## Chapter 34: The Return of the Return

Jan, 14th 2016

07:45

Narita International Airport

I was going through immigration check with a very tired body. Traveling across the sea from London to Tokyo, which took more than half a day and a full night, is not fun at all... Especially on a flight where I could barely sleep last night.

Moreover, after arriving, I still have to rush to a meeting at the ABCD company office in Minato right away in the afternoon, as planned before.

I can't really blame the person who planned the schedule because my arrival was not part of the original plan. It was a sudden decision made in agreement between me and my father during a phone call last week.

"Have you changed your mind and decided to come back and start working here, dear?"

I could sense the careful tone in myfather's question.

"Actually... I'm starting to feel bored doing nothing. I was just about to talk to you about this, Dad. "

I don't know why, but since I agreed to study in England in the field he chose for me seven years ago, I've clearly felt that my life has become completely free afterward.

My father almost never interfered in my life again, except for giving advice about my studies. This became even more obvious after I graduated with a master's degree in the same field last year. To be honest, I should have returned to Thailand immediately after that.

But I didn't...

I gave a simple reason: I was exhausted from six years of intense studying and needed a break My only condition was that I could take this break anywhere I wanted.

But it must not be Thailand...

What surprised me was that, even for such a big issue, my father listened with a calm demeanor. He simply sighed, signaling that he didn't quite agree, but the words that followed completely contradicted that sigh.

"It's up to you, my dear. "

It was an answer I never expected to hear from my father. No matter how curious I was, I didn't dare to ask again, fearing he might change his mind and force me to return home for real.

I spent a whole year aimlessly wasting time, wandering around Europe, sometimes crossing continents to America or Australia, before returning to London again.

Eventually, I started to feel that I had become too purposeless. My father's question on the phone last week made me seriously reconsider everything.

"I want to start working... but /feel like I'm not ready to go back to Thailand. "

My soft tone must have made him worry, as his next words were filled with tenderness, as if comforting a little girl.

But those words only made me feel pain.

"1 thought you already healed, Phim... "

Healed? That means my father still doesn't understand anything at all. He doesn 't realize that what happened to my feelings seven years ago wasn't just ordinary pain.

But it was a scar that leaves a long, deep cit mark.

Worse than that, it was a wound that didn 't appear on the body, visible to the naked eye.

But it appears clearly in my heart.

A scar, by its nature, never truly heals. Right now, it doesn't hurt because there's nothing to trigger it. But I'm not sure at all that ifl return to the same environment, full of old memories...

Will I still be able to endure it without feeling pain?

Of course, I swallowed the words that truly reflected my feelings and answered my father in the calmest voice I could manage. "1fyou mean that matter, Dad.. I've gotten much better now. '

"Ifyou say so, Phim, that puts my mind at ease. "

"The thing Ifear the most... is that you mightfall back into depression, like in thefirst two years after you moved there. "

We both fell silentfor a moment before I spoke again, in a tone that sounded clear and convincing on the surface.

"Don 't worry. There's no way I'll go back to being that weak again. "

I answered without being entirely sure whether it was trulyfrom my heart orjust words to encourage myself

"Here what we'll do... I have an idea. "

"What is it?" I asked.

"Our company has a big project right now. We need to collaborate with a Japanese maker. I want you to help me by going to Japan to managing the production processfor three months. Thisjob seems like it would suit you. "

His words felt like a light at the end ofthe tunnel. And that's why I had to get everything sorted out within a week and make sure I was in Tokyo in time for the meeting, which my father had said the team had already arrived in advance.

"Nong Phim! Over here!"

I turned toward the voice and saw a middle-aged man with slightly exaggerated gestures waving at me at the meeting point. I remembered meeting him once before—at my engagement ceremony with Phi Pun seven years ago.

It was Phi O, or Olarn, who held the position of MD in Manufacturing. He was one of the people my father trusted and relied on the most.

I forced a weak smile while pressing my hands together in a polite wai to greet Phi O, who quickly rushed over to take my suitcase from my hands with great care. He then led me toward a limousine taxi that was already waiting nearby.

"We'll head to the hotel first. Let Nong Phim freshen up a bit. It'll take about an hour or so from the airport to the hotel.

I felt utterly drained when I heard how long the journey would take. I couldn't help but let myself slump forward onto the seat like someone completely out of energy

"Nong Phim, are you hungry?"

"No, I don't think I can eat," I replied.

"The meeting starts in the afternoon. Nong Phim should have some time to refresh yourself a bit. We'll stay in Tokyo for only two days. After that, we'll move to Osaka for about three months."

I immediately became more interested in the conversation with the older man in front of me. Looking at him closely, he had a similar demeanor, appearance, and gestures resembled Aunt Tue from the fashion industry, almost like they were identical.

"Will you be staying with me for the whole three months, Phi Olan?"

"0h, no. I'm going back on Monday. Nong Phim will be staying with the head of the Production Engineer department, who is a woman. Khun Phot assigned her to guide you to learn the job."

I unconsciously furrowed my brows a little. My father had told me I was coming here as the Vice President to managing the entire preparation process. He also mentioned that he wanted me to learn from this project.

But he never said anything about learning from an Engineer.

"But don't worry, Nong Phim. She's very talented and she is the main incharge for this project. You'll definitely learn a lot from her." f'Yes," I replied briefly.

I leaned back against the seat again, losing interest in the conversation. But Phi Olan, with his overly friendly personality, kept chatting away non-stop. I half-listened, half-ignored, occasionally responding just enough to maintain politeness.

Phi Olan could talk about anything and everything, even things that shouldn't be said. And yet, he said them.

"When Nong Phim coming back like this... Khun Pun must be so happy. "

True, my eyes were still staring blankly out of the window, but ifPhi Olan had taken a moment to notice, he would have seen how tense my face had become, just from hearing the name of the man I hated so much.

"Every time I see him, Khun Pun always says he misses you.

"Is that so?" I replied flatly.

I replied because I couldn't think of anything better to say. From what I'd heard, it wasn't like that at all. Everyone who knew both ofus always brought me news, saying they'd seen Phi Pun here or there.

With different women every time...

But I didn't blame him much for this. After all, over the past seven years, I had hardly fulfilled the role of a good fiancée. Every time he planned to visit me in London, I would always wait until he arrived, only to then tell him that I had coincidentally made plans to visit a friend in another country atjust the same time.

Not to mention, I never called him, and I rarely answered his calls, so rarely that they could probably be counted on one hand. On top ofthat, I let different men come into my life as if I were still single, as ifl didn't have a fiancé.

If Phi Pun was lucky about one thing, it would probably be this.

Among all the men who came into my life, not a single one could win my heart, no matter how much effort they put into treating me well.

Most of the time, it ended with just a kiss.

Because after each meaningless kiss, the words I once said to someone would always come back to haunt me, echoing in my mind every time, forcing everything to end without any continuation.

24 promise that, in the end, turned into a curse. The words that said I would belong to him alone...

Only him, and no one else...

"We're here, Nong Phim. Go get some rest, and meet me at the lobby at noon."

Phi Olan's voice pulled me out of my thoughts again.

"I'll take you for lunch before we head to the office in Minato."

I tried to shake off the fragile thoughts lingering in my mind as I handled the check-in process and headed straight to the room Phi Olan had arranged for me.

The room was surprisingly large and luxurious, unlike typical accommodations in Japan, where space is usually utilized efficiently. But not this room who had a separate living area from the bedroom, along with a small kitchen counter and a dining table neatly set up.

As I walked into the bedroom, I was greeted by a wide glass window showcasing a high view of Tokyo from the 17th floor.

Beautiful... but lonely,

I collapsed onto the bed, exhausted, and began to worry about the unfamiliar and new experiences that lay ahead. Suddenly, I felt as though the blood in my body was surging powerfully.

I was so excited I couldn't sleep.

"Our office is on the 32nd floor, Nong Phim. This branch is mainly used for trading products from Japan to sell in Thailand, but there's one product that sells exceptionally well."

Phi Olan briefed me as we rode the elevator to the Tokyo branch ofABCD, located in a towering skyscraper in the Minato area.

"So, five years ago, our company decided to take over a small production factory here to reduce the costs of purchasing. Since the product has been performing so well in Thailand, there's now a project to set up the same production line in Thailand to cut down on shipping costs."

"Sounds interesting,"

I said and truly meant it. Six years of studying had cultivated a business mindset and perspective in me so thoroughly that even I could feel it. "For this project, the key role falls on the Production Engineer."

Ding!

The elevator signal indicated we had reached our destination floor. Phi Olan led me into the office, continuing to brief me as much as possible to save time since the meeting had already started some time ago.

"The Engineering team arrived since yesterday, to prepare meeting in advance... Oh, 100k, they're presenting nght now."

Phi Olan, who lead us to the large meeting room with transparent glass walls, gestured for me to look inside. I could see the team actively engaged in their discussion.

Inside the room, the table arranged in a UI-shape was almost completely occupied. At the center stood a whiteboard, where a tall figure was writing in neat, angular handwriting that seemed oddly familiar, as if I had seen it somewhere before.

There was nothing particularly unusual about the meeting itself.

What was unusual, however, was how familiar that side profile and broad yet delicate back seemed to me.

A back I once buried my face into while crymg countless times...

A back I once hugged tightly and clung to for long stretches of time...

A back that had once been my only source ofwarmth and comfort.

My heart beat fast when Phi Olan opened the door to the meeting room and led me to the center of the room. He clapped his hands to grab everyone's attention, signaling them to listen to what he was about to say.

And I knew well how I should compose myself.

"Everyone, this is Ms. Phimmanas Tantiburanakorn, our Vice President, who will be helping to managing this project."

"Hello, it's a pleasure to meet you all."

I said, bowing slightly and giving a sweet smile to everyone in the room.

Only one person remained still, staring at the whiteboard without turning to look.

"Nong Phim, the person in front ofthe board is who you'll be working with for the next three months,"

Phi Olan's words drew the attention ofthe person whose profile had made my heart race, causing her to turn and meet my eyes.

And in that instant, all my doubts and hesitation vanished completely.

As soon as I saw the slender face framed by elegant brows, a sharp nose, and thin lips curved into a proud, almost arrogant smile.

At that moment, the deep scar on my heart suddenly transformed into a fresh wound, as if it had just been inflicted moments ago with almost no effort at all.

The pain even more intensely as I met those brown eyes staring back at me, her expression almost impossible to read.

Underneath the icy composure that nearly took my breath away.

Those almond-shaped brown eyes gazing at me felt like blades cutting into my wound, making blood gush out uncontrollably.

I felt as ifl were about to stop breathing, as though I had lost too much blood.

There was no mistake.

It's really her.

The one person that I wished so hard not to meet again in this entire lifetime.

Kiran Phipityapongsa.

## Chapter 35: Intern

"Can I change it?"

"Change? Change what, Nong Phim?"

Phi Olan asked, his eyes wide as he hesitate, to ask Phimmanas who was sitting next to him, with her arms crossed and legs stretched out, was exuding an aura of displeasure.

Her sharp and elegant face, which I hadn't seen in so long, now looked unmistakably irritated. Her beautiful brows were furrowed tightly, and her full lips were pressed into a thin line, clearly showed it all.

I am feeling very conflicted and uncertain.

But even that couldn't hurt me more than seeing the once-beautiful brown eyes, eyes that used to sparkle like a shimmering sea, captivating me completely, now replaced with nothing but cold, hardened determination as she glanced this way and that. She looked at everything,

Except me.

"Change the person who will be teaching me,"

Phim said, her sweet yet sharp voice carrying no hint Of humor.

I instinctively swallowed hard and shut my eyes tightly. The memory Of being rejected by Phimmanas when she refused to partner with me for a group project in high school, simply because she was angry I didn't go home with her, came flooding back. That memory stung just as much now as it did then.

Phim's attitude is still the same, it hasn't changed at all.

But what about her feelings?

Are they still the same, too?

"Why is that, Nong Phim?"

Phi Olan's expression was clearly surprised. The situation unfolding before him was clearly something he had never expected. Fortunately, Phim had chosen to voice her request only after the meeting had ended.

And now, it was just the three of us left in the meeting room, continuing our discussion.

"1fNong Phim's concern is that Kiran is still young and might not have enough knowledge, there's no need to worry. Kiran isn't an ordinary young person."

"She's a special one."

Phim has reached this point, she couldn't help but glance at Phi Olan with doubt. Are you sure what you just said was meant not to insult her?

"Kiran is really good at setting up production lines. She's already done four or five, and the ones she built have super high productivity and efficiency, like they're skyrocketing. She's basically the star of the Production Engineer team. "

Phim stayed completely silent, not saying anything, which made it seem like Phi Olan was just talking to himself.

"She might look like she's always dizzy from mosquito spray, but actually, she's the youngest department head in the whole company, Nong Phim. At her age, she should still be a junior engineer. So, she's definitely not just an ordinary person."

There you go, Phi Olan even used the mosquito spray joke, which was something I used to tease him about, to try to convince the cold-hearted Vice President sitting in front of him

It'll probably work.

"Changing the person who will teaches you isn't impossible,"

I said in a calm, steady voice.

Phi Olan immediately turned to look at me, his eyes wide with shock, but it was already too late for him to stop what I was about to say next.

"But it would mean that all the personnel assignments and plans we've already set in place would have to be completely changed just to meet the demands ofyou... just one person."

Those beautiful brown eyes finally looked up and met mine, though they were filled with an intense, fiery anger.

At least now she was looking at me. "so, you need to have a good reason." "1 don't know what reason you have."

At this point, Phimmanas bit her lower lip tightly, making it very obvious. Phi Olan quickly stepped in, as usual, resorting to the Chairman's authority when he found himself cornered. He always did this in tough situations.

"Nong Phim, let's just say I'm asking this as a favor. This task was personally assigned by Khun Phot, and he never changes a decision once it's made. I really want you to give Kiran a chance. If it doesn't work out, I'll talk to your father myself, okay?"

Phimmanas tilted her chin up arrogantly. From refusing to look, now she was staring straight at me all the time. But there was a fleeting flicker of something in her brown eyes.

I can't interpret the meaning as I use to.

"'Fine. If yo're not changing, then don't changing. Let's just say I'm doing this for my fhther."

"Otherwise, someone might accuse me of not being professional."

The reception dinner for the Vice President that evening was kept simple, held at an elegant restaurant on the ground floor ofthe hotel where Phim was staying.

This was out of consideration from Phi Olan, who sympathized with the Vlce President for having traveled so far and still not having had a proper rest.

I chose to sit far away, on the opposite side of where Phim was seated. I didn't want to irritate her any more than I already had. Because it was already clear enough to know that.

How much... She despised me.

"You've just been poking at your food for a while now. I don't think I've seen you eat anything,"

Said Topp, the junior engineer who came along to observe the project. He looked at me curiously, as it was unusual for me. Normally, I'd be a fast eater, especially when alcohol was involved.

But tonight, it turned out differently.

I could only force a weak smile at Topp, unable to think of any explanation for the uncomfortable situation 1 had found myself stuck in this dilemma unable to move forward or back.

To be fair, it's not like I only learned about everything today. Honestly, the real reason I swallowed my pride and applied for a position at ABCD in the first place was because of a faint, desperate hope. A hope that, one day, I might see Phim again...

Even if it was only as her employee.

But I never expected to meet her like this, here, at this moment, and in this situation.

Last week, I, who was only mid-level department head, I was unexpectedly summoned by the company's Chairman.

His calm, straightforward tone as he spoke to me so matter-of-factly still echoed in my mind:

"Phimmanas will be learning the job from you. As an intern."

Those words shook me to my core.

The excitement made my heart race like a drumbeat, pounding endlessly.

At the same time, fear and anxiety over what I had done seven years ago haunted me so much that I could barely close my eyes to sleep.

I couldn't decide what worse: Phim who had moved and almost forgotten everything, or Phim who still held onto anger and still clinging to the past.

Which Pim would hurt me more ?

I just know it will definitely hurt.

There was no avoiding the pain.

"Kiran, it S timefor you and me to take responsibilityfor what we 've done, '

The Chairman said. "What do you mean by that, sir? "

I asked hesitantly.

"You 're the only one who can bring Phim back to the person she used to be.

"I've underestimated Phim Sfeelings 100 much. I thought it was just puppy love, something typicalfor teenagers. But I was wrong... completely wrong. "

"Phimfelt so much more for you... so much more.

"Even now, though she says she better, I can still tell. My child isn 't the same as before, not even close. "

"And since you 're the one who caused her this much pain..... "

"You 're the only one who can heal the wounds in Phim 's heart. "

Here we go again, another one ofthe Chairman's peculiar reasons. After working with him for several years, I've come to understand that once the Chairman has committed about something, it's nearly impossible to change his mind.

"But...

"No buts....'



"Let'sjust say we 're both in the same boat now. "I'm afraid Phim will be hurt than before. " "That not going to happen. "

"I believe I know my daughter well enough.

You could say I was cornered by reason or simply unable to defy the Chairman's orders. Either way, in the end, I had to face Phimmanas in the situation I had least wanted to encounter.

Of course, she was still the Phim who hated me, who was angry, and who wasn't as healed as she claimed to be.

"So, Miss Phim, you're so beautiful. Do you have a boyfriend yet?"

The voice of Phi Chart, a sales rep stationed at the Minato branch, drifted into my ears, pulling my attention back to the dinner in front of me. I couldn't help but feel curious about the same thing.

"'Chart, shut up. Nong Phim already engaged, to Khun Pun." Phi Olan interjected before Phim even needed to answer.

That sentence made it immediately clear to me..

Phim hadn 't broken offher engagement yet.

My mind couldn 't help but wander, imagining that maybe she had decided to give Pun another chance. But that thought alone sent my heart plummeting to the floor.

"Phi Olan, I'll excuse myself. I'm really exhausted,"

Phim said.

"0h, sure, sure, Nong Phim,"

Phi Olan replied quickly.

Phim stood up, flashing a sweet smile at everyone at the table as a polite farewell. Of course, that smile didn't extend to me in the slightest. The moment our eyes met, her smile turned into a tense, scowling expression.

Phi Olan glanced at me, gesturing subtly for me to follow her and escort the

Vice President. Without even thinking, I nodded in agreement. I followed Phimmanas at a distance, keeping far enough to not draw attention, but soon enough, she noticed. She spun around sharply, her face darkened with irritation.

Her voice was short and cold, and even the dumbest person alive could have picked up on the meaning.

It was obvious she was upset.

"Why are you following me?" she snapped.

I instinctively widened my eyes in a pleading manner, forgetting for a moment just how much she despised me.

"1'm not following you. I just happen to be going the same way."

"How can we be going the same way? Phi Olan said you're staying at a different hotel,"

Phim's voice turned sharp as we both stopped waiting in front ofthe elevator. I shrugged casually, answering her with a natural teasing tone.

It's almost as a reflex, a self-defense mechanism.

"Where Phi Olan stays is his business."

'But I'm staying here."

Phim let out a heavy sigh, clearly signaling her frustration. I acted as if I didn 't notice, though deep down, I wasn't as unaffected as I pretended to be. It was hard to endure being so despised by the one person I had loved my entire life.

Bad luck struck when a crowd of people arrived to wait for the elevator at the same time. Reaching the 17th floor took much longer than expected, as the elevator stopped at almost every floor. Phim's irritation became more and more obvious.

Meanwhile, I couldn 't help but let a small smile creep onto my lips.

The crowd in the elevator, ironically, worked to my advantage, forcing us into close proximity. Now, the small figure stood right in front of me.

So close that I could catch the faint, complex scent of her hair, her skin, and her clothes drifting toward me.

The loose strands of hair from her tied-up style brushed lightly against her slender neck, just inches away from my face.

It left me feeling strangely dazed, as if I had momentarily lost my grip on reality.

Unfortunately, everyone exited the elevator on the 10th floor, leaving just Phim and me alone inside. Without hesitation, Phim instinctively moved to the opposite corner of the elevator, as far away from me as possible.

As for me, I couldn't help but glance at her out of instinct.

Phim today looked even more beautiful than she already had been. Perhaps it was the way her sharp features, now slightly scowling, were subtly enhanced by expensive makeup, or the perfectly coordinated outfit that gave her an elegant, refined appearance, so different from the girl I had known seven years ago.

'What are you staring at!

Her voice rang out sharply, echoing through the elevator, making me flinch. Not even a glance was allowed?

It reminded me Of an Old saying, when you 're not the one, everything you do is wrong.

"'It's been so long since we last saw each Other. Can't I look at you for just a moment?"

'Il.. . miss you, Phim."

The reflection in the elevator mirror showed the flushed face of the person beside me after I gave my honest answer. But it wasn't shyness causing her to blush, it was anger.

Her next words, spoken in a low, trembling voice that turned raspy, were a clear indication of her being utterly furious, just like every time she reached her breaking point,

"I don't want you to talk like we're so close anymore."

"Don't forget where we stand now."

"Remember who I am, and who you are."

If it had been me from seven years ago, I would have hung my head in defeat, pressed the button to exit the elevator immediately, and fled the scene. I'd probably even have bought a plane ticket back to Thailand the very same night.

But I have changed. Working with many different people with different personalities made my soft heart become thicker and stronger. Harsh words from Phim don't hurt me any less.

But I learned to deal with it better than before.

"Ma'am... Yes Ma'am."

I answered the command and smiled a little while using my index and middle fingers to touch the right side of my forehead and then pulled them away quickly, like the salute Of a soldier. She looked at me with eyes full Of doubt.

But I still smiled at her.

"From now on, should I call you 'Vice' every time? Is that okay?"

"Anything is fine, as long as it's not calling my name."

I'm confused.

Finally, we reached the 17th floor, which took a very long time to get to. She hurriedly walked out first, while I followed slowly. But in the end, we both stopped and stood next to each other in front of the room.

"Don't tell me, you stay in the room next door."

"1 don't want to say that, but the truth is, yes."

She sighed heavily in frustration and hurriedly tapped the keycard, about to open the door. "Wait, Vice."

"What is it?"

"Tomorrow, meet at 8 AM in the lobby. Don't be late. We have a presentation. "

She nodded quickly as if she didn't care, then pushed the door open just as I called out again.

"One more thing, Vice."

"What else! "

I stood with my arms crossed, leaning my head against my own room door, giving a sweet smile, the kind that Pok called a "gentle, warm smile," before making an innocent doe-eyed expression, like a little deer, when I spoke to the grumpy person standing in front of me.

"Good night." I said.

Bang!

I was left standing there with my smile frozen as the small person responded to my sweet smile by slamming the door in my face so hard that the sound probably echoed all the way down to the first floor. But there was nothing I could do but slowly walk into my own room.

But just as I was about to collapse onto the soft bed, a loud scream from the room next door made me jump.

"Uhhhhhhhhh... "

I quickly pressed my ear against the wall ofthe room next to Phim's, and I could still hear a few more screams echoing from inside.

Damn it.

How can 1 tell Phim.

That this room doesn't have soundproofing!

Chapter 36: Sensei

The sound of knocking on the door, steady and continuous, finally woke me up. But before I could force my eyes open and stare blankly at the ceiling, I had to rub my ears and eyes for quite some time to fully wake myself up.

The sleepier I felt, the faster and louder the knocking became. That sound annoyed and irritated me so much that I grabbed the hotel robe and quickly put it over my light, thin nightgown. Then, I rushed to the door and yanked it open forcefully, intending to make the person knocking realize someth ing.

That they were being extremely rude!

Just wait, I'm going to scold them until they're speechless!

But when I saw the person knocking on the door, it was me who ended up speechless. The person knocking so rapidly and persistently to wake me up was the same person who kept me awake almost the entire night!

Kiran stood with her arms crossed, wearing a beige pantsuit that made her already fair skin look even whiter. She wore high heels-not too tall-but enough to make her tall and slender figure look even more elegant and striking.

Her long, straight black hair was parted in the middle and tied back low, showing off her small, proud face with just a hint of makeup. What was strange, though, was that her long, brown eyes weren't looking directly at my face like they usually did.

Following Kiran's gaze, I finally noticed that the collar of my robe had slipped so low that it barely covered anything. My face instantly burned with heat as I quickly grabbed the robe's collar and pulled it up high, almost instinctively.

### "Kiran!"

Kiran was startled and stepped back a pace, and raised both hands to shoulder level like a criminal surrendering to the police. Her face was flushed bright red, the color spreading to her ears. Her behavior was full of susprclon.

I couldn't hold back my breath and asking,

"Did you see anything?"

This time, Kiran shut her eyes tight and shook her head rapidly, like a doll on a car dashboard. Her voice, stammering and unconvincing, added to the scene.

'No, no! I don't see anything. I don't see the cleavage, I don't see any breasts, I don't see any pink lace nightgown. I don't see anything at all."

Clearly....„

### "Kiran!"

"Enough, no need to explain anymore."

The more she explained, the worse it got for me. I was sure my face was now so red I couldn't imagine it getting any redder. Maybe it was because I was annoyed at myself for accidentally calling someone by her nickname, making it seem like we were close. It wasn't because I was embarrassed.

Really.

"So, why are you knocking on other people's doors for fun? What do you want?"

This time, Kiran raised an eyebrow in surprise. That troublemaker folded her arms again, looking even more serious than before.

"Well, we have a meeting at the lobby at 8 a.m., and it's already 7:30. So, I came to check if the Deputy Director is awake yet. "

That sentence made my heart sink. Right, I had a presentation to attend today about preparing a new production line with the Japanese maker we recently took over, at 9:30 at the office.

And here I was, wasting time.

"You'd better hurry and shower, get dressed, and come down by 8:30 at the latest. Otherwise, you won't have time for breakfast."

"1 got it, alright."

Bang!

In the end, it was nearly 9 a.m. by the time I reached the lobby. Kiran was already there, standing with her arms crossed and a frown on her face. Just as I was about to turn toward the hotel's breakfast area, her slender hand grabbed my wrist.

"What are you trying to do, Deputy Director?"

"1'm going to have breakfast. What's so hard to understand?"

The tall woman didn't bother listening to me at all. She held my hand firmly and led me outside to where a taxi was already waiting in front ofthe hotel. By all rights, I should have pulled my hand away and scolded her for her audacity.

But for some reason, the warm and familiar grip of her hand made me lose myself. Without even realizing it, I was following her like a child, and by the time I came to my senses, I was already sitting in the back seat next to her.

"Here's some yogurt, and this is orange juice. Eat, Deputy Director."

As if I would let myselfbe taken off guard again! I slapped the yogurt out of her hand with force, furrowing my brows and crossing my arms. I wanted to make it clear that I wasn't happy with how things were going.

"Do you need to hurry like this?"

This time, it was Kiran who looked serious. She spoke in a calm yet resolute tone while her hands busily opened the yogurt and orange juice for

"It's necessary. Very necessary. "

"Punctuality is extremely important in business. Missing even a single second can make everything too late. For meetings like this, we should be seated and ready beforehand, not walking in afterward. That shows that we are not ready."

"This is the first lesson you need to learn, Deputy Director."

Even though I couldn't help but agree with what Kiran said, my reaction was to pout in frustration.

"So, who's the Deputy Director here, and who's the department head? You sure like giving orders!"

Kiran shrugged slightly. Who taught her that smug, mischievous attitude? If I found out, I'd burn down their house!

"The Deputy Director is still the Deputy Director. But right now, I'm the senser. "

"What? Sensei?"

"Sensei is Japanese for teacher. Don't forget, Deputy Director, you're just an intern. It's already generous enough that I'm not making you crawl on your knees!"

Look at you, talking like that.

"Here, Deputy Director, eat this. I already opened it for you."

As she spoke, Kiran pushed the yogurt cup so close to my lips that I couldn't avoid it. Since she went to the trouble of opening it, I had no choice but to eat it. Reluctantly, I took a spoonful.

Is this really Kiran?

Why is she acting like a dictator of North Korea?

"Lesson number two is..."

Suddenly, her slender hand reached out and lightly brushed my lips. Her thumb gently wiped back and forth with a fleeting touch. Her long, almondshaped eyes looked deeply into mine with a certain sparkle. It was the same gaze she had given me years ago.

I found myself momentarily lost in the soft touch and the glittering look in her eyes. Until-

"Deputy Director, you should carry a handkerchief. And you shouldn't eat so messily like this."

So, she reached out her hand just to wipe my mouth?

Really?

What annoyed me even more was that Kiran was now tasting the yogurt from her thumb, the same thumb she had just used to wipe the corner of my mouth. She made a soft slurping sound and murmured to herself, as if lost in thought.

"Actually, this yogurt flavor is pretty good."

Ughhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Annoying.

The atmosphere ofthe meeting was entirely professional, thanks to Kiran. We arrived about 1 5 minutes before the meeting began. She efficiently placed the meeting documents for everyone involved, prepared the projector, and ran a quick test of her presentation file with the ease of someone who knew her work well.

Kiran presented in English with a confident demeanor. Her voice was clear, strong, and persuasive. The presentation slides she had prepared were elegant yet simple, using only black, white, gray, and deep red. It was distinctive and reflected her unique style. The content was also straightfönvard and easy to understand.

The topic oftodayts presentation was the operational plan and areas where assistance was needed in managing the production process at the Japanese maker's factory.

Since Mr. Sato, the president of the Japanese maker that our company recently acquired, is not very fluent in English, an English-Japanese interpreter is needed to ensure smooth communication during the meeting.

And it seemed the interpreter was none other than Mr. Sato's secretary, Yumi. Her English was excellent, completely devoid of any Japanese accent.

She had a small, well-proportioned face, a beautifully defined nose, and perfectly shaped lips. But what stood out the most were her sharp eyes, slightly upturned at the corners, giving her face a sleek, captivating allure filled with undeniable sex appeal.

Which wouldn't be so annoying, really.

If she weren't being overly touchy with Kiran.

What on earth was that? Before the meeting even started, the female translator apparently needed to review the documents so thoroughly that she had to call Kiran over for a one-on-one discussion, with their thces so close they were practically touching.

And the most notable part ofthis "face-to-face" interaction?

It was that Kiran's small face was nearly pressed against Yumi's chest, which was as large as a child's head!

Not to mention Yumi's seductive smile and inviting gaze, as if they'd known each other for ages, which made it impossible not to think..

They must have gone over things in great detail together many times before, huh?

If this whole situation hadn't completely stolen my attention, I probably could have focused better and engaged more in the meeting. At the very least, I wouldn't have looked like my brain was utterly empty ofknowledge, yet completely full of chaotic free radicals, when Kiran turned to me after returning to her seat beside me.

"How's it going, Deputy Director? Do you understand the content?"

### "Uh. . Yeah, I do

I replied, avoiding eye contact and stammering, though it was clear I couldn't escape the sharp, scrutinizing gaze of this troublemaking sensei.

"011? Then explain it to me. What exactly did you understand?" Whooshhhhh.

In my head, I could almost hear the sound of wild thoughts running loose, crashing into each other in chaos.

I hated this question.

"Well, I understand what we need to do over the next three months!"

I blurted out.

"That's it. Who does what, where, and when? Your answer is broader than the Yangtze River,"

Kiran retorted without missing a beat.

"How detailed do you need it to be?"

I shot back, lifting my chin defiantly and arguing so intensely that it felt like the veins in my neck might pop.

"You don't need to go into too much detail, but you need to grasp the main points. "

"Who can even remember all ofthat?"

The person next to me rested her chin on her hand, looking at me with an expression that was exactly like an adult scolding a small child.

"Who said you have to remember it? You need to take notes.

"Lesson number three for today is: the Deputy Director needs to learn how to take meeting minutes or summary notes. That way, you'll know who is doing what, where, and when. Come here, I'll teach you."

As she said that, Kiran leaned in closer. She brought her face so near that I could smell her faint scent. Her left hand reached behind me to rest on the back of my chair, while her right hand grabbed a pencil and tapped it against the notebook in front of me. The whole setup made it feel like she was practically embracing me.

At that moment, all I could hear was the loud pounding ofmy own heart as I found myself staring at her side profile. She was so close that I could almost count her long, thick eyelashes.

Her deep voice snapped me out of my trance.

"Deputy Director! "

"What are you daydreaming about? Focus! Look, see what Phi Olan is presenting up there? We need to start by noting the date, the title, and the agenda of the meeting, like this."

Kiran pointed at Phi Olan, who was presenting the project's budget, and then wrote an example in my notebook with her familiar neat, angular handwriting. When she didn't hear any sign of acknowledgment from me that I understood what she was explaining, she looked up and met my eyes.

Seeing that I wasn't exactly being obedient or cooperative, she leaned down and wrote something big in my notebook, taking up almost the entire page:

If you're stubborn, I'll kiss you.

I glared at the naughty sensei, my hand pinching her thigh under the table hard enough to make her face turn red with pain, though she couldn't make a sound. I smirked in satisfaction before turning my attention back to the lesson.

It wasn't because I was scared of her threat.

I just didn't want the six years I spent studying abroad to go to waste, that's all.

Kiran looked pleased to see her "student" finally paying attention, but she couldn't help being annoying. She started scribbling something on the next page of my notebook.

She drew five stars and wrote underneath:

Very good.

Ughhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

What is this? Does she think I'm a second-grader in kindergarten?

Would it be a serious crime if a student strangles their teacher to death in the meeting room?

Luckily, in the afternoon, Phi Olan and President Sato's group had another meeting about materials at a supplier in another area of Tokyo. They decided to leave for lunch elsewhere beföre heading straight to their afternoon meeting. That meant I didn't have to endure sharing a lunch table with the charming translator, Yumi.

For some reason, I just couldn't bring myselfto like her.

So, Kiran volunteered to take me to a Japanese restaurant near the office, just the two of us. The hard part came when I was handed a menu entirely in Japanese with no pictures. I had absolutely no idea what to order.

"What would you like to eat, Deputy Director?"

"Fish is fine, anything simple,"

Hearing that, she turned to the waiter and ordered briefly in fluent Japanese. Her skill in the language made me feel a little annoyed.

The Japanese translator must have taught her well.

It didn't take long before our meals arrived. Kiran's was a sushi set, while mine was grilled mackerel with salt...

A last-resort menu.

When she saw me struggling awkwardly with the chopsticks, she called the waiter to bring me a spoon and fork. But even with that, I still sat there sulking, dissatisfied.

I didn't know why I kept getting irritated with her, almost as if I were acting out to get her attention.

"Deputy Director, aren't you eating?"

"Too lazy to eat."

"Why?"

"Because this fish has too many bones."

Kiran widened her eyes in surprise before taking my tray without a word, She then careftllly used her chopsticks to remove the fish bones, one by one,

I watched her side profile as she focused on picking out the bones. Her almond-shaped eyes lowered slightly, revealing her thick, straight lashes that matched her sharp nose. Her slightly upturned upper lip gave her the appearance of a mischievous child.

I used to loved this face of hers.

I recalled the first time I fell in love for Kiran in eighth grade. It was when I saw her diligently tying shoelaces for Pradee by the basketball court. From the commotion caused by Pradee, who complained that she wanted her shoelaces tied like Kiran's but didn't know how, I managed to piece the story together.

As I recalled the past, the same confusion and restless feelings that had kept me awake last night surged through me once again.

I still remembered the pain of seeing her for the first time in the meeting room. But just a minute later, another feeling, one that contradicted the pain, came rushing in.

I am glad to see her face again...

The face I had been missing and couldn't forget for seven years suddenly appeared betöre me unexpectedly. How could I not feel confused?

Especially when she said she missed me, smiled sweetly, and wished me goodnight.

I really should hate her. What was I supposed to feel after all that?

"All done, Vice. The bones are gone,"

Kiran said as she slid my tray back to me, gesturing for me to start eating.l should have thanked her.

But the bottled-up, conflicting emotions inside me pushed me to say something that was meant to hurt her instead.

### "Just stop it."

"lfyou think that small, good deeds like this will erase the mistakes you made with me..."

"Let me tell you, it's never going to happen."

"And stop acting so close and inappropriate. Don't forget, I'm your Vice President. "

I looked into her eyes with a stern, accusing glare. But for some reason, in that brief moment, I saw the pain in her eyes.

My heart ached as well.

"Understand. "

After a moment of silence, Kiran nodded, her face calm and composed, neither smiling nor frowning.

When she noticed I still hadn't touched my food, she pulled the tray back again. Then, with an innocent expression and a teasing tone, she asked:

"0r is the Vice too lazy to eat? Should I feed you?"

"1f you're too lazy to chew, I'll chew it for you first. "

"11ey, don't you understand what I just said? You don't even seem regretful in the slightest!"

Kiran arched one eyebrow, her face completely feigning innocence. Then She replied in the most mocking tone, stressing each word clearly:

"Regretful? How do you spell that?"

. UGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

Chapter 37: Invisible Explosion

After enduring the gloomy and tense lunch with Phim earlier, no matter what I was doing afterward, a certain song lyric kept playing in my head like a broken record:

Born into this life... with sins and karmaaaaa, leaving my heart so shattered and losttttttt..

What I hopedfor... is destroyed. What I longedfor... is out ofreach. My heart is left in sorrow

But wait, whose song is this?

Even though I didn't know the singer's name or the rest of the lyrics, this one verse seemed to perfectly reflect my life right now.

Just look at every word Phim has said to me, each one cutting, piercing, as if trying to wake me up from the hopeless dream I've clung to for the past seven years.

"0ne day, Phim and I will love each other agam like before."

But now. even forgiveness seems almost impossible.

And yet, to give up completely? Would I really do that?

If I gave up now, everything I had held onto and believed in about my love for Phim, even staying single and avoiding relationships for almost 7 years, like I'd taken a vow.

It would ne lost and mean nothing.

That's why I have to keep going, staying stubborn and following Phim around. I can't say anything because no matter what I confess, it will only make things worse.

It's my punishment for lying to Phim.

'Born into this life... with sins and karmaaaaa... '

"Phi Kiran, don 't turn around yet, okay? Slowly, then look. Yumi-chan dressed so hot tonight. Wow, wake up."

Tob whispered, the chubby engineer with glasses sitting across from me. He sounded like he was really impressed. His words finally pulled me out of the country song stuck in my head.

I glanced slowly at the head ofthe table. It was long enough to seat about 20 people from the office, all gathered to welcome the Vice President. The dinner was held at a fancy Japanese restaurant near our hotel.

Yumi, President Sato's secretary, was also there. She wore a tight, short red dress with a low neckline that showed her smooth, fair chest. The high slit in her skirt showed off her long, slim legs. With her pretty face, she looked as stunning as a lead actress in a top-tier Japanese AV film. That's why Tob, wide-eyed and craning his neck, kept sneaking glances at her with a gaze full of excitement. Meanwhile, I could hardly bring myself to look her way.

Because sitting right across from Yumi was Phim, who had been quietly smiling and watching her with a cold look since the party began, from the formal start to the fun and relaxed part of the event.

There was something in the air.

And that "something" sent chills down my spine, like snow falling right in the middle of the room.

The strange coldness pierced through my bones when the woman in the red dress, holding a wine glass, started walking gracefully toward me at the far end of the table.

Tob's excitement shot through the roof, while I froze, unsure how to react. I didn't know why I was scared.

I only know that I'm afraid.

"Hi honey, why do you look so tired?"

Yumi settled herself into the empty chair beside me. As she crossed one leg over the other, lifting her skirt slightly in the process, I could almost hear Tob gulp audibly. Her right hand held her wine glass at shoulder height, while her left hand casually rested on her right elbow, her movements slow and mesmerizing.

She gave Tob a small smile before turning to me with a playful sparkle in her eyes. All I could do was force a tired smile and reply weakly, raising my glass of liquor nervously.

"Yes, now I want to go to sleep."

"With me?"

Cough! Cough!

I choked on my drink at her teasing remark. Yumi burst into laughter, her full, rounded chest bouncing within perfect view.

I might have kept staring for a moment longer if I hadn't felt the sharp movement of something whizzing past my ear at high speed.

Whoosh... Crack!

At that moment, everything in the room stopped. It was so quiet you could almost hear everyone breathing softly, as if they were pretending to be dead.

"0h! I'm so sorry, everyone,"

Phim's voice cut through the silence. "I accidentally dropped my chopsticks."

Chopsticks dropped out of her hand?

I quickly turned to look at the chopsticks stuck in the gap of the divider behind me. The feeling of them granng past my ear left a burning sensation that hadn't gone away.

Tob, the brave one, carefully pulled the chopsticks out from where they were dropped. He held them up in front of his face, staring at them with such intensity his eyes nearly crossed. Then, in a quiet voice, he muttered to me,

"Phi Kiran, the Vice President Phim is really amazing! Just dropping chopsticks, and they flew this far? Even Xiao Li the Flying Dagger couldn't compare to her!"

Is this something to be impressed?!

"0h, Nong Phim, your chopsticks fell ofso far, huh? No problem, I'll have the staff bring you a new pair."

Phi Olan said hurriedly, his hands waving to get the waiter's attention.

Meanwhile, Yumi leaned in close to my ear and whispered, her voice full of curiosity,

"What's wrong?"

I wanted so badly to tell Yumi that if anything was wrong, it could only be one thing.

You and me!

But I didn't say it out loud because I thought it might be rude. All I could do was give an awkward smile and answer with a simple sentence.

"1 don't know."

I secretly glanced at Phim out ofthe corner of my eyes and saw her smiling and calmly saying sorry to President Sato. After a while, the party went back to normal. Everyone started to relax, and the fun grew as more people drank alcohol.

The person having the most fun seemed to be the one sitting next to me.

"What do you drink?"

She moved closer and pointed at the glass in front of me.

"Plum vine mixed with soda."

When I go to Japanese restaurants, I always drink plum wine because it's sweet and smells nice...

And it makes me drunk easily.

"Let me try?"

Yumi leaned in even closer as she reached for my glass. I could feel something soft and squishy press against my upper arm.

"Sure.

To stop her from leaning in further, I quickly pushed the glass toward her. But instead of picking it up like a normal person, Yumi dipped her finger into the glass and tasted the wine from her finger in a slow and teasing way. Her deliberate motion was so bold that I even heard a soft "Ahhhhh . " from Tob, who was clearly thrilled.

Oh no. I silently chanted in my head, 'Stay calm, stay calm,' but it was useless when I heard what Yumi said next.

"Your flavor is so good."

And as ifthat wasn't enough, she brought the wine glass to my lips, offering me a sip while her words became even more suggestive.

"Want to try me?"

I shook my head quickly, completely lost for words. At that moment, a loud sound broke through the room.

Bang!

Crash!

Crceccaaaak!

That wasn't the sound of the legendary ghost Pok Pok Kreet from Chiang Mai University.

Instead, it was the sound of someone slamming the table loudly with a loud bang, making the plates, bowls, and cutlery rattle and clatter, followed by the sound Of chairs being dragged with a long bang.

All these sounds happened within just a few seconds, caused by one person.

The Vice President!

I sat there stiff as a rock, unable to look directly. I could only glance out of the corner of my eye toward the head of the table, where I saw Phim standing with a cold smile on her face.

"1 apologize, everyone. I'll have to excuse myself. I'm not feeling well today."

"1'11 take you to your room."

Phi Olan quickly stood up, looking flustered. Phim turned to give him a sweet smile while shaking her head to refuse his offer. "It's fine. It's just a few blocks away. I'd rather walk."

"Why she looks so serious?

Yumi whispered to me in confusion, making me gesture for her to keep quiet.

"But I would like Kiran to go back with me,"

Phim added firmly, her eyes locking onto mine with an expression that left no room for argument.

"What did you say?"

"I'm not good at remembering the way... "

Arrogance....

Honestly, I should have been happy that Phim specifically asked me to take her to her room. But that was before I noticed the sharp, commanding glare she gave me, which sent chills down my spine.

How could I not feel scared when her eyes clearly saidjust one thing...

You're dead!

"Alright, alright, Kiran, get up! What are you waiting for?"

Phi Olan turned to me, nodding and almost forcing me to stand up. I swallowed hard, stood up, and said goodbye to everyone. The hardest part was saying goodbye to Yumi, who held onto my hand as if she didn't want to let go.

"Finish your farewells and hurry back, Sensei,"

She said softly.

And with that, Phim stormed out ofthe restaurant in her high heels without even looking back. I quickly scrambled to follow her, nearly tripping over myself in the process.

"Vice... please wait!"

All I got was a sharp side-eye, but she didn't slow down. I had to take long strides to keep up, almost halfwalking, half running to follow her.

I finally caught up with her in front of a convenience store about 300 meters from the restaurant. I walked beside her in silence, not saying a word.

After a while, it seemed like Phim's mood had cooled down a little. I could tell because her pace had slowed noticeably.

The early evening air in January in Tokyo was freezing cold, enough to make me blow into my hands for wan-nth. The petite figure in front of me hunched her shoulders against the cold. Her long, fashionable coat didn't seem to offer her much warmth.

I took off my thick black coat and gently draped it over her shoulders.

"Your coat is too thin, Vice. You'll catch a cold."

She flinched slightly in surprise, looking like she was about to scold me at first. But perhaps the care in my voice and the concern in my eyes softened her. The hardness in her beautiful brown eyes faded, replaced by a flicker of something else.

Phim lowered her gaze to the ground and said in a voice so soft I could barely hear her,

"Thank you."

We both slowed our steps until we were walking side by side, quietly and peacefully. The memory Ofus walking home together during high school resurfaced vividly.

"Aren't you cold?"

Phim turned to look at me, now left with just a thin suit, rubbing my arms as if that would somehow chase away the cold. I forced myselfto reply, carefully controlling my voice so she wouldn't hear my teeth chattering.

"Not cold..

"That's not true. Look at you, you've got goosebumps everywhere "

Phim stopped walking and gently reached out to smooth down the goosebumps on my neck. Her intention was probably to calm me, but instead, her touch only made my goosebumps worse and sent shivers all over me.

"1 have a scarf with me. wait a moment."

She rummaged through her handbag for a while before pulling out a long, light gray scarf and handing it to me. I gave her a warm smile as I took it and casually draped it around my neck.

"How can that keep you warm if you wear it like that? Hold on."

The petite woman stood on her toes, carefully rewrapping the scarf around my neck with utmost focus, like a wife tying her husband's tie.

My heart pounded loudly in my chest.

When I looked down at the person in front of me, I couldn't help but smile softly, overwhelmed by a sweet wave of happiness that hit me unexpectedly.

Just this moment alone was worth it.

Worth all the teasing and torment I had gone through the whole day.

Ting! ling! ling!

