
YOU LIKE ME, NOT MY DAUGHTER?!
1
Kota Nozomi
Illustrator: Giuniu


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You Like Me, Not My Daughter?! Volume 1 [Complete]

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Prologue

♠

The first time I saw Ayako, she was in the midst of a tragedy.

“I’ll take care of her.”

Her dignified voice had echoed throughout the room of adults dressed in black. Although she’d spoken none too loudly, her words had carried a silent determination that cut through the depressing atmosphere.

That moment had come after a funeral. The couple who’d lived next door to my family had passed away in a car accident and gone to heaven together. I was ten years old at the time, and I’d been brought by my parents to attend their funeral without understanding what was going on. I didn’t understand rituals like offering incense or giving condolence money. I didn’t know what it meant for someone to die; I didn’t comprehend it.

Our neighbors had been very kind people. They’d always greeted me with a smile when they saw me on my way to school in the morning. They’d even come over for a barbecue with my family. Even without totally grasping the idea of death, thinking about how I’d never see them again filled me with sadness.

My thoughts turned to Miu, the almost five-year-old child of the deceased couple. They had apparently been on their way to pick her up from preschool and go out for dinner when the unfortunate accident happened. Miu would never be able to see her mom or dad ever again—it felt like an outrageous tragedy.

However, Miu herself didn’t seem to understand her current situation. She looked confused during the entire ceremony, and she stayed unusually quiet. She might have not yet known that her parents had died—she might not have known what it meant for someone to die. I didn’t understand such things myself as a ten-year-old, so it was probably even more confusing for someone half my age.

One after another, adults clad in black forced their pity onto the puzzled girl with a barrage of you-poor-things. It was like they'd decided how she should feel for her—like they were drilling it into her.

The funeral proceeded peacefully, and it was followed by a customary banquet in a tatami room to thank the attendees and priests. There were tables lined with alcohol and sushi for the adults to enjoy. As they started to dine and the liquor began to flow, practical conversations about what would come next finally began, as if they'd been waiting for the liquid courage to kick in first. Their discussions were cold and calculating.

"I've already told you, we can't take her."

"Well we can't either. We already have three kids."

"How about you? You're still single, aren't you?"

"Hell no! Having a kid would make it even harder to get married."

"We'll probably have to put her in foster care."

"No way. That would make us look bad."

"Yeah, people will think we wanted to get rid of her."

"Then you look after her, mom."

"I already have my hands full with my husband. How about you help out with your father-in-law instead of leaving everything to me?"

The adults, who were probably Miu's relatives, raised their voices arguing over who would take her in. In other words, no one wanted to take her in. Everyone was already busy with their own lives or families and didn't have the extra resources to care for someone else's child.

The adults continued to try to pass the responsibility onto each other, growing more and more heated as the discussion continued. They all asserted their own needs with no consideration for Miu—they'd probably convinced themselves that there was no way a five-year-old could understand them. I don't know how much of the adults' words she'd been able to understand, but even my ten-year-old self could tell that things had turned ugly.

This carried on until one particularly nasty utterance. "Instead of getting left

by herself, maybe she should have joined—”

But before they could finish their terrible thought, they were cut off by the loud bang of someone slamming their hands down on a table. The woman responsible for the sound stood up and began to speak. “I’ll take care of her.” Her resolute declaration blew away the gloomy atmosphere that had settled over the room. “Do you hear me? I’ll be taking responsibility for my sister’s daughter.” The rest of the adults were taken aback at her insistence and fell silent.



She was apparently the younger sister of the woman who’d passed away. She was a beautiful woman with a gentle air to her. She looked to be around twenty

years old. You would never have expected it from someone with her downturned eyes and kind face, but in that moment, she was glaring daggers at her sister's relatives, looking down on them with a smoldering rage in her eyes.

"Wh-What are you talking about, Ayako?" The woman next to her, who seemed to be her mother, was panicking and trying to calm her down. "There's no way you can take her in. You only just found a job this year. How could you care for a child?"

"Sorry, mom, but...I've already made my decision." Ayako dismissed her mother and briskly walked off. "I don't want Miu to spend another second in this place." She confidently made her way to the girl sitting in the corner and crouched down to meet her at eye level. "Miu, would you like to live with me from now on?"

"With Auntie Ayako...?"

"Yeah. Let's live together."

"But I want to live with mom and dad..."

"Your mom and dad have...gone somewhere far away, so you can't live with them anymore."

Miu paused to think. "Am I alone then?"

"Yes, but I have something to tell you. I'm actually alone too."

"You too, Auntie Ayako?"

"Yeah, I am. After I started my job, I got a little carried away and moved out. I lived with my mom and dad my whole life before then, and now I've just been so lonely living by myself. What a mess, huh?" Ayako reached her hand out to Miu with a kind look in her eyes.

"Every day I'm so lonely and bored, so I want to live with you. Is that okay?" She made it seem like that was really all there was to it.

Miu nodded and mumbled out,"M'kay..."

Her answer made Ayako's face light up with a smile as bright as the sun. "All right! Come here then!" Ayako took the girl's hand and scooped her up. "Wow! I haven't carried you in a while, but you've gotten bigger, Miu. I might hurt my

back!”

“Hee hee, Auntie, you sound like an old lady.”

“Whoa now, do you know what happens to bad kids who say things like that? The tickle monster comes to get them!”

“Aha ha ha! Stop it, Auntie Ayako, that tickles!”

The two were smiling so cheerfully that one could easily forget that a funeral had ended just minutes prior. The other adults stayed silent, unable to say anything. There was something inviolably sacred about that moment between Ayako and Miu—no one could even hope to interject.

As for me...my gaze was fixed on Ayako. She was so radiant, I couldn’t help myself.

A girl had been thrown to the depths of despair by a cruel twist of fate, and this woman reached out to help her with no hesitation. She’d somehow turned the tables on this tragedy, becoming in my eyes both a noble hero and a benevolent saint all at once. It felt like she had seized hold of my heart.

Chapter 1: The Mother and the Boy

♥

Days start early when you're a single mother. My mornings would often begin with me rubbing my sleepy eyes and getting out of bed early since I had to pack a lunch for my high school daughter, and today was no different. *Jeez... Up until she left middle school, her school had been feeding her lunch, but not anymore.*

"No use complaining about that now..."

After taking a second to get my juices flowing, I began to prepare a rolled omelet in a rectangular frying pan. The versatility of a rolled omelet made it a strong ally to housewives everywhere; it worked both as a breakfast staple and as a part of a child's lunch. Meanwhile, I realized that the miso soup I was making at the same time was about to boil, so I hurried over to turn off the heat.

Let's give it a taste... Yup, good as usual!

Just as I was setting the completed breakfast on the table, my daughter, Miu, loudly stomped downstairs.

"Ahhhh! Shoot! I was too eepy and I overslept!"

As a woman in her thirties, I had no idea if "eepy" was something my daughter had come up with or if it was just how young people these days spoke.

Miu made a beeline for the bathroom, still stomping around getting ready, until she finally finished up and headed into the living room. She was still putting on her uniform as she walked in—the uniform for the high school that she'd started attending in April. She'd enrolled in one of the leading college preparatory schools in the prefecture. Her grades in middle school were honestly not the best, but thanks to her excellent tutor, she'd somehow managed to get in. Indeed, my daughter was a student at the prestigious school most middle schoolers in the prefecture aspired to attend, and she was currently wearing that school's uniform with...very little care at all.

Ugh, now her shirt's all wrinkly because she won't properly wear the jacket! I even ironed it for her yesterday!

"Why didn't you wake me up, mom?!"

"I did wake you up, but you just didn't get up. Here, you better eat quickly since Takkun will be here soon."

"You don't have to remind me!"

My daughter, Miu Katsuragi, sat at the table and began to scarf down her breakfast. We weren't related by blood, but to me, Ayako Katsuragi, she was my one and only daughter.

Actually, it would be incorrect to say we weren't related by blood because she was brought into this world by my older sister. It had been ten years since the day at the funeral when I'd decided to take Miu in and we'd begun living together in the house my sister and her husband had left behind. I could hardly believe it; just like that, a hectic ten years had passed. A lot had happened since then, so much that it would be impossible to describe in just a few words, but I felt like we had managed to become a family. Her calling me "mom" was enough to give me the strength to do my best every day.

"You know, Taku doesn't have to pick me up every day. We have to split up as soon as we reach the train station anyway. It's such a waste."

"Don't say that! He's going out of his way to accompany you. Besides, aren't you secretly happy that he does it?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing. Just, you know, if you take too long, you might lose Takkun to another girl," I teased.

Miu let out an enormous sigh. "How many times do I have to repeat myself? Taku and I don't have those kinds of feelings for each other. We're just childhood friends, and he's just my tutor. That's it."

"Really?"

"Really. I don't have any feelings for him, nor does he for me," Miu said in an exasperated tone.

I shrugged. “Hmm... Okay then.”

Gosh, she should be more honest with her feelings. I think they would be pretty cute together. At the very least, there’s no way he doesn’t have any feelings for her. What kind of guy comes by every morning to pick someone up without any ulterior motives?

It was at that moment that the doorbell rang, and I headed to the front door.

“Good morning, Miss Ayako.”

I opened the door to find a nice young man greeting me politely. He had on a fresh-looking shirt and slim-fitting pants, along with a tote bag on his shoulder that seemed like it’d be trendy with people his age. On his left wrist, he was wearing a slightly expensive-looking watch. He mentioned before that his father had bought it for him as a gift to celebrate him getting into college.

“Hello, Takkun,” I replied. His name was Takumi Aterazawa, or as I called him, Takkun. He was a college student who lived next door. He and Miu had known each other since they were kids. They’d spent some time together as neighbors before I started living here—in other words, while my sister and her husband were still alive. We continued to be friendly neighbors after I moved in to this ownerless house with Miu ten years ago.

On top of being our neighbor, Takkun was also Miu’s tutor. Miu was able to get into her school of choice thanks to the exceptional Takkun—who was himself attending a prestigious university—and his passionate guidance.

“I’m sorry, Takkun. Miu slept in, so she’s still eating breakfast. Would you mind waiting a little?”

Miu shouted over from the living room, “Sorry Taku! Can you wait a sec?”

Takkun smiled knowingly. “Sure, I can wait. On a side note, Miss Ayako, would you mind not calling me Takkun anymore? I turned twenty yesterday, you know?”

“Heh heh, I’m sorry about that. It’s hard to get rid of old habits. But wow... That’s right, you’re already twenty now!” I couldn’t help but feel emotional and ended up staring at the boy in front of me. “You were so cute when you were little! When did you get so big?”

When we first met, back when Takkun was still around ten years old, he was so petite and short, he was almost like a girl. Around the time he started swimming in middle school, he started to grow taller and put on some muscle, and now he'd grown into a proper young man. Even though he was standing on the lower step of our house's entryway, he still stood taller than me.

He really has grown up so much.

I impulsively stepped forward and gave him a pat on the head. Takkun looked embarrassed and took a step back.

"P-Please stop. I'm not a child anymore."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Takkun. I was lost in thought about how much you've grown, and I did it without thinking..."

"Also, my name..."

"Oh my, you're right! Hmmm... Since I've spent the last ten years calling you Takkun, it's hard to suddenly change it. I'm so used to you being Takkun..."

He didn't have anything to say to that and just kept looking at me silently.

"How about to make it even, you can call me Mommy Ayako like you used to?"

"How does that make things even?"

"Hee hee, don't worry about it. You're like a son to me, so it's fine if you call me that."

After a pause, Takkun muttered, "I'm not your son." Then, more gravely, he insisted "I am not your son, Miss Ayako."

"Takkun...?"

"Oh, um... I'm sorry for saying something weird. Of course I'm not."

"Oh, i-it's okay! Don't worry about it."

Takkun laughed it all off like that didn't just happen. I played along and laughed too, but truthfully, my heart was beating a little faster than usual.

That was a surprise. I mean, he suddenly got so serious...

His piercing gaze and deep, masculine voice woke me up to the fact that he really was a man now, and the sudden realization made my heart race.

“Sorry, that took longer than I thought it would!”

Miu had run over to the front door and began putting on her shoes.

Oh, she’s here! I guess she finished her breakfast.

“Thanks for waiting, Taku.”

“Yeah, of course. We’ll be heading out then. Goodbye, Miss Ayako.”

“Bye, mom.”

“All right, have a good day! ...Oh, wait!” I suddenly remembered that we had plans for the night and decided to remind them just in case. “We’ll probably start things around five o’clock, so don’t be late. That goes for the both of you.”

“We won’t.”

“We already know, mom!”

They nodded as if it didn’t need to be said and headed out.

I breathed a sigh of relief; there was definitely a feeling of relaxation that would wash over me knowing I had time to myself after seeing my daughter off every morning. Still, at the same time, I’d also feel the sadness of knowing I’d have to spend my day by myself, without her.

Troublesome thoughts began creeping in. *If... If Miu decides to leave home one day—if she gets married and decides to move out or something like that—wouldn’t I end up all alone? Our life together started because I didn’t want her to be left all by herself, but one day, I might be the one who’s—*

“No way. It’s too soon to think about that,” I reassured myself. My daughter was only fifteen years old, and she had only just entered high school. It was pointless to get anxious imagining such a future right now.

“Well... If she got married to Takkun and moved into his parent’s house, we would be neighbors, so I wouldn’t be lonely.” *It’d be pretty great if my daughter were only a minute’s walk away after she gets married! I wouldn’t get lonely at all!*

Takkun is such a nice and hardworking guy, and he's gotten so tall and handsome lately, and now he's even attending a prestigious university and on his way to a promising future. I couldn't ask for a better partner for my daughter!

You know what? That settles it! Those two should get together ASAP! I've got no doubts they'll take care of me in my old age!

"I really do think they would be great together...Hm?"

I had been letting my fantasies run wild as I returned to the kitchen, but then I noticed something lying there: a lunch in an adorable little package that I'd woken up early and worked hard to prepare. "You're kidding me!"

I rushed out of the house and called out to the two of them walking close together. "H-Hey, Miu! You forgot your lunch!"

It'd already been ten years since I started taking care of my daughter, and these restless mornings were my every day.

After seeing my daughter off again and quickly taking care of the dishes and laundry, I made the switch from mom mode to employee mode to start working on my job. I opened up my laptop on the table and made myself a drink—a health-food smoothie from a pod I'd plopped into my Dolce Gusto. It was a wonderful fruity green juice that was easy to drink and contained a day's worth of all the right veggies. I'd entered my thirties, so it was the kind of mindful choice I needed to make.

"All right, I'll let the illustrator know what we discussed, Yumemi," I said into my phone. "I'll also get the writers up to speed by next week."

"Sounds good. Thanks for handling it, Ayako."

The person on the other end was my boss, Yumemi, with her usual easy-going response. Although her voice was relaxed and feminine, the way she spoke to people gave the things she said a distinctly masculine quality. She was someone who always stood tall and sturdy—we'd worked together for ten years and I'd never once seen her panic.

I called her my boss, but more accurately, she was the president of the

company I worked at. She was more than a decade older than me, yet her voice, appearance, and sensibilities were all quite youthful.

“You’ve really been a great help with this project,” Yumemi continued. “We probably couldn’t have accepted the job without you.”

“What are you talking about? I’m just a humble editor.”

“Don’t be modest. There are many creators who accept jobs from us on the condition that *you’re* in charge of their project. The results you’ve produced and the trust you’ve built these past ten years have all paid off.”

“Ten years...”

“Yup, ten years... Huh, I know I brought it up, but it’s a strange feeling. I can’t believe it’s already been ten years since we started working together.”

Her nostalgic tone brought my thoughts back to the past. Yumemi, full name Yumemi Oinomori, was originally a skilled editor at a *major* publisher. Ten years ago, she left and started her own company, Light Ship. Then, I started working at Light Ship...also ten years ago.

Explaining what Light Ship did was extremely difficult. Under the president’s mission statement of “We do whatever as long as it’s fun,” we were engaged with various entertainment projects. Although my job title was “editor,” my work extended beyond that of an editor’s, and I’d been involved in a variety of projects. Recently, a lot of my work was being the intermediary between clients and creators.

“I’m really grateful to you, Yumemi. Any other company would have fired their new hire that came in one day and suddenly said they were now a parent.”

I took Miu in right when I’d started working at Light Ship ten years ago. From a human resources perspective, it must have seemed like a cruel joke for the woman who’d claimed in her interview to have no plans to get married or have a child to suddenly declare she’s a single mother. And naturally, right after I started at Light Ship, I took many half-days and PTO days to deal with all the preschool events and early pick-ups due to fevers and whatever else have you. I honestly wouldn’t have blamed them for firing me.

But that's not what happened. Yumemi made many accommodations for me after I became a parent—she prepared systems that made it possible for people to cover for me when I had to leave early or take a day off on short notice, and she'd even allowed for me to work from home.

"It's nothing to thank me for," Yumemi insisted. "It's only natural for a company to create an environment that allows its employees to work to their fullest potential. Also...not as the president, but as another woman, I wanted to support you. It was a big decision you made, raising your sister's child."

"Yumemi..."

"The girl you took in, Miu, she's in high school now, right? She's getting to an age where you don't have to be as hands-on anymore. Isn't it time you started thinking about your own happiness, Ayako?"

"'My own happiness'?"

"I'm saying, why don't you get a boyfriend or something?" Yumemi teased me with the tone of a drunk. I was at a loss for words at the sudden change in topic.

"A b-boyfriend? I, uh..."

"You haven't dated anyone all this time out of consideration for Miu, right? You've held back for ten years. I think you should lift the dating ban."

"I wasn't really holding back—"

"Love is good, Ayako. Your work becomes more fulfilling when you're in love."

"It's hard to believe you when you've been divorced three times."

"I'm a woman of many loves." Yumemi laughed.

She didn't even care that I'd bad-mouthed her. Her three divorces had all been caused by her infidelity—Yumemi Oinomori was just that kind of uninhibited, exuberant woman. She was making loads of money, but it was all being used up to pay alimony. She usually had three boyfriends at a time. I respected her as a *business*woman, but I couldn't say the same for how I felt about her as a woman.

"Yumemi," I sighed. "I have no plans of dating any time soon. The most important thing to me right now is my daughter, Miu."

I had made up my mind when I took in Miu ten years ago—I decided to raise my sister's child the right way. I'd never experienced marriage or childbirth, but the me who became a mother was no longer in the same position as a single woman. I wasn't in any position to be irresponsibly dating people.

If I'd dated someone and it'd progressed to marriage, that person would have become Miu's step-father. Miu and I already had the gap between us of not being mother and daughter in the truest sense—if a "stranger" were to have joined our family, it would have been an even bigger burden on Miu.

"Earlier you said it was time for my own happiness, but right now, I'm plenty happy." *I have a daughter I love, and I'm doing the work I want to do under a boss that I (technically) respect. It would be too much to want anything more.*

"I see. It's a shame that someone as beautiful as you feels that way. Aren't you at the age where you go into heat and miss human contact? A woman's sex-drive goes insane after she hits thirty. You must not know what to do with that remarkable body of yours, having to relieve your urges night after nigh—"

"Yumemi. It's still sexual harassment even if the boss is a woman."

"Oops, my bad," she said, possibly fearing being sued and finishing the conversation.

"Well, it's not that I don't want a man in my life, it's just that I can't think about it right now. At the very least, not until my daughter becomes an adult... No, not until she graduates and finds a job. Until then, I'll be focusing on being a mother."

"After she graduates would mean you'd be pushing forty, right?"

"It is what it is. If I can't get married, I'll have my daughter's husband provide for me," I joked.

After finishing up my workday at home early, I began to make preparations for the night. I cooked some food and picked up a cake I had ordered. Miu also helped with preparations once she got home from school.

We were holding a party at our house tonight—it was Takkun's belated birthday party. I cleared my throat and began speaking. "Well then, in

celebration of the twentieth birthday of Takumi Aterazawa, the Katsuragi family's beloved neighbor! Cheers!"

Following my toast, three champagne glasses clinked together at the center of the table, and a dulcet tone rang out. The glasses were filled with a non-alcoholic sparkling wine since Miu couldn't drink.

"Thank you for going out of your way to celebrate my birthday," Takkun said, smiling bashfully. He sat across from me at the table lined with various party foods like salad, roast beef, and pizza.

"Of course we would celebrate your birthday! You're like family to us, Takkun. Here you go," I said, handing him a plate I'd prepared for him.

"Thank you," he said, slightly bowing his head. "I'm really glad you'd go out of your way for me. You even prepared a feast for me."

"It's really no big deal. A lot of it is store bought too. You must've had a bigger celebration with your family yesterday."

