




HIGEHIRO

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

1

SHIMESABA

Illustration by boota



“How
is
it?”

Yoshida

A twenty-six-year-old office worker at a big IT company.

Sayu


A high school runaway. After meeting Yoshida, she ends up living with him.

“You’ve been going home right on time lately, haven’t you, Yoshida?
...Are you seeing someone?”



Airi Gotou

Yoshida’s superior.
Beloved at the office for
her gentle and caring
nature. The object of
Yoshida’s one-sided
affections for the past
five years.



“I want
you to keep
being my
mentor,
Mr. Yoshida.
I don’t
want
anyone
else.”

Yuzuha Mishima

A new office worker
being mentored by
Yoshida. She makes
a lot of mistakes but
manages to get by with
her winning smile.

Prologue
The High School Girl
Beneath the Telephone Pole

Chapter 1 Miso Soup

Chapter 2 Rent

Chapter 3 Smoking

Chapter 4 Clothes

Chapter 5 Pork Cutlet Curry

Chapter 6 Beard

Chapter 7 Makeup

Chapter 8 Yuzuha Mishima

Chapter 9 Cell Phone

Chapter 10 Airi Gotou

Chapter 11 Smile

Chapter 12 Living Room

Chapter 13 Business Trip

Chapter 14 Fate

Chapter 15 Nightmare

Chapter 16 True Colors

Chapter 17 Skin

Epilogue
The High School Girl
in the Kitchen

Afterword

“Let’s
sleep
together.”



c o n t e n t s

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and Took in a High School Runaway*

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ILLUSTRATION BY

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Copyright

HIGEHIRO 1

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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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue: The High School Girl Beneath the Telephone Pole

Chapter 1: Miso Soup

Chapter 2: Rent

Chapter 3: Smoking

Chapter 4: Clothes

Chapter 5: Pork Cutlet Curry

Chapter 6: Beard

Chapter 7: Makeup

Chapter 8: Yuzuha Mishima

Chapter 9: Cell Phone

Chapter 10: Airi Gotou

Chapter 11: Smile

Chapter 12: Living Room

Chapter 13: Business Trip

Chapter 14: Fate

Chapter 15: Nightmare

Chapter 16: True Colors

Chapter 17: Skin

Epilogue: The High School Girl in the Kitchen

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Prologue

The High School Girl Beneath the Telephone Pole

My heart was broken.

The woman who had broken it was two years older than me—my coworker. Her name was Ms. Gotou.

She was gentle and caring and had been kind to me since I was a trainee. She was an attentive woman with a graceful smile and had been my primary emotional support as I adapted to the life of a corporate drone.

“If she had a boyfriend, she really should’ve led with that...”

I’d lost count of how many beers deep I was. I could only barely make out the silhouette of my colleague Hashimoto sitting in the seat opposite me and laughing at my problems like they were someone else’s.

That’s right. We had gone on a date, Ms. Gotou and me. After five years working together, I had finally asked her out, and when she readily agreed, I was sure I had a chance! My expectations only continued to build as we strolled around the zoo together. To tell the truth, I spent more time gazing at Ms. Gotou’s profile than at the animals. I even stole a couple of sneaky peeks at her chest.

I was really worked up—it was my big chance, and I couldn’t afford to blow it. After we’d finished our tour of the zoo, we went to dinner together at a fancy French restaurant. I don’t even remember how the meal tasted.

I waited for the perfect moment, and then I asked her.

“So, do you want to come over to my place?”

We were both adults. She had to understand what I meant immediately. My

gaze, anxious and expectant, met hers, and she gave me a troubled smile.

Then she shook her head.

“I’m keeping it a secret at work, but the truth is I’m seeing someone.”

*

“So why’d she agree to the date, then?!”

“Come on, Yoshida. That’s the sixth time you’ve asked me that.”

“And I’ll ask it another ten thousand times if I need to...”

“I don’t really want to hear the same story ten thousand times, if it’s all the same to you.”

Hashimoto smiled wryly at me as I drained another beer.

“That’s enough for tonight.”

“Come on—I’ve still got a lot of steam to blow off.”

“Getting drunk is only making you angrier. You’ll never cool off at this rate.”

That was easy for him to say. He had no idea how I felt. Today, I had no choice but to drink.

After Ms. Gotou had shot me down, I’d immediately found a bench in a small park and slumped over, head in my hands. I was completely dumbfounded.

It turned out she’d been with her boyfriend for the last five years.

Which meant she had already been with another guy when we met.

“I’ve been acting like such an idiot...”

For five years, I’d been pledging my heart to a woman who was already taken.

“She tricked me...,” I muttered, head down. “I want back all those wasted years...”

I wanted someone to blame for what had happened. Rather than sadness, it was anger I felt boiling up inside me.

When I realized what was happening, I called Hashimoto.

“I was wondering what the big emergency was. You just wanted to complain about getting your heart broken, huh?”

“What’s wrong with that? I always listen to you brag about your wife, don’t I?”

“I don’t brag. I complain.”

“It all sounds the same to me!”

No matter what he said, Hashimoto had still turned up to hear my gripes.

“Agh... I was so sure it was going to work out with her.”

“She’s taken, so it’s over. Five years is a long time.”

“Oh, how I wanted her to stroke me with those soft tits of hers!”

“Keep it down, dummy.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the woman a seat over glancing our way with a strained smile, but what did I care? I’m sure the alcohol was partly to blame, but I could feel my sense of shame diminishing.

“Those gentle hands, always patting my shoulders, and that mouth praising my work... To think some other guy has already used them. It just hurts so much, I could die...”

“This is why you need to keep your fantasies separate from real life.”

“She could’ve at least let me have some before kicking me to the curb.”

“Wouldn’t that have been even worse?”

As we drank and talked, I realized just how dirty my thoughts about Ms. Gotou were. I figured it was only natural, however. At my age, there wasn’t much a man could do to separate the connection between love and lust. That’s just the way we were wired.

“Well,” said Hashimoto, “at least it’s cleared a few things up for me.”

“Like what?”

“I mean, there’s no way someone as hot as Ms. Gotou would still be single. She’s, what, twenty-eight now? That’s around when women start to worry

about marriage.”

“Exactly. That’s why I was so sure it’d work... I just didn’t know she was already taken... Hey, Miss! Another beer, please!”

I raised my hand to get the server’s attention and placed my order. Hashimoto sighed.

“I told you that you’ve already had too many. I’m not planning to miss the last train tonight.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

“Feel free to make yourself as sick as you like, but I’m not taking care of you.”

“I’m telling you I’ll be fine.”

I let Hashimoto’s warning go in one ear and out the other while I carried on chugging. It gave me a temporary reprieve from my heartbroken woes.

*

“Ugh... Mngh... Ooh, uggghhh...”

I propped myself up with both hands in front of the gutter along the side of the street as I puked into it.

I had been fine when we left the bar. Hashimoto and I had said good-bye, and I had grabbed a taxi without a problem. But that unmistakable smell in the back seat of the cab got me feeling sick and triggered my nausea from all the drinking.

My stomach emptied itself the moment I fell out of the cab. I saw all the meat and vegetables I’d eaten with my beer.

I managed to stagger a little farther before vomiting again. Nothing but liquid came up this time. It smelled like alcohol.

Then, on a street near my home, I threw up once more. Just yellow liquid. The inside of my mouth tasted bitter.

“Shit... Gotou...”

It was all her fault.

I stumbled to my feet but only traveled a couple of steps before I felt ready to puke again. This time, though, I knew there was nothing left, so I didn't bother crouching.

As I walked along the street, suppressing my gag reflex, I spotted the telephone pole at the corner of the intersection. Just one right turn from there, and I'd be home.

I stared vacantly at the landmark as I approached. Before long, something started to feel off. Well, not about the pole itself, but what was under it. There was someone there, hunched over near the ground.

...Another drunk?

In the city, it wasn't unusual to see boozers passed out on the ground near the train station. Even so, this was the first time I'd found one of them so close to my apartment.

As I drew closer, I realized it was a girl—a high schooler from the looks of her. The uniform was a dead giveaway. She wore a navy-blue blazer and a gray checkered skirt. She was sitting with her knees clutched to her chest, which meant the panties under her skirt were on full display. They were black.

...It didn't look like a costume.

That took only a moment for me to determine. You often saw women dressed as schoolgirls pulling in customers on certain streets, but the uniform the girl under the telephone pole was wearing was far too...plain.

I glanced at my watch—it was already one in the morning. What was some high schooler doing out so late?

“Hey, you over there. Schoolgirl.”

Before I knew what I was doing, I had called out to her.

She lifted her face from where it had been buried between her knees and chest, and she gave me a vacant look.

“What are you doing out this late? Isn't it about time you headed home?”

The girl blinked at me.

“The trains have stopped running for the night,” she said.

“So you’re just going to sit there until morning?”

“I don’t know. It’s kind of cold out.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

She hummed and tilted her head as if thinking something over.

Upon closer examination, her face was pretty cute. Her hair was chestnut brown—almost black—and she had almond-shaped eyes. Her nose had a lovely curve to it, although it was a little round at the tip. Her face straddled the line between pretty and beautiful. I could see the appeal, but she wasn’t really my type.

The girl straightened up and fixed me with her gaze.

“Let me stay with you, Mister.”

“Mis— Are you kidding?!”

The way she called me *Mister* combined with her oddly careless attitude pissed me off so much that I raised my voice.



“What kind of high school girl goes home with a man she just met?!”

“It’s not like I have anywhere else to go.”

“Stay at a karaoke box or an Internet café near the station, then.”

“I have no money.”

“So you think you’re just going to crash at my place for free?”

At that, she stopped to consider. Very quickly, she nodded to herself as if she’d made a decision.

“If you let me stay over, I’ll let you do me.”

I was at a loss for words.

Were all high school girls like this nowadays? No, there was no way. This girl was clearly off her rocker.

“You shouldn’t even joke about that kind of thing.”

“I’m not joking. How about it?”

“That’s a hard pass from me. Who’d want to sleep with some bratty kid?”

“I see...”

She nodded once, and a giant smile spread over her face.

“Let me stay for free, then.”

“.....”

Yet again, I was speechless.

“Thanks for having me over.”

Somehow, I wound up letting her into my home. We’d bickered back and forth next to the telephone pole for a while, but I quickly realized that it wouldn’t look good if anyone from the neighborhood saw me. What was the harm in letting her stay the night and kicking her out in the morning?

“Listen up. You were the one who said you wanted to stay here.”

“Huh? Uh-huh.”

“So I haven’t kidnapped you!”

“Ha-ha! You’re so funny! I know that.”

This was no laughing matter. In this day and age, whenever there was a dispute between a man and a woman, the man was almost always made out to be the villain. I’d heard plenty of stories about people sheltering runaway girls with their full consent only for them to become the subjects of kidnapping investigations later.

“Your place is filthy.”

“It’s a bachelor pad. What did you expect?”

“I’ve seen cleaner ones than this.”

Her statement alarmed me, and I quickly looked back at her.

She merely gave me a blank look and tilted her head to the side.

“What is it?”

“...Nothing.”

It was none of my business.

Neither the life she’d been living to that point nor the chain of events that had brought her here had anything to do with me. Once morning came, I’d kick her out. That’s all there was to it.

I went straight to bed, still wearing the clothes I’d had on all day.

Too many things had happened, and my body had reached its limit. With the alcohol’s help, I hazily slid into unconsciousness.

“Oh, you’re just going to go to sleep?”

“Yep... Do whatever you like,” I replied with indifference.

The girl sat down gingerly on the bed beside me.

“You don’t want to do me?”

“How many times do I have to tell you...? I’m not into kids...”

“Oh, okay then.”

Exhaustion began to take over. I closed my eyes, but just as I was drifting off, the girl’s voice echoed in my ears again.

“Is there anything you want me to do for you?”

If I was pushed to pick something, a bit of peace and quiet would’ve been nice. And I’d prefer not to wake up to a missing wallet.

But I wasn’t able to articulate any of that.

I was so tired that neither my mouth nor my body did what I wanted.

However, as hazy as my mind was, there was one thing that I craved intensely.

“Miso soup...”

Before I could think, the words came out of my mouth.

“I want to have miso soup made by a woman.”

As soon as I finished my sentence, I passed out.

Chapter 1 Miso Soup

The smell of something delicious filled my nostrils.

“Hmm...?”

When I pried open my eyes, the world outside my windows was already bright. And it didn’t feel like morning sun, either. This was full afternoon sunlight, shining through my south-facing window.

“What time is it...?”

Blinking the blariness away, I glanced at my watch, which was still on my wrist from last night.

“Agh, how is it already two PM...?!”

I got out of bed, frowning.

I couldn’t recall what time I’d made it home, but based on my current attire, I hadn’t even had time to change before passing out.

Thank goodness it was my day off. If I’d had work, I would’ve been in big trouble. This was a little more than “oversleeping.”

...Oh yeah. What was that delicious smell that had wafted in here a moment ago? I turned toward it, and there, before my eyes— —was a high school girl.

It was so sudden, my mind stopped functioning.

She was right there, smack-dab in the middle of my vision, hands on her hips and legs spread, staring me straight in the eyes. She lifted one hand.

“Good morning.”

“What the—?!” I raised my voice as I jumped out of bed.

The high schooler simply responded with a puzzled look, blinking at me a few times.

“What do you mean, *what*...? It’s pretty obvious. I’m a high school girl.”

“Why the heck is a high school girl in my apartment?!”

The high schooler gave a wry smirk.

“Well, I was told I could stay over.”

“And who told you that?”

“You did, Mister.”

“I’m not a *mister*.”

This time, she burst into laughter.

“Sure you are. You’re really funny, too.”

“It is so not funny. And what’s that smell? What are you cooking?”

I shoved past the high schooler, who was standing between the living room and the kitchen, and I saw steam coming from a pot on the stove top. After removing the lid, I saw that it was filled with gently simmering miso soup.

“...Miso soup.”

“I made it.”

“You shouldn’t just cook stuff at other people’s places.”

The high schooler sighed in response.

“What? What’re you sighing about?”

“You told me to make it, Mister.”

“I’m not a *mister*.”

She shrugged helplessly and added emphasis to her voice.

“If not *Mister*, then what? What should I call you instead?”

“You don’t need to call me anything. You need to leave.”

What was she even doing here, standing around in someone else’s home like she owned the place? Not to mention cooking miso soup without even asking.

“You really don’t remember? Last night, I was under that telephone pole with nowhere to go, and you came and talked to me, Mister.”

“I told you, I’m not... Wait, the telephone pole? Last night?”

Her words brought back a vague memory from the previous evening. I’d spewed my guts out on the way home. I remembered that. Then I’d passed the telephone pole near my apartment and saw someone underneath it...

“Oh, the black panties.”

“Why’s that the thing that jogged your memory? You’re so gross.”

“You’re the high school girl who was sitting on the ground.”

“Yes, that’s me.”

More and more recollections began to pop into my head.

I’d been binge drinking with Hashimoto, without giving a thought to the consequences. And on the way home, I’d found this girl.

And after that... What had happened after that?

I didn’t really remember anything else. A cold sweat began to run down my back.

“...I didn’t assault you or anything, did I?”

In response, the high schooler turned and stared directly into my eyes.

She said nothing. I could feel my sweat glands going into overdrive.

It’d be no exaggeration to say that last night was the most drunk I’d ever been. More importantly, I’d been desperate. I had no idea what I was capable of in that state.

“...Hey! Say something!” I felt my body getting clammy as I spoke.

Then a sputter of laughter escaped the girl’s lips, and she gave me a broad smile. “Ah-ha-ha! No, you didn’t do anything!”

“Why’d you take so long to answer?! You really freaked me out for a second!”

“I just wanted to mess with you! Hee-hee.” The girl’s shoulders swayed as she laughed. “Well, actually,” she continued, “I didn’t expect you to let me stay here

for nothing, so I'd planned on letting you do just that. But you kept insisting you're '*not into kids*.'"

"Oh really?"

Good job, past me.

If I'd have gone with the flow and had my way with her, I would have never forgiven myself—current me would've had to give past me one hell of a beating. I might have been trashed, but at least it seemed like I'd maintained a certain level of decency.

"That's why I asked if there was anything I could do for you, and..." The high schooler paused mid-sentence and let out a snicker. "You asked me to cook miso soup for you every day!"

"That sounds like an old-fashioned marriage proposal!"

No matter how drunk I was, I'd absolutely never say a line like that.

She cackled, clearly entertained by the whole situation. She was definitely making fun of me.

"Hey, Mister."

"I'm not a *mister*."

"What's your name?"

"...It's Yoshida."

She considered this.

"Mr. Yoshida... Yeah, it fits you to a T."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Your face just screams *Mr. Yoshida*."

This was the first time anyone had told me that I had a *Mr. Yoshida* face. Was it a high school girl thing? Honestly, I wasn't sure I could keep up.

"Aren't you going to ask me my name?"

"I'm not interested."

"Huh? Come on—just ask!"

Our conversation was progressing entirely on her terms.

But it *was* tiring to have to keep referring to her as *the high schooler* in my mind. It couldn't hurt to know her name.

"Fine. What is it?"

Clearly pleased that I had finally asked, she nodded and proudly told me what she was called.

"I'm Sayu!"

"Sayu."

"The *sa* character in my name comes from *Vaiśravaṇa*, the Buddhist god of warfare, and the *yu* comes from *kindness*."

"That's the first time I've ever heard someone use *Vaiśravaṇa* to explain a character."

Sayu chuckled and scooped a ladle of miso soup from the pot. She then poured it into a bowl she had no doubt commandeered from somewhere in my kitchen.

"Hey. How long do you plan on staying here?"

"Uhhh..." She made a noncommittal sound and held the bowl out to me. "Just try the miso soup for now," she said. "We'll talk after."

"Who put you in charge?"

As soon as I spoke, my stomach began to rumble.

Come to think of it, I'd puked up everything I ate the night before. I'd slept until the afternoon, too. Who wouldn't be hungry after that?

As Sayu heard my stomach growl, the corners of her lips curled up into a grin.

"Are you going to drink it or not?"

"...I will."

I reluctantly took the bowl from Sayu.

In the end, I simply couldn't bring myself to kick her out into the cold while drinking her homemade miso soup.

Chapter 2 Rent

“She shot you down, Mr. Yoshida? You poor thing!”

Sayu sipped some miso soup as if it had nothing to do with her. Well, I guess it *didn't*.

I'd meant to chase her off as soon as possible, but for some reason, she kept asking about what had happened yesterday, and I couldn't help but answer.

“I don't think you feel sorry for me at all.”

“I do; I really do! Being dumped sucks. I mean, it's never happened to me, but...”

“Really...?”

Our conversation continued aimlessly as I drank from my bowl.

It felt like forever since I'd had miso soup that didn't come from a packet, and it tasted delicious. It had the perfect amount of saltiness, and the fact that it was homemade added a little something extra.

Ahhh, how I wished I could have Ms. Gotou's homemade miso soup.

“How is it?”

Sayu pulled my thoughts back from Ms. Gotou.

“Y-yeah... Well, it's not bad.”

“So then it's good?”

“Yeah, it's good. As far as miso soup goes.”

“*As far as miso soup goes, huh...?*” Sayu cackled, her gaze turning mischievous. “Gotou...was it? I bet you were just thinking about how much

you'd like to try her miso soup, right?"

"...Not at all."

It made me uncomfortable how easily Sayu could read my mind. I quickly turned my gaze away, and she laughed, amused.

"I hit the nail on the head, didn't I? You're so easy to read."

"You sure are an annoying high schooler, you know that?"

I scowled at her, and she snickered again, her shoulders shaking. Apparently, even my scowl was funny to her.

Speaking to her like this gave me a nauseous, niggling feeling in the pit of my stomach. It was hard to describe.

Once again, she'd taken charge of the conversation, and having a girl call all the shots didn't sit well with me.

"Hey, Mr. Yoshida." Suddenly, Sayu was whispering directly in my ear.

"Wha—?!" I yelped, my body tensing.

Before I knew it, her face was right beside mine, and she was slowly moving it closer.

"Want me to make you feel better?" she asked breathily.

Goose bumps broke out all over my body.

"Didn't I tell you to stop doing that kind of stuff?!"

I pushed Sayu away, and her lips curled down into a pout.

"Come on. I know you don't really mean it."

"Hey, dumbass. I'm not so miserable that I need some flat-chested schoolgirl to comfort me."

She made a short, surprised noise and cocked her head. Then, all of a sudden, she started snapping open the buttons of her blazer before tossing it aside.

"I think I've got a pretty nice rack, though," she said, squeezing her breasts together.

Her chest was clearly visible through her shirt, and I couldn't help but stare.

What man could rip his eyes from a display like that?

“I—I mean, maybe they’re big for a high school girl... But Ms. Gotou is even more impressive.”

“Ha-ha! She is, huh?” Sayu giggled, then slumped back into her usual slightly hunched posture. “What’s her cup size?”

The way she posed the question so casually caught me by surprise.

H-her cup size...? I wasn’t sure.

“H-how should I know? Probably F, at least.”

“Oh, she’s the same size as I am, then.”

“Huh?! You’re an F?!”

“Yep. If hers look bigger than mine, then that would make her a G-or an H-cup.”

An H-cup... I had no idea how big an H-cup was.

My head spun imagining the kinds of bust sizes you might find on models in a men’s magazine. Oh, how I wanted to put myself between a pair of H-cups. I won’t say which part of me.

“But you know...,” Sayu began. “Don’t you think a pair of Fs you can touch is better than Hs you can’t?”

She tilted her head to the side and shoved her breasts together again.

I sighed almost unconsciously.

“What is it you’re hoping to get from tempting me like this? What would you do if I actually tried something?”

“Huh? I’d go along with it. You’re not a bad-looking guy, so I wouldn’t mind.”

“...You mean you want to sleep with me?”

Sayu blinked a few times.

“No, that’s not really what I meant.”

“Then what’s your deal?!”

By the time I realized it, I was already on my feet. She kept contradicting herself, and I was struggling to follow.

“If you don’t want to do it, then don’t pressure me! There are guys out there who’d assault you without a second thought!”

Sayu furrowed her brow and tilted her head.

“Let me ask you something,” she stated.

“What?”

“You’ve got a girl right in front of you telling you to go for it, so why won’t you?”

“Huh...?”



I let out another breath, half sigh and half question. I sensed that our age gap wasn't the only reason we were on completely different wavelengths.

I looked at Sayu like she was some kind of alien, and she gave a wry grin in response.

"What's with that face?" she said. "You're the one who's acting weird, Mr. Yoshida. Not one person so far has been kind to me and let me stay without asking for anything in return."

"....."

I didn't know how to reply after hearing that. I'd assumed that Sayu was a typical high school runaway who'd left home on a whim, but from the way she was talking, it seemed like she'd been on her own for months.

And what's more, I had a bad feeling I knew exactly how she'd been finding places to stay in the meantime.

"...Are you stupid?" I murmured. I crouched down to get on her eye level. "Where'd you come from? Let me see your school ID."

For a split second, Sayu's face clouded over.

However, she soon brightened up again and grinned. She reached into her skirt pocket, pulling out a small folding wallet. Her school ID was inside. I received it and looked it over.

"A-Asahikawa..."

My jaw dropped.

The words *Asahikawa 6th District High School, 2nd Year* were written on the small card.

"You came all the way from Hokkaido? By yourself?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"When did you leave?"

"About six months ago."

She hadn't been home for half a year?

We were right in the center of Tokyo. That was way too far for a high schooler to travel on her own.

“Have you told your parents?”

“Nope.”

“What? In that case, you have to go home right n...”

I trailed off.

Sayu’s carefree expression had turned obviously troubled.

“It’s fine. They’re probably relieved that I’m gone.” As she spoke, she seemed to be gazing far off into the distance.

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“I can.”

Sadness and resignation filled Sayu’s eyes.

It broke my heart a little.

“I don’t have any money left,” she said. “I’ve just got to do what I can so people will let me stay with them. It’s my only option.”

“What do you mean, *do what I can*?”

“W-well...,” Sayu stammered.

I felt anger well up within me, although I wasn’t sure who to blame.

“Stop fooling around.”

The words flew out of my mouth before I could stop myself.

“I don’t know about the scumbags you’ve met so far, but I don’t have one shred of interest in your body.”

“Then—”

“If you don’t want to go home and you can’t go to school, what do you intend to do for a living?”

Sayu’s eyebrows scrunched together.

“Like I was saying, I’m looking for someone to let me stay with them...”

“What are you going to do if I chase you out?”

“I-I’ll find someone else one way or another.”

“*One way or another?* Do you even have a plan?”

“Um...” Sayu mumbled something vague. She was clearly distressed.

Why don’t you understand?

I couldn’t imagine a normal person deciding their best option was to tempt men on the street. That said, at this point, *normal* was losing its meaning to me.

My heart hurt, but I wasn’t sure if what I was feeling was anger or sadness. Either way, I let the sensation sink in for a moment. Then, as if to shake it off, I addressed her decisively.

“You need to work.”

“Work?”

“That’s right. Even high school dropouts work for a living.”

“B-but...” Saya’s voice had grown meek, and her confident, composed attitude from earlier was absent. “A part-time job won’t even cover rent!”

She had a point. You’d have to work for a couple of months to earn enough to rent a place, and living on the streets for that long was not an option.

“You can stay here.”

“Huh?”

“I said you can stay here!”

Sayu blinked a few times, seemingly unable to believe what I’d just said.

“B-but I haven’t given you anything, Mr. Yoshida!”

“You don’t have anything I want, so forget about it.”

I frowned and carried on talking.

“So you’ve got no money! No place to live! So you think the logical thing to do is seduce men?! That’s the height of stupidity! I’m going to knock some sense into that brain of yours.”

“Why do you keep on calling me stupid?”

“You *are* stupid! And you’re spoiled. You don’t understand the value of things.”

Sayu swallowed whatever she had been about to say.

Looking at her head-on, I realized she was incredibly cute.

Why? That one word was circling round and round in my head. Why couldn’t she experience adolescence and fall in love like anybody else? Why hadn’t she been able to live a normal life?

“You’ve got nowhere to stay, right?”

“I don’t.”

“So crash here.”

“...Okay.”

“You can do all the housework. That’s your job from now on.”

Sayu’s eyes widened in surprise.

“I thought you wanted me to get a job.”

“We’ll work up to that. But first, we have to sort out how we’re going to live together. You can’t just do whatever you please.”

Sayu’s mouth opened and closed a few times, but no words came out. It seemed like she wanted to say something, so I waited for her.

“It sounds to me,” she finally said, “like you’re okay with me staying here forever.”

“Not forever. Just until you get sick of running away.”

“...I can stay for that long?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that.

From our few minutes of conversation, I had begun to realize just how spoiled she really was.

Sayu had been wandering from place to place, seducing any man who would have her. There must have been a safer way to live, even if it was more difficult.

I would've thought it'd be a lot harder to entice men you didn't like than to go through physical hardship, but it seemed like Sayu had gotten over any such reservations long ago.

It occurred to me that if I told her she could stay as long as she pleased, she might not leave for years. So I chose my words very carefully.

"You can live here until we've cured that spoiled attitude of yours."

Sayu looked a bit baffled, but she nodded. "U-understood..."

I exhaled and sat down on the floor.

It was unusual for me to get so heated. I certainly wasn't well adjusted enough that I had the right to lecture anyone else...

I picked up the bowl and took another sip.

"Ah, it's gotten cold." Even room temperature, Sayu's homemade miso soup was still pretty delicious. "Oh, by the way." I glanced up at her.

"Wh-what is it?" she asked, looking away. Her earlier elusive attitude was nowhere to be seen.

I pointed my index finger straight at her. "You try to seduce me again, and I'll kick your ass out."

"O-okay, I won't..."

And that's how it began—this unusual cohabitation between me, a twenty-six-year-old office worker, and Sayu, a runaway high school girl.

How naive I was! I had no idea what I was signing myself up for.

Chapter 3 Smoking

“What? Are you crazy?” asked Hashimoto.

I had expected this.

“You think so, too?”

“Well, it *is* crazy, isn’t it?”

During our lunch break, Hashimoto asked what had happened after I left the other night, and I ended up telling him about Sayu.

I felt it was too big of a problem to handle all on my own.

Though he didn’t look it, Hashimoto was good with secrets. I felt sure he wouldn’t let this get out.

“No one’s filed a missing person report?” Hashimoto asked.

I shook my head. “I thought about that, too. I tried looking her up online after she went to sleep.”

“And?”

“I couldn’t find a single lead on her.”

“I see...”

Hashimoto put a hand to his chin and grumbled.

“But even so, taking in a high school girl without knowing anything about her situation...”

“The more I think about it, the crazier it sounds.”

“You don’t need to think about it to know how crazy it sounds.”

“Oh? What’s so crazy?”

I bolted out of my seat in surprise.

A voice from behind us had interrupted our grumbling session. I turned to look, and there stood Ms. Gotou, looking our way with a smirk.

“Oh, Ms. Gotou...”

My expression was indescribable, I was sure.

This was the woman who had cast me aside so casually just days before. And now, here she stood, flashing a smile in my direction as if nothing had even happened.

“Oh, it’s nothing all that interesting!” While I just sat there, unable to get the words out, Hashimoto answered her question with a grin. “I was doing some online shopping and made a pretty big purchase, but it turns out I accidentally ordered two. I’m not sure if they’ll cancel the order, so I’m freaking out a little.” He even had a believable lie prepared to cover for me. Hashimoto was a pretty shrewd guy.

“That sounds like a pain. You two looked really stressed, so I was kind of worried.” Ms. Gotou giggled, then gave us a little wave. “You’d better go get lunch quickly, before break’s over.”

“Ha-ha! We’ll head out in a second!”

Hashimoto waved back, all smiles.

I smiled, too—a wry one—as I watched Ms. Gotou turn and leave.

“...You couldn’t work up a single word for her, huh?”

“What?! She dumped me! What was I supposed to say?!”

“Maybe a ‘hello’ or something, at least?” Hashimoto sighed and got up from his seat. “Let’s go get some food.”

“Yeah...”

I stood up as well.

Agh, what was Ms. Gotou doing, strolling over here and striking up a conversation like nothing had happened?

She had rejected me, but in my eyes, she still looked radiant.

That black skirt and jacket suited her so well, and her striped blue shirt managed to look sexy even though she had it buttoned up all the way. Her slightly wavy brown hair, her thin lip gloss—it all appeared so elegant and alluring.

Shit. It seemed I wasn't going to get over her anytime soon.

And how could I forget...?

“God, she's got massive tits...”

“Yoshida, you do realize you said that out loud, right?”

*

I ended up working two hours of overtime.

By the time I departed from the train station closest to my place, it was already nine PM.

“I wonder if she's eaten anything...”

My thoughts had turned to Sayu, who would be waiting at the apartment.

She didn't have any money, so I'd left her 1,000 yen, figuring that would be enough to get lunch. Even so, if she hadn't had dinner yet, she had to be hungry.

I stopped by the convenience store and grabbed two bento boxes.

As I hurried home, what Hashimoto had said to me that afternoon replayed in my head.

“Don't get too emotionally attached. You should send her back to her parents before you get in trouble.”

I knew he was right. But still...

“It's fine. They're probably relieved that I'm gone.”

Sayu's words, and the look of resignation on her face as she said them, were etched into my memory.

“No high school-aged brat should look like that,” I muttered to myself.

I picked up my pace and hurried home.

The key turned in the lock and I opened the front door. As I did so, I was greeted by a delicious scent wafting through the air.

