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


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You Like Me, Not My Daughter?! Volume 2 [Complete]

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Prologue

♠

I couldn't keep track of how many times I'd practiced how I would ask her out on a date. It was definitely over dozens of times, somewhere in the hundreds—I wouldn't be surprised if I had reached a thousand.

Miss Ayako Katsuragi was my next door neighbor and childhood friend...'s mother. My friend had lost her parents due to an unfortunate accident at a young age, and Miss Ayako took her in and raised her as her own daughter. I've been in love with this woman since I was ten years old. For ten years—ever since I was ten years old—I've stayed in love with her.

As the years passed and my hidden feelings smoldered, I thought a lot about how I would make my move. One part of that was thinking about how I would ask her out on a date. For the past ten years, I'd continued practicing how I would ask the person I was in love with out on a date—perhaps it was more of a repeated delusion than a practice run.

I'd come up with various excuses and scenarios in my mind to ask her out, but in the end, I'd never actually executed anything. I got as far as coming up with a message and typing it out, but I'd never actually been able to hit "send."

It was early in the morning, and I was walking the usual path to the train station. I stood at a crosswalk, waiting for the light to change as I stared at the smartphone in my hand and let out a deep sigh. A messaging app was displayed on the screen—specifically, my conversation with Miss Ayako, and the message I had already sent.

Takumi: Good morning. I'm glad to see you're doing well, Miss Ayako. I'm relieved.

It was a somewhat canned greeting.

A lot had happened between us recently. To describe it in simple terms...well,

I had gone and told her how I felt. I'd confessed my feelings and told her that I liked her and that I wanted to go out with her—I revealed the feelings that I had kept under wraps for ten years. The result was quite a tumultuous frenzy.

Nothing had really changed significantly on the surface, but I believe Miss Ayako went through a lot internally. After all, the boy she had known since he was ten years old—the man that she had only ever thought of like a son—had proclaimed his love for her. Miss Ayako had been visibly shaken by my confession, so much so that I became worried about how confused and uneasy she'd seemed to be.

She apparently hadn't had even the slightest inkling that I had feelings for her. The feelings I'd kept hidden hadn't been conveyed to her at all. I felt pretty mixed up about it, both happy and empty at the same time.

But now I'd shared the feelings I'd been carrying with me for ten years. Now that she knows, we would never be able to return to the way things were. We wouldn't be able to just be friendly neighbors anymore. According to my friend Satoya Ringo, confessing romantic feelings was a bomb that destroyed 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." Satoya had turned out to be absolutely right.

After I'd confessed my feelings, my relationship with Miss Ayako completely changed. It really was as if I had dropped a bomb—she'd borne the blast of my selfish affection. A peculiar nervousness arose between us, something between awkwardness and embarrassment, and over time, the shock waves from my confession reached the people around us as well. At one point, Miss Ayako had even flat-out rejected me. But...

A lot happened, and her response has been put on hold. She said that she hasn't been able to sort her feelings out yet, so she wanted time. Looking at things pessimistically, it could sound like she was just stalling on giving me an answer and prolonging things—but I was happy. I was unbelievably ecstatic about how I could continue loving her.

And then, the May I'd turned twenty, I received a response along the lines of "Let's leave things as they are for a while," at the movie theater. Presently, it

was the morning after that, during which I had stopped by Miss Ayako's house as usual and had afterward sent the aforementioned greeting-like message after saying goodbye.

I wanted to let her know that I was relieved and grateful that we were able to solve the temporary breakdown of our relationship and had reached a place that was close to our normal, but...

"Hm..." I groaned, my fingers frozen by hesitation, unsure if I should send the next message I had typed up.

Takumi: Do you have any plans this weekend? If not, would you like to go somewhere together?

The message itself was something I'd come up with last night. I'd copy-pasted the saved text, and all that was left was hitting "Send," but I was unable to do so. *Wh-What should I do...? It might just bother her. Am I taking things too far when she's still confused? I mean, it was just yesterday that I said I got ahead of myself and want to take things more slowly... It feels like I'm going against the rules asking her out so soon...*

No! If anything, maybe that's exactly why *now is the right time. I might have said that we would take things slow, but I also said that I would do my best to make her fall for me. It's probably better that I follow it up and actually make a move! But wait, no... Maybe I should...*

Even after getting through the crosswalk, I was still at a loss over whether I should actually send the message or not, and I was deep in thought while glancing down at my smartphone.

"You're texting my mom, Taku?" a voice called out from the side.

"Whoa!" I quickly hid my phone. It was Miu Katsuragi, the only daughter of the woman I was in love with. They weren't directly blood related, but she was Miss Ayako's dear child. Miu and my relationship would typically be labeled as "childhood friends." We'd started walking to the station together every day since she'd entered high school since we had the same route. "Wh-What do you want, Miu? You shouldn't be peeking at other people's phones."

“It’s your fault for checking your phone so many times when we’re walking together. Anyway, did I see the words ‘go somewhere together’? Are you asking my mom out on a date?!” It seemed that Miu had gotten much more than a peek. She got closer, smiling from ear to ear. “Wow, good for you. You’re actually shooting your shot, huh? My little Taku’s really getting in there.”

“Don’t tease me... I haven’t even sent it yet.”

“What, why? Why haven’t you sent it?”

“I mean...there’s a lot to think about.”

“Boo! What the hell. You sound like a loser.”

“Don’t call me a loser... There’s a lot of maneuvering when it comes to adult relationships.”

“Says the college student who still lives at home.”

“Hey.”

“You don’t have any relationship experience in the first place. If someone asks how long you’ve been single, you can just tell them your age.”

I grumbled in response. I was just a college student being brutally torn down by a high schooler.

“There, there, you don’t have to be so sad. I mean, the only reason you’ve been single is because you’ve been in love with my mom this whole time... Also, I couldn’t say mom knows a single thing about ‘adult relationships’ unless I lie through my teeth.” I wasn’t sure if she was trying to make me feel better or not, but she continued. “Anyways, if you’re going to ask her out, you should do it already,” she said firmly. “You guys are dragging things out too much. I get that everything’s a mess since my mom had to go and be annoying, but you have to be aggressive and make moves, Taku.”

“Y-You’re not wrong...but I have to consider her feelings too. I’m sure it’d be stressful for her to have to turn me down if I ask her out. Also, Miss Ayako is nice, so even if she didn’t want to go on a date, I feel like she might force herself to... O-Of course I know that I need to actively be making moves, which is why I need to dot my i’s and cross my t’s and think about the timing of things

—”

“Ugh, you’re so irritating!” Miu exclaimed, annoyed, before leaning forward and trying to grab my phone out of my hands. “Just give it to me! If you can’t send it, I will!”

“What the...? H-Hey, stop that!”

“You’re wasting time by being such an indecisive worrywart! All you have to do is aggressively go after her! My mom is extremely simpleminded—you don’t need to pull any moves on her or anything!”

“Come on... Don’t call your own mom simpleminded.”

“You should just have an overnight date and get her in bed! Then everything will work out!”

“Like hell they will! Also, a girl your age shouldn’t be saying things like that in public!” The battle for my phone went on for a few seconds, until Miu squinted and let out a puzzled voice.

“Hm...? Taku, isn’t that message already sent?”

“What...?” I checked the screen and was stunned. “What?!” What should have been on the screen was a message just a tap away from being sent—but for some reason, the message was already sent. “You’ve got to be kidding... What happened...?”

“Maybe you accidentally pressed it when you tried to hide your phone earlier.”

“No way...”

“Well, I guess things worked out. Good for you.”

“It’s not good! Wh-What am I supposed to do...?” The message that I’d accidentally sent already had a read receipt—there was nothing I could do now. Miss Ayako had already read the message where I asked her out on a date. “This is bad... This is really bad...”

“Jeez, what are you so worried about?” Miu said in an exasperated tone as she watched me get unbelievably flustered to the point of a cold sweating. “You were going to ask her out anyways. All that’s changed is you did it now.”

“No...you don’t get it. Even if I was planning on it, there’s mental preparation to be done first. I haven’t even thought about what we would do yet...” Suddenly, the phone in my hand vibrated. The screen displayed a response from Miss Ayako.

Ayako: Sure.

That was all. A curt, simple, four-letter positive response.

“Sure”? Wait, what does “sure” mean again? I’m pretty sure that in this country, it’s a word used to reply in the affirmative.

“See? I told you she’s simpleminded,” Miu said with a smug look as I stood there, my mind blank from shock.

Thanks to the message that got sent out in a strange way, I was able to successfully ask her out. In fact, I succeeded so easily that it now seemed silly how much I’d worried over it.

It appeared that I would be able to go on a date with Miss Ayako this weekend. It would be my first date with the woman I’d been in love with for ten years.

Chapter 1: Preparation and Execution

♠

“Your first date, huh? You must be pumped, Takumi,” Satoya said with a cutesy smile on his face after I told him about the events that had transpired this morning. It was around noon, and we were in the university cafeteria, Satoya sitting across from me.

Satoya Ringo was a guy. His outfit today was fashionable, but he was still dressed as a guy. He only cross-dressed off campus—while he was in class, he made a point of wearing clothes that made him visibly masculine. Apparently, the reason for this was that he would be accused of sending someone to take his place for attendance during lectures, and that was a hassle.

Well, although I described him as “cross-dressing,” Satoya doesn’t like the term. According to him, he’s simply “wearing cute clothes that look good on him,” not “cross-dressing.” When it came to fashion, he wasn’t bound by the stereotypical gendering of clothing. He would wear clothes that he liked the way he wanted to, and he enjoyed wearing makeup and nail polish as he pleased. This gender nonconforming style was what he believed in.

Although Satoya only looked like a slim, beautiful girl when dressed in more feminine clothing, it didn’t mean he preferred men. He liked women and was currently dating a woman.

“It looks like your chances of capturing your dear Miss Ayako’s heart will greatly change depending on how this date goes,” Satoya carried on. “Maybe it’ll even be a significant branching point for your life.”

“Don’t make it worse... It must be fun when it’s not your problem.”

“I mean, you said it. There’s nothing more fun than watching other people’s love affairs. As long as you don’t get too sucked into where the relationship goes, it’s peak entertainment.”

I sighed as he spoke so lightly of my situation. Ever since Satoya had found out about my feelings for Miss Ayako, his attitude had been consistently like this—

half joking and half serious. He had been enjoying my love life like it was some kind of show.

Though his attitude was somewhat flippant and aloof, I didn't really have any complaints. It would only be troublesome if he were to become overly invested and started to seriously cheer me on—after all, my love life was *my* love life. On top of that, despite seeming like he was fooling around, he would give me a genuine answer if I needed advice, and he'd even tried to cheer me up by inviting me to the movies when I was depressed about the rejection the other day. There was no doubt that he was a kind, dependable friend.

"At the very least, I know I have to give it my all..." I said as if I were trying to persuade myself. "It's an opportunity I didn't think I would have, so there's no choice but to use it to my advantage. That's why I'm here, asking for your advice."

"Advice huh...? To be honest, I don't know if I can help," Satoya said with a shrug. "As you can see, I'm a good looking guy with a handsome face, so I've naturally always been popular...but I've only ever dated people my age. I've never even *thought of* going on a date with a woman over thirty, let alone done so."

"I see..."

"I can think of a bunch of ideas that would be fitting for a college-aged couple, but I'm a bit lost when it comes to something that an adult woman would like. If it's a date between adults...around here, there's not much you can do without a car, I think."

"That's the problem..." I said, slumping down in my chair. We were in a suburban city in the Tohoku region. Rather than one family owning one car like most parts of the country, here it was normal for each person to have their own car. Unlike a big city where the train and taxis could be used to get around, the standard method of transportation in the areas in this region were cars.

Once you graduated and got a job, it was normal to own a car. Some college students even already had one—and those people were popular. College students who owned a car could get dates just based on the fact that they had a car. Well, that said, one wrong step could lead you to becoming the chauffeur

of your group of friends, leaving you to just be the guy who's convenient to have around.

"I forget, do you have a license?" Satoya asked.

"Yea, I got one in a driving boot camp last summer, which is why I was thinking about maybe renting a car for the actual date."

"I feel like you don't have to go as far as renting a car, but...hmm. I'm not sure. I might try asking some other girls."

"Sorry for the trouble."

"No worries. You're always helping me out—who knows how many classes I would've failed if you hadn't been there for me last year. Also..."

"Also?"

"I want you to be happy too," Satoya said with a small smile. "People's love affairs are the most enjoyable spectacle, so why not make them the best they can be and have them end in a happily ever after?"

"Satoya..." *You really had to go and say something nice.* I was truly blessed to have such a dependable friend. "Thanks. I'll do my best too."

"Yeah. Oh, but...this might sound like it's conflicting with what I said earlier, but don't try too hard either," he said, completely contradicting himself. "It's a date with the person you've loved for so many years. It's understandable to be ecstatic, and I'm sure you're also feeling pressured that everything has to go right. I don't think it's good to put too much pressure on yourself. Miss Ayako will probably just be exhausted if you're too stressed about it, so I think you should just take it easy."

I understood what he meant. There was nothing more pathetic than a guy who was desperate and on edge. Satoya wasn't wrong, but...

"I know, but...I don't think I *can* just take it easy," I explained. Satoya was listening intently as I found the words. "It's finally happening... I've wished for this moment to come for so long, for us to have the kind of relationship where we could go on a date...for her to finally see me as a man."

The past ten years, I'd imagined the scenario over and over again, and I'd

wished for it to come true over and over again—for Miss Ayako and I to be at a point where we could go on a date. The relationship we had where she doted over me like a son or a younger brother was a blessing, but at the same time, I couldn't help but feel hollow living like that. Every time she'd smiled at me and patted my head with no embarrassment or hesitation, I'd been filled with pain.

There wasn't any guarantee yet that we would actually become a couple. But things had slightly progressed from when she'd only thought of me as someone who was like a son to her. I couldn't not be ecstatic. I couldn't not put pressure on myself.

"This date... I'll make it successful no matter what," I said, as if I were taking an oath.

It was my first date with Miss Ayako—failure wasn't an option. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I fumbled the ball here.

♥

"I'm hooome," Miu called out upon returning home from school as she made her way to the kitchen. It was evening, and I was preparing dinner. I was perhaps expecting this. She had quite the pep in her step and a wide grin spread across her face. "So, mom. I heard that you're going on a date with Taku this weekend."

"Um..." *Ugh...she knew about it after all.* When I'd replied this morning, I thought that she and Takkun might still be together considering the time, but I'd wanted to reply right away. It wouldn't have been right to take too long to reply when I'd accidentally opened the message and left a read receipt. On top of that, it felt like the longer I took to reply, the harder it would be to do so. I wanted to send him my response before I thought too much and got lost on what I should do.

"Wowee, you're going on a date together. I can practically count the seconds until you become a couple."

"Wh-What are you talking about? That's...That's a whole different story."

"What? You're really gonna say that, after everything?"

"I-I mean, even people who aren't couples go on dates. It would be rude to

turn him down since he went out of his way to invite me out... Also, I just happened to be free this weekend! Yeah, I'm just bored! That's the main reason!" I rattled on.

"Here she goes again, being annoying..." Miu said, shrugging in exasperation. "Anyway, what was up with your message? 'Sure'? I can't believe your response to being asked out on a date was just 'Sure.'"

"What...? Wh-Why do you know that?!"

"You replied right when I was looking at Taku's phone, so I got a good look."

"No way..."

"It's actually kind of cute. It's so obvious how you were pretending to be curt to hide the fact that you were totally flustered. You were trying so hard to seem like you're totally used to this kind of thing that it was clear how inexperienced you are."

"Wh—!" *S-She knows everything! My daughter has total insight into my thought process! Ugh, what is this situation? It's so embarrassing that she knows exactly how I feel about a topic like this!* "M-Miu, that's enough. You shouldn't tease an adult like that," I said, trying to put on my best mom-face as I pushed down the shame inside me. "It's not like that... Yeah, you've got it all wrong. You're completely off base. There was a deep meaning hidden behind the four letters that make up the word 'Sure' that a high schooler just wouldn't understand. It's a high-level maneuver that can only be understood by an adult woman who's been around the block—"

"Taku and Mom are going on a date, huh?" She wasn't even listening.

Can you please listen? Mom's doing her best to come up with an excuse here. Completely ignoring me is cruel, Miu... Mom might just cry...

"Your relationship might just move forward all at once if the date goes well," she pressed on. "Oh, you don't have to come home either. I'm all for you sleeping over."

"Wh-What are you talking about? I won't be sleeping over! I'm coming home!"

“What? Does that mean that after the date you’re going to... Here?! I guess I’ll go stay over at a friend’s house.”

“What are you trying to be considerate about?!”

“I mean, I’m rooting for the two of you, and I thought I was prepared for that kind of thing to start happening in this house eventually...but it might be a little too soon.”

“What kind of thing are you talking about! I won’t stay over, nor will we both be returning to this house! We’re...um, more... You know, we’re going to have a wholesome date.”

“‘Wholesome’? Specifically, how will it be wholesome?”

“It’ll, um... We’ll have lunch together, and talk...and then I’ll be home before dinner.”

“Are you a middle schooler? What kind of date is that?!”

“I-It’s fine! It’s appropriate for a first date!” We had gotten in quite the heated argument.

“First of all,” Miu continued, dumbfounded, “it’s going to be Taku who’s planning the date as the one who asked you out, not you, right? Has he said anything yet?”

“No... He just said that he would let me know when things were decided.” Takkun was currently planning our date, and I was just waiting for him to reach out. *Wh-What should I do...? What if he’s planning a full-on overnight date?! What if he’s already booked an inn or something?! What if the classic rom-com thing happens where he books a stay at a hot spring inn and they mistake us for a married couple and have us in the same room, and the futons are laid out pretty close together, and we first sleep at the edge, but gradually get closer as the night goes on...*

Wait, that wouldn’t happen. That’s impossible. I couldn’t believe what I was thinking. It was terrible even if it was just a delusion. After all, something like that could never happen because it was none other than Takkun who had asked me out on this date.

“I don’t think Takkun would come up with anything strange for our date,” I muttered like I was trying to argue myself into believing it. “He would think about you and me, and... Oh.”

Miu broke into a satisfied smile. “Huh, I see... It seems like you trust Taku quite a bit.”

“N-No, I didn’t mean it like that...”

“You guys should just get together already.”

“Ugh, shut up!!!” I ended the conversation there as if I were fleeing, feeling like I wouldn’t be able to win no matter what I said.

“Ha ha, well, regardless I’m excited to see how Taku’s going to capture your heart on this date,” Miu laughed, seeming like she was finding this whole thing endlessly entertaining.

“Capture.” It might have been strange to say it that way, but in so many words, I was going on this date to have my heart captured by the boy with strange taste who apparently liked an old lady like me, a woman more than ten years older than him.

Takkun, Takumi Aterazawa, the boy who I’d known since he was little. I’d had no idea at all, but he had apparently been in love with me for ten years. Miu and I had played with him many times, and I had even gone shopping with him before, but it was of course our first time formally going out together like this.

This was going to be our first date.

“Oho, a date this weekend with the boy I’ve heard so much about? I’m jealous,” Yumemi said over the phone, her tone truly joyful. Miu and I had finished having dinner, and she was now upstairs in her room. What had started out as a phone call to answer some work-related questions had somehow changed topics to be about my love life. *I feel like this keeps happening these days...*

“I was wondering what had happened since I’d said those harsh things when we were talking the other day. I’m glad it seems like you two are doing well and getting closer without any issues.”

“I guess...” There was actually one issue—a big fuss that was quite an issue—but considering how things had turned out, you could probably say that we were doing well and getting closer.

“Good grief... I’m truly, deeply jealous of you. I’d like to go on a date with a twenty-year-old college student myself. I’ve recently been in a dry spell when it comes to men, and I’ve been bored.”

“Don’t tease me. This isn’t a joke for me...”

“Huh? What’s there to worry about? All you have to do is go on the date and have fun.”

“You’re not wrong, but...it’s a bit embarrassing to say, but I’m not used to this sort of thing.”

“Right... I forgot you’re a single mother who’s never been married. You’ve just been focusing on work and raising Miu ever since you took her in.”

“Y-Yes...”

Desperate for some help, I decided to ask Yumemi, the woman with plenty of experience with romance, a question. “Um, Yumemi, what should a woman do if she’s asked out on a date?” It maybe wasn’t the best idea to ask her when she had been divorced three times in the past due to her own extramarital affairs, but she was probably still more knowledgeable about dating than I was.

“Ha ha, there’s nothing to worry yourself over,” she said, as if to laugh at how I was on the verge of being crushed by my nervousness and unease. “I’m sure you’d need to carefully come up with some kind of plan if you were trying to get the man you liked to fall for you, but you’re in the opposite situation.”

“I am?”

“Your roles are switched. This date was planned by a boy who is helplessly in love with you in order to coax you, Ayako Katsuragi, into falling for him.”

“Huh?! J-Jeez...” I became overly embarrassed at her all too direct way of stating things. I was already well aware this was a date planned by a boy who was helplessly in love with me in order to capture my heart, but I couldn’t help but feel flustered having it put into words like that.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about. It’s his job to worry. You just have to stand tall and wait for his lead.”

I didn’t say anything back, so Yumemi continued to speak. “You are constantly the one who holds the power when it comes to this romance. Depending on your perspective, this could be the most incredibly fun situation for you to be in. If you just sit there and let things happen, he’ll keep on flirting with you. Whether you actually date him or not is up to you. You’ve basically got the juvenile love of a young man in the palm of your heart, and it’s yours to toy with. In a sense, you’ve found yourself in a situation that many women dream about.”

“It would be nice if I look at it that way...” From the outside, my current situation might be something people would be jealous of: I was a single mother in her thirties being wooed by a young man who wasn’t just looking for a casual fling, but rather who wanted to make good on his serious, all-too-pure affection for his first love—a man who was trying to have a serious relationship with marriage in mind.

“That said, well, you’re never one to take things lightly. I’m assuming the fact that you have the power in this situation is making you worry more. You were dealt a hand only someone experienced could really make a play out of.”

She continued as I listened quietly. “If you were to put it into mahjong terms, it’s as if a beginner were a tile away from a menchin but they’re confused because they don’t know which tile is their wait.”

“Putting it into mahjong terms doesn’t really help my situation...” Though her example wasn’t helpful, I understood what she was trying to say since I knew the rules.

Menchin was the abbreviation of menzen-chin-i-so, a yaku that completed a hand. This yaku required a player to match all their tiles with tiles of the same color, and it was a big hand that scored many points. However, menchin was often a hand with a complicated wait—a beginner wouldn’t know which tile they could win on and would surely sit there, their head spinning. They would be just as close to losing their mind as they were to completing their hand.

This hand would be a huge opportunity for an experienced player, but this

rare opportunity would just make a beginner feel more flustered than ever. That situation was probably exactly what I was going through right now. This situation of mine was completely in my favor...to the point that I wasn't sure what I should even do with it.

"It might have even been good to turn him down once before going on a date with him. It might not be so bad to play hard to get and see how he reacts. It would help make it clear who has the power here too."

"I-I couldn't do that. I can't play games like that." *Also...* "I don't want to run any more either," I added on.

Ever since Takkun had confessed to me, I'd continuously run from the situation without realizing it. I tried to act like the confession had never happened and did things to try to make him hate me and leave on his own. I'd kept running to the point it was becoming pathetic. But I made a decision: I wasn't going to run anymore. No matter what happened to us moving forward —whether we ended up dating or not—I wouldn't shy away from facing him, I'd hear out his feelings, and I'd decide what to do after all of that. That was my minimum obligation towards him for liking someone like me for ten years, and it was what I believed to be proper etiquette.

"It's already like I'm kind of running right now, since I'm reserving my answer to his confession for now. I'm aware that I'm not being fair. That's why...I don't want to do anything that would seem like I was playing with his feelings anymore," I explained. "I want to face his feelings towards me without running away."