Right after hearing the sound of repeated notifications from my Line app,

Phim's demeanor changed completely. From gently adjusting my scarf, she suddenly yanked both ends tightly around my neck, making me choke and let out a loud gasp.

Her soft and kind look turned cold and sharp in just a few seconds. Without looking back at me, she walked quickly ahead and spoke in a low, fast vorce.

"Aren't you going to check? Maybe someone's asking for your room number!"

Ughhhhhhhh

Her words made my chest hurt, like someone rubbed something spicy on it and set it on fire. I hurried to walk faster and catch up with her at the elevator. Without thinking, I took out my phone to show her, wanting to prove that it wasn 't Yumi messaging me.

"It's probably from Pok, Phim. look."

Phim glanced at me with the corner ofher mouth lifting slightly, then read the sender's name aloud in a cold, slow voice.

"Yu.-. Mi.-. Chan... Kiss Kiss Kiss.

Oh nooooo!

I looked down and saw the notification clearly showing a message from the ID Yumi Chan. I almost threw my phone away like it was on fire.

Yumi, oh Yumi. Out of all the days in a year, why did she have to message me today of all days when she never did before?

The atmosphere in the elevator felt like I was being frozen solid by Phim's occasional side glances. Her face stayed so calm and unreadable that I couldn't tell what she was thinking.

Ding!

Like the sound of a lifesaving bell, the elevator doors opened. Phim strode out quickly, almost running, as if she couldn't bear to look at me for even one more second.

"Phim... wait!"

I rushed after her, managing to stop her door from closing with my hand. I dropped the playful "Vice President" I had been calling her all day, though the new name still felt unfamiliar on my tongue.

I looked deep into her brown eyes, now filled with nothing but anger and frustration.

"Phim, there's nothing between me and Yumi. We're just coworkers, nothing more."

Phim gave me a bitter smile, one that showed she didn't believe me at all. "Why are you telling me this? Save your explanation for someone else. '

Her voice was faint and shaky as she spoke. She moved to close the door, but I quickly blocked it with my hand again. This time, my voice was firm, yet it carried a pleading tone I had never used with anyone.

Except Phim.

"1'11 explain... but only to the person I care about."

"And that person is you."

Her brown eyes widened slightly, a flicker of hurt flashing through them, the same 100k I had seen years ago. We stared at each Other in silence for nearly a minute before her raspy, trembling voice broke the stillness, barely above a whisper.

"Liar..."

Click.

The door closed softly, and I couldn't hold it back anymore. The fact that she didn't slam the door in my face like she usually did didn't make me feel any better.

Even though I couldn't see it with my eyes, I could clearly feel the pain in Phim's heart breaking into pieces.

I dragged myselfback into my room, completely drained. Pressing my ear against the wall, I listened, but unlike last night, there was no sound of screaming. Instead, I heard something faint...

The sound of someone sobbing.

I stayed with my head against the wall for a long time before finally picking up my phone and opening the Line app, the root of the problem. But I didn't choose Yumi's message.

KieZillaaazZ: When will you arrive?

Pock... The Best: I already told you, I'll be at the airport tomorrow at 8

KieZillaaazZ: Can't you come earlier?

Pock... The Best: sure, I'll tell Captain Uncle to fly faster. What the hell, Kee! A plane isn't a bus that you can speed up!

KieZillaaazZ: Ughhh! ! !

Pock... The Best: What's wrong with you? Can't handle it anymore?

KieZillaaazZ: Maybe. It feels like there's no way out for me and Phim.

Pock... The Best: Don't be scared, Kee... like a wise Chinese philosopher once said.

KieZillaaazZ: What did they say?

Pock... The Best: If there's no way out... go back through the way in.

KieZilIaaazZ: What's the name ofthis philosopher?

Pock... The Best: Umm... probably Wang Yiao Niao.

KieZillaaazZ: Is that even a real Chinese name? What dynasty were they from?

Pock... The Best: Umm... maybe the Pot Dynasty.

KieZillaaazZ: I've only ever heard ofthe Tang Dynasty...

Pock... The Best: Yeah, well, the Pot Dynasty is a mysterious dynasty that disappeared. Why are you grilling me about this, Kee?!

KieZillaaazZ: Nothing, I just wanted to tell you to hurry up and come.

Pock... The Best: Alright, alright. Don't worry. I'll see you tomorrow... and I'll take care of it for you.

Chapter 38: The Rule of Substitution

It's Saturday, but I woke up early at 6 a.m. I sat up and lay back down repeatedly on the bed for a while... Until I finally decided to get up, take a shower, and get dressed. If it weren't for the freezing temperature outside, almost below zero, I probably would have already wandered around the hotel hallway.

All just to wait for Pock.

I can't help but feel like a little kid who got bullied by friends, crying with a runny nose, wanting to run to their mom for comfort.

And then complain, complain, complain...

Just wait and see.

I'll tell Pock that Phim doesn't love me!

But since it's still too early... Pock probably won't arrive at the hotel until almost 10 a.m. All I can do is killing time. In the end, with nowhere else to go, I decided to lounge in the lobby starting from 8 a.m.

I sat there until after 9 a.m. but still chose not to eat the breakfast the hotel had set up in the large hall near the lobby.

Because I intend to wait and have breakfast with someone.

Someone who now walked out of the elevator with a grumpy face.

Today, Phim was dressed casually in an oversized cream knit sweater, jeans, and dark brown ankle boots. Her wavy, reddish-brown hair fell gently over her shoulders, and her lightly made-up face showed off her clear cheeks and full pink lips. She looked so youthful, like she had traveled back in time to when we were both freshmen student.

Phim's look today made me freeze in place, unable to take my eyes off her. A lump rose in my throat as I saw an image that had been etched into my memory for so long come to life before me.

But maybe it wasn't really her..

This woman just looked similar. She resembled the person who had once poured so much love into me, love that felt overwhelming and endless.

Even if she looked similar, she wasn't the same person..

But does the Phim who once loved me so deeply still exist somewhere?

If she does, where is she hiding now in this vast universe?

"Phim, can I sit with you?"

Phim looked up at me with a deeply annoyed expression as I sat down across from her. Her reply was short and curt, matching the cold look on her face.

"Who told you to call me by my name? Call me Vice President like before."

I shrugged like I didn't care, focusing on stabbing a sausage on my plate and chewing it while my cheeks were still stuffed full.

"Nope, not calling you that. It's a day off today."

And just like that, I couldn't enjoy my meal in peace anymore. Phim, clearly frustrated but unable to vent her anger by hitting me like when we were dating, decided to grab the mustard on the table and pour it all over my sausage, bacon, and fried egg until it overflowed on the plate!

It looked like I was eating pumpkin soup instead of breakfast!

What made it worse was when I looked up, Phim was already smirking at me with a satisfied, mocking grm.

So I fought back. I gave her an evil smile, then stabbed my fork into a piece of bacon completely soaked in thick yellow mustard. Not stopping there, I used my knife to scoop up more mustard from the plate and slathered it on. Slowly, I put it in my mouth, chewed with closed eyes, and smiled as if I were tasting the most heavenly, flavorful, and silky dish in the world.

When in reality, I wanted to spit it out so badly.

What kind of taste is this?

I absolutely don't want to drink it! Its terrible!

The more I acted unfazed, the more annoyed and restless the person in front of me became. She eventually put her fork and knife down and stopped eating her salad altogether. Crossing her arms, it seemed like an idea suddenly popped into her head. Her grumpy face softened into a sly little smile as she spoke in a sweet, yet suspiciously fake, tone.

"It looks delicious, doesn't it? Go on, finish it all. I'll sit here and watch until you're done."

What bad luck and bad karma!

I want to throw it away.

Luckily, Pock's Line message saved me just in time.

Pock... The Best: My loveee, I'm here. In front of the hotel. Come get me!

KieZillaaazZ: Got it, I'm downstairs already.

I immediately dropped the fork and knife, overjoyed, not because Pock had arrived, but because I was finally free from having to choke down the mustard soup on my plate.

"Phim, Pock's here. I'm going to pick her up real quick."

While Phim still looked confused, trying to piece together what was happening, I dashed out of the restaurant. Standing in front of the hotel was Pock, waving happily, with a bright yellow suitcase by her side.

What was strange was that standing next to Pock was a young man of average build with honey-colored skin and strikingly handsome Thai features. He greeted me warmly from afar with a sincere smile, even though we had never met before.

His simple yet stylish outfit and the large camera slung around his neck gave him the vibe of a hipster, though I couldn't quite put my finger on why.

But why was he with Pock?

"What's this, Pock? Who's this guy you brought along?"

Pock pointed at the man as ifto silently ask me, Is this the one? When I nodded, she immediately grabbed his arm, making the man flinch in surprise. Pock grinned so wide it almost reached her ears as she loudly answered my question.

"1 don 't know him. I just met him on the train from the airport. He's Thai, and he just so happens to be staying at the same hotel. It's like fate!"

At that moment, the man's broad smile shifted into an awkward one, like someone being hugged too tightly by an orangutan with no escape.

Everything probably won't be anything to worry about.

If, in the next moment, he hadn't raised his hand to wave at shoulder height and smiled even wider, as if greeting someone he knew. And that someone was walking toward us from behind.

"Hey, Phim... surprise!"

Those words made my heart sink. It felt as though the heart that had fallen to the ground was now being crushed under someone's foot when Phim's next words echoed.

Of

"Tan, why didn't you tell me you were coming? You left me worried all night when I couldn't reach you."

I felt a lump in my throat.

Sure, it's true that over the past seven years, I couldn't realistically expect Phim to have no one else in her life. That would be almost impossible. But deep down, I still couldn't help but hope.

And I never thought I'd have to see it with my own eyes

But thanks to the strength I've built up over the years, I managed to stand there calmly this time.

Without walking away like I always had before.

Unlike Phim, who now couldn't even meet my gaze.

The one more shocked than me, though, was probably Pock. Her eyes were wide open, her mouth hanging in disbelief, yet her hand stubbornly clung to Tan's arm. She glanced at me as if to silently tell me to stay strong, then turned to greet Phim with a bright and cheerful voice.

"Can you sec mcce! Phim, do you see me? It's Pock! Do you remember

Phim turned to give Pock a sweet smile. She squinted, carefully studying Pock as if trying to recall her memories.

Well, it makes sense. Pock has come a long way since our school days. Her clothes, hair, and makeup have changed so much that she looks almost unrecognizable. Because of her work behind the scenes in the entertainment industry, everything about her now trendy and fashionable than ever.

Looking from the left, she resembles Kaem The Star...

Looking from the right, she resembles Beyoncé...

But looking from the front...

Ifpossible, I'd recommend not looking at all...

Save your eyes...!

"Of course I remember! Who could forget Pock? How have you been? Doing well?"

Pock waved her hand enthusiastically, full of flair, but still stubbornly refused to let go ofTan's arm.

"Oh my gosh, it's a long story. Let's all go grab something to eat! I'm starving. Not at the hotel, though. I want sushi. We can chat and catch up, right, Phim? Right? Surely, Phim won't turn down a friend after so long!"

Pock wrapped things up so neatly that it left no room for Phim to decline. That's the skill Pock had honed over her four years working in the entertainment industry. Phim looked slightly uneasy but eventually nodded in reluctant agreement.

"We'll pack up my stuffin Kee's room first. Let's meet back here at 10:1 5, okay? Right, Tan? Say yes, or I'm not letting you go."

Pock said, turning to the man she still clung to tightly. Tan gave her an awkward smile before nodding slightly.

"Alright, sounds good. Okay, deal."

This time, Pock finally release his arm. I took Pock's bag and walked alongside her, but I couldn't stop glancing at the pair we'd just left behind.

They're very affectionate with each other!

"Calm down, Kee. Stay calm

Pock whispered, patting my back and shoulder with her large hand. But it did nothing to cool the boiling blood surging through my veins.

"Their relationship probably isn't going anywhere yet."

"How do you know?"

I whipped my head around to ask, my voice filled with hope. Pock tilted her head toward Tan, who was now talking to the staff at the lobby. He seemed to be handling something about his room.

"At least they haven't had sex yet. If they had, they'd be sharing the same room. Trust me on this.'

"Maybe they booked separate rooms to look proper, but in the end, they'll probably end up spending the night in Phim 's room. And you know those rooms aren't soundproof."

"Stay strong, Kee. Hold it in. You've done a lot to her; now you've got to endure this. Don't cry. If you cry, I'll smack you."

With that, Pock quickly dragged me into the elevator to avoid any chance of running into those two in an awkward moment in the confined space.

"You're staying in the room next to hers? That's great! You can eavesdrop tonight."

I swiped the keycard and let Pock into the room without saying anything. She threw herself onto the thick, soft bed, squealing in delight.

"This room's so spacious! Not like my place. I'll only stay with you for a few days, okay? My crew's filming in Tokyo, but you're heading to Osaka soon, right?"

"Yeah...

"Geez, Kee. When did you become so soft? Just a little thing like this, and you're already at a loss for words."

I didn't reply. Instead, I carried Pock's suitcase over to the wardrobe and started unpacking her things. Then, I poured her a glass of water, knowing she must be tired and worn out from the overnight flight.

"Good, you should learn to take care of me more, my dear. By the way, did you fight with Phim last night?"

"Just a little. how do you know?"

Pock sipped the water and let out a dramatic "Ahhhh" like it was the most refreshing drink in the world. Then she smirked and tilted her head back and forth as if she had a secret.

"Phim's eyes are so puffy.... Even though she tried to hide it with pro-level makeup skills, I can tell. Who am I?....l'm Pock, of course. What did you do to make her cry?"

I decided to tell Pock everything that happened last night in detail. After listening, she slapped my knee with a loud smack!

"0w, Pock! That's my knee! Why don't you slap your own?"

"0h, really? I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt my knee, so I borrowed yours to make a confident statement. "

"What does it mean?"

"Geez, you idiot. Phim is still Phim. She's jealous to the max, like a volcano erupting and burning everything down. And here you are, sulking and thinking she doesn't love you. How could you be so smart academically but so clueless in this?"

Before I could respond, Pock jabbed my forehead with her finger, pushing me so hard I fell offthe bed.

Even after being scolded like that, I didn't feel hurt. Instead, some ofher words sparked a tiny glimmer of hope in my heart that I couldn't ignore.

"This is easy... you'll get her back in no time if you follow what I say." Even though my friend sounded so confident, I still couldn't imagine how things could turn around like that. Especially when such a huge obstacle had already made itself so clear.

"But first... the most important thing you need to do right now is..."

"What is it?"

"Do you know which floor has the 1,000-yen vending machine for adult movies? Take me there. Right now."

Annoying.

That was the first feeling I had as I followed those two walking side by side, acting so comfortably with each other as ifthe world revolved around them. Their similar height and their sharp, stunningly Thai features made them look like a perfect match.

Irritated....

That feeling came next. I stared down at the ground, turning my head left and right as if searching for something, until Pock couldn't help but ask.

"What are you looking for, Kee?"

"1'm looking for a rock... I need to kick something to vent my anger."

"There aren't random rocks lying around in Japan, Kee..."

"Then a can is fine.. "

'Yeah, well, Japan doesn't have random trash lying around everywhere like back home either..." "Then can I kick you?"

"Mercyyyyy...., back when I was young, my knees got grazed often, leaving my shins smooth. And now, everything is gone. Now I have to drink Anlene like it's water!"

Since I can't do anything about it, I, now sulking like someone who hasn't been able to poop for days, quickened my pace to catch up with the two of them. I chose to walk right behind Tan, taking long strides until the tip of my foot accidentally-on-purpose hit the back of his heel.

Thud.

Tan turned slightly, gave me a small smile, but said nothing. He then turned back and continued walking as if nothing had happened.

Fine, then.

Thud. Thud.

Thud.

"Uh... excuse me. Just in case you didn't realize, your foot has hit mine several times now. Maybe you should walk a little farther away or take shorter steps. "

Finally, Tan stopped walking and turned to talk to me. Phim looked at me with a disapproving stare... though in that disapproval, I could see a hint of curiosity and confusion.

"1 think I'm walking normally... my strides are normal too. If we're colliding, it's either because you're walking too slow."

"Or maybe because your legs are short..."

I barely heard Pock's faint voice in the background as she tugged on the hem of my coat repeatedly. Tan, however, simply smiled softly and replied in a calm, gentle tone.

"Alright then... if it makes you feel better."

Ha ha ha.

Ha ha....my foot!

Who taught this shon guy to end every sentence with a soft "ha," like some old-fashioned drama character? So annoying I almost wanted to flick his mouth!

To avoid further conflict, Tan sped up his pace and walked far ahead of Phim, turning back only to take a picture of her smiling.

Unfortunately, every time he tried to press the shutter, Pock and I would synchronize perfectly, stepping in to flank Phim, baring forced grins, flashing peace signs, or poking our cheeks at the exact moment he captured the shot.

After the photo was taken, Pock and I would step back casually, walking behind Phim as if nothing had happened.

But when Tan tried to take another photo, we'd rush up again, striking another pose right next to Phim

"Excuse me... I'd like to take a solo picture of Phim."

"Go ahead. Just think ofus as part of the background, like trees or grass."

Tan sighed, exhausted. He packed up his Camera in defeat and decided to walk silently without saying another word.

We eventually decided to have a brunch at a sushi restaurant. Of course, those two sat close together on the opposite side of the table from Pock and me.

During the meal, Pock enthusiastically chatted with Phim about various topics, intentionally leaving out anything related to me to avoid annoying or

upsetting her. Near the end ofthe meal, Pock casually turned to Tan and asked about his travel plans in Japan.

"1 was thinking of taking Phim to Asakusa Temple today... and since Phim starts work in Osaka next Wednesday, I was planning to visit Shirakawa-go in Takayama before then. It's right in the middle between Tokyo and Osaka, so it's easy to get there."

Wow, is this a visit or a honeymoon? Seems like everything's been planned out perfectly.

"1 want to go too..."

"Uh. . sorry, what?"

"Pock and I want to join. Everywhere. Every place you're going."

Even I couldn't believe those words came out of my own mouth. I wasn't the only one surprised, Phim stared at me in shock.

Meanwhile, Pock froze mid-chew, her mouth still stuffed with sushi, jaw practically on the floor.

"So, it's that easy? No negotiation or anything?"

"Then let's compete in something... if I win, let us come along."

Tan squinted one eye and smiled, clearly feeling like he had the upper hand. Finally, as if he wanted to test something, he nodded and agreed to my proposal.

"So, what should we compete in?"

"How about solving hard math problems? Or saying the value Of pi with the most decimal places? Whoever gets it right wins."

Pock almost choked on her sushi, while Tan shook his head quickly.

Of

"1 studied photography, not math. That wouldn't be fair. Let's do something fair for everyone. "

"Fine, you pick."

Pock pulled on my sleeve like crazy. She had probably never seen me act this wild before. Tan, on the other hand, smiled wide and pointed at the plate in front of him.

"How about a wasabi-eating contest?"

Hearing that, I swallowed hard. I'm tetTible with strong flavors like wasabi or mustard. Even now, while eating sushi, I drown it in soy sauce to hide the tiny bit ofwasabi on the rice.

And now I'd have to eat it plain?

Seeing the nervous look on my face, it seemed Tan knew I wasn't good with wasabi. He smiled even more and made sure I couldn't pick a different challenge.

"1'11 take this one. No changing. I'll even agree to be your servant for a day if you win."

With such an exciting deal, I forced myselfto nod in agreement, though reluctantly. Pock's face turned pale because she knew exactly how weak I was when it came to this. Tan waved to the waiter, asking for a large amount of wasabi.

"The rules are... we'll take turns gradually increasing the amount, like we're daring each Other, and we have to eat it. Whoever can't handle it loses."

The contest began, with each Ofus having an empty plate. We kept daring each other, adding a bit more each time, until the wasabi ball that started as small as a fingernail grew to the size Of a thumb.

But that wasn 't fast enough for Pock, who seemed completely fed up after watching for a while. In the final round, she scooped all the wasabi onto my plate. What was once the size of a thumb now became as big as a child's fist!

"Pock! What are you doing?!"

Pock nodded vigorously, signaling for me to trust her strategy. Tan's eyes widened as he raised his hands in mock surrender, laughing lightly as he spoke.

"lfyou're this dedicated, I'll give up... but you still have to eat it to show

I gulped hard, sweat pouring down my face uncontrollably. I held up the chopsticks, now loaded with a massive ball of wasabi, staring at it until my eyes almost crossed.

In that moment ofhesitation..

Should I eat it or not...

Eat it Or not...

Just as I was hesitating, someone stomped on my foot so hard that I let out a loud YAAAA! In the very next moment, Pock's large hand shoved the chopsticks full of wasabi straight into my mouth with expert precision, like a professional wasabi feeder.

For a moment, I froze. Then the strong, burning taste ofthe wasabi hit me. My face turned bright red, and tears ran down my cheeks nonstop. I grabbed Pock's thigh with my right hand and squeezed it so hard that she yelled, while my left hand scratched at the table like I was in pain.

Amid Phim and Tan's shock and disbelief.

But, oh my god.

1 WON!

Of

Even though I looked like I was on the verge of dying, I couldn't help but feel proud of my hard-fought victory.

And I owed it all to my dear friend, the mastermind behind this triumph. I'd remember her name forever:

Pock Preecha Chana Phai Phan!

Chapter 39: The Accomplice

Tan's unexpected arrival wasn't part of my plan...

And now, his unannounced visit seems to be the cause of several complications.

Sure, we've been chatting on Line every day, and he probably knows most of my movements. But that doesn't mean I wanted him to travel all the way from England to see me here.

I couldn't be so heartless to chase him away or reject his prepared planned itinerary, even though his presence seems to be causing someone else to lose her composure.

Someone... who, whenever she felt hurt or jealous, would usually just walk away. But this time, it's different.

For Kiran, this kind of fierce determination to outdo someone has never happened before. Yet, even the victory she achieved just now doesn't seem to have made her feel much better.

Because in the end, she sat quietly, saying nothing, the entire subway ride to Asakusa Temple.

I occasionally glanced at Kiran, who was sitting on the opposite seat. Her perfectly arched brows were furrowed tightly, and her sleek, jet-black hair, which was left loose over her shoulders, had been pushed back repeatedly, making it look messy. Her long, almond-shaped brown eyes, usually so cold and empty, were staring Off into the distance.

For a brief moment, our eyes met. But she immediately looked away.

At that moment, I realized something.

Whether she avoided me, refusing to talk or meet me like she had years ago, or sat right in front of me but acted cold and distant like now, the feelings I experienced were exactly the same.

It felt like my heart was breaking.

The sharp pain that hit me was so intense that I instinctively placed a hand on my left chest.

"Phim, are you okay? You don't look good,"

Tan's deep voice asked with concern.

I couldn't help but glance toward Kiran when I saw Tan lean closer. Thankfillly, the tall woman now had her headphones on and her eyes closed, as if she were dozing off.

I didn't know why I felt so uneasy.

I could only tell myself this that I didn't want anyone to misunderstand.

"1'm fine, Tan. Just feeling a little dizzy."

Unfortunately, just as Tan reached out to touch my forehead, Kiran opened her eyes and looked right at us. I moved back quickly, avoiding Tan's hand. My heart skipped a beat when, this time, Kiran didn't look away like she usually did.

Instead, she stared at me with empty eyes and a blank face that showed no emotion.

"Phim, we've arrived. Let's go,"

Tan said, gently holding my arm to help me.

I wasn't sure if I was being too mean, but I pulled my arm back without thinking. Tan didn't seem to notice and kept smiling like usual, always cheerful.

Kiran and Pock had already stepped out ahead. I kept looking at Kiran's slim back, unable to stop the memories flooding my mind.

Kiran and Pock together.

It was like fish back in water.

"Hey, guys! Why do the rickshaw pullers here so... uh... well built?" Pock asked loudly, her curiosity as sharp as ever.

When we reached the front of the temple, Pock let out an excited noise, clearly impressed by the muscular men standing ready to offer rickshaw rides for sightseeing.

These men wore tight-fitting pants that highlighted their lower body, something Pock seemed particularly interested in. They all wore bright smiles and called out to attract tourists.

"Hey, hey! Tan, my dear servant, come ride the cart with me right now!"

Pock waved Tan over, who stood with wide eyes, raised eyebrows, and pursed lips. His face was full of confusion as he pointed at himself.

"Servant? I thought I was supposed to be Kiran's servant."

Pock made her intention clear by grabbing Tan's arm as if they had been close friends for years. She easily pulled him to walk alongside her with the same incredible strength she had back in high school.

"Kee's servant is my servant too! Kee handed you over to me just now. Right, Kee?"

Pock turned to Kiran, who glanced at Tan with her usual cold, haughty demeanor. Without saying a word, Kiran raised one eyebrow and gave a small nod in response.

"See? Let's go!"

With that, Pock dragged Tan along, even though he tried to resist by slowing his steps and adding as much friction as possible. But it was no use, he couldn't overpower the strength of the tall, broad-shouldered girl.

Pock chose the longest city tour option, lasting a full hour, and with a steep price tag. But since Tan was now her "servant," she forced him to pay for it.

After negotiating with the muscular rickshaw driver, Pock practically tossed Tan onto the seat and then jumped in after him, using her strong arms to lock him in a headlock. She flashed a big smile, waving cheerfully at me and Kiran, while Tan stretched his hand toward me, his fingers curling as if pleading for help.

Seeing this, Pock tightened her grip around Tan's neck, pulling him even closer to her.

"Kee, you and Phim go enjoy the temple first. Don't worry about me. Phim, have fun, okay?"

Then she turned to the rickshaw driver and shouted in her signature English accent, loud and proud,

"Go, go! Go with me... free bigfun!"

I smirked, finally catching on to their game. These two were always up to something.

It wasn't just a coincidence, it was teamwork.

What made it worse was that as the rickshaw rolled out of sight, accompanied by Pock's excited squeals, I turned back to find Kiran standing there, smiling slyly, her expression full of mischief.

She didn't seem cold or distant toward me at all, unlike just a moment ago.

"Come on, Phim. Let's go into the temple."

I shot a glare at the tall figure, though I wasn't sure why. All I knew was that every time I saw her sweet wide smile, my instinct was to make it disappear as quickly as possible. Not because I wanted her to feel hurt, but I didn't like hervsweet wide smile.

When i saw it, I felt so uneasy.

Reluctantly, I walked ahead toward the temple. Near the entrance was a giant red lantern where everyone stopped to take pictures, using clever techniques to make it look like they were alone in the shot, even though, in reality, dozens of people were packed together in that same spot.

"Do you want a picture, Phim? I can take one for you."

'No, thanks. Too many people,"

But Kiran didn 't listen. She moved closer and snapped a photo of me with a sulky expression before I even realized it.

"Who said you could take a picture? And why did you take it like this? You can't even see the red lantern."

She ignored me completely, staring at the photo on her phone and smiling so widely, she looked like a child who had just found their favorite toy. Then she turned to me with a playful glint in her eyes.

Her eyes sparkled brightly, and she spoke without looking away or losing her smile for even a second.

"1 wasn't trying to take a picture of the red lantern."

"1 just wanted to take a picture ofyou, Phim."

My face grew hot instantly, and I was sure it must have turned completely red. Even though I frowned and bit my lower lip hard, almost to the point of drawing blood, I couldn 't find the courage to face Kiran. So, I turned around and walked briskly into the temple, forcing her to follow quickly behind me.

The path leading to the temple was lined with countless shops, filled with souvenirs and tempting food displays. Each shop was decorated beautifully in a unique Japanese style, creating a lively and colorful scene.

It would have been wonderful to walk slowly, browsing the shops one by one without a care. But it wasn't that easy. The street was packed with people from all over the world, so moving forward felt less like walking and more like being carried along with the crowd. Thankfully, the cold weather kept it from feeling too uncomfortable.

"1'm thirsty,"

I mumbled without much thought, scanning the area again. No matter how hard I looked, I couldn't spot a single shop selling bottled water or smoothies.

I wandered aimlessly, stopping here and there to look at things, pretending not to care about the person behind me.

But now that I think about it. . .

It's too quiet.

Really too quiet.

Did she suddenly decide to ignore me again?

Worry began to creep in, and I couldn't help but glance back.

Nothing.

NO one.

Kiran was nowhere to be seen.

A strange uneasiness bubbled up inside me. I looked around frantically, turning my head left and right, searching for her in the sea of people bustling past. My eyes strained as I tried to focus on the crowd, but all I saw was a blur ofunfamiliar faces.

Not even a glimpse of Kiran among them. She was gone.

Left me again.

"Gotcha!"

The familiar voice suddenly whispered near my ear, making me whip around. There she was—the person I had been frantically searching for standing there with a carefree smile, looking as ifnothing had happened. Without thinking, my fist started pounding against her shoulder, making her yelp in sumrise.

I forgot myself for a moment and let words slip out without filtering them, something I hadn't done in the past few days.

"Kiran, where did you go? You left me all alone again!'

Kiran 's expression faltered as she heard my words. She held up a Water bottle and spoke softly, looking guilty, while I felt my cheeks burn from calling her nicknames so casually.

"1'm sorry. I heard you say you were thirsty, so I went to get you some water."

"Don 't disappear like that again, understand?"

I smacked her chest firmly to emphasize my order.

Kiran looked genuinely guilty. She tried to make it up to me by opening the bottle cap and offering me the water. But I couldn't help giving her a slight glare, even as my hand instinctively gripped the edge of her shirt tightly, afraid she might vanish again without saying anything.

I followed behind her with a sulky expression, but that attitude didn't help much in the crowded streets. The constant jostling of people around us made me lose my gr1P on Kiran's shirt more than once.

Eventually, Kiran turned around and firmly took my hand in hers.

"Hold on like this, okay? You won't lose me now."

Honestly, I shouldn't have given in so easily. I should have pulled my hand away and scolded her for grabbing it without asking.

But the warmth ofher slender, graceful hand gave me an inexplicable sense of comfort. In the end, all I could do was hold on tighter and follow her obediently.

Everything around me seemed to blur into the background.

It all felt hazy, like I was drifting in a dream..

I told myselfto let the dream last just a little longer. Just a bit more. Before I'd have to wake up and face the reality I needed to accept.

"1 want to eat."

As we passed a soft-serve ice cream shop crowded with people, I tugged on Kiran 's hand to make her stop and spoke softly. She raised an eyebrow and asked in a gentle tone,

"1t's this cold, and you still want ice cream?"

"1 want it,"

I repeated stubbornly, sounding like a child.

Kiran smiled warmly and used her other hand to pat my head affectionately. I looked up at her with a pleading gaze, momentarily forgetting myself.

"Alright, what flavor do you want?"

"Anything." "Matcha, then?"

"1t's bitter." "How about charcoal?"

"It's black."

"Cookies and cream, maybe?"

Hearing that, I couldn't stop myself from smiling, no matter how much I tried to hold it in. My face felt warm, so I quickly looked down at the ground. But I couldn't help replying in a grumpy tone.

"1 dont want it."

"Then, I'll have cookie and cream."

I accidentally yelled at her, and to make it worse, I punched her hard on the chest, making a loud sound. But she still had the nerve to laugh, clearly pleased that she managed to tease me.

"Then, what will you eat, Phim? You don't want this, you don't want that. "

"Anything is fine."

"Hmmm.

She smiled and teased me while answering in a high-pitched voice, before turning to order a strawberry ice cream, which has always been my favorite flavor and the one I ordered when we used to eat together in high school.

She remember that. And still, she asks.

Ughhhhhhhhhh...

When we got the ice cream, she handed it to me before taking my hand and leading me to the back street of the shop where there were fewer people.

"Let's finish eating here first. Phim likes to eat messily. Ifwe walk and eat, it will get even messier."

The tall person acted like she was the one in control, and I could only pout before starting to enjoy the ice cream cone in front of me, like a little child.

"Eat with me."

Suddenly, she reached out and leaned against the wall I was standing by, then moved her face close to mine, so close that there was only the small ice cream cone between us.

We were in a position that made it seem like I was being trapped by the mischievous person. I opened my eyes wide in surprise and asked her with a trembling voice.

"What?"

"Can Kiran have some too?"

She used her name like she always did when she wanted to be cute or when she wanted something. It was a simple phrase, but it always made me soften, like wax in the heat of a flame.

And even now, it worked.

It would have been better if the words "Can Kiran have some too?" didn't mean her leaning in and slowly biting the top part of the ice cream cone I had left.

Little by little....

Little by little....

Until finally, her warm lips stopped to taste the ice cream at my lips without warning. She teased with her tongue, moving playfully as if enjoying the sweet and fragrant taste of the ice cream.

My other hand instinctively grabbed tightly at her slim waist, completely forgetting myself.

At the moment when it felt like I had no strength left to resist, a calm voice came from somewhere.

"That way of eating ice cream looks really delicious."

It was Tan's voice, spoken without even a hint ofa smile. Looking behind him, I saw Pock running towards us, her hands full of snacks, with a startled expression. I could only press my lips tightly together, so embarrassed I didn't know how to feel, knowing someone had seen me and Kiran like this.

Meanwhile, Kiran just turned her face to look at Tan with a calm expression, even though her hand was still pinning me against the wall. Her eyes were bold and frill of confidence as she spoke in a cold tone.

"Delicious? Very delicious."

"But too bad, this cone belongs to me now."

"Don 7 even think you 'Il get a chance to taste it. "

Chapter 40: Caught red-handed

Sometimes I feel like Kiran should just change her name to "Troublemaker" and be done with it.

Take yesterday, for example.

She went on saying such possessive things about me. But the moment she saw me about to open my mouth to scold her, that tall girl immediately grabbed Pock by the neck and walked away in a hurry, like she had something to hide.

And then today, when we had to take the train to Takayama early in the morning, the troublemaker was sulking again, refusing to talk to me as usual. As soon as she got on the train, she went and sat snugly next to Pock on the seats up front, far to the right of where Tan and I were sitting, several rows apart.

Those two looked like they were plotting something. And it didn't seem like anything good!

"Phim, that gear necklace belongs to Kiran, doesn't it?"

"What did you just say, Tan?"

I had to repeat the question from the man beside me, unable to believe my own ears. Normally, Tan wasn't like this. He had never crossed the lines I had drawn before.

Tan. the one who had always been patient with me, whether on days when I was depressed or furious. He was so kind, so kind that he was the only person I ever thought about opening my heart to and giving a serious chance years ago.

But in the end, it all fell apart... on the day we decided to kiss.

For me, it turned out to be a bland and meaningless kiss, one that only made me realize something even more than before.

A truth that, if I didn't count my family, was undeniable,

I am a person who finds it incredibly hard to love anyone.

Throughout my life... it feels like I could count only one person. "Tan asked Phim if Kiran is the owner of that gear necklace, right?"

### "Tan."

I spoke in a stern voice to Tan, feeling somewhat displeased. My eyes couldn't help but glance toward where Kiran was sitting, just to make sure she couldn't hear the conversation between me and Tan. Meanwhile, the man beside me kept speaking, as if he had been holding it in for a long time.

"The gear necklace, every time you see it, makes you act strange... but when someone ask for it, you throw a tantrum until it always ends up back where it belongs."

I shut my eyes tightly... feeling an aching pain deep inside, as if Tan was pressing his hands against an open wound, making it worse.

I didn't want to hear it.

"Can you not talk about it.

"Please... You knows it hurts me. Why do you have to say it?"

His face dropped, and his big round eyes looked even sadder than before. I rested my head against the window beside me to stop the conversation. The snowy view outside, which had been covering the fields, changed to a wide, empty river with a bridge over it. It reflected the emptiness dragging my thoughts down.

Deeper down.

Sinking further down..

How many nights has it been since I last slept soundly? The bittersweet feelings swirling chaotically inside me every time I see her. And now, with the tender moment that happened just yesterday, it's left me so shaken I don 't know how to handle my own emotions anymore.

I really don't know.

"Phim... are you hungry? It'll take quite a while to reach Shirakawa, go by bus,"

Tan asked, his tone more normal now, as he placed my suitcase into a coin locker at the bus station.

"I'm not really hungry. I don't want to eat."

"You should eat something. I'll go get something light for you to eat."

"0kay?"

Before Tan could even finish his sentence, Kiran's familiar long hand extended a bag of sandwiches and juice toward me with her usual emotionless expression.

I could only purse my lips at the tall girl, feeling a mix of childish resentment and frustration bubbling up from nowhere. Look at her, after all this, she still refused to speak a single word to me.

When I didn 't immediately reach out to take the sandwich, Kiran pushed the bag so close to my face that it was nearly resting on my nose. Then, in her usual dry and curt tone, she spoke,

"Take it."

I stayed silent. but that long hand moved even closer, repeating the same words again.

"Here... take it."

"Phim, just take it. Otherwise, Kiran might shove it all the way into your eye socket,"

Pock teased, trying to persuade me. Without thinking, I instinctively reached out and grabbed the bag in front of me. The moment it was in my hand, the troublemaker quickly turned and walked away to board the bus.

I wanted to scream!

"Kiran is ridiculously jealous, isn't she?"

"Tan."

I couldn't stop myself from scolding the man standing there sulking like a child, his voice whiny and petulant like a woman's. Then, feeling utterly frustrated, I stormed off to board the bus.

On the bus, I tried to share the sandwich with Tan, worried he might be hungry. But he refused, giving me some ridiculous excuse, that the sandwich might have been coated in a love spell by Kiran, like poison, and that eating it would make him fall hopelessly in love with the giver.

After that, I stopped caring whether Tan was hungry or not.

If you don't want to eat, then don't!

The bus took 50 minutes to reach Shirakawa-go, a village full of old Japanese houses with sharp triangle shaped roofs that almost touched the ground.

Right now, Shirakawa-go was covered in snow, almost every inch of it. The bright white snow sharply contrasted with the dark brown of the old houses standing tall in rows. The falling snowflakes, which never seemed to stop, made everything look dreamy, like a picture from a fairy tale.

The bus stop was on the other side of the village, so the tourists had to walk across a long concrete bridge over a wide, fast-flowing river.

When I saw it, my hands became cold, and a strange fear crept into me. I saw the backs of Kiran and Pock walking ahead, not thr away. Tan walked beside me, showing his care and concern.

I looked around at the view, including the area under the bridge, feeling uneasy. The freezing wind blew so hard that I had to pull my winter jacket closer to my body to keep warm.

The view in front ofme was blurry because ofthe snowflakes falling and swirling everywhere.

Beautiful...

But it felt scary too...

The atmosphere felt like, at any moment, a snow demon, a woman with a pale face, long hair, and a white kimono, might appear to scare us. A yukionna in the snow...

The old Japanese legend says she often appears during snowstorms.

I kept my eyes on the ground, lost in strange, eerie thoughts and my own imagination for a while. Then, as I finally looked up, the sight before me left me so stunned I nearly fell off the bridge.



"Phim, what's wro—AHHH!"

Tan rushed toward me out of concern, but in the end, he ended up screaming himself after seeing what I was staring at. I placed a hand over my chest, trying to calm my wildly pounding heart.

At first glance, the figure in front ofme looked like a snow demon with long, messy hair blowing wildly in the wind. The pitch-black strands covered her entire face, and when I looked closer, it seemed as though I could see glowing red eyes staring right at me.

A pale, gray hand slowly reached out to touch my shoulder, leaving me frozen with fear, unable to breathe.

Thud!

"Hey, Pock! I've told you so many times not to let your hair down randomly! Look, you scared Phim half to death!"

It turned out to be Pock, who had let her long hair loose and just happened to turn toward us at the perfect moment. I couldn't believe it was the same person, how could just letting her hair down make her look so terrifying?

"Wow, you really slapped me hard, huh? And you two, Phim and Tan, seriously? It's just me, Pock! Didn't you recognize me? Screaming like you saw a ghost."

"Sorry, Pock. I was daydreaming, and when I looked up, I got startled for a second. By the way, why did you turn to us?"

Pock slowly tied her hair back, looking more like herself again as she answered me with a hint ofpity in her tone.

"1 turned around to ask Tan to take a picture of me. Calm down, Phim, okay? You sure it was just a little startled? You screamed like the world was ending."

"And Tan! You screamed like a girl too. Come here, walk with me so you'll get used to it."

Without waiting for a response, Pock marched over and grabbed Tan's arm. He was still frozen in place, wide-eyed like someone cursed into stone.

Unfortunately for Tan, Pock was much stronger and easily half2dragged, half-pulled him along, even though he still looked completely out of it.

I stood there in confusion, stuck in the middle of the bridge for a moment, until a gloved hand gently took mine and led me forward.

Well.. how smooth ofyou, Kiran.

The same pattern as yesterday, no doubt.

I quickly pulled my hand away, not wanting to lose face, but the person in front of me always found ways to intimidate me, both directly and indirectly, until I had no choice but to follow along.

"lfyou struggle too much, you'll fall, you know."

"Just walk with me nicely, or I'll leave you here alone, Phim."

Terrified of having to cross the bridge alone, I ended up grabbing her hand instead and following her closely, as usual.

Once we made it to the other side, I felt much more at ease. Tan was waiting near the first traditional house at the entrance ofthe village, smiling brightly.

Right now, he had his camera pointed in my direction.

But his smile faded as I walked closer. Perhaps it was because the scene through the lens showed me and Kiran holding hands. To make matters worse, the tall girl tightened her grip even more, making my face burn with embarrassment.

Tan lowered the camera from his eyes. The disappointment and sadness in his big, round eyes were painfully clear. He stood there, shoulders slumped, as Pock came over to cheer him up with a playful tone.

"Tan, darling, come take my picture! Come on now, my posing skills are top-notch. Let me tell you, in this entire industry, I'm only second to Luk Ked's mom!"

### "Uh...'

Tan hesitated, but being the gentleman he was, he couldn 't refuse. While Pock was inviting him, she was already standing in a dramatic pose, one foot pointed, hand on her hip, head held high, lips pursed. With his photographer instincts kicking in, Tan couldn 't resist raising his camera and snapping photos.

Click, click, click, click.

Pock then began moving backward, striking a pose with each step in a steady rhythm.

"0ne, two, three, click!"

"One, two, three, click!"

Tan, as ifknowing his role perfectly, followed her, taking photos nonstop.

The two of them seemed to be thoroughly entertained!

I turned to see the tall girl beside me, her eyes gleaming and an evil smirk on her face. Unable to stop myself, I gave her a hard smack on the shoulder. But, of course, she didn't seem the least bit bothered.

Pock and Tan had wandered far away, continuing their rhythmic "One, two, three, click" routine until they disappeared in the distance.

Meanwhile, Kiran was gently holding my hand, leading me on a slow, leisurely walk as we admired the scenery.

My eyes were caught by a small, igloo-like structure and a cheerful snowman perched on a snowy hill not too far away. Excited, I shook off Kiran's hand and ran toward the two sights with great enthusiasm.

It was just a few minutes, really, just a brief moment, since I let go ofher hand.

But that short time seemed to be more than enough for someone like Kiran, who had the natural ability to draw people toward her.

"Excuse me... are you Thai?"

I looked back to see Kiran nodding, looking a bit confused.

"0h my! I knew it! At first, I wasn't sure because your face is sooo cute, it looks kind of Japanese or Korean."

The excited squeals, full of exaggerated flair, reached all the way to where I was standing. A group Of 4-5 offlce ladies quickly handed Kiran a phone, asking her to take a group photo for them. That wasn't anything unusual.

But what really stood out was the prettiest and most stylish woman in the group leaning in for a selfie with Kiran, giggling with excitement she couldn 't hide.

These people... unbelievable.

Huuuuuu.„...

Thud!

The sound of tightly packed snow, shaped into a round ball about as hard as a softball, flew through the air and landed squarely on Kiran's head with pinpoint accuracy.

I don't know how hard it hit, but it was enough to make the tall girl stumble a big step forward. She had to stand there shaking her head to gather her senses for a moment.

Then, she put her left hand on her hip while her right hand scratched her head awkwardly. Kiran sneaked a glance toward where I was standing, pretending to be clueless, looking nervous.

The result? The group of ladies scattered away from Kiran like bees fleeing a broken hive, except for the one who had asked for a selfie. She was still fussing around, trying to hand her phone to Kiran to save something on it.

Huuuffttttttt.„

Thud!

Same target, no mlss. .. Maybe I really have a talent for hitting my mark, don't I?

"Jen, let's go! Her girlfriend is soooo scary!"

The younger woman looked a bit reluctant as her friend pulled her away quickly, leading her in the opposite direction. They left Kiran standing there, confused for a moment, before she suddenly marched straight toward me with a determined look, ready to confront me.

I crossed my arms tightly, preparing to face whatever anger she was about to unleash. But then. the tone of her voice completely caught me off guard.

"So, that snowball you just threw at my head... was that your way of calling me over?"

Her voice was full of fake sweetness, paired with a head tilt and wide, innocent eyes. Everything about it was so overly dramatic!

I lifted my chin confidently, feeling in control, and answered with a tone full of authority.

"'Yep, that's exactly it."

"And why did you call me over, hmm\*"

"To take a picture of me with the snowman."

I pointed at the snowman in front of me, feeling confident. Kiran gave a big smile and quickly took her phone to snap lots of pictures of me. Then, she pretended to frown and mumbled something quietly.

"Phim, look. it'S backlight."

She handed me the phone to see, but I didn't notice anything wrong with the pictures.

"We need to take a selfie so the light looks better."

Before I could say anything, she moved her face closer, held up her phone, and took a selfie quickly. Without thinking, I smiled at the screen.

"See? Much better! Let's take one more." This time, she moved even closer, counting,

"0ne... twoooo..."

But at "three," her sharp nose softly touched my cheek.

The picture on the screen showed me smiling happily while Kiran sneakily kissed my cheek.

"Yes?" she answered sweetly.

Not only did she look unapologetic, but she also laughed happily and showed me the picture on her phone, like she was trying to tease me.

"Give it to me! Delete the picture right now!"

"lfyou want it, come and take it,"

Kiran said, raising her hand with the phone as high as she could.

I was so mad I wanted to scream. The only way I could think ofwas to jump and grab the phone from her hand. But every time I jumped.

Smack!

She pinched my cheek each time I tried to reach for the phone.

I jumped again, she pinched again. It happened three times in a row!

Finally, I lost my patience and threw myself at Kiran's midsection with full force, planning to knock her off balance and grab the phone.

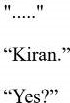
Wham!

But I guess I used too much strength. The tall girl fell backward with a loud thud, her head hitting the ground so hard I could hear the impact. To make it worse, I ended up landing on top of her with my whole body.

