

8 Saekisan
ILLUSTRATION BY
Hanekoto

The
Angel
Next Door
Spoils Me
Rotten





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Amane Fujimiya

A student who began living alone when he started high school. He's poor at every type of housework and lives a slovenly life. Has a low opinion of himself and tends to put himself down, but is kind at heart.



Mahiru Shiina

A classmate who lives in the apartment next door to Amane. The most beautiful girl in school; everyone calls her an "angel." Started cooking for Amane because she couldn't overlook his unhealthy lifestyle.





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NEW YORK

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Saekisan

TRANSLATION BY NICOLE WILDER * COVER ART BY HANEKOTO

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KEN Vol. 8

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Chapter 1

An Important Promise with the Angel

“...Today...is it all right...if I don’t go home?”

For a moment, he couldn’t understand what she was saying to him.

As soon as the muffled, near-whispering voice of the girl in his arms reached his ears, Amane’s thoughts screeched to a halt. It took quite a bit of time before he could process the meaning of her words.

...Is it all right...if she doesn’t go home today...?

She was asserting, however modestly, that she wanted to stay in his apartment and spend the night with him. It was true Amane and Mahiru were dating, and they had even slept in the same bed before, but the circumstances were different.

Mahiru was saying, unprompted, that she wanted to stay over.

When his train of thought, running many times slower than usual, finally arrived at the meaning of her words, Amane’s cheeks grew as hot as a roaring fire.

She wants to stay over.

Still, even Amane knew if she was asking to stay the night, she must have already prepared herself for what might happen given the current mood. Since Mahiru was still leaning against him, he could feel it in his body when she stiffened up from nerves or when she trembled a little, either out of bashfulness or nervousness.

He’d never expected to hear Mahiru ask for something like that, so he looked down at her in his arms despite himself, and she seemed to feel his gaze on her. Her dainty body shook with a start.

After that, with about half her face still buried in his chest, she looked up at him.

He could see himself reflected in her misty eyes as they wavered, full of embarrassment and expectation.

Amane's gaze became even more set as the pounding in his chest grew louder. As if to escape from his gaze, Mahiru buried her face in his chest again to try and hide.

Amane opened and closed his mouth several times, trying to make some sound. Gradually, he became able to speak, and he squeezed out some words without disguising the tremble in his voice.

"...Um, well...wh-what...do you mean?"

"I-it's just...as I said... I don't...want to be apart from you, Amane. I want to get my fill of you."

Though a suggestion like that was no longer enough to send him into a coughing fit, Amane went completely stiff, as if hearing Mahiru's words had stopped his breathing.

Mahiru glanced up at him. "This isn't enough... For two days...I've been patient. I want to spend more time...together with you, Amane."

"I—I want that, too, but still...um, isn't it a bad idea?"

Mahiru ought to have understood this herself, but Amane was a healthy young man, so if his girlfriend told him she didn't want to go home in an environment with no one to interfere, things might go a certain way.

Amane prided himself on being someone with strong self-control. But ultimately, he was still a high school boy with a powerful sex drive. He feared the moment he got a sweet and seductive invitation from his beloved girlfriend, he would trade his straight face and self-control for a beastly leer and swoop in to attack her.

Amane, who didn't want to let his desires get the better of him, knew he ought to avoid that situation entirely. In this case, he didn't think Mahiru was suggesting they go all the way. Rather, she simply wanted to spend more time

with him. All the more reason why he was hitting the brakes.

“If we’re a couple,” Mahiru said, “then it’s normal to spend the night together, right?”

“Th-that’s probably something normal couples do, but...”

“Are you saying we’re not a normal couple?”

“That’s not what I mean. It’s just, we’ve only been dating a few months, and —”

“It’s a little late to say that, considering I’ve already stayed over at your parents’ house.”

“Urgh.”

When she mentioned that, Amane couldn’t argue. He was at a loss for words. Mahiru looked at him with disapproval in her eyes.

“...Do you hate the idea that much?”

“I don’t hate it!”

Her voice had had a lonesome ring to it. Wanting to make sure she understood, he raised his voice without meaning to, and Mahiru stiffened from surprise.

Amane was sorry for shouting as he stared directly into Mahiru’s eyes. “This goes without saying, but I’m really glad,” he said. “I can’t believe what a lucky guy I am that you would say you don’t want to be apart from me. I also want to spend more time together, and if we could, I’d sleep next to you every day.”

Mahiru’s cheeks flushed red at the words *every day*, and even as Amane thought he might have said a little too much, it didn’t change the fact that he wanted to be by her side. So he forged on.

“But we don’t know what might happen, and I don’t want to feel like I’m rushing you or anything. I don’t want to do anything you don’t want... Haven’t you ever considered that I might do something if you spend the night?”

“I trust you, Amane, so...”

From the way she answered without hesitation, Amane was convinced that,

as he'd suspected, Mahiru was only asking to sleep in the same bed together. He was sure she had only asked to stay over because she trusted he wouldn't hurt her.

If that was what Mahiru wanted, then Amane wanted to grant her request. He made up his mind and tried to steel his resolve. Immediately, he felt a little poke from Mahiru.

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to use my trust in you against you. What I want is...I mean, if you want something...I'd give it to you."

"Huh?"

"You're someone who stands up and takes responsibility for his actions, right?"

"O-of course I am. I promise never to do anything irresponsible, as a person and as your boyfriend."

"Well then, there's no problem, is there?"

"I...guess not."

Amane did feel like she *was* using her trust against him, but Mahiru looked at him with so much confidence in her smile. It was as if she was entrusting everything to him, so there was no way he could let her down.

Though he had enormous misgivings about the evening and what would happen to his self-control, if Mahiru wanted to spend the night with Amane, he couldn't refuse her.

Amane also wanted to be by her side. If only he didn't have to worry about his own body's urges.

In his arms, Mahiru had sounded full of confidence in Amane when she'd spoken. Still, perhaps because she was feeling embarrassed about catching his gaze again, she let her eyes wander a little, then quietly added, "Just, I'd like to ask you to be gentle, wh-whatever happens." Then she leaned her body against him, so Amane didn't know whether to be embarrassed or delighted by her behavior as he bit his lip and adjusted his hold on her.

...What...should I do?

Amane had agreed she could stay over, but now that he'd calmed down and given it some thought, he realized he was crossing a very dangerous bridge.

Mahiru would stay over on the condition that he wouldn't do anything, even though he knew she would allow him to if he tried. But Amane had a feeling the balance between his reason and his instincts was already unsteady and tipping toward instinct.

Augh, but if I don't make a move now, I know I'll get an earful later.

Even though, in his mind, he could hear Itsuki saying, *Now's the time, man!!* Amane still didn't want to force things. He knew Mahiru would be the one hurt if the worst happened. So naturally, he was hesitant.

He was fully aware this was egotistical thinking, but even so, precisely because he had these concerns, he was not ready to give up on his self-control. And by no means did Amane believe it must be all right for them to take things too far just because he liked her or she was his girlfriend.

"...Uh, well, how about you go home first and take a bath? You can only use ordinary shampoo and stuff over here," he suggested to Mahiru, looking quite bashful in his arms.

Even if she was going to stay the night, Mahiru wouldn't be able to do her usual routine at his apartment, and she still needed to change her clothes.

He made that proposal thinking it would be more convenient for her to take care of all that business at home and then come over again. But Amane felt a jolt go through Mahiru's body.

After he said it, Amane realized he was probably inviting some terrible misunderstanding by bringing up the subject of a bath, especially given the current situation. He immediately froze, but Mahiru wriggled uncomfortably in his arms and curled in on herself.

"Y-you've got the wrong idea!" he protested. "I didn't mean it like that, okay?"

"H-hey, Amane?"

"Yes?"

Amane was worried that, as he'd feared, she must have taken his words too directly, but he could see when she lifted her head that Mahiru was not embarrassed.

"Your parents...they got in the bath together...right?"

"W-well, yeah, I guess so?"

"I—I don't have any hidden motives. I don't, but, well...s-since I'm finally staying over and all...I—I want to...get in the bath...together."

For a moment, Amane didn't understand what his girlfriend had just said to him. She had mumbled it so quietly, in such a trembling voice. He just stared.

...Together?

Getting in the bath was, of course, something one did without wearing any clothes.

This meant the two of them would be exposing their bodies completely, not wearing a single thing.

If she made him do something like that, even Amane would, naturally, have no chance of effectively restraining himself. He was confident he would leave all reason and control behind and indulge himself in her soft, fair skin.

Mahiru was much more aggressive than usual. And Amane, unable to hide his bewilderment, let his eyes wander around the room as he scratched his cheek, which threatened to burst into flames at any moment.

"Ah, no, that would, um, wouldn't that be a bad idea? We'd be naked..."

"Well, um...i-if I wore a b-bathing suit...wouldn't that be okay?"

"S-sure, it would probably be okay if you wore a bathing suit, but, um...are you prepared to have me touching your body like that?"

Even with Amane's best intentions, if his defenseless girlfriend was there, just an arm's length away, there was no way to say for sure he wouldn't do anything.

He couldn't tell whether Mahiru understood that or not as she fluttered her long eyelashes and cast her eyes downward.

“I mean, I assumed we’d be touching since we’re going to wash each other’s backs.”

“Y-you did?”

“I did. And I’m telling you I don’t mind. I like it when you touch me, Amane, and if I really didn’t, I wouldn’t be saying these things.”

“...Right.”

He could tell Mahiru had no ulterior motive and that she probably just wanted to be a happy couple like his parents, whom she deeply admired. So Amane said nothing more and just nodded.

“So basically, um, if I also put on my swimsuit and get in, we can avoid the problem completely.”

“Y-yes.”

“...Is that all right?”

“A woman never goes back on her word.”

He wondered whether that line had originally been about a man, but since Mahiru had prepared herself for anything and was the one who had suggested it in the first place, he didn’t want to ignore her feelings.

In short, all Amane had to do was exercise self-restraint.

Now that he had found the only partner for him—and that Mahiru aspired to have a relationship like his parents’, who were always close—he figured taking a bath together wasn’t a bad place to start. If Amane could control himself, being so close to each other might even be nice.

Amane tried to remember where he’d shoved his bathing suit—probably in the back of the trunk of clothes he wouldn’t wear anymore now that summer vacation was over—as he pressed a hand to his throbbing chest and nodded. “Okay.”

Amane, who had been first to put on his swimsuit and head into the bathroom, was feeling extremely uncomfortable and nervous.

It was going to take Mahiru some time to bring her swimsuit over and get

changed, so she had wanted him to go in ahead of her. But the longer he had to wait, the harder his heart throbbed.

He had seen her in a bathing suit before, but this would be his first time seeing her like that while they were alone together, not to mention during an overnight stay, in a cramped space where they would be in close contact. Of course he was feeling more nervous than excited.

And anyway, isn't getting in the bath together something men and women with more experience do...? he thought, assailed by uneasiness and embarrassment.

He wasn't even soaking in the hot water yet, but his body already felt feverish.

He pressed his lips together, wondering whether he wanted Mahiru to hurry up and come in or just not come in at all, when he heard the creak of the door behind him.

His movements were awkward as he turned around, and he saw his girlfriend looking at him timidly. Her skin was dazzling.

And the fact that he froze the moment he saw her there was probably inevitable.

...This must be the one Chitose mentioned...

He recalled Chitose had previously told him Mahiru had purchased two different swimsuits.

The one she wore this time was not what he had seen when they'd gone to the pool together.

What she was wearing now was a black bikini, a perfect contrast to her porcelain skin.

There weren't any needless embellishments. It was just plain cloth covering her skin. It wasn't cut terribly small or anything. It was just a regular swimsuit. But the fact that it seemed so suggestive on her anyway was because of her incredible shape.

Not that he would have expected anything different, but even when he took a

second look, the only way to describe the sight was *Magnificent*.

Everything about her was ideal, from her slim décolletage or her slender neck to the beautiful curves of her chest, waist, and thighs, which he could tell were perfectly soft yet firm.

Usually, Mahiru didn't expose much skin. She was the type who wouldn't dream of letting people see her chest, so Amane barely had any chance to lay his eyes on her body, and now he alone was being granted this rare privilege.

Mahiru was the one who had brought out this ultimate weapon of hers, but perhaps because she felt Amane's eyes on her, she bashfully tried to cover her front with her arms.

But even that gesture was erotic—pressing her breasts together until they met—and Amane found the sight was incredibly alluring. But at the same time, seeing her like that was also extremely tough on him.

Figuring it was bad to stare, Amane let his gaze wander. But that seemed to bother Mahiru, who was frowning just a little bit.

“...Does...it look weird?”

“N-no, not at all. It looks great, but...”

“But...?”

“...How can I say this...? It's very exciting,” he muttered, just managing to squeeze the words out.

Mahiru's cheeks flushed.

Clearly, she was aware of the swimsuit's effect. It was a clothing choice she normally wouldn't have made. It was slightly precarious when it came to protecting her modesty, considering it was made of only fabric and strings.

“...That's why I didn't wear it at the pool. I was embarrassed of people seeing me like this.”

“Well then, why did you buy it?”

“Th-that's, well, Chitose said...if I didn't do something like this, you would never be convinced, Amane.”

“What are you planning to convince me to do...?”

Shaking his head at Chitose’s remark, he glanced at Mahiru’s figure again.

...She could probably convince me to do anything after showing me something like this.

That was how much power Mahiru had looking like this. It made him want to crouch and look away entirely until he calmed down.

But there was no way he could do that, so he took deep breaths as he tried to recover his composure somehow and glanced at Mahiru again. He felt like running away. There was too much tension in a scantily dressed boy and girl being beside each other in such close quarters.

“Uh, so...f-first, should we wash our hair?”

“Y-yeah, good idea.”

Mahiru agreed in a voice that betrayed her feelings. She hung her head in an effort to hide her flushed cheeks despite the fact that she had not yet stepped into the hot water. From the waterproof bag she had brought with her, which was sitting on the bathroom floor, she pulled out a bottle with liquid in it.

Since Amane usually used men’s shampoo, he hadn’t expected Mahiru to use his and had expected her to bring her own. But for some reason, she had an awfully large number of bottles.

While he stood there, astonished a girl would use so many products for a single bath, Mahiru looked at him repeatedly and pointed toward the stool.

“If you would just take a seat...”

Evidently, she was going to wash his hair for him. At least, that’s what she indicated.

“N-no, I’ll do it myself...”

“...I want to do it.”

It was surprising to hear her say what she wanted so openly, even though she had done so mildly, when he had been expecting her to ask him for his opinion. Compelled by her insistence, Amane obediently sat down on the stool.

He wondered whether she was getting carried away as Mahiru stood behind him, holding a brush she had brought over.

“I’ve been wanting to do your hair at least once.”

The tension on Mahiru’s face began to dissolve as she started working through his hair. Actually, for some reason, she took on a joyful expression, and Amane could tell she was really getting into it.

This was much better than if she had stayed stiff and nervous the whole time. Since Mahiru had a tendency to forget herself and fall into a trance when it came to Amane, he had a hunch this was no exception.

For Amane’s part, even if he was feeling overly self-conscious, he’d been having difficulty with his physical reactions. So he was grateful for a change in mood like this. It allowed him to think about something besides how close their bodies were. Besides, he already knew Mahiru’s deft hands would help him relax. He’d fallen fast asleep once just because she’d stroked his hair while he’d been lying on her lap, so he was sure having her gently tend to his hair would feel good.

After thinking that far and closing his eyes, leaving everything up to Mahiru, he heard a quiet giggle behind him.

“You’re quick to relax, aren’t you?”

“Oh, well, yeah. You said you would do it for me, so I thought I’d leave you to it. I know it’ll feel good.”

“I’ll do my best to meet your high expectations.”

Mahiru answered him with a smile, apparently happy he was entrusting everything to her. She proceeded to comb Amane’s hair slowly and meticulously.

“First, it’s important to remove the excess dirt and grime with the comb, then thoroughly rinse your hair with hot water. But you’ve got short hair, so it’s probably fine either way.”

“That makes sense. It’s a pain, though, so I never comb it before bathing.”

“Your hair is short, so you probably never really think about it. Mine is long, so

it gets tangled easily. I can't skip that step."

"You maintain it so well despite that. It must be pretty stressful."

He opened his eyes and looked at Mahiru's hair in the mirror. It was long enough to pass her waist with ease. And yet she had no split ends, and her cuticles were perfect. Her hair's smooth and soft surface boasted a beauty that would make any girl jealous.

As he admired the incredible labor that must go into maintaining her hair, he heard another quiet snicker behind him.

"Well, I've always had nice hair, so I wouldn't necessarily say it's stressful, but...it is true I take care of it. Having pretty hair makes you look nice no matter what clothes you have on, after all."

"...You're a real lady. No doubt about that."

"I just want to be a version of myself I can be proud of."

She said that as she finished brushing; he saw out of the corner of his eye that she had picked up the showerhead. He understood she was going to rinse his hair with water, and he quietly closed his eyes.

"I'm turning on the water," Mahiru said gently, then sprayed warm water from the showerhead onto Amane's hair.

"Now let's go ahead and fully prewash your hair. When you're using styling products, it's best to wash them out to some extent at this point."

"The lesson starts now, I see."

"You're lucky enough to have nice hair to begin with, Amane. It can be even better if you try to take good care of it."

"Still, doing this every day must be a real bother."

"It's one thing you really shouldn't slack off on."

He heard the exasperation in her answer.

Perhaps because his tension faded a little while she washed his hair, the awkwardness between them vanished, and they began talking like usual.

"Well, assuming we'll bathe together in the future, I guess I'll probably start

doing it automatically, so cut me some slack for now.”

Amane was lazy and thought the routine Mahiru had described following every single day sounded like a pain, so he said that without thinking it through.

But after she had wet Amane’s hair down with the showerhead, Mahiru froze.

She stayed frozen behind him for ten long seconds before finally thawing out and turning off the shower.

Then she silently took out some shampoo and was lathering it up on a net sponge when he glanced at her reflection in the mirror.

“Ah, um, Mahiru?”

“...The fact that you say things like that so naturally is one of your faults.”

“Uhhh...?”

After building up quite a lather, Mahiru began to work it into his hair. Her face was red.

It seemed like she was doing sloppy work, but Amane figured it must be his imagination.

“...I’m happy to hear you say it, but you can’t pretend to be shocked by your parents anymore.”

He more or less understood what Mahiru was trying to say. It took him a while, but Amane also went red when he finally realized what he had said.

Despite how shocked he had once been by his parents getting in the bath together, he had gone and implied once he and Mahiru were married, they would take their baths together every day. He had no room to laugh at his parents anymore.

“If you don’t zip your mouth up, Amane, I won’t know what to do.”

“I’ll be more careful.”

The shyness between them that had finally faded away came right back. After that, Mahiru gave her undivided attention to silently washing his hair as both she and Amane continued blushing.

Before long, Mahiru finished her work, even applying conditioner.

Once she had thoroughly rinsed his head, Mahiru looked somewhat hesitant as she pulled out a bottle labeled BODY SOAP.

“...So, um...next is...your body.”

Amane understood what Mahiru was trying to say, and he froze.

He knew that was naturally the next step, but it exceeded all his expectations to hear her come out and say she would wash him. Sure, they had agreed they would wash each other's backs, and yet he didn't think either of them had meant they would really do it.

“N-no, that's, uh, y-you really don't have to force yourself!”

“I-I'm not, okay?! It's just...th-this is something even I can do. Um, you can do the f-front by yourself... J-just your back, okay?”

“Th-that would be great, please.”

Indeed, things would likely take an awful turn if he let her wash his front, too, so Amane quickly agreed with Mahiru. He hung his head, and he could feel the embarrassment steadily rising back up within him. On top of that, his body was overheating, maybe because his hopes had gotten out of control.

Mahiru seemed to be diligently lathering the body soap on the net sponge behind him. He could hear the sound of cloth rubbing against cloth.

The bathroom, echoing with the sounds of his sighs and the lathering of the soap, felt extremely awkward, and he could hardly stand to be there any longer.

“...Um, all right, then. Pardon me...”

Mahiru must have finished lathering. She whispered in a timid tone of voice, and he felt a fluffy, puffy sensation gently touch his back.

Of course, he knew it was just the painstakingly lathered body soap. But since she was so close to him in a place like this, wearing only a swimsuit, for a moment, because he was a guy, Amane couldn't help but wonder if maybe a particular part of her had bumped into him.

Something about the feeling of the bubbles being gently spread across his back was kind of ticklish.

Mahiru was thorough in her work, but because she was so careful in applying the body wash, Amane became impatient.

He wasn't used to it since he was never so delicate when he washed his back himself.

"...Your back is broader than I thought."

When he was sufficiently covered, and his whole back was spread with bubbles, he heard Mahiru mumble quietly.

"It is? ...I guess it's pretty big compared with yours, but..."

"Maybe it seems extra broad because it's you, Amane...but I feel like this is a back I can rely on."

He felt the palm of her hand against the area near his shoulder blades.

"Do you remember that time I sprained my ankle, and you carried me?"

"Yeah, I remember. That was when you got hurt trying to rescue a cat, right?"

"...Back then, I was really happy, you know? Though I didn't show it on my face."

"That always really confused me, yeah."

"...Now I'm sure you would find me out, Amane. You always find the real me."

Smoothly, she slid the hand on his back to his flat chest. Then, without pausing, Mahiru closed the distance between their bodies and clung to Amane. She rested her chin on his shoulder.

Amane felt something heavy and round pressing against his back. They were so soft that the bubbles paled in comparison. Amane softly let out a sigh.

"If it's what you want, Mahiru, I'll carry you as much as you like and support you. After all, I've already promised I'll never let you out of my sight and never disappear on you."

"...Mm."

"But listen, it'd be hard to carry you now, given how I'm sitting, so could you back up a bit?"

Usually, when he implied certain things were touching him, Mahiru leaped back dramatically all at once, but she showed no signs of pulling away.

“...Even if you’re not carrying me on your back, I want you to snuggle up close to me. I’m not going to impose all my burdens on you... Because we’re going to walk through life together.”

“...That’s right.”

“Someone told me you would be really happy if I did this when I stayed over.”

“Chiiitoooseee!”

Amane groaned despite himself, confident Chitose must have put the idea in her head, half as a joke. But Mahiru answered soothingly, “Chi-Chitose just gave me some advice. I wanted to do this myself,” and squeezed her arms tightly around him again. The only thing Amane could do was groan again as she gave him more of that soft, tender feeling.

It wasn’t unpleasant, and he was happy, but she was steadily filing down the shackles restraining him. She hadn’t bumped into him accidentally. Mahiru was pressing up against him on purpose. That, more than anything, was chipping away at Amane’s self-control.

“I—I get it already, so please let go. You’re making this difficult... I don’t want to be red as a lobster before we even soak in the tub.”

It would have been great if he could have boldly enjoyed her offering, but Amane didn’t have the luxury. He was doing his best to hold himself together, so he wanted to get a little distance and give his mind and body a chance to cool off. To his surprise, Mahiru obediently pulled away when he asserted as much.

He could see Mahiru reflected in the mirror, and after she let go of him, she seemed to get embarrassed and bashfully shrank in on herself.

Mahiru didn’t seem to know whether to be bold or not. She went straight to hugging her own shoulders and moaning sadly, and Amane found himself thinking she shouldn’t have done it if she was going to be ashamed of it right after.

For Amane, the relief he'd felt when she'd pulled away was more substantial than any shame he'd been feeling, so he smiled a little and turned around to face Mahiru, gently taking the foamy net sponge from her hands.

"I'll do the rest by myself, so you go do your own hair, please."

"...Fine."

"Any objections?"

"N-no, nothing like that...j-just, I was ready, so it's kind of a letdown."

"What did you think I was gonna try in a place like this...?"

"W-well, I thought...you might wash my back."

"This was your suggestion in the first place, Mahiru, but...are you saying you wanted me to wash your back?"

"Th-that's exactly what I'm saying! It's, um, you don't touch me very often, Amane."

Amane almost broke into a spontaneous coughing fit when he heard her extremely provocative statement. When he glared at her with a mixture of shame and judgment, Mahiru's face got even redder.

"...I—I mean, Shihoko and Shuuto said they scrub each other down all the time."

"I get mixed feelings about my parents mentioning stuff like that in front of you, but... A-anyway, first of all, my mom and dad are married, and it's still early for us... Besides, um, if...if you want to touch, I think it would be better to do it when we're relaxing in the tub."

If she got all slippery, there was a good chance his hands might slip somewhere they shouldn't, so he said that because he thought sitting in the bathwater was safer.

But in response to Amane's words, Mahiru spoke up in a determined voice that sounded like she was wringing out the words. "...I...I see."

Oh, did I maybe say something terrible...?

The doubt rose in his mind, but before it could produce a heat wave of

shame, Mahiru forcefully said, “I’m going to take care of myself, so face the other way, please.”

Following her command, Amane obediently turned his back to her. He could see in the mirror that Mahiru’s ears were bright red where they poked out from her hair, but pointing that out would expose the fact he had peeked, so he pretended he’d never seen anything and kept his back turned, feeling ashamed as he washed the rest of his body.

It was obvious that, unlike Amane, Mahiru would take quite a bit of time, so Amane was the first in the tub. But now Mahiru was done and glancing over at him, so he wasn’t sure what to do.

He couldn’t quite tell what she was trying to say. Without a doubt, his earlier suggestion that they could touch in the tub was at the top of her mind, but the way Mahiru was looking at him, he was pretty sure she wanted him to do something.

Her caramel-colored eyes were locked on Amane, wavering—not with caution, they were but troubled in some other way he couldn’t exactly read.

“U-um, where do you think I should...get in?”

Amane blinked once at the word *where*.

Amane’s apartment was built for one or two people, and the bathtub was only so big. It would be a little bit cramped if they didn’t watch their legs when they got in together. But Amane hadn’t stretched his legs in anticipation of Mahiru getting in, so she should’ve had plenty of space.

The fact that she’d asked him that question despite that must have been because she was working off what Amane had said earlier, which had almost been a slip of the tongue.

“...Uh, well, it’s open... You can get in anywhere you like, can’t you?”

Even though he had been the one who had said those words earlier, there was no way he could tell her to sit down in his arms, so he threw the decision back to Mahiru. She stiffened her lips just a bit and pouted, then slowly dipped one foot into the tub.

Just as Amane thought he would get to see her pure white skin without a trace of suntan, a flaxen curtain blocked his view.

A gasp slipped out of his mouth as Mahiru gently lowered herself to sit between his loosely crossed legs.

He had said she could sit anywhere, but he'd never expected her to actually come to him, and he had no idea how to react. Whether or not she knew how Amane was feeling, Mahiru reclined, leaning her full weight back against his body.

She had tied her hair up in a bun so he could feel her bare skin directly, which was undeniably arousing.

"...You said anywhere was fine, right?"

As hesitant as she was, Mahiru looked back at him with a triumphant smile. Her cheeks were red.

But Amane's face and body were on fire, so he was in no position to point that out. He couldn't say much of anything back. It was all he could do to answer with, "R-right."

"Well then, there's no problem, is there?" Mahiru said decisively as if trying to encourage herself.

She started pressing her head back against him, and even though it didn't hurt, it still made him feel uneasy, both mentally and physically. He gently touched Mahiru's shoulders in an attempt to stop her.

The moment he did, her whole body jerked dramatically, and the sound of waves splashing echoed around the small bathroom.

"On second thought, some distance might be better."

"N-no, it's not bad...I just...w-wasn't expecting you to touch me."

"...Aren't you the one who said it was all right for me to touch you?"

"That's true, but..."

Mahiru's words and actions had been inconsistent from the beginning. Amane could certainly understand why. But with a sly smile, he slowly wrapped his

arms around her body.

He could quickly feel her stiffening, so he stayed like that, embracing her loosely to get her to settle down.

“...Could you please not misbehave?”

Even if he didn't say anything, he knew perfectly well she would behave herself, but just in case, he whispered gently into her ear, which made her body twitch again. But then she obediently stopped moving around. Or rather, she curled herself up into a ball in his arms.

Though he was happy she'd settled down as he had hoped, it was obvious that, with the way things were going, they both would end up overly embarrassed and barely touch each other at all.

...I should have known. It's just as impossible for me to casually touch her as it is for her.



Although he felt like they had more hesitation about touching each other now than they had at the pool, that was probably unavoidable given the circumstances. They were clinging to each other in a perfectly private space, and on top of that, they both had already acknowledged certain things might happen. There was no way they wouldn't be feeling self-conscious.

For the time being, as he paid attention to these new developments, trying to ignore his other feelings, he hugged Mahiru tight, doing his best to gently wrap her up in his arms as he always did.

Though he was briefly shaken by the smell of her shampoo, more potent than usual, it wasn't enough to loosen his self-control. He set that thought aside as he tried to help Mahiru relax.

The way he was holding her, only cradling Mahiru's arms and making absolutely no contact with her torso, seemed like it would be enough to gently soothe her awkward stiffness.

Mahiru leaned her head lightly against his arm to force him to snuggle, and then, after a brief silence, she sighed.

The sound of their breathing echoed in the quiet bathroom.

As the two of them listened silently to the splashing noise as droplets fell from the faucet and made ripples in the bathwater, their bodies slowly but surely heated up from the inside out.

"...Um, Amane, aren't you getting fed up with me?"

While they weren't talking about anything in particular, just snuggled up close together and quietly enjoying the pleasant feeling of the hot water, Mahiru timidly asked him a question.

"...I...think this about myself, too, but I've been coming up short a lot and being really inconsistent lately... In everything I do."

"Oh, is that what you mean? I don't think you've done anything wrong. I know you like me, and you're trying your best, but sometimes your bashfulness gets the better of you."

"I wish you didn't know all that, geez."

“I mean...”

“If...if you know so much, then you understood my intention, and maybe that’s enough...?”

Mahiru mumbled in an embarrassed voice as she let her words trail off and contracted in his arms again.

Even Amane wasn’t so thickheaded that he didn’t understand what Mahiru was trying to say or what she was after. But he knew if he let his guard down, he might get carried away and do more than what Mahiru wanted. That was why he was restraining himself and being very conservative whenever he touched her.

“...I’m honestly not confident I can control myself perfectly, so there’s going to be trouble if you rile me up too much.”

“You say that, but you look like you’ve been perfectly calm this whole time.”

“Not at all. Go ahead, see for yourself.”

He was sure if she listened closely, there would be no hiding the violent drumming of his heart.

Though hesitant, Mahiru turned around and shifted her position to face him. She put her ear against his chest, which had become a little more toned recently.

At the moment, he kept a straight face and could explain away any redness by the fact that they were soaking in the bath. But the sound of his heart was the one thing he couldn’t fake.

Mahiru blinked a few times as she listened to the pounding, faster than usual, then looked up.

“See, I told you... Not calm at all.”

He’d already gotten permission from Mahiru, who had said she wanted more intimacy, and she was his first girlfriend, and they were soaking alone in the tub together. He did want to touch her. He was dying to touch her.

But more than that, he didn’t want to hurt Mahiru. And when he thought of their future, doing everything all at once didn’t seem like the best plan.

“...I was sure you’d gotten completely used to me by now.”

“As if! I want to touch you and do all sorts of things, but I’m holding back, that’s all.”

“Th-things?”

She must have imagined something because her face suddenly flushed. He smiled awkwardly at Mahiru and patted her head. She meekly let him do so.

He slowly stroked her head, musing he could do this much without making her feel embarrassed. Then he traced his hand down the contour of her head and rubbed her cheek, tickling her with the tip of his finger.

Mahiru narrowed her eyes and let her eyebrows droop as she melted into a pleasant smile. Then she closed her eyes entirely as if surrendering to Amane.

Amane bit his lip when he saw that sweet yet seductive expression, which stemmed from her trust in him. Then he lightly held her chin in his fingers...and immediately let go.

“Ah!”

“...I can tell you’re getting dizzy.”

If he could have, he would have liked to devour her lips. But she was already quite warm, and he was sure a kiss now would make her dizzy enough to knock her out.

Neither of them were used to this level of intimacy, so it was possible their kiss would have gone on endlessly and they would have drowned together. He might have dissolved, self-control and all.

He decided it was both physically and mentally dangerous, so he stopped short. But Mahiru looked disheartened as she responded, “...I see.”

She seemed to have been expecting something else.

Without meaning to, he smiled at her obvious disappointment, and Mahiru started slapping at his chest, so Amane suppressed the smile and slowly traced over her lips with the pad of his thumb.

Her lips, far smoother and juicier than his own, started to tremble beneath

Amane's touch, and her mouth opened slightly.

"...Disappointed?" he asked.

"You're a bully to ask me something like that, Amane."

Mahiru seemed to enter a sort of pouting mode after being teased, and after slapping his chest again, she turned her back toward him and sat back between his legs.

Obviously, she wasn't actually sulking, but when she hid her embarrassment like this, it wasn't good to poke fun at her or let it go on too long. He quickly apologized and slowly wrapped her in his arms.

He was hesitant, feeling both embarrassment and yearning, but he tried to shake free of both. With awkward movements, he wrapped his arms around her stomach and pulled their bodies closer until they were in full contact.

Her back was mostly bare, so when they were tightly pressed together, skin to skin, a shiver ran through Mahiru's body.

The shiver was noticeable, and he knew why Mahiru reacted that way, but he couldn't do much about that. After all, she also understood Amane's situation and could tell what was going on with him.

"It's warm in here, huh?"

"...Yes."

"Could we stay like this a little longer?"

He tried to express with his tone of voice that he had no ulterior motives. When he embraced her as gently as possible, Mahiru obediently relaxed and entrusted herself to Amane.

Feeling inwardly relieved she had given him permission, he loosely stroked her slender belly, and she wiggled ticklishly.

Even discounting the effect of being in the water, she felt smooth and pleasant. Slender and trim, yet wonderful, soft like a girl should be.

Mahiru didn't seem to find his touch unpleasant, but she did seem conflicted about being touched on the belly and started smacking Amane's arm with her

fingers in protest. But she didn't seem to be rejecting him, and soon, she was stroking Amane instead.

Sending up little splashes as she exacted her modest payback on Amane's arm, Mahiru kept her body weight leaning against him but turned a little to look back at him.

"Amane?"

"Mm, what's the matter?"

"Um...about what you mentioned earlier..."

"Earlier?"

"You talked about...kissing..."

Amane wasn't really one to talk, but Mahiru seemed to be pretty bad at getting direct statements out of her mouth, and he could hear a slight instability in her voice.

"What about it?"

"...A-after we're out of the bath, you'll do it—is that...what I can expect?"

In reaction to Mahiru saying something so adorable, Amane squeezed her tightly and buried his cheek in her shoulder. When he did that, Mahiru started slapping his arm in a panic.

"Wh-what's this all of a sudden?!"

"Come on, you can't say such cute things. We both want the same thing, so you'd better prepare yourself for what's gonna happen once we get out of the bath."

"Eh, uh...p-pretend you didn't hear that, please!"

Mahiru looked like she was getting ready to escape, having realized once she got Amane going, that was it. But he held her firmly yet gently so she couldn't escape.

"No way."

"Meanie."

“Yep.”

He answered her in a calm whisper. Maybe because she couldn't stand it any longer, Mahiru groaned as she murmured, “Dummy,” and vented her anger by forcefully pressing the pads of her fingers into Amane's knees, which were to either side of her.

Amane felt like if they clung closely to each other in the bath any longer, they would both get dizzy. So they decided to finish up their cuddling session and get out of the bath.

Mahiru was going to do the rest of her nighttime routine in the bathroom, so Amane left first, to dry his hair in the living room and wait for Mahiru's return.

He briefly considered waiting without drying his hair and presuming Mahiru would do it to tease her. But after she had washed him in the bath, he had a feeling Mahiru would scold him if he did anything that might damage his hair, so he quickly dried it off.

He also considered waiting in the bedroom. But if he did that, it seemed like he would end up greeting Mahiru with an impatient atmosphere and in a nervous state, so he stayed in the living room where they usually spent time together, trying to calm the pounding in his chest.

In an attempt to avoid being more nervous than he needed to be, he turned on the television and started watching some pointless, unfamiliar program when he heard a sound from the hallway.

For some reason, he felt embarrassed to even turn around, so he pretended he was still paying attention to the TV. Then he felt Mahiru's presence standing beside him.

At that point, he looked up for the first time and felt a little wave of relief.

He'd had a persistent suspicion Mahiru might have put on some suggestive nightclothes, and that he might find his resolve tested once again. But Mahiru wore a pajama set consisting of a knee-length nightgown and a lace cardigan.

The nightgown was made of overlapping layers of sheer material with a nice sheen and slip. It was thin, but he couldn't see her torso through it, a design that didn't make him uncomfortable.

The nightgown was made to be held up by straps and had no sleeves. However, the lace cardigan she was wearing over it was only slightly transparent, and she wasn't directly showing a lot of skin.

Mahiru must have felt Amane's eyes on her. She seemed to want to fold in on herself bashfully, but she didn't try to hide. Instead, she gave him a questioning look.

"D-does it look weird?"

"No, it's cute, and it suits you well. It's different from what you wore at my parents' house, that's all."

"O-obviously it wouldn't be good to wear clothes like these at your parents' house, would it? And since you're the only one who's going to see me, I...made an effort, I guess."

Mahiru squirmed as she said that, then took a seat beside Amane, bringing her body flush against him.

He sensed the feeling of the thin fabric and her fresh scent, sweet but not too thick, a little stronger than it had been in the bath. His body, which he'd thought had finally settled down, started throbbing again.

Considering how he felt with her beside him, he knew she would smell even better if he embraced her.

"Honestly, I wasn't sure what I would do if you came out wearing some insane lingerie."

"Actually, I kind of held back a little."

"Now, listen—"

"But, um, I—I worried if I overdid it, you might pull away."

Mahiru mumbled bashfully yet sweetly. If there were anyone on Earth who would be put off by how she looked, Amane would recommend they see an eye doctor.

"...I wouldn't pull away. I'd be happy you were wearing something for me."

"I—I wouldn't wear something like that, you know."

“Well, you’re not.”

“Do you want me to?”

“Well, I mean, maybe someday...um, if you want to wear it. If you want to show that to me, then do it.”

“...Someday...okay?”

“Sure, someday... For now, you don’t have to force it.”

He was sure Mahiru would look adorable, writhing with embarrassment, but he wouldn’t force her to wear anything she wasn’t sure about.

For some reason, Mahiru looked like she had something to say when Amane meekly backed down. He cocked his head questioningly, and her voice sounded slightly sharp as she said, “It’s nothing.”

Amane purposely didn’t pursue it and gently squeezed her hand.

Just squeezing her hand like he always did made Mahiru stiffen momentarily. But without saying anything, Amane wrapped her up in a gentle hug, and that stiffness loosened. She leaned her head against his shoulder.

Mahiru was close, not forcing herself against him, but snuggled up to Amane as if to say she wasn’t going to go anywhere, and it made Amane also shift his weight naturally to lean against Mahiru a little bit.

It must have been getting late, because the variety show ended, and the newscaster’s dispassionate voice, which they could hear from the television, streamed into the living room.

Half listening to that voice in an almost dreamlike state, unable to focus because of the pleasant warmth by his side, Amane moved his hand around Mahiru’s, intertwining his fingers with hers as if to say it would be hard to separate them as Mahiru seemed to want.

