

Story
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Rolling in Love

Introduction

"Eve... you want an older sister?"

My dad wanted to have a chat in the living room. It's so formal that it makes me nervous. But when I hear the words "older sister," I become excited and eager.

" An older sister? Ah... yes. I've always wanted a sibling. Being the only child is lonely."

" What I'm about to tell you may be shocking, but it's a good thing." My father wriggles uncomfortably. that makes me imitate him teasingly.

" What is it?"

I, who am 12 years old, giggle at his awkwardness. My father's ears are all red, and he's sweating so much he has to wipe it off with the back of his hand before he announces loud and clear.

" I'm remarrying."

Crack. Crack. The sound of lightning!

The song 'Kwan Fah Nah Dam' That the housekeeper's kid likes to sing loudly filled my head. My head is blank, and I can't think straight. My father has been single for over 12 years, which is the same as my age, since my mother died. Today, my father has a new love. But my father has to ask me what I think before he starts a relationship with someone.

" What if I don't want you to remarry?"

I asked a question to challenge him. I'm testing to see how much priority he gives me. Despite his gloomy expression, my father smiles kindly at me.

"I will listen to you"

It's known that all his love is for me. Everyone, including all our relatives, says that the only woman my father love is me. Yet one day my father walks over to tell me that he loves another. However, to not at all care about me and bring someone into the house is not appropriate. I look at my father as I hug my favorite doll worriedly. I want my father to love only me, but I also want a sibling.

"If you have a new lover, will you still love me like you do now?"

"No one can replace you."

"Will you still love my mom?"

"There is no one in this world like your mom. I can never love anyone as much as I love her."

"You promise?"

"Yes."

My father gives me his word and nervously waits my answer. I smile at him and nod.

"Okay. I will let you remarry."

"Thank you, daughter!"

My father happily pulls me into a hug. I heard a sob when he buried his face in my shoulder. I've been waiting to give my father a magical gift. But because I'm so young, whatever I do for him does not seem impressive. So allowing him to remarry and seeing him so happy makes me feel successful in finally doing so.

Moreover... an older sister, as my father mentioned, is also a big gift I'm getting myself.

Around one week after that talk, I got to meet my new mother and older sister. I'm not sure whether I'm excited or nervous. Because they are strangers, I feel both pressured and eager to meet them. My emotions are all mixed up, and I'm not sure how I should be feeling. But no matter how I feel, I will have to meet them anyway.

The gate slowly slides open to show my father's car slowly driving into the driveway. I stand behind the front door of the house, looking out at the guests who will become my family. Not long after that, everyone slowly gets off the car and grabs their belongings from the trunk. The atmosphere is so lively and warm that I can't help but smile.

My father looks happy with a woman who seems to be around his age. I guess she's my new mother. But the person I keep looking for is the other guest—a young lady with a ponytail who's busy picking up her luggage from the trunk. When I finally get a good look at her, I can't help but gasp in awe. Her magnetic charm has my heart racing.

" Eve... Eve! Come on out. Your older sister is here."

I, who am already waiting, slowly get out of my hiding place. My eyes are on that young lady with the sweet face who is standing calmly. She has a slight smile on her face and is looking straight at me as I'm looking at her.

Thump Thump...

Thump Thump...

She's so beautiful. Her light brown hair stands out from her white t-shirt and jeans. There's a backpack on one arm. She's not that tall, but she's very elegant. Because she has an aura that shines so brightly that I'm almost blinded by it, I can't do anything but stand still and not move.

"Why are you standing there, kiddo? Weren't you eager to meet your new sister?"

"It's okay, Uncle" She speaks in a nasal tone while smiling. "I will walk over to her."

After she says that, she walks over. Each step she takes seems to happen in slow motion. It makes me panic, so I step back. When she sees that, she pauses in surprise. She then tilts her head, looking curious.

"Are you afraid of me, angel?"

Angel... is such a cute word. She doesn't call me Sis because she doesn't think of me as a sister? Anyway, I won't call her sis too, then.

"No. I'm not afraid."

"If you're not, then come to me. Let's get to know each other"

" How do we do that?"

She opens her arms and kneels down without saying anything. I'm not that small, but she probably does that so that our eyes are at the same level. When I see her do that, I tighten my lips a bit as I make my decision.

Thud!

I dash in to hug her, knowing that I can do that. The person in front of me leans back, almost falling. Yet she laughs and wraps her arms around me.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Bam."

"Nice to meet you... I'm Eve."

Thump Thump...

My heart is pounding, like when I'm watching the climax of a Korean drama. I hug her tighter and reply with a happy smile.

" We'll be together forever. I promise"

— אנוכי ודאפנה

1. Love Confession

Finally, I have a perfect family, like all my friends. After my mother passed away when she gave birth to me, I kept telling my father that I wanted a mother like others. and my father has made my wish come true. Aside from a mother, I also have an older sister. Moreover, she is very popular at school because her face is so sweet that it turns everyone's head. had her beauty privilege makes me the younger sister of a popular kid in school. so I can now walk with my head held high when I'm at school .

We have lived as a family for 3 months now. Bam is three years older than me. I just started junior high school, while she's already in high school. My new sister is not too short or tall. Her hair is shoulder length, but she likes to tie it to a ponytail. My father moved Bam to my school, so she has a good environment, and it also allows us to be closer together. aside from being beautiful, she's also so smart. Whenever I ask for her health with my homework, she can answer them all and turn tough questions into ones as easy as peeling a banana. She's my pride. She makes an impression on my heart. She's everything to me. you can't even say that she's my first love.

I'm embarrassed... We are sisters, but we are also each other's first love.

Let's try that again... She's my first love. Mine only.

Oh. By using the phrase "mine only," I give the impression that she is one of my personal possessions. But, yeah, I'm possessive offer. No one can get too close. Bam is our nation's treasure. She's the best thing in the world.

I'm thinking so far and wide in my imagination that I forgot I'm asking the sweet-faced person to teach me homework. Bam goes quiet for a while before she glances at me and smiles.

"What are you thinking, looking at me like this?"

"..."

"Are you about to confess your love to me?"

"What!"

Because my mind was drifting and I just heard the last question, it startled me and made my heart race. When the sweet-face person sees my reaction, she laughs. Her clear, bringing laughter puts me back into a daze.

"You keep looking at me with sweet eyes. did you listen to what I taught you at all?"

Because I didn't, I looked very funny right now. Bam looks at me and messes with my hair adoringly before she pretends to scold me. \"I'm serious this time. if you don't listen to me again, I won't teach you anymore.\"

"Okay. I'm also serious this time. I'm sorry!"

"Good girl."

Her face makes me want to cry. Having an older sister who's so beautiful it's like a blessing from God. My father picked a stepmother who brought me such a beautiful and kind stepsister. I'm a bit curious why my father didn't hit on Bam instead. But... Bam it's too young for my father. I was just letting my imagination run wild.

"Here you are, kids. it's time for dinner."

As soon as I think about my stepmother, the older person, who's in her late thirties, makes an appearance. She comes to call us to go eat dinner. Bam, who was kind, changes into a totally different person. She becomes emotionless as she nods to her mother.

"Okay."

She closes her workbook and gets up without calling me. I'm a bit confused, but I don't think much of it. I follow her like an ugly little duckling. and compared to her... up I am ugly. The dinner is the same as always. There are many plates on the table to give us a lot of variety. Since my father remarried, I get to eat a lot of delicious food.

"Oh. The table is full of food. All are my favorites too."

I move the chair and look at the table, excited. My stepmother is responsible for our food instead of our housekeeper. my father can't stop smiling. Since my mother passed away, this is the happiest my father has been. I'm really happy to see this.

"Your mother did her homework well."

My father compliments my stepmother as she smiled shyly.

"I try my best. I don't want my daughter to not love me."

"Are there any of Bam's favorites?"

I ask, wanting to know, as I glance at my sister, who's smiling slightly. She's always well- composed when she's with adults. And it makes me admire her grace.

"I can eat anything. I'm not that picky."

"But I want to know what you like to eat."

"Why?"

"I'll remember it and learn to cook it for you."

I smile and wink at her. The sweet-faced young lady glances at me and adoring smile. Her eyes also sincere that I have to look away in embarrassment.

"You're so kind."

"It's because you're nice to me."

"I'm only nice to those who are nice to me."

Even though her words were a little strange, I curled up out of shyness and started to eat. We talked about this and that throughout dinner. My father tells us about what his day was like and what happened at work. My stepmother, who's my father's secretary, comments on his work before she changes the topic and asks about our school, friends, and daily lives. And the topic changes to our dreams for our futures.

"I want to draw cartoons."

I say that merrily because drawing cartoons is what I'm good at. My schoolbooks are filled with my cartoon drawings. I think I'm very talented in this area, yet...

"It's such an unrealistic dream." My father says this, and the entire table goes quiet. "Be serious, Eve. This is your future."

"You asked what I wanted to be, and I answered honestly. How was I wrong?"

"You have to help me run the company in the future."

I start to twist my mouth, and my eyes are becoming teary because my father doesn't respect my passion. My stepmother sees that the mood is turning sour, so she interrupts.

"She's still young. Let her enjoy her childhood for now. Don't pressure her."

" But..."

"It's still many years down the road. Let's change the topic. We were having a good time earlier."

Because my Stepmother's help me out, we switched to talking about something else. Bam, who is seated next to me, places her hand on my thigh

and lightly squeeze it, if sending me encouragement without looking at me. I'm so grateful that I grabbed her hand under the table and squeeze it.

"Thank you."

Knock, knock, knock.

The knock on the door startles me as I sit, feeling down because of what my father said. I can almost smile instantly when I open the door to see that it's Bam. The sweet-faced young lady tilts her head as she looks at me and asks me with her usual gentle voice.

"What are you doing?"

"Just thinking about stuff."

"Can I go in?"

"Ah-huh."

I gladly open the door wider for her to come in and try to pick up my things that are scattered around the room to make space for her to sit comfortably. The sweet-faced person is not one to complain. She just sits on the bed and looks around before looking at me quietly.

"Is there something on my face?"

"How are you?"

"..."

"Aren't you sad?"

She asks me a question that hits me square in the weak spot, and it feels like a flame is burning me. I choke up, and tears fall down my cheeks uncontrollably. The sweet-faced one opens her arms to welcome me.

"Do you want to hug me?"

"Bam"

"You don't want my hug?" She's about to put her arms down, so I hurriedly dashed into hug her so forcefully that she fell down into my bed. The older person laughs, as if she adores me. She pats my back gently, like she's consoling me. "It's okay. Don't cry. Your father will forget about it soon."

"Sob. Why doesn't my father understand me? I like to draw. Why does he have to kill my dream?"

"Because you're his only hope."

"Why can't I have a dream of my own? Why do I have to be his hope? Why do I have to pursue his dream?"

There is no greater consolation than a good listener. My different-blood sister simply hugs me and pats my back rhythmically. She lets me cry. Eventually, I start to feel better, so I get up and look at her. I just realized how embarrassing it is that I'm lying on top of her.

"Are you okay? I put all my weight on you."

"You're very light. It wasn't that heavy. Is it better now that you've let it all out?"

"I feel a lot better. Thank you so much...Having a sister is great."

The person beneath me smiles cheerfully and wipes my tears away with her fingers. Because of the posture we're in, we are forced to look each other in the eye for an extended period of time as she does that. My heart is beating so heavily that I'm afraid the sweet-faced young lady will hear it and feel awkward. Yet I don't want to move away from her just now, so I try to start a conversation to prolong this moment.

"What perfume do you use?"

"Huh?" She seems confused when I suddenly change the topic. But she gives me another smile. "I'm not using any perfume. I'm just using cologne."

"It smells so good, even if it's just cologne."

"Perfumes are expensive."

"Ah... I'll buy you a bottle when I have money."

"Wow. At such a young, you already have a generous spirit. I'll wait. I'll just use cologne for now. Sometimes I use my mother's without her knowing it. But if you buy me one, I'll only use yours forever."

"Forever..."

I ended our conversation like that. Bam wriggles a bit, probably because she's getting heavy.

"You're heavy now?"

"Let's get up."

Though I regret it a bit, I get up and stretch out my hand to Bam. Yet the sweet-faced young lady shakes her head and chooses to get up herself. She gives me a reason for that, so I don't feel insulted.

"I choose not to hold your hand because I want to get up myself after I fall. I want you to do that too."

"You're so capable. I needed your consolation when I was that sad."

"Then I'll be your exception. If you're sad, I'll extend my hand out for you to hold and pull you up." she reaches her hand out to pat my head again.

"I'll get going."

"Why are you so nice to me?"

"Huh?"

She's about to grab the door knob, but she turns to look at me curiously.

"You are being too nice to me, considering we just met. It intrigues me. But... in a good way."

"It's because you're cute."

I drop my jaw and don't know how to look.

"And I feel sorry for you."

"..."

"So I think that I want to do whatever I can for you. That's all."

As she turns around again. I stopped her with a confession that I didn't think I would dare say.

"I love you, Bam."

She pauses with her hand still on the doorknob and turns to me with a smile.

"Thank you."

That's all she says before she walks out of the room. I fell to the floor. It took a lot of courage to confess my love to her. Though I'm so young, I know the meaning of what I just said.

I love her...

This woman is my first love. One that I know, without a doubt, is true love!

2. Mask

We live a normal family life, Where my older sister never knows that she has a younger sister who admires and is crazy about her. Bam is my role model in every way, whether It's the way she walks, her speaking voice, her table manners, or her good grades in school that never disappoint. If anyone is disappointed, it is my father, who constantly compares me to her. But that's not a big deal because my father never pressures me about my grades. The only thing he's serious about is the degree I'm going to get and the career path I'm going to take.

I'm to carry on the family business.

Since that event, we have never talked about it again. I avoid talking about it and continue to do what I want. My inspiration to pursue my dream is Bam. Add to that my stepmother, my father's ex-secretary, who has become his new wife.

"How's your drawing? Are you better at it?"

My stepmother asked one night when she dropped by my room. I'm about to go into high school now, which means that I have to choose which area of study I want to focus on. It's an important step in life.

"I think it's better."

I hand her my latest drawing. It's a drawing of her, but it's more like a cartoon than a portrait. My stepmother looks at it and smiles.

"You're good. I don't regret sending you to drawing classes without your father's knowledge."

"Thank you so much for supporting my dream. My father would have never done that," I say that sadly. My stepmother gently pulls at my cheek in adoration.

"Don't let him know. And when it's time to choose your career path, it's your life; remember that. Do what you want."

Those are words of great encouragement to me. My heart is as full as a hot air balloon floating up into the sky, and as a result, I can see far away. Getting to do what you want is a great blessing. Yet as my stepmother and I giggle happily, someone is looking at us as she's leaning on the doorway without saying anything.

"Bam. I also drew a picture for you." I pull the paper out of my school bag and hand it to her. The sweet-faced young lady takes it and looks at it, expressionless. That makes me nervous. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"It's beautiful."

There are many levels of "beautiful." "Stunning" means it's really beautiful. "Beautiful" is more like a compliment to get by. Bam is making me feel like that picture it's not beautiful at all.

"If you don't like it, I'll draw you a new one."

"No need. I think it's beautiful already... Bam. If you want to compliment your sister, do so. It's not necessary to try to look cool." My stepmother interrupts.

"I'm sleepy. I'll go to bed... Good night, Eve."

Bam takes the drawing with her as she walks away. My stepmother simply sighs as Bam walks away, while I am becoming depressed. Bam, who's always nice to me, seems bored with life. She's never been like that with me.

"Is Bam in a bad mood, mom?"

"She's probably stressed about her university application. It's her senior year."

"Ah, that's right. Time flies. She just started high school when we met."

"Let her be. Teenagers are like this. Don't worry about it. And don't worry about what she said. Your drawing is good. Please work on your dream. I support you."

"Thank you!"

After my Stepmother left, I diligently drew a new picture for Bam. It took me around an hour to finish drawing Bam in my imagination. My excitement at wanting to show it to her because I want her to compliment me causes me to rush over to her room, forgetting to knock on the door in the process. And what I saw shocked me. Bam is smoking at the window. The smoke made me cough.

"Eve!"

The sweet-faced young lady throws the cigarette away and waves her hand to try to get the smoke out of the room in panic. She then dashes over to close the door and looks at me in shock.

"Why are you here?"

The stern voice makes me feel small. When she catch up with her emotions, she changes her tone of voice and gives me a smile.

"I'm sorry. I was surprised. I'm afraid my mom would see it."

"I'm sorry that I forgot to knock on the door before I came in."

"I was wrong for not locking it as well. So you saw it all."

"..."

"You must be very disappointed to see me smoke."

"Not that much. I'm just surprised... How long?"

"I'm not sure. I don't remember when I started." She walks over to wash her hands in the bathroom before coming back out with a smile on her face. It seems like she also washes her mouth to get rid of the smell when we talk. "So what's up? Why did you come to see me?"

"I just want to give you a drawing."

"You already did."

"I think you don't like that one, so I drew you a new one. Here." I hand it to her nervously. The sweet-faced one takes it and looks at it for a while. It's a drawing from my imagination, so it's not something that has really happened before. It's a drawing of Bam playing with a puppy. I saw her cry when we watched a movie about those four-legged creatures, so I think she must like animals.

"You're so talented."

She praised me! This means that this picture is not just plain "beautiful," but it must be really beautiful. I smile widely. Yet the person who received my picture has tears in her eyes. My jaw drops.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm sleepy."

"Does my picture make you sleepy?" I'm depressed again. That makes her laugh and wipe her tears, and she tells me with a shaky voice.

"I admit it. I'm so moved that I'm crying. But I want to look cool, so I said that I was sleepy. I ended up making you feel bad."

"You're that happy?"

The sweet-faced young lady nods and wipes her tears with the back of her hand again.

"It's because I never get anything, I guess."

"Why?"

"Well... I don't know. In the past, if I wanted something, I had to do something as a trade. You're the first person who gave me something without wanting anything back."

"I do."

I lick my lips and tell her honestly. The beautiful sister raises an eyebrow and tilts her head.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to love me."

Thump Thump...

As I say that, my heart pounds with excitement. I have no idea why I said it, but it prompted the sweet-faced one to hug me and rub my back gently.

"If you want my love, I'll give it to you. I liked you a lot."

Thump Thump...

That's her love confession. Though it's nothing more than a sisterly one, it makes me feel good.

"I like you more. You're my first love."

Following that, everything falls silent. The sweet-faced young lady then giggles into my ear, "haha." That turns our heartfelt moment into a humorous one. I scrunch my face a bit and move away from her.

"What? I confessed my love to you, and you laughed at me? How do you think I'd feel?"

"Why are you so adorable? What should I do? I already told you that I like you too."

"You don't have to do anything. Just don't laugh at my love for you..." The sweet-faced young lady gently kissed me on the forehead before I can finish my sentence. There was no forewarning to prepare me. It was the first time I had received a kiss from someone other than my father. And I notice, from the color of her cheeks, that Bam is surprised at her own action too.

Thump Thump...

Thump Thump...

"What were the two of you doing?"

My stepmother opens the door to see us and asks with a flat voice. I hurriedly stepped back and smiled at her like the good kid I was.

"I was just chitchatting with Bam. I also came to give her a new drawing."

"It's almost 11:00 p.m.; you should be in bed, good girl." The older person said it kindly. I nod to acknowledge that and turn to smile at Bam again.

"I'm going to bed. Sweet dreams. Dream of me a little"

"Ah-huh."

Her lively smile turned into a cold one again. It's always like this when my stepmother is around. I don't quite understand the reason behind it, but there must be one. I will ask her when we are closer.

But... she kissed me on the forehead. Are we close yet?

[So giddy. Your sister was just expressing sisterly love. Don't daydream too much. Do you really think someone with God-created beauty like her doesn't already have a lover?]

"Why are you making me depressed? I was happy!"

I'm hiding under the blanket while talking to my friend on the home phone. I wanted to brag to my friend about all the good things that have happened today. Yet 'Awe' shattered my happiness into pieces.

[I was just stating the facts. If you were that beautiful, wouldn't you have a lover? Even you, her sister, like her.]

"She never talked about any boys."

[Why would she talk about boys with a stepsister like you?]

"Because we're close."

[Are you thinking that one-sidedly?]

"Were you born to tear down all my confidence? What a bad friend, idiot."

[Curse at me all you want. If you want someone to praise you, go talk to your stepmother. If you want the truth, come talk to me... By the way, we're about to start high school, so which major will you choose?]

"Arts— maybe a language, or arts in general."

[Wouldn't your father go crazy? You complained that he wanted you to take over his business, didn't you?]

"My stepmother will help talk to him. That's what she said."

[Your stepmother is so kind. It's the other side of what we see in TV series. Even Cinderella was shoved into the kitchen.]

"It's because I'm a good daughter with great discipline, a high noble, talented in the arts, and an outstanding athlete."

[Fine. Why is your life so easy?]

"It's not fun talking to you. I'm going to talk to Bam. I'll ask for her advice on what I should study."

[Up to you. But once you enter high school, she will go to university, right? Now that's the real thing.]

"Real what?"

[Our school social circle is small, and there are few options. You've walked past all the guys so many times that you don't want to date anyone anymore. But in university, it's different. Your sister will have so many lovers and kids.]

"Where are the kids from?"

[Your sister's lover's sperm.]

"F***..."

I immediately hung up the phone. I'm not a particularly rude person, but I can't help but curse at such a friend. My father taught me the manners of a princess living in castle, yet I lost them because my friend kept tearing down my confidence. Geez! I will prove to her how close to Bam I am. She said that she liked me. She also kissed me on the forehead. If that's not close, what is?

Once I'd made my decision, I jumped up from bed, stuck my head out from under the blanket, and walked over to Bam's room. Again, I forgot to knock on the door. But once I open the door, I see my stepmother talking to her daughter. I was going to go back because she told me to go to bed earlier, but I wanted to wait until I could see Bam, so I waited. As I do, I can't help but eavesdrop because they seem very serious.

Knowing about others' business... is my number one Talent.

"Have you decided on your degree?" My Stepmother's serious tone of voice is one I rarely hear. Or, to be exact, she's never used it on me. Bam, her sweet-faced daughter, is looking out the window with her arms crossed across her chest, not seeming to care to listen.

"Yes. I want to be a doctor."

She's such an angel. My first love is incredibly gifted.

"You have to get a business degree."

The person who was so kind to me this evening is as cold as my father when it comes to her own daughter. Are all parents like this— kind to others' kids but mean to their own kids?

"I don't like it."

"But you have to do it."

"Isn't this enough, mom?" Bam is getting louder. Her calm demeanor that I've always seen has turned into the demeanor of a kid being stubborn toward her parents. " We get to stay in a big house. We have everything now. Why are you making me do this?"

What is she saying?

"I told you from the start that if I can't get everything, I don't want anything at all. Why did you think I married Kit?"

"Because he's rich."

"So you know."

"It should be enough. Do you want to die because you're buried under so much money? Also, he has a daughter. Everything will go to Eve anyway."

" I won't let that happen."

What?

"Everything will be ours. Yours and mine."

"Mom, she's the daughter..."

"She's not your sister. Are you forgetting that?!"

"..."

"Your mask is falling off. Always remember that that kid is a stranger. You have to get a business degree and learn everything about the business so that you can take everything. That kid..." My stepmother leaves it there and shrugs. "Let her get whatever degree she wants. If she likes drawing so much, let her draw. If you really feel bad for her... after you get everything, you can hire her to paint your bedroom, your husband's bedroom, and your kids' bedroom. She should have enough to eat with that."

My hands are shaking. I slowly walk away. Because of the shock, my heart is pounding. I never dreamed that I would hear something like that. What I saw was not what it was. What I thought was not what I hoped for. The masks of my stepmother and stepsister fell, and I saw their ugly, rotten faces behind them. They are here to destroy me and my father. I won't let that happen.

Don't think they are the only ones who can wear masks... I will wear a mask too!

Summary

3. Not cool

"You're really taking the math and arts major? I thought that you liked the arts and would focus on drawing."

When my father told everything at breakfast that I was going to major in math and the arts as well as get a business degree, my stepmother asked me in a serious tone, even though there was no reason to be concerned.

Yes... I ruined her plan by changing my major.

"Our likes and dislikes can change. I liked drawing yesterday, but I no longer like it now. I have come to realize that I should prioritize what my father has built." I smiled to please my father. Bam sits with her back straight tilts her head, looking at me from the opposite side of the table. She seems curious, but I show nothing but a smile, a smile, and another smile.

I smile so much that it looks fake. But it's a mask. If it's real, how can it be a mask?

"You don't like it anymore? So you won't draw anymore?"

Bam, who tends to keep quiet when we are all together, speaks up like she regrets it or something. Her face and reaction are so serious that I almost have to shake my head to get rid of the idea that she's sincere. But, no! I heard what her mother and she planned to do the other night. There is no sincerity there; it is simply what I imagine to be through in my head.

"I guess so."

"What about the drawing courses you registered for?" The witch, who pretended to be a good mother, still asks eagerly. "It was many tenths of thousands. Such a waste."

Why would you care? That's my father's money.

"Can't we ask for a refund?" My father asks casually because he knows that once they have money in their pockets, it's hard to get it back. But maybe something can be done. "Maybe just 50%."

"We can't. That's a very famous tutor. What happened? Why do you suddenly not want to draw anymore? Did your father pressure you into this?"

My stepmother is still trying to convince me to take an arts major. I just shake my head and pretend that I've come to my senses.

"I just grew up. I suddenly realized that drawing wouldn't lead to a real job. or, if I want to make it, I'd have to be one of the top five talents, the pinnacle of the pyramid. I probably can't do that. It's better to help with my family's business so I can help my father in the future. I'd be helping you too."

"..."

"Please take me under your wing. When I grow up and become a manager there, I will have to ask for a lot of help from Miss secretary. Ops. I'm sorry, I mean, mom. I haven't started work yet, and I already gave you my secretary position. Haha."

I giggle. My father laughs along with me because he believes that I am joking. The mother and daughter only look at each other and try to go with the flow.

After breakfast, I get ready to go back to my bedroom and read cartoons. Yet my stepsister, who is not a blood relative of mine, calls me.

"Eve."

"..."

I know that it's her. For a brief moment, my heart is pounding from excitement as I hear her call to me. But when I think about what happened,

I have to calm myself down and put on my mask as I turn to her and smile, pretending to be a good kid.

"Yes?"

"Can I talk to you?"

"Of course, Miss Bam."

"..."

"Can I call you Miss Bam from now on? I prefer this."

"Why? Calling me Bam is cute and brings us closer"

"It's like you're not calling me sister. Let's use whatever term makes us happy... More importantly,"

"..."

"I don't want you as my close sister anymore."

My words can be interpreted in many ways. And it would be correct in any way interpreted.

I no longer respect her because I'm overwhelmed with disappointment. That's another half of it.

I also no longer want her as a sister because I like her so much. That's another half.

"Okay. You can call me whatever you like."

"Thank you."

"But why don't you like to draw anymore? You can talk to me, you know?"

"Why does everyone ask me this today, both Secretary mom and you?" I puff my cheeks and stomp my foot a little when I speak to make it seem like

it's nothing important. "The reason is simple. I don't like it anymore."

"How can someone suddenly dislike something?"

"We can."

"..."

"Like yesterday, I liked something a lot, but I no longer like it today."

I look her straight in the eye. Bam looks back at me like someone who doesn't like to lose. We stare at each other without anyone giving in until the sweet-faced young lady finally closes her eyes and nods.

"I understand."

"..."

"Let me excuse myself."

She ends our discussion easily and walks into her room. I, who acted so cool, almost dropped to the floor because acting is so tiring. also, those beautiful eyes that stare at me—it was like they were casting a spell on me to like her more and more, which is the exact opposite of my intention.

[If you really heard them say those things, you have nothing to regret. I would have done more than you have. I'll hire someone to cast witchcraft on them so they die and burn in hell. *&UH]

And all the curses from hell flow into my ears, as my friend is very into it. I become all pumped up as I listen. Yet, in honesty, I'm also sad.

"I don't know why I can sense that Bam..." I pause as I call her Bam. "...that girl is not that bad a person."

[You're holding back from cursing at her? I respect your heart of gold. They are wearing masks in front of you. Did you forget?

"But..."

[No but. Think of her as your parallel. A real daughter and a daughter-in-law can never live peacefully together. Remember that. All the buried treasure must be yours. No sharing. So do what you intended to do. Focus on your studies and career. Once you're successful, kick them out to live on Mars.]

"That far?"

Even though it is an exaggeration, I am nervous on the inside. If I really do that, I may never see her, my first love, again. My friend can tell how I'm feeling by the way I sound, so she's being sarcastic.

[You're still daydreaming about your stepsister? She has bad intentions, and you're still having doubts?]

"Maybe she's not like that. Maybe it's just her mother."

[Have you ever seen a kid who is not like their parents? She's the same as her mother.]

"My father is a businessman, but I like to draw."

[Love really makes you blind. I'm trying to get you to see what's in front of you, but you're still arguing for her. Fine. It's your life. I'm just warning you.]

"Haven't you heard of the saying, 'Keep your enemy close to you'?... How did the conversation come to this?"

[What about drawing? Will you really stop? You're very good at it.]

When I'm asked that, I want to cry. It's my dream. I thought things were going well before I heard what I shouldn't.

"What can I do?"

[Sneak to class. Don't let them know.]

"Really? I can do that?"

[Gosh. You amaze me with your cluelessness. What is there in this world that we can't do except fight for true democracy?]

"Idiot. Don't talk about politics. I'm too young for that."

[Oh, how ignorant!]

I can't help but feel sad for having to throw away my dream after I decided not to choose a career in drawing. At first, I thought it was a dream come true to meet my stepmother and have a sister. But it turns out that I jumped out of a frying pan into the fire. They are crueler than I expected. Though I want to whine like other rich kids who act like kids all the time, I have to grow up. I have to force myself to get a degree I don't want. But even if I can't choose that career path, getting to take drawing courses is good enough. I've already paid for it, so I might as well do it for relaxation. That's what I think.

I'm standing in front of the arts tutoring school where I registered for a one-on-one course. I intended to take the course to get as much knowledge as I can and get it over with. I can draw in my free time. My father will be okay with that. However, when I arrive, the employee at the counter who remembered me informs me that someone has already taken my place.

And I see her drawing with my tutor...Bam.

I stand at the doorway as I watch my tutor teach the sweet-faced young lady to sketch. Though I can't hear what they are saying, it seems like the tutor is praising her. I get more angry when I see that. She's stealing away my last happiness. Since I'm still a kid and immature, I sulk. I attended to pick a fight with Bam; no, "Miss Bam." I wait for her at home, writing down all the words I will throw at her in a notebook, because I'm afraid that I will forget when I see her sweet face when it's time.

Around two hours after that, the mean stepdaughter (that's how I will picture her from now on) gets back home. I give her time to settle down and prepare herself for a while before I enter her room, without knocking as usual.

"You!"

As soon as the door opens and I see her under the light that shines through the curtain, all the words I prepare are swallowed instantly. Her naked body has her back to me as she's about to slip into her clothes. I can only stand there, stunned, blushing, and unable to breathe. Instead of letting those harsh words I've prepared out of my mouth, I just sweep my eyes all over her body like I'm an explorer. Her milky white back has a tattoo under her right shoulder blade. It's a sentence. I've always known that she's beautiful, but seeing this makes me completely lose my mind.

Bam. Not again. "Miss Bam" hurriedly grabs what she can to cover herself and looks at me, shocked, as if she's seen a ghost.

"You didn't knock the door again" She speaks with a somewhat moody tone. I look in another direction out of respect and to give her time to cover herself. "Did you see anything?"

"No."

"Liar."

"Why did you ask if you weren't going to believe me?"

"What did you see?" Bam puts some clothes on quickly and walks to me. "What did you see?"

"There's nothing to look at. Just... your body."

"What else?"

"How much do you want me to elaborate? It's awkward." I stare at her and sigh. "I saw you naked. And I saw your tattoo."

"Don't tell anyone what you saw."

"Who will I tell that I saw you naked?"

"I mean the tattoo."

"You're worried about the tattoo? Why? What does it say?"

"Just don't tell anyone, especially my mother."

Her eyes are full of anxiety. I pretend to roll my eyes and shrug to annoy her.

"I don't have much to talk to your mother about anyway."

"Don't tell anyone."

"What's the big deal? It's just a tattoo." When I see her look all serious, I raise my hand as a white flag.

"Fine. I won't tell anyone that you have a tattoo. Why? What does it say? Why are you this worried?"

"Nothing. But please knock on the door before you come in next time."

Her voice is very stern, so I'm becoming mad. I'm keeping her secret for her, so why is she so angry with me?

"No, I won't. This is my house. If you want me to keep it a secret, you have to tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"What does the tattoo say?"

"It's not that important. You don't have to know."

The more she refuses to tell me, the more I want to know. So I try to lift up her t-shirt. But she brushes my hand off.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to know what it says. Is it your lover's name?"

"Yes, Happy now?"

"Yes!"

Damned! Was that what I wanted to say to her! All the words I've prepared to throw at her are gone with the wind and the sunlight on Saturday afternoon. As soon as I said that, I closed the door and ran to my room without getting any answer from her.

Why am I not cool at all!

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4. Not changed

I'm in high school and have chosen my major according to what I promised my father. Bam (I'll continue to call her this because I'm already used to it) got into one of the top public universities. It's so famous that if people hear which one it is, they will exclaim with excitement. Not only is she beautiful, but she also has a big brain. It makes me more angry and makes me pressure myself more when I compare myself to her. Knowing that she got into the business administration program, which requires a score as high as the price of APPL stock to get into, I want to die on a daily basis. So I study like crazy, though I have a few years left to prepare. I have to admit frankly that... studying in an area that you have no passion for is not only not fun, it's useless. Nothing goes into my head except for the physical education class.

So in order not to feel hopeless, I ask my father to send me to tutoring schools. The cost is higher than Bam's university tuition. I cry as I study every single day because I hate it. Math is a wonder of the world, and I have no idea why it was invented. English is the only subject in which I can get by.

Plink. Plink, Plink

With my ten fingers and one foot, I am currently playing Pachelbel's Canon in D on the piano to relieve my stress. Even though I play it perfectly, I don't think it sounds good at all. I couldn't draw because of my stress. I also cannot remember anything I read. So music is my outlet, as it's something I can do well, and my father has praised me for it. At least I should have something to show my dad that he can be proud of.

"I thought it was just furniture. So someone can actually play it."

The sweet voice that I couldn't get out of my head can be heard. My fingers immediately stopped. If you don't pay attention, it will appear that I am angry to be interrupted. But actually, I'm embarrassed to have this sweet-faced young lady as my audience.

"Of course I know how to play it"

I cast a glance at her in her university uniform before quickly turning away because I'm about to reveal how beautiful I think she looks in it. Her light brown hair, cut in a shoulder-length choppy bob style, complements her face perfectly. How can someone look this good?

"..."

Yet she suddenly goes quiet. That makes me glance at her again to see that she's looking at me.

"What?"

"We haven't chatted in a while."

"We both have to study hard. Also, we don't have anything to talk to each other about."

"I've always wanted to ask, and since today we have a chance to talk, I'll ask you now. The sweet-faced young lady who's sitting on the sofa leans forward and looks all serious. "Why are you mad at me?"

"I'm not."

"Then what is it? I remember that we were good. But you don't even look at my face lately. You don't talk to me like you used to. We're too distant. There must be something."

"Think carefully. What could be the reason someone changed like that?"

"..."

"Let me know when you figure it out."

I shrug and continue to play the piano to look cool. The same song, but played in a different key, gives a different vibe. And I can sense that the song is annoying, though it's the same song as before. There's a soft breeze on my back. I can feel it, but I didn't pay attention to it until Bam, who's standing behind me, put her chin on my shoulder as I'm playing the piano.

"I can't think of any reason."

Thump Thump...

Thump Thump

What's this? I am attempting to annoy her, but she is responding with cuteness. I'm having a heart attack, I, who say that I hate her, am blushing. Her action makes me feel good, and I want us to stay in this position forever.

Can she just take off her head and put it here? I wouldn't mind that

"You're making me play the wrong notes"

I pretend to complain. It seems like she feels guilty that she ruined my song, so she hurriedly moved back. I regretted that.

"I'm sorry"

"It's okay. I can continue to play." I say this as my fingers are still playing the piano. The sweet-faced young lady is now sitting next to me. She looks at my fingers as she shakes her head.

"I mean for making you angry."

"..."

"I don't know what I did wrong. But I'm sorry"

She says this as she reaches her hand out and puts it on my hand lightly. My fingers stop their movement, as if they want to absorb the warmth from that

hand. My heart goes weak when she says that. When you give your heart to someone, you can't stay angry when they try to reconcile with you.

This is probably why those who are in love tend to turn their friends into dogs. Every time the person they love tries to reconcile with them, they can't help but fall back in love with that person. The same goes for me.

But this is not reconciliation between lovers. When I think of that, I continue to play the piano and respond to her without looking into her eyes.

"Your hand is in my way. I can't play the piano like this."

Instead of moving her hand away, Bam squeezes my hand, not wanting to give in to me.

"Tell me what's wrong"

I tighten my lips, stop playing the piano, and turn to look her in the eye without being able to say anything. I should say something about what I heard. If I ask her frankly, will she admit it? And if she does, what next? Will she stop the plan she's executing with her mother for me?

"If I tell you, will you be honest with me?"

"Of course. You're the person I like the most. Don't you remember when we first met? I told you that we would be together forever."

"..."

"If we continue like this, we will be uncomfortable and can't be together forever, like I said."

"Okay. I'll tell you." I decided to talk about what I know. I pause a bit because the housekeeper walks in to interrupt us.

"Miss Bam, there's a friend here to see you and pick you up to go to the university."

The sweet-faced young lady turns to me and nods as she says, "Shh"

"Let's talk about this when I come back."

Bam gets up and walks to another room to grab her purse. I watch as she leaves, but when she turns to look at me, I pretend to be looking around aimlessly to look cool. Once I'm certain she's walked out to her friend's car. I watch her from the big window, frustrated, especially since the friend is a guy.

"Miss Bam just started university and already has a guy to pick her up and drop her off." The housekeeper says that teasingly when she sees me looking out the window. "But well, she's so beautiful. It would be more strange if no one hit on her. Oh? Or he's not hitting on her. Maybe they are already lovers. Else, Miss Bam wouldn't let him pick her up and drop her off like this, don't you think?"

"I don't know.

When the housekeeper notices that I have no comments, she scrunches her face, bored because she has no one to gossip with.

"You're no fun."

"How is gossiping fun?"

"You get to know many things.

"And do you know if they're together, to be gossiping about them?"

My voice is a clear indication that I'm very moody. So the housekeeper walks away. I do nothing all day except lock myself in my room and look out the window to see what time she comes back. I'm at the dinner table, and my father's capable stepdaughter still isn't home yet. She said that she is applying to be a cheerleader

"She's good. My father praises her to my stepmother, who's sitting next to him when he hears that. "Studying and doing activities too, your kid is very capable."

"She's not only my kid."

I unconsciously twist my mouth. It seems like my stepmother sees it, so I hurriedly smile to make what I did appear to be just her imagination.

"Yes. So capable and beautiful. I saw a guy driving a brand new car come to pick her up."

"Really? Bam already has a boyfriend? But it's not surprising because she's very good-looking. My father continues to praise her while my stepmothers frown, not looking happy.

"He's probably just a friend, not a boyfriend Bam told me that she wouldn't have anyone until she graduated. She wants to focus on her studies so she can help you with work."

"Don't take it too seriously. Let her enjoy her teenage years."

"But as the oldest child in this house, she has to take things more seriously than this."

"Don't worry. I already said that I'd help dad, though my grades are not as good. I quickly say this and smile at my father. "I read every day. I will get into the university I want. I won't disappoint you, dad."

"You don't have to pressure yourself that much." My stepmother says this like she means well. "You should spend time with your friends. Enjoy your childhood to the max."

"How is that different from Bam? She's also just a teenager. Why are you so strict with her?"

I asked back. It just so happens that the sweet-faced young lady returns at the same time. So, she hears what I just said. She looks at me and then at her mother, knowing what's going on, before raising her hands in respect to my father.

"Hello, Uncle."

She never calls my father "father," not even once. That's the opposite of me, who is an obedient kid who calls her mother "mother." My father

acknowledges Bam and starts a conversation smilingly.

"We were talking about you. I heard that a guy picked you up today. A kid told me."

My father looks over at me as he says "kid," to indicate that it was me. So I sit here awkwardly and shrug.

"I didn't spill the beans on you. I was just telling them about the brand new car."

"Is he your boyfriend?" My father goes back to the same topic, but my stepmother quickly interrupts.

"No, he's not. Right, Bam?"

Though her voice is calm, her eyes are like blades. The sweet-faced young lady looks her mother in the eye before she sits opposite me and replies frankly. I can't tell if she's being sarcastic

"He's a senior from my faculty. We are getting to know each other."

Gasp!

She doesn't admit that he's her lover. Yet the words 'getting to know each other' make my heart race. I'm starting to feel anxious. I suddenly have the urge to throw things. I should be happy that the mother and daughter are fighting, but I want her to not have a lover until she graduates, like her mother said.

I'm possessive... very possessive. And I also hate her a lot because I have to.

"Introduce him to me someday, so I know who he is and where he's from." My father tells Bam, then turns to talk to her mother. "Don't worry about your daughter too much. She's an adult now."

"Ah-huh."

It's only me who can hear the frustration in my stepmother's voice. Her daughter already knows that her mother doesn't like what she's doing, but she chooses to do it anyway. After dinner, Bam comes to see me in my room. She tilts her head and smiles at me.

"So."

"So what?"

"You like to gossip?"

The sweet-faced young lady didn't seem angry when we talked about her at the dinner table. So I shrug, put my hands in my pockets, and deny it, trying to look cool as usual.

"I was just talking about you. I wasn't gossiping. It's just a normal conversation at the dinner table."

"What about arguing with my mother for me?"

"Argue?"

"Saying that I should be able to enjoy my teenage years like others."

I didn't intend to argue for her. I just wanted to argue with my stepmother. She just happened to walk in when I was saying that. I'll take credit for it, then.

"It was nothing."

"Thank you."

"For arguing with my stepmother? There's no need to thank me. I just argued because I wanted to win."

"I still want to thank you. Since I was born, no one has ever stood up for me before. You've done so many things for me." The sweet-faced young lady reaches out her hand to pat me on the head, but I lean away. She pauses.

"But I still wonder why you're mad at me. You're very cold toward me."

Since we're talking and we were interrupted this morning, let's talk now. What is it? What happened?"

"If you really want to talk, take off your mask. Stop pretending to be nice. I want to puke,"

"..."

My words shock the sweet-faced one. She opens her mouth to say something. Then she shuts it. And then she opens it again, She does that repeatedly.

"Mask... So you know about my mother and me? How?"

"Nosy."

"..."

"I mean, I was nosy, not you."

Even at a time like this, I'm afraid that she'll think that I cursed her. My feelings are all over the place. I both love and hate her. I want to believe her when she says she loves me, but I don't want to trust her actions at the same time.

"I heard your mother and you talk about why you're here and what you want. It's too bad... I thought we could be a real family, but your mother doesn't think so. Neither do you."

"So that's why you said that you liked one thing yesterday but no longer liked it the next... I just understand what you meant."

She looks so sad that I want to pull her in a hug. But I keep thinking that this is just one of her acts. This is just another mask that she's wearing

"Yes."

"But." The sweet-faced person looks at me with tears in her eyes. She's not crying, but her eyes well up. "I still think the same about you"

"Think what?"

"I like you."

Thump Thump...

Thump Thump...

Suddenly, the person in front of me says that she likes me. How should I react? Should I be excited, sad, or angry? What kind of atmosphere is this?

"Why are you suddenly saying this?"

"I just want you to know that though you've changed. I haven't."

"..."

