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SHIMESABA

Illustration by booota

HIGEHIRO

After Being Rejected, I Shaved
and Took in a High School Runaway




Yoshida

A twenty-six-year-old office worker.

“Can we...
stay together
just a little
longer?”

Sayu

A high school runaway. Yoshida took her in, and she now lives with him.



*"You're
so crap
at lying,
Yoshi."*

Asami Yuuki

Sayu's senior from
her part-time job.
A *gyaru* girl.



“I’m saying
I want to
go to your
place,
Yoshida.”

Airi Gotou

Yoshida’s superior and
the object of his one-sided
affections for the past
five years.

c o n t e n t s

Yuzuha Mishima

A new office worker being mentored by Yoshida.



“I
love
how you
go out
of your
way to
teach me
things
like this,
Mr.
Yoshida!”

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Afterword

HIGEHIRO

*After Being Rejected, I Shaved
and Took in a High School Runaway*

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ILLUSTRATION BY

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After Being Rejected, I Shaved and Took in a High School Runaway

Shimesaba

Translation by Marcus Shauer (MediBang Inc.)

Cover art by booota

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Yen Newsletter

Chapter 1 Rain

A smartphone dropped to my feet with a loud *thunk*.

The sound of it hitting the floor made the woman sitting beside me, dressed in a suit, jerk her shoulders in surprise.

I immediately picked up the smartphone and handed it to her.

“Oh, thank you.”

“It’s fine... If you’re sleepy, you should put your phone in your bag.”

She smiled sheepishly at my response and, with a nod, put her smartphone away in her bag before hunching over slightly and closing her eyes again.

With that, our abrupt conversation came to an end, and once again I could hear only the rumbling of the air conditioner and the sound of the train clattering down the rails.

Sometimes, when the train sways my body, it puts me in an odd mood.

Dozens of strangers are crowded together in this tiny space, sitting side by side, and we share this time together with no particular interest in one another. We pay no mind at all to what sort of person might be sitting next to us.

We don’t know each other, and yet we gather here. We board the train at some station, spend a moment in one another’s presence, and get off somewhere else with no idea of where our fellow passengers are headed.

This is all perfectly normal, but when I really think about it, it leaves me with an indescribable feeling.

If I knew everyone on this train, would I care about who was getting off where or what their destinations were?

I was continuing to ponder this subject, swaying along with the train, when a man in street clothes standing in front of me quietly muttered, “Oh... It’s raining.”

“Huh?”

I had spoken before I could catch myself, and with a small cough, I also turned around to look out the window behind me.

Raindrops had started pattering against the window.

I held back a frustrated click of my tongue. True, the sky had been overcast all afternoon, so I’d been expecting some rainfall, but I wished it would have waited until I was home.

I checked the weather forecast on my phone every morning, and if it looked like rain, I would pack a folding umbrella in my bag. Today of all days, however, I’d overslept and hadn’t looked.

I couldn’t risk getting my suit wet, so if the rain didn’t ease up by the time I reached my local station, I’d have no choice but to buy a plastic umbrella.

I glanced up and saw the man in street clothes was also scowling out the window.

I wondered if he had forgotten his umbrella, too. Would he buy one when he reached his station? Or would he get wet on his way home? Was someone waiting for him there? I hoped he had someone to welcome him home. They could bring him a towel and keep him from catching a cold.

At that point, I had to laugh at myself.

This was all in my imagination. I didn’t know the first thing about this man.

I let a breath out through my nose. It was a bad habit of mine to get wrapped up in every strange thought that occurred to me.

...Still.

I looked back out the window and noted the rain growing heavier.

Absently, I found myself wishing that no one on the train would catch a cold.



“Whoa... How can it be raining this hard?”

When I arrived at my station, the sound of pouring water was so loud I almost felt like I was behind a waterfall. It was coming down in buckets.

“Ugh.”

I stopped by the small convenience store attached to the station, but they’d already sold out of umbrellas.

“Oh well. I guess everyone else needed one, too...”

I ventured out to the edge of the roofed area to check if the rain had let up at all, but it was still intense. It was lashing against the ground with such force that each droplet was bouncing back up with a noisy splash.

I was staring at the sky, unsure whether to stand there and wait for it to die down or sprint to the taxi stop, and so I was slow to notice the person approaching me.

“Is something the matter?”

“Wha—!”

At the sudden voice, I pulled my gaze back from the sky and found a uniform-clad high school girl standing in front of me, holding an open umbrella.

“This rain’s really something.”

“Y-yeah...”

“You left your umbrella at home, so I came by to see if you were all right.”

“Oh.”

I saw that in addition to the umbrella open in her right hand, she held the black one I always used in her left.

“Don’t you have something to say to me?”

As she spoke, the corners of her mouth curved upward, and she passed me the umbrella in her left hand.

This kid... She was getting pretty cheeky.

*T*sking internally, I took the offered umbrella.

“Thanks, Sayu.”

“Heh, that’ll do.”

She nodded with a self-satisfied expression that quickly gave way to a silly grin.

“Let’s go home. Dinner’s ready.”

“...Yeah.”

I opened my umbrella and stepped out from beneath the roof of the station, at which point I was instantly met with the noisy pattering of heavy raindrops striking the material over my head.

If Sayu hadn’t come to pick me up, I would’ve had to walk in this, I thought with a shiver.

Glancing at her as she walked beside me, I felt something deep in my heart: Sure enough, this roommate of mine was astonishingly thoughtful.

I’d first met Sayu on my way home the day I was shot down by my crush of several years. I had been extremely drunk.

For reasons still unknown, Sayu had run away from her home in Hokkaido and made it all the way here to Tokyo, staying in the homes of various men as she traveled.

What’s more, she had used the worst means possible to do so—she would let those men use her body as compensation for her stay.

She had tried the same approach with me, but I don’t have an iota of interest in high school girls. Still, I wasn’t going to just toss her out on the street, so I let her stay with me on the condition that she would do all the housework. And yet...

“I figured you’d be a bit tired, since it’s the weekend, so I made it a little heartier.”

“Oh, makes sense...”

I watched Sayu, a ladle gripped in one hand, put the pot of miso soup back on the burner. She looked strangely in her element, and it left me at a loss for

words.

This girl, with her youthful beauty, thoughtfulness, and skill, was supposed to be attending high school in Hokkaido.

I frequently had my doubts as to just what she was doing here, staying with a man she wasn't related to, but when I thought about how much I was relying on her, there was nothing I could say.

And so once again, we found ourselves finishing up the day, our dependence on each other just as strong as ever.

It was a complicated situation, and yet at the same time, it felt comfortable.

As I took a pensive sip of miso soup, she peered at me, and our eyes met. It wasn't uncommon for this to happen during meals, but there was something different about her gaze this time. She seemed more timid.

"...What is it? Something wrong?" I asked.

Sayu, who had clearly been waiting for this question, began shifting her gaze conspicuously. Then, all of a sudden, she straightened up.

"Mr. Yoshida."

"Wh-what's with the sudden formality?"

Sayu's face, always relaxed with a lighthearted smile, had suddenly turned serious. I braced myself, expecting something terrible to happen.

Something like her cornering me in only her underwear.

When this girl made up her mind, there was no telling what she'd do.

As I sat, slightly on edge, Sayu lowered her head toward the floor and placed her hands together in front of her, bowing deeply.

"Please let me get a part-time job."

My mouth hung open for a moment.

But soon, I exhaled a puff of relief.

"So that's all it was."

"What do you mean, *that's all*?!"

“No problem.”

“What do you mean, *no problem*?! ...Wait. Are you sure?”

“I said *no problem*, didn’t I?”

“But you barely thought about it...”

Seeing Sayu straighten up and gape at me, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Was it that serious a request?”

“It’s... It’s just that we’d agreed I’d do the housework for now.”

At her reply, my eyes naturally drifted toward the room where I slept.

There wasn’t a speck of dust anywhere. The bed I’d left in a mess when I got up had been tidied, and all the clothes that would’ve been strewn about if I was still living alone had been neatly put away in the closet.

To be honest, she did the housework to such a high level of perfection, you could almost say she took it a step too far.

And besides, although I was impressed with her work, it also made one thing obvious to me—just how small my place was.

If I lived in a giant mansion with a bunch of rooms, it would be an entirely different story, but doing chores every day in a place this size, it was only natural you’d start to run out of things to do. The only laundry the two of us generated on a daily basis was underwear. To be honest, using the washing machine every day for so few clothes was a waste of water. Similarly, I appreciated her vacuuming each day, and the more frequently she did so, the less dust accumulated. But there was no need to clean the same spots over and over with such attention, and doing the chores so regularly meant less work was needed each day.

“It’s not like there’s a ton of housework every day, right? I can tell you’ve been having a tough time finding things to do recently.”

“Ugh... You caught me.”

“It was really obvious.”

When she wasn’t doing chores, all Sayu had to amuse herself with were the

books and comics I had bought her a while back and her smartphone for surfing the web.

I had been thinking it was about time for her to get a job, so it was pretty convenient that she had brought it up first.

“B-but...I might fall a little behind with the housework.”

“That’s still a hundred times better than if I had to do it myself.”

Sayu scratched the back of her neck shyly, then gave a simple smile and muttered, “Thanks.”

Recently, Sayu’s needless reservations toward me had begun to fade, and I noticed she was thanking me for things more often. From my perspective, this was great news.

“Do you have your eye on anywhere in particular?”

“Yep. I was thinking about the convenience store near here.”

“Oh yeah... Family Market.”

“That’s the one.”

Family Market was a convenience store less than five minutes away. I appreciated the short distance, which would make it easier to handle any problems that might arise.

However, having never worked any part-time jobs as a high schooler myself, I still had one question.

“Don’t high schoolers need their parents’ permission to get a job?”

“Uh, I don’t think so. Though it might be different if the job is dangerous enough to put your life at risk.”

“Oh, okay. So you don’t need a signature or anything?”

“Probably not.”

I let out a small sigh of relief. If she was right, then there wouldn’t be any problems. If she did need a guardian’s permission for anything, I’d probably have to play the part. And since that would almost certainly be a crime, I wouldn’t be able to grant her permission for the job.

“Will you go for an interview soon, then?”

“Yep, I will.”

“Then we’d better buy some clothes for it.”

“Uh, isn’t my uniform good enough?” Sayu asked, as if it was the clear choice.

I frowned in response. “Obviously not. Your uniform is from Asahikawa Whatchamacallit High School, isn’t it?”

“Well, sure, but they won’t know that.”

“It’d be pretty easy to find out. Plus, they’ll immediately know it’s not a local school. If they start questioning where you’ve come from, it’ll be a mess.”

“Oh, I guess you’re right.” Sayu groaned and smiled wryly.

“My school uniform isn’t much help in these kinds of situations, huh?”

I shrugged and agreed.

To my way of thinking, school uniforms served as a kind of proof of status. Like a “new driver” sticker on a car, the holder could expect a certain amount of leniency, along with protection. It was a roundabout way of indicating you couldn’t take responsibility for yourself.

I remember finding this extremely annoying when I was in high school, but these days it seemed natural to me that minors should be legally protected from danger at the expense of some of their freedom.

“Do you hate your uniform, then?”

I had no idea why I asked her that. The words just spilled out of my mouth.

Maybe it was because this exchange had reminded me how much I’d despised my uniform when I was a high schooler.

Sayu blinked with surprise before quickly shaking her head.

“Nope. I love my uniform. After all, this is the only time I’ll ever be able to wear it.”

To be honest, that wasn’t the answer I was expecting.

Though I didn’t know her reasons, this was a girl who’d abandoned her life as

a student to run away to a city hundreds of miles away, all on her own. I'd just assumed she must hold some resentment for her uniform, too.

"I mean, it helps you tell someone's status, doesn't it? If you see someone in a uniform, you can work out whether they're a middle schooler or a high schooler."

"Well, that's true."

Sayu snickered and pinched the hem of her skirt.

"Middle school teachers are pretty strict, so students all wear their skirts below their knees. Even the rebellious ones only raise theirs a little above the knee at most."

Sayu narrowed her eyes as she reeled off this information.

"High school freshmen wear their skirts a little short, but second-years wear theirs crazy short. And then there are third-years—they've settled down by that point, and they have entrance exams to focus on, so they go back to the standard length."

I kept my eyes locked on Sayu as she happily continued her monologue.

Why would a kid like this, who enjoyed talking about student life so much, abandon it and come all the way here? Sayu, unable to hear my thoughts, suddenly gazed up at me.

"High school girls' uniforms might all look the same, but they're actually completely different."

"What do you mean? Like, their designs?"

"No. Hmm, how do I put this?"

Sayu rested her chin on her hand and hummed in thought.

"Working adults wear suits, right? And they all wear them the same way."

"Yeah, true. We have to consider rules and etiquette."

"Right, right. But with uniforms, they differ depending on the school, and students also have their own way of styling them. Like..."

Sayu paused for a moment and flashed me a wide grin.

“You can sort of tell what kind of person someone is just from the way they wear their uniform,” Sayu said. She seemed to be enjoying herself immensely.

To tell the truth, I didn’t really get what she was talking about or why she found it so interesting.

However, I did find Sayu’s enthusiasm as she spoke a little endearing.

“Well, I guess nobody’s gonna be like, ‘Oh, that’s Yoshida from such-and-such IT company!’ when they see me wearing my suit.”

“Yeah! That’s exactly my point!” Sayu nodded happily and smiled.

Then she exclaimed, “Oh!” as if she’d had a sudden realization. “Your beard!”

I furrowed my brow and cocked my head in confusion.

“What about my beard?”

“I just realized, when you miss spots shaving, it’s like a uniform.”

“Huh...?” I frowned in confusion, unable to see what she was getting at.

Sayu snickered in response, her shoulders shaking. “When I look at you in your work clothes, Mr. Yoshida, all I see is some plain old guy in a suit.”

“No need to add *old* in there.”

“But when you miss some spots shaving, it’s like, ‘Oh, he’s the kind of old guy who can’t shave his beard right!’”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I smiled wryly, to which Sayu murmured, “You still don’t get it,” before scratching the back of her neck. “Your beard lets me see a little bit of who you are. Just like how you can kind of imagine who a girl is based on how she wears her uniform.”



“...Hmm, I don’t really get it.”

I shook my head, and Sayu shrugged in disappointment. Seeming to decide that no further explanation would help get her point across, she took a deep breath, looked toward the floor, and continued to speak.

“Well, anyway... I guess my uniform’s a no-go, huh...?”

“Yeah... So—”

“Okay, then,” Sayu interrupted, staring straight at me. “I’ll get you something in return once I have my first paycheck, so...could you buy me some clothes to go out in?”

I felt Sayu’s request push the words back into my throat. Instead, I let out a silent breath, unsure what to say.

I was simply surprised.

“No?” she pressed.

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, to which Sayu cocked her head as if asking for confirmation. I frantically shook my head from side to side.

“Uh, no... Of course it’s fine. Of course.”

“What’s got you tongue-tied?”

“Well, it’s just...”

When Sayu first arrived, she had been so reserved that she wouldn’t rely on me for anything. Recently, she’d started to give in a little, which I considered a positive development.

I just hadn’t realized how pleased I’d be when she finally asked for something she needed of her own accord like this.

Unable to hold back a smile, I put a hand over my face to hide my expression and nodded.

“I was just thinking how unusual it is for you to come out and ask something of me.”

When she heard this, Sayu averted her gaze, her face reddening slightly.

“I just...” After a moment’s hesitation, Sayu continued. “Don’t you prefer it this way, Mr. Yoshida?”

This statement left me speechless yet again. A breath spontaneously escaped from deep within my throat. “Haah.”

Though I tried to fight it, I couldn’t keep the smile from my face. “You know me pretty well, I guess.”

Sayu gave me a goofy grin in response, adding, “Well, yeah.”

Much as I’d come to understand Sayu little by little, she’d come to understand me, as well. That’s all it was, and yet strangely, my heart swelled at the thought.

“Okay, so why don’t we go shopping now?” I asked.

“What, now?! So soon?”

“If you wanna start working right away, you’re gonna need those clothes. C’mon, let’s hurry up and eat.”

“Uh, oh, okay...!”

I glanced at Sayu out of the corner of my eye as she picked up her chopsticks again and felt a relaxed smile come to my face.

And so my peculiar life with a high school girl named Sayu drifted on, changing little by little.

Chapter 2 Senior

“A middle school graduate! For real?”

My senior’s hand froze as she was setting a sandwich on the shelf, and she turned to look at me, wide-eyed.

“Yes.”

“A middle school graduate?! No way! Whoa! That’s killer! You’re so killer, Sasa!”

“Killer?”

“I mean, I think that’s pretty cool, working straight after graduating middle school. I can tell you’ve got spirit. Oh, after you move the old ones forward, put the newer ones in behind them, ’kay?”

“Alright.”

Her name was Asami Yuuki, and she was my senior at the convenience store where I’d just started working.

She had blond hair and golden-brown skin. At a glance, it looked like she’d been to a tanning salon. In contrast to this bold style, her makeup was light, and her eyes were narrow and sharp, making her look very chic.

Although I had been overwhelmed by her appearance and attitude when we first met, she’d been very diligent in teaching me the job, and most importantly, she was easy to talk to.

“Oh yeah, why are you being so formal? That’s mad funny. We’re the same age, right?”

“Well, yes, but you’ve been working here longer than I have, Miss Yuuki.”

“No biggie. And just call me Asami!”



“Okay... Uh, sure.”

I nodded, and the corners of Asami’s mouth curved into a smile. Then she went back to filling the shelf with sandwiches.

“So why didn’t you go to high school? Was there, like, something else you wanted to do?”

“Uhhh, no, um... Just because?”

“Just because, huh? Well, I guess that’s valid.”

As she continued to teach me the basics of the job, Asami asked me a number of questions about myself, and did so with a curious degree of enthusiasm. It didn’t seem like she was desperate to know more about me, but at the same time, she didn’t seem to be asking simply to make conversation. It was as if she was interested but keeping it casual, with no intention of prying. That was how it felt.

The thing about only graduating middle school was a lie.

It would be far too troublesome to explain to her that I had been attending high school, but left and moved all the way here by myself. And besides, I was worried about the annoying Q&A session that would follow if I were to tell her the truth. However, judging by Asami’s reaction to my story about only graduating middle school—an unbelievably risky choice in this day and age—I thought it was possible she wouldn’t have said anything even if I’d been honest.

“We follow the same rule for pretty much everything: move the old things forward and put the new ones in the back. Simple, right? Well, we have to log the products as shelved before we put them out, but you can get to that after you’ve learned the rest, okey dokey?”

“Gotcha.”

This was the first time I had ever heard a high school girl use the phrase *okey dokey*. I couldn’t help but smirk a little as I answered, though she didn’t seem to notice.

That’s right, Asami was seventeen, just like me. As you might guess from her appearance and the way she spoke, she was a stereotypical follower of the

gyaru subculture—outgoing and into a special style of fashion.

“So, Sasa. Whereabouts do you live?”

I wished she’d stop calling me Sasa, because it kept making me want to laugh.

“About a five-minute walk from here.”

“Oh, I’m the same! Maybe we live super close to each other.”

“My home’s near the station.”

“Ahhh, you’re station-side. I’m the opposite.”

Asami scratched her head and gave a small sigh.

“I’m about five minutes from here, heading away from the station. Oh, but five plus five makes ten, so that means it’s only a ten-minute walk to your place! It’s mad funny we’re so close!”

“Mad funny?”

I gave a vague response, sensing that the conversation was taking an uncomfortable turn.

And sure enough, Asami’s next line was exactly what I’d expected.

“In that case, I’ll come hang out at your place sometime.”

Of course.

It was exactly like her to say “I’ll come hang out” rather than “Can I come over?”

I immediately put on an inoffensive smile and waved my hand in front of my face.

“Hmm, I dunno. I’m not sure what the person I live with would say about that.”

“Huh? The person you live with?” Asami’s eyebrows perked up. “Doesn’t sound like they’re a family member. Do you, like, live with your boyfriend?”

“No, not my boyfriend.”

“So you’re saying this person isn’t a family member, or your boyfriend?”

She was asking one question after another.

As I was struggling to come up with an answer, I suddenly recalled the words of a man I'd stayed with some time ago.

"When you hide something, hide only the thing you most want to keep secret and be open with everything else. You have to focus on the most dangerous land mine or else you'll set off the whole field, no matter how careful you are."

He was an odd guy who had managed to date seven women at the same time without any of them finding out. His cell phone would ring countless times a day, and every call he got would be from a different woman. He'd say things like, *"I really like you,"* and, *"You're the love of my life,"* into the receiver, but I noticed that when he made moves on me, he'd only ever call me *"cute."* I remember thinking to myself, *It's true. He really doesn't tell unnecessary lies.*

"We're not blood related, but he's like my big brother. I've known him since I was little."

"He's your brother, but not blood related? Isn't that kinda fishy?"

"Not at all. He's very kind."

"Maybe he's just pretending."

Of course, the part about knowing Mr. Yoshida since I was little was a lie. But if I'd tried to tell her he was related to me, the truth would definitely have come out eventually.

"He doesn't abuse you or anything, does he? Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine! He's never done anything like that!"

To be honest, his insistence on the subject infuriated me.

I found Asami's solid moral convictions surprising. To tell the truth, her appearance made her seem pretty loose, and I was a little taken aback by the gap between my image and reality. It made me wonder if I was the odd one for getting used to the idea of living alone with a man.

"Real talk, Sasa. You're pretty cute, y'know? Any normal guy would be turned on living with you. And he's not family, after all."

I thought so, too.

“Nah, I’m not so sure. There really hasn’t been any of that.”

“No, c’mon. He’s gotta just be holding back. I’ll bet he’s the type to spring on you one day out of nowhere.”

For some reason, Asami had zero trust in Mr. Yoshida, though she’d never even met him. Still, I knew very well what she was trying to tell me. I didn’t think my relationship with him was normal, either.

“Well, anyway, there’s some stuff going on in my life, so he’s letting me stay at his place.”

“Huh... And your folks haven’t said anything?” Asami asked, as if the thought had just occurred to her. She was now placing rice balls on the shelf.

Hearing the word *folks* sent a momentary shock through my body. But I quickly put on a smile and nodded. “My parents don’t really like to interfere in my life.”

As I answered, I turned to face Asami. She gave me a sidelong glance, and our eyes met.

The indifference I’d seen before was gone. Her gaze was piercing, as if she had something to say.

It startled me.

“Hmm, so they’re that sort, huh? Well, in that case, I guess it’s not so weird that you’re living with a stranger.”

Asami looked away from me and went back to putting rice balls on the shelf. That brief, tense moment had dissipated, returning us to the relaxed atmosphere from before.

What was that look she’d just given me?

I felt my heart beginning to race.

“Well, either way, I’m still coming over, Sasa,” Asami said bluntly, looking back at me. “I’ll make sure this brother of yours is on the up-and-up.”

“Uh, okay...”

I hadn't asked her to do that.

I gave her a strained smile, but Asami seemed dead set on visiting my place, and her words had a strange intensity that made it difficult to refuse.

"Today's fine, right?"

"...Huh?"

"We finish work at the same time, don't we? It's perfect."

"What? Today?"

I broke out in a cold sweat—this was way too sudden.

"Does your brother work? Or is he, like, unemployed?"

Were those the only two options? That seemed a little extreme.

"He works. Really hard, actually."

"So he's the kind who's not there when you get home?"

"That's him, yeah."

"Then I'll wait until he gets back."

Why was she the one making all the plans here? Why couldn't she ask, "Can I come over?" or "Can I wait for him?" I had some things I wanted to say to her about it, but I was too panicked to voice any of them.

How was I going to explain this to Mr. Yoshida?

To be honest, I wanted to tell her no, but considering the way the conversation had played out, I suspected it wouldn't be a good idea to refuse. It would be like acknowledging that my relationship with Mr. Yoshida was something I felt guilty about and needed to hide. Well, if that had actually been the case, I wouldn't mind at all. I would have simply asked her to please stay out of it. However, Mr. Yoshida and I were maintaining a respectable relationship, and although she was only my senior at a part-time job, I couldn't bear to insult Mr. Yoshida's character by letting her think otherwise.

After a little hesitation, I made my choice.

"Well, I guess you can come."

What a half-hearted response.

Asami nodded in acknowledgment, then gave me a thumbs-up.

“Leave it to me!”

What was I leaving to her, exactly?

I put on a strained smile and gave her a noncommittal nod.

Our shifts ended at six PM. Mr. Yoshida usually came home at around eight PM.

I would have to send him a message as soon as I finished work.

It was incredibly fortunate that Mr. Yoshida had bought me a cell phone.

Chapter 3 *Gyaru*

“Ugh.”

I had received a rare message from Sayu during work, and upon checking to see what it was about, the contents left me frowning.

It seems like my senior from work is going to come over.

I’m really sorry, but I couldn’t refuse.

She’ll probably be there until you get back.

Oh yeah, she’s a girl.

I let out a sigh.

I didn’t mind Sayu having someone over. I thought it was a good thing for her to make a friend. But how was I going to explain our relationship?

As I fretted over this, I received an additional message.

I explained to her that we’re not blood related but that you’re like a big brother from my neighborhood who’s looked after me since I was little.

“A big brother who looks after you, huh,” I muttered softly with a wry smile.

She may have always been calling me “*mister*” this or “*mister*” that, but when it came down to it, she had come up with a convincing lie. Of course, if she were to introduce me as her actual brother, I’d have to give a fake name and all the rest, which would be a lot of trouble. I was grateful she’d portrayed me as a neighbor she’d grown up with instead. That way, I wouldn’t have such a hard time making our stories line up.

In any event, she had said she couldn’t refuse, so there must be some reason why. And there wasn’t anything in the apartment I needed to hide.

Got it.

I sent a brief reply, then placed my phone on the desk. Raising my head back up to face my computer, I realized that Yuzuha Mishima, my subordinate, was standing right next to me. The sight of a person suddenly popping into my field of vision caused my shoulders to jolt on reflex.

“Whoa, you scared me! Say something next time!”

“You’ve got tunnel vision, don’t you, Mr. Yoshida?”

Mishima responded with a wry grin, and Hashimoto, seated next to me, snorted audibly.

“Got a message?” she asked. “Who from?”

“That’s not really any of your business. Anyway, do you need something?”

She looked dissatisfied with my answer for a moment but soon let out a small sigh and pointed to my work PC.

“I’ve uploaded the data you asked for to the server. Please take a look at it.”

“Oh, you’re pretty early today. Okay, I’ll get that done.”

“Much appreciated.”

I nodded and looked at Mishima. Tilting my head to the side, I encouraged her to continue, but was met with a blank look. Mishima tilted her head slightly, too. She seemed perplexed.

“Yes?”

“Uh, is that all?”

“Yes, that’s all.”

A low groan escaped my throat.

“Just email me about things like this. You don’t need to waste time coming over here.”

“Uh, really? But it seems kind of silly to send an email when you’re only a ten-second walk away, doesn’t it?”

“Emails leave a record, which is helpful if any issues come up.”

Mishima furrowed her brow. “What kind of attitude is that? You make it sound like you’re expecting problems.”

“You cause problems more often than not, I believe. And,” I added, “problems occur when you least expect them. So if you send an email telling me you’ve uploaded the data to the server, you’ve now established that the data was uploaded. That way, even if it gets lost, you won’t be at fault.”

After hearing my explanation, Mishima’s eyes widened. “Huhhh,” she said listlessly, her mouth agape. “So you gave me that advice for my own benefit.”

“It doesn’t just apply to you. I’m saying we should all take measures to make sure we aren’t held responsible for mistakes we didn’t make.”

“I love how you go out of your way to teach me things like this, Mr. Yoshida!”

Hearing this declaration, Hashimoto, who’d been working in silence, broke out into a laugh.

“She said she loves you, Yoshida.”

“Shut up! I just want to get her out of my hair already.”

“Wow, how mean! You know I couldn’t work under anyone but you, Mr. Yoshida!”

“You’ll never work, no matter who you’re under.”

Mishima laughed off my comment, but Hashimoto whispered, “Well, recently she’s been working a lot harder than before.”

He certainly wasn’t wrong. I could tell she was doing much more accurate work than she had in the past. Still, seeing her sluggish pace never failed to make me antsy.

Completely oblivious to my feelings, she puffed out her chest with pride as the corners of her mouth turned up into a smile.

“That’s because I can do anything I put my mind to.”

“Oh, really... Then why don’t you hurry back to your desk and start setting your mind to some work? You can begin by typing up that email. Better late than never.”

“Roger that!”



Mishima gave an exaggerated salute and headed back to her seat. I kept my eye on her until she sat down. Then, sighing, I turned to my own PC.

“Hey, Yoshida. Don’t you think you’re overdoing it a little with her?”

At Hashimoto’s sudden question, I cast him a sidelong glance, but he never once looked away from his PC as he continued to speak.

“If you ask me, people like her need to learn their lessons the hard way.”

“Yeah, I don’t disagree, but...”

“Then why not just leave her be?” Hashimoto stopped typing and glanced sideways at me. “Seems to me like you’re trying to help her out before she has a chance to mess up.”

“Not at all.”

“I don’t have a clue what you’re thinking, but that’s how it looks to me.”

Hashimoto, apparently having said all he wanted to say, went back to staring at his monitor and noisily clacking away at his keyboard.

“I teach her what I can. What’s so wrong about that...?” I asked quietly before returning to work myself.

I was pretty sure Hashimoto could hear me, but he stayed silent.

*

“Wow, he’s a boomer!” the blond girl exclaimed, pointing at me. She was dressed in *gyaru* fashion, and she was rude—no doubt about that.

At a loss for words, I shot a glance at Sayu, who was standing behind the other girl and shrugging. She gave me a subtle, apologetic bow from beyond the rude girl’s field of vision.

“Oh, but now that I’m taking a closer look, he’s actually kinda cute... He’s like...just got that boomer vibe. He’s got a good face, though—what a waste. Oh, I’m Asami, by the way. No need for formalities or anything. Nice to meetcha!”

“Uh, hey.”

She shot out a hand to greet me, so I gave a small nod and gripped it. The moment I did, the *gyaru* girl—or rather, Asami—gave me a wide-eyed stare.

“Whoa! Mr. Yoshida, your hands are friggin’ huge!”

“Uh, really?”