Her slim fingers, thoroughly warmed through due to the bath, couldn’t escape and simply squeezed his back gently.

“...Should we go on to bed?”

The words came out naturally, and Mahiru silently and gently squeezed

Amane's hand.

When they moved to Amane's bedroom, still holding hands, Mahiru looked around.

She had been in the room many times before, so there shouldn't have been anything curious about it. Still, Amane figured that, given Mahiru's personality, she probably hadn't inspected the space all that closely before. Either that, or she had thought about what was coming next and was distracting herself to ease her nerves.

Though he didn't know Mahiru's true intentions, he smiled slightly when she turned her gaze to the top of his desk.

"...You've got the stuffed animal very neatly displayed, don't you?" she asked, pointing at the stuffed cat she had acquired at the game center on their Golden Week date.

It was probably somewhat out of place in Amane's room, but since Mahiru had put in so much effort to get it and give it to him, he naturally thought it would be a shame and a waste to store it away, so he had set it there.

He'd figured it would be fine since pretty much nobody ever went into his bedroom. But now it felt a little awkward to have the person who had given it to him point it out like that.

"Well, I just wanted to make sure it didn't get too dusty. I don't hug it when I sleep or anything, like you do."

"A-are you making fun of me?"

"What do you mean? Why would I make fun of you when you look so cute doing it? I'm happy you treasure my gifts."

Mahiru was really taken with the stuffed bear he had given her for her birthday the previous year, and apparently, she often held it while she was sleeping. That information had come from Chitose, who occasionally stayed over at Mahiru's place, so it was probably slightly exaggerated.

Mahiru must have been embarrassed to hear him talk about her sleeping with her stuffed animals because her eyes wandered a bit, and then her gaze turned

somewhat sharp as if reproaching Amane. But when Amane gave her a frank compliment, that took the thorns out of her eyes, and she became incredibly shy.

“...I’ve been taking good care of the one you gave me, Amane.”

“Thanks... You didn’t bring it with you today, did you? The bear.”

“Well, today I have you, so...”

“...Yeah.”

He wasn’t about to ask whether that meant she was planning to be the big or little spoon, but he was ready to let Mahiru hug him as much as she wanted to.

Amane was also planning to touch Mahiru to his heart’s content.

He thought they would get right to it, but Mahiru still stood beside the stuffed cat, so Amane’s eyes wandered over to the toy.

Its big, empty, round eyes seemed to be drawing Mahiru in, and Amane felt like they were staring straight at them.

He felt uncomfortable. Like a couple getting intimate while being watched by a child. He didn’t have that kind of relationship with Mahiru yet, so it was a sensation he hadn’t experienced before. But regardless, he felt something close to that. Without a word, he picked up a blanket that was lying on his chair and covered the stuffed animal.

“...Is something wrong?”

“Ah, w-well...I sort of...felt like we were being watched and couldn’t relax.”

Even though Amane was perfectly aware they were not actually being watched by the stuffed animal, for some reason, he didn’t think it was good for what was about to happen—or rather, for what he was about to do to Mahiru—to be observed.

Of course, Amane wasn’t planning to force anything to happen. Still, the thought of the intimate moments between lovers being reflected in those big, lifeless eyes made him nervous.

“Heh-heh, so it was bothering you, too, Amane?”

“Oh, shush.”

“I find things like that about you cute, you know?”

“That’s rich coming from someone who sleeps holding her teddy bear.”

“I thought we finished that conversation earlier, geez.” Mahiru huffed angrily. When Amane smiled back at her, she seemed to get even more upset and started poking his side with her free hand.

Of course, it didn’t hurt. Rather, the ticklishness only added to Mahiru’s cuteness. It was perfectly adorable.

Mahiru was launching this cute counterattack to hide her embarrassment, but Amane was the only person against whom she would physically retaliate. When he considered he was the only person she would ever touch like this, he did not feel inclined to argue or resist her.

Mahiru turned a slightly reproachful gaze on Amane, who still showed absolutely no reaction despite her direct attack against him, so Amane smiled calmly as he formed a loose fist and deprived her poking hand of its freedom.

That is, all he did was entwine their fingers together so their palms were touching.

Even still, after opening her eyes wide, Mahiru blushed faintly and lowered her gaze to the floor. He knew she didn’t dislike his touch, so as he gently squeezed her hand a few times, he tugged at her.

Mahiru followed Amane’s lead without the slightest resistance and sat on the bed.

At that point, as he might have expected, she lifted her head, and her eyes went a little wider, but Amane pulled his hand away, sat right down next to Mahiru, and took her into his arms.

“...So is it all right if we pick up where we left off in the bath?” he asked.

“Y-yes,” she replied, though he could hear a little awkwardness in her voice.

He didn’t think she disliked it, but it was evident her nervousness must have returned. However, he also felt like he had come too far to stop, so Amane gently raised Mahiru’s chin and softly bit down on her lip.

He didn't know whether it was just because he had gotten a little bit used to this, but he didn't feel the surge of passion and lust that usually immediately set his head ablaze.

What did well up was a feeling of love so strong that he feared it would completely engulf him as if he could drown in it, and exaltation that warmed the inside of his chest. The urge to gently embrace her and cherish her was stronger than the urge to hurry things along, and he slowly, slowly, with gentle movements, put his lips over hers in a way he hoped would relax Mahiru's nerves.

Even though their lips were only touching lightly, it felt so good that they seemed as if they might melt together. He heedlessly kept pecking at her, enjoying the smooth feel of her lips, when he heard the faint sound of ticklish laughter.

A voice only the two of them could hear and no one else.

He wanted to hear more of that voice, and their kisses, which had only been superficial at first, naturally progressed onward and onward, becoming deeper and deeper until they embraced each other tightly, passions rising.

They weren't yet accustomed to kisses like this, where they were both so fired up. But even so, Mahiru was clearly eager to continue.

When a sweet but hoarse sound seemed to get caught in her throat and escaped from the corner of her mouth, he felt indescribable excitement.

He'd always been self-conscious about how naive he was, but now that things had turned out like this, his passion had been rapidly growing, and, as if his feelings were driving him onward, he had found new vigor.

The stiffness in Mahiru's slim body had already disappeared, and instead, she leaned helplessly against Amane as if all her strength had left her. The thought that her soft limbs were touching him through the thin fabric left him hopelessly in love and yearning. His hand was already reaching for her.

When he moved the one hand that had been embracing her to touch her waist through her nightgown, it brought on a faint shiver only Amane, who was kissing her, seemed to notice.

When he gently brushed her waist with his palm, that alone was enough to make Mahiru move and wriggle slightly, but she didn't seem eager to escape. She simply accepted his wandering hand.

More than anything, that fact threw fuel onto the fire inside him.

With movements that were almost natural, as if he somehow knew what he was doing, his hand moved upward toward the soft parts there. But before his hand arrived, Mahiru suddenly leaned away from him.

It was then that Amane realized what he had just been trying to do, and in a panic, he stopped kissing Mahiru's lips and pulled his hand away. But when he did, Mahiru, still with a red and puffy face, buried her face in Amane's chest so he couldn't pull away from her entirely.

He had at first assumed she was rejecting his touch, but her dainty hands were covering his. As if to tell him not to go anywhere.

"...Um, I don't...have any intention of changing my mind about staying over, so..."

Her voice was a little muffled because her face was buried in his chest, but there was no doubt about what she'd said, and this time it was Amane whose body went stiff.

Mahiru glanced up at him, and their eyes met.

Her face was completely flushed, possibly because of the kissing, and she gave off a pleading air.

Though her caramel-colored eyes were so damp that they seemed like they might overflow with sweet tears at any moment, she was nervously peeking at the movement of Amane's hand.

Without meaning to, she swallowed.

It was almost certain Mahiru would let Amane continue what he was doing.

Even if he tried to take from Mahiru that most precious thing, which she could only give away once, she seemed ready to offer it to him gladly.

That was how much she trusted Amane and how much she loved him.

Amane took great pride in that.

He wondered if it was okay for him to respond to that trust and love.

Conflicting feelings swirled around and around in his body.

His desires, which impatiently urged him on, battled with his sincere love for her, and that internal conflict threatened to destroy his sense of reason.

He let out a sigh, and Mahiru trembled.

Since she was leaving everything about what was going to happen to her up to Amane, she was probably full of expectation and anxiety about where things were headed.

In such scenarios, girls often had no choice but to take the passive role. Many had smaller, less sturdy bodies. If the worst were to happen, it would be the fairer sex that would suffer the repercussions.

After he thought about that, Amane's answer came out.

"So, um..."

"Y-yes?"

"Speaking just for myself, I want to make you mine, Mahiru."

"...Yes."

She probably had no idea how much he had been looking forward to the day when he could be intimate with her.

As much as Itsuki and the others teased him for his naïveté, even Amane naturally had urges, and he had even seen them in his dreams. Ever since they'd started dating, even though he felt somewhat guilty and uncomfortable about it, he'd even indulged in some wild fantasies to relieve some of the pressure.

The fact that he'd been hesitant to extend a hand toward Mahiru despite all that had been because he'd had his eyes set on the future.

"...But the thing is...well, I'm not old enough to take responsibility, and if anything happened, I think you're the one who would have the most trouble. Well, of course, I would take responsibility, but it's not like I can promise we'd immediately have a formally recognized relationship."

It was only one way for him to take responsibility.

But legally, they could only get married after they turned eighteen.

If they did the deed and Mahiru got pregnant, the child would be born while they were still in high school. Even if they were well-informed and took precautions during the act, that would only reduce the chances of something happening. It wouldn't prevent anything for sure.

If something happened, it would affect the rest of Mahiru's life, and she would probably face a lot of cruel judgment. Mahiru would get hurt because of what Amane had done. Mahiru would have to give up on her dreams for the future.

There was no way Amane could sacrifice Mahiru's future to satisfy this momentary urge.

"It's because I care about you so much, Mahiru. I want to respect you. I wouldn't want to get in the way of what you want to do with your future or keep you from studying what you want. When I consider the fact that I'm going to spend a long time by your side, I know it would be awful to ruin your life over momentary feelings and desires."

"...Sure."

"I'm prepared to walk through this life with you, Mahiru. But I..."

"You don't need to say anything more."

She cut him off as he was about to continue, and he was sure she would judge him and call him a loser. But Mahiru put on a cherubic smile that was awkward yet endowed with more joy than he had expected.

"Amane, I understand that you respect me as much as anything and that you love me deeply. You treat me with such incredible care. I...I'm a really lucky person."

Mahiru smiled as if she was satisfied from the bottom of her heart. Then she kissed Amane lightly and smiled at him again, at point-blank range.

"...And I love you the way you are, from the bottom of my heart."

This time, Amane was the one who planted a kiss on the darling girl, who was

wearing a smile that overflowed with more happiness than any he had ever seen before. Then he embraced her small body again.

“Will you wait for me until I’m able to take responsibility?”

As if she understood from his touch the conflict Amane was feeling, Mahiru looked down slightly, then nodded bashfully and buried her face in his chest again.

He was sure she could hear the noisy pounding of his heart.

“Until then, I’ll be in your care.”

Mahiru replied in such a gentle, content voice that it would have made anyone who heard it happy. Then she lifted her face half off Amane’s chest and showed him a smile full of joy.

He embraced Mahiru again and whispered, “I’ll treasure you,” secretly savoring the warmth and softness of her body.

Of course, he had no regrets about his decision. His desire to treasure Mahiru was not a lie. He was determined to spend his whole life by her side, making her happy.

But his body seemed about to start complaining, so he hoped she would allow him just a little satisfaction.

“...So, um...”

“Yes?”

“Can I say something pathetic?”

“Go ahead. I’m ready to accept every part of the person I love, the cool parts and the pathetic parts, and any requests.”

Even though he was a little disconcerted by how open-minded Mahiru was being, Amane kissed her neck, made up his mind, and opened his mouth to speak.

“...Um, well...could I...touch you? Just a little bit.”

He had no intention of going back on what he had said earlier. It would be unthinkable to break his vow.

But his mind was going crazy with desire, and he wanted to be allowed to indulge it just a little bit.

Mahiru blinked dramatically in surprise. Amane's request seemed to have exceeded her expectations, and her face flushed red.

But it wasn't a look of rejection. It seemed to be a look of consent. After she looked up at him once bashfully, she lowered her eyes.

"...J-just be gentle, please."

Amane was sure he was just being foolish to think he had heard some slight anticipation in her whisper of a voice.

Even so, he relished hearing Mahiru accept his request. Then Amane gently tugged on her hand, and they collapsed together onto the bed.

Chapter 2

A Secret Resolution

When Amane woke up in the morning, Mahiru was not there. He was sure he had fallen asleep holding her in his arms the night before.

His eyelids still heavy, Amane slowly examined the state of the bed around him, and the only trace that Mahiru had been there was the open space beside him...or so he thought at first. However, for some reason, the stuffed cat had been placed on the edge of the bed and was facing his direction.

The toy cat, which he had covered with a blanket so it wouldn't see anything, had, by someone's doing, made its way closer to Amane and was insistently staring at him with those same big, round eyes.

He saw his own somewhat relieved expression reflected in those eyes and remembered the previous night's events. In a fit of embarrassment, he turned the stuffed animal around to face the wall.

...She was so cute...

As Amane had promised and as Mahiru had requested, he had tried to be very gentle.

Even so, Mahiru must have been very excited, and Amane had gotten to see some sides of her he'd never seen before.

Mahiru's delicate, restless voice, still ringing in his ears, the sweat dripping down her flushed skin, the soft textures of her body, so unlike his own, and her glazed eyes filled with trust and anticipation—all of this was vividly etched into Amane's memory, sweetly tormenting his sense of reason.

He felt as if he had somewhat lost control of himself the night before, but even so, he could at least say honestly that he had kept his promise to her.

That being said, he was sure he had done everything shy of breaking that promise.

Just recalling it made the area around his hips feel uncomfortable, so as he tried to drive the thoughts from his mind the best he could, he got up and heard the sound of the metal fixtures creaking from the direction of the door.

“...Are you awake?”

Mahiru poked her face through the gap. Judging by the apron she was wearing, she appeared to be making breakfast. She seemed to have already changed into her daytime clothes.

The nightgown from the evening before had gotten all wrinkled, so of course, she had changed. But Amane couldn't deny feeling like he wanted to see it a little more. Still, he had seen plenty of it the night before, so he couldn't complain.

“Good morning,” he answered her in a voice that was still somewhat husky with sleep.

Mahiru looked at Amane for a moment and blushed, but she didn't run away.

“Breakfast is ready, so come eat after you change and wash your face.”

“...Okay.”

The way she said it sounded just like they were living together, which felt very embarrassing. However, since she actually came over almost every day and stayed right up until it was time to go to bed, it was like they were half living together already.

“What's for breakfast today?”

“Rice, rolled omelets, miso soup, the burdock root salad I made earlier, cold tofu, and some chilled salmon.”

“An extravagant meal, first thing in the morning! ...Amazing, it's like a dream.”

“I overdid it, you know? You're still half asleep, so this will wake you up.”

Mahiru stepped into his room from the hallway, approached Amane, and pinched his cheek between her fingers.

It wasn't painful at all; it felt less like she was trying to wake him up and more like she had just come over to touch him.

Mahiru seemed satisfied after squishing his cheek a few more times. Feeling warmth and happiness, as if a sunny spot had formed on his chest, Amane gently placed his palm on the back of Mahiru's neck and tugged at the collar of her shirt.

Right at the base of her neck, covered by her clothes until a moment earlier, right where Amane had touched her, was a series of small red marks, like camellia flowers fallen on fresh snow.

The marks were faint, not all that conspicuous, and in a location her school uniform would cover. But they were quite the provocative sight to the person who had left them there.

Only the two of them knew the marks continued below her clothing.

"...Not hiding them for now, huh?"

"Th-that's your fault, isn't it?"

"I am really sorry about that... I couldn't...control myself..."

He had understood rationally that it would cause trouble for Mahiru if he left marks where people could see. But his mind, overcome by heat, had wanted to ravage that newly fallen snow, and he had almost unwittingly brought his lips to bear.

Mahiru quickly straightened up her clothes. Her face had turned redder than the marks on her neck, and she kept silent, so it seemed like she would give him the silent treatment whenever he reminded her of the previous night's events.

To be sure, he had seen more new sides of Mahiru than he had shown her, so she clearly wanted him to stop probing into things. He didn't want to stir up trouble and go without breakfast.

Besides, given how Amane operated, once he brought it to mind, he probably wouldn't be able to put things to rest just by washing his face.

"A-anyway, hurry up and get changed and wash your face before you come and eat. Cool your head off."

“...It looks like you might need more cooling off than me, though.”

“What did you say?”

“Oh, no, it was nothing.”

Mahiru, whose head was clearly just as hot as Amane's, glared at him a little. Then Amane pressed his lips together and pulled his shirt off.

The moment he did, Mahiru shrieked pitifully and hurried out of the room. He couldn't help but laugh.

And yet yesterday she was very interested...

Amane laughed until his shoulders shook. He could hardly believe the girl who had run away so bashfully was the same Mahiru with whom he had made, however falteringly, all those secret memories, just for the two of them. Still chuckling, he changed into fresh clothes.

Amane finished every last bite of the breakfast Mahiru had prepared, and then they retired to relax on the sofa. However, although Mahiru was sitting beside him, she was acting strangely.

Normally, even if she didn't snuggle up against him, she would settle in close enough for them to touch. But that day, Mahiru left a little space between them, and she looked stiff.

Whenever he tried to hold her hand or anything, her whole body jumped like a frightened animal, so feelings of guilt were welling up inside him.

“...Um, I feel like you're really distant right now.”

“W-well, that's...inevitable, isn't it? It's your fault, Amane. After all, you...um, touched me...so much, so of course I'm conscious of it.”

Even though she had been a little awkward during breakfast, she had behaved normally otherwise. But now that the two of them were sitting together again like this, she seemed to be remembering things and feeling embarrassed.

Fortunately, Mahiru didn't seem to be particularly angry with him, as she blushed and cast her eyes downward.

“Well, um, I admit it was my doing. Did you hate it?”

“I—I never said I hated it, and I agreed to it, all on my own...I-I’m happy it happened. Th-that’s not the issue. I’m just embarrassed, so when we sit here like this doing nothing, I remember we got...intimate, and I don’t know what to do.”

“I...see... It’s not as if I’m not embarrassed, too, but...it’s more like, I want to spend more time with you, so...”

Of course, it would have been a lie if Amane had said he wasn’t embarrassed at all.

The more he thought about the things they had shared and the new secrets between them, the more embarrassed he became and the more he agonized over the fact that he had done things that would usually have been unthinkable for him. Also, whenever he thought about Mahiru, he remembered her warmth, touch, and everything else and found himself wanting her again.

He could only remain relatively calm despite it all because of the promise he had made the previous night, a promise lodged deeply in his heart, acting as a linchpin holding him together.

“I-if you put it that way, it makes it seem like there’s something wrong with me for being embarrassed, doesn’t it?”

“...Is it bad to want that?”

“It’s...not bad.”

Mahiru quietly whispered, “No fair,” as she closed the distance between them and sat close enough for them to touch each other.

The scent that wafted gently over to him smelled like the fabric softener Amane used, combined with Mahiru’s scent. It made him feel incredibly self-conscious.

...It’s nice to smell your own scent on your girlfriend.

Mahiru had probably been taking on Amane’s scent for a while and he just hadn’t noticed, but now that she had stayed over like this, he realized anew that Mahiru was getting used to being with him bit by bit and that it had become normal for her to be there. The thought made a warm feeling gradually

spread throughout his chest.

He was just thinking it would be nice if they became even closer, and he was completely smitten with Mahiru.

“...Um, come to think of it, your parents are at their hotel by now, right?” Mahiru asked quietly and timidly as he squeezed her hand and enjoyed its gentle warmth and pleasant feeling.

“Hmm? Ah, that’s right. I got a message that they’re coming over this afternoon. Their timing feels kind of off, though. Like they know something’s up.”

Although they’d had the option to stay with Amane, his parents had deliberately chosen to make reservations at a hotel when they had come to town.

It was a good thing since the previous evening’s events with Mahiru would never have happened if the two of them had been staying in Amane’s apartment. But Amane was conflicted about it in several ways.

“By the way, uh...as you might imagine, it’d be embarrassing if they heard about this, so keep things vague, please.”

“S-sure.”

“I guess I’m scared they might see right through us. Or that they might get the wrong idea, and I’d rather not have my mother getting carried away, so don’t say anything careless. Can you do that for me?”

“I-I’ll be fine!”

“I wonder. You know, you’ve become more open, easier to read. So my mother might see right through you and get herself all worked up.”

Since they’d started dating, Mahiru had begun to show her true self at school, including her natural smile and demeanor. That didn’t mean she was a completely open book about her emotions. But it made it easier for the people close to her to tell what she was feeling.

And Mahiru felt entirely at ease with Amane’s mother since the two of them had become friends, so it was all the more obvious if she was the one reading

her. Amane was worried this time, it could very well backfire.

Amane's mother was frighteningly perceptive. If she suspected something and pointed it out, it was possible Mahiru would give everything away, so he really wanted her to be careful.

"Oh, come on, Amane. Aren't you jumping to conclusions about your parents' behavior?"

"I have a feeling we're really in for a wild ride."

"...I can't entirely argue with that, but even so, I'm also certain they are kind and considerate people."

"That and this are two different matters. I don't like the way she grins at me."

This was Amane's mother, Shihoko, they were talking about. Even her future daughter-in-law couldn't deny she had a tendency to get carried away. But he, too, understood Mahiru's view on things.

Amane also appreciated his mother as a person and a parent, but he couldn't deny the possibility she would get carried away and start prying and meddling in their business, which he did not appreciate.

"I get it already! ...I...I mean, right now, I don't want to tell anyone else, either."

"...Mm."

Mahiru didn't even seem like she was planning to tell Chitose, judging by the embarrassment in her eyes.

Her cheeks were faintly flushed, probably just from saying it out loud and remembering it herself. She gave him furtive glances, letting her eyes wander as if she could hardly endure it.

He felt Mahiru's love in the fact that she didn't try to move away from him, despite all that.

"...Your parents are coming over in the afternoon, right?"

"Yeah, that's what I heard anyway... Why?"

He cocked his head, wondering if something was the matter, but Mahiru's

eyes as she looked at him were filled with enthusiasm, and his chest throbbed a little bit.

“W-well, um, w-we can spend a little more time together, just us.”

Mahiru said something incredibly cute, and in spite of himself, Amane cracked a smile when he answered her.

“And here I thought we were together, just the two of us, every day,” he teased gently.

“Th-that’s true, we are, but...um, t-today is special.”

That day was the day Mahiru had accepted Amane from the bottom of her heart. They had shared each other’s warmth and made up their minds. He understood why Mahiru said it was special.

“...It sure is. Let’s relax until my parents get here, okay?”

“Yes.”

But it was embarrassing to be reminded why it was special, so Amane laughed quietly. He gently squeezed Mahiru’s hand and basked in her warmth again.

“Mahiru, sweetheart, I haven’t seen you since the culture festival!”

By the time Amane and Mahiru had finished lunch and taken a rest, Amane’s mother and father, Shihoko and Shuuto, appeared. They seemed just as lively as always.

Even though they had just seen each other the day before, Shihoko threw her arms around Mahiru, making a big deal about how happy she was to see her again. Amane narrowed his eyes at her, wondering what she was up to.

“Why are you acting like it’s been such a long time when only a day has passed?”

“Come now, I was apart from my darling daughter for a whole day! Of course I missed her, you know?”

“I think you have to be apart for at least a month before it counts as a reunion.”

It had been over a month since their previous meeting. Or the time before

that, to be specific, when Shihoko had last seen Mahiru. It had been the last day of their homecoming trip. So Amane could understand her acting so overjoyed when they had reunited at the culture festival. But he didn't quite get why she had the same kind of energy again now.

Shuuto was calmly watching Shihoko as she acted far too cheerful, but he didn't seem interested in stopping her from clinging to Mahiru.

"Minor details, not worth mentioning. If I missed her, I missed her."

"Mahiru, if she's too annoying, you can tear her off you."

"Oh, I can't believe you, Amane. I-I'm happy to see her..."

Mahiru did seem to genuinely enjoy Shihoko's doting, so she wasn't lying about that. But she was often overwhelmed by his mother's overabundance of enthusiasm. She seemed like she was always on the back foot whenever they met.

Of course, Amane understood Mahiru liked his mother and that she was happy for the attention, but...he felt conflicted, as her boyfriend, over whether or not it was all right for his mother to greet his girlfriend with even more vigor, and more touching, than he did.

Shihoko was the one who seemed dissatisfied with the exasperated remark from Amane, and she puffed up her cheeks angrily. Her face looked so youthful that even her own son nearly questioned her age.

He was fully aware she was acting that way on purpose, but as her son, he wanted her to tone it down a little. He would die from embarrassment if she acted that way outside the house.

"Really, Amane, you should take a lesson from Mahiru and learn to be just as sweet as she is."

"If I became as sweet as Mahiru, you'd recoil in shock, Mom."

"Well, that's true, but a long time ago, you were just as cute as a little angel, Amane... Oh, and now you're all standoffish and not cute at all."

"Right, I forgot it was a crime to not be cute."

"Oh my, are you sulking now? Well, I suppose that is one cute thing about

you.”

“You can stop now!”

“And here I went out of my way to compliment you!”

“Now, now,” his father interrupted. “Amane’s at the age when he has mixed feelings about getting compliments from his mother for being cute. He’s got his pride as a man, after all.”

“Goodness. Things like that are cute, too, you know. Even if you’re embarrassed.”

“Can I get mad now?”

Since his father’s help wasn’t actually any help at all, Amane glared at his overly lovey-dovey parents as he tried to keep the corners of his eyes from twitching violently. But it was Mahiru who stepped in to mediate this time.

Mahiru didn’t seem to want them to fight. Honestly, Amane wasn’t all that irritated, and he didn’t want to fight, either. However, he was certainly exasperated with the way Shihoko was teasing him.

“A-Amane, calm down.”

“I am calm,” he replied. “Someone is just being annoying!”

“Well now, I don’t know about that. And you shouldn’t blame others for your attitude.”

“Look who’s talking!”

“Come on, that’s enough,” his father tried again. “Shihoko, if you don’t put a lid on it soon, Amane’s going to stop talking to you. And Amane, you know your mother craves attention, so you shouldn’t give her a chance to respond like that.”

“...Fiiine.”

At times like this, Amane’s father stepped in to mediate as a neutral party. He was the only one who could get Shihoko to quiet down.

Even though he knew neither of them was really serious, Shuuto had sensed if he let the argument continue, it might drag on for a long time, so he had

stepped in to put a stop to it, and both Amane and Shihoko meekly obeyed.

“Since we went so far as to take a vacation to come and see you, I’m sure we’d all like to spend a more relaxing time together, right?” Shuuto said as he patted Shihoko on the back and smiled at Amane. His smile beamed so brightly that anyone would have been taken aback.

Amane obediently stowed the verbal weapons he had been about to pull out and apologized. “I’m sorry for getting so upset over something small.”

“I overdid it with the teasing. I’m sorry,” his mother followed obediently.

Even though both of them insisted on their ideas in their arguments, they knew it didn’t mean anything, so when this happened at home, after they both apologized, they always let bygones be bygones.

Be that as it may, even though he knew it was immature of him, as a kind of minor revenge, Amane recaptured Mahiru from his mother’s arms and drew her close to himself. When he did, Shihoko looked unhappy, but Mahiru didn’t seem displeased, so he immediately flashed his mother a grin.

He couldn’t help but feel that, by doing so, he might have somehow satisfied her. But as long as Mahiru was happy, that was enough for him.

“...Anyway, I’m surprised you guys could coordinate your vacation time to take several days off together.”

They were both fairly involved with their jobs and had been able to coordinate their work schedules for the trip.

Even with how relatively easy their workplaces made it to take time off and how understanding they were about things like child-rearing and participating in school events, Amane was already grown, and it was strange his parents had been able to take a vacation to go to his culture festival.

“Well, in my case, I put in my request well ahead of time, and they adjusted my schedule. And luckily, your father was also able to get some vacation time.”

“You didn’t have to come all the way out here,” Amane insisted. “The two of you could have done something more relaxing together.”

“Oh no, do you mean you didn’t want to show us around your culture

festival?”

“No, I just mean coming here means taking a pretty long trip. And rather than going out of your way, wouldn’t you have preferred to spend the time as a couple, with no one else around?”

Although they had tried not to make it obvious during Mahiru’s visit, Amane’s parents were both very busy. Part of the trade-off for their high incomes. It was a shame they had had to spend their precious vacation time on their son’s culture festival.

Taking a special trip in the car to see him cost time and energy. But in fact, it had taken less than half a day for them to see his school event.

If they were going to do that, he would have preferred they use the time to take care of themselves and catch up on some much-needed rest, but his mother let out an easy laugh at Amane’s words, which were half from worry and half from consideration.

“You sound like the mother now, Amane,” Shihoko said with a mischievous smile. “But we always spend time alone as a couple at home. Now is the only time of your life when you’re going to participate in your culture festival, so of course we made that our priority, right? Surely, it’s all right that we used the opportunity to come and see our son and daughter?”

“...I guess so.”

Rather than making a jab about her treating Mahiru like she was already her daughter-in-law, Amane had to focus his nerves on hiding his embarrassment over how much his parents cared about him. He answered in an unintentionally sharp, sulky voice, but his mother laughed heartily seeing him like that.

“Well, after all, we did think it would be bad of us to intrude on the new couple, so we got a hotel, but...”

“Oh, shush. You didn’t need to do that.”

Of course, their decision was the only reason the events of the previous evening had been able to happen, but there was no way he could tell them that.

“...My goodness.”

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing. But you know, sometimes it’s nice to stay in a hotel, and I think splurging a little was the right decision.”

“She’s right. There are many more places to stay here than where we live, and the night views were lovely.”

Amane gave his mother a sharp look when she seemed to have something more to say, but she didn’t seem to intend to actually say it. She purposely changed the subject and smiled at his father.

Shuuto must have picked up on that, and there was no particular reason why he needed to question it, so he nodded as he described the lobby of the hotel where they had stayed the night before, the scenery they had seen from the windows, and everything else about it.

As long as the two of them had enjoyed themselves, Amane didn’t have anything else to say and wasn’t going to interject any further. But then, as if she had suddenly remembered something, his mother turned her gaze toward him.

“Looks like you two had a little sleepover last night,” she said. “You really are getting along well, aren’t you?”

Amane held everything in until he nearly had a coughing fit. When he glanced at Mahiru, she was shaking her head vigorously.

Still, he didn’t think Mahiru had talked. She hadn’t even had the chance to mention it, since the four of them had gotten straight into a conversation the moment his parents had arrived.

That was precisely why, without meaning to or realizing he was doing it, he grimaced as he wondered why his mother had come out and said such a thing. Even leaving aside the fact that Mahiru was easy to read, it was all over for them now that Amane himself had made a face confirming his mother’s suspicions. But Shihoko didn’t seem to be paying any more attention to how they were behaving.

“I just asked because I caught a glimpse of the contents of sweet Mahiru’s bag over there. I guess I was right on the mark.”

When Amane followed Shihoko's gaze, he saw Mahiru's toiletry bag, with the various items she had brought into the bathroom the night before, sitting beside the sofa.

He wasn't sure whether to be angry they'd been tricked into revealing the truth or frightened it had been so easy for his mother to tell Mahiru had stayed over.

Though the furrows in Amane's brow had deepened, now that his actions had given him away, it didn't seem possible to come up with an excuse, so in a sulky voice, he snapped, "Shut up, is that so bad?"

His mother laughed, easily and joyfully. "No? At your age, I'm sure you're fed up with us telling you this and that about such things. And after all, you're straightforward and earnest just like your father, so we're not worried!"

"But here you are teasing them in spite of that, Shihoko."

"Heh-heh, forgive me this much, please? After all, this is my darling son we're talking about." His mother smiled serenely, and Amane could tell no matter how much he wanted to push back, there was no way he was going to win this round, so he gave up and sighed.

Shihoko smiled at Amane as she always did, but after a few moments, she shifted her gaze to Mahiru.

"Oh, that's right. Amane, would it be all right for me to go out with Mahiru?"

Amane puckered up his face at the inconsistency of his mother asking him while looking at Mahiru. His eyes narrowed, and he wondered what she was after all of a sudden.

"Don't ask me, ask Mahiru."

"Of course I'm going to ask her, but you're so possessive that you seem likely to say no."

"I mean, it's true I am pretty possessive, but I've got no intention of controlling where Mahiru goes. She may be my girlfriend, but she's ultimately her own person. I'm not going to try to tell her what to do or what to think."

Just because they were dating, that didn't mean Amane had any right to

control what Mahiru tried to do. Even if he gave her his opinion, he couldn't compel her to do something, nor would he want to.

No matter how close they might be, even though Mahiru was his beloved girlfriend, she was her own person with her own personality. It would have been wrong of him to try and make her do as he pleased.

So if Mahiru chose to go on an outing with his mother, that decision would have to be respected. All Amane could do was request that his mother not share any strange stories with Mahiru while they were together.

He looked at his mother, wondering why she had made him say something so obvious, and Shihoko reacted to his exasperated look with delight.

"Oh-ho-ho, isn't that wonderful, Mahiru, dear? You can really tell at times like these that Amane's the straightforward and sincere type."

"Y-yes."

"It doesn't feel much like praise coming from my own mother."

"Oh, how I wish you would just hush and accept it. Right, Shuuto?"

"That's right."

"Not you, too..."

When his mother praised him, it always sounded like teasing. And he avoided accepting her compliments directly. But when his father praised him, it made him feel strangely uneasy.

Amane's father was never one to flatter, and he always pointed out his weaknesses. So Amane knew when his father praised him, he was always genuine. That made it a bit hard for him to relax.

His father's serious and very earnest praise made Amane embarrassed and uncomfortable. But at the moment, Shuuto didn't know how Amane was feeling, or maybe he did and was purposely provoking him with his words of praise.

"The fact is, you're kind and faithful to the people you trust, Amane. With your words and your attitude, you're not always up-front with people, but deep down inside, you're a considerate boy, and anyone who knows how you usually

act can see you're hiding your embarrassment."

"Wh-what are you getting at here...? Knock it off."

"Well, we hardly ever get any time with our son, so telling him he's appreciated must be fine."

"Enough already!"

Amane couldn't even be mad at his father, whose cheerful smile was in no way malicious or hiding some ulterior motive. But he felt frustrated that he could do nothing but sit there with the shame written across his face. He turned away to hide his burning cheeks, but a clear voice like a tinkling bell tickled his earlobe.

"Amane's no match for you, is he, Shuuto? Because your gentleness naturally counters his prickliness."

"I agree."

"Normally, he pretends to be indifferent. But in situations like this, I think he's still quite childish, don't you?"

"Isn't it adorable?"

"Heh-heh, it sure is."

"Hey, you two!"

Amane glared at his parents, who looked relatively calm because they were not the ones in the cross fire, and his girlfriend when Shihoko smiled at her with an innocent expression.

"Ah, it may be a little late, but I wonder if I would be all right to invite you on an outing?" she asked. "I feel bad about intruding on one of your precious vacation days, but we rarely get the chance to go out together, after all."

"Yes, of course. I'd love to go out with you."

"All right then, it's decided!"

Amane stared at them with open disapproval, reproaching them for their untoward excitement, but they ignored him and decided on an outing. Amane figured it was probably all right for him to complain, just a little.

It was his girlfriend and mom's prerogative to go out together if they wanted, but there were all sorts of things he wanted to say about their evaluation of him.

"Would you please not continue the conversation like I'm not here?"

"Oh, you want to come on our girls' trip?"

"I don't really need to do that, but... Oh, whatever."

It seemed like the outing was probably meant to give them some private time together, so in a show of resignation, Amane sighed to signal his objection, however insignificant, and turned to his father.

"If the two of them are going out, what's your plan, Dad?"

"Ah, there's actually a conversation Shuuto wants to have with you, Amane."

"...Conversation?"

If his mother wanted to talk to him, he could expect it would probably have something to do with Mahiru, but he couldn't imagine what his father might have to say. Yet he only received a gentle smile when he looked back at his father.

Shuuto, who almost always wore a mild expression, was always somewhat inscrutable. It put Amane on his guard a little, not knowing what his father was thinking.

Amane took some solace in the fact that his father wasn't the type to say anything strange or make unreasonable demands, but that also made it even harder to guess what he wanted to say to him.

"Sometimes, I just want the two of us to talk. I mean, when your mother is around, you usually just get worked up arguing with her."

"I wonder whose fault that could be."

"It's your fault, Amane. For worrying too much about the little things. Right?"

Shihoko cocked her head and looked to Mahiru for agreement, but Mahiru stopped short of that and just put on a fleeting, troubled smile.

I guess Mahiru already knows my mother comes out and says weird stuff that

makes me snap back at her.

Mahiru's smile was strained. She was obviously trying to be gracious. In his mind, Amane sent her a message that it was also all right for her to speak freely.

"At least Mahiru didn't agree with you."

"Oh, hush. Well, that's fine, just fine. I've got lots of things I want to talk to sweet Mahiru about anyway."

"Don't try to put inappropriate thoughts in her head."

"You have no faith in me, do you? You don't have to worry about me. I know my manners in that regard. And it's not like we're going to do anything you would hate. We're just going to have a chat, just us girls!"

There was no stopping it now that his mother had made up her mind. As a kind of insurance, Amane shot Mahiru a look and got a smile in return.

"It's all right," Mahiru said confidently, and he didn't know whether or not that meant it was okay to trust her.

"Well, Mahiru dear, should we get going?"

"Ah, w-wait, please. First, let me go home and get ready."

Amane chose to believe his mother wouldn't ask Mahiru about things she didn't want to talk about. He watched the two of them leave his apartment hand in hand, their footsteps light.

Amane and Shuuto were left alone. Amane, for one, felt relieved that the apartment had fallen totally silent. He loved and cared for his mother, but her energy was hard for him to handle, and he often got irritated with her. It was no surprise he felt immediately relieved as soon as he was free of her.

"...She's like a storm or something. Whenever Mom shows up, things get noisy, for better or worse. Normally, things aren't quite this lively around here."

Shihoko, who always lavished cheerful smiles on everyone around her, was the mood maker of the Fujimiya household and a well-known woman in his parents' neighborhood.

She always wore a smile and loved to chat. Although she had strong communication skills and was a good-natured person, she also possessed a keen aspect and could cut people down to size when necessary. Amane thought she was an easy person to like.

Her temperament didn't change whether she was at home or out and about. Even alone with her family, she was always very lively.

"Do the two of you usually not talk very much?"

"It's not that we don't talk. We're just not as excitable as Mom."

Neither Amane nor Mahiru were naturally very talkative. They were the type to stick to calm conversations. They also often spent time quietly sitting beside each other without saying anything at all, so Shihoko's whirlwind conversational style was not like theirs at all.

"Ha-ha, that's because both of you are so calm."

"Mom just doesn't have any calmness, does she?"

"Come on, don't say things like that. You just haven't seen much of that side of her. At home, she's quieter than you'd think."