"I liked you yesterday, and I still like you today."

Summary

5. A request

"I liked you yesterday, and I still like you today."

Words that sounded like a love confession from Bam stun me. Though I know her feelings are not the same as mine, my heart is still racing. I turn my face away and cross my arms over my chest because I'm both moved and confused. I don't want to acknowledge anything. When she sees that I won't listen to what she has to say, she gets ready to leave. I can't help but stop her with a question.

"Why?" She stops and turns towards me, questioningly. So I elaborate.
"Why do you like me?"

I feel awkward saying that. Asking why someone likes you is embarrassing. The sweet-faced young lady smiles slightly and turns to look at me.

"You're very open about how you feel. You dare to express what you like or dislike. Though you pretend to be happy, it's clear that you're just being sarcastic."

I'm not wearing my mask well enough. Damned.

"You have what I don't have; that is courage. I want to be half as courageous as you are." The sweet-faced young lady turns away and says something like she's thinking to herself "I want to be stubborn with Uncle and argue with Mom."

"That's because I know why your mother and you are here."

"That's courage... Courage to fight. In the meantime, I don't dare do anything. I'm just my mother's good girl. I have to say that I like what I don't like. What I don't like, I have to say... I can do."

The sadness in her voice makes me go soft. But I continue to argue with her.

"You don't need courage. Just be honest."

"And dare to abandon your dream by giving up drawing and pursuing a degree that your father desires simply because you want to win."

She sees right through me. It's true. It's very painful for me. It took me a lot of courage to decide not to go to drawing classes and not to follow my dream of getting a degree in arts and drawing.

"So, why are you keeping your mouth shut? Say what you want to say or do not want to do. Say you like what you like. Say you don't like what you don't like. Just express yourself."

She tilts her head a bit and smiles broadly at me.

"I did express it. I expressed that I liked you"

Thump Thump...

Thump Thump...

"Please continue to be like this. Please don't change. At least be my role model."

We paused to look each other in the eye for a while. Then my stepmother calls us from behind. The cruel one tends to wear a mask of the always-kind. When she sees me, she lets out a kind smile.

"Oh, I didn't know that you girls were talking here. What are you talking about? Can I join?"

"We just finished. Let... me excuse myself."

I walk back to my room. I take a quick peek outside as I'm about to close the door and see that my stepmother's face changes right away. She then calls her daughter into her room to talk in private.

Bam is under that much pressure? I didn't know.

I have zero understanding of what's in the math and arts school books except for the cartoon drawings that I drew inside them during class. I put my chin on my hand and sigh as my eyes wander. Awe chose the same major as me because she doesn't know what she wants to be when she grows up. She just picked whatever her friend chose. Right now, she's poking my waist and raising her eyebrow.

"What grade do you think you will get this semester?"

"The semester just started, and you're asking about my grade already?"

I say that in frustration. I don't need to go see any master fortune teller to know that... if it's not 0, it will be borderline failing. Math is my enemy. It's as cruel as my stepmother.

"Being a child from a rich family is not good at all. It means you're under a lot of pressure. Who said being born rich makes your life easy?"

"They probably only look in from the outside. It's shallow. What about you? How's this major going for you?"

"I will probably get 0, same as you. My mom will probably spank me to death. But I'm luckier than you because I'm not the pride of my family. I have an older brother. Being the middle child is great. I can do whatever I want because my parents forgot that they had me. LOL."

My friend laughs sarcastically. Awe was also born into a good family, but she doesn't like to study. She is not the center of attention or the source of family pride. And she also doesn't know what she likes or doesn't like to do, so she just picked what her friend does.

What's with this country? Why ask what you want to be when you grow up? Who can answer than at such a young age? People change every day.

I didn't like Bam yesterday, but I do today. See this is human nature.

"I don't know if I'm stupid or if our education system is too advanced. It's like they are sending us to the Olympics. I still don't blame myself for having chosen the wrong major. But the course is really hard.

"I heard that in other countries, kids can just pick which classes they want to take. You don't have to pick a major like this. It's like they allow you to find yourself until you know what you want to be. Take whichever class you want, or use it as a free period if you prefer. But then, you'd have to be responsible to study in a system like that."

"Are we like that?"

"What are you asking? Are we responsible, or do we have the brain to get through this?"

"Both"

"I have none of those."

"Me too."

"Gosh/Geez."

We lay our heads down on the table, even though the teacher is still teaching diligently. It's because we know that nothing goes into our heads anyway, so we just chitchat during class. Yet we have to make sure not to disturb others.

"Let's go on strike at the Ministry of Education. Let's hold up a sign that says 'Get rid of this educational system. Thai kids are dying.'" Awe says it like someone with a strong ideology. "Or should I ask my father to send me to study abroad? Ah... shall we go? Maybe we'll do well if we study abroad."

"You say it like you're inviting me to Dream World. It's overseas!"

"Because it's overseas. We can be free. We can choose to study whatever we want. Our parents can't micromanage us."

"But we have to use their money"

"It's their job to raise us."

"Evil child."

"I didn't ask to be born. If they want me to do well in life, they have to support me. Let's go. Let's go overseas, just the two of us."

My lively friend invites me eagerly. I look at her and shake my head, as I'm not really into it.

"No. It's too far. I like it here. The food is also delicious here. It seems lonely so far away."

"Is it because it's lonely or because she's not there?"

"I'm going to slap you to the ground."

"Those two, stop talking. If you don't want to study, just step outside. The teacher seems to lose patience with us, so we are sent to stand outside of the classroom. Awe and I smile dryly at our classmates and walk out with our heads hanging. But once we're free. We continue to chat. Awe tugs at me to stress her point.

"Think about it. Graduating from overseas is so cool. Everyone will go, "Wow." Thais like those who graduate overseas. It will be easy to get a job."

"Geez. You're saying it like we'll be office workers. Your parents would never have it."

"I was just babbling, But we'll be the pride of our families. Do you think those with status who graduated from overseas really studied? No way. They just hire people to do their thesis for them. They didn't even graduate from a good university; it just had an English name. Aside from Chula and Thammasat, those are the cool ones. For example, 'Hello, I graduated from Victoria Beckham University."

"That's the wife of a soccer player."

"Some don't know her. Come on. Think about it. You can study drawing too. When someone asks, you can say that you graduated from the University of Davidoff Cool Water."

"That's a perfume."

"But someone who doesn't know would think that you graduated from a university by a lake, believe me."

Because it was just casual chitchat, I didn't think about studying abroad any further. But I have to admit that it's a good idea. The only thing that's in the way is that I don't want to move away from home. More importantly... there's someone I want to be near here, though we are parallel.

Every day, I ask myself if we can be friendly toward each other. If I'm a good daughter, could I change my stepmother's mind? But it's too much of a fantasy. If even I don't believe that it can happen, there's no hope that I can change my stepmother.

She's here to take everything from us. She's not here to be Mother Teresa

This is another day that I'm back from tutoring, exhausted. Being a Thai kid is so tiring. What they teach you in school is not enough; you have to go to tutoring schools, or you can't compete with your classmates. When I get home, I hear shouting and see that my father is standing between my stepmother and her daughter, who are talking louder than ever.

"I sent you to study, not to do bad things like this"

"Bad things? Have I ever stepped off the path you laid for me? I told you that it's nothing, so it's nothing."

"If that's the case, why would he drop you off and pick you up? Don't you dare get distracted."

"Calm down. She just has a boyfriend. And it's all under our watch."

"No. I've already laid a path for you. Do not ruin my plans. Don't step outside the lines I drew for you."

I tighten my fists when I hear that. The word "plan" is them taking everything away from my father. So that's the pressure Bam has always been under. She's never been brave enough to break the rules, so she rebels in other ways, like getting a small tattoo on her back, which a mother like hers would never let her do. Also, the smoking was probably to rebel as much as she could.

There's no opportunity for me to join the conversation because it's not a topic for kids. So I can only watch from afar, trying to give Bam all of my support. I'm also waiting to see how Bam fights back. She may do as she always does, which is break up with that guy or ask him not to come here to give her mother peace of mind, yet...

"If you think that what I'm doing is bad, then I'll make it proper. I'll officially date him."

"Bam!"

"I'll give him the answer he's been waiting for today: that I'll be his girlfriend."

The sweet-faced young lady walks upstairs, my stepmother can only stand there, frustrated. My father is consoling her. As for me, who sees everything. I quickly walk another way to go see Bam in her room. And because I never knock on the door, I enter the room to hear her talking on the phone while smoking near the door.

"Let's officially date. I've decided... Nothing. I just see that you're sincere and do things properly... Come to introduce yourself to my family one day. My mother wants to meet you. Yes...I..."

"..."

"I love you too"

The last sentence makes me step back out of strength, like someone who's about to faint. I can't pick up on how she feels because I can't think straight anymore. At that moment, a thought entered my head. I walk over to my

father, who is having a serious conversation with my stepmother. I'm also serious. There's a lump in my throat, and every time I swallow, it feels like I'm swallowing blood.

"Dad, can I talk to you for a second?"

"Later, kid. This is not a good ti..." My father can see that I'm also dead serious, so he asks. "What is it? Did someone do something to you? We can talk now. I'm listening."

"Yes, what is it, Eve?"

My stepmother hurriedly changes her mood and pretends to care. I look at them one at a time and say it in a way that my father would comply with my request.

"I'm begging you."

"What?"

"I want you to send me to study abroad. Please do this for me."

Summary

6. I've already told you

I'll admit that a fleeting emotional outburst was what prompted my request. But there was some truth to it. My father and stepmother are discussing whether it's a good idea. It's not a problem for my father. He will give everything for my education because he wants me to succeed for his pride and for the sake of his business. But my stepmother, who appears to have good intentions, says she worries if I go alone because I may not be able to live comfortably.

I have become their hidden turmoil.

As my thoughts come to this, I smile. I run into my stepsister, who is about to enter her room just as I am about to enter mine.

We both keep quiet... She's so quiet that I'm frustrated that she doesn't say anything or make any comment about this. As Bam is about to step into her room, it's me again who stops her because I can't take this silence.

"Aren't you going to say anything?"

"About?"

She pretends to not know, though she knows well what I'm talking about.

"About me asking dad to send me to study abroad"

"What should I say?"

"Anything Maybe... you don't want me to go because you don't want me to be better than you. It would make it harder for you to take over the company."

When I say this, she smiles. It's almost a laugh.

"It would be great if that's the case. I don't really want to work for your father's company. And I would get to see you fight with my mother. It's a win-win for me."

"Is that from the heart?"

"Do you want to see it?"

It was a playful challenge, but it makes me unconsciously look at her breasts. The sweet-faced young lady sees where I'm looking, so she pretends to cover her breasts and glances at me slyly.

"I see that."

"See what?" I drop my jaw and look away embarrassingly. Damned. My subconscious mind is working so well. As soon as she asked if I wanted to see it, I stared at her breasts.

"I saw you look at it. Haha... You really can't hide your feelings."

I grab my doorknob, getting ready to enter my room, but she stops me with her words.

"Actually, I want to make a comment on something, but I'm not sure if it's appropriate."

"..."

"So I won't. Good night."

That's all she says before she disappears into the clouds. She leaves me standing here, baring my teeth at her, because she makes me want to know, and she just left.

What was she going to say?

Is it that she doesn't want me to go?

Those questions linger on my mind, and I will never get the answers I want until she tells me. I can't believe the daughter of a cruel stepmother can have this much influence on me. I roll in bed, and before I know it, it's already morning. Because it's Saturday, I can get up late. But I get up early because I'm curious about something. My brain is not cooperating with my need for rest at all.

"I'm surprised. My daughter is up early today. There must be a storm brewing in China that is about to hit our coast."

"Your joke is so academic." I drag a chair out from under the dining table and sit down. The housekeeper walks over to ask what I want for breakfast, like in a TV series. I just ask for milk before I glance at her new clothes.

"What are you wearing? There's an apron and lacy sleeves. Is this a cosplay costume?"

"It's the new uniform."

My stepmother says it like she's been waiting to tell me. Her soft voice is full of confidence. She walks over to serve freshly cooked, boiled rice to my father.

"Uniform?"

"I'm applying an order to this household. I want everything to be in order, so I ordered the housekeepers and drivers to wear uniforms. So it's clear who does what"

"Are we one of those families in a TV series?" I almost said "out of this world," but I was able to hold it in out of respect for my father. "They will be uneasy. We're not from a royal family. Dad... I don't like it."

"It's..." My father stutters. He appears to agree with me but is reluctant to express his disagreement with my stepmother in front of others. "Whatever. They can wear whatever; just continue to do their job as always. I don't want any problems."

"But I have a problem."

I start a fight with my stepmother first thing in the morning. The beautiful woman, who's my father's secretary, gives me a hard gaze, but it's just for a second. She then quickly changed her appearance.

"But your uniform tells who you are. It tells your role and responsibilities."

"Just having them for students, doctors, and nurses is annoying enough. It's too much to discriminate at home, too. Moreover, this is a home, not a place of work. Can't you tell if I'm my father's daughter or the housekeeper's daughter if I don't wear a uniform?"

"..."

"What if my father wears a t-shirt and shorts? Would that make him a gardener? Am I following your logic?"

"But having orders is good. Else, there would be chaos in our society." Bam says this while wearing casual clothing that she can wear at home or grab her purse and leave home at any time. I glance at her in frustration. Why does she agree to this nonsense? So she's taking sides with her mother?

"Then we will have to go buy our uniforms too."

"..."

"So we know who's the real daughter and who's the stepdaughter of my father's. Is that a good idea?"

What I said stuns everyone at the table. This is a great morning. I can argue with the mother and daughter with ease. My reasoning is impenetrable. I'm using the rights of everybody in his house to fight with my stepmother, who's imposing a stupid house rule.

"Let's not argue about this. If you don't like having uniforms..."

"Then we don't need them. I'll tell everyone that they don't need to wear them."

My stepmother interrupts my father, like someone who wants to be in control of this household. But that's that. She has to know who comes first and who's more important: the person on the same bed or the result of the strongest sperm. The priorities are obviously different.

I don't know about other families, but for mine. I'm the number one priority.

I look victorious and glance at my stepsister, wanting to show off. Yet she just smiles back at me merrily. And that makes my heart pound.

What is this... She was on her mother's side a minute ago. Why is she smiling at me so proudly now? What should I do?

"Let's change the topic. I thought about your request yesterday."

"About?"

"Oh? You asked me to send you to study overseas. Have you already forgotten?"

Because I asked it on the spur of the moment, it vanished from my memory like the wind and the morning sun. When my father reminds me, I nod to acknowledge it.

"What's your answer?"

"Sorn and I discussed it, and we think that you're too young to go alone."

I glance at my stepmother, who's smiling at me like she really cares about me. I don't want to go that badly, but because she tries to stop me, I will have to win this battle.

"This is the perfect age to go study abroad, dad. I would be able to speak the language fluently and look professional when dealing with foreign clients. What are your thoughts, mom? Is it just my age that's the problem?"

"Of course. How old are you? If you really want to go, why not go to a university there? You may want to go now because it looks cool, but you'll be very homesick."

"You talked as if you'd studied overseas. Where did you go?"

"I haven't"

"Then why do you talk like you know?"

"Eve." My father warns me because my tone of voice and words are aggressive. So I soften my voice and reply reasonably.

"I want to go for your business. There's nothing more to it. My mother, who passed away, also graduated from the US. I just want to live life where my mother did." I turn to my father and speak to him sweetly. "Didn't you meet mom there, dad? And Grandpa has also sent you there since high school. Did he think that you were too young?"

"But I'm a man."

"Is my mom transgender?"

"Why are you so argumentative?" My father laughs and raises his hands to show that he gives in. "I told you we could never win an argument with her."

"If you really want to go, I'll only make one request."

"What is it?"

"Let Bam go with you."

"I'm not going."

The stepdaughter, sitting opposite me, quickly stopped me from planning too far ahead because of the condition my stepmother made. Though I won the argument and will get to go study abroad, I was happy when my stepmother asked for Bam to go too. Yet Bam stubbornly refuses to go. That disappoints me, but I have to hide it.

"I already got into a university here. I would have to drop out. Moreover... it requires a lot of money"

"You don't have to worry about money." My father quickly interrupts. I almost add "yes" merrily, yet it would make me look too eager. "It would be good if you went with Eve. So you two can take care of each other."

"You want to send me there so I can be your daughter's helper?"

She says that with a flat voice, but it sounds so aggressive that my stepmother calls her daughter sternly.

"Bam!"

"I'm sorry. I just want to try to speak with reasons like Eve. I want to be smart, confident, and admirable. But it seems like you don't like it"

"..."

"If there's one thing I can ask from Uncle, let it be this. I don't want to go study abroad.

After the conversation on the dining table, I immediately looked for an opportunity to talk to the stepdaughter privately. She's standing with her hands in her pockets and playing with the water in the pool with her foot. It seems like she's thinking about something. Seeing that, I just sneaked a peek at her from a distance for a while. She then calls me without even turning to me.

"Say what you want. Why are you just sneaking a peek at me?" She glances at me and raises an eyebrow. "I may mistake it for you having a crush on me."

The teasing that seemed like flirting almost made me fall into the pool. But that's just my imagination. In reality, I'm trying to act cool by putting my hands in my pockets as I walk towards her, shrugging.

"I'm not sneaking a peek at you. If I was, you wouldn't see me."

"You want to talk to me about going overseas to study?"

"Yes"

"What about it?"

"Why don't you want to go

"I already told you my reason. I've already gotten into a university here. It's too bad if I have to drop out. And I like Thai food. Though the traffic is bad, we don't have all of the manhole covers, and the roads are full of potholes. It's not that bad."

"What you've said is not that bad?"

"I'm used to it."

"Then why don't you try getting used to a new place where the city is clean, there are no potholes on the roads, every manhole has a cover, and there's also Thai food?"

"So, you want me to go with you?"

When she asks this, I stutter.

"You can go. It's your opportunity. My father allows it already, I told you, we're rich. Or are you really afraid that you'd really have to be my helper?"

"Haha."

I get mad because she laughed at my question. So I start picking a fight again.

"Why are you laughing?"

"It's funny that you asked me that. I am afraid that things will turn out that way because it seems like you don't know how to do anything."

"That's insulting."

"Is it true, though?"

Yes... I bare my teeth at her but refuse to answer. I grew up like this. I've never done anything because someone always did it for me. So it will not be easy when I go to study abroad, to be honest. I'm asking for it. It's become of Awe. She puts this idea in my head.

"I won't make you my helper. Don't worry. Is it just an excuse for you to stay here with your boyfriend?"

"I don't know, Maybe it is"

Her response makes me jealous.

"I can't believe you're one to be clingy to a guy"

"What would you rather me cling to? My sister?" She looks at me and tilts her head. "A naughty sister like you?"

"W... what? I didn't mean that."

"Listening to you on the dining table today makes me admire you more. You have very good reasoning. Though it was a bit aggressive, it was solid. Even my mother can't win you over on the uniform topic."

"But you didn't agree with me."

"I did. It was just my duty to side with my mother. But actually, I agree with you." She looks at me in admiration, "Can someone be clingy to a sister?"

Thump Thump...

Thump Thump...

She leans down so that our eyes are at the same level. Her smile always keeps me from being angry with her. I can't even be frustrated with her for long.

"If you're clingy to me, you would have agreed to go study abroad with me by now rather than refusing so adamantly. This is what those who are clingy to their lovers do. I'm not that important to you."

"You're important."

She gives me an intense look before emphasizing her stance once more.

"I've already told you how much I like you."

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7. Inauspicious birth (time)

"Can't you see that your stepsister is flirting with you?"

Awe, who comes to tutoring school with me, stops paying attention to the video of an imaginary tutor (the tutor is probably sleeping and scratching his private part at home right now) and pays attention to our conversation instead. My family is a topic of high interest to my friend right now. She said that I'm like Cinderella, but not one she feels sorry for, like in the cartoon. I need to rebel and make the story mine.

"I will be your angel."

My friend can't help but make herself one of the leads. I glance at her and pretend not to hear what she just said as I continue my story.

"Why would Bam do that?"

"Her mother flirted with your father; why can't she do that to you too? Moreover, I think it must be very obvious that you are crazy about her. I can tell from Mars, even though I don't live with you. So you've made the right decision to go study abroad with me."

"Have you talked to your parents? Are they okay with it?"

"Of course. That's why I stopped paying attention to the video. He must be rich, making tutoring money from playing a video without even having to be here."

"How do you know that you'll be smarter if you go study abroad?"

"I don't. But I'd be happier than if I were here and studying math. I asked my aunt, who's a math genius, why we need to know calculus and the xyz

formula, and the answer was so that we can know the speed of a rocket."

"..."

"What would I want to know that for!"

How frustrated must she be to be yelling that loud? Everyone turns to look at us, annoyed. So Awe has to pretend to lay her head on the table, ignoring everything around her, until everyone stops looking at us before she sits back up.

"So, we will go study at a place that fits us. I will come back with a degree from abroad and speak fluent English. I may be in politics in the future, who knows?"

"It would be the end of our country."

"Idiot"

"What angel speaks like this?"

"My version. Stop talking about me, and let's get back to you. To get away from the flirtation that has you trapped in the maze of her charm, you must get far away from her. Distance will make you forget her and see things clearly. And when you're more mature, you will elegantly take back all that is yours. You will take over your father's business with grace and shove the mother and daughter out of the way. Wahahahaha."

The loud, victorious laugh that echoes through the room makes my friend lay her head back on the table. This time, one student yells out, 'Please keep quiet.'

Yeah. The distance will make everything less intense. My obsession will slowly fade away....

In the end, my father agreed to let me study abroad. Though my stepmother is against the idea, I think my father is happy to let me go because he's been talking about it since I was young. He wants me to gain experience from a wider perspective and study in a place with a good education system. It

takes a while to arrange to go to high school there and take care of the student visa. There's no problem with the accommodations because Awe has relatives there. We just have to pay for accommodation and food as we see fit.

Awe no longer goes to school because we don't need to. The pressure of having had to live within strict rules makes her dye her hair bright orange now that she has broken free. When she's in the sun, it's like her head is on fire. As for me, I go to school on and off because it's too boring to just stay home.

Knock Knock

I acknowledged the knock on the door because I thought it was my housekeeper bringing me warm milk before bedtime. Yet it's Bam who enters with a glass of milk

"I brought this for you."

"..."

"Are you afraid that there's poison in it?" She teases me when she sees that I just look at it. It's not that I'm arrogant or anything. I'm just stunned and curious as to why she's here in my room. "I'll drink it first, then."

Gulp Gulp

The sound of the milk going down her throat makes me look at her, feeling bad. The sweet-faced young lady looks at the glass in her hand, which is now half full, and laughs.

"I'm sorry. This brand of milk is delicious. I was just going to taste it, but I almost finished it. So, there's no poison, see?"

"I didn't say anything. You imagined that I was afraid of poison. What kind of person do you think I am?" I grab the glass from her hand "I just wondered why you're the one who brought me milk today instead of the housekeeper"

"I asked to do it temporarily."

She looks at me in silence, like she's pressuring me to drink the milk she brought me. And because I don't want her to feel bad, I finish the glass and make the sound, "Ah." I also open my mouth to show her that I have swallowed it all. That makes her smile.

"You're so cute. You showed me you really finished it too."

"Happy now? Can I go to bed now?"

"You're leaving in a few days."

"Yes. Now you and your mother can be happy. But don't even think that I'm going to let you two have everything. I will come back ten times stronger, and you and your mother won't be able to do anything to me."

"I'll wait"

She's never shown that she doesn't like me at all, no matter how much I criticize her. Her mask never falls off. It's only me who tends to show my bare face It's because I wasn't trained to wear a mask from the start

"You don't like me like you said you do, right?"

"What?"

The sweet-faced person who's walking away pauses and turns to me.

"You just want to keep your enemy close, and it's not beneficial to you to make me angry."

"You're overthinking."

"The fortune has it that someone who's born on an inauspicious day like you tends to keep their feelings hidden and wears a mask to hide their feelings. And when you decide to be cruel, you're really cruel."

"Inauspicious day? What do you mean? What fortune?"

"I inquired about your birthdate with a fortune teller."

"..."

"I have to get to know my enemy, right?"

This is another piece of advice from Awe. Though I don't believe it, it doesn't hurt to try. There's no way for me to know her past if she doesn't tell me. So another way to get to know her is through her birthday.

"Haha. Seriously... Haha."

The laughter slowly becomes louder. The scrunched face of the person who's laughing makes me, who was all serious, smile unconsciously. But when she looks my way, I have to pretend to look as if it's not funny at all.

I've never seen her this lively before. Is this part of the mask she wears?

"What's so funny?"

The fortune-telling is funny. If you want know something, why didn't you just ask me?"

"Will you tell me if I ask you?"

"Try asking first, So... what did the fortune teller tell you?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"So I can tell you which is accurate and which is not."

"You may lie."

"True. But I still want to know. If it's accurate, I want to go ask something too."

I hesitated about telling her. But since she asked, I will give it a try.

"You were born on an inauspicious day"

"Will I die young? It sounds scary." But she doesn't look at all scared. She casually listens with her hands in her pockets and her weight on one leg. "What else about the inauspicious day?"

"It's the birthday of leaders, such as the Lord Buddha and Jesus Christ. You can influence others to listen and do as you wish... You're one of those who likes to boss people around."

"Ah. I feel better. What else?"

"They are those who can hide their feelings well. If they love someone, they will love them a lot. But if they hate someone, they will hate them nonstop."

"Everyone is like that."

"Those born on this day are very good-looking and have the perfect personality to manipulate and draw people to them. If they are into bad things, they will spiral downhill and become alcoholics, gambling addicts, and sex addicts."

"Ah-huh."

"They like to smoke and tattoo."

The sweet-faced young lady glances at me smilingly.

"What you said is very broad. Anyone can be like that. You can say that it's accurate or just human nature. Is there anything more specific?"

"You're interesting, and more so when you're in bed"

I said that grudgingly, repeating everything exactly as the fortune teller told me. Bam is stunned when I get to this part. Her amusement turns into embarrassment as she blushes.

"That's purely guessing."

"It's an art of reading people. You can believe it or not. I just want to know what you're thinking so that I can be cautious. We've been talking for too long. I'm tired. I want to sleep now."

"Wait"

Bam gently grabs my collar from the front. I look at her hand, confused. She's not picking a fight with me or anything. It looks like she adores me, even.

"W...what?"

"Wipe your mouth first. There's milk all over it."

The person in front of me leans down toward me as I'm about to wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. I thought that she was going to kiss me for a split second, so I closed my eyes. Yet she just wipes my mouth with her thumb and giggles.

"Why did you close your eyes?"

"I'm sleepy!"

I say that like someone who's willing to die right here and now from embarrassment. The sweet-faced person looks at me smilingly and licks her thumb slowly. The sight of her tiny tongue licking her thumb causes me to choke up. What she's doing is worse than a kiss. I can only stand still like a statue, trying not to fall while still standing.

"The milk stain is gone. You can go to bed now. I won't disturb you anymore."

"Bam. No. You! What did you intend to do?"

"Wipe the milk stain."

"No... What you did was.. "I can't explain it; I just know that I'm too embarrassed to say anything. The person in front of me must know that, so she smiles slightly.

She then looked at me and laughed

"I do what those born on inauspicious days do."

"..."

"I'm manipulating you."

— אוריאל זקן

8. Another inauspicious birth (time)

I can't sleep!

That smile and laugh, as well as what she did, are imprinted in my mind. I sit up in the middle of the night. My heart has been pounding since the event. And what's more frustrating is... the area between my legs.

When my thoughts turn to this, I slap myself in the face to get a grip on myself. But it seems like it doesn't help at all. She's still in my head. It's like there's a chip inside my head preventing me from forgetting that look on her face. Though I know that she's the daughter of a witch and that she's handing me a poisonous apple, I have to admit that I'm ready to bite that apple.

I would rather die than not taste it.

When will I learn to follow my head instead of my heart? I lay back down in bed and stared blankly at the ceiling. It's past 2 a.m. She's probably sound asleep, leaving me anxious and yearning for something. I must satisfy my desire. But every time I'm about to, I'm too embarrassed to do it. But if I don't...

My hand slowly sweeps from my neck down to my breasts. I close my eyes and imagine that someone is touching me. Though it's embarrassing, I'm alone, so no one can see me. I'm the only one who knows about this.

My nipples are hard. I want someone to put them in their mouth. If there's someone I can exchange feelings with, it would be great. So I turn to my body pillow. I sweep one leg over it and take off my pants. I start to rub the middle part of my body into it. The moans I have to hold in make it more

embarrassing. But I can't help it. It feels so good, and I need to satisfy my desire.

'Get on me.'

The image of Bam replaces the body pillow. So I changed my position to sitting on top of my body pillow. One hand is on my breast as I imagine her squeezing, massaging, and looking at it with obsession.

'Ride me.'

I do as I am told. I move like she's a horse. The middle part of my body is wet and hot. It's squeezing and constricting.

'Faster'

"Ah."

I'm riding the body pillow like it's a saddle. I close my eyes and imagine her smiling at me slyly. She's tasting the milk on my lips with her thumb

'Harder.'

"I'm almost there."

I say that and do it in the rhythm I want. Not long after that, I reached the finish line. My mind is blank as I lie down on the body pillow. She, who's still in my imagination, is laughing like she's mocking me.

'You're so shameless.'

Her harsh words make me bare my teeth and whisper to myself.

"Who makes me like this?"

I hug the body pillow tightly because all my muscles are still tight. My heart rate gradually decreased after it had been beating in a fast marching band rhythm when I crossed the finish line.

"Because of you... I have to wash the body pillow cover again!"

For the time being, I refuse to look at Bam's face. You can say that I'm avoiding her. Because every night... Every night when I use the body pillow to symbolize her, it is frustrating that my adrenaline surges like a wild horse. I thought only men were like that. And I can't talk to anyone about it because it's too embarrassing.

Time flies. And it's finally the time that I've been waiting for. It is time for me to leave this place. It's time for me to leave her. Tonight is the last night. I pack my clothes and recheck my checklist to make sure that I don't forget anything. I look at the body pillow again and bite my lips tight.

It's frustrating... I'm aroused every time I look at it.

Knock Knock

The knock on the door startles me. I shake my head to get rid of my dirty thoughts before I open the door to see the person who has made me so wild lately standing there.

"Are you packing?"

I'm blushing so hard that I can feel the blood pumping into my face.

"Yes, I am."

"You're so polite. Anything I can help you with?"

"I'm almost done."

I changed back to talking to her casually after I unconsciously spoke to her politely. The sweet-faced young lady can probably sense my mood, so she laughs a bit and walks into my room without waiting for my permission. She looks at the clothes on my bed and sits down, thinking of what I may forget to pack. She has no idea that she's sitting right next to my body pillow. I quickly wipe the body pillow off my bed. She looks surprised.

"What is it?"

"I'm dusting."

"The room is clean. You are good at packing. I don't need to help much."

"I will have to help myself when I'm there. So I might as well start now."

"You're good at helping yourself."

(Cough)

I choke on my own saliva when she says that. I have no idea how I look, but the sweet-faced person's eyes become wide open. She puts her hands on my cheeks and immediately exclaims.

"Gosh Your face is so hot. Do you have a fever?"

"No. Don't touch me all of a sudden." I brush her hands off. Maybe I used a bit too much force, so the mood turned sour. We're both quiet, as if we just fought.

"I want to be close to you."

"..."

What should I do? I don't want the mood to be like this. I brushed her hands off because I was embarrassed. But it made our misunderstanding even worse than it was before.

But... that's okay. Her mother and she are my enemies. I must not forget!

"But it seems like I can't break down the wall of hatred. I understand... My mother has bad intentions. You can't possibly suddenly trust me."

"What about your intentions?"

I asked her back. The sweet-faced young lady looks at me quietly.

"What's your intention? Why are you trying to get close to me?"

"Well... She pauses and winks cutely. If it were someone else, I would say that it was so cheeky. But because it's her, everything looks beautiful. "I was born on an inauspicious day, so I like to exercise my charm, I guess. That's what you told me. If there's nothing I can help you with, I'll leave. You're leaving tomorrow?"

She says that and goes quiet. She wraps her arms across her chest, as if she's hugging herself.

"It's a bit lonely."

"We rarely talk. What's with being lonely?"

"But I get to see you around the house. It's better than nothing. No?"

"You have a boyfriend..."

"It's not like having you around."

"..."

"Ah. I'm exercising my charms again."

She laughs and turns around to walk away. My heart pounds as I look at her back. There's a strong urge to stop her. I grab her shoulder with one of my hands. She turns back to me, and I use this opportunity to quickly lean in and kiss her chin lightly.

"What's this?"

She doesn't sound mad; she sounds more surprised. Because I see a smile and curiosity in her eyes, I reach over to close the door as I shrug, trying to look cool. I'm manipulating her too.

"I was born on an inauspicious day, same as you."

"I like to exercise my charm and manipulate people."

I close the door right after I say that. I lean against the door and stand still because I'm afraid I'd fall to the floor if I didn't after I tried to act cool.

I did it...

It's a goodbye kiss. And I hope she won't forget me.

My flight is at 6 a.m. My father gets up really early. He seems more excited to go to the airport than I am. I have to say goodbye, as I should. My stepmother looks so sad as she sends me off. It's as if she gave birth to me herself. Just looking at it makes me want to vomit, but I can only smile and pretend to be grateful for her concern.

"Please take care of my father for me, stepmother."

"I will take very good care of him even if you don't ask me to, Miss Eve."

We both wear masks toward each other. Though we act like we love and trust each other, there's a clear distance between us based on how we call each other. I glance at my sister, who's standing beside her.

"Please take care of the house, sister."

Those are sarcastic words that make Bam smile from the corner of her mouth. She knows I say that to please my father as well as to sarcastically insult her.

"The house won't run off, sis."

Sis? I straighten up in frustration before I raise my hands to pay respect to everyone as I get ready to get in the car to head to the airport.

"I'm leaving. See you again."

Of course, this doesn't include my father, because he wants to send me off at the airport. It's directed at the stepmother and stepdaughter who will stay at home. Bam doesn't say anything. She just sends me off with her eyes. I'm a bit disappointed, but I can understand that. I don't know what to say to her either.

At least we kissed goodbye.

My father and I get in the car to go to the airport. I can't help but glance at the side mirror. I keep looking at that sweet face until she's out of sight. I don't know how many years I'll be away or how much she'll change when I see her again. Will she be taller or shorter? Will she be fatter or skinnier? Will she be blooming like she is now? I'm hoping that as she ages, my feelings for her will fade. I hope I'm that kind of person. I hope I'm someone who judges people from the outside. I hope that I do not cling to her simply because she was my first kiss and first love.

As I'm thinking about this and that and looking at the color of the sky change, there's a message on my phone. When I open it, I sit up straight because I didn't think that she, who wouldn't say anything to me, would send me a message.

'Email me some time. This is my email. BammBYY@****.com'

I smile and close my phone before closing my eyes, feeling good. As I leave, there are no unresolved issues. We're not fighting, and I hope that we can be closer when I come back.

I mean closer in that way.

9. Everything is true

10 years later

Yes. This is a story told with a decade-long gap in the timeline. There's nothing interesting about my time abroad because it was the time of my life... without her. But... I'll give a brief overview of what my time there was like.

When I got there, my world broadened. Some Thai social standards were wiped off the board, as if a tsunami washed them away. What was considered inappropriate in Thailand was common behavior there. The clearest example would be sex. There, sex is considered an exercise that gives you pleasure. If you're with someone, you should try living together. Or if you're not in a serious relationship, it's okay to find pleasure in it if you can come to an agreement that there's no commitment.

Sex toys are furniture. When I visit a friend, I see some of them put them on the headboard for everyone to see. People can talk about sex openly. And especially with your partner, you need to be open about what you want and how you like it. Some couples split up for genuine reasons, such as dissatisfaction with the size or because the sex is too boring. LGBTQIA+ is nothing new. Anyone can be together, get a marriage license, and call each other wife and husband.

Awe and I became closer the longer we spent time together. Awe gets to live her life as freely as she wishes. I've absorbed many cultures from there. And of course... I've had lovers, both men and women. Sex is not a big deal, but I won't tell the people at home how I lived my life overseas. But you know what... Living overseas and having many lovers didn't help me forget her. So in going back home, I'm not only excited about seeing my father, who's my last family member, but I also badly want to see Bam again.

How much has she changed?

Or maybe she's already married with kids.....

As for the email that she gave me, I sent her a short message. I waited for years, but she never replied to me. I thought she had died, so I called home with the excuse of being home sick and missing my father. But as soon as she picked up the line, I hung up. I was angry with her for months and found myself a lover just to get back at her. Can you believe I'm still excited to see her after what she's done to me?

And part of the reason I came back was because of her email.

'Uncle is very sick. You should return to Thailand to learn the details.'

So I came back. She replied to the email I sent 10 years ago with a message asking me to come back to Thailand. I will bare my teeth at her. I will also slap her a few times with my wet shoes to vent my fumes.

My plane has landed on Thai soil... My father said that someone from home would pick me up. I dress in casual clothing that fits Thailand's hot weather. It would be strange to be dressed like I'm on a catwalk for a 20-hour flight. Yet when I see who picks me up, I want to fly back to the US to change my clothes and redo my hair and makeup. I will tolerate another 20 hours on the plane so that I create the same first impression as she's doing to me right now.

"Eve. You're all grown up now."

Bam picks me up at the airport in a white V-neck t-shirt and casual slim-fit jeans. She has her hair tied back. She is not wearing a lot of makeup, but it still looks better than what I am currently sporting. My heart is pounding. I can't believe that she's as beautiful as she was ten years ago and more.

She's firmer. She's more mature. And she still has a beautiful smile. She's also cooler than she was, if I need to praise her some.

"Where's the driver?"

Those were my first words to her. The sweet- faced woman laughs a bit and shakes her head.

"You haven't changed at all. Come on... I'll help you with your luggage."

"It's okay. I can do it myself."

"You're still good at helping yourself."

If I had been drinking water, I would have splashed it out. Though I can talk about this casually because the culture from where I came from has made my skin very thick on this topic, when she says what she did ten years ago, I'm suddenly embarrassed.

"So..."

"Huh?"

"How are you?"

Okay. I finally get to ask her a proper question. The sweet-faced woman smiles at me slightly without looking into my eyes.

"I guess... good."

"What does that mean?"

"It has the word good in it, so it must be good. How about you? Are you good?"

"Good."

"Does that mean you're good?"

"It has the word good in it, so it must be good."

"So argumentative." The sweet-faced person reaches her hand out to gently pull my cheek before she raises her eyebrows. "You're taller than me now."

"Or are you shorter?"

"Can someone become shorter?" She walks by my side as she takes me to the parking lot. She seems to be letting her mind drift. I pull my luggage along and glance at her from the corner of my eyes with interest. She's thinking about the question, "Can one become shorter?" so much so that I laugh.

"You don't have to take it that seriously. I'm 5 centimeters taller."

"That's a good height."

"How so?"

"It has the word good in it, so it must be good."

We are at the car. So Bam came alone today. That surprised me.

"Where's the driver?"

"He resigned a long time ago."

"And we didn't hire a new one?"

"Everyone can drive. I can also drive."

"What about when my father wants to go somewhere?"

"I drive him."

She replies casually and opens the trunk. As she's about to put my luggage in the trunk, I refuse her help and do it myself. It would be taking too much advantage of her to let her do so. For me, she's not a hired hand. We're just not that friendly with each other.

After everything is in place, I call her and hand her a box a bit larger than a palm before we get in the car. The sweet-faced woman accepts the perfume box. which is a bit heavy, looking surprised.

"A gift from overseas."

"Perfume?"

"Fish sauce." I don't know why I have to be sarcastic. I can just say yes, but, well, "Of course it's perfume."

I could have kept it short and said this in the first place.

She looks at the perfume box and tries not to smile. I glance at her reaction as my heart races. Her smile can always kill me, and it probably always will.

"I thought you already forgot about this. The perfume."

"What about it?"

"You said that you would buy me perfume when you're grown up and have enough money to do so."

"I don't remember saying that."

Actually, I remember everything. I just don't want her to be full of herself. Or, in other words, I don't want her to know how important she is to me. I want to be her enemy, though my action is the total opposite of that.

I hate myself.

"They say that giving someone perfume will make you hate each other."

"That's probably true. Because I hate you."

"It's a good way to hate... Thank you."

Actually, I'm a bit afraid that she wouldn't like it because perfume is something that only the person who uses it knows what they like. We take our time getting in the car. Bam unwraps the plastic cover and paper box. She can probably see now how beautiful the packaging is.

"Wow... It looks expensive."

"Buying from there is not as expensive as here. But it is pricey."

"I will have to use it even if I don't like it. It would be a shame if something this beautiful remained unused." She tests the perfume on her inner wrist after she says that. My heart pounded with excitement. I'm anxious about her reaction. "Why did you pick this scent for me?"

"It makes me think of you. It has a sweet note."

"Have you tasted me?"

The teasing question makes me frown. I'm hiding my embarrassment under my annoyed face. I can't let her know how I really feel.

"You seem to be a sweet person. Your face is also sweet."

"Would you be disappointed if I'm not sweet after you taste me?"

"..."

"I like to exercise my charm. It's my inauspicious birth thing."

"You haven't forgotten about that?"

She doesn't reply. She just smiles and nods.

"Let's get in the car. Uncle's neck is probably as long as a giraffe's now, waiting for you at home."

After our chat, we drive home, which should take almost an hour. The perfume on Bam's wrist fills the car, despite the fact that she only sprayed it once. The scent really suits her. Come to think of it, she hasn't told me whether she likes it or not. But my ego keeps me from asking. So I talk about something else.

And my first topic is...

"Do you have a lover?"

I remember that she had a boyfriend who drove her around before I went to study abroad. Of course, someone beautiful like her would have a lover. Yet I still want to hear it from her.

"What about you?"

"I asked you first. You should answer me first. I'm trying to start a conversation, so it's not too quiet."

"No."

I almost smiled. But I know that I shouldn't, so I change to a look of surprise.

"Why? Is it because you're not a good person?"

"Why do I have to be a bad person just because I don't have a lover? What about you? Don't just ask me; answer me too."

"No."

"Since we're both single, we should just hook up." She says that casually as she laughs. I glance at her and say something that makes her stop laughing

"Do you want to do that? Do you want to be my girlfriend?"

"..."

"..."

This time, it's really quiet. I look at the road. One of my arms is on the door, and I lean my head on that arm to rest my neck. She dares to make a suggestion, but when I ask, she goes quiet. She's not cool at all. At least she should say something to lighten the mood. Though I was just asking teasingly, her going quiet like this makes me lose my confidence.

"You're still as courageous as ever. I thought you would change."

"Changing the topic, huh?" I laughed in my throat. "I don't know why I need to hold it in. It's just the two of us here. So, how are things here?"

"I already told you that I'm good."

"I mean the plan to take everything my father owns. How far are you along? Have you got a lot already?"

"Not enough." She replies flatly. It's as if she's being sarcastic, which makes me glance at her, wanting to bite her face.

"You have a roof over your head and food on your plate. You've got to study at a good university, too. Isn't that enough? Let me tell you this now: I won't let anyone take anything from me as long as I'm still alive."

"So I can take it all if you're dead?"

"You will go as far as killing me?"

"We see that a lot in TV series."

"Are you serious?" I'm becoming suspicious because her flat voice shows no sign of joking around. The mask she wore ten years ago is still as effective as ever. She's never shown her sorrow, I can never guess what she's thinking or about to do. All she does is talk in circles with a smile on her face.

"I thought you'd be more courageous. You've been so cool since you were young."

"You talk like we're old. And I wasn't that young when we met. I know everything."

"And do you remember everything?"

"Of course I do. Especially the email you gave me but never replied to when I wrote you until ten years later. Did you just resurrect from your death? If you don't intend to write me back, don't give it to me in the first place. Gosh"

After I'm done with my speech, she giggles. The person who appeared to be emotionless is now laughing so hard that there are tears in her eyes.