Immediately past the entrance was a hallway leading to the living room, with a kitchen area to one side. Sayu was standing just outside the kitchen, with a ladle in her hand.

“Oh.” She turned toward me. “Welcome home...Papa?”

“Knock it off. I’m going to puke.”

I felt a sense of relief wash over me.

On my way home, I’d started to worry that she might have passed out from hunger, but if she was cracking jokes, she must be fine.

“Are you always this late?”

“Nah, I worked overtime today.”

“So you work long hours sometimes.”

“No, I always have overtime.”

“So that means you’re always this late.”

I slipped my shoes off as we chatted and then peeked into the pot that Sayu was stirring. It was miso soup. I could tell from the steam wafting out of the pot that she’d only just finished making it.

“Miso soup again?”

“Isn’t it your favorite?”

“When did I say that?”

I cocked my head at her inquisitively, and she responded by bursting into laughter.

“The other night, just as you were passing out, you said, *‘I want miso soup...’* So I figured you must love the stuff.”

“Did I really say that?”

I had absolutely no memory of it.

“But actually, the miso soup is all I made. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry. I bought bento boxes. Want one?”

I lifted up the plastic bag in my hand. She gave me a wide grin and nodded.

We went into the living room, and I noticed a pile of folded laundry in the corner. The wrinkles in my spare shirts were all smoothed out. Had she washed and ironed everything? I hadn’t even asked her to do that.

A quick glance at the floor, and I could tell all the dust and fallen hair was gone. I scanned the room for the vacuum and found it sitting in a different spot from where I usually kept it.

She’d even done some cleaning.

I peeked at Sayu from the corner of my eye. She was humming to herself as she ladled the miso soup into a bowl.

I had told her to handle the housework, but I’d never expected her to be so diligent. It seemed like she was pretty skilled and had a decent sense of responsibility to boot.

I went to take off my suit and change into some loungewear.

Then I pulled my favorite Marlboro Reds and a Zippo lighter from my suit pocket.

“Huh?”

It was only then that I realized the ashtray I usually left on my desk in the living room was missing.

“Sayu.”

“Hmm?”

“What’d you do with my ashtray?”

Upon hearing this, Sayu clapped her hands together as if she’d just remembered something. Then she pulled a pristine ashtray from the cupboard.

“Sorry,” she said. “I washed it with the rest of the dishes.”

“Oh, I see. Thanks.”

“Uh, sure...”

I took the ashtray and headed out to the balcony.

“Huh?” Sayu called in confusion from behind me.

“What?”

“Nothing. I was just wondering why you’re going out there to smoke.”

I frowned at her question.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you always smoke in here, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

“So why go out to the balcony now?”

I didn’t understand what she was getting at.

“Because you’re here.”

Sayu’s eyes widened in surprise at my response.

Why the hell was that so astonishing?

I didn’t care where I smoked when I was living alone, but I wasn’t about to do it indoors with a nonsmoker. That was just common sense.

“What’s with that face?” I questioned.

“No, I just...” She shifted her gaze to the floor and took on a pensive expression. Before long, she looked back up and flashed a smile. “That’s really kind of you.”

“Huh?” I snapped at her before I had the chance to stop myself, then hastily clamped my mouth shut. That was a bad habit of mine. There was no need to intimidate a kid. “What’s so kind about it?”

“Well, um... Ah-ha-ha!”

Sayu gave a fake laugh, and I could tell she was wringing her hands behind her back.

“Everyone before you...just smoked. They didn’t seem to care that I was there...”

When I heard her explanation, that half-anger, half-sadness feeling took me over once again. Why had all the adults in this kid’s life been so worthless? No wonder her values were all messed up.

“Smoking in front of minors, taking advantage of a schoolgirl. You’ve sure been around some real trash.”

I channeled my anger into my words, spitting them out with emphasis.

I raised my hand holding the box of cigarettes and pointed at Sayu.

“Listen. It’s not that I’m being kind. Those guys were just trash. Don’t misunderstand.”

“Uh...”

“Don’t lower your standards. Have a decent gauge for what’s acceptable.”

Once I had said my peace, I put my hand back on the door to the balcony.

“Let me smoke, and then we’ll eat. Just wait a sec.”

“...’Kay. Got it.”

Hearing her reply, I stepped out onto the balcony and closed the door behind me.

I took a quick peek back into the room and saw Sayu standing there with a troubled smile on her face, scratching the back of her neck.

I took out a cigarette and flicked the lighter open with my thumb. Once I lit the cigarette, I snapped the lighter shut. The clink echoed in the night air.

I took in a puff of tobacco smoke and exhaled.

“...Haaaah.”

At the same time, I let out a sigh.

This really brought home how much older I’d gotten.

When I looked at that high school girl, I started to feel like I was her guardian. I couldn’t imagine how anyone could lust after someone like her.

Sayu's inexplicable grin flitted through my mind.

She did have a really cute face. A more genuine smile would suit her better.

Just who had wreaked so much havoc on her sense of worth?

The girl did act rather spoiled. Truthfully, that could've been the root of her issue. Still, she must have suffered through some awful people and deplorable environments in her life, making things worse and leading her astray. I felt the beginnings of rage bubble up again.

"Nothing but trash, all of them," I whispered before taking another drag on the cigarette.

Like I was one to talk.

I was overindulging her, helping her to run away. I was trash, too.

We were all being selfish.

Every last one of us. Even me.

As I let out yet another puff of smoke, I took some time to think about the real meaning of what I was doing.

Chapter 4 Clothes

It was Saturday.

I was lazing around the living room, reading the newspaper. I didn't own a TV, so the newspaper was the only way I kept up with current events.

"Man Arrested on Suspicion of Sexually Assaulting a Middle School Girl, huh..."

The headline caught my eye as I skimmed through the articles, scratching my butt.

Young women held a special sparkle in my eyes, too, but I just couldn't see them in an erotic light. Until recently, I'd thought that was the norm. But considering how often I saw reports of sexual assault against minors, it seemed like more men lusted after underage girls than I expected.

"Personally, I find older women more attractive..." I grumbled to myself, turning the page.

"Sorry! Coming through!"

Sayu made her way across the living room, hands full of laundry, and stepped over me as I lay on the floor.

I didn't expect it, so I accidentally caught an eyeful as she passed. She was wearing light-blue panties made of a thin-looking material. They were a much more mature style than I'd expected, and the sight left me so flustered that I spoke up in an effort to cover my reaction.

"Hey! You just showed me your panties!"

"I'm wearing a skirt. I can't help it."

Sayu was doing the housework in her school uniform yet again.

“That reminds me. You’re always wearing that outfit.”

“It’s all I have. I wash it, though, so it’s clean.”

“That doesn’t make it any less weird for you to have it on around the apartment.”

I pulled myself up, went over to my work bag, took my wallet out from its usual spot, and glanced inside. More was left than I’d expected. I nodded to myself and took out a 10,000 yen bill.

“Here, go and buy something. You could probably get a full outfit at that Uniclothes store.”

“What? I can’t do that; I’d feel bad.”

“You should feel worse about showing me your underwear every day.”

Sayu mumbled something to herself, then clapped her hands together as if she’d just had a great idea.

“Come and pick something out with me!”

“Ugh...” I grimaced at the thought.

I imagined Sayu and myself lined up together buying her clothes.

“It’d look like I was your sugar daddy.”

“Ha-ha. Yeah, it would.”

“Go clothes shopping on your own. I’ll buy a futon for you in the meantime.”

Sayu’s reaction to the word *futon* was explosive.

“Whoa, you really don’t have to! I’m happy to sleep on the carpet!”

“You’re going to wake up sore sleeping like that.”

“Not at all!”

Why was she so reluctant about everything?

I’d told her I’d buy her one. A simple “thanks” would do.

“You literally wake up every day going, ‘Ow, ow, ow.’”

“Huh? No I don’t!”

“Yes you do.”

So she was doing it unconsciously.

“I just don’t feel right sleeping in a bed and making a girl sleep on the floor.”

“But—”

“It bothers me, so I’m buying it. I’m not asking for your opinion.”

“Uh...”

I mean, what kind of adult would I be if I didn’t have bedding for guests in the first place?

I’d convinced myself that I didn’t need any, since the only guests I’d have would be guys who came by for all-night drinking parties. And besides, if a woman ever came home with me, we’d just share my bed.

“So that’s that. Go out and buy some new clothes.”

“Got it.”

“You can keep the change for your allowance.”

“Huh?”

Sayu looked bewildered yet again.

“No, that’s okay,” she said.

“You haven’t got any money, right? You can’t spend every day in this empty apartment with nothing to do for fun.”

“Just having a place to stay is enough for me.”

It seemed like it was against her nature to accept help from adults.

I couldn’t be sure what the adults in her life had been like up until now, but at the very least, she must have felt it necessary to hold back around them.

A sigh escaped my lips.

“I’m telling you it’s fine, so it is. If you don’t use it, then just save it, okay?”

“But I...”

Evidently unconvinced, Sayu turned her gaze to the floor.

“You’ve treated me so nicely... I don’t know how to pay you back for all of this.”

Her words were so simple and honest that for a moment, they left me speechless.

So she wasn’t really holding back. Her mind was just occupied with how to compensate me for all the favors. Without a way to do so, she didn’t want to accept any more.

I scratched my head and groaned.

Sayu was just a kid... Why was she like this?

“I...”

I took my time choosing the right phrases. What could I say to get through to her?

“I’m a pretty busy guy, so I don’t really have time to do chores.”

My words came slowly and awkwardly.

Sayu stared at me intently the whole time.

“But now, you’re handling all of that for me. For the past week or so, it’s made my time at home much more comfortable... Is that not enough?”

I met Sayu’s gaze, and she quickly turned away, clearly troubled. Finally, she muttered, “If that’s all right with you, Mr. Yoshida...then I don’t mind.”

“Of course it’s all right with me.”

I nodded and stood up.

I couldn’t go out in these wrinkled bed clothes. I opened my tiny furnished closet and retrieved something better to wear.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

I had just yanked off my pajama top when I heard Sayu’s voice behind me.

“What is it?”

I cast a glance in her direction. She pursed her lips tightly, then formed a quick, gentle smile.

“Thanks.”

“...Yeah.”

I breathed in sharply through my nose, then quickly tossed on a T-shirt.

That’s all you needed to say, I thought.

*

“Wow! It’s so soft!”

Sayu rolled around on top of the futon.

She had changed out of her uniform and was now wearing a casual gray sweat suit. It seemed much more appropriate for indoor wear, and it looked a lot easier for her to relax in.

“You’re kicking up a bunch of dust, dumbass,” I chided her gently, a half smile on my face.

Sayu lifted just her face and stared at me.

“What dust? I clean the apartment every day.”

“...Good point.”

I nodded and lifted the pull tab on the beer in my hand. The sound of carbon dioxide rushing out reverberated pleasantly in my ears.

“Good thing we got the futon, huh?” I asked Sayu before taking a sip of the beer.

“Yeah. I’m sure I’ll rest well tonight.”

“I’m glad.”

“Mr. Yoshida.” Sayu locked eyes with me. “Let’s sleep together.”

“Pfft!”

I was fully prepared for her to say “thanks,” but this unexpected solicitation nearly had me choking on my drink.

I clamped my mouth shut, narrowly avoiding spraying beer everywhere. I

managed to gulp down the mouthful, then began coughing violently.

“A-are you okay?”

“You...”

I pointed a finger at Sayu.

“I told you, if you play those games again, I’m kicking you out. Weren’t you listening?”

The corners of her mouth turned up in a self-satisfied smirk, as if to say, “I knew you’d say that.”

“I didn’t say anything about doing dirty stuff.”

“Huh? ...Oh, yeah, I guess you didn’t.”

“You’re obviously the only one here who thinks sleeping with a high school girl must mean sex.”

“I told you I’m not into that, dumbass.”

“Oh? I wonder if that’s true.”

Sayu snickered to herself, then went back to idly rolling around on top of the futon.

I watched her from the corner of my eye, then lifted the beer can to my lips once more. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but beer seemed to taste better than it had when I partook of it alone.

“So? Are we sleeping together?”

Sayu stopped rolling around and cast a glance in my direction.

“No way. I’m sleeping in my bed.”

“You scared?”

“I like to have room when I lay down for the night.”

Sayu laughed mischievously and pulled in her chin, peering up at me from below.

“But I’m real soft, you know. Don’t you want to use me as a body pillow?”

She pointed at herself to make it clear what she was referring to.

“I’ll really throw you out, you know,” I stated with a snort.

“I’m just kidding!”

Watching Sayu’s shoulders bounce with laughter reminded me of how she had looked earlier that day.

It had been obvious from her expression that she was completely unaccustomed to receiving kindness from an adult. As soon as she’d gotten anxious, her attitude had become more reserved, her voice quieter.

The memory left me with an empty feeling.

“Hey, kid.”

I called to her, taking another swig.

This time, Sayu didn’t face me, only moving her eyes in my direction.

“You’re a lot cuter when you smile.”

She stared at me blankly for a moment, but her cheeks soon flushed ever so slightly.

“What? Are you hitting on me?”

“I told you, you’re not my type.”

After teasing me, she rotated away.

She was blushing. I knew it.

Not to repeat myself, but I didn’t like having a girl set the pace of the conversation. Chuckling to myself, I gulped down the last of the beer.

Kids should smile.

That was how I really felt. And besides, a girl who was all smiles and full of attitude was more endearing than an anxious one.

I wasn’t into underage brats either way, though.

I headed to the fridge with the empty can in my hand.

I opened the door and took out a fresh one.

“Still drinking?”

“I’m off tomorrow as well, so it’s fine.”

I cracked the tab on the cold beer as I responded.

Just then, another vague thought occurred to me.

Having someone around to talk to was surprisingly nice.



Chapter 5 Pork Cutlet Curry

Ever since Sayu had turned up, the living environment in my home had changed noticeably.

For starters, she always had food ready for me in the morning before I left for work and in the evening after I got back. It was a huge lifestyle alteration. Until now, I'd always been pretty haphazard about cooking for myself. If I had a craving for something in particular, I'd look up a recipe on my phone and follow along with the directions. Otherwise, I just picked things up at the convenience store. When it came to breakfast, I regularly skipped it entirely.

The fact that Sayu was doing the laundry for me every day was a big factor, too. Before she came along, I'd managed it only on the weekends, and even then with great reluctance. My white dress shirts for work were so annoying to wash and iron on weekdays, I had bought one for each day of the week, plus two as backups. Now, however, Sayu got the laundry done every day and even ironed my shirts. I had never imagined that having someone else handle my clothes would be so pleasant.

With my homelife thus improved, I began to notice changes at work as well.

Now that I was eating breakfast in the morning, my mind was ready to work right from the start of the day, and I could maintain my focus until lunchtime without being incapacitated by hunger. Plus, on an entirely emotional level, wearing a clean, unwrinkled shirt made me feel much more presentable.

I wondered if this was the way guys with wives felt every day...

I pondered this as I typed.

"What are you talking about?" Hashimoto asked suddenly, eyes still glued to

his monitor.

“Huh? What’s up?”

He snickered as he side-eyed me. “What, you didn’t notice? You just muttered something about *guys with wives* out loud.”

“Uh, oh? Did I?”

Hashimoto’s shoulders shook with laughter as I slapped a hand over my mouth in panic.

“It *is* nice to have someone doing the housework for you every day,” he said, as if reading my mind. Then he shrugged.

“To be honest, I don’t really remember how hard the chores were when I was living on my own.”

“‘*Danger past, God forgotten,*’ as they say.”

“I guess so. Well, in your case, Yoshida, you’d better not get too lax. That girl’s not going to stay and help you forever, after all.”

Hashimoto wasn’t wrong, but his slightly condescending tone bothered me.

“Hey! It’s not like you can be sure your wife’s going to stay with you forever, either.”

I had said it only out of desperation, but Hashimoto simply grinned and waved it off.

“Nah. We’ll be together until the end. Probably.”

“Is that so...?”

I knew that Hashimoto was a devoted husband, but I wasn’t sure how to respond to this level of boasting.

“Anyway, it sounds like she’s doing a good job with the housework.”

Hashimoto kept his voice low as he talked, his fingers still tapping away at the keyboard in front of him.

He was the only person in the office who knew what was going on with Sayu. In fact, he was the only one I had told at all. There wasn’t really anyone else I

could talk about it with.

“She’s done everything I asked and more.”

“I had assumed she’d be pretty wild, since you said she was a runaway, but I guess she takes her responsibilities seriously.”

I nodded a few times in response with Hashimoto’s remark.

To be completely honest, Sayu was a hundred times more diligent with the housework than I’d expected her to be. I had chalked up her excellent job the first few days to simple enthusiasm, assuming it would wind down over time. But that turned out to be far from the case. Ever since she’d taken over the chores, she’d continued to work just as hard every single day without fail. She really didn’t fit my image of a runaway at all.

As my admiration for her diligence grew, I understood her less and less. She wasn’t my type, but she was definitely on the pretty side. She was friendly and good at housework. So why had she left home and come all the way here? I couldn’t for the life of me come up with a reason.

“Your forehead’s wrinkling,” Hashimoto commented, pulling me out of my thoughts. “You made a sour face all of a sudden, so I got worried.”

“Oh, uh...sorry,” I mumbled in response.

Hashimoto snorted, then pointed his chin toward the clock on the wall.

“Want to go eat?”

I looked over and noticed that it was already one PM. Others in the office headed out for lunch around this time.

“Oh, yeah... Once I finish typing out this line, I’ll be at a good stopping point. Hold on just a second.”

I punched in some code as I spoke. Once I’d saved the file, I made a backup and put the computer in sleep mode.

Hashimoto had just shut down his computer as well and was throwing on a jacket. We gave each other a small nod and got up from our chairs.

“I’m off to lunch,” announced Hashimoto, voice monotone. Our nearby

colleagues responded with “enjoy,” showing a similar lack of enthusiasm.

I mirrored Hashimoto’s announcement, and as I did, my eyes met Ms. Gotou’s. She was seated a short distance away.

Ms. Gotou made a small “oh” sound, then hurriedly jolted out of her chair.

“I’m off to lunch, too!” she said, grabbing her wallet and standing up.

As I left the office, I puzzled over her odd behavior. She normally took her break a little later than this, but maybe she was simply hungrier than usual today.

“Want to eat out? Or should we head to the cafeteria?”

“I’m not really craving anything in particular. Let’s go to the cafeteria.”

Hashimoto nodded at my response, giving me an exaggerated salute.

Just then, I heard the clacking of heels approaching from behind. Somehow, I sensed the footsteps quickening as if trying to catch up with us. Wondering who it was, I turned around, and there was Ms. Gotou’s face, much closer than I’d expected. I jumped back instinctively.

“Whoa, Ms. Gotou!”

“What do you mean, *whoa*?”

She giggled at my reaction, the ends of her hair swaying.

“You’re going to lunch, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Mind if I come along?”

“Uh.”

Put on the spot, I found myself unable to answer. My mouth flapped opened and shut a few times as I glanced toward Hashimoto, silently asking for help. He didn’t even try to stifle his laugh and slapped me on the back.

“Why would we mind? We’re just eating at the office cafeteria, though. Is that okay with you?”

Hashimoto’s words were warm and inviting, and they earned him a joyful

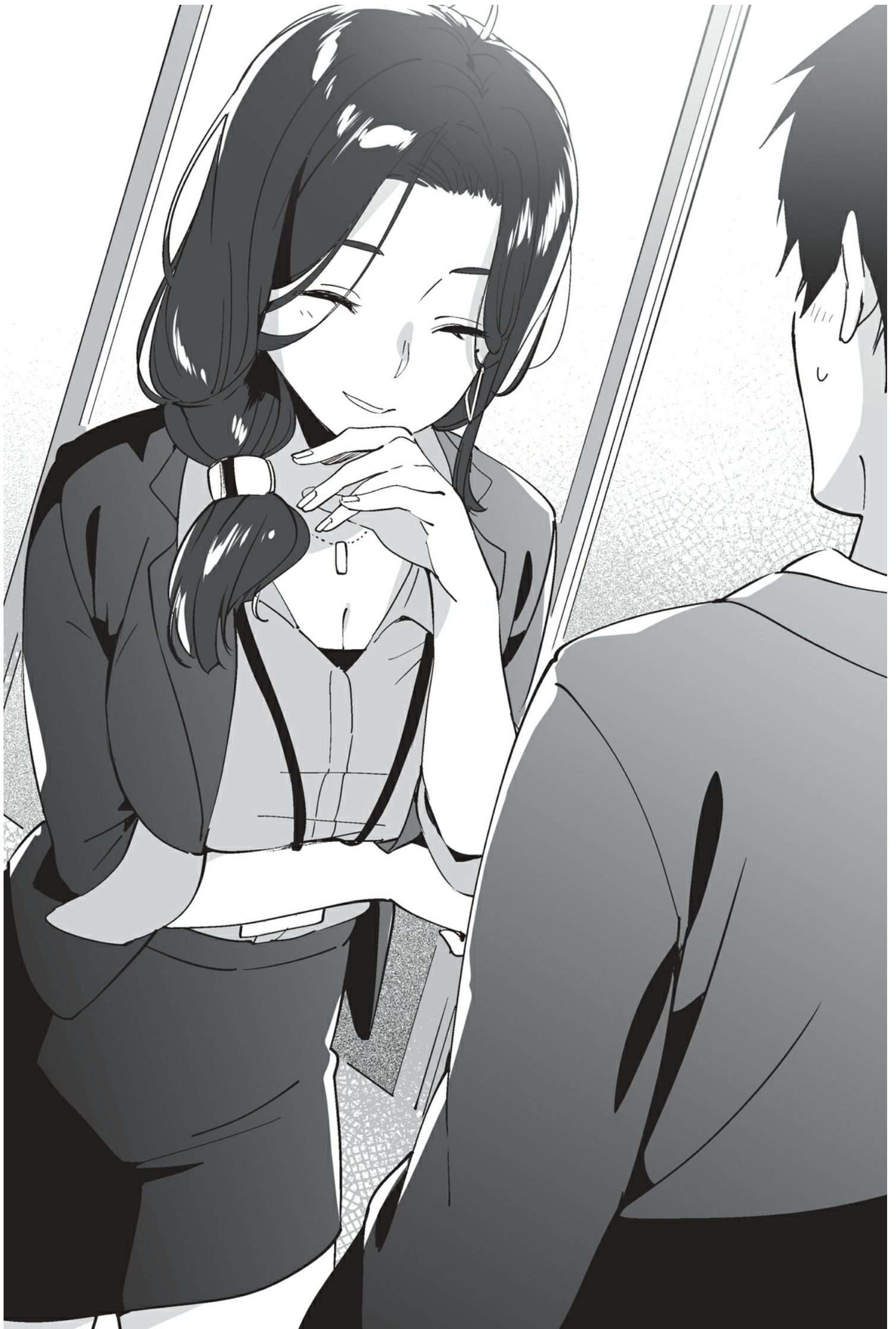
smile from Ms. Gotou, who nodded in approval.

“Of course!”

“All right, let’s get a move on... Hey, Yoshida, you awake there?”

“Y-yeah...”

I was still dazed, unable to keep up with the sudden turn of events. Hashimoto gave me another slap on the back.



“...It’s your chance to talk to her,” he whispered so that only I would hear. I gave a small nod.

Ever since Ms. Gotou had rejected me, I had hardly exchanged a word with her. Hashimoto had just created an opportunity for me to change that.

I steeled my resolve and headed for the cafeteria.

*

“Somehow I expected you to order something lighter...,” Hashimoto said with a wry grin.

Ms. Gotou set her tray of pork cutlet curry on the table and tilted her head playfully.

“I don’t usually eat this much. I’m just really hungry today.”

“...Yeah, you usually eat a small salad from the convenience store.”

My quiet interjection brought an uninhibited grin to Hashimoto’s face.

“Whoa, Yoshida. You’re certainly paying attention.”

“I-it’s just very noticeable when someone only has a salad. Even the women in the office who are watching their weight still have rice balls.”

“Hee-hee, so you observe everyone’s lunch habits, huh?”

“Er...”

Their comments were making me feel guilty. I could feel my face getting hot.

Embarrassed, I slurped at my bowl of Chinese noodles. I had ordered them without thinking, out of habit. They tasted cheap, but that was to be expected for the price. It was hard to explain why, but I kind of liked the inexpensive flavor. Feeling the intentionally strong soy sauce flavor spread over my taste buds, I continued slowly chewing my food.

After happily swallowing a mouthful of curry-soaked pork cutlet, Ms. Gotou cast a glance my way and began to speak.

“So,” she began, “you’ve been going home right on time lately, haven’t you,

Yoshida?”

She posed the question casually, in a singsong manner, but I found myself oddly unsettled. Part of me was happy that she had noticed when I left the office, but another part of me felt guilty about the reason I had been departing on time. These and other emotions were swirling around in my mind.

“Well, that’s because, uh, I’ve been doing pretty well recently... I finish my work no problem, so I can get out the door right away.”

I averted my gaze from hers as I replied, and she giggled slightly.

“In the past, it seemed like even when you finished your own work, you’d end up staying late to help out other people. So more often than not, you kept working even though you didn’t have to, isn’t that right?”

“Ack... How do you even know that?”

Ms. Gotou was right—I did do that. To tell the truth, I prided myself on having the skills to handle my daily workload with no problem. However, at our company, the amount of tasks given to each employee varied considerably depending on the projects they were involved in and their specific skill set. That’s why I always went out of my way to help colleagues who looked busier than I was.

The reason I hadn’t been doing so recently was, without a doubt, because I had a high school girl living with me.

I couldn’t do anything about my job, but with someone else—a minor, for that matter—living in my apartment, I felt an odd sense of obligation. I wanted to go back as fast as I could to make sure she was all right. Because of that, I’d been completing my work as quickly as possible, then checking my coworkers’ progress on projects I was the lead for and clocking out right on time.

However, it surprised me that Ms. Gotou had been taking so much notice of what time I left. Since she was my superior, perhaps it was natural that she paid attention to her subordinates’ schedules. Still, knowing she’d paid that much attention to me caused a tingly feeling to form in the pit of my stomach.

“I got curious because you started leaving earlier so suddenly,” Ms. Gotou remarked, then she stuffed more curry into her mouth.

She licked up a little of it left on her lips in an oddly seductive way, and I averted my gaze. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Hashimoto smirking faintly. What the hell was he grinning at?

“I guess it does attract attention if I head home before my superior.”

At this, Ms. Gotou appeared surprised. She blinked a few times before breaking into a smile.

“That’s not what I meant at all. At this company, making it out of the office in good time is proof you’re proficient at what you do.”

Ms. Gotou’s praise set my heart soaring. Compliments on my work from higher-ups always made me happy, and hearing the woman of my dreams giving me such straightforward acknowledgment felt particularly good. That was why her next question—the one I should have been watching out for the most—caught me off guard.

“What I really want to know is *why* you’re leaving on time... Are you seeing someone?”

I choked on my noodles. I managed to stop myself from spitting them out and began to chew furiously. After I’d swallowed the mouthful, I took a deep breath.

“Why would I be seeing someone?! Didn’t I just...”

“...confess to you,” I was almost about to say, but I realized how loud I was being and kept my mouth shut. I noticed our coworkers one table over giving me the side-eye, so I stopped and cleared my throat.

“You just...what?” asked Ms. Gotou. She was smiling brightly, her head cocked to one side—clearly trying to tease me.

“Please, let it go...”

Next to me, Hashimoto shook with exaggerated laughter at my plea. Ms. Gotou started snickering as well but apparently had no intention of giving up on her inquiry.

“If you’re not seeing someone, then why are you rushing home?”

Her cross-examination had me at a loss.

There was no way I could tell her I was putting up a runaway schoolgirl. The thought alone was absurd. But if I couldn't tell her the truth, it was hard for me to explain why a bachelor with no hobbies like myself would want to be at home.

"...I-it's my sleep."

The words flew out of my mouth, a response to my desperation.

"I've been trying to get a lot more sleep lately."

"Hmm... Sleep, huh?"

Ms. Gotou nodded, but it wasn't clear whether or not she believed my lie.

"I've been pretty exhausted at work... I was worried it was affecting my productivity, so I figured I'd try doing something about it."

I was stumbling over my words and had just barely managed to get that far when at last, Hashimoto, unable to sit and watch me suffer for another minute, offered me a lifeline.

"Well, it's true you look healthier, and your work seems to be going smoother, too. I guess it's been doing some good, then?"

At times like this, I could always depend on Hashimoto. He would use his relaxed tone of voice to naturally lead the conversation exactly where I wanted it to go. It was a skill that I would never be able to replicate.

Ms. Gotou gave a small sound in response to Hashimoto's words, then stared at me.

"He's right. You look healthier and a lot sharper, too. Your shirts are perfectly ironed and everything."

"So you were even paying attention to my shirt wrinkles... How embarrassing."

"Don't worry," Ms. Gotou said lightly. "I've never passed anyone up for a promotion over a wrinkled shirt."

I smiled wryly. Knowing she had been mindful of my attire was surprising. It was hard to imagine that I was the only one she watched that closely, but on

the other hand, examining all of her subordinates that closely sounded like quite a challenge. Once again, I was in awe of her display of managerial prowess.

“I’m early to bed, early to rise, so now I have time to iron my shirts in the morning.”

I was a terrible liar, but to my relief, my words came out somewhat naturally this time. In reality, I’d barely ever taken care of my own housework, so what I’d just told her was a blatant lie. I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to maintain eye contact, but Ms. Gotou kept her eyes firmly on her curry and didn’t even spare me a glance. I had gotten lucky.

“I see, I see. That does make sense.”

She nodded, still smiling, and took in another mouthful of food.

I struggled to hold back the sigh of relief that desperately wanted to escape my lungs. I was really awful at keeping secrets. The excessive talking I did to cover for myself made it hard to breathe.

And yet, I couldn’t afford to go around telling everyone the truth about my situation. If word got out, I wouldn’t be the only person affected. I had to be careful.

“It just surprised me to see a coworker who’d been working the same way for five years suddenly change his style!” said Ms. Gotou. “I didn’t mean anything by it, so don’t mind me.”

She was trying to reassure me as she took another bite of her meal. It was as if she’d sensed my earlier doubts and was responding to them. Only then did I realize she’d already finished half of her curry. I, on the other hand, had barely even picked up my chopsticks, and my noodles had started to get soggy. Flustered, I was about to begin eating when a thought sprang to mind.

How could someone who ate only a single salad every day suddenly wolf down a whole plate of pork cutlet curry, and with such speed, just because she was a little hungrier than usual?

At one point some time ago, I had wanted to focus more on my work, so I started eating a smaller lunch and working through my break. I got hunger pains

only for the first few days. Maybe my stomach shrank or something, but once I'd gotten used to it, it became normal for me. I clearly recalled getting sick later when I tried to eat a big meal all at once, though.

After that, Hashimoto got fed up with me and made me steadily increase how much I ate each day, until I was able to handle a regular size lunch again.

Considering my experience, I had some doubts about Ms. Gotou's eating habits.

Maybe she had been holding back the whole time, and having salads for lunch had been trying for her.

As I pondered this and continued slurping at my noodles, I sensed someone looking at me. I glanced up, and there was Ms. Gotou. Our eyes met.

Startled, I flinched and quickly averted my gaze.

"Wh-what is it...?" I asked pathetically, head angled down at my bowl. Ms. Gotou let out a long breath through her nose and smiled.

"Nothing. You just made the face you make whenever you're worried about someone."