"Wow, I can't imagine Mom ever shutting up."

Ever since Amane could remember, his mother had always been a lively person.

She had never failed to speak and act kindly, even as she teased him with her usual carefree smile, and her presence was like the sun in that it cheerfully warmed the air of whatever space she was in. Amane had been saved by that cheerfulness several times at least.

She had such a strong presence that Amane wondered if she couldn't feel at ease unless she was talking. As someone who had always seen her that way, he couldn't imagine his mother being quiet.

"That's because you see your mother as a lively person."

"How do you see her, Dad?"

"Hmm. I see her as someone who gets lonely easily and always needs

attention. She's been going on and on about how lonely she is ever since you moved here."

"I've never seen her act like that, though..."

Shihoko had told him, jokingly, that she was lonely before, laughing as she had. But Amane had never imagined she might be serious.

Shihoko, who had always respected Amane's wishes, had seen him off with a smile when he'd left to further his education. She'd never tried to stop him or anything. His father's assessment of her as someone who got lonely so easily was incredibly unlike the image Amane held of her.

Shuuto seemed to realize from Amane's expression that he was surprised, and his eyebrows drooped as he gave Amane a somewhat troubled smile.

"Your mother is a sensible adult, and she's entirely aware she has to let go of her child. If she acted like she didn't want to separate from you, it would bother you, right? It would be wrong for your parents' feelings and desires to hold you back when you decide on your own path, so she's been trying not to let it show."

"...That doesn't sound like something you ought to be telling me."

"That's true. Keep it our secret, okay?" Shuuto put on a slightly playful smile.

Amane pressed his lips together. He wasn't sure how to feel. But Shuuto looked at him with gentleness in his eyes.

"You don't need to be concerned, Amane. Your mother and I are happy as long as you're leading a healthy, happy life. The greatest satisfaction we have as parents is to see you living your life your way."

"...Sure. I think I'm very lucky."

"That's great to hear. I'm also glad to have such a son."

Shuuto smiled at him with serene eyes.

Though Amane felt somewhat awkward, the exchange had also made him happy. The environment around him had obviously rounded off his sharp edges over the months and years.

If he had still been the old, embittered Amane, he didn't think he could have accepted his father's words so openly.

"Anyway, there's one thing I wanted to discuss with you, Amane."

"...Discuss?"

Now that he mentioned it, Amane remembered Shuuto had stayed behind because he had something he wanted to talk to him about. Amane cocked his head, and although Shuuto wore a gentle smile, his intentions were unreadable.

"That's right. It's easy to tell by looking at you, but you and Miss Shiina are really getting close, huh?"

"That's...well, yeah. We're dating, of course, but I think we get along super well."

His father's tone of voice hadn't been teasing but rather admiring and confident, so Amane also gave him an earnest answer.

Amane knew it wasn't in his father's nature to pry about the state of their relationship, but still, when it had seemed like his questions were headed in that direction, Amane had put himself on guard.

But the questions Amane had been expecting never came. Instead, Shuuto smiled happily and said, "It's great that you're getting along well."

Amane was taken aback. "...Seriously, you're not going to say anything, are you, Dad?"

"You're the one who would be embarrassed if I asked. You'd probably get all sulky."

"Shut up."

Amane, embarrassed his father had seen through everything, averted his eyes. He heard a laugh.

"Besides, from the way you're acting, it doesn't seem like you've done anything yet."

Amane had a heavy coughing fit.

Shuuto's confident tone of voice was, in a certain way, even worse than his

mother's teasing. Amane started to choke up. As he fought to regain his breath, he stared at his father and was greeted by his usual smile.

"Well, I don't suppose that's anything for me to complain about. I know how you are. I'm sure you thought everything over before you proceeded. That's one of your strengths and one of your weaknesses."

"...I thought about the future and decided this was the right thing to do."

"You may be my son, but I have to say, you've turned out to be very rational for a high school student. Well, it's undeniable you're deeply in love."

"...I can't help it, can I?"

"Mm, no, you can't."

Shuuto chuckled momentarily and said he had been the same way. Then, suddenly, he stared at Amane with an expression like he was suppressing a smile.

"Now then, on to the main topic."

"Hmm?"

"I don't want you to worry about the cost, okay?"

That brief comment made Amane's body stiffen.

Both Amane and Mahiru had a common understanding that they would get married sometime in the future. That was precisely why they had decided to protect Mahiru and her future by not having sex yet. That understanding had guided them during the previous evening.

Everything beyond that, the pragmatic issues—the matter of cost, of getting Mahiru's parents' permission, and so on—were things Amane had been thinking about but hadn't discussed with Mahiru yet.

If they were going to get married, then, of course, financial questions would arise. Once he'd thought about things like the ceremony and where they would live, plus the question of income and what to do after entering her name in the family register, it had occurred to him that they couldn't get by just by dreaming about it.

He had never expected his father to come right out and say it, and he froze despite himself.

Shuuto was smiling wryly as if he'd expected that. "For a good while now, I've been sure from how you two were behaving that you had probably already made up your minds. I know you, Amane, and once you set your mind to something, you don't waver, and your decision never changes. I figured you were probably thinking about it intently and sincerely. We're very similar."

"...You also married your first love?"

"Well, if you don't count my mother and the times I said I wanted to marry her when I was a little kid, then yes. You too, right, Amane?"

"That doesn't count!"

Amane couldn't help but avert his gaze as his father smiled in amusement, a touch of laughter in his voice.

Frankly speaking, Amane wished he could forget the times when, as a little boy, he had said he'd marry his mother. It had been the silly talk of a child, too young to have any common sense or decency, who only knew and loved a very select number of people. Even if it was brought up now, everyone was sure to understand it as a joke, but still, he couldn't help but be embarrassed.

Occasionally, his mother brought it up and set the vein in his forehead twitching by saying, "Remember when you used to say you were going to marry me?" But when his father brought it up casually, it only produced feelings of embarrassment.

"Well, all joking aside, as far as that's concerned, with the way you are, I'm sure you're thinking far down the line. You're a smart kid. I'm sure you don't think you can solve every problem in store for you with nothing but your feelings?"

Shuuto looked at him with a relaxed and gentle smile that showed he had seen through everything, which gave Amane goose bumps.

Amane also understood the challenges before him, and he wasn't sure how to proceed, so he had been thinking of asking someone for advice, but he had never expected his father to be the one to broach the subject.

“You can be kind of scary, Dad.”

“It’s because I’m your father. I have some insight into my kid.”

Usually, he might suspect his father was just being vain. But when Shuuto spoke, it really did seem like he had figured everything out already, and Amane couldn’t just brush his words off. Indeed, Amane’s father had recognized the conflict in Amane’s heart and figured everything out before he had even asked his son about it. He could be intimidating in his own way.

“It’s so like you to try to take on everything yourself.”

“...Well, it’s something I decided for myself, so I was planning to talk to Mahiru after I sat down and did some planning.”

“It’s admirable that you’re trying to plan things out when you’re still so young, but I think there’s a limit to what you alone...no, to what you two can do. I’m telling you, you can rely on your parents if we can help, okay?”

“Even so, it can’t be right to depend on my parents for everything.”

He knew his father was probably saying all this out of kindness, but Amane already depended too much on his parents.

They let him live away from home on his own like this and gave him enough money to live without wanting anything, and now he was trying to decide his future without even consulting them.

Amane’s actions could easily be called selfish, but his father didn’t seem bothered by his hesitation.

“You are reserved about the strangest things,” he said, laughing the comment off. “In cases like this, I think you ought to depend on us for practical matters. For my part, as your father and as Miss Shiina’s parental figure, I want to celebrate with you. If anything, I want a girl like Miss Shiina to be happy without any worries and my son to be happy, too, okay? I want you to let me do this much.”

“...Aren’t those things we could do for ourselves?”

“How long do you think that will take?”

“Uh...”

It was painful to hear it said out loud.

His father probably meant if they wanted to do everything themselves, they would have to find jobs and save up for several years before they could afford to arrange everything. Amane wanted the ceremony to live up to all of Mahiru's dreams, and he wanted to see Mahiru in her dress and white kimono.

But it wasn't easy because he knew that meant making Mahiru wait.

"Do you want to make Miss Shiina wait that long? Time is especially precious to girls, you know."

"Ugggh...but still..."

"As far as I'm concerned, the ceremony is just the beginning, and I think it's the last big gift your parents can give you. My precious son and daughter will be leaving their parents' care and starting life as a couple, so I'd like you to let us help you with that much."

Shuuto smiled and took a sip of his coffee. After he set his cup down, he spoke again.

"Of course, if you've decided to do everything yourselves, I'll support your decision. But if that's not the case, we want you to let us celebrate with you, enough to make up for Miss Shiina's parents as well."

Amane already knew both his parents were aware of Mahiru's family environment and were trying to act as her foster parents. It was obvious to see that as her parents and as her in-laws, they really cherished Mahiru.

Just as Shuuto had said, they had been giving Mahiru lots of parental love to make up for everything she'd never gotten from her own parents. For that very reason, he looked ready to compromise, but Amane could also tell he wasn't going to surrender.

Shuuto smiled as if he had seen right through Amane, who had been wondering if it was really okay to presume upon his parents so much. Then he ruffled Amane's hair and messed it all up.

"You've always been bad at relying on people or turning to others for help. Can't you do it this time and let us do something parental?"

“...I let you spoil me plenty.”

“That’s not true. You barely had a rebellious phase and instead developed a spirit of self-reliance first. Imagine how lonely we felt!”

Shuuto ruffled Amane’s hair again and showed no sign of stopping, but Amane also did not make him stop.

It tickled and felt awkward, but it wasn’t unpleasant. Amane’s confidence and feelings of security toward his father allowed him to meekly accept the gesture.

“So long as you become a parent and show me my grandchild’s face, it’s all good. You can worry about filial piety and all that stuff after your own lives are stable, okay? Luckily, both your mother and I are in good health. We look after ourselves, and our family lines are long-lived. You’ll have plenty of time to repay the favor before we die.”

Shuuto spoke with a broad grin like he was talking to a child. Even as Amane scowled and resigned himself to such treatment, he was secretly grateful to have these people as his parents.

By the time Mahiru and Shihoko came home from their shopping trip, Shuuto and Amane had finished their tender father-son moment and returned to acting normally.

Amane was glad because it would have been unbearable to be treated like a child in front of Mahiru, but a tiny part of him also regretted it.

However, since he wanted to act like a dependable man in front of Mahiru, he tried to keep a calm expression and not give any indication of what had happened as he went out to greet the two of them.

“Welcome back. Did you finish your shopping and whatever you had to talk about?”

“Of course we did! Right, Mahiru, dear?”

“...Y-yes.”

In contrast to the beaming and confident Shihoko, Mahiru was bashfully drawing in on herself for some reason. Amane knew that, in all likelihood, some inappropriate ideas had been put into her head.

But it wasn't the time to question her about that, so he purposely let it go and took her bags from her.

When he looked at Mahiru, trying to caress her with his gaze, her face turned red. His suspicion that some unnecessary things had been put into her head became a certainty, and he turned to his mother with an exasperated gaze.

Shihoko was smiling calmly.

She wore a mysterious grin full of accomplishment, so he pressed her to find out what she could have said to Mahiru.

"...I'm begging you, please don't tell her any weird stuff."

"Oh, how mean! I didn't tell her anything weird! I just gave her some advice on some important things while we were spending time together."

"Are you sure it wasn't stuff we should take our time with and learn at our own pace?"

"It was all stuff you can't teach a boy, so it's all right. We ought to gain wisdom from our elders, you know?"

"...And is it information I can ask Mahiru about later?"

"You'll find out before too long, so that's no problem. Though I think being in such a rush is unbecoming of a gentleman."

When she said that, he was forced to shut up.

Mahiru didn't seem to want to talk about it, either, which he understood meant they'd had a complicated conversation between women, so he figured he shouldn't force the issue.

However, based on the way his mother was acting, it didn't seem like he could entirely relax, either, so even if he didn't ask, he would need to be cautious.

Amane gave the grinning Shihoko a chilly look. Then he carried the perishables in the grocery store bags into the kitchen and put them in the refrigerator.

Since apparently they were having dinner at Amane's apartment that night

before his parents returned to their hotel, there was enough food for four people, double what there usually was. There was something kind of funny about that.

After washing her hands, Mahiru stuck her head into the kitchen.

“...Amane, does it bother you?” she asked.

Amane shrugged slightly.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious, but I had my own conversation with Dad about a few things, and I don’t feel like telling you about it yet, so I’d say we’re even.”

“Ah, wh-what did you talk about?”

“It’s a secret.”

Amane smiled impishly like Mahiru always did to him and tossed the vegetables into the produce compartment. Mahiru fidgeted uneasily as she pounded on Amane’s back, which only made him smile harder.

“—Listen, I won’t interfere when it comes to the things you want to give Mahiru, okay, Amane?”

Those were the words his father had said to him after messing up his hair.

Still, Amane wasn’t planning on relying on his parents to the extent his father suggested. He intended to get a part-time job and get his funds ready. He didn’t intend to cut corners when it came to entrance exams, either, so he knew he would have to work harder than ever to be able to do both.

...I might be able to get some help from Kido there.

She had previously invited him to work at her job in what had probably been half a joke, so it seemed like it might be good to take her up on that. The service industry really wasn’t his forte, but it would be perfect for acquiring work experience.

Amane was keenly aware that, from now on, he would have to work hard in even more areas than before.

Mahiru looked up at him. She seemed unsettled.

But Amane smiled at Mahiru and told her again, “It’s private,” then closed the door to the produce compartment in high spirits.

Chapter 3

First Step Toward the Goal

“Sure, I’ll ask my manager. She’s been saying she wants more help, so I think it’ll probably be okay!”

The next day, taking advantage of the fact it was also a holiday, Amane tried calling the number Ayaka had given him during the culture festival. A very nonchalant voice answered the call.

After he’d decided to get a part-time job, Amane had mulled over where he should work. When he’d remembered getting that invitation from Ayaka, he had decided to go there for work experience and to improve his poor social skills.

He wanted it to be a surprise for Mahiru and didn’t want her to overhear them talking, so just to be safe, he had the conversation near the entrance to their apartment building.

In Amane’s mind, suddenly asking for the job when he had previously turned down the initial invitation might lead to disapproval even from the generous Ayaka. But contrary to his expectations, she readily agreed, which baffled him.

“Ah, what about an interview?”

“I think they’ll probably do one, but that’ll be a breeze. You’ll get a referral from me, so there’ll be no question about your character. No matter how I might seem, I act very serious and goody-goody at work, so the manager trusts me.”

It was not surprising. Even at work, people seemed to trust Ayaka because of her excellent character. Even Amane, who hadn’t known her for long, could tell she was dependable, friendly, good-humored, and cheerful, so of course people liked her.

He heard Ayaka clear her throat on the other end of the line in a tone that made him imagine she was puffed up with pride, and he couldn't help but smile.

"I don't mind giving you an introduction, but are you sure you want to do this job, Fujimiya?"

"Well, I think it'll get me used to dealing with customers and stuff."

"Mm, that's not really what I'm asking. Did Miss Shiina agree to this? I mean, did you explain it to her?"

"N-no, I haven't talked to her about it yet."

"Then don't you think it's a no-go until you have a serious talk with her? We make good money here, but I wonder if Miss Shiina might get jealous."

"Uh, that's..."

The part-time job Amane was so earnestly seeking was, in fact, the same job Ayaka did.

It was the place that had lent them the costumes for the culture festival—in other words, it was a café where the staff wore those costumes while they served customers. If he worked at that café, Amane would also serve customers while wearing that costume, just like he had during the culture festival.

If he had started working at a place like that without saying anything about it, it was obvious Mahiru would have felt a storm of emotions when she'd found out.

Mahiru had gotten sulky at the culture festival whenever female customers had spoken to Amane or asked for his number, so he didn't want to do anything that would make her feel insecure. Of course, cheating on her would be unthinkable, and he was sure she trusted him not to do that, but that was a separate issue from these emotional matters.

"Why do you suddenly want to get a part-time job anyway?"

Ayaka phrased it as a simple question, but Amane held his tongue.

He didn't think Ayaka would out him to Mahiru if he asked her to keep it a secret, but saying he wanted to save money for a ring would be a little

embarrassing.

It was probably well-known among their acquaintances that Amane was infatuated with Mahiru, and he himself was perfectly aware of that fact. However, he was still hesitant to explain he wanted to give her a ring.

At the same time, he didn't think Ayaka would understand unless he told her. Besides, he figured hiding something from the person helping him get the job wasn't good.

"...So...can I ask you not to tell anyone, especially not Mahiru?"

"Ah, I know. You want to get some kind of present for Miss Shiina. Maybe a Christmas present?"

"Ch-Christmas, huh...? That's...something to think about for next year, but... well, I kinda want to give her a ring..." he answered, letting his words taper off questionably at the end, and he got silence in return.

While waiting to hear Ayaka's voice, Amane started inwardly panicking, worrying that maybe he was rushing things too much, considering he was still just a student.

But after ten long seconds of silence, he heard her mumble quietly, "Oh, I knew it, even through the phone." Then, louder, she said, "I see. I understand and am satisfied with your plan, Fujimiya."

"...Great. I guess I really want to pay for it myself."

"Right, right. Then you'd better give up on the idea of working here, okay? Even though you'd be working hard for Miss Shiina's sake, Fujimiya, I don't think even she would like the idea of her boyfriend working at a place where it's easy to get involved with other women."

She was exactly right. "Yeah, that's true," he answered. "Sorry, I didn't think that through."

He was already mentally preparing a new plan to go back home and look at job-recruiting sites when he heard Ayaka's voice again.

"Instead," she continued, "if another café would be all right, I can give you a referral there. It's the café my aunt runs, but it's a quiet place, and the

customers are in a higher age bracket, so I think it might be a good match for you personality-wise, Fujimiya.”

“That would be awesome, but...don’t you want to work there, Kido?”

Since she had a connection and was a family member, he figured there was no reason she shouldn’t work there.

But on the other end of the phone line, Ayaka mumbled, “Ah, yeah...,” and seemed to struggle to put something into words. “Mm, well, I...sort of don’t get along with my aunt...”

“But you’d still introduce me? Wow, thank you.”

“Ah, no, it’s not that bad, okay? My aunt is, how do I say this? ...She’s really...doting, I guess you would say?”

“Doting?”

“Yeah. My aunt is super close to my mom and dotes on her sister’s daughter, meaning me, but...she spoils me too much. Like, bad enough where I don’t feel independent anymore. If I work for her and her attitude toward me and my working conditions is different from everybody else, then my coworkers will get the wrong idea about her.”

She seemed more uncomfortable than displeased when she described it, so Amane figured it was probably something like how his mother treated Mahiru.

However, Shihoko expected a lot from Mahiru and still went out of her way to spoil her, so it seemed like Ayaka’s situation was different.

“So anyway, that’s why I don’t work at my aunt’s place but at one of her friends’ places instead. Even so, she’s still kind of taking care of me, in a way, but I pride myself on getting people to like me for my personality, so it all works out.”

“I’m sure. Watching you work, I thought you were incredibly friendly. It was amazing how you pulled people in.”

“Take it easy. Miss Shiina will get jealous if you say things like that too casually. Anyway, if you’re good with it, Fujimiya, I’ll check in with my aunt, and once I confirm things with her, you can go in for a trial run. How’s that? That

way, you can take a look at the café and decide for yourself. But I think it'll be an easy place for you to work."

"That's a huge help, but...are you sure it's okay to ask you to do so much?"

"It's fine, it's fine. Look, I know how much you love Miss Shiina, so let me help you out, okay? If you want, you can even ask me my opinion on rings!"

"...Well, you know, when it comes time for that, I might ask you and Chitose both."

"Heh-heh, you can count on us."

Regarding rings and such, Amane thought it'd be best to take in opinions from other girls, especially Chitose. Since she had been keeping an eye on Amane and Mahiru the whole time, there was no way he could not ask her. If possible, he wanted both girls to help him.

But at the present moment, that conversation was a long way off, so he made a vague agreement, and after Ayaka said, "I'll call you later, or maybe give you a report at school," they hung up.

"...A part-time job?"

When he returned to his apartment and spoke to Mahiru, who had been relaxing in the living room, she looked at him in surprise.

"Why now, all of a sudden? Next year, we'll be getting ready for exams, and actually, it's about time to start studying for exams anyway."

Naturally, there was no way he could hide something as big as a part-time job, so he talked to her honestly about it. But Mahiru hit him with some very sensible questions.

If he could, he wanted to keep his plans as secret as possible from Mahiru until he handed her the ring, but he was well aware starting a new part-time job right when they were supposed to begin preparing for exams was somewhat unusual.

"Ah, well, there's something I kind of want to buy, no matter what it takes."

"Something you want?"

“Also, I want to do it to acquire some work experience. Of course, I don’t intend to take on so many shifts that it’ll get in the way of school. I think I’ll have finished saving what I need around the time the other people in our class start retiring from club activities, so I should be able to focus on studying before the exams really get going. Even thinking about grades, it probably won’t be too different from people participating in clubs. My grades depend on my effort, so I don’t plan on letting them drop, but even if they do, I don’t think it’ll be because of the job.”

Amane had always been able to focus on his studies because he had more time to spare than other students who belonged to different school clubs. But once he started working, he would no longer be an unemployed member of the go-home club, which would require him to put in a lot more effort.

If he had to say, Amane considered himself rather good at studying. But he knew once he devoted some time to a job, it would be difficult to maintain his grades with the same amount of effort he had been making.

But Amane had absolutely no desire to give up on his education or his future with Mahiru, so he planned to study harder than he had ever done before and hoped paying more attention in class would help him learn the material.

Even if it meant dramatically increasing his responsibilities, Amane didn’t intend to yield or quit. He was determined to make it work.

Amane looked at Mahiru with a serious face, and Mahiru frowned, looking troubled.

“Well, it’s not for me to interfere, and if you’ve thought it through, then I will respect your decision, Amane. Though I am sad we’ll have less time to spend together...”

She gave him a slightly lonely-looking smile, and he feared he would lose his resolve, but he couldn’t surrender just for that, so he smiled back a little.

“Sorry. To make up for it, I’ll prioritize spending time with you on my days off work.”

“You always put me above everything else, so it’s all right if you prioritize yourself, too, you know?”

“Listening to my heart is what makes me put you first, Mahiru, so that all works out.”

He would never be satisfied by putting himself first. Being with Mahiru was his deepest desire, and making Mahiru happy made Amane happy, too.

Amane was entirely aware he was so in love with Mahiru that her happiness directly equaled his own, and even though it made him feel a little uneasy, seeing the person he loved look pleased was the most satisfying feeling for him.

That’s how he so confidently reassured Mahiru he didn’t intend to abandon or neglect her. Mahiru understood Amane’s words came straight from his heart, and she pressed her lips tightly together and ground her forehead against his upper arm.

Chapter 4

New Interactions

It was the first day back at school after the break following the culture festival, and the fervor and excitement of the festival must not have completely left the students yet because there was a somewhat giddy atmosphere at school.

Even Amane's class, which was comparatively calm, was still about twice as lively as usual. His classmates would whisper from time to time about who from what class had started dating whom, bringing home the fact that the culture festival had led to a certain mingling of the sexes.

Occasionally, someone would shoot a glance over at him, too, but the looks were mainly directed toward Mahiru, so they were probably commenting on Mahiru's appearance at the culture festival and so on.

"Mornin'."

Looking very sleepy, Itsuki entered the classroom and headed straight for Amane's seat. Amane waved his hand loosely and looked at Itsuki's face as he responded, "Morning."

Amane hadn't yet asked his friend, who had opened up about his troubles at karaoke, what had happened when he'd gone home after that.

If Itsuki's father had said something to him, Itsuki probably would have been depressed or in a bad mood, but from what Amane could see, he was wearing a very normal expression, so Amane felt inwardly relieved.

"Good morning to you, too, Miss Shiina. You're looking...hmm?"

"Good morning. Is something the matter?"

As a matter of course, Itsuki greeted Mahiru, who was sitting beside Amane,

with a smile. But when he saw Mahiru's face, Itsuki's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

He scratched his cheek after gazing at her for a moment as if he were trying to confirm something.

What's with that face?

He looked back at Amane like he had something to say. Amane's eyes also narrowed, and he wondered if there was some problem. But the look in Itsuki's eyes wasn't disapproving, so he didn't understand what it might mean.

"...Amane, man, let me see you for a second."

"Huh?"

"Just come on."

For some reason, Itsuki beckoned Amane to one corner of the classroom. Frowning openly, Amane followed him.

Itsuki came in close, as if he was a little afraid of people seeing them, and quietly asked, "Hey, man, did you take it to the next level with Miss Shiina?"

"Huh?!" Amane exclaimed hysterically, and he looked over at the distant Mahiru, who was wondering what was up. He tried to keep the color of shame from rising to his cheeks as he waved his hand at her to tell her nothing important was happening.

When Mahiru's eyes left them, he glared at Itsuki, but he was met with an exasperated expression and couldn't complain.

"Hey, hey, why do you think I moved us over here? Don't blow yourself up about it."

"If I blow up, it's because you suddenly said something weird."

"Something weird? So that means you must not even realize it's just oozing out of the both of you... I can tell Miss Shiina is acting differently than usual somehow. To begin with, it's like you two have gotten closer. I mean, you two were already getting pretty close since you revealed you were dating, but now your whole vibe is different."

When he heard there was something different about the two of them, Amane briefly cast his gaze over toward Mahiru.

Mahiru was quietly waiting by Amane's seat, staring at them curiously. When their eyes met, she looked bashful.

"She doesn't seem any different to me."

"You can't see it objectively! Look, I know the two of you are always flirting these days, but man, the mood you two have now is definitely different than it was at the culture festival. It's like you know each other on a deeper level, like you belong to each other...or something?"

"It wasn't what you're imagining."

"Oh?"

"Well, we didn't go all the way."

Amane kept it ambiguous, and Itsuki grinned as if to say he could see right through everything, so Amane nudged him in the side with his fist to wipe the smile off his irritating face.

He put some strength behind his nudging, but Itsuki didn't seem to take any serious damage and laughed. "Stop trying to hide your embarrassment."

Amane was getting angry, so he stamped his foot and sighed quietly.

Itsuki's perceptiveness was scary, but either way, they would have eventually told Itsuki and Chitose about their plans for the future. Amane didn't intend to tell them how much of each other's bodies they had discovered, but he figured he probably ought to tell them they had their eyes set on the future.

"...Anyway, we don't plan on doing it yet. I made a promise to Mahiru."

"A promise?"

"We won't, not until I'm able to take responsibility. I expect to take lifelong responsibility, so I asked her to wait until then."

Amane told him, feeling self-conscious about the promise he would be incredibly embarrassed about anyone overhearing.

After his eyes went wide, Itsuki looked at Amane with a mixture of

exasperation, admiration, and even a slight sense of disagreement.

“I think your patience and sincerity are amazing, and I respect you for that, but is that going to be enough?”

“...Maybe not, but it’s okay. I want to treasure her. I’m serious about that.”

Since he had found the person he would spend forever with, he wanted to respect and cherish that person.

If he was being honest, he was slightly anxious about whether he would be able to endure the wait, but he would be ashamed of himself if he broke his promise, so he intended to persevere.

“That’s so like you, Amane. You’re head over heels, huh?”

“Shut up.”

“Well, Miss Shiina must be happy if you’re that serious about it. By the way, if you get to the point where you can’t hold out any longer, let me know. I’ll give you some helpful items.”

“I know what you’ll probably give me, and I don’t need your help.”

“I think you’re the one who’s gonna regret trying to play it cool...”

Amane had complicated feelings about his friend’s concern with such vulgar matters and quickly rejected the offer. Itsuki just shrugged as if to say, *Suit yourself*.

Amane knew he would probably rely on his friend in the future, but at least at the current stage, he didn’t need to turn to him for that. He wanted to grill Itsuki on how he would acquire such things in the first place.

Looking undauntedly back at Itsuki with disgust, Amane sighed dramatically. “Anyway, after I graduate, I’m going to be with Mahiru,” he said, “so starting now, I’m getting ready for that.”

“Getting ready?”

“Ah, Fujimiya, good morning. Why are you boys whispering in a spot like that?”

With impeccable timing, Ayaka entered the classroom. When Amane casually

raised a hand in greeting, she strode over, looking at the two of them curiously as she approached.

“Hmm, there’s something awfully suspicious about two boys whispering secretly to each other. I wager Akazawa here was telling Fujimiya something dirty.”

“Don’t you have any faith in me?!”

“Ah-ha-ha!”

Ayaka laughed it right off, then looked at Amane and seemed unsure whether to talk to him.

Her gaze slipped over to Itsuki briefly, which probably meant she was wondering whether she could say what she had come to say with Itsuki standing there or whether it would be better to wait until later to tell Amane.

Of course, Amane had no intention of hiding the fact that he was going to be working part-time. He was planning to tell Itsuki the reason, so he asked Ayaka, “Have there been any developments with the thing I asked you about?”

Ayaka smiled, looking a little relieved. “About the job, right? My aunt said it’s okay, so if you could tell me what days are good for you, she’d be glad to hear more.”

“Mm, got it. I’ll get in touch later.”

“Great, I’ll be expecting it.”

“Sorry for taking up your time with this.”

“Oh no, I’m always happy to help a friend in need, and my aunt is also thrilled I turned to her.”

Ayaka laughed slightly awkwardly, and Amane also smiled faintly.

It sounded like Ayaka’s aunt really liked her. Ayaka was wearing a worried expression, but she had gotten him an introduction to the job, and he was very grateful. He made a mental note to do something else to thank her later.

Ayaka said she would see them later, waved her hand, and headed for her own seat. Amane watched her go and then looked at Itsuki, who nodded in

understanding.

“I see. It sounds like things are gonna be tough on you, Amane.”

“My parents say they want to pay for the ceremony and everything, but I want to at least buy the ring myself, you know? This is what I decided, and I feel like I ought to put in the work, at least for the proposal.”

Amane’s pride wouldn’t allow him to rely on his parents for everything when it came to making a vow that would affect the rest of his life. He knew he should acquire the ring on his own.

Even though he felt like he wasn’t necessarily doing it all under his own power, since Ayaka had recommended him for the job, he had decided in order to achieve his goals smoothly, he would need support from others.

“You really are determined once you’ve decided on something, huh? I think that’s admirable. But...”

“But?”

“...I can’t believe you didn’t consult me before deciding something like that!” Itsuki grumbled peevishly.

Amane opened his eyes wide at his friend’s words, then ruffled his hair as he said, “I’ll be sure to turn to you next time.”

Itsuki seemed a little embarrassed by it. He shook free of Amane and shoved his shoulder, but Amane knew he was just hiding his embarrassment, so he laughed it off just like Itsuki had done earlier.

“Ah-ha-ha, it’s just like Itsuki to pout about something like that!”

After lunch, Chitose asked Amane to meet her on the sky bridge. She had been wondering why Itsuki had been a little sulky all morning and asked for an explanation.

Amane told her the truth, and Chitose slapped his back with a nonchalant smile, which made Amane frown. But Chitose’s attack didn’t seem like it was going to stop. Far from it, the slapping became more intense as she started to say, “That’s why you’re...,” and trailed off.

Amane was getting fed up. The way she was slapping him was more shocking

than painful and seemed imbued with emotion. Amane knew he was at a disadvantage, so he meekly accepted it, feeling the pressure from Chitose's radiant smile.

"Itsuki has friends in all sorts of places and lots of connections, but the first person you turned to was someone else, so that's what's making him sulky. Aside from Mahiru, the person who knows you best is Itsuki, after all."

"Uh, w-well, I felt bad about it, but..."

Just at the right moment, Amane had remembered Ayaka had offered him that part-time job, so he had called her. Itsuki probably wasn't amused by that.

Itsuki was Amane's closest friend, and he had relied on him before, so he did feel guilty about leaving him out this time. But it was precisely because he tended to rely on Itsuki so much that he had tried to avoid burdening his friend. However, in this case, it had backfired.

"I think Itsuki probably wanted you to turn to him for help, right? He prides himself on being a good friend, and you've bailed him out before, so I think he probably wanted to repay his debt to you."

"Bailed him out...? Surely, I'm the one who's always depending on him. I'm the one who ought to repay a debt, and I didn't want to cause him any trouble."

"See, and that's what's wrong with you, Amane. You tend to think your self-assessment is also how others judge you. From Itsuki's point of view, you helped him out. You can't just ignore that. It's the same as ignoring his feelings, you get it?"

"...I think I really screwed up."

"Well, so long as you understand now, it's all good. If you're sorry, consult him on something else, okay? And of course, me too."

Chitose looked up at Amane with a grin, one of the most cheerful, beaming smiles he had ever seen. Amane could feel his cheek twitching.

"...Could it possibly be...you're mad, too, Chitose?"

"Oh-ho-ho!"

Her face was strangely cheerful, and her expression didn't seem to hide

anything, but her eyes weren't laughing. Chitose always wore a carefree smile, but there seemed to be more to her expression this time.

"Well, the thing about that, right, is we've been good friends for about a year and a half, and you've never consulted me on a single thing. It's a lonely feeling!"

"Uhhh, I'm really sorry. I'll be more careful next time."

"Good grief. You can be so cold. So let me guess, you didn't say anything to us because then you wouldn't be able to keep it a secret from Mahiru? You want to surprise her, right?"

"...Right on the money."

"That puts me in a bind, when you don't tell me things you should!"

Amane suffered a few more blows to his sides, but the minor punishment seemed like just deserts, so he didn't try to stop her.

After battering Amane with her fists for a while, Chitose let out a big breath as if to say she was taking it from the top.

"Well, it's obvious you're thinking of Mahiru's future. Itsuki and I can see yet again that you really love her. You're so lovestruck. I could never have imagined it, not with how you were before."

"Quiet, you."

Amane had accepted that meeting Mahiru had made him a gentler person. He felt like there was a lot less distance separating him from other people. That wasn't only Mahiru's influence, but Itsuki's and Chitose's as well.

He didn't like being called lovestruck. But there was no changing the fact he was head over heels for Mahiru, so he couldn't deny it.

Be that as it may, he didn't enjoy having it pointed out, so he couldn't help but scowl.

"Anyway, I've already made up my mind. So, well, if you would give me a helping hand, I'd be very glad."

He wanted a girl's opinion, and he genuinely wanted her to lend him a hand

as a friend, so he bowed formally at the waist and lowered his head. He heard an exasperated sigh from above.

“Even if you didn’t ask me, I’d do it! After all, it’s for the sake of my dear friend’s happiness!”

“Chitose...”

“Of course, I mean Mahiru! You’re too standoffish, so you’re demoted!”

“Gah...guess that’s that.”

“Heh-heh, just joking! Both of you are my dear friends, of course. I want everything to go well, and if there’s anything I can do, I’ll help.”

He raised his head and saw Chitose puffed up with pride, wearing her usual bright and cheerful smile. Amane also smiled in relief and lightly clapped his hand down on Chitose’s shoulder.

“Got it. Today, you’re going out with Chitose, yeah?”

That day, after school was over, Amane was getting ready to head home with Mahiru as usual when she turned him down in an apologetic tone. But he smiled lightheartedly and accepted it.

After all, he had no intention of telling her where she could and could not go, and there was no reason they had to be together all the time. If anything, he didn’t see why she was so worried about him.

He thought back on his past behavior, wondering if maybe he came off like the controlling type, but Mahiru still sounded apologetic.

“So I might be late getting back. Your mother will be with us, though, so I don’t think we’ll have any problems.”

Her unexpected words blindsided Amane. Despite himself, he gaped at Mahiru.

“Why will my mom be there?”

His parents hadn’t gone back home yet. They had apparently taken some paid leave so they could have a longer holiday. They were planning to do some sightseeing his mother was interested in before they returned home.

They had told Amane that since they planned to go home the following day, they would spend the remaining day wandering around the neighborhood. But he had absolutely never imagined his mother would involve not only Mahiru but also Chitose.

“Your mother said she wanted to talk to Chitose...”

“I can’t help but feel like she’s going to put a lot of unnecessary ideas in her head.”

“Ah-ha-ha, I’m sure she would never...”

“It’s possible with my mother. When that happens, you’ve got to stop her, Mahiru.”

Though he said that, Amane understood Mahiru might also want to hear what his mother had to say and might not try to stop her. Or, more likely, his mother’s enthusiasm might be too much for Mahiru to intervene. Either way, he wasn’t expecting much.

He at least wanted Mahiru to keep his mother from revealing his dark past and looked at her with that sincere plea in his eyes. He didn’t mean to look at her with too much intensity, but Mahiru’s cheeks flushed, and she averted her eyes.

Chitose, who seemed ready to head home, cackled with laughter when she saw Mahiru like that and skipped over to them.

“Hey, hey, what’re you up to, you lovebirds?”

“Worrying about my mother filling your head with all kinds of weird stories.”

“So you’ve finally stopped denying you’re a couple, huh...? Anyway, I saw you staring at each other and wondered what you were up to. You don’t have to be so worried.”

“My mom is the type to carelessly disclose all sorts of things with a smile.”

“Oh-ho, in other words, you’ve got a guilty conscience about something?”

“It’s nothing like that. I just hate the idea of my childhood being dragged out into the open. I believe you also don’t appreciate your past being paraded in front of other people.”

“Uh, well, that’s...”

Amane had only been friends with Chitose since they had started high school, but from what he had heard from Itsuki, Kadowaki, and some other students, Chitose had once been the complete opposite type of girl she was now.

He didn’t want to have to say his past was similar to Chitose’s own dark past, so he shot her a look that said, *You know what’ll happen if you try to ask about things you shouldn’t, right?*

Chitose shrugged and nodded. “I get it, I get it!”

“Well, putting all that aside,” Mahiru said, “there are certain things I want to discuss with your mother, so we’ll talk about things other than you, Amane.”

“What are you planning to talk about with her?”

“That’s a secret between us girls.” Chitose grinned. “And without further ado, I’m borrowing your wife now!” she said as she linked arms with Mahiru.

Mahiru cast her eyes down bashfully but happily snuggled up to Chitose.

If Mahiru was all right with it, that was fine, but Amane was still worried about what they would discuss. He was just thinking to himself that his mother better not talk about anything weird when another girl suddenly joined the crowd.

“Oh, the two of you aren’t going home together today?”

Ayaka popped up with a pleasant smile, her neatly arranged ponytail swinging. She had noticed Chitose was pulling Mahiru off by the hand, and her eyes were wide at the sight.

“Oh, hey, Kido. The two of them said they’re going out together.”

“I see, I see. Well then, could I borrow your husband, Miss Shiina?”

“Huh?”

Mahiru froze at the sudden request. It wasn’t clear whether she was surprised by the idea of Amane going out with another girl, even if she was a friend, or the fact that Ayaka had described Amane as her husband.

Amane couldn’t tell, but Mahiru was looking at Ayaka with a startled

expression.

“If you don’t have any plans either, Fujimiya, I’d like you to hang out with me after school. Ah, don’t worry, Miss Shiina, it definitely isn’t that kind of hanging out!”

“I-I’m not worried about that, but...”

