

THERE'S
NO WAY

A SIDE

CHARACTER LIKE ME

COULD BE
POPULAR
RIGHT?

3

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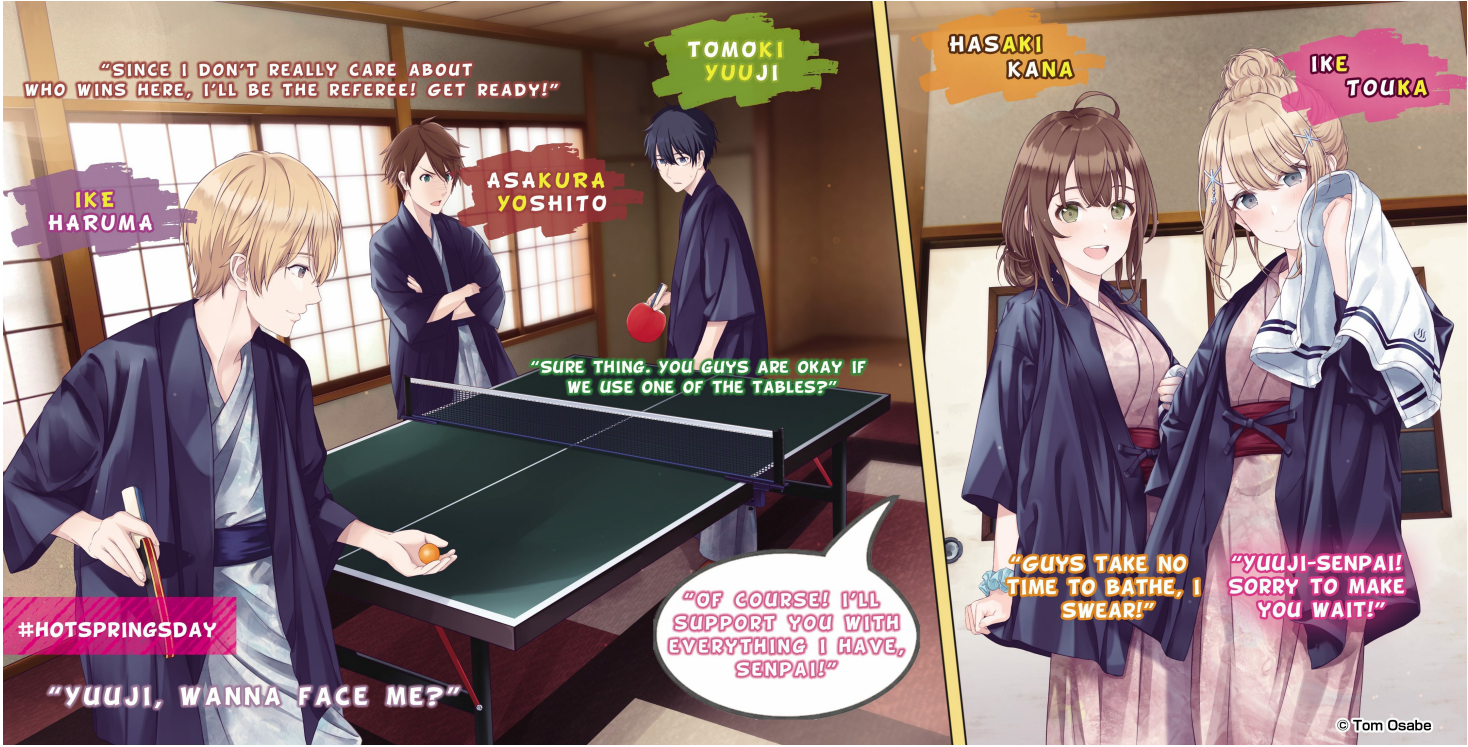


“Your back is so wide, Tomoki-kun.
it reminds me of my father’s.
When I was still very small,
we would take baths together
and I would wash his back.”



“I wish I could’ve become a proper adult.
Someone with more... emotion, I suppose.
Someone who’s gentler with others.
Do you know what I mean?”

#OPENINGTOEACHOTHER



#LOVECONFESSION?!

MAKIRI
CHIAKI

IT CAN'T BE... DID MY TEACHER JUST CONFESS
HER LOVE FOR ME? BUT I'M HER STUDENT!

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Chapter One

There's Seriously No Way a Side Character Like Me Could be Popular, Right?

My life so far hasn't been the greatest. I guess it's because I look like I'm constantly out for blood. That, coupled with my less-than-stellar social skills, means people have pretty much always avoided me like the plague. Because of that, it's been incredibly rare to find someone who actually has the guts to approach me.

Even the first friend I ever made way back when I was a kid ended up vanishing from my life without a trace. This kinda thing kept happening for so long that, at some point in my life, I just kinda gave up on making friends.

But hey, at least things are different now.

Ever since I started high school, I became friends with Haruma Ike—the *real* protagonist of our story. I mean, the guy is basically a god. He's handsome, athletic, and super friendly. It's no wonder he's the most popular guy in school. And since I've become his buddy, my life has taken a complete 180. Things are finally starting to look up.

I also got to know Ike's little sister, Touka, who's developed a bit of an inferiority complex over the years because of her brother's success. Can you blame her, though? I'd also be suffering big time if my brother happened to be outstanding at pretty much everything he did.

Our relationship got off to a rocky start, mostly because we pretended to get together in order to ward off all the guys at school. Over time, though, I believe that our relationship has deepened enough to say that we're now very close friends. At the very least, I consider Touka a person I can confide in.

Also, remember that first friend? The one that had vanished from my life? Yeah. His name was Natsuo, and it turns out that he had never really

disappeared at all! It also turned out that *he* is actually a *she*, and her name's Kana Hasaki.

And if you think my life couldn't get any more chaotic, you won't believe what I'm gonna tell you next. Just a little while ago, she actually confessed her feelings for me! Surprised? Yeah, that was how I felt, too. Although I wasn't able to return her feelings because of my situation with Touka, I'm happy that she mustered the courage to tell me.

Those three aren't the only ones I've gotten closer to recently, though.

I happen to help Ike with his student council responsibilities from time to time, and it's led me to get better acquainted with other members of the council. There's Tanaka and Suzuki—both my seniors—and a guy from my class called Asakura Yoshito, who simply helps out like I do. He was obviously terrified of me at first, but I quickly dissipated any doubts he had. Now, we get along just fine.

There's also Kai Rekka. He hated my guts at first, but after a fight, we managed to sort out our differences and became friends.

Last but not least, there's another special figure who I need to mention. She's been a great help in my life. In fact, I can safely say I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her. She's stuck her neck out for me and saved my butt on numerous occasions, so I really owe her. Her name is Chiaki Makiri, and she just so happens to be a teacher at my school.

Thanks to all of these people, I can proudly say that my time at highschool is far from the worst. In fact, I'm quite enjoying myself now.



The final exams are pretty much over, and summer is looming on the horizon. Actually, it's pretty warm outside right now, despite it being the evening.

I'm currently in the middle of a conversation with Makiri-sensei.

"What's... with..." she mumbles.

She's wearing her usual attire, but I can't help but notice that a few of the buttons on her shirt are unfastened, allowing me to catch a glimpse of her pale,

milky skin. Oh, crap—I hope she didn't notice that. I'll look away and pretend like I didn't see anything.

Wait, uh, what was she saying? She spoke so quietly that I couldn't make her out.

“Uhh, sorry. Could you repeat that one more time?” I ask.

In response, her cheeks flush a bright crimson, and she begins to tear up slightly.

Wait a second... You can't be serious! Is she actually going to confess her love to me? But I'm her student, and she's my teacher!

Hold on, I seriously need to cool it. Kana's confession was certainly unexpected—in fact, I bet it was something completely out of the norm. I'm the side character here, remember? I shouldn't be on the receiving end of any confessions, much less from my teacher of all people. But if that's not what she's going for, then why's she acting so weird? What could possibly be making her all flustered?

Okay, no more fooling around. Snap back to reality. I look her in the eyes and wait for her to finish.

After a long, awkward moment of silence, she shouts at the top of her lungs. “I'll say it again! What's wrong with me being a virgin?!”

“I... I don't think there's anything wrong with that,” I whisper in return, unable to say anything else.

I'm the side character of this story, right? That means any semblance of popularity with girls *should* be out of the question. But... I'd be lying if I said that I didn't feel utterly perplexed when Makiri-sensei decided to confide something so personal to me.

Chapter Two

Asakura's Wrath

It's already June, and the rainy season's about to end.

School is finally over for the day. As I look out the window, I see a beautiful summer day is waiting for me—seriously, the sun's shining, and there's not a single cloud in sight.

"Senpaaai! I don't get this part! Can you help me?"

Remember when I mentioned a little while ago that our midterms were finally over? Well, now we have to deal with finals. It's a damn shame, really—it's so nice out, yet we're cooped up in some family restaurant for a study meeting.

Touka's sitting right next to me, speaking in that fake sugary voice she's so good at whenever she wants to get my attention.

"Uh, let me see... Okay, so what you have to do here is..."

Although Touka is no slouch when it comes to academics, I still have a slight advantage because I'm a year older. That means I'm at least a little more familiar with what she needs to tackle for her own exam. My grades were decent last year, so I think I can be of some help.

"Oh, I get it now! You're the greatest tutor ever, Senpai!"

Nah, Touka, it's more like you're a genius. I wasn't really confident in my explanation, but she picked up the concept like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Wouldn't expect any less from my boo!" she exclaims with a wink.

We're still faking a relationship currently, so everything she's doing is just an act. She needs to make sure everyone around us believes that we're a real couple. Actually, I'm pretty sure there's another reason she's doing all of this. A little while ago, she basically forbade me from getting a girlfriend—obviously

because it would get in the way of our current “relationship.” And as a result, she declared that she’d try her hardest to make me fall for her. That way, I wouldn’t be interested in any other girls.

So yeah, that’s why she’s amped up the flirtation recently.

“Hey, Yuuji-kun. This part isn’t making any sense to me. Could you lend me a hand over here?” Kana says, leaning over from her seat and placing a hand on my lap to get my attention.

“Hm? Where?” I ask.

“Uhh, here. You see...”

I proceed to explain the problem to her, but she doesn’t catch on as quickly as Touka did. When I notice her continuing to struggle, I go over it with her again.

“Okay, now I get it! Thank you, Yuuji-kun!” she exclaims brightly.

“Nah, don’t sweat it. It’s a good way for me to review, as well.”

It’s a good thing Ike’s here, just in case I wasn’t able to answer her question. He’s sitting right next to Kana on the other side of the table. As I look at him, he quickly meets my eyes and gives me a gentle smile.

I’d definitely have a crush on him if I were into guys. He’s *that* good-looking.

“Hehe! You’re just such a nice, handsome, smart, and dependable guy, Yuuji-kun. You’ve got me head over heels for you!” Kana gushes.

“*Tch*,” Touka clicks her tongue in annoyance. As you can see, Kana’s definitely the reason Touka’s been trying extra hard to win me over recently.

Let’s rewind for a minute—Kana confessed to me a little while ago, and while I did reject her, I also kind of ended up encouraging her to pursue the object of her affections—i.e. me. I didn’t realize she was talking about *me* back then, remember? I thought she had something going on for Haruma! Well, at any rate, the damage has already been done. Ever since that day, Kana’s been flirting with me relentlessly.

“Umm, excuse me, Hasaki-senpai? Could you please stop ogling my boo in that, like, super slutty way of yours? And if you’re gonna flirt with him, could you at least *try* to be original? I’ve already told him all that before,” Touka spits

out with a sour face.

“Whoaaa. You’re scaring me a little bit, Touka-chan. I didn’t know you were the dominatrix type! And here I thought you were a little less high-strung around your partners, but I guess I was wrong,” Kana retorts.

“Huh?! *Dominatrix*?! Well, I’m sorry to break the news to you, *Mister* Natsuo, but Senpai never loved you and never will. Kindly screw off, ‘mkay?”

“H-Hey! He might’ve confused me for a guy back then, but things are different now! I could steal him from you any day of the week!”

Oh right, I forgot to remind you—I’ve known Kana ever since we were little. We used to play together during summer vacation, back when she looked more like a boy and called herself Natsuo. Up until very recently, I never would’ve imagined Natsuo was actually a girl, let alone one of the most beautiful and popular ones at our school.

“Screw you and your saggy grease sacks...” Touka mutters under her breath, a vein practically popping on her forehead.

“Hm? Did you say something?” Kana asks, unable to hear her.

Huh? Saggy grease sacks? I look over at Touka and catch her glaring at Kana’s chest. Oh. *Ohhhh*.

“I don’t get it—why don’t you just ask my brother for help instead of bugging my boyfriend about it? My brother’s *literally* right beside you, y’know? Stop bothering my sweetheart, thanks,” Touka shouts.

In response, Kana lowers her head and places her hands on top of mine, making me jump a little in surprise. “If Yuuji-kun told me I was being a bother, then I wouldn’t ask him—but he hasn’t said that, has he? Besides, I’d really like it if he could teach me *more*... both with my studies, and with love, if you know what I mean,” Kana says quietly, squeezing my hand with a passionate look.

“Just have my brother help you out with that if you’re so freakin’ desperate, you little...!” Touka shouts while slapping her hands away from mine.

As you can see, I’m in the middle of a sticky situation right now. And whether I like it or not, I’m the main cause of it all. I glance to my side, where Asakura is

trembling in his seat. I feel for the guy—I'd be pretty pissed as well if I came here to study and couldn't concentrate because of these two.

I take a deep breath and decide to put an end to their quarrel. "Touka, Kana, just a sec."

"What is it, Yuuji-kun?"

"What's up, Senpai?"

They both answer with a bright smile in my direction.

I need to set them straight. Otherwise, this is going to end badly. "We came here to study, not to shout at each other. If you're not going to stop, please just leave," I scold them, the discontent obvious in my voice.

"I'm sorry, Senpai. It won't happen again," Touka quickly apologizes, catching on to my bad mood.

"Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry too," Kana adds while sticking her tongue out.

They're not being genuine, are they? Oh, well. As long as they shut up, hopefully Asakura will have some peace of mind while he studies.

"But why?!" he suddenly cries out, slamming his hands on the table.



Damn, did I intervene too late? He looks like he's reached his limit. Wait... why is he glaring at *me*?

"Why don't any girls go after *me*?!" he cries in agony. "I... I rise up against this injustice! Ike's always surrounded by girls wherever he goes, and you've got two of the most popular girls in the entire school fighting over you! What about *meee*?!"

And with that little outburst out of the way, he goes quiet and gazes lifelessly into the distant horizon, his eyes empty and cold. What is he even looking at?

I wish I knew what to say right now. To be honest, I've always thought he has all the makings of being popular with the ladies. He's got a great, cheerful personality, he's a really outgoing guy, and he's in the volleyball club at school. I'm sure there's *someone* out there who's interested in him—he just hasn't realized it yet. I doubt it would do him any good to hear this from me, though. To him, I've got my "girlfriend" and Kana as some sort of side chick.

Hmm... Yeah, I don't think saying anything would make things better. I'll just keep my mouth shut.

"I'm sure that eventually, you'll find that special someone," Kana suddenly consoles him.

"Yeah, you've definitely got the looks. It's only a matter of time!" Touka exclaims.

Their comments manage to calm him down and make him blush. "Oh, really...?" he replies bashfully as he fidgets slightly. "Actually, if you guys don't mind, what would you consider my strong points?"

"I think it's admirable that you're not afraid of Yuuji-kun!" Kana compliments him.

"I really like that you're Yuuji-senpai's friend!" Touka adds cheerily.

Their comments don't appear to help. The light in Asakura's eyes extinguishes one more, and he turns his attention to Ike. "Please, Ike, help me with my studies. I may lose when it comes to girls, but I'll make him pay during the exams."

Huh? Why did he glare at me when he said that last bit? Not gonna lie, I'm feeling a little threatened right now.

"You look like you're ready to take on anything, so of course I'll help. Touka, Kana, no more fighting, okay?" Ike says with a gentle smile.

Neither of the girls seem to appreciate his call for a truce, as both of them are coming across as pretty upset right now.

"Dammit, he's mad at us now. Yuuji-senpai, it's not too late to call the police on Hasaki-senpai. I mean, she's clearly harassing you. You could have her sent to jail so we never have to see her again," Touka whispers to my ear.

"Clearly, Asakura-kun wouldn't be so mad at us if you were my boyfriend already. Yuuji-kun, you meanie," Kana leans over and whispers in my other ear.

Their words and warm breaths tickle my ears, causing me to tremble a little.

I glance over at Asakura again. Hold up, is it just me, or does he look like he wants to murder me right now? *Sigh*, it's no wonder he's so pissed, what with the way these two are all over me.

Chapter Three

Checking Out the School Rankings

A few days have passed since our “explosive” study session at the family restaurant.

Exams are finally over, our tests have been returned, and the overall results have been posted on a bulletin board for the world to see. Teachers I’ve passed have displayed mixed reactions. Some were delighted about their students’ results, while others... well, you get the idea.

Anyway, since the results are published on a single bulletin board, everyone in the school is ranked together. Obviously, those with the highest scores stick out from the crowd, so everyone’s eager to find out where they stand. I am too, but since I don’t exactly wanna make everyone shit their pants and ruin their day, I always wait a bit before checking my grades. By the time I arrive, the crowd’s already disappeared—perfect.

For these finals, I had Ike help with my studies. I know my grades were pretty damn good, so I’m curious to see where I’m positioned this time. Last time, I managed to place in the top 10. I’m thinking I might’ve been able to break into the top five with some luck on this occasion. Let's see...

“Damn, Asakura’s in fifth.”

If I’m remembering correctly, his score was pretty average during midterms, but I guess his competitive, tryhard nature paid off. Plus, he’d studied with Ike specifically for these exams. Impressive. Makes me wonder why he didn’t care much about studying last time—I mean, he could easily stay in the top ranks with a little more effort.

“But in the end, it doesn’t even matter...” someone mutters behind me.

I whip around in surprise and find Asakura leaning against the wall beside me, mumbling bitterly to himself.

“Where the hell did you come from?” I ask.

“I was waiting for you to check your ranking so we could compare how we did.”

“Oh, okay. Well, it definitely seems like you’re gonna win this one. Guess I should be congratulating you, dude. You did great.”

He’s been giving it his all ever since that study meet. He totally deserves the victory.

“Oh, but have I now? *Sigh...*” he says while rolling his eyes.

“Yeah. I mean, I might’ve been able to study more since I’m not in a club, but there’s no way I could ever top that. Fifth place is really something.”

He chuckles. Did I say something funny? I don’t really know what he’s getting at here, but he’s pointing at the billboard again. Maybe I’m missing out on something?

“I lost, dude,” Asakura states simply.

I check the billboard again. Looks like I ended up in second place. *Oh.*

“So that explains your reaction... Ouch.”

It wasn’t my intention to sound like a giant asshole before, but that’s definitely how I came across. I just assumed I’d never make in the top five, much less in second.

“You did it, dude. You’re the school’s number one,” he says, trying to seem like he’s not upset.

“Okay, Veyeeta. We all know Gok—I mean, uh, Ike is number one. Always was, always will be.”

“He doesn’t count because he’ll always be at the top. If we rule him out, then technically you’re the best,” he mutters before quickly turning around to return to class.

God, I really hope he doesn’t hold this against me. Seriously, I didn’t mean anything bad by that.

“Hey, Yuuji-kun! Here you are! We were wondering why you weren’t coming

back to class!” a familiar voice cries out.

“I was just checking the rankings,” I reply.

Huh, I didn't know Kana and Ike were looking for me, as well. Well, at least I won't be alone.

“I checked a little while ago myself. Congrats on second place!” Kana exclaims with a cheery grin and a thumbs up. “No one could ever hope to surpass Haruma, so that would make you number one right now!”

Wow, talk about déjà vu; Asakua just told me the exact same thing. Guess everyone already assumed that Ike would be number one. Can't say I blame 'em.

“Thanks, but credit where credit is due—it's all thanks to Ike that I managed to get to where I am right now, after all.”

“Well, that doesn't change the fact that you took time out of your day to help Touka, Kana, and others who needed help. No need to underplay your accomplishments! Seriously, I think you're amazing—getting second place is nothing short of praiseworthy!” Ike adds.

I still think *your* accomplishments should be acknowledged more, Ike—this is the guy who's been the unsurmountable champion ever since he's arrived at this school. That's something.

“People with good grades are so cool! I mean, Haruma's just on a whole 'nother level entirely, but you're still super great, Yuuji! I really mean it!” Kana gushes.

I don't know if I'm supposed to be encouraged or insulted by that, but I'll smile so she doesn't suspect anything. And as much as I'd love to continue to talk to these two, I can see a girl waiting patiently in the corner. She clearly wants to look at the results, but I'm positive she's not coming over because of me. I should leave.

“Let's head back to class,” I speak up.

“Actually, I gotta go to the teacher's room to get some papers for the next class. You two head back without me,” Ike mentions right as I'm about to leave.

“You don’t need me to lend you a hand or anything?” I ask.

“Nah. It’s just a bunch of papers. I’ll manage,” he blurts out while rushing toward the teacher’s room.

“There he goes,” I say as his figure quickly leaves our sight.

“And now we’re all alone. Just you and me,” Kana murmurs with her trademark puppy eyes.

Too bad she hasn’t noticed that we’re actually *not* alone—someone else has just arrived.

“You are Yuuji Tomoki, correct? May I have a moment of your time?” the newcomer—that girl in the corner—asks.

At first, I’d assumed she just wanted to check out the bulletin board, but was too afraid to. However, I quickly realize that I don’t recognize her at all, so I have no idea where her courage to approach me is coming from. I feel so lost right now.

“Uhh, sure,” I reply hesitantly.

She sighs in relief. Based on her appearance, from her prim posture to her well-kempt black hair, she looks to be from a high-class family. She just has that air about her.

“I should introduce myself. My name is Otome Tatsumiya.”

She’s not scared of me? Well, that’s already praiseworthy. She’s got major guts.

I nod without saying a word.

“Could I possibly trouble you with a brief chat?” she asks with a smirk.

“Sure. What’s up?”

Before Otome can answer, however, Kana suddenly interrupts us.

“There’s not much time left before our next class, Tatsumiya. Are you okay with that?”

Now that she mentions it, yeah, there’s only about five or six minutes left at most. Whatever she wants to talk to me about, she’ll have to get it in quick. I

can't imagine it'll be a long conversation, though.

"Yes, Hasaki, there should be more than enough time. I would simply like to ask him one simple question."

These two are clearly familiar with each other for some reason.

"You know her?" I whisper to Kana.

In reply, she flinches, blushes, and covers her ears. "Y-You can't just whisper sweet little nothings like that out of nowhere! You're gonna make my heart explode!"

That wasn't my intention, but I'm definitely in the wrong here. Damn, seeing her face turn 50 different shades of red is making me feel kinda awkward in a way.

"Sorry, I'll keep it in mind for next time. Anyway, you two know each other?"

Kana sinks into deep thought for a few seconds before she answers. "Yeah, she's the vice-president of the student council, and she always tends to be around Haruma. I've talked to her a couple of times."

"Oh, so she's the vice-president. Got it."

Still doesn't ring any bells, but I'll keep that in mind.

"I'm well aware of who you are. We've seen each other in the student council room a few times before, but—judging by your expression—I assume you don't remember," Tatsumiya quickly interjects. She clearly overheard me, but she's wearing a poker face. Well, it doesn't seem like she's mad at me for forgetting.

"Sorry, I'm terrible at remembering faces," I apologize.

That's actually a lie, but people usually freak out when I tell them I recognize them. After all, why would I remember them? What could I possibly be planning? In their minds, I've probably stuck them on some sort of mental shit-list.

"Actually, yeah—I guess it does ring a bell," I add. "Anyway, what did you want to talk about?"

"I wished to discuss the recent exam rankings. If I recall correctly, last year,

you placed in 10th. This year, you managed to achieve sixth place during our midterms. Now, you have managed to secure second place. It's clear you have always been a model student, but your scores this year have been... *exceptionally* exemplary. I was wondering if you could divulge your secret—how exactly did you improve so drastically?" she inquires with a sharp glare.

Her ice-cold tone and matching eyes pierce my soul, and I feel chills running down my body. It feels like I'm in the middle of an intense interrogation right now, rather than being asked a genuine question out of sheer curiosity. She can't seriously be insinuating I did *that*, right?

"Are you implying that I've cheated my way up?" I ask.

"What?! You can't be serious, Tatsumiya! Yuuji-kun would never do something like that!" Kana jumps in to defend my case.

Tatsumiya is initially taken aback by Kana's outburst, but quickly giggles.

"Why would I assume that in the first place?" she responds. "I have already established that you are no doubt a model student. I simply assumed that you might be attending a cram school of some sort, or that you had some other methods for studying. I'm just curious about the methods you used to improve so much, nothing more."

"Really? Because I feel like I'm being drilled right now, if I'm being honest with you," I follow. I know I shouldn't be assuming the worst here, but her expression tells me she's pretty ticked off by whatever I've done. What else should I conclude here, other than that she's clearly lying to me?

"I-I apologize for that," she stammers, finally looking away. "I will admit that I've been trying to hide my discontent with the current state of the rankings. No doubt that is why I sounded as though I was displeased with you."

"Why would you be mad at me in the first place?" I ask.

She looks at my eyes again, blushes slightly, and smiles.

"Ever since I was accepted into this school, my aim has always been to best the Council President. Unfortunately, my efforts last year were in vain. I was convinced that this year would be different, but now I see that even you have surpassed me. Because of that, I was hoping for some advice on improving my

academic results and overcoming this hurdle.”

Oh, so that’s why she’s pissed. She just doesn’t want to admit that I’ve done better than her despite her hard work. I feel for her—she’s clearly put a lot of effort into scoring as high as she did.

“Up until now, Tatsumiya has always been the best in the school’s rankings... if we don’t count Haruma, anyways. You overtook her this time,” Kana whispers to me.

It really grates on my nerves when everyone dismisses Haruma’s achievements so easily. Like, they just automatically assume that he’ll always be the best. Can’t he get some recognition from time to time?

“Well, I’ll fill you in on what I did. There isn’t really anything to hide, after all,” I answer.

Her face brightens the moment I agree to collaborate with her. “You will?!”

“Yeah. Like I said, I’ve got nothing to hide. My grades have gotten better thanks to Ike’s help. That’s basically it.”

“Thanks to the President? Could you elaborate?” she asks.

“He’s been helping me out with studying since the last midterms. At first, I never bothered asking for help, especially with the questions I had problems with. Obviously, that also meant I never got any better at them. Ever since I started asking Ike for help, I’ve been able to understand the material that totally stumped me before and lowered my grades. Plus, he has this really efficient way of doing things—it meshes really well with my study methods. That’s why I’ve managed to improve.”

“You... You’ve been studying with the president after school hours?! Agh, I wish I could have him for myse—I mean, I see! So you have your own efficient means of studying, but you seek his aid when you come across difficult questions you have trouble understanding. Is that correct?”

Huh, she lost her composure for a moment there. She’s clearly got a crush on him. Good for Ike—he’s a ladies man through and through, even if he never intended for that to be the case.

“Yep, you got it,” I answer.

She nods. “Unfortunately, that is not a method I could utilize.”

“Why not? Unless you’re actively trying to avoid him, for whatever reason, I’m sure he’d lend you a hand. All you need to do is ask him.”

The moment I propose the idea, she smiles, but it’s obvious she’s forcing it. “It would be strange and rather tactless if I asked for his help simply so I could best him, would it not?”

Now I get why she waited for Ike to leave before she approached us. I thought she was scared of me, but actually, she was embarrassed to ask me this with him around. That actually puts me at ease. Even Kana looks satisfied with her answer.

“Sadly, I can’t really help you out apart from that,” I reply with the same forced smile.

She reminds me of Kana, in a way: she’s a girl who hates losing against others, especially when it comes to whatever she’s put her mind into. I can really sympathize with her because of that.

Tatsumiya bows slightly to conclude our conversation. “Well then, I must take my leave. I bid you farewell. Until the next time, Tomoki and Hasaki.”

She turns around and starts heading back to her own class. Wait a second, “until the next time”? Does she plan on talking to us again or something?

“She’s quite beautiful, isn’t she?” Kana whispers.

“Yeah, she’s cute,” I reply. I’d be lying if I said otherwise, regardless of who’s asking me.

“Um... What do you think of girls like her, Yuuji?” she asks in a low voice, somewhat downtrodden.

Well, honesty is the best policy. Hopefully, she doesn’t hate me after I share my opinion.

“Well, I’d say you’re in a league of your own—I mean, you’ve got guys from all over the school after you. You’re super cheerful and friendly to everyone. Your warm personality is what makes you attractive, in my opinion. Meanwhile, she’s

attractive in a kind of... unconventional way. She's colder and way more polite, so she gives off a totally different vibe. Like, this has to be the first time I've seen someone our age unironically say 'farewell' instead of goodbye. It kinda surprised me."

Rather than freak out and roast me, like I expected, she blushes even harder than before and starts trembling slightly.

"Hey, you okay?!" I cry.

"H-How can I be okay?!" she mumbles frantically. "How can I be okay after you told me I was attractive?! I never knew you saw me like that!"

Oh, wait... Did I accidentally say something embarrassing? Now that I think about it, I might've. Shoot.

"Uhh, sorry about that. Forget what I said," I blurt out.

"Oh, no, I'll never forget it. Never. *EVER*," she boldly declares as she locks her eyes with mine. She smiles and sighs lightly in relief. "That's good to know, though. I guess I shouldn't be too worried about her."

How am I supposed to react in this situation? Someone help me... I don't want to make things worse, so I'll just clam up for now.

"Wanna go back to class?" I suggest, trying to change the topic while also attempting to rid what she just said from my mind. Smooth, Yuuji. Real smooth.

"Yup. We'd better hurry up, or we're going to be late."

We quickly head back to our class, making it back just before the bell rings.

Chapter Four

Receiving Counsel

The bell rings, signaling the end of the morning classes. Makiri-sensei asks the class reps to go through the usual routine—you know, stand up and bow so everyone can leave.

“Okay, everyone, we’re done for today,” she finishes, then promptly leaves the class.

I gather my things and quickly get on my way, as well. As soon as I step out of the class, though, I find myself face-to-face with Makiri-sensei. Once she notices me, her face lights up—as if she’s just remembered to tell me something.

“Good timing, Tomoki,” she says. “There’s something I’d like to talk to you about. Could you make some time for me later today?”

“Sure. I mean, if you’re free now, we could just do it here,” I suggest. I’d rather talk to her now and get it over with so it doesn’t take up my time after school.

“Hm...” she ponders for a bit. “Very well. In that case, would you mind following me to the teacher’s room? I have to go there anyway.”

“Sure thing.”

She smiles and quickly heads to the room.

As I follow her, I whip out my phone and send Touka a brief text, just in case she’ll end up worrying about me. “Got some stuff to do, don’t wait up.” If I don’t give her a heads up, and she doesn’t see me in class when she comes to fetch me for lunch, she’ll get really mad at me. Yeah, I learned that the hard way.

Almost immediately after, she sends me a reply. Well, it’s not so much a “reply” than one of those angry emojis, steam erupting from the tip of its red

face. She follows up with, “I’ll w8 4 u at the usual spot then! >:(”

God, how long does she take to read my messages? Two seconds? I answer with a simple, “Kay” and leave it there. I turn my phone off, which immediately makes me more aware of my surroundings—namely, how other students are looking at the two of us as we walk toward the teacher’s room.

“Hey, guys, you seein’ this?”

“Makiri-sensei’s called him to the student counseling room.”

“How many times has Tomoki gone there already? One of these days, he’s definitely gonna get expelled.”

I manage to catch brief snippets of gossip as I pass by. I can’t believe that I’m already a senior, and most people in this school are still scared shitless by me. Whenever I show up, I’m suddenly the topic of all their hushed conversations.

I realize that Makiri-sensei has stopped in her tracks—she must’ve heard them, too. She turns around to face a few of the hecklers and glares at them.

“Do you guys have any business with me or Tomoki, by any chance?” she asks in a stern tone.

“N-No, of course not...” one of the students stammers, clearly intimidated by her.

Her sharp glare and icy tone cause the students to recoil—it always slips my mind that she’s considered one of the scariest and strictest teachers here. She’s always been nice to me.

“Good. Hopefully I won’t catch you guys gossiping about others again.”

I hear the students breathe a collective sigh of relief when she turns on her heels and resumes walking away. Most of them are scared of her, and for good reason if her lecture was any indication. Still, she did it to protect me. I’m pretty happy about that, to be honest.

“What are you smiling about, Tomoki?” she suddenly asks.

“Was I?”

“You were,” she confirms with a nod.

I hadn't noticed that she'd looked back to check on me, or the fact that I'd been grinning. I feel like an open book whenever she's around.

"Sorry, please don't mind me," I mumble.

She tilts her head a little, but doesn't reply.

"So what did you want to talk about?" I ask.

"Your test results. You really outdid yourself this time, Tomoki, and I wanted to congratulate you. Getting second place is nothing to sneeze at," she says with a bright smile.

I am so confused right now. On one hand, it feels good to receive those compliments, but on the other, I feel kinda weirded out. I mean, did she pull me aside *just* to tell me that?

"Thanks. It's all because of Ike, if I'm being honest. He's the one who helped me get to where I am. So if you're going to praise anybody, it should be him."

The moment I mention his name, she looks at me with a puzzled expression, though. "He may be an excellent student, but that doesn't take away the merit of your own accomplishments. *You're* the one who got as far as you have through your own efforts. You should be proud of this achievement."

"True, but I feel like it's important to mention that my friends supported me. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't have been able to score as high. But yeah, I'll admit that personal effort is a very important factor, too. I mean, just look at Asakura—the guy worked his ass off, and he ended up in fifth place for these finals."

As soon as I bring up Asakura, her expression changes.

"I actually wanted to talk about him, as well," she says in a serious tone. "His marks have drastically improved over a very short period of time, and I feel that it was all thanks to Ike's recent intervention. It worries me that this may be my fault as a teacher—maybe I'm not doing enough for you guys?"

"I think he's improved so much recently because he's been very motivated to get better. Plus, Ike's on his case all day and helps him out. You shouldn't beat yourself up because of it, since it's not your fault, in my opinion."

She very clearly forces a smile in response. "Ike told me the exact same thing when I asked him about this."

"Huh. I didn't know you'd already talked to Ike about it," I reply.

"Indeed. I wanted to hear a different side of the story, because I already had a good idea about how you'd react. So I was seeking another perspective. Don't worry about it too much. I asked Asakura about it as well, if you're curious."

"Oh, okay. And what did he say? If you don't mind me asking, that is."

"At first, he simply told me that he wanted to be as good at his studies as you and Ike were. But after we talked a little more, he started going on this rant about the difference between the three of you. Apparently, you and Ike 'have girls constantly swarming around you day and night,' while he 'isn't so lucky.'"

"Did you even have an answer for that?" I ask, dumbfounded.

"Well... I told him that 'getting girls' shouldn't be his main focus."

"Wait, was that really the right thing to say?!" I suddenly blurt out, jumping to my feet. "Won't that just discourage him?!"

I thought I'd get reprimanded for my little outburst, but she just blushes and looks away instead. What on earth is going on in her head? I wish I could read her thoughts right now.

"Uhh, Makiri-sensei?" I ask.

She jumps in surprise, as if I'd just shaken her awake from a nap. "There's something else I'd like to discuss, actually," she suddenly mentions.

It's obvious she wants to move on from the previous topic. Okay, I won't say anything else; I'll hear her out.

"Something else? Sure, go ahead."

"It seems that you're becoming quite popular with some ladies, or, at least, that's what I managed to glean from one of Asakura's rants..." she trails off for a moment, looking straight into my eyes. "Perhaps I'm misunderstanding the situation, but aren't you still in that fake relationship with Touka? I've also noticed how you've grown to be awfully close to Hasaki."

If she were any other person, I'd understand if she had some sort of misconception about me "two-timing" with Touka and Kana. Fortunately, she knows my situation. If anything, she just appears confused about what's going on between us right now.

"Uh... let's just say that a lot of stuff's happened between us," I explained.

I wish I could delve further, but I can't really come up with anything else right now. As I rack my brain to think of a better way to explain the situation, Makiri-sensei suddenly stops in her tracks. It looks like we've arrived at the final destination. She begins to open one door after another, and as I follow suit, I get a sense of déjà vu. We're at the student counseling room. It's been a while since I've been here.

Makiri-sensei takes a seat, ponders her words for a brief moment, then asks, "If you don't mind, could you explain everything in detail?"

