



in

Love

✿ Introduction ✿

She turned to meet my eyes, and tears streamed down her cheeks, leaving me stunned and speechless, defeated by her tears.

Every time Arpo was upset, I couldn't help but try to make up with her. But these were tears I didn't dare to touch.

Her face looked serious, and the sunlight shining on her face made her tears sparkle even more, leaving me just staring.

"I've made my decision... Senior, I think..."

"I'm done loving you."

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❖ Chapter 01 ❖

"Bow, the neighbor girl is here to see you."

I was in the middle of getting dressed for my first day at work after graduating when my mom barged into my room without knocking. Hearing the words "*neighbor girl*," I sighed in exasperation.

"What does that troublemaker want now?"

"What else could that be unless she's here to see the apple of her eye,"

Mom giggled. This happened every time "she" came to see me. I finished getting ready, walked downstairs, and headed straight for the person waiting outside. She had her back turned to me, so I cleared my throat with my usual cold demeanor.

"You're here early."

As soon as she heard my voice, she turned around, her shoulder-length curly hair bouncing. She flashed a bright smile like a morning sun. That sweet face always looked like this when she came to see me, and it somewhat annoyed me.

"I brought you a lunchbox. Senior."

"**Senior**" was the term she used to address me instead of my nickname. It referred to the fact that I'd always been her senior in elementary, junior high, and high school, and even in university, though we were in different years. Now, she was in her third year at university, much more grown-up than before. But what hadn't changed was her relentless pestering. Others found her adorable, especially my mom, but to me, she was the epitome of annoyance, like someone incoherent.

"Why did you bring this?"

"For your first day at work! It's a lunchbox filled with my love."

She handed it to me with her long arms. I took it, opened it, and saw artfully arranged food-sausages, vegetables, fruits, and a heart-shaped fried egg on top. I closed the lid immediately.

"I won't eat"

"Eat them, please,"

She pouted cutely, thinking it made her look even more adorable I frowned, showing no reaction, and sighed.

"Why do you keep doing this? Aren't you tired of bothering me every day? I've told you since elementary, high school, and university that I'll never like you. Do I have to keep saying it for the rest of my life?"

I stood firm, but she kept smiling brightly, showing no sign of being hurt by my words.

"It's okay because, for the rest of my life, I'll only love you. Senior. And today, I have something to tell you."

Here she goes again....

"...."

She took a deep breath, exhaled confidently, and said what she always did.

"Senior, I love you!"

That sentence made me roll my eyes. I'd heard it so many times that it had lost all meaning I just laughed dryly.

"People say that those who declare their love easily don't really mean it."

"Who says that?"

"Someone"

"Then it's not credible because I really love you, Senior"

She smiled brightly before quickly changing the subject.

"Let's go. I'll take you"

"Take me? How?"

"Ta-da!!"

She proudly pointed to a bicycle with a woven basket in front I looked at the vehicle that was supposed to take me to work and smiled tiredly before shaking my head.

"Are you nuts? When will I get to work if I ride a bike?"

"I'm not taking you to work, just to the bus stop. From now on, I'll take you to the bus stop every day and pick you up if my class doesn't finish late."

"Well no Walking is easier It's just at the entrance of the alley."

"How is walking easier? Riding a bike is faster and easier You just have to ride in the back seat while I cycle. It's so convenient. Let's go, or you'll be late. I woke up early to make this food and wait for you to take you to work on your first day Don't make me sad."

"You're sad, and so?"

"I'll cry."

"Then cry"

"You don't want to see me cry, Senior, because it'll annoy you."

"Even if you don't cry, you still annoy me."

"So, to cut down on some annoyance, you have to come with me."

I couldn't argue with her. So, I followed her, carrying my bag and lunchbox, and sat on the back of her bike, letting her cycle. Mom came out to the front of the house, smiling and waving happily as if seeing me ride with the neighbor girl made her day.

So annoying.

As I sat on the bike, watching the little girl pedal, I saw her hair tied in the back and couldn't help but feel a bit fond of her. She'd woken up early to make me a lunchbox and wait for me to take me to the bus stop at seven in the morning, hoping to impress me.

'**Arpo**', the girl who insisted I ride on the back of her bike, was the neighbor I'd known since she was little. I was about three years older than her. The first time I met her was when her family moved in next door over ten years ago. Her mom introduced her, hoping I'd be her playmate.

'My name is Arpo.'

She was about eight years old then, with big brown eyes, a sweet face, and slightly curly short hair I still remember it well. At first I thought she was cute, but as time went on, she became annoying, always asking me to play. Maybe it was because I was getting older and starting junior high school, so I didn't want to play with someone younger. But she tried so hard to show up every day so I wouldn't forget she existed.

'I love you, Senior.'

That was her declaration of love at nine years old. When I first heard it, I didn't think much of it. But by middle school, she'd gotten into the same school and greeted me. I didn't remember when she stopped calling me "Sister" and started calling me "Senior."

'I want to be close to you, Senior, but I don't want you to see me as a little sister because I love you like a girlfriend'.

She was fourteen when she openly declared this. I was a senior in high school then. I didn't know how to feel about it, but I started avoiding her.

Yet, she kept pestering me, sending me dolls and flowers every Valentine's Day, coming to my house every evening to declare her love once a day until it became a habit.

'I'll make you get used to it. One day, if I don't say I love you, you'll feel like something's missing.'

Years had passed, and she'd declared her love for me over a thousand times. To me, it'd lost all meaning. She said it whenever she wanted, in front of everyone, showing how much she liked me. Instead of finding it strange or repulsive, the adults found it endearing and normal.

Normal what! A girl declaring her love for another girl should make people feel uneasy!

"We've arrived at the bus stop safely. How was it, Senior? Was my riding smooth and comfortable?"

I got off the bike slowly, not offering any praise, just saying,

"Thanks"

"I'll come to pick you up in the evening"

"No need "

"See you!"

Ding ding.

The sound of the bicycle bell faded as she rode away, waving with her back turned. I sighed and shook my head at her stubbornness, then boarded the bus to work. Today was my first day, and I was a new employee on probation. The work environment was like school, everyone saw each other so often that it became mundane. When a new person joined, it was exciting, and everyone came to introduce themselves.

My current tasks were simple, mostly photocopying and gathering information to send to my department head for review. These three months

were crucial. If I performed well, I'd have a secure job here.

At lunchtime, everyone started heading out to eat. They all had their own groups. Aew, who sat next to me, invited me to join her group, which I saw as a good start. So, I joined them, but I stood out because I brought my own lunch. I only ordered a drink at the restaurant. I looked at the small lunchbox, feeling embarrassed in front of my coworkers, not wanting them to see the heart-shaped fried egg. But I had to open it eventually.

"Wow, a lunchbox! It looks like something out of a Japanese cartoon. So cute."

One of the seniors at the table pointed at the heart-shaped egg.

"Did your lover make it?"

"No, it's not like that."

"Then it must be your mom."

"No, not her either."

"Did you make it yourself?"

"Well something like that."

I replied evasively I needed to tell her to stop making these because I was tired of answering questions.

"Then eat up. You've been staring at it for a while, Aew, who sat next to me, said. I looked at the lunchbox with slight annoyance and was about to close it, but Aew touched my hand.

"Aren't you going to eat?"

"It doesn't look very appetizing."

"If it's not good, I'll eat it."

As soon as she reached for it with her fork, I grabbed her wrist and smiled sweetly.

"No"

"Hmm?"

"It's made in just the right amount for one person. I won't be full if I share."

"You said you wouldn't eat?"

"I changed my mind It's mine."

In the end, I ate the lunchbox filled with so much love it was almost sickening. I didn't want anyone else to taste such poorly made food. It was the most annoying thing. That troublemaker deserved to be insulted for meddling with a lunchbox I didn't ask for.

"Next time, don't bother making it."

When she came to pick me up on the same old bicycle, I handed back the empty lunchbox Arpo kept her promise to wait for me when I got home. Today, I arrived at the bus stop about half an hour late, even though I'd planned the timing perfectly. But the traffic was so bad that it made me late.

The cute girl took the lunchbox, shook it, and looked excited and happy, her eyes wide open and her smile bright as the sun.

"You ate them all? I'm so happy! I thought you wouldn't finish it."

"I didn't. I threw it away"

"Why? I woke up at 4.30 AM to make it for you, and you just threw it away? That's not very considerate."

"It wasn't good"

She squinted at me and smiled

"You said you didn't eat it."

"...."

This girl is over-smart.

I lifted my chin and shrugged slightly,

"I tried it. It wasn't good, so I gave it to the stray dogs around the office. At least they could eat it"

"If dogs can, humans can too. I don't care. I'll make it again, and it'll be better next time."

"I said you don't have to You're so meddlesome. It's annoying, you know? You should just sleep in and take it easy."

"Making food for you makes me happiest. Come on, hop on Let's go home."

"Such an annoying girl."

I said it, but I still got on the back of her bike. All the way, she kept ringing the bell, making me sigh in annoyance.

"Can you stop ringing that bell?"

"It's a nice sound Okay, I won't ring it. So, how was work today?"

"Nothing special."

"Did you get along with your coworkers?"

"Butt in."

"Did anyone hit on you?"

"No."

"Good, because I won't stand for it. You're mine."

"Since when did I become yours?"

"Since you were born. We're soulmates, and no one can separate us."

"Whatevs,"

I muttered, rolling my eyes and looking at her curly hair.

"I think you have too much free time. Arpo."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you have any research or homework at university? Why do you spend all day hanging around me? Maybe if you had a boyfriend, you'd stop daydreaming like this."

"Why would I need a boyfriend? I already have you. And you... you don't have a boyfriend either because deep down, you love me too, right?"

I pouted and rolled my eyes. Arpo giggled to herself before suddenly exclaiming, making me jump.

"What happened?"

"Nothing. I just noticed that guy from the next neighborhood changed "

"Who?"

"The one who always skateboards. Today, he's wearing glasses. He went from cool to nerdy. The glasses suit him, though."

"Looks like you found someone you like."

I teased, watching her praise the guy. She even remembered he lived in the next neighborhood. As for me, I didn't know anyone except her because I didn't associate with anyone. She knew everyone.

"I don't like him. I only have eyes for you. But..."

"But what?"

"I tend to like people who wear glasses."

"Good thing I don't need glasses."

"I'd love you no matter what. We're home."

She gently braked the bike and rang the bell cheerfully.

"I feel like an ice cream truck uncle Woohoo!"

This cheerful girl annoyed me again with her imaginative career aspirations. Sometimes, she wanted to be a bus conductor to hold the coin box. Other times, she wanted to be a gas station attendant because she liked the smell of gasoline. Now she wanted to be an ice cream truck uncle.

Amazing

"See you tomorrow. I'll make you another lunchbox, and it'll be better than today."

"I said no."

"See you Woohoo!"

She rode into her house and waved goodbye before shooin me into mine. I walked in because if I didn't, she wouldn't go inside either. As soon as I entered, my mom greeted me excitedly, wanting to ask about my day, just like the small girl had earlier. But I was too tired to repeat myself, so I quickly excused myself to my room to rest.

"Why are you in such a hurry? You didn't even say anything."

"I have a slight eye strain."

I didn't know why, but suddenly I had a headache. It was all because of that annoying girl who made my body show signs of fatigue. How could someone with perfect vision suddenly get a headache?

It made no sense.

"Maybe you've been staring at the computer too much. Want to try wearing glasses?"

I paused and turned to ask my mom again for confirmation.

"Do you think I need glasses?"

"If your eyes hurt, it might be from overuse. If it's not nearsightedness or farsightedness, it could be the light. There are glasses that block UV rays or whatever they call it. I saw it in an ad."

Mom seemed knowledgeable, even if she wasn't sure what it was exactly...

"And if I wear them, will I look good?"

"You're already beautiful. You can wear anything."

I smiled slightly and spoke to my mom one more sentence before heading upstairs to my room.

"If you think it's good, I'll try to find some glasses to wear."

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♣ Chapter 02 ♣

I was someone who took care of my body regularly. Not because I wanted to be skinny but because I wanted to be healthy and free from diseases. However, I wasn't a gym rat who needed to weight train every day, knowing every move or which part was the bicep or tricep.

So, the easiest exercise for me was brisk walking and running around the neighborhood. The best time was before work, so I chose to burn calories from 5.30 to 6:00 in the morning. But just when I thought I'd picked a good time and was waking up early, someone else was up even earlier.

"Senior, let's go running."

Arpo, the nosy girl, was waiting for me in front of my house at 5:30, making me sigh. When I wasn't working, I'd run in the evening, and this small person would run with me. Even after changing the time, I still ran into her.

Unbelievable.

"Why are you up at this hour?"

"They say exercising in the morning reduces stress."

"And how did you know I run at this time?"

"Mom told me."

Yesterday. I did meet Arpo's mom. She usually woke up early to give alms to the monks. We exchanged a few words yesterday, but I didn't think she'd tell her daughter about it.

"How long are you going to follow me?"

"For life. Come on, there's no harm. More people, less lonely, especially when it's still dark. It's dangerous."

"Running in the neighborhood, what's dangerous? There's a security guard cycling around all the time."

"The security guard still isn't your dad, right?"

"And who you are, my mom?"

"Just being someone in your heart is fine."

"Very hilarious."

My 'hilarious' didn't mean it was actually hilarious. It was sarcasm, since she wanted to run so much, I didn't mind. I let her jog alongside me. But my jog and Arpo's jog were different because my legs were longer, making her have to speed up and pant.

"Slower, Senior Your legs are too long."

"I always run like this. You always complain. Aren't you used to it yet?"

"I am, but I want you to be considerate, I want to run alongside you."

"Exercising isn't about romance or shooting a music video where we have to be side by side."

"Harsh."

While we were running, a familiar face joined us. **'Elle'**, Arpo's only close female friend, came to run with us. I remembered she lived in this neighborhood, too. but I never knew she regularly exercised because I'd never seen her before.

"I thought you couldn't make it."

"I thought you wouldn't wake up in time."

"When you said more people, you meant more than two, huh?"

I recalled when she said 'more people' rather than using the proverb

'Two heads are better than one'.

She even planned with her friend beforehand.

"Annoying."

"Don't listen to her. She likes to say things like that, but she's actually happy to have company."

Arpo defended me and jogged with her best friend. I glanced at them, slightly annoyed. My privacy seemed to be gone with this busybody.

"Since you have a friend now, you two run together."

I said and ran ahead. but the two girls didn't give up on running as a group. They caught up with me eventually. The sky started turning blue as the sun was about to rise. I checked my watch. It was 5:45 AM.

"Let's take a break."

Arpo grabbed my shirt and pulled, pleading. I jogged in place, not having cooled down yet, and frowned.

"If you want to go ahead Why should I wait?"

"Because I came to run with you. We've run a lap around the neighborhood. Wait a bit for me, I need to use the bathroom. Elle stay with Senior If she runs off. hold her back. She's stubborn."

"Okay."

When the little girl went inside, I glanced at the guest who joined our morning run. Elle's eyes, looking at Arpo, were filled with deep meaning

She watched until Arpo disappeared and kept looking I was jogging in place, unable to resist speaking like an oracle.

"Do you think the name Arpo is strange?"

"Yes, but not particularly."

"Really? I've wanted to ask her what it means for a long time but never did Who named her?"

"Her grandpa."

I answered knowingly. There was nothing I didn't know about that girl. Arpo was a distorted version of Opal. Her real nickname was Opal, but her grandpa never pronounced it right, so it became Arpo. The family called her Arpo since then.

Of course, I didn't explain this and changed the subject instead.

"If you like her so much, just ask her out."

"What?"

Her surprised tone and expression made me smirk I shrugged and nodded toward Arpo's house.

"Arpo. You're staring so hard your eyes might fall out. You should take her. I'm tired of her."

I was about to run off but was stopped by an annoying question, making me pause when Elle spoke.

"Can I"

"...."

"If I really ask Arpo out?"

"Why not? Arpo isn't mine. Bye"

"But Arpo told you to wait"

"She's not my mom. If you want to wait, go on."

I ran off without caring anymore. But Arpo's friend jogged alongside me as if she'd been instructed by her best friend and had to keep that promise

"I'll go with you. Arpo told me to. She doesn't want you running alone. If she comes out and sees only me, she'll be upset"

"You're very obedient. Then keep up. If Arpo sees me running alone, she might get mad."

Then. I used my advantage of long legs to speed up until my heart pumped hard. Seeing me start to sprint, Elle quickly ran beside me and overtook me as if she intended to race. Seeing that, my competitive spirit flared up. I sped up. Now, it wasn't just exercising but a triathlon. From jogging, it turned into a 4x100 relay. Neighbors exercising stopped to watch us run like a buffalo race. I'd never lose, no matter what, including running.

In less than five minutes, we finished a lap and were back in front of Arpo's house. Arpo smiled at us, confused as to why we didn't wait and why we ran so fast.

I won't lose

I've never lost, no matter what.

And this annoying Elle wouldn't stop running. She kept up and overtook me at the curve I sped up again, barely ahead of her. Our second lap seemed like a final showdown, with Arpo's house as the finish line. When we reached Arpo's house again. Elle stopped and collapsed. I, the first to cross the finish line kept jogging in place feeling like I was about to die.

Damn.....This kid runs fast It's like she thinks winning will get her Arpo's heart.

"I can't.... I...blargh."

Elle vomited to the side Arpo quickly ran to her friend, rubbing her back worriedly The sun was up now, the sky bright, celebrating my victory.

"Ugh "

I felt nauseous too, but when Arpo looked at me. I swallowed it all and stood tall, raising an eyebrow.

"What? Already lost? I thought you'd be tougher."

I taunted my rival. Elle glared at me, her face still pale I looked at her and smirked, sweat dripping down to my chin. My body was burning calories like crazy.

"Are you running for a medal or something?"

Elle asked, trying to speak while catching her breath, making it hard to understand. I spread my arms as if to say.

'This is easy peasy. It's too embarrassing to fall, don't you think?'

"This is just basic running. You think it's for a medal?"

Actually Senior....My rival looked between me and Arpo but didn't say it. I stared at her, waiting, then interrupted.

"Let's just say you lost today. You're not my competition."

"...."

"In anything."

I said meaningfully and walked casually into the house, trying to keep my composure. But once inside, my legs gave out, and I leaned against the wall breathing heavily.

That almost killed me. Just a bit more, and I would've had a heart attack. Damn.... girls these days are so strong. Or maybe I'm just too old. But whatever, I still won. Let them know who they're competing with.

"Hahaha.... haha.... huff huff."

I laughed to myself before feeling a hand on my shoulder from behind
When I turned around, I saw it was Arpo, looking at me with wide eyes, not sure when she'd followed me in.

"Are you fainting? Want an inhaler?"

"I'm not fainting."

"But you collapsed right in front of me and started laughing weirdly."

She looked at me with concern.

"Are you okay. Senior?"

"I'm not crazy. They say if you laugh, you can trick your body into thinking you're happy."

"What kind of theory is that? And why were you running so intensely just now? It looked like a 4x100 relay. You didn't even wait for me."

"If I waited for you. I wouldn't be running. Go home now. I'm going to shower and get ready for work."

I slowly got up, using the wall for support, feeling weaker than ever before.

"Blargh..."

"Are you going to throw up?"

"No."

I swallowed it back down.

"Just clearing my throat."

"If you're tired, just say so. What's the point of competing?"

Arpo took the towel hanging around her neck and wiped my sweat with concern.

I looked into her eyes, squinting and tilting my head as I asked,

"You're quite charming, you know."

"Huh?"

"Don't you know anything?"

I looked out the window, even though I couldn't see anyone, I wanted to tell her with my eyes who I meant.

"Someone has a crush on you"

"A crush? What?"

"Are you dumb or just pretending?"

"I don't understand anything you're saying. First, you told me that I'm charming, then you said I'm pretending to be dumb. Give me some context, and I'll tell you if I know or not."

"Elle, your friend, has a crush on you. Can't you see?"

I shut my mouth quickly, biting my lip for blurting that out.

Damn it, it's not even my business. Why did I say that?

"Oh, Senior... we've been friends since elementary school. How could she like me? Besides, I'm a girl, and so is she."

"You tell me you love me every day."

"True... but Elle isn't like me. Don't worry."

"Why should I be worried?"

"Maybe you're jealous,"

She smiled mischievously. I bared my teeth at her and stood up abruptly, but I staggered and leaned into Arpo, who caught me as if she intended to prevent me from falling. Once my body had rested, I let myself lean into her, not wanting to move because I was so tired.

"That's nonsense. I'd never be jealous of you. You're the one who likes me, remember?"

"I do. I pester you every day, telling you I love you every day, just in case I get lucky... It's nice."

"What?"

"You're hugging me and not letting go."

Realizing it, I pulled away from her and stood up straight, puffing out my chest to show strength and confidence.

"I'm not hugging you. I just... leaned on you for a moment. Go home now, shoo shoo."

"You're shooing me away like a dog. Fine, I'll go... but can you walk? Running that hard might make you sick."

"I'll never get sick."

"I know you're tough as a grizzly bear, but you don't have to push yourself... Want me to help you up to your room?"

"You're so annoying. Go home already. Go take care of your dear friend."

"Elle already left. I'm here to take care of my love."

"Oh, so if she hadn't left, you wouldn't be here?"

I said sarcastically.

"Still jealous."

"Go away, shoo shoo."

I pushed her towards the door. She laughed cheerfully, pleased that she'd successfully teased me, as I pushed her out to the front door. Before leaving, she turned back and winked.

"Fine, I'll go. But before I do..."

Here we go again.

"I love you, Senior."

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✿ Chapter 03 ✿

My work life continued as usual, but what changed was my colleagues. Everyone started forming cliques and gossiping about how arrogant I was because I didn't let anyone touch my lunchbox at that time. They used to invite me to lunch, but not anymore.

So, I ended up eating alone, which wasn't too bad because I was too lazy to talk to people. I didn't know, maybe others would feel pressured without friends to talk to, being boycotted. But for me, having no one to talk to was the most peaceful thing. I didn't have to join in gossiping about others, even if I became the subject of gossip myself.

And because Arpo diligently made me a lunchbox every day, I didn't go to the canteen or anywhere else. I chose to eat at my desk, listening to music while everyone was away. While enjoying surfing the net, listening to music, and eating, I heard a cough from behind.

"I was worried you'd be sad eating alone, but you seem happier."

"Mr.Mekha."

I turned off the music and pulled out my earbuds. His voice, cutting through the music, made me sit up straight. Mr. Mekha owned the company I work for. He was mature, clean-cut, and handsome, and he often greeted me because I was the youngest in the company.

"Why are you eating alone?"

"I have a lunchbox, so I didn't go eat with my colleagues."

"You could take your lunchbox and eat with them."

"They'd be embarrassed if I brought a lunchbox to a restaurant. I don't want to be rude to the restaurant owner, sitting at their place without ordering."

"That's reasonable. I thought you didn't get along with your colleagues."

Even though I didn't say it out loud, I could tell he was particularly interested in me. From the way he frequently checked on me, this was another reason my colleagues didn't like me. I overheard gossip in the restroom saying,

"Yada is a dick rider."

Oh right... Yada is my real name.

"Yes"

I didn't say much and wished he'd leave because I wasn't comfortable eating my lunchbox. But he still stood nearby, peering at my lunchbox with interest.

"The heart-shaped fried egg is lovely. Did your boyfriend make it?"

"Yes,"

I replied briefly, wanting to end the conversation and avoid unnecessary complications at work.

"Your boyfriend is good at cooking. Does he make it for you every morning?"

"Yes."

"You probably want to eat now. I won't bother you."

With that, he walked out of the office to have his lunch. I sighed in relief as he left.

Why are people so nosy these days? Whether it's my boyfriend or someone else, why do they need to know?

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But even though I tried not to get involved with anyone, others still bothered me. In the evening, while waiting for the bus to go home, a fancy European car pulled up where I was standing. The window rolled down, and someone waved me over.

Mekha...

"Get in. I'll give you a ride."

"It's fine."

"Come on, don't leave me hanging. Standing in a crowded bus might get you infected with Coronavirus,"

He insisted. The bus I was waiting for hadn't arrived, and other buses couldn't pull in because his car was blocking the way, honking.

"Hurry up. If you don't get in, I won't leave."

I looked around. People at the bus stop were starting to get annoyed, all eyes on me. I licked my lips, deciding what to do.

Why does this guy have to be so annoying? I've shown that I have a boyfriend, with the lunchbox and all, to indicate we're living together. Yet, he still won't give up.

Finally, seeing the bus loudly honking because it couldn't pull in, I reluctantly got into his car. Mekha smiled triumphantly and drove off, asking where to drop me off.

"Ratchathewi."

"That's a broad area."

"Just drive, I'll direct you."

"Okay... you can call me Mek."

"Mekha is better. I don't want to be inappropriate with my boss."

"After work, you can."

He tried hard to get close to me. No matter how distant my words were, he didn't give up, chatting about various topics. As I said, I'm too tired to talk. Whatever he said, I just listened, smiled faintly, and responded with a simple "Yes."

"Actually, our homes are on the same route. We could go home together every day."

"That wouldn't be good."

"Why not?"

"People at the company already look at me negatively. Being disrespectful to the boss."

"Is that why you don't eat with anyone? Because everyone is detesting you?"

"Yes,"

I answered honestly to cut the conversation short and let him know he was part of the reason I had no colleagues. He tried to get too close to me.

"That's not good. It's like I'm blocking you from making friends."

"...."

"How about this, from now on, you can bring your lunchbox to my office. I'll eat with you."

"What?"

I gasped, not expecting this outcome.

"No need. It'll only make things worse. This is already hard enough."

"It's okay. Let people gossip. We're innocent."

"Innocent,"

I muttered, almost not believing what he said. The handsome man looked at me, raising an eyebrow as if he didn't hear what I said. But I diverted his attention by giving directions until we reached the bus stop near my home.

"There, that stop is my house."

"Okay."

Mekha parked at the bus stop and seemed about to open the door for me. I raised my hand to stop him, feeling embarrassed if he acted like a gentleman at such a crowded bus stop.

"No need, I can get out myself. Thank you for your kindness."

"Don't mention it. I can do this much for you."

I got out of the car and watched him drive away until he was out of sight. Once I was sure he was gone, I hopped on the next bus that would pass by my house and continued to my destination. Of course, when the second most annoying person left, the number one popped up with a bicycle and a ringing bell.

"Senior, woohoo, I'm here!"

Why is my life so annoying? Get rid of one, and another shows up.

After getting off the bus, the adorable girl waved and smiled brightly as the sun called me over. It's been a week since she started picking me up and dropping me off without missing a day. I squinted at her and handed back the lunchbox, slightly annoyed, repeating the same line as if rehearsed.

"Don't make me a lunchbox anymore."

"I can't do that. It's become a daily routine."

I glanced at her fingers, covered with a few bandages, guessing they were from cooking for me. It's been like this since the first day, and today, it seemed there were more.

"Do you think I feel good eating food while thinking about your fingers getting cut?"

"You care about me,"

She smiled shyly.

"No."

"If you don't care, why ask about my fingers?"

"Just thinking about blood dripping into the sausages in the lunchbox makes me feel like a vampire. And that sun-shaped fried egg."

"Heart-shaped! Cooking sometimes involves injuries, but it's all about effort and heart."

She placed her hand on her chest, looking dreamy.

"Just seeing you eat it every day makes me happy."

"But I'm not. Your lunchbox makes me have no colleagues."

"What does my lunchbox have to do with it?"

"I don't know. Just don't make it anymore. It's annoying."

"If you don't want to eat it, just throw it away. I'll still make it anyway. Oh, I have a special surprise for you today,"

She said, changing the subject and ignoring my request to stop cooking.

"What now?"

"You'll see when we get home. Hurry up, get on."

Ring, ring...

I rode on the back of her bicycle home every day as usual. Good thing Mekha had left; otherwise, he'd have seen the pathetic sight of me riding a bicycle home instead of taking a songthaew or motorcycle taxi.

I didn't want to complicate things. If he dropped me off and this girl saw me getting out of a European car, she'd gossip with her mom, and I'd get questioned.

Besides being annoyed by questions, I'd be annoyed by her whining.

"How was work today?"

"Nothing much."

She continued her role as a reporter, interviewing me daily while riding the bicycle home. Though slightly annoying, it killed time.

"And what about the lunchbox causing you problems?"

"No one invites me to lunch anymore because I have a lunchbox. Now I have to eat alone every day."

"This is bad. You don't have any friends. Maybe I should stop making lunch boxes,"

She said with a hint of sadness in her voice. I rolled my eyes a bit and shook my head.

"No need. Making lunch boxes is economical. I don't really want to associate with my coworkers anyway. I just wanted to tell you that because of you, I don't have any coworkers."

"So, is that good or bad?"

"There are both pros and cons. But the more people, the more problems. Just having you as a neighbor is already a headache. If I had friends at the office, too, I'd go crazy."

"So rude, hehe."

She giggled as she kept pedaling. Then, with a cheerful tone, she said

"So you really eat my lunch boxes and don't throw them away. That's why you don't have friends."

"..."

"But it's okay. If you don't have friends, I'm willing to be your friend."

"That's offensive, and you're too young to be my friend... or maybe being friends is good. Friend zone, you know."

I teased. The girl cycling the bike screeched to a halt and turned to look at me, protesting loudly.

"No, there's no such thing as a friend zone. We're spiritual friends. I don't want to be just your friend or your little sister."

"When it comes to this, you get so serious."

"No matter how chill a person is, some things need to be clearly expressed. And this is not a joke."

She winked at me.

"Arpo belongs to Bow just as much as Bow belongs to Arpo."

I pushed her face away, annoyed, making her turn back in the right direction.

"Ride home already. Be as serious about going home as you are about confessing your love."

"I'm serious about everything-cooking, exercising, picking you up, and dropping you off every day without fail. See, I'm consistent."

"Yeah."

"And today, I have new activities to hit on you. Let's go home and see something interesting."

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A can with a neatly cut lid was thrown to me from the window of the house next door, where our rooms faced each other. I looked at the phone with a kite string tied to the bottom of the can, instantly recognizing it as a tin can telephone using string to transmit sound like we used to play with as kids.

"Is this the special thing you mentioned?"

"I'll use it to confess my love to you every night and day through this love can."

"A Coke can?"

I turned the can over and pretended to throw it away, but she screamed from across the window to stop me.

"Don't throw it away. I worked hard to punch holes in it because it's a tin can. Please show some empathy for my effort."

"If you want to talk, just call me."

"When have you ever answered my calls?"

"Because when I do, you say the same thing every time. It's annoying. And if I don't answer my phone, do you think I'll chat with this silly can?"

"Think of it as an activity between us. From now on, I'll confess my love to you every night through this can... Let's test it. Put it to your ear."

"No."

"Then I'll shout my love for you to the world as usual. I love..."

"Fine, speak into the can."

I said, annoyed because her loud voice might disturb the neighbors. When I put the can to my ear, her voice came through, loud and clear.

"I love you."

The sound was faint and muffled but audible enough, following the principles of sound waves. I grimaced slightly and looked at her coldly.

"Are you satisfied now?"

"No, you try it. I want to hear your voice."

I looked at the can and spoke into it, but only moved my lips. Of course, she couldn't hear what I said because I wanted to tease her. She frowned slightly and pretended to tap the can in her hand.

"Why can't I hear what you're saying?"

"Maybe it's broken."

"How can that be? If you can hear me, I should be able to hear you. Speak louder. Say anything."

I smiled mischievously and spoke into the can again, but this time I practically shouted.

"Annoying."

"I heard that. Loud and clear. Next time, speak like this."

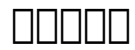
"Ugh, so silly. Why do I have to play along with this nonsense?"

"Because I want to confess my love to you every day like this."

"And I'll tell you you're annoying every day."

"That's okay. Just being able to confess my love to you makes me happy....I love you!"

Unbelievable...



♣ Chapter 04 ♣

It was just like any other day. My routine hadn't changed at all. I went to work, had no friends, ate lunch alone, and Mekha drove me to the bus stop one stop before his own, even though I'd firmly told him not to.

Everything remained the same, ending with Arpo waiting to pick me up at the bus stop and riding her bicycle to drop me off at my house. It was quite a normal day, but life couldn't be exciting every day. It wasn't until I sat down for dinner with my parents that something unexpected happened.

"Today, a guy walked Arpo all the way to her house,"

My mom said as I was about to take a bite of my food. I paused for a split second but continued eating without asking anything.

"You've got competition now, hahaha,"

My dad laughed heartily.

"We've watched Arpo grow up, and now, knowing a guy walked her home, it's exciting for us 100."

"She's grown into a lovely young lady, not the little girl who used to follow Bow around anymore. She'll probably bother you less now,"

My mom added, noticing my silence.

"You might feel lonely now, Bow."

"Lonely? It should be good. She won't be running around confessing her love to me all day. Now she'll probably confess to someone else."

I replied.

"Why does that sound like you're feeling a bit down?" My dad teased.

I put down my cutlery, not wanting to say much, signaling that I was full. I'd barely touched my food, which made my mom look at me curiously as I got up to head to my room to shower and get ready for bed.

"What's this? You barely ate anything today," she said.

"I'm on a diet," I replied.

"You're already as thin as a feather, and now you're still dieting?"

My mom said, sounding a bit hurt that I didn't finish the meal she'd prepared. My dad, on the other hand, smiled broadly, always finding a way to tease me.

"Give her a break today. She might be feeling a bit off because the girl who used to confess her love to her now has a boyfriend," my dad joked.

"Stop talking about it. I'm not feeling off or anything. Whoever has a boyfriend, it's their business.."

I cut the conversation short and escaped upstairs. A simmering emotion crept into my heart. I stayed silent, not commenting on Arpo's new admirer. If I was upset, it was because she picked me up as usual but didn't mention anything about herself, only asking about my work. I felt it was unfair that I was left in the dark.

Clank clank.

After showering and drying my hair, I heard the sound of a can hanging by the window rattling, like a phone ringing. I looked at the shaking can and walked to the window to see Arpo waving and pointing at the can, signaling me to pick it up and play along.

I looked at her tiredly, grabbed the can, and tossed it out the window in annoyance, then closed the curtains to cut off communication, like hanging

up on a phone call.

Arpo's voice shouted from the opposite window, complaining about what I did.

"Why did you throw the can? We promised it would be our love can," she yelled.

I rolled my eyes and opened the curtains, seeing her trying to reel the can back in.

"Who wants to play with you every day? Go talk on the phone or do something else. I want to rest," I said.

"How can I talk on the phone when you never answer my calls?" she replied.

"When you call, all you do is confess your love,"

I said knowingly. The sweet- faced girl smiled mischievously, pretending to be shy.

"I have to confess my love every day," she said.

"It's unnecessary," I replied.

"It is. If you don't hear my confession, you'll feel uneasy," she insisted.

"You're imagining things. Besides..."

I paused. Arpo, waiting to hear what I'd say, looked at me intently, but I decided not to speak and closed the curtains, cutting off communication entirely.

"Besides what? Finish your sentence. How will I know if you close the curtains on me... Senior, I love you," she shouted.

Even without the can, she still shouted her confession. I shook my head, not believing it much. How could she love me when she had someone else

walking her home?

Liar.

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My routine continued. Every morning, I went for a run to burn off the calories from the previous day and to get my brain to release dopamine, making me feel refreshed.

Of course, Arpo showed up at my house, stretching. I looked at her sweet face, not caring, and started running. Arpo, noticing me, quickly caught up.

"Why didn't you tell me you were running?" she asked.

"..."

"Are you okay? You've been acting strange since yesterday. You won't even talk to me."

"Who talks while running? You need to breathe. If you talk, you'll choke," I replied.

"Yay, you're talking to me in full sentences."

Arpo said, running ahead and turning to face me, running backward.

"But you're still acting strange. Are you upset with me?"

"Why would I be upset?" I asked.

"I don't know. I can't figure it out. It seems like you're annoyed about something, but I can't find the reason. Did I do something to upset you?"

"There's nothing to be upset about. I'm fine, not annoyed. Who can be as cheerful as you? But then again... you're probably so happy you're about to burst," I said.

"Happy about what?" she asked.

"Someone's hitting on you, right?"

I said, realizing I shouldn't have brought it up, and shut my mouth. The sweet-faced girl glanced at me and smiled smugly.

"Oh, so you do care about my life," she teased.

"No, my mom told me."

"If you don't like it, I'll tell him to leave," she said.

"It's not about what I like. It's your life."

"No, if it makes you uncomfortable. I need to show that I only love you. I'll handle it. Woohoo,"

she said cheerfully as if it was easy to get rid of someone from her life. She stopped running backward and ran beside me, trying to keep up.

"Why handle it? It's good that someone likes you. You'll stop bothering me." I said.

"I can't stop bothering you. My heart belongs to you. I want you to know I only love you... I'll tell you how it goes today. Stop being annoyed because..." she said.

"Here we go again," I interrupted.

"I love you!" she shouted.

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I didn't pay much attention. After finishing my run, I walked back home. My mom, who woke up early to give alms, greeted me with a smile as I was about to head upstairs to shower and get ready for work.

"What happened? Why are you singing as you walk into the house?" she asked.

"Huh?" I feigned confusion.

"What song?"

"You were humming a song as you walked in. What's got you in such a good mood?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"If you're in a good mood, just say so. It's better than yesterday when you looked like a sourpuss. Seeing you like this makes me feel better," she said.

I didn't understand. Why would I be in a good mood? I was just humming a new top-hit song. Dopamine was released, making me feel good after exercising.

But I wonder if that girl will do what she said. Will she really tell off the guy who liked her? I'll wait and see.

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Everything continued as usual, but my mind kept wandering to Arpo about whether she'd do what she said. If she really rejected the guy and he got angry, would she get hurt if the guy got angry?

My thoughts were all over the place, worrying about that meddlesome girl. While riding home with Mekha, who insisted on dropping me off, which had been going on for a week now, not counting weekends, the handsome guy who claimed to be going the same way interrupted my thoughts.

"Why do you have me drop you off at this bus stop?" he asked.