If Ayaka was inviting him out, it probably had something to do with that part-time job. The timing was actually really convenient because his parents were visiting, and he would need a legal guardian’s permission on the employment contract and the other paperwork before he could get settled in at his new job.

“How about it, Fujimiya? Are you free?”

“Well, I don’t really have any plans.”

Aside from the usual exercise and homework, Amane didn’t have any plans for the rest of the day. It was fortunate, considering he had been suddenly invited out like this.

“Great! It’s perfect because the café is open today, and the two of you are always together, so it’s hard to wedge myself in between you. It makes me hesitant to come talk to you, you know?”

“We’re not always together. Even at home, it’s not like we’re glued to each other.”

“So you *are* basically living together. I see, I see. Just from the way you talk, I can tell it’s normal for her to be at your place all the time. What a player!”

She went on to say even most sweethearts didn’t spend so much time together. Unable to offer a rebuttal, Amane shut his mouth, and Ayaka giggled in amusement.

“Well, it’s just because you’re so close and care about each other so much. Isn’t that right, Fujimiya?”

“...That’s right. Is there something wrong with that?”

“Uh-uh, I get all warm and fuzzy just looking at you, so I think it’s great. Miss Shiina really has somebody who loves her!”

Mahiru smiled bashfully at the mention of love, blasting everyone around them with beams of radiant joy, but Mahiru herself didn't seem to notice at all.

Amane felt like Ayaka had done it on purpose, but since he was about to owe her an enormous debt, he couldn't complain.

However, when he shot Ayaka a look that said, *Don't tell Mahiru about the reason for the job*, she stuck her thumb up in the air with a grin, so Amane just let out a sigh.

After splitting off from Chitose and Mahiru, Amane walked along, following Ayaka.

The café was far enough that they needed to take the train to get there, but it wasn't all that far, so it didn't seem like he would have any trouble commuting.

The only question was ultimately whether he would get the job, but...when he asked Ayaka, she answered him with a grin. "It's fine, don't worry."

She continued, "My aunt's café runs with a small staff, but recently, more customers have been showing up, so they've been shorthanded and looking to recruit someone with good manners. The hourly wage is good, but the right person who fits the café's vibe and seems like someone the customers will like just hasn't appeared yet, and it sounds like a real problem. And then I got the request from you—wasn't that lucky?! That's how it feels anyway. A real lifesaver. I think you'll be just fine, Fujimiya."

"I'm not sure I'm all that polite, though."

He never did anything to be deliberately rude, but being called polite made him cock his head in confusion. He did think he possessed all the necessary manners, but he wouldn't have said his manners were ideal.

He shrugged and suggested she was overestimating him. But Ayaka's cheerful voice immediately shut him down. "Not that again! Fujimiya, you always know how to behave depending on who you're with, right? You're always super polite with the teachers and act like a model student."

"Of course I do—they're our teachers, and...I guess I'd rather they consider me a good student than have them think they need to keep an eye on me. If I can get on their good side, it might benefit me somehow."

He always treated his elders with respect, inside and outside school. However, he also selfishly believed if his instructors liked him, it would mean good things for his grades and general education. That wasn't his entire motivation, but still, it was part of the calculation, so it wasn't like he was a real model student.

It was people like Mahiru and Yuuta who were actually good students. Amane just did a good job of keeping up appearances.

Thinking about such things made him feel like he wasn't very nice at all, and he shrugged. Ayaka let out a sharp little laugh.

"What's wrong with that? In this case, the important things are your manners and etiquette. Regardless of your intentions, the only thing that shows is the result. As long as you've mastered that, whatever you have going on inside doesn't matter."

"...Kido, do you believe that?"

"Surprised? I'm the pragmatic type. I don't demand that everything benefit me in some way, but I don't think it's strange to look for whatever merits you can find in the things you do, to a certain extent. I'm definitely not always acting with purely charitable intentions."

Ayaka spoke without hesitation. She had a pretty utilitarian way of thinking about things. Amane looked at her a little wide-eyed, but it was not a look of disgust or aversion, more like a feeling of kinship.

"That's true in this case, you know. I proposed this because it has merits for me, too. It's not a one-hundred-percent virtuous offer."

"All right, let's hear it. What are the merits?"

Amane believed Ayaka, who had answered his sudden and unreasonable request, was acting mostly out of goodwill, but she didn't seem to want to admit that.

"Mm, of course, there's the fact that my aunt has been struggling, but...the biggest reason is that I want my Sou to have a few more good friends, I guess."

"Kayano?"

“Yep. See, my Sou is a pretty quiet guy with his head in the clouds, and he doesn’t really show much interest in other people, right? But it seems like you made a good impression, Fujimiya, and you’re the quiet type, too, so I figured you two just might be compatible. So then, when you happened to be looking for a part-time job, I thought I could tackle that at the same time as I solved my aunt’s staffing problems and introduce you to the café where Sou works.” Ayaka apologized dejectedly. “Sorry! It’s mostly merits for me.”

Amane shook his head and smiled. “No, this is the first I’ve heard of Kayano also being there, so it’s a bit of a surprise, but I’m the one who’s getting the introduction. It’s nice knowing one of my classmates is working there already. It’s great.”

“Yeah? I’m glad.”

She put on a silly smile that made all his tension dissolve at once. He was convinced that, just as he’d suspected, Ayaka was a good person.

“Right, so that’s all great, but...even though your boyfriend works there, you still decided not to work at your aunt’s place?”

“Uh, yeah, about that. There’s the reason I told you earlier, but...well, my aunt really likes me, but she likes it the best when I’m there with Sou.”

“Hmm?”

“Whenever we’re together, we just stare at each other, smile, and don’t get any work done. It’s because we’ve both been spoiled since we were little, see? Also, because of how I am, whenever my Sou’s around, I tend to stare at him, and once, he told me, ‘You’re about to start drooling, so knock it off.’”

“...Pfft.”

“Y-you just laughed, didn’t you? Even I know my manners! I don’t make a habit of dribbling in front of other people!”

Ayaka went a little red and scowled. But given the story’s content, her expression had little impact, and it only invited laughter again, so Amane didn’t go out of his way to hide it and laughed openly.

While Amane was pacifying the somewhat pouty Ayaka, they finally arrived at

a café with a low-key feel to it.

It was an extremely traditional coffee house with a chic flair, and judging from appearances, it catered to an older age group and had a fairly high-class feel.

“...Is this really the place?”

“Why are you so surprised? It’s a nice, chill café, right?”

“I think it seems like a nice place, but is this the sort of place for a student to work?”

When Amane had heard it was a café where students could work part-time, he had imagined something more like a major chain restaurant. But unlike those big chains, this was an establishment with a dignified atmosphere.

“That’s why I asked someone like you, Fujimiya, someone young but levelheaded. First things first, let’s go say hi to my aunt.”

She added quietly, “Don’t really feel like it, though...”

Smiling at Ayaka’s comment, Amane followed behind her, wondering curiously what sort of person this aunt of hers was.

When they opened the stately door with a CLOSED sign hanging from it, the hinges made a faint creaking noise, and he heard the tinkling of a cheerful doorbell, which, for some reason, made him feel nostalgic.

On the inside, the café was the quiet kind of place the exterior had led him to expect. Dark oak and white were the basic themes, and it had a simple but elegant interior design. The place was also scrupulously clean, and it had a very sophisticated air.

Along one wall was a bookshelf big enough to cover the whole wall, packed tight with books.

It didn’t look like there were that many seats, far fewer than in a chain café. It was obvious the place was under private management.

But thanks to that, unlike chain places, it had a quiet, restful atmosphere.

The café seemed to be closed that day, and since there were no people in it, Amane eagerly took in the interior when a woman emerged from the back,

wearing an apron.

At a glance, she looked like a calm woman, about a decade older than Amane.

She was a beautiful woman with long black hair who looked like she belonged in a café or a used bookstore. Though it might have been rude to say so, she seemed like such a quiet woman that he could hardly believe she was related to the cheerful and friendly Ayaka.

“Oh...Ayaka, welcome.”

“It’s been a while, Aunt Fumika.”

Ayaka bowed politely, and the woman she had called Fumika looked at her with gentle eyes and smiled.

“I’m so glad you came. You rarely visit, even when young Souji is here, so I was getting lonely.”

“Uh, sorry about that... I thought I would be getting in your way.”

“Getting in the way... Never, I’m happy having the two of you here. Though I do have to work awfully hard.”

“And that’s the problem,” Ayaka mumbled quietly, but her words didn’t seem to reach her aunt.

Standing a few steps behind Ayaka, Amane felt puzzled as he watched the two of them.

He could only feel perplexed. He could see nothing in Fumika’s graceful appearance and mannerisms that might trouble Ayaka. From what he had seen just while they had been talking a little, she seemed like an ordinary young woman. If anything, she gave the strong impression of being a calm, well-mannered woman, and he couldn’t see anything that might bother anyone.

If he had to say, maybe it was that her eyes were filled with an abundance of affection for Ayaka, but he didn’t understand how that could be enough to make Ayaka dislike her.

Everyone had their pet peeves, so he couldn’t criticize her for it, but it wasn’t easy to understand.

Amane was watching Ayaka get somewhat overwhelmed when the woman's eyes suddenly turned on him.

Her pitch-black eyes briefly sized him up, but that gaze quickly softened.

"And would this be the young man you mentioned, the one interested in a part-time job?"

"Ah, yes, this is him. He says he wants to work. Fujimiya, this woman is the owner of this café, Miss Fumika Itomaki. My aunt."

"I'm Amane Fujimiya. Thank you for giving me some of your time today."

"Well...that's quite all right. It was Ayaka's request. Her judgment is sound, so I'm sure we won't have any issues."

Fumika smiled gently and smoothly, sweeping her eyes over Amane, briefly looking him over, and then smiling again.

In response to her beautiful, sophisticated, boundless, and even intimidating smile, Amane sensed the downy hairs on his back stand on end.

"By the way, what is your relationship with Ayaka?"

"We're classmates, and she's friends with me and my girlfriend."

For some reason, the question had given him a chill, and when he flatly denied any closer relationship, Fumika's smile became gentler. The chill that had afflicted his body vanished, so he reasoned his answer was probably correct.

"I see, that's wonderful. Ayaka and Souji are very in love, so I wouldn't know what to do if you were interested in her, too."

"I've already made a promise to someone else, so that would be impossible."

"Well, isn't that lovely...?!"

Her black eyes glistened brightly as if they were glowing, so despite himself, Amane retreated slightly. But Fumika didn't seem bothered by it, as her cheeks flushed.

Her expression looked just like that of a young maiden in love, and little by little, Amane started to realize what Ayaka didn't love about her.

“I think it’s wonderful you’re so firmly determined at your age. Does the reason you’re looking for a job have something to do with that?”

“Yes. Um, I want to give her a ring...”

“Fantastic! Yes, yes, if you’d like to work here, you’re certainly welcome...!”

“A snap decision, Auntie?! Well, I knew it would be, but...!”

Amane was frozen in place. He’d been given a job without a proper interview, and Ayaka sighed with an expression of astonishment and embarrassment. Fumika was grinning, wearing a genuinely cheery smile.

“Auntie, it’s not good to pry too much...”

“Come on, I won’t ask anything that makes him uncomfortable! But the start of a romance, it’s so...”

“Rein it in, please. I feel bad for Fujimiya if you’re going to use him for both work and entertainment.”

“I’ll get his permission, plus I just want to consult him on some scenarios, okay?”

“Work and entertainment...?”

“The café isn’t Aunt Fumika’s main occupation, you see. Her real job is writing, and she does all sorts of other things, too. I don’t understand why she’s still running the café...” Ayaka grumbled that it was a mystery because the writing made her all her money.

Without meaning to, Amane looked at Fumika and saw she was wearing a smile he couldn’t read. “Of course, I’m diligent about running the café as well, so you don’t need to worry about it going under or anything,” she said. “And I’ll pay you well.”

“Auntie, please make sure you keep track of his hours properly, okay? And you can’t go giving him extra spending money or anything.”

“You don’t have to worry so...”

Ayaka earnestly lectured Fumika, who frowned gloomily, and Amane became vaguely worried about whether he would actually be able to work there.

For better or worse, Amane's employment was quickly decided, and he took his employment contract and returned home.

It had been less of an interview and more of a simple meeting, but he seemed to have won over his employer, so that gave him some peace of mind for the moment.

He wasn't sure whether it was good she had decided so quickly, but he was sure it had to be good he'd been able to find a position. If anything, it had been too easy, enough to make him worry there might be some repercussions in the future.

It sounded like all there was left to do was get his and his parents' signatures and seals on the contract and send it off.

Ayaka apologized to him while they were on their way back, and she warned him Fumika had a strong personality. He figured if that was how she was, it was unavoidable that even someone like Ayaka could hardly handle her. She was an egotistical type with a different sort of audacity from his mother's.

Considering the kind of person Miss Itomaki is, I can never, ever allow her to meet my mother.

Shihoko was meeting Chitose that day, but personally, Amane thought those two were dangerous types who shouldn't be mixed, so he was anxious about how that would go.

Both Chitose and Shihoko understood some lines shouldn't be crossed, so he thought they would probably be okay, but he knew without a doubt that Mahiru would fall prey to their enthusiasm.

Resolving to console her once she got home, he opened the front door.

"I'm back... Wait, Dad?"

"Welcome home."

He'd been sure nobody was there, so his greeting had been quiet, but for some reason, his father, Shuuto, came out to greet him. He was supposed to be out enjoying some sightseeing, and Amane was caught by surprise.

Since his parents were the ones renting the apartment, they had spare keys,

so it wasn't so strange for his father to be there, and Amane wouldn't complain. But he'd been sure his father was out with his mother and the others, so Amane hadn't expected him to be in the apartment.

Shuuto gave Amane a curious look.

"Oh, I messaged you, but I guess you didn't see it. It sounds like Shihoko and the girls are going to eat out for dinner, so I thought I might make dinner for us while I go over your employment contract."

After he had finished the interview, such as it was, he had sent his parents a message on his way home to tell them he had gone for an interview and gotten the job, so he wanted them to sign his employment contract as his guardians. But after that, he had put his smartphone away, so he hadn't noticed when his father's message had come in.

After his father told him about it, Amane pulled out his phone and saw there was indeed an indication displayed in the notifications bar that said a message had come through from his father.

"Sorry, I didn't notice. But wait, didn't you want to go out with them, too, Dad?"

He had heard the girls were going out, but he'd never expected they would be together through dinner. He figured that meant they had really hit it off, but he wasn't sure how to feel about his father being left out.

"Ha-ha, the three ladies are getting along so well, and if I was around, Miss Shirakawa would probably hold back, don't you think? Knowing that, I didn't join them and struck out on my own, but...I figured it worked out perfectly once I saw your message."

In short, it would have been unbearable for either side if his father had joined in on the girls' party.

Amane shrugged. He figured since his father had been considerate, his mother had let him go rather than drag him along.

"You don't mind? Coming over here on one of your few vacation days, that is."

“We came here to see you guys in the first place and do some sightseeing while we were at it. And anyway, I lived here a long time ago, so I doubt anything would seem as novel to me as it will to your mother.”

“Well, that’s probably true, but still...”

“Besides, wouldn’t you feel lonely eating alone, Amane? And I worry about what you would cook.”

“...I can more or less prepare a normal meal now.”

He answered the slight teasing in a sulky tone of voice.

It really was “more or less,” but Amane had gotten to the point where he was able to cook. Of course, he couldn’t compare with the excellent skills of someone like Mahiru, but even so, compared with when he had first moved into this apartment, there was a world of difference.

He had progressed to the point that, as long as he made things exactly according to the recipe, they passed Mahiru’s inspection.

Amane hated the idea of people thinking he didn’t try to improve himself, so his voice took on a sharp edge. But when his father saw how Amane reacted, for some reason, his smile grew.

“That’s right, that’s right, you can do anything if you try, huh? Very impressive.”

“...By any chance, are you making fun of me?”

“I would never. It’s just that cooking a meal with my boy has always been one of my dreams, so I’m happy to have found the chance.”

Shuuto looked at him with a genuine, gentle, and affectionate smile, and Amane looked back at him, dumbfounded. Shuuto asked him, in a confident tone, “You’ll lend me a hand, won’t you?”

Of course, Amane had never intended to leave everything up to his father, but he found himself wearing a bitter smile when he realized, from his father’s way of speaking as if he had seen right into Amane’s mind, that he still didn’t stand a chance against him.

“...Yeah.”

He agreed obediently, and his father gave him a gentle, mellow smile. Amane found his own smile, taking on a different tone.

After Shuuto and Amane had finished eating the meatball pasta they had made together, they were taking a breather when they heard the sound of the front door unlocking, meaning Mahiru and the others must be back.

Amane headed for the entryway, thinking about how rare it was for him to welcome Mahiru home, and he found her and Shihoko holding a multitude of paper shopping bags.

It was not the number of bags he'd expected for a single day's worth of shopping, and Amane, who wasn't very materialistic, didn't have the slightest idea how they could have come back with so many.

"...Why do you have so many bags?"

"Oh, we've got something for you, too, Amane. Don't need to worry!"

"No, I don't care about stuff for me. Why did you do so much shopping, and what did you buy?"

Amane knew his parents earned a good living and that, fundamentally, they weren't the type to waste money, so he figured his mother's purchases must have been things she really wanted, but even so, there was just so much.

"Clothes I want Mahiru to wear and cute little accessories, stuff like that. And we also bought some clothes and things Mahiru picked out specifically for you to wear, Amane."

"So you bought things for special occasions, which I will normally never wear?"

He had complicated feelings about his mother buying his clothes, but since Mahiru had chosen them, he knew they couldn't be anything too awful.

He assumed he would hear everything from Mahiru later, bit by bit.

Amane looked at his mother in doubtful exasperation, but she slipped past him wearing a confident smile, so he looked at Mahiru, who was left behind.

Though he could see on her face how perplexed she was and that she also worried maybe they had bought too much, Shihoko seemed to have bought

everything triumphantly for Mahiru's sake, and Mahiru hadn't been able to stop her.

"...You didn't buy anything weird, did you?"

"W-weird? No, we didn't...?"

"All right, that's good to hear."

Mahiru gave him a curious look. Feeling relieved, he took the shopping bags from her. He didn't know whether they contained her things, but he thought making her keep holding them would be wrong.

He listened in the direction of the living room as he watched Mahiru take off her shoes and heard his parents talking. They seemed to be talking about his part-time job, and he could hear his mother saying what amounted to her catchphrase: "My goodness!"

Amane's father had signed for both of them in the guardians' field of his job contract, and he didn't need his mother's signature, but he knew he should probably run things by her as well.

Dad is quicker at settling things like that, and I couldn't get ahold of Mom anyway, but...

Today, they had all ended up coming back to his apartment like this. But initially, his parents hadn't planned to come over after sightseeing. He figured they would probably go back to their hotel after resting for a little while.

Mahiru was in the middle of changing into her slippers, using Amane's body for support as she did so, which tickled slightly. He was waiting for her to finish when she looked up at him as if she had just remembered something.

"Come to think of it, how did your visit to your new job go?"

"Mm, well, she seemed to like me, and I got hired."

He had never expected to get hired so easily, so he was perplexed by it, but Mahiru responded as if it was no big deal.

"I knew you'd get the job, Amane!"

Mahiru had confidence in Amane, and he couldn't help but feel like she

slightly overestimated him. But he knew if he said that out loud, she would take him to task for putting himself down, so he stayed quiet.

“So tell me, what kind of person is the owner?”

“How should I put it? She’s a peculiar older-sister type...?”

“Older sister?”

“Kido told me she was her aunt, but apparently, there’s quite an age gap between her and Kido’s mother, so she’s more like a much older sister.”

He knew asking a woman’s age was taboo and hadn’t asked for specifics, but he figured she was in her mid-to-late twenties.

He had asked Ayaka about her in passing while they had been in transit and learned that, apparently, Ayaka’s mother had doted excessively on her much younger sister. This had led Fumika to also adore her older sister and ultimately treat her sister’s daughter, Ayaka, like a beloved pet.

Amane noticed Mahiru’s cheeks stiffen slightly when he said “older sister,” so he poked at her face very gently with the tip of his finger to loosen the tightness.

“You don’t have to be worried. She’s one of those people who loves couples and likes to watch over them, so she wanted to hear all about how close I am with you, Mahiru.”

It seemed like a little spark of jealousy had flared up, so he went ahead and defused it, and Mahiru suddenly blushed bright red and restlessly shrank in on herself, looking uncomfortable.

“...It’s not that I’m doubting you or anything, okay? I just thought, ‘What would I do if she fell in love with you...?’”

“That won’t happen.”

“It could!”

For some reason, Mahiru was very insistent. As he responded with a troubled smile, Amane softly stroked her head. He didn’t want her to worry.

At first, she seemed a little sullen and displeased, but her expression gradually

softened, so he kept enjoying the soft texture of her hair, passing it gently through his fingers.

“Even if something like that happened, I wouldn’t love her back, and it would interfere with business, so I’d just quit.”

“I—I wouldn’t necessarily want you to go that far... Um, the thought just made me uneasy.”

“Right. So if it would make my girlfriend feel bad, it would be best for me not to work there anymore. It’s not like working there is my actual goal. I’m only doing it to get enough money for my real goal.”

Given how she’d acted, it was absurd to think there was even a one-in-ten-thousand chance of Fumika falling in love with Amane. But if that unlikely event came to pass, and something happened, he would feel guilty toward Ayaka, but he would quit and find a different place to work.

He was working to make Mahiru happy. But if working there would make Mahiru sad, then there was no need to keep at it. He could find another way.

He didn’t intend to mistake the means for the end, and Amane wasn’t foolish or obtuse enough to make the wrong choice.

He added that she didn’t have anything to worry about, and Mahiru buried her face in Amane’s chest.

“Now what?”

“...I love that about you.”

“Is that the only thing?”

“I love that about you, *too*, dummy.”

When he teased her, she grumbled in a slightly peevish voice and head-butted Amane in the chest, so Amane smiled and took it as he gently patted Mahiru’s back.

Chapter 5

Three People for Lunch

“And so? Everything worked out with the job in the end?”

Itsuki asked him about it the following day at school, so Amane was honest and nodded.

Itsuki replied with a casual shrug. “You had Kido’s introduction, so I was never worried, but if it’s all settled, that’s good to hear. Oh, I am curious why you look like you have something to tell me.”

“Well, yeah. She’s kind of an intense person, the aunt.”

“Guess she really must be for you to say so. Now I’m curious about her!” Itsuki laughed as he leaned his weight back in his chair.

Amane also gave a wry smile, but he intended to keep the rest a secret for the time being. If he told Itsuki, he would undoubtedly show up at his workplace immediately.

At the very least, Amane wanted to keep his friends from coming to his workplace until after he had started the job and gotten settled in. That was true even in Mahiru’s case.

When he’d told Mahiru that morning, she had sulked quite a bit, and he’d had to spend about ten minutes doting on her to get back in her good graces.

Now Mahiru was sitting over at Chitose’s desk talking.

For some reason, Chitose was looking their way and grinning, but he knew reacting would only amuse her, and that thought irritated him, so he deliberately ignored her.

“Well, I think the owner is a little strange, but it seems like I’ll be able to work there, no problem. And Kido said if I need anything, I can turn to Kayano for

help anytime.”

“Ah, Kido’s boyfriend, right? That low-key macho guy?”

“I think you might get a funny look if you mentioned that to Kayano himself... and then he might give Kido a death glare, but...”

It seemed like Souji would focus his ire on Ayaka, who had planted that perception in their minds, rather than on condemning the two of them for thinking that way.

Rather than acting ashamed, he imagined Ayaka would simply say, *What’s wrong with that?* Amane mostly felt bad for Souji, who had to put up with Ayaka spreading rumors about him behind his back.

In fact, Ayaka wasn’t in the classroom. Either she hadn’t gotten to school yet or she was with Souji.

“Anyway, I feel better having someone I know there, and from what I heard from the owner, it sounds like her regular customers are on the older side and relatively calm, so I shouldn’t have too much trouble.”

“Hmm, that’s good to hear. At any rate, having your job all set is a happy thing. But next time you need something, come talk to me!”

“Yes, yes, I’ll turn to you, my dear, close friend.”

Itsuki still seemed to be holding a tiny bit of a grudge. Amane patted him on the back, and he frowned like he was trying to hide his embarrassment. Then he whacked Amane on the back much harder in return.

This was one of Itsuki’s ways of showing friendship, so as he coughed, Amane laughed, saying, “You jerk!” as he gently pressed a fist to Itsuki’s cheek.

As he launched his minor attack against Itsuki, Amane let his gaze slip over to Mahiru, who huffed and looked at them, slightly dissatisfied.

She was protesting what he had told her that morning about postponing coming to his workplace.

However, she did seem to understand the reasoning, and thanks to the time he had spent spoiling her that morning, he was satisfied Mahiru would restrain herself, so he didn’t think there would be any issue.

Itsuki had followed Amane's gaze and suddenly poked fun at him. "Just as lovey-dovey as always, huh?" When Amane frowned, Itsuki broke into a wide grin as he gently brushed Amane's fist away. "That reminds me, yesterday Miss Shiina and Chi and your mother went shopping, right? I heard from Chi that they had fun picking out clothes for you, but what did Miss Shiina buy?"

"...Do I really have to tell you that?"

"Oh! My dear, close friend leaves me out again!"

"I knew you were still holding a grudge... Fine. It was a pair of full-body cat pajamas."

Amane puckered his lips up when he recalled the contents of the paper shopping bag Mahiru had handed him the previous day, and Itsuki burst into raucous laughter.

Indeed, Shihoko and Mahiru had purchased Amane a full-body pajama set with a hood with cat ears.

There was no way Amane, who was taller than average, could put on the cute pajamas, which were so obviously meant for a girl, or so he had thought, but they'd said, "There were sizes for guys, too!" Indeed, the pajamas they had produced were large enough that they'd fit him no problem, which had left Amane cradling his head.

"Y-you, in cute pajamas...?"

"Shut up. To make up for it, Mahiru's gonna wear rabbit pajamas, so it's fine."

At his age and with his build, it would be beyond embarrassing to wear a childish onesie, but Mahiru had looked at him with such a sparkle in her eye that he had no choice but to go along with it.

He probably would have firmly refused if he had been expected to wear it all by himself.

But Mahiru must have known that would have been unfair because she had made sure he knew she had one, too. Apparently, she had purchased her own one-piece pajama suit. It was light pink and had a rabbit design.

With the terms established that Mahiru would wear her own set and that she

would not take any pictures, Amane had agreed to put on the pajamas. It sounded like they would wear them the next time she stayed over.

The pajamas would give Mahiru a much more wholesome appearance than the negligee from last time, so that would be easier for Amane to endure in several ways and might actually be a blessing in disguise.

“I’ll have to get Miss Shiina to take a picture of you in your pajamas and send it to me.”

“Hey, don’t even think about it! I already told her, absolutely no photos.”

“Oh, come ooon! It’s okay, I’m sure you’ll look cute, so cute!”

“I can see you’re about to burst out laughing. Ass.”

Itsuki insisted it’d be great even as he struggled to control his expression, so Amane slapped him on the shoulder. Itsuki didn’t fight back. He was too busy holding back a laugh that made his whole body tremble.



A short distance away, Chitose and Mahiru were nodding to each other.

“They’re really close friends, huh?”

“They sure are.”

Amane made the fiercest face he could as he continued his weak attack against Itsuki.

Amane usually ate lunch with Mahiru and the others, but on that day, at Ayaka’s invitation, he was having his meal with her and Souji.

Ayaka hadn’t said as much, but it seemed like she was setting up an opportunity for him to become better friends with Souji since they’d be working at the same café.

From Amane’s position, even though Souji was his friend’s boyfriend, he hardly ever talked with him. Since things would probably go smoother if they got to know each other before they started working together, he had decided to accept the invitation.

Following Ayaka, Amane arrived on the roof, where he saw Souji had already spread out a picnic sheet and was waiting for them. Souji must have known Amane was coming because he didn’t look particularly surprised to see him.

“So like I said, Fujimiya here will be working with you from now on, babe!”

Looking at Amane, who had picked a corner of the picnic sheet and taken a seat, Ayaka put on a bright and friendly smile.

Souji did not look impressed with Ayaka’s smile. In fact, he turned a somewhat sympathetic eye on Amane.

“Ah...so Ayaka dragged you into this, huh?”

“D-dragged? How rude! I just guided the right person to the right job, that’s all!”

“You’re right. I do think Fujimiya would fit in at the café, but...”

“Right? You ought to appreciate me a bit more, Sou, geez!”

Ayaka looked a little more childish than usual as she huffed angrily in protest, and Amane found it charming. He figured it was a side of herself she only ever

showed Kayano.

“Actually, I’m the one who made the request,” Amane said, “so Kido’s helping me out a ton.”

“Oh yeah? But you must have been baffled by Fumika, right?”

“Well...”

He hadn’t known what to expect when he’d met Fumika, and if he was being honest, he found her a bit overwhelming. But she didn’t seem like a bad person, and he thought she was the type he could talk to. He figured it would be all right as long as he didn’t share too much.

At the same time, if Ayaka had told him about it beforehand, he could have prepared himself better, so he did have some complaints.

When he glanced over at Ayaka, he saw that her body had stiffened with a start as she opened the pouch containing her lunch box.

“Listen, I just wasn’t sure how best to explain a person like Aunt Fumika, okay? She’s so intense...”

“Well, I mean, I got a job in the end, so it’s all good. She doesn’t seem like a bad person or anything.”

“She’s a good person, you know? It’s just, well, once she takes you under her wing, she spoils you, and she’s an airhead sometimes, and she spends her days lost in daydreams, that’s all.”

“I guess I’m destined to fuel her fantasies. As long as no one gets hurt.”

“...Probably not, yeah. I think, um, probably.”

He wasn’t sure whether to poke fun at her apparent lack of confidence, but Ayaka wasn’t to blame, so Amane let it go and unwrapped his lunch, which Mahiru had prepared for him.

Amane’s father had made dinner the previous night, and they’d had pasta, so this lunch box consisted of the small dishes Mahiru usually prepared in advance, plus some dishes she’d made using the leftover ingredients from dinner, as well as some things she had made that morning.

He felt terrible about her going out of her way to make so many little dishes first thing in the morning, but Mahiru seemed to enjoy it, so he also hadn't been able to stop her.

He usually placed that burden on Mahiru, so Amane had thought about trying to make their lunches himself. However, whenever he tried, Mahiru got dejected and asked, "Haven't you been satisfied with what I've been making...?" so he found it difficult to put that plan into practice.

Incidentally, Amane's parents were supposed to have already left by the time he and Mahiru got home, so they had said their good-byes by telephone that morning. The words had come very easily on both ends, probably because they had plans to come visit Amane's home again over winter break or spring break at the latest.

"Ah, is that something Miss Shiina made?" Ayaka asked with a smile, brimming with curiosity. She had been observing Amane as he opened the lunch box lid and saw with satisfaction that, once again, one of Mahiru's homemade rolled omelets was inside.

"Mahiru made the omelet. The sweet-and-sour meatballs are leftovers from what my dad made when he came to see us."

"So your dad can cook, huh? Same as my dad. My mom can't really cook, and she's no good at housework, either, so my dad does it all."

"I feel like Kaori is a little extra special in that regard, though."

Kaori was probably Ayaka's mother's name, Amane reasoned.

"...Uh, um, let me explain so you don't misunderstand. My mother works really hard at her job, okay? She just kiiinda can't do housework! The other day, she blew up our microwave, but she can handle things like laundry!"

"That's her fault for not checking what she put in the microwave first. And doing laundry just means putting detergent in the machine and flipping the switch..."

"Do you think that's helping, Sou?"

"Well, you're the one who brought it up..."

Souji insisted he wasn't trying to criticize Kaori specifically, and Ayaka seemed to realize she had run her mouth all on her own as her cheek began to twitch visibly.

For the time being, Amane pretended he hadn't heard anything and averted his eyes, feigning ignorance.

"A-anyway, that's why my parents wanted me to grow up learning to do housework, I figure," she said. "And I learned how to do it, right? Though my dad still seems to have some complaints."

"You were raised to be a girly girl, and it'd be fine that you grew up to be that way. But since you developed your obsession with bodybuilding, you've given me nothing but grief. You're always chasing after naked men, Ayaka."

"Don't say it like that!!"

Ayaka shrieked her wide-eyed objection to Souji's remark. Anyone unfamiliar with the situation could certainly have taken it the wrong way. However, Amane noticed she didn't deny the accusation. He had one thought about it.

Well, if she loves muscles, I suppose she would want to see them in the flesh.

As far as Ayaka was concerned, it was probably a matter of pure aesthetic appreciation. But from her father's perspective, her obsession was probably a source of concern.

"You're the one who perverted me, Sou. And I'm not out chasing anyone. You're the only one for me, and it's your fault anyway!"

"Don't blame other people for your actions."

"I said, it's aaaaalllll your fault, Sou!"

As Souji pinched one of Ayaka's cheeks between his fingers and Ayaka whined at him childishly, Amane let a little laugh slip out.

Of course, there was also the fact they were dating, but he thought this must be due to them being very good childhood friends. It was a different closeness than that of a couple like Itsuki and Chitose, and seeing it was a novel experience.

"...Wh-why are you laughing?"

“Oh, I was just thinking you two get along so well.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you, Fujimiya. Not when you’re always flirting with Miss Shiina.”

“We’re not that bad!”

“Oh no, you flirt all right. Enough that it embarrasses us.”

“Don’t point your finger at people,” Souji said to Ayaka, who had sternly pointed her index finger at Amane. He grabbed her finger and made her lower it.

While thinking they always seemed in tune with one another, Amane sighed quietly.

“...It’s not like we do it on purpose.”

“So, in other words, you always get along like that, and you’re lovey-dovey every day? Pretty amazing.”

“Shut up.”

“But still, that’s why you were determined to get a job for Miss Shiina’s sake. I think it’s great you’re so motivated and that you already started thinking about the future!”

“Ah, so you suddenly decided to get a part-time job for Miss Shiina’s sake, huh? Privately, I thought you seemed like the type that wouldn’t want to deal with customers, Fujimiya, so I was curious about it, but I guess that makes sense.”

It wasn’t that Amane hadn’t explained himself. He had told Ayaka he didn’t want her spreading it around too much. It seemed like even Souji had not known about it. So when Souji nodded in understanding, he could see Ayaka make an awkward expression.

She had probably thought she would be breaking her promise if she’d said he was going to work for Mahiru’s sake.

But at any rate, since he would be working in the same place as Souji, and since he was bound to get asked about it at some point, there was no point in hiding his reason. As long as Souji didn’t tell Mahiru, there was no issue in him

knowing.

“Keep it a secret from Mahiru, okay? I want to surprise her.”

“That’s exactly right. Don’t you say a word, babe!”

“You’re the one who let it slip, Ayaka.”

“Ouch!” Ayaka held her forehead with tears in her eyes after Souji flicked her.

Souji looked at her like she was a hopeless case, then smiled awkwardly at Amane, who was taken aback by their exchange.

“Well, now that I know what this is about, if there’s anything I can do, I’ll help in whatever way I can.”

“...Thank you.”

“Right back at you. Thank you for becoming friends with Ayaka despite the way she acts.”

“...Oh, that’s strange, and here I thought I was helping you make a new friend, babe... I mean, I’m not so terrible that I have you worrying about me, am I?”

“Whenever you talk, you just make it worse.”

“Wow, okay!”

Ayaka stuck her lip out in an angry pout at the way Souji responded and slapped him on his chest, which was (according to Ayaka) quite muscular under his shirt. Amane watched them with a fuzzy feeling in his chest.

“Ah, speaking of the job, my aunt asked if you could wait a little bit before starting. She wants to have you on standby for a week or two so she can ask you about shifts and get your uniform,” Ayaka mumbled as if she had just remembered it.

The two of them had settled down after their couple’s comedy act and started to eat lunch again.

Amane hadn’t yet returned the signed contract forms to Fumika, so she didn’t know his phone number or how to contact him. Apparently, she’d had no choice but to entrust her message to Ayaka.

It was just like Ayaka to decide sharing his contact information without his

permission wouldn't be good, and so even now that his job was secured, she seemed to have decided to play the role of the messenger for him.

"Sure, I didn't think I would be starting immediately anyway. By the way, what do you mean by uniform?"

"Yeah, not like the ones you saw from my café the other day, something simpler. They really make you look like a waiter. The outfits for the female employees are also simpler than ours. They're not all frilly so that you can relax."

"You can imagine my confusion about wearing a flashy costume in that coffeehouse."

Since Fumika had asked Amane to meet her on the day the café had been closed, he hadn't known there were uniforms. But Amane was relieved to hear they didn't sound like something he had to worry about.

The outfit he had worn at the culture festival was comparatively tame but still a little extravagant. It would have been hard to wear something like that all the time, even if it was just for a part-time job.

More importantly, if his friends saw him dressed like that at his job, it was sure to cause Amane all kinds of trouble. They'd had a field day with it at the culture festival, and he had only had to wear that outfit for two days, tops. He did not want to have to wear the costume all the time.

Amane was relieved to hear he'd be wearing regular waiter clothes.

"Ah, oh yeah." Ayaka spoke again as if she had remembered something else. "Uh, I told her your sizes, Fujimiya. I hope that's all right?"

"It's fine, but how did you know?"

"I saw them when we were getting ready for the culture festival, and I can tell by looking at you."

Ayaka laughed and said she could tell a boy's body size even under his clothing. It was probably a technique honed by her love for muscles.

Souji, who had been listening off to the side, didn't even try to hide his exasperated expression and spoke to his girlfriend just a little bit rudely. "I

guess we can be honest now and call you a pervert, huh?”

“So mean!” Ayaka said with raised eyebrows. “You’re unbelievable... Ah, of course, I can only tell generally. When it comes to the quality and density of your muscles, I can’t tell without touching them or seeing them directly, so... Of course, I’m not going to sexually harass you, okay?! I would just inspect you, with your consent.”

“I...see... Uh, well, I’m glad you saved me the effort of telling your aunt my sizes...I guess.”

“Ayaka, you’re scaring him. Look, Fujimiya, you don’t have to force yourself to play along with this thing. It’s okay.”

“It’s not nice to call a person ‘this thing.’”

Ayaka looked cute, huffing in anger, but her face deflated into a frown when she met Amane’s eyes.

“I’m really sorry, okay? For showing you my weird side.”

“Ah, no, it’s kind of too late for that.”

“Urk, he got me! But I can’t say anything... I’ve been showing you this side of me all the time, ever since the culture festival, huh...”

“Oh, well, yeah. I’m very well aware you have a peculiar interest, Kido. And I don’t really think one way or another about it... I mean, as long as no one’s getting hurt, people all have different interests and preferences. I’m not going to call you creepy or slander you.”

Amane might feel differently if he became the object of her interests and it caused him problems, but as long as that didn’t happen, he didn’t have the inclination or the right to criticize her.

Every person had their own tastes. So as long as it wasn’t hurting him, he figured he had to respect hers.

And anyway, he didn’t remember being raised to think he should exclude someone just because they were different.

Besides, he couldn’t shake the feeling Mahiru was also quietly starting to appreciate his developing muscles, so he couldn’t quite pretend like it had

nothing to do with him. He could have complained to Ayaka about her spreading influence, but Mahiru seemed to enjoy it herself, and if it added to the things she liked about Amane, that had to be good...probably.