“Whoa, that’s mad funny. Look, Sasa, they’re massive. I’m losing it!”

She lined the palm of her hand up with mine, wild with giddiness. Then she turned back to Sayu, repeatedly exclaiming, “They’re so huge!”

An indescribable smile drifted across Sayu’s face, and she said, “Yeah, mad funny.”

Oh. That was an expression of resignation. She wasn’t amused by any of this.

Asami, however, paid no attention to Sayu’s reaction and continued yammering on about the size of my hand before finally appearing to recall something and staring into my face.

“Wh-what...?”

“Yep! He seems like a nice guy! He gets an okay from me!”

It appeared she had granted me some sort of permission, although I wasn’t entirely sure what for.

Asami nodded emphatically, then headed back into the living room.

“I was just worried, you know? Because Sasa told me she was shacking up with some guy she’s not related to. And she’s not even dating him? I was like, uh-hh, what’s up with that? He’s not your family, and he’s not your man. That’s kinda sus, right?”

“Sus?”

I was a little too old to know what *sus* meant. It seemed like I’d have to infer the meaning from context.

Sayu, who was also listening to Asami, had a dubious smile on her face; I couldn’t tell whether she was amused or troubled.

“But now that I’ve seen ya, I can tell you’re harmless, mister, so you’re fine by me. Oh, I meant bro, not mister. My bad!”

After she'd finished her rapid-fire chatter, she seemed to recall something yet again, patting my bed. "Well, why not join us and sit down, Mr. Yoshida?"

It's my apartment, dummy. Sayu's senior seemed like a force to be reckoned with.

"Yum! What the heck? This tastes crazy good! Do you get to eat this every day, Yoshi? You must be the happiest man alive, right? This is wild!"

More of her fast-paced chatter.

From the moment I got back from work, Asami had made herself right at home in our living room, inundating me with questions about Sayu and myself as Sayu cooked dinner.

To tell the truth, I wasn't very good at lying. Keeping up the facade of Sayu and me being neighborhood friends since she was little was dragging me down, and to be frank, it was pretty stressful trying to keep up with Asami's energy level.

Sayu had remained cleverly discreet as she made dinner for the three of us, and now, we had gathered around to eat it. Honestly, with three people at the table, the room felt packed. This apartment was meant to house one, and it did so comfortably. However, with two or three people filling the space, its small size quickly became obvious.

"Y'know, your place is stupid small, Yoshi," Asami remarked in a carefree tone, as if she could read my mind.

"Well, once you decide to head home, there should be a little more space."

"Gotta eat first."

"Then eat and go home."

Asami cackled before taking a bite of the stir-fried vegetables Sayu had prepared. She seemed to be enjoying them.

"But I kinda like how stupid small it is."

"Stop saying *stupid small* over and over."

"My place is ginormous! Too big, scary big."

“Is that a brag...?” I gave her a strained smile before filling my mouth with white rice. Just about then, a shadow passed over Asami’s expression.

“Nah, I’m not bragging.”

She was still smiling, but I could see something dark in her eyes. *Crap*, I thought to myself. I must have touched on something sensitive. We’d just met; I didn’t have the guts to broach a subject she didn’t want to talk about.

“So you live nearby?” I did my best to steer the conversation in a different direction.

Asami’s expression immediately brightened up, and she nodded enthusiastically.

“Yeah! It’s only about a ten-minute walk. Crazy, huh?”

“It’s not that crazy.”

Sayu, who’d been silently listening to our conversation, suddenly burst out laughing. I looked in her direction, wondering what had come over her all of a sudden, and found her shoulders still bobbing with laughter as she glanced back and forth between Asami and myself.

“You two get along way too well to have only just met.”

“Huh, you think so?”

“Well, Yoshi and I are already like soulmates, kinda.”

Did she even know what the words *soulmate* meant? Nah, there was no way.

I smiled helplessly at Asami’s glib declaration, while Sayu continued to cackle away. Sayu had seemed pretty nervous about Asami when I first got home, but I felt like her nerves were gradually easing.

“Oh yeah, about today’s miso soup—”

Just as Sayu started talking, her smartphone began vibrating violently where it sat on the desk. The noise resonated throughout the apartment and made us all jump.

“That scared the crap outta me!”

Apparently, Asami had had the crap scared out of her.

It seemed like Sayu had a phone call. She checked to see who was calling, then tensed up a little.

“It’s our manager. But why?”

“Ohhh, our manager. Probably calling about your shift.”

“Sorry, I have to take this.”

With her phone in hand, Sayu rushed to the entryway, put on her shoes, and stepped out of the apartment. The call wasn’t anything private, so it should have been fine to answer inside, but she seemed prone to worrying about such things.

And so I was left alone with Asami.

It was true that Asami and I had been carrying on a conversation just the two of us while Sayu was cooking, but being *essentially* alone and *actually* alone felt like two different things entirely. Apparently, Asami was seventeen, the same age as Sayu.

I’d felt the same way when I first met Sayu, but being alone with a high school girl I’d only just met smelled like bad news from a social standpoint, and before I knew it, an uncomfortable sweat was running down my back.

“The manager likes to talk your ear off once he has you on the line. She might be gone for a while,” Asami informed me before taking a bite of white rice.

“He doesn’t just talk about work?”

“Mm-mm.”

Then Asami, still chewing, held her palm up toward me. It seemed like she was asking me to wait until she finished. An image of Mishima flashed across my mind. *Hey, did you see that, Mishima? Even high school girls don’t talk with their mouths full.*

Asami swallowed the bite down with a big gulp before continuing.

“Our manager’s the type who’s always lonely. He’ll call about work at first, then outta nowhere, he’ll just start chitchatting. He goes on and on. I keep telling him, but he never learns. It’s so tiresome.”

Something about the way she said *tiresome* felt off. It wasn't that she was using the word incorrectly; it was just so inconsistent with her usual way of speaking that it made quite an impact.

"You say that, but it sounds like you always give him your time. That's pretty kind of you, isn't it?"

"Well, it's just sorta sad. It reminds me I don't wanna turn into a lonely adult."

That struck me as pretty harsh.

A lonely adult. I couldn't help thinking I would fall into that category as well.

"Anyway, enough of that." All of a sudden, Asami spoke up, narrowing her eyes playfully. "I wanna know what kinda relationship you have with Sasa."

I tilted my head, confused. Hadn't we already gone over all of this earlier while Sayu was making dinner?

"I told you before. We grew up in the same neighborhood—"

"Yeah, yeah. Sure you did. Enough with all that." She interrupted my answer with a dismissive wave of her hand. "You're so crap at lying, Yoshi. I know you two are making all of that stuff up."

"...You're kidding."

As shaky as my explanation had been, she'd kept interjecting with amused exclamations, such as "Wow!" and "That's mad funny!" I was certain she'd bought it.

"I mean, I saw your eyes when you were talking about you and Sasa back in the day. They were darting around so much, they were basically bouncing off the walls. It was crazy. Like, what, were they trying to set a world record for the high jump?" She spoke quickly, then followed up with a cackle.

I couldn't help but laugh myself when she said the thing about the world record. She had a unique way with words that I found amusing. However, as amused as I was, I was panicking just as much.

She knew I was lying. But how was I supposed to explain it now? I had no idea how to get out of this, and I couldn't just tell her the truth and air all of Sayu's secrets without her consent, either.

“Hey, your eyes are darting around again,” Asami said, grinning smugly. “C’mon—just tell me the truth!”

Cold sweat continued to roll down my skin.

Still, I couldn’t just stay silent.

“...Sayu and me, we...” I swallowed hard to cover up my nervousness.

I pictured Sayu’s smile in my mind—that relaxed, unstrained smile. What kind of face would Sayu make if I told Asami the whole story?

Suddenly, my panic subsided, and I calmed down. “...What Sayu told you was the truth.”

Asami raised her eyebrows in surprise. “The truth? What do you mean by that?”

She’d latched on to the word *truth*.

However, she wasn’t asking for its literal meaning; she was asking what I meant by it.

I scratched my head, though it wasn’t itchy, before continuing. “It’s like what politicians sometimes say.”

“Like what?”

“Like the phrase, ‘I don’t recall.’”

Asami had a short laugh at that.

“What’re you even talking about? Have you switched topics on me?”

“No, wait, hear me out. When they say that, do you really think they don’t remember?”

Without taking any time to think, Asami shook her head. “No way. No politician would forget something they’d said themselves. That’d be crazy.”

“Right? But if they insist, we have to go along with it.”

At that, Asami nodded a few times, apparently understanding. “I see. In other words, they mean, ‘Let’s leave it at that,’ yeah?”

I didn’t respond, but my silence served as affirmation.

The one who had lied to Asami was Sayu, not me. It would be wrong for me to divulge Sayu's secrets of my own accord—or at least, it wouldn't be right.

"But that's kinda the same as admitting you're lying."

Asami narrowed her eyes slightly, shooting me a piercing look. I felt like she was testing me, but I wasn't going to change my mind.

"I'm not clever enough to cover up something that's been exposed and then go on lying about it. And besides—" I cut my sentence short and took in a deep breath. As the air filled my lungs, I got the feeling I knew what I needed to say next.

I was hit with the sudden desire to smoke a cigarette.

"...I don't think it's right for me to tell you what she's trying to cover up."

I stopped there, then took the last bite of white rice left in my bowl. Curious why Asami hadn't replied, I looked up and found her staring at me blankly, her mouth agape.

"What?"

I put on a puzzled expression, and Asami, as if suddenly remembering she had a mouth, gasped before covering it with her hand. Then she broke into a broad smile.

"Ha-ha, seriously, you're a really good dude. I'm shook!"

"Huh? A good dude?" I asked back, and Asami gave a small nod before looking down at the desk.

"People don't usually think about what's right or wrong. They think about what they want or don't want to do. That's just the way people are."

"I *am* thinking about what I do and don't want to do."

This statement made Asami raise her head again, and she looked me straight in the eye. I could sense she was wondering what I meant. Her eyes were strangely eloquent.

I let out a small breath, then carried on speaking.

It was simple.

“I just don’t want to do something that isn’t right. That’s all.”

Asami’s eyes widened.

Then she burst out laughing.

“Hey, whoa! Did I say something funny?”

“Ah-ha-ha, no, it’s just...”

Asami was laughing like she found something truly hilarious, her shoulders bouncing up and down. Eventually she looked up, covered her mouth with a hand, and spoke.

“It’s just so friggin’ funny. When you said that, your eyes didn’t move at all.”

“What’s so funny about that?”

“There are lots of people who say that kind of thing, trying to act cool, but most of them won’t meet your gaze. It’s like they’re looking around for someone to borrow the line from. It’s mad funny to watch, but you, Yoshi...” She paused, and the smile disappeared from her face. “...I could tell you were speaking from the heart just now. I’m pretty surprised.”

She didn’t say *shook* this time.

I smiled wryly, parroting her words. “Pretty surprised?”

“Oh yeah,” Asami gasped, her shoulders jolting. “I was shook, I meant shook,” she rushed to correct herself. Then she continued speaking, as if to distract from her slipup.

“You’re such a good guy, Yoshi. I’m totally shook.”

“I’m not so sure that’s true.”

“It is. Sasa’s super lucky,” Asami said, looking back down at the desk. A tinge of gloominess appeared in her eyes again, and I instinctively looked away.

“We can choose who we get involved with,” Asami said, her tone hushed, “but not who we happen to meet.”

I wanted to poke fun at her for dropping her slang again, but I held back.

“That’s why I think she’s really lucky—she got to meet someone nice enough

to want to get involved with.”

In the beginning, when Sayu had first brought Asami here, I couldn’t help but wonder why she’d felt comfortable enough to bring this senior coworker home with her. However, the far-off look that passed over Asami’s face every now and then did remind me of Sayu.

I scratched the back of my neck, speaking without much thought.

“Everyone meets someone like that at some point. If you haven’t yet, then you will in the future.”

“What do you mean? I’m not looking for anything like that. You’re so friggin’ funny.”

Before I knew it, she’d slipped back into her usual slang.

“Hey, don’t you ever get tired of talking like that?”

“Huh? Why would I? This is just the way I talk.”

“So when you talk normally, that’s deliberate?”

Asami made an obvious “oh crap” face in response to my callout. I couldn’t stop myself from laughing.

“What’s so funny?! You’re crazy annoying!”

“Nothing. Your eyes are just as talkative as your mouth, you know?”

“Huh? What?” Asami’s eyes darted around the room, and my shoulders bobbed with laughter. I pointed at her and declared, “Trying to set a world record for the high jump, I see.”

She blushed in obvious embarrassment, then smacked me full force on the shoulder.

“Ouch! That hurt!”

“Stupid! You’re such a dick!”

Asami was still slapping me on the shoulder when the front door swung open.

“Sorry about that. Our manager likes to talk... Uh, what happened?”

Sayu, who’d just come back into the room, eyed Asami and me suspiciously.

The look on Asami's face changed in an instant. She got to her feet and sidled up to Sayu.

"Sasa, Yoshi's bullying me! He's the worst—a total boomer!"

"Hey!"

Sayu eyed us each in turn, then smiled wryly. "You two seem to be getting along better than ever."

"Does it look like we're getting along?" I asked.

Sayu gave a dismissive "yep" and walked Asami, who'd been nestling up to her, back to her seat. Then she turned to me. "I mean, you two don't seem so nervous around each other anymore, do you?"

I shrugged and stayed silent.

Sayu seemed pretty adept at reading the room and interpreting other people's expressions. I got the feeling lies wouldn't work on her—not that I had any intention of lying in the first place.

A glance at the clock showed it was already past ten PM. If I didn't send this high school girl home soon, I'd be in trouble.

"Hey, hurry up and eat your dinner. You've gotta head home. I'll go with you."

"Huh? There's no need for that. It's just a ten-minute walk."

"If you're caught alone at this hour, you'll get taken into custody, idiot."

Asami cackled and waved her hand in response. "The po-po don't patrol this area. Don't worry."

The *po-po*?

Her choice of slang was so bizarre, I lost my train of thought.

"Besides, if they saw you walking a schoolgirl around at this time of night, you'd be the one they'd take in for questioning, Yoshi! You're killing me."

I spent a moment imagining the police hauling me in for questioning, and it sent a shudder down my spine. Still, the thought of sending her off on her own only to have her run into someone suspicious made me anxious.

“Either way, I’m not comfortable letting you go alone. I’ll walk you.”

Asami snorted at my insistence.

“You shoulda just said so in the first place. Mad funny!”

Who did she think she was, acting so high-and-mighty?

“Let him walk you,” said Sayu. “I’d feel awful if something bad happened to you on the way home.”

Asami nodded a few times in response. “Sasa agrees with you, so who am I to argue? I’ll allow it.”

“Where do you get off talking like that...?” I gave her a wry smile, but the truth was, I didn’t dislike Asami’s way of talking. It felt casual, like I was just cracking jokes with one of the guys.

“But if you get questioned, it’s not my fault, Yoshi. If you’re fine with that, then we’re all good.”

“Fine, fine. Just hurry up and eat.”

Asami let out a big laugh for some reason, then got to work finishing off her side dishes.

My gaze drifted from Asami to Sayu, and our eyes met. She stared at me for a moment.

“What?”

“You’re smiling about something, Mr. Yoshida.”

“No, I’m not!” I snapped, making Sayu snicker. After that, she went back to eating her dinner.

I’d originally thought Sayu had just brought home some rude *gyaru* girl, but to my surprise, I found myself thinking they made a good pair.

I was really glad that Sayu, who had been cooped up for ages, had finally gotten out of my insular apartment and made a new friend.

I hoped that these new experiences would eventually help her make peace with the past so she could deal with things properly.

“Thanks for the meal.”

I finished my dinner a little before the others and hurried off to the balcony. I had a strangely intense urge to smoke. It wasn't because of stress, however; I simply wanted to soak in my thoughts, a cigarette in my mouth.

I liked to smoke when I was frustrated *and* when I was happy. That's what made it such a problem.

*

“Here's fine.”

I made friendly conversation with Asami as I took her home. We'd been walking for only about eight minutes when she stopped me.

“I can take you up to your house.”

“No, it's fine. I'd rather you didn't see it.”

Her words implied a clear rejection. I knew she wasn't just saying that to be polite, so I didn't push it any further.

“Okay. Well, you might only be two minutes away from home, but you still need to be careful.”

“You're such a worrywart. It's mad funny.” Asami giggled and waved at me. “See ya, then. I know it's a bit late, but sorry for turning up uninvited.”

“It's fine. Aside from the fact that my place is a little cramped, you weren't that much trouble.”

That was a lie. I'd been extremely anxious on my way back from work.

“I think you've got a pretty nice place, though,” Asami said with a shrug. “I kinda like how cramped it is, too.” She may have been acting playful, but her eyes remained somewhat gloomy.

I didn't know what she liked so much about tiny apartments, but the look in her eyes upset me.

“If you liked it that much, you should stop by again,” I said, and Asami's eyes went wide with excitement.

“What, for real?”

“Spend some time with Sayu.”

Asami broke into a broad smile and pointed at me. “What are you, her dad? That’s so friggin’ funny.”

“I’m her guardian.”

Asami nodded at my response, then sighed. “Her guardian, huh? Sounds good to me. I’d love to come again, as long as you’re okay with it.”

Asami laughed, lifting up one of her hands to wave good-bye and turning her back to me.

I raised a hand as well, nodded, and watched her walk off at a brisk pace.

Then, all of a sudden, she turned around and walked back over to me.

“Since you’re her guardian, I wanna give you some, like, advice...” Asami used her index finger to point at her own face. “Sasa is a total pro when it comes to using the right smile at the right time, so you gotta watch out.”

She didn’t wait for a reply; as soon as she had said her piece, she turned on her heel and walked away.

I silently watched her leave. She took a left turn a few intersections farther down, and that was when I lost sight of her.

“Using the right smile at the right time...”

I pictured Sayu’s smile.

Her carefree smile.

Her forced smile.

And then the smile that made it seem like she was hiding something.

What if she’d been using all those faces with some goal in mind?

Asami’s words—*you gotta watch out*—replayed in my mind.

“What does she mean, I need to watch out?”

What did I need to watch out for, and how was I supposed to do that?

I let out a single sigh, then began making my way back home.

Chapter 4 Dinner

“I see... Well, I’m not trying to force you, but I didn’t expect you to say no this time, too.”

Section Manager Odagiri was making no effort to hide his disappointment.

Although his words made me feel guilty, there was no way I could nod and say yes.

He was asking me to come on a business trip.

I had always been quick to agree to such trips in the past, but with Sayu in my apartment, I was no longer able to simply leave home for extended periods of time. I had turned down a business trip once before, much to everyone’s surprise, and the fact that I was doing so again clearly displeased the section manager.

“What’s going on with you lately? Don’t tell me you’ve lost your motivation to work.”

“No, not at all!”

“You’re right. I can tell from your output that you’ve still got the same drive. So there must be another reason why you don’t want to go, right? I’d feel more reassured if you came out and told me what it is.”

It was understandable that he was questioning me, but it still made me uncomfortable.

I’d been considering making up an excuse for this kind of situation for some time now but hadn’t expected I’d need it so soon. He’d caught me completely off guard.

“Have you started seeing someone? If you have, you can just say so. Well...it’s not like you’re married, and I can’t imagine you turning me down for that anyway.”

“I’m not in a relationship or anything.”

“So what is it, then?”

The section manager’s tone wasn’t forceful, but I could sense that on this occasion, he was determined not to let me get away without an answer.

It was a complete mess.

I couldn’t just tell him I had a high school girl staying at my place. However, I lacked the resourcefulness to come up with a convincing lie on the spot to smooth everything over.

Flustered, I stood in silence for a number of gut-wrenching seconds before a familiar face suddenly appeared behind the section manager.

“Oh, Section Manager Odagiri. How are you today?”

“Oh, Mishima...”

The face that had popped out from behind the section manager belonged to Mishima.

“Can I borrow Mr. Yoshida for a moment? Or are you in the middle of something?”

“Well, we were just discussing a business trip.”

As soon as Mishima heard this, her jaw dropped and she let out an exclamation of surprise.

“A business trip? Mr. Yoshida?”

“Yes, but it seems like he’s turning me down.”

“Well, there’s no way he can go on a trip right now!” Mishima’s rebuttal was much too loud. Her sudden outburst even gave me a shock. “Mr. Yoshida told me he needs to pay regular visits to his parents’ home this month. His mother isn’t doing well, after all...”

Just then, Mishima suddenly covered her mouth with her hand. “...Oh, I

wasn't supposed to mention that, was I?"

Then she looked at me and cocked her head apologetically. At least, her expression appeared apologetic; I could tell by the look in her eyes that she wanted something else from me.

Just nod.

That's what she was trying to say.

"Y-yeah... Well... It's too late now. You've already said it." I glanced down at the floor slightly, and Mishima hung her head.

"S-sorry...", she said quietly.

Seeing this, the section manager frantically waved his hands from side to side. "Wh-what? You should have just told me that in the first place!"

"I, uh..."

"Mr. Yoshida cares a lot about his family, and he doesn't want to use them as an excuse in situations like this. Isn't that right?"

"W-well, I guess..."

Mishima continued to ramble on, clearly anticipating that I wouldn't be able to come up with a good reply.

"In that case, I'll just have to find someone else. I understand how that kind of thing might be tough to talk about, Yoshida, but...next time you can just tell me it's a family situation and leave it at that."

Section Manager Odagiri looked into my eyes with the same fervent intensity as before. This time, however, it came from a different emotion altogether.

"You've always been such a serious worker—refusing to go on a business trip for that kind of reason would hardly make me doubt you. Just be honest with me next time."

"...Yes, sir. My apologies."

Although Mishima had been the one to come up with the excuse, the way the section manager trusted me and took it at face value filled me with a tremendous sense of guilt. I nodded.

“But now I’m stumped,” said Odagiri. “Who should I send instead?” His gaze wandered toward a nearby desk. “I can usually rely on Endou for these things, but he’s on a different trip at the moment.”

Endou, another member of our team, was the coworker who had taken my place the last time I was asked to go on a business trip. His desk currently sat unoccupied. It seemed like he had been away on that business trip to the Tohoku region for about a week. Endou’s office pal, Koike, had accompanied him, too.

“On top of that, Hashimoto’s got a wife waiting at home for him, and none of the other newbies in the office would be of any use on a business trip.”

The section manager’s eyes then drifted to the seat next to mine. My coworker Hashimoto, who’d been silently working at his desk a moment earlier, must have sensed that the section manager was heading this way and bolted. Hashimoto had always been a dependable friend to me, but these kinds of situations were a notable exception. For better or worse, he always prioritized managing his own risks.

Section Manager Odagiri was at a loss. There was no one left to ask. I, having turned him down, didn’t know what to say. However, the uneasy silence this had created between us was soon interrupted by someone unexpected.

“Mr. Odagiri. A moment?”

A dignified voice resonated from across the office.

I turned toward it to find Ms. Gotou with one of her hands in the air, smiling at Section Manager Odagiri.

It was so rare to hear Ms. Gotou speak up at times like this that he and I both froze in shock.

However, the section manager immediately nodded, as if he’d just remembered that his body could move, and murmured, “Be right back,” before leaving me alone and making his way over to Ms. Gotou’s desk.

Ms. Gotou was my supervisor and the woman who had originally brought me to this company. I’d had a crush on her for some time, and what’s more, she’d already rejected me.

With me heading up my project and Ms. Gotou focusing on HR and administrative tasks, we didn't get to chat as much as the other staff. But since we worked in the same office, I caught sight of her often each day.

As I was staring absentmindedly at Ms. Gotou, who was using hand gestures to convey something to Section Manager Odagiri, somebody suddenly poked me in the side.

It was Mishima. She'd sidled right up to me. She started to speak in a soft voice without looking at me.

"You should probably prepare some excuses, Mr. Yoshida."

She was obviously talking about the business trip.

The suddenness of that conversation had caught me off guard, but Mishima's quick thinking had saved my skin.

"Thanks for that," I replied quietly.

She let out an embarrassed huff through her nose, then shook her head. "Sorry to have lied about your family being ill. It was rude of me."

"No, it's fine... That was probably the most believable excuse you could have come up with."

"Even so, it wasn't really my lie to tell."

I cast a sidelong glance her way.

When I saw Mishima at work during the day, she appeared to be kicking back and taking her time. As far as junior colleagues went, she was hopeless. And yet, at times like this, I could sense how polite and dutiful she really was.

"It's because of Sayu, isn't it?"

"...Y-yeah, you could say that."

Though I kept nearly forgetting about it, Sayu and Mishima had met.

Mishima and Hashimoto were the only two people in the office who knew about Sayu. That must be why she had been unable to overlook my dilemma and gone out of her way to help me.

"Anyway, you really saved me there."

In response, Mishima stared straight at me and said, “Aren’t you going to... pay me back for it?”

“You’re pretty shameless, huh?”

“But I *did* help get you out of trouble. I deserve a little something in return, don’t I?”

“I’ll treat you to a meal.”

“Deal. And nobody else is invited!”

“Well, yeah. I’m not going to pay for anyone other than you.”

Mishima clenched her fists and gave an emphatic nod.

“I gotta use these situations to save up some Mr. Yoshida points.”

“These *points* sound kinda fishy...”

The moment I made this jab and flashed a half smile at Mishima, Section Manager Odagiri and Ms. Gotou both looked over at us at the same time, making me jump. Ms. Gotou smiled cheerfully and tilted her head to the side, and the section manager gave a few nods before walking toward us. It seemed like their conversation was over.

“Looks like Ms. Gotou’s pulled some strings to get the other branch to send someone instead. Phew, what a relief!”

“Oh, really...? That’s great.” I was genuinely relieved.

My first priority was to not leave Sayu at home on her own, but it was naturally never my intent to cause trouble for the supervisor to whom I owed so much. My situation meant I had to refuse, but there had been no one else to go in my place when I turned down the request. To be honest, I had been at a loss.

I suspected that Ms. Gotou had seen I was in a desperate situation and decided to step in. The least I could do was thank her in person.

As I looked in Ms. Gotou’s direction, pondering this casual thought, our eyes locked. I instantly felt the need to look away, but more than that, I had the mysterious feeling that if I did so, I would somehow be “losing,” so I held her

gaze. As I did, a cheerful smile spread across her face, and she gave me a small wave.

Her gesture was so sudden and natural that it took me a moment to even register that it was directed at me. I continued to stare at her blankly, to which she responded with a small quizzical furrow of her brow before waving once more. Despite having gazed at her for such a long time, it was only at this point that I finally realized she was waving me over.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

“Ow!”

I felt an elbow dig into my side once again and turned toward Mishima. She was gesturing in Ms. Gotou’s direction with her chin.

“She’s calling for you.”

“Oh, so it *was* me she was calling.”

“Who else would it be?” Mishima said, peering at me with a distinctly sharp look. “Geez... Why don’t you just go talk to her already?”

What had gotten her so moody?

“O-okay...” I nodded a few times in response, then headed toward Ms. Gotou’s desk.

“Come on... Why did it take you so long to get over here?” Ms. Gotou asked casually, a mischievous smile on her lips.

“It’s just, for a moment I didn’t realize you were calling me,” I responded simply.

She snickered and went to sit down.

Ms. Gotou had great posture. Even when she sat back down at her desk, she leaned forward slightly, bent her knees, then set her hips in the chair with her back straight. I couldn’t help but follow her motions with my eyes.

The rainy season was nearly upon us, and even the air conditioners in the office couldn’t stave off the humidity entirely. Although it was still early in the season, many members of the staff had taken advantage of our company’s

single-shirt dress code—including Ms. Gotou and myself.

As she sat down, her shirt's unfastened top button allowed me a glimpse of her collarbone. I averted my eyes.

"S-so...what did you need me for?"

Feeling awkward, I took the initiative and started the conversation. Ms. Gotou quickly glanced behind me before pointing to her computer monitor.

Her disconcerting glance prompted me to turn and look as well, only to find Mishima staring right at me. Our eyes didn't meet by chance; she was most certainly ignoring her work to watch us.

Get back to work!

I frowned at her and wiggled my fingers as if typing in the air. Mishima gave me a big, defiant scowl, then stuck out her tongue before turning her attention back to her computer screen.

"Hee-hee. You two seem to get along well."

"Not really..."

Ms. Gotou appeared to have observed our interaction, and I felt a little embarrassed, like she was laughing at me.

When I returned my gaze to Ms. Gotou, she once again pointed at her computer monitor.

I drew a little closer to get a better look at the monitor. It displayed an open Word document with the simple sentence, **do you have any plans after work today?** written on it. After I made sure I'd read it correctly, she started clacking on her keyboard again and added, **how about dinner?**

Ms. Gotou and I had been eating out together more frequently than before. That in itself made me happy, but this was the same method she had once used to suddenly invite me to a barbecue restaurant; I could still remember how flustered I had been as she forcefully cross-examined me about my love life. I was overjoyed that Ms. Gotou wanted to spend some of her private time with me, but that dinner still had a somewhat bitter taste in my memory.

Even so, there was no way I was going to turn down a dinner invitation from

her—this was a stroke of luck for me. Besides, I'd never been the type to decline a supervisor's invitation for no reason.

"Sounds good."

Despite my unpleasant memory, I found myself nodding.

"Really? Great. I'll message you the details during lunch." Ms. Gotou's answer was concise, and her smile was sincere.

"Understood."

I tried my best to make my responses sound office-appropriate, even going as far as giving a polite "excuse me" and a bow as I left her desk.

When I turned on my heel to leave, I got a clear view of Mishima's head bobbing unnaturally but decided to ignore it.

Back at my desk, I saw Hashimoto had also returned to his seat next to mine, his face calm and nonchalant.

"Quite a long bathroom break you took there."

"My stomach started killing me all of a sudden."

"I see, I see..."

I glared at him as he answered without a hint of shame. Then a knowing smile came over his face.

"Weren't you just planning a date with Ms. Gotou during work hours?"

"It's not a date..."

"But you admit it wasn't work-related."

"Shut up."

It really pissed me off how he would see through everything and still tease me over it.

Ignoring Hashimoto, who had successfully avoided an encounter with Section Manager Odagiri and was now happily typing away without a care, I realized that if I was going out to eat this evening, I needed to let Sayu know.

I picked up my cell phone and typed a short message.

Sorry, Ms. Gotou invited me to dinner tonight, so I'll be eating out.