"Hee hee... Ha ha ha!" Yumemi burst into laughter after a moment of silence. "It's nice to see that you're back to being so pure and innocent. That's the Ayako Katsuragi that I love."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"Of course. You sound a lot more like yourself and so much more wonderful than when you try to act like an adult and put on airs," she said, sounding like she was having a ball. "If you don't want to be crafty and play games, there's only one piece of advice I can give you: have fun." Her advice was shockingly simple. "It's a date, after all. Don't sweat the details and just have fun. Act like

you're back in your twenties—no, your teens—and enjoy your youth as a young girl again."

I didn't know what to say to that. "I'm sure that's what he wants too," Yumemi added.

"P-Probably..." I agreed and let out a small sigh. "I understand. I won't think about it too much, and I'll have a good time."

"Good. Well, maybe I didn't even need to give you that advice." She then continued in an overtly taunting voice. "It seems like you were trying to sound very serious talking to me about this, but...I can tell from your words and actions that you're pretty happy right now."

"Wha—?"

"Hey, it's nothing to be embarrassed about. Everyone's happy and excited when they're asked out on a date, no matter their age."

"C-Come on, Yumemi."

"Ha ha, don't be so embarrassed. Well then, I wish you the best of luck," she said, hanging up the call on her end with a teasing laugh.

With my smartphone still in my hand, I face-palmed right there at the table. "Ugh... What's her problem...? Saying whatever she wants at the very end like that..." My face was hot, and my thoughts were a jumbled mess. "I mean...I can't help it. I'm looking forward to it," I said, unable to admit she was right.

The moment I actually put my feelings into words, I felt a tall wave of shame wash over me. *I'm looking forward to it. Yeah, that's right.* Despite everything I'd said, I'd ended up being excited for this date—my first date with Takkun. I was plenty worried and nervous...but at the same time, I was looking forward to it.

I'd said several things that sounded good, like going on the date was my obligation, or it was proper etiquette, or that I didn't want to run anymore, but at the end of the day, I was excited for this date. My heart was pounding wondering what kind of date Takkun would plan—it was practically beating out of my chest as I imagined the various scenarios that could take place.

"Argh!" *Ugh, I hate this! I hate myself! I'm already over thirty—most people would consider me an old lady, but I'm unbelievably flustered, panicked, and...elated over one single date. I'm so embarrassed by myself.*

That night, I received a message from Takkun after my post-dinner call with Yumemi. The message was about our date this weekend, and it detailed the general area we would be going to, and what time we would meet up. I had nothing to object to, so I let him know I was good with everything.

I'm glad that wasn't a phone call. If he had called, my voice would've been shaking with nervousness and excitement. *Takkun might be feeling the same way.* It was his first date as well; he might have been even more nervous and excited than I was.

As we both let our thoughts run wild, time continued to pass on, and it was finally the weekend of our date. The memorable event of our first date together was going to start...or it was supposed to have. My date with Takkun would meet an unexpected ending—no, rather, it would meet an unexpected beginning.

♥

“I had fun today, Miss Ayako.”

“Yeah, me too, Takkun.”

After doing a bunch of your typical date activities and finishing dinner, we were walking side-by-side on a path that ran along the ocean with a beautiful view of the nightscape. We strolled at a leisurely pace, bathing in the afterglow of the date with each step as we watched over the water, which shimmered with the stars’ glow in a mirror of the cosmos before it.

“I wonder though, Takkun...is it really all right for you to have treated me to a meal at such an expensive restaurant? I feel bad. I should at least pay you back for my own portion.”

“It’s fine. Please, don’t worry about it. Since I live with my parents, I don’t have a lot of expenses... Also, there’s no better way to spend my money than to make you happy.”

“Wha— J-Jeez, Takkun...” I looked down, embarrassed. *Wow, this is like a dream... I didn’t think I’d be able to enjoy such an adult-like date with Takkun.*

We continued to walk silently, when suddenly, something grazed my finger. I didn’t have to guess what it was—Takkun, walking beside me, was casually intertwining his fingers with mine. He did it like it was second nature to him, gracefully and without missing a beat.

“What? Oh...”

“I’m sorry, my hand just...”

“It j-just?”

“I’ll let go, if you don’t want to.”

“Huh...? I-I don’t dislike it, but...”

That’s no fair... You can’t just put the onus on me like that... While I floundered thinking of how to respond, we continued to hold hands until eventually I was worn down and acquiesced. His rugged, masculine hand was a size larger than mine—and just our fingers being intertwined was enough to

make my heart feel like it was going to beat out of my chest.

This is bad. Oh no, I'm going to lose my mind from being so nervous... This situation is deadly. It's...It's too romantic! Walking the oceanside path with the beautiful view after our date, Takkun being gently assertive... I felt like I was going to be swept up by the romance of it all.

"W-We should probably head back soon..." I said, trying to shift the mood as I quickly let go of his hand. "It's getting pretty late, and Miu's probably waiting for me..." I began to pick up the pace as I rattled off excuses, but just then, I felt a squeeze—Takkun was hugging me from behind. He'd wrapped his long arms around me, comfortably taking my whole upper half into his embrace.



“Wh-Wh-What...?!” I exclaimed, falling into a panic at the sudden embrace.

“What would you say if...I said I didn’t want to let you go?” he whispered into my ear, his voice quavering slightly due to his nervousness, but still incredibly sweet.

“Wha...?!” The circuits processing my thoughts overheated, and my brain was on the verge of a meltdown.

A sky full of stars, the ocean at night, and a pair who were not quite a couple... It felt like a romantic, trendy song could start playing at any moment.

“N-No, Takkun, I can’t... I have a husband I love... Well, I don’t, but I do have a daughter I love... Well, yes, she’s supportive of our relationship...b-but my underwear today is...well, no, I am actually wearing nice ones, but... W-Wait! I-I’m not the kind of easy girl who goes all the way on the first da—”

“What are you doing, mom?”

I was awakened by the voice of my daughter. I wasn’t on an oceanside path with a beautiful view of the night—it was morning, and I was atop my bed. I had apparently wrapped myself in my comforter and was rolling around in bed, which Miu was watching with a truly exasperated look.

“Huh...? M-Miu?”

“Morning, mom.”

“G-Good morning... Huh? What are you doing here, Miu?”

“You wouldn’t come down, so I came to wake you up. You need to get it together. Today’s your long awaited date with Taku.”

Right, that’s right. Today’s my date with Takkun. That’s why I was up worrying and couldn’t sleep last night. That’s why I totally slept in... I looked over at my phone and saw that it was past eight o’clock. We were meeting at ten-thirty for our date, so I had more than enough time to make it, but this was still way too late for a housewife to be getting up.

“You seemed to be writhing in pain saying, ‘No, Takkun,’ in your sleep... What were you dreaming about, mom?” she asked, looking like she was cringing at

my sleep-talking.

“What?! N-Nothing! I wasn’t dreaming about anything! It was a totally normal dream!” I insisted, aggressively trying to cover it up.

Ugh! Wh-Why did I have a dream like that?! I know today’s the date, but how could I have a dream like I’m some lovestruck girl whose imagination is running wild? Not only that, but the fantasy was so old-timey! It was practically straight out of an ancient soap opera! It would be fine if I’d dreamed about being on the receiving end of a more modern trope, like getting cornered against a wall or him holding me by the chin, but instead I got wooed by a move from the nineties?! My age is showing! I’m imagining scenarios that people in their teens and twenties would have zero connection to! My millennial-ness is showing!

“Well, do your best, all right?” Miu casually said as I held my head in my hands with anguish. “Don’t worry about me. You can totally go home with him.”

“Huh? I-I’ve said it before, but no one’s going ho— She’s not even listening...”

Miu hadn’t waited to hear the rest of my rebuttal and had already left the room. I let out a deep sigh. Too much had happened since I woke up, and I already felt tired.

I’m worried, I thought to myself with another sigh. *If I’m like this already, am I going to be able to handle our date today?*

Despite already being on the verge of getting crushed by my worries, I decided to at least get out of bed and use my fingers to comb out my bedhead. Just as I was about to change out of my pajamas, my smartphone I’d left by my pillow began to ring.

I was shocked to see what was on the screen—the call was from Takkun...’s mother, Tomomi Aterazawa.

“H-Hello?” I said, picking up the call.

“Hello, Ayako.”

“Good morning, Tomomi.”

“Good morning. I apologize for calling so early.”

“No no, it’s fine, but...did something happen?”

“Um...I’m not sure how I should say this,” she said, sounding troubled. “You were planning on going out somewhere today with Takumi, right?”

“U-Um...y-yes.” It felt wrong to deny it, so I had no choice but to tell the truth. *Ugh, this is embarrassing, having our date brought up by his mom!*

Tomomi continued as I stood there flustered. “Regarding the date...could you cancel it?”

I stood there silently, all the warm feelings I was having leaving my body in an instant—it was as if someone had doused me in cold water. My embarrassment disappeared, and my heart started to grow cold. Within seconds, various thoughts began to spin around in my completely cooled mind.

Oh, yeah. That’s right. Of course this would happen. What was I thinking? Why was I getting so excited?

There was no way his parents would think well of their son dating an old lady like me. She had mentioned their having approved of it once before, but there was nothing strange about his parents’ feelings changing at the last moment. It was only natural for them to be against us dating.

“I understand. I’m sorry—I should’ve been the one to turn him down in the first place. I truly apologize for causing you trouble.”

“What? Wh-What are you talking about, Ayako?” Tomomi asked, confused by my apology. “We’re the ones who caused you trouble. I’m really sorry.”

“What?” *Why do I get the feeling we’re talking about different things?*

“You went through the trouble of clearing your schedule for him, and...I can’t believe him...”

“Uh... Um, did something happen to Takkun?” I asked.

“He came down with a fever,” Tomomi explained. I was stunned silent, and remained so for a few moments.

And so, our first date reached the unimaginable conclusion of “canceled due to sickness.”

Chapter 2: The Room and Bedside Manner

♥

“Whaaat?! Taku came down with a fever?!” Miu shouted hysterically upon me telling her that today’s date was canceled. I’d come downstairs and told her after my phone call with Tomomi had ended. “Jeez, no way. That’s awful...” She sighed as she leaned against the couch, looking up at the ceiling. “What the hell is Taku doing? This is the most important moment that he has to get right. Why would he go and come down with a fever? Ugh, it’s just...lame.”

“Hey,” I scolded. “Don’t say that. It’s not like Takkun wanted to get sick.”

“I know, but lame is lame. Especially how the date was canceled through his mom, that’s extremely lame. Taku’s twenty, you know? It’s not like calling out sick from school.”

“Well...he couldn’t help it, you know? Takkun had apparently tried to drag himself out of the house, and his mom had to force him to stay home.”

That was what I had heard from Tomomi. Apparently, he’d already been quite ill last night, and his symptoms had gotten worse this morning. He’d had a high fever and was stumbling around, but he’d still started to get ready to head out for our date. However, he hadn’t been in any shape to be going out, so Tomomi had to be strict and convince him to cancel—she’d forcefully confined him to his room and called me.

“After his mother called, I got a message from Takkun too. He apologized so much to the point that I started feeling bad...”

“What else was he going to do?” Miu sighed. “Ugh, I wonder why things turned out like this. Taku really doesn’t have luck on his side, huh?”

“So...do you have any plans today, Miu?”

“Hm? Why?”

“It turns out that Tomomi has to run out for some errands around noon today. I’m worried about Takkun being all alone, so I was thinking you could go

check on him and see how he's doing."

"What? No way, I can't. I have plans to go out with my friends."

"Really? Shoot, I wonder what we should do..."

"Why don't you go, mom?" she suggested, as if it was the natural course of action.

"What...? M-Me?"

"You're free, aren't you? Since you were supposed to be on your date today."

"I guess I'm free." Now that I thought about it, it was probably the natural thing for me to be the one to go over. I had cleared my entire day for the date, so I had nothing going on now that it was canceled.

But wait, I'm going to go visit Takkun? At his home, with no one home?

"But...isn't that kind of...you know?"

"Know what?"

"You know... It's like...kind of, you know..."

"What are you being so squirmy and shy about?"

"I'm not being squirmy or shy!" I exclaimed loudly. Miu had been giving me a puzzled look, but it twisted into a knowing smile.

"Oh, I get it now. You're embarrassed about being alone with Takkun in his room if you go to see him." I was taken aback, having her so sharply point out what I was feeling. "Jeez...what are you even thinking about? I'm sure you don't have to worry about anything weird happening. I'm sure he won't go beast mode on you when he's down with a fever."

"Th-That's not it! I'm not thinking about that kind of..." Despite desperately wanting to deny it, I couldn't finish my thought because Miu had hit the nail on the head.

Of course, I wasn't thinking that something not safe for work would happen just because we were alone in his room, but there was something uncontrollably embarrassing about it that I couldn't stand. Being alone together in a house... Just thinking about that scenario made my face incredibly hot and

my feelings go astir.

“Haven’t you been to Taku’s room a bunch of times already? There shouldn’t be anything to be embarrassed about after all this time. There’ve been plenty of times where you came to pick me up from his house and you ended up staying and playing games with us.”

“That’s true...” Miu was right. I’d been to Takkun’s room numerous times—the three of us had even played together. There had even been a time when Takkun and I had come up with a plan together for a surprise gift for Miu.

That was normal in the past. I hadn’t thought anything of it when I was alone with Takkun back then, but things weren’t the same anymore. There was no way I could feel neutral about being alone with him now. After his confession, after I’d found out the feelings he’d had hidden, Takkun had become a much bigger deal to me. Everything that had to do with him was something that I would overthink—and each time I overthought things, I would get embarrassed about having done so and hate myself for it...it was a terrible cycle!

“You’re thinking about Takkun so much that I’m kinda getting secondhand embarrassment.”

“Ugh, shut up! Don’t make fun of your mother.”

“Well, I get that it might feel awkward, but I still think it’s better if you go,” she said between sighs. “Maybe the reason he even came down with the fever was because he was so excited about your date.”

“Wh-What? What is he, a kindergartner getting a fever the day before a field trip?”

“He was probably just that excited.”

I couldn’t say anything to that.

“Anyways, you should really go see him,” Miu said much more seriously. “I’m worried about Taku... He’s also probably really depressed about ruining your date. I think it’s best you go so you can cheer him up too,” she said, sincerely and not at all teasingly.

I had no choice but to nod at her saying the right thing so earnestly. “A-All

right then," I agreed.

Our date had been canceled due to unforeseen circumstances, but either way, it looked like I was going to be spending the day with Takkun.

♠

I was dreaming. My body felt heavy, and I was in a daze... In this state, where the lines between being awake and being asleep were blurred, I was experiencing a faint memory.

I was dreaming about Miss Ayako. I had mixed feelings about it—I was happy, yet also embarrassed. It appeared that I was literally thinking about her at every hour of the day, since she was even showing up in my thoughts when I was asleep.

Miss Ayako stood before me, but my point of view was quite low, as if I were looking up at her. It was a dream about a time when I was still shorter than her, when I didn't speak in a masculine way yet.

"T-Takkun..." Miss Ayako said, looking my way with her face bright red. The reason for her blushing was the outfit she had on. "How does this look...? D-Do I look like Santa Claus?"

She was in a Santa costume, but not the red coat and long pants that a stout man would usually be seen wearing. To describe it plainly, what Miss Ayako was wearing was a Santa-themed bikini. Her chest and behind were barely covered in a red cloth. She was big in all the right places, but her waist was slender.

The outfit was just overwhelmingly exposing, and her exquisite physique was on full display. It was much too stimulating a sight for my child self. Actually, it didn't matter that I was a kid—it would be too much for me even now. Miss Ayako in her Santa-themed bikini was just that destructive.

"Ha ha... I probably shouldn't wear this after all. It's a little cold, and feels a bit naughty..." She laughed, trying to play off her embarrassment as she twisted her body in an attempt to somehow hide her chest and backside that were accentuated by her outfit.

Wait. Hey now. What the hell kind of dream am I having...? Why am I dreaming of that time? Even if I'm going to dream about the past, aren't there

other things that I could recall? Am I sexually frustrated? Why am I recalling one of the highest-tier horny memories from my mind's folder of treasures?

"Um..." my dream self—my still young self—muttered, retracing my memories of the past. "I-It looks really good on you, Mommy Ayako..."

"...on you, Mommy Ayako."

"Huh? Y-Yes...?"

Still half-asleep, I heard a familiar voice. I lifted my heavy eyelids and saw I was in my room, but there was someone before me who shouldn't be there.

Miss Ayako. The women who seemed to be constantly in my thoughts was looking down on me as I lay in bed, and she seemed slightly worried. *Oh, am I still dreaming right now? There's no way that Miss Ayako would be in my room...*

"Mommy Ayako," I called out, my mind still foggy. My hand reached out on its own, perhaps driven by my fever. It felt like I was wandering a desert in search of water and my body was reaching out to the mirage of an oasis before me.

However, the mirage was physically there—Miss Ayako gently held the hand I'd extended to her.

"Y-Yes...? I-It's me, Mommy Ayako...?"

"Huh...? Whaaat?!"

Her bashful voice and the sensation of her holding my hand finally awakened me from my stupor. I swiftly sat up and stared intently at the woman at my bedside.

"M-Miss Ayako?!"

"Hello, Takkun," she said, a smile coming across her slightly worried expression as I sat there shocked.

♥

Takkun was sitting up in bed, his eyes widened in surprise as he looked at me.

"What... Huh? Wh-Why are you here in my room, Miss Ayako?"

“Um, I heard that your mother would be out this afternoon, so...I came by to check on you and see how you were doing.”

“I-I see...”

“How are you feeling, Takkun?”

“Uh... O-Oh... I think I’m doing a bit better since I spent the entire morning sleeping after taking some medicine. I was really lightheaded this morning though,” Takkun said, sounding like he was still waking up. As he spoke, his expression began to cloud over. “That’s right... I came down with a fever on such an important day and had to be in bed...” His voice was tinged with deep regret and guilt as he mumbled. “Miss Ayako, I... I’m really sorry,” he said, bowing his head to me.

“I-It’s all right, you don’t have to apologize, Takkun. I don’t mind at all.”

“But...it was my long awaited date with you...”

“You’re sick. What were we supposed to do? You really shouldn’t feel bad about it.”

“Okay...” Even though he nodded, it was clear that he was upset.

“I can’t believe you caught a cold at this time of year, though.”

“The truth is, I haven’t been sleeping very much these past few days...” he said guiltily.

“Why haven’t you been sleeping?”

“Well, um... I-I couldn’t sleep after thinking about our date...”

“What...?”

“Also, I was doing practice runs.”

“P-Practice runs?”

“I was going to rent a car for today, but after getting my license last summer, I haven’t driven much, so I wanted to make sure I got used to driving. So, I’ve been borrowing my father’s car at night and driving the route for our date a few times.”

“Y-You were doing all that?!”

“I mean... Wouldn’t I look bad if I made a mistake while driving during our date?”

“I guess...” I was shocked. I’d thought that Takkun seemed to be putting a lot of thought into our date, but I hadn’t thought it was this much. I couldn’t believe he’d sacrificed sleep to review our date route. “I really appreciate it, but you’re working too hard. You don’t have to take a date with me so seriously...”

“It would be impossible not to,” he firmly rebutted, looking right into my eyes. “I’ve been waiting to go on this date with you for so long, Miss Ayako. There’s no way I couldn’t take it seriously. I wanted it to go well no matter what... And more than anything, I was just really excited for it. That’s why I couldn’t just sit around and do nothing.”

“Takkun...”

“But as a result, I ended up getting sick the day of... Talk about backwards priorities. How lousy of me. There’s lame, and then there’s this...” His head hung down as he seemed endlessly depressed.

In a sense, Miu had guessed right. He had been so enthusiastic about the date that all his motivation had ended up fruitless. He truly had ended up in the same situation as a kindergartner who was so excited for a field trip that they’d ended up getting a fever the day of.

If I had to say whether it was lousy or not, it probably *was* lousy, but...deep down, I felt my heart throb over it. There was something incredibly endearing about him in his current weak, saddened state.

“Thank you, Takkun.” Before I knew it, I’d taken the hand he had out of his covers and placed my own atop his. “Thank you for working so hard for me.”

“Miss Ayako... But I...”

“It’s all right. Like I said earlier, I don’t mind at all. It’s true that things didn’t turn out so well, but your feelings are more than clear to me. The fact that you cared so much and worked so hard for our date makes me really happy.” Takkun seemed like he didn’t know what to say, so I decided to pile on more encouragement. “Don’t be so sad and take the time to rest. Once you’re better, um... Well...let’s have our date then!”

“What?” Takkun’s face shot up.

Wow...what fast reflexes... It was as if his gloomy eyes were filled with light in an instant.

“Is that okay?” he asked.

“Sure...”

“We can have another date?”

“Yes...”

“Reall—”

“Yes, really! Gosh, that’s enough already.” *Don’t ask so many times! It’ll make me embarrassed!*

Ugh...this is wrong. How did this happen? I was supposed to be the one getting asked on a date, but now it’s like I’m actively pursuing him! No, it’s not like that! It’s just that Takkun was so sad, so I had to... Yeah, I had no choice!

“Y-You can’t do anything about getting sick, so usually you wouldn’t cancel, just reschedule,” I explained. “Yeah, that’s what’s usually done. It’s normal. It’s definitely what is generally done.”

“I see, just reschedule...” Takkun smiled, looking relieved.

Ugh, he’s so obviously happy. I felt like I was going to get dizzy from the gap between his smile of pure bliss and his expression from when he was still weak and hurt.

“Oh, are you hungry, Takkun? I brought some congee I made. I’ll heat it up for you!” I said before I ran out of the room, unable to handle the nice atmosphere.

I had used the Aterazawa’s kitchen a few times in the past. Whenever they would have Miu and I over for dinner, I would help with the cleanup and dish washing. When I mentioned I would be stopping by today, Tomomi let me know that I was free to use the kitchen, so I took her up on it.

I lightly warmed up the congee that I had brought over in a pot and poured a portion out into a bowl before bringing it to Takkun’s room.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Here you go.”

“Thank you,” Takkun said as he sat up and reached out for the bowl of congee.

“Oh, hold on, it might be a bit hot still.” I grabbed the bowl before he could and scooped up a mouthful in the spoon. Then, I blew on the spoonful several times to cool it down. “Here, it’s ready. Open up.”

“Huh...?” Takkun blushed and froze up as I brought the spoon towards his mouth. Seeing his reaction, I finally realized my mistake.

“Oh! I-I’m sorry. I-I didn’t mean to! I always do this for Miu, so I just... Whenever she gets sick, she becomes such a baby, so!” I shouted, bright red.

“I-It’s all right! I understand!” Takkun said back, still blushing.

After we’d finished yelling at each other, Takkun took the tray I had brought the food on and began to eat the congee, this time on his own.

“Ooh, it’s good.”

“Really? I’m glad to hear that.” Takkun continued to scarf down the congee. *It’s a good sign that he has an appetite. He’s got some color to his face too. I hope he continues to get better.* As I watched him eat, I was suddenly thinking of the past. “I used to be able to feed you...”

“What?”

“Didn’t I spoon-feed you a bunch of times?”

“Well...isn’t that when I was younger? You kept doing it, so I just obliged...”

“Hee hee, that’s right. You seemed so embarrassed every time, but you let me feed you anyway. It was so cute.”

Takkun’s face turned red, and he was lost for words. His reaction was so cute, I couldn’t help but keep going. “Speaking of the past, you were calling me Mommy Ayako earlier.”

“*Guh! Ack, gack!*” Despite choking on his food, Takkun managed to somehow get the congee down. “Y-You heard that?”

“I did.”

“Shoot... No, I mean, I was just dreaming about the past, that’s why.”

“He he, it feels so nostalgic to be called Mommy Ayako. You suddenly started calling me Miss Ayako one day.”

“Of course...I couldn’t keep calling you Mommy Ayako forever.”

“That’s true...” He was right—of course he couldn’t. The boy who’d been ten years old when we’d met was now twenty. In the past ten years, he had grown from a boy into a man. Despite that, there was a part of me that kept treating him like a child. That was why I hadn’t noticed—why I couldn’t notice—the feelings he had been harboring. Because of that, I was currently confused and wandering.

Takkun wasn’t at fault. All he’d done was live his life earnestly, devoted continuously to his feelings. He’d grown with time and become a man, that was all. The problem lied with me, with my perception and how I’d been taking things. No, that wasn’t it—in the end, it was all about my heart...