"Huh?"

I snapped out of my thoughts and looked at him.

"Because it's my stop."

"But I saw you take the bus and get off at the next stop."

He said, making me wonder if he was a stalker, knowing my every move.

"How do you know?"

"One day, there was traffic, and my car was next to the bus you were on. I saw you get on and off at the next stop," he explained.

"Oh,"

I had nothing to say but the truth.

"I feel uncomfortable with you dropping me off at my house, so I have you drop me off one stop early."

"Wow, you're so blunt it surprises me," he said.

"I can be even more straightforward,"

I said, perhaps inspired by Arpo's determination.

"I'm not comfortable with you dropping me off every day. People at the office are starting to look at me negatively, and I don't want that. Let today be the last day you drop me off."

"Since when do you care about what people at the office think? From what I've seen, you don't seem to care about anyone."

"I care about my own feelings,"

I said, looking him straight in the eye.

"Doesn't the word 'uncomfortable' already convey enough? A normal person would understand that they shouldn't push someone to do something

they're not willing to do."

"...."

"The only reason I got in your car was out of respect because you're my boss. But today, I'm making it clear: don't do this again. I really feel uncomfortable."

"Did your boyfriend find out that a guy was dropping you off at home?"

"Not yet, but it'd be better if he never finds out about this... And we're nothing more than employers and employees. So, let's end it here. Drop me off at the next stop, and there won't be a next time."

"I shouldn't have brought up the bus stop conversation."

"Even if you hadn't, I'd already decided to tell you. Thanks for driving me for the past week. It was convenient for travel, but I wasn't comfortable. Being just employer and employee is enough."

He pulled over at the usual bus stop to let me out. I thanked him with a wave and got off the car, then hopped onto the bus that passed by my house, making sure he saw me without having to hide anymore.

The handsome guy just smiled without saying anything and drove off. I felt like a weight had been lifted, being able to speak my mind.

Honestly, I got the inspiration from her. Today, I'll ask if she really turned down the guy who walked her home like she said.

After riding the bus to another stop, I got off. Today was different; there was no bicycle waiting to pick me up with its usual jingling sound. I stood there for about half an hour, but seeing no sign of her, I grudgingly walked back home, my good mood from the day completely gone.

She broke our promise...

That phrase kept floating around in my head. She said she'd pick me up every day, but today, she was nowhere to be found. She must've been

flirting with that guy and had forgotten that someone was waiting at the bus stop.

About ten minutes later, I reached home, stomping my feet in frustration. My mom, seeing my sour face as I was about to head upstairs, greeted me as usual.

"You were in a good mood this morning. Now you look like a sourpuss again. Worried about your girl?"

"What girl?"

I accidentally snapped at my mom. She sighed deeply, not paying much attention to my tone.

"Arpo is in the hospital."

"What?"

The new information made my frustration vanish instantly. I paused mid-step on the stairs, frowning.

"What happened? Why is she in the hospital?"

"She had a stomachache and fainted while trying to ride her bike to pick you up. The bike fell on her. I was planning to visit her at the hospital."

"What's wrong with Arpo?"

By the time we reached the hospital, it was already past seven. Arpo was undergoing an appendectomy. My earlier frustration disappeared as I watched her being wheeled into a special room the hospital had arranged. I stood by her bed, looking at her pale but still sweet face, and sighed.

"You're really worried about her, aren't you?"

Arpo's mom said, startling me a bit.

"Well..."

Saying no would be rude, so I just replied,

"Yes. Usually, she picks me up, but today, she didn't come, so I was surprised, I didn't think she'd be this sick."

"Arpo never breaks her promises to you. But today was an accident. Even though she was in severe pain, she still tried to get on her bike. But she only managed a short distance before collapsing. She even hit her head, leaving a bump the size of a lime,"

Her mom said, looking worriedly at her daughter before turning to me with a stern face, though it seemed more playful.

"Don't be too hard on Arpo. She loves you with all her heart. Just go along with her a bit. She was upset about the can you threw out the window last night. When she wakes up, make sure to make up with her."

Even her mom knew about that? I could only give a dry smile, unsure of how to react.

"Meanwhile, I'll leave Arpo in your care. I'll go get some clothes and be back by eight. She should wake up from the anesthesia by then. Take care of her for me."

"Sure, no problem."

Arpo's family left her in my care and walked out. I pulled a chair next to her bed to watch over her until she woke up. Her pale face made me reach out to touch her cheek and sigh.

"Stupid girl, making everyone worry."

"I'm glad to know you're worried,"

She replied in a raspy voice, startling me. I stepped back a bit but quickly regained my composure, crossing my arms.

"Why did you wake up so soon?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's because your aura is so dazzling,"

She said, laughing before wincing in pain. I almost rushed to her but held back.

"You still have a heart to say that even though you're in pain. When did your stomach start hurting?"

"In the evening, but I didn't think it would be this bad. You must have been really pissed that I didn't pick you up."

"Not at all. It was actually nice not having that jingling sound like an ice cream truck on the way home."

"The sound is lovely. So, you had to walk home today... Your legs must be tired. When I get better, I'll give you a leg massage."

"Take care of yourself first."

"And... today, I told that guy to stop following me. He won't bother me anymore. You don't have to worry now."

"Why should I? You having a boyfriend has nothing to do with me."

"I just want you to know that I only love you... Ouch, it hurts,"

She said, wincing again. I quickly reached for the remote to call a nurse, but her small hand stopped me.

"It's okay. It's just the wound."

"Then don't move. You're so annoying,"

I said, biting my lip in genuine concern. She pulled my hand to her cheek, acting clingy like a cat. I didn't pull away, gently stroking her cheek with my fingers, feeling a mix of pity and worry.

"I'm so sleepy."

"Then sleep."

"Stay with me until I fall asleep. Then you can go."

"Hmm."

"I love you. I love you so much..."

She slowly drifted off to sleep. I looked at her sleeping face, feeling a pang of sympathy, and leaned in to whisper something softly to her. I stayed by her side, holding her cheek.

Even when she was half asleep, she still told me she loved me.

Unbelievable.

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♣ Chapter 05 ♣

Arpo's recovery went well. Before long, she was back home but still needed to rest. During this period, I had to walk home alone from the entrance of the alley after work. Although it was a bit far, it wasn't a problem; I considered it exercise. But... I didn't know why it felt a bit lonely. There was no familiar jingling sound to annoy me like always. This must be what that troublemaker wanted-to get me used to having her around.

When I got home, I went straight upstairs, carrying a soda can with me. Mom looked at me curiously because I'd never drunk soda before, fearing it'd upset my stomach. The elderly couldn't help but comment.

"What mood are you in, drinking soda?"

"Moody."

"Really?"

"Really."

I didn't say much and went straight to my room, locking the door to be alone. I poured the soda down the toilet, leaving just the can. Then, I poked a hole in the bottom, tied a kite line to it, cleaned the can, and removed the lid to get rid of the sharp edges. It took me a full hour to do it meticulously. Once I was sure it was done, I opened the window and called out to Arpo, whose window was next to mine, to open her curtains.

"Arpo!"

I called her name, which I rarely did because I usually called her the Troublemaker. Soon, the sweet girl who was called opened the curtains quickly and smiled brightly, competing with the sun in her joy.

"Ahhh! Senior called me. What's up, darling?"

Oh, come on...

"Take this."

I threw the can, aiming just right, and it landed perfectly in her hands. Arpo looked at it curiously, turning it over before her face lit up.

"Oh, a love phone for you to say you love me!"

"Just a phone, no love confession."

"Did you make this, Senior?"

"The one you made wasn't pretty, so I made a new one. I didn't want you to get upset and complain to your mom again."

I pretended to ignore her, not wanting to make eye contact. I did it out of pity for the sick.

"Think of it as a consolation for just getting out of the hospital."

The cute girl glanced at me and smiled mischievously. Seeing that smile, I couldn't help but snap at her.

"Why are you smiling?"

"You do care about me, don't you? You do care, right?"

"Throw it back. No need to play with it."

"Let's play! Just admit you care about me. Is it that hard? Let's test the sound. Say something, Senior. I'll listen."

I looked at the troublesome girl and spoke into the can. But the sweet-faced girl frowned and shook her head.

"I can't hear anything."

"Then you try talking back. Let's see if I can hear you."

"I love you, Senior."

The sound traveled clearly through the string. Nothing was wrong with it. My craftsmanship wasn't too bad. I smiled proudly and shrugged.

"I heard it clearly."

"Then why can't I hear anything? Try speaking again, louder this time."

She pressed her ear to the can. I sighed and complied, speaking into the can.

"Annoying."

"Okay, that's clear. It has to be this loud."

She smiled brightly, pleased.

"From now on, let's talk through this can every day."

"If I have time, III."

"Senior, you always have time...oh,"

She stopped using the can and shouted across the window.

"Do you remember what tomorrow is?"

"Movie day."

"No matter how many years pass, you never forget this day."

"Because it's a day I set myself. No one else needs to remember it."

"I'm coming to watch too, is that okay?"

"You have Netflix at home. Why come to mine?"

"I always come to your place. Every time, you say the same thing. Aren't you tired of it?"

"Troublemaker."

"I'm still sick, you know."

She pretended to clutch her stomach and looked weak. I rolled my eyes and sighed.

"Fine, come if you want."

"Yay! See you tomorrow. I love you, Senior."

"You already said that."

"I can say it again. Bye-bye."

Movie day was a day off that I'd established since my school days. I used to study hard, participate in school activities, and prepare for exams. I couldn't handle the pressure, so I declared to my family that I needed one day a month for myself.

On that day, I'd do nothing but watch movies, eat snacks, and not touch any books or do anything else. Since then, every month, I have had this activity, with the troublemaker Arpo always sitting next to me.

As everyone knew, no matter how much I chased her away, she never left, so I got tired of saying anything.

Even in my working years, I didn't forget this rule. I turned off my phone so no one could contact me because I wanted privacy. It's a movie day. I bought snacks, milk, and drinks, arranging them like a mini VIP cinema in my room. Arpo, who dragged herself over, smiled brightly at the door, bringing her own snacks.

"I'm hereeeeeeee!"

"I see. So annoying, can't I have one peaceful day?"

"You say that every time... I'm still sick, you know."

She made a pleading face. I pouted, knowing she was faking it, and looked away.

"Then hurry up and come in. I'm about to start the movie."

"You're secretly waiting for me, aren't you? Stop acting cool."

She smiled cheerfully but still didn't come in, making me frown in annoyance.

"If you're coming in, just come in. Why are you just standing there? Do you want to watch the movie or not?"

"I do, but... I have a favor to ask."

"What now?"

"Don't get mad."

"What could be more annoying than you?"

"There is... That's why I'm asking you not to get mad. If you promise not to get mad, I'll come in and sit with you."

"What?"

"Promise you won't get mad."

"Fine."

"I brought a friend to watch, too. Ta-da!"

Arpo gestured to her friend, Elle, the sprinter who competed with me a few days ago.

I glared at the friend she brought. This wasn't part of the deal. Usually, it'd be just the two of us. She should know how much I value my privacy.

"Senior promised not to get mad, right, Elle?"

The girl named Elle looked at me like a rival. There was something in her eyes that showed she wasn't afraid of me, making me straighten up.

"Yes, I heard it too... she said 'fine.' You wouldn't be cruel enough to break your word and look like a liar, would you?"

Her words made me gnash my teeth slightly and then bite my lip.

"Come in, then. I didn't say anything. If you take too long, I'll watch alone and kick you all out."

Arpo quickly waved Elle in, who sat on the sofa in front of my bed. The three of us sat together, with me on the far left. Arpo in the middle, and Elle on the far right. Now, with snacks and soda ready, all that was left was to choose a movie.

Everyone left that task to me. Of course, I picked a Western movie I wanted to watch, Ignoring anyone else's opinion, even though I knew Arpo desperately wanted to watch a Korean series.

She was a die-hard fan of the Korean series.

The Western movie I chose was an indie film. If someone didn't like it, they could easily fall asleep. Another reason I picked this genre was to make the troublemaker fall asleep, which she often did when we watched movies together. But today, she brought a friend. While watching, they chatted quietly, making me feel like an outsider.

Having fun, aren't you...

I glanced at Elle, who met my gaze. A smile appeared on her face, as if to say,

"Thanks for giving me time with her."

Even though I didn't intend to compete, I couldn't stand being ignored. So, I put on the new glasses I'd made, leaned back, crossed my arms, and said

nothing. Of course, Arpo noticed my actions, making her turn away from her friend and look at me excitedly.

"Senior, you're wearing glasses?"

"Only when watching movies."

"But I've never seen you wear them."

"Well, I'm wearing them now."

"Wow."

Her face looked dreamy. I glanced at her, admiring and infatuated with the glasses, feeling a bit amused. Of course, I didn't forget to glance at Elle to declare my victory, even though I hadn't said a word about the Korean series.

"Senior, you look so cool. Ahhh!"

Arpo leaned her head on my shoulder and hugged my arm tightly. I tried to shake her off, but she clung on until I gave up.

"Wear them all the time, I love it."

"You're overreacting."

"You never wear glasses. You look even more handsome with them."

"Handsome?"

"Handsome in my sight. You're so boyfriend material."

She got all excited and playfully bit my shoulder, making me yelp.

"Are you a dog?"

"Sorry, I just couldn't help it. You look too good. Your face with those glasses is just too cool,"

She said, ignoring her friend and leaning her head on my shoulder.

"Let me stay like this for a bit. I'm so excited."

I won... by a landslide.

Elle, seeing this, seemed unable to bear it any longer and got up.

"Arpo, I'm going to the bathroom."

"Okay, go ahead."

"Can you take me?"

"Just walk out and turn left. You'll get there. I want to stay with Senior."

Arpo barely paid attention to her friend. I almost burst out laughing but managed to keep my manners, so I just smiled mischievously. The other girl stomped off in a huff, but no one seemed to care. Once she was gone, Arpo sat quietly watching the movie with me, but couldn't help asking.

"Are you wearing glasses because of me?"

"Why would I wear them for you?"

"I don't know, just wishful thinking. By the way, what movie is this? I can't follow... yawn,"

She said, yawning widely but still keeping her eyes on the TV screen.

"I want to sleep."

"You never finish watching a movie."

"I'll finish this one because you're wearing glasses."

"That doesn't make any sense."

After watching together for a while, I heard the steady breathing of the person clinging to my arm. When I looked down, I saw she'd fallen asleep. I gently adjusted Arpo's head to a more comfortable position on the sofa. The small girl adjusted herself, resting her head on the backrest and closing her eyes contentedly. I looked at her with affection, thinking she never seemed to grow up in my eyes.

Or has she?

The difference from when she was a child was that now, many people were infatuated with her. Both the close friend who had ulterior motives and the classmate who followed her home. From focusing on the movie. I shifted to staring at her face instead. She'd always been cute since she was little, but she was overly cheerful and a bit annoying.

Why do people like her so much? Why does everyone, even my own family, adore her?

I slowly moved closer to her. Her pink, delicate lips were breathing steadily. Before I knew it, I leaned down and pressed my lips against hers, which were slightly parted.

"Senior."

Elle's voice suddenly broke the silence. I paused but didn't jump, worrying the person beneath me would wake up. I looked up and locked eyes with Elle.

We stared at each other with only the sound of the movie in the background. I raised a finger to my lips as a sign to be quiet and mouthed silently.

"Don't tell anyone."

□□□□□

♣ Chapter 06 ♣

It was the weekend, but even though it was my day off, I still woke up early to exercise as usual. I was someone with a high level of self-discipline, and I never compromised by sleeping in because it'd give me an excuse to be lazy and skip my workout. I also felt that the early morning was peaceful, and if I wanted to do something, I should make the most of this time. So, I chose to go for a run to sweat out the stress, which is relieved by serotonin. It made me feel both physically and mentally relaxed, but it could be a bit annoying when...

"Heeeey, wait for me!"

Arpo, who woke up early just like me, was already waiting to run alongside me at five in the morning. Even though this was a day off, she never gave up on annoying me.

I gave in...

"It's weekends, and you're still waking up to run?"

"I always run with you, Senior. Why do you keep asking this?"

"What time do you go to bed and wake up every day?"

"I try to go to bed at the same time as you so I can wake up and see your bright, radiant face. Besides, running in the morning makes me feel energetic, helps me think clearly, and I can understand what I read. Woohoo!"

She continued her cheerful woohooing. I glanced at her with a look full of curiosity.

"You're in a good mood today."

"Must have slept well."

"Just about sleep?"

"What else would it be?"

"Didn't Elle tell you anything?"

"Hmm? Tell me what?"

So, that girl didn't mention what happened, or maybe she didn't want Arpo to know what I did. She saw me as a 'competitor. If Arpo found out what I did, it might shake her confidence, and Elle would lose hope. I kept a straight face, pretending not to know anything, and shrug.

"Nothing, just asking. Thought you might have talked, and it made you happy."

"There must be something. Otherwise, why would you ask if something happened? Come on, tell me. Elle should have told me something."

"Nothing."

"Don't lie. There must be something. Otherwise, why would you bring it up?"

And so, she kept pestering me all morning. Of course, I didn't say anything. I just ran and then disappeared back home to shower before coming down to offer alms with my mom.

Naturally, the little troublemaker, seeing what I was doing, ran over to offer alms with me in front of my house, even though her mom had just finished offering alms at their house. Instead of helping clean up, she ran over to me and nudged my elbow as if to share the merit.

"What is it?"

"I want to make merit with you so we can meet again in the next life."

"Do we have to meet again in the next life?"

"Of course, I'll follow and love you in every life."

Our whispered conversation made the monk smile kindly. I bared my teeth a little at her and then focused on my prayers. The cute girl nudged my shoulder and whispered,

"What did you wish for? Did you wish for the same thing as me?"

"How would I know what you wished for?"

"I wished for you to fall in love with me already."

"Nonsense."

"You don't know how much the monk likes me. I can wish for anything. Abracadabra... make her love me, make her only look at me and no one else, fall head over heels..."

I reached out to cover her mouth to stop her from praying because it was getting on my nerves. The adorable girl smiled under my hand and then kissed it, making me pull my hand away.

"Taking advantage."

"Seize the opportunity when you can."

After offering alms, I helped my mom clean up. Of course, the little one helped too. While helping, she kept pestering me about what Elle and I talked about that she didn't know. I made a slightly annoyed face and sighed in frustration.

"If you want to know, why don't you ask your friend?"

"Right. Asking her would be easier."

She was about to call Elle when I grabbed her shoulder, unable to keep my composure. The cute girl looked surprised that I touched her, which I rarely did, and twisted shyly.

"What is it? Are you taking advantage of me back?"

What a thought...

"Why call so early? Your friend isn't awake yet. I told you there's nothing. Why do you have to ask?"

"The more you act like this, the more I want to know. Is there something I don't know? If there is, just tell me so I don't have to ask my friend."

"I said there's nothing."

I tried to keep a normal face and crossed my arms.

"Can't you trust my word?"

"I trust you, but this time, I really can't help but be curious. Tell me, please."

"No means no. It's annoying."

I dismissed her and walked upstairs, leaving the little one to fret alone. But not long after, out of the corner of my eye, while reading by the window, I saw Elle walk into Arpo's room. They were chatting animatedly.

I wasn't sure if Arpo chose that spot to talk so I could see, but it worked. I almost jumped out of my chair and walked over to her house, which I rarely visited.

"Oh, Bow, what brings you here? It's rare to see you."

"I'm here to borrow Arpo's pencil sharpener. May I?"

"Of course, dear."

Her mom didn't mind at all and even invited me in, saying,

"Stay a while. I'll bring some snacks."

"I won't stay long."

"Stay a while. Arpo's friend is here. It's lively."

I hurried up the stairs and stopped at her door. At first, I decided to knock but then changed my mind and opened it to see what they were talking about. As soon as I peeked in, Arpo looked surprised, as if I were seeing a ghost because I'd never visited her room. It was always her visiting me.

"What are you talking about?"

That was the first thing I asked directly. Elle, seeing me, smirked knowingly. Arpo, still naive, answered straightforwardly.

"We're just chatting, and I was about to ask Elle if there's anything I don't know."

"And what did Elle say?"

"She said..."

Arpo glanced at her friend and shrugged.

"Nothing."

I almost sighed in relief. Elle looked at me and sat next to Arpo before teasing me.

"Actually, there's a little something, some small details we didn't tell you, Arpo."

"What is it? Hurry up and tell me. I'm excited."

I clenched my jaw, hiding my sweaty hands behind my back.

That kid is playing a psychological game with me. If she blurts it out, how am I supposed to explain what I did yesterday?

"Well... I need to use the bathroom first."

Elle pretended to test the waters and walked past me, not forgetting to make eye contact.

"I'll tell you when I get back."

"Don't be coy. Why the secrecy? No bathroom break. Not allowed."

"If you want to say, just say it."

I decided and lifted my chin. I wouldn't let a younger person blackmail me like this. It was just a kiss, I'd find a reason to counter it, even if it didn't make sense.

"We're already here."

"Do you really want me to say it? You might feel uncomfortable."

"I'd rather feel uncomfortable than let a girl like you blackmail me. If you don't say it, I will... Arpo, yesterday I..."

"I like you, Arpo."

Both Arpo and I looked at the speaker, stunned. The close friend suddenly confessed her feelings, which made the beautiful girl, who was excited, gape. I unclenched my sweaty hands, unsure if I felt relieved or annoyed.

"W-what?"

"You heard right. I like you. And senior..."

Elle looked at me, raising an eyebrow as if challenging and reminding me of my earlier words.

"Will you really step aside?"

I turned to leave, whispering in Elle's ear with a grim smile.

"Even if I step aside, it doesn't mean you'll succeed."

With that, I prepared to walk away, but Arpo called out before I could leave.

"By the way, did you come to see me for something?"

Oops, I forgot... What was I here for again?

Faced with that question, I grabbed the excuse I told her mom earlier.

"I was going to borrow a pencil sharpener, but seeing you're busy, I'll come another day."

"Is that really all?"

Arpo walked over and stared into my eyes. She reached out and grabbed my wrist, squeezing tightly. Her eyes were teary as if seeking help or rescue in this situation.

"Won't you stay a bit longer?"

"I..."

I glanced over at Elle, starting to understand. Arpo was evidently uncomfortable with her best friend confessing her love and probably didn't want to be alone because she didn't know how to act. I sighed a little and shrugged.

"I can stay. I haven't been to your room in a while. But what about you, Elle? Is your confession over?"

"Huh?... Well..."

Elle looked flustered. Honestly, she hadn't planned to confess her love this time. I was the catalyst that made her blurt it out, and now she probably felt that Arpo was just as uncomfortable. It was like she was becoming an unwanted third wheel.

"Maybe that's enough for today. I'll leave now, Arpo."

"Okay."

Before leaving. Elle turned back to look at her friend with a sorrowful expression and then walked away, looking dejected. As soon as we heard Elle leave the house, Arpo's tears started flowing, clearly unprepared for this kind of situation.

"What is this? Why did Elle suddenly..."

"It wasn't sudden. She's been feeling more than just friendship for you for a long time."

"But Elle knows. She sees everything. She knows how I feel about you. I consult her about everything. She's the only friend who knows the depths of my feelings. And now she says she likes me? It's like I've lost a friend... because of you!"

"Hey, what did I do?"

"You forced Elle to confess."

Suddenly, the cute girl threw the blame at me so fast I could barely follow it. I frowned and crossed my arms.

"When did I force her? I don't remember that. I just know that if not today, then someday, she'd have to say it. Otherwise, her heart would explode."

"Better let her heart explode."

"Why? Do you despise your friend that much?"

I smiled, but it was more of an affectionate smile. She confessed her love to me every day, but when it happened to her, she was disgusted-such a double standard.

"I feel sorry."

"Hmm?"

"I know how painful unrequited love is. For Elle to say that, it took a lot of courage. She confessed her love, knowing full well that I like you. Elle will never get that kind of love from me, but she still said it. It'd have been better to keep it to herself until she died."

"You confess your love to me every day."

"It's different. No matter how many times I confess my love to you, you'll never hate me."

"How do you know I don't hate you?"

"You love me with all your heart."

She smiled so broadly that her face crinkled like paper. I looked at her bright, sunny smile and turned away, feeling a bit shy, then pushed her face until she fell back.

"Stop being so silly... I came to borrow something and almost forgot. Can I borrow your electric pencil sharpener?"

"Excuse."

"Why would I make an excuse? Go get it."

"Is that the tone of someone borrowing something?"

The girl with the sunny smile walked sulkily to the desk and picked up the pencil sharpener. But she just stood there for a long time, not moving. I couldn't help but walk over and find Arpo standing there crying.

"What's wrong?"

My voice softened when I saw her trembling. The charming girl looked up at me and hugged me tightly.

"What should I do? My only friend doesn't think of me as a friend anymore. I have no one left."

"Don't overthink it. Just ignore it. Being loved is better than being hated."

"But I know how Elle feels about me. My heart is full of pity and uneasiness. I know how painful one-sided love is, and it's a love I can't return. How will Elle feel?"

Even now, as she cried, she was worried about her friend's feelings, about how painful it must be to be rejected because she could never change her mind. I pulled Arpo into a hug and gently stroked her small, wavy hair to comfort her. She must feel so lost. I had a part in forcing Elle to confess.

"It's okay. You're not alone. You still have me."

"Really?"

Arpo took the opportunity to wrap her arms around my waist and nuzzle her head on my shoulder. Her baby powder scent made me smile.

This little girl is still a child at heart...

"Really. Even though I don't want to be your friend that much, what can I do? You have no friends."

"I mean, really..."

"...."

"Did you really kiss me while we were watching a movie together?"

Oh crap....

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♣ Chapter 07 ♣

Everything fell into a deep silence, with only the sound of the air conditioner and the TV playing Netflix on a loop. Arpo and I stared at each other for several seconds, and it was me who broke the silence with a sigh.

"Look into my eyes."

"...."

"Do you really think I'd do something that stupid? Why would I kiss you?"

My serious tone, which I hoped would build trust, seemed to work. Arpo, who'd been quiet for a moment, slowly broke into a wide smile before frowning again.

"Exactly, how could that even be possible? Elle must've been seeing things."

"Not only seeing things but daydreaming too. And you, you're not even that cute. Why would I want to do something like that? Boo."

"..."

"Kissing you? I'd rather stick my tongue out at you."

"I can fight back with my tongue."

"Not talking to you anymore. Today has been full of nonsense. One person confesses her love, and another suspects I secretly kissed her."

I tried to end the conversation by pretending to leave, but Arpo grabbed my arm and hugged me tightly, resting her head on my shoulder.

"Don't go yet. I'm sad."

"About what?"

"My best friend just confessed her love, and the person I have feelings for is sticking her tongue out at me. How can I not be sad?"

"You're smiling so much your face looks like crumpled tissue paper. You don't seem upset at all. Besides, being loved is better than being hated, right?"

"Is that what you think, too? Having someone love you is better than having someone hate you. Because I love you, you don't hate me."

"You always manage to turn the conversation back to yourself."

I rolled my eyes dramatically.

"What kind of sad person smiles like that?"

"This one."

She said, slowly changing her smile to a pout and then bursting into tears like a dam breaking.

"What is this? Your mood swings are too much. One moment you're smiling, the next you're crying. Why are you crying now?"

"Because my only best friend confessed her love to me, and I can't return her feelings. Waah."

"Stop crying. Crying over and over is too much. Just be normal. You tell me you love me every day, and I don't cry like this."

"It's different. I only have one best friend. I tell her everything. Now, she wants to change our relationship, and I can't look at her the same way anymore. What should I do?"

The little girl threw herself into my arms, crying loudly. I awkwardly reached out to hug her and gently stroked her thick, wavy hair to comfort her.

"It's okay. It's just a small thing."

"From now on, who will I tell my stories to? I won't have a best friend anymore."

"You have me."

"Wow."

"From now on, just tell me everything. I'll listen."

"Really? I can tell you everything?"

She looked up with welled eyes, and I couldn't help but smile and pinch her cheeks, making her smile.

"Really. Tears don't suit you. Smile like the sun again."

She slowly smiled, even though she was still sobbing.

"From now on, I'll tell you everything."

"Okay."

"Answer my calls too."

"Okay."

"Play the tin can telephone with me."

"Okay."

"Listen to everything I say and think about it."

"Sure."

"Then... starting now,"

She took a deep breath, wiped her tears with her sleeve, and blurted out,

"I love you."

Well, there you go...

"Think about it, okay? You promised."

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It seemed like I'd made a promise that played right into her hands. But that was okay. Since she didn't have anyone to talk to, I could be her conversation partner. Even if it got a bit annoying, she hadn't called yet, which made me worry.

In the end, I sat by the window, hoping she'd talk to me through the tin can telephone, but she didn't. She turned off the lights and went to sleep without bothering me like she usually did.

This morning at five, I went for my usual run. I stood around, hoping the little one would come out cheerfully, saying, *"I'll join you,"* but there was no sign of her. So, I ran alone, worried that Arpo might still be upset about her friend's confession.

But my worry mixed with irritation. Yesterday, she forgot to do something. and it made me restless. After exercising, showering, and getting dressed, everything should have been normal, but my face showed no signs of happiness, so much so that my mom noticed.

"What's wrong? Why do you look like you have a small piece of dog poop in your mouth?"

"What are you talking about, Mom? What an implication."

I pouted and crossed my arms.

"Nothing's wrong. Where are you going?"

"To the market."

"I'm coming with you."

"What mood are you in? You never want to go, saying you don't like the market smell."

"Well, today I want to. Why are you stopping me?"

"I'm not stopping you. What makes you think that? Did you have a fight with Arpo?"

"Why would fighting with that girl make me upset?"

"How would I know? Maybe she forgot to tell you she loves you."

I straightened up like someone caught red-handed. Mom, who spoke without thinking, didn't notice my reaction and waved her hand.

"If you're coming, hurry up. Do I need to carry you on a palanquin?"

"Why are you so sarcastic?"

I stomped my feet and followed Mom to the market. Before leaving the house, I glanced at the next house towards Arpo's bedroom and frowned.

"It's late, and she's still not up."

"She wakes up early to run every day. Let her sleep a bit."

"I wake up to exercise every day. It keeps me healthy."

"She's at an age where she needs to eat and sleep. School is tough."

"And my work isn't?"

"What's wrong with you today? Are you starting a fight with me?"

I pouted and followed Mom to the regular tuk-tuk that picked us up. We went to the market, where I helped Mom carry the basket and pick out vegetables and fish for breakfast.

My mind kept wandering to the sweet-faced girl who wasn't as cheerful as before. I was worried, yes, but also irritated.

What's the big deal? If a friend confesses their love, just say you don't love them back, and it's over. Why sulk like a child?

After shopping, we took the same tuk-tuk back home. But we were surprised to see a familiar car parked in front of the village. I frowned, recognizing the car, and asked the tuk-tuk driver to stop. I walked over to the car and knocked on the window.

Whirr...

The electric window rolled down, revealing my boss's face on his day off. He was wearing a stylish polo shirt and gave me a dry smile as if searching for an excuse for being here. I raised an eyebrow at him.

"You didn't just happen to park here for no reason, did you?"

"Well..."

"...."

"I was trying to pretend to bump into you, but I didn't know which house was yours. I saw you riding a bike into the village, and the security guard wouldn't let me in. So, I parked here."

"The security guard did his job well. If he let strangers in, who knows where they're from, and our stuff gets stolen, he'd be the one in trouble."

"Do I look like a thief?"

"You make me uneasy. Are you following me? How did you know I live here?"

"I..,"

"What's going on, Bow?"

Mom, who'd gotten off the tuk-tuk, walked over. Mekha, seeing an older person, guessed it was my mom and quickly greeted her from the car.

"Hello, I'm Bow's boss."

"Oh, do you have important business on a day off? Coming all the way here?"

"He's here to make a move on me."

I answered with zero emotion. Mom looked as shocked as my boss, who looked like he'd seen a ghost.

"But he couldn't get into the village, so he made an excuse to meet me."

Mom pinched my waist, making me yelp, and whispered through her lips.

"Such a good catch, and you leave him waiting in the car? That's rude."

Mom whispered and smiled at my boss.

"Would you like to come in? Since you're here so early."

"No,"

I answered almost immediately.

"I'm in a bad mood today, not ready for guests."

"But I'm ready, so we're ready together, on the path we choose~"

Mom sang a song.

I bared my teeth. Mom invited Mekha, telling the security guard he was a guest. In the end, he exchanged his ID card and followed the tuk-tuk to our

house. After a brief welcome, Mekha and I sat in the garden because Mom said she needed to tidy up the house, as it was too messy to show.

She didn't forget to serve drinks to our guest, leaving me to entertain him with a face as sour as a dog's butt.

"Why are you doing this? I thought we'd come to an understanding."

"I don't know either,"

He said, taking a sip of water. At the office, he was the boss, but on my days off, he was just an ordinary guy. Even if it meant being rude and potentially affecting my job, I didn't care much. If being invaded or harassed made me uncomfortable, I was always ready to quit.

"Can people really do things without knowing it?"

"Maybe I just don't want to give up."

"No one wins in this situation because there was never a competition to begin with. To make it clear, I'm going to be rude and leave you alone. Go ahead and flirt with my mom; she seems to like you a lot. Look, she's coming over now."

As soon as my mom walked over, I walked past her and out of the house, heading into Arpo's house as if it were my own. Arpo's mom, who saw me, smiled in greeting but couldn't help looking out the front door curiously.

"Who is that, Bow?"

"My boss. Is Arpo awake yet?"

"Probably. I heard some noise in her room, but she hadn't come out. Maybe she's not feeling well."

"Can I go up and see her?"

"Why are you asking like you've never gone up before? Go ahead. She'll be happy to see you."

I walked up to Arpo's room, already feeling quite irritated. This time, besides escaping from someone trying to flirt with me, I also wanted to see how downcast the little troublemaker would be after being confessed to by a friend.

When I arrived, I knocked lightly on the door. Arpo opened it, looking like she'd just finished showering and stared at me in surprise, her eyes widening as if she couldn't believe it.

"Oh, you're here early. Is something wrong?"

"Maybe I missed you."

"Wow."

She placed a hand on her chest, pretending to be touched, but I knew she was just acting cheerful.

"Giving me hope like this isn't good. If I start believing it and then try to make a move, don't say I didn't warn you. This is my bedroom, after all."

"If you think you can, go ahead and try. Let me in."

I squeezed into the room to enjoy the cool air conditioning and sat on the freshly made bed. Arpo was quite orderly or had made it a habit to tidy up in the morning. After waking up, she'd neatly fold her blanket. The beautiful girl looked at me, puzzled, as she'd never seen me visit this early.

"Is something wrong?"

I glanced at her irritably. Today had been full of annoyances, and she was part of it.

"Just a bit. I'm here to hide. How about you? Still feeling down?"

"Down about what? I'm fine."

"If you're fine, then why last night..."

I trailed off, pretending not to mention it.

"It's good that you're fine."

"You really care about me, don't you, senior?"

"What are you talking about? Who cares?"

"If you didn't care, why would you be here?"

"I'm hiding."

"Hmm?"

"Look out the window."

As soon as I said that, Arpo walked to the window and peeked out, seeing a blue car parked in front of my house but still not understanding.

"Whose car is that?"

"My boss's."

"Did your boss come to make you work on your day off? What a harsh company."

"No, he came to flirt."

"What?"

"You heard me. Why ask again?"

"What? Do I have a competitor now?"

The cute girl looked downcast but also determined.

"I've loved you for years. I won't let someone else take you away. You don't like him, right?"

"If I liked him, why would I be here? I'm here to hide. But it seems my mom likes him. She seems very welcoming."

"Your mom is so fickle. She says she loves me but lets others have a chance to flirt with her daughter. I can't accept this."

"If you can't accept it, what will you do?"

"I'll go show that you're mine."

Her determined voice made me smile. Her enthusiasm probably made her forget about her friend's confession, which was good because having something else to think about would keep her from overthinking.

"How will you show it?"

"I'll go down and tell him right now. You... are mine. He has no right."

She patted her chest as if I were her untouchable possession, I looked at the smaller girl and nodded before standing up.

"Alright, go ahead. Show your claim."

"Huh?"

"Or were you just bluffing?"

"I always mean what I say."

"Good. Follow me. Let's go show him."

I walked out of the room with Arpo following behind. As we walked, Arpo brought up something that made me pause.

"I couldn't sleep last night. I forgot to do something."

"What?"

"I forgot to tell you I love you. When I remembered, you'd already turned off the lights and gone to bed. I didn't want to call and disturb you."

"At least you have manners."

"So today, I'll tell you twice... Senior, I love you."

I smiled as I walked down the stairs. The irritation I had felt vanished. But when I turned to meet her eyes, I kept a neutral expression.

"You must've been really stressed yesterday. Are you feeling better now?"

"I have to get through it."

"Good."

We stood on different steps of the stairs. I reached out and placed my hand on her head, gently stroking her hair to encourage her.

"Everything will get better."

She looked at me in astonishment, surprised that I was stroking her hair. I quickly withdrew my hand, looking at it before shaking it off as if I were disgusted.

"Do you ever wash your hair? It's so greasy."

"You're so sweet today. I love you, Senior."

She hugged me tightly, almost causing me to fall down the stairs. I looked flustered, not knowing how to react. She usually just said she loved me but never acted on it. Being hugged made me awkward, and I pushed her away, sighing.

"That's enough. Hugging is uncomfortable."

"You're so warm today, like a microwave. Now that I'm fully energized. go show everyone that you're mine."

She walked ahead of me out of the house and turned into my house next door. But as soon as she saw my boss and my mom laughing together, her confidence faded, and she hid behind me.

"Where did the brave girl go?"

"I didn't expect your boss to look this good. No wonder your mom is so happy."

"My mom being happy doesn't mean I am. Go on, show him."

Arpo hesitated, so I grabbed her wrist and led her to the garden table where my mom was happily entertaining the guest. When they saw us, my mom clicked her tongue, annoyed that I had left the guest waiting outside for so long.