Kiran went completely still.

I panicked and didn't know what to do. I quickly crawled to her, holding her face in my hands, my heart racing with worry and fear.

"Kiran... are you okay?"



As I leaned in closer, our noses almost touched. Kiran's eyes, which had been closed, slowly opened. But instead of calming me, it made my heart beat even faster and harder.

I tried to pull away quickly, but it was too late. Her hand grabbed my waist and pulled me closer, making our faces even closer than before.

Iler brown eyes, soft and sweet, with a hidden smile in them, seemed to pull me in, deeper....

....and deeper.

At that moment, all I could hear was my own heartbeat.

At that moment, I couldn 't look away from her eyes that had always influenced me.

And then....

Her lips touched mine, kissing me passionately. Her warm tongue gently teased me before sliding in to meet mine, moving slowly and tenderly.

Before I could melt completely or lose all my breath..

"Damn it! That hurt!"

It seemed like a dark, spherical object came rushing toward us. It tripped over mine and Kiran's legs, as we were still lying on the ground, tangled together and blocking the way.

The object lost its balance and rolled around before it landed face hit into the snow.

Kiran and I quickly moved away from each other. We sat up fast and leaned against the small igloo, trying to act normal like nothing had happened.

But.....

"Pock! How did you get here?"

It turned out that the fast-moving spherical object was, once again, Pock. Covered in white snow, Pock slowly lifted her face from the snowy ground. Her face was dusted with white particles, and her messy bangs only added to her disheveled appearance.

Kiran quickly went over to brush the snow off her dear friend's face with a look of pity.

"1 was asking Tan to take pictures of me running joyfully in the snow! But, what were you two doing lying here? Counting each other's eyelashes?"

Pock's words made my face heat up instantly, and I was pretty sure it had spread to my ears too.

"'You're imagining things. We were just lying there making a snowman. A tiny one. Minimalist style!"

"0h, so tiny it's probably the size of an eye booger. Did you need a microscope to see it?"

Tan arrived just in time, helping Pock, who seemed to have twisted her ankle, carefully get back up. Then Kiran supported her best friend, guiding her to a nearby bench to sit down and get some first aid. The two continued their strange conversation the whole way.

"So, making a snowman, huh? Then why is your mouth smudged with pink lipstick?"

"1 put it on! My lips were dry, okay? It's cold, so my lips cracked."

"Are you applying Geisha style? Why does it look crooked, and not fully apply?"

"Whatever. I applied it as a tribute to the country's signature style. Ifyou don't stop asking, I'll kick your other leg and sprain it too."

"Have mercy on me, Kiran! Just today, my knees are more worn out than ever. I've been running and posing all over the village for miles, you know, just to make it here, you clam!"

Hearing that, I could only think to myself, those two really are mischievous as best friends should be.

"Phim, looking like this... it seems like you still love Kiran."

The deep voice that spoke next to my ear made me tense up instantly, my face tightening with stress.

What's wrong with Tan today? Why does he keep trying to provoke me like this?

This isn't like the Tan I used to know at all..

"No, wait... to put it more accurately."

'"You still love Kiran a lot."

Chapter 41: The Surface of Touch

You could say right now, I'm feeling quite pleased with myself, and you wouldn't be wrong.

Whenever it seems like Phim lets her guard down, even for just a moment, giving in to my charm a little, I can't help but seize the opportunity to savor those sweet, fleeting feelings she stirs in me.

But no matter how much I take, it never feels like enough.

Over the past two days, my actions have been reckless and daring. If I could touch her, I touched her. If I could kiss her, I kissed her. It's as if I'm burning through a lifetime's worth of courage all at once, courage I've hardly ever used before.

And now, I'm using it all up at this very moment.

"'Kiran, how long are you planning to keep smiling like that? Your gums probably all swollen."

Pock's voice snapped me out of my thoughts. She raised one eyebrow as she glanced into a compact mirror, while her other eye was sneakily looking in my direction. Her lips were slightly parted, just enough.

Of course, she was putting on lipstick.

With red lipstick, to be exact.

On the shaky bus with lots of turns.

"1s it wrong for me to smile?"

As I said that, I turned and gave Pock a sweet, happy smile. I wanted to stop smiling.

But I just couldn't stop right now.

Then Pock made it easy for me by pressing her big finger hard on my bottom lip. There was a loud "pop" when my lip snapped back. It was a rough and rude way, but it worked really well.

Now I'm not smiling anymore.

"What are you doing? And is that a finger or dried meat? Why does it taste so salty? Idiot!"

Pock just shrugged and went back to putting powder on her face like nothing had happened. These days, she put on makeup much more easily, not as clumsy as before.

But that doesn't mean it looked any better.

Pock's makeup style, come to think of it, is like an abstract art piece. At first glance, it always brings up so many questions, like:

Where's the beauty in this?

Why did she do that?

What does it even mean?

"So, how do I look? Do I look fabulous now?"

Pock's voice snapped me out ofmy strange daydream. She turned her whole face toward me, even blinking her eyes innocently while waiting for my answer.

"Umm... it's okay."

I accidentally looked away when I answered her question. Lying really is a

sin...

"Huh? If it's okay, then why are you avoiding my eyes?"

Pock grabbed the hair on my forehead and pulled me to look at her straight in the face. When she noticed me glancing away, she used her other hand to grab my small face, forcing me to look directly at her.

"I'm just scared of your eyebrows... Why are you combing your eyebrows like that?"

"It's a Hollywood trend, you know. It's popular these days."

Saying that, Pock turned back to carefully comb her eyebrows again.

"With makeup like that... isn't your boyfriend going to dump you?"

Smack!

A large, heavy hand landed on my shoulder. Pock's face turned a mix of red and gray. She gave an embarrassed smile, squirming shyly. It completely clashed with her words Of denial.

"Shut uuuuup! Don't you dare say things like that where Phrai might hear you. Boyfriend, my foot! With a name as dull as his, all I've experienced from him so far are his foot stomps. I haven't even seen his thighs, let alone anything else. "

I'd never expected someone like Phrai Paisan, who seemed so bold and fearless in everything, to become painfully shy when it came to love. Look at him, he has no clue how to court Pok properly? He spends his days inviting Pock to eat Korean BBQ.

And then....

And that's it....Just grilled pork.

But if he didn't have feelings for her, what kind of crazy person would ask a woman to eat Korean BBQ with him for seven years straight? It's a good thing Pock sometimes said no, or her Beyoncé-like figure wouldn't have lasted this long.

"But I'm still unsure. If I really have to marry Phrai, I'd feel bad for our kids..



"Just look at his face,"

Pock said, sighing deeply as she carefully combed the other eyebrow. "When I see it, I want to at least improve the bloodline a bit, you know?"

She spoke about her imagined child with such heartfelt pity that I almost laughed.

"And then there's his behavior, his manners... Phrai's rougher than a gravel road! How's my kid, little Mon-Maeo, supposed to grow up with a dad like that? Just think about it."

She even had a name picked out for her child, Mon-Maeo. But why does that name sound so familiar?

"Come on, give it some time. A guy who loves you like Phrai is rare, you know. Seven years! It's gotta be weird like this for him to handle you. As for Khun Kam, don't expect much. He brings a new girl home every day.

His stepmother even gave up calling their names and now just calls them all 'dear' to avoid mistakes."

"But Phi Kam is so handsome! Ugh.. , and now he's even more handsome,"

Before Pock could finish gushing about Khun Kam, the bus arrived at Takayama Station. Tonight, we'd stay here in this small, charming town full of character.

On the way to Shirakawa-go earlier, we'd stored our luggage in a coin locker. Once we arrived back, all we had to do was grab our suitcases and head to the hotel, which wasn't far from the station.

As the four ofus walked to the hotel, it seemed like Pock had gotten much closer to Tan. Over the past two days, Pock had practically stuck to him like glue, as if she was guarding us from getting too close.

When we arrived at the hotel, which was quite large and luxurious compared to the surrounding area, the four ofus went to our rooms to rest, agreeing to meet again in half an hour to explore the town together.

The atmosphere in the elevator was tense as we secretly wondered if Tan and Phim would be staying in the same room. We all felt relieved when, upon reaching the fourth floor, the petite girl stepped out of the elevator first, while Tan stayed with me and Pock.

Ding!

Sixth floor. The three Of us were staying on the same floor. I noticed Tan had been staring at me for a while now. Thankfully, we walk down the hall, with the three Ofus side by side, ended at the door to Pock's and my room. I quickly opened the door and rushed inside while Pock lingered to wave a dramatic goodbye to Tan.

"Do you think he's dating Phim?"

I flopped down onto the soft bed, asking Pock, who slowly dragged her suitcase into the room. She lazily tossed her things around before plopping down on the sofa at the foot ofthe bed

"I don't think so... they're probably just close friends "

"Why do you think that?"

Pock crossed her arms, furrowed her perfectly parted brows, and began to think deeply.

"1fPhim loved someone like you. there's no way she'd go for someone like Tan. Tan is soft, sweet, always attentive, and cares about everyone, always, I mean it. You, on the other hand... "

"Uh. the more you praise him, the more it feels like you're insulting me."

"Back thennnn, I actually asked Phim why she liked someone clueless like you."

My heart started pounding as if I was about to learn the secret of the universe. I couldn't even stop my voice from trembling when I asked Pock,

"Why? I've never asked Phim about that."

Pock walked over and heldy cheeks with both hands, like she always did when she wanted to say something important. Her neatly parted eyebrows moved slightly, and her eyes, with thick eyeliner, looked straight at me seriously. Her big lips, covered in red lipstick, opened a little before she spoke in a deep dramatic voice. "Listen to me carefully... "

### "0kay... "

"Phim told me..."

"Pock, don 't bother asking... it's none ofyour business. "

Huh...

Pock said that and then flopped onto the bed, lowering her head and pretending to cry dramatically, like she was in a big theater production. All I could do was sigh loudly at her response, which didn't help clear up my questions at all.

So, are Tan and Phim dating...

And why would Phim like someone like me?

Takayama was completely different from Tokyo. It was a small town far from modern development, yet every inch of it was filled with unique Japanese charm.

Every alley was lined with small, traditional Japanese shops selling adorable souvenirs, especially the red monkey dolls in ninja outfits, a symbol of the prefecture, which could be seen all over the town.

There were also many famous food options, both sweet and savory, that looked so delicious. Phim and Pock, the two girls, couldn't stop squealing in excitement. They kept holding hands, pointing at each shop, stopping to buy things, and snapping pictures for their Facebook posts.

"Can we talk for a moment.. .?"

The soft, deep voice ofthe man who had been walking beside me for a

While finally broke the silence. Tan had looked like he wanted to say something for a while now, I could tell. I'd just been waiting for him to speak up.

"Do we really even have anything to talk about... T'

"Yes, we do... and it's something important."

I glanced at young man next to me. His face was filled with pain, like he was carrying a heavy burden. Great, another person hurt because of my actions.

"Please don't hurt Phim again. I'm begging you."

My heart felt like it froze the moment I heard Tan's unexpected words. How close must they be for Phim to trust him to share what had happened between us?

"Do you know how hard it's been? How much effort it took to help Phim become strong again? Two years of her just existing, barely living day to day. Five more years of her being cold and emotionless."

"But you....you only need three days. Just three days with you, she's already shaken. Three days, and everything I've worked so hard to build is about to fall apart."

His voice cracked, shaky with emotion. But it wasn't just him who felt the pain. Every word he spoke was like a sharp knife cutting through my heart, leaving it in pieces. I swallowed hard and replied in a quiet but firm voice. "You have every right to judge or criticize everything you've seen. But... "

"'You should leave some room in your judgment... for the possibility that you don't know or understand everything."

"lfyou don't know how I felt the day I left Phim... ifyou don't know how much patience it took for me to survive these past seven years..

"Then you have no right to talk to me like this again."

"The wounds in Phim's heart that you 'Il never be able to heal completely..

"1 will spend the rest of my life healing her myself."

After we finished looking around the town and having fun, we went back to the hotel to rest. I decided to by the hot onsen because Pock kept asking me to.

I carefully looked at the sign outside the onsen on the fourth floor. Luckily, the hotel offered both mixed baths and separate malc and female baths. But of course, I had to double-check everything. Ifl accidentally entered the wrong room...

My life could change forever.

'Kiran, at 4 p.m., go to the onsen on the fourth floor. Phim said she's going to soak there."

Pok's teasing, dramatic whisper echoed in my mind. She had managed to gather this "important" information while shopping with Phim earlier. "Come with me, okay?"

"Nope. I'm going to the mixed bath."

"What?"

"Who knows, maybe I'll get lucky and meet a Naga."

"This is Takayama, not Nong Khai."

"Whatever. even a green snake isn't so bad."

Thanks to Pock's burning desire to soak in the mixed bath, I now found myself standing here, feeling incredibly nervous. I glanced at my watch, it was already 4: 1 0 p.m. Phim must have gone inside by now.

I took a deep breath and walked through the curtain into the room, moving slowly and nervously, like I was sneaking into a place I wasn't supposed to be.

The moment I stepped into the room, a wave of heat seemed to rush at my face. The space was much larger than I'd expected. At the far end of the room, clear glass windows revealed a view of a bamboo garden behind the hotel. The large L-shaped bath, entirely decorated with black stones, gave the room a quiet, private, and serene atmosphere.

From a distance, I could see Phim's small, bare back, so pale and delicate. Her hair was tied up, showing off her graceful neck with soft strands of hair gently resting here and there. That neck, one I was so obsessed with, made so hard to resist placing my lips on it every time we were close.

My heart pounded hard and fast. I swallowed nervously, taking a slow breath to calm myself. My eyes moved to the small changing area in the right corner, and I walked toward it as quietly as possible.

The rules ofusing onsen here were clear. Even though I had mentally prepared myself beforehand, but now that it was time, it was hard not to feel embarrassed. The rule was simple: you had to remove all your clothes, every single piece.

Thankfully, the hotel provided a small towel, the kind usually used for drying hair.

It was supposed to help you feel less exposed.

However, for someone as tall as me, the towel was practically useless. Cover the top, and the bottom was exposed. Cover the bottom, and the top was exposed. For the first time, I truly understood the saying, "pull the blanket up, and yourfeet get cold. '

But worrying like this would be a waste of time. For all I knew, Phim might already get out of the onsen. With that thought, I decided to use the small towel I had...

I covered my head with the towel and walked out with my head down.

If I couldn't see anyone, then I could pretend no one could see me either.

Such deep philosophy wasn't written by a famous thinker, but from me.

By keeping my eyes fixed on the floor, I eventually managed to step into the onsen. I flinched a little at the intense heat of the water, almost too hot, but after a while, my body began to adjust.

Slowly, I removed the towel from my head and looked around for my target. After a moment, I spotted the petite figure leaning her head against the edge Of the bath. Her eyes were closed, and she looked completely relaxed. Besides Phim, there were only two older Japanese women in the bath.

Lucky me.

I moved quietly through the water until I stopped right beside Phim, in the same relax position. The difference was that the petite woman still held the small towel to cover herself hidden under the clear water, while I kept the towel over my head instead.

We stayed like that for a while until Phim slowly opened her eyes, probably sensing someone next to her. She quickly turned to look at me, where I was waiting with a playful smile. Her light brown eyes widened in shock. Phim's soft, pink cheeks gradually turned redder.

Until finally, it turned bright red.

"'How did you get in here?"

I shrugged slightly and gave her an innocent look, trying very hard to keep my eyes focused only on her face.

Not anywhere else...

"1 just walked in. Nobody told me I wasn't allowed."

Phim's full lips pouted in frustration, and her pretty brows knitted together. She clutched the small towel closer to her body, but instead of hiding her, the movement only drew my attention downward instinctively. After all, humans are naturally more drawn to motion than stillness.

"0uch! Phim, that hurts!"

Her free hand twisted sharply into my flat stomach, making me cry out in pain. But I couldn 't yell too loudly, afraid the two Older ladies might turn to look.

"'Serves you right. That's what you get for being stubborn."

"Why? Are you going to threaten to leave me at the temple again '

Her face, which had calmed to a soft pink for a while, immediately turned bright red again. It was obvious she'd been reminded of that incident. The time she had threatened to leave me at the temple when I kept asking her for an answer.

Was the beer I gave her to taste bitter or sweet? "1fI leave you at the temple, at least you'll get meals."

"And what if I just dumped you on the streets."

Born into this life... full ofkarma...

That song suddenly echoed in my head again. Could the petite one really be this cruel-hearted?

"You're so mean. .."

This time, I couldn't hide my sadness anymore. I accidentally let out a complaint, my face looking as if I was about to cry for Phim to see.

Right now, I probably looked no different from a little puppy abandoned by its owner. I must have looked so pitiful that the person in front of me couldn't help but speak in a soft, hoarse voice, almost like a whisper.

"Don 't make that face.

"What face?"

"The one you 're making right now... "

"Fine, I won't leave you on the street.. .or at the temple either."

"Phim??'

"1'11 keep you. but only outside the house. You're not allowed inside."

Her strange way of comforting me made me smile without trying. I even felt light, like a balloon rising into the sky. It reminded me of something the boss once said:

'Only the person who hurt you that can heal you, as ifthe pain had never happened '

Everything seemed to be falling into place, until a group of Japanese women walked into the room, about two or three of them.

One of them was a beautiful young woman with a classic Japanese look, but it seemed like she wasn't making the most of the small towel she had.

The towel barely covered even one side of her breasts!

I couldn't help but stare in shock as the woman gracefully stepped into the bath. She lifted her towel so high that it revealed almost everything.

Everything I saw for just a fleeting moment.

And then, everything went dark.

Phim's small hand was now tightly covering my eyes, so tight I couldn't see a thing.

"Don 't look. "

Her cold, firm voice whispered near my ear, making my heart skip a beat. At this moment, it felt like she was hugging me from behind.

Both of us are naked.

The smooth, soft sensation pressed against my back made my mind go blank. My blood rushed wildly, and I struggled to control my breathing, trying not to pant too much.

"I'm not looking, I swear! But Phim, let go ofrny eyes first?" you

The moment the small figure whispered into my ear, her breath sent shivers down my spine. And as if that wasn't enough, her soft, warm touch against my back as she stood on tiptoes completely broke my self-control.

Drip, drip.

"Kiran! Oh no... your nose is bleeding so much!"

Everything happened so fast. The moment Phim saw my unstoppable nosebleed, she reacted as if I were a critical patient needing immediate ICU care. I had no idea where she got the strength, but she pulled me out of the bath and made me pinch my nose and tilt my head back the whole time.

Phim was in such a panic she didn 't even bother changing her clothes. She grabbed the yukata provided in the dressing room, throwing one over me and one over herself, before taking my hand and leading me to her room, which was on the same floor as the onsen.

Once inside, she made me sit on the bed, propping me up with pillows she had arranged. Then, she rushed to get a wet cloth to wipe the blood off my face carefully. After that, she wrapped some ice in a small towel from the fridge and gently pressed it against my nose and cheeks. Her face was so serious now that I couldn't help but think:

Is this how itfeels to have terminal cancer...

"Phim... I'm fine, really. It's just a nosebleed. Don't stress so much."

It didn't help. Her pretty brows furrowed even more, and she replied in a tone like she was scolding a small child for being naughty.

"How can I not be worried? A nosebleed might seem harmless, but when it happens without a reason, it could be a sign of something serious."

There is a reason, absolutely, and I knew it better than anyone else. I wanted to tell her so badly, but. it might bring shame upon me.

"Phim... are you worried about me?"

I pulled her closer into my arms. With both of us covered only in thin yukatas, the warmth and softness ofher body against mine were undeniable. It was so close that I could feel her heartbeat racing.

And she could probably feel mine too.

"Of course I'm worried... why would you ask that?"

Her short reply, spoken in a hoarse, trembling voice, made me forget everything. It was as if all the self-control I had left vanished in that moment. I pulled her even closer, our bodies almost melting into one. Her shaky, hot breaths sent me reeling.

I pressed a kiss to her forehead, then let my lips gently trail to her eyelids, her cheeks, the tip of her nose, and finally to her lips. I kissed her deeply, letting my tongue taste the sweetness of hers, the kiss soft yet intense, as if satisfying a never-ending thirst.

My hands slowly undid the knot of her yukata, gently slipping inside to feel the warmth ofher slender waist and tracing the heat Of her soft stomach. At that moment,

It felt like she was holding her breath as our hands touched. Her small hands dug sharply into my back... sending my emotions into scatter.

At this moment...

Everything seemed completely out ofcontrol.



Chapter 42:The Fall of the Berlin Wall

I felt like I was drowning..

Sinking deeper into an ocean of desire, with Kiran holding me as we moved together. The warm touch of her lips softly ran across my burning body, like I had a high fever. Without thinking, my hands wrapped around her neck as her nose softly brushed against the side of my neck.

"Darling.

A low, shaky voice escaped me without realizing it. All the feelings I had kept inside for so long rushed out, making it hard to breathe. Her gentle kisses on my stomach made me shake, and I pulled my stomach in, trying to avoid the heat of her touch.

My body started to move on its own, out of my control, as if it didn't belong to me anymore.

It belonged to her.

I yearned for her...

But she...

Who does she belong to now?

Who does Kiran belong to?

For just a briefmoment, that question flashed through my mind. It felt like an invisible hand pulled me out ofthe endless sea, just as I was about to completely sink into it.

Before it was too late...

"Stop... That's enough.



With all the strength and focus I had left, my small hands pushed Kiran away. I sat up, my robe slipping offmy shoulders, my hair a messy tangle.

Her long, almond-shaped eyes looked startled, filled with questions, before shifting into pain and disappointment so deep that I had to turn away. I couldn't look at her face, afraid that in the end, I would give in again, just like always.

"I'm not someone you can do this with, without giving me any explanation about the past. Do you have any clarity to tell me? Nothing. Not about the past, the present, or the future."

"1'm sorry...

She reached out her hand to touch my arm, but I pulled away. I tried hard to stay calm, but my voice still shook with hurt as I spoke

"Do you see me as just a toy?"

"No, never. I've never thought ofyou that way. To me... you 're the one I love."

The word "love" from her felt like pouring oil on a fire, making it burn even more.

"Love? If you love me, why did you treat me like this?"

"And what about Sai? Where did you put her? Didn't you choose her? Didn't you like her so much?"

My voice was rough and fast, like it always was when I was angry. Kiran looked at me with an expression I couldn't understand.

"No, I didn't like Sai. I wasn't with her."

Confusion and the shock of hearing something I'd never known before hit me hard. What did Kiran mean by saying she never dated Sai? Had they broken up?

"When... When did you break up?"

Kiran swallowed hard. She looked hesitant, as if it was difficult for her to answer.

"We never dated..

A lie.

This was the cruelestjoke I'd ever heard.

"You're lying. Ifyou weren't together, then why didn't you contact me for the past seven years? Not even once!"

I waited nearly a full minute for her answer, but in the end, that was all she said. Just one word. Kiran seemed to swallow the explanation I desperately wanted to hear, her lips pressing tightly together. Her brows knitted, and her brown eyes looked full Of pain, as if she were the one being hurt the most.

But wasn 't I the one who should feel that way?

### "Get out!"

I couldn't hold back my tears any longer. My small fists pounded against her chest over and over. She didn't dodge or push me away. Instead, she tried to pull me into her arms.

"Phim, calm down... Phim, please listen to me first.

In that moment, everything seemed to fall silent. My hand struck Kiran's small face hard, turning her head to the side. Tears fell from my eyes as I saw red marks appear on her pale cheek. She blinked rapidly and let out a long sigh, as if holding back all her emotions.

"I understand... No matter the reason, you're not ready to listen right now. When you are—"

### "Get out!"

I repeated the same words, cutting her off before she could finish. The sight of Kiran's törced, bitter smile broke me even more. She straightened her robe to making sure it was neat before slowly standing and walking toward the door.

"Thank you... for taking care of me just now. Compared to when we were kids, you've really improved, you know that?"

Click

I broke down the moment I heard the sound ofthe door closing.

I threw myself onto the bed, burying my face in the pillow as loud, violent sobs escaped me. Inside, it felt like a war was raging between two opposing feelings that wouldn't stop fighting.

It felt like anger, like hatred... but deep inside I keep yearning for her.

I wanted to get revenge, to hurt her as much as she hurt me... but just seeing the pain in her eyes made it feel like I was the one hurting more,

How was I supposed to handle this contradiction in my heart?

I really don't know.....

I didn't feel like going down for dinner as we'd planned, but I couldn't refuse Tan, who came knocking at my door, insisting I join.

I didn't want to ruin the Japan trip for the one and only best friend I had in the world. So, I gave in and tried my best to hide the puffiness under my eyes from all the crying with makeup I thought looked seamless. But even then, I couldn't escape Tan's sharp gaze.

"Phim... are you okay? You don't look well."

"Ifyou want me to come down with you, don't ask too many questions."

The young man nodded reluctantly, like someone used to giving in to me. He led me down to the hotel lobby, where Kiran and Pock were already waiting.

For a moment our eyes before Kiran quickly looked away. But that made the red mark on her face even more noticeable. My heart sank with guilt, knowmg I was the reason for that awful mark.

"Phim and Tan are here... Let's go eat the famous Takayama beefl"

Pock linked her arm with mine in a friendly gesture, like a diplomat trying to make peace. I guessed she probably knew at least a bit about what had happened between Kiran and me, but she was clever enough to pretend she didn 't.

The air outside was freezing, and I had to wrap my arms around myself tighter to keep warm. But before that, a large long black coat from the man walking next to me was gently draped over my shoulders. For a moment, I wanted to refuse his kindness, knowing full well someone's eyes were watching from behind.

But on second thought...

Maybe it wasn't necessary to refuse.

The four of us arrived at a restaurant famous for its Hida beef dishes, a specialty of Takayama. Pock seemed more excited than anyone as she eagerly ordered food. In the end, she chose a sukiyaki set and Hoba leaf grilled beef, a local specialty.

When the food was served, both Tan and Pock couldn't stop praising how delicious the beefwas. Meanwhile, my tongue could hardly taste anything at all.

"'Kiran... Eat something. Here, I'll cook it for you. You're so skinny. Just eat, okay?"

Kiran used her chopsticks to nudge the beef on her plate around, giving Pock a wealy• smile that made my heart ache.

"1 don't really want to eat... "

"Then should I order something else? What do you want to eat?"

Pock waved her hand eagerly, calling the staff over, trying her best to cheer up her dear friend.

"1 want Some sake... something strong."

I couldn't help but glare at Kiran when I heard her answer. This time, instead of looking away like usual, she met my gaze directly with a stubborn determination I'd never seen in her before.

"Sure... I'll drink with you."

Tan's deep voice chimed in. He smirked slightly, his big round eyes glancing at Kiran with a hidden meaning I couldn 't quite understand.

"Butjust drinking isn't fun, is it? Let's make it interesting."

"How about a drinking contest? Me against you."

I turned to scold him, irritated, but for the first time, Tan seemed just as stubborn as Kiran. He didn 't even glance at me, instead keeping his smug smile as he challenged Kiran, whose brow furrowed deeply before replying with a serious tone.

"That depends. what do I get ifl win?"

Tan smiled widely at Kiran, though his eyes didn't show a hint of friendliness. He pulled out his wallet, rummaged through it, and finally took out a train ticket, waving it in front of her.

"Ifyou win, you get this, a train ticket to Osaka tomorrow. You'll get to sit next to Phim. Do you want it?"

"Oh my goodness... dear lord, you're being wicked, aren't you? "

Pock muttered under her breath as Tan and Kiran locked gazes.

I hated that Tan was pulling something like this, but what could I do? He didn't even look at me.

He had never been like this before.

"lfyou want it...fine, let's compete."

Kiran 's cold words sent a surge of irritation through me, making me want to scream. What were they both trying to do?



"Tan! Stop this!"

Tan didn't listen to me. Instead, he ordered a large bottle of sake and then turned to look at me with a determination in his eyes I'd never seen before. "Please, Phim. let us handle this. It's between Kiran and me."

Fine. Go ahead. Drink yourselves to death if you want to! If both ofyou are going to act this ridiculously, then just do it!

I crossed my arms and legs, sitting back with a sour expression, feeling annoyed beyond belief. The two of them were downing sake like it was some kind of war. Each time they took a sip, their faces twisted in discomfort from the alcohol's strength.

Yet neither of them seemed willing to back down not even a little.

"Phim... Can I talk to you for a bit? Outside."

I was surprised to hear Pock suggest that. In over ten years of knowing her, we'd rarely ever spent time alone together.

Since those two were lost in their own world, there was no point in me sitting there, stewing in frustration.

Pock and I walked outside, and neither Tan nor Kiran even bothered to glance our way.

The cold air outside was sharp enough to make Pock blow on her hands.

Her face was calm but serious, an expression I wasn't used to seeing on her. "Phim.. . no matter what you and Kiran are fighting about today, I can tell..

"Kiran is really hurting."

Pock's words sent a sharp jolt through my heart.

"So, Kiran told you everything?"

"No... it's because she hasn't said anything at all. That's how I know she's hurting."

"She only lies to us about being okay when things are really bad for her."

I stopped walking and stared down at the ground, clenching my fists tightly enough to hurt. My voice came out so soft, it was almost a whisper.

"I hate myself, Pock. I hate how, when it comes to Kiran, I'm always so

"7 years, Pok. 7 years I spent living with pain, with hundreds and thousands of unanswered questions. And now, it's like none of that even happened. She's acting like nothing ever happened, like she can just slip back into the place she left behind. After we've only just met again, three or four days, without giving me any clarity at all. Do you think that's fair?"

Pock reached out and gently patted my upper arm, her hand moving up and down as if trying to comfort me. Then she spoke clearly and firmly.

"Seven years, I get it, Phim. but What about these past three or four days? You've been hurt for 7 years, do you want to see Kiran suffer for the next seven years just to make it even? This is love, Phim, not a math equation. It doesn't need to be equal in every way. And life is too short to waste on pain when it's clear that both of you still love each other so much. Even as an outsider, I can see it."

"And another thing... how can you be so sure that Kiran hasn't been hurting for the past seven years?"

I turned to look at Pock in surprise, unable to guess what she was trying to imply.

"Because of Sai, obviously. How could Kiran feel pain, Pock? She's had someone with her this whole time, while I was the one left behind!"

"That's not true. Besides you, Kiran never dated anyone. Ever. Oops!"

Pock quickly raised both hands to cover her mouth. This was the second time today that I'd been told Kiran and Sai never dated. But it still sounded too unbelievable, especially since it came from Kiran herself and now Pock, her best friend.

"What do you mean, Pock? If Kiran really didn't have anyone, then why didn't she ever contact me? Sorry, but I just can't believe it."

Pock scratched at her lips nervously, her face showing the inner struggle she was having. Finally, she let out a long sigh and spoke, her tone making it clear how uncomfortable she felt.

"l'm not really in a position to say much, Phim. and as for Kiran, she definitely won 't say anything. Explaining it would feel like blaming someone else. So let me put it this way instead, I'll give you a little hint."

"lfyour idea of love is enduring pain all by yourself, just so you can stay by the side of the one you love... "

"Then Kiran's idea oflove might be letting the one she loves gofree.

"You might not understand what I'm saying right now, Phim... but one day, you will. '

"Achhh... achhh.

Kiran looked like a complete mess. The tall girl was leaning against a light pole, her hand gripping it for support as she threw up violently, tears and snot streaming down her face. Pock stood nearby, awkwardly shifting around while dutifully rubbing her friend's back.

"Pock. what are you looking for?"

Tan blurted out the question, clearly unable to keep his curiosity in check any longer.

"A dog...

"A dog? Are you afraid of being bitten? Don 't worry, Pock, there aren't many stray dogs in Japan. You don't have to be scared."

Pock clicked her tongue in frustration, still glancing around nervously as she replied.

"1'm not afraid ofbeing bitten... I'm worried because, um. Tan, you don't understand how dangerous dogs can be in situations like this."

Tan raised an eyebrow, clearly puzzled by Pock's answer. He stood there slightly tipsy, not drunk out Of his mind like Kiran. Crossing his arms, he rubbed his stubbly chin and looked thoughtfully at Kiran, who was still retching nonstop.

"I never thought Kiran to be such a lightweight."

"Don't you dare say that, Tan! This is all your fault! You're the one who started this ridiculous contest, and now look at her!"

I yelled at the man beside me, so angry that he looked really guilty. His big, round eyes stared at me, full of regret, but I ignored him. I turned to Kiran instead. She had probably thrown up everything by now and was leaning weakly against the light pole, looking completely drained.

Pock and Tan worked together to help Kiran walk to the elevator. She kept her hand over her mouth the whole time, her face, which had been pale earlier, now bright red and full of discomfort.

"Pock, can you take care of Kiran tonight?"

I asked, feeling worried, even though I was sure Pock would handle it well.

To my surprise, Pock shook her head quickly, avoiding my eyes with a guilty look.

"I can't, Phim... I feel like I'm going to have diarrhea. I can barely take care of myselfi Ugh... cough, cough."

"Diarrhea? But why are you coughing?"

Tan interrupted, as usual, pointing out her excuse didn't make sense. Pock looked annoyed this time and snapped at him, shouting loud enough for everyone in the lobby to hear.

"What, do you want me to fart to make it more real? Tan, maybe try not talking for once, no one will call you mute if you stay quiet!"

I didn't pay attention to Tan and Pock's argument. What mattered most right now was how Kiran was going to get through the night in her current state.

"So, who's going to look after Kiran, Pock?"

"You, Phim. Can you let her stay in your room for just one night?"

"What? ! "

"Fine, ifyou can't, just leave her to sleep by the elevator. It's no big deal "

Pock said this casually, but at the same time, she reached out and gently patted Kiran's head as she leaned weakly against the wall. Then, Pock mumbled to herself in a tone full of exaggerated sympathy.

"Oh, Kiran your life isjust so pitiful.

Sigh.

"Alright, fine. I'll take care of her. But can you and Tan help me carry her to my room?"

I knew this was one ofPock's tricks, but I willingly walked into her trap. To be honest, I was too worried about Kiran to let her out of my sight tonight.



Tan and Pock's faces were total opposites as they carried Kiran to the bed in my room. Tan looked grumpy, clearly annoyed, while Pock had a big, cheerful smile, completely ignoring how obvious her intentions were.

Pock, who had just claimed to feel unwell, was now grinning widely, nearly showing all 32 of her teeth as she entrusted the drunk and unconscious Kiran to me.

"Take care of her, okay, Phim? Let's go, Tan. Stop standing there looking like a sad puppy, or I'll drag you!"

With that, Pock grabbed Tan, who looked utterly dejected, and dragged him toward the elevator with her usual superhuman strength. She left me alone with Kiran.

Kiran, with her long legs, lay curled up on the soft bed, completely unaware

Of anything. The large gray coat she wore had already been removed by Pock in the elevator after Kiran kept mumbling about being too hot. Her face, turned to the side, still showed the faint trace of a red mark that had started to fade.

I sat down beside her and gently stroked the mark, as ifthat could make it disappear faster.

The sight of Kiran's sleeping face, one I had secretly admired many times before, was now right in front of me again. But this time, her brows were furrowed tightly, as though she wasn't sleeping peacefully at all.

I got up to take a damp towel and returned to the bed. Using all my strength, I managed to roll her onto her back. Carefully, I wiped her face, her neck, and her arms.

When I reached her torso, I hesitated for a moment. In the end, I decided to unbutton her white shirt, one button at a time.

But as soon as I undid the second button, I froze, clutching the collar of her shirt tightly. What I saw was something I hadn't seen in years.

I could hardly believe my eyes—Kiran was still wearing that necklace.

The same gear necklace I had intentionally given her as a birthday present seven years ago. The same necklace I had forcefully shoved into her hands in a fit of rage when she admitted she was dating Sai.

My hand remained clutching her shirt, and my heart pounded so hard it felt like it might burst. Earlier in the day, I hadn 't noticed the necklace on her. She must have taken it offbefore soaking in the hot springs.

Now, my mind was swirling with questions.

Why was she still wearing this necklace?

If it didn't mean anything to her, why keep it?

I thought back to Pock's cryptic words from earlier that evening. If her statements had been like waves slowly eroding the tall, sturdy wall I had built in my heart.

This necklace was a raging storm, battering those walls until they began to crumble under its force.

A wave of confusion and vulnerability washed over me as I was struck by yet another moment. Kiran suddenly rolled onto her side, clutching the hand that gripped her collar tightly.

Her body trembled with violent sobs, even as her eyes remained closed

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and I froze in shock, unsure of what to do.

The scene felt oddly familiar, like a memory from long ago. I remembered the sight of someone so proud and confident, breaking down into gutwrenching sobs without a care for who might see.

It was the same as that day, the day her short, thoughtless words hurt me so deeply that I almost went mad with grief—on my birthday.

But that day, my own tears had blurred my vision, obscuring everything else. I hadn't noticed her tears.

I had overlooked Kiran's tears.

I had been so focused on my own pain that I failed to see anyone's tears.

Her shaky words, mixed with crying, were hard to understand, but some parts hurt me so much that I reached out to gently stroke her hair with all the care I had.

"Pim.., please...

"Please... '

It took several long minutes before her sobbing slowed down. I watched as the worry disappeared from her face, and her eyebrows relaxed like before.

But in the moment Kiran 's tears stoppedfalling-.

That was the moment...

Every wall I had built around my heart came crashing down..

Chapter 43: Justice does not exist in the world.

We are not dead yet...

Even though it feels so close... waking up with a terrible headache, as if my head is about to explode into pieces. My throat is so dry, like it's full of sand. And every time I swallow, there is a bitter and sour taste lingering all the time.

I struggled with myself for a long time... before I could finally open my eyes. Once my vision adjusted, contusion and disorientation hit me hard.

Where is this place...?

The little bit of awareness I still had left told me that this was probably not my room or Pock's room.

I even had to blink several times, then slowly look around the room. But still, I didn't see any of Pock's scattered belongings, not even a single piece.

The Oil painting hanging above the TV at the foot ofthe bed looked strange too. I remembered that in our room, there was a picture of a beautiful, elegant Japanese woman weanng a dark kimono. One hand Of hers was pulling down the collar slightly, revealing her fair chest.

But now, the picture in front of me is a watercolor painting filled with a sakura garden. The soft pink colors look dreamy and delicate, and they seem somewhat familiar, as if I've seen them somewhere before...

At this point, I could feel a sweet, refreshing scent filling the room, lingering softly in the air. And that was the thing that completely woke me up from my drowsiness.

For me, there is only one person in the world with this unique lovely scent...

I quickly turned to look, and it was indeed Phim. She was standing in front of the mirror at the dressing table, gently dabbing perfume on her wrist and neck. Her small gestures made my heart beat out of rhythm.

I instinctively turned back to check my own body under the thick blanket, feeling nervous. But when I saw that everything was still in order... I let out a deep sigh.

How disappointing. I didn lose my virginity.

"Are you awake?"

Perhaps my sigh was too loud, and she heard it. She stopped what she was doing and came to sit on the bed beside me. Her small hand reached out to stroke my hair and cheek gently.

The fierce, scolding gaze that had harshly torn at my soul yesterday. had now softened into sweet, harmless eyes, as gentle as a little deer in the big forest.

Or could it be that we are actually dead..

Ifthis is death, then it's worth it, ascending to heaven to meet an angel who looks exactly like Phim.

"Do you have headache?"

The sweet, soothing voice from the person in front of me, a voice I probably hadn't heard for almost a decade, rang out, reaffirming my susplcron...

I must be dead for sure!

I might have kept wallowing in self-pity, thinking about dying from overindulging in sake at such a young age, if that beautiful hand hadn't reached out and pulled my cheek until it stretched painfully.

"I asked, why didn't you answer...?"

Ahhhhh... why does it hurt so much?

But if it hurts like this... It must mean I'm not a spirit yet.

Ahaaaaaaaaaaah!

I jumped back, pressing myself against the wall out of instinct, as we usually do when we're extremely shock. My small eyes were now wide open as my brain worked hard to process the situation, but in the end, I couldn't find any explanation for the sudden change in behavior of this small person, whose dull, beige tone had suddenly turned into a vibrant pink.

"Why do you look so scared of me?"

Phim's expression visibly turned sadder. She made my heart sink even further when I heard her next sentence, filled with both a sense of hurt and a gentle plea.

"Can you not be scared of Phim.. Phim apologizes."

The small figure pouted, lowering her gaze to the bed, tracing circles with her index finger. Her behavior was just like Line sticker Sally, who was pointing at the branches on the ground.

Seeing her like this made me want to pull her into my arms and comfort her like I used to.

But I didn't dare...

After yesterday's incident, I realized that from now on, whatever I do, I have to think carefully. Some actions could hurt Phim again, and no matter what, I don't want to see her suffer any more than this. "1'm not scared... I'm just. um, a little confused."

"Not scared... then come sit here."

The hand that had been tracing circles a moment ago shifted to pat the spot on the bed in front of her with a soft slap. Her beautiful brown eyes now looked inviting, beckoning me to sit closer to her.

And what could I do? Phimmanas' pleading expression made my heart melt... Deep inside, I almost wanted to fling myself toward the small figure with lightning speed.

Suddenly, the bruise on my right cheek stung sharply, as if warning me to be cautious.

In the end, I chose to crawl on my knees across the bed, moving slowly and reluctantly, as if I wasn't entirely willing. Finally, I sat neatly with my legs folded in front of the small figure, who now had a proud, satisfied smile on her fhce.

"Do you have headache?"

Phim repeated the same question that had yet to be answered. But this time, she didn't reach out to touch my cheek like before.

Instead, she moved her hand in a circle around my knee...

What the hell!

Is this some kind of endurance test for a hangover person?!

Even though I was slightly mesmerized by the touch circling on my knee, I Still had enough presence ofmind to respond to her question with a faint nod.

Wait, what did Phim ask again.

Her small hand suddenly reached out to feel my forehead, showing clear concern.

"Does it hurt...? Then let's take some medicine. Phim brought some medicine. Wait here for a moment."

This time, I shook my head quickly, but Phim didn't pay any attention. She rushed to rummage through her neatly packed suitcase, making shuffling noises as she searched for something.

Unlike us and Pock, who can turn a luxury room into a pigsty in less than a heartbeat, Phim was neat and organized.

Phim returned with a long headache pill and a glass of water in her hands. She handed them to me so close to my face that I had no choice but to take them and swallow the medicine.

"Why am I here? I only remember being really drunk..."

"Yes, you were very drunk... and Pock had stomach problems. So, Pock asked me to let you sleep in my room."

Oh, Pock...Pock...

Was this a plan or accident? How did she still believe Pock's story?

"Did um... bother or cause any trouble last night?"

I forced myself to ask the question I most wanted to know. Deep down, I knew that every time I got so drunk I lost control, the overwhelming feeling pain I had always kept in check would sneak out during moments like this, manifesting in unpredictable ways.

Ifl were to go by what Pock had told me.. ,

If I didn't throw a tantrum. then I must have just cried nonstop.

Especially on my birthday... the pain from seeing Phim cry her heart out because of me always came back to haunt me, as if everything had happened just yesterday.

For the past 7 years, Pok and I have gone through moments like that countless times together...

"You didn't cause any trouble. you just slept like a baby."

Phim's soft voice snapped me out ofmy thoughts. She answered the question without looking me in the eye, almost as if she were hiding something.

Slept like a baby? What does that mean? Or could it be...

Did I pee on the bed?!

Even though the possibility was almost zero since I had no history of doing that, it still seemed better to check and be sure. With that thought, I shot up from the bed suddenly and, without a second thought, rushed toward the door with urgency. But the small figure quickly moved to block my way.

"Anyway, thank you so much, Phim. But now, I'd like to go back to my room... I want to take a shower."

"Take a shower here... I'll prepare warm water for you to soak in. It'll make you feel better."

Phim, Who had been avoiding my gaze just moments ago, now tiptoed and used both hands to gently push my shoulders, guiding me toward the bathroom instead of the door.

"I can't shower here... I don't have any clothes."

"You do. . . while you were still asleep, Pock brought them over."

Phim pointed to a neatly folded set of clothes I had planned to wear today, sitting perfectly on the sofa. I couldn't underestimate Pock anymore. Despite her clumsy and blunt plans full of audacity, it seemed like they were effective!

I nodded reluctantly because there was no reason left to refuse Phim. Not to mention the enthusiastic way she was about to prepare warm water for my bath, something I couldn't help but admire.

Oh, dear lady... such a perfect wife.

"Take your shower here. Tan and Pock already went out to explore the city. It's late now, you know?"

Glancing at the clock, I realized it was already past 9 a.m. This morning, the four of us had planned to go out for a city walk at 8 a.m. Phim had patiently waited for me to wake up without disturbing or bothering me at all.

Why is she being so kind to me, even though yesterday she seemed so angry, as if she wanted to tear me apart?

I kept thinking about this the whole time I soaked in the perfectly warm water that the small figure had prepared for me, but I couldn't come up with any answer that félt convincing enough.

After finishing my shower, washing my hair, and getting dressed in the bathroom, I walked out while drying my hair with a small towel. I sat down on the chair in front ofthe mirror, which was now filled with an army of beauty products neatly arranged by the small figure. As I curiously observed the rows of cosmetics in front of me...

A beautiful hand seemed to reach out from behind me and gently take the towel from my hands.

"Let me dry your hair for you."

The moment her soft, sweet voice whispered by my ear, the mirror reflected my face, now flushed bright red. Looking deeper, it also reflected the image of the small figure carefully and tenderly drying my hair with the towel.

Her face was just as red as mine.

My heart felt like it was swelling and floating high into the air, but my mind couldn't help but feel suspicious about her strange behavior.

Did I, in my drunken stupor, perhaps kneel and beg for her forgiveness last night?

Is that why she's acting as though she 's forgiven mefor everything?

"AII done... your hair dries so quickly,"

Phim said softly.

She draped the towel over the back of the chair while both her hands gently held my shoulders, straightening me up. She looked into my eyes through the mirror, inspecting the neatness of my hairstyle with the manner of a professional hairdresser.

I turned and lightly touched her left arm. At this moment, her demeanor was so adorable that I couldn't hold back anymore. Finally, I pressed a kiss to the smooth, pale skin ofPhim's forearm, unable to restrain myself. Phim's face looked shocked... and she froze, stopping all movement.

