can’t! I can’t use a child’s playtime as an excuse to touch her chest! This is no time for such dirty thoughts! I would be betraying Mommy Ayako’s trust in me! Well, it’s not like she trusts me, exactly, it’s just that she thinks of me as a child...*

*Agh, what do I do?*

I couldn't touch her—I couldn't do something so dishonest. At the same time, if I hesitated here, she would find out that I was looking at her like *that*, and that would embarrass her as well.

*Maybe pretending to be an innocent child and just touching her would be the best way to avoid hurting her feelings... No, but it wouldn't be right to trick her like that... Argh, aaagh!*

"Takkun?" Mommy Ayako stared at me, looking worried as I sat there overcome with intense agony. Just then...

"Come on, do it right, mom," Miu said, sounding displeased as she waited for her appearance. She ran over to us, stood behind Mommy Ayako, and said, "When the doctor's going to tap you, you're supposed to do *this!*" Just as she finished speaking, Miu reached over and swiftly pulled up Mommy Ayako's T-shirt from behind, causing the two large breasts caged within to plop down with a fierce jiggle.

I gasped, lacking the quick wit to react courteously to the sudden situation before me. I even forgot to look away and ended up just staring—I was totally drawn to the sight of Mommy Ayako's boobs, held inside her bra though they were.

There was an indescribable air of maturity to her purple bra, which was decorated with detailed embroidery. Even though her bra was huge, Mommy Ayako's chest was still crammed tightly inside it. On top of that, it looked like the bra had shifted out of place because of how violently her T-shirt had been pulled up, and—

"Eek!"



The moment Mommy Ayako realized what had happened and screamed, my mind finally snapped back to reality. “A-Ahhh!” I screamed too, though it was a bit late, and dramatically looked away. My heart was pounding out of my chest, and my face felt incredibly hot.

*I... I just saw something incredible. I’ve accidentally witnessed something insane! They just popped out, like an explosion!*

“H-Hey, Miu, you can’t do that...” Mommy Ayako said, scolding Miu as she readjusted her shirt.

“But...you’re supposed to show your chest to the doctor,” Miu complained.

“We’re just playing right now, so we don’t have to,” Mommy Ayako said, looking embarrassed as she wriggled around to adjust her bra through her shirt.

Watching Mommy Ayako slightly blush as she tried to fix her bra left me feeling very unsettled...

“I’m sorry you had to see that, Takkun.”

“I-It’s okay, I’m fine.” I still felt worked up, but I somehow managed to act calm.

“I’m glad though,” Mommy Ayako said with a sigh. She nervously smiled. “Thank goodness it was *you* who saw, Takkun.”

“Huh...?”

“If it were your dad, it would’ve been such a mess.”

I didn’t know what to say. Mommy Ayako’s offhand statement threw cold water on all the simmering excitement I’d been feeling.

*Why? What difference does it make that it was me?* Mommy Ayako didn’t mind me seeing her chest, but she seemed to not like the idea of my dad seeing it.

I realized why by thinking about it a little bit more. To Mommy Ayako, my dad was a “man,” but I was just a “child.” It would have been embarrassing for a man to see her in her underwear, but there was nothing shocking about me seeing her like that because I was a child. I was no different from a son or

younger brother to her.

From Mommy Ayako's perspective, I wasn't someone to be thought of as a man.

We finished playing doctor soon after that. We'd gotten to the scene from the show where the main character, played by Miu in our recreation, takes over the examination, but Mommy Ayako began giving some passionate notes on Miu's acting.

"Agh, that's not the line, Miu!"

"No, no. Jinko wouldn't say that!"

"No, it's like this. *This* is how you do Jinko's signature pose!"

Unsurprisingly, Miu became obviously bored and said, "I don't wanna do this anymore," which brought an end to our game of doctor. I asked her what she wanted to do next, to which she responded, "Um... Hide-and-seek!"

So it was that our next activity was hide-and-seek inside the house—definitely a popular choice among kids on rainy days. Using the impartial method of rock-paper-scissors, it was decided that Miu would be seeking, leaving Mommy Ayako and I as the ones hiding.

"One... Two... Three," Miu slowly and loudly began counting aloud, keeping her eyes shut while she stood in a corner of the entryway.

Mommy Ayako immediately headed upstairs, while I wandered around the first floor.

*All right then, where should I hide?*

The important thing for me to keep in mind was that this was someone else's home. Even if we were very friendly neighbors, I wasn't a member of this household—that is to say, I was a guest, not a family member. It wouldn't have been right of me to snoop around too much. I didn't feel comfortable heading upstairs without permission just because it was for the game, nor did it feel right to open their storage spaces like closets and such. I was an upper-grade elementary schooler—I had enough common sense to know I shouldn't do such things.



*Even if I do snoop around and hide somewhere private without permission, Mommy Ayako might not get mad. I feel like she'd just laugh it off and say, "You're basically a member of this family, Takkun." That doesn't mean I should take advantage of her kindness though.*

This was an issue of common sense and manners. Other people's homes were not my own, so it was on me to handle the things in others' homes with due courtesy. I wanted to be a polite person with a good understanding of common sense, but most of all, I wanted Mommy Ayako to think, "Wow, Takkun is such a well-mannered man." Given my dedication to picking a sufficiently conscientious hiding place, my options were quite limited.

There was yet another factor I needed to consider: this game of hide-and-seek was mainly for Miu. Her happiness was the highest priority, so it didn't make sense for me to try too hard when hiding. I wasn't going to gain anything by competing seriously against a girl who was a whole five years younger than me. Places where it would be too difficult to find me needed to be off-limits.

Still, I couldn't choose somewhere too easy. If Miu discerned that I deliberately didn't try to hide, she might sulk. I needed to find somewhere appropriately obscured where she would both have to make an effort to look for me while also still being able to eventually find me.

To summarize, my hiding place had to fulfill two requirements: it had to be somewhere acceptable for a guest to enter, and it had to be somewhere Miu would be satisfied to find me.

"Hm... Oh. That place might be good," I said, thinking aloud. I'd made my way to the living room, where I found a good spot that met both my requirements—the curtains by the windows.

*I could wrap myself up behind those. Yeah, I think that's a pretty good spot.*

The living room was where we were just playing, so I didn't have to worry about the guest issue. The curtains were long, so if I hid in them, it would probably be surprisingly difficult to find me. I wouldn't be able to stop the curtains from looking a little inflated, though, so it wouldn't be too hard to notice I'm there when Miu was trying to find me.

*I think I found a pretty good spot,* I thought as I nodded to myself.

“Fifty-two... Fifty-three... Fifty-four...”

I still had time before Miu would finish counting, but I decided to hide early. I wrapped the curtain fabric around myself and did my best to seem natural. I was going to try to stay completely hidden at first, but if Miu was having a hard time, I could stick out my hand or foot.

I stood there, trying to breathe quietly. Then, when Miu had counted to seventy, something unexpected happened—the curtains were suddenly flung open.

“Huh...?” I was surprised. Miu wasn’t done counting, so I thought she had jumped the gun, but...

“Takkun...?” It was Mommy Ayako. “You were hiding here? I couldn’t tell at all.”

“Wh-What are you doing here? I thought you went upstairs...”

“Oh, that was a fake-out.”

“A fake-out...?”

“I loudly stomped upstairs, then I quietly sneaked back down. That way, Miu will think I hid upstairs.” I didn’t know what to say. “Hee hee, this is the way an adult strategizes,” Mommy Ayako boasted.

I wasn’t sure how to feel about this. Mommy Ayako was taking this game totally seriously, pulling out some strange tricks to win at hide-and-seek with her six-year-old daughter.

*That’s...That’s so immature!*

“I *was* going to hide in the storage closet of the tatami room after directing her attention to the second floor, but I ran into some unexpected complications...”

“Complications...?”

“I-I couldn’t fit inside...” Truly, she’d been headed off the pass by an insurmountable problem. “There were more things stored there than I’d thought, and I thought I could just barely fit inside, but my butt just kept getting stuck at the last second. Oh, but it’s not what you think! It’s not like I have a big

butt, or that I gained weight recently, or anything like that! There are just some spaces that are impossible for an adult's butt to fit into..." She was really desperate to try to explain herself. "That's why I was rushing to find a different hiding spot, but... I see, you're hiding here. Shoot, what should I do...?"

Mommy Ayako seemed totally lost, and Miu was already in the nineties. "Agh, I don't have any more time!" At her wit's end, Mommy Ayako did something totally unexpected. "All right, let me in, Takkun!"

"What?!"

Before I could say yes or no, Mommy Ayako jumped inside, wrapping the curtain around her body. Of course, I was wrapped up with her. We were covered by the same, large sheet of cloth, and coming into contact more than ever before.

"Huh, what...?!" I repeated.

"Ah, don't move, Takkun. Miu will find us. Come on, get closer to me. We have to make ourselves smaller."

"Mmgh?!" I reflexively tried to distance myself, but Mommy Ayako forcefully held me closer. She squeezed me tightly, trying to do everything she could to make us appear smaller. Because of our height difference, my face ended up completely buried in her large chest.

"Hundred! Ready or not, here I come!" Miu yelled spiritedly upon finishing counting. Following her voice, I could hear her footsteps rushing up the stairs.

"Okay, it sounds like Miu fell for my plan and headed upstairs. I think we've bought ourselves plenty of time." Mommy Ayako seemed genuinely happy, but I couldn't care less about winning right now.

*Is there any point to buying time in this game? It won't end until we're found anyways,* is what I wanted to say, but it wasn't what was at the forefront of my mind.

*Whoa. Whoaa?! What's going on?! What's this crazy situation?! My entire face is buried in boobs... No. You could say that I'm squished between them.*

Because of how strongly I was pressed against her body, I could feel how soft

Mommy Ayako was, even from over her clothes. It wasn't just her boobs that were soft, but her stomach, her thighs... It was like all the different supple parts of her body were wrapping around my small frame.

Mommy Ayako's body was large, soft, and warm... On top of that, she smelled nice. I knew it was rude to sniff someone, but my nose was buried in her chest, so her scent was unavoidable.

There we were, sandwiched in the dimly lit space between the blackout curtains and the wall. With how close we were to each other, I couldn't help but feel her warmth and her softness and take in her smell... I was experiencing all these nonvisual aspects of her for the first time, and it was much too stimulating—my heart wouldn't stop racing. I was going to lose my mind from the excitement and nervousness of it all...

"Takkun, are you all right?" Mommy Ayako asked, sounding worried. It was probably because I hadn't said a single word.

"I-I'm okay..."

"If you say so. Just hold tight a little longer, then. The real challenge starts when Miu gets back downstairs."

*Why are you taking this game so seriously, Mommy Ayako?*

Five minutes passed, but Miu still hadn't returned downstairs. She was probably really focused on looking upstairs.

Back on the first floor, I was desperately trying to endure the close contact with Miss Ayako, but then I was hit with a second attack.

"It's getting a little hot," Mommy Ayako said with an exhale.

It was indeed. Not only were we hugging each other, but we were wrapped up in a curtain—it was only natural for heat to build up inside. It was only a little warm, just enough to get a little sweaty, but that little bit of sweat was a fatal blow to me.

Words would fail to describe how the hot air engulfing us felt. The scent wafting off Mommy Ayako was growing ever stronger, ever more intense.

My eyes had gotten used to darkness, and I could clearly see her massive

boobs before me, along with her deep, deep cleavage. I could see small beads of sweat sitting atop her bare skin, and...I was losing my mind. I was about to abandon all reason and forsake my common sense and let my mind focus entirely on the boobs in front of me, and how I could just—

*No, I can't! No! What am I thinking?! That's completely unacceptable! Mommy Ayako is just being unguarded because she knows I'm not that kind of kid! I can't betray her trust. She just touches me and lets me touch her without hesitation because she sees me as a child... I'm just... I'm...*

Once I broke out of my silent contemplation, I looked up, and my eyes met Mommy Ayako's.

"Hmm? Is something wrong, Takkun?" Mommy Ayako looked totally comfortable.

Of course, her forehead seemed a little damp from the heat building up inside the curtain, but she seemed comfortable in a way unrelated to the physical temperature of our hiding spot—she looked calm, like she was completely composed. I was on the verge of falling into a total panic from the excitement and embarrassment of it all, but Mommy Ayako didn't seem the slightest bit flustered—even though we were right up against each other and I was all over her boobs.

"Are *you* fine, Mommy Ayako...?" The feelings I didn't dare to put into words nevertheless leaked out a little.

"Huh?"

"Isn't this uncomfortable? You know, um, being so up close to me and touching like this."

"Well..." Mommy Ayako looked perplexed, like she didn't understand the intentions of my question. "Of course I'm not uncomfortable."

"Would you get close to just anyone and touch them like this?"

"Wh-What?! I wouldn't do that..." Mommy Ayako asserted, seeming a bit troubled by the question. "I mean, if it was a boy I didn't know, I wouldn't touch them and hug them like this. I'm sure they wouldn't want me to do that either, but..." She continued with a very gentle smile. "I don't mind since it's you,

Takkun—I love you.”

I fell silent. For some reason, her “I love you” made my heart fill with pain.

Mommy Ayako probably liked me. This wasn’t me being conceited, I just believed it was an objective fact. There was no doubt that she had positive feelings toward me...but her “liking” me was completely different from my “liking” her. It was the way someone felt toward their younger brother or their child, not a member of the opposite sex. That was why she didn’t hesitate to touch me and didn’t get flustered just because we were hugging or anything. Even if I saw her in her underwear, or even if we were completely pressed up against each other, Mommy Ayako wouldn’t think anything of it.

While my heart was beating out of my chest, Mommy Ayako wasn’t feeling anything about what was happening. I was someone she could unthinkingly say “I love you” to. It made me so incredibly frustrated.

“Oh! I see your feet!” Miu loudly yelled. The curtain was immediately opened, and Mommy Ayako and I were found. “Found you!”

“Oh... It looks like we’ve been found.”

“I didn’t know you were here... I thought you were definitely upstairs,” Miu said.

“Heh heh, you still have lots to learn, Miu,” Mommy Ayako chuckled.

“But you can’t hide together! Now we don’t know who’s the next seeker.”

“Oh, that’s true...” Mommy Ayako said. “Um, then...”

“I’ll be the seeker,” I said, heading to the entryway before either of them could respond. I closed my eyes and began counting to a hundred.

I was doing my best to act normal, but my body felt incredibly hot. It wasn’t because my face had been buried in Mommy Ayako’s boobs—that excitement and embarrassment had instantly disappeared. What was really burning me up was the disappointment, frustration, and panic I felt from how she’d just treated me. I knew that it was wrong to feel this way, that it was expected for Mommy Ayako to treat me like a child—after all, I *was* just a child. No matter how mature I tried to act, I was just a kid, so it was perfectly normal for her to



treat me like one.

Yes, it was perfectly normal...for now. But the same didn't go for the future. Once I became an adult and grew taller, Mommy Ayako's view of me would definitely have to change. She would surely see me as a man, I thought.

That was why I was committed to doing my best. I was going to play the long game.

*One day, I'm going to become a man who makes Mommy Ayako's heart race, no matter what!*



Satoya had wanted me to share a raunchy story from the past, but just telling him a story outright felt like it would be devaluing a precious memory of mine and also be an invasion of Miss Ayako's privacy, so I'd tried to make the story as PG and innocuous as possible...but it seemed to just make the story boring.

"So, my point is... I'm repeating myself, but Miss Ayako is just an incredibly charming woman, and... Huh?"

Before I knew it, Satoya had fallen asleep. He'd laid his head down on the table with a canned cocktail still in hand. I could hear the faint sound of his breathing coming from his pretty sleeping face. "So, you fell asleep after all," I muttered with a sigh.

His declaration that we wouldn't be sleeping tonight was just a lead-up to what I knew would happen.

*Well, I might've bored him to sleep. After trying to get rid of all the raunchy elements, the story was just me complimenting Miss Ayako.*

I carried Satoya bridal-style to his bed so he could sleep there before returning to the table alone and gulping down the rest of my drink.