"Where have you been, Bow? It's rude to leave your boss alone"

"I went to see Arpo."

"Hello, Auntie."

Arpo greeted, bowing her head and scrutinizing my boss. She seemed unsure about this meeting, her sweet face showing uncertainty as if comparing something and then looking away. I sighed, noticing her behavior.

"Hello, dear."

My mom replied, looking puzzled because I usually didn't approach Arpo first. So saying 'went to see' was quite new for her.

"Since you're here, sit with us."

"We'll stand. There's not enough seating. Besides, I don't have time to sit. Let's be straightforward, Boss."

I called him 'boss' instead of 'Mekha' to make it clear that we weren't close enough for me to let him sit in my house.

"I'm very annoyed."

"Bow!"

Arpo glanced at me and grabbed my arm, as if to remind me that he was still my boss. I was straightforward: if I didn't like something, I said it. Only a shameless person would persist even after being told they were annoying. And I hoped there would only be one such person in my life-the little one beside me. No more, please.

"We're just employer and employee, nothing more. And as I've told you before, I have someone I love."

Everything fell silent. I slowly moved my hand to hold Arpo's, intertwining our fingers and holding them up for everyone to see.

"And that person is this woman... Arpo."

"...."

"My girlfriend."

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♣ Chapter 08 ♣

After making such a bold declaration, the group scattered like confetti. My boss looked flustered and excused to get a hold of himself. Meanwhile, my mom twisted my ear and dragged me into the house, furious at my inappropriate behaviour, with Arpo trying to mediate.

"Please, Auntie, don't be so harsh. She's already hurt." Arpo pleaded.

"Hurt? Good! She acts like she despises you every single day. But today she uses you as a tool to chase a man out of the house. Do you think you'll often a chance to have a handsome, rich company owner chasing after you?"

I twisted free from my mom's grip and quickly covered my ears.

"Mom, you're overreacting. Instead of seeing it as harassment, do you think it's a good thing? Do you know how uncomfortable I've been these past few days? Today, I just made it clear that I don't like him. What's wrong with that?"

"The problem is there are many ways to reject someone. Not by using Arpo as a tool. How do you think she feels?"

"Nothing. She wants to show she belongs to me... right, little one?"

I glance at Arpo, who was standing there with a sheepish smile, unsure of what to do in this situation.

"What's wrong? Usually, you're chatty, but today, you're just smiling awkwardly."

"Well, I think what you did was a bit too harsh... just a bit. When I saw his face as he walked away, he looked so dejected," Arpo said.

"That means it worked," I replied.

"Will this affect your job?"

My mom asked, starting to worry. But I shrugged nonchalantly.

"If it does, so be it. If this causes me to be bullied to the point of being forced out of the job, then I'll quit."

"Is it that easy to find a job?"

My mom retorted.

"It's better than having a husband I can't stand. What kind of decent man flirts with his subordinate? Mom, work is work, and personal matters are personal. If he's mature enough, he should be able to separate the two,"

I said firmly, then turned to Arpo, who was still smiling slightly but not daring to show it too much.

"Honestly, aren't you happy that I made things this clear?"

"W-what? I haven't said anything."

"But today, I did use you as a tool. I admit it."

I raised both hands in surrender.

"I'll make it up to you for helping me get rid of that annoying guy."

"Stop saying 'annoying.' It's not cool at all. How long are you going to be annoyed with people?"

My mom said, looking at me with frustration. It seemed she really liked Mekha because he was good-looking, had a stable job, and wasn't someone who'd easily come into my life. But for me, it was the opposite.

The better they are and still single, the more problems they have.

The more they dare to approach, the bigger the problem.

"It's annoying. There's no way to stop feeling annoyed. Just like I'm annoyed with Arpo."

I said, pouting at the sweet-faced girl who wasn't fazed by my words.

"But there are people who don't feel anything about my annoyance."

"Because you're not really annoyed with me," Arpo said.

"Annoyed is annoyed. There's no 'not really,'"

I replied, turning away. Her bright smile was making me feel strangely emotional.

"But you promised to make it up to me for using me as a tool today,"

Arpo reminded me.

"Yeah."

"Then let's go on a date," she said.

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

Even my mom couldn't help but make a sound of surprise, but then she smiled, seeming more amused than anything when Arpo said that.

"You promised to make it up to her, so go all out, Arpo. Make her do whatever you want. Opportunities like this don't come often,"

My mom encouraged.

"Mom, you're just pushing me. I'll make it up to her, but that doesn't mean going on a date."

"Making it up means the person being compensated gets to request. And today, she's asking you to go on a date. You promised her. Yay, date, date, date."

Arpo cheered, dancing around.

Arpo's excitement made my mom, who was initially upset, start to smile. I could only look at her and sigh.

Yes, I blurted it out. Since I used her as a tool, I need to make up for it.

A date with Arpo is still better than one with Mekha.

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I didn't realize how serious Arpo was about the date. I thought she'd forget, but she got more excited, showing me clothes every day and asking,

'Is this outfit nice? Will it match with yours?'

She showed off the new clothes she'd bought, and I calculated the amount of money she'd spent, which seemed like a lot. I had to ask her to stop buying more.

"Stop buying clothes. We're only going out for one day. Why buy so much?"

"I'm excited. Since I fell for you, I've never gone anywhere with you alone."

"And what about when you pick me up on your bike every evening? Isn't that alone?"

"It's not the same. This will be our first date. I have to look good. What color do you have? I want to see if our outfits match. What will you wear?"

"T-shirt and jeans,"

"Then I'll wear a dress... blue, right? Oh, but I didn't buy blue. I need to buy a new one."

She said, looking disappointed.

"No need to buy more. The brown dress will do. I have a brown shirt."

"Oh, okay. You'll wear a brown T-shirt, and I'll wear this dress. See you on Saturday. Ah... how should I do my hair?"

Her excitement didn't fade as she closed the curtain. I looked at the curtain and shook my head. She even cared about matching clothes with me. Seeing that, I went to my wardrobe and looked at my clothes, which were mostly white, black, and blue. There was no brown, as I told her. But if I told her that, she'd buy more.

Does a date need this much preparation?

"Let's go on a date!!!"

Arpo was in a brown dress matching my T-shirt, which I secretly bought during a lunch break. Today, we looked like a couple, and both our moms teased us. They never opposed or criticized Arpo's infatuation with me. They even seemed to support it. Seeing us in matching outfits, they complimented us, which annoyed me.

"You look like a perfect couple,"

My mom said.

"Mom, are you joining in too?"

I grumbled, crossing my arms and looking away.

"Matching outfits, we look like clowns."

"But you agreed to wear it. You actually care about her, pretending not to,"

My mom laughed at my reaction.

"But I've never seen this brown shirt before. Besides black, blue, gray, and white, do you have this color?"

"I do. You just never saw it,"

I quickly said, changing the subject.

"Can we go now? If it gets dark, I won't go."

"Let's go! Yay, date time!"

Arpo cheered, linking her arm with mine.

"I have so many plans for today."

"Just do one or two things. Why so many? Just walk around and go back."

"You're opposing everything she says. Let her do what she wants. If you agreed to go, it means you'll do everything."

My mom pushed me towards the door.

"Go now. It'll get late, and traveling will be hard. Take a taxi, Don't make her struggle."

"Okay."

"You should buy a car. It'll be more convenient."

My mom suggested as we walked to the taxi.

"You're grown up, having a job now."

"No, if I have a car, people will ask for rides."

"Of course, if you have a car, I'll be your passenger every day, Arpo said.

"That's why I never buy a car."

"Get in already. Stop bickering."

My mom said.

Once the taxi arrived, we headed to Asiatique. Arpo planned everything, so I didn't have to think. The place was far away, and traffic was bad. I grumbled, hating sitting in the car for long. Arpo hummed and looked out the window, smiling at me occasionally.

"Don't be grumpy. Look around while we're together. It's fun," she said.

"Looking at cars? You're always in a good mood."

"Because you're with me. The view outside isn't as beautiful as looking at you. The longer I'm with you, the happier I am. Even if we're stuck in traffic all day, being with you makes me happy."

I glanced at her as she spoke with sparkling eyes. She seemed genuinely happy about our date today. I accidentally made eye contact with her and then turned my face away, feeling a bit shy.

"Is it really that good?"

"Try loving someone, and you'll see how good it is."

"Ridiculous."

My heart raced when I heard that. Day by day, I started feeling less like myself when I was around this girl.

She always speaks her mind without holding back. When people like someone, aren't they supposed to keep their feelings to themselves? Why does she keep babbling on without a care in the world? Does she really like me?

After about an hour, we arrived at our destination. The place was bustling with people and lights. I'd never been here before, so I was quite excited. Arpo was thrilled to see new things, pointing here and there happily.

"There's a carousel! Let's ride it."

"Are you crazy? How old are we to be riding a carousel?"

"In Korean dramas, the leads ride carousels."

"But this is a Thal novel."

"And what's the title of our novel?"

"Arpo in a bad mood."

"No, it's not."

"Then what is it?"

"Arpo in love."

"Why in love?"

"Because I'm really in love, Senior. Let's ride the carousel. It's part of the plan. Let's make some good memories together."

She grabbed my hand and dragged me to buy tickets for the carousel, which slowly moved and swayed. I sat on the horse, feeling a bit embarrassed because I wasn't that young anymore. Meanwhile, Arpo sat on another horse, squealing and asking me to take a video of her.

"Do I really have to take a video? Just sitting here is making me dizzy."

"Please, I want to capture the moment. I'll film you, too."

The charming girl took out her phone and started filming me without a care. So, I had to do the same. We filmed each other, but I was the first to stop and look away.

"That's enough. The video is just a bunch of swaying."

"It's okay. I'll film you. After this, let's ride the Ferris wheel."

"What?"

"The Ferris wheel, over there."

She pointed to the giant Ferris wheel, making my face turn pale.

"I'm not going."

"Why not?"

"No reason. The carousel is enough. After this, we're going home."

"We just got here. What do you mean, go home? It's dark now, and the view by the Chao Phraya River should be spectacular. Please, do it for me."

"I'm not going. No way!"

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And then I found myself on the Ferris wheel, sitting stiffly with my arms crossed, not knowing what to do. One secret I'd never told anyone was my fear of heights. I hated heights the most. I couldn't even watch videos of people skydiving, bungee jumping, or standing on a balcony looking down because it made my hands sweat. I kept imagining how my body would shatter if I fell. This Ferris wheel was the same. What if it malfunctioned and the hook holding the cabin broke? Our bodies would plummet with the small cabin, leaving nothing behind.

Ah... I could already see myself covered in blood and guts.

"Look at the river, senior. It's so beautiful from up here."

"Yeah."

She clung to the glass, running back and forth, making the cabin sway. I almost screamed but managed to keep my composure by sitting stiffly with my arms crossed.

"Let's take a picture together."

"No, I'll just sit here."

She paused for a moment, seeing that I hadn't moved an inch, and smiled.

"You've been sitting like that for one full round."

"And what do you want me to do? Dance the Macarena? Sitting in a Ferris wheel means sitting, not dancing."

"Or are you really scared?"

"Scared of what?"

"Heights."

"No!"

I answered almost immediately, but the small girl didn't believe me.

"Answering like that means you're definitely scared of heights."

She ran towards me from the opposite side, making the cabin sway, and I bared my teeth.

"Stop running. The cabin is swaying."

"Why? Are you scared it will fall?"

"Yeah."

"There you go. You're scared of heights."

She wrapped her arms around mine and rested her head on my shoulder.

"So cute."

"Just sitting here is cute? And why are you leaning on me? You're heavy. Move away. Shoo."

"It's cute that even though you're scared of heights, you still came up here."

"I told you I'm not scared."

"If you're not scared, move to the window. You're sitting right in the middle."

"I'm not moving. I'll sit here. I like sitting in the middle. It's... balanced."

If we just sat still and stayed in the middle, the cabin wouldn't sway. But it seemed the little one wasn't cooperating, running back and forth, disrupting the balance I was trying to maintain.

"If you don't move to the window, I'll jump around and make the cabin sway like a swing."

"Don't you dare."

"You're really scared."

"Yeah. If you want me to sit by the window, I will. And you... sit at the edge."

"Why?"

"It will balance out."

"Haha."

"What's so funny?"

"Your cuteness."

"Stop saying I'm cute."

I slowly moved to the window and looked down, feeling sweat forming on my palms and back.

Damn it. Why did I have to do something so against my nature? If I fell, there wouldn't be anything left for my parents to bury.

Thinking that, I closed my eyes tightly and clenched my lips. The adorable girl laughed softly in my ear, making me jump.

"When did you get here?"

"Since you closed your eyes. I just found out that someone as brave as you is scared of heights. Even you have a weakness."

"Stop picking on me. Yeah, I'm scared of heights. Happy now? Go ahead and announce it or put it in the newspaper."

"If you're scared, just say so. No need to make a fuss... Don't be scared. Heights are beautiful. Looking down lets us see so much more."

Even though she said that, I kept my eyes closed.

"I don't want to see."

"If you keep your eyes closed, I'll kiss you."

"You wouldn't dare..."

Before I could finish, Arpo kissed me. I opened my eyes wide in shock, forgetting my panic about heights. I looked at the lovely girl who gazed at me with sparkling eyes, a hint of shyness, and a lot of courage to do what she did.

"You..."

"I love you, Senior."

"You say that every day, but kissing is too much."

"I've wanted to do it for a long time."

"I haven't given you permission."

"If I asked, I wouldn't get to do it... Don't you feel anything for me?"

Her serious question, filled with a pleading tone, made my heart melt. But I pretended to be stern and looked outside before closing my eyes lightly again.

"I don't feel anything."

Muah.

She kissed me again, making me open my eyes. I stared at her as if to warn her, but she didn't seem scared anymore.

"If you close your eyes, I'll kiss you."

"Then I'll keep them open."

"If you keep them open, I won't kiss you."

But when I opened my eyes, I saw the height again. Now, I was torn between keeping my eyes open and enduring the height or letting her kiss me repeatedly. Neither option seemed viable.

"When will this Ferris wheel complete its round? It's too slow."

I don't know. But whenever you close your eyes, I'll kiss you."

"You're getting bolder."

"Actually..."

She placed her hands on my thighs and looked into my eyes.

"I want to do more than kiss, but I'll wait until you're more willing."

"You're really bold."

I stared into her eyes. As the Ferris wheel moved, I closed my eyes again and was kissed, this time with her tongue. I grabbed her shoulders.

"What are you doing with your tongue?"

"Choose. Are you more scared of heights or me?"

"Arpo."

"I'm more scared of you than anyone."

"...."

"But now, I love you more."

Her confession was different this time, making me purse my lips and swallow hard. I didn't know what I was feeling anymore. Was I really scared of heights, or was I more scared of her kisses? As the Ferris wheel moved again, I decided to close my eyes.

"I'm more scared of heights."

"Great. Then let's kiss."

I didn't refuse her anymore. The Ferris wheel moved, and her soft lips pressed against mine, making me respond. I couldn't do anything else. She had my secret fear of heights as leverage.

If I had to look at the height...

Kissing Arpo was easier...

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♣ Chapter 09 ♣

I tossed and turned all night after being kissed on the Ferris wheel like that. Since we got off, Arpo hadn't said a word about the kiss, only teasing me about my fear of heights and talking about other things as if it never happened. Maybe she was afraid that if she brought it up, I'd reject her or get angry. But being ignored and not mentioning it felt quite awkward for me.

The sensation of her soft lips on mine, the wetness of her tongue and lips that slipped in, still hadn't faded. Her faint breath and the sweet scent of her small body lingered on my lips and nose.

It was past three in the morning, and I still couldn't sleep. Looking out the window, I saw that Arpo's room light was off, indicating she was probably sleeping soundly.

Why is it only me feeling this way? It's so unfair. Since she didn't mention it today, I really hope she won't bring it up tomorrow.

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The next morning, I still went out for my usual run. Having not slept all night, I wasn't as energetic as usual. My mind kept obsessing over those lips. Arpo, who woke up early, ran beside me without a sound. She kept smiling so broadly that it was almost annoying, like a crumpled piece of A4 paper, and greeted me in a high-pitched voice.

"Helloooooo!"

"Do we have to see each other every day?"

"Not really. There were days I was sick and couldn't run. But I told you, I have to run with you every day. On days I'm not here, you'll miss me."

She said cheerfully.

Today, I didn't even dare to look her in the eye, only staring straight ahead, afraid she'd bring up the gondola incident from yesterday evening.

"Slow and steady drops can wear down a stone. Your soft heart is made of flesh and blood; I must be able to get wear away your wall."

"Just stay this firm until you're twenty-five."

"Why twenty-five?"

"People change every day. No one can love someone for a lifetime. And twenty-five is the borderline between youth and adulthood. By then, you'll understand."

"I'll show you that I'm steadfast and will love you eternity."

What a beautifully crafted word, 'eternity.'

I almost smiled but kept a stern face and continued running. However, soon, I was out of breath and had to stop, taking deep breaths. Arpo, on the other hand, kept jogging in place and looked at me curiously.

"What's wrong? Tired already?"

"Yeah."

"You're usually so strong. Why are you tired so quickly today?"

"Didn't sleep much, so my body is weak."

As soon as I said that, I bit my lip, regretting it immediately.

Damn it. Saying I didn't sleep much might make her overthink that I couldn't sleep because of that kiss.

"I was thinking about work a lot last night."

"Oh, really?"

Her teasing tone made me even more embarrassed. I pretended not to care and started running ahead of her again. The lovely girl chattered and laughed without knowing the meaning behind her laughter.

"Wait for me! I have short legs!"

Crazy girl, stop laughing now!

I sat biting my nails since I started work until they were short and rough. They snagged on my clothes and hair and even scratched my face with the uneven bits. There was plenty of work to do, but I couldn't focus my mind and hands to work systematically because of yesterday... just that kiss.

That kiss, really.

Okay, I admit it wasn't my first kiss with her. At least once, I had stolen a kiss when she wasn't paying attention, but the feeling was different. Receiving a response, the warm touch of her tongue slipping into my mouth, felt like we were communicating something without words. However, for that communication, the other person had to respond with the same feelings. And last night, how did I respond to her?

Is that kid getting too confident?

But this morning, she seemed fine, acting like nothing happened. She didn't even seem nervous or show any signs of embarrassment. It was me who lost my composure.

Ugh! I shouldn't have gone on that stupid date. Staying home would have been better. Forget it! I can't work like this.

I got up, pretending to go to the bathroom, but actually headed to the fire escape to spend some time alone and think. Arpo's face kept floating in my mind, making me feel like I was going crazy.

Besides the kiss, how far would things have gone if it hadn't been on the Ferris wheel?

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Ring!

My phone rang, startling me. I closed my eyes and brushed away the vivid imagination from my mind before answering when I saw it was my mom. It was good -something to interrupt my thoughts. Otherwise, I'd keep thinking about last night.

"Mom, you called just in time and changed my lonely life that lovely day."

[Change what?]

"Singing a song by Frank Sinatra. Anyway, what's up? Calling during work hours."

I asked with a smile, not thinking much, and crossed my arms. I was looking at the sky through the light coming in from the fire escape. Mom sounded a bit worried and excited as she changed the subject.

[Did you hear about Arpo getting her bag snatched?]

"Huh?"

I dropped my arms and stood up straight, shocked.

[She's all scraped up. Luckily, someone helped her, but the thief got away with the bag.]

"Where is she?"

[Just got back from the hospital. She's at home, telling the story...]

I didn't wait for Mom to finish. I ran back to the office, grabbed my bag, and left. My high heels twisted a bit, making me stumble forward just as Mekha was walking by. I almost fell into him like in a drama scene but quickly pulled away, took off my shoes, and ran barefoot without even

apologizing because I was so frantic. I hailed a taxi in front of the company and headed straight home.

When I arrived, I saw Arpo animatedly recounting the incident, looking disheveled in her student uniform. I burst into the house, panting, and rushed to her, checking her all over for injuries.

"Do you get hurt?"

"How did you get here? Aren't you working?"

"I heard you got your bag snatched. Did they do anything else to you?"

"They just took the bag and ran. I didn't see the thief's face... It was so exciting,"

She said excitedly, as if it were a thrilling life experience, and laughed.

"Just like in the movies."

"You're still smiling? And what's with these wounds? Your chin, too."

I lifted her chin, imagining she must've fallen and hit her face on the ground, injuring her chin.

"Four stitches, you know."

"Why weren't you more careful?!"

I shouted, making everyone in the room go silent. Realizing I was too loud, I cleared my throat.

"Were you dressed to attract thieves?"

"No, I just had my bag on the side, and a motorcycle drove by and snatched it. I fell and hit my face, got some minor wounds. Luckily, a good samaritan took me to the hospital."

"A good samaritan?"

"Frame."

I noticed the good samaritan when Arpo gestured to a stranger sitting in her house. A handsome girl with short hair, looking cute and stylish, one of those cool girls who made women turn their heads, greeted me politely.

"If she hadn't taken me to the hospital, I wouldn't have known what to do. The situation was so chaotic."

"Thank you."

I bowed in gratitude.

"It's her fault. Instead of going to university properly, she made someone else take her to the hospital."

"Bow, why blame her? She's the victim."

Mom said very displeased, seeing me scold Arpo. I crossed my arms, pouting, and turned away in frustration.

"If she'd been more careful and carried her bag properly, she wouldn't have been snatched. Next time, if they want it, just give it to them. No need to get hurt."

"Who on earth hands over their bag to a thief? You weren't there; you don't understand how scary it was. Oh... you're just pretending to be angry. You're really worried about me, right?"

She looked at me from head to toe, noticing my torn stockings and the shoes I was holding instead of wearing.

"Did you run here barefoot?"

"The heel broke."

"Did you rush here because you were worried about me?"

"Why would I run?"

"Because you care about me."

Arpo clung to my arm, not caring about anyone's gaze.

"The handsome girl smiled at us and then stood up to leave.

"If everything's okay, I'll head out now, Auntie."

"Don't go yet. Stay for dinner. It's a way to thank you."

Arpo's mom invited, grateful and polite. The handsome girl hesitated until Auntie insisted.

"At least exchange LINE or phone numbers so we can thank you properly next time."

"Okay, but really, no need to be so formal. Just doing my duty as a good citizen."

And so, the two exchanged LINE IDs and phone numbers, with Arpo eagerly peeking over to see. I watched the small figure's antics and playfully tugged her hair to pull her back to her spot before gently scolding her.

"Stop acting like a peeping tom. If you want to add her on LINE, just do it. No need to be so nosy."

I said sarcastically. Arpo's eyes widened a bit before she agreed.

"You're right. Frame, can I add you on LINE too? So I can thank you properly."

"Sure."

The cool girl looked at Arpo fondly, and they exchanged LINE IDs. Watching the two of them interact so closely made me a bit annoyed, so I gritted my teeth and walked out of the house without saying goodbye to anyone, forcing my mom to follow me out.

"What's going on with you? Leaving without saying goodbye and looking like this-your stockings are all torn. Did you get so panicked you ran out?"

Mom asked with a smile. I glanced at her and wrinkled my nose.

"Why does everyone think I ran out? I just wanted to see for myself what someone who got their bag snatched looks like. But she doesn't seem too shaken up, and she even made a new friend."

"Are you jealous?"

"Nope."

"Your tone says otherwise. By the way, that tomboy is quite handsome. It's the first time I've seen a really good-looking tomboy up close."

"If you're so interested, why don't you go flirt with her?"

"If she flirts with me, I'd go for it. But it looks like she's more interested in Arpo. From now on, you won't have to be annoyed by the girl anymore."

Mom laughed. I stopped walking and looked at her back, not too pleased.

"Mom."

"Hmm?"

She stopped and turned to me, surprised to see my serious expression.

"I have a favor to ask."

"I'm shocked. You look so serious. What is it? Must be something big."

Mom said, putting her hand on her chest knowingly. The last big thing I asked for was an expensive iPad for school, but this time it was even bigger.

"Can you help me with a down payment for a car? I'll pay you back in installments."

"What brought this on? I used to encourage you to drive, but you never wanted to."

"Well..."

"I need it to drive to work. Taking the bus is a hassle. Look, I came home with my stockings all torn. Do you want to see your daughter struggle?"

"Is that really the reason?"

"What other reason could there be?"

"Maybe something like... wanting to drive Arpo to university because you saw her get her bag snatched?"

"Why would I do so much for that girl? Never mind, I don't need the car."

I walked ahead of Mom with a huff. She laughed softly behind me and spoke in a relaxed tone.

"Alright, I'll help with the down payment. I want you to drive to work too. But you have to pay me back, and there's one condition..."

"What?"

"You have to drive Arpo to university every day."

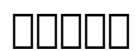
"You really love her, don't you?"

"I think someone loves her more than I do."

Mom walked back into the house. I could only watch her back and chew my cheek before glancing at the house next door. I saw Arpo and her mom walking the tomboy to her car, thanking her profusely. Arpo, noticing me from the corner of her eye, waved cheerfully. I could only huff and walk back into the house without showing my face again.

Why do I have to drive her to school? It's not my business. If it weren't for the car...

I wouldn't do it!



✿ Chapter 10 ✿

Just one week had passed when my mom and I went to a used car dealership to buy a car. Honestly, we should've bought a new one, but we happened to find a barely used car with only 600 kilometers on it because the owner had moved abroad. The price was almost 40%25 off the original, making it an easy decision for us. It was a small, gray Japanese car, just the right size for me.

The interior still had plastic covers because the previous owner hadn't removed them. It was a great deal for someone looking for a good, almost-new car. I felt lucky but wasn't overly excited since I still needed to learn how to drive.

Arpo, on the other hand, was thrilled and cleaned it every day after her morning exercise, even naming it '*Darling*.'

"What kind of person names a car, especially one that isn't theirs?"

I crossed my arms and watched Arpo happily humming while wiping the car. When she looked at me, I quickly changed my expression to one of indifference and raised an eyebrow as if her antics didn't amuse me.

"Someone like me."

"Why are you so happy about it?"

"Because I like it."

"If you like cars so much, why don't you buy one yourself?"

"Because if I could drive, I wouldn't get to ride with you to university. This '*Darling*' is really useful. From now on, I can ride with you every day."

"Who said I'd take you?"

"Your mom told me everything."

Arpo said with a sly smile.

"She even said you bought the car because of me."

"Don't believe everything my mom says. I bought the car for my own convenience so I wouldn't have to take the bus anymore. It has nothing to do with you."

"But you promised to your mom that you'd drive me every day. That's why you got this car. Darling will be with us for a long time. Just thinking about it excites me."

Arpo blew some invisible dust off the car before turning to me with a cheerful face.

"Ta-da! The car is spotless now, just like it came out of the showroom."

"It's a used car, not from a showroom. And it's not that fancy. Compared to Frame's car, the one who helped you that day, her car was European."

"Whether it's European, Indian, Pakistani, Korean, or whatever, I like yours the best. It's the best."

Arpo was ecstatic, and I couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm until she noticed and stopped to look at me.

"You like this car a lot too, don't you? Stop pretending. For me, it doesn't matter what brand the car is. It depends on who owns it and who drives it. By the way, are you comfortable driving yet?"

"I can drive a bit, but I'm not confident enough to go on the main roads. I need to practice parking more before I feel ready."

"That's great. You're smart and will get the hang of it quickly. Just thinking about going places together excites me."

"Who's going with you?"

"The back seat is quite spacious."

Arpo changed the subject and looked inside the car.

"So what?"

"If you're not ready to drive, we could do something more fun in the back seat..."

She gave me a naughty look. I stared at her, unsure, before my thoughts went to inappropriate things, making me flick her forehead. She rubbed her forehead, pouting.

"Ouch, why did you do that?"

"Don't be a pervert. The car has a guardian spirit, and no one would do that with you."

"You must be thinking the same thing, blushing like that. We're both a bit naughty, aren't we? It's good to know we're on the same page."

"What do you mean? Go take a shower and get ready for school. Stop being silly."

"Okay."

"Take a taxi today."

"But it's expensive."

"Take a taxi."

"...."

"Understand?"

"Fine, I'll take a taxi. You're so strict, but I'll do it because you care. Hehe."

"Hehe the hell. I'm not worried about you. It's just..."

I was trying to find the right words that wouldn't make me lose face too much.

"It's safer."

"You're worried about me getting my bag snatched again. It's just a concern. Besides being afraid of heights, you're also afraid I'll know you care. Water dripping on a stone every day will wear it down. You're starting to love me, aren't you?"

"The stone walks away every day. It won't wear away."

"Stones can't walk."

"I'm a turtle shell, not a stone."

"That's okay. I'm a rabbit. When you take a step, I'll take a step to follow you."

"And where will you get the water to wear me down?"

"My pee."

"You idiot!"

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Two weeks later, besides taking driving lessons, my dad also taught me how to drive and park elegantly at home. But even so, I still wasn't confident enough to drive on the main roads or go to the mall. My mom, seeing that I could drive and had just passed my driving test, forced me to drive out on the weekend with Arpo, using the excuse:

"Go on a date with her. Don't go alone."

"I don't see why I need to go out. I'm not in a hurry."

"But I'm in a hurry. I made the down payment for the car, and you're still hesitating. When will you learn to drive? Stop being scared and go out. I'm all dressed up and ready"

"Is this considered dressed up?"

I looked at the small girl in a T-shirt and jeans, looking like she stepped out of a Uniqlo magazine, smiling and winking, ready for the real deal.

"If it's not good enough, I can go back inside and change to be a proper passenger princess for you."

"Don't believe this kid's nonsense. She's just trying to delay. Arpo, you're fine as you are. I think you look great... And you, stop hesitating and drive out. Take her to watch a movie or listen to music. It's a holiday. Practice driving"

"Mom, why are you making me do this? I'm not ready."

"If not today, then when? Arpo has been taking taxis for two weeks. Do you know how much that costs?"

Hearing that, I made a sour face. Calculating the taxi fares Arpo had to pay to go to university, I reluctantly agreed with my mom. I pouted and stomped into the house to grab the car keys, then waved them at my mom.

"Happy now, Mom? Fine, I'll go."

"That's the spirit. Learn to drive already. Once you're good, you can take us on trips."

"I want to go too!"

Arpo eagerly waved her hand, and my mom smiled gently at her, always fond of her.

"Sure, Arpo. Wherever you want to go, she'll take you. She got the car for you."

"Who got the car for this girl? Mom, stop talking nonsense. She might take it seriously."

"You're so stubborn. Go now and stop hesitating."

After being forced, I reluctantly drove out with Arpo as my companion. This time, my dad didn't come along, making me so tense that I gripped the steering wheel tightly, trying to remember that the appropriate speed on the main road shouldn't exceed 100 kilometers per hour.

Arpo, seeing me purse my lips and drive slowly, looked at me with a mix of fondness and pity. She gave me a dry smile and touched my arm encouragingly.

"Don't be so tense. You're driving well."

"I know I'm driving well."

I tried to convince myself, even though I knew I was forcing it.

"You don't have to say it."

"Confidence is good... Oh, a bicycle just passed us."

I bared my teeth when Arpo mentioned the old man who'd just cycled past us. We were now in a busy market area, so driving slowly was acceptable. But the more people I saw, the more scared I became.

My dad had repeatedly told me that if I had to hit something, it should be a car and to avoid all living things, especially people. And now, there were so many people. I shouldn't have listened to my mom about driving out. I should've just pretended to be sleepy and gone back inside to sleep.

"You don't have to remind me. I'm driving safely for both the driver and other road users. Whoever wants to pass can pass."

"I wasn't saying anything."

"Your words and eyes are clearly calling me a terrible driver."

"It's not that bad."

"Don't say 'bad' from your mouth."

"I was complimenting you."

"Can you stop talking? It's distracting."

"So, where are we going on our date?"

"I can barely drive. Don't talk about dates. I can't even park properly!"

I almost snapped, making Arpo go silent. It wasn't her fault, but my own anxiety. The scariest part was parking. With my dad around, it was manageable, but now it was just Arpo and me. Neither of us was confident in driving. How would we manage?

A date at the mall? No way. I'll never park there. I'm embarrassed at my skills.

"Then let's start with a date on the road. At least drive over 40. I've been hearing honking from behind for a while, and you've been stuck at the crosswalk for too long."

"We have to wait for people to cross! Can you stop talking? I can't concentrate."

I spoke with tears welling up. I had never been this anxious before. Not even during my university entrance exams. I was doomed. Would I make it home safely?

"Thank you."

"What now?"

"Learning to drive for me," her radiant smile eased my fears.

"Who learns to drive for someone else? Are you crazy?"

"You bought the car just to pick me up and drop me off, didn't you?"

"Stop talking so much. Do I really look like such a kind person to you?"

"You've been kind for a long time, even if you don't show it on the surface...
Oh, watch out, senior! A cat!"

Screech!

I slammed on the brakes in a panic, but it was too sudden, causing the car behind to crash into the rear with a loud thud.

Damn it... First day on the road and I get rear-ended.

I bared my teeth and looked at Arpo, who seemed distressed. She gave me a dry smile, like a desert lacking water. I glared at her, but I was more worried about the car that hit us, so I just said before getting out of the car,

"You're dead when we get back!"

Yeah, I didn't blame myself. It was her constant talking that made me lose focus on driving. I got out to check the situation. The other vehicle was a big motorcycle that had rammed into us. The rider took off his helmet and stood with his hands on his hips, ready to confront me.

"I knew it, a woman driver. Shouldn't have followed so closely."

His curt tone made my face heat up and tense. This was a form of discrimination.

Why? What's wrong with women driving? As if the statistics show that Thai men never get into accidents. And that condescending tone!

I was going to apologize politely, but now I straightened up, pursed my lips, and responded curtly.

"So, what do you want to do? You hit the rear, so you're at fault."

"Brave enough to say I'm wrong, not blaming yourself for driving like a turtle."

"Can't you speak nicely? I'm just learning to drive, so of course, I drive slowly. Why didn't you keep a safe distance?"

"Hey, you! You're the one at fault, braking suddenly. I'll kill you!"

"What kind of man talks like this? You can speak nicely."

Arpo, who had gotten out of the car, quickly walked between us and bravely stood up for me.

"Just call the insurance and be done with it."

"What insurance? My car doesn't have insurance!"

His loud voice drew the attention of the whole market.

"My headlight is broken, and I just got this bike. Damn it, if you can't drive, go ride a donkey!"

"That's too far."

"And what are you going to do about it?"

The furious rider reached out and shoved Arpo's shoulder. Seeing her being touched roughly like that made me lose all sense of reason. I lunged at the rider and threw a punch at his face, forgetting everything else.

Wham!

"Ahhh! You bitch, do you want to die?"

The rider, clutching his nose, found blood streaming from it.

"Blood..."

I pulled Arpo behind me and rubbed my sore fist. I was seeing red, and it seemed no one could stop me now.

"You want to die? How dare you...."

"..."

".....touch my Arpo!"

□□□□□

✿ Chapter 11 ✿

The situation almost escalated into a big mess if it weren't for the motorcycle taxi drivers and people at the market who stepped in to break it up. Not long after, a traffic cop drove by and took all of us to the police station to mediate the situation.

The officer didn't really want to deal with a brawl case, so he tried to talk the other party into settling it and paying for the damages to avoid a criminal record. My dad had to bow his head repeatedly, apologize, and pay as much as he could, which ended up being more than a few thousand baht.

"Why should we pay him? With his smart mouth, he deserved to get punched."

I continued to whine stubbornly, feeling that I wasn't in the wrong. Now, back home, everyone just shook their heads at my obstinacy, even though I'd explained the incident in detail.

"I had to protect Arpo. What did I do wrong?"

"There was no need to use violence."

"But he touched Arpo first! He was wrong!"

I argued with my dad, refusing to back down. Arpo, seeing that I was still heated, reached out to tug on my shirt and shook her head.

"Don't raise your voice. No one here is blaming you. Everyone understands."

She said.

"Understand what? Didn't you hear my Dad blaming me? Dad, I did everything you taught. Don't hit living things. Drive under forty in residential areas. If you're going to blame someone, blame the motorcycle that hit us, not your daughter, who was trying to protect this girl."

"I get it. You did the right thing."

"Don't be sarcastic, Dad."

"See, when I take your side, you say I'm being sarcastic."

"Earlier, you were blaming me, and now you're saying I did the right thing."

"It wasn't entirely right. When driving, being cautious is the most important thing, but you shouldn't go punching a guy you've never seen before. It's good enough that it didn't get recorded in the police log."

Dad sighed at my hot-headedness. I looked around at everyone, pursing my lips, unwilling to accept being blamed.

"Loving and protecting your girl is understandable, but you can talk things out, Bow."

"Who loves her?"

"You"

"Who protects her?"

"You do."

"I'm going to scream! I was just doing the right thing!"

I glanced at Arpo, who was smiling as I argued with Dad. Feeling flustered, I quickly changed the subject.

"If it's such a big deal, I won't drive anymore. If you want to blame someone, blame her. She talked the whole way, and I couldn't concentrate."

"Yeah, you're never wrong."

Mom sighed, making me pout and cross my arms.

"That's right, I'm not wrong."

"Bow, the arrogant."

Mom said, making me widen my eyes in surprise

"Where did that come from?"

"Arpo calls you that. Today, I see that you really are."

I glared at the small person who had been gossiping about me.

"Nobody cares about Arpo, huh? Fine, I was wrong today. Arrogant, whatever. From now on, no matter what happens, I won't care anymore. And I won't drive either."

I stormed off to my room, leaving the adults to continue their conversation. Of course, "letting the adults talk" meant the younger ones weren't part of the discussion.

Arpo followed me to my room, slipping in without waiting for my permission. Once inside, she smiled brightly, competing with the sun outside, while I scowled and frowned at her.

"Because of you, I got blamed."

Who else can I take it out on but Arpo?

The sweet-faced girl smiled and blinked innocently, raising both hands in surrender.

"I admit it"

"What?"

"What do you mean, what?"

"Why admit it so easily? Aren't you going to argue?"

"Our parents already argued enough. Someone has to be on your side, and I'll support you."