I looked back up at her, and our eyes met again. She cocked her head, giving me a mischievous smile.

"Bull's-eye?"

"Uh, it's not..."

I felt my face burning up.

Why did she always have to deduce what I was hiding and make me so uncomfortable?

"I'm right, aren't I? You've met someone you like."

"H-huh?"

Gotou's comment was so sudden, all I could manage was a foolish sputter.

"Going by the serious face you were making, they must be really special."

"No, I mean..."

I couldn't admit I'd been thinking about her, so I kept my mouth shut. Ms. Gotou glanced at her wristwatch and suddenly jerked up in surprise.

"Oh no! I took an early lunch because I had a meeting planned!"

With that, she hurriedly shoved the rest of the curry in her mouth and stood up.

"Sorry to run off like this. Let's talk again soon!" She waved to us as she rushed off.

"Uh, sure," I said.

"Good luck!" Hashimoto called after her.

I watched Ms. Gotou as she hurried out of the cafeteria, after which I let out a small sigh. I felt incredibly exhausted.

"What was all that...?" I said.

Still sitting beside me, Hashimoto snickered and patted me on the shoulder.

"I'm sure she just wanted to talk to you, Yoshida."

"Don't be stupid. Why would she go out of her way to talk to the guy she just rejected?"

"Maybe because you're stressing about it?"

He laughed like it wasn't his problem, then set his chopsticks down on his tray.

"Ms. Gotou seemed like she was having fun, and she pretty much only talked to you."

Now that I thought about it, I realized he was right. It did seem like she had been speaking almost exclusively to me. Hashimoto had contributed only short responses and interjections.

"If you ask me, I'd say you still have a chance."

"You're an idiot. There's no way."

I tried to live my life without unrealistic expectations. I certainly wasn't going to hold out hope for someone who had already turned me down.

Despite my response, Hashimoto's grin didn't fade.

"You know my wife said no to me five times, right?"

"I know that, but...you're special."

"There's no guarantee you're not special, too."

"....."

I didn't have an answer for that. And there was no point in continuing this conversation anyway.

"Yoshida."

Hashimoto patted me on the shoulder again.

"The real fight begins after you get rejected."

"You talk too much, you know that...?"

I started to regret ever telling him about my heartbreak. Still, I'd needed someone to hear me out after that date, and Hashimoto was the only person I could tell. In that sense, I didn't have much choice.

"All right, let's grab a smoke and get back to it."

I paused for a moment before responding. "I thought you quit smoking?"

"I did. But after seeing you so dejected, I thought I'd do you a favor and accompany you."

He reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a candy cigarette. I burst out laughing.

"Dumbass..."

"It's better than smoking alone, right?"

"...I guess. Let's go."

We got up from our seats and headed over to the smoking room, which was on the same floor.

While I didn't enjoy his teasing, Hashimoto was always there for me. It frustrated me a little, but I couldn't deny it.

Chapter 6 Beard

“Mr. Yoshida, your beard.”

I had just reached for my first bite of breakfast when Sayu suddenly pointed to my chin.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t you need to shave?”

“It’s fine like this for today. It’s a hassle anyway,” I responded, using my chopsticks to break the yolk of my fried egg. Sayu had made the food again this morning.

“Oh, I see.”

She sipped audibly at her miso soup.

“I noticed you shave some days before you go out but don’t on other days. Is there some pattern to it?”

“Nah. I just shave when it gets too long.”

“I see, so it’s not *too long* yet.”

She snickered and poked at a fried sausage with her chopsticks.

Now a bit self-conscious, I ran my fingers over my chin. It made a scratching sound and left a somewhat stiff and sharp sensation on my fingers.

“Hmm. Maybe I should shave.”

“Well, which is it?”

I stirred the broken yolk into the white of the egg, then shoved the mix into my mouth.

“It’s hard to say. I feel like I’ve turned into an old man.”

Sayu tilted her head. “Why?”

“Because of the beard.”

“Because you’ve grown it out?”

“No, not that.”

I stuffed a few bites of white rice into my mouth and hummed, chewing thoroughly before swallowing.

“When I turned twenty, I’d shave my beard the moment I noticed a bit of stubble. I was really careful not to overlook any stray hairs.”

And now I was like this.

As long as it didn’t look too untidy, I didn’t mind letting it grow out a little.

“Some people think of the beard itself as a sign that a man’s old,” I said, “but I think it’s a little different.”

I sipped on my miso soup. It was delicious, just like it always was when Sayu made it.

“A man’s old when he starts thinking of shaving as a hassle.”

“Ha-ha. But some young men find it a hassle, too, don’t they?” Sayu countered.

“Still, they do it anyway. They say it’s a bother, but they still shave it. When you get on in years, you stop caring so much what other people think, and you start to shave less often.”

“I see, I see.”

I’d been nibbling on my breakfast as we spoke, but Sayu had already cleared her plate.

She put her hands together to give thanks for the meal, really looking the part.

“You’d better finish up quick, or you’re going to be late,” she said.

“Right, right.”

I nodded, picked up the rest of the egg with my chopsticks, and scooped it all into my mouth. The mellow umami flavor of the half-cooked yolk and the soy sauce blended together on my tongue. It tasted like pure bliss.

Ever since Sayu had moved in, I'd started looking forward to breakfast.

I finished every last bit of rice, as well as the side dishes, and sipped down all of miso soup with a slurp.

Sayu was sitting across from me, watching me finish eating with a wide grin.

"Thanks for the meal."

"Don't mention it," Sayu replied. "I'll do the dishes. Go ahead and brush your teeth, Mr. Yoshida."

"All right. Thanks."

I got up and headed to the bathroom, just as she'd suggested.

"Oh, hey!"

I heard her calling out to me from behind.

"Hmm?"

"Mr. Yoshida..."

She looked over at me as she carried on stacking the dishes on the table.

"I think you should shave. The beard doesn't look good on you."

"That's none of your business."

"Pfft."

Sayu laughed.

I scratched my back and made my way into the bathroom once more.

My reflection looked unusually exhausted.

I remembered how, when I first moved into this apartment, I used to psych myself up in front of the mirror. I would shave and wash my face and say, *"Let's work hard again today!"*

"Hmm."

I hummed to myself as I picked up my electric razor.

“Geez, I really am an old man,” I muttered as I turned it on.

*

“Mishima... You again? Seriously, how many times is this?”

“Oh! Good morning, Mr. Yoshida!”

“Forget *good morning*. Shouldn’t you be apologizing?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

I could already feel my blood pressure rising, and it wasn’t even noon yet.

“You haven’t read the instruction manual, have you? Have you?”

“I did! I read it, but...”

“You didn’t go over it thoroughly enough, then, because you wouldn’t have screwed up if you had!”

I had raised my voice, and I noticed Ms. Gotou, who was sitting some distance away from us, glancing in our direction.

I felt myself tense up and cleared my throat.

“I’m reeeally sorry.”

The person currently sitting in her seat and bowing her head to me in a carefree manner was my subordinate, Yuzuha Mishima.

She’d joined the company this year, and I was supposed to look after her. It was tough for her to learn new things. There was no shortage of people in the office with the same problem, but her ineptitude somehow surpassed all the others.

But the thing that pissed me off the most was her attitude. No matter how much I scolded her, she’d awkwardly laugh it off without so much as a hint of remorse. It was like she thought it was her right to make mistakes as a new employee.

“Um...” Mishima looked up at me timidly. “So what was wrong with it?”

I let out a sigh. She wasn't even aware of her mistake.

"For starters, you used the wrong programming language."

"But I only know the one."

"If you don't know, then learn it! I gave you a reference book!"

"I didn't have time to go through it. Heh-heh..."

That was the face. She was trying to smile her way out of trouble. This was what really got to me.

"It's fine. I'll take care of it. I'll give you a different task, so go do that instead."

It was pointless for me to draw this out any longer.

The job would get done faster if I just did it myself.

"I'm sorry. I mean it."

"If that's true, then spend some time studying to make up for it."



“Heh-heh. I’ll do my best.”

Mishima beamed and nodded.

I clicked my tongue and turned to leave.

“Uh, Mr. Yoshida?”

“Yeah?”

I turned back to see Mishima smiling without a care, as if she’d already forgotten that I was angry with her.

“You look a lot cooler clean-shaven.”

My mind went blank for a moment.

I put my hand to my chin. I’d just shaved that morning, so my skin was still smooth. Suddenly, I felt ridiculous.

“Don’t worry about my beard—worry about your screwups!”

“Heh-heh. Sorry.”

I marched briskly back to my desk and sank into my chair.

“Rough morning, huh?” Hashimoto smirked from the next seat over.

“She’s really something else. I wish I could hand her off to you.”

“No thanks, I’m good.”

Hashimoto snickered as he clacked away at his keyboard.

Not only had I wasted time with the new recruit this morning, but now I had both my work *and* the work I’d taken from her to do.

I pressed the power button on my computer, noticing the faint reflection of my face in the still-black monitor.

“...Did the beard really look that bad on me?”

I had spoken the words softly to myself, but I heard Hashimoto laughing.

“What’s so funny...?”

“Nothing.”

Hashimoto shifted his gaze away from his computer to stare directly at me.

“It’s just that I can’t believe it’s taken you this long to notice.”

“Dumbass!”

It seemed like I really did look better clean-shaven.

Starting tomorrow, I’ll make sure I shave every day, I thought to myself. This old man had made up his mind.

Chapter 7 Makeup

It was my day off.

Paying no mind to my unruly bed head, I opened my laptop and started checking my email. Suddenly, an online advertisement popped into view.

GOOD NEWS FOR ALL YOU MAKEUP-OBSESSED HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS OUT THERE! ALL OF OUR COSMETICS ARE NOW UP TO 70 PERCENT OFF!

At first I wondered why I was seeing an ad clearly not meant for me, but at the same time, it brought a question to mind.

“Huh? High school girls use makeup...?”

“What?”

Sayu, who was wiping off the table, turned to me. I must have said what I was thinking out loud.

“Uh, nothing, sorry. It’s just that this ad is targeting high school girls who use makeup.”

“Ohhh... Hmm, I guess there are a fair number of girls who do.”

“Really...? I see...”

Thinking back on it, makeup had been banned at my high school. Despite that, I remember some of the so-called “trendy girls” coming to class with makeup anyway and getting reprimanded by our teaching advisers. Those few bold students were the minority, however, so I never got the sense that it was the norm for schoolgirls to wear that stuff. I didn’t know whether times had changed or if my school was just that strict, but either way, the ad was a surprise for me.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Did you wear makeup before? I haven’t seen you with any since you moved here.”

Sayu hummed in thought, tilting her head and looking a bit troubled.

“I’ve worn it before, but only when I felt like it.”

“You did?”

“Just a little.”

I wasn’t too surprised. Sayu didn’t seem like the type for heavy cosmetics... Since she was naturally attractive, a bit of light makeup would be more than enough. In fact, as a guy, I didn’t think she needed any.

“...So you left all that stuff behind?”

This question slipped out, and Sayu cocked her head once more.

“All that stuff?”

“Your makeup. You aren’t using any.”

“Ohhh... Yeah, I guess I did.”

“Isn’t that inconvenient for you?”

“Inconvenient...?” I usually spend the whole day at home. What would I need makeup for?”

“Well, I guess you have a point...”

I wondered if it had been stressful for her to give up something that had been a routine.

I clicked on the ad and looked at the webpage. Scanning over the contents, my eyes were drawn to one particular section.

“Skin lotion...”

“What?”

“Skin lotion. Did you ever use it?”

Written across the webpage in large letters was the phrase, SKIN CARE IS EVEN MORE IMPORTANT THAN MAKEUP! Honestly, I knew next to nothing about these kinds of products, but I remembered Hashimoto telling me he used lotion every night before going to bed because his skin dried out easily. If that kind of care was something that men paid attention to, then it had to be important to high school girls in the prime of their youth.

Sayu couldn't meet my gaze, her eyes darting around the room. It looked like I'd hit the nail on the head.

"Well?"

"I—I mean... I did, but..."

"Frequently?"

"...Just before bed."

"I see."

I scratched my head, closed the advertisement page, and then shut my laptop as well.

"Okay. Shall we head out?"

"Huh? Where?"

As I ran a hand through my messy hair and headed toward the bathroom, I shot a glance at Sayu. She seemed taken aback.

I went to the mirror and pulled a comb roughly through the tangled mess atop my head.

"Shopping for skin lotion," I replied casually.

"Huh?"

*

We were on the first floor of the department store in front of the train station, heading toward the back where the cosmetics counters were located. This was probably the first time in my entire life that I had been to this section

of the store.

“Weren’t you the one who said you didn’t want to go shopping together because you’d look like my sugar daddy?”

Sayu was pouting. She had yet to get over being dragged here.

“Look, it says the skin lotion’s that way. Come on.”

I pointed to the sign hanging from the ceiling. Sayu cast a glance my way, clearly wanting to say something. Instead, she let out a little sigh as we headed toward the makeup section.

I took my time, walking a few paces behind Sayu, and let my gaze wander around the sales floor.

There were colorful bottles of various shapes and sizes on the shelves and posters of famous actresses on the walls. So many of the things I was seeing were completely foreign to me. I’d never imagined the day I’d find myself in this kind of place.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

Sayu timidly ushered me to her. Even when I was right next to her, she kept glancing at me.

“What is it?”

“Just... Here’s the skin lotion...”

“I know. Pick the one you like.”

“I don’t really need any, though... I’m not going to die without it.”

“I promise its fine. It’s just skin lotion, and we’re already at the store.”

“It’s not like I agreed to come. You practically dragged me...”

She was right. I couldn’t deny that I’d all but forced her to come along.

“Don’t worry,” I said, brushing off her disapproving looks. “Just pick the one you like. I told you I’d buy it, so go ahead.”

Sayu shifted her glare to the products on the shelves. I watched her expression from the side and started thinking to myself.

This girl wasn't my child or related to me. I didn't have any real duty to watch over her, so my concern might be seen as presumptuous or misplaced. Still, I couldn't help but worry about her.

Sayu had plenty of spare time. However, she likely had nothing to do. Sure, she did the housework, yet there was no way it occupied her for the whole day.

It would have been fine if I had a TV at home, but I'd never been much of a TV watcher, even as a child. Thus, when I started living alone, it didn't seem worth the effort to buy one.

I'd thought of makeup thanks to an online ad I saw by pure chance, but at any rate, I wanted to provide Sayu with an environment where she was free to enjoy the things she used to do.

Ever since the futon and indoor clothes, I'd noticed that Sayu was very hesitant to let me buy things for her. I wished she would just accept what I gave her without a hassle. Unfortunately, it wasn't that easy.

Even if I gave Sayu money and told her to go and buy something with it, I was certain she'd return empty-handed, explaining that there wasn't anything she liked or giving some other excuse. If she did buy something, she would probably choose the cheapest thing on the shelf. That's why I'd gone out of my way to tag along this time.

"Mr. Yoshida, you...", Sayu muttered, not lifting her gaze from the products. Her hair was covering her eyes, so I couldn't read her expression.

Despite calling out to me, she was waiting an unnaturally long time to continue her thought.

"What is it?" I asked.

Her shoulders twitched.

"Um...", Sayu muttered. Then she abruptly looked up at me and beamed. "What kind of scent do you like, Mr. Yoshida?"

"Huh? Scent?"

Her unusually bright smile and sudden question had me perplexed. When she had called my name a few seconds ago, her tone had been completely different.

I was sure this wasn't what she had originally intended to ask.

"Smell, huh... Nothing comes to mind."

"Are there any you hate?"

"Why're you asking?"

"It's just..." Sayu whispered quietly in response, averting her gaze. "I don't want to use something with an odor you dislike. If we can find something you enjoy, that'd...be better, wouldn't it?"

I sighed. "You're overthinking this."

"I've got to consider your opinion! You're the one buying it for me! And I don't want it to make you uncomfortable."

"There aren't really any smells I hate. Just pick whatever you like."

"No way. There must be something! Everyone has at least one scent they can't stand!"

I wasn't sure what made her so confident on that point, but faced with her insistence, I decided to make a show of mulling it over.

"Hmm... A smell I hate..." I felt a sudden flash of inspiration. "Raw garbage?"

Sayu burst out laughing.

"There's no such thing as raw garbage-scented lotion."

"Okay then. The smell of my own armpit sweat?"

"Ah-ha-ha! Stop! Stop!"

Sayu chuckled and shook her head.

"That's not what I meant. More like a...fragrance."

"I don't know what you mean by *fragrance*."

"Oh, on the train! Like on the train!"

"On the train?"

Sayu nodded in reply, then raised an index finger.

"You know when you're packed in on a crowded train, and you smell

someone else's perfume? Have any of them ever made you go, 'ewww'?"

"...Yeah."

Her description was so specific that I was able to recall a few times on my way to work when I'd experienced that kind of thing.

"An old man's cologne. The scent is way too strong."

"Ahhh... I know what you mean. I get it, but...I doubt any of these lotions are that overwhelming."

Sayu took a couple of bottles from the shelf and scanned the ingredients.

She muttered to herself as she turned around a number of bottles. "This one...seems to have a mild fragrance..." She'd obviously done this before.

I let out a small sigh.

"I knew it."

Sayu must've done this all the time back in her hometown. She'd been without this for months now. Of course, as she'd said, it wasn't something she'd *die* without, but at least she could take some small amount of pleasure from the familiar experience now that she had the luxury to do so.

Still, whenever my thoughts turned to Sayu, I always ended up in the same place.

My mind got stuck on one specific question.

What on earth had made her, a perfectly ordinary high school girl, run away from home, throw away her past, and choose to sacrifice everything short of her own life?

As I stood there wondering, Sayu suddenly turned to face me.

"Mr. Yoshida. What fruit do you like?"

"Uh, um..."

The question caught me off guard, as I was deep in thought. As she took in my reaction, Sayu tilted her head.

"What's up?"

“No, it’s nothing. Fruit, huh... To be honest, I haven’t eaten much fruit lately.”

“Huh... Did you have a favorite when you were a kid, then?”

“When I was a kid...”

I thought back absentmindedly. My parents weren’t really the type to eat much fruit. At least, fruit definitely wasn’t served as a snack or a dessert in my apartment.

But then I suddenly remembered something my mother had said every winter.

I always crave them when I see the kotatsu come out...

“Mandarins... I like mandarins.”

“Mandarins, I see.”

Sayu smiled and nodded a few times.

“Did you have a *kotatsu* at home?” she asked.

“I did.”

I gave her a half smile, and she snickered in reply.

“Then I’ll choose something with citrus...”

She hummed to herself as she picked a small bottle from the shelf.

“This one smells like oranges.”

“Huh...?”

“Don’t *huh* me.”

Sayu was clearly pouting.

“No, I just meant you should pick something you like.”

“I want to get something *you* like, Mr. Yoshida.”

“Like I said, as long as it’s not a cologne, I’m fine with it.”

Clearly displeased with my response, Sayu gave an unabashed scowl. Then she suddenly froze as if she’d just come up with an idea. She moved her head slightly to look at me.

“Wha— Whoa!” My question was interrupted as Sayu plunged toward me and buried herself in my chest. “Wh-what’re you doing?!”

“Mr. Yoshida.” Sayu grinned mischievously, looking into my eyes. “Would it make your heart race if I smelled like oranges...?”

“Wh—?” I lost the ability to form words; now I was just making sounds.

Her body was slim and delicate. Her chest, on the other hand, was large for a high school girl, and her small physique made it stand out even more. I felt like all my senses were heightened, and Sayu’s body felt unnaturally soft.

I shuddered. I could feel goose bumps forming on my skin, and I frantically distanced myself from Sayu.

“No, it won’t...”

“Ah-ha-ha. Fine.”

She flashed a playful smile to suggest she’d only been joking.

“You’re really innocent for an adult, Mr. Yoshida.”

“Shut up.”

Her teasing irritated me, and I scowled, to which Sayu simply cackled. Then her smile abruptly slipped away, and she prodded my chest with her elbow.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

“Hmm?”

“...Thanks.”

Sayu thanked me quietly. Then she handed over the tiny bottle she’d picked up a moment earlier.

“Sure. Just this?”

“Yeah. I don’t need any more. You only use a little drop of it at a time anyway.”

“Really? How about makeup?”

Sayu forced a smile and pouted playfully.

“You really want to see me in makeup that badly?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I don’t need any, then,” she retorted with a smirk, sounding unconcerned. “I don’t need to wear makeup if I’m not trying to impress anyone.”

“...So that’s how it is, huh?”

I took the bottle of skin lotion from Sayu’s hand and headed for the register.

“That’ll be 1,578 yen, please.”

I was caught off guard by the store clerk’s chipper request.

This lotion was pretty pricey... Still in shock, I pulled two bills from my wallet.

“Being a high school girl must be tough, huh,” I whispered to Sayu.

Giggling, she replied, “No kidding.”

Her words sounded somehow detached, as if she no longer considered herself one of them. I almost blurted out, “Just because you’re not going to school doesn’t mean you’ve stopped being a high school girl,” but I didn’t.

“Since we’re already out, is there anything else we should pick up?”

Once we finished checking out, I forced the bag containing the skin lotion onto Sayu, who looked at me with suspicion.

“What do you mean, *anything else*?”

She clearly wanted to know if I was planning on buying her more stuff. I shrugged and smiled wryly.

“Anything,” I corrected casually, then walked off in search of an escalator to the next floor. “You going to stay there?”

“Wai— Hold on!” Sayu chased after me in a panic.

Maybe we could find something to help her kill time at home?

As I walked along, lost in thought, I noticed how much more fun it was to shop with someone else.

I peeked at Sayu, who tilted her head curiously when she realized I was looking at her.

“What?”

“Nothing... Never mind.”

This was just me, but I couldn’t help feeling that ever since Sayu had moved in, I’d started enjoying things more than I had when I was doing them on my own.

I was a man of few, if any, hobbies. I’d spend my days off sleeping and aimlessly browsing the web, or I’d go to the sports gym I’d casually signed up for to exercise whenever I felt like it. That was about it. I only shopped for the bare minimum—food and clothes. As a result, even though my local station had a department store, I’d rarely set foot in it before now. Even if I had, I would’ve purchased my necessities and left, like an automaton.

This was the first time in a while that I decided to take my time to shop.

And it was all thanks to Sayu.

The biggest change was the way I felt on my way home from work.

Before she showed up, I constantly spent my commute thinking about what work I’d completed that day and what I would need to make progress with the day after. Home was simply a place to bathe and sleep. It never occurred to me to hurry home.

But recently, I would be wondering if Sayu had had any problems while I’d been at work or if I might return to find her gone. Inevitably, I’d finish as soon as my shift was over, catch the earliest train, and rush home from the nearest station.

Sayu had become that important to me.

I knew she was a stranger who had abruptly shown up at my apartment, but I couldn’t bring myself to leave her be.

I didn’t know whether it was because she was a high school girl, because I felt *sorry for her*, or some other reason, but I just...

“Mr. Yoshida?”

My shoulders lurched in surprise as she suddenly called out my name.

“Y-yeah... What’s up?”

“I should be the one asking you that. Your forehead is all wrinkled.”

“Huh? Oh, right...”

It seemed I tended to furrow my brow whenever I got lost in thought.

“Sorry. I was thinking.”

“About what?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

I forced a silly smile, and Sayu matched it with her own awkward one and nodded.

Yes. That was the face.

Sayu changed her expression all the time, but the majority of her faces seemed *improvised* and made me feel strangely uncomfortable.

Every time she smiled, I found myself wondering if it was really from the heart.

“Sayu.”

“Hmm?”

I looked over at her as I stepped onto the escalator that went to the second floor. She stepped on behind me and looked up with her big, round eyes.

“You can...”

I had a hard time making the words come out right.

You can rely on me a little bit more.

I thought that’s what I wanted to tell her.

However, I felt foolish when I considered how meaningless those words were.

“No, it’s nothing...”

“Huh?”

“I forgot what I wanted to tell you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

If she couldn’t rely on me, it was either because she couldn’t trust me enough

to open her heart or because she felt I wasn't trustworthy.

If that were the case, it wouldn't make a difference what I said. It'd just put Sayu on the spot.

I didn't need to rush it. I decided I should communicate little by little and wait for her to open her heart to me gradually.

"Hey, Mr. Yoshida."

As the escalator reached the top and we arrived at the second floor, Sayu called out to me.

"Hmm?"

"It's... Um."

Sayu looked at me, then quickly averted her gaze and fumbled her words. It looked like she was finding them hard to get out.

"What is it?" I asked again.

She blushed slightly, and then she said it.

"I-it's just... I'm a little hungry."

That caught me so off guard that I was momentarily stunned silent. Still, it wasn't long before I found it funny and burst out laughing.

"Why are you being so polite?"

"I don't know, I just..."

"So you're hungry, huh? What do you want to eat?"

I held back another laugh as I set foot on the next escalator.

"There should be lots of restaurants on the upper floor."

"Y-yeah..."

Sayu looked somewhat relieved and followed after me.

The hilarity of the situation slowly subsided, and soon, a breath escaped from my nose.

Sayu, it seemed, had not only understood what I had wanted to say earlier,

but she was already making the biggest concession she could.

“You’re always making food for me at home, after all. The least I can do is treat you to something you like while we’re out.”

Sayu gave a sheepish grin in response and nodded emphatically.

“Okay... That’s fine sometimes, I guess.”

It seemed to me like a kind of ritual she performed to convince herself something was truly all right. It was sort of cute.

She genuinely did have a nice smile. I honestly wished I could see it more often.

“What do you feel like?”

“Maybe something we can’t have at home... Omelet rice?”

“I’m pretty sure we can make that at home.”

“Only restaurants make it with the really fluffy eggs!”

“I—I see...”

As we continued our small talk on the way to the food court, I noticed the vague sense of uneasiness I had felt toward her had been wiped away.

At the same time, I was a little disappointed that I was so pathetic that a high school girl had to worry about my feelings.

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“It’s so heavyyy...”

“Come on—we’re almost there.”

Covered in sweat, I unlocked the front door and let Sayu go in ahead. She was carrying plastic bags in both hands.

“Ha, what a load... I—I thought I was going to die!”

“Don’t die on me yet, okay? ...And go inside already. My stuff’s heavy, too!”

“And whose fault is that exactly? ...Oof!”

Still complaining, I picked my own plastic bags back up from the ground and headed inside. I slipped my shoes off at the entrance and followed Sayu into the living room.

Hanging from my shoulder was a paper bag stuffed full of comic books, light novels, and other assorted reading material we had picked up at the department store. The bag's straps were unusually narrow, and they painfully cut into my shoulders.

This had to be the first time in my life I'd made a big enough purchase at the bookstore to require a paper bag.

"Do you really have the time to read all of this? When you get back from work, you usually eat, bathe, and head straight to bed."

"I should be free on the weekends."

After finishing our meal at a somewhat pricey omelet rice restaurant, we wandered by several shops until we noticed a bookstore and headed inside. And that was the story behind this massive purchase.

At some point in the past, I'd decided I would spend my commute time reading manga, and I'd started purchasing a weekly boys' comic magazine. However, I found that it was rather difficult to read on the packed trains, and after a month of toughing it out, I just gave up. At the bookstore with Sayu, I'd spotted the new volume of a series I'd particularly enjoyed back then, and I ended up putting the entire series in our shopping cart. We were already there, after all, so I figured I might as well.

Or at least, that was what I wanted Sayu to think. I did want to read the volumes I got, but I thought it could be good for her to have some reading material within easy reach when she got bored around the apartment. For that reason, I also picked up some novels that were advertised as being "*all the rage with young readers*." And although it was likely a little heavy-handed, I added in a book of essays titled *Why I Ran Away From Home*, written by a female author who spent several years as a runaway when she was a student.

If I'd offered to buy something for Sayu directly, she would have probably refused, so I decided it would be better to say I was buying them for myself as an excuse and then leave them around my place where she could get at them.

As a plan, it sounded great in my head, but I hadn't accounted for the fact that books were extremely heavy when you bought a lot of them. The surprising heft left me drenched in sweat.

"Hey... I just realized something."

The plastic bag Sayu was holding contained a massive amount of groceries.

"Wouldn't it be nice to eat something a little fancier at home?"

It started with a whimsical suggestion on my part, but, as expected, Sayu refused to give me a straight answer when I asked her what she wanted to try, so we ended up with a list made entirely by me.

After buying every ingredient necessary to make the dishes on the list, we'd wound up with the amount Sayu was currently struggling with.

"Is all of this going to fit in the refrigerator...?"

"...Oh."

I hadn't thought that far ahead.

I was a single man living on his own who couldn't even be bothered to cook for himself. It went without saying that my fridge was on the smaller side. The layout of my apartment itself didn't allow for anything too large, so regardless of whether I prepared food or not, my appliances had to be small by necessity.

I opened the refrigerator door wide and looked at the plastic bag Sayu had put down by her side, making a mental calculation.

"...Maybe if we really stuff it."

"Ah-ha-ha! Okay. Let's do it." Sayu cackled, bringing the grocery bag over to the fridge.

"Maybe today I can prepare some dishes for later in the week. Maybe a bitter melon stir-fry? We can toss it in Tupperware, and it'll free up space."

Sayu began speedily shoving the contents of the grocery bag into the fridge. From how efficiently she was working, I could tell that I would be more of a hindrance than a help, so I quickly retired into the living room.

Instead, I started taking the comics and novels out of the paper bag and

stacked them on the floor next to my bed. I didn't usually read books, so there was no bookshelf to put them in.

"These books and comics in here..."

I raised my voice a little, and Sayu closed the refrigerator door for a moment and looked over at me.

"Hmm?"

"Feel free to read whatever you like if you have some free time during the day."

Sayu's eyes flickered, and she gazed into the distance. She looked down slightly, and a smile crept onto her face, as if she'd remembered something funny.

"Okay. If I have time, I'll give them a look."

"Good. Oh, but don't you dare spoil anything I haven't gotten to yet!"

"I won't!"

Sayu chuckled before picking up the plastic bag again. I thought she was going to carry on putting the items in the fridge, but she just stood there, frozen, bag in hand.

"Hmm? What's wrong?" I called out to Sayu, but she'd stopped moving. The bag she had picked up had been in the hallway, so she was facing away from me, toward the door, and I couldn't see her expression.

"Mr. Yoshida... Why are you...?" She began to speak, but her words trailed off.

"Why am I what?" I asked her curiously.

She turned her face to me, and her lips formed a soft smile.

"It's nothing. Never mind."

"Hey, come on. I want to know."

"Nah, it's nothing. Really. Forget it."

"You..."

I was about to press her further, but Sayu just laughed and opened the

refrigerator door, once again piling in groceries.

For some reason, I began to feel angry.

Not because she had evaded my questions. Well, that might have been part of it, but what bothered me most was that “smile.”

Sayu wasn't happy, but she grinned anyway. She was using the expression to some end.

As an adult, it was common to run into people faking smiles. Doing so was crucial in business and social contexts, and there was nothing wrong with using it to your advantage. In fact, people who couldn't grin on command, such as myself, were at a clear disadvantage.

However, something about seeing a high schooler already employing that kind of social trick rubbed me the wrong way.

That kind of expression didn't suit a child. Sayu's smile should be innocent and honest. There was no reason at all for her to grin if she didn't want to.

“Stop forcing yourself to smile.” The words came out of my mouth before I'd had a chance to think them through.

Sayu's movements stopped.

“Only do that when you feel like it. I'm not expecting you to look happy all day long.”

As I continued speaking, Sayu's face slowly turned toward me. Her expression was somewhere between shock and confusion. This was probably causing her more stress, but I couldn't stop myself.

