

Author • Yuishi Artist • Kagachisaku

volume

5

An Introvert's

# HOOKUP HICCUPS:

This **GYARU** Is Head Over Heels for Me!



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## Prologue: Changes Noticed, Changes Unnoticed

It started with an offhand remark.

“Is it just me, or do those two seem closer somehow?”

I didn’t know who’d said it, but the words definitely reached our ears. Nanami and I looked around, wondering which “two” the comment referred to. We immediately heard someone laugh and say, “You two, you morons.”

*Are we closer?* I wondered. Nanami and I looked at each other and tilted our heads in puzzlement. After all, we were behaving the same as usual. Seeing our reactions, though, the people around us continued murmuring that we had indeed stepped it up a notch, but it’s not like we meant to come off that way.

“Well, that’s to be expected, isn’t it?” Otofuke-san mumbled.

“I mean, of course you’d be closer than before,” Kamoenai-san said.

Seeing our clueless expressions, the two friends smiled in exasperation. Their voices were so soft that only Nanami and I could hear them, but it seemed that even they agreed.

After that, we ended up getting told the exact same thing at lunchtime and after school, by our classmates and even by our teachers. As we continued to wonder whether something had actually changed, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san tried to explain how they saw it.

“Seriously, you guys seem way closer than you used to,” Otofuke-san remarked.

“Yeah. I mean, it’d be crazy to claim that you weren’t,” Kamoenai-san said, giggling.

I still didn’t quite understand what they were talking about. I mean, sure, Nanami and I were holding hands as we spoke, but that was the same as always. That said, it had taken a while for us to get to that point too.

“Really? Aren’t we the same as always though?” Nanami asked, placing her



index finger on her cheek. Her friends both scratched their cheeks, their faces twitching.

“Uh, it’s not about physical distance or anything,” Otofuke-san explained. “It’s more like your emotional distance. Thinking about it, I guess you two were always physically close.”

“Yeah! It’s your whole atmosphere, though of course you’re literally close too.”

Were we really, though? In any case, they’d given us something else to think about. Atmosphere, huh? What an abstract explanation. Maybe that was why our classmates had been so vague.

“Are we really that different?” Nanami and I both asked simultaneously, making Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san burst into laughter. Even though it was just an accident, Nanami and I found ourselves blushing.

Once they’d finished laughing, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san grinned and took their leave, telling us they shouldn’t get in the way of the young, happy couple. *Oh, come on—we’re all the same age here*, I thought.

Still, as I watched the two walk away, I felt secretly relieved that things hadn’t gotten awkward between me and Nanami’s friends. They were both so important to Nanami, and I didn’t want to make her sad or anything.

When I glanced at Nanami, our eyes met. She’d been looking at me too. She smiled at me awkwardly, making me laugh.

“Do you think we’ve changed that much?” she finally asked, tilting her head again.

“Hmm. I feel like we’re the same as always,” I replied, still unconvinced.

Even so, I knew from reading manga that people rarely recognized these kinds of changes in themselves. I wasn’t sure if the same were true in real life, but maybe that was what was happening to us now. Maybe everyone else could see the change more clearly than we could.

Besides, we already had an idea of what had caused the change. In fact, we had too many ideas, and all of them had something to do with my relief that

things hadn't become weird between me and Nanami's friends.

I took a moment to think back on what had happened. This might sound kind of cliché, but where there's a beginning, there's always an end. That's just a fact. The end would always come, whether you wanted it to or not, and that was neither good nor bad. I should know, considering I'd just experienced one of those ends.

Perhaps others might feel that that hadn't been an end but rather a transition. For me, though, it had most definitely been an end. If anything, I felt like our weekly dates were the transitions. That, too, was kind of cliché, but there were always stops and starts to everything.

Four transitions and one end, all in this past month. I'm talking about all this as though it happened some weeks ago, but actually it had only been a few days. And every single one of those things had been an extremely precious, irreplaceable experience.

There might be people out there who've experienced similar things to what I had, but nonetheless, I would say with certainty that my experiences were unique. Thinking about it, though, I should probably describe them as being "our" experiences rather than just mine, and the more I thought about it, the more strongly I felt that this was a story that both Nanami—my girlfriend—and I shared. Yup, girlfriend. Nanami was my girlfriend.

I was once again overcome by the sense of security that came with being able to call her that. Not so long ago, there'd been a chance that I would lose the privilege to do so. Although I don't know for sure just how likely that might have been, I was glad things had turned out the way they had.

Yeah, I know, I know. There's no point in beating around the bush. Still, I can't help dragging my feet like this. One thought always leads to another whenever I recall what had happened on that fateful day, but even so, I should make myself clear: the end I'd experienced had been that of my relationship with Nanami.

Actually, that's not entirely correct, but it wouldn't be incorrect either. Saying that makes it sound like she and I actually broke up, but it wasn't like that. What I meant to say was that the relationship that had ended wasn't our relationship in general but the false one based on a dare.



Ugh, saying it like that makes it sound terrible. But it's true—until just a little while ago, Nanami and I had been going out because of a dare. At least, for Nanami, it had been because of a dare; for me, her confession had been like a bolt from the blue (though I might be using that expression incorrectly). And, just the other day, that dare had ended.

The dare had ended, but our relationship hadn't. Honestly, that was all there was to it; but even so, I couldn't help but feel like a long and winding road had finally gotten us to this point. One month felt like a whole year, and yet it also felt like the blink of an eye.

When Nanami had admitted she'd confessed to me on a dare, I'd been so overcome with surprise that I'd felt my blood run cold. I mean, I'd never expected her to come clean. But after that, we'd both talked things over and decided to continue our relationship with each other. I know that sounds a bit stiff, but that's the only way to describe it.

All's well that ends well. When one thing ends, another begins. Thus the somewhat twisted relationship between Nanami and me had received a fresh start. But then...

"I wonder what's different though," I muttered.

I mean, when I stopped to think calmly about what had changed, I couldn't help thinking nothing had. Sure, I understood that people around us thought differently, but my feelings and my attitude hadn't changed one bit. I had thought that maybe time would pass and something would change, but that hadn't been the case at all. Clearly, change wasn't always the right thing to pursue, but I still couldn't help wondering if that was okay.

After all the mental gymnastics, I finally came upon one thing that *was* sure to change, though it sure had taken me a while to realize it. It was the fact that I was now one-hundred-percent confident that Nanami liked me. Those sound like the words of someone who's way too full of himself. Still, for a guy in his teens, knowing that the girl I liked liked me back was a huge confidence booster.

Although until now I hadn't been sure how she felt, now I could act with confidence. *Act...as in, do what? Hmm... Okay, so now I have more confidence,*

*but what am I supposed to do next?*

My train of thought suddenly stopped there. I felt like my mind was going in circles.

“What are you groaning about?”

At that moment, I felt Nanami poke my cheek. It would have been easy for me to claim that nothing was wrong, but I wondered if perhaps it would be better to share what was on my mind.

*Yeah. Nothing good would come even if I tried to hide it. I should just tell her, I thought.*

“I was just wondering how we were going to change moving forward,” I confessed.

“Change? Is there something you want to change, Yoshin?”

Seeing Nanami tilt her head in a puzzled fashion, I wondered if I’d put it too simply. I suppose it was just a bit difficult for me to put my thoughts into words. I mean, how was I supposed to phrase it? Still unsure, I attempted a second explanation.

“Well, I mean, until just recently, our relationship had been kind of fake, right?”

“Fake... Yeah, I guess you could say that. What about it though?” she asked.

“Then on our one-month anniversary the other day, it stopped being fake, so now we’re actually dating. As in, now we’re actually boyfriend and girlfriend.”

When I put it in words like that, I felt my cheeks grow hot. *Jeez, I never used to be the type to say stuff like this. Oh well, I’ve already said it. I’d better just get on with it.*

“So I was thinking, if we’re going out for real, maybe we should aim for some kind of change. Like, is it really okay to stay the same as we were before?”

Although the second half had come out in a rush, I’d managed to tell Nanami what I was thinking. I felt my face grow warmer and warmer until my entire face felt hot. I was probably completely red.



Nanami poked my cheek with her finger and smiled at me gently. I felt the tip of her slender finger on my cheek and followed its movement with my gaze. She brought it to her lips as though deep in thought.

Seeing her fall silent, I started getting nervous, like a child anticipating a scolding. I felt cold sweat run down my body and my heart begin to pound. As my palms became sweaty and the tips of my fingers cold, I worried that Nanami was going to be grossed out. Thinking that maybe I should let go of her hand, I looked down at my own. Then, as if she knew exactly when to speak, she asked, “In that case, why don’t we talk about what kind of changes we’d like to make?”

“Huh?”

That was all I managed to say. I’d thought she might reproach me for suggesting that we needed to change, but that hadn’t been the case at all.

Nanami giggled a bit at my loss for words, then winked as she poked my cheek again. I waited for her explanation as she continued playing with my face.

“Our relationship is strange, isn’t it?” she said. “At first, we had nothing to do with each other, and then there was the dare, and now we’ve started dating for real. Just in this month alone, our relationship has changed so much.”

“Now that you mention it, I guess you’re right.”

“That’s why I feel like things are just going to change naturally moving forward. If that’s the case, then we should accept that change will come and talk about what kinds of changes we want and don’t want. It’d be nice to assume that there will be changes and then take things step-by-step while we talk things through.”

“Assume that there will be changes?” I repeated.

“Yeah. Doesn’t that sound like more fun?”

Given that I hadn’t even thought of it that way, Nanami’s suggestion was a complete eye-opener. I’d been sitting there wondering what I should do, totally afraid of change, while Nanami had already accepted change as par for the course. I felt like I’d been released from a tangle of webs, like my endless loop of consternation had ended—as though something had finally fallen into place inside my chest.

“You’re right. That does sound like more fun,” I said, finally managing a laugh. Nanami flashed me a toothy grin. My cold sweat had subsided, and warmth had returned to my fingertips. I squeezed Nanami’s hand tightly again. She looked at me, her eyes wide in mild surprise, but she quickly squeezed my hand in return.

“Speaking of change, do you ever change up how you look?” Nanami asked. “Toru-san’s been asking me to bring you to the salon again.”

“What? But I just went a couple of weeks ago. I thought you’re just supposed to get your hair cut every six months or so.”

“Uh...is that really normal for guys?”

Nanami and I continued walking, going back and forth about random topics. However, my overall relief had made me forget about something important: the fact that Nanami frequently dug her own grave or self-destructed out of embarrassment. This time, too, Nanami seemed perfectly fine, so I didn’t notice anything. In fact, I wouldn’t realize until some time later.

As we set out to learn more about each other, the first days of our brand-new relationship together passed gently, just as they always had.



# Chapter 1: Apology and Forgiveness

Although our actions and relationship had changed, many things didn't change at all—or at least, they hadn't changed yet. Visiting Nanami's house today was one of those things.

My parents were already back from their business trip, so I actually didn't have a reason to be going over there so frequently. However, when I'd mentioned that I wouldn't be visiting so often in the future, Nanami's entire family had risen up in opposition.

Nanami's mom and dad, Tomoko-san and Genichiro-san, had been the ones most against the idea. Nanami had been against it too, but her parents had been even more vehement. Although I was grateful for their kindness, I also felt bad about being a bother. Nevertheless, I'd ended up taking them up on their invitation.

Because of that, I was visiting the Baratos again. At least I wasn't doing it every day. What's more, although I just said that my visits hadn't changed, today was slightly different from usual. Usually when Nanami and I came home, I would go straight into learning to cook from Nanami or making dinner for the night with Nanami and Tomoko-san.

When I thought about it, making dinner with your girlfriend's mother seemed pretty unusual. I wondered why it had taken me so long to realize that. In any case, instead of doing that, I now found myself in Nanami's room, having been urged inside by Tomoko-san herself. Nanami's mom had told us she wanted to prepare a feast by herself today. Nanami had offered to help, of course, but she was now in her room with me as well.

That was one thing that was different. It was a small difference, but this was probably our first time finding ourselves with nothing to do right after getting home. The other major difference was how Nanami was in her room right now. I mean, it was her room, so of course she'd be there, but for some reason, the distance between the two of us was more pronounced than usual.

The conversation we'd had earlier about us being closer seemed almost like a figment of my imagination. Nanami was putting so much distance between us that even I couldn't help but notice.

Until now, she would have attached herself to me the minute we walked into her room, or asked if she could put her head in my lap, or tried to get me to put my head in hers. Yeah, she really was one to do all sorts of things. In other words, Nanami was always the type to want to do those sorts of things whenever we were alone in her room, yet today, for some reason, she was sitting with one whole cushion's worth of space between us. She was even sitting with her legs bent, her arms wrapped around her knees.

I looked at her more closely and noticed that she was actually trying to avoid my gaze. Although she'd look at me with sidelong glances from time to time, she would quickly turn her face away. She'd been perfectly normal until a minute ago, but the moment we'd stepped into her room, she'd started behaving this way. What in the world was going on?

When I got up and took half a step toward her, she shivered a little and leaned her upper body away from me. Seeing her reaction, I sat back down in my original spot. I had to admit, that put me in a mild state of shock. Nanami seemed to realize she'd backed away from me, because she raised her hands in the air in panic. Although I felt rather panicked myself, I did my best to suppress my anxiety.

"What's wrong, Nanami? Did I do something wrong?" I asked, to which Nanami simply shook her head slightly. So I hadn't done anything. If that was the case, then I couldn't think of any reason why this was happening.

Nanami raised her head and stole a glance at me. When our eyes met, I smiled at her, but Nanami turned and hid her face. *Seriously?* I thought. This was a bit of an emotional blow. No, it wasn't a *bit* of a blow; it caused quite some damage.

Even in my state of shock, I tried to talk to Nanami only to finally realize her ears had turned red. No, it wasn't just her ears. When I looked more closely from the side, I realized her cheeks and even her neck had turned scarlet. She was red all over. Seeing her like that, I couldn't help but feel more confused.



“Um, Nanami? Why are you all red? I mean, did something happen?”

Even when I tried to think back, I couldn't come up with anything. We'd left school together, talked about changes that might take place in our relationship, got back home, come up to her room...and that was it. At least she wasn't angry with me. She seemed to be blushing out of embarrassment about something, but what could she possibly be embarrassed about?

For now, I decided it best not to press further and simply waited for her to calm down. The panic I'd felt a minute ago had vanished completely, perhaps because I knew she'd spit it out when she was ready. Moments later, I was proved right, because Nanami, glancing over at me, slowly began to speak.

“So you know how you and I were dating because I confessed to you on a dare?” she murmured.

“Yes, I know. It was like that until just the other day,” I said.

“And now we're actually going out, right?”

“Uh, yes. We did talk about that earlier.”

I didn't see how any of this could lead to her being so embarrassed or make her blush so much. *It's not like we're gonna start making out all of a sudden... Wait, hold your horses, Yoshin.* My thoughts scattered in the wind as Nanami continued talking.

“It's just that I realized I was actually alone in my room with my boyfriend...with you. And when I thought about that, I got nervous all of a sudden,” she said.

“Huh?”

At that moment, my mind stopped functioning.

Until just the other day, Nanami and I had been in a relationship based on a dare. We'd even gone on a date since we'd started dating for real, and a few days had passed since then. What she was describing didn't seem like the kind of thing that should take so long to realize. It was also true, though, that we hadn't really stopped to confirm that we were in a real relationship now. I supposed we'd been kind of busy with updating Baron-san and stuff like that.

Our whole relationship before now had depended on a dare. In other words, we'd had a kind of cushion between us that had allowed us to act in ways that would get the other person to like us. Even if we had acted somewhat boldly, we could have subconsciously justified our actions by writing them off as for the sake of the dare.

Acting in the name of the dare: that was what we had done until now. I finally understood that, albeit belatedly. Now, though, I became conscious of what I hadn't realized before—that our cushion, our safety net, was gone.

"Uh, yeah, I... You're right. We're alone, aren't we?" I said.

"Y-Yeah, we're all alone," she responded.

Now that I was fully aware of the situation, even I was at a loss for words.

Technically, Tomoko-san and Saya-chan were home too, so we weren't *alone* alone. Still, we were alone in this room together. Well, we were usually alone when we were in Nanami's room, but the point stands.

Between us was a space large enough to fit a single cushion, and that distance felt terribly large. It was a space that either of us could close in a moment, but it still felt far. I felt so nervous that I had to ask myself how I'd done all the things with her up till now.

Nanami must have felt just as nervous as I did. If anything, she was probably even more nervous. After all, she was normally uncomfortable around guys. I knew I was being kind of slow on the uptake, but when I thought about that, I couldn't bring myself to make a move.

That, though, was exactly why I should be the one to do it. I didn't mean to say that that was what guys should do. It was just a question of taking turns. Nanami had eased my anxiety earlier. Now it was my turn to do the same for her.

"Hey, Nanami, is it okay if I sit closer to you?" I asked. There was a danger of coming off as overly saccharine, but if I got close to Nanami now without getting permission first, I would only startle her. That's why I'd had to suck it up and ask.

I felt like I was dealing with a timid cat, though given that I'd never owned a

cat before, that was based completely on my imagination. I just wanted to get rid of this feeling that there was an invisible barrier between us.

When she heard me, Nanami opened her eyes wide for a moment, then nodded slightly. Relieved, I looked at her. It was as though she were shining brilliantly before my eyes. Amazed, I had to rub my eyes for a moment, but she was still shining upon my second look. She looked prettier than she ever had before.

“Okay, here I come,” I told her.

Nervously, slowly, I moved closer to Nanami, trying not to scare her. The approach reminded me of how I used to walk up to the rabbit living on the school grounds. I wondered if that rabbit was still there.

Even after I’d shuffled closer, I didn’t take any immediate action. I waited until Nanami regained her composure. Truth be told, I was nervous too and wanted a little time to calm myself down.

Silence settled in the room, but it wasn’t an unpleasant one. In fact, the more time that passed, the more comfortable it began to feel. Nanami seemed to be feeling similarly—the redness in her cheeks had faded, and her expression had softened a bit. She ended up being the first to break the silence.

“Hey, Yoshin, can you stroke my hair?” she asked. She slowly leaned toward me, letting her upper body touch mine. Before, she would have immediately put her head in my lap, but this time, Nanami had asked me first instead. I swallowed hard.

“You’re sure, right?” I managed to say.

“Yes, please.”

I slowly lifted my hand and reached for her hair but found I was way too nervous. *Is my palm too sweaty right now?* I wondered. Unable to shake off the worry, I wiped my hand with my handkerchief before attempting to touch Nanami’s hair.

I hadn’t touched her hair in a while, so I was taken by the soft and pleasant sensation I felt on the palm of my hand. It felt like I was petting a luxurious carpet, and I wanted to keep touching it forever.



From there, I slowly began to stroke her hair. Nanami half closed her eyes, looking as though she found comfort in my touch. Then, from out of nowhere...

“Hee hee hee...”

“Ha ha ha!”

We both burst into laughter. Nanami took my hand, then slowly, gently, brought it to her cheek. Her warm skin felt smooth against my palm.

“Thanks, Yoshin. I think I’m a little calmer now. I like your hand. It’s warm.”

“Good, I’m glad. I, um, got nervous after thinking about what you said, but I feel calmer now too.”

To be honest, my heart was still beating loudly from the warmth of her cheek. However, if Nanami said that she’d calmed down, then that was all that mattered. She brushed her lips against my hand, then giggled again. My heart skipped a beat.

“I guess it’s weird for us to get nervous over this, since we’ve already kissed and stuff,” Nanami said, offering me a bashful smile. She pressed her lips to my hand once again.

*Uh, just what I am supposed to do here? I thought. Am I supposed to kiss...or smooch her hand, as Tomoko-san would say? I wasn’t expecting this at all. Hey, wait a minute. Isn’t it usually the opposite, in terms of gender roles?*

“I guess we have, but that was only once,” I said.

“Right, but why won’t you do it again?” Nanami asked indignantly.

“Well, I mean, you know...”

Nanami puffed out her cheeks and glared at me. My eyes met hers for a moment, but I turned away to avoid her gaze. However, at that moment, I made up my mind and gently tugged her hand so my lips met her palm.

I’d only done what Nanami had done to me, but my heart was thumping wildly. *How was she able to do something like this?! It took everything I had.*

Whether or not she knew what was going on in my head, Nanami was blinking, her eyes glimmering in delight. “Wow, Yoshin, you’re so forward! Isn’t

that the sort of thing princes do?” she said. Now obviously very happy, she touched my hand in a soft and playful way. It didn’t hurt at all, but it did tickle and sent a strange tingle down my spine. Trying to withstand it, I looked her straight in the eye.

“You did it first. Besides, it’d be weird to get excited over this, given that we’ve kissed and all,” I said.

“Excuse me? But we’ve only kissed once!” she exclaimed.

“Isn’t that what I said a minute ago?”

“Yeah, well, you only said what I said earlier too!”

After that, it felt like the strange wall that had stood between us vanished, and we both began to laugh. We finally felt like we were back to normal. There was still a teensy, tiny bit of awkwardness, but I was sure that we’d get used to that too.

Although it might sound odd, everything suddenly felt new to us, like we’d been dating for no time at all. I mean, I knew a month wasn’t terribly long, but it was still a long time to me. Maybe this overwhelming sense of newness was because we’d realized the nature of our relationship had changed. That said, when we’d first started going out, I’d been so caught up in not screwing things up that I hadn’t really gotten the chance to think about anything. To be totally honest, I didn’t dislike the way I was feeling now.

“Please excuse me!”

While I was deep in my thoughts, Nanami suddenly plopped her head down in my lap. Apparently, her nervousness had dissipated, and she was now starting to feel like her usual self. I reached down and touched her hair again. She looked at me as though my touch tickled. She then placed her index finger on her lips and smiled seductively. My heart skipped another beat as I waited for her to speak.

“Then should we kiss again?” she asked, tracing her finger over her lips. I felt my cheeks growing warm again. Nanami, too, was blushing.



“I’m not sure how I feel about you giving your lips away so willingly like that,” I remarked.

“Oh, it’s a special bargain just for you, Yoshin. It’s a great deal. What do you think?”

Scratching my head, I closed my eyes and thought very hard...or at least, I pretended to. I mean, was there any guy in the world who could receive such an offer and refuse? No, I was pretty sure there wasn’t. The question might as well have been rhetorical.

*I’ll approach this with a solemn attitude*, I thought.

“In that case, I do believe I shall take you up on it,” I declared, opening my eyes and looking down at her. I heard her draw in a breath. Still, even as she seemed at a loss for words, she returned my gaze immediately. She then reached up and touched my cheek.

“There’s no refunds, sir. Are you sure about your decision?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t go back on it. Oh, but if I do change my mind, would I have to pay the penalty with my lips?”

“In that case, go ahead and change your mind.”

Then Nanami closed her eyes and waited.

I didn’t know what it was, but maybe I’d managed to kiss her so smoothly on our one-month anniversary because we’d both been feeling so excited. To try to kiss her when we were both calm like this felt, well, kind of embarrassing. Then again, I supposed I hadn’t actually kissed her all that smoothly on our anniversary either.

Recalling that moment, I suddenly realized an error in our conversation, but for now, I had to set that aside. My first order of business was to make sure I didn’t keep Nanami waiting. I brought my lips closer to hers as she lay with her head in my lap. And finally...

Our lips met.

My lips touched hers for a mere few seconds before I moved away. Nanami kept her eyes glued shut as her face turned completely red. My face was



completely red too, of course.

“If you were gonna get so embarrassed, you shouldn’t have said anything to tempt me in the first place. Even your neck’s all red,” I told her, gently bringing my hand to the exposed part of her neck.

“Eek!” Nanami exclaimed, practically jumping out of her skin. It was her own fault really. I guess that was one of those things that would never change.

Her face still red, Nanami smiled at me shyly and mumbled, “But I want us to kiss each other more, so I wanted to try to get as used to it as possible.”

As she looked away from me slightly with her hands hiding her mouth, I had to resist the urge to jump up and shout about how adorable she was. *Seriously, how does she manage to be this cute?!*

I took a deep breath in order to calm myself. “You don’t have to get used to it,” I told her. “If you did, I wouldn’t be able to see all your adorable reactions.”

I know, I know. I was going to make people nauseous speaking like that. Still, I felt like I was going to lose my mind if I didn’t tell her how cute she was.

As I sat there embracing my happiness, Nanami slapped me lightly on the chest. There was no force behind her smacks; they just made little *pat, pat* sounds.

“Jeez, how can you be so calm about this? Don’t tell me you’re used to it already. That’s so not fair!”

“Oh, no. I’m not calm at all, and I’m not used to it either,” I said, coming back to my senses as I saw Nanami puff out her cheeks. I laughed awkwardly and scratched my cheek. Apparently my efforts to maintain my composure had made me seem like I was actually calm.

“By the way, you said that this was our second kiss, but isn’t it really our third?” I asked. That’s right: we’d kissed twice on our anniversary—she’d kissed me, then I’d kissed her. That was why our kiss just now should be our third.

However, Nanami had implied this was our second kiss. I know it was a minor detail, but I couldn’t help thinking about it. Nanami seemed slightly surprised by my question. She opened her eyes wide, then hid her face again. As I sat there,

not understanding her reaction, she began to speak to me again, this time in a barely audible voice. However, sitting so close, I didn't miss a word she said.

"Well, um, I meant that it was the second time you'd kissed me. I'm still too embarrassed to kiss you myself," she mumbled.

"What? But weren't you the one who kissed me first? Isn't it a bit late to say that?" I asked.

"I was all worked up then, but once I calmed down, I was worried that my kissing you maybe seemed a bit forward. You weren't weirded out by it, right?"

Hearing her question, I couldn't help but laugh. It tickled me that we were similar in so many ways and that she'd worry about something like that now.

Nanami turned bright red and puffed out her cheeks again as she watched me continue to laugh. Then, with fists that had very little force behind them, she began hitting me on the chest again.

I went on laughing, and although Nanami looked like she was upset at first, she eventually started laughing as well. I felt so incredibly happy. Once we'd calmed down a little, we both fell silent, and stillness filled the room. Nanami lay down with her head on my lap again while I stroked her hair slowly.

"You know, it's really relieving having your head in my lap like this. Like, it really feels like everything's finally over," I said.

"I'm really happy too. I guess I feel that all the more, given all the stuff that's happened. But maybe it's not that everything is over. I mean, things are just getting started," she said.

"You're right. In that case, it's a pleasure."

"Yes, it's a pleasure."

As both Nanami and I gazed at each other, there was a sudden knock on her door.

"Come in!" Nanami called. At her invitation, the door opened, and Tomokosan walked in with a tray in her hands.

"I've brought tea for the two of you— Oh, what's this, now?" she asked.

“Oh, th-thank you,” I stammered.

“Thanks, mom. Hm? What’s wrong?” Nanami asked.

While Nanami and I both thanked her in our own ways, Tomoko-san stood there with her mouth agape, still holding the tray. She looked from me to Nanami and blinked several times.

“Um, what are you two doing?” she finally asked.

“What do you mean? I’m lying with my head in his lap,” Nanami explained.

“No, I mean, why are *you* lying in *his* lap?” Tomoko-san said.

“Oh...”

Then Nanami and I finally looked at each other. Come to think of it, this might have been the first time that we’d been in this position in front of her. With her nervousness finally gone, though, Nanami didn’t seem to mind the situation at all. “Can you leave the tea over there, please?” was all she asked. I, on the other hand, was starting to sweat in a mild panic.

Tomoko-san seemed just as perplexed by Nanami’s reaction. In fact, as she left, I heard Tomoko-san mumble, “Maybe I should ask my husband to let me do the same...”

Once her mother was gone, Nanami slid away from me, took a sip of her tea, and said...

“Wh-What do we do, Yoshin?! Mom saw us! She’s gonna tell everybody!”

“Wow, it’s a little too late for that now, don’t you think?” I said.

Nanami, who had been as cool as a cucumber until just a moment ago, had gone into a total meltdown. She remained in that state for some time, talking excitedly. As I watched her, I came to the realization that, all in all, we hadn’t really changed that much after all.

That’s right—people didn’t change so easily. That was what I was thinking as I sat there recalling an incident from several days prior.



First, to go back in time for a bit...

It was several days after we had given our update to Baron-san and company—after Nanami and I had made a fresh start as a true, official couple.

Obviously we hadn't told people around us that we'd restarted our relationship. If we did say something, it was only to mention that we'd had our one-month anniversary. Because of that, to most people, our relationship must have seemed like it always had. But there were some who knew different. To those people, the fact that we were continuing our relationship had an entirely different meaning. That outcome also brought about change for those people too.

This was probably just one of many such examples.

Soon after Nanami and I had told each other our secrets and restarted our relationship, the two of us were summoned to an empty classroom. To say that we were summoned might sound kind of ominous, but this wasn't that kind of story.

The ones who had summoned us were Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san. That was why I already had an idea of what they wanted to talk to us about. Nanami probably felt the same way. She and I quietly entered the classroom.

Of course, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were inside waiting for us without even sitting down. I can't say I was terribly surprised that they were there. However, I did find myself surprised when I actually saw the two of them.

The two girls waiting to speak to us weren't wearing their uniforms in their usual casual manner. Instead, it was as though they were dressed in some kind of formal wear. They'd removed all of their accessories, and Kamoenai-san wasn't even wearing the locket she always had around her neck.

Seeing them like that for the first time, I felt my eyes widen in surprise. When I glanced at Nanami standing beside me, though, I noticed she didn't seem surprised at all. She must have known this was coming. I suppose that was to be expected—the two had summoned us through Nanami after all.

What awaited me was an apology from the two of them.

"I'm truly sorry, Misumai," Otofuke-san said.

"I'm sorry too," said Kamoenai-san.

They both then bowed deeply to me. Nanami was looking at the two of them with a pained expression, but she didn't say anything in response. It must have been because their apology was directed at me.

The two girls must have chosen an empty classroom out of consideration for me as well. If anyone just happened to see all this, who knew what kinds of rumors people would start about us?

As for me, I had no idea what to say to the two of them. I really had no clue, but I did my best to tell them how I honestly felt.

"I already heard everything from Nanami," I said. "She told me she was dared to confess to me after losing a card game to the two of you."

Both their bodies twitched at my remark. I immediately regretted making it, realizing I'd done so in a mean-spirited way. Still, I continued by telling them how it had all turned out.

"Don't worry. Everything's fine. Nanami and I have decided to stay together for the long haul. We're not breaking up."

I gently pulled Nanami into an embrace. Their heads were bowed, so they probably couldn't see. Finding herself suddenly drawn toward me, Nanami grinned shyly, making me feel all warm inside. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san looked up for a moment, and seeing Nanami in my arms, they looked sincerely relieved. But even that was for only a moment, as they immediately bowed their heads again.

"Thank you. I know I don't have the right to say this, but thank you, honestly," Otofuke-san said.

"Thank you for choosing Nanami and for forgiving all of us," Kamoenai-san said.

Although they seemed to be trying to hide it, their voices made it sound as though the girls were tearing up.

All this wasn't about me forgiving them or not; forgiveness clearly went both ways. Just as I had forgiven Nanami, Nanami had forgiven me too. That was all there was to it. But maybe since I hadn't shared that fact with the two of them, it seemed as though I was the one forgiving Nanami.



The two girls didn't seem to be raising their heads anytime soon. It was my first time seeing them like this. I supposed that was just how much they cared for Nanami. I thought for a moment and came to a decision. If they cared about Nanami this much, I had to tell them the truth.

When I glanced at Nanami, she gave me a slight nod. I nodded to her in return, then turned back to her two friends.

"Please raise your heads, both of you. It's my turn to confess. Actually, I knew about the dare all along."

Silence filled the classroom. For a moment, I thought they weren't going to look at me—until their heads suddenly snapped up and they looked at me with wide-eyed stares.

*Oh, thank god—they finally looked up. If anyone had walked in while they were still bowing to me, who knows what kinds of weird rumors would have started?*

"You knew?!"

"But how?!"

I'd thought that maybe the two of them had suspected something, but given their outbursts, it seemed I was wrong. Since they apparently hadn't suspected a thing after all, their reactions made perfect sense.

As I looked back at the wide-eyed girls, I saw that they had indeed been tearing up. They were so shocked, though, they were unable to speak. They just stood there, frozen, their looks of surprise still plastered on their faces. Figuring the two of them might not move again until someone gave them a nudge, I urged us all to take a seat.

"Um, maybe we should all sit down while I explain."

After that, I explained to them I'd been there in the classroom that day, telling them essentially what I'd recently told Nanami. As I explained, I was amused to watch their expressions transform from those of teary-eyed seriousness to absolute astonishment, although I knew I shouldn't be amused by that.

"You were there that day? Seriously? I didn't notice you at all," Otofuke-san

muttered.

“Wow, Misumai, you’re amazing! Are you actually a ninja or something?! Like, are you from a family of ninja?!” Kamoenai-san shouted.

“Uh, no, both my parents work for normal companies,” I mumbled.

Otofuke-san seemed stunned to know I’d been there, while Kamoenai-san seemed inordinately excited. *Wait, why a ninja though?* I wondered. *Is she referring to the day we first met? Wow, I’d totally forgotten about that.*

After I’d finished, both girls let out heavy sighs. They remained silent for a while, but then Kamoenai-san eventually spoke up.

“I see. So the dare was a bust to begin with. Wait, no, maybe the dare worked because of your cooperation, Misumai,” Kamoenai-san finally said.

*Cooperation... Can we really call it that?*

I was grateful that she was willing to spin things in a positive way, but I wondered if the two of them realized I’d been deceiving Nanami this whole time. I looked at Otofuke-san, who was nodding as she listened to Kamoenai-san’s conclusion, and tried to discern whether or not she realized it. In the end, I couldn’t tell.

I considered whether I should point it out to them, but before I did, I decided to ask them something I’d been wondering about since the beginning of all this.

“So why me? Why was I the one you picked? I mean, I’m happy with the way things turned out, but I always wondered about that.”

“Oh, I was actually wondering about that too,” Nanami added. It seemed she’d been thinking the same thing. “I mean, I’m glad it was Yoshin, but why did you guys pick him?”

When I glanced at her sitting next to me, I saw that she was looking at me too, her cheeks tinted pink. Although I wanted to say something thoughtful in response, I just sat there scratching my cheek, trying to hide my embarrassment.

When I looked back at Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san, I realized they were looking at us in exasperation, their eyes narrowed. Nanami and I both cleared

our throats as we tried to get our heads back in the conversation. *Well, I beg your pardon.*

The question of why they'd chosen me remained though, especially if they hadn't even noticed me in the classroom that day. I had considered the possibility that maybe they'd chosen me because I happened to be there at the scene—that the two of them had noticed me, but Nanami hadn't, so I was the sacrificial lamb. However, given their surprise when they'd learned I'd known all along, that theory had gone out the window.

*Why, then?* I didn't think I could be blamed for thinking that. Of course, there was still the possibility that they'd chosen me at random without giving it much thought. *Wow, if that's the case, asking why they chose me is the most embarrassing thing I could do. How could I be so full of myself?*

As I sat there regretting the fact that I'd even asked the question, Otofuke-san took a notebook out of her bag. Similarly, Kamoenai-san took out her phone and began tapping away methodically.

Otofuke-san handed me the notebook without a word. Kamoenai-san turned her phone toward me, urging me to look at the screen. *What is this? It's filled with notes.*

"What is this?" I asked out loud.

"It's all the info we collected on the guys in our school," Otofuke-san explained. "We really wanted to help Nanami get over her discomfort with guys, so we did some research."

Flipping through the notebook, I saw it was filled with information about all the guys at our school. When I looked closely, I saw that Kamoenai-san's phone displayed the same information. Seeing me and Nanami so surprised at this revelation, the two friends smiled wryly.

"If Nanami had said she wasn't romantically interested in guys, then we wouldn't have bothered," Kamoenai-san said.

"But she saw us hanging out with our boyfriends one time and said she was a little jealous. That's why we thought we'd try to help."

Every page of the notebook was chock-full of details. For example, one guy

was apparently two-timing, and another was serial dating just about every girl he could. I was pretty impressed by the level of detail they'd gone into.

*Wow, this is amazing. Wait, how did they manage all this? I have a feeling these two are already qualified to become private investigators.*

Nanami was just as shocked by the contents of the notebook. I supposed she didn't know about it either.

"Um, how did you manage to do all this?" I asked.

"It's all just stuff we collected through chatting with the other girls. We did our best to cull through all the rumors that were going around, like who was going out with whom, who broke up with whom, or whose boyfriend did what to whom. If you talk to different friend groups and connect all the dots, then everything becomes pretty obvious."

*Uh, that's not frightening at all.*

When you play dating sims targeted toward guys, the characters you're friends with often tell you how you're faring with the girl you're trying to win over. Maybe this was the girl version of that. It seemed slightly different, but on a basic level, it seemed to work the same way.

Otofuke-san was describing it as though it weren't a big deal, but I felt like it took a considerable amount of effort to do something like this. I'd also heard she got really good grades, which left me wondering how she managed to get any sleep.

As I continued leafing through the pages of the notebook, I eventually found my own name. It was marked as being the number one choice for helping Nanami get used to guys. That in and of itself seemed like an honor. And yet...

*"No one here from the same middle school, no friends, no girlfriend, no one terribly close. No good rumors, but also no bad rumors. Goes straight home. Doesn't have much of a presence and is quiet, but if you talk to him, he can engage in a normal conversation..."*

Their assessment of me written on the page was very objective. I felt like I was receiving a glimpse of how the girls evaluated guys, which sure was scary. I sensed a kind of thoroughness in the way that not a single insult was written

down.

“Hey, wait a minute. Don’t you think your description of Yoshin is kind of negative?” Nanami protested.

*Is it negative? If anything, I feel like them saying all this was the biggest compliment they could’ve paid me back then.*

Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were trying desperately to explain themselves to Nanami, saying that they hadn’t known me very well at the time and that they’d had the most difficult time with writing my profile because there were no rumors to go off of. I couldn’t help feeling bad for the two of them.

*Oh, wait—it looks like their assessment of Shibetsu-senpai isn’t that bad either. It says here that he really likes girls...but I didn’t realize he’d never gone out with anyone before. I never would’ve guessed. Whoops, I shouldn’t look at it anymore without permission. I’ll stop here.*

I closed the notebook and handed it back to the two of them.

“I see. So you used this to choose who Nanami should confess to. It seems like a really elaborate plan. I mean, this must have been a lot of work,” I said. Even based on a cursory glance, I could tell that the two of them had done an extraordinary amount of research on every possible candidate.

They had probably done it so that if anything were to happen, Nanami wouldn’t get hurt by it. That was why they’d chosen me, the person with the fewest number of social links with anyone at school. If they chose me, even if Nanami were to dump me—or if I were to dump Nanami—I would have no one to talk about it with. Even if we broke up at the end of the month, if I didn’t know it was all for a dare, then it would just get written off in my memory as a failed high school romance.

While I was nothing but impressed by their level of foresight, I heard the two of them mutter, “We kinda wanted to return the favor for Nanami helping us get with our boyfriends.” They both seemed to be deeply emotional as they nodded at their own remark. Nanami was tilting her head, not understanding what they meant.

“Did I do something?” she mumbled in a voice only I was able to hear.



*Wait, you don't remember?* When I looked at her questioningly, she seemed to have picked up on my thoughts and just shook her head. Well, it wasn't uncommon for someone to be saved without the savior ever knowing about it. Maybe this was another case like that.

"Come to think of it, you didn't stop Shibetsu-senpai and the other guys from asking Nanami out," I said, changing the subject. If Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had gone to such lengths in terms of research, I would have imagined them also wanting to sabotage other people's attempts to ask her. Instead, she had been confessed to by several guys—even though she had turned down every one of them.

"For the guys we thought were relatively safe, we left it up to Nanami to decide. We always looked out for her in secret though. As for the guys we thought might be trouble, we, you know, had our own way of taking care of them." Otofuke-san flashed me a smile that chilled me to the bone. I had to admit I was slightly—no, pretty damn intimidated.

Of course. This might be a bad way to put this, but Nanami was a lot more innocent than she appeared. She might have seemed flashy, but she was really pure at heart. If she were a manga character, she would most definitely be categorized as being the easy heroine, but her innocence was also what made her so adorable.

That was why there was a possibility that she might have been ensnared by some douchebag, but it seemed the two girls had eliminated that possibility beforehand. In a way, they could be taken as somewhat overprotective, but I felt nothing but comfort and gratification because of them.

"I see. Then it's all thanks to the two of you that I was able to start dating Nanami. I'm really, truly grateful." I bowed in thanks while still in my seat, but the two girls seemed surprised.

"But aren't you angry with us?"

"Yeah, I honestly thought you'd yell at us and stuff. Where's all this coming from?"

They looked at me as if starting to panic, but I had no reason to be upset. In fact, I'd already missed my chance to be angry. If I had really wanted to respond

like that, I should have done it the day I'd overheard their conversation in the classroom. If not, I should have said something when Nanami had confessed to me.

But I hadn't.

I'd forgiven Nanami, and Nanami had forgiven me, and that was the end of that. At this point in the game, I wasn't at all interested in being angry with the two of them or tossing aside my willingness to forgive them. Besides, at the end of the day, they were Nanami's best friends.

"That's just how I feel. In fact, I have every reason to thank you and no reason to be angry at all."

Otofuoke-san and Kamoenai-san stared at me, their mouths hanging open in surprise. With bewildered expressions on their faces, they looked back and forth between me and Nanami.

"Not gonna lie, I was ready to do anything to have you forgive me," Otofuoke-san said.

"Me too! I was so ready to do anything."

"You two... You shouldn't say stuff like that so easily. I mean, this would never happen, but what were you gonna do if I demanded sexual favors or something?"

"I would've done it if you were gonna forgive me," Otofuoke-san answered immediately.

Kamoenai-san nodded in full agreement.

*Uh, that's how determined you were?* They were so prepared to accept punishment, they kind of scared me.

Just then, I heard a low voice from beside me that seemed to come from the depths of the ocean.

"Yoshin?"

It was Nanami.

*Oh, shoot.* I could tell from her voice and expression that she was slightly

pissed off. *Hey, wait. That was all just hypothetical! I didn't mean it for real.*

"I only said that as an example. Don't worry," I said.

"I know that, but you haven't done anything even with me. It just makes me wonder if you wanna do stuff like that. Like, am I meeting your needs and stuff?" Nanami asked in earnest.

"Uh, maybe we should get back on topic," I responded in desperation.

I'd wanted Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san to know that they shouldn't say things so carelessly, but I'd ended up shooting myself in the foot. Even after I tried to change the subject, Nanami kept tugging at my sleeve with her cheeks puffed out.

I'd already forgiven the two of them, but it seemed they weren't going to let themselves off so easily. I knew from experience how important it was to get closure. After thinking about it for a while, I took out my phone and offered it to the two of them.

"Well, if you're really willing to do anything, then can you take a picture of me and Nanami? You know, to commemorate the fact that we've really started going out," I said.

Otofuke-san frowned. "Is that really all you want?"

"That's super easy and all, but isn't there more you want?" Kamoenai-san asked.

"No. This really is all I want. Besides, I have a feeling we'll be friends for a long time, since you're both so close to Nanami. I don't want anything weird to get in the way of that."

I handed my phone to Otofuke-san, then Nanami did the same with hers.

"Hatsumi, Ayumi, thanks for bringing me and Yoshin together," she said.

"I also wanna say thank you for helping us meet," I said.

At that, both Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san started crying. They must have been feeling a whole slew of conflicting emotions.

Some people might say I was being too easy on them, but this was the

decision I'd made. There was no way I was going to regret it.

Both in tears, they accepted our phones and proceeded to take our photos as smiles blossomed on their faces. After they'd taken a few, Nanami suggested that we use the timer function to take a picture of all four of us.

Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san refused at first, saying that their eyes were red from crying, but Nanami finally convinced them, and we took a photo together. Sure, you could tell they'd been crying, but they were both smiling brightly in the photo on my phone.

"Yeah, this is a great photo. Thanks. This might sound kind of arrogant, but I totally forgive you both for everything. I give my word that this is the last time I'll ever mention it."

The two friends laughed awkwardly. Maybe they hadn't yet forgiven themselves, but I was sure they'd slowly be able to come to terms with my forgiveness. It was all just a matter of time.

"Well then, I hope I can count on you as friends, Otofuke-san, Kamoenai-san," I said.