"What's so funny?"

"You're cute."

"Cute what?"

"I'm surprised. You were waiting for my letters?"

"Not letters. Email."

"Mail means letter. It's just an electronic one."

"You never replied. Why didn't you reply?"

"I didn't know what to write."

It's a mean response. It makes me feel so bad that I clench my hand into a tight fist. But I forgot that we're not close enough for me to be feeling down because of this. She gave it to me in case we needed to contact each other, not for chitchatting. I should have understood that.

"It's good that you didn't reply, actually. So it's clear that we're not friendly toward each other."

"I've always wanted to be friendly with you."

"But your actions say otherwise. You say you want to be a friend, a sister, or someone with good intentions, but you can't even reply to an email. Don't ever expect anything from me from now on. I won't even feel good towards you."

"You feel good towards me?" Bam glances at me a bit. "You like to say that you hate me."

"I will really hate you. I will say that to you every day so that we remember it. Are you happy now? You and your mom will be kicked out of my house

ASAP, penniless."

"Did you mean all that?"

"Absolutely. Everything is true."

We go quiet until we reach our home. Yet the sweet-faced person won't press the remote to open the gate. She closes the headlight but keeps the air conditioning on. She then unbuckles her seatbelt and leans in until our noses almost touch.

"If everything you said is true, then I agree."

"Please let me know the topic. I'm confused."

I bury myself in my seat. My head is against the headrest. I'm afraid that she will hear my heart pound because I'm excited, shocked, and surprised. All those emotions are whirling inside of me at the same time.

"You said that everything that you said is true."

"Yes. S... so?"

"Then I say yes... to being your girlfriend."

10. Deal

We looked each other in the eye for a long, long time. I can smell the perfume on her wrist mixed with her body odor. It blends so well that I want to wrap my arms around her neck, roll her into a ball, and swallow her in an act of cute aggression.

"If you say yes..."

She suddenly says that after she agrees to be my girlfriend without me having gotten a grip on myself just yet.

"It means that you like me."

"..."

"So it means that nothing you said earlier is true"

"What are you saying? I'm confused." I wriggle uncomfortably. Bam moves away from me and sits back up straight in the driver's seat. She laughs because she was successful in teasing me.

"You said that you hated me. If we're lovers, it would mean that we like each other. If you like me, it means what you said at the airport was not true."

"You wanted to f*** me up so badly that you had to lean in?"

"That's so rude. Haha." Though she complains, she laughs merrily.

"How many times have you laughed since you got in the car? What's so funny?"

"I laughed? I didn't notice." She looks surprised and finally presses the remote to open the gate. "It's like your return makes me happy."

"Sweet talk. Is there any truth in there?"

"Guess."

It feels like we're constantly testing each other whenever we talk, and it's frustrating at times. When I said what I said was true, I meant the part about me not letting her mother and her do anything to my father. Concerning me hating her... she should skip that. It doesn't count, and I hope she knows that.

After we get off the car, Bam helps me with my luggage. She is about to drag it into the house for me too, but I take hold of it before she can do that. Our hands touch, and it's like we're shocked by electricity. I immediately pull my hand back while she just glances at her hand without saying anything.

"I can take care of my stuff myself. You're not a helper. Call someone to come help me."

"It's not much. Don't bother them. And in just a few steps, we won't be alone anymore." She takes the luggage from me again and leads the way before she pauses and looks back at me. I also come to a halt as I wait to hear what she has to say. "Eve... I missed you."

"..."

"I'm glad you're back. Welcome home."

The broad smile that I've never seen before since we've known each other almost makes me faint. Her slight smile is already beautiful and brightens up the world, but when she smiles like this, all the flowers seem to be blooming too. My jaw drops. I clear my throat a bit and shrug.

"Ah... thank you."

That's all I can say before I walk side by side with her and grab my purse that was on the luggage so I can help lower her load a bit.

"Do you want to know my answer when you agreed to be my girlfriend?"

"No."

That's all she says before she calls my father to come greet me. I'm a bit stunned that she ended our conversation so coldly like that! She didn't drag it on or try to prolong it to wait for my answer at all.

"Eve! Daddy's good girl, you're back."

My father seems to be waiting for my return. He almost ran over to me, carries me in his arms, and swings me around like I'm three years old. The thought of it makes me chuckle. But I'm glad to see my dad. I take a whiff of his perfume, which is tinged with a cigarette odor that I miss.

"You're still smoking? You shouldn't with your heart condition."

"He's gradually quitting. He can't completely quit it all at once."

A voice from a third party interrupts us. I, who was smiling at my father, immediately stopped smiling before I put back on my good-girl mask. I greet my stepmother, who walks in with a cool glass of drinking water.

"Welcome home, Eve."

"Glad to see you, mom."

I forced myself to walk over and give her a hug. It's good that I didn't eat anything except plain water on the plane. Otherwise, I would puke everything onto her back, and I would feel sorry for those pigs, ducks, chickens, and mushrooms that haven't been digested yet.

"How does it feel to be home?"

"It's like I'm back to ruling my empire." I reply with a cryptic message as I smile at her before I turn to my father. "When I heard that you were sick, I

realized that I had to come back to do my duty as a good daughter. When shall I start work?"

"Wow. My little girl is full of energy!" My father laughs merrily. "You can rest first. Your mom is taking care of the company."

"I can't do that. You spent a lot to send me to study abroad. If I do nothing, I will wither to death. I'm ready. You can send me to work."

"Haha. Do what you want, daughter. But I'll tell you this: It's not easy. And I won't let you start at the management level."

"I know I have to start from the bottom. That's why I want to start immediately. So I can rule your empire quickly." I scrunch my face and glance at my dad. "Or have you changed your mind and no longer want to give your company to me?"

"Are you crazy? I've built all this for you and you only."

"All for me? It feels good to hear that. You're so cute, yeah, mom?" I turn to smile at my stepmother, who still has that glass of water in her hand. She is still wearing her mask, so she smiles at me. We smile at each other before I remember something. "Before I start work, let's do the gift thing. When I found out that you were sick, I hurried back, so I didn't have time to properly prepare. I got them from the airport. I hope you won't be disappointed, dad."

"You didn't need to waste money. It's my money anyway."

"Savage. Your words hurt." I put my hand on my heart. My father looks at me adoringly and consoles me.

"But whatever you buy me will make me happy. Where is it?"

"Here."

I ran to open my luggage with Bam's help. Her smile shows that she likes the conversation I started, though she says nothing.

Which side is she on? She seems to like it every time I argue with her mother.

"Here it is. It's a wallet."

"What's this? Can't you let me be excited about unwrapping the gift?"

"I don't like excitement. I'll just tell you what it is."

After my father opens and checks out the new hand-made wallet that's currently trendy and extremely expensive, he changes his wallet right in front of me to please me. I turn to look at my stepmother, who expects a gift as well, smile at her, and hand her a bag of fried durian.

"I'm so sorry. Like I said, I was in a hurry, so I grabbed whatever I could. I heard that this brand is delicious. The price at the airport is not cheap either."

This is the first hook aimed at her mask, but the mask doesn't even crack. She can still look happy.

"Thank you so much. I've been wanting to eat this!" After she says that, she asks the helper to grab a pair of scissors so she can eat them in front of me, like what my father just did with the wallet I gave him. I glance at her reaction and smile dryly.

"I'm glad you like it. I was worried the entire way here that you wouldn't like my gift. If I get to go overseas again, I'll buy you more of these. I don't need to think too much now that I know what you like."

"You have gifts for us, and what about Bam?" My father asks when he sees the sweet-faced woman stand still like she's invisible.

"I already gave it to her at the airport."

"Don't tell me it's fried durian too."

"It's perfume" I say that loud and clear without caring about the person who just got a bag of fried durian. I then pretend to stretch myself. "I think I

have jet lag. Let me go soak in warm water, and I'll come back to chitchat with everyone."

"Good You... lead the way. I know you're dying to show it to her."

"Show me what?" I ask my father curiously as I see him try to let my stepmother tell me.

"We renovated your room." My stepmother tells me this smilingly.

"Renovate?" I'm surprised. My stepmother widens her smile.

"Yes. We renovated it. Come and see. Your father spent money without a budget to welcome his daughter back home. Moreover... your sister designed every little detail. We hope you like it."

I frown immediately when I hear that Bam designed it. I imagine she just changed the bedsheet and moved the furniture to make it look excitingly new. Yet, it's not like that. When I step into my bedroom, it's like I've got a new house. It's brand new, as if the room itself were conjured by magic. It's modern yet warm

"No way. Bam designed this?" I can't believe it. "You have the skill to design a built-in closet with a coffered ceiling and reflective light pattern behind the TV like this? It's far beyond the capabilities of someone who does it as a hobby."

"Bam is a professional. She graduated in this area."

"Professional?"

I glance at the person who doesn't say anything. letting her mother do all the talking.

"She's an interior designer."

That's unexpected! I've always thought that she would do everything her mother ordered her to do. I remember she was pursuing a business degree before I left.

"What about your business degree?"

"She dropped out. She wasn't happy, so she got another degree"

"It's lucky that she got into the same university." The stepmother says that sarcastically, but when she sees that I'm looking straight at her, she smiles, "I was just afraid that if she got into other universities, it would be far from home."

"The room is very beautiful. It's minimal but elegant. Extravagant but simple. The white tone with hints of red makes it comfortable yet lively... But if I don't like red, what will you do?"

"Change the color. It's nothing complicated."

"It's lucky that I like it, so there's no need to change." I say that with admiration. I look over to the bed, where I once imagined being on it with her. "Is the bed new too?"

"Yes, I want you to have a larger bed. Yours was 3.5 feet. It's too small to roll around. So I think in your place... a queen size is better."

"Since you renovated it, why not just go for a king-size bed?"

"It's too big. You will feel too far away from your lover when you sleep together."

"Lover?" I giggle. "Someone who doesn't have one doesn't worry that much about that. Let's say, "Thank you" for designing my room with such care and for knowing that I like the color red."

She doesn't respond. She just smiles and walks away, both her and her mom. This is my free time in my safe zone. Once I lay down on the bed, I roll around because I have space to do so now. But it's not so large that I feel lonely. So she designed this for the time when I have a lover? She designed it so that I don't feel too far away from my lover when we sleep together?

I haven't stopped thinking about her since I got back.

With every breath, since I went to study abroad and have had many lovers, no one can replace her, who is my first love. In the end, I broke up with them all and came back to see her again to let that feeling intensify. Her teasing and seduction in the car make me not care to unpack and walk over to see her in her room. The doorknob I'm reaching for is swung away from me as she happens to be walking out of the room.

"Eve? Where are you here? Are you here to see me?"

"Ah-huh."

"You still don't knock on the door. How..." She leaves it at that and lets me guess what the next word is. "But it emphasizes how you haven't changed except for your height and age."

"What is your degree?"

"Huh?"

"Let's go talk inside your room. I don't want your mother to see us."

I slip myself inside the sweet-faced woman's room. It's the same as it was before I left. It's clean, organized, and not cluttered with many items.

"Why do you suddenly want to know what degree I graduated with?"

"The plan you and your mother have... it has to be a business degree, no? But I just heard that you changed to study interior design?"

"Well... I don't like math, so I changed."

"Someone who's so smart and wants to be a doctor doesn't like math?" As I'm interrogating her, I see something out of the corner of my eye on her white bed. It's my body pillow. It should be in my room, so I'm surprised that it disappeared from there and showed up here.

"People change every day. I suddenly liked drawing, so I changed."

"Didn't your mother kill you for doing that?"

"I'm still alive." She smiles at me like she's happy about something. "And you're still in top form. You came back with fried durian for my mom. Haha."

She laughs like she means it. She also puts a hand over her mouth to exaggerate. I avert my eyes from her cuteness because I am about to suffer a heart attack. I can't get rid of this reaction when I'm with her.

"What about this pillow?"

"Huh?"

"Why is my body pillow in your room?" I reach for it and hug it tightly to my chest, "Thief."

"I hug it when I miss you. I can smell you on it."

I suddenly don't know how to look. I'm not sure if the phrase "smell you" is a metaphor or if she can smell me because this pillow and I have been through a lot together. You could even say it's my first lover.

"The real owner is here, and she wants it back." I'm about to walk away, but Bam grabs the body pillow and hugs it tightly to her chest

"I'm not giving it."

"How can you not give it? It's mine."

"You don't miss it. You didn't take it with you. It's mine now."

"No. Everyone cherishes their possession."

We fight for the body pillow like children. After being all serious, when we look each other in the eyes, we smile and eventually laugh. Bam finally lets go and raises her hand to give in.

"Till return it to you"

"You missed me that much? Even though I hate you?"

"You hate me one-sidedly. You're my cute little sister, and you're probably a friend who I like the most in this world."

I don't understand what she's trying to communicate. She has always said that she likes me, since the day we met. But because I overheard that conversation, I don't want to believe it. It may be a mask she's wearing. Yet the body pillow I see in her room makes me go soft.

"Do you mean that?"

"What? If you mean returning your body pillow, yes."

"I mean that you'd be my girlfriend."

She smiles, but it's a sly one with a hidden meaning.

"If you agree to that, it means that you like me. And it will make what you say about you hating me or about destroying me and my mom all lies. You will immediately become someone who doesn't have a firm stance in my eyes. I like someone who's determined. I especially like it when you say that you hate my mother."

It's an unusual point of view. But in terms of oddity, I surpass her.

"I will be your girlfriend."

"You have no stance. I like you less now."

"I will be with you, though I hate you. I will let you love me one-sidedly." I wink at her. "What's better than keeping your enemy close? I will be your girlfriend and prevent you and your mom from taking everything from us."

"..."

"Stunned? This is my defense if you insist on debating me. We're lovers now. And I want my body pillow back too. Deal"

I don't even wait for her to respond. I'm ready to open the door and go back to my room. looking cool, before I faint. But the sweet-faced woman replies

loud and clear, even before I walk past the door.

"Deal."

— אוריאל

11. Love is not a secret

I responded with sarcasm and a strong desire to say yes because I had been waiting to say yes since we were in the car. The person listening looks at me and laughs softly.

"That's a good enough reason. Keep the person you hate close... huh?"

I dash toward her until our noses almost touch. Our heights are almost identical. Bam is about to step away, but I wrap my arm around her back to lock her in place. She seems nervous, and her panicky reaction is so appealing to the eyes.

"We both know we feel something for each other." My directness stuns her. So I immediately continued. "No sisters tease and seduce to torture each other for fun."

"Does this mean it's torturous for you when I seduce you teasingly?"

"It's one of those traits of those born on an inauspicious day. And I can't help it that I was born on one of those days too... I already told you that those born on that day are good-looking and manipulative."

"You're being redundant."

"And have I told you that those born on inauspicious days will be obsessed with gambling, alcohol, and sex?"

"So?"

"I love relationships that are a gamble, like the one I have with you. I love you trying to seduce me." I lift her chin up with my finger so we can look

each other in the eye. "And I like to seduce you. I'm guessing you like it too."

"Full of yourself."

"That's that."

I step back to give her room to breathe before I cross my arms over my chest.

"We're no longer single. When someone asks whether you have a lover, you have to answer... Yes"

"What if they ask who? What should I tell them?"

"Tell them..."

"Yes?"

"It's a secret."

How can I be so chic and cool? As soon as I leave her room and am back in my own room, I jump up and roll in my new bed, which is softer and larger than my old one. So she designed this bed for herself? Geez... so smart.

Wait. Did she think about this when she agreed to be my girlfriend? Being lovers means that we're not just going to look each other in the eye, smile at each other, or say how much we love each other over the phone or in text messages.

Ah... Let's send the phrase "how much we love each other" to the planet Mars for now. I have no right to even say that I like her.

Because I've lived overseas for a long time. I know what lovers do. But here, even though people know about living together before marriage since before democracy, they pretend sex is taboo. I have to talk to her about this.

We are lovers. We have sex. But we won't say that we love each other. That's the deal.

I sit up, startled, thinking that I can't afford to be slow in this matter. So, though I just got back from her room, I go there again. This time I have enough good manners to knock on the door three times and wait for the person inside to welcome me in. Bam looks surprised to see me again. She's blushing a bit. I'm not sure if it's due to the weather or because she's shy. I want it to be the latter.

"Did you forget something? You already took the body pillow."

"I forgot that lovers don't just say that they are lovers."

"..."

I push her into her room and close the door with my foot before I dash in to kiss her. The sweet-faced woman is shocked. She pushes me off her and takes a deep breath.

"What..."

"Our relationship doesn't stop at just saying that we're lovers. I want you to remember this."

"..."

"We're not children. Sweet dreams, Goodnight."

My heart is pounding because I got to touch her lips. But I'm keeping my cool as I prepare to leave. Yet the voice of the sweet-faced woman stops me before I can open the door.

"I know that we're not children. Do you think this is a TV series?"

I turn to look at her, who's staring back at me. I can sense that she's trying to keep her voice from shaking as she says that. Seeing this, I think she's even cuter than before.

"I've been preparing for your return in every way."

"Then be prepared. I won't stop there next time."

Ah-huh... I will get you!

My return is going well. It's like I finally get what I've always wanted, and the day I've been waiting for has finally come. What are friends for if not to brag about this? Awe, who is still in the US, is talking to me even though she is so drunk that her words are all jumbled. And it's still early morning there.

[I just got back from a party. How was your trip back?]

"You're talking to a spirit. Of course, I made it back safely!"

[And very well, too. What's there to be so happy about on your first day back? Have the stepmother and stepsister been kicked out of the house?]

"Crazy! I would be too capable if I could kick them out this soon."

[Stop beating around the bush. Say what you want to brag about. If you call me this late over there, something must have happened.]

"I have a lover."

[That's nothing new. You're saying it like you've never had a husband.]

"My lover is a woman named Bam."

[Bullshit. How can you cook up something like that so fast?] Awe is still drunk, but she's trying to keep her head straight for this discussion. My friend knows how attached I am to this stepsister. No matter who I was with, it didn't last because I couldn't feel as much.

"Well.."

I gave her a brief summary of what happened. Awe doesn't sound excited, happy, or angry.

[It's too complicated. It can't be love.]

"How simple must it be for it to be love? Is this not simple enough? One asked, and the other said yes. She was even the first to ask."

[Then why can't you say that you love each other? Why keep it a secret? Yaya even said that love is not a secret. If you want to love, why hide it? Ah.... there are good lyrics in Thai songs that can be used in many situations.]

"We're sisters by law. How would my father feel if I were with his other daughter, though she's just a stepdaughter? It's right to keep it a secret."

[No. Though your reason is solid, I don't believe that it's love. Your sister seems to have a hidden agenda... It's not that she doesn't like you, but it's too fast and complicated. Be careful with your heart. You want to chase the two of them away; now what? Now you're her lover. If you chased away the mother, would the daughter have to go too? Have you thought of that?"]

"Are you saying that Bam agreed to be my girlfriend as a guarantee that she wouldn't have to leave this place?"

[I'm not her, so I can't say. There's also this thing about the body pillow that she stole to hug, imagining that it was you when you were away. It can sound like what people who are crazy about each other do. Let's just say, only give her 50% of your heart for now.

"You know that I gave her over 100% a long time ago."

[That's why I called you stupid every day when you were here. Try to control your feelings. You can love her, but you must love yourself more. Wait and assess the situation first. And bed her whenever you can.]

"You call that assessing the situation?"

My friend giggles and excuses herself to go to bed. It's already early in the morning where she is. When I heard what Awe said, I also started to think..... Why must everything be this complicated? If we're together, we're together. There's no need to keep it a secret. If I want to confess my love, I should just do it rather than stay within her conditions.

Conditions...

Yeah. She always has this condition when we talk about love. If I say I love her, I'm instantly not credible. It's more like she's afraid to hear that word from me. Why? Why is she so afraid to hear it? My curiosity is running wild. It's 11 p.m. here, and I'm not at all sleepy. Okay. Let's go talk to her again. I don't know what I want to talk about yet, but let's go first and go with the flow.

After I come to that conclusion, I leave my room to go see her. But I happened to see her walk to my father's room first. I was about to call out to her, but I didn't. I sneak after her. It's good that she doesn't close the door, so I can peek in.

"Your medicine, Uncle."

"Thank you, Bam. You must be tired of having to take care of me like this." My father smiles at her as he takes the medicine and follows it with water. That should be the end of it, but my father grabs her wrist before she can leave. "Bam... you know how I feel."

Huh?

My father's words make me frown. Before I went to study abroad, my father didn't talk to her like this. This is not like a father-daughter talk. Yet it seems intimate somehow.

"Please rest."

"I know what I told you that day makes you uncomfortable."

"..."

"But I would go crazy if I didn't say it." My father squeezes Bam's hand tighter. The sweet-faced woman pulls her hand off politely.

"See you tomorrow. Sweet dreams. Goodnight"

I quickly find a place to hide as Bam walks out of the room. My heart is racing because I'm having a bizarre fantasy in my head based on how my father spoke to her and looked at her.

Dad... Let it not be what I anticipate it to be.

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12. The smile on the mask

The next morning, I tried to act like nothing had happened. Actually, nothing did. I was just curious, but I'm also afraid I'm too pessimistic. We are all sitting together at the dining table, like in the old days. It's time for us to gather and talk. And because I'm really curious, I started a conversation.

"Bam, your design skills are top-notch. You have impeccable taste. It is fitting that you pursue a degree in this field. So where do you work? Shouldn't you leave for work already?"

I look at the clock, which says that it is 9:30 a.m. My stepmother replies for her daughter, who tends to not say anything when we're all together.

She's been like this since before I left, and she's still like this now that I've returned. It's strange.

"I asked her to take care of your father. So she's not working in an office."

"Why don't we hire a nurse? Wouldn't someone who has a degree in that area be a better option to take care of my father?"

"I don't like strangers." This time, my father speaks up. "It's better to let Bam do it."

"..."

"I like Bam."

I straightened up the same instant as Bam. Though she maintains her emotionless face, I can tell she's uncomfortable by the way she looks at her plate as she puts the spoon in her mouth, as if it's a lost Egyptian treasure.

"Because your father likes Bam, I didn't hire anyone. Family is more trustworthy than strangers."

"Why don't you take care of my father? Isn't marriage about being together through sickness and health?" I ask, looking innocent. I look at her with big round eyes, like there's no hidden agenda whatsoever, but I can see Bam smiling from the corner of her mouth, though she's still looking down at her plate.

"She's good with office work. She's not capable of taking care of an old man either. Let Bam do it." My father interrupts and waves his hand. "Let's change the topic. When will you start work?"

"Ah..."

So we changed the topic without going back to the topic of finding a nurse to take care of my dad. This is stuck in my head, but I don't want to say much just yet. Because if my assumptions are wrong, then we'll all be upset for no reason.

Since I haven't started working yet, I can calmly keep an eye on my dad and Bam to see if anything fishy is going on. From what I see, my father always calls for Bam. He calls her when he's thirsty. He calls her when he wants to go for a walk. And the sweet-faced woman never says no.

"Are you really okay with taking care of my father?"

I ask as she steps out of the restroom. I've been waiting for her in front of the restroom since I saw her go in. Bam seems surprised to see me and by my question.

"Of course."

"Your mother forced you, right?"

"You can't quite say that. I intend to do my best according to my salary."

"How much?"

"50,000 Baht."

That's a good income. But staying at home to care for an old person must be very boring for someone who recently graduated and still has career ambitions. Even I can't stand to be with my father for longer than an hour because of our age gap. I just say I love him and go about my business.

"How long can you continue to do this? What if my father's condition worsens and he dies" You won't be able to get a job by then."

"It's okay."

"How so?"

"Because if that's the case, I'm sure to get something."

I frown, not liking what she just said.

"You want my father to die? This won't do. I have to do something to get my father to be willing to hire a nurse to take care of him instead. What if you get greedy one day? What if you poison him? Shit."

"I'd never thought of that until you said it. Poison... ah. It has to be something that can't be traced. Rodenticide is easily traceable. Pesticide seems too cruel."

We both go quiet and look at each other like we're evaluating each other. It's unclear to me whether she was joking or serious. I like her a lot, but I also have to tread carefully around her.

Love shouldn't be complicated.

But why does everything that she does cause me to overthink?

"Are we still lovers?"

I change the topic so quickly that Bam looks confused, but she smiles at me.

"What's this? You suddenly ask this, like you're not sure. Do you think our deal that day was just a dream?"

"If we're still lovers, like we agreed to be," I push her into the restroom and close the door. I then grab her collar to pull her in and kiss her passionately. She doesn't reject me, and she responds in a way that shows she knows what she's doing. After a while, I step back, knowing that I'm blushing very hard. "If we're lovers like we agreed to be, we have to be able to kiss whenever we want. This is what I want to tell you."

"You can just tell me if you want to do this. You don't have to act like I'd run away from you."

"I don't know. I guess I'm really afraid that you'd run..."

Bam moves closer to me and is the one who kisses me this time. My back is against the restroom door. I let her use her lips and tongue however she wanted until she moved back.

"I won't run. I'm a fighter."

"You're a good kisser." I compliment her, a bit frustrated. "You must kiss often."

"I've had lovers. You didn't expect me to not experiment, did you?"

"I don't mean that."

"Bam... Where are you? Please come see me."

As my father's voice echoes through the house, we both freeze in place, fearing that he will find us together in here. Bam puts one hand on the door and uses the other one to play with my hair as she replies to my father in a normal tone of voice.

"I'm in the restroom."

"I want to swim. Do you want to swim with me?"

She looks so emotionless that it surprises me. Her face doesn't show any emotion. It's cold. There's nothing that I can read from that face.

"Okay. I'll go meet you at the swimming pool. Let me finish here first."

And we can hear my father walking away. We know that he's no longer here when the sound of his footsteps can't be heard. Bam moves back from the door and sighs before she startles because she catches me watching her.

"Is swimming that boring?"

"No, I just don't like getting wet."

"Then why didn't you say no if you didn't want to swim?"

"I have to do whatever my boss orders. A 50,000 Baht salary means that I can't just do what I want... I have to go now. Please wait until 5 minutes after I leave before you go out so that no one will suspect us if they happen to walk by."

She reaches for the door, but I press my back on it to stop her from going out just yet.

"I have something to ask you before you leave."

"About?"

"Do you get any days off from your job?"

"I can if I want."

"Let's go on a date tomorrow."

"Sure."

She responded without hesitation. I'm stunned. I laugh awkwardly because it seems too easy. When it's complicated, it's like a knot I can't untie. But when it's easy, it's as easy as peeling a banana and eating it.

"Can I go now? Your father will become frustrated."

I move away from the door but can't help but grab her hand and pull her in for another kiss.

"I'm sealing the deal so you don't forget that we're lovers."

"You're the only one in this house who can make me smile." She, who's smaller than me, reaches her hand up to mess with my hair adoringly.

"Having a younger sister as your lover is good like this, I guess."

"I'm not your younger sister."

"Good. Else, we can't kiss like we did."

We go our separate ways, as we agreed to do. Bam leaves first, and I leave five minutes later, so if someone walks past to see it, they will think that I went in after she's left.

A secret that you have to hide is always exciting. This too.

So sneaking a peek at her in her swimsuit is also exciting. But my intention is more than just a dirty thought. I want to see my father's and Bam's body language to make sure that I'm not imagining things. I stand to watch from my bedroom window, which gives a clear view of the swimming pool. I eventually see the sweet-faced woman walk over, wearing a black one-piece swimsuit that is designed to reveal some parts of her body. My father, who's already in the pool, waves his hand to call her into the pool to play with him.

Let's not call it playing. Bam just goes into the pool to make it seem like she's accompanying him, yet the water surrounding her barely moves. It's only my father who swims over to her and chitchats

"I'll teach you how to swim."

My father holds her hand while Bam barely opens her mouth to speak. That makes me certain that my father has crossed the line... the line I'd never expected my father to cross.

As the water gets deeper, Bam has to start moving her legs. When my father sees that Bam's feet can no longer reach the pool's floor, he laughs and pulls her closer to him. My father is not an old, fat guy like others. He doesn't even look 40 because he exercises and takes care of his body and appearance. My stepmother also makes him take a lot of vitamins at every meal. But looking good doesn't mean he can do that to his stepdaughter.

I tighten my fists with jealousy and pain to see something like this. There is no misunderstanding whatsoever. The emotionless face and reaction from the sweet-faced woman show that she's hiding so many things under her mask. Why doesn't she refuse if she doesn't like it? Why does she have to comply this much? She knows he's her mother's husband.

As I'm thinking about going down to help her or interrupt them, I see someone looking from behind a pillar in a hidden corner. I'm certain that it's my stepmother. She's standing with her arms crossed across her chest, watching what I'm watching, but the difference is...

A smile.

She's smiling at what's happening!

13. Try me

"Dad.. I'm here..."

Splash!!!

I jump into the pool and swim freestyle, as if I'm an athlete on a national team, straight to Bam. I drag her to the shallow side of the pool and swim backstroke to my father to kiss him left and right. I act naive and get in the way of everything. My father seems confused, but he laughs.

"What's this? You suddenly jump in."

"I heard you guys from the window and want to join. I haven't played in the pool with you for a while. Can you teach me how to swim? Help. I can't swim. How do you do the dog paddle swim? I forgot."

I pretend to play in the water with my father merrily. My father laughs and plays with me. When the sweet-faced woman sees that I'm here to play with my father, she gets up from the pool, covers herself with a blanket, and squints at me.

"You're going, Bam?"

"Yes. You already have someone to play with you, so I'm no longer needed."

"You are!"

"You're not. This is father-daughter time." I quickly interrupt before I pretend to cover my mouth in shock. "Ops. I forgot. You're also his 'daughter'. Come on, Bam. The older sister must also play in the pool with her father. Yeah, dad? A daughter is a daughter. Come daughter..."

I stress the word daughter almost 100 times, and that makes Bam, who tried to keep her emotionless face on, burst out laughing before she quickly gets a hold of herself and goes back to looking emotionless. My father pretends to go along with me, but he allows Bam to walk away.

"It's okay. You can go, Bam."

"What? You just invited her to play with us. Next time, if you want to play again, invite me. Why have a daughter if you won't invite me? Ah, Bam is also your daughter."

I hug and play with my father a bit more before I swim back. My father just splashes the water around, clearly bored.

"What's this? Is it that boring to play with me? How is playing with Bam different?"

"What are you saying? You two are no different."

"Right? So you can invite me next time. I like to swim." As I'm saying this, I cast a glance over to the pillar in the hidden corner where I saw my stepmother from my room. Yet she's no longer there. Her smile is stuck in my head. And I need to find out as soon as possible why she was smiling when her daughter was playing in the pool with her husband. They are too old to be touching the way they were. Even I, who am the real daughter, am conscious of how my father and I touch. What was she thinking? I must know.

"I think you have too much free time."

"What?"

As I'm thinking about this and that, I turn to my father when he suddenly says that.

"I will send you to work next week. Are you ready?"

Is this his way of getting me to leave the house? But if I say that I'm not ready, everything will be taken away from me. This is why I came back.

"Of course I am. Let's do what you think is good."

"Good. I'll get everything ready."

My father swims to the edge of the pool and gets ready to get up, but I stop him.

"I've been here for less than five minutes, and you're leaving?"

"I just want to play for a little. I can't exhaust myself too much. You know that I have a heart condition."

"This too..." I ask, looking all innocent. "You have a heart condition that requires someone by your side all the time?"

"Huh... It's..."

"I've only seen those with weakness in the arms, legs, or one side of the body paralyzed who need someone to shadow them. But you're still young and strong. You just need to watch what you eat, exercise correctly, and watch your stress, no?"

"It was Sorn's idea. She said that it may be too late if something happens without anyone knowing. So she has Bam come take care of me."

"What? Instead of letting her work in her profession, she has to take care of an old man like you?"

"I'm not old!"

My father interrupts in denial. I go silent for a bit and pretend to laugh.

"That's right. You're not at all old. But compared to Bam or me, you're old... Think about it. When you were 30, Bam was probably just born."

"I don't want to talk with you anymore."

"You can't stand being old? LOL"

My father walks away without looking back at me at all. I, who pretended to laugh, slowly let the sound fade as I watched my father walk away. Meanwhile, I'm planning a way to permanently separate my father from his stepdaughter because if I leave it like this, my father will dig a deeper hole and will be unable to climb back out.

I haven't forgotten about the date. But because I just came back and don't have a car, asking my father to buy me one takes too long, so I have to borrow Bam's car in front of my father. That makes him immediately interrupt.

"Why are you borrowing her car? Hers is brand new. What if you crash it? Moreover... do you know how to drive?"

"I do. When I was there, my lover let me borrow one all the time, and I even drove across states." I say that without thinking much, but it makes the sweet-faced woman straighten up a bit. I'm sure I see it, and it's not just my imagination.

"Lover? We've never talked about this. Sit down. We need to talk."

"Don't be old-fashioned, dad. It's just a lover, like..." I have to search for words that make it as breezy as the thinnest sanitary napkin. "...puppy love. Go out on a date to eat, watch a movie, and come home."

"And..." My father stutters. He wants to go deeper but is afraid of my answer, so he just changes the topic. "I still don't trust you to drive. It's different here. Go take some driving lessons first. Use our driver for now."

"It's okay. I'm not that possessive of the car." Bam says this softly. "When do you need it?"

"Tomorrow, I have a date."

I say it to her with a hidden message that only we know. And that surprises my stepmother.

"Oh. If you will use it tomorrow, then what will Bam use?"

"It's okay. I don't need to use it." She pauses and smiles from the corner of her mouth. "I have a driver."

"Who?"

My father unconsciously uses his stern voice, so I deliberately look at him for him to see. My father realizes what he did and clears his throat a bit before he changes to a softer tone of voice.

"A friend... a female friend."

"Ah... Are you sure your friend can drive safely? Do you want to use my car? You can use my driver too."

"Your driver is to drive you. Why are you spoiling Bam so much? You bought her a car but won't let her drive it? And when I want to borrow one, you have so many conditions. If she's not your older daughter, I would think that you're jealous."

I hit right to the heart, and that makes my father turn to stare at me. It's not an angry look. It's more like he's trying to cover up something. But it makes everyone go quiet.

"Eve! Why are you talking like this?"

"I was just kidding. You're so serious. So I can use your car, Bam?"

"Can you drop me off where I'm meeting my friend?"

"Sure. I'll drop you off to your friend in person."

And Bam's female friend is me. Her catching a ride with me means that I'm not dropping her off anywhere. Bam seems a bit nervous as I drive because I drive pretty fast. Her car has a good engine. I giggle at her nervousness and can't help but tease her.

"I won't take you to hell. I have a lot of money. It would be too bad if I didn't use them all."

"Don't talk like that."

"You don't normally get any days off? You have to ask my father each time you want to come out?"

"I can take a leave anytime I want to. But where would I go? I only stay home, so I don't use any of my off days. By the way, where are we going?" The sweet-faced woman looks around and sees that we're heading out of town.

"Bangsaen". I want to go to the beach... Ah.... Turn off your phone. We will not use our phones or social media today. It's a detox."

When I say that, she turns off her phone, shows it to me, and puts it back in her purse. She then talks about where we're going.

"We have to go on a date that far? I thought we were going to the mall to watch a movie or something."

"It's better to go farther away. We may meet someone we know if we go to the mall. And watching a movie is like giving our time to the movie. Going to the beach is better."

"You know the direction? Have you been there before?"

"We have GPS. No fear."

"I thought you said we were not using our phones."

"I meant you."

When I say that, she just nods and opens her window. She pulls something out and starts to smoke. It's a long e-cigarette, the smoke from which is relatively harmless to those around you. The mint scent draws my attention to her.

"You've graduated from traditional cigarettes to electronic ones, huh?"

"I'm trying to quit. It doesn't look good on me. And my mother may catch me smoking one day."

"Does it really help?"

"I smoke less and do not crave it as much as I used to. And my mouth smells much better."

"Your body smells good too, due to the perfume I gave you."

She glances at me and smiles from the corner of her mouth before replying shortly.

"Ah-huh."

We make it to Bangsean. There are not too many people, or you can say there are almost none, because it's not the weekend or a holiday. We find a spot where we can park and walk down to the beach. The beach is much cleaner than the image I have in my head. Bam rolls up her pants legs to above her knees and walks into the water to taste the saltiness, even if it's only on her skin. The wind blows her perfume scent toward me. I walk up to her and smile as I look at how relaxed she is.

"You seem relaxed."

"I haven't been out of town for so long... It's been so long, I can't even remember how old I was the last time I did. It's good that you're back."

"If we weren't lovers, we wouldn't get to come on a date like this."

"Thank you."

"What for?"

"For agreeing to be my girlfriend."

She says that flatly. But I, who hear it, am shy.

"If you work outside of home, you will meet many people. We may not be together like this because you'd have so many choices."

"What about you?"

"Huh?"

"You studied abroad for so long. You've had lovers. But you agreed to be my girlfriend. What's that? It's not like you don't have options."

"Maybe I don't. That's why I agree to be your lover."

"If you say so."

She says that smilingly and kicks the water with her foot, relaxingly. I don't want to take away her happiness, but I have to ask.

"Why do you have to comply with your mother so much? You comply until you are harassed."

It's as expected. She's no longer unwinding. Her foot is left hanging in the air as she glances at me. We don't have to go into details about the word "harassed." There is only one person involved. And that's my father.

"There are some people we just don't want to disappoint. It's okay if I'm touched here and there."

"Does your mother know?"

"..."

"You know that your mother knows."

"You know?" She seems surprised. I nod as I put my hand in my pocket.

"I saw your mother watching from behind a pillar by the pool yesterday. She wasn't surprised. She was even smiling when she saw that my father was trying to touch you more than he should."

"No wonder you jumped in to play with us... So you were there to help me." She reaches out her hand to pat my cheek and caresses it with her thumb. "You've been cool since you were a kid, and you're still cool now. How can I not ask you to be my girlfriend?"

"It has nothing to do with being cool. If you don't like it, why don't you..."

"I don't want to talk about others right now. We're on a date, aren't we? It's our first date. You should try to impress me."

I open my mouth to argue, but when I see that she's serious about changing the subject, I sigh.

"Being at the beach is not enough to cheer you up? What else do you want to do?"

"You invited me here. You have to think of an activity for us."

"You will be shocked if I do." I tease to uplift our conversation. And I also wanted to test the water. Yet the other person shows no fear.

"Try me. Let's see if I will really be shocked."

She stares me down for so long, as if it's a game, and whoever looks away first loses. The power of her eyes, combined with the overwhelming feelings I have for her, has had me lost since the first second. But I've come this far, so I can't lose.

"I want to spend the night with you here."

Though I didn't say it directly, I think it's clear what I mean. My heart is shaking. I'm afraid that she would be disappointed in me. Yet... not only is she not shocked or disappointed, she replies to me flatly.

"It seems like we want the same thing."

14. The ringtone

It's like a dream...

I've always imagined her face whenever I made out or had an intimate physical relationship with another person. But I never imagined this day would come. I make sure to look for a nice hotel for us so as to avoid coming across as too crude. So I searched for a pool villa on the spot, with Bam's comments about whether the place looked nice and seemed private.

It's like we're picking out a place for our honeymoon.

We finally decided on a place. It's lucky that it's not peak season and that it's a weekday, so the five-star hotel we found is perfect. As I turn the car into the parking lot, I glance at her, as if I'm asking, "Are you sure?" And since she doesn't show any sign of hesitation, we walk into the lobby and show them our booking.

Thump Thump...

Thump Thump...

It's about to happen. Physically connecting with the person I've always dreamed of touching—my first love. How happy would I be? Would she be as happy as me? If not, would she say it frankly? After being courageous all along, I am now very excited.

As we check in and the hotel's staff is about to show us the room, a familiar voice calls out from behind. I just know that it's familiar, but I wasn't sure who it was at first. But when I turn around, I see that it's "Annie," a half-Thai I met in the US. She's here with her family and runs over to hug me like someone who likes skinship.

"At first, I thought I had the wrong person. It's really you, Eve!"

Annie's excitement is the total opposite of my current state of confusion. This is not the right time or place for us to meet. I glance at Bam from the corner of my eyes and see that she's looking at us with interest.

"I'm surprised to see you here."

"Do you remember that I told you that my family is in the hotel business?"

"Don't tell me this is your hotel."

"It's mine!" She hugs me again merrily before she backs away and turns to look at Bam, like she just noticed that Bam is with me. "So, you're here with?"

I look at Bam as my head searches for a good answer. Our relationship is a secret. Would she be okay if I said that she was my girlfriend?

"My sister."

"Ah, the one you told me is the daughter of your stepmother? Hello." Annie raises her hands to pay respect to Bam casually. "Eve talked about her sister, Bam, a lot when she was there. You're very beautiful in person. If you're not her sister, I would have thought that you were her lover."

And the lively lady stopped paying attention to Bam after that. She continues to talk nonstop.

"You're staying here? I'll go crash with you tonight."

"Crash with me?" I blink. "You can't. I'm with my sister."

"Then you can come to my room. We'll be done in ten minutes."

Done what! That cryptic message caused Bam to walk away. Even though she turned my situation on its head, I don't have the heart to be angry with her because of how honest and lively she is. Things were going so well. If

only we just checked in and went to our room, my ultimate dream that I've been praying for would come true. And it's all ruined because of an ex.

No. This is not right.

"Let's talk later." I cut the conversation short and asked the staff to take us to our room. But Annie takes this opportunity to take over the staff's job by grabbing the key card.

"I'll take you to your room. No one knows this hotel better than me... By the way, do you only come with your sister? And you chose a honeymoon-sweet?"

"Well... it's spacious."

"True. It's very spacious. But it's more fitting to come with a lover. That's okay. I know it's not peak season, so it's cheap. Everyone wants to stay in this room. BlaBlaBla."

It's a strange feeling when your ex shows the honeymoon-sweet room to you and your new lover. Bam doesn't have any comments. She just follows us quietly, looks around, and listens to the elaborate description of how great the room we booked is.

It's a 52-square-meter room with a semi-studio design. It has an indoor bathtub and an outdoor jacuzzi. No one can look in from the outside, but we can see the bed clearly from every angle. There are two towels neatly folded into swans snuggling on the bed. I'm not taking in the beauty of the room because I'm focusing all my attention on the person I came with.

"Isn't it beautiful? I'm very proud of this hotel. It's great that you came to stay here. But it would be better if we stayed together."

"Why do you keep saying this?"

We ended a long time ago, and I was the one who broke it off because I knew she wasn't the one. I remember that she didn't seem hurt at all. She's very open-minded. If the other person wants to leave, she will not cling on.

Yet she keeps coming back to this, which is inappropriate to do in front of the sweet-faced woman who I intend to spend the night with.

"Well. Just in case I get lucky. Make yourself comfortable, then. I'll come back to bug you tonight."

"Don'..."

She leaves before I can finish my sentence. Everything goes quiet. Bam looks at me smilingly and scans the room with her arms crossed.

"This room has a really nice atmosphere. Or maybe it's because the person who described it knows it very well."

Is she mad at me? I can't guess. She wears her mask so well that I can't see underneath it at all. Or maybe I'm so anxious that I can't see anything clearly.

"Your ex is beautiful."

Here comes the ambiguous phrase that I was afraid of. I try to keep my cool and shrug.

"Of course. I have high standards. But let's not talk about others. The bed is so spacious."

I walk over to sit on the bed and bounce around to show her how soft it is. But Bam just walks to the outdoor jacuzzi.

"I love this jacuzzi. It reminds me of an onsen in a manga. It would be better if the water was warm."

"Then let's go in the jacuzzi."

"You spoil me so much. Are you like this with every lover?"

She says that without even looking at me. I'm starting to panic. So I walk over to sit by her side.

"Annie and I ended."

"I didn't say anything."

"I can't tell if you're mad or not."

"Why would I be?"

"Because Annie is my ex, and we're staying here. If you don't like it, we can move."