"Hide-and-seek, huh...?"

Recalling the past awakened my feelings from that time as well.

*That's right. She was only treating me like a kid back then, so I got to have all those happy accidents. It was the icing on the cake of all those memories.*

But my younger self hadn't thought of those moments that fondly. I'd been able to feel her chest without her getting upset or feeling uncomfortable, which was surely a privilege many men around the world longed for, but I hadn't felt grateful at all.

I *had* been a little happy about it, as excited as a child could get about something like that, but more than anything, I'd been frustrated by the fact that she'd been treating me like a child—it'd been so disappointing that she hadn't thought of me as a man. I'd sincerely wished to grow up quickly.

"What a happy story this is," I said with a smile. "She used to only think of me as the neighbor's kid, but now, I get to agonize over whether we're going to date or not."

In a sense, my dream had come true. I might be close to what I'd dreamed of as a child: a man who could make Miss Ayako's heart race.

I had no idea what she was currently thinking, but judging by her recent bizarre and incomprehensible actions, she was probably struggling and feeling lost. I wasn't sure how things were going to turn out, but I decided it was best to let my feelings calm down so I could enjoy the happiness of this current situation. After all, ending up in a romantic-comedy-esque situation like this with Miss Ayako was something my childhood self could only dream of.

As I sat there silently, I thought about how having time like this was perhaps a good thing after all. I got to look back on the past and take some time to collect myself after having all these impatient feelings.

*I'm mentally prepared now. I'm going to accept it—no matter what she decides, I'm going to accept it without running from it. Then, I'll tell her again. I'll tell her that I still love her, that no matter what she decides, my feelings won't change. Just like they haven't for the past ten years.*

# Read it if you want! *Love Kaiser* Glossary 4

## *Love Kaiser White*

The fifth series in the nationally popular Sunday morning animation franchise *Love Kaiser*. Its tagline is “Her pure white runs redder than blood and blacker than darkness.”

*Love Kaiser White* revolves around the practice of medicine. The series takes place in a university hospital, where doctors fight to cure patients who have been infected by the Incurablen virus, a kind of pathogenic monster.

*Love Kaiser White* is generally a classic magical girl series, with the main characters transforming to take down the virus monsters, but a majority of the story focuses on the slough of political drama and factional conflict within the university hospital. Several episodes focus only on the medical drama aspect and end without any of the characters transforming even once.

Several medical professionals oversaw production, which helped the show depict extremely realistic treatment methods and interpersonal relationships within medical offices. The show’s authenticity would become its defining trait.

From the very first episode, where the sudden death of a patient encouraged the audience to consider the idea of dignified death, the show cemented itself as a challenging addition to the *Love Kaiser* franchise in a way that was distinct from the previous entry, *Joker*.

When the Love Kaisers in *Love Kaiser White* transform, they become smaller than one micrometer and enter their patients’ bodies to fight the Incurablen directly. However, the main character Jinko Utouzaka (discussed in the following section) is often shown to lack faith in that method, frequently forgoing transforming in favor of using contemporary medical techniques and surgical procedures to exterminate the virus.

The Love Kaisers’ weapons, which they used to transform, were mainly based on medical equipment, such as scalpels, syringes, and surgical scissors.

In episode three, there was a scene where Jinko snapped at an inexperienced doctor and yelled, “You have no business holding a scalpel with such lukewarm resolve!” Children watching were terrified by her threatening attitude, and this fear led to an unfortunate phenomenon where these young viewers were reportedly uninterested in having the toy version of Jinko’s scalpel due to reasons like “Jinko will get mad at me, so I don’t want it.” Perhaps due to this incident, toy sales were stagnant despite the series’ critical success.

## **Jinko Utouzaka**

A twenty-eight-year-old surgeon. Jinko is the oldest main character in all fourteen installments of the *Love Kaiser* franchise to date (excluding, of course, several non-human main characters). All of the Love Kaisers who join her are also adults and medical professionals—all in all, the average age of the Kaisers who appear in the series is thirty-two.

Jinko is a genius lone-wolf surgeon. Her incredible skill leaves her unrivaled in her specialization, and she performs even the most difficult surgeries without issue.

Nevertheless, Jinko is arrogant and has a cold personality. She doesn’t belong to any of the factions within the hospital, and she doesn’t follow anyone’s orders. She ignores the hierarchy within the university hospital and follows what she believes to be right, making her an unorthodox presence in her workplace. Her manner toward inexperienced doctors borders on hatred, and she doesn’t hesitate to condemn anyone who makes medical mistakes as well as anyone who lacks the diligence to continuously improve their skills. Countless employees have been banished from their positions in the hospital after Jinko condemned their conduct and reported it. Although her overbearing haughtiness has turned her into an outcast among the hospital’s staff, she maintains her disposition out of her concern for the patients.

Jinko maintains a certain level of distance from the people she treats, but she uses a relatively warm demeanor with them, and they tend to like her. She also has some allies in the hospital who are understanding of her personality.

Her solitary nature and abnormal obsession with mastering one’s profession

stem deeply from the death of her mother, who was an army doctor.

Jinko's decision to fight as Love Kaiser White was based on both the desire to improve her own skills as well as her dedication to saving her patients' lives. As she fights the Incurablen alone, she eventually finds herself outmatched, so she forms a surgical team to save every last infected patient. However, all the professionals she gathers are similar to herself—masters in their fields with difficult personalities, each of whom could also easily be described by Jinko's characteristic “genius lone-wolf surgeon” epithet.

For the longest time, Jinko had only fought her battles using her own skills, which leads to her clashing with the other women whose personalities are so similar to hers. However, in the end, she creates a one-of-a-kind team.

Incidentally, because of the medical theming of the show, there was a short segment at the beginning of each episode where Jinko recommended proper hand-washing and throat-gargling practices to children. However, this segment was animated before Jinko's personality was fully determined, so it showed her smiling and jauntily dancing around in a way she would never do in the program proper.

## Chapter 3: The Parents' House and the Sprain



It was the first night of the Obon holiday. My mother slaved away in the kitchen to prepare a feast for her daughter and grandchild—well, probably eighty percent for her grandchild—who she hadn't seen in a while.

"It's delicious. Your cooking's just as good as always, grandma," Miu praised her while scarfing down pieces of chicken karaage.

"My, my," my mother said happily, her face wrinkling with a smile. "You're quite good at giving compliments, Miu. There's plenty more where that came from, so don't be shy and eat up."

"I definitely will," Miu said, continuing to inhale food.

"It's really satisfying to watch young people with an appetite eat," my mother said with a giggle. "When it's just me and your father, I don't really have the motivation to try so hard. We've just been having premade side dishes from the grocery store these days," she said, speaking gently with a small smile.

This was my mother, Harue Katsuragi. She had long hair that was well maintained, and a kind, gentle face. She looked to be in her forties, but she was actually nearing sixty—for better or for worse, she had a young face and was often mistaken for being younger than she was, just like me.

"I have to say, you've gotten so much bigger, Miu," my father said. "It feels like it was just the other day that you finished elementary school, but now you're already in high school. I guess I really have gotten old," he said merrily before taking a large swig of his beer. He seemed to be thoroughly pleased about seeing his grandchild.

This was my father, Fumihiro Katsuragi. His face was covered in freckles and wrinkles, and his hair was buzzed short and completely white. He was already in his sixties, but was still working as a carpenter, which made him quite muscular.

"You've grown into such a pretty girl," he said.

“What, really? Maybe it’s because I inherited some of your handsomeness,” Miu said.

“There you go again with that slick talk of yours,” my father said with a chuckle. “You must be buttering me up to get some holiday gift money.”

“No, no, I would never,” Miu said. “I’m just saying what’s always on my mind. Anyways, here, my dear grandfather, let me pour you some more beer.”

“Ha ha, you’re really good at this, Miu. We got quite the clever grandkid, honey.”

“We really do,” my mother replied with a giggle.

My parents seemed to be totally over the moon getting to see their grandchild. *Miu’s really good at rubbing her grandparents the right way.*

“By the way, Miu, how’s high school? Are you having fun?” my mom asked like she was making small talk.

“Yeah, I’m having fun, but the schoolwork is tough. I have to study a lot because I overreached and chose a preparatory school.”

“You don’t have to take studying so seriously,” my father said. “You should have lots of fun while you’re a kid. I didn’t even attend classes half the time in high school.”

“Miu isn’t like you, dear,” my mother said, strictly putting my father in his place before turning back to Miu. “I’m glad to hear you’re having fun. So...” Her expression became a bit more mischievous. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

My father almost spit out his beer. “Wh-What are you talking about? A boyfriend...?”

“It’s perfectly normal to have a boyfriend or two in high school,” my mother said. “Especially since Miu’s so cute. I’m sure the boys won’t leave her alone.”

“No, I won’t allow it!” my father exclaimed. “Miu’s too young to have a boyfriend! I won’t have it, no matter what.”

“I don’t think it’s a matter you have a say in, dear,” my mother said, exasperated by my father’s stubbornness. “So, do you have one, Miu?”



“D-Do you?” my father also asked, hesitant.

“Mm, well...” Though my parents’ question wasn’t totally considerate, Miu didn’t seem particularly bothered, and was just as casual and cheery as usual with her answer. “Not for now. There just aren’t any guys who can match up to me,” she said.

“Oh my, is that so?” my mother said, disappointed.

“S-See, what did I tell you?” my father said, relieved.

I’d been sitting there, enjoying my mother’s cooking while watching the heartwarming scene of the three of them, when suddenly...

“Oh, but...mom recently got a boyfriend,” Miu declared. I was stunned.

“Mmph?!” I choked on the potato salad I was eating. “Ack, ough... H-Hey, Miu...” I stared at her, completely shocked, but she just returned a sadistic look.

“Isn’t that true, mom? You two are totally in love, right?”

“What...?” *What is she thinking?!*

“Oh my!” My mother’s eyes were wide with shock, but a joyous smile quickly replaced the surprise on her face. “Is that true, Ayako? Jeez... When did this happen? You should’ve told me if you’ve met someone.”

“No, um, well... W-We’re technically not dating yet...”

“What? Is that so? But ‘yet’ must mean...”

“I-I think there’s a chance we will date...”

“Oh, wow, I didn’t know something so fun was going on in your life! So, what’s he like? What does he do for work?” My mother was beaming with joy as she aggressively started poking around in my love life. On the other hand, my father was...

“I see... I-Is that so? I mean, you’re in your thirties now. It’s normal for that to happen... Wh-What good news...” He spoke quietly, and something was awkward about his tone. Unlike his playful response to the possibility of Miu dating, this was much more real, like he was actually flustered.

“Come on, Ayako,” my mom nudged. “What’s he like? Tell me.”

“Um, well... Um... Uh...”

*Miu!* I screamed internally as I glared at her, but she seemed completely unbothered as she continued to eat.

After dinner, I got in the bath. I let out a heavy sigh as I bathed in the tub of my parent’s house.

It was such a mess after that. My mother kept asking questions, and my father, who’d been jovially drinking beforehand, was suddenly quietly drinking by himself, bummed out.

“Jeez, Miu... What were you thinking?”

I managed to leave things at an ambiguous “I’ll let you know more if we actually decide to date,” but that was just putting the problem off for later.

*Ah, that’s right. If I date Takkun, I’ll need to be sure to tell my parents about it. I-I don’t want to... How do I even begin to tell them that I’m dating a college student who’s ten years my junior? Not only that, but he’s also the neighbor’s boy that I’ve known for a long time.*

My parents knew that I’d been helped countless times by the Aterazawas over the past ten years...so I couldn’t help but wonder about the disgust they might feel finding out that I was going out with their family’s only son.

“Ugh...”

I knew this would happen—our age gap wasn’t something that could just be swept under the carpet with such sentiments like “Age doesn’t matter as long as there’s love.” I was over thirty, and I had a daughter. I wasn’t in a position to date someone just because I wanted to. I couldn’t help but worry about how others, including my parents, saw me.

Of course, Takkun had considered such factors, and I’d made up my mind about these things when I realized how I felt. I wasn’t going to use my situation as a reason to give up on dating him. Still, when faced with reality, dealing with these situations felt a bit troublesome.

*I don’t want to tell them,* I thought, sighing internally. *I don’t want to tell my*

*parents about Takkun.*

As I sat there in the tub, my mind wandering, I heard a voice coming from the changing area.

“Mom.” It was Miu, whose silhouette I could see behind the frosted glass door.

“What is it, Miu?”

“Can I join you?”

“Huh...? Wh-Why?”

“I’m just gonna come in,” she said, quickly getting undressed and entering the bathing area before I could answer.

Her body was slim, without a single ounce of excess fat. Her skin was plump and youthful, and she had a dainty butt. My daughter was beautiful, boasting a body many would be envious of.

*H-Her youthfulness... It’s blinding.*

“Scooch over, mom,” she said, climbing into the tub after lightly washing her body off. The tub at my parents’ house was a little bigger than ours, but it was still cramped with two people in it.

“Wh-What’s going on, Miu?” *I’m surprised she wants to take a bath together. I guess she can still surprise me. She gets so upset if I ever try to join her though...*

“Nothing really. I just thought I should get it over with,” Miu said nonchalantly. “Grandpa and grandma still have to bathe, right? They’re trying to be considerate by letting us go first, so I thought I might as well get it over with now,” she explained. I wasn’t sure what to say to that, but she wasn’t done.

“Well, that’s just an excuse too. I actually wanted to talk to you alone.”

“You wanted to talk to me?”

“Yeah, talk. Well, more than us having a conversation, I thought you might have something you want to say to me.”

“That’s true... I definitely have something I want to say,” I said, glaring at Miu.

“What was that just now? Saying I have a boyfriend and whatnot...”



“Oh, so you *are* mad about that.”

“I’m not mad, just... I want to know what you were thinking.”

“Does it matter? You would’ve had to tell them sooner or later. Once you two get engaged, you would have no choice but to tell grandma and grandpa.”

“E-Engaged?! E-Even if that were to happen one day, there’s a proper way to handle things!” *Like getting mentally prepared first!* “If I tell them the truth right now, it’s just going to create a huge mess... Who knows what they might say when they find out this potential partner is a twenty-year-old college student?”

“I knew it’d be an issue if they were against your relationship—that’s why I didn’t mention who it was,” Miu said, completely carefree. “Maybe it was a bit inconsiderate of me, but...if I don’t start letting others in on what’s going on, I feel like you’re just going to drag things out forever,” she said, shooting me a glare.

“Urgh...” I was at a loss for words, but I did my best to get my thoughts out. “I-I’ll be fine now. I’m going to talk to Takkun when we get home.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Knowing you, you might sidestep the issue again once you actually see him, like you did this morning.”

*This morning? ...Oh, right.* She was referring to when I fell for her lie and tried to hide from Takkun in the car.

“Th-That’s different. I have very complex reasons for doing what I did.”

“Reasons? You’re basically just likevoiding him, aren’t you?”

“Likevoiding...?” I echoed, confused.

“It’s when you like someone so much that you can’t help but avoid them.”

“I-I...”

*Well, I feel like things are much more complicated than a single word like that could explain, but I guess when you boil it down, that might be what’s happening. I like him, but I get flustered when I see him, so I end up avoiding him, even though I don’t want to. Oh, yeah... It’s starting to feel like I’m*

*likevoiding him.*

“It’s pretty common for girls in love to likevoid their crushes though. Even some of my classmates do it, but... Can I just say one thing?”

“You don’t have to. I understand what you’re trying to say.”

“A woman in her thirties likevoiding someone is...pretty cringey.”

“I said you don’t have to say it!”

*Sorry for being cringey! Sorry for acting like a teenager in love when I’m in my thirties!*

“Jeez, what happened to the dramatic developments that took place the other day? What happened to the version of you that was bawling and professing your love? I thought you would finally move forward and get your happily ever after after you’d made up your mind.” Miu was just as caustic as ever.