"Same here, Misumi. Now we're friends for real," Otofuke-san replied.

"Yeah, totally!" Kamoenai-san exclaimed. "Next time, we should all get together with our boyfriends!"

On that day, I made two new friends.

They were my girlfriend's best friends—two trustworthy people who, like me, cared about Nanami very much. They were female friends, but Nanami was happy too.

Seeing Nanami so happy, I became even more determined to do my best for her. Next to us, though, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were muttering something between themselves.

*What are they talking about?* I wondered. It would still be a while before I found out.







Thus we finally settled things with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san. You could even call it a kind of reconciliation—though that might be wrong, since we hadn’t had a fight or anything.

Either way, we had managed to dislodge the wedge between us and have a real heart-to-heart talk among the four of us. I was sure that in the near future, we would all be able to laugh about this. If we could all continue being friends, then there was nothing more I could ask for.

“What’s up, Yoshin? You’re all spaced out,” Nanami said, looking up at me as she tilted her head. Since I didn’t have anything to hide, I told her about the day we’d talked with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san. Nanami seemed to remember the day too, as she narrowed her eyes.

“You have good friends, Nanami,” I said from the bottom of my heart. I was envious of her for having friends who genuinely cared about her. Perhaps I felt that even more strongly because I myself didn’t have friends like that.

“Yeah, I guess we’ve known each other for a long time now,” Nanami murmured. She looked up and gazed at something far away as if recalling some distant memory. I thought I’d heard her mention before that they’d become friends back in elementary school. Although I knew I’d never be able to beat them in terms of the number of years they’d known each other, I still found myself feeling a little sad about it.

*Well, maybe from now on I can try to make up for it by hearing more stories about her past,* I thought. After all, we’d only been going out for a month. We still had so many more memories to make together, so there was nothing to worry about.

“Dinner’s ready, you two!”

As I heard Tomoko-san calling us, I just about jumped out of my skin. *Ah, that’s right. We do still have something to worry about—or rather, something to take care of.*

We had to tell Nanami’s family.

Nanami and I had already let them know that we'd celebrated our one-month anniversary. However, that was all we'd told them. We hadn't said anything to them about the dare.

We probably should have explained everything on the day I'd confessed to Nanami myself, but I hadn't been able to do it yet. That was all down to me.

I mean, think about it. Nanami had finally told me she'd confessed because of a dare, and I'd admitted I'd known all along. There'd been no way we could have explained that kind of thing to her parents that day. We'd all been super amped-up, so it had seemed wrong to try to talk business right after. I know I'm making excuses, but I just couldn't have handled that all at once. That was why we'd decided to explain things at a later date, and that date was today.

A week had passed, so I was feeling much calmer than before. Nanami and I had also talked in advance about what to share. Now understanding what Nanami's mom already knew, I had come completely prepared.

Whether I was nervous or not was another matter entirely. I was way less nervous than I'd been on our one-month anniversary, but now I was feeling a different kind of fear.

As I was grappling with those emotions, a gentle touch enveloped my hand. It felt soft and warm, spreading a sense of security through me. Nanami had placed her hand on mine. When I looked at her in surprise, she smiled at me gently as though trying to put me at ease. Her hand softly squeezed mine. The warmth of her hand gradually made its way to my heart. It made me smile back at her.

"It'll be okay," Nanami whispered. There's no way she could have known what those three little words did for me. Now I felt like I could tackle anything. I nodded slightly, then left the room with Nanami.

We'd talked with Tomoko-san ahead of time and asked her to make some time for us after dinner. If Genichiro-san had been home, we would have talked to him at the same time, but unfortunately he was going to be late that night. We would have to speak with him later.

When Nanami and I reached the living room, we saw a huge feast covering the dining table. There were deep-fried shrimp with tartar sauce, sautéed fish,

fried chicken, onion soup of a deep amber color, and a salad made of chicken, tomato, and mozzarella. *What's up with this extravagant meal?* I thought.

"I hadn't cooked by myself in a while, so I ended up going all out!" Tomoko-san said cheerily, beaming at us as she removed her apron.

Everything looked delicious. I know I've already mentioned how happy Tomoko-san looked, but that smile was something else.

Nanami's mom was the type of person to always have a smile on her face, but she looked even happier today than usual. Her smile was reminiscent of a sun that shone so bright, it dazzled both my eyes and my mind. That was how dazzling her smile was.

Saya-chan, too, widened her eyes as she walked into the living room. "Whoa, what's with all this food? Did you make it, onee-chan? Is it a special occasion or what?"

I wouldn't blame her for thinking so—the table was so crowded with food, it looked like we were celebrating something.

Despite her surprise, Saya-chan immediately took a seat and picked up a piece of fried chicken with her fingers. She popped the whole piece in her mouth, offering us a chubby-cheeked grin.

Although Tomoko-san scolded her for picking at the food before everyone sat down, Saya-chan paid no attention to her mother. Unable to resist, she reached for a second piece of fried chicken, but Tomoko-san slapped her hand to make her stop.

"Come on, you two. Let's eat before things get cold. There's plenty for everyone," Tomoko-san said, urging us to sit down. Nanami and I sat down next to each other. After we'd all brought our hands together to give thanks for the meal, we finally dug in.

It was a shame Genichiro-san couldn't make it home for dinner, but the meal was loads of fun nonetheless. We all talked excitedly, so much so that I wondered if we were psyching ourselves up for the discussion yet to come.

Dinner eventually came to an end. Saya-chan returned to her own room, while Nanami and I went back to Nanami's. Tomoko-san accompanied us, and

Nanami and I sat down across from her.

A teapot and three steaming cups of tea sat in the middle of the table. Tomoko-san brought her teacup to her lips, drank slowly, and then sighed. “So, what was it you wanted to talk about?”

Unlike her giddy and bubbly tone from earlier, Tomoko-san’s voice sounded calm and tempered. Steeling myself, I straightened my posture and began to speak.

“I wanted to talk to you again about my and Nanami’s relationship.”

When she heard my tone, Tomoko-san furrowed her brow and turned to me with a troubled smile on her face. She looked both sad and apologetic at the same time as she, too, sat up straighter and looked straight at me. When I saw the look in her eyes, my suspicion turned into conviction. Even though Nanami had already told me, I hadn’t quite believed it.

“You really did know about the dare too, huh?” I murmured.

Without saying anything, Tomoko-san simply nodded slightly.

*Ah, so it really was true.*

Even then, seeing Tomoko-san nod didn’t make me feel lied to, frustrated, or angry. I guess I was just surprised, hearing her admit it for the first time.

Back when I’d talked with Nanami about explaining the situation to her family, I had learned that Tomoko-san already knew about the dare. We’d had that conversation only a few days ago.

*“My mom’s the only one who knew about it.”*

I’ll never forget the expression on Nanami’s face when she told me that. She’d looked so nervous, like a child who thought she was going to be yelled at, and so small, as though she might break if I touched her carelessly. I’d already known Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had been in on it, but hearing that Tomoko-san had also known too had thrown me for a loop. Still, I didn’t feel particularly bad about the discovery.

Nanami had apologized to me, of course, so I’d reassured her by saying that couples were meant to forgive each other in situations like this. Nanami had

rubbed her cheek against mine in such an adorab— No, wait. Let me get back on topic here.

“I’m just curious... How long have you known?” I asked.

Nanami was the one who answered my question. Sitting next to me, she turned slightly away and mumbled, “Actually, she figured it out the day I brought you home for the first time.”

“Huh? Wait, seriously? Isn’t that being too perceptive?”

I couldn’t even hide my shock as Nanami proceeded to explain that her mom had questioned her after noticing her odd behavior. Nanami, of course, had had no choice but to explain the situation without hiding anything.

Still, for Tomoko-san to have picked up on it so quickly was impressive. Even if I hadn’t known about the dare, Tomoko-san probably would have. I wondered if that was possible because they’d known each other for so long. Or maybe it was part of the bond between parent and child. I was pretty sure my parents didn’t suspect anything though.

My parents and I didn’t see each other that often, though they were certainly happy that I’d gotten a girlfriend. *Wait, they don’t suspect anything, do they?* If they’d known all along despite everything that had happened, then I’d feel super embarrassed.

Tomoko-san continued sipping slowly from her teacup. I couldn’t help but be captivated by the elegant gesture.

“Since we’re here, how about we have some dessert while we chat?” she suddenly asked, standing up. Before we could respond, she stepped out of Nanami’s room and returned some moments later with a tray filled with three servings of cake.

“I splurged a bit today, so let’s enjoy this treat,” she said.

Overwhelmed by Tomoko-san’s enthusiasm, Nanami and I both did as we were told, bringing forkfuls of cake to our mouths. The sweetness of the cream, the tartness of the fruit, and the toasty aroma of the sponge cake tickled my senses. When I sipped on the warm tea, it reset the sweetness in my mouth. Its bitterness immediately made me want more of the dessert. Talk about a

dangerous feedback loop.

Maybe because of the treat, I started to calm down a bit. Did sweets help people feel more relaxed, or was it the scent of tea?

Nanami and I paused after taking a few bites of the cake. When I looked more carefully, I realized that Tomoko-san hadn't had any of her own. Maybe she had actually brought the cake for me and Nanami. I took a deep breath, then slowly began to speak.

"Tomoko-san, Nanami and I confessed our feelings for each other on our one-month anniversary the other day. From now on, we'll be restarting our relationship as a real couple," I declared. I straightened up again as though to make my point clear. It felt embarrassing saying all this in front of my girlfriend's mother, but I continued anyway. "I'm in love with Nanami. Even if her confession to me was only for a dare, my feelings for her now are completely sincere."

As a side note, I was pretending to be calm, but my hands were shaking under the table. Nanami had gently put her hand on mine to soothe me. Thanks to her, I'd been able to finish saying what I wanted to say.

"I see. Thank you, Yoshin-kun. And I apologize," Tomoko-san said, bowing deeply.

"Nanami's already apologized to me, so there's no reason for you to apologize too," I said.

"Oh, no, that's not what I mean. This is from me. I'm truly sorry, Yoshin-kun. I took advantage of your kindness."

Tomoko-san's expression was one I'd never seen her wear before. It was the exact opposite of her earlier cheery smile. It was an expression that was hard to describe—a complex mix of regret and relief. It seemed Nanami had never seen Tomoko-san like this either. We sat there, quietly listening as she continued.

"I know I should have scolded her and put a stop to it as she told me. I'm sure that would have been the proper thing to do." Tomoko-san took a small sip of her tea, just enough to wet her lips. Maybe she felt nervous too. "I knew in my head that was the right thing to do, but seeing Nanami talk about you so

adoringly and so wistfully, all thoughts of scolding her left my mind in an instant.”

Tomoko-san stirred her tea lightly. Gentle steam still rose from her cup, but the tea would probably grow cold if she kept that up. Still, Tomoko-san’s hand didn’t stop.

“Seeing her like that, when I knew just how uncomfortable she felt around boys, I just couldn’t bring myself to say anything. In fact, I even fanned the flames and pumped Hatsumi-chan and Ayumi-chan for more information. I was doing things so that Nanami would be able to continue going out with you.”

Tomoko-san’s swirling hand came to a halt. When she looked up, I saw there were tears in her eyes.

“I wonder if I’ve made you lose faith in me. I’m sorry, Yoshin-kun, and thank you for forgiving Nanami.”

Tomoko-san bowed once again. When I caught sight of Tomoko-san’s tears, my breath caught in my throat. I felt like it was the first time I’d seen an adult cry.

Nanami, too, had tears in her eyes. She was looking straight at her mother. She wasn’t taking her eyes away, as though confirming the result of her actions.

As for me, hearing Tomoko-san’s explanation had helped to resolve some of my concerns. *So that’s why Tomoko-san did so much for us during our month together*, I thought. Maybe she’d felt guilty, but even then, how much she’d supported us was undeniable. Although she’d said that she had done it for herself, she had also done it for Nanami.

That was precisely why I decided to tell Tomoko-san something I hadn’t planned on telling her.

“Tomoko-san, I actually wasn’t going to share this with you, but the truth is I knew from the start that Nanami confessed to me on a dare.”

“I’m sorry?” Tomoko-san looked up, her mouth half-open in surprise. I was pretty sure this was my first time seeing her caught off guard. Today was full of firsts, it seemed.



“I mean, it was totally a coincidence. Can I tell you the full story?” I asked. I then proceeded to explain to Tomoko-san what I’d also told Nanami.

As Tomoko-san listened to my explanation, her mouth opened wider and wider. *Well, today sure is a day when I get to see all sorts of unexpected expressions.*

“...and that’s how Nanami and I came to forgive each other. That’s why, Tomoko-san, I don’t want you to worry about this anymore either.”

Once I’d finished saying everything I wanted to, I moved to drink my tea. It was slightly cold but hit the spot as I’d talked so much. I drank it all in one go.

Tomoko-san, meanwhile—her mouth still hanging open—couldn’t seem to find the right words. Glancing at her, I wondered whether she was angry with me and prepared myself for the worst. After all, I had basically been deceiving her daughter until just recently. It wasn’t hard to imagine the anger of a parent who learned of that. It’s not like I could claim it was all tit for tat, given that I was the only one who’d known about the whole situation.

Silence dominated the room for some time. I’d heard that some kinds of silences could be painful to the ear, but to be honest, I had no idea what that meant. Perhaps the situation I was in was precisely that.

I wasn’t sure if it was mine, Nanami’s, or Tomoko-san’s, but I could have sworn I heard someone’s heartbeat echoing through the room. It was Tomoko-san who broke the silence. Her voice sounded strained.

“Y-You knew it was a dare? And you still seemed that crazy about each other? Wait, really? That’s so hard to believe,” she muttered to herself. It seemed she was surprised not by the fact that I’d known about the dare but by the way I’d been acting *despite* knowing.

*Uh, is it really that surprising? And is it just me, or is Tomoko-san shaking? It can’t be that shocking, right?*

Apparently, Tomoko-san hadn’t even guessed that I’d known all along. Her level of shock made that clear enough.

“Crazy? I thought we liked each other about an average amount compared to other couples,” I remarked.

“Um, no, nothing about that was average. Even my husband and I were starting to get a little flustered watching the two of you. That’s why I assumed that you didn’t know.”

Sure, I had been going all in from the start. That, I was willing to admit. Baron-san was always making jokes about me moving too fast, but I’d just thought he was exaggerating. I figured that my idea of going all in as a dating notice was probably what everyone else would consider normal. Apparently, I was wrong though. I mean, it wasn’t that I doubted Baron-san’s words, but to be told that I wasn’t at all normal by yet another married person made me realize my standards were off. I began to feel a bit worried.

“What did you think, Nanami? I know it’s too late in the game to be asking this, but did I make you uncomfortable?”

“Not at all. It’s not like I know what other couples are like either, so I was trying to give it my all too. Maybe that wasn’t normal either,” Nanami replied.

*So she was going all in too, huh?*

Tomoko-san looked completely stunned by our exchange, but nevertheless, a smile appeared on her face. “I guess you two will be better off if you stay that way. Be good to each other, okay? I want to congratulate you too. And again, I’m sorry.”

“Come on, no more apologies. I’m sure our relationship will be as strong as ever from now on. I’m glad we’ll be able to put all this behind us.”

“I wish I could tell you how strange that sounds coming from just a high school student...” Tomoko-san murmured, smiling a perplexed smile as she sighed and placed her hand on her cheek. I supposed even the things I said didn’t really qualify as normal. *Wait, is it not normal to want to get along with your girlfriend’s family?*

When I laughed to cover up my embarrassment, both Tomoko-san and Nanami giggled. Seeing them both like that made me happy, but it also made me wonder about something.

“This is just a hypothetical, but what were you gonna do if things *hadn’t* turned out well between us?” I asked Tomoko-san.

Everything we'd talked about up until now had been clouded by the assumption that everything would turn out just fine. If Nanami and I had broken up, what would Tomoko-san have done? I didn't have the emotional fortitude to continue visiting the Baratos as Nanami's friend. I could only assume that, if we had broken up, I would no longer associate with Nanami or her family at all.

"Well, first I would have patted her on the back, and we would have had a good cry together. After that, I would have fed her lots of cake, just like this. In other words, I would have tried to console her as best I could," Tomoko-san said. Despite her smile, I didn't fail to notice that her hands were shaking a bit.

It seemed that Tomoko-san, too, was relieved by how things had turned out. I felt the same way. I didn't know what I would have done if Nanami had rejected me. Even if it were a normal breakup, I probably wouldn't have been able to recover for at least a few years. Would I have tried to fall in love with someone new?

As I started thinking about the tragic future that could have been, Tomoko-san clapped loudly as if to clear the air. Nanami and I looked at her and waited for what she had to say next.

"In that case, shall we get back to our dessert?"

"Yeah, let's do that," I said.

"That sounds like a great idea."

"Well, then—eat up!"

Just like that, Tomoko-san was back to smiling her usual smile. I felt undeniable happiness at the simple fact that I could bring my hands together in thanks for the treat in front of me. I picked up my tea, and Nanami broke off a piece of cake with her fork. The pleasant aroma of the tea put me at ease.

The more I calmed down, the more I felt as if all my nervousness from the day had been rewarded. And once I'd taken a sip of my tea...

"So, did you two kiss?"

I got sucker punched by an outrageous question.

It took all I had not to spit out my tea, but I ended up nearly coughing up my

lungs. Nanami, on the other hand, dropped her piece of cake onto her plate. “Yoshin, are you okay?!” she exclaimed.

“Oh dear. You really shouldn’t try to hold that in, you know. It’s better if you cough it all out.”

“It’s because you said such a crazy thing, mom!” Nanami cried, rubbing my back. When I caught a glimpse of her out of the corner of my eye, I saw she was as red as the strawberries decorating the cake.

“Well, you know, you’ve already smooched each other on the cheek, but I haven’t seen you lock lips yet,” Tomoko-san exclaimed in a panicked manner that was rather rare for her. “I just wondered if you did that on your one-month anniversary.” It seemed she had completely different terms for kissing on the cheek and kissing on the lips.

*No, no, no. This is no time to be analyzing her language. How does she know we’d kissed on the cheek?* I was pretty certain we’d never done it in front of Tomoko-san. I shot a glance at Nanami, who was looking down at the floor, her face bright red. She continued to rub my back, but at that moment, Tomoko-san dropped another bombshell.

“At this rate, I’ll get to hold my first grandchild sometime next year, though I suppose I don’t want to be a grandma quite yet.”

“You won’t! Why would you even say that?!” Nanami shouted.

“Oh? But don’t you want to do things like *that* with Yoshin-kun?”

“Well, I mean, if you asked me, maybe I’d want to, but... Wait, what are you trying to get me to say?! We’ve only just kissed!” Nanami cried.

“Aaah, so you *did* kiss! Oho, I see. So you’ve finally had your first kiss,” Tomoko-san remarked.

“Y-You tricked me!”

Tomoko-san was finally back to her usual self. I smiled awkwardly, quietly relishing the fact that I could be witness to this exchange between the two of them.

*Wait, this is no time for me to be relishing anything. I have to help Nanami get*

*out of this mess somehow. Oh man, she's already so red. My girlfriend really is cute.*

However, just as I was about to jump in, their exchange veered in a different direction. I decided to let them proceed and listened closely instead.

“Seriously, mom, it’s way too early to be talking about grandkids. We’re only in high school!”

“I can’t help it. On a serious note, I’m more than slightly worried that you won’t be able to hold yourself back if you two keep up at this pace. I’m nipping things in the bud before you try to take advantage of Yoshin-kun.”

“Wait, *I’m* the one who’s gonna take advantage of him?!”

“Well, of course! You’re my daughter, after all.”

Tomoko-san really was saying some ridiculous things.

From there, the two women continued their animated debate about whether Nanami would or wouldn’t take advantage of me. For some reason, Nanami seemed to be losing, and I was starting to feel like it would be difficult to step in between them. Suddenly, Tomoko-san turned to me.

“Oh, but Nanami takes after her father too, so it’ll be fine. What would you do if Nanami tried to take advantage of you, Yoshin-kun?” she asked.

“I’d lie there and take it like a man.”

“Yoshin?!” Nanami stared at me wide-eyed, her cheeks still flushed. Realizing that that probably hadn’t been the right response, I turned to look at her.

Our eyes met. In that moment, I felt like a current of electricity passed between us. We both blinked several times, but neither one of us looked away.

“You know I’d never take advantage of you, right? When we do it, I want it to be really meaningful and have it be on a special occasion and stuff,” she said, fidgeting.

*Please, stop! It’s way too early to make a resolution like that. We don’t have to force ourselves. We can just go at our own pace.*

“I’m just kidding, Nanami. I’ll definitely be careful not to get us into a situation

like that, but I'll also work hard to make sure that you won't get tired of me."

"Oh, i-is that right? Um, yeah, right. Of course."

*Is it just me, or does she seem kind of disappointed? I'm just imagining that, right? I mean, I can't help it. I still don't have the guts to do anything like that.*

You can call me whatever you want. Having run through this past month at full speed, I needed a bit of a break. At the same time, I had to make sure that she wouldn't get sick of me.

There's an old saying that goes "You don't need to bait a hooked fish." I'd heard that it was often used to describe men who suddenly became cold toward women once they started dating. Some people interpreted it to mean the two had gotten closer, but to me, that didn't sound right. I felt that it was precisely *after* you started dating that you had to make more of an effort.

Some people might criticize me for acting like I knew what I was talking about when Nanami was the very first girlfriend I'd had, but in my opinion, it was *because* Nanami was my first girlfriend that I couldn't slack off. I had to always keep an eye out for the best way of doing things. That would help us think about and care more about each other.

Of course, then some might say that I shouldn't allow myself a break, but going all out all of the time would be exhausting. It was important to strike a healthy balance. Sure, that was also a bit of an excuse to make sure I wouldn't cross a line that shouldn't be crossed. Overall, though, I meant what I'd said.

"I'll work hard to make sure you don't get tired of me either," Nanami said as she made small fists in front of her chest, flaring her nostrils as she breathed out of her nose to indicate her resolve. Even as I thought there was no way I would grow tired of Nanami, I also reminded myself that I really couldn't let myself slack off.

Just then, Nanami seemed to realize something and suddenly leaned closer. As I wondered what she was doing, she pointed to her own cheek and laughed.

"Yoshin, you're acting all cool, but you have whipped cream on your cheek. Here, I'll get it for you," she said.

"Oh my. Aren't you supposed to lick it off of him when that happens?"

Tomoko-san asked.

*Tomoko-san?!*

“You’re right. I should do that,” Nanami immediately agreed.

“What?! Nanami-san?!”

Because I’d been addressing Tomoko-san in my mind, for the first time in a while, I’d ended up adding the honorific to Nanami’s name too.

As for how the whipped cream ended up coming off of my face...that would remain a secret.



“Wait, so does that mean there was a possibility that onii-chan would have broken up with you and started dating me instead?”

That was the outrageous question Saya-chan asked upon hearing our story.

“Where does that even come from?! Saya-chan, were you even listening to what we just said?!” I exclaimed.

Meanwhile, Nanami’s face had lost all color. “What?! Saya, don’t tell me you actually like Yoshin!” she yelled as she gripped her sister’s shoulders.

Saya-chan simply looked at Nanami, her eyes narrowed in exasperation.

It was just a few days ago that Nanami and I had told Tomoko-san what had happened during our one-month anniversary. This time, it wasn’t just Nanami’s parents who were present at her house: my parents had gathered there as well. Both of our families were there, in other words.

Since both my parents were finally back from their long-term work trips, we had decided to take the opportunity to have a little get-together. My parents had been wanting to thank the Baratos for some time for looking after me in their absence. At first, we’d considered getting together at our house, but Nanami had invited us over since there was more space.

As a side note, my parents and Nanami’s parents had decided to make today’s meal together. All Nanami and I had to do was eat. Mom and dad had told me to let them act like parents for a change—though from my perspective, they



were already doing more than enough for me. Maybe it was all thanks to Nanami that I'd come to feel that way about them.

To get back on topic though, we hadn't gotten together as a big group like this since that time we'd gone on our trip. That was why, before we started eating, Nanami and I had shared with everyone that she and I had started dating again. In other words, we had told our families that our relationship had been based on a dare until then. Tomoko-san already knew this, of course, but everyone else—Genichiro-san, Saya-chan, and my parents—had yet to find out.

Would we tell them or not? Nanami and I had talked it over and even gotten Tomoko-san's opinion on it. In the end, we had decided to tell everyone. Tomoko-san also seemed to have something to say.

It had crossed my mind that maybe we didn't have to share this or that we really shouldn't say anything unnecessary at this point. Ultimately, though, that wasn't the conclusion we'd ended up reaching. Together, Nanami and I had decided that we wanted to avoid telling lies as much as possible.

Of course, there might be times in the future when we would have to lie about something. We might even tell a white lie or two in order not to hurt each other. Even a nice surprise might be considered a kind of lie. Still, we had decided never to tell a lie if doing so would lead to us hurting each other.

Situations where people misunderstand each other often start with a small lie, but that lie often ends up creating a huge chasm between them. That's when all sorts of unfortunate things happen. In TV shows and manga, characters always overcome such barriers and ultimately strengthen their relationships, but in reality, once a chasm like that develops, it becomes difficult to close up. It's not that uncommon for couples to become estranged because of something like that either. That was why, in order not to let something like that happen, we had decided to always talk to each other about any little thing that came up.

Telling our families the truth was just one part of that. In order to avoid all possible hang-ups in the future, we had to tell them the truth about our relationship. Both Nanami and I had been incredibly nervous; we had gripped each other's hand as we began finally fessing up.

That's when Saya-chan had thrown us for a loop. Before Genichiro-san or my parents could say anything, she had beaten everyone to the punch.

"Oh, no, it's not like I like him or anything like that. It's just that I was thinking it'd be nice to have a boyfriend like that, so I figured if you two were gonna break up, maybe he could try going out with me."

"Wow, so that's how it is," I muttered to myself as I sat there. "That seems totally flippant. Or is that just how middle schoolers are nowadays? Well, I guess we can't really say anything."

"Isn't it pretty normal to date first and then start liking the person later?"

*Wow, middle school students are getting pretty scary. Then again, I suppose what she said is true. I mean, we're prime examples of that.*

Seemingly unconcerned, Saya-chan continued. "Aren't there shojo manga like that too, where the guy ends up dating his ex-girlfriend's little sister? But then they both can't forget their exes and very obviously have lingering feelings for each other and stuff."

"I don't know much about shojo manga, but is that really true? And if that were the case, wouldn't I end up being a really lousy guy? Have you ever read manga like that, Nanami?"

"Hmm... I don't think so. Besides, if things turned out like that, I'd have to watch you and Saya get all cozy with each other, right? That'd be too much, even if it were a punishment. I think I'd go crazy."

Nanami pressed her hands to her cheeks as she looked at nothing in particular. Yeah, I was pretty certain I wouldn't be able to act all close with another girl in front of Nanami—especially if that girl was Saya-chan.

It wasn't that I disliked Saya-chan or anything. It's just that, even if I did break up with Nanami, wouldn't it be way too cruel to start dating her younger sister? That would basically be torture. Then again, I suppose breaking up with Nanami would be a kind of torture in itself.

Saya-chan was laughing as if it were no big deal.

"That's why it makes a good story," she said. "Think of it this way: if we did

that and then something happened, it would be easier for you two to get back together. Even if you did break up, if you were able to stay close to each other, you'd be able to figure out how you really felt and get back together quickly."

When she said that, I finally understood the real reason she was saying all this in the first place. Nanami probably realized it too. Saya-chan swiveled around to face her parents.

"That's why, mom and dad... Oh, I guess mom already knew, huh? Oh, come on, dad. You don't have to look so bothered. In the end, they've already worked things out, so it's fine. Don't be angry with them, okay?"

Genichiro-san had his arms crossed, his facial expression fixed in a grimace. He must have been tensing his arms; his biceps looked like they were about to burst.

*I should probably prepare myself to get punched a couple of times. I think I watched something once that said that if you just grit your teeth with full force, there's no blow you can't withstand.*

"Nanami lied; Tomoko knew about it; and even Yoshin-kun knew this whole time," Genichiro-san said, his voice low and heavy. It was so much softer than his usual voice, and yet it seemed to reverberate throughout the whole house.

More than anything, though, I was struck by the fact that I was hearing Genichiro-san call Tomoko-san by her name for the first time. Tomoko-san, meanwhile, was reiterating her apology.

"I understand what you must be thinking. I'm so, so sorry, dear. If you're going to be angry, please be angry with me."

"Oh, no. I'm not angry. I just... I feel sad that I was left out. Besides, with Saya telling me she was in the same position as I was, I couldn't be angry even if I wanted to." Genichiro-san smiled awkwardly, then immediately turned his sharp gaze upon Nanami. Uncrossing his arms, he gripped his knees tightly with both hands. "Even if you're both all right with it, Nanami, you hurt Yoshin-kun deeply. I assume you understand that and have every intention of making it up to him. Is that correct?"

He wasn't angry, but he nonetheless spoke the words that he knew he

needed to speak as Nanami's father. Still, I felt I had to interrupt him.

"Genichiro-san, I really wasn't hurt all that much."

"Listen, Yoshin-kun. It's even more troublesome when you don't realize just how hurt you are. That's why it's necessary for you to heal that wound moving forward. It's the parts of the heart that you aren't aware of that are actually most important." He smiled gently at me, placing his hand on his chest.

*That wound... Do I actually feel hurt by this?* If anything, I felt like I'd been healed by the time I'd spent with Nanami more than I'd been hurt by it. Still, Genichiro-san was looking at Nanami with a serious expression on his face. Maybe this really was something that he had to say as a parent. If so, then I couldn't get in his way. I watched the two of them in silence, careful not to miss anything.

"Yes. I do understand, and I'll make it up to him. I have every intention of spending my whole life making it up to him, dad, because Yoshin's really important to me. I love him," Nanami said clearly, looking straight at Genichiro-san in front of both our families. She wasn't blushing like she usually would. Her expression serious, she stared at Genichiro-san as though the two were having a staring contest.

*What does she mean, her whole life? This is the first I'm hearing of this.* However, this wasn't a moment when I felt like I could raise my hand to ask that question.

The wordless staring match continued until Genichiro-san broke the silence.

"I see. Well, if you're prepared to do that, then I won't say anything more. I wish you two every happiness." Genichiro-san smiled slightly, then turned to my parents and bowed his head. Tomoko-san bowed to them at the exact same moment. "Shinobu-san, Akira-san, I'm terribly sorry about this. Our daughter has displayed the utmost disrespect toward your son. I want to take this moment to apologize to you," he said.

"I'm truly sorry," Tomoko-san added. "I should have been the one to stop her, yet I egged her on instead."

Faced with their apology, my parents ended up getting flustered.

“Oh, no, no,” my father said. “It’s totally fine. Please raise your heads. We thought it was strange that our son would get a girlfriend all of sudden, but now it makes complete sense.”

“I for one can’t believe that what we saw was all for a dare,” my mother said. “I still can’t believe it. It felt like they were scattering sugar and flowers all around them wherever they went. How can they expect us to believe all this when they were acting like that? Don’t you agree, Akira-san?”

My parents were nodding to each other, seemingly unbothered by the situation. In fact, they seemed more exasperated by our displays of affection for each other. *What the heck? Isn’t that kind of rude coming from my very own parents?* They weren’t exactly wrong, though, so it wasn’t like I could say anything back to them. In fact, I could even understand how they were feeling, just a little.

*For the record, mom, I had no previous experience of dating anyone, so I really had to figure things out as I went along. Plus I was making a lot of extra effort just to get her to actually like me, so please let me off the hook.*

Suddenly, my mom turned to me. “Yoshin, do you also realize that you were deceiving Nanami-san?”

“I do. I was deceiving Nanami and everyone else.”

“I see. In that case, make sure you don’t ever forget that.”

Mom and dad now turned to Genichiro-san and bowed their heads. A part of me couldn’t bear to see them do it.

“We’re sorry for our son’s poor behavior toward your daughter,” my dad said.

“As his parents, we should have kept a closer eye on him. We sincerely apologize,” my mom added.

As my parents bowed their heads, Genichiro-san and Tomoko-san began to look flustered as well, and Nanami and I felt our chests tighten. Nanami tightened her grip on my hand.

Soon, my mom and dad raised their heads and turned to me. “Misconduct on your part is also on us for not raising you properly. As your mother, I’m more

than willing to apologize on your behalf, but I don't want you to take that for granted."

Dad nodded. "Your mother's right. This is just my opinion, but I believe a good man is one who can take responsibility for his own actions. From now on, keep that in mind and be good to each other."

Although they hadn't raised their voices at all, the words they spoke seeped into my heart. Nanami seemed to feel the same way. When I looked at her, I noticed she was tearing up. Before we knew it, we both found ourselves bowing to my parents. I felt like this was the first time I'd so willingly listened to what they had to tell me.

*I really have to work harder from now on*, I thought. Just as I was gearing myself up, though, my mom continued. "Also, there's something I want to ask you, Yoshin. I have a feeling that you feel the same way, Akira-san, but..." She paused for a moment, then straightened her posture and turned to face me. "Yoshin, you actually like Nanami-san, right? I want to hear you say it out loud in front of both of us."

*Right. Nanami's already made it clear how she feels, but I haven't said anything about it yet. In that case...*

Sitting up straight, I made my declaration to my mom—no, to everyone present.

"I love Nanami too, so much so that, in the future, I want us to get married."

With that, I heard everyone draw in deep breaths.

*Huh? Why's everyone acting like that? When Nanami said she loved me, they didn't react like that, right? Wait, why?*

Nanami was blushing, and Saya-chan was staring up at me happily, her eyes sparkling. Genichiro-san and Tomoko-san were wide-eyed in surprise. As for my mom and dad, they were shaking their heads in exasperation.

"I wasn't asking for you to go that far, Yoshin. All I wanted was for you to say that you liked Nanami-san. You're really jumping the gun there."

"Well, what he said just now really does prove he's your—that he's *our* son,"

my dad said.

*Oh, shoot. I really did say too much. I'm not usually the one putting my foot in my mouth. I mean, come on—Nanami said it too, so it was only right for me to say it back.*

As if my declaration were the signal, our families started talking about all kinds of things.

“Well, wouldn’t you know it?” my dad said. “They’re already starting out so similar to each other. I suppose we don’t have to worry about the future. Maybe we’ll be able to see our grandkids’ faces not long after these two graduate from high school.”

“Are you suggesting they’ll get married while still in college?” Genichiro-san replied. “Well, I suppose that’s entirely possible. In that case, we’ll have to support them as best we can.”

Tomoko-san hummed in thought. “Or maybe they’ll end up spending many years together before getting married. This is just a guess, but surely they’ll become even more intimate from now on.”

“You’re saying they weren’t serious until now? Well, that’s terrifying,” my mom murmured.

“Wait, seriously?” Saya-chan exclaimed. “I don’t wanna be an aunt while I’m only in high school. But maybe it would be nice to meet my niece. Or do you think it’d be a nephew? I bet they’ll be cute. I’m gonna spoil them rotten!”

Nanami and I turned redder and redder, and I felt her quietly shifting closer to me. She did so surreptitiously so that no one else noticed and then whispered into my ear in a voice quiet enough that only I could hear.

“I’m so glad we told everyone. Let’s try to be happy together, okay?”

“We’re not just gonna try. If we’re together, there’s no way we won’t be happy.”

After whispering to each other softly, we looked into each other’s eyes and smiled. I really was glad that we’d told everyone the truth. I’d been so nervous before we’d talked to them, but now I felt calmer, like a weight had been lifted



from my shoulders.

When I looked up, I noticed that everyone around us—who we'd thought were still chatting—had fallen completely silent. They were all watching us and grinning. Nanami and I stared down into our laps, embarrassed.

“Well then, tonight, to celebrate the official start of Yoshin-kun and Nanami's relationship and Shinobu-san and Akira-san's return from their work trip, we're having a temaki party!”

As if to divert everyone's attention away from our cherry-red faces, Tomoko-san got up and began bringing food to the dining table.

“We're going all out today! We have all sorts of delicacies that Shinobu-san and Akira-san brought from their trip, like sea urchin, fatty tuna, and even Japanese mantis shrimp! There's plenty to go around, so eat up, everyone!”

We all scrambled out of our seats to help Tomoko-san carry the plates to the table. She had refused our help in preparing the food, but she was willing to let us set up for dinner, at least.

In the midst of the bustle, Tomoko-san turned to me. “Oh, I almost forgot. Yoshin-kun, do you want to stay over tonight? Just for tonight, I'm willing to let you sleep with Nanami in her room if you want. Though I guess for the two of you, that's not terribly exciting anymore.”

“Um, no, thank you. I think I'll go home tonight. I'd like to sort through my feelings somewhat. And besides...”

“Besides?”

“I'm so worked up today, I can't really tell what I'll end up doing. I'm pretty sure that wouldn't fly.”

“Oh my. How bold of you.”

I was just kidding, but Nanami seemed to take me seriously. Flustered, she slapped my back really hard a good number of times.

“But you really confessed on a dare, huh?” Saya-chan remarked. “I didn't think stuff like that happened outside of manga. And to think that you'd do such a thing. How unexpected.”

“I know. I won’t ever do something like that again.” Nanami really did seem to be feeling down about it. This was going to be a real learning experience for both of us. Seeing her looking so despondent, though, I felt I should come to her aid.

“Do you have anyone you want to confess to, Saya-chan?” I asked, attempting to turn the tables on her. However, instead of being fazed, she simply replied that she had no one in particular in mind. The person who *did* end up taking my bait was someone completely unexpected.

“It’s much too early for Saya to be dating! Though, while I’d really like to say that, I know that’s all up to Saya herself and that I can’t stop her. Still, as a father, I can’t stand the thought of losing both of my daughters already,” Genichiro-san murmured.

“Oh dear. In that case, shall we have another one?” Tomoko-san asked.

“I suppose Yoshin doesn’t need us to look after him so much anymore either,” my mom said. “Maybe it would have been nice for him to have had a younger brother or a sister. What do you think, Akira-san?”

“That’s true. When the two of them get married, things will feel pretty lonely. Do you think it’s too late to try for a second kid?” my dad said.

“Hey, wait a minute! This was supposed to be about me, but now it’s all about you guys!” Saya-chan complained.

Both Nanami and I had frozen upon hearing the current conversation. My half-finished hand roll had undone, spilling its contents onto my plate. My hands were quivering with mortification.

“Stop talking about things like that in front of your own son!” I yelled.

“Seriously, mom, dad, just stop! How can you talk about things like that?!”

Our parents seemed entirely unaffected by our protestations. In fact, Nanami and I were at a loss for words again when we saw our parents looking at us as though we were the ones in the wrong.

“Oh my,” Tomoko-san said. “But don’t you see? We were affected by just how intimate the two of you were.”

“Wait, are you saying it’s our fault?” Nanami asked, confused.

“Well, I suppose we won’t be terribly lonely if we’re going to have grandkids,” my dad added.

“Come on, dad. You’re just getting ahead of yourself. Please give me a break.”

That was how our evening meal with our two families continued—relatively peacefully, that is.



Time passed quickly. By the time we realized it, three weeks had gone by since Nanami and I had confessed our feelings to each other. That meant that roughly the same amount of time had passed as between Nanami’s first confession and our family trip to the hot springs.

It had all happened so fast—too fast. Last month, each week had felt really full and eventful. Nowadays, the time just didn’t feel as packed at all.

Well, maybe that wasn’t entirely true. These past three weeks, we had been filling in Nanami’s friends and explaining everything to our families. In that way, we were trying to get rid of the lumps stuck in our throats. We had felt especially nervous telling the truth to our parents, but everyone had been more than willing to accept it. I couldn’t be more thankful for that.

For the sake of the future, I didn’t want anyone to have any lingering feelings of guilt or regret, so I had to get things resolved sooner rather than later. In that sense, I was glad that we’d talked to the people closest to us.

Was this what you’d call tying up loose ends? Maybe; maybe not. In any case, after we’d gone through it, it seemed more like a pleasant memory—if you can call something so recent a memory.

“When I stop to think about it, I suppose it really has been an eventful month,” I mumbled to myself.

Since Nanami was the first person I’d ever dated, of course I didn’t know much about how people normally went about relationships. Judging from what I’d been told, it seemed our relationship wasn’t normal at all, but that info was coming from the people around us, who weren’t exactly people our own age.

Oh well. Most importantly, there was no longer any kind of sadness or worry between us, and I should be happy about that.

I might have mentioned this before, but since my parents' return from their work trips, I was visiting Nanami's house much less frequently. To make up for it, though, we'd started taking turns visiting each other's house. In other words, on some days, we were now going to my house after school, and on other days, we were going to Nanami's house. Sometimes, Nanami even had dinner at mine. We would stop by one of our houses after school and study together, cook dinner together, grab a bite to eat somewhere, go on a shopping date... In other words, our days felt really peaceful now. Today, we had bought snacks and headed to my place to just hang out and relax. Okay, fine—actually, I was struggling to understand parts of my homework, so Nanami was going to tutor me a bit.

Nanami got way better grades than I did, and, as expected of someone who wanted to become a teacher, she was also very good at explaining things in a way that was easy to understand.

"Yoshin, when you're studying, you should really focus on doing just that. You're not even concentrating. I know things have been kind of chill lately, so maybe you feel like you finally have a moment to reminisce, but we should really think about doing that later."

*Oh, whoops.* Nanami must have overheard my mumbling.

"Yes ma'am. I'm sorry, Nanami-sensei," I said.

"Good. In that case, shall we get back to our studies, Yoshin-kun?" Nanami replied, and we returned to the books in front of us.

Calling her "sensei"—"teacher," that is—was one of the conditions Nanami had set for her tutoring me. She'd said that she wanted to start getting used to being called that to prepare her for later on.

Maybe it wasn't a bad idea for her to get a part-time job as a private tutor or something—just for female students, of course. I mean, no healthy guy would be able to concentrate on studying if he had a tutor like Nanami, so it was only right to be considerate. Actually, no. That was a lie—I could come up with all sorts of reasons, but the truth was that I simply didn't like the idea. Maybe that

meant I was a little bit too possessive. It wasn't like I could stop her from doing what she wanted, but that didn't mean I shouldn't care about what she was doing. I just had a tough time striking the right balance. If I tried thinking through it myself, I might end up arriving at all sorts of egocentric conclusions, so it was probably better for me to talk things through with Nanami.

To be honest though, I'd always been worried about Nanami because of her popularity. I'd thought that maybe other guys' affections for her would die down given that we were going out, but I'd heard through the grapevine that she was even more popular now. Was that sort of thing even possible? I could only imagine that it was because Nanami had become way less averse to guys since we'd started dating.

Apparently, she seemed more approachable and, well, more *sensual* than she had been before. Although I hadn't really known Nanami back then, I had to agree that she was plenty sensual now. To others, though, she seemed to have leveled up in the sensuality department.

That was why I was worried. I'd heard that there were guys waiting to pounce on the chance to ask her out if she ever broke up with me. It was terrible. I had absolutely zero interest in having her taken away from me. I didn't need any foreshadowing like that. The fact that there was no chance of me suddenly getting popular also added to my worry.

*Wait, I'm getting distracted again. I have to concentrate on studying. Concentrate, Yoshin. Concentrate!*

Earlier, I said there wasn't any kind of sadness between me and Nanami. Actually, though, I did have some remorse—a kind of niggling in my chest. It wasn't something I could resolve with my judgment alone. I wasn't even sure if it was something I had to resolve in the first place. A part of me wondered if it was something that I should just leave be. I'd been thinking about it the last few days whenever I let my mind wander.

I looked over at Nanami, who tilted her head quizzically as she returned my gaze. She must have sensed that I wasn't focusing again. With a concerned smile on her face, she poked my forehead gently. I smiled as I finally came to a decision.

*Yeah, of course. This isn't something I can just decide on my own. I have to talk about it with Nanami.*

Once I'd made up my mind, I readied myself to focus on my studies again. If I was going to think about my future with Nanami, I had to work on getting my grades up first.

Perhaps because of my renewed concentration, I managed to finish my assignment relatively quickly. Now it was time for a break.

"Nanami, there's something I wanna talk with you about. Do you have a minute?"

"You wanna talk about something? Well then, yeah, of course. Is that why you were distracted earlier? Come on, Yoshin. If you're gonna study, you have to focus."