“Listen, I don't want you worrying about how you should act around me. This may not be your home, but...”

Whatever the case may be, until she came to terms with whatever was troubling her, she wouldn't go back to where she came from. And I wasn't going to throw her out.

“This is a place you can stay, at least. As long as you keep your promise to me, you can do whatever you like. So...you know. There's no need for you to smile when you don't mean it.”

Once I finished speaking, I saw Sayu's gaze dart around for a second before she gave a deflated sigh and assumed a troubled expression. Then, after a moment, she nodded a few times.

"O-okay. I'm sorry," Sayu replied. She was staring at me. "Mr. Yoshida."

"What?"

"Before, I... I was going to ask you, 'Why are you so kind?' "

The corners of her mouth curled up as she said this. Then she let out a long sigh.

"But I realized it was a pointless question, so I stopped."

"Pointless?"

"Mr. Yoshida. If I asked you the same thing now, would you be able to tell me?"

She'd answered my question with another question. I was at a loss for words.

"I guess not... For starters, I've never thought of myself as kind."

"Right? That's what I thought." Sayu paused there and grinned.

This time, her expression looked much more natural. This must've been how her smile was meant to be.

"I figured you didn't have a reason for being kind. That's why I thought asking would be pointless."

"I told you, I'm really not."

"Yes, you are. You're nicer than anyone I've ever met before," she stated resolutely and marched over to stand beside me. Then she took a seat. "That's why, if you tell me to stop, I will."

"...You'll stop what?"

My question brought a sour look to Sayu's face, and she prodded me in my side.

"I'll stop worrying about how I should act and smiling when I don't mean it."

"Oh..."

“I’ll do my best not to hold back around you, and I won’t force myself to look happy. Sound good...?”

Sayu fixed her gaze on me. Our height difference meant she had to look up to me slightly, making my heart beat a little faster.

“Yes, great,” I answered, looking away.

Sayu nodded awkwardly beside me.

“But...I probably fake smiles...out of habit at this point. It might take some time...”

“It’s fine. I understand.”

I nodded, feeling her gaze on the side of my face. She could change her expression in the blink of an eye, so it was no surprise that she had been developing the skill for a while.

She must have picked it up out of necessity. Anger began to well up in me again, this time toward the circumstances that had led her here.

“No one can just change their habits overnight. Take your time,” I said.

“...You really are kind.”

“Come on. I know I’ve said it before, but you need to raise your standards...”

“You’re wrong. I have some confidence in this area,” Sayu interjected before I had the chance to finish. Then she placed her hand on mine.

“It’s not easy to accept people for who they are,” she continued. “Up until now, I don’t think anyone’s ever accepted me as you have. Mr. Yoshida...you’re kind.”

Her words seemed to carry an unusual weight, and although it didn’t feel proper hearing someone call me *kind*, I couldn’t bring myself to argue back.

“Um... It’s hard to say this, but...” Sayu kept her hand on mine as she continued to speak.

“I’ve always told myself not to cause trouble for you, but just letting me stay here is already a big inconvenience for you, isn’t it?”

“Ha-ha. You’re not wrong there.”

A snort of laughter came out of my nose, and Sayu soon joined me, giggling.

“Anyway, I’m going to stop thinking about it like that. From now on...” She paused mid-sentence to squeeze my hand.

“From now on...my goal is to make you glad I showed up.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that statement. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sayu, who was sitting behind me, tense up.

“Wh-what? Did I say something weird?” she asked.

“No, it wasn’t weird. It’s just...”

She never changes, I thought to myself.

I wished she could be more selfish and willful. For some reason, she was determined to return every favor extended to her.

“You’re pretty kind, too, for the most part.”

“Huh, wh...? In what way?”

“Like I’d tell you.”

“Wh-why not?”

Sayu made a show of acting offended by my reply. There was something childishly sweet about this side of her, too. I found myself unable to contain my smile and gave her a firm pat on the shoulder.

“Okay, better keep at that housework from now on. I’m expecting big things from your cooking.”

She stared at me blankly for a moment before flashing me a shy grin.

“Mm-hmm. You better be ready.”

The smile on Sayu’s face had a lighthearted air to it, appropriate for someone her age. It looked genuine.

I wanted her to keep that expression forever, though the thought was probably a little selfish.

Still, I couldn’t help it.

Sayu’s natural smile was just that charming.



Chapter 8

Yuzuha
Mishima

Chapter 8 Yuzuha Mishima

“Mishima!”

Hashimoto flinched beside me at the sound of my angry voice, and the entire office went quiet. A few people glanced in my direction.

The target of my outburst slowly turned her head my way and tilted it inquisitively.

“Yes? What is it?”

“Don’t give me that!”

I stood up and made my way toward Mishima. Our coworkers who had turned to watch all made faces as if to say, “Not those two again,” before going back to their work.

I gritted my teeth at her blank stare and raised my voice again.

“How many times do I have to tell you to test your files before submitting them?!”

“I did!”

“We can’t deliver a product that hasn’t been tested and shown to function. You understand that, right?”

“I guess so.”

“What do you mean, *I guess so*?! There’s no way we can sell a product with your portion of the code this full of mistakes!”

At this point, Mishima finally seemed to realize that she’d made a mistake, and that was why I was yelling at her.

Her mouth fell open in surprise.

“Uh, really?” she said. “That’s pretty bad, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is, and it’s your screwup!”

“What should I do about it?”

“Fix it. Today.”

“There’s no way I can finish it today.”

I felt like I was going to burst a blood vessel.

Why on earth did Human Resources hire this mess of a person? She possessed no skills and no sense of responsibility. Honestly, she wasn’t even worth the effort.

“The deadline’s tomorrow, so it has to be done today. It’s my butt on the line as your mentor.”

Mishima raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“...If I don’t get it done today, will you get fired, Mr. Yoshida?”

“Huh? Of course I won’t get fired. It’s just...”

I ran my hand along my chin.

“I might get taken off the project. If that happens, they’ll probably assign you a new mentor.”

It would be the blessing of a lifetime to have someone else train Mishima, but this project was the result of my efforts, and I’d personally involved many others in the office. There’s no way I could let myself be kicked off the team halfway through.

“What’s that? You wouldn’t be my instructor anymore, Mr. Yoshida?”

“If you can’t get this fixed today, that’s very likely.”

As soon as she heard this, Mishima’s perpetual smile faded. She suddenly looked serious.

“All right. I’m on it,” she stated.

“Uh, hey...”

Mishima turned around and headed straight for her seat.

Compared to the usual leisurely pace she kept around the office, she was practically running.

“What’s her deal...?” I wondered to myself.

I was usually very blunt and stern with Mishima, so I had assumed she would prefer to have someone else train her.

And yet, the moment I’d mentioned the possibility, she seemed shaken.

Well, as long as she was taking her work seriously, that was all that mattered. I nodded and went back to my seat.

“More trouble again?” asked Hashimoto.

“Her code morphed the system I designed into something unrecognizable.”

“What a woman.”

Hashimoto was teasing me again like this had nothing to do with him.

As he spoke, his eyes never left his monitor. It looked like he had a pile of work to get on with—not just his own tasks, but the stuff I had dumped on him, too.

“But it looks like she’s started taking her work seriously, at least.”

“How can you even see her when you’re focused on your screen like that?”

“I’ve always got one eye on the computer and the other taking stock of the office. That way, if one of the managers I hate is around the corner, I can sneak off to the toilet in a flash.”

“You really are too smart for your own good.”

It was true, though. Whenever a superior caught me, Hashimoto was always nowhere to be found. I wanted to practice paying attention to my surroundings as well.

I glanced at Mishima as I opened the programming tool.

On any other day, she would have been looking from side to side, stretching, and generally seeming like she wasn’t concentrating. But now, she was entirely

focused.

“...What’s gotten into her?” I mumbled, returning to my work.

It was great that she was finally taking her work seriously, but she didn’t have any skills to speak of.

I expected nothing she submitted would be of any use, and I’d end up doing it myself anyway. I would need to finish my own work as soon as possible.

After a small sigh, I set my fingers to typing.

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“Heh-heh! Good work!”

“Yeah...”

We were at a lively, flat-fee bar—the kind where you could order a range of drinks and side dishes all for the same price. Mishima shoved her glass into mine to say “cheers.”

For some reason, I had agreed to join Mishima for drinks after work.

She tipped her glass filled with a Cassis Orange cocktail toward her lips and took a gulp. I took a swig of my draft beer. My throat clenched as the alcohol went down, sending a refreshing sensation straight to my brain.

“Yes! I’m so glad we were able to deliver the product.”

“No kidding.”

I smiled wryly and took another swig of beer.

A few hours earlier...

Astonishingly, Mishima turned in a completely flawless data set.

I thought it would take her until evening to make the corrections, and I wasn’t expecting anything remotely usable even then. So when I saw the data, I felt my eyes widening in surprise.

Thanks to Mishima submitting her edits early, I was able to focus my efforts on my own work and leave the office on time.

It was then that Mishima had suddenly popped the question.

“How about we go for drinks, Mr. Yoshida?”

After my constant scolding, an invitation to go drinking together was the last thing I had expected from her.

For a moment, I worried about what Sayu would have for dinner, but I knew she'd probably be able to cook something up for herself. There was emergency money at home for her, as well.

Well, once in a while won't hurt, I assured myself. I nodded in affirmation at Mishima's suggestion.

“Anyway, if that's how much work you can get done when you put your mind to it, then you should do that all the time!”

“Fweh!”

As I spoke to her, Mishima was busy stuffing her mouth with grilled chicken.

“Wawad mmnnm—”

“Hey, c'mon, finish your food before you talk!”

Mishima began furiously chewing on the chicken skewer.

I felt pleasantly tipsy from the alcohol as I watched her heated battle with the mouthful of food.

She had nearly shoulder-length, chestnut-brown hair that curled slightly inward toward her face. Her eyes were wide and bright, and she had a small, delicately shaped mouth and nose. To put it simply, she had a very “cute” appearance.

Whenever her name would come up among the higher-ups during drinking parties, her appearance always received high praise from the “old geezers” at the table. There was no doubt in my mind that her cuteness had helped her to get hired.

As it happens, in a batch of new graduates with similar skill levels, it's often the best-looking ones who get the job. The old guys at the company were probably on the hunt for eye candy.

“Wh-what is it?”

Mishima had managed to finish chewing her food while I was staring at her, and she was now looking from side to side, clearly worried as she fiddled with her hair.

“Oh, sorry.”

Now that I thought about it, it must’ve been difficult to relax with me staring right at her as she ate.

“I was just thinking how much more popular you’d be if you were better at your work.”

“Huh, really?” Mishima slurred a little as she spoke. “I think most people at our company prefer incompetent women.”

“What?”

Mishima giggled at the scowl forming on my face.

“It’s true; it’s true! You’re the only one who ever scolds me for messing up, Mr. Yoshida!”

“For real? What about the other old geezers? Don’t they say anything to you?”

Mishima assumed a stiff posture and put on an uncharacteristically husky voice in response to my question.

“‘*You’re hopeless. Just leave it to me,*’ he says, then makes this face like he’s so cool.”

“Wha—? Who does that?! That’s so gross coming from a geezer. Come on, tell me. Who is it?”

“...Mr. Onozaka.”

“Wha—? Ha! That’s amazing!”

My shoulders shook, and I slammed the table in amusement.

Director Onozaka was somewhat well-known as Lewd 2D Barcode-Head among his peers. His work computer had frozen one time, and when Hashimoto had gone to fix it, he found that the trouble had been caused by a virus Mr.

Onozaka had caught from a webpage titled “You’ll Cum to This! Top Anime Collection.” This incident, paired with his comb-over that resembled a barcode, were the source of the nickname.

I’d heard about him making passes at many new employees, and it seemed like Mishima had become yet another of his victims.

“I see. So it was Barcode-Head,” I said.

“Wai— That’s so mean, calling him Barcode-Head!” Despite her objection, Mishima giggled.

“So what now? Are you admitting that you’re just screwing around to get your bosses to like you?”

My expression suddenly turned serious, and Mishima, clearly puzzled, shook her head emphatically.

“Of course not. I don’t care about that.”

“So what, then? You can do your work, so just do it.”

“Oh yeah, I meant to say this earlier.”

Mishima tipped her glass once more and let out a quick breath through her nose.

“What would someone do if they’re already trying their best, but they got told to work even harder?”

“...Hmm?”

I didn’t understand what she was getting at.

“Then they’d just work harder, I guess,” I answered.

“And what if, after that, they get asked to work *even harder*?”

“Then they’d do just that.”

“Ah-ha-ha. But that’ll kill them!”

Mishima waved her hand in front of her face and popped a piece of onion from her chicken skewer into her mouth.

“Donyoo ee—”

“I told you to finish eating first!”

Half a smile crept onto my face as I repeated myself, and Mishima hurriedly bit down on the onion.

She swallowed it with a large gulp and exhaled.

“Don’t you think it’s only possible to give your all when it counts if you take it easy the rest of the time?”

“There’s always a fire lit under your ass at our company. You work there. You know that. Every day is busy, so it’s always ‘the right time’ to put in the effort.”

“Really? I don’t think so at all.” She snorted and lifted up her index finger. “I mean, even if I wasn’t there, the work would still get done, right?”

“Yeah, but that’s because you’re a newbie.”

“Hmm, maybe, but still...” Mishima narrowed her eyes at my reply, then smiled playfully. “I think the projects would get completed even if *you* weren’t there, Mr. Yoshida.”

“Wha—?”

I wanted to argue back, but my mind was blank.

Would our work be all right without me? I’d never considered it before.

To tell the truth, I felt like a lot of people at the office depended on me. After five years, I had a good track record, and the jobs I’d been involved with brought in a profit, for the most part.

I was necessary! I’d always believed that, as selfish as it was. I hadn’t even thought about the possibility the opposite could be true.

“Heh-heh. Well, they would definitely be in a tough spot without *you*, Mr. Yoshida.”

“...Yeah.”

“Still, even if it was tough, I think they’d make do one way or another.” Mishima nodded, as if agreeing with herself, then went on. “What I mean to say is, I think there needs to be a standby available for all the workaholics in the office. Someone who can fill in when they’ve worn themselves into the

ground.”

“...And you’re saying that’s you?”

“Exactly!”

She made a peace sign with her right hand and smiled broadly.

Faced with such an innocent expression, I could do nothing but sigh.

“As your boss, I still think you should try and get things done to the best of your ability...”

“And I did that today, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

I forced a grin as I drained my glass.

I didn’t feel like going into lecture mode while out drinking. At least I knew Mishima could do the work when she put in the effort. That was good news to me.

“You’re a really kind person. You know that, Mr. Yoshida?”

“Huh?”

I scowled at her.

“I am?”

“You are. You take the time to discipline me properly,” Mishima replied, staring at me. “It must be tiring, always explaining things to someone who never gets any better.”

“If you know that, then stop making it necessary to do so.”

“Normally, if you don’t understand something the first few times someone tells you, they label you as ‘useless’ and give up on you right away. Even the bosses who *are* kind to me usually just act that way because they want me to like them.”

The more Mishima spoke, the more her usual lighthearted nature gave way to something entirely different.

She seemed philosophical and coolheaded. This was a whole other side of her

personality.

“But you, Mr. Yoshida, you get angry with me with all of your heart.”

“That’s because you really suck at learning.”

“Heh-heh! You’re making me blush!”

“That wasn’t a compliment!”

She giggled, then emptied her glass as well.

“Oh, excuse me! One more, please.”

She handed both her glass and mine to the server as she ordered another drink.

“Still drinking?” I asked.

“Aren’t you?”

“If you are, then I guess I’ll join in.”

“Heh-heh. Please do!”

Mishima could hold her liquor surprisingly well.

I had assumed she wasn’t a big drinker, as she’d started off with a cocktail. But seeing her order a second glass so soon after her first gave me the impression that she was reasonably confident in her capacity for alcohol.

“Oh, carrying on where we left off...,” Mishima said, fidgeting with her hair. “Well...um, since we were on the subject...”

She seemed a bit uneasy. What had come over her all of a sudden? Was she feeling off?

I eyed Mishima questioningly, and she looked down at the floor to her side, her cheeks flushing.

“I want you to keep being my mentor, Mr. Yoshida. I don’t want anyone else.”

“Oh, really...?”

Why was she so shy about that? She was making me feel embarrassed as well, and I didn’t like it.

“So I’ll only work hard when things are bad!”

“No, I need you to put in effort all the time!” I shouted.

Mishima let out an amused giggle.

I was sure she would go right back to her usual lackadaisical attitude. But, well, even so...

The server arrived with our second round, and I glanced at Mishima as she lifted her glass to her lips.

It was probably a good thing that I’d learned a little more about her. Otherwise, I’d just keep getting pissed off without any idea what was going on.

My mouth slackened, and I took a swig of my fresh, still-foamy beer.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Mishima remarked. “Lately, you’ve been shaving every day, haven’t you?”

“Oh? What about it?”

“Nothing. I just wondered if you started seeing someone.”

“Wha—?”

I furrowed my brow, and Mishima waved her hand back and forth apologetically.

“N-no, it’s just that you used to shave about once every three days. And now, all of a sudden, it’s every day. I thought you might be shaving for a girlfriend or something!”

“Have you been paying that much attention to my facial hair?”

Mishima’s face turned beet red in response. “N-no, not at all! Don’t say it like I have a fetish for beards!”

“Come on. I didn’t say anything about you having a fetish.”

“Since you’re always yelling at me, I just have a lot of chances to look at your mouth! I wasn’t doing it weirdly, I swear!”

“How can you look at a beard weirdly?!”

Is she sure she doesn’t have a beard fetish?

I snorted as I answered her. “No, I don’t have a girlfriend. I was just rejected, actually.”

Mishima stared at me, dumbfounded, her mouth half open.

What was with that face?

“You were rejected? By whom?”

“By Ms. Gotou.”

“Ms. Gotou?!” Mishima repeated, her voice extremely loud.

A couple of office workers who were sitting next to us glanced at her. She noticed them watching and cleared her throat.

“...So that’s your type?”

“Got a problem with that?”

“You like them with a real hourglass figure, huh?” As she spoke, she drew an exaggerated shape in the air—large, tiny, and large again.

“That’s right.”

“Huh...”

Mishima narrowed her eyes and frowned. It wasn’t like it was any of her business what I preferred.

“Anyway, sorry she blew you off. But don’t worry about it—you’ll bounce back.”

“Shut up. I don’t need your pretend sympathy.”

“Oh, no, I’m not sympathizing with you at all.”

Mishima’s sour expression suddenly turned into a sweet grin.

“Actually, it’s lucky for me!”

“Huh?”

As if to dodge the question, Mishima downed the rest of her cocktail with a big gulp.

“Serverrr!”

“Hey, no! That was way too fast!”

“But I want to keep drinking!”

“Fine...”

I told her I’d join, so I couldn’t stop drinking now.

I was pretty sure I had enough money in my wallet, at least. I let out a sigh, then lifted my beer glass, picking up the pace.

When Mishima had mentioned the word *girlfriend*, Sayu’s face had briefly come to mind.

I’d started shaving my beard because she’d told me to.

I took another absentminded swig of my beer, and the thought left my mind as quickly as it had come.

*

“You’re so laaaaate...,” Sayu groaned as she flopped around on her futon.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“I cooked dinner for yooouuu!”

“I said I was sorry.”

It was an honest apology.

When I arrived home, Sayu was in a terrible mood.

Mishima had turned out to be a heavy drinker.

We’d stayed at the bar until she’d finally had her fill, and she’d kept up her pace for more than two hours.

Eventually, I quit matching her and focused on finishing her side dishes instead.

I had left work on time, but it was past ten PM when I made it home.

Sitting upright on my knees, I watched as Sayu jerked her face toward me.

“...Was it a woman?”

“...Well, yeah, it was.”

A lazy subordinate from work, to be precise.

Sayu was the one who'd asked the question, but my reply seemed to take her by surprise, and after a momentary delay, she breathed out audibly through her nose.

“Ugh! So you went out with a woman instead of eating my cooking?!”

“I told you, I'm sorry! And I really am!”

“Did you have fun drinking with her?!”

This kid was a real pain in the butt! I couldn't say that to her, though. She'd cooked dinner for me, after all.

While I sat there in silent anguish, Sayu began to tremble slightly.

As my mind raced, trying to deduce what she was thinking, she slapped a hand over her mouth.

“Heh... Hee-hee...”

Apparently, she had been teasing me the whole time. Sayu was struggling to hold back her laughter.

“Ah-ha-ha! Oh, you're so funny! Come on—I'm not really upset.”

“What the hell...? You were pranking me?”

“You're just too silly, Mr. Yoshida, apologizing like that. Hee-hee!”

She cackled and stood up.

“But make sure you eat the leftovers for breakfast tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I will,” I replied.

Sayu grinned and flopped back down onto her futon.

“You're not very drunk today, Mr. Yoshida.”

“I've got work tomorrow. Who gets drunk on a work night?”

“You were trashed the night you met me.”

“I...had just had my heart broken,” I said, expression bitter. “And I had paid

time off the day after.”

Sayu snickered.

“You liked her that much, huh?”

“...Yeah, I guess I did.”

I nodded as I spoke, and Sayu posed a question with a big grin on her face.

“What did you like about her?”

What did I like about Ms. Gotou...?

I said the first thing that came to mind.

“Her chest.”

“So honest!” She began giggling again.

I didn’t know why she found it so funny. I was extremely serious.

Whether it was Sayu or Mishima, I couldn’t stand it when women set the pace of the conversation like this.

Chapter 9 Cell Phone

“Hey.”

Mishima stood at the end of my cold stare.

“Oh, Mr. Yoshida. Did you want to grab lunch?”

“No, you dummy. Does your day not feel complete until you’ve screwed something up?”

She cocked her head in confusion.

This woman was so clearly dumbfounded that there may as well have been a question mark over her head. Her attitude really pissed me off. I was now well aware of how technically capable she was, despite her lackluster performance.

“Fix it—now.”

“F-fix what?”

“You know what, don’t you?”

I drew closer to Mishima, a vein in my forehead visibly throbbing with anger, and Mishima’s eyes began to dart around the room frantically. Then she brought her lips to my ear and whispered.

“I told you yesterday, didn’t I? I only work as hard as necessary...”

I wasn’t impressed. I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer to my face. This allowed me to speak to her so that no one else could hear.

“Listen up. I didn’t say anything yesterday because we were out for drinks, but I’m not going to let you breeze through the day with that kind of work ethic. Don’t get the wrong idea.”

“But! Does that mean you’re going to work me into the ground?!”

“Why wouldn’t I? Everyone else is already toiling away.”

“Ugh...”

She looked visibly deflated.

I glanced up, and just then, my gaze met Ms. Gotou’s. She was sitting at her desk on the other side of the office. Our eyes locked.

I let go of Mishima’s shoulder in a fluster, then coughed self-consciously.

“Anyway, just get it done before lunch.”

“Wha—? Isn’t lunch break less than an hour away?” Mishima retorted, and I flashed her a big smile.

“Do it.”

“Ugh...”

I knew she had what it took, so I would make her do it. I didn’t want to work her to the bone, but if she didn’t at least put in *some* effort, it would be a problem for me.

I kept one eye on Mishima as she reluctantly began her work, then headed back to my seat.

But then...

“Hey, Yoshida! Got a moment?”

I heard someone calling me from their desk on the other side of the office.

Startled, I turned around, only to find that the source of the voice was Ms. Gotou.

“Me?”

I pointed to myself and tilted my head to one side. Ms. Gotou nodded and ushered me over.

Huh? What could this be about? Did I mess something up?

Cold sweat oozed from my forehead.

The emotional discomfort of having been rejected by Ms. Gotou so recently was one thing, but she was also my boss.

Recently, she'd been juggling tasks related to human resources and hadn't had much to say to me, so for her to call me over so suddenly really made me sweat.

It was with these thoughts that I made my way to Ms. Gotou's desk. She smiled at me sweetly and continued clacking away at her keyboard.

Then she pointed to her monitor and smiled again. Was there something she wanted me to look at?

Assuming that was what she meant, I timidly took a peek at where she was pointing.

She had a Word document open on her screen with a single sentence: **Can you spare some time after work tomorrow?**

"Huh? Tomorrow?"

I answered out loud, and Ms. Gotou thrust her index finger in front of her mouth to shush me.

"Contact me later."

She kept her demand short and hushed, then turned back to her work as if nothing had happened.

Huh? What was this about? It didn't seem like she was casually asking me out drinking.

A date? No, that didn't make any sense. She'd recently refused me.

I stood there, lost in thought, and Ms. Gotou glanced at me out of the corner of her eye.

"Hey. You can go now."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry!"

She was signaling me to hurry up and get back to my desk. I turned around and did just that.

It seemed like I had no choice but to go with Ms. Gotou after work tomorrow.

I wasn't sure whether I was happy about that idea or not. Maybe a mixture of both.

On my way back to my seat, I suddenly sensed someone watching me. I scanned the office, and my gaze met Mishima's.

She hurriedly looked away and pretended to be busy typing on her keyboard.

Don't sit there gawking at me! Get to work! I silently cursed at her in my mind, but my thoughts immediately went back to Ms. Gotou.

Why did she want to meet with me? I was not going to be able to relax until I found out.

*

"Huh? Ms. Gotou invited you out for dinner?"

Sayu poked at the meat-and-potato stew she'd prepared and blinked at me in surprise.

After I finished work, I'd sent a text to Ms. Gotou from the train confirming that I would go.

Afterward, I had received her response:

Sorry about earlier. Why don't we get dinner together after work tomorrow?

"You must be pretty happy."

"Not at all... What does she want? Why does it have to be over dinner?"

"She's just asking if you want to go eat. It's no big deal."

"You're wrong! There has to be something going on!"

Sayu brushed off my objections with a half smile.

A kid wouldn't understand, but dinner and drinks were loaded with many implicit meanings in the adult world.

For example, you might be notified of a potential promotion, or it could be the opposite.

When I'd just joined the company, there were times that my bosses would gently reprimand me when we were at a bar together. "*You really messed up there,*" they'd tell me.

Being invited out by a boss you weren't on very good terms with was nerve-racking.

"Don't worry about it. Eat your stew. It'll go cold."

"Oh yeah... Thanks for the meal."

As Sayu advised, I tucked into the meal, which was still giving off warm motes of steam. I picked up a soft, light-brown potato with my chopsticks and lifted it into my mouth.

"Oh. This is great."

"Really? I'm glad!"

Sayu nodded with satisfaction and took a bite of her own potato.

"Mm!"

"You're a pretty good cook, you know?"

She smiled meekly, like she was a little embarrassed. "Keep praising me."

"You're the best chef in Japan!"

"Too much!" Sayu cackled, then mixed a bite of meat and white rice together to take another mouthful.

Sayu's cooking truly was delicious. I had to assume she had also cooked at home.

...Had her parents taught her to cook? I shook my head at this thought. I needed to stop thinking about these things. It wasn't going to get me anywhere.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

Sayu cocked her head to the side, and I stuffed some steamed rice into my mouth as if nothing had happened.

"Well? Are you going?"

“Hmm?”

“With Ms. Gotou to dinner.”

Sayu put down her chopsticks and stared at me.

I nodded in response.

“Well, I can’t really say no, can I?”

“Why not? Because you have feelings for her?”

“Because she’s my boss.”

Sayu frowned. It was clear that she didn’t believe it.

“But it’s actually because you like her, isn’t it?”

“Of course not.”

“So you don’t?”

“That’s...a separate issue entirely.”

Sayu snorted at my obvious deflection.

“You won’t admit it, but you do still have a crush on her.”

“...It’s not like I can just stop. I was crazy about her for five whole years.”

My words held a hint of anguish, and Sayu turned away. Her expression seemed to say, “Crap, I messed up.”

“Sorry,” she apologized.

“It’s fine; don’t worry about it. Just think of me as a miserable old geezer.”

“But you’re not.” Sayu shook her head from side to side. “Mr. Yoshida, you’re a cool guy. I don’t think Ms. Gotou would have rejected you if she didn’t already have a boyfriend.”

“Ha-ha. You don’t have to flatter me.”

“I’m serious!”

The more she tried to smooth things over, the more miserable I felt.

I let out a dry laugh.

“Well, I’m going tomorrow either way. She’s my boss, and I still like her, so I can’t refuse.”

“Got it. So you don’t need me to make dinner for you tomorrow?” Sayu asked, nodding.

That’s right. The meal she’d made for me the night before had gone to waste because I was out drinking with Mishima. She wasn’t just asking if I intended to accept Ms. Gotou’s offer; she was confirming whether or not I required dinner.

That made a lot of sense. I nodded in reply.

“Yeah. There’s no need to cook for me.”

“Got it.”

At this point in the conversation, another thought came to mind.

“Oh yeah. Do you have a cell phone?”

“Uh, a cell phone...?”

Sayu forced a smile and shook her head.

“Nope. I don’t.”

That was a pretty big shock.

Even elementary schoolers carried smartphones nowadays. The thought that a high school girl like her wouldn’t have one had never even crossed my mind.

“Did you leave it at your house?”

Sayu shook her head again.

“When I was living in the Chiba area, my friend... I mean, my classmate from Hokkaido kept calling me on it, and it got a bit annoying, so...”

Sayu chuckled, deflecting.

“I ended up tossing it into the ocean.”

“You can’t just toss garbage into the ocean!”

Sayu sure was something. Her action was way over the top, and I wasn’t impressed by the littering.

“So you haven’t had a cell phone since then?”

“That’s right.”

“No way...”

“It’s not that bad, believe it or not.”

Well, she had a point. For someone like her, who had put the people in her past behind her, it likely didn’t feel like an incredible loss.

“Why do you ask?”

Sayu tilted her head questioningly.

“Well, I just realized that if something comes up and I can’t get home, I have no way of contacting you. If I can’t get in touch, you might waste time cooking for me.”

“Oh, I see...”

Sayu nodded, as if in sudden realization, then, seemingly embarrassed, she darted her eyes around the room.

“What?”

“It’s just...,” she mumbled quietly. “This sounds like a conversation that newlyweds would have.”

“Huh...?”

“I-it was a joke! Don’t make that scary face at me!”

My expression was as stern as I could manage, and Sayu waved her hands in front of her in a panic.

“I mean, even if I did prepare something, you could just eat it the next morning. It’s no big deal!”

“But it would be more convenient for you to have a cell phone, wouldn’t it?”

Sayu shook her head emphatically.

“No, I don’t need one! Really, I don’t!”

“There’s no need to be so resistant.”

“I’m telling you, it’s unnecessary. I probably can’t even get a contract for one anyway!”

Now that she mentioned it, she was right.

High schoolers couldn’t sign up for cell phones unless they went with their parents. At least, that’s how I’d always understood it. To make matters worse, I’d never had a phone when I was in high school, so I had no idea what the process required.

“Still, it’d be good to have a way for us to contact each other,” I muttered, but Sayu still stubbornly refused.

“It’ll be fine—don’t worry!” she insisted.

She was still in the habit of holding back, even with something she really wanted.

I looked at Sayu out of the corner of my eye and gave a wry grin. This wasn’t just a problem for her, but for me as well.

With a high schooler occupying my apartment, it was honestly unsettling not to have a method to keep in touch when I was out. Should anything happen, I wanted to be able to contact her.

A cell phone, huh...

Was there no way to get a hold of one?

I fell asleep thinking about it.