I'm confident she's someone I can trust—she'd never spill the beans about my fake relationship to anyone else. I'm also aware that she's just here to help, so it would be best if I fill her in on everything that's happened up until now.

So I recall all the various developments between me and Kana, starting from our childhood to her recent confession. Obviously, I skipped the small details—like how it's kind of my fault that I didn't realize who she was in love with before I gave her my support—but Makiri-sensei seems to understand pretty much everything I tell her.

"May I ask how you replied to her confession?"

"I rejected her."

"And why did you do that? I think she's a great girl in many respects."

"Well, mainly because of my relationship with Touka. It might be a sham, but I do cherish what we have going on right now. And as for Kana, I only see her as a friend. It would've been pretty shitty for me to accept her feelings with that in mind, to be honest. Plus, well... there's this other thing that I didn't realize back then, but now I do."

"And what would that be?"

Back when she had confessed, I had mostly focused on my feelings at the base level: how happy I had been, how horrible I would've felt if I had hurt her, and most of all...

"I was scared. I don't know why, exactly, but looking back, I'm positive that I definitely was."

Back then, I knew that I had nothing to fear if I rejected her straight up, but some sort of nagging anxiety had stopped me. I can't really explain why I'd felt that way, but it still bugs me to this day. My emotions are a mystery at times.

"Well, I've kept my eye on you for a year now, and I've learned about your circumstances, more or less, so I think I understand where this is coming from. In my opinion, you don't need to rush to reveal everything about yourself, or your feelings toward the situation. Eventually, you'll figure everything out. I'd recommend not giving it much thought, because you'll just end up stressing yourself out."

"Is that really how I should work things out?" I ask incredulously. I try to understand where she's coming from, but I'm not very successful.

She gives me a carefree smile—a rare sight from her—and teases me slightly. "You're at an age where your feelings are accentuated more than ever. In time, you'll learn to comprehend and control them better."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I'll try to not think about it for the time being."

"Good kid. Don't extend this to Hasaki, though—when it comes to her, being honest about your feelings is the best thing you can do," Makiri-sensei adds in a more serious tone.

"Absolutely," I agree.

"Very well. I'm sorry for taking so much of your time. You can go back to class now—it won't be long until the next period starts."

I nod and stand up, ready to leave. Unfortunately, we both happen to rise at the same time and end up standing uncomfortably close to each other.

We look each other in the eyes.

"Huh. I just realized you're wearing more makeup than usual," I note.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she replies with a trembling voice.



Fuck, I shouldn't have said that. Uhh, how do I make this sound less creepy?

"Sorry, I didn't mean anything bad by it. It's just, uh, you seem to be more tired than usual lately, so I'm assuming that's why you've put more makeup on. Are you doing okay?"

"Oh, so that's what it was. I'm fine. There's no need to worry about me," she assures me with a smile.

"That's exactly what a tired person would say."

Makiri-sensei looks surprised by my response.

"I'm fine, really. I'm just a bit tired because I had an argument with my father over the phone yesterday. That's all. You know... how family is. It's always the same wherever you go," she says, trying to force another smile.

Well, at least that was way more genuine than her previous attempt at putting me at ease. That's good. Makiri-sensei knows my family situation isn't the greatest either, so it's nice that she's able to be sincere with me like this.

"Yeah, I feel you," I answer with a nod.

With that, she turns around and heads for the exit. As she places her hand on the doorknob, she looks back to bid me farewell. "Mhm. I appreciate your trust in me, Tomoki. Thank you for confiding in me about your family and friends. I hope we can continue to chat like this."

"Sure."

I can tell something's really bugging her, but I doubt I have the answers she's seeking. What I *should* be taking away from this is that she genuinely cares about me—that much is obvious from our conversation today.

Chapter Five

A Trip to the Student Council Room

Once I'd finished speaking with Makiri-sensei, I headed straight to the roof so I could eat lunch with Touka. Then I had to endure a snoozefest of afternoon classes before our afternoon break finally arrived.

"Saw you following Makiri-sensei to the staff room earlier. Did something happen?" Asakura suddenly pops up next to me and asks in a worried tone.

"Oh, uhh, yeah. It wasn't anything serious. Don't sweat it," I reply.

He's probably worried about me because everyone at school has this image of Makiri being the toughest teacher around. I'm sure he believes that she called me in to give me the sermon of the century or something.

"Huh. Okay, if you say so, dude," Asakura replies, seemingly convinced by my short explanation. "Speaking of, she's pretty hot, but she gives off these, like, spooky vibes whenever she's around us. Makes me wanna stay the hell away from her, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I get why you think of her in that way. I think she's kind, though."

"I'll never understand why she doesn't scare you at all. Makes no sense to me. She always sounds so... cold, you feel me? Her poker face doesn't help either. It's like I can never tell what's going on in her head. Gives me chills just thinking about it."

"Is she really that scary?" I ask incredulously. Suddenly, I remember her going off on some students from another class just a few days ago. They'd looked dangerously close to crapping their pants.

"You should've heard the things she said when she called me in the other day. Ah, the memories..." Asakura recalls, closing his eyes and twisting his face into a grimace. This must have been the conversation that Makiri-sensei had mentioned earlier.

I wait silently for him to continue.

“You sure are sticking up for her, though,” he suddenly adds. “D’you like her or something? What, are you into women giving you death glares?”

“Nah, nothing like that.”

Asakura rubs his nose lightly in response and grins. “I... I actually wouldn’t mind being with her.”

“Oh, really?”

Well, this is unexpected. I guess rather than being worried about me, he was actually jealous? Maybe he wants to spend more time with her? I don’t really want him to take anything the wrong way, so I remain silent.

“Just picture it, dude—she’s probably the type who acts all cold and shit at first, but then she has those rare moments where she blesses you with an unforgettable smile. Ahh, perfect.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty nice when she does that,” I confirm.

He’s not wrong, but I do think he’s exaggerating a little bit. Her smile’s great and all, but I don’t think it’s as precious as he’s implying. Since I’m not really in the mood to argue with him or anything, I just go along with it.

“What are you guys talking about? What’s so ‘nice’?” Kana suddenly speaks up. Her desk is right next to ours, so it’s easy for her to jump into the conversation.

“Oh, we were talking about Makiri-sensei. She summoned Tomoki a little while ago,” Asakura answers.

“Really? Are you okay?” she asks me, clearly concerned. “All I know about her is that she’s pretty strict.”

“It was nothing bad. Don’t worry,” I answer with a wave of my hand.

“That’s nice to hear, but I am curious—what were you saying about her smile just now?” she continues.

She’s giving me a bright, cheery grin, but knowing Kana, she’s anything but happy right now. Things could get ugly really quickly depending on my answer.

Asakura, my friend, my fate rests in your hands. I quickly glance at him, hoping he understands my signal, and he smiles back at me. Good to know he has my back.

“Oh, that,” he quickly explains. “We were just talking about how even someone as cold as her probably has those moments where she smiles. Tomoki and I agreed that it would be pretty frickin’ amazing to see .”

Goddammit, Asakura. Way to add fuel to the fire.

“Oooh, so *that’s* what you’re into, Yuuji-kun? Interesting...” she says with a piercing look.

“Uhh, well, he might be exaggerating a bit,” I flounder.

“I find it funny how you’re always calling me ‘cute’ and ‘one of the prettiest girls in school,’ but you’re thinking the same thing about Makiri-sensei. Not to mention your relationship with Touka-chan. You sure like to keep your options open, huh?” she whispers.

Okay, we’re both screwed if we don’t do something here. I place my hand on Asakura’s shoulder—maybe *this time*, my silence can convey what’s needed.

“Huh. I figured she’d go all out on your ass for that, but for some reason, I feel like you got off lightly,” Asakura notes.

Wait, really?

“If you say so...”

He looks so miserable right now that I can’t bring myself to disagree.



Classes finally end. Just as I’m about to pack my things up and head home, Ike calls out to me.

“Hey, Yuuji, can you come to the student council room for a sec? I wanna talk to you about something.”

He probably wants me to lend him a hand with a few things. I’ll go, since it’s not like I have any other plans. As long as I let Touka know in advance, she usually doesn’t have any issues with it.

“Sure, dude.”

“Nice. Follow me,” he says with a smile and quickly leaves the class.

As I head to the council room, I fire off a quick message to Touka explaining that I’ll be doing some stuff over there.

“K Senpai, catch u there,” she replies.

“Guess Touka will be joining us,” I tell Ike as we walk toward the room.

He answers with a chuckle. Did I say something funny?

“Oh, don’t take it the wrong way,” he adds. “It just made me think about how well you two are getting along.”

I feel really embarrassed. I mean, he’s my friend. I know I should be more open with him about these things by now. It’s nice that he knows me well enough to be able to tell what I’m thinking about most of the time.

“I guess we do,” I answer, not really knowing how else to follow up.

After a while, we finally arrive at our destination. When we enter, we notice that both Tanaka-senpai, one of the secretaries, and Suzuki, the council’s accountant, are already there waiting for us.

“Hey, guys. How’s it going?” Ike asks.

“Yo,” they both answer at the same time.

These two don’t treat me like a freak show—unlike the rest of the school—so I’m cool with them.

““Sup,” I greet them.

“You two are here quite early. I heard that Tatsumiya will be running late today, but what about Taketori-senpai? Where is he?” Ike asks.

“He probably didn’t feel like hanging out today.”

“Yeeeah... I guess he’s not coming,” Ike says with a sigh.

I know pretty much everyone in the student council, but Tatsumiya was sort of the unfortunate exception because I couldn’t exactly recall her face properly. Other than that, this Taketori guy is the only person I’ve never seen.

“Oh well, it is what it is. Okay, once Touka arrives, I’ll explain why I called you guys in toda—” Ike begins, but is soon interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Come on in!” Suzuki calls out.

“Hey, guys! Is my boo here already? Yuuji-senpaaaaai!” Touka gushes as she bursts through the door.

“Yep, your boo’s here alright,” Ike says while trying his hardest to stifle a laugh.

The moment Touka spots me, she rushes over and plants herself next to me. “Looks like my brother managed to rope you in again, huh, Senpai? He’s such a meanie! How dare he steal our precious romantic time together, right?! But it’s okay, Senpai! I’m here now, and that’s all that matters! Here, I’ll give you a great big hug so you’re not sad anymore!”



What the fuck is she on about? Why's she stretching her arms out?

"Jeez, Senpai. Don't stare at me like that! You're gonna make me blush!" she practically squeals.

"*Siiigh*. Anyways, what are we here for again?" I ask Ike, wiping the past 10 seconds clean from my memory. Touka pouts slightly when I ignore her, but she quickly returns to normal.

"Okay, so check this out," Ike says while handing me a stack of papers stapled together. "Basically, at the beginning of every August, the members of the student council organize a short trip somewhere. *Originally*, the idea was that the trip would be a good opportunity for members to get to know each other better, discuss school-related matters, and brainstorm areas of improvement, but, in truth, it's just an excuse for everyone to have a little holiday."

"Huh. I didn't know that was a thing," I respond.

"It is, yeah," Suzuki answers with a nod.

"I'd like you to join us, Yuuji. You'd have to cover some of your own expenses, but they wouldn't be very high. What do you think?" Ike asks.

I glance at the papers he gave me, which contain a total based on the cost per person during last year's trip. Yeah, it's really not a lot, although money isn't my issue anyway.

"And you're okay with me joining, even though I'm not a part of the council?"

Ike nods. "Mhm. I asked our supervisor, and she said you can come as long as you're cool with it. Same goes for Touka, too."

"Huh? Why me?" Touka blurts out, clearly surprised.

"You and Yuuji have been helping us out quite a bit. He's been lending a hand since last year, and you started pitching since the first school study meet, remember? Technically, the trip's meant to discuss the betterment of the school, so people outside of the council can join—especially if they've collaborated with us and wanna see the school improve. We made exceptions last year, as well. I don't see why you guys can't be a part of it if you really want to."

Oh, it happened last year, too? I understand now.

“Well, no pressure,” he assures us. “Take a few days to sleep on it before you get back to me.”

“Senpai, we gotta go on that trip!” Touka blurts out as soon as Ike’s finished speaking.

“You sure seem eager about all this,” I note.

“C’mon! It sounds fun, doesn’t it? What, you don’t wanna?”

“I guess you’re right,” I admit after a pause to think it over. “It does sound cool. So yeah, we’ll tag along if you guys don’t mind.”

Ike lets out a sigh of relief. What, did he really think I’d refuse his offer or something? “Nice! That’s fantastic to know. I’ll give you the details in a couple of days. Do you mind waiting till then?”

“We’re gonna have a good time, I’m sure of it,” Tanaka-senpai says.

“Yeah! I can’t wait for this trip, to be honest,” Suzuki follows up.

“Oh, right—I almost forgot. We need to have this document signed by your parents, just to be safe. You know, to get their permission and whatnot. Either of their signatures work, so yeah,” Ike adds as he hands me yet another sheet.

I hesitate for a moment before replying, “Yeah, no problem.” Him saying that had reminded me of my father’s face.

Ike stares at me for a moment, then places a hand on my shoulder and continues. “Okay, then. I’m going to hand them over to Makiri-sensei the day before the trip, so you have until then... but the sooner, the better.”

“Uhh, Senpai?” Touka asks, looking at me.

I don’t reply. Instead, I force a smile, say goodbye, and leave the room.

Touka follows shortly after. We leave the school grounds and make our way to the train station. There’s a long period of silence between us before Touka finally breaks the ice.

“Senpai, you don’t get along with your parents?” Touka asks, straight to the point.

I try to feign ignorance, pretending like I didn't hear her question, but I end up buckling under her persistent gaze. "My parents divorced a while ago, and I'm living with my dad right now. We haven't talked in months, though."

"Oh... I see. I shouldn't have asked that. I'm sorry, that was rude of me," she replies while looking at the ground.

Crap. I didn't mean to make her feel bad. I guess I can tell her more about it.

"It's not like I'm bummed out by the divorce or anything. As for my dad... Well, teens always fight with their parents, right? I guess I'm just like everyone else."

"Why don't you guys get along? Did something happen?" she asks. Maybe the fact that I'm willing to open up to her is making her feel a little bolder.

"My dad used to be a policeman. He'd always drill this idea into me that I had to fight my own battles if I wanted to right any wrongs in my life. Let's just say it didn't end well. I guess I took his words too literally—for a while, I was the kind of guy who smacked people around to resolve all my conflicts."

Touka doesn't say anything, instead keeping her head facing downward while listening closely.

"I never really told you about what happened last year, did I? The reason I got my reputation at school, I mean."

"No, you haven't yet."

"It's a boring story, but here goes," I say. She needed to know about it at some point.

This takes me back...



I was on my way home that day, grumpily trudging through the large puddles. It was the middle of the rainy season, which meant days and days of unrelenting downpour. I hated it—the terrible weather always ruined my mood. Actually, that wasn't entirely the case—I wasn't pissed at Mother Nature; I was pissed at pretty much everyone at my school. Teachers, students... it didn't matter who it was. They always ran away the moment they saw me. And

whenever I passed by them, I could hear them gossiping under their breath about me.

Three months had already passed since I'd started attending high school, and nothing had changed—everyone was still avoiding me like the plague.

I'd never intended to come off as a scary guy, but I suppose a combination of not exactly being on my best behavior, in addition to keeping to myself, had been enough to do the trick.

The only one who'd had the balls to talk to me back then was Ike. He wasn't afraid of me at all. I'll admit, back then, I didn't have the greatest opinion of him. I'd seen his type before—the guy who tried to be buddy-buddy with everyone, but always had something up his sleeve. I made sure to be respectful at the time while constantly keeping my guard up around him. In my mind, I was convinced he wasn't being sincere with me.

My first year of high school was pretty uneventful, unless you counted my parents' divorce. To be honest, I'd known it was only a matter of time. My mom was terrified of my dad, but she'd stuck around until after I'd entered high school so the separation didn't mess with my entrance exams.

And as for my dad, the man was basically married to his job. I swear, he loved it more than us. He was almost never home and never gave a damn about us.

Still, I was pretty pissed when I found out about the divorce through a letter my mom sent me after she'd run back to her parents' home. My dad also left me a memo at home, simply stating that he and my mom were no longer married.

I had been stewing over the whole situation that morning when I came across a familiar scenario: a group of low life thugs surrounding some students from another prestigious school that was nearby.

"Hey, didn't I tell you dumbasses to bring us the cash?" one of them barked.

"Dude, we don't have any. Give us a break," one of the students pleaded.

Like I said, this wasn't the first time I'd seen these guys together. Although the area was fairly busy, there wasn't a single passerby who was willing to call for any help—most just pretended like nothing was going on.

Everything about it pissed me off: the high schoolers who refused to stand up for themselves, the assholes who preyed on the weak, the people who turned a blind eye to the whole thing. But most of all, I was pissed off at myself for getting angry over stupid shit.

So what did I do?



Yeah... I picked a fight with the thugs in order to help the students escape.

“What the fuck’s your problem, yo?!”

The scumbags tried calling their friends for backup, but I still managed to beat them all to a pulp in the end.

Unfortunately, that hadn’t exactly made things better. Not only had it worsened my already shitty mood, but my reputation at school took even more of a hit. A few students had witnessed it, which meant that everyone at school soon knew, as well. My parents were called in, the term “expulsion” was thrown around, and I was placed under house arrest for several days.

Fortunately, things didn’t escalate to the point of expulsion, but things certainly escalated back home. Whenever I got into a fight—regardless of the cause or context—my dad would beat the shit out of me. This fight was no exception.

“How dare you? *How fucking dare you?! All you ever do is disgrace yourself and this family,*” he yelled, grabbing me by the collar of my shirt and smacking me in the face. “If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you 100 times—don’t get involved in any fucking fights! You *only* resort to violence if there’s no other alternative and you need to protect yourself! Are you deaf? Do I need to beat the lesson into you?!”

Normally, I would take his beatings silently because he tended to be right, but that day, things were different.

“D’you think beating me is *really* the right thing to do here? Huh?” I asked.

“It is. If the carrot doesn’t work, then the stick sure as hell will,” he replied.

“No wonder Mom left—she must’ve been sick of your holier-than-thou

attitude. You always try to justify doing whatever the fuck you want.”

“*What the hell was that?*” he growled. It was the angriest I’d ever seen him.

“I said, ‘no wonder Mom left.’ You’ve always treated us like garbage under the guise of being a good father, but the truth is you’ve never done shit.”

“All right, that’s enough. Shut your goddamn mouth.”

He shoved me aside, but almost immediately thought better of it and threw a punch my way. I managed to duck just in time and quickly grabbed his arm to restrain him.

“I got into that fight because I was defending a group of kids from a bunch of assholes who were trying to take their money. Wouldn’t that make it the right decision? Maybe I should’ve ignored it like everyone else and pretended it didn’t happen? Or what? Should I have let those guys beat the shit out of me?” I spat out all at once. The rational voice in the back of my head screamed I shouldn’t have bothered getting involved in that fight, but I still wanted to hear what my dad had to say about the whole thing.

He didn’t answer, which only ignited my anger even further.

“Say something, you motherfucker!” I screamed.

And suddenly, before I’d even realized, the tables had turned completely. Instead of my dad beating me up, I was pummeling him with no holds barred. Seeing as he was a former officer, I knew he could take it. I just kept wailing on him without mercy, one flurry of punches after another. After a while, I stopped; he was crumpled, unmoving, on the floor. Now *I* was the one on top, looking down on *him*.

“What’s wrong, old man? Aren’t you proud of me? I’m defending myself, just like you taught me to do all these years.”

I lifted him up by his collar and brought him close, just like he had done to me moments ago. That was when I noticed that my father’s enraged expression had disappeared. He was on the brink of tears, trembling and terrified. Terrified of *me*. He was no longer the father who upheld his ideas of justice with an iron-clad fist, but a weak man who was afraid of his own son because he couldn’t keep him in check anymore.

I loosened my grip and let him slump to the floor, where he laid groveling in pain and shaking in fear.

It was too late; what was done was done. And since that day, we'd never spoken again.



It was all thanks to Ike and Makiri-sensei that I didn't get expelled. Ike somehow managed to track down the guys I'd saved, and they contacted the school to cover for me. He even located the assholes and somehow convinced them to chill out and never set foot in the area again. Seriously, he went through a lot of effort for a guy he'd barely talked to.

Makiri-sensei, on the other hand, believed my story from the very beginning, unlike everyone else. Despite being a new teacher at the school, and one I didn't even have any classes with, Ike told me that she'd fought tooth and nail to convince everyone that I was in the right.

With their help, that was the end of that.



I finish the story and look over at Touka, who's staring at the ground in shock. And here I was expecting her to make some snide comment about my story being a giant bore.

Suddenly, she grabs my hands and smiles earnestly. "Thank you for trusting me with this, Senpai. You must've had a rough time. I wish I was there with you when that happened. Now I get why you're not on good terms with your dad."

"Well..." I mumble as I look away.

"Hm? What? Something wrong?"

"It's not like I hate the old man or anything like that. Now that I look back on it, I realize that my circumstances at school and at home led me to do it. In the end, I was the one who'd been itching for a fight, even if I'd masked it behind the excuse of saving those guys."

"That's not true at all!" she cries. "You might be a discount Casanova who's terrible at making friends, but you're not a thug! Sure, you'd resort to violence

if needed, but you'd *never* fight just for the heck of it! You're a nice guy, and I know that first hand!"

"Is this your attempt at consoling me?"

Honestly, it's a relief that she still trusts me after I've told her all this. I truly feel happy from the bottom of my heart.

"Do you actually feel sorry for your dad right now?" she asks.

I nod. "Yeah, I was—hell, still am—a pain in the ass... in more ways than one. I've thought of apologizing to him a couple of times before, but I've always ended up backing out."

"Then this whole signature thing for the trip will be the perfect opportunity!" she exclaims with a smile. "Don't you think he'll be happy that you've got friends to go on vacation with? I mean, it shows you're not getting into fights anymore."

I pause to think about it. "Wish that would be the case."

"You can always tell him that you got yourself a girlfriend who happens to be, like, prime wife material. In this case, I'll allow it."

"Who are you even talking about?"

"No need to be shy, Senpai. You need to let go sometimes," she says with a prideful tone and a shake of her head.

"Looks like we reached the station," I say.

"Oh my. Trying to run away now, shy guy?"

"I'm sorry, Princess Peech, but I gotta get home somehow."

"Wait, what? 'Peech'? I'm talking about you being super-duper shy, Senpai. What are you on about?" Touka asks. Suddenly, her expression changes. She giggles, leans in, and whispers in my ear, "Whatever happens, I've gotta say that I'm excited to have our first night out together, Senpai."

Her breath tickles me a little. The sensation, in combination with her puppy dog eyes, causes me to jolt. She grins impishly in response.

"No comment," I reply.

My answer only emboldens her even more. Up until we part ways, she never wipes that devilish grin from her face.



I arrive home soon after and notice my dad's shoes already lined up at the entrance. I guess he arrived earlier than I did today. I peek into the living room, but there's no one there. He's probably in his room already.

I head over to his room, open my bag, remove the form, and open the door. Sure enough, there he is. He's listening to music with his headphones on and reading a book, so it makes sense he didn't hear me coming in. As I stare at him, I suddenly notice that he seems shorter than I remember him being.

In the end, I can't bring myself to say anything to him. It's too late to patch things over now—if I'd had any chances to fix things with him, it would've been a long time ago. I close the door and head to my room.

I'm sorry, Touka, but I'm not as strong as you think I am. I know you tried to encourage me and all to mend my relationship with him, but I just can't.

Chapter Six

A Different Type of Confession

It's Friday evening, around the time I like to take my nightly jog in the nearby park. Since we're in the middle of July right now, it's been ridiculously freakin' hot lately. At least I have the park all to myself—I tell you, running at night without a single soul around has to be the best feeling in the world. On top of that, there's quite the pleasant breeze blowing.

At some point during my exercise routine, I spot a faint shadow—someone else is in this park. It's pretty weird for anyone to be here this late, but that's none of my business. I plan to ignore them and go about my way, but then I notice that the mysterious shadow is staggering around a lot, barely managing to stand.

I approach the figure from behind and realize that it's a young woman—a *drunk* young woman.

I know that a lot of adults like to go out and get wasted on Fridays due to getting the weekend off, so seeing a few drunks loitering around here and there isn't that surprising to see. Still, I am worried about her—here she is, alone in the middle of an abandoned park.

I could try calling out to her to help, but I'm worried that my face will end up scaring her away. I mean, she could easily get the wrong idea. For the time being, I'll follow her to see if she'll be okay. If I feel like disaster will ensue, that's my cue to jump in and intervene.

As I'm trotting along to keep pace with the young woman, she suddenly falls to the ground. I hope she hasn't hurt herself. The fall was pretty clean, but I can't help but worry about her given the state she's in. I approach to help her out, but she's not moving. Crap, did she hit her head? This is *not* good.

"Hey, are you okay?" I ask as I kneel down next to her to get a better look.

No answer.

I'm growing more and more worried by the second. I turn her over to get a better look at her face. First, I need to check to make sure she's breathing... Yep. It's faint, but it's there. She's alive, at the very least, and that's the most important thing. Hey, wait a second—I know her!

“Makiri-sensei?!” What is she doing here?!

She's always so graceful and composed at school that it's kind of blowing my mind that the drunk mess in front of me is actually her.

“Ngh...” she lets out a groan. Her voice is so sexy right now that I'm getting all embarrassed just hearing it.

She reacted to my voice, so it looks like she's still conscious. Her eyes open ever so slightly and take in the view around her.

“Huh? Tomoki-kun? Why're ya here ‘fall plashesh?” she mumbles, her breath reeking of alcohol.

Huh? Did anyone get what she just said and mind filling me in? She's really let herself go today. Well, at least it wasn't a case of mistaken identity—she's definitely Makiri-sensei. How else would she know my name?.

“I jog around here every day. What are *you* doing here, Sensei?” I reply with a forced smile. It's better to just get straight to the point and ask her what's up.

“Aww, noch you choo, Tomoki-kuuun...” she drunkenly whines, looking like she's on the brink of tears.

“Say what?” What's wrong with her? “Um, I didn't really hear you. Could you say it again?”

“What's... with...” Makiri-sensei whispers something, but it's so low that I can barely hear her.

“Uhh, sorry. Could you repeat that one more time?” I ask.

In response, her cheeks flush a bright crimson, and she begins to tear up slightly.

After a long, awkward moment of silence, she shouts at the top of her lungs.

“I’ll say it again! What’s wrong with me being a virgin?!”

“I... I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that,” I whisper in return, unable to say anything else.



I’m in a total state of shock after Makiri-sensei’s bold declaration, but somehow manage to quickly regain my composure.

“I’m going home,” she mumbles, visibly angry at me and my stunned silence.

“Want me to escort you there?” I ask.

I’m still somewhat dumbfounded, but it is true that the sooner she returns home, the better. And I’d rather go with her—who knows what kind of issues she could run into if she leaves alone in this state.

“Ngh...” she moans while shaking her head. She attempts to stand up, but immediately loses her balance and begins to fall once again. “Ouch!”

Before she crashes to the ground again, I swoop in and manage to catch her in my arms. Just feeling the soft skin of her slender figure is enough to get my heart racing and my face burning. Through the thick stench of alcohol, I can also pick up a faint waft of the sweet perfume she uses. Crap. I need to calm myself down before I do anything else.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I finally manage to ask.

“My feet hurt,” she states with another shake of her head. She must’ve sprained her ankle the first time she fell.

“You can lean on me. I’ll help you get back home,” I say.

“I don’t wanna walk. It *huuurts*. Can’t choo jus’ give me a piggyback ride?”

God, she’s acting like a total kid right now. I would love to tell her to suck it up and walk, but I’m pretty sure that’s impossible for her at the moment. I mean, not only is she drunk, but she’s also injured.

“Where do you live?” I ask.

She tells me her address, which is surprisingly close—totally within walking distance.

“Hang on tight. I’ll get you there,” I say. And with that, I scoop her up and carry her in my arms. She’s actually pretty light.

“Huh?! You’re not gonna gimme a piggyback?!” she yelps, her face turning even redder.

I know she’s drunk and all, but maybe I went too far? Like, I’m not sure I want to give her a piggyback right now given how wasted she is—I don’t want her suddenly puking all over me. Whatever, she’s probably exaggerating. I’ll just ignore her and keep going.

At first, she’s reluctant to the idea, mumbling strings of gibberish in protest. Once she realizes that I’m completely ignoring her, though, she eventually shuts up.

She leans her face against my chest and falls asleep. Couldn’t she have at least waited until we arrived at her place first? I swear, once she returns to her senses, she’s getting the lecture of her life—I don’t give a damn if she’s my teacher or the Queen of freakin’ England.

... Now that I think about it, I really hope I don’t get seen by the police. I could end up getting pulled over and questioned, and I can’t imagine things going over well in that scenario. Please, don’t let me run into any trouble on the way back to her place.



The address Makiri-sensei had given me earlier leads us to an apartment block. I wake her up so she can help me get inside the building and figure out where we’re going. As we ride the elevator up, I count my blessings—we hadn’t crossed paths with anyone so far. Once we arrive in front of her apartment, I use the card key to enter. All right, in we go.

I turn on the lights, revealing a tidy, simple, and modestly-sized apartment. The bedroom and small kitchen make it easy for me to locate where her bed is. Although everything is placed neatly in its own spot, one thing in particular stands out to me—there’s a large teddy bear beside her pillow. Of all the things she could treasure, an adorable plushie wasn’t even on the list of what I had in mind.

I carefully place her on top of her bed and breathe a sigh of relief. Mission accomplished.

Suddenly, her arm shoots out and grabs mine. She yanks me closer, and I'm caught so off-guard that I end up tumbling onto the bed with her. What the hell is she up to? "What are you doing?" I ask.

"Ngh... Mmhh... Johnny..." she mumbles groggily.

Huh? Johnny? Who the hell is Johnny?

"You're scaggier than usual today..." she continues.

Wait a second, is Johnny... her teddy bear? I hand her the plushie, and she immediately clings to it like a baby.

"Johnny..." she murmurs with a wide smile.

She's always the definition of seriousness at school, so seeing her hugging the plushie like this is a pretty weird sight, to say the least. I didn't know she had this childish side to her.

Well, at least she's safe at home now. I can finally take a breather.

As I peer at her, I'm reminded that she really is an incredibly attractive woman. Hold on, we're still sharing the same bed. Shit! My face feels like it's on fire, and I bolt out of bed as quickly as I can.

I check on her once more for good measure before turning off the lights. The best course of action right now would be to leave, lock the door from outside, and place her card key in her letterbox so she can find it tomorrow.

But as I'm about to make my way out of the apartment, I'm hit by a wave of anxiety. Will she be okay like that? It's not like she was so far gone that I needed to call an ambulance or anything like that, but I'm not sure if I should leave her alone here. For all I know, she could vomit while she's asleep and end up choking on it. No, I'm not kidding about this.

Well, I guess I've got no other choice—I'll have to spend the night with her and make sure nothing bad happens. I return inside the room.



I spend a long time at her side, watching over her until I start to notice the sunlight peeking through the curtains. I'm currently half-asleep, but I've been trying my hardest to stay awake in case anything happens to Makiri-sensei.

"Ugh... Nnnhh..." she grumbles and slowly begins to wake up. Looks like she'll be fine. "Ugh. I had too much to drink last night... My head is killing me..."

She rises up from bed, turns, and notices that I'm in the room with her. "Huh?"

"Good morning, Makiri-sensei," I try to greet her like I normally do.

Her face twitches as she starts to mentally process the scenario in front of her, but her expression quickly changes to one of fear. Wait, has she totally forgotten last night's events? I mean, waking up and finding a guy you weren't expecting in your room sounds like a pretty scary experience, all right. I'm sure she's more worried about the fact that I'm here to begin with, rather than the possibility that something might've happened between us.

Wait, shit! Maybe I should've called the police last night and let them take care of her? Ugh, I'm such a goddamn moron! If only I'd just—

"T-Tomoki-kun?" she blurts out, interrupting my train of thought. "Huh?! Um... Am I dreaming right now?"

"I wish," I answer with another forced smile. There isn't much I can do in this situation but wait for my divine punishment while she tries to piece the events of last night together.

As she comes to her senses, her expression changes multiple times. First, she's surprised, but as more and more memories come flooding back, she hides her face under her bed sheets. After a few seconds, she finally stands up to face me with a beet-red expression and misty eyes.

"I'm so sorry for being such a bother yesterday!" she shouts while bowing her head.

Phew, looks like she's remembered everything. And here I was scared of being framed for a false crime, or something, and spending the rest of my high school life behind bars.

“You were a pain in the ass, yeah,” I reply in a cold voice. Needless to say, I’m livid right now. Hopefully she regrets her actions.

“I truly regret what happened, honestly. Your parents must be worried sick about you. Please apologize to them in my stead.”

“It’s okay. My pops doesn’t give a damn about me, so I should be good in that regard.”

Makiri-sensei looks at me in surprise. We stay silent for a while—neither of us know what to say or do in this situation.

I take a deep breath and decide to question her a little. Although I do want to reprimand her somewhat, I also don’t want to push her too far. I’ll tread carefully, then. “I know that being a teacher is stressful, and I don’t think it’s wrong for you to drink from time to time as a way to wind down, but do you always end up like that whenever you go out?”

“No... That was the first time I’ve been so drunk...” she mumbles while avoiding eye contact, her cheeks flushed.

“Did you get into an argument with your parents or something?”

The moment I mention her parents, her shoulders begin to tremble, and she has an anxious look on her face. She looks like she’s about to burst into tears. Did I pry too much? Maybe she doesn’t wanna answer?

“You... You remember what I told you yesterday about being a virgin, don’t you?!” she suddenly shouts, now angry for some reason.

This time, it’s my turn to be embarrassed. I avert my eyes as I recall her bold confession from last night. “Uhh, yes.”

“I’ll be clear about this. For the record, I’ve always lived a sheltered life. I spent most of my life in all-girl schools, and up until recently, I hadn’t had many chances to interact with guys, okay?”

“Okay?”

“My father was worried about me because I’ve never been in a relationship. He’s been constantly hounding me about marriage and a future grandson, warning me about how I’ll end up an old crazy cat lady, and so on. I’m not the

best when it comes to dealing with men, so then he became worried that I'd end up dating some asshole. I just..."

As if I'd opened a dam, Makiri-sensei unleashes a flood of words all at once.

"So basically, you wanted to drink to forget about all of that," I add.

Well, even if she *is* my teacher, we're all human in the end. I'm sure anyone else would also turn to an extra drink or two to forget their problems. Shit happens. Still, I wish I could help her out somehow. I've already come this far, so why not?

"Not gonna lie, I'm pretty mad at you," I tell her.

"Of course you are."

"Listen to what I'm gonna tell you, got it?"

She nods.

I take a deep breath, look her straight in the eyes, and exclaim, "Sensei, you're a beautiful woman, and you were in a deserted park, dead drunk in the middle of the night! If you weren't careful, some asshole could've found you. God knows what could've happened then!"

Her face reddens even further at my implication, and she hangs her head.

"I get that you want to drink to forget your problems, but at least be prepared next time! Take a cab back home, or maybe even bring along someone you trust to help you back home safely. You've helped me out more times than I can count, Sensei. I respect you in more ways than one. The last thing I'd want is for you to go through some horrible, traumatic experience. So if you ever have any problems, or need to nag at someone, you can talk to me. I'm willing to lend you a listening ear, no matter if it's about your father or whatever else is on your mind."

"Okay... Wait, what? You would listen to my nagging?" she asks, lifting her head in surprise and looking at me.

"Yeah, I would."

She appears surprised for a second, but right after, she flashes a smile.

“What are you smiling about?” I ask. Was something I said funny?

“Oh, I’m sorry about that. I’m not trying to make fun of you or anything like that. This whole thing just made me think, ‘who’s really the teacher here, and who’s the student?’ Heh.”

With that, my anger drains from my body. She’s just so cute right now, so attractive—much more so than she normally is with her composed air.

“Thank you, Tomoki-kun, for worrying about me. I appreciate your concern for me, as well as the fact that you hold me in such high regard. Seriously, it makes me happier than you might think—you’ve made my day.”

Man, I’m so embarrassed right now... not to mention tired. In fact, I feel like I’m about to pass out any moment now.

“I’m going back home now,” I say before heading towards the entrance.

She stands up and follows behind me. “I’ll take you there.”

“My place is like a 10 minute walk from here. I’ll be fine,” I tell her.

“Oh, I didn’t know you lived so close to me.”

Without even bothering to look at her, I put on my running shoes and head out.