"Sorry, sorry. I just couldn't stop thinking about something."

"And here I was thinking you were gonna say you couldn't focus because we were alone together."

Nanami lay down on the floor and placed her head in my lap, raising her feet high into the air as she flopped over. I wasn't sure if it was on purpose or if it was because she needed the momentum to change her position, but when she did that, the hem of her skirt slid down her thighs. I couldn't *see up* her skirt from my angle, so she probably knew what she was doing. Still, I could see her thighs perfectly well. That might have been even worse.

"Yoshin, I brought some tea since I thought you two might be taking a...break."

And, of course, the door to my room swung open with the perfect timing, allowing my mom to step in and catch a glimpse of Nanami with her legs in the air. From her angle, mom must have been able to see right up Nanami's skirt. Realizing what was happening, Nanami immediately sat back up and held her skirt back down in place. Even from behind, I could tell from her ears that she'd turned bright red.

*Mom, please knock... Oh, wait. Her hand is still in a fist. Could it be that we just didn't hear her?*

It was too late to find out now. The fact remained, though, that my mom had gotten a full view of what was under Nanami's skirt. Even *I* had never seen that. *Why does my mom have to get herself into situations like she's the protagonist of a romantic comedy?!*

"Um, I'm just gonna leave the tea right here," mom said, raising her glasses and placing the tray of teacups on the table where we were studying.

"Th-Thank you so much," Nanami mumbled in response.

Mom was about to walk out of the room, so for a second, I thought that she wasn't going to mention anything. Just before she exited, though, I heard her mumble, "High school kids these days wear some impressive underwear. Is that what's considered normal these days? Or are those for special occasions? Has Yoshin already seen them? No, if he had, they would have definitely gotten started on something. Maybe it'd be best for me to stay out of their hair for a while."

Maybe mom meant that monologue for her ears only. Unfortunately, though, Nanami and I both heard it loud and clear.

My mom wasn't the type to get flustered by things, so maybe she had a tough time figuring out how she was supposed to act in situations like this one. She continued mumbling to herself as she left my room.

*Um, is Nanami really wearing something that shocking?* I couldn't help shifting my gaze toward the skirt that the tomato-red Nanami was pressing down. It wasn't like staring would give me X-ray vision, but Nanami was twisting her body as if trying to escape from my gaze. Feeling me looking at her, she began to explain in a panic.

"Th-They're totally normal! I'm wearing cute ones today, but they're perfectly normal! D-Do you wanna see?! If you see, you'll know that they're normal!"





*No, I'm not going to look! Take your hands off your skirt, Nanami! Please don't get ahead of yourself!*

"Calm down, Nanami! Even if I saw them, I wouldn't be able to tell if they were normal!"

It wasn't that I didn't want to see them. If mom was speaking the truth, though, then I might not be able to control myself if I did. *Besides, seeing your girlfriend's underwear in your room... Wait, is that actually okay? No, wait, it can't be okay. Ugh, I'm getting confused.*

After finally managing to calm Nanami down, I nudged her back toward my lap. She slowly—quietly—lay her head down. I couldn't see her underwear, of course.

*Dammit, after hearing mom's stupid comment, I can't help looking in that general direction. Even if I can't see her underwear, I can still see her beautiful, pale thighs.*

Just as I was thinking that, I felt a piercing gaze coming from below me. When I looked down, I saw that Nanami was glaring at me with narrowed eyes.

"Pervert."

"You've got me all wrong, Nanami! This is all just the power of suggestion. I really can't help it," I exclaimed, justifying myself as I threw both hands in the air. Nanami, on the other hand, still seemed dissatisfied.

"If you wanted to see, you should've just told me," she mumbled.

*Should I have told her I wanted to see? No, wait, wait. I have to change the subject. I have to talk to her about the remorse I've been feeling.*

"Actually, Nanami, there's still something I want to talk to you about."

"What is it? Did you change your mind about wanting to see my underwear?"

"Totally not! Let's take our minds off underwear for a bit!"

"But why? Isn't it important to know what kind you like?"

For some odd reason, we ended up having a debate about underwear. Eventually, though, I had to cut the argument short because we started getting

to the topic of what kinds of bathing suits I liked.

“This isn’t what I wanted to discuss! It’s not about underwear; it’s about us!”

“Sheesh. Well, I guess this was still a win since I got to find out you like bikinis. Maybe it *is* still a bit too early to be talking about underwear.”

“Nanami-saaan...”

“Sorry, sorry, I get it,” Nanami finally said. “So, what is it you wanna talk about? Oh, and don’t worry—when we do plan on going to the beach, I’ll buy one bikini just to show you and another for when we’re actually hanging out on the beach.”

*Just to show me?! No, stop it. We’re getting off topic again. Right now, I have to focus on the thing I want to talk with her about.*

“I wanted to talk with you about Shibetsu-senpai. I was thinking of telling him about the dare even though we haven’t told other people at school. What do you think?”

“Hm? Well, if that’s what you want, then sure. Also, do you like cute bikinis or sexy bikinis?”

*Um, sexy ones... No, cute ones would look really good on you. Whoa, careful! I was about to say that out loud. Whoa, wait, stop! Is that the end of our discussion? Is that the resolution to my emotional turmoil?!*

“Oh, I just thought maybe you’d be against the idea, so I was feeling kind of torn about it,” I managed to say.

“But you thought we should tell him, right? If that’s how you feel, then I’m totally good with that too. You forgave me, and that’s all that matters to me. That’s why, no matter what senpai says or what he thinks of me, it’s my responsibility to deal with it.”

“But are you really sure?” I asked, feeling uneasy about seeing her speak about it so plainly. In response, Nanami furrowed her brow and smiled at me.

“Let me guess—you wanna continue being friends with senpai, so you don’t wanna keep any secrets from him, right?”

“Y-Yeah. He’s done so much for me, so the fact that he’s the only one that

doesn't know makes me feel bad."

This had all started with Nanami's confession on a dare. Even knowing that it was a dare, I had deceived Nanami in order to get close to her. Now we were officially going out, but, not knowing any of this, senpai had called me his friend and given me advice about so many things to help me in my relationship with Nanami. That had continued to this day. He was an important senpai as well as a friend.

"What if senpai stops being your friend because of it?" Nanami asked.

"That would suck, but that's precisely why I want to explain everything to him—because he *is* my friend."

Maybe this was all for my own self-satisfaction. Maybe I'd just end up making Shibetsu-senpai sad. Even so, since I'd restarted my relationship with Nanami for real, I felt like I wanted to restart my friendship with Shibetsu-senpai too. This was my way of showing respect to the person who'd liked the same woman.

"If that's what you've decided, then of course I won't stop you. And I'll go with you to talk to him too."

Nanami put both of her hands on my cheeks and brought my face closer to her own. As if she'd asked, I leaned in closer...and kissed her on her cheek.

"If you end up getting hurt, I'll be there to comfort you. Besides, if it's senpai, I'm pretty sure you'll be fine. That guy likes you a whole lot, you know?"

"That means a lot to me," I said. "But do you really think he likes me that much?"

"Yeah, you guys get along so well, I get jealous."

*Really? If so, that would make me kinda happy.*

As I sat there strengthening my resolve, Nanami brought her face closer to mine and smiled at me devilishly.

"By the way, Yoshin-kun, Nanami-sensei hasn't received her reward for her work as a private tutor yet."

"Yes, yes. Would this do?" I asked, kissing her on the cheek. Seeing Nanami's

satisfied smile, I grinned with embarrassment.

Soon after that, it was time for Nanami to return home. My dad was giving her a ride, so I hopped in the car with them and saw her off. Once I got my driver's license, I wanted to be the one to pick her up and drop her off. I'd never really had much interest in getting one, but it was starting to seem like a pretty good idea.

After my dad and I arrived back home, my parents and I had dinner. While we were watching TV in the living room, my mom asked me a question.

"So, Yoshin, did you, um, end up seeing Nanami-san's underwear?"

"No, mom. Of course I didn't. I wouldn't have the guts to do that sort of thing anyway."

"Despite being my son, you really are quite spineless. Are you sure you don't regret it? It was pretty amazing."

It really was hard talking to my mom about this—not that it would have been any easier with my dad. Just as I stood up thinking it best to walk away from the conversation, mom called out to me.

"Yoshin, you do have to show her that you desire her once in a while. Otherwise, she's going to be snatched away by someone else."

"There you go, saying stuff like that to provoke me. You're just messing with me, aren't you?"

"Oh, could you tell? But I do mean it. Make sure you treat Nanami-san well. What's best for a man and what's best for a woman isn't always the same thing."

Without responding to her comment, I made my way back to my room. I had to be honest—talking about things like that with my mom was rough, but maybe I should take what she said to heart, seeing as it was advice from a woman.



It was decided—I was going to tell Shibetsu-senpai everything. I'd thought Nanami might be against the idea, but she'd agreed so readily that I couldn't

help feeling deflated. However, I did wonder if I should take this as a sign of Nanami's trust in me.

As of now, I was more concerned that Nanami was jealous that Shibetsu-senpai and I were getting along so well. Sure, I was a little bit flattered too, but there really was no reason for her to feel that way. I didn't *want* her to feel that way. I had to make sure to show her through words and deeds that there was nothing to worry about and that everything was okay.

Even mom had reminded me that men and women valued different things. In other words, I had to circumvent any misunderstandings by behaving appropriately from the get-go. I had heard about that stuff before, but I wondered if it really was that prominent. I had to stop and recall what my mom had told me later on.

*"Make sure you don't let Nanami-san get away, okay? I don't think there's much to worry about, but still. Oh, and don't you dare cheat on her. If you do, I'll disown you."*

My mom had spoken those words with a gaze so cold that I'd felt myself shudder. Of course it would motivate me to do as I was told. Besides, I felt the same way as my mom did about cheating anyway.

Still, I had mixed feelings about the fact that the first object of my girlfriend's jealousy was a male friend whom I didn't even have romantic feelings for. No matter how much I thought about the situation, I didn't know how I should feel about it.

"Yeah, maybe I should just assume I'm loved," I finally concluded.

"Hm? Yoshin, did you say something?"

"Nothing at all, Nanami."

"Oh, yeah? For a second there, I thought maybe you felt slightly weirded out but also secretly happy about the depth of my love."

From one step ahead of me, Nanami grinned and turned her head slightly to look back in my direction. *So you did hear what I said...*

"And do you know just how deep my love is for you?" I asked in return.

“Oh, I know perfectly well. You like me sooo much, don’t you? But you know, girls just can’t help being jealous. Even if it’s just a really good friend, I still can’t help feeling this way.”

“Well, I mean, I don’t get jealous if I see you being all friendly with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san. If anything, I think it’s kind of nice to see girls talking excitedly with each other.”

“Hmm, I wonder if that’s just how boys are,” she said.

Maybe it was too much to say that all guys didn’t get jealous, but I still felt it better not to deny the suggestion. If I tried to say anything against it, I might just end up opening up a whole new can of worms.

“Well then, shall we head over to see Shibetsu-senpai?” I said. “He’s probably still at practice.”

“I haven’t seen him in a while, but aren’t they practicing really hard for that summer tournament? Maybe we can go cheer him on.”

*Wow! It’s super rare for Nanami to say something like that! Is she slowly getting over her fear of guys? Or does she just want to thank senpai, who’s always been so good to us? Then again, I’m the one he’s always helping out.*

If it was the former, I would be pretty pleased but also a little worried. I knew I just said I didn’t get jealous, but maybe I had to pray that I wouldn’t get into a situation where I would.

“I mean, you’re gonna go watch him play anyway, right, Yoshin? I just thought it might be fun to go see a basketball game on one of our dates. I wanna see senpai play basketball too.” She touched her index finger to the tip of my nose as if to dispel my worries.

*I see. To Nanami, this is just another date. I don’t want to seem rude to senpai, but a date like that does sound like fun.*

“If you turn up to cheer him on, senpai might get all worked up and try to show off or something.”

“It’ll be fine. Besides, Shibetsu-senpai doesn’t seem to like me like that anymore.”

“I’m also kinda worried that you’re gonna start to think senpai’s super cool.”

“Don’t fret! No matter what or who I see, I’ll always know you’re the coolest.”

Nanami spoke with a straight face, without even a hint of a teasing smile. I felt like she thought of me way too highly. Still, her words caught me by surprise, and I couldn’t help grinning. My face probably looked super creepy.

*Snap out of it, Yoshin. We’re gonna go see senpai, and it’d be rude if I turned up with this stupid grin. I have to get my act together.*

“Shall we head off, then?” I asked.

“Yup.”

She took the hand I offered to her, and we began walking toward the gym. I was used to us holding hands by now, but I could still remember just how nervous I used to get. To be honest, I still felt nervous when I became aware of it.

“Basketball practice, huh? I wonder what kind of stuff they do. Do they practice special moves and stuff?” Nanami asked.

“Special moves? Where’d you get that idea? Wait, was it my fault?”

“Totally. I saw it in the manga I read in your room the other day. It was really good.”

“Um, I think in real life they probably do basic training and drills rather than invent special moves.”

As in, normal basketball games probably didn’t feature any special moves. The phrase “special moves” itself sounded kind of insane. I mean, those sorts of things didn’t exist in real life—or so I thought.

“Speciaaaal moooooove!”

As soon as we reached the gym and opened the doors, we saw Shibetsu-senpai dunking the ball through the hoop while shouting at the top of his lungs. It was an impressive, one-handed slam dunk. They must have been playing a practice game, because no one seemed to be able to stop him. In fact, all his teammates were looking at him with exasperation.

*Senpai busted out a special move. You've gotta be kidding me.*

"Captain, can you really only make those dunks while yelling stuff like that?"

"I thought I told you to knock that off, Shibetsu. It may help you get on your game, but honestly, it's next-level embarrassing. People stare at us even when we're just practicing."

Shibetsu-senpai's "special move" seemed rather unpopular among his teammates, as it turned out. Still, the team captain was laughing heartily; his teammates' comments didn't seem to bother him at all.

"What are you talking about? Shouting at the top of your lungs empowers you to exert yourself in ways you ordinarily can't. That's why you all should stop being so embarrassed and give it a try," he was explaining. Then his gaze came to rest on us. "Oh? Why, if it isn't Yoshin-kun and Barato-kun!"

When Shibetsu-senpai noticed us, the other guys on the basketball team also turned to look in our direction. I'd always thought Shibetsu-senpai was tall, but everyone else was just as tall as he was. He told the others to take a break, then trotted over to where we were standing.

"Sorry, senpai. We didn't mean to interrupt practice," I said.

"No, no. We were about to take a break, so it's all good. So what's happening? It's been a while since we last saw each other. Have you finally decided to join the team?"

"Nah, that would leave me with way less time to spend with Nanami, and me joining in the middle of my junior year would only cause you trouble."

Shibetsu-senpai thought for a moment, then took a towel from a girl who appeared to be the team manager. The manager had short hair and tanned skin that suggested she spent a lot of time playing sports outside in the sun.

When I bowed slightly to her, she bowed back. I was pretty sure it was the same girl who'd stood talking with Nanami and Shibetsu-senpai when I met up with her at the train station a while ago. We hardly knew each other, but I greeted her all the same to be polite.

Nanami, on the other hand, began talking to her as though they knew each



other well. *So this is the difference between someone like Nanami and an introvert like me, I thought.*

“Thanks, manager. Oh, there’s something I need to talk with Yoshin-kun about, so it’d be great if you could have the team resume practice after they’ve had a break.”

When Shibetsu-senpai smiled brightly at the manager, she looked at him with irritation and sighed audibly. She then gave a quick nod before walking back toward the other team members.

*Wait, I thought senpai was supposed to be really popular. Shouldn’t a girl blush and smile happily if he grinned at her like that? The manager seemed more like she was glaring at him.*

“She’s an excellent manager, but I’m pretty sure she hates my guts. She’s always scolding me and that kind of thing. When I waved back at a group of girls cheering at a recent game, she told me to get my ass in gear instead.”

“Ah, I see. I heard you were super popular with girls, but I suppose that can’t possibly apply to *all* girls.”

*I guess that’s already been proved by Nanami’s reaction to him. But more importantly...*

“It’s all good, senpai. We’ll watch and wait until you’re done with practice. We just wanted to ask if you could spare us some time after you finished.”

“Hey, Yoshin-kun, what’s happened to you?” senpai asked as I’d barely finished explaining. His question startled me a little. I flinched as he looked at me with eyes that seemed to see right through me.

“Um, what do you mean, what’s happened?” I mumbled.

“Oh, don’t take it the wrong way. It’s just your expression—or rather, the look in your eyes has changed, and for the better, at that. I was curious if something had happened.”

“For the better?”

“Sure. Your eyes had a good look in them before too, but they also seemed to have some hesitation in them. Now all that hesitation seems to have vanished.

People with eyes like that are tough opponents in basketball. You have the look of an athlete who's not to be trifled with."

*Have I really changed that much?*

I felt slightly bewildered by the suggestion. Neither Nanami nor my family had said anything of the sort. As if to help me relax, Shibetsu-senpai began slapping my shoulders with his two large hands.

"Ha ha ha! There's no need to look so worried! You're wasting those good looks! What do you say, Barato-kun? Your boyfriend's becoming a man, don't you think? That's why I need to hurry up and hear what this is about—otherwise I won't be able to concentrate on practice at all and will end up getting yelled at by our lovely manager. Let's hear it."

"I don't disagree," Nanami replied, "but why are you acting like part of his family or something?"

"Hmm... I see myself as Yoshin-kun's good friend. Don't worry, I'm not trying to steal him away from you, Barato-kun. Even if you stop shooting me daggers, you'll still have nothing to worry about."

Nanami's eyes widened, and she blinked several times. Those probably weren't the kind of words she expected from Shibetsu-senpai. For a guy whose head was supposedly only filled with thoughts of basketball, he was surprisingly sharp. Didn't this mean he was actually really smart? Or was it just instinct?

"I realize just how much you've done for me, and I see you as a friend now too, but weren't you trying to take Nanami away from me at first, senpai?"

"There are no sides once the game is over! That's what sportsmanship is all about. It's all good, Yoshin-kun. You can count me as a good friend, so there's no need to sound so formal. Just so you know, I'll take it to heart if someone close to me acts all distant like that!"

I had so many things to say in response, but it seemed better for me to first take care of what I'd come here to do. The manager was starting to glare at us too.

"I'll keep that in mind. Would it be okay to move somewhere a little bit more private?" I asked.

“Hmm, sure thing. If it’s something to keep to ourselves, why don’t we go to the clubroom so that we can lock the door? Don’t sweat it—we keep it clean, so it won’t smell like dirty socks. Though, just to make sure, you’re not coming to talk to me about the two of you joining the basketball team, are you?”

“Definitely not.”

“Well, that’s too bad. If you joined the team, I could train you directly, and if Barato-kun came with you, she’d be able to help take some of the burden off of our manager.”

As it turned out, the basketball clubroom *was* unexpectedly clean. While there were some shirts and basketball-related books strewn about here and there, it wasn’t at all plagued by the filth often associated with the clubroom of an all-male sports team.

Maybe that was just prejudice on my part, though, from the image I harbored in my head. Maybe the manager was cleaning the place on a daily basis or the members themselves liked to keep it clean. A faint floral smell was wafting through the space.

“Pretty clean, huh? A messy clubroom leads to a messy state of mind. That’s why we make it a point to keep it nice and tidy. If I had to be honest, though, I’d say it’s because the manager would yell at me if I let the place turn into a pigsty.”

Shibetsu-senpai must have seen my thoughts playing out on my face. His explanation had even included a punch line. I never thought Shibetsu-senpai would be the type to get yelled at.

“I am the captain, after all. In other words, while I’m fully in charge of the team, I have to take responsibility for their actions. It makes complete sense that I’d be the one getting punished for any misbehavior.”

As Nanami and I both stood there, eyebrows raised, Shibetsu-senpai locked the door and turned to us with a smile.

“Oh, come now, Yoshin-kun. Don’t look so surprised. Is it really that surprising?”

“Um, in a way, I suppose. It’s not something I thought I’d ever hear coming

from the guy who challenged me over the right to date Nanami.”

“Ha ha ha! Forget about that already. Well, I suppose I had my own reasons for it. Enough about me though! I’d like to hear from you...from the both of you,” he said, pulling out a couple of folding chairs. They were the same ones often used in the gym, but it seemed they had them in the clubrooms as well.

Nanami and I sat down next to each other, while Shibetsu-senpai sat across from us. He’d sat close enough that he could easily reach me, but I didn’t try to put a table between us just in case. If it so happened that he got mad after my story, I was prepared to take one—no, several punches from him. I felt like I’d been having to prepare for the worst a bit too frequently lately, but there was no helping that.

Deep down, I knew that Shibetsu-senpai wasn’t the type of person to throw his fists so easily, and I trusted him completely. Still, I couldn’t disregard the possibility. I hadn’t a clue just how much of an impact what I was about to say would have on his emotional state.

Nanami had offered to step up to protect me by taking the blame, but I felt that this was precisely the time when I should be the one to step forward—since I was her boyfriend and all.

Besides, men were pretty simple creatures. If they could punch each other once and make peace, then they’d be friends forever. At least that was how it worked in manga. The one thing I couldn’t let happen was for Nanami to take the brunt of Shibetsu-senpai’s anger. That said, I had a pretty strong feeling that no matter what, he wouldn’t direct his anger at Nanami.

I opened my mouth slowly, ready to tell senpai the truth about my and Nanami’s relationship. I tried to tell him, but...my mouth wouldn’t move. All that came out were heavy breaths—not a single sound. I tried taking a few deep breaths, but the result was the same. In fact, I noticed my body was beginning to shake.

I was afraid. Even though I’d made the decision myself, I was freaking out at the last minute about having to tell Shibetsu-senpai the truth.

I’d always been fine being alone. Even now, although I would talk to a few of the guys in my class, I wasn’t terribly close with them. I wouldn’t meet them

outside of school, and I certainly wouldn't start up conversations with them myself. That was about the only connection I had with them.

In the midst of that, I had become friends with Shibetsu-senpai. No matter how it had started, senpai had called me a friend—a good friend, even. And now I was afraid of the possibility that he would disappear from my life because of what I was about to say to him.

I was overcome with self-loathing for feeling this way despite having decided to tell him everything. I was possibly even more nervous than when I'd told our families the truth. No matter what happened, family members couldn't leave you, but friends definitely could. Friendships could disappear for any small reason. That was what I was afraid of.

As those thoughts swirled around my brain, I felt my hand enveloped by something soft and warm. When I looked down, I saw that Nanami's hand was gently holding mine. She was smiling at me without saying a word. She was smiling as if to let me know that everything would turn out okay. Shibetsu-senpai was in front of me, smiling too. He was silently waiting for me to start speaking. Feeling Nanami's warmth and seeing Shibetsu-senpai's expression, I began to feel courage well up inside me.

*That's right. Nothing will change unless I talk.*

As soon as I thought that, my mouth began to produce actual words.

"Shibetsu-senpai, what did you think of my and Nanami's relationship?" I managed to ask. Shibetsu-senpai responded quietly and sincerely, without his expression changing at all.

"Well, to be honest, at first I wondered why she chose you and not me. I'm the captain of the basketball team, and I was fairly confident of my popularity, so when I heard that she confessed to you rather than to me... I'll be honest: I was jealous. And, as you know, I behaved in an idiotic way because I was overcome by that jealousy. But when I witnessed the strength of your relationship, well, I knew I had to give up. I felt ashamed for having felt like that in the first place."

"If I told you that relationship was a deceptive one, what would you say?" I asked next. Senpai paused to think for a moment, then looked at me, a troubled

smile on his face.

“Sorry, Yoshin-kun. Just between us, I’m actually not that bright of a guy. Could you be a bit more direct? I’m not trying to provoke you or anything, so don’t take this the wrong way.”

He was right: that was a totally abstract and unfair way of putting things. I took a deep breath, tightening my grip on Nanami’s hand. Then I told Shibetsu-senpai the truth.

“Nanami confessed to me as part of a dare. And, knowing that, I tried to make her like me so that I could make her my real girlfriend.”

Shibetsu-senpai’s expression turned to one of surprise. Of course—if he learned that the relationship between me and the girl he liked was all based on a lie, he had every right to be angry. On top of that, I had taken advantage of Nanami’s feelings and situation. I was prepared to accept every scrap of anger that came my way. Shibetsu-senpai, however, now appeared to be thinking, having overcome his surprise. He then closed his eyes and placed his hand on his chin as though he finally understood something.

“I see, so that’s what it was. Barato-kun confessed to you on a dare.”

“That’s right. And I want to reiterate that I knew all about it but went along with it anyway for my own sake.”

“Yoshin... Senpai, that’s not it. It was my fault that I asked him out in the first place. It was just a coincidence that Yoshin knew about the dare.”

Nanami was trying her best to explain, but Shibetsu-senpai wasn’t listening. Instead, he seemed deep in thought as he continued mumbling to himself.

“I see, then I kicked up a fuss about nothing—not that it was any of my business. I should have hit the brakes a bit.”

“Senpai?” I said, trying to see if he was okay. After thinking for a minute, he raised his head, a serious expression on his face.

“So for you two to be coming to talk to me like this must mean that you both now know about everything that happened, yet you’re still together. Is that correct?”

“Uh, yes, that’s right,” I replied as Nanami nodded. Senpai thought for a moment longer, but what he said next was unexpected for the both of us.

“I see. That’s ace!” he exclaimed, clapping his hands and flashing us a brilliant smile. It was a genuinely cheerful expression that suggested no ounce of gloom or sadness.

*Huh? Wait, what does he mean by that?*

Nanami and I were just as surprised as each other. We sat there with our mouths hanging open, probably looking quite silly.

“Aren’t you angry, senpai? I mean, back when you challenged me to that basketball match, Nanami and I were dating only because of a dare.”

“Hm? There’s no reason for me to be angry. I mean, from the looks of it, you both care about each other a lot, no?”

“That’s true, but...”

“Then there’s no problem at all. All’s well that ends well! After the battle, you both won the war!”

Listening to him, Nanami and I found ourselves even more shocked.

*Wait, “battle”? What battle, senpai?*

“Besides, the dare is more an issue between the two of you—or maybe it was more like a tactic. I imagine that level of secrecy and deception is fairly commonplace in any romance. If anything, I was the fool for trying to barge my way into the middle of things. Even if I didn’t know, I’m still sorry.”

So, at the end of it all, he ended up being the one to apologize. Not quite understanding his logic, I tilted my head in confusion. Nanami seemed to feel the same way; she was looking at him with her head tilted as well. Seeing us both look so confused, Shibetsu-senpai grinned at us some more.

“Yoshin-kun, I for one believe that absolutely anything can trigger the start of a relationship.”

“Absolutely anything?”

“I’m not saying I necessarily approve of asking someone out that way, but

that was just how you guys' relationship started." Senpai retained his gentle smile as he spoke. "There are countless couples who genuinely confess to each other and still break up in the end—be it from differences in values or because their love simply cooled off."

I hadn't even thought of that, and I don't think I ever would have realized if senpai hadn't mentioned it to me. After all, I hadn't thought a relationship would be possible between me and Nanami in the first place.

"When you think of it like that, your relationship is something short of a miracle," Shibetsu-senpai said, pointing to both me and Nanami. "You started off not even knowing anything about each other. Now you're so in love that you're choosing to stay together even after coming clean. What else would you call it?"

"Then you're willing to forgive me?"

"It's not about whether I forgive you, though I really should reiterate that there's nothing wrong with your relationship. And of course I forgive you! That's what friends are for."

I was tearing up just hearing that. The emotion I felt was completely different from when my own parents acknowledged our relationship.

Nanami gripped my hand tighter. Before I even realized it, we were both bowing to Shibetsu-senpai in silence.

"Besides, I feel like a load has been taken off my shoulders. If Barato-kun's managed to overcome her discomfort toward guys, then there's no better outcome, I'd say."

With that single comment, both our heads shot up.

"What?"

"How did you know I felt uncomfortable around guys?!"

Shibetsu-senpai smiled awkwardly and scratched his cheek. "The reason I asked you out was because—well, this is embarrassing to share—but it's because I arrogantly thought that I would be able to help you overcome that discomfort, given how popular I was with girls."



*Uh, more importantly, how did he even know in the first place?*

Nanami, seemingly as flabbergasted as I was, was staring at Shibetsu-senpai with her eyes as wide as saucers. Seemingly amused by our reaction, he smiled wryly and continued. “Despite how I come off, as captain of the basketball team, I’d say I have a pretty good eye for people. Seeing the way Barato-kun behaved, I just had an inkling.”

“And yet you kept looking at my chest when you confessed to me?”

“Hey, I’m nothing but honest about my desires! I love boobs! Besides, I didn’t think for a moment that you’d turn me down.”

*I see, so senpai was thinking about Nanami too in his own way.*

“That incident, as well as my whole meeting with Yoshin-kun, was a good medicine in terms of my arrogance. I admit it was a bit bitter, but I suppose some pills are harder to swallow!” Shibetsu-senpai slowly reached out toward me. “Yoshin-kun, are you still up for staying friends with me? I don’t feel like we made that clear.”

Not only did Shibetsu-senpai forgive me, but he was making such a kind offer. Trying to ignore the way my field of vision was beginning to blur, I gripped his hand. “Of course. It’d be an honor, Shoichi-senpai.”

I was pretty sure he smiled in response.

On that day, although I had thought I would lose a friend, I had in fact managed to gain a *good* friend for the first time in my life. However...

“Whoa, you totally remembered my first name! Now, Yoshin-kun, grab hold of that momentum and try to be a bit more casual with me!”

“I’m so sorry, Shoichi-senpai. You have to let me off the hook on that one. I can’t possibly talk so casually around someone I respect so much.”

“Did you hear that, Barato-kun?! Yoshin-kun said he respects me! What an awesome day! I’d better work my butt off to stay at that level. Today is gonna be a slam dunk fest!”

Overwhelmed with excitement, he jumped out of his seat with joy. To Nanami and I, who were still sitting down, he seemed to loom over us like a mountain.

I'd never understood just how tall he was until now. Even as a guy, I felt intimidated by him. When I glanced over at Nanami with concern, I realized she'd stood up too and was facing him head-on.

"Senpai, you may be Yoshin's good friend, but *I'm* his girlfriend," she said with her shoulders back. "Please make no mistake about that."

*What's going on here?*

"Huh?! Come now, Barato-kun. Yoshin-kun and I are tight. Can't you let us have some time to hang out together, just us guys?"

"But I want to go on dates with Yoshin on our days off."

"How about once a month? You can even come too!"

*Huh? What's with this ominous feeling?*

Even after that, Nanami continued her debate with Shibetsu-senpai, very much standing her ground as his equal. Seeing her so fearlessly go up against such a big guy made me feel emotional in terms of how strong she'd grown.

*Wait, this is no time for that.*

"Hold up, why are you two acting like you're fighting over me?!"

However, my question didn't seem to reach them.

## Interlude: What Were We Arguing About?

“I’m sorry things turned out this way, Yoshin.”

Back in my room, I was lying prone over Yoshin’s lap, my palms pressed together in apology. I was in a different position compared to our usual lap pillow. I felt that if we did the same thing over and over, it might just become routine—though I suppose I wouldn’t have minded at all even if that did happen.

As I squirmed on top of Yoshin’s firm thighs, he writhed as if I was tickling him. With my palms still together, I looked up at him.

“I don’t think anything’s wrong,” he said. “I kinda want to go, and you were saying you wanted to see it too.”

“I know, but I didn’t think my wish would be granted on the very day I mentioned it.”

Yoshin brushed the hair from my forehead. His gentle touch felt so comfortable that I found my eyes closing by themselves. Just how good would it feel to fall asleep like this? I wasn’t about to find out.

We were talking about our earlier conversation with Shibetsu-senpai. Yoshin had told him about the dare, and they’d quickly made up. Actually, there hadn’t been any falling out in the first place. In any case, there was no chance that their friendship would go sour. If anything, it seemed to be stronger than ever.

At the same time, I had also learned that Shibetsu-senpai had been thinking of ways to help me out. I knew it was after the fact, but I felt sincerely grateful about that. Well, maybe I was able to feel that way because his reason for staring at my chest had been so simple. Even Yoshin had once said that he couldn’t help looking in the general direction sometimes.

Before, all I’d been able to feel was a sense of disgust about things like that. Now, though, I could write it off as just the way things were. I knew that change was largely due to the fact that I now had Yoshin in my life. No matter what

happened, Yoshin would always protect me. To have someone that I could feel that way about gave me more courage than I ever could have imagined. I know all this seems way too melodramatic when we're talking about boobs, but I couldn't help feeling that way regardless.

Let's get back on topic. We're supposed to be talking about Shibetsu-senpai right now.

After that conversation, Shibetsu-senpai and I had ended up having quite the battle. I have to say, I'd never imagined fighting with him over my boyfriend. To omit the details of the battle and get to the conclusion, it was decided that Yoshin and I would go to see Shibetsu-senpai's practice game next weekend. In other words, we were going to watch a basketball game for our date.

Yoshin had told me that he'd turn Shibetsu-senpai down himself if I really didn't feel like going, but I knew that he'd done a lot for Yoshin—also, I'd kind of been wanting to watch a game myself.

Shibetsu-senpai seemed really happy that Yoshin and I were going to go cheer him on. We wouldn't have been able to go if the game were being held at another school, but since it was going to be at our home gym, any student that wanted to could watch.

Even so, I'd never thought that Shibetsu-senpai would take such a liking to Yoshin.

"I can't lose!" I exclaimed.

"Wait, Nanami, hang on."

As I clenched both my hands into tight fists, Yoshin gently wrapped his arms around mine.

"Senpai's my friend. You're my girlfriend."

"I know, but sometimes a woman has to fight a battle that she just can't stand to lose. I'm pretty sure that's the case, anyway."

As I sat there with the flames of my fighting spirit crackling in my heart, Yoshin looked momentarily exasperated and then burst out laughing. *What's up with him?* I thought as he continued grinning to himself. I began to wonder if I'd

said something funny, and as it turned out, I wasn't wrong, exactly—but he wasn't laughing about what I'd said just now.

"You sounded really tough earlier today," he said.

I shrank back in embarrassment. Yoshin continued stroking my hair as he laughed quietly, his shoulders shaking a little.

"I never imagined you'd compete against senpai like that."

In total contrast to his shaking voice, Yoshin continued stroking my hair slowly and gently, but because his body was shaking, his hand was shaking slightly too. The vibration seemed to shoot straight from the top of my head down to my toes. Feeling that strange sensation throughout my body, I began to worry whether he thought I was being foolish or he felt weirded out by me. However, that didn't seem to be the case.

*Is it just me, or does he seem kind of happy?*

I became slightly embarrassed and had to force myself to stretch to try to hide it. Was my body feeling tingly because I'd been in the same position for a while? Shifting around on his lap, I could feel his body directly against my own.

"It's because he was trying to take you away from me," I said.

"Oh, come on. He wasn't trying to do that. He just wanted us to hang out, though I'm not really sure he'd have much fun spending time with me."

I turned around in his lap and looked up at him. Then, reaching up, I pinched his cheek with my fingers.

"Fwah?" he said.

"I have fun when I go on dates with you or spend time with you, so I'm sure senpai would have fun hanging out with you."

"You really think so? Don't you think it's different from us being together and going on dates? I mean, I know I have fun just spending time with you, but that's not really the same thing."

He seemed oddly negative—or maybe suspicious—but I couldn't help feeling thrilled to hear that he had fun just being with me. To hide my sudden shyness and to show him concern, I reached up my other hand to pinch his other cheek

too. Both were soft yet somehow firm. The mochi-like consistency was somewhat addicting. I wondered if men's obsession with breasts was something like what I was feeling now.

"Senpai isn't a bad guy, and he'll probably take you to places you haven't been to before. You guys can just have fun doing stuff like that together."

That's when I realized I was saying something that sounded like I was trying to sell Yoshin on Shibetsu-senpai. *Why am I doing this?* I wondered. But it was true that I also understood what it felt like to want to hang out with someone you wanted to grow close to. That was why Shibetsu-senpai and I had compromised and settled on me and Yoshin going on a date to see his team play.

After thinking for a moment, Yoshin—whose cheeks were still in my grip—slowly opened his mouth and said, "To be honest, I haven't hung out with a guy friend since elementary school, so I'm feeling kinda anxious about it. I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to do. I guess that's why I'm so reluctant."

"But you make so much effort when you're going on a date with me."

"Yeah, but that's because it's for you."

My heart skipped a beat when he said that. I didn't know how to handle being given special treatment. At the same time, I was finally able to understand what Yoshin was so afraid of. If he suddenly had to do something he wasn't used to, of course he would be scared. It was precisely my job as his girlfriend to give him words of support.

"In that case, let's make our next date a kind of rehab! We can cheer for senpai's team until we're blue in the face, and you can get more used to the idea of hanging out with a guy friend again. I'm sure senpai would appreciate it, and it'll probably be loads of fun too."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Senpai's probably gonna dominate the court. I've never really watched any sports games, so I'm looking forward to it."

"Definitely. I can hardly wait for our date."

"I didn't expect you to end up supporting senpai. But yeah, I should take this as a good opportunity to hang out with senpai more."

When Yoshin made a fist to express his determination, I wrapped my hands around it gently. His gaze shifted to me, and he smiled warmly.

“But you’re always gonna be my number one, Nanami,” he said, smiling even more brightly. I smiled back at him in return.

“You’re my number one too, Yoshin.”

He continued smiling warmly, looking as happy as I probably did in that moment.

## Chapter 2: Shaky Adolescence

After having successfully told Shibetsu-senpai about our relationship, I found myself alone in my room. I was playing my game for the first time in a while, updating Baron-san and company on what had happened up until today. I hadn't really been letting folks know what had been going on lately.

"I see, I see. So you talked to that friend of yours, and now there's nothing standing in the way of you and your happiness. Oh, to be young! I'm really glad to hear it went smoothly."

Baron-san sounded reassured on the other end of the line. Hearing him say that made me realize that everything really was over, and I let out a sigh of relief. Even this exchange with him felt like business as usual.

"Yes, thanks to all your help, there's no longer anything hanging over our heads, though we have run into quite the problem," I said.

"Quite the problem, you say?"

"My girlfriend and my senpai were fighting over me."

At that moment, I heard Baron-san burst into a chuckle. I knew exactly how he felt. If I were in his shoes listening to him tell me something like that, I would have probably burst out laughing too. It was such an incomprehensible turn of events.

Incidentally, Peach-san was also on the call. She, too, seemed to be laughing, though while trying not to make too much noise. The sound was of a much higher pitch than I would have expected. This might have been the first time I was hearing her laugh like this.

"C-Canyon-kun's the heroine of the story?" Baron-san said through heavy breaths.

"H-How did things get to that? Didn't your senpai used to like Shichimi-chan?" Peach-san stuttered.



Both of their voices were quivering. I bet they were stifling their laughter. Personally, I would have preferred that they just laughed out loud without trying to be so polite about it.

It was as Baron-san said: I was getting treated like the heroine in some love story. Given the fact that Nanami had been saying nice things about Shibetsu-senpai at the end of it all, though, maybe I didn't need to worry about any antagonism between the two. After all, we were going to go watch Shibetsu-senpai play.

When we'd talked with him a little more, we'd learned that despite his desire to hang out with me, he unfortunately wouldn't have any time because his days were filled with practice. Apparently, he was even having to cut back on hours at his part-time job. I wondered what kind of work he did.

Shibetsu-senpai had firmly declared that he had no doubt the team would advance to nationals, but he still had no intention of him or his team letting their guard down. After we'd finished our conversation, he'd headed right back to practice.

"I'd love to meet that senpai of yours one of these days," Baron-san said, his voice chipper with amusement. "Either he'd see me as a rival or he'd thank me for taking care of his friend."

With the way Shibetsu-senpai was now, it would most likely be the latter. Given how proactive he was, I wouldn't have been surprised if he even came to meet my parents. I wondered how my parents would react if they met him. I had a feeling they'd be super happy just because I had a friend. Though I'd feel bad for Shibetsu-senpai, I really didn't want them to meet if that were the case.

"You can say that because it doesn't actually affect you," I said. "Given how much he's done for me, especially that time he helped me find clothes for my first date, I for sure have to make time to hang out with him once things calm down."

"I'm glad things are going well with your senpai, Canyon-san, but how are things with Shichimi-chan these days?" Peach-san asked. "Have you two gotten any further? You know, like, have you done anything beyond kissing?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, Peach-san, but I'm afraid we've only kissed. Besides,

aren't you only in middle school? Aren't you a bit too young to be thinking about things beyond kissing?"

"Oh, please. I want to hear about the love lives of high school students!"

I'd heard that girls tended to be more mature than guys, but when it came to stuff related to dating, Nanami and I were both total newbies. We were still trying to figure out the basics, which meant there was no way we would have gone further than kissing. In fact, I wished people would give us more credit for the kissing part. Even with that, we'd only gotten used to kissing on the cheek. Kissing on the lips was still a huge deal for us.

I was pretty sure we weren't going to be able to get beyond that while we were still in high school. I was still too nervous to take any kind of action. Doing so would damn near give me a heart attack. I imagined that the chest pains I got from my heart pounding so much were usually only possible from running a full marathon—not that I knew for sure, since I'd never done anything of the sort.

"Like I said, we haven't done anything beyond kissing. That's the truth. And even if we had, I might be kind of hesitant to share it."

"Is that so? Well, I guess I should ask Shichimi-chan about stuff like that, then. But does that mean things haven't really progressed between you two lately?" she asked.

"We've just had a really big change, so we're planning on taking it easy for a while."

This past month had been a whole series of turbulent events. I felt it was fair to say that it had been a pretty intense month. Even if there was no way to get around it, I felt like we were moving along at a really fast pace. I understood that there were people who moved at even faster speeds when it came to relationships, but I honestly felt like I was running out of breath. I felt it would be better to progress at a much slower speed in the future.

"You're right," Baron-san said, his voice sounding serious. Until a moment ago, he'd seemed amused by the conversation. I was a little taken aback by the shift in mood. "No one can argue against you taking it easy for a bit. Still, even though it's fine to go a bit slow, don't forget to do things that you should be doing."

“Things I should be doing?” I repeated.

“You now have a friend—a *good* friend. That in itself is a wonderful thing. I’m pretty certain that from here on out, your circle of friends will continue to expand.”

“Expand?”

“Right. To be frank, I think you’ll become quite popular. That’s among guys and, of course, girls too.”

*Me, become popular? That doesn’t strike me as a possibility at all. Why would I become popular?* I thought. The word “popular” seemed a better fit for people like Shibetsu-senpai and Nanami. It was a word that had nothing to do with someone like me.

“As a word to the wise, you may not realize it, but you’ve become a much more attractive guy,” Baron-san said.

“I think Canyon-san’s always been an attractive guy,” Peach-san protested.

I felt kind of funny when he complimented me. Nanami said the same thing to me occasionally too. Still, I didn’t really know about stuff like that. Besides, if I *did* understand and started acknowledging what an attractive guy I’d become, I would probably only negate that change.

Baron-san tried to quiet Peach-san and continued to explain. “And now that you’re a more attractive guy, there are people around you who are also popular, right? I wouldn’t be surprised if there were people who tried to get a piece of that. Either way, there’ll be people who’ll now see you differently.”

“Do you really think so? I guess I can’t really tell.”

“Well, it’s not something that would ordinarily change so quickly, but you do recognize that the relationships you have with people have changed a lot in this past month, right?”

That was true. I was now always alone with Nanami, and if not, we were usually with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san. Those three really stood out. All they had to do was stand together and they automatically looked cool. What was more, Shibetsu-senpai had become a good friend. Those changes were

undeniably significant.

“What I’m trying to say is that while it’s great to make more friends, you shouldn’t spend all your time and energy on *just* your friends and forget to pay attention to your girlfriend.”

“Forget to pay attention?”

“That’s right. We’re talking about your priorities here. If you mess up who to give priority to, you might not realize the error of your ways until it’s too late.”

Baron-san’s words had an indescribable weight to them. Peach-san seemed to be holding her breath, as she wasn’t saying a word. Both she and I must have picked up on the tension. If we’d been chatting by text, we might not have felt the gravity of his statement.