He didn't mean to reject Ayaka for her particular taste in big muscles. But making her squirm a little was amusing.

Muttering he didn't have the right to complain about other people's tastes in the first place, he gripped a piece of Mahiru's homemade rolled omelet in his chopsticks.

Ayaka's body shook as if she was overcome with emotion, and with a full-faced smile, she drummed happily on Amane's shoulders. "You were raised well, Fujimiya," she said. "I mean, you're a good person! I understand why Miss Shiina fell for you!"

"...Ayaka."

"What is it, Sou? Jealous? It's okay, I'm totally devoted to you..."

"No, that's fine, that's not it. But Fujimiya looks crushed..."

The attack on Amane's shoulders had caused the omelet to fall out of his chopsticks and right into the sauce for the sweet-and-sour meatballs they'd made with the leftover ones from the previous day's meatball pasta.

It was lucky it hadn't fallen onto the picnic sheet or his clothes. But to Amane, who loved the delicate taste of the omelet, the change in flavor was quite a surprise, and he'd frozen in place. Souji had interpreted that as being stricken with grief.

Ayaka panicked in response to Amane gazing down at the piece of omelet, now covered in sweet-and-sour sauce.

"I-I'm so sorry! I didn't mean for that to happen!"

"N-no, it's all right, I can still eat it. It's not like it fell on the ground or anything. It'll be good like this, too..."

"You look really down! I'm sorry! I'll go kneel in front of Miss Shiina later and beg her to make you another one!"

"N-no, it's fine..."

He hadn't meant to look so seriously depressed, but Ayaka had started profusely apologizing, so Amane smiled lightheartedly. For some reason, she apologized again with an incredibly regretful look.

"Amane, you really do love my omelets, don't you?"

Ayaka had apparently explained the situation to Mahiru, and Mahiru smiled as she and Amane left school together, remembering the earlier conversation.

Neither of them had plans to go anywhere that day, so they were leaving school side by side as usual. While deciding what to have for dinner, Mahiru seemed to remember the incident, adding, "That makes me really happy."

She giggled. Apparently, she thought what she had heard about Amane's behavior from Ayaka was quite funny. She was laughing elegantly, so the people around them started glancing at them.

Amane squeezed Mahiru's hand to tell her not to laugh over nothing, but she didn't seem like she was going to settle down. He wanted to pinch her cheek, but one of his hands was holding Mahiru's bag, and his other hand was holding her hand, so he couldn't.

"I've been putting them in your lunches regularly, haven't I? I made extra this morning, and sometimes I even make them for dinner, you know?"

"That's one thing, this is another. I wanted to eat that one for lunch."

"Well. I'll let you know that thanks to you, I got a very earnest apology from Kido and a sincere request."

Amane hadn't intended to blame Ayaka in the least. He had been the one feeling down about such a small thing, and it wasn't like the omelet had fallen on the ground. The flavor had just changed a little bit.

He had never expected Ayaka to really apologize, and now that he'd been informed she had gone to apologize while he hadn't been around, it made him feel guilty instead.

"Man, now I feel like I did something bad to Kido. I was feeling down on my own, that's all."

"It sounds like you made a really somber expression, Amane."

“Well, I mean, yeah... It was one of your rolled omelets.”

“I make them for you all the time!”

“...Even for dinner?”

“You want to change the menu? And when we just decided it, too! You are just hopeless!”

Even though the words Mahiru was using said she was fed up, her voice sounded cheerful and amused, so Amane knew she wasn't actually upset.

Her gentle smile made him feel uneasy, as if he were being treated like a child, and Amane pressed his lips together, trying to keep himself from becoming sour.

“All right, I'll make you a rolled omelet for tonight's dinner. In exchange, can I get you to spoil me a bit?”

“Come on, I'll do that if that's what you want. I'll do it without you even asking.”

If Mahiru was actively asking to be pampered for once, he was happy to oblige. Plus, he was planning to spoil her whether she asked for it or not. He could even say doting on Mahiru had become one of his hobbies.

When he readily agreed, Mahiru, the one who had brought the subject up, winced instead.

“...Well then, we might have a problem.”

“Why?”

“I mean, you don't know the meaning of moderation, do you?”

“Moderation? Have I been that hard on you?”

“That's not it... Once you decide to spoil me, you do a very thorough job of it...”

“I just do what I set out to do...”

Amane, who was the type to see something through once he had made a commitment assuming nothing drastic happened, was of the opinion that if Mahiru came to him with the request, he would spoil her as much as she

wanted until she was satisfied.

Though he didn't intend to do it to the extent that Mahiru became uncomfortable, he was sure it would be all right until she slowly melted in his arms.

"...I have a hard time if I get spoiled too much... My knees go weak for a while, and I can't stand up." Mahiru added that last part quietly, and Amane couldn't help but smile.

Though she spoke of spoiling, what she really meant was touching, kissing, hugging, and things like that. But it sounded like even that was quite intense for Mahiru.

When he focused intently on spoiling her, Mahiru became weak and limp. He had seen it plenty of times. But it sounded like Mahiru didn't want to fall into that state.

When he complained he couldn't help it when she was so cute, he heard her mumble quietly, in a sulky, whining voice, "I can't take it because you don't know how to hold back." She continued, "Anyway, you mustn't take it too far. Just do it normally, please."

"I don't know what you mean when you tell me to spoil you normally, though. I'm always doing it normally."

"...This must be the signature technique of the Fujimiya bloodline..."

"I'm not as bad as my dad."

Indeed, he didn't have as much skill as his father did at spoiling and couldn't do it as naturally.

Amane thought his father seemed to be extremely sweet and kind toward his family and someone who loved them deeply.

He took care of people. He didn't spoil them rotten in a poisonous way that destroyed their bodies and souls. More than anybody else Amane knew, he always kept an eye on his family, and when it was necessary, he took a step back and watched over them kindly while still making sure they were taken care of. That was the kind of person he was, the kind who, more than anyone else,

offered them deep and generous love.

Amane wanted to be a little more reserved than his father, but one of his goals was to become more like him. Yet he didn't think he had made it to that point yet, and he wasn't sure he was clever enough to do it.

From Amane's perspective, since Mahiru had a great deal of self-control and was the type to put on a brave front but also really needed someone to take care of her before she broke under the strain, he had been spoiling her in moderation, trying to soften her up. But it seemed as if Mahiru had interpreted that as an excess of affection.

"I'd like you to try letting Shihoko hear you say that, Amane. It's unfortunate she's not here at the moment."

"Why my mom? ...Well, I guess they did go home already."

His parents had already left. It was only natural since they had to go to work the next day.

The culture festival and the vacation days following it had been lively, so Mahiru seemed a little bewildered by the difference now that his parents weren't with them anymore.

"It's going to be lonely around here."

"You seemed to enjoy yourself while my parents were here, Mahiru."

"That's because they're fun! And because I got to hear old stories about you."

"...I think I'll make sure to spoil you extra."

"Ah, th-that's a little..."

Mahiru became flustered at Amane, who had decided to spoil her thoroughly that night to get her to reveal what his parents had talked about. But it was her fault for that slip of the tongue.

Before he'd learned that particular detail, he had planned to be a little more reserved. But apparently, that would not do at all.

Amane's lips curled into a smile as he wondered how he should play it, and with a somewhat stiff expression, Mahiru kept her head pressed against

Amane's upper arm until they reached the supermarket.

"...Ah, um, listen, I think you need to go easy on me, Amane."

After dinner, Amane proceeded with his plan to spoil Mahiru more than usual. Mahiru looked up at Amane with a bright red face.

He was petting her while they were sitting on the sofa together, but she had gotten extremely embarrassed.

Since he wasn't touching her in a particularly sexual way or letting his hand stray to any places it shouldn't, the reason her face was so flushed was either because he had been stroking her head while looking her in the face or because he had let her lie down in his lap.

"I don't know. Now, when you say go easy on you...maybe you could tell me what you heard about me..."

"I—I told you, I didn't hear any old stories you need to worry about!"

"Specifically?"

"...There was the story about how when you were little, you got carried away pushing yourself on the swings and went flying and cried, or the story about how you used too much force when you tried to kiss your mother on the cheek and head-butted her instead."

"Well, that's illegal. Straight to jail."

"Oh, come on...!"

When he'd been little, Amane had gotten carried away by his mother's enthusiasm, so he'd often committed blunders like that. But knowing Mahiru had been told about them was so embarrassing, he wondered if it was some kind of punishment.

The story about him kissing his mother's cheek when he'd been little wasn't something she should be sharing at the drop of a hat. It was just the kind of thing he didn't want anyone to learn.

Amane certainly felt more embarrassed than Mahiru, who was currently being lavished with affection. He was the one who'd had his past exposed, without his knowledge, right there under his own roof.

The kiss for his mother had been an accident, so that one didn't count. But since there was still a chance Shihoko might press her cheek to his or kiss him, dredging up stories like that from the past threatened to bring on a headache.

Instead of scolding her for listening to stories that were none of her business, Amane slipped his fingers along the side of Mahiru's torso, tracing over her with a soft touch. Mahiru trembled, startled, and looked up at him with her cheek twitching.

Of course, that had to be a request for him to stop, but since this was a punishment, he had no intention of stopping. He knew his mother had probably brought the stories up unprompted, but there was no doubt Mahiru had listened with intense interest.

He moved his fingertips across her very, very gently as if to say she was just as guilty.

Mahiru was very ticklish, so he tried to hold back, but she shrieked at an even higher pitch than usual and clung to Amane. She didn't try to escape, probably because she would have lost her balance.

"Eep! ...H-ha, I'm s-sor—"

"...What else did you hear about?"

To get her to lay everything bare and find out all the unnecessary old stories she'd heard from his mother, Amane traced carefully over her waist, gently with almost a feather touch. Mahiru started writhing as she tried to hold back from laughing.

"N-nothing, not this time."

"This time?"

"I-it's just a figure of speech..."

"...Even assuming you've told me everything, it sounds like you're expecting to hear more in the future, young lady. Don't you think it's unfair only my past is dragged out in the open?"

"B-but everything in my past is a problem from before that age..."

She added she couldn't point to any specific incidents, and Amane stopped

tickling Mahiru.

He knew he had probably made her remember some unpleasant things. Mahiru's young childhood had been when she had not received protection or love from her parents, so she probably didn't want him to bring it up.

Feeling bad about raising the topic, Amane frowned and looked at Mahiru. She could tell what he was thinking and gave him a small smile.

"You don't have to worry about that, okay? Because it's not that important to me anymore. Right now, at this moment in time, I'm satisfied, and that's enough."

"Mahiru..."

"Besides, I was well-behaved even when I was a child, so I was never a little rascal like you were, Amane."

"Sorry for being such a little rascal...Well, I can't imagine you being a tomboy, Mahiru."

Paying her back for her teasing words by tugging on her cheek, he imagined Mahiru when she had been small.

Sure enough, he couldn't even imagine her as a tomboy.

Mahiru, who seemed like she had been a good girl who'd had her parents' approval from a young age, had probably had even better manners than she did now. It was all too easy to imagine her as an obedient child, so he would have liked to get a glimpse of what a tomboy Mahiru might have looked like.

...Maybe I'll get to see it if we have a kid who looks like Mahiru.

He couldn't help but feel any of their children would turn out rather meek no matter which parent they took after, but there was no way of knowing until they were born.

Whether they turned out to be well-behaved, tomboys, or even little rascals, no matter what, he was confident they would be adorable. He definitely wanted them to resemble Mahiru more than they resembled him, the one without any charm.

Amane privately enjoyed his heartwarming daydream. He knew Itsuki would

make fun of him and tell him he was way too impatient if he ever caught wind of it.

Mahiru buried her face in Amane's chest and rubbed her cheek against him.

"...You know, I wasn't very charming when I was little. I just behaved myself because I wanted my parents to praise me. Because it was effective at getting attention, I could do an impressive number of things for my age. But people talked behind my back about how I wasn't a very likable child."

"Who said that?"

"The mothers of the other children I played with at the time, I think... Amane, your face, your face!"

"But still..."

He couldn't believe there were people who would speak badly of a child in a place and at a volume the child could hear, so he had frowned very hard without meaning to. Mahiru squished his cheeks to loosen him up.

Especially when it was so easy to hurt a child, he really would have liked to have words with the unnamed parents who had been so carelessly cruel toward a child they didn't know well. But it was in the past, so there was nothing he could do.

He was glad to see Mahiru didn't seem burdened by it and brushed it off easily, but if it had hurt her and stuck with her, he would have been angry enough to think about what he could do for her.

"Don't worry. Miss Koyuki praised me and told me how cute I was."

"Good job, Miss Koyuki."

Giving an internal thumbs-up to the woman who had acted as Mahiru's surrogate parent, someone he had never met, Amane stroked Mahiru's head and held her close as she pulled the memories out of the back of a mental drawer.

"I was less bothered by it than you think, Amane. The things my own parents said to me were more painful than anything said by a complete stranger, after all."

“...Mahiru.”

“How about we leave it at that since I don’t think we want to have a gloomy conversation? The one thing I can say is I went through some painful things at the time, but I met you like this and got involved with you because I had that past behind me. I have no reason to deny my past, so please don’t make those faces. You are a worrier!”

Mahiru laughed, and he brought his lips to her forehead and embraced her again. As she squirmed in his arms, Mahiru’s lips curved into a smile, and she kissed Amane back.

“...Besides, now I have your love, Amane, so I’m fine.”

In response to Mahiru’s pointed smile, Amane mumbled, “You’re adorable,” and decided to spoil her even more that night. Then he kissed her lightly again and patted her head.

Mahiru seemed very open to this kind of pampering and obediently accepted what Amane was doing, snuggling into him with heavy-lidded eyes.

If he kept going like he was, he would forget himself and keep on spoiling Mahiru endlessly, and it was not unlikely he would also start to melt the way things were going. So Amane applied the restraints of reason again to keep himself in check as he recalled something that, come to think of it, he had forgotten to tell her.

“Before I forget, I want to go ahead and tell you this. Once I start my job, I’m definitely going to be getting home late on weekdays, so you can go ahead and eat dinner without me.”

Thinking he ought to have said something a little bit earlier, when Amane stopped stroking Mahiru and told her that, in his arms, Mahiru blinked her big round eyes.

“We’re still discussing my shifts, but I’ll be there until closing on weekdays, so I think it will probably be about nine o’clock before I get home. Of course, there’s no way I can make you wait until then.”

“That’s not too late. I’ll wait.”

He intended to have her eat before him because it would be wrong to have her wait with an empty stomach, but Mahiru responded as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

She was looking at him with a curious gaze, and all Amane could do was frown awkwardly.

“But won’t you get hungry?”

“I’d rather my heart be satisfied than my stomach, so I will wait for you, Amane. It’s boring to eat alone, and I don’t mind the time I spend waiting for you.”

“It’s going to be late, you know.”

“There are plenty of other people who do club activities or have part-time jobs, and compared with some of those folks, I wouldn’t say it’s all that late... Or do you dislike the idea of me waiting for you?”

“It’s not necessarily that I dislike it. I just don’t like the idea of making you wait.”

Amane would feel guilty about her silently making a meal on her own and waiting for him. It would be comparatively better for his mental health if she ate before he got back, but Mahiru did not seem the slightest bit willing to give in.

“It’s not like I’ll be waiting here without anything to do, you know. If I’m waiting, there are plenty of things I can do in the meantime. I can bathe, do homework, or review stuff for school. There’s all kinds of skincare and haircare I can do. I have plenty to keep me busy. It’s just that the order of things will change, that’s all.”

Mahiru made it sound like it wouldn’t be any trouble when she told him that, then laughed, “You’re such a worrier!” and poked his cheek.

“You’re putting in the effort to get something you really want, so there’s no way I wouldn’t cheer you on, is there? Actually, as far as things I can do go, I can have a hot meal and a bath waiting for you when you get home.”

“I would be incredibly grateful for both... Though, what would make me

happiest is if you would come out to greet me when I got back. That would really cheer me up.”

“That all sounds easy enough.”

“...You don’t have to overdo it, okay? Promise me you’ll put yourself first?”

Since this was Mahiru they were talking about, she seemed likely to prioritize him even if she had other things to do. But Mahiru was laughing it off.

Amane had no intention of telling Mahiru what to do, but Mahiru seemed to dislike having dinner without Amane, and she clearly wasn’t planning on changing her mind.

Since that showed how much he was loved and how much she considered him in her plans, he was happy, but nevertheless, he didn’t want her to force herself to wait.

“I should be the one telling you that—don’t overdo it trying hard at your job, okay? I don’t know what you want to buy, but I worry because you’re the kind of person who always follows through with something once he decides on it.”

“I won’t overdo it. I wouldn’t want to worry you, Mahiru.”

“I am a little worried about what will happen when you’re on the job, though... Even being generous, I can’t say you’re especially sociable, Amane.”

“That’s true, but why does it still sound kind of insulting?”

Sure, that was something Amane knew about himself and something other people recognized as well. But he wasn’t sure how to react when it was pointed out to his face.

When he grumbled he wasn’t all that unsociable in what didn’t exactly amount to a counterargument, Mahiru let out a soft sigh.

“I didn’t mean you have no social skills, just that you don’t normally seek out more social interaction than necessary. I think you could do it if you tried.”

“Well, that’s because I’ve never really wanted to be friends with a huge number of people. I’m satisfied with a small social circle.”

“...But really, if you tried, you could do it. It’s possible to flip that switch, you

know?" she sighed.

"Why are you sighing?"

"...I'm wondering what I'm going to do if you get too popular, Amane..."

Despite himself, he laughed at his incredibly adorable, worried girlfriend, and Mahiru, who heard him laughing, looked up at him with an annoyed expression.

"It'll be fine. I won't get popular, I promise."

"You have no understanding of your own value, Amane."

"Now, listen. Judging by the prices on the menu and the general atmosphere, the clientele of that café seems to be old uncles and aunties. I won't get popular, but even if I do, it doesn't matter."

Rather than a quiet, privately owned café like the one Amane would be working at, young people were more likely to go to a chain restaurant that was a little more boisterous, where they could eat and drink without worrying. Plus, from what he had seen when they had shown him the menus, the prices were a bit too high for high school and college students to casually have a drink there.

Conversely, the flavors of all the drinks and food were very good, and the calm space apparently made it popular with the older crowd.

Well, the fact that the café's owner was a young, beautiful woman was also probably a reason the older men went there.

According to Souji, there were very few young female customers, so Amane could work there with peace of mind.

So even assuming he did become a little bit popular, it would be among folks decades older than him, which really seemed less like popularity and more like people doting on a son or grandson.

"I'm telling you, Mahiru, you have nothing to worry about. And the owner sounds like a good person, too."

"...I hope you're right, but..."

Mahiru sounded like she understood. Amane stroked her head to soothe her, and although she looked slightly dissatisfied, she must have been happy

because she smiled a little and let Amane do as he pleased.

Chapter 6

Just a Friendly Push

“What’cha reading?”

“The job manual. Kido brought it to me and said it would probably be best if I went through it and memorized it beforehand.”

Amane was looking over the work handbook that had been compiled into a binder. It had been handed to him along with the suggestion that he would be better able to prepare himself if he knew what was there before starting the job. Itsuki seemed to notice and came over to talk to him.

Everything he needed to know to do his job was there, from the basics of customer service to the menus, the way to use various utensils, the names of different coffee beans, and how each variety tasted.

He had learned the basics for the culture festival, so it wasn’t particularly difficult for him to learn how to treat customers or to study the menus. However, he had to memorize the varieties, flavor profiles, and origins of all the coffee the café served so he could explain them properly when asked by a customer. That took more effort than he’d expected, so he’d decided to read over them whenever he had a spare moment.

“Are you allowed to take something like that outside?”

“It’s really just the explanations of customer service and how to use the utensils, so it’s no problem, Kido said. She told me it’s not like there are any company secrets in here or anything, so she got permission to let me take it. She figured it would also be better for the café if I learned the job quickly.”

Ayaka probably only gave him so much attention because she felt responsible after having introduced him, but Amane also thought it showed she had confidence he would be able to memorize everything properly.

He couldn't expect to depend entirely on Souji, who would be working with him, so he figured he probably ought to get up to speed as quickly as possible to be useful at the café.

After all, if he didn't, he would never be able to invite Mahiru to the café, so to live up to his girlfriend's expectations, he had been reading the manual very seriously.

Mahiru usually approached Amane during breaks, but perhaps she could tell he was focused on something because she had disappeared off somewhere instead of coming over to see him.

Amane turned his gaze away from Itsuki and back to the lines of text in the manual, deliberately etching them into his mind, and Itsuki let out an exasperated sigh.

"You're so serious about things like that, Amane. I mean, I know the driving force behind it is love, but still."

"Shut up."

He had his reasons, and he wasn't going to deny them, but embarrassment won out when someone else spelled it out like that, so he snapped at Itsuki. But Itsuki didn't seem cowed by Amane's brusque tone and was still grinning.

"Oh, to think that quiet loner Amane has changed so much... Love is a mighty thing! People really can change, I guess."

"What are you hoping to accomplish by teasing me this much? Are you trying to make me mad?"

"No, no. There's just something kind of...dazzling about you."

"Go be dazzled somewhere else. Hang around, and you'll lose your chance to come see where I work."

"So mean! You've got to let me see what you look like at work, too!"

"You're one to talk. You've never let me come see you at work even once."

Itsuki was teasing Amane, but Amane knew Itsuki also worked a part-time job. However, Amane didn't know where he worked or what job it was.

Itsuki was fundamentally a frank and open guy, but for some reason, he rarely talked about the fact that he had a job.

Amane had gotten the sense that, although it wasn't necessarily a secret, Itsuki didn't want people to ask about it, so he wasn't planning to prod him more than necessary. But he figured it was all right to give him one little poke.

Amane looked up from his manual and stared at Itsuki, who was evading the point with a faint smile. "Oh, me? Well, I..."

"You keep saying you want to come to my workplace, yet you've never taken me to where you work, and you haven't even told me where it is."

"Nya-ha-ha, there was never any need to tell you."

"When you put it that way, you're right, but it makes me worry you might be doing some kind of shady job."

"No way, I would never!"

"Well then, what have you been doing?"

"Uh, well, okay. I work as a florist. At the shop of someone I know."

"...You sell flowers?"

That occupation had been completely outside Amane's expectations, and when he looked surprised despite himself, Itsuki made an uncomfortable-looking face.

"Come on, I thought you would say that. That's why I didn't tell you. I knew you would say it doesn't suit me."

"I wouldn't say that, but...you've never mentioned anything about flowers even once, have you?"

"I've never had the opportunity, for one thing. And I'm not that knowledgeable about them yet, either... I mean, I've handled flowers for flower-arranging class and stuff, and my dad said I could work there, so I'm doing it. That's the only place he gave me permission to work a part-time job."

Itsuki scoffed, revealing his anger. It was clear who it was directed toward. He didn't have to say anything. All Amane could do was frown.

At Amane's school, students had to petition the school and receive permission from their guardians to start a part-time job.

Luckily for Amane, he had gotten permission from his father, so he'd been able to get his petition approved quite quickly. But in Itsuki's case, his father, Daiki, had probably been an obstruction.

Daiki, who was strict even from Amane's perspective, seemed to be the type of person who wouldn't endorse the idea of students, who were supposed to be studying, getting jobs in the first place. Or rather, from how Itsuki grumbled, it sounded like he had actually been rejected initially.

"Even to get him to compromise on this, I had to stand my ground and force the issue."

Amane decided it was probably best not to ask how much effort it had taken to get Daiki to give in.

"You know, I don't have any complaints about the flowers, but I don't like being ordered around. I'm already a high schooler, right? I don't know why he's unhappy about me saving money so I can spend it however I want. The shop owner is even an acquaintance of my dad's, so I know he reports on me, too. Although I've got the owner's sympathy, so they're probably pretty bland reports."

"If you're going that far to hold down a job, that must mean there's something you really want, huh?"

The Itsuki that Amane knew was not the type to make extravagant purchases. Even the sums he used for leisure were relatively modest. He occasionally spent money on fast food or karaoke, but other than that, as far as Amane had seen, he didn't spend much. And anyway, it sounded like he received his own spending money, including lunch money, meaning he got a reasonably large amount.

In that case, Amane thought there must be some big thing Itsuki wanted to get, but he quickly shook his head.

"Nah, I'm saving up now so I'll be okay even after I leave home."

"...Sorry."

Amane had put his foot right into something he'd been determined to avoid, so he apologized earnestly and got a bitter smile in response.

"I knew you were going to apologize for asking. That's why I didn't say anything. This is all because I'm so stubborn, and I think I'd have to agree if you said I was rushing things."

After checking to ensure Chitose wasn't in the classroom, Amane lowered his voice and asked, "...You've still been having problems with your dad, even after what happened?"

Thanks to the fact that their classmates were chatting fairly loudly, Amane's voice only reached Itsuki, who was close beside him. He kept his voice low, fearing their conversation might leak out to Chitose through their classmates.

Itsuki grinned broadly at Amane's consideration. Amane knew it wasn't a happy smile, but it was coming from a troubled place, which was painful to him.

"Nothing's changed at all! Although, since I fought with him so much after middle school graduation and up through the start of high school, we weren't talking much to begin with anyway."

As Amane might have expected, it sounded like the fact they hardly talked even at home was ongoing.

Amane had been worried things might have gotten strained because he had butted in where he didn't belong at the culture festival, but seeing how Itsuki was acting, that didn't seem to be the case.

"My parents still control my life while I'm a student, so if they really wanted to limit me, there'd be nothing I could do because I'm still a minor. I figure I'll have less trouble if I'm prepared."

"...Still, I don't think even your dad would be so inhumane as to use your school tuition and living expenses as tools to force you to listen to him..."

Certainly, Daiki seemed like an uncompromising, unwavering type of person. Even an outsider like Amane could tell, although it seemed harsh to say so. But at the same time, Daiki also seemed like a person with a very strong sense of responsibility and was a respectable adult.

If Daiki had been the type to restrict everything to bend his son to his will, then even Amane would probably have protested rather than hold back because he was an outsider. But the fact was that, even though there were certain restrictions in place, he didn't go so far as to coerce Itsuki to do anything.

They had come to an impasse, but Daiki was unlikely to do anything to force Itsuki to comply with his wishes.

Itsuki must have known that, too, because he let out a heavy, exasperated sigh.

"My dad is just as stubborn as me, but, as a person, I don't think he'd do anything too extreme, you know? That said, if something happened and I needed to get away from him quickly, I figured I'd be helpless if I didn't have some funds of my own. For better or worse, I understand very well how stubborn my dad can be."

"...You can be difficult, too, you know."

"I do know. But this is how I am."

Itsuki, who always seemed flippant but had prudent and unshakable convictions, tried to act aloof as he said this, but it was obvious his words were built on a foundation of severe distress.

Amane could see he possessed a certain type of stubbornness, which meant he wouldn't yield, even to his father's words.

He knew this was absolutely not the moment to tell Itsuki he resembled his father, so Amane just smiled in his heart. He could see Chitose casually strolling over to them, apparently back from her errand, so he reverted to his usual expression.

"What's going on over here? What are you talking about with such serious expressions?"

"Hmm? I was just complaining that we won't be able to hang out much since Amane will be busy with work, too."

Completely shielding Chitose from their conversation, Itsuki smiled broadly

and quickly suggested a different topic, so Amane got on board with it and continued the ruse. “Well,” he said, “I’ve kind of got a lot of shifts, so I don’t know...”

“You’re right to worry,” Chitose said. “If you start spending all your time at work, I’m gonna swoop in and steal lonely Mahiru’s heart, you hear?”

“I wouldn’t like that, so I’ll be really careful not to ignore Mahiru.”

“Mm, good, you do that.”

“Don’t get carried away, now.”

“Oww!”

Chitose’s attitude revealed she had her personal opinion about Mahiru’s situation, and when Amane poked her forehead with the tip of his finger, she staggered and wailed dramatically. “Itsukiii!”

Itsuki cackled with laughter and consoled Chitose by stroking her head. It seemed like Amane and Itsuki had gotten away with avoiding any questions about their earlier behavior.

Chitose, who was sulking adorably and holding her forehead even though he hadn’t put much force behind the poke, stuck her tongue out when Amane’s eyes landed on her.

“Don’t look at me with that face, geez!”

“It’s your own fault for being so bossy, Chitose.”

“Oh, what do you care? It’s between me and Mahiru anyway. More importantly, we expect you to eventually invite us to the café!”

“I don’t want to invite you at all anymore.”

“What?! But we want to see our friend in all his glory!”

“Can you promise not to make fun of me or sit there with a goofy grin?”

Chitose averted her eyes, so he glared at her hard. From the look on her face, her thoughts were quickly becoming preoccupied with something else.

“Those sorts of things... No, I don’t think I’ll do them.”

“And you think I’m going to trust you when you can’t even look me in the eye and say that?”

“Come on! You’ve never given us your customer service smile before, Amane. I want to see it and Yuuta’s, too!”

“Ah-ha-ha, same here!”

Yuuta must have seen that Amane and the others were gathered together, and he had come over to join the group at some point. He nodded, wearing a gentle smile.

For some reason, Yuuta had also joined in. Amane stood there with his cheek twitching. He didn’t know what Yuuta was thinking.

“I’m sure you must have seen my customer service smile the other day...”

“Mahiru was there, so that was a revised version, and it wasn’t directed at us, either.”

“Now, look...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. What do you say, Yuuta?”

“Sure!”

“Why are you colluding with her on something like that? It’s not fair, is it, for me to be the only one who gets stared at and laughed at... I thought we could go through it together, but you’ve got club activities, Kadowaki. You don’t even have a job!”

Yuuta, the track club ace, was busy with club activities, so naturally, he didn’t have time for a part-time job. Even though the track-and-field club at their school maintained a very reasonable training schedule that wasn’t too demanding, if he started working part-time on his days off school, it would wear him out. If Amane had been in Yuuta’s position, he definitely wouldn’t have taken a job.

Incidentally, Chitose did not seem to have gotten permission to work from her parents.

It sounded like they had discussed it extensively and concluded there was no way she had the time and energy to spare for a job when they were worried

about her schoolwork even at the best of times. Amane was in no position to be critical of other people, but considering Chitose's grades weren't all that good, what her parents had said seemed quite reasonable.

"Yuuta, you definitely seem like you'd be a good fit for service-type jobs," Chitose said.

"Kadowaki's always smiling and conducts himself politely, so I can imagine it pretty easily," Amane agreed.

"Setting aside the question of whether I'm actually going to get a job, smiling all the time makes the whole room brighter. Isn't that nice?"

"Well, sure, I guess. Whenever you're smiling, everyone around you naturally starts smiling, too... Well, they get cheerful...? I guess."

"Why was that a question?"

"Who knows?"

Some people, guys and girls, were more burdened with jealousy than anything else. But that wasn't Yuuta's fault, and it was something he seemed to try not to think about.

Recently, in their classroom, both the envy toward Yuuta and the scramble for his attention had calmed somewhat, but he still seemed to be receiving many come-ons from girls in other classes who liked him. Amane gazed at Yuuta. He was again keenly aware being popular must be a tough gig.

For instance, if Yuuta started working at a café, it would definitely make him popular even outside their school. Amane could imagine women would start visiting his workplace frequently, so it was unlikely Yuuta would try working part-time.

"Well, at any rate, I'm hoping Fujimiya gets comfortable enough in his job to invite us all soon."

"...So you're excited to go, too, Kadowaki?"

"Sure, well, it's like this. If my friend goes through all the trouble to get a job, I want to see it, right? Right, Itsuki?"

"Eep, Yuuta's putting pressure on me."

Amane had figured if Itsuki hadn't told him where he worked until just now, he had probably not told Yuuta, either, and sure enough, it sounded like he hadn't.

Chitose must have known exactly where Itsuki worked because she sounded exasperated. She said, "Itsuki doesn't even want me to get anywhere near the place," and stared at him as well. She didn't seem inclined to offer him any help.

"That's because I don't want you to see me working so seriously!"

"You basically just admitted you usually never take anything seriously, though."

"That's because I'm not a serious dude!"

"...I don't know..."

It was true Itsuki was always kidding and messing around, but everyone there knew that was not all there was to him.

For that very reason, Yuuta's smile also looked faintly bitter. He seemed a little exasperated with Itsuki, but being who he was, he wasn't going to say anything and just shrugged once.

Yuuta soon reverted to his usual smile and turned his gaze on Amane.

"In any case, I'm looking forward to seeing you work a part-time job, Fujimiya."

"...Your smile's kind of scary, though."

"Ah-ha-ha!"

Yuuta looked at Amane and warned him not to leave him out when the time came. Amane shivered and sidestepped the pressure, saying, "That's a long way off anyway."

Chapter 7

First Part-Time Job

A week after Amane had been accepted at his new workplace, he received a message that the owner, Fumika, had finished getting his uniform ready and had decided which shifts he would work.

As a result of their discussions, they agreed he would work four days a week, with shifts on three weekdays and on Saturdays. Since Amane was a second-year student and had to be conscious of his upcoming exams, he could only work so many shifts. With his working hours, he wouldn't be all that different from the students who spent their time on club activities.

Amane was already preparing for next year's exams and had no intention of cutting corners in his studies, so it didn't seem like there would be any problem with those working hours.

It's gonna be hard work doing everything without letting anything slip...

In addition to his usual student life, he had to study for his exams, keep up with his exercise and self-improvement, and now add a part-time job. Before meeting Mahiru, Amane had been a real slacker, so his schedule now seemed unbelievably packed.

The only reason he didn't find that worrisome was because he had a clear goal in mind and he was determined to achieve it no matter how much work it took. Though he was aware he would be swamped, his sense of satisfaction was even stronger.

As he entered his upcoming plans into his schedule book, he said quietly and with a keen determination, "Good."

"Well, I start my job today, so go on home without me."

When he told Mahiru that after school on the day he was to start working, he

got a slightly lonesome smile in return.

Though his heart hurt a bit to see it, there wasn't anything he could do about it. He was working so he could make Mahiru smile later, so all he could do was take it in stride.

Mahiru didn't know why he had decided to get a part-time job, but she understood he had made up his mind and was doing what he wanted, so she seemed ready to respect his wishes and not do anything to sway him from his path.

However, the ease with which she accepted it all made Amane worry.

She's definitely gonna get lonely, huh...

Mahiru wasn't the type to insist on getting her own way. She paid close attention to others, often caring more about their situations and giving way to their needs.

Her modesty was probably a virtue, but it could also cause Mahiru stress without him noticing, so Amane wanted to pay special attention to her now that he was starting his job.

"Ah, Amane, you start your work today? Wow, good luck!"

While he was gazing at Mahiru, feeling guilty to see her looking slightly dispirited despite her smile, Chitose, who was apparently planning to walk home with Mahiru, cheered him on with a casual attitude.

Chitose must have known perfectly well that Mahiru was going to get lonely because she'd been keeping her company more often since he'd decided to get a job. Amane knew she was doing it out of concern for Mahiru, so he was grateful, but the probing looks she gave him occasionally were a little frightening.

"Don't even think of following me, okay?"

"...I wouldn't!"

"From the way you just paused, I'm not sure I believe you."

Chitose had answered him in a somewhat stiff voice that sounded quite suspicious, but he wagered if he warned her off ahead of time, she probably

wouldn't be unreasonable and try to follow him.

Chitose would never take the initiative to do something that would really bother somebody else, but be that as it may, her curiosity had been piqued, and it was working stealthily in the background, so he did not completely trust her. He knew she usually acted with good intentions. But in this case, he was working a perfectly regular part-time job, so he wanted her to behave.

"...Once I'm settled in, you can come visit, but please wait until I'm used to everything. I don't want to look inept at handling customers."

"You're worried about being inept, but I feel like you already mastered it all at the culture festival."

"That was just the basics, right? And I think we had guidance from Kido."

"...Well then, it seems like we'll be able to go see you at your workplace soon, Amane. You learn fast, after all."

Mahiru obediently saw him off, remarking she was looking forward to it. Amane scratched his cheek and then ruffled her soft-looking flaxen hair.

Mahiru's caramel-colored eyes opened wide, and she looked startled. Amane stared intently at her expression, and then his cheeks softened into a smile.

"Well then, I'll work hard to settle in as quickly as possible and rush right home."

"...I plan to wait for you as long as it takes, but hurry home, please."

"I already know that. I'll work hard and look forward to dinner."

Although their classmates more or less knew Amane and Mahiru were neighbors, he was embarrassed for them to hear they were having dinner together regularly, so he lowered the volume of his voice. But the two people beside them could still hear them, and Chitose was smirking while Itsuki wheezed loudly with laughter.

Amane went ahead and gave Itsuki a light whack with the back of his hand.

"Owww!" Itsuki stumbled dramatically and leaned on Chitose.

But Chitose, who was observing Mahiru's smile, brushed him off like he was a

nuisance. "Itsuki, you're heavy."

Itsuki made a pretty miserable face.

Amane burst out laughing at the two of them, and beside him, Mahiru also started laughing. Looking a little embarrassed, Itsuki poked Amane in the side in revenge.

Feeling reluctant to go while everyone was chatting so happily, Amane ended the conversation, left school, and headed for his workplace.

It was his first day, and he had been allowed to work on the same day as Souji, who was his classmate but had more experience on the job. He wondered if Ayaka had also had something to do with that because when they'd passed in the hallway, she had smiled and said, "I hope you'll take good care of my sweet Sou!"

If he had to say, Amane was the one being taken care of, but seeing Ayaka's innocent smile, he'd lost the desire to say anything and meekly nodded.

He met Souji in the entry hall, and they headed toward the café together. But even after he spotted Amane, Souji's tranquil expression didn't change. Amane couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"Looking forward to working together," he finally said.

"Same here. I'm looking forward to it. I don't have any experience, so I'm sure I'll be a nuisance for a while..."

"No, you don't have anything to worry about. If anything, Ayaka was way too excited when she recommended you for this."

"Oh, no, it's all thanks to Kido I was able to find a place to work, and I owe her one, so I don't mind her excitement."

The invitation from Ayaka had been great. It had been an absolute lifesaver. He had an acquaintance to work with, and the pay wasn't bad. She had set him up with a workplace that would consider the fact that he was a student. If anything, he owed a great debt to Ayaka.

Incidentally, when he had told Ayaka he wanted to do something to thank her, she had made a request that was very typical of her. "I want you to let me

help you develop muscles Miss Shiina will appreciate,” she had said. With his face twitching somewhat, Amane had decided to accept.

He seemed to have gained another fitness coach in addition to Yuuta, and he wasn't sure whether or not to laugh. For the time being, he figured if it would make Mahiru happy, that was fine.

Whether he knew about that exchange or not, Souji gently scratched his head through his unruly hair and mumbled with a sigh, “I hope you're telling the truth, but...”

He seemed to be troubled by the wild way Ayaka behaved. Even Amane, who hadn't known them for long, could easily tell Ayaka did whatever she pleased when muscles were involved, so Souji, both her childhood friend and her boyfriend, must have been having a hard time with it.

Well, I'm sure she behaves herself, but still...