“Th-That’s what I thought would happen too! But I guess I was a bit too caught up in the drama of it all, or rather, my resolve was too strong to hold up after the dust settled... It’s like a cautionary tale about how everything is bad in excess and will just lead to chaos...”

“Haven’t you noticed how on this journey to love, everyone around you, including Taku, has been trying to support you?”

“Support me?”

“While you’ve been hesitating, everyone’s paved the road for you—all you’ve had to do is just run straight toward the goal line. Thanks to everyone’s efforts, you’ve finally left the starting line, but...it’s like you sprained your ankle on the first step.”

“I-I’m that clumsy?!” *I sprained my ankle even after being completely prepared thanks to all the backup I have? That’s hilarious. If my life was a comedy, I’d be killing it.* “I-I know that I’m being pathetic. I’m fully aware of that. Everyone is kindly rooting for me, but I’m such a klutz... I feel terrible about it.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s anything to feel terrible about. It’s not like you asked

for their help, and everyone's just doing it on their own. Saying that they made an effort makes it seem positive, but at the same time, it's like they're driving you into a corner you can't back out of." A sentimental look came over Miu's face, and her sharp tone shifted into something slightly frail. "It must be difficult to have everyone cheering for you. You can't fail, but even if you succeed, it feels like you have to overachieve for everyone to accept your win... I think it might've put pressure on you."

"Miu..."

"Maybe things got a little off track because you didn't get to start the race on your own time... You know, they say that smooth, paved asphalt is actually worse for your knees, so..."

I didn't know what to say. There was a warm feeling spreading throughout my chest. *Wow, Miu is such a good kid.* I thought she'd come in to berate me on account of how pathetic I was being, but that didn't seem to be the case. Despite the fact that I was being a klutz, she had been worried about me. She might have even been feeling guilty about rushing my romance.

"Thank you, Miu..." I said. "Thank you for worrying about me."

"I'm not worried... I just sympathize and feel bad for you."

"Like you said, maybe I didn't get to start the race when it was right for me."

I'd been able to realize how I felt about Takkun thanks to those around me, especially Miu. If Miu hadn't put on that one-man show, I would've continued to ignore my own feelings, and Takkun and I would've stayed in the lukewarm situation of being more than friends but less than lovers. But, if one were to look at things negatively, it could be said that I'd been forced to begin this race. Despite that...

"I'm still really grateful. If everyone didn't support me—if you hadn't encouraged me—I might've never been able to actually start. Thanks to you, I was able to move forward."

"And as a result, you sprained your ankle."

"Sh-Shut up."



After I finished bathing, I was preparing our room for the night.

“There we go.”

I pulled out two futon mats from the storage closet and prepared our sleeping space. As I handled this monotonous task, there was something else on my mind.

“A sprain, huh...?”

I was recalling the conversation I had with Miu in the bathtub. Perhaps it was true that my love life was like a paved road. Takkun was a sincere gentleman who was occasionally very zealous about his goals, and it was that disposition that’d made him so well prepared to ask me out that he’d already gotten his parents on board before he’d told me how he felt.

As for my daughter, who one would have expected to have been my biggest hurdle to overcome, she was incredibly supportive and smart enough to come up with a plan to encourage me to move forward—she cared for me more than anyone, and she was the best daughter in the world.

Yumemi was strict but kind, and Takkun’s mother was also an incredible person... All the people related to this romance aside from myself were amazing.

Thanks to that, my love life, a story between a single mother in her thirties and a twenty-year-old college student, had been transformed from a maze littered with obstacles into a straightforward, nicely paved road. All that was left for me was to progress forward. On this route to victory that one hundred percent of people would be able to complete, I’d sprained my ankle on the first step I’d taken.

I let out a sigh. I was disappointed with myself. Just as Miu had said, the fact that everyone around me was so perfect might have put some pressure on me, but I was still at fault. There was nothing as embarrassing as tripping over nothing.

“Oh, speaking of which...” I suddenly remembered something from the past.

*All this talk of sprains and tripping reminds me, I did have a sprain that one time.*

I had led a relatively healthy life, having never had any major injuries or illnesses, but I *had* sprained my ankle once in the past. Of course, the person who helped me back then was...



It was about five or six years ago. I couldn't exactly remember what time of year it was, but I could remember what Takkun was like very well—it was around the time he'd entered middle school, when he was starting to get taller but was still just barely shorter than me.

It was also a time when he hadn't been quite so masculine with the way he spoke—back when he'd called me “Mommy Ayako.”

“I really messed up,” I mumbled with a sigh.

I was walking home from my local grocery store. Ground meat was on sale at a great price, so I was excitedly making my way back, thinking about the Hamburg steaks I was going to make for dinner, when I tripped. There was nothing there, but I took a tumble.

You know, when you trip as an adult, the embarrassment is bigger than the pain—and it was all the more embarrassing that I tripped over nothing for no reason at all. *Maybe I need to exercise more? I haven't been working out at all these days.*

“Ow...”

I used the guard rails beside me to support myself while I rubbed my right ankle. Fortunately, this was a relatively isolated street and no one saw me trip. I wanted to quickly flee the scene before someone noticed, but the moment I took a step, a sharp pain ran through my right ankle. It seemed like I'd twisted it pretty badly when I'd fallen.

*There wasn't even anything there...*

“I don't think it's broken...”

I took off my shoe and sock and saw that my ankle was a little swollen. It didn't hurt that badly on its own, but once I put weight on it, the pain

intensified. It seemed like I was going to have trouble walking.

“Wh-What do I do...?”

I didn’t want to call for an ambulance over something like this, but it was going to be quite difficult to get home on this foot. *What should I do?* I was at my wit’s end.

“Mommy Ayako...?” Just then, Takkun was passing by on his way home from school. He was wearing his middle school gakuran uniform and carrying a backpack. He’d probably seen me with one foot bare and thought something was wrong, so he quickly ran over to me. “What’s wrong, Mommy Ayako?”

“Takkun... Um, I actually just tripped and twisted my ankle.”

“Huh...? A-Are you okay?!”

“Yeah, it doesn’t hurt that bad, but...it does hurt a little to walk. I think it might be sprained.”

“No way...” Takkun looked truly concerned. He then put on a serious face and thought silently for a bit. Several seconds later, his eyes were filled with determination. He strapped his backpack over his chest before turning his back to me and crouching down. “Get on, Mommy Ayako!” he said without an ounce of hesitation.

“Wh-What?!” I was stunned. *Get on? Does he mean...?*

“I’ll carry you to the hospital on my back.”

It seemed that I was right.

*Takkun’s going to carry me? On his back? Am I, an adult much too old for something like this, going to take a piggyback ride from a middle schooler?*

“I-It’s fine. I’m not hurt that badly.”

“You shouldn’t take a sprain lightly. It’s definitely better to get it checked out as soon as possible.”

“I can’t have you do that for me though, Takkun... Also, um...I’m probably heavy. I gained a little bit—just a very little bit—of weight recently, so...”

“I’ll be fine. I’m pretty strong thanks to being on the swim team.” Takkun

didn't seem like he was going to back down.

"Um, well... Thank you." Overwhelmed by his strong will, I decided to accept his offer.

*Agh, this is incredibly embarrassing...* Though this was a pretty isolated street, I was about to be an adult on a piggyback ride in public. On top of that, the person carrying me would be a middle schooler who was over a decade younger than me. *I wonder what people would think if they saw this...*

I looked down at Takkun's back as he stood there, crouched down before me. His body was dainty and slender. Even though he was going through a growth spurt and getting taller, he was still shorter than me... He probably also weighed less than me. I felt incredibly guilty to have a boy like that giving me a piggyback ride.

"I-I'm getting on." Feeling conflicted over various factors, I put my weight on his back.

"Ngh..." For a moment, Takkun let out a pained groan.

"S-See, I'm heavy! You don't have to force yourself to do this. You can just put me down."

"I'm fine... You're not heavy at all. You're as light as a feather," Takkun said. He was obviously trying to sound tough.

He then took a step forward. One step became two, then three. It felt a bit precarious at first, but once he got a pace down, there was more stability to his movement, and his steps became confident.

"See, it's fine," Takkun said.

"You're right... You're amazing, Takkun," I said, impressed. *This is incredible. When did Takkun get so strong?*

"I'm going to head straight to the hospital, so hold on tight, Mommy Ayako."

"O-Okay, I will." I heeded his reliable words and held on to him. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my body against his.

Takkun suddenly gasped, and he stumbled a bit. "Y-You don't have to hold on that tightly, Mommy Ayako... Your, um...chest and stuff is touching."

“Huh...? Oh. S-Sorry.” I quickly lifted my upper body off of him. I’d pressed my body against him without thinking, which made my chest push up against his back.

*That’s right. Takkun’s in middle school now, and he’s going through puberty. He’s at that age where he starts getting interested in women’s boobs and things like that. It’s not like back in the day when he was totally okay even when we took a bath together or he’d see my bra, nor like when I hugged him tightly inside the curtain!*

*Oh, Takkun’s red all the way to his ears... Ugh, the fact that he’s embarrassed is making me embarrassed too. Now I’m starting to think about my butt, which he’s firmly grasping so he can carry me. I wonder how he feels about touching my butt? I hope he doesn’t think “You have a bigger butt than I expected, Mommy Ayako.”*

“Mommy Ayako...” Takkun began, perhaps feeling awkward about the silence. “What were you going to do if I hadn’t passed by?”

“I wonder... I guess I would’ve tried to get myself home or to the hospital.”

“You can’t do that! You should’ve called me if you were in trouble. We exchanged cell phone numbers the other day, remember?” Takkun sounded really worried.

He was right. Takkun had my cell phone number. I’d thought it was so soon for him, but it wasn’t that uncommon for middle schoolers to have cell phones these days. When I was a kid, I had to wait until high school, no matter how much I’d begged my parents. Even Miu had started begging for one as soon as she hit the upper grades of elementary school, and I was probably going to have to buy her one once she was in middle school.

“No way... Wouldn’t you be bothered if I called you over something like this?”

“It’s not a bother at all,” Takkun said in a serious tone. “If you’re in trouble, I’ll run to you no matter where you are.”

“Hee hee. Thank you, Takkun. Even if you’re just being nice, I appreciate it.”

“I-I’m not just being nice, I mean it,” he said, earnestly refuting me. There was something adorable about that.

There were still some childlike elements left to his voice, his face, and his attitude. Still, the way he was carrying me on his back as he walked was incredibly manly. His back that had seemed so small before seemed so big and reliable now...

“You’ve gotten so big, Takkun,” I said, softly.

When we’d first met, he was a young boy who was as cute as a girl, but before I knew it, he had grown big enough to be able to carry me while he walked.

“Of course I did...” he said, slightly bashful. “I’m not going to be a kid forever.”

“Hee hee, that’s right.”

“I’m going to get even bigger. I’m already about to be taller than you.”

“I see. Maybe once you’re even bigger and become a handsome, adult man, I’ll volunteer to be your wife.”

“What?!” I’d gotten an unexpectedly big response to my lighthearted joke.

“Jeez, Takkun,” I said with a laugh. “It’s just a joke. You don’t have to be so surprised.”

“A-A joke...?”

“Of course. You wouldn’t be happy with an old lady like me as your wife, would you?”

“I would...” Takkun said. Though he was quiet, his feelings were unwavering. His back was still to me, and he was blushing up to his ears. “I would be happy.”

“Takkun...”

I figured he was probably just trying to be nice and it was all just simple lip service. It had to be that. I had made a self-deprecating statement, so being the kind boy he was, Takkun had had no choice but to compliment me. Despite that, his voice was incredibly serious, and it felt like he’d said it after mustering up his courage and determination—it’d made my heart skip a beat.



*No. No, no no! No way, this is wrong! Why's my heart all aflutter?! What am I thinking?! How is my heart pounding because of a boy who's over ten years younger than me!*

*Ugh, this is terrible. Just awful. I know I don't really interact with men often, but I can't believe a middle schooler from my neighborhood is making my heart race.*

*This is Takkun's fault... It's all his fault. Jeez... He's still so young, so why does he seem so attractive?*



Reminiscing about the past and basking in nostalgia filled me with a mixture of embarrassment and happiness.

“Now that I think about it, that's about when Takkun started trying to sound more manly and stopped calling me Mommy Ayako.”

It was right after that incident that his voice had begun dropping—as his secondary sexual characteristics had developed, Takkun's voice had become much deeper, and he'd quickly passed me in height. To pair with his voice change, he'd also started calling me “Miss Ayako” and paid attention to speaking like a gentleman. I remembered feeling slightly happy that he'd grown up, but a bit melancholy that he'd changed.

“I bet Takkun could easily give me a piggyback ride now...” He could probably even carry me bridal-style. *Actually... he's done that.* Takkun had really grown so much. He'd gotten bigger, grown into an adult, and become attractive.

“No...” That wasn't right. Takkun hadn't *become* attractive. Takkun had always been charming since he was a young boy. He was like a prince who'd always helped me in my times of need. So, to be more accurate...he'd always been charming, but he'd become even *more* attractive. In other words, the current Takkun was the *most* attractive version of Takkun.

*Oh, but...he was also so cute and wonderful when he was younger too—*

“Oh, Ayako.” As I was lost in thought, I was interrupted by my mother, who'd come upstairs. She seemed to have finished bathing and was now dressed for



bed. "I would've prepared your futons for you."

"It's the least I can do. Where's Miu?"

"She's downstairs teaching your father how to use a smartphone."

*Ah, every grandparent's favorite new activity: learning how to use a smartphone from their grandchild.*

My mother joined me as I finished getting Miu's and my futons ready. "Are you going to see the Niozakis tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yup, that's the plan."

The Niozakis were Miu's father's side of the family—the family my sister had married into. Her husband had been the third-born son of his family, so it wasn't like she'd had much obligation to support his parents, but she'd still taken the Niozaki surname nonetheless.

Because of that, Miu had originally been born into this world as "Miu Niozaki." After my sister and her husband had passed, I'd adopted her and she'd taken my last name, "Katsuragi."

We made sure to see the Niozakis every year during the Obon holiday. Miu's grandparents on that side surely wanted to see their grandchild, and we also had to pay our respects at the family grave. My sister, and Miu's mother, Miwako Niozaki, was resting with her beloved husband in the Niozaki's family grave. It had become our yearly tradition to visit their family, then visit the grave.

"By the way, Ayako," my mother said, just as we finished setting up the futons. "You really won't tell me about your boyfriend?"

"Y-You're so annoying..." I'd thought I'd been able to get myself out of it earlier, but she still hadn't given up. *A mother's curiosity is no joke.*

"Annoying? Isn't it natural for a mother to be curious about her daughter's boyfriend?"

"Like I said, he's not my boyfriend yet."

"You're just counting down the seconds until that happens, right?"

“Well... Either way, it’s a secret for now! I’ll tell you all about it once everything’s settled, so don’t ask me about it,” I said, forcing an end to the conversation.

“Good grief. I don’t know what you’re getting so embarrassed about... I’m just asking because I’m curious. I have no intention of trying to lecture you about who you’re with, no matter what kind of person he is,” she said, exasperated. “He knows about you and Miu, right?”

“Well, yeah...”

“Then there’s no reason for me to be against this relationship. It even seemed like Miu was rooting for you. If both Miu and you think he’s a good person, I won’t judge or anything.”

“Um...”

“I think your father feels the same way too. Sure, as a father he has some mixed feelings about his daughter getting married, but...we know you’re getting on in years. You might not get an opportunity like this again, so I don’t think he’ll be looking to interfere. Even if he were to disapprove of your partner, I’ll make him accept it, so don’t worry. You can’t squander this opportunity, Ayako.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I should’ve expected this, but my mother was treating the news like marriage was already on the table. *Considering my age, I guess it’s normal to assume that dating someone means we’ll eventually get married, but...he’s still in college. They definitely won’t approve.*

My mother seemed like she was grateful just to have someone interested in me, being that I was in my thirties and had a child, but even *she* would definitely be quite shocked to find out that this potential boyfriend was my friendly neighbors’ twenty-year-old college student son.

