

CHAPTER XVII - A LOVE MORE TRUE

Touma stared blankly at the dresses before him. His expression seemed to ask "what the hell is this?" It was (almost) a profound expression of confusion and of shock and of frustration, as if he was passing judgement upon the world (of fashion, that is).

This expression is one that I always found attractive.

To be honest, I could never really explain why.

Perhaps it's because I find it attractive when Touma assumes a *dominant* and *powerful* role. When he does that—when he looks upon the world as if it's an oyster whose pearl is his to take, I can see the ambition in his eyes, burning like a mighty flame with nothing to quench them. But I suppose I've always viewed Touma as just that: a strong and ambitious individual.

I felt a flick against my forehead. Touma's looking at me now. His expression's calm again.

How disappointing...

"Go ahead and pick one, Celeste," he said, clearly referring to the dresses in the store. "Choose one that'll make you *happy*. But choose carefully," he added quietly, in almost a whisper, "lest your happiness only be there for but a fleeting moment."

"What're you talking about?" I asked with a giggle. Of course, I *knew* what he was talking about. It had nothing to do with a dress. He meant love, didn't he? I don't even think he consciously let that warning slip out to me. His old lover is just still on his mind.

Choose your love carefully, lest the happy life with them that you imagined slip away from your fingertips in a fleeting moment's time. That's what he meant.

But that's fine. We all make mistakes.

We all fall.

We all pick ourselves back up.

We all *rise above*. That's part of life. Sometimes, people just need a little bit of *help* to rise and move on. And since Touma clearly needs someone by his side to help him, I'd gladly fill that role. I'll fill the void that *Michiko Inoue* left in his heart. I'll give him the love he *deserves* and make everything right. I know I will.

I know that no other girl can provide him with a love more true than mine. And I'll prove it. Nodding to myself, I look around once more and suddenly spotted a beautiful white dress with thin shoulder straps and a frilly but conservative skirt.

It's perfect.

Reaching my hand out, I take it off the rack. Glancing at the price tag, I make note of the 40,000 yen price tag. It's not *too* much. "How's this?" I ask Touma.

He glanced at the dress. His expression softens a little. "I like it," he said.

"Then I'm gonna go try it on!" I said. "Come on, let's go to the changerooms! Just wait outside, and I'll give you a little private fashion show or something!"

Touma nodded and followed me along to the changerooms. Stepping into one of the unoccupied rooms, I look back at him for a moment and smile before pulling the curtain shut.

Suddenly, a thought flows through my mind: *Michiko Inoue* would look good in this dress, actually. When I think about it carefully, in fact, I can't really think of many outfits that she'd look *bad* in.

Was *she* the one Touma mentioned who made any outfit look good?

Wait, what? Why the hell is Michiko Inoue so *perfect*?

As I continue to close the curtain, a distant figure catches my eye. My hand stops moving in an instant, leaving a sliver of space for me to look through. The figure's brown hair is inconspicuous, but those magenta-colored eyes of hers are all too recognizable.

Speak of the devil. Guess *who* showed up.

With Michiko Inoue suddenly entering the scene, should Touma turn around, he'd surely spot her. With all the training from our work, his eyes are sharper than those of a hawk! And if she manages to spot Touma, she'd surely approach him too! He isn't ready to face her again yet, however. A blind man can see that much.

"Celeste, quit staring at me," Touma said (oblivious, it seems, to the issue at hand). "Please hurry up and change."

"R-right," I replied, closing the curtain. All I have to do is be quick, right? I drop my black skirt and slip right out of the light blue blouse I have on. Adjusting my bra so the straps don't show too prominently (and trust me, they would—I'd be wearing *black* underwear with a *white* dress, after all), I put the dress on and adjust my glasses. After a quick look in the mirror, I hang up my own clothes on the hooks provided in the changeroom and pull the curtain open.

Touma smiled. "It looks good on you. The dress compliments your figure, and its design suits the *aura* you give off. It feels *regal and strong*, yet *gentle and down-to-earth*. I honestly like it."

My cheeks are red. I can tell. They feel like they're on fire. Stepping out of the changeroom, I approach Touma. "Well, I suppose I could get this one," I said, "but—"

I was going to say that I wanted to look around a bit more first, but something catches my eye. Michiko Inoue seems to be wandering around aimlessly. Though she hasn't seemed to notice us yet, she's headed straight for us!