"If we do that, then I will lose."

"Lose?"

"..."

Though she remains emotionless, her words reveal that she sees this as a competition. Suddenly, my heart raced with excitement. I can't resist leaning in to steal a kiss from her, yet she moves away and walks into the room.

She's angry...

I was worried that she'd be angry, but now I'm happy to know that she is. I'm so happy; I'm like a dog with two tails. The more she walks away, the more I chase after her. I grab her wrist and pull her in, trying to lean in to kiss her again.

She gets away.

"Is this all you think about? I'm not done admiring this room."

"We can admire it after we do our thing."

I admit that I'm very eager, especially now that I know she's angry with me. My excitement is bursting. I slowly press her down onto the bed and lay on top of her. I use all of my strengths to press her arms and legs down. I'm breathing heavily. The dream I've had for over ten years is coming true.

My eyes are always on her.

I'm obsessed with her.

And I won't let this chance slip away.

The moment I lean down to her and it seems like she's not resisting me anymore, the phone rings. I frown a bit but won't let her out of my fortress.

"Why is your phone ringing? We agreed that we would turn off our phones."

"I was checking my messages and forgot to turn it back off."

"Since when?"

"When we got to this room,"

"So you were really mad."

"What are you saying? Why would I be? Your ex was just showing us the room. Didn't you say that it was over? Or are you two still close?" She squints at me. "No. I have to say that the two of you were already very close."

The phone is still ringing. I'm both frustrated and excited. She doesn't normally show her feelings. The most I see is her laughing when I do something that she really likes. But this emotion and reaction are like a little girl who's sulking at her lover. And I'm her lover, whom she's sulking at.

"You have to let me go pick up the phone. Uncle is waiting."

"How do you know that it's my father?"

"It's a ringtone set only for him."

"..."

"A special ringtone."

"Are you trying to get me mad?" I still won't let her go. Instead, I lean down to snuggle her neck and take in her enticing scent, which is a mix of her body order and the perfume I gave her. "You use my perfume. But why is the scent so soft?"

"I intend to use just a little. If people can smell it from a distance, it may bother them. It's only for those that can get close to me."

She's so mysterious and seductive. I press my lips against hers gently. We've done this before, but only briefly. This time, it's longer. Her lips are soft. The moist saliva we share feels like we're confessing our love to each other through our lips. The only problem is that the phone won't stop ringing. In the end, I give up, roll myself over, and bare my teeth.

"That's so badass of you. How jealous must you be to turn on the phone so that my father can harass us like this?"

"Why do you always presume that I'm jealous? Maybe Uncle is calling because it's something urgent."

"We know what my father is thinking when it comes to you."

She doesn't say anything on this topic and just gets up to pick up the phone. I don't need to listen in on what the other side is saying to know that he's asking about what she's doing, where she is, and when she'll go back home. I become frustrated, so I walk over to grab the phone and throw it into the jacuzzi that the owner has promoted so much.

"The phone is expensive. You throw it into the water like that; what am I going to use?"

She complains but does not look at all sad.

"Why don't you just tell dad that you don't feel anything for him? You're his daughter."

"Stepdaughter."

"Your mom is his wife. What my father is doing is not right."

"That's your father's business. If I don't go along, he can't do anything."

"You don't even intend to try to fix it, do you? Your mother also knows what my father is thinking, but she's letting it go on." I look her in the eye like someone who's jealous and has lost all the romantic mood. "What do the two of you plan to do?"

"We plan to take everything away from you."

"..."

"And if we can't get it from your father, I will get it from you. Look at you. You're obsessed with me. You took me on a secret date. You booked this room for us. Where would all your father's wealth go if not to my account?"

It's like she's put her mask back on to say all these sarcastic things to me. My father has completely ruined the good mood we created. I walk over to grab my purse and walk out the door.

"If my father misses you so much, let's go back."

"What about you?"

"Me what?"

"Don't you miss me anymore?"

Her words make me bare my teeth. It's like she's playing with my emotions. She pushes and pulls. She knows how much I like and love her, so she gives me a taste but won't let me have her easily. She's making me go crazy. And it's so frustrating that I let her do that easily.

"I like you a lot."

I confess, though my actions are clear without me having to tell her that. The sweet-faced woman is stunned because she didn't think that I would suddenly say that.

"..."

"But you won't get a dime from me. On the contrary... I would take as much from you as I can!"

— אוריאל

15. My lover

It's a first date that's... f*** annoying.

From our plan to spend the night, it turns out that Bam has to come back home just because my father called. We park as we're about to turn into our house because going out and coming back together would make it obvious that we went out together.

"You go in first. I'll go in half an hour from now."

I say it like I'm ordering her. Bam glances at me smilingly. She seems to be adoring me.

"You haven't said a word during our one-hour drive. Now that we're home, you're ordering me around? Are you seriously pissed that we didn't spend the night?"

"Because you turn on your phone." I look at her. furious. "Else, we'll be..."

"We'll be?"

Do I have to say what we both know? Bam, who was going to get out of the car, changes her mind and sits a little longer. This time, she starts a conversation, even though she has always been a good listener who doesn't say much.

"Have you ever considered that we aren't even close?"

"What do you mean?" I give her a puzzled look, wondering why she suddenly brought this up.

"We've known each other for a very long time. That's probably what you think." She's explaining this to me like an adult. I don't know why I suddenly feel like I'm two inches tall as I listen to her respectfully. "But you forget that we've been apart for over ten years. You went to study abroad after I moved in for only around three years. And we haven't even gotten to know each other again after you came back before we became lovers."

"But you made the deal."

"It's good that we don't have a sisterly bond. So it's not too awkward for us."

What she says is true. It would be more difficult if we were kids who ate and slept together for over ten years and then became lovers. My being away is good for our relationship.

"Ah-huh."

"So in going on a date with you today, I wanted to get to know you in many ways. I observed your every move."

"Observe..."

"The way you drive and the way you squint and look at me to see what I'm thinking before you speak—you're hot-tempered, but you still speak to me politely when you drive. You don't eat vegetables. You like soda. You get frustrated when things don't go your way, like the only child from a well-to-do family that you are."

Thump Thump...

She really observed me, like she said she did. I didn't know that I was being watched. I glance at her again and startle when I realize what I'm doing. I tend to look at her facial expression before I speak.

"Say what you have to say. I'm listening." Bam puts her chin on her hand and looks at me, smiling. She's like an older sister who's looking at how her little sister will solve a problem.

"But you agreed to spend the night with me, though you know that I don't have patience?"

"How to say this?" She laughs. "I probably wanted to know what you could do. And from what I observed, you couldn't do anything when I insisted on coming back."

"It's because my father harassed us."

"We were in Bangsaen. We don't have to come back if you don't want to. But you came."

"..."

"Because you didn't want to force me. You care." She leans into me and kisses me lightly on the cheek to say goodbye. "And it makes me feel that you're warm rather than strong-willed. I learned a lot about you today. Let's go on a date again."

"I will get to know you too the next time we do."

"Sure."

Bam gets out of the car and walks to the house, which is 200 meters away. I touch my cheek on the side that was kissed as my heart trembles. She's right. If I insisted on not coming back, there was nothing she could do. She knew what spending the night meant and didn't say no. It was all about getting to know me without me even knowing it.

And what she says is true. We know each other too little.

I'm officially obsessed with her external looks- her sweet face, her nasal tone, and her mysterious appearance that seems like she's always thinking about something. I wanted to see the real her behind her mask. But my wanting to see her was me trying to bed her without observing what she likes to eat or her general behaviors when we're together.

I feel like I've been completely defeated.

Because I've been warned that we don't know each other well enough, I start to observe her more. I observe her every move. I watch and predict what she will do next. Sometimes I'm right, and sometimes I'm wrong. She likes flavorful food. I should say, very flavorful. I've seen her order papaya salad and eat it with the housekeeper in the kitchen without acting like she's the daughter of the owner of the place. She giggles when she sees cute dogs on TV.

"Why don't you get a dog for a pet?"

"It's enough to see how cute they are on TV. There's no need to get one. Moreover..."

"Moreover?"

"Nothing."

And that's her annoying habit. She says things to get me interested, then leaves it at that. I have to observe and guess the rest myself. Her being so mysterious makes me want to know her more with each passing day. Is this part of the seduction? Is she trying to charm me like she did my father?

"You."

When we meet and no one is around, I will call her and send her our signal. We make out, and she never resists. Most of the time, it's me who takes advantage of her, rather than her doing the touching.

Is she just letting me do what I want? Is this also part of the seduction? I understand her less with each passing day.

"Do you really like me?"

I ask after we've moved away from each other. The sweet-faced woman raises her eyebrows a bit and smiles at me adoringly.

"I let you do all this, and you're still asking?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know what?"

"Sometimes you seem easy..." She straightens up as I say that. I hurriedly continued. "Sometimes you seem to put up a wall. I've been trying to observe you and guess what you will do next. Sometimes I get it right, and sometimes I get it wrong. But most of the time, I'm wrong."

"So you're observing me. Copy cat." She reaches her hand out to squeeze my nose out of cute aggression. "Are you afraid that you'd lose to me? I know you well, but you don't know me at all?"

"I'm trying to get to know you."

"I am easy." She admits it frankly. When I'm about to open my mouth to argue, she puts her finger on it to stop me. "But I'm only easy when it's something I want to happen."

"So you want us to kiss?"

"How direct must I be? Let's split up before someone sees us."

She moves away from me and is ready to depart. But then I call out a name that causes her to quickly turn around!

"Bambi."

"What?"

Her stunned look is what I wanted to see. She doesn't easily lose her composure; that's what I've observed. Being called Bambi must have really stunned her.

"From now on, I will call you Bambi, my little deer."

"I'm older than you. What little deer?"

"It's because you're cute."

"I know that." She says that without any shame. "If you want to call me that, you can. But don't call me that in front of others."

"Bambi, Bambi, Bambi."

"Stop!"

Her face is all red. What I sense is that she likes this name but pretends it's embarrassing to be called that.

"Can I ask you something before you go?"

"What now?"

"Does Bambi like flowers?"

"Huh?"

There must be some sweet moments when we flirt, especially when you know that the other person is interested in you and you don't have to pursue them. It would be too cold and arrogant to not do anything. So I called a flower shop and asked for a grand bouquet to be sent to my house. As I wait, suddenly, there's a huge tow truck turning into my house with the emergency light on. I just stand there and blink when I see what's being slid down from the truck. It's a yellow Mini Cooper, which comes with a salesperson who walks to me with a large bouquet, smiling.

"Are you Miss Eve?"

"Yes. What's this? I ordered a bouquet and got a Mini Cooper? I'm confused."

There is laughter coming from inside the house. My father and stepmother, who seem to be waiting for this, walk out. My father wraps his arm around my shoulder from the back and says to me kindly:

"Surprise."

"Huh?"

"I bought a car, so they gave us flowers. This is your new car." My father takes the key from the salesperson and swings it in front of my face. "So you don't have to borrow Bam's. You have one of your own now."

"You bought me a car? Really!"

I, who was going to surprise my lover, am a lot more surprised that I now have a car of my own (with a bouquet of flowers). There is a handover ceremony consisting of a huge car key made of foam because the salesperson has to take photos. Actually, I don't like these kinds of ceremonies. Why do I have to take photos like I won gold from some lucky draw? I have to pay money and also take a photo like I'm in the 'Dreams Come True' show?

"Try it. Your mother chose it for you."

Mother? I glance at my stepmother and give her the biggest fake smile.

"How did you know that I liked this model? You did your homework well."

"I think the size suits you. And Bam told me that you like the color yellow. Bam went to choose this car herself."

Okay. I'll be happy then. I look at the person who was in the conversation and who's now hiding inside the house. She wouldn't come out to take any credit. My father looks around for her when he realizes that she's not here.

"Bam... come take your credit. Hurry." My father teases her. Bam, who's hiding, slowly walks out with her hands clasped in front of her thigh and smiles slightly, like someone who's not good at expressing herself. "Thank your sister. She gave me the brochure and told me that you should have your own car."

"Are you possessive of your car? You're afraid I will borrow it again?"

"How did you know? I tried to keep quiet about it."

When someone who rarely speaks says this, I find it difficult not to smile because she is so adorable. She's not that possessive, but she probably saw

that it was inconvenient for me to get around. There are days that I want to go to the mall but have to use taxis. When we were alone, she kept repeating how unsafe taxis are because of all the terrible things that have been reported in the media.

"Let's just say that from now on you don't need to use a taxi or borrow anyone's car. Drive your own car."

"Thank you, dad." I raise my hand to pay respect to my father and dash into the arms of the old man as I glance at the sweet-faced woman and wink at her. She pretends not to see it and looks the other way before looking surprised when she sees something.

"There's a motorcycle and someone peering in front of the house... Kaew, go see what he's doing here."

Kaew is a helper. The tiny person runs over to the gate before she lets that motorcycle in with a grand bouquet.

"I'm delivering flowers to... Bambi."

Bam immediately turns to look at me. At the same time, my stepmother sees the strange reaction from her daughter. I pretend to know nothing and tease her.

"Wow. I thought my surprise was grand, but the surprise for your older daughter is more grand. That's a huge bouquet. Who is it from?"

She doesn't say anything and just smiles slightly. She doesn't even try to hide her feelings. It's like she wants everyone here to see her smile, especially my father, whose mood has shifted. His kind voice has changed to a stern one as he interrogates Bam.

"Who is it from, Bam?"

Bam picks up the card and reads it to him flatly.

"It says, 'your lover.'"

"Lover?" The mother of the sweet-faced woman has a huge question mark on her face. "Be serious. Who is it from, Bam?"

The cruel stepmother's mask is cracking. She snaps the card away from Bam's hand and reads what's on it out loud. I'm a bit embarrassed because I didn't expect what I wrote to be read out loud for everyone to hear like this. If there's a podium, it would be an official event.

'Because I like you a lot and am serious about this relationship, I hope you're impressed with this bouquet of flowers. There will be more if you love the person who sends it to you.'

Like you

Your lover'

When Bam hears her mother read what is on the card, she starts to blush. As for me, I scratch my neck awkwardly because I think too many are hearing the message I wrote. I didn't expect this.

"Who's this lover of yours?" My father asks sternly. Bam looks him in the eye and replies nonchalantly. Yet her tone of voice indicates that she means every word she says.

"It's someone I'm seeing right now." She glances at me and gives my father the broadest smile I've ever seen from her. "It's my lover."

16. Saving the best for last

My father paces the living room, where we have all gathered. I twirl my brand new car key and observe my father's reaction. Bam is hugging the bouquet she just received from her 'lover.' She touches here and sniffs there to show my father that she's impressed by it.

"Why don't I know that you have a lover? Who is it?"

My father gets right to the point. The room is tense. But the person being questioned answers without showing any fear.

"You've never asked. I didn't know when to announce it."

"But you're home all the time; how can you have a lover? You don't know this either, do you?" My father turns to ask the witch, who's looking tense as well. I don't think she looks like that for the same reason my father does, though.

"No, I don't. Bam never talked to me about this." The mastermind looks at her daughter and squints, like she's trying to find fault. "Who is he? What does he do? Who are his parents? Where did you meet him?"

"I also have a lover." I interrupt to get some attention. But my father just shakes his head.

"You studied abroad. It's normal that you have one."

"Then why is it strange for Bam to have a lover? You seem very anxious, dad. Do you know that?" I also get to the point, intending to warn him to keep his composure so it's not too obvious. "If it's not Bam, I would think that you're jealous."

"Eve!"

"Why do you have to yell at your daughter?" I look pitiful and turn to the sweet-faced woman, who seems to be trying not to smile. "Bam, help me. I'm just saying it as I see it. He's more protective of you than me. How can I not feel bad about that?"

"I... I'm not jealous. I'm just concerned for her mom."

"I don't see her mom having a problem with it."

"I'm about to. Let's not talk about this just yet. You're too tense. If Bam is not my daughter, I'd think that you have feelings for her."

What my stepmother said made my father gather himself and clear his throat.

"Eve is influencing you. Don't say something like that again, Eve. It's disgusting."

"Yes. Very disgusting. How can a stepfather love his own stepdaughter? I must have watched too many TV series. I'm not talking about it anymore. Let me excuse myself. I'm going to play with my new car." I get up and merrily invite the sweet-faced woman to go with me. "And I'll have a sisterly chitchat with Bam. No daughter feels comfortable discussing her lover with her parents unless the relationship is serious to the point of getting married and moving in together. I'll gossip with you if I know something juicy."

I grab Bam's hand and pull her out of there. After we're far from the adults, I laugh.

"My dad is at a loss. This is good. We need to do something to make him think about what he's doing. What do you think?"

"I'm thinking about why you sent me flowers." She doesn't mention what just happened at all. She just looks at the flowers and pokes each one of them, looking curious. "What is this one called?"

"Lilly."

"I like it. It's large and has a nice fragrance."

"I'll order you an entire farm of lilies next time."

"Why did you send me flowers?"

"It's the promotion period. I'm getting to know what you like and don't like. And because I don't know which flowers you like, I tell them to put everything in the bouquet. In the end, I get to know that you like lilies. So, it would be easier next time."

"You're learning to take it one step at a time. Thank you for the flowers."

"You seem to like it a lot."

"Every woman likes flowers. You were spot on. And I'm impressed." She said that with a smile. And she can't help seducing me a bit by lifting my chin up with her hand. "I'll return the favor."

"Tonight?"

"I just praised you for learning to take it one step at a time."

"I mean, let's go for a drive. What were you thinking?"

"Oh..."

"But whatever you're thinking about, I can comply."

"Crazy."

I'm about to go rest myself after Bam walks into her room. But the sound of my stepmother calling me brings me to a halt. She calls me softly, as if she's afraid that Bam will hear it. I raise my eyebrows, surprised.

"Can I talk to you for a bit?"

My heart is racing out of panic. Did she see or hear anything? Or did she see that our body language was not very sisterly? But because I'm curious, I muster up my courage and walk to her politely. It's inappropriate to make someone more senior walk to you.

"Sure. What is it?"

"Can we talk in your room?"

"Of course."

What does she want to talk about? Why does she look so serious? I'm becoming anxious, but I try to hide it behind the mask I always wear when I'm with her. I smile before I close the door and get right to the point.

"What's up? Why do you look so secretive?"

"I want to talk about Bam."

"Ah-huh." I look around aimlessly and laugh dryly. "What about Bam?"

"I'm worried about Bam having a lover."

"..."

"But I know that if I ask her, she will not say a word to me. She's very reserved."

I agree with that. She's very reserved when she's with the adults. She listens more than she speaks. The only reaction I see from her is an empty gaze or a slight smile to indicate that she acknowledges what's being said to her.

"And what do you want me to do?"

"Bam likes you."

Thump Thump...

Thump Thump...

The directness almost made me fall backward. I almost fainted, thinking that our secret was no longer a secret. What did she see? Why did she say that?

"If it's you, Bam will open up and talk about herself. I want you to try to find out who Bam's lover is."

Oh...

That's the voice in my head. I almost let out a sigh of relief before I smiled politely as I acted all excited.

"You want me to be your spy? But I'm not sure if Bam would tell me anything. We have an age gap. And I was abroad for quite a while. She wouldn't tell me if I suddenly asked her."

"But you're the closest one to Bam. I saw you two talking just a moment ago. Though I couldn't hear what you two were talking about, I can sense that you two are very close. Bam seemed to be in a good mood. She plays with you more than anyone else. If it's you, she will let something slip."

I pretend to hesitate before I sigh.

"I'll give it a try."

"I thank you just for trying."

"But..." I pretend to drag on, so the person who's about to leave after she gets what she wants halts and turns to listen.

"Yes?"

"If I'm your spy, what would I get out of it?"

The smiling mask shows a glimpse of dissatisfaction before she tilts her head and asks, trying to look kind. She's like Bam in many ways. I'm not surprised. They are mother and daughter.

"What do you want? I'll give it to you if I can."

"I'll tell you when it's time."

At 10 p.m., I, who have been driving around since late evening, drive back to my house and turn off the headlight. I send a message to the sweet-faced woman that I'm here and waiting. Not long after that, Bam walks out of the gate. Her suspicious look, like she's committing a crime, makes me laugh after she gets into the car.

"Why do you have to sneak out? Are you going to spend the night with a guy?"

"It's exciting, I guess. Drive. I want to take a breath of fresh air and enjoy the view."

"You give an order as soon as you get here."

"Why else would I have a lover?"

That word makes my heart pound. The word "lover" loud and clear turns me into a girl who's been confessed to without the word love.

The car slowly moves at a slow speed, as the purpose is to enjoy the view. The sweet-faced woman sits still for a while before she opens the window and pulls out her e-cigarette. The sweet scent, combined with the perfume I bought her, gives me butterflies in my stomach. I park on the side of the road and look at her smoke without saying anything.

"Why do you suddenly park here?"

"Are we close yet?"

"How should I respond to that? What would indicate that we're close? I want to know that too." The sweet-faced woman exhales smoke through her mouth again. Curiosity makes me grab the e-cigarette to smoke too. And I immediately coughed. "What are you doing!"

Her scream makes me, who's choking, want to yell back, "I'm smoking, of course." But because I can't stop coughing, I can't say that.

"I want... (cough) to try it too."

"Is it something you should try?" She snatches it back and looks at me sternly. "You're not being cute at all."

"Why are you so possessive?" I rub my neck and glance at her, surprised. "I just took one drag."

"I'm not being possessive with you. But it's not good. Why would you try something that's not good for you?"

"You smoke."

"I smoke it so I can quit smoking."

"Can you quit yet?"

"No, but I'm trying. It's healthier not to smoke. Don't do that again. Not just smoking. I mean everything."

"..."

"What?"

I look at her quietly before I smile. Her scolding me like a mother scolding her daughter made me scared sh*tless.

"You're scolding me, love. This is a new moment with you."

"Love..." Now, she's the one stunned. It's probably the same as when she said I was her lover. "I don't want to scold you, but on some matters, I can't just let it pass. I want you to be healthy."

"You're concerned about me."

"We're lovers. Of course, I'm concerned. Or do you think that we're just pretending to be lovers, like in TV series? Pretend to be lovers so one doesn't have to be forced into a marriage. And in the end, the lead says that

she graduated from overseas and will inherit thousands of baht from her family."

"Haha. Aside from being fierce and possessive, you also like to watch TV series. Hey... you can just say that you're concerned about me. Short and simple. Your mom said you are reserved, but you can recap a TV series from start to finish."

"When did you talk to my mom?"

"Today."

Bam is clearly shocked. I don't say more, so she presses me.

"What did you talk about? Why does she suddenly talk to you?"

"Why did you tell my father that the person who sent you flowers was your lover?"

"I asked you first." She seems clearly anxious.. When I see her reaction, I want to ask frankly why she has to be so anxious that her mother talked to me. But this doesn't seem to be a good time for me to do that.

"Your mother said that we seem close, so if I ask about your lover, you may let something slip."

"Maybe my mother is suspicious about us? Why else would she ask you?"

"She doesn't seem to suspect us. But didn't you do this because you wanted everyone to know that you have a lover?"

"Well..."

"You're quite a rebel. Haha." I laugh adoringly. "You're only fierce to me. When it's your mom, you're like a little puppy."

"That's not a very nice comparison."

"If you're going to rebel, go all the way. You don't want to live in the shadow of your mother any longer, do you? If you're afraid like this, you will have to do as she says forever. When will you be able to introduce your mother to the lover you picked yourself if you go on like this?"

She glances at me and smiles.

"If I were to introduce you to her, would you go with me?"

"It depends on how brave you will be. You know that I dare speak my mind and do as I wish." I place my chin on the steering wheel and look at her. I want to pull her in and kiss her. And she seems to know it.

"You're having bad thoughts."

"Can't I?"

"You can. But not too much."

"I agreed to do as your mother wishes with an important condition, you know?" I slowly lean into her, and she doesn't back off. She's holding her ground, waiting for me to go in.

"What condition?"

"If I'm successful, I can ask for anything from your mother."

Our lips almost touch, but I go on to finish the conversation so we can kiss without having to talk more, and our tongues can touch without being interrupted. I really hope she lets me do more than just kiss. Maybe she will let me do something else. But it all depends on her.

"What will you ask from her?"

"I will ask for you."

And then we kiss without saying more. We got home at 2 a.m. because we got carried away making out. But that was it. We didn't do more. Because we believe in...

Saving the best for last.

— אֵלֶּיךָ יְיָ וְיָשׁוּב

17. First step

"Bam hasn't told me much. She just said that she already has a lover, and they have been together for a while now. We're not close enough, I guess. I need more time."

When my stepmother hears my report, she nods understandingly and thanks me.

"You've helped a lot already. Please let me know if you find out more."

I, who had walked over to report to my stepmother very suspiciously, dropped by the sweet-faced woman's room immediately after I finished. As soon as she opens the door, I can smell her perfume. It makes me take a deep breath, and I can't help but snuggle into her neck with the door still open.

Slap!

The sound of the slap on my arm makes me cry out before I'm dragged into the room by the collar. Bam immediately locks the door because she's afraid that someone will hear us, especially the mother she's very scared of. I giggle and rub my arm before I tease her.

"I only touched you a little bit. Why are you playing hard to get?"

"I'm not playing hard to get. But you have to know the appropriate time and place."

It appears that she is growing accustomed to lecturing me. She has since taken on the role of a mother, teaching a little girl. I like her like this more than the slight smile on an emotionless face because this makes her more human.

"Okay. I was wrong." I dash in to hug her, but she pushes my face away. "I can't even hug you? You said you're not playing hard to get."

"I'm punishing a bad girl; otherwise, you will think that you can just try to make up with me and everything will be okay after you do something naughty."

She's so serious.

"So fierce. I will not call you my lover from now on: I will call you my mother."

"If you want me to be your mother, then I will not let you kiss me from now on. Kids don't make out with their mothers like this."

"But kids get to breastfeed. If I can't snuggle but I can suck your breast, I'm okay."

After I say that, she goes from acting all fierce to smiling and eventually laughing. She pushes my face softly.

"So naughty."

"In case I get lucky."

She shakes her head and rubs my shoulder.

"Did it hurt?"

It was about as painful as an ant bite, if not completely painless. But once I'm asked, I want to ask for her tenderness. So I scrunch my face and show her my arm where she hit me.

"It hurts a lot. I will have a deep wound."

"You're being so dramatic."

"Please blow on it to make it better." I blink like a little girl asking for her mom's love and tenderness. The sweet-faced woman glances at my shoulder

and leans in as though she will blow on it as requested. Yet she exceeds my expectations by kissing it lightly. That startles me, "Ops."

"You prefer me to blow on it?"

"I prefer what you did, but I didn't expect it. You're full of surprises. The unexpected is what makes people fall for you."

"Including you?"

"Do you love me?"

I suddenly asked her that. I didn't intend to say something like that, but suddenly my brain ordered me to say it. That makes me laugh a little.

"It's too fast to ask if I love you. We don't know each other well enough. Let me ask you back... Do you love me?"

If I say "yes," it would seem like a lie. So I choose to remain silent. And she takes that to mean I feel the same way she does.

"See? If you hesitate to say it, it means it's not love yet. But if you ask if I like you, of course I do. Otherwise, I wouldn't agree to be your girlfriend. Ask me after we have more shared experiences, maybe ten years from now."

"Ten? Why do you have such a long timeframe?"

"Love doesn't come easily. We need to get to know each other better, to the point where we can tell what each other is thinking just by looking into their eyes."

"What about us making out?"

"It's because we like each other. There are many who had a one-night stand without even liking or loving each other. You studied abroad, but quite old fashion."

It's her who's so open-minded that I'm surprised. I don't pester her on this and change the topic instead.

"How can we become closer? I want a short cut. Can you tell me about yourself?"

"I'm not good at talking about myself. Otherwise, I would have replied to your email."

That's another topic I want to talk about. I want to know why she never wrote me an email all those years. She has a wall around her heart, and I'm determined to get past it.

"Then shall we start by exchanging love letters?"

LOL!

She laughs so hard that I don't even know what expression to make. She is already cute when she smiles slightly, but when she laughs like this, she becomes 100-1000 times cuter.

"Not only are you old-fashioned, you're also out-dated. Who sends love letters these days? How shall we send it? Via the post?"

"Email. So you can make it up for not replying to my email."

"I don't know what to write to you."

"I'll write you first. If you don't know what to write, just reply shortly. Even one sentence is good enough. Let's call it practice. I really want to become closer to you. Can't you do that for me?"

My pleading causes the sweet-faced woman to smile at me. She scrunches her face and nods.

"I'll give it a try."

"We'll start today. You have to reply when I send it to you, okay?"

"Ah-huh."

I rush back to my room, open my notebook, and go into my email to send one to the sweet-faced woman in the room not far from mine. Come to think of it, this is kind of strange. But they say that, aside from speaking, another good way to communicate is through letters. Though we can chat instantly, it's too fast. Letters are the best way to convey a lengthy message to the heart. This is just changing from paper to email. It's free, and there's no need for stamps; that's it.

Hello, my love

How was breakfast today?

From your lover

The very short email I just sent her is the first step in breaking down the sweet-faced woman's wall. The first step must be simple. Now I just have to wait for her to reply to me.

Hello, my love

The breakfast was like it's always been. It's nothing special. The same housekeeper prepared it.

From your lover

Yes! She replied. It's a good first step. That's it for today. It won't be exciting if we do it too often. I'll make it a daily routine, so she slowly gets used to it and eventually tells me more about herself. I got this idea from the book 'Atomic Habits.'

"You can start work next week, Eve."

My father suddenly tells me this as I'm picking a series to watch via streaming service. To be honest, I want to start work, but having rested at home for a while, I've become lazy and don't want to go out.

"Wow. It's kind of fast."

"Didn't you want to start work immediately when you got back?"

"Yeah. But I'm lazy now. Staying at home is more fun." I look up to the second floor, where nobody is around apart from Bam, who's hiding in her room.

So there's only me, my dad, and the stepmother in this conversation. "I'm about to get closer to Bam too."

I nudge my stepmother. The beautiful middle- aged wife of my father seems interested.

"I'm glad to hear that. Bam doesn't have many friends. I'm glad she's becoming closer to you."

"If I have to go to work, we won't be close any more. We will only meet in the morning. I'd probably get home late due to the traffic. It would be nice if... Bam could go to work with me."

That's my objective. So far, I've been the one to intervene whenever my father approaches Bam. I worry that if I'm not around, he'll be able to do whatever he wants. My father is not a player or a Casanova, but he is interested in her, so I need to eliminate any chance he has with her.

"Bam has to take care of me. How can she go to work?"

"Don't you think she's bored, dad? She doesn't see anyone but you day in and day out."

"How's being with me boring?"

"Your age gap is huge. What do you talk to her about?"

"General topics."

"Wouldn't it be better if she worked outside of home? Let her see the world a little. Be careful; she may not say anything, but one day she may not be able to take it anymore and just pack up and go live with a guy. You can't say I haven't warned you if that happens."

My father is starting to look frustrated. But my stepmother is leaning my way.

"Let Bam try working." My stepmother says this. My dad turns his head so quick, he almost breaks his neck. "At least she will be with Eve, so there's nothing to worry about. I just realized that Bam has no social circle. I don't even know who her lover, who just sent her the bouquet, is."

"Maybe Tinder?" I add fuel to the fire. "It's a dating application. Maybe she found one from there."

"Bam is not like that." My father argues. "If Bam goes to work, who will take care of me?"

"You have a heart condition. You're not bedridden. Bam is my daughter. Though she's under our watchful eyes, we don't know what she's thinking. She only talks to Eve. If she goes to work with Eve, then I won't worry much."

"That's right. If we work together, maybe I will get to see Bam's lover. I saw Bam sneak out and get into a car that was parked in front of our house the other night."

"Really?!" My father raises his voice out of nowhere. My stepmother is probably aware of this, so she doesn't seem surprised.

"Yes. I saw it too. So, let's do that. Let Bam be by Eve's side. If you find out anything, please let me know. I trust you, Eve."

But I don't trust you at all, mother. I just smile livelily to both of them before I quickly leave to tell the person in the conversation this news via email rather than knocking on her door and telling her.

Dear Love,

Next week, you have to go work at the toy factory with me.

From your lover

But it seems like Bam cheated. Instead of replying to my email, she rushes out of her room like she's about to sprint somewhere. But it happens that the person she wants to see is waiting right in front of her room. So I'm dragged into her room, and the door is locked as usual.

"What does that mean, working at the factory?"

"I told your mother that it's better if you go work with me. If someone picks you up or drops you off, I can tell her."

"Why didn't you talk to me about this first?"

"It was spontaneous. Don't you want to do that? Go outside some. I feel stuffy just thinking about having to be with my dad all day."

"Are you doing this for me or for yourself?" The sweet-faced woman is not angry or anything. She smiles slightly and sighs. "To be honest, I'm unprepared."

"Your mother will come talk to you about this herself."

"Why does she suddenly agree to this? What reason did you give her?"

"Well... I said that being home all day makes you stray. You're probably bored with my dad, so you used Tinder to find a man and sneak out to meet him at night, coming back home very late... Ouch. You bit me. There are teeth marks."

This is another side of the sweet-faced woman. Sometimes she's cold, but sometimes she's fierce. Right now, she uses force. She bit me with her teeth because she didn't know how to let off steam. But I just laugh.

"I want to bite you. You make it seem that I have no worth left in me. That's why my mother let me go with you, huh... Smart."

"Are you happy that you'd get to go work outside?"

"It's... good."

"If you're happy, say it. You don't have to try to look cool. Give me some reward." I lean my puffy cheek toward her. "A kiss on the cheek."

"You never fail to try to touch me."

"I'll take whatever I can."

But instead of kissing me on the cheek like I asked, she pulls my hand, drags it under her shirt, and puts it on her breast. I look at what she's doing, shocked. Like I've said before, she's full of surprises. Now too.

"Wow... you."

"I want you to listen to my heart."

And she gives me the widest smile I've ever seen.

"Listen to how happy it is that I will get to leave this jail. Thank you... my love."

Summary

18. Invade

We came to the conclusion that Bam would go to work with me. When my stepmother gives the order, my father doesn't dare say much because they are mother and daughter. To come up with too many excuses would be too obvious. Moreover, I've already dropped the bomb that he seems jealous; if he's too obvious, my teasing would become true.

If it's not true, why worry? But because it is true. he is.

"You two will have to start at the lowest-ranked level, which is the stock management position. You have to check if the stock is correct. The work is not tough. It's just so you can learn the system."

My stepmother explains the scope of work briefly as she hands me the uniform. I look at it excitedly because I didn't expect a uniform.

"This is like in the TV series. No one can know that I am the owner's daughter. How many months will I be in this position?"

"Around one month. I'd like you two to observe the employees to see if they are dissatisfied with anything or if there is a problem so that we can fix and improve the system. It will make it easier for you when you're in a higher position because you'll know what they have to deal with."

When it comes to work, my stepmother can explain it in a systematic and holistic manner. My work starts tomorrow at 9 a.m. I have to wake up at 7 a.m. to shower, eat, and go to the factory.

"Would it be appropriate for Eve to drive her Mini Cooper to work?"

Bam, who's been listening quietly, asks this. My stepmother laughs a bit and shakes her head. It's a laugh we rarely see.

"No. You and Eve have to find a way to get to work yourselves. Figure it out. Ah... you will each get an exact 300 Baht allowance for transportation and lunch. Not more. Not less."

"What can I do with 300 Baht!" I almost scream. "We're just training. Why do we have to go this far?"

"So we know what it's like for those who can barely make ends meet each day. We have to get by with that. She wants to know if a 15,000 Baht salary is enough for everyone by using us as her lab rats."

The genius daughter can read her mother like a book. I just drop my jaw and smile dryly.

"If it will make me understand the employee better, then I'm glad to do it. The taxi will cost us 300 Baht. We won't have enough money for lunch."

"We will not take a taxi."

"I can't walk. Sob... Dad, can you have someone drop us off midway, at least? I'll take a bus from there or something." I look at my father pleadingly. My father doesn't reply and looks another way in frustration.

"That's why I say don't go to work. If you go alone, I'll give you 1,000 Baht."

"Why are you so invested in Bam?"

This time, my stepmother asks him herself. We all go quiet. I glance at the sweet-faced woman who seems to like this. My father can only reply with a stutter when he's asked that.

"I... I just don't want her to go to work. We used to be together every day."

"We'll meet when I get home from work." Bam gives my father a sweet smile. "I'll massage you when I come home."

Leading him on... that's what she's doing, and it frustrates me. How can my father be out of her orbit if she keeps doing this? When we all split up to go

to our rooms, I couldn't help but sarcastically say to her:

"You say you don't like what's going on and rebel, but you just led my father on. If you will go that far, why don't you just be my father's mistress?"

"I can do that?"

She keeps her straight face on, which makes me want to scream because I know she's trying to annoy me.

"Bambi!"

"Don't call me that." She reaches her hand out to close my mouth, but I bite it until she cries out. My teeth marks are on her hand like a stamp. "You like to use force?"

"You did it to me before. It's just a bite."

"I was just trying to please him. If not, it wouldn't end. Why are you so possessive? We are going to work together, which means we will be closer to each other than ever."

"Can we be closer than that?"

"How close?"

"I want a part of me to be inside your body." Because of my profanity, the sweet-faced woman slaps my forehead so hard that it makes a sound. Slap! "You're the one who likes to use force."

"You deserve a kick rather than a slap. There must be a limit to your profanity. Let's go to bed. We have to get up early tomorrow. You have to learn new ways to get around, too. Also, a new social circle."

Her scolding makes me timid. Actually, I agree that I was too naughty. Maybe I'm too used to being with Awe, so I think it's okay to talk like that to everyone.

"Are you angry?"

"Not exactly. I just want to warn you to be more careful with your words. Sometimes it's too crude."

"I thought you liked me the way I am. I say what I think. And you're my girlfriend. I want to be able to talk to you about everything, including this."

"..."

We both go quiet for a while. I have to change the topic to cut the conversation short because I'm afraid it will get more awkward than it already is.

"Before we go..."

"No kissing today. I'm afraid my mother will catch us. The other day, she asked why I scratched your chin. It's lucky she thought I scratched your chin, not lifted your chin to do something more." Bam preempts me before I can say anything. I can only scrunch my nose.

"That's not all that's going on in my head. I was just going to say... you should try sending an email to me first, not only wait for me to send you one and reply to it shortly. It's like I'm the only one trying."

"..."

"It's like I love you one-sidedly."

She looks at me a bit and nods to acknowledge what I say before flicking her fingers on my forehead.

"Don't overreact. The word "love," if used too often, will lose its meaning."

"You take the word love so seriously. I won't love you anymore. ore. Just email me."

"Okay. I will email you after I take a bath."

"I love you."

"..."

"Blep!"

I stick my tongue out at her and run into my room. But because I don't hear her door close, I open the door a bit to sneak a peek. I noticed her standing where she was contemplating something. She doesn't seem to be angry or happy. She seems to be sad about something.

Is she sad because I said I loved her? Why...

I can't get her out of my head, even when I take my bath. I try to think about what could make her that uncomfortable when I say I love her. Or am I pressuring her to the point of discomfort? Maybe I should be more patient and take it one step at a time, as we've agreed to do. Though we've known each other for a long time, we barely know each other. Getting to know each other is most important at this point. We like each other, and that should be satisfactory to a certain level. I shouldn't expect too much too soon.

Okay. From now on, I will be more patient. I will not rush things.

Ding!

The email notification on my phone rings. I finish drying myself up first because I don't want my phone to get wet. I then pick up my phone to check it out, and it's Bam's email. It's very rare for her to write me first, if I don't count when she wrote me when I was still overseas.

Dear Love,

You're right. Because we're lovers, we should be able to talk naughtily to each other. If we don't do that with our lover, who will we do it with? So I'll ask you frankly: What do you want to put into my body?

From your lover

I laughed after I finished reading the email. One of my hands is holding on to the towel I wrap around myself. So I use the thumb on my other hand to reply to her. I must be careful not to be too naughty or in too much of a hurry. I promised myself that.

Dear Love,

I'm sorry you have a naughty girlfriend who makes you have to think hard. What I wanted to put inside your body was my tongue. I like kissing you. I like that our lips touch and that our tongues intertwine. That was what I meant. Don't think too far. But you wouldn't let me kiss you today. That's too bad.

From your lover

I reread it three times because I want to make sure it's not too crude to the point that it would make her feel uncomfortable. She probably doesn't talk about this kind of thing very openly. A relationship between lovers is obviously different from one with a friend. So I have to be on the cautious side. After I put my phone down and was about to go grab my pajama, there's a knock on the door. Because I'm not one to overthink things, I open the door with only a towel wrapped around my body.

"Ops. Why are you here?"

Bam shows up in front of my room less than five seconds after I sent the email. She sweeps her eyes from my head to my toe with a straight face.

"Are you taking a bath?"

"I'm done."

"Why didn't you dress properly before you opened the door? If it's a man or a thief, what would you do?"

"What kind of thief knocks on the door? And my father is the only man in this house, if we don't count our driver. But he wouldn't come up here. You're too worried. So, what's up?"

"I have a request."

"What?"

"I want a part of you inside of me."

After she finished saying that, she pushed me into my room and kissed me. She cradles my face in her palms and presses her lips against mine. She slips her tongue in to communicate with me, like I said in my email. I unconsciously let go of my towel and wrapped my arms around her neck. Bam jumps back and turns away as soon as I have nothing to cover my naked skin and...

Yeah.

I shockingly bend down to grab my towel and cover myself up before I quickly make excuses because I'm afraid that she'll get me wrong.

"I didn't intend to do that. It slipped my hand. Don't think that I intended to seduce you."

"LOL."

Bam covers her mouth and laughs out loud as she waves her hands, but still continues to not look at me.

"I didn't think that you were trying to seduce me or anything. What's this? You suddenly turn into someone who overthinks." She turns to look at me after she's sure that I've wrapped the towel over my body. "I was just shocked. I'm in my adjustment period."

"That's a relief. I'm afraid that you'll think that I'm pressuring you too much. It was really an accident. However, you're entering my room and kissing me... What's this?" I rub my lips with my thumb, feeling shy.

"Isn't this good?"

"It's good, but I..."

"It's a bit hot in here. You probably took a warm bath, so the steam came out."

"Is it?" I tease her. "Aren't you hot because you saw me naked? But I can't help it. I have great skin and a great body. I'm also this cute. It's not strange for you to feel a bit hot."

"How can you say something like this nonchalantly? But..." She walks to me and does what she just did. "Because it's hot. I want our tongues or something to intertwine."

When I consider all the words she used that mean "kiss," my stomach does a little dance because it makes me think about all the possibilities. Usually, I'm the one to initiate sensual touch, and she's the one to pull back and stop me. Today, however, she is the one who approached me and invaded my personal space. She's starting to adjust.

It seems like the saying, one step at a time, needs to be applied to another occasion... Why am I this way? I can never keep a promise I make to myself.

Summary

19. Ann

And the time for me to work is here. I'm very excited. I've always wondered what it would be like to work. But... I don't see why I have to act like a real employee by taking the bus to work.

Bam and I are fighting the crowd on a bus that doesn't even have air conditioning. We are both in our uniforms. All the seats are taken, so we have to stand. I don't mind standing, but the driver's constant breaking and accelerating makes it difficult for me to balance myself, causing me to almost fall face down numerous times. I also fell and unintentionally sat on an elderly man. Finally, Bam instructed me to grab the back of a seat and stand behind me to lock me in place. It looks like she's hugging me from the back.

"You smell so good."

I can smell her perfume. I can't help but compliment her, but the sweet-faced woman shakes her head.

"It's a perfume that doesn't suit the hot weather. If I don't use it every day, please don't be mad at me."

I agree with her. Rolling in love better suits the nighttime or cold weather. When used in this hot weather, the scent can be very strong. Fortunately, it doesn't seem to bother the people around us too much.