“Oh, by the way—would you mind exchanging phone numbers with me?” Makiri-sensei speaks up before I leave.

“What?”

“Why do you look so surprised? I can’t nag you about my life if I don’t know your phone number,” she explains while flashing a devilish smile.

Wait, she’s actually going to accept my proposition? Dope.

Makiri-sensei adds my number to her contacts with a wide grin. I’ve never seen this sort of smile at school. For some reason, it makes me realize that Makiri-sensei actually isn’t much older than I am.

“Well, I hope you’re prepared for a lot of complaining on my end, Tomoki-sensei,” she warns as she finishes fiddling with her phone. She looks me dead in the eyes and gives me another cheeky smile.

“Oh, come on, don’t call me ‘sensei’... But yeah—whenever you need me, I’ll be there for you.”

After that, I leave her apartment and head back home. The entire way there, I try my hardest to stop myself from going completely red.

Chapter Seven

An Invitation

It's now Monday, a few days after Makiri-sensei's shocking confession.

It also happens to be the day that the end-of-term ceremony is held. Everyone's pretty excited about kicking off their summer vacation tomorrow, but I've mostly been worrying about other things—mainly, about my last day of classes with Makiri-sensei.

I hope nothing weird goes down when we end up crossing paths at school again, especially after what happened on Friday. Then again, I think we can handle this situation like adults and pretend that nothing ever happened, right? Still, I stay alert as I and the other students head to the gymnasium. If at all possible, I'd like to avoid bumping into her right now.

"Whoa, look at Tomoki. He's dragging himself along like some kind of demon's possessed him."

"It's like he's trying to tell us that he's gonna torment us in spirit, even when we're on vacation. God help me."

"Hey, stop staring at him. You're gonna get us all killed."

Damn. I was just trying to be careful about avoiding Makiri-sensei, but I managed to appear even scarier than usual. Man...

"Ah! Tomoki-senpai!" someone shouts from behind me.

"Hey," I answer as I turn around. It's Kai.

"You got any plans for this summer, Senpai?"

"Huh? Uhh, well, I've got a few plans, I guess. You know about that student council summer trip they do every year?"

"Nope. Never heard of it."

“Well, apparently it’s a thing. They invited me to go with them, even if I’m not an official member, so yeah.”

Kai flashes a bright smile and exclaims, “Well, you’re always helping them out! It’s only understandable that they’d invite you!”

“Nah, I don’t think I help out *that* much, but hey.”

“Come on, man. You even go as far as giving up quality time with Touka to help them ou—oh, uh...” he flounders, his smile quickly replaced by mortified surprise. Guess it was a slip of the tongue.

“Uh, well, Touka’s actually been tagging along to help, too,” I explain.

“Nice. But hey, you could spend some time with me too, you know,” he adds.

“O-Of course, man! I’d never forget you!”

I don’t think he was *intentionally* trying to pressure me or anything like that, but I’m certainly sweating now. I just never expected that I’d have an underclassman begging me to make time for him. It’s such foreign territory to me that I’m still not used to it.

“We could visit the hot spring some day—just you and me. I know this great place I go to sometimes with the guys in my club,” he eagerly suggests.

“Whoa, a hot spring? That sounds like a plan.”

It’s kind of a weird choice in my opinion, but I *do* like big open baths, for whatever reason. I wouldn’t say I’m against the idea at all.

“Really?! Sweet!” he exclaims happily. “Okay! I’ll set everything up, so expect an invite soon!”

Damn. Whenever he gets all excited to spend time with me like this, I feel all warm and fuzzy inside. It’s nice to feel appreciated.

“Sure thing. Oh, damn, we’re already here. Okay, see ya later,” I say as we approach the gymnasium.

“Got it. See ya, dude,” Kai says.

I walk past him and enter the gym. As I do, I swear I can hear Kai shouting, “Let’s fucking gooo!” in the distance. But that must’ve just been me hearing

things, right? No one would ever be *that* excited to hang out with me during the summer.



Once the ceremony ends, school is over with. Yep, we got out way earlier than usual. I return to my class and start preparing my stuff to leave until suddenly, a certain someone bursts into the room and greets me.

“Senpaaai! Let’s walk home together!”

As you can probably guess, it's Touka. She pops back out to wait for me in the corridor, but it’s too late—everyone in the class has already turned around to stare at me the moment she shouted my name. I return their gaze, which quickly makes them feign ignorance and return to their own business.

Man, the second year’s already over and done with, yet we’re still doing the same old song and dance. It gets tiring after a while. This isn’t funny anymore! At the very least, they could spice things up a bit by changing up their reactions. Whatever. Hopefully next year, things will be different.

I stand up and head over to Touka, but Ike speaks up before I can leave.

“Excuse me—before you two leave, would you mind coming to the student council room with me? We’ve completed the necessary documents for the trip, and I’d like you to have them before you go.”

“Sure,” I reply.

“Okay! If Senpai’s going, then so will I!” Touka adds, clearly in good spirits.

I thought Ike would be tired of Touka’s saccharine comments by now, but judging by his smile, he looks quite happy with how she’s handled the situation.

“Thanks guys. Let’s get going then,” he says.

Once we arrive, we notice someone else there who seems to be waiting for us.

“Splendid work today, President... I see you have summoned Ike and Tomoki, as well,” Otome Tatsumiya, the vice-president of the student council, greets us in her usual flowery tone.

I look around, but Tanaka-senpai and Suzuki are nowhere to be seen—she's the only other one here.

"You're here pretty early, Tatsumiya," Ike replies.

"You're not incorrect. School did finish earlier than usual today, after all," she answers with a smile.

I'll say hi, too—it would be rude to stay silent. "Hey. I just remembered that you're part of the council too, huh?"

"I am. We meet yet again," she replies with a smile, although this time it feels a bit enigmatic.

Touka puffs her cheeks out slightly as she watches our brief exchange. "Umm, Senpai, who is this girl? And how does she know me too?"

Is it me, or does she sound angry right now? Not that I have any idea why, though.

"I must apologize, Ike—I believe we've never had the pleasure of being properly acquainted. My name is Otome Tatsumiya. I'm a second year, and I fulfill the role of vice-president of the student council. The president talks about you from time to time—I do hope we'll get along well going forward."

"Ohh, so you're the vice-prez. Okay! Nice to meet you!" she exclaims with a grin. She's pretty much mastered the fake smile by now, but this one takes the cake in that regard.

Tatsumiya approaches Touka and claps one of her hands. "Indeed. I, too, am very pleased to finally meet you. I know this may sound unusually rash, but would you mind if I could address you as 'Touka'?" she asks with an unusual zeal in her tone.

"Uhh, sure? I don't really mind..." Touka mumbles, clearly confused and put-off by Tatsumiya's complete 180 change in attitude.

"Thank you, Touka. And you may address me as 'Otome' from now on."

Touka glances at me, as if pleading for me to help her out of this awkward situation. Oh, right—doesn't Tatsumiya have feelings for Ike or something? I guess it's in her best interest to be in Touka's good graces, considering she's the

sister of her crush. I nod to Touka, trying to signal that she should just go along with it if she wants it to be over.

“Um... err, so, ‘Otome’?”

The moment Touka utters those three syllables, Tatsumiya looks like she’s won the lottery. “Oh god, yes!” she cries *way* too enthusiastically. “*Ahem!* I do hope we get along well, Touka!”

“Uhh... sure,” Touka mumbles as she quickly takes several steps back.

“Ah!” Tatsumiya gasps at Touka’s retreat, and her expression immediately darkens.

Damn. If she hadn’t pretty much told me that she has a crush on Ike, I’d swear that she has the hots for Touka instead.

Once that weird exchange is done, Ike steps in.

“Anyways, here are the documents for this year’s trip. Read them over, and if there’s anything you don’t understand, be sure to ask me in person or send me a text, okay?” he says while handing us a stack of papers.

I skim over them quickly—nothing out of the ordinary. “Okay. If something comes up let you know.”

“Okay, Senpai—now that we’re done here, let’s go home!” Touka exclaims.

“Right. Well, looks like we’re on our way. See ya later,” I say to the other two.

“Bye-bye!” Touka follows.

“Be careful on your way back,” Ike says.

“Goodness, you’re leaving so soon? I see... Very well. I bid you farewell for the time being,” Tatsumiya replies, gazing intently at Touka. It’s pretty clear she doesn’t want her to leave just yet, but Touka and I ignore her silent plea.

We open the door to leave, but nearly collide with someone; it’s Makiri-sensei. The moment we see each other, we avert our eyes. I knew this was going to be awkward.

“Oh! Tomoki-kun and... Ike...” she greets us, trailing off hesitantly.

Fortunately, Touka hasn’t noticed anything’s off between us. “Ah, Makiri-

sensei. Good work today! Oh, yeah—you're tagging along on the student council trip, aren't you?"

"That's right. The teacher who's normally in charge of supervising the student council happens to be quite busy, so I'll be the one going in his stead," Makiri-sensei explains.

"Nice! I'm looking forward to seeing you there!"

"Likewise."

With that short exchange out of the way, Makiri-sensei turns to me with an expression like she just recalled something.

"Oh, I just remembered—Ike-kun mentioned that you still haven't submitted your parental permission slip. You need it to come on the trip. Have you managed to bring it today?"

I wasn't expecting her to turn the conversation in this direction, so I find myself at a loss for words. Fortunately, it's a very basic question. I nod, remove the slip from my backpack, and hand it over.

"Sorry for taking so long with this," I apologize.

"There's nothing to apologize for. It's not like you had a time limit anyway," she assures me as she takes the sheet of paper from my hands. She's forcing a smile right now, obviously trying to fake normalcy.

I look over at Touka, signaling that we can leave.

"Okay, guys! See ya!" she chirps while leading the way out.

"Be careful on your way home," Makiri-sensei replies in her usual cold and composed tone along with a faint smile. It's like nothing's changed.



Touka and I make our way toward the train station as usual.

As we walk, I think back to our recent interaction with Makiri-sensei. For the most part, nothing seemed out of the ordinary—I mean, she acted like she always did. Sure, we were both embarrassed at first, but things quickly returned to normal. I should follow her example and try to act like my normal self, as

well.

“By the way, Senpai—you *did* talk with your dad about the trip, right?” Touka asks.

“Uhh, yeah. I did. Mhm.”

I really want to avoid talking about this subject, so it’d be nice if she gets the message and drops it.

“Hmm... Senpai, don’t tell me that you faked your dad’s signature,” she suddenly says.

Shit. She’s onto me.

“I might have.”

“So you weren’t able to talk things out with him?” she asks.

“We pretty much never talk. Ever. I know you tried your hardest to encourage me, but I chickened out. Sorry. I’m pretty pathetic, I know.”

She shakes her head and replies, “I’d never think you’re pathetic, Senpai. You know how long I haven’t been able to get along with my shitty brother either? So, yeah... And no, it’s not like we get along better now either, okay?!”

“Uhh, sure,” I mumble.

I can’t help but laugh a little when I see her trying her hardest to deny the truth. It’s clear as day that they’re starting to improve their relationship, even if just a little.

“I wouldn’t want to rush you either. Do things at your own pace, but...” she trails off, then thrusts her finger at me. “If Makiri-sensei finds out about this, and you end up not being able to go, then I’m gonna be *pissed*. Got it?”

“Uhh... If that happens, then I’m sorry in advance,” I say with an apologetic bow.

She grins and wags her finger from side to side. “Hey, that’s not the reply I was looking for. A *real* guy would say he’d make it up to me by inviting me to a fancy hotel for a few nights!”

“I mean, it is summer. We could always plan an excursion or something of the

sort... as long as you're okay with it, of course."

She stares at me with a tired, exasperated expression, but then smirks. "Oh well. It's a shame we won't get to spend a night together like I proposed, but I'm just as happy to be invited on a date, Senpai!"

With that, she stands on her tiptoes and pats my head.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask.

"Hehehe, consider this your reward for inviting me out all by yourself! Aren't you happy that your cute girlfriend is doing this for you?"

I'm actually not really a fan of this sort of thing, but she's trying her best to reward me in her own way. I guess I'll let her do whatever she wants.

Seeing Touka's smile makes me think that this summer's gonna be better than usual. I'm pretty excited about it, not gonna lie.

Chapter Eight

The Perfect Hangout?

I open my eyes to the first day of summer. The cicadas are chirping louder than ever, and it's pretty hot outside. It's a good thing I have air conditioning in my room, otherwise I'd have been cooked alive by now.

I don't have anything planned for this summer apart from the student council trip, though. Normally, I like to spend my free time studying, reading manga or light novels, training, and watching Youtoob videos. Yeah, nothing crazy, I know. Well, I guess I'll kill some time by doing one of tho—oh, my phone's vibrating on my desk. Someone must've just sent me a message.

Let's see... It's from Ike. It reads, "Are you free today? We can hang out if you are. How about it?"

Well, scratch my "plans" to laze around the house all day. Thanks, Ike.

It's an immediate yes for me. "Sure. Let's do it," I reply.

"Great! How about we meet in front of the train station after lunch? 2:00PM near the Pachiko statue sound good to you?" Ike responds almost immediately.

The Pachiko statue is, as you might guess from the name, an imitation of the original Hachiko statue in Tokyo. It's placed in front of the main train station where a lot of us students pass through every day. A lot of people use it as a meeting spot when they're looking to hang out.

"Sure. See you there."

I still have a good chunk of time before I have to be there, so I think I'll go out and run for a bit—can't waste beautiful weather like this, after all.



With my morning jog out of the way, I take a shower and return to my room. When I check my phone, I notice that I have two new messages.

“Senpai, I bet ur totes free today! How bout a date?! ≡”

The first one is from Touka. I’m assuming she hasn’t heard from Ike about our arrangement earlier this morning. Although I’m happy that she invited me, I can’t exactly cancel on Ike.

“I already made plans with Ike,” I text back. “We’re gonna meet up at the Pachiko statue at 2:00PM if you wanna tag along.”

I doubt she’ll be up for it, considering Ike’s going to be there, but it doesn’t hurt to try. That’s one text down.

“I know I said we wouldn’t be seeing each other much this summer, but since I’m almost done with my tennis training, I was hoping we could hang out this afternoon! What do you say?”

This one is from Kana. I’m glad that she also wants to spend time with me, so I’ll just copy-paste the message I sent to Touka.

The phone vibrates right after I send my response.

“Aw man! I wish it was just u + me!” she writes, adding one of her stupid upset emojis. As I’m about to reply, I receive another message from her. She follows up with an even more moronic emoji, its cheeks puffed out with a circle of text explaining that it’s “angry.” “O well, I won’t be a crybaby about it. Count me in!”

“Okay, see you there,” I text.

Kana, on the other hand, takes a bit longer to answer—she’s probably preoccupied with her tennis training and couldn’t reply.

“Oh, Haruma’s coming along? I was hoping it’d be just the two of us spending some lovey-dovey time together...” she replies, adding a crying emoji at the end.

Seriously, what’s with all these idiotic emojis? Am I missing out on something here?

“Oh well, if you’ve already made plans with him, there’s no point in trying to force things. We can have our special date next time! Count me in!”

“Not like we’d be ‘lovey-dovey’ even if we were alone together,” I remind her.

“Anyways, see you there.”

Okay, I should probably message Ike to tell him that these two will be joining us.

“Hey dude, Touka and Kana wanted to hang out with me all of a sudden, so I invited them to come along—” I stop typing. Before I send the message, I really need to think of a way to apologize to him for the inevitable trainwreck that’s to come.



I arrive at the statue. Despite the place being pretty crowded, it doesn’t take me very long to spot Ike.

“Hey, handsome. Are you alone?”

“You’re super hot. Would you like to hang out with us, cutie?”

Some college girls are swarming around him, obviously trying to pick him up. I don’t blame them—I mean, have you seen the guy?

“Sorry, girls, but I’m waiting for someone,” he replies.

“Whaaat? Your girlfriend?”

“Nope. A friend of mine.”

“He can join us!”

They’re sure stubborn—Ike’s already politely turned them down, and yet they’re still going at it, trying to convince him to hang out. As they close in on Ike, fake smiles plastered on their faces, I decide to step into the fray.

“Hey. There you are, Yuuji,” Ike calls out to me, relief washing over his face.

The girls, on the other hand, look like their souls have been sucked out of their bodies the moment they lay eyes on me.

“Ah! Oh, w-we’re sorry. You wanted to hang around with your buddy. That’s completely understandable,” one of them quickly backtracks.

“But before we go, here—have our LIME IDs. You better text us, got it?”

The girls quickly jot down what I assume is their LIME profiles on a piece of

paper, hand them over to Ike, and frantically flee the scene like bats out of hell, all the while trying their hardest to avoid looking at my mug.

Once Ike's sure they're gone, he heaves a sigh of relief. "Thanks for that, dude. I never know how to handle these types of situations properly."

Huh? Is that really the normal response when a bunch of older girls try to flirt with you? If Asakura heard that Ike had just gotten hit on by some college girls, he'd faint for sure.

"I'm kinda jealous of you, not gonna lie. You're just on another level," I say. I've never had random people approach me before, so the notion of having someone hitting on me is completely unimaginable.

"Oh my, so you'd like it if a girl tried to flirt with you, Yuuji-kun?" a voice suddenly calls out from behind me. I turn around to spot Kana, who wastes no time snaking her arms around one of mine. "It's okay, Yuuji-kun—I can fill that role for you if you want. You're *sooo* dreamy, after all. Wanna grab a few drinks with this cutie right here?" She sticks her tongue out and flashes a devilish smile.

"I never said I wanted anyone to flirt with me," I reply.

"Yeah, you tell 'em! Hasaki-senpai, that's *my* spot. I'd appreciate it if you'd quit getting so touchy-feely with *my* boyfriend, thanks!" Touka, who appears out of nowhere, shouts.

With that, she rushes over, pries Kana away from me, and locks her arms with mine instead. Kana glares at Touka, practically throwing daggers, while Touka returns her look with an icy stare of her own.

"Anyway, looks like everyone's already here."

Touka and Kana look at me with puzzled expressions the moment I say that. Did I do something wrong?

"Huh? Senpai, you're telling me that this *temptress* in disguise is allowed to hang out with us today? I'm worried that she'll sexually harass you! You didn't tell me she'd be tagging along! What's the meaning of this?! Explain this instant!"

“I-I’m not going to sexually harass anyone! He didn’t tell me that you’d be coming along, either! I bet you just followed Haruma uninvited because you knew that he’d be hanging with Yuuji-kun! *You’re* the sexual harasser! Right, Yuuji-kun?!”

What the hell’s up with this barrage of questions all of a sudden? Wait, shit—only Ike knew that these two were coming. I never told either of the girls that the other was invited, too. Man, I screwed up big time.

“Uhh, yeah... I might’ve forgotten to tell you both about this. Sorry?” I flounder.

“Huh?! You’re just gonna say ‘sorry’ and leave it at that?!”

“Sounds fishy to me...”

They both hang their heads in despair.

Ike jumps in, trying to smooth over the situation. “Come on, girls. It’s not like it’s a bad thing to hang out together from time to ti—”

“You shut it,” Touka immediately snaps.

“Whose side are you on here, Haruma?!” Kana quickly adds.

Ike shrugs and places his hand on my shoulder. “I’ll always be on my friend’s side. Anyways, Yuuji, I’ll leave this to you, buddy,” he says before hiding behind me.

Okay, so maybe this *is* my fault, but I was hoping he’d give me a little help instead of throwing me to the wolves.

Kana and Touka are practically one step away from jumping at each other’s throats, but Touka seems to think better of it. She quickly turns to me and starts speaking in her sugary, fake girlfriend voice.

“Whatever. The point is that Senpai’s mainly here to spend time with *me*, after all. He cares about our super-special date the most. Like he gives a damn about you and that other guy who decided to ruin everything by coming along. Right, Senpai?” she states while staring up at me with her puppy eyes.

I’m guessing she wants to ruffle Kana’s feathers rather than actually trying to flirt with me.

“That’s not fair! I... I want to be the one having the super special lovey-dovey date with Yuuji-kun!” she cries out as she glares at the two of us.

How can I solve this disaster? Think, Yuuji, think!

“Still jealous of me now?” Ike asks from behind me with a self-satisfied smirk.

God, if only Asakura was here... I’d like to respond to Ike, but he’s completely got me here. He’s won the battle, but not the war.



After a while, we finally manage to defuse the ticking time bomb that is Touka and Kana. We’ve been milling around the Pachiko stone without a plan in mind, so we decide to move on.

“So what do you wanna do, guys? Any ideas?” Ike asks in an attempt to break the ice.

“I was thinking that Senpai and I could go to the karaoke place and sing all by ourselves. You two can do whatever. Sayonara, losers!” Touka exclaims while tugging at my arm, trying to distance me from Kana and Ike.

“Well, I was thinking that Yuuji-kun and I could go watch a movie while you and Haruma spend some special sibling time together. How about that?” Kana suggests while trying to pull me to her side. They’re pretty much playing tug-of-war, and I’m the rope.

“Well, too bad for you—I already went to the movies with Yuuji-senpai a while ago, and it was great! I bet he doesn’t feel like watching any movies today,” Touka retorts.

“True, we did go once,” I say.

We actually watched a pretty old movie last time. I don’t know if it really set the “romantic” atmosphere she’s trying to sell to Kana, but it is true that I don’t feel like going there today.

Kana hangs her head the moment she hears my reply.

Seeing her like that brings me down, and after a pause, I add, “We can go another day, though.”

She lifts her head and flashes a smile. “Okay! It’s a promise!”

I nod in response.

“Senpai. Are you *literally* inviting another girl out on a date in front of your *beloved* girlfriend? You’re the absolute worst,” Touka grumbles. She puffs her cheeks in her trademark angry hamster expression, and her face goes red.

“I meant that for everyone, not just the two of us. We can all go to the movies together.”

Kana is my friend, after all—I wouldn’t want to leave her out of our plans. Just like I cherish my fake relationship with Touka, I’d also like to cherish my recently rekindled friendship with Kana.

“I wouldn’t mind that... For the time being, that is,” Kana answers with a smile.

This is a difficult situation for me. I get what she’s after, but I can’t give it to her because I’m technically in a relationship already. But it still hurts, seeing as my relationship is fake and I’m just hurting Kana’s feelings every time I reject her. What makes it even worse is when I see her hiding her pain behind a smile. I sure hope this doesn’t come back to bite me in the ass or weigh on my conscience too heavily in the future.

Either way, this isn’t the time to be apologizing to her right now. “Sounds good,” I say.

“You’re a womanizer *and* a moron, Senpai!” Touka shouts, clearly unhappy at my attempt to patch the situation up.

“Hey, I’m not a womanizer. Quit calling me what I’m not.”

“Oh right, my bad—it’s not *just* women that you deceive with your sweet little nothings. Silly me. I almost forgot! Hmph!” she snaps back while giving me the stink eye.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I ask, confused as hell.

“Ignorance is bliss, after all. You sure are *forgetful* about your actions when it suits your agenda...” she whispers just loud enough that I can hear her. Well, guess I’m not getting an answer anytime soon.

“Uhh, guys, any ideas on what we’re actually going to do?” Ike finally pipes up with an awkward attempt at a smile.

Oh, right—we need a plan. I look around our surroundings, and one place in particular catches my eye.

“How about we go there?” I suggest, pointing at an entertainment center near us. I know it has a karaoke place, like Touka suggested earlier, as well as a couple of arcade centers and sports-related activities.

“That sounds nice.”

“I’m cool with that, too.”

“Okay, then we got a plan.”

Looks like we’ve finally decided on a location, at least.



Once we pay the entrance fee, we try to come up with ideas on what to do.

“I’ve actually never bowled before in my life,” I say.

“Whaaat?! Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve never hung out with people before, and I never really thought of going there alone, so...”

Touka looks at Ike and then Kana.

“I haven’t tried it either,” Ike says.

“Well, it’s the same with me. My friends and I always hang out outdoors,” Kana adds.

It’s like they’re trying to find any excuse to agree with me. But why?

“Same goes with karaoke, by the way—I’ve never been to one in my life,” I continue.

The three of them smile when I say that.

“Let’s do some bowling and karaoke today, then.”

“I’m sure it’ll be a blast if we do it together.”

“Sounds good to me.”

I’m kinda embarrassed. They’re going out of their way to please me, which makes me very happy.

“Let’s do that then,” I agree with a nod.

We head to the bowling center, pay our fee, borrow a few pairs of bowling shoes, and grab some bowling balls. The receptionist shows us where the lanes are, and we get right into it.

Ike is the first one up. He grasps his bowling ball like he’s already mastered the sport. He rolls the ball so it curves down the lane and manages to hit a perfect strike with it. This guy is just the star of the show wherever he goes.

“Whoa, nice shot!” Kana cheers.

“I feel like I can crush it today,” Ike answers happily, and the two of them high-five.

“Nice going, dude,” I compliment him, also reaching out for a high-five.

“Thanks!” he says, returning my gesture.

Touka, on the other hand, fiddles around on her phone, completely ignoring her brother’s impressive feat.

Kana stares at our high-five, and her attitude completely changes. “Okay, Yuuji-kun! I’m going to crush it now! Be sure to watch me closely!”

“Uhh, sure.”

Kana picks up her bowling ball and rolls it down the lane. She manages to knock down five of the ten bowling pins, but quickly follows up by knocking the rest down. Looks like she’s scored a spare.

“Whoa! Did you see that, Yuuji-kun?!” she exclaims while excitedly turning around to see my reaction.

“I sure did. Great shot,” I say with a nod.

Her expression brightens as she heads my way, palm up in the air, ready to high-five me.

“Yaaay! High-five! High-five!”

I reluctantly raise my hand to meet hers. Instead of lightly slapping my hand, though, she grabs hold of it.

Touka reacts instantly, placing her phone down and shouting, “Hey! What the hell are you two doing?!”

Good thing she’s intervened—I’m kinda weirded out myself.

“Kana, this isn’t a high-five,” I add rather unhelpfully.

“Come on, everyone can make mistakes, right?” Kana asks while giving me her puppy eyes.

I mean, how am I supposed to respond to that? I guess she could’ve made a mistake, or conveniently forgotten how to high-five, so I don’t really know what to say.

“Um, isn’t it, like, super obvious that it’s *not* fine? Would you stop trying to feel up my bae so casually, you sex freak?” Touka interjects, doing several swift karate chops in the air to separate our hands.

“Being jealous all the time won’t do you any good, Touka-chan,” Kana grumbles while caressing her hand.

Neither of the girls seem happy about the situation, that much is clear.

“Senpai?” Touka speaks up, directing her attention toward me. “You’d better watch me closely—closer than you were watching *her*. I’m gonna wipe the floor with her.”

She grabs her bowling ball and hurls it straight at the pins. Just like her brother did a few minutes ago, she manages to get a strike.

“I did it! A strike! Senpaaai! High-five!” Touka exclaims happily. She raises both of her hands up and approaches me.

Actually, her gesture looks more like she’s asking for a hug rather than a high five. I’ll just raise both my hands and see what happens.

“Waaah! Nice going, Touka-chan! Amazing! Great strike!” Kana suddenly bursts out, placing herself between me and Touka. Just like she did with me, she grabs Touka’s hands.

“Yaay, thank you so much!” Touka replies with just about the fakest sugary voice ever. “But how about you back away from me right now, hm?”

“Huh? But I totally knew that you were going to try the same stunt I did with Yuuji-kun, Touka-chan. I’d rather not have you bother him, considering he’s going to be throwing next.”

“Excuse me?! What the hell are you saying? As if I’d ever act as slutty as you do. Plus, newsflash—I’m his *girlfriend*. It would be okay if I did it, *and* if he didn’t want to let go.”

“But the fact is that he joined hands with *me*, not you. Not to mention you had to force us apart. Otherwise...”

“Huuuh?! Damn, I had no idea you were slutty *and* delusional. I’ve gotta say, I actually feel bad for you now that I know. Poor thing...”

Their hands are still clasped together, but as they’re bickering, they’re also pushing against each other, as if they’re about to enter an impromptu wrestling match.

Well, whatever. It’s my turn now, so I’ll leave them to it for the time being. I ask Ike about the basic rules and toss my ball to see what happens.

In the end, I manage to knock down a total of eight pins with my two throws. It’s a shame things didn’t go the way I wanted, but I’m still a novice. I guess this should be good enough for now, right? I do want to score at least one strike while I’m here, though.

And this should go without saying, but Touka and Kana are still at each other’s throats while I’m taking my turn.



The first bowling game comes to an end. After a few turns, I managed to get the gist of the game. Soon enough, I ended up scoring several spares and strikes, and finished with a score of 150 points.

“150 points on your first game is amazing!” Kana exclaims.

“You’re *sooo* cool, Senpai! Nice going!” Touka gushes.

I don’t think it’s *that* great, but the two of them heap on the praise

regardless. Meanwhile, Ike managed to land a strike on every single turn—he scored a perfect 300 points.

“Hey, Haruma, don’t you think that it’s a bit of a waste of money if you’re going to come in and nail every shot? Where’s the fun in landing a strike 12 times in a row? I know you scored the highest out of all of us, but still...” Kana nags.

“More like creepy. Ew,” Touka chimes in unnecessarily while giggling.

“I think it’s amazing that you scored double what I did,” I add.

Ike smiles but doesn’t say anything. I feel for him.

“As long as you had fun, that’s all that matters, dude,” I reassure him.

Ike must have the patience of a saint. How can he stay so composed after being belittled by Kana and Touka like that? I’d definitely lose my temper if that were to happen to me. I now realize the amount of shit he gets from these two and the composure required to endure it. He’s a great guy.



Once we’ve finished our bowling session, we have a drink at a nearby cafe. After that, we move on to karaoke.

“Okay, Senpai, you sit next to me! My brother can place himself in some corner and disappear for all I care! And you can wait in the corridor outside, Hasaki-senpai! Oooh, I know—why don’t you do some squats while you wait? They’d *really* help you out.”

Why does Touka have to be such a complete ass with Ike and Kana all the time?

“Okay—you can sit beside him. *I’ll* sit on his lap instead,” Kana retorts.

“Umm, how about no? Horndog.”

Ugh, whatever. Screw both of them. I’ll ask Ike to see what we should do.

“How about you and I sit beside each other, Mr. Ladies’ Man?” he suggests with a teasing tone.

Ike, you’re the ladies’ man, not me. Wipe that smirk off your face.

“Sure. I don’t care where we sit anyway. Uhh, so how does karaoke work again?”

Ike teaches me how to use the remote controller that works with the touch panel where we select the songs from.

“Yuuji-senpai, you’ll sit next to *me*!”

“And *I*’ll be sitting on your lap!”

Both Kana and Touka barrage me with their demands in the middle of Ike’s explanation.

“I’ll be sitting next to Ike. And I’d rather not have anyone on my lap. Why don’t you two sit over there next to each other?” I say, pointing at the sofa in front of the one we’re lounging on.

The two of them grow silent and plop themselves down on the opposite sofa. Their heads hang low in shame.

“Heh... You two never listen to anything I have to say, but it’s a totally different story when it comes to the guy you like, huh? Then you both shut up and listen, I see,” Ike remarks. I guess this is payback for all the shit talk he was being barraged with before. He’s definitely enjoying teasing them this time around. “Anyway, I’m going to pick a song.”

Ike scrolls through the selection of songs and chooses one. Once he does, lyrics appear on the screen in front of us, and the music starts playing. It’s a pretty popular song—even I’m familiar with it. I guess he played it safe and chose something that everyone would like. I should do the same.

Ike is the first one on the microphone. His voice is clear and pleasant to hear, his tone fitting perfectly with the original song. Plus, he’s following the rhythm of the music flawlessly. He’s perfect even when it comes to singing karaoke, huh? I bet if Tatsumiya or the hordes of other girls who like him could hear this, they’d all squeal and faint like massive fangirls.

As for Kana and Touka...

“I’ve heard other people sing this one on TV before. I thought only haughty, narcissistic types liked this,” Kana notes, surprising me.

Touka doesn't even chime in; she's busy fiddling with her phone and completely ignoring the situation yet again.

I should've just invited Tatsumiya and some other girl—that would've made things much more enjoyable. I'm gonna have to apologize to Ike after this.

"You're great at singing, dude. Wouldn't expect any less," I commend him. I hope I can lift his spirits up, even if just a little.

"Those two didn't seem to like my performance very much," he answers while handing the mic to me. As soon as he does, another song starts playing. Oh, it's the one I queued up while he was singing.

"Ah! I totally love this song!" Kana exclaims.

"You have great taste in music, Senpai! You're just perfect!"

And of course, the moment I step onto the stage, Kana and Touka are reinvigorated and start singing my praises.

This is so awkward. It's actually my first time singing, and I'm definitely not ready for what's in store. In the end, I manage to get through my piece. It's embarrassing, to say the least.

"Whoaaa! You're so good at singing, Yuuji-kun!"

"Senpai, you're the greatest karaoke master in the world! I think I fell in love with you even harder than before!"

Geez. They make it sound like I'm some sort of superstar.

"Th-Thanks..." I reply hesitantly.

The next song starts playing, and it's another popular one. It's a romantic piece sung by a famous female singer.

"Hey! That's my song!" Touka exclaims.

She starts to sing, and her delivery is just as perfect as Ike's. I'm surprised—she's actually got a pretty damn good voice. So good, in fact, that I get lost in her singing and don't even realize when she finishes.

"How was it, Senpai?" Touka asks.

"That was brilliant. Seriously. I was really captivated by your singing there."

“Nice!” Touka cheers, then sighs in relief.

“Heh, you sly witch. Of course you’d choose that song,” Kana mutters.

“Oh shut up already,” Touka retorts with an icy stare.

The two of them are bearing wide smiles, but I’m getting increasingly scared, not gonna lie.

“Okay, it’s my turn now! Yuuji-kun, be sure to listen up!” Kana chirps.

And she called Touka a sly witch? She just picked a love ballad by a female idol group—that’s pretty much identical to Touka’s selection! Sure, Touka was better than her, but Kana’s not too shabby either... I just don’t think that this kind of song fits her usual upbeat personality.

“Your thoughts, Yuuji-kun? Did I make your heart skip a beat or two?” Kana asks me the moment the song is over.

She actually did. Her singing was great, even if the song choice wasn’t the best.

“I did. It was awesome,” I reply.

Kana giggles, and her cheeks flush. “I’m so happy...”

“That song suits you perfectly, Hasaki-senpai,” Touka remarks.

Wow, she actually complimented Kana? Nice. I wasn’t expecting that.

“I-It did?” Kana asks, just as surprised as I am.

“Yup. It was as boring and plain as you are. You’re just made for it!”

“Oh, come on—I may not be the most interesting person, but you take it to another level,” Kana replies with a smile on her face.

I can practically see the sparks crackling from the intense stares they’re giving each other.

Ike suddenly stands up. “Hey, I’m going to go get some drinks. Do you girls want anything?”

They both shout that they want ice tea in unison. Moments like these make me think that they could get along if they wanted to, considering their tastes

are quite similar.

It'll probably be hard for Ike to juggle everyone's drinks on the way back. He could definitely do it, but if I can help him, then I'll feel more at ease.

"Hey, I'll help you out," I say.

"Oh, thanks. You're a lifesaver."

We leave the room and head toward the drink bar inside the karaoke place. There's no one here apart from us. I take a couple of glasses for Touka and Kana, put some ice inside them, and hand them over to Ike.

"Thanks, Yuuji," he says. He heads to the drink machine, pushes a button, and fills the glasses with iced tea.

"No problem, man. I just thought it'd be easier if we both carried the drinks back so you wouldn't have to do it alone."

Ike laughs a little at my response.

"Did I say something weird?"

Ike turns around and looks at me. "Well, that's not what I was thanking you for."

"I can't really think of anything else I did that warrants it."

"I was thanking you for Touka and Kana."

"Huh?" I blurt out. I'm at a loss here.

"It's been a long time since I've seen Touka being that happy and upbeat. For god knows how long, all she ever did was go along with things with that fake little laugh of hers. Plus, she'd look at me like... well, you know. She's changed, Yuuji, and it's thanks to your relationship. I'm sure of it," he explains with a wide smile.

I have no idea what to say in response to this sudden outburst of honesty.

"Same goes with Kana. She's always been perky and cheerful, but I could tell that she was hiding something deep down that she could never consult me about. Sure, I think that she might take things a little too far sometimes, but it's good to see that she's also developed as a person, you know?"

He pauses to take a deep breath, then continues, “The three of us hung out together a lot before we finished middle school. But then Touka and Kana’s relationship soured, and Touka and I grew distant. Eventually, we just stopped being together all the time. I knew what was going on, but I couldn’t do anything to change the situation. I wasn’t... I wasn’t able to fix things with Touka either. To be honest, I’d already kinda given up on trying to get things back to normal. But the way things are right now—with those two constantly bickering and snapping at me—takes me back. It reminds me of how we were when we were younger, and that makes me very happy.”