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I can't focus. This isn't the same as being unable to focus in class because your teacher's a boring lecturer though. No, this is something else. I can't *stop* thinking about Touma. I miss him. I *want* him. I find myself curling my fingertips again and again as if doing so would bring me closer to being able to grasp him again. I just want to hold him.

I miss Touma.

I realize that I always say that. I know I do. But I can't help it. What can I do? I love Touma. I love him more than anything else, and I *know* that what I had with him was *special*. I still don't really know what sort of lustful demon had appeared and seemed to *possess* me and made me cheat on him, but I know that whatever it was, it wasn't really *me*. It wasn't *my* heart.

I love Touma.

Even now, just thinking about him is making my body feel hot. I know we're technically not seeing each other anymore, but even so, I'm terrified of the idea that he could be with another girl. After all, which girl could hold for him a love more true than mine?

And thus, even though he's no longer mine, I still wish to monopolize my Touma.

Oops. I suppose he's not *my* Touma anymore...not now, at least.

Is that weird of me? Or is that sort of greed just a natural human emotion? Is it strange that I still call him *mine*? Is it odd that I wish to monopolize him? When you love someone, it's natural to want them to yourself, isn't it?

Isn't it?

I'm just wandering around this shop without any clue of what to look for by now. I just want to pick out a dress that Touma would like. I just want him to tell me I'm beautiful one more time.

Just one more time.

I look around, searching for that perfect dress. And lo and behold, I think I've found it. A short distance away, there's a wonderful red dress with the most elegant little frills around the straps. The dress itself is very simple, with few details upon it. The dress for a minimalist.

I *know* Touma would like that one. Walking over to it, I pick it carefully off the shelf and turn towards the changerooms.

And at that moment, I feel my heart begin to race.

There's a man by the changerooms. I think it's Touma. It has to be, right? His hair is done in his signature side-parting style, and he's wearing the recognizable white blazer and black pants. It's probably safe to assume that he's wearing the black tank top too.

Beside the man (Touma?) is a face that I recognize instantly, all but confirming my suspicions. Her blonde hair can be seen from a mile away (in fact, how did I *not* see it earlier?), and those blue eyes fit almost perfectly into her glasses.

It's Celeste (I still don't know her damn name). Fuck all, why the hell is she so *perfect*? And why is she so close to my Touma? What the hell?

Having seemingly noticed me, Celeste's eyes shift over to me for a brief moment. Our eyes met. I blinked once and proceeded to stare right at her. And I shrugged.

Her eye quickly twitched.

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"What're you looking at?" Touma suddenly asked me. Of course, I couldn't tell him that Michiko Inoue had showed up. Or that she'd spotted me. And I definitely can't tell him that she's coming our way.

There's only one thing I can logically do, right? Yeah, there's only one thing...

I'm sorry if this pisses you off, Touma...

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I make my way towards Celeste and Touma. Touma's starting to turn around too. Maybe I can take the opportunity to talk to him a bit. Yeah, that would do.

That would do nicely.

I'm only meters away from them now. I can feel my heart pounding out of my chest. I love this feeling, to be honest. I love how Touma makes me feel. I love *Touma*. I don't want to leave him.

And yet in that instant, everything fell apart.

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Ignoring Michiko Inoue entirely, I sighed. Placing my hands on Touma's cheeks, I smile at him. "Hold still," I said. And then, I brought him close to me, clutching him tightly. I slowly leaned by face upwards, looking deeply into his eyes.

This is what I've been wanting this whole time.

I've had enough of Michiko Inoue. She's done enough damage. Now it's time for me to help heal Touma's wounds, and I'm going to make *sure* she doesn't ever hurt him again.

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She tried to kiss him.

Listen, I get it: Touma and I aren't dating right now. He's technically not my boyfriend. I have no right to stop him from kissing another girl. And he didn't even do it. They're getting close, but I can still stop them.

But even so, it *hurts*. I'm not really *sad* per se, but I *am* angry. And I am definitely jealous.

No, more than that, if I'm being honest.

I'm *livid*. I'm *crazy envious*. I don't even know why I'm this upset, but still. Celeste tried to *kiss* him. Touma didn't initiate it. *She* did.

She tried to kiss *my* Touma.

I can feel my emotions boiling over. I know I should approach things calmly. Touma has always told me that.

But just this once, I can't possibly listen to that advice.

"What the *fuck* do you think you're doing to *my* man?" I shout.