“What did you dream about, Takkun?” I asked out of curiosity. *I wonder what time he was dreaming about.* In the ten years we had spent together, I had only thought of him as like a son or a younger brother to me, but he’d been seeing me as the opposite sex. Although we’d been spending the same ten years together, we’d seen that time through totally opposite lens. I wondered what his feverish mind was recalling.

“W-Well...um...” he said, struggling to get the words out. “I was dreaming of the time you had on the Santa-themed bikini...”

I let out a sound of shock that blew away the current somber atmosphere. “Wh-What?! The Santa-themed bikini...? You mean *that* thing?!”

“Y-Yes...*that* thing.”

“Gosh! Why are you dreaming about that?!”

“I can’t really control what I dream about.”

Ugh! I can’t believe Takkun was dreaming about that! An embarrassing moment from my past that I’d hidden deep in my memory and completely forgotten was now clear in my mind. On a Christmas some years ago, I’d made

the blunder to end all blunders—I'd meant to buy a regular Santa costume, but I'd ended up buying a risqué one instead.

I was glad Takkun was the only one who'd seen it; I might have died if it had been anyone else... Or that's what I had thought until now, but things were different now that I knew Takkun had been thinking of me as a woman since he was ten years old.

Oh my god... Oh my god!!!

"How could you, Takkun...? Why do you even remember something from so long ago?"

"I'm sorry, but it was just...a real shock to my system."

"Well sorry! It was probably weird and didn't look good on me anyways!"

"No, that's not what I meant... It was shocking in a good way. You have a really nice physique, so that kind of outfit looked really good on you..."

"Wha...?! Y-You don't have to lie to make me feel better."

"I'm not lying! You're really beautiful, and you have a perfect figure... That's why I was genuinely just admirin—"

"Gosh! I-I get it, that's enough!" I was on the verge of dying by compliment and couldn't take it anymore. *I can't do this! Stop. Please stop. If you say any more nice things about me...you might make me lose my mind.* "Jeez, I didn't realize you had such a dirty mind, Takkun..." Out of embarrassment, my words came out in a pouty tone.

"I don't know what to say to that..."

"You also said that you got a good look at my boobs when we took a bath together..."

"I will say this," Takkun said after a short pause. "You were the one who was showing me your body, both during the bath and with the bikini, so it's not like I was *trying* to see."

"Th-There's no need to split hairs like that! Anyways, just forget it!" I yelled aggressively, even though I was definitely the one splitting hairs here.

“I-I’m sorry.”

Oh no, I made him apologize. I’m sorry Takkun... I’m just being incoherent because I’m embarrassed. As I sat there overcome with guilt, Takkun continued. “But I can’t help having dirty thoughts...”

“Huh...?”

“No man would be able to feel normal with the woman he loves before him in a revealing outfit...”

“Wh-What?”

“There’s no way I’ll ever forget what I’ve seen. It’s so burned into my mind that I’ve dreamed about it multiple times.”

“M-Multiple times...?” As I sat there flustered, Takkun looked me straight in the eye. I could see his face getting flushed, but he didn’t waver—his passionate gaze pierced through me.

“I... How do I say this... I didn’t fall for you just for your looks, but...I also really like how you look. Your face is beautiful, of course, but you have a great figure, and everything about you is just so charming...”

“Wha— I, u-um...”

That molten look in his eyes was beginning to melt me into a puddle. Combining that with how flustered I was feeling from yet another barrage of compliments, I felt like I was losing the plot. My body was hot, and my mind was going blank. My embarrassment and excitement were continuing to boil over, and my decision-making skills were going out the window.

“You really think so...?” I asked. Before I knew it, the words had left my mouth. I placed my hand on my chest to point to my body. “You, um... You really like my body, Takkun?”

“What? I mean...when you put it like that, it sounds kind of graphic, but...yes. I like your body...”

“Do you? If you’re sure you like my body...” I sat on the bed, right next to Takkun, quite close to him. “...maybe you can try proving it to me?”

♠

What did she just say to me? Prove it to her? How? Considering the context...I would be proving to her that I liked her body. No way—Miss Ayako would never suggest something like that. Absolutely not. She wouldn't in a million years. My thoughts were racing in that moment, trying to figure out what she meant.

"Could you give me your hand?" she asked, reaching out. The second her hand grazed mine, my mind went completely blank. She grabbed my wrist with both her hands and brought my hand closer to her body.

"Wha— M-Miss Ayako?! What are you doing?"

"It's fine, just reach your hand out."

"Wait, j-just hold on—"

"I-It's embarrassing for me too!" she exclaimed. "But...I want you to feel it and prove it to me."

"Feel it...?"

Huh? What? What is this? What's going on?!

Ignoring me as I was sitting there awash in confusion, Miss Ayako pulled my hand even closer. I was inching closer to her, and my eyes couldn't help but follow my hand. Inevitably, her ample bosom entered my view.

Her voluptuous breasts projected menacingly from her torso, stretching the fibers of her sweater to their limit and luring my gaze into their iron grip. Whenever she squirmed even slightly, her abundant chest would sway heavily, making my sense of reason oscillate in time with every vibration.

They're large. Truly massive... Incredible.

The all too enormous forbidden fruit was only a few centimeters away from my hand.

"You might not even want to touch the body of an old lady like me..."

"Huh...? No, it's not that I don't want to, it's just..." Of course I wanted to touch her. If I was being honest, I had lost count of how many times I'd fantasized about touching her. I had definitely not fallen for Miss Ayako just

because of her body, but...at the end of the day, I was a guy. I couldn't stay completely pure.

Be that as it may... Even if I wanted to touch the breasts of the woman I loved...that didn't mean I was okay with this strange turn of events!

"W-Wait, Miss Ayako! Why are you doing this all of a sudden...?"

"Don't worry about it! Just do it. Not losing momentum is important with this kind of thing!"

"Momentum...?"

"Come on, just do as I say!" she exclaimed vehemently as she continued to pull my hand toward her, her embarrassment written all over her face.

If I'd really wanted to, I probably could have brushed her hand away. But...I couldn't. No matter how much my rational mind was against this, my overflowing desire dulled my senses. As a result, I wasn't in active control of my body—I was at her mercy.

Miss Ayako tugged my hand strongly toward her body, guiding it to her upper body, then into her sweater."Wha?" *Skin?! Hold on, am I going to touch her directly?! Even over-the-shirt would've been more than enough, but we're just going for bare skin?!* "M-Miss Ayako, this is..."

"It's all right, Takkun..." she whispered sensuously—although she looked like she was desperately fighting the humiliation bubbling up inside her.

My hand slid under her clothes, first under her sweater, then going even further—within her undershirt. As my fingertips came into contact with her soft skin, I felt her flinch.

"Ah!" she let out in a sweet voice, before letting out a small moan.

"I-I'm sorry..."

"I-It's okay. Your hand was cold, and it just surprised me a bit." She took a moment to breathe, then looked directly into my eyes. "Go ahead, Takkun... Don't hold back. Feel it for yourself," she said as she aggressively tugged on my arm.

A soft, squishy sensation came across my palms. My honest impression

was...it didn’t feel quite as incredible as I had expected. I had imagined more volume—something that was far from being able to fit in the palm of my hand—but it didn’t feel like there was much of anything to grab at all. Nevertheless, her soft, smooth, warm skin was a pleasurable sensation. It felt blissful...I almost wanted to be touching it forever...

“H-How is it, Takkun?”

“I’m not really sure how to answer that...”

“This is my body... It’s my...m-meat...”

“Meat”? I guess she wasn’t wrong; it was technically meat. At the end of the day, even boobs—that is to say, women’s breasts, those orbs beloved by a majority of men the world over—were just lumps of fat. Many men yearned for, lusted after, and had their thoughts overtaken by those mere clumps of meat, at times to the point that their lives would be ruined.

Even what I was touching right now was just meat. But that’s not to say I was touching Miss Ayako’s breasts...what I was actually holding in my hand was her stomach.



“Um, Miss Ayako, I have a totally genuine question...”

“Wh-What is it?”

“Why am I currently fondling your stomach...?” I was overtaken by immense confusion, as well as a feeling of disappointment. I’d *thought* my hand would continue to ascend upward toward her chest after she’d guided it below her undershirt...but what’d actually happened was that my hand hadn’t been led anywhere but straight forward—Miss Ayako was only having me feel her stomach.

Why...? Why am I touching her stomach?

“Wh-What do you mean why? Didn’t I tell you earlier...? I said you would prove it...” she said with a face that looked like she was choking down her embarrassment. She continued to forcefully press my hand into her stomach as she spoke. “You idealize me too much... You know, um, you only know what my body was like when I was in my twenties. That’s why I wanted you to experience my real body, since you’re still fantasizing about the past— Huh?! Wh-What?!”

Miss Ayako suddenly let out a flabbergasted shriek in the middle of her explanation and let go of my wrist. She then jumped back, creating some distance between us.

“O-Oh my god, Takkun... Th-That’s...!”

“Huh...?

“Um, your, that... I-It’s all...!” she screamed, covering her face as she became bright red. Her bewildered gaze, which I could see peeking through the gaps in her fingers, was honed in on my crotch.

The mini-me residing in my lower body was making his existence very obvious. Unlike the thick, sturdy weaves of jeans or slacks, the thin fabric of my pajamas didn’t hide so much as an inch of my tiny man’s steely resolve. He was standing tall, unabashedly expanding his fabric enclosure toward the ceiling.

“O-Oh my god!” I grabbed my covers and covered my crotch in a hurry, though it was kind of too late for that. “I-I’m sorry! I—”

“Takkun...? Huh? Wh-Why...?” Miss Ayako seemed extremely confused. I felt embarrassed and guilty and desperately wanted to run. “D-Did it get big because you touched my stomach...?!”

It looks like there’s quite a misunderstanding here.

“W-What...? Do men get excited even just fondling stomachs? Or do you have some kind of special feti—”

“I don’t! I didn’t get excited because of your stomach!”

“B-But, that’s what happened...”

“No, this is, um... Just now, I thought that... I thought you were going to let me touch your breasts.”

“Wh-Whaaat?!” All the blood that had drained from her face rushed back as if it were boiling up. “Wh-What were you thinking, Takkun?! I wouldn’t just let you touch my breasts!”

“I-I know, but...”

“Do you really think I would take your hand and make you touch my chest myself...? I-I wouldn’t do something so perverted! I just wanted you to touch my stomach!”

I mean, that’s kind of perverted in its own way, isn’t it? I thought to myself.

“I can’t believe you thought you were going to touch my boobs... Jeez, you make these kinds of misunderstandings because you keep having dirty thoughts,” she scolded.

“I-I’m sorry...” Though I apologized, the whole situation didn’t sit quite right with me. No matter how you looked at it, Miss Ayako was at fault here for misleading me. If she had done the same thing to ten guys, all ten of them would have had the same misunderstanding. “B-But still...why your stomach?”

“Well... I-I wanted you to know about the current me,” she said as she stumbled on her words. “It was quite a long time ago when you saw me naked and when I wore the bikini. That’s why... Even though you complimented my figure a lot earlier, that was about my past self... I thought that if you were fantasizing about my current self, my body in my thirties, in that way, it would

be better if you knew what the truth was...” Her voice grew quieter as she spoke, her words slowly becoming mumbles. “You know, um, when you age...a lot of unsightly things begin to happen to your body. I’ve been slacking a bit recently, so I hadn’t been paying attention to my stomach...”

“*That’s* what you were worried about?”

“What do you mean, ‘that!’ It’s an area of concern for girls in their thirties!”

“You don’t have to be concerned. You’re not fat in the slightest, Miss Ayako.”

“Y-You’re lying...! It’s fine, you don’t have to pretend! You just felt the truth for yourself, didn’t you?”

“Well, it’s true that there’s a little bit of meat there. It felt a bit squishy.”

“See, what did I tell you...” she said, on the verge of tears.

“But your figure is normal. I think women are more charming with a bit more meat on their bones. Also...I think it’s kind of cute that you have a squishy stomach.”

Miss Ayako let out a small gasp.

“I mean, it’s not that your squishy stomach is cute, but it’s the fact you’re worried about how squishy your stomach is that’s really cute. I mean, your squishy stomach has its own charm to it too, but—”

“H-How many times are you going to call my stomach squishy!” she yelled, flustered. “Jeez... There you go teasing an adult again...”

“I wasn’t teasing you.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this from a pervert who gets excited touching *stomachs*...” she muttered bitterly.

“I’ve told you, that’s a misunderstanding!” I jabbed back in a panic.

Though the mood was awkward for a bit, Miss Ayako suddenly laughed. “Hee hee. I was supposed to be here to check on you, so what are we even doing?” she said in a slightly self-deprecating tone, before facing me once again. “I’m sorry for, you know, being misleading...”

“No, no. I’m sorry too, for making you see something like that.” We both

bowed our heads to each other in apology.

“For now, I’m relieved it seems like you’re feeling a lot better. This morning I didn’t think you’d even be able to get up...” she said with a relaxed look, before suddenly blushing. “I meant ‘get up’ as in ‘get out of bed!’ Not like ‘getting *it* up’ or anything weird, okay?!” she said, adding on a completely unnecessary explanation.

“It’s all right! I understand!”

She then cleared her throat before quickly standing up and picking up the tray with the now empty bowl. “Well then, I should get going.”

“Um... I’m really glad you came to see me. Thank you very much.”

“It was nothing. You don’t have to thank me. Just rest up and get better soon.”

“I will. And once I’m better...please let me ask you out on a date again.” I got the words out. It was a bit embarrassing, but I pushed that aside and said it.

Miss Ayako looked taken by surprise for a moment, but then... “Yeah...I’ll be waiting,” she said dryly.

After she left, I lay back down and took it easy. My body was still feverish, but the clouds in my mind had cleared up, and I felt refreshed.

♥

That night, I was on the phone with Yumemi.

“Ha ha, your date being canceled because of a cold wasn’t the ending I was expecting. But...maybe it’s not a completely unfortunate turn of events.”

“What? How so?”

“It seems like Takumi got to have a bedside event pop up in place of the date. I’m not sure whether it was just a silver lining to the cold or whether the cold itself was a blessing in disguise.”

“‘A bedside event’...?”

“As far as I can tell, it seems like he’s raised his affection points with you through that event. Hee hee, I thought he didn’t have much going on, but he

might actually be quite the calculating guy to get sick at the last minute like that. I'm glad to see he's smoothly setting off the event triggers to clear your route."

"I think you might be playing too many video games, Yumemi."

"Ha ha, you might be right. We've had a lot of video-game-related projects recently—it seems that my mind has been completely taken over by that kind of thinking."

"Jeez..."

"Takumi Aterazawa, huh... Hee hee," Yumemi muttered. "I'd love to talk to him in person one day," she mused in an immensely jolly tone.

Chapter 3: The Holy Night and the Swimsuit

♠

The expected thing to do here would be to continue on to the next part of the story. As most of you would have imagined (due to it being obviously set up at the end of the previous chapter), Miss Ayako's boss, Yumemi Oinomori, will suddenly enter the picture and causes quite a commotion.

However, before the "Yumemi's Invasion" arc, there's something I desperately want to talk about first. Even if it messes up the chronological order of the book, there's a flashback that I want to squeeze in here—a flashback regarding Miss Ayako's Santa-themed bikini.

Yes, this flashback concerns the cosplay that was vaguely referenced in the previous chapter. I...felt that it wasn't discussed enough, or rather, the details given were overly fragmented. If the story were to continue from this point without setting the record straight, I fear that people will think Miss Ayako just randomly wore a risqué outfit like some pervert who got carried away.

That wasn't the case, not at all. There's a perfectly rational explanation for why Miss Ayako wore something so humiliating. There was a very Miss Ayako-like reason for it. I desperately want to share that, to annotate that experience. I don't mind being misunderstood, but I can't bear to see Miss Ayako be misunderstood.

That's why I'd like you to please forgive this sudden flashback to the past. If you would be so kind, I'd like you to come with me on this journey. It was ten years in the past, when I was not yet a man and was still just a child...

It was midway through December. I came home from school and saw my next-door-neighbor Miss Ayako standing in her driveway. She noticed me as well and gave me a kind smile as she waved at me.

"Welcome home, Takkun."

"Thanks, Mommy Ayako!" I couldn't hide the excitement in my voice. *I can't*

believe I got to run into her like this. Today's a great day!

I liked Mommy Ayako. I couldn't put it quite into words as a grade schooler, but...I liked her as a woman. It was basically love at first sight when we'd first met, but after we'd taken a bath together and I'd found out about her weaknesses and how noble she was, my feelings had grown deeper.

To put it into more specific terms, I wanted to date her and then marry her after that. Of course, I didn't think that we could date right now. If a child like me asked out an adult woman, she probably wouldn't take me seriously, and it would probably just cause more trouble than it was worth. But one day, I wanted to...

"Are you leaving to pick up Miu?"

"Nope, not yet. I was actually going to go do some shopping before I went to pick her up..." she said, trailing off as she seemed to be lost in thought. "Hey, Takkun, are you busy today?" she suddenly asked.

"I don't think so..."

"I see. Well then, do you want to go shopping with me?"

I had no reason to turn her down, so I said yes immediately. After I responsibly got the green light from my mother, who was at home, I hopped into Mommy Ayako's car.

"I want to go buy a Christmas present for Miu today," Mommy Ayako said as she drove down the highway.

"Oh, okay. I guess it's almost Christmas time."

"It's a little bit early, but if I don't prepare ahead of time, the toy she wants might get sold out. Once I buy the present, I'm going to pretend to be Sa— Oh." She suddenly cut herself off. "By the way, Takkun," she asked, slightly nervous, "do you believe in Santa Claus?"

"Huh...? I-I don't really..." The Aterazawa household didn't really try too hard when it came to these sorts of things, so I'd never believed in Santa Claus as far as I could remember. My parents would just buy me what I wanted for

Christmas, and I never woke up to presents that magically appeared the night before.

"I see... That's good. If you believed in Santa Claus, I might have just destroyed the magic," she said with a sigh of relief.

"Even though I don't believe in him, Miu might since she's still five."

"That's right! Recently, they've been practicing a song about Santa at her preschool. She sings it at home too, and it's just so cute! She seems like she's excited to get a present from Santa Claus, so I thought as her mommy I have to do my best!"

"You're amazing, Mommy Ayako."

"It's nothing to praise me for. I'm just doing what's normal... Oh, by the way, Takkun, keep today a secret from Miu, okay?"

"Okay, I will."

"Thank you. It'll be our little secret." As the car stopped at a red light, Mommy Ayako reached her hand out toward me with her pinky up. "Do you pinky promise?"

I silently stared. *Hmm... I guess Mommy Ayako is treating me like a kindergartner like she always does. I'm already ten years old though!* Despite my mixed feelings, I put up my pinky and pinky promised her. Mommy Ayako's hand was a little cold, but at the same time, it felt soft—I felt my heart race. The light then turned green, and the car started moving once more.

"Do you already know what toy you're going to buy, Mommy Ayako?"

"Of course!" she said, nodding enthusiastically at my nonchalant question. "I'm going to buy a *Love Kaiser* transformation trinket for Miu's Christmas present this year!" She had a burning fire in her eyes—a burning fire that might have been running just a bit too hot...

We arrived at a big-box toy store in the city, the largest toy store in our area.

"I'm really glad you came with me, Takkun," Mommy Ayako said with a dry laugh as we got out of the car in the parking lot. "I'm still not used to coming to

places like this on my own.”

That appeared to be the reason I was invited today. For Mommy Ayako, going to a toy store and buying things on her own in the sea of families with their children was a bit of a tall order.

“Oh no... I guess it’s pretty busy today after all,” she observed glumly.

“It’s just that time of year.”

The atmosphere within the store was completely festive, with many families and their children shopping despite it being a weekday evening. As I looked around the bustling store, Mommy Ayako reached her hand out to me.

“Here, Takkun.”

“Huh...?”

“We should hold hands. I don’t want you to get lost.”

“I-It’s fine... I’ll be okay.”

“Don’t be so shy. It would be bad if you got lost, right? Come on.” I felt too embarrassed to comply, so I kept my hand at my side, but Mommy Ayako ignored me and grabbed my hand, a little aggressively. *Whoa. We’re...holding hands.* “All right then. Let’s go.”

“O-Okay.” As I walked, my heart thumping loudly, Mommy Ayako seemed to be completely calm. She didn’t seem to think anything of holding hands with me. I was slightly sad, and also a little frustrated. It was only natural for things to be this way, however—I was just the neighbor’s kid, someone adjacent to a son in Mommy Ayako’s eyes.

“By the way, Takkun...” As we walked toward the girl’s toy section, still holding hands, Mommy Ayako suddenly spoke up. “Do you watch *Love Kaiser*?” she asked, nervousness and hope both in her voice.

“I don’t... I’m a boy.” It was true that I didn’t watch it—I felt like it would be embarrassing for me, as a boy, to be watching a cartoon for little girls.

“I-I see...” Understandable as it may have been, Mommy Ayako was clearly disappointed in my answer.

H-Huh? Did I make a mistake? Suddenly anxious, I tried to clarify my statement. “U-Um, but...it’s really popular right now. *Love Kaiser*, I mean.”

“That’s right! *Love Kaiser*’s super hot right now!” she exclaimed, her eyes suddenly shimmering with excitement. “The one that’s airing right now, *Love Kaiser Joker*, is a truly incredible work of art! The idea is that fifty Love Kaisers fight each other until only one remains, making for an entry to the franchise that both goes against the grain and is really innovative. Even among people in the industry, it’s being held up as a show to keep your eye on! On the other hand, the unusually dark plot has drawn a lot of complaints, but...it’s not like they’re just writing a cruel story for the heck of it! There’s actually a deep interpersonal drama playing out in it, and—” As I stood there overwhelmed by Mommy Ayako’s hot-blooded rapid-fire explanation, she suddenly seemed to snap back to reality. “Um, at least, that’s what I’ve heard about it. It’s not that I think all that, it’s just what the general public is saying...”

“...Do you like Love Kaiser?”

“Whaaat?! Wh-What are you talking about?! I’m a full-grown adult, you know? I wouldn’t get into a cartoon for little girls! I’m just watching it with Miu to keep her company! Yup, I only watch it for Miu! Oh, if only I could sleep in on Sundays, but Miu always comes to wake me up. Being a mom is so tough!”

“I-I see...” It felt like I shouldn’t pry anymore about this, so I took a hint and just nodded.

We continued walking together and arrived at the girls’ toys section.

“Wow, they have so many *Love Kaiser* toys,” she cooed as she marveled at the selection. There were colorful transformation trinket toys lining an entire row of shelves.

“Do you already know which one you’re buying?” I asked.

“I’ve thought long and hard about it, but I got it down to two,” she said with a pained expression. Her face showed a deep agony that made it clear that she had thought as hard as she could about this decision. “One is Love Kaiser Speed’s transformation trinket, the ‘Happy Vrooming Rod,’ a transformation mechanical staff. The girl who transforms into Love Kaiser Speed, Chie Itadori, is one of the main kaisers, and she’s Miu’s favorite character. She’s been saying

for a while that she wanted this toy.”

“I-I see...”

“The other is Love Kaiser Solitaire’s transformation trinket, the ‘Exciting Heart-Throb Magnum,’ a transformation machine gun. Hiyumi Kuinajima transforms into Solitaire—she is, as they say, a sub-Kaiser, and...she’s just a super charming character. She’s just so precious it can’t be put into words. All I can say is you have to give it a chance and watch it!”

“O-Oh...” *What should I do? Mommy Ayako’s using a bunch of specialist terminology that I’ve never heard before. “As they say?” As* who *says? I don’t know any of this...*

“Which do you think is better, Takkun?”

“Um...I guess the one that Miu likes is probably better.”

“Well, I guess...I can understand that. But...I think you have to consider more than the short term with toys like these. It’s true that Speed is pretty airheaded and very energetic and cute, and I understand why Miu likes her, but...I feel like Solitaire is going to be the one who does a lot all the way until the end of the show. I feel like you need to consider the long term with this decision, don’t you agree?”