And here I thought that he was being treated like trash, but I guess that’s just what he’s used to if it brings back pleasant memories.

“The reason we’re all back to how we were right now is all thanks to you, man. So yeah—I just wanted to express my appreciation.”

Ike looks down at the glasses he’s holding. We’re done filling the drinks.

“You don’t really need to thank me for any of this,” I reply hesitantly.

Sure, maybe I’m one of the reasons Ike and Touka have started to get along better, but I can’t really agree when it comes to Kana. That was nothing more than pure luck. Plus, he shouldn’t be the one thanking me—I should be the one thanking *him* for all the help he’s given me. He’s the reason I’m here in the first place. I’m glad that he feels appreciative, but I can’t accept his gratitude when I haven’t done anything to warrant it.

“I know you try to act all cool and aloof, my man, but you gotta dial it back a little sometimes,” he jokes.

“Oh shut up.”

We’ve returned to our classic banter. If I didn’t try to appear as “cold” as he’s suggesting, we wouldn’t have ended up as friends in the first place.

Ike laughs, but then quickly does a 180 and gives me a serious look. “Actually, there’s one more thing I need to mention—it’s not that I’m worried about it or anything, but take into account that I consider both girls family. I don’t know what’s going to happen between the three of you, but whatever it is, hopefully this situation—with both of them fighting over you—doesn’t last much longer.

You get me?”

I nod. He’s clearly not joking around, so I should do the same. “Got it,” I reply.

He’s right. Sooner, rather than later, I’m going to have to sort out my feelings and decide what I’m going to do in regards to my “relationship” with Touka. After that, I need to tackle the issue with Kana and her feelings.

Ike appears content with my answer, because his usual smile returns to his face. “Good to know we’re on the same wavelength. Anyways, let’s go deliver some drinks.”

We should definitely be heading back, yeah. I take Touka’s iced tea, along with my beverage, and we both head back to the karaoke room.

“Ah!” Touka and Kana shout at the same time the moment we return.

We find ourselves faced with a bizarre scenario we weren’t expecting: the two girls were singing in unison. Ike and I exchanged surprised looks.



“So you two *can* get along, after all,” I note.

Kana and Touka go red and hang their heads in embarrassment.

“We thought about singing a duet just for you!” Kana blurts out.

“This was only so you could decide which of us would be your better partner! You gotta listen and tell us!” Touka hastily adds.

Ike and I leave the drinks on the table and proceed to plop down on the sofa. Man, and here I was hoping that they were actually getting along.

Ike takes my shoulders and jostles me slightly, interrupting my train of thought. “If you really want to know the answer to that, then any competition is pointless.”

What? Where’s he going with this?

“Huh? What’s your deal?” Touka asks.

“What do you mean, Haruma?”

Both of them are as confused as I am.

“Easy: Yuuji and I will sing together first since I’m already his best partner!”

He places his arm around my shoulder and grins at them. Unlike his smile, Touka and Kana are furious.

“Excuse me?! You have *got* to be kidding! What kinda bullshit is that?!” Touka yells.

“You can’t be his best partner! Impossible!”

Ike looks at me, as if seeking my help. His face slowly approaches mine. Geez, if I was Tatsumiya or one of the millions of girls that have a crush on him, I’d totally faint right now. Too bad I’m a guy; otherwise I’d definitely go after him.

“Sure. Let’s hit the stage, partner,” I manage to answer without swooning on the spot. Nice going, me.

“Like hell you are!” Touka screams.

“You cheater! Haruma, you idiot!”

Ike chooses a perfect song for us to sing together and hands a mic to me with

a smile.

“Look, I don’t really care what you two have to say about it. Ready to go, partner?”

I accept the mic. “You got it.”

And with that, we start to sing together. Although Touka and Kana don’t seem very happy about it, I, for one, think we make a pretty good pair.

Chapter Nine

A Token of Gratitude

It's Friday night, and we're still in the first stretch of summer.

I'm chilling at home when my phone suddenly vibrates. When I check the screen, I see the name "Makiri-sensei" pop up. What could she be calling me about?

"Hello. Are you there, Tomoki-kun?"

"Yeah, it's me," I answer.

"Good evening—oh, this is Makiri, by the way. Do you have a moment to talk?"

"Sure. What's up?"

I hear her take a deep breath on the other end before she continues. "It's about your documentation for the student council trip."

Crap. I'm pretty sure I know why she called now, and it probably won't end well.

"This isn't your father's signature, is it?"

I can't really tell how she's feeling from her voice, but I bet she's mad at me. For sure.

I briefly hesitate, then decide to admit it. "I'm sorry."

"At the very least you're honest about it."

"Not like giving you a bunch of excuses would make the situation any better. I assume this invalidates the document and I can't go on the trip anymore?"

She pauses for a few seconds before uttering, "Yes, exactly."

Understandable. Well, now I need to think of a way to apologize to Ike and Touka. How the hell do I go about that, though?

“You need to get your father to sign the document,” Makiri-sensei states.

“Um, there’s a reason I tried to get away with forging his signature...”

“I’m well aware of your situation, but I’m going to go out on a limb and guess that you didn’t even ask him for permission in the first place.”

“Uh... maybe.”

“You just assumed he’d say no and that’s why you did it.”

“I did. I get it sounds like a lame excuse, but I *really* can’t get his signature.”

“I know you don’t feel that your presence will have much of an impact on the trip, but everyone wants you to attend... more than you may think.”

I can’t say anything back to her, since this is just her way of showing how much she cares about me.

“In any case, this warrants a home visit. I’ll visit your place and talk to your father in person.”

“Wait, what?”

I wasn’t expecting to hear *that* of all things.

“I’ll inform your father about this immediately. By the way, do you have any plans for tomorrow?”

“Nothing in particular, no. But wait, are you actually coming? Is this definitive?”

“It is. I will arrive at your place around... 3:00PM, so I’ll let your father know to keep his schedule open around that time. You should also make sure to be at home tomorrow morning.”

“Huh, so you’re coming no matter what. And why do I have to be present in the morning?”

“I’ll take care of everything that happens. Understood?” she states in a serious tone.

“What are you even talking about?”

“A-At any rate, I’ll see you tomorrow!” she hurriedly exclaims before hanging

up.

Why is she coming tomorrow? And what did she mean by taking care of everything? I swear...



The next day, my home's intercom rings right at noon. I head toward the entrance and open it, fully expecting Makiri-sensei to be standing there.

"Good morning, Tomoki-kun," Makiri-sensei greets me, just as anticipated.

Her outfit consists of a white blouse and a straight skirt, and she has her tailored jacket in one arm and a stylish bag in the other. I must admit, I'm entranced by her fashionable ensemble.

"What are you staring at me for?" she asks with a glare.

"Oh, well... it's just that I've never seen you in these kinds of clothes before, so I'm a bit surprised."

"I dress like this whenever I go to events, too, but I suppose you've forgotten," she says with a forced smile.

"Uhh, my bad," I mumble, my cheeks beginning to flush.

"Don't worry about it," she assures me with a smile.

"Right, come on in. Excuse my manners," I say. With that, I head into the living room.

"Much appreciated," she replies. She enters, removes her shoes, and follows me in. "Your place is quite well-kept. Are you the one responsible for keeping things in order?"

"More or less," I reply. "I made sure to clean a bit before you came today."

"I see. That's a shame—I was hoping this would be the normal state of your place."

Well, the house is looking like a freakin' five-star hotel right now. Clearly it's not in its "normal state."

"I'll prepare some tea for you," I say after placing a cushion down for her.

“Actually, would you mind if I ate here first?” she asks as she places her bag on the table.

I stare at her blankly for a second. “I thought you were being weird over the phone yesterday, but *this* is what you were talking about?”

She’s pulled out a pair of lunch boxes from her bag—this is the reason she showed up with several hours to spare before my father arrives. Because of that, we have plenty of time to enjoy lunch.

“What? You didn’t think I’d be the cooking type?” she asks.

“I just don’t get why you’d go out of your way to make one of these for me. There’s no reason for it.”

She throws me an awkward glance. “Consider... Consider this an apology for what happened the other weekend, okay?”

“Oh, I see now.”

I get it now. So she came earlier as a way to thank me. That makes sense.

“A-Anyway, let’s eat!” she blurts out. “Would you mind if I used your microwave to heat these up?”

“I’ll take care of that. Don’t worry,” I say. I take the lunch boxes and place them in the microwave. While the microwave is doing its thing, I prepare some tea for her.

Finally, I head back to her with everything in hand—lunch, utensils, and tea.

“I actually snuck a peek at the food while I was warming the lunch boxes up, and it looked great,” I tell her.

From what I saw, it had a little bit of everything, and everything seemed delicious. I’m practically drooling right now as I’m waiting to dig in.

“Thank you. By all means, help yourself,” she says.

“Okay, thank you,” I say, then eagerly pop a rolled piece of omelet into my mouth. “Damn!”

This is way more delicious than I was expecting. When I’d carried her back to her place after I’d found her drunk off her ass, I assumed that she wasn’t really

the domestic type. But when it comes to her cooking skills, it turns out I've been proven pleasantly wrong.

I sample everything else in the box, and each and every piece of food tastes heavenly. Like, it's seriously out of this world good.

"Do you like the food?" she asks.

I quickly nod while I continue to stuff my face. It's kinda embarrassing, but she doesn't seem too bothered by my bad table manners. I continue to scarf down her delicious lunch, undeterred.



Once we've finished eating, Makiri-sensei returns home to clean the lunch boxes, and then she'll be back at 3:00PM for the meeting with my father. I can understand why—there's no doubt my old man would be none too pleased if he caught her coming over with lunch just for the two of us.

It's almost 1:30PM now, so I still have some time to kill before the meeting. I guess I'll go back to my room and read some manga.

Ding dong!

Oh, scratch that—someone just rang the intercom. I wonder who it is?

"Good to see you again, Tomoki-kun. I'm back," Makiri-sensei greets me.

Wait, why's she here already?

"You're awfully early for the meeting," I remark.

"I just thought that since I'm already paying you a visit, I could observe how you study. Would you mind showing me?"

Maybe she still wants to repay me for that weekend? Then again, I can't help but suspect the reason behind this request is that she has a little too much free time on her hands.

"Uhh, sure. If you don't mind," I reply, moving aside to let her in.

"I hope I'm not bothering you," she says as she makes her way inside again. "I'd like to see your study environment, actually. Would you be so kind as to show me to your room?"

“Now *that* sounds like you’re doing a proper home visit as my teacher.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing. Why are you so shocked by that?” she asks with a cold voice and an even more frigid glare.

“Um, sorry. Your outfit is just so different from what you normally wear at school that it’s kinda throwing me off, and...” I trail off hesitantly. I’m not sure if I should complete that thought.

“And?” she prods, fixing her powerful stare on me.

I give in under her gaze and admit, “You look so pretty that I kinda forget that you’re actually my teacher.”

God, what the hell am I even on about? She totally thinks I’m a weirdo right now.

She goes silent for a few seconds before retoring with, “Next time, please keep those idiotic remarks to yourself.”

I can’t even look at her face right now because of how embarrassed I am. However, I wouldn’t exactly be surprised if she’s furious at me right now.

“I-I’m sorry...” I whisper, then quickly lead the way to my room.

“Your room is quite tidy. It’s actually quite spartan,” she remarks as she scans my room from top to bottom.

Well, she’s not wrong—my room consists only of my bed, a simple dresser, a desk, and a chair.

“Do you actually study when you return home, or do you busy yourself with other things?” she asks while looking at me with a concerned expression.

“I usually watch movies on either my phone or my tablet, read manga, and stuff like that. I also have a dumbbell and some training stuff inside my dresser. I use those to work out whenever I’m here, too,” I say. I grab my tablet off my desk and show it to her.

“I see. So you only need a tablet for entertainment,” she answers while nodding. “Would you mind showing me how you’d get ready for a studying session?”

I do as she says, scattering my books and notes across my desk. I open the book of summer homework that we've been assigned and get to work.

Makiri-sensei is staring at me the entire time, which is super unnerving. Maybe she's waiting for me to ask questions, but right now, I feel so awkward that my mind's drawing a total blank. I do my best to remain focused on my homework, trying not to think too hard about it.

Hey, wait a second—I've just realized that there's a beautiful woman with me in my room right now. Sure, she's my teacher, and I'm her student, so I'm positive this is no big deal for her. And sure, in terms of guys, I'd equate to less than a pebble on the side of the road, but still. Her presence alone is distracting me so much that I can't concentrate properly.

"Tomoki-kun, you're not writing anything. Is there something you don't understand?" she suddenly asks right beside me.

"Whoa!" I yelp.

Talk about humiliating—she caught me while I was spacing out, and now I don't know what to say. And what was with that scream?

"Looks like you're having trouble concentrating," she notes with concern. "Maybe I should advise your father to keep an eye on you..."

I'm already having a bad time as is. I can't even picture what that would end up like.

"I-I suppose so, haha," I hastily answer, hoping she hasn't noticed that I've lost all my marbles.



I managed to regain my cool not long after that and made quick work of my assignments. Once I'd finished, it was almost 3:00PM.

"My father will be coming home anytime now. We should probably go back to the living room."

"Agreed," she nods.

Once we return, I prepare some cold tea for Makiri-sensei and serve it with a side of crumpets.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have bothered going to the trouble,” she thanks me when I offer her the food.

Suddenly, I can sense the rumble of footsteps by the entrance. My father’s returned.

“It appears your father is already here,” Makiri-sensei whispers.

We hear my father enter the house. Shortly after, he opens the living room door and greets Makiri-sensei. “It’s been a long time since we last saw each other, Makiri-sensei. The meeting is for 3:00PM, right? I hope I didn’t get it wrong.”

Makiri-sensei stands up and bows. “It’s been a long time indeed. I should apologize for arriving earlier than the appointed hour.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I actually came back earlier than usual because I was worried about being late myself,” my father says.

He plops down on the seat in front of me, and since I don’t exactly want to sit next to him, I choose to sit next to Makiri-sensei instead. It’s a little weird, since usually the parents and children sit together in front of the teacher when they visit.

“Well, although it’s somewhat earlier than the appointed time, we should probably go ahead and start the meeting now,” my father declares. “So... what has my son done now?”

I’m not mad at him for assuming the worst, seeing that the only reason teachers have come to our place in the past has always been to tell him bad news. And hell, it’s even true to an extent this time—I mean, I pretty much admitted that I forged his signature and used it to try and go on a school trip. I know Makiri-sensei was mostly taken aback rather than angry, but what I did was still wrong.

So yeah, all things considered, my dad isn’t exactly wrong for asking that.

“I assume Tomoki-kun hasn’t shown you this?” she asks while pulling the document out of her bag and placing it on the table.

My father takes the document and examines it. “No, he hasn’t. This is the first

time I've ever laid my eyes on it. What is it?"

"The school's student council organizes a summer camp trip every year that lasts for a few days. In order to go, the members require one of their parents to sign this document."

"And what about it?" my father asks, clearly not understanding what she's trying to get at.

"Yuuji-kun was invited to the event this year, but he hasn't given me his document yet. That's why I came here—I was hoping that you can sign it and give it to me directly so we can avoid any issues."

"I didn't know you were a part of the student council," my father says to me. He seems to be in shock.

"Uhh, I'm not."

"You're not?!"

Now he looks even more confused than before. We're pretty much the same when it comes to these things. I know it makes zero sense too, Dad.

"Though Yuuji-kun may not be an official member of the student council, he's been helping them out immensely this year. That's why the members of the student council expressly requested him to attend the trip with them this year," Makiri-sensei explains.

"Really now?" my father muses.

Makiri-sensei smiles, nods, and continues her explanation in an attempt to help me out. "Yes. He may have not told you about it, but he's been of great help to the student council this term—I'd go as far as to say he's been invaluable. He's also on very good terms with all of the members. In fact, I would personally appreciate it if he could attend this trip, as well."

My father looks at me, then at the document, and then back to me again. He's in disbelief. "Why didn't you tell me about this?"

I remain silent, staring at him for a while, before I mumble, "You know why."

"I see..." he responds simply while looking away. He doesn't sound angry—in fact, his voice lacks any emotion.

I still don't know how we're supposed to patch things up between us after what happened last year. I bet he's still the same way he's always been.

"My father and I have difficulties seeing each other eye-to-eye," I explain to Makiri-sensei. "He's almost never home, and when he is, he's prone to violence—it's no wonder my mother left us. He beat the hell out of me back then, and I never retaliated. Well, I do understand that I used to be an asshole, but still. Anyway, I got him back one day. I'm not gonna apologize for what I did, and I know you won't either. He hasn't raised a hand against me since then, and he's allowed me to attend school like a normal person. Thanks to that, I've been able to make some friends, so at least there's that to be thankful for. Well, I've said my piece."

I end up pouring everything out to her, because her presence has given me the balls I needed to confront my father. He would've killed me for saying any of this out loud last year—in fact, no doubt he would've shut me up and apologized to Makiri-sensei for my "lies." But things are different now, and I'm truly thankful to my teacher for being here.

My father, on the other hand, doesn't say anything. He's hanging his head so that we can't see his face. After a while, he looks at the document, signs it, and stamps it with his personal seal.

"Th-Thank you..." Makiri-sensei mumbles, clearly surprised.

My father doesn't bother to respond to her, though.

"Yuuji—you are I, we're the same," he whispers faintly. "I've always thought that what I did was rightful, that the beatings I gave you were justified. Recently, I've begun to wonder if I was truly wrong for what I did back then. It's all thanks to you."

Makiri-sensei looks like a fish out of the water right now.

I'm not surprised. I expected my father to react like this, no matter what I said.

"In the end, there's not much of a difference when it comes to being 'right' or 'wrong' about something. It's all about perspective."

After that cryptic delivery, he stands up and leaves the room.

Uh, what? I have no idea what he meant by that. Did Makiri-sensei get any of that?

Before anything else happens, my father returns to the room with a couple of manga, looking like he's on the verge of tears.

"I just knew it. You and I are cut from the same cloth, Yuuji. You truly are my son," he declares, placing the manga on the table.

Makiri-sensei and I lean over to look at the titles. Looks like they're... *We Never Learn* and *Why the Hell are You Here, Teacher?!*

"Son, whoever you want to be with, I will support you."

"Did I give you brain damage the last time I hit you or something?!" I cry out. This is the first time I've seen him smile like this. God, he pisses me off so much. I wish I could bash his face in right now. "You *do* realize that if Makiri-sensei wanted to sue you for this, you'd pretty much instantly lose the case, right?"

"Ahh, I knew that you'd find yourself an older girl. They're always better, aren't they?" he muses, as if in a trance. He completely ignores me and continues to spout nonsense.

I'm at a total loss.

"Um, what's going on?" Makiri-sensei asks, clearly confused.

"These are some romance manga my son reads," my father boldly declares.

"Nice lie—these are yours, old man!" I shout in protest.

"Fine. While these may indeed be mine, I know for a fact that you also have these in your digital library."

"Why the hell do you know what kind of manga I read?!"

"Heh, I knew it. You're just like me."

"Wait, you were just bluffing to make me spill the beans?!" I practically scream, flabbergasted.

My father gives me a rather nasty smirk.

"So that's the sort of thing you read on your tablet?" Makiri-sensei asks. "Your father says they're romance. Are they?"

“Indeed they are,” my father quickly jumps in before I can mend the situation. “They’re about the protagonist having an affair with their teachers.”

“Huh?” Makiri-sensei blurts out, unable to hide her surprise. She quickly clears her throat and regains her composure, though. “Oh, well... they are fictional, after all. As long as the reader doesn’t confuse reality with fiction, there should be nothing wrong with him liking those.”

My father doesn’t seem to be affected by her icy tone, though, because he continues. “Makiri-sensei—at this point, I don’t know if what I did back then was right or wrong, but I hope that you can lead my son down the right path. I beg of you.”

I’m pretty screwed right now. My dad’s delivery is all wrong. It feels more like he’s giving her my hand in marriage or something. He’s even bowing his head!

But Makiri-sensei doesn’t seem even remotely fazed by this, because she simply straightens her back and looks at him seriously. “Of course,” she answers.

“I hope you can lead him down the right path until the end of his days,” my father continues with a serious look on his face.

This completely throws Makiri-sensei off the rails. I feel so confused and also awful at the same time; it’s like my father just harassed my teacher. If my father goes to court for this, I’m definitely taking Makiri-sensei’s side. Sorry, Dad.

Chapter Ten

Departure

We're in August now, only a few days into our summer vacation.

I find myself walking to school of all places. Yeah, I know it's weird, especially on a day as hot as this one. There's a good reason behind it, though, I promise. I'm doing this today because the fateful day has arrived: it's finally time for our student council trip.

The moment I arrive, I head straight to the student council room—that's where we're supposed to meet. I knock on the door, and a voice from inside beckons me in.

"Oh, Yuuji. There you are," Ike greets me.

"Looks like I'm the last one here," I note as I look around.

We all exchange greetings. I'm 10 minutes earlier than the supposed meeting time, but everyone's already here waiting for me. Yep, Ike, Tatsumiya, Tanaka-senpai, Suzuki, and Touka are all here. The only one who's still missing is Makiri-sensei, who's supposed to come pick us up with a minivan and drive us over.

"Apparently, Taketori-senpai's too busy studying for an exam he has to retake, so he won't be tagging along," Ike explains.

"Hi there, Yuuji-senpai!" Touka exclaims in a cheery voice.

"Hey," I reply.

As soon as I answer her, Touka heaves a sigh of relief and heads my way. Is she happy that I'm finally here?

"Ah! Touka..." I hear Tatsumiya cry.

Hah, Touka's only relieved because Tatsumiya was probably hanging all over her and bothering her. Tatsumiya also notices Touka's visible relief and shoots me a nasty glare. Oh well, whatever.

“Well, since we’re all here, we should go fetch Makiri-sensei so we can get going.”

“I’ll go to the staff room and call for her. You guys wait for us at the front gate,” Tanaka-senpai commands.

“I’ll come with you. I don’t want you to wait for her alone,” Suzuki adds, following behind him.

“Okay, then we’ll be at the gate. See you guys there,” Ike says.

Tanaka and Suzuki leave the room, and we follow suit shortly after. Ike locks the room’s door behind us, and we make our way toward the gate.

“Oh man, not gonna lie—I’m, like, totally pumped for this trip!” Touka exclaims in her usual cheery tone.

“Huh, weird to see you actually excited about something.”

“Oh, you have *no* idea! The fact that Hasaki-senpai won’t be there to spoil everything makes this all *infinitely* better,” she replies with a grin. I like it when she smiles like that.

“I heard that she’s preparing for an upcoming tennis competition, so yeah,” Ike explains.

“Well, if I may give my opinion on the matter... it would be quite bizarre if she *did* accompany us, considering she doesn’t participate at all in the student council or even assist in any manner,” Tatsumiya points out with her usual calm demeanor.

“Oh well. It’s a shame, but I guess that’s just how it is,” Ike says.

“Aw, I’m *sooo* sad that she can’t come! What a shame!” Touka says, her voice dripping in sarcasm. “Psych! Anyways, I can’t wait to have you all for myself on the trip, Senpai!”

“Wehehe, yes indeed. I must admit, I *am* looking forward to enjoying some quality time with you on our excursion, Touka,” Tatsumiya adds with a sinister grin.

“Uhh... yeah, sure,” Touka mumbles vaguely, trying to ignore her as much as possible.

“Goodness! Perhaps I’m being overzealous in my attempt to become friends with her! What will the president think of me now?!” she cries.

“It’s okay. I think you just don’t know how to go about this yet,” I try to assure her.

Tatsumiya looks at Ike with a fiery passion; Ike smiles at her, but doesn’t reply. I don’t receive an answer from Tatsumiya—I doubt she was listening to what I said. She’s too busy staring at Ike to pay attention to anything else.

It takes a few minutes, but we eventually arrive at the school’s front gate. The minivan in question is already waiting for us, along with Makiri-sensei.

“Hey, guys. Place your luggage in the back,” she directs, then hops into the driver’s seat.

I throw my stuff in the back as instructed and open the van’s door. As I’m about to enter, I take in the seating situation. Suzuki and Tanaka-senpai are already sitting next to each other at the very back. That leaves four seats for the rest of us—three seats in the second row, and one up front riding shotgun.

“Why don’t we sit next to each other, Touka?” Tatsumiya suggests.

“Uhh, I was actually hoping to sit next to Senpai, so I don’t know...” Touka replies hesitantly.

If I sit in the second row, with Tatsumiya and Touka, I know for a fact that Touka will ignore her the entire trip—that won’t be fun for the other girl. Honestly, the best bet would be to have her, Touka, and Ike sit together. That way, she can sit between them. Plus, I don’t want her to think badly of me, so I’ll let her have the spot.

“I’m too big for the back. I’d just hog up all the space. I’ll take the copilot seat instead,” I quickly say and jump to sit beside Makiri-sensei before anyone can protest.

“*Whaaat? Sigh*, oh well. I’ll sit behind you, Senpai,” Touka says.

Well, even if she’s displeased with the outcome, at least she didn’t object to my reasoning. That’s nice.

“Very well. President, you may enter first,” Tatsumiya ushers Ike forward.

“Alright.”

Ike goes in first, getting the seat right behind Makiri-sensei. Tatsumiya follows after, then Touka, who sits right behind me. I swivel my neck to check on Tatsumiya. She’s got a wide grin on her face, so I’m assuming this is the arrangement she wanted. Good. When I turn back around, I see Makiri-sensei staring straight at me. Uh, crap. This is awkward.

“Um... Thank you for all the help the other day,” I whisper to her. “I wasn’t expecting to be able to come on this trip, but you’ve made it all possible... so, uh, thanks again.”

“No need to thank me. This is a good chance for you to be with your friends, after all,” she replies in a dejected tone.

I finally realize that she’s worried about something. “Is something wrong?” I ask her.

She smiles awkwardly in response. To be honest, I’m still worried about what my dad pulled when she came over. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d been quick to get herself a lawyer right after, but fortunately, nothing has happened so far.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just...” she mumbles.

“Yes?”

She avoids eye contact with me and doesn’t reply. Instead, she quickly whips out her phone from one of her pockets and starts typing. In just a few seconds, my phone vibrates. Makiri-sensei pockets her phone once more.

“Okay, guys, put your seatbelts on. We’re heading out,” she calls out to everyone, immediately and effectively ending our previous discussion.

Everyone does as she says while I pull my phone out. Makiri-sensei had obviously sent me a text, and the unread notification pops up on my screen. What does it say?

“Well, you’re the first guy who’s ever been up here next to me, so I’m a little nervous! Don’t mind me!”

I whip my head up and stare at Makiri-sensei. She gives me a cold look in

response and mutters, “Could you not stare so much?” Her beet-red face only indicates to me that she’s saying that out of embarrassment.

I guess it’s a good thing my dad didn’t creep her out enough to sue us. I can sleep peacefully now.

“Uhh... yeah. I guess you can’t concentrate on driving properly if I’m doing that. Sorry,” I apologize awkwardly.

“Is it just my imagination, or have you grown bolder recently?” she whispers to herself.

And with that awkward exchange out of the way, she starts up the car, and we drive toward our destination.

Everyone’s having a nice time in the car. Tatsumiya seems to be having fun talking to Ike and Touka. Ike’s always been a social butterfly, so chatting with people and naturally caring about others is the norm for him. Touka, on the other hand, is clearly not having the time of her life. Still, Tatsumiya is managing to engage in a normal conversation with her, which is a huge step ahead of what was happening before. She’s a tenacious girl, so eventually she would’ve managed to do it.

Meanwhile, Makiri-sensei and I are making small talk up front, chatting about this and that.

After about two hours, which pass by fairly quickly, we arrive at a stretch of mountains. Makiri-sensei slows down and follows the trail up the mountain that leads us to our destination—an elementary school that’s been renovated into a lodging house.

“Alright, guys—we’re almost there, so sit tight,” Makiri-sensei informs us.

We all look out the window to check the place out. I can’t remember which prefecture we’re in now, but we’re completely surrounded by nature.

Once we arrive, Makiri-sensei parks the minivan at the designated spot in front of the building.

“Damn, I wasn’t expecting the countryside—er, mountainside—to be like this,” Touka muses as we all walk toward the building.

“Unfortunately, I’ve heard that the nearest supermarket is approximately a half-hour drive from here,” Tatsumiya adds.

“Damn...”

There’s already a man waiting for us at the entrance. He’s pretty old, but clearly appears to be someone who works here.

“Welcome to Mikura. My name is Yamamoto, and I am one of the staff members. There are other people working here, of course, but I will be your host during your stay here,” he greets us, then looks over our group in surprise. “Oh, by the way, where is your teacher? Will it just be you students, then?”

“Pleased to meet you. My name is Makiri. I believe this is the first time we’ve met, so I understand why you wouldn’t recognize me. I’m their teacher, and I’ll be in charge of supervising them while we’re here,” Makiri-sensei introduces herself. Although she’s smiling, her voice is firm and commands seriousness. I can’t imagine she’s very pleased to be mistaken for a student.

“Oh! I apologize! That was quite rude of me! You just look so young that I didn’t even consider the idea. I should’ve assumed you’re a recent college graduate. Please forgive my rudeness,” Yamamoto apologizes while placing his hand behind his head and laughing a bit. Before Makiri-sensei can get a word in, however, he continues, “Okay then, I’ll be handing everyone a map of the place. Your rooms are marked down. You can leave your luggage there.”

Apparently, the guys have to stay at the first floor of the building, while the girls get the second floor. Makiri-sensei has her own place on the second floor, as well.

“Very well. Listen up, everyone! We’re going to our rooms to unpack. Once we’re done with that, let’s all meet here again in around... 15 minutes. Understood?” Makiri-sensei commands in a cold tone. Yep, she’s definitely pissed about what happened just now.

Ike, Tanaka-senpai, and I arrive at our room, leave our belongings there, and return right back to our meeting spot.

Yamamoto is already there waiting for us. When he takes a good look at my face, he jumps a little. Upon realizing I noticed that jolt of his, he gives a forced

smile and chuckles. Oh well, this is what usually happens. I don't blame him for reacting like he did.

The girls take a little longer to come back, but eventually we're all gathered together again.

"Looks like everyone's here. Let's get going, then. I know you guys have just arrived, but we're going to take a long hike now, so brace yourselves," Makiri-sensei warns.

Yamamoto hands us another map and explains what it depicts.

"Very well. You see the checkpoints here, the ones that are marked on the map along the road? Each of those contains a riddle, let's say. We'll split you guys into two teams—both teams have to solve all the mysteries; once they've done so and completed the track, they need to return here. The course is meant to be finished in around an hour and a half, but there's no time limit, per se. However, the closer you return to the hour and a half mark, the more points you'll receive. It's not all about arriving first, though! That alone won't guarantee your victory! Solving the riddles can grant you points, as well, so be sure to complete them all if possible."

We're given some materials before being told that we need to relinquish our phones and watches over to Makiri-sensei. This is to prevent monitoring the time we'll take to do the course.

"As for the teams, the student council members will form one—they're the ones this course is directed toward, after all. It's meant to improve their bonds and increase cooperation."

"Which means... Senpai and I will be together ALONE?!" Touka shouts.

"Nice try, but no. I'll be tagging along," Makiri-sensei replies dryly.

"Oh, right..." Touka grumbles. Hah, she sure is disappointed.

"Are there any questions before we start? If not, then I'll be taking your phones and any watches on you," Makiri-sensei continues.

No one has anything to say, so we do as told and hand her our stuff.

"The student council team will be doing the course clockwise, while Makiri's

team will start counter-clockwise. Please wait until I give you guys the signal to begin,” Yamamoto explains. He peers down at the stopwatch he’s carrying in his left hand.

“Senpai, Makiri-sensei, let’s do our best, okay?” Touka pipes up.

“You know it,” I reply.

“Yes, Ike-san, let’s,” Makiri-sensei says.

“Alright, everyone, you can start now!” Yamamoto exclaims.

Ike is the first one to make a move. “Okay, guys, see you later.”

Good thing this is meant as a team-building project, not a competition. I’ll take it easy and chill out as we walk along the path and solve the little mysteries.

Touka is smiling a lot as we’re walking along, so I’m assuming she’s thinking the same thing I am. “Damn, Teach,” she suddenly says, breaking the silence of our peaceful stroll. “I didn’t notice before, but you’re, like, totally different when you’re not wearing your work clothes and makeup. I bet you could totally pull off wearing a student uniform, and no one would be any the wiser! I mean, I’d have trouble telling, at least!”

Makiri-sensei wearing a school uniform? Man, now *that* I gotta see.



“Sigh... I don’t know if that’s something you should be saying to my face, Ike,” Makiri-sensei replies coldly.

“Aren’t you happy that people think you’re younger than you actually are?”

“That sort of thing isn’t such a perk in today’s society. There are many people who associate a baby face with a lack of maturity, and I really dislike that.”

Huh, that makes me think... Maybe that’s the reason she tries so hard to be all harsh and serious at school? That would make a lot of sense.

“Oh, come on—I bet those people are just jealous of you, Teach,” Touka tries to assure her.

Makiri-sensei smiles a bit. “You two are still too young to understand, I suppose. Anyway, don’t mind me. Let’s continue.”

“Okie dokie!” Touka replies cheerily.

We finally arrive at our first checkpoint—a Shinto shrine. There’s a formidable staircase leading up to the temple. Once we finally scale that behemoth, we’re greeted by a sign that holds our first mystery.

“How many steps are there in total?” it reads.

That’s not so much of a riddle, I guess, rather than a simple question. All we have to do is descend the stairs and count them as we go down. Hopefully the other riddles are a little more challenging, because otherwise, this’ll be a complete cakewalk. Plus, I’m not really sure which part of that was meant to foster a team spirit or anything like that.

Once we count the stairs, we continue the trail and head in the direction of the next checkpoint.



After an hour or so, we manage to finish the course without any issues.

Yamamoto is waiting for us with steaming-hot cups of tea. Once he’s ascertained that we’ve finished, he hands them over to us.

After a short wait, the student council team arrives, as well. Yamamoto hands each of them a drink.

Each team presents a slip of paper containing our answers to Yamamoto. He scans each sheet and then declares that both teams got the questions right.

“Okay, now I’ll announce how long each team took to complete the challenge. Team Makiri took exactly one hour, 28 minutes, and 48 seconds. Very impressive!”

“Damn!” everyone exclaims.

I wasn’t expecting us to be done in that amount of time, to be honest.

“But the student council team was even more impressive—they took exactly one hour and 30 minutes! Therefore, they win! Congratulations!” he cheers with a hearty clap.

Damn, Ike is a monster. He didn’t have anything on him, and yet he managed to make it here right on the dot. Wow. He deserves the praise, so I clap as well. I guess the student council really *is* on another level.



Dusk approaches, and the sun is setting. We move into the building’s main courtyard and listen to Makiri-sensei announce our schedules.

“Okay, everyone, it’s time for us to prepare dinner,” she states. We need to cook our own dinner—curry with rice and a salad—so everyone has a different task to fulfill. “We have all the ingredients we need, as well as the wood for the campfire. The logs still need to be chopped first, though, so be careful whenever you do that. If someone doesn’t know how to light the fire, then please ask Yamamoto.”

“I’ll be watching over you guys, as well. That way, there won’t be any issues,” Yamamoto follows up.

“I hope your curry lives up to my expectations,” Makiri-sensei says with a smile.

With that said and done, we all gather up.

Touka looks a little worried. She crosses her arms and pouts, “I never actually chipped in back when we did this in elementary school, so I’m kinda at a loss here.”

“It will all work out with some effort, hard work, and determination,” Tatsumiya says, trying to reassure her.

“We should divide our tasks evenly. Does anyone have a preference?” Ike asks.

“I suggest splitting into several groups,” Tatsumiya says. “For example, one group can focus on preparing the curry, while another takes care of the other tasks. Tanaka-senpai and Tomoki could be responsible for chopping the wood, Suzuki could wash the rice, and—once the fire has been lit by Tomoki and the curry checked on—Tanaka-senpai and Suzuki could prepare the salad. That means the president, Touka, and I will be the ones responsible for cooking the curry. What does everyone think of this?”

“I’m good with that,” Tanaka-senpai says.

“Same,” Suzuki agrees.

“I don’t know...” Touka mumbles, seeming rather unhappy with the proposition.

“What’s wrong, Touka?”