"We just went out for dinner. Honestly, I prefer getting to eat your cooking, Miss Ayako."

"My, my. You won't get anything extra for complimenting me, you know?"

Oh Takkun... So honest and cute. Can he become my son-in-law now?

"Taku's twenty, huh?" Miu sentimentally muttered. She had served herself some salad and had been munching on it before she chimed in. "I can't believe it. You know, if you commit a crime from now on, they won't keep you anonymous and they'll use your real name in the reports. You gotta be careful."

"Why would I need to be careful of that? I'm not going to commit any crimes."

"I don't know about that... It's always some Goody Two-shoes like you who ends up becoming a wanted criminal."

"If you keep saying rude things like that, I'll give you double the homework."

"What?! That's an abuse of power! Hold on, why are you still my tutor? Entrance exams are over, so I shouldn't need one anymore!"

“I asked him if he’d keep helping you out,” I said. Miu seemed unhappy with that. “Miu, you were only able to barely—miraculously—pass your classes thanks to Takkun. If you get complacent now, you’ll easily fall behind.”

“What? C’mon...”

“My daughter may need a lot of work, but please keep taking care of her, Takkun.”

“Of course. I won’t hold back with her.”

“Boo.” Miu unhappily protested as Takkun and I laughed.

“Oh, right, I just remembered,” I said as I stood up. I headed to get something from the depths of the kitchen. “Ta-da! Wine I got as a gift!” I said, proudly holding up the bottle before setting it down on the table. “Hee hee, I got it a little while ago from an author I worked with. Would you like to drink together in celebration of you turning twenty, Takkun?”

“What...? Is that all right? It looks so expensive.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay. I don’t really drink alone, so it’s just been sitting there.” I didn’t dislike alcohol, but I wasn’t the type of person to drink on my own—not to mention it would’ve been shameful to get drunk alone in front of my daughter. “It would make me really happy if you drank with me, Takkun.”

“Well, if that’s the case, then I’d love to.” Takkun happily nodded.

Yay! It’s an expensive bottle after all. It should be shared.

I uncorked the bottle and began to pour the wine into prepared glasses. As the red liquid mixed with the air, a floral fragrance immediately spread.

“Wow, that smells great! That’s some expensive wine for you.”

“You two always get to have fun,” Miu said, puffing her cheeks and sulking. “Hey, mom, can I have some too?”

“You cannot. You’re just a highschooler fresh off the vine, so you can just enjoy the smell.”

“Don’t be so strict! A little won’t hurt.”

“No, you can’t. You know, recently regulations around underage drinking

have gotten really strict, and you can't even do it as a joke. If we want to have a scene like that, we have to age up the characters or have them just get drunk off the scent. People in production have actually gotten really creative and—"

"Whatever, just give me some!" Miu exclaimed, completely ignoring my accidental venting about publishing industry woes. She jumped out of her seat and reached out to grab the wine glass in my hand.

"Hey, Miu!"

"Just one sip! Just give me one sip."

"No! You need to let go."

"Be careful you two—" Takkun chimed in, but it was too late.

"Oh." Miu and I reacted simultaneously. The wine glass that Miu and I were fighting over tipped down, and the contents splashed all over Takkun, who'd been trying to intervene.

Takkun had gone to the washroom to wash off his face and hair after the generous splash of wine that had landed on his head. I left cleaning up the living room to Miu and prepared a towel for him before heading to the washroom.

“Here, Takkun. Use this.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m sorry, it’s all our fault.”

“It’s no problem at all. It was an accident, after all,” Takkun said with a kind smile.

What a good boy.

“If you’re uncomfortable, you can go ahead and take a shower here,” I offered. “I still have the clothes you used when you stayed over before.”

It was right before Miu’s exams. Takkun had called it “study camp” and stayed over for around a week for the final stretch of exam preparations. He did occasionally stop by his house, though, since it was right next door.

I suddenly felt a little mischievous and couldn’t help but tease him a bit. “If you’d like...we could bathe together.”

“What?!” Takkun blushed bright red, just as planned. His reaction was priceless.

“I’ll wash your back to make up for spilling wine all over you,” I continued.

“Wh-What are you talking about...?”

“Hee hee, there’s no need to be so embarrassed. We’ve taken a bath together before, you know?” I giggled at how completely perplexed Takkun seemed.

“That... That was ten years ago...”

“Heh heh, I’m sorry. Rest assured, I was just joking.”

Takkun was silent for a moment before responding. “Please don’t tease me like that.”

“Anyway, I’ll bring over a change of clothes, so just wait here, okay?”

I left the washroom and opened up the door to the hallway closet.

Let's see, I think they were right around here...Oh, there we go!

"Takkun, are these clothes ok— Aah!" I let out a small scream upon opening the door to the changing room. Takkun had already taken off his dirty shirt, so he was naked from the waist up, and I got an eyeful of his slim yet toned body.

"Oh, I-I'm sorry."

"N-No no, I apologize for opening the door so suddenly. Um, I-I'll leave your change of clothes here." I set the clothes down on a shelf to his side and shut the door as if I were running away. With my back to the door, I let out a sigh.

After the sense of shame passed, I felt a tinge of self-loathing.

I'm getting flustered over seeing a man naked from the waist up? Am I a schoolgirl or something? Reacting like a middle-schooler at my age... How embarrassing... What even was that sound I let out? Maybe that'd fly if I had seen him from the waist down.

But...yeah. He had himself a real man's body, didn't he? Well muscled, good bone structure... The kind of impeccable body any young man would be happy to have. Just speaking objectively, of course.

Really, just one look at him and you can tell he's not at an age where we can take baths together anymore. He's no longer the adorable young boy from next door. He's a grown man, one who's old enough to drink alcohol, no less.

We resumed the party after Takkun finished changing. The three of us enjoyed the food together and ended things with the cake I'd picked up earlier. Before I knew it, three hours had passed.

"It's gotten pretty late," I said while glancing at the clock hanging on the wall, wine glass in one hand. It was already past ten o'clock, and all the food was gone except for some cheese and crackers to snack on.

Miu said she was tired and left during the party, and she was already fast asleep in her room. She hadn't had a drop of alcohol, but maybe the smell had gotten to her. Currently, it was just me and Takkun in the living room.

"Don't you have to get going soon?"

"Thanks, but I'm fine to stick around. I don't have a curfew, and I've already

told my family that I might stay over tonight."

"Well, in that case, I'd love for you to keep me company a little longer," I said while pouring wine into Takkun's glass.

"Thank you."

"Oh, but be careful not to drink too much. I don't want to force you to drink or anything."

"I'll be okay. I can hold my liquor."

"Oh, really? That must mean you had your fair share of alcohol before you turned twenty, right?"

"Oh, um. I'd like to retract my last statement."

"Hee hee, all right. I'll pretend I didn't hear anything," I said as we laughed together.

Wow, I feel really good right now.

It felt nice getting drunk again for the first time in a while—and thanks to the drink du jour being an expensive wine, I even felt elegant doing so

"I can't believe it." I sighed. "To think I would be able to drink with you like this." I twirled my glass, staring at the wine swishing around inside as the words spilled out of me. "Time really flies when you get older. I turn into more and more of an old lady every day and I hardly even realize it's happening."

"You're not an old lady at all, Miss Ayako," Takkun replied.

"It's okay. You don't have to flatter me."

"It's not flattery! You're very pretty and kind, and you have a mature charm to you. That's why, um..." Takkun trailed off as if he had gotten embarrassed in the middle of finishing his thought, and his face flushed.

I was slightly happy, but also slightly embarrassed—it was a strange feeling. "Hee hee, thank you. You're the only one who says such lovely things to me, Takkun. Miu keeps treating me like an old lady these days. She's so rude," I complained before taking another sip of wine. The fruity fragrance filled my mouth, and I could feel my spirits being lifted.

“Hey, Takkun,” I leaned over. “Do you have a girlfriend?” I asked, unable to help myself.

“Wh-Why are you asking that all of a sudden?”

“Why not? Let’s dish about our love lives.”

Hmmm, I’m kind of acting like a drunk auntie. I’m not exactly proud of myself for it, but I won’t miss this chance to have a deeper conversation.

“What’s wrong, Takkun? You can tell me the truth,” I insisted while staring right at him.

“I-I don’t have a girlfriend,” Takkun answered bashfully. As if to hide his embarrassment, he chugged the rest of his wine. “If I’m being honest, I’ve never had a girlfriend before.”

“What? R-Really?” His answer was unexpected, leaving me a bit shocked.

Takkun looked slightly hurt by my reaction. “You don’t have to be so weirded out...”

“Oh, I-I’m sorry. I’m not trying to make fun of you or anything, I was just surprised because you seem like you would be popular with the ladies.”

“I’m not popular at all.”

“You’re kidding! I mean, you’re kind, and smart, and good-looking too. You also had a successful high school swimming career, didn’t you?”

“It was only at the prefectural level. Though...there were some girls who maybe sort of tried to ask me out after I won at the prefectural tournament.”

“See, I knew you were popular! You didn’t want to date any of those girls?”

“Well... It just didn’t feel right.”

“I see. So, what kinds of girls do you like?”

“What?”

“Do you like anyone right now? Even if she isn’t your girlfriend, you must at least have someone you like.”

“Th-That’s, um...” Takkun trailed off, obviously at a loss for words. He seemed

very nervous.

Oh? This reaction... Could it be? “So, there *is* someone. Not a girlfriend, but someone you like, right?”

Takkun stayed silent.

“Hee hee, of course you do. It’s only natural for guys to have a girl they’re crushing on. So, who is it? It’ll be our little secret.”

“U-Um...”

“Could it be that you’ve had unrequited feelings for this girl for a long time?”

Takkun looked shocked, giving an easy-to-read reaction to my leading question.

I knew it! His crush has to be Miu! Takkun likes my daughter after all! Wow, this is incredible! I’m so excited!

“Did you not date anyone until now because you liked this girl?”

“Um, well, y-yes...” Takkun nodded, embarrassed. “I’ve liked this person for a long time, and I couldn’t imagine dating anyone else.”

Wow, what a pure love. What should I do? My heart is pounding just hearing about it!

“Y-You’ve never thought about confessing to her?”

“I-I didn’t want to trouble her. Also, I was scared about destroying our current relationship. There’s another thing...”

“What else?”

“I was also worried about our age gap. Well, I actually don’t mind it at all, but I thought maybe that person would mind it.”

An age gap...? Oh, I see. Miu and Takkun are five years apart after all. Five years might be a big gap in a relationship between students.

“Don’t worry, Takkun, a difference in age doesn’t matter as long as there’s love,” I reassured him.

“Miss Ayako...”

“It’s silly to give up before you’ve even confessed. You won’t get anywhere if you don’t tell her how you feel. Also, if you keep dawdling, you might lose her to another guy! Are you okay with that?”

“No, I... I don’t want that to happen.”

“Then there’s only one thing to do, Takkun!” Maybe it was the alcohol speaking, but I spoke as if I were an expert on the topic. Takkun still looked confused and conflicted—that’s why I had to speak up. I was going to support his love with everything I had!

“Have more confidence in yourself. It’s okay, I know you’ll be all right. I promise, you’re a good-looking, kind, wonderful boy. So, why don’t you be brave and take that leap?

“‘Be brave’...”

The next moment, Takkun shot up out of his seat. He looked straight into my eyes, his gaze filled with passion as if the confusion and conflict he’d been feeling was all thrown aside.

“M-Miss Ayako!” His voice was slightly high, possibly from nervousness, but it was painfully clear how serious he was. “There’s something I’ve always wanted to tell you.”

“Tell *me*?”

What does he need to tell me? Oh, I see. He must want to ask for my blessing for Miu and his relationship! I get it, you want to check in with the mother before asking out the daughter. It’s very like him to be so responsible.

I was happy to say yes. My answer would be an immediate approval. If anything, I wanted to ask him to please be her partner.

“I was planning on waiting a little longer to say this... I wanted to find a job and make my own money first. But I’m going to say it after all. I can’t hold back any longer, and more than anything, I don’t want another man coming into the picture because I was dragging my feet!”

Though his gaze trembled with unease, Takkun had a look of determination befitting of a man. He proceeded to utter the words that would definitively

change our relationship.

“Miss Ayako. I... I’ve always liked you.”

I fell silent, and my mind went completely blank.



What? Huh...? I must have misheard him.

“T-Takkun? C-Come on, are you drunk? You completely messed up the most important part!”

“Huh? I m-messed it up?”

“You just said that you like... *me*...”

“What? I didn’t mess that up though,” he replied completely seriously.

Hm? Um... Huh? What? H-Hold on. Just wait a moment... What? What? What?

As I began to slightly panic, Takkun paid no attention and continued to speak, his gaze still serious.

“You’re the woman I’m in love with, Miss Ayako. It always has been you. For ten whole years, I’ve only ever been in love with you.”

I didn’t respond. I couldn’t. It felt like I’d instantly sobered up, yet at the same time, my whole body felt like it was on fire. This may have been the first time a man had told me straight to my face that he was “in love” with me. My heart was beating out of my chest, and my train of thought was stuck in place like its engine had overheated.

What is going on? What is this situation? I don’t understand.

Reaching peak confusion, I internally screamed...

You like me, not my daughter?!

Chapter 2: The Confession and the Confusion

♥

The next day, I overslept.

“Hmm...? Ah...it’s seven thirty... Wait, whaaat?!”

I was completely taken by surprise seeing the time displayed on the smartphone that I’d grabbed from beside my pillow. I jumped out of bed and rushed down the stairs.

This is bad! This is really bad!

A homemaker waking up at seven thirty in the morning was done for—after all, seven thirty was the time that my daughter had to leave for school!

“Oh, morning, mom.” Miu had just appeared from the living room as I arrived downstairs in despair. “You finally woke up.”

“Miu, I-I’m sorry. I’ll make breakfast right away.”

“It’s okay, I had some cereal,” she calmly replied. It appeared that she had already had breakfast.

Taking a closer look, I realized she was already in her uniform. Her hair was also done, and she had her school bag on her shoulder. She looked like she was ready to leave at any moment.

“I woke up early since I went to bed early yesterday. Oh, right, for lunch I’ll just buy something, so don’t worry about that.”

“I see. I’m sorry. I’ll be sure to make you lunch again tomorrow.”

“It’s okay. It’s kind of surprising that you slept in though. Did you stay up late drinking with Taku?”

The moment Takkun’s name came up, I completely froze solid. It felt like all the drowsiness in my body had been vaporized in an instant and I’d been placed on full alert.

“U-Um, I d-don’t really remember...” My voice was trembling so much it was funny, and my eyes darted around. It wasn’t that we’d stayed up late drinking—I’d gone to bed at my usual time of eleven. The only thing was that I hadn’t been able to fall asleep at all. I’d worried continuously under the covers.

“The one I like is you, Miss Ayako.”

The shocking confession I’d received before going to bed, the all-too-serious confession, had been endlessly spinning around in my head.

“What’s wrong, mom? Your face is all red. Are you okay?”

“What?!”

I quickly touched my cheek and found that my face was surprisingly hot.

“Maybe you have a fever. Should I go get the thermometer?”

“I-I’m okay! I promise I’m fine!”

“If you say so... Oh, morning, Taku.”

Before I realized it, the doorbell had rung, and my daughter’s childhood friend had arrived to pick her up as usual. My brain, which had grown ever more addled last night thinking through what’d happened at the party, was forced to snap back to reality like a rubber band that’d been pulled and let go.

“Morning, Miu,” Takkun greeted Miu before turning to me. “G-Good morning, Miss Ayako.” He sounded obviously nervous, and his expression was awkward as well—he looked uncomfortable, or rather, embarrassed.

As for me, my mind had gone completely blank. Even though I had seen him almost every day, right now I couldn’t look directly at him.

“G-Go-Good morning, Takkun... Oh!” I remembered how I was looking at the moment, shame overcoming me in an instant—I had just woken up and was in my pajamas with my hair disheveled. I tried to comb through my hair with my fingers in a panic. “I-I’m sorry you had to see me when I’m not decent!”

“What are you so flustered about? Taku’s seen you in your pajamas a bunch of times.”

Miu’s cold jab calmed me down. She was right, he had seen me in my pajamas

multiple times when he'd stayed over. He had also seen me without my makeup—actually, he had even woken me up before.

Aaaagh! How embarrassing! What am I doing?! Why am I reacting like a schoolgirl in the middle of puberty?!

I was embarrassed by the fact that I was embarrassed to be seen in my pajamas, rather than the fact that I was seen in my pajamas itself.

Reacting like this...it's like... It's like I'm suddenly seeing Takkun as a man...

"Miu, would you mind going on ahead?" Takkun said as I stayed flustered with confusion. "I have something to talk about with your mom."

"Huh? I guess I don't mind." Miu looked puzzled, but she put her shoes on and left the entryway without asking any further questions.

The door shut behind her—the moment we were left alone, an indescribable amount of tension filled the room.

After a moment of silence, Takkun spoke up. "Did you sleep in? That's rare for you."

"Y-Yeah, I couldn't really sleep..."

"I couldn't sleep at all last night either," Takkun said, looking straight at me. It was the same, scarily serious gaze. "Miss Ayako, I—"

"It's okay! I understand! It's all right!" Without realizing it, I had raised my voice as if to cut off his words, as if to reject what would come next. "I'll pretend I didn't hear what you said yesterday!"

"What...?"

"So, you don't have to worry about it either, Takkun. It was, um... You were drunk, right? That's why you were in a strange mood, right? I understand, I get it!"

"Miss Ayako...I—"

"L-Let's forget about it. Both of us can forget all about yesterday. I-It's all okay... At my age, I'm not so naive that I would take something said in the presence of alcohol seriously, so—"

“Miss Ayako!” Takkun exclaimed. I shrunk at his strong raised voice. “Why would you say that?” Takkun looked shaken—he seemed angry, but also saddened. “It’s true that I got a little bit drunk and might have been in a weird mood. There was some part of me that said what I said because I was under the influence... But everything I said was true.”

I didn’t respond, and Takkun continued to speak.

“I’ve liked you for a very long time. A very, *very* long time,” he said, repeating his words as if there was nothing stopping him anymore—his words that he used to convey his feelings towards me. “I’m sure you just see me as a brat still scrounging off his parents. I’ve thought about giving up on my feelings many times, but at the end of the day, I still like you. I would genuinely like to date you.”

“Takkun...”

“You don’t have to give me an answer right away...but it would make me happy if you’d at least consider reciprocating my feelings.” Then he said his goodbyes and left the entryway.

I felt weak and fell to my knees on the spot. “He was...serious...” It hadn’t been a joke.

If what he’d said yesterday had been a joke—like if he’d been pretending to have feelings for me to get a cheap laugh or something—that would have been mortifying in itself. Indeed, it would have felt awful, but...if I was being honest, some part of me wanted him to be joking. That was the part of me that had tried to get him to pass it off as a joke so we could both let it go and forget about it.

But Takkun’s sincerity and passion wouldn’t allow for me to run away from his feelings with cheap tricks. Takkun was serious, prepared to burn bridges, and I couldn’t back down from giving him an honest response—I would have to face Takumi Aterazawa’s genuine love head-on.

“Takkun likes me...for real...and he’s liked me for a long time and had these unrequited feelings... Aaagh!” I held my head as I agonized over the situation. I was in a horrible embarrassing state, sitting in my entryway in my pajamas, and I couldn’t wrap my head around what was going on. I was at my limit. “Wh-

What do I do?”

♠

“Takumi, wake up.”

I felt my shoulder being shaken and immediately opened my eyes. This was room 102 in the economics department lecture building, and I had fallen asleep at some point during the lecture for my mandatory modern economics course. I quickly looked up only to find that the professor was gone, and the other students had already gotten up from their seats.

“Shoot...”

“I took notes for most of the key points. Wanna copy them?”

“If you don’t mind, thanks.”

“No worries. You’re always helping me anyways,” Satoya said with a saccharine smile. He handed me his notes, which listed the key points of the lecture in his pretty handwriting.

Satoya Ringo was short with a dainty figure. His face made him look young enough that he could pass for a middle schooler, and he had his long hair tied back—we really didn’t look like we were the same age. His clothes were very fashionable, and his taste shone through in his choice of accessories and trinkets. Even though he was a guy—and maybe it’s old-fashioned of me to put it that way—he had his nails painted a bold color. To put it simply, he was a fashionable good-looking guy with a cute face.

He was a friend from the same major that I’d met in college, and we even attended the same seminars now. We ended up doing a lot of things together because we had picked most of the same lectures as well.

“It’s rare for you to be sleeping during class.”