I wanted to write something a little more thoughtful, but since I was at work, I kept the message brief and sent it quickly.

Hashimoto side-eyed me and began to speak in an obviously mocking tone.

"Oh, messaging your wife?"

"Knock it off already."

*

Once the meat touched the grill, it instantly began sizzling.

I watched how tiny bubbles formed on the surface of the meat as it steadily shrank to a smaller size, then began flipping the strips over with a pair of tongs.

"Mm, looks good," Ms. Gotou said from across the table, her eyes sparkling even more than usual.

We were at the same barbecue restaurant we'd visited before.

I watched the meat turn from pink to a light-orange color on both sides, then used the tongs to press down on it. The meat sprang back against the grip of the tongs; it seemed to have been cooked through to the center quite well.

"It's ready to eat."

I lifted a slice of meat from the grill as I spoke, and Ms. Gotou picked up her plate with both hands. She smiled, looking slightly childish, as I put the meat on her plate.

"Hee-hee, thanks. You really are a grill master."

"It's really not that big a deal."

Ms. Gotou and I had both already taken a few sips of beer from the glasses sitting in front of us, and we'd also made a toast.

We exchanged frivolous conversation while we grilled the meat. As my stomach filled, my impatience caught up with me.

"So why'd you invite me out today?"

I was used to it by now, but Ms. Gotou never brought up the subject she actually wanted to discuss of her own accord. I'd tried my best to wait it out, but her unwillingness to get to the heart of the matter eventually made me lose my patience.

Ms. Gotou cocked her head. "What do you mean, *why*?"

"I mean, there has to be some reason, right? You went out of your way to call me over during work hours to arrange this."

Ms. Gotou pouted, looking embarrassed.

"Uh-oh. Looks like I'm busted."

You didn't really try to hide it, I thought to myself. I was slightly irritated, but one look at her playful expression set my heart aflutter, and my infatuation got the better of me.

"I guess you are..."

"Hee-hee. Well, you're right."

Ms. Gotou moved another bite of meat from her plate into her mouth and slowly chewed on it. Once she'd swallowed it down, she peered at me, tilting her head slightly to one side.

"Why did you turn down that business trip today?"

I'd seen that one coming. I could feel the muscles in my face tense up, only to realize that once I'd made that expression, I would have to answer. Ms. Gotou had been staring right at me as she asked her question. There was no way she didn't notice how it had affected me.

"I've said this before, but I'm not blaming you or anything. Our company policy is that business trips aren't compulsory, and you're free to turn them down anytime."

She was right. Our company was a venture that had expanded and gone public in a short span of time, and it tended to avoid adopting systems today's youth might consider old-fashioned. We were free to take our lunch break anytime between eleven AM and three PM, and we could work flex hours as we saw fit. Ms. Gotou's claim that the boss's orders didn't need to be strictly

obeyed was also part of this more modern style of management.

It was my opinion that the stress-free work life produced by these regulations had directly contributed to our success.

“So I’m asking strictly out of personal curiosity.”

“I see...”

My words served only as a vague acknowledgment of her statement.

“Last time we went out for barbecue...,” I continued, “you...also had me ask all the questions like this.”

She suddenly began to fumble over her words. Although I had been avoiding her gaze, this made me look back at her. However, she avoided meeting my eyes and looked down at the table, squirming awkwardly.

“So there’s still nothing going on between you and Mishima...?”

“C’mon! Not this again. I told you, there’s nothing between us...”

“But you’ve started eating lunch together more and more, haven’t you?!”

“It’s just that we get on better now... Actually, it’s more like she’s gotten clingier with me... It’s hard to put into words, but we’ve just had more opportunities to do stuff together.”

“Well, okay. Even if you two really have nothing going on...”

Ms. Gotou was now speaking more firmly. Her hand gestures and body language only added to this effect, and she was being uncharacteristically aggressive.

“It’s obvious that you’ve started going home on time more often lately.”

“Th-that’s just because I want to get more rest!”

“That, at least, is definitely a lie. You shouldn’t interrupt someone if you’re just going to dart your eyes around like that.”

“I swear, I’m not lying...”

I was lying.

She took one long, stern look at me, then let out a sigh and began talking

more slowly.

“You probably haven’t even realized this,” she began. “But you never used to use your cell phone in the office, Yoshida.”

Her next comment made me feel sick to my stomach. Had she really been watching me that closely? Ms. Gotou must have noticed a change in my expression, as something prompted her to wave her hand in denial.

“Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to lay into you or anything. I know you’re not messing around.”

“No, it’s fine...”

Ms. Gotou gave a wry grin at yet another of my vague responses before continuing.

“It’s just that when one of my subordinates who never used to touch his cell phone in the office all of a sudden starts using it...I figure he must have someone he wants to get in touch with now.”

“That...makes sense, I suppose.”

Of course, I didn’t want to agree with her, but it was hard to argue with such extremely basic logic. I couldn’t deny it, so I simply nodded.

“I’m just really curious... Oh, want another beer?”

“Yeah... That’d be great.”

Ms. Gotou grinned at my answer, then pushed the button to call over the serving staff. She met the server with a brisk “two more beers, please” and handed over both of our empty glasses.

“Sorry, I should’ve asked if you wanted one earlier...,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Oh, no, we’re not here for a company party or anything. It’s fine.”

She was right, but I found myself wanting to argue back, though I managed to hold my tongue.

I realized she was implying that this was the time to cast our work positions aside and speak freely.

“So anyway...,” Ms. Gotou trailed off, looking down slightly before glancing

back up at me. “What is it?”

There was no need for me to ask what she was referring to; I already knew. She was asking why I’d declined the business trip and who I’d been getting in touch with. This question communicated both.

“Well...,” I began, then promptly shut my mouth.

I honestly never planned to tell anyone other than Hashimoto about Sayu. However, by some quirk of fate, Mishima had also found out that Sayu was freeloading at my place.

Then was there any point in being stubborn and hiding it from Ms. Gotou?

“Here are your beers.”

“Oh, thanks...,” I replied.

Our server, who’d just rushed over to where we were sitting, quickly set our beers down on the table, left us with a “please enjoy,” then hurried off to serve her next set of customers.

I watched Ms. Gotou pick up the two glasses, pull one toward herself, and push the other toward me. I felt myself gradually coming to terms with my feelings.

That’s right. Before I decided whether or not to talk about Sayu, I needed to resolve this awkwardness between Ms. Gotou and me.

The haze of thoughts I’d been experiencing a few moments earlier finally turned into words I could verbalize.

“Can I ask you a question first?”

Ms. Gotou stared in blank amazement for a moment, then cocked her head.

“What?”

“Well, it’s...”

I knew what Ms. Gotou’s question meant. I also understood the doubts that had led her to ask it. And yet, there was still one thing I was clueless about.

“Why do you keep such a close eye on me, Ms. Gotou?”

I looked her in the eyes as I asked my question. She was visibly shocked by it.

Ms. Gotou often said things that suggested she'd been keeping a close eye on my behavior. I hadn't given it much thought until this point and had assumed that she just closely observed all her fellow employees. However, going off what she'd told me this time, it was obvious that she was observing me too closely for that to be the case.

Well, it *was* true that she kept a careful eye on all members of the staff. I often saw Ms. Gotou carefully surveying the whole office, walking around and making it easy for anyone who needed to approach her.

Even so, if Ms. Gotou was observing every single person in the office with the same level of attention, there was no way she'd be able to remember the kinds of things she'd pointed out today.

This meant that, at the risk of sounding overly self-conscious, I had to conclude that she was focusing special attention on me alone.

She had been the object of my affection for more than five years, but my hopes of having a relationship with her had been destroyed. Despite that, I could now tell that Ms. Gotou was paying more attention to me than she did to any of the other staff members. I couldn't help but feel strange about it.

Wasn't I just one of the many members of our team to her? If there was a particular reason why she'd been keeping an eye on me, then what was it?

It would feel pretty unfair to share my secret with her before I cleared up these doubts.

"If you don't want to answer, you don't have to." This seemed to matter to me more than I had thought. "But if you don't answer my question, then I can't answer yours."

This statement came out in a much stronger tone than I usually used.

Ms. Gotou's eyes widened slightly at my statement, and she blinked in surprise. Then the corners of her mouth turned up in a smile, and she let out a sigh before speaking.

"You surprised me there...", she said, taking a sip of her beer to buy time. It

was only then that I realized I hadn't yet taken a single gulp of my latest beer; about a centimeter of the froth had already melted away. I frantically took a swig. The tingling sensation struck my throat as I swallowed it down, making me reflect on the harsh tone I'd used just moments before.

"I never knew you had such a determined side to you," she said, blushing slightly. Why was she blushing now? "It's true. I watch you more than I watch anyone else. That's a fact," she continued, forming one word at a time. She was still acting a little off—less relaxed than usual. She didn't look me in the eyes. Her face was flushed, and her gaze hovered over the table without meeting mine.

I said nothing and waited for her to continue.

"Yeah." Ms. Gotou nodded to herself, then finally looked up at me. "Ummm... Don't be surprised when I tell you this, okay? ...No, forget it. I'm sure you will be."

"...Huh?"

"I'm going to tell you why I've been paying so much attention to you, Yoshida."

"...Uh-huh."

It was obvious from her expression; she was finally going to tell me the truth. She wasn't her usual laid-back self: that person who was impossible to read. She was acting visibly different.

Ms. Gotou took in a slow, steady breath, then exhaled. She stared into my eyes resolutely, a somewhat enthusiastic look on her face; then she said it.

"It's because I'm in love with you, Yoshida."

My mind froze.

What did she just say?

That she was in love with me? Was that what she'd said?

My brain started back up again, but all I felt was a rush of confusion.

This couldn't be happening. *You kicked me to the curb just a few months ago,*

didn't you? You told me you had a boyfriend. Does this mean you broke up with him?

No, wait a minute.

Even if they broke up, I doubted she would develop feelings for me so soon afterward.

My thoughts were spinning and overloading my brain.

Eventually, what came out of my mouth was this:

“Huh?”

It was the only word I could think of.

Chapter 5 Confession

“You’re kidding, right?” I asked, my voice coming with difficulty.

Ms. Gotou silently shook her head. “I’m serious—”

“No, but...,” I interrupted. “You told me you had a boyfriend! You said you’d been dating for five years!”

“About that...” She smiled wryly and shook her head before continuing. “I lied.”

“...Whaaat?” I felt the strength drain from my body and flopped back against my chair. “What do you mean...?”

Obviously, I had doubts.

She liked me back, yet she’d still turned me down.

Why?

It didn’t make any sense.

Ms. Gotou seemed to have expected my question. She nodded a few times, an indescribable expression on her face. Then she continued to speak.

“I apologize. I just have a really good sense for these things.”

“A sense?”

“Yeah.”

As Ms. Gotou nodded in affirmation, our server came by once more to hand us a plate of meat—I’d forgotten when we’d ordered it. It was only then that I noticed the restaurant was much noisier than when we first arrived; it must be getting crowded. The server, too, seemed to be in more of a hurry than before.

This took my mind off Ms. Gotou for a moment, and I could feel myself calming down a little.

Ms. Gotou casually slid the plate of meat in my direction. It seemed she was telling me to start grilling. I silently accepted the plate, then began using the tongs to place strips of meat on the grill one at a time.

“When you invited me to your place, I was over the moon. I wanted to jump for joy, but...,” she murmured, staring at the meat loudly sizzling on the grill. “Then it occurred to me that it wasn’t the right day.”

“It wasn’t the right day?”

“Yeah. I thought that if I simply went along with it and we hooked up, things would fall apart afterward.”

I looked directly at her as I asked my next question. “So that’s the *sense* you were talking about?”

“Exactly. And that’s why I had the sudden impulse to lie.”

“About having a boyfriend.”

“Yeah.”

I sighed and set down the tongs.

Did that mean what I thought it did?

Ms. Gotou was in love with me and was happy that I had invited her over, but, for some unknown reason, she had decided it wasn’t the right time and turned me down.

I scratched my head.

I didn’t get it at all.

I mean, we both had feelings for each other, didn’t we? Why couldn’t we have just started dating?

It wasn’t like we were holding a wedding. Why did it matter if it was the right day?

“What, so are you saying you have to consult an almanac first?” The question was out of my mouth before I knew it.

Ms. Gotou burst out laughing. “Ah-ha-ha, not at all! I’m not buying a lottery ticket!”

“What do you mean, then?” I muttered, flipping over the strips of meat. “I’m completely lost.”

Ms. Gotou snickered. This was no time for laughter; I was being serious.

Hearing her express her feelings for me should have made me happier than anything in the world, but while my heart was beating abnormally fast, it had also left me with a strangely uncomfortable, unpleasant feeling.

“You know, I’m a very cautious woman,” she said, her eyes fixed on the grill. “I like my meat delicious, cooked nicely all the way through.”

“If you overcook it, though, it’ll stop tasting good,” I replied.

“But if you eat it while it’s still soft just because it’s tasty, it might make you sick.”

“If you’ve grilled meat enough times before, you’ll be able to judge when it’s ready just by looking at it.”

This statement made Ms. Gotou giggle, and her shoulders shook with her laughter. “Do I seem like the type with a lot of experience?”

“Of course...,” I said, exasperated. “After all, you always look so sexy.” At that, Ms. Gotou clasped a hand to her mouth.

“I’m sexy?”

“You are. You’re dripping with sex appeal.”

My reply left her cackling.

“The meat’s ready to eat,” I announced.

“Oh, really? Thanks!”

Ms. Gotou happily took her chopsticks and plucked up a strip of grilled heart. She chewed the meat, a joyful smile on her face.

“Mm, yummy,” she said.

“Yeah...”

I looked away from her with a strained smile. This was exactly what I'd meant when I said she was dripping with sex appeal. I was about to lose it. I felt myself getting more and more irritated.

"So what you're saying is even if you date me, you don't think it will last? Just to summarize."

"Hmm... Yeah, that about sums it up."

"So when would be a good time for us to start dating?" I asked point-blank. I knew she'd never progress the conversation on her own. I had to be direct.

She cocked her head slightly in response to my question. "Hmm... I'm not sure."

"Haaah..." A sigh escaped my lips.

I loved this woman. The feelings I had for her were definitely romantic in nature.

And yet, our last few minutes of conversation had made me feel terrible. My heart had been beating so fast, I felt like I would die, and yet nothing had even come of it.

To be honest, it felt like she was toying with me. If she wasn't interested in a relationship, she should have just told me straight out.

"I don't believe you," I said.

"Huh?" Ms. Gotou lifted her gaze from the grill to stare at me.

"I don't think you actually love me. I just can't believe it."

"That's not true. I've always loved you."

"You're just making fun of me, aren't you?"

Upon hearing my accusation, her expression clouded over for the first time that night.

Ms. Gotou put down her chopsticks and gave me a serious look.

"What can I do to make you believe me, then?"

I was taken aback.

Both her expression and her words had startled me.

She had been casually dismissive just a few moments earlier, so her sudden change in tone and attitude took me by surprise.

Still, I couldn't give in.

My heart was pounding, but I kept my cool.

I was about to play my best card.

"Can you sleep with me?" I said bluntly, looking Ms. Gotou straight in the eyes.

She raised her eyebrows for a moment before immediately looking away.

I noticed her cheeks gradually beginning to flush red.

The silence between us felt like it would last forever.

I lifted my beer glass to my lips and took a long swig to cover up the awkwardness.

"I...", Ms. Gotou finally began before stopping herself. At last, she continued very quietly. "I'm a virgin... Is that okay?"

"Pfft!" I spat out my beer.

The word *virgin* reverberated vividly in my mind.

At the same time, I realized how foolish I'd been. My request had been far too rude and direct.

"Please forget about what I just asked."

Ms. Gotou looked shocked. "You don't want me because I'm a virgin...?"

"Oh, no! That's not what I meant!" My voice came out louder than I'd intended. I didn't want her to misunderstand. "I just realized my question was very rude, so I'm asking that you please let me take it back."

"Oh... Still, do you care that I'm a virgin?"

She seemed pretty hung up on that. Was it really so important?

"No, not at all. It's just... I can't believe you're like that."

“What do you mean, *like that*?”

“Uh, I mean...a virgin.”

Saying the word *virgin* in front of a woman felt strangely embarrassing.

And besides, like I said, it just didn’t make sense that a woman with her sex appeal could have made it to twenty-eight without ever having done it.

“It’s no big deal... The opportunity just never presented itself.” Ms. Gotou turned away and pouted.

From how she was acting, it seemed likely she was telling the truth. She seemed very self-conscious about it.

“No, I’m really sorry. I mean it—forget what I said.”

“You can’t just unsay something.”

She was right.

All I could do was hang my head in shame.

Slowly, I lifted my head back up and looked at Ms. Gotou. She was gazing down at the table, her cheeks flushed red.

“A-are you angry?” I asked.

“I’m not mad, I just...” Ms. Gotou squirmed in her seat a little, then glanced my way. “I really do have feelings for you, Yoshida.”

“Oh, right, I see...”

“So if that’s really what you want, then—”

“Ah! No, it’s not! Trust me!” I interrupted, sensing what she was getting at. “Like I said, let’s put that behind us!”

“But you do want to, right?”

“Well...”

I really did.

But I reined in my desires.

“I’ll wait,” I said as my heart cried out in protest.

I was a complete idiot. If I'd insisted, I could've gone all the way. I could have had Ms. Gotou's tits... The ones I'd been dreaming of... How could I have been so stupid?!

I let out a small sigh as I mentally cursed myself.

This was fine.

At any rate, I couldn't let Ms. Gotou consume my life anymore. My heart couldn't take it.

I needed to process my muddled feelings and make it clear what our relationship was.

"Just so you know, I won't confess my feelings to you ever again."

"Huh?" Ms. Gotou's eyes widened at my words.

I continued, undeterred. "You say you love me."

"I do..."

"But now isn't the time."

"Yeah."

"Then when you think the time is right, I'd like you to confess your feelings to me."

Her breath caught in her throat. It seemed like my ultimatum had come as a complete surprise.

I felt a little better. Gathering momentum, I pressed on.

"You always make other people do the talking, and I'm not going to fall for it anymore."

"No, that's not what I—"

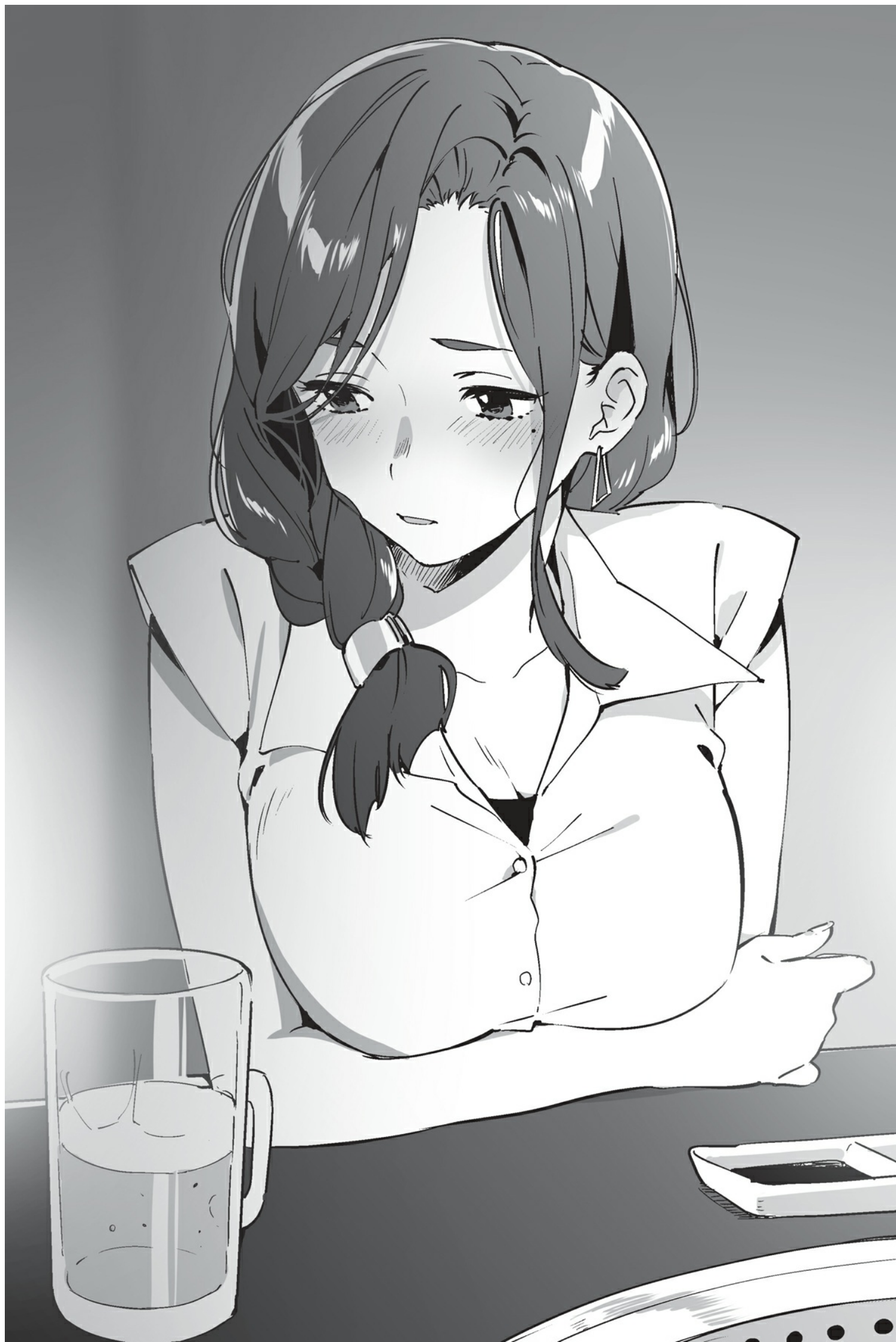
"If it's not intentional, that's even worse!"

Ms. Gotou puffed out her cheeks. "N-no need to get angry! Do you really love me?"

"I do! That's why I'm pissed!"

Her strange suggestiveness and the glances she always tossed my way—

clearly meant to provoke. The way she made it sound like she was leaving everything up to me when there was really only one choice on the table. I hated all these things she did that got me so worked up, but at the same time, they were what drew me to her.



“It just hurts how you make my heart race and then leave me hanging,” I said plainly. “If you really love me, then it’s not fair unless I get to play with your feelings a little, too.”

I paused, yanked my glass off the table, and gulped down a mouthful of beer.

A small drop of it escaped from the corner of my mouth.

I set the glass back down with a thud.

“Ahhh...” A sigh escaped from my mouth. “There. I said it...”

I had told her exactly what was on my mind. I had finally said it. My affection for her and everything that came with it had been stressing me out. As much as I liked her, there was definitely a side to her I found trying.

It was like two opposite sides of the same coin. She both made my chest feel tight and set my nerves on edge.

Now that I’d let her know exactly how I felt, it was like the weight on my heart had suddenly lifted.

Ms. Gotou stared at me blankly, then snickered.

“That’s what you’ve always wanted to say to me?”

“Yes, very much so.”

“For five whole years?”

“Yes.”

When she heard my answer, she started cackling.

“You really do love me, don’t you, Yoshida?”

“I told you I did, didn’t I...?”

I’m the meat you’ve been cooking for five years.

I decided this metaphor was a bit much, so I chose not to say it out loud.

“I understand,” she said. “Fine. I’ll confess to you next time.”

“Please do.”

“I don’t know when it’ll be, but... Will you wait for me?”

I held back my impulse to immediately say “yes.” I couldn’t let her set the pace; I knew now how she felt about me, but I needed to stand up to her or else everything would go her way.

“I mean, who knows? Maybe someone better will come by before then.”

“So your feelings for me are really that shallow?” She pouted.

“No, that’s not what I meant.” I took a swig of my beer. “I just mean, if you cook your meat too long, you’ll burn it.”

I settled for a tasteless joke.

Ms. Gotou chuckled and nodded. “All right. I’ll be careful not to overcook it, then.” With that, she took a sip of her beer as well.

For a little while, we hid our mutual embarrassment by silently stuffing our mouths full of meat from our plates and gulping down a few sips of beer.

“I answered, you know,” Ms. Gotou said slowly.

I knew what she was hinting at. It was my turn.

Ms. Gotou had given a very clear answer to my question. I felt it was only fair to answer her question with full honesty in return.

“So what are you curious about?” First, I needed to get confirmation. “Did you want to ask whether I have a girlfriend?”

Going by what she’d said so far, it had to be something along those lines.

At my direct question, she seemed taken aback for a moment. Then she nodded and put down the chopsticks she had been holding.

“...Why else would you suddenly start turning down business trips? You never have before.”

“Well, I mean, that’s not the only possible reason...”

I couldn’t simply deny what she was saying. If I was in her position, with the same suspicions, I might’ve had the same thought process.

It wasn’t like I regretted how seriously I had taken my work in the past, but I never expected it to be turned against me like this.

However, if her question was whether or not I had a girlfriend, I could answer with confidence. I looked Ms. Gotou right in the eyes and spoke.

“There’s no other woman. Ever since I joined the company, I’ve only ever had eyes for you.”

This blunt statement left Ms. Gotou speechless, her mouth hanging half open, and she averted her eyes from me with a start.

“I—I see...” She shifted her gaze aimlessly around the table, nodding. “Well, I don’t think you’re lying, at least. Your eyes dart all over the place when you lie.”

“Like a world-class high jumper, I’m told.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Remembering Asami’s remark, I’d quietly tried it out for myself. However, I didn’t have the courage to say it twice. That aside, it seemed I was quite well-known as a horrible liar. I had no idea even Ms. Gotou thought of me that way.

“Why, then?” No matter how hard I tried to dodge the subject, she persisted. “Why did you turn down the trips?”

I swallowed slowly. I’d already decided that I wasn’t going to lie. I would just have to tell her the truth, choosing my words carefully in order to cause as little trouble as possible. I steeled myself for what might come next.

“I don’t have a girlfriend, but I’ve got someone living with me now. Someone much younger. A minor, actually.”

Ms. Gotou’s brow furrowed at my explanation. “What? Why? What do you mean?”

“It’s exactly how it sounds. I’m currently sharing my home with a minor. That’s why I don’t want to leave it unattended for too long.”

“No, I get that part. It’s just...” Ms. Gotou looked around in confusion and tilted her head. “This...minor. Who is this kid to you?”

“Our families used to live in the same neighborhood. We’ve known each other for a long time.” I took care not to let my eyes wander as I said this. Ms.

Gotou stared at me and listened to me speak.

“...Okay. So why does this old acquaintance of yours live with you now?”

“Apparently, they ran away from home. There was no one else to turn to.”

That wasn't a lie.

“When did this start?”

“A few months ago.”

Ms. Gotou nodded a few times in response, looking strangely convinced.

“I see. So that's why you hurry home... And just to be clear...” My ears had no trouble picking up the icy drop in her tone. “Is this kid a boy? Or a girl?”

I had been pretty sure that question was coming. The meaning of us “living together” would change greatly according to the answer I gave. And yet, the moment she put the question out there, I realized that she already had a lot of things figured out.

“Do I really need to tell you?”

Ms. Gotou averted her gaze and licked her lower lip, obviously conflicted.

“Yoshida... I'm sure you know this, but...that's a hairbreadth away from being a crime, you know? Some runaway girl staying at an adult man's apartment?”

“I know that.”

“I hate to ask, but nothing weird has gone on between the two of you, right?” Ms. Gotou's tone was severe. Her usual soft, unwavering smile had disappeared to make way for a serious expression. She was looking me right in the eyes.

“I've done absolutely nothing of the sort. I would never touch a woman unless I was serious about her,” I answered bluntly.

Ms. Gotou held my gaze for a few more seconds, then closed her eyes and let out a big sigh. “...I see. That's good, then.”

She took another gulp of beer and stared at her glass as if in contemplation. Then she closed her eyes again, let out another deep sigh, and began to speak. “...Yoshida.”

“What is it?”

She turned to look at me. “I’m still not satisfied.”

“Huh?”

“You told me that you love me.”

“I did, and I do.”

“Yeah, I know. But...” Ms. Gotou scowled and looked away for a moment. Soon, a clear look of dissatisfaction had permeated her entire face. “But it doesn’t sit right with me for you to say that while you’ve been living with another woman every day for months—”

“Come on—she’s not *another woman*. She’s just some kid. Nothing’s ever going to happen between us.”

“That’s not it. That’s not my point, Yoshida,” Ms. Gotou snapped back at me. “I know you can be a real gentleman, and it’s obvious from your attitude that you don’t see her that way.”

“Then what are you so—?”

“People’s values change every day,” Ms. Gotou cut in, interrupting me. “You might think that way today. But what about tomorrow? Or the day after? While I’m home alone, you’re spending time with that girl. You never know when your feelings toward her might change.”

“No, I’m telling you, I would never even consider falling in love with a high schooler.”

“For the time being. And there are lots of high schoolers who act older than their age. How can I know that you won’t one day wake up and find her attractive?”

“Ms. Gotou.”

“And besides, even if you don’t have any romantic feelings, what about her? If she falls for you and suddenly corners you, will you be able to say no? One thing might lead to another, and—”

“Ms. Gotou!” I raised my voice, making her flinch back and stop talking.

I continued slowly, my tone reproving. "Nothing will happen between us. I mean it."

"...Honestly? You swear?"

"I swear. Do I need to pinkie swear?" I asked, lifting up my right pinkie finger. Ms. Gotou stared at it for a moment and snickered.

"Why are you treating me like a little kid all of a sudden?"

"I'm not..."

"I know... I got a little emotional. I'm sorry."

Ms. Gotou bowed slightly and brought the last bite of meat from her plate to her mouth. She chewed on it a couple of times, then let out a small huff from her nose.

"This tastes so good."

"Glad to hear it."

She continued to eat in silence for a few minutes, her eyes downcast like a sulking child. I spent this time taking small sips of my beer and not saying a word. A glance at my watch showed that it was past eight PM. Sayu would probably be finishing her dinner about now.

"...Yoshida." Ms. Gotou called my name. When I looked up, I found her sitting in front of me, looking far less confident than usual. "...You won't let a little girl steal you from me, will you?" she asked, gazing up at me.

I felt goose bumps spread all over my body. "Ms. Gotou..."