*I can’t tell her... At the very least, I can’t tell her right now, after all that.*

“I think it’s also time you start thinking about your own happiness,” my mother mumbled in a gentle tone as I agonized internally. “For the entire decade since Miwako passed, you’ve been doing your best to raise her daughter all on your own. I’m sure there are lots of things you had to give up—lots of

things that didn't go your way. Still, you gave everything you had to raise a child."

"Mom..."

"I have to say, I couldn't believe I'd see my own child take action like that. I was so surprised when you said you'd take Miu in at Miwako's funeral—I couldn't believe you'd say something so stupid."

"Ha ha..." I let out a wry laugh.

I recalled that day. Thinking back on it, my mother had had an incredibly troubled look on her face when I'd declared I'd take Miu in ten years ago... At first, she'd been completely against me raising Miu. I was well aware that she'd said so out of concern for my own life, but I was stubborn, and I wasn't going to back down.

When Miu wasn't around, we'd argued countless times. Eventually, I'd worn my mother down, and she'd slowly begun to support me.

"It's only now that I can say this, but...if you had ever said, 'I can't do it,' your father and I were planning to look after Miu. We'd discussed it back then."

"Really?" This was the first I'd heard of this.

"I mean... We didn't think you'd have it in you." My mother let out a deep exhale before she continued. "We'd thought it was impossible for a woman barely in her twenties to raise a child on her own when she hadn't even gotten married or had a kid of her own yet. We thought you'd just gotten caught up in the heat of the moment and that you'd reach your limit right away. Your father and I talked about it, and we decided that if you were struggling and complaining, we would take Miu in right away. We thought we'd be able to handle one more child."

I was stunned. Their thinking hadn't been that they hadn't trusted me—rather, they'd wanted to prepare an escape route for me, just in case I'd needed it. That was no doubt out of their deep love for me.

"Despite that, you've spent the last ten years raising Miu into a wonderful girl. You didn't complain at all, and you fulfilled your duties as a mother," my mother said as she looked into my eyes with a gentle smile. "I guess we didn't

fully understand our daughter back then. We underestimated your resolve.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I’d *thought* I had resolve when I took Miu in. I’d been determined to raise her on my own.” I’d thought that I’d been all she’d had, and I would somehow make it work. I’d thought that I’d made up my mind—but in truth, I’d been self-important and entirely too convinced I could be some kind of savior. “That determination was mistaken... Just like you said, I’d gotten riled up in the heat of the moment.”

I’d been upset and had probably overestimated my abilities. I now knew the truth. It was precisely because I’d spent the last decade raising a child that I was able to reflect, and I now understood that the resolve I’d had at first was foolish.

“I mean, I wasn’t alone,” I said. “I couldn’t do anything on my own. So many people helped me: my boss and coworkers, the teachers at school, the neighbors, and you and dad... I was only able to survive until now thanks to everyone.”

*Raise her on my own? Now that I think about it, that was so cocky of me. Talk about overconfidence.*

“Ayako...”

“By the way, you said I should start thinking about my own happiness, but...I haven’t once thought that I was unhappy in these past ten years. There were plenty of difficult times, but I would say that I’ve been happy, even including all those times.”

I’d been happy. I truly believed I’d been happy. Miu was a wonderful girl who’d given me so many things. There were so many people who’d rooted for our family and supported us.

Also, there was a boy with strange tastes who’d fallen in love with me, who had been in love with me for ten whole years. He’d earnestly been in love with me this whole time, and he’d continuously supported me as well. Being the dense woman that I was, I’d gone a long time unable to realize the truth about how he felt, but once I had, I’d become so unbearably happy. All the various versions of him I’d known throughout the years, from elementary, middle, and high school to now in college, had been so incredibly endearing to me.

My daughter was lovely, I was surrounded by wonderful people, and to top it off, I'd spent the last ten years being loved by an endlessly charming prince. If this wasn't happiness, I wasn't sure what was.

"So, I don't think of this guy like a reward for holding back all these years or anything like that... Um, I'm not sure how to describe it but... It's like I've been happy all these years, but now I'm taking a step forward to being even happier."

I wasn't sure I'd been articulating how I felt all that well, but my mother had been listening to me silently all the same. Once I'd finished, she sighed lightly and gave me a satisfied smile. "You've become an incredible mother, Ayako."

I couldn't help but feel bashful after hearing that. There was something slightly embarrassing about being complimented by my mother at my age.

The next day, Miu and I headed to the Niozakis' home. It was also in the northern part of the prefecture, so it wasn't too far from my parents' house.

After Miu greeted her paternal grandparents, the four of us headed out to go pay our respects at the family grave.

We arrived at the cemetery and climbed up the long flight of stairs before reaching the Niozaki family plot. It was the resting place of Miu's father and mother—the final resting place of my older sister.

We lit some incense and silently prayed before the grave. We hadn't planned it out or anything, but it seemed like Miu and I prayed for a bit longer than we had in previous years.

As we headed down the stairs, Miu's paternal grandparents a few steps ahead of us, I whispered quietly to Miu so they couldn't hear. "What did you talk to them about?"

Miu giggled. "Probably the same thing as you."

"I see," I said. I couldn't hold back and gave a slight chuckle.

Whenever we came to pay our respects to Miu's parents, who were currently in heaven, I always gave them reports on how Miu had been doing, but...this year, I might have talked a little bit more about myself.

*All right, I thought, psyching myself up internally. I felt bad for keeping Takkun waiting, but I felt like I'd been able to use this holiday to calm myself down. I'd been able to tell my sister how I was doing too—I had no more reasons to hesitate and no more pretenses to hold me back.*

*Once I get home, I'm going to tell him. I'm going to face him and tell him how I feel. I'm going to close the chapter on the previous ten years of happiness, and we're going to move forward into a new chapter of happiness together.*

## Chapter 4: The Confession and the Underwear



It was the morning following the end of the Obon holiday, and I woke up feeling off in a way I couldn't quite describe.

"Ugh... Agh..."

I was a bit sleep-deprived. We had gotten home from my parents' house last night, and I had gotten into bed before midnight, but...I was too nervous about today, so I hadn't been able to fall asleep.

I was finally going to respond to Takkun asking me out today. I was going to explain everything about the kiss and the likevoiding and come clean about how I felt. After that, we would become a couple. Probably.

*I-It'll be okay, right...? We'll actually be able to date this time, right? Takkun won't suddenly say "I need to think about it" after all this, will he? What if he's started thinking, "I'm not sure I want to date a woman who's willing to be such a pain in the neck in spite of how old she is..." To be honest, I can't blame him if he thinks that. I've blundered enough to warrant that.*

*Agh, will it be okay? Will it really be all right?*

"I-It'll be okay! It'll definitely work out!" I said, desperately trying to psych myself up.

*Yeah, it'll be fine. I mean...I can't go back now, so I have no choice but to move forward.*

"All right, then." After I finished going through the excuses in my mind, I left my room and began my morning activities.

It was a little past eight o'clock. Miu seemed to still be asleep, so I was going to leave breakfast for later and get other chores done early. I was going to meet Takkun at... Actually, we hadn't decided yet. I had said I wanted to see him today, but the specifics hadn't been worked out.

*I'll wait a bit more to message him, then we can decide where to meet and at what time.*

I didn't know how things were going to go, so I was getting more and more nervous every second...but it was going to be fine, because I had prepared a letter just in case! I had poured my heart into writing it whenever I'd had some time while Miu and I had been visiting my parents. I'd detailed my feelings for him in poetic, intelligent prose and put my skills as an editor to the fullest possible use. If I got nervous in the moment and couldn't speak, I had reading the letter to fall back on.

*Maybe it's pretty cringey for a woman in her thirties to be preparing a handwritten love letter, but...I can't help it! I mean, really, it isn't a love letter, it's more like a study guide! It's insurance just in case I need it! In the worst of worst cases, even if I get too nervous and end up doing something catastrophic like likevoiding him again, as long as I give him this letter, he'll know how I feel!*

"First up is...laundry."

Though my talk with Takkun today was a pressing issue, I still couldn't forget about housework—that was what being a single mother was like. During the morning, I needed to take care of all the chores that had piled up.

First I needed to wash the clothes we'd worn while visiting my parents' house. I headed to the changing area in the bathroom and saw a huge pile of clothes—it was everything we'd pulled out of our suitcases last night. I divided the clothes so I could wash the whites separately later, then I threw the rest into the washing machine.

"Oh, right... I should wash this too."

I took off the sleep bra that I had on under my pajamas. I'd sweat even while sleeping at night, so I had to wash my sleep bras often. I placed my undergarments into a laundry bag then turned the washing machine on.

"Next I should clean the house... Wait, no!" I was about to move on to the next task, my mind still hazy from being half asleep, but I realized something important. "Today's garbage day!"

*I completely forgot! The days are different because we just had the Obon*



*holiday! This is bad... I really need to take the trash out today. I still have trash I forgot to take out before the holiday in our storage locker outside! This is bad! The garbage truck is going to be here soon!*

I quickly changed out of my pajamas and ran out the front door in a hurry. After grabbing the trash bags I'd piled inside the locker, I sprinted toward the collection site.

Luckily, I made it just in time. Right after I placed the trash bags into the collection pile, I saw the garbage truck coming up the street.

"Thank god," I said with a deep sigh of relief.

*That was so close, I just barely made it. I'm so glad I didn't run into the garbage man either since I'm...*

I looked down toward my chest, and there were my breasts, swaying with each step I took. It felt like they were swaying much more than they usually did. It was like they had been freed from the armor that protected them—in other words, from a brassiere.

"Urgh..." *Now I've done it. I took out the trash without wearing a bra...* After I'd removed my sleep bra, I had gotten dressed in a hurry and run out of the house, so I'd forgotten to put on a new bra. I'd noticed on the way there, but I hadn't had time to go back, so I went to the collection site as I was.

*I can't believe I'm taking out the trash without even wearing a bra... It's like I've given up on having dignity as a woman.*

Not only that, but I was wearing a thin white shirt. Because I didn't have the protection of a bra, if someone had stared hard enough, they'd probably have been able to see some sensitive parts of my body.

*Agh, I need to get home quickly. If someone sees me like this, I won't be able to show my face in the neighborhood—*

"Miss Ayako..."

"Huh?!"

Once again, I ran into Takkun on the way home by complete coincidence. We were neighbors, so it made sense. We even lived right next door to each other,

although the fact had completely slipped my mind. I had planned to message him later to meet in the afternoon...but, in the end, there hadn't been any guarantee that we wouldn't run into each other until then.

Takkun was dressed in a T-shirt, athletic shorts, and leggings, and he was wearing some trendy-looking neon sneakers. He looked like he was going for a run.

Takkun was on the swim team in middle and high school, and he was currently in an athletic club as well, so he sometimes went for a run in the neighborhood. He didn't look sweaty, so he had probably just started.

"G-Good morning. It's been a while," he said, greeting me with an awkward smile. This was probably uncomfortable for him, and he likely had a lot of thoughts running through his head, but he was being considerate to me and doing his best to talk to me like usual. Despite that, I...

I couldn't say anything. I swiftly turned my back to him, covering my chest with both hands.

"Huh, what...?"

"I-I'm sorry, Takkun... I can't right now!" I yelled as though I were begging him to let me go, and I fled the scene.

*Ugh, why, why?! Why does the timing have to be so bad?!*

I ended up avoiding Takkun again. I repeated the same blunder from before the holiday. I didn't even want to! I had made up my mind to never likevoid him again. I'd made up my mind about how I felt over the holiday and I'd been determined to tackle this issue head-on. I'd made a point of throwing away the weak part of me that got flustered and ran away when running into him.

But then, in spite of it all, I didn't have the determination to face him while I was braless! *No way, I can't do it... If we'd physically faced each other and talked, he'd definitely have noticed, and if he'd noticed, he'd have been disappointed in me. He'll think, "Oh, she's the kind of woman who takes out the trash without even wearing a bra..." My only choice was to run.*

*I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, Takkun! I'm not likevoiding you! I'm not running from you! This is a strategic retreat in order to protect my dignity as a woman! I'll talk*

*to you about the important stuff once I'm prepared, both mentally and clothingwise!*

After I finished running back home, I stood outside the front door and panted, trying to catch my breath. I was filled with immense guilt, and all I could think about was how I needed to get a bra on as soon as possible. Then, as I reached for the doorknob...

I was squeezed tightly—I'd been embraced from behind. It was out of nowhere, and it made my heart skip a beat.

"Don't run from me, Miss Ayako," a familiar voice whispered near my ears.

"T-Takkun..."

It took me a second, but I finally understood the situation. Takkun had run after me, and he was currently holding me from behind. It was that famous embrace from a soap opera in the nineties that had appeared in the dream I'd had some time ago—that delusion that betrayed my age was now taking place in real time.

"After everything that's happened, I'm at my limit... I can't take it anymore." I could hear panic and nervousness in his soft voice. Despite that, there was incredible passion behind it. It was like his rational mind couldn't suppress him any longer, and his desires all poured out—it felt like he was at the end of his rope. "Do you know how anxious and worked up I've been? You suddenly kissed me out of nowhere, and then I had to wait... I thought I'd finally get to hear from you today, but then you ran again..."

"N-No, that's not—"

*Today is different! It's not like when I was likevoiding you before the holiday! I made up my mind to have a real conversation with you! But... I'm not wearing a bra right now! I'm not prepared to face you while I'm braless!*

I wanted to lay out my reasoning for him, but I couldn't. Not only that, but Takkun cut me off as he squeezed me even tighter.

"I can't wait anymore..." he said, sounding like he was really, truly at his limit. "I love you, Miss Ayako."

I thought I was going to melt. It was a declaration of love from the man I loved, whispered so close to my ear that I could hear him breathing. The sensation was all-consuming—his voice felt more intoxicating than the deadliest of poisons and more nectarous than the sweetest of honey, and it had dissolved my mind into a puddle.

“I love you. I really, really love you, Miss Ayako.” He repeated himself over and over, like a dam had been burst. It was like all the feelings he’d been holding back until now were pouring out. “I’ve loved you for the past ten years. Since I was ten years old, I’ve been by your side with these feelings in my heart.”

I recalled the past decade—the days when I hadn’t yet thought of him as a man.

“My feelings haven’t changed since I told you how I felt in May... No, I love you even more now than I did back then.” It felt like he had an endless number of intensely passionate things to say. “You were troubled and flustered after I confessed my feelings to you, and despite being an adult, you were fretting like a young girl... It was so adorable and charming. I’ve gotten to see so many new sides of you that I’ve never known before, and I’ve grown to love you even more.”

I recalled all the days between now and when he confessed to me—the days I’d finally begun to think of him as a man.

“I love you so much, I can’t take it anymore,” he continued. “I don’t want anyone else to have you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” He was telling me the honest truth with no bells or whistles. His arms tightened around me even more. “Miss Ayako, why did you kiss me the other day?”

“That was because...” I hesitated to answer.

“Ever since you kissed me, I’ve been thinking about it,” Takkun continued. “I’ve wondered what you were thinking. I came up with various reasons and imagined different scenarios.” I fell silent. “But I always ended up at the same answer. It might just be wishful thinking, and I might be a bit self-centered for thinking it, but it’s the only thing that made sense to me.” His voice was trembling, and he sounded like he was about to burst into tears at any moment,

but there was no pain in his voice. If anything, he sounded hopeful.

“The Miss Ayako I know would never kiss a man she didn’t have feelings for...” he began. I was stunned as I began to realize what he was about to say. “That’s why, what I believe is...” He sounded like he was about to burst, like his heart was screaming.

“You like me, right, Miss Ayako?”

Words fail to capture the wave of emotion I felt surging from my heart through my entire body—it was like I’d been shocked with lightning, yet the tingling in my body was sweet and gentle.

My body felt hot, and I couldn’t keep my feelings suppressed any longer. “Yeah...” I answered with a nod. I gave him a firm nod, confirming his reasoning. “I like you... I love you, Takkun.”