“I didn’t sleep much yesterday.”

“Oh? Were there any assignments that required staying up like that?”

“No, it wasn’t an assignment, but...”

“Then that would mean...were you up thinking about the mommy next

door?”

I held my tongue. “Looks like I hit the nail on the head,” Satoya carried on, twisting his baby face into a mean-spirited grin. “You’re so easy to read, Takumi. You probably couldn’t ever cheat.”

“Shut up,” I responded bitterly. Despite my tone, we left the lecture room and headed to the cafeteria together.

Lunch time was crowded at the cafeteria. We purchased food tickets and got in line. I got curry, while Satoya got a loco moco bowl. We took our food to some open seats and sat down.

“What, no way... You confessed? Really?” Satoya said, eyes widened in surprise after hearing what had happened.

I had already told Satoya about my feelings for Miss Ayako, about how I had been in love with the mother next door for the past ten years. The other night, when we drank at her house together, I’d let my feelings slip without thinking.

“Hm, hmm... Wow. I gotta be honest, that’s pretty funny.”

“It’s not funny! It’s serious for me.”

“I know, but I can’t help but get kind of pumped up. I mean, my best friend finally pushed his ten years’ worth of love one step forward,” he said, unable to hide his excitement.

Damn it. Must be nice when it’s not your problem.

I sighed, still unable to believe what had happened. The fact that I’d been able to speak my feelings seemed out of the question for me—just remembering it made me feel like I could die from the embarrassment.

It would sound cool if I could say that I had no regrets, but that wouldn’t have been the truth. I had several—no, many regrets. After getting in bed, I’d spent the night suffering in agony. I’d thought about how I wanted to turn back time over and over. Yesterday, I’d crossed a line that I would never be able to turn back from.

“You really did like her, huh?” Satoya said as if he were impressed, looking into the distance.

“Did you think I was lying?”

“Well, it’s not that, but there was a part of me that couldn’t believe that you had a ten-year-long unrequited love for your childhood friend’s mother who’s a decade older than you.”

I remained silent. I could understand where he was coming from. If you were to look at it through the lens of common sense in Japan, falling in love with your childhood friend’s mother was probably not normal. I knew that already—and I’d continued to be in love with Miss Ayako these past ten years fully aware of that. I continued to want to date her.

“What was it again? You started to like her after you took a bath together when you were ten and saw her naked?”

“N-No, jeez. Don’t talk about me like I’m some pervert.”

“But you *have* taken a bath together before, right?”

I didn’t respond. *I mean, I have. We took a bath together, and I got an eyeful of her naked body.*

At the time, Miss Ayako herself had shown no signs of trying to hide anything. She’d probably had her guard down because I was just ten years old, but because of that, I’d seen *everything,* including parts I shouldn’t have.

“Unable to forget her bare body, you’re still in love with her... Wow, Takumi, that’s pretty perverted for you. It’s a little stalker-esque.”

“Shut up. It’s not like bathing together is the only reason.”

I do honestly find it a little sad that I can’t deny that the bath we took together made me rapidly start to think of her as a woman.

But it wasn’t just that. It couldn’t be reduced to just that—my unrequited feelings of ten years weren’t something that could be described in a single phrase.

“Well, it is incredible in some ways. After all, you’ve had unrequited feelings for one woman for ten years without paying attention to any other women. Maybe perversion and pure love are two sides of the same coin,” Satoya continued, speaking in an all-knowing tone. “I guess I can understand finding a

friend's young and beautiful mom charming. Honestly, even though my own mom just looks like an old lady to me, I've had the experience of finding someone else's mom weirdly sexy... But those experiences are usually childhood fantasies. Normally, the spell is broken pretty quickly."

I stayed silent, but Satoya continued. "For you, Takumi, you've continued to hold onto that fantasy even after you've turned twenty. After letting it age for that long, a fantasy could probably turn into reality," he said with a tone that made it hard to tell if he was admiring me or making fun of me.

Satoya reached his hand out to my head and continued. "Regardless, I'm glad you were able to tell her your feelings. Good work on the confession. Well done! You're worthy of my praise."

"Shut up, don't do that," I said, brushing off the hand he was trying to pat my head with.

"I gotta say though, confessing because you were drunk *is* just a little lame."

"I-I guess it is after all..." That was my biggest regret—even if I was going to confess, the circumstances needed to be considered. "I-It was partially Miss Ayako's fault too. She started giving me relationship advice and said things like 'If there's someone you like, you need to tell her how you feel,' and...my feelings just got roused all at once."

"That was probably because she never would have guessed that she was the person you liked. She was probably really surprised."

"Yeah...she probably was."

Seeing how she'd acted last night and this morning, it was painfully clear how flabbergasted and flustered Miss Ayako was. For better or worse, it seemed that she'd had absolutely no idea that I had feelings for her.

"I kind of feel bad about it. Now she has to deal with this burden because I had to go and tell her how I feel."

"That *is* what confessing your feelings does," Satoya said as if he knew what he was talking about. "Mustering up the courage to put your feelings into words and confessing them... It's generally treated as something virtuous, but in reality, you're just selfishly dropping a bomb on your interpersonal

relationships. All is fine if it goes well, but if it fails, then it's like you got them mixed up in an accident—the whole event becomes a bundle of stress for not only the person in love but also for the person who has to reject them. Being forced to reject someone can really hurt some people."

I felt an endless depression overcome me as I considered his merciless words. What Satoya said was completely true. I had dropped an enormous bomb on my life—it was a lethal weapon that exploded existing interpersonal relationships to the point that they couldn't maintain their original states, dressed up with a pretty phrase like "confessing your feelings."

Miss Ayako and I probably can't go back to the way things were. Even if she says "Let's keep things the way they are" she probably won't smile at me the same way ever again. She probably won't ever treat me as just her daughter's childhood friend ever again. I selfishly shattered the relationship I'd built up with her over ten years into pieces.

"I guess your future depends on Miss Ayako's response."

"Yeah..."

I still hadn't gotten a response. Or, more accurately, I got scared and delayed closure. Both last night and this morning, I ran away without hearing her response. I said that she didn't have to respond right away, as if I could afford to wait, but that wasn't the case at all—I was just afraid of hearing her answer. But I couldn't hold it off forever.

I sighed deeply. I would have been lying if I said I didn't regret my impulsive, tipsy confession, but there was a part of me that had prepared for it. Sooner or later, I think I would have ended up in this situation. I was at my limit, both with having these feelings stay unrequited, and with her not thinking of me in that way at all. I felt hopeless, hurt, frustrated, and sad that the woman I had fallen for wouldn't see me as a man and continued to treat me as a child. I couldn't take it anymore.

♥

That day, I wasn't able to get many chores done. Each time Takkun's confession popped back into my head, my mind would go blank—and whenever I tried to forget about it by focusing on something else, it wouldn't be long before I could hear his words ringing in my ears again.

How many years has it been since a man asked me out?

I'd had guys ask me to be their girlfriend a few times when I was a student, but this was different. This may have been the first time in my life that I'd received such a serious and earnest confession. Takkun's feelings came across so clearly that it hurt, which was why I was going dizzy and at my wit's end.

"I'm home. Hey mom, what's for din— What's all this?" Before I knew it, Miu was home and raising her voice in shock at the disastrous state of the living room. The laundry was partially folded, the vacuum was still out, and my laptop and documents were splayed across the table—everything had been left unfinished.

This messy, cluttered room is a lot like my heart right now...

"What's wrong, mom? What's all this?"

"Oh, welcome back, Miu... Oh no, it's already this late?" I got up from the couch I had been laying on as if I were dragging my body up. It was already past five o'clock. I'd meant to just take a quick break, but I'd ended up spending a full three hours stewing in my thoughts. "I'm sorry, I'll get everything cleaned up right away. Also...for tonight's dinner, would it be okay if we ate out? I haven't prepared anything."

"That's fine, but... Are you okay, mom? Are you sick? You've been weird since this morning."

"I-I'm okay, I'm completely fine..." I said, brushing her off and beginning to put away the laundry.

"Did something happen with Taku?" Miu asked with a dubious look. Startled, I dropped all of the clothes I was holding.

"Wh-What...? Why would you think that?"

“Both of you were acting weird this morning... Did something happen after I went to bed last night?”

“N-No-Nothing happened! Why would anything have happened? Ha ha, don’t be so silly Miu! Jeez... H-Ha ha!” I tried my best to act like nothing was wrong and headed to the fridge to grab a drink. My throat was dried out from the nervousness and panic.

“Oh, I bet I know... Did Taku confess his feelings to you?” she offered, dropping a bomb on me ever so casually.

“Wha— Ouch!” The bolt from the blue was immediately followed by a bonk to the head—I was so flustered I had forgotten to stop walking and ran into the fridge. A strong *thunk* came from the impact. “Ugh! O-Oooouch...” I grabbed my forehead and curled up on the spot.

“So...that’s what happened after all?” Miu said between sighs.

“N-No! No, y-you’re wrong! Just now, that wasn’t because of what you said _”

“I see, I see. So, he’s finally confessed.”

“...it’s a health regimen where you apply force to your temple, and... What?”

“Wow, it’s really taken so long.”

I was utterly confused. “H-Hold on, Miu... Give me a second here. Um, okay, so...” *Let me think this through. Why is Miu so calm? Our emotional states are the polar opposites. Why isn’t she surprised? Takkun confessed to me! He said that he likes me! Shouldn’t this be a huge deal?! Unless...*

“...you knew?”

“Do you mean, did I know about how Taku likes you?”

“Y-Yeah...”

Th-This is embarrassing! Having it said again like this is embarrassing! My daughter saying it makes it even more embarrassing!

“It’s not really that I knew, but you could tell, especially with how obvious Taku was. It seemed like you yourself didn’t notice at all. If anything, you

misunderstood to such an incredible degree that you thought he was into me.”

Her words left me stunned.

“Jeez, I can’t tell whether you’re just slow on the uptake or if you just straight-up don’t have a sense for this kind of thing at all...”

“W-Well...” I mustered up a rebuttal as my daughter glared at me scornfully. “There was no way I could tell. I’m an entire decade older than Takkun. From his perspective, I shouldn’t be anything more than some old lady... Just an old lady from his neighborhood...”

I made myself sad saying that... However, as sad as it was, it was the truth. My current self was probably a full-fledged old lady in the eyes of the youth. When I was twenty, even I myself thought that being in your thirties meant you were an old lady. It’s only natural, then, that I’d never expected this would happen, not even in my dreams—I’d never have begun to imagine a boy who was more than ten years younger than me would be romantically interested in me.

“To me, you’re just an old lady, but obviously Taku doesn’t see you that way,” Miu said. She sounded like she was trying to cheer me up, but she wasn’t exactly hitting the mark. “Age gaps don’t matter as long as there’s love, right?”

“Well...” I had said the same words to Takkun. I didn’t expect that the phrase I’d impulsively blurted out would come back to haunt me like this. “I was convinced that Takkun liked you, Miu...”

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: you’ve got it all wrong.”

“But Takkun comes by every day to take you to school...”

“Because he wants to see you.”

“He tutored you so enthusiastically for your exams...”

“Because you asked him to.”

“Wh-What about that time I had a really bad cold and had to stay in bed, and he took care of me the entire time without sleeping to lessen the burden on you...”

“No matter how you look at it, that was all for you.”



After having all my points rebutted with cold, hard logic, there wasn’t anything more I could say.

Huh. Wait a minute. Could it be that...everything he's done up to this point that I thought he was doing for Miu was something he was doing for me?

"So Takkun comes by every day because he likes me, and he helped with your exams because he likes me, and he took care of me when I had a cold because... What? Does Takkun *love* me or something?!"

"Yeah, he probably does love you."

"What...? Ugh... Aaagh! Waaah!" I completely lost the ability to use my words and had no choice but to curl up into a ball.

Why me? I still don't get it. Why would a twenty-year-old boy be in love with an old lady like me?

"So, what are you gonna do?" Miu asked as I was about to die of shame.

"What do you mean?"

"Are you going to date Taku or not?"

"I-I can't answer that so suddenly..."

"Just so you know, you don't have to worry about me," Miu said casually as she moved to sit on the couch.

"I'm fifteen now. I don't plan on sticking my nose in who my parent dates. If anything, I want to support you."

"S-Support me?"

"Yeah. I think I'd be happy if you and Taku got married."

"Married?! Wh-What are you talking about?!" My mind had already been racing from him telling me he had feelings for me—I hadn't thought about anything past that.

Marriage. Takkun and I getting married... Agh! No, I shouldn't be thinking about this!

"I like Taku," Miu playfully said, ignoring the panic that was overcoming me. She continued to say ridiculous things. "He's not my type romantically, but I like him as a person, and there are things I honestly respect about him. I could call Taku 'dad.' That sounds pretty good to me! It could be pretty awesome to have

such a young dad.”

“Th-That’s enough, Miu. You shouldn’t be making fun of adults.”

“I’m not making fun of you at all.” Miu then cast her gaze slightly downward and let out a small sigh. The light atmosphere was gone, and her tone became more serious. “I’ve felt some, like, guilt? I’ve felt a little bit of something like that, because you sacrificed your twenties for a ‘stranger’ like me.”

I was stunned speechless, and I felt my chest tightening. “If you think about it, it’s my fault that someone as beautiful as you hasn’t dated, right? Sacrificing your own life for me—”

“Miu, how could you say that?” I cut her off with a strong tone. *I have to say this. Those words need to be refuted.* “I don’t think of you as a ‘stranger’ at all. Also, I’ve never thought that I sacrificed my own life for you. If anything, it’s the opposite. You don’t know how many things you’ve given me...” I could feel the emotion building up in my voice. My eyes gradually began to warm up, and tears were about to fall. “Miu, do you remember the day you called me ‘mom’ for the first time? How long after I took you in was that—”

“All right, all right. You don’t have to do all that,” Miu said, waving my story away in annoyance. Her expression was stone cold, like she was the inverse of my current emotional state. “I don’t need that kind of cliché, touching story.”

“What?!”

What do you mean ‘cliché’? I was about to tell a really good story! I was supposed to create a surge of emotions by telling the story of my best memory, and then we were supposed to have a passionate mother-daughter hug!

“Every time you’ve had a drink recently, you start crying and telling that story. I’m over it.”

“Oh...”

“In any case, maybe calling it a sacrifice was a poor choice of words. Still, even if you wouldn’t say you sacrificed your twenties entirely, you probably wanted to be considerate of me and held back on dating and stuff, right?”

“W-Well...”

Well, there was probably some part of me that did that.

I was never the kind of person who actively went after love or looked for men, so there was a chance that I wouldn't have found a good partner even if I hadn't already had Miu. That said, taking care of Miu may have added some extra pressure on the brakes already applied by my shy self.

"Hey, mom? I want you to know, I think of you as my real mom," Miu said. Though her words were extremely touching, her tone was relatively nonchalant. "You think of me as your real daughter, right?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"Then you get it. Just like you want me to be happy, I want you to be happy too," she explained. I didn't know how to respond.

"It's nice that you put me first, but why don't you try putting your own life first?"

I couldn't argue against any of what she'd said—she had completely refuted me. I had been completely silenced by her sound points.

"You've really grown up, Miu," I said like a sore loser. My fifteen-year-old daughter appeared to be much more mature than I'd expected, having picked up quite the profound worldview. As a parent I had mixed feelings about this—I was happy, yet at the same time, I felt pathetic.

Chapter 3: Daily Life and Change

♥

If someone were to confess their feelings to you, saying, “I like you. Please go out with me,” and on top of that said, “You don’t have to give me your answer right away,” most people would probably try to not see that person for a while. Not only would it be rude to make contact before giving an answer, but it would also just be awkward. It’s polite for the person who received the confession to avoid the person whose feelings they’re considering as much as possible until they can offer a definitive answer.

However, life isn’t always full of convenient circumstances. If the person who confessed their feelings to you is someone you see on a daily basis, both you and that person have to live your lives as you had been while dealing with that awkwardness and nervousness.

Such were the circumstances that Takkun and I had to live in. At the end of the day, we were next door neighbors. Regardless of what resulted from his confession, we would probably have a lot of points of contact in our lives moving forward. Currently, Takkun was coming by every morning to take my daughter to school, and I had also asked him to tutor my daughter.

In turn, such were the circumstances that led to today, a day where Takkun would be coming over to tutor my daughter. The doorbell rang close to five in the afternoon, a little bit before the time we had agreed on.

“What...? Oh, just a moment!” I called out from the shower. While cleaning the bathtub, I’d put the valve on the wrong setting, and my head had been doused in shower water. I was over the whole thing and just decided to take a shower, which led me to the current situation. “I can’t believe it... He’s already here?” I muttered to myself.

I was going to be finished before Takkun got here...Why is it always days like this that he has to arrive early?

A familiar voice called out from the front door, saying, “Excuse me.” Just as I

had suspected, it was definitely Takkun.

"Miu! Hey, Miu! I can't get it, so could you... Oh, right. She went out to buy something." Miu had left not too long ago, saying that she was going to the convenience store. It was true that when it rains, it pours. I shut off the shower and thought about what to do.

Wh-What should I do...? I can't make him wait too long, but answering the door in just a bath towel would be embarrassi— Hold on.

I was sure that something similar had happened before. It was one year ago, and just like now, Takkun had come over when I was in the shower. I thought back to what I did a year ago.

"Hello. Welcome, Takkun."

"Oh, hello— Wait, M-Miss Ayako?! Why are you dressed like that?!"

"I apologize for how I look. I was right in the middle of showering."

"Even so...y-you shouldn't do that. You should wear some clothes."

"Hee hee. Aww, Takkun. Why are you so flustered? Did I maybe turn you on?"

"Wha?! Um, I..."

"Just kidding, hee hee. A young boy like you wouldn't be interested in an old lady body like mine."

"Th-That's..."

"Um... It would be embarrassing if the neighbors saw though, so it would be nice if you could shut the door..."

"Oh! I-I'm sorry!"

That was it! My past self just kept calm even in this kind of situation and casually played it off as a mundane occurrence.

If that's what I did before, then it would be natural to do the same today!

If I handled this situation differently—if I went out of my way to wear clothes to answer the door even though it was the same situation—then that would be like I was being overly conscious of things! It would be like I was suddenly thinking of him as a man because of the confession! That meant there was only

one thing to do.

Determined, I reached out for my bath towel.

“W-W-Welcome...” I greeted him with my trembling voice as I opened the door.

“Oh, hello— Huh?!” Takkun exclaimed in surprise, leaning backwards. “M-Miss Ayako?! Wh-Why are you dressed like that?!”

Takkun’s reaction was pretty much the same as last time. His face was bright red, and he was completely flustered.

His reaction hasn’t changed. I’m the one who’s changed...

“S-S-Sorry! Th-The shower, in the shower! Sorry for...for how I l-look...” Frantic and embarrassed, I was getting tongue tied, and my voice had gone unnaturally high. Though I was attempting to mimic my attitude from a year ago, I was completely unable to.

Why? Why is it like this? Why am I so embarrassed?

Well, I am *completely naked with just one bath towel wrapped around my body...of course this is embarrassing. After all, I’m butt naked under the towel!*

It was somewhat embarrassing a year ago, but that was nothing compared to my current embarrassment. My body felt like it was on fire, and I felt like I was about to breathe flames.

I can’t look directly at Takkun. This is bad. This is really bad.

Things were different from a year ago—my current self was completely seeing Takkun as a man. After knowing how he saw me, it was unbearably embarrassing to be standing in front of him dressed like this.

Well, this was probably a failure. No matter how you look at it, it’s a failure. What am I doing...? This is just what a pervert does.

Now that I was thinking about it, I felt like the last time I was at least wearing underwear. At the very least I hadn’t been some nymphomaniac who answered the door without her underwear on.

Wait. Does that mean right now, at this age, I’m doing something

unbelievably embarrassing...?

“Y-You can’t do that, Miss Ayako... Even if you were showering, a woman shouldn’t answer the door dressed like that...” Takkun responded with a perfectly reasonable argument as I trembled in shock at my lack of underwear. “What would you do if the visitor had been a strange man and he tried to assault you?”

“C-Come on, you’re worrying too much Takkun. It’s one thing to be worried about a young girl like Miu, but no one is going to assault an old lady like me—”

“That’s not true!” Takkun said firmly, cutting off my self-deprecation. He then closed the door behind him and continued in a softer voice. “You’re not an old lady, Miss Ayako. You’re incredibly beautiful and womanly. At the very least, there’s one guy right here who’s so turned on that every bone in his body is begging him to take you to bed.”

“What...? J-Jeez, what are you even saying...?”

“I-I’m sorry, but I can’t help it when the woman I like is standing in front of me dressed like that.”