She was making a face I'd never seen before. The simple thought that I'd been the one to draw it out of her made my body tremble with emotion, although I wasn't sure whether it was pure joy or a sense of superiority that I was feeling.

To put it bluntly, it excited me.

I looked away from her and continued. "It's been five years. The woman I've been in love with for five years just told me she loves me. How could any other woman possibly win me over?"

My reply made her blush a little, and she averted her gaze.

A strange silence fell over us, and Ms. Gotou pointedly cleared her throat.

When I turned back, I found the familiar, confident Ms. Gotou wearing her usual gentle smile.

“Well, if you’re absolutely sure...” She cocked her head a little, and one corner of her mouth turned up in a smirk. “Let me meet her.”

My mind went blank.

Meet? Let who?

Ms. Gotou.

Meet whom?

Sayu.

And where would they be meeting?

“Uh, well...”

Cold sweat started pouring out of my body, but Ms. Gotou wasn’t backing down.

“I’m saying I want to go to your place, Yoshida.”

“Wait a second! Hold on!”

“You don’t have anything to be ashamed of, do you?”

“I don’t, but you can’t!”

“Why not?”

Her simple question left me stammering.

“Wh-why not...? Uh...”

“Is it really more trouble to invite me over than it is to live with a high school girl?”

“.....” I was at a complete loss for words.

Ms. Gotou gave a satisfied nod. “All right. It’s decided, then.”

I hadn’t said a word.

My silence had been as good as permission.

Chapter 6 Loneliness

Sorry, Ms. Gotou invited me to dinner tonight, so I'll be eating out.

I noticed I had a message from Mr. Yoshida the moment the pot of meat-and-potato stew finished cooking. Although this left me a little conflicted, I was simply grateful that he'd gotten in touch with me. I had no right to control his actions in the first place.

Got it! Have fun!

Even so, Mr. Yoshida was probably feeling guilty about skipping dinner with me, so I wanted my text to give the impression that I didn't mind at all.

I put my phone back into the pocket of my sweatpants and lifted the lid off the pot. The white steam that wafted out from it was accompanied by a gentle, salty scent, which drifted up my nose and straight down into my stomach.

"This looks good," I said to myself as I used a pair of cooking chopsticks to grab a single piece of potato from the pot. I blew on it before taking a bite. The flavor of the soup base and the aroma from the small amount of bonito stock I had added greeted my nostrils.

"This turned out so delicious..."

With a nod, I switched off the stove, then sat down in the hallway kitchen.

The scent of the stew filling the hall made my stomach growl, but I wasn't in the mood to have dinner right away.

"Poor Mr. Yoshida," I muttered quietly, "missing out on such a good, freshly made meat-and-potato stew..." I chuckled to myself. But before long, I let out a sigh.

Right about now, Mr. Yoshida would be eating dinner with Ms. Gotou, the object of his affection. They might be going to some fancy restaurant, or maybe they'd have barbecue like last time.

Come to think of it, I had no idea what Mr. Yoshida was like outside of the apartment. What was he like at work? What kind of relationships did he foster, and what did he do for fun?

There must be so many expressions he made only for other people—ones I'd never had the chance to see.

When Mr. Yoshida looked at me, all he saw was a child. It pained me that he didn't recognize me as the "woman" I was. This wasn't necessarily a bad thing; that was the reason we were able to live together so easily, and it was also a strong testament to his good character. However, as an adolescent girl, the fact that he was not even slightly interested in me as a woman left me with mixed feelings.

If I were Ms. Gotou...

For some reason, I found myself pondering that idea.

If my body were like Ms. Gotou's, would Mr. Yoshida put his hands on me? Mr. Yoshida told me before that her breasts were bigger than mine, but mine were actually pretty big for my age. If these weren't enough to arouse Mr. Yoshida, I couldn't help but wonder what kind of monster-size breasts Ms. Gotou had.

I wondered what sort of looks Mr. Yoshida gave Ms. Gotou. Try as I might, I had a hard time imagining any.

However, attempting to envision his face when he looked at her did make me a little gloomy inside. I was pretty sure these feelings didn't stem from romance or love or anything like that. And yet, the possibility of him looking at someone else in a way he didn't look at me made me uncomfortable.

"I just don't get it...," I grumbled, resting my head against the hallway wall.

I knew that I'd changed in a lot of ways since moving in with Mr. Yoshida, and I still wasn't sure whether those changes were good or bad.

However, I knew I felt much more at peace with myself than I had before. About that, at least, I was certain.

And the person who'd made me feel that way was none other than Mr. Yoshida.

He'd given me all he could, then told me to do whatever I liked. That's why I didn't want to impede on his freedom, either. I tried to cause as little trouble for him as possible while supporting him as much as I could. I had decided that was how I was going to live my life for now.

I opened the rice cooker, and the faint scent of freshly cooked rice rose up with a cloud of steam. I scooped some rice into my bowl—the one that had been reserved for guests until I moved in—and ladled some meat-and-potato stew into a slightly concave plate meant for side dishes.

I had intended to make another vegetable-based dish as well, but I lost interest in cooking the moment I found out Mr. Yoshida wouldn't be coming home. I didn't mind having only one dish to go with the rice if I was just cooking for myself.

“Time to eat.”

I clasped my hands together, picked up my chopsticks, and brought some meat-and-potato stew to my mouth. It was pretty delicious, if I did say so myself. The corners of my mouth turned up on their own, then drooped down again almost immediately.

Good stuff.

That was what Mr. Yoshida always said whenever I'd done a good job on a dish. He never failed to let me know what he thought about my cooking each and every time. He didn't wax lyrical about the ingredients and seasonings like some food critic from a cooking show, but I appreciated his simple feedback.

I put some stew in my mouth and chewed.

Then I took a mouthful of white rice.

As I continued to eat in silence, I began to taste the stew's flavor getting weaker and weaker.

“Somehow,” I muttered to myself, “it’s lost its flavor.”

This empty feeling was familiar to me. It reminded me of being back in Hokkaido...

“Your omelets are always so good, Sayu.”

An old friend’s voice played back in my mind.

No sooner had the memory returned to me than goose bumps sprang up on my back, and I broke out in a cold sweat.

I rushed into the bathroom before another thought could enter my head.

“...Blegh.”

I immediately threw up the stew and rice I had just eaten into the toilet. My throat was burning, and yet my stomach felt freezing cold. I couldn’t stop trembling.

But gradually, my breathing returned to normal, and my nausea subsided. I flushed the toilet.

I slowly rose to my feet, but my toes felt a little numb, so I couldn’t really tell if they were actually touching the ground.

So in the end...

Even though I’d come this far, I still hadn’t escaped my past.

Every time I recalled that dear friend, I was overcome with nausea.

But why had I suddenly thought of her? She hadn’t come to mind once since I’d moved in with Mr. Yoshida.

It didn’t take long to figure out the answer.

It was because Mr. Yoshida wasn’t here today. On top of that, I’d become accustomed to my new life, so I wasn’t as overwhelmed by everything anymore.

Had Mr. Yoshida come home like he normally did, this never would have happened.

The thought made me sigh.

“I haven’t changed at all...”

I say that everything's my fault, but deep inside, I always put the blame on someone else.

Having completely lost my appetite, I took a plastic bottle of barley tea from the fridge and had a few sips. That was when the cell phone I'd left on the desk in the living room began to buzz. The only contact I had on the messaging app was Mr. Yoshida, so if my phone was going off it had to be a message from him.

I glanced at the clock on the wall and saw it had been no more than an hour since Mr. Yoshida told me he wouldn't be home for dinner.

It was still too early for him to be heading home. He was eating with the woman he loved, after all; it was only natural that he'd drag out their meal for as long as possible.

I looked at my phone's screen and saw a message notification from Mr. Yoshida.

Sorry, this is really last minute, but...

It was only a notification, so the rest was cut off in the preview. I swiped the screen to open the messaging app.

What I saw when I opened the conversation with Mr. Yoshida made my eyes go wide with shock.

Sorry, this is really last minute, but I'm bringing Ms. Gotou over tonight.

...Bringing her over?

To this apartment?

I felt a sharp pain in my chest.

This was an adult man bringing home the woman he loved. It wasn't hard to imagine this would be more than just a guest paying a visit.

As upset as this news made me, I had no intention of opposing Mr. Yoshida's decision.

Oh! Should I go stay someplace else tonight, then?

I typed this out quickly before putting the phone back on the desk. Then I slumped down next to it.

Mr. Yoshida, here, this very night, with Ms. Gotou...

I almost started imagining the details before banging my head against the desk.

“I’m such an idiot. That’s his business.”

Why was it making me so upset?

Mr. Yoshida might be starting something with the woman he’d spent years longing for. Shouldn’t I be happy for him?

But...

It wasn’t more than a few seconds before I was overcome with anxiety.

If Mr. Yoshida and Ms. Gotou began a romantic relationship, my presence would almost certainly be in their way. It would be practically impossible for him to hide me from her, and he wouldn’t be able to call her over whenever he pleased.

That would mean...

I...

“I guess I’ll be thrown out again...”

Saying these words out loud made my chest feel tight.

And yet, despite my misery, the image of Mr. Yoshida’s smile—that shy one he occasionally showed me—flashed across my mind.

If my going away could make Mr. Yoshida smile like that, it might be enough for me.

That was the thought I settled on.

The phone on the desk began to buzz again, so I sat up to look at the message on the screen.

No, it’s not like that...

When I read the rest of the message, my mind went blank.

Ms. Gotou says she wants to meet you.

“Huh?”

A wild yelp escaped my lips.

How did Ms. Gotou know about me? The only possible explanation was that Mr. Yoshida had decided to tell her. But if that was the case, how had he explained our situation? And why had she said she wanted to meet me?

My mind was suddenly flooded with questions.

I couldn't sit still as these doubts swirled around in my mind. I propped my elbows on the living room desk and crossed and recrossed my legs.

Then, at last...

If that's okay with you, Mr. Yoshida, it's okay with me.

It had probably taken me more than ten minutes to reply.

Chapter 7 Meeting

“It really is cramped, though.”

“I told you I don’t care, didn’t I?”

“No, really. I think it’ll be smaller than you’re expecting.”

“It’s fine, I swear.”

After we finished eating, Ms. Gotou and I had taken the train to my local station.

As we exited the ticket gates, I felt my anxiety suddenly start to build. My stomach went cold, and my pulse began to race.

“Oh, wow! There’s a movie theater!”

“Yeah... It’s been there for quite a while.”

“Do you go often?”

“No, not really.”

“Hmm... A theater so close to home and you never go.”

“Do you like movies, Ms. Gotou?”

“Not really.”

“Oh, I see...”

In that case, what was the point of this conversation? Her reaction to seeing the theater was so extreme, I had assumed she was a movie buff like Mishima.

Ms. Gotou followed me, looking around the station area as we passed. Her eyes then landed on the nearby convenience store.

“Wait. What was the girl staying at your place doing for dinner tonight? She has to be starving by now, right?”

“Oh, probably not...” I shook my head, then clenched my left hand and mimed gripping a knife with my right. “She cooks. I’m sure she’s managed to throw something together.”

At that, Ms. Gotou gave a knowing nod and side-eyed me. “...Boasting about your wife, huh?”

“Th-that’s not what I meant!”

“Ah-ha-ha! I’m only teasing!” Ms. Gotou laughed, clearly amused, then began making her way toward the convenience store.

“Do you need to get something?” I asked.

“The least I can do is bring her a present.”

“No, I’m sure she doesn’t need anything...”

“And who says you get to decide that, Yoshida?”

Ms. Gotou’s shoulders shook with laughter as she walked into the convenience store. I couldn’t imagine Sayu being happy to receive a gift from her. What I *could* vividly imagine was her glancing at me repeatedly, a troubled smile on her face.

I followed Ms. Gotou into the convenience store and found her standing in front of the dessert aisle, inspecting the shelves. Without looking at me, she asked, “Does she like sweets?”

“...I’m not sure. I don’t think she hates them, at least.”

I remembered going to a chain restaurant and watching her eat a parfait once. I couldn’t tell from her reaction whether or not she loved it, but it hadn’t looked like she was displeased, either.

“Then maybe something with cream in it might make her happy?”

“No idea...”

“Or maybe ice cream?”

“I wonder...”

Ms. Gotou suddenly cast a quick glance in my direction. We locked eyes, leaving me slightly startled.

“You don’t really know much about her, do you?” Ms. Gotou said casually, flashing me a bright smile. “All right, then. An éclair, an ice cream, and a bag of chips! I might as well just buy them all. As long as she likes one of them, I’ll call it a win.”

“You don’t have to buy her all of that...”

“No, I really do!” Ms. Gotou said cheerfully. “I’m the one who’s intruding, so I’ve got to bring her something she likes.” She began to add snack after snack to her shopping basket.

By the looks of things, she hadn’t been listening to me at all. Or...

I thought back to what Ms. Gotou had said a few minutes earlier.

You don’t really know much about her, do you?

Perhaps she’d decided that nothing I could say would be of any use.

Now that I thought about it, what did Sayu like? What did she dislike? It seemed I didn’t have a clue about the little details of her life.

“Are you going to buy anything, Yoshida?” Ms. Gotou called out to me, shocking me out of my introspection; it was only then that I realized she was standing right beside me. Her basket was loaded with items.

“Y-yeah... I think I’ll get a coffee.” I nodded, trying to disguise how lost in thought I’d been, and made my way toward the drink aisle. I grabbed a random sweetened latte, and Ms. Gotou, standing behind me, immediately snatched it from my hand.

“Uh, what?”

“I’m paying.”

“No, it’s fine. You don’t need to—”

Ms. Gotou cut me off and brought her face right up to mine. This sudden change in physical proximity shut me right up.

“I’m inviting myself over, so it’s my treat. Got it?”

“Uh, okay...” I nodded in acquiescence, and Ms. Gotou grinned and headed toward the register.

I watched her from behind and sighed.

She always moved at her own pace, with no regard for mine.

Once she had paid, we leisurely made our way toward my home.

Had I been alone, I would have walked much faster, but Ms. Gotou was wearing high heels. If I didn’t match her strides, she would be exhausted by the time we got there.

I usually made this walk alone, so having somebody with me and hearing the loud *click-clack* of her heels reverberate into the night air was strangely refreshing.

“Hey, what’s her name?” Ms. Gotou asked me out of nowhere.

“Huh?”

“The kid’s name. What should I call her?”

“Oh...”

She was asking about Sayu.

I hesitated over whether I should share her name without her permission, but Ms. Gotou would just ask her anyway.

“Her name’s Sayu.”

“Sayu. Has a nice ring to it.” Ms. Gotou nodded, then continued her line of questioning. “And what’s her last name?”

“Her last name? I’m not sure... I feel like I saw it when she showed me her school ID, but I didn’t really take note of what it was.”

Ms. Gotou burst out laughing. I turned to see what was wrong, but she was already looking this way, a mischievous expression on her face.

“You were neighbors for so long, but you don’t know her last name? That’s really odd.”

I opened and closed my mouth, trying to respond, but no words came out.

She'd caught me.

I'd lied to Ms. Gotou about my relationship with Sayu when we were chatting at the barbecue place. I'd taken extra care not to let my eyes dart around the room, and because she didn't especially push the issue, I had assumed I was in the clear.

And yet, here I was, caught red-handed; she must have suspected something all along.

I cast Ms. Gotou a sideways glance. She still seemed as upbeat as ever, clacking her heels as she walked along the street.

It didn't seem like she was going to press me on the issue of Sayu's last name. She was simply smiling in her usual relaxed manner, making it impossible to tell what she was thinking. I had always found that mysteriousness attractive, but at this moment, it was making me uncomfortable.

After that, Ms. Gotou stayed away from the subject of Sayu and continued to make small talk instead. Then, before we knew it, we'd reached my home.

"...Could I actually ask you to wait here a second?"

"Hmm? Why?"

When we reached the door to my apartment and I'd turned the key in the lock, I suddenly chickened out.

"It's just, I think I forgot to tidy up."

"Huh? Didn't you tell me Sayu did the housework?"

"No, well, she does, but what if she's missed a spot?"

"You never know when to admit defeat, do you, Yoshida?" She smirked and placed her hand on the doorknob. I frantically held the door shut, and Ms. Gotou responded with an even more artificial smile. She was practically grinning ear to ear. Then she grabbed hold of the doorknob with both hands and wrenched open the door with all her might. This was completely unexpected. I had been holding the door shut with just one hand, and this caused me to lose my grip and let go. The front door suddenly swung open with great force, and when I looked inside, I found Sayu standing in the hallway, her mouth agape.

She looked at Ms. Gotou and me in turn, then silently cocked her head in bewilderment.

“I-I’m home...,” I said.

Sayu finally forced a smile and exhaled.

“Welcome back...”

I looked to my side and found that Ms. Gotou was the only one with a genuine, cheerful grin.

“Good evening, Sayu. My name is Gotou.”

Ms. Gotou looked Sayu directly in the eyes as she introduced herself, then extended a plastic bag of groceries with one hand.

“How about a snack?”

Sayu smiled vaguely and glanced at me.

See? This is exactly what I predicted would happen.

The expression on Sayu’s face was almost exactly how I had imagined it.

Ms. Gotou followed Sayu’s gaze to me, then smirked. “So, how long do I have to stand here waiting?”

“Oh, sorry! Come in, come in...”

Sayu and I both looked uneasy as we led Ms. Gotou through the entryway and closed the door.

I could feel cold sweat running down my back. I desperately tried to imagine what Ms. Gotou was going to say to Sayu, but nothing sensible came to mind.



“Do you like sweet things?” she asked.

“Yeah, I do...,” Sayu replied.

Ms. Gotou was moving at her own pace, wearing a big grin, just as she always did. Meanwhile, panic-stricken Sayu muttered quiet, faltering responses to her questions. Standing behind them and glancing from one to the other, I couldn’t help but sigh.

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“Ah-ha-ha! So you’re basically telling me you picked her up off the street and let her stay with you? You’ve been keeping quite the secret from me, Yoshida.”

It was the first time I had met Ms. Gotou, but she was exactly the kind of woman Mr. Yoshida had described, and she was even more difficult to read than I had imagined.

Neither Mr. Yoshida nor I was able to hide anything from her.

Ms. Gotou spent her entire visit munching on snacks and throwing out question after question, politely ignoring all our attempts at deflection.

At some point, Mr. Yoshida and I completely gave up and began answering honestly.

“Yoshida hasn’t done anything weird to you, has he, Sayu?”

“Hey, Ms. Gotou!”

Ms. Gotou put on a mischievous smile as she sized us both up. I could see out of the corner of my eye that Mr. Yoshida was in a clear state of panic, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

What are you so worried about, Mr. Yoshida? You refused me every time.

“Not at all. It actually surprised me.”

Ms. Gotou narrowed her eyes and nodded in response. “It surprised you, huh?” She fixed me with a piercing stare, and my eyes darted away in panic. Her stare was really hard to handle. It felt like she was peering into the depths of my soul.

“Well, to be fair, Yoshida doesn’t seem interested in younger women. I guess that’s lucky for you, too, Sayu.”

“I wouldn’t have put a hand on her even if I was interested.”

“Oh?” said Ms. Gotou. “Are you sure about that?”

“Hey! I’m not that kind of guy!”

“Ah-ha-ha! I was just kidding!”

Ms. Gotou kept teasing Mr. Yoshida, and each time, he would respond by getting slightly embarrassed. Their interactions should’ve brought a smile to my face. They made it clear exactly what kind of friendship—and more—they’d built up over the years they’d worked together. I should have found it wonderful, but for some reason, something about it rubbed me the wrong way.

Just what was I being shown here?

When I hung my head, suppressing my gloomy thoughts, I sensed that Ms. Gotou, who was sitting in front of me, had lowered her face slightly. She was peering at me. I looked up and met her gaze.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Uh, no... It’s nothing.”

“Your face says otherwise.”

The grin on Ms. Gotou’s face didn’t budge. She tilted her head to the side, maintaining her stare.

Ugh, that smile. I really wished she’d give it a rest. It felt like that smile of hers was concealing her true nature. The fact that I couldn’t guess what lay beneath was so creepy, I kept losing the courage to reply.

“Really, it’s nothing,” I said in an attempt to keep up appearances. “I think I just ate too much for dinner.”

“I see,” said Ms. Gotou. She nodded and asked no further questions. I was sure she was aware that my answer was just an excuse, but she didn’t press me. Although it was a relief, I still felt uneasy.

“Speaking of, what did you have?” asked Mr. Yoshida, in order to break the

awkward silence. I looked at him appreciatively before responding.

“Meat-and-potato stew. It turned out pretty good.”

“Oh, really? Too bad I couldn’t have had any when it was fresh.”

“Yep. Eat plenty of it for breakfast tomorrow morning to make up for it.”

“Sure thing.”

Ms. Gotou started laughing as she listened to our usual chatter. Once her shoulders stopped shaking, a bright smile appeared on her face. “You guys are like a couple of newlyweds.”

“Come on—I told you to stop saying stuff like that.”

Mr. Yoshida’s reaction just made Ms. Gotou laugh even harder. She had an almost childish quality to her face when she was laughing.

“I’m gonna use the bathroom.”

“Okaaay, we’ll be here,” Ms. Gotou called out.

Mr. Yoshida stood up and made his way down the hallway toward the bathroom.

Ms. Gotou and I were left behind in the living room.

I broke out in a cold sweat. What should I talk about? Did we even need to talk in the first place? Then Ms. Gotou exhaled through her nose and started speaking, her voice quiet.

“Hey, Sayu.”

“...Yes?”

We locked eyes. The secretive smile she’d been wearing before had disappeared from her face. All that remained was a gentle expression and her piercing gaze.

“There’s something I wanted to discuss, just the two of us.”

“Just the two of us?”

“That’s right.” Ms. Gotou nodded, raising an index finger with purpose. “I have some things I want to ask you, and I imagine you’re the same, right? So...”

I found her knowing expression irritating, but she was right; there was one thing I was desperate to ask. She was, indirectly, presenting me with a potential trade. She was telling me that, as long as I provided her with the opportunity to speak to me alone, she would answer my question.

What a sly woman. At this point, there was only one choice I could make.

“I’ll try to buy some time,” I said.

Ms. Gotou grinned and gave a small bow.

“Thanks.”

“Sure...”

I looked away from her and waited for Mr. Yoshida to come back from the bathroom. It must have been only a few minutes, but it felt like so much longer.

Finally, I heard the toilet flush, and a few moments later, Mr. Yoshida emerged from the bathroom. I turned toward him and delivered the line I had prepared.

“Mr. Yoshida! Sorry, but I forgot to buy ingredients for tomorrow’s breakfast.”

He froze for a moment, then cocked his head. “Then just toss something together using whatever we have.”

“No, you need to have a proper breakfast.”

“Still, if you haven’t gone shopping, there’s not much else we can do about it.”

“No, I mean...” As bad as it felt to mislead Mr. Yoshida, I pasted a fake smile on my face. “Do you mind going to buy them for me? It’s already after ten, so I’ll get taken into custody if the police spot me...”

Mr. Yoshida furrowed his brow at my explanation, then looked at Ms. Gotou and me in turn. “Sure, but...will you two be all right alone?”

“We’ll be fine. We’re enjoying having a little chat, aren’t we, Sayu?”

“Uh, yeah... Yeah, it’ll be fine. Is that okay?”

Ms. Gotou flashed Mr. Yoshida a natural smile. When he saw me nod, he gave a small sigh and agreed.

“What do you need?”

“Eggs, garlic chives, and miso.”

“Got it.”

Mr. Yoshida cast one last glance toward Ms. Gotou; grabbed his wallet and cigarettes from his work bag, which was set against the wall in the hallway; and headed to the front door.

“I’m gonna have a smoke while I’m out, so I might be gone awhile.”

“Got it. Take care.”

He left the apartment, closing the door behind him.

For a few moments, silence filled the room.

“All right, then,” Ms. Gotou began. I looked up to find her once again staring directly at me with that piercing gaze. “So, mind if I ask first?”

“...Okay.” When I nodded, Ms. Gotou smiled again. It was different from the one she’d shown me earlier, though; this smile was somewhat troubled.

“Is it true that you’re a high school student?”

“Yes.”

“Where’d you come from?”

For a moment, my words stuck in my throat. I wondered whether I should tell her the truth. However, I knew she’d see right through any lie I might attempt.

This wasn’t a matter of whether or not to tell the truth. With her, being honest was the only choice I had.

I swallowed, then continued. “I’m from...Hokkaido.”

“When did you run away from home?”

“More than half a year ago.”

Hearing my response didn’t result in any notable change to Ms. Gotou’s expression. She simply continued piling on the questions.

“Why did you run away from home?”

That one threatened to bring back all sorts of memories of Asahikawa, so I shook my head. "...I don't want to answer that."

"...Okay, I understand." Ms. Gotou nodded quietly. "I won't ask about what caused you to run away from home or how you ended up coming here."

Ms. Gotou's tone of voice was gentle; I knew she'd gotten a feel for my state of mind from the way I answered her. I was glad I hadn't lied to her. It was unnerving that her true feelings were so hard to read, but it was evident that she was speaking to me with the utmost respect. There was no way I could be dishonest with someone who was treating me so respectfully.

"However..." I could sense a slight drop in Ms. Gotou's tone. "There's one thing I need to clear up," she declared, staring at me intently. I returned her gaze. Her eyes felt like they could swallow me up. My heart was starting to race.

"As Yoshida's friend but someone who doesn't know you, I'm in a unique position to ask this," she began, smiling.

The next moment, her smile was gone, and she shot me a piercing, cold glare. "How long do you intend to stay here?" She cocked her head slightly as she spoke.

My heart skipped a beat.

I had asked myself the same question many times since I moved in with Mr. Yoshida. And now she'd confronted me once again with that hazy doubt I'd put on hold for so long.

Chapter 8 Reality

I opened my mouth to speak, but I knew that I had nothing to say.

“I...,” I started, then shut my mouth again. A minute passed, or maybe even longer. Ms. Gotou and I may have spent five whole minutes without speaking.

“No answer, huh?” she said, breaking the silence and smiling kindly at me. Her tone wasn’t one of reproach; she was just making sure.

Ms. Gotou looked down at the desk for a moment, her eyes wandering over it as if she was choosing her words very carefully.

“...Middle schoolers and high schoolers are special.” I could see a hint of sorrow appear in Ms. Gotou’s eyes as she said this. “No matter how hard they may try or how grown-up they may act, at the end of the day, a high schooler is still a high schooler. As frustrating as it is, they can’t become anything else.” Ms. Gotou spoke in a singsong voice without looking me in the eyes. “That’s how powerful a status it is.”

Then she lifted up her head and looked my way. “You can change your location and you can stop wearing your uniform, but you’ll still be a high schooler—and nothing else.”

Her words dug away, sharp and precise, at the weakness in my heart.

I had already been vaguely aware of this. Even when I abandoned my old environment and ran away to someplace new, I was still treated as a high school girl, no matter where I went. All the men I’d met before had sex with me because I was a high school girl and they thought I was cute. Beyond that, they saw me as an inconvenience—just a runaway schoolgirl who had overstayed her welcome. That’s why I’d ended up moving from one place to the next. Mr.

Yoshida, on the other hand, thought of me like a child for the same reason.

“Yoshida might let you get away with this, but society won’t.”

Hearing Ms. Gotou’s words made my heart ache, but at the same time, I could feel the murky uneasiness within me dissipate.

Mr. Yoshida never once asked me for the things the other men had. He simply let me stay with him. As long as I did the bare minimum of housework, he would never say a word about how I spent the rest of my time. This lifestyle brought me great relief, but it also filled me with doubt.

I had turned and fled from all the unpleasant things in my life.

Was it really okay for me to be living so peacefully? Was this allowed?

Ms. Gotou had given me my answer.

It wasn’t.

“...Thank you very much.” Before I even realized what I was saying, the words had already escaped my lips.

Her shoulders twitched in surprise at my response, and she stared at me.

“I think...I needed someone to tell me that.” I felt like the words were spilling out of my heart, one after another. “I wanted to run away from everything, to find comfort, but...at the same time, maybe I wanted someone to tell me not to run away.”

Ms. Gotou sat there and listened, not saying a word.

“Mr. Yoshida told me very clearly that there was something wrong with my attitude. Before I came here, I stayed with lots of different men... In exchange, I offered my body.”

My statement made Ms. Gotou’s eyes widen for a moment, but then she bit her bottom lip and hung her head. “That’s...”

“I really wasn’t in my right mind. I would let any man have me in exchange for a few days’ board. It even gave me a little pleasure, being desired by them. But —” I cut myself off.

Mr. Yoshida’s face sprang to mind.

He was the only one who hadn't let me make that easy choice.

"...Mr. Yoshida never put a hand on me. Actually...he once told me he'd knock some sense into me."

"Pfft!"

Ms. Gotou had been listening with a serious look on her face, but at that, she burst out laughing.

"I'm so sorry. I know this is no time to laugh, but...hee-hee!" She shook her head repeatedly and vibrated with laughter. "I can so clearly imagine him saying that. It's so...him," she said, turning to me with a gentle expression. "Good for you. You found a place where you can feel comfortable."

"...Yeah." I felt tears start to well up but managed to hold them back.

"It sounds like Yoshida's completely accepted you. And you trust him, too. That was clear from the way you two were talking to each other." Ms. Gotou tapped her index finger on the desk as she continued. "You can let him spoil you. There's no need to fight back when someone who accepts you treats you well."

As she spoke, she stood up and sat back down beside me. She then placed a hand on top of mine and squeezed it tightly. Her hands were cold.

"But no matter how much Yoshida accepts you, this can only last as long as society allows your disappearance. You understand what I'm saying, right?"

"I understand."

"So you need to consider things, even if you take it slow. About where you'll go and what you'll do...in the future." Ms. Gotou peered at me from her seat right next to mine. The look in her eyes was serious, as if she was asking me something important. I found myself wondering if this was who she really was, though I had no real proof.

"...I was willing to do anything to escape from my past and my old surroundings. Well... In a way, I still haven't."

"Mm-hmm."

"Just remembering it makes me want to throw up, so I can't imagine anything

worse than going back.”

“I see.”

“But...I do realize I can’t go on like this. Mr. Yoshida can’t provide for me my whole life. So...” I breathed out slowly and said each word separately, as if I was checking them one by one: “I have to face my past.”