She was a sociable and straightforward girl, clever and well-meaning, yet also quite shrewd. Amane was well aware of that, so he wasn't put off by it, but he could easily imagine it causing hardship for her boyfriend, Souji.

Amane's feelings on the matter must have been visible in his expression because Souji seemed to notice them and let out an even deeper sigh.

While they were having that conversation, Amane and Souji had arrived at the station.

They needed to ride a train to get to the café, but it was only two stops from the closest station. Itsuki's and Chitose's houses were both farther away, so when Amane was finished working, he could get home before Mahiru got sick of waiting.

The café wasn't far from the station, either, so he didn't expect any trouble commuting.

“Is your place within walking distance of school, Fujimiya?” Souji asked quietly when he saw Amane stop to charge his metro card because he didn't have a commuter pass.

“Yeah. I picked my apartment because it wasn't that far from school.”

“Really? That’s nice. With school so close to home, I bet you can relax and sleep in.”

“Well, I would normally have time to spare since the commute isn’t very long, but sometimes Mahiru has to come wake me up, so...”

He normally got up a little bit early on school days to give himself some extra time. But ever since Mahiru had started coming over to make breakfast, he had been trying to leave himself even more time in the morning.

He was perfectly capable of getting up without help. Still, one of his secret indulgences was savoring the blissful moment of awakening to Mahiru’s voice, so he occasionally asked her for a morning wake-up call.

Since she already frequently came into his apartment to make breakfast while he was still sleeping, it didn’t seem to trouble her too much.

At Amane’s words, Souji mumbled, “That’s a little unexpected.”

He continued, “I always took you for a really diligent guy, Fujimiya.”

“The fact that you say so tells me I probably look very put together lately. I’m actually really spoiled.”

Amane’s life was nowhere near as disorganized as it had been, but there were still many areas where he depended upon Mahiru. So when Souji asked him if he had it all together, he had to look puzzled.

Of course, he didn’t leave everything up to Mahiru, and he did the things he could do, but still, Mahiru bore a lot of the burden.

It was a major concern of his, but he also knew he had certain self-indulgent tendencies.

He had just recently met Souji at the culture festival, so the fact that Souji thought he looked like someone who had it all figured out must have meant he was doing a decent job getting his life in order.

“I think our standards for being spoiled must be different. If you want to talk spoiled, Ayaka’s...”

“Kido?”

“Ayaka probably looks like she’s got her whole life in order, right? At home, she slacks off. She’s super lazy. Though I’m not one to talk.”

“I can hardly imagine it.”

“Well, Ayaka looks really put together on the outside, plus she looks after me. But she lets it all go whenever she gets careless, and when she gets like that, she’s worse than me. Outside the house, she seems independent and reliable, but at home, she’s pretty much the opposite.”

“...But I think that’s because she’s taking advantage of being with you, Kayano. You’re her boyfriend, so being with you is what lets her show the careless side of herself, don’t you think?”

He had seen Ayaka act carelessly on occasion, but even so, he still thought she was a steady, considerate, and dependable girl. That had to be why she didn’t show her careless side outside the house and only let her boyfriend, Souji, see it.

After blinking a few times, Kayano seemed to ponder something for a moment, then awkwardly shifted his gaze down and to the side.

“...I think I might have accidentally ended up bragging a little bit there. Sorry.”

“N-no, I don’t really mind, but...”

Seeing Souji look embarrassed also made Amane feel strangely embarrassed, and he averted his eyes, too.

Amane realized he had probably also been bragging in the same vein without meaning to. Shamefully, Amane tightened his cheeks and pressed his lips together to keep them from trembling.

Amane and Souji continued their conversation as they walked, and they soon arrived at the café where they worked.

It was Amane’s first time on the job, and he was nervous, if only a little bit. But whether Souji knew how he was feeling, he walked into the café without hesitation, accompanying Amane.

When they stepped inside, hearing the somehow nostalgic bell ring behind them, a male employee Amane hadn’t seen on his visit the other day, who

looked to be about college age, came to greet them.

He was older than Amane, a young man who gave off a sophisticated air and was dressed in the waiter's outfit Amane would also be wearing.

"Welcome, Kayano. Is the boy behind you the new hire I heard about?"

"Yeah. We have the same shift, so it works out perfectly."

The male employee, who had apparently already heard about Amane, looked at him with a cheerful smile. Souji nodded to him and, without pause, gave Amane a push on the back. They headed down the hallway that led to the back room.

When Souji quickly turned his head to look behind them, Amane followed his gaze and saw that an elderly male customer was about to enter the café.

"We've got customers coming, so we'll go ahead and get changed, okay? Sorry, Miyamoto, looks like you'll have to get acquainted later."

"Roger. See you later, new guy."

The male employee called Miyamoto sent a very playful wink toward Amane, who was moving stiffly because of his nerves. Then he turned back to face the customer who had come in.

Amane, who had missed his opportunity to greet him, gave a sharp little bow, and Miyamoto must have seen it, because Amane saw him wave lightly with his hand behind him. Then the two boys entered the employee locker room in the back.

"This is your locker, Fujimiya. The key's here. Your uniform is in the locker, so put that on, okay?"

Souji had apparently been entrusted with looking after Amane by the café owner, Fumika, and he handed over the key to the locker that had been assigned to Amane. Then Souji started to take off his blazer. Imitating Souji, Amane also started to change into his workplace uniform.

The uniform's sizing had been taken ahead of time, so it was no surprise it was a perfect fit.

Amane's outfit was the same thing Miyamoto had been wearing when they'd

met him earlier. It consisted of a white dress shirt and a black vest, with a garçon apron and slacks in the same color. It was a comparatively simple ensemble.

The neck of his shirt was closed with a black necktie, completing a typical waiter's uniform. It was more casual and yet more elegant than the costume Amane had worn at the culture festival.

Since he was technically supposed to be handling customers, he reasoned maintaining a gloomy air might have a bad effect on the café. He had set his hair into a neat style, but he'd gotten anxious about whether it would match his outfit.

He checked himself in the full-length mirror that was in the locker room, and though he felt perplexed by his unfamiliar appearance, when he looked over at Souji, he saw he had also put his uniform on perfectly and looked quite dignified.

Souji must have been used to wearing the uniform because, unlike Amane, who undeniably looked like the clothes were wearing him at the moment and not the other way around, Souji looked confident and stylish. It would be going too far to say Souji usually lacked vitality, but he often looked a little sleepy, whereas now his expression had a little more life in it, likely because he was in work mode.

"...I don't look weird?" Amane asked.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with it. But if Miss Shiina saw you, I do think she'd be delighted."

Souji must have already known Mahiru was deeply in love with Amane because, although he wasn't talking in a mocking tone, he still teased Amane about it.

"Well, I don't plan on showing Mahiru for a while..."

"I feel like Miss Shiina might get bitter about that."

"She already is, but I convinced her somehow."

He was going to try to get settled in at his new job quickly so he wouldn't

make a nuisance of himself, and he intended to have her wait until then.

Amane gave a small, wry smile, and Souji also smiled similarly.

“Was Kido happy to see you all dressed up, Kayano?”

“If I had to say, I think Ayaka likes it better when I take my clothes off than when I get dressed up.”

“Ah...”

Amane expressed understanding, and Souji put on a smile with more tinges of bitterness than before, then let out a sigh.

“...But that’s not to say Ayaka is never interested in getting dressed up nice. It’s just, her tastes can be kind of particular.”

“Well, you certainly do have some impressive muscles, Kayano. Got any good tricks?”

Since they had been changing clothes together, Amane had naturally seen more of Souji’s physique. He was even more muscular than Amane had imagined from seeing him clothed.

But he wasn’t needlessly thick. He was built up where he needed to be and whittled down where he wanted to be. He had a lean, steely build, and Amane found himself admiring Souji despite himself.

Makes sense why Kido fell for him.

In Amane’s immediate circle was Yuuta, with his well-proportioned, athletic build, and Kazuya, who seemed to have trained his body even harder. But Souji’s physique was different from either of theirs. He seemed like a prime example of physical beauty.

“I think, instead of asking me, you’d probably hear more information than you’d ever need if you asked Ayaka.”

“Ah...you’re probably right...”

He could more or less imagine her telling him all about it with evangelical fervor, her ponytail swinging as she spoke with a relaxed smile and a fire in her eyes. Amane gave Souji a somewhat frosty smile.

Ayaka seemed like the type who never stopped once she started talking about something she liked. She already wanted to tell Amane all about the finer points of bodybuilding. But even Amane could only handle so much, so he would have to ask her to take it easy with her instruction.

“...You want to train, too, Fujimiya?”

“Well, sure, I would look more attractive if I got in better shape, and Mahiru would probably be happy about it, too...plus, I believe your young lady friend has been teaching Mahiru a thing or two.”

“Sorry. I’m really sorry about that.”

“N-no, I mean, it’ll be one more reason for me to work hard at improving myself, so...”

Souji, whose girlfriend was out there going overboard proselytizing the beauty of a muscular physique, apologized with a complicated look on his face, so Amane shrugged and waved his hand to ease his concerns.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t greet you when you arrived.”

Souji had led Amane into the kitchen, a galley space for preparing light refreshments, where he was explaining where to find various ingredients and what to use them for when Fumika, who had entered the kitchen behind them, apologized to Amane with a contrite expression.

“I remembered you were starting today, but...young Souji was here with you, which put my mind at ease. Welcome aboard again, Fujimiya. It looks like we got the size of your uniform right, so that’s wonderful. I’m glad Ayaka’s judgment was correct.”

“Ayaka’s eye is never off. It’s actually kind of uncanny, eh?” Souji grumbled quietly.

Amane almost laughed but held it in and bowed his head slightly to Fumika.

“I’m in your care from today onward. Thank you for this opportunity.”

“Actually, you’re the one helping me out, and I look forward to working with you... Let’s see, have you met the other kids yet?”

“He saw Miyamoto briefly, and he hasn’t met Oohashi yet. Oohashi was

making coffee behind the counter earlier, so I don't think they've even seen each other."

"Well then, first of all, I think I'll introduce you to everybody. It doesn't look like we have much customer traffic today, so it's the perfect time for it. These are the people you'll be working with, after all."

Fumika smiled gently and gave Souji instructions. "Souji, dear, head out to the floor and take over for the others, would you?" Then, with a relaxed demeanor, she summoned the employees currently working the front of house from the doorway.

Souji patted Amane lightly on the back to pep him up, then went out.

The people who came into the kitchen in his place were the young man named Miyamoto, with whom Souji had exchanged conversation earlier, and a young woman in her early twenties with brightly colored, medium-length hair that fell in loose waves, who stood out for her height, as she was taller than most women. She looked mature, probably about college age, and she looked to be just about a hand's width taller than Chitose. Amane figured she had to be over 170 centimeters tall.

Considering what Souji had just said, he reasoned she was probably Oohashi.

"Ah, it's the boy Kayano-chan brought in earlier! You did say we were going to get another part-timer. Welcome, welcome!"

The young woman grinned broadly and, with a gentle smile still on her face, approached Amane and looked him over with great interest as she walked around him.

Because she was tall, their faces were inevitably quite close when she approached him. But there was no way Amane could rudely push her away since she was both his senior and a girl, so all he could do was stand there with his cheek twitching, wondering what was going on.

Miyamoto didn't even try to hide his exasperation when he sighed at Oohashi and grabbed her by the collar to pull her away from Amane.

Still holding Oohashi by the collar, Miyamoto flashed a pleasant smile at Amane, who had stiffened at Oohashi's sudden approach.

“Sorry, that must have startled you. I’m Daichi Miyamoto. This one’s Rino Oohashi. If you have any trouble, I hope you’ll count on us.”

“Hey, don’t you call me ‘this one’! The man says to come tell us if you have any trouble, but right now, I’m the one in trouble, you see!”

“Well then, greet him properly. That’s where you ought to start, don’t you think?”

Oohashi made a dissatisfied face, and after taking her to task, Miyamoto looked resigned as he let go of her shirt.

As she straightened out where her shirt collar had gotten twisted, Oohashi turned to face Amane again, and her mouth formed a friendly smile.

“I’m sorry, didn’t mean to startle you. I’m Rino Oohashi. I’m one of your seniors here. You can depend on me anytime, new guy.”

“Best not to rely on her if you can avoid it. She messes up all the time.”

“Hey, don’t be so rude, Daichi.”

“How many times do you think I’ve cleaned up your messes...and how many times do you think you’ve inconvenienced a customer?”

“And I regret it every time! I’m sorry! I don’t do it on purpose!”

“I know it’s not on purpose and that they were all accidents, but you cause too much trouble. You get that?”

Miyamoto went on and on, ignoring her objections as if he were scolding a child. He spoke kindly, but his eyes weren’t smiling.

Oohashi must have messed up quite a bit. She couldn’t look straight at Miyamoto and whined, “I get it, geez!”

Amane was wondering what to do as he watched their exchange unfold—it was not exactly a lovers’ quarrel, but an exchange with a similar feel—when Miyamoto seemed to come to his senses.

“Sorry, we got into it and ignored you,” he said, scratching his cheek uneasily. “Anyway, we’ll be your coworkers starting today. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Right, um, Miyamoto and Oohashi, was it? I’m a little late introducing myself,

but I'm Amane Fujimiya."

"Mm-hmm, Fujimiya-chan, is it? Got it, got it."

"...She puts 'chan' at the end of everyone's names, so give her a pass. Okay?"

"W-well, she can call me whatever she wants..."

Amane wouldn't get angry over something as trivial as how someone addressed him, so he didn't object. But he couldn't shake the slight discomfort, given his age and appearance.

As he let out a sigh that communicated all the trouble he went through working with Oohashi, Miyamoto turned his gaze toward Fumika, who had been calmly watching their exchange.

"So then, what shall we have young Fujimiya do today?" he asked her.

"For now, I plan to have him learn what we do in the back of house. Even though he's going to serve customers, that comes after he's settled, and it wouldn't go well anyway if he doesn't know how we do things here. I gave him the manual, and it sounds like he's read it. It also sounds like Souji has taught him some things, so I think he should start today by combining that knowledge with some actual practice working here. Luckily, since it's a weekday, we don't have that many customers yet."

"Sorry for the extra work."

"Not at all. I don't expect you to be ready for action right away, especially not on your first day. And we have enough hands that you don't need to rush it."

"I'm a little doubtful to hear you say we have enough hands, boss. It feels like we are just barely staffed with our shifts. Well, this café isn't that big or anything! We have been able to keep things going with our current numbers, but still... That's why it'll be such a big help to have Fujimiya join us!"

Miyamoto put on a bright smile to reassure Amane and patted him on the shoulder. His cheer was infectious, and Amane smiled back. Fumika just watched them with amusement.

By the time Amane had finished learning about the various elements of the café from his seniors and made his way home, it was already late enough that

he would have usually been taking his bath.

As he boarded the elevator in the apartment building he called home, Amane took a big breath.

Even though he had only worked about four hours, he was exhausted, probably because it was an unfamiliar environment and job. He hadn't made any major mistakes (or rather, he hadn't been entrusted with any tasks he could fail in any significant way), but it was always stressful to do something for the first time.

Thankfully, while his seniors all seemed to have their quirks, they were all good people, and they had been kind to Amane, who was still getting used to the job.

The place had a casual, peaceful atmosphere. He thought it was a very good workplace.

But he was still exhausted.

He got out of the elevator, walked to his door with heavier steps than usual, and opened the door as he always did—just as Mahiru came rushing down the hallway to the living room.

Amane blinked several times, wondering what the matter was since she seemed to be in such a hurry, and Mahiru put on a relieved smile.

“Welcome home, Amane.”

“I'm back. You didn't have to come running. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

He guessed Mahiru had probably been waiting in his apartment the whole time.

He had told her when he had expected to get home, but she had probably been lonely by herself.

Ever since they had started dating, Mahiru had always been at Amane's place, except when it was time to bathe or sleep, so it was already normal for her to be in his apartment. Given that situation, suddenly being left alone must have felt lonely.

“N-no, not at all. I had plenty of things to do while you weren't here.”

“Does that mean you weren’t lonely?”

“...Th-that’s a different matter entirely.”

Mahiru averted her eyes and blushed faintly, and Amane smiled despite himself. When Mahiru noticed, she puffed out her cheeks a little. There was dissatisfaction in her eyes, but there was something fawning about the look she gave him.

Without trying to suppress his smile at Mahiru when she turned away sharply in a pout, Amane took off his shoes and stepped inside.

When he headed to the sink to wash his hands, he saw the light in the bathroom beyond the sink was turned on.

He turned around and saw Mahiru seemed to have recovered her good spirits. She was standing there with an ordinary expression.

“Your bath or dinner, which will you have first?”

It almost sounded like Mahiru was greeting her new husband with those words. He felt the corners of his lips curl up but somehow suppressed the smile.

Things like that were even cuter when it seemed like Mahiru wasn’t unaware she was doing them. Amane was confident her cheeks would turn red if he said what he was thinking.

But if he said those things to Mahiru now, she seemed likely to cease to function for a little while, so he kept himself in check and just smiled at her. Mahiru was wearing her own graceful smile, and it looked like she was entrusting every last thing to him.

“I’m sure you’re probably also hungry, Mahiru, so maybe dinner first is good.”

“All right, then I’ll go dish things up. Today, you started your first part-time job and worked hard, so as your prize, I made rolled omelets.”

“Whoo-hoo! What an incredible reward that is.”

When he’d gotten home, his bath and dinner had been ready, and Amane’s favorite dish had even been prepared for him. He was truly a fortunate guy.

“Heh-heh, you’re very easy to please.”

“They’re my favorite, and they’re delicious. They have extra value because they’re yours, so I think it’s the best reward. Thank you for always thinking of me.”

She had gone out of her way to make the omelets especially for him, and it had taken her time and effort, so he would never say it was easy. Just because she had made something for Amane, it was worth plenty.

On top of all that, Mahiru’s rolled omelets were incredibly delicious, so it was a luxurious reward.

He was grateful that, in addition to making his meals every day, she also took his preferences into account. Once again, it occurred to him that she was the type of partner that was hard to come by.



Thinking that he had to repay her for her devotion somehow, he washed his hands and was about to head into the living room when Mahiru clung to him from behind.

He tried to turn around and see her expression, but he couldn't since she had her face pressed into his back. All he could tell was that she was being bashful.

Mahiru ground her forehead into his back and clung to him, squeezing her arms tightly around his midsection.

He chuckled, feeling a little glad he had been exercising lately. Mahiru seemed to be able to tell from his breathing and the movement of his belly that he was laughing and slapped him on the stomach a few times.

"...I appreciate the thanks, but don't catch me off guard like that!"

"Should I announce it beforehand when I'm going to praise you?"

"Th-that would cause its own problems... One of these days, I'm going to have you at my mercy, you'll see," Mahiru said as she pulled away from him.

She looked all worked up for some reason as she escaped toward the kitchen in a hurry.

Chuckling quietly and thinking it was a gallant way of escaping, Amare went into his bedroom to change.

"So anyway, how was your job?"

Mahiru had arranged a complete Japanese-style meal for them that evening, and as they were eating, she asked him, slightly restlessly, about work. She sounded worried.

Mahiru seemed to be trying to refrain from saying too much about Amare's new job, but she was curious about his first day at work.

"Mm, I didn't really have any issues. I mean, it was my first day, so they didn't give me any big jobs to do. All the seniors seem like nice people, and I think it'll be a good place to work."

"Is that so...? That's great. I was wondering what you'd do if it turned out to be a nasty place..."

“I got an introduction from Kido, and Kayano works there and doesn’t seem unhappy about it, so I think I’m all good on that front.”

To begin with, the person running the place was Ayaka’s relative, Fumika, so if there were any problems, Ayaka would probably know, and she would probably not let Souji work there. For that reason, Amane felt secure enough to start working a part-time job there.

Although he hadn’t known Ayaka for that long, and although he had told Mahiru about her being a little strange and having certain over-the-top interests, he thought she was a good person.

And the owner, Fumika, if only she didn’t get so carried away by her fantasies, was usually a kind and responsible woman (according to Souji), so Amane didn’t think he would have any issues working for her.

“You don’t have to worry about me. I think I’ll get along just fine. They’re matching my working hours up with my schedule and everything.”

“...I hope you’re right. I’m glad it’s somewhere you think you can do your best. All I can do is watch over you and cheer you on, after all.”

“That’s more than enough. Knowing I have a delicious meal and a hot bath waiting for me when I get home makes me insanely happy. Thanks for always looking after me.”

“...Though it might not be much, I’ll help you out so I can see you in your work outfit soon, Amane.”

“...You want to see it that badly?”

When she told him about her secret objective, he answered in a startled and somewhat exasperated voice, and she nodded vigorously.

“I want to see how my boyfriend looks at work. Besides, from what I could see from the pictures of Mr. Kayano in his uniform I got Miss Kido to show me, it looks like it would look really great on you, Amane, so...”

“I wonder.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing it, okay?”

“Well, now thinking about you seeing me in uniform is making me feel

embarrassed...”

He didn’t hate the idea of her coming to the café, but it would mean she would see him presenting a face to the world different from the one she usually saw, and he felt an indescribable sense of embarrassment at the thought.

But Mahiru seemed to think it was good there was a difference, and she wanted to see a side of him he didn’t usually show. It sounded like she was prepared to wait for it.

“...If you hate the idea, I’ll hold off.”

“I don’t hate it, but, well...will it really be all that much fun seeing my customer service smile?”

“You don’t usually smile at all, so that makes me want to see it even more, I guess.”

“I’ll smile as much as you like if that’s what you want...”

“...Your work smile will be different from your private smile, so it’s a special case.”

When she put it that way, he knew she was probably right. He certainly gave Mahiru special treatment. There was no arguing about that, so he was sure he had a smile he only showed her.

“Besides, I want to see you working hard, Amane.”

“...I’ll do my best to settle in as quickly as possible.”

It seemed like his only option was to try even harder. If his darling girlfriend said she wanted to see him working as a full-fledged employee, he would spare no effort.

Getting used to the work quickly would be helpful for the café, and it would give Amane confidence as well.

He thought it seemed a little simpleminded, even for him, to get more motivated because of something Mahiru had said, but his exasperation toward himself melted right away when he saw Mahiru’s smile and the light of expectation in her eyes.

Chapter 8

A Coworker's Secret Woes

People gradually grow accustomed to unfamiliar environments, and after a week, Amane had learned to do his job to a certain extent.

His main job was serving the customers. He wasn't responsible for making any of the things they ordered, which was a relief for Amane, who was perfectly aware of his own lack of experience.

He hadn't yet been allowed to prepare the coffee he was offering customers, but for practice, in his spare moments, he had been getting instructions in the back room on how to brew it. In this café, they were very particular about their coffee, so no compromise on flavor would be permitted.

Apparently, depending on the beans and how finely they were ground, the ideal brewing time and temperature of the water used for extraction changed. Each brew had a particular flavor, so he would have to practice until he could reproduce them all.

Nevertheless, once he memorized the brewing times, how to use all the equipment, the timing of agitating the beans, and other such details, he would be able to produce a reliable cup of coffee. With proper instruction, it was something Amane could learn to do with practice.

"Mm, good."

There weren't many customers in the shop, and the orders had settled down, so they had left Souji and Oohashi in charge of the front of house. Amane was receiving instruction from Miyamoto.

He brewed the coffee using a coffee siphon, an instrument that just screamed *coffeehouse*, and his brew seemed to be fine.

“The only thing I saw from watching you make it is that it might be better to agitate the beans a little more and extract them for a slightly shorter time.”

“I’ve been using a timer, though...”

“Since you’re using unfamiliar equipment and working carefully, you probably took a little longer than expected. I think that slight delay is what brought out a little too much astringency.”

“Sorry. I’ll do better.”

Miyamoto explained Amane’s mistake politely and gently, without harshly criticizing him. Amane still wasn’t confident he could serve his coffee to customers, which was probably also one of the reasons he’d taken extra time.

Add that the flask on the coffee siphon was made of glass and that if he hit it against something or dropped it, it would break...these were the sorts of misgivings he had.

Like he was seeing right through Amane’s thoughts, Miyamoto said, “When I first started, I was afraid to touch it, too. It seems so breakable,” and flashed him an easy smile.

“You’ll be fine as long as you don’t drop it or toss it around,” Miyamoto continued. “You always handle things carefully, Fujimiya, so don’t worry.”

“I hope you’re right, but...”

“That idi...I mean, Rino, she broke one on her first day, so at least you’re more careful than that.”

Amane had a feeling Miyamoto was trying not to say something too critical, but he pretended not to notice.

“Well, everyone makes mistakes, and you won’t get scolded all that harshly for wrecking a single flask, so relax. Of course, if you broke a whole bunch of them at once, even our owner would scold you and give you a scary look, though.”

“Those sound like the words of someone who’s experienced it firsthand.”

“Because Oohashi did it once.”

Miyamoto mumbled with a nostalgic look in his eye that when that had happened, the owner's face had really started twitching, and Amane responded with a vague smile.

It must have been pandemonium in here.

He had seen from the very start that the café didn't have all that many siphons, so he could imagine breaking several of them at once would be enough to actually get in the way of doing business.

It sounded like the siphons were all specialty items from a maker Fumika liked, and Amane didn't want to even imagine the cost of replacing several of them.

Vowing in his heart to be supremely careful, he sipped the coffee he had brewed with Miyamoto.

It had a rich, bitter taste that spread over his tongue.

The coffee had a smooth flavor, and the bitterness didn't linger forever on the tongue. It was mild but had an unmistakably deep richness.

Amane didn't like coffee that was too acidic, but this blend was both bitter and acidic, and the faint sweetness of the beans asserted itself, bringing the whole thing into balance. It was effortless to drink.

But sure enough, he could tell the astringency and bitterness were coming out more strongly than in the cup Miyamoto had made first as an example, so it was clear he needed more improvement.

"Ah, how nice, how nice, you look like you're enjoying that!"

Oohashi came from the front of house, taking a breather while no orders were coming in. A tray with used plates was in her hand, which she must have cleared after some customers had left the café.

"Fujimiya-chan, gimme a sip!"

After setting the plates down in the sink first, she came over to pester Amane. Amane hesitated, wondering what to do. But the next moment, Miyamoto grabbed Oohashi by the scruff of her neck and yanked her away from Amane.

He moved so skillfully and agilely that, for a moment, Amane didn't

understand what had happened.

“Hey now, Fujimiya’s got a girlfriend, so don’t do anything that gives people the wrong impression.”

“Ah, my bad. Come to think of it, I think you said something about that. My brother’s got lots of ’em, so something like that oughtta be fine anyway!”

While they’d been working, Amane had gone ahead and briefly explained his circumstances, so that was probably why Miyamoto had stopped her. Oohashi also obediently stepped back.

Miyamoto wasn’t even trying to hide his exasperation, and Oohashi was grinning foolishly. They seemed to be extremely familiar, more than ordinary colleagues. Amane had thought that so many times over the past week, but he’d been unsure whether it was something he could ask them about directly.

“The two of you are very close, huh?”

“Well, that’s because we’re childhood friends. We’ve been by each other’s sides for twenty years now!”

“It’s safe to say we’re stuck together, yeah?”

“Isn’t that awful?”

Looking displeased, Oohashi chopped at Miyamoto’s side and shrieked when she got pinched in return. Taking advantage of the fact the customers could not see them where they were, they immediately retaliated against each other.

That was the kind of relaxed relationship that didn’t develop in a day, and from the way they behaved, Amane could see just how close they were.

But he couldn’t help but feel like they had a special relationship, even as childhood friends, and he wondered whether male and female childhood friends usually turned out this way.

Ayaka and Souji were dating, so their intimacy made sense. But if he had to say, Miyamoto and Oohashi seemed similarly close to one another.

He didn’t think he was friendly enough with them yet to point that out. So although he was curious, he didn’t particularly press them on it as he watched their casual exchange.

“By the way, what sort of girl is your little girlfriend, Fujimiya-chan?”

Oohashi somehow brushed off Miyamoto’s hand and asked her question innocently, so Amane hummed and looked up while he thought about it.

“What sort? I’m not sure... She’s kind and a good person.”

He wasn’t sure how to describe Mahiru when someone asked what kind of girl she was.

If Oohashi had gone to his school, she would probably have already known without him having to say anything. But she was a college student. She didn’t have any connection to Amane’s world, so if he didn’t explain, she wouldn’t understand.

But if he told someone from outside his school who had never seen Mahiru in real life that she was a girl everyone called an angel, he knew Oohashi would either laugh or cringe, so he couldn’t explain things that way.

On the other hand, if he told her about the image of Mahiru he had in his head, even if it wasn’t his intention to embellish, Oohashi might think he was just bragging about his girl.

So he had used a cliché expression, but Oohashi didn’t seem to find that description satisfying.

“Hmph...” She stuck out her lip in a pout. “Looking at you, Fujimiya-chan, I’d guess your girlfriend is probably also a really good kid, but just telling me she’s nice isn’t telling me much.”

“Well, I agree with you there, but she’s a hard worker and a sweet girl. Either way, why do you want to know about the personality of someone else’s girlfriend so badly?”

“Well, you see, stories of other people’s love taste as sweet as honey, and no matter how old a girl gets, she loves gossiping about romance! We’re even happy to listen to people who love going on and on about their love lives. We eat it right up.”

“Girls do, huh?”

“Daichi, do you have a complaint?”

“No, not at all!”

“Hmm, I guess it’s fine...”

Amane loudly slurped his coffee, which had begun to cool, hoping to appease the two of them, who were, for some reason, acting like they were about to quarrel. When he did, Oohashi, who had a bit of a prickly air about her, perhaps because of Miyamoto’s words, came even closer.

“Leaving that aside,” she said, “look, Fujimiya-chan is a serious young man, right? I’m just curious what kind of girl would fall for him!”

“Curious? I don’t—”

“Hey, hey, you should bring her by the café sometime.”

“I told her not to come, at least not until I’m used to the job. Sorry to say.”

“Whaaa?”

Oohashi whined in a sweet but dissatisfied voice, but Amane wouldn’t yield.

First of all, he didn’t know why everyone was so eager to come pay him a visit where he worked. It had started with Itsuki, and now even the senior workers at the café were telling him to allow it, which he had not expected.

“Well, we’ll just have to believe we’ll see your girlfriend someday. By the way, is she cute?”

“Objectively, or subjectively?”

“Both?”

“Looking at her objectively, I think she’s incredibly cute. And subjectively, she’s the cutest girl in the world.”

Figuring he should answer that one honestly, he responded quickly, trying his best not to fill his words with too much enthusiasm and to avoid bragging too much.

Going just by her physical appearance, Mahiru was a natural beauty. Although everyone had their own preferences, she was so good-looking that he was sure anyone who looked at her would agree she was beautiful. That much was undeniable.

He did want to point out that, from his perspective, Mahiru's adorableness stemmed more from her behavior and the way she let only her sweetheart spoil her than from her physical beauty.

Even though that's not necessarily what Mahiru herself is going for, she really is very cute.

Amane knew it wasn't her intention to make everyone think she was cute. Still, Mahiru had many small mannerisms overall that were really, incredibly adorable, such as when she sulked in jealousy over his relationships with other girls, tugged at the hem of his clothes when she was feeling lonely, or head-butted him to hide her embarrassment after exploding with shyness over something or other.

If Mahiru had done all those things on purpose, he'd probably just consider her another girl who was trying to come across as cute, but since Mahiru was nothing but genuine, there were times when Amane's heart couldn't take it. It actually would have been easier for Amane to deal with if being cute were her goal, but since she did those things naturally and from the heart, they always shook him to the core.

If he were to try to tell his coworkers about it, he would no doubt be able to go on endlessly about Mahiru's cuteness. But since that would either make the two senior workers recoil from him or get fed up with him, he kept those thoughts inside and tried to speak casually—but Oohashi was covering a grin with her hand.

"Oh, uh-oh, we've got him bragging now," she said.

"You invited it by saying you were happy to listen to people going on about their love lives...", Miyamoto replied.

"Ehhh, but he's working this job for his girlfriend's sake, right? I think she must be a great girl. And you must be really devoted to her, right?"

"I'm not working for her sake. That's not quite right. I'm just doing it because I want to. This is something I decided all on my own."

He figured he had better go ahead and deny that.

Amane had taken a part-time job purely because he'd wanted to do so. He

didn't intend to use Mahiru as his justification.

Even though he understood it as something linked to Mahiru's happiness, he couldn't push part of the responsibility for his decision onto her by saying he was doing it "for" her. Amane was working of his own free will, for his own sake, and that was all. Even if the result would end up being something for Mahiru, he wouldn't yield on that point.

"I really can't say I'm doing this for my girlfriend or anything. I decided all on my own that I wanted to do something like this, and as a result of me acting on my decision, I'm making her lonely. I'm really a very selfish guy."

Because Mahiru respected Amane's choice, she accepted it even though it kept them apart. But even so, he understood he was making her lonely and adding to her burdens.

That was precisely why he was always so grateful for her and why he was able to work hard to achieve his goals.

Both Oohashi and Miyamoto blinked at him in astonishment.

"He's a serious one, all right."

"Completely different from you, Rino."

"How did I end up getting dissed?"

"You change boyfriends too much, one right after another. How many months did you keep the last one?"

"Oh, shut up. Who I date has nothing to do with you, Daichi. It's not like I'm stealing anyone else's boyfriends, and I'm not dating you, so what do you care? Don't try to keep tabs on everything I do just 'cause we're old friends!"

"...Ah, right, of course. I'm sorry."

Miyamoto, who had been strongly spurned, frowned slightly. When he averted his gaze, he looked somewhat upset, but Oohashi didn't seem to notice his behavior and returned to the front of house, looking like she was in a bad mood.

Miyamoto watched her go with a slightly lingering gaze. Then he must have noticed Amane's eyes on him because he quickly changed back to his usual

calm, gentle expression as if nothing had happened.

“...Um, Miyamoto?”

“Hmm?”

“Well, uh, sorry.”

Amane cast his eyes down, sure that things had turned out like this because he'd said something he shouldn't have. But Miyamoto cheerfully and easily waved his hand and laughed it off.

“Ah, it's fine. You didn't do anything wrong, Fujimiya. She's always been like that, and I think it's too late for us, no matter what I might say.”

“N-no, that can't be true—”

“Fujimiya.”

“Yes?”

“Other people's hearts are beyond your control. I know that very well.”

“...Right.”

“I'm telling you, don't worry about it. It's fine.”

Amane couldn't tell if Miyamoto was saying that to dispel his concerns or because he himself had already given up and accepted things as they were.

But what he could be sure of was that, at that moment, Miyamoto's eyes briefly narrowed and he looked hurt.

Whether or not he knew what Amane was thinking, Miyamoto told him smoothly without any emotion in his voice, wearing his usual expression, “I'm going to the front of house, so take care of the cleanup, please,” and left the kitchen.

As if they were swapping places, Souji came back in, carrying a tray laden with dishes. When he saw Amane's expression, he put on a strained smile.

“...I think it's pointless to say anything to Miyamoto, you know. When that guy has made up his mind, he's just as set on it as you are, Fujimiya, just in a different way.”

Souji must have been near the café counter because he seemed to have guessed what was going on. Amane frowned, looking troubled, and laughed and shook his head lightly as he set down the used dishes. Souji's words made it clear that, in his own way, he was paying attention to the issue at hand and must have also sensed something about the situation between the two of them.

"I feel awkward prying too much into their business, but I'm not imagining it, right?"

"I'm not you, Fujimiya, and I can't peek inside your head, so I don't know. But probably, yes."

"...It's just, like, I don't have those types of people in my circle, so I wasn't sure what conclusion to reach, I guess."

Even Amane could tell, from what little of their conversation he had heard, that if his suspicions were confirmed, Miyamoto must have suffered a lot of hardship over the years.

The girl he loved had hooked up with other guys and had changed partners many times. Always close at hand as an old childhood friend, but never looking in his direction, and always falling for other people. Amane thought about how incredibly painful that must have been.

Amane knew it was rude of him to assume he knew how Miyamoto was feeling arbitrarily, but still, just imagining it made his chest hurt.

"I'll go ahead and say this so you don't misunderstand me. Oohashi isn't a bad person at all. She just kind of falls in and out of love easily, that's all."

"That easily?"

"I've been working here for the past year, and Oohashi's been here longer than that. As far as I know, she's had five or six boyfriends. She doesn't date multiple guys at once, but she changes boyfriends frequently."

"Oh...she must be really popular."

"Well, outwardly, she seems quiet and beautiful, after all. It's just that, on the inside, she's a straightforward and fierce person."

With her tall, well-proportioned figure and sweet face, she gave off a gentle

impression, and as long as she didn't talk, she seemed like a graceful young woman. But as soon as she opened her mouth, it was apparent she was the type who got carried away and cracked dirty jokes without a second thought. The difference between assumptions and reality was stark.

She was a cheerful and friendly person, but it would be impossible to guess her personality from her appearance alone, Amane mused. He suspected maybe that was why she had gone through several boyfriends.

"...And Miyamoto has watched her go through all these guys without saying anything?"

"Basically, yeah."

"That's just..."

"...Well, it's not our place to say this or that about it, but given how they're going, I think it's going to work out somehow, don't you? Ultimately, Miyamoto is the only one who understands Oohashi, and he's always looking out for her. I think she'll settle down with him when she's ready. She seems like she'll go crying to him eventually."

Although Souji usually seemed determined not to overstep when it came to his coworkers, he readily shared his assessment.

Souji's assessment probably came from watching them interact time and time again. But even Amane, who wasn't all that close to Miyamoto, could see it wasn't something he should meddle in.

Rather than worrying about this and that, meddling needlessly, and making things worse, surely it was better to leave the decisions about the future to the people involved. It might be important to give them a push on the back sometimes, but that could also be the trigger that broke down their relationship. Amane wasn't close enough friends with either of them to shoulder that much responsibility.

"Well, I'm sure it'll all work out between Miyamoto and Oohashi. They're like, uh, what's that saying? There's a cracked lid for every pot, right?"

"Kayano, that's pretty rude..."

“Who are you calling a cracked lid?”

“Gah, Miyamoto!”

They had carelessly let Miyamoto overhear something he probably shouldn't have heard, and now he was staring at Souji with a carefree, high-pressure smile. Actually, he was glaring at him.

“Kayano, you go clean the siphons. And don't forget the filters.”

“...On it.”

“Fujimiya, will you go with him?”

“Y-yes.”

Amane also followed his instructions, cheek twitching. He realized he wasn't in any position to disobey. As he did, he heard Oohashi's cheerful voice as she came to the back and walked over to see how they were doing. “Oh no, Daichi's picking on the new kid! Let me go report this to Itomaki-chan!”

“I am not! And I'll thank outsiders not to stick their necks where they doesn't belong!”

“I don't want to hear it from the bully himself! You're the worst!”

It wasn't really bullying. Amane and Souji were paying for their own mistake, so they understood why Miyamoto had doled out punishment. But Oohashi, who didn't know the circumstances, was egging Miyamoto on in a teasing tone, so his attitude naturally hardened.

“If Oohashi acts like that, even Miyamoto will dig in his heels, of course.”

“...I bet.”

As they washed the plates and utensils they had been instructed to clean, conversing quietly so the other two couldn't hear them, Souji and Amane sighed in unison at the sound of the hushed voices arguing behind them.