“Huh...? But it’s a present for Miu, so I think it’s better to get her what she wants...”

Mommy Ayako went silent for a bit before she answered. “You’re right, you’re absolutely right, Takkun. But is it right for me as a mother to just give my daughter whatever she wants? Is that motherly love? If I truly care for my child, shouldn’t I gift her something that will be more useful in the future, even if I have to be a bit heartless in the moment?”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

“Miu’s still young, so she just hasn’t taken notice of Hiyumin’s dark and stylish charm yet! Oh, Hiyumin is Hiyumi Kuinajima’s nickname online. Hiyumin is super popular with the older fans, but the kids don’t seem too interested in her... Also, she hasn’t been showing up very much in recent episodes. I can’t go into detail because it would be a spoiler, but...she had an extremely traumatic

experience, and she's left the battlefront... But I think this is setting up an awakening for her! I'm sure she'll obtain an incredible powered-up form and be back to fight soon enough. And then Miu will definitely become obsessed with Hiyumin! That's why, in anticipation of the powered-up form that will likely eventually arrive, I think it would be best for Miu if I purchased Hiyumin's transformation item, right? Don't you think so too?"

"Uh...yeah." I didn't even understand half of what she just said, but when she turned at me looking for affirmation, I wasn't sure how to say anything else. "If you think that's best, maybe you should do that?"

"Nooo, Takkun...! Don't just brush me off with a forced smile! Stop...don't look at me like I'm some annoying creature! Your face is just screaming 'Don't ask a question when you've already decided on the answer!' Don't look at me like that!"

I don't think I've got such a specific look on my face... Well, I guess I am a little over it all.

I've learned something though. I knew the phrase "forced smile," but I've never really known what it actually meant...I guess smiling when you feel like I do right now is what adults call a "forced smile."

"I-I know, I get it..." Mommy Ayako whimpered. "You were right all along... This is a present for Miu, so it would be best to pick something she would want..." she said between sobs, as if to convince herself. Then, her hands shaking, she grabbed Love Kaiser Speed's transformation toy.

Despite having made her decision, she looked back multiple times, staring reluctantly at Love Kaiser Solitaire's transformation toy.

After checking Mommy Ayako out at the register, the cashier giftwrapped the purchased toy. We had finished shopping and were just about to leave the store.

"H-Hey, Takkun," Mommy Ayako suddenly said. "Do you want to go to the bathroom before we head out?"

"I'm okay right now."

“Are you sure? Maybe you should just go...just in case, you know?”

“What? But...”

“It’s just in case, you know? There’s a small chance that you might need to go in the car. If you just pretend you have to go, you might actually end up needing to by the time you reach the potty.”

“O-Okay then, I’ll go to the bathroom.”

For some reason, Mommy Ayako was pushing me to go to the bathroom so insistently I doubted she would take no for an answer. I nodded and headed to the restroom...but I stopped on the way there, unable to fight against my curiosity.

What’s going on with Mommy Ayako? She seemed to really want me to go to the bathroom... Is she going off to do something by herself? I sneakily headed back out and hid behind a shelf as I looked around.

I was stunned by what I saw. Mommy Ayako was in the checkout line. In her hand was the toy that she had ended up not buying after much deliberation—Love Kaiser Solitaire’s transformation machine gun.

I...kind of understood what was going on. *I guess Mommy Ayako wanted the toy for herself.* It didn’t seem like it was another present for Miu. That was probably a toy for Mommy Ayako herself to play with. *I see. I guess even adults want transformation toys from cartoons. She should’ve just bought it and said that she wanted it, but I guess it was maybe too hard for her to do that with me there. Being an adult seems difficult.*

Mommy Ayako was happily humming after she made her purchase. “Oh, Takkun...” she said, noticing me there.

“Thanks for waiting,” I said, walking up to her as if I had just returned from the bathroom.

“Um. Th-This is...” Mommy Ayako glanced at the new addition to her purchase as she carefully picked her next words. “I, um, they gave it to me...” she said with an extremely awkward smile.

“They gave it to you?”

“Yes! They gave it to me! Apparently, I was the ten-thousandth customer of this store! So they said they would give me one toy of my choosing... I, of course, didn’t want any toy, so I just picked the first thing that came to mind. I really would’ve been fine with anything though!”

Sh-She’s lying! She’s really trying to cover up the fact she bought herself that toy! And I know I’m just a kid, but couldn’t she have tried a little harder to come up with something believable? There was a lot I wanted to comment on, but I pretended to believe her and didn’t refute anything she’d said.

“Wow... That’s amazing, Mommy Ayako.”

“Y-Yeah... I’m really lucky,” she said with a relieved smile.

Yup, that was the right choice. I did the right thing. As long as Mommy Ayako is having fun, that’s fine with me.

We were back in the car, driving home.

“Are you going to put the present by Miu’s bed on Christmas Eve?”

“That’s the plan, but I have one more surprise in mind.”

“A surprise?”

“Apparently, putting the present by the bed fails a lot of the time because kids will wake up the moment you put the gift down. That’s why I’m going to go with a two-tiered plan.”

“Two-tiered?”

“When I put the present by her bed, I’m going to be dressed as Santa Claus. That way, if Miu wakes up, she’ll just think I’m Santa Claus and I’ll keep the fantasy alive.”

“I see...that sounds fun.”

“Hee hee, doesn’t it? I actually already bought the Santa costume online. Oh, right, I’m going to try it on when I get home, so will you check to see if I look like Santa?”

And so, after that conversation, and upon arriving at the Katsuragi household,

I joined Mommy Ayako inside her home. I sat on the couch in the living room, waiting for her to finish changing.

“T-Takkun...” Suddenly, as I was waiting, a pitiful voice called out as the door to the living room opened.



I gasped in shock at the sight before my eyes. There was Mommy Ayako, decked out in a Santa hat and a bikini. The outfit was red and white, in keeping with the Santa theme, but the color that dominated the outfit's palette was Mommy Ayako's skin tone. It was absurdly scanty—her large breasts looked like they would spill out of the red fabric at any moment.

"I've really gone and done it now..." she mumbled between whines as she hid her face in her hands in embarrassment.

"Huh? Wh— Huuuh?" I was at a loss for words. *Why? It's the middle of winter. Why is she wearing a bikini? When did Japan move to the southern hemisphere?*

"I just looked up 'Santa Cosplay Women's' and bought whatever without really paying attention...and this is what arrived... What should I do...?" Mommy Ayako mumbled, tears in her eyes as she looked herself over in her outfit. Each time she twisted her body, it would inevitably bring either her chest or her rear to the fore, and the sight took my breath away. I knew that I shouldn't be ogling her so much, but my eyes couldn't help but be drawn in.

Whoa. This is... This is too much. I didn't know that Mommy Ayako had such a nice figure... For starters, her boobs are so big. They're just so huge! Despite that, her waist is so slim, and she's not fat in the slightest. I accidentally saw her naked before in the bath, but...her amazing body wrapped up in this red bikini is naughtier than when she was naked.

"I still wanted to try it on, but...I don't think this is any good. Even if we're inside, I'm still cold in a bikini... Also, it's a bit naughty."

"I-It looks good on you, Mommy Ayako."

"Ha ha... Thank you, Takkun," she said with an empty laugh. "I guess I'll seal away this bikini for now. That just leaves finding an actual Santa costume somehow... I might mess up again buying something online, so maybe I should go look for one in stores..."

"M-Maybe you don't have to try so hard? You don't even know if Miu's going to wake up in the middle of the night."

"Hmm... Nope, I'm going to do it." Though she looked like she was considering it for a bit, she quickly affirmed her will and nodded to herself, speaking in a

tone like a stubborn child. “I decided that I would enjoy these types of events to their fullest,” she said, a strong will and slight fragility behind her eyes. “I don’t want to do anything that would make Miu sad... Also, I want to do all the things that my sister and her husband couldn’t do, even if they’d wanted to. That’s why doing too much is just the right amount of effort.”

“Mommy Ayako...” *Wow... Mommy Ayako really is incredible. She’s a bit clumsy sometimes, but her true self is kinder than anyone else, and she loves Miu deeper than anyone else.*

“Yeah... You’re right. Doing too much is more fun anyways,” I said, a smile naturally forming on my face. I felt like I was able to see the parts that I loved about the person I had feelings for again, and my heart filled up with a warm sensation. “I’ll help as much as you need, so let me know if there’s anything you’d like me to do.”

“Thank you, Takkun. Well...I guess this will be the first favor I’ll ask of you.” Mommy Ayako then brought a finger to her lips. “Don’t tell anyone about my outfit today, okay?” Her gesture and tone were playful, but her eyes were serious.

“Y-Yeah, got it...” I nodded strongly.

Thus ends the flashback, and also where we’ll be wrapping up stories about my childhood for the time being.

Also, just as a side note, Miss Ayako did go on to buy a regular Santa costume, and she succeeded at placing Miu’s present by her bed. Miu was very excited to receive her gift... And aside from the slight tragedy that ensued when Love Kaiser Speed, who transforms with the toy that Miu received, died in the episode that aired a week later, Christmas that year was a great success.

However, there is another, later end to this story. Unable to forget the taste of success that first Christmas, Miss Ayako continued to cosplay as Santa every year...however, she suddenly stopped one year. During the year in question, I’d been invited for dinner, and the three of us were enjoying Christmas dinner together...

“Speaking of,” Miu said, suddenly speaking up after we’d finished enjoying

the Christmas cake, “you know how you dress up as Santa Claus and put my present by my bed, mom? Why don’t we stop doing that this year?” she said casually, in a tone that made it clear she couldn’t care any less.

“What...?” Miss Ayako said with a shocked look, completely frozen. She had been planning to do the same thing this year, and various plans had been shared with me prior to this dinner. Miu’s words completely rained on Miss Ayako’s gift-giving parade. “Wh-What are you talking about? Dressing up as Santa? I-I don’t know what you mean by that, Miu... Your gifts are from Santa, you get them for being a good gi—”

“You don’t have to do that. I’m over it.”

Despite Miss Ayako desperately trying to keep a smile on her face and make excuses, Miu shook her hand and brushed her off.

“I appreciate the thought, but I’m in middle school now,” Miu explained. “I’m just tired of pretending to not notice.”

“P-Pretending?! Huh...? M-Miu, does that mean you knew...?”

“Of course. I noticed around five years ago.”

“Five?!”

“You were working so hard, and I thought it would be wrong if I didn’t play along, so I’ve pretended not to notice all this time, but it doesn’t seem like you’re ever going to stop. I really didn’t expect you to keep doing it after I got to middle school.”

Miss Ayako was stunned into silence, so Miu piled more on. “It’s kind of, like, embarrassing for me at this point, you know? I mean, my mom cosplaying as Santa Claus every year? I feel like it was barely passable in your early twenties, but you’re pushing thirty now. So, starting this year, let’s not do it anymore. I think it’ll be easier for us both that way. Yeah, let’s do that.” Miu nodded to herself. “Phew. I was finally able to say what I’ve been holding in these past five years...” Miu said, sounding just as relieved as her words suggested.

In contrast...Miss Ayako was shaking, her face racked with a look of despair and humiliation that words would fail to describe.

Following Miu’s request, Miss Ayako sulked and holed up in her room, making Christmas that year quite the fiasco. But looking back on it now, it was a fond memory.

Thus concludes the addendum to the tale of the Santa-themed bikini. I feel somewhat strange... I’d meant to share a heartwarming story about Miss Ayako, but I feel like I ended up just showcasing more of her clumsy side...

Regardless, the flashbacks unrelated to the main plot are now over. Thank you very much for listening. Please enjoy the main story from here on out!

Chapter 4: The Lone Wolf and the Sudden Attack

♥

There was no other way of putting it—I was completely taken by surprise. She came by in the middle of the day, without calling ahead, completely unannounced.

“Hey. It’s been a while, Ayako.”

“Yumemi...” I just stood there, astonished, upon opening the door.

She had a slim figure like a model’s, and it looked great in her designer pantsuit. Her unruly hair, which she hadn’t seemed to put any effort into tidying, stood in stark contrast to her fitted formal outfit—but all the same, the wild aspect her hair gave her appearance somehow matched her attire. There was a charm to the imbalance of it all.

Although she was already well into her forties, she had plump skin and a youthful face—and it was upon this face of hers that she had her most striking feature: her ferocious gaze, reminiscent of a wolf’s, which was still as fierce as the day we’d met. This was Yumemi Oinomori, the president of Light Ship, the company I worked for.

“I have plans to meet Sora tonight, so I thought I would come by and see you while I was in town,” Yumemi explained as she sunk her weight into the couch in my living room.

Sora was a long-time female illustrator who lived around this area. We had worked with her on several occasions, and I was friends with her as well.

“I don’t mind you coming over, but...it would’ve been nice if you’d let me know the day before. Even the day of would have been fine,” I said as I served up coffee from my Dolce Gusto. “There aren’t that many people who would just show up unannounced at someone’s house in the middle of a weekday.”

“Sorry about that. I just really wanted to surprise you,” she said, apologizing

for nothing with her apology.

She really never changes, does she? I thought to myself with a sigh. She was someone who really did whatever she wanted, and I'd been at the mercy of her whims countless times.

"It really has been a while though," Yumemi added profoundly as she grabbed the mug before her. "I think it's been about six months?"

"I think so... It doesn't really feel like it's been so long since we talk on the phone almost every day though."

"Ha ha, that's true.".

Light Ship was a company Yumemi had started after leaving her position as a highly skilled editor at a *major* publication. What the company actually did was extremely difficult to pin down: it took on a wide variety of projects, but more or less, we were engaged in creating various entertainment media,, such as video games, animation, and light novels.

I joined the company ten years ago, and I was somehow still working there. Though I had to go out on business calls on occasion, I mostly worked from home using my computer and communicating over the phone or through emails. Because of that, it had been a while since Yumemi and I had seen each other in person.

I sighed as I stared at Yumemi's face. Just as always, she didn't show any signs of aging, to the point that I was a bit jealous. No one would think she was in her forties—if she tried enough, she could probably pass for a woman in her twenties.

"It looks like you've gotten a bit rounder since I last saw you," she said in a pensive tone.

"Huh? I'm...rounder?"

"Yeah. It's like you got more meat all over you and became rounder."

"You were talking about my figure?!" *I thought that she meant my emotional state seemed softer, like the edges had been rounded off! I can't believe she meant it literally!* "Yumemi... Even if you're a woman, as my boss, it's sexual

harassment for you to talk about things that someone is sensitive about. Emotional abuse as well. Maybe I need to start looking into taking some action...”

“I-I was just joking. Jeez, you’re just as merciless as ever,” she said, looking scared for just a moment. “I *was* talking about your vibe, not your figure. It’s not like you were ever a prickly person, but...I feel like there’s something more graceful to your presence and the subtle movements you make, and you seem so much more womanly,” she said, looking at me as if she was seeing right through me. “I guess women become more beautiful when they’re in love.”

“Wha—? I-I’m not in love...”

“There’s no need to be shy,” Yumemi laughed.

“I’m not being shy. Besides...the only reason you think I’ve changed is because of...what’s it called...confirmation bias! You only see me that way because you’ve already decided I’m in love.”

“Ha ha, you might be right.” She brushed off my desperate rebuttal like it was nothing. “Well then, Ayako, though it’s unclear if you’re in love or not, there’s definitely someone who’s in love with you. Where is the famous Takumi Aterazawa, and what is he up to right now?

“I-I think he’s at home right now... Miu heard he wasn’t going to school today. He said his lecture for today was canceled, so he’s going to be doing work at home.”

“That’s convenient,” she grinned. “Well then, Ayako, why don’t we order in some sushi?” she continued...before adding on with a vicious smile that it would be for three people.

♠

There was no other way of putting it—I was completely taken by surprise.

“Have you had lunch yet?” Miss Ayako asked me.

“No, I haven’t...”

“Would you like to come over and have sushi then?”

“Can I? I’m more than happy to, but why all of a sudden?”

“It’s a long story... There’s another person who’ll be joining us, and she’s a bit strange, but if you’re all right with that...”

After accepting that sudden and puzzling invitation, I headed next door to the Katsuragi household, where an uncomfortable-looking Miss Ayako amid three portions of quite expensive-looking sushi awaited me. And also...

“Hey. It’s nice to meet you, Takumi.” I was greeted by a beautiful woman. She was in a suit, and she had a wild vibe to her. “Come on, don’t just stand there. Sit with us.”

“O-Okay...” She encouraged me to take a seat with an easygoing attitude as if this were her own home. She’d said it so naturally that I followed her command without thinking.

“Well then, cheers to us three meeting, and to health and prosperity,” the woman sitting on the couch across from me said as a toast—she was running things on her own, and Miss Ayako followed. I hurriedly picked up my glass from the table and raised it as well. “By the way, Takumi, do you like sushi? Are there any types you don’t like?”

“Huh...? I-I like it just as much as the next person. There isn’t anything I particularly dislike either...”

“I see, that’s good to hear. I only like salmon and ikura, so as a token of goodwill, I shall gift you all the other sushi.”

“What? Um...”

“There’s no need to hold back. You’re young, so you should eat up.” Before I could object, she quickly plated all her sushi aside from the salmon and ikura for me.

What a waste of expensive sushi. She seems like she has the palate of a child...

Whatever, that’s not important. Just wait a minute. Who is this person? She has this air to her like she’s some important person, and she’s been acting overly friendly, but who in the world is she?

“I-I’m sorry for calling you over so suddenly...” Miss Ayako apologized guiltily as I sat beside her flummoxed. “I was against it, but I just couldn’t say no to

her...”

“That’s completely all right, but...who is she?”

“Um, she’s—”

“Oh, that’s right. I haven’t introduced myself yet. Here you go,” she said, putting down her chopsticks and interrupting Miss Ayako’s response to pull out a business card from her suit pocket. Even though she was sitting as she handed the business card to me, I stood up to take it with both hands, as was customary.

Um, this is *how you accept a business card correctly, right?*

“First name Yumemi, last name Oinomori. I’m just someone who wants to spend every day with a smile on her face... I guess you could say I’m like a woman about town.” After giving her spiel, she—Miss Oinomori—resumed eating.

I sat there, overwhelmed by her strange intensity, and glanced down at her business card. “President of Light Ship— Wait, ‘*president*’?!” I exclaimed, stunned. I reflexively looked up at Miss Oinomori before turning to Miss Ayako. “Isn’t Light Ship the company you work at?”

“It is...”

“So, this person is the president of your company...?”

“I-I hate to admit it...but she is,” Miss Ayako responded, looking mixed up about it all.

I looked back to Miss Oinomori and stared at her intently. I had no idea that the president of the company Miss Ayako worked at was this beautiful woman with a devil-may-care attitude.

“Titles mean nothing. I just do the work of a president out of necessity. It simply fell to me since I’m the one who started the company. I have no attachments to my position. If anything, I’d like to step down right away and make some room for new blood. How ’bout it, Ayako? Would you like to take over as president?”

“Please don’t joke about that. Our company is basically dependent on your

network and fame," Miss Ayako said, exasperatedly dismissing her.

It was unclear how much of what Miss Oinomori had said was serious. From the way the two spoke to each other, I could kind of sense that they'd known each other for a long time.

"Well, now that we're done with introductions," Miss Oinomori began as she sipped on some tea after finishing just her salmon and ikura sushi, "I hear you've fallen for Ayako here."

"Guh!" I almost spit out the food in my mouth. One wrong move and I would've choked. "Wh-Why do you...?"

"Hee hee, there's no need to hide it," she laughed. "I've heard the gist of things from Ayako."

"Hey, Yumemi! Ugh... I-I'm sorry, Takkun. I talk to Yumemi about personal things sometimes, so..." Miss Ayako explained in a panic. It appeared that Miss Oinomori was already aware of many things.

"So, am I right?" Miss Oinomori asked, leaning forward with a sadistic smile.

"W-Well... Y-Yes, I'm in love with her," I said, having no choice but to respond in the affirmative.

"T-Takkun... Jeez..." Miss Ayako muttered.

It felt like I could die from the embarrassment—even Miss Ayako, who was sitting beside me, looked to be quite embarrassed.

"Hee hee, I see. That's good to hear," Miss Oinomori said, seemingly the only one having fun while Miss Ayako and I sat there blushing. "Even so...you're still young. You're twenty, right? I can't believe you like someone like Ayako at your age..." She looked me over, her eyes full to the brim with curiosity. "Do you have a thing for *mature* women?"

"Guh! Ack, gack!" This time, I completely choked on my food. The sushi had fully gone down the wrong way.

"Hey...wh-what are you even talking about, Yumemi?!" Miss Ayako exclaimed, in place of me since I was unable to respond.

"I mean, we have here a young twenty-year-old man in love with a woman in

her thirties. There's only one explanation I can think of in a situation like this—the young man has a thing for mature women."

"That would mean that you're calling *me* a mature woman, right?"

"What do you mean? You're totally a mature woman."

"I-I'm not! I'm still too young!" Despite Miss Ayako's desperate rebuttal, Miss Oinomori seemed to be unfazed.

"Hey, there's no shame in being attracted to mature women, Takumi. It's a popular genre in the world of adult content for men. It's by no means a peculiar fetish."

"Um... I don't have a fetish for mature women or anything," I said after catching my breath. "Well, um...maybe it's like I don't *not* have a fetish for mature women either. I'm sorry, I'm not even sure myself."

"What? You don't know? Isn't it about your own tastes?"

"Yes, but... I've never liked anyone besides Miss Ayako, so I've never really thought about what kind of women I like. Or rather, I've only ever thought about Miss Ayako."

Miss Oinomori listened silently as I continued. "Even when those kinds of topics came up in conversations with my friends, the only person that would come to mind for me was Miss Ayako... I feel like Miss Ayako is the only woman who is my type— Huh? Um...?" I suddenly realized that the atmosphere had completely changed. Miss Ayako was bright red and looking down, while Miss Oinomori, who had asked the question in the first place, looked uncomfortable.

"Wow... Ayako, you've captured the heart of quite a man."

"L-Leave me alone..."

"Hee hee, you've got me. I was just teasing you, but it feels like you beat me. I can't believe you left me speechless. You're pretty impressive, Takumi." I wasn't really sure what'd happened, but it seemed like I'd scored some points with her. "That's unfortunate. If you were just into older women, I would've volunteered myself to be your girlfriend. This young lady was planning to give you a *very* detailed lesson on the charm of a real adult, something Ayako can't

do.”

“I don’t think you can call yourself a ‘young lady’ at your age, Yumemi.”

“Being young isn’t about age. It’s about your mindset.”

“It’s unfair for you to call yourself a young lady after calling me a mature woman. You’re much more of a mature woman than me at forty-two.”

“F-Forty-two?!” I exclaimed in shock without thinking. I couldn’t help but stare intently at Miss Oinomori’s face. *There’s no way. I thought she was in her thirties...or possibly even in her late twenties.* “You don’t look like you’re in your forties at all. I thought you were much younger.”

“Thank you. It’s nice to hear, even if you don’t mean it.”

“No, I definitely do... When I first saw you, I thought you might even be younger than Miss Ayako.” I blabbed on out of shock, but I realized what I had done as soon as the words left my mouth. *Shit. That was bad! I’m pretty sure I said something really bad just now!*

“I see...” Miss Ayako said under her breath.

I should say that this was expected. The atmosphere that had become awkward earlier turned ice cold in the blink of an eye. In an instant, a depressing gray cloud came over Miss Ayako. There was a slight tinge of anger behind her eyes as well, but that was drowned in the overflowing despair draping over her. “I see. I look older than someone in her forties... I didn’t know that’s what you thought of me, Takkun...”

“No, you’ve got it all wrong! You look plenty young as well! I just, I know your age so... I ended up comparing your actual age to what Miss Oinomori looks like...”

“Ha ha ha! My bad, Ayako,” Miss Oinomori laughed loudly, contrasting with my earnest effort to make up for what I had said. Her tone was both genuinely joyful and completely sarcastic. “I’m so jealous of you though. I don’t know if it’s because most people think I’m so young, but I don’t come off as dignified at all. I’m truly envious of how you look as old as your age. Would you mind teaching me how to have a bit more gravitas?”