There’s no way she’s worrying about her ability to cook. I mean, she’s made me some pretty damn good lunch boxes before, so I know she’s good at it. Then what’s bugging her so much? Is she *really* that reluctant about being around Tatsumiya?

“Never mind,” Touka says after some hesitation. “I’m fine with your idea, yeah.”

“Let’s get going, then.”

“Well, President, Touka—I do hope I’m not a hindrance,” Tatsumiya says, clearly ecstatic about her proposition being accepted.

I feel she’s been the one happiest with the pair-ups and such so far. She’s certainly crafty and knows how to get her way. Hats off to her.

In any case, we get down to business. Under Yamamoto’s supervision, Tanaka-senpai and I start to chop the logs and light the fire.

“Damn, Tomoki-kun, you’re pretty good with fire. Do you do these things

often?” Tanaka-senpai marvels.

“Nah, I learned about it from random manga and YouToob tutorials. I’m actually just as surprised as you are that I managed to pull it off this easily.”

Never would’ve guessed that *Yurui Camp* and *Camping with the Boys: The Movie* would’ve helped me so much—Tanaka-senpai is even praising me. Thanks, anime!

“Oh, really? Wow,” he replies.

“Of course he’s better than you—you’d die trying to get out of your own house, Tanaka-senpai,” Suzuki jokes as she carries some utensils toward us. She places a hand on his shoulder and looks at me. “My condolences, Tomoki.”

“Hey, cut me some slack. Ah well. Guess we’ll start on the salad over here.”

“Yup. See ya in a bit, Tomoki!”

They both head off to work on the next task. Those two get along really well, huh? I wave at them as they leave and then turn my attention back to the fire. It’s not long before Ike arrives with the curry.

Eventually, Yamamoto and everyone else gather around the fire and help themselves to a generous plate of curry. Time to dig in.

“Whoa!” I shout the moment a spoonful touches my tongue. This curry is so good that I wouldn’t have expected it to be cooked outside in the sticks. Ike just has that magical touch.

“Your cooking is superb, President... You’re perfect...” Tatsumiya whispers dreamily to herself as she ogles Ike.



After we have our fill, we take a shower.

We have a little free time to kill before we have to go to sleep, so pretty much everyone is gathered in our room, playing a board game Tanaka-senpai brought. I, on the other hand, am outside.

It’s pretty silent out here, that’s for sure; especially compared to the hustle and bustle of this afternoon. The only thing I can hear are crickets chirping. I

look up at the twinkling night sky and spot three particular stars—Altair, Deneb, and Vega, the Summer Triangle.

As I sit there and stargaze, I start to feel the exhaustion from the day's events creeping up on me. I'm not physically tired, but this is the first time I've ever been out here doing something like this with others. I'm mentally exhausted more than anything. I think back to a camping trip in elementary school. I was left alone to do my own thing, so I'd never experienced what it felt like to collaborate with others until now.

"Boo!" Touka suddenly shouts next to me, pressing a cold can against one of my cheeks. "Did I scare you half to death, Senpai? Have this; hopefully you like orange juice."

"Yeah, I'm fine with it. Thanks," I reply as I accept the drink.

She sits down next to me and clinks her can against mine. "Here's to us, Senpai!"

"Sure," I say, watching her down her own drink. I quickly follow suit.

"Are you tired, Senpai?"

"A little, yeah. You sure you don't wanna be with everyone else?"

She smiles. "It's fine. It's not like I'm part of their student council group anyways. Plus, I'd be lying if I said that I didn't want to be alone with you. I've been hoping we could spend some more 'quality time' together, if you catch my drift."

"Heh," I snort. So even Touka gets tired of socializing. Happens to the best of them, I suppose. "You didn't look very happy while making dinner earlier. I knew you weren't a fan of being around Tatsumiya, but I didn't know it was *that* bad."

"Oh, you saw me, huh? I mean, I can tell you why I don't like her that much," she answers while looking at me.

"If you're okay with it, sure."

"I've been trying really hard to get some alone time with you today, but every time I try to pair myself up with you, *someone* has to butt in. She's done this a

couple of times now, so yeah..." she grumbles. Then she gives me an impish smile and asks, "Happy to hear me say that?"

"The only thing I'm taking from this is that you don't necessarily *dislike* being around her."

"Oh my god, Senpai, you're so tactless! Can't you just say that you're, like, super happy and leave it at that?! Okay, fine! I don't *hate* the girl, but still..."

We grow silent, peering up at the night sky together.

After a few minutes, Touka breaks the silence. "I'm actually happy that I was able to come here with you, Senpai," she whispers. "We've never done this kind of thing together before, so I'm still pleased with this arrangement. I'm genuinely having a lot of fun."

I look at her, and she returns my gaze. Our eyes lock.

"What about you, Senpai? Has this been fun for you?" she asks with a smile.

The look in her eyes and her cheeky smile make my heart skip a beat.

"Yeah, I am having fun. And it's all because you're here," I reply.

My answer makes her grin, and her gaze intensifies. "Holy crap, Senpai! I'm super familiar with the whole Casanova act—you're trying to capture my heart with your sweet little nothings. Have you fallen for me already, perhaps?" she asks in a flirty tone.

"That wasn't my intention, no. I'm not trying to flirt here," I answer with a shrug.

"Huh..."

She quickly grasps my hand and places it on her head. I can feel her silky strands of hair.

"What's wrong?" I ask her.

She gives me another cheeky smile. "We're in a relationship, remember, Senpai? Now's the perfect time for head pats while we watch the night sky together!"

Oh, okay. I guess this is her newest idea of getting closer to me. It's obvious

that she's trying her hardest to get me to fall in love with her, as she'd proposed earlier. Well, that's fine by me. I'm just happy about the fact that she trusts me enough to do this in the first place.

"Oh, well... I guess I will," I reply.

Too bad we aren't really a couple. But her hair feels nice and I'm okay with this, so you won't hear me complaining.

"Whoa, I wasn't expecting you to agree so quickly! You okay up there, Senpai?!" Touka shouts, her face turning some weird shade of crimson I've never seen before.

"I knew you wouldn't like me doing this! Why did you even try?!" I yell back, quickly yanking my hand away from her head.

"Hey! Wait, wait! I didn't mean it like that!" she cries.

She reaches out, catching my hand mid-air. Our faces end up incredibly close to each other.

We look into each other's eyes for a few seconds, then quickly avert our gaze.

There's a deafening silence. I'm pretty damn embarrassed by what just happened, and I bet Touka feels the exact same way.

We end up spending some more time together gazing up at the stars. It's silent, though I wouldn't consider it awkward at all. I figured Touka would continue to tease me some more, but I guess she's had her fill for the night.

Remember when I said that I was mentally exhausted? Well, forget about that—I feel like I'm on cloud nine right now. I wonder why?

Chapter Eleven

The Way Back Home

We wake up bright and early at 7:00AM the next day.

After we all gather in the main courtyard, we do some light exercise before enjoying our breakfast. It's a simple meal, nothing too fancy—rice balls, rolled omelet, and a light pork miso soup—but still quite nice. I think the other guys agree with me, because they've all also been eagerly scarfing the food down.

“Hahahaha! I love it when I see young'uns eating their fill. Eat as much as you'd like! There's even seconds if you want! Ahh, it feels good when my cooking is appreciated,” Yamamoto exclaims with a hearty smile.

I didn't think very highly of the man before, but I must admit that this has definitely given him some brownie points with me, that's for sure.

Eventually, we finish eating and head toward one of the building's former classrooms. We're going to be staying here till around noon practicing our debate skills or something of the sort. We'll mainly be discussing the school's many problems in order to come up with solutions to improve or solve them. At first, I thought that only the student council members and Makiri-sensei would be participating, but apparently Touka and I will be joining in, as well.

We arrive at the classroom, and it's quickly decided that Ike will be the one leading the conversation as a sort of moderator. With that settled, we begin our discussions.

Most of the time, I feel like I'm being placed in the role of a yes-man. Although they frequently ask for my opinion—looking for views from a normal student's perspective—I don't really feel as though I can speak for everyone else at the school. I mean, my experience is totally different from my peers, and I know I shouldn't play victim and pretend I have the same problems as everyone else. So in the end, I mostly end up nodding and agreeing.

Touka, on the other hand, has some very... *strong* opinions about the issues we're discussing and makes sure to let us know it. Her presence is making this whole event a lot more interesting overall.

She's definitely made for this, I think as I look at her.

"Um, Senpai, can you stop staring at me so much?" she asks, glancing at me.

"Oh, right. Sorry," I reply as I look away.

She's right; I was staring too much. Gotta stop doing that. Instead of leaving it at that, though, she gets even more ticked off for some reason.

"I mean, it's not like I *dislike* it or anything, okay? But isn't it super obvious that it's embarrassing for me, too?" she whispers to me.

I look over at her again; she's fiddling with her bangs and looking away. Her face is so red that it reaches as far as her ears. It all just reminds me of what happened last night—it was pretty embarrassing in the moment, and recalling it now makes me feel even more bashful. I bet that's what she's thinking of, too. Shit, now even *I'm* blushing. Damn it all.

I avert my eyes and mumble, "Right."



After a while, the debate ends without anything of note happening.

To be honest, I wasn't very invested in the whole event. Still, there was one thing that I realized beyond a shadow of a doubt—whenever the student council gets serious, they get *serious*. Like, it's obvious they really care about how the school's run and their duties. I don't think the opinions I gave were very useful, but as far as I can tell, everyone's pretty happy with how things turned out in the end. I guess that's good enough for me.

Anyway, it's finally lunch time. This time, we get to eat grilled fish, deep-fried local wild plants, and soumen—thin, white noodles. Everything's tasty and pairs perfectly together, so you won't hear me complaining. And, once again, everything's been prepared by Yamamoto.

"Hahahaha! Looks like you've all worked up a healthy appetite! We've got plenty of food to go around, so please help yourselves!"

Okay, so maybe I wasn't a fan of how he reacted toward me at first, but one thing's for sure—he's definitely won over my stomach.



And that's pretty much the end of our trip to the mountains. Yeah, really. All that's left to do is return to school.

"Good job out there, everyone. Remember, the trip's not over until you've returned safe at home, so take care of yourselves out there," Yamamoto bids us farewell.

We all say our goodbyes to him. Farewell, Yamamoto—although I might not remember my less-than-stellar first impression of you, your excellent cooking will remain in my heart forever. Have a good one.

Finally, we pack up our things into the minivan and hop in. It's the same seating arrangement as the way up here, which means I'm riding shotgun once more. This time, however, everyone in the back eventually falls asleep. By the way, I should mention that Tatsumiya is using Touka's shoulder as a pillow and drooling happily.

"Good job on the trip, Tomoki-kun. You can sleep if you want. There's no need to stay awake for my sake," Makiri-sensei says while she looks forward, concentrating on her driving.

"Nah, I'm not that tired," I lie—in reality, I'm about ready to pass out. Still, having Makiri-sensei as a trip companion is quite the experience, and I wanna indulge in it as much as I can.

"I see," she whispers. "What did you think of the trip, by the way?"

"Well, the food was good. More than anything, I had fun. It was a good experience overall."

I did a lot of things that I'd never tried before, but all in all, it was very enjoyable, and I liked it a lot. Don't get me wrong—I'm totally beat, just like Touka warned me beforehand, but I had a good time.

"That's great to hear," she answers with a smile.

I feel like Makiri-sensei and Touka care about me way more than most people.

It kind of weirds me out a bit at times, but I must admit... I like feeling appreciated, especially by them.



It's later that night; around 9:00PM, to be precise. I'm chilling in my room, lying down in bed and watching some cooking videos on Youtoob, when my phone suddenly begins vibrating. Makiri-sensei's calling me. What could she want at this hour?

"Hey there, Tomoki-kun. It's me, Makiri," she says with an oddly determined and energetic voice.

"Hey. What's up?" I ask.

"I'm at the same park you found me at earlier. Um, get over here right now!" she shouts. Is she scared of something?

"Wait, what?"

"You told me that you'd be willing to listen to my rants, right?" she asks in a trembling voice.

She's drunk again.

"All right, I'm coming over now," I assure her.

"I'll be waiting for you."

I hang up and head straight to the park without even bothering to change clothes first.



"Heeey! I've been waiting for you!" Makiri-sensei shouts the moment she spots me entering the park. She sounds like she's in a much better mood now than when she called me a few minutes ago.

She's sitting on one of the swings, rocking back and forth while calling out to me. I swear, if I didn't know her, I'd find it hard to believe she's a teacher right now.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask.

"I've been trying to sober up a little using this. I h-heard it was effective, but..."

instead of that... it's just been making me feel dizzy, an—*blurgh!*” she stops short, her hands flying up to block her mouth.

She actually thought that a swing would help her sober up? I can't believe what I'm seeing. How stupid is she?

“Can you stand up?” I ask, extending my hand to help her to her feet. “You can lean on my shoulder. I'll carry you home ASAP.”

She accepts my hand and stands up. After staggering slightly, she manages to lean against my shoulder.

“I-I'm sorry about this,” she apologizes while hanging her head and blushing. I'd say she looks cute right now, but the stench of alcohol is kind of overpowering anything positive about her currently.

As she uses my shoulder as support, we slowly start heading toward her apartment.

“I'd appreciate it if you complimented me,” she mumbles. “This time, I called you before disaster ensued.”

“Yeah, no kidding. Do you do this often? And by that, I mean drink until you can barely stand,” I chastise her.

“How rude! I don't drink *that* much. The swing really helped me sober up, as well!”

“If anything, I think it made you feel even worse.”

She puffs her cheeks out and looks at me in anger. It's cute, don't get me wrong, but her “eau de l'alcool” is so strong that I can't help but feel slightly disgusted.

At any rate, she must've had a reason to call me, right? Apart from using me as a chaperone service back home, I mean. I'll hear her out.

“So yeah... What did you want to talk to me about?” I ask.

“You can't tell?” she asks indignantly, blushing as she looks at me out of the corner of her eye.

Am I supposed to read her mind? I can't think of anything in particular.

“I’ve always wanted to be... okay?” she mumbles, making it difficult to understand what she’s saying.

“Wanted what?” I ask.

She lifts her face slightly and looks me straight in the eye. “I wanted to experience my youth like you guys are doing, okay?!” she cries, tears flowing from her eyes.

This is the first time I’ve seen her cry, and needless to say I’m shocked. I can’t believe that, just a few hours ago, we were having a normal chat in the car. She was composed and unflappable back then, like nothing could break her.

Well, all right. I’ll give this some serious thought. How can I make her feel better?

“Let’s get you home first, and we’ll figure things out after,” I tell her.

“Hell no we’re not!” she snaps coldly. She looks a lot more serious than she just did moments ago. I guess even when she drinks herself silly, she can still compose herself. “Tanaka-kun and Suzuki seem to get along well, Tatsumiya’s panties are basically drenched each time she speaks to Ike-kun, and you and Touka are clearly made for each other. I saw you two talking, and... Ahh! Everyone’s making the most of their youth! What about me?!”

I mean... I know Tanaka-senpai and Suzuki get along well, but I don’t think they’re as close as she’s implying. I should probably say something before things take a turn for the worse.

“Hey, Touka and I aren’t in a real relationship, so we don’t really count. Remember?”

She looks at me, her eyes squinting in suspicion, and sulks. “*Hmph!* I saw you two last night—you guys were all over each other while stargazing. You were even petting her head! Are you two *really* faking your relationship?!”

She got me there. I’m put on the spot, so I just mumble, “Uhhh... right. You saw us? I didn’t know that.”

“*Sigh.* I went out to look for you two, and that’s when I saw everything. Imagine being me in that situation: everyone else on the trip is pretty much a

couple, and I'm the odd one out. The lonely old hag of the group. *Sniff!* I never had the chance to talk to any guys while I was young, either..."

"Now I'm curious—what was your school experience like, Teach?"

Maybe this way, I can stop her before she digs her own grave. It seems to work, because she stops rambling to think for a moment.

"I'd rather not talk about it. It's a secret of mine," she finally mutters while averting her eyes.

Well, so much for that. Back to the previous topic, I guess.

"At any rate, I was a wreck after the trip was done. And then what do you think my father does the moment I come back?! He calls me and starts nagging again about how I need to get married!"

"Damn, that sounds bad. Has he proposed setting up those formal interviews with potential suitors and stuff?"

She nods slowly.

"He... He has. Don't get me wrong—it's not like I'm opposed to the idea. I'm well aware that there are a lot of successful and happy marriages that come out of matchmaking. I just... I just want to experience how it feels to truly fall in love. I don't want it forced on me," she confesses with a sad little smile. "Say, Tomoki-kun, what do you think of me? I must be pathetic, being as old as I am without a single relationship to speak of."

"Well, I read in an article not so long ago that around 30% of women in their 20s nowadays haven't actually been in any sort of relationship, so it's not that uncommon. Lemme see if I can find it..." I trail off as I pull my phone out and start searching for the article in question.

"I'm not looking for validation through Viki articles, Tomoki-kun! I want *your* opinion on this!"

"Well, if you wanna know, I don't really think it's pathetic or anything like that. I find it kinda funny you're asking me about this, though—I mean, I'm not in a real relationship either. How am I supposed to have any opinion on this?"

"Even though you constantly have a cute junior and a beautiful childhood

friend fighting over you all the time? Hmm?” she questions in a snippy tone while casting a glare my way.

Fortunately, we’ve finally arrived in front of her apartment building. “Hey, we’re here,” I say as I show her.

I hasten my pace, hoping that the conversation is over and done with. Makiri-sensei opens the door with her card key and turns around.

“I’ll be fine from here,” she states. “I think it’d be best for both of us if you didn’t enter my place too often.”

“Pfft... I mean, I’m already *in* the complex, so I don’t see how it can get much worse. But yeah, I guess you do have a point.”

As she’s about to enter her room, however, her foot catches on the slightly elevated door frame. She tumbles forward, but fortunately she manages to throw her arms out and partially break her fall so her face doesn’t end up a bloody mess.

“Never mind,” I quickly blurt out, then come inside and remove my shoes. “I’m staying here to make sure you don’t crack your skull by accident.”

“Th-Thank you. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

I take her hand—only to make sure that nothing bad happens, of course—lead her to her bed, and sit her down.

“I’m hooome, sweetheart!” she exclaims, launching herself toward her giant teddy bear Johnny and giving him a tight embrace. Oh man, if only she wasn’t drunk... If only...

“So, uh, yeah. I’m out,” I mutter, turning around to leave.

“Hey, Tomoki-kun,” Makiri-sensei calls out to me, stopping me in my tracks. “If you don’t think that I’m pathetic... c-could you stroke my hair like you did with Touka last night?”

Fuck me. I was too careless, thinking this was over already.

“Can I just think that you’re not a complete trainwreck and leave it at that?” I plead.

“Oh well,” she says, standing up and skipping over to me. “I suppose you leave me no choice then.”

She reaches her hand out toward me, but I quickly grab it.

“What are you gonna do?” I ask.

“I’m going to pet you instead! Isn’t it obvious?! Geez.”

She’s dumb. There, I said it.

“No, it’s not! How do you even come to the conclusion that *this* is a normal response in this scenario?!”

Her eyes grow misty as she looks directly at me. Shit, did I go too far? Was I an asshole? I don’t think so, but it’s pretty apparent she’s about to cry right now. I can’t stand seeing her like this, so I look away and take a deep breath. Then, slowly, I lead her to the bed once more.

“Wait a—Tomoki-kun?!” she shouts in surprise. It’s a genuine reaction—one that’s more in line with her usual cold, collected personality.

She’s really adorable right now. I quickly grab Johnny and thrust it into her arms before she gets the wrong idea.

“I’d prefer it if you *didn’t* stroke my hair while you’re drunk, mainly because I know we’ll both regret it later—you more so than me. I’ll be going home now. If you find yourself stuck with the burning desire to pet me once you’ve sobered up, I’ll give it some serious thought. Okay?”

With that, I grab the keycard and head toward the exit. “Oh right, I’ll slide the card through your mailbox once I’m out. Don’t forget to get it tomorrow!”

She doesn’t answer, but I still put my shoes on and leave. Once I lock the door, I slip the card in her mailbox like I said I would and go my way.

My thoughts are filled with Makiri-sensei on my way home. I feel like it’s a shame that the only time I get to see her soft side is when she’s drunk. It’s a waste. I wouldn’t mind if she opened up to me a little more while she’s still sober, you know? Well, that’s my two cents, at least.



The next morning, I wake up to a message from Makiri-sensei apologizing for what happened yesterday. I guess she actually remembers what happened at the very least.

It's time to answer. I let out a heavy sigh, then type out, "It's fine. Don't worry about it."

"I'm really, truly sorry about this," she replies immediately. She really must feel terrible.

And here I thought she'd be too drunk to recall anything, but clearly I underestimated her. Not like that changes anything—I still think that her actions were seriously irresponsible, and I should let her know as much.

"Hey, Teach, please read this carefully: next time you need to vent, be sure to call me BEFORE you get plastered. Got it?"

This time, it takes her a little longer to text back. I guess she's pondering what to write since I tried to set her straight. Or maybe not. I don't know; I'm not a mind reader.

"So it does bother you, right?" she finally replies.

"Oh, so NOW you realize that maybe calling me drunk in the middle of the night might bother me?"

"Sorry, you're right. I'm so shameless. I need to remember that I'm a teacher and you're my student."

Well, at least she seems to understand now. I was about to tell her to not be too hard on herself, but I don't think that would've sounded genuine after all the scolding I just did. Plus, she would've dismissed the comment for sure. I'm not sure *what* to say, though, so I leave her on read for a couple of minutes.

"I... I just wanted you to pamper me a little, since you're such a nice guy," she suddenly messages me.

This is the first time I've ever heard anything like that from someone older than me, and as a result, I'm at a loss right now. I try to come up with a simple, concise way to express my feelings.

"You've always cared about me and helped me out, Teach. So I don't really

mind helping you out whenever you need me. You're always there for me, so I want to repay your kindness."

There. I hope that was good enough.

"I'm fine with that. I hope you can continue to help me out in my time of need, Tomoki-kun," she responds.

Did she send me that just to tease me or something? You can't even imagine how embarrassed I am right now. I suddenly think back to when she called me "Tomoki-sensei." That was pretty nice, right? It's a shame she didn't continue with that.

Throughout the rest of the day, I find myself staring at her last message. I can't keep myself from smiling whenever I think about it.

Chapter Twelve

This Childhood Friend Won't Lose the Competition!

We're right in the middle of summer, and the sun is seriously delivering the heat today. As I wipe a copious amount of sweat off my forehead, I make sure to keep my full attention on the girl playing on the tennis court in front of me.

This round has a clear winner already—we're at match point right now, as a matter of fact. The girl's opponent weakly returns the ball with a certain hesitation, a mistake the other girl capitalizes on. She drives the ball into the other side of the court over and over again with incredible speed and force. Eventually, the match is decided.

"Game, set, match! The winner is Hasaki!"

After Kana and her opponent shake hands, she looks my way, smiles, and throws me a peace sign. I return with a thumbs up.

Why am I here, you may ask? Simple—I promised her that I'd come and watch her match. This time, I'm alone; no one else is tagging along. Apparently, she wouldn't be able to concentrate properly if Touka and Ike were looking at her play... or so she claimed when she invited me. So yeah, that's why they aren't here with me.

"Did you see what I did back there, Yuuji-kun?" she exclaims as she runs over to me. She's got a towel in her hand, which she uses to wipe off the sweat she built up from all that exercise.

"Sure did. Well done," I congratulate her.

She blushes and lets out a giggle. "Hehe, thanks. What did you think? How was I?"

"To put it bluntly, you completely dominated her. It was pretty cool to see you in action."

I'm being serious. I genuinely believe that she was awesome and entertaining to watch throughout the entire match.

"Phew, that's good to hear. I didn't want you to see me lose horribly like I did the last time, you know?"

"Nah, shit happens from time to time. You did great."

She giggles once more and looks at me straight in the eyes. "Oh, by the way..."

"What's up?"

"I think you're *way* cooler than I am."

How is that the case exactly? I'm so confused. I mean, I can't remember a time anyone has ever told me that, especially not as genuinely as she did just now.

"I don't know why I'd be "cooler" than you, given that you're the one absolutely owning the competition on the court," I reply.

"No way! You're the most awesome guy I've met. I'm serious."

"You're joking, right? You ever look at yourself while you're playing? C'mon," I mumble as I try to hide my embarrassment as much as possible.

Kana laughs at my remark.

"What's wrong?" I ask. Is she laughing at me? Did I say something wrong?

"I was just thinking that, well... we look like a *real* couple when we talk like this. You get what I mean?" she giggles while fiddling with her bangs.

I can't give any sort of comeback to that—we *did* sound like one of those cheesy couples from a sappy manga or movie.

"Anyway, you killed it this match. Be sure to give it your all during the next one, as well," I say, trying to steer the conversation in a different direction.

"I'll do my best, so could you keep your eyes on me and only me? Please?"

I nod. I can't exactly say anything else right now—I don't want to add more spice to the situation.



Kana continues to dominate the matches and eventually manages to reach the finals. The girl she's facing happens to be last year's champion, but Kana doesn't seem daunted by this fact. In fact, she treats her just like any other opponent.

"Game, set, match! The winner is Hasaki!"

Upon hearing this, Kana strikes a victory pose in the middle of the court. The sting of the loss from the previous championship has finally dissipated, and she's managed to overcome all odds and win this one without any issues. The other girl isn't so happy, to say the least. I can't help but feel sorry for her as she cries on the court. Victory must have been so tantalizingly close, and yet so far away from her now.



The award ceremony is over, which also marks the end of the competition. The sun's already setting, but it's still just as swelteringly hot as it was hours ago. Yeah, summer's just *that* punishing over here.

Kana approaches me after she receives her medal and tells me that she needs to talk to me. We decide to go to a nearby park so no one can hear or intrude on our conversation. We sit together in silence for a bit before I eventually decide to spark the conversation.

"Gotta congratulate you again for your victory today, Kana. You were amazing back there."

"Thanks! You're the reason I was able to win, though," she says with a smile.

"What do you mean by that? You won based on your own merits alone. I didn't do anything," I state, completely puzzled.

She shakes her head and says, "Oh, no, don't get me wrong—I was able to give it my all this time around because *you* left me to go on that trip with Touka-chan. It gave me plenty of time to dedicate myself to training."

She's smiling, but if looks could kill, I'd be lying here, murdered, right in the middle of the park. Kana and I aren't going out or anything, so it's pretty weird

that she's getting all passive aggressive and badgering me about who I spend my time with, but whatever.

Well, nothing I say will make her feel any better, so I give her my most neutral answer. "Uhh, okay?" I blurt out.

"Hehe! I was just joking, silly! Don't take it to heart. I *am* a little mad I couldn't go, but I'm not bothered by it anymore," she says with a slight laugh. "I did mean what I said before, though: I won thanks to you. Ever since I realized that I have feelings for you, I've been able to focus on my hobbies and other things more than ever before."

"You're making it sound like I was some problem that I also ended up being the solution to."

"I guess you're kinda right in a way. Though it's not like you intentionally created the issue, haha."

Both of us laugh a little, but it's obvious we're faking it.

"There's still quite a bit of time until summer's over," she says with a playful tone, immediately jumping back on the offense.

"Yeah," I reply simply. We still have about half of our vacation left, to be exact.

"I would love it if we could hang out together soon," she coos while looking me in the eyes.

I wanna spend time with her, as well—we *are* friends, after all. There's nothing weird about hoping for that sort of thing. The thought actually reminds me of something.

"Why don't we go to a hot spring one of these days?" I ask her.

I remember that Kai proposed the idea a little while ago. I'm sure he'll contact me soon enough, so I might as well ask her to join me. I could even invite Touka! I know that they get along well deep down, so this could be a good chance for them to reconcile.

She remains silent for a while, then whispers in a dumbfounded voice, "Wait, what?"

What? Was my invitation that much of a surprise?

“You don’t like those kinds of places?” I ask.

“I-It’s not that, it’s just... I-I mean... What?”

Her face goes beet red, and she’s trembling slightly. Damn, that was way too awkward of me to suggest, wasn’t it? I should fix the situation before things get worse.

“Y-Yes, of course I’ll go!” Kana blurts out, interrupting my thoughts. “B-But remember that b-before we go, you’ll need to break up with Touka-chan first, okay?!”

“Excuse me?” I ask. Now I’m the one who’s dumbfounded.

“A-Aren’t you asking me out here?! You know, on a date to the hot springs?”

Ohh, now I get it. Whoops, that’s definitely not what I was going for. She’s staring at me intensely, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes as she waits for my response.

“Uh, okay, I might’ve given you the wrong idea,” I falter. “Kai invited me to go to a hot spring a while ago, and I thought that I could make the best out of it by inviting you and the others.”

“Excuse me?” she quickly shoots back, giving me an icy glare.

“I wouldn’t want to invite a girl to a place like that alone—she’d think I’m some sort of weirdo. Sorry. Next time, I’ll take a second to explain the situation better. I get it if you don’t wanna come.”

“W-Wait a second! I’m going anyway! I have no issues with that,” she shouts back.

“O-Oh, okay. I’ll ask Kai about his plans and let you know, then.”

Kana hangs her head, remaining silent and sullen for a few seconds. Then she turns her head to glare at me with a fiery look and spits out, “You’re a sly one, Yuuji-kun—a very bad boy. Do you realize how flustered you made me for a moment?”

This is completely 100% my fault. So much so, in fact, that I’m the one

blushing right now.

“I’m really sorry,” I reply.

She glues herself to me and says, “If you’re *truly* sorry, then apologize by allowing me to stay like this until I say so.”

“Do you *really* need to be this close to me?” I ask. Before I can say anything else, though, she places her index finger on my lips.

“Nope. No complaints. Just stay quiet,” she chides me with a serious expression.

Okay, I can’t break away from her now—if I do, she's going to hate my ass. That’s the last thing I want to happen, to be honest. I guess I have no choice but to endure this embarrassment and allow her to have her way with me.

She’s beaming so much right now that it’s hard for me to not feel good about this, though. I never knew just being with me made her *this* happy.

Chapter Thirteen

A Surprising Encounter

“Senpai... you’re so big...” Kai whispers in my ear, his voice tinged with excitement upon seeing my body.

“Really now?” I ask.

He nods. “Um, so, can I...?”

“Sure, go ahead,” I consent and brace myself for what’s about to happen.

“Damn, so hard...” he gasps as he grazes me.

“I guess I do train a lot back at home, so it’s no wonder my back’s that firm,” I reply, basking in the blissful sensation of having my body washed. “I gotta say—ever since I met you, you’ve also definitely bulked up.”

“*Hngh!*” he... moans? Huh. Maybe he’s really giving it his all while washing my back? “Y-Yeah, I guess, hehe. I’ve been doing my best to try and be more like you, Senpai.”

“It’s clear to see that you’ve put in a lot of effort to look the way you do now, dude. Good job.”

Even from a single glance, it’s pretty obvious that he’s put on a ton of muscle compared to before.

“Okay, now it’s my turn,” I say.

He looks me in the eyes and murmurs, “Please be gentle with me, okay?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah. Don’t worry, man,” I assure him. I gently place my towel-covered hands on his back and begin to touch him in return.

“Ah! Damn, that feels good,” he gasps.

Okay... I guess that means I can put a little more oomph into it, then.

“*Ngh!* Whoa, you’re being so rough now! Ah, *haah!*” he pants as I begin to

work my hand a little more vigorously. I must admit that it's hard for me to grasp other people's limits, so I'm not exactly sure when it'll become "too much" for him.

"What the hell are you two doing?" Asakura asks suddenly as he heads our way.

"Isn't it obvious? We're washing each other's backs," I explain. "I mean, we came all the way here, so we might as well. It's not weird or anything. Come here, Asakura. Join in the fun."

Oh right—I forgot to mention this earlier, but we're currently at the hot spring Kai invited me to. I also decided to invite Asakura, Kana, Touka, and Ike along. We reserved the place all to ourselves, so there's no one else apart from us right now.

"Sure, why not? I wouldn't mind having my back washed, as well," Asakura says as he approaches me.

I finish with Kai's back, and he blurts out, "Um, thanks!" For some reason, he seems somewhat downtrodden that I'm done, but he soon heads straight to the open hot spring.

Asakura sits down in front of me with his back facing me. "Give it all you've got," he challenges.

"Leave it to me."

I begin rubbing his back with the same body towel I used on Kai.

"I've gotta hand it to you, Kai—you've found a pretty nice place," Asakura marvels.

"The soccer club boys told me about this hidden gem. If anything, thank them," Kai replies.

"Hidden gem" is right. The place is well off the beaten path, so it's no wonder not a lot of people know it exists. You need to hop on a bus, then make a long trek to reach a pretty, uh, "rustic" looking establishment. Yeah, let's go with that. That means that other places closer to the station are way more popular, snagging all the potential clients. I shouldn't really worry about it, but it does

make me wonder how they're managing to keep this place in business.

"Say, Tomoki—now that we're all butt-naked in front of each other, maybe it's about time we open up to each other. Get to know ourselves a little better and that stuff, you know?" Asakura suggests as I scrub down his back.

"Sure, sounds good to me."

It would be pretty nice to speak openly about whatever. Plus, we don't exactly have anything else to hide from each other after being naked in front of each other as he said. I must admit that opening up about ourselves and that stuff is something that I've been longing to experience with friends, so this is the perfect opportunity.

"I do have a question to kick things off, actually. Oh, and speaking of "kick"—I *will* kick your face in depending on your answer, so be prepared," he warns me in a serious tone.

Whatever it is, he's clearly not joking around. It must be very important.

"What's up?" I ask as I continue moving my hands.

"Be honest, are you two-timing Touka-chan with Hasaki?"

"No I'm not," I quickly reply. What's the point in asking me that?

"Come on, dude. No need to lie to me. I saw you and Hasaki snuggling at the park the other day. It definitely looked like you two were more than just friends."

He saw that? Fuck me, dude.

I seriously need to think this over, and carefully. Asakura looks dead serious about this, and if I give him the wrong answer, things might go south real quick.

"You're a nice guy, Asakura," I tell him.

"I don't know where that's coming from, but if you're trying to dodge the question..." he warns in an angry tone as he turns around.

I shake my head. "I'm saying that because I know that you're worried about Touka and Kana's feelings. But despite that, you're also worried about jumping to the wrong conclusions, which is why you asked me first. I think that's

commendable of you.”

“That doesn’t answer my question, dude.”

“I already gave you my answer. No, I’m not two-timing. Hasaki confessed to me a while ago, but I turned her down because Touka’s already my girlfriend. That’s still the case—I’m dating Touka, and no one else.”

Asakura doesn’t seem convinced. He doubles down, insisting, “Pretty weird to say that when she’s still pursuing you. Plus, I don’t get why you two would get all close and personal at the park if you really *did* reject her.”

Well, it’s not like I have any reason to hide the truth from him. “It’s a little bit embarrassing to admit, but I wasn’t firm or decisive enough when I rejected her. Anyway—and I know this might sound like a cheap excuse—she kinda forced me to do that with her at the park as some weird form of apology for something I said. So, uh, yeah...”

Asakura sinks into deep thought for a bit. “Okay, so I guess you don’t really have any feelings for Hasaki, and you’re being faithful to Touka. After all, you rejected Hasaki when she confessed to you, right?”

“Yeah, I did. Good to know you’ve grasped the situation,” I reaffirm. Surprisingly enough, he seems a bit despondent by my response. “Something wrong, dude?”

“Can I kick you in the face anyway?” he asks while clapping his hands down on my shoulders.

It could be because it’s super hot in here, but for a moment, I swear he looks like he’s about to burst into tears. Nah, I’m probably just imagining things.



Once we’ve finished with our bath, we head back to the common room. It’s pretty much the quintessential classic Japanese room. It’s completely empty, mainly because—as I mentioned earlier—we’ve reserved the whole place for ourselves the entire day.

Asakura makes a beeline for the massage chair the moment we enter, but our conversation isn’t over just yet. “Sorry for being so harsh earlier, dude. I know I

got on your case pretty bad back there,” he apologizes.

“Don’t sweat it. We’re friends, after all. Everything’s all good, right?”

“Friends, yeah...” he whispers, his head drooping as he speaks. “I guess now that we’ve laid all our cards on the table, it’s pretty damn apparent who’s been lucky in love and who hasn’t, you catch my drift? Makes me feel like I’m a failure as a guy.”

I guess it doesn’t take much to bruise his male ego.

“You shouldn’t give it much thought, dude,” Ike tries to reassure Asakura while patting him on his shoulder.