I said it. I finally said it. I was finally able to put the conclusion I'd come to in my heart into words. It seemed like I'd finally been able to give back just a little bit of love to the man who'd given me so much of his own.

"I've fallen in love with you, Takkun... I don't know when it happened, but... I love you... I love you so much now." My feelings felt like a tempest beyond my control, poised to make themselves known whether I wanted it or not...yet I wasn't able to properly verbalize them once they got up to my throat. Nevertheless, I couldn't slow down now—I was going to speak even if it came out clumsily.

"Ever since you told me how you felt, I couldn't stop thinking about you... Every day, my mind was filled with thoughts of you. Then you started doing so many charming things that I kept thinking about you more and more..." I wasn't sure what I was saying anymore. At this point, I was just yelling out what was in my heart, following my instincts.

"After our trip to the resort, I had a long conversation with Miu, and I was finally able to realize how I feel. I was able to realize that I love you—not as a neighbor, not as someone like a younger brother or a son to me, but as a man."

I didn't have the letter that I'd worked so hard to prepare, and I couldn't remember any of what I had written down in it either. All I could muster were unpoetic, unintelligent words without an ounce of an editor's skill. "Before I knew it, I started to feel like I've been in love with you since long ago. The whole ten years we've spent together have become so incredibly dear to me... I'm totally elated, and my head is in the clouds, to the point that I've started thinking that maybe we were in love at first sight, or maybe it was destiny that brought us together!" I gently placed my hand on his arms as they embraced me. "I love you... I love you, Takkun."

"Miss Ayako!" His arms tightened even more around me. His passionate, intense embrace enveloped my body in gentle warmth. Part of me wanted to stay like this forever, but...I slowly pulled his arms off me.

I turned around, and finally faced him. Now that I was actually looking at him, I saw that he seemed like he was almost crying. Tears had formed in the corners of his eyes, and it was a look of longing without any manliness or composure.

My own expression was probably worse though—I already had tears streaming down my face. I wasn't sad in the slightest bit, but I was so overwhelmed with emotion that I couldn't stop crying.

"Takkun," I began, looking him in the eye. "I love you too. That's why, if it's possible, I'd like to date you..."

"...but," I continued, unable to stop myself, "are you really, really sure you want me?" I couldn't help but ask before there was no turning back. "I have more than a decade on you."

"Do you really think it would change things after all this time?"

"You know, I was... I mean, I was only barely, but... I was born during the Showa era, you know."

"I know that."

"And I have a daughter."

"I know that too. I've known that for ten years."

"I'm really not all that impressive. I... I'm dense, and I'm kind of an airhead a lot of the time, and who knows what I'll do when I'm panicking, and sometimes when I'm too lazy to do chores, I completely avoid them... Also, I've started gaining weight recently... Though, I feel like I've been saying, 'I've started gaining weight recently' for the past ten years..."

Takkun listened to me silently.

"With all of that said, are you really okay with me?" I asked again.

"Yes." Takkun responded without hesitating for even a second. "Those are all parts of you, the woman I love. You're the woman I've loved until now, and the woman I'll continue to love," he declared with a smile.

"Takkun..." The emotion rising up within me pushed me to action, and I hugged him, not with the old soap opera maneuver, but this time directly from the front. "I'm sorry I made you wait so long..."

"It's fine. I don't mind," Takkun said, hugging me back. Now that we'd confirmed how the other felt, we were embracing each other tightly.



An endless wave of bliss washed over me. *Oh, I'm so happy. I feel like everything I've been wanting is being fulfilled. It's like the universe is blessing us. Is it okay for so much happiness to exist in the world?*

"I'm so incredibly happy... It's like a dream... I can't believe I get to date you, Miss Ayako... Huh?" There was a sudden sound of surprise that pulled me back to reality from my dreamy state of mind. Takkun suddenly jumped back and distanced himself from me. "Huh? What?" He stared intently with a look of shock and confusion. He was specifically staring at my chest. "M-Miss Ayako... Wh-Why aren't you wearing a bra?"

"Huh...?" For a moment I didn't understand what he was saying, but I quickly realized and gasped as I covered my breasts in a hurry.

*Sh-Shoot! I totally forgot! I got swept up in the moment and it totally slipped my mind! I'm not wearing a bra right now! I was braless for that entire emotional confession!*

"N-No, this isn't...! It's not what you think!"

*No... Nooo! This is the worst! I can't believe Takkun found out. It's because I got excited and hugged him. Of course he would notice when we're both wearing thin clothes and we hugged so tightly that I pressed my chest against him.*

"Um, I... Just now, I was on my way back from taking out the trash... I-I don't usually walk around without a bra, okay?! But I slept in today and was in a hurry, so I just forgot..."

"I see... Oh. So, is that why you ran from me earlier when you saw me...?"

"Th-That's right! It's because I didn't want you to find out I wasn't wearing a bra! But still, you ran after me..."

"I-I'm sorry, I thought you were just avoiding me again."

"I wasn't... I wasn't going to avoid you anymore, and I was going to properly respond to you asking me out... That was the plan..." Despite my intentions, everything went completely unexpectedly. *How did this happen?* I could feel tears different from the happy ones from earlier beginning to form. "Ugh, how did this happen... It's the day I finally get to start dating you, but I've been

braless this whole time! I'll probably remember this forever, won't I? Each year as our anniversary comes around, I'm going to remember this and be in agony!"

"E-Even if you do, let's celebrate our anniversary together over and over again."

"Y-Yeah..." Though it was a bit awkward, Takkun tried to cheer me up with a kind smile, so I nodded back.

I, Ayako Katsuragi, was a thirty-something-year-old woman. It'd been a quick ten years since I'd taken in my sister's child, and now, for the first time in my life, I had a boyfriend. Things had dragged on quite a bit until we'd gotten here, and the moment that we'd actually become a couple dragged on at the very last second, but this kind of ending was perhaps befitting of me, and I wanted to look at it as a positive.

That night...

"I see, I see. So you're finally dating now," Yumemi said with a satisfied chuckle after I reported the news to her over the phone. "Man... It feels like it's been so long—and if I feel that way as an outsider, I'm sure Takumi's spent a lot of time fretting over things."

"I-I can't say you're wrong..."

"Well, congratulations. I'm happy for you, from the bottom of my heart."

"Thank you. You helped me a lot, Yumemi."

"I didn't do anything. I just teased you and had some fun."

*Wow, she's being modest. Although... There's definitely a possibility that she really was just teasing me the whole time.*

"Ayako," she continued, her tone a bit lower and more formal. "You've overcome various obstacles and finally started dating, so I'm sure that you're over the moon right now, but...the hard part starts here, you know?"

"I know..." I nodded with a heavy head. *I know that. The real difficulties are probably what lies ahead.*

If this had been a fairy tale, the story would have had a happy ending once

the prince and princess got together, closing with some line like “And they lived happily ever after.” But this was real life. The story didn’t end once we got together—it would continue on forever. Furthermore, not every couple stayed happy just because they’d vowed to love one another, whether they’re dating or married or whether they’re the same age or not. People broke up, and divorces took place.

Not only that, but there was no getting around the fact we were a couple with an age gap of over a decade. It was probably impossible for us to date smoothly without any issues.

“There’s so much more time spent actually dating in a relationship. What happened before you got together will be a tiny blip compared to the arguments and accidents that lie ahead now that you’re together. Surely you’ll believe that from someone who’s got three divorces under her belt, right?”

“Ha ha,” I laughed dryly. Her poking at her own weak spots wasn’t funny, but I moved past it with a chuckle.

“Sorry, it’s not like I want to rain on your parade when you’re so happy. It’s just... I might be the one who creates your next obstacle.”

“What?” *Yumemi is our next obstacle?*

“Jeez, I wonder why it had to be now... It’s not like I planned for this, but the timing is just horrible,” Yumemi said to herself, sounding apologetic as she ignored my confusion.

“Ayako,” she began with a serious tone, devoid of even an ounce of jest. “What do you think about working in Tokyo starting next month?”

## Chapter 5: The Separation and the Transfer



It was the day after Takkun and I decided to start dating. I'd been in a daze since that morning. Miu was a student, so she was still on summer break, but being a homemaker and a working adult, I had to go back to business as usual following the Obon holiday. Despite those responsibilities, I had woken up at the same time as Miu, who'd lazily stumbled out of bed without even setting an alarm. I couldn't even bring myself to make breakfast, and we both had cereal.

"What's wrong, mom? You seem out of it," Miu said with a dubious look as she sat across from me at the table.

We had started eating at the same time, but she was already done. As for my own bowl, I had more than half left. *I need to eat it soon, or else the cereal will get soggy.*

"Do I seem out of it?"

"You do. You really do."

"Oh... You're right. Yeah, I do."

"Where's all your drive? You seem down even though you're finally dating Taku officially." I sat there silently, still absent-minded. "I wanted to send Taku a video of you being giddy, but seeing you so unenergetic like this is throwing me off." I still had nothing to say back. "Well, I have a good idea of what's going on," Miu said, her exasperation evident in her tone. "You're thinking about going to Tokyo, right?"

"Yeah..." I finally responded, limply nodding my head. Miu and I had discussed most of what'd happened during my phone call with Yumemi last night.

"You want *me* to work in Tokyo...?"

"That's right," Yumemi said with a serious tone. It appeared that she wasn't

joking even in the slightest. “It’s something I’ve been thinking about for a while, ever since *KIMIOSA*’s anime adaptation was greenlit.” *KIMIOSA: I Want to Be Your Childhood Friend* was the project I was in charge of that was going to get an anime adaptation. “As I’m sure you’re aware, when a light novel gets an anime adaptation, there’s a ton of work for everyone involved with the source material. The author, the illustrator, and, of course...the editor.”

I fell silent. That was something I already knew. When a project was being adapted into an anime, the workload of the editor in charge would massively increase. There was a countless variety of tasks that the editor would have to handle—I couldn’t even begin to describe it all in a single sentence.

The job of the editor was already wide in scope. Aside from supporting the creation of the project and doing actual editing work, editors were also the middlemen between authors and others. If the project were to expand into other forms of media, the editor was always a part of discussions with external companies. When the other form of media was specifically an anime adaptation...there was an incredible number of meetings that needed the editor’s presence.

The editor would have to be at times a mediator and at times a buffer, liaising between the author and all involved parties. Along with communication through phone calls and emails, the editor would generally be on-site during affairs such as script meetings, voice recordings, in-person events, and live streams. It was an immense workload that was near impossible to handle if you weren’t living in the Kanto region.

“Of course, I understand your reasons for your current work situation. That’s why, at first, I was planning on having you focus on the source material while leaving anything related to the anime to other people.” I listened intently as she continued. “I’ve always been skeptical of the traditional workflow that puts so much load on the editor alone. There are plenty of editors who have been overwhelmed with work because a project of theirs got an anime adaptation, which led them to falling ill and even passing out. This industry has a culture that makes editors compete with each other over who hasn’t gone home the longest, but I’ve always wanted to change that into something healthier and more ethical.” I continued to silently listen to her. “So, when it came to the

*KIMIOSA* adaptation, I thought it was best to reduce your burdens as much as possible. I thought it was best to prioritize your life in the Tohoku region—your life with Miu—and not push you to work too hard. But then I thought...was that really the best thing for you?”

“What’s best for me...?” I echoed.

“Ayako, as the editor in charge of the series, don’t you want to give your all to the *KIMIOSA* anime?” Yumemi asked. “This goes without saying, but aside from Ms. Shirando, the author, the person who’s the most familiar with and the most invested in *KIMIOSA* is you, without a doubt. You’ve been with Ms. Shirando since she made her debut as an author, you started this project up from scratch, and you helped to get this project to where it is today and got it greenlit for an anime adaptation.” She wasn’t wrong. “Of course, I think it’s possible to handle the tasks related to the anime without you—I’ve made the proper preparations for that. It’s just... I just thought that maybe there’s a part of you that *wants* to take on this job.”

*Is she right? It’s a project I’ve built from the ground up—do I not want to be there?*

“If you were willing to throw yourself into the thick of it regarding the anime-related tasks, I’d be nothing but grateful. There would be nothing more reassuring than having you work on it. Ms. Shirando might not say it out loud, but I’m sure she probably wants you to handle things as well... Getting adapted into an anime is one of the biggest steps a project can take toward becoming a multimedia franchise, and this project is as precious to her as a child. It’s natural for her to want to put it in your hands as someone she trusts.”

*I wasn’t sure what to say. That might be true... Ms. Shirando is a reasonable, mild-mannered person, so she probably wouldn’t admit it, but I don’t doubt she wants me to take care of things with the anime.*

Even beyond that, I was feeling guilty about being so hands-off. It was a project I had worked on with her for so long, yet I was going to be leaving the anime adaptation, huge event that it was, to other people. It definitely didn’t sit right with me.

“B-But Yumemi...” I began. Her suggestion had come so suddenly that my

mind was still a mess, but the words left my mouth before I could think about it. “Giving my all to the anime would mean...”

“Yup. I’m asking if you want to move here,” she said. “Of course, I’m not asking you to move your entire life to Tokyo. Well, I don’t mind if that’s what you want to do, but that’s not a decision you can make that easily. That’s why, for now, why don’t you try coming here for just three months?”

“Three months...?”

“The company will provide your lodging, so you don’t need to worry about rent. If you’re up to the task, I’d like you to live in Tokyo for three months and give your all to the anime adaptation.”

I didn’t know what to say...

“Oh, sorry for going on and on like that.” Yumemi’s tone softened. “It’s only natural for you to be completely lost after having all this sprung on you. Sorry for reaching out to you about it so last minute—I didn’t want to end up having to send you back home if you agreed to transfer here but something went wrong, so I’ve been waiting to bring it up until after I was sure I had all the details ironed out.” I listened as she continued. “Just so you know, Ayako, this isn’t mandatory. It’s just a suggestion. If anything, I’m asking even though I know you’ll probably say no. There’s nothing wrong with you turning this down if you don’t want to do it.” I was still at a loss for words, but Yumemi wrapped up the conversation with her usual eloquence: “I want you to think long and hard about it before you make a decision. Think about Miu, and think about your new boyfriend. You’re the only person who can decide what’s currently the most important thing in your life.”

“If you go, you’d be there starting next month, which would be...next week, right?” Miu asked.

“Mm-hmm,” I nodded. “The scenario readings, um, basically meetings where the people working on the anime discuss the plot, begin at the start of next month. If I’m going to participate in the production, I should be involved from the beginning.”

When a manga or a light novel got greenlit for an anime adaptation, one piece

of advice—or rather, a request—that editors would have for their writers is to “Be involved in the anime zero percent or a hundred percent.” Basically, if the original creators wanted to be involved in the adaptation, they should give everything they have to participating in the production, and if they didn’t want to be involved, they shouldn’t reserve the right to nitpick.

If a creator decided to be zero percent involved, then they shouldn’t stick their nose in the anime at all. They would do best to only answer any questions, complete any requested tasks, then leave the script and casting to adaptation staff—it would be their duty to trust the people working on the new production while they would focus on the most important project, the source material.

If a creator decided to be one hundred percent involved, on the other hand, it would be important for them to handle that responsibility sufficiently. They needed to participate in all the weekly meetings and be there for the voice cast auditions. It would become their duty to bring up all their ideas for the adaptation and pour all their effort into the anime’s success through managing the input and feedback of the anime’s various staff. Of course, they had to do all this without slacking on the source material.

Adaptation staff would be happiest when the original author aligned themselves with either the zero or the one hundred approach. The worst thing was to insert oneself half-heartedly. That wasn’t just the case for the authors either—the same went for editors. Getting involved with an anime adaptation as the editor in charge of the source material essentially meant you were agreeing to be the nerve center of the anime production. If you weren’t going to do that, then it would be for the best that you abstained from getting involved at all. At the same time, if you *were* going to get involved, it was imperative you followed through at every level.

“I see. This sure is out of nowhere. Something like this would never happen at a normal company, right? Discussing a transfer one week before it would happen is crazy,” Miu remarked.