*

“Huh? Why don’t you just sign up for another cell phone under your name and give it to Sayu?”

“Oh yeah...”

I had asked Hashimoto for advice before we started work the following day, and he quickly provided a solution.

He was right. I could just get a contract under my name, couldn’t I? I hadn’t

even considered that.

“Hmm. I guess I’ll go do that on my next day off,” I mumbled to myself as I turned on my work computer.

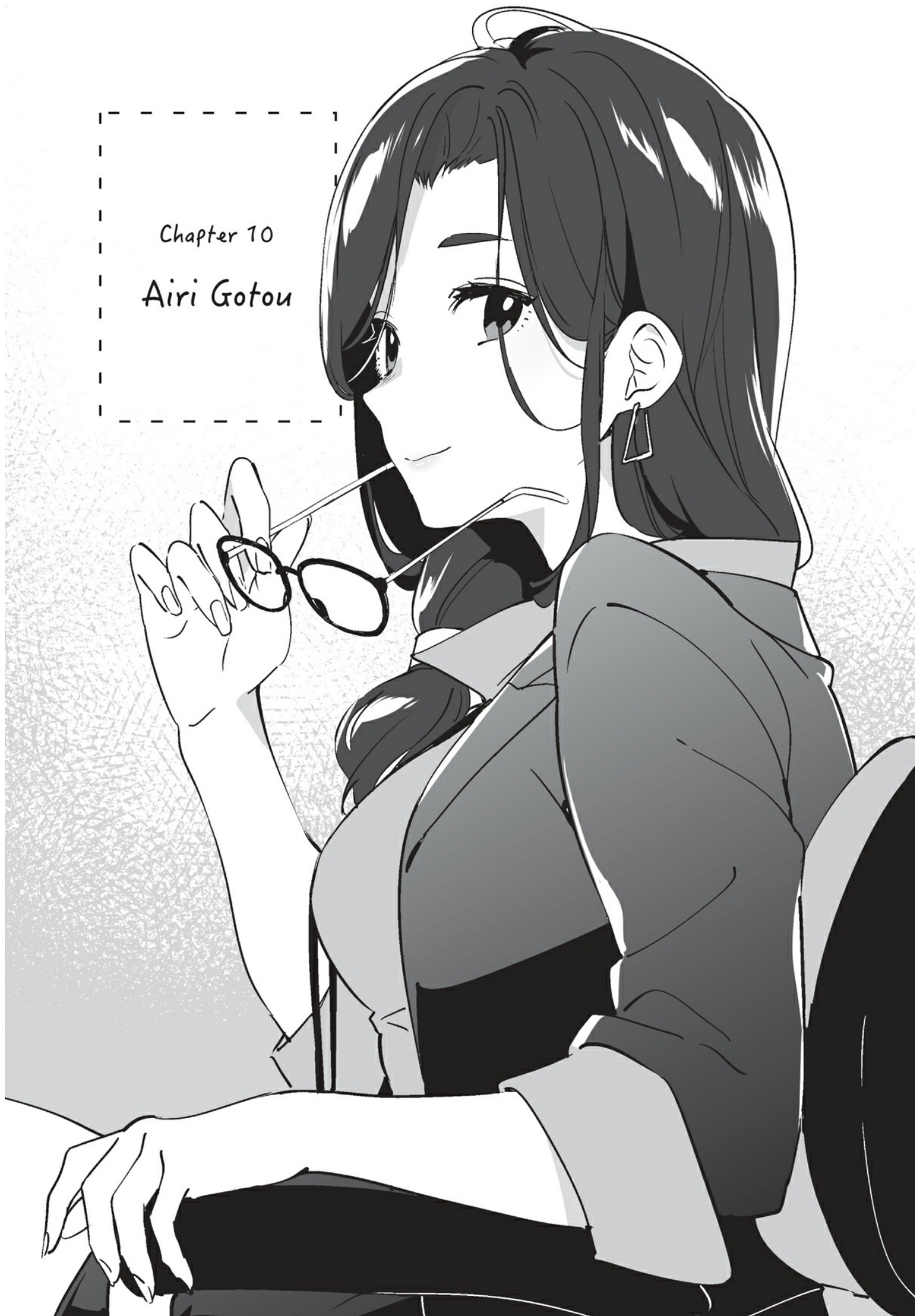
I could continue worrying about the cell phone situation later.

First, I had to get through tonight.

Ms. Gotou wasn’t at work yet, and I stared at her empty desk, sweat running down my back.

Chapter 10

Airi Gotou



Chapter 10 Airi Gotou

“Huh? Dinner with Ms. Gotou?”

“Yeah...”

I nodded, and Mishima dropped the piece of grilled salmon from between her chopsticks back onto her plate.

“Oh.”

The sound of the salmon hitting the plate seemed to return her to her senses. She reached down with her chopsticks and picked it up.

She had ordered the salmon lunch set from the work cafeteria, saying it was her favorite. With grilled fish, steamed vegetables, soup, a side dish of pickles, and a scoop of steamed rice, this meal was simple but had a bit of everything you could want.

In stark contrast, I was tucking into my bowl of Chinese noodles. The noodles were already soggy by the time I’d taken my first bite. They didn’t taste outstanding, either.

“Uh, um, so, er, you invited her out, Mr. Yoshida?” Mishima asked, waving her chopsticks.

“No. Ms. Gotou invited me.”

“Huh... I just don’t get it!”

She took a bite of her fish.

“I just don’t get it!” she repeated.

I shook my head with a snort.

“Yeah, I don’t get it, either.”

“You don’t get it, but you’re still going?!”

“Who can say no to their boss when they get invited out to dinner?”

“I would!”

I slurped down another mouthful of noodles.

“You’re you, so you can get away with it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Mishima puckered her lips in a pout, but I refused to respond and went in for some more noodles.

There was no point in telling her that the bosses favored her for her good looks, and that was why they let her get away with it.

Mishima frowned at me as she put the last bit of her fish into her mouth.

“Ih ha’ t’ he a hwap.”

“Seriously, you have to stop talking while you eat.”

Did all young girls act like this?

When we were drinking together a few days ago, it had occurred to me that nobody had ever warned her not to talk with her mouth full. Wasn’t that typically something parents taught their children? Even excluding them, Mishima’s close friends and other people in her life should have said something to her by now.

Maybe young people these days just didn’t care about that sort of thing. Who was I to know?

She swallowed her mouthful of food, then continued speaking.

“It has to be a trap.”

“What do you mean, *a trap*?”

“She’s tricking you, Mr. Yoshida. You’d better not go.”

“And why would she trick me?”

Mishima simply responded with an “errr,” her eyes roaming the cafeteria as if she was looking for a better answer.

I wished she’d think a little more before she spoke.

“W-well, anyway...”

She thrust her chopsticks in my direction and repeated herself.

“I’m telling you, you shouldn’t go.”

“Don’t point chopsticks at people.”

This woman really had no table manners whatsoever.

*

“Come on, Yoshida, grill it up.”

“Uh, yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll have you know Mr. Onozaka told me you’re a *‘grill master.’*”

“Ah-ha-ha...”

That was one way to put it. In actuality, Mr. Onozaka was always too busy chatting up the new girls in the office to grill any meat, leaving me to do all the work. With a grimace, I took the plate of salted ribs with green onions and tossed the contents onto the grill.

Ms. Gotou was sitting in the seat across from me.

“Ooh, that smells so good!”

“For sure...”

I was having a hard time keeping the conversation going.

Why had she invited me out to dinner tonight? That was the only thing I could think about.

“That one’s ready to eat,” I said.

“Oh, really? Then I’ll go ahead and grab some.”

Ms. Gotou transferred the freshly cooked meat to her plate with a grin.

Then she sank her teeth into a piece of rib. It was a long, thin strip of meat, impossible to eat in one go, so Ms. Gotou bit into the rib halfway down its length and chewed off a mouthful. As she used her front teeth to sever the meat, her lips engulfed the strip in a particularly erotic way.

...No, wait. It wasn't proper to stare at her while she was eating.

Flustered, I darted my eyes away from Ms. Gotou and took a piece of rib that had finished cooking onto my own plate. I poured on a little sauce and then ate the whole morsel. Biting into it with my back teeth made the juices burst out, and flavor filled my mouth.

"...Mm."

It might be an awkward meal, but the meat tasted as delicious as ever.

Come to think of it, Sayu didn't often make meat-centered dishes. I'd eaten all the chicken I could possibly get my hands on at the bar with Mishima, but it had been a long time since I'd had pork. I chewed the meat slowly. It was even more delicious than I remembered.

My eyes drifted upward and met Ms. Gotou's. She was staring at me. My heart skipped a beat.

"I see you only needed one bite."

"Uh, is that bad?"

"Not at all. It was very manly." She giggled at her own words.

...Yeah. Everything about her was sexy. *Give me a break.*

"Well, I am a man, after all."

I gave what could barely be considered a reply, then took another mouthful of meat to hide my embarrassment.

What the hell was I saying, *I am a man*? Anyone with eyes would know that!

I could feel my face getting warmer, and only partly because of the heat from the grill.

"Are you nervous about something?"

Ms. Gotou lowered her head slightly and peered up at me.

“Yeah, a bit,” I replied, smiling wryly.

“Why?”

“Well... What would you think if someone who had rejected you asked you out to dinner suddenly?”

“Ah-ha-ha! So that’s what’s wrong?”

Her shoulders shook with laughter as she took another nibble of rib.

My eyes darted away from her once more. I couldn’t watch her eat that again.

If I wasn’t careful, I might find myself in an uncomfortable situation downstairs.

“In that case,” she said once she had finished swallowing, “why don’t we pose each other some questions to break the ice?”

“Questions?”

“Yeah, we each get three. You have to answer whatever you’re asked. How about it?”

“...We can inquire about anything we want?”

A titter of laughter escaped Ms. Gotou’s nose.

“Did you have something in mind?”

I didn’t think this was fair. She knew exactly what my question was, but she refused to reply directly. Instead, she wanted to make me ask her.

I hated this part of her, but at the same time, I found it incredibly attractive.

As I struggled to answer, Ms. Gotou giggled, then lightly waved her chopsticks.

“Ask anything you like...even if it’s a little dirty.”

“No, no. I’m not really interested in that kind of thing.” I shook my head.

That was a lie. I actually wanted to ask what cup size she was.

“All right, first question! Go for it!”

Ms. Gotou’s tone was lighthearted, and she was staring straight into my eyes.

I felt a bit lost.

To tell the truth, I most wanted to inquire about why she'd invited me to dinner. I wanted to ask her right away, but I was afraid of her answer.

I didn't have the guts to skip straight to the heart of the matter.

"...Why *yakiniku*?"

"Huh? That's your question? You know you've only got three, right?"

"I know. Just answer, please."

Ms. Gotou was the one who had suggested *yakiniku*.

I was honestly surprised. I'd never pictured her as the type of woman who would invite a man out and say she was craving *yakiniku*. I couldn't help suspecting that there was some reason behind her choice.

"Well, it's because it's you, Yoshida," said Ms. Gotou casually.

I went blank for a moment, then followed up with another question.

"Because it's me?"

"That's right. Because it's you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, excuse me! A heart skewer, please."

She interrupted my question by putting in an order to a passing server.

"Do you want anything, Yoshida?"

"Uh, salted tongue."

"Heart skewer and salted tongue. Oh, and two more beers, please."

Ms. Gotou gave our order to the server with a smile.

"Coming right up," he replied, entering the order into his portable tablet. As he did so, he took the opportunity to glance at her chest. I knew how he felt. You couldn't help but look.

"So, where were we?"

"Uhhh... You'd said *because it's you*."

“Right, that was it! You’re the reason, Yoshida.”

Ms. Gotou nodded emphatically, lifted her beer glass to her lips, and gulped down the remaining half of the frothy liquid.

I couldn’t help but stare, dumbfounded. She was one hell of a drinker.

Within a few seconds, her glass was dry, and she let out a loud “pwah!” Even this looked somewhat lewd, and I hurriedly averted my gaze once again.

“Well?”

“Huh?”

“I just drank half my beer in one gulp.”

“Yeah. You’re a good drinker, huh?”

I tilted my neck as I said this, and Ms. Gotou giggled.

“See? That’s what I like about you.”

“...Huh?” I grimaced, not understanding what she was getting at, but Ms. Gotou waved a hand in front of her face and continued speaking.

“When I’m out with my other colleagues or the higher-ups, I can’t suggest we eat *yakiniku* or gulp down beers. They all want me to be graceful.”

“Ohhh... I see.”

I could certainly understand her point.

Ms. Gotou looked very mature, which—naturally—made her popular with her bosses as well. To put it bluntly, many people viewed her in a sexual light.

I could sort of understand why she didn’t feel comfortable proposing beer or *yakiniku*. She would sound like an old geezer.

“So why is it okay when it’s me?”

“Because you aren’t put off by that.”

“Well, beer and *yakiniku* are pretty delicious.”

“Hee-hee! You don’t mind my eating pork cutlet curry, either.”

Ms. Gotou’s eyes narrowed slightly, and her shoulders bobbed with laughter.

She then rested her chin in her hand and locked eyes with me.

“That’s why you’re the only one, Yoshida. You’re the only one I can invite to this sort of place.”

“Ha-ha. Should I be happy about that?”

“Hmm, I wonder. Hard to say. Hee-hee!”

Ms. Gotou’s laugh was slightly nasal, as if she was about to let out a snort.

For some reason, my heart fluttered. That smile of hers had been my weakness for five whole years.

“All right, what’s next? Question two.”

She pressed forward, her chin still in her hand, and looked up into my eyes as if testing me. Her gaze was a provocation: “Are you going to keep me waiting?”

I let out a small sigh.

“Why did you invite me out today?” I tried to be precise. “Did you need something from me?”

I returned her stare and saw the corners of her mouth slowly turn upward.

She was calm in a way that suggested she’d been waiting for this.

Sometimes Ms. Gotou really drove me crazy, and this was one of those times. I ground my back teeth in frustration.

I had a very hard time dealing with this woman. And yet, I was still so attracted to her. I could hear my heart pounding violently in my chest like it was sounding an alarm.

I just wanted a reply already.

Ms. Gotou slowly began to speak.

“Well, about that...”

She pointed to me with her index finger.

A giant smile appeared on her face as she continued.

“Yoshida. I think you have a girlfriend.”

She was so confident that, for a moment, I was caught off guard.

I finally managed to shake my head from side to side emphatically.

“No. I told you, I really don’t have one.”

“Liar. I don’t believe you.”

“Why not?!”

Ms. Gotou’s eyes began to wander. She seemed at a loss for words—a rare occurrence for her.

Then the faintest voice came from her lips.

“I-it’s just so weird.”

“What’s weird?”

Ms. Gotou put down her chopsticks, bent forward slightly, and continued speaking.

“I’ve been watching you for five years now. For that whooole five years, you’ve worked your butt off for the company. You never thought twice about working overtime. And now, all of a sudden—overnight—you’ve started taking off the moment your shift ends.”

“But that’s just...”

“You want to sleep more? How could I possibly believe that? If that were true, you would’ve started a long time ago.”

I had no answer for her.

When Ms. Gotou had pressed me on the subject before, I’d told her it was because I wanted to make sure I got a decent night’s rest. But that had been a hasty attempt to cover up Sayu living with me. I couldn’t deny what she was saying now, and I had no counterargument.

“And...you and Mishima have gotten a little closer lately, haven’t you?”

“...Huh?”

“Mishima leaves work on time almost every day, and I can tell she’s very fond of you, Yoshida. You even left work together before, right? So I thought

maybe...”

“W-wait a second!”

I could feel the conversation veering in an odd direction, so I interrupted, forcing her to stop.

“I—I might have misunderstood, but...”

“What?”

“You don’t think...Mishima and I are dating, do you?”

“Am I wrong?!”

“Um, yeah!”

I had no idea how Ms. Gotou had come to that conclusion. Sure, she had hastily explained why she was suspicious just a moment earlier, but it still didn’t add up in my mind.

She thought Mishima had a thing for me? No, that was impossible.

Admittedly, we may have left work together to grab some drinks, but that was just the one time. Did Mishima and I truly seem so intimate that leaving together one time was enough to cause suspicion?

“It’s fine. You don’t need to hide it. I won’t tell anyone else.”

“No, no. Honestly, it’s not like that!”

“...R-really?” asked Ms. Gotou, her voice timid.

“Really! ...It wasn’t too long ago that I confessed to you, remember?”

Ms. Gotou’s cheeks turned a light shade of red in response, and she coughed nervously.

“How could I forget? ...B-but that’s... I mean, I did turn you down. It wouldn’t be that weird for you to have moved on to someone else...”

Ms. Gotou was acting so strangely today. She was behaving suspiciously, and her relaxed attitude from before was nowhere to be seen. I felt like I was talking to someone much younger than me.

I took another swig of beer and began in a slightly stronger voice, “You

know...”

“Wh-what?”

Ms. Gotou looked at me, appearing a bit rattled.

I didn’t want her to misunderstand, so I decided to be blunt.

“For five years now...I’ve only ever had a thing for you.”

“Huh?”

“For all this time, ever since I joined the company, I’ve been in love with you. I was serious when I confessed to you. I’m a little surprised you’d think I was the type to say, ‘Okay, next!’ and move on right after you rejected me.”

I looked straight into Ms. Gotou’s eyes as I spoke. Her face turned redder with every word, and she shook her head.

“No, that’s not what I meant! I didn’t think you were insincere. I just—”

She broke off there. She hunched over a little more in her seat, and her voice lowered to a whisper.

“I just thought you’d prefer someone younger than me...”

“Huh...?”

An unexpected sigh escaped my lips.

“...I still love you, Ms. Gotou.”

This was obviously going nowhere, so I jumped straight to the point. She’d already passed me up once, so there was nothing left to feel ashamed about.

“Honestly, I don’t have eyes for any other woman... You’re that special to me, Ms. Gotou,” I stated, eyes cast downward. I was understandably a little embarrassed.

Five years.

I’d had feelings for her for five years. Sure, she’d shot me down once already, but my heart wouldn’t give up that easily.

A few seconds passed, and Ms. Gotou remained silent. Eventually, she looked up, and I could immediately tell how much she was blushing.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Uh, no, it’s nothing...”

Ms. Gotou shook her head, then took a drink of beer to hide her reaction.

“S-so there really is nothing going on between you and Mishima?”

“Nothing.”

That aside...

I had been so distracted by her sudden question that I had overlooked everything else. But once I had calmed down, doubt bubbled up in my mind.

“Why are you so interested?”

“Huh?”

Ms. Gotou froze on the spot.

“You were the one who rejected me. I feel bad saying it like this, but I don’t think it’s your business who a guy you don’t even like dates next.”

“Well, I...”

Ms. Gotou seemed perplexed for a moment. Then she picked up her chopsticks as if she’d just remembered they were there, grabbed a piece of meat, and took a bite.

I reflexively looked away.

When she’d finished chewing, I returned my gaze, and she gave a small snort before starting to speak again.

“A man telling me he loves me and then immediately hooking up with a younger woman is a little upsetting, don’t you think?”

“So that’s how you felt...”

“Yes, that’s how I felt,” she said assertively before gulping down more beer.

As I thought, Ms. Gotou was acting very strangely today. I wanted to ask her some more questions, but she wasn’t the kind of person to discuss things she didn’t want to talk about. After five years, I had learned that much, at least.

“Anyway, nothing’s going on between Mishima and me, and I don’t have a

girlfriend.”

I could tell there was no point in continuing on this topic, so I repeated myself one last time, with emphasis.

It was strangely humiliating to tell the woman I loved that I didn’t have a girlfriend. It made me a little angry, even though there was no one to blame.

Ms. Gotou coughed once and regained her calm, composed aura.

“I see... That’s good, then,” she said, nodding.

“Huh?”

“What?”

“Is that all?” I asked.

“Is what all?” Ms. Gotou cocked her head in response.

Why was she confused? I was the one who should have been confused.

“You invited me out to dinner, and that’s all you wanted to ask?”

Ms. Gotou nodded nonchalantly.

“Well, yeah...,” she said.

“...You’re kidding.”

I sighed, dejected, then flopped back into my chair.

“I just thought, after all this...that you had something important to say.”

“Are you saying this wasn’t important?!”

Her tone of voice was so commanding and sharp that it startled me.

“Why is this a big deal to you?”

Ms. Gotou looked surprised by my question, but then she cleared her throat.

“That’s a secret.”

“I see... A secret, huh?”

I wasn’t sure I followed, but she was clearly on the defensive, so there was no point in asking her anything else.

I gave up and moved the remaining uncooked slices of meat onto the grill.

“All right then,” continued Ms. Gotou in her usual tone of voice. She was back in control. “You can still ask one more question. What’s it going to be? Or are you done?”

She put her glass down on the table.

Her gestures were obviously saying, “You’ve already asked what you wanted to, haven’t you?” Plus, I was sure she was trying to cut off our previous conversation, which only frustrated me further.

“...Okay.”

The alcohol had given me courage. Maybe I wanted to vent some of my frustration, too.

I decided to press ahead with my question.

“What cup size are those?”

Ms. Gotou laughed out loud.

She set her palm against the side of her mouth as if she was sharing a secret. Then she spoke, her voice as quiet as a whisper.

“...They’re I-cups.”

I-cup? What size was that?

I started counting on my fingers.

Ms. Gotou saw me and giggled again.

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I looked out the window as the train rocked its way down the track.

What a night.

Once it was time for Ms. Gotou to ask questions, all she wanted to know about was Mishima.

“If you’re not dating her, then are you interested at all?” she’d pressed. “Is there a chance you’ll fall for her eventually?” Her barrage had gone on and on.

I'd stood my ground and asked why she was so insistent. It turned out she'd gotten the impression that Mishima and I were suddenly acting a lot closer. She had hastily invited me to dinner to find out the truth.

After hearing her reasoning, I realized Ms. Gotou had an unexpectedly cute side to her.

I kept telling her that Mishima was just my subordinate. I repeated myself over and over.

Maybe it was because of all the alcohol in her system, but Ms. Gotou pulled no punches in hounding me about Mishima, unable to believe that I wouldn't prefer a younger woman. "Doesn't she have a nice body? I bet you like women like that, right?" she'd insisted. It was, frankly, quite annoying.

The only desire I had concerning Mishima was for her to take her work seriously.

I'd never thought for a second that someone would get the wrong idea.

And yet, here I was.

I let out a great sigh. It was all so incomprehensible.

Ms. Gotou had turned me down. I'd given her my heart, and she'd thrown it away.

Yet, she was still concerned that something would happen between Mishima and me for some reason.

No, she was right. It would be upsetting for a man who'd just confessed to you to run straight to a younger woman. But I sensed a desperation in how Ms. Gotou conducted herself today, which suggested something more.

I remembered what Hashimoto had said in the cafeteria the other day.

"If you ask me, I'd say you still have a chance."

"The real fight begins after you get rejected."

Maybe, just maybe.

If she were interested in me, Ms. Gotou's behavior would make a lot more sense.

That said, this was Ms. Gotou we were talking about. I couldn't imagine she would be the type to develop a sudden interest in someone after they confessed to her.

My excitement was over before it had even begun.

I spent the rest of the train journey arguing back and forth in my mind, gradually exhausting myself.

By the time I had made it home, I was still thinking about Ms. Gotou, desperately wishing I could stop.

"I'm home."

"Oh!"

I unlocked the door and let myself in, and Sayu bolted upright from her spot in the living room before walking over to greet me.

"Welcome home... Why the long face?"

"Huh?"

"Wasn't it fun?"

Sayu peered into my eyes.

"It was, but..."

"Really? That's not what your face is telling me. Did she say something to upset you?"

"Not exactly."

I took off my suit jacket and hurried past Sayu into the living room.

Why was she so good at reading my expressions?

"Hey, Mr. Yoshida."

"What?"

I turned around to see Sayu standing there with both her arms stretched out in front of her.

"Need a hug?"

“Huh?”

I grimaced, but Sayu kept standing in that same pose, inching her body closer and closer to me.

“I don’t know what’s wrong, but hugging a schoolgirl should make it better, don’t you think?”

“Of course not, dumbass.”

“Hya!”

She ignored my objections and wrapped her arms around me.

Her head nuzzled into my chest.

What did she want from me? I couldn’t help smiling wryly.

At any rate, I could tell she was trying to cheer me up.

“Okay, that’s enough.”

I patted Sayu’s shoulder, and she looked up at me.

“Feeling better?”

“Yup, all better.”

“Really? You’re a simple man, Mr. Yoshida!”

“Shut up.”

I peeled the grinning Sayu off me, then reached for my pajamas.

“Hey, hey!”

I heard Sayu call out to me as I unbuttoned my shirt.

“You stink of cigarette smoke! Go take a bath!”

“Did you already fill the tub?”

“I did! I figured you’d be home soon.”

“Wow, look at you.”

Sayu lifted two fingers into a smug peace sign, then pointed to the bathroom.

“Rinse your body, then get in the tub, and let the water wash all the bad stuff

from your mind.”

Her words warmed my heart.

She wasn't forcing her kindness on me, just setting it out so I could take it. I could feel that in her words.

“Okay, I will.”

I nodded, and Sayu returned to the living room to plop back down on the floor, looking pleased with herself.

Then she jerked her chin toward the bathroom to hurry me along.

“Okay, I'm going!”

I took a clean pair of underwear and my pajamas and headed to the changing area.

As I got undressed, I let out a small sigh.

I was grateful that Sayu was here, at least for today. If I were home alone, I would stay up all night thinking about Ms. Gotou.

“Ahhh... I'm so pathetic.”

I muttered to myself, smiling bitterly.

I realized once again that Sayu often filled an emotional support role for me.

“I should be the adult here...”

I washed the day's sweat off in the shower, then submerged myself in the bath.

Now that I thought about it, had she already taken a bath?

I pondered this vaguely as I gazed at the bathwater.

“Whatever. Why does that matter?” I murmured to myself and sank into the water up to my shoulders.

Before I knew it, my mind, which had been swirling with thoughts about Ms. Gotou this whole time, came to a pause.

After a moment, I felt a gloomy feeling rise up in my chest.

I had had dinner with Ms. Gotou, the woman of my dreams. Sure, a lot of things she had said didn't sit right with me, but I had enjoyed myself before heading home.

Sayu, on the other hand, must have been worried about me. She had gotten the bath ready, and she might have even planned out the words and gestures of her pep talk.

I was supposed to be her guardian, and yet today, she was the one who'd taken charge of everything, wasn't she?

It was like she was my...

"...No way. What am I even thinking?"

It was like...

It almost felt like I was a married man messing around with another woman. I quickly shook my head to dispel the thought.

The alcohol was getting to my brain. She was a high schooler, nothing else, and definitely not my wife. There was no need for me to feel any weird guilt about it.

But I did need to get my act a little more together.

"I'm being taken care of by a high schooler... How can I call myself her guardian?"

I scooped up some bathwater with my hands, then splashed it over my face.

Chapter 11 Smile

“Do you think a cute case would be better?”

“How would I know?”

It was my day off.

After dragging Hashimoto to the cell phone store, I had purchased another smartphone under my name and signed up for a plan with plenty of data.

Now I was struggling to decide on a case for the phone.

“Does she seem like she’d be into sparkles?”

“Nah, I’ve never seen her wear anything like that... I mean, all she had when I met her was a school uniform. I don’t know the first thing about her tastes.”

Hashimoto forced a smile.

“You don’t seem to know much about her, considering you’re living together,” he remarked.

“Well, I don’t know why I would go out of my way to ask about her fashion preferences.”

“I see.”

At home, she only ever wore the gray sweat suit.

Her old phone might have given me some insight if it weren’t currently at the bottom of the sea somewhere in Chiba.

“If you’re that worried, maybe you should’ve asked her before we came here.”

“No way. If I told her I was buying her a phone, she’d definitely put up a

fight.”

I figured it would be best to go ahead and buy one, then hand it to her directly. She couldn’t really refuse something I’d already bought for her. Once the money was spent, it was better not to waste the device.

Hashimoto glanced at me from the side and burst out laughing.

“What?”

“No, it just seems like you’re quite fond of her, Yoshida.”

“Huh...?”

I scowled at him, but Hashimoto carried on speaking as he surveyed the phone cases hanging on the wall.

“I mean, if you’re just buying this phone to keep in touch with her, who cares what the case looks like?”

“You don’t get it. She’s a high school girl. She’ll care about stuff like that.”

“You’re just proving my point. In other words...”

Hashimoto chuckled, then continued with emphasis.

“...you want to make Sayu happy, don’t you?”

I fell silent.

That wasn’t my intention at all, not in the slightest. I knew that, but I couldn’t find the words to reply for some reason.

That was probably because, deep down, part of me did want to make her happy.

“Well, if you want to play it safe, just get one in black or white,” said Hashimoto.

“That feels like a solid choice.”

“You don’t want to risk getting it wrong.”

I stared at the white case in front of me as he spoke.

I imagined Sayu holding it. It fit her somehow.

“Let’s go with white, then,” I muttered to myself and took the white case to the register.

After I’d paid, I locked eyes with Hashimoto, who’d been waiting a few steps away from the register.

“Yoshida,” he began.

He looked me straight in the eyes.

“You should really consider how you interact with Sayu.”

His tone was at once soft with concern and sharp with warning.

“If she gets emotionally attached or, worse, she falls for you, you’ll be in trouble.”

“...I guess you have a point.”

I nodded as we walked side by side out of the store.

“There’s also the possibility that you could fall for her, too.”

“Not a chance. I’m only interested in big-breasted, older women.”

“That’s just your sexual preference.” Hashimoto smirked. “I may love my wife, but she’s not who I jerk off to.”

“What the hell?”

My face twisted into a strained smile as Hashimoto continued indifferently.

“In other words, who you fall for and who you’re into are two different things. You’d better be careful.”

“No, seriously, I’m only interested in older women.”

“Well, good for you if that’s true.”

Hashimoto snickered, then sped up his pace.

I walked a bit faster to keep up with him.

“Sorry I dragged you out today. Let me buy you lunch.”

“In that case, let’s have ramen. I never get to eat junk food at home.”

“There you go again, casually bragging about your wife’s cooking. Okay,

ramen it is.”

I nodded, forcing a smile.

“It was a complaint,” Hashimoto muttered, smirking.

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“Hey, heads up.”

I tossed a paper bag at Sayu, startling her, though she still managed to catch it.

“Whagh... Wh-what’s this?”

“Open it.”

She timidly rummaged inside the bag and took out a box. Her eyes widened.

“Oh, it’s—”

“A cell phone.”

“Where did this come from?!”

“I bought it.”

She looked at the phone, then back at me, before tilting her head in confusion.

“For yourself?”

“Of course not. It’s for you, dumbass.”

“Why?!”

“Because I want us to be able to keep in touch!”

She stared blankly at the paper bag.

“...Wasn’t it expensive?”

“It’s fine. I can afford it.”

“...Can I really have it?”

“Why else do you think I gave it to you?”

She nodded, and the corners of her mouth turned up slightly.

“You really surprised me. It’s rare for you to go shopping on your day off, so I did think it was a little weird.”

Sayu scratched her head, looking around the room.

“So it was for me, huh...,” she said, flashing her usual wide grin. “Could it be that...you’re pretty fond of me, Mr. Yoshida?”

“Don’t get too carried away. It’s just so I can contact you, that’s all.”

“I suppose so.” She nodded as she scraped away the seal that held the box closed.

Once she’d removed it, she opened the lid and took out what was inside.

“Whoa! It’s the latest model.”