I messed up again, didn't I.

I turned back, closing my eyes tightly, bracing myself for punishment from the small figure. I waited for quite a while, but no slap or scolding came. Just as I was about to open my eyes to assess the situation.

It felt like Phim's two arms wrapped around me from behind. Then, after a moment, her sharp little nose pressed against my cheek, planting a big kiss.

Phim had stolen a kiss from me!

I turned quickly, following my instincts, and that almost made our faces touch again. The small figure was now leaning forward, wrapping her arms lovingly around my neck. Her face was so close that I could almost hear her breathing.

My gaze must have been filled with questions, as Phim finally spoke with the most innocent, clear voice.

"

"I saw that you closed your eyes like this...

"So, I thought you wanted me to kiss your cheek...

"lsn't that right?"

I didn't say anything at all because both my thoughts and my heart had already fallen and scattered somewhere far away. I could only turn back to look at the mirror, which now reflected my own face flushed bright red, with the small figure smiling mischievously while staring at me with the sweetest gaze I hadn't seen in so long.

If there were any words left in my mind right now, it would probably be just one phrase,

I'm going to die!

"Pock. can I switch seats with you?"

Pim's short sentence made everyone go silent for several seconds...

especially Tan, who looked as if his entire world had just collapsed before him.

But it wasn't surprising for him to feel that way, since Phim had just made our intense drinking competition last night completely... meaningless.

It's true that the winner of the competition is Tan, and the ticket we tried so hard to get still ended up with Tan. But what does it matter, when the little one chose to sit beside me instead?

There's no justice in this world.

"Come on, Tan. That's just how life is."

"Everything in the world is a problem."

I heard Pock's voice comforting Tan. When I turned to look, I saw Pock patting Tan's back and shoulder from the back seat to cheer him up. Pock's face had a sly smile, and she even gave me a thumbs up when Tan bowed his head sadly.

What a mischievous person..

But when I turned to look at the cause of it all, who was nodding off until her head almost hit the window, I couldn't stay angry. I reached out and gently guided her head to rest on my shoulder.

She seemed to wake slightly but didn't pull away. I couldn't help but smile widely when she suddenly grabbed my arm, hugged it, and fell back asleep with a peaceful smile like a little girl.

I'm sorry, Tan.

That your victory made me this happy.

When we arrived in Osaka and left the train station, a van from the factory came to pick us up, just as planned. The time matched what we told the person who arranged the car and place to stay.

The van drove out of the city, not very far, until we reached the place to stay. It was a small, modern, two-story gray house. The house was in a neighborhood where all the houses looked the same.

I had a bad feeling when the van stopped, and I saw the back of someone standing in front of the house.

It can't be.

No, it's not true, right?

Then the person turned around with a big, bright smile. It looked like sunlight was shining from every tooth. "Hi... honey, how about your trip?"

It's really Yumi.

"Hi... you're Yumi, right? Konnichiwa, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

Of course, that wasn't my voice. It was Pock's voice. She walked quickly to

Yumi and shook her hand. She greeted her in strange English mixed with Japanese. Yumi looked confused but still smiled, as if trying to understand the way Pock acted like they had known each other forever.

I told Pock about Yumi on the first day she arrived. She was probably impressed by my short description of Yumi's looks, where I said she looked just like a top-tier Japanese AV actress.

Even though my mischievous friend's greeting to Yumi was strange, it was still good in one way, it kept Yumi busy before she could get too close to

Because just now, the sweet, pink atmosphere between me and Phim on the train had turned into a gloomy gray, with a faint red aura radiating from the little one's body.

Phim folded her arms tightly, and her beautiful eyebrows knitted together as

Yumi gave us a tour ofthe house. Yumi explained that she was assigned to arrange the best accommodation for Vice President Phimmanas.

,She also said that Mr. Poj insisted I stay here too because he didn't want his daughter to live alone for three months in an unfamiliar place,

The second floor of the house had two bedrooms, one for Phim and one for me. For now, Pock would stay in my room, while Tan had to sleep downstairs before heading back to England the day after tomorrow.

Unfortunately, Yumi wasn't just responsible for showing us the house. She also offered to take us out for dinner at a famous restaurant in Osaka, and it didn't seem like anyone could cruelly refuse her.

I glanced nervously at Phim. The little one now looked very upset, even though Pock stayed close to Yumi the whole time. Those sharp eyes met mine for just a moment before looking away.

For goodness' sake, we hadn't even been on good terms for eight full hours yet.

What a life. .

When we arrived at the restaurant, I walked at the very back of the group, dragging my feet. Pock, who was standing suspiciously near the entrance, came over to walk beside me. 'Don't worry, I'll help you out,"

She whispered.

I looked at my best friend with a glimmer Of hope. Having Pock on my side was always reassuring.

"You're going to help keep Yumi away from me, right?"

"Nope. I'll help look up on how to send your body back to Thailand instead."

"Huh? What did you just say?"

"Well, I didn't think Yumi would be this stunning. I mean, we've barely been here a few minutes, and Phim already dropped her chopsticks so close to your ear. You three still have three whole months together. If you somehow don't make it out alive, the best I can do is figure out how to send your remains back to Thailand, dear lord.

I gulped loudly, suddenly seeing her point in a way I couldn't argue with. But what could I do? I had no choice but to walk into the restaurant slowly, like a crawling turtle,

To my surprise, the atmosphere at the table wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Phim had managed to compose herself, adjusting both her emotions and her expression back to her polished, vice-president demeanor. She smiled and made polite small talk with Yumi from time to time.

At least until Pock decided to bring up a bizarre conversation topic with Yumi.

"Hey... Yumi, do you want to have Thai name?"

"Thai name? It sounds so funny. Can you name me?"

"Sure... Ummm, I'll call you Sayumphorn, and your nickname is Yum." Pfffftttt!

Both Tan and I, who were only drinking tea today, ended up spitting it out at the same time. I snapped my head around to see my mischievous friend, putting on her innocent face while Yumi laughed, completely unaware of the situation.

Yumi had officially become Pock's victim.

"Sa-Yum-Pong... right?"

"Oh no no no... it's Sa-Yum-Phorn. Repeat after me, Yum-Phorn."

### "0k. "

Yumi took a deep breath, her chest rising and falling, before shouting loudly enough for everyone, especially Pock, to hear,

'Yum... Pong!"

"Fine, Pong it is!"

Pok grumbled, annoyed.

"0h, Yum, your tongue is so stiff"

Pock kept muttering under her breath, clearly frustrated, and it might have been fine if Yumi hadn't turned to flash me a sweet smile just as Pock downed her drink in one go, failing at her mission to teach Yumi Thai.

"Honey... can you teach me Thai language?"

I froze, my face turning pale at being directly addressed like that. Sneaking a quick glance at Phim, I felt a chill run down my spine. She was smiling so sweetly her eyes were completely shut!

"Sure... ifl have time."

'ISO cute honey, I want to learn with you... by face to face."

t'...and mouth to mouth."

Pfffftttt!

This time, it was Pock who spat her drink out, nearly emptying her glass. Meanwhile, Phim tilted her chin up even higher, her clenched-jaw smile showing off her sharp jawline, with veins visibly popping on her forehead.

The sight made my chopsticks shake uncontrollably in my hand, to the point where I had to use my Other hand to steady them.

"Teach me, honey, how to say I love you in Thai?"

Crash!

Even with both hands holding on, I couldn't stop my chopsticks from slipping and dropping onto my plate. I turned to Pock, hoping she might help, but no, she was sitting there with her mouth hanging open, her eyes wide. Following her gaze, I saw why.

Phim was calmly making her way over and smoothly sat herself right between me and Yumi.

By squeezing onto the same chair with me!

"Yumi... do you want to learn Thai language with me?"

Yumi tilted her head, looking surprised that Phim had come this close. She gave Phim a sweet smile, which was returned with an icy one.

"0h sure... thanks, you're so cute."

"The first word I want to teach you is... rad."



"Sheeeeeeeshhh !

That was the sound of me, Pock, and Tan exclaiming in perfect unison at the hardcore Thai lesson Phim had just started.

'Red...right? What does it mean?"

Phim gave Yumi a dazzlingly sweet smile before responding in a cold voice that made my hair stand on end.

"It's... you. "

Chapter 44: Unproven by science

Yumi's offer to take the four of us to visit Osaka Castle the next day was bluntly and coldly rejected by Vice President Phim. Her curt response was short and simple made Yumi look very upset. "This is not a business trip... we need privacy.

"Ok, Vice President, I understand.. "

"Sce you on Wednesday."

It wasn't exactly kicking her out, but it felt like it. When we got out ofthe van, which stopped in front of the house, Phim stopped talking to Yumi and walked quickly into the house before anyone else.

Yumi-Sayumphorn, who didn't understand anything that was going on, just bowed low as Phim walked past, almost hitting her head on the ground. This is how Japanese people usually act politely, especially to their bosses.

Even if that boss just called her bitch (rad)!

Yumi-Sayumphorn stood still, waiting until she saw Phim go into the house. Then she bowed again, her head almost touching the ground, as a final goodbye.

She acted as polite and proper as folded fabric.

But as soon as she raised her head, the sweet and gentle woman from a moment ago turned into a seductive tigress. Yumi flicked her hair slightly before running her fingers through it, as if she had just emerged from a swimming pool.

Her beautifully shaped lips curled into a sly smile, and her sharp, rustcolored eyes sparkled with a playful, mischievous glint.

It would have been much better...if those eyes weren't staring straight at me like that.

"0h honey, I don't want to say goodbye... but I have to go now."

Her voice was low and husky, dripping with charm. Slowly, she walked toward me, swaying her hips with every step. I stood frozen in place beside Pock, who was just as stiff as I was. I could faintly hear her muttering under her breath,

"Is... Is... Ital, itai (\*1). "

In the next moment, everything around me seemed to fall silent. The only sound was the rhythmic thumping of Yumi's high heels echoing into my

My gut feeling, which had always been spot-on, was now screaming louder than ever. My heart raced, and I felt a mix of excitement and fear. My brain worked overtime, and in the end, I could only think of one way to survive.

Namotassa, Namotassa, Namotassa!

Being someone who isn't very religious, when I tried to chant something to protect myself, I could only manage one word. Karma and fate! With my lack of spiritual merit and the shortness of my chant, Sayumphorn didn't show any fear at all. In the end, she finally approached us.

Yumi used her two long fingers, with nails coated in deep red polish, to lightly touch her own smiling lips, as ifmarking them with an invisible kiss. Then, slowly, her fingers trailed down to my arm...

...up to my shoulder...

.up to my neck..

..up to my check...

And finally stopping right on my lips.

"Have a nice dream... baby. "

Her farewell, drawn out in a seductive tone, paired with her teasing smile as she went onto the van, made my heart drop all the way to my feet.

But that still didn't make my blood rush as much as when Pock tugged on my sleeve repeatedly, making me look up at the balcony on the second floor.

In that moment, my heart nearly stopped. My whole body froze, as if someone had poured boiling oil over me from head to toe.

It was Phim, standing there with her arms tightly crossed, glaring down at me with piercing, furious eyes. She stared at me in silence for a moment, her sharp gaze radiating pure anger, before she turned and stormed back into her room. The loud slam of the sliding glass door echoed through the

I hunched my shoulders, squeezed my eyes shut, and with trembling hands, started tugging on Pock's sleeve over and over, desperately looking for some encouragement.

"Pock... do you think I'll survive this?"

Pock is too quiet.

She was far too quiet. I had to turn and look, and what I saw shocked me even more.

Pock was standing there, pale as a sheet, her thick eyebrows twitching, her lips grayish-green and trembling. She was muttering something under her breath, over and over.

I leaned closer, listening carefully, and finally caught the phrase she kept repeating,

"Namotassa, Namotassa, Namotassa!"

If there were any words to describe Phim's mood right now, it would be just one,

Sulking!

It wouldn 't be an exaggeration to say that she had gathered every sulking behavior she'd ever showed in her entire life... and brought it all out today!

Every time our eyes met, she would purse her lips and lift her chin, completely ignoring me. No matter how many sweet smiles I sent her way, I was left awkwardly smiling to myself, over and over again.

And every time we accidentally crossed paths in the house, she would stomp her feet so hard the floor practically shook. Not to mention the clatter Of plates and forks being slammed loudly on the dining table during breakfast with all four of us.

Phim was still sulking even when we walked to catch the train. You could see it from her short legs moving so fast, like she was flying ahead Of us.

As for Tan? He was acting strangely today. Instead of walking behind Phim like he always did, he was waiting for Pock, who kept stopping to take selfies at almost every lamp post.

"Tan, why are you waiting for me today? Are you worried about me?"

Pock jumped and grabbed Tan's arm, just like a monkey grabbing a tree branch. Tan let out a long sigh, his big eyes looking like he had given up on life.

"1'm not worried about you, Pock. I'm worried about myself. If I don't walk with you, you'll end up dragging me with you anyway. t'

"In the last two or three days, you've put me in a headlock so many times that I think my neck bones are almost broken. So, I thought it's better to just walk with you now."

As Tan spoke, he rubbed his neck sadly.

"0h, poor you, my dear little boy. Hold on."

Pock quickly changed her position from linking arms to closing in on the young man's back without him being prepared. Her left hand went under his chin to grab his right ear, and her right hand reached over his head to grab his left car. At this point, Tan's eyes widened in panic, completely shocked.

Pock stayed in that position for about five seconds.

Then she twisted Tan's head sharply to the far right with such speed and force that a loud crack echoed in the air.

"Arrgghhhh ! "

"110w's that, Tan? Feeling better now? That scream means your neck pain is all gone!"

The poor guy slowly turned to look at Pock, blinking rapidly, his eyes full Of disbelief. A moment later, tears started streaming down his face like a broken dam. Tan gritted his teeth as he forced himself to reply to Pock with a trembling voice.

"Sniff... sniff... I'm better now, Pock. Sniff... completely better. Don't worry about me anymore. Please... sniffsniff."

What nonsense!

By the time I realized I shouldn't waste more time on these two, Phim had already walked far ahead, almost out of sight. I quickly lengthened my steps, nearly breaking into a run, until I finally caught up and walked beside the little one.

Phim glanced at me briefly out of the corner of her eye before turning her face back to her usual sulking expression. She lifted her chin even higher and sped up her steps, leaving me behind again.

"Phim, wait!"

'Whim."

### "Phim, my baby..."

From behind, I saw the little one stumble slightly before slowing her steps, almost stopping. She pouted so hard her lower lip almost touched her nose. Then, she spoke softly, as if talking to the wind or the sky.

didn't hear that." "Hmm""

'Say it again. "

Just a few short words, spoken without even turning around to look at me.

But those words were enough to send my heart soaring to the clouds.

"Phim, my baby.

I smiled wide, unable to hide my happiness as I stepped forward to grab her small hand and hold it gently. The little one was still pouting, though.

But her beautiful brown eyes were now sparkling brightly, as if she were smiling widely on the inside.

Phim let me hold her hand the entire way until we finally sat next to each other on the train. Across from us sat Pock and Tan, with Tan sulking and staring at Phim with a sad, pitiful look that never ended.

But did 1 care?

Absolutely not.

I made my indifference clear to his stray-puppy-like gaze by scooting closer to Phim until our shoulders were almost touching. Then, little by little, I slid lower and lower until my head rested smoothly on her shoulder.

Just as I was silently celebrating how smooth I was, the owner ofthat shoulder pushed her palm hard against my temple, sending my head tipping sideways to hit the rail with a loud thud!

"Don't do that again! Who told you to lean on me?"

Now it was my turn to pout, rubbing my forehead while muttering short, grumpy words loud enough for her to hear.

"1t hurts. "

"My cheek hurts too, and my head hurts."

There was a brief silence before the person next to me turned to me and spoke softly, almost like a whisper.

"Let me see."

Her small hands gently cupped my face, turning it toward her. Those big, round brown eyes of hers were now carefully examining my forehead. For a moment, I saw a flicker ofworry in her gaze as she leaned in closer to get a better look.

"Hmm... it's really red. I thought you were just pretending."

Pretending? Wow, what does she think of me?

"Does it hurt?"

The little one continued to stare at the red mark on my forehead, her finger lightly brushing over it as ifthat would somehow make it fade away.

"0f course it hurts. Comfort me."

"Come on, comfort me, Phim."

"Please?"

I gave her my most pleading eyes, not expecting much. But to my surprise, the little one gently cupped my face, leaned in closer, and slightly raised herself as she softly blew over my forehead.

"Please... please... get better soon, my good girl."

Who would have thought that a soft breath could feel like a storm, scattering my feelings all over the place, leaving my heart in complete chaos?

I probably would have stayed lost in that moment if it weren't for Pock's voice suddenly breaking through.

"Tan! Wait, Tan! I don't care if you're jealous of those two,"

### "But you can't pull my scarf and chew on it until it's ruined!"

"And that's my leg, not a banana tree trunk! Why are you gripping it so hard? It hurts!"

It wasn't easy at all to get to Osaka Castle, which was standing majestically beautiful in the distance. On the way, we passed through a park where a handsome guy was performing a street mime act. Pock stopped dead in her tracks, refilsing to move, and stood there watching.

To make things worse, she dumped a ton of coins into the performer's hat, so many that it almost lost its shape. Seeing that, I panicked and quickly dragged her away from the crowd gathered around the performance.

"Pock, you can't do this! You're about to make our whole country lose face!

Pock, still resisting and refusing to walk with me, argued back in a dramatic tone.

"1s it so wrong for me to spend money on a man? Does that really shame the whole country?"

Thwack!

"Of course, it's embarrassing, you fool! Those were all baht coins! I dragged you away before he could stomped on you is already a miracle."

After I smacked her on the head to snap her out of it, Pock seemed to finally come to her senses. She quickly turned around to check if anyone was following us, looking nervous.

Then, she darted toward Phim and begged her to take some photos of her by a cluster of plum blossoms or sakura, near the castle entrance.

Pock casually posed among the blossoms as if nothing had happened earlier.

"Kiran, it's like a magic! At first, I thought you were just bragging."

Suddenly, Tan appeared beside me, speaking out of nowhere.

"What do you mean?"

The young man shoved his hands into his pokets and kept his head down as he answered, his voice soft and tinged with sadness.

"1 mean, when you said you'd help heal Phim. It really feels like she's getting better. Phim doesn't seem like someone drowning in her own world anymore. I'm starting to believe that she really will get better soon."

"1 guess... I really have to let go, don't I?"

Tan's voice was faint and shaky. He seemed to be absentmindedly nudging a stone or something on the ground, struggling to kick it forward.

Stones aren't as easy to find here as they are in Thailand! "One day, you'll meet someone who's truly meant for you." "lfthat day ever comes, don't give up too easily, okay?"

I reached out to pat Tan on the shoulder sympathetically. He looked at me with an expression I couldn't quite read, then Edised his head.

"Can I ask you something?" "What is it?"

"Does Pock have a boyfriend? "

"Huh? What did you just say?"

"1 mean... I think Pock is really nice and warm. Being around her makes me feel protected."

The moment Tan finished his sentence, which carried a shy tone, it was like I could hear fireworks exploding in my head. My gut instinct screaming that my friend was about to land a handsome boyfriend made my blood pump faster than ever. I stammered out a reply, barely able to hide my excitement. "She doesn't! No boyfriend, no husband, no parents either, just a grandma!"

Tan nodded at my overly detailed answer with a confused look but didn't say anything more. He just gave a small smile and looked back down at the ground.

We followed behind the two girls from a distance as they wandered through the castle. Pock and Phim were chatting and giggling about something as they toured the castle, which had a serious and historical atmosphere. But when they passed a glass case displaying an intimidating samurai outfit, Pock's tone suddenly dropped to a whisper.

"Phimmm.., have you ever heard the legend of Osaka Castle?"

Phim shook her head quickly, her expression now a mix of curiosity and nervousness, as if she wanted to know what Pock was about to say but was also scared of it. Pock leaned in closer, lowered her voice even further, and stared at Phim intently with the most serious face possible.

"They say... this place has ghosts."

Before Pock could even finish her sentence, Phim grabbed onto her muscular arm tightly. The little one let out a low, trembling "Huuuu ' from her throat. She must have been afraid of ghosts.

In my mind, I was thinking about other things.

"They say the spirits ofsamurai who died protecting this castle slill linger here, unable to move on. At night, the guards sometimes hear a creeek... like someone dragging heavy chains. "

"Huuuu... Is it true, Pock?"

Phim whimpered.

It wasn't surprising that Phim's small hands were shaking Pock's arm in fear. What was surprising, though, was Tan's hand gripping the hem of my shirt tightly, as ifhe were clinging to me for emotional support.

"lt's true! And those spirits also carry their babies to the riverbank for the shogun every single day. Oh, just talking about it gives me chills!"

"Really?"

At this point, both Tan and Phim let out a long, trembling whimper in unison. Meanwhile, I sighed, scratched my neck, and made a bored face at Pock's ridiculous ghost story.

How could I not be annoyed? The legend I heard before was much scarier, Samurai ghosts were supposed to remove their heads and guts to hunt and eat villagers' livers until the whole town is gone?

After we got back to our accommodation, Tan began packing his things to prepare for his late-night flight. When it was finally time to say goodbye, his big, round eyes looked noticeably sad.

"Have a safe trip, Tan."

Phim bid him farewell with a bright, cheerful smile, which was the complete opposite of the man standing before her, who still wore the same sad puppy-dog face.

At the end, Tan raised his hand to shoulder level, waving slowly to Phim before turning to give me one last lazy half-smile.

As for Pock? No need to guess, when she saw how slow and reluctant Tan's goodbye was, she wasted no time. She grabbed him by the neck and dragged him straight to the taxi waiting in front ofthe house.

From a distance, it even looked like she touched Tan's forehead and then acted shy and flustered herself. Oh my, oh my...

This first wife is quick to act!

Once Tan left, the three ofus headed upstairs to shower and get ready for bed. The next morning, Phim and I had to go to work at the factory early, while Pock would head back to Tokyo for her job on a commercial shoot.

But just before we split up, Pock decided to drop a bomb. She walked up behind Phim and, in a raspy voice, like an Old man, whispered,

"Phimmm... "

The little one jumped so hard in surprise, rubbing the back ofher neck nervously like she was scared of something.

"Huuuu... Pock, why did you sneak up so quiet?"

"I just wanted to tell you, Phim, don't forget to pray before bed tonight. Last night, I heard some weird noises... like creeek, creeeek...like something dragging around."

Before Pock could finish her sentence, Phim stomped her feet and dashed into her room, slamming the door shut behind her.

"Pock! What exactly are you trying to do?"

Pock turned to me slowly, smirking slyly, her shoulders shaking with a wicked laugh that sent shivers down my spine.

"Just wait and see."

After Pock and I finished showering and washing our hair, it suddenly started raining heavily. Even though it was winter in Japan, rain like this could only be called unseasonal rain.

CRACK!

"See? Even the weather is on my side!"

Pock slapped my knee loudly and rushed out of her room. I followed closely behmd, worried about what kind ofmischief she was up to this time.

What I saw was Pock standing in front of the electrical panel box with a mischievous grin on her face. I reached out as far as I could to stop her, but it was already too late.

Click.

And then, everything was plunged into darkness,

CRACK!

"Kiran... Nooooo!"

"Yes, Phim, I'm here..."

I rushed to open Phim's door as fast as I could, worried about her. Seeing a shadow at the end of the bed, I immediately ran to hug her tightly. The person in my arms was trembling like a baby bird, clutching my shirt so tightly. Her voice, shaky and full of fear, made it clear she wasn't fhking it, she was genuinely scared.

"Why did the lights go out? Go fix it, please!"

I gently rubbed her hair, feeling guilty on behalf of Pock. But there's no way I am going to fix the electrical panel right now.

Dream on.

"1 can't fix it... the power's really went out."

I couldn't help but speak in a high-pitched. I feel sorry for the little one. But as soon as I hugged Phim, all the good intentions I had seemed disappeared without a trace.

"Just wait a bit, the lights will come back soon." "Please don't leave me. Stay with me, okay?"

I don't want to admit it, but Phim didn't need to beg me. At this moment, even ifthey splash holy at me water, I wouldn't leave.

Of course, no matter how long we waited, the power didn't come back. We couldn't stay like this hugging each other all night, so Phim eventually came up with a rather strange sleeping position.

The position was that, the little one lay on her side on the bed, while I lay on my back on the floor next to her. It wouldn't have been that strange...lf we weren't holding hands the entire time.

It wasn't just the darkness that scared her. She was afraid ofunseen things, the sound ofthunder, but most of all..

She was afraid I might leave the room!

So, she kept holding my hand, as if it were a hostage.

'Kiran..." "Yes? Why aren't you sleeping yet?"



"I'm cold.'

"0h....Do you want me to cuddle you? Aaaagh!"

Her small hand, which had been holding mine, pinched my palm hard enough to make me yelp loudly, echoing through the room.

"ldiot. I want you to get up and cover me with a blanket! "

Oh... I sighed, a bit disappointed, as I struggled to sit up with only one hand. Because no matter what, the little one refused to let go ofmy hand.

I reached out to grab the edge ofthe blanket, wondering why the little princess didn't just pull it over herself. It would've been so easy! Thinking that, I started feeling annoyed and, instead of pulling the blanket up, I flopped onto the bed behind her before she could react.

And just like that, I took the chance to hug her from behind without letting go of her hand!

"Kiran!! ! Get back on the floor right now!"

The little one squirmed and struggled in my arms, pinching and hitting me without mercy. But there was no way I was going to give in.

CRACK! CRASH!

This time, it was Phim who turned and buried her face against my chest. Her arms wrapped tightly around my waist. The louder the thunder roared, the tighter her hug became.

Her soft muffled voice reached me as she snuggled closer, her face pressed against my chest.

"Kiran, don't go anywhere. I'm scared."

I gently stroked her hair, holding her tenderly with care and affection. Slowly, I pulled her closer until there wasn't any space left between us. Then, I whispered softly into her ear. "Don't be scared, Phim. I'm here."

"1 am right here with you."

"1 am not going anywhere anymore. '

Footnote:

1. "Is... Is„. Itai, itai,

In this context, "Is... Is.. seems to express stammering or hesitation, likely from nervousness or shock.

"Itai, itai" (AP in Japanese) translates to "Ouch, ouch or ''It hurts, it hurts. " However, here it might not literally mean pain but rather convey a sense ofoverwhelming discomfort or surprise.

### Chapter 45: Life After Embarrassment

I couldn't sleep.

No matter how hard I tried to close my eyes, I just couldn't fall asleep.

How could I possibly sleep, when the sound of the heartbeat from the warm chest I was resting my face against was pounding louder than the rain outside?

It seemed like Kiran couldn't sleep either.

Maybe it was because we were in such an intimate position that made sleeping nearly impossible.

We were lying so close, facing each other, With our entire bodies pressed together. My arm draped over her slim waist, rising and falling in rhythm with her steady breaths. The warmth of Kiran's lips resting softly on my forehead and her heated hand placed firmly on my hip awakened something deep inside me, something that had been asleep for a long time.

It stirred.



I gently traced circles with my fingertips on the chest of the person in front Of me, trying to wake her up from her pretend sleep.



Kiran let out a sleepy murmur before her hand, the one I was resting my head on, pulled my face closer and began stroking my hair softly, as if trying to lull me to sleep instead.

"l can sleep, " I said.

This time, the hand around my hip tightened, pulling me into a warm and gentle embrace, as if treating my sleeplessness like a serious illness that needed to be cured with the utmost care and tenderness.

"Don't fuss, okay? You have to work tomorrow."

"I'm not fussing, I just can't fall asleep." ''Then what should I do to help you sleep?"

"Sing me a lullaby." "Hmmm... right now?"

"Yes... sing for me."

I couldn't help but smile against Kiran's warm chest when I heard her clear her throat, as if preparing to sing. But then, all she did was keep clearing her throat.

Still refusing to sing, I started to feel annoyed and ended up pinching her fiat stomach hard.

"0uchhhh!"

"Sing already! You're taking forever!" "What song do you want to hear? I can't think of anything."

"'Anything! Just something like a lullaby."

She cleared her throat again, but this time, Kiran actually started singing. "That spotted spider over there, I saw its saggv boobs and couldn 't bear... "

Smack!

My hand landed hard on her arm as punishment for singing such a ridiculous and completely inappropriate song for a lullaby. She quickly stammered, trying to explain herself, her words almost tripping over each other.

"Sorry, sorry! I just couldn 't remember the lyrics. Oh, okay, how about this one instead?"

"Clench yourfists and spin them 'round, raise your hands and wave them around Clench yourfists and spin them 'round, raise your hands and wave them around. '

Hmm... this song was much better, until the next verse.

"Spread yourfingers up and down, move them in and 0111, Ihrusl your fingers up and down, move yourfin— !!! "

There was no need for me to punish her this time. She slapped her own mouth with a loud smack! and shook her head vigorously, as iftrying to banish some wicked thoughts from her mind with great effort.

Judging from the lyrics, it wasn't hard to guess what Kiran's thoughts were wandering toward.

"Are you serious calling that a lullaby?"

"W-well... it could be....maybe?"

"Oh, really?"

"Well, you didn't say what age the kid is! Like... 4-5 years old? Or maybe 17-18 old?"

"0h...Have you been singing lullabies to 18-year-olds before?"

I shot back in a cold tone, my hand gripping her stomach tightly, refusing to let go.

I am angry!

I'm very angry.

Even though I knew it was just a teasing joke, it made me feel annoyed in a way I couldn't explain. The more I thought about what Pock once told me, that Kiran hadn't dated anyone in the past seven years, the more uneasy I felt.

Was it because so many people had tried to get close to her that she didn't bother to take anyone seriously?

Look at secretary, Yumi, for example. She flirted with Kiran in every way possible, in ways only a woman who desperately wanted someone could do. The only thing she hadn 't done was throw her leg over Kiran's shoulder, though for all I knew.

Or maybe she already had!

"Phim... I'm sorry! It was just a joke. I didn't mean it like that, not the way you're thinking!"

"Phim, please don't sulk, okay? Please, please... please?"

Kiran tried to fix the situation by pulling me into a hug, but I pushed her away and turned my back to her, pouting. I was so annoyed that I completely forgot..

This position was full of weakness.

Kiran exploited it perfectly.

Kiran hugged me tightly from behind, her arms draped over mine, her hand gently stroking the back of my hand slowly, as if trying to soothe my anger.

Her lips hovered near the nape of my neck, brushing lightly as she whispered into my ear. Her voice was soft but carried a weight that made it feel incredibly sincere.

"Phim, I've never sung anyone to sleep except for you"



"Since you left, I've been sleeping alone evoy single night. '

The firm tone from earlier suddenly , turning shaky and broken, which pierced my heart deeply.

"Sleeping alone, feeling lonely, thinking about only one person."

"Loving only one person."

"For the rest of my life... I can only love you, Phim."

"I am sorry... sorry for being the one who made our time together slip away and caused you so much pain. But believe me, I've already been punished enough."

"By having to live day by day..."

"In a world without you, Phim '

"But now that I'm lucky enough to be by your side again, if I could ask for just one thing, I'd only want. .

"Phim, please don't be too cruel to me."

Maybe it was because Kiran rarely spoke about her feelings or explained herself, but every time she did, her words always carried so much weight. To me, they always felt true and sincere.

And this time was no exception.

Every slow, deliberate word she spoke pierced straight into my heart, leaving me barely able to bear it. I took Kiran's hand, which was holding mine, and pressed it against my chest before placing a soft, meaningful kiss on the back of her hand.

Finally my tears fell down.

My quiet sobs prompted the person behind me to hug me even tighter.

The arm I had been resting on reached up to gently wipe away my tears. Her voice, soft and tender, sounded as though she were speaking to a little girl.

"Don't cry, my baby....?"



"Can you promise me something? "

'Wo matter what happens..



"Promise me you 'Il never let go ofmy hand again.

She was silent for a moment before her warm lips moved slowly, whispering softly into my ear.

"1promise, Phim.

"I love you. "

Her words sent my heart trembling, and hee warm breath lingered behind my ear. Slowly, her lips grazed my earlobe, making me flinch and instinctively tighten my grip on her hand.

She trailed gentle kisses down to the curve of my neck, her warm tongue lingering there for a moment, sending shivers through me. My grip on her hand grew tighter.

She carefully pulled her hand free and slid it under the oversized white shirt I was wearing. Her soft touch traveled slowly from my stomach upward, teasing me with a featherlight caress.

I held my breath as her long, slender fingers finally rested on my chest, gently pressing and caressing. I bit my lip, my hands reaching out to her in a yearning motion.

Kiran shifted and hovered over me, leaning down to kiss me deeply. Her kiss was intense, passionate, as if she were quenching a thirst. The sweetness of her lips made my thoughts scatter completely.

Before I realized it, my body beneath her was bare, stripped of any clothing. Her kisses traveled down to my chest, where she lingered, kissing, gently biting, and caressing as if she never wanted to stop.

My two hands wrapped around her neck possessively, as if afraid she might escape. I let out a low moan, barely audible, when the tall girl lowered herself to kiss my abdomen. She lingered there for a while, teasing me, making me let my guard down.

Just as I relaxed, her warm tongue moved to my most sensitive spot, which was now completely wet. Her tongue delved deep, teasing me here and there, making my feelings surge uncontrollably. At the moment she sucked and nibbled on my most sensitive point, both my hands tangled in her hair, and I couldn't help but moan her name.

" Kiran, please."

The tall person who was enjoying tasting something on my body responded to my call by sucking on the same spot again with a heavy touch. Then, she moved her body to pin me down, smiled sweetly, and pressed a lingering kiss on me for a long time. Finally, she inserted her fingers into my body before I could even brace myself.

My nails dug into her delicate back uncontrollably, and finally, our bodies moved to the rhythm of a slow, tight beat that gradually intensified into a more urgent pace.

I could feel her heavy breathing. Everything moved harder, faster, and finally came to a standstill at the same moment I bit into Kiran's chest, unable to hold back.

And she did that.

Over and over again...

Kiran overwhelmed me so much that I almost lost count.

Normally, I'm the one who wakes up first and stares at her every morning we get to spend the night together.

It's because I'm completely captivated by her peaceful, adorable sleeping face, it's almost an obsession.

But not this time.

Last night, she left me so exhausted that I ended up falling into a deep sleep myself. The first thing I saw this morning was Kiran propped on her elbow, gazing at me.

With a smile.

And eyes full of affection.

"Cheater.'

Kiran raised an eyebrow, clearly confused by the first words I said today.

But I didn't pay much attention to her puzzled expression, my eyes were drawn to the red marks all over her pale chest, exposed as she sat there without a shirt.

As for me...

Completely naked.

"Kiran, you're cover In bruises. Does it hurt?"

The person in front of me quickly shook her head, and to my embarrassment, she leaned in to whisper in my ear,

"1 liked them,"

Making my face heat up completely.

"Then... why are you smiling like that and not stopping?"

"Because... I'm proud."

Now it wasn't just my face that was hot, it was my whole body. Still, I couldn't help but ask, even if it made me feel like the victim.

"Proud of what?"

Kiran's sly smile grew wider, her almond-shaped brown eyes sparkling like sunlight on water.

"Proud that my lullaby worked. It made you sleep so soundly."

Smack!

I couldn't hold back and slapped her arm hard. She only laughed, clearly delighted that she'd successfully teased me into getting upset.

By now, the sky was bright, and everything was clearly visible. Feeling embarrassed, I pulled the blanket up to cover myself, even though I knew it wouldn 't help much, after all, Kiran had already seen and touched every inch of me.

When I glanced at the floor beside the bed, I was shocked to see our clothes piled together like discarded items with no value. Among the pile, my eyes were immediately drawn to an old, worn-out white shirt that looked so familiar I couldn't resist using two fingers to pick it up and unfold it to get a better look.

"Why... why are you still wearing this, Kiran?"

As I fully unfolded the faded shirt, I saw the tiny embroidered poop design on the left side of the chest. My heart raced when I realized Kiran was still wearing the white V-neck shirt I had bought her seven years ago.

"I still wear every items... ifit's something you bought for me."

"Because when I wear them, it feels like you're still right here with me."

Suddenly, she was so endearing I couldn't stop myself from throwing my arms around her,

I hugged her tightly even though I was completely naked.

And so was she.

I wrapped my arms around her neck and planted a kiss on her cheek with so much affection. Something stirred between us again, so easily, so naturally...

Ifnot for the sudden interruption.

Knock, knock, knock.

"Kiran! Are you awake? Tob called!"

It was Pock's voice breaking the silence, just as Kiran's hand had grabbed onto my chest.

Both ofus immediately pulled away as if an invisible hand had yanked us away from each other. Pock kept knocking rapidly as we scrambled to put our clothes on as quickly as possible.

"I am already knocking....Open the door!"

That was Pock's muffled muttering from outside, where she seemed to have decided that knocking was enough permission to enter. In the end, she swung open the unlocked door right as Kiran and I managed to finish getting dressed just in time.

Pock handed Kiran the phone to talk to Tob, her eyes widening slightly as she took in our messy appearance. I tried to smooth my hair down awkwardly, forcing a sheepish smile as if it would somehow make the situation less obvious. "Morning, Phim '

'Morning, Pock." "Did you see any ghosts last night?"

"Uh... no, not really."

"Yeah, that's what i thought."

"But judging by the looks of things.. "

"Phim must've had a ghost grab her head last night, right?" I was utterly confused when I heard that for the first time.

A ghost... grabbing my head?

Just grabbing it?

How is that even scary?

"If not, then surely a ghost must've licked her head!"

"Pock! Pock! Get over here now!"

Luckily, Kiran had finished her phone call just in time to grab Pock by the neck and drag her out of the room while I sat there utterly confused by the bizarre conversation.

In her rush to get Pock out of the room, Kiran didn't fully close the door.

And because of that, I could hear nearly every word of their conversation outside.

"Pock, how could you ask her something like that? Phim wouldn't understand! She's so innocent, nothing like you!"

"0h, oh, don't you dare say Phim's innocent! I don't buy it for a second. I'm the one who's innocent here. Phim's definitely lost her virginity before. I haven't, I'm the pure one!"

"Hey! Take back what you said right now! Phim hasn't lost her virginity. We just held hands innocently while sleeping!"

"0h really! Girl, why are you wearing each other's clothes? Do you even realize that you wearing her white V-neck shirt? And now you're not wearing pants... just underwear. Your shirt is short and your legs are so long I can almost see everything!"

After hearing this, I quickly looked down at myself and found that I was really wearing Phim's V- neck shirt with the little poop design.

Oh no! Where can I hide my face!

"Just because I'm wearing Phim's shirt doesn't mean anything happened. I just wanted to try it on, so I took it. Don't you understand fashion?"

At this point, I wanted to rush over and pinch Phim's nipple to make her stop making silly excuses, because that would be better than dealing with someone like Pock. But right now, all I could do was cover my face with both hands in embrassment.

"Alright Ms. Fashionista... stop telling lies right now! This is me you're talking to, you might fool others but you can't fool me! You.... ! "

Before Pock could finish talking, it seems Kiran chose to cover her friend's mouth and drag her back to her own room, until the voices I heard became soft and finally stopped..

Those two left me alone with my embarrassment.

I was feeling confused and full of questions.

What kind of ghost was Pock talking about? A ghost grabbing the head and ghost licking the head...

Are ghosts like that really in this house?

And should I be scared of them?!?

Chapter 46: Working Overtime

For me, eating breakfast today is not easy at all.

When the person sitting across from me right now is Pock, who is smiling so brightly. Pock keeps smiling... Smiling all the time.

From the moment she prepared the plates, bowls, and cutlery for everyone at the dining table. When she poured milk into the glass, when she used the fork to poke the yolk of the fried egg and spread it all over the plate while making a mischievous face

Or even when she was chewing a sausage with her mouth full, Pock was still smiling.

Unlike the tall person next to me, who is busy preparing documents for today's meeting. She bites the corner of a piece of toast while running around nonstop.

She never sat still, never stayed in one place for me to rely on.

She left me sitting here with a burning face, giving an awkward smile while facing Pock all alone. I'm scared of Pock's questions.

Especially after I already searched on Google what "ghost grabbing the head" and "ghost licking the head" mean.

I can't look Pok in the eye anymore.

"Phim...

There it is.

I quietly sighed, full of fear, as soon as Pock called my name. I slowly glanced at her. She was smiling widely, showing nearly all 32 teeth. Pock gestured toward the salad in front ofme, which was barely touched because I didn't feel like eating much.

"Eat a lot, okay?"

"1'm not really hungry."

"Even ifyou're not hungry, you have to eat."

"0therwise, you'll be exhausted. You'll still need a lot of energy tonight."

In my head, it feels like I can hear the sound ofmy face burning, like it's being pressed on something very hot.

And how am I supposed to answer that!

Pock's smile stayed in my mind as she walked with me and Kiran to the van for work. She planned to take a JR train to Tokyo later in the morning, so she didn't need to hurry.

Kiran and Pock hugged each Other, patted each other's backs, and acted like they would never meet again. They said goodbye for a long time before Kiran got in the van first to talk to the driver.

I don't know why, but as I stood there waiting to say goodbye to Pock, I felt like I was her target. Especially when I saw her eyes shining with a tricky look.

Before I could say anything, Pock grabbed my hand, held it tight, and patted the back ofmy hand hard, like a coach cheering for an athlete.

"Phim. before I go, I have something for you."

"What is it, Pock?"

Pock bent down to search for something in her pants pocket. She took it out and placed it in my palm, then pushed my fingers to grip it tightly.

"I brought this all the way from Thailand. I knew this day would come. Keep it, Phim. You might need it."

"And I have something to tell you too."

Pock looked straight at me with serious eyes, just like when we talked at Shirakawa-go. I couldn 't help but think that what she was about to say must be something very important.

Maybe, just maybe, it's about Kiran, something I've always wanted to know.

"Phim, 'Jimi' is yours„. use it."

Pok ended her sentence with a wink at me, then lifted her leg high and walked slowly back into the house, like a slow-motion scene from a Chinese gangster movie. She didn't turn back to look at me, not even once.

A strange feeling made me quickly lower my gaze to the object Pock had placed in my hand.

It was a small, thin, rectangular box, in a dull blue color. Reading the description, I found that it was used to relieve inflammation, pain, and swelling of muscles? !

Pock had already been back in the house for a while by the time I finally looked up, my face full of confusion, searching for answers. When I didn't see her, I could only look back down at the blue box in my hand and read the brand name again.

The white letters, clearly displaying the name, read,

"BaPia Cam."

I glanced at the side profile of the tall person sitting next to me the entire ride in the van as we headed to the factory.

I couldn't help but feel annoyed that even on a workday, Kiran managed to look good from head to toe. Not a single trace of her carefree, lively personality from the weekends remained.

Today, Kiran tied her hair in a low ponytail with a middle parting, showing off her small, delicate face, lightly touched with makeup. The large silver hoop earrings she wore added just enough detail to her long, smooth neck, keeping it from looking too bare,

She wore a fitted dark gray pantsuit with high heels, sitting cross-legged and staring out ahead in silence, as if lost in thought. Strangely, this kind of demeanor from her, calm and distant, always managed to make my face flush so easily.

I don't know why.

YVhy am I so in love with Kiran's cold and composed attitude?

We both sat quietly like that for a while, until the person next to me, still gazing forward, slowly reached out and placed her hand over mine, which was resting still by my side. She gently shifted from merely touching my hand to holding it firmly, her touch soft yet steady.

"Work hard... Madam Vice President. "

Her warm voice spoke without looking at me, but just that was enough to make me smile uncontrollably.

"Thank you, Sensei."

The two ofus let out soft laughs together and continued holding hands without saying another word.

It's hard to believe that such simple, encouraging words from the person next to me could make my heart swell, filling me with the strength to take on anything in the world.

Ifit's for her,

I feel like I can do anything.

After about 30 minutes, the van brought us to a medium-sized factory located just a little outside Osaka city.

Tob was already waiting at the lobby by the time we arrived. I glanced at the slightly chubby, nerdy-looking guy in front Of us, feeling a bit annoyed.

Tob was the reason Pock barged into my bedroom uninvited this morning.

Unlike me, Kiran asked about Tob's accommodations and well-being in a warm and friendly manner. Fortunately for Tob, there was absolutely nothing about him that made me feel jealous when it came to Kiran.

A distinguished-looking Japanese man came to greet us and led us to the meeting room that had been prepared. He introduced himself as Mr. Miyajima, the factory manager, and explained that he would be responsible for assisting us throughout the three months we would spend studying the production process here.

I smiled politely during the introductions, but my eyes weren't focused on him at all. Instead, I kept glancing around here and there. I was looking for someone.

Of course, the person I was searching for couldn't possibly be anyone else but. .

The gorgeous Thai interpreter named Sayumporn !

"Where is the interpreter?"

I silently thanked Tob when he blurted out this question. Mr. Miyajima widened his eyes in surprise and nodded eagerly in response, in typical Japanese fashion.

"No need, no need, I can speak English."

Though his accent was difficult to understand and far from pleasant to the ear, I couldn 't help but grin widely upon hearing the answer I wanted. In contrast, Tob's shoulders slumped, and his face clearly showed his disappointment.

I couldn't resist glancing at Kiran, curious to see her reaction to the news that we wouldn't be seeing Yumi today.

But it turned out Kiran didn't care about the earlier conversation at all. She was completely absorbed in preparing the meeting documents, working so intently that it made me feel ashamed of myself. I was the Vice President of the company, yet I couldn't even focus on my work half as well as she could.

The morning session was spent in a meeting, going over the objectives and operational plans for the next three months to inform all the stakeholders. By late morning, Mr. Miyajima had arranged a factory tour for us.

Tob had already walked ahead while I was still busy putting on the safety shoes, steel-toe shoes required for entering the production area. Kiran stayed close by, helping me the entire time.

When Tob disappeared from sight, the tall figure gently grabbed the factory-issued cap we were required to wear when entering the production line and placed it on my head. We were standing face to face.

Her arms reached around to adjust my high ponytail, threading it neatly through the back opening of the cap. She checked everything carefully, tucking my hair into place as if she were taking care of a little girl. The closeness of our posture now made it look like we were almost embracing.

We were so close that I could catch the faint, pleasant scent from the person in front of me, and my thoughts began to drift far and wide.