Chapter 9

The Angel's Secret

Recently, Amane had gotten used to going home after dark because of his job. He had started jogging down the street at night to get some exercise along the way.

Naturally, at that time of night, loitering around in his school uniform might have gotten him taken into protective custody, so once he was done with work, he changed into a tracksuit, making sure to add a reflective sash. It didn't look very cool, but since it was for safety's sake, nothing could be done about it.

After taking the train to the nearest station, Amane jogged to his apartment building, being careful of cars and pedestrians. By the time he arrived, only three hours were left in the day.

Usually, they would have already finished eating dinner and would be relaxing by that time.

Being in such a hurry was strange for someone used to being part of the go-home club, but it wasn't bad.

Amane had been too lenient with himself up until now. Until he had met Mahiru, he'd been in the go-home club and had been a total slacker. Even after he'd met her, they'd often spent time studying and relaxing together. His days had never been especially busy.

Having a set schedule made him feel somewhat constrained yet also self-sufficient.

"I'm home."

Although he had gotten used to it, he felt exhausted physically and mentally.

He was also feeling a little listless as he opened the door to his apartment and called out. But although the lights were on inside, there was no sign of anyone there.

He had been sure Mahiru would be waiting for him with dinner ready, but even after he took off his shoes, stepped inside, and looked toward the living room, Mahiru wasn't there.

When he peeked into the kitchen, he immediately noticed it smelled delicious, and a pot, covered with a lid, was sitting on the cooktop.

The stew inside looked to be finished already. Mahiru had prepared dinner and then left the apartment.

It wasn't like she had to be in his apartment, and he did think it was good for her to enjoy some time alone, but still, the first thing he felt was loneliness.

Before leaving for home, he had imagined what it would be like when he got there. The thought occurred to him that he ought to send her another message, and the moment it did, he heard the somewhat hurried sound of the lock opening from the entryway.

"A-Amane, you're home early..."

"Someone else is doing the final cleanup today, and I picked up my running pace a little... Sorry. It looks like you were doing your own thing. Maybe I should have taken my time."

"No, not at all! I wanted to see your face as soon as possible!"

Mahiru shook her head, looking quite flustered. Her hair rippled and swayed. Amane gazed at it, laughed quietly, and answered, "I'm glad to hear that."

Mahiru was incredibly charming when she said adorable things like that. But she didn't seem to notice Amane's laughter. She cast her gaze down, looking subtly uncomfortable, and mumbled something quietly.

"Mahiru?"

"Ah, I was just thinking out loud, don't worry about it. Since you're back now, I'll get dinner ready. I'll warm everything up while you're in the bath. The tub's already filled."

“Thanks for always thinking of those things... Hmm?”

While he marveled at Mahiru, who seemed somewhat more awkward than usual, he went to slip past her on the side. When he did, he noticed a gently sweet aroma was hanging over her.

Mahiru always smelled faintly sweet, but the scent hanging over her now had a different quality. It wasn't the smell of her shampoo or her person; this sweet smell was the kind that clung to her from the outside.

To put it more specifically, it was the smell of baked sweets.

“Wh-what is it?”

“...Nothing, just thinking you smell different than usual. It's a bit sweet, like some kind of dessert.”

“Ah... That's, well...at home, I...had a snack, so...”

“You did? You eat even less than I do, and I don't eat that much. Won't you ruin your appetite if you eat something beforehand?”

This was even more unusual because he'd heard her say that, as a general rule, she refrained from snacking between meals to preserve her fine figure.

Besides, Mahiru didn't necessarily have a small appetite, but if he had to say, she usually ate on the lighter side. It would be difficult, he thought, for her to have a snack and still eat a proper dinner.

“I-I'll still be able to eat, so there's no problem. It's fine, go and take your bath. You just got home from work, so you must be hungry.”

“Yeah, I'm starving, but—”

“Well then, rinse off the sweat, and let's have a nice dinner. Okay?”

Mahiru pushed Amene on the back as if she was trying to avoid something, and even as he thought that, sure enough, something was off, she sent him on his way to his room to get a change of clothes.

It seemed like Mahiru had been hiding something from Amene.

His suspicions grew stronger every time he came home from work. Suspicions turned to certainty. She was doing something in secret.

Whatever it was was limited to the times when Amane was out of his apartment, and she didn't show a trace of that behavior on the days he was off work.

And so he reasoned there was something she didn't want him to see.

...What is she hiding?

Mahiru was not good at hiding things or keeping secrets. Her behavior always gave her away. But this time, she was dodging and evading to the best of her ability and acting as if there were nothing going on.

That was enough to tell him there was something she didn't want him to know about.

He was certain he had been sidestepped when he'd asked Mahiru about it. But Amane knew he didn't want to force it out of her because of his curiosity. He figured Mahiru had her own thoughts on the matter and that maybe it had something to do with being a girl.

Once he considered that angle, he thought it would be rude to insist on dragging it out of her, so even though Amane thought it was very suspicious, he didn't question her about it directly.

Incidentally, when he asked Chitose and Ayaka about it, they stubbornly insisted they didn't know.

But from how the two of them were acting, it seemed they did know what it was she was hiding. In other words, that made the two of them her accomplices.

He couldn't hide that it made him feel a little anxious about being left out, but he figured maybe it was something she could only tell other girls and chose not to say anything.

"...Mahiru's been hiding something from me, man."

Though he didn't question her, Amane grew more anxious and despondent. Without meaning to, he let it slip to Souji, his work buddy, while they were commuting to the café one day.

Incidentally, he'd been able to tell by the way she was acting that Mahiru was

planning to proceed with whatever she was hiding that day as well, so there was even more of a haze of feelings swirling in his chest.

Whenever Amane's shift lined up with Souji's, they headed to the café together. When Amane announced his troubles the moment they sat down in the train, Souji blinked sharply at the sudden development.

Maybe he could tell from Amane's expression that it was not a light topic because Souji straightened up.

"Did you fight or something?" he asked.

"Not even a little. But Mahiru's hiding something, doing something in secret... though apparently, I didn't do anything wrong."

Amane had wondered if maybe he'd done something without realizing it, and just in case, he had tried asking in a roundabout way, but Mahiru had tilted her head curiously at his question, so he seemed to be wrong about that.

Because of that, since too much mystery begets more mystery, Amane's anxieties had been mounting.

"Hmm. Generally, when a girl starts hiding things from her boyfriend, that points to cheating, but in Miss Shiina's case, I don't think that's it. Not that I'm all that close with Miss Shiina, but that just doesn't seem likely because of her personality and how well you two get along."

"I think so, too, and Mahiru doesn't do such dishonest things. She hates it when people cheat more than anyone I know."

As Souji had said so casually, cheating was out of the question in Mahiru's case.

She had grown up in a difficult environment, so infidelity was absolutely unforgivable to her. She had seen her mother, stuck in a loveless marriage, take lovers on the side and spend all her time with them. She didn't want to be like that, and she had stated as much.

There was no way that same Mahiru would betray him. And anyway, it was ridiculous to think Chitose and Ayaka would collaborate for something like that. They were both thoughtful and earnest girls, so he assumed they would be

strongly against something so obviously wrong.

But he couldn't think of anything else Mahiru would need to hide.

Fundamentally, hiding things wasn't Mahiru's strong point, and she never even tried in the first place. The very act of hiding something from Amane and scheming behind his back caused her feelings of guilt to win out. Whenever he felt something was off, just a little nudge was enough to get her to confess. That was the type of person she was.

This time, however, she clearly wanted to keep whatever it was a secret and didn't want him to notice it, so he hadn't said anything. But it was obvious she didn't like to hide things and didn't lie. That was precisely why Amane was so suspicious.

"In which case, if Mahiru is hiding something from me, it's probably not something over which she has a guilty conscience. I don't think whatever she's keeping from me is bad. It's probably something she's embarrassed to tell me about or something about me. If she had broken something or anything like that, she would have told me up front and apologized, so it probably isn't anything harmful, either."

He had known Mahiru for about a year, and about five months had passed since they'd started dating. Spending that much time together, he had gotten a good grasp on Mahiru's personality and quirks.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm not really going to do anything."

"Huh?"

Amane answered without hesitation, and Souji quickly asked for clarification.

Listening to the low, groaning clatter of the train running along its rails, Amane let out a soft sigh, hoping to let it get lost among those other sounds.

"This is something Mahiru wants to keep hidden, so I figure it wouldn't be good to grill her about it. There are one or two things I also would like to keep secret, so if she doesn't want me to dig this up, I won't."

In fact, Amane was keeping his reason for taking a part-time job a secret from

Mahiru, so he had no right to be critical of Mahiru's thoughts.

If they were both hiding things yet still sustaining their relationship well, then there was no problem.

"That works."

"It works because I believe in Mahiru and know she would never hurt me intentionally. Rather than being concerned with everything she does, it's better if we can get along without intruding on the things we'd like to keep to ourselves. It's because I trust her that I should respect her privacy. I hear that's the secret to keeping things peaceful in the long run."

That statement had come from his parents, who had been flirting for years and years, so those words had considerable weight behind them.

Even from the perspective of their son, they seemed to always get along. They understood each other well and stayed by each other's sides. But that didn't necessarily mean they were involved in every single thing their partner did.

People who knew his parents were often surprised to hear that, but they weren't always necessarily stuck to each other.

They attached great importance to valuing one another's time, and when they pursued their hobbies, they were rarely together.

Even in the same place, they were often each doing their own thing, yet the mood was genial and mellow. Even Amane, their son, could feel how comfortable they were.

Growing up with parents like those had given Amane a sense of respect for both his and his partner's time.

"By the way, just supposing she is doing something she feels guilty about?"

"In that case, there wouldn't be any value in talking to me about it, and even in the unlikely event Mahiru dumped me, that would just mean I wasn't good enough and disappointed her. It would be my fault."

Mahiru was a deeply loving, devoted, and faithful girl. If a girl like her dumped Amane without even talking to him first, in all likelihood, that would mean the problem lay with him.

Because this was Mahiru they were talking about, he was sure she would sincerely communicate her feelings before dissolving their relationship.

The fact that she hadn't done so told him her secret had to be something benign. He was reluctant to pry and probe into that, but he didn't love the idea that Mahiru wanted to hide something from him.

Though he did think it was inevitable he would worry about it anyway.

"Well, this is Mahiru we're talking about, so I'm sure it's fine. But still, it's been weighing on my mind. She's keeping a secret from me, so I can't settle down."

"...How do I put this? Fujimiya, when you make up your mind about something, you really don't budge, huh?"

"Oh?"

He held that stance because he had such persistent faith in Mahiru.

If he couldn't get her to answer when she saw how flustered he was, it would probably be best to sit quietly and wait for it to be revealed to him in due time.

He was confident that, because it was Mahiru, her secret wasn't anything terrible, and that was why he hadn't questioned her about it. But he was ashamed to admit he hoped she would forgive him for being anxious about it.

"You know, when I used to see you in the hallway, you always had your head down, and you didn't seem very confident, but...now you've completely transformed into the angel's impressive boyfriend."

"I really didn't have any confidence back then. I feel like I'm standing up straight now because I have friends who gave me a little kick or a push and because of Mahiru's support."

He had undoubtedly received encouragement on more than a few occasions, and at times, the pushes had felt more like slaps. But thanks to that, he was standing by Mahiru's side and leaning on her for support when he needed it.

In addition to everyday material support like meals and housework, she had also been supporting him emotionally. Because of that support, Amene didn't feel like all his striving was a hardship. Rather, he found it enjoyable.

Amane finished by saying he could never thank her enough, and Souji nodded, looking serious.

“...So we’re seeing the fruits of Miss Shiina’s labor...or rather, she’s someone who brightens you up the more you treasure her, huh, Fujimiya?”

“Bright or not, it’s not easy standing next to Mahiru. I figure I’ve got to become someone I can be proud of. I want to become worthy as a man... It’s thanks to Mahiru that I started thinking that way. She really has helped me a lot.”

“But I think you also have a personal virtue that makes her want to support you, too.”

“I’m grateful you think so, but you know, I really do think it’s thanks to Mahiru that I can hold my head up high. And she’s why I want to work hard for her sake...no, actually, so that I can be on her level.”

He mumbled that was why Mahiru was so amazing.

“So in the end, you just wanted to make me listen to you brag, huh?” Souji responded quietly, and Amane spent the rest of the trip feeling embarrassed and a little guilty.

Amane was working at his part-time job three to four times a week. Sometimes, that fluctuated with the arrangement of the shifts, but it was generally about that often.

Weekend days were peak times for the café, but he always kept one or the other open so he and Mahiru could spend time together. There was no way he could neglect his studies, either. Fumika understood that, too, and she knew his true reason for working, so she was cheering him on in various ways.

This day was a break between his days on the job, and Amane had been enjoying a slow morning.

Although he felt like he was taking it easy, he had gotten in some weight training and a light jog as soon as he had gotten up and then hastily finished his homework. It would probably be more appropriate to say he was now finally taking a breather.

Amane was hit with the realization that his lifestyle was much better and healthier than before, and he smiled unconsciously.

But one thing still bothered him, even after he had finished all the things he had to do that morning.

He was worried about Mahiru's aforementioned secret.

It looks like she was doing something in secret again today, huh?

Mahiru, who had been over at Amane's place since after lunch, was still acting a little awkwardly. She had settled down now that it was past snack time, but every time Amane looked at her, she got a little stiff, so it was obvious she was hiding something.

He hadn't particularly felt like pointing that out, and by this point, she had gradually gotten her composure back.

Sitting next to Amane on the sofa, Mahiru was calm now, but in some ways, it seemed like her mind was elsewhere. She seemed preoccupied with her thoughts.

Since it was a precious day off, Amane had hoped to enjoy it with Mahiru, but...it would be wrong to press her when she was so spaced out. He at least wanted to hold her tight and make up for the time he had missed with her when he'd been at work.

"Mahiru?"

"Yes?"

"...Could I hug you?"

Relieved he had gotten a response, he still asked timidly, and when he did, Mahiru blinked her caramel-colored eyes pointedly, then put on an airy, fleeting smile and nodded.

She gently opened her arms, and he took her up on her kindness. He gently wrapped Mahiru's body up in his arms, enveloping her.

That day, she smelled like chocolate.

...She has a sweet smell on her every day.

No matter how much Mahiru might have liked sweets, she didn't eat them that frequently, especially since she watched her diet all the time.

And yet, recently, a sweet scent had frequently been hanging over her.

Amane, who was often close to her, didn't like sweet foods all that much, but he did like sweet scents, so he wasn't opposed to smelling the gentle aroma of sweets whenever he got near her or touched her.

Keeping his appreciation for her smell to himself, he drew her dainty body toward him courteously, but he wanted to cling to her more closely. The moment he gently touched her waist to pull her in, Mahiru shuddered with surprise.

"No!" The word came out involuntarily as she rejected his touch.

Amane felt his head rapidly cool off as he realized he must have moved too fast.

He had probably been wrong for touching her body so casually just because she made a habit of sitting close beside him.

Even if she was his girlfriend, that didn't mean he could touch her however he pleased. Sometimes, she wouldn't be interested, and sometimes, she wouldn't want to be touched that way.

Making an apologetic face, he gently moved away, and Mahiru looked up at Amane with a confused-looking expression.

"...Sorry. I got carried away."

"Ah, I—I didn't mean 'no'! That's not it! I—I gave you the wrong idea! I don't hate it when you hold me, Amane!!"

Mahiru seemed to have sensed that Amane thought he had been rejected and insisted on her genuine opinion in a panic, with lots of hand gestures.

"But you said no."

"Wh-what I should have said was...right now, I'm feeling self-conscious about my stomach."

"Your stomach?"

“...I...feel like I’ve gained weight. I don’t really want to be held by the waist.”

Mahiru said that and placed a hand on her stomach, and Amane couldn’t help but cock his head.

Mahiru, who was meticulous in taking care of herself, seemed to be maintaining her best possible figure. She didn’t look overweight and didn’t feel like it, either.

Just a moment earlier, she had felt as slender as ever. In fact, she was skinny enough that it sometimes made him worry about her health, and he wondered if it might be better for her to put on a little extra mass.

“Where? You’re as slim as ever. And you don’t eat in a way that would make you fat anyway.”

He knew Mahiru did stretches and light exercises every day at home and that she went jogging whenever she had time, and he also knew she played the fitness games on the game console in his apartment.

She was in the go-home club, but she was diligent about exercising to maintain her beauty. He couldn’t even imagine Mahiru, who was relentless about her self-management, growing fat.

It seemed unlikely, but Mahiru wasn’t making eye contact with him for some reason.

“...Or have you been?”

“N-no, I’ve been diligent about keeping up with my exercise. In fact, I’ve been doing more than usual. And I’ve been keeping a balanced diet, three meals a day... I have, but...well, outside of those meals...”

“You’ve been snacking?”

“Snacking, huh...? Well, I did have some snacks. That’s the reason.”

“That’s unusual.”

Mahiru was just as careful about her meals as she was about her style, so it was surprising to hear her say she was snacking often enough to make her worry.

He had never seen her overeating while she was spending time with him, so she must have been eating her snacks in her own apartment. She must have found something tasty enough to make her do that.

“Well, there is that saying about autumn enhancing the appetite, and your cooking is really good. This is the time of year when we can get new, tasty ingredients that are different from the ones we had in the summer, so it’s probably inevitable that we eat too many snacks.”

“...I’m both indecisive and meticulous, and it’s not good for me.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing... Anyway, whenever you touch my stomach, my fat...”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about, Mahiru... You’re so slender, you hardly have anything to pinch. Besides, if it’s only a little weight, it might be a measurement error. And your muscles are so firm, even if you got a bit softer, that wouldn’t be a problem.”

From Amane’s perspective, the world’s fixation on being thin was overblown anyway. But even by that standard, Mahiru was plenty thin.

It wouldn’t be a problem if Mahiru became a little plumper, and he didn’t like her or think she was cute and beautiful just because she was skinny. Also, in the first place, he liked Mahiru for who she was, so her physique had nothing to do with that. As long as he had no reason to worry about her health, that was all he cared about.

He looked into Mahiru’s eyes and told her with deadly earnestness that she didn’t need to worry about it, and Mahiru looked up at him and groaned softly.

From her perspective, it might have been a major problem, but to Amane, a slight increase in body fat or whatever was nothing to worry about. In fact, it might be good news that the amount of space Mahiru took up in the world would increase.

For Amane, holding back was the more serious problem.

“...I’d like to alleviate your fears just a little bit, but am I not allowed?”

“Y-you’re not not allowed, but... It’s fine, but...”

Mahiru seemed to have given up in despair. Amane smiled and pulled her toward him. Or rather, he picked her up in his arms and lifted her in the air.

Once he had hugged Mahiru, who had stiffened up, he put her back on the sofa so she could sit between his legs and he could hold her like a stuffed animal.

This was the easiest position for her to sit in if he was going to hold her on the sofa, but perhaps out of embarrassment, Mahiru seemed subtly uncomfortable.

But she settled down meekly and leaned back against Amane, so she probably didn't actually dislike it.

He put his arms tightly around the front of her and even touched her belly, which she was so concerned about, but she was so thin and dainty that he wondered where she had gotten the idea she had grown fat.

"...As I thought, you haven't changed."

"Because I've been putting in a lot of effort. But I'm worried about it."

"Even when you're this slim? ...Well, if you're hung up on it, I can't say this too forcefully, but don't strain yourself. I love any version of you."

"...Okay."

If Mahiru wanted to lose weight to stay in shape, he would support her. But he didn't want her to overdo it, and as he thought that, he gently but tightly embraced her so he could feel her body, soft as always, against his whole body.

Marveling at how a girl's body could be so soft despite being so thin, he buried his face into her shoulder and breathed in the heady mix of fabric softener and Mahiru, who smelled faintly of milk. He also picked up another sweet smell.

Musing that today's scent was in the chocolate family, he slid his lips over the base of her neck and gently pressed them against her.

He hadn't been thinking of doing this or that at all, but once he touched Mahiru's skin, he felt so happy, and her pale skin looked delicious to him. It was in his nature as a guy, so he couldn't do the slightest thing to stop himself.

He brought his lips to her smooth skin and kissed it, then nuzzled his cheek

against her, and Mahiru laughed like it tickled.

“...You turn into a big baby when you get tired, don't you, Amane?”

“I could say the same thing back to you, but...well, I was missing the warmth of your skin.”

He could have said the same thing to Mahiru because both of them got comfort from clinging to their partner when they were tired. Savoring the warmth and smell of the other person felt pleasant and made them happy.

As a basic rule, Mahiru was the one who more frequently behaved like a spoiled child, but recently, Amane had been coming home tired more often, so he'd also started to beg for attention like this more often.

Mahiru was always very happy when he honestly sought comfort with her, so sometimes he did it against his better judgment.

“I'm fine with you doing whatever you like, but please don't leave behind any marks. People can see them... When you did that the last time I stayed over, Chitose found them, and I got teased for it.”

“I said I was sorry... Guess I should do that someplace you can hide it a little easier...”

Amane had been extremely excited back then, and his sense of reason had half abandoned its post. Though he had not crossed any lines that must not be crossed, he had given in to his desire to decorate her pale skin.

Because of that, he had put the marks in visible places, for which he had repented.

When he remembered the sights he had seen that night, he became overwhelmingly embarrassed and hugged her even tighter, but in his arms, Mahiru slapped at Amane's thighs with some force.

“That's not even the problem, though! Amane, you do stuff like that when you get comfortable, don't you?!”

“I-I'm not necessarily comfortable, but...well, after all, it makes men happy to leave marks that say, ‘This is mine,’ so...”

There was no way he could be used to seeing her bare skin after only one

time.

Just remembering it, he felt shame rising into his face and desire rearing its head impatiently. It took effort for him to stay in control of himself.

But of course, there was no way he could avoid having those desires in the first place, and if there was a next time, it was likely Amane's lips would trace over her pale skin again in the same way, leaving marks behind.

"There's no way I could be used to my girlfriend's bare skin, is there?" he mumbled to Mahiru, who looked dissatisfied. When she slapped his thighs, he caught hold of her hands and entwined his fingers with hers. Mahiru immediately settled down.

Her ears turned red, so she was obviously feeling embarrassed.

"...Next time, only do it a little bit, somewhere that can't be seen."

"So you're already assuming there will be a next time?"

"Th-that's, well... I'm happy about everything you do, Amane, and...it also feels good when you touch me, and I like it."

Mahiru was adorable as she whispered, almost as if releasing a sigh, and continued squirming. Amane squeezed her hand in his.

She would probably accept just about anything as long as he was the one doing it, and she had said she liked being touched, too. His desires threatened to run rampant, but he somehow got them under control and stopped at putting kisses at the base of her neck.

Mahiru, of course, was sensitive, and her whole body shuddered, but she let Amane do as he pleased.

"...Anyway, right now, you mustn't leave any marks. If you do, your—"

"My what?"

"...Nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Well, now I'm super curious."

"It's fine!"

He tilted his head questioningly at Mahiru, who had stopped him and been

about to say something. Mahiru raised her voice like she was trying to evade the question and leaned her body weight hard against him. Thinking to himself that she was quite light, Amane smiled and accepted it.

Chapter 10

The Angel's Big Day Arrives

Amane had started working part-time, but that didn't mean he spent every one of his days off with Mahiru.

Mahiru had her own life. Sometimes, she wanted to be alone or spend time with other people. Recently, Mahiru had been up to something she was hiding from Amane, so there was also that to account for, and after school, on the days he was off work, Amane did things like relax at home until dinner or go out with Itsuki and the others.

"Are you sure it's okay for you to be hanging out with us, mister newlywed? Won't your bride get sulky?"

At Itsuki's invitation, they had taken Yuuta along as well, and the three boys had gone to sample the new products at a coffee chain, but they'd gotten takeout and had just started drinking the coffee in a park near the station when Itsuki brought that up.

Incidentally, he had half-jokingly suggested they go to Amane's café, and Amane had firmly vetoed that idea.

"Who are you calling a newlywed? Anyway, this is my personal time, so there's no issue with me hanging out, right? It would be one thing if I were out with other girls, but with friends of the same sex, it's just a simple hangout."

"Aw, I'm nothing but a simple hangout to you...?!"

"What are you saying? You're the one who invited me... And anyway, we've

never had the relationship for the fooling around you're implying, and we never will."

Itsuki wriggled his body around as he spoke in a way that deliberately sounded like someone who had been cheated on. When Amane looked at him with unamused eyes, Itsuki immediately returned to normal and, for some reason, started nodding with a knowing look.

"There's simply no way I could wedge my way in when you two are so madly in love, I guess."

"You've got Chitose anyway, and I don't need you."

"Meanie!"

"Well, that's because you meddle whenever you're around, Itsuki," Yuuta said coldly.

"Aren't you being too harsh, too, Yuuta?"

Yuuta nonchalantly dismissed Itsuki's words with feigned ignorance as he drank his frozen coffee, which had been newly offered for sale as a limited-time item.

It was a little more than a week into November, and the weather made it feel wintry. Amane was impressed Yuuta could drink something so cold outside when the season had already gotten colder. He sipped the hot matcha latte he had ordered.

Itsuki seemed to have guessed he had no one on his side. After putting on an act for a long ten seconds, during which he pretended to weep bitterly with even more forced gestures than before, he took a hearty swig of his limited-edition sweet potato latte as if nothing had even happened.

"Well, let's drop it. I'm glad you're hanging out with us, but aren't you tired?"

"If I'm tired from doing this much, then I'd think someone like you would be completely exhausted all the time, Kadowaki."

"Hmm, club activities are now really strict about making us take enough breaks, and it's not like I have the emotional stress of dealing with customers. Plus, I run track because I like it. Don't you feel any stress from your job,

Fujimiya?”

“Not particularly, no. It’s not like I have any special liking for customer service, but most of our customers are older folks, and they’re pretty calm. Plus, the senior workers there are all nice and thorough about teaching me things, so sometimes I get stressed about keeping up, but not about the environment.”

Not even a month had passed since Amane had started his job, but from the bottom of his heart, he was glad he had gotten an introduction from Ayaka.

Experience in customer service work would probably be valuable in the future, and he was grateful his coworkers all had good personalities.

Since he thought, if he was being honest, that whether a job went well was half determined by one’s coworkers, he was humbly glad he’d gotten an introduction to a workplace with such reasonable people.

Vowing to do something later to thank Ayaka, he swirled his paper cup around in a circle and shrugged.

“I think it’s a great workplace, better than I deserve.”

“Glad to hear it. I know sometimes the work environment can make things even harder than the work itself, and I hate places that treat you like you’re disposable.”

“I would quit immediately if I was working in a place like that, as you can imagine. Since it’s only a part-time job, I’ve got the privilege of being choosy. My mind and body are more important than any job, and a workplace like that is probably something Mahiru would hate, too.”

“She sure does love you, huh?”

“...I don’t think that has anything to do with what we’re talking about, though.”

Though Amane responded to Yuuta’s comment with an incredulous look, Yuuta just put on a cheerful smile, and Amane turned away, uneasy.

“On that subject, you’re working at a café, right?”

“Yeah, though, if I had to say, it’s aimed toward rich people. All our food and drinks are really good, and they seem to be priced accordingly.”

People were quite particular about the origins, roasting conditions, blends, and other features of their coffee, and the coffee at his café perfectly embodied that fixation.

Of course, coffee was not their only point of pride. There weren't many other items on the menu, but they were all of the highest quality. Their customers seemed to regard the café as a real hidden gem.

Amane sometimes wondered what kind of person Fumika was. There were sides to her even her niece Ayaka hadn't really seen, and the more he heard, the less he understood her.

"By the way, does anyone ever try to hit on you, Amane? I've heard it happens a lot."

"What kind of image of cafés do you have in your head...? I've never been hit on. I get complimented by quiet older ladies who say I'm cute, but that's probably because they find my clumsiness endearing or look at me like they're looking at their grandsons."

There were quite a lot of older ladies and gentlemen who were lukewarm toward the inexperienced new employee or who watched over him with a gentle smile. Though he had yet to make any major blunders, he had made quite a few minor mistakes, but all his customers had let them go amicably. From Amane's perspective, he felt so grateful and indebted that he almost felt guilty.

And so, there were many elderly patrons with money to spare, and at the moment, very few young people were coming into the café, so there hadn't been many instances of someone getting hit on.

To begin with, there were staff members who were much more good-natured and good-looking than Amane, so even if someone was looking for a person to hit on, they were likely to go for them instead.

The best Amane got was women the age of his grandmother telling him casually that they'd like to introduce him to their granddaughters. Of course, he had a girlfriend, so he always politely declined.

"You know, Fujimiya, you seem like you'd be popular with the older ladies.

You've got a gentle demeanor to begin with, and you're always polite as well."

"It's not like I'm allowed to be sloppy when I'm serving customers, can I...? Well, I think it might just be that someone quiet and plain like me is easier to speak to for our clientele. They talk to me all the time."

"Doesn't that mean you're popular?"

"As a conversation partner, sure. And that's got nothing to do with whether they're a man or a woman or how old they are. It's a relaxed atmosphere, so there's a lot of opportunities for the staff to chat with the customers when we're not busy."

The café didn't have the same kind of vibe as the coffee chains that popped up everywhere. It was a calm space with a peaceful atmosphere. They had lots of regulars, who were all calm, well-established people, and because of that, the café had developed a relaxed ambience, and it was a place where one could enjoy a conversation.

"It's fun to imagine Amane being so popular with those well-to-do ladies, huh?"

"Listen, you...it's not like that, okay? Even thinking that is rude to those ladies. Quit it with your weird fantasies."

"I can actually picture it pretty easily, which is a little scary."

"Not you, too, Kadowaki..."

Amane gave Yuuta an exasperated look when he started to join in. Still, Yuuta was making a more serious face than he'd expected, so he asserted decisively, "There's none of that."

In the first place, he had a girlfriend he loved and had promised his future to, so there was no way another girl would sway him. He was sure they weren't even looking at him. And those other girls probably didn't want Amane getting the wrong idea about their intentions.

Honestly...

Amane sighed, and Itsuki just shrugged, then glanced at his wristwatch. "Mm, well, I guess it's about time," he said.

“Time for what?”

“To consider how long we get to borrow you for?”

“Oh, come on...”

Certainly, Amane belonged to Mahiru, but Mahiru wasn't the type to monopolize him, and he figured she probably wouldn't get jealous of his friends of the same sex, so he was stunned.

But Kadowaki also agreed. “Ah, yeah, you're right. It may not even be five o'clock yet, but the sun is going down earlier, and it's getting colder, so should we call it soon? Either way, I'm sure you've got lots to do once you get home.”

“Sure, I guess...”

“Well then, let's call it a day. It's cold.”

Itsuki, who had quickly decided they should break it up, turned toward the entrance to the park like he wanted to leave but then seemed to rethink that and turned around to face Amane.

“Hey, Amane?”

“What is it?”

“When I see you tomorrow, there's gonna be all kinds of things I wanna ask you about,” he said with a satisfied grin, “so be ready!”

Amane was taken aback. He didn't understand what Itsuki was talking about.

Yuuta also looked at him with a strained smile. “That goes for me, too. See you tomorrow, yeah?” Then he took off as well.

Feeling vaguely like he had been abandoned, Amane mulled over what had just happened. He had some complicated feelings as he headed for home.

Once he got home, Mahiru greeted him like she always did.

What was different from usual was the smile Mahiru had on her face when she came to greet him. There was a bright, twinkling sparkle in her eyes, and her smile was soft and gentle. Her faintly flushed cheeks indicated her good humor.

“Welcome home, Amane.”

“I’m back. You’re in a good mood, huh?”

He was glad Mahiru was in good spirits, but he had no idea why. Mahiru usually came out to greet him with a smile when he got home, but she didn’t usually seem as cheerful as she did that day.

Since he didn’t know the reason, all he could do was wonder. But whether or not Mahiru noticed Amane’s bewilderment, her smile intensified.

“...From how you’re acting, I guess you didn’t sense anything all day long, huh?”

“Sense what?”

“I really have to wonder about you, if you didn’t remember what day today is, but...today is your birthday, Amane!”

In response to her slightly exasperated voice, Amane let an involuntary “Ah!” slip out.

“Oh, Amane! ...Happy birthday.”

“...I completely forgot. Since it’s my own birthday, it doesn’t matter to me.”

It was strange to think Amane had only realized it after Mahiru had said something, but it had totally slipped his mind. He had completely forgotten.

The previous year, Mahiru hadn’t heard about his birthday, and for the past few weeks, his new part-time job had been taking up all his spare brain power. Plus, his attention had been divided among so many things, from his daily weight lifting and jogging to homework and studying for school. His birthday had been the last thing on his mind.

And anyway, Amane never considered birthdays to be much of a milestone and had always figured it was okay not to bother celebrating his own. That was probably also another reason he’d forgotten.

While living at home, his parents had always celebrated his birthday, but since he’d started to live on his own, he hadn’t even given birthdays any thought, and that’s how he had come to this point.

“It does so matter! To me! I’m grateful for the day you were born. If you didn’t exist, I would never have been able to trust or love other people.”

Smiling wryly about the fact that Amane had completely forgotten, Mahiru gently took him by the hand.

“It’s thanks to you, Amane, that I was able to learn love is something that really exists. And happiness, which I can now feel from the bottom of my heart. I’m extremely grateful you came into this world, Amane.”

When she looked at him, Mahiru’s eyes were filled with an incredibly warm, soft light, different from when he had first met her.

The hand she had intertwined with his was warm. As if Mahiru’s passion for Amane was emanating from her hands, she was transmitting a gentle but pleasant warmth to him.

“Thank you very much for being born and for meeting me.”

He could tell his cheeks were growing warm as she expressed her feelings of true happiness.

He was surprised at how much her gratitude and appreciation warmed his heart. It wasn’t unpleasant, this gentle floating feeling that was different still from getting carried away by the heat of passion. It was a feeling he’d known for the first time after meeting Mahiru.

Amane knew he was lucky someone thought so much of him.

“...That’s my line. Thank you for always thinking about me and appreciating me.”

He didn’t know how he should communicate this passion and deep emotion to her, so he voiced his gratitude in a slightly clumsy way, and Mahiru smiled.

“It’s not much, but I prepared a little treat for you today, so I hope you enjoy it. Also, before dinner...there are a couple things I need to apologize for.”

“Hmm?”

Things you need to apologize for?

Amane cocked his head, and Mahiru cast her eyes downward, looking a little uneasy.

“Well, I believe you noticed I was doing something in secret. I’m sorry for

making you worry.”

Apparently, the suspicious way Mahiru had been acting up until then had been for the sake of this day.

“Ah, so that’s... Well, I understand now that I see what’s going on. I didn’t think you were doing anything terrible to me, so I was worried maybe I had done something, but—”

“I don’t think you would ever do anything bad to me, though. It’s just that I’m not very good at keeping secrets, so I made you worry, that’s all... I’m sorry for hiding something from you, Amane.”

Since it was an adorable secret, and since she had been doing something for him, there was no way he would hold it against her.

“I’m really not that worried about it... What’s the other thing?”

“It’s...because I was secretly preparing something for your birthday. It seems everyone decided not to say anything today to keep it a surprise. Really, everyone should have celebrated with you at school today. But my thing got in the way of all the good wishes you should have received today...”

“Ah, so that’s why...?”

He assumed Itsuki, Chitose, and others also knew it was his birthday. Since they were all very considerate people, they were the type to celebrate a friend’s birthday, so the fact that they hadn’t said anything had made it easy for Amane to forget it was even his birthday.

But they hadn’t said anything precisely because Mahiru had had a plan. In fact, the guys had probably invited him to hang out that day after school to delay him.

Though he grumbled quietly, “I can’t believe those guys,” he wasn’t actually that surprised.

As he worried over what was to be done with Mahiru, who was looking so apologetic, he gently patted her head while she was still looking down.

“Hmm, honestly speaking, I’m not very particular about celebrating on the exact day, the place, or whether anyone says happy birthday to me. I mean, the

birthday boy himself was so busy he forgot all about it, so it wasn't like we had to celebrate today, right? And it seems like everybody was thinking about me in their own way."

"But—"

"I'm just guessing, but I imagine those guys were thinking what would make me happiest was whatever surprise you had thought up for me, and that's why they conspired together to keep it hidden."

By supporting Mahiru, they had celebrated Amane in their own way.

Amane didn't especially care that he hadn't gotten any words of congratulations for his birthday. He was fairly confident his friends appreciated him.

"I can tell I'm blessed with thoughtful friends, so that's enough to make me feel plenty loved. It's not like they have to congratulate me directly or it doesn't count or anything. I don't measure our friendship by whether or not they said something to me."

He didn't remember becoming the kind of person who judged his relationships by words and gifts, and his friendships weren't built on such flimsy foundations. Just his friends' sentiments were enough.

And yet Mahiru seemed faintly disheartened. With a strained smile, Amane gently stroked her head and peered softly into her face.

"Besides, you know, it sounds like I'm going to get mobbed tomorrow... For today, you can have me all to yourself. They're going to ask me tomorrow, so make it something I can brag about, okay?"

"...Okay."

He said that last thing with a laugh, making a joke, and Mahiru also smiled, seemingly in spite of herself, burying her head in Amane's chest.

"...This is really extravagant!"

Looking at the items that were laid out on the table, Amane couldn't hide his feelings.

The many dishes there for his birthday meal were clearly a collection of

Amane's favorite foods.

Ordinarily, Mahiru considered the nutritional balance when planning their meals, but today was different. Amane especially loved eggs, and she had obviously tried to appeal to his tastes because there were several egg dishes on offer.

No matter how much he liked them or how nutritious they were, it wasn't good to eat too much of the same thing, so he tried to limit the number of eggs he ate in a single day, but the restrictions had apparently been lifted just for today.

One thing that stood out on the dining table was a dish Mahiru rarely made since it took a lot of time and effort and couldn't be eaten until the day after. It was the hard-baked type of omurice with beef stew on top.

Besides that, there was savory egg custard, potato salad with plenty of boiled egg in it, eggs simmered in tofu pouches, and more. The volume of food was normal for a high school boy's dinner, but there were many different kinds of dishes. The fact that there were basically no vegetables was less because Amane hated vegetables and more because he liked eggs too much.

"I put together a lot of little dishes of your favorite foods, Amane, without taking into account the types of cooking or the nutritional balance. It's okay if you don't have a balanced diet for one day."

In an elegant, playful voice, Mahiru said they could just eat some extra vegetables the next day. Perhaps because she could sense Amane's happiness, her cheeks were faintly flushed with joy.

"By the way, I'll make you your rolled omelets tomorrow morning, okay? As you can see, there was already a lot of food, and I think those taste better in the morning anyway. I'll prepare the miso-pickled grilled salmon that you like with them. Are you happy with tofu and daikon pieces in your miso soup?"

"A feast first thing in the morning... This spread is incredible, too, but..."

"Heh-heh. For now, please eat up before it gets cold. Today, I made the beef stew with very tender meat."

"Whoo-hoo! Omurice with beef stew poured over it is the right way to do it."

It was his personal favorite, but they almost never had it because of the work it required. Amane wanted to shout for joy but kept that urge firmly in check and pressed his hands together in appreciation.