“The... The woman you like?”

Takkun looked right into my eyes, his own filled with embarrassment and yearning.

I’ll completely lose my mind if you keep looking at me like that... It felt like my shame was boiling over and making me go crazy.

“Um, r-regardless...I think you should stop answering the door dressed like that.”

“I-I know. It’s not like I do this with just anyone. I knew it was you at the door, so...”

“What?”

“Um, n-no, I didn’t mean it like that! It’s not like I was trying to seduce you by looking sexy!”

“I-It’s okay! I understand!”

We were in a frenzy, both of us flustered and bright red in the face. It felt like the temperature in the entryway was rising.

What am I doing...? I answered the door not even wearing underwear because I was stubborn and had to put on airs, only to get an ordinary warning from a boy quite younger than me. As an adult, it's embarrassing.

As I was spiraling in self-loathing, Miu came home from the convenience store, as if to kick me when I was down. "I'm home," she announced with a bag of ice cream in one hand.

"Oh, you're already here Taku... Wait, mom? Why are you dressed like that?"

"U-Um. This isn't... It's not, um..." I said, scrambling to find an excuse.

"Oh, I see," Miu said as a malicious smile appeared on her face. "It seems that your relationship's progressed quite a bit without me knowing."

"What?"

"Well then, I'll be waiting in my room, so take your time until you're ready to tutor me. We don't really have to do tutoring today either."

"What? Oh...W-Wait, Miu!" I desperately called out for her, but she ignored me and made her way to the second floor. "What should we do? She might have gotten some wild ideas from seeing us like this."

"I think she actually knows what's going on and is just teasing us by pretending to misunderstand."

"I-I see..." I let out a sigh of relief. Thinking about it calmly, however, there wasn't really anything I could be relieved about. Not only had my daughter seen me like this, but she teased me about it—I completely lost face as a mother.

"Miss Ayako...did you maybe talk to Miu about what happened with us?"

"I-I didn't talk about it...but she just kind of noticed. It seemed like she, um, already picked up on it."

"Oh...I see. I guess I *was* pretty obvious," Takkun said, laughing nervously.

What? Was he really obvious? Just how dense am I if I didn't realize it when he was so obvious?

I cleared my throat and spoke up. “Um, well. So, Takkun.” I did my best to be cool-headed in both my tone and attitude. “Since you came early... Could I have a moment with you before you do your tutoring?”

“A moment?”

“There’s something I’d like to talk about,” I said. “A serious conversation between just the two of us.”

Takkun was silent for a moment before responding. “Dressed like that?”

“A-After I get dressed!” I jabbed while taking a step forward. Suddenly, I felt a draft between my legs, cooling me down where I least wanted it. *Agh! This blows!*

“You take your coffee black, right?”

“Y-Yes.”

After I finally managed to dress myself like a responsible adult, I prepared some drinks for us with my Dolce Gusto. We sat across from each other at the table in the living room. Takkun seemed to be a little nervous, which was understandable. After all, the person he’d asked out had pulled him aside, and he was alone with her, face-to-face. Affected by his nervousness, I felt myself becoming more nervous as well.

After mentally preparing myself, I finally spoke up. “Um...W-Well, first, let’s straighten some things out.” The air was tense. “So, Takkun...You, um...l-like me, right?”

“Wha?! I, um... I see we’re getting right to it...” Takkun said embarrassedly, covering his mouth with his hand. It seemed he did that every time he was embarrassed. It was a new discovery for me—despite being acquainted with him for ten years, it appeared there were still many things I didn’t know about him.

I didn’t know. I never knew what kind of face you would make when confessing your feelings...

“Yes. I l-like you,” In spite of how embarrassed he was, he was still managing

to look straight at me. His hand went back to bashfully covering his mouth. “Please don’t make me say it out loud...”

“I-I’m sorry. Um, it was... I wanted to check just in case, like a final confirmation.” Despite my stammering, I continued. “So...what do you specifically want to happen?”

“S-Specifically...?”

“I understand that you like me, but I was wondering what you were specifically thinking of past that.”

“Well...” Takkun hesitated for a moment before a serious look appeared in his eyes, and he stared right at me. “I-I would like to date you seriously. Of course, with marriage in mind...for the future.”

“Marriage?!” I couldn’t help but be taken aback at the unexpectedly direct word that came up. “Wh-What are you talking about, Takkun...?”

“I’m sorry. You’re right, marriage doesn’t really sound convincing coming from a college student like me.”

“Oh, no, it’s not that... It’s not about you, Takkun.” It’s not that I was surprised because a kid still living off his parents brought up marriage or anything like that. “You *do* know that I’m more than ten years older than you, right, Takkun?”

“Yes, I know that.”

“Also...I have Miu. I’m unmarried, but I’m a single mother. I have a child...”

“Of course. That’s why, if you would allow it...in the future, I’d like to look after Miu with you as our daughter. I’ve always thought that it would be nice if you, Miu, and I could become a family.”

I listened silently as he continued on. “That’s also why there was a part of me that wanted to wait until I at least graduated and had a job to tell you how I feel...”

I was speechless. The more I heard what he had to say, the more I became painfully aware of how serious he was. The confession itself may have happened impulsively, but Takkun had thought about a future with me much

more earnestly than I had imagined.

My heart pounded at how sincere and devoted he was—as a woman, I couldn't help but feel endeared with him.

Ugh, what is this?! What is with *him? Why can he say such embarrassing things?! How much does he like me?! He's always been thinking of a future with me? Wait. Hold on. Always?*

"Um, Takkun...Since when did you start...um, liking me, in the first place?"

"Since when? I think since about ten years ago."

"T-Ten years?!" My eyes widened in surprise. "Ten years ago... Wouldn't that mean you were only ten years old?!"

"Yes..."

"You've liked me since you were that little?!"

"That would be the case."

I was stunned silent.

Um... Does that mean Takkun has had unrequited feelings for me for ten years?! I knew he was devoted, but that's excessive!

Ten years ago, Takkun was around ten years old. That small, cute boy was romantically interested in me this whole time?!

"When you were ten...? H-Huh...? Wait, hold on. Isn't ten years ago around the time that we met?" *I took in Miu and started living in this house with her ten years ago. I must have also come to know Takkun as one of my neighbors at around the same time.*

"Um... Basically, it was love at first sight." Takkun said, bashfully uttering words that would make me feel embarrassed once again.

P-Please stop. I'm about to die from my heart beating so fast. I can't take this sugary sweet mood anymore...

"I thought that you were pretty from the first time I saw you..." Takkun continued. "What really sealed the deal was when we took a bath together—"

"A b-bath?!" I couldn't help but interrupt the conversation.

That's right... We took a bath together once. We were drenched on a rainy day, and I offered.

Naturally, we were taking a bath, so we were both bare naked...

"W-wait a minute. Takkun. Were you...looking at me like *that* since then?"

"Looking at you like what?"

"Like... A-As a woman..."

"I, uh...!" He hesitated to answer, but his reaction was the most articulate answer. The shame surged through my body in an instant, and I felt as hot as if I were on fire.

Y-You're kidding, right? I was completely unguarded that time... Everything was out. My chest, my butt, and my...

"H-How could you...? You're horrible, Takkun..."

"Wh-What?! I didn't do anything wrong! You came in on your own that time! I tried to leave right away, but you wouldn't let me and started washing my body against my will..."

"What?! St-Stop, you're making it sound like I did something wrong to you when you were younger!"

"I didn't say that!"

"I-It wasn't like that... I only thought of you as a child back then... I mean, you didn't have any hair growing around your peepee. It was completely smooth and small like a flower bud."

"P-Please stop recalling it! It's embarrassing!"

"I-I'm more embarrassed! You've got it easy since you've grown up since then. It's probably gotten bigger by now! Meanwhile, I was already in a fully adult body! To think that you saw everything..." *What was I like at that time? I feel like I must have been walking around in front of him completely naked. I think I probably washed his body as if that were normal. I think I might've even stepped over him to get in the bath, spreading my legs wide open. Ugh, it's so embarrassing!*

“You don’t have to be so down on yourself,” Takkun said, trying to cheer me up as I was experiencing shame bordering on despair. “D-Don’t worry about it. Even if I saw things, I was looking with the values of a ten year old...so I was mostly only looking at your boobs!”

“How is that supposed to make me not worry?!” I retorted fiercely. I wanted to hide in my room and cry, but I desperately mustered everything within me and reached out for my mug. I forcibly washed down my shame with the coffee that was starting to become lukewarm. After setting down the empty cup, I continued. “I apologize for getting upset like that,” I said, adjusting the atmosphere.

Let’s calm down. Takkun didn’t do anything wrong. It’s completely my fault for treating him like a child and getting into the bath with him.

“For now...I understand the general situation and background behind it. I also am plenty aware that you’re serious.” As I spoke, relief appeared in Takkun’s face for a moment. I felt my chest twinge in pain. Desperately pushing that pain away, I carried on...

“But I can’t date you.” I said it. I said it point-blank. I had to say it—at least I thought so.

“U-Um...” Takkun’s expression froze, the color of heartbreak appearing in his eyes. I felt pain in my chest again seeing him like this, but I had to continue. I put my heart in a box and put on a mask—the mask of a member of society, a mother, and an adult.

“I really appreciate your feelings, Takkun. I should be the one apologizing for you falling in love with an old lady like me. But I need you to understand. If you use your common sense, it’s plain to see that it’s impossible for us to date.”

“‘Common sense’...?” Although his head had been hanging heavily, as if it were drowning in an ocean of despair, he suddenly lifted it back up to meet my gaze. “What’s that supposed to mean?

“What?”

“What do you mean when you say you can tell it’s impossible when you use your common sense?”

“Well, that’s... C-Common sense is common sense. You get it.”

“No, I don’t get that,” Takkun said, leaning forward. His gaze trembled with unease, yet you could see in his eyes that he was being driven by an unwavering resolve. “Even though I would be sad, I would understand if you disliked me, or if you weren’t romantically interested in college students who lived off their parents, or if you liked someone else right now. But if all you have to go on is common sense, I can’t accept that.”

“I-It’s just impossible. I mean, we have such a large age gap.”

“You said that age doesn’t matter as long as there’s love.”

“I-I may have said that...” *I only said it because I thought you liked Miu! I didn’t think it would come back to get me like this!* “...but, if you think about it realistically, at the end of the day, it’s impossible.”

“So, before it was about common sense, now it’s about what’s realistic?”

“I-It’s just impossible, both realistically and using common sense!” I firmly stated. I took a deep breath to calm myself down.

I can’t get emotional. We need to get all the way through this.

“You’re just excited by temporary feelings. Dating and marriage aren’t things that affect just the two of us. We have to worry about work, our public image...also, your parents.”

“My parents?”

“Yes. I can’t imagine they would be happy about you marrying a woman like me who’s in her thirties and has a child,” I continued. “I’m sure you know this already, but your parents went above and beyond for Miu and me. Your mother and father treated me really well when I started living here. They helped me over and over again when I was struggling with raising a child for the first time.”

There were multiple times where the Aterazawas next door looked after Miu when it was the weekend and I couldn’t get out of work. They even picked her up from preschool and elementary school when she got sick and had a fever. They helped out in many other ways as well, like with preparations to enter elementary and middle school, things related to the neighborhood association

and community association—they even gave me information on which grocery stores and gyms in the area were affordable. I had constantly been helped out by them, to the point that I'd probably relied on them more than my own parents. If it weren't for the help of Mr. and Mrs. Aterazawa, I couldn't have raised Miu up to now.

"I'm so indebted to your mother and father that I won't ever be able to repay them. That's why I need you to understand. You're the very important eldest son of that family that has looked after me so much. There's no way your parents would think well of a young man like you and an old lady with a child like me dating, right? I can't bite the hand that fed me like that."

"That may be true..." Takkun said, nodding with a gloomy expression. "I want to say I'm not getting married for my parents' sake, but that's probably the thought of a child who doesn't understand the world yet. Marriage doesn't just affect the couple after all. Also...I care about my parents and don't want to do anything that would disappoint them."

"I see. So you understand then. That's great—"

Just as I'd been about to let out a breath of relief, Takkun balled his hand into a fist and began chattering excitedly. "But you don't have to worry about that! I thought that you would worry about something like that, Miss Ayako, and that's why I already convinced my parents ahead of time!"

I was stunned silent. *Come again?*

Chapter 4: The Past and the Promise

♠

I wouldn't be able to say exactly when I fell for Ayako, and I don't think it's really all that important, but if I had to pick the precise moment, there's one day in particular that comes to mind.

The rainy season was almost over, but there was a sudden downpour that day, like the sky suddenly remembered it was supposed to rain. It was about ten years ago—around three months since Miss Ayako had taken in Miu and started living next door.

I was only ten years old. I was in elementary school, and I was much shorter than my current height. Even compared to kids my age, I was short and dainty, and because of my youthful face, I was often mistaken for a girl. My classmates teased me about my feminine face, and I was slightly self-conscious about it. Yeah, it was around that period that my feelings started to take shape.

Back then, I wasn't quite so masculine with the way I spoke. To wit, I used a cutesy nickname for Miu, and I called Miss Ayako "Mommy Ayako."

I went straight home after school as I usually did, but on my way home, I got caught in a sudden shower. I rushed home because I didn't have an umbrella on me.

"H-Huh? It won't open..." I rattled the door, trying to get it open since I was drenched, but it wouldn't open. The door was locked. "Oh...right. Mom isn't home today..."

My mom was staying at a nearby inn for her high school reunion tonight. She'd given me a key to the house and told me to use it to get inside the next day, but I'd left it on my desk and forgotten it. Since she'd assumed I'd have that key, my mom locked the doors to the house when she'd left.

"Wh-What should I do...? I-It's cold..." My clothes were soaked through all the way down to my underwear, and the way they were stuck to my skin felt gross. The wet clothes were making me feel colder and colder, to boot.

I went around my house, looking to see if any door was open, but none budged—the house was completely locked up—neither a thief nor I could get in.

I returned to the front door, at a loss for what I should do. My dad and mom weren't going to be home for a few more hours. The rain was still pouring, and I couldn't go anywhere since I didn't have an umbrella.

I was still standing helplessly at my front door shivering from the cold when she appeared. "Oh, Takkun, is that you?" she called out to me. I raised my head to see the woman who'd been about to enter the house next door now running over to me. It was Mommy Ayako.

She was my next door neighbor Miu's mom...'s younger sister. A lot had happened, and she was now living with Miu as her mom. She was using a plastic umbrella, the kind you could buy at a convenience store. She must have bought it after it started raining because her clothes and hair were wet.

"Wh-What happened, Takkun? You're soaking wet..." Mommy Ayako took out a handkerchief from her bag and wiped off my face and hair. Her face got close to mine and made my heart skip a beat.

I liked Mommy Ayako. Even though I liked her, I wasn't sure in what way. All I knew was that I liked her. She was beautiful, and she had a great body—nothing like my own mom. Mommy Ayako was always smiling and kind, and I loved her for it.

"You can't get into your house? Where's your mom?" she asked.

"My mom...won't be home until tonight. She gave me a key, but I forgot it inside."

"I see... All right then. You're coming over to my house."

"What?"

"You'll catch a cold if you stay like this. You can wait at my house until your mom comes home." Mommy Ayako forcefully grabbed my hand, and we headed to her house next door under the umbrella together.

"Go ahead. Don't be shy and come on in."

“Th-Thank you for having me...”

Though she said not to be shy, I couldn’t help but be nervous. This was the first time I had visited the house next door. Upon entering the house and closing the door, the sound of the rain immediately became distant. Encouraged by Mommy Ayako, I was taken to the changing area of her bathroom.

“I just started running a bath, so wait a bit.”

“What...? You don’t have to do that. I don’t want to bother you.”

“No. You’ll catch a cold if you stay wet.”

“But...”

“Come on, don’t be shy. Hurry up and take off your clothes.”

“Hey... I-I got it! It’s fine. I can take off my own clothes.”

Mommy Ayako had started to try to remove my clothes for me, so I hurriedly brushed her off. Having my clothes removed for me when I was ten years old was embarrassing.

“Oh? Then hand me your school bag so I can wipe it down for you.”

“O-Okay...”

I handed her my school bag, and she dried it off with a towel. I began taking my clothes off, but the wet clothes were sticking to my skin and hard to remove. On top of that, I was nervous with Mommy Ayako so close to me, so I was having a harder time than I would have expected.

“Ugh... H-Huh...”

“Hee hee, what are you doing, Takkun? Here, raise your arms up.”

“Hey, wai—”

Mommy Ayako was unable to stand there watching, and I ended up getting helped by her. She took off my top for me, and I was naked from the waist up. She went on in a continuous motion, probably having done this multiple times with Miu, and took my pants off skillfully, underwear included.

“W-Waaah?!”

I covered my penis in a panic.

D-Did she see it?! Did Mommy Ayako see my penis?!

My mind went blank with surprise and embarrassment, but Mommy Ayako was completely calm. She was separating my pants and underwear that she had removed together as if it were no big deal.

“Oh no, even your underwear is soaked. I’ll go ahead and wash this for you—”

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong!”

“Huh?”

“I don’t want to wear those kiddie briefs. I want boxers, like an adult! But no matter how many times I tell her, my mom won’t buy me boxers...”

“Oh, is that so?”

I was making a desperate excuse to protect my pride as a fourth grader that I wouldn’t budge on, but it seemed like my spirit didn’t get through to Mommy Ayako at all. She was smiling, but she seemed like she couldn’t care less.

Come on... It’s a big deal. Whether I’m wearing briefs or boxers is a really big deal. Don’t you know that wearing boxers is proof that you’re a cool guy?

Setting my unsatisfied self aside, Mommy Ayako left me in the changing area with my school bag, telling me to make sure I warmed up. I was left alone completely naked.

“Maybe Mommy Ayako is mistaking me for a kindergartener...?” I muttered to myself alone in the bathing area, the words coming out like a sigh. The bath wasn’t ready yet, so I was using the shower to wash my body.

My mind was filled with thoughts of Mommy Ayako—thoughts of how she was as kind as I’d thought, letting me into her house and even preparing a bath for me...and also, feelings of sadness and futility at not being seen as a man in her eyes.

Hmph. I am *ten years old now. I’m at that age where I’m interested in things like boobs.*

The lady I had a crush on was fully treating me like a child—no, a

kindergartener—and I was left feeling embarrassed and pathetic.

Maybe it's because I'm short and weak... Hmm...

As I agonized in my thoughts, a beep went off, and a mechanical voice announced that the bath was ready. That's when the unbelievable occurred.

"It looks like the bath is ready." A voice called out from behind me as the door to the bathroom was opened. I reflexively looked back and almost passed out from the surprise. I thought that my soul was leaving my body.

She was naked—completely bare naked. Mommy Ayako entered the bathing area without a single thing on.

"Oh, Takkun, it looks like you're doing a nice job of washing your hair. How good of you," Mommy Ayako said with her usual smile as I remained dazed. She came closer, her large breasts swaying with each step.

Whoa...I already thought they were huge when she had clothes on, but they're bigger than I expected.

I felt like I was about to pass out from the sight of the first naked female body that I had ever seen aside from my mom's, but I managed to squeeze the words in my mind out.

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

"Huh? I just thought I would join you."

"Wh-Why...?"

"Why? Because I got pretty wet too."

"Th-Thi-This is wrong..."

"Why is it wrong? You don't want to take a bath with me, Takkun?"

"It's not that I don't want to..."

"Hee hee, I guess it's decided then," Miss Ayako smiled. I was at a loss for words.

Ugh, it's no use... Mommy Ayako totally thinks of me as a kid after all. She's taking a bath with me like it's the same thing as taking one with Miu, and she just thinks I'm shy and embarrassed.

She was completely unguarded. She didn’t have a towel on, nor did she try to cover any part of her body with her hands. Everything was in plain sight, including her chest and crotch. Yes, her large, plump breasts, her hourglass waist, and even...the area in between her legs...

“Um?! I-I’m done.” My heart full of embarrassment and remorse, I leapt up and ran to exit the bathing area.

“Ah!” I felt something squish. Mommy Ayako had blocked me from exiting and stopped me in my tracks. I wasn’t paying attention to what was in front of me because I was looking down—as a result, I dove right into Mommy Ayako’s body. I felt my entire body be enveloped in something soft...



“A-A-Aah...”

“Hey, it’s dangerous to run near the tub, Takkun.”

“U-Uh...”

“I know that kids your age don’t really want to take baths, but you’ll catch a cold if you don’t get your body nice and warm. You haven’t even finished washing your hair. Here, sit down. I’ll scrub you down.”