Suddenly, the intimate moment from last night came rushing back vividly in my mind. My heart skipped a beat as Kiran leaned in closer. My face, which was already burning, must have turned bright red, so much so that the tall woman had to comment.

"Madam Vice President, what are you thinking about? Why is your face so

I barely managed to turn away in time to avoid her teasing smile as I stammered out a response.

"It's nothing."

"1 don't believe you..

This time, I lightly punched Kiran 's chest above her heart. My small hand gripped the collar of her shirt and stayed there. Then, I looked up at the tall figure with soft, pleading eyes, as if silently asking for sympathy.

Now, it was her turn to blush. Kiran didn't say anything more but reached out to gently ruffle my hair with a fond smile. She adjusted the collar of my shirt one more time before walking ahead in the direction Tob had gone. "Why does I have to look at the process? Isn't that the engineer's job?"

I followed behind the tall figure, asking in a chirpy voice that didn't stop. Kiran turned back, raising an eyebrow at me as if surprised by my question.

"Of course you have to. How can a Vice President be a good leader if they don 't know what they're producing?"

### "But..."

"You don't need to know every detail, but a leader has to understand the big picture."

"lfnot, Madam Vice President won't know which direction to lead the company. "

I turned to look at the person walking beside me, feeling something different from before. I started to understand my father's reasoning, why he sent me to learn under Kiran.

Other than my father and Kiran, there was probably no one else in this company who would dare speak so frankly and teach the Vice President so directly.

And Kiran truly had the skills to teach me.

When we reached the production line, Mr. Miyajima began explaining the process from the very first step to the final one. His explanation leaned heavily on hand gestures rather than English. Fortunately, everything was visible and detailed on-site. However, Kiran's in-depth technical questions were still difficult to fully understand because of the language barrier.

At that moment, I saw the future clearly, an interpreter is truly important. Even ifl didn't want to admit it.

After we completed a general walkthrough of the production process, Kiran and Tob got to work as engineers, busily measuring the machines.

Meanwhile, I separated from them to listen to details about the company's performance with other executives who had been waiting for me.

This is the kind of thing I'm good at.

For lunch, the factory welcomed us by ordering bento boxes for everyone. Today, President Sato and his beautiful secretary were absent due to a business trip with a supplier in Tokyo. That's probably why I was a little annoyed, Kiran kept her head down, seemingly busy chatting with someone on Line, barely touching her food.

Lucky for her, I was surrounded and doted by the executives from different departments. All I could do was glance at her occasionally.

Kiran sent me a sheepish smile. She tried to speak to me without making a sound, but I could read her lips well enough to catch the name 'Tock" in her conversation.

If it's really Pock, fine. But if it's not...

Don't even think about returning to your country alive, Kiran!

"Phim. let me come in too. '

A sweet, soft voice came from the tall person who was now trying to push her shoulder against my bedroom door, stopping it from closing. Kiran was only wearing the white sleep shirt we swapped this morning, and she wasn't wearing any pants!

Like Pock said, this shirt was probably too short for Kiran. The sight in front of me was hard to ignore, with her pale thighs showing every time she moved.

"Let's swap pajamas again tonight,"

She said with a cheeky smile.

"You're crazy," I replied.

I hated how my words sounded like I was saying no, but my body did the opposite. I stepped aside and let her come into the room without any trouble.

The only reason I could give myself for doing this was:

I need to get my sleep shirt back.

When I turned around, Kiran had already dropped herself onto the soft bed behind me, where I had been sitting earlier. She lay there carelessly, and the short hem of her shirt lifted up, showing more of her pale thighs.

On top of that, the buttons ofher shirt were undone low enough that I could almost see her smooth, fair chest. The sight made my heart feel strange, and I couldn't think straight.

Before I could react, her arms reached out and wrapped around my waist, pulling me down onto her. I let out a squeal and laughed as she teased me, even though I was still a little annoyed that she kept playing on her phone during lunch.

But at this point, I guess I just had to let it happen.

"Phim..

"1 miss you." "...We've been together all day, and you still miss me?"

"Of course I do."

"I want to hug you and kiss you all the time."

Her muffled voice came as she rubbed her face against my back, while her arms wrapped tightly around my waist.

Who would have thought that someone as cold as Kiran could have such a sweet, clingy side?

"Are you tired today? I'll give you a massage."

Before I could respond, her long hands moved from holding my waist to gently kneading my shoulders, trying to take care of me.

The perfect pressure Of her hands made me relax. Kiran focused intently, massaging me seriously for a long time. Then, she grabbed my shoulders and gently turned me so my back rested on the bed.

My heart started pounding as my thoughts began to wander far, far away.. -reached as far as swapprng pajamas!

But instead, to my surprise, the tall figure had moved to sit sweetly at the edge of the bed. Kiran's long hands gently massaged my calves, which were

so sore today.

What I didn 't expect was how her hands slowly worked their way down to my feet, swollen and red from wearing the safety shoes. The moment her warm hands touched my soles, I instinctively pulled my feet away, not wanting to take advantage of her kindness.

"Don't do that, Kiran. I feel bad."

"1t's fine."

"You've never worn safety shoes before, right? It must hurt a lot."

She reached out and took hold of my ankle anyway. Every touch of her fingers pressing into the soles ofmy feet brought relief, easing the pain so much that I couldn't help but silently thank her.

What's more, Kiran wasn't just doing it casually. From the angle where I lay, I could see her focused, determined thce, she truly wanted me to feel better.

Until...

Suddenly, Kiran's small, serious face turned mischievous and sly as she lifted my leg higher, and higher, until finally, my left ankle was now resting on her right shoulder!

"Kiran, what are you trying to do to me now?"

"I'm just giving you a massage. Don't you feel relaxed, Phim?"

Relaxed?

Is this really what a massage is supposed to feel like?

Before I could respond, my body suddenly felt warm, as if I had a fever. Kiran's soft lips pressed gently against my ankle, then slowly moved upward with light, teasing kisses.

I squirmed slightly, overcome by the sensation as her touches brushed near my thighs. My hands instinctively pushed against her shoulders to create some distance, but it didn't seem to work. Kiran, persistent yet calm, reached out and carefully slid my small undergarment down to the end of the foot resting on her shoulder.

It was clear, I was now in a position of complete disadvantage.

Kiran leaned in again, her lips brushing softly against the inside of my thigh. I tried to keep pushing her back, but my hands had no strength left. At this point, I could barely resist her anymore.

In the end, the hands that had been pushing her away just moments ago turned into arms that wrapped softly around her neck instead. As her warm lips pressed against my most sensitive spot, my hips instinctively lifted to meet her touch, with no strength left to resist.

The moans that I couldn't hold back seemed to provoke Kiran, who was burying her face between my thighs, urging the rhythm of her tongue to tease me until I could hardly bear it any longer.

Even though not a single button on her shirt has been undone. But now I realize that the process of exchanging Kiran's pajamas will probably take a long time, until late at night. I can't help but feel worried that if it continues like this every night for the 3 months we've been here...

In the end, we might really have to use the medicine that Pock left behind.

Chapter 47: Sick Leave

Right now, I feel as though my body is floating in a hazy state all the time.

Floating above reason and clarity.

Faded by the questions.

The questions that I have always struggled to find answers during the times I lived alone.

But now....

At this moment, seeing the face of someone peaceful asleep right in front of me, so close, sharing the same breaths in this space.

It feels like, after all, I never needed answers or clarity at all.

I only need Kiran.

The golden morning sunlight shone softly across the bed. But the sleepyhead still lay there with her eyes closed, looking so adorable like a child. Even though I felt sorry for her lack of sleep, I decided to wake her up for work anyway.

I trailed my finger along her face, starting from the bridge of her nose, slowly moving down until I stopped at her lower lip. Gently, I stroked it.

I stared at her soft pink lips, beautiful and perfectly shaped. Last night, those lips had been mischievous, teasing and bothering me endlessly until I barely got any sleep. Feeling a bit annoyed, I couldn't help but want to tease her back.

So, I pressed a quick, firm kiss onto her lips.

It seemed like this method worked, because just as I was about to pull away, her sleepy hands grabbed my waist quickly and pulled me close into a tight hug.

Kiran nuzzled her face into the crook ofmy neck, as if searching for warmth. Her muffled, drowsy voice whispered softly, and I could barely make out the words,

"Just 5 more minutes, babe."

Just a simple word, one that once held special meaning for the two ofus, was enough to fill me with an invisible happiness that struck me from all directions.

I couldn't help but smile fondly as I felt the steady breathing ofthe person nestled into the crook of my neck, as though she was fhst asleep.

How could she fall asleep so easily now, when last night was a completely different story?

I let her sleep soundly like that for almost I O minutes before leaning in to steal a big kiss on her soft, pale cheek, hoping to wake her up.

But as usual, Kiran just mumbled sleepily, repeating the same words like a broken record:

"Five more minutes."

The difference this time was that I refused to fall for her tricks again. So, I grabbed her ear and gave it a firm twist.

"No! Kiran, do you even know what time it is?"

### "Ow! My ear! My ear! It's torn! Oh no!"

She raised her hands to cover her ears, whining dramatically as if I'd seriously hurt her. I couldn't help but pinch her slim waist, and only then did she stop squirming and slowly push herself up to sit, rubbing her ears and eyes like a helpless child being forced to wake up.

Kiran blinked at me with big, pleading eyes and spoke in the sweetest voice imaginable.

"Please help me shower? " "What?! Excuse me?!"

"Help me shower, Phim.

Even though I knew full well it was just teasing, my face still burned hot. I jumped up from the bed as if I'd touched something hot.

Seeing her grinning cheekily at me only made me more annoyed. In the end, I grabbed the large blanket and threw it over her, covering her completely.

She squirmed and thrashed around underneath, wailing dramatically like some kind of ghost under a sheet.

I quickly grabbed a towel and marched into the bathroom, unsure what else I could possibly do.

Sigh.

Can someone please tell me, what that shallow creature under the blanket?

My wife or my child?

"What did you just say, Tob?"

The sharp tone in Kiran's voice, something I had never heard from her before, echoed in the meeting room after Mr. Miyajima left the three of us alone.

She tapped the pen in her hand rapidly against the paper in front of her, her face now cold and emotionless, sending a chill through the air.

"The first item written in the plan, you haven't even started on it yet, have you?"

The chubby man stood frozen, his face pale, clutching his hands in front of her. He stammered nervously, answering Kiran's question with no confidence whatsoever.

"Well. it's just that I was busy listing all the machines in the production line, Kiran. There's... there's a lot of them."

"No need to explain. Just answer, yes or no."

Even though I wasn't Tob, hearing that sentence made me stop what I was doing and bite my lip tightly. Tob, on the Other hand, simply lowered his head and replied in a soft, shaky voice.

"Yes."

Kiran gave a slight nod in acknowledgment before lifting her eyes from the documents to stare directly at him. Her elegant eyebrows furrowed deeply, and her sharp gaze was more intense and serious than I had ever seen before.

"Tob, answer me this, who wrote this plan?"

"1 did."

"Since you're the one who wrote it, you need to take it more seriously."

"Writing a plan is a tool to help us work with purpose. It helps us think about the steps we need to take in an organized way. So, ifyou write one thing but then do something else entirely... "

''Then Tob's plan will be worth no more than a piece of paper, something you spent time drafting and stressing over but got no real benefit from." "I'm sorry, Kiran."

"Why apologize? What you need to do is fix it. Ifthis part of the plan isn't done, then you need to create a recovery plan by working extra hours."

"Understood."

"Tomorrow, Tob, you'll need to stay overtime to finish this part."

"Yes."

"And I'll stay and help you."

This time, Tob looked up at her with eyes full of gratitude and hope.

Meanwhile, I let out a quiet sigh, feeling nothing but disappointment.

How could I not feel disappointed?

Tomorrow is Saturday, and I had been looking forward to spending some special time with Kiran, going shopping or finding something delicious to eat in the city.

But seeing how serious and focused she was right now, even I didn't dare to protest or try to change her mind in a moment like this.

Tob disappeared from the room, while I sat there lost in my thoughts, frustrated and annoyed. I was venting my disappointment by scribbling messy, twisted lines onto the paper in front of me.

My face probably looked just as grumpy and twisted as the lines I was drawing. Eventually, Kiran slid her chair closer to mine and leaned in to see what I was doing.

"What are you doing, Madam Vice President? Didn't Sensei ask you to study the process chart? Why are you using the time to draw abstract art instead?"

Hearing that only made me more irritated. I pressed the pen harder against the paper, dragging it with such force that it nearly tore the page.

My lips pouted so much they resembled a duck's, and my cheeks puffed out like a blowfish.

I was doing everything I could to show that I wasn't happy.

But the person in front ofme acted as if she didn't notice at all.

In the end, it was me who had to swallow my pride and ask in a voice so soft it was barely audible.

"Can can 'I you just not work tomorrow?"

Kiran raised an eyebrow, looking like she was questioning me, just as I accidentally let out a sweet, pleading tone.

"1 want you to take me out, to go somewherefun, to eat something nice. '

"1 want to be with you, Kiran. I don t want you to go to work. '

"Please?"

Kiran gave me a gentle, sweet smile that made me smile back without realizing it. But the words that followed from her lips weren't what I wanted to hear at all.

"1'm sorry, but I still have to come to work tomorrow. The project is already behind schedule."

"But that's Tob's work!?'

"Tob's work is also my work. And it's your work too, Phim, because it's the company's work."

I lowered my head, unable to come up with a better argument to counter her. Kiran remained composed, her voice calm yet firm, as if she were gently scolding me.

"As an executive, you don't have to pay attention to the detail how operations are carried out to meet the goals and stay on track.

"But Phim, your role is to support everyone so they can work as smoothly as possible without being disrupted, you know."

"Right now, everyone is working hardfor you. DO you realize that? "

With Kiran saying something like that, what else could a Vlce President like me say? I could only fall silent, pretending to be a good student and focus on learning what Sensei was teaching me. But no matter how hard I tried, one question kept popping up in my mind...

That silly, childish person who was rolling around under the blanket this mornmg...

Where has she run offto play now?!

Today, Kiran didn 't seem sleepy or sluggish like she usually does. She woke up early without needing me to wake her. I guessed it was because she wanted me to sleep in and get plenty ofrest on this weekend morning.

But I woke up just in time to catch her quietly sneaking over to kiss her forehead before heading offto work. She looked surprised to see me awake.

The way I gazed up at her must have made my feelings clear, I didn't want her to go. That's probably why she reached out to gently stroke my hair, her touch soft and tender.

I grabbed her slender wrist tightly, and both my eyes and my voice were full of a pleading tone, one that even I couldn't believe I had the courage to use.

"Come back soon, okay? "

"1'11 be waiting. '

Kiran responded to my request by leaning down, letting her nose gently brush against mine in an affectionate gesture. Before the moment could deepen into something harder to resist, I reached out and pushed her away slightly, going against my own desires.

"Work hard, Sensei."

"'And phim, be a good girl too, Okay?"

"1've arranged for the driver to pick you up at 10:30 and take you to Namba for shopping. So, you won't feel bored."

I nodded in agreement, not wanting to make Kiran worry, even though deep down I didn't fully agree.

After all, my boredom can't exactly be cured by shopping.

But with nothing else to do and a need to burn away the emptiness of today as quickly as possible...

In the end, I decided to let the driver drop me off at Osaka's famous shopping district, Namba.

At first, I enjoyed browsing and buying branded items for myself, but it didn't take long before I started feeling bored. So, I decided to shift my focus to picking out personal items for Kiran instead, just like I used to do back when we were dating seven years ago.

With that change, everything suddenly felt so much brighter and more enjoyable.

I walked around shopping for Kiran with excitement, picking out things like pens, pencils, notebooks, pajamas, socks, and clothes. Betöre I realized it, evening had fallen, and an unseasonal heavy rain began pouring down.

I had to stop at a convenience store to buy an umbrella. I couldn't help but worry that Kiran might not have brought one with her. Her plan to take the train home now seemed much more difficult in my eyes.

So, I decided to ask the driver to change route and take me to pick her up at the factory instead ofheading straight back to our place. When we arrived, the driver pulled into the closest waiting area near the factory entrance.

I didn't dare call Kiran to let her know I was there, afraid she might accuse me Of disrupting her work again. so, I stayed in the car, patiently waiting for quite some time. But when there was still no sign of her coming out, I grew restless and decided to step out with my umbrella and wait at the building 's entrance.

Even though I was holding a large umbrella and standing under the covered walkway of the building, the wind still carried the cold mist of the rain, chilling me enough that I had to raise my other arm to shield myself from the spray.

I stood there hugging myself for a long while. Finally, the tall figure emerged from the building.

But it would have been so much better.. .if Kiran had come out alone.

Instead, she walked out with a curvaceous female translator clinging closely to her, sharing the same umbrella that Kiran was holding with one hand.

I couldn't help but wonder why Sayumporn had business in the office this late on a Saturday night like this.

And when I noticed her bold red lips, paired with her sparkling eyes that were fixated on Kiran, the one holding the umbrella for her, I grew even more cunous.

Could lhis the real reason Kiran was so eager to work overtime on a Saturday?

But more than that, I couldn't stop wondering...

How am I supposed to deal with the feeling that all the blood coursing through my body right now...

It's s boiling!

I stared at the two ofthem for quite a while until they finally noticed me. When they did, both of them froze in their tracks. Kiran flinched, clearly startled to see me standing there not too far away.

Meanwhile, Yumi's eyes widened in shock, before hurriedly bowing her head repeatedly to me until it becomes annoying.

From this angle, I can see.

Tob is running frantically from afar, just as I lift the corner ofmy mouth into a calm smile and speak in a clear, powerful voice,

"Kiran."

### "Let's go home."

After I finish speaking, I walk straight to the car without looking back even once. I only hear the sound of footsteps from the tall person who obediently runs after me.

Even though I don't look back, I can feel that Kiran, sitting silently next to

Trying to breathe as softly as possible.



Past experiences have taught me that Phimmanas's dissatisfaction with me can be divided into many levels.

Ifit's just the most basic level, Phim would hit my body, sometimes harder, sometimes softer, depending on how annoyed she feels.

A step higher, she would start sulking and being stubborn, acting like nothing is going her way.

The next level would be her getting upset, to the point of being really upset over something that seems to hurt her extremely fragile feelings.

And if that something happens to hurt her emotions deeply, her sulking and pouting would escalate into anger...

More than that would be rage... which could spread and end at the highest level, hatred.

It's hard to believe, but I've already experienced every one of these reactions from her before.

And now, ifl were to assess, I'd guess that Phim's dissatisfaction is currently at the level of. anger.

Last night, after we got back home, the small person ran off to stay in her room, refusing to eat anything. And, of course, my punishment for daring to open an umbrella for Yumi in front ofher eyes was...

I was forbidden from entering Phim's room.

Phim's anger carried over into Sunday. The small person hasn't come out of her room at all since morning.

Meanwhile, I'm just sitting here waiting for Phim, holding onto a tiny bit of hope that at some point, she'll come out to get a drink of water.

But even so, the wait stretched on for a long time until it was almost ten in the morning before the door, which seemed as though it was sealed shut, finally opened.

I took the moment when Phim hesitated for a while to move closer to the door and used my shoulder to stop her from closing it again. When I got a closer look at Phim, I saw that her sweet, beautiful face, which was usually sulky, now looked exhausted and pale.

My hand instinctively reached to touch her forehead, but she pulled away, her small hands swatting mine to stop me from touching her.

"Phim, you're burning up."

"1'11 take you to see a doctor."

"1'm not going."

Phim shot a sharp, fierce glare at me for just a split second, but that was enough to make my heart sink down to my feet with ease. The small person walked back into her room before curling up on the bed with her back turned to me, as I quietly followed her inside.

I lowered myselfto sit neatly beside Phim with a humble, subdued manner. When I looked at the head of the bed and saw two or three medicine bottles placed there, I couldn't help but feel a deep pang of sympathy for the person I love.

So, Phim must have been taking medicine on her own since last night.

When I turned to look, I saw that she wasn't closing her eyes but was staring blankly at the wall in front of her, lost in thought. I reached out and gently stroked her hair, full ofworry. This time, she didn't swat my hand away but remained still, which made me feel uneasy.

"Yesterday, nothing happened, Phim. Yumi just stopped by the office to pick something up right when I was about to leave. I didn't have an umbrella, so she lent it to me.'

"1 saw the things you bought for me, you know. They're so cute. I love every single one of them."

NO matter what I said, Phim's entire body remained motionless, lying there without reacting. Only her eyes showed a flicker of emotion, wavering slightly at some of my words.

"Phim..."

"1 don't want to see you like this."

"You told me before that no matter what, you wouldn't let go of me again.

So why are you ready to leave me over something like this?"

This time, her small, slender body turned sharply toward me, her eyes filled with such deep reproach as she spoke with a trembling voice.

"It's not just a small matter, it's a big deal."

"I'm just possessive ofwhat's mine.

I couldn't help but smile when I saw the stubborn, headstrong look on the small person 's face. It seemed like Phimmanas's level of dissatisfaction had dropped all the way down to just being mildly sulky now.



"1 don like Yumi at all.

"How would I trust you? She has such big boobs."

I burst out laughing when I heard that sentence from Phim, who probably didn't even realize she was pouting and glaring as if Yumi were standing right in front of her.

"1 doesn't like big boobs at all."

"'Prove it."

"It's true. Kiran only likes Phim's boobs. They're pink, too. And delicious."

Whack!

In the end, I managed to lower the tension to the safest level. Once she got to hit her wife a bit, the small person quickly became cheerful again, as if she had been cured by some magical medicine.

"Let's go see a doctor."

"No. I already have medicine."

"Since when could you diagnose yourself?"

"As long as I take it and gets better, then that's enough."

I turned to carefully read the labels on the medicine bottles at the head of the bed. There were cough medicine, anti-inflammatory pills, fever reducers, both in liquid and tablet forms. One bottle was a fever reducer that had to be taken before meals, so I grabbed it and held it out in front of the small person.

"Phim, take this first, and then eat something, okay?"

"1'm not taking it."

Phim shook her head firmly, making her already messy hair look even messler.

"You're so stubborn."

"Feed me then."

"Ifyou wants me to take it, then feed me."

Phim's face still looked as headstrong as ever, but her beautiful light brown eyes sparkled mischievously, full of playful energy that was hard to describe.

I smirked slightly, like someone holding the upper hand, as I replied with a negotiation of my own.

"Promise me first, if I feed you, you have to eat it."

When I saw the person in front ofme fall into my trap, I tipped the medicine into my mouth just a little. Phimmanas's eyes widened in shock as I leaned down to feed her the medicine mouth-to- mouth. The bitter-sweet taste of the liquid lingered on the tips of both our tongues, now tangled together in a chaotic mess.

The medicine had long been swallowed.

But I still didn't pull away, my hands were busy examine her temperature across nearly every part of her body, only to conclude that...

The patient was burning up with a high fever.

It seemed she needed an injection as part ofher treatment.

I'm not sure which part ofmy care for the patient went wrong, but by Monday morning, Phim still had a high fever.

Maybe it was the part where I tried to cool her body with a wet towel, but somehow, it always ended up leading to other activities.

Or maybe it was the strange way I gave her medicine, where she probably didn't take much of it.

I'm a really bad doctor!

Even though I had already showered, gotten dressed, and was ready to go to work, I couldn't bring myself to leave Phil-n alone in her weakened state from the fever.

No matter how much I worried about work, the truth was I worried about Phim even more.

In the end, I decided to call Miyajima to take the day off, then called Tob to give him detailed instructions for the tasks. But my phone call must have been too loud, waking up the small person

As soon as she stirred, her small hand reached out and grabbed my finger, just like a baby holding its mother's hand. Phim's tired brown eyes looked up at me as she struggled to speak in a hoarse voice.

"Can't you skip work?"

I sat down on the bed and stroked her hair gently. Who could be heartless enough to leave Phim like this?

"1'm not going. I'm taking you to the doctor."

The small person frowned, looking like she didn 't like the idea much, but she didn't argue anymore. Her hand, still holding mine, felt so warm it was almost hot. No matter what, she had to take some fever medicine before going to the hospital.

"Phim, take some fever medicine first. Your body's really hot."

As soon as I finished speaking, those tired, light brown eyes still managed to sparkle playfully.

"lfyou feed me like yesterday, then I'll take it."

There it is. People say I'm the one who's bad, but honestly, the person in front of me is way worse.

Still, I played along as ifl were Phimmanas's personal servant. With a sly smile on my face, I started reaching for the same bottle of medicine I used to "feed" her almost all night.

But when I grabbed the bottle and felt how light it was, my heart sank. I quickly looked around the head Of the bed for more medicine and, in the end, couldn't stop myself from muttering under my breath.

"Damn it... only pills are left!"

Chapter 48: Died in the Line of Duty

I never thought that taking just one day off from work with Kiran would lead to such serious consequences.

The serious event I'm referring to happened that afternoon, when Tob got injured and broke his arm after falling while climbing to inspect the piping system of the machinery. To make things worse, his condition was bad enough that he had to take several days offwork.

Every accident that occurs in a manufacturing plant is a big deal, requiring an investigation to find the cause, determine responsibility, and establish preventative measures.

Naturally, the one who had to be questioned and write all the reports was none other than Kiran, the young engineer's direct supervisor.

This week, Kiran's demeanor has been filled with tension and guilt, as she's taken all the blame upon herself. She's spent countless hours preparing the accident report to send to the parent company while still managing her usual tasks and covering Tob's workload as well.

I don't particularly like that Kiran has been bringing work home and staying up late to finish it, but I can't say anything about it. After all, this is better than her doing overtime at the office and leaving me alone every evening after work.

"Are you tired?"

Feeling sorry for the tall person sitting there frowning over a mountain Of documents, I walked up to hug her from behind. My hands reached around her Slim waist, and I rested my cheek against her warm, familiar back.

Kiran gently reached back to stroke the back of my hand, her voice soft and tender, like she was speaking to a little girl.

"I'm not tired. I'm sorry I don't have time to play with you."

My face immediately grew hot because there was no way to interpret her word play in any other way. My hands, which were hugging her waist tightly, instinctively turned to pinching her instead.

"0w! How about switching from pinching to massaging?"

Before she even finished her sentence, the tall person reached out to pretend she was massaging her own shoulders. So, I let go of my hug and started using my hands to massage her neck, moving slowly down to her shoulders and back, trying to please her.

"This feels so good. If Phim spoils me like this, I'll love you to death."

Hearing such a simple declaration oflove made me wrap my arms around Kiran's neck and rest my chin on her shoulder, playfully affectionate.

"And if I don't spoil you, will you still love me?"

Kiran grabbed my hand and planted a soft kiss on it before placing it on her chest, right over her heart. I could feel the rapid thumping of her heartbeat. A wave of indescribable emotions washed over me when I heard her soft voice whisper in my ear.

"Ofcourse. NO matter what, I could newer stop loving you.

Unfortunately for Kiran, the report she sent to the parent company in Thailand turned into the catalyst for a change in the chairman's business trip plans.

My father changed his schedule. Initially, he had planned to visit only to discuss sales updates at the ABCD Tokyo office, but he added a new agenda item, a report on the accident involving the Thai engineer at the Osaka manufacturing plant.

That's why today, the head of the engineering department had to report the incident in the meeting room of the Tokyo offlce.

Amidst a tense atmosphere, surrounded by the Chairman, Vice-President, and a large board of executives, Kiran stood to give her report.

The report had ended, but Kiran remained standing still in front of the presentation screen at the meeting room's front. Her face was calm and expressionless, neither smiling nor frowning.

Iler straight back and steady posture conveyed her readiness to accept any criticism or blame that might come her way.

"Kiran."

The Chairman's booming voice, full of authority, made me snap my head around to look at him in worry. His stern expression was so calm and unreadable that it was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

"Why weren 't you on-site with your team that day? Was it something that could be done by just one person?"

The tall figure standing in the middle of the room now looked extremely tense. Even so, her voice remained clear and steady as she responded, with no trace of hesitation in her sharp gaze.

"It was my fault, sir. I didn't come to the plant that day and gave instructions to my team over the phone without supervising the work in person. I sincerely apologize."

My heart ached as I watched someone like Kiran, so proud ofher dignity, bow to apologize for a single mistake. I had seen with my own eyes how much effort and dedication she poured into the company.

And the most painful part was knowing that her one mistake. . . was because of me.

"Mr. Chairman.

I couldn't hold back anymore and spoke up with a trembling voice, but my father didn't even look at me. He simply raised his hand to shoulder height as a signal for me to stop. In this situation, I wasn't in a position to defy the Chairman's order.

In the end, I could only frown and stay silent.



"Do you think you can just decide when you want to visit the plant or not?

You're the head of the production engineering department, Kiran."

Once again, Kiran offered no excuses. She simply bowed deeply to apologize again, leaving me clenching my fists in frustration, unable to do anything.

"From now on, any request for leave while working at a plant overseas must be approved by the MD at the parent company." "Yes, sir."

"Kiran, to be honest, I'm very disappointed in you."

"1'm sorry, sir."

"This time, there has to be a punishment. You'll be suspended from work for one week, and with the condition..."

"You must still complete all the tasks assigned to you within the original deadlines. The company will not extend the time allocated for the business trip under any circumstances."

After the short, clear, and decisive statement, Kiran's deep brownp, eyes, shimmering with emotion, looked straight at the chairman as if pleading for understanding. But the chairman showed no intention of reconsidering his decision.

My father probably didn't feel anything at all.

Unlike me, the moment I saw those eyes, I felt such a deep pain that I had to hold back my tears and turn my face away.

"Understood, Mr. Chairman," Kiran said.

After that, Kiran and everyone else left the meeting room, but my father and I remained seated in silence. His calm, indifferent demeanor, as ifunaware of what had just happened, pushed me to be the one to speak first.

"Dad, was your punishment fair and not meant to be a personal attack to

My father raised an eyebrow, seemingly surprised by my question. He looked as if he might remain silent, but my steady gaze, unwavering and fixed directly on him, must have made him realize that I was waiting intently for an answer.

"Why would you think that? Don't forget, Phimmanas, this is the professional world. Everything I do has a reason behind it."

 'SYou're the one who's mixing personal matters with work."

"But she took the day offbecause of me. I was sick that day,"

I replied, my voice trembling and stubborn. As soon as the first sentence escaped my lips, the rest came flooding out uncontrollably.

"Do you really think it's right for her to leave me alone, burning with fever, in a foreign place like this?"

At this point, the sharp, authoritative eyes in front ofme softened noticeably, but his voice remained firm, loud, and full of authority. "No matter the reason, Kiran must be criticized for allowing an engineer to take on a high-risk task alone."

"Being criticized by me ensures she won't be criticized by others. Do you understand?"

"Kiran carries the expectations of many, including mine. If she makes a mistake and faces no consequences, how do you think others will perceive

### "But..."

"And then there's the matter ofher position. Once Kiran returns to Thailand after this project is completed, the company plans to promote her from department head to manager. With that comes even greater responsibility, naturally."

"Even if a subordinate makes a mistake, the leader must take responsibility. This is something you need to learn."

It felt as if I'd heard this exact sentence before. At that moment, I realized clearly where Kiran 's way of thinking came from. No wonder my father used the word expectations when refemng to her. She was almost like a reflection of him in his younger years, an uncanny replica of the chairman.

Even me or my sister Prae, his biological daughters, can't even compare.

"You must learn to control yourself, to not let personal relationships distort everything because ofbias."

My heart sank when I heard at my father's hurtful words, and a fear surged over me that ifmy father found out that I had a relationship with Kiran...

Would my love be obstructed and interfered again?

Worse still, would Kiran lose the job she was so proud ofbecause ofrne?

"No, it's not like that, Dad. I only spoke up because I felt sorry for her. The two of us aren't involved with each other."

This time, the chairman turned his chair to face me directly, his calm expression replaced with a furrowed brow full of surprise and seriousness.

"I thought you still loved Kiran."

I barely managed to lower my gaze in time to avoid his piercing stare. Even so, my voice was still full of hesitation as I spoke.

"Why would I care about her, Dad? Have you forgotten that Kiran was the one who abandoned me so coldly?"

My father's frown deepened, his composed demeanor almost completely gone. Then, he slid his chair closer to me with a childlike urgency.

"Don't tell me. .."

"Even now, Kiran hasn't told you the truth?"

"The truth? What truth?"

My entire body froze upon hearing those unexpected words from my father. What truth? And what did these two have to do with it?

My father let out a long sigh and began tapping his fingers rapidly on the table.

Look at that, this father-in-law and daughter-in-law are alike, even in their habits when lost in thought.

"Phim... listen to me carefully."

"Yes, Dad."

"With a clear mind."

"Without anger. "

"Dad.

"There, see? You're already looking upset."

I glanced at Poj Tantiburanakorn, wondering to myself Is this really my father?

"Phim, promise me you won't get angry and will listen calmly and reasonably, okay?" 

Father nodded, narrowing his eyes in thought for a moment. But in the end, he spoke.

"Kiran broke up with you because of me."

"We both had something to exchange with each other."

"Kiran's role was to do whatever it took to make you hate her. I knew that was the only way to get you to continue your studies. The condition was that she couldn't tell you about it and wasn't allowed to contact you until you graduated and came back. "

"And in exchange, I promised her one thing. Anything she wanted."

"Do you know what Kiran asked for?"

My heart pounded so hard it felt like it might burst out of my chest, My fists clenched instinctively, terrified that the next words would crush me so completely I wouldn't be able to stand.

"Kiran asked for only one thing, that I must never force you into anything agam."

"For the rest of your life."

It felt as if a lump had lodged in my throat, making it impossible to breathe. I pressed my lips together and shut my eyes tightly, fighting back the surge of emotions threatening to overwhelm me. The answers I'd longed to hear from Kiran all this time were now pouring out of my father 's mouth.

I struggled hard to keep my promise not to let anger or frustration take over. I will listen to the truth without anger toward the person in front of me.

"She could've asked for anything that fulfilled her own desires, but instead, her request was about you. I truly admire that about her, which is why I've kept my word, no matter how much it went against my own wishes at times."

"Yes Dad. You 've really kept your promise. '

Looking back over the past seven years, there wasn't a single moment when my father forced me to do anything or tried to control my decisions like he had always done before.

I never returned to Thailand, and he never complained. I ignored my fiancé entirely, and he didn't say a word. Even after I graduated and didn't come home, he didn't scold me.

It made me wonder, but I kept my curiosity to myself, afraid that if I asked, my father would go back to being his old self.

So it was all because ofKiran?

"Your freedom, your life as it is now, was traded for the risk ofyou hating her for the rest of your life,"

I swallowed hard, my chest burning as if acid had been poured on my heart. I couldn't hold it in any longer. The tears I had fought so hard to keep back finally fell.

A large gray handkerchief, crisply ironed, was extended to me to wipe my tears.

"Why. why am I the only one. who wasn't allowed to know anything?"

"Dad, do you know how much that incident left scars on my life?"

"1 know.

"But it had to be that way because you were so stubborn. You wouldn't listen to anyone, not even me... your father, who didn't know how to teach you to love properly. To love in moderation. And most importantly, to love yourself. "

I burst into sobs, throwing myself into my father's arms as he reached out to gently rub my back and shoulders. A whirlwind Of emotions flooded through me, so overwhelming I could barely sort them out.

I felt sorry for Kiran, who, even now, had never blamed anyone, not even a single word, to defend herself.

I felt sorry for myself, for being kept in the dark about this strange agreement, left to endure unbearable pain without knowing anything about what was truly happening.

I felt sorry for my father, who had to go as far as making such a drastic deal with Kiran because of how stubborn and unyielding I was.

But mixed in with all that pity was anger, anger at everyone for letting things unfold this way. Anger at the 7 precious years lost to hatred and misunderstanding

The flood of feelings inside me was so immense that even the endless tears streaming down my face, feeling almost like blood, couldn 't fully express the sorrow and regret I felt deep within.

"How am I supposed to feel, Dad? I'm so confused right now."

At this point, my father reached out his large, warm hand, the hand that had always comförted me throughout my life, and gently stroked my hair. His deep but resonant voice broke through the noise in my head, still echoing from my heavy crymg.

"Phim, feel whatever you feel. And do what you truly want to do, my child."

"Even... even ifl want to be with Kiran?"

"1 already expected that. I have no problem with it." you accepting this because ofyour promise to her?"

"No, it's not that. It's because I know she's been waiting for you, and only you."

"DO you know why Kiran chose to apply for a job at our company, even though she had to face me every single day?"

"She said it might be the only chance in her life to see you again."

"The rest is up to you, how you 'Il deal with someone who values you more than she does about herself "

Kiran had already returned to her hotel room in the Ueno area. At first, I had planned to have dinner with my father at the welcome party for the Chairman.

But the truth that my father left me with burned like fire in my heart, leaving me restless. I canceled all my plan, tears streaming down my face.

And, of course, my father couldn 't refuse me.

After a hurried, frantic journey, I found myself in the elevator of the hotel where Kiran was staying, less than an hour after parted ways with my father.

The reflection in the elevator mirror showed my tear-streaked cheeks and eyes red from crying so hard. My heart pounded fast and hard, like it was about to leap out of my chest at any moment.

Oddly enough, I felt as though I was about to meet Kiran for the first time.

The first time... after what I felt like an eternity.

7 years Of separation.

Even though I'd just been with her two hours ago.

Ding!

The elevator's alert snapped me out ofrny thoughts. I inhaled deeply, filling my lungs with air, before stepping out slowly. I walked down the hallway and came to a stop in front of Room 1704.

I stood there staring at the door number for so long, making the rush to get here as quickly as possible feel almost meaningless. I closed my eyes tightly one more time, then opened them slowly.

Finally, I reached out my small hand and knocked on the door with steady, firm taps.

Knock; knock, knock.

Chapter 49: Wounds of longing

Knock, knock, knock.

Knock, knock, knock.

No matter how long or how steadily I knocked on the door, there was no sign that the large door in front of me would open.

The countless words I had carefully arranged in my head just moments ago had vanished, leaving me unable to remember any of them. All I knew was the restless heat in my chest.

I press my ear against the door, straining to hear any sound from inside the

Inside, where now I could only hear faintly the sad melody of a foreign song, mingling with what sounded like running water. It's enough to confirm.

Kiran was definitely in the room.

### "Kiran!"

Knock, knock, knock.

I knocked harder and called out to her with more urgency, my earlier feelings Of anger and doubt now completely overtaken by a frantic worry.

Flashes of Kiran's expression during the last moments of the meeting suddenly came to mind.

It was a face drained of pride, utterly defeated, something I never imagined I'd see in someone as fiercely confident and proud as Kiran.

Kiran I knew would never seem anxious or prone to despair. But with everything happening now, I couldn 't stop my mind from wandering to those possibilities.

The pressure building inside me made my knocks louder, my calls more desperate, as if I were terrified of the worst.

"Kiran... Kiran, please open the door for me!"

Knock, knock, knock.

But there was still nothing but silence.

"Life is too short to waste it hurting each other like this... especially when we still love each other so much."

This time, it was Pock's words that came back to me, as if she was standing right in front of me saying them. Her words reminded me that the terrible things from the past had now become nothing more than specks of dust.

Compared to the thought of losing the person I love the most..

I picked up my phone and called Kiran in a panic. I waited until the ringing stopped, but there was no answer. I called again and again, nearly I O times, but the result was the same every time. In the end, I lost hope and decided to go downstairs to ask the staff for a spare key card.

Just as I was about to turn around..

The door opened.

And the intense emotions I had just moments ago, slowly began to fade.

Until became warm.

And finally, cold completely.

When I looked inside, I saw her tall figure dressed in a white bathrobe that ended just above her knees. Her long, straight black hair was soaking wet, with water dripping from the tips onto her broad shoulders.

In one hand, Kiran was holding a bright yellow-orange rubber duck, which she must have brought with her from the bathtub, perhaps out of some instinct.

When she saw me staring at the rubber duck, unable to look away, the tall woman quickly moved her hand behind her back and gave me an awkward, shy smile.

Oh, my goodness. Just imagining her sitting in a bathtub full ofbubbles, playing with a little rubber duck, made me want to laugh.

Seeing her like this, who could ever scold Kiran?

All the complaints and scolding I had prepared earlier were swallowed back down into the depths of my heart. Now, the only thing I could manage to show her was a soft, hoarse voice and a pair of reproachful eyes.

"Why did you take so long to open the door, Kiran? I knocked so hard my hand almost broke, you know."

Before I could even finish my sentence, she grabbed my hand and brought it closer to inspect it carefully. Then she softly blew on the red marks on my knuckles, as if that would make the pain go away faster.

"l'm sorry, Phim. I fell asleep while soaking in the bathtub."

As she spoke, Kiran pulled me closer and guided me into the room, doting on me as if trying to make up for everything. Eventually, she pulled me onto her lap, seating me face-to-face with her on the soft, plush sofa by the wide window.

"But why didn 't you have dinner with the chairman? Why are you back so

Her simple question dragged me back to the reason I had rushed here so urgently, at a time that was far from appropriate.

But as soon as I thought of it.

Confusion rushed over me again, and I couldn't stop it.

"Phim, is something wrong?"

When I didn't reply, Kiran didn't push me for an answer.

I grabbed the towel draped over her shoulder and began drying her hair gently. Her long, almond-shaped brown eyes sparkled in the soft winter sunlight streaming through the curtains, glimmering like the surface of a champagne-colored sea.

I kept drying her hair for what felt like a long time, in a moment where everything was quiet, as if the wind and waves had stilled.

But the stillness felt too heavy, too uneasy, almost ominous.

It was then that my voice, cold and sharp, broke the silence, without giving Kiran any chance to prepare herself.

"Myfather told me the truth, Kiran. "

The champagne-colored eyes that had been sparkling moments ago now flickered visibly. Kiran's face turned pale, almost devoid of color. She swallowed hard, then spoke with difficulty. 'The truth about what?"

"About the deal you made with my father.

Kiran shut her eyes tightly and let out a long, shaky sigh. Her thin lips pressed into a straight line, but her slender hands pulled me closer, wrapping around my waist as if afraid I might disappear.

"Do you realize, that the decision you made seven years ago..

"It was no different than the death sentencefor me?"

By this point, clear tears started streaming down Kiran's face, falling freely without shame. She lowered her head onto my chest and began to sob violently, her cries breaking my heart into pieces.

Her muffled, shaky voice came through, but I could only catch one phrase:

"I'm sorry. '

I reached up and gently stroked the back of Kiran 's neck, like a mother soothing her child, with a calmness and composure I could hardly believe I possessed.

"Why did you agree to my father's terms?"

"Didn 't you feel sorry'for me at all, Kiran? "

Kiran held back her sobs and finally pulled away from my chest. She took a deep breath, filling her lungs, and then looked back at me with red, tearfilled eyes, full ofunwavering determination.

"1 just didn't want your relationship with the chairman to reach a breaking point."

"1 didn't want you to live your life constantly breaking promises with people, over and over agam, just because of me."

"1 wanted you to live with dignity, the way you deserve to."

Pock's words flashed through my mind once more, the words about how Kiran's love for me was about setting me free.

I could almost understand her reasoning, but it was still so difficult to accept a decision Kiran made entirely on her own. The composure I had moments ago was now replaced with a surge of emotions that bubbled up uncontrollably.

"And what ifI ended up truly hating you? What ifl couldn 'tforgive you? Or what ifI moved on with someone else? What would be the point ofwhat you did? Would it really be worth what you sacrificed? "

The room fell silent. so silent that I had to hold my breath, waiting for her answer. Kiran looked straight at me, her gaze filled with an emotion I couldn't quite understand.

"Of course, it's worth it..."

"As long as, in the end, you're happy with what you chose for yourself, then to me, it's worth everything."



"1 believe in your love, Phim. I believe in it more than anything else in this world."

"Even if, in the end, I'm not the one you choose."

"Then it's up to your heart, Phim."

My heart softened immediately when I heard those words. Right after speaking, Kiran turned her face away, as if trying to avoid looking at me.

Her side profile, the sharp bridge ofher nose, the proud curve ofher lips that once seemed so confident, and her red, tear-filled eyes, made her look more lost and lonely than I'd ever seen before

The expression of hurt and sadness, something Kiran rarely ever showed, struck my heart like a whip. I didn't know how to comfort her, so I simply reached out and gently stroked her check.

"You idiot..

"1 already have the person I've chosen."

"1 chose her a long time ago, and I'll never change my mind. "

'That person... is you, Kiran.

After I finished my trembling, quiet words, I leaned in and kissed her passionately, as if we hadn't seen each other in a long time.

The kiss that should have been a sweet kiss now carried the salty bitterness of tears, blending so completely it was hard to tell them apart.

I pressed my lips harder against hers, almost as if I wanted to consume her entirely, as her hands pulled my waist closer against her stomach.

In that moment..

I made my mind.

To leave behind the countless reasons that had driven us apart in the past. To let go of the painful memories that had trapped me for so long.

To leave it all as a thing ofthe past.

All the time that I'd lost..

From now on...

I will reclaim every second that I should have been happy.

"This one is named Jelly, and this one is named Pudding."

"Oh my... Kiran..."

"Yes, my love... "

"You can't just go around naming Phim's girls like that, okay?"

I said this with a soft, embarrassed voice that didn't sound like a scolding at all. Then, I reached out to brush Kiran's sweat-dampened hair back and gently tucked it behind her ear with care.

After the lovemaking that seemed to be sweeter and deeper than usual. Kiran stayed lying on top of my naked body, refusing to move. She kept tracing her fingers lazily over my chest, trying to name "them" without me ever asking her to.

"Why does Phim always go against me?"

This time, Kiran didn't stop at her usual half-pouting, half-pleading words. Instead, she protested by kneading my chest with her hands and pressing soft kisses here and there, as iftrying to mark her territory. I couldn't help but laugh at her childish behavior.

I wrapped my arms around her neck fondly as she rested her face on my chest.

"Do you like these girls that much? Look at you, acting like a kid who lost her mom."

This time, Kiran lifted her face, trying to make her almond-shaped brown eyes look round and pleading.

'Well, I did lose my mom."

"Don 't be ridiculous. Why would you say something like that and jinx your

I grabbed her ear and gave it a sharp twist, making her cry out. Then, as extra punishment, I pulled her cheeks until they stretched like dough. But instead Of showing any sign of remorse, the tall woman had the audacity to grin slyly at me.

"1 didn't mean that kind of mom."

"Then what kind of mom?"