“I did tell Nanami that she was my number one priority even if senpai and I were good friends. Still, you seem to really know what you’re talking about, Baron-san.”

“If you’ve already told her, then maybe I didn’t need to butt in. Well, I only know because I’ve experienced it myself. To tell you the truth, my wife and I have broken up once before.”

Although he said it like it was no big deal, I couldn’t help but gasp. A heavy silence settled in my room. Baron-san must have picked up on it, because he spoke up in a cheery tone.

“Oh, it was before we got married. My wife was actually pretty popular back when we were both in school. After we started dating, I started making a lot of new friends, and, because of that, I got a little full of myself.” As if trying to dispel the silence, Baron-san laughed. “As it turned out, I wasn’t as bad at socializing as I thought I was. My wife, *girlfriend* at the time, seemed to be fine with me hanging out with my friends, so I didn’t think that was any issue.”

“But then...?”

“One day, all of a sudden, she exploded with frustration. Though thinking about it, I guess it wasn’t that sudden at all. There’d been signs, but I’d been oblivious to them. I’d taken advantage of her understanding and, in the end, left her no choice but to explode like that.”

*Left her no choice but to explode...* Baron-san must have intentionally phrased it like that—to make me understand who made her explode and who caused it to happen.

“That was the first and only time I saw my wife crying from sadness. She was always so cheerful, blasé, and a little bit shy, but that day, I saw her cry.”

“That must have been painful. What did she say to you then?”

“She told me that she felt lonely because I seemed to only care about my friends. If that’s how things were gonna be, then she wanted to break up and go back to being friends ourselves. I only realized then that she was just a girl, even though she always seemed so mature.”

“So she thought that if you two went back to being friends, you would pay more attention to her,” Peach-san murmured. Baron-san laughed a little.

“So, what did you do then, Baron-san?”

“I apologized wholeheartedly, of course. It was all my fault, after all. I apologized, and because apologizing wasn’t enough, we started all over as friends.”

“As friends? You mean you didn’t make up?” I asked.

“That’s right. We restarted our relationship as friends, so we broke up once. It was hard for me, to tell the truth. I had to change the way I addressed her, and we of course weren’t as close as we’d been before. From then on, I had to work hard every day to make sure I wouldn’t lose to other guys who might make a move on her.”

I tried to put myself in Baron-san’s shoes, imagining how it would feel if I neglected to spend time with Nanami because I was putting my friends first and ended up hurting her because of that. I imagined how it would feel if she kept all her pain inside and I didn’t realize until it was too late. Just thinking about it broke my heart. The thought of Nanami leaving me was painful enough, but the thought of making her sad felt far worse.

“I was actually lucky, as it turned out. We still had a fighting chance because my wife chose to speak up.”

“Is that so?”

“If another guy had comforted her or gotten close to her back when she was in so much pain and I was still oblivious, we probably would’ve broken up permanently. I was cutting it very, very close.”

Baron-san’s voice was filled with grief. It came out dark and low, completely unimaginable for the man who always came off like a mature adult. For just a moment, he seemed to have gone back in time to when he was a student. That was just how painful his memories were for him.

“Not long after that, we were able to get back together. My wife apologized to me too for having held everything in and pretending like things were okay.”

“Your wife apologized too?”

“We were both young, you know? In the end, we just didn’t talk enough with each other. Maybe we just didn’t really know what to say. I know that’s just how things are when you’re still teenagers, but misunderstandings can cause all sorts of problems.”

“But that’s great,” Peach-san said. “You were able to make up and even get married. I’d love to hear all about that someday.”

“Well, parts of my stories might be a little bit too mature for you, Peach-chan,” Baron-san said, laughing.

“Wait, really? What happened? Now I really wanna know.”

With that, Peach-san began to question him about how things led to their marriage. I, on the other hand, kept thinking about the “misunderstandings” part. While the two continued talking, their voices didn’t reach my ears. I kept hearing Baron-san’s warning repeating over and over in my head.

“Is something wrong, Canyon-kun?”

I snapped back to reality when I heard Baron-san speaking to me in concern. Peach-san seemed worried about me too.

“Oh, it’s all good,” I said. “I was just starting to wonder if I’m saying enough of the right things to my girlfriend. I guess I just got a little worried.”

“Apologies, I didn’t mean to scare you. I just wanted you to know that things

like that can happen. It's just something to be aware of. I think it's best if you go for it with everything you've got, just like you always do."

"You've already told her she's your number one," Peach-san added, "so I feel like you'll both be fine. But Baron-san's right; it is probably best to do everything you can."

"Well, I guess overdoing it can feel controlling to the other person, so you'll probably want to do things in moderation," Baron-san said.

"Don't you think the two of them will be fine? They are the sugar-making machine, after all."

*Where did you learn to say something like that, Peach-san?* I thought. Hearing their comments, though, I began to feel more confident.

"Thanks for today, you two. I think I'll log out for a bit," I said.

"Sure thing. Best of luck."

"We're rooting for you!"

With that, I hung up the call and immediately dialed Nanami's number. The phone rang for longer than usual. I wondered if she'd already fallen asleep. While I waited, I thought long and hard about what I should say to her first. *Should I apologize for calling so late or thank her for today? No, what I want to tell her most is...*

The ringing stopped, and I heard the voice I'd been wanting to hear.

"Hello, Yoshin? I'm sorry, I was taking a bath. What's up? You're calling later than usual," she said.

"Hey, Nanami. I just wanted to hear your voice. Is it a bad time to talk?"

"Oh, no. I was just surprised, but I can totally talk. You wanted to hear my voice, huh? Were you feeling lonely or something?"

I smiled awkwardly at her teasing, but I didn't try to deny it. "Yeah, I actually do feel kinda lonely when I'm not with you. And I just wanted to tell you that you're the most important person in the world to me and just how much I like you."

“Wh-Where’d this come from all of a sudden? I really like you too! No, I mean, what happened? Did something bad happen?!” Nanami said, panicking.

“No, it’s not like that. Can I share something with you? I was actually talking with Baron-san and Peach-san just now,” I explained before telling Nanami about the conversation I’d just had.

Nanami was surprised at first, then sad at times, and then finally joyful about the story’s happy ending.

“I’m sure we’re gonna go through a lot of things too. I just don’t want us to keep things from each other and for us to try to talk things through instead.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I know that if we’re together, we’ll be able to get through anything,” she said.

“I like you so much.”

“I like you too... *Achoo!* Ugh, sorry, Yoshin. I just got out of the tub, so I’m still in a towel.”

“Isn’t that something you should’ve mentioned first?”

“You mean you want me to take a selfie and send it to you? You’re such a perv.”

“That’s not it! I want you to put some clothes on, or you’ll catch a cold!”

We laughed together, then said good night before we hung up. I wouldn’t dare admit that I’d felt a bit anxious for a moment there, nervous that she might actually send me one.



After saying good night to Yoshin, I turned off my phone. At that moment, all I had to cover myself was a towel. I felt kind of chilly after talking with Yoshin in such a state. I even wondered if I should hop back in the bath for a bit.

I was happy that he’d called me all of a sudden and that he’d told me what he, Baron-san and Peach-chan had been talking about. I’d never imagined they’d talk about something like that. In fact, I’d never imagined Baron-san and his wife to have broken up before. I’d only talked to him a little bit in the past, but he sounded like a really nice person. It made me sad to think that even



someone like that would get dumped by his girlfriend.

Of course, I didn't know Baron-san all that well, but I had a feeling that someone who'd help Yoshin couldn't possibly be a bad person. I supposed, though, that since they'd gotten back together and married, they'd still found their happily ever after.

*Will Yoshin and I ever break up?* Just thinking about it made me shiver all over. The blood seemed to leave my fingertips, making me feel cold, and I started sweating. Of course this was after I'd already taken a bath.

*I should go back in there and get warmed up again,* I thought. As I started to get ready to head back in, though, I looked down at my phone.

"Yoshin said he didn't need one, but maybe..."

*Does he really not want a photo of me? He did say he really liked me.* I started tinkering with my phone as various questions swirled through my mind. *This is just out of curiosity. Yup, pure, unadulterated curiosity. I have absolutely no bad intentions or weird feelings.*

If I took a slightly risqué photo of myself, how would I feel when I looked at it? That was what I was trying to find out. I most definitely wasn't getting caught up in the moment just because he'd told me how much he liked me. And, if in that process I unintentionally hit the wrong button and ended up sending the photo to him, it would just be an accident—nothing more than that.

*No, it probably wouldn't be wise to send it,* I thought. *That would make me seem like a pervert. I should draw the line there.* The last traces of reason left in me told me to strike the idea from my head.

Taking the photo was simply an experiment. I wanted to know what a guy would feel seeing a photo like that. I was a girl, but I was going to summon the boy in me. I'd heard that girls had parts like that within themselves too.

Although, in theory, I understood that that was in reference to girls seeing images of *other* girls, I proceeded to point my phone's camera at myself for a selfie. *Ugh, it's hard to do this when I'm trying to keep my towel in place. Should it be like this? No, things are spilling out too much. I have to keep it both sexy and classy. It's no good if you can see everything. This really is more difficult*

*than I thought.*

Just as I was standing there, trying to figure out what to do...

“Onnee-chan, you forgot your pajamas! How long do you plan on being naked? I heard you saying something, so I brought you...your...pajamas...”

Saya had caught me in the act. There I was, in only a towel, holding up my phone for a selfie, and there she was, one foot in the bathroom with my pajamas in hand. They were the pink ones, my favorite because of the way they felt against my skin.



I tended not to put my underwear on immediately after getting out of the bath. I would usually do so right before going to bed, after I'd cooled down a bit. That had been my routine ever since I was a kid. Saya knew that, which was why she'd brought just the pajamas, not the underwear.

*Wait, this is no time for me to be thinking about this!*

As soon as we both realized what was happening, the corners of Saya's lips curled upward to form a little crescent shape. She looked as though she'd seen something very, very interesting. Perhaps I just imagined her white teeth gleaming in a nefarious fashion.

I was so busy turning red from embarrassment that I was too slow. Not about to miss her opportunity, Saya spun around and shot out of the bathroom.

"Mooom, onee-chan's doing something naughty!"

"Wait, Saya! Let's talk about this! Saya?! Saya-chaaan?!"

I ran after her, still wearing only a towel. What was I supposed to do? She still had my pajamas. Of course I had to chase her.

And that was how I arrived at the living room.

"Oh my."

"Nanami, I daresay that's a bit much."

My parents, who were drinking tea, looked at me with exasperated expressions. It seemed Saya had already told them what I'd been up to.

"Hear me out first!" I pleaded.

Despite my attempt to defend myself, mom gave me a good talking-to. Only after we were done would I manage to take the second bath I'd wanted.

Mom told me that it wasn't okay to send Yoshin a photo of myself fresh out of the bath, even if we were going out. I had nothing I could say in response. Dad had the same opinion. It wasn't that they didn't trust Yoshin, but what would we do if someone accidentally sent the photo to the wrong party? They were absolutely right. The real problem, though, came after.

"If you're going to do something like that, you should just go up to him in

person.”

“Mom?!”

“Tomoko-san?!”

My mom’s words got a rise not only out of me but also out of my dad. Saya was practically on the floor, she was laughing so hard. A photo wasn’t okay, but showing him in person was. I couldn’t understand my mom’s sense of judgment.

In any case, since my parents were right to say that it was inappropriate to send such a photo, I really did take the lesson to heart. I’d gotten carried away and acted carelessly. That was why, once I’d gotten out of the bath a second time, I took a selfie of me in my pajamas. I wondered if Yoshin would still be happy with this.



It’s important to stay active. Moderate exercise is good for your health and helps develop both your body and your mind. More than anything, being physically strong could help get you out of trouble if anything bad were to happen. Let’s say there was a natural disaster, for instance. Even if you wanted to protect the people you cared about, there’d be no way you could do that if you weren’t strong enough. So, long story short, health really is wealth in this world.

I, for one, worked out for fun, so I thought I was pretty strong. However, seeing an actual sports team in action made me realize just how wrong I was.

“Wow, how did he move like that just now? He used to be over there, right? How is he already standing under the basket?”

“That’s so fast! He was on that end of the court, but now he’s already on this side! Wow, he’s flying!”

Nanami and I each had our own way of describing the situation, but in essence, we were both overwhelmed by Shibetsu-senpai’s movements. *How can he go from zero to sixty like that? And how is he basically flying?*

When I’d seen his dunk in the gym the other day, he’d already scored the

point, so it hadn't really hit me. Now, though, I was seeing everything from start to finish.

*Wow, he just scored another point, but he's coming back this way. I know it's my first time seeing a basketball game, but I didn't know just how fast-paced the whole thing really is. Whoa, wait! The offense from the other team is really fast too!*

"Whoa, senpai got the ball. How did he do that?" I asked in shock.

"I have no clue. He just had it in his hand all of a sudden! What? How?!" Nanami replied, slapping my shoulder with excitement. It didn't hurt at all, but my body swayed because of the impact. Still, I was so engrossed in the game that I didn't even have time to think about it.

Today, to fulfill our promise, Nanami and I had come to watch Shibetsu-senpai's practice game. I'd thought it was going to be a pretty laid-back affair since it was for practice and all, but boy, was I wrong! Both sides were so serious, anyone would think this was a real game. The action unfolding on the court was worth every moment of my attention.

In her excitement, Nanami kept leaning from side to side and bouncing up and down. Apparently, she was the type who got super involved when watching sports. Perhaps she had chosen her outfit today with that in mind. She was wearing pants coupled with a fitted white T-shirt and a loose jacket, all of which looked really comfortable to move around in. Every time she jumped, her jacket and her hair bounced with her. I didn't have the words to describe it, but her shirt really showed off the contours of her body. I was glad she'd worn a jacket to tone it down a bit—though even with her jacket, she drew a lot of attention to herself.

Since we were on a sports-related date, I, too, had chosen clothes that were relatively easy to move in. It seemed I'd made the right decision, though it felt kind of odd to not be wearing my school uniform while on campus.

Looking around, I noticed that while some students wore uniforms, most wore normal clothes. I didn't know any of them though. By now, most people knew that Nanami and I were going out, but if they saw us together at school wearing normal clothes, it might cause quite the commotion.

*I'd rather enjoy our date than run into a situation like that*, I thought. After letting my mind wander a bit, though, I realized that the game and all its excitement were still going on. *Shoot, I have to pay attention*. Even so, I kept getting distracted looking at the people around us.

There was no school today, but there were still a surprising number of people in the gym. Most of them seemed to be female students. Every time Shibetsu-senpai did something cool, I could hear them cheering wildly.

At first I'd thought they were all fans of his, but it seemed that wasn't entirely the case. The girls were screaming for the other players too. Looking at the other team members, it made perfect sense. I hadn't really thought of it before, but the basketball team was full of super good-looking guys. They were probably even more attractive than your average boy band members.

Shibetsu-senpai, of course, was particularly popular. I could hear him shouting something. The people in the stands cheered in response. He took a shot—so dynamic and full of force that I could have sworn the air around him shook—and sent the ball flying through the hoop.

"He's amazing," I muttered.

I was taken aback by the difference between the Shibetsu-senpai I was seeing now and the Shibetsu-senpai I usually saw. The guy on the court wasn't at all like the senpai who was always full of smiles; he was a young man taking on a challenge with a serious expression on his face. Even from my perspective as a guy, he seemed cool. I could now totally understand what made him so popular.

I glanced at Nanami, who was standing next to me. She seemed to be genuinely enjoying watching the game. I felt a tinge of regret that I hadn't taken up sports. I really was so simpleminded.

*I can't believe Nanami found it in herself to turn down such a cool guy*. It wasn't that I was feeling insecure or inferior, but I couldn't see how *any* girl wouldn't fall for him if he looked at her like that. I mean, even *my* heart was pounding just by looking at that intense gaze of his. Again, just as an objective fact, I was impressed that Nanami could choose to reject him.

"I had no idea senpai could look so serious," Nanami said.

“Yeah, he really is cool. I admire him.”

“Really? You’re cool too, Yoshin. I feel my heart flutter whenever you have a serious look on your face, so you’re just as cool as senpai. In fact, to me, you’re definitely the coolest of cool.”

*I just got crowned the champion!*

Well, champion or not, Nanami paying me such a compliment made me turn away from the game. My face felt hot, so I was definitely turning red.

Just then, I felt a soft shove, and my body swayed because of it. When I looked down, I saw that Nanami had attached herself to me and was looking up at me, smiling.

“Are you all embarrassed now?” she asked.

I nodded slowly, and she flashed me a toothy grin before quickly detaching herself from me.

Come to think of it, we were at school. Even though people were engrossed in the game and weren’t paying any attention to us, it would be pretty rude for us to get too touchy-feely during a game.

After that, Nanami and I focused on what was happening on the court as we continued to cheer on Shibetsu-senpai. The practice game ended in victory for the home team. When the words of thanks from both teams echoed throughout the gym to close out the game, the crowd broke out in thunderous applause. It was only a practice game, but the intensity of the event was overwhelming. Shibetsu-senpai was going around shaking hands with members of the opposing team and slapping the backs of his teammates. Every time he did something, girls throughout the gym started squealing.

The crowd of students didn’t seem to be dispersing, so Nanami and I continued watching as we shared our thoughts about the game.

“I’d never seen a basketball game before, but it was something else,” I said. “It was so intense and fast-paced, I could barely follow what they were doing.”

“Yeah, I’d only seen baseball and soccer games before, so it was cool to learn that basketball games are super fun to watch too,” Nanami said.



“Oh, really? I haven’t seen either baseball or soccer. Who did you go with?”

“I saw baseball with my dad and then soccer with Oto-nii and the girls. Maybe we can go together next time. Oto-nii sometimes gets us free tickets to soccer games.”

I never knew people in real life actually scored free tickets. Still, I’d learned today that going on a date like that could be a lot of fun. I had originally thought it was kind of odd to be watching sports when the two of us were together, but when I thought more about it, I realized that it wasn’t much different from watching a movie.

Knowing that another option had been added to the list of date ideas filled me with excitement. When I looked around the gym, though, I saw that the other team had already left and that our own team had returned to their clubroom.

“Come to think of it, this is the basketball team senpai was inviting you to join, huh?” Nanami mumbled with some amount of trepidation.

“Yeah. That’s one hundred percent out of the question for me.”

Shibetsu-senpai had told me I could join in the middle of the year, but I was pretty sure that wouldn’t work. I would just hold everyone else back.

“Well, after watching today’s game, I actually thought it’d be kinda fun for both of us to join the team,” Nanami said.

“Oh, no way. We can’t possibly join up when we’re not even serious about basketball. It’d be rude to everyone else.”

After seeing the game today, I understood perfectly well just how seriously the team members took basketball. Shibetsu-senpai might normally seem like he was kidding around, but he was probably feigning that to keep the mood from getting too serious.

What would happen if I joined the team with Nanami just to try to make myself look cool in front of her? It would most definitely bring down the morale of the rest of the team. That would cause all sorts of problems for Shibetsu-senpai, and more than anything, people would think poorly of Nanami. It was fine if people thought that way about me, but I had to make sure the same

never happened to her. That being said, seeing today's game, I was pretty sure I wouldn't even be able to keep up with their practice. It was a good thing I hadn't joined the team.

"Yoshin, maybe now's a good time to go."

"Oh, yeah, you're right."

With Nanami bringing me back to reality, the two of us left the gym. However, rather than going straight home, we headed for the clubroom. It seemed wrong to leave without saying hello, plus Shibetsu-senpai had invited us to stop by once the game ended. I hoped he hadn't just been saying that to be polite. Although the thought crossed my mind, I knocked on the clubroom door. I heard a husky voice call out, and then the door slowly opened.

"Apologies. Shibetsu-senpai just finished his game, so we're not allowing any photos— Oh?"

A tall young woman wearing a tracksuit stared at us from behind the door. Her face was well shaped, and her black hair was cut short. Upon first glance, she looked like a handsome young man; the only reason I knew she was a girl was because I'd met her before.

She was the team manager, whom I'd met at practice the other day. She really was good-looking. When she saw us, her eyes widened in surprise. Perhaps she remembered us.

After her moment of surprise, though, she proceeded to stare at us in silence. *Um, does she remember us?* All three of us remained silent as we continued looking at each other. The silence was slightly uncomfortable. *Wait, a minute ago she said something about taking photos. Whoa, does senpai get asked to do stuff like that? He's almost like a celebrity or a pro.*

The silence continued as the tall manager looked down upon both of us. As she continued studying us, I stepped in front of Nanami and managed to speak up.

"We, um, wanted to say hello to Shoichi-senpai, if possible..."

"Captain, your kohai's here to see you!"

However, my voice was drowned out as she called out almost simultaneously. The manager slowly turned around toward Shibetsu-senpai. Even though her voice was low and husky, it carried well nonetheless. “Come on in,” she then said, motioning for us to enter.

*Uh, it feels like she’s burning a hole through me and Nanami. I’m not just imagining it, am I? Senpai said before that the manager didn’t like him. Maybe she feels the same about us.*

Even though Shibetsu-senpai and I were friends now, I’d used a pretty unfair tactic to beat him at the basketball challenge. I wondered if that was what had made her dislike me so much.

“Oh, Yoshin-kun and Barato-kun, you both came! What did you think of the team’s performance today?”

“I wish I could say something cooler, but it was really amazing,” I replied. “I had no idea you could look so serious, senpai.”

“Ha ha ha! When I’m playing, I use facial muscles that I don’t usually use, so my face hurts all over afterward.”

I wasn’t sure if he was being serious or just joking, but he was massaging his face with his large hands. *Wait, maybe he really is serious.*

In the small clubroom, the team seemed to be having a meeting to go over the game they’d just played. There were light snacks on the table and basketball terminology scribbled all over the whiteboard.

“We didn’t mean to interrupt your meeting. We just wanted to drop this off. I hope you can all enjoy it,” I said, handing him a package.

“Ah, you didn’t have to do that! It’d be rude for me to refuse, though, so we’ll take it off your hands.”

“It’s not a problem at all. It’s homemade, so be sure to finish it today.”

The moment I said the word “homemade,” all the players seated at the table swung around to look at us. Nanami, slightly surprised, let out a small yelp. I moved quickly to stand in front of her and hide her from the view of the players. The manager, too, stepped between us and the team. Shibetsu-senpai,

however, turned around to show off the treat that I'd just given him.

"Hey, now. I can't give out homemade snacks to people who'd dare frighten a lady. Basketball players have to remain gentlemen at all times."

*Huh? Isn't golf the gentleman's sport? Or maybe basketball is too. I should look it up when I get home, though I guess it'd be better if all sports were gentlemanly.*

Nanami poked her head out from behind me and thanked the manager. When I thanked her too, she turned away from me.

*Yikes, did I make her mad?* As I stood there feeling anxious, Shibetsu-senpai turned back toward us.

"You might not be able to tell, but our manager's actually quite shy. That face she's making is a dead giveaway that she's still a bit nervous around you two. Don't take it to heart."

"Oh, I see."

I'd thought she was glaring at me this whole time, but it seemed I was mistaken. I shouldn't have jumped to such a thoughtless conclusion.

On the other side of Shibetsu-senpai, the team members were now murmuring, trying to get him to hand over the homemade treat. I did notice, however, that some of them were saying it had been made by a gyaru.

"Are you sure though? I would've thought eating stuff Barato-kun makes was your special privilege as her boyfriend."

Shibetsu-senpai also seemed to have the wrong idea. Now I understood why everyone seemed so eager to get at the treat. I suppose what I'd said had been a bit misleading. I should probably tell them the truth.

"Actually, I'm the one who made that, though Nanami helped me, of course."

Everyone in the clubroom froze. Even the manager had a look on her face that made me think I'd imagined her standoffish expression from earlier. *Huh? Why is everyone so surprised?*

And with that, an impressive flow of action only possible from a well-trained basketball team took place. The table was cleared of any and all items.

Shibetsu-senpai placed the treat on the table and opened the packaging. Everyone stared at the contents. *Gosh, this is embarrassing.*

Seeing what was revealed before him, Shibetsu-senpai gawked. “Wow. What a delicious-looking pound cake.”

“Uh, yeah. It’s a banana cake. When I was looking things up, I saw that something like this was good for replenishing nutrients after a game.”

Everyone let out murmurs of awe. It was totally embarrassing. I even heard someone say, “I see, so guys who can cook really are popular with girls nowadays!” That seemed like a bit of a stretch, but who was I to say so?

“Thanks, man. You must have gone through loads of trouble,” Shibetsu-senpai said.

“Oh, not at all. You just mix and bake, so even I could make it. Nanami gave me pointers, so I’m pretty sure it tastes okay.”

“I see, so you two have yourselves cooking dates, eh? It’s nice to hear you’re getting along so well.” Shibetsu-senpai clapped his hands loudly as the other team members looked at me in envy. *Uh, cooking together’s not that big of a deal, though I guess I am getting one-on-one tips.*

“Can you teach me how to cook one of these days too?” the manager murmured all of a sudden. “I’d like to learn how to make something like this.”

“Ah, what a wonderful idea! In that case, I’d like to learn too,” Shibetsu-senpai added.

Fidgeting from embarrassment, the manager looked down at her feet. When a tall woman did something like that, the unlikeliness of the gesture made her seem especially cute. The team members around us looked at her warmly.

Meanwhile, Shibetsu-senpai cut off a piece of the cake and popped it into his mouth. Having someone aside from Nanami eat the food I’d made was totally nerve-racking—especially when it was someone who was tasting my food for the first time. Nanami and I watched with bated breath as Shibetsu-senpai chewed the piece of cake in silence. The others also watched without uttering a word.

When Shibetsu-senpai finally swallowed with a loud gulp, he clapped his hands loudly. “It’s scrumptious!” he declared.

I let out the breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. I was so glad he liked the cake. Nanami leaned close to me and whispered, “Good job.” I turned around and smiled at her, giving her a thumbs-up.

Having received Shibetsu-senpai’s approval, the other players also dug in. I couldn’t help feeling happy hearing them talk about how good it was. It was pretty awesome to have people eat the food that I’d made.

Since we’d managed to drop off our gift, I decided it best not to take up too much more of their time.

“In that case, senpai, Nanami and I will get going. Thanks for having us.”

“Ah, whatever you say, Yoshin-kun. Thanks so much for coming today. Are you and Barato-kun off on a date now?”

“Yeah, we were thinking of going somewhere after this.”

“I see. Well, if you’re up for it, you should check out this place. We sometimes go as part of our practice, but I’m betting you’d enjoy doing something you wouldn’t normally do on a date.”

Shibetsu-senpai pulled out two tickets and handed them to us. I wondered if it was for some kind of basketball-related gig. It seemed like the perfect timing, what with having just watched their game and Nanami and I both thinking that it might be good to get some exercise. What’s more, the venue didn’t seem terribly far from here, although I’d never heard of it before. When I looked at Nanami, she shook her head to indicate that she didn’t know the place either.

“Thanks. What exactly is this place?” I asked.

“Heh heh heh. It’s...”

Shibetsu-senpai spread his arms wide and struck a pose, then proceeded to jump just like he had during the game—and, because of his height, he ended up hitting his head on the ceiling. Nanami and I both stood there in shock, but everyone else around us seemed unfazed. They were muttering something along the lines of “There he goes again.”

*Wait, is he always doing stuff like this?* I thought.

Perhaps banging his head like that actually hurt him, because Shibetsu-senpai's eyes teared up. He nonetheless acted as though nothing had happened and replied loudly.

"It's where we go trampolining!"

"Trampolining?"

Nanami and I tilted our heads in puzzlement.



*Trampoline.*

In my mind, the word referred to a circular apparatus with a strong elastic mat on which you could bounce around. The mat provided something like a resilient cushion, and jumping on it meant you could fly really high. That, I had to admit, was about the extent of my knowledge about trampolines.

That was why I had absolutely no idea that the word "trampolining" referred not only to bouncing around on that but also to the sport involving the use of said apparatus—or that facilities existed where anyone could enjoy jumping on them.

Either way, trampolines and trampolining had very little to do with my life. Okay, so maybe I'd played on a trampoline once when I was a kid. I think on that occasion I'd been jumping up and down in a large boxlike room filled with a bunch of soft, plastic balls—or maybe that wasn't quite the same thing.

When I thought about it, though, I realized jumping around on one could actually be kind of fun.

"It's a good thing we didn't dress up or anything, huh?" Nanami remarked.

"For sure. I'm more impressed that you knew you might want to let off some steam after seeing senpai's basketball game."

"Oh, you know, that's just what happens after I watch sports and stuff."

So she was speaking from experience, huh? The thought had never even crossed my mind, given that I rarely watched sports in the first place. The best

I'd done was watch recorded baseball games on TV, and even then, I only watched half while eating dinner. I wasn't the slightest bit interested in the World Cup or the Olympics. I knew people around me got excited about things like that, but honestly, I would have much rather been playing video games instead.

Enough about me though. Nanami and I had left the school grounds and were headed toward the facility Shibetsu-senpai had told us about. Apparently, it had been built only a few years ago and could be visited by just about anyone who wanted to use the trampolines.

When I'd heard about it, I'd been really surprised to learn that there were whole facilities dedicated to trampolines in the first place, but Shibetsu-senpai had explained that places like this had been popping up all over in recent years. Apparently, they were pretty popular, especially among families and couples—or at least those were the kinds of people he often saw when he went there himself. He'd discovered the place after looking up ways to grasp the timing of his jumps and develop his skills when in midair. Once he'd tried it out, he'd become hooked.

Jumping on a trampoline allowed you to jump much higher than your own two legs allowed, and it also put much less stress on your knees. With it being so beneficial to his training and so much fun to boot, Shibetsu-senpai had started going on days when he didn't have practice. After visiting a few times, he'd started to notice all the families and couples, which was why he'd decided to take his girlfriend there one day, if such an opportunity ever arose. It was one of the places he'd wanted to take Nanami if she'd accepted his confession. Now, though, he went with his teammates or with the team manager.

When I'd asked him if his trips with the team manager counted as dates, he'd told me that they'd only gone as part of club activities and that the manager had just wanted to verify the efficacy of the activity. The moment he'd said that, though, a chill had rushed through the clubroom. Was it just me, or had everyone stopped moving to stare at him with a look of exasperation?

"The manager must like Shibetsu-senpai, don't you think?" Nanami said.

"What?! Wait, really?!"



“Yeah, it’s just a hunch. I’m not that perceptive when it comes to romantic relationships, but the way she was looking at him and the feel of the room made me think it must be something like that.”

I was shocked. Shibetsu-senpai had told us she didn’t even like him, so I’d had no idea. Maybe Nanami had some kind of female instinct that I didn’t have. I hadn’t picked up on anything about the way the manager looked at him or the atmosphere around them. Was the reason it had suddenly grown so cold that Shibetsu-senpai had failed to notice these things too?

I had to confess, this wasn’t my area of expertise. Maybe because I hadn’t really interacted with people much, I had trouble knowing what kinds of things could change people’s moods or affect the atmosphere. That was why I couldn’t express myself unless I spoke directly, and I couldn’t really understand people’s true intentions when they said things in circuitous ways. I wished I could pick up more when it came to Nanami, at the very least.

“Maybe I need more practice,” I mumbled.

“What’s wrong, Yoshin? You always work really hard. You even made dessert for the team today.”

“Still, I feel like I need to get better at reading the room. If I did, I’d be able to understand you better too.”

Nanami smiled slightly and clung on to me. The closeness made it slightly difficult to walk, but compared to how we’d been toward the start of our relationship, I thought that we were getting pretty good at it.

“You really think that’s important? I mean, even if we don’t always understand each other completely, I’d much rather talk things through with you than have to feel out what’s going on. Like, I’d rather say things and understand than try to understand without saying things.”

*Ah, I see. That makes sense.*

I’d kind of thought about this before: that being able to understand each other without having to say anything actually meant that we weren’t telling each other how we felt. If that was the case, then I definitely preferred talking with Nanami.

“Maybe we just have to talk to each other even if we *do* understand each other,” I said.

“Oh, I guess you’re right. Just because we can pick up on things doesn’t mean we can’t still talk about them,” Nanami replied, laughing cheerfully. I mean, letting the other person know how you felt made perfect sense. Learning to understand one another and talking to each other were both important. For some reason, I had been thinking we just had to do one or the other.

“Oh, is it here?”

As we’d been chatting, we’d finally arrived at our destination. Walking from the station to where we needed to go always felt like it happened in the blink of an eye when we were caught up in conversation. Before us stood a building that seemed less like a sports facility and more like a large warehouse. The only difference was that children—who wouldn’t ordinarily be hanging around a warehouse—were heading in and out of the building. In fact, I could see loads of families, just as Shibetsu-senpai had mentioned, but I didn’t see many couples.

*So this is a trampoline park, huh?* Feeling nervous about visiting a new place, I wondered what kind of a place it was.

We checked in at the front desk and proceeded to the area with the trampolines. There, I saw square apparatuses that differed from what I’d imagined. *I guess trampolines don’t always have to be circular*, I thought.

It seemed there weren’t that many people there, since only a handful of kids were jumping around on the trampolines. Around them, their parents stood by and watched. The kids were jumping surprisingly high.

Once a staff member had explained the rules of the facility and given us a quick lesson on how to do some basic jumps, we waited for our turn. While having one person jumping on one mat at a time seemed to be the general practice, it seemed you could also jump side by side as long as you could work out the timing. First, though, we decided we should take turns in order to get some practice. At least to me, the activity still seemed a bit intimidating.

“Okay, we’re up. I guess I’ll go first,” I said, freaking out slightly.

“Good luck!” Nanami said in encouragement, balling her hands into fists and looking equally nervous. Seeing her like that actually made me feel more at ease.

The basic practice seemed to be that one person could be on a trampoline at a time. If there was no one jumping on one, then you could hop onto it and have a go. Fortunately for us, one of the trampolines was free, so we could start trying it out without any issues.

Since it took too much courage for me to immediately start jumping, I decided to take normal steps first. Unlike the floor, the trampoline mat rebounded under my feet every time I took a step as if I were bouncing softly. Okay, so I actually was bouncing, but that’s beside the point.

*Damn, just walking normally is difficult.*

Losing my balance slightly and stumbling forward, I managed to make it to the center of the mat. At first, I tried jumping slowly and lightly on the spot. Every time I did, a creaking sound echoed below me. From there, I gradually added more height to my jumps.

*Yeah, it’s super hard just jumping straight.*

Whenever I saw the floor approaching, it moved away from me just as quickly. Although I was using my hands like the staff member had taught me, it was going to take me some time to get used to jumping without losing my balance while also being mindful of my surroundings.

Since they’d mentioned something about two minutes per person at a time, I decided I should start by getting myself accustomed to the feel of being on the trampoline. I thought I heard Nanami’s voice, but since I couldn’t quite make out what she was saying, I tried to respond to her by waving my hands. I was pretty sure she was in the general direction I was waving at.

After that, I spent basically my entire two minutes trying to learn how to jump straight. Unfortunately, even though I thought I was jumping straight the whole time, when I finished, I found that I was facing the opposite direction from when I’d started. That’s why I was so surprised to hear Nanami’s voice coming from behind me. For a moment, I thought she’d managed to move without me noticing.

When I got off of the trampoline, another person got on and started jumping. I'd thought that Nanami was going to have a go after me, but it seemed I was wrong.

"Great job, Yoshin! Here, you can use this," Nanami said excitedly, handing me a towel.

"Oh, thanks. I didn't even think to get one. Thanks for bringing it," I said, gladly accepting it.

Nanami leaned back with exaggerated pride. The white shirt peeking out from beneath her jacket seemed extraordinarily bright. Suddenly, though, her expression changed—her eyes widened and her brows turned downward with regret. Caught off guard by her sudden change in mood, I froze in the middle of wiping away my sweat.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I think this was when I was supposed to wipe your sweat for you," she replied.

The reason came as a bit of a surprise. If anything, it didn't feel right to have her do that when we were out in public. It felt more like the kind of thing you might do for children.

Since I hadn't even sweat that much, I was soon done wiping it off. Nanami's shoulders slumped a little, but the next moment, she was back on her feet. Her mood really did switch quickly.

"Fine, then I'll make sure I do it next time!" she declared.

"No, no, that'd be way too embarrassing. We're out in public," I said in protest.

"Then will you wipe my sweat away for me, Yoshin?" she asked.

"What?!"

*Me? Wipe off Nanami's sweat? Is that even allowed?*

I knew we'd already held hands, gone to the hot springs together, and even kissed. For some reason, though, I felt like wiping her sweat for her would somehow be the most naughty thing we'd ever done. I wondered if it was

because it was something I would never do under normal circumstances, or perhaps the thought of me wiping away Nanami's sweat made me feel something I couldn't bring myself to articulate.

As I stood there, frozen in panic, Nanami handed me her own towel.

"Watch me, okay?" she said with a wink. I nodded and murmured something before watching her head off. She'd left her jacket and towel with me, so she was only wearing her shirt on top.

Like me, Nanami moved slowly toward the center of the trampoline and began jumping as though she were taking slow steps. I watched her nervously as she gradually hopped gracefully—and impressively straight—into the air. Nanami had tied her hair into a ponytail while I wasn't looking, and now it was swaying every time she jumped. I supposed when you had long hair, it would wave from side to side like that. She was smiling the whole time, looking like she was having a blast.

Nanami must have been naturally athletic, because she wasn't just jumping; she was doing the splits in the air and twisting this way and that, trying out all sorts of different movements. She sure picked up things quickly. When I suddenly got the idea of recording a video on my phone, she quickly noticed and made little peace signs with her hands while smiling. Unlike me, she seemed perfectly aware of her surroundings.

With my phone still pointed at her, I watched Nanami closely. The video was just a keepsake; I wanted to watch her with my own two eyes, not through a screen. Maybe that was why I noticed something odd. I didn't know what it was at first. Still, I could tell that something was slightly off. *What is it? Am I just imagining things?* I studied Nanami intently, as though trying to figure out what was making me feel like that. After staring at her for nearly a minute, I finally realized what it was.

"Oh!"

It was actually a rather dodgy realization, I had to say. Well, I didn't know if it was actually dodgy, but I at least knew what the source of my weird feeling was.

It was her chest. Nanami's chest, despite the fact that she was jumping so much on the trampoline, wasn't jiggling at all. That wasn't something to dwell

on, of course. To find that odd made me wonder just how much of a thing I had for Nanami's chest. Actually, I liked everything about Nanami, not just her breasts. Wait, that's not what I meant to say at all...

Once I'd made that discovery, though, I found my gaze constantly flitting back in the general direction of her chest. I wanted to watch her having fun, but because of my realization, my eyes kept traveling downward. If I'd known that this was going to happen, I wouldn't have tried to think about it in the first place. Still, it was too late for that now. *There must be times when a woman's chest wouldn't move around. Calm down, Yoshin.*

As I continued struggling to rid my mind of inappropriate thoughts, Nanami finished up her two minutes and returned to my side. After only two minutes of bouncing, we'd both broken out in a sweat, but Nanami seemed to be enjoying herself despite her shortness of breath.

"You were great, Nanami. Oh, and here's your towel," I said.

"Thanks. It's been a long time since I've worked up a sweat, so I can't keep my breathing steady. I guess I should exercise more."

Taking the towel from me, Nanami proceeded to wipe the tiny beads of sweat off her skin. Having lightly dabbed at her arms and forehead, she was about to move the towel along her neck when she suddenly froze in place. When I tilted my head, puzzled, she held her towel out to me and flashed me a toothy grin.

"Could you wipe the back of my neck for me?" she asked. "You know, because I can't quite reach it."

Even though she'd had no problem reaching there a moment ago, Nanami sat down in a chair close by and very deliberately turned her back toward me. Her hair, tied up in its ponytail, flowed down her neck and around her shoulders, looking beautifully healthy but also also suspiciously sexy at the same time. Although the nape of her neck usually remained hidden, I was able to see it clearly now.

I swallowed hard and, without thinking, took the towel she was holding out. *Shoot, now I have no choice but to do it.*

"Come on, Yoshin!"

Nanami wiggled gently as she waited for me to act. If I didn't hurry up and wipe away her sweat, she would start to feel chilly and catch a cold. Was it really okay for me to be doing this?

Yes, I know I was just making excuses, but they were excuses to talk myself into doing it rather than chickening out. I was trying to deceive myself of my own feelings. Taking the towel meant I wanted to do this, yet I was searching desperately in my head for excuses to claim that I had to and that there was also no problem if I did.

*Stop making excuses. You're going to do this because you want to.*

"Here goes, then," I said finally.

"Okay!" came her response.

In contrast to Nanami, who sounded excited, I nervously brought the towel closer to her skin. She was sitting close enough that I could do so easily, but it seemed to take so long for my hand to reach her. That whole time, I was sweating in a way that was different from when I was on the trampoline. I was breathing normally, but my heart was pounding with incredible force.

Then my hand made contact with her skin. Or, more precisely, the towel made contact with her skin, but I could still feel her softness through it. I felt like I'd traveled a very long distance before finally arriving at my destination. I wondered if travelers who finally found an oasis felt this way, as though they'd reached what they'd been seeking at long last. I'd never really traveled before, but I thought maybe I should try it out.

When I touched her, Nanami shivered slightly. Her voice and breath seemed to escape without her intending them to. I tried to wipe her skin slowly and carefully so that it wouldn't feel unpleasant for her. I was pretty sure I was being a lot more careful now than back when we'd handled glasswork in school.





The towel was soft, but I foolishly wondered whether it would somehow damage Nanami's skin. Just how sensitive would her skin have to be to be injured by the touch of a towel? Even so, I continued gently sliding it along her neck so as to not hurt her. I was only wiping the sweat off of her nape, but somehow, the area felt vast.

"Oh! Mmm, ah..."

"Nanami, please don't make sounds like that," I said.

"I can't help it. It feels so nice. You're really good at this, Yoshin."

*It feels nice? I'm pretty sure this is the first time anyone has told me I'm good at wiping. It's not something you hear under ordinary circumstances, except maybe when you're cleaning.* Regardless, I was pretty proud of myself for not getting flustered and putting unnecessary force into it.

Eventually, I took the towel away. It was slightly damp from the sweat I'd wiped away. *Don't even think about it, Yoshin. If you do, you're going to make yourself look like a pervert.*

"Okay, there you go," I said.

"Thanks! Next time you get all sweaty, I'll be sure to pay you back," she replied.

"No, I..."

"It's to show my thanks, so don't worry about it! Now, do you want to give the trampolines another go?"

*I see. Well, if she's offering to do that to thank me, then I'd be rude to say no, I thought as I returned the towel to Nanami. It might even be nice to have her do that for me. I mean, you know...the experience turned out to be far more normal than I was expecting. Yeah, that's right.*

*No, I'm totally lying. I was super nervous. There are still so many things I'm not used to when it comes to Nanami. Wiping away her sweat was far too out of the ordinary.*

"Then yeah. That'd be great."

The moment I said that, Nanami clenched both her fists in victory. The gesture seemed way too dramatic, and shouldn't it normally be the other way around? Then again, wouldn't it be strange even if it *were* the other way around?

"Why do you want to wipe away my sweat so badly?" I asked, seeing as she seemed so fixated on the idea. I mean, it wasn't that I was unhappy about it or anything; I just wondered why she wanted to do it so much.

Nanami started rubbing her hands together and then covered her mouth with them as if embarrassed. "Well, you know how we just saw that basketball game, right? I started thinking about what it would be like if you were on the team and I was a manager, so I wanted to do something kind of like that even if it was just pretend."

"I didn't realize you were the type to get into pretending, though I'm also not really sure if managers actually go around wiping off people's sweat."

"Oh, come on. I just wanna try it out!" Nanami started pouting, letting both hands fall in an exaggerated manner. The gesture seemed so funny to me that I burst out laughing. She looked slightly angry at first, but hearing me continue to laugh, she eventually started laughing herself.

"In that case, I'll ask my manager to wipe my sweat off for me."

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

"I'm not, I'm not! But maybe we should actually try jumping again a bit more."

The two of us then got back on the trampoline, trying it out together this time. At first, we took turns jumping, but once we got a little used to it, we tried to match each other's rhythm by jumping next to each other. It was surprisingly great exercise.

The people around us must have been more experienced than we were, because they were doing backflips and other kinds of tricks. I was pretty sure those moves were impossible for me. Nanami, on the other hand, was now trying out bouncing on her butt. She really was brave when it came to things like this.