That past I never wanted to think about again.

My best friend’s smile surfaced in my mind, then disappeared again. I wanted to forget what had happened, but I knew I shouldn’t.

“I’ll...make up my mind.”

I thought of my mother. I doubted she was waiting for me.

Then I thought of my older brother, who was probably worried sick.

“I promise I’ll leave and go back to where I came from. For my own sake...and for Mr. Yoshida’s.”

Once I’d said this, I paused to look at Ms. Gotou, who smiled and placed a hand on my shoulder.

“...Well said,” she whispered, wrapping her arm around my shoulders. “If that’s true, then everything will be all right.” She spoke softly into my ear. “Being a high school student is an important time in your life. It feels like it’ll last forever when you’re stuck in the middle of it, but...”

I felt her tone of voice change, as if she was reflecting on her own memories, speaking to someone who wasn’t here. “Those years are actually incredibly short.”

Then Ms. Gotou moved her hand from my shoulder to place it on top of my head, gently stroking my hair. “So face what you have to, and let people take care of you while you still can... Make the most of your time as a high schooler. You might not be attending school, but that doesn’t make you any less of one.”

Her words slowly worked their way into my heart, and I could feel my eyes welling up again. This time, I didn’t manage to hold back the tears; they poured out from the corners of my eyes.

My mind was so full of contradictions.

I wanted to run away from everything, and yet I knew I shouldn't. I didn't want anyone to pay attention to me, but I still wanted to be desired. I found my status as a high schooler constricting but was overcome with anxiety at the idea I might no longer even be one.

It was so inconsistent, and yet it was all part of my truth.

Ms. Gotou held me closer to her chest and continued to stroke my head as I cried. "All the things you're feeling right now belong to you. Nobody else can do anything with them, and they have no right to, either. It's your pain and your happiness. Those things are your property, and yours alone."

The gentle tone of her voice reverberated straight into my head. This was partly because we were pressed up against each other, but it was probably also because she knew exactly what I wanted to hear. Everything she said sank in without the least bit of resistance.

"So...once you've had enough of running away...accept everything. That's your duty as a person, and your right."

"...Uh-hungh... Okay... Hngh..." I nodded emphatically as I sobbed, and Ms. Gotou continued to hold me tight. Before I realized it, I was crying out loud.

Ms. Gotou's chest felt so warm.

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"So? Didn't you have something you wanted to ask me?"

When I had finally settled down after sobbing for a while, Ms. Gotou put her teasing smile back on and posed me that question.

Oh yeah.

There *was* something I really wanted to ask her.

"...Ms. Gotou." I sniffled, then looked her straight in the eyes to show I didn't intend to let her get away.

"Are you in love with Mr. Yoshida?" Ms. Gotou's eyes opened wide, and she started to laugh.

“Where did that come from? Is that what you wanted to ask?”

“It’s important.”

“To whom?” She was answering my question with another question, and hers stung. Still, I wasn’t going to falter.

“It’s important to me and to Mr. Yoshida,” I answered honestly, keeping my gaze fixed on hers, but Ms. Gotou just looked straight back at me and laughed as if she’d just seen something amusing. She didn’t say a word.

“W-well...? Are you?” I repeated the question, losing patience with her, but Ms. Gotou simply smirked and cocked her head.

This frustrated me further, and I ended up saying something I shouldn’t have.

“Mr. Yoshida is... He’s in love with you...”

But you keep hiding your true feelings.

That was what I was trying to say.

But Ms. Gotou just snorted, then asked me another question back.

“...Does that upset you?”

“That’s beside the point!”

“Ah-ha-ha, don’t get mad! You’re so cute!” She chuckled, then finally nodded, apparently resolved. “I love him. I can’t imagine being with anyone else.”

“...Really?”

“Why would I lie about that?”

“...It’s just so hard to tell what you’re really feeling...,” I murmured in response.

She nodded, grinning. “I prefer to be called a woman of mystery.”

“I really hate that about you.”

“Ah-ha-ha, there it is!” Ms. Gotou let out a childish cackle, then followed up with a quiet sigh. “I do love him, really. I’ve had my eye on him ever since he joined our company. He’s surprisingly frank and stubborn, and he’s so adaptable to other people’s ways of living. You don’t meet many people as kind

as he is.”

She looked as if she was reflecting on something truly dear to her. It was the first time I’d seen her make such a face, and it caught me by surprise.

“I’m glad...,” I whispered before I realized what I was saying.

Ms. Gotou side-eyed me and tilted her head. “What about?”

I answered without hesitation. “I’m glad Mr. Yoshida’s love is returned. That makes me really happy.”

At that, an unfamiliar expression flashed across Ms. Gotou’s face, but she quickly covered it with a smile. I wondered what thought had triggered it. I couldn’t tell whether it was sad, fearful, or angry; it had been a complex expression that was both passionate and dispassionate at the same time.

“Yeah. It’ll be nice if we can get together without any trouble.”

“Definitely. I think it’d be great.” I nodded, and Ms. Gotou gave me another misleading smile, then crooked her neck to peer into my eyes.

“Do I...have your blessing, Sayu?”

Just as I was about to answer, an image appeared in my mind.

Mr. Yoshida and Ms. Gotou were kissing.

Then I saw Mr. Yoshida’s bashful smile as he embraced her.

“...O-of course. I’m rooting for you!”

She grinned and thanked me.

For some reason, I felt a sharp pain in my chest.

Pretending not to notice, I started chattering away.

“Please tell me if there’s anything I can do to help! I don’t know what that might be, but...just let me know! And...”

I couldn’t tell if Ms. Gotou was smiling at me or not as she watched me prattle on; her expression made it hard to tell.

Just then, the phone rang, interrupting me.

I glanced at the glowing screen and saw that it was my manager calling.

“Oh, I’m sorry. This is the boss at my part-time job... Why did he have to call now?”

“It’s fine! Go take it.”

I gave Ms. Gotou a small bow, then hurried out the door with my phone in hand; I didn’t think I should take a call from work in front of Ms. Gotou.

And this time, I was in the mood to give him a little piece of my mind.

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The moment Sayu left the apartment, I felt all the tension in my shoulders release.

“Haaah...” A sigh fell from my lips.

I must have been really nervous.

Being honest about my feelings always made me so tense.

When Yoshida told me he was allowing some high school girl to stay with him, I decided to come see what kind of shameless hussy he’d picked up. But she turned out to be nothing like I’d expected. She was, instead, a modest and polite young woman.

And I’d recognized the look on her face and that certain darkness in her eyes. I’d seen it in the mirror time and time again back when I was in high school.

“I must’ve sounded like such an old lady...”

I had obviously been preaching to her.

How must she have felt? A woman she didn’t know had appeared out of nowhere and suddenly started talking down to her. She seemed to be listening to me by the end, but she clearly had her guard up at the beginning. I’d probably made her feel uncomfortable.

I had something of a warped personality, so I wasn’t able to guide people with direct actions the way Yoshida could. However, as I put everything into words and desperately tried to convey it all to Sayu, I could see myself from an outsider’s perspective—and it had sounded pretty flimsy.

Was conveying things always this difficult? It was far too late in my life to be

making that realization.

There was no one in the office I could talk honestly with. It felt like it'd been a long time since I'd had such a difficult conversation with someone.

"Face what you have to, and let people take care of you while you still can...? Speak for yourself, Airi." I thought back on what I'd said to Sayu, and a self-deprecating smile crossed my lips.

I really did have an awful personality.

I was asking someone else to do what I never could when I was a high schooler.

Sayu had a pure heart, and our conversation had probably left her thinking that I was actually kind. That, however, couldn't have been further from the truth.

I saw my past self in her. That's all it was.

I felt like putting Sayu's life back in order would bring my past self some closure.

Yoshida must have felt the same way.

Although Sayu said that Yoshida's kindness was unconditional, somewhere in the back of his mind, he must have wanted something from her.

"Adults are so selfish..." I muttered to myself, then let out another sigh.

That's why I wanted her to live freely and be selfish, too.

"Use your current restrictions, and learn what it means to be free."

I think that's what I really wanted to tell her. But for some reason, I was unable to form the words.

But maybe Yoshida could...

I was almost certain that Yoshida could guide her down the right path.

But what shape might her growing feelings for him take?

I decided not to pursue Yoshida until I found out.

My sense that now wasn't the time had been right on the money. I didn't ever

want to yearn for something I couldn't have again.

“What’s taking him so long?”

I felt a faint desire to see his face.

Chapter 9 Coincidence

“Oh.”

“Whaaa...?”

As I was heading toward the twenty-four-hour supermarket, I ran into someone unexpected.

We both stared at each other with foolish, blank expressions for a few seconds, then simultaneously pointed.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

“What are you doing here?”

It was Mishima. She was standing in the dark street, still wearing her suit.

“Uhhh... I went to see a movie.”

“You went straight from work to the movie theater? You sure have stamina,” I remarked, taken aback. I inferred she hadn’t been home from the fact that she was still wearing her suit.

She nodded, a vague smile on her face. “There was one I just had to see.”

“Which one?”

“Uhhh... It was called *The Song of the Hydrangea*.”

“Oh yeah. They’ve got a massive poster for that one in front of the station.”

I had seen that gigantic poster every morning on my way to catch the train. I was pretty sure Hashimoto really liked the lead actress. I could vaguely recall him strongly recommending it to me, but I had only been half listening at the time and couldn’t remember the details.

“Was it good?”

“Yeah, it was... It made me cry.”

Mishima seemed less talkative than usual, and I peered at her face. I could tell she was slightly red under the eyes; that movie must have been a real tearjerker.

“That aside...” My interest had shifted away from the film and back to the topic of what she was doing in my area. “Why are you all the way out here? The station is in the opposite direction.”

I understood that she’d gotten off at my stop to see the movie, but the fact that she’d ended up so far away from the theater was a little strange. There were no shops for her to visit around here; it was just a residential area.

Mishima scratched her cheek with her index finger as she replied. “I just felt like going for a walk. Then I thought to myself, *Oh, this is where Mr. Yoshida lives.*”

“Seriously?”

“And what about you? What are you doing out?”

“Huh? Oh...”

I couldn’t tell her that Ms. Gotou was at my place.

I had come to buy ingredients for tomorrow’s breakfast, but there was something unusual about the way Sayu had asked me. It felt a little like she was trying to get me to leave. That said, I found it hard to believe she’d be so eager to be left alone with Ms. Gotou. Perhaps I was overthinking it.

“I came to buy some stuff for breakfast.”

“Oh? Do you cook your own breakfast, Mr. Yoshida? That doesn’t seem like you.”

“I don’t. Sayu cooks it.”

At my response, Mishima twitched and looked at me in surprise. “Huh? Is Sayu at your place today?”

“Yeah, obviously. She doesn’t have anywhere else to stay.”

“...I suppose you’re right.” Her response was vague yet seemed to imply something. Then she asked, “Mind if I tag along?”

“Won’t bother me, but do you enjoy watching people do their grocery shopping?”

“I’m just curious what you’re going to eat.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Mishima followed after me with a relaxed smile on her face, as if it were a totally normal thing to do.

She continued to chatter on about this and that as I searched the supermarket for garlic chives, eggs, and miso.

“Chives-and-egg stir-fry, then?”

“Yeah. Seems like it anyway.”

“Does she cook it for you often?”

“Nah, only every now and then.”

“Chives for breakfast sounds like a recipe for bad breath.”

“I do brush my teeth before I leave, y’know.”

Mishima cackled, then pointed to the contents of the basket I was holding. “Actually, are you sure that’s enough?”

“Enough what?”

“Eggs. There are only four in that box, aren’t there?”

“Well, yeah... But they were on sale, and it’s not like we need a lot of them. It’s only the two of us.” As I spoke, I realized I’d run out of beer at home. I stopped by the liquor section, but when I went to grab a can from the stack, Mishima lifted it from my grasp.

“...What?”

“I want to ask you something.”

“Yeah?”

I glared at Mishima, upset by her abruptly confiscating my beer, but her face

was serious. This came as a surprise and cast a damper on my irritation.

Mishima stared into my eyes as she posed her next question. "If I asked to stay at your place tonight, Mr. Yoshida, would you let me?"

I was taken aback for a moment, but her suggestion was simply too outlandish. I let the breath escape from my nose. "Wait, what?"

"Exactly what I said."

"Why should I let some woman who isn't my girlfriend stay over?"

"Sayu's not your girlfriend, is she?"

"You know I'm like her guardian."

"Then what about Ms. Gotou?"

This left me at a loss for words.

Mishima furrowed her brow slightly before repeating her question. "What about Ms. Gotou?"

"...Wait, why are you bringing her up?" I retorted, and Mishima scrunched up her face. I couldn't tell if it was an expression of anger or sadness.

"Why are you trying to hide it from me?" she snapped.

"Hide what from you?"

"She's there! Ms. Gotou! In your apartment!" Mishima said the words so emphatically that I couldn't help but blink in amazement.

"H-how do you know...?!"

At my question, Mishima fumbled for a moment, and her gaze dropped to the floor.

"I decided to work a little overtime today for a change. I wanted you to be proud of me, Mr. Yoshida." Her words came out stilted, and she wouldn't look at me. "Once I had finished my program, I clocked out, only to see you and Ms. Gotou coming from the barbecue restaurant at the station. I got curious. I watched to see where you'd go and saw both of you get off at your stop."

At this point, she glanced up at me for a moment. "I'm really sorry I followed

you like that. I'll apologize for that part."

"Nah. I mean, it's fine..."

A vague reply was all I could muster. More than outraged, I felt panicked.

"I made the rash decision to get off at the same stop. I followed you both, but it was clear you were walking toward your place, so I was, like...you know... I felt helpless... So I went back to the theater and sat through a movie I'd been wanting to see. But I barely remember any of it."

"Wait, hey..."

Tears rose to her eyes as she continued to explain herself. I had no idea what to do.

It looked as if crying hadn't been part of Mishima's plan, and she scrunched her brows together in an apparent effort to hold back her tears. She took a moment before starting to speak again.

"I didn't want to go home like that, so I was just hanging around. That's when I ran into you, and...I thought I could use the opportunity to indirectly ask about Ms. Gotou."

"Mishima..."

"But, Mr. Yoshida... It pissed me off that you tried to hide it from me with clumsy excuses..." With that, she sniffled, then carelessly tossed the beer can she'd swiped from me into my basket.

"Let's pay up and get out of here."

"S-sure... Well, that was the plan from the start."

"Whatever you say."

I watched Mishima out of the corner of my eye as she rushed off toward the register, added a few more cans of beer to my basket, then followed behind her.

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Mishima, still looking a bit dispirited as she sipped on a box of soy milk, stood next to me in the area just outside the supermarket. The plastic bags I was

carrying were a lot heavier than I'd expected them to be.

A few minutes had passed since we finished shopping and left the store, but Mishima still hadn't said a word.

I had no idea why things turned out this way, but I didn't think a simple "okay, I'm heading home" would suffice, so I just stood aimlessly beside her instead.

"I was so sure...", Mishima said suddenly. "I was so sure you were bringing Ms. Gotou home because Sayu wasn't there."

"And in what situation would she not be there?"

"Well, I had no idea. That was just what I thought," Mishima said, putting her lips back on the straw of her soy milk. She took a big sip, then side-eyed me as she continued to speak. "Just think about it. Who would bring the woman they like back to their apartment if they had a high school girl there?"

"Well, I mean..."

"That means Sayu and Ms. Gotou are alone together right now, doesn't it?"

"Yep."

"This makes no sense...", Mishima muttered. She shook her milk box from side to side. It seemed like she'd already drunk the whole thing. "Just to be clear, Mr. Yoshida, you're still in love with Ms. Gotou, right?"

"Huh? I mean, that's..." My face twisted in bewilderment at her sudden question, and I fumbled my words. But there was no way I could brush this one aside. She already knew.

"Well, yeah... I can't just switch those feelings off right away."

Actually, Ms. Gotou had just told me the feeling was mutual, but I didn't need to tell Mishima that now, so I held back.

"In that case, what you're doing doesn't make sense, Mr. Yoshida."

"...What do you mean?" Puzzled, I cocked my head to the side.

Mishima frowned at me and shrugged. "I don't know all the ins and outs of it, but it just seems weird to me that you'd invite the woman you love over when you've got a high schooler freeloading at home."

“Well, that’s...” Before I had the chance to explain that Ms. Gotou had asked to meet Sayu, Mishima carried on speaking.

“If you’re really prioritizing the woman you love, then you should ignore all the other factors in your life to be with her. That’s what love is all about, isn’t it? I mean, you’ve had a crush on her forever, and now she’s at your place, right? This is your big chance. If there’s a high school girl there, she’ll just get in the way.”

“Sure, you have a point...but it’s not like I can just throw her out, is it?”

Mishima shook her head definitively. “Most people...would do just that,” she said coldly. I’d never heard that tone from her before. “We’re talking about a random high schooler you don’t even know that well and the woman you’re in love with. It should be obvious to you which one is more important—”

“Hey!” I interrupted her monologue, and she pursed her lips, dissatisfied. “So what’s your point?” I asked. “And why are you badmouthing Sayu all of a sudden?”

“I’m not badmouthing her at all. She’s a good girl.”

“But it sounds like you’re telling me I should’ve thrown her out.”

“I didn’t say any such thing.” Mishima shook her head, then fixed me with a piercing stare. “I was talking about which one takes priority for you, Mr. Yoshida.”

“Priority?” My head tilted in confusion. Mishima sighed, then nodded.

“That’s right. You’ve got Ms. Gotou, who you’ve been in love with for a long time, and Sayu, who you randomly picked up off the street. And today your dear, sweet Ms. Gotou has finally come over.”

“Right.”

“If I were in your shoes, Mr. Yoshida, and really wanted to start a romantic relationship with Ms. Gotou, I would have kept Sayu’s existence a secret from her. I would never have mentioned her being at my home, and introducing them to each other would have been out of the question. Telling a woman you want to date her but you’re letting a girl you’re not even related to stay at your

home just isn't going to fly—”

“Listen, will you?” I was unable to keep my mouth shut any longer and cut in. “That still doesn't mean I can throw her out! By your logic, if I do end up dating Ms. Gotou, I'll have no choice but to abandon Sayu!”

“Don't you get it?!” Mishima suddenly raised her voice in frustration and stamped her foot down as hard as she could. I flinched slightly, having never heard such an outburst from her before.

Mishima looked equally stunned at her own behavior. She gasped and hung her head. “I'm sorry...”

“It's all right...”

She continued, keeping her eyes fixed on the ground. “But...I was just saying that's what a normal person would do.”

“Do what?”

“They'd choose to throw Sayu out—if they loved Ms. Gotou and made dating her their priority, that is.”

“But...”

“No, I know, I know.” She looked back up at me and smiled. It was obvious she was forcing it, and it hurt a little to watch. “I know you're not the kind of person who'd do that, Mr. Yoshida. But...at the same time, it does make me wonder.”

She paused and let out a deep, long sigh. Then, quietly, she asked, “Doesn't that mean it's not love?”

“Huh?”

“Your feelings for Ms. Gotou. I wonder if you might have mistaken admiration for love.”

“No, that's not—”

“Or...,” Mishima interrupted and cast me a sidelong glance, “your feelings for Sayu are turning into love.”

“Now that's one thing I know isn't true.”

Our eyes met. I could see an erratic flicker of emotion in hers.

“I see,” she said.

We stared at each other for a few seconds before Mishima looked away.

“If that’s the case, then you’re too softhearted, Mr. Yoshida,” she declared, scratching her head. “And if you’re too softhearted, you’ll never get what you really want.

“...After all, Sayu’s not going to be living at your place forever,” she added in a quiet, spiteful tone.

I wanted to say something back, but nothing came to mind.

As I maintained my silence, Mishima looked up and flashed me another awkward, forced smile. “I’ve been really nasty today, haven’t I?”

“No, that’s not—”

“I’m really sorry! I feel like I’ll end up saying something I shouldn’t again if I stay with you any longer, so I’d better call it a day and head home.”

“S-sure... Okay. I’ll walk you to the ticket gate.”

“It’s fine! You should hurry home as quickly as you can, Mr. Yoshida. I’m sure they’re both waiting for you.”

“Says the person who held me up...”

“Heh-heh.”

All I knew how to do in difficult situations was joke around. At times like this, I realized how childish I still was.

“All right, then. Have a good evening!” she called out.

“Yeah... You too.”

Mishima spun on her heel and hurried off toward the station.

I watched her as she left, and thought back on her smile from a few moments earlier—that awkward smile she’d used to hide how she really felt. It was the same smile that Sayu had put on when she first came to stay with me, although Sayu’s was far more convincing.

Mishima had tried desperately to convey something to me, and I probably still hadn't understood it.

That smile must have been one of resignation.

I sighed and headed home.

Doesn't that mean it's not love?

Mishima's words echoed inside my head.

That couldn't be right. There was no doubt in my mind that I was in love with Ms. Gotou. My heart didn't race as fast for anyone else in the world, and no one else's suggestive behavior could ever get me so frustrated.

And then...

Your feelings for Sayu are turning into love.

That, at least, was absolutely impossible.

I simply wanted to protect her from the kind of treatment she'd suffered previously. I wanted to set her back on the right path.

I didn't see her in a romantic light at all.

Mishima's words did bring one thing to my attention, though.

I'd always had a vague desire to shelter Sayu until she could face her past and come to terms with her feelings.

However, I'd never considered how long that would take.

A month, or perhaps half a year. Maybe she'd even spend a year, or a few years, living with me.

Or...

She could even leave tomorrow.

When I considered that possibility, something surprised me.

I had a hard time imagining my life without her.

"...That's weird."

I clapped my hand over my mouth.

Mishima was right.

It would probably be difficult to have a romantic relationship with Ms. Gotou while Sayu was living with me. In fact, when I'd mentioned my situation with Sayu, Ms. Gotou had told me as much herself—that it didn't sit right with her for me to say I loved her when I had another woman at home.

Even if Ms. Gotou was to come to terms with that dilemma, we'd never have the time or space at my place to do the things that lovers do as long as Sayu was around.

In that case...

When would I be able to be with Ms. Gotou?

And when that time did come, where would Sayu be, and what would she be doing?

When I tried to think about it, my mind went blank. I couldn't imagine anything.

"...What a hassle," I found myself muttering.

Eventually, having made no progress with any of these thoughts, I arrived at my apartment.

I stood in front of the door and sucked in a deep breath. Sayu and Ms. Gotou were waiting for me inside. I couldn't go in with such a gloomy expression on my face.

I slapped myself on the cheek and psyched myself up.

I put the key in the lock and turned the bolt.

For some reason, the simple act of arriving home was enough to set my heart racing.

Chapter 10
Punishment



Chapter 10 Punishment

“This is punishment...for toying with me,” said my old girlfriend, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes, her trembling hand clenching a pancake knife. I listened to her as if she were a stranger.

I hadn't been toying with her. I did love her.

What shocked me most was that it was *her* saying those words. Of the seven women I was involved with, she had been the most intelligent and understanding.

I loved all seven of them equally and made each one happy. Things had been going well.

The expression she had made when I told her about the six other women in my life was indescribable. Her face had morphed, cycling through confusion, frustration, sadness, and anger before she finally spoke. “So...what are you planning to do after this?”

I didn't understand what she was asking. “Well... I plan to keep on loving all of you...”

“What are you talking about? Are you stupid?!” Her anger was palpable, and I realized I'd made a mistake. We weren't at the stage of our relationship where I could trust her with this.

“You're crazy if you think you can love seven people at the same time! What about marriage?!”

“I don't really see the point in getting married, you know? Just loving each other is enough.”

“But I wanted to marry you!” Tears poured down her face as she glared at me.

Then she picked up the pancake knife lying on the table.

Yeah, that was another mistake.

I shouldn't have brought up such a serious topic over pancakes. You live and learn.

She swung the knife in my direction like she meant it. I flinched. If I hadn't dodged the blow and she had stabbed me, she would have been charged with assault.

I certainly didn't want that, and getting hurt didn't sound great, either, so I turned tail and ran.

I spent a few days sleeping at an Internet café, and when I finally plucked up the courage to return home, there was no sign of her. Other women had contacted me over the past few days, but I didn't really feel like getting together with any of them. Once you slipped up with one of them, the rest were sure to follow; that's just how fragile these relationships were.

I ended up moving. I figured it was time to press the Reset button on my life.

I figured the best place to hide from someone was in the largest crowd possible, so I started my new life in Tokyo. I'd told my girlfriends where I worked, so, while I felt sorry for my boss, I decided to just quit. Before long, I was living in Tokyo and working part-time in the city.

I'd saved up a lot of money from my previous job, so I would probably be able to survive for a couple of years on a part-time salary. In the meantime, I could slowly look for something else.

The more pressing issue was how lonely I felt.

Before I moved, I had spent almost every day with one of the seven women I loved. That lifestyle had provided me with a sense of fulfillment; I'd had a variety of women—a whole bouquet of flowers to admire. But what about now?

I finished work, came home, and turned on the TV. Even when there was nothing I particularly wanted to watch, I'd turn it on just to hear another person's voice. When I got bored of that, I went to bed.

I didn't think I could get used to this new, bleak life.

I was staring blankly at the TV, taking a bite of a heavily seasoned, preprepared meal from the supermarket, when an idea suddenly struck me.

At times like these, the thing to do was pick up a runaway girl.

I remembered how, back when I had seven girlfriends, I'd picked up a high school girl in front of the convenience store in my neighborhood.

She'd had a pretty face, and her breasts were big, too.

Once I brought her home, she'd easily given herself up to me, and things had gone well. Her body was soft but tight inside.

However, unlike my other lovers, she had no interest in me at all. It made me a little uncomfortable when she would pretend to be turned on or look right at me while clearly thinking about something else.

I let her stay at my place for a few days but threw her out when one of my girlfriends said she was coming around.

I had as many women as I could want back then. I'd gotten choosy.

And now, I had none, and I was helplessly lonely.

I didn't care whether the woman wanted me or not. That was something I could take my time working on.

I just wanted to have sex with a woman—a soft, nice-smelling woman.

I wanted to be freed from the suffering of having no one to love by my side.

"All right."

Reaching a decision, I put my chopsticks back down on the table.

"It's about time I found a runaway girl."

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"Wha—? A runaway?" Asami asked, scowling dramatically.

"Yeah, a runaway girl. You haven't seen any around here, have you?"

"Nope. And what the heck are you gonna do when you find one?"

“I just want to take her home with me.”

“That’s basically a crime, y’know...and pretty yikes.” She shook her head in a clear show of disgust.

Asami was a high school girl who worked part-time at the same convenience store. She had tan skin and blond hair, and although she looked like an outrageous and wild teenager, she was actually incredibly guarded. I’d invited her out for dinner on a number of occasions, but she always tactfully declined.

“I’d be offering her a place to stay. Isn’t that kind of me?”

“Ha! Nice try. I know you’ve got an ulterior motive.”

“That kinda thing can happen any time a man and a woman share a roof, even if they don’t intend to.”

“Big yikes.” She brushed off the comment completely, taking it as a joke. Judging from her reaction, however, she didn’t seem to have any relevant information. Her eyes tended to give her away. All you had to do was ask a question, and you could usually tell whether she knew something or not; it was a handy trick.

“I see... So no runaways here.” I acted disappointed, and Asami snorted at me.

“Do you really need a woman that badly?”

“I had seven of them before and then lost them all at once. I think it’s understandable I’d be starved for company.”

“Seven! One for every day of the week! That’s stupid funny!”

I was telling the truth.

She, however, clearly didn’t believe me and cackled as she pulled some chicken kabobs out of the fryer.

“There’s a new girl my age, but if you try to hit on her, I won’t let you get away with it.”

I tilted my head in curiosity. “A new girl?”

“Um, what? You haven’t heard?” She looked in my direction as she continued to load freshly fried chicken kabobs into the food warmer.

“There’s a new girl, Sasa. Her name’s Sasa.”

“Oh... I do kinda remember seeing a new name on the attendance chart. So she’s your age?”

“Yep-yep. And let me warn you, she’s ultra-cute.”

“Ultra-cute, huh? Sounds fun.”

Asami scowled at me, despite the fact that she’d said it first.

“Lay a finger on her and I’ll mess you up.”

“Are you two close?”

“The closest. She’s my soulmate.”

Asami was friendly with everyone from the get-go. I remembered the way she’d immediately opened up to an older part-time lady I couldn’t stand.

“Huh...” I gave a half-hearted reply as I tried to imagine what this “Sasa” girl I’d never met was like.

If she was friends with Asami, she must be a bit wild, too, or maybe she was just a pushover. I hoped it was the latter; if that was the case, I could give her a push myself.

I spent the rest of my time at work absentmindedly fantasizing over this new bit of information as I went about my tasks.

Changing out of my work uniform at the end of my shift, I checked the schedule hung up on the wall. The very next day, I was going to be working a shift alongside a girl named Sayu Ogiwara.

I was already looking forward to seeing her face.

Chapter 11 Warning

“Sasa, your phone’s lit up.”

“Hmm?”

Asami, who was sitting at the desk in the living room with her textbook open, pointed to the phone lying in front of her.

Sayu picked it up and tapped the screen. Then she broke into a smile.

“It’s Ms. Gotou.”

“Gotou... Who’s that?”

“Hmm... I guess you could say she’s a friend.”

Sayu’s reply made Asami freeze on the spot for a moment before giving a dramatic “*huhhh?!* ”

“You’ve got another homie besides me?!” she cried.

“Well, I only just got to know her, really.”

“Whatever. It’s fine! There’s nothing wrong with having loads of friends.” Asami nodded enthusiastically. “It’s actually a good thing,” she added, as if to emphasize her point.

It seemed like Sayu and Asami had gotten off work at the same time, because when I’d arrived back home, I found them chatting happily in the living room.

Asami appeared to be reviewing something she’d learned in class and had her textbook open in front of her. At the same time, she was skillfully managing to hold a conversation with Sayu. As much as Sayu was enjoying their chat, she seemed to be taking care not to interrupt Asami’s studying too much.

There was a momentary gap in their conversation as Sayu replied to the text message. She looked relaxed—her expression was that of a normal high school girl chatting with her friend.

But why were Sayu and Ms. Gotou messaging each other?