"If you're supporting me just because I have no friends, don't bother. You probably think I'm wrong, too."

"You're overthinking it."

She hugged me, but I dodged. The smaller girl then hugged me from behind, resting her head on my back and rubbing it gently.

"I don't think you're wrong at all. To me, you're very cool."

"I'm a thug"

"Don't be sarcastic. I really think you're cool, protecting me just because that guy pushed my shoulder. It's a good thing he didn't raise his hand to slap me."

Imagining that made me frown even more. It's true, if that guy had been angrier and raised his hand to slap Arpo, what would I have done? Especially with her cheeky face. Just thinking about it made me clench my fists, Even just imagining it made me this angry.

"Yeah, if I hadn't punched him first, he might've done something to you. But Mom and Dad don't understand."

"Adults don't like violence, but sometimes violence can protect us."

"Do you really think that?"

"Yes, really."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Not teasing?"

"Not teasing."

"You're Being cocky."

"I'm not being cocky."

Our back-and-forth made me laugh a little. Arpo, hearing my giggles, peeked from behind to see me smiling, looking at me with love and joy.

"You're smiling."

I immediately stopped smiling and put on a serious face.

"No, the muscles on my face moved on their own."

"No matter how the muscles on your face work, it's a good thing."

She stopped hugging me from behind and moved to stand in front of me, hands behind her back, rocking on her toes shyly.

"I don't know what others say, but thank you so much today. You made me feel safe."

Being praised like that made me uncomfortable. I kept my arms crossed and looked away, shrugging.

"It's nothing. It's the duty of the older to protect the younger one."

"But my chest is bigger."

"Idiot, changing the subject again."

I pushed her face away and walked to sit on the bed. Arpo followed and sat next to me, leaning close as she liked to touch some part of my body. She

loved skinship and had been like this for a long time. I was getting used to it.

"But next time, don't do it, okay? I'm worried. No matter what, men are bigger. It's good he didn't fight back today."

"With his nose bleeding like that, he couldn't fight back."

"If there's going to be a fight, at least have a weapon. Bare hands like this, if he choked you, it would be bad. I'm just this small; how could I help if things got worse?"

"Call the police. You have a phone."

"Let's just say, next time, stay calm, okay? I'm worried because you're hot-headed. First day of driving, and there's already trouble. What about the following days?"

"Scared, huh?"

I glanced at her and laughed a bit. She nodded without shame.

"Yes, scared. Not scared for myself but scared that if something happens to Bow, I won't be able to bear it. So promise me you won't do this again."

"I won't promise."

"See, it makes me worried. You bought the car because of me. Today, there was trouble because of me. I don't want to be the reason you get hurt."

When she said that, I glared at her, unwilling to accept it.

"I didn't buy the car because of you."

"Then why did you buy it? Someone who refused to drive every day suddenly buys a car after I'd an incident."

"You're full of yourself."

"I have to be full of myself when I get the chance. Anyway, from now on, if you drive, I'll sit next to you everywhere. When you start getting hot-headed, I'll touch your arm like this."

She touched my arm and squeezed lightly.

"To remind you to stay calm. My touch will help you stay focused."

"You don't have that much influence over my heart."

"But it can remind you."

She leaned her head on my shoulder affectionately.

"I love you, Bow. Don't be hot-headed again. Even if I have to die in front of you, don't help me. Let me die; it's better."

"Why are you talking about death? It's upsetting."

I changed my tone and bared my teeth.

"We're still young. If anyone's going to die first, it's me."

"I can't bear to see you die first."

"Let's just say no one will die. I'll stay calm. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, I'm satisfied."

"Now go. Why are you sitting here for so long? I need privacy."

I told her to leave because I wasn't comfortable with Arpo sitting on my bed. Suddenly, my mind flashed back to the cable car, making me feel strangely anxious. Arpo, smiling brightly, pouted in disappointment.

"What? I just sat for a few minutes, and you're kicking me out."

"The room is small. Besides, I want to sleep. With you here, I feel cramped."

"You're good at hurting feelings. Even though it's clear you're not that cramped. The room is spacious."

Arpo moved away from me and lay down on the bed, spreading her arms.

"Ah, the bed is so soft. It makes me want to sleep."

"I told you to leave, and now you're lying down?"

"It's really comfortable. Let me nap for ten minutes, and I'll go."

"Hey!"

"I don't care."

She pretended to sleep and snored exaggeratedly. I licked my lips in annoyance and slapped her leg loudly to make her get up, but she didn't budge, so I had to shake her.

"Don't pretend to sleep. Go sleep at your own house."

"I want to sleep here. This room is comfortable. I want to absorb Bow's scent on this bed."

"Can you talk while you sleep?"

"If you want me to get up, you'll have to try harder because I won't give in."

I used all my strength to turn towards her and pull her up, but the sweet-faced girl yanked my collar down and opened her eyes with a big smile.

"Try to find a way to make me get up."

"I'd burn my house down if I had to."

"Burning the house? There's an easier way."

"What way?"

She pulled my collar down again, bringing our faces so close that our noses almost touched.

"Use magnetic power."

"Where am I supposed to get a magnet?"

"From your lips, like this."

She wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled herself up to kiss me, closing her eyes. I opened my eyes wide in shock, trying to pull away, but she locked me in place.

"Just like this. Kiss me, and I'll spring up following your lips."

She finished speaking and kissed me again. My face felt hot, and my heart pounded. Her boldness almost made me faint. Lately, this little rascal hadn't been hiding her desires at all. She'd take any chance to be the offense. I tried to pull away, but she held my neck firmly. The weight made me collapse onto her, and I sighed.

"What if my mom opens the door and sees us?"

"Then we're busted."

"And you're still doing this?"

"It's worth it."

"I'm not enjoying this."

"Then pull me up."

She opened her eyes again, and we stared at each other closely. Her light brown eyes made me shut mine quickly, not wanting to look. It seemed like I was giving in, closing my eyes as if agreeing to the kiss. The adorable girl kissed me again, and this time, I didn't resist.

We kissed under the cool air conditioning, the temperature dropping rapidly. I slowly pushed myself up, her lips still on mine, and used my arms to lift her into a sitting position. Arpo got up easily, her lips still attached. I gave her a hard kiss and quickly pulled away.

"You're up now. Time to leave."

"That was a nice wake-up call,"

She said nonchalantly, wiping her mouth like a victor.

"I'll pretend to sleep more often."

"You won't get another chance to sleep in my room, you little brat."

"Oh, I will. You'll let me in again. Besides..."

She got up and walked to the door, glancing back at me with a smile.

"Even if I don't come to you, you'll come to me."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you..."

"...."

"..love kissing me."

"Get out of here!"

I grabbed the nearest pillow and threw it at her, standing at the door with a big grin.

"Love kissing you, my ass! Don't show your face around here again."

"Hehe. You're such a liar. If you didn't like me, then why..."

"Did you use your tongue?"

"Arpo!"

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♣ Chapter 12 ♣

Arpo's seemingly casual question made me panic and feel my face flush with heat. I tried to think of an excuse but couldn't come up with anything, so I answered awkwardly, like someone desperately trying to find a way out with words they didn't even understand.

"There's only one reason people use their tongues."

"What is it?"

She smiled and squinted playfully.

"I just wanted to push you away."

The reason made no sense, but it was all I could think of. My answer made Arpo giggle, and I realized that not answering might've been better than giving such a ridiculous response.

"You pushed me so hard I almost flew away."

"Stop making that face. Get out of my room. It's suffocating."

"Alright, I won't pester you today, but..."

"But what?"

"It's a good thing, you know. I've kissed you twice now."

She said, leaning in with a smile.

"I'm starting to make serious moves on you. This time, you can't just slide away saying I'm just your younger friend."

"Get out!"

"Okay."

She smiled broadly and walked out of the room in a good mood. I followed her and locked the door, leaning against it, feeling drained. I bit my lip in frustration at how easily I had given in. Arpo had gained the upper hand.

I had tried to maintain my composure, but I had been outmaneuvered by a single girl. It was ridiculous. I was older, yet I was the one being pursued and never able to refuse. I hated that my body never resisted her, no matter the situation.

No, I have to be stronger. I can't let a mischievous girl affect me this much!

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After that day, I changed my running routine to practice driving on the main road. Every morning at five, I'd start the car and drive around the neighborhood to practice. Gradually, I became more confident and started driving on the main road without my dad. My confidence grew each day.

"I can drive now."

I told my mom proudly, twirling the car keys in my hand.

"Today, I'm driving to work for the first time."

"Excellent. When you're willing to do something, you never fail."

I smiled at my mom's praise but quickly stopped.

"So today, drive your girl to university too."

"Why do I have to take her?"

"Isn't that why you learned to drive?"

"How many times do I have to tell you it's not about Argo."

"Alright, alright, it's not about her. But as promised, drive her to university."

"No way. The traffic is terrible."

"If you don't, I'll take the car back."

I crossed my arms and glared at my mom, frustrated.

"Fine, for your sake, I'll drop her off and pick her up from her uni."

"See?"

"See what?"

"Just take her there. You don't need to pick her up... Were you planning to pick her up, too? Wow, Bow, you're better at this."

I uncrossed my arms, shocked that I'd let that slip.

"I'm just saying. If you only want me to drop her off, I'll do it."

"It'd be nice if you picked her up too. Some days she finishes early, so you won't have to go. On days she has late classes, you could just pick her up. It's not that hard."

"Why doesn't her family buy her a car?"

"Because they know how much you love her."

My mom laughed, seeing my flustered face. I huffed and stomped out of the house, calling for Arpo to hurry up.

"Arpo, are you ready? If you're late, I'm not taking you."

"Coming!"

Arpo shouted from the upstairs window, waving cheerfully in her student uniform. In less than two minutes, she came running down in her skirt, just above her knees, with a shoulder bag. I looked at her outfit, feeling a mix of fondness and slight annoyance.

"Isn't that skirt too short?"

"Old-fashioned. It's not short. It's cute,"

She said, pouting and spinning around.

"Besides, I'm a senior now. We don't care about skirt length."

"If someone snatches your bag, you'll not only get hurt but also expose yourself. Who taught you to wear it so short?"

"You're nagging like an old woman."

My mom said, looking at Arpo affectionately.

"I think it's cute. Besides, how could she get her bag snatched when she has someone to take her to the uni?"

"Hmph,"

I turned away, ignoring my mom's words, and changed the subject.

"Hurry up and get in the car. I don't want to be late for work. Instead of going straight to work, I have to drop you off first. Is this really necessary?"

"Stop complaining. You bought the car for this."

"Who told you that? If you say that, she'll take it seriously."

"She already did. Let's go. I'm ready."

Arpo said cheerfully, linking her arm with mine and resting her head on my shoulder. I pushed her head away, annoyed by her clinginess.

"Get in the car already."

"Yay, I get a ride today!"

She ran to the passenger side and hesitated a bit before fastening her seatbelt. I noticed her hesitation and frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't want to wear the seatbelt."

"Are you crazy? Put it on now."

"No, I'm confident in your driving skills. To show my confidence, I won't wear."

"There's no such thing. Put it on now."

"No."

"Put it on."

"No."

I leaned over to pull the seatbelt for her, annoyed. As soon as it clicked, Arpo leaned in and kissed my cheek, smiling with her eyes closed.

"What was that?"

"It was a plan. I knew if I didn't wear it, you'd put it on for me. So I took the chance to kiss your cheek."

"You're crazy."

"Hehe, starting the day with a kiss. Today must be a good day."

I bared my teeth and quickly pulled back to the driver's side, almost smiling but forcing myself to stay neutral. Arpo always found ways to take advantage, even in small ways. Should I scold her or stay quiet?

"Since today is a good day, I won't say anything. Let's go."

"When you're calm, you look so cool. How can I not love you?"

"...."

"When will you love me back?"

"In the next life."

"So we'll meet in the next life, too. Great. No matter the life, as long as I have you, I'm ready."

"You're delusional."

Dropping Arpo off went smoothly. I wasn't nervous anymore, and my driving wasn't as slow as it was in the beginning. Everything felt natural. I parked by the curb to drop her off at the university like a pro. I couldn't help but feel a bit proud of myself. When I set my mind to something, I had to succeed, and driving was no exception.

"Safe and sound. You drive so smoothly,"

She praised, trying to flatter me.

"Oh no, I can't get the seatbelt off."

"Don't use the same trick. I'm not falling for it."

"Then I won't get out."

"Ugh."

I made a sound of annoyance and shook my head before reaching over to unlock her seatbelt without leaning over. But Arpo leaned in and kissed my cheek again. This time, I stayed calm, not reacting because I was getting used to her stealing kisses.

"Thank you, my dear. See you later. I finish at five."

"Get home on your own."

"I'll wait."

"Hey."

"Haha."

She got out of the car and waved goodbye, standing there until I drove away. and she became a small figure in the rearview mirror. I shook my head, smiling, and drove to work in a slightly better mood.

Today was indeed a good day. I was proud of myself for driving without anyone honking at me, dropping the little one off at school, and arriving at work safely.

Even though I said I wouldn't pick her up, I kept checking the clock and my work, trying to finish everything quickly. At four o'clock, I shut down my computer, cleared my desk, and handed my completed work to my supervisor before getting ready to leave. Leaving work on time wasn't exactly the culture here. It made it seem like I wanted to rush home and wasn't responsible.

"In a hurry to leave while others are doing overtime."

"Why stay and waste electricity when my work is done?"

I retorted with a smile.

"Those who dawdle during work hours and then do overtime, that's something to think about."

With that, I walked out, ignoring any grumbling or gossip behind me. I never cared about others' opinions and had always been this way. My concern wasn't the criticism but the ticking clock. Arpo said she finished at five. I didn't know if the traffic would make her wait, so I hurried to the elevator, went to the parking lot, and started the car, driving off immediately.

Luckily, my workplace and the university weren't too far apart. No matter how bad the traffic was, I could still make it on time, even if just barely. I called Arpo to let her know I'd arrived. Her voice sounded a bit off when she realized I was actually there to pick her up.

"Are you really here?"

"Of course, didn't you finish at 5 PM?" I replied.

"I thought you might be too busy to come."

"Why do you sound like that?"

"It's nothing. I'll be out in a minute."

She did seem a bit off. I frowned as I hung up and waited by the roadside with my hazard lights on. It wasn't long before Arpo walked out with someone else I recognized. That little tomboy... what was her name again? She walked alongside Arpo, waving goodbye before Arpo got into the car.

"Did you wait long?" She asked.

"Yeah, a bit. Who was that with you?"

"Um..."

She hesitated a bit before answering.

"Frame."

"Oh, the one who helped you when your bag was stolen."

I said, my tone changing noticeably.

"No wonder you sounded like that when I called. Next time, just tell me if someone else is picking you up so I don't have to come."

"It's not like that."

"Then what is it like?"

"...."

"You say you like me, but then you flirt with others behind my back. You seem so innocent, but you're quite the player."

I sneered and started driving. We both stayed silent until Arpo couldn't take it anymore and started explaining.

"After the day my bag was stolen, Frame and I kept in touch. We're just friends."

"Elle is your friend too. Where's she now?"

"She goes to a different uni."

"And Frame goes to the same uni as you?"

"Yes, we go to the same uni but different faculties."

What a small world. That little tomboy goes to the same university as Arpo, meaning they see each other every day. So, all this time, while I was learning to drive, Frame was the one taking her home, huh?

The thought made me grip the steering wheel tightly, unable to say anything until Arpo placed her hand on my arm, only for me to brush it off forcefully, feeling something boiling inside me.

"Don't touch me!"

My voice was sharp enough to make her eyes widen in shock. Realizing I'd overreacted, I adjusted my posture and tried to soften my tone.

"I need to focus on driving."

"Are you mad at me?"

"Why would I?!"

I nearly shouted, then snarled when I realized I was being too loud.

"It's good you have a friend to take you home. Now I know I don't have to rush my work to pick you up. It's actually better this way."

"It's obvious you're mad,"

She said, her voice starting to tremble. I glanced at her and saw her fiddling with her thumbs, looking down at her hands as if she didn't know what to do.

"It's my fault for not telling you, but I thought even if I did, you wouldn't care."

"You usually tell me everything. Why stay quiet about this? If you have someone to take you home, I won't come anymore."

"I'm about to cry." She said.

"Why cry? You're usually unabashed."

Hic

Arpo's sobbing made my heart frail. From being boiling mad, I started to calm down. The red light signaled us to stop, and I glanced at Arpo, whose tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Why are you crying over something like this? Stop crying right now."

"I made you mad, and you seem really mad."

"I'm mad because I didn't know someone else was picking you up. If you'd told me from the start, there wouldn't be any problem. I wouldn't have had to buy this car either."

"You bought the car because of me?"

I hesitated, feeling awkward immediately. It was like I'd let a forbidden word slip out. I turned to look out the window, not wanting to explain

myself further. But the sound of her sniffing and sobbing, something I rarely saw from her usually cheerful self, made me turn back to comfort her.

"Please stop crying. I'm not mad anymore."

"I'm feeling guilty." She said.

"Why?"

"You did all this for me, but I treated it like a joke."

"You didn't. You just didn't think I'd come to pick you up."

"I said I'd wait for you, but I let Frame take me home... It's terrible. How could I do this to you? Waah."

She buried her face in her hands, crying loudly. I was stunned by her outburst. The red light counted down from fifty-one. Feeling awkward, I reached out to pat her head, something I rarely did.

"I'm not mad anymore. Stop crying so I can focus on driving."

"I'm sorry... *Hic*."

"I forgive you."

"Wow."

"What can I do to make you stop crying? The light's about to turn green."

"I can't stop crying."

"Look up."

"No, I look ugly."

"Look up. I'll make you stop crying."

Arpo lifted her tear-streaked face, her eyes red and swollen. Seeing her genuinely upset, I unbuckled my seatbelt, cupped her cheeks with both hands, and gave her a quick kiss on the lips before pulling away. Arpo looked stunned, and her sobs swallowed back. I returned to my seat and buckled up just as the light turned green.

"Finally, you stopped crying." I said,

"You kissed me."

"..."

I kept driving, pretending not to hear her. She kept repeating herself.

"You kissed me. You kissed me!"

"Can you keep it down? I'm trying to drive."

"You kissed me..."

She kept mumbling and then laughed through her tears. I glanced at her without saying anything but couldn't help smiling as I drove us home.

Was she really that happy?

It wasn't even the first time I kissed her...

□□□□□

♣ Chapter 13 ♣

After comforting her until she stopped crying, Arpo started chatting non-stop all the way, as if she'd never cried before. I almost smiled but ended up looking a bit annoyed because she just wouldn't stop talking. She seemed overly happy about the comforting kiss I gave her.

"Who can be both beautiful and talented? In no time, you were driving already. If you could ride a horse, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Are you going to keep talking? We're almost home, and it's annoying."

"You should be used to it by now. I always talk a lot... If you can drive like this, you should be able to drive out of town."

"That's an exaggeration."

"Let's go to the beach. Somewhere close. Consider it practice for long-distance driving."

"If you want to go to the beach, ask that little tomboy. Her car is cool and performs better. My car is a clunker, it won't go far."

I couldn't help but retort. Even though I wasn't angry anymore, I was still bothered by the fact that Frame drove her to and from university. Today, she even had Frame drive her back, even though she'd already made plans with me.

"Don't be jealous."

"Jealous? I'm just stating the facts."

"I didn't make any plans with Frame. Usually, she offers to drive me home because it's on the way, and I can't refuse. But now that you're picking me up, I won't go with her anymore. You'll pick me up every day."

"I can't pick you up every day."

"Then I'll take the bus... I want to explain why Frame drives me."

"That's because she likes you."

"...."

"Your silence means it's true."

"It doesn't matter what she thinks. My heart has always been with you."

She never hid her feelings for me, not once. This time was no different. Every time I heard it, I felt a warm smile inside, but I couldn't help but grimace. It was automatic. Maybe because I'd heard it since we were little, and now that we'd grown, she still hadn't stopped telling me she loved me, not even for a day. Today was no different.

"A hundred people could hit on me, and it wouldn't compare to you patting my head once. If you ask how firm I stay, it's like a giant rock."

"You were water before. Now you're a rock. So, what are you?"

"It depends on what you are. If you're a rock, I'll be water. If you're fire, I'll be..."

"Oil,"

I interrupted, breaking the mood, but Arpo just grinned widely.

"Yes, I'll pour oil on the fire to make you hotter."

"Ridiculous."

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When we got home, Arpo kept bragging about how smoothly and carefully I drove, conveniently skipping the part where I kissed her. The adults who heard this smiled with satisfaction and pride that I could drive so well that she praised me. They were also pleased with the idea of going out of town.

"That's a good idea. The more you drive out of town, the better you'll get. Let's go this weekend,"

My dad suggested enthusiastically. I stayed silent, letting the adults talk.

"Where should we go? Pattaya?"

Arpo answered excitedly.

"I'll go tell my parents we're going on a trip this weekend."

"Sure, the more, the merrier. Let's stay overnight and come back. A bit of sea breeze would be nice."

"You're really going all out,"

I interjected with a smile, watching Arpo's excitement.

"Just one day of driving, and now we're going out of town."

"What's wrong with that? I also want to feel the salty sea breeze. It's been a long time. Now that my daughter has a car, I have to make the most of it."

"And how will a small car carry everyone?"

"Arpo's family has a car too. We'll go as two families,"

My mom said, but Arpo quickly interjected.

"But I want to ride in the Senior's car," Arpo said without shame.

"You're a great driver. I want to ride with you. Can I sit in the front?"

"Your family has a car. Why not go with them? It's less hassle."

"That won't do."

She made a face and smiled brightly like the sun. I shrugged, not really caring much.

"Suit yourself. Go in whichever car you want, but if you're in mine, no talking"

"I'll zip my lips. Now, I'll go tell my parents and book the accommodation. Yay!"

Arpo ran back to her house. I could only watch her run off with affection until my mom, who had been observing me, smiled and teased.

"Isn't she cute?"

"What?"

"Arpo, isn't she cute?"

My mom raised an eyebrow at me.

"Constant dropping wears away a stone."

"You're teasing her,"

My dad interrupted.

"Arpo is still young. She's just infatuated with her senior. When she matures, she'll find her own partner."

"I was just joking. Why are you so serious? Or are you afraid our daughter will have a girlfriend?"

"I don't know. I can't explain it,"

My dad said, crossing his arms and thinking. I felt a bit uncomfortable and got up to escape upstairs.

"Excuse me, I'm tired from driving all day."

I walked upstairs, unable to stop thinking about what my parents said. It was something that had always been on my mind, too. To me, Arpo was still the little girl who admired her senior. I tried to overlook things and make them seem like nothing because I thought the same as my dad. If one day she matured and stopped being infatuated with me, I might be the one who got hurt from not having anyone to fuss over me anymore.

Being careful not to give her any hope or myself was something I was very cautious about.

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If my family wanted to go on a trip, they'd make it happen. With just three days' notice, everyone was ready as if they'd planned it three weeks ago. Arpo's family came fully prepared for the beach, with floaties, a duck, and a big wide-brimmed hat on her mom's head, even though it was still early morning.

My parents were no less prepared, wearing flowy outfits as if they were going for a photoshoot. Everyone was excited about this trip out of town, except for me, who dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, not showing much excitement.

"Why are you wearing jeans? They look uncomfortable. Why not wear something more comfortable?"

My mom asked when she saw me holding the keys, ready to start the car I looked at her from head to toe and shrugged..

"Is the comfortable outfit you're talking about the one you're wearing? I thought you were going to a gala dinner"

I teased, trying not to show too much excitement, even though I woke up at five this morning to get ready because I was excited about the trip too. I was a bit stressed about driving long distances for the first time.

"You're exaggerating."

"Senior, I'm here!"

Arpo waved and spun around, showing off her floral sundress and a wide-brimmed hat, not as big as her mom's but clearly ready for the beach.

"Another one exaggerating."

"Why do you always have to say things that ruin the mood? It's annoying. Get in the car already. We need to check in at the hotel and take pictures before sunset. I'm ready to post on Facebook."

My mom pushed me towards the car while she and my dad sat in the back, giving Arpo the chance to sit in the front with me. I made a small fuss and then started the car, ready to go.

We were traveling in two cars, one for our family and one for Arpo's family, heading straight to Pattaya using the route I planned last night after Googling directions.

All the way, Arpo chatted with my parents, even though I'd told her beforehand not to talk too much because it would distract me. But she kept talking and professing her love for me in front of my parents, making them laugh and find her endearing.

My mom couldn't help but tease.

"You say you love her now, but when you find your real partner, you'll forget her, and Bow will be lonely."

"She won't be lonely because that day will never come. I'll love her forever!" she said confidently. I smiled and chuckled.

"Forever doesn't exist"

"Then I'll love you consistently. I won't promise forever, but I'll love you the same every day and more each day."

"Doesn't saying that make you feel cringed?"

Our banter made my parents find us endearing all the way to Pattaya. I admit I felt a bit proud that I managed to get us there safely, even though it was my first long-distance drive. Our accommodation was a vacation home that Arpo booked online. The photos matched what she showed, with a pool in the middle and two houses for the two families.

"Tonight, I'll sleep with Senior."

Arpo didn't waste the opportunity.

Even though the two houses had enough rooms for both families, she insisted on sleeping with me, making me frown.

"Why do you have to squeeze in with me?"

"The bed is big enough. Besides, I've been waiting for a chance to sleep with you. Let's create good memories together."

When she spoke, her eyes sparkled. The words "*good memories*" made me feel a little fluttery. so I turned my face away. The adults who heard it laughed heartily and agreed.

"Good, the girls will have fun, and the adults will have our kind of fun... Tonight, let's have a poolside party, ending with some drinks and a barbecue like in the dramas. Oh, I've wanted to mimic those drama scenes for so long."

"Mom, do you even eat barbecue?"

"Hey, don't interrupt your mother."

I pouted and went to unpack my things in my room. Arpo quickly came in, placed her stuff, and hugged me from behind, nuzzling her face against me with joy.

"You smell so nice, Senior."

"Why are you hugging me? It's uncomfortable."

"Come on, it's just a hug. We've already kissed, you know. And you kissed me first."

"Why bring that up?"

I bared my teeth and pulled away from her. Arpo changed the subject by grabbing her compact camera and taking a picture of me with a loud 'click.'

"What are you doing?"

"Capturing a memory of us sleeping together."

"Literally sleep! Don't be ambiguous. It's confusing."

The words 'sleeping together' and 'sleeping' had entirely different meanings. Arpo seemed to be teasing me on purpose.

"It's all the same to me."

"Keep your pervy thoughts to yourself."

"What do you think I'm thinking?"

"I don't know, but it feels weird."

I looked deep into her eyes, then turned away and crossed my arms.

"You must've some plan. Your eyes look expectant."

"Don't let my expectations come true, or you'll be in trouble, Senior."

"What do you mean?"

"La la la."

Arpo sang as she skipped out of the room without saying anything. I watched her leave, shaking my head and sighing.

Don't let your expectations match what I've been thinking!

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In the late afternoon, around four o'clock, both families went for a walk on the beach, taking pictures as the sun was at a 45-degree angle, which is considered the most beautiful light. Mom made me take hundreds of photos but chose only one to post on Facebook with an English quote, trying to be youthful.

Meanwhile, Arpo stood looking at the sea, the salty breeze making her skirt flutter, and I found myself staring at her in awe. The sweet girl, realizing she was being watched, turned to me and raised an eyebrow. I looked away as if nothing had happened

"Are you sneaking a peek at me?"

"What nonsense are you talking about?"

"I saw you looking. Why? Is the beautiful light making your heart flutter, senior?"

"You're so full of yourself."

"I wore this outfit on purpose to let the wind blow and seduce you, senior. How is it... did it work?"

"Does my face look like it worked? It's just the wind blowing, your skirt lifting, revealing those bear-patterned panties. How could that be arousing?"

"Oh my, you saw my panties."

"You're grown up and still wearing cartoon-patterned panties. How is that sexy?"

"They're cute. They were only thirty-nine baht at the market."

She pouted but quickly smiled.

"If the bear pattern doesn't turn you on, then tonight... I'll wear lace. I bought a pair for almost five hundred baht just for this."

"Idiot. No matter what pattern you wear, it won't work. I knew you had an agenda."

I said knowingly.

"You won't see my thighs."

"Just your big toe is enough to turn me on. I'll lick from the doorknob in."

"For a big toe?"

"Feet are enough. You're so crude. Hey!"

Suddenly, the cute girl pushed me hard, causing me to lose my balance and fall into the sea. I looked at her in shock, eyes wide with anger.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Hehe. When you're at the beach, you have to play in the water."

Arpo said, jumping into the water with me in her dress, not caring about the wind making her look beautiful anymore.

The adults, who were taking pictures, couldn't help but snap photos and laugh.

"Bow is wet as a duck."

"Why do I look like a duck alone? She's wet too."

I splashed the seawater angrily.

"And I didn't plan to play in the water. I'm wearing jeans; it's heavy."

"You're at the beach, you should have played in the water. Stop pouting. If you keep making that face, you'll look old."

Everyone in the family seemed to spoil Arpo, making me a bit annoyed. Arpo, still hugging me in the water, laughed happily.

"How can someone look good even when wet?"

"What's not good about me?"

"Nothing."

"Of course."

She smiled mischievously, which I noticed.

"What are you smiling about?"

"Tonight, you'll be mine, Senior."

"Are you delusional?"

"Hehe."

Her face, which seemed to have a devious plan, made me feel a strange flutter. This was the first time we had the chance to share a bed. I didn't know what her mischievousness would lead to, so I decided to be extra cautious. As long as I didn't go along with it, nothing could happen.

In the evening, Mom fulfilled her dream of a poolside party, complete with a barbecue grill and seafood, accompanied by soft music. I sat swinging my legs in the pool when a small hand handed me a bottle of red wine with low alcohol content, smiling broadly.

"Here you go, Senior."

"I'm not drinking."

"Come on, it's a party. Have a little drink."

"You're too young. You shouldn't be drinking at all."

"I'm twenty-one now. Besides, my parents allowed it. They said to go all out for the party. They even said this wine cooler is too little... Are you afraid I'll get drunk and do anything to you?"

"You're daring me, huh?"

I snatched the bottle from Arpo's hand, glaring at her.

"This won't affect me. Besides, if I don't consent, you can't do anything to me."

"Not really, if someone has feelings."

"Yeah, right. 'Feelings', my ass."

I gulped down the drink to show her wine didn't faze me at all. Arpo giggled and swung her legs in the water, sitting next to me. The sight of us sitting together was familiar to the adults. Everyone was having fun, and Arpo leaned her head on my shoulder affectionately.

"Won't you soften up?"

"Why are you saying this out of the blue?"

"We've kissed already."

"Why say it so loudly? What if someone hears?"

I looked around nervously.

"And that wasn't a kiss. It was just... lips touching to get it over with."

"Why did I fall in love with you,
Senior?"

"...."

"You're stubborn, mean, but still cute in my sight. Do you know... every time you act mean, my heart aches. I thought I'd give up."

I didn't know if it was the wine or something else, but suddenly, the usually cheerful Arpo seemed sad. Her words made my heart flutter, and I frowned, pretending to be sarcastic.

"Is it because of that little tomboy that you're thinking of giving up?"

"Perhaps."

Hearing that, I pushed her head away and got out of the water. I placed the wine bottle by the pool and walked away, heading to my room. Arpo, sitting by the pool, looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"Are you going to bed?"

"Yeah."

"Can I sleep with you?"

"No, I want to sleep alone."

"But I'm sleepy."

Hmph.

She said she'd give up because someone new came along but was still following me like a little puppy. I looked at her, feeling a bit annoyed, but let her follow. After drying off from the chlorinated pool water, I climbed into bed. Arpo walked around the bed, slipped under the blanket, and snuggled up to me, looking at me with big, blinking eyes like a parrot.

"What are you looking at? Didn't you say you were sleepy?"

"Looking at you, Senior. I want to kiss."

"Idiot."

I turned away and reached to turn off the lamp. The room turned dark, but there was still some light from outside. Everything fell silent, but strangely, I wasn't sleepy at all. Maybe it was still early, or the wine made my blood pump, keeping me wide awake. I felt her breath on my neck, slowly moving up.

"What are you doing?"

Arpo, who'd leaned in, moved to lie on the other side of the bed, which had a little space.

"I prefer sleeping on your side, senior."

"Just say so. Stop being annoying."

I shifted to give her space and turned away. I knew what Arpo intended but pretended not to. Soon, her hands started to wander under the blanket. As soon as she tried to slip her hand under my shirt, I grabbed her hand and bared my teeth.

"If you don't sleep, I'll kick you off the bed."

"You're hurting my feelings again. It hurts."

"You're usually so shameless. Now you're saying it hurts."

"One day, if I stop loving you, you'll feel it."

Arpo turned away, sounding sulky. I pouted, annoyed, but her words made me feel irritated. I turned towards her, who had her back to me, and called her name.

"Arpo."

"What now?"

"Turn around."

The smaller girl turned back, pouting like a sulky child. Even though it was dark, I could see her face because my eyes had adjusted to the darkness.

"Lift your head."

"Why?"

She asked but still followed. I slipped my hand under her neck and pulled her body closer until there was barely an inch of space between us.

"Does it still hurt?"

Arpo looked confused for a moment before giving me a sweet smile.

"Yes."

"What should I do?"

"Indulge me, and the pain will go away."

Whether it was the effect of the wine or something else, I found myself easily giving in to Arpo's wishes. The petite girl immediately leaned in to kiss me and then shifted to be on top.

"Finally... the stone is worn away."

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♣ Chapter 14 ♣

Arpo leaned down to kiss me like someone who was drunk. As for me, I accepted her kiss without any resistance. Now, the music from outside, where the adults were having fun, seeped into the room, unaware of what the kids from both families were up to.

What am I doing? Why did I let this happen?

Arpo slowly slid her hand under my shirt, even though I initially didn't allow it. Her palm cupped my breast and squeezed as if she knew she could. Her lips gradually moved from my mouth to my cheek, then down to my neck. A thrilling sensation pierced my heart. I accidentally took a deep breath and arched my body, seemingly accepting her invasion.

"I love you... I've always loved you."

She kept saying that as she slowly lifted my shirt over my head. My body was now only in underwear and pajama pants, untouched. I put my hand on my forehead, closed my eyes, and accepted all the feelings without saying anything.

"Do you love me?"

I wasn't sure if that was a question she wanted an answer to. I flipped over to be on top of Arpo and started kissing her back. I wasn't good with words; I wanted my actions to tell her everything. Of course, I didn't answer but instead did the same to her-kissing all over her face, nuzzling her neck, and undressing her piece by piece until her body was bare.

"Please tell me you love me."

But I still didn't say anything. I used my mouth to lick, suck, and taste her body, inhaling the sweet scent of a young woman. The sweet-faced girl who asked for my love seemed unable to bear it anymore. She flipped me over again, undressed me completely, and looked at me with an unreadable expression.

"Please, tell me you love me."

She pleaded, her hands roaming all over my body, massaging my chest until I was breathing heavily. I was caught in a whirlwind of sensations, not thinking of saying anything but showing my actions by pressing my lips to hers to make her stop talking.

After pulling away, I looked into her eyes. My remaining hand slowly moved to the sensitive spot between her legs and circled it. Arpo trembled, writhing but not pulling away, spreading her legs for me. She held my face, speaking in a shaky voice that was hard to distinguish between pleasure and sobbing, but it was intoxicating.

"It's okay. If you don't say it, I will"

"..."

"I love you, Bow..."

"..."

"I want you to know, even if you..."

"Stop talking."

She bit her lip and flipped me over again, putting me underneath. I looked at her, caressed her cheek, and pulled her down for a kiss, touching her body willingly. Arpo moved lower, removed my pants, spread my legs, and used her mouth.

"One day, you'll tell me you love me."

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I didn't know how much time had passed. The next thing I knew, the sunlight was hitting my face, making me wake up. This morning felt unusually refreshing. When I turned to hug the pillow, I found she was gone.

She wakes up early...

At first, my grogginess made me not fully aware, but soon my senses returned. The events of last night and my naked body made me feel embarrassed. I clutched the bedsheet tightly and closed my eyes in shame.

Damn it, I messed up. I wasn't even drunk, I remembered everything that happened and the sounds that still echoed in my ears. I didn't know how to act. It was probably good she wasn't here now. Maybe Arpo felt the same and got up early.

I looked at the clock by the bed and saw it was only 8:30 AM. Normally, I wake up much earlier to exercise, but it seemed I used too much energy last night, making me wake up late today. But someone else woke up even earlier. Thinking that, I turned to lie on my back, looking at the ceiling, covering my face with my hands, and stifling a smile. I was annoyed with myself for letting go.

How would I explain to her what happened yesterday? Should I claim I was drunk?

Ridiculous.

I just had one bottle of Spy Wine Cooler, and I didn't even finish it. With only five percent alcohol, claiming I was drunk would be too shameless. It was all driven by emotion. She'd definitely giggle about what happened. How should I act? But Arpo wasn't one to tease. Maybe she'd pretend nothing happened, but it did. I couldn't act indifferent like before.

Before, it was just a kiss, and we pretended to forget. But last night was more than that. The moans, the actions she did to me, and I did to her, I was

fully aware of everything.

Ah... I can't act indifferent and arrogant anymore. If she brings it up, I'll have to admit I have feelings. But for someone like me to say that takes a lot of courage.

Thinking that, I got up, looked at the clothes scattered around the bed, and grimaced in embarrassment.

Did I really let her undress me that easily? Her hands roamed all over my body, and there was even a bite mark on my arm...

As I thought about last night, something seemed off. The atmosphere was good, but Arpo seemed strange, though I couldn't explain what it was.

Better not think about it now. Take a shower first, clear my head, and then decide what to do next.

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After showering and dressing, I went downstairs, hoping to find Arpo. I was ready to face her mischievous smile, but she wasn't there. Only the adults were sitting, drinking coffee, and chatting. When they saw me, they smiled and teased me.

"Woke up late, huh?"