Forgive me for coming back to an earlier topic, but once I'd calmed down a bit, I found my mind wandering back to something. That's right—I couldn't stop thinking about Nanami's chest. Bouncing around together made me notice it even more. Her chest wasn't jiggling at all. I mean, that was a good thing, since if it had been, it could have possibly warped the sexual preferences of everyone here. Still, given how much attention Nanami was garnering, it might already be too late.

In any case, once I started thinking about it, I couldn't help glancing over in the general direction from time to time. In the end...

"Jeez! You're staring at my boobs too much!" Nanami yelled.

Soon after, we took a break and bought some tea from a vending machine. As we were enjoying our drinks and wiping away our sweat, Nanami ended up getting angry at me for real. Her cheeks were puffed out as she glared at me with anger in her eyes.

What was I expecting? I should just be grateful that she'd waited until we took a break to get angry with me. There was nothing to do but apologize. Nanami was wearing her jacket now, using it to hide her chest. Still angry, she tilted her head quizzically.

"I mean, seriously, what's going on with you today? This whole time, you've been staring at my boobs even more than when we were at the hot springs!"

"Uh, um, well..." I stammered, averting my gaze in a panic. *What should I do? If I answer honestly, will it be considered sexual harassment?* Still, at this point, I really couldn't pretend nothing was going on. I remembered telling her once that I couldn't help looking at things that moved, but I never realized that my gaze would be drawn to things that *didn't* move as well.

"I was just thinking that your chest wasn't jiggling at all today," I murmured.

Nanami, who had been hiding her chest with her arms, uncrossed them and looked down at her breasts. Then she lifted one of them with her hands, only to let go of it again.

*Wait, what are you doing?!*

Nanami started trembling slightly. I immediately began to panic, thoroughly

convinced that my confession had made her angry. However, she wasn't actually angry, as a muffled sound escaped her.

"N-Nanami?"

Her trembling gradually grew more pronounced, until finally her shoulders began to shake. When she raised her head, I saw that she was laughing.

"M-My boobs weren't jiggling. You were looking because they weren't jiggling?"

She wasn't speaking terribly loudly, but she was really laughing now, her shoulders still shaking. I wasn't sure if it was because she was trying to keep her voice down or because she was laughing so much, but she was pressing her hands to her stomach with tears in her eyes. When she finally paused, I heard her take a deep breath.

"N-Nanami-san?" I said tentatively.

"Ha ha ha! Did you want to see my boobs jiggle that much? Ha ha ha, I can't help it! My stomach hurts from laughing! This is the first time anyone's looked at my boobs because of something like that!"

It seemed that my reason for staring at her boobs amused her in just the right way. Was it really something to laugh about?

I sat next to her and watched over her as she continued laughing wholeheartedly. Sometimes, when a laughing fit takes hold of you, it takes some time to calm down. Once she seemed to have collected herself somewhat, I handed her the tea we'd bought.

"Ha ha ha. Oh no... I feel like I'm gonna start laughing again!"

Although her shoulders were still quaking, Nanami took the bottle from me, opened the cap, and took a swig. I was worried she might choke because she was still laughing when she drank, but that didn't end up becoming an issue.

"Are you better now?" I asked after she'd sighed in relief.

Taking a break from drinking her tea, Nanami nodded at me in silence. I really hadn't expected her to laugh so much. I felt like it was the first time I'd seen her laugh like that.

Nanami seemed to have calmed down completely now, because she was no longer laughing. Instead, she had her hands on her chest and was grinning while staring at me. “I see, so it’s a shame they weren’t jiggling, huh?” she asked.

“No, no, that’s not what I meant! I just wondered why they weren’t moving as much as they usually do. It wasn’t like I was bummed out or anything,” I said, my voice growing smaller toward the end.

“So you weren’t bummed out?” she said.

“Um...”

“Oh? So you’re telling me you weren’t disappointed in the slightest?”

With a wicked grin on her face, Nanami prodded me in my ribs. I’d failed to reply immediately because I couldn’t deny fully that I was, in fact, slightly bummed.



Nanami could probably see right through me. Still, she waited for my response. She was being slightly mean about it, but if this was my punishment, then I was getting off lightly. I raised both hands in surrender and mumbled, “You’re right. I was slightly disappointed.”

“Indeed! Honesty is the best policy!” she said, puffing out her chest with her hands at her hips. With her upper body arched in triumph, Nanami looked at me with a proud expression. *How did we get here from talking about her boobs not jiggling?* I thought. Paying zero attention to my state of perplexity, Nanami proceeded to speak while maintaining her current posture. There was no way it was easy for her to talk like that.

“Look, Yoshin. Notice anything?” she asked, skillfully swaying her body. When she did, her chest didn’t move at all. As I studied her more closely, I finally noticed something aside from the lack of movement.

*Is the shape of her body slightly different today? Is this the true source of the weirdness I felt? But what if I’m wrong? Since Nanami’s the one who asked, it should be okay for me to mention it, right?*

I tried to gather the courage necessary to form the right words—slowly, as though pouring liquid into an empty bottle a little bit at a time. The moment I felt that the bottle was full, I gave her my response. “Is your chest a little smaller than usual?”

I wanted to kick myself for gathering all that courage to say something as stupid as that. It was a comment that would ordinarily get me a punch in the face. After all, breast size was a sensitive topic.

That was the only difference I could notice though. Usually, Nanami’s chest was quite a bit rounder, but today, it appeared rather flat. *Is she gonna get mad at me this time too?* I wondered, but again, my expectation was incorrect.

Nanami, as it turned out, had returned to her usual posture and was now clapping her hands happily. Did this mean that I was right?

“I figured we’d be moving around a lot today, so I decided to wear a sports bra. It keeps my chest from swaying around, and plus I wore one that Hatsumi and Ayumi told me about that makes my chest look smaller.”

“Makes your chest smaller?” I repeated, trying to process the information.

“Makes it *look* smaller. It’s still the same size,” she said.

Huh? What did that mean? Her chest wasn’t small, right? But it could look small? Was this some kind of mystery of the human body? Wholesome high school guys had no knowledge about stuff like this.

Paying no mind to my confusion, Nanami continued her explanation. “It can actually hurt when your boobs move around too much, you know? Plus they say that letting them fly too much can actually make them droopy. That’s why when you’re exercising it’s better to wear a sports bra.”

“Doesn’t it hurt though? Like, isn’t it hard to breathe? Do you feel any pressure?” I asked. I couldn’t wrap my head around what was happening, but I had to believe that anything that altered the shape of your body must be painful in one way or another. I felt that if she was having to bear that pain while we were on our date today, we should just go somewhere where she could wear something more comfortable.

However, it seemed my worries were unwarranted. Nanami told me nonchalantly that she was neither uncomfortable nor in any pain. Just as I was admiring the transformation, though, Nanami proceeded to drop another bombshell.

“Still, I’m impressed you could tell that my boobs were a different size from usual. You must really like my boobs, Yoshin. I wonder if that makes you a booby expert.”

“Why would you say something like that?!”

“Oh, right. You’re only interested in *my* boobs, so maybe you’re my personal booby expert!”

As I remained speechless, Nanami stretched out her arms and twirled several times on the spot. Even if her boobs were smaller than usual, they still were larger than most people’s. Maybe that was why I hadn’t noticed the difference at first. Upon closer inspection, though, I did see that they looked a little different today.

“They don’t move even when I twirl like this or jump around on the



trampoline. It's really impressive, huh? Though I guess it must be a bummer for you, Yoshin."

"A bummer?" I asked.

"Yeah, because my boobs don't jiggle."

"Wait, just how much is the me in your mind fixated on the jiggling of your boobs?"

"You really love my boobs, huh? Jeez, you really are a handful," she murmured, furrowing her brow as she placed one hand on her cheek. She was probably—no, *definitely* making fun of me, making me sound like a terrible person. Still, I couldn't deny what she was saying, since I really did like her chest.

This *really* wasn't the kind of thing we should be talking about in public. There were families hanging out here too, and a conversation like this totally wasn't appropriate for the ears of young children. Wouldn't we get yelled at by someone?

I looked around us worriedly, but the parents seemed to be engrossed in their children jumping and so weren't paying any attention to us at all. The children were too busy bouncing around to notice, and there weren't any staff members around us either.

Although our chat seemed to have flown under the radar, I thought it best to end our conversation here—before our luck ran out and people caught on to what we were saying. If we got too carried away, we'd end up causing trouble for the facility. I leaned closer to Nanami, who was now looking at me with her cheek on her fist, and whispered, "Let's talk about things like this when it's just the two of us."

Nanami's eyes widened. She brought her hand up to her ear and took a large step back—then sat down as though her knees had given out.

"What? Whoa, Nanami, are you okay?!"

"I...I'm fine! I'm totally fine! I was just a little surprised!"

When I tried to rush over to her, she thrust both her hands forward to stop

me. *Was what I said really that surprising?* She was flapping one hand at her face, her shoulders heaving from heavy breaths. Even though she'd seemed fine while jumping on the trampoline, now her face was completely red and sweating all over as she kept one of her hands pressed to her ear.

Her breathing gradually slowed, becoming deeper and deeper. Just as I wondered whether I should get her another cold drink to help calm her down, Nanami exhaled and whispered, "I think my legs totally gave out."

*What?! Is she okay?!* I wondered, unable to understand why this was happening. Nanami, however, looked up at me and glared.

"It's because you said something so weird. If you whisper things like that, of course my legs will give out."

"But we can't keep talking about breasts while out in public," I said in protest.

"You mean you didn't say that in a pervy way?" she asked.

Not at all. What would make her think that? Thinking about it though, maybe what I'd said *could* be taken that way. Still, saying that we should talk about that stuff in private couldn't possibly be interpreted as suggestive under these circumstances. Regardless, maybe I had gone too far by whispering into her ear.

After nodding and groaning for some time, I sat down next to Nanami. "Totally not. I didn't mean it in a pervy way," I said.

"Then why'd it take you so long to answer?"

My silence just now was only because I'd been thinking, not because I was admitting to what she'd suggested. Even so, I continued sitting next to Nanami until she finally managed to calm down.

Incidentally, we'd been having so much fun at the trampoline park that we hadn't even realized we were almost out of time. We went back and forth a bit about whether to stay longer, but sitting down had made us both realize our legs were nearing their limits. With that in mind, we decided it was best to call it a day.

"Hey, Yoshin..." Nanami said.

"Yeah? What's up? Do you want me to fetch you something else to drink?"

Nanami shook her head slightly, took her hand off of her ear, and shuffled up close to me. Maybe because we were out in public, she did so in a way that seemed modest and not detectable to the people around us. After a brief silence, she looked straight at me with a gaze full of resolve. “I was thinking of being more proactive from here on out,” she finally declared.

“Where’d this come from?” I asked, taken aback by the sudden remark. I mean, I felt like she was plenty proactive already. Was she telling me she planned on taking that one step further? Could my heart even handle that? *Wait a minute, didn’t we just say we’d take things slow and steady? Why the sudden change?* I thought.

“It’s just that I’m doing all these things, but you can make my legs give out with just a single remark! It’s not fair!” she said. Pouting, she took my hand and brought it up to her ear. When my fingertips brushed against it, her whole body shivered.

Even if she claimed it was unfair, I wasn’t doing it on purpose. That couldn’t possibly be the reason. When I looked at her expression, though, I could tell that she was being completely serious.

“Well, I’m sort of kidding,” she said, “but do you know how the other day you suggested we take things easy since we’ve been moving so fast up till now?”

“Yeah, I did say that.”

“Well, I started thinking that while you did that, it’d be nice if I could repay you for certain things from before.”

“Repay me?”

I didn’t really think of myself as having given Nanami anything. As I began to wonder what she could be talking about, Nanami shook her head slightly as though she’d read my mind.

“You’ve given me lots of things. That’s why I want to be really proactive and give you lots of things too, to pay you back while you’re taking time to relax.”

I’d received plenty of things from Nanami, so she didn’t have to feel this way. Even if I told her that, though, I had a feeling that she wasn’t going to change her mind. Still, her sentiments made me feel really happy, even if I couldn’t help

wondering just how she intended to kick it up a notch. *Wait. Could it be...?*

“Was that whole thing about your chest earlier you trying to be more proactive?” I asked.

“Yep, though you managed to turn the tables on me real quick.”

So it was true. I never would have expected her to initiate a conversation about her chest though. Did she intend to seduce me? If so, would I be able to resist?

“Also, you know how I do things and then get all embarrassed about them later? I was thinking that I wanna try to get used to lots of things so that I can stop doing that.”

The moment I heard her say that, I grabbed her shoulders tightly, completely by reflex. Not even batting an eye at her shocked expression, I said, “Nanami, modesty’s important. You shouldn’t ever think of changing that.”

“Uh, I wasn’t expecting you to say something like that with such a handsome look on your face,” Nanami murmured.

Wait, modesty *was* important, wasn’t it? Of course, Nanami was adorable no matter how she behaved, but she was at her very cutest when embarrassed. If that went away, I felt like I would become terribly depressed.

When I looked at her again, I realized that she looked somewhat frightened and almost weirded out. *Shoot, I said that way too passionately without realizing it.* Recognizing the error of my ways, I let go of her shoulders.

“I’m sorry. I did that without thinking,” I mumbled.

“Wait, really? You care about it that much?”

Nanami seemed slightly confused as she watched me take a step back. Maybe opinions about things like this differed between guys and girls. It would probably be important for us to have an actual conversation about this at some point.

Whatever the case, I understood how Nanami felt. Even if I told her that she shouldn’t worry about it, that probably wouldn’t affect her decision. All I could do was accept her feelings. Also, I should probably be the one to support her

through the process and be sure to put a stop to things if they ever got out of hand.

“I really appreciate that you feel that way, but you’ve already done so much for me. So, well, don’t try to repay me too much. And you definitely don’t have to do anything weird, okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll do my best. But you know, if I do half-ass it, you’re only gonna get me back. What should I do?”

Clasping her hands into fists in front of her chest, Nanami thought happily for a moment. *Honestly, she really shouldn’t worry about it so much*, I thought. It seemed I had to think of ways to give back to her too—in secret, of course, so that she wouldn’t notice—and I should start with what was within the realm of possibility.

It was then that I noticed that Nanami had frozen in place. She looked down, her fists still clenched. Then, thrusting her chest out toward me slightly, she mumbled with embarrassment, “Um, do you want to try touching my boobs sometime?”

“I wouldn’t do that!”

I felt slightly conflicted by my answer. She might as well have just asked if I wanted to squeeze them. In any case, it seemed that we needed to have a long discussion about how we should—and shouldn’t—be trying to give back to one another.

## Interlude: An Exchange between Two Sisters

After our date had ended and I'd taken a bath, my body felt warm despite the slight loneliness in my heart. As I was wallowing in that lingering, wistful happiness, a very rare visitor stopped by my room.

Well, that was too dramatic, since it was just Saya who'd come to see me. However, this felt like the first time in a while she'd visited me in my room like this. The last time was probably back when I'd graduated from middle school or just before I'd started high school, which made it maybe just over a year ago. I'd stopped visiting Saya in her room too.

There wasn't any particular reason for that. We'd both just kind of stopped. Our relationship hadn't soured or anything. We still went shopping together like before and hung out together too. For some reason, though, we'd stopped going to each other's rooms. Maybe we just recognized what it meant to have our own personal space.

Saya was sitting on my bed now, swinging her feet back and forth. Having her in my room felt kind of odd, but seeing her here also made me feel happy. Looking around my room with interest, Saya placed a hand over her mouth.

"Your room really hasn't changed much at all since before. The only thing that's new is that picture of onii-chan over there," she mumbled.

"You think so? I feel like it's changed a lot," I replied.

"And I thought maybe your bed would smell like onii-chan too, but it doesn't."

"Hey, what are you doing?!"

Shocked to see Saya flop down on my bed and start to sniff it, I swiftly hauled her up in my arms. Not putting up much of a fight, she proceeded to put all her weight on me instead.

Saya hadn't stuck to me like this since elementary school, so her closeness felt nostalgic. She used to always want me to baby her, just like this.

“Aw man, your boobie pillow really is the best. I totally missed it. I’m so jealous that this all belongs to onii-chan now. It’s warm and smells good because you’re fresh out of the bath,” Saya said, completely ruining the mood.

Yeah, she hadn’t changed one bit. She’d always used my boobs as a pillow, even back when they’d been a lot smaller than they were now.

“Jeez, Saya. Would you quit using my boobs as a pillow, please?”

“Hatsu-nee’s boobs are soft, but she’s got muscle, so they’re more like memory foam. In terms of softness, though, Ayu-nee is definitely number one.”

“Just when did you have the chance to try out both of them?” I muttered, slightly dumbfounded. I admit I was more struck by hearing Saya call them “Hatsu-nee” and “Ayu-nee” for the first time in a while though. The four of us used to play together a lot a while back. Today seemed to be a day for all sorts of nostalgia.

For a while, Saya and I continued talking about nothing in particular. *Why’d she even come to my room in the first place? Did she just stop by to hang out?*

“So, what kind of a date did you have today, onee-chan?” she asked.

“Today? Oh, we went to see senpai’s basketball game, and then we stopped by this trampoline place.”

“Trampoline?! You mean these murder weapons of yours were bouncing all over the place?! Did you make sure to take good care of them?!”

“No, no, they weren’t bouncing around. I wore a sports bra, so they were totally secure. Hey, stop playing with them!”

Saya was bouncing my boobs around with her hands. *Why are you so fixated on my boobs?* I thought. Actually, she had once told me the reason why, explaining that she was envious because her own boobs weren’t that big. To me, Saya’s boobs were plenty big enough for her age. They were probably just as big as mine had been when I was in middle school. My boobs had only started getting bigger after I’d graduated, so in that sense, Saya’s had the potential to become even bigger than mine.

I reached out for Saya’s chest as she was playing with my own.

“Whoa!” Saya shouted, leaping up in shock.

*Wait, so you can touch other people’s boobs, but you can’t stand to have your own touched? This might be kind of fun.*

“Jeez, onee-chan! Take that!”

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?!”

As if in retaliation, Saya reached for my hips, but when I tried to block, she diverted her hand to my chest. Not wanting to lose, I began my own counterattack. I had to admit, I was enjoying messing around with her like this. It really had been a while.

After we’d carried on that way for a while, both Saya and I ended up covered in sweat. Maybe because Saya exercised regularly, she at least wasn’t out of breath. I, on the other hand, was breathing heavily, and I could feel beads of sweat sliding down my skin.

*Jeez, I just took a bath. Do I have to hop back in again? I’m practically soaked. After all that jumping earlier today, I feel super tired.*

“Jeez, it’s hot. I’m all sweaty,” I said through heavy breaths.

“You’re kind of sexy when you’re all out of breath, onee-chan.”

*Jeez, this kid.* I gently bonked Saya’s head with my fist. She put her hands where I’d hit her and laughed, sticking out her tongue. Wiping my sweat off with a towel, I took a step away from her to cool down.

“So you saw that senpai of yours play, huh? How was it? Was he cool?” Saya asked.

“Um, I thought he was impressive, but I’m not sure if I’d say he was cool. The game was a lot of fun though. I never knew basketball could be so interesting.”

“Do you have any pictures of the game? I wanna see this guy in action.”

*I don’t. I mean, I was too absorbed in watching the game. Had Yoshin been in the game, I’m sure I would’ve taken pictures, but he was standing next to me. Should I have taken pictures of Yoshin as he cheered? No, that’d be too weird.*

“I’d really love to meet that senpai of yours,” she said. “Hearing your and onii-



chan's story made me want a boyfriend for real."

"You were serious about that? I'm not really sure I like the idea of my little sister wanting to meet my senpai."

Saya started rolling around on my bed, continuing to insist that I introduce them. *Introduce her to senpai, huh? Should I do that?* As I was thinking about it, I suddenly remembered something.

*That's right, the manager.* I was still pretty sure the manager liked Shibetsu-senpai.

"Saya, I hate to tell you this, but..."

"Hmm? What is it? Did something happen?"

"I can't introduce you to senpai."

"What? Why?!" Saya asked, leaping up from the bed. She froze and looked at me as I began to explain to her everything that had happened today—including the whole thing about the manager who probably liked Shibetsu-senpai.

After hearing me out, Saya remained still, sitting with her legs crossed and her hands clasped in her lap. She seemed to think for a moment, then took on a serious air and said, "Yeah, let me meet him once."

"Were you even listening to me?!" I shouted. Saya, however, still had that same look on her face. *Is my sister trying to get first dibs on senpai?!*

"It's not what you think," she said.

*Oh, did I say that out loud?*

Saya glared at me a bit and then, finally smiling, pointed her index finger in the air. Shaking that finger, she said, "If things really are that interesting, then I'd love to meet senpai so that I can help move things along between the two of them."

"Don't you think that's none of your business?" I asked.

Saya shook her head and exhaled through her nose in anger. "You don't get it, do you?!"

Her response somehow got on my nerves.

“You see, it’s really important for the people around the couple to help set things up. If someone like me comes along and feels like a threat, the manager might get motivated to take action! It’s important for people to feel a sense of danger, though you might not understand that, given how fast things moved for you.”

*Huh? Is that really how things go? And how does Saya know something like that in the first place? She seems more experienced than I am.*

“At least, that’s what I always read in shojo manga,” she finally said.

*Oh, I see. Yeah, of course. That makes perfect sense.*

“I mean, I prefer to pass on guys who have a prior commitment anyway. I don’t want to get myself in any fights with people if I can help it. But, damn, I guess senpai’s already spoken for, huh? That’s too bad. My love didn’t even get a chance to start.” Pouting again, Saya lay face down on my bed and kicked her feet. I approached her and began gently stroking her hair.

“There’s no need to rush. You’ll find someone nice one of these days,” I said.

“I never thought there’d come a day when you’d end up saying that to me,” she mumbled.

Yeah, I never thought I’d end up saying something like that either. Regardless, I continued comforting her for some time. Saya lay there with her eyes half closed as she let me keep stroking her hair.

Suddenly, her eyes widened, and she got up, raising both her hands high in the air.

“Enough with all this already! This isn’t like me! Let’s go hang out with Hatsu-nee and Ayu-nee next time!” she shouted.

“Okay, okay. The four of us really should hang out. It’s been a while.”

“And how are things with onii-chan these days? Have you gotten beyond kissing yet?”

“Of course not! Oh, but I did ask him if he wanted to touch my breasts, so maybe that kind of counts as going beyond kissing.”

I blushed, recalling the conversation. While I sat there, wallowing in just how

forward I'd been, Saya gave me an exasperated look and sighed deeply. Then, coming closer toward me, she lifted my boobs without warning.

"Don't ask him if he wants to touch them—let him squeeEEEEeze them!" she yelled, proceeding to squeeze my breasts in actual anger. "I can't believe you have such huge knockers but don't even bother to use them. I came to ask you how things were going, but you haven't made any progress at all!"

"Hey! Wait, Saya, stop it!" I yelped. *So that was the reason you came to visit my room!*

Saya continued squeezing my breasts, but it felt more like she was giving me a massage. I felt the tension in my chest slowly disappear. *Seriously, when you have big boobs, your chest gets all tense. Aaah, gosh, that feels good.*

I was letting the unreasonably enraged Saya do as she willed when suddenly my phone started to ring. Looking at the screen, I saw that it was a group call from Hatsumi and Ayumi, which was unusual for them at this hour. Since Saya was there, I thought it'd be nice for all of us to chat. First, though, I had Saya take her hands off my chest.

"Hello? What's up? It's rare for you to call at this time of night."

"Yeah, well, we had something we wanted to ask you. Do you have time to talk?" Hatsumi asked.

"Saya's here too, but I'm totally good."

"Oooh, Sa-chan's there too? That's rare. Hey, Sa-chan! Long time no chat. It's Ayumi," came my other friend's laid-back voice from the other end of the line. I hadn't heard her call Saya that in a long time either. Saya, though, was still pouting as she responded to the two of them.

"Hi, Hatsu-nee, Ayu-nee. It's been a while. Hey, so why didn't you tell me about the dare you gave onee-chan? That's so not cool."

"Wow, it's been ages since I've heard you call me that," Hatsumi replied. "But you know, we couldn't pull you into this mess and risk getting Tomoko-san involved."

"I'm so sorry about that, Sa-chan," Ayumi added. "I'll treat you to ice cream

next time, so will you please forgive us?”

Although Saya was complaining, I could tell from her tone of voice that she wasn't actually angry. She probably just wanted to have her own say about all that had happened. She was laughing at their responses, a look of resignation on her face.

“So, what was it you wanted to talk about?” I asked.

“Well, do you remember how Misumai didn't even get angry with us the other day?” Hatsumi asked.

“He even thanked us about everything, you know? So we were thinking...”

With the two of them dancing around the subject, Saya and I tilted our heads, wondering what it was they wanted to say. It was rare for them to be the ones to call and yet be so reluctant to share what was on their minds. Since they'd already said they wanted to talk about something, they must have had something specific they wanted to bring up.

Still, the two took a while to get on to the actual topic they wanted to discuss. They seemed to be meandering on purpose, but Saya and I waited patiently for the two of them to begin.

“So, we actually talked to our boyfriends about the dare, you know? We told them that we did something really bad and that we, like, wanted to repent for it.”

“Huh?! What were you thinking?!” I shouted. *I mean, seriously, what did they think they were doing?* “Didn't they get really angry?” I asked.

“Yeah, they did. They hadn't been that mad with us in a long time, but that's totally fine, because we did it to get yelled at, basically, even though it was super scary,” Ayumi explained, her voice shaking.

Hatsumi wasn't saying anything, but it sounded like she dropped something on the other end of the phone. Maybe she was remembering the incident and couldn't keep herself steady. *Wow, I guess they really did get majorly scolded.*

I smiled wryly, thinking they really had no reason to be so concerned. They had probably sought out people who would put them in their place precisely

because Yoshin hadn't gotten mad at them at all. Their boyfriends had probably known that and had yelled at them accordingly.

"So did you want to talk about how you and your boyfriends could make up somehow?" I asked.

"No, that's not it. So, uh..."

"Our boyfriends are asking us to let them meet Misumai."

"What?!"

That dumb yelp was all I could manage in response.

## Chapter 3: My First Proper Night Out

As I've previously mentioned, before I met Nanami, I usually spent my free time alone, by myself. That might have been a result of my past, even if I couldn't remember it. Whatever the case, my isolation had been something that I'd chosen myself. Now that Nanami was a part of my life and there were more people around me, the times I'd spent alone felt like something from the distant past. There was no going back.

Still, I had to acknowledge that I'd never thought of being alone as particularly painful. It wasn't as though the people around me were ostracizing me. Well, maybe they were, but I'd never heard about it, so it was the same as it not happening at all. Those memories of spending time by myself weren't all that memorable either. I didn't have any unpleasant memories, but I didn't have any particularly good memories. That was just how my life had been up until now.

Taking that into account, the past month I'd spent with Nanami had been more eventful than any other time in my life. I could firmly declare that I'd experienced so many different things in that single month. Everything was new and completely unknown to me.

I once heard that as we get older, we start to perceive time as moving faster than it used to because we've already experienced many things before. For me, though, the past month felt like it was moving super fast despite everything being brand-new. They say time flies when you're having fun, right? So maybe the reason things feel like they're moving faster as you get older is because you're having more fun. But what do I know? I'm still a high schooler. I suppose I just have more to look forward to in my life.

To get back on topic though—today, I was about to experience something new. I was going to meet Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san's boyfriends. What was more, these were people who'd known Nanami for way longer than I'd known her. From what I'd heard, they'd met her while she and her friends were still in elementary school. When I thought about the nature of their

relationship, I figured that made perfect sense.

“Oh, we’re finally here!”

Hearing Nanami’s cheerful voice, I looked up to see what she was referring to. I’d been led to a large building near the train station. Apparently, it was a gym. I’d never even realized there was a gym here.

Rather than entering through the front of the building, Nanami swiftly proceeded toward the back and rang the buzzer on the intercom. We heard voices and then a loud click as the door was unlocked.

Why was it that entering a building through the back filled me with such a strange mix of nervousness and exhilaration? I’d felt the same way back when I’d once visited my parents’ workplace on an errand some time ago.

Nanami, who was leading the way, seemed to have been here several times before; she continued walking without any hesitation. I simply followed her. Since we usually walked side by side, even this felt new to me.

Today, Nanami was wearing a black “tube top”—at least, I was pretty sure that was what it was called—a white jacket, and a pair of skinny jeans. I know this is probably the most unoriginal comment ever, but I thought she looked really cool.

As a side note, without her jacket covering her torso, her back—no, not just her back, the entire area around her shoulders was on full display. She had her jacket on now, so it wasn’t a big deal, but when I’d gotten a glimpse of her earlier, I’d nearly frozen in place. I mean, her upper body was covered only by what was essentially a tube-shaped piece of fabric. I understood why it was called a tube top, but it was too daring of an outfit for my eyes.

“I sure haven’t been here in a while,” Nanami said. “I think the last time I came was when Hatsumi and Ayumi went on a diet.”

“Really? Those two don’t look like they need it.”

“Hatsumi had a part-time job as a ring girl, so she said that she wanted to get more lean around the waist.”

“A ring girl?” I murmured. That was those people who walked around the ring

between rounds in a match, right? I'd had no idea someone could get a part-time job doing that. I wondered if she'd gotten into it because her brother did martial arts.

"She looked really hot too. Everyone was surprised when we told them she was only in high school. I'm pretty sure her picture was in a magazine."

Wow, the more I heard about it, the more this felt like a story of a world far, far away from the one I lived in. Having her picture in a magazine made her sound like a model or something. I wondered if she was still doing it. Nanami was talking about it as proudly as if it were one of her accomplishments.

Just as I was becoming curious about what the uniform was like, Nanami turned around and looked at me with a mischievous smile on her face.

"Do you want me to borrow the costume and wear it for you next time?"

As she continued looking teasingly, I felt my heart skip. She'd totally read my mind. *Did she just say she'd borrow it and wear it? The sexy uniform? Does she mean just in our rooms, or...?*

While I stood there, unable to respond, Nanami's smile turned to one of consternation as her face flushed.

"Hey, say something! I feel like an idiot when I'm the only one getting all excited over here!"

"I guess I didn't know what to say. Besides, I don't even know what the uniform looks like. I can't just ask you to wear it for me."

"Oh, that's true. I can show you a picture of it later."

I had to admit, I was looking forward to it. Of course, that was because I was curious about the uniform itself and I was looking forward to being able to verify what the outfit looked like. Right. *Jeez, just who am I making excuses to?*

Before I knew it, I was standing in front of a door. The door, labeled with the words "Meeting Room," was thick and closed tight as though guarding a fortress.

I wasn't used to seeing meeting rooms. You didn't really see them at school. I could have imagined seeing one in a manga or something, but I didn't realize



they existed in real life. It seemed more like a room where the final boss would be waiting in a video game.

When Nanami knocked on the door three times, we heard a voice from the inside, telling us to enter. It was a low voice that I was hearing for the first time.

*They're here—Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san's boyfriends.*

Harboring a strange nervousness, I watched as the door slowly opened. As it creaked, the bright light from inside the room shone into my eyes. There wasn't much difference between the levels of brightness in the hallway and in the room, so it wasn't blinding. Still, the inside of the room seemed oddly bright.

"Oto-nii, we're here! Is everyone else here too?" Nanami called.

"I...I apologize for intruding," I mumbled.

Perhaps I should have said "excuse me" instead. I followed Nanami into the room, bowing my head. Apparently, she found my behavior amusing, because she giggled and took my hand.

When I raised my head and looked around the room, I was surprised to find that it was bigger than I'd imagined. *So this is what a meeting room looks like, I thought. It's different from the AV rooms at school.*

Inside sat two guys and two girls. The girls were the usual two: Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san. Near them sat the two guys, whom I was meeting for the first time—though I did recognize one of them.

As soon as they saw us, the two guys stood up and bowed to me. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san followed suit. As I stood there flustered by their greeting, the more muscular guy opened his mouth to speak.

"Sorry for making you come all this way. We really should have been the ones to visit you instead."

The other guy, who wore glasses and had a kind face, added, "Since our discussion would be somewhat particular, we decided it would be better to have it someplace private. That's why we asked you to come all the way here like this. We sincerely apologize for the problems our girlfriends have caused."

"We're really, truly sorry."

The two guys were both apologizing to me. Although I had been apologized to before, being bowed to by adults felt oddly humbling. Not knowing what I was supposed to do, I looked around for help. *Since they're bowing to me, am I supposed to say something like "Please raise your heads," or should I say, "It's okay"? Man, how do I deal with this?*

As I was beginning to panic inside, I felt someone gently squeeze my hand. Feeling the soft but certain touch, I looked at Nanami. She smiled at me and moved her lips without saying a word. It looked like she was telling me that everything was going to be okay.

At that moment, I felt the calmness return to my head. To let her know that I was okay now, I squeezed her hand in return. Nanami slowly looked away and smiled more broadly.

"Please raise your heads," I said. "Your girlfriends have already apologized to me about this. It's totally behind me."

As the two guys slowly looked up, I saw the two of them head-on for the first time. One was tall and muscular with his closely cropped hair bleached blond. He had a sharp look in his eyes and a very handsome face. Although he clearly had muscles, when compared to Genichiro-san's hulking body, this guy seemed much more lean. He was wearing loose-fitting clothing, but the parts of his body peeking out through the gaps suggested that there wasn't a single part of him that hadn't been put through rigorous exercise.

So this was Soichiro Otofuke-san, Otofuke-san's older stepbrother—and boyfriend. Since I'd looked him up on the internet yesterday, I knew what he looked like, but that was about it. I wondered what kind of a person he was. Unfortunately, I didn't know much about martial arts, but from what I'd found out, he seemed to be a pretty famous competitor. I guess that wasn't a surprise though, given that he was both skilled and good-looking.

However, what shocked me most was the dude's nickname: "the Siskon Champion." It wasn't an official name, just what his fans called him. Nonetheless, it was the kind of name that made you wonder why they chose it. Honestly, I couldn't figure out why they'd decided to call him that. It seemed to stem from the fact that he would talk about his stepsister every time he had an

interview with the press. Most people just assumed that he cared about his stepsister a lot, but for those who knew what was really going on, the nickname took on an entirely different meaning. That being said, if those directly involved didn't mind it, it wasn't anything for others to comment on.

The other guy in the room had short, curly brown hair. He was wearing glasses with thin, silver frames, and in total contrast to Otofuke-san's boyfriend, he had big, gentle eyes. The soft hint of blue in them made me wonder if he was multiracial. He, too, was incredibly good-looking.

This man must have been Kamoenai-san's boyfriend. She also called her boyfriend "onii-chan." I thought I recalled hearing that they'd grown up together. It was easy to see why having someone like him around since childhood would make her lose any interest in guys her own age.

When he looked up, I saw his gentle smile. He was wearing a white button-down shirt with a pale-blue tie that matched the color of his eyes. Maybe his clothing choice was why he seemed so intellectual. He was as tall as Otofuke-san's boyfriend, and I was pretty sure both of them were as tall as Shibetsu-senpai. It seemed unfair for people to be gifted both in height and in good looks. The fact that they were both tall also meant that I was being looked down on. I wasn't tall myself, so I'd known this would be inevitable. Still, I couldn't help feeling small in their presence.

"Hearing you say that makes me feel a lot better. I'm Soichiro Otofuke. You might already know this, but I'm Hatsu...Hatsumi's older brother. Please, call me Soichiro. It's nice to meet you."

*Otofuke-san's older brother...* Soichiro-san emphasized those words as he extended his right hand toward me. I took it and gave it a shake. I knew he wasn't putting a lot of strength into his grip, but his handshake felt powerful and masculine.

*Seriously, though, his hand is massive.* Even though I was a guy too, I was pretty sure he could easily wrap his hand around mine. Regardless, I saw the handshake through and mumbled, "It's nice to meet you too."

"Really, I do apologize for all the trouble Ayumi caused. Oh, I'm Shuya Oribe. We're far apart in age, but I'm Ayumi's childhood friend and also her boyfriend.

It's a pleasure."

*Kamoenai-san's childhood friend...* Oribe-san extended his right hand toward me. When I took it, I noticed his handshake was soft and accommodating, in contrast to Soichiro-san's firm grip. I took the moment to introduce myself. "It's nice to meet you both. I'm Yoshin Misumai. I, uh, have the pleasure of dating Nanami Barato-san."

I felt like I hadn't introduced myself like this since the time I'd met Nanami's family. Saying it out loud again felt really embarrassing. Either Nanami felt the same way or she felt weird about announcing that we were dating, because she was looking down at the floor the entire time. *Yeah, she's definitely embarrassed.*

Once the introductions were out of the way, the two guys took a good look at my face. They both looked me up and down and then nodded several times as if they finally understood something. *Uh, am I missing something?*

As I stood there flustered, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san slipped stealthily behind the two guys and slapped them on the back of their heads.

"Hey, aniki, you're staring at him too much. Stop being so rude," Otofuke-san said.

"You too, onii-chan. If you're gonna stare, stare at me," Kamoenai-san added.

Having had their misdeeds pointed out to them, the two guys quickly apologized.

"Right, sorry about that," Soichiro-san said. "I was just curious to see the kind of guy Nana finally decided to go out with. Sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

"I have to apologize as well," Oribe-san added. "Just the fact that Nanami-san was dating someone came as a surprise, but then we heard it started with a dare. Staring was pretty impolite of me."

Having known Nanami since she was little, they must have been really worried about whom she was dating. It made perfect sense that they'd be concerned about some guy who had shown up out of nowhere.

"Not at all. It's perfectly understandable that you'd be concerned," I said.

“That means a lot. I mean, it was only the other day that Hatsu told us Nana had a boyfriend.”

“Soich— Aniki, can you please stop calling me that?”

“Oh, come on. ‘Hatsu’ sounds cute.”

I didn’t know anyone called Otofuke-san “Hatsu.” Although Otofuke-san was pouting as she complained, she was blushing and actually looked kind of happy. Also, she’d started by almost saying something different, so maybe Otofuke-san didn’t usually call him “aniki” either. Perhaps she was trying not to call him by his name because I was here.

Anyway, that’s a thought for another time. What Soichiro-san had said was way more important. I had assumed they’d been aware of it long before that, but it turned out neither of them had known Nanami had a boyfriend.

When I looked at Nanami with concern, she was staring at them with her eyes wide. As a drop of nervous sweat trailed down the side of her face, she brought her hand up to her mouth and asked, “Oh, uh, did I never tell you two about it?”

“Nope.”

“Not once.”

Apparently, our whole relationship was news to them. Well, I supposed we had both been really busy this past month, and a lot had happened even after we’d put an end to the dare. She probably hadn’t hidden the fact on purpose.

Still, the one who seemed most bothered by all this was Nanami herself. She crouched down with her head in her hands. “Seriously? Oh, wow. You’re totally right. I never told you guys,” she muttered. Then, after standing back up just as quickly, she took a few steps to stand immediately beside me. She took one breath, two breaths, three breaths, then stopped breathing altogether.

As I watched her in silence, she entwined her arm with mine and pressed her body up against me. She did it with so much momentum that I almost lost my balance, but I managed to remain upright somehow. Maybe because of that, I could feel the softness of her body against mine. Well, she was wearing some rather revealing clothes today, so maybe that was also the reason.

With Nanami attached to me like that, none of the guys in the room could say anything. While still standing super close to me, Nanami took a deep breath. Once, twice... This time, she only did it twice. Then, with her cheeks flushed, she looked straight at the two guys. She was staring at them so fiercely, you'd think she was about to make a monumental declaration.

"Oto-nii, Shu-nii, this is my boyfriend. He's the first guy ever to be this important to me."

A shy smile spread across her lips. The two guys looked terrified for a moment, but that fear was immediately replaced by smiles of relief. Their smiles held so much affection and tenderness that the guys looked like Nanami's true older brothers. It was then that I realized just how much the two of them also meant to her.

"I mean, given that Gen-san already approves of the relationship, there's really nothing for us to do," Soichiro-san remarked.

"That's true. As long as her father accepts him, it's not our place to argue. Still..."

"...we're relieved," they said in unison.

Although they said that, Soichiro-san was scratching his head guiltily for some reason while Oribe-san was shrugging his shoulders in an exaggerated manner. The two turned to me and bowed again.

"Thank you for taking care of Nana," Soichiro-san said.

"We leave our little sister in your care."

Although Nanami took a step away from me to protest, she looked flattered by their concern. I wasn't about to let any of them best me, so I leaned back and stood with my head held high. I knew I couldn't compete with either of the two of them in height, but I wanted them to know I cared about Nanami as much as they did. That was why I would try to pack all the strength I had into the words I spoke. If I didn't, I wouldn't be able to face up to the fact that they had entrusted Nanami to me.

*The two guys who've watched over Nanami for years are willing to accept me as her boyfriend. I have to stand proud. I have to do everything I can right now, I*

told myself.

“I told her parents this too, but I’ll do everything in my power to make Nanami happy. Thank you so much for protecting her up till now. I still have much to learn from the two of you,” I said, drawing Nanami closer to me by her shoulders. She looked at me in surprise.

I knew that there was some bravado behind that statement, but I meant every word. I didn’t want to make her sad, and I most definitely wanted her to be happy. For that, I was willing to do anything. That was my everything, and for now, that was enough. I also wanted to express my recognition that I still had to become a lot stronger in both mind and body in order to accomplish that. After all, this huge responsibility had been entrusted to me by a martial artist. I had some work to do.

The two guys raised their heads and looked at me with surprise, making me wonder whether I’d done something wrong. However, they proceeded to smile wryly.

“Uh, Misumai-kun, are you really a high school student? I wasn’t expecting you to say something like that,” Soichiro-san replied.

Oribe-san nodded. “I can see why Gen-san would give you his stamp of approval. I never knew high school students were so mature these days.”

I felt like they were impressed by me, but in an odd way. I mean, given what they’d said to me, how else was I supposed to respond? Nanami, meanwhile, was sticking close to me, grinning happily. That was how I knew I hadn’t said anything wrong.

Seeing Nanami and me look at each other and laugh, the two guys murmured softly.

“I’m glad you’re Nana’s boyfriend.”

“Totally.”

Those words made me happier than anything else they could have said.



After that, we talked for a while before eventually leaving the meeting room.

Both the two boyfriends and Nanami's two friends had offered their apologies, which Nanami and I had accepted. None of it had seemed necessary, since all had already been forgiven. Still, it's always important to get closure.

It wasn't that I couldn't empathize with the two guys in terms of what their girlfriends had done. If Nanami were ever to do something like that, I would probably apologize with her too. I had to believe that romantic relationships became stronger when you could be there for each other through both the good times and the bad.

I remembered reading somewhere that if you could only share the good with each other, you wouldn't be able to build a healthy relationship. I couldn't remember where it was that I'd read it—perhaps in a manga or a novel—and it wasn't like it had left that strong of an impression on me. Still, thinking back on it, I felt like I had to agree. It was also why I understood that Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were building healthy relationships with their own boyfriends. I wanted to be able to do that with Nanami too.

Having taken care of the primary objective of the day, I assumed we'd all be going our separate ways, but Soichiro-san was kind enough to invite us to lunch. I tried to decline since he was offering to treat us, but we ended up taking him up on the offer. It had been hard to say no when he'd said he wanted to make amends and have the chance to get to know me better.

So there we were: me and Nanami, Otofuke-san and Soichiro-san, and Kamoenai-san and Oribe-san. It felt strange to be out and about as three couples, but Nanami looked delighted. Actually, it wasn't just Nanami—both Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san seemed excited too.

"It's like a triple date!" the girls exclaimed as they walked.

*A triple date? What in the world is that? What am I supposed to be doing right now?*

As I walked along, confused, I noticed that the girls had begun talking among themselves while the guys had begun their own conversation. The three girls were chatting excitedly, whereas the guys were more or less just watching over them. That was when Soichiro-san and Oribe-san continued their apology—or rather, explained why they'd wanted to meet me today.



Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had ultimately confessed their guilt to them, but that had also been the moment when the two girls had realized that they, too, had never reported that Nanami had gotten herself a boyfriend. Ordinarily, this wouldn't have been an issue, but in this case, they had failed to update the two people who had essentially served as Nanami's older brothers since she'd been in elementary school. Learning that their surrogate little sister had started dating had come as quite a shock. That was why, in the middle of their scolding, the guys had told their girlfriends that they wanted to meet me—that they wanted to see for themselves what kind of a guy Nanami had ended up with.