"Actually, you just want to hug me, right?" I tease her. She doesn't reply but puts her head on my shoulder in front of all these people.

"Probably."

It turns out that it's me who's embarrassed. I move a bit farther away from her to force her to stand up straight. She probably knows that I'm embarrassed, so she does so willingly. Yet she still encircled me with her arms. Though she's smaller than me, she can stand firmly and be my support.

She has high leadership skills.

"You're the shy type? I always see you say naughty things. So you're all talk?" The sweet-faced woman teases me. I scrunch my nose a bit in frustration.

"It depends on the situation."

"You graduated from abroad. I would have thought that you don't care how people look at you."

"You have to respect the culture of each country."

"You're starting to know good manners."

Her comment makes me bare my teeth at her. She's always thought of me as someone with bad manners?

"You appear to be adept at using public transportation."

"When we didn't have much, my mother and I took the bus everywhere together. I have to thank your father for giving me good cars to ride on."

"Yes. I have to thank my father as well."

"..."

"If not for him, I wouldn't have met you."

This time, she's the one who's embarrassed. And seeing this side of her makes me happy. Because of the traffic, we get to talk more than ever. Normally, I just want to make out with her when we're together, and if we

talk, it's always something nonsense or related to the people at home. When we're on a bus like this, we get to talk about this and that, including this.

"I've always wondered." Bam brought up a topic as we discussed our emails last night. "Why do people have sex?"

"Oh? It's natural. Your question doesn't suit your IQ. Ops. I don't mean that you're stupid. I'm just really surprised by your question."

"I know that. But I've always thought it meant we had to be naked. We have to let someone else see everything about ourselves. For me, it's unbearable to be naked in front of someone else."

"No wonder you turned the other way immediately yesterday when my towel got loose. So this means that you can't use the onsen?"

"I never even considered using it. How can people get naked just like that?"

"Because it's taking a bath. You surprised me again... You let me kiss you. You let me touch you. But you can't stand other people seeing you naked?"

She chews the inside of her cheek without arguing. Or is this one of the reasons she never lets me do more than kiss her and touch her here and there? Is she ashamed of her naked body?

"You've never had sexual relations with anyone?" I ask her right to the point. Bam winks to say yes. That makes me smile. "Your previous lovers never did anything to you? Wow."

"Why do you have to sound so happy?"

"I just understand how it feels when a guy knows that his lover has never been with anyone before."

"You're just like other Thais. You value a woman based on her past relationships."

"Not at all. Because if I do, it would mean I'm a terrible person."

"How so?"

"Because I've had sex."

I reply frankly. The sweet-faced woman straightens herself up and stops encircling me from behind. She grabs the bar above her head and turns her head away from me. I laugh when I see her reaction.

"So it's you who value me based on my past relationships. What's the matter..." I poked her tummy with my finger. "Are you jealous?"

"We have to get down at this stop."

She just says that and leads me to the door. I smile as I look at her back. I follow her and take a position behind her. I hug the pole so that I don't fall when the driver breaks.

"What you don't know is that every time I make love, I always imagine that the other person... is you."

We were able to make each other embarrassed on our first day at work. This is a good start. It took us 45 minutes to get to the toy factory that my father owns. This is actually the warehouse. Our office is in the Central Business District (CBD). Deals are done there, and it is also where the sales, HR, and CEO work.

The warehouse is large, hot, and stuffy. Everyone knows what to do. As newcomers, we have a senior who already knows that we will be here today to give us a brief overview of the layout and the function of each area.

"If you're tired, you can rest anytime you want, miss."

The word "miss" gives me goosebumps. Bam gives Kai a cold stare and warns him in a detached, but not offensive, voice. You can say that she's authoritative but not scary.

"Please treat us like all the other employees. My mother requested that."

"I apologize. I forgot... Then, please allow me to call you by your nickname and assign you work as I deem appropriate."

"Thank you."

Is she always this cold? I observe her admirably as I watch her every move. My first task is to pack products. Some have plastic cases, so I only need to put the product in, then staple and glue it. But I have to do it quickly and hand it to the people who will put it in a box. It's a fun job, but after a while, my back aches. Bam is assigned to check the stock to see if it matches the number in the system. Everyone here is friendly. The only frustrating part is when some male employees awkwardly try to get near the sweet-faced woman. Some also annoyingly tease her like they are teenagers.

"Why do men believe that making bird noises will make women shy and date them?"

I say this during our lunch break. There's a canteen that sells food at employees' benefit prices here. Yet I still see some bring their own lunch.

"Because they don't know how to express themselves. Some who are brave will approach you and talk to you without fear of rejection. Those are the daring ones, but they don't really like you because they don't care if you end up hating them. As for those who do not dare look you in the eye or are too shy to talk to you, they like you a lot, so they are afraid that they will annoy you. They ended up becoming those who lack confidence."

Bam explains in detail. There are really people who are like that.

"You have a wealth of knowledge."

"A lot of people flirted with me."

"You're not at all humble."

"I should be able to talk to my lover about everything, right?" She winks at me as she uses what I said against me. I smile shyly when she calls me "lover" and shrugs.

"Right... So, which type am I?"

"You're both. You're shy, but you're determined to get your way. You come disguised as the younger sister who really likes her new older sister. But when you know the truth, you hate her and no longer care if you're hated. So you do everything you want to do, whether it's being sarcastic, flirting, or getting intimate."

"I'm really like that."

"How was work today?"

"It's fun!" I say this merrily before I put on an act that I'm really exhausted as I ask for tenderness from her. "But my back aches so much. Do our employees do this every day? The salary is so low. Will they ever advance in life working like this?"

"People who work here do not think of career advancement. They need money just to get by. If they have enough savings, maybe they will invest and start their own business someday... if they try hard enough and have enough ambition."

"But how can they have savings? I got 300 Baht today, and after the bus fare, drink, and lunch, I only have 100+ Baht left. And that doesn't even include the bus fare back home."

"Also, not including the utility bills and the rent. I have to propose that my mother raise their salary. It wouldn't make your father any poorer, right?"

"I agree with whatever you say. You're so capable in every way. I saw you drive the pallet truck too."

"It's my survival instinct. If I don't do a good job, my mother will lock me up at home again. It's so boring."

Our first day on the job ended on a good note. We had to use our labor and start to understand our employees more. This is probably what my stepmother wanted to teach us. Should Bam and I ever find ourselves on the

management team, we will be capable of understanding and resolving issues if our employees go on strike.

I look bored on the way back because we have to take the bus again. Yet the sweet-faced woman walks past the bus stop to the hired van.

"It's your first day at work. You must be very tired. I'll let you take the van and Skytrain back today."

"Isn't it overspending?"

I suddenly see the value of my money. I've spent money without caring since I was born. The 30-50 Baht transportation fee was nothing to me. But now, it's a lot. That amount can buy me a meal.

"It is. But I want you to know that if you can't manage your money well, you won't have any savings. That's why the employees take buses, making various connections. It's so that they have enough money for dinner. It's because we have dinner waiting for us at home, so we can do this."

She has already considered and calculated everything. I reach out to hold her hand without saying anything as we ride in the van. I'm impressed and proud that she's my lover. Our relationship is very complex. She is the daughter of a scheming stepmother who is plotting to steal all of my father's money. Yet I fall head over heels in love with her.

Ah... I'm in love with her. There's no other word for it.

The van took only 20 minutes to get us to the Skytrain station because it uses the expressway. The traffic wasn't that bad. We will take the Skytrain from there. But just as we're about to go buy tickets, someone from the back yells excitedly at us.

"Bam!"

Bam stops and looks back.

"Ann."

"I'm surprised. Wow."

The person who calls out to Bam dashes in to hug her and jumps up and down. Bam smiles happily. She's not emotionless, like she usually is with other people. It tells me that they are quite close.

"How many years have passed since we last met? Three? Wow, I'm surprised to see you. Have you changed your number? Why can't I contact you? BlaBlaBla."

They talked merrily. Bam laughs as they talk. She seems to miss her friend. I'm suddenly air (invisible). But not for long, since Ann soon notices me.

"Who's this? Your coworker?"

"This is Eve."

"You're cute." Ann compliments me without any sign of shyness. "You have great skin too. You must be a rich kid in disguise who goes to work in a factory to search for your birth father."

"Wow. You must have graduated from a theatrical degree with a major in imagination." Bam laughs when her friend imagines my backstory. It makes me laugh too.

"Are you heading back home?"

"Yes."

"Why do you take the Skytrain? Aren't your family rich?"

"You also have a car but are at a Skytrain station." Bam argues, but her friend shakes her head.

"I'm here to buy milk tea. I'm going back to my car that's parked near here. This won't do. We must have a meal together and chitchat now that we meet."

"I'm tired today. It's my first day at work. I feel sorry for Eve too." She looks my way, understandingly.

"It's just a meal. We can have it at this mall here. I'll drive you home after... I miss my friend." Ann glances at me and winks. "I want to get to know this cute person too."

I notice Bam straightening up a bit. Her voice goes from being happy to being cold. But she doesn't reject the offer.

"True. I haven't met you for so long. And you're dropping me off too. Who can say no to that? But let me ask my... lover. Do you want to eat first or go home now?"

"Lover?"

Ann's eyes become wide open, and she immediately tries not to smile. I can sense that she's having fun. As for me, when Bam calls me that in front of someone else, I feel really embarrassed and nod to agree with her.

"Whatever my lover says, it's good."

"Thank you." She strokes my back and smiles from the corner of her mouth. "Good girl."

20. S.O.S.

This is probably the first time I've met Bam's friend in person, excluding the guy who picked her up when she was in university. Ann... The woman in front of me is the total opposite of the sweet-faced woman. But the way they talk indicates that they are close. I'm very confused about their relationship. How can they be friends?

One talks nonstop, while the other just listens with a smile and occasionally laughs.

"I'm shocked. Your lover is a woman. I couldn't tell." Ann says this frankly and looks my way. "How did you two meet? Tell me everything."

"Well... we've known each other since we were kids."

By kids, she means when my stepmother and she moved in. She talks about her past openly. It's surprising. She's very reserved and rarely shares her personal stories with anyone, but she readily shares them with Ann when she asks.

So they are very close.

"What is it like to be in a relationship with someone you've known since you were young... What if it doesn't work out? Won't it be hard to still be around each other?"

"We're adults. We got together for a reason. So if we have to break up, there must be a reason for that too. We can go back to being what we were."

"What is that?"

"Strangers."

I look at the person who says the opposite of what I'm thinking in shock. I thought she would say "sisters" or something. But I remain quiet and let them continue their conversation.

"It seems like your lover is too quiet. Young lady... Can I call you that? You're so cute." She leans in a bit. "And you look yummy too."

"Thank you" I really don't know what to say when I'm told that I look delicious in front of my lover. Should I smile or cry?

"Don't you have anything to say to me?"

"Huh?" I glanced at Bam a bit. She doesn't have any opinion on this and just takes a sip of water. She's letting me make my own decision. "What should I ask?"

"Like, how did Bam and I become friends when we're not at all alike?"

It's like she can read my mind and knows that's what I'm wondering. I nod to admit it and say what she nudges me to say. It's already getting too quiet. Bam wouldn't say a thing.

"Yes. How did you become friends? Umm... it's like Bam is the winter and you're the summer."

"Such a nice comparison. Haha." The beautiful woman giggles and looks out blankly, like she's trying to think back in time. "I'm the bad girl who always tries to steal Bam's lover."

"Huh?"

"Look at your face. She's shocked, Bam. This is funny." Ann reaches out her hand to pull my cheek, oblivious to my lover, who is sitting right next to me. Bam remains motionless, displaying no emotion. I'm under pressure now. I'm not sure whether I should go along with her or reject her touch.

"You girls talk. I'm going to the restroom."

"Don't hurry back. I'm going to flirt."

Bam walks away. As she leaves the restaurant, she glances at me from outside the glass wall. Her cold expression is telling me that she's angry. I'm sure of it... Though she doesn't express herself much, it's clearly anger. But rather than being afraid, I'm excited. At least now I know that she's not happy.

"What does it mean that you always steal her lovers?"

"Ah... how do I say this? She's very beautiful. We agree on that, right?"

"Yes."

"She's so beautiful that I flirted with her as well."

"Ops." I exclaim because I'm really shocked. Women can admit frankly that they like women these days? And how can she tell that the other person likes women too and won't reject her?

"I obviously failed. Bam is so arrogant. So I thought... Geez... if you're playing hard to get, I will steal all your lovers. If I can't have you, no one can."

"That doesn't seem like a reason you two can become close friends." I'm getting excited after being nervous the whole time I've been sitting here. The woman in front of me giggles, knowing that I'm finally starting to enjoy the conversation.

"Bam didn't like who she was with anyway. So she used me. I successfully won over every guy that approached her, until I realized, shit... can it really be this easy? So I couldn't help but walk over to ask her directly. And she just said... If you can steal them from me that easily, it means they don't like me that much anyway. I felt like I was picking up trash from her when she told me that nonchalantly."

I almost laughed out loud. Bam is an absolute badass.

"She wasn't angry at all?"

"Not at all. It's like she was just with them to annoy her mother... I found that out later."

"Ah..."

"Does Bam's mother know that you two are together?"

"No."

"Wow. A secret. So Bam is serious. Interesting." I can sense something under the table that gives me goosebumps. Ann's toe is crawling up my leg as if she's teasing me. "If I try to steal you, would I be successful?"

"No, you won't."

"Wow. Loud and clear. I like a challenge."

"Bam is my first love. I've tried being in relationships with many people, but no one can make me feel the same way I do when I'm with her. So... no matter how charming you are, you won't be successful."

"It's always difficult at first, but as time goes by, you will gradually be swayed. You will think about me and the fun I can give you the way Bam can't. Shall we play a game?"

"What game?"

"Cheating."

Why is she this direct? And Bam leaves me alone with her for so long that I'm starting to be at a loss as to how I should continue on with this conversation. Can a close friend do something like this? Should I yell for help from the other customers in this restaurant?

"You look like you saw a ghost? Haha." Ann stops teasing me with her leg and takes a sip of water merrily. "Finally, Bam finds someone she's serious with and calls a lover."

"What?"

"Bam told me that... she already has someone that she likes. But I didn't think that it was a woman and someone she knew since she was a kid. This kind of relationship is extremely dangerous. I don't understand why she'd risk it. But after talking to you, now I know why she couldn't move on."

"..."

"You're very sure of yourself. Bam told me that the person she likes is just like me, and that's why we can be friends, though our relationship started in a very strange way."

"Really? Bam has liked me for a long time?"

"You want to know? I can go into details because I'm the only person Bam talks to about everything." She goes quiet for a bit and then suddenly blurts out a set of numbers: "062-15569**."

"Huh?"

"I will only say that once. If you can remember it, call me. We can arrange to meet and talk. And if we get along really well, we can continue at a hotel. I'm open... Bam's here. Thank you for taking a while. I already gave Eve my phone number."

Ann tells Bam everything she told me and what she's doing. Bam just nods to acknowledge it without saying anything. I can't follow them.

"You become friends quickly." Bam says this and smiles from the corner of her mouth. "How's it after your talk?"

The friend sitting on the opposite side puts her chin on her hand and squints at Bam like she's enjoying this and is having a lot of fun.

"I want her."

Bam doesn't say anything after we meet her friend, and Ann drives us home in her sports car. Actually, she does talk a little, but her words are so few

that I feel like I should do something.

"Your friend is nice."

I start a conversation as we walk from the gate to the house. Bam, who's been quiet all the way back, glances at me a bit.

"You like someone like that?"

"She's very open."

"Being too open is not good."

"But being as reserved as you is also not good."

"I thought you liked me because I'm unpredictable." She glances at me smilingly before she looks all serious. "Don't pay too much attention to Ann. She's not fitting to be anyone's friend."

"But she's your friend."

"Yes, she's my friend. But I don't want you to get too close to her."

"I don't see anything wrong with that."

"I said no; it means no." She says this coldly and stares at me to indicate that she's serious about this. I shrug. I don't tell her yes, but I also don't tell her no outright. The sweet-faced woman tightens her lips a bit and is about to stomp away. I'm at a loss as to why she's angry with me.

I already shrugged; why is she still angry... She's quite the jealous type. I didn't expect this.

I'm glad, but not at ease. After I get back to my room, I immediately email her. I don't think that I did anything wrong. I don't know why I have to try to reconcile with her. She's the one who tagged me along to have a meal with her friend. She should know what her friend is like. How am I wrong?

Dear Love,

What's the matter with you? Why do you look so upset? If you're truly upset, you should be upset with your friend. I was cornered because of your friend's advances, but you're not talking to me, as if I were the one at fault.

You know that I like you a lot, so you think you can sulk anytime you want? That's not cool at all.

From your lover

I pace the room anxiously while waiting for her email response. And I get a short email back almost right away.

Dear Love,

S.O.S.

She doesn't even write who it's from. That short response caused me to panic and rush out to look for her. Bam is not in her room. So I go downstairs to find that Bam and my father are talking about something. My father is touching her. He's grabbing her wrist and talking to her with an angry voice.

"You wanted to go work outside so you could go anywhere you wanted? What's that "lover" on your phone? What is it? Bam... tell me now!"

I observe the situation, not knowing what to do. My father is losing it. He has changed from being a kind uncle into someone who's blinded by jealousy. I clear my throat.

"What are you doing? Dad... Bam's wrist is all red. What are you angry about?" I walked to stand between them and breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm asking her who dropped her off."

"You can ask me. I came home with Bam."

"Who was it?"

"She's Bam's female friend, named Ann. We came home late because we met her as we were getting on the Skytrain. What did you think Bam did?"

"..."

"You thought she went with her lover? Even if that's the case, so what?" I cross my arms across my chest and look at my father in all seriousness.

"What would her mother think if she knew what you did to her daughter? I'm starting to wonder why you're so anxious. She's your daughter."

"She's not my real daughter!"

My father said what he shouldn't say out loud, like he couldn't hold it in anymore. His jealousy is showing. He's very angry that Bam came home late and went out to work all day.

"Because she's not your real daughter, you have no right to do this to her. I think you're too dangerous."

"I... I don't mean that." The older person is starting to get a hold of himself when he sees that I'm protecting Bam and looks at him disapprovingly. "I was just worried. Bam is beautiful. Everyone likes her."

"And it seems like you really like her."

"No!"

"I think we need to talk about this with her mother. We belong to a well-educated social circle. If something like what we see in the news happened

here, it would be so shameful that we would have to bury our heads in the sand. And I couldn't bear having a father like that."

"..."

"Bam and I will go live somewhere else."

"No. I won't allow it." My father looks like he's about to cry, but he can't say anything. He just covers his face with his hands. "I didn't want it to be this way."

"It already is, and we have to talk. I understand that you're lonely. But not her. Not Bam."

I grab Bam's hand and take her upstairs to get away from my father. When we are alone in my bedroom, there is complete silence. We both look into each other's eyes but are at a loss for words.

"Come here."

That's all I say before I hug her. Bam resists at first, but eventually wraps her arms around me. We don't kiss like we normally do. It's an embrace to console and comfort her, so she knows she has me.

"Thank you."

"It's okay. I am your lover."

"..."

"And I'll take you out of here. Even your mother can't stop us."

21. Her true self

"It's not that big of a deal. I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding."

That's my stepmother's response after hearing about what happened. The entire family is gathered in the master bedroom, which is quite private. We chose to discuss the matter here because we don't want others in the house to hear about this kind of thing. I tighten my fist and sneak a peek at Bam to see how she wants to proceed.

"Bam is probably too close to Mr. Kit. Perhaps all the news on TV has made us overly suspicious. Thank you for your concern, Eve." My stepmother is threading the subject carefully. Actually, she should be concerned about her daughter's well-being, not about my anger.

"Concerning Bam moving out, I don't think it's necessary. Let's ask what Bam thinks about it."

I stay quiet because I want to see how much Bam will stand up for herself, yet...

"If you think that it's nothing, then I'll believe so, mother."

"Shit!"

I curse and immediately walk out of the master bedroom without looking at my father or the victim that I tried to protect. I lock myself in my bedroom. I feel like I was left behind along the way. It was none of my business, but I fought like a fool.

Ding!

There's an email notification from Bam, but I just look at my phone without any enthusiasm. A part of me doesn't want to open it because I'm still angry.

But another part of me wants to know what she wrote me. If I were to guess, it's a lame explanation, like she was just being obedient or something.

Dear Love.

Thank you for protecting me, and I'm sorry I can't do anything.

From your lover

I bare my teeth at the phone and groan in my throat. I want to scream into my pillow, but I know that it's useless. I think that it's useless to talk through email. I need to talk to her face-to-face and pull her hair a few times so she can think straight. And as soon as I open the door, I see the sweet-faced woman waiting for me right outside.

"Can I talk to you?"

"Can I slap you?"

"If it will make you feel better, then go ahead."

I can't believe her! I say this, and she still acts like normal. I said I would slap her, and she just let me. This is domestic violence. She should say that she won't let me do it and will fight me. I can only bare my teeth at her and move out of the way. I close the door after she gets in, but I just stand there. When the sweet-faced woman sees that I won't follow her in, she turns to look at me with puppy eyes. That instantly puts out the fire in my heart and melts me into wax.

"I'm sorry."

"Why did you do that? We agreed that you would move out. I've helped you secure that deal."

"I can't go against my mother."

"Will you die if you do that this once!"

"You don't understand."

"Tell me, so I do."

"My mother has never made the wrong decision since I've been born. What she thinks and does is always right. She never made a mistake. If I do what I want, like you said, and it's a mistake, my relationship with my mother would..."

"My father almost dragged you to bed, and you're still saying your mother made the right decision? Go ahead, then. If you think that your mother's twisted logic is right, do what you want. Your complimenting me on my courage is just an empty compliment. You don't think to take my lead at all. If that's the case, then continue to live your life in your gloomy world; I won't interfere anymore!"

I open the door and invite her out. Yet the sweet- faced woman just stands still and asks me, looking pitiful.

"You're not kissing me today?"

"How can I bear to kiss someone this stupid?"

Actually, she's far from stupid. But I'm too angry to be romantic or save her feelings right now, so I was harsh with my words. Bam walks out of the room, and I close the door behind it. As the clock ticks, my guilt eats me up so much that I don't know what to do. However, walking over to try to reconcile with her would be supporting her decision.

She must realize that she needs to fix the problem. No. She knows she has to fix it, but she doesn't dare do it because of her mother.

I stomp to lay on my bed and put my arm on my forehead. I roll around like someone who can't sleep because I'm too worried about what will happen after this. Will I be able to protect her from my vulnerable father? And someone suddenly pops up in my head. It startles me and causes me to sit up. I close my eyes as I try to remember the numbers she gave me.

...0 what? The last digit is 6 or 7.

My memory still serves me right. I call a random number, and I expect the receiver to say that I've got the wrong number, but when I ask, 'Is this Miss Ann?' there's a laugh on the line.

"You really called. I'm shocked."

The liveliness in her voice makes me feel better. When you receive positive energy, your body will also be happy. I'm so happy that I let out a smile.

"You're such a lively person."

"Why are you calling me? Have you changed your mind? Are you swayed? Hey... don't lead me on. My heart is fluttering. I can steal one more from Bam."

"I'm not calling because of that."

She's so open. She says frankly that she wants to steal me. It's really strange that Bam has her as a friend—a close friend too. Maybe she uses Ann to get rid of those who approached her. She just hands whoever she doesn't want to her friend.

Or did Bam introduce me to her friend to get rid of me...

"What is Bam doing? Why are you able to call me?"

"There's something that causes me to be quite frustrated. I'm not consulting you; I just want to ask you a question. You know everything about Bam, right?"

"It depends on what it is. But I know almost everything."

"It's about Bam's mother."

"Oh. You go for the climax. That's a very serious topic. Good girl couldn't go against her mother again? What is it about? It must be something big for someone who didn't even try to remember my number to call me."

"I want to ask you something."

"It's not just something. I'm sure. Haha."

The lively laugh makes me sigh. I strangely feel like I'm doing something wrong. And I don't understand why I don't want Bam to know that I'm calling this person, though Ann is Bam's friend.

"Yes. It's a big question. But since you seem to know her well... like very well,"

"I know her quite well, but..."

"But?"

She goes quiet for a while.

"But I don't want to talk on the phone. You have to come see me, period. If you dare come see me now. I will tell you everything I know."

"We can talk on the phone."

"I'm in charge of this game. Haha." She laughs merrily, like she's playing a game. "I will start my countdown. If you take too long to decide, I will hang up because I'm about to go soak in a warm bath. Five... Four..."

"Okay. I'll go see you. Share your location."

"Haha."

Why do I feel like I'm being tricked? But well, if I want the tiger cub, I will have to go into the tiger's cave. If I allow Bam to continue on like this, she will never step out of her mother's shadow, which means that our love will never be without obstacles.

Others may have their family's objections as obstacles. Family is also one of my obstacles... but it's because my father may make a grave mistake because he can't control himself.

I sneak out in the middle of the night. I have to admit that the sound of my car as I started the engine was not quiet at all. And I also have to open the gate. In the end, I just tell myself, "Forget it," and drive out to the location I set on the GPS. Because Ann's condo is not far away and there is no traffic at night, I get there in only ten minutes. Ann comes down to pick me up in a crop t-shirt and shorts, like she's ready to go to bed. She may not even be wearing her bra. I don't know if she's trying to seduce me and get me and Bam to fight, or maybe she just thinks that we're both women, so it shouldn't be a big deal because we both have the same things physically.

"It must be very important for you to come here. Normally, one would try to push it to tomorrow or the day after. Or at least when the sky is not this dark."

"You're the one in charge. You were counting down. Even if I wanted to push it off until tomorrow, I couldn't."

"You're right. I forgot that I set the rules. Haha." She likes to giggle as if she's mocking people. I can only make a sound in my throat and follow her into the elevator to go to her room. "Okay. Make yourself at home. You can take off your clothes before we talk if you want."

"Why would I do that?"

"In case you want to have fun."

She serves me drinks, letting me choose between red wine and plain water. I point to plain water. I have to be careful to talk to her while I'm thinking straight, not drunk, and risk falling for her charm due to alcohol. Things would take a grave turn if that happened.

I'm going crazy as it is.

"Do you want to watch Netflix?"

"Why is Bam so afraid of her mother?"

I get right to the point before Ann takes me off the topic I'm here to discuss. The beautiful woman scrunches her nose, looking bored because I'm not easily persuaded. She sips her red wine and sits with one leg crossed over the other. I see a glimpse of something inside those tiny shorts. It seems intentional.

"Afraid? Don't use that word. It's more like she respects her because she owes a lot to that woman... She's a good girl."

"But there must be things that she can decide on her own, even if she respects her. Especially since they are mother and daughter."

"But they are not mother and daughter by blood. If it wasn't for her mother... Bam wouldn't be here today."

The secret I've always wanted to know gradually comes out of Ann's mouth. She tells me casually, as if it's not a secret at all. If anyone wanted to know, they just had to ask, and she would tell them. But if no one asks, she won't say anything. That's that. While we're talking, there are three calls from Bam. After that, she didn't call again. I look at the number on my phone, feeling pressured, but I tell myself not to pick it up. One, because I want her to know that I'm angry and that I feel bad about what she chose to do. And, two, I want her to worry too. Yet, now that there are three missed calls, I'm a bit worried that she knows where I am and what I'm doing.

"Bam was selected from an orphanage because she looks like her mother. I met her mother once. She's very arrogant and confident in herself. I know then that she would tell Bam to stop having me as a friend." Ann laughs and shrugs. "Oh well. I change lovers this frequently; who would want their kid to be my friend?"

"But Bam didn't do it?"

"Of course not. I'm her only friend at the university. We didn't get along at first. Because she is so beautiful, I stole all of her boyfriends. Strange that she wasn't at all angry, but she walked over to me and said... Please help get this guy out of my life. It's a strange relationship, don't you think?"

"You're only friends? Bam and you..."

"Friend, of course." She smiles and sips her wine. "I tried to exercise my charm, but it didn't work. I thought that she was 100% straight. But..." She spins her wine glass, takes the last sip, and goes, "Ah," like it's really refreshing. "She just already has someone in her heart, the sister who went to study abroad."

"If she really already had someone in her heart... why did she have so many boyfriends?"

"Everyone has to find themselves. Maybe you have doubts about whether what you're feeling is true... Don't pretend to not know this. Didn't you have any boyfriends when you were abroad?"

"..."

"Gotcha. You also change lovers like tissues." I bared my teeth at her a bit. She's far too forthright with someone she's only met today. "Actually, Bam has a lot of lovers too. She's just very quiet about it."

"You talk about changing lovers a thousand times already today."

"You're secretly counting? But that's that... She changed lovers often, but she never crossed the line. It's okay. She's never been with anyone for over a month. It's like she was testing it and jumping the ship because it's not it. She probably never found the right one. What about you? How long have you been with Bam?"

"A bit over a month."

"Oh. A record high. Have you two crossed the line?"

"No!" I scream. She laughs merrily. "Do you have to get into that much detail?"

"Talking in depth will make us closer sooner. Oh. Hang on. Let me pick up this line."

The merry one picks up her phone. For a split second, I thought it was Bam, but it wasn't. It seems like it's the person she's with at the moment. Ann doesn't even get up to get some privacy. She just picks up the line and talks in front of me. I can make out that the other person on the line is probably not sure that she's by herself.

"Are you not listening, Daddy? I told you that I didn't pick up the line because I'm talking to a friend and I had my phone on silent mode. If you're like this, I won't have it. Many want me. I can do without you. Goodbye."

The word "Daddy" makes me sit up straight. Her lover's name is Daddy? Or is it a pet name for someone older than her? After she hangs up, that same number calls repeatedly, 4-5 times, but she doesn't pick up. She pours herself another glass of wine and shrugs like she doesn't care.

"Sorry for the interruption... Ah, you're curious as to why I called my lover 'Daddy.'" She pretends to look around like she's afraid someone will hear us, though we're in her room. Maybe she's afraid that the ghost will hear us. "I have a sugar daddy."

"W... what?"

I almost cried out in Parseltongue (the serpent language in Harry Potter). My shocked face makes her laugh. It's not at all funny. What did she just say? She's too open.

"I'm very easy going. I can tell you everything about myself. Bam's friend is like my friend... But if you also want to be my lover," She rubs her leg against mine softly and teasingly again. "I can be that too."

"You tell everyone about this?"

"I do so only with those that I can talk to openly. You came here to talk to me about Bam and about your father thinking of crossing the line with his stepdaughter. So I guess I can tell you about myself too. Maybe it's because I dare to take risks that Bam decided to be my friend. She probably sees the courage in me that she doesn't have. That's why I say she also wants to have a lover, but she's quiet about it and does not dare to do it."

"I... I think I better leave."

I get up because I'm not sure how to handle the situation. I want to run out, but I'm not sure if it's from embarrassment or something else.

"The world is very wide open. Think of it as something normal. I give others pleasure, and they... here."

Ding!

There is a message notification that a money transfer of 100,000 Baht has been made into her account. She shows it to me openly.

"The other party repays me in cash. I don't love anyone. I don't have any feelings... I only love myself."

"You may love someone one day. What would you do if your lover knew..."

"Would that person judge me for living my life in exchange for money? Then it's not love. More importantly..." Ann walks to me as I back away until my back is against the door that I was going to walk out. She leans in and whispers in my ear. "I like women. Men are just sexual objects that help me overcome my boredom."

"..."

"They see me as an object, so I see them as one as well. We're even. If people want this to be a free country, they have to be more open-minded... So, how was today? Did you get enough information? Do you want to know anything else about Bam?"

"I don't know what else to ask." I swallow hard because I really can't think of anything else. "But I really thank you for letting me know why Bam is so scared when it comes to her mother. This will allow me to handle the situation better."

"There's one more thing she's afraid of now. Trust me."

I don't know what she means. I excused myself after a few more words. I left with a pounding heart. Ann's risk-taking nature makes me seem like a baby in a womb. She's so open and free-spirited. But though she laughs, I can sense that....

She doesn't feel anything.

Someone who has feelings will not do what she's doing. It's like she's doing them because she's bored.

She loves herself in her own way. She lives in the present. She doesn't care about the past or the future because she doesn't know if they exist. But that 100,000 Baht in her account is real, and she can use it as well as forgive her 'Daddy' and call him back.

It's past 2 a.m. now. I can't believe I talked to Ann until this late. She's fun to talk to. Though I was a bit nervous, I admit that I lost track of time. Everyone is asleep. All the lights are closed. It's good that at least the guard is still awake and opens the gate for me. After I park the car, I tiptoe to my bedroom. I was startled when I opened the light to see Bam sitting there, waiting for me.

"Why are you in my bedroom this late at night? It's past your bedtime."

"Where did you go? Why are you just back?"

"I went to see a friend."

Your friend... I say that silently to myself. I admit that I'm acting like someone with guilt. I don't know why I have to feel guilty. It's like I cheated and am being interrogated by my wife when, in reality, I didn't.

"Who."

"You don't know her."

"Is it the friend named Ann?"

Her direct question makes me straighten up. The sweet-faced woman shows me a picture from her phone. I guess Ann took it when I didn't know and sent it to her. That woman is fun to talk to and a pain in the ass at the same time. She called me to her and got me into a fight with my lover. Gosh... Such a good friend. Why does Bam have her as a friend?

"Yes. Though we just met today, we're friends."

"Why Ann?"

"I don't know." I answer in a way that is annoying. Actually, I don't have many friends. My best friend is still overseas. And Ann knows about Bam the most. If not her, who was I to ask?

"I told you not to get close to Ann."

"We're not close."

"Then why did you go to see her?"

"To talk." I shrug. "She's a good friend to talk to when I'm stressed, don't you think? You got yourself a good friend."

I can see rage in her eyes. She is throwing them at me, and I'm on the verge of falling over. But that's only my imagination, so I'm still standing still because I don't know what to do. She normally keeps her emotions to herself. The most emotion she showed was when she laughed. But this is rage. She would normally keep a straight face when she's angry. She's never shown it like this.

"Another one to fall into her charm." The word "another one" is distant but arouses me. Bam walks over to me and squeezes my arms tightly. "Ann is always successful. And she's successful with you too."

"I admit that Ann is quite charming, but... you're squeezing my arms too tightly. It hurts."

"What did you talk about?"

"General topics."

"What did you do with her?"

"Many things." I keep it vague. Though the situation doesn't look good, I keep trying to annoy her because I'm still angry that she chose to be her mother's good girl today. Bam is squeezing my arms harder. But then she slowly lets go and closes her eyes.

"How much do you like Ann?" She's back to talking normally again. I feel better, but I can sense that she's not herself at all.

"She's cute and very open. I get to see her from many perspectives. We are alike in many ways. And she's very different from you. So different, that I'm surprised that you're friends. But I like her. She does what she wants rather than cages herself because she's afraid of everything like you."

"..."

"It's dull."

"You actually like someone like that?"

"I was aroused." I laugh in my throat sarcastically. "When her legs were climbing up mine, I was shaking. She told me that she likes women, and men are just her sexual objects. She gives them what they want in exchange for something. I've never met anyone this open before. It's the total opposite of you... You wear a mask so much that I can no longer tell what's real and what's fake. I'm not even sure when you've really laughed from the inside since we've been together. Or when you..."

Bam turns to walk to the door, like she can't stand to listen to me anymore. As I think that I'm winning, I am stunned when the sweet-faced woman locks the door instead of walking out. She turns to stare at me.

"I will show you who I really am."

22. At the dining table

My heart is pounding as Bam walks over to me slowly, like a tiger who sees its prey. Actually, I like these kinds of activities, but this is really not the right situation. We are against TV series where the male lead uses force on the female lead. Yet Bam and I are in the same situation, though I'm up against another female.

"Don't do anything that you will regret later."

I warned her. If she was in a better mood, I would take my clothes off this instant. But not like this. The sweet-faced woman cradles my face in her palm and kisses me passionately. She slips her tongue in. She knows how I like it. I try to get away, so she pushes me down on the floor and lays on top of me. Looking at her from beneath makes her look large, like a man. Bam presses my hands down, using hers.

"Don't. I will fight. Ouch!!!"

Yet she moves her face to the side and takes a full bite of my ear. I cry out in pain. It's almost a squeal. What I was expecting was a sensual touch born of resentment. But this is pain and almost a burst of laughter.

"Why did you bite my ear?"

She moves away. There are tears in her eyes. She's not crying. It's more like tears of rage.

"I want you to feel pain, so you know how I feel."

"Is your pain in your ear?"

"I ache all over!"

After she says that, she gets up and is about to leave. I'm confused, but I rush after her in such a hurry that I'm dizzy. Yet I can't let her go. It may be because of those tears in her eyes. The rage she didn't let out with words turned into that bite. I grab her shirt and pull it to stop her. It works.

"You're jealous."

"..."

"You need to learn to speak your mind more. Or do something to make me know... ah, biting my ear doesn't count."

"I already told you not to get involved with Ann. That's all I asked from you, but you can't do it for me."

"I didn't know who to go to to consult about you. Ann is your only friend. She knows your story. I just went to talk to her. Nothing more."

"Really?"

"Really, what? Even if you don't trust your friend, you should trust me, who has fallen in love with you for over ten years. Who did you think I fought with my father about something that should be left unspoken for?"

We both go quiet. The sweet-faced woman tightens her lips and thinks silently to herself. I have to cradle her face to force her to look me in the eye. At first, I was afraid that she would use force on me, but now I really want her to do that rather than look sad. It makes me feel guilty.

"Bambi."

"Don't call me that."

"At least I hear you say something after a long pause. If calling you Bambi can make you feel something, I will continue to do that."

"You're crazy."

I smile and kiss her on the cheek to console her. This is our first fight. Though there was violence, like Mike Tyson's bite on the ear, I'm not at all angry with her. Bam is not violent by nature. It was probably her limit, and she didn't know how to express it.

"I thought you were going to press me down on my bed."

"What kind of person do you think I am? Real life is not like the TV series. Who would be in the mood to do something like that when they're angry? I just wanted to smack you until you're an A4 paper."

"But you didn't. How jealous must you be to bite my ear so viciously? I'm really happy."

"Are you a sadist? You're smiling even though I hurt you?" She scrunches her mouth and peeks at my ear, where she bit. "But I won't apologize. Does it hurt a lot?"

"Why did you lock the door if you weren't going to do anything to me?"

"Because I know that you would scream. I was afraid that my mother would open the door and come in to find out about us."

So the only thing in her head is her mother, the woman to whom she owes so much that she doesn't dare make any decisions of her own. She never considers what she must face. I look at her understandingly, but I do not say anything. I just kissed her on the lips. This time, it's sensual. There is no anger or resentment. She tries to move away at first, the way I did earlier when she locked the door. It's a bit frustrating. But when I insisted, she kissed me back. It's like her anger is slowly dispersing.

"Since you already locked the door, sleep here?"

"I know what you're thinking. I won't let you touch me."

"You're kissing me as you're saying that."

"I won't let you do more. Don't even think about it."

"I'm not." I pull her hand and put it inside my shirt. I'm very aroused. At a time like this, letting her go would be like suffering myself. And this is a good way to reconcile. "I want you to touch me."

Her eyes shot wide open in shock. Her face is blushing like someone who's very embarrassed by the very direct invitation. As the sweet-faced woman is still in a daze, I slowly drag her, as I make my way backward, to my bed. I lay on the bed with her on top of me. She's still cautious and hesitant.

"I'm not here for this."

"You've made a grave mistake. You're in the tiger's cave. Are you really not going to take the tiger cub?"

I don't just invite her with words; I also pull my shirt off. So right now, I only have my bra on the top part of my body. She looks at my figure and looks away. I cradle her face in my hands and guide her to look at me again.

"The hook is on the front."

I say that as an invitation. Bam hesitates. She's curious but cautious. I can tell that she's never done something like this before, so I put her hand on the hook and let her decide her next move.

Swoosh.

And the hook is unhooked. Everything is revealed to her. The sweet-faced woman looks at it, stunned. It seems like she doesn't know what to do next.

"I..."

"Use your mouth."

"..."

"Please."

My pleas and begging seem to tear down her patience. She caresses one side with her hand and licks another with her mouth. She does it slowly, as

if she wants to take her time tasting it. When she does that, I lift my chin and wrap my arms around her neck. I moan in my throat. That seems to get her going. She starts to be more aggressive. Her imagination serves as her guide as she gives kisses and caresses everywhere.

She's a fast learner.

I watch her every move as I guide her on which part to pay extra attention to. Sometimes she's so self-centered that I have to laugh.

She has a naughty side to her.

She's very curious.

Her hands slowly take off my underwear. There's a bit of embarrassment at this point, but I can't back out of it now. I open my legs for her and smile from the corner of my mouth.

"Why are you shocked? You act as if you don't have it too. Do I need to tell you what to do next?"

The question that unintentionally insulted her made her immediately go down and use her mouth on my sensitive spot. I jerk out of shock. I wanted her to do something else. This is very intimate, and I'm not that confident in my body at this moment. She's better at this than I expected. Her warm tongue makes me look up to the ceiling and moan loudly. I can't resist grabbing her head and feeding myself to her, as if I'm telling her to consume all of me.

"I want to try." She says this as she slowly slips her finger inside of me.

"I don't have to guide you much."

"Instinct guides me."

"Your instinct knows the way very well. Ah."

She slowly moves her finger in and out, fast and slow. My body jerks aggressively as I quickly reach my climax. It's because I haven't done it for

a long time. Bam knows that I've reached my goal, so she takes her finger out and licks it before she winks at me.

"How was it for a first-timer?"

I hold on to her hand so she stops doing what she's doing. Even though I'm very courageous, I don't know what to do when I see her do that.

"You're too good. Where did you learn how to do it?"

"There is a lot of stuff on the internet. And I add in a bit of my own imagination."

Her looking so full of herself makes me press her down onto the bed. I grind my lips against hers and move my hand all over her body. I try to take her clothes off too, but she holds on to them tightly and presses her legs together.

"I'm not ready today."

"You will suffer."

"It's my heavy day."

"Liar"

"If you want there to be a next time, you have to let me go."

It's like a small threat, but it makes me give in easily. It's okay. Today was a little step forward. At least I'm released, and I get to be more intimate with her than ever.

"Can I at least kiss you?"

Bam stares at me for a long time before she eventually smiles slightly and wraps her arms around my neck to pull me down to her.

"I'll allow it."

The sweet smell of the e-cigarette is in the air. I've been lying in bed, looking at the ceiling, for a while now. I glance at the sweet-faced woman sitting at the window, looking out blankly into the 3 a.m. sky. I examine her with interest. She lives life like a mature adult. It shows in her words and actions. She always thinks before she talks and listens more than she speaks. Yet she's like a young lady when it comes to sex. She's inexperienced. I saw her curiosity as I guided her. And I'm certain that she likes it.

But she doesn't allow me to enter her personal space yet.

I get out of bed, wrap the blanket around myself, and walk over to her. I kiss her lightly on the cheek and move a bit to kiss her lips.

"Sweet. Cigarette after sex?"

She looks at me. She's startled by my words. There's a hint of embarrassment in there, but she also seems to be smiling.

"Crazy."

She will say this when she's embarrassed. It's like she doesn't know what to do. I share my blanket with her and swing my body sideways. When your serotonin is high because you're in love, you want to be near that person.

It's love. And I hope she feels the same.

"What happened is not from rage, yes?"

"I don't want to talk about it..." She shakes her head and rephrases that. "Not that it wasn't good, but I'm shy."

"I know. But I have to praise you for being a very fast learner. And you were ready to comply with my every instruction."

"You're talking about it again. I'm going to my room. It will be morning soon. Someone may see me go out of your room." She looks so nervous that it's funny. I still hug her as a way to get her to stay. She doesn't reject me by

trying to get loose. It's probably because she doesn't want to leave that much anyway. She's just embarrassed.

"So what if they see you go out of my room? We're both women."