He didn't forget to give thanks for the food, and as soon as he was finished, he brought a spoonful of the beef stew omurice to his mouth, and a smile naturally spread across his face.

The beef was soft enough that he could easily cut through it with his spoon, and even after it was in his mouth, it didn't have a dry texture. It was incredibly delicious. He could tell immediately when he started chewing that she had used good meat.

Nodding to himself as he keenly enjoyed the combination of the properly seasoned stew and the omurice, Amane reached for the other dishes, trying not to grab too quickly or be rude.

Mahiru watched him with a smile as she ate her own food gracefully.

"...Something wrong?"

"No. You always eat your food like it's delicious, Amane. As the cook, I feel appreciated."

"That's because it *is* delicious. It's no exaggeration to say your cooking is the best."

"I'm glad you think my cooking is the best, Amane. Though I won't start slacking off just because you said so."

Smiling wryly at Mahiru, who was being stubbornly stoic, Amane eagerly shoveled food into his mouth. All the plates were cleared in no time.

There had been quite a lot of variety, but there hadn't been too much food, so Amane, whose appetite was bigger now that he was working, had been able to devour everything.

Mahiru flashed a satisfied smile at Amane, who had eaten every last bite, then slowly stood up from her chair and set the dishes in the sink.

He thought about helping, but the moment he started to stand, she told him in a kind but firm voice, "The birthday boy gets to relax," so Amane dejectedly

took his seat.

Once all the dishes lined up on the table had disappeared, Mahiru turned back to Amane again and put on another smile.

“There’s dessert, too, after dinner. I really hope you like it.”

“...Would that be the dessert you were secretly practicing making?”

Now that they had made it this far, he finally knew what Mahiru had been hiding.

Occasionally, after Amane came home from work, a sweet smell had come wafting over. She must have been making a cake for Amane.

“Yes. As you can imagine, I didn’t want to show it to you until I was happy with it, so...after many rounds of practice, I made one with a flavor I think you will like.”

He also worked out that’s why she had been worried about gaining weight.

She had probably been tasting her many experiments. It depended on exactly what they were, but sweets were, of course, high in calories, so if she had been trying them all, she may well have gotten concerned. Also, Mahiru hated wasting food, so she wouldn’t have let anything go to waste.

“I would have been happy with anything you made, Mahiru... Sorry, that was rude. I love that you put in so much effort, but I hope you didn’t overdo it.”

“I didn’t... Though I did do some extra exercises afterward.”

“And I’m sure that’s why your figure didn’t change. It’s just like you, Mahiru, to take care of yourself like that.”

“Well, I don’t seem to have gotten any wider, so I think I’m safe. All right, I’ll bring it out now, okay?” Mahiru said.

She brought over a plate from the refrigerator with what appeared to be a handmade chocolate cake sitting on it.

She placed it on the table with a small, slight noise.

It was already cut into easy-to-eat slices, and Mahiru quietly distributed them onto smaller plates.

Looking more closely at the cake, it seemed to be something like a gâteau au chocolat. It might have been closer to a chocolate ganache. From what he could see, he got the impression the texture was smooth and heavy.

Mahiru had garnished it after baking it with fresh cream and mint sprigs, but still, the impression it gave was truly simple.

“I made gâteau au chocolat. You don’t like sweet things much, and I thought maybe you would prefer something easy to eat that paired well with something to drink. I chose milk, thinking about the strong flavor of the cake, so if you would have them together, I would be happy.”

“The best way to eat something is to follow the chef’s recommendation. Thank you for making this—I’ll dig right in.”

He could say that with confidence. He was sure it would be a good pairing since Mahiru had meticulously made everything. Without concern, Amene cut into his gâteau au chocolat with his fork while Mahiru watched.

Just as his eyes had told him, the texture was extremely smooth and dense, so it felt stiff as he pushed his fork down.

Even so, he was able to cut it easily. Amene cut off a bite-size piece and slowly brought it to his mouth. The first thing that happened was that a rich chocolate flavor spread through his mouth.

It seemed less like a gâteau au chocolat and closer to a chocolate ganache. It was smooth and almost sticky.

It was still different from chocolate ganache and had a silky smoothness that melted away and dissolved in his mouth. The exquisite flavor complemented the firmness of the texture.

It wasn’t overly sweet, but he could taste the richness of the chocolate. It was obvious she had adjusted the recipe to highlight the quality of the chocolate.

“...This is crazy good!”

He didn’t need to exaggerate as he let his true feelings spill out, and Mahiru let out a sigh of relief and smiled.

“As long as it suits your tastes, I’m glad. I was aiming for just the right flavor

and texture.”

“It’s super good. It’s amazing you can make something like this.”

“Heh-heh, it’s a real blessing to get a reaction like that. It was worth all the effort.”

Mahiru smiled with a laugh like the ringing of a bell. As she watched Amane eating his gâteau au chocolat with gusto, her smile became a little impish.

“By the way, can you tell what the secret ingredient is?” she asked.

Amane closed his eyes and focused on the taste buds on his tongue.

Sure enough, behind the deep sweetness of the cake, there was something aromatic and bitter, different from the chocolate, that lingered on the back of his tongue.

It was the aroma of something Amane had recently gotten used to smelling at work.

“Mm...it’s coffee, but...hmm? This...is from my café?”

The subtle flavor and aroma resembled the coffee they served at his workplace.

He had been half guessing, but Mahiru said, “That’s right!” and clapped her hands with a grin. “I’m surprised you could tell!”

“Oh no, it was just a lucky guess. But you’ve been sneaking around with Kido, so I thought that might be it.”

“You were really paying attention... Ah, I still haven’t been by the café to see how you’re doing, okay? As you guessed, I had Miss Kido help me. She bought the coffee beans for me from the café where you’re working. I even got the owner to make a blend that would bring out the richness and depth of the chocolate, so I really can’t thank her enough.”

“So you even got Miss Itomaki in on it...? I thought she’d been smiling a lot whenever I saw her recently...”

He would never have imagined even the café owner, Fumika, had been involved. He was a little worried about his next shift. He imagined it would be

tough to deal with her.

But the coffee from her café certainly was delicious.

He'd heard that, as he might have expected, coffee was especially good when freshly ground. Amane had even considered buying a coffee mill so he could grind it and savor it at home, but he'd never thought about enjoying the coffee in this form.

"Heh-heh. All I did was reach out to Miss Kido, but before I knew it, word had spread... She was happy to help. I'm just glad you didn't notice, Amane."

"You're really something..."

He felt self-conscious in front of Mahiru, who evidently spared no effort for his sake.

Amane didn't want her to sense he was feeling embarrassed. But when he cut into his gâteau au chocolat again, Mahiru gently stopped his hand and deftly took Amane's fork from him.

When he looked up, he made eye contact with Mahiru, who was wearing a coquettish grin.

"Since this is a special occasion, I think I should feed you myself."

"Ah, n-no, that's—"

"You don't have to hold back."

She must have known Amane would be hesitant because she flashed him a smile to drive that hesitation away and gently put the gâteau au chocolat against his lips. Amane groaned but obediently ate the cake.



Amane's chest prickled with embarrassment at Mahiru's lovey-dovey act, which she knew he would tolerate. But even so, Amane still let himself sink into the happiness that welled up inside him.

Amane felt so embarrassed he could die as Mahiru hand-fed him his slice of cake. Wearing a satisfied smile, she happily gazed at Amane as he blushed.

"Was it good?"

"...It was delicious, but did you have to feed me?"

"I did. You're the birthday boy."

"It would have been utterly humiliating if anyone else had been around to see that. It's fine when it's just the two of us, though."

If Itsuki and the others had been there, Amane would have been subject to relentless teasing. Either that, or they would have given the happy couple lukewarm looks and smiles.

Mahiru seemed to be in an even better mood than Amane himself, so she might not have paid any attention to anyone watching. But Amane, who would have been the center of attention, would have been horribly embarrassed.

Deciding to pay Mahiru back when it was time to celebrate her next birthday, Amane took a sip of milk as a palate cleanser, since Mahiru had sweetened it in more than one way.

Mahiru smiled and pulled something out of the handbag next to her. It was a white box a little bigger than the palm of her hand, decorated with a navy-blue ribbon.

Naturally, Amane wasn't so slow that he couldn't guess what it was, but when he reflexively looked at Mahiru, she bashfully broke into a smile while blushing faintly.

"Here's your birthday present. I don't know whether you'll like it or not."

She sounded a little unsure of herself as she gently put the box in Amane's hand, then watched closely to see how he reacted, fidgeting nervously.

She probably wanted him to open it in front of her, so he untied the ribbon.

When he took the lid off the box, he found another box inside, covered in velvet.

He felt slightly let down by the bait and switch because he had been confident his present would be directly in the gift box, but that was tempered by the knowledge that Mahiru was trying to surprise him.

Wondering what on earth could possibly be so thoroughly packaged, he gently opened the inner box. Inside was what looked like a clip with a subdued, white shine.

For a moment, he didn't know what it was. There was an engraving of a flower on it. Eventually, he recognized it was something he wore to school ceremonies.

“...A necktie pin?”

“Exactly. Honestly, I wasn't sure what to give a guy. A lot of people give wristwatches as gifts, but they're too expensive, and I thought you would feel awkward getting one. Plus, I thought we might have different opinions on what looks good. You already have a wristwatch anyway, and you seem to like it, so...”

As a general rule, Amane always had his smartphone on hand and rarely wore a wristwatch. The only times he wore a watch was when he was going out, and the watch he wore had been a gift from his parents for entering high school.

They had apparently splurged a little on it, so naturally, he was hesitant to wear it at school. Amane didn't go out all that often, so he'd had few occasions to wear it.

But even so, since he had worn it each time he had gone out with Mahiru, she seemed to remember it.

“That's why I decided on something you could wear more often and that you would normally never buy for yourself. At our school, other than at ceremonies, you're free to wear a necktie pin as long as it's not too showy, right? And I thought I'd get you something you could use once you're a working adult, too.”

The only necktie pins they were allowed to wear at ceremonies were pins with the school emblem on them, but outside of that, they weren't particularly

restricted. Most of the boys didn't wear them at all because they were too much trouble.

Amane also didn't usually wear one. In fact, he had totally forgotten about the pins' existence. But now that Mahiru had given him one, it seemed he would be wearing one daily.

In all likelihood, she had selected this sort of everyday pin as a gift precisely because she wanted him to wear it.

"I also looked at neckties since you'll need plenty of them once you enter the workforce, but...while you're a student, your tie is already decided for you. School rules are school rules, right? I can pick out some of those once you have to wear a suit."

"...Mm, thanks. I'll take good care of this while I use it."

She was indirectly telling him she intended to always be by his side, so his chest naturally filled with joyful warmth.

Of course, Amane had felt that way from the start, but this made him realize Mahiru also had that feeling, and he was embarrassed but, more importantly, happy.

Amane smiled at Mahiru, etching a vow into his mind to never, ever forget to treasure this necktie pin and Mahiru, along with this warmth in his chest. Mahiru looked relieved as she put on a weak smile.

"Thank goodness. I was a little worried about whether you would be happy with it. Honestly, I knew it wasn't a normal gift for a high school guy."

"I'm confident I would be happy with anything you gave me, Mahiru."

"Heh-heh, I know that. But if possible, I wanted to give you something you needed, Amane. You're not very materialistic, and you take good care of your things, so I was worried about what to get you."

It sounded like Amane had caused her some trouble. Since he typically didn't desire specific things, all he could do was give her a strained smile.

"From my perspective, I'll generally be happy with anything you give me, you know?"

“...It’s scary to think you might be happy even if I gave you an old candy wrapper or something.”

“I’d figure you had some reason for doing it, like maybe it had an interesting or a cute pattern on it or something, and I’d keep it.”

“But I would never do that! Before giving you something like that, I’d pick something more normal and just give you the actual candy!”

“I mean, I know you were just joking... Any gift that you put thought into would make me happy, Mahiru.”

“...Geez.”

She didn’t sound especially pleased, but she was still smiling, so he figured she was probably just hiding her embarrassment.

After looking at Mahiru in delight, he gently put the necktie pin away, determined to start wearing it the following day. Mahiru timidly grabbed the hem of Amane’s shirt.

“And there’s one more little present, actually.”

Amane tilted his head in confusion at her somewhat hesitant tone of voice, wondering what was going on.

“Today, from now until the day ends, I’ll do anything you ask me to do.”

The second he heard that, he nearly choked.

He was glad he hadn’t been drinking the milk. If he had, he was sure it would have shot right out of his mouth.

After coughing a little, he looked at Mahiru, who stared back at him like she had made up her mind. She had said it in earnest.

“...That’s a dangerous thing to suggest...”

“It’s for my boyfriend, so...”

“Even then, that’s...”

He couldn’t help but feel he had talked to her about this before. It was an extremely dangerous thing for a girl to say she would do whatever a guy asked of her.

Even if they were dating, a dangerous thing was a dangerous thing.

“...Amane, you won’t ask much. You’re not that selfish.”

“That’s not the problem... You can’t say that. You’re a girl.”

“I don’t believe for a second that you would do anything extreme.”

“...And if I did?”

“Like you said yourself, I would make you take responsibility, so...”

Mahiru stared directly at him with a gaze full of pure trust, and Amane felt himself unconsciously start to give in as he gently scratched his cheek, then softly extended a hand toward Mahiru’s body.

“I’ll take responsibility even if I don’t do anything, but listen...you dummy.”

Mahiru was definitely indulging him, and he did think she would be okay with whatever he did to her, but it was still a little scary. Even though he had made her a promise, he was a healthy young man, and there were bound to be times when his self-control stopped working.

Though I guess that’s one way to show how much she loves me.

Thinking that, no matter how he looked at it, she was being too trusting, he gently embraced her soft body and buried his face at the base of her neck.

He inhaled deeply and smelled her bodywash, a little stronger than usual, telling him she had already been in the bath.

I bet if I told her I wanted her right now, she would probably agree to it.

He didn’t have the slightest intention of breaking his vow to himself, but as embarrassed as he was, he could easily imagine her going along with it. His sweet girlfriend was frightening. He couldn’t tell when he might lose himself.

A man’s self-control was flimsier than tissue paper and could vanish as soon as he got stirred up.

He focused and reminded himself again that he had to be careful. Then he slowly slid his lips over to her cheek and exhaled softly.

The second he did, Mahiru’s body shook with a jolt. Anyone could have seen by looking at her that she was on high alert and very ticklish.

He didn't intend to let anyone else see her like this. As long as Amane was the only one who knew she was so sensitive to touch all over, that was fine. As long as he was the only one who knew her weak spots, everything was fine.

Amane smiled a little at Mahiru, who squirmed in his arms but didn't resist, and gently brought his lips to her ear.

"...Let me see. It's been a while, so I wonder if you would let me lie in your lap."

Mahiru seemed to want Amane to ask her for something, so Amane made a request that would allow him to be pampered as much as possible without obliterating his self-control, and Mahiru suddenly went red in his arms.

He really did mean to lie in her lap. He wasn't implying he would do anything else, but he had a feeling she was imagining some weird fantasy.

Amane naturally had no intention of doing what they had done the last time she had stayed over, at least not now. He had only just managed to stop himself last time, and he didn't know what might happen next time.

"...I really just meant let me lie in your lap... What did you imagine?"

"N-nothing! I would never imagine anything lewd!"

"I never even asked you whether you imagined anything specific, though."

When he pointed out that he hadn't mentioned anything specific, the redness in her cheeks grew even more intense.

Mahiru's face grew so red he wondered if steam might start coming out. She turned her eyes, half flooded with tears, up at Amane and glared at him slightly, then twisted her body around and escaped from his arms.

"D-dummy, you dummy, Amane!"

"I didn't do anything!"

"Uh...but...you're being mean."

"Okay, that's true. I'm sorry. You're so cute, I just..."

Mahiru was way too charming to resist when he thought she didn't mind being touched. Without thinking, he had said some teasing things, but there

was no questioning the fact that she pouted when he picked on her too much.

And so, anticipating her reaction, he meekly apologized. Mahiru didn't seem like she was going to voice any further complaints. Instead, she began venting by banging her fists lightly against Amane's chest.

She didn't even attempt to hide her red cheeks as she took her anger out on him. Amane chuckled quietly and patted her head, but as he might have expected, her mood didn't completely recover. He could mainly tell by how her cheeks still looked like they were stuffed with little balloons.

"...I'm bringing a change of clothes over, so while I'm gone, please go take your bath."

She saw Amane's tentative smile didn't change, and Mahiru swiftly escaped, leaving the apartment. Of course, she had promised to return quickly.

Though he was taken aback for a moment by Mahiru fleeing as fast as she could, the joyous feeling that welled inside him after she'd left was enough to make him laugh out loud.

When Amane finished his bath and returned to the living room, Mahiru was already back.

She had already changed into her nightclothes, and this time, she was wearing the light-pink bunny onesie pajamas she had purchased. Amane also had a set of cat onesie pajamas that weren't quite a match for hers. But he hadn't expected Mahiru to come back dressed like that, so he was wearing his regular nightclothes.

Mahiru's hair, which usually flowed down her back, was tied into two loose bunches below her ears, and she had the hood on the pajamas pulled up, so she looked different and extremely adorable.

The last time she had stayed over, Mahiru's revealing negligee had seriously challenged Amane's self-control, even though she had worn a sweater with it. But this time, it seemed like he could rest easy.

"...That looks great on you. Very Mahiru."

"What do you mean by that?"

“I mean, the way it’s small and fluffy and cute, and the way it’s lonesome, it’s a lot like you...”

His image of rabbits differed a bit from the ecology of real rabbits. Still, according to how he imagined them, they were cozy, soft, fluffy, adorable, and lonesome, so he would say a bunny costume was a perfect match for Mahiru, who also got lonely easily.

Initially, he’d thought he’d been complimenting her, but Mahiru didn’t look very happy.

After peering up at him with a sullen face, she looked at his damp hair and frowned again.

“I already knew what you thought about me, Amane. More importantly...am I right in thinking you intentionally didn’t dry your hair because I’m here?”

She took him to task, questioning why he hadn’t dried his hair with the hair dryer as she pinched it between her fingers. A faint smile rose to his lips, and he thought, *Of course, she would notice something like that.*

Whenever Mahiru wasn’t around, he always dried his hair thoroughly. It was only when she was there and her hands were free that he sometimes towed off his wet hair so he could get her to dry it the rest of the way.

He knew it was extra trouble for her, so he only did it occasionally as his own little way of demanding attention. It made him happy to get touched by and care from Mahiru, so he did it against his better judgment.

He thought it was childish, but he couldn’t stop.

“You’re imagining things...is what I’d like to say, but I did it on purpose. I wanted you to do it for me.”

“Geez...it’s fine, though. I enjoy doing it. Because it seems like your way of telling me you want to be spoiled.”

He had complicated feelings about how thoroughly she had seen through him, but he gave up and went with it when he saw how tickled she looked.

He sat down on the sofa at her urging, while Mahiru looked resigned. However, she couldn’t hide her delight, breaking into a smile as she turned on

the hair dryer.

His hair dryer in his apartment was a low-noise model, so it didn't make too much sound while warm air blew at him from Mahiru's hands.

He had gotten most of the water itself out with a towel, so all that was left to do was blow off what remained. But Mahiru felt his hair as she blew warm air on it, mumbling, "I see you're not neglecting your hair. I'm glad you're taking it seriously."

Just as Mahiru put a lot of effort into her skincare because she wanted it to be smooth when Amane touched her skin, Amane also thought Mahiru would be happy if it felt nice when she touched him, and he had been doing a fair amount of grooming himself.

Thanks to that, he had improved the smoothness and glossiness of his hair, so when she dried it, she no longer faced any difficulties getting it untangled.

"...Amane, you really do have naturally good hair, don't you?"

"I get it from my parents. Though it's the soft type, so it also tangles easily."

"That also means it's easy to make it smooth and glossy, so isn't that great? Maybe I should have given you some haircare supplies for your birthday present."

Mahiru finished drying his hair, going on about how much smoother and glossier it could be, then produced a comb from out of nowhere and quickly tidied up his hair, which was fluffed up with all the air in it.

Once she had done that, she combed it into his usual hairstyle.

"If it would make you happy for my hair to be smoother, I could get some better haircare products," he suggested.

"I—I don't know about happy...I just think it feels nice, and I enjoy combing it out," she replied.

"Then maybe I'll ask Kadowaki for some recommendations. As long as you're happy, Mahiru, I'm happy."

Besides, it might make her more likely to touch his hair regularly. He decided not to mention that was his real objective.

As part of his self-improvement plan, anything that made Mahiru happy was worth doing. And it would probably be a good thing to do anyway because it was linked to his self-confidence. As he thought this, Mahiru placed the comb on the table and ground her forehead against his upper arm.

Chuckling at this familiar way of hiding her embarrassment, he watched as the ears on her hood bobbed back and forth with every shake of her head and smiled even wider.

“All four of the bunny’s ears are pink, huh?”

“Oh, be quiet... Since we went to the trouble of buying them, you should wear your pajamas, too, Amane. I’m the only bunny here.”

“Then we’ll have a cat being groomed by a bunny.”

“Won’t that be cute?”

“...I’m okay with you being the only cute one.”

He thought the very idea of a cat and a rabbit, who could easily become predator and prey, doing something so harmonious could be amusing. But Amane felt that even if he became a cat, he wouldn’t be especially charming.

Recently, compared with before, his build had been improving, and he was gradually losing his baby-face features. He objected to Mahiru calling him cute when he thought he had left cuteness in the distant past. But that was how Mahiru felt, and his objections didn’t amount to much.

The redness in her cheeks must have settled down slightly because Mahiru looked up at Amane. For some reason, she thought he was cute. He deliberately gave her no warning before stealing a kiss.

Mahiru blinked sharply several times, then her cheeks flushed even redder, but there was no resistance. Instead, she seemed happy, and all the strength left her body as if to tell Amane he could do as he liked while holding her.

As he ever so gently feasted on her glossy lips, he slowly, slowly and carefully pressed them open like the two shells of a pink clam, and Mahiru meekly accepted him in without any protest.

Recently, it had been happening bit by bit—Mahiru had begun accepting

Amane and doing the same things back to him, which was genuinely adorable.

As he savored her softly spilling, feeble voice, the cute little bunny accepting the wolf even as she trembled made his heart leap in his chest.

It wasn't like Amane was used to this kind of kissing, either, and honestly, his passion seemed likely to get the better of him. But since he had seen Mahiru grow frightened when he'd devoured her greedily the last time she'd stayed over, he kissed her as tenderly and deeply as possible.

"...We should have bought you a wolf onesie instead of the cat."

A few moments after they had quietly pulled their lips apart, Mahiru muttered this with a hint of bitterness as she tried to catch her breath. In response, as he swallowed the shame raging inside him over the kiss, Amane smiled.

"If we did that, little bunny Mahiru would be the only cute one, though."

"Meanie."

Mahiru pouted, sticking out her moistened lips, and this time, she head-butted Amane's arm like she was intent on sulking.

"...Why do you suddenly stop being cute at times like these?"

"I never was."

"That's a lie. I mean, look at how inexperienced you are."

"Oh, be quiet."

It was his first time dating anyone, so his inexperience was inevitable.

Somehow, for the moment, he had managed to ease the awkwardness and nervousness that came with trying the things lovers did. But being new to it meant that, of course, he lacked experience.

If that innocence equated to charm, then he was happy to let Mahiru be the only charming one. He didn't want the person he loved to see him at his limit.

"...Next time, I'll have to surprise you, Amane. You're always doing it to me," Mahiru quietly mumbled, scheming.

To keep her from putting more of her plots into words, Amane covered her

mouth with his again and had his fill.

After they kissed for a while, Amane and Mahiru moved into the bedroom.

Even though she had been there many times and had even slept over there before, Mahiru was gripping Amane's hand with a little force as if she was somewhat nervous.

Smiling slightly at Mahiru acting like that, he gently traced his fingertip over her palm in a tickling way to dissolve her stiffness as he guided her over to the bed.

Mahiru trembled slightly on the bed, showing her shyness. Amane thought she looked like a baby bunny about to get eaten by a wolf.

In response to her cuteness and charm, Amane retracted his fangs, and rather than pounce on his prey, which seemed ready to leap away at any moment, he sat beside her and stroked her head to reassure her.

Even though he'd said earlier that he wasn't going to do anything, she was nervous, which must have been because they were in the bedroom.

"I'm not going to eat you or anything. Today, just like I said, I want you to let me lie in your lap."

"A-are you sure?"

"...Were you expecting more?"

"N-no, I wasn't! But, well, you just kept on..."

"I kept on what?"

"...You got really calm and acted really manly all of a sudden, and I guess I'm just feeling embarrassed. It's...it's not fair."

Mahiru's body got smaller as she squirmed like she couldn't stand being there. She looked up at Amane, and in response, he smiled a little, realizing that somehow he had been skillfully keeping up appearances.

Sure, maybe he looked calm on the surface, but in reality, he was not at all. In fact, he wasn't calm because he had already been intimate with Mahiru once before.

But he had been trying to keep his cool because he knew he couldn't devour her. If he got too greedy, it would only frighten Mahiru, and he thought it wouldn't be fitting for a man to get so worked up. That was all.

"I thought I told you earlier, though. I'm really not calm at all. I'm just not letting it show on my face because I want you to think I'm cool."

"If I told you to let it show, would you?"

"No way."

"No fair."

"I would look pathetic, right? All flustered with my face bright red."

About five months had gone by since they'd started dating, and it would be pathetic of him to blush every time they kissed or touched each other a little bit.

He figured girls preferred guys they could depend on and that if he kept his composure at times like this, Mahiru would also stay calm. But Mahiru timidly moved to grab onto the hem of Amane's shirt.

"...Is it selfish of me to want to see you as you are, Amane?"

She asked him quietly and uneasily, and Amane hid his face with his hand for a moment and quietly sighed.

It sounded like she was unnecessarily worried by Amane's attempts to look cool.

"...Please understand that I love you, so I wanted you to see me looking cool."

Amane drew Mahiru, who was beside him, into his arms and placed his forehead on her collar. Mahiru stiffened for a moment, but her quiet laughter reached his ears.

"You're always cute and cool, Amane."

"The 'cute' was unnecessary."

"Heh-heh... I get the perk of getting to see both sides."

Amane couldn't say anything when he heard how happy she sounded, and in an attempt to keep her from seeing how embarrassed he looked, he fell right

onto the bed, Mahiru and all.

Because he fell in such a way as to minimize the shock as best he could, this merely resulted in a gentle swaying of Mahiru's tied-up hair, but the shock to Mahiru's heart must have been severe, and she blinked sharply at him several times.

Sure enough, Mahiru's stare embarrassed him, but nevertheless, Amane immediately embraced her and buried his face in her curves.

Perhaps because it was wrapped in a onesie, her supple body was extremely warm, fluffy, and soft. And they also had the exquisite scent of Mahiru's apartment, which combined sweetness and freshness.

If the mood had been what Mahiru had apparently been imagining with equal parts anticipation and worry, Amane probably would have been excited. But now he was in relaxation mode, and even he wasn't thinking about laying a hand on her, so only pleasantness and happiness filled him.

Mahiru stiffened up momentarily, but she started stroking his head once she saw he wasn't doing anything. That felt even better.

"You need a lot of pampering today, huh?"

"...That's all right, isn't it? Let me have it."

"Yes, yes."

It sounded like Mahiru had seen right through him, hiding his embarrassment, and a small burst of her giggling laughter reached his ears.

"You're being quite bold today, Amane."

"At least today, I thought I'd touch you a lot."

"Of course, that's fine, but it's just, how do I put this...? You're touching me like you usually do, right? Um, I was sure... I thought you'd touch me a little more directly."

"Oh, well, I do love feeling you, and I want to get to know you like that, but it's also true I feel satisfied just being beside you and feeling your warmth."

He lifted his head out of her soft curves, and this time, he embraced Mahiru,

wrapping her dainty body in his arms.

Amane didn't intend to do the things Mahiru had apparently been imagining. In fact, he was confident if they did those sorts of things every time she stayed over, at some point, his self-control would fail him. She let him do as he pleased while reacting very cutely, so he knew he would start wanting more and more, with no end in sight.

But he really wasn't planning to do anything that day.

Being a man didn't necessarily mean he wanted only one thing. He felt plenty of happiness just calmly spending time with the girl he loved.

Maybe his physical satisfaction was lower than the last time she had stayed over, when they had had much more direct contact, but emotionally, he didn't feel unfulfilled at all.

There he was, with the girl he loved enough to promise his future to lying beside him, snuggled up to him with trust and affection in her eyes.

There was nothing that filled him more with feelings of security, happiness, and satisfaction.

As if in agreement with Amane, who felt content just to be touching her, Mahiru put on a soft, contented smile and snuggled up against his chest.

"...Me, too. I'm happy just being by your side, Amane."

"I'm glad. If it were just me, it would feel kind of unfair because I'm so easy to please."

"I get the same way when I'm with you. As long as you're here, Amane, that's all I need, but..."

"But?"

"I'm even happier when we're touching."

Mahiru said this extremely sweet thing and looked up at Amane, appealing to him with eyes that asked if they could touch.

"You want to touch me? That's fine. But I've got a guy's body, so I don't think it'll feel very nice to the touch."

“Oh really? I think your muscles feel nice... When I run my hands over your stomach, it feels so rugged.”

As soon as he gave her permission, Mahiru shyly started reaching toward him with her fingertips, running them over his chest and stomach. He stirred slightly at the ticklish sensation.

Even though he thought this was definitely Ayaka’s influence, Mahiru seemed to enjoy touching him, so Amare decided to let her go for it and enjoy the sweet sensation.

“I’m seeing results from weight lifting every day. I wonder if we can say I’ve grown out of my bean sprout phase.”

“I think we can. At least you don’t have any useless flab. Everything’s so solid. You’ve gotten quite sturdy, you know, compared with before.”

“...I’d rather you didn’t recall how I used to look, please. I was so gangly.”

He couldn’t help but feel embarrassed when she brought back memories of when he had first met her.

Although Amare was currently decently firm and muscular now, he had had an extremely slender build in the past.

He hadn’t had that much flab, but his build had been what one might call spindly, and he had been weak as well. He definitely wouldn’t have been called sturdy, and whenever he thought back on it now, it made him want to punch his former self and tell him to try harder.

Since Mahiru seemed to like his current body type better, he was happy he had made the effort. Since he also looked better in stylish clothes now that he was in shape, he figured he could say he had made the right call back when he had decided he would become worthy of Mahiru.

“Heh-heh. But I was very aware you were a guy, you know? When you carried me on your back, I thought about how different we are, from your bones to your muscles.”

“Well, the thing about that...is you have a petite frame, Mahiru.”

She had developed a soft and dainty body, even though it was kept firm

through her own efforts. But even Mahiru's frame, which had nothing to do with those efforts, was dainty. One could say she was small overall.

"...I may be small, but I'm sturdier than you think, Amane."

"Even so, that doesn't change the fact that you're dainty. It makes me think I have to touch you gently. Like you might break."

"And yet I've never once seen you use enough force to break me."

"Still...I want to treasure you, so it's something I always keep in mind. That's how important you are to me."

Amane wanted to be as gentle and considerate toward Mahiru as he possibly could. From that moment and for the rest of his life, he intended to cherish her and be by her side to protect her, so he needed to be careful.

It wasn't that he wanted to be overprotective, but even though Mahiru was the type to work hard and keep in shape, she was still a girl. No matter what she did, because of her sex, she wasn't as strong or sturdy as most men, so Amane knew he had to take good care of her.

He did know being swaddled was not what Mahiru wanted, so he wanted to treat her with care in a way that made it easy for her to live while respecting her free will. He wanted to be certain he never made Mahiru cry. Amane intended to make her happy for the rest of his life.

When he murmured that with determination, Mahiru blushed even redder than Amane had ever made her blush before and responded quietly, "Th-thank you... Even though it's your birthday, Amane, I feel like I'm the only one getting presents."

"No, I've gotten more than enough already! Besides, the date just changed over."

He had received so many gifts from Mahiru, and his desire to treasure her came from the bottom of his heart, so surely it wasn't anything Mahiru had to worry about.

Besides, before he knew it, the date had already changed. His birthday was over.

It seemed quite some time had passed without them noticing while they had been cuddling and kissing on the sofa and the bed. His birthday had been over too soon, but Amane was confident he had received more than enough happiness for one day.

“You’re right. Aw, I was hoping you would ask me for a few more things.”

“The time really flew by. I guess I can’t expect you to listen to any more of my requests, huh?”

“Well, tell me what you were planning to ask for.”

“...I wanted a kiss from you before we went to bed.”

They had just been kissing earlier, but that had come from Amane. It was very rare for Mahiru to initiate. She was even more bashful than he was, after all. She seemed to like the kissing itself, but unfortunately, she also seemed embarrassed by it, which led to her almost never being the one to kiss him.

Since this was a special occasion, he wanted Mahiru to kiss him the way she wanted to kiss him, and since it was his birthday, he figured he would try asking for something he would be embarrassed to ask anyone else for.

He thought it was fine to ask, but for some reason, Mahiru was making an awkward, slightly exasperated expression.

“...You really don’t ask for much, do you, Amane? I thought I could get you to beg me for something bigger.”

“When I’m this satisfied, I don’t know what more I could ask for. You celebrated the day I was born, and you’re beside me, giving me your warmth like this. That’s already enough. I’m not saying I don’t have any other desires, just that I’m satisfied for now.”

“...In that case, I’ll be greedy.”

“You will?”

Amane had always thought *greed* was a word that was far removed from Mahiru, but Mahiru nodded with an earnest look on her face, then frowned intensely.

“Listen, the truth is that now that you’re working, I’m always lonely and

wondering if you might come home early. I also worry about you being approached by other girls. You're so cool, so I don't know what to do if you become popular. I have no intention of interfering with something you want to pursue, and I'm not worried about you cheating, but I do get anxious. I constantly find myself hoping you won't go."

Mahiru grumbled about not wanting to stand in Amane's way and pressed her face into his chest.

"I don't want you to leave me, and I want you to touch me more. I want you to be by my side, always and forever... And I think the part of me that wants those things is greedy and overbearing."

His mouth seemed ready to curve into a smile against his will at the sentiment she expressed.

That was how much Mahiru cared for him, how much she treasured him, and how much she loved him. She wanted to be by his side forever.

Amane realized he was incredibly blessed.

As he chuckled a little at Mahiru, who had described her intense feelings of love as greed, he squeezed her with his arm around her back.

"...I'm just guessing here, but I'd say I'm needier than you are, Mahiru. Much needier than you think."

Mahiru had called herself greedy, but if that was true, then Amane was far greedier. Because he never intended to leave her.

If it would make Mahiru truly happy, he could probably convince himself to swallow his bitter tears and part with her, but unless that happened, he never intended to leave her. He would make her happy himself and spare no effort to do so.

He didn't mean to shift the responsibility onto Mahiru by saying he was doing it all for her sake. Amane had decided on his own that he wanted to make her happy, and he had chosen to put in all the effort, living his life while holding on to so much love he could hardly carry it all.

"I'm just as needy in love as everyone else in my family, you see. I don't think

I'm likely to be the exception. Though I think that probably hasn't sunk in for you yet, Mahiru. It's not the kind of neediness that constrains you, but my feelings for you are wide and deep. I'm never going to be able to let you go. I don't want you to have eyes for anyone but me... So sometimes I wonder what I'll do if you ever get sick of me."

Amane knew how much he needed Mahiru.

Since treating this as a casual relationship would have been rude toward Mahiru, he had pursued a serious relationship with the intention of staying together for life. Still, from an outside perspective, it probably looked too serious. They had promised to spend their long lives together while they were still in high school. That was as serious as it got.

And yet, Mahiru smiled joyfully. She gave him a happy-looking, soft smile.

"If that's how much love I'm getting, then I think I'm a fortunate girl. Don't you think it's ideal for you to hold on to me and never let go, and to only have eyes for me?"

"Are you really sure?"

"I am... I will never let you go again, Amane, so the feeling is mutual. I'm absolutely never going to let you take your eyes off me, okay?"

He could hardly believe she had said such a thing, but Amane nodded in agreement, and Mahiru smiled contentedly and shifted just a little closer to him.

There was a mischievous smile on Mahiru's lovely face.

"I'll give myself to you, Amane, so please give yourself to me, too, okay?"

She whispered to him passionately, and the remaining distance between them evaporated. Their faces were close enough that their breaths intertwined, and there was nothing between them when they made contact.

Even though they just touched their lips together gently, even though it was that kind of kiss, Amane felt a burning passion. And yet, there was a pleasant calmness to it that combined security and elation that warmed his chest.

Even though the kiss only lasted for a few seconds, Amane felt a sense of

satisfaction that was entirely unlike when they kissed deeply, and when his eyes met Mahiru's, he smiled.

He was sure both of them only had eyes for the other. He didn't have to worry at all.

"...Good night, Amane. Sweet dreams."

"Good night, Mahiru."

Mahiru clung to him and melted into a smile that seemed to say he belonged to her, and Amane returned a gentle smile as his eyes softly drifted closed.



Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up a copy of this book.

My name is Saekisan, the author. I trust you enjoyed Volume 8 of *The Angel Next Door*?

That is to say, how did you find this volume, which started with Miss Mahiru's unbelievable conduct?

We have Mahiru, who, as a girl, wants Amane to love her and desire her, and Amane, who is dragging his feet because he wants to treasure Mahiru.

Since Amane is fundamentally the type of person who wants the one he loves to be as happy as possible and who wants to cherish her with great care, he likes to be cautious. It's impressive he was able to endure her advances...I think. You get to decide whether he's a weakling or a gentleman.

Well, after holding out, he might be in for a rough time in another year or so, I imagine, as if I'm not the one who's responsible. Of course, as the writer, I want to describe every day of their lives.

Also, Amane has started a part-time job for the sake of his vow. Since he's good at juggling lots of things, I think he'll do a fine job of handling his studies, work, and training all at the same time. He's got a different kind of vitality when compared with the Amane at the beginning.

Keep on working hard, Amane, for Mahiru, and for yourself.

And once again, Hanekoto drew some amazing illustrations for this volume. I also want Mahiru to make me a meal... Grilled salmon, rolled omelets, and all the rest. Doesn't that just sound like the best breakfast ever...?

Every time we add another volume, Mahiru's smiling face becomes softer and reveals more of her emotions. It's truly adorable. The illustrations for the special edition are also outrageously cute, yet they also have this sexiness to them that is out of this world.

By the way, I was the one who chose the picture of her in her boyfriend's shirt out of several contenders. Yes. That's what I like. I can't help it.

When I think about the fact that the anime will be starting around the time this volume goes on sale, I start trembling with fear, and the pressure gives me a stomachache, but when I realize I'll get to see Mahiru and the others in motion, I can't hold back my excitement.

I think every author would be delighted if they got to enjoy their work as an anime!

Now, we've reached the end, but I still need to thank everyone who has helped me.

To the head editor who worked so hard to get this book published, to everyone in the editing department at GA Books, to everyone in the sales department, to the proofreaders, to Hanekoto, to everyone in the print shop, and to all of you who picked up a copy—truly, thank you so much.

Let's meet again in the next volume.

Thank you very much for reading to the end!

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