“Ugh! Maybe you don’t seem dignified because you say and do ridiculous things and don’t act your age!”

“I also seem to have the better physique between the two of us. Unlike you, who’s slacking, I keep things tight by going to the gym three times a week.”

“I-I’m busy as a single mother who has to cook and clean! I can’t live a leisurely life without a care in the world, unlike a certain triple divorcée!”

“First of all, the man in love with you said that I look younger than you. Those are the results even with the advantage you get from his feelings, which means that generally speaking, I’m much younger-looking than you by a wide margin.”

“Y-You don’t know that! Maybe Takkun *actually* has a thing for mature women, so he’s aged me up in his mind!”

Because of my slip of the tongue, a battle had begun between the women that they couldn’t back down from, and I was suspected of having a fetish.

“Looks like you’re not going to back down,” Miss Oinomori said.

“Of course not,” Miss Ayako snapped back.

“Very well. Let’s have a competition then,” Miss Oinomori grinned. “We’ll determine who looks younger between the two of us with a head-on battle.”

“A battle...? How would we do that?”

“Hm. How about this?” Miss Oinomori broke into a wicked smile. “We’ll wear outfits that would be cringey unless worn by a young person, and the winner will be whoever looks better.”

The rules of the competition were incredibly simple. Just as Miss Oinomori explained, the two would wear outfits that were a bit embarrassing to wear after a certain age, and whoever looked better would win. That is to say, the one who was the least cringeworthy would win. The winner would be decided by a judge, which was of course me.

I had been dragged into their battle, something I had no business being involved in. *I don’t wanna do this... I know this is all because of the one careless thing I said, but being the judge of this is rough.*

“M-Miss Ayako...” I called out before the competition began.

“It’s all right, Takkun,” she responded, her voice trembling with nervousness. Despite that, she carried determination in her voice. “I won’t lose, no matter what.”

I didn’t know what to say. *I, um. I just wanted to ask if you wanted to stop this battle that won’t leave anyone happy. I wanted you to calm down and come to your senses.* It appeared that these women’s competition was beyond stopping.

“Why did this happen?” I muttered to myself with a deep sigh after being left alone in the living room.

The others were currently changing into their outfits that were “cringey unless worn by a young person.” Miss Ayako was going to look for something in the house, while Miss Oinomori was going to change into an outfit that happened to be in her suitcase that was “just right” for this competition. *I wonder what kind of outfits they’re going to end up wearing.*

“I’m coming in, Takkun.” The first one to finish changing and return was Miss Ayako. The door to the living room flung open, and I was stunned silent upon seeing her. She was dressed as a high schooler. Well, not really a high schooler—there was too much of a slightly X-rated air to her to be calling her a high schooler.

She was in a blazer, dress shirt, and pleated skirt: those holy grounds that only teenage girls could enter, the quintessential symbol of adolescence, the school uniform. Miss Ayako was bashful and blushing up to her ears. Despite her embarrassment, she was kind of striking a pose, perhaps because this was a competition. There was something indescribably painful about what I was seeing.

“H-How do I look? Does my high schooler outfit pass...?”she asked.

I sat there silently.

“Hey...Takkun... Please, anything but silence. Give me some kind of reaction. When you react like you’re weirded it out...it makes me want to go throw myself into the street...” Miss Ayako pleaded, looking like she could burst into tears at any moment.

“U-Um...” I was at a loss for words, overwhelmed by the sight of a woman in her thirties dressed as a high schooler. I didn’t want her to jump into the street, so I quickly tried to squeeze out some kind of comment. “Um, i-it’s kind of...c-cr—”

“Cringey?! Ugh... I-I knew it, of course it is. It’s cringey no matter how you look at it... I mean, a woman in her thirties dressed up like a high schooler? I just... I’m sorry I was born...”

“No, you’re wrong! I was going to say ‘cramped’! Like, the size looks too small, so you look cramped in it, that’s it!” I quickly tried to correct my rushed judgment, as it appeared that Miss Ayako was on the verge of losing any hope for recovery in the face of her crushing despair. “That’s Miu’s, right...?”

Miss Ayako nodded in response to my question. It was just as I thought—the uniform was Miu’s. The top and skirt were likely backups. Blazers weren’t worn during this season, which was likely why it was available to wear despite Miu being at school right now.

“Does it fit all right...?” I asked.

“I-It does...because I’m really sucking in my stomach right now.”

“I don’t know if you can call that ‘fitting’...”

“I can’t help it! It’s super tight! It’s Miu’s fault for being so skinny in the first place! Why is that girl so thin?!” Miss Ayako lashed out.

Even though she was concerned about the fit around her waist, I was concerned about something higher up...her chest area. Her twin mounds were pressing up against the shirt like there was no tomorrow, and the buttons looked like they could fly off at any moment.

G-Good lord... She’s bursting at the seams. So voluptuous...

“H-Hey, Takkun, how is it, really? Tell me your honest thoughts... Does this look good? Do I look like a high schooler?” Miss Ayako asked desperately.

It was immensely difficult to answer her. “U-Um, how do I say this... It looks good, in a sense.”

“In a sense?”

“Um, well... It’s a bit difficult to see you as a high schooler after all, and it really looks like a cosplay, but...as a cosplay, it looks very good on you.”

“Is that a compliment...?”

“It technically is...” I wasn’t lying. There was something about Miss Ayako dressed in the school uniform that made it hard for me to stay calm looking at her. It was like tapping into a guilty pleasure, like there was something taboo about it, which made me feel like I was going to become dizzy. The outfit wasn’t working for various reasons, but at the same time, those same reasons made it irresistible. “I think you look very attractive.”

“That doesn’t make me feel much better...” Despite her words, Miss Ayako seemed a little happy to hear that. She seemed to be fairly pleased.

Seeing her kind of happy like that is cute. There’s something endearing about her doing something a bit silly for her age... As I reaffirmed Miss Ayako’s charm, if I could call it that, there was suddenly a voice.

“Whoa, it’s a high schooler,” Miss Oinomori’s voice rang out. She had finished changing and returned to the living room.

“Ha ha, I see. You’re wearing Miu’s uniform. I didn’t think you’d come out cosplaying as a high schooler... I’m pretty surprised, Ayako. Nothing makes me happier than you taking such a ridiculous competition seriously. I’ve loved that innocence and naivete of yours for ten years.”

I couldn’t help but be dumbfounded by Miss Oinomori’s appearance.



“What... Wh-Why...?” Miss Ayako said, her voice trembling. “Why didn’t you change?!” Just as Miss Ayako had said, Miss Oinomori was in the same suit she was wearing earlier. Nothing had changed since she left the living room earlier. “Weren’t you supposed to change into the clothes that you happened to have on you, the outfit that was ‘perfectly cringey unless worn by a young person’?”

“What? Oh, well, that was a lie,” she said, flat-out, as if it were truly nothing.“Why would I conveniently be walking around with something like that on me? Hee hee. I actually can’t believe how easily you fell for such a sloppy lie.”

Miss Ayako was stunned silent.

“Oh, of course I’ll take the loss here. You’ve completely defeated me, Ayako. I didn’t think you would resort to such a desperate outfit. Woof, it’s cringey. Yup, really cringey...hee hee... It looks good on you, ha ha...” Unable to hold back, Miss Oinomori burst into laughter.

It appeared that this competition had just been us dancing in the palm of her hand from start to finish—we had been tricked into playing along with her practical joke from the very beginning.

Having won the battle but lost the war, Miss Ayako became dazed and fell to the floor. “I-I really hate you!” she screamed in tears.

I couldn’t find the words to comfort the high schooler in her thirties breaking down crying before me.

♥

It took me a while to pick myself back up, but I figured no one really wanted to watch a woman in her thirties cry while dressed like *this*, so I dusted myself off and returned to my room on the second floor.

“Hee hee. Come on, lighten up already, Ayako,” Yumemi said, walking into the room as I changed out of the school uniform. “I’ll give you a proper apology. Sorry! I’m sorry. Ha ha.”

“Don’t apologize while laughing!” I yelled while removing my top, now standing there in my bra. *Oh no, there’s an unusual wrinkle on the blouse. I’m sorry, Miu. I’ll iron it out, so please forgive me.* “I’m really upset this time! I won’t forgive you unless you double my salary!”

“Oh, sure. Double, right? I’ll make arrangements for it to take effect next month.”

“Please don’t... I’ll be the one in trouble with Mr. Kanamori and the other members of the accounting department.”

“What’s with the change of heart?” *I can’t take this anymore... What’s wrong with her? Why is the president of our company someone who acts like a carefree bum?* “Either way, things turned out all right, didn’t they? You might not have planned for it, but you succeeded in showing off your school-girl cosplay to Takumi. If he has a niche fetish, he’s probably fallen for you even more.”

“I don’t really want him to fall for me more over something like this...”

“So you *would* like for him to fall for you more?”

“I... Th-That’s just semantics!” I forcefully ended the conversation there, afraid that if we kept talking, she would keep dragging out the ways I really felt —even the feelings buried deep in my heart that I hadn’t realized were there.

“Hee hee, you’re always so fun to tease, Ayako,” she muttered jovially before raising both her arms and stretching out. “Mm, either way, I’m glad I stopped by. I got to see your voluptuous cosplay, and I got to meet Takumi, the reason I came here in the first place.”

“So you *were* after him?”

“Yup. He’s someone who might become your husband one day, so I had to check out the goods for myself.”

“Wh-What are you talking about? It’s too early to tell what will happen with us...”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot you’re currently enjoying the amazingly fun period of being more than friends but less than lovers.”

“Ugh...” No matter what I said, she was just going to tease me. All I could do was groan.

Yumemi chuckled at me, but then the smile suddenly left her face. “But, you know...” She sighed. “You should probably stay away from him.” Her tone seemed both derisive and resigned.

“Huh...?”

“I came to see just what kind of man made you lose your mind to this degree, and honestly...I was expecting more. He seems like he’s just a run-of-the-mill college student you could find anywhere.”

Yumemi launched into a contemptuous diatribe, one she delivered awfully matter-of-factly. “His face isn’t bad, but it’s not like he’s especially handsome...and as a college student, he’s got no money to speak of. On top of that, he lives with his parents and doesn’t have a car either. I completely see why you said you can’t think of him as a man. A woman in her thirties would have to be hardcore into younger men to put up with all that—guy just doesn’t have enough going for him. I think he’d be fine to fool around with, but I don’t think he qualifies as a serious candidate for a future together.”

She started snickering a little as she continued to pile on more criticism. “Also...he doesn’t seem very reliable. He’s boring and lackluster. It’s a pretty big con that he caught a cold on such a critical day as your first date—there’s nothing more pathetic than a man who doesn’t perform well under pressure. Not to mention, agonizing over unrequited feelings towards someone for ten years isn’t devoted, it’s just creepy. It’s almost stalker-like.”

She kept going. “There’s plenty of better men out there in the world. I can introduce you to some of them if you’d like. With your good looks, you could

get as many handsome, rich men as you wan—”

“Yumemi.” I couldn’t help but speak up. “I’m going to be *very* upset if you continue to insult him any further.” My voice was shaking so much from anger that even I was shocked. And not just my voice—my whole body was trembling from the violent rage I felt in my chest, from the fury that was now boiling over.

“Please take it back. Takkun isn’t an unreliable man. He’s earnest, sincere, kind, and extremely reliable.” I gave Yumemi—my boss, the president of the company I work at—a piercing glare. This was the first time since I’d joined the company that I had ever spoken to her in such a belligerent manner. “In the ten years since I took Miu in... Takkun’s presence has supported me in so many ways.” My memories all surfaced in the back of my mind in an instant. In the ten years that I had spent with Miu, Takkun had always been there. He was always by my side, supporting me.

“I didn’t realize it myself until now, but...the first person I call when I’m in trouble is Takkun.” All this time, I hadn’t noticed it. I’d never noticed how much he had been there for me because it had become so normal. “Whenever I had to leave Miu home alone because I was busy with work, Takkun would always play with her... He would always help me with my plans for birthdays and holidays, and he even took Miu’s entrance exams more seriously than I did...” I couldn’t count the number of times he had helped me—I had an endless stream of memories recalling all the times he’d been there to lend a hand. “I don’t know any man more reliable than Takkun.”

Yumemi listened silently as I went on. “He might not have much to his name, but he’s in college—of course he doesn’t! His future has enough potential to make up for it! Takkun will definitely do something incredible and get rich! I can guarantee it! And about his face... I-I like it! I think Takkun’s handsome! He’s got a nice body too since he’s toned from swimming! He’s totally my type!”

Yumemi remained quiet as I went down my list of rebuttals. “Also, I don’t think there’s anything creepy about him having feelings for me for ten years. I was surprised at first, and a bit confused about what to do, but...now, more than anything else, I’m happy about his devotion. For him to love someone like me for ten years... A-Anyways, Takkun is an incredible man! I can’t just sit here and let you keep badmouthing—”

“Pfft... Hee hee, ha ha ha!” Yumemi suddenly burst into laughter during my emotional rant. “Ha ha, I see. I get it now. If that’s how you feel...” Smiling like she was having the time of her life, Yumemi placed her hand on the door to the room. “...you should be saying all that to his face.” She forcefully swung the door open and quickly reached her hand out before forcefully pulling in the person who was outside the door.

“What...? T-Takkun?!” I exclaimed in shock. Takkun had a look of discomfort upon being dragged into the room.

“I-I’m sorry, I... You guys were taking a while, so I got worried and came to check on you, but then...the sudden turn your conversation took made it hard to come in...”

“Hee hee. You’re a bad boy, Takumi. I can’t believe you were eavesdropping on a secret conversation between women.” Despite what she said, Yumemi looked completely amused. She was delighted, like a hunter looking down on the prey caught in their trap.

“Y-Yumemi, don’t tell me you knew that Takkun was there from the beginning...”

“I knew where he generally was by the sound of his footsteps,” she said without any guilt. If anything, she seemed proud.

She got me. I’ve been tricked by her again. She heard Takkun coming upstairs and waited for the right moment to spring her trap. She said things that would upset me on purpose and tried to get Takkun, who was right outside the door, to hear our conversation. And she did it all having predicted what I would say back.

“Hee hee. Though it was all a ruse, I’m sorry for saying such horrible things, um, what was it again...?” Yumemi placed her hand on Takkun’s shoulder as she apologized, then turned to me. “The earnest, sincere, kind, and extremely reliable Takkun, was it?”

“Wh—?!” *She’s taunting me! She’s totally making fun of me right now! Agh! This is so embarrassing! What all did I even say?! I feel like I was swept up by my anger and said a bunch of embarrassing things!* “Y-You’ve got it all wrong, Takkun! That was, um... I was just getting back at her for what she said, and it’s not how I really feel...which isn’t true, but, um...”

“I-It’s all right, I understand.” Takkun and I both stood there, our faces flushed.

“Ha ha. You’re both so innocent—it’s cute,” Yumemi said with a gleeful laugh before turning her back to us and leaving the room. “I’ll be heading out then. I’ve had more than my fill enjoying your youthfulness and naivete.”

“What...? Wait.” I stepped out to see Yumemi off as she headed downstairs.

“Enjoy your youth to the fullest, Ayako,” she said, not turning to face me and only craning her neck my way, as if to stop me from following her. “The American poet Samuel Ullman said ‘Youth is not a time of life; it is a state of mind,’ and I live by those words.”

That was something I was well aware of. The poem was blown up and displayed on the wall as the company’s mission statement in the president’s office at Light Ship—the entire poem, that is, not only just the famous opening line.

“No matter how old you become, if you continue to live life to the fullest, your soul won’t age, nor will it decay,” Yumemi continued. “That’s why you should have your fill and enjoy both work and romance to the fullest. You’re much too young to be using age as a reason to stay in a standstill.” After finishing what she had to say, Yumemi let out a satisfied chuckle and shuffled down the stairs. She then grabbed the suitcase she had left at my entryway and left my home.

All Takkun and I could do was watch silently as she strutted away. I felt...kind of overwhelmed.

“M-Miss Oinomori is an incredible person.”

“She really is...” I agreed, half as a compliment and half as an insult. In the end, we had been dancing to the beat of Yumemi’s drum the entire time—she’d led us around like puppets on strings. *Jeez...she’s quite the troublesome president.* She had no regard for others, and she was totally arrogant; she gave freely when it came to both money and romance, acting first and thinking later; no matter how old she got, she carried herself like she was the biggest kid on the block. She was the physical manifestation of impulsiveness and a lack of common sense. But, despite all of that, I couldn’t bring myself to dislike her,

which was the biggest problem.

At the end of the day, I was grateful for Yumemi—so much so that I could never thank her enough times, even if I spent my whole life doing it. It was thanks to her that I'd been able to keep the career I wanted, even though I'd suddenly become a single mother as a new hire.

"I'm sorry for getting you mixed up in my boss's nasty little games."

"It's all right, but, um..." Takkun blushed and averted his gaze.

"Hm? Is something wrong?"

"I, um... M-Miss Ayako...I think you should put something on..."

"Huh...? Aah!" I slowly looked down and saw what I looked like and let out a scream. *I-I'm not wearing a top!* I was still wearing the uniform skirt, but the only thing I had covering my chest was my bra. *God... I-I messed up! Yumemi started insulting Takkun while I was changing, so I hadn't finished when I started arguing back... I've just been like this since then! I've just been in my bra!* "Jeez... Why'd you take so long to say something, Takkun?"

"I-I'm sorry. I couldn't find the right moment to bring it up... Oh, I'll go get my jacket."

I sank to the floor as I watched Takkun run out of the room. *Did Yumemi plan for this to happen too...? Did she execute her plan the moment I started changing, predicting that this would happen...? Ugh, agh, dammit! I hate her after all!*

Chapter 5: The Plan and the Purpose

♠

It was evening on a weekday, and I was meeting up with Satoya at a café by the train station after my lectures for the day. I was the one who'd invited him out, but he picked where we would go.

"First off...let me give you this," I said, handing an envelope to Satoya. He'd sat across from me after we'd ordered coffee.

"What's this?"

"Remember when I came down with a cold the other day and you went to the restaurant I had reservations at for me?"

The last item on the itinerary for the date I'd planned, which I was supposed to have gone on last week, was a dinner with a great view of the night sky. It was a nice Italian restaurant with a good vibe that Satoya had told me about. It wasn't that expensive of a restaurant, but they did offer options for multicourse meals, and it was a popular restaurant among working women.

However, as we all know, my date was rescheduled due to my cold. I contacted Satoya the morning of the date and had him and his girlfriend take the reservation in place of Miss Ayako and me.

"It's to cover your dinner," I explained. "Take it."

"Huh...? I can't accept that. Why are you giving me this?"

"You went as a favor for me, so it's only fair that I pay for it. Thanks to you, I didn't have to cause the restaurant any trouble by failing to show up."

"Come on, you don't have to worry about that. Rin and I both had a good time, so don't sweat it."

"I mean...wasn't it pricey?"

"It was... Hmm, I guess if you really insist, I'll just take half, since I don't really feel comfortable accepting all of it." Satoya took only half the money in the envelope before handing it back to me. It felt like it would be worse to just

force my gratitude onto him, so I accepted the envelope. “You really are quite the responsible young man, huh? I totally thought you were going to ask for date advice again. I never thought this was what you were asking me out for,” he said exasperatedly. “Your rescheduled date is happening this weekend, right?”

“Yeah.” I had talked about it with Miss Ayako a few times, and we planned our do-over date for this weekend. “I don’t think I need advice for the date itinerary this time... Miss Ayako strongly warned me against pushing myself this time.”

Every time we talked to each other to decide on when to have our date, she would repeatedly say things like “Um, Takkun... It’s really sweet that you’re trying so hard for me, but just don’t overdo it. It would be terrible if you caught a cold again, so...just don’t push yourself too much,” or “Renting a car is just a waste of money, so let’s go in my car. I don’t mind driving either...” She seemed to be pretty stressed about me getting sick from overextending myself.

How uncool of me, I thought to myself with a sigh. *I just wanted to make her happy, but I’m making her worry about me instead.*

“I see. I guess I can understand where she’s coming from. The more you try, the more you’ll just end up stressing her out.”

“How pathetic... I was trying to work hard because I wanted her to see me as a man, but because of that, I’ve made her worry about me like a son.”

I wonder how she feels about me. I don’t think she dislikes me. Maybe I’m just flattering myself, but I think she does *care about me. She feels something close to affection for me...I think. But I don’t know whether that affection is familial or romantic. What’s worse is that Miss Ayako might not know either. It might be that those two types of affection aren’t mutually exclusive, and her feelings are actually ambiguous and uncertain—where one ends and the other begins might not be entirely clear.*

“There there, don’t worry about it too much. What happened this time was partially my fault too. I ended up putting too much pressure on you by proposing an itinerary more geared for adults...which is why I’ve called in a special advisor.”

“A ‘special advisor’...?”

“Yup. The person who’s most knowledgeable about you and Miss Ayako in the entire world.” I was stunned. “Since I thought you’d want date advice again, I’ve already called her in. That’s also why I chose this place... Oh, perfect timing. Looks like she’s here.” Satoya waved towards the café entrance.

The person who’s most knowledgeable about Miss Ayako and I? Who is that? Puzzled, I followed Satoya’s gaze. *Oh, I get it now.*

“Oh, hey there,” she said with a wave upon noticing us. She was someone I knew very well—Miss Ayako’s daughter, Miu Katsuragi.



“It’s been a while, Satoya. You’re just as good-looking as usual.”

“Thanks! You’re just as pretty as usual too, Miu.”

“Ha ha, thanks bro.” After exchanging casual greetings with Satoya, Miu turned to me. “Hey, Taku. Haven’t seen you since this morning.”

“Miu...” *I see. It’s true that there’s no one else in the world as knowledgeable about Miss Ayako and me as Miu. I can see why Satoya called her in as a “special advisor.” But still...*

“I’m going to go get a drink,” Miu announced before heading towards the register.

After she left, I leaned forward over the table and whispered, “Hey. Why did you invite Miu, Satoya?”

“Because I thought she was the right person for the job. If you want to get Miss Ayako to fall for you, the fastest way to do it would be to see what her daughter thinks,” he said calmly. “I’m actually more confused by you. Why aren’t you relying on her as a resource?”

“Well, that’s...” I went silent for a moment, then I decided to admit how I felt. “It’s awkward...” I said, the words coming out like a sigh.

“It’s awkward?”

“I mean...isn’t it kind of embarrassing to ask the person you like’s daughter for advice? Like, ‘What should I do to date your mom?’” Satoya was quiet. “Also...if everything goes well—if Miss Ayako and I date and eventually get married, Miu’s going to be my stepdaughter. If I rely on her too much now, I won’t have any dignity or anything as a stepfather...”

“Ha ha, I see. I guess you have your strange sense of pride about this,” Satoya said, slightly snickering at me.

I did think it was a bit creepy of me to stress myself out imagining how things might go after marriage when I didn’t even know if I’d be able to date Miss Ayako. I was pretty much counting my chickens before they’d hatched. But I couldn’t not think about it. After all, the woman I fell for had a daughter who was dear to her. It felt like the bare minimum for a man seeking to date a single

mother to consider his future relationship with that mother's child.

"What are you two whispering about?" Miu said upon returning with her drink as she sat next to me. "I mean, I have a pretty good idea what it is." She took one sip of her caramel macchiato, topped with a mountain of whipped cream, before making her guess:

"I bet Taku's resisting getting my help," she exasperatedly declared.

She hit the nail right on the head, and I couldn't say anything.

Miu let out a heavy sigh. "I get why you don't want to rely on me. That's why I haven't said anything to you until today," she said with a look of sympathy and pity. "You seemed super depressed when your date got canceled because of your cold, so I thought I had to finally step up."

"Well, thank you for that..." I muttered sarcastically, averting my gaze. It felt reasonable to act a little bitter having salt poured in my wound like that.

"Well then, Miu's cooperation is decided, so let's start strategizing for your date this weekend," Satoya began, clapping his hands together as if to signal a fresh start to our conversation. "There's still the plan from the canceled date, but I think we should avoid it since it might be bad luck. I think we should start from scratch."

"That might be for the best..." I nodded.