Even though I knew asking would only lead me to fall into her trap, I couldn't stop myself. And now my heart was pounding harder as her sparkling, teasing eyes looked straight into mine.

"We11... my beloved mother of course."

"Ugh."

I said "ugh" with exaggerated disgust and turned my head away, even though the edges of my lips were curling into a smile. I was already flustered by her cheesy words, but her next sentence was even more devastating.

"Poor Kiran .

"I'm an orphan. No wife.'

Arghhhhhhhhhhh.

Every word Kiran said made me wonder who had taught her to speak like this. Thinking about it, there was likely only one possible culprit.

Pock Prechachanapai.

My small hands immediately pinched and smacked the tall woman on top of me, who was laughing proudly at her own words. I took advantage of her laughter, flipping us over so that I was the one on top now. It wasn't difficult at all.

And, of course, being in this position gave me the advantage. I couldn't help but smirk wickedly as I saw her face grow pale beneath me.

"What... what is Phim planning to do? Why does your face look so

"Actually, I think I'm the one who's missing a mom."

### "And..."

I gently ran my hand along her flat stomach, which was now tensing as if trying to escape the heat ofmy touch. Kiran's face filled with shock as I moved my hand higher, letting it linger over her chest.

Then, mimicking her earlier actions, I began kneading and lightly sucking on her sensitive skin, making her stammer out a trembling protest, clearly helpless.

"W-wait, Phim... wait. we can talk about this, okay?"

But by this point, there was no way I was going to show mercy. My naked body pressed down fillly against hers, and I buried my face into her beautiful chest, seeking warmth.

"1'm willing to talk with you, Kiran."

"Butfor now, you have to do what I sayfirst. Okay?"

Chapter 50: Compensation for Damages

"Is it true, Pock?"

"Did you really decide to date Tan?"

Phimmanas voice went unusually high, full of absolute surprise, as she asked Pock, who was sitting there bashfully, her sharp cheekbones turning an adorable shade of reddish-gray.

The two of us had arranged to meet Pock at a dessert café in Harajuku. Since I had a full week off work after being suspended by the Chairman, we had plenty of time.

The moment the two of them saw each other, they started chatting happily and ordered an array of luxurious Japanese- style desserts, snapping pictures for Facebook with enthusiasm.

And somehow, the conversation between the girls shifted into what felt like a segment of "My Husband is Better Than Yours, " featuring Pock.

After listening to Pock proudly announce that she had started dating Tan, I continued eating my dessert, enjoying it without the slightest surprise.

I already knew about this, as Pock had messaged me on LINE earlier to tell me that Tan had been texting her to flirt for a while. She'd quickly decided to date him in just a few days.

Phim, however, was completely stunned. She was so shocked that she dropped her fork onto her plate with a loud Clink!

"How did this even happen, Pock?"

"There's no black magic involved, right?"

Pfftt!

I couldn't help but spit out my iced cocoa. The small woman beside me still had the presence of mind to grab a sweet-colored handkerchief and gently wipe the corner of my mouth.

Meanwhile, Pock rolled her eyes dramatically as Phim kept glancing at me with affection.

"Um, Phim, can you focus on me again? Kiran is an adult, she can wipe her own mouth."

Phim let go ofme and gave Pock a soft, sheepish smile, though she still reached out to grab my hand, holding it on her lap as if to comfort me after my supposed traumatic cocoa-spitting incident.

"Oh, sorry, Pock! Please, go on."

Pock bit her lower lip dramatically, twirling a strand of hair by her ear as if she were a 14-year-old girl.

"1t's got nothing to do with black magic, Phim. It's all about love, you know? During those 3-4 day trip, we got really close to each other. And, well, when a beautiful girl and a handsome guy spend time together, the chemistry just... sparked instantly! "

Pock hurriedly continued talking non-stop, afraid that Phim might turn her attention back to me. Meanwhile, the small woman nodded seriously, as if trying her best to understand Pock's explanation, her face looking deep in thought, like she was solving a difficult puzzle.

"'Ah, I think I understand now. Honestly, Tan has always been a bit... unusual. He doesn't think like a normal person."

Pock shot a glare at Phimmanas so intense it looked like her dark pupils might disappear into her eyelids. Phim, on the other hand, seemed to have thought of something. A sly little smile appeared on her lips, forming an adorable dimple.

Adorable enough to make me want to grab her and kiss her right here, right now!

"No wonder..."

"Huh? What do you mean, 'no wonder,' Phim?"

"I can't tell Pock, but I can tell Kiran."

Phimmanas smiled mischievously but didn't elaborate any further. What was worse was how the little troublemaker pretended to cup her hands and whisper something softly into my ear.

Her breath brushed against my neck, making the hairs on the back of it stand on end. But the words she whispered didn't mean anything at all.

"Tonight... Phim wants to eat cookies again.

Phim was teasing both me and Pock at the same time with her overly dramatic, love-filled whispering act.

She managed to kill two birds with one stone!

Poor Pock was dying of curiosity, stretching her neck to peek over at me while winking so hard I thought the wrinkles around her eyes might turn into crow's feet, or worse, duck feet. She must have thought Phim had shared some juicy secret with me.

Thankfully, Phim stopped Pock's ridiculous behavior before her eyes fell out. She turned to her with a playful laugh, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

"Well, ifyou're that curious, Pock, why don't you pack your bags and come with Kiran and me back to Osaka? We're planning to visit Kyoto. If you tag along, you'll get all the answers you want."

"Huh? Why does this feel so complicated and full of secret, like some twisted betrayal story, Phim?"

It would've been much better if Pock hadn't turned to me with a murderous glare when she said the word betrayal. Her mouth, which at first glance seemed like it was smiling, was actually muttering something under her breath.

And, of course, I was probably the Only person in the world who could read her lips and figure out what she was saying.

It seemed like Pock's silent muttering translated into just one sentence:

"Sitting with your sly wife is really bad!"

"Come on, Pock. Please? I promise you'll love this trip,"

Phim said, her tone sweet and persuasive.

Pock pretended to be conflicted, flipping through her notebook dramatically. She sighed heavily, acting as though it was a truly difficult decision.

"Well, since Phim is asking so nicely, how could I say no? And besides.. "

'SMY schedule is wide open until almost the end Of next month." Why can I have this kind ofluck when buying a lottery ticket? "Great! It's settled then, Pock. Tomorrow we're heading back to Osaka together!"

"Sure thing, Phim! But I have one more question."

"What is it, Pock?"

This time, Pock glanced sideways at me before loudly asking in her usual bold style,

"Hey, Kiran, open your mouth and let me see something."

I hated how fast my reflexes were. Without thinking, I opened my mouth so wide she could probably see all the way to my uvula, if she was a doctor with a flashlight.

When I realized what I was doing, I stopped to think about how utterly random and unrelated Pock's command was. It made no sense at all !

"Well...your tongue is still intact,"

Pock said after inspecting me with mock seriousness.

"1 thought Phim might've cut it off already!"

"What?! Why would you think that?"

"Well, you've been sitting there like a mute background extra with no lines for quite a while now, Your Highness!"

Now here I'm standing in front of someone's bedroom door, staring at it wistfully. My finger absentmindedly traced the edge Of a small handmade sign hanging from the doorknob, which read:

You're absolutely forbidden from entering this room, Kiran!

"Hey, what do you think your sly-wife is plotting in there, Your Highness? "

The raspy whisper in my ear startled me, and I instinctively whipped around to look.

My face almost collided with Pock's, who had leaned in so close that her chin was practically resting on my shoulder. She was sporting a disheveled look, her long hair hanging messily over her face, revealing only her chin and her dull, cracked lips.

The sight made me jump in shock, and I let out an uncontrollable scream at the top ofmy lungs.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

As soon as my loud scream echoed through the room, Pock immediately started looking around, glancing nervously at the floor as if afraid of something.

"Kiran, why are you screaming? What is it? A cockroach?"

"Why are you asking? I screamed because you scared me!"

"0h, come on! Were you stunned by my beauty? Sorry about that, I just washed my hair, so I'm feeling a bit sexy right now."

After saying that, Pock bend down and dramatically shook her head, trying to make her thick brown hair fall perfectly, like in a shampoo commercial.

Of course, instead of looking like a shampoo model, her hair became even more tangled, making her 100k even messier.

"'Pock, you're seriously scaring me. Are you sure you're not trying to cosplay as a ghost right now?"

At that, Pock immediately pouted, clearly offended, but her hair still hung all over her face. I couldn't take it anymore, so I grabbed a handful ofher messy bangs, pulled them back, and tied them up with a black hair tie I had around my wrist. At least now she looked a little more presentable.

"You're always ruining it when I try to be sexy,"

Pock grumbled.

"Alright. Let's get to bed? We've need to leave early tomorrow to Kyoto."

Tonight, Pock was staying over at the house Phim and I shared in Osaka so we could leave for our Kyoto trip the next morning as planned.

"So I really get to sleep in the same room with you tonight? Oh, how delightful this is, Your Highness,"

Pock teased with a laugh that dripped with sarcasm.

I turned to glare at her because she is the main reason I was being separated from Phim tonight.

"Pock, shut your mouth! It's all your fault. You teased Phim until she got embarrassed, talking about ghosts with random heads and whatever that pea-something medicine was. And now, I'm stuck here with you!"

"Oh, come on! Give her a break. You know, muscles get tired if you use them too much,"

Pock said with a grin.

"Don't talk about her like that! I've told you, we're pure. We just hold hands and sleep."

Pock let out a deep, sarcastic chuckle, her shoulders shaking as if she couldn't believe a word I was saying.

"Hold hands? Yeah, right, hold her down to the bed, you little liar! Anyway, you haven't answered my question yet. Why did your sly-wife suddenly decide to invite me on this Kyoto trip? What secret is she keeping? Tell me

"There's no secret."

"No way! What did Phim whisper to you? Tell me!"

I blinked a few times, trying to process Pock's question, and as I thought back to Phim's whispered words, my face immediately flushed hot at the memory,

'Tonight... Phim wants to eat cookies again.

When I didn't give her an answer, Pock pushed me further.

"Well? What did Phim whisper to you?"

"It's nothing. She just told me.. .9' "Told you what?"

"Tricking Pock feels so satisfying."

The scene infront of me now made me stop in my tracks, staring as if I had been frozen by a spell.

Phim's delicate figure stood out in a light pink kimono decorated with tiny sakura petals, her hair styled in an elegant high bun pinned with a dark brown hairpin.

She stood smiling sweetly, framed by the picturesque setting of Kyoto's Kiyomizu Temple wallovay. On both sides of the sloping path were small shops, and in the distance, the red temple gates glowed faintly under the sunlight.

It was, without a doubt, the most beautiful sight I had ever seen in my life.

I couldn't help but smile when I saw the small woman waddling toward me in her Japanese geta sandals, her steps unsteady like a little penguin returning to its group. Instinctively, I reached out my hand to steady her.

She grabbed my hand with a glowing smile on her face, then quickly wrapped her arms around my waist in an affectionate hug.

"1 love you, Phim.„so much."

Phim tilted her head to look up at me, surprise flickering in her eyes. She seemed puzzled by my sudden declaration of love in such an unexpected time and place, but the joy in her gaze couldn't be hidden.

Her soft, full lips couldn't seem to stop smiling as she asked in a sweet, playful voice,

"Why are you saying this all of a sudden? Are you feeling unwell?"

As she spoke, her small hand reached up to feel my forehead and neck, as if she were genuinely worried that I might be unwell. But instead of answering, I caught her wrist gently and gazed deeply into her light brown eyes.

"1 can't help it. Seeing you in this outfit..

"1've fallen in love with you all over again, Phim"

"And i keep falling over and over."

'Gosh.

Phim's soft cheeks, framed by delicate curls ofhair, turned from a faint pink to a deep red. Before the small woman could grow more flustered, Pock suddenly appeared at just the wrong moment.

Her arrival reminded me of a simple truth, not everyone looks more elegant in a kimono,

While Pim moved gracefully in her geta sandals, walking like a dainty little penguin, the sound ofher soft footsteps going kiri kiri, Pock stomped along behind her. She dragged her feet, bent her knees, and walked with her legs apart, resembling a giant gorilla looking for its lost cub. Her heavy footsteps thudded loudly, echoing thunk thunk thunk.

Pock's makeup, as usual, was outrageously bold and impossible to replicate. Her brown hair streaked with faded blonde looked like dried hay and had been puffed up like a villainous servant from an old TV drama.

She wore a floral-patterned kimono, likely adorned with bright blue flowers, that clashed sharply against her dark brown skin, making her stand out like a sore thumb from far away.

"Kiran, help me out here!"

Reluctantly, I freed my hand from Phim's gentle grasp and extended it toward Pock. Yet, she barely touched my hand, instead resting just the back of her fingers on mine, strutting with a smug elegance like an empress holding onto her loyal eunuch's arm.

I couldn't help but glance at her over-the-top hairstyle and clumsy, awkward walk. Concerned for my eccentric friend, I finally asked,

"So, where are you going, grandma?"

'Grandma's going to the bus station but doesn't have enough for the fare, sweetie!"

She said, before dramatically spitting to the side.

"Ugh, Stop messing with me! Don't I look beautiful in this?"

"Say it!"

Pock demanded an answer, glaring at me with piercing eyes. Her left eyebrow twitched furiously, and I couldn't bring myself to look her in the eye. Something about her braided eyebrow fashion choice made me uneasy.

Thankfully, Phim's icy, commanding voice interrupted before things could escalate further.

"Pock.

"Don't tease Kiran."

In an instant, Pock's rowdy, thug-like behavior, reminiscent ofa yakuza collecting protection money, transformed into the meek obedience of a lowly servant bowing to her master. She bent over, humbly acknowledging Phim's order with a pale, trembling face.

I couldn't help but smirk as I let out a quiet chuckle deep in my throat, amused by the sudden shift in her demeanor.

No matter how many years passed, the first wife would always lose to the sheer authority of the maid-wife's.

"Hi, everyone,"

That familiar soft yet deep voice echoed up from the walkway below, making all three of us turn to look at the same time. What we saw was a young man with round eyes and a medium build, the very same man we had sent off to London just two weeks ago.

And yet, here he was, standing in Kyoto as though the half-world distance between Japan and England had never existed.

So this was the secret behind Phim's earlier mysterious "1 see,'' which she had refused to share with anyone, not even me.

### "Surprise!"

The man spread his arms wide, flashing a smile as bright as the lead actor in a Western romantic movie. The only thing missing was someone dashing into his arms to complete the cinematic moment.

If anyone was going to do it, it would probably be Granny—wait, no—Pock. There she went, gripping the hem of her kimono like an old lady holding up her sarong, her feet digging into the ground as she clumsily wobbled and staggered her way down the sloped path toward Tan.

What's more, the loud clack of Pock's geta sandals with each forceful step added to the drama. Her shrill, trembling voice echoed, sounding like it might be her final words before the end ofher life.

'VT-T-Taaannnnnn!"

The entire scene played out in slow motion, and I watched as Tan's smile began to falter, his overly long grin looking increasingly stiff. For a second, I wanted to yell down and suggest he walk a little closer to help cut the distance Pock had to cover.

But, of course, I stayed quiet, enduring the moment to the best ofmy ability. Finally, just as I thought I couldn't take it anymore, Pock tripped slightly on her geta and into Tan's chest in a perfect, conveniently timed embrace.

Oh.. perfectly time.

"'How did you get here? Why didn't you tell me you were coming, Tan?"

Pock feigned annoyance as she playfully pounded her fists on Tan 's broad shoulders with exaggerated dramatic flair. I couldn't help but roll my eyes and sigh, glancing upward in exasperation.

"They're cute together, aren't they?"

The sweet voice beside me spoke softly as its owner wrapped her arms around mine and rested her head on my shoulder, clearly trying to butter me up. But I acted indifferent, turning my head to look the other way.

"Hmmm... Why does it feel like someone's pouting? Look at that sulky little lip—it's sticking out so far, it'll touch your nose soon."

The small woman reached out to flick my lower lip playfully, making a soft pop pop sound, until I had to turn my face away to protect myself.

"Is someone upset? What's wrong, Kiran?"

"Kiiiii... "

I had planned to hold out a little longer, but I couldn't resist the commanding tone that carried so much authority, hidden behind her dazzling, cold smile. Reluctantly, I gave in, answering her question without turning to look at her.

"1'm not mad... just a little annoyed."

"At what? Tell me so I won't do it again,"

She said sweetly, tilting her head like she genuinely wanted to fix it.

No matter how hard I tried to bury the sudden rush of irritation deep down, my voice still betrayed me, tinged with frustration when I answered her.

"1t's about you still staying in touch with Tan, without me knowing anything about it."

This time, Phim pulled on my arm, making me stop walking. She shuffled in front of me, her small figure blocking my path. She looked up at me with wide, worried eyes.

"Kiran, Tan and I are just friends. Ifl were ever going to think about him that way, I would've done it years ago, not now."

I glanced sideways at Phim, still trying to keep my composure.

"I don't know... if he's with Pock now, why did he contact you when he came here? Why didn't he just tell Pock instead?"

"If he told Pock, how would it be a surprise for her? Come on, Kiran."

"In my eyes, Tan is still suspicious. He's been in love with you for so long, and now he suddenly likes Pock just like that? What if Pock ends up heartbroken? What if Tan takes advantage of her? What will you say then?"

At this, Phim averted her gaze, looking down almost guiltily. She blinked rapidly before answering in a voice so soft I could barely hear it.

"Um... honestly, I think I'm more worried about Tan in this situation."

"Ahem! "

I growl at her in frustration, something I'd never done before. But instead of getting angry, Phim burst out laughing. She threw her arms around mine, hugging it tightly while stroking it up and down in an attempt to calm me down.

"1s this what they call jealousy over a friend? Don't be like that, okay, my strong one"

"I'm just worried about her."

"That's Pock we're talking about, Phim. Pock, who's practically another version of me."

The small woman tightened her grip on my arm and spoke in a soft, gentle tone, as though she were comforting a child.

"But it's Pock. Don't you want to see Pock happy for once? Just look at her."

I glanced toward Pock, who was now wrapping her right arm around Tan's neck, pulling his head to rest on her shoulder. She patted his head repeatedly, looking thrilled, like a wild hunter proudly showing offthe human prey she'd caught to serve as her tribe's dinner.

"Pock has done so much for you, Kiran. It's time to repay her, don't you think? When moments like this come, when Pock might actually have someone, even if you can't help, you mustn't stand in her way, okay?"

"Pock just wants someone to stay by her side. Someone to share her thoughts with. Someone to bring a bit of sweetness into her life."

"Just like how you want to have Phim."

Even though I understood every reason behind Phim's words, every single sentence she spoke, I didn't know why, in the end, the first tear still fell from my eye.

A tear fell, accompanied by a strange sense of emptiness I'd never felt before. It was as if.. .

The little dark-skinned, curly-haired girl who used to play with me since we were kids was now running offto join her new boy friend, leaving me alone to play with the sandpile.

It was hard to believe that the one blurry image through my tear-filled eyes right now was the sight of Pock's back as she walked away with Tan. Phim stood beside me, trying to console me while laughing softly in amusement as I wiped away my tears over and over.

By the time Pock had disappeared into the distance, my tears had dried up, even though my lips were still pouting so hard they almost touched my nose. But I could at least begin to make peace with things.

"Then you need to make sure Tan knows," I said.

"Knows what?" Phim asked.

"Tell Tan that he's not allowed to hurt Pock. Not even a little."

"If he ever makes Pock cry.. e"

"I'll demand a compensation for the damage! "

Chapter 51: Starving but alive

"Pock, what do you want to eat? Grilled eel rice bowl or soba noodles?"

The soft, caring voice directed toward Pock made me feel a surge of irritation I couldn't quite suppress. Right now, the four of us were having lunch at a restaurant along the sloping path near Kiyomizu Temple.

These restaurants weren't much different from the typical touristy spots back home, the kind of places that sold all the popular dishes.

But none of them are tasty.

"Pock's not going to eat grilled eel rice bowl. Ifthey have salted fish rice, then go ahead and ask her."

"Kiran, don't be mean...

Before I could even finish my sentence, Phim wrapped her arm around my neck and pulled my head down to rest against hers. She gently stroked my hair while flashing a sly smile at Tan and Pock, who sat across from us.

"True, Phim. Kiran, do you even realize? Just now your tone was so aggressive. Look at your face, been sulking like a cat's butt for a while now.

Your eyes are red, your lips are pouting. What's wrong with you?"

Pock turned to snap at me, prioritizing her man over her friend as usual. Meanwhile, Tan took on the role Of a saint, smiling warmly at everyone at the table before raising an eyebrow and looking sweetly at Pock.

"Pock, calm down. Don't scold Kiran. Let's talk about us instead. What do you want to drink? Hot green tea or Chinese tea?"

Ugh.

It was so obvious, it was all an act!

"Pock doesn't drink green tea or whatever. Do they have bael fruit juice? Order that for her instead. "

"Kiran, if you keep acting up, I'm really going to scold you,"

Phim warned me seriously this time, her tone sharper. I pouted in frustration but chose to stay quiet, sulking in silence.



When the food started arriving at the table, Phim turned her attention to me, scooping bits of food and piling them onto my plate as if I were a child.

"Kiran, come on eat. Stop sulking."

Pock raised her eyebrows, glancing at me as I quietly poked at the food on my plate with my chopsticks, clearly brooding. Without saying a word, she picked up the lone tempura shrimp from her soba bowl and carefully placed it onto my plate.

'Kiran, take it. Isn't it your favorite?"

I scratched my head, confused by her strange behavior. This was Pock, my friend who had spent our entire lives snatching food off my plate like a starving hyena. And now she was willingly giving me her prized tempura shrimp?

Was the world about to end?

"Aren't you going to cat it? It's your favorite too."

Pock shook her head so hard the tassels on her hairpin nearly smacked Tan in the face. Avoiding my gaze, she answered softly.

"Just take it. I'm on a diet."

After saying that, she buried her face in her bowl of soba, slurping it down so loudly it echoed throughout the restaurant. Her ravenous eating completely contradicted her claim about dieting, but it made me smile nonetheless. At least she gave me the shrimp instead of offering it to Tan.

But my smile didn't last long. It vanished the moment I saw Tan sliding his bowl of beefrice over to Pock. She used her chopsticks to pluck out a large piece of beef and ate it with such delight that it made her entire face light up.

"Awww, Tan, you're so kind. Truly the master of my heart."

Pock cooed, dripping with exaggerated affection.

What is this?

All these years, Pock had only ever had me!

I was the only one who had ever given her food all this time. And now, what on earth was happening in front ofme?

This short-legged guy was replacing me in every way!

"Tell me, what can I do to cheer you up, Kee? Come on, tell me."

Phim's sweet voice snapped me out of my intense glare at the round-eyed, short-legged guy who was frantically taking photos ofPock in the same pose over and over, one, two, three, snap! All with the thousands of red torii gates at Fushimi Inari Shrine as the backdrop.

I turned to look at Phim with a look of guilty.

"Sorry, Phim. I ended up ruining the fun for everyone."

The small woman looked up at me, half pouting, but then she wrapped her arms around mine and rested her head on my shoulder, her usual affectionate gesture.

"It's not like I'm completely not having fun. It's just... at first, I had such high hopes."

"To be honest, I wanted this to be a honeymoon trip with just you and me. But even with Pock and Tan tagging along, it's okay." "Phim..

"But you're supposed to focus on me aren't you?"

My heart sank at her softly spoken words of complaint. She was right, I had been so caught up being annoyed with Pock that I hadn't paid her the attention she deserved.

"I'm sorry, Phim. Would it be too late if our honeymoon started tonight instead?"

This time, Phim stopped walking and looked up at me with curious eyes.

"'What do you mean?"

"Well... let's start our honeymoon tonight, keep it going all night without sleeping, and maybe end it late tomorrow morning. How does that sound?"

"You're crazy, Kiran."

The small fist landed on my upper arm just as I expected it would, but when the opportunity presented itself, there was no way I was letting it slip through my fingers.

"lfyou want to make me feel better, will you do something for me?"

I reached out and wrapped my arm around her slender waist, pulling her closer. Then, I leaned down and whispered softly, our faces so close that we could almost hear each other's breaths.

"Justfor tonight, before bed, Phim, don wear anything underneath your yukata. Just the yukata is enough. '

"Not even a single piece, okay? Deal? "

With just those words, her cheeks flushed instantly. Phim bit her lower lip teasingly, while her small hands clawed at my stomach with enough force to send a tingling sensation, like I was falling from a great height.

"Phiiiiimmm... Phim! Come take some pictures! You're wearing such a pretty kimono today, though not as pretty as mine!"

Pock's loud voice interrupted us, shouting and waving from a short distance away. The distraction gave Phim the perfect chance to escape. She quickly started to walk away, but before she could get far, I grabbed her slender hand.

"Deal, right?"

I asked, almost pleading, as I looked at her with soft, hopeful eyes.

Phim didn't reply. Instead, she gave me a playful smile before gently pulling her hand away from mine. Her light brown eyes sparkled, a mix Of sweetness and mischief that made my heart skip a beat and my thoughts spiral into faraway places.

Places like our bedroom tonight.

"Hey, Kiran,"

Pock called out, breaking my trance, "Do you have allergies or something?" Out of nowhere, Pock's voice broke in from beside me, making me turn to frown at yet another one of its random, baseless questions.

"Why?"

saw you breaking out."

"You mean breaking out in a rash?"

"Nope, I meant the ground breaking out! Look at you, your eyes were practically following your little wife everywhere! Ifl hadn't called Phim over to take a picture earlier, you two might've ended up doing something inappropriate right in the middle ofthe shrine. No respect for holy places, my lord?"

I let out a frustrated sigh at Pock, who had once again grossly exaggerated the truth. My heart is pure and virtuous didn't deserve such accusations.

"Not everyone can be as perfect and proper as Master Tan, the beloved guardian angel of your heart, huh?"

Hearing my sarcastic words, Pock suddenly acted all shy, twisting and swaying in a way that was overly dramatic. It took all my self-control not to kick this overly dramatic friend ofmine, especially in a sacred place like this.

"You're too much. I was going to say this back at the restaurant."

"Say what?"

"You're way too obvious with your jealousy over me. Ifyou keep it up, you're going to make Phim upset."

"1 mean, sure, you're her real wife, but can't I just have one real boyfriend too? It's not easy being in this situation, you know."

Pock pretended to cry, using the sleeve of its kimono to wipe at its completely dry eyes like someone in a sad movie. Watching that fake act, I wanted to help but instead of using my hands, I wanted to stomp with my feet.

"Kiran, come take a picture with me!"

Lucky for Pock, Phim's happy voice stopped me before I could act on my revenge. I turned and saw her standing nearby, smiling brightly and bouncing on her toes like a little girl calling her parent.

I kept a calm face, walking toward her and Tan slowly, frying to stay cool. But as soon as I got close, Phim rushed over to me, grabbing my arm with a big, happy smile.

"Come on, Tan, take a picture of us!"

She said, waving Tan over to take the photo.

For just a second, I saw Tan's face change, his eyes looking sad. It was only for a moment, but it was enough for me to feel the pain he was trying so hard to hide.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't fully hide it.

"Closer! Yes like that Phim! Now lean in! Kiran, your nose is touching Phim's cheek! Yes...!"

Pock's loud voice filled with excitement sounded more like someone cheering for a Muay Thai match than directing a photo shoot.

The uproar made Tan's once-shadowed eyes, sparkle again in no time. At that moment, I finally understood.

Only someone like Pock, with all their absurdity and humor, seemed capable of healing Tan's heartbroken soul.

"That's it, Phim! Lean in closer, eat Kiran's head ifyou have to! Perfect!

Just think of this as a free pre-wedding shoot. Beautiful! Keep going, just like that!"

Clink, clink, clink!

Even after walking around Kyoto all day in her wooden sandals, Pock still hadn't gotten used to them. Her awkward steps with bent knees and loud stomping of her geta sounded like thump, thump, clunk!

The steep slopes of Kyoto show no mercy, and Pock finally broke into complaints, making everyone stop to wait for her.

"Kiran, my legs hurt,"

Pock whined, bending down and clutching her knees while panting heavily.

Seeing Pock 's pitiful state, I couldn 't help but offer to help out of sympathy.

"Okay, how about this? I'll grab the belt of your kimono and lead you along like I'm walking a rabbit. Sound good?"

"0h, come on, Kiran! I'm a stunning beauty in this kimono, and you want to drag me around like I'm some bunny? YVhere's your sense, huh?"

Pock dismissed my offer without a shred of appreciation and turned to Tan, who was watching her with a mix of pity and amusement.

"0hhh, my feet hurt so bad... my knees, too! Tan, darling, help your wife

Tan, clearly not used to being called Pock's husband, widened his eyes in shock. He quickly began stammering an explanation to both Phim and me, insisting that nothing had happened between him and Pock to make them a couple.

"Oh, come on, Tan. You've got food in your mouth and a soft bed waiting, what more could you want? Besides, remember that night you got drunk playing drinking games with Kiran? You jumped on my back! "

"On your back? Pock! Please finish your sentences properly!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. But the point is, your back and mine have already touched, Tan. That's a lot of skin-to-skin contact if you ask me. You've gotta take responsibility! I've already called my grandma and told her I've got a husband now!"

At this point, Tan straightened his back with an expression caught between embarrassment and resignation. His nose flared, his eyes widened, and his cheeks turned beet red.

Not knowing what else to do, he raised his hands in surrender and gave an apologetic smile to the loud, dramatic woman towering over him.

"Here's an idea. I'll wear Pock's geta instead, and Pock can wear my shoes. flow's that?"

Pock glanced down at Tan's old, scuffed brown leather boots, the kind that looked more like they belonged to a rugged adventurer than someone walking through Kyoto in a kimono.

Her face contorted into exaggerated dismay, her acting once again worthy of a full production on the Ratchadalai stage.

'Combat boots with a kimono? Tan, are you even thinking straight? Or are you just so jealous of my beauty that you're trying to ruin my delicate elegance with these barbaric shoes?"

Tan closed his eyes and furrowed his brows, clearly at a loss for how to respond. It seemed like he'd finally resigned himself to the fact that reasoning with Pock was a lost cause.

"Alright then, how about this? I'll carry you to the hotel instead. It's not that far now. "

"Awww, Tan, you just can't resist me, huh? You're dying for me to feel your back again, aren't you?"

Tan let out a long, weary sigh, rubbing his temples as if on the verge of passing out. But even then, he took a deep breath, crouched down, and dutifully offered his back for Pock to climb on.

Pock pretended to act shy for all offive milliseconds before leaping onto Tan's back so fast that the loud thud echoed through the quiet street.

Once she was settled, Pock clapped her large hands on Tan's sides, urging him forward like a jockey commanding a horse. Any sign ofher earlier knee pain had miraculously vanished, and she now rode comfortably while poor Tan, bearing her full weight, visibly struggled with trembling legs at every step.

By the time we finally arrived at our ryokan-style inn, I was the one nearly collapsing in exhaustion, not from physical strain, but from dealing with the chaos that followed Tan's so- called "surprise."

Ilis plan turned into a disaster for Phim and me, the honeymooners, when the receptionist informed us:

"Sorry, sir. The rooms are fully booked."

As if that wasn't bad enough, after we scoured the area for an available room for Tan, every nearby inn gave us the same answer: fully booked. This left us with no choice but to come up with a solution together. At the moment, we only had two rooms: one for Phim and me, and one for Pock, who had been enjoying her privacy.

The first to suggest a solution, unsurprisingly, was Pock herself.

### "Tan can share my room. I don't mind at all."

"Great idea! I'm all for it,"

I chimed in, immediately seeing the practicality ofher suggestion.

But before I could even finish speaking, Phim was already pinching and slapping me in a frenzy. The petite woman hissed in a mix ofwhispering and growling, all while her hands mercilessly pinched my arm.

"Kiran! Pock's still a girl, you know! How could you suggest she share a room with a man?!"

"How can you say you care so much about your friend, but you give in so easily now?"

I let out a long, awkward sigh. It's not that I don't care about my friend, but when I imagine Phim in nothing but a yukata in this traditional Japanese room...

I have no choice but to let fate take its course.

"Alright, here's the solution, Pock, you stay in our room with Kiran and me.

Tan can stay in Pock's room. Problem solved!"

As soon as Vice-President Phim's decree was issued, Pock and I let out a synchronized heavy sigh, as if it had been pre-planned.

Meanwhile, Tan looked so relieved, like he'd narrowly escaped a death sentence. Without wasting any time, he grabbed his things and bolted to the room as fast as his legs could carry him, afraid the decision might suddenly be reversed.

That's it! It's all ruined!

The honeymoon marathon I had dreamed of, from nightfall until sunrise, was now completely wrecked because of that short-legged guy who had already waddled Off into the distance.

But fine, this time I'll sacrifice for Pock's innocence, even if it means letting her stay in what was supposed to be our honeymoon suite.

Phim led the way to the room, walking enthusiastically, while Pock and I shuffled along behind her, dragging our feet as if all hope had been lost.

When we reached the traditional Japanese room, with its futons laid out on tatami mats, any hope I had of sneaking some late-night cuddling with Phim completely vanished.

If Pock was already eavesdropping from another room during our romantic moments, what would she do now, with us sleeping in the same room?

If I couldn't resist and my hands wandered in the middle ofthe night, Pock would probably wake up, squat down, and watch the whole thing like it was a live performance.

"Kiran, you know, I could sleep in the closet ifyou want. I've dreamed of listening to Phim's improvised love songs up close for a long time,"

Pock teased.

Turning toward her voice, I was greeted by Pock's mischievous smirk and narrowed eyes. Without a second thought, I grabbed her by the neck and dragged her out to the back balcony, afraid Phim might overhear us.

"Pock, stop teasing Phim like that! She was kind enough to let you stay in here. "

"Kind, my foot! That little wife of yours is ruining my chances!"

Pock snorted, shoulders shaking with laughter, before tilting her head back at a perfect 45- degree angle to gaze dramatically at the night sky. Then, out Of nowhere, she started humming a slightly modified version Of Konthi Mee Phua (Those Who Want a Husband) by Bowkylion.

"A girljust wants a mannnn... why can you understand? My heart's hurting so bad, so badddd-.. A girljust wants a mannnn, why block my way? You 'Il never understand, you 'Il never understandddd!"

Pock's frustration about not getting her way and rushing into having a husband tonight carried over to dinner. The hotel had prepared a Japanesestyle set meal in a private dining room, but Pock's mood was clearly sour, judging by the sharp tone of voice used when questioning Tan, who was seated next to her.

"Why does Tan get a bigger piece of fish than me?"

"Uh... no, Pock, I think you're imagining things. They look the same size to me."

"Not true! Hey, Kiran, do you have a ruler? Let me measure it!"

"Pock, come on. Who carries a ruler around? Don't bother Kiran like that,"

Phim said, trying to mediate.

I sighed heavily, dragged into the conversation for no reason, but still reached into the pocket of my jacket and pulled out a 15cm steel ruler. I handed it to Pock reluctantly.

"What?! You actually carry one?!"

Tan's round eyes widened in shock as Pock eagerly grabbed the ruler from me. Truth be told, I had worn this jacket to work earlier, and the ruler was just something I always kept handy for tasks.

"See? I knew it! Tan's piece is 10 centimeters, and mine's only 9.7 centimeters. Good thing I didn't fall for Tan's tricks!"

Tan's jaw dropped, seemingly at a loss for words. He just sat there helplessly as Pock switched their plates without asking for permission. And Pock didn't stop there.

She went on to use my ruler to measure every dish, carefully comparing the portions on her plate with Tan's, just to ensure she had slightly more food

on every plate

"Tan, you have to understand. Look how small these portions are, they're like offerings for a spirit shrine. I can't get full on this. Earlier at lunch, Kiran even stole my shrimp. I've been starving since then!"

"Pock, you can take my food if you're still hungry. I don't mind."

Pock turned to Tan with eyes brimming with gratitude, then snatched the fish from his plate cautiously, as if afraid he might change his mind. She immediately began eating, clearly satisfied.

Tan, meanwhile, watched Pock with a look of fondness and warmth, like a pet owner admiring a puppy joyfully devouring its meal. That look reassured me, at least a little, that Tan truly cared for Pock and wasn't just pretending to date her because he was still nursing a broken heart over Phim.

Once the chaotic dinner finally ended, it was time to bathe and get ready for bed. This used to be the time of day I looked forward to the most, but now, sharing the room with both Phim and Pock, the air felt thick with tension.

That tension only grew when Phim, the last to finish her bath, stepped out of the bathroom. She wore a light-colored yukata, the fabric thin and loosely tied, far from what anyone would call modest.

My throat tightened as I swallowed hard, my gaze helplessly drawn to the beads of water glistening on her skin. My mind dnfted far away, imagining things I knew I shouldn't, but I couldn't help myself.

The most dangerous part was the way Phim looked at me, her eyes sparkling brightly like stars. She smiled, and little dimples appeared on her cheeks as she stood on her tiptoes and leaned in to whisper softly into my

"I kept my promise," she said.

"Under this... "

She continued, her voice teasing, "1'm not wearing anything at all."

"Not even one piece... "

Gasp!

After finishing her words, Phim smiled and walked over to lie down on the futon near the wall. I could only stare after her, wide-eyed, and scream silently inside my head. It didn't take long betöre I found myselfunder her spell, lying down next to her.

Just as I was about to relax, Pock's voice interrupted.

"Alright! Time for bed, kids. One night without any late-night 'activities' won't hurt, right, Phim?"

That made Phim's face turn bright red. She stammered softly, too embarrassed to fight back.

"Pock, you're saying such weird things... I'll just go to sleep now."

With that, she quickly turned her back to us and faced the wall, clearly flustered. Pock laughed so hard her shoulders shook, then turned Off the lights and lay down on the futon beside me, as if she knew exactly where to go.

I turned to face Phim's back, silently repeating calming thoughts to myself, trying to control my emotions. After a while, Pock's snoring filled the room, indicating she was fast asleep. That's when mischievous ideas began to creep into my mind like mushrooms popping up in a damp forest.

Pock's asleep... maybe I can just hold Phim?

Before I could properly plan anything, Phim suddenly turned around to face me without any warning.

Her soft brown eyes, filled with a teasing sparkle, locked onto mine. This time, they were more powerful than ever. My heart raced so hard it felt like it might jump out of my chest.

Things only got worse when she slowly shifted her leg higher and higher, revealing her glowing, pale thighs in the darkness.

She gave me a sweet smile before closing her eyes slowly. Her breathing became steady, signaling that she had fallen asleep, leaving me frozen in place. My hand, almost by instinct, reached out to scratch the tatami mat outside my futon, making a thint scratching sound.

Phim stirred slightly, probably annoyed by the noise, and adjusted herself, causing the collar of her yukata to fall open even wider, exposing more than before.

At that moment, I rolled onto my back and pinched my own leg hard, trying to suppress the overwhelming emotions that I couldn't express in any other way.

Strangely... I didn't feel any pain.



Concerned that something might be wrong, I pinched myself even harder, worried I might have become numb or paralyzed.

### "Kiran, are you okay?"

Pock's raspy voice suddenly broke the silence from the futon beside me. Though confused about why she was asking, I shook my head to say I was fine.

"Of course, you're not hurt,"

Pock said, her voice filled with irritation.

"Because you 're not pinching yourselJ! "

"You're pinching my leg, you idiot! It hurts so much!"

Chapter 52: Master and Servant

Apr, 22nd 2016 ABCD Company Bangkok

Manager Meeting

The meeting room, which I knew so well, now felt strange in some way. It had been arranged for the Manager Meeting, a meeting that only happened once a month. Of course, everyone who joined the meeting had to be a manager or higher.

It felt strange that I, just a department head, had to sit among all these managers. Most of them were at least in their late thirties, looking serious and experienced.

I silently blamed Phi Olan for pulling me into this meeting early in the morning without saying much except,

"Just get in, Kiran. Don't make a big deal out of it."

08:55 AM

There were only 5 minutes left before the meeting was supposed to start, but the president's seat was still empty. This was unusual for President Poj, who was always very punctual and usually arrived early.

Since the president was nowhere to be seen, the participants in the room started exchanging uneasy glances. Finally, as the last minute ticked by, the sound ofhigh heels clicking steadily against the floor echoed from the back of the meeting room.

Even before turning to look, my heart began pounding in sync with the footsteps. My mind raced to picture the owner of those heels, who could only be...

"Sorry for being late. Today, the president has assigned me to attend this meeting as his representative."

I couldn't help but smile to myselfwhen I saw that the footsteps indeed belonged to Phimmanas.

Today, the vice president appeared with the elegance and authority of a true queen. Her reddish-brown hair, which she usually left flowing, was tied back to show off her graceful neck that I had always admired. Her sweet yet striking face was accentuated by bold makeup that gave her an air of confidence and power.

Everyone in the meeting room stood up and bowed to the vice president with great respect. Naturally, I was among them.

I, the so-called wife, and not just any wife, but a wife who was now bowing his head respectfully to her wife, had no choice but to do so.

"We can start the meeting now."

As the firm, commanding voice of the vice president rang out, full of authority, everyone in the room bowed once more before sitting down to begin the meeting.

I noticed the vice president glance my way for a briefmoment, but when our eyes met, she quickly looked elsewhere, though she couldn't hide the small, adorable smile that crept onto her face.

"The first topic for today is to congratulate those who have been promoted in this new fiscal year."

Phi Olan spoke in a clear, confident tone, as was typical ofhis style. As soon as he finished her sentence, I had a vague idea why I had been dragged into this meeting without warning.

Since I had no prior knowledge of this, my body reacted strongly. My heart pounded out of rhythm, and my hands trembled so much that I had to clasp them tightly together. I lowered my head and swallowed hard when Phi Olan suddenly called out my name in the middle of the room.

"Congratulations to our new Production Engineering Manager, Kiran Pipityapongsa.

Just as I suspected.

As soon as Phi Olan's announcement ended, I stood up quickly, bowing politely with a small smile on my face. Inside, however, I was a whirlwind of emotions. My vision blurred slightly when I looked toward the vice president and saw her beaming with joy, making no effort to hide her feelings.

My ears rang, and the sound of applause in the room seemed distant, as if it was coming from far away.

More than that, I had to stand there quietly while Phi Olan spent time praising my achievements, listing all the good qualities she could think of.

'Kiran is the youngest Production Engineering Manager this company has ever had, but that doesn't mean her work is any less significant. "

"0ver the past four years, Kiran has been a key driver in creating new production lines and improving existing ones to increase efficiency while lowering costs. This has been crucial to our company's profits."

"And most recently, her project to study the production line for our new product at the Osaka factory was another major step forward, showing her potential to grow even further. This is why she has been promoted this fiscal year.

let her say a few words now. Please go ahead, Kiran. "

After listening to Phi Olan's long, formal speech that almost put me to sleep, she suddenly passed the mic to me. I hadn't prepared any speech for such an important moment. Feeling a bit lost, I glanced around the room and flashed a sweet smile to buy time to think ofthe right words.

But when no elegant words came to mind, I took a deep breath and decided to say something simple and heartfelt instead.

### "Thank you."

As soon as those two short words left my mouth, the room went quiet for a moment, and everyone looked a bit confused. It wasn't until P'Champ clapped first that the others followed. Slowly but surely, the applause grew louder until it filled the room.

I stood with a sweet smile, waiting for everyone to finish clapping before slowly sitting down, feeling strangely drained.

Even though I hadn't done anything at all.

"Kiran, oh Kiran! I spent so long settlng you up, and all you said was one short line?"

Phi Olan, sitting next to me, still whispered complaints under his breath. Oh, come on. Just because I'm his close junior doesn't mean I'm good at giving speeches like he is.

The meeting continued, moving through topics like sales updates and company performance, all things the management needed to know. Finally, we reached the last agenda: announcing the welcome party for the new vice president. It was set to take place this evening at a fancy restaurant near the office.

The last part of the meeting was the closing remarks from Vice President Phimmanas. She seemed to be in an especially good mood as she smiled and spoke in her clear, sweet voice.

"Thank you for all the topics presented today. And congratulations to the company's new department manager. "

It would've been better if, at the end of her sentence, she hadn't glanced at me with such a meaningful and sweet smile.

"Let's stay like this for a long time, Kiran."

I blinked in confusion, unsure whether her words were meant as a congratulation or a marriage proposal.

Luckily, Phi Olan must have sensed something, so he quickly stepped in to thank the vice president and smoothly closed the meeting.

In the end, it seems both Phim and I need to practice giving speeches.

After the meeting, everyone hurriedly left the room. Unlike them, I moved slowly, hesitating, as my eyes kept glancing toward the small figure. I hoped I could get a moment to talk to her.

Since returning from Japan last week, we hadn't had much time together. Phim had been busy settling her move from England back to Thailand, and I had been tied up with ongoing projects, barely seeing daylight.

Now, seeing her face again, a surge of emotions hit me so hard I could barely contain it.

I missed her.

I missed her so much.

So much that I wanted to run to her instead of awkwardly hesitating like this.

At least moving slowly paid off. Just as I was about to leave the room, one of the last to go, I heard a familiar sweet voice softly call from behind.

'Congratulations again, Phim's my clever one.

I turned to find her warm, genuine smile lighting up her face. She reached out, lightly tugging at my sleeve in a playful, unconscious gesture. When I glanced down at her hand, she quickly pulled it back, tucking it behind her with a shy look.

"Thank you. By the way..."

"Don't forget to reward your clever one... tonight, maybe?"

When I said this, her shy, adorable face seemed to blend with the graceful and composed face of Vice President Phimmanas. She quickly coughed lightly, covering her mouth to regain her composure.

"Let's talk about this later, Kiran."

She quickly stepped aside, avoiding my gaze, and left the room in a rush. I couldn't help but watch her until she disappeared, not realizing someone else had been watching us from behind for a while.



I spun around at the sound ofmy name and saw Phi Olan standing there, frowning deeply. My boss rubbed his rough chin thoughtfully, as if he was lost in some serious contemplation.

"1 think you need to be more careful about this. These kinds of things are delicate matters. Not all coworkers will easily understand."

Phi Olan's warning, both blunt and indirect, made me lower my head, realizing in that moment.

The love between Phim and me, in this boss-employee dynamic, was not going to be easy at all.

"0kay, Phi Olan. I'll be more careful."