"I don't want anyone to question us. And not everyone will think that it's okay for me to be in your room this late at night just because we're both women."

"Who do you mean?"

She goes quiet. It's like she has an answer but wouldn't say it out loud. She's so cautious when she speaks. One day, I will make her speak freely, plead, and scream. I promise myself that.

"I'll let you go because you will come back."

"So full of yourself."

I pull my blanket down to my waist to show her my naked top half. The sweet-faced woman tightens her lips. I smile merrily before I pull her in for a hug. She doesn't resist and willingly snuggles into my soft breasts.

"You'll come back. I'm certain of it."

It's such a bright morning today. I had a full night's sleep. I feel lively and energetic when I wake up. I smile at everyone in the house. If something is going to pull me down, it's the fact that I couldn't get into Bam's personal space. But that's okay. A good occasion doesn't come only once. Once one experiences that kind of activity, there will surely be another.

Why does that not make me seem like the leading lady...

We are having breakfast. Everyone is seated at their usual spots. Like I said, I'm in a good mood today, so I smile at everyone. It's the total opposite of everyone else on the table. I forgot that I had a bad fight with my father

yesterday. Everyone else at the dining table seems stressed and uncomfortable, especially my father.

Umm... Is Bam stressed too? Probably not? I still can't read her because she shows nothing.

"You're in such a good mood. Has something good happened?"

My stepmother asks. It makes me sit up straight and smile at her in a way I rarely do. My mask is my fake smile. Yet today, my smile is genuine. I will be myself today to celebrate a good day with a good person.

I sneak a peek at that good person sitting opposite me a bit before I reply to my stepmother.

"I got a good sleep, so I'm full of energy."

"Ah. I see you hum as you eat. Bam also has a good appetite today." My stepmother says this as she looks at Bam's plate. She eats a lot today, not her usual nibbling. That makes me smile. But the sweet-faced woman is acting too nervous. She doesn't even dare look at me after our good night together.

She's still a virgin. Geez... I haven't touched her. Why is she embarrassed? Isn't it me who should be acting that way?

"Yesterday I didn't have dinner because of the incident." Bam immediately puts her fork and spoon down. Instead of getting to finish her last bite, she was interrupted. "And I'll probably need a lot of energy today."

"Energy? Then you should eat another serving so you have all the energy you need today." I mutter as I sip my water and look at her. The sweet-faced woman still won't look at me. She also sips her water.

"I thought you got a good sleep too. I saw you walk out of Eve's room at 4 a.m."

(Cough.)

Bam choked and spat out her water. I glance at the person who said that and frown a bit.

"Did you two sleep together last night?"

"What?" I startle when I'm asked that. But my stepmother just tilts her head like everything is normal.

"Didn't Bam sleep with you last night? She came out of your room very late."

"Ah."

"Yes." Bam answers. "After the incident, I went to consult with Eve."

My father, who's kept quiet, asks curiously after Bam mentions the incident.

"What did you two consult on?"

I noticed the nervousness in his voice when he asked that. We can't pretend nothing happened. We just avoid saying it out loud, but everyone on this dining table knows what happened, including my stepmother. Yet she doesn't take it seriously. But my father knows that Bam and I take it seriously. And he's nervous because he doesn't know what we may talk about in private, especially what I may try to influence Bam to do.

Are you that afraid... Geez, dad. Maintain your composure.

Bam picks up her tissue and wipes her lips a bit before she responds. It's about what we talked about last night but ended in the heat of the moment. I tried to push it out of my head, but... she didn't.

"I think I will move out."

23. Honeymooners

Everyone goes quiet. I, who never dreamed that I would hear this, am shocked. But, in this situation, I can't really express how I feel. So I keep reaching for more food on the table as I look at Bam with interest. The person who's most shocked is my father. He stops eating and stands up. He clearly does not want to hear it.

"Move out? Where will you live? We'd come to an agreement yesterday." My father turns to my stepmother. "You said that she wouldn't move out."

"Yes."

My stepmother sits still as she replies. She's a lot calmer than I expected her to be. But I can sense turmoil within her. Bam decides to get up and invites me to go to work, saying nothing more, like the quiet person she is. She leads me out of there. I drop my fork and spoon down, raise my hands to pay respect to my father and stepmother, and follow her out. Yet we haven't stepped foot out the door when my stepmother calls her daughter.

"Bam."

Bam turns back to look at her mother without showing any emotion. However, I am aware of the struggle she is having with her good-girl nature. This is the point at which we'll find out if her naughtiness triumphs.

"Can I talk to you for a bit... Eve, may I?"

That means that she wants to talk to Bam in private. I'm smart enough to not ask any questions and walk away. But I can't stop myself from looking for a place to hide and eavesdrop. My stepmother has her arms crossed over her chest. She's not intimidating. She's even asking out of concern.

"Have you thought about where you will live?"

They have a strange mother-daughter relationship. If this was another family, they would be screaming at the top of their lungs right now. And because they don't do that, I'm having trouble trying to listen in on the conversation.

"I've researched a few places."

"Just researched? And have you thought about how you will pay for the rent and utility bills?"

"I'll figure out a way to earn some extra money. At least I'll have some income from working at the factory."

"What about when you no longer work at the factory? What will you do then?"

"I'll struggle to survive."

"You've grown up a lot." My stepmother walks to Bam and raises her hand. I'm about to dash in to protect her, but I have to stand where I am. The hand goes on the daughter's head and pats it lightly. "I ordered you to stay, but you're being stubborn."

"..."

"It's up to you, then. Please inform me of your new location. Don't just disappear."

That's all the stepmother says before she leaves. She leaves Bam standing there, frozen. I slowly show myself and walk over to be with her. The sweet-faced woman's eyes tear up. She's almost crying. But she just wipes away her tears and shakes off her sorrow.

"Let's go."

I dare not tease or annoy her because she is so quiet. We're sitting side by side on the bus. All I can do is hold her hand to show her support. Bam just glances at me a bit. But that gives me a chance to look her in the eye.

"Are you happy now?"

"What?"

"I was stubborn with my mother."

I smile. She's implying that she did that for me...

"I am, though I didn't expect to see it. Is this your first fight with your mother?"

"Ah-huh."

"You've never been stubborn with your mother before?"

"No."

"Then know what it's like to be a naughty daughter."

"You were listening, weren't you?" She gets to the point, and that makes me smile dryly at her.

"How can I not? I was a bit surprised that you two didn't yell at each other. I thought your mother would be meaner to you."

"Her being mean would be better than this." Bam says that as she looks out the window. "My mother knows my weak point well. She knows that I won't leave if she can make me feel guilty."

"Then..." I realize something and nod to myself. "Because your mother knows that you're learning to be stubborn, and if she goes against you now, you will reject her more, so she supported you in every way. And she's gotten to you."

"..."

"But since you know that, why would you feel guilty? If you let your mother's nice act get in the way of what you intend to do, you won't be able to move out."

"Give me more time. This is the first time I have disobeyed her. If I get through this, it will be easier the next time."

Being stubborn causes her a lot of pain. This won't do. I have to change the topic. I let go of her hand and pretend to browse this and that on my phone. But actually, I'm writing her an email to give her encouragement. Also to remind her of our hot night.

Dear Love.

You did great this morning. Your defiance excites me. So, after work tonight, let's drink some beers in my room.

There are many more that you must learn.

From your lover

After I clicked send, there's a swoosh! sound. And in less than ten seconds, Bam picks up her phone to read something and glances at me, blushing. I shrug and smile, as if what I wrote wasn't such a big deal.

"I don't drink beer." She speaks to no one in particular and looks another way. "Moreover... my mother saw me leave your room last night."

"Yeah. Shocking. It's lucky that we're sisters."

"I told you that some may not think that way."

"What do they think, then?" I turn to whisper softly into her ear. "They think that we did it?"

"Eve!"

Bam screamed at me to scold me. And because she was quite loud, everyone on the bus looked at us with interest. I giggle at her reaction. She's probably very embarrassed that I teased her by talking so frankly about our activity.

"You're cute even when you're angry." I poke her cheek, but she brushes my finger off. "Bambi."

"I'm older than you."

"But you're very naive on some matters. Do you want to grow up?"

"..."

"If you come to my room tonight, I'll teach you what adults do."

"Crazy."

She continues to brush my hand off annoyingly. Looking at her angry face makes me smile happily.

It seems like... she's no longer thinking about her mother.

Today, I can't stop thinking about Bam's problem. Accordingly, I can't concentrate on work at all. The sweet-faced woman is now driving the pallet truck with a stacker. She looks so cool that it turns me on. As I look at her, I unconsciously bite my lips. Why does she look good with every move she makes?

I'm probably overjoyed because we've just taken another step forward.

Last night was something new. So we're like honeymooners. And it would be better if I knew that she feels the same way. Maybe she's just keeping it in. She's good at hiding her feelings. She's good at everything, actually.

Even if it's her first time, she's still good.

All of the employees who were gossiping about celebrity infidelity suddenly worked as if they were computer-programmed. Even I, who was letting my mind wander, could feel the tension in the air. And the reason is revealed when I see my stepmother walk in for a routine inspection. She's very elegant, stern, and firm. She speaks loudly. Though she's not exercising excessive authority, she's feared by all.

Except for me.

But I shouldn't be showing it. So I just continue on with my work. My stepmother pauses to silently look at her daughter driving the pallet truck. Bam bows to her to pay respect, not revealing their relationship, and her mother walks away.

She goes to the length of coming to the factory herself today...

"Mrs. Sorn is at the factory today. Something good must be happening."

I listen in on the gossip. I don't normally mingle. This is the first time I butted in.

"How so?"

When they see that I'm interested, the gossip becomes more juicy.

"Mrs. Sorn doesn't visit often, but every time that she's here, she will hide herself in the manager's office."

"Miss Thip? So?"

"So... Miss Thip is not one to look past."

Why are they being so vague? Do I need to ask what each word means? I blink blankly, showing that I don't understand what they're saying. So they make small noises, as if they are annoyed.

"Not one to look past plus fun; what else can it be? The other day, someone from HR said that she heard some strange sounds coming out of the room."

"Strange, how?"

"Strange, like.... ahhhhh.... and the sound of the desk shaking."

This time, I look like I've seen a ghost. I look at my stepmother, not wanting to believe what I just heard. I even want to laugh out loud. What kind of gossip is this? How can two women do things that would make them go "ahhhhhh?"

Oh... that was the same sound I made last night.

When I think of that, I immediately turn to look at Bam. Her words suddenly echo in my head in repeat mode.

'And not everyone will think that it's okay for me to be in your room this late at night just because we're both women.'

"Crazy."

I mutter in my throat, not wanting to believe it. I can't sense that kind of vibe from my stepmother at all. She is so smitten with my father. She always tries to please him. And doing this at the workplace is too unprofessional.

But I can't just let it pass. It may be nothing more than rumors, but I have to file this away for future reference. Every piece of information has to go through further scientific observation and investigation. And my science is...

"Where did your mother find the detective who caught your father cheating?"

I immediately call Awe using the free VDO call feature from an application that allows us to call as far

as outside of this world. Awe looks like she's about to kill me for calling her and waking her up at 3 a.m. where she is.

[Damned. I know you're in a hurry, but can't you wait until it's morning here? I'm not getting enough sleep this period. And you not only call to wake me in the middle of the night but also bring up my father cheating on my mother.]

"I'm sorry." I apologize. I really feel guilty because it is a sensitive matter. "Can I have your mother's number? I want to hire a detective."

[But my nosiness wins over everything. Before I give you the number, you must tell me what this is all about.]

"I suspect that my stepmother is cheating."

[OMG. This is worth waking me up.]

I laugh aloud, 'HA,' at how easily she forgives me for no reason. And I get the number I want soon after, along with a threat from across the sea.

[If you don't update me, I will fly there to rip your chest open.]

After I hang up, I glance at the direction where my stepmother disappeared into the manager's room and go back to work. If the gossip is true, it will be the turning point.

It may be why my father is the way he is.

It is why Bam has to go through what she's going through.

It's all on you!

Dear Love,

I saw you drive the pallet truck with the stacker, and I feel that you are so cool. It makes me hot, and I want you to help cool me down.

Miss you,

From your lover

I have to be direct with her because she's very reserved. I have to break all her walls. It's easier now that we're intimate.

It's me who's easy. She, on the other hand, is very hard.

We kissed. We caressed. But I've never seen even her thigh. Though I'd entered her room without knocking and accidentally saw it, that was many years ago, and it was only that one time. I've never seen it again since. So it's as if I didn't see it at all. It seems more like my imagination...

The day that I will get to see or do something will come. I'm determined to make progress today. At least I will see her thighs. Just wait and see.

Dear Love,

Are there any other thoughts in your head? Naughty. Crazy.

From your lover

I scrunch my nose and sip my cool beer. I grab my phone from beside my bathtub and type back to her. Today must be better than yesterday. Otherwise, I'd feel as if she hit and ran on me. It'd be like she got me and is no longer interested in another round. I won't have it!

Dear Love,

I only think about it with you. Who else do you want me to think about it with? I'm in my bathtub. I feel like passing out from the warm water. It's

fortunate that I have a cool beer to rub on my face and revive me. It would be better if it were your touch and not the beer mug, though.

I want to scream and let out my steam, like last night.

If you don't come, I will go see you in your room. If your mother sees it, it will get out of hand.

From your lover

Will this kind of flirting work with her? I can't be more candid than this. If she doesn't come to my room, I will have to go to hers. Am I the only one who misses the other person? Don't lovers yearn for each other?

I wait around ten minutes, but the sweet-faced woman still doesn't reply to me. So I grab my phone and am about to type to her again. Yet my bathroom door suddenly opens. Bam, who's still in her uniform, stares at me from the door. She's blushing very hard and is biting her lower lip.

"I thought you wouldn't come. You didn't reply."

"I don't drink beer."

"You can smoke your e-cigarette." I put one leg on the edge of the tub. There are still bubbles covering my body, but you can still make out what's under the water. "But only after you learn your next lesson."

"Why are you like this? You're forcing me by using my mother as a threat."

I smile knowingly as I lick my lips and sip my cool beer.

"Would you have come if I didn't do that?"

"Crazy."

"You would have." I arch my back so that my breasts are above the water. "Hurry up. I can't stand it anymore... Ahhhh."

Like I said, there's no need to use her mother as a threat at all. She wanted to come and eat me, as we are in your honeymoon period.

— אורי שחף

24. Good at getting revenge

Our wet and slippery skins touch. It arouses my emotions. There are waves in the warm water that mirror the rhythm of her hands moving in and out of my body. I sit up and hug her tightly. My hips are grinding against Bam. In a whisper, she stutters at me. She's no longer scolding me. It's more of a nervous and respectful request.

"Keep your voice down..."

"Ahh... Hmm." I open my mouth and nibble her arm. It then turns into bites as my emotion rises almost to the peak of a mountain. I no longer care if I will tear her flesh out or how many red marks I'm leaving on her body. I have to reach the peak, and my bites are my way of telling her to...

"Faster."

"Harder."

"Almost."

Not long after that, after the sweet-faced woman does as I requested, I look to the ceiling and drop into the tub, out of strength. I would drown if Bam didn't support my neck. She puts her forehead against mine as she breathes exhaustingly. Her face is filled with sweat and steam. She's probably hot both inside and out. She's all wet, yet still with all her clothes on.

"Bambi."

"Huh?" She closes her eyes and responds to me without reacting to that name like she normally does. It's as if she's accepted me calling her by that name. I wrap my arms around her neck and ask, out of breath.

"Don't you want to try?"

She opens her eyes and looks right at me. There's hesitation, but she just says...

"No."

She does, but she's not brave enough to do so. I pull her in for a kiss. Our tongues exchange touches, as if we're communicating without words. My hand goes inside her shirt to touch her bare skin. She's not resisting or fighting against it. Her zero resistance makes me see good opportunities to unclothe her.

"Try."

"No... I don't want to."

I lift her shirt up and unhook her front-hook bra. Her skin is pink from soaking in warm water. The buoyancy of her skin is thanks to the warm water. Though she says no, when I nibble and lick, she lets out moans of happiness. I completely forgot what she just said.

I have to get it.

At least, I have to get something from her because I want to touch her too.

My hand slowly tries to take off her shirt. But Bam pulls it down. She doesn't want me to take it off.

"No. I won't take it off."

"Okay."

There's something I can do without having to take her clothes off. I will slowly tear down her strong wall and reveal her soft side, one bit at a time. If she won't take her clothes off, I will reach my hand into all her sensitive spots. It's surprising that she doesn't resist me. Her only golden rule is 'not taking her clothes off.'

I spin her around so that her back is toward me. I pull her in so that she leans on me. We kiss. We caress. We are crazy about each other. Our moans rhyme to make sweet music. When I sense that her body is ready, my hand slowly slips into her pants and touches her most sensitive spot. She startles.

"No. No more." It seems like the sweet-faced woman has regained her consciousness. She brushes my hand off. But I've come this far. I restrain her with my two legs and dig into her neck with my tongue, as it is the nearest accessible area.

"I'll be the one who says "no" this time. If you won't let me, I will scream so loud that your mother can hear me."

"Eve!"

I reach my hand in again and massage the area with my fingers. Bam's legs are shaking. The moistness that is coming out of her body tells me that she's ready. She's going soft. The resistance is lower. Yet she's still trying to squeeze her legs together to stop me.

"Enough. If you continue, I will not come see you again."

"Try it first."

"No."

"This is what I do when I miss you."

"..."

I try to convince her with words and action. Bam almost went under water. The sweet-faced woman's eyes wander as her jaw drops when I massage in a circle and nibble her ear gently and teasingly at the same time.

"You have no idea how long I've been obsessed with you. I have to imagine what your naked body looks like or what you sound like." I move my

fingers faster. The sweet-faced woman digs her feet into the tub as her emotions rise. "My ultimate dream is to hear your moan."

"Ahhh... No..."

"And to see you happy."

"Ahhh."

"To say I love you and I get you to the peak." I accelerate my fingers, knowing that she's almost there. Her moan is more frequent and louder, so loud that she puts her hand over her mouth. She's no longer stopping me. She even spreads her legs wider to accommodate me.

"It's good, isn't it?"

"Ahhh."

"Is it good?"

"..."

"If not, I'll stop."

I stop my hand movement like I said I would when she wouldn't give me an answer. It's like I'm teasing her. Bam seems confused. She looks at me like she wants to kill me.

"Eve!"

Her voice is shaking, filled with rage. It also seems like a plea. All of that in one word.

"I'll let you go get some sleep."

"Crazy!"

She splashes the water on us both. She looks at me as I lay back down on the tub, not looking like I'm interested in continuing what we were doing.

She then gets up, grinds her teeth, and clasps her hand into a fist.

"You're an a**

"Beg me."

"What?"

"If you beg me, I'll help you out."

She bares her teeth without saying anything. Her ego seems to be higher than her desire. When I see her get up and get ready to leave, I grab her arm and pull her back down into the tub again. I want to laugh at how cute and aggravated she is. Well, anyone would be angry at this point. I just want to see the many sides of her.

"Can't you just say... help me?"

"You want me to ask you to do this? What kind of person would it make me look like?"

"Like me."

"..."

"Please say it, Bambi. I want to feel important."

I say that as I kiss her on the shoulder. The sweet-faced woman still makes angry noises in the throat, but she willingly lays back down and kisses me back.

"Please."

"Please what?"

"I want... you."

As soon as she says that, I kiss her and start our love song again. I have to start from the beginning. Bam's emotions rise quickly because I'm helping

her. I'm not giving her very advanced lessons yet. This is only the intermediate level. I'm caressing her with my fingers and triggering her curiosity. I end it with a faster pace in the last five seconds.

Five...

Four...

Three...

Two...

One...

Boom... Everything explodes as she cries out loud without any intention of keeping it in. She lays back on me and looks at the ceiling. She's still fully dressed, but she's reached the peak. This is probably the first time that someone introduces her to a new world.

"I love you, Bambi."

I kiss her temple gently, wanting to please her. Yet the sweet-faced woman just glances at me and replies with a stern voice. She gets up quickly, so quickly that the water splashes and soaks us.

"Annoying!"

She cursed at me.

Bang!

The bathroom door is closed with force due to her anger. Once she's gone, I laugh at how angry she looks. It seems like her wall is slowly collapsing. I really hope that it will all collapse so I can see her naked self in full one day.

Including her heart.

After I finish my bath, I get up, wipe myself down, and walk out of the bathroom. I'm surprised to see Bam sleeping on her side, with her back to me, in my bed. She's wearing my pajamas, which seem to fit her perfectly.

"What's this? Are you trying to seduce me?"

"Crazy!" She screams and sits up. She looks straight at me. "I will sleep here tonight. I wouldn't know how to explain myself if I went out of your room and my mother saw me again."

I think about this afternoon when the other employees were gossiping about the manager and my stepmother. I nod a bit and walk to the closet to pick something to wear. I just drop the towel to the floor and stand, naked, as I pick something from the closet.

"Shameless."

"Huh?" I turn to look at the sarcastic one nonchalantly and tilt my head. "I have to be shy around my wife?"

"What?"

"Oh? Or husband? I can't decide. It's okay. Anything is fine. Let's leave it to the situation and our satisfaction." I shrug and hum as I slowly pick something to wear. I want to give her time to examine my naked body, and the sweet-faced woman is brave enough to not look away. That makes me glance at her and smile slightly. "What's this? You're staring at me. Do you want another round, Bambi?"

"You're such a pain in the ass. You weren't like this when you were younger."

"You have no idea what I was like." I glance at the body pillow next to her and suddenly feel embarrassed. I quickly turn around to grab something to wear because I no longer want to stand here and choose.

"What is it? You were so shameless a minute ago; why are you suddenly in such a hurry to put something on now?"

"You want me to do it slowly?"

"No. I'm just surprised." She says that with a nasal tone of voice and scrunches her face cutely. "It's like you just thought of something."

She's a very good observer. I ignore her comment and jump onto the bed to sit next to her. I quickly steal a kiss on the cheek and hug her as if I'm asking for tenderness. Yet, she just pushes me away.

"Don't ask for tenderness from me."

"You're still angry? I was just teasing you. It's not like you didn't reach your climax."

"Eve!"

"Bambi."

"Stop calling me that."

"You were okay when I did it in the bathroom."

Teasing her so she shows some emotions of a young lady always makes me happy. She's normally so calm and quiet. It's like she keeps so much inside and refuses to say it out loud. The good thing is that she doesn't speak so much that it's annoying. But the bad thing is that I never get to know what I want to know. I'm the 'I have to know' type. I want to win. And I'm like this only when it involves her.

Please open up to me. I'm crazy in love with you, Bambi.

"I don't like it when you open your mouth. It makes me furious."

"You're cute when you're furious."

She gets off the bed and goes to smoke her e- cigarette on the balcony. I'm about to follow her, but she waves her hand to stop me.

"Don't come annoy me more. I want to calm down."

"I don't want you to be calm. I feel special when I see you get hot when we're together."

I grabbed the e-cigarette from her. I want to make her angry again, but she just lets me hold on to it calmly. She doesn't stop me. She just looks at me and smiles from the corner of her mouth, daring me to take a drag. And again, I cough. She knows that I would, but let me do it as if she's getting back at me.

She's so cute, even when she's getting back at me. Does she know how madly in love I am with her?

"(Cough.)" I cough harder and have to hit my chest because I choked. Bam is looking at me worriedly. She rubs my back slowly.

"How are you? Do you want some water?"

"Are you worried about me?"

I was really coughing at first, but later on it was more acting. She looks at me knowingly and takes the e-cigarette back. But I take it back and smoke it casually.

"It's not that hard. I only coughed the first time, but I can smoke now."

"Don't. I don't want you to become addicted to it."

"Like me?"

"What?"

"Are you addicted to me like you're addicted to cigarettes?"

I immediately kiss her and exhale the cigarette smoke into her mouth after I finish saying that. The sweet-faced woman tries to get away, but I'm being stubborn like a little kid. I'm exactly like those boys in kindergarten who will try to annoy the girls they like the more they like them to get their attention. But I'm lucky that the girl I annoy also likes me, so it turns out well. She stops trying to get away and kisses me back instead. Our hands

are moving on each other's bodies. We drag each other into the room. This time, she's in control. She pushes me onto the bed and gets on top of me.

"I will do what you did to me in the bathroom."

"Oh. You're still frustrated about that? I thought you'd be over it by now. In the end, I took you to the peak of the mountain."

"I will make you want to get there, but you can't reach the peak, just like me."

"You're very naive when it comes to these things. It will take time... Ops." The sweet-faced woman pulls my pants off and lifts my knees up, putting my feet on the bed. She bends down to lick, suck, and nibble until I gasp. She's a very fast learner. The position she's arranging surprises me because I've never taught her these lessons. I dig my fingers into her hair and ask her as I breathe heavily.

"Where did you learn this?"

"Do you think that you're the best teacher in the world? There is a lot of stuff I can learn from the internet."

"Wow. Bambi watched porn for me. I'm impressed... Ahh." I moan as she again uses her mouth on me. Her tongue is sweeping in circles. My emotions are rising. I press my hips against her mouth as I press her shoulder so that she goes lower.

The less she can breathe freely, the better.

The more she can come inside of me, the better.

Her fingers slowly come in the same way I taught her. She moves them in and out slowly. She looks at how wet and slippery I am.

"Faster, I... Ahhh."

She accelerates, as I requested. I progress from halfway up the mountain to almost at the top. But just as I'm about to place my flag at the peak, I'm

dragged down to the bottom of a cliff when she pulls her fingers out and gets up.

"What are you doing? Come back!"

Not only does she smile at me annoyingly, but she also licks her fingers to tease me and winks.

"I'm getting my revenge. Good night."

She lays down in bed next to me and rolls over to the edge, sleeping with her back to me. She snores at me no matter how much I poke, request, beg, or snuggle her. I know she's just pretending to be sleeping.

She's such a badass. So annoying!!!

Summary

25. Single

"The food tastes terrible today."

I glance at the housekeeper who's responsible for it. Actually, I don't care that much about the taste. I'm just so frustrated and wound up that I want to scream. I also want the person sitting opposite me to know that her revenge is taking a toll on everyone.

I just teased her a little. Does she have to go this far? I was left hanging. There was no reconciliation or help. And for me to help myself with her lying right next to me was too embarrassing. Finally, I have some shame left in me.

As for Bam, she's still not expressing herself, but I can tell that she's happy to act normally in order to aggravate me and make me more frustrated. She finishes her plate, which she rarely does. She wipes her mouth and puts down her fork and spoon to indicate that she's full.

"Have you found a new place to live?"

My stepmother initiates a conversation. Bam replies to her flatly.

"I'm looking for one. I will let you know soon."

"Do you really have to move out? If I don't.... don't..." My father is trying to convince her not to move out again, but he's stuttering. It's probably because he's ashamed to say what he was about to say. So he just goes quiet instead.

"I do. I will have to move out one day. I can't just stay here with you forever."

"True." My stepmother interrupts to stop my father from saying more. "Are you going to rent the place? Find a good place to stay. Condos are not safe these days. We don't know who lives there."

"Okay."

"Let me know once you find a place."

We end the conversation there. Bam and I leave home to take the bus to work as usual. Though I'm still frustrated, when it's about her moving out. I can't help but offer my help.

"I'll help you look for a safe, clean, and not too expensive place."

"Haha."

"Why are you laughing?"

"Cute."

My eyes are wide open. I'm surprised that she suddenly laughs and compliments me. Yet it makes me even more frustrated. It's like she's mocking me about last night. Wait until it's my turn. Geez

"You're being an as..." I lower my voice at the end because it's a bit too rude. She's still older than me. Bam, who rarely laughs, smiles at me.

"Do you understand how frustrating it is now?"

"I just realized that you hold such a grudge. Why don't you do to your mother at least half of what you did to me?"

"I've never done that kind of thing with my mother."

"Stop trying to annoy me." She knows that I'm only making a comparison. She's laughing even harder than before. All my anger dissipates when I see her like this. I can only sigh. "I give up."

"You give up so easily. You should be angry a bit longer. You're so cute when you're angry."

"You like for people to be angry with you? Crazy." I steal her word and cross my arms across my chest.

"You always annoy me. It feels great to be able to do the same to you. You've introduced me to my dark side."

"I hope it's really dark."

"We closed the light when we did it."

"You are such..." I said that, feeling a bit annoyed. But I can't help but feel that it's funny too. "If I had reached the peak last night, I would have complimented that you're a great student and a very fast learner. But I give you 0 points now because you're annoying."

"I won't do that to you again next time."

I glance at her smilingly and wink once.

"So there will be a next time. You've fallen into my trap."

"Who's the one trapped?"

"Let's wait and see."

"Someone who likes it as much as you can't be patient."

"You know nothing. Most of the people I've been with crawl to me on their knees. You'll be the next one to beg for it because you lose patience."

"We'll see."

Work goes on as usual. I start to get along better with my coworkers. I lunch with them and get to know their backgrounds. Some are unable to attend school because their families cannot support them, so they must do labor work for a low wage. Some are so committed to furthering their

education that they attend classes at night, despite the fact that they are already tired from their day job. Life is not easy, yet they look happy and content. What they make in a month, I blow through in less than three days. I'm feeling ashamed.

"Let's go eat BBQ-grilled pork today."

Auey, one of the employees, invites everyone now that we are getting along well. I can't say no because I don't want to be a black sheep. Moreover, she invited me because she feels closer to me. Bam also doesn't seem to have any problem with it. She doesn't seem to want to go home that much. So I agree with everyone. After work, all seven of us go together as planned. I step out to talk on the phone with Awe about the detective I hired.

"Are you sure this detective is good?"

[Of course. My father's mistress is gone with the wind.]

"The price is f***ing high." I curse. This is my first month at work. I still don't know where to find the money to pay for it. I may have to withdraw cash from my credit card and have my father pay the bill. "A detective makes this much money?"

[They have to risk their lives. They have to put in a lot of effort to get what the clients ask for. Come on. Just pay up. You can throw it into your father's face and kick your stepmother out. She's such an a**. By the way... if the stepmother leaves, the stepdaughter has to leave too, right? You two are already intimate. Would it really be okay? It would be doing yourself an injury.]

"Bam is moving out soon anyway. We're looking for a place for her. We have no idea what my father will do next."

[Why does your obstacle have to be your father? Though a third person is a common obstacle, it is not a father.]

"And to fight my father about this is so stressful. I don't want to say what he's doing out loud. Now that we're on this topic, do you have a condo for

rent?"

[Yes.]

"Damn you. You just let me keep talking. Why didn't you say something so I could rent yours?"

[I was afraid that you would ask to use it for free, so I didn't offer. But if you want to rent it, I will tell my mom and show you the place myself.]

"How could you?"

[I'm back.]

"What the f****!"

I exclaim when my friend reveals the truth. I assumed Awe was still studying abroad because she was the last time we spoke. How could she come back without telling me and just reveal it when we're about to hang up? If I'm not to exclaim and curse at her, what am I to do?

[Why did you have to curse at me? Aren't you happy that I'm back? What kind of friend are you?]

"I'm your kind of friend. Why didn't you tell me that you're back? Why did we have to chat?"

[Because I'm good at typing. I use my computer. Let's just say I'll take care of the room for you.]

"Before you do that, slide your face on the floor to come see me first."

[Why should I? Have you changed your face?]

"You don't miss me at all, do you? Idiot."

[Kidding! I miss you badly, but I have jetlag. I just got here yesterday and woke up to talk to you. Let's meet tomorrow. I'll show you my room. Bring your wife along.]

"How rude? I'm hanging up."

I return to the table and join the BBQ-grilled pork party. Everyone is talking about the manager's affair colorfully. I'm a bit uncomfortable because the person in the conversation is my stepmother and Bam's mother. Yet the daughter is laughing merrily, like it's all good. She chimes in on the conversation as if the woman being discussed is not her mother.

"Everyone is in a relationship with a woman these days." One of my coworkers makes an observation. "And everyone thinks it's normal too. Why?"

"It's probably because BL series are very popular at the moment. If we think men being in a relationship together is cute, it's the same for women." Auey says this with a dreamy face. "I really like watching those BL series; they're so cute."

"It would be good if there were also GL series. I want to see women kiss."

Bam joins in on the conversation. I smile from the corner of my mouth and can't help but tease her.

"You like to watch women kiss?"

"I don't dislike it. It's beautiful. Don't you think so?"

"If you like to watch, do you like to do it too?"

I say this as I poke her with my leg under the table. She's sitting opposite me. The sweet-faced woman squints at me and kicks me back.

"Ouch. I'm having goosebumps. Women kissing?" One of us, who is completely straight, says this and acts all shaky about it. "How would it feel?"

"It would feel the same as men kissing. Don't be close-minded." Auey throws vegetables from a plate at her. "It's love. It's beautiful. Why are you getting chills over the preferences of others?"

"How would they do it? It's like putting two sockets together; how can it spark?"

"We can make fire by rubbing two stones together..." Bam says this as she grills the pork on the BBQ grill pan. "Would nothing at all happen if we rubbed two sockets together?"

"Good comparison." Auey compliments from the heart while I nod in agreement. "By the way, we've been talking for a while now; can I ask if you have a lover yet?"

"Huh?" Bam looks like she sees a ghost when Auey suddenly changes the topic.

"Someone asked me to ask you this."

"Who?" I interrupt, not sounding happy. But Auey doesn't seem to notice it, so she goes on casually.

"Someone from the product department was at the factory today and saw you driving the pallet truck. He asked me to find out and tell him. Where did you think I got the money to treat you all to BBQ-grilled pork today?"

"You were paid?" One of the coworkers asks excitedly. "How much?"

"1,000 Baht. And he said that if I get him Bam's number, he will give me another 1,000 Baht. But I'm an honest person, and I don't want to be a bad person. If Bam already has someone, I will tell him to leave her alone. So? Do you have a lover yet?"

Bam glances at me before she replies as she puts her chin on her hand. It makes her look both cute and naughty.

"Guess."

"What would I get if I guessed right?" I climb up her leg under the table with my leg again. The sweet- faced woman kicks my leg out again and uses her leg to climb up mine instead. She is smiling seductively at me.

"Anything you want."

She's seducing me. Our ongoing competition about who will be the one who loses patience first pops up in my head. I'm frustrated that I challenged her on that. I have low patience on this matter. I should know that more than anyone. Why did I challenge her? It's all because I was frustrated because I was left hanging last night.

"You already have a lover."

Auey replies before I can. So I can only shut my mouth and go quiet. Bam seems frustrated that the person who answered was not me. It's not the trap that she laid. I smile from the corner of my mouth because Bam doesn't get what she wants. On the other hand, I'm curious as to whether or not, if I answer correctly, she'll grant my request.

"The answer is..."

"..."

"..."

Everyone stops eating and looks at her like they are waiting for the lotto result. Bam tilts her head, looking all cute, and replies merrily.

"No."

Gasp!

When she says that, I feel like I received an electric shock. Suddenly, the pork in my mouth doesn't taste good. She tells others that she doesn't have a lover. So who am I? Who's this person who wrote emails to her saying 'Dear Love' and 'From your lover' every day?

"I'm not feeling well..." I get up, grab my stuff, and swing it on my shoulder. "Let me excuse myself."

"Oh. Are you okay? You were fine a minute ago."

Bam gets up and walks after me. She grabs my hand, and I'm the one to shake her off this time. I'm feeling bad because of her answer.

"Wait for me. Are you going to leave me here alone?"

"You're probably having fun with your friends. Go back to eat."

"How can I have fun without you? No. I'll go with you."

"..."

"Are you angry because of my answer?"

"Yes."

That's all I say before I walk away and hail a cab. Bam, who said she would come with me, just stands there looking as I leave. I wipe my tears off my face as I sit in the taxi.

"Where to?"

"Ah... I haven't told you? To..."

Damned. I've never been this sensitive before in my life. I guess love is not always beautiful. There's also pain that pierces your heart. And it seems like I'm not ready to handle it. This is the first time that I've been hurt by love. So this is what it's like to be heartbroken.

I arrive home in around 30 minutes. I ran to my room without talking to anyone. Bam arrives soon after in a taxi, just like me. She doesn't come knocking on my door to try to reconcile with me. Or, to be exact, she doesn't do anything.

Does she love or like me at all? Why am I the only one who approaches and pursues her?

If someone were to ask me whether I already have a lover, I would not be at all ashamed to tell them that I do. I will gladly and proudly point my finger

at her. But when it's the other way around, she says that she doesn't have one. I don't know where I stand at this point.

I'm worthless. I'm dispensable.

Ding!

There's an email notification on the phone. I glanced at it for a while, expecting the email to be from her. But if it's not, I will only hurt more. So in the end, I choose not to open it as well as turn my back on it.

Ding.

There's another email. My heart is racing, but I still don't think that it's from her. Because Bam is not someone to write to me first. She never makes a move unless I do first,

Ding.

The more emails that come in, the more my heart races. I want to pick up the phone, but I'm afraid of disappointment. I pace around beside my bed, looking at the phone that is lying on my bed face down, as if it's a hot potato. And there's a knock on the door not more than five minutes after that. I look over to where the sound comes from, scared. I'm not afraid that it's her knocking on the door. I'm afraid that....

It's not her.

"Who is it?"

"..."

"I asked, "Who is it?" It's late."

"It's me."

When I hear that, I buy myself some time by counting from one to ten, so it doesn't appear that I'm waiting for her. When I reach ten, I open the door to find her standing in front of my room with her eyes all red. Bam darts

inside, as if she is afraid I will slam the door in her face. I have to get out of her way.

"Close and lock the door."

Her voice is shaking, as if she's about to cry. I'm surprised by her action. But, to be a little rebellious, I just close the door without locking it. I then ask her with a flat voice.

"What is it?"

"I told you to lock the door."

She walks over to lock the door and leans on it, like she's afraid that someone will come in. Or maybe she's afraid that I will unlock the door. Her sad look almost made me dash in to hug and console her. So when you love someone more than yourself, you're like a slave who's always at her beck and call like this.

"Say what you have to say. We won't get anywhere if you just stand there."

"What's the matter with you?"

I stare at her, furious. She asked that, knowing well what's going on. This makes me want to annoy her because I'm still angry, despite the fact that I can see she's about to cry.

"Have a guess."

She bites her lips tightly. Me asking her back like that probably caused her pain. Because I like her a lot, I feel guilty. I almost dashed in to console her. But I'm still trying to keep my cool, so I just stand with my arms crossed and look away.

"If I guess right, what would I get?"

That makes me turn back to stare at her, looking like I want to kill her.

"I'm not like you, who will give you whatever you want if you guess right."

"Why didn't you read my emails?"

"There's no point in reading them. Dear Love, this and Dear Love, that, but I'm not even your lover."

"You should listen to my reasons first. I explained them in the emails."

"I don't want to listen to your explanation. I don't want to read anything. I feel like I'm invisible. I have no place to stand. You're ashamed to tell people that you have a lover. You're ashamed of me!"

"No!"

"If not, then why did you give that answer? You're not serious about us, are you? That's probably so. I'm just a step sister who happens to live in the same house as you, which can occasionally provide you with pleasure and excitement. When a guy asks for your number, you can't help but exercise your charm and check your rating. When you said you don't have a lover, it numbed me. Who is the person sitting there who sends you flirtatious and seductive emails every day because she is head over heels in love with you? It's so stupid. A stupid fool!"

The more I talk, the more angry I become. I try not to say the word "love." But I've had enough. I feel defeated and worthless. I'm like a stupid fool who loves her one-sidedly. And from what I've observed, that's how it is. People would normally approach me, but I turned them all down because I don't like anyone. Because no one is like her. I kept imagining that everyone was her, but they are not her. Now that I've met her again and have the opportunity to love and be intimate with her, she treats me like an object and invisible air. How can I not be angry?

"You won't even listen to my reasons? You suddenly hailed a taxi home. I wanted you to answer me, but Auey answered first. If she was right, I had to give her what she wanted."

"Don't give me that excuse. You never think anything of me. You seduce me every day, and it works. I'm obsessed and crazy in love with you. I'm not

ashamed to tell everyone that I love you. I told my best friend that you're important to me. But you made me realize who I am to you."

"..."

"You never really opened up to me. Even when we do it, you won't take off your clothes. You never reveal yourself. You just want pleasure. I let you see every part of me. I let you see when I'm happy, mad, and annoying. Name one thing I don't tell you or am not open with you. There's none. I can't take this anymore. I'm tired. Leave."

"..."

"Leave!"

I turn my back to her and hug myself tightly. I'm so afraid that I'll go soft on her. My tough act is to show her that I won't let something like this happen ever again.

We both go quiet. I don't hear the sound of the door opening. So I have to repeat myself.

"I chase you away like this, and you're still not go..."

Thud.

I'm hugged from behind. She puts her forehead on my shoulder, as if she needs support. I immediately go soft when she does that. I try to push her off, but she resists. She forces me to turn to her. She takes her pants off and only has her underwear left on her, while the top part is still fully dressed.

"I'm not hiding things from you. If doing this will make you forgive me, then please... forgive me."

"Bam..."

"I told Auey that I don't have a lover because I don't want to give her my number. If that makes you feel bad, I will tell her tomorrow that I already have a lover. I care about you."

She's crying hard. I've never seen her this sensitive before. I was going to act tough, but I'm now cradling her face and wiping her tears for her as I sigh.

"You're always like this. Can't you let me be mad at you for a bit longer?"

"Can't you not be mad at me? I'm addicted to you."

This is probably the bravest confession she's ever made. I slowly smile at her and hug her tightly and lovingly. I feel guilty for making her cry like this.

"Damned. Please know that I love you more than you could ever imagine."

She hugs me back. We part a bit before we reconcile with kisses. I start as usual. I slowly slip my hand into her shirt and arouse her.

"I eventually lost our challenge this morning. I really do like this activity."

I say that as I slowly kneel down and roll her underwear to her ankles. I've gotten a glimpse of her sensitive spot, but this will be the first time that I get to see it clearly. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. It's more beautiful than any other I've ever seen. So much so that I can't help but use my mouth and force her to put her leg over my shoulder. Bam seems to have a difficult time balancing herself, so she slowly backs her way to lean on the door. She grabs my hair gently, liking what I'm serving her.

"I'm the one who lost."

"..."

"I yearn for your touch every day."

26. Badass gang

I smile in the dark as I lay in bed and look at Bam smoke her e-cigarette. She always smokes after we're finished. I don't think it's a bad thing. However, she always scolds me when I want to do it too. I was only allowed to do it once because she wanted to see me choke and laugh at me. After that one time, she goes back to scolding me every time I want to smoke too.

Fighting doesn't have to always end in bed. But in this fight, she wanted to tear down her wall, even though it was only one piece. It's an important piece, but why... why wouldn't she take off her shirt? What's underneath it? Before I went to study abroad, I walked in on her when she was naked and knew that she had a tattoo there. But she never talks about it. She even prohibits me from doing so.

What's the tattoo...

"I think I may have found a room for you."

Bam thought I was already asleep. She gives me a surprised look and tries to wave the smoke away because she doesn't want me to inhale it.

"You're not asleep yet?"

"I never dare sleep when I'm with you."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid that you would disappear." I lean on my elbow and crawl up her arm with my fingers. "But what surprised me is that you're afraid that I would disappear too."

"You're babbling. Crazy. Go to sleep."

"Do you care about me that much?" I ask, full of myself. Bam glances at me and goes back to smoking. She's so reserved. None of her emotions are on display. It's the opposite of when she was trying to reconcile with me.

"Can't you say it to make me happy?"

"I'm not a talker. Actions speak louder than words for me."

"And I've seen how loud your acts are."

"Why are you still talking?" She can't help but reach her hand over to pinch me. I scream a little and tickle her waist. She struggles to get away and laughs nonstop. I'm on a roll, so I climb on her and tickle her all over. All she can do is wave her hand like a white flag.

"Stop. I'm tired from laughing too hard. Don't tickle me."

"I love you."