I felt bad for Satoya, who'd put together the previous plan, but I was hesitant to do it over. It was possible that it was bad luck, but there was also the fact that parts of that plan were already spoiled for Miss Ayako. Most of all, Miss Ayako told me not to push myself too much. I was grateful for her concern—although I also felt a bit pathetic and unsure about it—so I was on board for coming up with a brand new plan.

"Do you have any ideas, Miu?"

"Hmm, let's see..." Miu put her hand on her chin as if she was deep in thought. "I know about the plan you two came up with, and...to be honest, I didn't think it was a good fit for my mom. I'm not saying you did anything wrong, Satoya. It seems like a wonderful date for an adult woman, but my mom isn't really a normal woman in her thirties." Miu's expression twisted into

something indescribable. “I don’t know very much about her past relationship experience, but at the very least, she hasn’t dated anyone for the past ten years, so she’s at a middle-school level when it comes to romance. Even with this date, she was super flustered and panicked just over being asked out. I think it would be daunting for her to suddenly go on a romantic, adultlike date.”

“I see. I was actually worried about that too—the itinerary I came up with was geared towards an adult woman, not Miss Ayako in particular,” Satoya agreed, a satisfied look on his face like he totally understood where Miu was coming from.

Miu then turned to me. “I think it’d be cringey and make you look like a college student who’s trying too hard if you push yourself to do things you’re not used to. That’s what actually happened last week, isn’t it? The pressure of it all got to you and made you sick.”

“Well...” I couldn’t really deny that. Although I’d been beyond excited about the date, there’d been a lot of pressure too. I’d been overextending myself trying to be an “adult man” who could match Miss Ayako and trying to come up with a date itinerary fit for two adults.

“That’s why I think...” Miu began, looking straight into my eyes with a slightly relaxed tone of voice, “...that you should just be your usual self, Taku.”

“My usual self?”

“Yeah, the usual you would be best,” she casually said before taking another sip of her caramel macchiato. “If you’re going to overcompensate and end up failing, it’s better to head into battle at your usual level. Just don’t do anything extra, be your usual self, and act naturally.”

“But...I can’t do something like that. It’d be like I’m not trying at all.”

“I’m not telling you to not try. All I’m saying is be normal. If you just act like your usual self and act normally, that’ll be enough.”

“She’s right,” Satoya agreed. “Both you and I kept trying to think of how to make things better for Miss Ayako, but maybe we needed to do the opposite, Takumi. Even if you tried to overcompensate to seem more mature, you would reach a limit at some point... If you think of it that way, a strategy where we

bring her into your territory might be better.”

“My territory?”

“It’s basic strategy to fight on your own turf.”

“Yup, Satoya’s totally right,” Miu nodded. “A mature, adultlike date would just be uncharted waters for my mom. No one would win if you’re both in unknown territory.” She took a moment to catch her breath before continuing. “Just don’t be too scared to try things and do everything that comes to mind. There’s no one in this entire world who thinks about my mom more than you, so you have nothing to worry about. I have no doubt my mom would enjoy something you came up with on your own.”

“Miu...” I felt a warmth in my chest. Her advice really resonated with me, but most of all, it felt like there was trust underlying her words, although I might have been completely imagining it. Still, it was a ticklish feeling of both happiness and embarrassment. “Thanks.”

“I don’t need your thanks,” she said, waving my gratitude away before holding her hand out. “Come on.”

“Huh? What do you want?”

“My advising fee.” I silently stared at her. “It’ll be the cost of this caramel macchiato. I also want a slice of cake,” she added persistently.

“You’re pretty shrewd, you know?” I complained as I pulled out a thousand-yen bill from my wallet.

“Thank you for your patronage,” Miu said before happily taking the bill and getting up once again. “I said it before too, but...” she began, looking down on me still in my seat. “My mom is pretty simple. If you just keep making moves and being aggressive, she should easily fall for you.”

“You really shouldn’t be talking about your own mother like that.”

“You have nothing in your way—and if there are any obstacles, my mom’s just making them up on her own. Any issues are all just...problems within herself.” Then, a dark veil came over Miu’s face, which had been plastered with a flippant smile this entire time. I could sense a bit of sorrow in her downturned

gaze. “If this date ends up being a failure, I have some things up my sleeve too...”

“What things?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it,” she said, suddenly looking up again and quickly shaking her head. “It’s bad luck to think about what’ll happen if things don’t work out. It’s really nothing, so just forget about that, pretty please,” she said, ending the conversation in a joking manner and more or less fleeing to the register.

Chapter 6: Paradise and Pleasure

♥

A week after we had to postpone our date due to extenuating circumstances, the day we rescheduled it to had finally arrived. After discussing various details ahead of time, we'd decided to forgo renting a car and just go out in mine, so we were starting our date by meeting up at my carport.

It was now nine fifty-five in the morning, five minutes before we agreed to meet up. I stepped outside to see Takkun had left his home at the exact same time as well.

"Good morning, Miss Ayako."

"G-Good morning, Takkun." Seeing him look a bit nervous made my voice unnaturally high. "How are you feeling...?"

"I'm feeling great. I slept for eight hours every night this week."

"Ha ha. Keeping nice and healthy, I see..." Though there was some friendly joking in our back and forth, the conversation itself was somewhat shallow. It was probably because we were thinking of each other as a person of the opposite sex.

This was my first date with him. Just because it had been canceled once didn't mean I would be any less nervous or anxious now...

"Miss Ayako..." Takkun said, breaking the short silence. He looked at me intently. "Your outfit today looks nice." Just that alone was throwing me for a loop, but he had more to say. "You've done your hair differently from usual too. There's something different and new about you... I think you look...very beautiful."

"W-Well, even *I* have nice clothes for going out on dates..." My embarrassment ended up making me sound a bit hostile. The truth was, I'd kind of gone out of my way to buy this outfit for our date. *Ugh, this is bad. How am I going to hold up if I'm getting embarrassed by such a low-level attack? If I'm already going down for the count after a quick jab, what's going to happen to*

me once we're out on our date? "Sh-Shall we get going?"

"Sure. Well then...I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but I'll be borrowing your car," Takkun said with a quick bow before heading to the driver's side.

"Are you sure you're okay with driving? I really don't mind driving."

"I'll be fine, I think. Your car is the same as my mother's, and I've driven her car a few times."

It would have been rude of me to keep pushing when he insisted it was fine, so I got into the passenger's seat as he sat in the driver's seat.

"So...where are we going today?" I asked while Takkun adjusted the seat and mirrors.

"Um, well... Let's leave it a surprise for when we get there," he said with a knowing smile.

Is this okay? Is he doing something difficult to make me happy again...?

"Oh, it's nowhere weird though, so there's nothing to worry about," Takkun added on, perhaps because my worry was apparent. "You've been there before too."

Although Takkun hadn't seemed very confident in his driving, the trip went totally smoothly, just like you'd expect from how much he'd practiced behind the wheel. If anything, he was even better at driving than me—he passed other drivers and switched lanes without missing a beat, and he stayed calm and drove safely even when getting onto the freeway. Thus, after roughly an hour on the road, we'd left our home prefecture and reached our destination..

"This is..." Upon exiting the car, I was stunned. Over half the cars in the parking lot were minivans and SUVs—the kinds of large cars popular with families with kids. A crowd of couples with their children in tow were headed for the entrance from the parking lot. Past the entrance gate, I could see roller coasters and a Ferris wheel. "A-An amusement park...?"

We were at an out-of-prefecture amusement park. It was a large-scale, no-holds-barred theme park, known for being the largest one in the Tohoku region.

If I was being honest...I couldn't hide my surprise. I'd thought a lot about where Takkun would take me for our date, and I'd never imagined it would be an amusement park. Not only that, but this amusement park was...

"This spring, my club came here to welcome the freshmen who joined," Takkun said after getting out of the car and standing beside me. "We did this very college-student-like game where the freshmen looked for their upperclassmen and solved puzzles throughout the amusement park. You've been here before too, right?"

"I have... It was a long time ago though." *It was when Miu was still in elementary school. The two of us visited this amusement park once.*

"I heard about how you came here with Miu before... Do you remember how you showed me pictures of your visit? There were a lot of photos of Miu having fun, but...there were almost no photos of you."

I went silent. In a sense, it was the natural thing to happen—I was the one taking those pictures of Miu, after all. As a mother visiting an amusement park with her young daughter, I was the photographer. The only photos of me from that visit were a shot or two of the both of us taken by a park staff member.

The star of the show was the child. What needed to be prioritized over everything else was the child's smile, and parents weren't allowed to put their child aside and enjoy themselves. That hadn't hurt me at all. What'd been most important to me was that Miu had had fun—and also that I could take some pictures of her having fun. There wasn't anything saddening about me not being in the album. But...

"That's why I thought it would be nice if I could take a lot of pictures of you today," Takkun said. "Anytime you've had a fun outing in the past ten years, you've always prioritized Miu, right? But today, I want you to only think about your own enjoyment, not your daughter's. It'll be nice if you can just let today be all about you and enjoy the amusement park to its fullest."

"I..." I couldn't think of what to say. *Takkun...I didn't know you were thinking something like that.*

For the past ten years, it hadn't been painful for me to put my daughter first above all else. Even if one thing or another had been a bit hard, I had a hundred

times more memories filled with fun and happiness...

...but I would be lying if I said that it'd never felt like I was neglecting myself. I would be lying if I said that I'd never held back, or that nothing had ever tested my patience.

Ah, I wonder what this is... This warmth radiating from deep in my chest... It felt like I once again got to see how Takkun had truly been paying attention to me for the past decade.

"Um... I-I'm sorry, I guess an amusement park was kind of a childish date spot," Takkun said anxiously—I'd left him hanging while I'd been too choked up with emotion to speak.

"N-No, that's not it... I'm not unhappy with this at all, it's just... I'm really happy that you were thinking of me, and I like visiting these kinds of places, but..."

"But?"

"I-Isn't it a bit cringey...? For me to be running around an amusement park at my age...?" The concerns bubbling up in the pit of my stomach finally spilled out of my mouth. "It's not like I'm here with a child, so...is it all right for an old lady in her thirties to go on a date at an amusement park?"

"Oh, *that's* what you were worried about?"

"W-Women have a lot of concerns!"

"I've said it before, but you're not an old lady by any means. Also, there's no age limit to having fun at an amusement park."

"R-Really?"

"Really. Come on, let's get going."

"O-Okay..." I started walking, with Takkun leading the way. Our first date, a date at an amusement park, had begun.

After we got through the entrance gate, the view before me was instantly out of the ordinary. Alongside numerous attractions that made your heart race just by looking at them, there were shops filled with souvenirs and park

merchandise. Everywhere you looked was overflowing with excitement as crowds of people walked around with smiles on their faces.

“There are a lot of families with kids here since it’s the weekend,” I observed.

“Yes, but... There are a lot of couples here too,” Takkun replied.

Just like he’d said, there were many couples in the park on dates...but they were basically all young people. All the couples were people in their teens or twenties, youthful as can be. Women in their thirties were all with their children, and I couldn’t see any other women that age there alone with their partner. *Maybe I’m standing out after all...*

I feel like I’m in a dream. If I told my past self about this, she would laugh out loud and not believe me—if I told her about how I was on an amusement park date with Takkun...

“Oh, Miss Ayako, look over there,” Takkun said as I was unable to relax, my head in the clouds. He was pointing toward a carousel. “There was a picture of Miu riding that, right?”

“There was. Miu really took a liking to it and ended up riding it three times,” I said, becoming filled with nostalgia. But that didn’t last for long.

“Come on, let’s ride it.” Takkun had casually made an insane suggestion.

“What...?”

“Let’s ride the carousel.”

I went silent for a moment before responding. “Wait, hold on.” *Me? Ride a carousel? Me, at my age of thirty-redacted years old, riding a white horse?* “I-I can’t, Takkun. I...I’m pretty sure it has an age limit to ride it! On the upper limit, I think it said ‘Women over thirty should check themselves...’”

“It doesn’t say anything like that.”

“But, I mean, an adult my age riding a carousel is...”

“It’s totally normal. See, there’s a lot of people riding it.”

“Th-Those adults are all with their children. I would be able to justify it if I was riding it with a child as well, but...”

“It’ll be fine, no one will care.”

“Wh-Wha—”

We lined up for the carousel after a bit of forceful encouragement from Takkun. The line wasn’t too long, and it was quickly our turn to ride. We entered the gate and got onto our white equine seats.

It felt improper to straddle the horse, so I sat sideways with my legs closed. *Wait...this also might be embarrassing because I’m acting high and mighty like a princess or something... I don’t know. I don’t know how a girl in her thirties is supposed to act!*

“Whoa, it’s surprisingly high up.”

“Are you all right, Miss Ayako?”

“I mean, I’m fine, but...” Was this *all right*? Was it okay for an old lady like me to enjoy a ride like this without a child? Would I be looked at with disdain?

“Please hold on tightly to stay safe. Okay, see you later.”

“Okay... Huh? What?! W-Wait, Takkun!” I hurriedly stopped Takkun, who was trying to leave me alone on my white horse. “Wh-Where are you going?!”

“I’m getting off, of course.”

“A-Aren’t you going to ride it with me? I thought you would be by me.”

“What? I wanted to take pictures of you from outside the ride, so...” He said it like it was obvious.

You’re kidding me, right...?! So I’m going to ride the carousel by myself?

“After I get enough pictures, I’ll be waiting right at the exit.”

“W-Wait, I think I want to get off—”

“All right, folks, the carousel will now begin moving!” a member of the staff announced, interrupting my desperate cry.

W-Wait! Wait for me, Takkun... Don’t leave me alone in this fairy-tale world! Despite my internal pleading, it was too late. Takkun had quickly scurried off, and the carousel was moments away from moving. All the features of the carousel—the jovial music, the spinning scenery, the white horse that bounced

up and down—were driving this girl in her thirties into a corner.

My mental stability can't take the fairy-tale fantasy! Nooo! Waah! I'm riding a carousel alone! I'm getting excited riding a white horse even though I'm in my thirties! I'm all alone even though there's parents with their children all around me!

I looked toward Takkun, hoping for him to save me, but he was just holding up his smartphone with an innocent smile.

"Wha—? Wait, no... Are you really going to take pictures...?!" I yelled, covering my face in a panic, but the music kept my voice from reaching him. Takkun kept holding his phone up, giving me a little wave.

Ugh... He looks like he's having fun. I don't know what could be so fun about taking pictures of me. Ugh, agh, jeez...

Huh... What is this feeling? I feel silly for getting so embarrassed. Maybe it's actually okay for me to like this? Even at my age. Maybe it's perfectly fine for me to fully enjoy this amusement park date.

Where my heart had once felt clouded over with shame and hesitation, I suddenly felt a warm ray of light. Before I knew it, I was posing for Takkun—I was smiling and flashing peace signs, albeit with great effort. A boy with strange tastes had said he wanted to take my picture, so this was the least I could do for him, after all—it was by no means me having fun.

Surrounded by children and their parents, I sneakily got off the carousel, trying not to stand out.

"Did you have fun?"

"I had...something." More than fun, I was fatigued—mostly mentally.

"I got some nice shots."

"Y-You really took my picture...?"

"Yeah, I took a great video."

"A video?!"

“At first I was just going to take pictures, but I thought I might as well take a video. Thanks to that, I was able to capture how you started out hiding your face before gradually posing more and more with each turn of the carousel.”

N-Nooo! I only tried hard because I thought you were taking photos! What do you mean *you took a video?! Delete it all, right now!* “I’m glad it seems like you had fun.” Despite what I wanted to say to him, seeing him happily reviewing the footage left me silent.

This is unfair. How can I ask you to delete it after watching you look at it like that*?*

“Ugh... Jeez. Come on, Takkun. Enough of looking at that, we’re going onto the next ride.”

“Huh...?”

“Why do you look so surprised?”

“I just... You suddenly became a bit assertive. It’s a good thing though. I’m really happy to see you get into it.”

“I-It would be a waste to just spend the date embarrassed, so I decided I would enjoy myself today. That’s why...we should head to the next ride.”

“Yes,” Takkun nodded, extremely pleased.

The next attraction we headed to was a roller coaster.

“Are you all right with thrill rides, Miss Ayako?”

“I’m not good with the really crazy ones, but I like a good thrill ride. I wanted to ride the ones here when I came before, but Miu was still too young, so...”

“Oh, right, they have height limits to ride them.”

Since the roller coaster was a popular attraction, it had a long line snaking around its entrance. Upon getting in line, we were squished by the crowd around us as we slowly made our way toward the front.

“Um, Miss Ayako,” Takkun said resolutely in the middle of the clamoring line. “Can I hold your hand?”

“What?”

“I-It would be bad if we got separated.” Takkun reached his hand out to me while choking back his embarrassment. From his gaze and his voice, I could tell how much courage it’d taken for him to ask, but...

“W-We can’t,” I said, reflexively pulling my hand away. The reason was nothing that deep—I was just surprised because it was so sudden. I quickly tried to explain my reflexive reaction. “I mean... W-We don’t know who might see us... Also, in a line of this size, we probably won’t get separated.”

“Y-You’re right... I’m sorry,” Takkun said, his disappointment written on his face as he pulled his hand back.

What? You’re giving up...? No, of course he is, I said no. But I didn’t think he would give up so easily... Ugh, if he’d just pushed a little harder, I would’ve totally let him hold my hand. If he’d assertively and strategically made advances towards me, like in a certain past dream, then...

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye. Takkun was hanging his head down in sadness.

You can tell just how upset he is. Of course he is—he mustered up the courage to ask me, and I totally rejected him. Don’t make that face, Takkun... Ugh, agh, jeez!

“Wha?” The next moment, Takkun let out a surprised yelp. What other reaction was he going to have when I—the person who had just rejected holding hands with him—held his hand? “Miss Ayako...”



“J-Jeez, Takkun... You really don’t get women at all,” I said, mustering up a condescending tone. “You shouldn’t give up so easily after being rejected once. You need to be pushier... A ‘no’ from a woman can sometimes just be a ‘yes’ flipped on its back. That’s why a guy needs to read into the meaning behind her words...”

Takkun didn’t seem to have anything to say to that, but I pressed on. “I-I’m not saying that you should be pushier with me though! It’s just a generalization! I’m just speaking in general terms!”

Ugh, jeez... What am I even saying? I feel like I’m saying something so selfish and confusing right now. I’m being so annoying right now.

I continued to wallow in self-hatred until Takkun finally said, “I see, that’s helpful to know.” He didn’t complain a single bit—he just gave me a smile. He held back my hand so gently that it almost tickled.

“Takkun...you’re too naive.”

“That’s not so bad, is it?”

“I’m worried you’ll be tricked by some ne’er-do-well because of your naivete. Do you remember that time we went to go buy a Christmas present for Miu? I said that I got Love Kaiser Solitaire’s transformation trinket as a gift for being the ten-thousandth customer, and you totally believed me...”

“I’m only saying this since you’re bringing it up, but I knew you were lying.”

“You knew?!”

After riding the roller coaster, we went around visiting the various attractions as we pleased. We rode a ride where you spin around in the air, a roller coaster that splashed into water, and one that moved forward by pedaling.

In order to avoid the lunch rush, we decided to eat a little late and have a quick bite at a quick service restaurant with outdoor seating.

As we enjoyed our time at the amusement park, Takkun would take any chance he had to snap photos of me. At first, it was so embarrassing I couldn’t stand it, and I said things like “What’s so fun about taking pictures of an old lady

like me?” but the more he took, the more I got used to it.

If anything, it became fun. It was fun—so much fun. We went around enjoying the various attractions together, took lots of pictures, had a casual lunch at place we’d wandered into, impulsively bought crepes that we just happened to see and ate them as we walked around... It was like I was a teenager or in my twenties again. It was like we were two students dating...

“There’s just something about crepes at a place like this that makes me want them,” I mused.

“I totally get it. Even though you know that it’s no more special than any other crepe you could get anywhere else,” Takkun replied.

“Yes, exactly!”

We stopped at the edge of the walkway and ate the crepes we had just bought. I’d gotten a strawberry one, and Takkun had gotten a chocolate and banana one. *Yup, the classic flavors are definitely the best for crepes!*

“Oh, Takkun. You’ve got a little whipped cream on you.”

“I do...?”

“The other side, over here,” I said, reaching out to his cheek. I wiped the cream off his face with my finger, then licked it off. “Mm, the chocolate tastes good too.”

“Wha...?” Takkun’s face turned bright red...which made me realize what I had just done.

“Oh, um... I-I’m sorry, Takkun...! I fell into old habits and did something embarrassing again!”

“N-No no, it’s all right! I’m sorry I keep getting embarrassed!”

We stood there apologizing to each other. *I did it again... I can’t believe I did that. I’m pretty sure I’ve done something similar for him in the past too. I know it’s something adults usually do to their children, but maybe it’s also a common thing for couples to do...? So maybe it’s actually okay? Well, even if couples do it, we’re not dating yet, so... Hmm.*

While I rode my own emotional roller coaster, getting excited then feeling

awkward, we continued to make our way through the amusement park.

“Miss Ayako, look over there.” We arrived at a plaza, and Takkun pointed to a crowd. “It looks like they’re doing a special promotion where they’ll take commemorative photos for you.”

“Oh, wow.”

“Since we’re here, would you like to have our photo taken?”

“Hmm... Yeah, let’s do it.” I was starting to feel bad that I was the only one having my picture taken the whole time, and it was a good opportunity, so why not have our photo taken?

We made our way to the crowd to line up—it was only then that we understood what kind of group they were targeting with this promotion. The setup of the photo was that a member of the park staff would hand you props, which you would then use to take a photo with the Ferris wheel as the backdrop. But the props they had were all heart-themed items...and most of the people lined up were with a partner as a couple. Even the people getting their photo taken the moment we lined up were a couple—they were snuggled up and flirting with each other as they enjoyed the photoshoot.

“I-It looks like this is for couples...”

“It seems that way...”

“Wh-What should we do?” *I don’t think we should be participating in something like this... Wait. Maybe it would actually be more embarrassing to* not *participate at this point because it would seem like I’m overthinking it. Ugh, I just don’t know... I don’t know what to do!*

“I think it should be fine...” Takkun began. “It doesn’t say that only couples can participate... Besides, there’s other people in line who don’t look like couples either.”

Just as Takkun had said, among the many couples, there were married couples with their children, and even a group of boys who looked to be in high school who held the heart-shaped props and yelled, “Dude, this is so depressing!” as they excitedly joked around with each other. It seemed to be quite a freewheeling, relaxed photoshoot.

“Yeah, it looks like it’ll be okay...” *If people are being this casual about it, I’m sure it’s fine for us to participate even though we’re not a couple. There shouldn’t be any cliché rom-com thing where they’ll ask us to prove that we’re a couple.*

Now that I was a bit less worried, we got in line.

“Thank you for your participation!”

“The next group, please select your props here. Boyfriends pick from here, girlfriends pick from over there.”

“Sir, can you squeeze in a little more? You’re fine as you are, miss.”

The park staff were working quickly to take the photos, handling the park guests with coordination like it was an assembly line. The line continued to move, and it became our turn.

“Please pick from the props here, um...” The park staff member, who’d had her customer service smile on this entire time, looked lost for a moment before deciding what to say. “Ma’am, you can pick from here, and your little brother can pick from these,” she said after looking at Takkun and I.

I was stunned. It felt like my heart had frozen over for a moment. *Oh, I see. Of course. There’s no way Takkun and I would look like a couple. No matter how young I look for my age, there’s no way I look like I’m in my twenties like Takkun.*

It’s fine. I’m not mad, nor am I upset. I just... This is a reality check. My head was in the clouds, thinking we were like students on a date, but now I’m being brought back to earth. If anything, I should be thankful. At least we look like siblings—if she thought we were a mother and son, I think that would’ve really been distressing. I guess it’s still possible that she thinks we’re mother and son, but she called us siblings to hedge her bet...

*V*arious thoughts raced through my mind in an instant, when suddenly, my shoulder was grabbed from behind—Takkun was wrapping his arm around me and drawing me in close.

“She’s my girlfriend! It’s completely obvious!” he exclaimed, loud and clear while holding me against his chest. From where I was inside his embrace, his

declaration resonated clearly in both my eardrums and my heart.