“Is it? I just bought it because it looked impressive.”

“What? You’re killing me!” Sayu cackled, then stared at me. “Thanks, Mr. Yoshida.”

“No problem.”

I looked away, starting to feel a little embarrassed. I was just happy she liked what I’d bought her.

“Oh, there’s a case in here, too.”

She noticed another box inside the paper bag and pulled it out.

“It’s white!”

“Is that good?”

Sayu nodded vigorously.

“I love white.”

“Really? That’s a relief.”

“You’ve got good taste, Mr. Yoshida,” she said, her tone weirdly condescending. She beamed as she took out the case and quickly popped it onto her new smartphone.

“Ta-da!”

“Looks good.”

“Thank you so much.”

An innocent smile covered her face as she eagerly pressed the cell phone’s power button.

That’s right. There was no reason for a child to hold back when an adult gave them something. As long as she said “thank you,” that was enough.

As I thought about all this, I couldn’t help laughing.

It was like I really was her guardian. Well, the role I was playing was just like that of a guardian, but I still felt strange having paternal feelings for a high school girl I knew nothing about.

But then...

I remembered what Hashimoto had said that afternoon.

“There’s also the possibility that you could fall for her, too.”

It was a ridiculous idea.

There was no way I could develop those kinds of feelings for her. In my eyes, she was a child rather than a woman.

“Oh, Mr. Yoshida.”

“What is it?”

“Let’s exchange contact info.”

She tiptoed over and showed me her cell phone.

It seemed that she had downloaded the most popular messaging app as soon as she had started up the phone, and it was now taking up the screen.

“How’d you get all that sorted out so fast?”

“Heh-heh. I am a high school girl, after all.”

Young people must really be more adaptable than the rest of us. Whenever I bought a new phone, I would struggle to grasp all of its features and where to find them.

I opened the same messaging app on my own phone and showed her my ID.

These days, even the bosses at work used these kinds of apps to contact us. Occasionally, they'd even send me important messages, and I'd have to remind them to please use email.

However, it really was a handy tool. You could check your messages in real time and make calls that didn't eat away at your regular phone plan, so I could understand its popularity.

"Okay! I've added you!" Sayu grinned.

I looked at my own screen and found the name "ItsSayu" displayed in the "Friends" section.

"Couldn't you have thought of something more creative?"

"What? Yours is 'yoshida-man.' What's the 'man' part for?"

"Shut up. I just picked it at random."

Hashimoto had forced me to start using this app because it was *"too much of a hassle to email each other,"* so I went with whatever name had popped into my head at the time.

Sayu cackled, then clutched her new cell phone against her chest in a tight embrace.

"Hee-hee!"

She smiled at me, clearly very content.

"What is it? You're creeping me out."

"Look."

Sayu shoved her phone my way once more so I could see the screen.

The only name displayed in her "Friends" list was "yoshida-man."

"You're my only friend, Mr. Yoshida."

"Just on this app."

She snickered, then narrowed her eyes at me and continued speaking.

"I'm only using this app for you."

Her voice resonated alluringly in my ears.

There was something bewitching about the way she was smiling, too. It sent goose bumps shooting down my spine, and I frantically averted my gaze.

“Wh-when you start working part-time, you’ll get a bunch more friends, I’m sure...”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Sayu returned to her typical indifferent attitude, then grinned.

“In any case, we can contact each other whenever we like now.”

“That’s right.”

“Just tell me if you’re going to be late or if you don’t need dinner.”

“Got it.”

Sayu hummed to herself happily as she headed back to the living room. She plopped herself down on the floor and tapped away on her new cell phone.

I let out a sigh, then walked toward the bathroom. I rinsed my hands with soap and then proceeded to wash my face.

What was all that about?

Her smile was strangely suggestive, and her cloying tone had clouded my thinking.

I knew she was only a child, but her voice had had an unexpected intensity. It had squeezed at my heart and left me pouring sweat.

I was used to seeing a silly, lighthearted smile on Sayu’s face. In fact, I even found it a little cute.

However, that smile she showed me today was one I’d never seen before. It felt like there was some *intention* behind it.

I splashed another handful of water over my face and let out a long breath.

“I really don’t get high school girls...,” I muttered to myself.

But even now, all I could see going around and around in my mind was the captivating smile that Sayu had made moments earlier.

Chapter 12 Living Room

“Okay, I’m off.”

“Yep! See you later.”

I gave a small wave to Mr. Yoshida as he stepped out of the entryway.

As soon as he’d left the apartment and closed the door, I suddenly became aware of how silent the room was.

“...All right,” I muttered quietly, heading back to the living room.

I started by collecting the plates we’d left on the table after breakfast, stacking and carrying them to the sink.

Now it was time to wash the tableware. This was always the first task I did after Mr. Yoshida left for work.

As the water ran over my hands, I felt my thoughts clear up, and the sound of the clattering plates distracted me from my loneliness.

I made quick work of the dishes, and because there was no space to let them dry, I wiped them all down with a cloth.

This first task took about ten minutes from start to finish.

The nearest station was roughly a ten-minute walk away. I wondered if Mr. Yoshida was already on the train by now.

As I thought this, I laughed at myself.

“What difference would it make to me, even if he was?”

No matter how much I talked to myself, there was no one here to listen or respond. Whenever Mr. Yoshida was away, I tended to talk to myself a lot

more.

And the more I talked to myself, the lonelier I felt.

Come to think of it, Mr. Yoshida talked to himself a lot, too, and he must have done it subconsciously. Sometimes, the things he was thinking about automatically found their way out of his mouth, and it was really amusing to watch.

“Oh!” I exclaimed quietly as I put away the plates I’d just wiped dry.

I was doing it again.

“I’m thinking about Mr. Yoshida again,” I whispered and let out a breath through my nose.

Until this point, I’d stayed at many different men’s places. Naturally, everyone I met had his own particularities, and no two of them were the same. Even so, there was one thing that all the men I’d stayed with had in common.

They’d all let me stay with them “for their own benefit.” I thought that was completely natural. Who would be kind to someone if they were getting nothing out of it?

All the men I’d met so far, every single one of them, had “touched” me.

It was to be expected. It was my bargaining chip, and it was what they wanted as compensation for letting me stay with them.

I represented a ticking time bomb, socially speaking, and in exchange for keeping me around, they took full advantage of my status as a high school girl.

To be honest, I thought that was pretty ordinary behavior.

If anything, Mr. Yoshida was the weird one.

He was a mystery to me.

To tell the truth, when he told me he was “*not into kids*,” my reaction had been, *You say that now, but I wonder what you’ll say in a few days.*

However, he never changed his mind.

In fact, not only did he spend time earnestly preaching to me, but he also let me stay in his apartment with only the perfunctory requirement that I “*do the*

housework."

I didn't get it at all.

What was in it for him, having me here?

I didn't think there was any real need for me to do the chores. No, to put it more accurately, it wasn't something he needed me, in particular, to do.

After all, he'd been living alone up until I came along. I could tell just from looking that he didn't really cook for himself, but he'd been getting by just fine anyhow, hadn't he?

It didn't make any sense that the only thing he wanted from a high school girl who'd suddenly fallen into his lap was for her to do the housework for him.

Age-wise, I was brimming with youth and vigor. Not only that, but I also thought I was pretty good-looking, if I did say so myself. It wasn't just me singing my own praises, either. It was an objective fact.

No matter how much he insisted he wasn't into younger women, he should feel something.

"Shouldn't some part of him be attracted to me...even just a little?"

As these words left my mouth, I felt unexpectedly gloomy.

Mr. Yoshida was a kind man.

After spending just a few days with him, I couldn't help but see that. I was extremely lucky to have found him. That was undeniable.

Still, there had to be more to the story.

Mr. Yoshida had never "pursued" me as everyone else had.

That fact made me strangely uneasy.

"Why is that?"

I didn't get it.

This was a kind of anxiety I had never experienced before.

And it was strange for me to feel lonely during the afternoons when Mr. Yoshida was out.

In the places I'd stayed at in the past, I'd felt more relaxed when the owner wasn't there. I didn't have to fulfill his expectations, and I could do whatever I liked.

Things were different now.

When Mr. Yoshida was out, the hours felt like days. I'd get the housework finished in no time at all.

I'd taken my time reading the comics and books that Mr. Yoshida bought for me, yet I'd still finished them within a few days. When I read them, it wasn't the content that put me in a good mood but the fact that Mr. Yoshida had bought them for me. I'd received gifts from other men in the past. They had bought me things so expensive, like lingerie and necklaces, that comics and books couldn't possibly compare. However, none of those things had ever brought me happiness the way that Mr. Yoshida's gifts had.

Even I didn't understand what had happened to make me feel this way.

I felt safe when I spent time with Mr. Yoshida.

And the safer I felt, the more scared I became.

Why was he letting me stay here, in such a pleasant environment? What had I ever done to deserve this? I didn't have a clue, and I spent every day possessed by this strange unease.

I even thought it would be easier if he made a move on me. I would be relieved to be needed in a way that was easy to understand. And there was a part of me that wouldn't mind if it was Mr. Yoshida, though I didn't know why I felt that way.

However, I knew that would never happen.

Mr. Yoshida didn't see me in that light at all. And he wasn't pretending, either. He simply didn't have an ounce of desire for me.

"Haaah..."

It was all so new to me. I had been bewildered from the moment I'd arrived.

I felt safe yet anxious. I was anxious, yet I felt warm inside.

Those were my emotions, but it felt like they belonged to someone else. I felt like I was outside of reality somehow.

I wiped down the table with a wrung-out cloth and released a sigh.

“I wonder how long I can stay here,” I whispered to myself before flopping down onto the living room floor.

If Mr. Yoshida ever found it inconvenient to have me around, would he kick me out, like all the other men had?

That’s right, for example...

If he found a girlfriend.

The moment this thought occurred to me, I felt my heart being squeezed inside my chest.

“He’s so kind, after all.”

So much so that from my perspective as a woman, it was completely beyond me that he hadn’t found someone yet.

He did seem to be hung up on the fact that Ms. Gotou had shot him down, but he had just gone out drinking with another lady from the office, and there must have been plenty of other women in his social circles.

Now that I considered the situation, it wouldn’t be surprising if one of them took advantage of his heartbreak and made a pass at him.

And if Mr. Yoshida entered into a physical relationship with someone, I’d definitely have to leave.

I got the impression that even high school couples went to each other’s homes often. It was only natural that adult couples would do the same, especially a man who lived alone.

In that case, there’d be no space for me. Even if they lived separately, a man sharing a roof with a random high school girl would end any normal relationship.

“Ha-ha. If he gets a girlfriend, I’ll have no choice but to leave.”

I laughed humorlessly.

One negative thought led to another, and I found myself dwelling on pointless hypothetical questions.

“If...?”

If Mr. Yoshida did get a girlfriend...

...then he and that woman would...do it, wouldn't they?

The thought had me instantly covered in goose bumps.

“...I'd better start the laundry.”

I stood up and headed for the washing machine, but the mental images from a few seconds earlier still lingered in my mind. I felt my gut tighten.

Mr. Yoshida, sleeping with a woman I didn't know.

For an unfathomable reason, I found imagining this spectacle indescribably repulsive.

I knew it shouldn't have anything to do with me.

It was only natural that someone as kind and put together as Mr. Yoshida would find a partner, and the things they would do together would be perfectly normal, too.

But the more I imagined it, the more uncomfortable I felt.

“Ugh...”

I sank down to the floor before I'd even reached the washing machine.

“What's going on with me...?”

Being alone like this, in Mr. Yoshida's apartment, was really killing me.

I felt a swirl of loneliness and negativity like I'd never experienced before beginning to consume me.

“Mr. Yoshida...come home already.”

He'd only just left, yet here I was, saying his name out loud and praying for him to return.

Chapter 13 Business Trip

“Did you mess up on purpose again? You better cut it out, or I’ll send you flying!”

“No...! I swear I didn’t! It was an honest mistake this time...!”

“That’s even worse.”

“No, please listen to me... You’ve got it all wrong. I rented a ton of DVDs the day before last and stayed up all night watching them. I came to work exhausted the next morning, and that’s how—”

I slammed my hands on the desk, and Mishima’s shoulders jolted a little. Hashimoto, who was sitting next to us, let out a playful “whoa there!” as if to defuse the situation.

“I don’t care what your excuse is. Can you fix it by the end of the day?”

“I’ll do it. Trust me!”

“All right. Get to it, then...”

When I looked up to focus a sharp glare on Mishima, I noticed one of the bosses approaching from behind her.

It was our section manager, Odagiri.

I had a bad feeling about this.

Whenever Section Manager Odagiri came by our department, he brought trouble with him. And for some reason, his gaze was locked on me.

True to my sense of foreboding, he marched over to my desk and called out to me.

“Hey. Got a second?”

“Sure, what is it?” I replied, straightening myself up and turning to face him.

“Sorry to spring this on you, but...”

Section Manager Odagiri scratched his bearded chin and continued.

“I want you to go on a two-week business trip with me.”

“Huh? A business trip? Where to?”

“To our branch office in Gifu.”

“G-Gifu...?”

Honestly, I didn’t want to leave the apartment unattended. Sayu was there, after all.

I could only imagine that leaving her unsupervised for two weeks would be bad.

I did my best to look apologetic.

“That’s...a little difficult for me right now...”

Section Manager Odagiri’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Huh? It’s rare to see you refuse a business trip. You usually jump on board right away.”

“Well, I guess... Ha-ha...”

With a high school girl holed up at my place, there was no way I could join him. Still, I couldn’t tell the section manager the truth. I smiled dryly.

What if I could get Hashimoto to go in my place...? I made up my mind and looked over to the seat next to mine. Hashimoto, who had been sitting there just moments earlier, was now nowhere to be seen.

That coward... He must have gone to the bathroom...

He was the fastest escape artist in the office, that was for sure.

Well, he did have a wife at home, so I doubted he’d want to leave her for weeks, either.

“Uh... How about Mishima? Maybe Mishima would like to go.”

I suddenly pointed in Mishima’s direction, catching her off guard.

“Wha—?” she replied.

She was capable enough, and I knew she was single, so she would be the perfect candidate.

She looked in Section Manager Odagiri’s direction, but he just shook his head.

“There’s no company lodging at this branch. We’ll have to get a hotel. But it is a business trip, so we can’t afford two rooms. And I can’t very well share a room with a woman.”

“Huh, why not? You’re married, so it’s not like anything weird would happen.”

The section manager looked like he had mixed feelings.

“Well, that’s true, but...,” he grumbled.

“And you’d be fine with it, too, right?” I asked, peeking at Mishima. Looking at her face, I was startled.

“Uh, no, I would not...”

Her face showed open disgust.

Well, that was understandable, but wasn’t that...a little much? She probably shouldn’t make that face in front of our boss.

Section Manager Odagiri also caught Mishima’s expression, then shook his head repeatedly.

“No, she’s obviously not okay with it. It’ll have to be a man. Please, Yoshida. You’re the only one I can count on for this. You’re single, after all.”

His words were like a knife to my heart. There was no need to comment on my relationship status. Although, I understood how it might be frowned upon to send employees with families on business trips.

“Is there an actual reason why you can’t go? If there is, I’ll leave you alone.”

This was the toughest question he could have possibly asked.

My thoughts raced as I struggled to come up with a good answer. I absolutely

couldn't tell the truth about my situation.

Just as I was desperately trying to think of something to say, my savior appeared.

"Mr. Odagirii...I thiiink he just doesn't want to gooo..."

A male staff member staggered out from behind the section manager and walked up to us, his tone of voice playful. It was Endou, who worked at a desk not too far from mine.

"I'm happy to go on the business trip. I'm single, and I'm bored as hell. How about it? What do you think?"

"Speaking to me that casually isn't helping your case. I'm your boss!"

"So you don't want to go with me? I didn't see you as the type to let personal feelings get in the way of work. I thought you were supposed to be our section manager..."

Endou yammered on persistently. Section Manager Odagiri glared back at him, making no effort to hide how he felt.

"Will you be able to work properly for the whole two weeks?"

"I always do," Endou replied, raising an eyebrow. "As long as you let me do what I like outside of work hours, that is."

Section Manager Odagiri let out a sigh and nodded.

"Got it. All right, I'm counting on you, Endou."

"All right! It's a deal."

Endou gave a wide smile as he watched Section Manager Odagiri head back the way he had come. Then he turned to me and smirked.

"Yoshida, I thought you only had eyes for the senior managing director!"

He was talking about Ms. Gotou.

"What do you mean?"

Endou sidled up to me until we were shoulder to shoulder, his movements clearly exaggerated.

“It’s a girl, right?” he said, voice low.

“Huh?”

“You don’t want to go on the trip because you’re seeing someone. Am I wrong?”

Endou’s words astonished me. Was that how he’d interpreted this whole situation?

However, I couldn’t wholly deny his assessment, and that vexed me. It wasn’t like I had a girlfriend or anything, but I did have a girl at home who required my guardianship. I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a woman at the center of the problem.

“Mr. Yoshida...”

Mishima, who’d been watching from beside me the whole time, cast a glance my way.

“You have a girlfriend...?”

“No! I told you, I don’t!”

“Don’t lie,” said Endou. “You’ve always been the first out the door for business trips. If you’re suddenly reluctant, it has to be because of a girl.”

“You’re wrong. There are plenty of other reasons not to go on a business trip...”

I began to explain myself, but the words caught in my throat.

I couldn’t think of a single believable reason why I’d refuse to go on a business trip.

Endou noticed the look on my face, gave a complacent smile, and then plopped his hand on my shoulder.

“Well, we’ll probably get in trouble if we stand here chatting. Let’s go grab lunch.”

Endou pointed to the clock hanging on the wall. It was already past one—the perfect time for an afternoon break.

I sighed and raised my voice to tell the rest of the office I was leaving.

“...I’m off to lunch.”

My coworkers responded with a listless “enjoy.”

I glanced at Hashimoto’s seat out of the corner of my eye. He still wasn’t back.

He could eat alone for all I cared. That’d be his punishment for fleeing from the section manager all by himself.

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“Is this really the best they can do? *Shirataki* has more substance.”

Endou looked exasperated as he slurped down his Chinese noodles.

“Every day, I feel more like I’m eating animal fodder. They could at least change the menu listing. Maybe they could call it the ‘cattle feed set.’ At least then I could have a laugh at the name when I ordered it.”

“You say that, but you still eat it every time.”

Beside Endou sat our coworker Koike, who Endou had dragged along and who was currently working on a plate of fried rice. Endou and Koike were close friends. Objectively speaking, their personalities were complete opposites, but they seemed to complement each other perfectly.

“Well?”

Endou, who had been bantering with Koike, suddenly turned toward me.

“Are you seeing somebody? There’s no way you hooked up with the senior managing director, right?”

“I told you, it’s not like that.”

I waved both hands dismissively, but Endou just gazed at me, looking skeptical.

Feeling another pair of eyes, I looked to my side and saw Mishima glaring in my direction.

“Your chilled Chinese noodles are getting soggy,” I said to her.

“I don’t care about my noodles,” she replied. “I’m more interested in what

you're talking about, Mr. Yoshida."

Barely touching her meal, she continued to stare straight at me.

I exhaled slightly, then put forth the excuse I'd desperately thought up while ordering lunch.

"I'm expecting a package, and it's supposed to come sometime within the next two weeks."

"A package?" Endou replied, frowning. "What's in it? Can't you just pick it up later?"

"No. I have to be there to receive it in person."

"That's what I'm asking! What kind of package is that?"

I took a long pause and tried to make a face that indicated I didn't want to talk about it. At that, Endou grinned and nodded.

"Makes sense. I get it. You're a busy guy, Yoshida!"

Endou smirked, as if he understood everything, then lightly patted Koike on the shoulder.

"What?" asked Koike.

"You had some DVDs shipped to your place last year, too, didn't you?"

Koike furrowed his brow for a moment, then nodded a few times.

"Oh yeah, I did. I was really into that one girl at the time. Kokoa Naruse."

"Ack!"

I nearly spit out my fried noodles.

Mishima eyed me suspiciously from where she sat to my side.

"Who's this...Naruse person?"

"Oh, what was it...? She's a character in some anime, I think."

She was actually a porn actress.

Endou got a big laugh from my little cover-up, while Koike let out an exasperated sigh and shoved more fried rice into his mouth. Only Mishima was

left with a quizzical look on her face.

“Well, if you’re that desperate to keep it a secret, I’ll stop asking.”

Endou chuckled and slurped up more Chinese noodles. As I watched him, I began to feel a little guilty.

“Hey,” I said. “I’m sorry about earlier. For making you go on the trip in my place.”

“Doesn’t bother me at all. I’m single, and it’s not like I’ve got anything better to do. Plus, there’s probably lots of good food in Gifu.”

“Sure, but I know how much you hate the section manager.”

“Yeah, I can’t stand him.”

Endou’s tone was joking. He smirked, and his shoulders shook slightly.

“I hate him so much that I’m actually kind of looking forward to it. So don’t sweat it.”

“...Sorry. I owe you one.”

“Don’t make such a big deal out of it, Yoshida. That’s why you’re not popular with the girls.”

“That’s got nothing to do with it,” I fired back. But I couldn’t help thinking he might have a point.

“Well, I don’t care what your reasons are, but you’re still making me go on the trip in your place.” Endou took an exaggerated slurp of his Chinese noodles and turned to look me in the eye. “Just be sure to make the most of whatever it is, whether it’s some DVDs or a girl.”

After that, he got quiet and began to focus on his meal. I let out a small sigh as his slurping sounds continued.

He was clearly saying “I don’t buy that excuse, but I’ll give you a pass this time.” Endou was rude and selfish, but strangely enough, he could also be very generous. He’d stuck his neck out for me at work countless times before.

I probably wouldn’t be able to keep fooling him. I wondered if Sayu would be back in Hokkaido the next time a business trip came my way...

“Yo. Shi. Da.”

“Ack!”

Just as I'd stuffed another bite of fried noodles into my mouth, Mishima prodded me forcefully in the side with her elbow. Once again, I nearly spit out my food. I frantically swallowed it down, then slapped Mishima on the shoulder.

“Why would you do that while I'm eating?”

“I just...”

She looked into my eyes and then away again, then repeated this several times before she finally spoke.

“Do you genuinely not have a girlfriend?”

“I told you, I don't. How many times do I have to say it?”

Having to keep saying that was dealing me psychic damage. I really wished she would stop asking.

She opened her mouth again, clearly wanting to say something, but stopped herself and simply nodded.

“Okay, good...”

“Wait, I don't need your permission to be in a relationshi-ow-ow-ow! Crap, that hurts! Why do you keep elbowing me so hard? That's my rib!”

“Well, you were annoying me, so...”

For some reason, Mishima looked like she was sulking as she finally started on her chilled Chinese noodles. I looked at her, puzzled, and Endou, having witnessed this whole exchange, suddenly started roaring with laughter.

“What's your problem?”

I glared at Endou, who was now slamming the table, still chuckling away. He shook his head from side to side, shoulders trembling.

“No, it's just...,” Endou said, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. “I'm beginning to believe you actually don't have a girlfriend.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I said. Right, Mishima?”

Endou tried to pass the floor to Mishima, who glared at him and took a giant bite of her noodles.

I had no idea what they were getting at. I looked to Koike in bewilderment, but he simply flashed me a wry smile and shrugged.

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After lunch, Mishima quickly finished her corrections, and I didn't have much work myself, so I began preparing to clock out on time.

I stuffed my belongings in my briefcase, and just as I was about to head out, Mishima stopped me.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

“Yeah?”

It was obvious from my tone that I was annoyed she'd stopped me on my way out.

Despite this, Mishima seemed utterly unfazed. She gathered her belongings and walked over to stand in front of me.

“Do you have some time after work?”

“Not really... I was hoping to head straight home.”

“You have an errand?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then let's hang out for a bit.”

I was a little annoyed by how insistent she was, but after what had happened at lunch, I was worried that insisting on going straight home might result in more pointless misunderstandings.

“Well, since you seem so insistent, I guess it's okay. Where did you want to go?”

“Let’s see a movie.”

“Huh? A movie?”

“There’s a theater at the train station near your place, right?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Then let’s go! It starts in an hour.”

“H-hold up!”

While ignoring my reply, Mishima strode toward the door at such a pace that I had to rush to catch up to her. I suddenly got the impression that someone was looking at us, and when I looked up, I spotted Ms. Gotou, seated at her desk, staring at me. My heart skipped a beat, but considering the situation, I couldn’t say anything to her. I gave her a small nod and hurried out of the office.

Chapter 14 Fate

"You can never tell when a meeting was fated until after the fact."

With those words, the professor passed a handkerchief to the tearful protagonist.

"If you do meet someone who will change your fate, you won't know until after it has happened. After everything has changed and everything is over, only then do we realize."

"But if that's true...what should I do about the way I feel?"

The protagonist was a girl who'd met a boy of the same age at university and was running around trying to win his love, saying that what she felt for him was *fated*. In this scene, the girl, who'd found out that the object of her affections was going to study abroad, was talking to her professor.

"Is this how my fated love will end?" she asked him, tears in her eyes.

"Does it matter if it's fate or not?" he replied.

"Huh?"

The professor tipped his coffee-filled mug up to his lips, gulped down a mouthful, and took a long pause.

"Fated or not, your feelings are still real. Isn't that good enough?"

The protagonist's eyes widened in response to the professor's words.

"Shouldn't you run to him as fast as you can and tell him how you feel? It doesn't matter what the outcome is. In the end, that's all you can do, right?"

With that, the professor put on a playful smile.

The protagonist nodded furiously, large teardrops again streaming down her face, and jumped to her feet.

“All right. I’m going.”

With that, she bolted out of the professor’s office. He gazed after her, squinting as if she were too bright to look at.

I suddenly wondered how Mishima was doing and glanced at her out of the corner of my eye. She was staring at the screen, making an expression I’d never seen before.

She looked both angry and like she was about to cry. As I took in her profile, I realized this was the most serious I’d ever seen her.

I wish you’d show a bit of that at work, I thought to myself. Still, I was a little moved by how seriously she was taking the movie.

I was having a hard time getting invested in the story myself. I stole a glance at the person to my other side. Their eyes, too, were glued to the screen.

I suppose I wasn’t really the type to enjoy movies in the first place. I knew the people on the screen were real, but it felt like the stories were taking place in a completely different world. I couldn’t empathize with any of the characters.

However, one of the professor’s lines had struck a chord with me.

“You can never tell when a meeting was fated until after the fact.”

Those words felt strangely fitting. When I thought about it, I realized that the kind of meetings that changed the course of your life tended to happen out of the blue. You didn’t notice in the moment and carried on without much thought. It was only afterward, when you looked back, that you realized how important it was.

For example, that was how it was for me when I met Ms. Gotou.

It was at an event for soon-to-be graduates where many different businesses had gathered to recruit new employees.

I’d just attended a talk hosted by the company I was hoping to join. Since I was already there, I’d decided I may as well check out another. While looking over the other participating companies, Ms. Gotou came up to me.

“Looks like you’re actually serious about finding a job here.”

I can still remember the smile on her face as she spoke.

If I hadn’t met her there, I probably wouldn’t be at my current job. I wouldn’t have been blessed with a position or a workplace that suited me so well or made as much progress in my career.

In fact, I couldn’t think of another meeting since that had changed the course of my life to the same degree...

Just then, a face appeared in my mind.

An unrestrained, absentminded smile.

Come to think of it, ever since Sayu came along, my daily life had wholly changed.

Still, I didn’t feel like our meeting would have much of an impact on my future. I’d spotted her by chance, and it turned out that she was looking for a place to stay. I’d offered her one, and in return, she had been helping me out with housework and such. There was nothing more to it.

“You probably have no idea, but...!”

The protagonist on the screen raised her voice, which surprised me and pulled me from my thoughts and back into the movie.

The scene had changed while I was thinking. The protagonist and the young man she was in love with were standing some distance apart on the screen.

“When we first met, you really saved me!”

The protagonist’s voice trembled, and tears welled up in her eyes as she desperately tried to form her thoughts into words.

The boy opposite her stood and listened, looking slightly perplexed.

“You didn’t give it a second thought when you were reaching out to help me, I know, but...to me, it meant the whole world!”

A flashback began, and we were transported back to the beginning of the story. The scene showed the protagonist starting college, having just arrived in the city. The crowded campus made her feel incredibly isolated and small, and

she stopped in her tracks. Just then, a young man slammed into her. He had been looking the other way, and he caused her to fall backward onto the ground, right in the middle of the crowded campus. The boy frantically apologized and, with a troubled face, offered her a hand. *“Are you okay?”* he asked. That was when the protagonist fell in love.

“I felt so lost, but you came and found me... That gave me so much reassurance!”

The protagonist cried as she confessed her feelings.

“Since then, I’ve only ever thought of you!”

That phrase, *you came and found me*, lingered in my ears.

A flashback of my own played in my mind.

I recalled when Ms. Gotou had rejected me and I’d drunkenly found my way home. Sayu had been sitting there beneath the telephone pole, clutching her knees to her chest, a feeling of hollowness surrounding her.

What had Sayu been thinking back then?

Was she hoping...that someone would find her?

And then there I was.

“I knew it was pure chance that you ran into me there and then, but...”

Had I found her? Had she been found?

“It made me...so happy.”

I watched tears bubble up in the protagonist’s eyes on the other side of the screen, all the while thinking of Sayu’s absentminded smile.

*

“Mmmmngh...!”

As soon as we left the theater, Mishima reached her arms up and stretched out her back.

Her shirt was visible between the flaps of her suit jacket, and as she stretched,

the fabric pulled tight, revealing her curves.

Her body looked...healthy. It's not that I thought she was small, but...

Ever since I'd been exposed to breasts as freakishly large as Ms. Gotou's, looking at other women inspired a sense of relief. Honestly, that was the only reason why I snuck a peek.

"I..."

When Mishima had finished stretching, she broke the silence.

"I got a lot more out of that than I expected to."

"More out of it?"

"Yeah. I came here just thinking it would be fun to see a love story with you."

"What does that mean?"

"It was so much better than I had expected, though..." Mishima said with a lilt in her voice, then grinned. "How about you, Mr. Yoshida?"

"What about me?"

"The movie. What did you think?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure..."

My mind had been wandering for most of the film, but I felt like I couldn't admit that.

Mishima seemed to have really enjoyed it, so it didn't feel right to make something up. Was there anything I could comment on honestly?

After some thought, the professor's line came to mind.

"Oh, that's it. That part when the professor said, '*You can never tell when a meeting was fated until after the fact.*' When I heard that...it really resonated with me."

I could see Mishima's eyes light up as I spoke.

"Oh yeah! That made sense to me, too... So we agree."

Mishima nodded somewhat approvingly before her face suddenly turned sullen.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

She put a hand to her chin and spoke in a soft voice.

“But I’m not so sure I want to buy into that idea.”

“Hmm? You said it made sense, didn’t you?”

“Well, it did, but I don’t know if I like it.”

I cocked my head, not understanding what Mishima was trying to say, but she continued looking for the right words to express herself.

“It’s... How do I say this...? Isn’t it kind of, I don’t know...boring?”

“Boring?”

“Yeah! Right now, we’re having incredible encounters that will affect the rest of our lives, aren’t we? Those meetings happen in the present. Not in the past and not in the future. They’re happening right now.”

“I guess so.”

I nodded, and Mishima’s gaze fell to the ground as she let out a small sigh.

“So wouldn’t you want to realize it when you meet someone? Whether or not it was fated, that is.”