“Oh come on, man—you’ve got an adorable vice-president drooling all over you wherever you go at school. I’d rather have someone who’s going through the same struggle console me here,” Asakura replies glumly with a thousand-yard stare.

“I only spend time with her because of the student council. That’s all. What does that have to do with ‘your struggle’?” Ike asks, the confusion evident on his face.

This doesn’t help Asakura feel even remotely better. If anything, Asakura’s head droops even more as he entrenches himself in self-pity. I place a supportive hand on his shoulder in an attempt to make him feel better and shake my head silently. I’m trying to tell him that when it comes to love, Ike isn’t the best at picking up what the girls are putting down.

Asakura immediately covers his face. After a while, he boldly declares in a trembling voice, “My guys, I need a girlfriend!”

“Yuuji-senpai! Sorry to make you wait!”

“Guys take no time to bathe! I swear!”

Touka and Kana arrive fresh out of the bath wearing special yukatas that serve as bathrobes. The place lends these to their customers free of charge while they use the facilities. Both girls have tied their damp hair into hair buns, wet strands still clinging coyly to their skin. Seeing them like this is pretty stimulating in a way. I mean, I’ve never seen either of them straight after a

bath, let alone wearing anything like *this* in the process.

“I saw a ping-pong table in the room next to this one. You know if we can use that?” Touka asks Kai.

“Of course we can. I’ll ask the receptionist for some paddles,” he says excitedly. With that, he rushes out of the room.

“Okay. Why don’t we play a few sets, then?” Ike proposes.

We all move over to the next room and spot two tables.

“Okay, guys—I’ve got the paddles and a few balls,” Kai calls out, emerging with six rackets and four balls in hand so we can play.

“Yuuji, wanna have a match?” Ike challenges me once we grab our paddles.

“Sure thing. You guys are okay if we use one of the tables?” I ask everyone else.

“Of course! I’ll be backing you all the way, Senpai!” Touka exclaims.

“I’ll be your own personal cheerleader, Yuuji-kun. You’ve got this!” Kana adds brightly.

“I wanna support you too, Senpai, so I guess we won’t need to use the other table after all,” Kai follows up.

“Since I don’t really care about who wins here, I’ll be the referee! Get ready!” Asakura announces while he glares at me and Ike.

“*Whew...* I feel like everyone’s hoping I lose here,” Ike notes as we position ourselves at both ends of the table.



I lost the match, obviously. I thought that I was holding my ground quite well until the middle of the game; that’s when Ike suddenly decided to go beast mode and destroy me in every set.

“You owned me there. Damn,” I congratulate him.

“I’ve played *way* more table tennis than you might think, man. I was kinda worried at the beginning—I thought I was gonna end up losing for a minute there,” he replies.

We both fought hard, that's for sure.

"Good job, Senpai! Here, have this towel!" Touka exclaims.

Nice timing, Touka—I'm sweating buckets over here after that.

"Thanks, I really needed this," I say as I wipe my face.

"And to think that I'd have to surpass a sly seductress like you..." Kana whispers.

Uh, let's pretend like we didn't hear that and move on.

"How about we play in pairs now? Dibs on Senpai!" Touka excitedly shouts.

"No way. Yuuji-kun will be paired with me!"

Great, now they're bickering again.

Asakura doesn't seem to particularly appreciate the little spat unfolding before his eyes either. You and me both, buddy. I bet he's bored out of his mind, and it wouldn't be cool for him to constantly be a spectator whenever we hang out. Fortunately, he turns to Ike and says, "Ike, face me now."

"You got it, dude."

"I deserve to be with him more than you!" Touka shouts.

"No you don't! Fine! We'll decide this with a match!" Kana screams back.

The more I watch their little back and forth, the more I regret inviting the two of them. I thought they'd start to get along better, not fighting at every freakin' opportunity.

I look over at the other table where Ike and Asakura are having their own match. They're sweating a lot, just like I am. It makes me want to hop back in the bath, to be honest.

"Okay, guys—I'm gonna go take another bath," I tell them.

"I'll go with you, Senpai," Kai says, coming over to follow me. "Do you need your back washed aga—"

"Whoa there, bucko," Touka cuts him off, grabbing his arm to stop him. "You stay right where you are. You're gonna be the referee for our match."

“B-But I...” he manages to sputter, tears in his eyes as he gets dragged back into the lion’s den.



As I head back to the baths, I stumble across an old man changing the banners that indicate the men’s and women’s baths.

“I didn’t know that the bath placements were changed on the same day,” I speak up. I’m legitimately curious if this is par for the course.

The man turns around and grumbles, “I should’ve switched them this morning, but I didn’t, so I’m doing it now. No need to give me that scary look, young man. I swear, youngsters these days have no patience at all...”

I wasn’t even angry at the guy; I was just asking him a question. My god. Well, it’s not like saying anything will change his mind, so whatever.

I enter the newly-appointed men’s bath, undress, and walk to the washing area. I take a quick shower first, then head for the hot spring itself. The room’s pretty steamy, so I can barely make anything out.

Just before I’m about to dip my toes into the water, however, I find myself face-to-face with someone who’s already in the bath—someone I’m totally not expecting.

“Hm? Tomoki-kun?” she asks in a surprised tone.

I stare at her face more intently, trying to see if my mind—as well as the thick cloud of steam—is playing tricks on me.

“What are you doing here of all places, Tomoki-kun?” Makiri-sensei asks, her voice a mixture of both embarrassment and anger.

“What the?” I blurt out.

What the hell is going on right now? Why is my teacher here?! My mind’s gone completely blank, while Makiri-sensei’s face grows increasingly red. I have to say something here, but *what* exactly? What do I do?! Please, god, kill me now!



Chapter Fourteen

Back When I Was a Student

“Um... could you leave, Tomoki-kun?” Makiri-sensei demands in a stiff tone.

I do as she says, turning in the direction of the exit. Unfortunately, just as I’m about to enter the dressing room, I hear a pair of old men walk in.

“Hah, this place is lookin’ just as deserted as ever.”

“Well, it’s no wonder—it’s a pain in the rear to reach. Plus, the owner’s so senile he’s pretty much got one foot in the grave.”

Their voices must be audible to Makiri-sensei as well, because I suddenly hear a splash of water behind me. I turn around and see her standing up in the bath, trying her best to cover her body with her arms so I can’t see anything.

“What the hell? There are two other men in the woman’s dressing room?! What is the meaning of this?!” she screams, having lost any semblance of composure.

How do I deal with this? If we leave right now, we’re going to have a situation on our hands. I don’t exactly want to just leave her behind either—I don’t want those two old farts to see her, if possible.

“I’ll explain later,” I hastily mumble. “For now...”

I trail off and jump into the hot bath with Makiri-sensei.

“Huh?!” she cries out.

I make her press her back against mine in order to hide her. She’s smaller than I am, so that’s not exactly the issue here. It’s more the fact Makiri-sensei is naked and nestled up close to me. Thanks to the thick blanket of steam, I can’t see her body at all. Still, that doesn’t excuse the sticky situation I’ve put myself in, and I struggle to stay calm.

The two men walk into the room, wash themselves, and enter the open bath

with us.

“Oh, wow, there’s a young ‘un here. Now that’s a surprise,” one of them notes, squinting his eyes.

They look to be in their 70s at least. We’re practically sitting next to each other, and they still seem to be having trouble making my face out. Plus, they’re also speaking quite loudly.

Well, thanks to their trouble with hearing and seeing, they haven’t noticed Makiri-sensei hidden away behind me.

“Oh? Now hold on a sec...” one of the two practically shouts, leaning in even closer to take a good look at me.

Did I screw up somehow? Did my body language expose me? Please, god, I’m begging you here—please don’t let them find out.

“He must be a Yakuza initiate or somethin’. He ain’t talking,” he concludes.

“Hm? Well, he certainly looks the part,” the other agrees.

With that, they decide to ignore me and speak to each other instead. I guess they were scared of my face? I’m kind of too busy shitting bricks right now to keep my expression under check; apparently when I’m nervous, I look like I’m about to murder someone.

Well, the saving grace here is that they didn’t catch on to the fact that Makiri-sensei’s here. I guess this is a win in our book.

“Could you at least explain what’s happening?” Makiri-sensei whispers behind me.

Considering the old men can barely hear each other unless they yell, I guess it’s fine to reply quietly.

“I found the old guy who runs the place changing the banners around right before I came in. I don’t think he was aware that there was someone inside already,” I explain. I know it sounds like some random bullshit I came up with on the fly, but hopefully she believes me.

It’s not exactly like he was wrong to make the assumption that the place was vacant—like I said before, I’m honestly shocked this place hasn’t gone out of

business yet.

“I swear, that’s just... Well, considering those two just entered, and I know you wouldn’t simply barge into a women’s bath without a good reason, you must be telling the truth. I don’t blame you for this,” she says with a tone of resignation.

I’m glad she’s not angry, but why exactly is this happening to me? I mean, this is the sort of scenario that would happen to the protagonist—someone like Ike. So why am I stuck in this awkward scenario? To be completely honest, I’m not exactly feeling grateful here. If anything, I’d more describe it as unlucky.

“I’ve been troubling you so much recently, too. I should be acting like a role model to you kids, not like... well, like how I’ve been acting,” she mutters, clearly upset.

“Not like it’s your fault for what happened here,” I try to reassure her. “Plus, you’ve always been a role model for us... except for when you drink, obviously.”

“*Hmph!* What do you mean by that?” she asks angrily.

“Well, you get really clumsy when you drink. It’s, uh, cute in a way...” I manage to blurt out, red as a tomato.

“You’re such a tease, Tomoki-sensei,” she answers with a gentle tone.

I don’t reply, because I’m currently too busy trying not to explode in embarrassment.

“Didn’t you ask me a few days ago about my bygone student years? You did, right?” she asks, turning around to peek at my face.

“I did, but you refused to talk about it.”

“Oh. Well, to hell with it—I’ll let you know if you want. Given our current *situation*, there isn’t much left to hide.”

I really wish she didn’t point out our “current situation,” since I’ve been trying my hardest not to think about it. But it’s true that I’d really like to listen to what she has to say.

“I mean, sure. I guess if you’re okay with it,” I reply.

“Very well. Let’s see. Where to start...? Well, my mother died when I was very young. My father had to raise me all by himself, which I suppose is what made him overprotective of me. That’s one of the reasons I went to an all-girls school in the first place,” she explains.

“Oh, I see,” I manage to answer, not really knowing what else to say.

“I’ve always known that my father acts the way he does out of love and concern for me. That’s why I’ve never really challenged any of his decisions or demands throughout my life. I never really had my own desires growing up, so I decided to follow the strict lifestyle my father mandated for me. I wanted to please him, you see... wanted him to be proud of me. Well, in the end, all that it resulted in was an upbringing with no friends or allies to speak of. That’s it. Pretty pathetic, isn’t it?”

Makiri-sensei pauses and leans against me, making my face turn red as a lobster. “Your back is so wide, Tomoki-kun—it reminds me a lot of my father’s. When I was still very young, we would take baths together, and I would wash his back. I wish I could’ve become a proper adult. Someone with more... emotion, I suppose. Someone who’s gentler with others. Do you know what I mean?”

What is she talking about? She’s saved my ass countless times. Plus, she’s only been a teacher for a little over a year now. Maybe this is just her insecurity speaking—her fear of not being able to become what she classifies as a “normal adult.”

“You’re definitely a strict person, but I wouldn’t consider you to be emotionless or anything. Don’t put yourself down like that,” I say while turning around a bit to look at her face. I care a lot about her, so it pains me to see her looking so down.

“There’s no need for you to try and console me. I’m fine, really.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do here. Believe in yourself! Have more confidence!” I shout. Oops, I think I just lost my cool for a second there. Well, now that I’ve said my piece, I should double down while I can. “I think that you *are* the role model you want to be. You’re a kind person who’s fair to everyone. Of course, that doesn’t apply to when you’re under the influence, but still.”

She stares at me in shock for a second, then giggles. “You’re such a tease, I swear. Thank you for your words, though—they really mean a lot to me. I’ll try to have more confidence, Tomoki-kun.”

I look around and realize that the old men are gone. When did that happen? With them out of the picture, we get out of the bath as quickly as possible.



Makiri-sensei and I manage to escape that predicament without stirring up any trouble. After we change into our clothes, we return to the room where my friends are.

“Oh! Hello, Makiri-sensei! What a coincidence! I didn’t know you were here, too!” Kana exclaims in surprise the moment she sees the two of us entering the room.

Everyone’s attention shifts toward us.

“Yes, what a surprise,” she plays along. “I happened to come across Tomoki-kun right after I finished my bath.”

“Want to play with us, Sensei?” Ike asks.

Makiri-sensei shakes her head and replies, “No thank you. I’ll be heading home now. You guys stay here and have fun.”

And with her usual cool poise, she leaves the room.

“Damn, man, she’s as cold as ever,” Asakura grumbles as soon as he’s sure she’s gone. “Would’ve been nice to connect with her through a few games. Plus, she’s hot—I mean, seeing her fresh out of the bath is kinda arousing, you feel me?”

“I wasn’t expecting her to come to a place like this all alone on a weekend,” Touka adds. “I mean, you’d expect her to have a boyfriend in tow or something. Or maybe she came here for a little time to herself? Ahh, that’s just, like... how should I put it? That’s so mature! I love it!”

I want to say something about assuming that she has a boyfriend is rude, but I hold my tongue. I will admit that it’s hard *not* to think that, considering how good-looking she is.

“Just don’t say that in front of her, and we’ll be fine. We don’t want her getting all depressed because of it,” I mumble instead, unable to contain myself.

“What d’you mean by that, Senpai?” Touka asks, looking at me like I have a few screws loose.

Chapter Fifteen

No Comment

Today's just another summer morning. I'm in my room, doing the usual—you know, watching cooking videos on Youtoob and chilling—when my phone suddenly vibrates. Apparently I've gotten a text message from Ike.

"I've been wanting to make a photo album out of the pictures we took on the trip, so others pitched in and we made a simple one. I was hoping you could come by the student council room today and pick yours up. If you can't, that's cool—I can send you an online copy."

Wait, people took pictures on the trip? I didn't even notice. But, yeah, I definitely want a copy.

"You're gonna be in the student council room?" I ask him.

Not like I have any plans today. I'll drop by and see what's up.



I head to school in the afternoon.

Once I arrive at the student council room, I knock on the door. Soon afterward, I hear Ike on the other side telling me to come in. I enter and notice that it's just him and Tatsumiya here.

"Hey, Yuuji. Sorry for making you come all the way to school today," he greets me with a smile.

"It's okay, man. I didn't exactly have anything better to do anyway."

"If that's the case, you could always invite Touka on a date. I'm sure she'd appreciate it more than you may think."

Touka and I have met up a handful of times this summer already, but I've never actually invited her on a straight-up "date." I always assumed it would make me look like a dick, you know? I'd hate for her to think I'm implying she

constantly has nothing to do. I'm sure she has her own life and friends outside of our fake relationship; besides, annoying her while she's on vacation isn't something I want to do. This way, she doesn't have to worry about pretending we're a couple in front of everyone else.

I wish I could be honest about this to Ike.

"Greetings, Tomoki," Tatsumiya says in a stiff tone.

Huh? Where did all this anger come from? Maybe she's jealous because I get to hang around Touka and Ike more than she does?

"Hey," I reply. "Is it just the three of us here today?"

"Well, there isn't exactly much going on right now," Ike replies. "Takatori-senpai and Tanaka-senpai are studying for their recoup exams, and Suzuki seems to be taking a special summer course somewhere."

"Then why are you two here? I assume there's still stuff to be done?"

"We have some paperwork to finish up. Plus, there's the album to keep us busy. I also need to prepare some documents for whoever takes over the council next year. I don't want them to get appointed only to immediately be crushed under the onslaught of duties and responsibilities."

Hey, hold up. Wait a second. Did I hear that right?

"Wait, Ike, does that mean you're not going to run for president again next year?" I ask incredulously.

"To be honest with you, I haven't decided what I'm going to do just yet," he admits with a sheepish smile.

I know Ike. He's definitely hiding something, and whatever it is, it's not good. I believe without a shadow of a doubt that he'd end up crushing the election if he campaigned next year. What could possibly be on his mind?

"At any rate, Tomoki—here's the album in question," Tatsumiya interjects as she hands me a rather small album.

"Thanks."

"You should thank the president instead—he's the one who spent a great deal

of time and effort creating it. He's also the one who procured all of the photos. I am of the opinion it came out rather nice. It's charming and has an air of—how should I describe it—*nostalgia* to it. What are your thoughts?"

"Oh, right. Thanks, Ike, I had no idea," I reply.

I open the album and check through its contents. Everyone's got wide smiles in the pictures, and then there's me, looking like someone just killed my dog. Yikes. I wasn't aware that my constant resting bitch face was *that* bad. Now I feel a little sad. But after flipping through a few more pages, I spot photos of myself eating Yamamoto's cooking with a dopey grin plastered on my face, which makes me feel a little better.

"Well, now that the album is in your hands, you are free to go home if you so wish," Tatsumiya says. She bows her head and opens the door for me, giving me a clear invitation to get the hell out. Maybe she wants to have Ike all to herself?

"Yuuji, have you had lunch yet?" Ike asks before I leave.

"Nah, not yet," I reply.

"Then why don't we go and grab a bite together?"

"Sounds good to me."

"What?!" Tatsumiya shouts the moment I accept his offer.

"Something wrong, Tatsumiya?" Ike asks her.

"N-No, my apologies."

I bet she was already planning on inviting Ike out to lunch after this and her plans just went up in smoke. Yep, now she's glaring at me. Man, she's just too easy to read. Sucks to be you, Tatsumiya.

"Why don't you tag along?" Ike offers.

"O-Oh! So you'd like me to join you two. Well, if you insist, then I suppose I have no choice in the matter! I'll partake in lunch."

"There's no pressure to come if you're too busy and all, though," Ike tries to reassure her.

"I said I would partake, and that's exactly what I intend to do!" she cries way

too quickly after him.

“Uhh, right. Sorry about that,” Ike responds with an awkward smile.

Tatsumiya whirls around so Ike can’t see her and grins, her face as red as a tomato. She looks pretty pumped about this development.

Meanwhile, I feel like I’m trapped in some short of cheap romcom bit right now.



We end up going to a popular hamburger chain.

We order our food and then sit at a booth meant for four. I scooch into the inner seat, and Ike sits beside me. That leaves Tatsumiya on the other side—in front of Ike—where she’s giving me an intense death stare. If looks could kill, I’d have been six feet under a long time ago.

Our food eventually arrives. Ike, seemingly oblivious to our tense situation, digs right in. I follow suit after a moment of hesitation. Finally, Tatsumiya heaves a noticeable sigh, then begins eating her own meal.

With that awkward moment out of the way, we start talking about random subjects.

“What’s wrong, Tatsumiya? You don’t look like you’re in a good mood,” Ike asks, dropping a bomb in the middle of our small talk.

Well, he’s not wrong—she stopped chiming in a little while ago, and she looks pretty bummed out. I’m kinda worried, as well.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she replies with a faint blush on her cheeks. “I was simply thinking about how men eat so quickly. You seem to be no exception, President. I’m so slow that I feel a bit guilty.”

Yeah, she’s right. She isn’t even halfway through her meal yet, while Ike is pretty much done with his.

I can’t help but feel like I’m being ignored. Whenever Tatsumiya speaks, it’s like she actively tries to remove me from the conversation. It’s almost as if I’m a ghost or something right now. Well, you know what they say—love makes you blind, right? I just didn’t know they meant that literally. Heh.

“Oh, sorry—I wasn’t thinking about that at all. Take your time, Tatsumiya. Don’t worry about it,” Ike assures her.

“I will, thank you,” she replies with a smile, then returns her attention to her food.

“Oh, Yuuji, you have some bread crumbs on your face,” Ike notes.

“Really? Where?” I ask, feeling around my face to try to find the tidbits.

“Just a little to the left... No, your left, not mine, haha. Oh well, I’ll take care of it,” he says. He leans in, plucks the offending crumbs with one of his fingers, and places them on a nearby napkin. “Got them.”

Now I’m flustered as hell, and Tatsumiya hates my ass even more. Great. Just great all around. Hey, to the big genius who’s writing this book: I’d appreciate it if you stopped making me the victim in these contrived scenarios. Ike’s the protagonist here, not me, and he deserves better. Thanks.

“By the way, Yuuji—the fireworks show is coming up soon. Have you thought about inviting Touka to that?” Ike asks out of the blue.

The show in question is a yearly event that’s organized specifically in this city, and the fireworks they use are pretty cool. It *would* be nice to invite her there... That is, if we were in an actual relationship. As it is, I don’t know if she’d be up for using her time on me of all people.

“I didn’t have any plans for that just yet, but I was thinking about inviting her, yeah,” I tell him.

“Oh, I see. You definitely should. Please.”

I nod and turn my attention toward Tatsumiya instead. She looks like she wants to say something, but she just lowers her head and continues to eat silently instead. I imagine she’s looking to invite Ike to accompany her. Well, seeing as I thwarted her lunch date, I’ll make it up to her by giving her a helping hand here.

“What if you and Tatsumiya joined us?” I ask Ike. “I bet we’ll have more fun if we go as a group. Also, I’d love to go there with all of you.”

“Wait, what?” Tatsumiya blurts out with a mouth full of food. How

uncharacteristic.

“I wouldn’t mind that, but I don’t know if Touka would approve,” Ike points out.

“Oh, uh, right. She wouldn’t be the happiest about it, for sure.” As would be her right in this situation.

“P-President!” Tatsumiya cries, quickly taking advantage of the chance she’s given. “I just so happen to be unoccupied that day, so I wouldn’t object to going. What do you say?”

“I mean, I don’t have any plans either. As long as Touka doesn’t give us any issues, I’m fine with going as a group, yeah.”

“Splendid! I hope things work out!” Tatsumiya exclaims with the biggest smile I’ve seen yet.

She finishes up her meal in a much better mood than when she started.

“One more thing, Yuuji,” Ike adds in a stern tone. “This is serious, so...”

“Serious? Sure, what’s up?”

“Recently, I’ve noticed that Makiri-sensei has been kind of, well, *down*, if you know what I mean. What do you think, Tatsumiya?”

“Indeed. When I presented her with an album from the trip, her mood completely changed.”

Both of them sound concerned.

“We’re just worried about her. Do you have any idea about what’s bothering her, Yuuji?”

In fact, I know the exact reason behind her sudden 180 earlier—or at least, I think I do. I’m sure the constant arguments with her father, uncertainty about life, relationship status, and little drinking habit combined have started to take a toll on her.

“Oh, President—there’s a spot of ketchup next to your mouth,” Tatsumiya notes, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Hm? Oh, sorry.”

“No need to worry about it. I’ll wipe it off for you,” Tatsumiya says. She grabs a napkin and wipes the ketchup off his face.

Whoa there, guys—do I need to give you two some space?

Anyway, back to Makiri-sensei. I think the best course of action here is to feign ignorance. She confided in me, after all. It’s not my place to tell them what’s going on in her life.

“Nah, no idea. Sorry,” I reply with the most neutral face I can muster. And that’s the end of that. I have no comment on the matter.

Chapter Sixteen

Asking for Some Advice

The very next day, I happen to bump into Makiri-sensei at a convenience store close to my home. As soon as I see her, I let out a surprised yelp, giving my presence away instantly.

“Oh!”

“Oh my! If it isn’t Tomoki-kun. Hello.”

“H-Hi there...” I manage to mumble.

The last time I saw her was when we were in the hot spring in our birthday suits, so I’m kind of having a hard time facing her right now. I never would've expected to bump into her only a few days later, much less have to try to strike up a normal conversation.

“Are you okay?” she asks. She must be feeling just as flustered as I am, but she sure as hell doesn’t show it—she looks just as calm and composed as always.

“Yeah, I’m doing fine. What about you?” I ask.

“I’m all right,” she says with a gloomy expression on her face. Is there something upsetting her? “In any case, I must take my leave now.”

With that brisk parting remark, she just as briskly exits the store, groceries in hand.

“Uhh, sure,” I falter as I stare at her retreating back.

I’m reminded of the conversation I had with Tatsumiya and Ike yesterday. They were worried about the sudden shift in Makiri-sensei’s behavior, as well as the fact that something seemed to be bothering her. While I know she’s struggling with watching on passively as we experience our youth, I have a hunch that there’s something more going on that she’s not telling us.

I quickly grab what I need, buy it, and rush out after her.

“Makiri-sensei!” I shout as I catch up to her.

She turns around and tilts her head slightly, looking confused. “What’s wrong?”

The words I wanted to say quickly die in my mouth, and I struggle to muster up the courage to speak. I need an excuse to speak to her, something to get her to open up. Am I seriously just going to stand here without saying anything? Come on, Yuuji! It’s clear by now that she trusts me enough to tell me about her troubles, but maybe we need a place that’s a little secluded. A place where nobody will hear our discussion or see us together... Yes! That’s it!

“There’s something I’d like to talk to you about, and it’s very important. If it’s okay with you, do you mind if I drop by your place?” I ask, looking her in the eyes.

“Wait, excuse me?”

What, she didn’t hear me the first time? “There’s something I’d like to talk to you about, and it’s very important. If it’s okay with you, do you mind if I drop by your place?”

“W-Wait just a second, Tomoki-kun! Do you have any idea what you’re saying right now?! I can’t just allow students to waltz into my house like that! It’s not right!” she frantically stammers, her face red as a tomato.

I mean, she’s already allowed me in not once, but *twice*. No, something’s fishy here—she’s definitely hiding something from me. I’ll just double down. I can’t let her go on keeping things from everyone else while she suffers alone.

“I know what I’m saying, but I’m not taking it back. I... I want to know how you truly feel, Sensei!”

I’d like to be able to get to the root of her problems and help out if I can. I’m not sure how much I can do, but seeing her like this only makes me want to reach out to her even more.

Makiri-sensei stares at me blankly without saying anything for a few seconds. Suddenly, the bag containing her groceries falls to the ground with a *thud*. Her

hands fly up to cover her face, but I catch a glimpse of how unbelievably red she is between her fingers.

“E-Excuse me?! What?! What are you...” she sputters, squirming uncomfortably.

Her reaction makes sense; she must be struggling with her inner demons, wondering whether it’s all right to reveal everything to me. Maybe she doesn’t trust me fully yet. If that's the case, that’s fine.

After a while, she quietly says, “Very well. Follow me.”

When I look at her, I see tears in the corners of her eyes. I nod, take her bags, and follow her back to her place. Her face is still a little red as we walk next to each other.

Whatever worries she’s harboring, I’ll try to help her in any way I can. She’s done so much for me that I want to return the favor.



After a rather awkward 10 minutes, we finally arrive at Makiri-sensei's place. She looks calmer than before, which is good.

“Come in,” she says, inviting me to go inside.

“Thanks,” I reply.

I take off my shoes and enter the apartment, which is just as neat and tidy as ever. The only thing that really stands out in the room is “Johnny”—her giant teddy bear. Makiri-sensei rushes to put her groceries in the fridge, then quickly stuffs Johnny inside her wardrobe.

She gives me an icy glare and asks, “Anything to say about that?”

“Not at all,” I answer, pretending I didn’t see anything.

“*Sigh*. Please just sit over there,” she directs while pointing at the low table in the middle of the room.

I do as she says. She, in turn, sits on her bed and immediately wraps one of her pillows in a tight hug. Her expression rapidly shifts from surprise to embarrassment by her little gaffe—no doubt she’s used to snuggling with

Johnny the moment she arrives home—and she settles by placing the pillow on her lap.

An awkward silence ensues.

“*Ahem*. What did you mean earlier? About ‘wanting to know how I truly feel’?” she asks in a faint voice.

Her eyes dart around the room, trying to focus on anything but me. Her cheeks are also tinged a light pink. No doubt she’s nervous, just like I am. I get it. It must take a lot of work and courage to fully open up to someone else.

“You know exactly what I meant,” I answer bluntly.

She closes her eyes and curls her fists. “I... I truly do respect you, Tomoki-kun! I realize that you’re my student, but I’ve ended up growing closer to you than I have to any of the others. It’s not just that, either. I trust you. In fact, I believe that you’re the only man in my life that I’ve opened up to to this extent. I can understand why someone as incredible as Hasaki would fall for you, as well as how you’ve managed to get the amazing friends you have now—you deserve all of those things. However... no matter how close we’ve grown, and no matter how much I trust you... in the end, you’re my student, and I’m your teacher. A- And even if I did treat you as an equal before—as *my* sensei—that was not okay of me. I blame myself for everything.”

I’m happy to hear that she trusts me so much. It’s something I actually take pride in. Thanks, Sensei.

“Don’t get me wrong, though—I’m happy that you hold those kinds of feelings toward me. I’m serious. B-But I really need some time to think things over. You do understand what I mean, don’t you?”

Really? She needs time to think about it? To me, it just seems like she’s trying to run away from everything.

“I’m happy that you trust me to that degree, Sensei,” I tell her.

“Oh! I, er... Maybe you didn’t understand what I was trying to tell you. That’s no surprise—I suppose I haven’t been clear enough about it.”

“No, I get it. You feel you can rely on me, but you’re implying that this is

something you need to talk to an actual professional with, not me. I'm sure there are things that you can't easily open up about to others."

Yep, I get it. Everyone has their own secrets deep down, after all.

"Yes, that's it. That's what I—er, what was that?"

"You may see me as nothing more than one of your students, Sensei, but to me, you're more than just my teacher—you're someone I owe my life to. I know that I might not be able to do much, but I really want to do whatever I can to support you and be by your side. I mean it," I say, giving her a serious look.

Makiri-sensei recoils a little, and I can see her lips trembling faintly.

"Excuse me?" she manages to faintly whisper. "Tomoki-kun..."

"Yes?"

"Can we rewind the conversation a bit so I can make sure I fully understand?"

"Huh? Sure, I guess."

What's with that look? She seems completely lost right now. Did I say something that confused her?

"Um, you spoke about wanting to know my true feelings, correct?" she asks.

"I did," I affirm.

"And by that... you meant that, um, you wanted to know if anything was bothering me, correct? You weren't saying that you wanted to know how... how I feel about you?"

"Obviously. I don't know where you'd get the other idea from."

"Oh... yes, of course. I knew that. Of course I knew what you meant from the very beginning," she states while looking away. Wait a second, do I sense a tinge of annoyance in her tone right now? What? Why? "And when you said you wanted to be by my side, you meant that you want to help me with my problems in any way possible, correct?"

"Yeah," I reply. "I may not be of much help, but I want to do whatever I can."

She heaves a heavy sigh, then tosses the pillow on her lap on the bed. For some reason, her expression practically screams that she wants to murder me.

Have I done something wrong now?

“Basically, Ike and Tatsumiya told me yesterday that they’ve noticed you’ve been feeling down recently,” I explain. “So I was wondering if something’s been bothering you. Did you get into a fight with your dad again?”

“So even my students have noticed something’s wrong... I’m such a failure,” she whispers with another heavy sigh.

“You’re not...” I start to say, but I never finish my sentence. I assume I wasn’t meant to hear what she just said, so I fall silent and wait for her to continue.

“You were right, in any case—there is a certain ‘something’ that’s been troubling me as of late,” she confesses while casting her head down. I can spot tears forming in the corners of her eyes. “My father is serious about having me married, and because of that, he’s decided to play matchmaker. He’s set up a formal marriage interview for me.”

Chapter Seventeen

Makiri-Sensei's Troubles

“So your dad’s arranged a formal marriage interview?”

She nods.

“I mean, you can always say no if you don’t click with the guy your dad sets you up with.”

“That is true, yes, but there’s an issue that comes with that,” she replies with some hesitation.

“Which is?” I ask.

“My father doesn’t understand why I’m so against it, especially considering that I’m not in any sort of relationship right now.”

“I mean, I don’t wanna sound rude, but it’s not exactly his place to question how you live your life,” I tell her honestly.

“You’re right. I want to be in a relationship with someone I truly love, not with someone who’s been forced on me. I tried to convey this to my father, but he refused to budge on the matter. And as a result, well... I *might* have told him that I’m actually seeing someone just so he could stop hounding me so much.”

Wait, hold the phone. What was that?

“Hold on a sec—so you really *do* have a boyfriend?” I ask.

“Isn’t it obvious that I’m not?!” she shouts, flustered.

“Then why’d you come up with such a bald-faced lie?!” I yell back in return.

Then again, Touka and I are also technically “dating,” so I guess I don’t really have the right to lecture her about this. I’m being pretty hypocritical here, aren’t I?

“Anyway, my father responded that he wanted this supposed ‘boyfriend’ of

mine to come along with me when I visit him again. He wants to ensure I'm not lying and ascertain whether my 'boyfriend' is worthy of me or not. He claimed that if he was satisfied with him, he'd call off the arrangement; otherwise, he'll go through with his plan."

"Aha. So *that's* why you've been looking so down. Now there's no going back."

She nods without saying a word.

"You really have it rough right now. Maybe lying about that wasn't the best idea..." I quip.

"We had that conversation the second time you picked me up from the park."

"Yeah, do yourself and everyone else a favor—never drink again."

She giggles a little at my snarky response. "And now here I am. I have to find *someone* to win over my father before this weekend. I'm desperate here."

"Okay, I see what's up now."

"Yes. It might sound silly or frivolous to you, but I really *do* want to fall in love with someone naturally. If I'm going to marry someone, it has to be 'the one,' if that makes sense. I just can't bring myself to accept that my own father is forcing me into a marriage for the sake of convenience. On the other hand, he's devoted his entire life to the sake of my well-being, so I'd hate to make him sad. I don't feel like it's my place to talk back to him. That's why I drink. Well, who knows? Maybe he's right, after all—maybe an arranged marriage *would* make me happy..."

Why did she contradict herself so quickly? It seems like she has so many conflicting emotions swirling around inside her right now that she's unable to decide what she truly wants.

"Sensei, what are you even—"

I don't continue, though, because Makiri-sensei signals that she's not done talking.

"I believe I've said this before, but I'm aware that there are many arranged marriages that have worked out just fine. I'm sure that my father knows my

type well enough, and maybe I'd end up liking him in the end. Honestly, all this talk of 'true love,' relationships, and arranged marriages comes across as so bizarre to me that it makes my head spin. Well, I apologize for making you worry about me, but I'll be fine. I'll work things out somehow."

Is this how she's planning to resolve the situation? By telling me not to worry and just go about my way? Hell no. I don't give a shit about favors or our prior history right now—I won't stand by and allow her to shut everyone out and refuse help.

"Sensei, I know how much of an amazing person you are. You've got a lot going for you—you're nice, gentle, and... well, you're very attractive, too." Her face reddens at my remark, but I continue, "You may be strict with your students, but it's all out of concern for them. You've saved me from being expelled I don't know how many times now. Plus, you and Ike were the only ones who trusted me back when... *that* happened last year. It's because of you that I have friends now, and why I can live my school life without any worries. This time, Sensei, it's my turn to help you out... just like you've helped me out so often in the past."

"What are you implying? What could you possibly do about my situation?" she asks with a forced smile.

"I'll be your boyfriend, Sensei!" I declare.

"What?" she whispers, her eyes as wide as saucers. "W-Wait, did I hear you correctly?"

I nod with a smile. "Don't worry too much about it. I'm more than used to pretending to be someone's boyfriend."

"Oh... right..." she mumbles and shoots me an icy glare.

"So... I'm guessing you're not okay with it?"

"Of course I'm not," she instantly answers. "I thank you for the proposition, but I wouldn't want to involve you in my massive mess. You'd be getting yourself into nothing but trouble."

Hm, I get why she'd say that. I'm still a teenager, after all, so I've got pretty much zero experience or understanding of how the real world works. Not to

mention that I'm pretty much clueless on how this crazy concept known as "relationships" work between friends, family, or... hell, anyone really. I won't back down though!

"You said that you wanted to find true love, didn't you? That you wanted to marry 'the one.'"

She goes silent for a while, then admits, "I did."

"Then please, Makiri-sensei, I'm begging you—tell me how you *really* feel right now!" I declare, standing up to approach her.

She looks away for a moment, but quickly turns back to me with a defiant glint in her eyes. Her lips are trembling once more.

"Do you *really* think that I'm okay with my father ignoring my feelings just to lock me into a loveless marriage?! No! That isn't what I want!" she cries, standing up to face me. "I hate myself for not being able to tell him how I really feel about anything! And I'm not going to give up on finding my true love! So are you serious about this? Would you be willing to pretend to be my partner?"

"I already told you that I'm okay with it. I even feel bad about it—I wish I knew someone else who could fill that role instead of my bratty ass."