Just that teasing made my face flush, but I had to act like nothing happened and it was just another ordinary day.

"Well, we're on vacation. No reason to wake up early."

"Usually, you wake up at five to exercise. Look at Arpo. She woke up early to go jogging."

"Arpo went to exercise?"

I asked, surprised. Normally, if I didn't run with her, she wouldn't move. And after a tiring night, she still had the energy to jog?

"Where is she now?"

"Probably by the beach. Did you two fight last night?"

"What makes you think we fought?"

I asked my mom, who suddenly brought it up. She shook her head, pouting a bit.

"I don't know. She seemed different this morning, not as cheerful as before. Did you two fight because you slept together?"

"What?"

I quickly raised my voice, feeling guilty, but Mom frowned.

"Well, you really slept together. Did I say something wrong?"

"Oh."

I sighed in relief, feeling like I had a guilty conscience.

"I'll go find Arpo."

"Well, first thing in the morning, you're looking for Arpo. Who's more attached to whom?"

Dad teased, but I ignored him and walked outside. The beach was vast and empty. Not knowing which way to go, I chose to go left. It seemed like a good instinct because after about 800 meters, I saw Arpo sitting on the sand, staring at the sea.

"Arpo."

I called her. Arpo flinched a bit and turned to smile at me with sad eyes. Seeing that, I agreed with Mom that she seemed different today.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I went jogging and happened to find you."

I lied, not wanting her to know I was looking for her. Today, Arpo looked more beautiful than usual, maybe because of the wonderful night we had. I saw her as more mature without realizing it.

"You woke up early." I said.

"But you woke up late today."

"Not calling me 'Senior' anymore?"

"Is it okay?"

"Call me whatever you want."

After saying that, I sat next to her. We both stayed silent, not saying anything. Arpo, sitting idly, grabbed some sand and threw it into the sea, looking for something solid but finding nothing. I watched her strange behavior. She was silent and not as cheerful as before.

"Is something wrong? Why are you so quiet?"

"I'm just thinking about random things."

She didn't tease me as I expected, which was good because it saved me from feeling awkward or uncomfortable.

"Tell me what you're thinking."

"Thinking about what you said."

"What?"

"Forever doesn't exist."

I looked at her in surprise. Out of nowhere, she brought up this topic. Her gaze stretched out to the sea, filled with sadness.

She should be cheerful, right? She slept with me already. And I even came to see her. Coming like this, I don't know how to act.

"What happened? Why did you suddenly think of this?"

"Because of last night."

She mentioned it, and it made me start to feel awkward, to the point where I cleared my throat a bit and shrugged.

"What about last night..."

I meant, *'Did I do something wrong?'*

Maybe I hurt her, or maybe she felt bad about my lack of experience. It was my first time. Everything was instinctual, so it wasn't strange if there were some mistakes.

"Do you know how hard I tried last night?"

"..."

"To get you to say you love me, P' Bow."

I looked away towards the sea as if I didn't hear what she was trying to convey. There was so much to do last night. I didn't have the focus to tell her I loved her. Was that what she'd been overthinking?

"But it turned out I was the only one saying I love you."

"Well, you've always been like that, and *I've* always been like this."

For the first time, I referred to myself as P' (Translation note: a term used to refer to oneself or others as the older person.) because I felt we were too close to use the ordinary 'I' and 'you' anymore Arpo gave a faint smile and turned to me with a sad smile.

"But last night should've been different. Your actions made it seem like you had feelings for me, but you didn't say it."

"Do words matter that much?"

"If I didn't say I love you, would you know that I love you?"

"..."

"Same here. I don't know how you feel about me. Your actions seem like you care, but you can't even say you love me. Last night, I tried so hard to make you say it, but you didn't."

"Why are you pressuring me?"

"It felt like the breaking point."

Suddenly, she got serious and turned towards the vast sea, using the silence to make the atmosphere even more tense.

"What breaking? I don't understand."

"I'm trying to understand your feelings. Last night, it seemed like it was more about the mood. If there were no wine, if we didn't sleep together, if the atmosphere didn't push us closer, I wouldn't have had that special night."

"Hey..."

"What am I to you?"

She asked without looking at me. I was stunned by her straightforward question but maintained my character by answering in my usual arrogant style.

"Well... a little sister."

"Do siblings do that?"

"Why do you need a label?"

"Sometimes we need clarity."

Arpo sighed and threw a handful of sand forward.

"But there's a saying... ambiguity is a form of clarity."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Maybe I should give up on you, Bow."

Thump-thump...

My heart pounded, and my blood rushed like someone who was utterly shocked. Arpo had never shown this side before. This was the first time, and it scares me.

"I used to think that where there's a will, there's a way. But with you, it's so hard."

Hard? Last night, she had all of me, and now she's saying this?

I opened my mouth to say something but couldn't think of anything. After several seconds, Arpo spoke up with tears in her eyes.

"If you don't love me, I think I should give up."

"Hey, don't be dramatic."

"No, I'm not being dramatic. I just don't want you to feel uncomfortable."

"Then what was last night? I gave in to you completely."

"You just wanted to get rid of the annoyance."

"Don't assume things."

I started to get anxious but kept my voice steady.

"I'm just like this."

"If someone doesn't love you, no matter what you do, you'll never hear 'I love' you' from them. I think I should understand that by now."

"...."

"From now on, I won't bother you anymore. I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused."

"Hey..."

She turned to look at me, tears streaming down her cheeks, leaving me stunned and speechless. I couldn't resist her tears. Every time Arpo was sad, I couldn't help but comfort her.

But these were tears I didn't dare to touch. Her face was serious, and the sunlight made her tears sparkle even more, leaving me just staring.

"I've decided... Senior, I think..."

"...."

"I think I'm done loving you."

□□□□□

♣ Chapter 15 ♣

Even though her tears were streaming down, she tried to stay cheerful by talking and smiling, mixing various emotions together. The more I looked at her, the more I felt sorry for her.

But this wasn't a feeling of pity because hearing "***I think I'm done loving you***" felt like a hard blow to the back of my neck. I was stunned; my mind went blank for a moment, and my ears went deaf. I thought I had misheard, but deep down, I knew she'd said it.

After a passionate night together this morning, she acted like it meant nothing. I straightened up, my neck stiff, and looked at her with a hard gaze, almost wanting to reach out and strangle her for saying such a thing. It felt like she was trying to shatter my ego. Of course, I'd never beg her to reconsider.

Who do you think I am?

I'm Bow, the arrogant.

"So, you've made up your mind?"

"I don't know if it's the best decision, but giving up seems like the best way out. It won't bother you, and it won't make me any sadder."

Saying goodbye to me would make her less sad, huh?

Hearing that, I bit my cheek and turned to look at the sea, almost laughing bitterly.

"If you think it's good, what can I say?"

"..."

"Not loving means not loving."

I meant if she didn't love me, then she didn't. There was nothing I could do. However, the meaning could be taken in two ways. For example, when I said, "*No means no.*" After speaking, I stood up, brushed the sand off my body, and crossed my arms without looking at her.

"Are you going to sit here much longer? Our parents said we've been out for a long time. Don't make them worry."

"I want to sit here a bit longer. You go ahead."

"Suit yourself."

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What a trip full of fluctuating emotions. Even on the way back, Arpo asked to return with her family car. My parents kept asking what we fought about last night, and I just denied it. While driving, my mind wandered back to last night.

Everything was as beautiful as it should be. Nothing was wrong. nothing was right. We exchanged our first experiences with each other and even laughed at our awkwardness.

But in the morning, everything changed. It felt like being used and discarded. I gripped the steering wheel tightly and pressed the accelerator furiously, thinking about what Arpo said that morning.

'I think I'm done loving you.'

If you don't love me, then you don't love me. I don't care. I'm not one to regret things later.

"Who do you think you are!"

"I'm your father! Driving this fast, where are you rushing to?"

Before I could talk to myself, I heard my father complaining about my driving for a while. He thought I was talking to him and quickly responded angrily. I made a slight noise before replying softly.

"I wasn't talking to you."

"Then who were you talking to? I'm the only one talking here. Driving this fast, you'll crash into someone. Ease up on the accelerator."

After regaining my senses, I complied easily. My parents sighed and shook their heads at my easily swinging mood until my mother couldn't help but ask.

"Are you on your period?"

"Mom, why ask that in front of Dad... I'm not."

"Then why the sour face all the way? Since this morning. What did you fight with Arpo about?"

"We didn't fight. We talked nicely."

"If you didn't fight, why didn't she ride back with us? It must be something serious. Otherwise, Arpo, who clings to you, wouldn't ride with her own family. What did you do to her?"

"On the contrary, she did something to me!"

I slammed the steering wheel in frustration. My parents flinched slightly at my angry mood and didn't dare to ask more. My mother changed the subject to lighten the atmosphere.

"Okay, no fighting. Let's gossip about celebrities... Honey, another celebrity couple, divorced. They just announced their engagement three months ago."

My mother, a gossip news reader, spoke with interest. My father, not wanting to pry into my affairs, talked to my mother instead.

"Who broke up now?"

"Miss G and Actor K."

"Can't guess."

"It's Gibgae and Khamin, the net idol and rising star actor. They suddenly announced their marriage. I thought they wouldn't last long. Anything that happens quickly ends quickly. Nowadays, everything is so fast. Unlike our time, courting through letters, it took two or three months for us to really talk."

"Because you played hard to get. This kind of thing is fast in any era."

"But I do it with you after our marriage. This celebrity couple... must've done that before."

"If they did, why rush to announce the marriage? Is she pregnant?"

"If that were the case, they wouldn't get divorced. It's like this: at first, love is passionate, and they want to be together all the time. When bored, they break up. Women are at a disadvantage. The whole world knows they were together, then break up like this. It's like being nailed and bailed."

The phrase "*nailed and bailed*" made me straighten up and grip the steering wheel tightly. My mother's words pierced my mind, doubling my irritation.

"What makes you think that? It's just having sex."

I raised my voice, feeling oddly connected to the topic.

"Women are always at a disadvantage."

"So what if they're women? The other party is also a woman. Why not think both sides gained something? We were both happy!"

"What are you talking about? They're a man and a woman. What women both? Who are you talking about?"

"Whatever. Whether man or woman, no one is at a disadvantage. Stop being such an old- fashioned."

I accidentally floored the accelerator again in frustration, making my mother scream.

"Fine, both gained something. Drive slower, can you? I don't want to die yet. Why so emotional?"

Damn it!

I tried to control myself, but it didn't work.

Because of you, Arpo... that little brat. After doing it with me, you say goodbye in the morning. What do you think you're doing? And you think I care?

No way. If you want to go, go. I won't beg!

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Okay, I need to act normal.

Since Arpo decided that way, I wouldn't oppose it, even though I'd been irritated all day and night. But Arpo did something different. She didn't come out jogging as usual, didn't come out to give alms or hang around the house. The last straw that made my mother frown was:

"It's okay. I'll go to uni myself today. I won't bother you."

"Bow, apologize to her now."

My mother spoke without asking for any reason. I, in my work clothes, got pinched on the back by my mother until I yelped and turned to look at her angrily.

"What for?"

"For whatever you did wrong to her. Arpo has changed... Arpo, she has always been like this. Don't be mad at her. She's crazy."

"Why call me crazy? I haven't done anything to her. Who exactly did what?"

I crossed my arms and looked at Arpo accusingly. The cute girl lowered her head, not daring to meet my eyes, so I had to speak up.

"I'll take you to uni today."

"But-"

"No buts. My Mom will scold me again. I have something to talk to you about... Don't make me carry you to the car."

My tone was as sharp as my gaze. Arpo nodded and got into the car obediently. Before driving off, we sat in silence. We hadn't talked since returning from the beach. After such a good time, we should've been chatting like a new couple. But the atmosphere between us was the opposite. And since neither of us started talking, I signaled and parked by the sidewalk to talk properly.

"Why did you stop?"

"Let's talk."

"About what?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? You're acting strange. Even the elders are suspicious. Are we mad at each other? What did we fight about? Tell me. I don't see any reason for us to fight."

We just got together, but the atmosphere is so tense. Why is she making things worse?

"We didn't fight. But as I said... I'm done loving you."

Thump thump...

My heart sank when I heard that. It felt like a thousand needles piercing my heart repeatedly. For years, she kept telling me she loved me until it became a habit. But hearing she didn't love me anymore felt like a sharp, poisoned thorn cutting deep into my heart and spreading through my body.

"Can't you act normal even if you don't love me?"

"I'm acting normal"

"Your normal is abnormal to others. Someone who used to be sweet every day suddenly disappears, doesn't jog, doesn't give alms, and wants to go to university alone. Are you trying to spite me?"

"I'm trying to move on."

"That means you still love me, "

I said hopefully, but I didn't smile.

"Then do what your heart wants."

"No, I need to move on. Acting like this makes me less close to you."

"After we slept together?"

"..."

"Are you trying to get my attention?"

The question burst out of me, making me press my lips together tightly.

Damn it, I should've eased into it, not blurted out something so hurtful.

Arpo shook her head and gave a dry smile, her eyes welling up with tears, looking pitiful.

"Is what I'm doing not good enough? So you won't be annoyed. And does doing this really get your attention?"

"Well.."

"It's not about getting your attention, P' Bow. Don't worry about it. Since we've already parked, I'll just get out here."

"No."

"..."

"I bought this car to take you places, so that's what I'm going to do."

"It's not your duty. Don't tie yourself down like that."

"Arpo... why are you making this difficult? I don't have a problem with it. I've given you all of me already."

I sighed as the clock ticked on and traffic started to build up, but I didn't want to drive off until we had sorted this out.

"Is it just because I haven't told you I love you?"

"..."

"If I say I love you, will everything go back to normal? Fine, I'll say it."

"No."

Arpo looked at me with what seemed like anger, making me flinch.

"Don't say it just to say it, especially if you don't feel it. The more you do that, the more it hurts me."

"Then what should I do? Are you just going to take me for granted?"

I demanded, forgetting that my attitude now was completely different from when I argued with my mom. I had turned into a weak girl who felt like she

was being wronged, like I'd been robbed of my virginity and then discarded.

"And didn't you get what you wanted from me too? We both got something out of it. It was just... the heat of the moment."

"Do you get caught up in the moment with everyone?"

"Maybe. If I'm close to someone, it could happen."

Hearing that made me furious. She said it so casually, without any shame or concern, and I felt embarrassed for bringing it up.

"If you can do that with anyone, then you shouldn't have done it with me."

"Honestly, I wanted to see what it'd be like with you."

"And how was it?"

"Meh."

"What?"

My face went pale when she said that. Arpo shrugged and smiled indifferently.

"Don't ask too much. It'll just hurt us."

"..."

"The more you ask, the more annoying it gets"

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♣ Chapter 16 ♣

Today, I was in a foul mood all day. Normally, I have a stern and serious face, but today, I was radiating danger throughout the office. Even the gossipers shut their mouths when I glared at them. I was in an exceptionally bad mood, and Arpo's words kept replaying in my head, making me furious and embarrassed to the point of blushing. She threw my own words back at me, catching me off guard. The feeling of being spoken to like that-I couldn't even describe how I felt.

'It's annoying.'

How dare she? Arpo dared to talk to me like that? Not to mention what she said about our relationship, dismissing it as:

'Meh.'

She acted like I was some novice, implying that what we did together meant nothing. It made me want to reach out and strangle her, but I didn't.

Who does she think she is? I'm Bow, the proud and haughty one. Has she forgotten?

As I sat at my desk, unable to concentrate, it felt like there were small bombs in my head, ready to explode. The company owner, who used to flirt with me, greeted me after not speaking since he found out I had a girlfriend.

"You're ruining the office atmosphere today, you know?"

Mekha said with a smile. I shot back with a fierce smile. As I said, I was ready to explode at any moment, and he was brave to approach me now.

"I didn't notice. And even if it is, it doesn't stop the work from getting done, does it?"

"I'm just concerned."

His voice was calm. Normally, the company owner wouldn't chat with employees, but this conversation happened because he had feelings for me. Someone like Mekha wouldn't normally express concern for an employee. Thinking this made me even more haughty.

"Thank you."

"I think you should relax a bit."

"What should I do? Smoke?"

"Do you?"

"I'd like to try."

"Then come with me. I'll take you."

I looked at him in surprise. I didn't expect him to invite me to do something like this. Already in a bad mood and not getting any work done, I decided to get up easily, surprising my boss as well.

"Sure."

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Maybe it was the stress that made me follow him so easily. After receiving a cigarette from him, I smoked it like a pro, not even coughing once. Mekha looked at me in amazement, so I smiled a bit and explained.

"I was a bit of a rebel in school, but I didn't get addicted. I haven't smoked in a long time."

"Why did you suddenly want to smoke? What's stressing you out?"

"..."

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. I just asked because I want to be friends."

I understood his good intentions, but I didn't plan to share my personal issues.

Who talks about such things openly, especially when it's about a personal love matter?

But I decided to keep the conversation going in a roundabout way.

"Just normal life problems. They make me irritable."

"Let me guess, family or love issues?"

The word "*love*" made me flinch a bit. I didn't want to admit I had such moments because I never thought I'd be sensitive about it. I almost crushed the cigarette in my hand out of pain, but I continued smoking and sighed before crossing my arms.

"When you smoke, are you worried about family or love? People have many things to think about."

"I wouldn't believe someone like you would worry about love. From what I saw when you introduced your girlfriend, you seemed very close. What else could it be?"

"You're quite chatty."

"I'm just making conversation."

"Spoiling me like this, no wonder the employees resent me. Following you out here, they must be gossiping by now."

"You don't care about what people say."

"You could say that. My job is to work, not to make friends at work. Let them gossip."

"Then there's no need to care about what others say. You're funny."

"How so?"

"Normally, you're hard to approach because of your arrogance, but when you're in a bad mood, you talk to me in a long conversation."

He smoked and exhaled. Now, the company owner was treating me as an equal, and I felt better about him.

"Arrogance... Everyone says that about me. I guess I really am."

"You're quite dismissive and have a sharp tongue."

"Am I really that?"

"You're good at hurting others' feelings."

Thinking back, I had to agree. I often said things that hurt others, especially Arpo. I frequently told her she was annoying and to get lost. Today, experiencing it myself made me so frustrated I could go mad.

"Others can hurt my feelings too."

"Only people you care about can hurt you."

People I care about...

That made me think. If someone else had said it, I wouldn't have felt much. But when Arpo said "*annoying*," it made me furious. This realization made me understand that I cared about her more than I thought. I was even willing to confess my love if she acted normally, but she rejected me again.

As I stared out the building, Mekha's stomach growled, interrupting us. I glanced at him, looking embarrassed, and smiled before crushing the cigarette butt with my foot.

"Are you hungry? I won't bother you then. Thanks for the chat."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"I could eat or not eat right now."

"I'll take this chance to invite you to lunch, even if you might refuse," he said humbly. I shrugged slightly.

"Sure."

"Huh?"

"You invited me to lunch, right? It's time to eat."

Mekha smiled happily that I gave him a chance to take me to lunch. Normally, I wouldn't talk to him or try to get involved. Maybe because I was feeling vulnerable, and having him around was better than being alone. The small bombs in my head had fizzled out, thanks to him for keeping me company.

"I wish you were in a bad mood every day. You're easier to approach."

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At first, I thought we'd just eat at the canteen, but being Mekha, the company owner, he couldn't eat with employees like normal. We had to go out, and he took me to a famous, somewhat fancy restaurant. I didn't mind, which was good because I didn't want to deal with the stares.

Today, Mekha seemed unusually excited. He awkwardly asked what I wanted to eat and served me as if we were on a date. I was easygoing and told him I'd eat whatever he ordered.

My mood had calmed down a lot. When the food arrived, we ate and talked about politics, the economy, and his business. Of course, we didn't touch on personal matters because Mekha was careful not to ruin the "date" (it'd

become a date). While eating, I noticed a couple entering the restaurant. They noticed me at the same time.

This wasn't a drama. There are hundreds of restaurants in Thailand, but we happened to meet here. Arpo and her tomboyish friend Frame froze upon seeing me. The sweet girl looked at me and then pretended not to see. Because she ignored me, I waved and called out loudly, making everyone in the restaurant turn to look.

"Arpo, you're here too? Come join us."

Mekha, seeing me wave at Arpo, turned to look and then back at me, confused. He nodded to the cute girl who was about to sit elsewhere. Arpo, unable to avoid my call, had to come over out of respect. I gestured for her to sit with us, forcing her not to sit elsewhere. Both of them, having no choice, sat with us, turning it into a double date.

"What a coincidence. There are so many restaurants, and we still meet."

I said cheerfully, even though a new bomb was ticking in my head. Mekha watched the situation, leaning back and crossing his arms, smiling as he understood immediately.

"Yeah, so many restaurants, but we still meet."

Arpo replied, glancing at Frame with some displeasure.

"She said this place is famous, but I didn't think you'd come to a fancy place like this. Usually, you eat street food and say these places are a waste."

"Mekha brought me here. And you? Done with classes already to have lunch with a friend?"

"I only had one class today. I'll head home after lunch."

"Good."

I spoke briefly, and then the waiter handed the menu to both of them to order food. Arpo leaned towards Frame and pointed at the menu, chatting

away. Watching them, I chewed the inside of my cheek in irritation but managed to keep a smile on my face.

"Or maybe after we eat, we could go watch a movie?"

Arpo suggested to Frame, clearly wanting me to hear. Frame looked delighted at the invitation, but I interrupted.

"I thought you said you were going straight home."

"I changed my mind. I'd rather watch a movie. We have plenty of time today."

"Being a student must be nice. You can go see a movie after class while I have to go back to work after eating" I took a sip of water and looked at Mekha for support, but he offered a better suggestion.

"How about we skip work today and catch a movie? By the way, Arpo, what movie do you want to see?"

Mekha asked.

"I don't know yet."

Arpo replied, sounding annoyed and pouting

"Then let's all go together and help pick one."

Mekha suggested.

"Can we really do that? Don't we need to go to the office?"

I asked excitedly. Mekha smiled and shrugged.

"Technically, no, but skipping work once won't bankrupt the company. Besides, I'm the owner. A movie break might be good to clear my head."

"Alright then."

I said, looking at Arpo and raising an eyebrow.

"What movie are we watching? I'll join."

"No, I don't want to go anymore."

Arpo snapped, irritated.

"Let's just go straight home."

"Aw, that's too bad. I was really looking forward to watching a movie."

I said sarcastically, crossing my arms. But Mekha didn't see it that way.

"It's no big deal. If Arpo doesn't want to go, we can go by ourselves."

I noticed Arpo's growing frustration and couldn't help but smile. She was just trying to spite me, but it wasn't working out for her. Instead, I had the upper hand.

"That's true. Let's take this chance to be rebellious and skip work for a movie after we eat."

"Suit yourself."

Arpo said, ordering her food and then excusing herself. I wasn't sure if she really went straight home. As for Mekha and me, once we got in the car, he drove back to the office without stopping for a movie, as he'd suggested. I glanced at him, wondering if I should ask, but I couldn't help myself.

"Aren't we going to see a movie?"

"You just wanted to make her jealous, right? I was helping you with that."

"You..."

"It's really about love, isn't it? You two are having issues, aren't you?"

I didn't respond, starting to feel he talked too much. I almost blurted out,

"You're annoying,"

But held back out of politeness.

"Don't fight for too long. It gives the third party hope."

"Do you mean Frame?"

"No."

"..."

"I mean myself."

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In the end, I think no one went to see a movie today...

Now, Arpo had the light on in her bedroom. I looked through my window, pacing back and forth, wondering what to talk to her about. Lately, we've been talking less and mostly just spiting each other. So, I needed to find something to talk about.

But starting a normal conversation felt awkward, so I looked at the love-can I made when I was trying to make up with her before and called out to Arpo from my room.

She opened her window and looked at me with a blank expression. When she saw me pointing at the can, she looked confused. I picked up the can and spoke into it.

"Hello, test."

She picked up her can and frowned.

"What are you doing?"

"Playing the love-can game. I saw it lying around and felt sorry for it. Didn't you come up with this idea?"

I replied without using the can. Arpo looked at the can and reluctantly played along, speaking into it.

"Do you need something?"

Her voice came through the can, muffled and hard to hear.

"Did you end up watching a movie today?"

"No, I went straight home. What about you? Did you enjoy the movie?"

"I didn't go."

"Oh.."

"I was going because you said you were going."

I said, trying to be indirect. Arpo shrugged and asked back, indifferent to my honest words.

"Anything else? I'm going to bed."

"Yes"

"What?"

"I love you."

I mouthed the words without sound, not expecting her to hear because I was too scared. Arpo frowned and pressed her ear to the can again before shaking her head.

"The can must be broken. I can't hear anything... Let's stop playing. I'm going to bed."

She said, tossing the can out the window like I had done before.

"Just throw it away. It's stupid."

With that, she closed the window and turned off the light. I looked at the can lying on the ground in shock, biting my lip and squeezing the can in my hand until it was crushed, my face red with anger.

Is she... getting back at me?

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♣ Chapter 17 ♣

The crushed can in my hand was thrown towards the window of the house across the street in a fit of rage. The sound of metal hitting the window rang out, but it didn't make the room's owner open the window. My face, red with anger, pointed a vengeful finger at that window.

"This is too much, Arpo! Come out and talk now!"

"..."

"Fine, I'll come to you."

I rolled up my sleeves and stormed out of the house like I was going to war. When I reached Arpo's house, I opened the door without even ringing the bell. Arpo's mom, who was watching a TV series downstairs, looked at me in surprise, seeing me there so late.

"Oh, Bow, is something wrong? You're here so late."

"I need to borrow a pencil sharpener."

"With that angry face? Did you have a fight with Arpo? I heard a loud noise earlier. Oh, was that you shouting, Bow?"

"Can I go up and see Arpo?"

I didn't answer her questions but instead asked for permission. Arpo's mom nodded worriedly, almost ready to follow me. But I stopped suddenly and looked at her with a sweet smile.

"I just need to borrow a pencil sharpener and talk a bit. Don't worry."

"Alright."

Though I spoke kindly, my words meant 'don't follow me, 'and it seemed she understood. When I reached the second floor, I knocked on Arpo's door. The person inside was silent but slowly opened the door, looking like she'd just woken up, which was clearly a fake. I'd thrown a can and shouted loudly; there was no way she was sleepy.

"What's the matter? It's late... Oh!"

I pushed her into the room and locked the door to prevent anyone from coming in. I didn't know how much I'd explode, but I didn't want anyone to interrupt.

"You've got some nerve."

"What's this about?"

"This sarcastic game you're playing! How dare you throw that can away when you were the one who came up with the idea of the love can game!"

I said, panting with anger, clenching my fists.

Arpo's eyes widened in surprise before she laughed.

"You came here because you're mad about the can? What's this? You said you were annoyed and didn't want to play. Now you're mad because I stopped playing? I can't keep up with you."

"I didn't want to play at first, but now I do. And I craft that can myself! How could you throw it away knowing that?"

"You threw my stuff out the window without a care. I did the same, and you're mad?"

"I'm not mad because you threw the can. I'm mad because you're being sarcastic. These past few days, what's been going on? I still don't understand what happened between us since the beach incident."

"The beach incident..."

Arpo closed her eyes, recalling what happened, and sighed.

"I explained everything. I gave up. Why can't you understand?"

"So now I'm the one who doesn't understand? Your reasons don't make sense. We were together, and then you left me confused... You used me and left."

I grabbed Arpo's collar and pulled her close.

"You hurt me too much."

"Do you really value that so much? I thought you were more modern."

"You're too modern."

"Sex and love are different things. Besides, you don't even love me. Why be hurt by this? It's like exercising. That day, I was just your exercise partner."

"Exercising? You compare this to exercising?"

I looked at her, stunned by her thinking that I couldn't accept. I wouldn't *exercise* with just anyone if it weren't her. Why couldn't she see that?

"And I didn't take advantage of you. That night, you also did me."

Arpo pulled my hand from her collar, looking shy.

"What? Did you like it?"

"..."

"We can do it again if you like it that much."

Arpo stepped closer to me slowly. I backed away, not expecting this, until my knees hit the bed, making me fall back. Arpo climbed on top of me, caressing my cheek slowly.

"If it bothers you that much, tonight I'll let you do whatever you want. Then stop overthinking. You've had me twice."

"Is this who you really are?"

"I'm not sure, but I liked it too. Having no string attached."

Arpo leaned in.

"It's fun."

She kissed me, and I kissed her back, forgetting my anger. I flipped her over, looking at her sweet face as she undressed without hesitation. Arpo's face was full of joy. She looked beautiful when she smiled, but I didn't like this smile at all.

It was the ugliest smile I'd ever seen since I knew her.

"Why are you staring? Aren't you going to continue?"

"You didn't even say you love me,"

I spoke, swallowing my pain. Arpo froze, staring at me defiantly.

"Because I don't love you anymore. Why should I say it?"

"Why don't you love me anymore?"

"Because loving someone who doesn't love you back is just sinking. I had to pull myself out of that crazy feeling and learn to enjoy not loving... So, are we doing this or not? I'm ready."

Arpo wrapped her legs around my waist, pulling me close.

"I want it."

"I can't do this with someone who doesn't love me."

I jumped up and walked out of the room immediately. I ran into Arpo's mom, who was standing at the door, listening out of concern. I was startled and quickly closed the door, remembering that Arpo was not dressed.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was worried you two were fighting, so I came to see if you could work things out. I heard a noise and then silence. So, are you okay now?"

"Don't say we're okay. It should be that we come to terms now."

"Terms of what?"

"That Arpo doesn't love me anymore."

I spoke painfully and walked away, glancing back at the second-floor window. The light in Arpo's room was off. She probably dressed and went to bed without a second thought. Only I was feeling this way.

It wasn't revenge. It was just... she didn't love me.

I'd never hear her say she loved me again. That's what Arpo decided when I realized it was too late.

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After that day, everything continued as usual to keep the adults from knowing our problems, I still took Arpo to university, but she'd ask to get off halfway, and I didn't argue because of my ego. I didn't pick her up because Arpo said someone else would bring her home, and that was Frame.

We didn't do things together anymore. Arpo wouldn't join me for our morning runs or our weekly movie nights, saying she had other plans. I think the family guessed something was wrong between us, but even if they asked, Arpo and I wouldn't tell them what it was. They saw it as a childish

fight that would blow over because I still took her to school as usual, as if nothing happened.

But it did happen... she didn't love me anymore.

It'd been over 14 days and 5 hours since we fought without words. It was strange that someone like me was counting the days and hours of our problem. I never thought Arpo would become such a big issue for me, not just locally but nationally. Many nights, I couldn't sleep because of this, but talking to her directly wasn't an option because if someone doesn't love you, nothing you do will change that.

One day, when I was supposed to watch a movie, and Arpo found an excuse not to come, a special guest showed up in my room. When I opened the door, I saw Elle, someone who'd disappeared from my life and wasn't an important character. I looked at Elle in surprise, frowning as she stood at my door

"Can I watch the movie with you?"

"No, it's my private space."

I replied arrogantly, but Elle pushed her way into my room without asking and sat on the sofa.

"I don't need to watch, but I have something to talk about."

"What is it?"

"Arpo"

Hearing that name made my ears perk up. I thought there must be something important; otherwise, Elle wouldn't have come to me, knowing how possessive I was about my private space. I didn't sit next to her but stood with my arms crossed, looking at the intruder who remained silent.

"What about her?"

"Arpo is going to date someone named Frame."

My heart sank, but I pretended not to care.

"Why are you telling me? Arpo dating someone has nothing to do with me."

"It has to be related. This is directly about you, Senior. We all know how you feel about Arpo... Arpo has been acting strange, in case you didn't notice."

"Strange? She seems normal to me. I didn't notice anything."

She'd been like that since we slept together. It wasn't that I didn't notice; I saw every little gesture. And she chose to leave me for someone better, someone who could give her more. She gave up on me for no reason, just because she didn't believe I could love her

She gave up on me.

"If Arpo were normal, she wouldn't have called to talk about this. Do you know that Arpo even came on to me over the phone?"

"What?"

I almost spat out the word because it didn't feel right.

"Are you imagining things? Arpo only sees you as a friend."

"That's exactly why it feels strange. She was chatting and even flirting with me, suggesting I should flirt with her if I really liked her. Someone like Arpo, who's head over heels for you, wouldn't do this unless she was trying to be sarcastic. If Arpo can do this with me, it means she can do it with someone named Frame, too. I don't want Arpo to be like this. I'm worried."

"What can I do?"

I let my arms fall to my sides, feeling exhausted.

"Work is already giving me a headache, and now there's this childish love drama. If Arpo wants to flirt because she's wasted time on me, she has the right to."

"But you like Arpo. Are you going to let her do this with anyone? Can you stand it?"

"Stop saying I like Arpo. Do you have any proof?"

"You kissed Arpo. Why would someone who doesn't love or like her do that?"

I hesitated, remembering she walked in at that exact moment. There was no excuse, so I just shrugged and accepted it.

"What can I do? Confess my love? She'd just think I was saying it for the sake of it."

"Have you ever told her?"

"No."

"Then you have to. If she doesn't believe you, you have to show it."

"How am I supposed to show it? This is just how I am."

"Because you've never done anything to confirm Arpo about your feelings, so she's acting out like this. I don't want Arpo to make mistakes just because she feels insecure. If you love or like Arpo, do something. If you lose her, you'll be hurt."

"Don't lecture me."

"You're always so arrogant. I'm just trying to help."

"You're just scared Arpo will end up with that little tomboy. You're doing this for yourself."

"I have no hope with her anyway. Even if she flirts or chats, which isn't her true nature, the girl who used to smile brightly barely smiles now. When she does, it's forced. It hurts to see. But if it's you, you could get Arpo back. Even if she doesn't love or chat with you, she'd be happier than she is now."

Yes... Arpo hasn't smiled brightly since that night. She's been sarcastic, acting tough and annoying.

Deep down, I knew that wasn't Arpo. I was hurting just as much. That smile that could rival the sun was gone.

"So... what do I have to do?"

I started speaking hesitantly. It felt ridiculous to discuss a love topic with someone younger. At my age, I should be talking about work, a stable future, investing in stocks, or starting my own business, not love like this.

"You have to get Arpo back."

"And how do I do that?"

"You have to hit on her."

□□□□□

♣ Chapter 18 ♣

I stared at Elle in shock.

Me? Hitting on someone? I've already said that at my age, I'm in the phase of building my fortune. All I think about is work. Thinking about flirting with someone is just not possible. Plus, I'm too old to invest my love and effort into feelings like that.

I made a face like I had a small piece of dog poop in my mouth and shook my head immediately.

"Are you crazy? Why would I do that?"

"If you don't, you'll lose Arpo."

"Then let her go."

I crossed my arms defensively, feeling embarrassed.

"If that girl doesn't love me, why should I invest in it? If someone doesn't love you, they just don't."

"That's exactly what Arpo thinks."

"..."

"If someone doesn't love you, they just don't. So, she decided not to love you anymore."

Elle dropped that bombshell before leaving. I didn't see her out because I was too stunned, just standing there, staring after the well-meaning person

who, for some reason, decided to play the good guy, even though she was in love with that girl too.

Flirting?

Dream on. I'm not doing something crazy like that!

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I was searching the internet for ways to flirt with someone. I found tons of methods on Reddit. Some of them made me roll my eyes. There were suggestions to keep calling persistently, always be there to pick her up and drop her off, and do everything to make her soften up. There were even some nasty methods, like black magic.

Black magic... If it really works, that might be interesting.

When I saw someone recommending love stone bracelets, I read about them with interest, even though I never believed in such things. It was fascinating that these stones supposedly had properties like charm, popularity, and instant love just by wearing them on your wrist.

Nonsense...

And then, I ordered two from Amazon.

Did I just spend my salary on this stuff?!!

I looked at the payment screen and paid with a sigh, feeling down as the money was deducted from my credit card. I was startled when someone appeared behind me, looking over my shoulder to see what I was doing.

"Are you interested in this stuff, too?"

Honestly, I was so embarrassed that my hands shook as I quickly closed the screen. Mekha, who I didn't know had shown up, made me glare at him with a look that could make him gulp and wave his hands in defense.

"I saw you looking really stressed, so I was curious. I didn't think you'd be shopping. I'm a bit disappointed it's not work-related."

His words made it seem like I was using work time for personal stuff, which was true. The embarrassment made me grit my teeth internally before responding politely.

"I've finished all my work."

"Then shopping is fine. I'm not disappointed in you anymore... By the way, what did you buy? Why is it so expensive?"

Nosy...

I almost said it out loud before grabbing my bag and looking at the clock. It was time to leave work, so I stood up and prepared to leave.

"It's time to go home. Excuse me, boss."

I'd never called him boss before, and I did it to show my displeasure. Mekha looked at me and sighed, shaking his head as if he had no idea how to deal with me.

"I thought we were friends now."

"Just because we had lunch and smoked together once doesn't make us friends. Excuse me."

"Alright."

I excused myself and walked home, my face red with embarrassment. I felt ridiculous for buying those love stone bracelets. I wasted money and had to face embarrassment. Luckily, he didn't see the payment screen. Otherwise, it would have been even more humiliating.

On the way home, stuck in traffic, I let my mind wander. A kid knocked on my window, hands pressed together in a wai, selling bunches of white champaka flowers wrapped in banana leaves. The kid looked so young,

having to help their parents work. I felt sorry and bought a bunch to place in my car.

It smelled nice.

I sniffed it a bit and thought... If I like it, Arpo might like it too.

When I got home, Arpo wasn't back yet. I frowned a bit because I remembered her schedule: she only had one class today and should have been home by now. She must be hanging out with that little tomboy again.

Thinking that made me jealous, but there was nothing I could do but wait. When the clock struck 8 PM, Frame's fancy car pulled up in front of the house. Arpo waved goodbye to the person in the car and stood there until the taillights disappeared. I, who'd been waiting for her to be alone, slowly emerged from behind. Arpo turned around, startled as if she'd seen a ghost.

"Ah!"

"Why are you so startled? Did you do something wrong?"