I suddenly confessed to her in an attempt to catch her off guard. She stops laughing and looks me in the eye. She doesn't say anything. She just looked into my eyes.

"Why don't you ever say you love me back when I confess to you?"

"Like I said, I prefer to act than to speak."

"And is what you're doing an act of love?"

"It depends on how you interpret it. What do you think?"

"You love me."

"Are you sure that I make you feel that way?"

"I'm not. But I will think in favor of myself. There will be a day..." I lean into her and snuggle her neck. My emotions are rising again. In this next lesson, she will learn how it feels when someone is inside her. "One day,

you will feel so much that you have to do something to show me that... you love me."

My finger slowly slipped into her body. The sweet-faced woman immediately tenses up and digs her nails into my naked shoulder to indicate that it hurts. I bite and whisper into her ear to console her.

"It's okay. You will feel better... You will feel good the same way I do when you do it for me."

I move my finger slowly. Her body is adjusting to this new touch. She gradually lets go of my shoulder. There is a long moan, as if I've found her favorite spot. So I focus on that spot and move faster when I sense that she's ready.

"Crazy."

"..."

"You're making me addicted to sex."

She arches her back when she reaches the peak. She covers her mouth with her hand because she's afraid that she will be too loud. I kiss her on the temple to console her. I then rub my nose against hers teasingly.

"You're not addicted to sex... You're addicted to me."

My appointment with Awe is at 3 p.m. My friend said she needed time to get dressed. So right now, I'm just waiting for the time because it's Saturday and we don't have to go to work. I intend to go swimming to exercise for a bit, so I walk over to ask if the sweet-faced woman wants to join me. But as I'm about to knock on her door, I hear my father and stepmother fight about Bam moving out.

"If she wants to move out, what can I do? She's all grown up now."

"You can stop her. You're her mother!" My father is walking back and forth, frustrated. I guess he knows that we are going to see the room today. "If she moves out, there's no reason for you to be here."

Gasp...

I swallow hard when I hear my father say that. I thought their relationship was in a good place. They've never fought. At most, they would argue quietly, like well-educated people, rather than shouting for all to hear. And of course, I'm not the only one to hear it. Bam does too.

"Wait here. Don't go down."

"Bam..."

"I'll fix this."

Bam looks at me as if she's serious about this. So I can only stand quietly in a hidden corner near the upper stairs as I watch her walk down to confront the two, who are fighting loudly.

"Uncle."

When my father hears Bam's voice, he goes from being angry to a kind person. He tries to smile to uplift the mood.

"When did you come down?"

"Just now. But I heard everything." Barn puts her hands in her pants pockets and sighs. "I don't want to have to say this because I don't want us all to be embarrassed, but I think it's time I handled it once and for all. For me... I hold you in high regard as a father figure. The reason I never called you father is because I don't want Eve to feel that I'm taking your love from her."

"..."

"In other words, I don't really want to be her sister."

I'm not sure if that's a hint, but I take that as, 'She thinks of me more than just a sister.' Maybe she's giving a hint to her stepmother. Or maybe her stepmother already knows this. The only person who's in the dark is my father.

"But me calling you uncle doesn't mean that I can go from a stepdaughter to replace my mother. I believe you have a better education and morale than most people, so you wouldn't go too far. But from what's happened, I can see that you can't help yourself."

"Bam... since you know how I feel, why..."

"Because my mother is your wife."

"A wife who never takes care of me, how can you call that a wife?"

"But a stepdaughter who takes care of you can't become your wife and replace her mother. There's a moral standard we have to live by. I can't do that. Even if you aren't embarrassed for the people in this house to know, you should still be ashamed of yourself. I can't be more indirect than this." Bam stares at her mother. "Mother. I know that you're using me so that you can continue to live here. But he's chasing you away like this; what do you want to do next? Will you move out or stay here and let him continue to abuse me?"

It's unnerving how forthright she is. She never says anything. She generally only nods when we talk at the dining table. But now she's the one doing the bulk of the talking and offering her mom the option of staying put or moving out with her.

"What abuse? That's not a nice thing to say. Apologize to your uncle."

And that's the answer from my stepmother. She chooses to tell Bam to apologize to the person who is abusing her. Everything goes quiet. Bam stares at her mother and turns to raise her hands to apologize to my father without any resistance.

"I apologize for saying too much. Let's just say that it was a scene from a TV series."

That's too simple! I'm about to dash down, but Bam stares at me from downstairs, as if she's saying. 'Do not come down no matter what.' So all I can do is stop myself. When my father sees that Bam goes along with her

mother, he immediately laughs it off and pats his stepdaughter on the shoulder.

"It's okay. If you say it's a scene from a TV series, then that's what I'll think it is. I'm okay."

"So will you let my mother stay here?"

"If you won't move out."

"That's up to you."

"I'm okay with that!"

My father laughs merrily. Bam excuses herself and walks up the stairs to go to her room. Of course, I follow her. I'm furious that that was all she did to fight for herself.

"You! My father gave you the opportunity to move out."

"You heard it. My mother won't move out."

"Are you two Siamese twins?"

"I don't think my mother is ready to move out just yet."

"Your mother has someone. She has a place to go."

"I don't think she's ready. Isn't it good? I get to stay here with you. We can make out every night. You should like it." She pulls me in for a kiss, but I push her away. I know she's trying to change the subject. This is not like her. "What is this? You're making me lose my confidence."

"I can tell that you're angry. You never do this. You're trying to distract yourself with sex."

"Can't you do that for me?"

"..."

"If you know that I'm trying to distract myself, can't you go along?"

This is the first time she has asked me for something. She's making me go soft, though I'm really angry with her.

"I really like doing it with you. But it's not like that's the only thing I want to do with you. I want to share your happiness and pain. You don't talk much. You never share anything. I don't know what you really want or what you're hiding. You won't even take off your shirt and let me see your tattoo."

"Listening to you talk about me like this makes me seem so mysterious. But there's no need for me to take my clothes off when we do it, no? You could do it last night with my clothes on."

"You're changing the topic again."

"Come on... please help me lower my stress."

"Not now. I have an appointment with my friend at 3 p.m. She will show us the room. Now what? You're not moving out anymore?"

"Just for this period. Moreover... you're not the only one who tried to look for a room. I also contacted someone. I intend to go see her place after yours. I have to cancel her too."

"Who?"

The sweet-faced woman goes quiet for a bit, like she just thought of something. And not long after that, she picks up her phone to call someone and waits for that person to pick up.

"Ann. I can't go see your room anymore today. Something came up at home. It will be a long time before I can move out. I'm sorry... I really feel bad about this. Is it okay if I invite you here for a meal? It's great that you're free... Do you want to swim? There's a pool here. You like to swim, I remember."

I'm surprised to hear the name Ann. I didn't think she would choose her. But then again, she's probably Bam's only friend.

"Ah-huh. See you this evening. I'll wait for you."

Bam hangs up the phone and sighs.

"You have to apologize when you miss an appointment. Have you apologized to your friend since we can't go see the room anymore?"

"I'll have to tell her... Since you invited Ann over, I'll invite Awe too. The more, the merrier."

"Ah-huh. Maybe it will make us feel better."

I don't know how things turn out this way. At first, the plan is to go see the new rooms for Bam to move into. But it turns out that not only is Bam not moving out, but we also invited the owners of the rooms we were going to see over to our home. We are treating them to a meal as an apology. My kind stepmother ordered food from famous restaurants to treat us to a poolside party. She lets us mingle freely by the pool. Ann took a tour of the house and praised it nonstop.

"Why would you move out of this palace? But I understand. Everyone wants personal space. You can't be with your mother forever... Why did you want to move out?"

This is a very difficult question to answer. Awe knows what's going on well, so she gives a vague response in our place.

"A tight space is okay, but a tight situation is hard to bear."

"How tight must it be to want to move out of this palace?"

"If you like it so much, why don't you move in?" Bam says this as she sips her beer, which she told me she doesn't drink. I look at her worriedly. I can sense that she's been in a bad mood since early afternoon. But she's still

Bam, who never expresses herself openly. Only those who are close to her can tell.

"Bam." Awe, who hasn't talked much, looks at her dreamily. "Please do it with me."

Bam almost spit out her beer when my friend made that request. She then laughs at how naughty Awe is. It is above my level, which she already thinks is high.

"What is this? I don't know how to react."

"I thought you were beautiful when we were younger, but you're at the top of the pyramid now that we're older. No wonder Eve did it with the body pillow. Who can blame her? I would do it with a light pole if you asked me to, I promise."

"Body pillow?"

"Damn you, Awe!!!"

I kick my friend so hard that she nearly falls out of her chair. But she's very good at balancing herself.

"That hurts. Why did you kick me?"

"What did you just say?"

"Haha... no wonder..." Bam glances at me and smiles. She continues on to sip her beer. Ann, who was walking around the pool, returns and joins in on the conversation.

"Can I tour your place? I love it. I'd never been to the home of a wealthy person before. Would you mind, Eve?"

"Do you want me to show you around?"

Bam grabs my wrist to stop me immediately. Ann smiles knowingly from the corner of her mouth when she sees that.

"It's okay. I can stroll around by myself. I won't trip and fall. Make yourself comfortable."

Shouldn't that be something I, the owner of this house, say? After she walks off, Awe whispers to me like someone who has been waiting to gossip.

"I think this Ann person is strange. It's not that I don't like her or anything, but she has this aura...that only someone as naughty as me can sense. And I sense it strongly."

"She's very open, like you." Bam replies casually. The alcohol in her body is making her less careful with her words. "More open than I can describe. No one is as open as Ann. But I like her."

"I also like you."

"Stop it." I scolded my friend to stop flirting with Bam. Awe makes a sound in her throat and changes to talk about Bam not moving out. "Since we're talking, Bam... I know everything because I'm Eve's best friend. So tell me the truth: why aren't you moving out, knowing how dangerous it is here?"

I'm about to smack my friend on the head, but Bam shrugs as though she's okay with it.

"If I leave, my mother won't have a place to stay. So I'll stay like this. Whatever will be, will be."

"No. We can't let it be." I object loudly. "You love your mother too much. We can find her a place to live elsewhere."

"Don't you love your father?"

"If my father is wrong, I have to fight him. I can't let him do anything to you."

"What if you have to choose between your father and me? Who will you choose?"

"Huh..."

Bam leans in on me. I can smell beer in her mouth. She asks me again.

"If you have to choose between the person who gave birth to you and me, the person you're crazy in love with, who will you choose?"

Even Awe goes quiet as she waits for my answer. Of course, I shouldn't have to choose between them. It's not that I can't choose, but I don't want to. I don't want to lose either one of them. But if it really comes down to it, I will have to choose my father... one who loves me more than anyone else. Bam didn't do anything wrong, of course.

"You have an answer. Me too... If I have to choose between my mother and you, I choose my mother."

"Though you may be abused one day?"

"That day won't come."

"How can you be sure?"

"I'll make sure of that."

This is the first time I have seen Bam this drunk. Her mother has to come and help me support her. We managed to lay her on her bed in her room. My stepmother seems stressed. Her mother is exactly like her; she's also very reserved. She only communicates through her eyes. She goes to grab a wet towel to rub Bam down, but Bam pushes her hand away.

"Don't take off my clothes. I will sleep like this."

"How can you? You smell like beer. It's dirty."

"Can't you let me have my way just this once?"

"..."

"I won't move out because of you. I just ask that you not rub me down. Can't I have that?" The complaint stuns her mother. "Let Eve stay. I'm more comfortable with Eve."

My stepmother looks at me for a bit and nods as she hands me the towel.

"Please help rub her down for me. She's probably really drunk. She's never been this stubborn before."

"I would be too if I were her. She gets nothing from being a good girl."

"..."

I make a sarcastic remark. My stepmother finally leaves the room, so there's only Bam and me left. Awe had already gone home since 10 p.m. because she felt dizzy. I rub Bam's face with the towel. I look at her pitifully and feel a bit annoyed. She dared be naughty to her mother just now, but when it's something important, she doesn't dare.

"You don't need to rub me down. I'll sleep like this."

"You're just afraid that I will take your clothes off. What's so terrifying about that?"

"I've already taken my clothes off in front of you. What more do you want?"

"I want you. But you're too drunk for me to do that today." I say that as I laugh. I just want to tease her. "That's too bad."

"Why is it too bad? I didn't say you couldn't do it."

She never talks like this. She never flirts or invites me without my initiating it. Because of alcohol, I get to see another side of her. Though I feel it's a bit odd, it's still cute.

"No. If I stay in your room for too long, your mother will be suspicious."

"Why are you suddenly so afraid? Are you going back to your body pillow? Haha."

She laughs merrily, and that makes me blush so hard I can feel it. So I stop rubbing her down and get ready to leave. Yet she grabs my wrist and pulls

me so hard that I fall down onto her bed. The towel and bowl of water fall, spilling water all over the floor, but the sweet-faced woman is unconcerned.

"You really want to do this? You're very drunk."

"Ah-huh. It's better when I'm drunk. And I'm sure I'm better than your body pillow."

"I think I better lock the door first."

"Isn't it exciting like this?"

"Who are you?"

"Haha."

She laughs and bends down to kiss me so that I can't argue anymore. I want to push her away, but I see no reason to say no. I may be worried about the water on the floor or the unlocked door, but never mind. I've always been carefree. If she wants it, I can only comply because she always lets me do it when I want to. So, it's only fair that I comply when she wants to.

Today, the pace is quicker than ever. Our pants are off, while our top parts are still fully dressed. She bites my neck so hard that I cry out. But it also arouses me. Bam separates my legs in a position I've never attempted before. She slowly rubs her sensitive spot into mine. The moistness creates a sound that makes my emotions run high. I can't help but let out long, deep moans, but I try to keep it down by covering my mouth with my hand. Bam, however, lets it all out. She cries out, not fearing that others will hear us. It's like she wants the entire world to know how happy she is.

She's hot.

She's aroused.

"You... it's too loud. Ahh." I try to stop her, but I can barely keep my voice down myself. "Someone will hear us."

As soon as I finish saying that, the door is opened. My stepmother is looking at us from the door, shocked. She looks awkward as she turns her face away. Aside from my stepmother, my father and Ann are also there. I push Bam away and cover my bottom half with the blanket. Bam slowly moves to find something to cover herself up with too.

"Why don't you knock before you open the door?"

That's what Bam says to everyone, especially her mother, who opened the door. She doesn't seem surprised. It's as if she intended for it to happen. My father slowly steps back, out of strength, and falls to the floor.

"You two... what the hell are you doing?"

Those were his last words before he fainted.

Summary

27. Pawn

My father was immediately taken to the hospital. It's lucky that he just fainted, and it was nothing related to his heart condition. However, I still feel guilty about being the cause and worry a lot that my father fell like that. After my father was released from the emergency room, the doctor requested that he be admitted for observation. After learning of my father's condition, Bam and my stepmother walk away to talk privately. I was going to follow them so I could listen in, but Ann is still with us, so I had to keep my composure. I don't want her to think that I like to eavesdrop.

"You two are so bad. You revealed your relationship to everyone so openly."

Ann, who's standing next to me, comments. My face flushes a little, but I have to act like I don't get what she's saying

"I don't understand."

"What do you think they are talking about?"

"I have no idea."

"I'll go eavesdrop."

She winks and walks after them. I debate whether I should go as well, but ultimately decide to go. I don't quite understand why Ann is here. She should go home already, because this is something that should be kept within our family. But whatever, it would be rude to tell her to go. When she feels like it, she probably will.

We found Bam and her mother arguing in front of the canteen. They both just stand there quietly. That makes Ann twist her mouth.

"Is this a fight? I'm not here to observe people communicating through telepathy."

"You're very direct."

"Why should I keep my emotions hidden? I say what I want. I discard what I don't want. Life is that simple... This is boring. I'll leave."

Ann is here because she wants to eavesdrop, and she walks away quickly when there's nothing interesting for her to find out. I look at her, confused. What does she want? But it's not the time for me to worry about that. I want to know more about Bam and her mother at the moment. Not long after Ann leaves, they start talking. Though they are not speaking loudly. I can hear them clearly.

"You did that intentionally."

The stepmother talks first. Bam looks at her and nods with an emotionless expression.

"You didn't have to choose that method."

"Which method should I have chosen so that I can move out then?" The sweet-faced woman says this emotionally. "You know what he wants."

"I let you move out. You were the one who decided to stay."

"I stay because you will have to leave too if I move out. Are you saying it was all my fault for trying to help someone in suffering?"

"You helped an animal out of suffering, but the animal turned on you... You're saying I'm an animal?"

"You said it yourself." Bam is starting to argue word for word. I feel bad for Ann that she left. But this is for the better. Family matters should stay within family members.

"I'm sorry."

Instead of scolding her daughter, my stepmother apologizes. That aggravates Bam's rage. This time, she raises her voice in a way I've never seen her do to her mother before.

"You're doing this again. You apologize to make me feel guilty. You're not at all sincere!"

"I'm really sorry."

"You just want me to feel that what I did was horrible. You're taking all the blame so that I will spend restless nights thinking about it and blaming myself... Don't you think that I feel horrible? But if I didn't do that, I could never leave this house. And it's all because of you. I'm only concerned about you!"

"..."

"You've gotten so much from Uncle already. Isn't it enough? To what extent do you wish to drag this out when you no longer love him? You should leave. No... You've never loved him, even."

"It has nothing to do with that."

"It does. It all starts on the day you plan to come and take everything from him. You come so that you can see the daughter of the woman you love. And what? You see Eve, and what? You not only did not do anything, but you also let Uncle abuse me. You never protected me. You have come solely for your own benefit."

The daughter of the woman she loves... Is that me? I swallow hard, as I have so many questions about everything that has happened. Because she probably still has alcohol in her body, Bam says everything that's on her mind.

"That's why I'm apologizing... I apologize for always looking past your feelings and thinking only of myself. You're right on that."

"You're always like this. You make me feel like an awful person again. Sob."

Bam buries her face into her palms and cries heavily. The stepmother looks at her daughter and reaches her hand over to console her. Yet she puts her hand down before it reaches Bam. It's like she feels too guilty to do so.

"Okay. I will move out. We will go live elsewhere. I will break up with him."

"Mom..."

"What can I do? Nothing goes as planned. I want to be a mean stepmother like in the children's stories, but I couldn't because Eve looks too much like Orn."

Orn is my mother's name. I take a deep breath as I start to put things together.

"I've got a lot from Mr. Kit already. I don't want to be too greedy. We can live on it. But moving out means that we won't go back there ever again. Are you sure you can cut ties?"

"..."

"Her father saw everything. After he wakes up, I will tell him the truth about why I came into his life. That would mean that Eve and you would have to end things."

"Okay."

Thump Thump...

My heart is pounding because I'm shocked at her immediate response. She didn't hesitate a bit. Doesn't the prospect of never seeing me again make her heart skip a beat like it does mine?

"I knew it was impossible from the start. Eve was just a pawn I used to get away from Uncle. It's time I let her go."

I'm her pawn...

We agree to let my stepmother stay with my father because it's inappropriate for Bam to stay after all that has happened. We ride back home together. No one says anything until we reach our house. Bam goes to her room while I, who is the last to go upstairs, change directions and head to the master bedroom instead of my own room.

"Can I talk to you for a bit?"

My stepmother, who's packing in front of the closet, looks at me, surprised.

"Yes." She responds while appearing as though everything is normal. Her mask never falls off, no matter the situation.

"Can you please tell me about you and my mother?"

"..."

"Since it's come to this,"

She's probably wondering how I knew, but there's no point in trying to find out. So she stops packing and puts her hands in her pants pockets. She falls silent for a moment and tightens her lips as she considers where to begin. Or maybe she's thinking about not telling me anything at all, which I obviously won't allow.

"What's the relationship between you and my mother?"

"Lovers."

I asked directly, so she answered directly as well. Though I'm prepared for that answer, I must admit that it's still shocking to hear.

"Then how can Mother have me?"

"She cheated on me with your father."

Gasp...

I drop my jaw. Hearing something this direct has a huge impact on you.

"Can you tell me everything? Why did you approach my father?
Everything... You have to because you will break up with him anyway."

"You probably heard my conversation with Bam?"

She still talks to me like I'm her stepdaughter. It's as if she has no hidden agenda. Sometimes she seems to adore me, but sometimes she seems cold and distant. Yet she was never a mean stepmother like in those children's stories, not even once. Or maybe she just didn't have a chance.

"Okay. I'll tell you everything."

She starts by talking about her relationship with my mother. They had been together since they were university students. Both hid it from their families. They studied at the same faculty. They stayed in the same room in a dorm. You can say that they lived together but didn't announce it to the world.

"One day, your mother suddenly said that she wanted to have children."

When she gets to this part, I see my stepmother smile mockingly. She walks over to the bed and sits with one leg crossed over the other.

"I didn't think much of it because it's a common dream for most women to have children to take care of them when they're old. As you know, our country is not kind to the elderly. So everyone expects their children to look after them. But as you know, two women cannot have children."

She goes on to tell me that she didn't pay much attention to it. She even laughed at the idea and suggested that they raise a puppy together. But around six months after that, my mother broke up with her, telling her that she was three months pregnant.

"Your mother is ambitious. She's beautiful and comes from a good family. She went to further her studies in the US and promised that she would come back to me. But when she met your father, everything was easy for her. However, it was extremely difficult to bear for the person who was

dumped." My stepmother laughs at herself mockingly. "My first love abandoned me heartlessly. She cheated on me with a man and got pregnant. How did you think I felt? What's so great about having children? Or was it just an excuse to leave me for a much richer man so she could have a good life? But who could blame her? We weren't married. We were just lovers. She had the right to choose."

"But you still hold a grudge."

"Imagine that it's Bam. What if she breaks up with you because she is pregnant with another man while living with you and promises she will never change? How would that make you feel?"

My heart breaks just imagining it, so to say that I don't feel for her would be a lie. Yet, this is my mother's story. So I have no right to judge.

After my stepmother lived through pain for many months, she found out that my mother died when she gave birth to me. Though she was still really hurt, she couldn't help but feel a deep hole in her heart. So all of her resentments are directed at my father. If it weren't for him, my mother wouldn't be pregnant and wouldn't have to die.

Then suddenly, a thought came to her mind. What if she becomes a part of his life and takes away all his happiness? What if she comes to take everything from him and dump him, so he can feel the agony of betrayal? So she furthered her studies and got a master's degree. She pushed herself until she became my father's secretary. And because she knew she would get to meet me, she thought she should learn how to be a mother, so she adopted Bam.

"I prefer an older kid because they know what's what. Also, having a kid makes others not approach me much. And... I liked Bam. We are alike in many ways. especially our looks. Everyone thinks Bam is my real daughter."

That is why Bam feels like she owes a lot to her mother. It's because she was adopted when she knew what was what, and because it is hard to find

someone who is willing to adopt an older kid. Most prefer a baby or small children. It's like when you adopt a dog, you prefer a puppy.

My stepmother moved in after she'd been with my father for a while. She intended to take everything and be the mean stepmother to get back at my mother for dumping her.

"But when I saw you, I adored you so much because you looked very much like your mother. I love her... No matter how much I say I hate her, I can't lie to myself. And because I adore you a lot, I don't want to have much to do with you. Because if I really loved you, my plan would fail, whether it was taking everything from your father or hurting him."

No wonder... When I wanted to pursue a degree in the arts, she supported me wholeheartedly. No matter what I wanted to do, she never got in the way. But because I was too biased, I saw it as her plan to prevent me from getting a degree that would allow me to take over my father's business.

"After you left to study abroad, I... started dating someone."

"The manager at the factory?"

She looks at me, surprised.

"Yes."

"You didn't even try to hide it. You wanted my father to find out, didn't you?"

"Yes." She smiles. "Your father probably already knows it. The only reason he hasn't kicked me out of this house is because he has feelings for Bam."

"That's what makes me see you as a terrible person."

I'm direct enough to say that to her face. She's the mother. Even if she's not Bam's real mother, she has to protect the child she adopted. Bam is so obedient, yet she hurts her feelings.

"Because I knew I couldn't hurt him as I planned to, I used Bam as a pawn. I admit that I'm a terrible person."

"You only love yourself." I can't stand her. "You only care about yourself. You hold a grudge against a dead person, but you wanted to take it out on a living person like my dad. In any case, why does Bam have to carry all this pain because of you?"

"I wasn't going to make Bam take any risks or anything."

"But she did. That's why she had to find a way out by doing something so embarrassing when we both know it's not like her to do something like that at all." I tighten my fist when I say this. "She drank beer to get herself drunk, so she could do something that shameful. You know that Bam was not wrong. She didn't want to do it, but if she didn't, she wouldn't be able to get out of here."

"I didn't want things to turn out this way. I love Bam." Her mask is cracking. Her voice is shaking, and her hands are trembling. The tears in her eyes tell me that she's really hurt. "You're right. I'm a terrible person. I'm sorry. Sob."

"Your apology will only cause Bam pain. She never believes your apologies are genuine because you do it to make her feel guilty. Therefore, your apologies are worthless. Everyone is hurt. Are you happy?"

"Sob. I'm sorry."

My stepmother continues to cry. I walk out and slam the door. Bang! I know everything now. It's painful. Everyone is hurt. But the one who's hurt the most is the person who's not a part of the problem at all.

It's the orphan who was adopted and used as a pawn. Her apologies are worthless!

28. Nothing

I've never been this nervous before in my life. Every time I approach Bam, I put on a courageous and shameless face. Even if she says no, I will keep on trying until I get what I want, no matter what it is. But after what just happened, what she went through, and what I've just learned, I'm nervous about approaching her.

I'm afraid of her answer...

All these years, I've been angry with my stepmother. I did everything I could to get her out of my house. Yet when that day finally comes, I'm afraid that they will really leave. If they leave because my stepmother cheated on my father, I can still continue my relationship with Bam. But they are leaving because my father and I like the same woman. Add to that what has just happened, and it's difficult for us to go on. And like we've seen, she will never choose me.

I mean... her mother will always be her priority.

I leave her alone in her room and do not bother her until the morning. She doesn't come down for breakfast, so I assume she wants to be alone and think things through. So now it's just my stepmother and me at the dining table.

"I will go visit your father in the afternoon today."

My stepmother tells me this, and I nod to acknowledge it.

"Okay. I'll go be with him in the morning."

I'm not sure how I feel about her right now. After I'm done with my breakfast, I get up and can't help but look at her.

"You will talk to my father today? I won't be there if that's the case."

"Yes."

So it's clear that my father will know everything from her today, which means that she's ready to leave this place. And of course, she won't be going alone. I look up at the second floor, feeling empty inside. If Bam leaves, will we ever meet again? Could we keep our relationship going?

I visit my father in the morning. As soon as I open the door, I see Ann talking and laughing with my father. I'm not sure what they're talking about. I look at her and frown a bit. She's not close enough to my father to be visiting. What's going on here?

"Your daughter is here. Then... I'll excuse myself."

"Thank you for your kindness."

My father looks over at the gift she brought and watches her leave. She winks at me teasingly before she closes the door. My father and I are the only ones left in the room. The caretaker went home to change.

The atmosphere quickly becomes tense. We will get to talk frankly about what my father saw yesterday.

"We have to talk, dad."

"I guess it's the same topic I have." My father grabs the remote to turn off the TV and stares at me, furious. "What the hell was last night?"

"It is what it is."

"She's your f***ing sister."

My father has never been this rude to me before. This is the first time, and it hurts. It doesn't hurt as much as what I'm about to say, and it will hurt more as we go on.

"Bam is also your daughter."

"She's not my real daughter."

"She's not my real sister as well."

"But you're a woman!"

"And your wife is Bam's mother. If you're looking for someone who's wrong in this, we can make it a competition and have people vote on it."

"You..." My father's face is all red from rage. "I didn't raise you to argue with me word for word like this. A man and a woman having those feelings for each other is normal. Me having those kinds of feelings for Bam is..."

"Disgusting!" I finish the sentence for him before he can do so. "It's unacceptable. Her mother is your wife. Aren't you ashamed of what you're doing at all?"

"Her mother doesn't say anything about it."

"Does that mean it's okay for you to do it? Where is your moral compass? We are human beings. We know right from wrong. We're not animals"

"You rascal!" My father grabs a glass of water close to hand and is prepared to throw it at me, but he stops himself midway. My words struck him square in the heart. It's the truth he knows deep down inside. "I have a lover, but it's as if I don't have one. How am I wrong to want to love someone who loves and cares for me?"

"Bam takes care of you because you're her father and her mother's husband. You have to understand that she did it out of respect, not romantic feelings. Dad... how would it look if this got out?"

"I don't care. My wife is having an affair with another woman. If I cheat too, who can blame me?"

"You know..."

"Yes. I've always known. The only reason I still let her live in our house is because of Bam. I love her, but you... you did something disgusting with

her. You tore my heart into pieces."

"You may love her, but does she love you? She loves me. Do you hear that? She loves me. We love each other. We're lovers."

"But you're a woman. You have to love a man."

"If my stepmother can be with another woman, why can't I? You can accept that your wife is having an affair with another woman, but you can't accept that my lover is a woman? Why such a double standard? You just want to see what you want to see. If you can't accept it, too bad. But we love each other, and I will not let you do anything to Bam."

"So you suggested she move out?"

"If it's too dangerous to stay, why stay? Please give me something to respect you for. I'm so disgusted that I can barely stand it."

"If you can't take it, leave. Go. I also can't bear having a gay daughter. What has this world come to?"

"You will have no one left. Mark my words."

I walk out of the room with tears flowing down my face. Like I said, just one rude word from my father already caused me pain, but this fight is way more than that. It's full of moral standards and what's right and wrong. It's not something a father and daughter should fight over at all.

It's something that should be left unspoken. I am sick to my stomach.

"You were so loud. You weren't afraid that anyone would hear you at all."

Ann, who's leaning against the wall outside the room, speaks to me. I startle and look at her, shocked.

"I thought you had already left."

"I never miss out on the fun." She hands me a handkerchief, but I remain motionless, not reaching for it. She has to wipe my tears while smiling, as if

this is something amusing to her. "Don't lash out at others if you're angry at your father. He's a lonely old man. It's normal to be like that."

"What kind of person stands here eavesdropping on other people's family matters?"

"Someone who doesn't give a shit."

"But you seem to care a lot about my family."

"It's an exception. It's a lot of fun. So many interesting twists and turns... So, are you heading home?"

"What's it to you?" I unconsciously asked rudely because I'm not in the mood to care about others' feelings. I want to be alone. I want to go home and cry my eyes out.

"Shall we go on a date on this shitty day?"

"Why should I go on a date with you?"

"It's better than going home to cry alone. No. You can't even go home. Your father just kicked you out, no? Homeless."

When she hits me where it hurts, I'm speechless with shock. As self-defense, I hug myself.

"I'm just going home to pack my clothes. Moreover... I have something I have to do."

"Before you go back to talk to Bam, talk to me first. There may be a way to help you get out of this."

I glance at her, curious. What way out? But because I find it interesting. I decide to go with her

"I'm only going with you because I don't know where to go."

"Ah-huh, tough girl."

I came home from my date with Ann numb because of what she offered. At first, I told her she was crazy, but the nonchalant woman told me to think about it. And, yes, what she offered is stuck in my head.

I go straight to Bam's room when I get home. It takes me a while to muster the courage to knock on the door and ask her to open it. Normally, I would just enter the room without care, especially since she's also my lover. But I'm being extra polite today. I want her to allow me to enter her space. The sweet-faced woman opens the door and looks me in the eye. She seems tired. It's probably because she didn't sleep. I wink at her and smile as if nothing has happened.

"What are you doing? Do you miss me?"

"I think of you, but I don't miss you."

"I'm going to sulk. So, what are you doing?"

I slip into her room, trying to appear as normal as possible, despite the fact that I clearly am not because I knocked on the door. Bam's luggage is open. She's packing. There isn't much to pack, but it's just sitting there unpacked, as if she's hesitating.

"So, you're leaving?"

"Ah-huh."

"Where to?"

"I don't know yet. I'll go wherever my mother takes me."

I nod understandingly, pretending to be interested in her clothes.

"You don't have much to pack."

"I don't buy a lot of clothes. I just wear what I have."

"I love you. Do you love me at all?"

My question has nothing to do with what we're talking about. It stuns Bam. I had my hand behind my back and tightened into a fist as I asked because I was afraid she would see them. My voice is both nervous and excited. I try to relax myself by standing on my heels and swaying back and forth.

She doesn't answer.

"Didn't you hear my question? If someone says that they love you, you should say it back. It's the polite thing to do."

"Then what should I say to your father?"

Gasp...

I swallow hard and with difficulty. So my father has said that to her.

"Am I like my father to you?"

"Saying I love you is meaningless. There's no way to fix this."

She continues to pack. I sit on her bed and continue to look at her in silence. I want to beg her to look at me, but all I can do is keep talking.

"Of course it's meaningful. It makes me happy."

My heart aches so much. I can't ask her to stay. This place is not for her.

But if she leaves... I don't know if we will ever meet again. Like my stepmother said, she's very decisive. Though she's very reserved and obedient, when she says no, it's a no. And I don't dare think that I'm important to her.

Maybe I'm just the first person she's had sexual relations with, and it made her happy. Maybe her feelings are not as strong as mine. That's too painful for me to bear.

"No matter what I say, it will just hurt us more. It's best left unsaid like this."

She zips up her luggage and places it beside her bed to indicate that she is finished. I try very hard not to cry. I want to continue to talk to her because this may be the last time that we talk.

"Can I go live with you?"

"..."

"You're so mean. You won't let me go with you."

"You have a house and a father. Why would you go live elsewhere with someone else?"

"I was just kicked out of here this morning. My father kicked me out because I was acting out too much. And you're not someone else. You're my lover."

"Eve."

"I love you."

"Did you ever imagine we'd get to this point?"

"I love you."

"We both know that it has to end."

"I love you. I love you. I love you. I won't listen!" I close my ears with my hands. Finally, I break down and cry out of fear. The sweet-faced woman stares at me blankly. Is she trying to hide her true feelings? I can't tell.

"I knew it would come to this, so I'd been preparing myself for a while. So, to make it clear before we part, and so that we don't owe each other anything..."

"I love you!"

"Let's break up."

"No. I won't break up with you."

The most terrifying word has just left her mouth. I sob and dash in to hug her. I beg her not to do this, even though I realize the situation is difficult and our being together is nearly impossible.

"I don't love you."

"You're lying."

"Not even once."

"You can't make me hate you."

"I did it with you because it was exciting. Getting to do it in secret here behind the adults made me feel like I could get back at Uncle. You were my pawn." She pushes me away and holds her gaze at me for a long time. "I think I should tell you the truth because lying about how much I love you and leaving will only make it hard for you to forget me. But believe this. I don't hate you."

"..."

"I don't love you. And I don't hate you."

"..."

"I feel nothing for you in every way. After today, time will heal you. I hope you understand everything this time. You're already an adult."

She turns around, as if to tell me that she has nothing more to say to me. I keep staring at her back in agony. Her words stab me until I am no longer whole. I don't know if there's any part of me that's not broken. But I know one thing: I know that she believes in actions more than words. So her talking more than she normally does means that there was no truth in what she just said at all. I know her well.

She's probably as broken as I am.

I hug her from behind. I kiss the nape of her neck understandingly and say goodbye.

"Good luck. Though time can make us feel less. I will never forget you. And I really hope that... you won't forget me either."

That is all I can say before leaving the room and sobbing like a child. She's leaving. She's really leaving, and she will never come back.

Today marks the end of our relationship.

Summary

29. Her perfume

Because my father kicked me out, I have to stay with Ann during this period. It's a good thing Ann rarely stays in her room. I don't know what she does all day. But it gives me private time to cry like someone who's heartbroken. I suspect that Ann is doing what she said she would do, but I don't dare ask her because I don't want to know the answer. Everyone else would probably never consider doing something as out-there as what I'm doing.

'If you want things to be simple, let me help you. I'm good at this... Your father will forget all about Bam, and there will be no more obstacle between the two of you.'

'What will you do?'

'I'm planning to be your stepmother. Are you okay with that?'

I didn't say whether I was okay with that or not. But accepting her help is kind of an answer in itself. I've been staying with her for two weeks already, and I'm running out of savings. Ann is kind enough to order food deliveries sent to her room for me. I have to note down how much I owe her.

I will not owe her anything. She may ask for something in return later on. She's too unpredictable...

Yet, one day, as I'm thinking about this and that on the balcony with an e-cigarette in hand, there's a message notification on my phone. When I open it, I see a short message from Ann.

'You can come home now. Your father has forgiven you.'

I frown and look at the calendar. I count starting from the day I moved in here and am surprised. It's so fast. Because I want to see it with my own eyes, I drop by my house but don't go inside. I peek through the gate and can hear laughter and water splashes. My father and Ann are playing in the pool happily. The person who was crazy in love with his stepdaughter is acting as if the person named Bam was never born into this world.

She could really do it. Ann has entered my father's life.

But, despite Ann's advice, I decide not to return home. So that always-merry woman drops by the condo. Her first words to me were,

"You're playing hard to get? I told you that you could go home already, but you won't. I almost lost my voice speaking on your behalf."

"You really did it." I lick my teeth. I'm a bit ashamed and feel guilty that I didn't try to stop her when I said that. "My father seems to be in a pink world full of bubbles."

"When did you see that?"

"When you were playing in the pool, maybe."

Ann giggles and sits on the sofa. She puts her elbow on the headrest.

"So what do you want to do next? Don't you want to go home? Your father is home alone. He's really lonely."

"From his laughter, I don't think he's lonely."

"So sulky." The always-merry woman lifts her legs as if she's exercising. "If you don't go back, I'll take every dime."

"Don't be greedy."

"If you don't want me to be greedy, then go back and keep an eye on me."

"If you're greedy, you won't be saying all this on my father's behalf."

Sometimes I wonder what this woman really wants. It's as if she's just having fun with life and doesn't take anything seriously. Though it may appear that she is trying to ruin my life, I believe that she is actually trying to help me. When she sees that I just stare at her, she glances at me and winks.

"My legs are beautiful, right? Do you want to touch it?"

"Crazy. How can you seduce my father and then his daughter?"

"I can because, actually, I like women, not men. Especially if it's someone Bam likes... it's very interesting." She gets up and crosses one leg over the other. "Have you contacted Bam?"

She switches topics so abruptly that I can't keep up. The question she just posed feels like she is piercing my heart with thousands of needles until it is riddled with holes.

"No."

"What do you do all day while sitting in my room? Just wait for me to send you food and drink? So worthless."

"What would you know? When was the last time something truly devastated you? Plus, even if I did, it's not like she'd respond. So, no. I'll continue on like this. Time will heal everything."

"Are you using time to heal yourself, or are you just wasting time? If I were you, I would use this time to do whatever would make me look cool. Bam is not the only woman in this world."

"But there is only one Bam in this world."

"Then do something. Don't just let the time pass like this. Start by going home and going to work. Otherwise, I'll take over your stepmother's role by being meaner than she was."

"Don't threaten me. You're just in it for the fun." I look at her in order to emphasize my point. "But don't have too much fun. Just help my father

forget the past, as we agreed. Take what you can and leave quietly."

Ann shrugs, as if she isn't taking my words seriously. She lies back on the sofa and teases me, testing her luck.

"Are you sure you don't want to have fun with me? I'm sure I'm more exciting than Bam."

"Crazy!"

"Those with true love are so boring."

I still play hard to get and refuse to go home. I buried myself in Ann's room for another three days. Eventually, my father loses patience and comes to see me at the condo with Ann. They are sitting side by side. My father looks at me with the most gentle eyes. He seems very happy, like someone who's received more than enough love. I almost twist my mouth, but I don't want to ruin the mood, so I talk to him nicely.

"Come home already. I forgive you for everything."

He dares to say... I keep quiet and express myself through my eyes.

"Have you asked me if I have forgiven you?"

"I'm already giving you a lot of leeway. And I'm living at home alone. It's lonely."

"You don't seem lonely." I glance at Ann. "But I'm glad that you're happy. You're happier than when I was home."

"That's not true. I want you to come home. I was angry when I said what I did."

"And you just come talk to me now? Isn't that a long time to be angry?" I can't help but be sarcastic. I then shake my head to reject him. "No. I'm not

going back. I've settled down. This is like when I lived overseas. It feels good to be out of your shadow. I enjoy living by myself."

"Are you sure you're happy?" Ann interrupts, resting her chin on her hand. "You look sad every day. Look at your father. He's already happy again in no time. Sadness disappears as quickly as joy arrives. Go home, so your father can smile fully again."

She wraps her arm around my father's and speaks on his behalf. I can see that they are intimate. Though Ann and I have an understanding, I can't fully accept it.

"I really want to live alone... I'm not mad at you all that much, dad. Don't worry. How about this? Why don't you give me your room and go live at my house instead, Ann, so you don't have to travel back and forth? It's a win-win. My father will no longer be lonely, and I will have my personal space."

Despite my offer's apparent stubbornness, my father seems pleased. He probably wants Ann to go back with him. She currently goes to see him but returns to this room every day.

"No. I don't want to trade." Ann responds with a whiny voice. "This is all I have, and you're taking it from me? But I'm okay if you buy it, so I can buy a new one."

She says this as she leans on my father's shoulder, asking for tenderness.

"Come to think of it, it's a good idea. If I sell this room to your daughter, I can move in with you so you're not lonely... Eve probably wants her personal space."

When Ann makes that suggestion, my father cannot hide his happiness. He immediately nods without even thinking.

"Ah... that sounds good. Everyone loves what's theirs. You can't just make a trade. I'm okay with that, but I have conditions."

I glance at Ann knowingly. But because I can't say anything, I nod to my father and wait for his conditions.

"What is it?"

"You have to start working as a way to pay for this room. I won't buy it for you for free because you're grown up now... You have to make your own living."

"Okay."

"And you have to go back to sleep at home two days a week. If you're not okay with that, you can't stay here, and I won't buy any other condos for you either."

I can tell my father just wants Ann to move in with him, so I agree to his terms and walk to the door to send my father out after we talk some more. My father looks at Ann like he wants some private time with me. Ann is well aware of this, so she quickly leaves so that my dad and I can talk alone.

"How have you been?"

"You ask me just now that you're about to leave?" I laugh nonchalantly because I get it. "I'm not doing anything special here; I'm just breathing. I don't have a job. If Ann hadn't ordered me food, I would have starved to death by now. I'm also lucky to have a roof over my head."

"She's nice."

"Probably so."

"I'm glad you're okay. I was worried about you."

"You were?"

"Of course. You're my daughter."

"But you kicked me out of our house."

"I was angry. Don't bring it up again. I don't want to talk about the past."

What happened is too embarrassing to talk about. I nod understandingly and slip my hands into my pants pockets.

"Okay"

"So, we're good?"

"We must be. You pay my salary. I'm now officially your employee."

"You talk too much." Before he leaves, my father gently messes with my hair and hugs me tightly.

He then speaks for only us to hear. "I'm sorry for everything."

Though I try to keep cool, when I hear my father say that, I become sensitive. There's a lump in my throat, and I hug him back. There have always been just the two of us. My father is a single parent because my mother died during my birth. He raised me all by himself and had no one until Bam and her mother came along.

"I'm sorry too... for saying those things to you."

"I deserved it. Just come home. I miss seeing you walk around the house. But I'll cope with it... Even if you don't move out now, you will move out one day when you get married."

"I won't get married."

I confidently tell him. We looked each other in the eye for a long time. We both know what I mean by that. I can't force myself to do something that goes against my sexual orientation, as my stepmother did.

"That's okay. Then you can be with me until one of us dies."

That's all my father says before he says goodbye. I walk over to the van parked in front of the condo to see him off. Ann is already waiting for him inside the van. My father looks so happy that I'm nervous. Ann makes him

happy, but I know that this is not forever. She's not the type to commit to one person for long. And that includes my father.

That was our deal.

'I promise I won't stay long after I've solved your problems.'