He nodded, then slung his arm over my shoulder like he always did whenever I felt disheartened by work full of challenges. His large, firm hand patted my upper arm as he said in a deep, steady voice,

"Hey, 1 know you're good, Kiran. You'll handle this, no problem."

I finally managed a weak smile as he walked me back to my department, where everyone was waiting to congratulate me on my new position with warmth and camaraderie, just like they always did.

I silently thanked my boss, my coworkers, and my juniors, reminding myself to do my best to steer everything in the right direction.

Because I loved everything about this company. But most of all, I loved the Vice President.

The welcome party for the new Vlce President was held in a vintage-style restaurant. The setting was chic and casual, with no formal ceremonies. The food was served cocktail-style, so the guests moved around, holding champagne glasses and mingling freely.

"Congratulations, Phi Kiran! You're so amazing!"

Kor-Ya, the cheerful intern from the accounting department, walked straight toward me. I was standing at the sushi and foie gras station in a hidden corner Of the venue with Tob, unwilling to leave our post.

Tob was rudely staring at the young woman, so I had to nudge his belly as a warning before turning to smile politely at her.

"Thank you,"

"You're amazing and so cute! Do you have a boyfriend, Phi?"

It was such a simple question, yet all I could do was offer an awkward smile, unsure how to explain to the person in front of me. I might've stood frozen like that for a long time if a sharp- eyed figure hadn't walked directly into the group.

Vice President Phim, dressed in a short white dress, moved gracefully like a lion stalking its prey. She stopped in front ofus, her sharp eyes scanning Kor-Ya up and down with an unreadable expression. Then, with an icy smile, she spoke in a cool voice,

"Excuse me, What's your name, and which department do you work in?"

Thud! Thud! Thud!

The soft clinking of a fork against my plate betrayed how much my hands were shaking. Tob even reached out to grab my trembling hand to stop it.

"Hey, Phi Kiran, are you okay? Why are your hands shaking?"

Tob's exclamation caught Phim's attention, and her sharp brown eyes briefly Shot toward me before she turned back to the unsuspecting intern.

"Well? Did you hear my question? Why aren't you answering?"

Kor-Ya, clearly unaware of what she had done wrong, glanced at the floor nervously before stammering out her reply.

"M-my name is Kor-Ya. I'm an intern in the accounting department,

"Alright then... Consider us introduced."

It wasn't exactly being dismissed, but it felt like it. The Vice President clearly had no intention of continuing the conversation. Kor-Ya quickly bowed her head, raised her hands in a polite gesture, and walked away.

Tob volunteered to follow her like an uninvited escort.

Tot)! Oh, Tob!

My life is on the line, and you're not here to help.

At this point, the Vice President turned to face me directly, her killer smile still lingering on her face. Her sharp voice rang out as I bit my lip tightly and slowly placed the plate down on the table with trembling hands.

"Kor-Ya. Such a tasty name, don't you think?"

"0h, Phim... I'm not a rabbit, okay? I don't eat grass."

Phim crossed her arms and stepped closer to me, making me instinctively step back. Her sweet face was now completely void of a smile.

u better mean that.

I swallowed hard and gave her a weak, awkward smile, unsure ofwhat else to do. Her small face scrunched up in a frown, and her sharp eyes glared at me fiercely, no longer caring about maintaining her image as the Vice President.

Until...

"You two seem very open, don't you, Phim?"

Both Phim and I snapped our heads toward the familiar voice. It belonged to a tall man with sharp features, a faint smirk always lingering at the corner ofhis lips.

He walked up to stand between us, uninvited, creating a perfect triangle among the three of us.

### "Phi Pun."

Phim growled, her elegant brows furrowing as her eyes hardened with irritation. Yet, the man didn't show the slightest sign of fear or respect. Instead, he responded with a faint, mocking smile, his cold eyes meeting hers without backing down.

"Who invited you to this event?"

"Why so hostile, Phim? This is a welcome party for the new Vice President. flow could her fiancé not show up?"

Phi Pun's last comment was accompanied by a smug glance m my direction, his expression full of superiority. I lifted my chin, meeting his gaze head-on while clenching my fists to keep my boiling anger under control.

"And what is this? Just a lowly department head standing so close, having a private conversation with the Vice President?"

Phi Pun's cutting remark made Phim glare at him with fury before spitting out her words in a low, trembling voice through gritted teeth.

"Phi Pun, if you're going to talk like this, just leave. Leave now, or don't blame me for not showing you any respect."

The man let out a mocking laugh and shrugged in an infuriatingly casual way. Raising his hands to shoulder height in a fake gesture of apology, he turned his attention fully to me.

"0kay, okay, my bad. I should say manager now, right? Congratulations, Manager Kiran. "

His last words were spoken with raised eyebrows and a mocking smirk, fueling the fire in my veins.

"What do you want?"

That was all I could manage to say. This was still a formal event, and even though the spot where the three of us were standing was somewhat out of sight, I couldn't afford to cause a scene. No matter how angry I felt, I had to control myself, for Phim's sake.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. I just wanted to congratulate you. Only a few years on the job, and you're already a manager. Impressive."

"Usually, people who rise in their careers this quickly... what do they call it? Using connections, right? But not you. You climbed up the ladder for real."

Smack!

Before my brain could think or filter what was happening, my hand slapped across his face with filll force, making his head snap to the side.

Phim quickly stepped in, grabbing my arm and holding it close, rubbing up and down to calm me.

Phi Pun froze for a moment, then touched the corner of his mouth where the slap had landed. He turned back to me, his eyes filled with rage as if he wanted to kill me.

"You can say whatever rude, nasty things you want....But don't insult

My anger was like a huge storm, and once it started, it wouldn't calm down easily. My hands clenched so tightly that my nails dug into my palms, leaving marks. Phim grabbed my hand, holding it tightly, whispering to calm me down.

"You're bold to do that! What gives you the right?"

The man glared at me, his face furious, his voice booming loudly without any attempt to control it.

"The right you'll never have in your whole life."

"The right of being someone Phim loves. Can you ever earn that?"

As I said those words, I thought I saw tears welling up in his light brown eyes. But he held them back, not letting them fall and make him look more pitiful than he already did.

'ISO, this is how you want it? Fine."

"Then I guess it's time for me to claim the right ofbeing her fiancé. People like you who sneak around will finally face the truth."

Phi Pun smirked slightly, even though his eyes were still full of anger as he let out a low, sharp voice right in my face.

"Let's see if it comes to that, if someone like Mr. Poj would let his own reputation crumble by going back on his word! "

Chapter 53: The Impossible Agreement

The tall man stood nervously in front ofthe large, dark door that reached the ceiling. He had been there for some time. 

The man let out a slow breath and waved his hand to dismiss the female secretary waiting near the door. She looked a bit surprised but nodded and quickly walked away without a word.

Pun watched her leave until she disappeared from sight. Then, he turned his eyes to the silver nameplate on the door, engraved with the word "President," as if it were alive.

Notjust alive, but an enemy.

The man took a deep breath. His sharp face, which usually wore a soft smile, now looked tense. His pale hand reached for the doorknob but hesitated for a long moment. Finally, he pushed the door open.

The first thing Pun saw was a middle-aged man with a strong, commanding presence. He was sitting on a dark brown sofa directly across from the door.

Poj Tantiburanakorn looked up at Pun as ifhe had been expecting him. His dark eyes, full of power, stared straight into Pun's. The gaze was so intense that Pun had to look away.

The young man bowed deeply to show respect to the person he called Uncle Poj, then stood still for a long moment. Finally, a firm voice invited him to come and sit nearby.

"What brings you here, Pun? Is there something urgent?"

The word "urgent" was emphasized, sounding more like a reprimand. It made Pun shrink in shame. He knew that the reason he had come here today was far from urgent.

Pun had been taught by his father that the most important thing in life was work. Anything else was nonsense.

And he was sure Uncle Poj thought the same way. This made him feel even more ashamed for coming here to disturb his uncle's time with a reason like...

Love.

Even though it was true, more tme than anything else, that love was burning inside him, consuming his thoughts and emotions.

The effort ofthe past 7 years seemed meaningless now. Phim had put him in the worst position of all.

The position of being ignored.

Pun would rather have her angry or shouting at him than pretending he didn't exist.

How could it be that Phim had been back from her internship in Japan for two weeks, and yet he had only heard about her return from someone else a few days ago?

"What is it, Pun? I don't have much time for you, you know that, right?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"lfyou know that, don't waste time being lost in thought."

"Don't slouch or avoid eye contact. Stand up straight and speak to me like a man. Understood?"

The calm and emotionless words sent a chill through Pun's body.

Obediently, he straightened his back and looked up at his uncle, trying but failing to hide his fear.

"Yes, Uncle."

Poj nodded at the young man's words before changing his posture, from sitting with his hands clasped on his knees, looking serious, to leaning back on the sofa with his legs crossed, which made the atmosphere feel much more relaxed.

"Say what you want."

Pun didn't respond immediately, as ifhe was still hesitating. But when the older man nodded to prompt him for an answer, Pun gathered all his courage and finally spoke up.

"Recently, Uncle, have you heard the rumors going around in the company?"

Poj instinctively folded his arms, a cautious reaction to the question from the young man, whose age was similar to that of a son.

Pun was likely used to speaking with the cunning tone of a businessman, often setting traps for his opponents during conversations.

But it seemed Pun had forgotten he was speaking to someone far superior in every way. Poj simply raised an eyebrow, questioning him, before replying in a calm but firm tone.

"What rumors? Your roundabout way oftalking is wasting my time. Get straight to the point, Pun."

The light brown eyes that usually looked stubborn and arrogant avoided his gaze again. Pun mumbled several apologies, which only wasted more time.

Seeing Pun's hesitant and insecure manner, Poj couldn't help but compare him to Kiran's request for a one-on-one meeting seven years ago.

Back then, Kiran never looked away. And more importantly, every word Kiran spoke seemed carefully considered, without a single unnecessary comment.

In this aspect, Pun couldn't match Kiran at all.

"The rumor is that Kiran got promoted to manager of the engineering department so quickly because... uh... because of a close relationship with the Vice President that goes beyond a boss and an employee. Have you ever heard about this, Uncle?"

At that moment, President Poj tightened his crossed arms. His thick brows furrowed deeply, showing his clear disapproval ofwhat he had just heard. Pun shrank back again in fear.

"I 've never heard such a thing. Is there really a rumor like this going around?"

Poj narrowed his eyes at the young man in front of him, as iftrying to extract the truth. But Pun kept looking down at his own feet, as ifhe were afraid they might vanish.

"I don't know who you heard this rumor from, Pun. But ifyou get the chance, let the source of this gossip know something for me."

"What is it, Uncle?"

"Tell them that the decision to promote Kiran was mine alone. Phim was only informed about it, nothing more."

"Uncle..."

This time, it Was Pun who lifted his head, looking at the Older man with eyes full Of confusion. It seemed he could no longer control his voice, which now revealed the anger burning inside him.

"What's so special about Kiran, Uncle, that makes you trust her enough to give her such an important position so quickly?"

Poj had never seen Pun act this way before. His sharp eyes were now filled with anger, staring directly without looking away as he mentioned the forbidden name: Kiran.

"Pun... do you know what the last thing a good businessman should ever do

"Never underestimate your opponent. "

"Uncle..."

"1t's not that I don't know how you feel, but ifyou set aside your bias for a moment, you'll see. Someone with Kiran's skills and dedication to her work isn't easy to find. She's the ideal employee every company dreams of having."

A sarcastic smile appeared on Pun's lips. He nodded as ifhe understood, but inside, he was deeply opposed. It showed in his reply, which camc out heated and direct, forgetting all respect.

"Is that why you support Kiran in everything, Uncle? Even to the point of turning a blind eye and letting Phimm openly date her? All while I'm still her fiancé?"

Poj's expression turned serious. He clasped his hands on his knees, showing that he understood Pun's emotions were now too intense to be controlled.

"Pun, you're letting your emotions take over. What would you say if I asked you to calm down and talk like an adult?"

Pun glanced up with his red, tear-filled eyes, then quickly looked away and reluctantly nodded.

"Alright.

"When it comes to Phim dating Kiran, I admit I knew, and I didn't stop it."

Pun frowned deeply, his face tense with thought. He didn't look at Poj but remained quiet, waiting for him to continue, though inside, he was seething with rage.

"Call it turning a blind eye if you like, but to me, it was more about choosing Phim's happiness."

"The biggest mistake ofmy life was forcing Phim to break up with Kiran. The result wasn't worth it at all. It felt like I tore away the one source of happiness from her life. Watching her live like someone without a soul was the greatest regret of my life."

'ISO, Uncle, you chose to let them date, even though they're both women? What about what others will think? What about the company's reputation? Did you think of that?"

Pun's voice was full of anger as he let his words pour out like a flood, destroying everything in their path. The more agitated Pun became, the more Poj worked to stay calm.

"Ifthis were earlier in my life, I might have thought like you. But honestly, I don't see the point of caring about what others think if my daughter is crying herself to sleep every night.

And as for the company's reputation, I believe its success won't depend on something as small as this. It'll be measured by performance, not gossip."

"But Kiran is a woman, Uncle. She's a woman. What guarantees that a love like theirs will last?"

woman, a man, what difference does it make? NO love, no matter what kind, comes with a guarantee that it will last."

"But..."

"A man and a woman can get married and still end up divorced. Even if they have children tying them together, what's the point? In the end, if they can't stay together, they'll leave everything behind anyway."

Pun grew more restless as the conversation started to slip further from the direction he expected. The key player in this game, Uncle Poj, was clearly siding with the other side.

"So, are you saying, Uncle, that you can proudly announce to everyone that Kiran is your daughter-in-law?"

Poj crossed his arms and tilted his head slightly, as if in deep thought. "No, but I can proudly say that Kiran.„ is like another daughter to

"Because, honestly, that's how I feel. Kiran's personality and mindset are just like mine when I was younger."

Hearing this, Pun raised his head sharply and shut his eyes tightly. He rubbed his temples, visibly stressed, and let out a heavy sigh, no longer hiding his frustration. Yet, he refused to give up, searching for more reasons to argue.

"Even though Kiran's family background is so different from Phim's, like night and day? How can you be sure she isn't with Phim just to take advantage of her?"

The older man shook his head slowly and sighed as well. He looked at Pisith, who now seemed lost and cornered, with no way out.

"1 already told you, didn't I..."

"Don 't underestimate your opponent."

"What do you mean by that, Uncle?"

"The fact that you bring up Kiran's family background shows you haven 't done your homework about your rival at all."

"Her father is an architect, her mother is an interior designer, and her older brother runs a photography studio. By the looks ofit, her family is just middle-class. And the name Pipittayapong? I've never heard of it before, so they're clearly not some high-society family."

Poj laughed loudly, unbothered by Pun's furrowed brows and lack of amusement.

"The surname Pipittayapong might not ring a bell for you. But what about Siraprapakorn? Have you heard of that?"

Pun's eyes widened in shock. Of course, he had heard of Siraprapakorn, the name of one of the wealthiest families in the country, known for their success in real estate. They even owned the entire street where Poj's mansion was located.

"The owners ofNa Nea Street, Uncle?"

"Exactly! You really didn't know? Kiran's mother is the middle daughter of that family. And Kiran is the granddaughter of Aunt Kim Aeng Siraprapakorn, someone my father respected like a sister."

"1 didn't know that at all, Uncle."

"Kiran's father is a proud man. He chose to provide for his family using his own skills, living modestly but comfortably. The only thing they accepted from Aunt Kim Aeng was the piece of land in Na Nea Street where their wedding home was built. They considered it a wedding gift."

"I also heard that Kiran is Aunt Kim Aeng's favorite grandchild. Honestly, Kiran might end up with more wealth than Phim in the future. So, Pun, you don 't have to worry about her taking advantage of Phim. "

Pun let out a long sigh, no longer hiding his frustration. Every piece on his chessboard had been knocked over. If he wanted to turn the game around, there was only one option left.

He had to invoke the engagement.

"And what about my engagement to Phim, Uncle? Does it mean nothing at ally,

"0r will you choose to break the promise you made to my father on the day of the engagement?"

Pun looked up at the older man, his eyes hard and red, like someone with no way out. But for some reason, the dark eyes staring back at him looked empty, with no feeling at all.

To Pun, that was the scariest look of all.



"That promise is void.

Pun felt his heart drop to his feet. The warm blood that used to flow in his body felt like it was drained out, leaving only an empty shell. His mind went numb as he repeated the word back in a shaky, weak voice, barely loud enough to hear.

"Void.. "

Uncle Poj didn't look like he was joking at all, and that made Pun completely lose control. He stood up quickly without thinking, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath to calm himself. But even so, his voice was short and showed how upset he was.

"What do you mean, Uncle? How is the promise void? The promise to let me marry Phim, the promise you made on the day of the engagement. Have you forgotten it?"

"I haven 't forgotten. In fact, I remember every part of the agreement very well."

President Poj slowly stood up, his back straight and strong, looking much younger than his real age. He walked to the dark wooden desk in the middle of the room, opened the top drawer on the right, and pulled out a brown envelope, He untied the string and slammed it on the desk.

Several photos spilled out onto the table.

"0ne of the promises you made, Pun, the one you said yourself and that still echoes in my ears, do you remember it? Do you remember what you said?"

Pun stood silent, not answering the question. His face turned pale, and sweat started to appear on his forehead as he glanced at the photos scattered across the desk.

They were pictures ofhim....

With many different women, in all kinds ofposes.

"You said it yourself, with no one forcing you, that you would love and stay loyal to Phim for your whole life. And I believed those words. I treated them as a real promise, man to man."

Pun clenched his fists tightly, leaving red marks on his hands. He bit his lip so hard it almost bled as he realized, without a doubt, that he had lost completely.

"But your words were nothing but empty air, meaningless. By the second year, I kept hearing from people that you were cheating on Phim."

"1 gave you a chance. I hired someone to check on your behavior. But what I found out was even worse than the rumors."

Pun lowered his head to look at the floor. Finally, tears began to fall freely. He looked like a little boy, trying to hold back his sobs as he weakly spoke in defense.

"But I didn't love those women. I was just... lonely. Phim acted like I didn't exist. She never answered my calls, never replied to my emails, never waited to see me when I visited. Please, Uncle, believe me. I love Phim, and only Phim."

Poj shook his head, looking tired and disappointed. He sat back down in his leather chair, drained. Even though he was angry at the young man in front of him, he still felt some affection for someone he had seen grow up.

To him, Pun now looked like a child crying over a toy he couldn't have, overlapping with the image of the tall, grown man standing in front of him.

"Those words only make me even more disappointed in you, Pun. Lonely?

You are so weak compared to Kiran, that small woman. "

"I didn't just check on you, so don't feel singled out. I also had someone check on Kiran. I wanted to know how she lived during the seven years she couldn 't contact Phim."

"She is nothing like you. Kiran didn't have anyone. She didn't date anyone, not even one person, even though she wasn't engaged like you were."

"1 don't believe that..."

'That's your problem. As for mine, this is where it ends. I won't take action against you, and I am sure I don't owe you any promises anymore. I will return the engagement dowry right away if the engagement is canceled.

Pun turned sharply to look at Poj, his tear-filled eyes desperate, begging for mercy.

"Uncle, please. "

Poj 's sharp, dark eyes stared back at Pun for a long time before he finally spoke, his deep voice calm and steady.

"I don 't have the right to decide whether the engagement will end or not, Pun."

"Because that right belongs to Phim alone. '

Chapter 54: To do List

"Iluuu... huuu..."

I don't know why, but the crying sound ofthe little girl in front of me didn't make me feel annoyed like I usually do when I see kids crying for no reason.

But when it came to this girl in front of me, my feelings were completely different.

I felt tenderness towards her.

The little girl, with her fair pinkish skin, looked about 6 years old. She wore a fluffy pastel dress. Her wavy brown hair was tied in a ponytail with a white ribbon.

She stood there rubbing her eyes, crying softly without stopping. Her pink cheeks were now covered in tears. I smiled gently while patting her head softly.

"Phim, why are you crying? Tell Phi Pun?"

She slowly stopped wiping her tears and looked up at me with wide, teary eyes, as if she was searching for someone to rely on. Her big, light brown eyes were filled with tears, making her long eyelashes wet. I smiled at her as I looked down, waiting for her to speak through her sobs.

"Boo Boo... huhu... Boo boo is... dead.

Oh, so it was her old dog, Boo Boo, that caused her to cry like this. I knelt down in front Ofher, pulled her cllose, and gently patted her back to comfort her.

"1t's okay, Phim. I'll find a new Boo Boo for you, okay? Don't cry anymore."

Phim shook her head so hard, so that her tied-up hair swung and hit my cheek. She looked stubborn and immediately rejected my suggestion without hesitation.

"No. There's only one Boo Boo in this world... The others are not Boo Boo."

Oh no. Phim didn't seem like a kid who could be easily convinced. I reached out and brushed her wet hair off her cheek, tucking it behind her ear, while trying to think of some good words that a 15-year-old like me could say to make this little girl stop crying.

"Then how about this, Phi Pun will find a dog that looks just like Boo Boo, okay? And we can give it a new name. How about Biaw? Does that sound

It seemed to work. As soon as Phim heard the name "Biaw," she let out a small laugh like a normal little kid. Her tiny hand reached out to grab the edge of my sleeve, shaking it up and down with hope in her eyes.

"Phi Pun are you serious? Promise me, okay?"

I smiled wide, trying to make her feel better. The small teardrops on her cheeks were starting to dry up. Her big light brown eyes now sparkled with hope.

"1 promise."

And just like that, the little girl in front of me finally smiled brightly. Now that she was in a better mood, she held my hand and led me to sit at a marble table under a big tree in the backyard.

The cool breeze of early winter blew gently, making everything feel calm.

The little girl in front of me now looked happy. She sat there swinging her legs back and forth, looking completely different from the crying little girl I had just seen earlier.

"Phi Pun, you're so kind. Phim love Phi Pun so much."

She loves me that much?

It was strange, how the innocent words of a little girl made my heart flutter like it was a love confession from a beautiful woman. For a moment, everything around me felt like it had stopped. In my eyes, the only thing moving was the sparkle in Phim's big, round, light brown eyes.

"Phim, Do you really love Phi Pun?"

I couldn't stop myself from smiling as I asked her. The way she nodded, making her tied-up hair swing back and forth, made my heart race even faster.

"Yes, 1 do.'

'Then when you grow up... "

"Will you be my bride, Phim?"

I said it.

I said it without even hearing my own voice. How could I hear it when my heart was beating so loudly, like the sound of drums pounding in my chest?

Unlike me, the little girl in front of me blinked her eyes, as if she didn't understand the meaning Of the question, something that was probably too diffcult for her.

"Bride...

"'Yes, my bride."

"What does that mean?"

I waited for her answer, my heart almost stopping. When I heard Phim reply like that, I couldn't help but laugh out loud. I scolded myself for asking such a silly question.

"I don 't know what that means, but I can be that for you, Phi Pun."

My heart, which had slowed down to its normal rhythm, suddenly started to race again because of her simple, innocent words.

I turned to Phim with hope in my eyes, extending my pinky finger toward her small hand, hoping to make a promise.

"Really, Phim?"

"No, I'm not. "

The small, innocent face ofthe little girl I was hoping to see smile suddenly changed. It became the sharp, beautiful face of the woman I could never forget. The innocent sparkle in her eyes disappeared completely, replaced with a cold, piercing glare that felt like it was going to kill me.

Right here.

Right now.

"Phim will never be Phi Pun's bride."

"Phim...'

"Never."

Her sweet voice echoed in my head. I clutched my temples as everything in front of me began to twist and blur, melting like it was being burned by the sun. The last thing I heard was my own painful scream, as if my heart were being ripped apart.

Gasp!

I jolted awake, pulled out of the nightmare by the sharp pain.

I sat up straight, gasping for air, my heart beating as fast as it possibly could. I wiped my forehead and found it drenched with sweat. My face was soaked with the effort of the dream.

I took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, repeating the action until my heart returned to its normal rhythm.

But even then, I still didn't feel much better. A deep throbbing pain pounded at both sides of my temples, forcing me to hold my head in my hands, just as I had done in the dream. Yes... it was just a dream.

Just a nightmare.

The memories from the past, from when Phim and I were children, had played out vividly in the dream. It was so real that I could still feel it. Strangely, I wasn't relieved to wake up like I usually was after a nightmare.

Because now that I was fully awake, a cruel truth hit me straight in the heart. I moved my hands from my temples to my chest, clutching at the ache.

Could Phim's words really hurt me this much?

I swallowed hard and reached for my phone, carelessly thrown beside my pillow. I stared at the lock screen, which was a picture of Phim smiling sweetly at someone. Someone who wasn 't me.

It was a photo I had secretly taken from her Facebook.

I stared at the screen for a long time, my feelings too complicated to describe.

I pressed my lips together, trying to hold back my emotions, which were as fragile as glass about to shatter. I unlocked my phone and opened the last message Phim had sent me, reading it over and over again as if that could somehow change the words.

Phimmy:

Tomorrow, I'll come to see you at your house, Phi Pun. I hope you'll be there waiting for me."

Even though the message was short and contained only a few sentences, I kept reading it over and over, fully aware ofthe fate that awaited me after meeting the woman I had been engaged to for seven long years.

Seven years filled with suffocating pressure and emptiness...

I turned offmy phone screen and let out a long sigh, unsure of what else to do. The glowing green numbers on the rectangular digital clock by my bedside read 3:36.

It was far too early to be awake, but I couldn't close my eyes again, not even for a second. Restless, I got up from bed and began pacing the room like a trapped mouse in a cage.

After pacing for quite some time, I finally collapsed onto the plush sofa at the foot of my bed, drained of all energy. But what appeared before me only acted as a trigger, breaking down every bit of patience and self-control I had left.

On the wall across from the sofa hung a large framed photograph in an elegant dark wooden frame. Its presence tore apart my fragile heart. It was one of the very few photos I had with Phim.



The image showed me gently sliding an engagement ring onto the finger of a stunning woman in a soft gray Thai traditional dress.

Everything in the photo looked beautiful and perfect, as though it were a dream. But if there was one thing out ofplace, it would be the cold, empty gaze of the woman in the picture.

Strangely, a photo that used to make me smile.

Now only made me cry...

Before I even realized it, my cheeks were soaked with tears. I pressed my lips together tightly and wrapped my arms around myself, sobbing uncontrollably in a way I never had before.

I kept staring at the photo through the tears welling up in my eyes, making the image blur and distort...

Until it almost felt like it had never existed at all.

Knock, knock, knock.

I wasn't sure when I had fallen asleep, but I jolted awake at the sound of steady knocking on my door. It took me a moment to gather my senses and steady myselfbefore I could get up from the sofa and walk to the door. "Khun Pun, Khun Phim is here to see you,"

Aunt Pa, the elderly housekeeper who had raised me since I was a child, said nervously. Her voice was trembling, filled with unease.

Just from her tone, I could already imagine Phim's demeanor. It wasn't hard to guess why she came to see me.

It was exactly as I expected.

I swallowed hard and forced myself to answer the housekeeper standing in front of me, having no other choice.

"Yes, Aunt Pa. Please tell Phim to wait a moment. I'll come down shortly."

The elderly woman nodded but couldn't help glancing up at me with worryfilled eyes. I forced a faint smile, the same smile I had always used throughout my life.

A soft, practiced smile at the corner of my lips, a smile that sometimes served as a tool to approach others or leave an impression. At other times, it acted as a shield, hiding my troubled, weak, and defeated feelings from the world.

Rarely did I smile because I genuinely felt like smiling.

And Phim had always been the reason of those rare, happy smiles I could count on one hand.

The door closed behind me, but a wave of emotions surged over me relentlessly. I walked slowly to the bathroom and stopped in front of the large mirror, staring at my own reflection.

The pale, haggard face of a young man stared back at me with red, swollen eyes. My puffy eyelids and swollen upper lip were undeniable evidence Of how much I had been crying.

Seeing my own state so clearly, I bit my lip and clenched my fists until my arm muscles tensed. Then, yet again, tears fell uncontrollably as emotions flooded through me, anger, sadness, confusion, all at once.

And in the middle of all that chaos, one single question rose in my mind.

How does a prisoner feel, walking to their execution ground, ready to face their final sentence?

"Have you been waiting long, Phim?"

My question seemed to snap the beautiful woman in front of me out of her daze. I had been quietly observing her for a while. Phim sat under the same large rain tree in the backyard that had once been our favorite spot as children

The place where I had read her favorite stories countless times.

The place where she often brought her dog to play on weekends.

A place once filled with laughter.

And today, perhaps, a place destined to be filled with tears.

"Not long," she lied.

Ifwe counted the time from when Aunt Pa knocked on my door to now, nearly an hour and a half had passed. Yet, Phim showed no sign of annoyance. Her soft, light-brown eyes observed me closely, so much so that I lowered my gaze to avoid hers.

I moved my chair and sat opposite her, trying to mask my nervousness. Phim was the last person on earth I wanted to know I had been crying. "Is there something you needed to see me about, Phim?"

I asked out of courtesy, but my face turned away, avoiding her gaze like a coward who couldn't face reality. I bit my lip and swallowed hard, feeling a lump rise in my throat.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Phim rummage through her bag. My heartbeat grew erratic, harder to control, even though I had anticipated this moment.

But when her small hand placed a navy velvet box on the table in front of me, my heart sank to the floor, completely defenseless,

"1 want to return the ring to you, Phi Pun."

"1'm here to call off our engagement."

I raised my head and closed my eyes tightly, trying to keep my emotions in check. But I couldn't avoid the truth forever. Finally, I looked directly into her determined, light-brown eyes and spoke in a hoarse, trembling voice.

"Can I refuse? Both the ring and your decision?"

Once again, my defense mechanism kicked in. My words, coated with pride and hidden motives, came out as indirect and evasive as always.

Phim lifted her chin slightly, her once-soft gaze now sharp and cold. It was the same piercing look I had come to know in recent years, a look of authority, undoubtedly inherited from Uncle Poj. It made me straighten my back instinctively, feeling a pang of unease.

"Whether you accept it or not, I'll leave that to you."

"But as for me, I'm done. That's all I wanted you to know."

When her words, which felt like a death sentence to me, Were finally spoken, the heart that had already dropped to the floor seemed to be stomped on without mercy, until it began to break into pieces for real.

"Why, Phim? Why would you do this to me? Why do you hate me so—"

I couldn't finish my sentence. I bit my lip tightly, trying to hold back the sobs rising in my throat. Phim furrowed her beautiful brows, looking at me with an unreadable expression before speaking in a cold, quiet tone.

"Don't ask me that, Phi Pun. You should ask yourself ifyou've ever done anything to make me feel good about you. The answer is no. Not even once."

Her blunt words, unfiltered and relentless, pierced through me. I looked at her, begging for sympathy with my eyes, but it seemed to have no effect on her at all.

"Why are you clinging to this fake engagement, something you forced me into? It was just a formality, Phi Pun. It meant nothing to me. Not even a little. So why are you holding on to it?"

I couldn't take it anymore. If Phim was going to be brutally honest, why should I hold back my own feelings?

"1f you weren't okay with this engagement, why didn't you break it off from the start? Why let it drag on for seven years? Do you know what that did to me? It made me believe, even just a little, that maybe there was still some small thread connecting us, something that could grow into something better. You're the one who kept it going, not me."

Her cold gaze turned into one of anger and aggression. I had to look away, cursing myself for still finding ways to say things that hurt her, even now, as if I wanted to destroy any remaining good feelings she might still have for me.

'You're wrong, Phi Pun," she said sharply.

"How am I wrong?"

I asked, desperate.

"I didn't hold on to anything. I never did."

"1 just wanted to tie you down with false hope. I wanted to play with your feelings, just like you played with mine. You manipulated my father into pressuring me into this engagement. And then what? Even after I agreed, you went behind my back and dropped that stupid card into Kiran's mailbox. Do you even know how much I hated you after that?"

Her cutting words were like daggers. I felt as though I was about to collapse. I never imagined that being ignored by her all these years was deliberate, a result of her hatred for me.

So that's how it was.

But I'm still me, the same as always. Even when there seems to be no way out, I still try to fight for any chance I can get. Always.

"1 just love you, Phim. I don't want you to belong to anyone else but me. Is that so wrong?"

Phim turned to look at me with eyes filled with disgust. That look, it made my heart ache so much I had to place my hand on my chest to steady myself.

"Yes, it's wrong," she said coldly.

"It's wrong to force something that isn't there. I don't love you, Phi Pun. Not even a little. I never have."

"Phim, please don't say that to me,"

I begged.

I reached out to hold her small hand resting near the navy velvet box. But she slowly pulled it away, as if trying to spare my feelings even now.

"lfyou don't want me to say these things, then don't make me feel worse about you than I already do, Phi Pun. I still want to see you as the good big brother I once had. Please, don't do this anymore."

For a moment, her tone softened, but I, in my foolishness, wasted that brief opportunity.

"Just imagine, Phim. What if you hadn't met Kiran? What ifthere was no one else? Could you ever love me then?"

Her brows knitted together in frustration, and I immediately regretted asking such a stupid question.

"lmagine?" she echoed, her voice icy.

"Yes," I said weakly.

"1 don't like imagining things that are impossible, Phi Pun. "

"When Iwas old enough tofall in love, Kiran was already the one I loved. And Kiran is the only one I can ever love. I've tried, but besides Kiran, I can love anyone else. "

How do I feel right now? Like a prisoner being executed over and over agam.

I was being torn apart, emotionally destroyed, again and again, by my own doing.

"That's enough, Phim. I understand now."

This time, it was Phim who reached out to gently touch the back of my hand, as if trying to comfort me. I bit my lip hard and turned away from her.

Warm tears welled up in my eyes, and I fought desperately to keep them from falling in front of her.

still want you to be my kind, caring big brother, Phi Pun," she said softly.

I bit down even harder on my lip as I nodded silently, avoiding her gaze.

Her small hand, which had been gently stroking mine, now squeezed it firmly. That small gesture made my heart jolt violently because I knew, it was a sign of farewell.

"1 have to go now," she said.

"Take care of yourself, okay?"

Phim stood up just as my tears finally fell. I sat frozen for a while before slowly turning to watch her. The warm tears blurred my vision as I saw her small figure walk toward the sleek car waiting nearby.

I almost called out to her, almost screamed her name. But then I saw her run into the arms of the tall, slender figure who had stepped out to open the car door for her with such care and affection.

The one person in the world I both despised and envied,

Kiran.

The car drove away long ago, and my tears had dried, yet I still sat under the same tree, unmoving. The gentle breeze of early winter carried small pink petals from the tree down to the ground, covering the earth in a soft, colorful carpet.

It was all over.

The one love of my life, it was truly over.

Forever.

Chapter 55: Countermeasure

### sep 16th, 2016

ABCD Company

Bangkok

"With such a big problem, Kiran, how do you think we can fix it?"

The deep, sharp voice of the President, filled with worry, made me instinctively look up into his piercing dark eyes. I couldn't help but feel a sense of sympathy for him.

At the moment, Mr. Poj was resting his left hand on his chin while tapping his right index finger rhythmically, like someone deep in thought. To be honest, I had never seen him appear so uncertain before.

It would have been better ifthis serious issue that required me to be called in urgently this morning wasn't directly related to me. But unfortunately, it was.

Vlce President Phimmanas had been coming home late every night.

And what worse, she would pout and sulk at the President even time he asked where she had been.

After listening to the President's big problem a few minutes ago, my body couldn't help but react immediately. My mouth felt dry, and I could barely swallow. Tiny beads Of sweat appeared across my forehead, competing With each other to drip down.

The President even handed me his dark handkerchief out of pity. Feeling awkward, I hesitantly reached out to take it and dabbed my forehead gently, careful not to seem ungrateful.

"So, Kiran, what do you think? How can we solve this problem? Phim has been in a bad mood every day, and it's making the atmosphere at home unbearable. You must have an idea, right?"

"Yes, sir,"

I answered cautiously. I couldn't possibly admit the trut, that I knew all too well how bad Phimmanas's temper could get because I'd almost lost my life a few times because of it. That wouldn't be appropriate to say in front ofthe President.

"1'11 ask you directly, Kiran. The reason Phim comes home late every night is because she's spending time with you after work, isn't she?"

The President's straightforward question made my back straighten automatically. I pressed my lips tightly together and raised my chin slightly, ready to take responsibility. When I replied, my voice came out hoarse and soft.

"Yes, sir."

After answering, I could only stay silent and watch the senous expression on the President's face, which suddenly softened into a small smile at the corner of his mouth. It was something I didn't expect.

What's going on?

Why isn't he angry?

He should be angry!

"You know, I guessed as much. So, there's only one way to fix this, Kiran."

The President suddenly stopped tapping his finger, turned to face me directly, and smiled slyly, a look that didn't fade from his face.

"Stop letting Phim come home so late like this."

Hearing his bold declaration, my heart almost dropped to my stomach. But I tried to stay composed, meeting the President's gaze without looking away even once.

"But, sir—"

"That's enough. You don't need to say anything else."

"But you can solve the problem by taking Phim to live with you. That way, I won 't have to worry about her going back and forth every night."

Wait, what?

Is this even real?

I blinked in confusion, my brain processing this situation slower than a snail. But before I could say anything, the powerful and intimidating man in front Of me added another statement that made me grab the dark handkerchief again to wipe away the sweat caused by my sudden embarrassment.

"Just make sure you do it properly, Kiran. "

'Grandma... "

"What is it, my dear Kiran?"

"Are we really just going to Mr. Poj's house for dinner?"

We swept our eyes over to Khun Gaa, who arrived today in a full suit, standing among a crowd of people. Grandma had somehow gathered a large group, arranging them into two neat lines on either side of the wide front yard. It left us stunned and speechless.

"Why are there banana and sugarcane trees here, Grandma?"

Grandma Kim Aeng, dressed elegantly in a traditional sarong and a smokegray lace blouse that suited her age, turned sharply to follow our gaze.

Two middle-aged men with sun-darkened skin stood in the front line, each holding a banana tree and a sugarcane plant. They were smiling so widely that nearly all 32 teeth were visible.

"It's nothing,"

Grandma replied, brushing it off casually.

"Someone gave me a lot of bananas and sugarcane, so I thought I'd take some over to Poj's house as a gift."

I furrowed my brows in confusion, blinking rapidly at her answer, which seemed far from logical. Still, I couldn't stop myself from asking more questions, curious about what kind of explanations Grandma would come up with next.

Even someone who wasn 't the brightest would easily understand what was happening here.

'tAnd those golden trays with flower arrangements, and the red boxes with sweets, what are those for, Grandma?"

"Those are gifts too, my dear. We can't just eat at Poj's house for free, can

"Why don 't we just take a car, Grandma? Why are we walking? It's a whole street away. "

"1 want to get some exercise."

"Then why invite so many people? Why not just go as a family?"

"1 was feeling lonely."

"But why—"

"Gaogi!"

This time, Grandma didn't wait for me to finish my question. The elderly woman I loved most in the world cut me off sharply, her usual cold smile spreading across her fhce, her go-to move when she was cornered by my never-ending questions.

"Yes, Grandma?"

"lfyou keep asking, I'm going to smack your mouth."

Once Grandma said that, what could I do? I pouted, shrugged my shoulders, and let out a long sigh, not knowing what else to do.

After all, I was the one who brought Poj's big problem to her attention. As soon as Grandma Kim Aeng heard about it, she immediately volunteered to handle it with utmost seriousness. It started with arranging a lunch meeting between both families at the Tantiburanakorn residence today.

But how did it turn into traditional wedding parade?

Mong Mong Teng Mong Teng Mong Mong Teng Mong!

### "Ahhhhhh!"

I stood frozen, mouth agape, as a full brass band energetically joined the parade, playing with so much enthusiasm it was almost overwhelming. At the front of the procession, the people dancing weren 't just anyone, they were the notorious troublemakers of the neighborhood.

But the most eye-catching of all was

Pok Preecha-Chanaphai-Pan.

Today, Pok was fully dolled up, wearing bold makeup in true Pok-Paemern style. On top ofthat, she wore a shiny turquoise silk outfit that, at first glance, made them look like a giant beetle. Pok was dancing wildly, bending their knees so low it seemed like they might touch the ground.

She raised her eyebrows and puckered her lips, performing exaggerated moves as if mocking the heavens, completely unbothered while everyone else watched in shocked silence.

To make things worse, Pok wasn't alone. Beside Pok was a scruffy-looking man, energetically matching Pok's moves as if they had practiced this duet in a previous life. The man wore olive-green fisherman pants, a bright yellow collared shirt, and a face covered in stubble. Despite his energetic dancing, his expression was one of utter boredom, as if he hadn't relieved himselfin days.

Even P'Fai had joined in!

They danced to the rhythm of "Mong Teng Mong" for a while before deciding it wasn 't exciting enough. P'Fai leaned over to whisper something to the band leader, who soon switched to a new tune.

As the familiar intro of a country song began, P'Fai shrugged his shoulders as if possessed, then grabbed a megaphone and belted out the lyrics to what sounded like a breakup anthem:

"Looking out the neighbor's window„ Yesterday they had a weddingggggg. A rich banker stole my loverrrr!"

Pfft!

Some drunks holding bottles of Mekhong whiskey under their arms spat out their drinks and scattered in every direction after hearing the wildly inappropriate lyrics.

Meanwhile, Pok calmly danced toward P'Fai with an expressionless face.

"1Wy heart is breakinggg, oh my heart is breakingg!

As soon as Pok reached the man, they raised their hands in a formal wai to show respect, then used the same hand to slap P'Fai's head hard, making him smash his face against the megaphone with a loud thud! The brass band's trumpet let out a high-pitched wail before the music abruptly stopped.

"Wait, Pok! Why did you hit me?!"

P'Fai protested, rubbing his head in confüsion.

Pok shook her head as if completely fed up.

"You should be grateful I didn't use the megaphone to hit you harder, P'Fai.

Who sings a breakup song at a wedding parade?! "

Scratching his head, P'Fai asked,

"Well, then what song should we sing, Pok? Tell me. "

"Listen carefully, P'Fai. Listen, remember, and do it right!"

Pok didn't respond but leaned over to whisper something to the band leader, who nodded and signaled the musicians to start a new song. AS an unfamiliar rhythm began, Pok nodded deeply to the beat like Rihanna, grabbed the megaphone, and started singing without anyone asking for it.

"They 've already had sex, no hope leftfor my hearrrtttt...

"My mind is blurry, my heart is heavy, when a friend tells me... thatyou and her are too close to ever pull apart... "

Sigh...

This song is better than the one Fai sang earlier, right?

But it seemed the drunk uncles liked this song much more. The moment Pok sang the first verse, the uncles, who had scattered in all directions to escape Fai's previous song, slowly crawled back and began swaying their shoulders together in the middle ofthe group

Pok led them with a megaphone in hand, belting the song with a voice so dramatic and layered that if Jintara Poonlarp heard it, she might have shed a tear. On top of that, Pok raised both shoulders high and jerked them up and down to match the drumbeat throughout the entire song.

At this point, I wiped sweat from my face and slowly turned around, looking for someone to save me. But to my horror, Grandma and Uncle Gaa were also swaying their shoulders along, no different from the brass band.

Sigh...

After Grandma Kim Aeng's wedding parade and brass band somehow made their chaotic way to the Tuntiburana house, thanks to the drunk uncles who kept dancing out of formation, the real challenge was the leaders of the parade.

Pok and Fai, who seemed to always take three steps forward and two steps back, made the journey take twice as long as it should have.

The fact we even made it here was a miracle!

Mr. Poj hurried out to greet us at the front ofthe house. His eyes scanned the entire parade with utter shock. The chairman gulped hard when he saw the brass band standing in full formation outside his home.

He raised his hands in a respectful wai and greeted Grandma with a level of politeness I had never seen before,

"'Hello, Aunt Kim Aeng. It's been a while." "Hello, Poj. How have you been, dear?"

"1've been well, Auntie. Uh, but... may I ask.. "

"What is it?"

"Are you really just here for lunch?"

"Of course! Why wouldn't I be?"

"0h, no reason, Auntie. It just seems. quite grand."

At that, Grandma burst into laughter and playfully patted Mr. Poj on the shoulder, like an Old friend. Then she raised her head high, puffed out her chest, and said proudly:



"Auntie doesn 't do small things. Auntie only does big things!"

Typical Grandma...

After Fai led the band and the whole parade home, Mr. Poj welcomed the remaining important guests, Grandma, me, Uncle Gaa, and Pok by escorting us to a grand dining room decorated in vintage style.

It looked like something straight out of a billionaire's mansion in a TV drama.

At the top ofthe winding staircase stood Phimmanas, wearing an elegant white dress that made her look like a goddess.

Her graceful smile captivated everyone's attention as she descended slowly, step by step, from the upper floor, enchanting the entire room.

Iler hair was tied high, showing off her slender neck and small, delicate face. Today, her makeup accentuated her sweet beauty even more than usual.

But what was sweeter than her face were the soft smile and warm brown eyes that locked directly on me with every step she took down the staircase. I was so mesmerized I nearly stopped breathing.

When she reached the last step, Phimmanas walked over and respectfully raised her hands in a wai to Grandma.

Grandma smiled warmly, taking Phim's small hands in hers with a look Of genuine fondness.

Honestly, it seemed like Grandma liked Phim more than she liked me...

Phim, now arm-in-arm with Grandma as they walked together to the dining table, turned her face slightly toward me. She gave me a small smirk while sending a teasing sparkle from her eyes. I smiled back, gazing at her with soft, adoring eyes.

Pok, sitting nearby in her silk dress, seemed so startled by our exchange that she nudged me in the ribs and whispered loudly:

"Hey, Khun Luang! You can't get carried away here! Show some respect to your future father-in-law! Be patient!"

"Pok, keep your voice down!"

I quickly locked an arm around her neck and clamped my hand over her mouth. Her eyes rolled dramatically as I squeezed tightly. But even then, she still managed to mumble through my fingers,

### "Let go... let... go... I'll behave..."

What was she even trying to say?

Dragging Pok to the table without drawing any attention was no easy task. Once there, she immediately cozied up to Uncle Gaa, pretending to be the family's eldest daughter-in-law.

Aside from Pok's constant antics, like trying to slyly flirt with Uncle Gaa, the rest of the meal went surprisingly smoothly. Grandma and Mr. Poj chatted happily about various lighthearted topics.