I stood with my hands behind my back, hiding the flowers, and looked at her accusingly. Arpo, who was still shocked, slowly changed her expression to a smile, not caring about my question at all.

"If we did the right thing today, there's nothing to fear tomorrow."

"Where did you go?"

"Out."

She answered bluntly. I pouted a bit and stood on my tiptoes.

"Where did you go?"

"Since when does you care?"

She looked puzzled before smiling coolly.

"Oh, since we slept together."

I was the one embarrassed when she said that, almost baring my teeth at her boldness.

"You say that so casually."

"What about you? Standing here quietly, were you waiting for me?"

"I was just taking a walk outside. The weather is nice."

"There are so many mosquitoes, and you're standing by the trash can. Your nose must be broken."

"I smell something nice."

"Go see a doctor. I'm going inside."

"I have a reason for the nice smell."

Arpo looked at me, confused. I pulled out the flowers I bought from the kid and handed them to her, showing off a bit and raising an eyebrow.

"It's champaka "

"They still can't cover the smell of the trash."

"Your nose is broken. Take it."

I shoved it into her hand.

"Smell it. It's nice."

"..."

"Smell it."

I almost shouted. Arpo sniffed the flowers reluctantly and nodded.

"Yes, it is,"

"See? Take it. It's for you."

"Huh?"

"What smells better than champaka flowers?"

I shrugged, trying to look cool.

"It's a gift for you."

"What's going on? You're weird today. Standing in the dark by the trash can and giving me flowers."

"They're not just flowers. They're champaka flowers."

"Well, it's a flower anyway."

"Stop talking. Take it. Put it by your bed. Oh... tomorrow's a holiday."

I started mumbling, getting excited, and bouncing on my toes.

"Let's go to the temple."

"You must be possessed. You never go to the temple."

"See you in the morning."

I cut her off and prepared to walk away because I couldn't stand there any longer. Arpo's voice stopped me.

"I can't go. I have plans."

"Plans?"

I turned back to look at her, frowning.

"What plans are more important than mine?"

"Any plans are more important than going to the temple. I have plans with Frame."

"Frame again? You've been too close to that tomboy lately."

"She's my friend."

"Friends don't hang out that often."

"And sisters don't sleep together either."

Ouch...

She had a point.

Then why did she do this to me?

I almost blurted it out but held back my emotions and returned to the original topic.

"Where are you going?"

"Not telling."

"I'm coming too."

"What?"

"I'm coming with you."

"No, you can't. I didn't tell Frame there would be someone else."

"Why? Is it a date?"

"Who knows..."

She trailed off, shrugging and smiling.

"It might be."

"Doesn't matter. I don't mind."

"But I do. Why would you come and be a third wheel?"

"See you tomorrow."

"P'Bow!"

It was probably the most shameless thing I'd ever done. No matter how much Arpo protested, I insisted on going. In the morning. I quickly showered and dressed, waiting in front of the house, watching for Frame's car.

I had to do this because they might sneak off, afraid I'd follow. Thinking about it made me pity myself. I never had to do this before. Arpo used to follow me around, and now it's me following her. Was this karma?

I'd been waiting for Frame forever since 8 a.m., but that little tomboy didn't show up until 10 a.m. When I heard the engine, I jumped up from the sofa and peeked outside. I saw Arpo walking out to greet the tomboy with a smile. They were chatting about something. I took the opportunity to stride over boldly and wave.

"Good morning, you two. You look fresh and ready for a trip"

"..."

"I'm coming too."

I opened the car door and got in the back seat immediately, not caring how they felt. They looked at me, but I turned away, not wanting to make eye contact. Now I understood how Arpo felt following me around. How much courage did she need, getting scolded and chased away but not giving up?

Oh, I wish I could disappear into the ground.

For over five minutes, the two of them chatted before getting into the car and sitting in the front. Arpo glanced at me through the rearview mirror, squinting her eyes.

"You really managed to get your way, huh?"

"I don't understand what you're talking about. I just asked to come along."

I said, crossing my arms and shrugging nonchalantly, trying my best to hide my embarrassment at my own audacity.

"Anyway, I hope Bow can come along today, Frame."

"Of course, the more the merrier," Frame replied.

"So, where are we going?"

I interjected, wanting to be part of the conversation. Arpo answered on behalf of the little tomboy behind the wheel.

"To the temple."

"The temple?"

I made a face like I'd seen a ghost and mocked slightly.

"Didn't you say any appointment is more important than going to the temple?"

"It depends on who the appointment is with."

I bit my lip, almost blurting out a sarcastic "*hmph*", "but managed to hold it in. Frame drove along, chatting away with Arpo, while I sat silently, arms crossed, watching them with irritation. My bad habit or desire to stir up trouble got the better of me, and I rudely blurted out a question.

"Frame, this car is really expensive."

I touched the genuine leather seat and looked around.

"Did you buy it yourself?"

People who earn their own money have a deep sense of pride, like me right now, working hard and earning a substantial income. Arpo looked at me through the mirror, knowing I was trying to provoke.

"My dad bought it for me as a gift for getting into university."

"What does your dad do?"

"Why are you asking that?"

Arpo interjected, embarrassed. I shrugged indifferently.

"Just trying to get to know you. People with money must have a source for it. If money just appeared out of nowhere, why would there be money laundering cases, right, Frame?"

I tried to make Frame seem inferior. Rich people must have some background. At least let me know where the wealth comes from.

"My family runs a toy business."

"Dildos?"

"P'Bow!"

"Just kidding. I have a sense of humor, you know."

Dildos are toys, too. If you go to Japan, you'll see that the adult section considers them toys. Sex toys, you know? What's wrong with that?

"And this is your first car, a European one. What's next, flying a plane?"

"I'll think about it."

I was being sarcastic!

Frame took my jab with a smile and continued chatting with Arpo. As we drove out of Bangkok towards Ayutthaya, Arpo asked Frame to stop at a gas station to use the restroom and buy some snacks. When Arpo got out,

she glanced at me and asked if I wanted to come along, but I pretended not to notice.

"Don't you need to use the restroom?"

"Nope."

"At least come to keep me company. I have something to talk about."

"I'm sleepy. Go ahead, don't worry about me."

"I'm not... fine."

Arpo left, leaving just Frame and me in the car. The little tomboy glanced at me through the rearview mirror and gave a dry smile. I seized the opportunity to ask directly.

"Do you like Arpo?"

"What?"

My straightforward question took her aback.

"Do you like Arpo? Is that why you pick her up and drop her off all the time? Just because you helped each other once doesn't mean you have to see each other every day."

"If you're asking directly, I'll answer directly... Yes, I like her."

She replied frankly, but her answer irritated me so much that I sat up straight.

"Does she know?"

"I'm not sure."

"Keep it to yourself."

I said angrily, crossing my arms and leaning in to whisper in her ear,

"Don't say it out loud."

"Why? Are you possessive of her?"

"You could say that."

"Do you like Arpo?"

"No."

"..."

"But I love her. Don't mess with her!"

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♣ Chapter 19 ♣

After finishing the sentence, we both fell silent. Honestly, I was more shocked at myself for blurting out something like that without thinking. The young tomboy blinked at me, looking like she was about to say something.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Arpo walking toward the car. At the same time, I noticed it, too. From being in the middle of a heated argument, forbidding her from messing with my people, I had to compose myself and speak in a firm tone quickly.

"You seem like an honest one. I hope what we talked about doesn't reach Arpo's ears."

"And what if it does?"

The young tomboy asked curiously, showing no signs of fear. I responded with a blank expression.

"I'll burn down your toy factory."

Arpo opened the car door, arms full of items from the mini-mart. I moved back to my original seat, crossing my arms as if nothing had happened. Arpo sensed the tense atmosphere and looked at me and Frame with a puzzled expression.

"Did something happen? Why does it feel so awkward?"

"You're imagining things."

I quickly said before the young tomboy could speak.

"We were just chatting about random stuff, right, Frame?"

I glanced at Frame through the rearview mirror. Frame met my eyes, smiled, and nodded.

"Yeah, just a straightforward chat."

"Really? What were you talking about? I want to know."

"I can't remember the topic."

"But you just talked about it. How can you forget? Come on, tell me. I want to know."

Arpo, knowing that pestering me wouldn't work, turned to pester Frame instead, chatting sweetly until I got annoyed and let out a 'tsk' sound, crossing my arms and looking out the window.

Are they really that close? It's annoying.

"You'll find out someday."

Frame said simply and started the car to continue our journey. We then changed the topic to what we'd do today.

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Teenagers were full of energy... Sometimes, I felt like I shouldn't have come along. Besides dog poop, one of the things I disliked most in life was going to temples. I didn't know why I felt so tormented every time I stepped into a temple and saw the large Buddha images.

Offering alms at home was fine, but going to a temple to pray and smell the incense everywhere was something I really disliked. Maybe it was because, deep down, I wasn't very religious. I just followed good principles in daily life but never prayed for anything because praying was for those who were suffering.

But Arpo and Frame seemed to enjoy drawing lots, praying, and making wishes, making me feel like a ghost who hated temples.

"P'Bow, aren't you going to pray?"

Arpo asked when she saw me sitting with my arms crossed, not even clasping my hands or doing anything other than sitting and watching others pray.

"I already did in my mind."

"At least pay respect in front of the main Buddha image. Didn't you want to come to the temple yesterday? You invited us."

She persisted, clasping her hands as an example. Seeing her like that, I reluctantly clasped my hands at my chest.

"True, I invited you to the temple, and now we're here."

"That's strange."

"What now? I'm clasping my hands, see?"

"You wanted to come to the temple yesterday, but now you act like you hate it. Do you want to be here or not? You're killing the mood."

"Whatever I do is wrong in your eyes now, huh? Fine, I'll show you what a good Buddhist does. Watch closely."

Seeing her scrutinizing me, I decided to clasp my hands earnestly and chant from the first to the last line on the board, moving my lips silently. I prostrated three times, drew lots with all my might until all the sticks fell out like a maniac, then went to fill the oil lamps and put money in the donation boxes for water, electricity, and novice education. After finishing everything, I glanced at Arpo and sarcastically said:

"Take me to ordain. All that's left is to shave my head."

"That would be good. You'd earn merit. I'd like to see you with a shaved head,"

She retorted, just as cheeky. I pouted slightly and stomped out of the temple after finishing all the tasks. After praying, the three of us went to eat river prawns. While eating, I watched the young tomboy peel both small prawns and the largest river prawns for Arpo, trying to please her. They laughed together as if they were alone. I could only glare at them and clear my throat.

"Is peeling prawns that fun? We just made merit, and now we're killing and eating prawns. So much merit."

"The prawns are already dead. They're food. Are you going to ruin the mood every time?"

Arpo said, slightly annoyed that I disagreed with everything.

"I'm not. I'm just stating the facts."

"If you don't like prawns, we'll eat them all ourselves."

Frame, who'd been silent, finally spoke up.

The role of a supporting character is to be invisible. The protagonist narrates. Who allowed you to interrupt?

"No, since I'm here, I'll eat to honor the girl."

I took the last prawn and put it on my plate. Arpo glanced at me briefly and then continued chatting with Frame, as if trying to make me feel like an extra. I cleared my throat as a signal and asked.

"What are you two chatting about?"

"We're thinking about where to go next after eating prawns. Arpo suggested dropping you off first because you can only handle one outing a day."

Frame said, making me glare at the mischievous girl planning to drop me off and go on a date. It was true that I usually only went out once a day because I was lazy and wanted to go back to my comfortable bed, but not today. Today was special. I'd endure it

"No worries. I'm free all day. If I get tired, I'll sleep in the car. Where are we going next?"

"To the movies, then shopping at the mall, and finally to a lounge."

"A lounge? You go to places like that, Arpo?"

I looked at her, surprised.

"Since when?"

"Starting today."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll try everything I've never done, and I'll do it with Frame."

She said arrogantly as if to say she'd always followed my lead but now would break free and do things she had never done.

"Great, I'll try new things too. I'll try everything with Frame as your friend." I said.

"Are you still coming, P'Bow?"

"New experiences are great. After eating, we'll watch a movie, shop a bit, and then go to the lounge. Plus, with me around, your mom won't complain because at least you have company."

"I already have Frame. Don't kill the mood."

"Having me around guarantees the perfect vibe."

I replied, smiling broadly. Frame smiled and continued eating prawns while Arpo sighed and shook her head.

"Sorry, Frame. We might not do everything we planned today because of a third wheel."

The word '*third wheel*' made me bare my teeth at her, showing my displeasure. Arpo had become bolder, speaking without the usual respect. But no matter what I did, Arpo didn't care. She continued eating and then paid the bill. Of course, I paid for this meal because I was the oldest.

"Don't worry. P'Bow. I intended to treat us," said Frame.

"I know you're rich, but I can't let someone younger pay. I'll cover this meal... I earn my own money now, so there is no need to use my parents' money."

I said, subtly jabbing and pulling out the money to pay. This meal was expensive, but I was too proud to let someone younger treat me.

"Then let me pay for the movie and the lounge."

Frame offered. I shrugged.

"Fine, if you insist."

"Thank you for the meal."

Arpo said, bowing gracefully as if I were a stranger. I stiffened, not accepting the bow, but looked at her with annoyance for keeping such a distance.

"You're welcome. Think of it as me gaining some merit."

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I must be a real third wheel because even during the movie, I sat between Arpo and Frame to keep them apart. After the movie, while shopping, I kept getting in their way, blocking their path, preventing them from shopping comfortably, and trying to rush things.

Arpo bared her teeth and covered her face with her hands, seemingly trying to endure my actions. When we reached the mall's parking lot, ready to head to the lounge, Arpo couldn't take it anymore and stood in front of me before I got in the car.

"P'Bow, please go home."

"What? We're going to the lounge next, aren't we?"

"You ruined the whole atmosphere today."

She said, clearly irritated. I looked at the small figure in front of me, raised an eyebrow, and used my finger to smooth out the frown on her forehead, smiling with satisfaction.

"You know, you look cute when you're annoyed."

Arpo swatted my hand away in annoyance and took a deep breath.

"Don't act like this with me, Arpo. How dare you swat my hand away? I'm older than you."

"Well, you're really annoying. P'Bow!"

Ouch...

The word "annoying" from Arpo hit me hard, leaving me stunned. As I recoiled, Arpo's eyes widened in shock, too, but she didn't take back her words or apologize. Instead, she changed her tone back to normal.

"Let's part ways here. At least the last place Frame and I go can have a good time."

"No way. The last place is where I should be the most. Get in the car. I'm not leaving even if you tell me to."

"When did you become so shameless?"

"Starting today."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Can't you tell?"

"..."

We stared at each other in silence.

"No, I can't tell. Why are you doing this?"

I reached out with both hands to cup her face, looking into her eyes meaningfully.

"I..."

"..."

"I want a free meal."

With that, I opened the car door, got in, and crossed my arms as usual. Arpo stood there, stiff, glaring at me from outside the car. I pretended not to notice, even though my heart was pounding. It felt like I was about to blurt out something she wanted to hear.

Why? Why don't I have the courage when it comes to her? I've been shameless all day, what's one more shameless act?

'I love you.'

The words were stuck in my throat. I wanted to say them, but something inside me stopped me as if I was scared. She'd wanted to hear it all her life, but it was the hardest thing for me to say. What if I told her and she didn't love me back?

'I think I'm done loving you.'

That sentence still echoed in my head. The image of her crying by the sea hadn't faded from my heart. She said it with a genuine feeling, and now she

was showing me she was moving on. Only I was stuck, trying to pull her back. And I didn't even know if she'd stay if I did.

Stay where she once loved me....

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.

And finally, the last mission of the day arrived. A secret lounge bar in the Charoen Nakhon area. I had no idea where this little tomboy found such a hidden place. It was a shophouse that didn't look like it could house such a place, but the upper floor was a beautifully decorated bar.

Though small, it had some customers. Arpo looked excited while I felt dizzy just looking at the place and the lights, even though I hadn't had a sip of anything.

I was sleepy and wanted to go home, but I had to endure it because of this girl.

When we arrived, Arpo went to claim a table and looked at the drink menu, ordering something alcoholic. I grabbed the menu and spoke to her sternly.

"You're too young to drink."

"I told you I wanted to try."

"And you're drinking too? Who's going to drive?"

I turned to Frame, who gave a dry smile.

"I won't drink today. I planned for Arpo to drink alone."

"Then why bring her here? Do you have some evil plan?"

I glared at Frame.

"Are you planning to get Arpo drunk?"

"No, I can't drink because I've to drive. But Arpo wanted to come here, so I brought her. I told her I had to drive, and she said it was fine."

"Yes, it's fine. If I get too drunk, we can just crash at a motel,"

Arpo said nonchalantly, making me grit my teeth and stiffen like a possessed medium.

"That's enough, Arpo. I'm not letting you drink."

"Try me."

The beautiful girl ignored me and waved to the waiter to order a drink. The menu was full of foreign names. Arpo ordered anything that sounded strange. When the pretty drinks arrived at the table, I grabbed the glass she was about to take and downed it like water.

The sweet and sour taste mixed with bitterness made me squint. I never liked the taste of alcohol, not in this life or the next. I couldn't believe I was drinking just to stop Arpo from trying it.

"Why did you take my drink? It was mine!"

"It's not good. You don't need to drink it. Let's pay and go home."

I nodded at Frame, as if commanding her.

"We're treating today, right? One glass is enough. Let's go!"

I stood up, but Arpo remained seated, waving for another order. I glared at her and shouted.

"Hey, didn't you hear me?"

"If you want to leave, go ahead. I haven't had a single drink I came here to drink, and I will."

Another glass was served. When Arpo reached for it, I snatched it and drank it again. She bared her teeth at me.

"You took my drink again. Another glass, please."

I took it and drank it again.

"Another drink, please."

"Another drink, please."

"Another... please."

"That's... enough."

Thud!

That was the last thing I remembered before darkness swallowed me whole, leaving me with no sense of anything.

When I came to, it felt like I was being undressed. I slowly opened my eyes to see the ceiling of my own bedroom. Arpo was wiping me down with a damp cloth. When she saw me open my eyes, she looked worried.

"How did I teleport here? We were just at the bar."

"We had to carry you out. Your dad had to carry you to bed himself. I got scolded."

Arpo grumbled, wiping my face with the cloth.

"Feeling better? You drank so much. Do you need to see a doctor?"

"Why does my forehead hurt?"

"You hit your head on the table."

Oh... It seemed I blacked out completely. No wonder I ended up at home like I teleported.

"How do you feel? Do you feel like throwing up or dizzy?"

"I'm fine, just a little dizzy."

I tried to sit up, but the spinning room made me lie back down.

"Okay, maybe I'm not fine. I'm really drunk."

"Why did you drink so much?"

"Because if I let you drink, this would happen. Think of it as me showing you an example... By the way, what time is it?"

"One in the morning."

"Why aren't you asleep?"

"I was worried. I feel responsible for you being like this."

"So the date was a disaster, huh?"

"Yes, you succeeded. Today was a terrible date because of you."

She said bluntly, making me laugh.

"You don't love me, but you still get in the way. You're selfish."

"..."

"I'm leaving. I'm annoyed."

I grabbed Arpo's arm as she was about to leave and looked at her with pleading eyes.

"Can you stay? I feel... feverish."

Arpo froze, looking shocked at my pleading tone, probably hearing it for the first time. Maybe because I was drunk, I dared to act this way, which I wouldn't normally do.

"What can I do if I stay?"

"A lot."

I pulled her hard, making her fall onto the bed, her arms propping her up over me. I took the chance to wrap my arms around her neck and pull her close.

"At least... hug me."

"..."

"I'm cold."

"P'Bow... are you trying to seduce me?"

"Is it working?"

"..."

"Sweetheart... is it working?"

I closed my eyes, feeling not quite myself. Arpo sighed, stroked my cheek, and leaned in.

"You're so frustrating."

"..."

"But it's working."

□□□□□

♣ Chapter 20 ♣

Arpo, who was about to leave, looked at me with eyes full of meaning when I held her back. The sweet-faced girl reached out to touch my face, then leaned in and kissed me. I melted into the touch before gently pushing her away, worried.

"Do I smell like alcohol?" I asked.

"I don't care," she replied.

"That's good."

I said, pulling her closer and wrapping my arms around her neck, locking her in place. We tangled together, reminding me of the atmosphere at the beach. The beautiful girl slowly slid her hand under my shirt, caressing me as if she knew she could.

I was getting used to the touch, not startled like the first few times. Maybe it was because I was drunk, so I let her do as she pleased. After a while, I flipped her over, making her lie beneath me. I stared into her eyes, biting my lip, my heart pounding, and stayed silent. Arpo, who was dazed, looked at me curiously and asked,

"What's wrong? Do you have something to say?"

"I..."

I love you... Should I say it now? Will she think I'm saying it just to get something out of it and overthink everything after tonight? But this is the perfect moment. I can feel my courage building. If I don't say it now, I might not get another chance.

"What is it?" she asked again.

"Before we do anything like this, I want to tell you before my courage fades," I said.

"..."

"I lo... **blargh**."

I started, but then my body reacted. The alcohol I'd drunk earlier was kicking in. I started to feel nauseous but held it back until Arpo noticed

"Are you okay? You don't look so good," she said.

"Nothing,"

I swallowed what I was about to throw up and took a deep breath.

"One more time, I can do it."

"..."

"I lo..."

Blargh...

It came up in my throat. I jumped up and quickly turned away, running out of the room because I couldn't hold it in. The food I'd eaten that day came out into the toilet upstairs. The loud retching sound was like a scene from a drama where the heroine showed she was pregnant, making Arpo rush to follow and rub my back, looking alarmed.

"Here we go, the alcohol kicks in."

Arpo said, rubbing my back and lightly hitting me, which hurt. I threw up and looked at her with reproach.

"Did you just hit me?" I asked.

"Do you think I was chanting a spell? How did you manage to drink almost ten glasses?"

"Who ordered that much?.... *Blargh*."

I turned to throw up again. I thought I was done, but it kept coming. Arpo made a frustrated sound, worried, and sighed.

"Why did you take my drinks?" she asked.

"If you drank, you'd be like me," I replied

"If I threw up, it has nothing to do with you."

"I'm not feeling well, you know... *Blargh*..."

I continued to throw up and rested my head on the toilet, feeling weak.

"Damn it, why does this have to happen at an important moment?"

"Is it that important? Hehe."

Arpo laughed, probably thinking the important thing was us getting intimate, but I meant something else.

"There's plenty of time."

"It's not like I get good opportunities like this often. I have something to say." I said.

"You can say it tomorrow," she replied.

"I'm afraid I won't have the courage again."

I said weakly, closing my eyes. Arpo shook me and tried to pull me back to the bedroom.

"Don't sleep here. Let's go back to the room. Get up."

"I want to, but I'm afraid I'll throw up on the bed... What if I throw up on you while we're doing it?"

"Still thinking about that? We're not doing it anymore,"

She laughed, a mix of exasperation and fondness, and tried to help me back to the room. I leaned on her slightly because I had no strength to walk, but eventually, I ran back to the bathroom and threw up again.

"One more time, then I promise I'll say what I intended," I said.

"Take care of yourself first, then think about other things," she replied.

"Go wait in the room. I'll follow," I said.

"I'll stay with you. If you have to sleep in the bathroom, I'll sleep with you."

"I thought you hated me," I said.

"I want to," she replied.

She stayed with me all night in the bathroom because I couldn't go back to the bedroom as I'd said. I was so mad at myself. When I was about to say something important, this happened. When would I get to say what she wanted to hear? When would I get her back? If this kept up, someone else would take her away before I could.

Don't take her, take my vomit first, please.

The next thing I knew, it was morning. I didn't even know when I'd moved to this comfortable bed. I woke up with a headache, and the person who said she'd stay with me all night was gone. I held my temples, feeling the pain but more worried about not seeing Arpo. I forced myself up and went downstairs to find her. I found my parents watching TV together.

"You're up? I thought you drowned in your vomit."

"Where's Arpo?" I asked.

"Waking up and calling for Arpo right away. Do you know you kept her up all night with your vomiting? Do you know that?"

My dad scolded, annoyed.

"And where did you learn to drink like that? Why did you get so drunk?"

"Dad, stop insulting me. I have a headache."

I said, pretending to be more in pain than I was.

"I did it to protect her."

"She ended up taking care of you all night, vomiting until she had to call me to carry you to bed at three in the morning. She took care of you all night. When you wake up, go thank Arpo for having to deal with a troublesome senior."

My dad said.

I bit my cheek and looked outside, noticing Frame's car. My sleepiness and hangover vanished, and I spoke sharply as if my parents had invited Frame into the house without knowing anything.

"When did that little tomboy get here? Why didn't anyone tell me?" I asked.

"How would we know? She's not our guest."

My mom said, looking at me confused.

"Hungover? You're grumpy this morning."

"Last night, Arpo took care of me. This morning, she's taking care of someone else." I said.

"She has her own social life." My mom replied.

"I don't have any." I said.

"Who would want to be friends with someone like you?" My mom said.

"Are you really my mom?"

I said, pulling up my shirt sleeve and running up the stairs to change clothes without even thinking about showering. I rushed out of the house and went straight to Arpo's house. There was laughter coming from inside, like everyone was having a good time. When they saw me, the laughter stopped. Arpo's mom greeted me, surprised.

"Oh, Bow, you're up?"

I'm sleeping, maybe?

I thought sarcastically. Everyone seemed happy to see Frame. I was probably the only one annoyed.

"Yes," I replied.

"I heard you were really drunk last night. Arpo and Frame were just telling us about your antics. It's funny... Bow has a silly side, too," she said.

Everyone laughed. Arpo looked at me with concern and asked,

"How are you? Still hungover?"

"What time did you leave my house?" I asked.

"Around six in the morning. I think. I haven't slept yet," she replied.

"Why didn't you sleep? Entertaining guests this early, do you have the energy?"

I asked, sitting down without being invited. I sat across from Arpo and looked at Frame, who was sitting next to her. feeling irritated.

"You're diligent in coming here, too."

Frame smiled but didn't say anything. She probably knew I was being sarcastic because I'd shown my displeasure since yesterday about her getting close to Arpo. And my love for Arpo was probably still echoing in her head.

"Yesterday, someone ruined the date," Arpo said teasingly, but it made me frown and glare at her.

"So, you had a new date?" I asked.

"When the date didn't work out, I brought her home to finish it. It's actually convenient to eat at home and talk about many things."

She explained. I clenched my fists on my lap, trying to stay calm.

"What did you talk about?" I asked.

"Everything It was fun. We talked about what Frame likes and dislikes, her family's business, how many people are in her family, and things like that. I'm summarizing," she said.

I asked, and she answered. Now, everyone was silent, watching my conversation with Arpo.

"An interview, huh?" I said.

"Not exactly," she replied.

"And do you know what Arpo likes and dislikes?" I asked.

Frame answered after being a silent participant for a while.

"Actually, I already knew some things after knowing her for a while. But talking like this, I got to know more," she said.

"And what did Arpo say?" I asked.

"She said she likes folk songs and would be impressed if someone played the guitar for her," Frame replied.

"Which is surprising because Frame can play the guitar."

Arpo said, smiling at Frame.

"Good- looking and talented."

"I didn't know you liked people who play the guitar," I said.

"Did you ever know anything about me? You never seemed interested in me," Arpo replied.

"And does she know more than I do?" I asked.

"At least she's trying to learn, right?"

Arpo turned to look at the little tomboy beside her with a smile, not thinking much of it.

"If I want to eat something, she takes me to eat. If I want to watch a movie, she takes me to watch it. She even let you come along on our dates. Where else can you find someone this sweet?"

"It's better than the one not caring at all. That's why they say to love someone who loves you back."

"Just being accommodating makes her your soulmate?"

"Does she love you?"

My question brought a sudden silence. The lively conversation, which was filled with laughter, turned serious as soon as I chimed in.

"Love, huh..."

Arpo turned to Frame.

"P'Bow's asking. How should you answer?"

"How do you want me to answer, Arpo?"

"Give her your best answer."

"If you want me to love you, I will."

"Then I love you, too."

"You're lying!"

I slammed the table in a fit of rage, forgetting all manners, and stood up.

"How can you love someone you just met? You've been chasing after me for years, telling me you love me every day. You know what I like to eat, what I don't like to do. You've never given up, no matter how much it hurt."

"..."

"Every morning, we go running together. In the evening, you pick me up on my way home."

"..."

"I bought a car just to pick you up and drop you off, to protect you as much as I could. Yes, I didn't know what you liked because I never paid attention. I only knew you liked me."

"Calm down, Bow. Let's talk this through."

Arpo's mom said, confused by my sudden outburst.

"I was the one you liked the most."

"Forever doesn't exist, and it was just in the past."

She said in a calm, indifferent voice, like a knife stabbing my heart, making me almost collapse. Tears streamed down my face, and I quickly wiped them away as I stared at her.

That's right, it was just in the past. I thought I mattered more than i actually did.

"Now I know I love you, and I've loved you all along."

I said that and pushed myself out of the house. Instead of going inside my house, I walked aimlessly through the village. The pain made me feel ashamed of what I'd said, but it was like the last straw. Arpo told everyone she liked Frame and didn't love me anymore. Telling her I loved her like that was my final farewell because I knew it wouldn't change anything.

If you want to hear it, I'll say it. If you don't love me anymore, that's fine. It's better than doing nothing.

My tears wouldn't stop. I didn't even sob. Sobbing shows weakness, and I couldn't stand that. But I still let the tears flow in front of Arpo and Frame's family. I had to leave. I didn't want anyone to comfort or pity me for how things turned out.

"P'Bow... P'Bow!"

Arpo ran after me, calling from the house far behind. I didn't turn back, afraid she'd see my tears. The small, short-legged girl ran after me, and I quickened my pace, ready to run away because I didn't want her to see me like this. But my headache made my body weak.

"Stop right there, P'Bow... I have short legs!"

Before I could start running, Arpo caught up and hugged me from behind. I tried to pry her hands off, not looking back because I didn't want her to see my tears. But Arpo's grip was too strong.

"Why did you just walk out like that? You scared everyone in the house."

"I have a headache."

I said, my voice mixed with sobs, so I cleared my throat to sound normal.

"Can you stop talking? I want to be alone to sober up."

"The more drunk you are, the more I need to be with you. I'm worried... Are you crying because of me?"

"Don't flatter yourself!"

"How can I not? You just told me you loved me in front of everyone."

Her voice was filled with joy, making me turn to glare at her smiling face.

"What are you smiling about? Are you happy now?"

"I won't smile then."

"If you don't love me anymore, don't follow me. Can't you give me time to move on?"

I started yelling at her like a bully. How much more do you want to humiliate me? At least let me have some dignity. Go be with your woman and leave me alone."

"You love me."

"Not anymore," I said.

"But you just said you love me. How can you not love me?"

"Because I don't love you anymore, so I won't love you either. Like we always say, forever doesn't exist."

"But not that quickly."

"Stop doing this."

Finally, I broke down, burying my face in my hands.

"Does humiliating me make you feel good? Fine, you win. You got me. You got my heart. Now, look at your success. Look!"

I pulled my hands away from my face and pointed at myself.

"This is the face of a loser, someone you don't love anymore."

"..."

"Someone who watched you from the window, who kissed you secretly while you were asleep. who whispered *'I love you'* in your ear while you weren't paying attention. Yeah, that's me!"

"When did you ever tell me you loved me?"

"I told you secretly!"

"And if it's not a secret? Did you ever tell me that?"

"I love you!"

Arpo hugged me tightly and laughed before starting to sob, leaving me confused. I was the one crying, but now she was the one in tears.

"Waah."

"Arpo... why are you crying?"

Her tears were rare, even though we had been distant lately. I hadn't seen her cry much unless it was something serious, like when Elle confessed to her or when she tried to move on from me at the beach. So why was she crying now? What did I do wrong?

Her tears made me feel terrible.

"I'm happy. You finally said it!"

□□□□□

✿ Chapter 21 ✿

The tearful voice of the smaller person surprised me quite a bit. It was filled with joy and emotion, unlike the past when she was always cold and distant. Now, Arpo was hugging me so tightly it was almost like she was merging with my body. I could only look at her in confusion and slowly push her away to see her face clearly.

"Didn't you hate me?"

"I never hated you... *hic*."

She cried like a little child, wiping her tears with her sleeve and looking at me with a smile. At this moment, I couldn't tell if she was crying or laughing.

"Do you know how long I've been waiting for you to say you love me?"

"What... and all this time..."

"It was nothing. I was just pushing you to say it."

It felt like a hard slap to my face, leaving me numb. From the embarrassment of being dumped, it turned into the embarrassment of being made to look foolish.

"Everything you did was to make me say it?"

"Yes, I've never stopped loving you."

Hearing that, I slowly stepped back from her, unable to even look her in the eye because it was too much to bear. Arpo, who was smiling, looked

confused when she saw my reaction and reached out to grab me, but I raised my hand to stop her.

"Don't touch me."

"What's wrong, P'Bow... Are you mad at me?"

"Don't use the word '*mad*.'"

I said through gritted teeth and turned to walk away. Arpo looked like she wanted to follow, but I ordered sharply.

"Don't follow me. I want to be alone."

"P'Bow..."

"..."

"Wherever you go, I'll go with you."

Arpo was back to being herself, the person who followed me around like a duckling following its mother. But this time, she wasn't pestering me, just quietly following as I walked, thinking about various things.

All this time, she iced me out, was cold to me, and forced me to say it without caring how much it broke me inside. For over ten days, I could barely sleep or eat, thinking she didn't love me anymore. My head was full of questions about what I did wrong and why she pushed me away and left me. But when the truth came out, it made me look stupid.

Mad? That word was too mild. But I didn't hate her either. It was somewhere in between, and right now, I didn't want to see her face.

The village was circular, so no matter how far I walked, I ended up back at my house. I opened the door, and I shut out Arpo, who was about to come in. She didn't dare push the door open because I glared at her with intense anger.

"If you step into my house, I'll throw you out."

"Please don't be mad at me. I did it all to make you realize you love me."

"Like I said, I don't love you anymore."

"That's not true. You love me."

"Think whatever you want, but don't follow me. Otherwise, I'll kill you."

Saying that made me sound delusional, but I could strangle her to death right here. Arpo saw I was serious and stopped, just watching me go inside. My parents, seeing my angry face, didn't dare ask anything because they knew I wouldn't answer. Right now, I wanted to be alone. No one should bother me.

You went too far, Arpo... too far!

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After understanding why Arpo did what she did, I went back to my normal life. Saying I felt relieved wouldn't be right. It was more like my heart was numb, dead, feeling nothing about life right now.

But it seemed I wasn't the only one living normally. Even Arpo, who hadn't shown up for almost two weeks, was waiting in front of my house today, ready to run, smiling brightly like the sun and waving at me.

"Yoo-hoo!"

"..."

"Can I join the health club again?"

I ignored what she said and started running without a word. Arpo tried to keep up with me, chatting away.

"I haven't run in so long. I miss the old vibe."

"..."

"And I miss you too, P'Bow. Or should I call you Senior? But I'm used to calling you P'Bow No matter what I call you, we still love each other."

"..."

I didn't speak, respond, or argue. I just kept running, letting Arpo talk to herself. The little one was quite persistent, talking about this and that the whole time we ran. Until the sky started to change color and the sun was about to rise, it was time to go home, coinciding with my mom going out to give alms.

If I happened to see my mom giving alms, I would join her as usual. But today, Arpo, trying her best to make up with me, reached out to touch my arm while I was putting food in the monk's bowl.

"Don't touch me."

My voice was so sharp that the monk paused while giving blessings. My mom looked at me with a warning glance, while Arpo looked dejected but forced a smile.

"I want to be with you in the next life."

"But I don't," I said truthfully. "Give alms by yourself."

I stopped giving alms and walked straight into the house. Arpo pouted but didn't say anything. Giving alms with my mom alone. After showering and getting ready for work, I opened the door to find my mom waiting for me with a serious tone.

"Let's talk."

Mom squeezed into the room and sat on the bed. I looked at her a bit nervously because I hadn't seen her like this in a long time, not since she scolded me for coming home late during my school days.

"What's up, Mom?"

"What's going on between you and Arpo lately? Why are you so cold to each other? What's the matter?"

"Are you here to talk about Arpo?"

I sighed in frustration.

"It's nothing, don't worry."

"I've noticed that lately, you and Arpo have always been cold to each other. Arpo disappeared for a while, and when she came back, you seemed angry with her. What's going on?"

"It's just a typical girl fight."

"You're grown up now, Bow. You know she loves you, right? That's why you're acting so arrogant."

"You don't know anything..."

I was about to argue, but seeing my mom's eyebrow twitch, I shut up.

"Can't grown-ups get mad?"

"I don't like this atmosphere. Be mature. If there's a problem, clear it up. I know you're like this: arrogant and stubborn, saying one thing but meaning another."

"Do I seem that bad?"

"Yes, you do."

"..."

"So grow up. Do what adults do. Talk and clear things up. We're neighbors, and when you fight, it makes it hard for us to talk to her parents."

Mom got up to leave the room.

"If she's wrong, forgive her. If you're wrong, just apologize."

"If it were that easy, it'd be nice."

"Everything is about communication and talking."

"..."

"Learn how to speak. Is Arpo your enemy? Why do you hate her so much? This morning, she cried while giving alms. I felt sorry for her. Arpo doesn't suit tears."

"You love that neighbor girl too much. You never ask what she did to me."

"Think about whether what Arpo did was appropriate for what you deserved. Don't ask 'why, ask 'what' made her do it. The answer is clearer."

Mom finished her lecture and left. I could only think about it and sigh.

Why did Arpo do that?

What made Arpo do that?

That's right. 'Why' and 'What' Just a slight twist, and the meaning changes completely.

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"Hi, P'Bow."

Arpo, waiting in front of the house in her student uniform, greeted me cheerfully again. I looked at her, not quite believing my mom that she cried while giving alms. Thinking that made my heart flutter, but I kept a straight face, feeling nothing.

"..."

"Can I ride with you to the uni?"