In order to explain how the two came to exchange contact information, we have to go back to the day Ms. Gotou visited my home.

Returning from my chance encounter with Mishima that day, I couldn't believe the scene I had come back to.

"My, it took you a while, didn't it? "

"Oh, welcome back, Mr. Yoshida."

As expected, Ms. Gotou and Sayu were waiting for me in the apartment, but...

"Hey, don't move. We're not finished here."

"B-but Mr. Yoshida's home..."

"This is more important than him."

The two of them appeared to be chatting amicably in the living room. And to top it off, Ms. Gotou had taken out her makeup kit and was applying some to Sayu's face.

"What are you doing...?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm doing her makeup."

"Why...?"

"What do you mean?" Ms. Gotou directed her gaze toward me as she patted Sayu's cheek with a makeup sponge. "She's got a pretty face! If she learns how to do her makeup, she'll be even prettier."

"Right..."

I didn't see the point in using makeup if your face was already pretty, but that was probably a man thing.

At first, I had been surprised by the unfamiliar scene before me, but what I found even more unexpected was how harmonious their conversation was.

While I'd been in the room, Ms. Gotou aside, Sayu had still been sounding the new woman out, and she remained guarded.

But by the time I got back, that no longer seemed to be the case. They were so friendly with each other that you could be fooled into believing they'd been on good terms from the start.

"I'm gonna go put the groceries in the fridge," I said, showing them the plastic bags.

"Oh, okay. Thanks." Sayu glanced at me as she replied, but she still didn't turn to face me completely.

I put the eggs, garlic chives, miso, and the beer I'd bought for myself in the fridge, then let out a small sigh.

Looking back, the day had been a total mess.

Ms. Gotou visiting my home was already enough to make me anxious, but then Mishima had appeared out of nowhere and started throwing questions at me I couldn't answer, only adding to my stress.

It had turned out all right in the end, but when I got home and started to relax, the exhaustion hit me all at once.

"Yoshida."

"Yes?"

I turned back to face Ms. Gotou, who was calling for me. She continued applying Sayu's makeup and let out a playful snort before continuing. "You must've smoked quite a few on the way back, huh?"

Her words made me jump, but luckily, Ms. Gotou wasn't looking this way.

"Sorry I took so long... I ran into someone I know."

"Oh, I see."

I left Mishima's name out of my vague explanation. Ms. Gotou must have been focusing more on Sayu's makeup than our conversation because she didn't press me any further.

"All right, I think we're done." Ms. Gotou gave a nod of satisfaction, then

placed the products on the desk and began rummaging through her bag.

“Here, take a look at yourself.” She produced a small mirror from her bag and handed it to Sayu.

Sayu timidly peeked into the mirror, and I caught her expression lighting up at what she saw.

“Whoa...”

“You look pretty different, don’t you?”

“It doesn’t even look like me...!”

“Hee-hee! Glad to hear my hard work paid off!”

When Sayu finished staring at her reflection, she looked up at me as if she’d just remembered something. “What do you think, Mr. Yoshida?”

“M-me...?”

I’d only seen her side profile up until that point, but now that I was looking at her face from the front, she did look really different.

Her usual slightly absentminded expression was brighter and prettier. It wasn’t like she was making a different face, but it somehow seemed that way. Her skin also appeared much more finely textured, even a little alluring.

Sayu’s dramatic transformation left me feeling a bit confused, and I quickly averted my gaze, flustered.

“I mean... It works for you, doesn’t it?” My ambiguous answer made Ms. Gotou laugh.

“You can give her a better compliment than that, can’t you?”

“I-I’m not really used to things like this...”

Ms. Gotou snickered at my reply. Sayu rocked from side to side, looking disappointed.

“I heard guys who can’t compliment girls on their makeup are really unpopular.”

“That’s fine. I don’t want to be popular,” I answered back, a little irritated.

Sayu and Ms. Gotou looked at each other, then began giggling in unison. Really, when had they gotten so close?

“Well, it’s getting late. I should probably head home,” Ms. Gotou said as she checked her watch. I put my keys and wallet back in my pocket and stood up.

“I’ll walk you to the station.”

“Oh, will you? Thanks.”

“I’ll come, too!” Sayu started to get up, but I shook my head.

“It’s late. I’ll take her by myself.”

“B-but...”

“Sayu.” Ms. Gotou offered a gentle smile in response to Sayu’s insistence. “If you want to talk, you can message me anytime. Let’s call it a night for now.”

“...Fine.” Sayu nodded, reluctantly capitulating to Ms. Gotou’s gentle persuasion.

Did that mean they had already exchanged numbers? It had taken me six months to get Ms. Gotou’s personal contact information, and yet she’d given it to Sayu on the very night they met. Feeling conflicted, I walked toward the door.

I threw on my outdoor slippers before stepping outside, then held the door open and waited. I watched Ms. Gotou in a daze as she calmly slipped on her low heels. *If we were married, I’d get to see this every day*, I thought to myself, then shook my head. I tore my eyes away from Ms. Gotou, directing my gaze upward. That was when I locked eyes with Sayu, who was still in the living room.

She had been watching us with an unfocused look in her eyes and flinched in apparent surprise the moment our gazes met. Suddenly, she pasted one of her preprepared smiles onto her face and waved. Unsure of how to respond, I tilted my head to one side in confusion.

“All right, thanks for having me over!” When Ms. Gotou finished putting on her heels, she stood up and looked back into the apartment. “Take care, Sayu. See you soon.”

“Uh, okay! See you...”

With that, Ms. Gotou left the apartment.

See you soon. Hearing her say those words felt a bit strange.

Did Ms. Gotou really intend on seeing Sayu again?

An uneasy sensation washed over me as I shut and locked the door to my apartment.

*

“She’s a good kid,” Ms. Gotou muttered as we walked along the street toward the station.

“Sorry?”

“Sayu. She’s a really, really good kid.”

“Ohhh... Yeah, I guess she is.”

“Is that why you couldn’t bring yourself to throw her out?”

“Well... I wonder that myself.” I responded vaguely.

Was I unable to throw her out because she was a *good kid*? Now that I was being asked, I felt that wasn’t exactly the case. However, I still wasn’t sure what had led me to take her in.

Ms. Gotou chuckled through her nose as she walked beside me. “I think that’s fine, you know.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing.” She smiled playfully and poked me in the shoulder. “You’d better keep your hands off her. I’m just a call away now.”

“I told you, I would never...” I frowned at her, and she giggled again, her shoulders shaking with laughter.

“One more thing,” Ms. Gotou continued. Her tone was noticeably different than it had been just seconds earlier. “Look after her.”

I got the impression she was speaking from the heart. The look she was giving

me out of the corner of her eye wasn't the jovial one I'd seen before; this time, she wasn't joking.

She was still smiling, but she had a serious look in her eyes.

"Of course... That's always been my plan," I replied, looking at the ground. "It's not like you can half-ass taking in a high school girl."

"Yeah, that's the kind of person I know you are. That's why I'm telling you this now."

I glanced at her. She was still walking beside me, but her gaze remained fixed on the path in front of her. I noticed a faint glimmer of something in her eyes, however, as if she was gazing far into the distance.

"She isn't stable—emotionally. She doesn't have a clue about herself," Ms. Gotou muttered, then looked to me again. "I wouldn't be surprised if she starts randomly unleashing those emotions, whatever they might be."

I found myself unable to pull my eyes away from hers, though I didn't know why. It felt like there was something powerful hiding inside them.

I couldn't reply and simply stared back at her until she suddenly broke into a wide grin and turned to face forward again.

"That said, I'm sure you'd be able to cope, no matter what happens."

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you heard? The higher-ups all call you Mr. Fix-It."

"Huh...?"

"They say that if they leave a problem with you, you'll find some way to work it out."

"Wait, what...? So *that's* why I've been getting all the difficult jobs lately...?"

Ms. Gotou laughed in amusement and patted me on the shoulder.

"I'm rooting for you. At work and with Sayu."

"...I mean, I appreciate the sentiment, at least."

I had tried to imply I'd welcome a break from all the annoying tasks, but Ms.

Gotou simply cackled again in response.

*

And just like that, I had come to share the secret of Sayu's existence with Ms. Gotou, and what's more, the two of them had apparently become friends.

However, they still wouldn't tell me what they had talked about while I was out that night. What on earth had happened to make them so close in such a short space of time?

Well, everyone's got secrets, so I decided not to dwell on it.

Besides, I enjoyed seeing that faint smile on Sayu's face as she stared at her phone while typing out her message.

Asami was right.

You don't need to have a lot of friends, but there's no harm in it. This was particularly applicable to Sayu, since she hadn't socialized with anyone but me before she started her part-time job. Having more people like Asami and Ms. Gotou to talk to could only be for the better.

I looked up as I pondered this topic and ended up making direct eye contact with Asami. My heart skipped a beat. Something about her gaze felt cold, as if she was observing me.

Even after our eyes met, she kept staring intently at me, not looking away. I got the feeling I'd be losing if I gave up first, so I continued glaring back at her, furrowing my brow.

"...What?"

"Nothing. I was just looking at you. Why?"

"Oh, I see..."

Her unfaltering stare began to make me feel a little self-conscious, so I ended up giving in and turning away.

Just as I picked up my cigarettes and lighter to take out to the balcony, Sayu's phone suddenly started ringing.

"Whoa, that scared me!" said Asami.

"A call?" I asked.

"Yeah," Sayu replied. "Looks like it's from our manager..."

"He calls way too often at night," I remarked.

Asami snorted, shrugging.

"Sorry, I'll go take this," said Sayu.

"See ya in a few," Asami called after her as she scampered off and went out through the front door.

It wouldn't have bothered me if she'd taken the call inside, but she was overly conscientious about these things.

I watched as she shut the door behind her, then turned toward the balcony so I could go for a smoke.

"Yoshi," Asami said suddenly.

"Yeah?"

"You really don't have any feelings for Sasa, huh?"

I frowned and cocked my head. "What do you mean, *feelings*?"

"Well, like..." Asami hesitated slightly, then continued in a quieter voice. "Y'know... Sexy feelings."

"Nope."

"That was quick. You know she's got tig-ol'-biddies and everything."

"Where do you get these phrases?" Sensing that this conversation was leading somewhere, I sat back down on my bed. "And why would you ask me that?"

"I mean, c'mon..." Her gaze drifted from one corner of the desk to the other. Unusually for her, she seemed to be taking the time to choose her words carefully. "It doesn't matter how much of a nice guy you are... You're living under the same roof as a cute girl with a nice body, aren't you? I wouldn't be surprised if you had a few naughty thoughts."

"Well..."

“Oh, or maybe you can’t get it up?”

“You’re gonna piss me off.” I let out a sigh and shook my head. “Yeah, anyway... I do find her cute, but she just doesn’t do anything for me. She’s still a kid as far as I’m concerned.”

Sayu’s gentle smile from a few moments earlier suddenly resurfaced in my mind.

“...I’d rather see her with a genuine smile on her face... That’s what I want the most.”

Asami looked taken aback for a moment; then she burst out laughing.

“Hey, what’s so funny?”

“Forget it! Sorry!” Her shoulders bobbed up and down as she giggled. Then she continued, smiling. “You really are stupid kind.”

“I’m really not.”

“You really are.”

Asami, whose voice had been cheery up to this point, suddenly took on a serious tone. Her expression made her appear much more mature; the contrast startled me.

“I already know you’re a nice guy, Yoshi. So can I ask you something?”

“...What?”

Her earnest expression and the fact she was asking for a favor seemed completely out of character, but I said nothing. I wasn’t so tactless that I’d poke fun at someone speaking this sincerely.

“At the convenience store...there’s a kinda...I guess dangerous? I dunno how to put it.”

“Yeah?”

Asami furrowed her brow and hummed like she was thinking. “One of our seniors there has a kinda bad vibe to him.”

“A bad vibe?”

“Yeah. Like...he’s kinda off, you know?” She kept tilting her head like she couldn’t find the right expression. “Like, if you give him an inch, he’ll take a mile sorta thing?”

“I don’t get it.”

“Hmm... To put it bluntly, he seems like a fuckboy.”

“Wha—...! Language!”

“But there’s something different about him. For some reason, he seems a little more chilled out.”

“...I still don’t really get it, but okay. So there’s a guy like that at your work,” I said, and Asami nodded quietly.

“Yeah, so anyway,” she continued. “Sasa and this guy haven’t worked a shift together yet, so nothing’s happened, but his schedule changes this week, and they’ll be at work at the same time.”

“I see...”

I had no idea who this guy was, so I couldn’t really understand the importance of what Asami was saying, but she seemed to think the fact that Sayu would be working a shift with him was a pretty big problem.

“That’s why, Yoshi...,” she started, looking straight at me. “I want you to keep a close eye on Sasa.” Her gaze was honest and direct as she said this.

“If something happens, listen to her, and if she gets in trouble... I mean, to keep that from happening... Oh, I’m gonna look out for her at work, too, obviously!”

“Pfft!”

“Whah?”

I was unable to stifle my laughter, and Asami frowned at me, clearly displeased.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. You just surprised me,” I said with a chuckle. Asami tilted her head to the side and stared at me. She was waiting for me to go on. “You’re just so

kind,” I finished.

Her cheeks went red, and she averted her gaze. “No I’m not.”

“You’re looking out for your junior at work and everything.”

“Well, she’s not just my junior...” After quickly checking her surroundings, Asami continued, her voice barely audible. “.....She’s my homegirl.”

I could feel my lips curling up, but I fought back against the impulse and chose to nod a few times instead. “Got it. In that case, I’ll keep a closer eye on her.”

“...Thanks.”

“Let me know if anything comes up with you as well.”

“I will.”

Just as the two of us exchanged glances and nodded, sealing our promise, the front door opened.

“Sorry about that. He goes on forever... What did I miss?”

Sayu stepped into the apartment and eyed Asami and me in turn, then cocked her head to one side.

Asami and I both burst out laughing and shook our heads.

“Nothing.”

“Nada.”

Our timing was perfectly in sync, and the absurdity of it made us both cackle with laughter.

“Huh? Seriously, what’s going on?” Sayu was the only one not in on the joke, and she entered the living room with a pout on her lips.

Things were peaceful.

Sayu and Asami were both such kind, honest kids.

It may have been a little presumptuous of me, but I wanted to do whatever I could to keep them both smiling.

Chapter 12 Rupture

“Good morni—... Huh.”

When I walked into the office through the back door, I found the lights inside were still off.

Both Asami and my manager were the type to leave the lights on even while they were out front, so this was pretty unusual.

I took my work uniform out of my shoulder bag and quickly got changed.

Then I glanced at the shift schedule hanging on the wall. My manager was coming in for the evening shift, and Asami should have been at work already.

Our setup might not have worked at a busier convenience store like the one near the station, but at ours, we needed only three of us to be there at any one time. In fact, my manager had even said that if there were four of us on a single shift, we’d barely be able to turn a profit.

In other words, this time, I would be working with a coworker I’d never met before. This made me a little nervous.

It was probably the other person, not Asami, who’d turned off the lights.

I placed a finger on the shift schedule and looked for the names of the people slated to work during my shift. One caught my eye.

KYOUYA YAGUCHI

Huh?

An uncomfortable feeling washed over me—or maybe a sense of déjà vu. I felt like I’d heard that name before, or at least seen it.

Was there a celebrity with the same name?

I racked my brain, but I couldn't think of one. Still, for whatever reason, the feeling of déjà vu just wouldn't go away.

I was still gazing at the shift schedule uneasily when the door leading to the storefront suddenly swung open, and a man's face popped out.

"Whoa, you scared me! You're early."

"Uh, yeah. Nice to meet you. I'm the new part-timer..."

I bowed my head deferentially a few times before making eye contact with the man in front of me, intending to introduce myself.

Instantly, I fell silent.

Yes. I remembered now. I remembered where I'd seen that name before.

The man in front of me blinked again and again in disbelief; then, mouth agape, he let out a loud "huh?!"

"Miyuki? It's you, isn't it?!"

"No, um..."

"What are you doing here?! Wow, it's been ages. I was thinking about you just the other day."

"Um... I believe you've confused me for someone else."

He hadn't. I knew that, but I continued to insist anyway, my voice trembling slightly.

"I definitely haven't! I never forget a woman I've been to bed with!"

"...!"

My skin broke out in goose bumps.

That's right. Kyouya Yaguchi. The man I had stayed with for a few days in Ibaraki. He had a handsome face, and his hair was a light shade of brown. His soft features made him seem kind.

I, however, knew what he was really like.

He was a weirdo who could skillfully maintain numerous relationships with women all at the same time without feeling the slightest bit of remorse. I

remembered finding it simply astounding to watch him juggle seven girlfriends at once.

“Oh, but I didn’t see your name on the shift schedule, Miyuki.”

“I told you. I’m not...”

Miyuki was a fake name I’d used. I’d picked it at random. It had obviously stuck in his memory, though.

Still, I couldn’t bring myself to tell him my real name now, not after I’d already told him it was Miyuki. Not knowing what to do, I shifted my eyes between Mr. Yaguchi and the floor repeatedly. That was when Asami appeared behind him.

“How long are you gonna hide back here, Yaguchi? And you’d better clock in, Sasa, or you’re gonna be late... Wait, what did I miss?”

Mr. Yaguchi’s eyes sparkled as he started talking to Asami, who had just popped into the office.

“Asami! I know this girl!”

“Huh? How?”

“Her name’s Miyuki, and she stayed with me be—”

“Wait!!” I interrupted him, practically screaming. He and Asami both turned, eyes wide with surprise.

My body was trembling, my pulse racing. I could feel my breath getting more and more ragged.

“Y-you’ve got me confused with somebody else. My name’s Sayu Ogiwara,” I said in a shaky voice, and Mr. Yaguchi cocked his head at me, looking mystified.

“I mean, but you definitely told me you were Miyuki when we first m— Ouch!!”

Before Mr. Yaguchi had the chance to finish his sentence, Asami, who was standing beside him, kicked him full force in the shin.

“No violence! What are you hitting me for?!”

“She said her name was Sasa. Are you an idiot?” Asami asked, voice cold, as she grabbed Mr. Yaguchi by the shoulders. “Anyway, you’ve been slacking off

back here for too long. Hurry up or I'll tell the manager you're screwing around on the job."

"Hey, whoa... I was just having a little chat with my new coworker. Besides, it's not like there's anything for me to do!"

"Shut it and get out there!" Asami shoved him out of the office by his shoulders, slamming the door behind him.

She sighed, then glanced over at me out of the corner of her eye. I could tell by the look she was giving me that she wanted to ask what the hell was going on, and I squirmed.

"U-um... Asami... I... Uh..."

I wasn't sure if I was trying to make up an excuse or tell her the truth. And yet, I managed to keep moving my mouth, producing a few words in a desperate attempt to fill the silence.

My heart was pounding in my chest, and my breathing was rapidly getting shallower.

"Um..."

"It's okay."

"...Huh?"

I lifted my gaze, which had been glued to the floor, and looked over at Asami. She met my eyes, then shook her head from side to side.

"It's fine. I'm not going to force it out of you."

"..."

I was speechless. She continued to hold my gaze, an unusually serious expression on her face as she continued. "If you need to tell me something right now, I'll listen. But it doesn't look that way to me. Your face is as white as a sheet."

Asami slowly stepped closer. Then she patted me on the shoulder and pointed to a folding chair nearby. It seemed like she was telling me to sit. I did as she suggested and took a seat.

Asami crouched down in front of me, took one of my hands in hers, and squeezed it.

“There’s no need for you to tell anyone anything you don’t want to right now. But if you ever wanna tell me, I’ll listen anytime... You got that?”

“...! ...Okay.”

I could feel my eyes getting hot. Tears began to well up at their corners. Ever since I’d come to Tokyo, I’d turned into such a crybaby.

Asami laughed as if to say, “What are we going to do with you?” then patted me on the shoulder again.

“Okay, come on out after you’ve cooled down a bit. I’ll punch your time card for you. But just this once, okay?”

“Mm-hmm... Thanks.”

“And I’ll take care of Yaguchi, so you don’t need to worry about him.” Asami flashed her teeth in a wide grin and left the office.

The moment she did, the tears I’d somehow managed to hold back started pouring out, as if the emotional levee inside me had ruptured. All my tension melted away.

Why was Mr. Yaguchi here of all places? Even if he’d just happened to move close to where I ended up, the chances of us becoming coworkers seemed statistically impossible. It was such a fateful, terrible reunion that I began to wonder if this was some kind of harassment.

Plus, Asami had overheard the conversation I’d had with him a few minutes earlier. She was a kind and perceptive girl, so even though she’d been extremely considerate, I got the feeling she’d deduced a lot more from that short conversation than I could guess. The fact that she’d still been so kind despite that was a huge relief. Yet, at the same time, it was incredibly painful.

For the first time since I ran away from home, I felt like I’d found a friend who I could talk to freely as an equal. But now, I was sure Asami would start being extra careful around me. I felt terrible about it.

Before I knew it, my tears had stopped. However, an unpleasant feeling still

remained; it was a cold, aching sensation in the pit of my stomach.

I glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that it was already ten minutes past my clock-in time. Asami had punched my time card for me, so I figured I'd better not stay there getting paid for nothing.

I wondered what I should do about Mr. Yaguchi, what would become of my friendship with Asami, and...

Mr. Yoshida's face popped into my head.

Should I tell him about what had happened?

A multitude of thoughts swirled around inside my mind, but for now, I just had to do my job.

I took in a deep breath, let it out again, then slapped my cheeks.

"...Okay."

Having pumped myself up again, I opened the door and headed for the storefront.

*

"Good work today! Get home safe!"

"Yeah, you too. Good luck with the last hour of your shift, Asami."

"This time of day's a piece of cake. Easy money. See ya!"

When my shift was over, Asami watched me clock out, then smiled and waved good-bye. I waved back, and she nodded before returning to stocking the shelves inside the store.

When I walked into the office, I let out a big sigh.

I didn't know what Asami had said to him, but from the moment I joined them out front and started work, Mr. Yaguchi hadn't said another word about our past. In fact, whenever I was struggling with some part of the job, he would come over and casually advise me on how to do it.

Asami, too, was jabbering away and going about her tasks as usual. It was as if she'd completely forgotten how I'd been acting before I started work, and she

never once mentioned it. The ways she spoke to me and looked at me were completely normal, too.

She'd seen me get so emotional—despite her kind words, she must have been concerned or at least curious. I wouldn't have been surprised at all if she'd behaved a little awkwardly around me, but Asami was acting so natural that it felt kind of unnatural.

At any rate, despite the mess at the start of the day, work had progressed smoothly, and I completed my shift without too much stress.

Judging by the way Mr. Yaguchi was acting, he might not bring up our past again. He'd been the picture of virtue as he helped me out with my work. I had only ever seen how he was at home, so it was a little odd to watch as he breezed through his tasks despite his relaxed, unhurried demeanor.

Maybe there wasn't any reason to keep despairing over what had happened. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to imagine things getting a little better from here on out.

I wrestled with these thoughts as I finished changing, then left through the back door of the convenience store.

However, the moment I stepped out onto the street, I spotted somebody leaning against a telephone pole.

"Oh, good work today."

"...You too."

The figure by the pole was Mr. Yaguchi, fiddling with his smartphone.

"I was waiting for you."

"...What for?"

The optimistic feeling I'd had mere seconds earlier disappeared completely.

Mr. Yaguchi's shift had ended more than three hours before mine. Had he been waiting here that whole time, or did he calculate my clock-out time and return to the store?

Either way, I had a bad feeling about the situation.

He noticed how wary I looked and offered me a careless smile. “Come onnn. No need to make that face. We’ve slept together, haven’t we?”

“Please don’t say things like that.”

“...That’s odd, Miyuki. I never got the feeling you were so touchy about that kinda thing.”

“...”

His words sent a sharp pang straight through my heart.

He was right. When I was living at his place, I was totally used to *that kinda thing*. I had even started trying to put on an act to make it seem like I was enjoying myself.

He wasn’t an unattractive man. In fact, he had a nice face and a nice body. I remembered being thankful that he wasn’t repulsive beyond what I could handle.

“I was surprised. I never thought I’d run into you here,” Mr. Yaguchi said, grinning. “Are you...staying with someone at the moment?”

“...”

When he saw that I wasn’t going to answer, he flashed me a wry smile and nodded. “I see—so you’re still on the run. You’re a determined one.”

“Um... Can I please leave now?”

“That’s not nice. We still have so much to catch up on.”

“There’s nothing I particularly want to talk about.” I gave him a brief, plain answer and started walking, intending to slip by him. I wanted to get away from here—away from him—as soon as possible.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Mr. Yaguchi, however, had other ideas and grabbed me by the arm. Despite his slight frame, his grip was quite strong.

“Wh-what is it...?”

“I’m just curious about where you’re living.”

“What...?” I asked back, and Mr. Yaguchi smiled whimsically and repeated his question.

“Like I said, I want to see where you’re staying now, Miyuki. It’s gotta be a man’s place, so there shouldn’t be anyone home, right?”

“...And what do you want to do there?”

“Nothing, just a visit! And we can take our time catching up. We haven’t seen each other in so long, after all.” When he was done speaking, he put on a childish grin. I found it creepy. Under no circumstances could I bring him home with me.

“No. I can’t have you over without the homeowner’s permission.”

“Why don’t you ask him for permission, then? I’m not gonna do anything bad. Come on—you must have his number at least.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond.

Did he really want to pay a harmless visit to our apartment? If so, that made his intentions even more confusing. I didn’t think we were ever so close that he’d want to reminisce about the past with me.

I shook my head. I couldn’t let him set the pace.

“Just no. I’m going home... Excuse me.”

I broke free from Mr. Yaguchi’s grasp, turned on my heel, and walked away from him at a brisk pace.

Then I heard Mr. Yaguchi’s voice coming from behind me, louder than before.

“Okay, how about this?”

Though I knew I should have kept walking, I found myself stopping in my tracks. I turned around to look at him.

“Take me to your place, and I won’t tell Asami or our manager about our past.”

A chill ran through me.

He was clearly blackmailing me. It was such a classic move, and I knew, in my head, that I didn’t need to take him seriously. Even so, his words were more than enough to unsettle me.

“And if I don’t...then what?”

Mr. Yaguchi gave me a wry grin and shrugged. “Do you really have to ask?”

At his reply, I fell silent.

He was going to tell Asami and our manager. I was sure that would spell the end of the peaceful life I’d finally found for myself.

If Asami found out I’d gotten here by offering my body to men I hardly knew, she might look down on me.

And if the boss found out, he’d definitely make me come clean about my identity. In the worst-case scenario, he might even hand me over to the police.

If the police got involved, it would cause trouble for Mr. Yoshida, and that was what I wanted to avoid the most. He’d already done more for me than I could ever repay, and it would be unforgivable for me to cause him problems instead.

I clenched my fists and took in a deep breath, trying to keep the agitated feeling in the pit of my stomach at bay.

“...You really just want to visit?” I asked. “Nothing else?” Mr. Yaguchi’s face lit up like a kid in a candy store, and he nodded emphatically.

“I really mean it! I just wanna talk.”

“So you don’t mind if I contact the homeowner?”

“Of course not! We don’t wanna worry him. I’ll be sure to leave before he gets back.” He looked down at his phone as he spoke. He must have been checking the time.

“...You can come over for a little while, then.”

“Really?! Great!”

“...But! ...You’d better keep your promise!”

“Of course, of cooouurse!”

His grin suggested he was genuinely happy. Normally, you might find a smile as innocent as his endearing, but considering the circumstances, I just thought he looked crazy. I couldn’t even manage to fake a smile back at him.

I took out my smartphone and brought up the messaging app.

I opened my conversation with Mr. Yoshida, but as soon as I started typing a message, I realized I didn't know what to write.

How could I best tell him what was going on without making him worry?

The first thing that came to mind was, "I'm bringing Asami over," but that was an obvious lie. If I was just going to lie to him, then there was no point in messaging him at all.

What if I said that it was a senior from work? That might be vague enough to get a pass.

I agonized over it, grumbling to myself as I typed out the message.

I'm having a senior from work over. We'll be done before you get home, though. Just wanted to let you know, so no need to worry.

Finally, I pressed Send.

Mr. Yoshida was the type of person who might wonder why I went to the effort of messaging him and start worrying about it. I'd tried to compose a message that would cause him the least anxiety possible.

I took a deep breath, put my smartphone in my shoulder bag, then turned toward Mr. Yaguchi.

"...I've sent him the message. Let's go."

"Whoa, that was fast. This is going to be fun."

Mr. Yaguchi, who had been leaning against the telephone pole, pushed himself back up to his feet with a grunt and jogged over to me, coming to stand by my side.

"Wanna hold hands?"

"...No."

With Mr. Yaguchi walking enthusiastically beside me, I made my way home—
anxiety still swirling in my chest.

Chapter 13 Disgust

“Wow! It’s so clean here! It’s way tidier than my place ever was.”

Mr. Yaguchi voiced his surprise as soon as we entered the apartment.

“He must be a pretty conscientious guy,” he said.

“I’m the one who does the housework,” I answered simply.

“...Housework? You, Miyuki?”

“That’s right.”

Mr. Yaguchi blinked repeatedly, seemingly confused, before suddenly bursting into laughter.

“He’s making a high school girl do housework! You found another weirdo, didn’t you?!” He cackled to himself as he said this, obviously finding the situation funny.

“...It’s not that weird, is it?”

“No, it’s weird all right. He should do the housework himself.”

Then, without asking permission, Mr. Yaguchi took a seat on Mr. Yoshida’s bed. He was being very bold for someone who didn’t do his own housework properly. For some reason, I felt anger begin to rise inside me. I wanted to snap back at him: “If you think it’s so easy to hold down a full-time job and keep up with the housework, why don’t you show us how it’s done?”

“So you do all of it? The cooking, the laundry, and the cleaning?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Ah-ha-ha! That’s so funny!” He continued to laugh for a moment, his

shoulders bobbing up and down; then he patted the space next to him. “No need to stand around. Why don’t you take a seat, Miyuki?”

I knew full well he wanted me to sit beside him. I nodded, then proceeded to settle down on the floor right where I was, hugging my knees. Mr. Yaguchi pouted in dissatisfaction but didn’t press me to move.

“...Hmm. So this is your latest hideout, huh.”

“...”