It made perfect sense that they wouldn't be able to keep their cool. The more I'd learned about what had happened, the more I'd understood that I'd had no other choice but to meet them. Of course, they'd been willing to give up if I'd said that I didn't want to, but since I'd been wanting to meet Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san's boyfriends myself, it had ended up being the perfect opportunity. After all, these were people who had watched Nanami grow up. They probably knew all sorts of things about her that I was yet to discover.

I also wanted to ask them a thing or two about dating, since they'd been in relationships for much longer than I had. Unfortunately, there weren't many people around me with whom I could talk about that kind of stuff. The classmate I'd been talking with lately had broken up with his girlfriend just the other day. The time between them starting to date and them breaking up had seemed really short, but maybe that was normal for high school students.

Well, I should probably talk about that friend some other time. Let's get back on topic—that is, dating. I'd only really heard about relationships from Baron-san, so I was eager to branch out and get opinions from other people as well. Given that Soichiro-san and Oribe-san had known the three girls so long and they'd also been dating for a while now, I might be able to pick up some tips from them. At least, that's what I was thinking.

“So what did you do to get Nanami-san's parents to accept you? I just feel like Ayumi's parents still haven't accepted me as her boyfriend yet. I'd love to get some advice.”

Instead, Oribe-san had asked *me* for advice. Even though I thought I didn't have any useful tips to share, not wanting to shut down the conversation, I

explained what had happened in my relationship with Nanami from the very beginning. I decided not to spill some of the details, wanting to keep them as memories that only Nanami and I shared, but I was pretty certain that I covered all the major points.

The two guys listened to me with all seriousness. As I talked, Soichiro-san let his mouth hang open at times. Other times, he appeared shocked and even scared. Still, they both listened to my account attentively, absorbed and completely serious about learning from the love life of a high schooler like me. I was grateful that they didn't make fun of me. However, my answer seemed to trouble Oribe-san even more.

"Maybe what I've been lacking is that kind of decisiveness," he was mumbling. "Ugh, but if I'd been decisive with Ayumi, I would've gotten into even deeper trouble."

Oribe-san was groaning to himself, his head in his hands, making me start to wonder what had happened to him. *Be decisive with Ayumi-san? Why would he think that?*

As I tilted my head in wonder, Soichiro-san told me what had happened, his face twitching nervously. Once I'd heard the story, I ended up with a twitching face too, not knowing how I should respond.

"So, um, the moment Ayu turned sixteen, she gave Shu something crazy."

In our conversation thus far, I'd figured out that Soichiro-san referred to people close to him with just the first few syllables of their names. He seemed to be figuring out where we stood, though, as he still called me by my last name.

Both Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san would complain that their nicknames made them sound like items of food, but Soichiro-san didn't seem to care. He just laughed cheerfully and told them that both of their nicknames sounded cute. He didn't even entertain their objections. So, with that considered, what could possibly be considered "crazy" to someone like Soichiro-san?

"What was it?" I asked.

"An application for a marriage license."

The moment I heard that, I burst out laughing from sheer nervousness. *Wow, I didn't realize you could actually do that. Wait, marriage license? As in a real marriage license? The thing that declares that two people have gone from just dating to being an actual married couple?*

Soichiro-san crossed his arms as if remembering. A drop of sweat trickled down the side of his face, and he swallowed hard. "It was the day Ayu turned sixteen," he explained. "When Shu asked her what she wanted for her birthday, she immediately opened her bag and pulled out the application."

"Her assertiveness is actually kind of scary," I admitted.

"Yeah, agreed. Well, a lot happened after that, but in the end, they promised to get married once Ayu graduated from high school. Maybe that had been her intention all along."

*Wow, her negotiation skills are scary too. Actually, what's even more frightening is that I can very easily imagine the scene. Otofuke-san has always seemed like a rational person, but Kamoenai-san runs entirely on instinct. Still, an application for marriage, huh?*

"I guess it's hard to get married as a high school student," I murmured.

"Actually, given how much Shu makes, they could probably get married now and things would be all right," Soichiro-san remarked.

Actually—though I couldn't say this out loud—I wasn't thinking about Oribe-san and Kamoenai-san; I was thinking about myself. More precisely, I was thinking about myself and Nanami. It wasn't that I'd jumped straight to the thought of us getting married. What surprised me was that Kamoenai-san already had her sights on marriage. Soichiro-san wasn't saying it out loud, but he had probably talked about it with Otofuke-san as well.

Now I couldn't help thinking about marriage too. After all, I had literally just declared that I would make Nanami happy. Still, even though I had heard about students getting married, it sounded like a difficult task to undertake, plus "students" probably meant "college students." I mean, women had to be at least eighteen to get married. One after another, negative thoughts flooded my brain. Maybe this was an indication of how differently I thought about marriage.

“What’s up, Misumai-kun? Did I say something weird?” Soichiro-san asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just thinking that you guys are really mature for thinking so far ahead,” I confessed.

Soichiro-san’s eyes widened for a moment. Then he immediately looked down and smiled. He glanced over at the girls, then looked back at me.

“Nah, if you ask me, you seem a lot more like the adult here,” he said.

“What? No way. That can’t possibly be true.”

Soichiro-san quietly shook his head. Then he repeated what I’d said earlier. Hearing someone else say it made me blush. I thought that maybe he was teasing me, but what he said next wasn’t what I expected at all.

“The fact that you can seriously and without hesitation say you like your girlfriend like that is really something,” he said somewhat sadly. “That’s really hard for me and Shu to do.”

I didn’t know why they felt it was difficult, but maybe it was because their relationships had more obstacles than ours had. It could be the differences in age, their relationships with each other, or barriers that involved law and ethics. Any of those things could be why they said it was difficult, or maybe there were different reasons entirely. It felt rude to dig into it too much, so I just kept quiet.

“Besides, at this point, I feel like you and Nana are way ahead of us. Gen-san approves of the relationship already, and I’m sure your parents are cool with it too, right?”

“That’s true. My parents are really fond of Nanami.”

“Oh, jeez. I’m totally stoked to see the little sister that we were so worried about overtake us big brothers. But still, it makes me feel kind of lonely.” Soichiro-san shrugged, switching gears to a more playful tone. Even I could tell his gesture was deliberate. I had to stifle a laugh.

“What’s this? Are you guys getting along that well already? Oto-nii, you’d better not be giving Yoshin a hard time.”

“What are you talking about? Nana, seriously, you’ve got yourself a great guy. Hats off to you. At this rate, you’ll be the first to get married out of all of us.”

“M-Married?!”

Nanami, who had linked her arms with mine, was looking at Soichiro-san with narrowed eyes. His unexpected response had left her speechless. As Soichiro-san laughed wholeheartedly, Nanami blushed furiously and kicked him. Even with her arm still locked with mine, her low kick made a pretty impressive noise.

I'd had no idea Nanami did stuff like this. Surprised, I couldn't help staring. Feeling my gaze, Nanami put her hands on her legs in embarrassment. She wasn't wearing a skirt, so it wasn't like her legs were showing or anything. Maybe it was just to make her feel better. Meanwhile, I didn't know what to say.

“That's a pretty nice kick you've got there,” I eventually remarked.

“You're complimenting me?!”

“It's because I taught her everything she knows,” Soichiro-san said proudly. Nanami proceeded to kick him once again, which made another impressive *thud*. *Maybe I should learn something from him too sometime. It'd probably be worth it, since it could help me protect Nanami.*

Seeing them mess around with each other like siblings, I took the opportunity to bring up something I'd been wondering about. “So, Soichiro-san calls you Nana, huh?” I said.

“Oh, yeah. It's just 'cause Oto-nii can only remember the first two sounds of people's names.”

“Hey, don't make it sound like I'm stupid. It sounds cute when I call people nicknames.”

Although Soichiro-san protested, he didn't deny it. *Hm? I'm pretty sure she's just kidding, but could it actually be true? No, it must be a joke. Soichiro-san's been calling me by my last name. If he could only remember the first two sounds, then he wouldn't be able to do that.*

“That's cool to have nicknames for each other. I've never had something like that before,” I said.

“Really? Not even when you were in elementary school?” Nanami asked.

“Um, I guess I don’t really remember.”

Maybe I had been called by a nickname, but I didn’t really remember anything about back then, and I hadn’t really had any friends in middle school. It was only when I’d started going out with Nanami that I started associating with anybody.

“Oh, in that case, can I just call you ‘Yo’?” Soichiro-san asked.

“Hey, why would you be the one to do that? Isn’t that supposed to come from me, his girlfriend?!” Nanami exclaimed.

“I mean, you can give him your own nickname if you want. I just wanna call him that. You can just call each other ‘darling’ or ‘honey’ or whatever.”

“But that’s what you and Hatsumi called each other before you banned it.”

*Huh? Really?*

When I looked back and forth between him and Otofuke-san, Soichiro-san turned slightly away from us. Otofuke-san, meanwhile, was an innocent victim, merely caught in the cross fire of our conversation. To think that she would call her boyfriend that. The discovery was super unexpected.

It didn’t seem at all likely that Nanami and I would call each other stuff like that. Yeah, that probably wouldn’t happen. Just the thought of doing so made me feel all embarrassed. I shook my head slightly to rid myself of the image I’d inadvertently conjured in my head. We certainly couldn’t be seen calling each other something that made it seem like we were swooning all over each other. We had to keep our PDA in check. Let’s ignore the fact that we usually acted like we didn’t care what people thought. What was important was that I *believed* I was able to keep things in check.

“I’m happy to have you call me anything,” I said.

“Oh, great. In that case—” Soichiro-san replied, but I interrupted him before he could continue.

“But can I ask you to wait just a little bit? I’d actually like Nanami to give me my first nickname, so as long as it’s after that, then anything would be fine,

really.”

Apparently impressed, Soichiro-san let out a sigh of admiration. Oribe-san, who had been walking ahead of us while moaning to himself, stopped and looked back at us. Staring at me with his eyes wide, he muttered, “So that must be it.”

*Uh, I’m pretty sure I didn’t say anything that impressive.*

Nanami, on the other hand, was so happy that she attached herself to me with a beaming smile on her face. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were watching her with smiles on their faces too. I felt like the air around us had somehow become gentle and warm.

“So? What kind of a nickname would you give me?” I asked.

Nanami looked up as though she’d been brought back to her senses with my question. Then, placing her hand on her chin, she fell silent for some time.

“Maybe ‘Yo-chan’?” she finally said.

“Hmm, isn’t the ‘chan’ part a little embarrassing?”

“Hey, hold up. That’s not much different from what I was gonna call him!” Soichiro-san was quick to point out. All that was important, though, was that Nanami was the one to give me my first nickname. She seemed satisfied, so I was too.

I turned to Soichiro-san, puffed my chest out, and declared, “So, yes, Soichiro-san—please call me Yo.”

“I know I said this before, but I’m glad you’re Nanami’s boyfriend.”

“I have to say, I completely agree.”

Both Soichiro-san and Oribe-san stared at me, their expressions a mix of exasperation and admiration. They seemed to mean something different by it this time, but I thanked them after a quick shared glance with Nanami. Everyone laughed happily at that.



For lunch, we decided to head to a restaurant that Soichiro-san frequented.

Apparently, it was run by one of his friends. He knew all sorts of people. It seemed like a really trendy place, so I felt kind of nervous and out of place going in there, but Nanami and the others didn't even hesitate to walk in. *Wow, they're so cool.* I couldn't help feeling impressed.

Spending time with all of them made me feel like an adult. I'm sure some people thought that high school students were already adults, but for someone like me, who had only ever been to chain restaurants, eating at an independently owned place felt like a very mature thing to do. Besides, having a meal together was the perfect way to get to know someone better.

I wasn't that good at holding conversations with people, but thanks to the way everyone else was chatting, I was able to enjoy our talk despite the nerves. We talked about a lot of different things, and among those topics was summer vacation. The chat wasn't anything weird, though; we just talked about the six of us going somewhere during the break. In other words, I got invited to go on a triple date.

"Let's go to the beach! And we should make it an overnight trip if we're going to the trouble!"

It was Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san who'd come up with the idea. Soichiro-san and Oribe-san thought it best to just keep it a day trip, but it was probably only a matter of time before they were persuaded otherwise. I thought it was usually the guys who proposed overnight trips, but I decided not to say anything.

As a side note, when I'd let slip that Nanami and I had already gone on an overnight trip—accompanied by our parents, of course—they'd been really surprised. That was why I had this vague feeling that our trip to the beach would probably include an overnight stay. Now, though, I was alone with Nanami.

"How did things turn out like this?" I asked.

There was no response.

Well, of course there wasn't. Most questions like this either didn't have answers or their answers had been clear from the get-go. In this case, it was probably the latter—as in, I already knew how things had turned out this way.



I was currently in a... What would you call it? A clothing store? Or a boutique, maybe? Anyway, I was in a clothes shop with Nanami, on what you might call a “shopping date.” That in and of itself wasn’t a problem. It was an extremely wholesome date—or at least I thought it was wholesome.

However, there was but a fine line between wholesome and unwholesome—because right now, I was standing in front of a dressing room. Not that standing in front of the dressing room was unwholesome, but inside the dressing room was Nanami. I could hear her humming happily and the sound of her clothes rustling as she undressed.

It was nice to know she was having a good time, but knowing that Nanami was changing just on the other side of that thin fabric made me super nervous. I’d seen her in various outfits before, including in a yukata that had been coming undone, but she’d never changed so close to me. Or had she? No, I was pretty sure she hadn’t.

The rustling of clothes and Nanami’s happy singing. Actually, we were here to buy something specific. It’s no use being coy about it, so I should just come out and say it: we were buying a bathing suit for Nanami.

While the six of us had been getting excited about going to the beach, we’d started talking about what to do after lunch. Since we still had some time after this, we decided to go to the pool. However, since no one had brought their bathing suit and I didn’t even own one to begin with, I’d assumed we’d abandon the idea and call it a day. But then...

“Oh, then how about we go buy swimsuits now?” Soichiro-san suggested. “In fact, I’ll buy them for you guys to celebrate your one-month anniversary.”

“That’s a great idea. I’ll pitch in,” Oribe-san added.

And, just like that, it had been decided that we would all choose swimsuits and then head to the pool together. *Just how quick to act are these people? They operate with quite the momentum.*

After that, there was a lot of back-and-forth—from me saying that I felt bad having them treat us to lunch *and* gift us swimsuits, to them saying that they wanted to give presents to their younger sister figure and her boyfriend, to Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san saying they wanted their boyfriends to buy

them bathing suits too, to the boyfriends refusing their requests...

I had to say, extroverts could really put on the pressure. I mean, seriously, we would just be talking, and they'd somehow find ways to rope me into whatever it was they'd proposed. I was blown over.

In the end, Nanami and I gave in to the pressure and found ourselves getting into Soichiro-san's car. For the record, Otofuke-san and Soichiro-san were also choosing bathing suits with each other now as a couple.

*Are we really gonna go to a pool after this? It's getting kind of late. Will any pools still be open?*

Nanami had tried to refuse their offer at first too, but now she was laughing with a troubled expression and going along with it. Maybe this was just the way they usually were.

"Sorry about this, Yoshin," Nanami said from inside the dressing room. "If you don't like it, you can just say so."

Feeling flustered, I answered her half-heartedly. Apparently voices coming from dressing rooms made me nervous.

Nanami was really positive about the situation. Apparently, she still had her bathing suit from last year, but since she'd been wanting a new one, this worked out perfectly. As for me, I'd been thinking that fashionable girls were a cut above the rest for renewing their bathing suits so often, but it seemed that wasn't the case. That wasn't the case at all. I mean, maybe some girls did do that, but for Nanami, the circumstances were quite different.

"Actually, my bathing suit from last year doesn't fit anymore, so I was wanting a new one," she'd told me when we'd been talking about this the other day.

"Oh, I see. Do swimsuits really shrink that much in just a year?"

"Uh, no, um, it's my chest that's making it a little tight."

Seeing Nanami blushing so much, I had immediately regretted making such an insensitive remark. *Did you seriously grow that much in just a year?* No, I couldn't have said that either. It would have sounded like sexual harassment.

I'd been so flustered, I hadn't known how to respond. Nanami, though, had

just looked up at me and said, “I...I’m in the middle of a growth spurt.” Apparently, she’d been just as confused as I was.

Who knew that we would end up going swimsuit shopping so soon after that conversation? It was far too soon to be acting this out. Sure, that was just how things normally went for us, but I for sure thought we’d wait until the weather was warmer.

*Ah, but right now, Nanami’s changing into a bathing suit on the other side of this curtain.* Just the thought made me feel even more nervous. Going swimsuit shopping was a regular trope in manga, but I’d never thought it would ever happen to me in real life.

Nanami had taken several different bathing suits into the dressing room. I wondered what kinds she’d chosen. I felt nervous, but I also couldn’t help thinking about what kinds of swimsuits she’d try on. As I sat there, my expectations ballooning by the moment, Nanami poked her head out from the other side of the curtain. Her entire body was hidden from view, so I couldn’t tell what kind of bathing suit she had on.

“For starters, what do you think of this first one?” she asked before quickly pulling her head back into the dressing room. I thought she would open the curtain for me to see, but the fabric hanging between us remained closed. As I continued waiting with my head tilted in confusion, I heard Nanami’s voice from the other side of the curtain. “Yoshin, hurry up!”

*Huh? “Hurry up”?*

While I stood there feeling even more confused, Nanami’s hand snaked its way out of the edge of the curtain and waved up and down several times. It seemed to be beckoning me. *Beckoning me?! Is Nanami seriously telling me to stick my head in there?!*

Even after watching Nanami’s hand retreat back behind the curtain, I hesitated. *Is this really okay? Wouldn’t it be better for her just to open the curtain?* As I thought that, though, I quickly realized the situation she was in. *Oh, right. She’s trying on a bathing suit right now. What would happen if she opened the curtain? She’d end up having to show the world what she looked like in a bathing suit. Nanami is wearing a bathing suit.*

I wasn't the only person there right now. There were even a few male customers walking around. Would it be okay to let them see Nanami in such a state? Of course not. That was why, if I was going to see what Nanami looked like in her bathing suit, sticking my head into the dressing room was the safest, most rational way to go. Okay, that's enough of my excuses.

I mean, even if I didn't justify it, Nanami herself was asking me to look, so it was fine. But for me to be able to calmly enjoy such an extraordinary occasion, I had to convince myself to do it.

I'm pretty sure I was only mulling it over for a few moments. Still, those few moments felt like a very long time to me. I had made up my mind, but I was still really nervous. Slowly but surely, I took a step toward the dressing room. The slower I walked, the more likely it was that I'd be misidentified by the sales associates as being suspicious.

"Okay, I'm coming in," I said, attempting to sound as not-creepy as possible.

"Welcome!" she replied. My heart just about leaped out of my chest. I felt like I could literally hear the loud *thump* in my head.

I poked my head in through the space between the curtain and the wall. Feeling unable to look at her immediately, I had to cast my eyes downward at first. There were no clothes on the floor. Was that to be expected? I mean, I would probably end up leaving the clothes I'd taken off directly on the floor.

*Taken off...* As soon as I thought that, I became very self-conscious. *Of course she's taken her clothes off.*

"What do you think of this one? Is it too tame?"

When I looked up toward the source of the voice, there stood Nanami in her bathing suit. It was an off-the-shoulder bikini with a huge ruffle over the chest. I thought I'd heard that ruffles like these were used to hide people's body shapes, but on Nanami, they seemed to emphasize her breasts instead.

The swimsuit was white with a pale-pink pattern that seemed both cute and refreshing. With her shoulders revealed like that, the outfit wasn't at all tame; in fact, it had the kind of healthy sexiness that made me worry about people hitting on her when she wore it. And when I let my gaze travel downward, I

saw...she was wearing the matching bikini bottoms over her pants.

“Over your clothes?” I couldn’t help exclaiming.

Because I’d raised my voice in such a small space, Nanami jumped momentarily in shock. *Oops, sorry. It was just so unexpected. I didn’t think you’d be wearing it over your clothes. Wait, is this the normal way to try things on?*

“Jeez, you scared me,” Nanami muttered.

“Oh, s-sorry. I just felt sort of disa—” I paused for a moment. Disa...? Disa, indeed. *Yeah, I should just man up and say it like it is. I was disappointed! I thought I’d get to see Nanami in her bathing suit! Yeah, yeah, I was too hopeful, goddammit. I’m a healthy high schooler. Here I was, thinking Nanami was in here with her bathing suit on, but then I see her wearing it over her clothes. Of course I’d be disappointed. I can’t help myself.*

“Disa...?” Nanami repeated, still in shock. I’d barely started saying the word, so I had thought that maybe she hadn’t heard me. Having discovered that she, in fact, had, I felt the blood drain from my face. “Disa... Disa-what?” she asked again.

“N-Nanami, that swimsuit looks great on you! It’s the most perfect, refreshing color for a hot summer!” I said, sharing my assessment in a panic. After all, although she was wearing the bottoms over her pants, I could still tell how the bikini looked overall. And of course, by “pants,” I meant her skinny jeans, not her underwear, just so we’re clear. If she had put on the bathing suit over her underwear, I wouldn’t have been disappoi— Wait, no, no. I’m talking myself into a hole here.

Every time Nanami moved, the ruffle on her top swished and swayed. Wait, was it called a ruffle? And beneath the swaying ruffle, I could see glimpses of the actual top itself.

“It’s a nice color, right? I like stuff like this. Look, it’s got the same pattern under the frill too.”

“Whoa!”

Nanami deliberately lifted up the frill—I didn’t know it was called that—covering her chest. With the part that had been somewhat hidden until now

being suddenly revealed to me, I couldn't help but cry out. Clearly enjoying herself, Nanami kept flapping the frill up and down, showing off the entirety of the bathing suit.

"Um, it looks good on you," I murmured.

Well, I was glad she seemed to be having fun. At least I'd managed to take her mind off of what I'd been about to say earlier. I decided I'd better change the subject and start talking about the next swimsuit she had in mind.

"Are you sure? Aren't you disappointed that I'm wearing it over my clothes?" she asked.

*She knew all along?!*

With my body stiff and a sheepish smile plastered to my face, I turned my head awkwardly and looked at Nanami. She had a huge smile on her face—a smile that showed not only joy but anticipation. Her lips were curled up in a deep arc, and her eyes were lit up with curiosity and expectation. It was her best smile of the day, almost as bright as the sun itself. I was about to say something to evade her question, but then I gave up.

"Yes, I was slightly disappointed," I confessed.

"Honesty is the best policy!"

As I looked down at my feet, Nanami reached out and patted me on the head as though she were soothing a child. Because I was in such an odd position, with just my head poking through the curtain, Nanami had to bend forward slightly. That was when I got a glimpse of her chest area, but it seemed Nanami still had her tube top on too. She was wearing both the top and the bottoms of the bikini over her clothes.

When I looked around the dressing room, I saw that, aside from the swimsuits she was going to try, only the jacket she was wearing today was on a hanger. If I'd just paid more attention from the beginning, I would have noticed that was the only piece of clothing she'd taken off.

*No, there's no way I would have noticed. I mean, how am I supposed to stay calm in such a weird situation?!* This outcome was inevitable. I was trying to sound cool, but that made me seem even more lame.

“Still, I didn’t know you’re supposed to try on swimsuits over your clothes. I learned something new.”

“Usually, you try it on over your underwear. You wouldn’t wear it directly.”

I wasn’t the type to try on swimsuits regularly, so hearing her explanation was a complete eye-opener. *I see, so you usually wear it over your underwear.* When I thought about it, it made perfect sense that you wouldn’t wear it directly, given that it was an item on sale at a store. It might be different if you were definitely going to buy it after, but that probably wasn’t always the case.

Sometimes, in manga and anime, the characters *would* try on bathing suits directly, but I guess that was just for show. *Hmm, I feel like my long-running suspicion has finally been solved, or maybe one of my dreams has been crushed. Either way, I learned something today—not that that knowledge will ever come in handy.*

At that moment, though, another question popped into my head. “Why didn’t you try them on over your underwear today?” I asked.

“Huh?!”

Nanami had told me that you usually try on swimsuits over your underwear. Today, though, she was wearing them over her clothes, which apparently wasn’t something she would normally do. I’d just asked the question because it had popped into my head, but when I thought about it more carefully, I realized that saying something like that might come across as yet another act of sexual harassment. As I watched, Nanami’s face turned redder and redder.

“Forget what I said!” I exclaimed, turning away.

Nanami—who had been all smiles a moment ago—was now completely flushed. She clasped her hands together and looked awkwardly down at her feet. After a few moments of silence, she finally raised her head, brought her hands to her mouth, and whispered, “It’s because, um, when I thought of you standing on the other side of the curtain, I got all embarrassed about getting down to my underwear in here.”

I felt like someone had punched me in the gut. *Man, is my girlfriend cute or what?!* If I weren’t in a public dressing room, I would have been screaming at

the top of my lungs. I wanted to pat myself on the back for suppressing the urge to do so.

Earlier, I'd been getting all nervous thinking that Nanami was changing just on the other side of the curtain. It seemed that she'd been feeling the same way.

"I'm usually fine though! Taking my clothes off in a dressing room, I mean!"

"Oh, uh, I see."

"But, you know, today I'm wearing a tube top, and my jeans are thin, so I figured it'd be fine! See, I'm wearing clothes on top too!"

I managed to avert my eyes just in time. In her panic, Nanami had rolled up her bikini top to show me the tube top she was wearing underneath it. *You don't have to show me!*

Nanami must have come back to her senses when I looked away, because I soon heard the sound of fabric rubbing over fabric. It seemed she'd put her bathing suit back where it needed to be. I hadn't seen her lose her cool like this in a while.

There was silence in the dressing room for several moments. I wondered if it was okay for me to stand there with my head poking in like that. I felt I had to change the mood.

"So, uh, which one are you trying on next?" I asked.

This was not the right move. I mean, I managed to break the silence, but still, it wasn't the wisest thing for me to ask.

"Um, next, I...I think I'll try this one," she stammered.

Trying to get herself together, Nanami grabbed one of the swimsuits that was hanging in the dressing room. It was probably one she'd been planning on showing me as a gag at the very end: a swimsuit that was essentially tiny pieces of fabric connected by lengths of string. Its surface area was so small that I had to wonder why such a swimsuit was even being sold in a store.

The moment the swimsuit was brought between me and Nanami, time froze again. The one who broke the silence this time was Nanami. Quivering like a puppy, she looked up at me through tears.



“That’s not it!”

Her exclamation echoed within the quiet confines of the dressing room.





“So, what kind of a swimsuit did Nana end up getting?” Soichiro-san asked me.

“Actually, she told me she wanted to keep it a secret,” I said.

“You too? Ayumi said the exact same thing to me,” Oribe-san whined.

“Hatsu too. It doesn’t hurt to tell me though, if you know what I mean.”

For some reason, Soichiro-san seemed somewhat fidgety. Actually, Oribe-san seemed restless too. I supposed I did as well—though maybe I only felt that way because of the way the other two guys were behaving.

After that earlier incident, both Nanami and I—and, of course, the others too—had managed to pick out our swimsuits. And, as I’d just told Soichiro-san, I didn’t know which one Nanami had ended up choosing. Apparently, it was a surprise.

Nanami had tried on a lot of different swimsuits, including a one-piece, some bikinis, and even that one that had essentially been made up of strings. She tried them all on over her clothes, of course, but she’d let me see every single one she tried on.

Knowing that she’d chosen one of them, I could feel the tension mounting. At first, I’d been kind of disappointed about her keeping her clothes on, but even with them over her clothing, seeing her try on all those swimsuits had been quite the experience. Maybe because she wasn’t wearing them directly on her body, she seemed less hesitant to show me things that would have seemed particularly bold otherwise. The one made of strings wasn’t even one you could wear at the pool. I had to wonder why they even sold something like that.

As for my swimsuit, I had thought I would just pick on at random. No one cared what I was going to wear. Once I’d figured out my size, I wasn’t even going to try it on. However, Nanami had told me that was boring and actually ended up choosing something for me. They were blue ocean-print swimming trunks with a dark-to-light gradient. And now, we three guys were waiting for the girls.

“You’re surprisingly swole, Yo,” Soichiro-san remarked.

“Oh, it’s because I work out. I assumed as much for you, Soichiro-san, but you’re pretty muscular too, Oribe-san,” I replied.

“It’s just the diet I’m on. Actually, Ayumi isn’t a huge fan of it,” Oribe-san said.

Each one of us was waiting for our respective girlfriend to arrive—or to be more precise, we were waiting for our girlfriends to change into their swimsuits.

*Jeez, I’m actually getting nervous.* Even Soichiro-san and Oribe-san, who I assumed were used to stuff like this, seemed nervous. That was making me *extra* nervous. The three of us were standing next to each other, all wearing our swimsuits, being totally fidgety. That’s right—we were already at the pool. What was more, it wasn’t just an ordinary pool.

It was a night pool.

*Man, I never thought I’d come to a place like this.* I knew I was being kind of dramatic, but I couldn’t help it. Plus, even though I had thought of it as “a place like this,” I had no idea what a night pool actually was. From the sound of it, it was just a pool that was open at night. That wasn’t wrong, but it seemed that swimming wasn’t the main point here. The pool was specifically designed for hanging out and relaxing. It’s kind of difficult to explain.

Inside the pool, the lights were dimmed to create what I was pretty sure was called indirect lighting. The water was lit up in all different colors. The scene was dark but still flashy, as contradictory as that sounds.

I guess because it was dark, the lights seemed to stand out more. Apparently, it was a very popular place for posting on social media. It was trendy, whatever that meant. I kind of wondered whether high school students were allowed to come to a place like this, but apparently it wasn’t a problem at all. Of course, we were accompanied by adults, but groups of high school students seemed permitted as well.

It was quite the culture shock. Fortunately, with summer not yet in full swing, there weren’t that many people here. I saw some guys hitting on girls, but they seemed to be getting reprimanded by the staff on-site. At first, it seemed like a disorderly place, but a closer look would tell you that wasn’t entirely the case.

The three of us continued talking as we glanced around. The reason I don't remember much of our conversation might have been because of the shock of what came after. Suddenly, someone called out to us.

"Well, you three sure are looking fine tonight. Are you all waiting for someone?"

"Would you like to come hang out with us? We're all high schoolers looking for a good time!"

The voices, which were coming from behind us, sounded familiar. When we heard them, the three of us looked at each other and couldn't help smiling wryly. Naturally, it was our girlfriends who had purposefully come up to us as though they were hitting on us.

"You guys are super...late."

"Ayumi, I thought I told you not...to."

When Soichiro-san and Oribe-san turned around, the two guys trailed off. They both seemed completely taken by their girlfriends. I completely understood how they felt. I fell into shock when I turned around. There they were, standing in their bathing suits.

Otofuke-san was wearing a bold black bikini. It was held together by strings tied behind her neck and various other places. She embodied an overwhelming sense of danger and maturity. She was striking a pose with one hand on her hip, her other hand extended out toward us.

Kamoenai-san was wearing a bikini too, but in contrast to Otofuke-san's, her bikini was fluorescent. Even though we were in semidarkness, it was reflecting light, making her seem as though she were emitting light herself. She was wearing denim shorts, with the top of her bikini bottoms peeking out over them. She, too, was striking a pose, extending the hand opposite to Otofuke-san's out toward us.

The two of them sure were bold. Of course, they both had nice bodies. I assumed they also must have chosen swimsuits that really flattered their bodies, but since they were other people's girlfriends, I didn't want to stare too much.

*Wait, I can only see the two of them. Where's Nanami?*

"Here, Nanami. Move up to the front," Otofuke-san said.

"Come on, you've gotta try to hit on them too," Kamoenai-san added.

Just as I was wondering where she was, the two girls nudged Nanami forward. Since it was dark, I hadn't been able to see her behind her two friends.

Nanami came forward very, very slowly. *Nanami, your hands and feet aren't even in sync*, I thought. Moving like a stiff robot, she looked up at me and, raising both hands awkwardly, extended them out toward me.

"Um, m-mister, would you maybe like to spend a little time with me?" she stammered.

The oncoming force of her awkward pickup line was more destructive than anything I'd ever felt before. My eyes wide, I took in her figure from the top of her head down to her toes.

First of all, she was wearing a white bikini. White was an extremely pure and clean color, but in the form of a bikini, that purity communicated a sexiness so direct, it was nearly violent. Under that layer of white, there was also a layer of a smaller, blue bikini with its strings peeking through. It was one of the layered bikinis she'd tried on earlier that day.

Apparently, some bikinis were designed to look like they were layered, but this one had two actual layers. I hadn't even known swimsuits like that existed. To be honest, when she'd first told me about them, I'd wondered why anyone would bother to wear two layers of a swimsuit, but now I totally understood. The underlayer peeking through was extremely sexy.

Her hair was tied up in a ponytail with a single braid.

My girlfriend, who looked as I just described, was hitting on me. Well, no, she was doing it as a joke. Still, this was totally against the rules. *What is she? An angel? A little devil? Or is she some fairylike being of some sort? Just, wow.* The only thing I knew was that the girl before my eyes was so removed from reality that she almost seemed like some fantastic vision. Words like "pretty" and "beautiful" started swirling around my brain. What was I supposed to say?

“P-Please say something!” Nanami whimpered softly.

Released from my trance, I took her hands, which she was extending toward me. “If you’d have me, I’d love to. Nanami, that bathing suit looks great on you. You’re so cute, I was speechless.”

Bombarded by my words and smile, Nanami turned so red so fast that I almost thought I heard a soft *boom* accompany her transformation. Just as quickly, though, a bright smile spread across her face like a flower in full bloom. Seeing that smile was enough to make me melt on the spot and smile more broadly myself.

The dim pool lighting illuminated Nanami, making her look incredibly alluring. Maybe the fact that we were at a place so out of the ordinary made a difference to how everything felt.

Nanami giggled softly, moving to take a step toward me when she suddenly stopped. The hesitation only lasted for a moment, though, as she took another step closer. *Um, what just happened?* She must have picked up on the question in my mind, because she brushed her hand against mine and laughed shyly.

“Um, I wanted to give you a hug, but I realized I’m in a bathing suit, so you’d be touching me directly,” she murmured.

*I see. Yes, she’s absolutely right. As much as I love some skin-to-skin contact, we might end up in a situation we wouldn’t be able to turn back from.* Imagining it, I couldn’t help blushing.

“Your swimsuit looks good on you too, Yoshin. You look cool,” she said.

We stood facing each other for a while, complimenting each other’s swimsuit. I felt my smile melting into a lopsided mess. Was it possible for anyone to be given a compliment and not go all mushy? As I felt my head drifting into the clouds, I became aware that I was being looked at. I thought that it was Nanami, but I was wrong.

“Oh, wow. It’s kind of embarrassing to see the womanly side of your little sister,” Soichiro-san said.

“Um, are these two always like this?” Oribe-san asked.

*Shoot, I forgot. Everyone else is here too.*

Still holding hands, Nanami and I both turned toward the others. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were laughing, but Soichiro-san and Oribe-san's mouths were hanging open. *Oh no, are they totally disgusted?*

Seeing their boyfriends look so stunned, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san grinned wickedly, then proceeded to latch on to their respective boyfriends. *Whoa, they had no hesitation at all doing what Nanami was so reluctant to do just a minute ago.*

"Come on, don't you have something to say after seeing me in my sexy bikini?" Otofuke-san asked, aggressively clinging to Soichiro-san's arm.

"Hey, hey! Look here! I look good too, right? And this is how the bottoms look!" Kamoenai-san exclaimed, turning down the top of her shorts so that Oribe-san could see. *Uh, this isn't something I should be seeing, right?*

"Hatsu, aren't you showing a bit too much skin?" Soichiro-san asked.

"Ayumi, stop it. That's indecent. Even if you're wearing a bathing suit—no, *because* you're wearing a bathing suit, you shouldn't be doing such a thing," Oribe-san said.

"That's not what we wanna hear!" Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san shouted together, both puffing out their cheeks as they ignored their boyfriends' embarrassment. The two girls were behaving like children wanting to be spoiled, which was in total contrast to their usual, mature demeanors at school.

*If I told people at school about this, there's no way they'd believe me. Even I can't believe it, and I'm seeing this with my own eyes. They both seem like totally normal high school girls.*

As I watched the four of them have their noisy chat, I felt Nanami pinch my cheek. "Yoshin, you're staring too much. Do you like their swimsuits that much? Why don't you look at mine?" she asked.

"No, no. I was just surprised. I've never seen those two act like this before."

"Oh, I see. It's your first time, huh? That's how they usually are when they're with their boyfriends. It's pretty normal."



*So that's normal, huh?*

I continued watching the four of them until Soichiro-san and Oribe-san ran out of steam and started complimenting their girlfriends in a roundabout way. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san, seemingly satisfied, hugged their boyfriends' arms even tighter.

"Well then, shall we all go and do our own thing?" Otofuke-san said. "We can meet up somewhere later, but it might be better just to stay in pairs."

"Huh? But I wanna hang out with Yo more," Soichiro-san mumbled, at which point Otofuke-san pinched and twisted his ear with all her might. I supposed Otofuke-san wanted to be alone with him, while Soichiro-san was trying to hide his embarrassment for feeling the same way. At least, he'd been red since he'd caught sight of Otofuke-san in her swimsuit.

Kamoenai-san and Oribe-san were already getting touchy-feely right in front of us. Actually, maybe it was more accurate to say that Kamoenai-san was coming on really strong while Oribe-san was trying to figure out what to do about her.

*Uh, why is everyone just ignoring Kamoenai-san like that? Is this really okay? She's attaching herself to Oribe-san like she's some kind of monster. I'm impressed he's able to withstand it. I really respect his willpower.*

"I'm sorry; I'd really like to spend some time alone with Nanami today too, since we've come all this way," I said.

"See you, Oto-nii! Later, everyone!" Nanami called.

"Dammit! I guess I'll yield to Nana for today. Hey, both of you, if anyone weird shows up, call me, all right?!" Soichiro-san called back.

"Enjoy yourselves, both of— A-Ayumi! Stay! Stay! Calm down, please!" Oribe-san shrieked.

With everyone sending us off, Nanami and I turned around and began walking. When I glanced back over my shoulder, I saw Otofuke-san giving Soichiro-san a huge hug as though she were deeply moved by something.

I wondered if he'd finally paid her a proper compliment. She seemed really

happy. Kamoenai-san and Oribe-san, on the other hand, had already disappeared. *I wonder if those two are okay.* It probably wasn't my place to worry about them though, given that they'd been dating for so long already. First and foremost, I had to be a good escort for Nanami.

As I thought about it, I stole a glance in Nanami's direction. *Uh, who is this divine existence walking next to me? Is she a goddess? Did she just skip over becoming an angel and shoot straight up to being a goddess?* We really were lucky that it wasn't terribly crowded today. Otherwise, just her walking around would have drawn everyone's attention.

Although our bodies weren't touching, we held hands as we walked. Usually, we walked so close that our bodies almost touched, but today, we were keeping a safe distance. *Now that I think about it, regular clothes are highly effective at protecting our bodies.* I knew that was a silly observation, but think about it: since we weren't wearing clothes, our bare shoulders would be touching each other directly. Just by removing that thin piece of fabric, it had suddenly become difficult for us to even touch each other.

Okay, I'm about to say something that's the lowest of low, but I want to ask for everyone's forgiveness. Wait, who am I making excuses to? No, I mean, just walking next to Nanami was a lot of fun, and I couldn't help it if I found myself ogling my own girlfriend. That's why I really want to be forgiven for my next thought.

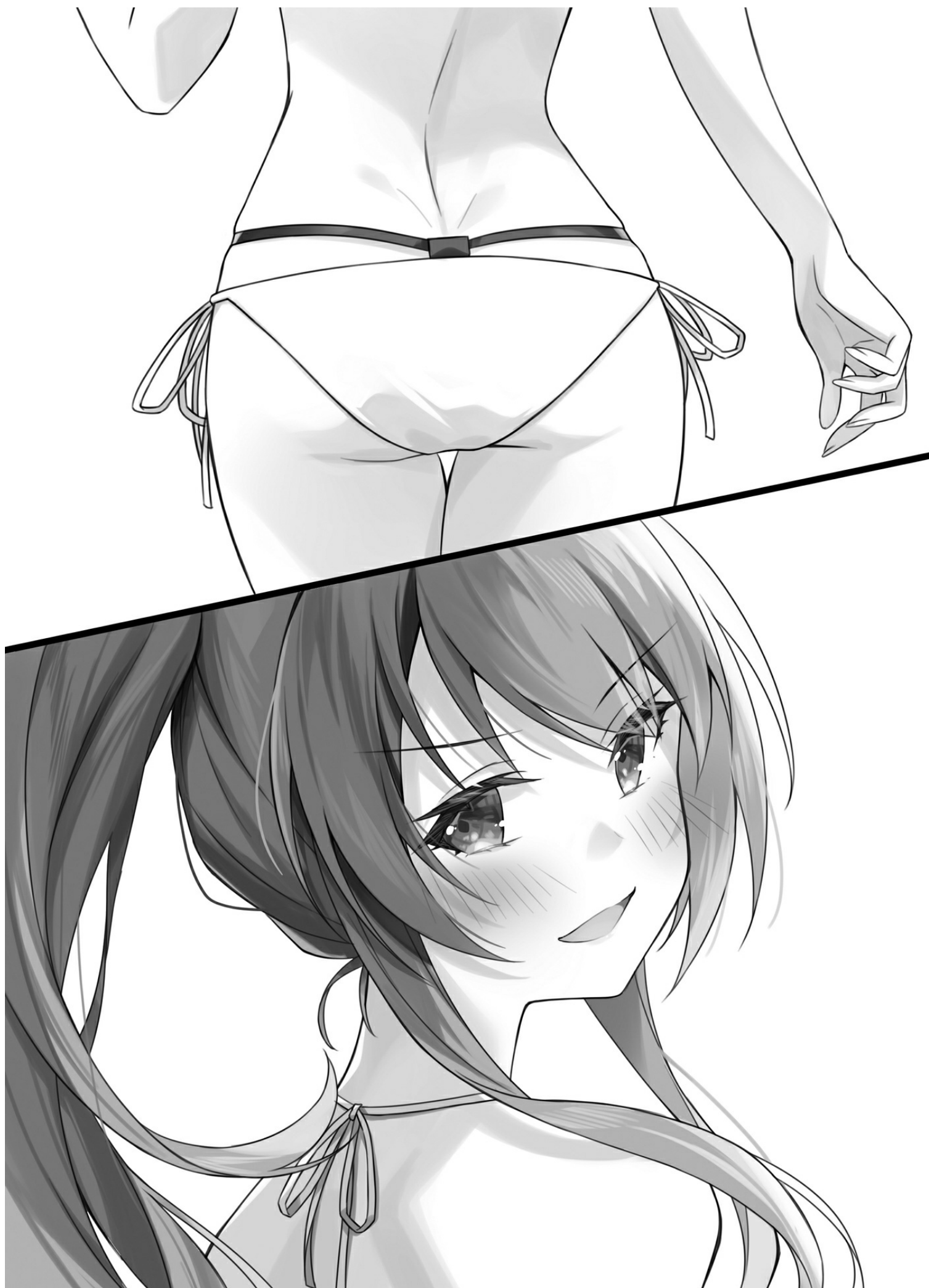
*As it turns out, it's not just boobs that bounce.*

I have to sincerely apologize. In my own defense, it was a complete coincidence that I'd made this discovery. While watching Nanami walking next to me, I'd been doing my best not to stare at her bouncing chest. That was why I'd been consciously trying to look at other things. However, that was when my gaze had ended up traveling *behind* her, and I'd been met with the shocking sight of her bouncing butt. Both her chest and her butt were perfectly supported by her swimsuit, so they weren't shaking that much. But there definitely was some bounce there.

I was really surprised. Ordinarily, I would have never *ever* noticed. I'd only made the discovery because we were in swimsuits. I'd learned something new

yet again. But while basking in the wonder of learning something new, I had failed to remember one thing: that women were able to accurately detect when men were looking at them and where they were looking.

“Well, well, just where do you think you’re looking?”