I didn't answer, which was like saying, *'If you want to come, get in.'* Arpo jumped into the front seat, smiling brightly at me.

"I miss the smell of your car, P'Bow. And I miss you too."

She chattered like when we ran in the morning, but I didn't say anything.

"And I know you miss me, too."

"After making me look stupid, you still dare to smile at me?"

That was probably the longest sentence I'd said to her since the incident. I looked at the road while Arpo pouted and shook her head.

"I never thought you were stupid."

"But I felt stupid, both in front of you and in front of Frame."

This time, I looked her directly in the eyes.

"After everything you did, do you think I can still love you?"

"What do I have to do for you to stop being mad?"

"Do the same thing."

The phrase could mean many things. She could be as cheerful as before or ignore me as she used to. I wouldn't feel anything. Arpo nodded and smiled at me until her face crinkled.

"Okay, I'll do the same thing, which is to keep trying until you soften up. And I have a schedule that you'll stop being mad in about three days."

Why three days from now?

Of course, I didn't ask anything and returned to the usual silence. When we reached the university, Arpo, who had hitched a ride, pulled out a jasmine

flower and placed it on the car's console.

"Here, this will make the car smell nice... Someone once gave me achampaka flower, so I had to return the favor with a Thai flower."

"Get out."

"I love you, P'Bow."

"..."

She said that and got out, waving goodbye. I drove off without saying anything, not even glancing in the rearview mirror because I still felt annoyed. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw the jasmine flower and picked it up to smell it.

Did she think one flower would make me forgive her?

I tossed the flower to the back of the car and thought about the flowers I'd given Arpo before. Did she throw them away like this? The flowers I'd mustered all my courage to give her-were they now in the trash?

Realizing this, I pulled over and reached back to retrieve the jasmine flower, placing it back where it was. I felt too cruel for discarding it so carelessly when it'd done nothing wrong.

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Even though I pretended not to care about Arpo's parting words, "in three days." I was quite interested and eagerly awaited what she'd do. That girl must have some plan, and I had to keep up. So, as the three days passed, I kept my distance but also counted the days, wondering what she'd do. Today, the sky was overcast, and the thick clouds covering Bangkok made me sigh as I had to drive home.

The traffic is insane. Everyone must be afraid of the rain and flooding... including me.

But the rain only threatened and never fell. When I got home, I found Arpo already in her room. Today, there was no sign of anything happening. She'd gone for a run with me in the morning as usual, and by evening, nothing had changed.

What was that about three days? Or is it tomorrow? Did I count the days wrong?

After dinner, I showered and prepared for bed. I glanced out the window again and saw that Arpo's room light was still on. There was no sign of anything happening except for the raindrops starting to fall on the roof. Mom rushed out to bring in the laundry. Soon, the rain poured down like the sky had burst open, with thunder roaring like a hungry stomach.

With that kind of noise, is the sky going to swallow Bangkok?

Seeing nothing unusual, I prepared to go to bed. But just as I turned off the lamp, I heard something hit the window with a 'thud. At first, it was nothing, but then it happened again and again until I had to get up and look. I saw Arpo standing in the rain, soaked. I stared at her actions in a mix of astonishment and confusion.

What the hell was she doing standing in the rain?

"What are you doing?"

I shouted over the sound of the pouring rain. Arpo shielded her forehead from the rain and shouted back

"I'm here to make it up to you."

"Hey!"

I was at a loss for words and started to feel awkward. I looked around for an umbrella but then stopped myself, thinking it wasn't my business. I shouted back.

"Get inside now, or you'll get struck by lightning!"

"Stop being mad at me."

"..."

"I love you more than anything in this world. Please get back together, or I'll stand in the rain all night."

I looked at her with cold eyes.

"Suit yourself."

I closed the window on her and went back to bed.

Did she think using the weather to pressure me would work? This isn't a music video: it's real life. Only a fool would do something like this.

Wait a minute... She said on the third day, I'd be nice to her. Did she know it'd rain and plan to pressure me with it?

Realizing this, I felt like smacking myself for thinking such a thing. The more I knew, the more I wanted to stay in my room and bury myself in bed, watching the relentless rain with a strange feeling.

Has she given up yet?

Has she gone inside yet?

If she gets pneumonia... well, she could find a new lung.

Damn it!

I jumped out of bed, grabbed an umbrella, and ran downstairs. Everyone was asleep, so no one heard the noise as I ran down and out. Arpo was still standing in the rain, soaked like a stray dog. Hugging herself and shivering. She looked at me and smiled.

"Are you losing your mind? Why are you standing in the rain? What music video are you filming?"

"A love song you haven't heard."

She replied cheekily, her face pale. I pursed my lips, still holding the umbrella over myself.

"Is this what you meant by three days? You checked the weather forecast and planned this, didn't you?"

"You're a genius."

"Damn it, you're cunning."

I handed her the umbrella.

"How did you come up with this plan?"

"I'm good at pressuring people."

"I believe it."

"Did it work?"

"..."

"Are we good now?"

"I can't say yet, but get inside before you get sick."

"Whose house?"

"Yours, of course."

"No, I want to go to yours."

"Why?"

"I want to sleep with you. I'm definitely going to get sick tonight, it's so cold."

Arpo hugged me, soaking wet, and pleaded.

"Please, let's make up. I put everything into this apology."

"Using pressure tactics like this doesn't work on me. If you don't go inside, suit yourself. I'm going back to bed."

I pulled the umbrella back and turned to go inside, but after three steps, I couldn't stand it. I turned back and handed her the umbrella.

"Damn it! Just come inside my house, okay?"

"Okay"

"But it doesn't mean we're good. You made me look stupid."

.

I still felt irritated but cared too much about Arpo to let her stand in the rain. She walked into my house, drenched from head to toe. My parents were already asleep, so I took Arpo to my room to change clothes, handing her clean clothes and telling her to change outside.

"I'll change in here."

She said that and stripped off all her wet clothes right in front of me without any shame. I turned away, gritting my teeth.

"Shameless."

"Why be ashamed? We've seen everything already. You should change too; you'll get sick from the rain."

"Don't worry about me."

Arpo quickly changed and then came over, snuggling up to me.

"Let's sleep."

"I'm not sleeping. When the rain stops, go back to your house."

"No, I'm sleeping here tonight."

Arpo slipped under the blanket stubbornly. I could only watch and chew my cheek, arms crossed.

"Why are you standing there? Are you going to stand all night? Or are you afraid you'll make a slip?"

"Sometimes I prefer it when you ignore me. When you're like this, it makes me want to kick you."

"Hehe."

Arpo laughed, pleased, seeing me accept the challenge by getting under the blanket next to her. But I immediately turned my back to her, not wanting to look at her sweet, pleading face because I was still angry. Arpo, seeing me do that, snuggled closer, her warmth pressing against my back, her arm draped over my waist, and her face buried in my nape.

"I love you, P'Bow."

"People who love each other don't do this."

"Because I love you, I needed reassurance. But I know what I did was wrong."

Arpo's voice was soft.

"I'm sorry for everything. I acted like a child just to hear you say you love me, dragging others into it and hurting you."

"..."

"But whether then or now, I still love you."

"You said you didn't love me anymore."

"I was pretending. It hurt me, too."

"Not as much as it hurt the one being lied to."

I sighed, pulling her hand off my waist and covering myself with the blanket.

"The rain stopped; go home."

"Am I your enemy, P'Bow? Do you hate me that much?"

Is she your enemy, Bow?

Mom's words echoed in my head, overlapping with Arpo's, leaving me stunned. I didn't hate her as much as I thought. I wasn't as angry as I expected. I was actually happy things were back to normal, but I still acted cold. It's true that being angry doesn't solve anything. Arpo had tried to apologize all day. If she really gave up, I wouldn't be able to turn things around.

Suddenly, I felt my heart soften. The more Arpo snuggled and pressed against me, the faster and harder my heartbeat became, reminding me of the night we went to the beach. That night, we were lost in passion and love, and Arpo's scent that night was the same as today.

"Achoo!"

The sweet-faced girl who was sulking at me sneezed a little, making me burst into laughter. From being stern and starting to soften a bit, I turned to look at her with a sigh.

"Serves you right. You wanted to make a scene by standing in the rain."

"In the movies, standing in the rain looks pitiful. So, I thought if I apologized in the rain, you'd forgive me... It's been days now, and you haven't talked to me at all. Can't you stop being mad?"

"Let me think about it."

Arpo smiled happily upon hearing that because "*let me think about it*" meant I was definitely going to forgive her. The small girl took this opportunity to climb on top of me under the blanket. I looked at her, a bit shocked at how quickly she moved in without warning.

"Take all the time you need to think. While you're thinking, I'll do something else... *Achoo!*"

Arpo sneezed right in my face, spraying saliva. I wiped my face and frowned.

"You're sick and still thinking about being naughty. Just saying 'let me think about it' doesn't mean you can do this."

"Don't you want to? Don't you miss our passionate nights? Ha..."

Before she could sneeze again, I reached out to cover her mouth, making her sneeze into my hand. I sighed at her illness and couldn't help but flip her over to lie down while I climbed on top instead.

"Sneezing like this, you can't do anything."

"I can... It's just a sneeze."

"We can do it, but the one doing it... is me."

"..."

"While I'm thinking about whether to forgive you, I'll be the one on top. Your job today is just to lie still"

"But..."

"If you don't want that, go home."

"What can I say? I'm at a disadvantage now."

Arpo said, puffing her cheeks. Seeing her cute and adorable demeanor, I leaned down to kiss her and slowly moved downward. Arpo jerked in

surprise, not expecting me to move in so quickly.

"P'Bow, wait... I..."

"I love you."

"..."

"I love only you. I've always loved you. You want to hear that, right?"

And as soon as I used my mouth, Arpo surrendered easily....

"I... I give in. Mm."

Her legs were spread apart. I was a bit clumsy doing this because I was usually the one being acted upon. But today, I needed to show her how overwhelming my feelings were.

The small girl now had flushed skin all over like a cooked shrimp. Her emotions were fully engaged, evident from what I tasted and how her body reacted. Even though I wasn't very skilled at this, it inspired me and made me tell myself it wasn't that hard.

Maybe because she already had feelings for me. Besides using my mouth, I tried new methods, like inserting my fingers. Arpo's body twisted, and her moans were so loud I had to warn her.

"Shh, keep it down. People outside might hear."

She looked like she was about to cry but obediently grabbed a pillow to cover her face. I smiled at her cute yet sexy behavior and continued doing everything at once.

Soon, Arpo's body jerked slightly, indicating she had reached her climax. The small girl removed the pillow from her face, breathing heavily, and slowly opened her eyes to look at me shyly.

"That's enough. I'm not mad anymore."

"Be mad a little longer."

"Huh?"

She looked surprised as I crawled up to her, unbuttoning my shirt and giving her a seductive smile.

"Since you were so mad, the apology should be a bit harder."

"..."

"At least I'm not done yet."

Hearing that, she giggled a bit before changing her expression to serious and flipping me to lie on my side, then climbed on top of me.

"It seems you like it when I'm mad."

"When you're mad, it turns me on... makes me want to apologize..."

"..."

"all night"

"It's not hard. Even if I'm not mad."

She leaned down to whisper in my ear and nibbled, knowing it was my weakest spot.

"I can do it all night."

"..."

"And forever."

□□□□□

♣ Chapter 22 ♣

Everything went beautifully. Our clothes were scattered all over the place. Even though I said I was the only one doing it, in the end, Arpo couldn't resist joining in. Now, she was snuggling up to me like a little kitten while I lay on my back, staring at my ceiling, thinking about this and that. As she kissed my cheeks with such passion and obsession, I looked at her with a bit of suspicion.

"Will it be like that day?"

"Like what?"

She kissed my forehead again and propped herself up on her elbow, looking at me lovingly.

"That after we did this, the next morning you ghosted me."

"Hehe."

Arpo laughed sweetly and kissed my chin before shaking her head.

"Not anymore."

"How is that day different from today?"

"That day, you didn't say you loved me even once. But today, you've been saying it all the time. I'm not protesting anymore."

"Was that a protest?"

"Let's call it a demand for the word 'love' from someone who never says anything."

She lay comfortably on top of me. I gently stroked her back, still unable to shake off my worries because of our past. It felt like a thin scar she left behind.

"Just because I didn't say 'I love you', you had to go that far? Didn't my actions show it clearly enough?"

"Honestly, I could tell you liked me, but I wanted to hear it once. No matter what I did, I couldn't get you to say it. Like I said, it hurt the one doing it, too. You have no idea how scared I was that you'd leave without looking back. Luckily, you held onto me."

"And if I hadn't?"

"I'd have come back to beg you as usual."

"So the result would've been the same."

"Good thing it wasn't. You finally said you loved me. I don't know how long you planned to be so stubborn."

I bared my teeth a little and glanced at the clock on the bedside table. It was past 3 AM. Initially, I was going to send her home once the rain stopped, but some activities made time fly. Realizing this, I quickly got up, feeling a bit embarrassed by the clothes scattered around the bed.

"Put your clothes on and go home."

"What? Are you getting revenge? You had sex with me, and now you're dumping me?"

"Don't be silly. If my parents wake up and see you stayed over, there will be questions."

"Just answer them honestly."

"Can we really be that honest with our parents? They wouldn't understand."

"So, you're not going to tell anyone what we are?"

Arpo's face fell a little, making me bite my lip. I felt like I was using her and not taking responsibility, even though that wasn't the case at all.

"It's hard to explain."

"Your family has known I've liked you for a long time."

"They see it as a little sister admiring her big sister. If they knew we did this..."

I hesitated and shook my head.

"Let's take it slow. It's not that I'm throwing you away, but this needs everyone's understanding."

"I think you're overthinking it. Our parents are very modern."

"Let's wait until we're more ready. Put your clothes on."

"One more round?"

"What?"

"It won't take more than fifteen minutes. I promise I'll put my clothes on after."

Arpo kissed me, but I pulled away, feeling shy.

"Are you crazy? We just did it. Aren't you tired?"

"I could do this with you all day."

Arpo pushed me back down and climbed on top.

"Besides, right now, you look so cute to me. I have to seize the moment. Who knows when I'll get to do this again, considering how stubborn and worried you are. You're really a worrier."

"How can I not worry? This is..."

Arpo nuzzled my neck until I started to melt. It's not that I didn't want to do it, but I was overthinking it. As her hands roamed my body, reaching sensitive spots, I couldn't say much because my body wasn't following my thoughts at all.

Damn it, this is so embarrassing. I want it, too.

"Just fifteen minutes, okay?" I said.

"It depends on you. Hurry up and finish."

"You're so cheeky."

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Finally, Arpo left my house around 4 AM. We tried to act as normal as possible. Even though we'd just parted, by 5 AM, Arpo was waiting outside my house to go for a run around the village together.

But today, things were a bit different. Instead of running, we walked closely together because there weren't many people around at this hour, except for the security guard patrolling on his bike. Whenever someone passed by, I'd jump away from Arpo like I was electrocuted. Arpo pouted a little and stopped walking as if protesting.

"Does walking with me embarrass you that much?"

Her criticism made me sigh but also feel guilty.

"If someone sees, it won't look good."

"Why not? We love each other."

"Are you going to sulk again? I already explained why."

"Love isn't a secret. If you want to love, why hide it?"

The lyrics of a famous song floated into my head, making me frown a little.

"I'm not hiding it, just not flaunting it."

"That's hiding."

Arpo stomped ahead of me in a huff. I grabbed her arm and shook my head.

"Give it some time."

"How much time?"

"Why are you in such a hurry? We just..."

"We just got together."

"Isn't that too blunt?"

"We didn't just get together. It's been almost a month. We just continued today. I don't want to hide anymore."

"I'm not trying to hide. I'm just figuring out how to tell my family."

"Figure it out quickly. I'm impatient."

"Now that you know I love you, you're being demanding?"

When I complained, Arpo's pout turned into a big smile, competing with the morning sun. She seemed so pleased with my confession that she couldn't stop smiling, which made me feel relieved.

"I'm not being demanding. Okay, I'll give you time. But if you take too long, I'll tell your parents first."

"I'll tell them myself. If you blurt it out, they'll be shocked."

"Okay, but hurry up. I want to be affectionate in public. If you take too long, I'll find someone else to be affectionate with."

"Big mouth."

"I'm confident in my big mouth. I made you happy all night."

I covered my face, wanting to bite my tongue. I couldn't believe this kid brought it up again. The sweet-faced girl leaned in and smiled brightly.

"Just kidding. I love you more than anyone in the world. I'll only be affectionate with you. But like I said, hurry up. I'm impatient. I want to tell the world we love each other."

"You're talking too much!"

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Everything went on as usual. We didn't show any signs of suspicion. My parents didn't suspect anything. I didn't say much because I wanted to find the most diplomatic way to explain. But everything around me seemed unusually fresh. My body felt energized and lively. Even at work, Mekha, who was about to walk past my desk, couldn't help but stop and greet me

"You seem in a good mood today. Something good happened?"

"Huh?"

I looked up from the company accounts I was working on and smiled at him without thinking.

"Why do you think that?"

"You smiled at me."

I immediately shut my mouth because I forgot about myself. Normally, I wouldn't show any emotion because I didn't want to get too close to anyone.

Damn it, I couldn't control my facial muscles.

"Is smiling bad?"

"It makes my heart tremble."

"Boss."

When I wanted to warn or stop someone, my tone would change immediately. Seeing my change in demeanor, Mekha raised his hands in surrender and quickly waved them.

"Whoa, whoa. I was just joking. No need to be serious. I know you don't have feelings for me. I just wanted to tease."

"It's not good for a boss to be too familiar with their subordinates. People in the company already don't like me."

"If you don't care about me, I believe you don't care about anyone in the world."

While we were talking, an employee passing by handed me a package, saying it was from the delivery service. I looked at the box, puzzled because I couldn't remember ordering anything. As I was about to open it, Mekha, who hadn't walked away yet, leaned in curiously, making me stop.

"Aren't you going to work?"

"I'm nosy."

"..."

"When I see someone opening a package, I get curious. It's like receiving a gift, even if it's not mine."

"I believe you're nosy, but it's personal"

"If you didn't order drugs, what are you afraid of?"

"You really want to see, huh?"

"Yes, I'm excited now."

Sometimes, he seemed like a three-year-old. But since I didn't think I did anything wrong, I decided to let him see because I was curious too. When I opened the box, I found two stone bracelets I'd ordered. Mekha smiled and chuckled a bit while I felt embarrassed by what I ordered and that someone saw it. His nosiness was making me angry.

"You really ordered them. I thought you just added them to your cart that day."

"Are you satisfied now?"

"What do these stones do?"

"They show that my boss is nosy."

"You're disrespectful."

He pretended to be upset and was about to walk away but couldn't help turning back to smile at me again.

"Smile often. You have a beautiful smile, even if it's not meant for me."

He said that and walked away. I pursed my lips, puffed my cheeks, and watched him out of the corner of my eye. Then, I looked down at the stone bracelet I'd ordered, feeling embarrassed. I'd forgotten that I'd done something so silly and ended up delivering it in front of a nosy person.

But come to think of it just ordering the stone bracelet made Arpo and me reconcile. Maybe magic really does exist, even though I haven't worn it yet.

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Arpo: I miss you so much.

As I was looking at the stone bracelet, thinking of a way to give it to Arpo, a message from the person I was thinking about popped up. I looked at the message and the bracelet, then placed my hand on my chest in surprise. How could it be so magical? How did she know I was thinking about her?

But replying that I missed her too didn't seem like me, so I had to respond in character.

Bow: Don't exaggerate. We just saw each other this morning.

Arpo: I miss our passionate night.

Bow. You always bring this up.

It wasn't just her who thought about that. But if I typed 'same here' or something like that, Arpo would get cocky and tease me all day and night. So, I had to act cool as if our lovemaking wasn't that big of a deal.

Arpo: I want to see you soon. I couldn't focus in class today.

Bow: What time do you finish? I'll pick you up.

.

I miss you too... This was a way of saying 'I love you' without using the word 'love' in the sentence. But her answer made me feel down.

Arpo: 2 PM. You haven't finished work yet.

Bow: Yes.

Arpo: But we can meet at home. I'm staying over at your place again tonight.

Bow: Don't you have a bed at your own home?

Arpo: Or do you want to stay over at mine?

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I smiled at her straightforward question until my cheeks almost burst, so I quickly stopped smiling and cleared my throat when people around noticed I was acting out of character.

Bow: See you at home. I have something for you today.

.

As soon as work ended, I jumped out of my chair and drove home immediately with a strangely longing heart. I knew I was acting weird, my heart was pounding, and I was excited to see someone waiting at home.

But when I got home, my eyes caught sight of a familiar European car that annoyed me. From being cheerful, my face turned sour. Instead of going into my own house, after parking the car, I headed straight to Arpo's house and found Frame chatting comfortably with Arpo's mom.

"Hey, Bow, I just heard a car drive back."

Arpo's mom noticed and smiled at me. Arpo, who'd disappeared, reappeared with drinks and smiled brightly when she saw me.

"You're here."

"Yeah."

I should've responded more sweetly, but I was trying to control my irritation, so my tone came out harsh.

"Hello, P'Bow."

Frame, who could tell I was in a bad mood, greeted me politely.

"You came straight here, huh?"

"Usually, I come and go like it's my own home."

That wasn't very mature of me. While the younger tomboy approached me politely, I acted like a child. Realizing this made me even more annoyed with myself.

"Are you never going back to your own home? Always coming to see Arpo."

"She just came to drop me off."

Arpo quickly defended, knowing my mood wasn't right. The sweet-faced girl served the drinks and then sat beside me, trying to comfort me. Even though she didn't act clingy, she gently rubbed my back as if to tell me to calm down.

"You two are really close, huh?"

"Are you thirsty, P'Bow? I'll get you some water."

"No need. Stay here."

I placed my hand on Arpo's thigh and pressed firmly, showing Frame that I could command Arpo to do anything.

"I just came to say hi. I'll be leaving soon."

"Stay longer."

Frame said with a smile, but I snapped back even more.

"You talk like it's your own home."

Everyone fell silent, seeing that I was seriously upset.

"I come here so often that I start to think of this place as my second home."

"And does the family here think the same?"

I glanced at Arpo, who lowered her head, avoiding eye contact. If it were before, she'd have fought back with sarcasm. But because we'd deepened our relationship and understood each other, I now led the relationship and had the right to be possessive. Arpo was in the wrong, and I needed to talk to her after Frame left.

"Anyone can come, dear. We're all family here. I welcome everyone."

Arpo's mom tried to make everything seem pastel, but I disagreed.

"No, I don't agree."

"And what capacity do you have to say that?"

Frame sipped her drink politely and raised an eyebrow.

"The homeowner welcomes me, and this isn't even your house."

"Frame."

Arpo warned her friend in a low voice. I licked my lips and laughed out loud. Today, my behavior was terrible. Jealousy made me crazy. I just realized today that I was this kind of person.

"As a poor person, I guess."

"P'Bow, don't say that."

"It's true. I don't have a luxury car, my house is small, and my hair is longer."

"P'Bow, you're changing the subject smoothly."

Frame laughed. Her words and tone were as if teaching me a lesson.

"We both know I meant 'status' in the context of 'relationship status.'"

I gritted my teeth, glaring at the handsome tomboy.

"And what status do you have?"

"Any status Arpo wants me to be."

"Same here. Whatever Arpo wants me to be, I will be."

"And what status is that?"

After beating around the bush, I exploded because it seemed like she was teasing me, forgetting that Arpo's mom was there.

"Can't you see I'm talking as her girlfriend?"

"..."

"I'm Arpo's girlfriend, and I don't like you. Get out of here!"

□□□□□

♣ 23.Reveal ♣

Everything fell into silence. The only sound was my heavy breathing, slowly returning to normal. The clock on the wall ticked away the seconds, each one dragging on. Every eye in the room was fixed on me, stunned.

Oh crap... I said it out loud.

I glanced at Auntie and opened my mouth, licking my lips nervously. I had no idea how to fix this situation. The gradual approach I'd planned was out the window. I'd blurted everything out, leaving no secrets.

What do I do now? What can I do...?

"Can we just rewind and pretend I didn't say that... please?"

Arpo's mom shook her head slowly, her eyes still wide with shock. I swallowed hard, looking around and locking eyes with Arpo, who was just as shocked, her hand covering her mouth.

Help me... I mentally pleaded with her, but she remained silent, her eyes sparkling with surprise. It seemed no one could help me now except myself...

"Kyaaaaaaaaa."

“ ... ”

"There's a disgusting cockroach! It's crawling everywhere, ruining everything!"

Whoosh!

I bolted out of the house immediately, not knowing what else to do. Arpo, probably regaining her senses, ran after me, shouting.

"P'Bow, where are you going?"

"Exercising!"

I shouted back without even looking at her. What a lame excuse. Exercising in work clothes, and I even forgot my shoes. Now I was running barefoot in the late afternoon sun, stepping on dirt and rocks, my feet hurting. But my embarrassment made me forget the pain. My heart was racing, and the only way to calm down was to run, though I had no idea where I was going.

"P'Bow!"

Arpo, having run around the neighborhood, caught up with me, panting. She put her hands on her knees and waved for me to stop.

"Stop running. You're making everyone more alarmed. You've already slipped up."

"How did you know where to find me? You were just behind me."

"Where else would you run but around the neighborhood? So I ran the other way to catch you here."

"What should I do? I blurted it out. We're screwed." I looked like I was about to cry, Arpo, still panting, smiled brightly in the evening sun.

"Why would we be screwed? It's not a big deal"

"Not for you, but it is for our families."

"You're overthinking it."

"How can I not? Who would accept their daughter dating the girl next door? Your mom's trust in me is probably gone because of that stupid outburst. Damn it! Now, there will be more obstacles."

I looked up at the sky, feeling lost. Nothing would be easy anymore. From now on, I'd be forbidden from seeing Arpo. Her family would also forbid her from seeing me. Things would get complicated. We'd have to sneak around, plan to defy our parents, and eventually run away together.

The end. My story will be continued in the special chapter... Maybe our parents will let us love each other later.

"You're overthinking beyond the human's brain process. I tell you I love you every day. Our parents know. It's nothing."

"While I'm overthinking, you're underthinking. Who would accept this?"

"It's the modern era. Phones can transfer money from bank accounts now."

"What does that have to do with phones?"

"I'm saying our parents aren't narrow-minded. Calm down, let's go home. Running like this is just hurting your feet. Here, I brought your shoes."
Arpo walked over and gently put my shoes on, one by one. I watched her, feeling touched, and bit my lip.

"Should we run away together?"

"Where would we go?"

She stood up, her eyes sparkling, clearly liking the idea.

"You're still smiling. I'm serious."

"I'm serious too. Where would we go?"

"Anywhere, as long as it's just us."

"You're quite the romantic. Love you!"

Arpo hugged me tightly. I pulled away, looking around.

"Don't. Someone might see."

"You shouted outside the house earlier. They might be planning our wedding by now. It's too late."

"Don't say that. I don't know how to face your parents or mine."

"We can face them. No matter what happens, I'll be by your side. Even if we have to run, I'll run with you."

"If we run, what about your studies?"

"Then I quit studying."

"Are you crazy? You can't let love ruin your education."

"You were the one who suggested running away. Remember?"

Oh right... I bit my nails, thinking.

If we run, I have to consider Arpo's future. Why does our love have so many obstacles?

"There must be a way,"

I thought logically.

"A way to make our parents accept us."

"What way?"

"Let me think."

I was about to start running again, but Arpo blocked me with her arms and legs.

"Why are you stopping me?"

"Think all you want, but no running. Work clothes and exercise don't mix. Just walk and think."

"I think better when I run."

"Have pity on someone with short legs like me who gets tired easily. I want to help you think, too. Walking and thinking is fine."

When I considered running again, Seeing Arpo look like she was about to cry made me give in out of pity. I actually wanted to think alone, but seeing she was part of this, having her help wasn't so bad.

Two heads are better than one. The saying fits this situation perfectly.

We walked quietly, deep in thought. I didn't know what Arpo was thinking as she kept glancing at me. I was thinking about how to explain this to our parents. The gradual approach was out. I'd blurted everything out. Arpo's mom was probably consulting with my mom or thinking about what to do next.

Will they reject or support us?

Thinking pessimistically, from what I'd seen in countless novels and dramas, no parents ever approved of this. So, I had to think of the worst-case scenario. If it didn't go as planned, we'd have to run away. But first, I had to figure out how to soften the blow.

Or we could go dramatic, like a Thai soap opera.

Suddenly, an idea popped into my head.

"I know!"

I stopped walking and snapped my fingers like a scientist discovering gravity. Arpo, seeing my excitement, couldn't help but get excited, too.

"What? Do you have a good idea? Tell me."

"It has to work. Let's go to my car."

"Why? Are we really running away?"

I didn't explain and walked quickly back to my house, grabbing something from the car. When Arpo saw what I took out, she looked puzzled.

"What's that?"

"A stone bracelet."

"And what are we doing with it? Throwing it at our parents?"

"Geez."

I frowned, annoyed that Arpo didn't get it.

"Don't you see?"

"What? Explain it to me."

"We're going to make a wish on this bracelet. It has to work."

The sweet girl made an awkward face. I stared at her and gnashed.

"Why do you make that face?"

"Is this what you said you could figure out? Praying?"

"Don't look down on it. As soon as I decided to use my credit card to buy it, we slept together a few days later. Do you see how sacred it is?"

When I said that, Arpo smiled slyly, delighted.

"You also have this side. Do you like me so much that you buy something like this to worship and make your wishes come true?"

"You've said too much."

I made a squeaking sound, blushing in embarrassment.

Well, I don't know when I started believing in these things, but isn't there a better way than this?

"Hold it. Put your hands together and pray, asking for everything to go well."

Arpo looked at the bracelet, amused. Seeing me clasp my hands in prayer, she couldn't help but ask.

"Is there a chant for this bracelet?"

"Maybe, but I don't know where I left it. Just pray in Thai. The sacred beings won't understand Pali or Sanskrit."

After saying that, I clasped my hands together and prayed for the sacred beings to help. If I still had any merit left, I wished for their support in our love. I hoped everything would go smoothly, that my parents wouldn't oppose, or if they did, that something would shut their mouths when I explained our situation to them.

I mumbled to myself before opening my eyes to find Arpo staring at me with an infatuated smile.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You're so cute, P'Bow."

She said, reaching out to pinch my cheek until it stretched like rubber. I yelped a little and made a face.

"I'm older than you, you know. Stop being like a child. Have you prayed yet?"

"I have. Let's go. Now, all that's left is our confidence. Let's go inside and talk to our parents."

As she pulled me into the house, my legs suddenly felt like they were nailed to the ground. Even though I'd prepared myself and prayed to the sacred beings, it was still incredibly difficult.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"We've done everything we could. What are you still afraid of?"

"But... I don't know."

"Come on, let's go in together. Whatever will be, will be."

Arpo said.

"O...okay."

In this situation, Arpo seemed braver than me. I followed her into the house slowly, trying to delay as much as possible to gather my courage. But in the end, we both made it inside. My parents were sitting and talking with Arpo's mom.

From the looks of it, Frame had probably already left since there were no cars parked outside. The two families were talking, and if it wasn't about us, what else could it be?

"Go ahead and say it."

Arpo nudged my arm and nodded. I pressed my lips together, making up my mind before the adults noticed us.

"Everyone, Arpo and I have something to say."

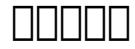
Our parents, who were talking, turned to look at us at the same time. I glanced at everyone with determination.

I'm beautiful, I'm capable, I can do this. Nothing can stand in the way of our love. Even the characters in Chaoplanoy's novels overcome all obstacles.

"What is it?"

I took a deep breath as my mom asked, raising her eyebrow. It seemed like everyone had been waiting for my appearance. So, I took this chance to confess what had happened and express my feelings in one sentence.

"Arpo and I, we're together."



♣ 24. Obstacle? ♣

I said It...

As I spoke, sweat trickled down my back. The feeling of letting it out was like confessing a grave sin. Honestly, we could've kept this between just the two of us since it was a personal matter. But I wanted our family to know because we were too close.

Besides, I'd already blurted it out earlier in the evening. Seeing Arpo's mom in the house made it clear she was here to talk about us. Better to say it myself. Whatever happens, let it happen. We'll deal with the consequences later. That's what I thought.

But how we would handle it was another matter.

If the family didn't accept it, if they tried to stop us from being happy, I'd already decided I'd play dumb and act like I didn't hear anything. I might even cause a loud argument and threaten to run away from home. We might get grounded, Arpo might be sent abroad to study, or my mom might introduce me to some guy to separate us. I'd thought of many scenarios but told myself that external factors couldn't tear us apart.

I held Arpo's hand tightly, my palm sweaty. Arpo looked at me with eyes full of emotion, as if she'd decided that no matter what happened, she was ready to follow me. We'd face it together. She was that steadfast, maybe even more than I was.

The mothers looked at us with calm eyes, which only added to the pressure. I swallowed hard and repeated myself.

"We're serious. We love each other. We're a couple, not just neighbors anymore."

And the response from my mom after my next sentence was...

"Really?"

"Huh?"

"If you hadn't told me, I wouldn't have known."

Her tone wasn't sarcastic, but it made me feel like my confession was a joke.

"Mom, I'm serious. Arpo and I love each other."

"..."

"We're two women who love each other."

"Yeah."

That single reply left me even more stunned. It was like my mom didn't care about the details. She just answered and then turned to talk to Arpo's mom again. I had let go of Arpo's hand and sat next to my mom to explain how serious this was.

"Mom, don't take this lightly. I'm serious."

"I know."

"Know what?!"

My voice almost shouted, but I wanted my mom to clarify so she'd really understand.

"I'm talking about love between two women."

"So what?"

"What do you mean, so what?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"Mom, be serious."

I looked like I was about to cry. My mom sighed, looking annoyed.

"How am I not serious? I get it, and nothing's more."

"Mom!!"

I raised my voice, looking shocked and speechless. Arpo's mom, seeing my face, laughed a little and acted like nothing happened.

"Everyone knows, dear. You shouted it out just now."

"Then why isn't anyone surprised?!"

I explained further, wanting everyone to take it more seriously. But my mom just bared her teeth.

"Why emphasize it so much? I said I know. We're talking about something important here."

"What could be more important than my grand confession?"

"The drama last night, of course. We're having a lively discussion. Everyone already knows about you two. What's left to confess?"

"Why are you acting like it's so normal?"

"How dramatic do you want it to be?"

"At least you should be angry, say something hurtful, or try to separate us to show you're serious."

"You watched too many dramas. We've known for a long time that Arpo likes you. You were just playing hard to get. Today, you finally admitted you love her. There's nothing more to it. Now go away. We're talking about the male lead's scene in the rain last night. What an actor."

My mom waved me off like I was a nuisance. But I still couldn't believe what I was hearing. Even Arpo looked surprised and couldn't help but add.

"Auntie, what she said is true. We're not joking... P'Bow and I are together."

"I'm happy for you. Your love has finally come true, right?"

My mom nodded at Arpo's mom. They both smiled as if they understood, and that was it.

That's it? Wait a minute. Is it that easy? No, it can't be that easy. The love between women like us is special. The family should be against it. Everyone should be in chaos, trying to separate us.

"Why aren't you shocked? At least you should be against our love, not accept that your daughter loves a woman. Auntie."

I looked at Arpo's mom.

"You should be angry that I'm older, more mature, but still in love with your daughter. You should be furious, yelling at me, saying, *'I'm so disappointed in you'*. Something like that."

"Oh, I'm annoyed now,"

My mom yelled at me like I wanted her to be, but in a different way.

"I already know, and you're making it complicated. Why do you like to make simple things difficult?"

"It has to be difficult. Love without obstacles isn't love."

"Arpo has liked you since she was little. Everyone knows. We've been rooting for you to accept her love. The only obstacle has been you, making it hard for everyone."

"I'm actually happy. Arpo doesn't have to chase after you anymore. Seeing her love you, I'm happy too."

Her mom said.

"No!"

"What do you mean no? You're together, aren't you?"

"Not like that. I mean..."

I stammered, feeling flustered. All the arguments I prepared seemed buried.

"I mean, you should do something so I can argue with you."

"I'll argue with you now if you keep being like this."

"..."

"I know you're together. Go on a date already. You're annoying!"

What is this? How did it turn out like this? All the preparation, all the fear, and it turned out to be nothing?

I looked at Arpo, who was smiling with tears in her eyes. She must've been worried, too, that the family would be against it. But it turned out like this. I still couldn't believe it. It felt too easy. There must be something more. Maybe they were just pretending to accept it now but would plan to separate us later.

"We've... kissed already."

I said it to test my mom's patience. This time, it worked. Both adults looked at me in shock. My mom reached out and pinched my shoulder, then hit my arm hard, genuinely angry.

"You crazy kid. Stuff like this... you should talk in private. Do you have to say it out loud?"

"Because you were taking it lightly."

"Who was taking it lightly? Everyone knows you two like each other. Do you need an explosion? Can't you accept it nicely?"

"It shouldn't be this easy. In every drama or novel, families are against it. Why are my families... and Arpo's family..."

I stammered, feeling troubled. It shouldn't be this easy.

"It's too easy. I don't believe it."

"Do you want it to be hard?"

"Yeah, it should be harder."

" 7×9 squared, then take the square root. Add pi. Solve that."

"Mom!"

"Why are you shouting? You wanted it hard, so I made it hard. Now go away!"

My mom raised her voice to match mine, making me shut up.

"Go love each other far away. What era is this? I'm used to Arpo's love for you. We've been waiting for you to accept her."

"You're that open-minded?"

"I'm used to it. If Arpo hadn't shown her love, maybe I wouldn't accept it. But she's shown it for years. And you love her, too. Even from Mars, it's clear you feel the same. We're just waiting for you to admit it. You're so arrogant it's annoying."

"I was worried about you, too, seeing Arpo chase after you. I'm happy to see her love fulfilled."

"Auntie, you're on Mom's side too? You can scold me. I'm not that trustworthy. Be an obstacle a bit. I'll handle it better."