“This industry isn’t normal,” I said with a hint of sarcasm.

*I mean, I agree that it’s really soon. That’s why, just like Yumemi said, this isn’t mandatory—it’s just a suggestion. I have the right to decide whether I do it or*



*not.*

If I turned this opportunity down, I wouldn't be penalized for it, and it probably wouldn't affect my chances of getting a promotion or a raise at all. If anything, I should've been grateful because I was given a chance. Being in a provincial area and working remotely already made my work situation a bit annoying, but Yumemi had given me a choice—a chance to be seriously involved in the anime adaptation of my project. She was even giving me a free place to live. Saying that I was being treated well was an understatement.

"Mom," Miu said, snapping me back from being lost in thought. "I said this yesterday too, but you don't have to worry about me," she said, nonchalantly. "I can easily handle being on my own for three months."

"I don't think so... I can't help but be worried going on a temporary assignment alone and leaving you behind."

Once Miu had entered middle school, I'd left her alone at home for work on several occasions. Still, the longest I had ever been gone was three days and two nights. Of course, this would be my first time leaving her alone for three whole months.

"I'll be fine. I mean, you say it'll be far, but it's just Tokyo. If you really wanted to, you could take a bullet train and be back home in two hours."

"Well..."

Miu wasn't wrong. It wasn't like I was getting transferred overseas, so I could come home quite easily. If I really wanted to, I could be home every weekend, and they'd probably expense my tickets for the bullet train home.

"I'm in high school now. Living alone is nothing."

"You're too young to be living alone," I said.

"What? Isn't it pretty normal? There's a bunch of high schoolers who live alone in the books you edit."

"D-Don't equate fiction to reality!" *I mean, she's not wrong!*

There was a good chance that high schoolers who appeared in manga and light novels were living alone. There were various reasons unique to each series,

but...to put it simply, those were the most convenient circumstances to enable various plot developments. Stories would become much more complicated when parents were involved.

*Still, I never thought I would be considering that kind of situation as a parent. Agh, I'm worried! I'm so worried about leaving my high schooler alone and going to work somewhere far away!*

As an editor, I was no stranger to casually suggesting things like “Maybe we can just say that the parents are on a business trip overseas? That way we’ll have more freedom.” But now that I was actually in the position of doing that to my own child, I was so worried that I couldn’t think straight!

*Oh, I'm so sorry... I apologize to all the parents of the main characters and female leads of the various books I've been in charge of. I shouldn't have sent you overseas so carelessly... From now on, I'll consider the plot carefully, give it a lot of thought, and with the utmost reluctance...I'll still send you overseas.*

“If I end up taking the assignment, I’ll see if grandma can come here...” It would probably be difficult for my mother to stay here for all three months, but she could probably come to check on Miu regularly.

“Wow, you really don’t trust me, huh...? I guess I don’t mind. Living with grandma sounds pretty fun.”

“I do trust you,” I said. “I’m worried, of course, but I believe you’d be able to handle living on your own for three months.”

Despite how my daughter seemed at times, she was surprisingly responsible. She knew how to cook and clean on her own, although she didn’t do either on a regular basis due to being lazy. Sure enough, whenever I had to be gone for work, she would make all her meals, do her own laundry, and clean the house. She would even iron her uniform before wearing it to school.

Even when it came to school work, she was the type to let it pile up and procrastinate until the last minute, but she managed her time well enough to always get assignments done on time. She was responsible—or perhaps just calculating.

*I'll be coming home regularly, and if my mom can also come here and help us*

*out, I think Miu can handle three months without me.*

“Is that so? Then what’s keeping you from going?” I didn’t know what to say. “This is a special opportunity to do a job you want to do, right? Not only that, but they’re even providing somewhere for you to live. They’re giving you the VIP treatment. If you’re not hesitating because of me, then what’s—” As she was speaking, a look came across Miu’s face like she had realized something. “Oh, yes, I see now. Of course, of course. You have a very important, precious boyfriend now.”

“Ugh...” Her exasperated tone made me shrink up.

“Wow, I’m shocked. I’m actually embarrassed at how self-centered I was. Here I thought my mother was being overprotective and worrying about me, but it turns out she’s been so worked up by her new boyfriend that he’s all she can think about. I guess you never really cared about your daughter at all.”

“Th-That’s not true! I’m thinking about you too! It’s just... I’m also worried about a lot of things with Takkun too,” I said, my voice gradually growing softer toward the end.

Miu let out a small sigh. “The timing really is bad. You’re finally going to start dating, but now it’s suddenly going to be a long-distance relationship. I can’t tell if you’re lucky or not.”

“Urgh...”

It was true. If I was going to work in Tokyo, then my relationship with Takkun would become a long-distance one right as it had begun.

*Well, three months isn’t that long, but why did it have to happen now of all times?! I mean, we just started dating! Isn’t this supposed to be the most fun period of a relationship?! Not that I would know, since I don’t have any experience!*

*Oh... I wonder what he’ll think. Right as he’s finally able to date the woman who spent so much time dragging her feet, she has to go to Tokyo for her job, so his relationship has to be long distance.*

“Have you told Taku?”

“Not yet...”

“You should tell him sooner than later. It’s important to discuss these types of things with your husband.”

“H-He’s not my *husband*! The word is boyfriend! He’s still my boyfriend!” I jabbed before nodding. “I know... I’ll talk to him today.”

It was best to bring this up as soon as possible. If I *was* going to take the assignment, I would have to start preparing for the transfer as early as yesterday... Not only that, but knowing myself, if I put it off now, I would end up never getting to it.

*I’ve made up my mind. I’m going to tell him today, no matter what. I should set something up now before I lose my nerve.*

Just as that thought crossed my mind, my smartphone on the table vibrated. It was a message from the very person I was just about to contact.

“It’s Takkun,” I said.

“Oh, what good timing. What did he say?”

“Um...” I began reading his message. “He asked if he could see me today.” That was the gist of the message, which had started with a morning greeting. He wanted to see me today if our schedules allowed for it.

*Hm, this is sudden. I wonder if something happened?*

For now, I responded.

**Ayako:** Of course we can. Is there something you need?

Takkun immediately messaged back.

**Takumi:** No, nothing in particular.

“Huh...? What does this mean? He doesn’t need anything, but he wants to see me.” *What kind of riddle is this?* I thought, puzzled.

“Mom, can’t you tell...?” Miu said, slightly exasperated but slightly embarrassed. “He wants to see you.”

“What? No, I know he wants to meet up, but I don’t understand what he wants...”

“He told you exactly what he wants.”

*Huh? He just wants to see me? In other words, he wants to meet up just for the sake of meeting up...*

“Whaaat?! S-So Takkun just wants to hang out?!”

“Obviously.”

“He just wants to come over, for no other reason...? It’s like he loves me or something!”

“He does, doesn’t he?”

“It’s like he misses me so badly that he can’t take it!”

“He probably does, doesn’t he?” In contrast to how flustered I was, Miu’s attitude was completely cold. “Until now, Taku’s always had to come up with some reason or excuse to see you, but now he doesn’t have to hold back. You’re a couple now, so he doesn’t need a reason to see you.”

*I-Is that how these things work? Couples can see each other whenever they want, even if they don’t have any reason to? What? That sounds amazing. You can just do whatever you want, huh... Does that mean I can call him just because I want to hear his voice? Am I allowed to do something so bold?*

“Jeez, I know I was rooting for you two, but now that I’m being forced to witness this honeymoon phase naivete... Let’s just say awkward is an understatement.” Miu looked like she had some mixed feelings. “Man, am I gonna have to keep watching you two flirt and be lovey-dovey up close like this? That’s so cringe...”

“D-Don’t say it’s cringe...” *I can’t help it, it’s my first boyfriend ever! It seems like this is Takkun’s first relationship too, so...we’re both dating someone for the first time! Of course there’s going to be naivete!*

“Anyways,” Miu said, getting the conversation back on track. “If Taku is

coming to see you, that gives you the perfect opportunity. You should have a proper conversation with him about your temporary transfer.”

“Yeah, I’ll talk to him about it.”

“I’ll judge you really hard if you end up hesitating in the moment and don’t bring it up, okay, mom?”

“I-I know.”

It seemed that my daughter had very little trust left in me.

## Chapter 6: Work and Love



Since he was a college student, Takkun was still on summer break. He had no plans for the day, and apparently he had time to meet whenever. I didn't want us to meet up too early or too late, so we ended up deciding he'd come over at about two in the afternoon.

Miu left the house before noon, saying she was going to work on her summer assignments at the library. I wasn't sure if she was trying to give us space or if she was actually behind on her homework. *Well, it's probably both... Now that she's in high school, I can't really help her with her assignments anymore. Good luck, Miu.*

I did some chores, took care of some work, and had lunch. After all that, our agreed-upon meeting time arrived pretty quickly.

"W-Welcome, Takkun."

"H-Hello, Miss Ayako."

After we'd finished exchanging awkward greetings, I invited Takkun inside. I prepared some drinks for us before sitting down across from him.

Takkun and I both sat there silently...and my house was already quiet. *Wh-What should I do? This is so awkward... I can't look him in the eye, and he seems embarrassed too.*

We had finally become a couple, but now it felt like we had both become really self-conscious. It was like time had turned back three months—back to when Takkun had first told me how he felt, and back when I'd realized the intent behind his actions. This discomposure felt just the same as when this had all started.

"Th-This feels kind of embarrassing..." Takkun said, breaking the silence.

"Y-Yeah... That's a good way to put it..."

I *was* embarrassed—of course I was. After all, we had finally become a couple. In other words, we were now in a state where we were both acknowledging that we liked each other. For all intents and purposes, it was like we were constantly shouting out we were in love. How could that *not* be embarrassing?

“If you think about it...dating someone is actually a really embarrassing thing to do,” I said.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, dating someone is basically like constantly showing off to everyone around you that you have someone you love, isn’t it?!”

Couples were only established if their feelings were requited—so, if you thought about it, dating was the same as getting up on a soapbox and declaring, “I have someone I love!” Actually, worse yet, it was more like boasting, “I have someone I love, and they love me too! Tee hee!” What an embarrassing thing it was to be dating someone!

“That’s um, quite the innovative thought...”

“But that’s what it means, right? You only become a couple because you like each other.”

“If you follow that logic, that would make marriage even more embarrassing.”

“Wh—?! Th-That’s right. It’s like you’re bragging to everyone around you that you and someone else love each other so much that you’ve exchanged vows with that person to be together for the rest of your lives!”

*Th-That’s so embarrassing! It’s basically like a humiliation kink! How can everyone just publicly announce their marriages?!*

As I began to fear the truth behind the institution of marriage, Takkun suddenly burst into laughter.

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just, I couldn’t believe how pure and innocent that sounded.”

“Huh? Urgh, you don’t have to make fun of me like that...”

“I-I’m not making fun of you. If anything...I love that innocent side of you,



Miss Ayako.”

I gasped and my heart skipped a beat at hearing the word “love” leave his mouth. Though I was charmed, at the same time, I wasn’t quite satisfied. *Should I really be flattered to hear I’m “innocent” at my age?*

“It’s really like a dream come true that I get to date you,” Takkun said.

“A dream? Isn’t that a bit dramatic?”

“No, it’s not. It’s something I’ve aspired to this whole time. I’ve spent the past ten years forever hoping that I’d get to have this kind of relationship with you,” Takkun explained, looking bashful yet truly content.

“Jeez, there you go again saying those things...” I couldn’t help but feel a bit sheepish myself. My heart beat faster, and my body was getting hotter. “Hey, Takkun... Why did you come see me today?” I couldn’t help but ask. I figured I knew the answer already, but I still wanted to hear him say it.

“Why...? Well, I didn’t really have a reason in particular.”

“So, does that mean you just wanted to see me after all...?”

“I-I guess that would be the case...” Takkun said. He was blushing, but he didn’t deny it.

“H-Huh... I see.”

“Isn’t that normal...?” he asked. “To want to see the person you love every day?”

I gulped. He said it again—he said that he loved me. *Ugh, jeez, Takkun! Why do you keep saying you love me so much?!*

As I sat there about to die from how lovestruck I was, Takkun asked, “Wh-What about you, Miss Ayako?” He seemed embarrassed, but he looked me right in the eye.

“Huh? What about me?”

“Did you, um...want to see me too?”

“U-Um, well...it’s, uh... Yeah.” The sudden question threw me for a loop, but I ended up nodding. “I wanted to see you too...and it made me really happy

when you said you wanted to come see me. I mean, I love you too, Takkun...” This time, Takkun was blushing, his face bright red as he covered his mouth with his hand. “Wh-What kind of reaction is that...?”

“It’s nothing, just... I thought you were really adorable saying all that.”

“Wh—?! I-I could say the same about you. Jeez, don’t tease me.”

“I’m not teasing you. I genuinely can’t get over how precious you are.”

“I-I told you to stop saying stuff like that! Sheesh...”

“I’m sorry, but when you react like that, it’s too much fun to stop.”

“Wh-What...? Urgh, you’re so mean, Takkun.”

“Ha ha,” he happily chuckled in response to my defeat.

*Wait... What even is this?! What’s with this lukewarm atmosphere?! Agh, I just— It makes me want to scream! Even though we’re enjoying ourselves, I’m sure this would look creepy to an outsider! We’re just an endlessly flirting couple! I think I would want to die if someone else saw us doing this.*

Luckily, the two of us were alone, and we didn’t have to worry about anyone watching—in other words, it was an incredibly fun and unbelievably blissful time.

*Ah, I’m so happy. I love Takkun. I love him. I love him, and he loves me. It sounds simple enough when you put it into words, but it feels like I’ve been given some kind of miracle. I feel like I might drown in all the happiness that’s pouring out of my chest. I can’t believe I’ll get to spend the rest of my life like this...*

It was that thought that suddenly cooled my elated mind down a bit. I remembered what I had to discuss with him today.

*That’s right. These days won’t go on forever. If I end up going to Tokyo, it’ll be difficult to make plans spontaneously.*

It was just going to be three months, but the next three months were the ones that should’ve been the most fun, since we had just started dating. I couldn’t help but feel like this was the most important period in a relationship.

I had already been horribly indecisive before we'd started dating, which had left him waiting so long for us to get together, and now here I was about to make our relationship long-distance thanks to my career. *Will Takkun really accept a woman as selfish as I am?*

"Hm...? What's that?" Takkun asked, pulling me out of my thoughts. His gaze had rested on a cardboard box in the corner of my living room.

"Oh, Yumemi sent that over."

"Miss Oinomori?"

"One of the projects I'm in charge of is getting an anime, so we're currently doing a lot of things to prepare for that."

"An anime adaptation...? That's incredible."

"It's the author who's incredible. I'm just supporting her," I said, making my way toward the cardboard box. I had already opened it up earlier, but...after I'd seen what was inside, I'd lost all motivation to deal with it and I'd ended up leaving it in my living room.

"We're preparing some character costumes for the voice actors to wear to events, but there's one they ordered in the wrong size. Yumemi sent it to me without asking. 'It's the perfect size for you Ayako! Consider it a gift,' she said." As I vented about work, I pulled out from the cardboard box...

"A-A maid costume...?" Takkun said, his eyes wide with surprise.

Yes, what Yumemi had sent me was none other than a maid costume. It was a mostly white outfit, but... I wasn't sure how to describe it, but it was basically like the epitome of what someone expected from a maid costume based on a manga or anime—there were frills galore, the fabric was thin and dainty, the skirt was short, and the top was...low-cut, to say the least.

This was the costume for Airi, one of the female love interests in *KIMIOSA*. She had a part-time job working at a maid café seven days a week, so she ended up being in her maid costume in most scenes where she appeared. Because of that, it was decided that her maid costume would be used for this event.

"Jeez, I wonder what in the world Yumemi was thinking..." She had sent this

before Obon—in other words, before I had started dating Takkun. She might have wanted me to wear this to seduce him or something, but even if she had...I hadn't asked for any such help.