My body shuddered as Nanami poked me in the chest. Showing me a toothy grin, she drove the tip of her finger into me. *Wow, it actually feels kinda weird when she prods my skin directly.*

“Jeez, Yoshin. So you like butts just as much as you like boobs, huh? You’re such a perv,” she said.

“No, uh, that’s...” I stammered.

She knew exactly where I’d been looking. How was I supposed to help it? I’ve said it before, but my eyes just get drawn to moving objects. As I stood there awkwardly, unable to defend myself, Nanami laughed.

“I’m just kidding. You were trying not to look at my chest, right? You don’t have to worry so much. Besides, I’m in a bathing suit. You should make the most of it.”

She removed her finger from my chest and brought it to her own instead. When she pressed it into her breast, its gentle curve changed in shape. My heart skipped a beat. Nanami pressed on her breast a few more times before removing her finger. I felt so embarrassed that I had to cover my face with both hands. It seemed that the unusual environment as well as the liberating fact that she was wearing a bathing suit were making Nanami act more boldly than usual.

“Nanami, please don’t try to seduce me like that,” I murmured.

“You too, Yoshin.”

*Huh? I haven’t done anything to seduce her though. I couldn’t pull a cool guy move like that even if I tried. What’s she talking about?*

When I frowned slightly, Nanami covered her mouth as though she’d said something she wasn’t supposed to. After freezing in place for several moments, she finally uncovered her mouth. Then, like a child confessing to having done something bad, she murmured, “I mean, you’re not wearing a shirt either, Yoshin. I don’t even know where I’m supposed to look.”

Once she finished her confession, she covered her face with her hands again. Even in the semidarkness, I could still tell she was flushing bright red.

*Huh? Not wearing a shirt? I mean, yeah, I'm in a swimsuit, so of course I'm not wearing a shirt.* All of a sudden, though, I became embarrassed about my own body. However, it would be odd to try to cover myself.

"I...I guess that's just how it is, huh?! I mean, guys are usually shirtless at times like these, right?!" I said, trying to act like nothing was the matter. I couldn't tell if the smile I was attempting to plaster on my face, accompanied by my odd comment, was helping to improve the situation at all. *But yeah, I guess guys don't wear shirts when they go swimming, do they?*

"Y-Yeah, that's just how it is!" Nanami replied.

"Totally. That's why you can also look as much as you want, just to get used to it. In fact, you can even touch my chest if you want," I joked, opening my arms wide. At that moment, though, I thought I caught a glimmer in Nanami's eyes, or maybe they just looked like that because of the lighting.

"Are you sure?" she asked, stopping in her tracks. I stopped too and stared at her. For a moment, she looked kind of...*hopeful*, but then she immediately wiped the expression off her face.

*What should I do? I can't tell her I was just kidding.* I thought for sure that Nanami was going to touch my body right then and there, but I was wrong.

"Oh, hey, look! They have free float rentals over there! Do you wanna go get a floatie together?"

"Oh, uh, yeah. Let's."

Nanami ran over to the booth, towing me along with her. *A floatie, huh?* In my mind, a floatie was a doughnut-shaped ring that fit around the waist, but the ones for rent at the booth were quite different. They were large like boats, and you could ride on top of them. *Is this considered a floatie too?*

When I looked more closely, I saw that the pool was filled with floating balls of light. There were girls around them riding floaties and getting carried leisurely along by the flowing water. There was barely anyone actually in the water. No one was swimming. It seemed that people came to the night pool to relax rather than swim.

Nanami and I rented a floatie and set it on the surface of the pool. It was fairly

spacious and seemed sturdy enough for both of us to ride on it, but we could also fall off if we lost our balance.

When I stepped into the pool, Nanami came in with me. The water wasn't too cold; in fact, it was kind of warm and felt to be the perfect temperature. I realized then that it had been a while since I'd last worn a bathing suit and gotten into water. I decided to try to get onto the float next.

It was at that moment that something warm that wasn't the water touched the area around my stomach. That something trailed its warmth from my belly to my waist, from my waist to my back. The difference in temperature between the water and that soft, warm something started to make me dizzy. I mean, there was only one thing here that would give off that kind of warmth.

"Nanami?" I whispered.

That's right. After stepping into the water, Nanami had pressed herself against me and wrapped her arms around my waist. Without saying a word, she let her hands trail along from my belly up to the spot just below my rib cage. A tingling sensation numbed my body.

"You said I could touch you if I wanted, so let me do it just a little bit, okay?" she whispered. Her lips were right up against my ear. Maybe because she was whispering right into it, her breath caressed my ear and sent a shiver down my spine. Nanami seemed to be enjoying my reaction, because she stayed where she was and giggled.

Her body was attached to mine, and yet all I could focus on was my ear. The coolness of the water, the warmth of her body, her hands as they traveled across me... The only thing keeping me sane was the temperature of the water. "You're really muscular, so I thought your stomach might feel hard, but turns out it's kind of soft. I wonder if it'll get harder if you flex. Hey, flex for me a bit," she said.

"Um, like this?"

"Oh, it is hard! How cool. What a funny feeling."

Still talking into my ear, Nanami seemed to be enjoying herself. I was trying to stiffen my abs, but every time she talked, all strength seemed to escape me. It

felt like she was touching me for a long time, but it actually wasn't that long. It was only a matter of minutes before she detached her body from mine.

The moment she moved away from me, I was overcome by a feeling of both longing and relief. No matter how many times I experienced it, I couldn't get used to that sense of loss when the warmth of her skin left mine. Still, I was glad that she was no longer so close to me, just in terms of keeping control of myself.

After that, I tried to get onto the float in order to distract myself from how I was feeling...and slid right off it. *Well, of course. You can't get on a float when you're already in the water. But I thought that that's precisely what you're supposed to do.*

Having splashed back into the water, I tried to stand back up immediately. It really had been a while since I'd last been completely wet from head to toe. Nanami, meanwhile, was looking at me as though slightly shocked.

"I for sure thought you got into the water because you wanted me to touch you."

*Oh, that's why. I totally wasn't thinking that at all.*

"Um, I guess you can't get on this thing when you're already in the pool, huh? I had no idea," I confessed.

"You're such an airhead sometimes, Yoshin," Nanami said, laughing heartily. Seeing her like that, I had to laugh too. Once Nanami had laughed to her heart's content, she got out of the water. Her body, slick with water, appeared even sexier than usual. Small droplets trickled down her skin. A drop from her back slid down her thigh and dripped into the pool, making ripples on the surface.

"You get on it like this," she said.

I looked up at Nanami as she stood by the poolside. As I took in the entirety of her figure from my vantage point, she drew the float toward her and got onto it with ease. *I see, so that's how you do it.* I got out of the water to follow suit. Nanami sat on the float like a mermaid. After making sure I was out of the water, she winked and reached out to me. "Get over here," she said.

Nanami, wearing a bathing suit, was sitting on top of the float. That was all it



was, and yet the scene was like a work of art. The water droplets on her body were sliding down and making small pools on the surface of the float. Every time she moved, more droplets leaped up, wetting her body once more.

A luminous ball floating nearby was illuminating Nanami's face while her figure was reflected on the surface of the water. Seeing her smile lit up like that, I felt so moved that I almost cried. All sorts of feelings—that she was cute, that she was beautiful, that I was in love with her—all got mixed together, but that mix made me happier than ever.

Seeing my girlfriend call out to me, I took a step forward. Since it was my first time getting on something like this, I did so with some amount of trepidation—only to lose my balance on the float. It was only slightly, and lucky for me, the float didn't flip over. Instead, I landed in Nanami's arms.

With Nanami hugging me, we were practically forced to lie on top of each other. I slumped over her helplessly on the float. It was completely lame of me not to have the strength to hold myself up. I could feel both of our hearts beating. Her heart was pounding as hard as mine was, if not harder.

I'd had no idea that you could feel each other's heartbeat when touching each other this way. The sensation was so much more distinct than when we hugged each other with our clothes on. The cool water, the warmth of her skin, her heartbeat... Everything felt so vivid and clear.

When I raised my head slightly, I saw that Nanami's face was inches from mine. We both started laughing from the silliness of the situation. Then Nanami delivered her best pickup line yet.

"Why, hello there, hot stuff. Would you like to relax a little in the pool with me?" she asked much more smoothly and naturally than before, winking at me to boot. I responded to her with every bit of sincerity I could muster.

"If you'll have me, I'd love to."

## Interlude: Relaxing on the Water

The float bobbed up and down on the water. As we rode on it, it drifted along with the flow of the pool. It was a movement that we had no control over. Its gentle swaying, which made it feel like time was passing slowly, combined with our darkened surroundings made it feel like I was going to drift off to sleep. If I'd been alone, I probably would have.

Even though the float we were lounging on was large enough for Yoshin and me to ride side by side, we weren't sitting that way. He was really close to me though.

"This is super relaxing," I mumbled.

"Oh, um, yeah," Yoshin replied. I shifted and leaned my entire weight backward. When I also leaned my head back, I saw Yoshin's face inches from mine. He was sitting behind me on the float. I'd slid my body between his legs so that if he just reached his arms out slightly, he would easily have been able to embrace me.

My heart had pounded when he'd fallen on top of me earlier, but it had pounded even faster when he'd moved farther away. When Yoshin had fallen into the water, his hair had gotten completely soaked and stuck to his forehead. It must not have felt the best, because he'd swept it away from his forehead and slicked it back behind his head.

Seeing him with his hair like that, what with his muscular body and unassuming gesture, had made my heart skip a beat. I couldn't even look him in the eye. That was why I'd ended up sitting in this position until I'd calmed down.



*Shouldn't I feel more nervous in this position though?* It wasn't until after I'd sat here that the thought had occurred to me. It was too late by then, and it would have been weird to shift again at that point, so I'd ended up staying where I was.

*I wonder what everyone else is up to. Are they playing in the pool? Or are they chilling out somewhere else? I should ask them when we meet back up.*

"This is my first time coming to a night pool, but it's really fun," I said.

"Yeah. It feels different from a normal pool, but it's nice that you get to relax."

It was true. Plus there was another thing that made being at a night pool such a different experience.

I picked up my phone from the top of the float. It was protected by one of the waterproof cases that they rented out at the pool. Yoshin had his phone with him too. When he'd fallen into the water earlier, I'd thought for sure it would break—but thanks to the waterproof case, it had been totally fine. It was a good thing we'd picked some up. He'd gotten totally flustered when he'd remembered that he had his phone on him. It had been super adorable to see how happy he'd gotten when it had turned on without a hitch. I wondered why he'd forgotten about it though. Had something made him forget?

Anyway, the reason I brought this up was because being able to have our phones on us meant that we could take loads of pictures. In fact, I'd already taken a few selfies with Yoshin. I was particularly thrilled about being able to snap some with the two of us so close together. I'd be sure to take some of just Yoshin later and maybe ask a member of staff to take one of the two of us.

"Come to think of it, aren't you gonna take photos too, Yoshin?" I asked.

"Oh, um, can I?"

"What are you hesitating for? Is it 'cause I'm wearing a bikini? It's totally fine."

I felt Yoshin nod slightly behind me. There was no need for him to act so reserved. When I considered it more, though, I felt a little embarrassed by the

idea that there would be a photo of me in my bathing suit on his phone. Still, fighting back that embarrassment, I asked, “Should we try having a photo shoot in my room later? Maybe it won’t be so embarrassing if we’re both in swimsuits.”

“In your room? Don’t you think that would be even more dangerous?”

When I thought about it, I realized that he might be right. I didn’t know what it was—I mean, wearing swimsuits was just as revealing as wearing underwear, but somehow it was fine at the pool. It was strange. Still, maybe because I’d told him it was okay, he leaned in closer and whispered, “Let me get a pic of you later.” Hearing him whisper into my ear with that low voice of his, I felt a shiver run down my spine. Maybe I should ask him to talk to me like that every once in a while.

After that, Yoshin and I relaxed on our float for a while. We lay back, sat next to each other, and took selfies of us in all sorts of other positions. I’d never imagined hanging out at a pool could be so relaxing.

“I know that this is our first time at a night pool, but don’t you think it’d be fun to go on a date to a pool during the day too?” Yoshin asked.

I had to agree. While you could relax at a pool at night, you could be really active and play lots of games and stuff during the day. I liked the idea. It made me start thinking about how we could go together next time, just the two of us.

I ran my hands along Yoshin’s stomach. He was nicely toned and had a slight six-pack going on, but it was still soft to the touch. I was slightly envious of that tight stomach of his.

“I’m kind of worried that you’d get hit on during the day though. You have such a nice body,” I said.

“Nanami, that’s my line.”

I mean, Yoshin really did have a great body. It’s not like I had a muscle fetish or anything, but I definitely thought his body looked good.

Realizing that we were both worried about the other getting hit on, we looked at each other and laughed. As long as we made sure to stay together, it wouldn’t be an issue.

Now that we'd taken some time to relax, it seemed like a good time to move to a different spot, but Yoshin told me to stay on the float and jumped into the pool by himself. As I sat there wondering what had gotten into him, I felt the float I was sitting on begin to move, and I realized Yoshin was pulling the float to help us move faster. Unlike the steady movement from before, the brisk gliding on the water's surface made me feel kind of giddy. If I could have had it my way, I would have liked to experience it with him alongside me. Unfortunately, if we did that, we wouldn't have been able to move around, so that was a bit of a bummer.

When we finally reached the poolside, Yoshin climbed out of the water. Then he turned toward me and held out his hand. "Your hand, my lady," he said, looking slightly embarrassed. It was too bad he burst out laughing right after he'd said it. *That's just like him, though*, I thought fondly as I took his hand and stood.

Wobbling slightly, I stepped off the float and onto the poolside. Then we returned the float to where we'd borrowed it. Because we'd been floating around in the pool for so long, walking on solid ground felt really strange. Yoshin seemed to be feeling it too, because both of us were walking with awkward steps.

I assumed the strange feeling would go away eventually, but I decided to take advantage of it—by attaching myself to Yoshin and linking arms with him. However, because I did it so suddenly, Yoshin was caught by surprise and shivered a little. It was a pretty funny reaction, given that we'd practically been stuck to each other the whole time we'd been on the float.

"Hee hee, I'm a little wobbly on my feet. Can you hold me up?" I asked.

Looking slightly troubled, Yoshin scratched his cheek, but he shifted his arm without a word so that it was easier to hook mine around it. I readily accepted the invitation. It was pretty huge that, thanks to our time on the float, the embarrassment I'd felt about linking arms with him had completely washed away. The air felt a little colder now that we'd gotten out of the pool, so the warmth of his body felt even more pleasant.

We walked around for a while like that, our bodies close together. The space

was only dimly lit, but the way they'd done so was really pretty. I thought it would be even more beautiful if they had fireworks in the summer. I wondered if they ever had events like that.

We soon came across a place that looked like a bar. Apparently, you could have drinks by the poolside. I thought they might only have alcoholic drinks, but it seemed they served regular soft drinks too.

"I'm getting kind of thirsty. Do you mind if we stop and rest a bit?" Yoshin asked.

"Sounds good. Wow, I feel like an adult," I replied.

The joint only had a counter, which reminded me even more of the bars I'd seen on TV. Yoshin and I sat next to each other and ordered our drinks—soft drinks, of course.

Not long after, they were brought to us. It felt kind of strange to be having drinks in the dark like this. Our glasses, which had long straws, looked oddly mysterious and beautiful. I held my glass with both hands and tilted it toward Yoshin. When he saw it, he seemed to grasp my intention. He picked up his glass in one hand and touched it lightly to mine. The light, clear clink of the two glasses meeting rang out between us.

"Cheers," he said.

"Cheers!"

Now I *really* felt like an adult. Had I ever toasted like this? It might have been my first time.

I proceeded to sip my drink through the straw while Yoshin touched his lips to the rim of his glass. I must have been more thirsty than I realized, because the cool liquid slipping down my throat felt really good. Maybe because of the atmosphere of the bar, the drink tasted even better than usual.

Yoshin and I continued sitting there, talking about the various things that had happened that day—meeting Oto-nii and Shu-nii, having fun on our swimsuit shopping spree, cuddling on the float just a little while ago. Since I'd had so much fun sitting on the float while Yoshin pulled it, we even talked about going on a waterslide at a normal pool next time. That way we could both have fun

together.

Yoshin told me he was a little worried my bikini might fall off, so I ended up hitting him a few times out of embarrassment. He was right, though. At the normal pool, I should plan to wear a one-piece instead. Bikinis obviously made me look good, so I would have to find a one-piece that made me look as good as possible. I had to think about future expenses too, so maybe it was a good idea to look for a part-time job. After all, the swimsuit I was wearing today had been a gift.

As we continued talking, though, Yoshin mentioned that he actually wanted to try working part-time too. I began to think about how nice it would be if we could work together, but then I realized it would probably be best to work at different places, since otherwise I'd be flirting with him the whole time. We just kept talking about silly things like that. We were so engrossed in our conversation that we didn't even realize it was already past the time we'd decided to meet up with everyone else. Time sure does fly when you're having fun.

Before heading to our meeting spot, though, we both took detours to go to the restroom. That was the only time that he and I were separated.

I wonder why bad things are always bound to happen when you're having a good time. I thought I'd been acting carefully enough, but maybe I let my guard down. Then again, things like this couldn't really be prevented even if you were being careful.

"Hey there, miss! Are you by yourself tonight?"

"You wanna hang out with us? We'll treat you to whatever you want."

Two guys were hitting on me.

In the past, I'd often been with Hatsumi and Ayumi, and since I'd usually wear pretty modest attire, I would never get hit on even if my friends did. More recently, since I was always with Yoshin, I just wasn't getting hit on by people at all. That was why it had been a while since I'd been in a situation like this. In fact, at the time, I didn't even realize I was being hit on. To be perfectly honest, I didn't even notice them and ended up ignoring them.



The two guys kept on talking, though, which made me finally realize they were trying to talk to me, and I surprised myself by not feeling scared at all. Before, even if Hatsumi and Ayumi had been the ones getting hit on, I'd always been afraid of the guys trying to talk to them, and my friends had ended up having to protect me. I'd probably been so scared and quivering so much that I'd been handing them more opportunities to try to hit on me.

Still, just because I wasn't trembling didn't mean I didn't find it unpleasant. That feeling of having someone's eyes ogling your body... Even if it had been a while, I didn't miss it one bit. If anything, it was a sensation that I didn't want to experience at all.

I thought they'd probably give up if I continued to ignore them, but the way they were looking at me still felt gross. It was while I was trying to decide what to do that Yoshin came to my rescue.

Standing in front of the two guys as if to protect me, he asked, "Do you have business with my girlfriend?"

Met with his single question and determined attitude, the two guys seemed immediately intimidated. With tense smiles suddenly plastered to their faces, they walked away mumbling to themselves.

During that moment, Yoshin's back seemed so dependable and so masculine that it made my heart flutter. Even though he'd said so little, just the fact that he had stood up to protect me made me feel overjoyed. He turned toward me and smiled warmly as though trying to put me at ease.

"Are you okay, Nanami? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left you alone."

I shook my head slightly. *There's no way we could have expected that. Besides, we can't possibly go to the restroom together.*

"No, don't be. Thanks, Yoshin. This is the second time you've saved me from guys trying to hit on me like that," I said.

"Oh, you're right—though last time I did it in a way that was totally lame."

"Not at all. You were cool then, and you're cool now. I've fallen for you all over again."

I felt so moved that I ended up stepping forward to embrace him and even leaned in for a kiss. That was when Oto-nii, Shu-nii, Hatsumi, and Ayumi—who had come looking for us—caught sight of us.

“Uh, sorry for interrupting.”

Still, we couldn’t possibly continue under those circumstances, so I gave Yoshin a stealthy kiss of gratitude on the car ride home instead.

## Chapter 4: Love from Me to You

There's a saying that goes "practice makes perfect." It's a very famous saying, so there probably aren't many people who haven't heard it before. I feel like I've known the phrase for as long as I can remember. I must have heard it from someone, but it was so much a part of my consciousness that I couldn't even remember who said it. It's a very good saying, the kind I've always tried to live by.

Embarrassingly enough, though, I'd been misunderstanding the phrase until recently. Well, maybe I hadn't been misunderstanding it per se, but I'd thought it meant that no matter what the task was, it was important to keep doing it. I had thought that for anything new I was trying to pick up, be it playing a new game, cooking, or studying, the most important thing was to keep at it—to practice a certain stick-to-itiveness, if you will.

I realized recently, however, that my understanding of the saying failed to note the most important aspect: the results. For some reason, I had understood the phrase "practice makes perfect" to mean that perseverance itself was more important than the outcome. It's difficult to explain, but to speak frankly, I had believed that being able to continue doing something was laudable regardless of what the outcome was.

I mean, sure, putting in effort can be great, but what if that effort is wrongly directed? What if you simply keep going and going without any clear goals? Unfortunately, in those cases, no amount of effort would have any real significance. Hmm. It's a little harder to explain than I thought.

Well, I guess there's no point in going on about the meaning of the saying. What's important is that I'd been misinterpreting it this whole time and that I needed to figure out what I should do now that I'd realized my mistake.

Nanami and I had come to our own decisions about our relationship that had started with a dare. We'd also managed to explain the situation to the people around us. I'd heard that it's often difficult to end things smoothly, and in this

case, that was completely true. The many discussions we'd had about the issue only highlighted just how much Nanami was cared for by the people around her.

I'd thought that Nanami and I were finally able to restart our relationship. While there was neither arrogance nor complacency involved, I had to admit that I was kind of sitting on my laurels a bit. That was why when I talked to Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san's boyfriends, I was in for quite a shock. For example, I learned that Soichiro-san would do everything and anything for the sake of Otofuke-san, who was both his stepsister and his girlfriend. That was probably one of the reasons he was called the Siskon Champion.

Soichiro-san made no effort to hide just how much he cared about his stepsister. If anything, he went around announcing it everywhere he went. It seemed that he did that to be able to protect her if something were ever to happen to them. While he hadn't yet announced that he was *dating* his stepsister, when they did get married, he would probably make it public. He recognized that, when that time came, it would be difficult for some people to accept it. That was why he played the part of someone who really loved his stepsister—so that if their relationship were to be discovered before he had the chance to announce it, Otofuke-san's reputation wouldn't be damaged as much. He also seemed to genuinely want to show people how much he loved her.

Of course, Otofuke-san was aware of the situation as well. At first she'd been against his idea, but it seemed she'd eventually given in. With both of them having come to an agreement, they were taking steps toward their future together. Oribe-san was doing the same for his own. Apparently, Oribe-san worked in research and lived by himself. There were often times when he'd end up stuck at his office and unable to go home. I was told that, before he started dating Kamoenai-san, he really hadn't been taking care of himself very well. Once they started dating, though, everything had changed. They'd gone through all sorts of twists and turns before they'd started dating, but now they had a really strong relationship. When Oribe-san was busy with work, Kamoenai-san would do the housework for him and wait for him at home. Oribe-san, on the other hand, never failed to show his appreciation and spent

as much time with her as possible in order not to take her support for granted.

As far as I could tell, Oribe-san and Kamoenai-san had the ideal relationship. The problem lay with the people around them. Because Oribe-san had told me Kamoenai-san's parents hadn't accepted him as their daughter's partner yet, I at first assumed that his mom and dad were against the relationship. Although the couple had known each other since they were children, that didn't change the fact that there was a pretty big age gap between them. However, the situation was actually quite different. Apparently, Kamoenai-san's parents were worried that maybe their daughter wasn't good enough for Oribe-san; Oribe-san's parents, on the other hand, were unsure if their son was good enough for Kamoenai-san.

It sure was an interesting case, but the fact remained that the parents hadn't yet acknowledged the relationship. That was why Oribe-san had made a promise—he would not lay a finger on Kamoenai-san until the two of them were married. In that regard, their relationship so far had been very proper and pure. Oribe-san had thought that her parents would find some peace and comfort in that assurance.

Kamoenai-san, on the other hand, was scheming all sorts of ways to get him to lay his hands on her. I had to wonder if stuff like that was the reason her parents were so worried about the two of them in the first place. Even Soichiro-san was saying that the relationship between Oribe-san and Kamoenai-san was unpredictable for the people around them. I, however, still had something to learn from the fact that they were always acting with each other's well-being in mind—although I'd definitely stop Nanami if she tried to get me to make a move on her.

In any case, hearing their stories had made me realize I'd been failing to think about and act toward my future together with Nanami. I was starting to think that aimlessly dating as we were just wasn't enough.

"That's why I thought it might be important for me to think about the future," I explained.

"Aren't you being way too serious?!" Nanami cried.

Since I only had vague ideas about my future, I'd been thinking I should take a

cue from the other two boyfriends and try to come up with some kind of a life goal. When I'd thought about it, though, it had become clear that I had nothing specific in mind. I'd only just started thinking about all this a little while ago, after all. Nanami, meanwhile, seemed somewhat exasperated but also pleased.

"You think so?" I asked.

"Yes! You're taking all this way too seriously. I don't think there are that many high schoolers who think that far ahead while they date people."

"Well, that's probably true."

Even though I didn't know any other high school couples aside from those two, it wasn't hard to imagine that what I was saying didn't apply to most students our age. Still, I knew that I had a lot to take away from their attitudes toward their relationships. They thought about each other, talked with each other, and moved forward in life with each other. It all sounded so simple, and yet I had a feeling that they were all very difficult things to do.

"Do you not like it when I take things like that too seriously?" I asked.

"It's not that. I don't dislike it one bit. If anything, it makes me happy."

I felt relieved to hear her say that. If she had said that these new ideas of mine were too much for her, I'd have dropped it in an instant.

Nanami seemed to have more to think about, because she crossed her arms and leaned toward me. As I marveled at her flexibility, Nanami frowned while maintaining her position. "The way you're so serious like that kind of reminds me of Shu-nii. He tends to tie himself in knots thinking about things all by himself, so I'm glad you're willing to talk to me like this."

Nanami was continuing to talk while maintaining her impeccable sense of balance, with her body essentially diagonal to the ground. I wondered if it was difficult for her to hold a posture like that. Just then, I noticed her body was beginning to tremble. I thought that maybe she would straighten up, but she stayed where she was.

"I'm like him?" I said.

"Yeah. Shu-nii used to mention thinking about the future when he first started

going out with Ayumi.”

It felt kind of nice to be told I was similar to someone Nanami admired as an older brother figure. Normally, something like this might make a person jealous of the other guy, but given that Oribe-san had a girlfriend, I didn't feel that way at all.

Secretly relishing the comment, I looked over and saw that Nanami—whose body was still diagonal but now quivering all over—was literally about to fall down. Panicking, I shifted closer in order to support her. She seemed to have anticipated that, because as soon as I did, she fell into me. I opened my arms wide in order to break her fall, but because the rest of my body wasn't quite prepared, I ended up falling too.

*Nanami, you totally did this on purpose, didn't you?*

I mean, Nanami was now sitting on top of me, cheerily kicking her legs up and down. She was even running her hands along my chest, sending shivers up my spine.

“N-Nanami?!”

“Um, hang on just a sec,” she said before proceeding to run her hands all over my upper body as if to check for something. My chest, stomach, shoulders, waist... Her hands moved completely randomly, applying light pressure while feeling various parts of my body. When I twisted around because of the ticklish sensation, Nanami seemed to find it amusing, because she continued touching with even more gusto. I couldn't help laughing out loud.

“N-Nanami, wait! That tickles! Stop! Th-That...!”

“Heh heh, you mean here? You like this? Go on, surrender yourself to me!”

Nanami continued tickling me for some time. I don't know how long she kept at it. By the time she was finished with me, I was exhausted from all the laughing I'd done.

“Uh, I guess I overdid it,” she muttered, smiling awkwardly as she straddled me, a drop of nervous sweat trickling down the side of her face.

“Nanami!” I shouted, this time unable to claim that everything was fine as

long as she was having fun. Looking down at me as I panted heavily, Nanami touched her fingertip to the spot between my eyebrows. My gaze naturally focused on her fingertip.

“Do you feel more relaxed now?”

“Huh?”

She began to stroke the space gently. After running her finger along the area one last time, she pulled her finger away, then brought it up between her own brows. “You were so keyed up earlier that you were scrunching up your eyebrows. It makes me happy that you’re thinking about us so seriously, but if you get so worked up, you’re gonna get all tired.”

I slowly brought my own finger up to the space between my brows. Had I been frowning that much? I hadn’t even realized. Right now, they were back to normal, so I couldn’t tell what they’d looked like before. Nanami took my hand and gently pulled it toward her. She then brought it up to her own eyebrows. I’d never thought I’d touch a place like that. It wasn’t normally a place you would consider touching at all. It also didn’t seem like a place you’d like others to touch so easily.

I ended up moving my finger reflexively, causing me to stroke the spot. I felt only the smoothness of her skin on my fingertip. Nanami let out a slight moan.

“Since it’s about the two of us, we should just have fun. You know, just relax and take it easy,” she said.

*She must be right,* I thought. *I guess I have been kind of keyed up.* Nanami let go of my hand, and I let it fall to the floor. I then relaxed my whole body as if to let my entire weight sink into the floor.

“Maybe meeting two guys who were like your older brothers made me anxious without me even realizing it,” I said.

“I see. You were anxious, huh?”

“Yeah. Maybe that’s where the whole talk about plans for the future thing came from too.”

“But, Yoshin, those two are adults. They see things differently from us, so



there's no need for you to think like they do. We're still in high school, after all."

"Yeah, you're probably right. I can't tell if I wanna hurry up and become an adult or not," I mumbled.

"Ha ha, then let's take it slow. We'll take our time with it," she replied.

Until now, I'd been making a conscious effort to make myself worthy of Nanami and to be the kind of person who wouldn't be embarrassed standing next to her. Being too forward or rushing things probably wouldn't be much help.

"Besides, I don't think the whole 'practice makes perfect' thing is wrong," she added.

"What?" I asked, raising my head slightly.

Nanami smiled down at me softly and touched my chest with both hands. I immediately braced myself, thinking she was going to tickle me again, but she didn't do that. She was just touching me.

"Even if we aren't after perfection, I still think it's amazing to be able to get better at something," she said.

"You think so?"

She answered with a beaming smile. Just like that, Nanami had come up with a solution to the problem I'd been struggling with. Her affirmation made my heart feel lighter. She sure had encouraged me a lot today.

Nanami nodded several times, patting me on the head in the process. It felt slightly strange that she was doing all this while continuing to straddle my waist.

*What exactly do we look like we're doing right now? If someone saw us, would it look like I'm being taken advantage of?*

"You're treating me like a kid," I muttered.

"Not at all. Oh, but I've heard that even adults like to be spoiled like kids once in a while, so it's totally fine. Isn't there, like, internet slang for acting like a baby?" she asked.

"Wait, where did you learn something like that?!" I shouted, jerking my torso

up like I was doing a sit-up. *Oh, shoot. Maybe that wasn't such a good idea.*

I'd done so reflexively, having forgotten the fact that Nanami was straddling my waist and was thus in the line of fire of my upper body. I immediately placed my hands on her back so that she wouldn't fall backwards, killing the momentum of my upper body so that my head wouldn't smash into hers. Her face was so close to mine that our noses almost touched. If I'd kept on going, maybe our faces would have smashed into each other.

Nanami was wide-eyed in shock at my sudden movement. Relieved that I hadn't slammed into her face, I rested my chin on her shoulder and exhaled deeply. At the same time, Nanami jumped slightly.

"U-Um, it's just something that Peach-chan told me about the other day," she stammered.

*Peach-san?! Just what exactly do you think you're teaching Nanami?! And why would you tell her about wanting to act like a baby?! What do you want to do with her?!*

As I sat there, thoroughly disturbed, I heard Nanami breathing heavily. She then patted me on the back, making me jump this time.

"Don't say weird things like that. It's bad for my heart," I said.

"Aha ha. Yoshin, if you ever want to act like a baby with me, don't ever hesitate to say it, okay?" she said, laughing happily as she patted me on the back once again.



"Sooo, do you just want a cut today? We can do a bit of color if you want."

"Oh, no, just a cut is fine. It's against school rules to dye my hair, even though they never actually say anything. Still, I don't think I'd look good with my hair dyed."

"Well, I don't think that's true. If you ever wanna try it out, let me know, okay? I'll give you a good deal."

"Thanks, Toru-san. If I change my mind, I'll be sure to let you know."

Today I was at a hair salon with Nanami. It had been a while since I'd last seen

Toru-san. Nanami had told me she wanted to get a cut and color, as well as a perm. Or was it some kind of treatment? I didn't really have a clue, but apparently she wanted to get all of those things. She'd also said that if she was going to get them, she wanted to do her hair in a style that I preferred.

As for me, as long as it was Nanami and she didn't go for anything too crazy, I'd like any hairstyle she chose. Apparently, she really wanted to get my opinion, though, which was why I was sitting there, flipping through an unfamiliar fashion magazine to learn things about hairstyles and to talk with Nanami about what I thought might look good on her. It was pretty fun; however, the more we continued our conversation, the more I realized Nanami was willing to listen to just about every suggestion I had.

When I remarked that she might look good with a bit of a wave in her hair around her neckline, she told me she'd try it out. When I mentioned that she might look nice with darker hair rather than light, she said she would dye it dark. I tried telling her that she should style her hair the way she liked it, but she responded excitedly that she wanted to incorporate my preferences instead. It felt like she was trying to become my ideal type of girl. I couldn't help feeling both guilty about and oddly elated by her endeavor.

I kind of had this weird feeling that if she surrendered to my desires too much, I might get too used to it. That feeling was almost too intoxicating and definitely dangerous. At that moment, I recalled what Baron-san had said before—that overdoing it might feel controlling for her.

*I have to be more careful not to have that kind of a dynamic between us,* I reminded myself. I also shared with Nanami what was on my mind. It might have ruined her momentum, but that was better than me sitting there agonizing over it alone.

Nanami seemed slightly embarrassed when I pointed out the situation, but she responded happily and also somewhat emotionally. "Hmm. So I guess you're starting to get more possessive than before, huh?"

"Wait, why do you seem so thrilled? Do *you* think I'm being possessive?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure. I just don't think you've ever said anything like that to me before. Like, you always tend to respect what I want and stuff."

“Um, did it make you uncomfortable? I mean, was I trying to control you too much, or was I being too possessive?”

“No, not at all. I think it’s kind of cute, actually. And besides...” Nanami trailed off, pausing for a moment. Then, as if she were trying to show me just how carefree she was about this whole discussion, she brought her index finger to her lips. “If it’s for you, then I don’t mind becoming whatever type of girl you want me to be,” she finished, tilting her head slightly and donning an alluring smile.

My cheeks flushed, and my heart skipped a beat before immediately pounding in my chest. When she saw my reaction, Nanami—with her index finger still pressed against her lips—began quivering and turning even redder than I was. We looked at each other, both of us red in the face, and suddenly burst out laughing.

“Nanami, you don’t have to force yourself to say things like that.”

“No, no! I mean, I know it was a bit much, but I wasn’t forcing myself at all! It was totally for real! If it’s for you, then I’m up for anything!”

Despite what she said, it was obvious that she was trying too hard. I couldn’t help laughing at her adorable self-destructive behavior. Nanami was pouting a little, but she was smiling nonetheless.

Once we’d laughed to our hearts’ content, we’d made two appointments so that we could pay Toru-san a visit at his hair salon. My hair had grown out a bit too, and I wanted Toru-san to be the one to cut it. That, and I just wanted to see him, since it had been a while.

And that was how we’d gotten to where we were now.

I hadn’t been expecting to be told that I should consider dying my hair. Maybe it was normal nowadays to do so, but I’d never imagined it for myself. I didn’t have the guts for things like that and couldn’t quite bring myself to take the leap. Plus, like I’d just told Toru-san, I didn’t think I’d look good with my hair dyed. Heck, I was even afraid of getting my ears pierced. I didn’t know how Nanami was capable of getting a hole punched in her ear.

Those were the thoughts that were swirling in my head as I sat there getting a

simple haircut from Toru-san. Nanami, meanwhile, was sitting next to me while she was getting her hair permed into waves. I wondered if this could be called a hair-salon date even though I'd never heard of such a thing. Watching Nanami made me realize just how much work it was for women when they came to a hair salon. Toru-san had only started cutting my hair once Nanami had entered her phase of simply sitting and waiting.

Right now, Nanami—with her hair in rollers—was hooked up to some kind of a machine. There were also several other circular machines placed around her. I didn't know if that was the right way to describe them, but the scene looked kind of futuristic and cool. How were machines at hair salons so awesome-looking? I felt like I was looking at something out of a sci-fi movie. *Maybe I do want to have my head hooked up to a machine like that,* I thought.

"Yoshin, it's a little embarrassing when you keep staring at me like that. I'm not sure how I feel about people seeing me like this in general," Nanami murmured, turning red and holding the magazine in her hands up to her face to hide from me.

I'd been staring because the machine looked cool, but that must have been rude of me.

"Oh, sorry, sorry. I just thought being hooked up to all those things looked really cool," I said.

"You think this is cool? I guess I don't really understand what guys think about stuff like that. Hey, Toru-san, do you think this looks cool too?" she asked.

"Well, I suppose it could look cool to some boys. I'm used to seeing them, since I use them all the time for work," Toru-san replied, smiling as he took his scissors to my hair. The movement of his hands was as dexterous as ever.

That reminds me, last time he'd given me a haircut for free because I'd volunteered as a hair model. I wondered how much it would cost this time. I'd only ever gotten cheap, ten-dollar haircuts, so I hadn't even thought to look up how much it might cost. *Well, it should be fine,* I thought. *I've brought a good amount of cash with me.*

"Yoshin-kun, if you're interested, do you want to try getting your hair permed sometime?" Toru-san suggested. "I've already started cutting it today, so we'll

have to wait until you let it grow out a bit first, but I bet you'll look great."

"Me, getting my hair permed?" I asked.

"Oh, I might actually wanna see that. I bet you'd look good," Nanami said, looking totally entranced. Unfortunately, I couldn't bring myself to think I would look good at all—though I guess I was willing to try it if it was going to make Nanami happy. That said, given that my grades were bad, the teachers would probably take issue if I suddenly did something like that. The school only let you get away with things like that if you were a good student.

Not knowing what was going on in my head, Nanami was already imagining me with my hair permed, and looking ecstatic about the image she'd formed in her mind. She looked adorable—the decision was already a done deal to her.

As I sat there trying to decide what to do, Toru-san made another suggestion. "Come to think of it, you two are heading into summer break soon, aren't you? How about you try it out during the break?"

"During the break? Wait, Toru-san, how did you know that we're starting summer break soon?" I asked.

"How? Why, because Hatsumi-chan works here part-time, after all," he explained.

*Oh, right. Otofuke-san works here. Then of course he'd know. With one question resolved, a second one immediately popped into my brain. What does he mean by trying out a perm just during the break?*

"You mean like a summer break makeover? Isn't that kind of embarrassing though? Like, you show up to school after the vacation ends, and you've got your hair dyed and permed and everything," I mumbled, imagining what it would be like if I showed up to school like that myself. To think that I would go through all that just to have no one react to it at all sent shivers down my spine.

*Oh, dang. It seems awful to get a makeover and then have no one say anything about it.*

"It'll be fine! At the very least, Hatsumi and Ayumi and I will definitely react," Nanami said, smiling reassuringly.

*True, as long as Nanami's there, at least someone will say something. But still, I don't know...*

"Oh, I didn't mean to mislead you. I meant that you can get your makeover just during the break," Toru-san said, smiling awkwardly.

*Just during? How is that possible?* I tilted my head slightly. Well, to be more precise, Toru-san was tilting my head so that he could get a better angle on my hair, but the posture just so happened to perfectly capture my current state of mind.

Toru-san continued by explaining, "So, for example, you can try getting a slight perm just before the start of the break and maybe try dying just the tips of your hair to see what it's like. Then around the time break ends, you can get a quick trim, and the perm will probably have grown out by then too."

*Wow, I didn't even know that was an option. What an eye-opener.* It seemed like a trick of the trade or even a kind of a cheat—but it was true that if it was just during the break, then I wouldn't really see anyone, and I wouldn't be going to school either. If I ran into a teacher outside of school, they might say something, but the possibility of that seemed pretty low. Plus if the encounter was outside of school, they probably wouldn't say much about my hair anyway.

"If you did that, then I'd have even more business, and everyone wins," Toru-san said, laughing slightly. "And I'll give you a good deal, of course."

*Wow, Toru-san is ever the businessman.* Between Nanami's desire and Toru-san's suggestion, I had to admit that I was getting swayed.

"What a great idea!" Nanami exclaimed. "That way, the school can't say anything about it, and if it's just during the vacation, I'd get to be the only one who sees him like that!"

"Nanami, you need to stop being so possessive. And don't flirt with him so much at the salon. I'm getting jealous."

The remark came from Otofuke-san, who was holding a tray of tea and snacks in her hands. Maybe she was about to go on break.

"Oh, Hatsumi! I didn't realize you were here," Nanami said.

“Of course I’m here. I’m working. Here you go—I brought you tea and some goodies,” Otofuke-san replied.

“Oooh, thanks! Cookies today, huh? Cool. The ones from this store are so good.”

*Wait, you get served tea and snacks at a hair salon? Wow, what great service.* I watched as Nanami happily brought a cookie to her lips.

“I brought some for you too, but I guess you’re in the middle of getting your haircut, huh? Do you want me to feed you?” Otofuke-san asked me, grinning devilishly. As I smiled wryly and was about to respond, I heard an unfamiliar voice coming from behind her.

“Hatsumi?”

It was Nanami, her voice so low that it sounded like it was coming from the depths from hell. She was also glaring at Otofuke-san with a sharpness in her eyes that I’d never seen before.

“I’m just kidding! Don’t look so scary—you ruin your lovely face when you do that! Come on, Nanami, smile! Misumai doesn’t like it either when you look so scary like that. Right, Misumai?” Otofuke-san asked.

“Oh, no, she looks beautiful even when she’s like that. The sharp look in her eyes coupled with the low voice is super cool, and the contrast between that and her usual cuteness is really something else,” I declared.

As I said it, Nanami’s sharp gaze turned soft and bashful. *What a shame. I kind of wanted to see more of that cool side of hers. Oh, well.*

“I’d love to have some later, though. Do you think you can put them there for me, Otofuke-san?” I asked.

“What the hell’s the matter with you two?” Otofuke-san muttered as she placed the cookies in front of me and returned to work.

“Gosh, I feel like the atmosphere in this shop got so much sweeter all of a sudden, or am I just imagining it?” Toru-san said, smiling as he was finishing up my haircut. “So, do you two have any plans for after this?” he asked.

“Oh, we don’t have anything specific going on. We were just talking about



walking around town a bit,” I replied.

“In that case, since you’ll be finished first, would you mind waiting in the staff room until Nanami-chan’s finished?”

“If that’s okay with you, then sure. Thank you,” I responded, grateful for the offer. There were already several women in the waiting area, and I was feeling like I might be a bother being the only guy there. Plus I wasn’t sure I would feel at ease being there by myself.

“Of course that’s okay! You can look forward to it!” Toru-san exclaimed.

*Huh? Look forward to what?* Toru-san’s response made me pause, but I gave in to the comfort of getting my hair shampooed and failed to think more about his remark.

Once I was done with my haircut, Otofuke-san led me toward the staff room in the back of the store. Toru-san had told me to wait there, but I found myself starting to feel nervous about waiting in an unfamiliar place. Being in a fancy place also made me feel uneasy. Was it just me? I supposed I just felt out of place. Even the hallway here seemed really fancy to me. I felt like I’d wandered into a different world somehow. Was this how protagonists who got reincarnated or transported to other worlds felt? I would never be a protagonist in anything; I’d only be one of the background characters at best.

The room I was shown to was tidy, spacious, and decorated all in white.

“I’ll go get you some tea. You can take a seat on the sofa there and relax,” Otofuke-san said.

“Oh, please, don’t mind me,” I mumbled.

Once left alone, I gazed around nervously, studying the unfamiliar room. There was a full-length mirror on one side and a large piece of white fabric hanging down from the ceiling. Equipment I’d never seen before lined the shelves on the walls.

The room didn’t feel cramped. If anything, it was actually pretty large. Maybe it was all the white wallpaper making the place feel larger than it really was.