"Just don't scream and run away saying there's a cockroach in the house."

"Ugh."

"Everyone accepts it. You're responsible enough to love Arpo. I've seen you grow up. Now you're together, I have no objections. I'm open-minded."

"Why is there no obstacle in my love?"

"The only obstacle has been you."

My mom said, shaking her head in annoyance.

"You're so difficult. Even when confessing your relationship, you're annoying. Do you think life is a novel with obstacles everywhere? Nowadays, many women are together."

"But I'm not a tomboy. I never showed it."

"Whether you date a man or a woman, I'm okay with it. Whoever you love, we love too, right?"

"True."

My mom and Arpo's mom nodded at each other. Arpo, seeing that I was about to say something, nudged me to stand up and gave me a big smile.

"Let the moms talk. Let's get out of here. Everyone understands now."

"It's too easy."

"Annoying!"

My mom snapped, genuinely irritated. If there had been something nearby, she'd have grabbed it and thrown it at me.

"Why do you keep saying 'annoying' today, Mom? That's my word... Please let me keep my character a bit."

"Even confessing love, you're still arrogant. Who's your parent? Go away, you're stink. I heard you went running in your work clothes, didn't you? Look, your stockings are all torn."

Mom reached out to pull at my stockings and grimaced.

"Who runs in work clothes? Go shower and come down for dinner."

Mom pushed me away in disgust. I couldn't help but sniff my shirt and realize it smelled of sweat, making me jump back and feel self-conscious. Arpo dragged me upstairs so we could talk alone. As we walked, I felt like someone who'd lost all hope.

Why was I so nervous? I prayed to God and braced myself for nothing. If the adults could accept everything so easily, we escaped to my bedroom on the second floor, leaving the moms to gossip. I eavesdropped from above but didn't hear them talking about me anymore.

They were still discussing last night's impressive scene with the male lead. It was as if what I said didn't matter. I scowled in frustration and crossed my arms. Arpo, seeing my annoyed expression, hugged me from the side and patted my shoulder to comfort me.

"Why are you upset? Everything went well."

"It went too well. Why wasn't Mom shocked by our news? I thought of all sorts of things to say to explain and solve problems, but Mom acted like, *'Hmm, the food you made is delicious'* Just like that."

"Hehe."

I glared at the person laughing to herself, annoyed.

"What's so funny?"

"Just laughing at you. Isn't it good that things are simple?"

"It's too good. Why are there no obstacles?"

"And what's wrong with having no obstacles?"

"It feels like our love isn't real. Mom acted like I was joking."

"From what I see, it seems like your mom understands well."

"Too well. What does a love without obstacles mean? Mom should have freaked out, complained, and begged me to be her daughter who loves a man. In other novels by Chaoplanoy, no parents accept it. It's too ordinary."

"What is this? No obstacles, and you're all mad."

"I think there's something fishy. It can't be this smooth. I don't believe it."

I frowned deeply until Arpo had to press her finger on my forehead to relax my brows.

"You're really overthinking, Bow. When I confessed my love, you denied it and found all sorts of reasons to justify yourself. No wonder you were hard to woo."

"That's in the past. You hit on me, didn't you?"

"Let's make everything simple. The moms have given their approval. The only problem left is you, Bow."

Arpo reached out to gently stroke my leg, trying to soothe me. I glanced at her and sighed.

"Can it really be this easy?"

"I don't know about others, but for you, Bow, it's always easy."

Arpo nuzzled her nose into my neck. I pulled away and looked at her warily.

"How did we go from talking about simplicity to this?"

"We can always get to this."

She continued to advance on me, pinning me down on the bed with her on top.

"I love you. Let's make everything simple. Don't overthink it. Let everything follow its course."

"A love without obstacles has no value."

"If you want obstacles, I've faced countless ones. Being rejected, hurt by words. Isn't that enough?"

"Did I do that?"

"The only problem in our love is you, Bow."

"But..."

"Relax."

She slipped her hand under my shirt and started to caress my breast, knowing she could. I didn't intend to resist because I was trying to relax as she asked, even though I was slightly bothered by how easily my family accepted it.

"Just loving me is enough. It's that simple."

"Why do you love me so much?"

I let her continue her advances, my eyes on the ceiling, pondering. "I have nothing. I'm a salaried employee, drive a second-hand Japanese car, middle-class. There's nothing special about me."

"You have your own charm."

"Is it really that simple?"

"Loving someone is that simple. But stopping loving someone is hard, and I'm like that. I could never stop loving you."

Arpo kissed me and continued her advances. As I was getting lost in the moment, I suddenly remembered something and jolted up, pushing her away and sitting up.

"No!"

"What now?"

"It can't be this easy. I haven't showered. I smell of sweat!"

If there's one thing that should be difficult, let it be this. I got up to grab a towel, ready to clean myself up, before Arpo grabbed my hand and shook her head.

"I don't mind."

"I do. It can't be easy, at least not this. Don't be stubborn."

We should need some preparation before doing that. As I was about to shower, Arpo pushed me to the door, turned me to face her, and slipped her hand under my work skirt, advancing on me without warning. Her fingers touched my sensitive spot, making my legs tremble. I tried to push her away, but she persisted.

"No, I like your scent, P'Bow."

Knock, knock.

A knock on the door came from behind. Mom, who came up to call us for dinner, shouted for me and Arpo to come down because dinner was ready.

"Bow, dinner's ready. Come down and eat. What are you doing?"

I'm about to be assaulted! Of course, I didn't say that. My body was weak, barely able to stand, but I forced myself to respond.

"About to shower. Give me five minutes."

"Hurry up."

Mom said only that while Arpo giggled.

"Only five minutes?"

"Yes, just five minutes. That's all the time you get. If we're really doing this, everything must be simple."

"Okay, I'll make everything simple."

She smiled and kissed me lightly.

"Let's shower together then. I'll wash you."

"If we shower together, it won't be five minutes."

"A couple more minutes won't hurt. I promise not to make it complicated. Let me celebrate this love victory as a reward... I love you, Bow."

Her fingers slipped inside me, making my body tense. I clung to her shoulders, who was being mischievous, and bared my teeth.

"Why are you like this?"

"Tell me you love me. I want to hear it."

"Keep it simple."

"Any way you want. No need for pir squared. I'm dumb."

I laughed a little and closed my eyes, fully embracing the moment as her fingers moved. I leaned against the door to support myself and looked up.

Love didn't always need many obstacles. I'd learned that if we made everything simple, without any fuss, just having someone accept our feelings and stop doubting, letting it flow naturally, that was enough. I looked into Arpo's eyes and told her I loved her repeatedly, forgetting I was supposed to shower because I was lost in the love Arpo gave me.

Simple, not flashy, tangible. No need for a lot of money. No matter the status or gender, everyone had the right to love.

"My feelings for you are squared; there's no need to take the square root."

"Making it complicated again. Just say you love me."

True, the real obstacle in love might be me. My arrogance made it drag on this long.

"I love you."

Arpo and I...

Arpo and Bow, the arrogant,... are finally in love.

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-----**THE END**-----

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♣Arpo 1 - Just One Position♣

Everything was going so well, but that was just how Seniors were. Even though our relationship had progressed, her old habits hadn't changed. She was just as mean as ever. Even after becoming my girlfriend, she still had that '*sharp tongue*'."

"Arpo, come back and talk to me."

"I'm not talking to you anymore. Don't bother me, and don't talk to me either."

"So, this is how you want it?"

"Yes. Enough is enough!"

I stormed into the house, kicking off my shoes in a fit of rage, tears welling up in my eyes. My shoes flew in different directions as I walked away, leaving P'Bow standing there, gritting her teeth, not following me as I'd hoped.

Does she think learning to drive is easy? If I knew how to drive, would I have asked her to teach me? Why did she have to speak so harshly?

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'If you're going to drive like this, you might as well ride a donkey. This is a road, not a barley field.'

'Why are you so stupid?'

'Ugh, I've lost my patience with you. Just crash into the front and die with the whole car.'

I'd heard that you shouldn't learn to drive from family or a partner because it could ruin the relationship. But I always thought that if we loved each other enough, she'd be more considerate. Lately, P'Bow had been much better, more loving and caring, even though she sometimes said things she didn't mean. She was afraid of losing me.

But why, when it came to driving lessons, couldn't she control her temper and be more considerate? After being scolded like that, I opened the door and walked out in the middle of the neighborhood while practicing driving, unable to stand her teaching any longer.

Enough is enough. If being in a relationship means hurting each other, then let's just go back to being sisters.

"Arpo, what's wrong, dear?"

Mom asked worriedly as she saw me walking upstairs with tears in my eyes. I pouted and glanced at her to show my tears of frustration, but I didn't say anything and ran up the stairs.

I wanted Mom to scold P'Bow for me. An act of revenge for her beloved daughter.

"Bow, what's wrong with Arpo? Why is she crying like that? Weren't you two practicing driving?"

Mom's voice echoed upstairs, but I didn't listen. P' Bow must have come into the house after calming down outside. I sat with my arms crossed, looking out the window. Even from here, I could still see her house...

No escape, huh?

How did I end up torturing myself by falling in love with someone like her?

"Arpo, open the door... I want to talk."

"No, let's calm down first. Don't talk when we're both angry."

Even though I said that, P'Bow took the opportunity to open the door. I hadn't locked it, hoping she'd come to apologize. Now she stood at the door, glaring at me with fierce eyes and furrowed brows. But even so, she still looked beautiful and cool in her own way.

"Let's talk while we're angry."

"You're so full of yourself."

She'd always been like this, sharp-tongued and determined to get what she wanted. Even if someone tried to stop her, she'd do it if she wanted to. And it was infuriating that... I loved her for being like this.

"I love you."

"..."

"Does that help you calm down a bit?"

Damn it, I completely lost.

I looked into her eyes, tears streaming down my face. The beautiful girl who was so angry at first sighed and closed the door, walked over to me, and used both hands to wipe my tears.

"You're the one who's being angry."

"Alright, that's true."

She admitted it so easily that my anger dissipated completely. I wasn't mad at her anymore, but my body still felt tense, so I couldn't smile. I continued to act stubborn and childish, crossing my arms and turning away.

Actually, P'Bow had improved a lot compared to before. I'd slowly softened her tough exterior over the years. Thinking back, she'd gotten much better and would probably continue to improve, though it might take some time.

When I thought about it, she was much better now but still herself. I loved her for who she was and would probably love her forever. Compared to the past, there wouldn't be this version of P'Bow.

Hmm... the past... huh?

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Over ten years ago, the memories were still vivid. The first day we met was when I moved to a new house. I was still a little girl adjusting to a new place, new people, new school, and my first friend was P'Bow.

"Arpo, this is our neighbor, Bow."

Mom, who'd made friends with the neighbors, introduced me to Senior, who didn't even smile. Her expressionless face made me feel uneasy, so I hid behind Mom. The beautiful but indifferent girl stared at me as if scanning through me.

"Why are you hiding behind me? Go talk to her. Get to know each other. We'll be seeing her for a long time."

"Are we going to stay here for a long time?"

As a child, I thought people moved houses frequently. I didn't realize that buying a new house meant staying there for life. Mom laughed with the neighbor while P'Bow's expression remained unchanged. She didn't say anything like her face was frozen with Botox.

"We already bought this house, dear. We're not renting like before. We'll stay here forever or until you get married and move out."

"Can I get married now?"

"How old are you?"

Mom laughed while P'Bow's mom, seeing her daughter's lack of reaction, pushed her forward to face me. Mom did the same, pushing me out.

"Say hello, kids."

I hesitated, still nervous, but forced a smile.

"Hello"

"Bow."

That was the first word she said. I heard her voice clearly. It wasn't too deep or too high-pitched, just right for her age, and not as harsh as I thought.

"P" Bow."

"Why is your name Arpo?"

I glanced at Mom for help, so she explained to her.

"Her real name is Opal, but her grandfather couldn't pronounce it right and kept calling her Arpo, so it stuck."

"That's strange."

She said, awkwardly placing her hand on my head.

"Arpo."

The warm touch of her hand on my head reassured me. At least she wasn't as mean as her expression suggested. I smiled at her, hoping to make a friend. Mom always said I had a cute smile and that smiling often made the world brighter. I hoped to make her smile back.

But... when I smiled, she pulled her hand back and looked at her palm.

"When was the last time you washed your hair?"

"Bow, don't tease her."

"But she hasn't washed her hair."

Bow's mom looked embarrassed as her daughter wiped her hand on her shorts, trying to get rid of the greasy feeling. My mom laughed kindly.

"She really hasn't washed it. Bow is a very straightforward kid."

"I'm going inside, Mom."

P'Bow said and walked away, but not before glancing back at me. I smiled at her again, but she just ignored me and turned away.

"She's so mean."

I said innocently. Her mom crouched down and smiled at me.

"Not really. She's just not good at expressing herself. When she put her hand on your head, it meant she liked you. Play with her often. She doesn't have many friends."

"Is she mean?"

Bow's mom laughed and nodded.

"You could say that. If you become her friend, I hope she'll smile more. You're a ray of sunshine, Arpo."

I nodded and looked at the house where P'Bow had disappeared.

Hmm... if I keep smiling at her, she'll smile back someday. I really want to see what she looks like when she smiles.

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I have a beautiful smile

I make the world brighter.

I might be someone's whole world.

So, I'll start with the person closest to me, and that's my neighbor.

At my school, I had a lot of friends because I liked to smile. People were drawn to me. So, I hoped I could succeed in this mission: to get Bow to smile. The next day, I waited to play with her in front of her house. Her mom welcomed me warmly, offering snacks while I waited for P'Bow, who was upstairs and wouldn't come down.

"I'll go get her. She's playing hard to get."

I sat on the chair, swinging my legs and watching cartoons while waiting. She finally came down, looking as expressionless as ever, and glanced at me. Her first words weren't very pleasant.

"Did you wash your hair?"

"Bow, is that how you greet someone?"

Her mom chided.

She lifted her chin arrogantly and dragged a chair to sit next to me. She stared at me, and I smiled at her so hard my face wrinkled. My mouth, strained from smiling, began to tremble because I'd been smiling for too long, and my gums were starting to dry out.

"Are you going to keep smiling until the next life?"

"Am I not cute?"

She looked at me intently, furrowing her brows, and tilted her head.

"What kind of kid looks at someone and asks if they're cute? Aren't you embarrassed?"

I wondered how she was raised. Every word she spoke was far from pleasant.

"Do you have any friends, P'Bow?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You never smile."

"I'm not a lunatic. Why would I just smile out of nowhere?"

"But you never smile, P'Bow. You always look grumpy."

"I have no reason to smile."

"Can you smile for me?"

"No."

"Bow, you're not cute at all."

Mom shook her head, exasperated.

"Go play with your her. Don't just stay cooped up inside. Get close to each other, you'll be going to the same school soon."

"Do I have to see her at school too?"

This morning, Mom told me that P'Bow and I would be attending the same school. When Auntie repeated it, it meant it was true. She'd be in sixth grade, and I'd be in second grade, with her as my senior to back me up so no one would dare bully me.

"Yes, so get close to each other. Go play together already."

P'Bow got off the chair and walked towards the door. I was still sitting with my legs dangling when she looked at me with annoyance.

"Get down. If you're told to go play, then go play. Being an adult is great, huh? They make you come down, make you talk, and make you play."

"How old are you, really?"

Auntie looked at P'Bow and shook her head before encouraging me.

"Arpo, go play with her. If she bullies you or doesn't play with you, come tell me."

"Just because I don't play with her, you have to snitching on me? Being younger is great."

"Okay, I'll go play with her,"

I said, sliding off the chair and walking towards her with my usual smile.

"Let's go."

"Humph,"

"Take care of your her. You're a senior."

"I'm just this small. How can I take care of anyone?"

"Is it that hard to just play? Go on, get out."

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P'Bow stomped out of the house with a sour face. I followed her like an ugly duckling following its mother. Suddenly, she stopped, and I bumped into her back, almost falling. She grabbed me by my bangs to keep me from falling. My hair was clenched in her hand.

"Watch where you're going."

"It hurts."

"You didn't even fall. How can it hurt?"

"Because you pulled my hair."

She looked at the hair in her hand and let go. I rubbed my forehead and tried to smile at her.

"You really did wash your hair."

She said, looking at me with irritation.

"So, what do you want to play?"

"I don't know."

"Are you stupid?"

"..."

"You must be Who else smiles like an idiot all the time? Fine, I'll decide what we play."

"What are we playing?"

"Racing."

"Okay, let's race."

I replied eagerly. She made a sound of annoyance and ran ahead without waiting. I stood there, confused. P' Bow, who'd run far ahead, stopped and glared at me.

"Why are you just standing there? Run! If you don't run, how can it be a race?"

Oh, so we start playing now. Hearing that, I responded cheerfully.

"Okay!"

I ran after her with my short legs until I caught up. When she saw me getting close, she ran ahead again. With her longer legs, she easily outpaced me. Not wanting to lose, I ran as fast as I could to catch up.

I had to keep up. If she saw me as a competitor, we could become friends easily.

I tried my hardest to keep up with her, but Bow ran effortlessly, her long legs barely needing any effort. Eventually, she disappeared into the distance, becoming a small figure while I kept running. But then, something unexpected happened.

The sound of small paws from street dogs running after me made me feel like an intruder in their territory. Panicking, I ran faster with my short legs, shouting for P'Bow at the top of my lungs.

P'Bow, help me! P'Bow!"

My voice cut through the air, but I didn't know if she heard me. All I could do was run. Fear made me frantic, running as if my life depended on it, feeling like a four-legged grim reaper was chasing me.

But when I stumbled over a speed bump. I fell, scraping my chin and legs. I cried out for mercy, and the pack of dogs was ready to pounce on me.

But then...

"Go away!"

Someone, sent by God, swung a stick at the dogs. I kept crying and slowly got up to see what was happening. P'Bow stood over me, arms and legs spread wide, ready to protect me. She shouted loudly, barking like a dog.

"Woof! Woof! Woof! Woof!"

Her barking stunned me. My tears turned to surprise and curiosity.

She can speak dog language...

The dogs barked loudly, but P'Bow couldn't stand it and chased them away furiously.

"Arghhhhhh!"

The tall girl ran after the dogs like a hunter. The dogs scattered in all directions, but she didn't stop, kicking and punching the air as if fighting the

wind. The sunlight shining on her made her look radiant. My tears, glistening at the corners of my eyes, made her look even more dazzling, and my heart raced.

So cool...

Thump...

Thump...

After the dogs ran away, P'Bow walked back to me, arms crossed, looking at me with teary eyes. She extended her hand to help me up.

"Get up. Crying doesn't look good on you."

"P'Bow..."

"You look better with a smile, even if it's annoying."

I slowly reached out and took her hand. The warmth spread through me, making me feel safe.

"Let's go home, you little burden."

"O... okay."

My superhero... she's so cool.

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That evening, P'Bow got scolded by Auntie. Her yelling was so loud it reached our house. She was upset that P'Bow couldn't protect me as promised. I was taken to the clinic to get four stitches on my chin. My mom wasn't angry at her after hearing what happened, but Auntie didn't let it go. The next day, she brought P' Bow to apologize at our house.

"Say it."

P'Bow was pushed forward again, her face sour. She looked at me with displeasure, feeling burdened and blamed for getting scolded. She chewed her cheek in frustration.

"You idiot."

"Bow!"

"Fine, fine..."

She extended her hand and ordered.

"Hold out your hand."

Confused, I held out my hand. P'Bow dropped two red candies into it and spoke arrogantly.

"Does it hurt a lot? Eat these, and it'll get better. Trust me."

"What did I tell you to say?"

"I know, Mom."

Her voice was dismissive, her face sour as she spoke to me.

"Sorry."

"What?"

"I said, I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For making you cry."

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"Sorry."

P'Bow, now in my room, spoke after seeing me silent for a long time, still crying. She couldn't stand seeing me cry, so she wiped my tears again and sighed.

"For what?"

"For making you cry."

"..."

"I was wrong for not teaching you properly and being impatient. Don't be mad."

I didn't forgive her immediately, but my anger subsided a lot. P'Bow, seeing I was still upset, sat next to me on the bed, pulled me close, and hugged me, rubbing my back slowly but firmly, trying to comfort me.

"Why do you always make me sad and then apologize later?"

"It's my fault."

I wasn't angry anymore... I felt better since she showed up at my door, ready to apologize without anyone forcing her. I didn't hug her back but leaned my forehead on her shoulder, signaling that I wasn't pushing her away and half-forgiving her.

"Actually... I don't want you to learn to drive."

I pulled away and looked at her, confused by her sudden statement.

"Why?"

"If you learn to drive, you won't need me anymore."

"What kind of reason is that? I just want to know how to drive so we can take turns if you're tired. That's all."

"If you learn to drive, one day you'll drive alone without me."

"Why do you think like that?"

"That's just how I am, and I have a foul mouth, too."

"You really do have a foul mouth."

Her eyes flashed for a moment when she heard me use the term "foul mouth" with her. Seeing her startled reaction. I couldn't help but laugh, wiping away my tears with the back of my hand.

"Well, it's true."

"You're laughing now. That's better. Tears don't suit you at all."

"But if I smile too much, you'll get annoyed."

"Sometimes it's annoying, but smiling is better... Does this smile mean you're not mad anymore?"

She seemed relieved to see that I wasn't as angry and cold as I had been just minutes ago.

"That's better."

"Why do you dislike it so much when I cry?"

"I keep hurting your feelings."

"At least you know it."

"I'm trying to fix it, you know. I'm doing my best. I'm not good at apologizing."

She sat with slumped shoulders and then lay down as if exhausted.

"Teaching you to drive is really terrible. They say not to learn with your lover or family because it will cause a rift."

I looked at her lying there and took the opportunity to lie down, resting on her arm.

"I don't have to learn to drive if you're afraid you won't get to drive me around anymore."

"No, that's too selfish. One day, you'll graduate and work. Taking the bus or a taxi is too dangerous. It's better if you know how to drive. But I won't teach you anymore. One, it's too painful to see you become independent without me. Two, I'm too impatient and might hurt you again."

"Then come and apologize to me."

"If apologizing means we fought, I don't want to fight."

"You really love me, huh?"

"You're so full of yourself."

"Oh, so you don't love me?"

I pretended to be upset and turned away, hoping she'd apologize a bit more.

"No matter how many years pass, I'll always be the one who loves you unilaterally, huh?"

"How did it come to this? I've already told you I love you."

"But just now, you said I was full of myself."

"Yeah, my mouth is like this. Aren't you used to it yet?"

"I don't want to get used to it."

"I'm someone who likes to show my feelings through actions more."

"Sometimes your actions are more confusing than your words. I like straightforward communication that says lo... hmm?"

She kissed my nape as she pressed herself against me, her hands slipping inside my shirt, touching here and there as if she knew she could.

"I can only speak straightforwardly when I'm doing something like this."

"Are you trying to apologize to me this way?"

"Is it not working?"

"We'll see."

She unhooked my bra and used her palm to touch the now-free skin. I bit my lip, trying not to make any sound that would encourage her, but my body responded on its own, and I ended up lying on my back to let her touch me more comfortably.

"Damn, it's working."

I said with a voice full of desire. The simmering anger slowly dissipated, replaced by another emotion. The usually stern-faced person who rarely initiated anything was now taking the lead. She must feel really guilty to start something like this.

"Don't be mad at me, please. I'm sorry."

"..."

"I love you."

"Tsk."

I made a small sound of annoyance before using both hands to hold her face.

"Doing this, how could I ever leave you?"

The usually hard-to-smile person now slowly smiled. I looked at her smile and used both hands to squeeze her cheeks until they were squished.

"Why are you so cute?"

"I can be even cuter."

Her hand slipped into my shorts, which I didn't know when they were unbuttoned, and her fingers went in, making me gasp.

"Want me to show you my skills?"

"I don't want your skills."

"Then what do you want?"

"Your lips."

She pressed her lips to mine, but I pushed her away slightly and shook my head.

"Not here,"

"Hmm?"

I pushed her head down while taking off my pants. Bow blushed a little and looked up at me, blinking.

"Yes, there."

"....."

"If you finish in five minutes, I'll forgive you."

"Why five minutes? Can't it be longer?"

"Mom will get suspicious."

Everything happened quickly because my body responded so well. In just a few minutes, we were downstairs, acting as if nothing had happened. Mom, who was standing by the stairs, sighed in relief when she saw me come down with P'Bow.

"Are you two okay now?"

"Yes."

P'Bow answered with a straight face, but I could see her cheeks were flushed with embarrassment.

"How did you make up?"

Mom asked casually, not thinking much of it. As for me, being cheekier, I answered nonchalantly, almost making P'Bow faint.

"Just one position, but it was thrilling."

"Arpo!!!"

□□□□□



♣Arpo 2.Love Confession♣

"I love you."

"..."

"Say it, please. I want to hear it."

I was pushing her hard, both comforting and threatening her, driving her to the edge and then pulling back just to hear those words. Normally, she was tough and never showed any vulnerability, but in bed, she became someone else entirely.

Her face was flushed, her body red, eyes half-closed, panting and gasping for breath, looking at me as if begging.

"I love..."

"Love who?"

"Don't tease me."

She said, almost crying as I pulled my hand away.

"Please."

"..."

"I love you."

Once I got what I wanted, I brought her to the peak within moments, knowing her body and rhythm well. She, now beneath me, pulled me into a tight embrace.

Her heartbeat echoed through our pressed-together bodies, the scent of our love filling the air. I panted, taking a deep breath before looking into her eyes, gently brushing the messy hair from her face.

"I'm going to sulk."

"What did I do wrong this time?"

She was still exhausted, her hand gripping my shoulder before slowly releasing and resting on her forehead. Every time we finished, she would be shy, avoiding eye contact because she was embarrassed by her actions during the act.

"Why is it so hard for you to say you love me? I always have to force it out of you."

"Recently, I've been saying it more often."

I pouted, pulling her arm away from her face and looking into her brown eyes with determination.

"You only say it when you're forced to, whether we're fighting, making up, or in bed. You never say it otherwise. It hurts, you know."

"Now that you know I love you, you sulk a lot."

"It's not sulking, it's feeling hurt."

I turned away, lying on my side with my back to her. She was silent for a moment before hugging me from behind, kissing the nape of my neck despite her exhaustion.

"I'm trying."

"Not hard enough."

"I'm not good with words."

"I love you. Three words. It's not that hard. Sometimes, I wonder if I'm just your sex toy."

"Don't say that. Come on, don't sulk. We were just fine a moment ago."

"How can I not? You never say it unless you're pressured."

"I've always been like this."

She sighed.

"What should I do?"

"..."

"Sweetheart."

My heart melted.

She didn't need to do anything, just say she loved me often. That's all I wanted. But as she said, she'd always been like this, never expressing her feelings directly, always trying to act cool. I sometimes wondered why I was so infatuated with someone like her.

Love has no reason. If it does, it's not love.

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Back then, Elle came to my room and told me that P'Bow had kissed me while I was asleep during a movie night. I could hardly believe my ears and even laughed.

"Are you crazy? P'Bow kissed me? You must be dreaming."

"I know how much you like her, and I don't want what I said to be a dream. Congratulations, she really kissed you."

I was still in disbelief as Elle confirmed it firmly. I glanced at the window of the house across the street and bit my lip. She never showed any signs. Then, she suddenly kissed me.

How should I feel? It was unbelievable.

"I'll ask her."

"She'll never tell you. Can't you see she's the type who never says anything directly?"

"But it's hard to believe. She always acts annoyed with me around."

"But I saw it. If she knew I was in your room right now, she'd rush over because she's afraid I'd tell you."

"She's not here."

"Because she doesn't know yet."

Not long after, P'Bow burst in. I, still reeling from the unbelievable news, was stunned. Elle glanced at her and then winked at me as if to say,

'See?'

But I had to play it cool, not wanting to seem too excited and curious about P'Bow's reason for coming.

"..."

"If you want to say something, just say it."

"Do you really want me to? It might make you uncomfortable."

"I'd rather be uncomfortable than let a kid like you blackmail me. If you don't say it, I will.... Arpo, yesterday I..."

I clenched my fists behind my back, my hands sweaty.

Is she really going to admit she kissed me? Is she going to confirm it?

She always said she was annoyed with me, but suddenly kissing me, what does that mean if not...

Oh my God... she likes me. I'm about to scream.

"I like you, Arpo."

But then Elle blurted out something even more shocking. From being excited about P'Bow, I felt like a huge rock had hit my head, knocking me out. Elle changed the subject, diverting Bow's attention. Instead of hearing something from P'Bow, I had to focus on Elle.

That day, I didn't get to know what P'Bow was going to say, but a part of me started to seriously think she had feelings for me.

Since then, I'd observed her behavior without showing any signs, teasing her a bit to see her reaction but not pushing too hard. Then, the day came when she took me on a date, and I realized she had feelings for me.

"If you close your eyes, I'll kiss you."

She closed her eyes...

Even though I seemed brave, she didn't know how nervous I was when she did that. It felt like permission, an indirect way of saying she had feelings for me-someone who didn't love or like you would never let you into their personal space like that.

I'd broken through her defenses. I'd succeeded.

But I like clarity. I wanted to hear it from her. Not saying it felt like nothing happened. P' Bow would continue to act indifferent, and I needed to make her say it.

But P'Bow was P'Bow. She was tight-lipped, never expressing her feelings. Even when we were at the beach and mutually agreed to be together, she wouldn't say it.

How could I make her say it? If she didn't, it'd feel like she didn't care and was deceiving herself. I had to make her say it. I didn't want to be just her outlet for desire, having sex and then parting ways. She'd shown she cared, but I needed verbal confirmation. So... that incident happened.

"I think I'm done loving you."

At first, I was terrified she'd let go of me easily because her words at the beach seemed indifferent. If she really let go, I'd be the one suffering, having to shamelessly go back to her.

But it seemed I'd triggered something. Suddenly, a new character entered my life, a handsome tomboy who helped me when my bag was snatched. She came as a friend, and I accepted her kindness.

"Since we're friends now, can you help me with something, Frame?"

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"Since we're friends now, can you help me with something, Frame?"

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Be my tool."

"What tool?"

"I want to make someone jealous."

"..."

"Can you help?"

"Sure."

It was a way of indirectly saying I wasn't interested in her. I could tell she liked me. Someone who genuinely cared would help and then leave, but she kept trying to stay in touch, sending stickers to chat. I responded casually but didn't tell her I already liked someone. Asking her to help was my way of saying,

'I have someone I love. Being friends is best.'

And so, the plan to make P'Bow jealous began. Frame, being good-looking and well-off, with a nice car and being the same age, made her feel bad every time Frame appeared. I played along, but every time I hurt P'Bow, I'd sit alone in my room, feeling down.

Whether teasing her to make her angry or throwing the can out the window, no one knew how much it pained me.

The can P'Bow made for me, I threw it out the window with my own hands...

She must've been hurt, but I had to be cruel. Otherwise, she'd never make things clear, and it would remain ambiguous with her tight-lipped nature.

"Have you been fighting with Bow lately?"

Mom noticed I was spending more time with Frame and often daydreaming, which worried her I smiled weakly at Mom and looked at the house next door, shaking my head.

"We're not fighting."

"Why aren't you chasing her like before? Are you dating that tomboy?"

"Isn't it a good thing that I'm not pestering her anymore? I always hear you complain about not bothering her too much."

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just used to seeing it. But lately, you seem down, so I thought you two must've had a fight."

"I stopped following her around so she could feel more at ease."

"And what about you? Are you at ease not following her anymore?"

I smiled sadly at my mom, unsure how to express myself. The mam who raised me and knew

me well reached out, stroking my hair gently, and sighed. I hugged her, inhaling her scent, needing

someone to comfort me, and she was right there, a good friend I desperately needed.

"Mom, it really hurts."

"So, you did have a fight. What happened?"

"I hurt her."

"...."

"Mom, I really like her."

I said, pulling away and looking her in the eye.

"You know how I feel, right?"

We'd never seriously talked about this before. She just saw me following P'Bow around every day and sighed before nodding.

"I know."

"And you don't feel anything about your daughter liking a woman?"

"I don't. Whoever you're comfortable with, I'm all happy for you. Maybe I'm just used to seeing I you run after her. I don't even remember when I started rooting for you so much that I forgot Bow is a girl."

I smiled at her, grateful she didn't oppose my feelings or who I was I hugged her again and whispered in her ear, explaining what had happened.

"I thought she liked me, and I was playing with her feelings."

"Why would you do that?"

"To make her finally say how she feels."

"And if Mom trailed off, pressing her lips together. I raised an eyebrow, prompting her to continue.

"What if it's not what you think? Suppose she doesn't feel the same way. What then?"

"Then I guess I'll have to give up."

"..."

"All I want now is clarity. If I don't get it, then I won't pursue it."

I was greedy. After everything that happened, P'Bow, who'd been pressured, finally spoke up. It made me so happy that we are together today. The only

obstacle was P' Bow herself. Her reluctance to speak made everything difficult. It took a lot to get her to say she loved me.

I was right. She loves me.

But I still feel it isn't enough

When people love each other, saying "I love you" should be normal, a daily routine, right?

She kept saying that '*saying it often makes it seem insincere*', but I didn't think so.

While I loved and told her my love every day, she only received it and never had her love back unless pressured by a situation.

Is it too much to ask for her to say it regularly?

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"Arpo... are you still mad at me?"

We were at the supermarket together, buying household items because Mom said she needed detergent and soap. P'Bow offered to drive us, and we'd been silent the whole way until now. I admit I was sulking.

Knowing she loved me made me want more love, more expressions of her feelings. Was I asking for too much?

"Are you on your period?"

I glanced at her and threw a glare before turning away in a huff, letting her know I was upset. We'd left this conversation hanging since we were naked, and now fully clothed, I was still sulking.

Hmph

"No."

"Then when will we talk properly?"

"If you have something to say, just say it."

"Sigh"

She sighed loudly, wanting me to hear, but I pretended not to care. She seemed out of patience, parked the cart, and spoke loudly.

"Fine, you want it this way, right?"

"..."

"Then so be it."

She said that and walked away, leaving me facing the detergent shelf alone. I watched her back shrink into the distance, my mouth agape. I'd turned a non-issue into a problem. And fighting with her was never easy. Making up and reconciling would be tough.

Why do I always end up being the one to apologize?

Feeling hurt and teary-eyed, I stood there alone, no longer getting her attention. Maybe I was too greedy, wanting her love and asking for too much. She must be annoyed by now.

Could this lead from love to... anger and hatred?

We just started. Are we breaking up already?

"P'Bow!"

I dropped my pride and the detergent in front of me to go find her. I didn't know where she had gone until I heard the store announcement.

Ding, ding, ding, ding.

"Miss Arpo, I love you. Please come to the information desk... Miss Arpo, I love you. Please come to the information desk. Thank you."

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Ding, ding, ding, ding...

People in the supermarket looked around, laughing and smiling, wondering what the announcement was about. Meanwhile, I stood frozen, unable to move, feeling my face heat up with no sign of cooling down. If I looked in the mirror now, I knew my face would be bright red.

Ding.

The sound of a message notification and the vibration of my phone in my hand brought me back to my senses. I slowly picked it up and opened the message from her, which made me want to laugh and cry at the same time.

Okay, I realized that forcing someone to say "I love you" was too much.

[Are you satisfied now? From now on, I'll say I love you morning, noon, and night, my dear.... From your P'Bow.]

Oh my God... Is she really this dramatic?

It turns out I was really on my period....

All the sulking and wanting to hear "I love you" so badly was due to hormones. Okay, I didn't want to blame it on my body's mechanisms. My brain also wanted to hear those words from the stern-faced person.

But it was just a bit too much, and now it seemed like she was serving it up without regard for anything, almost as if mocking me.

"Did you buy sanitary pads at the supermarket earlier... I love you."

"Hey... that's enough."

"I'm asking because I care... I love you."

"I know."

"Do you have period cramps?... I love you."

"Stop it, please. I give up."

She kept saying, "I love you," so much that it was almost like a surname attached to my name. My greed led to this consequence. She wouldn't stop saying it, and she said it in every sentence, afraid I'd feel neglected again.

Especially now that she knew I was on my period, she teased me even more, seeming to enjoy seeing me cover my ears as we drove home together.

"Actually, saying 'I love you' isn't hard. I'll say it from now on... I love you."

And she wasn't joking. When she dropped me off at home, she helped carry the groceries. Mom, who came out to greet us, smiled at both of us, looking a bit awkward.

"Really, Bow, you didn't have to go there with her. It's a waste of gas."

"It's okay. It's just a little thing. I did it out of love."

"What?"

"Because I love Arpo."

"Stop it, P'Bow. I already said I give up."

I almost screamed out. When she decided to tease me, she did it so thoroughly that I didn't know what to do. At first, I thought she'd only say it to my face. Now, she was saying it to my mom, too. Mom looked surprised, then smiled and looked at P'Bow strangely.

"What's going on, Bow? I'm shocked. Someone as tight-lipped as you saying 'I love you' so easily? You never did that before."

"I'm shocked, too. Saying 'I love you' is so easy. She wanted to hear it, so I tried my best. Especially since she's on her period, she might be in a bad mood if she doesn't get what she wants... Arpo, I love you."

"Go back home. I'm not talking to you anymore. Mom, cover your ears. Stop talking to her right now."

I pulled Mom into the house and sent P'Bow away. She complied and went back to her house. Mom looked at me and smiled mischievously.

"Someone must be really happy to be told 'I love you' like this."

"It feels good, but she's doing it sarcastically."

"Even if it's sarcastic, you can tell she really means it. She's probably trying to adjust to you. Someone as tight-lipped as her saying it, you should stop sulking."

Mom smiled and gently placed her hand on my head.

"I remember."

"What?"

"What you said. If you can't have it all, you won't take it."

"..."

"It seems like you... have all of her heart now. I'm really happy for you."

----END OF SPECIAL CHAPTERS----

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Sun Yan Note:

Please do not sell this book but PLEASE SHARE it for FREE...