Her eyes grew moist, and a stubborn flame practically burned inside them.

Mishima appeared a little different from her usual jovial self. This must have been how she truly felt.

“After everything is finished and beyond her reach, the protagonist finally realizes how important the other person was to her... That kind of plot development always makes me cry in stories, but I don’t want that to happen to me.”

A smile came to her face as she continued.

“I want to live in the present. I don’t care about yesterday or tomorrow. The only time I’m really alive is right now.”

The smile on Mishima’s face made her seem much more mature than she

ever had before. I hadn't known about this side of her.

"Then..." I had started speaking before my thoughts had time to catch up. "Have you ever...met someone like that, Mishima?"

Her face lit up in astonishment, and then...

"Pfft!"

She burst out laughing.

"Ah-ha-ha! Oh yeah. I forgot you were like this, Mr. Yoshida. It's refreshing when you're this thick."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Mm-hmm-hmm... Nothing, don't worry. It's fine."

Mishima was laughing so hard that tears were forming in her eyes. She wiped them away with one of her fingers, then nodded.

"Yes, I have."

I stared at her as she answered me.

"And I don't want to let it pass by me."

She stared straight ahead, glowing with determination.

Overwhelmed by her unexpected intensity, I looked away and nodded.

"Really? Give it your best, then."

"Yes, sir! I will!"

She gave me an exaggerated salute, smiling radiantly. It was somewhat of a relief to see her looking so happy.

That was the Mishima I knew.

I'd only realized it recently, but it made me strangely uncomfortable when somebody I knew made a face I hadn't seen them make before.

This applied to both Sayu and Ms. Gotou.

Whenever they would make an unfamiliar expression, I would be lost, unsure how to react.

This was especially true when it came to Mishima. I thought her usual goofy smile suited her best.

As I mulled this over, I suddenly became aware of something.

When she was first put under my supervision, that very same grin had irritated me. But how did I feel about it now? I had to admit that part of me found that side of her somewhat charming.

As I stood there, surprised at how much my opinion had changed, my lips turned up in a wry smirk.

“Well, if it’s you, I’m sure things will work out, Mishima.”

Her eyes widened, and she tilted her head to the side quizzically.

“What will?”

“Your fated encounter. Something will come of it, I’m sure.”

Mishima’s head was still tilted as an unreadable expression came over her face.

“What do you mean?” she questioned.

Mishima’s relentless grilling was embarrassing me, but I continued speaking anyway.

“Well... You have a good head on your shoulders and a nice smile to go with it,” I said bluntly. “I don’t see why the guy wouldn’t fall for you. That’s what I’m trying to say.”

I scratched the nape of my neck to hide my embarrassment. I wasn’t really used to giving people compliments. It shouldn’t have been a big deal, but I still felt weirdly awkward about it.

When I noticed Mishima’s lack of reaction, I turned toward her to see her gaze darting around erratically.

Mishima took almost everything in stride, but she looked oddly shaken up right now.

“W-well... This is...,” Mishima replied after a long pause.

Her face was hard to decipher. Her lips curled up, but she seemed upset.

“This is a bit rough.”

I’d never seen her smile like that before.

It looked like she was trying to conceal something important, but it was different from the deceptive grin she usually made at work.

I gasped, realizing I might have done something to offend her, but in no time, her expression had changed once again.

“I mean, I appreciate the praise, at least! There isn’t much opportunity for you to praise me at work.”

“It’s in your power to change that, you know...”

“Ah-ha-ha. I’ll do what I can.”

Mishima cackled with her usual mischievousness.

“But never mind that, Mr. Yoshida,” she said.

I’d seen her make this face before.

It was the exact same expression she made before teasing me.

I instinctively sensed danger and went to take a step back. Before I got the chance, however, Mishima drew in close.

“Wha—?”

In an instant, she had wrapped me in a tight hug. She was a head shorter than me, making her the perfect height to nuzzle her head directly into my chest.

“Wai—! What are you...?!”

I caught a whiff of her shampoo and felt my heart beat faster.

“Hey. Let me go...”

I had managed to grab hold of Mishima’s shoulders, but just as I was trying to push her away, she suddenly glanced upward and gave me a teasing smile.

“...Did I set your heart racing?”

“Wha—? Not at all. Now let go of me!”

I pushed her away again, but she simply cackled and stared into my eyes.

“Well now, that’s a new face, Mr. Yoshida.”

“A *new face*...? What face is that?” I asked.

She smiled with her teeth, looking triumphant.

“The face of someone whose heart is racing.”

“...Hmph.”

I could tell by her grin that I hadn’t done an outstanding job at hiding my reaction.

Despite my irritation, I looked away from Mishima, unable to say a thing.

“You shouldn’t tease guys.”

“I’m not,” she replied in a matter-of-fact tone. “I just wondered if you’d respond to me, too.”

“...How could I not react to a woman clinging to me?”

“Oh, so you actually think of me as a woman! Ah-ha-ha!”

Mishima was laughing, about what I couldn’t be sure. Then she let out a sigh so big that it sounded like she was expelling all the air from her lungs.

What on earth did this woman want from me? I sighed in exasperation.

Suddenly, I felt the urge to check the time and glanced at my wristwatch. It was almost ten PM. I’d better get back to the apartment soon, or Sayu would be worried.

I looked up from my watch and found myself meeting Mishima’s gaze. She’d been staring at me.

“Your expression says you want to go home.”

“Well... It’s about that time.”

“You have a point. Why don’t we call it here, then?” Mishima said briskly, bowing slightly.

“Thank you very much for today.”

“Sure. You too...?”

I didn't think I had done anything to deserve thanks. She was conscientious about the strangest things.

Mishima grinned, then turned around and began walking back toward the station.

As I watched her leave, she suddenly turned back to look at me.

"What if the person I met, my fated encounter...", she began, raising her voice slightly, "...was you, Mr. Yoshida?!"

"Don't be stupid! Go home already!"

Mishima laughed and gave me a broad wave. Then she entered the station without turning around again.

"...Time to go home, then," I mumbled, and I set off in the opposite direction.

A fated encounter.

Every time I repeated those words in my head, for whatever reason, it was Sayu's face that I saw.

I looked at my watch again. It was ten PM on the dot.

Would Sayu be waiting for me? Or maybe she was tired and had already turned in for the night.

Either way, I felt a little bad about what I'd done.

I'd contacted her as soon as my plans had changed, but I knew when I sent the message, she would already have begun preparing dinner.

I would have to eat the leftovers for breakfast tomorrow morning.

My pace quickened while I was lost in thought, and before I knew it, I was standing in front of my home. It really did feel like I got home faster when I had something on my mind.

I turned the key in the lock, but there was no *click* sound like I'd expected.

"Huh...? It was left unlocked."

I cocked my head in confusion and opened the door.

"Sorry I'm late. Sayu! You left the door unlocked."

I stepped through the door and called out to her but immediately sensed that something was off. I just couldn't tell what it was.

Normally, Sayu would answer and come right to the door, but I was met with silence today.

"Is she asleep...?"

I took off my shoes and headed into the living room, but Sayu was nowhere to be seen.

"Huh...?"

Sayu was almost always in the living room. Maybe she'd gone to the restroom?

I knocked on the restroom door, but there was no answer.

"Hey! Sayu?"

I knocked on the door to the adjoining changing room before opening it, but the bathroom light was off. Cold sweat began to seep out of my pores.

I opened the door to the bath to check inside, but she wasn't in there, either.

"...Maybe she went to the convenience store?"

I wouldn't have minded if that was the case, but I knew she didn't like going out to buy things unless she had to, so it was hard to imagine.

I took out my smartphone and opened the messaging app.

Hey. Where are you?

After typing in the message and sending it, I heard a cheerful beep coming from the living room.

"...Whoa, what?"

I hurried back into the living room to find the cell phone I'd bought for Sayu lying there, left behind.

My cold sweat showed no signs of stopping.

Even if she had gone out, would she have left her cell phone behind?

I wasn't sure if she was the type who took her cell phone everywhere, so I

may have been overthinking things, but even so...

I couldn't shake my unease.

What if someone had broken into the apartment and abducted Sayu?

The moment that thought entered my mind, I jumped into action.

I frantically shoved my shoes back on my feet and dashed out the front door.

The neighborhood, which I usually found completely unremarkable, suddenly felt incredibly dark and foreboding.

Chapter 15 Nightmare

“Are you sure?” he asked, squeezing my shoulders.

He had a kind air about him, this man. His face was above average. Not really my type, though.

I’d already forgotten his name.

“It’s fine.”

I tried my best to give him a confident, enthusiastic smile.

He nodded and began to touch me. Then our bodies connected.

“Does it feel good?” he asked.

“Yeah.” I nodded.

To be honest, it hurt.

But I wanted it to hurt.

“Misaki...!” he called out to me.

It wasn’t my actual name, but it was the name I had given him.

“Yesss.” I let out a sweet moan and tried to make it sound convincing.

I knew that would be enough for him.

I couldn’t even tell whether or not I liked the way it felt.

I just knew that my insides were throbbing a little, and my entrance was tingling with pain.

Those two sensations put me at ease.

Ahhh. I have a real body after all, I thought.

When I opened my eyes, the room was dark.

“Huh...?”

I bolted upright and looked over at the clock. It was just past nine PM.

When I saw the time, I froze. I hadn't even started preparing dinner. There was no way I could get it ready by the time Mr. Yoshida came home.

Ever since he'd entrusted me with the housework, I always made sure to have a meal and a bath ready for him when he got back. I felt that was my responsibility.

I was just about to message him to say that dinner would be late when I saw I had an unread message.

It was from Mr. Yoshida.

I'm going to see a movie with a coworker. We'll be at the theater close by in the train station. I'll be home late, so go ahead and eat before I get back.

I read the message and felt my whole body relax.

“...Thank goodness.”

It didn't make falling asleep in the middle of the day any more excusable, but at least I hadn't caused Mr. Yoshida any trouble.

Just as I settled down, I realized that my body was damp with sweat.

The cold sensation that followed was accompanied by the memory of my dream, sending goose bumps all over my body.

Things I hadn't thought about, or rather, that I had chosen not to think about since coming here, kept flooding my mind.

Meeting the mysteriously kind Mr. Yoshida had brought some peace into my life. Even I was aware of the change.

Still, there was no erasing the path I'd walked to get here, and it felt like the reality of my past was finally hitting me.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

The next thing I knew, his name fell from my lips.

When I realized what I was saying, it brought home what a complete fool I was.

The first time I'd stayed with a stranger, I'd thought I was prepared for what would happen. I'd run away from my family, and this was the price I had to pay to survive.

I thought that to escape one life of hardship, enduring other hardships was necessary.

I numbed myself to everything...or at least, that was the plan.

The truth was, I always felt it deep down. I was disgusted and uncomfortable with what I was doing, but I cast those feelings aside. That was how I'd made it this far.

And then I met Mr. Yoshida.

He'd rejected everything I offered him, yet he still took me in. He perplexed me, moved me, and now he was making me anxious.

I was such a selfish, weak, and stupid person.

Mr. Yoshida, on the other hand, was kind. He really was the kindest person I had ever met.

He kept a strict eye on other people, but it was out of concern for their well-being. He pretended to put himself first, but he was always tuned in to the pain of those around him.

The reason he was so kind to me must be because I appeared that pitiful to him.

It was so strange.

Since I had run away...from home and all my tangled connections, the only thing I had ever thought about was how long it would take until the next person threw me out.

How long would this one let me stay? For how many months, how many weeks...or how many days, even?

That was my metric for life.

This time, however, was different.

I didn't want Mr. Yoshida to throw me out.

Even more, I probably wanted him to like me.

That isn't to say I wanted him to love me or anything. I hoped to cheer him on in love and see him find happiness.

However, I did wish that he'd like me enough to allow me to play a part in his life.

That's why...what I was most afraid of was his kindness.

If he threw me away, what value could I ever hope to find in myself after that?

I still didn't know what conditions I needed to meet to prevent him from coming to hate me.

What did he want from me? Was I already meeting his conditions?

The more I thought about it, the more anxious I felt.

I'm going to see a movie with a coworker. We'll be at the theater close by in the train station. I'll be home late, so go ahead and eat before I get back.

I looked down again at Mr. Yoshida's message and considered its meaning some more.

Was this *coworker* a woman? He hadn't written "boss," so it couldn't be Ms. Gotou, the woman Mr. Yoshida was in love with.

Plus, Mr. Yoshida wasn't the type to voluntarily make stops on his way home from work, let alone go to a movie.

I had to assume he'd been invited there, and if that was the case, it must have been a woman.

Was it the same woman he had gone drinking with?

Mr. Yoshida had told me about his feelings for Ms. Gotou, but what about this other lady? She might be in love with him. And if so, what would they do after they finished watching the movie?

Once I had started imagining it, I couldn't stop. I knew it wasn't any of my business, but the more I thought, the more anxious I felt.

I looked at the clock. It was just past nine thirty PM.

Mr. Yoshida had sent the message at seven thirty PM.

"The movie...should be over soon."

I usually never had thoughts like these.

I knew I was being stupid, but still, I couldn't stop myself.

I put on some socks, slipped on my loafers, and ran out of Mr. Yoshida's apartment, still in my loungewear.

I was just going to stand in front of the movie theater. Once I saw Mr. Yoshida and his date, I would go home. That was all.

Any reasonable person would know that I was never going to find them. I didn't have the first clue what movie they were watching, and if I wanted to run into Mr. Yoshida, I'd have to get there at the exact time when he would leave the movie theater. There were crowds of people in front of the station, too.

It was entirely unrealistic of me to think I'd be able to spot Mr. Yoshida in these conditions.

At least, it should have been.

Whether I was lucky or unlucky, I spotted him as soon as I reached the movie theater.

A cute woman in a suit had her arms wrapped around him in a hug.

I froze in place. It was as if my body had suddenly turned to stone.

Mr. Yoshida was making a face I'd never seen before. He looked frantic, troubled, and embarrassed all at the same time.

Instantly, I recalled the day Mr. Yoshida had gone drinking with Ms. Gotou.

When I hugged him, trying my best to cheer him up, his smile had been a little distressed. He had patted me on the shoulder and said, *"Okay, that's enough."*

As much as I didn't want to acknowledge it, I realized what was going on.

Deep down, Mr. Yoshida didn't see me as a woman. Not even a little bit.

The lady embracing him outside the movie theater, however, was definitely a woman in his eyes.

I could tell from his expression.

"There's nothing wrong with that," I whispered, quiet enough so only I would hear. "It's no big deal. Nothing to get stressed about."

When I could finally move my body again, I turned my back to the movie theater and started the walk home.

I was going home. I needed to go home so I could greet Mr. Yoshida when he came back, just like I always did. I wasn't going to let him see that anything was wrong.

I'd apologize for not having dinner prepared and suggest he go ahead and bathe.

I took one step, then another, then stopped.

I suddenly realized my vision was blurry.

"Huh...?"

Tears were streaming down my cheeks. I was crying, and by the time I noticed, there was no stopping it.

"Why?"

Passing people cast suspicious glances my way, and I hurriedly started walking.

I wiped my face with the sleeve of my sweatshirt, but they kept coming.

The image of Mr. Yoshida's expression when that unfamiliar woman had hugged him kept coming back into my head.

"Why...? Why...?"

Why do I hate it so much?

As soon as that question popped into my head, I realized what feeling was growing inside me.

“...Ha-ha, no way.”

The wet tears running down my face didn't make my laugh any less dry.

This was jealousy.

I was envious of some woman I didn't even know.

A woman who brought out expressions in Mr. Yoshida that I couldn't.

I wanted to have him all to myself—it was so childish.

“...I'm so, so...”

My heart hurt so much, it felt like someone had put a knife through it.

It was just too much to take.

“I'm...so stupid!”

A sob escaped me, and before I knew it, I was running.

If things kept going like this, I would definitely get in the way of Mr. Yoshida's happiness.

I was gripped by the intense feeling that I shouldn't go home.

But I had nowhere else to go.

I didn't know where I was heading; I simply breathed in and out and kept running like an idiot.

*

After parting ways with Mr. Yoshida, I passed through the station gate and went down the stairs to the platform. And then I stopped.

“It's kind of annoying...to just go home like this.”

I recalled Mr. Yoshida's expression as he saw me off, and it irked me a little. He resembled a parent seeing their child off at day care.

It had given me a thrill to shock him a little earlier, but even if he saw me as a woman, he wasn't romantically interested at all. I could tell from the way he'd acted today.

I had known from the beginning, but it was still disheartening.

That was probably why I'd stopped. I felt as though going home would be giving in somehow, and resistance to the idea welled up within me.

I didn't feel like chasing after him or trying to do anything about it. From the way he was glancing at his clock, I was sure he'd already headed home. Even if I was to chase after him, I had no idea which way he'd gone.

For that reason, I decided to follow wherever my feet might take me and go for a walk around the neighborhood, enjoying the scenery along the way.

Acting quickly on whatever I set my mind to was one of my few strong points.

I exited through the gates and glanced around the front plaza of the station.

Looking at it again, it was pretty big. It had a theater, restaurants, and a department store. And yet, I was sure Mr. Yoshida barely used any of them. The thought amused me.

I had a feeling I had overheard Mr. Yoshida saying he lived more than ten minutes away from the station.

"All right. This way, then."

I found a somewhat dim, sparsely populated boulevard and randomly decided I would take it.

I didn't necessarily dislike the busy, bustling crowds at the station front, but streets with a silent, deserted atmosphere to them were much more to my liking.

Mr. Yoshida may have walked down this boulevard...or maybe not. Either way, I had a strange feeling as I walked along it.

"Come to think of it..." I muttered to myself. Fortunately, there weren't many people around to hear me.

Come to think of it.

I had never expected to find myself so preoccupied with romance.

I had a particular fondness for movies, and I really enjoyed the ones with love stories. However, whenever I watched them, I appreciated them as a

completely neutral third party, as if the story had nothing to do with me.

It was likely because I was sure I'd never meet a man as wonderful as the ones in those stories. The men in my world were depressingly insignificant and selfish people.

To be honest, I was pretty sure I'd gotten hired at my current workplace because the old geezers at the company thought I was cute.

During my interview with the higher-ups, I felt like Ms. Gotou was the only staff member who was truly trying to assess my actual abilities. I probably wouldn't have been hired if she'd had a bigger say at the meeting.

The older managers' approval got me the position, and they had been fawning over me ever since.

I quickly realized that, at my workplace, giving only a mediocre performance made my life a lot easier than going the extra mile ever would. I'd pretend to be incompetent, listen to the geezers' incomprehensible explanations, then show a little progress. Then I'd smile and say, "It's all thanks to you!" This was how my workday typically went. I kept both external pressures and my efforts to a minimum. I figured I'd just continue along passively until I had saved up a good amount of money.

During that period, I was transferred to Mr. Yoshida's project.

Mr. Yoshida was a truly great supervisor. He refused to accept my "ineptitude" and never gave up trying to get me to improve. Despite this, he didn't have a superiority complex toward me, even though I was a younger colleague who wasn't as good at my job as he was. He never looked down on me. He was simply strict in his assessment.

For the first time since I'd become an adult and joined the workforce, I felt like someone had seen me for who I was. I had been unconscious of it at the time, but it had made me very happy.

And so I doubled down on my performance as an "inept worker." Like a child, I watched Mr. Yoshida's reactions with a mix of anticipation and anxiety, wondering how far I could push him until he broke. Yet he never did.

Before I knew it, I found myself watching him whenever we were at work. I

soon came to realize that he was in love with Ms. Gotou. It was obvious.

Oh, I see, I had thought. He puts so much passion into his work because he wants to impress Ms. Gotou. But it soon became apparent that wasn't the case. Even when Ms. Gotou was temporarily transferred to a subsidiary branch for a few days, Mr. Yoshida still did his best. In fact, it seemed to me that he worked even harder than when she was there. He would sit at his desk, complaining all day to Mr. Hashimoto—the man in the seat beside him—but he'd still keep an eye on the other project members while he handled his own assignments. He must have been a serious and responsible person by nature.

I was well aware I wasn't the only person he was kind to. He was kind to everyone.

The moment I realized this, I felt my feelings for him turn into love.

“Oh?”

I had come to a fork in the path. One direction went downhill to a darker trail; the other went up a flight of stairs, seeming to open up into a much wider area ahead.

Having already had my fill of darkness, I chose the path that promised an open field and continued my walk. I actually liked climbing stairs. I found focusing on each step very pleasant.

As I walked along the path, I realized that it was lined by more streetlights, making it brighter and brighter. At the top of the stairs, a well-kept park spread out before me, its lawn thick with grass.

“Whoa, this is pretty nice!”

I took a look around and noticed an area with a number of wooden benches.

“So this is one of those parks designed for parents to chat while their kids play on the lawn, huh?”

I glanced around and saw that slightly elevated apartments surrounded the park. It must have been intended for their use.

Spots with this much greenery really were my favorite. The neighborhood around my place was super developed, so there was no space to build a park

like this.

I headed for the benches, feeling drawn to them, and took a seat.

There was a paved area a small distance away from where I was sitting where some young boys were practicing skateboarding. They were the only people I could see.

A place with so few people was perfect for relaxing and thinking through things.

I didn't mind going home late tonight as long as I didn't miss the last train, so I decided to sit in the park for a while and immerse myself in the lingering memories of my mini date with Mr. Yoshida.

But before I could start, I realized I was getting a little hungry.

Come to think of it, I'd skipped dinner and gone straight to the movie theater after work.

"There must be something in here..."

I turned to dig through my bag in search of a snack to tide me over when something I hadn't noticed before entered my field of view.

"Ahhh!"

I yelped and jumped up from the bench.

Someone was sitting behind the bench next to mine, clutching their knees to their chest.

"You... You scared me!"

The person had long hair, so I figured it was probably a girl. She was wearing a rough-looking sweat suit.

Apparently startled by my screaming, she raised her head from her knees. She was young, clearly a minor. I looked at her feet and saw she was wearing a pair of loafers. She must be in high school.

For a few seconds, we stared at each other blankly. Then the girl began to speak.

"Oh... You're the..."

“Hmm?”

“Uh, never mind...”

She emphatically shook her head side to side, then pressed her lips together.

“You’re a high schooler, right?” I asked. “What are you doing out this late? It’s past ten PM. If you don’t get home, the police will pick you up.”

At my warning, a complicated expression crossed her face, and she dropped her gaze to the ground.

“I don’t...know where to go.”

Those words were enough for me to grasp her situation.

She must have been a runaway.

It would be a different story if she were a college student, but running away as a high schooler was difficult. Unless they got lucky, kids who looked especially young would be taken into custody immediately if they so much as tried to use the train. Those who were smart enough to consider that were limited to wandering around their own neighborhood.

“...Well, as long as you’re with a guardian, they’ll leave you alone.”

I had spoken unconsciously.

I understood the feeling of wanting to flee from home and set your thoughts free from daily life.

The girl continued to stare at me with a hollow expression. I sat back down on the bench and continued to speak.

“I’ll sit here with you until I have to leave for the last train, so feel free to stay and think things over, okay?”

When she heard what I had said, the girl’s eyes instantly started to well up with tears, and then she bit down on her lip.

She hung her head for a moment before nodding.

“...Thank you very much.”

“Not at all.”

Any child who could mind her manners couldn't be bad.

I carried on digging through my bag, my thoughts becoming more and more like an old lady's.

At last, I found my target: some packets of brown-rice bran biscuits that I'd set aside in case I got hungry.

I took two out and began to unwrap the packaging from one of them.

Gurgle-gurgle-gurgle.

Just then, I heard a stomach grumbling—and this time, it wasn't mine.

I looked to the bench beside me, where the girl was still burying her face in her knees, not moving an inch. Her ears were poking out slightly, and I could see that they'd turned bright red.

"Pfft!"

I couldn't help but laugh before offering the girl the other packet I was holding.

"Want one?"

The girl looked up, her troubled gaze wandering for a moment before she gave a sharp nod.

"All right, here. What's your name?"

"Thank you very much... My name's...Aka—"

The girl suddenly stopped mid-sentence with a jolt. After letting a breath escape from her nose, her expression relaxed.

"I'm Sayu."

"Sayu, huh? Good name. I'm Yuzuha."

It was probably a fake name. She must have been about to give me her real one but stopped herself.

This girl was more clever than I'd expected. I liked talking with smart kids.

I had intended to enjoy this time by myself, but meeting someone like this was just as fun.

I chewed on my biscuit as I wondered what topic of conversation to lead with.

Chapter 16 True Colors

“Have you run away from home?”

After a moment’s silence, Miss Yuzuha had posed me this question. Her tone was unusual.

It didn’t sound like she was interrogating me, but she wasn’t simply asking a random question, either. She was curious, but I could tell by the warmth in her voice that she wasn’t going to pressure me for an answer.

“It’s...kind of like that.”

The truth was that I had run away from home more than half a year ago. Right now, it was Mr. Yoshida’s apartment that I was running from.

In fact, this laid-back, bran-biscuit-munching woman was the reason I’d given up on going back.

What was she doing hanging out by herself in a place like this anyway? The question nagged at me, but there was no point wasting my time on it.

“Wruwring aweh, huh...? If hum hagh behuwe.”

Miss Yuzuha struggled through a few words, still chewing on her bran biscuit at the same time. She swallowed it down and continued speaking.

“Sometimes you just want to get out, right? ...I ran away from home a bunch of times in my high school years, actually.”

“Did you?”

“My mom and I never saw eye to eye on anything. I’d often escape after we fought.”

A nostalgic-looking smile spread over Miss Yuzuha’s whole face. Then she cast

me a sidelong glance.

“Why did you run away, Sayu?”

I struggled to find words. Why didn't I want to go back to Mr. Yoshida's apartment anyway? I didn't have a clear answer.

As I hesitated, Miss Yuzuha looked away and then spoke again, as if passing me a ball.

“Fighting with your folks... Or maybe life at home's so happy that it bores you... Everyone has their reasons.”

None of her guesses were correct.

Even so, the phrase *so happy* struck a chord with me.

“Do you get along with your parents? Are they kind?” Miss Yuzuha continued with more questions.

He wasn't my parent, but I felt I should talk about Mr. Yoshida. She was asking me why I was here right now, after all.

“We get along well... At least, I think so. And yes, unbelievably kind.”

Miss Yuzuha glanced in my direction when I answered, then gave a perfunctory, “I see.” Then she whispered, “But you still ran away?”

It didn't sound accusatory; it was more to confirm a fact.

This was strange. Just moments earlier, I'd had my guard up around her, and imagining the scene of her embracing Mr. Yoshida was enough to make me feel sick.

But now, as I spoke to her, I could feel my innermost thoughts being coaxed out of me one after the other.

“I don't think unconditional kindness...actually exists.”

Miss Yuzuha's shoulders flinched at my words. Then she turned to face me. She cocked her head slightly, clearly waiting for me to continue.

“You always need some kind of motivation...to be kind to others.”

“I think so, too,” replied Miss Yuzuha, nodding.

“At home...there’s someone who treats me with unbelievable compassion. But I don’t understand why...”

Words rose steadily from deep inside my heart; I was shocked at just how smoothly they flowed, forming into sentences as they left my mouth. I wondered why I was talking so openly to someone I had only just met and, moreover, someone whose existence should be an inconvenience to me. Still, the words didn’t stop coming.

“If, one day, I stopped being needed by them... If they abandoned me... I couldn’t stand thinking about it, and I had to leave.”

“So that’s why you ran away?”

I nodded, and Miss Yuzuha sighed quietly.

“...Well, I do understand where you’re coming from.”

Miss Yuzuha swung her legs back and forth as she dragged out her words.

“I don’t think there’s such a thing as unconditional kindness, either... But sometimes, you find a person who offers you that kindness regardless.”

Miss Yuzuha, who’d previously been talking about the subject somewhat distantly, now seemed a little more passionate about what she was saying.

“No matter how much you question why they’re being so kind, you never get to the bottom of it. Even so, once you start thinking about it, you just can’t stop.”

She paused to let out an amused snort.

“And before you know it, you’re obsessed with them.”

Ah, I knew who she was talking about. I glanced at Miss Yuzuha’s face from the corner of my eye. Could she make it any more obvious?

She was talking about Mr. Yoshida, and she was head over heels for him.

We were both purposely vague and speaking about the same person. At this point, though, I was the only one who’d realized it.

“Fear is such a troublesome thing. It can stir us to action, but it can also freeze us in our tracks,” Miss Yuzuha remarked suddenly.

I lifted my gaze, which had naturally drifted toward the ground, and my eyes met hers. She was peering straight at me.

“I heard that in a movie once and thought, *Oh, that makes a lot of sense.*”

Miss Yuzuha continued staring into my eyes as she spoke.

“You must be so afraid right now, Sayu. That’s why you’re feeling stuck.”

Now that she’d put it into words, I knew it was true. I was terrified of being a burden to Mr. Yoshida and of him possibly rejecting me, and I was frightened that I’d lose the only place where I felt like I belonged.

“But if you let fear keep you from acting, then nothing will change, and you’ll stay scared forever.”

With that, Miss Yuzuha suddenly stood up from her bench and stretched.

“So, don’t you think it’s better to do something about it instead?”

Her eyes stayed fixed on mine as she spoke; it was a pointed stare that I found difficult to meet in my anguished state. She had depth to her, but more than that, she was an incredibly honest person.

She must have acted, and the result was the embrace from earlier.

“Well, there are times when taking action doesn’t change things, either, of course...”

Miss Yuzuha gave a self-deprecating smile, then plopped back down on the bench.

“Are you talking about the person you mentioned earlier?”

I already knew the answer, but I asked anyway. Miss Yuzuha’s gaze dropped to the ground, and she nodded.

“Yep. I did my best to get his attention, but he didn’t seem to notice. I’m not even on his radar.”

That couldn’t be true. She was the one who had brought out that unfamiliar expression in Mr. Yoshida. I didn’t think he’d make a face like that for just anyone; it had to be because he saw her as a “woman.”

But I couldn’t tell her that. I couldn’t admit that I’d been spying on them.

“Still, it’s better than doing nothing at all. If I’d simply waited around and done nothing, I would have regretted it when I didn’t get what I wanted...”

Miss Yuzuha spoke emphatically, hurling each word at the ground.

“It’s worth it to know that you did everything, and it still didn’t work out.”

I knew she wasn’t really talking to me; she was working through her own emotions.

Even so, her words resonated deep within me.

For half a year—no, since long before then—all I’d been doing was escaping. I’d been running and running from my fears, never knowing how far I would get, all so I could keep on “doing nothing.” I came up with scheme after scheme and never found any answers to anything.

From my perspective, the woman in front of me was honest, unyielding, and beautiful.

“Don’t give up yet,” I said, the words spontaneously flowing from my mouth.

Miss Yuzuha looked at me, a little startled.

“It’d be irresponsible of me to tell you that things will all work out, but...Miss Yuzuha, your straightforward, honest feelings...will definitely make a difference in his heart... At least, I think so.”

I chose my words slowly and carefully, and when I finished, Miss Yuzuha’s eyes were bright with the beginning of tears.

She turned away from me, looking a bit embarrassed, and scratched the tip of her nose.

“I didn’t expect a pep talk...,” she said with a pout, then she paused for a moment. “Thanks.”

The word came out in a soft, hushed tone.

“Not at all...”

Silence washed over us, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. Instead, it was strangely calming.

A couple of minutes earlier, my heart had been gripped with a deep,

inconsolable sadness. Now that feeling had been replaced with a sense of peace. I really was such a child.