“O-Okay...” Having my entire body wrapped up in a soft sensation, I lost the energy to fight back and had no choice but to do as Mommy Ayako said. She finished washing my hair that’d been only partially done, and she even washed every nook and cranny of my body.

As Mommy Ayako’s hand brushed over my entire frame, I caught glimpses of her naked body in the mirror in front of me. *Ugh...this is bad. I feel like I’ll get a nosebleed if I let my guard down. Okay, time to count the digits in pi. Um, how did you calculate past 3.14? The math teacher was talking about a lot of things in class... Oh, that’s right. In middle school you apparently start using a symbol to denote pi... Pi, the ratio of a circle’s circumference... Circles... Round... Boobs... Wait, boobs?! No, no, that’s not what I wanted to be thinking of!*

As I was fretting in agony, she finished washing my body. Following that, I entered the bath with Mommy Ayako under her orders.

“Ah, that feels good,” she cooed. I sat in the bath silently. “How is it, Takkun? Is it too hot?”

“I-It’s fine...”

“Why are you balled up in the corner like that? Come over here. You can stretch your legs out more.”

“I-I-I’m okay over here.”

“Okay then. I guess you’re pretty modest, huh?” Mommy Ayako said with a wry laugh.

It’s not that I’m modest, it’s just...you know.

“Hee hee,” she mischievously laughed. I was sitting in the corner of the bathtub, my back to her, but the next moment, Mommy Ayako jumped onto my back and hugged me. “Gotcha!”

“Wh-What...?”

“See, doesn’t it feel nice to stretch out your legs like this? You don’t have to be shy.”

It’s not that I’m being shy!

My shoulders were grabbed and forcefully pulled back, and I was left being hugged by Mommy Ayako from behind. It was true that it felt nice to stretch out my legs, but various parts of my body were now touching Mommy Ayako, and I was feeling good for different reasons.

Her boobs are definitely up against my chest!

“Hee hee, you’re so small and cute, Takkun. You could fit right in the palm of my hand.” Mommy Ayako sounded like she was having fun, but just that one line calmed down my dazed mind in an instant.

“It doesn’t make me happy to be called cute...”

“What?”

“I get teased pretty often at school too. They say I’m girly, or that I should wear a skirt because I’m short and scrawny.”

“Takkun... I’m sorry, I spoke without thinking,” she said, sounding truly apologetic. “I don’t think you have to worry too much about it. Everyone grows taller at different times, and boys often have growth spurts a little later than girls. I’m sure you’ll start growing taller and taller in no time.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes, really. If you eat a lot and exercise a bunch, I think you’ll grow bigger in a healthy way. Do you play any sports, Takkun?”

“Yeah... I used to play soccer and softball, but I wasn’t really good, so I quit right away.” I was bad at ball sports. I wasn’t good at handling the equipment, but more than that, playing alongside my teammates didn’t fit me well. When I thought about how my failures would cause trouble for my teammates, it made me nervous, and I always messed up.

“I see. Well, how about...swimming?”

“Swimming?”

“Yup! I just found this out recently, but apparently kids who take up swimming often grow up to be smart. A lot of people who are accepted into top universities apparently did swimming when they were young. That’s why I’m thinking of having Miu eventually take lessons.”

“Swimming...”

“Also, guys who swim are...kind of good looking. They have nice bodies with triangular torsos.”

“G-Good looking...” It was very simple, but those words coming from Mommy Ayako instantly made my mind up. “I think I’ll try it.”

“Really? If you start taking swimming lessons, maybe I can have Miu take lessons at the same place. Oh, but there’s lots of things I want her to take lessons for, like English, or dancing. What should I do...?”

“You really think a lot about Miu, Mommy Ayako.”

“Well, I am her mommy.”

Mommy. That’s right, she’s a mommy. Mommy Ayako became Miu’s mommy. She wasn’t her biological mom, but on that day of the funeral, Mommy Ayako became Miu’s mom.

“You’re incredible, Mommy Ayako.” My heart started racing, and the words poured out. “I really look up to you.”

“You look up to me?”

“Yeah! After her mom and dad were in that accident and Miu was left alone...you saved her. At the funeral, unlike the other adults, you were the only one who put Miu’s feelings first.”

Mommy Ayako stayed silent. “I thought you were so cool, and so wonderful,” I continued on. “You were like a superhero, Mommy Ayako!”

“It would be nice if I were a superhero,” she mumbled. Her voice sounded like she was fighting back pain. After I’d gone on about my admiration for her as if I was delirious with fever, without thinking, I turned back to face her.

“If I really were a superhero... I wish I could be strong, noble and cool, and do anything perfectly like a superhero...”

“Mommy Ayako...” What I saw when I turned back left me speechless. There were tears—tears were running down Mommy Ayako’s face, the drops traveling down her cheeks before dropping into the bath. “Wh-What’s wrong?”

“Oh, um, to tell you the truth, there was just...a lot that happened today,” she said after she wiped her tears with her hand and collected her thoughts for a moment. Though she was smiling, it was a sad smile that looked like she’d forced herself to put on. “I made a mistake at work.”

“A mistake...?”

“The job that I was in charge of...went to someone else. It was the first plan I’d ever thought up from scratch on my own, but I’m not working on it anymore...” She broke down what had happened into words I could understand. “I’m just a newbie at my company, but our president is someone who lets anyone do what they want regardless of if they’re new or not, as long as it’s a fun idea. So...the plan I’d thought of had been approved by a lot of people, and it was finally about to start, but...I wasn’t able to balance both Miu and work.”

Her voice sounded sadder and sadder as she spoke, but at the same time, the conviction behind her words started shining through all the more clearly. I continued to listen to her quietly.

“I can never stay late because I have to pick Miu up from preschool, and if Miu gets a fever, I have to pick her up from preschool even if I’m working... With all of that going on, it was just too difficult to be at the helm of a new project. A lot of people said I should prioritize my time with my child for now. I’m not sure if they said it to be mean or to be kind... The president did her best to try to put me in charge until the very end, but I felt bad and asked for someone else to be in charge myself.”

My ten year old self couldn’t understand how painful and frustrating it must have felt having to leave behind the plan she’d come up with due to unavoidable circumstances. But looking at Mommy Ayako’s sad face made me painfully aware of just how much it’d hurt her.

“The stuff with work... You know, it’s not really a big deal. It’s my own fault anyways. It’s just...” Her frail voice was trembling. Tears appeared in her doe eyes once again. “I got a call from the preschool when I was really busy at work. They wanted me to pick up Miu because she had a fever... When I got that call, just for a moment, I thought that maybe I wasn’t cut out to be a mother after all. I thought, maybe I should have just let someone else take her.”

“Mommy Ayako...”

“That’s bad, right? It’s horrible. Even if it was only for a moment, I’m a failure of a mom to be thinking something like that... I was the one who decided to take her in, and I thought I was prepared... I’m supposed to be Miu’s mommy, but... I’m the only one Miu has left, yet I... I just feel so embarrassed and pathetic...”



I didn’t respond. I thought it seemed understandable to think something like that for a moment if you were swamped at work. Surely everyone went through

feeling regret toward a decision they were determined to go through with. But Mommy Ayako couldn't forgive herself for even one such moment. Even though they weren't related by blood, she tried to be a mother—and because she was kind and noble, she couldn't forgive her own immaturity, and it was driving her to tears.

It was shocking. This was probably the first time in my life I had ever seen an adult bawl. In this moment, crying because she was unable to tolerate her sadness, Mommy Ayako seemed like a frail young girl—she was ten years older than me, yet she was reminding me of a stubborn little girl upset things hadn't gone her way.

"H-Haha, I'm sorry for complaining to you. It's not like I can expect you to understand these kinds of things at your age, right?" Mommy Ayako said, trying to brush it off with a smile as she wiped away her tears. "I need to toughen up, both as a working adult and as a mother. I need to be better. After all, I have to raise Miu alone from here on out."

"You're not alone," I responded. Before I knew it, the words had left my mouth, pushed out by feelings that were firing up deep in my heart."I'm here for you, Mommy Ayako."

"Takkun..."

"I-I might not be reliable, but I'll do anything I can! Also, it's not just me who's here. My dad and mom both love you and Miu! We'll help you with anything we can when you're in trouble! If anything bad or painful happens, I'll protect you, Mommy Ayako. So...please don't cry anymore." After I desperately pleaded, I felt a hand plop onto my head.

"Thank you, Takkun," Mommy Ayako said with a smile. As she patted me on the head, the ends of her tearstained eyes were lifted up by the beaming, apparently genuine smile she had on her face. That smile was so beautiful that I wanted to embrace her right then and there—so beautiful that my heart started pounding relentlessly, enough you could hear it from a mile away.

Yes, that was probably when my feelings for her all started. It must have been at that moment that I fell in love.

She'd been the lady from next door who I had a crush on, the lady who was

unbelievably cool and a good adult, who took in her sister's child and started raising her after an unfortunate accident... She'd been a superhero to ten-year-old me, and I blindly believed she was divine like a goddess or a holy mother—so I'd been shocked to see her weeping, and then I felt embarrassed for misunderstanding.

In truth, Miss Ayako wasn't an infallible superhero. She wasn't a goddess, nor was she a holy mother. She was just someone who'd motivated herself to be kind and noble. No matter how cool she seemed, she was a vulnerable woman—and once I understood that, I realized I wanted to protect her.

It might have been strange for a ten-year-old brat to think that, but I couldn't help but feel that way. I had this wish that was unbefitting of my ten-year-old self to protect her—I wanted to become a man who could protect Miss Ayako.

Even now, ten years later, my feelings from that moment hadn't grown weaker. If anything, those flames were burning stronger with each and every day.

♥

"Oh, good morning, Ayako."

"Good morning, Tomomi."

The next day, I bumped into Takkun's mother, Tomomi Aterazawa, at the wasteyard.

"I heard you had a birthday party the other day for our son. I really appreciate it."

"Oh, it was really nothing at all. Takumi is always helping us out, so it was the least we could do."

"How is high school going for Miu? Is she getting used to it?"

"I'm not sure, but she does seem to be having fun. She seems unhappy when I ask too many questions."

"Oh, she must be at that difficult age."

While greeting each other, we started having an everyday conversation as we usually did. From the outside, we probably looked like gossiping housewives.

Topics like recent happenings and rumors took up most of the conversation—to put it plainly, it was a simple chat without anything of substance. However, today I was going to bring something up.

“O-Oh, um, by the way, Tomomi,” I said after waiting for the right moment. “About Takumi...”

“Hmm? Did something happen with Takumi?”

“Um, well, I’m not sure how to say this, but Takumi’s getting to a good age.”

“A good age?”

“Well, um, you know... He’s at that age where...as a man, he would start to think about dating a woman.”

Tomomi didn’t respond, so I carried on. “I-I was wondering if you had any ideas about what kind of person you would want Takumi to date, or any wishes concerning that as his parent.”

“Ayako...did Takumi say something to you?”

I did my best to beat around the bush, but I probably only came off as unnatural. Though she’d seemed confused at first, Tomomi’s expression changed as if she had caught on.

“Wh-What do you mean by ‘something’?”

“Well, um...something like his feelings towards you?”

“Th-That’s?! Um...that’s, well... Yes.” It felt like there was no point in trying to hide the truth, and I solemnly nodded.

“During the birthday party...he asked me out.”

After a moment of silence, Tomomi responded, “I see...”

“O-Of course, I turned him down! Please don’t worry, I have no intention of dating him!”

Tomomi stayed silent, so I carried on once again. “Um, well, it’s not that I would be unhappy with Takumi, or that I dislike him, or anything like that. It’s just that looking at the situation with common sense, I felt that our relationship would be difficult, so...” I desperately tried to explain myself, but Tomomi didn’t

respond.

She silently closed her eyes and turned her head up to the sky. She had an expression painted with resolve and resignation—it felt like I could hear her inner voice say that this day had finally arrived.

After a few seconds of silence, Tomomi finally spoke up. “Ayako,” she said with a look of determination, as if she had accepted everything, “would you like to stop by our house for some tea?”

The Aterazawas' house was a two-story single-family house, just like ours. Around a dozen or so years ago, a major developer bought the land here and offered a special deal on new developments, which led to the construction of many new houses—so, in turn, both my sister and her husband as well as the Aterazawas had new homes built here around the same time. Since both families arrived together, they became acquainted.

When she was still alive, my sister mentioned on multiple occasions how grateful she was that her neighbors were good people. The Aterazawas had been really good to me as well since I'd started living in my sister's house.

"I think it's already been ten years since then," Tomomi said after she had a sip of tea, looking into the distance. We were in her living room, and she had prepared tea for us in a traditional teapot. I was too nervous and hadn't touched mine yet. "There was a time when you looked after Takumi until nighttime, because he didn't have a key and couldn't get into the house."

"Y-Yes, I did."

"After he came home that day, Takumi told my husband and me, 'When I grow up, I'm going to marry Mommy Ayako.'"

I didn't respond. I wasn't sure I should react. *I can't believe Takkun said something like that back then—on the day we took a bath together.*

"At first, my husband and I both thought he was joking. Well, even if he wasn't joking, we thought it was just a childlike admiration for you. He must have had a lot of fun playing with you. What exactly did you do?"

"U-Um... Nothing particularly special..." *I can't say it. I can't say that we took a bath together with how this conversation is going!*

"We just ignored it, thinking it was childish nonsense, but from that day on, Takumi changed."

I continued to listen silently.

"He started to put effort into school, and he said he wanted to take up swimming even though he hadn't wanted to when I'd suggested it before. Along with the new vigor he gained for sports and academics, he even stopped

being a picky eater. He would say he was ‘going to become a cool guy worthy of Mommy Ayako.’”

I didn’t respond as she continued.

“Regardless of his reasons, my son was finally motivated and doing his best at various things. As a parent, I didn’t want to put a damper on his efforts. I also thought that he would eventually like a girl at school.” She began to look quite conflicted. “But, in the end, Takumi has continued to say that he likes you for ten years.”

I continued to listen.

“Even after entering high school, even after entering college, he hasn’t changed at all.”

It was all I could do to stew over how I felt like I should apologize on my hands and knees.

“My husband and I are starting to get worried at this point... Of course, we don’t mean to say there’s something wrong with you, Ayako. It’s just... You know? We can’t help but be concerned about things like the age difference, and about Miu.”

“O-Of course... I understand.” It was only natural. If I’d been in her position, I would also have been worried, and I’d definitely have been against it if my son had said he wanted to marry a single mother who was over ten years older than him.

“We held a few family-meeting type things, but even then, Takumi’s feelings didn’t change a single bit. No matter how many times we try to convince him, he won’t listen to us at all. It seems like he’s truly got his sights set on you.”

Taking a pause there, Tomomi let out a sigh. “I see...that boy’s finally asked you out.” She looked somewhat sad and fragile, her face tinged with deep emotions that couldn’t be described in just a single sentence. It was an expression that only a mother who raised a child for twenty years could make—one that showed her experience as a parent.

“As a parent, in the end...you just wish for your child to be happy,” Tomomi continued. “You don’t want them to go out of their way to pick a path that will

be full of struggles. I can't help but wish for him to have a normal family life, even if it's a bit mediocre."

"I understand... As a parent myself, I agree with you. That's why I don't want you to worry, because I have—"

"But when you think about it, that's all just about my ego as a parent."

"...no intention of dating Takumi— What?" I looked up and stared at her. Tomomi had a slight, peaceful smile on her face, like she had figured something out.

"Parents can't decide for their child what happiness is. If anything, we should probably be thankful that our son found the path he was meant to take a long time ago."

"Um..."

"If this were just something that came up in the past couple days, I wouldn't have been able to permit it, but he's continued to work hard for ten years. He did his best in both school and sports, and he got into his first choice of selective schools for both high school and college..."

"Uh..."

"My husband and I have seen firsthand how hard Takumi has worked..."

"Tomomi?"

Wh-What should I do? She's completely in her own world. She seems like she's talking to me, but she's totally talking to herself! This conversation is independent of me!

"...so, we talked about it...and we decided to approve of you and Takumi dating."

"What?!"

You approve of it?! Of him dating me?! What about what I *want?!*

"We told Takumi about our decision and that we welcome him to do as he pleases from his twentieth birthday onward. As his parents, we wouldn't be cheering for him, but we wouldn't be against him either. We told him that we

would respect his decisions.”

That’s what you were doing?! The day before the birthday party at our place, that’s what you were doing?!

I was internally making jabs all over the place when Tomomi finally looked at me as if she had remembered I was there.

“And, of course, your feelings are the most important, Ayako. If you don’t want to date him, you can go ahead and turn him down firmly. You don’t have to be considerate of us in your decision.”

I didn’t respond, and Tomomi spoke up again.

“But...” She looked like she was holding back tears. Emotions she couldn’t keep down seeped into her voice. “If you... If you care for Takumi... In that case...” Tomomi adjusted her posture and deeply bowed her head. “...please take care of my son.”

I couldn’t say anything anymore. No matter what I said, no matter how I reacted, things were going to be weird. And so, I rode it out with an extremely ambiguous smile that wasn’t particularly affirmative or negative.

“I’m home— Whoa. Are you dying again, mom?”

It was now evening, and Miu sounded like she was completely done with me when she saw me laying on the couch as if I were dead. The living room wasn’t in disarray like last time, but that didn’t change the fact that I was in a pathetic state for a mother.

“Are you worrying over Taku again?”

“Yeah... I guess.”

“You should just hurry up and date him.”

“What makes you think that?” I said with a sigh as I sat up. “I...spoke to Tomomi today.”

“To Taku’s mom? No way... You hashed it out over Taku asking you out?!”

“Well, something like that.”

“Really?! Wow! Wh-What happened?! Was she against you guys?! Did she punch you?! Did she say something like ‘You have no right to be calling me your mother-in-law’?”

“She said, ‘Please take care of my son’...” I buried my head in my hands.

“It didn’t become a bloodbath? Lame.” Miu lost her enthusiasm.

“Why were you expecting a bloodbath?”

“That’s incredible though, getting the approval of his parents. I feel like a partner’s parents would usually be unhappy with a woman who has a brat in tow,” she said candidly.

You do know that you’re calling yourself a brat here, right? Does she think about the words she’s using?

“Good for you getting his parents’ blessing, mom. Now you can date him without any reservations,” she declared triumphantly.

Ah, what is this situation? My daughter is totally rooting for me, and Takkun’s parents approve of us. It’s like...there’s nothing in our way anymore! Everyone around us is really pushing for this! If everyone else is already going for it, it’s like I have no choice but to date him...

“But that’s not how things work...” I said, as if to convince myself. “Dating and marriage aren’t that simple.”

“It’s not very convincing coming from a woman who’s never been married.”

“Sh-Shut it...” After weakly responding to her salient point, I stood up from the couch. “Whatever. I won’t rely on anyone else anymore. I’m going to do something about this myself,” I said, my hand in a tight fist. “Takkun is probably misunderstanding something. He’s probably just into the idea of an older woman, or maybe his childhood crush has just dragged on for too long.”

It had to be something like that—otherwise things didn’t make sense. I wasn’t a particularly impressive woman who it’d make sense to pine for for ten years. I was an old lady in my thirties. Even if we were to date, I was just going to let him down—and if I was going to let him down either way, then I wanted to let him down earlier. If I was going to hurt him, it was definitely better for it to be a

shallow wound.

“If Takkun is living for a dream, I just need to wake him up from that dream. I need him to see the sad reality of the woman I am,” I continued. “This is ‘Operation: Make Takkun Face the Reality of a Woman in Her Thirties and Make Him Dislike Me’!”

“What a lame name,” Miu said coldly. Then she kicked me while I was down by saying that the naming pattern of “Operation Such and Such” is super old-timey and old-lady-like, and it felt like my heart was about to break in half.

Chapter 5: The Plan and the Chaos

♥

The first plan: “Operation: No One Wants a Drunkard Woman in Her Thirties”

This...is probably going to be unpleasant. A woman getting along in years drinking to the point of losing self-control was beyond embarrassing. *If I humiliate myself by getting drunk out of my mind, I can end even a hundred-year-long love.*

So, I put my plan in motion on a day that Takkun came over to tutor Miu. While the two were in her room, I drank—I gulped down the expensive wine that I had just uncorked the other day, half of which remained, straight from the bottle. I drank, and drank, and drank. Flavor be damned—I couldn’t feel even an ounce of the smooth mouthfeel unique to expensive wine nor the fruity scent. I finished off the bottle in the worst way possible.

By the time Takkun came downstairs, the bottle was empty, and I was completely ready to go.