"There's no need to apologize," she replies with a gentle voice and a tender look. "Thank you. You have no idea how happy it makes me that you'd be willing to help me out."

I find myself completely and utterly tongue-tied right now. I'm so nervous that I'm at a loss for words.

Seeing me in such a flustered state, Makiri-sensei giggles a little bit. "Very well, Tomoki-kun. I hope your performance manages to get me out of this."

My heart skips a beat. Makiri-sensei can sure as hell be charming when she wants to be. When I see her like this, I can't help but feel attracted to her.

Chapter Eighteen

Meeting Sensei's Father

It's been a few days since I agreed to be Makiri-sensei's fake boyfriend so her dad would finally get off her case about marriage. Today's the dreaded day—we're headed to her father's house. It goes without saying that I'm super freakin' nervous right now.

She picks me up in her car, and we're on our way. While she's driving, she glances at me a few times.

"Maybe it's too late to comment on it, but I don't know if your clothes were the best choice for today, after all," she grumbles.

"What do you mean? You chose these."

I'm dressed up in a sharp-looking suit and a crisp, white shirt. I look exactly like your typical businessman, minus the tie.

"I know. I thought that it would make the best first impression with my father. Casual clothes wouldn't have been any better, I think, but still..."

We stop at a red light. As we wait, Makiri-sensei gives me a scrutinizing look, examining me from top to bottom.

"You look a little *too* much like an adult right now—that might actually work against us in this case. We're only supposed to drop by to say 'hello,' but my father might end up getting the wrong impression. He might think you've gone a bit overboard just for a simple 'hello.' Do you understand what I mean?"

"I have absolutely no clue what you're getting at." Her thought process took so many twists and turns there that it's basically become a labyrinth, and I'm completely lost inside it.

The light turns green. Instead of saying anything back, she just glares at me and hits the gas.

“It’s nothing,” she finally mutters with a tinge of annoyance in her voice.

What in the world have I done wrong? I just wanted to know what she meant; now I’m being treated like some sort of criminal. Well, whatever. I don’t want to distract the driver, so I’ll just shut up.



After a lengthy two-hour drive, we finally arrive at our destination—a gigantic goddamn mansion. If I felt any pressure before, now it’s a hundredfold. She could’ve told me beforehand that her family was filthy rich!

“Um, Makiri-sensei, what does your dad do again?” I ask.

“He’s a higher-up in a rather large corporation,” she replies in a dry, neutral tone.

Uh... can I get some specifics? For all I know, her dad could be a lawyer, an accountant, or some kind of major businessman. Either way, holy moly. The guy’s clearly raking it in, because this place is huge. I wasn’t expecting Makiri-sensei to be one of those rich, upper-class ladies that I see so often in manga.

“Could you stop gawking at me, please?” she requests.

“Oh right. Sorry.”

She gives an exaggerated sigh in response. We get out of the car, walk up to the front gate, and ring the bell.

The door automatically opens up, and a rather plump woman in her 40s greets us. “Oh my, Chiaki-chan! Welcome home!”

I know that her mother died when she was young, so I wonder who this woman is. As soon as she takes a good look at my face, her jovial tone quickly changes. “O-Oh my... And who might this... *striking* young man be?”

Makiri-sensei doesn’t respond, she just smiles cryptically. As for me, I don’t really know what to say here.

“O-Oh, I see...” the woman mutters in a very low voice, her eyes wide as saucers. “*Ahem*. In any case, your father is waiting in the Japanese-style room. I’ll fetch everyone some tea.”

With that, she basically flees the scene. Once I’m sure she’s gone, I ask Makiri-

sensei, “Who is she?”

“She’s the housekeeper. When I was younger, I used to help around the house with chores and such. Now that I’ve moved out, though, she’s the one who takes care of the place and my father in my stead,” she replies.

Oh, duh—I should’ve expected that they’d have someone working for them. Silly me.

“At any rate, we should go meet with my father,” she continues in a tense voice.

I nod and have her lead the way as I follow her inside the estate. We walk through the winding halls and countless rooms before stopping in front of one of them.

“I’m here, Father,” Makiri-sensei announces while knocking on the door.

“Oh, Chiaki. Come on in,” I hear a voice beckon us from the inside.

“Yes, Father,” she answers while opening the door.

As I enter, I see her father sitting cross-legged on a small pillow in the center of the room waiting for us. He’s a middle-aged man, most likely no older than 50 judging by his appearance, with white hair. Still, I can clearly see the resemblance, and he’s quite handsome for his age—no doubt he was a heartthrob back in the day.

He looks over at Makiri-sensei, then at me. His expression doesn’t exactly read warm and welcoming. He glares at me and asks Makiri-sensei, “And this man is?”

Makiri-sensei falters for a brief moment, before saying, “He is the man I’m currently going out with. His name is Yuuji.”

Instead of backing off, this statement seems to rile him up further. His scornful glare intensifies, and he quickly begins needling me with his questions. “I know you mentioned this the last time we spoke over the phone, but I didn’t expect that you were actually telling me the truth. So is this true, Mr. Yuuji? Are you the one dating my daughter?”

“Yea—I mean... Yes, Sir. Mak—Chiaki and I have been seeing each other for a

while now.”

Oh crap, I really screwed up there. I’m still not used to calling her by her first name, and my little slip-up makes him pinch the bridge of his nose with a grimace.

He throws a piercing glare at us and commands, “Sit down, you two.”

We quickly do as we’re told.

Before he says anything else, Makiri-sensei decides to speak up. “I’ll introduce him once more. This is Yuuji—he’s the man I’ve been seeing.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Sir. My name is Yuuji Tomoki, and, just as Chiaki says, we’ve been dating for a little while now,” I say with decisiveness.

“He looks quite young. How old is he again?”

“He’s 20 years old,” Makiri-sensei answers for me.

“So he’s still in college,” her dad concludes.

“He is.”

We made sure to come up with a believable story beforehand. I’d be her underclassman in college, which is how we supposedly met.

“How long have you two been together for?” her father asks.

“Well, to be completely honest, it’s quite recent,” I admit. “I’ve been job-hunting for a while now, since I aspire to be a school teacher one day—that’s how Chiaki and I ended up spending so much time together. One thing led to the other, and, before I knew it, I’d fallen madly in love with her. I confessed my feelings, and that’s how our relationship began.”

“He’s a very earnest and friendly man, not to mention he doesn’t mind that I’m older than him. So I decided that I would give dating him a chance,” she follows up.

I should’ve been a little more detailed with my story—especially with the confession—since she has to follow up on what I said, but fortunately she just plays along. Good thing she managed to do that before I ended up shooting myself in the foot.

“And before you ask, yes—we *are* serious about this,” she boldly declares. I follow up with a firm nod.

“You’re trying to convince me that you’re ‘serious’ about a relationship with a mere college student?!” he whispers angrily.

Fuck. This isn’t going well.

“However, I will agree to one thing—this... *Tomoki* of yours doesn't appear to be your run-of-the-mill youngster. Kids these days lack any guts at all. I don’t sense any trace of doubt in his answers, and he isn’t cowering just because I’m your father. Very well, Tomoki, tell me more about yourself.”

Well, at least he’s attempting to find a compromise to this situation, even if I *am* “a mere college student.” Makiri-sensei and I sigh in relief.

Before I can say anything in reply, the door to the room opens, and the housekeeper from earlier storms in with several cups of tea.

“Thank you,” Makiri-sensei’s father says.

The housekeeper bolts out of the room just as quickly as she came.

And with a cup of tea in hand, Makiri-sensei’s father starts hounding me with questions, one after the other.

Thankfully, we’d prepared for this beforehand. Makiri-sensei came up with a list of questions he’d likely ask, and I rehearsed how to appropriately answer them. It turns out that she’d been spot-on with her predictions. He listens to my replies with great interest, growing more and more favorable toward me as time passes. Unfortunately, my feelings of guilt also continue to grow for lying to him.

After some time, he looks visibly relieved. I must’ve given him the impression that I’m an incredibly dependable person, even though everything that’s come out of my mouth since I got here is complete bullshit.

“Hm...” he mutters, seemingly signaling the end of his lengthy cross-examination. “I’m not entirely convinced yet about leaving my daughter in your care, but I wouldn’t mind seeing how things develop between the two of you for the time being.”

“Wait, does that mean...?” Makiri-sensei asks.

“Yes. For the time being, we'll postpone our little talk about arranged marriage. I'll let your suitor-to-be know. You found yourself a good young man. He has guts and a heart, and that's what really matters.”

Looks like we managed to successfully fool him. Makiri-sensei and I breathe a sigh of relief almost in unison. We try to be quiet about it, though, so her father doesn't notice.

“Yes, he does. I'm proud that he's my student,” Makiri-sensei replies with a gentle tone.

“Wait, excuse me?” her father blurts out. He doesn't fail to notice her slip of tongue and seems rather taken aback by it. Meanwhile, I'm busy sitting here trying not to crap my pants. “What was that you said just now, Chiaki?”

Hasn't she noticed? For the love of god, woman! Earth to Makiri-sensei! Out of everything that could have possibly gone wrong in this meeting, this is by far the worst. She seriously screwed up.

“Hm?” she asks, confused by his question. “I said I'm proud that he's my—Oh! What I meant to say is that I'm proud of him being my *boyfriend*.”

“You said ‘student’ before.”

“No I didn't. Are you sure you didn't just mishear me, Father? You aren't exactly getting any younger, after all.”

Makiri-sensei tries to defuse the situation, but the damage has already been done.

“Tomoki, I assume you carry your student identification card with you at all times, correct? Or, at the very least, a legal document that states your birthdate. Could I please see it so I know that I'm not simply imagining things?”

“W-Wait a second! Don't you think you're being a bit rude asking him that, Father?!” Makiri-sensei protests.

“You keep your mouth shut!” he yells. She seems taken aback by his sudden outburst, yet, while slightly trembling, obeys her father. “Come on, Tomoki—show me your ID. Quickly now!”

I shake my head. We hadn't prepared for this scenario, so I obviously don't have any sort of fake ID. The jig is up.

"I see, so it was all a farce all along. Enough of this," he spits out, glaring at Makiri-sensei. "It looks like your teacher is nothing but a failure after all. She wouldn't even last a single day at my workplace."

Her father's scathing words emanate an intense pressure, to say nothing of the daggers he's staring at us. I can practically feel his hostility from a mile away.

Makiri-sensei looks to be in complete shock at his words, but after a moment of hesitation, she manages to resolve herself. "What?! It's not your place to judge me as a failure, Father! Maybe if you weren't so determined to marry me off to a complete stranger, then I wouldn't have resorted to this!"

"Hah! Don't make me laugh!" he shouts back. Makiri-sensei shuts up and succumbs to her father's presence. "You're nothing but a disappointment. I don't understand why, but you're obsessed with the idea of staying single *and* being a pathetic teacher for the rest of your life."

"Father! I—"

"I don't want your cheap excuses. How dare you drag one of your high school students here and lie to my face? Are you even *sane*, Chiaki?" He takes a deep breath and continues, "Maybe I've just pampered you too much ever since your mother died. You'll have to forgive me for not being a good father to you. But not to worry—now I'll open your eyes to the truth!"

He raises his hand toward her, and she flinches, closes her eyes, and braces herself. Before he can do anything to her, though, I grab his arm. It wasn't my place to interfere while he was giving her a tongue lashing, but no chance in hell will I ever let him lay a finger on her.

"What exactly are you doing?" he grumbles.

Makiri-sensei opens her eyes and looks at me, her expression like a deer in headlights.

I turn to her father and prepare to give him a taste of his medicine... verbally, anyway. "Look, Sir—I'll admit that we tried to deceive you, and I know I'm not

really in any position to say anything back to you, but could you at least *try* to understand where your daughter's coming from here?"

The father glares at me with his a murderous look in his eyes. "Let go of me this instant," he commands in the most arrogant tone I've ever heard in my entire life.

I do as he says and wedge myself between the two of them so he can't try that stunt again.

"First of all, I wholeheartedly apologize for... all of this. It was wrong of us to lie to you. I'm sorry for what happened, Sir," I say with a deep bow of my head.

"And here I thought you were a decent, trustworthy man. In the end, you turned out to be nothing more than a lying snake," he spits back.

"You're right. I won't deny that going through with this plan makes me a huge scumbag. Still, like I've already said, maybe you should listen to what your daughter has to say for once."

"Hmph! My duty is to raise my daughter, just like any other father would. The only reason this has even occurred is because of my failure to raise her properly. It's clear I've spoiled her too much. As such, I must now correct my mistakes and guide her along the right path. Chiaki lied to me! She has no right to give me any of her pitiful excuses now

Wait a sec... I've been thinking about this for a while, but I have a feeling this guy still believes Makiri-sensei and I are together, and he's just hung up about the age thing. I don't think he's caught on to the main lie yet.

Now that I think about it, I guess it wasn't the brightest idea to have me—a teen, and her student no less—fill the role of her fake boyfriend. Still, he's being far too irrational about it.

"You could at least hear her out before rushing to any conclusions," I try to reason.

The father gives me a sympathetic glance. "I realize you're still too young to understand, but you ought to realize one simple thing: your little 'relationship' will never be accepted by the real world."

Huh. He really believes that we're going out despite my age.

"You've done nothing wrong in this matter, anyway," he continues. "I will call a taxi and ensure that you get home safely. Don't worry about paying. I'll cover your fare. I will formally apologize tomorrow, but from now on, do keep your nose out of my family's business. It doesn't matter what sort of 'relationship' you believe you have with Chiaki."

So that's that? Is he just going to ignore everything Makiri-sensei and I have to say? In a way, he has a point, though—his family is his business, and, in the end, I might have no choice but to drop it. Still... this guy is just like my old man. It's his way or the highway for him, and once he's set on something, nothing will make him change his mind. No wonder he's so unwilling to listen to us—he's already predisposed to think that we're wrong no matter what.

Makiri-sensei's father sighs, and Makiri-sensei glances at me with a gentle expression. That's when something clicks: she probably feels powerless in her current predicament, just as I did before I met her and Ike. Those two stood by me when no one else would. Even when I'd completely given up on myself, she refused to do so. Now it's my turn to return the favor. Don't worry, Makiri-sensei—I'm here for you!

I clench my fist, look her father right in the eye, and tell him, "No. I don't care what you have to say. This *is* my business, whether you like it or not."

"What?" Makiri-sensei whispers.

Her father looks irritated by my defiance, but he turns to Makiri-sensei and addresses her instead. "I should've never allowed you to become a teacher in the first place. You yourself realize how wrong this is, don't you? Stop entangling others in your stupid mistakes! At any rate, although you turned out to be a failure in that regard, it's not too late. I won't allow you to make such a mistake again. You will come work for me at the company. That's an order."

I know everything he's saying is out of concern for her, but that's all the more reason to intervene. He thinks that he can solve everything his way. I may not be the protagonist of this story like Ike is—hell, I'm sure Ike would've been much more composed in this situation—but I won't allow him to get his way so easily. I'll stand up for Makiri-sensei, just like she and Ike did for me in the past.

“You said before that my relationship with Makiri-sensei didn’t matter at all, right?” I ask.

“Indeed, it does not.”

“And how did you come to that conclusion?! Huh?!” I snap. “She’s the first adult I’ve ever respected in my entire life. Last year, she was the only teacher who actually gave a damn about me—all the others just assumed that I was just a thug based on how I looked and brushed me off. I’ve got major social issues to boot, so I’d convinced myself I’d be alone forever and lost all hope in ever making friends. Yet Makiri-sensei stuck to her guns and supported me when nobody else did. Despite my inability to communicate how I really felt, she managed to look past my appearance and extended a hand to help me get back on the right track. Sure, I still have my share of problems at school, but at least I’ve been able to make some friends. I owe everything I am today to her. She’s one of the most important people in my life.”

“Tomoki-kun...” she whispers.

“This whole mess isn’t Makiri-sensei’s fault. She’s a good person and doesn’t deserve to be treated like this,” I state.

“I must apologize, Tomoki. I may have rushed to certain conclusions without thinking...” her father murmurs, almost visibly losing steam.

Great. Hopefully this means he understands my point of view better now.

“You’re... You’re still too young, lad. Still, I believe it’s thanks to your youth that you were able to express yourself like you just did. I’m certain that you still have much to experience in life, but—perhaps in this one respect—you understand my daughter’s feelings better than I do. Fine. I’ll allow you two to stay together.”

Wait, no! Shit! He probably misinterpreted that my whole speech was about the reason why I fell in love with her! I should’ve made that clear beforehand. Dammit! I screwed up! I need to fix this before things go downhill. Think, Yuuji, think! There must be something I can do. What can I say to make him understand that this is all a big misunderstanding? I can’t come up with anything! Double shit!

“It’s okay, Tomoki-kun,” Makiri-sensei speaks up from behind me, and I turn around and look her in the eyes. She’s crying gently, small tears rolling down her cheeks. “You did more than enough. Thanks.”

Is she implying that I should give up? But... Oh well. I guess I should wait and see what she has to say about this.

“Father, I’m sorry about lying to you. I should’ve brought a real boyfriend with me—a suitor you would’ve preferred. I’m sorry for making you worry so much about me,” she says with a bow, her gaze now resolute. “I know that this may sound childish, but I want to fall in love with someone I consider to be ‘the one.’ That’s why I don’t want to have my marriage arranged. I should’ve spoken to you about this before.”

You did it, Sensei! You finally told him how you really felt! Nice going!

“Do you realize what you’re saying right now?” her father asks.

“I will always be your daughter, and you will always be my father. That reality will never change. I also understand where you were coming from when you tried to slap me earlier.”

“Then why won’t you listen to what I ask of you?!” he cries.

“What sort of example would I be setting for my students if I blindly obeyed everything you said without question? As a teacher, I have a responsibility toward them.”

“Bah! As if a failure like you would be able to teach anything of value!”

“I’m not denying that I have my faults, just like everyone else. I’m not perfect. Nobody is, really. I’ve resorted to alcohol more than once. I’ve even had to get one of my students to pick me up when I was near blacking out... several times, in fact. But do you know something? It means I can sympathize with my students. I know how they feel when they’re lost and alone, because I feel the exact same way! And it’s my duty as an educator to show them that fact—that everyone has their flaws!”

“You’re just trying to justify your own weakness. Don’t think that you’ll be able to convince me with those lies.”

“Maybe you’re right, Father. But it’s *because* of my ‘weakness’ that I’ve been able to grow closer to my pupils. They’re not the only ones who grow as people—I do alongside them. As proof of that... I never would’ve imagined that someone would say they owe their very life to me.”

She glances at me as she speaks, and I nod silently. “That’s why, as a teacher, I can proudly proclaim that I don’t think I’m taking the wrong path in life. I want to continue doing what I do, and I want my students to respect me and my choices in life!”

A wave of relief and happiness washes over me. She’s finally found the courage to face her father. Maybe this brings me one step closer to repaying my debt to her, to showing her my immense gratitude.

Makiri-sensei stares at her father with her usual cold, composed expression. There isn’t a trace of fear to be found on her face anymore. She declares, “I may be your daughter, but that’s not all I am. In the face of society, and in my students’ eyes, I am a teacher! I’m an adult who deserves just as much respect as any other. My choices are made by *me*, for *me*—I’ll do whatever’s best for me and my life. Plus, I plan to meet ‘the one’ someday, to fall in love and bask in the glow of true romance.”

Damn, not gonna lie—she sounds so cool that I might’ve even fallen for her a little.



Makiri-sensei’s father stays silent for a while after listening to her speech. His eyes are gleaming, and he’s inspecting her with a look of respect now.

“This might be the first time you’ve been so open about your feelings. I... I suppose you’re not a little girl anymore. *Sigh*. Well, given your feelings toward marriage, I suppose it wouldn’t be right to introduce you to any suitors. I’ll accept the blame and apologize to the man I had planned for you. *Sigh*. Do whatever you want from now on—I couldn’t care less.”

His words are piercing, but do I sense a hint of relief in his eyes?

“I plan to do so. Thank you, Father,” she replies with a smile.



Her father turns to face me, smiles faintly, and says, “It was rude of me not to introduce myself at the beginning. My name is Sennouji Makiri, but you may call me Sennouji. In any case, Tomoki—or, should I say, Yuuji—it may be a tad early, but would you care to join us for dinner?”



We move to a dining hall. Makiri-sensei and I sit down next to each other, while Sennouji sits on the opposite side facing us.

One of the housekeeping staff brings out our plates, which had been prepared ahead of time by the lady who’d fetched us tea earlier. I think she left already, which is kind of a shame—the spread is one of the most luxurious-looking meals I’ve ever had the pleasure of witnessing. She must have some serious talent.

“Please help yourselves,” Sennouji says, chopsticks in hand.

“Thanks for the food,” Makiri-sensei and I say at the same time.

I take a bite and immediately blurt out, “Whoa! This is fantastic!”

Seriously, it’s so delicious that I doubt I can stop eating if I tried.

“Takuma always prepares amazing meals,” Makiri-sensei adds with a smile on her face.

For some reason, Sennouji doesn’t seem as pleased with it, though. Is something the matter?

“I won’t deny that she’s skilled at cooking, but I still think yours is far better,” he tells Makiri-sensei with a faint blush.

“Yeah, I’ll admit it—Makiri-sensei’s cooking skills are great,” I follow.

“Glad to know you understand,” he replies with a smile.

“C-Could we please talk about something a little less embarrassing?” Makiri-sensei asks while blushing.

For a while, we eat and chat idly. Suddenly, though, Sennouji turns to me and asks, “By the way, Yuuji, I must ask—have you ever thought about pursuing a career in law?”

“Why are you asking him that, Father?” Makiri-sensei, who’s clearly flustered

by his question, blurts out.

“I didn’t ask you, Chiaki. Let the young man answer. So, Yuuji? There aren’t many youngsters like you in my firm. They don’t have the guts to speak in the composed manner that you do. I could give you a job if you so wished.”

I guess he’s taken a liking to me, which is far from a bad thing. If anything, I’m relieved—I was pretty much convinced that he saw me as nothing more than an annoying brat.

“I haven’t really decided on anything yet, but I’ll definitely consider the opportunity... if you don’t mind, that is,” I reply.

“That’s fine for now. Be sure to keep it in mind for your future, lad,” he says with a smile.

“And now you two are talking about the future?” Makiri-sensei mumbles, blushing even harder than before.

I guess she isn’t happy that her dad’s trying to convince me to follow a certain path. I mean, she is my teacher—technically *she’s* the one who should be advising me on my future prospects.



“Yuuji, it’s getting quite late. Seeing as you’ve already had dinner, you’re free to take a bath here if you’d like,” Sennouji speaks up after we’re done eating and clearing the plates.

“Father, remember that Tomoki-kun can’t be out too late,” Makiri-sensei objects.

“Oh, come on. There’s no need to be like that. I wouldn’t mind showing my bathroom off to him, let him take a gander at it and all.”

I knew he liked me already, but not this much.

“Sure. If you insist,” I reply.

Makiri-sensei sighs in exasperation while her dad grins at my response.

I take a towel set and head to the bathroom. There’s a dressing room right outside the bathroom where I take off my clothes first before entering.

“Damn, now *this* is a bathtub! It’s got that classic Japanese style and everything!”

I marvel at the room’s furnishing. The place basically screams “Japan”—especially the traditional, massive wooden tub that can easily fit a few adults in it. Yeah, needless to say I’m floored.

I wash my hair and body. As I’m in the process of scrubbing myself squeaky clean, I hear the door open.

“So? What do you think of my bathroom?” Sennouji asks from the entrance.

I glance over at him. The guy’s naked as the day he was born, and he’s jacked as hell. Like, he’s so in shape that he could’ve easily lied and told me he was 10 years younger, and I would’ve believed him.

“It’s incredible, Sir. I love big baths, so I’m pretty much living my dream right now,” I answer.

He grins a little and nods. “You’ve got that right. I don’t even let Takuma touch this place—I’m the one who handles its upkeep. It’s my favorite place in the entire estate.”

“Why are you here, by the way?” I ask.

I don’t think he heard my question, because he silently walks over without a response.

“Um... I was wondering why you’re here, Sennouji,” I repeat slightly louder.

“Oh, I was thinking of washing your back. Are you opposed to that?”

Oh, he wanted me to call him by his name. He’s kinda charming in his own way.

“I don’t mind, but only if you’ll let me wash yours after,” I reply.

“Hahaha! Very well!” he exclaims heartily.

He grabs a towel, lathers it up generously, and begins to scrub my back. He’s putting some strength into it, which makes it feel pretty nice.

“Say, Yuuji...” he speaks up.

“Yes?”

“How long have you been going out with Chiaki now?”

Fuck, we never cleared up that misunderstanding, did we? It’s time to confess.

“Um, Makiri-sensei and I aren’t actually dating or anything,” I reply.

“Hahaha! What a funny joke, young man. You really think that your teacher would bring you here to meet her *father* just ‘because’?”

Man, I’ve got nothing to say in response. I wish I could point out that this was all ultimately *her idea*, but I’m freaking out right now. Something about seeing his smile is making me feel too intimidated to reply.

“However, I do understand why you feel as though you have to act the way you do, considering how society will scorn your relationship. I’ll assume that you’re just telling me this because it’s what you normally have to do. I hope that, as you grow older, you’ll end up opening up to me about your relationship. I’d like to support you and my daughter as much as I can, okay?”

I detect a tinge of sadness in his voice, but I don’t know how to reply. He stops washing my back for a moment and continues, “I’ve been a terrible father. Everything I’ve ever done has been for her—she’s the light of my life, always has been... even if it dimmed somewhat when my wife left us. I’m sure Chiaki felt nothing but loneliness after my wife died, and yet she never complained a single time about anything I decided for her. And let me tell you, not every choice I made was the correct one. I was mistaken in her upbringing, for one. I never allowed her to be herself. Instead, I always pushed for what I thought would be right without asking for her opinion, and she ended up becoming an innocent girl because of it. I thought that the only way she wouldn’t be taken advantage of by a shady man would be through an arranged marriage with someone of my choosing... someone I deemed to be a suitable partner for her. I never realized that she’d already blossomed into a full-fledged adult, fending for herself and searching for her own happiness in life. I should’ve trusted my daughter, and that’s something I’ll have to own up to for the rest of my life.”

His voice is filled with remorse. I grab a nearby bucket, pour some water all over my body, stand up, take his towel from him, and begin scrubbing his back in turn. I put a little elbow grease into it, and he seems surprised by it.

“What are you...” he begins to ask, but trails off.

“Makiri-sensei once told me that my back was pretty wide, and that it reminded her of you. I think she was wrong about one thing, though,” I say.

He remains silent, waiting for me to continue my thought.

“I agree that your back *is* pretty large, just like mine. But she implied that I reminded her of you, and that’s where I feel she’s wrong. You’re the one who’s been single-handedly carrying your daughter’s life on this back all these years, not me. To be honest, it makes me wonder if I’ll ever be able to become half the man you currently are. I know for a fact that you cherish her a lot, Sennouji. She told me that you did your best to raise her, and that she’s proud of being your daughter,” I tell him as I pour a bucket of hot water over his back to wash the soap away. I really do respect him for that.

“Chiaki... Chiaki said that about me?” Sennouji croaks, his voice trembling slightly as if he’s on the verge of tears.

“She did,” I answer.

“I-I see...”

I hear him begin to weep. His shoulders tremble as he tries to wipe away his tears covertly so that I won’t see them. I guess he had his reasons for everything he did and said when we met with him this morning. One thing’s for sure, though, especially after hearing him cry—he truly does care about her.

He stands up, faces me, and bows. “Yuuji! She’s my everything, my treasure! But I wholeheartedly believe that you of all people can make her happy! I know that your relationship will be fraught with hardships, but I trust that you’ll be able to protect and look after Chiaki to the best of your abilities. If there’s something I can do—anything—just let me know. Let me help you in any way I can.”

I have to tell him the truth. The longer this goes on, the worse it’s going to be.

“I’m really sorry to burst your bubble, but I wasn’t kidding when I said that Makiri-sensei and I aren’t dating.”

I know it’s harsh, but he deserves to know.

“You’re a stubborn boy, I’ll admit. You remind me of myself when I was your age. I like you,” he says with a good-natured laugh. “Okay, have it your way. You two are *definitely* not dating. But I’ll say this regardless—I leave Chiaki in your hands.”

Man, it’s just not getting through to him. Goddammit. Forget about digging myself into a hole—I’ve practically dug my own grave here, haven’t I?

Chapter Nineteen

My Teacher

After we take a nice bath together, Sennouji and I return to Makiri-sensei.

"You two certainly took your time," she points out.

"Hmph! We were simply enjoying a lengthy conversation, man-to-man," Sennouji huffs, crossing his arms and looking away. "You should take a bath yourself, Chiaki. It's been a while since you've had one here."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'll pass."

"No need to be so shy. I'll make sure to entertain Yuuji in the meantime. In fact, why don't you two stay the night? Or rather, I insist you do."

Makiri-sensei sighs. Unlike her father, who's the definition of being in high spirits, she seems rather tired. "I think we've been here long enough today, and I really should be getting Tomoki-kun back home. We wouldn't want to keep him any longer or anything like that. We'd just be bothering him at that point."

"Seriously? You're worried about bothering him *now*?" Sennouji whispers. Makiri-sensei gives him a sharp look, and he visibly deflates. "I suppose Yuuji is still a student. It wouldn't bode well for him to return to his place too late."

Makiri-sensei stands up and smiles once more. "I'm very glad that we were able to talk everything through, Father. We'll get going now, okay?"

"*Hmph!* At least allow me to see you out of the estate."

The three of us head outside, and Sennouji stands and waits at the front gate as Makiri-sensei and I hop into her car.

"Please be sure to visit again sometime to keep me company. You two are always welcome."

"I... I hope that day comes soon, but who knows?" Makiri-sensei replies, her eyes puffy and red, as if she's about to cry.

Sennouji, on the other hand, flashes us a bright smile.

He bought our made-up story in the end. All's well that ends well, I suppose.

"We'll see you later, father."

"Take care on the way back. Yuuji, I hope we can meet again soon," Sennouji says with a smile.

I try to match his friendly grin, but instead end up forcing out the world's most awkward grimace ever. "Me too," I answer.

Makiri-sensei starts the car, and we drive off. Soon, Sennouji is no longer visible. We remain silent for a while. I'm exhausted, and I bet she's not feeling much better. Maybe I should think of a topic to break the ice and cheer her up a little...

"Do you mind if we take a small detour on our way back?" she suddenly asks.

"Sure, whatever you want," I reply.

Maybe she needs to buy a couple of things from a convenience store nearby? After a few minutes, Makiri-sensei stops the car in front of what appears to be a park.

She gets out, and I—completely confused—do the same. I'm immediately slapped in the face by the thick, humid summer air. We were basking in the luxury of air conditioning in the car, so I start sweating as soon as I'm outside.

"So this is the place you wanted to check out first?" I ask.

It's nice and all, but it still looks like your average, run-of-the-mill park to me. Nothing here really stands out to differentiate it from other places I've seen here and there. Actually, there is *one* thing—there isn't a single soul in sight.

"Yes, this is it," she replies softly.

She walks forward, venturing deeper into the park, and I follow close behind. Eventually, we reach the end of the path, where there's an iron fence to prevent us from tumbling off the cliffside. Beyond that is a breathtaking scene laid out for us—a view of the entire town at night. So *this* is what makes this spot so special.

“Back when I was still a student, I often came to this place by myself,” Makiri-sensei explains while leaning against the fence. She looks out over the town with an enigmatic smile on her face.

“So you stopped here to take in the view, I assume?” I ask.

She nods. “Yes. Looking back, I can’t say this spot brings back too many good memories, though.”

“If that’s the case, why go out of your way to come here? What’s the point of visiting a place that only reminds you of negative things?”

Makiri-sensei seems somewhat downtrodden by my question. “I remember that whenever I looked at this town, I’d always focus on the lights of the houses. That made me feel like I was all alone.”

I peer over at the spot in question. It’s just the residential area, nothing fancy. Still, I think I get what she means when I gaze at the thick clouds of smoke billowing out of the chimneys and the lights twinkling merrily. Each one of those homes must have a family inside—a happy one.

“I’ve never had to worry about money throughout my life. On the other hand, I never had any friends, and my father always arrived late at night, which made it almost impossible to see him. Losing my mother when I was young was devastating. I was constantly alone... so, so alone,” she explains with a slight squint of her eyes. Maybe these lights are too bright, too cheerful. That’s why it’s so painful for her. “I can still feel the scars—all the heartache and loneliness—after all these years. They’re something I’ll never forget. That’s why... why I hoped to become someone who could extend a hand to others like me. I wanted to help those who suffered when they were young so they could stand up and have what I never had. That’s why I became a teacher.”

She pauses for a while, and I remain silent too. Finally, she turns around and looks me in the eyes. She’s smiling, but I can tell she’s trying her hardest to refrain from crying. “Tomoki-kun—you’ve said multiple times that I’ve saved you, but I believe you’re mistaken.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Everything I’ve done for you—intervening on your behalf, trying to help you

mend your relationship with your father, helping you make new friends—has all been to satisfy my fragile and meaningless ego. Although you may have benefitted from me being there in the process, I’ve always believed that it was *you* who saved me from the dark pit I was trapped in. You allowed me to help you.”

“Excuse me?”

“I know what you must be thinking right now. That I’m a sham, that I betrayed you,” she mutters while looking down, avoiding eye contact.

I take a moment to think about her words before answering. “Regardless of your intentions, the fact of the matter is that you’re still the one responsible for getting my life back on track. It’s all thanks to you that I’m still here today.”

“What?”

Why’s she so surprised at my answer? I guess I need to explain myself further.

“Maybe you didn’t hear yourself properly, but I think what you just told me is very telling of just how nice you are. Despite how lonely you felt all those years, and despite the fact that no one ever extended their hand to you, you still decided to help others. You’re an amazing person to me. Why can’t you see that?”

She’s still looking as gobsmacked as she was before and continues to keep quiet.

“Okay, uh, lemme try to sum this up,” I say, feeling a little awkward. “*Sigh...* I believe you’re someone who deserves some serious respect, and I’m proud to have you as my teacher. So yeah, that’s that.”

It’s pretty embarrassing to be so upfront about my feelings, but if this is what she needs to hear... Plus, she’s opened up to me about her past and her emotions, as well. I think I can place more than enough trust in her at this point to reciprocate. I hope my little speech has helped in some way, but I’m still not sure if I worded everything correctly. In the end, what I want more than anything is for her to take pride in who she is and her work.

I look at Makiri-sensei. Her shoulders are trembling, and she’s on the verge of tears. Before I can react, she throws herself at me and buries her head in my

chest.

“Thanks, Tomoki-kun,” she mumbles.

“Um, are you okay?”

“I know it’s too late to say this, but I still do want to be a good role model for you. I mean it. And I... I... *sob!*”

The dam has burst, and she’s now sobbing. I guess that’s why she pressed herself against me: because she didn’t want me to see her face.

“Just let me stay like this for a while longer, please,” she chokes out between sobs.

“Sure thing.”





I really don't know how she feels about this whole ordeal—not fully, anyway. The best thing to do here is just shut up, let her unwind as much as she wants, and listen to what she has to say.



"I must apologize, Tomoki-kun. I'm supposed to be your role model; someone you can be proud of. But recently, all I've done is rely on you," she suddenly says. Her voice is muffled because she's still glued tight to my chest, but I can hear it trembling a little bit.

"It's okay. Really. I mean, I *did* tell you that I'd be here for you if you ever needed it."

She takes a deep breath, lifts her head, and looks me in the eyes.

"Your words have made me the happiest woman alive, Tomoki-kun. You made me realize that my choices in life weren't wrong, after all." Her cheeks are dyed a light pink, and her longing gaze pierces me. "Thank you, Tomoki-kun."

I guess I've managed to cheer her up, and that's all that really matters in the end.



We stay at the lookout a little longer before returning to the car to continue our trip back home.

We ride in silence again for a good while. I'm still embarrassed about what happened back there—I mean, she threw herself at me. She's probably as embarrassed as I am as well. Instead of talking, Makiri-sensei's pressing her foot down on the gas. We're seriously speeding down the road.

"You must be tired after all that's happened today. You should really take a nap," she says out of nowhere.

"Nah, I'll stay awake with you."

"Sleep."

Her terse command tells me everything I need to know: she IS embarrassed.

I don't want to escalate the situation any further, so I simply nod. "Okay, I'll

try to get some shut-eye then.”

“Good. I’ll wake you up once we’ve arrived. Try to rest as much as you can in the meantime.”

I close my eyes and find myself drifting off in just a few minutes. Damn, I guess I really *am* as tired as she said.