*A maid costume? There's no way I could wear something like this.* Fed up with her antics, I let out a sigh.

"So, Miss Ayako..." Takkun began. His eyes were locked onto the maid costume. "Have you tried it on?"

"Huh...? N-No way, of course not."

"I see..." he said, looking obviously disappointed.

*What? What's with that reaction...*

"Takkun... Do you want me to wear this?" I asked.

*Huh? Wait. What am I even saying?!*

"Uh... W-Well, yes..." he nodded, despite being surprised.

Something I had noticed recently was that Takkun was generally humble and modest, but he could be quite aggressive. Even if he was embarrassed about it, he was pretty honest about saying what he wanted!

"I'm curious to see what you would look like in something like that," he admitted.

"I-Is that so? I see..."

*So that's what he thinks. He wants me to wear it, huh? If I wear this, it'll make him happy...*

"W-Well then," I said, my voice trembling. "Maybe I should go put it on."

Under normal circumstances, I never would've worn something like this. Wearing a maid costume at my age... Cringey would be an understatement. My usual self would *never* have worn something like this, no matter how much someone begged me to.

Actually, anyone who knew me knew I was easily pressured into things, so much so that I was even self-aware about it. I could imagine someone being insistent enough that I'd give in and put on the costume. Even in situations

where I'd managed to see through a ploy to shower me with compliments and sweet-talk me into wearing it or situations where I hadn't fallen for some kind of trap that'd force my hand...in the end, I'd probably just wear it if it's what someone wanted.

Today, however, I hadn't needed any kind of crazy situation to reach that end result—I'd skipped over the agonizing and immediately agreed to put it on. *I probably don't have much time left to do silly things like this. I want to spend my little remaining time making Takkun as happy as possible. If he wants me to wear something, I'm going to wear it.*

Although my motivations might have been similar to feeling under pressure, I decided to dress up in the maid costume...but as soon as I put it on I was overcome with immense regret.

"W-Welcome, mast— Sorry, I can't! I can't do this!"

I had gotten dressed in the changing area in the bathroom and returned to the living room. I'd thought that I wouldn't be able to endure the embarrassment if I hesitated for even a moment, so I'd decided to give it my most spirited effort, but alas...I couldn't even finish one line.

*This is so cringey... This costume is too much...*

When I'd looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, all I could see was an older woman wearing a frilly, airy skirt. Not only that, but it was too much to bear in a physical sense as well. The costume had apparently been the wrong size for the voice actress—more specifically, it'd been too big for her—yet it was slightly tight on me.

My chest and rear were squeezed into the costume, stretching it out. Not only that, it was a two-piece maid costume with a bare midriff, so the less toned area around my waist was completely exposed.

I felt like I was going to fall into despair at any moment as I endured the critical damage to my heart, while Takkun stared silently.

"Takkun... Don't just stare, say something please..."

"Um," he began, hesitating.

“Wait, never mind, don’t say anything! Don’t mention any of what’s happening here!”

“Which is it...?” he said, comedically jabbing back with a slightly troubled look. “It looks good though, Miss Ayako.” A straightforward compliment if there ever was one.

“Wha—? I-It’s fine, you don’t have to flatter me like that... You must think it’s pretty cringey, don’t you? You hadn’t expected it to look so bad when you’d suggested I wear it, right?”

“Not at all,” he reassured.

“Really...?”

“Well, maybe just a little bit...” Takkun admitted.

“S-See! I knew it!”

“But that’s what’s so good about it! The way you’re embarrassed about wearing something mismatched to your age is unbelievably charming,” he said passionately while clenching his fists. “I love when you do things unexpected for your age, Miss Ayako.”

“Wh-What...?” *Is that a compliment? I don’t know how to feel about that...*

If I were to take it as a compliment, I could consider him to have meant that I was endlessly youthful in my demeanor...but either way, wouldn’t it still boil down to meaning “You’re doing embarrassing things unbecoming of your age”? And he liked that?

“Y-You know, Takkun... I’ve thought this for a while now, but you have some pretty freaky tastes...”

“Urgh...” Takkun seemed hurt for a moment before staring me in the eye and adding on, “Wh-Who’s fault do you think that is?”

“Huh...?”

“Hypothetically, if my fetishes were strange, then...I think that would be because of you, Miss Ayako.”

“R-Really?!”

“You’ve done a lot of things to me ever since I was a child... I always saw you as a woman, but you continued to treat me like a child... We took a bath together, you wore a Santa-themed bikini in front of me, and you even hugged me tight while we were wrapped up in a curtain.”

I gasped. “Th-That’s because...I never knew you thought of me like that...”

I hadn’t known. I’d had no clue of his feelings. I’d never noticed that he thought of me as a woman. Because of that... *Yeah, I’ve done some pretty sketchy things. Like that thing, or that other thing, or even the other one...*

I had initiated physical contact with him countless times over the years, unaware of how he saw me—now that I knew that he had been looking at me as a member of the opposite sex that entire time, I was filled with embarrassment and regret.

“You made my heart race all those years while you were completely unaware of how I felt. If you think my tastes are freaky, then that’s all your fault, Miss Ayako. Because you seduced me all those times, my body is unable to love anyone else but you...” Though he sounded like he was complaining, it also sounded like a passionate declaration of affection.

*“My body is unable to love anyone else but you”? That’s...a pretty intense statement.*

“Well, um, I’m sorry for that.” I wasn’t sure what to do, so I decided to apologize for now. “As for the crime of toying with an innocent and pure boy’s heart, um... I’ll be slowly making up for it over time,” I said in a joking manner.

“Th-That would make me very happy. I hope you do so, for many years to come...” Takkun responded with a chuckle. “Oh, Miss Ayako. Since you’re already wearing it, could I take a picture...?”

“A picture?!”

“In commemoration,” Takkun clarified.

“What would this commemorate?! No! No way!” *I can’t leave a record of something so shameful! If someone were to ever see it, I’d never be able to show my face in public again!*

“I can’t? I promise I won’t show anyone,” Takkun insisted. “It’d be just for me to enjoy.”

“H-How are you going to enjoy it...? Regardless, no means no. I don’t want a picture of me in such an embarrassing outfit.”

“It’s nothing to be that embarrassed about... You cosplay *Love Kaiser* characters regularly, don’t you?”

*“Love Kaiser is different!” That’s part of a ceremony, so it doesn’t count! I just do it in my room, alone, to pump myself up! It’s just for my self-satisfaction, so it’s okay!*

“I really can’t, no matter what?”

“N-No, you can’t...”

“I thought you were going to atone for your crime of turning me into a freak...”

“Urgh...” Takkun was being unusually cruel. I couldn’t believe he was using my own words against me the moment they’d left my mouth. *Jeez, does he want a picture of me that badly...? Does he think that I’m that charming...?* “F-Fine, you can take my picture...”

“R-Really?”

“Under one condition. You have to be in the picture too.”

“You want me in it...?”

I thought that I could maybe endure the embarrassment if I wasn’t the only one in the photo. I just couldn’t take the idea of me being photographed like it was some kind of solo photo shoot.

“Heh... Heh heh. This way, if the picture ever gets leaked, you’ll be taken down with me. We’ll travel to the depths of hell together.”

“Please don’t say something so scary...”

And so, it was decided that we would both be in the pictures. Takkun pulled out his smartphone and extended his arm, and I inched closer to him.

“Miss Ayako, can you, um, come closer?”



“O-Okay...” Since it was going to be a selfie, we had to get quite close to each other.

“Can I put my hand on your waist...?”

“Y-You don’t have to ask about things like that.”

Takkun gently placed his hand over my waist and pulled me in closer. I decided to follow along and swallowed my embarrassment as I slightly hugged him. The composition of our photo reflected in the camera was a very lovey-dovey, flirty picture, fitting for a couple’s selfie.



*Ah, what is this feeling?* Touching him like this, I could feel his warmth, his firm musculature, and the scent of his body. It felt like I was feeling his entire existence with my body, and I was filled with immense happiness. I'd never known before... I'd never realized it felt so blissful and good to be touching the person you loved like this.

*I think I might like this... I might like touching and getting close like this...a lot. I really like it.* It was embarrassing to be admitting to enjoying something so babyish, but...I couldn't help what I liked.

*I want to touch him even more. I want to touch him, and I want him to touch me. I want to cuddle up to him even more...*

But if I ended up going to Tokyo, I wouldn't be able to touch him like this. We could message each other or hear each other's voices over the phone, but there wouldn't be any physical contact. The internet and technology were quite advanced, but there was still no way to hug your partner from far away.

*If we end up going long distance, I won't be able to feel his warmth or enjoy his scent for a while.* The moment that thought crossed my mind, all the sensations I was getting from him felt ever more precious and endearing to me.

"I'm going to take it no— Huh?"

Right as he was about to take the photo, I leaped onto him, hugging him. It wasn't the slight hug from earlier, but a full embrace. I wrapped my arms around his back, buried my face in his broad chest, and hugged him tightly. "Mmph..."

"M-Miss Ayako?"

"Mmph... Mmmph..." With my face still buried in his chest, I let out a strange whine. It probably came off as odd, like something was wrong with me, but it was all I could do to calm myself down in the face of the anxieties looming large in my head.

"I'm sorry, Takkun..." I said after I'd eventually calmed down. "I've been invited to go work in Tokyo..."

We sat next to each other on the couch as I told him about the temporary assignment—I told him about everything, including the circumstances of the anime adaptation, as well as the three-month period.

On a separate note...I had already changed out of the maid costume. I couldn't discuss something so serious in such a ridiculous outfit. *This is a really important conversation for us as a couple...*

"So, you might be going to Tokyo starting next month..." Takkun said with a solemn look upon hearing my explanation. He didn't seem to be as flustered as I thought he would be. It was possible that he was quiet because he was so shocked. "That's so sudden..."

"Yumemi had to prepare things on her side first, so..."

In most cases, a temporary transfer like this would never have been considered on such short notice, but this wasn't a mandatory transfer—I was allowed to decide for myself. I wasn't at risk of getting in trouble by turning it down. On the other hand, that also meant that the responsibility for the decision lay with me. I didn't have the excuse that my company was forcing me to leave—it was my own choice to make, so I had to take responsibility for any of the consequences of my decision.

"As long as I have the will to go, Yumemi's said that she'll support me in any way possible. They've also secured housing for me near the offices... I'm truly grateful for everything. I've discussed it with Miu too, and she says she'll be fine on her own and thinks I should go..."

"So..." Takkun began, getting to the core of the issue, "what are you planning to do, Miss Ayako?"

"I...want to go," I said. It was like I was giving in and admitting how I felt. "I'll probably never get another opportunity as great as this one. I think it's a chance to improve my skills as an editor. I couldn't ask for a better chance than this. Also..." I paused for a moment before continuing. "More than anything, I *want* to do it. I *want* to do the anime adaptation of my writer's series the right way. I built the original project from the ground up, and I want to stand alongside it as it reaches new heights."

It was true that I wanted to use this incredible opportunity to build on my

experience as an editor, but that wasn't my biggest motivation for going—more than anything, I wanted to see my project through to the end. It wasn't my obligation or my responsibility, but my desire, plain and simple. It wouldn't be wrong to say my goals were self-centered.

This wonderful story that Ms. Shirando had written was blessed in several ways, and it'd made it to the amazing point of getting greenlit for an anime adaptation. As the person in charge of her light novels, I wanted to see the project through to the very end. Aside from Ms. Shirando herself, the person who understood this series the most—the person aside from her who loved this work the most—was probably me, and I *wanted* it to be me. That's why I was ready to give everything I had to the anime adaptation and work to make it the best it could be for the series.

I'd originally accepted it as a wish that couldn't be granted to me. I'd had the logistical obstacle of living in the Tohoku region, so I'd given up on that dream. I'd hidden my desire because I hadn't wanted to trouble the people around me with my selfishness...but then I was unexpectedly given a chance to make my dream come true, which reignited the longing I'd hidden deep inside my heart.

"That makes sense..." Takkun said with a wry chuckle. "You've always been holding back, even when it comes to work. Even if there was an assignment you wanted to take on, you would always put Miu first and keep work on the back burner. You've always prioritized your time with Miu..." I listened intently to Takkun. "I think Miu knows that, and it's why she's rooting for you to go. I'm sure she wants you to do everything you've held back on for her sake."

That might have been true. She'd always seemed carefree, so it'd never been obvious, but Miu was always thinking of me. I was so grateful to have a daughter like her.

"What about you, Takkun...?" I asked in a slightly pleading tone. "What do you think?"

He didn't respond.

"Would you be upset if I went to Tokyo...?" I asked again.

After thinking for some time, he finally opened his mouth. "Well, I guess I would be a little upset," he said with a slightly pained look. "I would be lonely

and sad if I was apart from you, Miss Ayako. Especially since we're finally dating now and things are just getting started for us..." I winced a bit hearing how he felt, but he carried on nevertheless. "That said, I would be even more upset if you weren't able to pursue what you want because of me." He looked me straight in the eye as he spoke. "I've wanted to date you for the longest time... I've wanted to become a respectable man worthy of being by your side. I don't know how far I've come in accomplishing that goal, but a man like that wouldn't hold you back at a time like this, right?"

"Takkun..."

"Please give your best at work while you're in Tokyo, Miss Ayako," he said with an incredibly kind smile. He was affirming my feelings, despite how selfish I was being. "I support your dreams from the bottom of my heart, and I'll do anything I can to help them come true."

"Takkun..."

"I mean, I would hesitate a bit more if it was a long assignment, like two or three years, but it's just three months..."

"That's right... We'll be long distance for just three months."

It was just a measly three months. We were in the same country, and if we really wanted to see each other, we were only two hours apart. If an actual long-distance couple saw me struggling over this, they might find me pathetic. But when I considered the fact that I wouldn't be able to see Takkun as easily for three months, it felt like an eternity.

"Ugh..." Various emotions began swelling up inside me, and I felt like I was going to burst into tears. I tried to suppress the boiling love and sadness, but I gradually lost the strength to do so. *Maybe I don't have to force myself to put up a strong front. We only have a week like this left.*

There was no point in pretending like I was some tough woman. It was maybe best if I set aside all appearances and pretenses and had him coddle me as much as I wanted. As such thoughts crossed my mind, I found myself embracing him again.

"M-Miss Ayako..."

“I don’t want it... I’ll be so sad not being able to see you...” I said, throwing away my dignity and whining like a child. Takkun was surprised at first seeing me like that, but he quickly put on a gentle smile and placed his hand on top of my head.

“I’ll be sad too. But it’ll be okay. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“I’m sorry, Takkun... I’m sorry this is happening right as we’re starting to date... I’d wanted to repay you for all the time you’ve spent waiting for me now that we’re dating, but...”

“You don’t have to think about that. It feels like a miracle that I get to date you in the first place, and I’m incredibly happy.”

“I might call you every day once I’m in Tokyo, but don’t get annoyed by me, okay?”

“I won’t get annoyed.”

“You can’t cheat on me because I’m gone either...”

“I would never. You can’t cheat on me either.”

“I won’t have time for that. It’s not like I’ll be going for a vacation.”

“Don’t take the trash out without a bra on while you’re over there.”

“I-I won’t do that anymore! That was just a onetime thing! I won’t ever do it again!”

As I leaned on the man sitting beside me, we traded silly banter back and forth. Talking to him like this almost made me forget that I was an entire decade older than him. My stubborn idea of needing to act like an adult had faded, and I was being spoiled by my boyfriend just like any other girl would be. *I wonder how long it’s been since I’ve been spoiled by someone like this...*

“I only have about a week until I go to Tokyo, so...I want to spend lots of time with you and be super lovey-dovey, Takkun...” I said. I’d finally admitted it—I’d admitted something incredibly embarrassing in the heat of the moment.

I never would’ve been able to admit to something like that in my usual state of mind, but the time limit of having one week left together took off my armor as an adult and exposed my childish desires. *Still, maybe that was maybe a bit*

*too embarrassing for me to say.* As soon as the words had left my mouth, I was full of regret and shame.