“I don’t know if the one you’re worried about is a family member, a boyfriend, or someone else, but...”

Miss Yuzuha stood up from her bench once more, took a few quick steps toward mine, and seated herself right beside me.

“If you truly want to stay a part of that person’s life and want to feel needed by them, there’s something you have to do first.”

Miss Yuzuha took my hand in hers and gripped it tightly as she spoke. The night air had chilled my hands, but hers were very warm. I was unexpectedly flustered.

“What’s that...?” I asked her.

She stared straight into my eyes and maintained the silence for a few seconds. Her stare was so direct, it was making me nervous. Still, I was unable to look away. I simply blinked and waited for her to continue.

“You need to show your true colors.”

“My true colors...?”

“Yes, exactly. You need to show them your actual self, all the parts that make up who you are. Then you need to ask that person, ‘Will you stay with me despite all this?’ ”

Miss Yuzuha stopped there and suddenly let go of my hand. I felt the chill seep back into it the moment she released her grip.

“I think we all have some part of ourselves that we want to hide from others, but it’s tough to ask someone to accept you when you’re still keeping so much of yourself from them.”

“...I see.”

As I responded, I thought about Mr. Yoshida.

I had the feeling he was intentionally avoiding asking me about a number of things, and I’d been more than happy to take advantage of that.

However, Miss Yuzuha was right. It was naive and selfish to ask that he accept me when I was still hiding so much from him.

“And besides...,” Miss Yuzuha continued. “This *incredibly kind* person you’ve been talking about has shown you nothing but unconditional kindness so far, right, Sayu?”

“...Right. So much so that it scares me.”

“Then they might never stop.”

Her words caught me by surprise.

“They’re probably kind because they have a lot of trust in you. So...why don’t you try trusting them a little in return?”

She was absolutely right.

Had Mr. Yoshida ever once betrayed me? We might not have spent that much time together yet, but he had never once mistreated me.

“You’re...totally right.”

I had gotten tangled up in my thoughts, scared myself, and then run away.

It was all so stupid.

“...Thinking of heading home?”

A gentle smile came to Miss Yuzuha’s face, and she looked me straight in the eyes.

I knew she wasn’t trying to force me. It was a question, and she was asking it out of pure kindness.

There was no point in wasting any more time at the park. Mr. Yoshida had probably started worrying about me by now.

“Yes...I...”

I’m going home.

That was what I had intended to say, but I was interrupted by the sound of someone’s shoes slamming into the ground. Miss Yuzuha and I both looked toward the source of the clamor.

A person had appeared along with the sound. It was the person I'd been thinking about only a moment earlier.

"Sayu!" he shouted, making my shoulders jump.

Mr. Yoshida, who was still wearing his suit from work, jogged over. Sweat was pouring down his face.

"...What the hell are you doing here?"

"Uh, I..."

"You even left your cell phone, so I was so worri—"

He started to speak, still gasping for breath, but it wasn't long before his gaze shifted to the person sitting next to me. The moment he saw her, he froze.

"...I thought you went home, Mishima."

"You too, Mr. Yoshida..."

Miss Yuzuha's face was the picture of bewilderment as her eyes darted back and forth between Mr. Yoshida and me.

"Uh...is...?"

The corners of Miss Yuzuha's mouth turned up in a troubled smile, and the words that came out sounded strained.

"Mr. Yoshida, is this your daughter?"

"How could she be?!"

"I guess not. Ah-ha-ha!"

Now it was Mr. Yoshida's turn to look bewildered. He let his gaze shift back and forth between the two of us before quickly fixing his glare on me.

"You'd better have a good explanation for this."

A good explanation.

Those words gave me a strange feeling. It must have sent him into a panic when he found out I was gone.

Usually, people were relieved when I finally disappeared from their lives.

I was reminded of what Miss Yuzuha had said earlier.

“So...why don’t you try trusting them a little in return?”

Mr. Yoshida had been nothing but good to me, yet my deep-seated fears prevented me from trusting him.

I knew I needed to confront these feelings head-on.

I nodded slowly.

“I don’t know if you’ll think it’s a good one, but...I’ll explain.”

Upon hearing my response, the wrinkles between Mr. Yoshida’s brows finally smoothed out, and he sighed. I saw a drop of sweat run from his cheek to his chin, and the sight made me feel happy and a little guilty.

“Uhhh, Mr. Yoshida, wait!”

Miss Yuzuha stood up and made a great display of waving her hand in front of Mr. Yoshida’s face.

“What?!”

*“Don’t *what* me! Um, she’s a high school girl, isn’t she?”*

“That’s right.”

*“Don’t *that’s right* me! Um, are you two living together?”*

“Well, yeah.”

*“What do you mean, *well, yeah...*?”*

Her eyes darted around in a clear sign of distress as she scratched her head.

“So that’s why you’ve been heading home early...,” Miss Yuzuha mumbled quietly, then loudly clicked her tongue. *“What the hell is going on?!”*

Then she fell silent and slumped back onto her bench, loosely stretching her legs out over the ground.

“So Sayu and I were both talking about the same person... Ha-ha, that’s kind of funny.”

Miss Yuzuha laughed carelessly, then glanced my way.

“That conversation is just between us, okay?”

“Ah... Yes, of course.”

When I nodded, Mr. Yoshida eyed me suspiciously.

“Your *conversation*?”

“...Didn’t you just hear her say it was between us?”

At that, a flustered Mr. Yoshida looked back and forth between us a few times before shrugging in defeat.

“Mr. Yoshida!”

Miss Yuzuha suddenly raised her voice, loud enough to make both Mr. Yoshida and me jump.

“What?!”

“You’d better have a good explanation for this.”

She tried for a threatening tone as she repeated Mr. Yoshida’s words from a moment ago.

He forced a smile, then nodded gently.

“I know. I’ll explain everything the next chance I get.”

Miss Yuzuha stared at Mr. Yoshida and sighed. Then she sprang to her feet with a playful smirk on her face.

“Okay then. Since this feels like a ‘family matter,’ I’m going to go home!”

“What were you doing here in the first place?!” Mr. Yoshida retorted.

“Where I go and what I do isn’t really any of your business, Mr. Yoshida.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, then picked up her bag.

“Did your heart race when you ran into me here?”

“Not really... Ow!”

Miss Yuzuha smacked him with her bag and laughed.

“Okay! I’ll see you around, Sayu.”

“Sure... See you.”

Miss Yuzuha waved, and I gave a quick bow in return. Then her gaze shifted to Mr. Yoshida.

“Bye, Mr. Yoshida. I’m looking forward to hearing your *good explanation*.”

“Fine.”

Miss Yuzuha flashed him a sidelong glance, then turned on her heel and headed back down the flight of stairs.

I wasn’t sure how to put it, but I thought she seemed like a really cool person.

I knew she had a firm grasp of what was truly important to her, deep down in her heart.

“Hey, Mishima!”

Mr. Yoshida suddenly raised his voice beside me, causing me to flinch. Miss Yuzuha turned back toward us in surprise.

“Take care!”

His words sent her into a fit of laughter, and I could see her whole body shaking.

“Sure thing, Daddy!”

She responded in an equally loud voice, and I couldn’t help but chuckle as well.

Mr. Yoshida scratched the back of his neck in a show of embarrassment, then waved Miss Yuzuha off with a shooing gesture.

After watching her disappear down the stairs, he glanced at me out of the corner of his eye.

“All right. Want to head home?”

His casual suggestion made me feel warm and fuzzy inside for some reason.

I fought back tears and nodded.

“...Yeah, let’s go home.”

Mr. Yoshida sighed once, patted me on the back, and started walking.

His shoulders looked so broad from a few paces ahead.

Chapter 17 Skin

The first thing I did when we arrived home was take a shower.

Not only had the sweat I'd worked up from running around the city left my skin all sticky, but I felt like some hot water might help clear my mind.

It also occurred to me that Sayu would need some time to think through what she wanted to say. While I was showering, she could organize her thoughts and calm down for the conversation ahead.

As I let the hot water run over me, my mind was filled with a mixture of relief and doubt.

First and foremost, I was relieved that I had found Sayu. Even better, nothing terrible had happened, and she was unharmed. While I was running around searching for her, I had even imagined a thug might have kidnaped her.

However, finding her safe and sound brought up even more questions.

Why was she out so late at night? And why hadn't she contacted me?

Sayu definitely would have let me know if she needed to run an errand before heading out. That was just the kind of person she was.

Yet she didn't contact me and left her smartphone behind.

As I mulled it over, it occurred to me that she might have left the apartment because she was fed up with being here. But if that was the case, it wouldn't make sense for her to leave all her other belongings behind.

It was also beyond me why she was with Mishima when I found her. Had they agreed to meet in front of the station? They didn't even know each other.

Still, it seemed unlikely that they had run into each other at the park by

accident...

The more I considered it, the further the answers seemed from my grasp.

“...It’d be quicker just to ask her.”

I knew that. However, I couldn’t stop my mind from spinning. I turned off the shower and stood up.

I left the bathroom before the whirlpool of my thoughts had the chance to engulf me entirely.

I dried off my hair and body roughly with a bath towel and then put on my underwear and pajamas before exiting the dressing room.

“I’m out of the bath, Sa—”

When I stepped out, I looked toward the living room and saw Sayu. My jaw dropped, and I stood frozen on the spot for a few seconds.

“You, uh...”

Thoughts rushed through my mind, but I couldn’t bring myself to say anything. After a pause, I was finally able to get a few words out.

“Put some clothes on.”

That was it.

Sayu didn’t move a muscle. For some reason, she was simply standing in the living room half naked and staring right at me.

All she was wearing were her bra and panties. They were simple and black with small, cute ribbons on the trim.

No, never mind all that. Why was she standing undressed in the living room? It didn’t seem like she had been changing, and she hadn’t even bothered covering her body when I walked in.

“Mr. Yoshida, I—”

“I’ll listen to what you have to say, but only after you put some clothes on.”

“I...”

“Save the chat for when you’re clothed, okay?”

“Listen to me.”

Sayu’s tone was serious. I couldn’t think of a good response, so I shut my mouth.

I had no idea what she wanted to talk about, but at the very least, the fact that she was in her underwear had to be connected.

“...Um, Mr. Yoshida, you might not think so, b-but...”

Sayu was stammering as she spoke. I was at a loss for what to do, so I simply avoided looking at her and listened.

I felt like it wouldn’t be right to keep staring at a high school girl in her underwear.

“I am...a woman, you know... Well, a girl, actually.”

“Um, I already knew that.”

Her phrasing made it sound like a shocking revelation, and it caught me off guard.

Evidently unsatisfied by my reply, Sayu shook her head.

“No! You don’t understand, Mr. Yoshida.”

“What don’t I understand?”

In response, Sayu started to walk toward me, one step at a time, not saying a word. I stepped back reflexively. The sight of a high school girl in her underwear coming toward me held an unusual intensity.

Once she reached me, she gazed up into my eyes from below.

“...Wh-what’s your problem?” I said.

“I think I have pretty big boobs for a high school girl.”

“Maybe you do.”

“And this high school girl with big boobs is standing right in front of you in her underwear.”

“Yeah. I keep telling you to put something on!”

“How do you feel about that?”

Sayu kept her eyes mercilessly fixed on mine as I continued to look in any direction but hers.

“I don’t feel anything. High school girls shouldn’t expose themselves to men like—”

“Do you want to do me?” she spat out, interrupting me and sending my thoughts screeching to a halt once more.

Suddenly, my mind came whirling back into action, along with a tinge of exasperation.

“Didn’t I tell you? If you casually try and seduce me, I’ll kick you out—”



“All the other guys I’ve met so far...”

As I started to reprimand her, Sayu interrupted me again. This time, she was almost shouting. I felt like my whole body was frozen in place by her intensity.

Sayu grabbed my pajama shirt and clenched onto it tightly. Her hands were shaking.

“All the other guys I’ve met so far...have wanted to do me.”

It was obvious from the way she called them *the other guys* that she wasn’t referring to boyfriends.

She was talking about the people she’d temporarily stayed with.

My heart ached for her.

From the first day when Sayu came into my home and told me her story, I’d kind of assumed that was what had happened. She always skirted around the topic, so I never asked directly.

However, watching her standing there, silent and shaking after everything she had said, made it apparent to me that I needed to ask.

“...Did you do it?”

I placed my hand over Sayu’s, still gripping my pajama shirt. After a moment’s hesitation, she gave a small nod.

I let out a sigh.

“...I see.”

“Are you disappointed...?”

“No... I don’t know. Sorry.”

I couldn’t clearly say “no,” and I felt terrible about it.

Simply put, my heart was a jumble of different emotions. I felt disappointed in men in general, angry about the whole thing, and confused as to why Sayu had let guys like that touch her.

“Don’t you want to do it with me, Mr. Yoshida...? Didn’t that thought ever cross your mind at all? Even just a little bit?” Sayu asked, wrapping her arms

around me. She rubbed her chest against mine.

I wanted to yell at her to stop it and shove her away, but the look on her face was so serious, so earnest, and I could tell there was sorrow and pain brimming just beneath the surface. I didn't have it in me to fight back.

"Hey," Sayu breathed out slowly, and her hand brushed over my private parts through my pants.

"Whoa, stop!"

"Not until you answer."

She looked me straight in the eyes as she ran her fingers over my pajama bottoms.

"Don't I turn you on?" she asked, slowly moving a finger to the waistline of my pants.

Sayu must have noticed after all that touching. If a woman comes on to me and presses her chest up against me like that, of course I'm going to react.

My lower body was firm evidence of that.

I let out a sigh and grabbed Sayu's hand, pulling it away from my pants.

"You do. Do you honestly believe there's a man out there who wouldn't be turned on after all that?"

When she heard this, Sayu's face turned bright red, and her eyes darted away.

"Why are you getting embarrassed? You're the one doing all of this. You've got to be kidding."

"I-I'm sorry..."

"It's fine—just let me go already, or I really *will* get mad."

"O-okay..."

She put some distance between us and gazed around the room before finally blushing and putting her hands in front of her chest.

"And now you're covering up? Go put some clothes on already..."

"I—I don't want to... I'm going to talk like this."

Why was she being so insistent?

I still didn't have a clue what it was she wanted to say or why all of this was necessary.

"Um... It's, uh..."

She struggled to find the words as her eyes roamed across the floor.

It was clear that she was trying hard to say something, so I kept my mouth shut.

"I was so desperate. I was desperate not to have to go back home. I would have done anything to avoid it."

The words gradually started coming out.

"Taking in a high school girl comes with its downsides. That goes without saying. If the cops find out, they'll arrest you on the spot. That's why...I thought I needed to give people an incentive to balance it out a bit."

Sayu fell silent for a moment and hung her head.

It seemed like she didn't want to say the main thing out loud.

"...So that *incentive* ended up being your body, huh?"

She hunched over in response to my question, then nodded slightly.

"...Yeah. At first, I really didn't want to...but once I'd gotten used to it, it felt totally normal to me."

"...I see."

"In fact, when I felt desired in that way, it was like I could be myself—like I was needed. That made me happy... It satisfied me."

"...Right."

I didn't know whether I was sad or angry.

I just didn't want to hear it.

And yet, Sayu wanted me to listen. That's why she was speaking so fervently.

There was no way I could plug up my ears and refuse.

My feelings were running in circles like they might surge out at any moment, and I fought with all my will to keep them suppressed. In the meantime, I kept my answers short.

“They’d all call me *‘cute,’* say it *‘felt good,’* and take advantage of me. And in return, they’d offer me their homes. It was easy to understand, and I liked that about it. And when the cost of letting me stay came to outweigh the benefits, they’d throw me out. Then I would start all over again.”

Sayu looked indifferent as she recounted her past, her tone of voice unconcerned. Her face was so blank that it was like she was reading out an account of somebody else’s life.

“That’s why I just can’t understand.”

She looked up and stared into my eyes.

“Why are you letting me stay, Mr. Yoshida?”

Her voice was incredibly soft, but I could feel the heat in her words.

“I’ve never given you anything. Even the housework... Anyone could do that. It might be convenient for me to do it, but there’s no reason why it has to be me. I cause you so much trouble, yet you’re always so kind to me. So much so...that I don’t know what to do...to make sure you won’t abandon me like the others.”

“You...”

I couldn’t form the words I wanted to say.

I knew she was making a good point.

There weren’t many people in this world who would accept the downsides of a situation if it didn’t also benefit them. But that was something she shouldn’t have had to worry about until she was an adult. And yet, here she was, a high school girl, so worried about it that she had even offered up her own body. Just thinking about it filled me with a deep sense of resentment.

“I really am a child. I’m stupid and helpless, and I don’t even understand myself... So unless someone wants something from me, I don’t know what to do.”

She drew closer to me again as she spoke.

Standing in front of me, she wrapped me in another embrace.

“If you’re not totally opposed to the idea...”

Her voice trembled slightly as she spoke with her head pressed into my chest.

“Have sex with me. I wouldn’t mind if it was with you, Mr. Yoshida. If you have sex with me, then I’ll feel a little— Urk! Hngh! Wh-what? That hurts...”

Not letting Sayu finish her sentence, I wrestled her into the tightest hug I possibly could.

“Mr. Yoshida... I can’t breathe...”

“Shut up.”

“What, why...? Wagh!”

I grabbed Sayu by the shoulders and, still holding on to her, shoved her against the wall of the hallway with a thud.

“Mr. Yoshida... Um...”

“No.”

“Huh?”

“I said no.”

I maintained eye contact with Sayu as I continued speaking. I must have been scowling. I just couldn’t think of a way to release all the tension that had built up in my face right then.

“Listen up, and I mean it.”

She blinked, confused, and nodded a few times.

“Honestly, I think you’re a very beautiful girl.”

“Huh?”

“As far as high school girls go, you’ve got good curves, a nice body, a pretty face, and you’re even great at doing the housework. You’re perfect.”

“Wh-where’s all this coming from?”

“But you’re still not my type.”

Sayu looked stunned.

“...Huh?”

“I’m not in love with you.”

Her jaw dropped, and she simply stared at me, continuing to blink.

“I don’t want to sleep with a woman I don’t love. Your body...I mean, it gets a reaction from me, but that doesn’t mean I want to see you naked, and I can say with absolute certainty that I don’t want to have sex with you. You asked me just now whether I was totally opposed to the idea. So here’s your answer: I am. You got that?”

My tirade came out in one long breath, and Sayu swallowed hard, seemingly overwhelmed. A few seconds went by with neither of us saying a word.

“...Ohhh-kay,” Sayu said finally, nodding.

“All good, then... Now get dressed already.”

“O-okay...”

I pointed at her discarded sweat suit in the living room, and Sayu hurriedly trotted over and pulled it back on. Finally, she was clothed.

Her exposed flesh no longer consuming my vision, I could feel myself relaxing at last. I fell to the floor and sat down right there in the hallway.

Every movement I had made and every word I had said had been to stop Sayu’s foolishness before it went too far. And with that goal accomplished, I was finally able to regain my composure enough to tell her something.

In my mind, the things I wanted to say began to form into words, one at a time.

“...You told me you never gave me anything, but that’s not true,” I murmured.

Sayu, now fully dressed, slowly headed over and sat down next to me on the floor.

“For me, home was really just a place to eat and bathe.”

The words came out of my mouth bit by bit. I could see that Sayu’s gaze was fixed on my profile.

“I’ve always enjoyed my job, and the harder I worked, the more money I saved, so it never bothered me that all I ever did was work.”

As I thought back on it, I realized how much the words I said rang true.

For the five years since I’d joined the company, all I could ever recall doing was working. Of course, there were some occasional nights out drinking or trips to the bowling alley with coworkers, but that was it.

Moreover, I had never dated anybody or taken any long vacations. All I did was work, work, work.

“I always thought that was enough for me. And I imagined that, if I started dating Ms. Gotou, it’d make my day-to-day life a little more fun.”

I was putting myself down a bit, and when I glanced at Sayu, she offered me a strained smile and exhaled through her nose. She was clearly unsure what to say.

“But then you came along, and...everything changed.”

And then Sayu had come along.

Words started spilling from my mouth without much thought behind them.

“There’s delicious food ready for me when I get home, and you’ve already run the bath. Not only that...but you’re there waiting for me, too.”

I heard Sayu, who was still sitting beside me, take in a deep breath.

“How should I put it...?” I continued. “You seem way too worried about becoming an ‘asset’ to the people you’re staying with...”

All this time, she’d been scared of how people perceived her and what they wanted from her.

I wanted to give Sayu a clear answer, and this was it.

“Just having you at home has made my life so much fun, Sayu.”

I peeked at her out of the corner of my eye as I spoke, and I could see her eyes glistening.

“Of course, I’d just been rejected by Ms. Gotou when I decided to take you in, so my loneliness might have had something to do with it. But now, whenever I

come home, you're here. We get to chat while we eat, and I'm not alone in the apartment at night. Those things have made this apartment so much more comfortable to live in. It's given me a reason to hurry back from work every day."

As I continued, huge teardrops started running down Sayu's cheeks. I wasn't sure why she was crying, but at the very least, I could tell that it wasn't from sadness.

"That's why I don't need anything from you."

I scratched my chin. I had thought I shaved this morning, but a little bit of stubble had already started growing back.

"I'm just a miserable, lonely old geezer, you know?"

That's right. I should have told her that sooner.

Ever since I picked her up, I had felt like I was the one who saved her, rather than the other way around.

For some reason or another, she had run away from home and ended up living with a bunch of deplorable men. I felt like it was my role to protect her and turn her back into a sensible high school girl, as self-righteous as it sounded.

I still felt that way, but that wasn't the whole story.

It wouldn't be fair of me to claim that it was.

"You can keep staying here until you feel like going back home."

It wasn't enough for me to just accept her. When you live with someone, you have to treat them as an equal. Anything less than that would be wrong.

"So will you do me that favor?"

At long last, I had voiced my true feelings. Sayu sobbed loudly, her head hung low.

She sniffled a few times before wiping the tears away with the hem of her sweatshirt. Then she lifted her head, revealing her tear-stained, scrunched-up face, and spoke in a shaky voice.

“Is that really what you want?” she questioned.

“Yeah. I just want you to stay with me.”

“...You’re such an unselfish, sad old geezer.”

“Right?”

Sayu giggled, tears still rolling down her face. I started to find it funny, too, and my shoulders shook with laughter.

She snickered and shuffled closer to me, still sitting on the floor. Then she rested her forehead on my shoulder.

“—nks.”

“What?”

“We make a pathetic pair.”

That was obviously not what she had been about to mumble just a second ago. Nevertheless, Sayu turned to look up at me.

“Now I feel bad for you, so I guess I’ll have to keep you company.”

And then she finally flashed me her familiar, carefree smile.

“Yeah, please do.”

High school girls were difficult for a geezer like me.

But for a high school girl like Sayu, geezers were probably pretty difficult to deal with, too.

Now that we had shared our weaknesses with each other, perhaps our real “life together” had finally begun.

Epilogue

The High School Girl in the Kitchen

“Mr. Yoshida, your beard.”

“What do you mean? I already shaved!”

“You missed a spot.”

“Huh?”

Sayu was standing in my simple kitchen preparing a rolled omelet. I headed back to the washroom, and sure enough, I had missed a spot on my chin. I clicked my tongue in irritation and turned the electric razor back on to tidy up the remaining hair.

“But you know...”

When I stepped back out of the washroom, Sayu started speaking again without looking up from the frying pan.

“It kind of suits you, having a few spots you missed.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what I said.”

She turned off the stove and shifted the freshly cooked fluffy omelet from the frying pan to a plate.

“Okay! It’s ready.”

“Looks delicious.”

“Help yourself to as much rice as you want. Oh, take this, too.”

Sayu handed me a bowl along with the plate of rolled omelet, then began

ladling miso soup out of the pot. She was so good at cooking that I always wondered if she was meant to be a housewife.

A few weeks had gone by since the night Sayu cornered me in her underwear.

By now, I was totally used to seeing Sayu doing the housework.

It had been difficult to explain the situation to Mishima... But in the end, it all worked out.

“Well, it is you, Mr. Yoshida. You’d never have it in you to lay a hand on a high school girl.”

Although she had been a little rude, Mishima had more or less accepted the circumstances of our situation.

Lately, I was bothered by how friendly Ms. Gotou had become all of a sudden. For some reason, she had started inviting me to lunch, and whereas she’d typically just eat a salad alone, she ordered much heavier meals whenever we ate together.

Of course, I wasn’t unhappy with this sudden turn of events, but not knowing why had me on pins and needles. It wasn’t good for my heart.

She would say something like, *“I thought I would show you my true self, Yoshida,”* with a charming smile on her face. She was toying with me, just like she always did.

The environment around me in the office may have changed a little, but things at home with Sayu continued problem-free.

I set the plate of rolled omelets down on the table and opened the rice cooker. As I scooped steamed rice into my empty bowl, my eyes happened to shift toward Sayu, and I paused to take in her appearance.

“Hey. Why’re you wearing your school uniform today?”

Sayu smirked in response and glanced in my direction.

“Does it suit me?”

“Of course it does; you’re a high schooler, after all.”

“That’s not what I mean...,” she protested, pouting. “I just thought it’d be nice

to dress up as a high school girl from time to time.”

“From time to time? Uniform or not, that doesn’t change who you are.”

“Well, yeah, but...”

Sayu walked into the living room carrying two bowls. She had made steamed rice, a rolled omelet with sausages, and miso soup. It wasn’t anything special, but it looked delicious.

“Thanks for the meal.”

“Sure. Dig in.”

She watched as I took my first bite, then continued where she left off.

“Whenever I wear this uniform, it’s obvious that I’m a high school girl, whether I like it or not.”

“Well, yeah.”

I took a sip of miso soup. It had just the right amount of saltiness, and its flavor warmed me to the core. I loved this feeling.

“I might be spending all my time in the kitchen cooking, but when I see what I’m wearing, it reminds me of who I really am.”

“I guess so.”

“It’s useful that way.”

She stuffed a bite of rolled omelet into her mouth as she spoke, then nodded in satisfaction.

Unable to make heads or tails of what she was saying, I offered an ambiguous grunt of acknowledgment.

“You know, I ran away from home because I didn’t like being a high school girl.”

My chopsticks froze mid-reach. She’d never told me that before.

“But now, how should I put it...?”

She glanced around the table for a moment, then gave me a big grin.

“Now, I’m kind of happy that I’m a high school girl.”

“...I see.”

I nodded and took another sip of miso soup.

There was still so much that I didn't know about Sayu.

After all, I didn't ask her about anything she didn't bring up first, and I didn't feel the need to, either.

The one thing I could say, though, was that I was pretty fond of that smile of hers.

“Well, you know,” I began. “School uniforms are...”

As I spoke, Sayu watched me as she took a large bite of white rice.

“Your school uniform is...nothing special, but...”

I should have told her it suited her, but I felt a little too embarrassed to put that into words.

“That natural smile of yours...looks perfect on you.”

I tried to make it sound like a throwaway comment, then took another bite of rolled omelet. It had just the right balance of saltiness and sweetness, and its texture was so fluffy.

It suddenly occurred to me that Sayu wasn't responding, so I looked up at her. We locked eyes, and I noticed that her face was beet red.

“What's wrong?”

“Uh, er, no... It's nothing. Heh-heh!”

She laughed, clearly dodging the question, and nibbled on some of her sausage.

She smiled from the heart more and more often lately. Those grins suited her age, and I found them adorable.

She'd experienced many awful things before, but I hoped she could at least loosen up while she was living here.

I wanted her to take her time and save up her energy to face whatever it was she needed to deal with.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

Hearing my name all of a sudden, I looked up to see Sayu, still staring at me.

“If I weren’t a high school girl,” she said, “would you have fallen for me?”

“Huh?”

My voice came out in a ridiculous-sounding squeak, making Sayu cackle and shake her head.

“I’m kidding; I’m kidding. You’re always so serious about everything. It’s funny.”

“You brat...”

If Sayu weren’t a high school girl...

The first image that came into my mind was of Sayu, a few weeks earlier, when she had approached me in only her underwear.

Had she been a bit older and not a high school girl—for example, if she were closer to my age...

“Have sex with me.”

Sayu’s voice replayed so vividly in my mind that goose bumps started to form all over my body. I shook away the memory and snapped back to the present.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s fine.”

I quickly scooped up some steamed rice and started chewing, avoiding the subject.

At the end of the day, she was just a high school girl. She was so much younger than me, and a little brat, to boot.

I repeated that in my mind as I swallowed the rice.

I took a deep breath in, then let it out again, and a single thought began to creep into my mind.

It was probably for the best that Sayu was a high school girl.

The emotions this thought brought up made me feel highly uncomfortable.

What difference would it make?

It was too early in the morning to be thinking about something this complicated. I took a long, slow sip of my miso soup. As I enjoyed the sensation of it slowly warming up my body, everything unimportant melted away from my mind.

“Mr. Yoshida, you’re eating pretty slowly. Are you all right for time?”

“Hmm? Oh...”

I looked at the clock to find that I had only five minutes before I needed to leave.

“Crap!” I muttered to myself, then frantically gulped down the rest of my breakfast.

I rushed to the washroom, quickly brushed my teeth, threw on my jacket, and grabbed my bag.

“All right, I’m off.”

Sayu walked to the entryway to see me out and gave a small wave as I jammed my feet into my leather shoes.

“Have a good day.”

The morning sun coming through the living room window was shining from behind her smiling face, and I had to squint slightly to look at her.

“...radiant.”

“Huh?”



“Uh, nothing. See you later.”

I stepped out the door, breathed in the sharp morning air, and slapped my cheeks with my hands.

We were acting just like newlyweds.

That thought, albeit brief, astonished me.

I didn't know for how long we would live like this.

However, whether by coincidence or fate, Sayu and I had met, and now we were living under the same roof.

I didn't have the faintest idea what might come our way in the future or how things would turn out, but I knew I didn't want to give up before I had to.

I looked back at the front door.

Until recently, my trips to and from home had always been solitary.

Now things were different.

It was still my apartment and where I set off from, but now, it was also Sayu's refuge: a place where she could feel safe and spend her days in peace.

The thought of working to protect this place filled me with a spurt of positive energy.

“All right, let's go,” I whispered to myself and set off for work.

I may have been an old geezer and Sayu a high school girl, but our life together was only just getting started.

Afterword

Nice to meet you. My name is Shimesaba.

I previously spent my time modestly writing stories on the web. I'm still in shock even now.

Thinking back, when I first began this story on *Kakuyomu*, I remember looking at the trends on the site and carelessly thinking, *Well, this will never be popular*. I had been enjoying myself writing a trendy *isekai* fantasy story when the character of Sayu suddenly popped into my head (I think it was when I was taking care of business on the throne). I was practically possessed with the desire to put pen to paper and did so immediately.

From such unplanned beginnings, this work has grown a large readership and even been singled out by an editor. For this, I feel extremely fortunate.

I think the fates of both people's stories come down to chance meetings, and I am genuinely happy that this story and the people who enjoy it were able to find each other.

And now for some acknowledgments.

First, to those who found this work in the vast expanse of the Internet and kindly read it, and to those who cheered me on, I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Next, a big thank-you to Editor W, who saw potential in this story and brought it all the way to publication. Or should I say I'm sorry? At any rate, I am in your debt.

Finally, to my illustrator, booota, who granted the characters shape and life; my proofreader, who pored over the manuscript much more closely than the

author; and everyone who helped bring this work to publication, please accept my heartfelt thanks.

Here's wishing that chance will bring my work to you again in the future. And with that, I will bring this afterword to a close.

Shimesaba

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