“Excuse me, Miss Ayako. Miu said she wanted something to drink and—What?!” Takkun, who’d apparently come to get some refreshments, yelped upon opening the door to the living room. He was probably alarmed by the fact I looked like I’d passed out with my head resting on the table.

“Ohhh... T-Takkun...?” I did my best to sit up, but I couldn’t find the strength to do so. My body was unsteady, and my vision was spinning.

Oh... It looks like I’ve become completely drunk.

Actually, I felt more unwell than drunk. After drinking a large quantity of alcohol at a pace I never had before, my stomach was making mysterious movements.

“A-Are you all right?”

“I-I’m... I’m totally fine. I-I-I’m just drunk!”

“This is the wine left over from the other day... Did you drink it all by yourself?”

“Yeah, I drank it! And then I got drunk!”

I felt terrible, both physically and emotionally, but I somehow managed to get my foggy mind to work and played the part of a drunkard—a horrible drunkard woman.

“What are you doing, Miss Ayako...?”

“I was hiding it until now, but I actually drink quite a bit on my own. I always drink in this terrible way, getting plastered all by myself”

“What? Um... You don’t drink that much, do you, Miss Ayako?”

“I-I drink! I was just hiding it until now, and I actually drink a lot! I visit multiple bars in one night! I chug whole pints of vodka!”

“I think vodka is better as a shot rather than a pint.”

“I’m the kind of drinker that has my tequila with lychee!”

“Doesn’t *lime* usually go with tequila?”

“I enjoy simple mocktails like everyone else too!”

“I believe it’s a *cocktail* if it has alcohol in it...”

Shoot! I tried to play the part of a heavy drinker, but I don’t really know that much about alcohol!

“Th-The p-point is, I drink! Ever since I started working full-time, I’ve been masking the stress of my job with alcohol. I go off to various bars after work, and I often come home the next morning, and I even drunkenly go home with men sometimes—”

“What are you talking about?” Takkun spoke with a wry smile as I desperately tried to keep talking. “It’s only very recently that you started letting yourself drink, right?”

“What...?”

“You said that you turned down all offers to go out with your coworkers because your daughter was still young.”

“Well...”

“There was a time when you had dinner at our place too... My father offered you a drink, but you turned him down. You said that it would be dangerous if something happened to Miu in the middle of the night and you couldn’t drive.”

I didn’t respond. It was true that I had been turning down alcohol for a long time. If Miu were to get a fever or get injured in the middle of the night, it would be troublesome if I couldn’t drive. In the suburban city we lived in, cars were necessary in one way or another. For us Katsuragis, a one-parent one-child household, it would make things quite difficult if I couldn’t drive when necessary. Because of that, I did my best to avoid drinking. It was around the time that Miu’s high school entrance exams finished that I started allowing myself to drink.

“I-I’m surprised you remember something like that...”

“Of course I remember,” Takkun said. “I’ve watched you all this time, Miss Ayako.”

“Wha...!” My face already felt like it was burning up from the wine, and now it was feeling even hotter. “W-Well, I did turn down drinks, but, um, I...” Unable to look Takkun in the eye, I stood up and made to run away, only to get dizzy and lose my balance. The intoxication was getting more and more intense.

“A-Are you all right?!” Takkun caught me in an instant and held me up by the shoulders. “It seems like you’re pretty drunk, considering you’re saying all these ridiculous things...”

My attempt to act like a heavy drinker had been determined as incoherent actions caused by inebriation. I was somewhat relieved, but I also had mixed feelings about it.

“I understand you want to keep the expensive wine to yourself, but you shouldn’t overdo it,” Takkun chided.

“Y-You’re right...” I had been scolded with sound logic by a twenty-year-old child.

It’s not like that! Whose fault do you think it is that things got like this!

“For now, I’m going to take you to your room.”

“What...? I-I’m fine! I can walk on my own...” I tried to act tough and brush his hand away, but my legs were still unsteady, and he ended up keeping me from falling over. “H-Huh...? Ugh... I can’t... No, I-I got this...”

“Excuse me,” Takkun muttered with determination before swiftly picking me up. One arm was holding my back, while the other was under my knees. It was what was known as a bridal carry.

“Wh-Wh-Whaaat?! Wh-What are you doing, Takkun?!”

“I apologize, but I can’t just leave you alone. You might hurt yourself.”

“Even so...”

Th-This is embarrassing! Getting carried bridal style at this age is embarrassing!



“A-Am I heavy...?”

“Not at all. If anything, you’re too light,” Takkun said as he lifted me up with ease. “I’ll be taking you to your room, then.”

“All right...” There was nothing else I could say. I had no choice but to agree. I was supposed to get drunk and embarrass myself in front of him, but somehow, this had turned into him showing me how kind and reliable he was.

Operation: No One Wants a Drunkard Woman in Her Thirties was a complete failure.

The second plan: “Operation: No One Wants a Prodigal Woman in Her Thirties”

This...will be quite unpleasant.

I figured a woman who spends all her money buying up items from expensive brands and going out to expensive lunches and dinners was probably undesirable to men. Even I, a woman, found that kind of woman objectionable. If they were someone like Yumemi who worked hard enough to start a company or something like that, I felt like they were free to spend the money they’d earned themselves as extravagantly as they wished, but a woman with a regular salary like myself spending her money in an unrealistic way would look embarrassing to others. Takkun would surely be let down if he found me to be a vain and wasteful spender.

So, in order to play the part of a spendthrift, I was going to randomly select and purchase some items from a luxury brand that I didn’t particularly care for online—or, at least, that was the plan. I got right up to the last step before I became incredibly conflicted.

“Ugh... Argh...” I groaned, alone on my couch in the living room. I had my smartphone in hand, and I was on the checkout screen of an online retailer. With just two more taps, I would confirm my purchase, but I had been here for thirty minutes unable to tap the screen.

I groaned in strife and argued with myself out loud. “Th-This...this alone is 200,000 yen? This bag, that doesn’t look like it can even store that much...is two hundred grand?” I’d decided to buy a purse from a famous luxury brand that anyone would be familiar with, but the price was staggering.

It’s so expensive. It’s their most affordable bag, but it’s still pretty expensive. It’s impossible, right? For a bag to cost that much?

It wasn’t so expensive that I couldn’t just pay for it out of my savings, but we weren’t particularly wealthy. Miu had just entered high school, and I was still going to need money for her. I definitely wanted to send her to college, and I wanted to avoid financial aid if possible. It was just recently that I’d decided to commit to saving money in order to accomplish that... What would I accomplish by spending unnecessary money right now?

“Ugh... Argh... I-I won’t buy it...” After all my anguish, I ended up pressing “cancel” on the order confirmation screen.

Operation: No One Wants a Prodigal Woman in Her Thirties ended with a strategic retreat.

The third plan: “Operation: I *Really* Didn’t Want to Do This”

My back was against the wall with this plan—after repeated failures, I had no choice left but to execute this operation. I would be putting myself on the line by carrying out this plan.

The previous plans relied too heavily on acting. In other words, they were plans where I played a fake version of myself, like a drunkard or a spendthrift. However, this plan was different. In this third plan, I would be putting myself fully out there—I would be completely revealing my true self.

My potential losses were immeasurable, but I had no choice but to do this. *In order to make Takkun see the real me and be disappointed, I need to do this...* Upon preparing myself for what was to come, I made various preparations then invited Takkun over.

“What did you want to show me, Miss Ayako—” Takkun had come in and opened the door to the living room before he froze in place, his eyes widening and jaw dropping.

“Shine bright, lone silver bullet! Love Kaiser Solitaire!” I said.



Yes, it was none other than me who uttered that line. Standing in the middle of my living room, leaving behind everything from my shame to my dignity, I

spoke as loud as I could from my diaphragm to yell out an anime character's catchphrase while striking a pose. I was in a frilly, flowy, sparkly costume straight out of a show geared toward little girls. In my hand was a colorful decked-out gun that served as both a transformation trinket and weapon.

"M-Miss Ayako..."

"Heh... Heh heh... You've finally seen it all now, Takkun," I said dryly as he stood there flabbergasted. *Well, it's more like I did everything I could to make him see it.* Despite the facts, I continued. "Th-This...is the real me..." Though I was still in cosplay, I was already acting like my usual self since I burned all my energy role-playing that line.

"I was hiding it until now, but I'm actually a huge fan of the 'Love Kaiser' series. I'm such a huge fangirl that, even though I've gotten so old, I buy the toys and costumes...even though I'm in my thirties..." I pushed down my feelings of conflict and hesitation and revealed my truth.

Love Kaiser was a nationally popular anime geared towards little girls that aired on Sunday mornings. It was what was known as a magical girl series, and the main plot centered on girls who obtained transformation trinkets and fought bad guys. Currently, the series was airing its fourteenth title, *Love Kaiser Vegetable*, which was themed around vegetables and samurai.

I was kind of, sort of, completely obsessed with this anime series. I made sure to record each episode every week, and I would rewatch each one at least three times.

"At first, it was for Miu. When I first took her in, she liked *Love Kaiser* just like any other normal girl, so I started watching it with her. We used to watch it together every week..." Ten years ago, after I'd started looking after Miu, I'd wanted to do more things together and have more things in common that we could talk about, so I started watching the *Love Kaiser* series she'd liked. That was also around the time that the fourth title in the series, *Love Kaiser Joker*, had started airing. This was my first step down the rabbit hole. "As a result, I ended up becoming obsessed with it."

"Wow, the anime series made for girls these days are pretty incredible," I'd thought to myself.

“This is totally different from when I was a kid, the animation is so smooth.”

“This...This is amazing.”

The story was fleshed out and explored deep themes—it was unbelievable that it was a children’s show. *“Huh? What? No way... I wasn’t expecting a plot twist like this! Does this mean all that stuff from the first episode was foreshadowing this?! Th-That’s amazing! I have to buy the entire series on DVD!”*

“Whoa, that’s so cool! They have merch for adults too!”

And so, despite the fact that I’d started watching this show for little girls in order to deepen my bond with Miu, before I knew it, I’d gotten much more into it than she’d been.

“Around the time she entered middle school—actually, it was more like when she was in her last few years of elementary school—she naturally grew out of the series. But I hadn’t been able to leave it behind,” I explained to Takkun. “Now I watch it alone, I even go to see the movies by myself every year... I even buy some of the merch that Premium Danbai releases for adults here and there...” I looked down at the costume I was wearing, a mainly black frilly dress and transformation gun fully decked-out with decorations—both items were purchased from PD.

PD was the abbreviated name for Premium Danbai, an online retailer geared toward adults ran by the famous toy manufacturing company Danbai. They sold various expensive and high-quality merchandise for anime and tokusatsu series, and I was a frequent shopper of theirs. Though I was hesitant to buy a brand-name purse, I was quick to spend on this kind of merch.

“So...what do you think, Takkun? This is the real me. I’m the kind of woman who’s totally into children’s anime when she’s too old for it, and who secretly cosplays in her room...”

I’d done it; I’d gone and revealed the part of me I’d been hiding. I could feel tears forming from the embarrassment and emptiness I felt...but this was what I wanted. Even Takkun had to be disillusioned after seeing what a cringey woman I was, watching me get worked up about a show for little girls at over thirty years old.

After staying quiet for a while, Takkun finally spoke up. “That’s...” He looked at me in my cosplay and broke into an awkward smile. “That’s the costume for Love Kaiser Solitaire, Hiyumi Kuinajima’s transformation, right? Even though it’s been ten years since her series aired, Hiyumi’s still really popular. It seems like they regularly release merch for her, and she even had a surprise cameo in the summer movie last year.”

“Y-Yeah! Hiyumin was in last year’s summer movie! They didn’t say anything about it before the movie came out and it was a complete surprise, so when she showed up, the whole theater was roaring with excitement! I was so shocked I ended up crying! They even got her original voice actress, and... Wait.” I couldn’t help but jump at the topic, but in the middle of my thoughts, I remembered what I was doing. I stared intently at Takkun’s face. “Wh-Why do you know all this about Hiyumin and this outfit?”

“Well, it’s because I also watch *Love Kaiser* every week.”

“Wh-What?!”

As I was left completely surprised, Takkun continued. “To explain a little more, I already knew that you like *Love Kaiser.*”

“Whaaat?!” *You knew?! You knew about my cringey interest?!* “H-How did you...?”

“Miu’s complained to me about how you secretly buy merch and cosplay in your room, and how you kept pestering her to go to movies and events.”

M-Miu! Why are you spilling the beans to the neighbor about the embarrassing things your parent does?!

“I’ve also always been kind of a nerd, and I like anime and manga, so I wanted to watch what you liked and decided to watch *Love Kaiser* from the first series. It ended up being pretty good, and I became a fan as well,” Takkun said with a troubled laugh as he scratched his cheek.

Overtaken with shock, my mind went blank. Despite the fact that I had desperately tried to hide this interest, Takkun knew about it like it was no big deal. Not only did he know about it, but he’d also tried to understand it—without any judgment or prejudice, he’d tried to like something that I liked.

“*Love Kaiser*’s pretty good. At first, I kind of looked down on it as a kid’s show, but there were surprisingly deep themes, and at times the story got quite heavy and serious. But what’s really good about it is despite all of that, at the end it properly wraps up as a show geared towards children.”

“Y-Yes! That’s it! The fact that it’s a children’s show is so important! They have so many annoyances to be considerate of, like the circumstances of the toy manufacturers or the feelings of the board of education, but they push things to the limit within those confines!” I gushed, once again forgetting the situation I was in.

Takkun turned his gaze towards the toy gun in my hand. “This is the item that Love Kaiser Solitaire uses to transform, right? I think it was a PD exclusive and really expensive...”

“Y-Yes... It’s not the kind that they sold while the show was airing...but the one they sold a few years later for the older fans...the one that cost about 50,000 yen...”

“Fifty grand...”

“B-But, the quality matches the price! The work on the fine details is incredible, and it really feels like it came out of the show! Also, when you press here, a line recorded by the voice actress plays!”

“My trump card is reversible!” the gun said.

“Whoa, that’s so cool! Isn’t that the famous quote from episode thirty-six?”

“It is! It’s that famous quote from episode thirty-six! There’s a bunch of other famous quotes from the show too! Oh, also, when you press *this* button, it plays the theme and other songs from the soundtrack!”

“I see... I understand why it costs 50,000 yen now.”

“Right, you get it!”

“So, is Hiyumi Kuinajima your favorite character then, Miss Ayako?”

“Well, my favorite’s changed multiple times, but at the end of the day, Hiyumin is definitely best girl. First of all, *Love Kaiser Joker* itself is a masterpiece. I don’t think the premise of the Love Kaisers killing each other off

until one is left would be possible today. Even when it was done ten years ago, the producer had to fight various people to push it through. In the savage world they built where someone was dying off almost every week, Hiyumin's Love Kaiser Solitaire may have been a sub-Kaiser...but regardless, everything about her is so cool!"

"She really is cool. She initially comes off like a cool-headed lone wolf, but she gradually begins to show her passion for her friends...and then in the midpoint of the series—"

"Yeah, her epic fall to the dark side in the midpoint! It's so precious how she's completely thrown to rock bottom, but then desperately struggles to return to the world of light!"

"Yeah, she's so cool and precious. Ugh, talking about it is making me want to rewatch *Love Kaiser Joker*."

"Let's watch it! I have the full Blu-ray box set! I'll lend it to you... Wait, no. I'll watch it with you! Let's have a watch party at my house!"

"I-Is that okay?"

"Of course! I'm so happy that I get to watch it with you, Takkun! Oh, we should also go watch this year's summer movie together! I was pretty embarrassed going by myself as an old lady, but I'll feel better going with you!"

"Yes! Definitely, let's go together!"

"It's a promise then! You gave me your word!"

We continued to talk and talk about *Love Kaiser*. This was the first time I'd ever gotten to discuss my interest, this anime that I'd gotten into in my twenties after I'd started working full-time, and it was so fun that I couldn't help myself.

After enthusiastically promising to each other that we would definitely watch the summer movie together and seeing Takkun off, I was overcome with deep regret.

"This is wrong. Why? Why did this happen?" I mumbled to myself as I sat on

the living room couch, deeply upset with my head in my hands.

How did this happen? What happened to make things turn out like this? I was trying to get him to dislike me, so how did I end up making plans for a date? On top of that, it feels like I initiated things and asked him out...

"It's all Takkun's fault... It's his fault for saying he likes *Love Kaiser*... How can I not be happy hearing that?! I hid my interest for so long..." I couldn't believe that he even understood this interest of mine. I'd thought he would be completely put off, but it turned out to be an interest we shared. "Miu always just makes fun of me..."

"Of course I'd make fun of it." Suddenly, Miu, who had returned home from school, was here in the living room. She didn't comment on my current state at all, as if she had gotten used to seeing me upset on the couch. She simply looked down toward me with an exasperated gaze. "I mean, my mom being into a little girl's show and going to movies every year and even buying merch... How could I not?"

"M-Miu..."

"I think people are free to be interested in whatever they want, but I *do* wish you'd stop inviting me to things. I'm not interested, and that won't change."

"B-But...what other choice do I have? If I go by myself to *Love Kaiser* movies or events...I kind of stand out, you know! I try my best to act like I'm just there to get things for my daughter, but that only goes so far! I'd feel better if someone was there with me!"

"Then you should just go with Taku from now on."

"W-Well, that's..." I couldn't find the right words and fell silent.

After letting out a deep sigh, Miu responded. "Looks like your special operation to make Taku hate you isn't working." I couldn't say anything back. She was right—all my plans had completely failed.

I was supposed to have been acting pathetic in front of Takkun and making him lose interest in me, but not a single thing had gone right. If anything, it felt like we had grown closer—we had each become fonder of the other.

“B-But this operation had just begun! I have countless flaws, so I’ll just slowly wear down his feelings for me, and—”

“Mom,” Miu said, interrupting me. Her tone seemed to have passed exasperation and was now tinged with anger. “How long are you going to keep running?”

“What...?” I was completely taken by surprise. I didn’t understand what she meant.

“I guess it’s fine. I have a few things in mind if you’re going to keep acting like that,” Miu said, ignoring my speechless self as she headed upstairs.

Chapter 6: Truths and Pretenses

♥

Takkun came over to tutor Miu today, on time and as per their usual schedule. While the two were studying upstairs, I was downstairs taking care of chores like dishes and laundry, during which I received a call from Yumemi. It was a simple call to confirm something work-related, and I handled the issue she'd called about right away, but...

"Ha ha, looks like you've had quite the cute little romance blossoming behind my back. I can't believe the college boy next door asked you out." Yumemi laughed as if she were having a grand time.

Ugh, I knew I shouldn't have told her. After I'd given her the go-ahead for the work thing, I'd brought up what was happening with Takkun under the pretense that it was something a friend was going through, looking for a little bit of advice. However, Yumemi had seen through my lie immediately, and before I knew it, she'd drawn the whole story out of me. It just goes to show you can't underestimate the silver tongue of a successful woman CEO—although part of her success here may have been due to my guard being down.

"Takumi Aterazawa... Now that you mention it, I think you've talked about him here and there. I believe you said he was the boy next door who tutors your daughter? Not only that, but you've mentioned that you'd like to see him and your daughter date, if I recall correctly."

Rather than confirm or deny any of that, I stayed silent and braced myself for her inevitable punchline. "But it turns out Takumi had feelings for mommy, not her daughter! Heh heh. Ha ha ha! This is absolutely hilarious!"

"It's not funny..."

"My bad, my bad," Yumemi apologized halfheartedly in response to my retaliation. But the amusement in her voice was still present. "It's a real pure love, isn't it? He's had unrequited feelings for you for ten years, right?"

That appeared to be the case, all things considered—you might even say it

was almost *too* pure.

“Having someone be so devoted to you... I’m jealous, really.”

“‘Jealous’? Please, don’t tease me Yumemi. I really need advice here.”

“What? I was being serious,” she said puzzled. “Advice, huh...? I see, you wanted advice this whole time. I thought you were just gloating. Let’s see... What exactly do you need advice on?”

“What do you mean? I need advice on...you know, what I should do moving forward...”

“You should date him,” Yumemi said. This time her tone wasn’t teasing; she said it like it was the obvious answer. “As far as I can tell, he’s a sincere, devoted, very good guy. Why don’t you just date him for now? If it doesn’t work out, you can just break up, and that’s that.”

“I-It’s not that simple...”

“It is, though, when it comes to men and women. If anything, aren’t you making things too complicated by overthinking it?”

I couldn’t say anything back. “You seem to be concerned about the age difference with him, but he’s already twenty now, right?” she carried on. “I think it’s actually rude to treat him like a child at this point.”