He took his time scanning the room, moving his neck around to get a better look at his surroundings.

“It’s small.”

“...It’s not meant for two people.”

“And yet you’re staying here. Pretty gutsy of you,” he said, grinning. It didn’t sound like he meant it sarcastically. “How long have you been here?”

“About two months.”

“Two months?!” he repeated loudly. I had the feeling this was the first time I’d seen anything other than a smile on his face since I’d met him earlier that day. “What? This guy’s let you stay here for two whole months?”

“Yeah, that’s right...”

“And you do the housework?”

“Yes, I do the housework.”

“What else?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?!” Mr. Yaguchi raised his voice again. He froze for a few seconds, his mouth hanging open, before letting out a breathy sigh of disbelief.

He scratched his head, adding, as if to himself, “I haven’t heard of that kind of kink before...”

“Huh?”

“Uh, nothing,” he replied with a sweet smile, then cocked his head at me.

“Excuse me for being so blunt, but have you had sex with him?”

“...*Cough!*”

He’d changed the subject so suddenly, I gasped and swallowed some of my own spit by mistake. It went down my windpipe and left me choking for a moment.

“A-are you okay? Was it that surprising a question?”

“You...”

Once I stopped coughing, I looked up, and my eyes met Mr. Yaguchi’s. He really did look perplexed.

“So he just picked you up off the street and let you stay here for two whole months?”

“...Yeah.”

“And you don’t think it’s weird that he hasn’t once tried to have sex with you? He is a man, after all. If you were hopelessly ugly, I might get it. But you’re clearly a pretty young girl.”

The way Mr. Yaguchi talked about the most outrageous things without stumbling or hesitating over his words left me speechless.

That said, I did understand what he meant. I had wondered the same thing at first.

“...I see.” Mr. Yaguchi nodded again and exhaled through his nose.

Then he looked me in the eyes and spoke with an air of indifference. “Then I guess it’s been a long time for both of us.”

“Huh?”

“Since we’ve had sex.”

“Uh, um.”

“I’m the same. I broke up with all my girlfriends before I moved here.”

He stood up from the bed as he said this, then came and took a seat beside me on the floor as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I immediately

tried to put some distance between us, but he grabbed me by the shoulders.

“U-um... Just talking, remember?”

“Well, that was my plan, but now that I’m alone in a room with a beautiful girl like you, I just can’t help myself.”

“That’s...!”

I strained my arms to push him away, but the grip Mr. Yaguchi had on my shoulders was much stronger. I couldn’t move. I shot him a reproachful glare, but his face was closer than I had expected, and I ended up being the one to flinch back.

His gentle smile never faltered.

“Awww, don’t make that face. We used to do it every day back at my place, remember? I know you don’t hate it. Sex, that is.”

“That’s not the proble—”

He didn’t even wait for me to finish before drawing his face closer to mine. The instant I sensed he was going for a kiss, goose bumps spread all over my body.

“...Hngh!!”

Right before his lips met mine, I drove my head full force into his.

With a loud, dull *thunk*, my forehead collided violently with Mr. Yaguchi’s.

“Ow!!”

The strength left his right arm, and I took the opportunity to escape from his hold and back up against the wall.

Mr. Yaguchi rubbed his forehead and stared at me in surprise.

“That was pretty mean of you... Does doing it with me sound that bad?”

“Haah... Haah...” I tried to answer him, but my shoulders just heaved up and down with each ragged breath, and I couldn’t form words. I didn’t know whether it was anger or fear, but I was seething with emotion, and my lips were trembling.

“I’d understand if I was totally repulsive, but I’m sure I don’t look that bad. We never had any problems having sex in the past. Why are you so against it now?”

He drew closer to me again as he spoke, and I instinctually pressed my back against the wall. I knew I couldn’t go back any farther, but I kicked and pushed my feet against the floor all the same.

“It’ll be fine, won’t it? It’s no big deal.”

“...No.”

“I’ll make sure it doesn’t hurt. Trust me—it’ll be fine.”

“...Get away from me!!” I shouted before my thoughts could catch up. My throat tingled, and heat coursed throughout my body. I felt my skin crawl. Every inch of me was rejecting this man.

Although I’d been with him before, I was now repulsed by the idea, and there was nothing I could do to change that.

Oh, why did I ever let him into the apartment?

So that I could protect my friendship with Asami, so my manager wouldn’t find out the truth...

And then I saw Mr. Yoshida’s face in my mind.

That’s right. Mr. Yoshida.

I’d brought this man here because I didn’t want to cause any trouble for Mr. Yoshida.

I could feel the goose bumps disappearing.

If I gave in to Mr. Yaguchi and smoothed things over amicably, I would be able to put this behind me without bringing Mr. Yoshida any trouble. I didn’t know what would happen if I sent Mr. Yaguchi away like this and his anger got the better of him.

As I thought about it, the strength began to seep from my limbs.

I released the tension from my body, still curled up and pressed against the wall, and looked at Mr. Yaguchi. The inside of my mouth was completely dry.

“.....Do it.”

“Huh?”

There was no way Mr. Yaguchi could have heard the tiny voice I’d forced out of my throat. He tilted his head in confusion.

I sucked in a deep breath, ignoring the throbbing pain in my stomach, and repeated myself.

“I said...I’ll do—” My words were interrupted by a clattering from the entryway.

Mr. Yaguchi and I both instinctively turned toward the source of the sound.

The door flung open, and in walked...

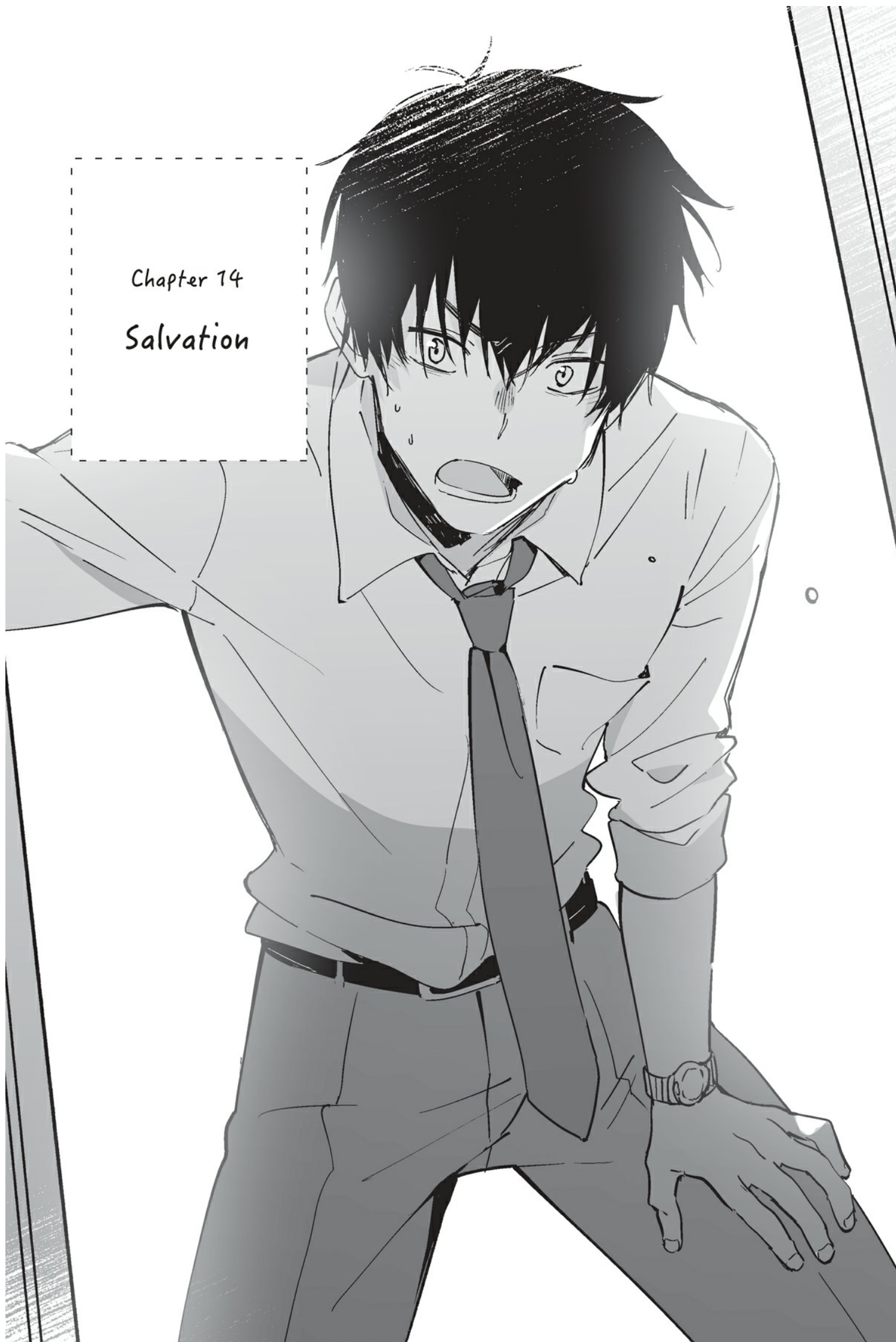
“Ahhh...” A hoarse gasp like a sob escaped from the back of my throat.

“Sayu...!”

Mr. Yoshida stood in the entryway, breath ragged.

Chapter 14

Salvation



Chapter 14 Salvation

“...Ahhh, now we can finally take a break.”

“Phew... This one sure took some heavy lifting.”

The sun had already begun to set by the time I was finally able to deliver the commissioned program, and both myself and Hashimoto next to me were completely drained.

“Every time we had a meeting, we’d get asked to do something else that wasn’t on the order form...”

“This many additions and we couldn’t charge for any of them. It sucks... If we don’t start overcharging them, they’re just going to keep taking advantage of us.”

Even Hashimoto, who almost never complained about work, was unable to hold back his frustrations on this occasion.

“Well, we got it done one way or another. Good work.”

“You too.”

We both casually picked up the cans of coffee I had bought and pulled the tabs open in unison.

It was deadline day, so we’d been stressed out since the morning. Now we could finally kick back.

With that thought in mind, I had started to relax when I felt the smartphone in my pocket begin to vibrate.

“Hmm?”

Who would get in touch with me at this hour? I took out my phone and

looked at the screen. It was a message from Sayu. It read: **I'm having a senior from work over. We'll be done before you get home, though. Just wanted to let you know, so no need to worry.**

"Her senior from work..."

The way she had worded it sounded odd.

Did she mean Asami? No—if it was Asami, she would've just written "Asami" rather than go out of her way to write it like this.

That suggested it was a different senior. For some reason, though, the way she'd added *no need to worry* at the end of her message troubled me.

I didn't particularly mind her inviting friends over. In fact, Asami invited herself over all the time, and lately, Sayu had stopped bothering to message me about it at all.

That was when I remembered something Asami had told me a few days earlier.

"One of our seniors there has a kinda bad vibe to him."

"Hmm... To put it bluntly, he seems like a fuckboy."

Instantly, I found myself jumping to my feet.

Hashimoto looked at me, surprised. A jolt ran through Ms. Gotou, who was seated at her desk on the other side of the room, and she cast a glance my way.

I hurriedly sat back down, but the bad feeling I'd had a few seconds earlier was still swirling inside me.

"What is it, Yoshida?" Hashimoto asked, a note of concern in his voice.

My thoughts were spinning.

We had finished building the program. All there was left to do was write up the report and hand over the post-processing. Nothing I needed to handle myself.

My thoughts still racing, I threw on my jacket and turned to speak to Hashimoto.

"Sorry, I gotta leave early. Can you take care of the rest?"

“Huh? What happened?”

“I’ll explain later.”

“...All right, got it. I’ll figure something out.” Hashimoto forced a smile and waved me off. “I don’t know what’s up, but you’d better hurry.”

“Sorry. And thanks.”

I shoved my laptop into my work bag, checked to make sure I had my wallet and phone, then dashed out of the office.

Behind me, I heard Ms. Gotou’s voice ask, “What’s wrong with Yoshida?!” Followed by Hashimoto’s response: “He said his stomach hurts so bad, he might be giving birth!”

*

No matter how much of a rush I was in, the train wasn’t going to move any faster.

I jostled around inside the train car, feeling fidgety. Midway there, I was unable to resist sending Sayu a message asking if she was okay, but she didn’t reply.

My anxiety only increased, and as soon as I got off at my station, I began sprinting as fast as I could. It wasn’t far to run.

Before I knew it, I’d arrived at my apartment. I fumbled with the key and flung open the door.

The first thing I saw was an unfamiliar man staring at me with a blank expression. Then, when I shifted my gaze, I saw Sayu leaning against the wall, trying to get away from him.

“...Sayu!” I called out her name, my breathing unsteady, and Sayu, her jaw still hanging open in surprise, exhaled as if all the strength had left her body.

Now that I was looking at her, I could see that her hair was a mess. Her clothes were still on, but they were wrinkled.

And right in front of her stood the unfamiliar man.

I could feel my blood begin to boil. This must be what it felt like to really lose

your temper.

However, using what little reason I had left, I managed to keep myself from lunging right at him.

“...Sayu.”

I looked at her, and she looked back at me in a daze.

“...Is this your boyfriend?”

I knew very well what the answer was, but I asked her anyway.

This was, after all, our home; I didn't think it was right to throw him out without letting her have a say in it.

It was obvious, even from across the room, that Sayu was about to cry. She didn't say anything; she just shook her head from side to side.

I nodded, then posed another question to her.

“...Want me to chuck him out?” Tears started pouring down her face. She nodded her head up and down.

“All right.”

The instant I saw her nod, I sprang forward.

“Uh, wait, wai-wai-wai-wait!”

“Outside, you asshole!”

“No violence, please!! No violence!!”

“Shut up and get out!!”

I grabbed the man by the collar of his shirt and took him outside. Luckily, he was a thin wisp of a man, so despite not exactly being a bodybuilder, I was still able to drag him out without too much trouble.

I shut and locked the door behind us, then gave him the most severe glare I could muster.

“Who the hell are you?” I asked, and the man, who seemed to have relaxed a little now that I'd let go of him, responded with a smirk on his face.

“Yaguchi. Kyouya Yaguchi.”

“And you’re Sayu’s senior at work?”

“Ha-ha. Is that the name she gave you? She told me her name was Miyuki.”

“Miyuki...?”

“She stayed at my place a few months back. Only for a couple of days, though.”

That was when I realized the gravity of the situation.

She’d stayed with him a while back, which probably meant...for whatever reason, Sayu had run into one of the men she’d let sleep with her.

That explained why Sayu had taken the trouble to tell me there was *no need to worry*.

“Anyway, I’m her senior, yeah. I asked if I could come over, and she said it was fine, so that’s why I’m here.”

“I know. She messaged me.”

“And you still rushed home to toss me out. You’re a bit of a worrier, aren’t ya?”

Yaguchi’s hostility toward me was obvious. Well, it wasn’t like I’d tried to hide my hostility, either, so it made sense.

“What were you trying to do?” My question was straightforward, and after a moment of staring at me blankly, he burst out laughing.

“Wasn’t it obvious? I was trying to have sex with her.”

I felt something inside my body explode. I fought back the urge to strike Yaguchi and chose to stamp my foot on the hallway floor instead.

“Don’t mess with me!”

“I’m not messing with you. I’m completely serious. Look at you. You really haven’t laid a finger on her, have you?”

“Isn’t that a given?! She’s a high schooler!!”

“Come on. What part of that is a given...?” He smirked again and pointed at me. “You’re the one who’s acting weird here. You’ve put up some high school

girl for more than two months and not done a thing to her. You grabbed a huge social risk off the street and took her home for nothing. What exactly are you getting out of it?”

“It’s not about what I get out of—”

“No way!” Yaguchi cut me off mid-sentence. “Nobody in the world just takes on trouble without expecting a reward! Talk pretty all you want, but don’t push that judgment off on others.”

“G-go to hell! We’re adults... Adults should never take advantage of children that way! It’s not right!” When I yelled at him, Yaguchi just blinked in surprise, then gave an exaggerated sigh.

“It’s no use. You’re not getting it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just let me say this. You’re no different.”

“Oh? From who?”

“From me.”

This claim left me speechless. We were the same? I had no idea what he was getting at.

“You heard some high school girl going, ‘Save meeee,’ so you let her shack up at your place and hid her away. From that point on, we’re no different. She might have consented to it, but her parents didn’t, so the very fact that you’re keeping her at your apartment makes you a criminal.”

“So what? Are you trying to say that because we’re already criminals, having sex with her doesn’t make it any worse?”

“Raping her would make it worse, so that wouldn’t be the same. But she offered me sex in return for letting her stay. What’s wrong with taking her up on it?”

“...You’re so fucked up.”

“You’re the one who’s fucked up,” Yaguchi continued, rattling on. “From what I’ve heard, you’re having her do your housework or whatever. Are you playing

newlyweds or something? I don't know what kind of kick you get out of it, but you must be insane to let her live with you for two months for free and work a part-time job as well."

"She doesn't want to go home, so I can't exactly make her, can I?"

"Ah-ha-ha! You just don't get it!" Yaguchi laughed like he thought I was crazy; then, all of a sudden, he flashed me a cold stare. His elusive smile was gone, and I felt like he was squeezing my guts with his bare hands.

"So are you gonna look after her for your whole life?"

This question made the breath catch in my throat.

"Are you gonna keep taking care of her? What are you gonna do about college? What about her career?" Yaguchi just kept going. I wanted to fight back but couldn't find the words.

He stopped for a moment and let out a small sigh.

"Look, it's just irresponsible, isn't it?" he said, exhaling from his nose. "We're the same, exactly the same. It doesn't matter whether or not you've had sex with her; you're still just taking advantage of her, aren't you? I'm sure you thought you were saving her and that felt good, but if she ever becomes inconvenient for you to keep around, you'll have no choice but to throw her out. The way you feel about it now is irrelevant. You know why?" He had been speaking quickly; then he paused, shot me a sharp glare, and delivered his next words nice and slow: "...You're not her parent; you're not anything to her."

Yaguchi's accusation made me feel like my stomach was caught in a vise.

I knew that. I knew.

But...I still wanted to save her. Was it wrong to feel that way?

"But..."

My fist clenched tight, I gave my answer.

"But I..."

I glared at Yaguchi, still standing in front of me.

"...I don't want to become just another adult trying to warp her values."

What Yaguchi had said was probably right. I couldn't deny it.

However, it still didn't justify what he had done.

My words may have emerged from a heart in chaos, but I was confident they expressed how I really felt.

Yaguchi stared back at me with a look of suspicion, like he was facing off with a space alien. Then he quickly glanced away and began scratching his head.

"...You're a pathetic dude. I'm over this."

With that, he turned on his heel, seeming deflated, and began trudging off down the hallway.

"Hey!" I called after him, and he looked back at me, clearly annoyed.

"What is it?"

"Don't mess with Sayu again," I said. "Ever." He gave a heavy sigh, clearly annoyed.

"Just thinking about you jerking your justice boner at me every time has already put me off. My dick's over it. I won't bother her anymore. Promise."

He started walking away again, but once he had gotten halfway down the hall, he stopped and turned around.

"You better not have given me all this shit just to toss her out on the street tomorrow. That'd be pretty fucked up. Just saying," he added derisively.

"Why would I?"

"Well, you say that now... But if Miyuki quits her job, I'm gonna have the last laugh. Peace."

Yaguchi spat out his parting words and continued down the passageway. I watched him until he was out of sight, then leaned against the hallway wall.

His words were still echoing in my head.

I'm sure you thought you were saving her and that felt good, but...

What was wrong with trying to save her?

I couldn't tell whether I was sad or angry. My emotions were at a fever pitch,

but all they did was churn around inside me with no escape, growing stronger and stronger.

What was wrong with trying to help a troubled child?

“Goddamn it...”

Those two words escaped from the back of my throat. My breath was hot.

All that talk of “what I was getting out of it” was unbelievable.

He was an adult. He should have been the one protecting her.

But none of them had.

“Shit...”

Not a single one of them had ever helped her.

None had ever extended a hand in kindness.

So why was I in the wrong for doing just that?

“None of you ever did...”

She was already hurt, but all they had done was add even more salt to her wounds.

Then they irresponsibly tossed her to the wayside.

“If you don’t want me to help her...then you all should’ve helped her instead!!”

The emotions raging inside me finally came to the surface and burst out, rushing through my throat and roaring from my lips.

My breath was ragged. For some reason, my vision was blurry; it took me a few seconds to realize that tears were running down my face.

I slumped against the hallway wall, trying to catch my breath, when suddenly, the door next to me clicked open.

It was the friendly looking woman who lived next door.

“Uhhh... I heard a bit of noise... I-is everything okay?”

I hadn’t spoken to this neighbor since I introduced myself on the day I moved

in, and yet here she was, staring at me with a look of obvious distress on her face. I could feel my cheeks turning red.

“Oh, sorry...for the noise. I’ll go back in now.”

“No, it’s fine... I’m just glad you got the problem sorted out.”

“Yeah...”

With our perfunctory conversation finished, the neighbor shut her door again.

A sigh escaped my lips.

I felt a little calmer now.

Once I’d calmed down, I remembered that Sayu was still inside. That’s right. My anger didn’t matter right now. It was *her* I needed to worry about.

I hurried to the door and turned the knob, only to be met with a dull *thud*. It wouldn’t open. Oh yeah. I’d locked the door behind me. I turned the key in the lock and pulled the door open.

“Sayu...”

When I entered the room, I found Sayu sitting in the same spot as before with her knees still curled up to her chest. Her shoulders were shaking up and down every few seconds.

She was crying.

“Sayu, I sent him home.”

“...Mr. Yoshida.”

She slowly lifted her head and looked up at me with a vacant expression. Her face was stained with tears.

“What’s...wrong with me?”

Tears continued to stream down her face as she spoke. Unable to stand there and simply listen, I walked over to a spot in front of her and sat. Then I took her hand in mine and gave it a squeeze.

She looked down at my hand, then put her other hand over mine and squeezed it back.

“Some time ago, that guy and I...did it.”

A sharp pang pierced my chest. An image of the two of them suddenly crept into my mind, but I pushed it out just as quickly.

“It didn’t feel particularly wrong. It just felt normal.”

“Sayu.”

“We did it so many times.”

“Sayu, that’s enough.”

“And yet, here I am...” Her voice trembled, and she tightened her grip on my hand. “When he tried to do it again...I—I got so scared.”

Sayu sniffled and hung her head, her body still shaking.

“Mr. Yoshida... Am I broken?”

Her question made the breath catch in my lungs.

“I could do it before, but now I can’t... I—I just...d-don’t understand...wh-what’s happening to me...”

“Sayu...!”

Before I realized what I was doing, I had wrapped my arms around her in an embrace.

“It’s all right. That’s completely normal...!”

“B-but that’s how I managed to make it this far, and now, all of a sudden...”

“It’s okay. It’s okay to feel scared of the things that scare you. You’re not in the wrong.”

“Hngh...”

I hugged her as tight as I could, and Sayu, unable to express how she was feeling in words, sobbed into my chest.

Why?

Why did this have to happen to her?

As I held her, I was overwhelmed with a sense of powerlessness.

I had been under the impression she was finally starting to leave behind all those self-sacrificing values she'd been taught.

But it wasn't like that at all.

No. She *had* changed.

She was now able to reject the advances of a man she didn't like. She was feeling exactly like she should.

And yet, she still couldn't bring herself to make peace with that.

Nothing could be more heartrending.

I bit my lip and was met with the faint taste of blood.

"It's all right, Sayu. You said no to him. You did good."

In return, Sayu wrapped her arms around my back and spoke up, her body shaking.

"But...now that I've turned him down...he might go and tell people about my past... That means the manager will find out, and he'll call the cops, and they'll cause problems for you, and...!"

"It'll be fine. That's my responsibility for keeping you here."

"That's not—!"

She lifted her tear-stained face to look at me.

I didn't know what she was about to say, but I was certain I didn't want to hear it.

"Please!" I cut her off, shouting. "Think about yourself for a change...!"

Sayu sniffed repeatedly and fixed me with a blank look.

"Why do you always try to take on all the suffering yourself? The people who hurt you don't even think twice about it. But if you don't take care of yourself... nobody can protect you...!"

I felt tears coming on and desperately tried to hold them back.

I sensed the walls shaking from the loudness of my voice. The silence that followed seemed to stretch out. All I could hear were Sayu's sniffles and the

hum of the ventilation fan.

Her stare still fixed on me and tears running down her cheeks, she muttered a question: “Why, Mr. Yoshida...? Why do you want to protect me so much?” I just looked at her, stunned.

“If you’re too softhearted, you’ll never get what you really want.”

Mishima’s words.

“If she ever becomes inconvenient for you to keep around, you’ll have no choice but to throw her out.”

Yaguchi’s words.

They both flashed across my mind, jumbling together.

“I don’t know...”

Before I knew it, I was speaking aloud.

“I don’t know why, either...,” I said, hanging my head.

I didn’t know why I was keeping her at home with me.

I thought she could help ease my loneliness in exchange for a place for her to escape to.

But it seemed I really couldn’t stand to see her get hurt.

I had no idea why.

For whose benefit were we living together? Was it for mine, or for hers? I didn’t know anymore.

The reality I’d intentionally left hazy had rushed up on me all at once, and I no longer understood.

With my head still down, I suddenly sensed the warmth of something wrapping itself around me.

I realized it was Sayu, embracing me in her arms.

“Mr. Yoshida...”

Her voice was nasal as she spoke.

“...I’m sorry.”

“...Don’t apologize.”

“.....Thanks.”

“.....You really have changed.”

I hung my head even lower, not wanting her to see me fight back tears.

Sayu embraced me even tighter. My face was crushing into her chest. It felt so soft.

“...You’re the one who’s changed me, Mr. Yoshida,” she said.

“I just want you to be a regular high school girl,” I replied, not thinking too hard about my words.

“...Yeah.”

“Go to school, make friends, learn all sorts of stuff, and grow up into an adult.”

“...Yeah.”

“Seeing you not being able to do that... It just hurts so much. That’s how I feel, anyway.”

“.....Yeah.”

I pushed her back by her shoulders, and Sayu relaxed her arms at the same time, letting me go.

“I don’t know if I’m doing this for you or for me anymore,” I said, looking her in the eye. “But what I do know is...I really want you to start treating yourself better.”

Sayu’s eyes began to water as I spoke, and she nodded a few times.

“...Yeah. Yeah, got it.”

Her face was still a mess from crying, but she gave me a simple, tender smile; this one wasn’t rehearsed.

“I’ll do my best.”

I felt like I knew the journey she’d been on, but I probably didn’t have the first

clue.

And yet...

Her natural smile was truly a beautiful thing to behold.

Sayu gave one big sniff of her runny nose, then wiped the tears from her face with her sleeve and exhaled loudly.

“I’ll go make some miso soup!”

“Huh?”

“I cried a lot today, so I’m gonna make it extra salty!”

“O-okay...”

With that, she stood up and headed for the kitchen.

I watched her, still sniffing away, as she began to fill the pot with water. A faint sense of relief washed over me.

If I had arrived home just a few minutes later, she might now be standing at the edge of an even greater despair.

At the very least, I was able to save her from that fate.

That was enough to make me believe that Sayu and I had met for a reason.

And yet...

I recalled the reality of our situation I had been reminded of so often in the past few days.

I could never be Sayu’s parent.

Someday, I would have to send her home.

I could sense that still-vague truth rumbling louder and louder as it pressed itself upon us, as if to say, “Nothing has been resolved yet.”

I, at least, couldn’t let myself forget that.

Chapter 15 Starry Sky

“...Did something happen yesterday?”

“Huh?”

Asami had asked me this question out of the blue while we were at work together. I was concentrating on stocking some shelves, so my reply ended up sounding a little distracted.

Frustrated by my reaction, she repeated herself with more emphasis.

“Don’t *huh* me! I’m asking whether something happened with Yaguchi.”

“Mr. Yaguchi? Why?”

Hearing his name was enough to set me on edge, but I tried not to let it show on my face.

Although I was working the same shift as Mr. Yaguchi again, he hadn’t said a single word to me. I was also feeling awkward about the previous day’s events, so I was grateful for his silence, but it must have given Asami the sense that something wasn’t quite right.

If I told Asami what had happened with him the day before, I doubted that either Mr. Yaguchi or I would benefit, and it didn’t seem like he was going to say anything himself. So, as much as I hated keeping Asami in the dark, I decided stay silent on the matter.

Asami stared at me for a couple of seconds, then tutted.

“I hate it when you’re like this, Sasa.”

“Huh...?”

Asami turned on her heel and headed toward the door to the office. Mr.

Yaguchi was back there on break.

“H-hey!”

I chased after her in a panic, but she ignored me and threw open the door.

“Huh? What the—?”

I heard Mr. Yaguchi’s voice coming from inside the office and hurried into the room. There, I found him sitting on the folding chair and eating his boxed lunch as Asami stood imposingly in front of him.

“Did you do something to Sasa yesterday?” Asami didn’t mince her words.

Mr. Yaguchi stared blankly back at her, then cast his gaze in my direction. The look on his face was plainly asking, “Did you tell her something?” I shook my head reflexively.

When Mr. Yaguchi saw my reaction, he smiled wryly, then explained exactly what had happened.

“I went to her apartment and suggested we have sex.”

“What?”

“She said no.”

“Well, duh! How stupid can you be?!” Asami roared. Mr. Yaguchi frowned and shook his head.

“If I didn’t ask, how would I know the answer?”

“You shouldn’t have even had to ask! Wait, you didn’t assault her or anything, did you?”

Mr. Yaguchi scratched the tip of his nose with his left hand, then flashed a whimsical smile.

“W-well, I suppose it got a little close.”

“...You—!”

The instant she heard Mr. Yaguchi’s reply, Asami swung her right hand full force and slapped him on the cheek with her palm. The sound of the strike echoed throughout the office. Mr. Yaguchi’s wooden chopsticks clattered to the

floor.

Shocked by how candidly Mr. Yaguchi had admitted to his actions and by Asami's sudden slap, I could only stand where I was, flustered.

"That hurt...and you made me drop my chopsticks."

"You're lucky that's all you got," Asami said coldly as Mr. Yaguchi cradled his cheek.

He'd gone a little pale as he looked up at Asami, who was displaying a very different attitude from usual. I couldn't see her face from where I was standing.