*Jeez, I feel kind of lonely. I wish Nanami would finish up soon.*

They'd called this place a staff room, but if that were the case, wouldn't the staff come in to take breaks? That wasn't the feel I was getting from the room. I felt like I'd seen something like this before. This place wasn't so much a staff room in a hair salon. It seemed more like...

"A photo studio?" I murmured.

*That's right. It's a studio.* The room looked really stylish, but it was just like the studios that appeared in random making-of videos I'd seen before, what with the fabric and the setup of the room. There were no cameras anywhere, though. When I thought about that, I found myself feeling less nervous. Maybe it was out of relief that the room was similar to a place I knew slightly rather than a completely unfamiliar one. I plopped down on the sofa and sighed deeply. Once I'd relaxed slightly, a new question entered my mind.

*Why was I shown to a studio, then?*

Perhaps they'd done it so that I wouldn't have to run into the other salon staff. That was thoughtful of them, given that I knew only Toru-san and Otofuke-san. Even if I did run into other people, I wasn't confident that I'd be able to hold a conversation with them. What concerned me even more, though, was Toru-san's comment earlier about me looking forward to it. I wondered if his remark had something to do with the fact that I'd been brought here.

*Maybe they're gonna take a picture of me and Nanami for us—you know, as a keepsake, since we've both had our hair cut and styled and everything.*

That had to be overthinking it though. This room probably happened to be the only one that was open.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I've got tea and cookies here, so you can munch on them while you wait. Nanami will probably finish in about an hour or two," Otofuke-san said as she returned.

"Whoa. I'd heard that women take a while to get ready, but I didn't realize it would take that long," I replied. The ten-dollar haircuts I'd gotten before hadn't even taken half an hour. It really must be hard for women to go through their beauty routines.

"Well, you know, there's all sorts of other things for her to do too. Girls just

want to look as pretty as they can in front of the guys they like. You can forgive her for that, right?”

“If she’s doing it for me, then of course that’s totally fine, and I can more than understand. I’m just worried she might get tired.”

“Jeez, it’s stuff like that that makes you something else. Even though aniki’s willing to come with me to the salon, he complains that I take too long and just ends up waiting somewhere else.”

“But Soichiro-san at least comes with you, right? He must be a good boyfriend, then. He’s a martial artist *and* your stepbrother. That’s pretty cool.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. We went through a lot of stuff together, but our parents are finally cool with our relationship. Once I finish high school, we’re planning to live together,” Otofuke-san said, blushing and flashing a shy smile.

Hearing that they were already planning to live together made me feel kind of jealous, though maybe the fact that he was her stepbrother made it easier for them to make plans like that.

“In any case, just sit back and wait for Nanami to make an appearance. I’m gonna get back to work,” Otofuke-san said.

“Oh, right. Sorry to keep you. Good luck with work.”

Smiling brightly, Otofuke-san waved and left the room. Alone again in a room filled with silence, I contemplated how to while away the time as I waited. *Maybe I should play my game on my phone*, I thought to myself, opening up the chat app to see if Baron-san and others were logged in. *Yup, loads of them are here*. Since I was at the salon, I decided to keep my phone on mute and chat via text.

**Baron:** Oh? Aren’t you on a date with Shichimi-chan today, Canyon-kun?

**Canyon:** I’m actually at a hair salon now, waiting for her. I was told it’d be another hour or two, so I thought I could hang out here for a bit.

**Baron:** Ah, I see. Of course! Dang... Dating, studying, playing games... High schoolers sure are busy.

**Canyon:** Are you okay on time yourself? I know you’re living apart from your wife for work now, but do you ever get to go see her?

**Baron:** Oh, no worries about that. My wife actually came to visit me last night. We hadn't seen each other in a while, so she's still sleeping.

I sensed a hidden, mature meaning behind his statement, but I decided not to pursue the matter. It was clear that even if I did, he'd only dodge my questions. At least, that's what I thought.

**Baron:** Hey, listen to this, Canyon-kun! When my wife came to see me yesterday, she gave me a huge hug as soon as she got here. She was acting completely head over heels for me! She was so cute and I was so happy that I had no idea what was going on! I just hugged her back and lifted her up in a princess carry!

Baron-san must have been super happy, because as we played the game, he had started talking about his wife, whom he hadn't seen in a long time. That, of course, started a flood. He shared so much about just how fond he was of her that I started getting embarrassed just listening to him. It was rare for Baron-san to be so forthcoming with his affections. She must have made him really happy.

He wasn't going into details, but it was clear that the two of them had spent a very *intimate* evening together, in various meanings of the word.

**Baron:** Gosh, it was so nice to get to eat her cooking after so long. To be honest, I'd been so jealous of the fact that the two of you are always cooking meals for each other.

**Canyon:** You don't cook, Baron-san?

**Baron:** I do, but it's just simple stuff. I'm planning to make breakfast today, though. Once she wakes up, we can have it together.

And on and on it went. Baron-san's report and declarations of love for his wife came at me like a tidal wave. As I sat there, I finally realized that I was getting to be on the listening end for a change. Even after that, I got to hear him talk more about what it was like being part of a married couple.

**Baron:** I'm thinking of maybe changing jobs. My current job has me moving around too much. I've been to so many places already.

**Canyon:** Wow, really?

**Baron:** Yeah, where I work, they really don't hesitate to send you all over the place. Though I guess compared to my friends who get sent everywhere from Hokkaido to Okinawa, I don't have it so bad.

**Canyon:** Wow, that really does sound rough.

Just a moment ago, Baron-san had described high schoolers as being busy, but it seemed that he was even busier than I was. Having given me a glimpse at just how difficult and harsh the life of an adult could be, Baron-san gave me some advice.

**Baron:** If you want to stay with your girlfriend for a long time, I recommend getting a job where you aren't forced to relocate frequently.

Just yesterday, too, I'd had the chance to contemplate my future. Given Otofuke-san and Soichiro-san's relationship, the people around me were definitely taking their futures seriously. Otofuke-san's mention of living together with Soichiro-san was probably a part of that too. It did sound rough to be in a job that required you to move around a lot though. My parents went on a lot of business trips, but that wasn't as bad as having to move. They only ever left for about a month at the very longest; if it was a short trip, it would only be for a few days.

It was something to think about when I eventually looked for a job. Still, people often said that you never could tell things like that until you started working for a company.

*Wow, I'm totally thinking about this with the assumption that I'll still be with Nanami then. I mean, I guess that's okay. I just have to be careful not to demand too much of her from my end.*

As I continued chatting and playing my game, there came a knock at the door. *Oh, is Nanami done getting ready?* I wondered.

**Canyon:** Sorry, Baron-san. It seems that Nanami's all finished up, so I think I'll excuse myself.

**Baron:** Gotcha. I think I hear my wife making her waking up sounds, so I'll go check on her. Even that sounds cute, you know?!

I wanted to ask him if his wife was a cat or something, but I kept my mouth shut and logged out of the game.

“Come in! Wait, am I allowed to say that? Oh, well. Yes, please come on in!” I called.

“Hey there, Yoshin-kun! Nanami-chan’s all done now. Thanks so much for waiting,” Toru-san said as he opened the door and entered the room.

No, wait. It wasn’t just Toru-san. He was accompanied by several of his staff members. Nanami wasn’t anywhere to be seen though. *Wait, I thought he said she’d finished!*

“Now then, it’s time for the finishing touches. Have at him, everyone!”

“Roger that, boss!”

*Excuse me?*

At Toru-san’s ominous command, everyone started toward me at full force. Before I could say anything, I was surrounded by the villain’s minions.

“Huh?! Wait a minute! What? No, wait, why are you trying to take off my clothes?!” I found myself shouting.

“Be quiet and strip! Don’t worry; it’s not scary! And, oh my, you may be thin, but you’ve got some nice muscles. What a sight for sore eyes.”

“Leave the hair to me. Let’s do without the wig and just go with your natural hair.”

“Hee hee hee...muscles on a high school boy... I like! You’ve got abs too. I only have the boss to thank. Don’t worry; we’re not gonna strip you naked. Just change into these clothes here.”

*Whoa, whoa, whoa! Why are all the people working here so dramatic?!*

They weren’t groping me or anything, but they were certainly—and very precisely—taking off my clothes. Surrounded by staff, I changed into the clothes that they’d told me to wear. They then had me sit down in a chair and proceeded to style my hair.

Still unable to process what was happening to me, I let them do as they pleased. I guess I was just obeying them because a part of me was still in shock.

*Why clothes? Wait, what clothes? Plus I just got my hair cut a little while ago. More importantly, what happened to Nanami?* Questions popped into my head and disappeared just as quickly. In the meantime, the staff completed their work at breakneck speed. By the time I realized what had happened, I'd changed into a completely different outfit from before. The clothes were unfamiliar to me and mostly white.

*Wait, I thought they looked unfamiliar, but maybe I have seen this attire before. This is a suit—no, a tuxedo! Uh, why am I wearing a tuxedo?*

"Oh my. You look good! And the size is perfect. You really do look quite handsome," Toru-san said.

"Wait, uh, Toru-san, can you please explain what's going on here?"

"Nanami-chan! We're all ready in here, so you can come on in!"

"Wait, you're just gonna ignore me? I'm not sure that's..."

My voice of protest trailed off as I caught sight of Nanami entering the room. There was no spotlight focused on the spot. The lighting in the room was normal, and my eyes hadn't gone haywire either. For me, though, the spot where she stood appeared to be bathed in light. Like an insect attracted to the light, I couldn't take my eyes away. Even more so than when I'd seen paintings during a school trip to an art museum, the view before my eyes shook me to the core.

There stood Nanami, wearing a dress that was white just like my tuxedo. The dress used ample amounts of lace but boldly showed off her shoulders and the area around her collarbone. What was more, while I knew that this seemed contradictory, the dress still managed to retain a sense of purity. Her hair, now with a slight wave, fell over her right shoulder toward her collarbone. The skirt was just long enough to touch the floor and flared out toward the hem. It made her look like a pure-white flower blossoming on the surface of a lake.

She wasn't wearing accessories of any kind. It was just the dress and Nanami herself creating a delicately balanced work of art. I stared at her, forgetting to

breathe. Once I was released from the illusion of having had my respiratory functions taken away, I finally took a deep breath. Then, seeing Nanami again, I realized that she looked like a bride.

*A bride? Whose? Mine?*

When I looked more closely, I saw Nanami gazing up at me, her cheeks flushed slightly. As our eyes met, I noticed she seemed to be entranced by a kind of ecstasy as well. I felt a spark between us in that moment.

“You’re beautiful,” I muttered, the words reverberating throughout the hushed room. Everyone else around me, too, seemed to have been stunned into speechlessness by Nanami’s beauty.

There was no response to my comment for several moments. Nanami and I just stood there, seeing our own reflections in each other’s eyes.

“Thanks. You look handsome too, Yoshin,” Nanami replied slowly, smiling at my comment. I took in her words as slowly as she’d taken in mine. She continued to pay me another compliment, blushing even harder. I, on the other hand, was overcome more with the desire to touch her than with gratitude for her kind words.

I started to walk toward her, slowly, carefully. Nanami appeared to me as though she would grow farther away with every step I took. Was this how it felt to encounter a mirage in the desert? I couldn’t be sure if the dreamlike vision in front of me was in fact reality.

I drew closer to her, one step at a time. Nanami waited for me in silence. When I finally reached her, I felt like I’d been walking for days.





*I finally made it.* As soon as I thought that, my hands were touching her cheeks. Nanami trembled ever so slightly at the touch, but she nonetheless took my hands. I hadn't noticed before, but she was wearing white gloves. I felt the smoothness of the silk on my fingers.

No longer caring what was actually going on, I placed my hands on Nanami's shoulders and was about to bring my face closer to hers—when I finally noticed the people standing behind her. Or rather, I noticed multiple pairs of eyes lit up with anticipation. Although I had been momentarily transported to a fantasy world, I was immediately pulled back to reality. Panicked, I looked back at all the people standing there.

There they were, all the people we knew so well. Nanami's family, my family, Otofuke-san, Soichiro-san, Kamoenai-san, Oribe-san, Shoichi-senpai... They were all staring at us not with warm and supportive gazes but rather with the sharp looks of carnivores intent on catching a glimpse of the definitive kiss. Having been dragged back to the here and now by the discovery of our audience, I realized what I'd been about to do.

"What are you all doing here?!" I yelled.

"Hmm? Oh, we were just told that something interesting was happening here today. Don't mind us. Do go on," Genichiro-san responded.

"Genichiro-san, aren't you supposed to get upset at the fact that a guy is trying to kiss your daughter? Shouldn't you be more opposed to the situation?"

Having never kissed Nanami in front of her parents and mine, I couldn't help protesting his response. However, everyone only sighed deeply and smiled awkwardly at us.

*Wait, we haven't kissed in front of them before, have we? I know we got kind of close once, but still, why are they all reacting like this?!*

"I think it's a little too late for that," Genichiro-san said, articulating the precise thought that was floating through my mind. Everyone else nodded.

*Wait, what? Why is everyone agreeing like they talked this over already in a team meeting or something?*

Otofuke-san smirked. “So, to tell you the truth, since the two of you both booked your appointments at the same time, we got talking with Toru-san and decided to set up a photo shoot for a pretend wedding as a late one-month anniversary gift to the two of you,” she explained.

“We asked Hatsumi-chan to invite everyone,” Tomoko-san added. “Everyone was so happy to be here for the two of you.”

“Everyone already thinks the two of you should get married, so it was pretty easy to convince them all to show up,” Hatsumi-san said.

Despite their explanation, I remained more than slightly confused. Then, when I looked more closely, I realized that the men were all in suits, while Tomoko-san, Saya-chan, Otofuke-san, and Kamoenai-san were all wearing fancy dresses. They were neither too flashy nor too plain. Everyone was wearing a tasteful outfit. Each one of the dresses was a different color, creating a very festive atmosphere.

Both my parents were wearing suits. My mom was wearing a tie, not a dress. That was fine, since I couldn’t possibly imagine my mom wearing a dress. What concerned me most was the person standing next to them: Shibetsu-senpai.

Senpai, who for some reason occupied the spot next to my family, was wearing a black tuxedo and a bow tie. *Wait, why are you standing next to my parents, senpai?* He must have noticed my questioning look, because he raised his hand in the air to greet me. *Jeez, he looks good no matter what he wears.*

“Shoichi-senpai, um, don’t you have to be at practice? Isn’t your tournament coming up?” I asked.

“Hm? Don’t worry. I’m headed over there once this photo shoot is done. You know I wouldn’t miss seeing a friend on their special day! Oh, and I’ve also taken the liberty of introducing myself to your parents.”

*I’m not so sure if it’s all that special. It’s a normal day, after all.* When I glanced at my parents, though, I saw they had tears in their eyes.

“Yoshin, I didn’t even know you had such a wonderful friend,” my father said.

“Sir, ma’am—please leave your son to me!” Shibetsu-senpai declared, gripping my dad’s hand firmly. *Wait, how did he get to be so chummy with my*

*parents so fast? How does he manage to make friends so quickly?*

“Come on now, you two,” Toru-san announced. “You’ll have to wait a little longer for your kiss. After all, you don’t want your makeup to get out of place. Let’s take the photos first.”

I realized then that I was still gripping Nanami’s shoulders. I didn’t want to look like I was still in a panic, so I removed them deliberately slowly. As I heard Nanami mutter something in disappointment, Toru-san ushered the two of us along toward the center of the studio. Someone had set up the space in preparation for the shoot. Maybe it had already been like that when I’d come in and I just hadn’t noticed.

If I hadn’t spotted the other people in the room earlier, I probably would have gone ahead and kissed Nanami right then and there. But as much as I was bummed about the kiss that hadn’t been, the thought of having everyone see us made my face burn. I had to say something to take their minds off it.

“Toru-san, isn’t something like this expensive? I know it’ll make for a nice memory, but still...” I muttered.

“Kids shouldn’t worry about things like that. Besides, if we hang the photo up in our salon, it’ll be a great advertisement! Even if we cover the costs for the shoot, we’ll still get more in return!”

“You’re gonna hang it up?” I exclaimed.

“I’ve already gotten the okay from your parents!” Toru-san said as he continued with the preparations. I shot a disapproving look at them, but they seemed not to notice—or rather, they chose to ignore it.

*Wait, you’re gonna put up a picture of me? A photo of Nanami would be amazing, but I don’t think I should get mixed up in this.*

“Oh, um, d-don’t they say that wearing a wedding dress before actually getting married will push your own marriage back to later in life?!” I stammered.

“Do you really think you’ll end up marrying late when you already have a partner? Besides, this dress isn’t an actual wedding dress. It just looks like one, so it should be fine,” Toru-san replied.

“Wait, Yoshin, are you saying you don’t wanna marry me? You said before that you did!”

*What the hell is a dress that just looks like a wedding dress? And that’s such an unfair thing to say, Nanami, given that I did actually say that.*

I tried to come up with other excuses to back out of the situation, but I could only picture all my claims getting refuted by the people around me. That’s why, in the end, I raised my hands in defeat and decided to have my picture taken at their will. *So be it. I just have to be brave.*

Besides, it wasn’t every day that you got the opportunity to have wedding pictures taken with your beautiful girlfriend while still in high school. I should be excited. If I wasn’t, that would probably call for divine punishment of some sort.

“All righty! Now smile, you two! Here we go!” Toru-san called.

And the photo shoot began.

We linked arms. We held hands. We took photos with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san, Soichiro-san, and Oribe-san. We even took pictures with Shoichi-senpai. We got photos of Nanami and her family, as well as of me and my family. We even got some pictures of me and Nanami’s family.

“I’m really impressed that the two of you were able to keep this a secret,” I said to my parents.

“Oh, if I’m going to get to see my son all dressed up, of course I wouldn’t say anything,” my mom replied.

“That’s right. I didn’t think I’d ever get to see this, so I’m all choked up,” my dad added.

When I looked more closely, I saw that they both had tears welling up in their eyes.

It was true that my parents had been super shocked when they’d first learned that Nanami and I were dating. In that regard, I guess it made sense that they’d be elated if we held a mock wedding. Even I had thought I’d never be able to give them a day like this.

Since that was the case, I decided I should do my part as the dutiful son and

let them enjoy the occasion—or at least, I decided it was best to let them do what they wished. As soon as I'd decided that, though, my mom dropped a bombshell.

"I guess all that's left now is to let us meet our future grandchild. In that case, maybe it's possible to get married while you're still in college. Oh, but it's hard to have kids when you're still in school, so maybe it'd be better to wait until after you graduate."

Maybe because of all the things that had been on our minds lately, both Nanami and I raised our voices in shock.

"Mom?!" I shouted.

"You're getting ahead of yourself, Shinobu-san!" Nanami exclaimed. "I, um, would like to enjoy being just the two of us for a while after we get married."

"Nanami, calm down! Girls can't get married until after they turn eighteen now!"

Nanami, however, must have been imagining our life as newlyweds together, because she was smiling blissfully. My comment had pretty much been a product of my own confusion; age wasn't the issue here, after all.

Mom sighed. "You're right. It'll probably be nice to enjoy being by yourselves for a while. Plus you'll have to rent a place to live."

"Oh my. What's this I'm hearing? Do you mind if I join in?"

*Shoot, she's come to add fuel to the fire.* It was Tomoko-san, of course, joining in the discussion of people who seemed to be getting way too ahead of themselves. There was no way the conversation could be stopped now. Seeing the women getting excited about the topic, the men looked at each other and shrugged.

The entire time, Toru-san continued taking photos of us excitedly. I looked at him as if to say, "I guess this all makes for a good memory, huh?" Toru-san winked back at me, which put a wry smile on my face.

After having taken a bunch of photos, Toru-san joined us and had photos taken of all of us in a big group. This wasn't a real wedding. We were just

dressed up to take photos for the sake of memories. Still, everyone was congratulating the two of us.

“Should we end with a photo of the two of them? Yoshin-kun, can you do a princess carry?” Toru-san asked.

“Of course! What do you think I work out for?” I replied, puffing out my chest with pride.

To come clean, I didn’t actually work out for any particular reason. Still, that was the response I gave: that I had been working out for Nanami’s sake and that it had all been for this moment.

The only problem was that I’d never actually *done* a princess carry before. I’d only ever seen it.

“So, um, here I go,” I said.

“Come here, you,” Nanami replied.

I swallowed hard. When I cautiously placed one hand behind Nanami’s knees and another on her waist, she slowly entrusted her weight to me. That sense of trust made the move incredibly smooth. Although I felt her weight in my hands for a moment, the sensation left me very quickly. *Actually, she’s incredibly light. I can do this, no problem!* I shouted in my mind as if to encourage myself.

I then lifted Nanami’s body into the air. Assuming the position of the princess carry, Nanami happily wrapped her arms around my neck and snuggled close to me. I couldn’t help smiling at the fact that we’d managed to pull it off without a hitch.

“That’s so nice,” I heard Saya-chan mutter. “I wanna do that too. Maybe I should ask.”

*I’m sorry, Saya-chan. This is for Nanami only,* I thought. I also saw that Genichiro-san had a strained expression on his face.

As I was glancing around all the people in the room, Nanami smiled happily and leaned closer. “Yoshin, let’s promise to hang out a lot during summer break. And after that, there’s Halloween, Christmas, and New Year’s. And then next year, there’s Valentine’s Day too.”

“Then we have all sorts of things to look forward to! I used to spend most of those alone before, so I don’t think the idea’s quite hit me yet.”

“Then I’ll do my best to make sure you get really excited about all of them. Let’s stay together forever, yeah?”

“Of course. We’ll always be together,” I replied.

Nanami’s face was inches from mine. It wasn’t like yesterday, when we had ended up so close to each other because I’d sat up without thinking. This time, we were close to each other because we’d chosen to be. Even if I worked out, I only did it as a hobby. I was sure I’d soon reach my limit on carrying her—and yet I felt like I could hold Nanami like that forever.

Nanami leaned back slightly, then brought her lips to my cheek. In return, I touched my lips against her cheek too. That ended up eliciting a reaction from those around us, as they started calling for us to kiss each other. *Are you serious? Are you all drunk? You’re not drunk, are you?!*

Toru-san already had his camera ready so as not to miss the moment. He was as good as—if not better than—a professional photographer.

“What do you think?” I asked Nanami.

“It’s kind of embarrassing, but I don’t think they’ll stop. Should we just do it?”

Even so, we were both nervous. However, if we didn’t do it, I was pretty sure they were going to boo us out of the room. *No, wait. It doesn’t matter what everyone else says. What’s important is whether or not Nanami and I want to kiss each other.*

I started to lean in to kiss her...and ended up losing my balance. I fell backward, and Nanami ended up on top of me. I’d totally reached my limit because I’d been using muscles I never used. Everyone was booing me, asking me what the hell was wrong with me. I guess I deserved that.

As if we were recreating the scene from yesterday in Nanami’s room, Nanami was sitting on top of me while I lay on the floor. She and I looked at each other and started laughing softly. Then Nanami quickly began to move. She held my face softly in both hands, then pressed her lips against mine. I was kissing Nanami while still lying on the floor.



It had all happened suddenly, but I couldn't say that I was surprised. I guess I'd had a feeling that Nanami would do something like that. Those around us, though, had had no idea. I heard people taking pictures, shouting, and congratulating us. Nanami and I were filled with joy.

After we kissed each other for a long time, Nanami quietly moved her face away from mine.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you too," she replied, grinning down at me from above. Not to be outdone, I flashed her the biggest smile I could manage. Then I hugged her where we lay. Seeing Nanami smiling so happily in my arms, I made a decision—and kissed her on the lips once more. I heard everyone taking pictures of us again, but I let the sounds fill my ears as I hugged her even tighter. We remained in an embrace even after we ended the kiss.

Before, we'd had nothing to do with each other, but now we were able to be with each other like this. That made me happier than anything I could have imagined. I wondered if Nanami felt the same way.

"I'm really happy, Yoshin."

Hearing those words that almost made me think she'd read my mind, I couldn't help smiling. Nanami was smiling back radiantly. I knew that many things would change from here on out. Once we graduated from high school, our environments would change. Maybe we would fight. We might even have to spend time apart in order for us to achieve our dreams. But what I was feeling now wouldn't change. I would never change the fact that I loved Nanami. The days of the gyaru who had confessed to me on a dare and my loner, introverted self would continue. With newfound resolve and certainty in my heart, I embraced Nanami tightly once more.

## Epilogue: The Message

Gosh, yesterday sure was fun. All of it made me so happy. Even though it was already the following day now and I'd gone through my entire day at school, I was still basking in the afterglow of it all. I hadn't managed to sleep all that much last night either, since I hadn't been able to calm myself down.

"Nanami, are you okay? You look like you're about to nod off," Yoshin said from where he was sitting beside me.

"Mmm, I think so. Oh, no, wait—maybe not," I mumbled, rubbing my eyes and putting my head on Yoshin's shoulder. There were several other people aside from us in the classroom, but they must have gotten used to seeing me with Yoshin like this—they no longer stared at us the way they had before.

People often made fun of Yoshin, saying that he and I were really flirty at school. *Who cares if we're flirting with each other? We're going out, after all. Though I guess it's not like anyone's saying flirting is bad.*

"I'm impressed that you managed to stay awake during class," Yoshin remarked.

"That's because class is important. You have to pay attention in class too, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am." Yoshin scratched his head a little. He was getting better with his studies lately, though he still sometimes fell asleep in class. It was fine as long as I could tutor him, but if he couldn't manage to stay awake in the long term, it could cause problems for him later. I had to force myself to be strict with him—though it was debatable whether this really qualified as me being strict.

"So what do you wanna do today? Should we hang out somewhere?" I asked.

"How can you ask that when you look so sleepy?" he replied. "Don't you think it'd be better to just go home and rest for the day? You've been pretty active lately. If you don't take care of yourself, you might get sick."

“Wow, you sound like my mom,” I said, mustering up a laugh. Yoshin just patted me on the head. *Oh, shoot. Now I’m really gonna fall asleep. Maybe I truly am at my limit today. I feel so sleepy.*

I wondered if this was because I’d been so excited about things lately. It was true that for the last several weekends I’d been doing all sorts of activities and not giving myself a chance to relax much. As I let out a big yawn, Yoshin ended up yawning too. *Yawns really are contagious, aren’t they?*

“In that case,” I said, only to be interrupted by another yawn, “how about we sleep together again at my house today?”

“Nanami, we’ve never slept together,” Yoshin replied, though he, too, had to pause to yawn again. “Or maybe we have, but you probably shouldn’t say things like that at school. People are going to misunderstand.”

I felt like the people around us were suddenly murmuring among themselves about something. I was too sleepy to pay much attention to them though.

Yoshin helped me to stand up, and I held on to him as we both made our way to the shoe lockers. *Oh, shoot. Now that I’ve admitted I’m sleepy, it’s hitting me all at once.* I stumbled while half floating along, with Yoshin supporting me along the way. *I have to at least put on my own shoes, though I wouldn’t mind if he helped put them on for me.*

When I opened my shoe locker as I mulled over the possibility, I saw that there was a slip of paper inside. It was just a plain sheet of copy paper that had been folded in half. *What is this thing?* I thought, unfolding the near blank sheet of paper without even thinking about it. The sleepiness that had been clouding my brain cleared up in an instant.

I felt a chill run down my entire body, as though I’d had ice water poured over my head. I opened my eyes wide. There was just one question written in the center of the sheet of paper.

*Is the dare still going on?*

## Afterword

Good evening, everyone. I'm Yuishi. I am overwhelmingly relieved to have been able to release this fifth volume. Still, I apologize that its release was delayed by about a month. Rather than having any issues with the production process, there were other matters that caused the delay. Regardless, I'm happy that we managed to get the volume out to you all.

This volume marks the beginning of the second part of the story. Have you enjoyed it? I couldn't be happier if you enjoyed the start of something new now that the issue of the dare has been cleared up. I had originally thought that the story would end with volume four, so hearing that we'd get to publish a fifth volume was delightful news for me.

The task of evaluating a work is entrusted to its readers. Whether a story's style matches the tastes of the reader or whether a text is interesting is often very subjective. It's nearly impossible for a work to be accepted by everyone. I imagine that there are both feelings for and against the idea of releasing this volume, accompanied by opinions that the story should have ended cleanly at the conclusion of volume four. Regardless, it's my honest desire to write stories that people can enjoy. I want to continue making an effort as a light novel author to keep doing precisely that in the future.

On December 1, I celebrated the one-year anniversary of my debut as a light novel author. The fifth volume thus serves as the first book in my second year as a published author. The year felt both long and short at the same time. During those months, I had the good fortune of seeing the release of four volumes, a manga adaptation, and international editions such as an English language translation and a Taiwanese edition.

For the manga adaptation especially, every time I get to preview the storyboard, I'm always amazed to see how the words I've written have been transformed on the page. As a reader of the manga myself, I'm very much looking forward to how Nagomi Kanna-sensei will continue to develop the work

in the future. Nanami is absolutely adorable in it. In manga form, her cuteness is simply next level.

What did you also think of the illustrations in volume five? The Nanami and company conjured up by Kagachisaku-sensei look absolutely lovely as well. I was grateful to have the characters appear in many different outfits in this volume. We also managed to have the characters appear in swimsuits fairly early on. In addition, Melonbooks was kind enough to issue a tapestry for the release of the volume.

Right now, I'm living my best life, in which I've been able to do things that I've always wanted to do. Although my birthday's in January, I feel like all this has been an early birthday present for me.

I cannot thank my editor, Kobayashi-sama, enough when it comes to this project. I will continue making an effort to be able to release another volume. I thank you in advance for all your support.

Finally, although I know this has probably been announced already, I've been fortunate enough to be given the chance to release a sixth volume. I would have panicked if we'd ended up without a volume six, given the ending of this volume. This, of course, is all thanks to the readers and everyone else who helps make this series possible.

For volumes one through four, I was writing with a particular theme in mind. For volumes five and on, I'm attempting to do the same. I'm currently writing volume six, hoping that I'll be able to write all the way up to the conclusion that I'm envisioning.

Well then, I'd be much obliged to see you again in the next volume!

Yuishi, who's hard at work on volume six

December 2022



## WATCHING THE BASKETBALL GAME

“That’s so fast! He was on that end of the court, but now he’s already on this side! Wow, he’s flying!”

In her excitement, Nanami kept leaning from side to side and bouncing up and down. Apparently, she was the type who got super involved when watching sports.





“Well, you three sure are looking fine tonight. Are you all waiting for someone?”

“Would you like to come hang out with us? We’re all high schoolers looking for a good time!”

AT THE NIGHT POOL

“Um, m-mister, would you maybe like to spend a little time with me?”

The voices, which were coming from behind us, sounded familiar. When we heard them, the three of us looked at each other and couldn’t help smiling wryly. Naturally, it was our girlfriends, who had purposefully come up to us as though they were hitting on us.





**“I love you,”** I said.

**“I love you too,”**  
she replied, grinning at me.

Not to be outdone, I flashed her  
the biggest smile I could manage.



## Bonus Short Story

### After the Pool Trip

Compared to the fatigue I often felt from working out, the fatigue I felt after being in a pool was different—though maybe I was the only one who felt that way. Either way, my entire body felt kind of sluggish, and I also felt really sleepy. I always fell asleep after being in the pool for gym class. I couldn't tell Nanami that, since she'd probably scold me for it. She really was a serious student.

Still, I couldn't help wondering why being in the pool made me so sleepy. Regular gym class didn't make me feel that way, but after an hour in the pool, I was guaranteed to sleep through the class right after it. That was why I'd kind of assumed that being in a pool at night would tire me out in the same way. As it turned out, though, the tiredness I was feeling now was different from the way a regular pool made me feel. I can't really describe it well, but I somehow felt tired and more awake than ever at the same time. Maybe my brain was really alert, or maybe I was just really worked up. I didn't really know the reason, but my best guess was that it was because of a certain someone's presence beside me. I glanced over at Nanami, who was sitting next to me.

"Hm? What's up?" she asked when she noticed me looking at her. She was wearing regular clothes now, but just a little while ago she'd been wearing a bathing suit. I inadvertently pictured her figure and felt my cheeks growing hot. I couldn't believe that, not so long ago, we'd been spending time with each other while practically naked. I knew it wasn't a dream or fantasy or anything. After all, I had pictures.

"Oh, nothing," I answered, to which Nanami tilted her head. It seemed she hadn't picked up on what I was thinking. I mean, if she had, she'd have to be a mind reader.

Just then, a light from outside shone over her. We were currently in Soichiro-

san's car, on our way home after hanging out at the pool. The sun had already set, so it was dark inside. I was hoping that prevented her from noticing how red my face was.

Even though it was dark, the light of streetlamps and various buildings along the street occasionally filtered in through the windows and lit up her face. Seeing her illuminated in so many different colors felt both magical and beautiful. Nanami smiled at me as my gaze remained transfixed on her.

"The pool was fun, huh, Yoshin?" she said before calling toward the front of the car. "Thanks for bringing us today, Oto-nii."

"Yeah, it really was. Thanks a lot, Soichiro-san," I added.

"No biggie. You're very welcome," replied Soichiro-san, who was the one driving. Otofuke-san was sitting in the passenger seat, giving him directions as they chatted. She occasionally complained that navigating for him was a pain in the ass, but she seemed to be enjoying it all the same. Kamoenai-san and Oribe-san were sitting in the seats behind Nanami and me, fast asleep while leaning into each other. They both looked peaceful as they breathed softly.

Until just a moment ago, they'd been all over each other. Maybe all the flirting and joking had tired them out. It was probably a good thing that Oribe-san wasn't driving. Earlier, Soichiro-san had shoved him into the back seat, saying that he should just relax since it wasn't his car. Maybe Soichiro-san was a little wary of having Kamoenai-san in the passenger seat, or am I just overthinking it? I felt like my impression of her had changed completely that day. Yeah, I probably shouldn't think too much about it.

Anyway, I know I thought this back when we'd been on our onsen trip, but traveling in a car together really was nice. I didn't know much about driving since I'd never really been into cars, but being able to do so certainly expanded your options in terms of the things you could do. It made me want to get my driver's license one day and take Nanami out for a drive. It might also be nice to take a road trip together, just the two of us.

It was then that I heard Nanami let out an adorable sound.

"Ayaaaw..."

She was yawning. I had to chuckle when I saw her mouth open slightly as she attempted to do so discreetly.

“Feel free to take a nap, you two. We’ll be sure to wake you up when we stop by a convenience store,” came a voice from the front seat.

“No, I’m good. I’ll stay awake. I’m not all that sleepy; I just can’t help yawning,” Nanami said as she rubbed her eye with her hand curled up like a cat’s paw. Her eyes, which had teared up because of her yawn, glistened and looked somewhat sensual in the darkness. She yawned once again, this time more grandly, then hopped closer to me. Maybe because of her momentum, she ended up leaning as though she’d fallen on top of me. *Wait, this isn’t the same as leaning into me, is it?*

“The pool was fun, but now I’m tired,” she said, lazily drooping herself over me like a cartoon. I nearly lost my balance because of the unexpected weight, but I somehow managed to remain upright.

Just kidding. She wasn’t heavy. She wasn’t heavy at all. I wished she’d stop glaring at me like she suspected me of thinking that. It was cute, but it was still scary. As though trying to emphasize just how heavy she wasn’t, Nanami pressed her body into mine. I have to admit, I hadn’t been expecting her to get physically pushy.

“I’m so tired,” she moaned, attaching herself to me so thoroughly that I thought we’d become one. Perhaps because we’d been close to each other in our swimsuits earlier, I didn’t feel so nervous this time. If anything, the pressure from her body felt oddly comfortable.

I patted Nanami lightly on her back, and she shook her head as if to rub it against me. The movement tickled. After we’d been sitting like that for some time, she suddenly looked at me and smiled.

“So? What did you think of my swimsuit? Did I look good in it?” she asked.

“Huh? Didn’t I tell you what I thought when I first saw you in it?”

“That’s not good enough! Girls want to hear things like that as often as possible. They want their boyfriends to always think they’re pretty and to tell them so over and over.”

Like a child making a fuss, Nanami pressed her head against me. The lingering scent of the pool drifted from her hair and tickled my nose. In addition to the chlorine, I also picked up that sweet aroma particular to girls. I know that makes me sound a bit like a creeper, but to me, this was a totally natural reaction for a healthy teenager. Yeah, it was most definitely normal.

I patted Nanami on the back once again as she continued headbutting me. To anyone else, we must have looked like we were embracing each other. Well, I guess that wouldn't be completely wrong, but it was fine since no one was looking.

Just as I was thinking that, I felt someone staring at me from the front seat. I turned to look and saw that it was Otofuke-san. Well, that made sense. If it hadn't been her, that would have been scary.

When our eyes met, Otofuke-san slowly lifted her hand and proceeded to give me a thumbs-up. *Um, what am I supposed to do with that, exactly?* I thought. She mouthed something, then grinned at me mischievously. *Is it just me, or did she just say "good luck"? Why didn't she say it out loud? And if she did say that, what is she expecting me to do?*

"What's wrong?" Nanami asked, tilting her head while pressing her face to my body. Her cheek had changed shape from being squished against me. Suppressing the urge to touch it, I answered her.

"You looked great. I got all nervous because you looked so sexy."

Nanami's eyes widened. Then, grinning happily and spreading her arms wide, she hugged me at full force. She must have been super excited by my comment, because it was a mighty powerful hug.

"You looked good in your swimsuit too, Yoshin. You were so handsome, my heart was pounding," she said.

In complete contrast to girls, guys just wore regular trunks. Most people probably looked good in them. Still, I felt genuinely happy about her compliment. *Yeah, it really does feel good to be complimented even after the moment has passed.*

When I thanked her, Nanami moved away from me slightly, then brought her

face up to my ear. “Do you want me to wear a sexier swimsuit in the summer?” she whispered.

*Sexier?!*

I pictured the bikini Nanami had been holding when we’d gone swimsuit shopping—the one that had basically been made of strings. The human imagination sure was a powerful thing. It was even able to combine different images into one. In other words, I pictured Nanami wearing that bikini. Having already seen her wearing a bikini at the night pool must have helped. I already knew what Nanami could look like in a swimsuit. *What would happen if she wore a bathing suit like that?!*

“Absolutely not,” I declared.

“What?!” Nanami exclaimed, her head snapping up. She must not have expected me to say no.

“Nanami, people hit on you even with that other swimsuit. I can’t imagine how many people would try to talk to you if you wore an even sexier one.”

“But you’d protect me, right?”

“Of course I would, but I don’t want you to end up having to experience something unpleasant on the off chance that I can’t keep my eye on you.”

It would be great if I could watch over her twenty-four seven, but that just wasn’t realistic. There were bound to be times when we’d end up getting separated from each other. The more revealing her swimsuit was, the higher the risk of something bad happening. Besides, even her swimsuit from earlier had nearly given me a heart attack.

Nanami, apparently convinced by my reasoning, took a deep breath. Once she’d finished exhaling, she looked up at me. “In that case, we’ll have you wear the sexy swimsuit instead.”

“Why is that the solution?!” I yelled.

*What in the world does a sexy swimsuit for men look like? Wait, does such a thing even exist?*

“But then it’d be bad if you wore something like that and got hit on, so I guess

that's a no-go too."

"Wait, Nanami, I can't process this all at once," I moaned, but Nanami paid no mind to my confusion and, if anything, kept adding to the pressure. *Are you telling me guys get hit on too?* I thought. But Nanami seemed to enjoy seeing me with question marks floating around my head.

"Guys totally get hit on too. Whenever Oto-nii isn't with Hatsumi, he's always getting approached by sexy older girls."

"Isn't that because it's Soichiro-san though?" I wondered out loud. He was handsome, and he was kind of famous. I thought that he must be a special case, but Nanami raised her index finger in front of my face and wagged it from side to side.

"Not at all. To those older girls, you're gonna seem like a cute younger guy. Plus you've got nice muscles."

"Cute? But no one's ever said that to me before."

"Who knows what'll happen in the future? Actually, the more I think about it, the more you seem like the type to get picked up by older girls. I absolutely have to protect you!"

As someone who'd never been popular with girls in my life, I couldn't quite believe what she was saying. Nanami, on the other hand, must have started imagining things as she continued talking. She was even starting to quake with anger.

*No one's gonna think I'm cute, so there's no need to worry,* I thought, though I had to admit that it felt pretty nice to have her worry about me like that.

"Even if I do get hit on, I have no intention of hanging out with anyone but you. You have nothing to worry about," I said.

"If you say so. But if something does happen, I'll protect you, okay? I'll protect you like you did for me today!" Nanami exclaimed, clenching her fists in front of her chest. I couldn't help smiling wryly as I patted her head and thanked her. At any rate, I just had to make sure to prevent any situation that would make Nanami have to protect me.

Regardless, there was no way I was going to entertain any such invitation when I had Nanami in my life. Soichiro-san, too, probably turned down any advances given that he was in a relationship with Otofuke-san. Getting flattered or pretending to go along with other girls just to make your girlfriend jealous was absolutely out of the question. I would never do that, but I had to keep those things in mind nonetheless.

“Then maybe I’ll just have to show you the sexier bathing suit in my room when we’re alone together.”

Although Nanami murmured the words softly, I didn’t miss them. It seemed she hadn’t given up on the sexy swimsuit idea after all. Plus she’d mentioned her room. She’d said that before too, hadn’t she?

I recalled just how red Nanami had gotten when she’d held that risqué bikini up in the dressing room. Judging from that, even if she were to try wearing a sexier swimsuit, she’d probably turn completely red and get too embarrassed to actually do it. Yeah, the likelihood of her pulling it off was incredibly low. Although I felt a tinge of disappointment at the thought, I decided to focus on the plus side—that there was absolutely nothing to worry about.

*But what if Nanami does manage to get over her embarrassment and actually ends up doing it? Um, well, I guess I’ll just have to cross that bridge when I come to it. Even if I think about it now, I don’t have a clue what I’d do.*

As I was going back and forth on the matter, I felt something soft and warm on my cheek. Although the sensation was unexpected, having an inkling of what it was, I turned toward Nanami...who’d kissed me.

“That’s to thank you for protecting me from those guys earlier today,” she said before kissing me on the cheek one more time and then moving away. Taken by surprise, I sat there with my mouth hanging open. I pressed my hand to the spot where she’d kissed me.

“Well, that was out of nowhere,” I mumbled.

“No, it wasn’t. I actually wanted to thank you then and there, but you know, timing and all.”

Come to think of it, she’d tried to kiss me at the night pool too. She couldn’t

back then because everyone else had arrived, but it seemed she hadn't forgotten about it.

"You'll have to thank me too if I save you from girls, okay?" she said, smiling and tapping on her cheek as though urging me to kiss it already. I looked at her and smiled, but that smile was immediately wiped off my face.

"Wow, they're so much in love!"

"Ayumi, you idiot! You're too loud!"

"Oh, shoot!"

The voices were coming from both in front of us and behind us. Yeah, it was Kamoenai-san and Otofuke-san. Kamoenai-san had woken up without us noticing, and Otofuke-san was watching us in the rearview mirror. Then, without warning, Otofuke-san and Soichiro-san each lifted a hand and gave us a thumbs-up. It seemed Soichiro-san had been watching us in the rearview mirror too. *Wait, isn't that kind of dangerous?*

Nanami and I turned bright red, unable to say anything. When we slowly looked behind us, Kamoenai-san was smiling, flashing us a thumbs-up while clearly enjoying herself. *Jeez, you're all having too much fun here.* Nanami, who'd thought the two of them weren't watching, hid her reddened face and curled up against me. I patted her back to try to help her calm down.

As a sidenote, Kamoenai-san proceeded to kiss her boyfriend on the cheek as he continued snoozing in the back seat. She then cuddled up against him and fell right back asleep. Otofuke-san, seemingly trying to make Nanami feel better, told her that kissing someone on the cheek was just like a friendly greeting and kissed Soichiro-san on the cheek the next time we were stopped at a red light—before turning as red as the traffic signal herself. It was an evening during which I felt like I'd discovered an unexpected commonality between the three of them.

As yet another sidenote, Nanami remained in her curled-up position next to me and fell asleep too. The exhaustion must have finally caught up with her. Yawning, I continued patting her on the back, the way one might for a small child.





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An Introvert's Hookup Hiccups: This Gyarū Is Head Over Heels for Me! Volume 5

by Yuishi

Translated by Satoko Kakihara Edited by Stephanie Buck

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