I don’t know how long I nodded off for, but I eventually open my eyes again. The first thing I see is Makiri-sensei looking away from me. I stare out the window and notice the car isn’t moving. We’ve stopped somewhere close to her apartment building.

“Did we just get here?” I mumble, still half-asleep.

“Oh, um! Y-Yes! Yes, we did! I was about to wake you up, actually, but you woke up so suddenly that you startled me! Yes! Anyway, I’ll accompany you home. Lead the way!”

“It’s fine. My home’s just a five minute walk from here. I can manage just fine by myself.”

I unfasten my seatbelt and exit the car.

“O-Oh, right. All right, then. Be careful on the way back...” she says in a sad tone.

When I turn back to her, I see that her face has been illuminated by the nearby street light. I hadn’t noticed earlier in the darkness of night, but she’s red as a tomato.

“Why’s your face so red? You okay?” I ask.

She jumps in surprise. “I-I’m totally fine!”

“I guess you’re pretty wiped out after all that. You didn’t push yourself too hard, did you?”

“O-Of course I haven’t. I appreciate your concern, but there’s no need to worry about me. I know the reason for this already,” she replies with a sharp glance.

Well, she doesn't seem sick or anything at least. I bend down toward her and say, "Anyway, I'm going back home now. You be careful as well on the way back, Sensei."

I can see her hesitate about something for a moment. After a few seconds, she calls out to me. "Say, Tomoki-kun, I'm going to keep relying on you from time to time, so..."

"And I'll be there for you. Why are you bringing this up now?"

She pauses in uncertainty, then continues, "What I want to say is that if you ever need my help as well, I want you to come to me for advice. Okay?"

"Sure thing. I mean, I've been doing that over the last year anyway, so..."

She looks away, her cheeks still a bright red. I don't know if it's her intention when she acts like this, but she's absolutely adorable.

"Um, actually, Tomoki-kun... There's one last thing I'd like to ask you before you go."

That's when she hits me with something I never saw coming.

Chapter Twenty

My First True Love

Despite being liberal on the gas pedal, it still takes us a while to arrive back from my father's place.

I stop the car and look over at him. He's fast asleep, his chest rising and falling with each soft breath. He must have been really exhausted from everything, given how quickly he passed out after closing his eyes. It all seems so surreal. Everyone around us considers him to be incredibly intimidating. Whenever I look at his face, though, I don't feel fear—I feel attraction. His face is especially cute while he's asleep.

One day, I... I hope to become his wif—wait, no! That's not what I meant! I need to calm down and think things through. I-I meant that I want to be the only one who sees his adorable sleeping expression. Yes, that's right. Wait, that's not it either! Come on—take a couple deep breaths and be rational about this.

After a few minutes of contemplation, I come to a realization. I finally understand how I feel.

I look over at his sleeping figure and am immediately assaulted by a burning sensation in my chest. I press both my hands against it in an attempt to ease the pain. I can't keep my feelings buried within me any longer! I need to voice them out loud!

"I love you..."

I'm well aware that he couldn't hear what I just said, but I needed to say it in front of him anyway. Ever since the day he helped me when I was dead drunk, I've noticed that my feelings toward him have been shifting wildly. I can't even recall *when* I started to feel this affection for him, but one day it happened.

I can't believe it—my first love, and it just so happens to be one of my

students! He's constantly on my mind to the point where I often feel like a dumb, lovestruck teenager.

He's sweet, serious, intelligent, level-headed, and a hard worker at heart. Then there's the way he doesn't hold grudges, despite the entire world being against him, his introspective nature, his eagerness for self-improvement, and... god, I suppose just like everything about him. He's always been there for me whenever I've needed someone to talk to, and he's helped me out multiple times. I can tell how much he cares about me from the way he's gotten angry at others on my behalf. On top of that, he was able to voice my true feelings to my father—something I'd never been able to achieve before him. With him by my side, I've come to the realization that I would fall in love with any man who would go out of his way as much as he has for me... regardless of age.

Would he ever be open to the idea of marriage with someone like me, though?

Oh my god, I actually entertained the idea of marriage! Father, someone—kindly come and slap some sense into me! My face is burning right now! No doubt I'm as red as a rose currently! Okay, Chiaki. Let's take a few more deep breaths and calm down.

After I've managed to settle down, I glance at him again.

"You're the coolest guy I know."

My gaze focuses on his captivating lips, and my heart skips a beat. I really want to kiss him while he's still asleep. I know I shouldn't, but just thinking about his lips is enough to make me forget all the issues that would come with it. It's as though I'm being drawn in by some mysterious power, a stronger will that's not my own. I don't resist; I let my dark desires guide me. My face approaches his, and I...

"I shouldn't."

Right as our lips are about to touch, I manage to stop myself. It's not that my desire to kiss him has suddenly vanished, of course—I'd probably be the happiest woman alive if I did. It's just that... I don't know if he'd reciprocate my feelings. Perhaps my affection is one-sided, and I'd only be stealing his first kiss from the person he's been saving it for.

In the end, I decide that it'll be best to tell him how I feel first. Unfortunately, I haven't been very successful at that yet. Also—and this is rather embarrassing to admit—I'd prefer it if he's the one who initiates things.

I'll simply try to avoid looking at his lips.

"There should be nothing wrong with this, at least..." I whisper to myself as I approach his face and kiss him on the forehead instead.



Eventually, he opens his eyes. It certainly catches me off guard, but I quickly avert my eyes and feign calmness. I don't want him to suspect that I've been watching him sleep this whole time.

"Did we just get here?" he mumbles, still half-asleep.

"Oh, um! Y-Yes! Yes, we did! I was about to wake you up, actually, but you woke up so suddenly that you startled me! Yes! Anyway, I'll accompany you home. Lead the way!"

I make what is likely the worst excuse possible in this scenario. He doesn't seem to suspect anything, which is more than good enough for me.

He quickly gets out of the car. After we say our farewells, he turns around and prepares to head back to his place. I wish we could spend more time together, but I'm worried that if we do, I may just die of embarrassment.

But when I touch my lips, I recall how he said goodbye to me just now. I...

"Why's your face so red? You okay?" he asks me, peering into the car with a concerned expression.

Oh god, did he notice how red my face is because of the streetlights? Look away! I can't let him see me like this!

"I guess you're pretty wiped out after all that. You didn't push yourself too hard, did you?"

"O-Of course I haven't. I appreciate your concern, but there's no need to worry about me. I know the reason for this already."

He still doesn't know how I feel, but his innocent concern for me makes my

heart race and my chest tighten once more. Although I desperately want to confess, and I feel terrible about keeping this secret from him, I know that telling him would cause issues for both of us.

“Anyway, I’m going back home now. You be careful as well on the way back, Sensei,” he says. With that, finally turns around and starts to walk away.

I should tell him... wait, should I? I don’t know!

“Wait! Say, Tomoki-kun, I’m going to keep relying on you from time to time, so...”

He’s my first love. I want him to pamper me, listen to everything I have to say, and keep me company. I want to confess my feelings and have him reciprocate! Why can’t I tell him?!

“And I’ll be there for you. Why are you bringing this up now?”

Maybe he doesn’t understand what I truly meant by that, because he seems somewhat puzzled. Very well, I’ll tell him as plainly as possible that I love him! B-But I... when I look him in the eyes, something suddenly dawns on me—he has complete faith in me. It’s something I can just *sense* deep down, and I falter once more because of it.

“What I want to say is that if you ever need my help as well, I want you to come to me for advice. Okay?”

I’m an adult, as well as his teacher. He’s just a child compared to me! Telling him that I have feelings for him would be wrong on many levels... but I just want to confess so badly! I *need* to, even! The responsible adult in me, the one called “Makiri-sensei,” is practically screaming how terrible of an idea it is. He respects and looks up to me. I’m the first adult he’s been able to rely on and fully trust.

Still, when I think about it, I suppose I’m not some special exception. It could’ve been anyone. Any other teacher in my position would have won his trust if they did what I did. I was simply at the right place at the right time in this situation—that’s all there is to it.

Regardless, *I’m* the one he chose—to think, *I’m* the one he trusts! Nothing makes me happier than to hear him say I’m the teacher he’s the proudest of

having. And it's for that very reason that I just can't break this bond we've formed. If I confessed, I'd be throwing away everything we've built up until now! I must remain his guiding light, his role model, his teacher—nothing more.

A confession would only confuse him and cause him unwanted trouble. I'd also prefer to avoid the likely scenario of him rejecting me, as I doubt he'd be willing to have a relationship with someone like me. I'm a disaster deep down, after all.

"Sure thing. I mean, I've been doing that over the last year anyway, so..."

In the end, however, it means that I need to keep my feelings locked away once again, just as I've been doing all these years with my father. That's the last thing I want.

"Um, actually, Tomoki-kun... There's one last thing I'd like to ask you before you go—if you ever managed to find a real girlfriend, would an age gap be too much of an issue for you? Actually, would you prefer her to be older or younger?"

"Uh, where did this question come from?" he asks, puzzled. I'd be weirded out as well if I was asked something like this out of the blue.

"I was just curious," I reply.

"What do you even mean by that?"

"*Sigh*. Sometimes you *are* a little slow..."

This is a little humiliating. I know that I must look ridiculously red right now, but I suppose I need to tell him directly. Otherwise, he may never understand.

"Now that my father has put the idea of an arranged marriage aside, it means that I'm free to pursue my true love. I-I was wondering if—in the event that I don't find anyone—you'd be willing to take responsibility. Do you understand what I mean?"

Tomoki audibly gulps and gawks at me. He's visibly surprised and nervous. After a few seconds of hesitation, he scratches the back of his head and mutters, "Way to put me on that spot like that. Well, uh, leaving aside if *that* would ever happen or not, I doubt anyone as pretty as you would have any

trouble getting yourself a guy. Just quit drinking so much, and I'm sure guys will be all over you. I mean, uh... I wouldn't mind doing that at all, but still..."

Seeing him struggling to make a point makes me laugh a little.

"Please don't make fun of me. Come on," he protests.

"I'm sorry. At any rate, I sure do hope that whoever likes me is ready to accept my flaws as well," I reply.

"I guess that's true, but it won't be easy finding that perfect someone."

"Right? That's why I asked you about your preferences. That way, I know where to start from on my end."

"Oh, I see," he says while forcing a smile.

I suppose this is enough for one day.

"I'll be going home now. No need to answer me. Be careful on your way back, Tomoki-kun."

"You too, Makiri-sensei."

Although Tomoki is already some distance away from me, my heart is still beating just as quickly—no, even quicker—than before. Time for some more deep breaths to regain my composure.

So, in conclusion, how do I feel about Tomoki? Although I'm happy he views me as "Makiri-sensei"—the only teacher he can respect and confide in—I'd also like it if he saw me as "Chiaki Makiri"—the woman who loves him.

If I knew how he felt about me romantically, and if he were open to a relationship, I wouldn't hesitate to confess. That's what I intend to ascertain going forward. Still, how exactly am I going to achieve that? I swear, sometimes I encumber myself with the stupidest and most difficult challenges. How can I possibly continue being his "teacher" and his "significant other" at the same time?

Sigh. I'm just a disaster of a person. Oh well... I suppose the heart wants what it wants.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the third volume of Side Character. Oh, right—hi there! Sekaiichi here.

Sooo... yeah! It's finally here! I know, I know—we've released the third volume, and now a manga's coming out, too?! It's all thanks to you guys. This never would've even been possible without your support. Thank you all so much! I can't wait until you tell your grandkids about this Sekaiichi guy who—way back in the day—made you crack a smile or two, and...

Anyway, leaving that aside, volume three is the long-awaited debut of Makiri-sensei, someone I very deliberately kept to a minimum for the first two books. I decided to make her the main girl this time around, and I hope that you've come to like her more after reading this. I know I certainly did, so I'd be so happy if you felt the same!

This volume is based on the initial content from the web novel, but with a good number of tweaks and changes. For example, I don't really delve into Yuuji's past in the web novel, but in this volume, I dedicated a sizable segment to it. In fact, Yuuji's dad doesn't even exist in the web novel version. I also really, really want to write more scenes involving Yuuji, Haruma, and Makiri together. My imagination's running wild just thinking about it.

I actually find it funny that apart from Takuma (Sennouji's housekeeper) and Otome, all the other new characters are a bunch of old farts! There's Yamamoto, with his excellent cooking skills; the harsh—but equally cute—Sennouji; and Yuuji's dad, who has a secret romcom addiction. Expect to see more of these old timers in the coming volumes! Don't worry, there'll be plenty of screen time for the rest of the characters as well, including Otome!

I also want to address everyone who's sent me letters until now. Thank you so much! I'll try my best to keep releasing material that'll appeal to everyone! Actually, I wouldn't mind getting a few more supportive letters to lift my spirits. I especially like those that are along the lines of, "Go, go, Sekaiichi, go!"

Now I'll jump to words of gratitude for those who collaborated with me.

First of all, to my editor-in-chief: I know I gave you some serious headaches,

but I want to thank you. It's because of your help that the story turned out as great as it did! I hope we can continue to work together just as well as we've been doing so far.

I also want to thank the illustrator, Tom Osabe. He did a terrific job. The editor-in-chief proposed him as the replacement illustrator and showed me one of Tom's illustrations—a girl doing a peace sign. I was so impressed by his fashion sense and coloring that I had no other choice but to ask him to draw for Side Character! I'm so glad that he accepted. Thank you, Tom. I hope we continue to work together in the future.

I also want to express my gratitude to everyone else involved in the production of this novel. Thank you!

Most of all, though, I want to show my appreciation to the readers who purchased this book. Actually, as a way of saying thanks, I've decided to add a little sneak peek for the next volume. It's a short segment featuring plenty of Touka. Enjoy!

Coming Up in the Next Volume!

"It's about time you started spilling the beans, Senpai. What are you hiding from me?"

I doubt I'll manage to find a better time to ask him about this. I know we're in the middle of a date, but I also really want to know what's going on.

"Huh?"

"You're acting pretty weird today. Normally when we're on our super lovey-dovey dates, you tend to look more, like... chill, y'know? Like you're having a good time. But right now, you look more like you've just watched your family die in a fire. So yeah, that's why I'm asking."

"Are you sure our dates are 'super lovey-dovey'?" he mutters under his breath, then punctuates it with a cough. "*Ahem!* Yeah, I'm hiding something from you right now."

Damn, this guy really just admitted it straight to my face.

"So what is it, then? You have some side piece you're not telling me about?" I prod. I'm trying to come across as cool as possible, but my insides are a mess right now from the nerves. I can feel my chest ache as I ask him the question.

"Sorry, but I can't exactly tell you," he says, giving me an awkward, worried look while scratching the back of his head. "I don't really like keeping secrets from you, but this is something I can't really talk to you about. I'm really sorry."

"Just to make sure, you didn't go and get yourself a real girlfriend or something like that, right?"

"Do you really have to ask? We agreed that we'd let each know if that happened. Remember?"

"I do," I reply, feeling slightly more at ease.

But I'm obviously still a *little* pissed at the fact that he doesn't wanna tell me whatever he's hiding. I guess we're not close enough yet to fully open up to each other.

"Oh well," I say, trying my best to sound bright and cheerful. "If you don't

wanna tell me, I guess I'll just drop it. Still, Senpai—I *do* think it's kinda rude to keep secrets from me. Lighten up a little!"

Despite my best efforts to lift the mood, I can't shake the feeling that we're in the middle of a majorly awkward situation.

"Okay! I guess I gotta punish you for it!" I exclaim.

"Wait, what?!" Senpai blurts out, before forcing a smile.

"We're gonna go to the beach together," I explain.

"Sure. We should plan something."

"*And* we're gonna go to the town's summer festival and watch the fireworks, okay?! Just the two of us—*alone*!"

"Sounds good to me. I'm looking forward to it," he replies flippantly.

Huh? Is he trying to make fun of me or something?! Well, two can play at that game! Let's see how far I can push his buttons!

"I bet you're just *dying* to see me in a cute little bikini and a yukata... aren't you, Senpai? You perv."

"Of course I—uh, I mean... maybe. Just a little..."

"You've never been good at hiding things. Also, you're a terrible liar," I goad him.

"I guess I am, haha," he replies in a light tone. He looks so downtrodden that I feel the need to cheer him up a little.

"Oh, but I know what you're really thinking: 'You said this is supposed to be a punishment, but seeing you in a bikini is more of a blessing than anything!' Am I right?"

He scratches the back of his head again and looks away. "You know, that does sound pretty nice. Not gonna lie, I really *do* wanna see you in those outfits."

When I see the blush creep across his face, I can't help but get butterflies in my stomach. Damn, look at me—I don't even care about the fact that he's hiding something anymore. It's precious little moments like these that make me forget about all the bad stuff. They just remind me that, well... I really like this

guy. I love him to bits.



Look forward to volume 4!

Extra Story One

Final Sword

It's just another random summer Sunday. I'm picking up a few things at a convenience store when I happen to run into Makiri-sensei, who's in casual clothes.

"Oh, Tomoki-kun. What a coincidence."

"Good morning. Yeah, what are the odds?"

"Are you planning to pay for all of that with your mobile wallet? I know I probably shouldn't stick my nose in other people's matters too much, but try to practice it in moderation if you can," she notes as she sees me paying at the register.

"It's fine. I don't really use my phone to pay for anything but groceries. It caps at a thousand yen, anyway, so yeah. I couldn't spend it on phone games even if I wanted to."

"Oh, I see. I remember that you told me at some point that you're not much of a 'gamer,' per se, but are there any you play from time to time?"

"Well, there are a couple, but like you said, they're not really my thing overall. There's this one I'm actually kinda interested in trying out called *Final Sword*, though."

"Oh, I think I know that one. I've seen it mentioned in some articles, and it was featured in *The Lord of Entertainment* the other day. The host, Nori Janai, said he was thinking of giving the game a shot."

"Yeah. I remember the guy streamed it on Twit once. It gave off these super creepy vibes, so I just had to try it," I reply while trying to force a smile.

Makiri-sensei sinks into deep thought for a bit, then says, "I... If I'm being honest, I'm a little intrigued by the game myself. If you don't mind, could you

show me what the gameplay is like?”

Her face is tinged red, and understandably so. This isn’t exactly something a teacher would normally request from one of her students.

“Of course I can.”

“That’s... That’s a relief. Why don’t we head somewhere nearby so we can look things over there?”

I nod wordlessly.



We find a family restaurant nearby with roomy, comfortable seats and order unlimited drinks. I busy myself with purchasing the game using my mobile wallet and downloading it on my phone. Then Makiri-sensei and I choose a few drinks for ourselves.

“Okay, I’m gonna start the game now,” I announce. I place myself in front of Makiri-sensei and turn my phone toward her so she can see the screen better.

She squints her eyes slightly and says, “It’s still a little hard to see the screen.”

With that, she stands up and sits right next to me, bringing over a faint scent of sweet perfume.

“I-Is something wrong?” she asks.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just thinking about how you came to sit next to me, and, well...”

“What?! Well, I-I simply wanted to...” she trails off, frantically shaking her beet-red head.

“You must be *really* invested in this game if you’re willing to sit this close to me. Are you thinking of buying it if it looks good?”

“I suppose so,” she mumbles with a poker face. Huh? Where did all that enthusiasm go? What happened?

At any rate, I start playing the game. From the very beginning, the game text, dialogue, and terminology seems like it’s been written by a bombastic, edgy teenager. The first boss I encounter is some sort of monster that looks like a

pouch. Unfortunately, its hitboxes barely make any sense, and its HP bar is so janky and badly implemented that it doesn't budge no matter how many times I hit the damn thing.

After what feels like an eternity, something finally happens.

"I'm dead. Game over," I grumble, tired and frustrated with the game. Oh well, at least it lived up to my expectations. After I get another game over to add to the death count, I close the game. "So how was it, Sensei?"

I look up over at her, and she raises her head at the same time. Our eyes lock, and I realize how embarrassingly close our faces are to each other. Talk about a sticky situation. I'm basically shitting myself right now, but Makiri-sensei seems to be just as calm as ever.

"I guess that after watching you play it, I'll pass on buying it myself. Still, I really enjoyed spending the morning with you," she says with a soothing smile.

"Well, I suppose that's at least *one* positive I got from wasting my money on this game."

"You '*suppose*'?! *Hmph!*" she exclaims, crossing her arms with a displeased expression.

Wait, why's she so mad all of a sudden? Can someone tell me what's going on?



I ended up continuing to play the game until I beat it. Rough edges aside, I actually enjoyed it. I told Makiri-sensei all about it, but—weirdly enough—she didn't seem very enthusiastic about the game anymore.

Extra Story Two

"Generational" Gap

Touka and I are currently on a date when a question pops into my mind.

“Say, Touka, what’s with the ‘ecks-dee’ thing you always use when we text?”

She whirls back around and looks at me as if I’m an alien or I’ve suddenly sprouted a third head. “Damn, Senpai, you’re asking about that *now*? What year is it again? Is this, like, the so-called ‘generational gap’ everyone’s losing their minds over all the time?”

“You do know we’re only one year apart, right?” I point out.

She completely ignores me and continues, “Anyways, you use ‘xD’ whenever you find something funny. If you look at it sideways, it makes a face. Look—the ‘x’ is supposed to be the closed eyes, and the ‘D’ is the laughing mouth. See? Oh yeah, it’s also, like, the hottest emote as of last year.”

“Whoa. You mean the most popular in Japan?”

“Yeah. There’s this thing called the ‘online expressions ranking,’ where they hold a poll every year about the most commonly used ones. Stuff like ‘xD’ and ‘lol’ are usually in the top five... for now, anyway.”

“‘El-oh-el’? What does that even mean?”

“It’s an acronym, dummy! It stands for ‘laughing out loud’—y’know, like the boomer version of ‘xD.’ C’mon, how did you not know *that* one?” she answers with a giggle.

I don’t get it. She’s acting like I’m supposed to know all these random terms. Am I out of touch? No, it’s the children who are wrong.

“You’ve completely lost me now,” I reply. “What even is a ‘boomer,’ anyway?”

“Hahaha! Oh my god, talk about a total boomer question! You seriously crack

me up!”

Damn. Considering the way she was looking at me before, maybe I really *am* one of these “boomers.” I must seriously be out of the loop when it comes to how the youth communicate with each other and stuff.

“*Ahem!*” Touka interjects, clearing her throat after her laughing fit dies down. “So the thing is, I browse Chirper a little *too* much, which is why I’m always up to date with what expressions everyone is or isn’t using. I gotta admit, though, things like memes come and go pretty quickly nowadays—those that last more than a month or so can consider themselves lucky.”

“You’ve never talked like that around me, though.”

“I mean, I’d prefer it if you could actually understand what I’m saying, Senpai! Hahahaha!”

“Well, I appreciate the thought,” I reply.

I’d definitely have a hard time deciphering her if she used her strange internet lingo all the time, so I’m grateful she keeps me in mind. Still, the term she called me—“boomer”—is bothering me, for some reason. Is it supposed to be some sort of insult?

“Actually, there’s this one expression I’ve been thinking about recently,” she mentions.

“What is it?” I ask.

She fidgets nervously, looks me in the eyes, and mumbles, “I-I’m always thinking about how you’re my... my little pogchamp, y’know?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask.

She looks away in response, trying her best to hide her flushed face. Wait, is it something embarrassing? Now I’m even more curious.

“I-I’d rather not explain it to you. It’s too embarrassing. You can look it up once you get back to your place, okay?”



Back at my place, I do as I’m told. I type, “What does it mean to be someone’s

little pogchamp?" into the search bar and press enter.

Well, I'm enlightened now, but no less embarrassed than Touka was when she told me. No wonder she was so red.

Extra Story Three

Personality Test

I find myself speaking to Kana one day when she brings up a topic we've never touched upon before.

"I've been doing a lot of these online personality tests lately," she says.

"Oh, really? Did you find any cool ones?"

She nods. "Okay, here's a question I found pretty interesting: You find yourself on a train, and you and two other people are taking up the priority seating. At the next stop, several new passengers get on. One of them is an old man with a cane—he looks like he's having a hard time walking—and a pregnant woman. You think to yourself that you should give up your seat, but to whom? This is under the assumption that the two people next to you haven't noticed these two, by the way."

Hm, interesting. I'll give it some thought. I ask, "Is this supposed to be some sort of morality test?"

"It's part of a personality test!" she replies.

I pause for further consideration before I reply, "Well, if this were a real situation, the other two guys in the priority seats would've bolted the moment I sat down next to them. So that means both the old man and the pregnant woman would be able to sit down anyway. Okay, yeah. That's my answer."

"Yuuji-kun, this isn't some IQ test. It's to figure out your personality," Kana answers with a forced smile. It's clear that she's pretty pissed by my response.

"What's this supposed to determine, anyway?"

"Well, supposedly you can figure out the reaction of the other person who needed the seat, but didn't get it."

"Wait, what? Wasn't this a personality test?" I ask, glaring at her in suspicion.

It seems like she wants to say something, though, so I bite my tongue and let her continue.

“Anyway, let’s move on to the next question. This one’s part of a special personality test I made up! Okay, so when you think of the word ‘female friends,’ who immediately comes to mind?”

Hm... I guess it would be Kana. Touka’s supposed to be my girlfriend, and Makiri-sensei is more like someone who I respect and feel indebted to. I wouldn’t exactly call them my “friends,” per se.

“You,” I reply.

“Hah!” she shouts. “*Ahem!* Well, the results are in for ‘Yuuji-kun’s Special Personality Test.’”

“Huh? The what now?”

“My quiz has been specially designed to reveal the girl you *really* have feelings for deep down in your heart! The first one who springs to mind—me, in your case—is your ideal partner, which makes us 100% compatible! Sooo... if we end up dating, we’ll have a long and prosperous life together! We’ll settle down, get married, and who knows what else.”

I’m taken aback for a second, but I quickly see through her little ruse. “At this point, you’re just doing the equivalent of palm readings,” I point out.

“I’m not going to sit around and accept this for much longer,” she grumbles.

“What do you mean?”

She glues herself to me, looks straight into my eyes, and declares, “Don’t think I’ll be content with just being your friend forever.”

“You never took any online personality tests, did you?”

She giggles, but doesn’t answer me.

It’s kind of weird that she’d make this whole story up just to try to flirt with me or say her piece. Then again, seeing her try this hard at something is pretty respectable, and I can’t help but feel a little embarrassed by it.

Extra Story Four

The Spooky Mansion

Touka decided one summer day that she really wanted to try out one of those haunted house experiences. We knew of one that was set up at a nearby mall, so we agreed to go there on a date.

“Welcome to the *Spooooky* Mansion. Please make yourselves comfortable, and feel free to explore to your heart’s content.”

“Damn, they really nailed it with the atmosphere! I think it might actually beat you in terms of scariness... almost,” Touka teases.

“Not funny, Touka.”

We’re led further in through winding corridors by staff members. They’re all dressed up as butlers and maids, which adds a lot to the overall mood. The setting, ambient music, and random eerie sounds all give off a sense of dread, but I’m not feeling all that creeped out yet—I’m aware that this is just made-up, after all.

“Eeeek! I’m *soooo* scared, Senpaaaai!” Touka jokes. It’s pretty obvious by her tone that she isn’t even remotely scared, either. She’s just been in a teasing mood all day.

“You’re clearly not,” I point out.

“I’m actually legit terrible with ghosts and stuff, Senpai. I’m basically pissing myself over here. See?”

Sigh. Whatever. I’m just gonna get through this and do my best to ignore her for however long we’re here for.



There were a couple of cool, creepy gimmicks after that, but it feels like it went by way too quickly. After a few more jumpscares, we eventually return to

the beginning of the attraction.

“Welcome back, visitors. Oh my, it appears as though you’ve both been possessed by a ghost. We’ll have to perform an exorcism!” the butler waiting at the entrance shouts in a dramatic tone the moment he spots us.

We’re led to a room containing a row of coffins, and Touka and I are promptly stuffed inside a couple of them. Damn, this is some pretty elaborate stuff. I know it’s part of the experience, but these guys really went all out.

The coffin’s lid suddenly slams itself shut, and the whole thing starts to shake like crazy. Okay, I won’t lie—I’m feeling a little scared now. I squeeze my eyes shut until the coffin settles down. When I open my eyes, I feel an uncomfortable sensation, like I’m being watched. I look around and suddenly see a pair of red eyes staring back at me. To stop myself from shitting my pants, I remind myself over and over again that it’s just a woman in a costume.

“Oh damn,” the woman gasps, which snaps me back to reality. I guess when our eyes met, she was the one who ended up getting frightened instead. I can’t believe I’m the one who ended up freaking a staff member out... How the tables have turned.

I hear Touka’s piercing scream from the coffin beside me. I guess I should get out and check in on her.



“Uhh... are you okay, Touka? You look pale. Was that a little too scary?” I ask. I’m kinda worried about her, because she hasn’t said a word since we left the haunted house.

“I’m just kinda mad, that’s all. I wanted you to be around to protect me from the ghosts and all that, but we totally ended up getting separated. So, yeah, there went my plan.”

“I knew you were a good person, but I didn’t know you cared *this* much about me,” I reply in genuine surprise.

She takes a deep breath and says, “I wish we could’ve spent that bit in the coffin holding hands, at least. That way, it wouldn’t have been scary at all, right?”

With that, she weaves her fingers between mine and looks up at me.

“Heh, you really are a good person, Touka.”

She flashes a smile in return. There’s the Touka I know.

Extra Story Five

The Perfect Hangout? Another Perspective: Touka and Kana

Yuuji-senpai, Hasaki-senpai, my shitty brother, and I have all ended up at a karaoke place. Hasaki-senpai is being freaking annoying as usual, and as we start to bicker, my brother decides to turn tail and run. “Hey, I’m going to go get some drinks. Do you girls want anything?”

Hasaki-senpai and I end up shouting that we want ice tea at the exact same time. Ugh.

Yuuji-senpai and my brother duck out of the room. Well, what do I do now that I’m stuck here waiting with this broad?

“I guess I’ll pick out a few songs I can sing with Yuuji-senpai. You stay over there and try not to be a pest, ‘mkay?” I instruct.

“Would you stop talking to me like that? I swear, you make it sound like I skipped a shower or something... which I didn’t, by the way. And just for your information, my love for him is way stronger than yours will ever be,” the harpy known as Hasaki-senpai replies. She looks away with reddened cheeks.

I can’t really think of a good reply, so the room falls silent. I mean, she *is* right, in a way. In the end, our relationship is nothing more than an arrangement. Even if *my* feelings toward Senpai are real, I have no idea what he thinks of me.

“Anywaaays!” I speak up, breaking the silence. “Time to make a setlist for the two of us!”

“Um, excuse me, but I doubt you’ll have time to do that—I’ll be the one singing with him, okay?!”

“Tch...” I click my tongue in annoyance.

“It’s true that you’re his girlfriend, but I’m sure he’d agree to sing with me too

if I asked him! He's not your property!"

I can feel my expression darken at her words. *Sigh*. As much as it hurts, she's not wrong. I wish we were a real item; I'm sick of all this pretending. I'm pretty sure he doesn't have any romantic feelings toward me, though... or at least, none that I've been able to notice. Maybe if I was his *real* girlfriend, I'd have some ground to stand on when I nag him about not getting mushy with other girls. But with how things are, I'm pretty powerless. And what's next? First, she'll ask him to sing or hang out, but who knows where that'll lead?

"I'm really sorry about this, Touka-chan. I just want you to know how serious I am about this," Hasaki-senpai says as she plucks the control pad out of my hand. "Oh! Nevermind what I said before. This one sounds perfect for you two."

The song she's pointing out is "Cheating on You" by Charlie Booth. Okay, that's it—this bitch has crossed the line!

"You wanna take this outside? Because I totally wouldn't mind knocking your teeth out right about now," I growl.

Kana answers by giggling. "There you go again. As soon as things get competitive, you always resort to violence."

Sometimes, I wish I was better at reading people. Maybe she can already tell that our relationship is fake? I can't think of any reason she would... but what if she does? Still, I guess this is her insane way of trying to connect with me.

"Okay, let's do that," I reply.

"Wait, you're actually going to sing that with him? Fine by me, I suppose. You do you," she says.

"Not that, you little—!" I snap back, but swiftly cut myself off. "What I *meant* to say is that we should battle it out to see who'll fit better with Senpai! But I'm only going along with it because you're being an annoying ass, okay?!"

"Hahaha! You're so cute whenever you get all worked up like this. I bet that's one of the reasons Yuuji-kun finds you so charming as well. I'm warning you, though—I'm not going to lose!"

"Oh, would you just shut your fat mouth already?" I grumble. I'm feeling a

little awkward after her compliment, so I'm not really sure what else to say.

I search through the song catalog and find the perfect one—it's the opening theme to an anime we used to watch a lot together when we were kids.



And, well... everyone knows how the rest of the day went.

“Easy: Yuuji and I will sing together first since I'm already his best partner!”

“Sure. Let's hit the stage, partner.”

Hasaki-senpai and I remained silent as we watched Yuuji-senpai and my brother having the time of their lives singing together. Given the fact that we were both constantly at each other's throats to be his first choice, it goes without saying that we wanted the ground to swallow us whole right then and there.

Extra Story Six

The Perfect Hangout? Another Perspective 2: My Friend Ike and I

Ike, Touka, Kana, and I decided to hang out at a karaoke spot for the rest of the day.

Ike and I went to the drink bar to get away from Touka and Kana's constant bickering. Plus, they'd been belittling Ike.

Once we'd returned with the drinks, though, we found them singing together. It was refreshing to see, don't get me wrong, but it was also kind of unsettling.

Ike teased them, and they both reacted almost immediately, trying to find any excuse for their actions. They claimed that they were trying to figure out "who's better suited to be my singing partner." Uh, okay.

I still remember Ike laughing and shaking my shoulders as he proudly declared that we'd be the ones dueting together. He'd shut Touka and Kana down instantly, and they were none too pleased about his decision. As for me, I'd looked forward to singing with him more than anything else, so I instantly agreed to his proposal.

"Sure. Let's hit the stage, partner."

Touka and Kana weren't exactly the happiest about my decision, but it wasn't like they could have done anything about it.

And with that, Ike had handed me a mic, and we'd both went at it and sung our hearts out. Man, that'd been so much fun.



I still vividly remember it all.

Once the song had started, I'd felt the energy flow through me. It was as if Ike's enthusiasm had been transferred over to me, allowing me to give it my all.

And as we sang, I found my body moving on its own, my hips swaying to the beat. It felt like my body no longer belonged to me. I busted out moves from a musical program I'd watched on TV ages ago, recalling the movements of the idols on screen as they danced and sang to popular songs.

"Whoa, what the hell's going on with these two?" Touka asked, staring at us with a perplexed expression.

"I don't know, but damn..." Kana murmured, looking equally shocked by our performance.

Ike—my partner in crime—and I continued to belt at the top of our lungs and dance like crazy. When the bass dropped, everything reached a climax!

"They're literally doing the same choreography..."

"Are you sure they didn't practice this song beforehand?"

Kana and Touka—who were pretty much the equivalent of our "excited fangirl" audience—commented on our moves. Although their deliveries were rather cold and detached, I didn't let their remarks bother me.

I kept at it until I noticed that the song was about to end. I didn't want that raging moment of ecstasy to ever finish—I would've loved it if it had continued for an eternity, and I'm sure that Ike felt the same way. Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end. Rather than feeling discouraged by the thought, I decided that I needed to put everything into the final burst. Ike joined me, our lungs burning and our legs starting to give out.

Once the song had finished, I looked at Ike, and we both shook our incredibly sweaty hands. We had been victorious in the battle against all odds.



It's now the day after the hangout, and I'm with Kana, Touka, and Ike again. They're commenting on our performance yesterday, but their eyes look devoid of all life—as if reminiscing about it has them feeling empty inside.

"Honestly, Senpai, that wasn't exactly a stellar performance," Touka remarks in a cold, detached voice.

"Uhh, some parts were fine, I guess? I mean it! I think you were *okay*... just

not always, um...” Kana chimes in icily.

“Oh come on, girls. I wasn’t being myself because I was so pumped up, you know?! Singing with Ike is just an experience. Seriously,” I defend myself.

“Yeah, and that’s what pisses me off the most,” Touka quickly retorts.

“Maybe we should’ve nagged Haruma instead of Yuuji-kun,” Kana says.

These fools. Must we always be so fearful of new experiences? They just don’t get it.

“Well, *personally*, I had a lot of fun,” Ike adds. “I hope we can hit up the karaoke place again another day—hopefully sooner rather than later!”

“Of course, man! Same here!” I reply.

Man, that was a blast. I legitimately can’t wait to perform another duet with my buddy.

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