

V

"Let's walk home together, darling!" Hanae cried as the bell rang, signaling the end of the school day.

Yuuto jumped a little, snapping back to attention at the sound of her voice. He turned around slowly. "S-sure," he replied, rubbing the back of his head. Before Yuuto could say anything else, Hanae practically leapt out of her seat, grabbing her bag and taking him by the hand, dragging him out of the classroom.

Nori, yawning, turned to the right. "Hey dude, wanna go to karaoke or someth—wait, where'd you go?"

"You're too late, Einstein," Sayaka said, walking past him and out of the classroom.

"B-b-b-but..." Nori began.

"So, darling, shall we go visit your parents?" Hanae suggested.

"What do you mean 'visit?' I live with them, so I'm just going home," Yuuto replied. "I don't think I'm 'visiting' at all."

"Sure, but *I* am!"

"Uhhh...what?"

"How can I be a bride if I haven't even met my future in-laws?" Hanae commented.

"How do you even know they're your future in-laws?" Yuuto retorted. *That's a pretty good question, actually*, he thought. *Why didn't I ask sooner?*

"What? Did you think your fiancée was someone else?" Hanae asked, bringing Yuuto back to reality.

"W-well, no but—WAIT A MINUTE!" Yuuto cried, realization finally coming to him. "Since *when* did I have a fiancée?"

"Ummm..." Hanae paused. She raised a hand and began to count on her fingers, seemingly lost in thought, ignoring the fact that she was about to cross the road during a red light.

"HEY!" Yuuto shouted, reaching out and grabbing her by the arm, pulling her back to safety right before a passing truck could hit her. "Watch out for the friggin' traffic!"

Hanae blinked, coming back to her senses. "O-oh! I almost...you saved me, darling!" she cried, throwing her arms around him. "I just *knew* you cared!"

"I don't—err...well, I do but not like that—oh, you get what I mean!"

"Yeah! You're head over heels for me, just like I am for you!"

"Not even close."

Hanae sighed. "Aww...fine...but mark my words, I'll change that!" She cleared her throat. "Anyways, about your earlier question, you've had a fiancée for about nine years now."

"Nine years?" Yuuto mumbled. *But I haven't met her before! Besides, how could I have a fiancée when I was only six years old—oh, I get it now*, he thought. "Hanae, have we met before this?" he asked.

"Yeah," Hanae answered confidently, "we have when we were kids, once or twice. You disappeared soon after though, but when my parents said you had finally moved back to this city I just knew I had to see you again, so I transferred schools."

"Huh..."

"Perplexing, isn't it? Let's go to your place and see if your parents can help us figure it out!"

"Hey, good idea—OH, WAIT A MINUTE!"

"Uhhh...who're you?" Goro asked, staring at the girl beside his son.

"Y'know, Pops, I asked that very same question when I first met her," Yuuto chuckled.

"You two sure are dull," Aoi mumbled, walking out of the kitchen. "Like father, like son, I suppose," she smiled. "Welcome, Hanae. I take it your mother is doing well?"

"She is, Mrs. Ishikawa," Hanae responded, "and I am glad to see that you're also doing well. You look as young as ever!"

"Oh, stop it, you!" Aoi laughed. "It's been nine years since we've last met, and I'm already in my mid-forties!"

"I would never have guessed," Hanae said. "Incredible!"

"Keep telling her that," Goro laughed, nudging his son in the arm. The two men of the house shared a chuckle as Hanae continued to shower Aoi with compliments.

Minutes later, the four sat in the living room, sipping tea. Yuuto's eyes darted around uncomfortably. Hanae sat calmly beside him, a big grin plastered onto her face. Opposite to her, his mother wore an equally big grin. Beside her, his father sat there, rather confused and dumbfounded. He sighed. "Alright, so I guess I'll just address the elephant in the room."

"ELEPHANT? WHERE?" Goro cried.

"It's a metaphor, Pops."

"O-oh...right, I knew that! I was just testing you, that's all!"

Ignoring his father, Yuuto continued. "What's with all this 'fiancée' business?"

"FIANCÉE?" Goro cried. "W-wait, this isn't another one of those 'metaphors,' is it?"

Yuuto rolled his eyes. "Okay, clearly you're gonna be of no help, Pops, so wanna explain, Mom?"

Aoi froze in place, turning pale. With shaking hands, she slowly raised her cup to her lips, taking a sip of tea, and put it down. "I-I'm gonna use the washroom—" she began.

"You just went five minutes ago, dear," her husband replied.

"HOLY CRAP, LEARN TO THROW A WOMAN A LIFEL—I mean...uhh...oh God," she paused, noticing her son's suspicious glare. "F-fine," she said, giving in. "Nine years ago when we visited this city, we went to see one of my friends."

"That would be Minori, right?" Goro asked.

"Yes. Minori Tsukuda, that is. The two kids, the ones that you currently see before you, were busy playing outside. Therefore, while you and her husband were busy drinking yourselves to fucking death, we women discussed some more important matters and went ahead and arranged a marriage between our kids. However, I could have sworn I told you two already..."

"Never heard a word of it," Yuuto said.

"Not even a bit," Goro agreed. "I'm pretty sure you just *thought* you told everyone, not realizing that you didn't."

"Shit," Aoi mumbled. "I-I mean...please don't swear like Mommy," she laughed nervously.

"Well shit, you're too late on *that* one, Mom," Yuuto chuckled in response.

"Oh well, I tried."

"It was nice seeing you, Hanae, dear. Please take care of my son," Aoi smiled, waving.

"I will, for sure!" Hanae replied.

"I'll walk you home, it's getting late," Yuuto said, taking her hand.

"THEY'RE HOLDING HANDS!" Aoi suddenly screamed with excitement, causing her husband to jump.

Ignoring his parents, Yuuto took Hanae's hand and the two walked off.

"Darling, does our engagement upset you?" Hanae suddenly asked as the two continued walking.

"Honestly? Well," Yuuto replied, "it doesn't upset me at all. It *did* surprise the crap outta me, but it doesn't bother me since it's authentic."

"R-really?"

"Yeah. Promise."

"B-but even so, darling...I don't mind if you want to try dating other girls..."

"Wait, say what now?"

"It's only fair that you get a choice in who you fall in love with. I had already decided that I'd wait for you no matter what...but you were just informed of this arrangement. I've made a choice already, but you haven't, so I'm okay with you dating other girls until you're ready to decide whether or not you actually want to be with me..."

"Hanae..."

"Darling, I want you to have the chance to make an informed decision. After all, love is a difficult affair."

"I...I see." Yuuto took a deep breath, tightening his grip on her hand.

Hanae smiled at him, leaning her head over onto his shoulder. "And besides," she giggled, "if I let any other girl take you from me, then I don't deserve to be your fiancée!"

"R-right..." Yuuto chuckled.