“Oh...! I apologize! I’m terribly sorry for my mistake!” the park staff member said, bowing her head in a panic.

After picking out our props, we walked toward the photo area. Calling the current atmosphere awkward would’ve been a huge understatement.

“I’m not your girlfriend...” I muttered after a short silence.

“Um, well...” Takkun was at a loss for words. “I just kind of got caught up in the moment... Sorry for saying something like that.”

“I’m not mad... I was just surprised. I didn’t know you could be so bold, Takkun.”

“Well, I mean... Earlier you said I should be pushier, so...”

“Jeez... You didn’t have to actually take action so soon...”

Oh, this is bad. I’m trying my best to act like the older, more knowledgeable one here, but it’s not working. I’ve been avoiding looking at him this whole time. I can’t look at him. I can’t have him see me like this...

“All right then, I’ll be taking your photo!” the park staff called out upon our arrival, turning the camera towards us.

“A little more to the right please, sir. Miss, um...can you look up, please?”

“Y-Yes.” I did my best to look up and put on a smile, but I wasn’t able to give a proper one at all. I didn’t stay expressionless, nor did I give a practiced picture-taking smile. My face was bright red, my eyes were teary, and all I could manage was a smile overflowing with happiness.

Following our photo session, we walked around the amusement park leisurely and purchased some souvenirs before getting on our final ride of the day. *There's no other way to end your day at an amusement park*.

"W-Wow, we're so high up..." I muttered while looking out at the view from the Ferris wheel cabin. I could see the entirety of the park, and the other park-goers walking around looked like small dots. *We're so high up. It's higher than I thought it would be. It's a bit scary to be this high up...*

"It's a great view," Takkun said, sitting across from me. Unlike me, he was showing no signs of fear. He was enjoying the view below us with a peaceful look on his face. As I watched him, a desire for mischief arose within me. I pulled out my smartphone from my pocket and snapped a photo. "Huh...? Wh-What are you doing?"

"Nothing, really—you just looked so serene that I couldn't help myself."

"I don't think it's any fun to be taking pictures of me."

"You know, I said that a bunch of times today... I said it *a lot* of times."

"But if it's pictures of *you*, there's value in taking them! You're really pretty, and you make all kinds of cute faces, and you're a really special subject who's super fun to captu—"

I let out a squeal of embarrassment. "Th-That's enough already! Either way, this is my time to get payback! Let me take some pictures too!" I positioned my phone camera toward Takkun, who was covering his face in embarrassment.

"What? P-Please stop... If that's how it's going to be, I want to take more pictures of you too, Miss Ayako."

"Y-You're not allowed to! It's my turn now! Don't point your camera this wa—" I reflexively got up and tried to grab his phone from his hand, but suddenly, the ground swayed beneath me—the cabin swung widely. "Aah!" Just as I lost my balance, I glimpsed the scenery outside. I was instantly overcome with terror, and my body felt faint.

"Miss Ayako!" Just as I was about to trip, Takkun reached out and caught me. I fell onto his chest, but the way I landed made it practically liked I'd jumped

into his arms—I'd ended up accidentally putting my entire body weight on him, but he firmly embraced me.

I gasped for air, catching my breath. "Th-That was scary..."

"A-Are you all right?"

"Yeah... Thank you, Takku—" I looked up as I thanked him, then I finally realized how close we were.

We were close—unbelievably close. My body was completely pressed against him. Besides the fact that my breasts were so squeezed against his chest you'd think I'd done it on purpose, our legs were intertwined in an awkward tangle. What was closest of all was our faces—his lips could graze mine at any moment.

We both let out a shocked gasp before turning away from each other and creating some distance between us. We got back into our original positions of sitting across from each other as quickly as we could while still being mindful of the cabin swaying.

"I'm sorry, it was just all of a sudden..."

"No, it's okay... Don't worry about it."

An awkward mood descended on our cabin. *Darn it*, I thought with a sigh. *We were having fun and it was going so well. Why did I end up doing something so clumsy...?*

For a short while, we sat in silence. The cabin continued to rise, and we were gradually approaching the apex of the Ferris wheel.

"Miss Ayako," Takkun began. "Thank you very much for today."

"What...?"

"I'm really glad I got to go on this date with you."

"Wh-Why are you being so formal all of a sudden?"

"I just thought I need to be sure I express these feelings to you because...I really had a good time. For so long, it's been a dream of mine to be able to go out with you like this, and my dream finally came true."

"A dream? Come on, isn't that a bit overboard?" I joked with a nervous laugh.

“I need to thank you as well. Thank you for asking me out on this date, Takkun. I had so much fun today.”

“Really?”

“I’m not just saying it to be polite. I *really* had a good time. I was a bit surprised at first when we arrived at the amusement park, but...I had so much more fun than I thought I would.”

Takkun smiled with relief at what I said. His emotions swayed so obviously with every move I made—watching his honest reactions made me realize once again that this boy really did like me, which in turn made my face warm up.

“Thanks to you, it was the best amusement park date ever,” I said.

“No, no, you’re giving me too much credit. I didn’t really do anything.”

“No, it’s true. It’s all thanks to you. If you didn’t bring me here, I never would have thought to come to an amusement park on my own. I guess...I thought I was too old for this kind of thing.”

It wasn’t anything extreme like banning myself or disciplining myself, but there was a part of me that had been resigned to give up on this sort of thing. I thought I had to stay away from these kinds of youthful activities that teenagers and people in their twenties enjoyed.

I’d somehow gotten a job at my current company, I’d taken in Miu and become a mom, and I’d lived through the turbulent days of single motherhood. Before I knew it, I had entered my thirties and become an adult. There hadn’t been any other option than for me to become an adult. I couldn’t stay a child forever. I couldn’t use my youth as an excuse to do only what I wanted and fool around.

I’d never thought that it was a mistake for me to have spent my time like that. No matter how many times I redid my life, I was confident I would make the same choices and live the same way—and because of that, I wasn’t aware of the pangs of regret I felt deep inside.

Jeez, this is all Takkun’s fault. This young man’s existence is completely stirring me up.

“Can I...ask you out again?” Takkun asked, staring right at me with a serious look. “There are many more places I’d like to go with you, Miss Ayako.”

I was stunned. My heart felt like it was burning up. It was like the things that I had given up on and cut out of my life, the regrets and desires that I hadn’t noticed were there, were now being fulfilled with warmth.

Unable to look him in the eye, I averted my gaze toward the window, only paying attention to the sky since looking down was too scary. “Sure...” I dryly replied. That was the best I could do. My heart was so full that I couldn’t find any more words.

The sky was blue, and it was still too early for the sunset. *I wish the sun were setting already. Maybe then I would be able to hide my embarrassingly bright red cheeks in the warm light of the sunset.*

And so, in a poetic, slightly embarrassing fashion, our date at the amusement park wrapped up nicely—but little did I know it was the calm before the storm. I never would have thought that something so major would happen on the way home.

Chapter 7: Lodging and Lust

♥

The elevator arrived at our floor.

“It’s that one over there that’s lit up...” Takkun said, looking nervous as he pointed to the flashing room number. They appeared to have a system where they use a flashing light to show you to the room you chose at the entrance.

There was a disgusting squishing sound as we walked down the carpeted hall. We were both drenched from head to toe. The water had naturally gotten into our shoes, but we were soaked all the way through to our underwear.

We entered our room to find something that looked similar to a regular hotel.

“Wow... It’s a lot more normal than I thought it would be,” I noted.

“Yeah, it’s surprising... It’s not that special, is it?”

“You’ve never been to one of these before, Takkun?”

“O-Of course not! What about you, Miss Ayako?”

“What?! N-No way! Today is my first time too!”

While we awkwardly interacted with each other, we set our belongings on the floor, using the towels in the room to wipe off the water from our clothes and bags.

“Well then, Miss Ayako,” Takkun began. “Please use the shower first.”

“What?”

Perhaps it was because I had sounded so confused, but Takkun quickly clarified. “N-No, I didn’t mean it like that! Well, I did, but... I know it’s a super cliché phrase in this kind of situation, but I didn’t mean it like *that*... I just meant that it would be bad if you caught a cold, so...”

“I-I know! I’m also sorry for reading too much into it!” I said, apologizing in a panic. “Well, I guess I’ll take you up on that and shower first.”

Unlike a regular hotel, there was no partition between the changing area next

to the bathroom and the rest of the room, making it completely visible from the bedside. Unsure of what to do, I went into the bathroom with my clothes on, and removed my soaked clothes inside.

I let out a deep sigh. My body was supposed to be cold from the rain, but my face was unusually hot. *Why? Why did things turn out like this? I thought our date ended on a really good note. So why are we at a love hotel together?!*

Earlier that day, after getting off the Ferris wheel, we took a quick look around the gift shops then left the amusement park before sunset. We had no further plans for the day and were going to return to our respective homes.

Though it was an early end for a date between two adults, the weather forecast predicted torrential rains tonight. Takkun suggested we return home early. Of course, there was no "What if I said I didn't want you to leave?" kind of moment. *Yup, that wouldn't happen. There's no way. Yay for single-day dates!*

"Thank you for driving, Miss Ayako."

"It's fine, don't worry about it. You took me around the park the entire day, so this is the least I could do."

We were in the car on our way home, and I drove in an attempt to thank him for everything he had done. We got off the freeway and were now on surface roads. In thirty minutes, our date would come to an end.

"It looks like we'll be able to get home before it starts raining," Takkun said from the passenger's seat. Dark clouds began to gather in the sky before us.

"That's good. I just got these clothes, so I didn't want to get them wet."

"Huh, I didn't know those clothes were new."

"What? Oh! I-It's just a coincidence! I just happened to have new clothes! I didn't get excited for the date and buy new clothes or anything!" I quickly tried to defend myself, but the very next moment there was a loud pop.

A large noise that sounded like something had burst echoed through the car. At the same time, the sensation coming from the steering wheel felt strange.

“Huh...? What? Wh-What was that sound just now...?”

“I think you might have a flat tire...”

“What?! N-No way... Huh? Wh-What should I do?!”

“It’ll be okay! Please stay calm!” Takkun said firmly as I was about to completely panic. “Don’t brake suddenly. Slowly decrease your speed and park on the side of the road. Nothing bad will happen immediately because of a flat tire. There’s no need to panic.”

“O-Okay...” Thanks to Takkun’s powerful tone, I was able to regain my composure.

I parked the car on the side of the road and got out to find one of the back tires completely flat. The air had gotten out, which made the tire get crushed from the weight of the car.

“I wonder if I ran over something.”

“That might be it, since there seems to be quite a big hole in the tire...” Takkun said as he inspected the tire from various angles. “How long have you had these tires?”

“Um, I think I haven’t changed them since I got this car, so...I think it’s been five years.”

“I see. Maybe it was just at the end of its life. It looks like the grooves are pretty thin too. Well, either way, it’s really good that we didn’t get a flat on the freeway. Are you enrolled in any roadside assistance programs?”

“Oh, yeah... There was one I was recommended when I bought the car, and I’ve been enrolled in it ever since. Though I’ve never actually used it before. Where did I leave the card...”

“Is it maybe in the glove compartment with your registration? I hear most people keep it there.”

“Oh, that’s right. I remember now, I’ve left it in there all this time!” In contrast to me, who was lost and didn’t know what to do, Takkun was very collected and calmly instructed me on what to do.

I called the roadside assistance service. “I see. Understood...”

“What did they say?”

“Apparently, they just got multiple calls from the area, so they can’t come right away. It looks like it’ll take an hour.”

“I see...”

The sun was setting, and the gathering storm loomed ever larger. If we waited an hour here, we could easily get caught up in a downpour.

Ugh, why did this happen? We had such a fun date, why did an accident like this have to happen at the very end?

“Miss Ayako,” Takkun called out as I stood there depressed. “Could I try fixing the tire?”

“What...?”

“Well, not fix, but just switch it to the spare.”

“The...spare?”

“You probably have one in the back of your car for temporary use,” Takkun said as he opened the trunk. He peeled the carpet back to reveal a compartment I wasn’t even aware existed. There was a slightly thin tire, along with several tools such as a car jack. “Oh, good. Recently there have been more cars that come with a repair kit instead of a spare... The damage to your tire is pretty major, so I didn’t think a repair kit would work.”

“What? Huh? What is this? This part...opens? Why is there a tire here... Huh? I didn’t put this here.” I was slightly panicking upon seeing items I had never seen before in an unknown space in the car I had been driving for years.

“It depends on the car, but it’s often standard for the car to come with a spare tire as well as a set of tools to swap it in. Well, most people forget about it. It’s part of the curriculum at driving school though,” Takkun explained with a nervous laugh.

Now that you mention it, I feel like I might have learned something like that...or maybe not. Ugh I can’t remember at all. I mean, I got my license over a decade ago.

“Here we go,” Takkun said as he lifted the spare and tools out of the compartment in the trunk and set them in front of the flat tire.

“You know how to fix a flat tire, Takkun...?”

“Well, if it’s just replacing the tire...”

“Wh-Whoa, that’s incredible.”

“It’s not. It’s just switching out the flat tire for the spare.”

“I mean... You don’t have your own car, right? How did you even...?”

“I’ve always been the one who switches my mom’s and dad’s cars’ to winter tires every year. It costs two thousand yen per car to get it done, so I would do it to earn some money.”

Oh... That’s right, I think I’ve seen him doing it before. I remember seeing him carrying tires around the Aterazawas’ carport.

“It’s my first time replacing a flat with a spare, but...it’ll probably be fine. I’ve prepared for this.”

“You prepared...?”

“Oh, um...” For a moment, Takkun made a face as if he had slipped up, but then he slowly began to explain. “Before our first date plans, I had anticipated and prepared for various kinds of accidents... One of those was if the rental car got a flat...”

“Y-You thought about all that?”

“Ha ha, that was probably unnecessary effort. It was because I was preparing for all those different kinds of accidents that I became sleep deprived and got sick, so...” Takkun slightly laughed at himself as he placed the car jack under the car. “But I’m glad it ended up being useful.”

“Takkun... I-Is there anything I can help with? I’ll do whatever you need.”

“Thank you. If you don’t mind, could you point your phone’s flashlight here? It’s starting to get dark.”

“Yeah, I got it.” I turned on the flashlight on my phone and pointed it toward his hands.

Takkun used the tools, seemingly familiar with them as he propped the car up and began switching out the tires. There was something so dependable about him working with a serious look on his face.

The spare tire was just for temporary use, and it was apparently not recommended to drive very long on the spare. And so, after putting on the spare, we headed to a mechanic by the highway. It was common in provincial areas like this to have many mechanics by the freeway exits.

We entered one of said mechanic garages and had them take a look. We found out that the damage to the flat tire was quite bad, and I had no choice but to buy a new tire. I was told that the other tires needed to be changed out soon as well, so I decided to go ahead and replace all four of them at once.

It was going to take until noon tomorrow for my car to be ready. We left the garage and headed for a bus stop along the highway. Unfortunately, all their rentals were being used, so we had no choice but to walk home.

“I’ll drive you here tomorrow. I think I should be able to borrow my mom’s car.”

“Thank you. That would really help me.”

The sun had set by now. The sidewalk along the highway was illuminated by the lights of the various shops. We quickly walked past the hustle and bustle. We couldn’t take it slow because it had begun raining already—we were still a bit far from the closest bus stop.

“I’m sorry, I should’ve brought a better umbrella.”

“No, it’s not your fault at all. I’m sorry too for forgetting to bring one at all.”

“It’s all right. We were supposed to be home much earlier, after all.”

Because the weather report had stated that it would start raining during the night, I didn’t bring an umbrella with me. Thanks to that, we were both under the folding umbrella that Takkun had brought.

Though we were sharing an umbrella, there was nothing romantic about the mood. We were both at wit’s end. If it started raining harder, as it was

predicted to, it would be impossible for the small umbrella to cover two adults. Because of that, I single-mindedly hurried toward the bus stop, but...

“Are you all right, Miss Ayako...?”

“I-I’m...not all right. Maybe. I’m sorry, I wore shoes that aren’t very good for running.”

“There’s no need to hurry.”

“B-But the rain will—” Right before I could mention it, the rain became a downpour in an instant. The deluge aggressively slammed into the pavement all around us, as though a bucket full of water was being poured on us from the sky. “Whoa... I-It’s raining really hard.”

“It’s pouring now... Let’s take cover over there for now.”

We headed toward an area with a roof to escape the heavy downpour. The small folding umbrella stood no chance against the rain, which was coming at us hard from a low angle. Takkun did his best to keep the umbrella up and shield us, and though I was extremely grateful for his effort, the rain that bypassed the umbrella was slamming into me. It was as if the rain was ignoring his kindness as it ruthlessly drenched my brand new clothes. By the time we made it under the awning of a conspicuous empty building with a “Now Leasing” sign, we were both completely drenched.

“I-It’s really coming down,” I said in between pants trying to catch my breath. “I didn’t think it would start raining this hard so suddenly.”

“Me neither...”

“Here, Takkun. Use this handkerchief. It’s probably not enough at all, but...”

“Don’t mind me, you should use it Miss Aya—?!” In the middle of what he was saying, Takkun suddenly turned red and looked away.

“What’s wrong?”

“M-Miss Ayako, um... Your clothes...”



“Huh...? Eek?!” I looked down to find that my blouse had become quite see-through. The drenched white top stuck to my skin, and my underwear was almost completely visible. *This is bad. It’s bad that it’s showing, but the bra I’m wearing is my super intense battle armor for just in case, in case of the one in a million, no, billion chance that something happened.* “I-It’s not what you think, Takkun! I’m not always wearing something black like this... It’s just a coincidence that today, I...”

“Well, um... J-Just put this on for now.” As I stood there completely flustered, Takkun gently draped his jacket over my shoulders. “It’s wet, but you should be able to hide it a bit.”

“Th-Thanks...”

“But, what should we do...?” Takkun said as he looked toward the sky. The rain was endlessly pouring down from the pitch black sky.

“It doesn’t seem like it’ll let up any time soon...”

“According to the weather report, it’s not going to stop until tomorrow morning.”

“What...What are we going to do? We can’t get into a taxi if we’re this drenched...” A sudden chill came over me, making me shiver. My soaked clothes and underwear were stealing the warmth from my body.

“Are you okay, Miss Ayako? You must be cold...”

“I’m okay. I’m more worried about you, Takkun. It would be terrible if you caught a cold again. We need to get somewhere warm...”

We both looked around before noticing at almost the exact same time. We found the perfect spot. Another common feature of provincial areas: there were a lot of love hotels by freeway exits.

We both fell silent as an awkward atmosphere took hold. The emphatically expressive sign that had left us at a loss for words showed the hotel name and cost of lodging in blazing hot pink.

I know. I know logically that a hotel would be perfect for our current predicament. We could stay out of the rain and take a shower. We could dry our

clothes with a hair dryer. We could even stay until tomorrow morning. It's all but the best place for us.

Despite the facts, however, *that place* being a specialty hotel for a certain kind of activity stirred up my heart and I became flustered. *Ugh, why? Why? Why is it a love hotel, of all things?! I would probably get self-conscious even just going to a regular hotel alone with him... The fact that it's a love hotel makes me think about* that *kind of thing even more...*

"Ha, ha ha. We couldn't go there—that would be bad...right?" I said, trying to dismiss the idea jokingly as I spoke up to break the awkward silence.

"Let's go.," Takkun said, slightly flushed while still maintaining a serious look. "We don't really have any other options, so...please."

"B-But..."

"Please. I promise I won't do anything...!" Takkun said, endlessly earnest as he bowed his head to me.

After being asked like that... I had no choice but to nod "yes."

And so, with no other choice—with truly no other options for us—we came to the love hotel to take refuge from the heavy downpour. I ended up going along with Takkun's plan, and I knew that he didn't have any ulterior motives. He decided this was for the best out of consideration for my health, and for my own part, I wanted to avoid Takkun getting another cold.

We had both just thought of the other and took the most logical course of action. But still...there was a part of me that didn't respond to logic, and it was causing a stir in my thoughts and quickening my pulse. Ever since we'd entered the hotel, my heart had been beating out of my chest.

"S-Sorry to keep you waiting." I had finished my shower and gotten changed before leaving the bathroom. Takkun was in the room, using a hair dryer to desiccate the clothes I'd left out after undressing in the bathroom. "Thanks, Takkun. I can take over from here, so you should go shower."

"Okay...but your clothes are still we—" Takkun looked back towards me and froze in a panic.

It was probably because of how I was dressed—I was in the white robe that was an amenity of this hotel. I didn't have anything else to wear, so this was my only choice. My underwear had gotten drenched as well, so I was completely bare under the robe.

"J-Jeez...You're staring too much, Takkun!"

"O-Oh, I'm sorry. It was just, um, so provocative..."

"Ugh! I-I don't have any other choice! There's nothing else to wear!"

Ugh, I hate this...! It's so embarrassing. I feel like my face is going to catch on fire. I know it was between this or nothing, but with a robe this thin, I'm basically naked anyway!

"Um, well then... I'll go take a shower."

"Okay. I'm going to call Miu, to, um, let her know I can't come home tonight..."

"That sounds good..." Takkun replied awkwardly to my own awkward declaration before grabbing a robe to change into and heading to the bathroom.

Now alone, I sunk into the couch while letting out a heavy sigh. "Wh-What should I do...? I can't believe I'm having a sleepover with Takkun...!" Not only that, but we were at a love hotel of all places. *What kind of mistakes did I make to end up in a bizarre situation like this?* "I-It's okay! Takkun promised to not do anything... Yeah, I can trust Takkun! It's okay. It's fine. Nothing is going to happen..." I yelled to myself out of nervousness. "Oh, that's right... I have to make a call."

I took out my smartphone and called Miu, who immediately picked up. After taking a deep breath and calming myself down, I did my best to explain the current situation to her, doing my best to make sure she didn't have any misunderstandings—of course, leaving out that we were at a love hotel.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. You'll have to eat dinner by yourself today. I think there's some fried chicken in the freezer, so just heat that up with something... N-No, what are you even saying!... That's not what happened, we really had no choice!... No, we will *not* be staying for multiple nights! ...N-No, no, you've got it

all wrong, what are you talking about?! It's totally a completely normal hotel! It's really just a regular hotel! It's so normal that you would be surprised how normal it is! ...The name of the hotel? The name is, um... Oh no, my phone's about to die. Sorry, I have to go, bye!"

I forced an end to the conversation and hung up. *I convinced her...right? Ugh, whatever, I don't care anymore. I don't want to think about it. It's fine, I was able to tell her I can't come home tonight, and that's enough.*

"Um, next is... Right, I need to dry Takkun's clothes too. Takkun kept prioritizing my clothes and left his own." I picked up the hair dryer and began drying Takkun's clothes along with mine that were still slightly wet.

As I was drying the clothes, Takkun came out of the bathroom. He was dressed in the same robe as I was, of course. He probably wasn't wearing any underwear, so he was dressed only in that white fabric...

"Aren't you staring a bit too much as well, Miss Ayako?" Takkun pointed out bashfully.

"I'm not! I-I wasn't staring!" I shouted, quickly averting my gaze. *Shoot! I couldn't help myself and got a good look at him. I focused on his slightly exposed chest. I'm totally hyper aware now that our outfits basically leave us in the nude...*

"I'll help you dry the clothes."

"O-Okay..."

We both continued to dry out clothes, but as we worked, I couldn't look directly at him. Takkun was also flushed as he worked silently. *This is bad. This atmosphere is bad. It's so suffocating... I'm going to get dizzy.*

In an attempt to improve the mood, I scanned our surroundings only to find something that would only make everything worse. *What? No way. Wh-Why is* this *here...?*

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh, um... I just found this..." Though hesitant, I picked up a bottle that was by the sink. It was about the size of my palm, and it read "LOTION" on the

bottle. “Ha ha... I guess it’s a love hotel after all. I can’t believe they really have lube just out in the open like this.”

“What...? Um, that’s,” Takkun began, struggling to get the words out. “I think that’s actually lotion. Like, a facial moisturizer...”

“Huh...?”

“I don’t think it’s the kind of lubricant you thought it was...”