And with Phim constantly throwing sweet glances my way, the atmosphere was far more relaxed than I had expected.

After lunch, we moved to a cozy lounge with glass walls, offering a full view of an English garden. As I sipped my tea, enjoying the peaceful scenery, my gaze drifted toward three trays placed on a white oval table near Grandma and Mr. Poj.

Pok leaned close to my ear and whispered in her raspy voice,

'The first tray on the left has a large diamond set. The second has a land deed for prime real estate. And the last one? A blank check. Your grandma sure doesn't mess around."

"Pok, where are you even getting this nonsense from? Stop making stuff

Pok chuckled slyly and leaned in to whisper again.

"Come on, who do you think I am? This kind of stuff, I always know."

"Are you some kind of psychic or something?"

I couldn't help but glance upwards when I heard Pok's response. Almost instinctively, I wanted to nudge my dear friend with my foot, but thankfully, the conversation between Grandma Kim Aeng and Mr. Poj distracted me just in time.

"Poj, do you still remember Pakorn, Gah's father, and Ganya, his mother?"

"0f course, Auntie. Pakorn, the tall, quiet man? In the architect circle, he's widely respected. And Ganya, as a talented interior designer, was equally impressive. They were a perfect match."

Grandma smiled proudly at her daughter and son-in-law before taking a small ceremonial sip of her tea.

'When Kha graduated, Pakom and Ganya helped design and build a grand studio as a gift for their son. Then, when Kiran got promoted last April, Pakorn started building a house for his daughter. It's nearly finished now."

"'That's such a meaningful gift, Auntie. A father designing it and the mother decorating it must make it so special. Kha and Kiran are very lucky to have parents who love and care for them so much. It must be such a warm home."

"Well then, Poj, wouldn you want Phim to live in a warm, loving home like that too? "

Hearing Grandma's soft yet bold question, I immediately turned to look at Mr. Poj's and Phim's reactions, trying to gauge their thoughts.

Meanwhile, my hands, trembling slightly, brought the tea cup to my lips for a sip. But I must've been too nervous because I didn't taste anything at all.

"Earl Grey is good, you know. But next time, you don't need to feed it directly into my mouth like this."

I jumped in shock when I realized that the cup I was holding so carefully with both hands ended up being held right to Pok's mouth. She was resting her face on my shoulder and casually sipping from my cup with a straight face, her eyes sparkling mischievously, looking oddly like a chimpanzee.

Strangely enough, I didn't even move the cup away, just letting her sip as I waited anxiously for Mr. Poj's answer.

Mr. Poj suddenly burst out laughing, clearly amused.

"Are you sure about this, Auntie? Phim is very diffcult to raise."

"Dad.. '

The small woman furrowed her brows and pouted at her father, clearly sulking as she stared at the ground, looking frustrated.

"'But ifyou promise not to return her, I won't refuse, Auntie."

"Returning her won 't happen. I guarantee it." "Then take her, Auntie. She's yours now."

"Well, that's settled then. Deal."

Not only did Grandma and Mr. Poj speak, but they even shook hands firmly, like politicians signmg an important national treaty. After the handshake, they both chuckled together, leaving Phim and me red-faced, feeling like we wanted to curl up and hide.

Phim's small face was now as red as a tomato. She pressed her lips together tightly but smiled sweetly with her eyes. At that moment, as she accidentally caught my gaze, she quickly looked away, as if my eyes were forbidden.

"Hey, Kii."

Of course. That heavy feeling was because Pok still had her face on my shoulder.

"What do you want?"

"I just want to know why you two are so embarrassed."

Pok paused deliberately, leaving us curious about what she was going to say next, before finally uttering a sentence that made me almost want to shove ashes into her mouth to silence her right then and there.

"I've seen you two together so many times already."

The two-story white house, with its beautifully arranged brick wall accentuated by the black frames of the surrounding glass windows, was lovingly designed and decorated by my parents.

This house was chosen as the venue for the dinner to strengthen the bond between our families and Pim's that evening.

My parents stood at the door, beaming with smiles, as though they had won the first prize in the lottery. They eagerly greeted Khun Phoj in a familiar, friendly way, reflecting their long-standing relationship.

I noticed that my father, who was usually reserved, was particularly talkative today, especially with Pim. He even initiated the conversation, which was unusual for him.

Could this be him doting on his future daughter-in-law?

And my mother?

She barely had the chance to properly get to know Pim because she was overwhelmed by some mysterious emotion, which made her seem confused and distracted.

"Pok, are you still not full? This plate of stir-fried noodles with soy sauce was made especially for you! Two kilograms of pork, three big packs of noodles, and a kilo of kale—I even bought a 49-inch wok to make sure you'd have enough to eat!"

"Oh, Mom, it's so delicious! I don't want to get full too quickly!"

Pok replied with his mouth full, using her left arm to hug the plate possessively while her right hand shoveled noodles into her mouth at high speed with a fork.

It would've been better if she had chewed and swallowed before answering. And more importantly, she should've wiped the noodles off the corner of her mouth!

"Really, dear? Alright, then! I'll cook another wok full just for you!"

Looks like Mom is smitten with herfuture daughter-in-law too.

Taking advantage of everyone's happy chatter after the delicious dinner, I invited the small-framed individual out for a walk in the beautiful garden beside the house.

My father had carefully planted every fragrant plant I loved, from Indian cork trees and lantana to a large trumpet flower tree with sprawling branches.

Its beautiful blooms had fallen, scattering across the small, colorful stones lining the pathway surrounded by neatly trimmed Korean banyan hedges.

Phim and I sat down on a brown bench placed to enjoy the garden's beauty. She leaned her head on my shoulder, snuggling sweetly, and spoke in her soft, gentle voice.

"This house of yours is so beautiful and feels so warm."

"1t's not my house."

"This is our house."

At that moment, Phim looked up at me with a gaze full of gratitude I'd never seen before. Strangely, the tears shimmering in her soft brown eyes somehow matched the shy smile on her face perfectly.

"So we'll really live together, right?"

"'Not yet.

"Not until you accept this ring from me first."

Phim, who had looked a little disappointed earlier, now watched as I took out a dark gray velvet box. My heart pounded so loudly I thought she might hear it as I opened the box to reveal a small gold ring with a single, sparkling diamond on top.

"Sorry the diamond is so small. I saved up to buy this ring myselfbecause I wanted to give it to you as a gift for the day we finally get to be together, the first day of all the days we'll share from now on."

"Phim, will you accept it?"

Phim didn't say a word. Instead, she covered her mouth with one hand and tried to hold back her tears, though it still managed to fall. Tears ofjoy, I thought.

Watching her nod quickly over and over again melted my heart. I gently pulled her into my arms, letting her rest her head on my chest with so much love.

"Don't cry, Phim. Let me put the ring on you now."

She held out her left hand obediently. I smiled to myself and carefully slipped the ring onto her ring finger, then lifted her small hand to brush it gently against my lips.

I couldn't resist leaning down to kiss her forehead as she continued to cry like a little child. She stayed hidden against my chest, refusing to look at me even for a moment.

So, I bent down and whispered softly into her ear,

"I love you, Phim."

"Stay with me forever, okay?"

Chapter 56: Declaration of Power

"Come here, fat cat. Let me hug you."



I reached out to grab the fat white-spotted female cat named Yaw Niao (Sticky Pee), named after the philosopher Wang Yaw Niao, who is an idol for both Pok and me.

I hugged it to my chest and stroked its soft, velvety fur, enjoying the feel of it. Yaw Niao seemed happy, lifting its head for me to scratch its chin and closing its eyes, looking adorable.

But today didn't seem to be Yaw Niao's lucky day.

"Meowwwww! "

A sharp, high-pitched cry came from Yaw Niao as it leaped off my lap. It had dodged Phimmanas' foot, which lightly poked its belly with an indifferent expression, though her eyes clearly showed jealousy.

Once she got rid of the fat cat, the small woman plopped herself into the spot on the bean bag where the cat had been, causing it to sink and shift shape quickly.

I raised my arms and loosely wrapped them around Phim's chest while resting my chin on her shoulder, trying to be affectionate. But her cheek was still puffed up with a sulky look.

Her pouty lips and full pinkish cheeks stayed curled into a wave, showing her frustration even more.

"Why is Phim pouting? Tell me, okay?"

Silence,

"1s Phim mad at Yaw Niao? Why did you nudge her with your foot?"

Still no response.

Phim stayed completely silent, sulking, and I, stuck in the middle between her and the cat, didn't know what to do to cheer her up. So, I tightened my arms around her and stole a big kiss on her cheek. That seemed to work a little because she finally let out a small smile.

But she still didn't say a word.

"lfyou don't tell Kii, I'll keep hugging you forever."

Not just words, this time, I started planting soft kisses all over her. I kissed her cheek, behind her ear, her earlobe, down to her neck, and finally to her smooth, pale shoulder. That's when Phim grabbed my thigh with her small hand, gripping tightly, before speaking in a soft, shaky voice.

'kii, stop it. I give up."

"You give up?"

I smirked mischievously when I heard the words of surrender from Phim, who sat frozen on my lap. My slender hand slowly trailed from her knee up to the inside ofher thigh, moving higher and higher until..

Slap!

Phim's hand smacked mine with full force, making me pull back and rub my stinging hand with a pout. Then, I pulled out my ultimate weapon, widening my eyes like a helpless little deer and blinking rapidly in an exaggerated show Of innocence.

But instead ofrnelting, Phim shot me a sharp glare that was so piercing I instinctively shrank back like a scolded child.

"That's not what I meant when I said I gave up!"



But, being someone who's never learned their lesson, I only pretended to sulk for a second before wrapping my arms around her small frame again in a playful hug. Though she still wore a pouty expression, I noticed how she subtly leaned into me, resting her head against my chest like she couldn't help herself.

"So, why is Phim mad at Yaw Niao? I still don't get it."

Phim, still snuggled up against me, didn't answer right away. Instead, she grabbed my hand, which was loosely wrapped around her, and placed it palm-up on her knee. Then, she started tracing little circles on my palm with her fingertip, as iftrying to tease me.

"Well..

"Well... what?"

At this, she tilted her face up to look at me, her big eyes full of a childlike sulkiness. She pouted a little before mumbling in a quiet voice, almost too soft for me to hear.

"1 just... don't like her."

"She's always cuddling with Kii... "

"And Kii pays more attention to Yaw Niao than me."

I scratched my head awkwardly, feeling completely thrown off, like someone trapped in a small room with mosquito-repellent smoke wafting around. It wasn't like I didn't know how jealous Phim could get.

But seriously.

Yaw Mao's a cat, isn 't she?

Even if she's a female cat!

"Who said I care about the cat more than Phim?"

"I don't know... Kii's always hugging Yaw Niao. You don't hug Ph— mmmph ! "

Before the petite person could finish her sentence, my lips gently nibbled on Phim's earlobe, catching her off guard. Her delicate shoulders shuddered up and down as I slowly breathed into her ear and then trailed my lips down to her neck, sucking and nibbling with an intoxicating touch.

Phim's small hands dug into my thighs with all her might, but her touch only seemed to ignite a certain emotion.

That is boiling inside, becoming even more intense.

While my left hand slipped under the hem of Phim's t-shirt and slowly dragged, gently sliding up to pass under her tiny bra and stopping to knead her full breasts with a heavy rhythm, my right hand reached into the shorts Of the petite person sitting on my lap.

I could feel the up-and-down motion of her Stomach and her rapid, panting breathing as my hand moved to touch her sensitive, wet areas. My fingers rubbed and circled there for a long time before penetrating Phim's body, causing her to flinch and unintentionally let out a low, hoarse, breathless "darling."

With her sitting posture, the petite person was easily attacked from all directions... Phim responded to my warm lips that were sucking and nibbling her beautiful neck and the gentle caresses on her chest with low, indecipherable moans, as if everything was completely slipping out of her control.

I emphasized the defeat of the petite person by moving my fingers slowly for a long time before speeding up.

Faster.

Faster....

I could no longer differentiate between her rapid, panting breathing and her low moans. Phim's hands grasped wildly before gripping my wrist, which was moving quickly, with a tight, tense grip.

Eventually, her small body shook strongly in my embrace before collapsing weakly against me. The small person looked completely exhausted, except for...

Her small hand still held mine tightly in her sensitive spot, not letting me pull away, as if she was seeking warmth. Feeling fond of her, I wrapped my other arm around her and pulled Phim closer to me.

I kissed her ear gently, noticing her cheeks were flushed red, and the hair near her face curled slightly from sweat.

Phim's warm lips pressed against my forearm unexpectedly. Her touch was so deep and passionate that I let out a low groan from my throat. It seemed to tease Phim into feeling something once more.

The small girl guided my hand, which she was holding, even lower than before and began moving her hips up and down in rhythm With the motion Of my fingers that had started moving again.

It's just that our movement this time

Under Phim's complete control.

"Huh... What did you just say, Kiran?"

"Pok... Pok, please lower your voice."

Pok's loud shout echoed through the coffee shop, making me glance nervously at the nearby tables. I nudged my friend's hand, hoping to get her to tone it down just a little.

"Are you telling me that she, that maid ofyours, is jealous of that cat?!"

"Pok... keep it down, please.'

Not only did Pok ignore me, but she dramatically acted out a scene worthy of a stage. She slapped her broad hand on her chest while using the other to mess up her hair until it was wild, like someone who'd completely lost it.

The whole café started turning to stare at us with judging eyes, as if I were the one who turned Pok into a raging gorilla in the middle of a crowded shop.

"Pok, will you stop it or not?!"

That worked.

As soon as my sharp, irritated tone hit her, Pok shrank her neck slightly and let out an awkward laugh, finally realizing she'd overdone it.

'Yes, my lady... this lowly maid will stop, my lady. Don't be angry, I beg you. And your feet, my lady, don't tap them so angrily, please. Be still, oh noble one. Steady now, steady..."

Pok sat down quietly next to me on the long, soft, brown velvet sofa. She started massaging my shin while I stretched out my legs, clearly trying to please me.

"Can you listen to me calmly, like a normal person? Why do you always get so shocked, Pok?"

Pok pouted, rolled her eyes, and sighed loudly in frustration. But her big hands didn 't stop massaging my leg.

"Well, my dear lord, can you let me be shocked? That wife of yours is jealous of a female cat! How can I not be surprised, my dear lord?"

Pok ended her sentence with exaggerated hand gestures, acting like a maid in an old drama. This made me frown and sigh again as I thought back to Phim's behavior ever since she moved in with me earlier this month.

I leaned back on the sofa, staring at the loft-style high ceiling with exposed concrete, and let out another long breath.

"1 knew Phim was possessive since our first year of dating. But after she moved in with me, it feels like her jealousy has gotten worse."

Pok immediately stopped massaging my leg, leaned in closer, and wiggled her ears like someone who's always eager to gossip.

"How so?"

"Well..."

That was all I could say before sighing again. My reaction only made Pok even more curious. She moved closer, almost leaning into me entirely.

"lfyou keep staying quiet and don't tell me about your jealous wife, I'll give you a title..."

"Stop it, Pok. I don't want your silly titles. I'll tell you now."

Instead ofbeing happy that I was about to share, Pok shook her head and clicked her tongue, looking annoyed.

"Why so easy? Now I can't name you Lord of Slow Speeches."

Look at this. Every time Pok makes up some ridiculous title for me. First, it was Lord of Gentle Touches, then Lord of Skilled Lovers, and now, just because I hesitated for a moment, she was ready to call me Lord of Slow Speeches.

Does this even make sense?

"Well... Phim doesn't just get jealous of the cat, Pok."

"What do you mean?"

"1 mean, if I stare at a billboard of Mew Nittha for just a second too long while driving, Phim twists my arm until it bruises. And that's not all—when we watch Korean dramas together, if I say the lead actress is cute, Phim pinches my eyelid so hard I nearly go blind. Then, when I try to read a book instead, she wiggles her way between me and the book and lies down on my chest. She says, 'Go ahead, keep reading,' but I can't even get past two sentences. In the end, I always have to stop and do something else instead."

Once I started talking, I couldn't stop. Pok, who was sitting cross-legged and listening closely, looked completely stunned. Her mouth hung open so wide that her jaw almost hit her knees.

It was so bad that I had to reach over and push her lower jaw back up to close her mouth.

"Are you really this shocked, Pok?"

Pok blinked a few times as if rebooting her brain before speaking.

"How can I not be shocked, Kii? Your wife is jealous Of people, animals, and even objects!"

I nodded, reluctantly agreeing with her. I tapped my fingers quickly on the sofa's armrest while rubbing my chin, thinking hard. I frowned and spoke with more confidence than ever before:

"It's probably because ofthe ring. That ring made Phim stronger.

I squinted, staring off into the distance without focus, and mumbled to myself like a madman.

"There must be someone brave enough to throw the ring into a volcano."

"Pok, why are you so quiet?"

"Aaahhh!"

I screamed and jumped back when I turned to look at Pok. She had changed her position, now kneeling with her long, dry reddish-brown hair covering half her face.

Her eyes were wide open, and she gave me a creepy smile while crawling her fingers across her knees like Gollum from The Lord Of the Rings.

"My precious... my preciousss..."

All the hairs on my body stood up at once as if they had a mind of their

"Pok, do you seriously not care that you're scaring me?"

"My precious... my darling husbandsss,.."

Thud!

Pok stayed completely in character, leaning in closer with her eerie act. I'd had enough. I pushed her head away firmly, unable to hold back anymore.

"Enough already! You're scaring me!"

"Why are you always so quick to shove me, Kii? What am I to you, huh? A punching bag?!"

Pok collapsed dramatically onto the other end of the sofa, pretending to cry while dabbing her non-existent tears with exaggerated gestures.

I glanced at her with a mix of irritation and disbelief, still annoyed by her Gollum cosplay. How dare she turn Phim into this scraggly, wild-haired creature from The Lord of the Rings?

'ISO, Kii... do you have any final words for me?"

"What? What's your angle this time, Pok? Don't push me. You know once I get heated, I can't cool down easily."

"Relax! I'm just asking because I'm worried about you, okay? I bet you haven't realized yet, your peace is already gone."

" ..What are you talking about?"

"You know about the big company party this Friday at the hotel, right?"

The party this Friday night? Of course, I know about it. It's the big 20thanniversary celebration for ABCD Company. Lately, Phi Olan has spent almost all his time preparing for this grand event.

He even hired top professional organizers, people who work in the entertainment industry, just to manage this party.

But don't tell me the "professional organizer" is...

"Yes, darling, it's me, your dear wife, handling this

Pok said, raising her thick brows proudly as she answered the question I hadn't even asked yet.

This person knows me too well.

"Phi Olan has disappointed me. I thought he was someone with good vision and good taste."

"0h, Kii, you're praising me too much. Phi Olan does have good taste. That's why he hired me!"

I shook my head in frustration at Pok, who only listened to the parts she liked and assumed I was praising her.

"But what does this party have to do with me? Tell me now."

Pok gave a sly smile, laughing quietly to herself. She moved closer to me and gently pushed my head back until it rested on the couch.

"0h, Kii... with a wife as jealous as yours, ifyou saw the guest list like I did..."

"you'd be running to find a lawyer to write your will in three to seven days, my dear Lord Kii."

Ding dong.

The party at the fancy hotel was now full of people talking and the sound of champagne glasses clinking. I was wearing a black dress with an open back and deep red lipstick, which seemed to catch everyone's attention. People, both familiar and unfamiliar, came over to compliment me.

"Why does my little sister look so beautiful today?"

I glanced sharply at Phi Olan, my eyeliner making my eyes look sharper than usual. My face clearly showed I wasn't in the mood for jokes.

"Don't tease me, Phi Olan. Pok made me dress like this, I didn't even want to."

Phi Olan laughed, clearly amused. He raised his glass to clink it with mine, sipping his champagne lightly, then turned to tease me more.

Phi Olan's words made me swallow hard. Slowly, I turned to look at Phimmanas, who was now standing beside Phi Olan, greeting guests with her usual grace.

It seemed she knew I was watching because not long after, her beautiful brown eyes, paired with a strapless white dress that revealed her flawless neckline, turned to meet mine. She smiled sweetly, making my heart race so fast I had to quickly avert my gaze.

"Konbanwa, Kiran-san."

The familiar Japanese greeting caught my attention, and I immediately turned to see President Sato bowing eagerly in my direction. I quickly returned the gesture, bowing deeply in response, though I couldn't help but recall Pok's warning from a few days ago.

"You betterfind a lawyer 10 draft your will in three to seven days, Kii. "

When President Sato disappeared into the crowd, I finally understood Pok's ominous words. If President Sato was attending this party, then...

"1-Ii! Honey, I miss you so much..."

Just as I feared.

Suddenly, that line from a pop song echoed in my head. I shut my eyes tight before slowly forcing a polite smile.

Standing before me was the woman who might just cause my early death tonight.

It was her.

Yes, it was Yumi.

"Hi, Yumi.. '

Sayumporn, in a bold red strapless gown, displayed her perfect, fair skin and alluring cleavage. The high slit of her skirt revealed her long, shapely legs, which made it hard for anyone to maintain eye contact with her during conversaüon.

Her full, dark red lips curved into a radiant smile, her rust-colored eyes sparkling as she greeted me warmly, as always.

"Today, you're so sexy, honey..."

"You too..."

The compliment slipped out as a courtesy before I realized it was probably a mistake. Suddenly, I noticed a shadow overlapping mine on the carpeted floor.

"Hello, Yumi... how are you?"

The chilling voice came from none other than Phim. Her sweet yet sharp face now wore a cold, icy smile. My own smile disappeared instantly.

The fine hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as her calm but frigid tone cut through the air.

A chill ran down my spine, as if ice water had been poured down from my head to my toes, making the hairs on my body rise without warning.

'Hi, madam... I'm fine,"

Yumi bowed deeply in respect to Vlce President Phimmanas, as polite as ever. But this time, Phim appeared much more cheerful than usual.

She wrapped her arm around my waist, pulling me close, and gently stroked the back of my hand in a way that sent a clear message. Phim smirked, raising her brow, and leaned toward Yumi, speaking softly but with undeniable authority.

"Yumi... Could you do me a favor?" "Sure, madam. Please tell me." "Do not call her 'Honey'... please!"

Ohhhh,"

Yumi exclaimed in shock. Her eyes widened as she stared at me, now held protectively by Phim's arm around my waist. Phim flashed her a triumphant smile at Yumi, clearly showing she had the upper hand.

Yumi looked stunned, staring at me as though trying to process everything, until an unexpected voice interrupted the tense atmosphere.

"0h my god! Oh my god! Long time no see, Yumi!"

Pok suddenly burst into the conversation, completely shattering the tension that had left me frozen in place. Dressed in a bright yellow evening gown with a high front slit, full makeup, and dramatic style, Pok rushed in and grabbed Yumi's arm with exaggerated friendliness. Yumi looked at her in utter confusion.

"Sorry... who are you?"

Pok took a step back, slightly thrown by Yumi's response, but only for a moment.

"It's me, hiii, your friend! I gave you a Thai name, remember? 'Sayumporn!' Do you remember?"

Pok's hilariously clumsy mix of languages seemed to jog Yumi's memory. Her eyes widened again, and she pointed excitedly at Pok, unable to hide her surprise.

"Yum Phong! Right? How are you?" "1'm fine, thank you, and you?"

"1'm fine."

"OK... sit down, please."

Yumi was about to squat down right then and there, following Pok's casual "command," but Pok quickly grabbed her arm to stop her.

With a firm grip, Pok dragged Yumi away, pulling her to a safer distance, far from the icy glare Phim had been throwing in her direction.

It was clear Pok's intention was to keep Yumi well out of Phim's line of fire.

I forced a weak smile at my cruel fate, finding myself face-to-face with Phimmanas, alone in this kind of situation. From the corner of my eye, I noticed that strange, sweet smile still lingered on Phim's face as she watched Yumi's back fade into the distance. Then, without even looking at me, she spoke in a cold, chilling tone.

### "Don't think I didn't notice, Kiran."

My entire body shivered as goosebumps spread all over, but I tried to play it cool. Mustering the courage to answer her, my voice came out shaky and full of guilt.

"Phim. uh... what are you talking about?"

That icy smile remained on her sharp, beautiful face as she finally turned to meet my eyes with an unreadable expression. Her hand, still resting lightly on my waist, seemed more like a playful tease, contrasting the intensity of her gaze.

"When you talk to Yumi, you never look up, do you?"

Gulp.

Goodbye... beautiful world

"Do you really enjoy looking at big chests that much?"

I swallowed hard, barely able to get my hoarse voice out, the sound so faint even I could hardly hear myself.

"N-no, not at all! I don't like that at all. I only like yours, Phim, just yours!"

Phim sent me another one of those strange, sweet smiles, but it was paired with the sting ofher hand pinching the bare skin on my back, hard.

I jolted from the pain, and before I could say another word, she leaned up on her toes to whisper in my ear. Then, without looking back, she walked away, leaving me frozen in place, consumed by fear from her parting words.

"Good. It's better you don't like it. Because ifyou did...'

"When we get home tonight, I'd punish you by squeezing your face with my chest until you can't breathe!"

Chapter 57: Theory of Memories

Dec 4th, 2016

Baan Pipityapongsa, Bangkok

20:05

"Happy Birthday, Gaokii! May you have happiness and prosperity. Ifyou wish for money, may you get money, if you wish for gold, may you get gold, my dear."

Grandma gave a long-winded birthday blessing while using her plump hands to hold my face, gently touching my left cheek, then my right cheek, and finally pressing her palms on my forehead to finish

I could only respond with an awkward smile, feeling shy under the teasing gaze of Pok, who was clearly watching with the intent to mock me.

Pok smirked smugly, as if mocking me for being treated like a little girl. It might have been less humiliating ifthat grin of hers...

. have strands Of stir-fried noodles dangling from the corner ofher mouth!

"Pok..."

"Yes, Phi Kaa..."

Pok quickly turned her head toward Kaa's sweet, deep voice, so fast that I swear I heard the sound of her neck cracking-crack! She instinctively used her big hand to massage her neck while flashing a syrupy sweet smile at

That smile gave me goosebumps all over.

"1 really want to try the stir-fried noodles in your mouth-oops, I mean in your plate, Pok,"

Kaa said sweetly.

"Last time, your mom made so much, but for some reason, 1 didn't get to try it. Look at that; it looks so delicious."

Before Kaa could even finish his sentence, Pok shot back from him as if hit by a wave of scorching heat. Her smile faded instantly, and she pressed her lips together tightly.

Pok stared at Kaa suspiciously, hugging her plate of noodles protectively with one arm while carefully shifting the plate farther away from him with the other.

"Men... you can't trust them."

"Kaa, you must really want to eat me, right? That's why you're pretending to praise how delicious I look. Don't think I don't know your trick!"

"Uh... Pok, 1 meant the noodles..."

"1 don't care! I trusted you, and this is how it ends, you just want food. But you won't get it so easily. My mom made this just for me. Hmph!

Without waiting for a reply, Pok began shoveling the noodles into her mouth greedily, as though she hadn't eaten in days. Kaa could only watch the massive tray Of noodles, surrounded by golden-brown fried chicken legs, slowly disappear.

Pok had skillfully filled the plate earlier, leaving Kaa to sadly poke at his sad plate of rice mixed with mackerel that Mom had prepared for him. I swear I wasn't imagining things, there were tears welling up in Kaa's eyes.

Poor. ..poor Kaa.

Why did the food served at my birthday party feel so class-divided like this?

Oh, Mom... so unfair.

"I'm heading home now, dear. It's late,"

Grandma's warm, raspy voice pulled me back to her immediately. I hugged her tightly, nestling my head against her chest to sweetly win her affection, just as a favorite granddaughter should.

"Why are you leaving in such a hurry, Grandma? Won't you stay for cake?"

Grandma gave me a big smile, lovingly patting my head, but she still didn't answer. I tilted my head, full of curiosity.

"Grandma, are you in a rush to shower, pray, and go to bed?"

"No, dear..

"I'm rushing home to catch up on my Korean drama. Lately, I've been obsessed with Mr. Big Boss. Ho ho ho!"

Her answer made me roll my eyes instinctively. Grandma pulled me in for another hug, kissed both Ofmy cheeks, and said her goodbyes before leaving for her grand mansion down the next street.

She was accompanied by Uncle Kai (Kased Siraprapakorn), her eldest son and the one managing the family's real estate business.

My birthday party went on even after Grandma left. Suddenly, the lights went out, and everyone gathered around me. Kaa carried a large chocolate cake with lit candles on top, ready to be presented.

Everything was gomg as expected for a birthday celebratiop, except for one thing, the Happy Birthday song.

Pok, who led the singing, had somehow turned it into a mix ofluk thung, molam, and ska reggae. She even added rhythmic shoulder shaking, mimicking the drunk uncles holding bottles of liquor under their arms at the local folk music shows.

"Happy birthday to you....uuuuu, happy birthday to you, hip hip hip, happy birthday, happy birthday, eh eh eh, happy birthday..."

I couldn't help but smile as happiness filled my heart completely, seeing everyone I love gathered around me.

There were my dad, mom, Kaa, Pok, and most importantly...

It had to be Phim.

Phimmanas was looking straight at me with her beautiful brown eyes sparkling brightly. The flickering golden candlelight made her soft gaze even gentler than usual.

Phim smiled sweetly as she walked toward me, her voice soft and tender as she spoke.

"Kii, make a wish."

I smiled back at her words, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath before blowing out the candle flame effortlessly. The room erupted in cheers and applause as though I had achieved something extraordinary. Amidst the noise, I could hear Pok giving Kaa strict instructions nearby.

"Phi Kaa, cut the cake in half first, okay? I'll take the top halfwith the cherries and sugar decorations. The bottom half, slice it into five pieces and share it, dad, mom, Kii, Phim, and you. Got it?"

"Uh... sure, Pok. Got it."

"Good. You understand, right? Then why do you look so confused, like you're dizzy from bug spray fumes like Kii over there?"

Pok proceeded to oversee Kaa, who carefully carried the cake like it was priceless. Kaa obediently followed every one of Pok's instructions, cutting the cake as ifhe were a soldier taking orders from his commanding officer.

W'hile everyone's attention was on the cake, Phim leaned in close to whisper in my ear, her tone eager.

"What did you wish for, Kii? Tell me."

"0h, nothing much. I just wished for world peace," I replied.

At that moment, the sweet smile on Phim's face vanished almost instantly. Her lips twisted into a pout, and her sparkling eyes seemed to dim with disappointment.

"If you don't want to tell me, fine. I don't want to know."

"Phim, don't you really want to know?"

"No I don't."

Phim turned her face away in a sulk, but I reached for her hand, holding it firmly. I leaned close and softly whispered into her ear, even as she pretended not to care.

When I finished my sentence, her lovely face turned a deep shade ofpink almost immediately.

"I wished that every birthday I have from now on..."

"You'll always be here next to me to give your blessings."

The moment I finished, her large eyes locked onto mine with meaning. A wide smile spread across her face as she grabbed my cheeks, pinching and twisting them playfully.

"Then I'll make a wish too... to make sure your wish comes true."

White Brick Ilouse

Bangkok,

21:36

With a simple push of the black iron gate connecting the two homes, the three of us, Phim, Pok, and I, easily made our way from my parents' house to mine. It was just a short walk away.

We stopped at the small white greenhouse, shaped like a matchbox, nestled in the garden parallel to the main house. The entire structure was decorated with clean white bricks.

"1've been meaning to ask you, Kii. What's this little greenhouse for?"

Pok asked, scanning the structure critically.

"1f it's for Yaw Niaw (the cat), it's bigger than my condo. But if it's for Phi Kaa, then your dad clearly doesn't love his kids equally."

Pok examined the greenhouse with exaggerated gestures while Phim covered her mouth, laughing softly. It was clear she already knew the answer, but Pok, sharp as ever, noticed her reaction. She leaned in close, her brow furrowed as he stared at Phim intently.

"Pok! You scared me! Why are you looking at me like that? Step back a bit, will you?"

Phim exclaimed.

"You know something about this house, don't you? Tell me right now."

"1 don't know anything! Nothing at all!"

Phim insisted.

Pok circled around Phim like a watchdog, sniffing out a secret. But before long, Phim stood tall and turned her piercing gaze on her. Her sharp eyes seemed to freeze Pok in place.

"1 said I don't know, Pok. Don't push it,"

Phim declared firmly.

And just like that, the once-bold watchdog turned into a trembling puppy, letting out a pitiftll whimper. Pok bowed slightly to Phim, clasping her hands politely like a servant to her mistress.

"0kay, Phim. If you say you don't know, then you don't know."

Phimmanas glanced at Pok with a look of superiority before turning to speak to me. Her face was calm, showing no smile, no emotion. It made me instinctively bow down slightly, just like Pok did, as if trying to survive the moment.

"Stay here and play with Pok for a while ifyou want,"

Phim said firmly.

"But don't come upstairs later than I I :30. You understand, right?"

"Got it."

"Don't be stubborn."

"Okay, okay. 'i

Phim gave us one last look, her expression unreadable, before walking off with confident steps. Pok and I stood frozen, holding our breaths until we were sure she had entered the house. The moment we were certain, Pok slammed her right fist into her left palm in frustration.

"That maid-wife of yours is getting more and more bold, you know! You shouldn't give in to her like that, Kii. You're losing all your power as a leader. "

I raised an eyebrow at Pok and replied,

"Hmm, just now, I think you were even more scared of Phim than I was.

The second she walked inside, you suddenly got brave, didn't you?"

Pok widened her eyes, muttering under her breath but unable to deny my words. I ignored her attitude and scanned my keycard to unlock the glass door of the small house, leading her inside.

The house was equipped with a modern smart home system, with all the lights turning on automatically.

Pok looked around, clearly amazed, and couldn't stop complimenting how "smart" the house seemed. She wandered from one room to another like a child exploring a friend's house.

"Hey, Kii, this house is really cute. Simple but classy, chic but down-toearth.

"Is that supposed to be a compliment, Pok?"

Pok ignored me and ran straight into the master bedroom uninvited. Then, suddenly, a loud, dramatic scream came from the room. Alarmed, I rushed in to see what was wrong.

"Oh my God! What is this?!"

"What's wrong, Pok?!"

I was greeted by the sight of Pok sitting at the head of the bed, waving her hands up and down repeatedly as if worshiping something. She was staring at a large oil painting hanging on the wall above the bed.

"0h, Queen Beyoncé... I am so honored to bask in your glory this close,"

Pok declared dramatically.

If you're wondering what the painting was, let me clarify..

No, it wasn't a famous monk.

No, it wasn't King Rama V.

But yes, it was what you're probably guessing.

That painting? It's a portrait of Beyoncé, crawling on all fours, reaching for a clam shell.

"Kii, why do you have this picture of Queen Beyoncé in your room?"

Pok asked, her voice filled with mock surprise.

"11ave your tastes changed? And look, the bed sheets are green, my favorite color! Are you sure this is even your house?"

"1t's called pastel green, not just green. Anyway, follow me outside, and I'll explain."

Pok obediently followed me out to the counter bar in the middle of the house. She gasped in excitement as she inspected every item on the counter, clearly impressed.

TO show Off, I pressed the remote on the bar to turn on the sound system, a feature I was especially proud of in the small house.

You don't even have to try. It comes easy for you

The way you move is so appealing.

The song "Good Time" by Pertti Kurikan Nimipäivät filled the room, its smooth tones echoing through the space. I was starting to feel proud and at ease until Pok ruined the moment. 'Wii, I don't understand this song,"

She said bluntly.

"1t doesn't suit the vibe."

"What do you want to listen to then? You can choose from the music app on my phone.

I sighed, sliding my phone toward her so she could pick a song. But Pok, being the troublemaker she is, chose a song I had strictly forbidden.

"You don't notice, don't realize anything.. "Pok, not this song. I said, any song but this!"

"Oh, my bad! My bad! 1 forgot!"

The next song she picked was even worse.

"1 sit and watch you with him, looking so happy. The way he looks at you, it's everything..."

'Wok, I swear, not this song either! Are you asking for trouble?!"

Pok quickly stopped the song, realizing her mistake, and picked another. Finally, she played something that was less likely to get her kicked out of the house.

"Born into this life with sins, my heartfilled with sorrow... "

"Okay, Kii. I like this song."

In the end, Pok and I found ourselves sitting together, listening to Rak Nee Mee Gam by Santi Duangsawang. The song, strangely mismatched with the sleek, modern design of the bar counter, played on as if it belonged nowhere.

I stared at Pok's dreamy expression as she got lost in the melody. Finally, I broke the silence.

"Since you're standing behind the counter, can you make me a drink?"

"0fcourse, no problem."

Pok spent a while stirring something in a tall glass with a small spoon, the clinking noises echoing throughout the house. Then, she slid the glass over to me, leaving me frozen in disbelief on the barstool.

"What is this, Pok?"

"It's Ovaltine, Why are you so dumb?"

"When did I say I wanted Ovaltine?"

"Uh, hello? Didn't you just tell me to make you something? Why are you so picky?"

I smacked my forehead with my palm, the sound ringing out loud, while my oh-so-smart friend showed no sign Of guilt.

meant alcohol, Pok. Who would mean Ovaltine?"

"Oh... Oops. My bad. But hey, I'm a clean soul! Just drink it, alright? Stop being difficult. Oh, and do you want a soft-boiled egg with that?"

"This house doesn't have eggs."

"No worries. I brought some. I grabbed them from my mom's house earlier."

And just like that, Pok reached into her oversized sweatpants pocket and pulled out... two eggs.

"Do you carry eggs like this often?" "Not really. This is just the third time."

WHACK!

Before I could respond, Pok cracked the eggs into a shot glass, yes, the kind for vodka, and microwaved them like a pro. While waiting, she whipped up her own Ovaltine.

Once the eggs were ready, she added soy sauce and pepper like a seasoned chef. Then, she turned to me with both drinks in hand.

"11ere. Cheers!"

The sharp sweetness of condensed milk in the Ovaltine and the salty richness of the soft-boiled egg traveled down my throat, all while Santi Duangsawang serenaded us through the surround sound system. It was a surreal experience, to say the least.

Before things could get even stranger, I handed a keycard to my dear friend, who was busy scraping the last bits of egg from her glass with a spoon.

"Here, take it."

"What's this?"

"This house. I built it for you. The key is yours now."

CLANG!

The spoon fell from POWs hand, hitting the countertop. her eyes widened, jaw dropped in shock, and as usual, her thick eyebrows twitched uncontrollably.

"What are you saying, Kii? Are you really giving me this house?" "Well, maybe not 'giving.' I built this house for you, that's all." "Why? I already have a house, you know."

"Because I want you to be part of every moment in my life."

"At least if one ofyour houses is here, no matter where life takes you, husband, family, you'll always have a reason to visit."

"But it's your birthday. I haven't even given you anything, and here you are, giving me something."

"You've already given me so much, Pok."

"1'm giving you this house because I want to thank you."

"Thank you for helping me survive the painful memories ofthat night, year after year. Thank you for staying by my side and never leaving me to face things alone."

"Thank you for everything. "

Pok burst into tears and clumsily leaned over the bar to hug me. I couldn't help but smile and pat her dry, hay-like hair. After crying for a while, Pok used my shirt to wipe her nose and tears before stepping back.

She fidgeted for a bit, rubbing her eyes, then snatched the keycard and stuffed it into her sweatpants pocket, zipping it up tightly as if afraid I'd change my mind.

"For the effort you put into this, I'll accept it. But I have one question." "What is it?"

"Can I bring my boyfriend here? You know, just in case of emergencies?"

I shrugged slightly as my answer. As long as Pok agreed to stay in this house forever, everything else didn't seem like such a big issue anymore.

"0h right, I almost forgot. Phim left a housewarming gift for you."

"0h, so the little housemaid is on this too, huh? No wonder she kept giggling earlier when I asked what this house was for."

I walked over to the drawer under the TV, where Phim had stored the gift box, repeatedly telling me to make sure Pok received it the same day I handed over the key.

But before I could grab it, Pok dashed over and snatched the long black box herself, as curious as ever.

"Let's see what the little housemaid has for the main wife."

Thud

The box lid fell to the floor with a loud thump as Pok, who had leaned in to peek at its contents, froze in place. Her expression turned blank, and she mumbled softly, her words barely audible, "so, the little housemaid went this far, huh..."

Unable to contain my curiosity, I leaned in to see what kind of gift had left Pok so flustered.

Inside the box was a sleek black sign with elegant silver modern fonts, likely meant to be placed at the front of the house. It wouldn't have been unusual at all if the bold lettering on the sign hadn't read:

"House of the Maid."

11:28 PM

I managed to pull myself away from Pok, who had insisted on staying overnight in the little house to celebrate her new place. It was no easy task, as she demanded I help her hang the "House ofthe Maid" sign that Phim had given her, right that very night.

Her reasoning? If Phim walked by and didn't see the sign, she might think Pok was being rebellious and would convince me to kick her out within three to seven days.

Sigh...

But all ofthat faded from my mind the moment I stepped into the house and was greeted by the soft, sweet scent of vanilla candles filling the air.

Something told me...

Something was different about the house tonight.

The downstairs area was completely dark, with not a single light on. Yet, it still glowed softly with shimmering golden candlelight coming from the staircase. My heart pounded hard in my chest with every step I took toward the light.

I stopped at the bottom ofthe stairs and saw that every step was adorned with vanilla-scented candles. The walls of the stairwell were decorated with white twine string, tied with Polaroid photos that trailed from the first step to the very top.

A flood of emotions surged through me, almost overwhelming, as I saw the photos clearly.

They were all pictures of me.

Snapshots ofmy life, during middle school, high school, playing sports, staring into the distance, smiling brightly at someone unseen in the frame, or even squinting uncomfortably in the sun during school events.

At the stairway landing, the photos transitioned to my university years, my face smudged with paint during freshman activities, selfies from my early days with Phim, and playful photos like when Phim followed me to Samet to make up after an argument.

I reached out and lightly touched each photo with my fingertips, drifting through the memories. Eventually, the string ofphotos led me to the very last step.

The final photo before the memories with Phim faded away was a picture of the two of us in my dorm, smiling widely as we leaned into each other, radiating happiness.

I reached the hallway leading to the bedroom and discovered that what I thought was the final photo wasn't the end at all.

The string of white twine continued, adorned with more photos, this time covering the wall all the way to the bedroom door.

A lump rose in my throat as I saw the images more clearly, photos from the

7 years that had slipped away. They were taken from social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram

Upon closer inspection, every single photo had a familiar yet mysterious account liking them.

The account's name?

MamyMooyong.

I was such a fool.

Such a fool for never realizing that account was Phim.

Such a fool for thinking that in those 7 years, Phim had forgotten about me.

I walked dazedly past the photos, my steps carrying me to the bedroom door, where faint music could be heard from the other side.

Knock, knock, knock.

I fought back the surge of emotions swelling within me as I knocked firmly on the door. And then, I waited.

I waited, feeling as though every second passed painfully slowly.

Click.

It was like rain falling in the dry season.

Itfelt like seeing a rainbow on a sunny day.

Like feeling a cool breeze in April.

Like a weary heart becoming strong again.

Finally, the door opened, accompanied by the faint sound of a love song. The familiar sweet face smiled at me, her smile reaching both her lips and eyes, though her beautiful eyes were filled with shimmering tears.

"You're back, aren't youQ"

I swallowed hard, struggling to hold back the tears ofjoy swelling within me. I tried so hard to steady my voice as I responded to the person standing before me, pouring as much meaning as I could into the simple words I spoke.

"I'm back."

"And I'm not going anywhere ever again."

It felt like... meeting her had brought light into my life.

My life truly began the day I met her...

At that moment, I couldn't hold back my overflowing emotions any longer. I pulled her into a tight embrace, and Phim responded by wrapping her arms around my waist, resting her head on my chest like she was seeking com fort.

Looking over Phim's shoulder, I noticed the room glowing with a warm yellow light, filled with photo frames and small pictures of the two of us. They captured moments from when we were interning in Japan and living together.

But what caught my attention most was the white bed covered with strange, soft, pinkish objects that looked oddly familiar. My curiosity got the better of me, and I had to ask.

"What's that? Why does it look familiar?"

Phim followed my gaze to the bed and quickly ran over to gather the strange objects in her arms. She rushed back to me, her excitement shining through.

"Don't you remember? These are Mooyong's siblings! This one is Mu Khem (Salty Pig), and this one is Mu Wan (Sweet Pig). I secretly made them for months. Do you think my sewing skills have improved?"

I looked down at the unevenly stitched, pinkish stuffed pigs, all varying in size, swallowing hard as I tried to think of the best response to give her.

"Uh... well, you can kind of tell they're pigs. They're cute!"

"Stuffed pigs, right?" "No, Phim made them!"

"Phimmm..."

She looked so shy that I found her absolutely adorable. So much so that I couldn't resist wrapping my arms around her again, leaving just enough space between us for Mu Khem and Mu Wan.

"Thank you so much, Phim, for doing this for me. This is the best gift I've ever received."

Phim looked up at me, her eyes filled with meaning. Then, she said something I never thought I'd hear.

"What I've done... it's still too little compared to how I feel."

"1 love you, Ki."

"1 never told you, have I? That I love you."

"1 wrote it once, in a letter... but it was a letter from this exact day, 7 years ago. It's a shame... it was a letter I never sent, so you never got to read it."

"Kii... I've always loved you. Loved you more than anything, as much as one woman could ever love another. I'm sorry for never telling you that before. "

A wave of emotions I'd never realized existed before came crashing over me, pushing tears from my eyes. I buried my face into Phim's delicate shoulder and let myself sob openly, unashamed.

Oh... you,

You made me know a love with no conditions. Having you is what fills my heart, I want you to know.

Having you is what makes my healt whole.

I want you to know...

"1t's okay, Phim. You don't have to apologize. Even though you've never said it before, I've never felt like you didn't love me. You've always shown me your love."

"You've told me you love me through your actions..."

"But thank you for saying it today."

"1t's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard."

I kissed her soft lips deeply, as if I were a parched soul finally finding water, The kiss lingered for so long before I pulled away, only to press another tender kiss on her forehead with all the love I could give.

love you too, Phim. Let's stay together like this for a long, long time.

Oh... you,

You made me know a love with no conditions.

Having you is whatfills my heart, I want you to know.

Having you is what makes my heart whole.

Now I know, without needing to wait,

What love truly is.

The End—