“That may be true...but I don’t think it’s as simple as you’re making it out to be.”

“Why not?”

“I’d be dating someone ten whole years younger than me... If you just think about it with common sense, it’s impossible. It would never work out.”

“Ha. Ha ha, ha ha ha!” After a moment of silence, Yumemi loudly burst into laughter, unable to hold herself back.

“Y-Yumemi?”

“Ha ha, my bad. I couldn’t help myself. I never thought I’d hear the words ‘think about it with common sense’ come out of your mouth.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. “I wonder who it was who decided to take in her

sister's child in her early twenties ten years ago?" she continued. "You'd just started working full-time, you had no savings, and you had no experience raising a child... Despite that, you decided to take Miu in. Wasn't Ayako Katsuragi the woman who made the decision that was absurd if you 'thought about it with common sense' and pulled it off?"

I suddenly thought back to ten years ago, to the me in the past that had decided to take in Miu at the funeral. *Was I thinking about common sense then? No, I wasn't.* My feelings had taken over so much that it hadn't even been a passing thought.

"Good grief. Looks like you've also changed quite a bit in the past ten years," Yumemi continued with a slightly snide tone. "You were probably just young back then. Because of your youth, you were able to let your wave of emotions guide you without thinking about the consequences. You could drop everything in your life for someone else's sake because you had nothing to lose."

"'Something to lose'..."

"People with nothing to lose can do anything. They can take on any challenge. But, as life goes on, various things build up in our lives, and we gain things that we'll be lost without. Money, family, friends, even things like pride or self-esteem... And gaining those things is what we call 'aging.'"

I could only listen on as she spoke her mind. "You see, the more people age, the more scared they are of falling," Yumemi continued. "The reason you were able to make that decision to raise your niece was probably because you were 'young.' But you're different now. You've aged. Over the course of ten years, you've gained many things that you can't bear to lose."

Ten years... The memory of my family bickering over who was going to take in Miu popped up in the back of my mind. To be honest about my feelings then, I was judging them. I was let down and slightly resentful of them and the way they were only thinking about themselves and not about Miu at all.

Looking back on it now, however, I think they were probably just desperate. They wanted to protect the lifestyles they'd come to enjoy and maintain the lifestyles of their families they cherished. It wasn't that they felt nothing for Miu, it was that they had their own families who meant more to them than

their relative's child—they had things that they couldn't bear to lose.

But I hadn't had anything. That's why I'd been able to act based only on my feelings that rose in that moment. Those feelings may have been kindness, love, or even a sense of justice. They may have been precious feelings that should be looked back on as something heartwarming. But the only reason I'd been able to have those feelings and act on them was because I hadn't had anything to lose—it was because I was still young.

"It's often said that a requirement to be a hero is to be alone," Yumemi carried on. "And it's true: no one with a family could be a hero. If you prioritized your family over everyone else, you'd be a failure as a hero, and even if you did the opposite and didn't pay your family attention, it'd just make you a bad hero. No matter how you look at it, those with families can't be a hero."

I decided not to interrupt her train of thought. "Looks like things are different from ten years ago when you could act freely without regard to anyone, just you and the clothes on your back, huh, Ayako? Now you have Miu, your family. You have a home that's been built up over the past ten years, and you have a life. I'm sure you're acquainted with people in the area and your neighborhood, and even at work, your position and responsibilities are different from when you were a newbie ten years ago. This environment, having too many things to lose, is probably what drives you to consider 'common sense,' because 'common sense' is a card that adults love to use. Welcome to the fuckin' boring world of adulthood, Ayako." Her bitterly sarcastic words felt like a sharp knife cutting through me.

I had been sitting there dazed for a while following the phone call when the door to the living room opened.

“Is your call done, mom?”

“Um, yeah... Where’s Takkun?”

“He already left. He didn’t want to bother you while you were on the phone, so he left without saying bye.”

I turned to look at the clock and saw it was already past nine—it seemed that I’d gotten so swept up in the conversation that I’d ended up talking for quite a while. I shut my open laptop and began cleaning up, and Miu sat down across from me.

“Hey, mom?” She looked me squarely in the eye and spoke with a serious tone. “What are you going to end up doing about Taku?”

“I mean... I won’t do anything. I’ve said it many times already, but it’s just impossible for us to date.”

“Yeah, yeah, I don’t need to hear any of that,” Miu said with a deep sigh as she scratched her head. Her voice carried a slight sense of frustration and exasperation. “Ever since Taku confessed to you, you’ve been running away from the issue.”

“What...?”

“You’re always shutting down the conversation by insisting it wouldn’t be socially acceptable, bringing up reasons like his parents’ feelings or ‘common sense’ as an excuse to say things wouldn’t work out. Not only that, but you started doing some weird plan to act ridiculous in front of him and make him dislike you instead. All you’re doing is running away.”

“I-I’m not runni—”

“You are.” Miu’s gaze was cold and steady. I wanted to turn away, but the quiet anger present in her eyes wouldn’t let me run. I couldn’t look away. “You’ve been throwing around superficial terms like ‘common sense’ and ‘reputation’ that *sound* like reasons, but you’ve just been avoiding the actual matter at hand this whole time—you haven’t said how *you* feel at all.”

“I...” Having that said to my face made a lightbulb go off. It wasn’t something I’d been conscious I’d been doing, but just as Miu said, I’d been subconsciously avoiding deciding how I felt. Since the very beginning, when I’d acted like the confession had never happened, I’d been using the convenient excuse of common sense to mask my own feelings and to neglect to answer Takkun. In the end, I’d become a coward who’d wished for him to simply give up once I showed him my ugly side and destroyed his image of me.

I didn’t know what to say after she told me I was running. *That’s right. I haven’t actually told him anything yet. I haven’t given him a proper answer. I’ve...I’ve been running. I’ve been running and running from Takkun’s confession this entire time.*

“Just stop running already and tell me the truth, Mom. Tell me how you really feel.” Miu glared with a condemnatory gaze. “When you set aside annoying pretenses like common sense, reputation...and me, how do you feel about Taku, as a man?”

I was at a loss for words. Miu’s condemnation and Yumemi’s sarcasm were spinning around in my mind, mixing up my thoughts. Despite my confusion, I desperately tried to think about it—I had to think about it, without running away.

Once I’d sincerely considered Takkun’s confession and how I felt in my heart, I decided to tell Miu the realization I’d come to. “I like him. Of course I like him. I’ve loved him for a long time. I know very well what a sincere and kind person he is... He’s even my type in terms of how he looks. I think anyone who’d get to date Takkun is lucky. They should be ecstatic to have such a wonderful boy so genuinely feel for them.”

Miu listened silently, one of her eyebrows twitching for just a moment—but just as she was about to respond, I continued before she could. “But, in the end, I don’t think I can see Takkun as a man.” After all was said and done, that was my answer and how I felt. It was truly, honestly what my heart was telling me. “I like Takkun, and I love him...but those feelings are more like the love a mother feels for her son. No matter how I look at it, I can’t think of him as a romantic partner.”

I had been watching Takkun grow for a long time, since he was ten years old. Even if there were things about him that I found manly now that he was grown, I couldn't think of him as the opposite sex. There was constantly a part of me that was almost reluctant to think of him in that way.

"Miu, I've always thought that it would be nice if you ended up with Takkun," I continued. "I thought you two were great for each other. Of course, that's just my selfish wish as a parent, but the fact that I thought that means Takkun is not another man but like a son to me."

Miu still didn't respond.

"Also, just acting according to how I truly feel isn't as easy as you make it out to be." Yumemi said it was simple, but it was impossible for me to think about it like that. No matter what I did, I couldn't think of it as something simple. "Earlier, you told me to put aside annoying pretenses and just say how I really felt, but that's impossible. The way I truly feel and the way I want society to think of me go hand in hand."

If things were so easy that pushing aside pretenses left you with only true feelings, I would have been much luckier and I'd have had a much easier time in life—but pretenses aren't something that just covers up how someone truly feels. If I'd been a child, I might have been able to easily peel away the pretenses covering my feelings like the skin of a fruit, but that wasn't the case for adults. After years of ripening, the peel and fruit, the pretenses and truths, had melded into a single sticky mess. How adults truly feel always seeps into the pretenses meant to cover up those feelings, and the cores of our precious true feelings could be fused with pretenses.

"Miu, I'm already an old lady in her thirties. I can't let emotions and impulses guide my love life. No matter what, I have to consider my current life and the future. I can't be so unguarded that I face such bare affection exposed."

I couldn't neglect to think of the risks—all I could see were the risks. The risk of dating a boy ten years younger than me who lived next door, in this area, in this house. I didn't know how people would look at us if it came to light. *It would be fine if it only affected me, but if Miu also got strange looks...*

This was probably the thought process of the "fuckin' boring adults" Yumemi

had referred to. When putting risks and merits on a scale, we could only consider the risks—rather than wanting to reach out for something new, we feared losing what we currently had. It was the thought process of a careful, cowardly, conservative, old-fashioned adult who was constantly afraid of falling.

But I was okay with that. I was already a parent; there was no way I could stay a child. I was prepared to become an adult ten years ago.

“So...that means you can’t date Taku after all, right?” Miu finally said after some silence. She sounded over the situation, as if she had given up.

“That’s right...”

Miu closed her eyes and let out a deep sigh. Her expression was a mixture of various emotions that couldn’t be described in one word—there was some anger, but also some sadness in her face. But then, her words that came after a pause stopped my heart.

“So, that’s how it is, Taku!” she suddenly exclaimed, facing the hallway. A few seconds later, the door to the living room slowly opened, and he appeared.

“T-Takkun?!” He walked into the living room with hesitation in his steps. He looked down as if he felt bad, and I could see heartbreak in his eyes. “What, why? I thought you left...”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not Taku’s fault. I pushed him to stay.” Miu said matter-of-factly, interrupting his apology. “I asked him to pretend to have gone home and listen while I dragged out how you really felt.”

“Wh-Why would you do something like that?”

“Because I felt bad for Taku,” she said in a chilling voice. “He mustered up the courage to confess his feelings, to finally tell you how he’s felt all these years... Yet your response has remained ambiguous and half baked.”

“Th-That’s...”

“You might have been trying to make it so no one gets hurt—and maybe that was you trying to be kind—but I think, in the end, that that’s kind of unfair.”

I couldn’t say anything, I had nothing to say to that. *“Unfair,” she says.* It felt

like the word my daughter had uttered was stabbing me deep in my heart.

“Miss Ayako...” Takkun eventually said. “I.... Um, I’m really sorry.” The first thing that poured out was a deep apology. “I made you go through so much trouble, all because I told you how I felt... I even caused trouble for Miu... I’m really sorry for doing something that would destroy our current relationship so selfishly. But, um... I wanted to thank you.” What came next was gratitude. “Thank you for thinking about me so seriously... I may have eavesdropped, but I’m glad I got to hear how you really feel. It’s not the answer I wanted, but I’m glad to have an answer now, ha ha.”

Takkun then smiled. It was a dry, empty smile that was so obviously forced. It was a smile that filled me with pain when I saw it.

“Ha ha...W-Well, I knew that it wouldn’t happen from the beginning. I confessed knowing I would be shot down. There’s no way a brat like me would be a fitting partner for a proper adult like you,” Takkun said with an unnaturally cheerful tone. “I can’t say anything to hearing that you can’t see me as a man. That’s only natural since that’s how you treated me until now. It must feel like your son confessed to you, right? Of course that would feel gross... I’m pretty gross, aren’t I? You were just kind to me because I was your neighbor, and a child, but I one-sidedly looked at you as the opposite sex this whole time... I’m really gross...” His cheerful facade gradually faltered, his voice trembling. “Ha ha, just please forget about all this, Miss Ayako. Let’s forget about the past few days, like they never happened, and go back...back to...”

His voice finally gave out and he started crying. The tears flowing down his face ran over his forced smile. He then hid his face with his hand, as if he had only just realized he was crying, then fled the living room with an “Excuse me.”

“W-Wait! Takkun, don’t—”

“Mom!” As I reflexively tried to go after him, Miu’s harsh, cold voice stopped me. “What good would it do to go after him?”

“Wh-What do you mean...?”

What good would *it do? I’m not sure what I thought I would do for him. Go after him, apologize, comfort him...and then what? I would stay by his side while he was deeply hurt, cry with him...and then what? What would that do for him?*

The only person who'd be comforted by that is me. I would just be satisfied that I'd let my heart bleed for him, that I'd done all I could for him. That would only serve to let me feel justified about what I've done...

"That's unfair, mom," Miu said, as if she were accusing me.

I couldn't say anything back. *"Unfair."* I completely agreed with her. Without realizing, I kept acting unfair.

I fell to my knees on the living room floor and desperately held back the tears about to overflow. At the very least, it wasn't right for me to cry as if I were the victim.

Chapter 7: Women and Men

♥

“You’re not alone.”

“I’m here for you, Mommy Ayako.”

“If anything bad or painful happens, I’ll protect you, Mommy Ayako.”

“So...please don’t cry anymore.”

I awoke from a dream of the past—of a time around ten years ago, when I took a bath with Takkun back when he was a young boy.

“‘I’m here for you,’ huh...?” I muttered to myself, ruminating on my dream as I lay awake in bed. I slowly recalled the past that had been lying dormant in the depths of my memory. *Oh, that’s right...he told me that back then, back when he was still young and calling me Mommy Ayako, back when I was so overwhelmed with work and with raising Miu...* I had forgotten something so important until this very moment. “That made me so happy...”

It truly had made me happy. I felt like I’d been saved, like everything had been worth it. Even if he’d just been trying to be considerate, even if it had just been the kind of irresponsible promise children are prone to making, what he’d said had left me overjoyed. A child, just barely ten years old, had managed to warm my heart that had been rimed by life’s pressures.

But...for Takkun, those words hadn’t been him being considerate or comforting, nor had they been thoughtless. He had probably lived his life from that day on honoring those words. For those ten years, Takkun had always been by my side. He’d always helped me when I was in trouble. I had mistaken his actions to be a result of his feelings for Miu, but they had all been a result of his feelings for me.

Takkun had kept his untarnished love, his all too pure and innocent heart, with him all these years, even now that he was twenty. But I couldn’t accept those feelings from him. I’d become an adult far too long ago, and after having lived so long in the world of adulthood, I couldn’t face his pure affection for me

straight on.

“I have to get up...” I mumbled, dragging my still-not-quite-awake body out of bed. Getting out of bed would start a new day. My life wasn’t over yet—I had yet another day to overcome as an adult, the condition I’d experience for both the remainder of and the majority of my life.

It had been a few days since I’d (indirectly) turned Takkun down. I hadn’t seen him even once since that day. He’d stopped coming by in the mornings to pick Miu up, and he’d passed on a message through Miu that he would be canceling his tutoring sessions. It would be impossible for us to go on like this and not see each other forever since we were neighbors, but...right now, I had no idea how I would face him.

“Mom? ...Did you sleep in again?” As I made my way downstairs with heavy steps, Miu popped out of the living room. She was already dressed in her uniform and looked ready to leave at any moment.

“Morning...”

“That’s not an answer,” she said with a sigh. “Whatever, breakfast is ready.” As I walked into the living room, breakfast had already been laid out on the table. There was rice, miso soup, ham, sausages, eggs, and a pack of natto—it was a very typical selection. Miu usually left chores to me, feeling too lazy to handle them, but she could take care of most things if she wanted to. For the past three days, Miu had been making breakfast every morning. “I’m getting better and better at cooking since you’ve been slacking off,” Miu complained, sighing again. “I had so much time today that I even made my own lunch,” she said, showing off.

“I see... That’s impressive,” I dully responded as I mixed the natto. For the past few days, I had been in a terrible rhythm of being unable to sleep at night and unable to wake up in the morning. No matter what I did, Takkun’s face wouldn’t leave the back of my mind, and it left my chest tightened in pain whenever I would remember it. His heartbroken face and his tears wouldn’t leave my thoughts.

“Ugh... Isn’t it wrong for you to be the one depressed here? You’re an adult.

You need to get it together.”

“L-Leave me alone...”

“Think about how I feel having to see you be a drag first thing in the morning.”

“Miu...why are you being so harsh with me?”

“Because I’m on Taku’s side, of course! I wanted to support his pure love for you, and I also wanted him to be my dad,” she said with a joking tone. She poured her natto onto her rice as she continued. “Well, there’s no point in me supporting him anymore. Apparently, Taku got a girlfriend,” she said ever so casually.

“What?” I dropped the chopsticks I’d been about to eat with. My mind went blank, unable to process the words she’d just said “Wh-What? What did you just...?”

“I said he got a girlfriend.”

I pondered silently. *I still don’t understand.* My brain refused to process the words. “What? Y-You’re kidding, right? I mean, Takkun is...”

“He started dating someone else because you turned him down.” In contrast to my confused self, Miu spoke as if she couldn’t care less. She spoke frankly between bites of food. “They say a new love is the best way to heal a broken heart. Taku has been pretty popular ever since he was in high school, and now he’s got a bright future going to a famous university, so it’s only natural that the girls won’t leave him alone.”

I couldn’t respond.

“He apparently hadn’t dated anyone until now because he only had eyes for you, but he’s not bound to you anymore,” she continued. “Now he can start his happy, fun college life. Maybe it was for the best that you turned him down—he’s finally been awakened from his childhood dream and can date a cute young girl.”

I stayed silent.

“Oh right, I think they’re already going on a date today. Apparently, they

don’t have any classes this afternoon. I heard they’re planning on walking around the train station before heading to a movie. Must be nice to be in college. You have so much time even on weekdays.” After quickly finishing up her breakfast, Miu got up to leave. “I’m done, so I’m gonna head out, bye,” she said, heading out for school.

I sat there in a daze, unable to touch my breakfast.

That afternoon, I took a bus to the station. *It’s just a coincidence. I have something to take care of by the station*, I told myself. I headed to the building by the station that housed the theater on its top floor and entered a café on the first floor. *This is also just a coincidence. I’ve been wanting to visit this café for a while, that’s all.*

The café was pretty empty, and via pure coincidence, I sat in a seat with a good view of the entrance to the building—I had no other motives here. The trench coat, sunglasses, and facemask I had on to hide my identity were also all a coincidence. *It’s, um... I know! It’s just to protect me from UV rays!*

I let out a sigh. *I should stop this. Making excuses to myself is just sad.* In the end, I’d come here because I couldn’t help myself after hearing what Miu had said—I couldn’t help but wonder what kind of person Takkun’s girlfriend was. *Ugh... What am I doing? I’m the one who turned him down, who hurt him. I have no right to be doing something like this... Not that anyone has the right to spy on someone else’s date to begin with...*

As I agonized in my thoughts, he appeared. *It’s Takkun! He’s really here!* He walked in through the building’s entrance. I pulled out the magazine I’d brought with me and hid my face in a hurry, peeking through my sunglasses. He wasn’t alone—next to him was a girl.

The girl was dainty and petite with a cute face. Her hair was in soft waves, and she was wearing brightly colored lipstick. Her skirt was quite short and showed off her slim, beautiful legs. The girl, with her outfit that was oh so youthful in taste, gave Takkun an innocent and cheerful smile.

They walked past me, side by side, looking like they were having fun. They looked like a couple, what with both of them being young. I was slightly dazed,

and I felt my heart grow cold in an instant. *It was true... I thought Miu might be lying just to tease me, but it was true.* Takkun had a girlfriend, and he was on a date with her.

After the initial chill dissipated, my heart suddenly grew hot in my chest. *What the hell! Who does she think she is? So cute, and stylish, and her legs are so thin... She pisses me off! Also, what's up with Takkun? He's all giddy with that girl! Come to think of it, she's completely different from me! Even if he were to get a girlfriend so quickly, would he really go out with such a young, dainty, skinny girl who's the polar opposite of me?! I guess you preferred young, cute girls after all! You wanted a young girl your age, not an old lady like me!*

Though my selfish anger had run rampant, my rage only lasted a moment, and my heart immediately froze back over with self-hatred. *Ugh, what am I getting so upset about? I have no right getting upset like this.*

My heart was unbelievably scrambled, and I couldn't even make out how I was feeling. Despite my confusion, before I knew it, I had run out of the café and began tailing the two of them.

The theater, which was located on the top floor, wasn't too crowded since it was a weekday. *Getting close is going to be difficult without a crowd.* I continued to observe Takkun and his girlfriend, hiding behind the counter selling merchandise.

After buying their movie tickets, they bought drinks from the concession stand. They appeared to have bought two different drinks, and they took a quick sip of each other's to try the different flavors.