"You might think doing stuff like this is part of your life's work or something." Asami's voice trembled slightly as she continued. "But when people have already been scarred, all you're doing is adding fresh, new wounds and reopening the old ones."

I saw that she was clenching her fists tightly.

"Your thoughtless actions might mean nothing to you, but the other person may be feeling the pain of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of old scars! Just because you can't see them doesn't mean they're not there...!"

The anger in Asami's voice was plain to hear. I'd never seen Asami so obviously infuriated, and it must have been Mr. Yaguchi's first time witnessing it, too. We both kept on listening, speechless.

Asami's shoulders had begun to tremble, but her words, though quiet, were clear.

"People who hurt others when they're already down and wounded are trash. You're nothing but trash!!"

Asami's voice had continued to grow in volume until, finally, her anger exploded, and she was screaming at Mr. Yaguchi. He didn't move an inch; he was frozen in shock, eyes glued to her.

"Apologize to Sayu."

"Uh..."

“Apologize!!”

“F-fine. I get it. I will. I’ll apologize.”

Overwhelmed by Asami’s intensity, he nodded several times.

But just as he shifted his gaze to me, a voice from inside the store called out, “Excuse me!”

Come to think of it, all three of us were holed up in the back room even though the store was still open.

Asami gasped in realization, and after a momentary wince, she turned back to face Mr. Yaguchi.

“Apologize. No ifs, ands, or buts!”

“Okay. Fine.”

As soon as she heard his reply, Asami breezed past me and darted toward the storefront. “I’m terribly sorry to make you wait!” I heard her say when she reached the register. Her voice was slightly higher than usual.

With Asami gone and the two of us left alone in the office, Mr. Yaguchi let out a sigh of apparent relief.

“Haah... This area sure has a lot of do-gooders, doesn’t it...,” he muttered.

“ ... ”

Then he turned to face me. After uncomfortably biting his lip a couple of times, he bowed his head in my direction.

“My bad about yesterday.”

“Huh...?”

“I don’t think I was in the wrong to suggest it... But yeah, I accept that I might have been a little too forceful. I just...got a little excited, y’know,” he mumbled, his gaze still directed toward the floor. Then he looked up at me.

“I’ve never done it without the other person’s consent. But if I’d kept at it yesterday, I would have ended up tarnishing my good track record.”

“What are you talking about...?” I couldn’t suppress my honest response. I’d

only ever thought of him as a flake.

However, going by his attitude yesterday and the look on his face right now, he probably *didn't* mean any harm. The two of us were just too misaligned to ever see eye to eye again.

“Um,” I started to speak.

“Hmm?”

A doubt had suddenly surfaced in my mind, and I'd decided to vocalize it.

“Why did you tell Asami all of that, but not about our past? Couldn't you have used that to justify your actions at least a little?”

I was referring to what he'd insisted repeatedly the day before: “*We never had any problems having sex in the past.*” I didn't think it justified his actions, but if he'd told her something like, “We had that kind of relationship in the past, so I thought it'd be okay,” he might have sounded a bit more reasonable.

And yet, he had never mentioned any of it.

He blinked in surprise a few times, then cocked his head with a curious look on his face.

“Well, I promised not to mention anything about our past as long as you let me come over, didn't I?”

His response left me bewildered.

He was the one who'd insisted he just wanted to talk, then once we were at the apartment casually started assaulting me. Yet he was going to keep his other promise?

His behavior was so inconsistent, it surpassed confusing and became hilarious.

“Pfft!”

“Huh? What's so funny?”

“Nothing. It's just, you're so odd, Mr. Yaguchi.”

“Huh...?”

He furrowed his brow, looking a little hurt.

"I still don't think I can forgive you for...what happened yesterday, but..." I began.

Mr. Yaguchi remained silent and merely tilted his head a bit to one side.

"I don't even feel angry anymore," I continued. "...I was just scared yesterday, but if it happens again, then..."

I gathered all my strength and looked directly into Mr. Yaguchi's eyes. He met my gaze and opened his mouth in surprise.

"...I will get mad."

At my warning, his jaw hung slack for a few seconds; then a gasp escaped his lips.

"I don't like the sound of that. It won't happen again... Besides, now I know you have a scary guard dog," he said jokingly before leaning over to pick up the chopsticks he'd dropped earlier. "But that guy you're living with... He's really letting a good opportunity go to waste."

"Huh?"

Mr. Yaguchi tossed the chopsticks into the garbage can and shrugged.

"He might be bringing you up to be a good woman, but he'll never have you for himself. If you ask me, he's too serious. He's gonna miss out on the good things in life."

"A good woman...?"

"Yeah. What, you don't think so?" He shot me the same smirk, just as he had the day before. "My cheek's killing me right now, so I'm gonna go buy a drink from the vending machine to cool it down."

Mr. Yaguchi got up from the folding chair and headed for the door that led out of the office. Halfway there, he turned around and pointed at me.

"I've apologized. Be sure to let Asami know."

"Uh, sure..."

"And..." Mr. Yaguchi scratched his head and raised a single eyebrow before

continuing. “Tell her I’d appreciate if she’d use some of that slang when she’s yelling at me. It’s less scary that way.”

“Please tell her that yourself.”

He cackled at my reply, then made his way out.

I was left in complete silence, alone in the office.

Considering how frightening I’d found Mr. Yaguchi the day before, I was surprised at how calm I felt.

The reason, however, was as plain as day.

The day before, Mr. Yoshida had protected me from him.

And just now, Asami had done the same.

All it took was the knowledge that there were people in my life who would protect me.

I never knew how empowered that could make me feel.

*

“What? Yoshi isn’t coming home today?”

“...Looks that way.”

I led Asami into the living room of the apartment. She’d turned up after her shift as if it was second nature to her. Then, as I was cooking dinner, a message from Mr. Yoshida had appeared on my phone.

Sorry, we’re having a little trouble at work today, and I have to help out, so I’m gonna stay over at the office tonight. I feel really bad leaving you home alone after what happened yesterday, but there’s nothing I can do about it this time... Really sorry. No need to cook anything for me tonight. Just make something for yourself. Don’t go out unless you really have to. If anything happens, just message me.

I was surprised by how long the message was; Mr. Yoshida’s texts were usually very concise and to the point.

Asami took a peek at the screen as I was reading and scanned the message for

herself.

“He worries way too much, lol. Does he think he’s your dad or something...?”

“Yeah... Well, I did give him reason to worry.”

Asami side-eyed me as I said this, then elbowed me in the ribs.

“It wasn’t your fault, Sasa.”

“...”

While I was trying to work out how to respond, Asami snatched the phone from my hand and started typing a message without asking permission.

“Hey, wait!”

“I won’t write anything bad. Don’t worry,” she assured me casually as she tapped away at the screen with astounding speed.

Heya, Yoshi☆ Asami here. I’m at your place with Sasa right now. I’m thinking I might stay the night so I can keep an eye on her, since you can’t make it home tonight. I’ll be, like, her guardian. Pretty sick idea, right?! Need a response ASAP, kthxbye.

Asami’s message caught me by surprise.

“What? Can you really stay over?”

“It’s all good.”

“Won’t your parents worry?” I asked, and her eyes darted around the room for a moment. By the time I’d noticed, however, she’d put on a smile and nodded.

“It’s all good, seriously! They’re not even home today!”

“Oh, I see...”

I wondered if I’d asked an insensitive question and felt a little guilty.

That was when my phone started vibrating; I had a reply from Mr. Yoshida.

Sorry. If you’re able to stay over, I’d appreciate it. Thanks.

Asami saw the text and grinned.

“Did you see that, Sasa?! We’re gonna get to spend the whole night together! Wild!”

“Yeah. Wild.”

Her smile was infectious; it always looked so gentle that I couldn’t help but get caught up in it.

“Well, how about we have dinner first?” I suggested. “You must be starving.” But after a moment’s thought, she shook her head.

“Nah. I’m good on dinner.”

“Hmm?”

“There’s a place I wanna check out, actually. Wanna come?”

She pointed out the window.

It was already after eight PM, and it was pitch-black out.

“At this time of night?”

“Yep-yep. In fact, this is the time to go.”

“Well, I guess we’ll be okay as long as we’re together. Let’s do it!”

“Ayyy! You always know what I’m saying, Sasa!”

Asami gave an emphatic clap of her hands and jumped to her feet.

“Now that it’s settled, let’s get moving right away! Come on!”

“W-wait! Where are we going?”

“You’ll see when we get there. Oh, we’ll need to stop by my house, ’kay?”

“R-really?”

She continued talking up a storm as she strode toward the entryway. I hurriedly turned off the stove and the living room lights, slipped my phone into my pocket, and followed her out of the apartment.

“There aren’t many streetlamps around here,” said Asami. “Seems like it would be scary to walk around alone at night.”

“Really? It seems normal to me.”

“There are way more around my place. It’s so bright, it’s kinda annoying.”

“O-oh. I see.”

We continued to chat as we walked along, and our surroundings quickly grew unfamiliar to me. We were only ten minutes away from Mr. Yoshida’s apartment, and yet I recognized none of the buildings nearby.

Then, just as Asami had said, more and more streetlamps began to line our path, and I noticed the area getting brighter. The buildings, too, looked fancier. They were all impressive single-family houses.

Asami suddenly stopped in her tracks and grinned at me. “Wait here a second,” she said.

“Uh, s-sure.” I nodded, and Asami grabbed her wallet and pulled out a thin card. She inserted the card into a machine fixed onto a large gate before us. After making a loud, clunking sound, the automatic gate slowly opened.

“Uh...”

When I looked up, I saw a massive house emerging from behind the gate. In fact, up until now, I had thought of these places more as “large buildings” than as “houses.”

“I-is this your house, Asami?”

Asami turned back toward me and gave a small “yep.” The smile she flashed me a second later seemed to contain a hint of loneliness.

Once the gates were fully open, Asami darted inside. A few seconds later, I heard some rattling and saw she was coming back out, pulling a bicycle behind her.

“I’m back!”

“A—a bike?”

“Yep-yep. Our destination isn’t exactly in walking distance.”

“Wait, do I have to ride it, too?”

“That’s right. C’mon. Hop on the back.”

“Riding tandem... Is that really a good idea?”

If a cop caught us, we might be taken into custody.

My words brought a smug smile to Asami's face.

"Would you rather run behind me?"

"Don't be mean!"

"Just chill. The po-po don't patrol where we're going. It's in the city, but it's basically the sticks."

"The po-po..."

As we continued chatting, Asami shut the gate behind us, then swung one leg over her bike. She patted the small luggage rack on the back.

"C'mon—it'll be fine. Hop on."

"Okay..."

I cautiously sat down sideways on the luggage rack. Asami looked back at me out of the corner of her eye to make sure I was seated, declared, "All right, we're off," and began pedaling.

The sway of the bike made me lose my balance.

"Whoa!"

"You can put your arms around my waist. Hold on tight."

"O-okay..."

I grabbed onto Asami's waist, just as she'd told me to, and immediately felt as if I'd regained my balance.

The wind whipped against me as the bike gradually picked up speed. I felt the breeze blowing against my legs; my top half, however, was warm from embracing Asami.

How could someone I had only just met make me feel so secure?

Such thoughts filled my mind.

"Hey, Asami."

"Hmm?"

Suddenly, I found myself speaking.

“I’m...”

“Yeah?”

“I’m from Hokkaido.”

“Whoa! That’s pretty far. What made you come all this way?”

Should I tell her? Would I be able to now?

Those questions didn’t even cross my mind.

Before I knew it, I was telling her who I was and where I was from, as if it was no big deal at all.

Asami pedaled the bike while interjecting at a slow, comfortable pace to let me know she was listening.

As the time flew by in this state of calm, it felt like something huge, heavy, and dark that had been hanging over me was slowly dissolving into the night air. I felt liberated.

I told her about what I’d been through before I came here; I told her about meeting Mr. Yoshida, Miss Yuzuha, and about meeting her; and then I told her about Ms. Gotou.

Around the time I finally finished explaining it all, Asami stopped pedaling.

“We’re here,” she announced, braking. That was when I realized that the scenery around us had changed completely.

“Wow...,” I said, despite myself.

We were on top of a small hill. Before my eyes was a park with a little bench, a lawn, and so much greenery I couldn’t believe we were still in the city.

And in the sky, the stars were shining bright.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yeah...”

“This is my favorite place.”

As she spoke, Asami set her bike down at the edge of the park and slowly

walked toward the center of the lawn.

Then she lay down in the grass, and I went and lay down beside her. All I could see were the stars.

“It really is beautiful... I never knew you could see this many stars in the city.”

“It’s kinda freaky, right? The first time I saw it, I was shook.”

Asami cackled, then let out a small sigh. The words that followed came slowly.

“Dad’s a politician.”

“Huh?”

“Mom’s a lawyer. Mad funny, huh?”

“Wait, are you talking about your parents?”

“Yeah.”

She let out a huff through her nose, then carried on speaking.

“My parents have always been really busy, so I got left alone allllll the time. I wasn’t unhappy or anything, but it was pretty lonely. It made me start hating that massive house I live in.”

“...Oh.”

“I started wearing *gyaru* fashion to get my parents’ attention, but it just made my mom pass out from shock and my father go nuts. Still, it never made them wonder why I was doing it or anything.”

“Mm.”

“And my mom would always get real mad at me if I didn’t keep up with my studies. So I studied hard like she told me to.”

It was no wonder Asami was so smart. It all made sense now. And yet, at the same time, I felt a little sad for her.

“I think my mom wants to make me into a lawyer, too. I realized that around the time I started middle school. But I don’t really care about that stuff.”

“Yeah, I don’t think you’re cut out for it.”

“Pwa-ha! That’s a little harsh, don’t you think? Well, anyway, that’s why I...”

At that point, she suddenly stopped talking. I waited for her to continue, but she stayed silent. Curious, I turned toward her and saw that for some reason, her face had gone red.

“Huh? What is it?”

“Um... You won’t laugh, will you?”

“Huh?”

“Promise me you won’t laugh.”

“I—I won’t, I promise.”

I wasn’t sure I should say that when I had no idea what was coming, but I was determined to hear her out and take her words seriously.

When Asami heard my response, her eyes darted around dubiously. Then she spoke in a quiet voice.

“I wanna be a novelist.”

“What?! That’s amazing! I know you can do it!”

“M-maybe... I—I mean, if I could, that’d be great.”

“You can! I’m sure of it!”

I’d seen the essays Asami had written for school; I remembered just how impressive I found the flow of her writing and how well structured the passages were.

“Okay. I get it already.”

Asami was blushing so furiously that, despite the dark, I could still tell how red she’d gotten.

“So that’s why I’d rather study literature than law.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“But when I told my mom that, she was totally opposed to the idea.”

“...Yeah, I guess that’s no surprise.”

Asami sighed and pointed toward the star-filled sky.

“That was the first big fight I had with my mom. So my dad brought me out of the house for a while, which he never does. This is where we came.”

She narrowed her eyes slightly as she stared up at the sky. I gazed at her face from the side as she described the memory. She looked uncharacteristically mature.

“We lay back on the grass, and watched the stars together, just like you and I are doing now. I was so shocked at how pretty they were. That was when my dad told me that no matter how big my worries might seem, they were tiny compared to the size of the universe.”

Asami snickered to herself, as if she found it really funny, and narrowed her eyes again.

“I didn’t have a clue what that bald old boomer was talking about, getting all cosmic on me outta nowhere.”

“That was mean of you.”

“I mean, why bring space into it? Of course I can’t compare—I’m just a human,” Asami said, laughing. Then the look on her face suddenly turned serious.

“Still... Even though I couldn’t get on board with what my dad said at all, looking at the stars did get me thinking.”

“About what?”

Asami paused for a moment. Then she replied, quiet but firm.

“There are so many big stars in this universe, and yet, we all still have lives to live and things to do.”

As she spoke and gazed up into the night, Asami’s profile struck me as truly beautiful—so much so that I found myself joining her and turning back toward the sky.

“It’s true that from the perspective of the stars, we’re tiny. We’re so tiny that I doubt they’d even be able to see us, and yet we still have our own histories and futures, and each and every one of us puts our all into accomplishing what we can in our lifetime.”

“...”

As we watched the night sky stretch out before us, I felt Asami's words slowly begin to sink in.

“Well, you might be like, ‘Why’s this girl jabbering on about herself all of a sudden,’ but...” Asami paused and gently took my hand in hers.

“You’ve got your own history, too, Sasa, and your own future. No matter what happens, that will always be yours to keep. From what you’ve said...I can tell the past has been tough on you, but...”

She squeezed my hand tight, then tilted her head as she turned to face me. Our eyes met. “It all has meaning. It’ll be okay.”

“...”

I sniffled. Heat rose in my eyes.

Asami, unconcerned, kept her gaze fixed on mine and carried on talking. “You’ve made it this far, even if you took a beating along the way. That’s amazing. You’re such a fighter, Sasa. I understand why you tell yourself to just keep going. But sometimes, it’s okay to stop walking and ride a bike.”

“...Yeah..... Yeah...”

“You’ve walked this far. I know you can make it back.”

“.....Yeah!”

I wrapped my arms tightly around the girl lying next to me.

My eyes felt like they were burning. Ever since I got here, I’d been doing nothing but crying.

“There, there. Don’t cry. Don’t cry... I said don’t cry.”

My head was pressed against Asami's body, so I couldn't see the look on her face, but I could hear that she was sniffing as well.

On top of that little hill, beneath that starry sky.

Asami and I spent a good hour or so crying our eyes out.

Chapter 16 The Future

“I’m really sorry about yesterday...!”

After I finished my overnight shift, I headed straight home and apologized to Sayu, who waved her hands back and forth dismissively.

“Don’t worry. It’s not your fault, Mr. Yoshida!”

“But still...”

“It’s fine, trust me. Anyway, never mind that. Why don’t you go and get changed? Dinner will be ready in no time.”

She pushed against my back and forced me into the living room.

There were still many more things I wanted to apologize for, but it didn’t seem like there was any point in arguing, so I did as she said.

While I changed out of my work suit and into my pajamas, Sayu rushed around preparing our dinner. By the time I was done, the whole meal was already set on the table.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. Let’s eat!”

Sayu clasped her palms together enthusiastically to offer thanks for our meal, then scooped up her chopsticks. She was clearly trying to make things less awkward for me.

I offered my thanks as well, then took a sip of miso soup. I could feel my whole body relaxing. It might sound strange, but drinking Sayu’s soup always made me feel like I was truly home.

“Sayu.”

I'd had something on my mind the entire time I was at work.

"Yeah?"

I instantly lowered my head in a deep bow.

"I'm sorry you had to experience something so frightening."

"Huh? Oh, you don't need to—"

"Sorry I wasn't here to protect you."

"You did, though!!" Sayu shouted before flinching at the loudness of her own voice. Then she shook her head from side to side. "You did protect me..."

"Still, you must have been hurt."

"It was my own fault. Just a reminder of what I did to get here."

"But—"

"Mr. Yoshida," Sayu interjected before I had the chance to argue back. She placed her chopsticks on the table and looked me straight in the eyes.

"Before I came here...", she continued, giving me a serious look, "I never thought anyone would help me. I just figured that as long as people took advantage of me, I could take advantage of them, too. My thinking was all warped."

She had been taken advantage of. In other words, she gave others what they wanted from her. Then she would take advantage of them in exchange. In her case, that must have meant having a safe place to stay. In that sense, she was right; that was exactly what she had been doing.

"But then..." Sayu paused there and shut her eyes. She took in a long, slow breath, then exhaled. When she opened her eyes again, the look on her face was extremely gentle, and she was wearing a natural smile.

"Then I met you, Mr. Yoshida. You were the first person to protect me. And I met Asami, and she accepted me, too."

Tears began to form in her eyes as she spoke.

I couldn't take my eyes off her smile; it was the first time I'd ever seen her

make that expression.

“I wanted to run away from all the hurt, but no matter how far I ran, I was still in pain. I thought I would never escape it, but at the same time, I couldn’t stop running. It was so hard.”

With that, she jumped to her feet and came up next to me. She sat back down on her knees by my side and grabbed hold of my pajama sleeve.

“But then I started living with you... And finally... Finally, I...” Sayu gazed into my eyes and tugged on my sleeve.

“I—I can... I can think about the future now.”

At her words, my skin broke out in goose bumps.

“The future...,” I found myself repeating despite myself.

“Yeah, the future.” She nodded. Tears had formed around the edges of her eyelids. “It’s not about how far I can run away anymore. It’s about where I can go from here. I can finally start thinking about that.”

“...Sayu.”

“I’m going to give some proper thought to...what I should do and what I want to do.”

With that, she let go of my sleeve and placed her hand on top of mine.

“I’m gonna work up the courage to do that... So...” A single tear rolled down her cheek as she continued.

“Can we...stay together just a little longer?”

Just a little longer.

I trembled at her words.

For a moment, I was stunned silent. My mouth flapped open and shut, and Sayu hung her head and fought back tears.

“I-is that a ‘no’ ...?”

“No, it’s just...”

She’d asked if we could stay together for *just a little longer*.

Until now, we had both avoided touching on that subject too openly. And now, she'd done just that.

"You've..."

Sayu had finally put forth a time limit. What's more, she'd put it into words. This felt like a momentous and pivotal point in our relationship.

"You've come...so far," I said, sighing.

"Huh?"

She'd cocked her head, and I placed a hand on top of it and ruffled her hair. I didn't care how much I was messing it up.

"W-wait, Mr. Yoshida!"

Sayu had resolved herself, so I would have to do the same.

Deep down, I must have believed there was nothing wrong with endlessly pushing forward her leaving date, keeping her in my apartment as long as possible, and continuing our overly comfortable life together.

Just like Yaguchi had said, I really was enjoying having her in my life. My intention had been to save her, but she'd ended up saving me as well.

Although I was aware of this in the back of my mind, I'd never clearly verbalized it, and that inconsistency had tormented me.

I was her guardian. I couldn't put this off any longer.

"I feel the same way."

When I started to speak, Sayu, hair still a mess, fixed her gaze on mine.

"I'll do whatever I can to help you move forward and get back to your old life."

As she listened, Sayu's eyes widened.

"So..."

I decided to tell her something I'd never told her before.

"Give it all you've got."

Instantly, her eyes flooded with tears, and she furiously wiped them away

with her sweatshirt. She sniffled as her nose began to run and nodded emphatically.

“Mm-hmm!”

Sayu gave a huge smile, showing her teeth.

It was a childish expression and one I’d never seen her make before. For a moment, I found myself unable to look away.

“Oh, crap.”

“Hmm?”

I pointed at the miso soup to distract from my embarrassment.

“It’s getting cold.”

“Oh, you’re right. We’d better eat up quickly.”

Sayu wiped her eyes with her sweatshirt one last time, then hurried back to her seat at the dinner table.

We shared few words as we relished the meal; I felt reinvigorated.

This was enough for me.

Now she could move back toward leading an ordinary life, one step at a time.

As I reflected on this, I had another realization.

I took a sip of miso soup, and the salty flavor permeated my tongue.

We’d just promised each other that we would part ways.

Sayu must have recognized that, too.

And yet, I knew we were both certain it was the right thing to do.

Epilogue

It was rare for me to work late.

The convenience store wasn't very busy, so I'd never had to work past my scheduled clock-out time before. However, just as I was about to finish for the day, a sports club from some nearby high school came bursting into the shop, so Mr. Yaguchi and I ended up stuck at the registers and weren't able to make much progress with stocking the shelves. If we left the job unfinished, it would cause problems for the staff members working the next shift, so we stayed a whole extra hour.

"Great work today!"

By the time I left the office and checked my phone, it was just past seven PM.

It was a Saturday. Mr. Yoshida would be at home, and I knew he'd be hungry.

I needed to hurry home and prepare dinner, so I picked up my pace and started making my way back to the apartment.

It was only a five-minute walk, so before I knew it, I was home. I took the spare key out of my bag and unlocked the door.

"Sorry I'm late, Mr. Yoshi..."

As soon as I opened the door, I saw Mr. Yoshida standing in front of the kitchen counter connected to the hallway.

"Oh, welcome back."

"It's good to be home... Wait, what are you doing?" I asked. He had a pot in front of him and a sullen look on his face.

"Making miso soup," he answered bluntly, his face turning even gloomier.

“What does it look like?”

“Huh? You’re cooking?”

I hurriedly kicked off my shoes and rushed to his side to find a brown broth slowly simmering away inside the pot.

“But why?”

“What do you mean, *why*? You—”

He cut himself off and scratched his chin. He had a little bit of stubble, so it made a bristling sound under his fingers.

“You always cook it for me, so I figured, maybe I should make it sometimes...”

I could feel my body heating up as he said this.

Why did that make me feel so happy?

As I wondered, I impulsively wrapped my arms around Mr. Yoshida in more of a tackle than an embrace.

“Whoa! Watch out!”

“Thanks, Mr. Yoshida!”

“S-sure... It’s almost ready, so hurry up and get changed. Well, the soup’s almost done anyway. I’ll leave the sides to you...”

“Yes, sir!”

I practically skipped into the living room, where I quickly set about changing out of my outdoor clothes and into my loungewear.

I yanked off my top and, half undressed, I glanced at Mr. Yoshida out of the corner of my eye. Predictably, he wasn’t looking my way. I watched him spacing out in front of the pot he was stirring and felt somehow unsatisfied.

“Mr. Yoshidaaa.”

“What...? Hey! Put some clothes on first, dumbass!”

Mr. Yoshida had turned when I called his name but immediately averted his gaze when he saw me.

“Pervert!”

“You were the one who called for me, you dummy!”

His face turned a light shade of red, and he fixed his gaze back on the pot in front of him.

I tossed on the top I wore around the apartment, giggling.

I felt completely at home in this place.

I didn’t even question whether it was okay for me to be here anymore.

I pulled off my jeans and slipped on sweatpants. I stole one more glance at Mr. Yoshida, who was innocently stirring his pot of miso soup.

I no longer questioned if it was okay for me to be here...

But...

“Mr. Yoshida!”

“Are you dressed?”

“Yes!”

“What is it?”

He side-eyed me as I called out to him.

I smiled brightly and repeated my words from a few minutes earlier.

“It’s good to be home!”

He gave me a skeptical look and scratched his chin out of habit, making a bristling sound again.

“You already said that.”

“Aren’t you gonna welcome me home?”

“Huh? ...Welcome home.”

“Hee-hee!”

I nodded in satisfaction, and Mr. Yoshida cocked his head slightly and sighed.

It’s good to be home. Welcome home.

How many more times could we exchange those words?

It was a little painful to think about.

That said, I'd already promised him.

And so, I would spend another day with Mr. Yoshida, savoring the happiness of my life with him and slowly anticipating its end.

We would continue this strange cohabitation—a high school girl living with an adult man—if just for a little longer.



Afterword

Nice to meet you. My name is Shimesaba.

I used to spend my time modestly writing on the web. Before I knew it, it was decided that the second volume of this story would be published, and I'm still in shock as I write.

This may seem like a shift in topic, but I really love games. I'm the kind of nerd who plays games of every genre.

Before, due to the influence of my parents, I used to play almost nothing but single-player RPGs, but recently I've started playing more and more multiplayer games over the Internet.

Of those, one I've found particularly enjoyable is that Nintendo console game with the squids where you throw ink all around.

Of course, you can set a time with someone and play together, but it usually matches you up with strangers over the Internet, so you can play anytime.

Looking at it in a positive light, it's the kind of system that lets you join in whenever you feel like it, even if you don't have a friend to play with. Viewed in a negative light, it's an awful system that keeps forcing you into cooperation with people you don't even know.

For my part, I was having a lot of fun with it, but after playing for a few months, I started thinking, *Oh, I've been matched with this person before*, and came to remember the avatars and names of people who weren't even my friends.

That struck me as really interesting.

Through the Internet, I was meeting people over and over whose face, name,

and location I didn't know, who I wasn't even Internet friends with, and remembering their usernames. When I write it out like this, it really does seem like a strange phenomenon.

So, just for my own amusement, I want to share my username from back when I was playing that game with the squids.

When I was active, I used the name YogaFireShimesaba. I was the one waving around a gun that looked like a mechanical pencil.

If anyone who picks up this book remembers fighting against me (or with me), I'd love for you to contact me somehow. However, even if you do reach out, I probably won't remember you, and I won't be able to give much of a response beyond, "Oh, I see lol." But I think you, too, will experience the strange feeling of, "So that squid I ran into once with the weird name is off writing novels, huh?"

It's easy to imagine your existence is something known only to you and your acquaintances, but that might not necessarily be the case. You might be the person I passed today at Shinjuku Station.

And now for some acknowledgments.

This time, too, Editor W has really taken care of me. Next time (if there is a next time), I promise I'll do it all perfectly. I mean it.

A big thank-you to the illustrator, booota, who has blown the breath of life into these characters and graciously reworked their schedule to do so.

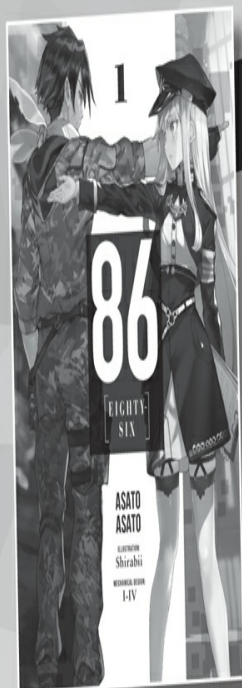
And to all those involved in this book's publication, thank you so much. It's thanks to you that I was able to put Volume 2 out into the world.

Finally, to all of you who not only bought Volume 1 but this book as well: It is because of my readers that I am able to keep writing. Thank you very much.

I will end the afterword here, wishing that chance will bring my work to you again in the future.

Shimesaba

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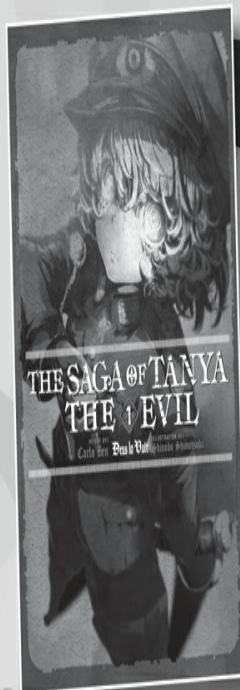
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