That was what she said in the car that day when I fought with my father. I smile and wave to my father until the van is out of sight. Everything is back to normal now. My father and I have resolved our disagreement. My stepmother and Bam are now strangers from our past.

Life... must go on.

I return to work for my father, beginning at the bottom and working my way up the ranks. I worked in both accounting and purchasing. I learned a lot. People are starting to suspect who I am. Those who don't know treat me like a friend, while those who suspect it treat me with respect. I am promoted to manager level and get to attend meetings after three months. I get to know how the company is run. It's not like in the TV show, where you just sign a few papers, your job is done, and you can go flirt as much as you want. Signing a document represents a decision or acknowledgement of permission for something. We must accept responsibility for our signatures. If we sign off on something and it turns out to be a mistake, we are responsible.

After initially using public transportation, I now have a company car. For fear of what people might think, my father made me drive an old car at first. But soon after, I'm back behind the wheel of my European car. That's a confirmation to everyone that I'm the daughter of the owner who came in to learn about the business. I never look down on my employees because I know how hard they work, and if not for them, the company couldn't run. Everyone is an important part of the company. It's like Lego. If one piece is missing, the game is over.

My father is quite proud of my work. He even stated that he would allow me to take over his position soon and that I would be able to take over the company after that. He's happy with his new love. No matter how much Ann takes from him, he will turn a blind eye. I had to warn her when we were alone together by the swimming pool.

"You said that you wouldn't be greedy, but you took a lot already."

Ann, who is sipping wine on the pool chair while wearing sunglasses, adjusts her sunglasses and says, 'cheers,' as if I'm there to drink wine with her.

"It's nothing. Your father is happy. It's a reward for making the person you love happy. Aren't you fine with it?"

"You can take it, but not too much. I won't allow that."

"I see you always do. So, how are things? I heard a lot of nice things about you. I'm not sure if this is the same person who was sitting by the window like a sad, lonely dog. You look well-groomed and educated now. If Bam sees you now, she will surely fall in love with you."

The mention of the name I pretend to forget causes my heart to bleed as if it had been cut open.

"Why do you have to mention her name?"

"I'm afraid that you will forget her. Have you contacted her?"

"No."

"Huh? You're so boring."

"You get bored so easily. You also take on the boredom of others and disrupt their lives."

"If it weren't for me, would you and your father make up? I think he may be fine with you getting back together with Bam, even." Ann finishes her glass of wine. "Do you want to contact her? I can help."

"No."

"So arrogant."

"If we're meant to be, we will be."

"I've seen people who think like this die before they can be reunited. Both want to see each other but are making it difficult. But it's none of my business; I can only help this much. Do you want to swim with me?"

"No."

"Doing it with your stepmother is fun, especially in the pool. It's slippery and wet."

"Jesus."

I return to my condo, drained. The entire day was spent reading reports, attending meetings, and stopping by my house to allow Ann to annoy me. My eyes are about to close. While I wait for the elevator, a neighbor comes over to stand next to me, dragging something with her.

Nice fragrance...

I glance at and examine the person. She smiles at me slightly and walks into the elevator when it arrives. When she gets in, there's a perfume fragrance that makes her wriggle her nose and comment softly.

"Nice fragrance."

I know this perfume well. It triggers memories that I tried to bury to flow out like a river. I know well that Bam is not the only person who uses this perfume. Yet I still want to know who in this building uses it. This perfume costs nearly ten thousand Baht. Whoever it is must be wealthy.

And when the elevator arrives at her floor, that woman drags her belongings out. As for me, I go back to my room and sit quietly alone in the dark. Today Ann talked about Bam, and I smelled her perfume in the elevator.

These bring back memories. So I pick up the phone and type my 40+ emails in a hurry.

Dear my sweet love,

I miss you so much. I smelled your perfume in the elevator on my way up today. My heart is breaking.

Love you,

From your lover

And, as usual, I do not press the send button. I never press the send button. I only drafted all these emails. I have not had the courage to contact her. I'm afraid that she may have changed her email to cut me out of her life. She may be afraid that I will write her something like this. Therefore, I only type them up and then put my phone away, face down. I lie down on my bed, cry my eyes out, and go to sleep, crossing my fingers that I have a dream about her.

Even if I only see her in my dreams, that will do...

But life must go on. I don't have much time to be sad. I have to get back to work. Today I have an important meeting in which my father has asked me to represent him in a negotiation concerning our international logistics. He sent his secretary to come with me. The meeting place is an Italian restaurant with a relaxing but luxurious atmosphere. My English skills are put to use as I negotiate with a Singaporean business partner. Everything is going well and is not as frightening as I had feared before we agreed to be business partners.

"You did well again today. You're capable, just like your father."

"Thank you."

I smile at my father's secretary as I tie my hair because its shoulder length is annoying me. As we make our way toward the elevator that will take us down to the parking lot, I get a whiff of a scent that is familiar to me, which causes me to look up.

"What is it?"

"Nothing... I smell perfume."

"Same here. It's very sweet and fits the wearer well. Perfumes choose their wearers too. If I wear it, it would smell like street market perfume."

"That bad?" Because the secretary says that the perfume chooses its wearer, I glance over to see who's wearing it. It happens to be the same time that the person who wears the perfume turns my way. The timing is so perfect; it's like fate. Everything seems to pause. As Bam looks me straight in the eye, she stops moving. I stopped moving too, frozen.

Time stops. Nothing moves. When we meet again, it's as if the time we spent apart has been reversed.

"Miss Eve... The elevator is here. Miss Eve."

"Yeah... Yes."

I turn around and follow the secretary into the elevator. I don't even dare look back at Bam. What I saw was Bam with a man. I can't see his face, but I can tell that they are close because she's very reserved, so she wouldn't come with someone or talk to someone easily.

It's probably her new lover... It's lucky I didn't send those emails to her.

The elevator door closes as Bam is about to walk to me. I look another way. I don't want to know what she wanted to say to me because seeing her with someone else is already more than I can bear.

Time didn't heal anything. It's all a lie!

Time only favors her while I'm living in hell.

My tears flow. I have to hurriedly wipe them because I don't want my father's secretary to see them. As I'm walking out of the elevator at the parking lot level, I get an email from Bam.

An email... after none in four months.

Dear Ex-Lover...

...

From Ex-Lover

I bite my lips tightly and bare my teeth. I almost threw my phone away. Even in her email, she only types dots, like she's trying to annoy me.

"Damn idiot!"

"What?"

The secretary is shocked because I suddenly cursed. So I have to tell her, half annoyed and half ordering.

"You can go back first. No need to wait for me."

"Where are you going?"

"To slap someone!"

30. You are the only one to see this

[Fin]

I dash to the elevator and return to the restaurant after telling the secretary that. When I arrive, however, only the man is there. Bam vanished mysteriously, as if she possessed magical powers. Though I don't want to ask my competitor because it hurts, I have to see her now. I want to pull her hair and slap her three times, the same as her dots in the email.

"Where is Bam?"

"She just took the elevator down. Probably to the parking lot."

He seems to be guessing, but I go back into the elevator and down to the parking lot again. I see my father's secretary standing where she was. She tells me as if she knew this would happen.

"You just missed your friend. She was asking for you, so I told her that you went back up to the restaurant."

Damned! We missed each other. So I go back up again, and the result is the same. The man tells me the exact same thing the secretary told me.

"She just came back up and went back down."

"Shit. I'm dizzy already!"

My lack of patience makes me go down the elevator again, and the secretary is at the same spot laughing.

"She went back up. Why don't you call each other to arrange where to meet?"

I bare my teeth out of frustration and grab my phone to type her an email.
Yet her email pops up first.

Dear Ex-Lover,

Please stay put and wait for me. I'm tired.

From your ex-lover

Would she know that what frustrates me is the word "Ex-Lover?" While I see her as my present and future, I'm her past-simple tense. And because I don't want to lose, I type back to her.

Dear Ancient Lover,

Why don't you stay put so we can finally meet? So annoying.

From your ancient lover

But after I typed that, I stayed put. I tell my father's secretary to go back. She still worries that I have to stand here alone, so I give her a hard gaze.

"Please go. Don't make me say it again."

My rage is enough to share with the world, even in the hidden corners where no one knows. Since she tells me to stay put, I will stay put. I put my hand on my hip and shifted my weight to one leg, ready to slap her. Yet the elevator sits idle for over five minutes.

What is this? She told me to stay put, so I did. What now?

I'm anxious and annoyed. I raise my hand, about to press the elevator button to go see her at the restaurant. But the door opens, and Bam walks out with other passengers. The plan to slap her has to be abandoned because it would make me look like a rascal. She stands motionless, waiting for others to walk away. And when we're finally alone, I get ready to grab her hair, pull it, and swing her head around. Yet she dashes in to hug me tightly.

"Ah..."

My rage suddenly subsides like a thermometer buried under snow. For some reason, my anger has transformed into gratitude. No! I can't be nice just two seconds after she hugs me. It would make me look too much like a loser.

"Get off me."

I push her away and back off. There is no slap. I will play silent war with her. Now I just stand still and take stock of her reaction to figure out what she wants.

"How are you?"

She asks when I don't say anything.

"A lot better than before."

What about you... That's what I want to say, but I choose to remain silent and let her speak.

"Yeah. You seem to be doing fine."

"..."

"Is there anything you want to say to me?"

"Probably the same as what you said in your email. Dot. Dot. Dot."

She goes quiet and nods understandingly.

"Okay."

She then walks back into the elevator, ready to leave. I dash into the elevator and press the 'hold' button, so it doesn't go anywhere. I then sound like I'm yelling at her.

"That's it?"

"Ah... that's it."

"Did we go up and down the elevator just to look at each other in silence? That's all you have to say? Are you crazy?"

I raise my hand and squeeze her shoulders tightly out of rage. All of my resentments are channeled through my hands. I must be squeezing her very forcefully, yet Bam doesn't make a sound.

"You don't seem to have anything to say to me. So I think that... I should leave. I don't want to put you in a difficult situation."

"Are you rushing back to see your boyfriend?"

"Ah-huh."

Ah-huh?! She doesn't even deny it to lower my rage.

"Then, go. I'm too tired to chase after you."

"..."

That's all I say before I walk out of the elevator and let the door close so she could go her own way, while my heart ached as I stared at it. Time will heal everything. Yet meeting her makes it seem like time doesn't help with anything.

I miss her.

I want to hug her.

I want to tell her that I love her, but I'm afraid I won't get any response if I do.

There wasn't even a goodbye. I'm about to walk out of the parking lot to find a taxi because the secretary really left with the company car. Actually, I have work that I have to clear at the company. I have to attend a meeting to give a summary of today's successful negotiation with the Singaporean business partner.

But as I'm about to look for the exit, there's another email from Bam. I hesitated but decided to read it. I see a message that makes my heart race. My head goes blank, as if I don't have a brain in my skull. My responsibility has vanished in the blink of an eye. I forgot I had work.

Dear Ex-Lover,

I miss you.

From your ex-lover

While her email made me very happy, I still have no idea what she hopes to accomplish by sending it. So I still head for the exit. And more emails pour in.

Dear Ex-Lover,

Meeting you makes me realize that time doesn't help with anything.

From your ex-lover

And another,

Dear Ex-Lover,

If we still have feelings for each other, can we meet again? If you still feel the same, I will give you anything you want.

From your ex-lover

I'm not working anymore!

I spin around and run back to the elevator to go see her at the restaurant. But I find Bam waiting in front of the elevator. She's typing something on her phone. Panting, I call out to her. The sweet-faced woman looks up at me with teary eyes and a trembling body.

"To my ancient lover, was what you just wrote me true?"

I ask, clenching my fist. I'm as excited as a beauty pageant winner who knows she's about to be crowned. I don't need to get the first prize. Any prize from this woman will do. No. It has to be the first prize. I have to be her number one. And I want the first prize only from her!

"I'm not good with words."

"I know. Just say yes or no."

"It's true."

"Anything?"

"Yes."

"Will you be my lover again?"

Bam is sobbing heavily. She nods, clearly happy that I said that. I dash in to hug her and cry as heavily as she does. I miss her more than I can put into

words. Her alluring scent makes me want to cuddle with her and sink my fangs into her skin. It's a love I would give anything for.

"I miss you too... I miss you so much."

I confess with a trembling voice. She hugs me back and sobs.

"There's not a day that I don't miss you, Eve. I tried."

"You mean that man?"

"Ah-huh."

"You opened your heart to others. You're meaner than me."

"If I don't do that, I won't be able to forget you.... But it didn't help."

"That's okay. Never mind. We meet today." I move away from her. "From now on, I'm not going to let you go. Even if you run away, I will find you."

"I won't run away. I won't go anywhere. I completely give in to your every demand."

Because she's not good with words, what she says is credible and meaningful.

"Everything?"

"Yes."

"Tell that man to go back."

"No need. He will go back on his own. I'm not going back up to see him."

"You're so mean." I laugh and wipe her tears for her. "You won't change your mind again after this just because of my father, will you?"

"This is a matter between the two of us. Even if you have ten fathers, I won't go anywhere. It's too painful... I've been missing you every single day

for four months. I want to email you, but I can only draft them. I don't dare to call you either. I'm afraid that you have moved on and no longer love me."

"Why are we so much alike?" I laugh, look up, and pull her in for a passionate kiss. "I wrote a lot of emails to you."

This time, Bam laughs too. Her laughter is sweeter than ever. It's full of joy and contentment.

"Okay. Now that we've met, let's not waste any more time. You said you would give me anything I wanted."

"Yes."

"Then, let's start with this."

I take her to the elevator and press the lobby floor. As I reserve a room with the staff, Bam looks at me and smiles slightly, knowing exactly what I'm thinking.

"I'd like to make a reservation for one room."

"Which type?"

"Honeymoon suite."

The sweet-faced woman giggles as she hides behind me. The staff does her job and soon hands me a key card. We run to the elevator and go to the floor indicated on the key card. I keep shaking my legs in the elevator because I want us to arrive quickly.

"Though you seem more mature from how you're dressed, you still lack patience."

"Well... ah-huh."

"We should talk a little first, so we know what's going on with us."

"I don't really want to talk. But if I don't, it may seem too crude." I admit it frankly. "Are you staying with your mother?"

"No. I moved out and now live alone."

"Where?"

"Ann's condo. I rented a room. Do you know condo xxx? I live there."

I turn to look at her, stunned.

"I also live there."

"You're not living at the house with Uncle?"

"I moved out since he kicked me out. When I get to live on my own, I enjoy it very much. So I bought Ann's condo."

"So, we've been living in the same condo? Why haven't we met?"

"Because I'm heartbroken by you, I don't leave the room at all. And recently, I started working for my dad, so it's late by the time I get home. We probably just missed each other, like with the elevator today... We're here."

I grab Bam's hand and run to the room number on the key card. The honeymoon suite is at the end of the hall. As soon as we open the door, Bam jumps on me. I carry her and lay her down on the floor, though the bed is not far away. We don't admire the beauty of the room at all.

We yearn.

We want each other.

I catch a whiff of her perfume now and then as my nose explores every inch of her skin, and it awakens my natural instinct. Bam flips me down beneath her and climbs on top of me. She takes on the role of the aggressor. She touches me with her hand and slender fingers and slowly takes my clothes off, one piece at a time, with ease.

"Should we take a bath first? The tub is huge."

I invite her and point my head to the open bathroom. The sweet-faced woman gets up quickly and pulls me by the hand to the bathtub without saying anything. Usually, she doesn't get impatient when we do things like this. That's my role. But she's different today. She craves and takes swift action like never before.

We get into the tub and turn the water on at a temperature to our liking. My body is now wet as the water fills the tub. The sweet-faced woman is still fully dressed because I rarely get to touch her. She's the aggressor in this game. Her fingers slowly slip into my body. I tense up as I anticipate the joy she will soon bring me. I push myself up to a sitting position and hug her. I then move my hips to find the perfect rhythm for myself.

"I love you... Ahh... I love you."

I keep telling her that. I bite her shoulder, fully aroused. All of my yearning explodes like a bomb, causing the water to splash and ripple, producing bubbles. I hug her tightly when I reach my peak. And now, it's my turn to give her pleasure.

"Your turn."

I unbutton her pants. Even though we're extremely aroused, it's amusing that wet jeans are difficult to remove. We laugh and moan at the same time. My hands swept all over her body. I caress and massage her until she's out of breath and has to breathe through her mouth.

"I can't take it any more."

She says this as she pushes me down and gets on top of me. She takes off her shirt. This is the first time that she's been completely naked in front of me.

"Promise me that you won't leave me."

"We've come this far." I say that to her adoringly.

"Let me borrow your leg."

She gets on my leg and turns her back to me before she takes off her shirt for me to see the tattoo I've always wanted to see. I hold on to her hips as she rubs and rides freely on my leg. The English letters on her back, under her right shoulder blade, say...

"You are the only one to see this."

The sweet-faced woman turns her head to look me in the eye. She's panting and has not yet reached her peak, yet she still attempts to talk to me.

"You will be the only one to see it."

"This is why you never take off your shirt?"

"I intend... Ah... for the person to see this to be the one I will be with forever... And that's you."

She jerks as she reaches her peak for the first time tonight. She continues on to the second round immediately by leaning into me and spreading her legs.

"Help me."

My fingers slip into her body. I bite her ear. Lust and love become one. I can't help but say it again.

"I love you."

"Ahhh."

"I'm obsessed with you."

"(Pant)"

"I will have only you forever. I promise."

She reaches one of her arms to wrap around my neck and looks at me as she jerks again when she reaches her peak for the second time.

"I love you."

After everything we've been through together, this is the first time she says that. My fingers are squeezed. I massage her as I kiss her on the cheek. I think there were tears in my eyes when I heard her say that. This day has finally come—the day she tells me she loves me.

"And I've always been obsessed with you."

As she says this, she tenses up, squeezing her legs, and rolls over to lie on top of me in the tub. She then kisses me all over my face to prove it.

"From now on, I will say I love you every day. No one can stop me now."

"Yes, no one can stop us now."

We hug and confess our love to each other nonstop. We go on to rounds three, four, and more to make up for the four months that we were apart.

It doesn't matter who disagrees with our love as long as she admits that she loves me and I admit that I love her.

"Eve... I love you."

She loves me back.

Fin

Special Chapter I

Bam

I Can't bear to be apart from her

The two things that I can't quit are e-cigarettes and her... Eve.

I'm one who always uses my head over my heart. Because I know that the heart is all about emotions. And the best way to have control over your emotions is to always be conscious, which comes from the head. But she is my exception. I can't fight my deep emotions. Though I keep telling myself that it's impossible, I still choose to come back to her.

"Did we really happen to meet by chance?"

Eve asked after seeing me blow out my e-cigarette smoke. I was on a date with a guy, yet I ended up on the bed with another woman. If this is not using the heart over the head, I don't know what it is.

I turn to smile at her slightly and shrug.

"I don't know. Maybe it's fate."

"It's funny to hear you say things like this. Seriously. Was it by chance or design?"

"By design."

"How did you know that I'd be here?"

"I have a spy."

I tell her smilingly. Eve tries to figure it out, but she comes up with nothing. I don't reveal anything and instead change the subject. "Don't you have to work today?"

"I do, but... I won't go."

"No. You have to go to work."

"What's this?" She hugs me tightly and whines. "Can't I be naughty for just one day?"

"I don't like someone who's irresponsible. If our time together brings out the worst in you, I have no interest in staying around."

She pulls back from me, panicked.

"Instead of being happy that I want to be with you, you threaten me? Do you really love me?"

"Because I love you... I want you to be a responsible person. I like someone who is mature. Look at the person I came with today. What kind of man do you think he is?"

"You just declared your love for me, and you're already comparing me to another man? If you like him so much, why don't you go with him? Why are you in bed with me now?"

"If I liked him more than you, I wouldn't be here now. Though you're younger than me, for me, you've always been cool. Don't ruin that because we met."

My preaching, which leans toward a threat, causes Eve to exhale heavily and dress grumpily.

"Fine. In the end, our love is not equal. I'm always the one to chase after you, while you're always the one in control." As Eve buttons her shirt, I

walk over and help her, as if I'm trying to make it up to her. She looks at me, still grumpy. I can tell she's worried rather than angry.

"If I go to work... will you disappear?"

"So that's what you're worried about." I laugh and shake my head. "You're trying to cling to me because you're afraid that I'll disappear?"

"..."

"I'm not going anywhere from now on. When you finish your work, I'll be waiting in the condo lobby. We'll meet there and catch up on the four months that we haven't seen each other. Sounds good?"

"Promise that you won't disappear again."

"I told you already. You will be unable to escape me from now on. I let you be the only one to see my tattoo."

Her grumpy face is now all smiles. After I finish buttoning her last button, she hugs me tightly. It's as if she wants to become one with me.

"Can you say you love me again? I want to be sure."

I hug her and whisper into her ear.

"I love you."

Eve goes back to work willingly. As for me, I get dressed and stare out the window as I ponder. If not for Ann, I wouldn't have met Eve.

Yes... Ann was the one who sent me Eve's whereabouts.

Although I stayed away and let time heal my heart, I was able to find out from Ann how Eve was doing over the past few months. But, as you can see, I can't take it any longer. Many times I have started emails to her, only to abandon them in the drafts folder out of fear of what might occur.

I'm afraid that she won't be able to forget me.

I'm afraid that she's already found someone new.

I'm afraid that... she won't answer my email.

My fears fought inside of me. As time goes by, my tolerance has reached its peak, so I had to find a replacement. The guy I came with today was someone I met on the Skytrain. He asked for my LINE ID. I didn't like him, but because he said, "I don't want to regret not doing anything when I had the chance," I decided to open up to him. Today was our first date. We didn't plan to come here at first, but Ann sent me a spoiler about where Eve would be, so we were here.

'Eve has a business meeting today at Hotel xxx. Just in case you want to see her.'

So, I decided to come here.

Ann was always telling me where Eve was, but I chose to ignore her. Yet today, after I decided to date that guy, I know that no one can replace Eve. So if I meet her again and my feelings are the same or stronger, I will not let her go.

Because I may regret it if I do... I've been thinking about the same thing the guy who asked for my LINE ID did.

If someone were to ask me, "Why must it be Eve?" I wouldn't be able to give them the answer. There's no reason. My heart just tells me that it has to be this person, even though my head stops me every time we get close. I remember the first time I looked into Eve's eyes. She was twelve. I liked her the first instant our eyes met. Though I was there because it was my mother's plan, I wasn't emotionally invested in her resentment. I was just being a good girl and doing what I was ordered to do. I was only to be a good sister to Eve.

But this good sister fell in love with that kid. How could I be a good sister, then?

Eve is very charming and confident. She walked over to me and told me she knew everything about my mother's plan, even though she could have just kept quiet. She was ready to make an enemy—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. I admired her for that. Her efforts to be my enemy only made me respect her more. She gave up her dream of becoming an artist to pursue a degree in business because she didn't want my mother to succeed.

She is true to her words.

As for me... I wanted to be a doctor but had to pursue a degree in business because my mother ordered me to. In the end, however, I was stubborn enough to switch to a degree in interior design rather than continue studying something I detested. I had some drawing skills, which was a good thing. I graduated with an admirable grade.

The plan all along was for me to work for Eve's dad and steal as much money as possible for my mother. I had no freedom. The debt I owe her has shaped me into this person. Sometimes I envy all the birds in the sky. They can fly as far as they want. No one can force them. They can split up from their flock and fly alone if they want. And they just fall from the sky when they die.

Often times, I would look down from the second-floor window, wanting to spread my wings and jump to end things. The debt I owe my mother has always suffocated me. I can't live my own life. I can't breathe. So I both envy and admire Eve. She does what she wants. Her determination to protect her father made my heart race.

While she was studying abroad, I felt that the house was too wide and quiet. I didn't know how to behave, aside from following my mother's orders. And so that I don't miss Eve too much, I took her body pillow that still has her scent on it. The body pillow represented Eve. I slept with it every night. And on some nights, I do something unusual with it.

"I miss you so much."

It's common for women to have sexual desires. I've been releasing them on that body pillow, thinking that it was Eve. It's embarrassing, but it will

remain a secret of mine. I'd feel guilty afterwards and wonder how I'd ever face her again. But when she showed up, I knew the real person was better than the body pillow.

"Do you want to be my girlfriend?"

I remember not knowing what had gotten into me. We were talking as if we were enemies, but I asked her to be my girlfriend. I was going to say that I was kidding, but she said yes. So we were in a secret relationship, and the body pillow was no longer useful.

If she finds out what I did to her body pillow, she will tease me until our children are old.

Well. We can't have children.

I laugh as I smoke my e-cigarette and watch the smoke settle in midair. She's probably reached her office by now. She's much more mature and responsible now. Would she know how fast my heart raced the moment I saw her in her checkered suit and high heels?

Dear Current Love (I'm not letting you be my ex ever again; remember this.)

I will probably reach the condo at 6 p.m. If I don't see you, I will knock on every door to find you.

P.S. I'm still hungry for you. Let's eat before we talk.

From your lover

Eve sent me an email. It makes me laugh out loud. Aside from being brave in many ways, she's also the most naughty person I know.

I like it... But I won't tell her, or I won't get to sleep.

Eve is not the only one who has work to do; so do I... I sell products online. As the middleman, I purchase them from China and also custom-make accessories. It's not a lot of money, but it's enough to get by. The majority of my products are keychains, postcards, and anything else that can be manufactured in China. However, if the customers require highly customized products, I must manufacture them in Thailand and sell them at a higher price. Because I have plenty of time, I head back to the condo to ship out some products. My date ended, and in order not to be rude, I called to end it briefly with him.

"I'm sorry, but I think we're not a good fit. I'm sorry I left without saying goodbye."

I'm not one to say much. He tried to say something back, but I just cut the conversation short and hung up before I continued on with my work. I wait in my room for Eve after I go to the post office to ship the product and respond to customer emails. I keep staring at the clock as I wait for it to be 6 p.m. I've never been so excited to wait for something like this before. This is the first time I've had to wait for someone.

Eve... is that person.

Time doesn't help with anything. It just made me miss her more. I think this is the perfect timing. If I had gone to her earlier, the outcome might have been different. She may still be mad at me and ignore me. Or I may not miss her this much.

Now is perfect... But it's a little slow. When will it be 6 p.m.?

My anxiety eventually leads me to go down to wait for her since 5 p.m. I take my phone with me, so I have something to do to kill time. I look at the people that walk past me; I even counted how many there are. One of them triggers my interest.

One with a one-wheel electronic scooter.

It's a woman in a leather jacket, wearing a full protection kit. She walks into the condo with her one-wheel electronic scooter. She's so cool that I look at

her as she walks past me. However, she comes to a halt and turns to face me before walking over.

"I'm sorry. What perfume are you wearing?"

"Huh?"

"I think I caught a whiff of it in the elevator earlier. I can't help but ask now that I have found the source,"

I smile at her directness. Normally, when people see someone wearing pants or perfume they like, they are too shy to ask. But she walks right over and asks out of curiosity.

"Rolling in love."

"Okay. I can get that out of my head now. It really suits you."

"Thank you. Your perfume is also very nice.

What is it?"

"Obsessed."

"That's a great name."

I almost told her that it suited her too—a cool person who uses a perfume that doesn't bother others. She's someone others can easily become obsessed with, just like the perfume name. We smile at each other before she makes her way up the elevator. I look at the clock again. The long hand just reached the number 6. I can only sigh as I go on waiting.

When will it be 6 p.m.? I miss her already.

"Bambi!"

Eve's voice startles me a bit. I turn to look at her with a pounding heart. Another cool person is shouting at me, despite the fact that she stated she'd be here at 6 p.m. She dashes over to hug me.

"You said you'd be here at 6 p.m."

"I can't bear to be apart from you."

Ah... this is what it's like for lovers. We have the same thoughts.

— אולי —

Special Chapter II

Bam

2. Climax

Why am I such a good girl to my mother?

Every child should be a good child to their parents, right? That's what I've always thought since my mother adopted me. When I found out that I would have a family of my own, I felt like I had won the lottery. I promised myself that I would do my best so that the person who adopted me would not regret it.

It's one of those traumas that has stayed with me. When you're abandoned at a young age and one day someone adores and wants to love you, you're afraid that you will lose it at some point. You're worried that they'll stop loving you one day. I'm like that.

I live in fear every single day. It strips me of my identity. After meeting Eve, my twisted logic was gradually corrected. If that person really loves and adores you, they will not lead you down the wrong path. You have to be yourself and think for yourself. You have to live your own life.

"What's your dream?"

Eve inquires as I respond to a customer on my computer about an order. I raise my eyebrow a bit and turn to look at the person who's sitting with her legs crossed and looking straight at me. I reply casually.

"I want to fly... like a bird."

"If it were someone else, they would say they wanted to be a doctor, a prime minister, or the president. You're so original." The naughty one giggles. "You're so mysterious. That makes me love you."

".."

"I love you."

She repeats that, expecting me to say it back. I pretend to roll my eyes and turn my focus back to the computer. She's becoming frustrated.

"I said I love you."

Every time Eve confesses her love to me, I will just smile slightly or pretend not to hear it. That was before we were officially together, with no one standing in our way. I was always uncomfortable when she said that she loved me because I didn't see any possibility of us being together.

My mother was her stepmother.

Her father had feelings for me.

There was no light at the end of the tunnel. So I chose not to say it back to her. But my actions appeared to be too obvious. However, I understand the hurt feelings that the person waiting may have felt as a result of the lack of response. But that was all I could do at that time. I wanted to confess my love only to the one who could truly be in my life.

In the end... Eve is that person, no matter how much time has passed.

"I love you too. Happy?"

"I said it three times, but you only said it once. Who loves the other more is blatantly obvious."

"Saying it more frequently means that you love me more?"

"One with more money is more wealthy."

"What kind of reasoning is that?"

"You can't argue, can you?"

"I love you—once. I love you—twice. I love you—thrice. Happy?"

"Happy."

This is my response after we've been apart for so long. I'm certain of our relationship now. My mother walked away from her father, and he now has a new person to take care of him. There is no longer an intersection that can get in our way. And it seems like I can't move on with anyone else. So she's the one who got that response from me.

"What were you thinking when you got the tattoo?"

Eve changes the question, clearly wanting to talk. We moved in together because it's a waste of money for me to rent another room from Ann. This room also belonged to her, but Eve has already bought it.

"I wanted to be naughty."

"Are you saying that only bad kids get a tattoo?"

"No." I laughed because my answer was vague. "I wanted to be naughty with my mother. It made me feel alive."

"Wow." Eve exclaims as if I were so cool. "Your mother must really dislike tattoos."

"My mother forbade me from getting one. According to her, only convicted criminals have one. So I got it to be a rebel."

"But you wouldn't let your mother see it."

"I wasn't that naughty. I'd never do anything to disappoint my mother." I try not to smile, though I want to laugh at myself. "I'm quietly stubborn, I guess. Aside from the tattoo, I also dropped out of a business degree to pursue a degree in interior design. You were my idol, you know?"

"Geez. It's a strange way to be someone's idol. I feel weird. For me, you're a very good girl to your mother."

"It's probably because I was adopted. I don't want her to feel like she chose the wrong kid to adopt. It would be extremely painful if she said that being disappointed is natural because I am not her flesh and blood... and in the end, I disappointed her."

"You can't let her have her way in everything. Even if she is your biological mom, that still holds true. She must protect you. If she can't, you have to protect yourself."

I like Eve's reasoning. It makes me feel better. I admit that I've been feeling guilty toward my mother. If I went along with her, maybe she would still be living in Eve's house. Or if I tried to control myself, did not get involved with Eve, and gave hope to Uncle, the outcome would be different.

But I felt that that logic was too twisted. My love, respect, and fear for my mother don't mean that I can change from wrong to right.

"I like your tattoo. Why did you choose this pattern?"

She changes the topic again, seeing that I have gone quiet.

"Because of what it says. You're the only one to see it. Something like that."

"How can I be the only one to see it? The person who tattooed it saw it too."

"I wasn't naked. Does that count?"

"I just wanted to pick a fight with you. Haha. But do they tattoo kids under 18? I thought it's against the law."

"Why would I tell my real age? But they didn't ask much. When I picked this design, they just did it."

"The person who did it got to see your smooth, radiant back." She sounds possessive. "Were you hit on?"

"If the person hit on everyone who got a tattoo, there would be no time to do anything else. And... it was a woman."

"Ah... but."

"With two kids."

I know what she was going to say. "Maybe she's a lesbian," or something like that, so I preempted her. Eve sighs as if she's relieved and smiles.

"Should I get one too? I'll get the same one as you."

"Am I the only one who gets to see you naked?"

"..."

When I say that, the naughty one is stunned. It frustrates me. I feel bad, like a close-minded person, even though it happened a long time ago.

"I've never done anything with anyone, but you've done it all. I feel like I'm not living life to the fullest."

"I was trying to forget you. But I imagined that everyone was you."

"Even with a guy?"

"Even with the body pillow."

I laugh and forget all about my frustration. She replies so honestly and frankly that I don't know how to be mad at her. Eve dares to live life. She can say what she likes and dislikes without fear that others will feel bad. She's confident in ways that I couldn't be because of my mother.

My mother kept me within her boundaries. Those boundaries, however, were eventually broken.

"Does your mother know about us yet?" Eve changes the topic again. She's probably afraid that I will sulk because of her past. I know what she's thinking, so I go along with her.

"No."

"I think I will tell my father."

She's always courageous. I look at her, stunned. This is a sensitive issue. Coming out, though your parents are already aware of it, is still not easy.

"Aren't you afraid that he would get in our way? Especially since it's me."

"He can't do anything about it. He has no right. My life is mine. He's with Ann, and I never get in the way or say anything about it."

"Then should I also tell my mom?" I mutter as I ponder. "But what's the point of doing so?"

"Just let her know what's going on in your life. But she has no right to order you around. I want you to be an official part of my life. It would be similar to when people get married and announce it so that everyone knows the other person is theirs. I will tell my father... you are mine."

It's reasonable. When I see her courage, it makes me think that I should do something about us too.

"Then, I will tell my mother as well."

This is one of my bravest moments. Not only did I make my mother and uncle fight so hard that my mother had to move out of the house, but I also shamelessly came to see her at her new house to tell her about Eve and me, though I can just let it be a matter between us. I haven't seen my mother in four months. Today, I arrived at the address my mother gave me without informing her in advance. I secretly hoped she wouldn't be home. However, my mother notices me even before I press the bell because she is watering her trees outside.

"Bam."

My mother is wearing a t-shirt and loose pants. It's a different look from her usual confident woman persona. It surprises me a lot. We just stood there

and stared at each other for a long time. Eventually, my mother invites me in.

"Why are you standing there? Come in. It's hot."

"Thank you."

My mother's house is a two-story home in a neighborhood of multi-million-baht homes. I guess she bought it using the money she got from Eve's father. She chose a place that suited her taste. She probably desires a good society in which there is plenty of parking and neighbors respect one another. There's a lake, park, and pool here. It's a bit far from the city, but it's nice and quiet.

When I walk into the house, my mother's lover, who was the factory manager when I worked there, stares at me, stunned. She wasn't expecting a guest, especially the daughter of her lover, who used to work for her. She appears slightly embarrassed. However, I remained emotionless. I just raised my hands to pay respect to her politely.

"Hello."

"This is my daughter. And this is Aey, my lover."

My mother introduces us casually and without embarrassment, despite the fact that her lover is a woman. I just nod. My mother's lover excuses herself so we can talk in private.

"We haven't met for a while. I invited you over so many times, but you wouldn't come. How are you? Are you good?"

"I'm fine."

"What are you doing now?"

"I sell stuff online. I'm also looking for a job where I can put my university education to good use."

"If you need any help, let me know. Why not open your own company?"

To be honest, aside from the matter with Eve's father, my mother is a very kind person. Though she was quite strict with me, it was all for my own benefit.

"It's okay. I'd like to try it on my own first. You seem happy."

"I would be happier if you came to live with me."

I shake my head and smile without saying anything. My mother's lover then brings us cold water. So my mother invites her to join us in our conversation.

"It's okay. We're family. It will allow us to be closer together. What brought you here today? There must be something you want to talk to me about."

"I'm just here to update you on my life. I'm also in a relationship with someone."

"You have a lover?"

"Yes. We're living together."

My mother seems a bit shocked. "Living together" is not a phrase parents want to hear unless there is a marriage license or proof of a stable relationship.

"Who is it?"

"Eve."

My answer makes my mother swallow hard.

"I'm not here to ask for your permission." I try to hide my fist because I'm very afraid of my mother. I've acted bravely with her a few times in the past, and this time is no exception. I have to disregard how she feels about it.

I will fly. My dream is to be a bird and be free. I'll step out of my mother's shadow.

"You don't have to ask for my permission. You're all grown up now."

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"Why do you always interpret what I say the worst way possible? I may have been too strict with you in the past, so you doubt that what I say is true. But this time, I'm being honest with you. Your life is yours. I have a woman as a lover. What can I say? I can't possibly tell you to find a lover who's a man."

"..."

"I love you. So I will also love who you love."

"But it's Eve." I repeat that. My mother just smiles at me. It's the most sincere smile I've ever seen from her.

"The fact that it's Eve makes me love her all the more."

What I was afraid of went well. Shouldn't there be more obstacles in love? I come back to my room, confused. I sit and think about it for a while before Eve returns and sits next to me.

"You got back before me." Eve leans on my shoulder. Her commute home from work had to have worn her down. "How was it? You talked to your mother already, right?"

"Yes. What about you? Have you told Uncle?"

"Yes."

"How was it?"

We both go silent. Eve looks at me like she saw a ghost.

"It's too easy." She says this with a worried face. "Dad said that my life is mine. I should do whatever makes me happy, even if it's you."

"Same." This time, I'm the one who looks stunned. "My mother said the exact same thing. My life is mine. She will love whoever I love. She loves it even more because it's you. It's... isn't it too easy?"

"Yes!" Eve seems to agree with me. "Love should be more difficult. There should be lots of obstacles. We have to fight until we're discouraged, cry, and say goodbye to each other. Then, four years later, we'll meet and declare, "We don't give a damn what others say."

"That sounds familiar." My eyes twitch a little as I reflect on my life. "Didn't we already do all that, though it was only four months?"

"Ah. True. We've been through everything I just said. Or... have we passed the climax?"

"Probably."

"So our love is accepted by all, and there will be no more obstacles?"

We smile and laugh at each other.

"Yeah. When it's easy, it's so easy."

"Come to think of it, there's one more obstacle." Eve is all serious and looks at me as if she's thinking about something. I look into her eyes and know what she's thinking.

"Again? You do it every day."

"Will you be the obstacle to our love?" She pushes me down on the sofa and climbs on top of me. "Your clothes are already too much of an obstacle. Let's celebrate passionately and scream."

"You're so naughty. But I like it."

As she laughs, Eve leans in for a cuddle. While we're teasing, the naughty one pauses and whispers into my ear.

"Let's do as we promised from now on."

"What promise?"

"Let's be together forever."

I smile at her when she says that.

"You don't forget anything."

"If it concerns you, I never forget anything. From now on, we will share and tell each other everything. We will live as though we're the same person. Let's not care about others. Let's grow very old together. Sounds good?"

"Good." I recall something while she is bending down to me.

"Ah."

"Huh?"

"There's one thing I haven't told you."

"What?" She seems interested. "How can you make me want to know at a time like this? I am unable to continue."

"Well..."

"What? What? What is it?"

"I did it with..."

"..."

"Your body pillow."

"Shit!!!!"

Now this is the climax.

Special Chapter III

Bam

3. The tattoo

"I like your tattoo."

"It's good that you like it... but... ah... you can't continue on like this. Are you trying to kill me?"

"I can't stop because of your tattoo."

I want to laugh, but this is not a good time. To be honest, I'm surprised by her level of energy. She seems like a delicate woman. She barely has the strength to lift things. But when it comes to this, she is a force to be reckoned with. She's never tired. It's me who's almost out of breath.

Actually, I wasn't anticipating this sort of outcome. I tattooed... only to rebel against my mother.

I've become a bird in a golden cage that can't fly since being adopted. My mother was extremely strict in all aspects of my life. I can't deny that she had good intentions and played a significant role in my healthy development into the person I am today. But it was sometimes too much, and I wanted to rebel.

I remember going to a tutoring school and walking past a tattoo parlor. It was a Saturday afternoon, and I wasn't wearing a student uniform. I've walked past the shop several times and always wondered if getting a tattoo

hurt. Some got a very large tattoo, and some only got a small one for themselves to look at. But it will be on your skin forever.

"Don't you ever get one. Only convicted criminals have tattoos. I don't like it. Your beautiful skin will be marked."

And because my mother doesn't like it, I decided to walk into the shop. A lady looked up at me. There wasn't any other customer in the place. She didn't ask for my age. She didn't care who I was or where I was from. Her smile makes me feel less nervous.

"Will it hurt?"

"Like ant bites. It also depends on which one you want to get. If you want a big one, you will have to endure pain, and it will take several days to get it done."

"I want one that only takes one day and inflicts the least pain."

"Do you have anything in mind?"

Which design? I look at all the designs on the wall and look away. I wasn't going to get a tiger or Japanese or Indian letters.

"I want something minimal. A sentence in English."

"Which one? And where do you want it tattooed?"

I've already decided that I want it somewhere I can cover with my clothes because I don't want my mother to see it. I want to rebel, but I also want to be a good girl for my mother. So I got one on my back, just under my shoulder blade. I came up with a sentence right then and asked the lady to pick a beautiful font for me.

You're the only one to see this.

I chose that because I intend to not let anyone see it if it is not the person I chose or am certain is the one. That includes my mother. Getting the tattoo wasn't that scary. It came out beautifully on my back. I think it's very chic and doesn't give the feel of a convicted criminal, like my mother said. Yet I hid it. It will be a secret that no one knows.

Yet, one day... suddenly, a naughty kid entered my room as I was changing and saw it.

Eve.

She probably didn't see what it said, yet she saw it. Aside from me and that lady at the tattoo parlor, she was the first and only person to see it. At that moment, I don't know why I was glad it was her, even though I was mad that she came in without knocking. I even thought for a split second whether it was her who would be the only person to see me naked. If it was Eve, it would be nice.

And it really is Eve who gets to see it clearly. She's the one I allow to see my tattoo and read it, and I don't plan to let anybody else see it from now on.

Eve is still kissing my tattoo nonstop as her fingers are aggressively working on my body. It smashes in slow and fast. I'm trembling all over.

"Stop. It's been many rounds already. I can't anymore."

"Your tattoo arouses me."

"I'll remove it."

"No. Because I'm the only one who can see it."

She moves her lips down low and licks upward. I jerk and scream. Her fingers are caressing the middle part of my body after it's done working on the inside. I make a lot of loud noises. I dig my hands into the bed sheet until it's all crumbled. I begged. I requested. But she won't stop. And the most frustrating part is that my body doesn't reject her.

"Stop, Eve. Please. I... Ahhh."

Eventually, my body caved in. I exploded. The sudden gush of fluid on the bed jolts us both. I look at the wet bed, embarrassed, and point at her as I back away until my back is against the head board.

"If you come in, I'll kick you."

"Bambi."

"Don't Bambi me!"

"Don't be selfish."

"How am I selfish? I let you have your way until I'm all out of strength. And..." I look at the bed sheet and raise my hands to cover my face.

"Damned. I won't let you have your way anymore. I won't let something like this happen ever again."

She crawls up to me and presses me down onto the bed again. I try to get away. Yet she becomes all agitated and pulls my hair.

"I'm not done. Help me."

Though I'm a little taken aback, when she feeds me, I eagerly accept it and begin to comply with her when she moans. Eve is so hot that I am completely obsessed with her. I want her to be as elated as I am.

So I'm now officially addicted to sex.

As for Eve, she's addicted to my tattoo.

This is probably karma for my rebellion against my mother. Now I end up having to do this nonstop. But I'll admit that...

I'm happy to do it.