“I’d love to,” Takkun said. He didn’t laugh or mock me and seemed happy.

*Ah, I love him. I love you, Takkun.* “I love you, Takkun,” I said, letting my thoughts pour out.

“I love you too,” he said, immediately returning the sentiment as he hugged me tightly. It was like we were being surrounded by a kind of bliss you can’t find anywhere else. “Um, so...” After we’d spent a few seconds enveloped in happiness, Takkun shifted slightly backward and looked at me incredibly seriously. “Can we start getting lovey-dovey now...?”

“R-Right now?!”

“Yes,” he said with a firm nod.

*Wait, hold on. Just wait a moment. I know that I’m the one who brought it up, but isn’t it too soon?! I haven’t mentally prepared for that yet!*

Despite the fact that I was panicking, overwhelmed by his passionate gaze, I couldn’t help but nod and respond, “That’s, um... I-It’s fine...” The next moment, Takkun grabbed me by the shoulders like he couldn’t wait any longer. “Huh...? Wh-What...?”

Ignoring my confusion, Takkun slowly brought his face closer to mine. I was completely frozen, and a million thoughts were running through my mind.

*Oh, he’s going to kiss me... This is technically our second kiss. If we’re not counting that first one, I guess it’ll be our first kiss since we’ve started dating. Am I okay? What did I have for lunch? Actually, what do you even do when you get lovey-dovey with someone? How far do you go?! Don’t tell me... D-Do you go all the way?! In broad daylight like this...? U-Um, I haven’t prepared one of those...*

In an instant, all kinds of thoughts ran through my mind...but then they dissipated just as quickly. I couldn’t think anymore—I just wanted to surrender myself to this course of events. I wanted to let him do anything he wanted to me. I shut my eyes, and left everything to him—



“I’m home!” Just then, the front door was unlocked and swung open as Miu’s familiar voice rang through.

Takkun and I both gasped, our faces only a centimeter apart, and we leaped away from one another with all the force of two opposing magnets. I quickly adjusted my clothes and hair before I stood up.

“Oh, you’re still here, Taku,” Miu said as she entered the living room.

“Y-You’re home early, Miu...” I said, desperately trying to appear calm. My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest, and I was sweating nervously. *Why did she have to come home right at this moment?*

“Yeah, I finished my work for the day. Did you talk about things with Taku?”

“Y-Yes, I did. Right, Takkun?”

“Y-Yes...” he agreed.

“Huh, I see. Why are you guys acting so nervous?” Miu asked, staring at us dubiously. Even though the AC was on, we were sweating and breathing heavily. Eventually, her face grew red. Miu seemed slightly bashful and at the same time put off by the unique restlessness Takkun and I were giving off.

“Wait... Were you *doing it*?”

“We weren’t!” Takkun and I both exclaimed in unison.

A week later, I was going to head out to Tokyo on my own. Our romance, which had finally begun, was going to enter its first chapter as a long-distance relationship.

# Epilogue



It was now September. Summer break was over, and students were entering their second term of the school year. I had arrived in Tokyo on my own.

“Phew...” Upon exiting the bullet train, I saw a bustling crowd walking past me. *There’s always so many people here.*

The weather was slightly hotter than the Tohoku region, but it was much cooler than when I had visited in July.

I somehow managed to get through the congestion in Tokyo Station while dragging my suitcase behind me, then I hopped into one of the taxicabs lined up by the exit. As I sat in the back seat, I messaged Miu.

**Ayako:** I arrived in Tokyo!

**Miu:** Good for you.

**Ayako:** Are you doing okay?

**Ayako:** Are you having any problems?

**Ayako:** Let me know right away if you need anything.

**Miu:** It’s just the first day.

**Miu:** It’s only been two hours since I saw you off at the station.

**Ayako:** Aren’t you sad without me around?

**Miu:** How old do you think I am?

**Miu:** You don’t need to be so worried.

**Miu:** Grandma’s here too. I’ll be fine without you.

I couldn't help but get worried about her, but Miu was as cold as ever. *Jeez, I get why they say kids don't understand how dear they are to their parents. Well, I guess Miu will probably be fine.*

My mother was staying over starting today. I messaged her as well, and she had already arrived and begun preparing dinner. She seemed to be pretty excited about being there to watch Miu, so I decided to relax and leave the house to her.

I was going to message Takkun next, but for some reason, my hands wouldn't move. *He didn't come to see me off at the station*, I recalled as I stared at my phone silently. He'd apparently had an errand to run—he wouldn't tell me what it was, but it was something he apparently couldn't put off.

Though there wasn't anything I could do about it, I couldn't help but feel sad. *I wanted to see him one last time before I left— No, no, I can't be thinking like that. You can't be so sad on your first day, Ayako! You're going to have to be long-distance with Takkun for the next three months. It'll be fine! We've got this. After all, we got to spend the last week being lovey-dovey!*

Yes, we'd spent plenty of time together. It was like we'd been stocking up on physical contact for the next three months, and we saw each other over and over again... Well, we hadn't gone as far as to see each other every day, especially since we'd both had things to do. We'd also been worried about what each of our families would think, so we weren't able to be too obvious, but still...anytime we'd had a spare moment, we'd tried to see each other.

Knowing that I wouldn't have a chance to spend time with him like that for a while made me able to be more honest about how I felt, and I daresay I managed to be a bit bold with what I did during our time together. I'd had him indulge me quite a bit—we'd spent time leisurely chatting, holding hands, and even hugging! A few of the things we'd gotten up to even made me blush when I remembered them.

Best of all, the day before yesterday, we'd spent the entire day on a date, and we'd even gone to see the new *Love Kaiser* summer film, so I'd managed to enjoy quite the fulfilling week before my transfer. *I should be able to survive on these memories for three months... No, I have to survive, since I made the*

*decision to come here.*

“Yes, it’s here... Oh, could I have a receipt?”

After ten minutes of driving, the taxi arrived at my destination. I thanked the driver and exited the vehicle. I was surrounded by tall buildings.

This area was a bit farther from the center of the city, but as someone who’d grown up in a provincial area, it felt incredibly lively. The road beside me was busy with cars consistently zooming by—I couldn’t imagine so much traffic back home.

The condo I would be staying in for the next three months was in this area. It was close to a train station and convenience stores, and there were plenty of restaurants nearby. This area was apparently quite a popular place to live. Even if it was only for three months, it was quite the special treatment to get to reside here for free.

*Since it’s close to a train station, I could’ve used a train from Tokyo Station to get here cheaper, but I used a taxi... Oops. I mean, I have a suitcase with me today, and I can expense it, right?*

I checked the route to my building on my phone before heading there. After traversing the unfamiliar roads, managing to somehow not get lost, my phone rang.

“Hey, Ayako,” Yumemi greeted.

“Hello. Did you need something?”

“No, nothing really. I just thought you might’ve arrived by now.”

“I’m in Tokyo. I just got out of a taxi and I’m heading to the condo. I was going to call you once I got there.”

“Ah, I see, so you haven’t gotten to your place yet. I guess I caught you at the perfect time.”

“Perfect for what?” I asked.

“Nothing, don’t worry about it.”

“Sure...” *Is there something going on?*

*I guess it's fine. Introducing mysterious implications is basically Yumemi's favorite pastime. There's no point in thinking about it.*

"Anyway, I'm happy to have you here," Yumemi continued. "I can't believe I'll get to work side by side with you for the next few months. Heh heh, what a strange feeling."

"It really is..." I couldn't help but get emotional.

It had already been ten years since I'd started working under Yumemi at Light Ship. Out of consideration for my suddenly becoming a single mother, Yumemi had gone out of her way to let me work remotely. Ever since then, I'd been working from the Tohoku region. I'd shown my face in Tokyo every now and then, but the majority of my work was done from home...and now, after ten years of doing that, I was going to work at the main office starting tomorrow. I was both excited and nervous at the same time.

"For now, you should take the rest of the day to relax. You're going to be working hard starting tomorrow."

"Understood... Oh, I see it." I'd kept walking as I was speaking to Yumemi on the phone, and soon enough, my building had come into view. "Wow, it's so much grander than I expected." Even when compared to all the housing complexes in the area, it was bigger and newer than everything else. It looked quite expensive to rent a unit. If someone were to purchase one... I couldn't even begin to imagine how much it would cost. "This is incredible, Yumemi... I didn't know you owned a unit in such a classy building," I said, slightly shocked.

The unit I was staying in wasn't company housing—Light Ship didn't have any in the first place—but a condo that Yumemi personally owned.

"It's nothing special. I'd just accidentally ended up buying it when a realtor had come by on a sales call and cajoled me. He'd said something about how it would be an *investment* or something. Man... That real estate office knows what they're doing. They always send some handsome young guy they know I'll like when they're trying to pitch something to our office."

"I see..." *Apparently, the wealthy accidentally buy condos when urged by handsome salesmen.* As usual, though my boss worked hard, she played hard too. *Wait, is it still "play" if she bought it as an investment?*

"I've rented it out to people in the past, but I got tired of dealing with it, so it's been sitting empty these days. I'm honestly grateful that you're using it."

"Well then, I'll be sure to enjoy my time there."

"You do that. So, about that condo..." Yumemi said jovially. "To celebrate your new life here, I prepared a little surprise for you."

"A surprise?"

"You'll know once you go inside, so look forward to it."

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

"How rude. What kind of person do you think I am?" Yumemi scolded me.

*I mean... Considering how she is usually...*

"Don't worry, it's not a mean-spirited prank or anything like that. I prepared something I know you'll enjoy for sure," she confidently declared before hanging up the call.

*Something I'll definitely enjoy? I wonder what it is. I'd like it if it were expensive alcohol or delicious meat.*

As I pondered the various possibilities for my surprise, I stepped into the building. I used the key that she'd sent me beforehand to get through the autolocking entrance, then headed into the elevator to get to my floor.

"Here it is." I stood in front of a corner unit on the tenth floor and exhaled. This was going to be my home for the next three months. *I'm going to do my best. I'm going to give it my all. I even left behind Takkun to work here, so I need to work hard, or else it won't be fair to him.* The moment I thought about Takkun, I was overcome with intense sadness.

*I want to see him,* I thought with a heavy sigh. *I want to see him already. It would be so nice if I opened the door and Takkun was standing right there. That wouldn't happen though.* As I dreamed of the impossible, I inserted the key, but...

"Hmm...? Huh?" The door was already unlocked. *Huh? Why is it open? Is maintenance here or something? Or is this the wrong room? Does this have something to do with Yumemi's surprise? Could it be that she's here herself?*

With various thoughts running through my mind, I decided to ring the doorbell. Several seconds after the ding-dong of the bell, the door opened from the inside, and I was completely stunned. “What...?”

The door was opened by someone I knew very well—someone I’d known since his childhood, whom I had recently started seeing romantically. He was my dear boyfriend, whom I had spent the last week doing nothing but being lovey-dovey with... It was Takkun.

“Huh? What?” Panic. Confusion. Astonishment. I blinked as various emotions overcame me.

At first, I thought I was hallucinating—that my mind and heart longed for Takkun so badly that I had tricked myself into seeing him—but I was wrong. No matter how many times I blinked or rubbed my eyes, Takkun was standing right there before me, in the flesh.

“Huh? What...? Wh-What are you doing here, Takkun—?” I was completely perplexed.

“I’m sorry!” he exclaimed, bowing deeply. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything until today... But, even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. Miss Yumemi’s conditions were that I keep it a secret from you.”

“Huh? What?” *What is he talking about? Yumemi? Conditions? I have no idea what’s going on. What is happening here?*

“Um... I’m not sure where to begin. Basically, uh...” Takkun seemed beyond lost, but he continued without any hesitation. “Starting today, I’ll be living here with you.”

“Wh—”

*Whaaat?!* I thought, screaming internally. I had enough sense left in me to not cause trouble for the neighbors, but...I still didn’t understand. I had no idea what was going on. *Is this Yumemi’s surprise? Was there some conspiracy in the works without me knowing?* I couldn’t fully grasp the situation, but the man before me was definitely real and definitely Takkun, which meant that he was probably telling the truth—he and I would be sharing this condo.

Our romance, which had at last begun, was going to enter its first chapter as a

long-distance relationship...or so I'd thought. In a turn of totally unexpected events, our first chapter was going to see us living together.



## Afterword

“What’s more important, me or your job?” is the classic line girlfriends and wives use with their male partners who work too much, but in this day and age, it’s normal for a woman to be working hard as well, so I’m sure there are plenty of men out there who’ve pulled out this line as well. The feelings behind the phrase go something like “Don’t just pay attention to your job, pay attention to me too.” I’m sure most men would feel a bit pathetic admitting something like that, but I don’t think it’s right that only men are expected to adhere to stoic, old-fashioned masculinity—and topics like these are no easy task to discuss. Regardless of gender, the older one gets, the more difficult it is to think of work and romance separately, so I hope everyone can have proper discussions with their partners and balance those two aspects of their lives.

With all that said, I’m Kota Nozomi. This is the fourth installment in the romantic comedy series where a guy and the mother he lives next to experience a pure, age-gap romance.

The following contains spoilers for the main story.

The two leads have finally gotten together! Well, it was basically set in stone that they would date with the ending of volume three, but I mixed in some flashbacks and took my time illustrating how they actually ended up dating. I had a lot of fun writing all the scenes with Mommy Ayako and little Takkun.

Though we’ve reached something of a conclusion to this romantic comedy, I’m apparently allowed to keep going, so I’ll continue forward. I was thinking about doing a “Long Distance Arc” where I could come up with all the things that might happen now that they’re dating with the physical obstacle of distance between them, but I felt like no one wanted that. Instead, volume five will be the beginning of the “Exciting Cohabitation Arc.” This will definitely be more fun!

There was a lot of talk about Mommy Ayako’s work in this volume, but...a lot

of it is my imagination, so I apologize if I got anything wrong. This series is a romantic comedy first, so just think of anything related to publishing as something akin to a side dish that's there to enhance the main course. In the real-life publishing industry, there isn't anyone who can pull off the superhuman feats that Yumemi does...

I have a sudden announcement to make. The comic adaptation of *You Like Me, Not My Daughter?!* is currently being published on the manga app Manga Park. It's an incredibly high-quality adaptation, so please check it out!

Not only that, but there's also a promotional video for the series that includes character voices! I hope everyone enjoys Mommy Ayako and Takkun's voices!

And now for my acknowledgments.

To my editor, the great Miyazaki, thank you very much for another great volume. I apologize for always cutting it so close.

To the amazing Giuniu, thank you for another volume of wonderful illustrations. The cover illustration of Mommy Ayako is so mommy that it's really mommy, and I love it.

And to you, the reader who picked up this book, I give my greatest thanks. I hope to see you all again in the next volume.

Kota Nozomi



This is the fourth volume.

After drawing that illustration for volume 3, I'd thought, "Yay! They got together!" I didn't expect the miscommunication in this volume, and it left me on the edge of my seat... Sure enough though, Mommy Ayako and Takumi were finally able to reach the starting line of their romance!

Also, I enjoyed the deep dive into Mommy Ayako's work.

Though the couple may have distance keeping them apart, from here on out, their days will be filled with the shenanigans of innocent romance novices.

Or so I thought, but then they're suddenly living together?!

Please, volume 5!!!  
When is volume 5 coming out?!

This afterword illustration is a cleaned-up version of a rejected draft for the cover of volume 2.

I drew a married woman who got wet in the rain with hydrangeas behind her as she looks back.

(Note: Mommy Ayako is not married.)

I wanted to give the illustration a seasonal feel while drawing Mommy Ayako giving off a dewy kind of seductiveness...

I hope I can keep drawing all kinds of Mommy Ayakos.

*You Like Me,  
Not My Daughter?!*

Volume 4  
Giuniu





YOU LIKE  
**ME!**

NOT MY  
**DAUGHTER?!**

**4**

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











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You Like Me, Not My Daughter?! Volume 4

by Kota Nozomi

Translated by sachi salehi Edited by Zubonjin

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