“Whaaat?!” It was like a hammer had come down on my head. I quickly checked the label to find “facial moisturizer” written in small letters on the back of the bottle. *Oh no. I-I messed up! I completely fumbled it! I made a super embarrassing mistake!* I stood there in despair due to the shame.

But then, Takkun suddenly burst into laughter. “I-I’m sorry. I’m not laughing, I swear— Ha ha ha.”

“Wha— I-It’s not that funny!”

“I’m sorry... But it’s a little funny... It’s not a mistake someone normally makes.”

“Ugh! I-I can’t help that I made the mistake!”

“I know we’re at a love hotel, but why would there be that kind of lubricant just sitting by the sink?”

“I-I don’t know! Maybe there are love hotels out there that keep that kind of thing by the sink...”

“You’re right, who knows? Hee hee, ha ha ha!”

“Ugh, it’s not that funny...! You’re so mean, Takkun...”

Takkun laughed as if his nervousness had melted away, while I was pouting like a child.

For better or for worse, the atmosphere in the room lightened up after the lotion incident. I was still embarrassed about the whole thing, but we were finally able to talk to each other normally.

After drying our clothes, we ordered room service and ate while watching shows on the large television mounted on the wall. I...sort of expected love hotels to constantly be playing adult content, but we were able to watch regular programs without issue. As we talked and laughed while watching variety shows and other TV series, I was almost able to forget we were in a love hotel.

However, that tranquil atmosphere eventually had to come to an end. “We should probably head to bed...” Takkun said nervously. It was now a little past eleven o’clock.

“Yeah, we probably should...” I nodded—and the conversation ended there.

We both repeatedly glanced at the bed. It was a large, queen-sized bed that occupied an entire corner of the room. Indeed, as this was a love hotel, there was only one bed. It was something we’d been well aware of before coming in—a problem we’d been ignoring the entire time, one we’d kept putting off resolving...

“Miss Ayako, you should sleep in the bed,” Takkun said, breaking the awkward silence. “I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Huh...? No, that isn’t fair.”

“Don’t worry about it. If anything, it wouldn’t be right to make you sleep on the couch. I wouldn’t be able to sleep from the guilt if you did that.”

“But...”

“Please.”

We continued this back and forth for a bit, but Takkun eventually won. We quickly prepared our sleeping areas, and then I used...or rather, I desperately struggled to use the control panel to turn the lights in the room down to the dimmest setting.

“Well then, good night,” Takkun said.

“G-Good night...”

We exchanged our good nights, then we each headed to our territory. I climbed into the wide bed, while Takkun lay on the cramped couch. The room fell silent.

There was no way I was going to be able to sleep, of course. It was partially because of my anxiousness surrounding our current situation of staying at a love hotel, but more than that, I was worried about him.

I shot him a quick glance. He was laying on his side on the small couch, bending his legs and looking quite cramped. As I’d expected, it didn’t seem too comfortable, and he was tossing and turning.

“Having trouble sleeping?”

“Hmm...? Oh, I’m sorry, was I being loud?”

“No, you weren’t loud, but...that doesn’t seem too comfortable.”

“I-I’m all right. It’s not *that* uncomfortable to lie on... Well, in the worst case, I’m fine losing sleep for one night,” Takkun said, trying his best to sound upbeat. It was obvious that he was trying to be considerate toward me. I appreciated his kindness, but it hurt me more.

“Takkun.” Before I knew it, the words had come out. “You promised before we came into the hotel that you wouldn’t do anything, right?”

“What...? Y-Yes, I did.”

“We just came here because it was an emergency, so... You didn’t come here with any ulterior motives, right?”

“O-Of course not.”

“Okay... Well, I believe you that you have no ulterior motives. I don’t think you weren’t lying when you promised to not do anything.” I lifted up the duvet slightly as my heart began racing an unbelievable amount. “Let’s sleep together.”

We continued arguing back and forth for a bit before Takkun finally gave in, and we agreed to sleep in the queen bed together. We wouldn’t be sleeping

snuggled up to each other like a couple, of course. Even though we were sharing the same duvet, we were each lying on opposite ends of the bed.

The bed was wide enough for two people to comfortably sleep in, so there wasn't any physical contact. But, even so...my heart continued to beat out of my chest, and it showed no signs of calming down.

"Ugh..." I muttered.

What should I do, what should I do, what should I do? I'm sleeping with... I'm sleeping with Takkun?! Ugh, how did this happen... I mean, I guess I'm the one who invited him to sleep with me. I know it's strange of me to panic when I'm the one who suggested it, but... Urgh...Agh!

I trust Takkun, of course. I trust him, but...don't men sometimes have moments where they can't control themselves?! Don't they have times where they know it's wrong, but they can't control their bodies?! From his perspective, he's sleeping in the same bed as the woman he loves... Wouldn't a man be unable to help himself in a situation like this?!

On top of that, it was completely my idea. If for some reason he lost control of his lower body... I don't think I'd have a right to complain. And come to think of it, we're both perilously lacking any underwear. Inviting him to sleep with me when we're dressed like this... If there were some kind of mix-up, surely I wouldn't be able to claim I was the victim in the situation. If something were to happen...I don't think I could pass blame.

Wait, no... it's not like I want *him to do something to me! I just, um... I'm just conflicted whether I have a right to reject him if he does lose control of his lower body. It would be another story if I were a teenager, but I'm not sure a woman in her thirties like me inviting someone to bed could get away with saying, "That's not what I intended."*

Lower body. Takkun's lower body... Aaagh! This is bad! I totally just remembered! I clearly remember the other day when I went to go check on him! His manhood was standing tall, aggressively reaching toward the ceiling, pushing against the fabric of his pajamas. Ugh... No, this is bad, I shouldn't be thinking about something like this... Ack, the image won't leave my mind! I thought about it once and now it won't go away!

“Miss Ayako...?” Takkun called out from behind.

“Y-Yeas?!” With my mind occupied by all the raunchy imagery, my voice came out strange.

“A-Are you okay?”

“I’m fine! Nothing’s wrong,” I said, desperately trying to swat away the images flitting about in my head. “Are you okay, Takkun?” I asked, doing my best to speak calmly.

“Nothing’s wrong, it’s just, I haven’t been able to sleep. Have you been awake as well?”

“Yeah... I’ve been completely awake.”

“I thought so.”

“Ha ha, there’s no way we could sleep like this...” I rolled over for just a moment and saw Takkun was still facing away from me. I turned my back toward him once more to match him.

We continued to talk, facing away from each other. We could still hear the rain pouring outside the window. Perhaps it was normal for a love hotel, but there seemed to be some serious soundproofing, so the pitter-patter of the rain was pretty quiet—we could clearly hear each other talk even though we were speaking very softly.

“I just remembered... Wasn’t there a time we slept together before?”

“There was. I think you, Miu, and I all slept together.”

“Yeah. Just like three peas in a pod...”

I didn’t remember every instance in detail, but this had happened on several occasions. Sometimes when Takkun would come over, Miu would get sleepy after lunch, and I’d casually suggest, “Why don’t we all take a nap together then?”

“It was so normal in the past... I didn’t think anything of sleeping with you, Takkun.” But things were different now. Sleeping together like this was now so embarrassing I couldn’t take it. “There’s so many things that have changed like this recently...” I said with a sigh.

Things that I'd been fine with in the past now made me self-conscious. When Takkun was younger, it felt natural to do things like feed him or hold his hand, but now...I couldn't act normally doing them. That was partially because Takkun had grown up, but the biggest reason was because I'd found out how he felt. It was because I'd come to know how he saw me now, and how he'd been looking at me.

"I'm sorry..."

"Huh? Wh-Why are you apologizing all of a sudden?"

"It's my fault, isn't it? It's all because I had to go and tell you how I feel that you have deal with all these annoyances."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Takkun. It's not like I should be getting so self-conscious and worked up about things..."

"Satoya warned me too. He said confessing your feelings is like tossing a bomb on your relationship. I think that's actually true, since...we can't return to how things were."

I didn't have anything to say back to him. *Takkun might be right. We can't return to the way things were. We can't return to just being friendly neighbors. No matter how hard we try, things will never fully return to how they used to be.*

"From the moment I did it, I've had some regret about telling you how I feel. After all, if I hadn't said anything, things could've continued like they were forever..." he admitted quietly. "But..." Suddenly, his voice carried a strong determination. "...right now, I feel more than ever that I made the right choice by telling you."

"Huh?"

"Because I confessed my feelings to you, I was able to meet a Miss Ayako I never knew," he said, sounding genuinely happy. "There's a part of me that feels really bad about all the confusion and trouble I've caused by doing all this, but...there's a part of me that thinks, 'Miss Ayako is so cute when she's not sure what to do.'"

"Wha— That's what you've been thinking?!"

“I’m sorry, I did think that...” Takkun sounded apologetic, but he didn’t deny it.

I-I feel conflicted! Wh-What do you mean it’s cute when I don’t know what to do?! I don’t know if I should be happy or angry.

“Because I confessed to you, I’ve been able to see new sides to you that I’ve never seen before. And more than anything, you’ve started looking my way. You’re thinking of me as a man. That just... It makes me really happy.”

“Takkun...” Ever since Takkun had told me how he felt, our relationship had completely changed. It was completely different—as if a bomb had been dropped on it. But the change wasn’t all bad... “I-I might...be happy...about some things too...” I said with some reflection, but my words came out not sounding too confident. “After you told me how you felt... I thought a lot, and I worried over a lot of things... There were a lot of difficulties too. But I don’t think it would have been better if you hadn’t said anything.”

Takkun was listening intently, so I decided to explain myself more. “I’m pretty oblivious to things, so...I wasn’t able to realize how you felt until you told me. If you hadn’t confessed your feelings to me...things might have ended with me never noticing.” Not only would I not have been able to realize how he felt, but I also would have pushed for him to date my daughter. Looking back on it now, the way I acted was cruel. After all, I was completely oblivious to the feelings of the man who fell for me, and on top of that, I’d tried to cheer on a relationship between him and another woman. “That’s why... I’m really glad you told me how you felt. Thanks to that, I’m able to face your actual true feelings,” I said. “Thank you for having the courage to tell me, Takkun.”

“Miss Ayako...”

“Having said that...I-I’m sorry I haven’t been able to respond... Things are kind of unfinished because of my indecisiveness...”

“No, don’t worry about it. I’ve said it before, but I’m plenty happy with how things are right now. I’m already resolved to wait for your response.”

I didn’t know what to say. *Wow, Takkun really is such a good kid—no, it would be rude of me to call him a good kid. He’s a good man.*

Takkun was very charming as a member of the opposite sex. From our date today, to how he handled the accident with the flat tire, to his attitude since we came into the hotel... It had all been very attractive, and he was so dependable, and most of all, he was as sincere as could be.

More and more, I felt how much he cared about me, which made me more and more attracted to him. I couldn't help but take interest in everything he did, and whether I was with him or not, I was thinking about him all the time.

"I wonder..." I began, as if I were talking into a void, still facing away from him. "I wonder if I were younger, if I would have been able to make a decision more easily." It was a pointless thing to think about—I already knew the answer, but I couldn't help but think about it. "If I were about your age... If I were the same age as you and in college, maybe I wouldn't hesitate like this, and not be so annoying like this, and just more easily..."

If I'd been younger. If I'd been a child. If I...hadn't had Miu. I probably would have dated Takkun then. I wouldn't have had a reason to turn him down. I would've said yes to him asking me out and started dating him, and we might've become a happy couple, the kind anyone would be envious of. But...my current self couldn't do that.

All the obligations of being an adult kept my feet planted firmly on the ground, unable to step forward. I was much too young to be using my age as a reason to hesitate according to Yumemi, but...I still couldn't do it.

I'm not young anymore, Yumemi. I wasn't young. I wasn't at an age where I could date just based on how I felt, and more than anything, I had Miu. I had my dear daughter.

Ugh, just having thought of those "ifs" makes me feel pathetic... I don't even want to imagine what things would be like if I didn't have Miu. It's like I'm treating her like she's in my way... I'm getting irritated with myself.

Will I get more of these kinds of thoughts in the future, perhaps? Maybe the deeper my relationship gets with Takkun, the more Miu will become...

"Hmm... I'm not sure," Takkun said after a short while, cutting into my self-deprecation spiral. "I've never thought about whether you were younger."

“What? You haven’t?”

“I’ve thought about the opposite. Like, if I were older and an adult, maybe I could have been a man that would match you. But I’ve never once thought about how things would be if you were younger. The Miss Ayako I fell in love with is the mother who raised Miu, after all.”

I didn’t know what to say. “I was attracted to the Miss Ayako who took in her sister’s child and raised her with an abundance of love,” Takkun continued. “That’s why if you were younger and we met as students in the same year of college... I don’t think I would’ve fallen for you.” I was still keeping my mouth shut. “Wait, no, but I think you would have been attractive as a college student as well! But, um... I’m not sure what to say...”

As Takkun lay there panicking, I *still* couldn’t say anything—because I was desperately trying to hold back tears.

Right. Of course that’s how he feels. Why was I anxious about something so trivial? The boy who fell for me is none other than Takumi Aterazawa—the boy who’s been by my side more than anyone else, the person who’s supported me more than anyone else for the past ten years.

He’s seen more of me than anyone else. He’s not just professing his love out of nowhere. He knows everything about me, and he accepts all of me—he’s loudly declaring his love for me while knowing exactly who I am.

I felt ashamed I’d spent even a single second wondering whether Miu was standing in my way. Takkun had never thought of her like that at all. He didn’t consider my daughter to be an obstacle or a hurdle—he thought of her as a part of my life. He was accepting all of me at once...

“Heh heh...” After I was able to keep the tears away, a laugh naturally spilled out. “So, I guess that means you’re into mature women after all.”

“What? No, that’s not what I—”

“Hee hee, I’m just kidding,” I said, laughing it off as I slowly turned back around. I was facing Takkun’s wide back on the opposite end of the bed. I wasn’t particularly into backs or anything...but looking at his made my heart race. My face heated up as my mind went blank. “H-Hey, Takkun,” I began as

my heart was beating out of my chest. “Isn’t it a little cold...?”

“What...? A-Are you all right? Maybe you got too cold after all... I’ll call the front desk and have them bring us more blank—”

“N-No, no! I’m not that cold!” I quickly stopped him trying to handle things in a much more earnest way than I had expected. “When I said cold...I just meant a little bit. I think... I-It might be because of the gap. Because there’s a gap between us, whenever the duvet moves, cold air gets in, s-so...” I wasn’t sure where any of this was coming from. “Can I go over there?”

“What...?”

“I-It’s cold, so I don’t really have a choice. If we sleep close together, I think we’ll both be able to sleep better. It’s really just that., I don’t have any other intentions, so...”

“I...d-don’t mind...”

“R-Really...? Well then...” I rustled under the covers, heading towards him. My heart felt like it was going to burst out of my chest, but still, I slowly made my way over...

Even though I said we should sleep close together, I wasn’t snuggling up against him—I just got close enough for our hands and feet to brush up against each other. Just that amount of contact made the warmth of his body feel all too real, and it made me feel incredibly hot.



“It really is warm when we’re close together...” Takkun said.

“Yeah... Oh, but you can’t look this way, Takkun. You have to keep facing that way.”

“Why...?”

“Because I said so.” After all, there was no way I could show him the face I was making right now. I was so ecstatic that it was embarrassing.

I gently placed my hand on his back—his large, wide, and warm back. It was a strange feeling. Even though my heart was racing, I felt very calm. The relaxing warmth wrapped around my body and heart. Before I knew it, I had fallen asleep, still filled with happiness.

Epilogue

♥

It was the next morning.

“You look sleepy, Takkun... Were you not able to sleep much?”

“No... I was awake most of the night.”

“I see. I guess it’s hard to sleep somewhere you’re not used to.”

“Well...it was mostly your fault.”

“Huh...?”

“You’re a really fussy sleeper.”

“Y-You’re kidding! Did I kick you?!”

“No, you didn’t kick me, but... Maybe it’s because you got hot or something, but you kicked the covers off.”

“What...?”

“Once you were out of the covers, since you only had the robe on, bits and pieces were on the verge of slipping out all over the place...”

“What? Huh?”

“I basically spent the entire night making sure you kept the covers on...”

“I can’t believe that happened... H-Hold on! Bits and pieces...? Wh-What was I doing?! What kind of shameful sight did I show you?!”

“I-It’s okay. I somehow managed to stay rational and didn’t take any pictures!”

“I don’t think that counts as okay?!”

As we had our silly banter, we paid for our stay at the machine by the door, as was characteristic of love hotels, before leaving our room. Just to be extra cautious, we left the hotel separately before we met up to ride the bus together.

The rain had let up long ago. Once we got home, just as he had promised, Takkun borrowed his mother's car and drove me back to the mechanic garage. I got my car, which now had fresh new tires, and got home—only then did it feel like things were over. It was a first date full of turbulent developments, and somehow, it came to an end. Or at least it should have...

I was making dinner for Miu and I later that night.

"Heh heh..."

"Hey, mom...can you not laugh to yourself? It's creepy," Miu exasperatedly complained from the living room couch.

"Huh... W-Was I laughing?"

"You were. You've been like that ever since you got home... Was your date with Taku that fun?"

"Wha— N-No... What are you talking about? I was just laughing because I remembered something funny, and it has nothing to do with Takkun..." I quickly tried to come up with an excuse, but it was a total lie. The truth was, I had been thinking about Takkun nonstop.

I kept remembering our date from yesterday, or rather, our date from until this morning, and thinking about it filled with happiness each time. It felt like I'd entered a dream I still hadn't woken up from yet...and I guess those elated feelings of mine were written all over my face.

Oh, I see. Yeah, that would be creepy. I'm just standing here smiling to myself...

"Well, I guess you did pull off coming home the next morning on your first date, so you can't help but be ecstatic."

"I-I'm not ecstatic..."

"I better ask now... If I get a little brother or sister, can I name them?"

"You're getting ahead of yourself! I've told you a million times, but we haven't done that kind of thing yet!"

"Not yet, huh?"

“Huh?! N-No, you’ve got it wrong. That was just a figure of speech! R-Regardless, nothing happened!” I exclaimed, desperately pleading innocent.

Miu snickered. “But it’s not like you didn’t make any progress, right? You must have at least made plans for a second date.”

“Well, we did...”

“Huh, interesting. Where are you going next?”

“I don’t know yet... I think Takkun will probably come up with something again.”

“Really? I see. I think *you* should think of something next.”

“Wh-Why? Isn’t that weird?”

“What’s weird about it?”

“I mean...*he’s* the one who likes me.”

As soon as I said it, I stopped in my tracks. *Wait. Something’s not right. I feel like I might have just said something incredibly arrogant.*

I mean, it’s not like I’m wrong? And it’s not like I could invite him out. If I did that, I would basically be saying that I *like* him*. It would be like I’m saying yes to him asking to date me. And more than anything, me inviting him out would be way too embarrassing for me to do.*

So, yeah, it’s normal for him to be the one to invite me... Wait, is it normal? Is it okay for me to think it’s normal?

Yumemi’s words popped into the back of my mind.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about. It’s his job to worry. You just have to stand tall and wait for his lead.”

“You are always the one who holds the power when it comes to this romance.”

“*Depending on your perspective, this could be the most incredibly fun situation for you to be in. If you just sit there and let things happen, he’ll keep on flirting with you. Whether you actually date him or not is up to you.”*

“You’ve basically got the juvenile love of a young man in the palm of your hand, and it’s yours to toy with. In a sense, you’ve found yourself in a situation

that many women dream about."

I'd firmly rejected those words of hers—I couldn't do something so insincere, and I wanted to face his feelings head on without running away—or at least, that was my intent.

Where did that leave how I was acting now? I was all happy and giddy because of how fun our date had been, and I had high hopes about how he would make his next move, wondering where he would take me on our next date. At the end of the day, was I acting any differently from the women Yumemi mentioned who toy with the juvenile love of young men?

This isn't right. How did this happen? I was just trying to accept all of his feelings.

"Huh, I see." A deeply unimpressed voice rang in my ears as I was lost deep in thought. "It's kind of like... I guess the date failed after all," Miu said, as if she were disappointed, as if she had given up.

It failed? What failed? Our date was an unbelievable success, wasn't it?

"Oh well. I'm over it. I'm done now—I'm giving up," Miu muttered to herself apathetically, ignoring my confused self. She swiftly got up from the couch and made her way toward me. With quiet steps, she slowly came closer. "Hey, mom. I've decided that I'm going to stop rooting for you two." She was looking straight into my eyes, her gaze penetrating. "I'm going to date Taku."

At first, I had no idea what she had said. My brain didn't register her words. But, gradually, my mind began to comprehend it, as her proclamation slowly sunk in. I could feel her peering into the depths of my heart with her fierce glare—she wasn't going to allow me to back away.

"You've been dragging your feet for too long. That must mean Taku's pure love was too much for an old lady like you to handle, right? Well then, you don't have to force yourself anymore. If you don't want him, I'll have him. I'll make Taku happy."

"Wh-What...? What are you talking about...?" I was struggling to get my words out.

Step by step, Miu came ever closer. I could see the indomitable determination

in her eyes. Her smile was intense—downright incendiary. This was the first time in the ten years we'd been together that I'd seen Miu make a face like this. It was a side of my daughter I'd never known.

"Come to think of it, you always were saying that Taku and I should date. Your dream was for Taku and me to get married, right?" I fell silent. "Well, good for you, mom! Your dream will come true!" She smiled brightly, like she was excited to share this moment with me.

With one last stride, Miu brought us face to face. "Can I count on you, mom?" She was challenging me. Testing me. Evaluating me. Pulling out my heart to have a look inside. "You'll root for me, right?"

Upon receiving this news—no, this declaration of war—from my daughter, I...

I...

Afterword

When I was a student in my teens, people in their twenties seemed very much like adults to me—people in their thirties, then, were basically as adult as you could possibly be. They seemed like they knew everything about the world and society and were quietly living their lives with no worry or distress.

If I were to describe things in video game terms, people in their thirties seemed like they had already defeated the final boss and all the secret bosses, and all they had left to do in the game was hit max level.

However, once I myself started pushing thirty...I felt like my impression was totally off the mark. Life was a continuous stream of worry and failure, and I wasn't coasting through life like I thought I would be. I wasn't doing anything but grinding levels, unable to take down the final boss or any of the hidden content. If anything, there were moments that made me think, "Did my level *decrease*?"

Just hitting thirty made me no closer to clearing the game of life. But, on the flipside, if I were to look at things in an extremely positive way, you could say I learned that life is full of things worth living for no matter how old you get. "Youth is not a time of life; it is a state of mind": you can enjoy your youth no matter how old you get just by changing the way you feel. Well, be that as it may...your feelings can be one of the most difficult things to control, which makes it hard for life to go how you want.

With all that said, I'm Kota Nozomi. This is the second volume of the pure-love romantic-comedy with the mom in her thirties. The second volume was pretty much just the couple flirting after the mom, who was hesitant in volume one, managed to move forward just a bit. The epilogue leaves things on an unsettling note, but I didn't lie about the direction of the series I mentioned in my afterword in the first volume. This is a one-on-one romantic-comedy without a harem. What kind of moves will the Katsuragi mother-daughter duo make from here on out...? I hope you'll stick with me into volume three.

I have a sudden announcement to make. *"You Like Me, Not My Daughter?!"* is

already set for a comic adaptation! It will be serialized on the manga app Manga Park, created by Hakusensha, the publisher famous for publications such as the magazine *Young Animal*. I was truly shocked... I received the offer for the manga on the release day of the first volume. I was so grateful. Any further news will be shared by Dengeki Bunko or on my Twitter as needed.

And now for my acknowledgements:

To my editor, Miyazaki, thank you very much for your work on this volume again. I thought I wouldn't make it in time for the April issue, but after you repeatedly demanded—I mean, cheered me on a ton, I somehow made it in time.

To Giuniu, thank you for your wonderful illustrations once again. They're all incredible, but the cover is especially amazing. It's overflowing with a certain eroti—I mean, charm that can't be put into words.

And to you, the reader who picked up this book, I give my greatest thanks. I hope to see you all again in volume 3.

Kota Nozomi