Wh-What?! Isn't that... That's an indirect kiss! I'm not a middle schooler, so it might be strange of me to freak out over an indirect kiss, but...aren't things moving a bit fast for having only gotten together three days ago?! Also, wouldn't you be more flustered about an indirect kiss? Why is he so calm about it, like he's just hanging out with the boys...?

"Oh no..." I mumbled to myself. I wasn't careful enough—after getting flustered about the indirect kiss, I forgot about hiding myself and went completely out in the open. My eyes met with Takkun's girlfriend, who stared at me blankly for a moment before whispering something into his ear. Takkun looked in my direction, his eyes widening with shock before running my way. I couldn't run and froze up on the spot.

"Um... Miss Ayako?"

"Y-You've got the wrong person..." I replied. He silently looked at me.

"I-I'm sorry. Yes, it's me," I admitted. I wasn't able to pull one over on him. Of course I wasn't going to fool him—my disguise was simply a coat and sunglasses. My identity was obvious from up close.

Giving in, I took off my sunglasses. What came into my now clear field of vision was Takkun's surprised expression.

"What are you doing here...?" he asked.

"U-Um, I'm.... I-I just thought I'd see a movie."

"Dressed like that?"

"Wh-What's wrong with this? The UV rays are strong today! A-Anyways, what are *you* doing here, Takkun?!"

“I mean...I’m here to watch a movie.”

“I-I know that...but seeing you do such a thing gives me pause. Isn’t a day off from classes a perfect opportunity for you to steal a move on your classmates?”

“What?”

“I-I know you’re all excited now that you have a girlfriend, but you’re still a student... Aren’t your days off when you should spend the most time studying?!”

“A girlfriend? What?”

“N-Not that it has anything to do with me! Who you date has absolutely nothing to do with me! B-But... It’s just... I...” My rambling was so incoherent I’d even lost myself, yet I kept going on. As Takkun stood there confused, *she* appeared—his girlfriend walked up to us, late to the scene.

“So, you *are* the Miss Ayako I’ve heard all about,” she said after looking back and forth between Takkun and I. In that moment, my mind that was already a jumbled mess was thrown into further confusion—not at her words, but at her voice, the timbre of which left me in great shock.

“I thought I felt someone staring...” she continued. “When I turned around, there was this totally suspicious woman looking our way, so I thought it might be you, and sure enough, it was.”

I felt like she might have casually said something terrible by calling me a totally suspicious woman, but that was neither here nor there. Her voice, the voice that rang out, was low. It was a low, masculine voice, unimaginable to recognize as a woman’s.

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Ayako. Takumi is always talking about you,” she said with a beaming smile, ignoring my completely blank state of mind. No, not she. “My name is Satoya Ringo. I’m a friend of Takumi’s, and we go to the same university.” The cutely dressed up girl standing in front of me spoke in a masculine fashion and introduced herself with a masculine name, Satoya, in her low, masculine voice.

“What...huh? A b-boy?”

“Yes, I’m a guy,” he calmly nodded. He then looked down to look at his clothes, and realization washed over his face. “Oh, right, I’m dressed like this today, ha ha,” he laughed. “I totally forgot. I felt like things were just like at school since I’m with Takumi. I apologize for the misunderstanding.” I silently stood there. “Did you think I was Takumi’s girlfriend or something?”

“Y-Yeah...”

She—no, Satoya—had asked me that with a joking tone, but my brain had stopped functioning after the barrage of shocking events, so I couldn’t remember to brush it off and responded totally honestly.

“What? You really thought I was his girlfriend?”

“Oh, no! I-It’s not that, it’s just...” I tried to recant my statement, but it was too late.

Satoya then solemnly thought to himself before speaking up again. “Takumi, you said that Miss Ayako turned you down, right?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“I see, Takumi was rejected... So, Miss Ayako was just now following us dressed in an outfit that could only be for tailing someone. On top of that, she mistakenly thought I was your girlfriend...” Satoya mumbled to himself as he thought, then continued. “I see. This is... Well, I should probably take a hint and leave you two to it.”

“Maybe... Yeah.”

“Okay then, I’ll go head to my seat first, just come when you’re done. I guess it’s fine if you don’t come though,” Satoya said, seemingly understanding of the situation. He then took Takkun’s drink with him and walked off, gallantly taking graceful strides with his beautiful, hairless legs. Left alone, we moved to a corner of the walkway with less people.

“So...is he your friend?”

“Yes. We became friends in university. We end up hanging out together more often than not.”

“Even though he’s so cute...he’s a boy?”

“Outside of school, he usually goes out crossdressing. Well, if you call it crossdressing, he’ll deny that it is. According to him, he’s ‘not crossdressing, just picking out cute clothes that would look good and wearing them.’”

“I-I see...” It sounded like a very modern sentiment. *I don’t think an old lady like me can keep up.* Regardless, the person that I had mistaken for Takkun’s girlfriend had turned out to just be a friend. It now made sense why they were so comfortable with each other, like two guy friends hanging out, since that was exactly what was going on.

“He invited me out to the movies today. He said I should forget about my broken heart and just have a good time.” I couldn’t say anything to that. “Why did you follow us though? Not only that, but you thought Satoya was my girlfriend.”

“That’s because, um...” I said, hesitating.

“Did Miu say something to you?”

“H-How did you know?”

“I told Miu I was going to the movies with Satoya today, and she asked for a bunch of details like the time and place...also, she knows that Satoya dresses like that.”

“S-So Miu tricked me?!” As I stood there in shock, Takkun nodded, as if to say that was the case. *U-Ugh! Miu! Why would you lie about something like this?!*

“So, basically, Miu fed you various lies and made you think I got a girlfriend, and you got curious and came to get a look at her?”

“U-Um...” I wasn’t sure how I should respond—what Takkun said was completely correct, but I didn’t want to come out and acknowledge it. *If I admit he’s right, that would be like... It would be like I came because I can’t stop thinking about him...*

“I have to say, I’m kind of shocked.”

“I-I’m sorry! I know it was rude of me to tail you...”

“Oh, um, I’m not shocked about that,” he said with a nervous smile. “I couldn’t care less about that. What I’m shocked about is... Well, I know Miu

tricked you, but I can't believe you thought I would already get with someone else."

"What?"

"There's no way I could get over you so easily. I wouldn't go and start dating someone just because you turned me down. My feelings went unrequited for ten whole years, and if I'm honest, even now..." His voice was becoming more passionate as he spoke, and though he started to lean forward in the heat of the moment, he quickly collected himself. "I'm sorry... I'm sure I'm being a nuisance by saying something like this."

I didn't know what to say. "Ha ha, it's pretty disgusting of me to let my feelings linger like this," he continued. "Um... I-It'll be all right though. I can't do it right away, but I'll do my best to stop liking you." It looked like he was forcing himself to smile.

He's going to stop liking me... He'll stop having those feelings for me...

Takkun corrected his posture. "I look forward to continuing our relationship as neighbors," he said in a sincere tone. "Also...if you're all right with it, I'd like to continue tutoring Miu as well."

For some reason, I felt an immense distance between us—it was like he'd drawn a line in the sand, that he'd done his best to set this boundary in our relationship. I couldn't help but feel like he was treating me like a stranger.

"Also... I won't misunderstand you and think that you followed me because you were jealous or anything, so don't worry about that either."

"What?"

"I get it. You were just worried that I threw myself at some random girl because I couldn't care anymore after being rejected, right? You felt responsible, so you came to see how I was doing. Don't worry, I won't misread what's going on here," he said with a sad-looking smile, as if he was trying to convince himself.

"Well, Satoya's waiting for me." He turned to leave—to leave me. He'd drawn a line and was trying to put distance between us. The moment I realized that, my chest tightened with pain, and my mind went blank.

“W-Wait!” Before I knew it, I had grabbed the sleeve of his jacket, and slightly aggressively stopped him. “D-Don’t stop...” I said as he turned to face me with a surprised look. I wasn’t thinking anymore, but my mouth was moving on its own. The words bypassed my mind and bubbled up from deep within my heart, erupting out from pure impulse. “Don’t stop liking me.”

What...What am I saying? But I didn’t stop—it was too late to stop the words from coming out. “Jealousy... It’s probably jealousy...” I was supposedly pouring my heart out, but my words were still unclear regardless. I couldn’t help it—even *I* didn’t know what I was thinking. “I didn’t like it... When I heard from Miu that you had a girlfriend, I was so surprised and shocked and depressed, I just couldn’t sit still...so I ended up following you. I think it’s because I was jealous. I was so bothered by the idea of you dating someone I couldn’t stand it.”

Takkun stood there, listening silently as I continued. “It’s strange, isn’t it? I flatly refused to date you, and yet... I can’t control my own feelings anymore...” The words were flowing out nonstop. I kept saying what came to my mind, like a child who’d just started speaking. “What I said the other day to Miu in our living room was the truth. To me, you’re the boy who lives next door, and you’re like a son to me...and that’s why I can’t think of you as a man. At least, I wasn’t supposed to be able to... But ever since you confessed to me, after you said that you liked me, my thoughts have been consumed by you... Whether I’m asleep or awake, all I can think about is you, and my mind is all jumbled up...”

Takkun was like a son to me—that was the truth. It was *supposed to be* the truth.

“I think...I actually already had been thinking of you as a man...” I said, letting out the words that would jump over the line that was drawn between us. I had been averting my gaze from my inner self, but now I was facing it head on.

“Miss Ayako, I’ve always liked you.”

From the day that he confessed his feelings to me, Takkun’s presence in my heart had grown unbelievably large. I was running from the all too straightforward and pure affection that had come my way from the boy who I had wished would date my daughter, the affection that was too blinding for me. I’d tried to brush it off and sweep it under the rug, acting like it’d never

happened...but I couldn't do that anymore. It was no longer possible for me to continue to play dumb.

"Um... What I'm trying to say is... I do see you as a man, but it's not a lie that you feel like a son...and I get irritated thinking about you with another girl, but I don't even know if it's jealousy or like when a mother helicopters her son, so..."

"In other words..." Takkun finally spoke up as my words and feelings got awkwardly tangled up. "...you think of me as a man, at least a little bit, right?" he said with a serious expression, his eyes looking like he was hopeful of something.

"Y-Yes..."

"But those feelings where you think of me like a son won't completely go away."

"Th-That seems to be the case..."

"That's why you can't go out with me?"

"Yeah... Everything is happening kind of quickly, so I haven't really figured out my feelings..."

"Despite that, you don't like the idea of me having a girlfriend, so you don't want me to date."

"Um..."

"You don't want to date me, but you want me to continue liking you. You're telling me to stay in love with you."

I thought about it for a moment. *W-Wait... Now that I think about it, aren't I saying something kind of insane?! Aren't I saying something completely self-centered and incredibly annoying?!*

"Ha.... Ha ha. Ha ha ha!" Takkun burst out into laughter. It was a loud belly-laugh. "Ha ha... Miss Ayako, isn't that kind of awful? There's being selfish, and then there's *this*."

I couldn't say anything back to that. It *was* awful—truly terrible. Here I was, an old lady in her thirties, saying something like a middle schooler in love with the idea of love—no, not even a middle schooler would say something so

annoying...

“It’s fine,” Takkun said as I stood there overcome with intense self-loathing.

“What...?”

“I’ll do everything just the way you asked. I won’t date another girl, and I won’t stop liking you.”

“Wh-What...? You’ll do that?” *I know I’m the one who asked him to do all this, but I feel like what I was asking was just the worst.*

“Maybe I’m just weak to you after falling for you, but I don’t have any other choice but to do as you say.” He bashfully moved his hand to cover up how he was breaking into a smile. “It may sound strange...but I’m pretty happy right now.”

“You’re happy?” I wasn’t sure how he could be happy in this situation, having some lady in her thirties say the most annoying thing ever to him.

“Hearing that I’m allowed to keep liking you, I just... I suddenly feel really happy.”

It felt like he’d dealt a heavy blow with that line—his words firmly grasped my heart. As I stood there flustered out of my mind, Takkun came closer. “So...does this mean I can, um, take this to mean there’s still a possibility of us dating? That I have a chance with you?”

“Wh-What?! I, um, well... I-I guess so. You might have a little bit of a chance. Only a little bit of a chance though!”

“Understood,” Takkun said with a smile—a smile full of genuine happiness that made the sad fake-smile he’d had on earlier seem like a lie. Overwhelmed with embarrassment and itchy all over, I was no longer able to make sense of anything.

“Um, but... Even if you have a chance, i-it doesn’t mean something will happen with us right away! I want more time to think things through...”

“I understand. I probably got ahead of myself. Let’s take things slowly.” Despite me running my mouth and saying pathetic things, Takkun gave me a warm smile, seemingly unbothered by my words. “I’ve been waiting ten years. I

can handle waiting a bit more.”

“Takkun...”

“Um, well... I guess let’s leave things as is for a while,” he said, reaching his hand out to me, slightly embarrassed. “I look forward to it.”

“U-Understood. It’s a making-up handshake.” I reached out to the hand he put forward, slightly nervous. His hand felt very big in mine—big and bony, completely different from the hand I’d held when he was younger, making it apparent that he was a man. He strongly, but gently, grasped my hand to complete the gesture.



“I’ll do my best,” said Takkun. “I’ll do my best to make you fall for me.”

“G-Go easy on me, please...” All I could do was look down, away from his straightforward and passionate confession.

Epilogue

♥

Days start early when you're a single mother. My mornings would often begin with me rubbing my sleepy eyes and getting out of bed early since I had to pack a lunch for my high school daughter, and today was no different.

...Well, to tell the truth, I'd been dropping the ball recently, but today I'd finally managed to get out of bed like I was supposed to for the first time in a while. I'd gotten some restful sleep and woke up feeling great.

Just as I was setting the breakfast I'd cooked on the table, my daughter, Miu, loudly stomped downstairs.

"Ahhhh! Shoot! I was too eepy and I overslept!"

As a woman in her thirties, I still had no idea if "eepy" was something my daughter had come up with or if it was just how young people these days spoke. I didn't know—and there were so many things I just didn't know. I didn't know about how my daughter had grown so mature, nor about the feelings the boy living next door had. I didn't even know how *I* truly felt. *Even after becoming an adult, life is full of unknowns...*

"Jeesh... I need to wake up early since mom's totally been useless these days... Wait, huh? Mom?"

"Sorry for being useless," I said to Miu, who looked stunned to see me. "Good morning, Miu."

"M-Morning..."

"Come on, hurry up and eat before your breakfast gets cold."

"Oh, ha ha. I guess you're back to your usual self," she said with a wry laugh as she sat down at the table. I poured myself some coffee before sitting across from her. "I wouldn't have minded if you'd stayed useless for a bit longer. My household chore skills would've leveled up even more."

"You could just do chores on a regular basis, you know?"

“No no, that’s a totally different thing.”

“Wow...”

“Anyways, you’re really simple, aren’t you mom?” Miu said while staring intently at me, exasperation in her voice. “Now that you’ve made up with Taku, you’re suddenly energetic.”

“Sh-Shut up...”

“You should be thankful. It’s all thanks to my kind little lie.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s all thanks to you,” I said as I felt a smile forming. I’d meant to be sarcastic, but I suppose that was just the sore loser in me talking.

“Oh well. It’s really kind of pathetic, not to mention annoying, of my own mother, you know? You made such a big deal about everything only to say, ‘Let’s start as friends,’ and procrastinate on the conclusion. What is this, a middle school romance?”

“Ugh, leave it alone already.” *Stop being so right already... I know better than anyone I’m being indecisive and pathetic and acting like an annoying middle schooler in love with the idea of love.*

Afterward, around the time we finished eating breakfast, the doorbell rang. My daughter and I headed to the entryway and saw *him* there. Takkun. Takumi Aterazawa. The boy who lived next door*. No, he’s not just a boy anymore. I can’t see him as a boy anymore. He’s a grown—*

“Mornin’, Taku.”

“Morning, Miu.”

Miu gave him a casual greeting, to which he responded before looking my way. He looked slightly embarrassed, but he looked directly at me. I was a little embarrassed as well, but I didn’t avert my gaze and looked right back at him. I faced him head on.

“Good morning, Miss Ayako.”

“Good morning, Takkun.” It was our usual greeting, just like we had done until now, but there was something different about it. I may have just been overthinking it...or, perhaps, things were going to change from now on. *How is*

our relationship going to change from what it was moving forward...?

"What are you guys doing, staring into each other's eyes first thing in the morning?" We both snapped back to reality with Miu's teasing words after having been unconsciously gazing at each other, quickly breaking eye contact. "It looks like I might be the third wheel here. Want me to just go ahead?"

"Lay off me," Takkun insisted. "Come on, let's go."

"Okay, fine. Bye, mom."

"Goodbye, Miss Ayako."

"H-Have a good day," I said as I saw them off. Once the door closed, I let out a sigh of relief. *Good, I think I was able to be normal... Probably...* We'd only just made up yesterday, so seeing Takkun's face still made my heart race, and I almost lost myself in confusion, but I was able to put on a calm front.

Released from my nervousness, I returned to the living room to see the smartphone I'd left on the table displaying a notification—I had received a LINE message. The sender was the person I'd just said goodbye to.

"T-Takkun?" Though I thought it was strange, I opened the app and checked the message. There I saw a considerate greeting.

Takumi: Good morning. I'm glad to see you're doing well Miss Ayako. I'm relieved.

But the message that followed left me stunned.

Takumi: Do you have any plans this weekend? If not, would you like to go somewhere together?

"Wh-Wh-Whaaat?!" I fell to the floor while letting out a confused scream. *This is... I'm being asked out on a date, right?! It's totally a date, right?! He, like... He has no intention of hiding how he feels?! No warning shots or curve balls, just a fastball down the middle?! It's so aggressive! His methods are completely unsubtle!*

"I'll do my best to make you fall for me."

His words from yesterday popped up in my head. *Isn't this, um, kind of quick?! I know he said he was going to do his best, but couldn't he be a little more relaxed about it? Didn't he say that he got ahead of himself and that we would take things slow?* My mind and heart were a jumble of embarrassment, helplessness...and also a bit of happiness.

I, Ayako Katsuragi, a thirty-something-year-old single mother with a very adorable daughter, was being fervently pursued by a boy with strange taste who apparently liked me more than my aforementioned adorable daughter.

I'd somehow managed to buy myself some time...or, at least, I thought I had. *Perhaps it's only a matter of time before I'm completely smitten with him and wrapped around his finger.*

Afterword

I think dating is surprisingly harder once you become an adult. Beyond just liking or not liking someone, no matter how you slice it, various factors and requirements like their job, their salary, their savings, their views on marriage, their views on children, each of your parents' approval, and other such things become a part of it. It's a completely different game from when you're a student and can date just based on feelings.

The same goes for how you ask someone out. When you're a student, all you probably need to do is just tell them, "I like you. Please go out with me." When you're an adult, something so adolescent becomes embarrassing.

For heartbreak as well, students get a chance to go to a new environment and reset their interpersonal relationships with people every few years, but things aren't so easy for adults. The more one becomes an adult, the scarier it is to stumble. You become a coward toward romance and get cold feet.

The main character of this story is a woman whose circumstances left her as the caretaker of a child, and she had no choice but to become a mother, an "adult," even if she had to overextend herself to do it. It's a story where this woman, who had lived so long as an adult, is thrown a fastball of unrequited feelings at lightning speed from an angle she didn't expect. She gets scared, shies away, and continuously makes excuses to run from those feelings. Despite all of that, in the end, she faces those feelings just a bit.

With all that said, I'm Kota Nozomi. This is my first time writing for Dengeki Bunko. A story about an unmarried single mother who took in her sister's child, a boy who's had unrequited feelings for her for many years... It goes without saying that this is a work that has what I'm into on full display.

I wanted to write a romantic comedy with the main character being the mom who lives next door! The direction of this genre, and in turn, this series, is to center on a pure-love romantic comedy of just the young man and mom next door, one on one. I won't be making it a harem; I just want to showcase a male lead who's devoted to the woman he loves.

Also, this is a little behind-the-scenes fact that doesn't really matter at all, but the last names for all the characters are taken from areas in the Tohoku region of Japan with names made up strings of kanji that are hard to read. This really doesn't matter at all.

The following are my acknowledgements.

To my editor, thank you for getting such an absurd project approved. I went for it thinking it wouldn't be approved anyways, so when I was told that I could write this story, my first reaction wasn't happiness, but rather to be shocked and wonder, "Is Dengeki Bunko okay?!"

To Giuniu, thank you for the wonderful illustrations. Mommy Ayako looks exactly like the adorable mom I was imagining—it's truly the best.

And to you, all the readers who have picked up this book, I give my utmost thanks. I hope to see you all again in Volume 2.

Kota Nozomi