

義妹生活

三河ごーすと

illust Hit en



Days with my Step Sister

presented by
ghost mikawa

Illustrations

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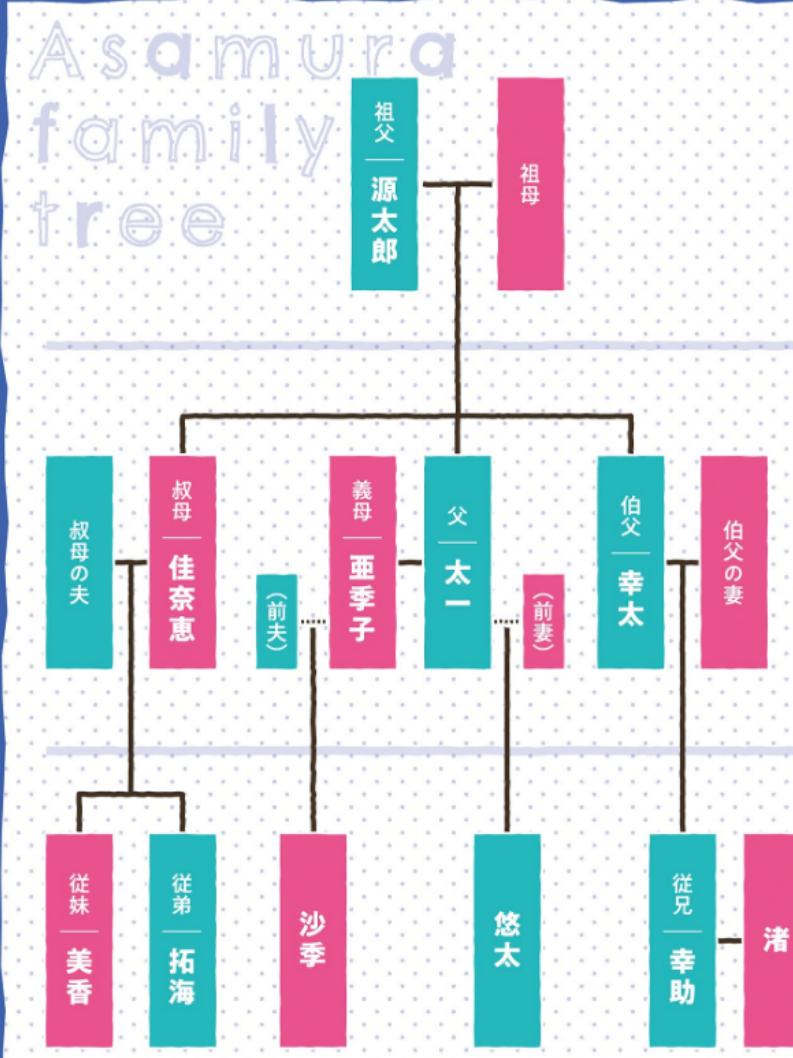






ふと、妹さんが
視界に入りこんくる。
前めりになって
画面に釘付になつてた。
彼女の頬にひと筋だけ
涙が零れて落ちる。
俺は慌ててクリーーに向き直った。
見てはいけないものを
見てしまったような気分だ。
同時に俺の心に
ひとつ感情が湧きあつる。
このひとを大事にしたい、
そんな気持ちだった。

浅村家 家系図



Prologue

Prologue: Asamura Yuuta

It was night in the living room. To counteract the bristling cold filling the room, we had the heat turned up to the point that the A/C unit was giving off healthy rattling sounds.

Along with that sound, I let out a faint groan as I worked through my physics textbook. I looked around the table and spotted a cup. I picked it up to take a sip and—Hm? I realized there was no fluid inside the cup. It turns out my cup of coffee was empty, which immediately ruined all my focus. I turned the cup upside down to get the last bit of coffee out, but after a single drop touched my lips, no more sweet joy came.

It had gotten quite late at night. If I drink another cup now, I probably won't be able to sleep. I, Asamura Yuuta, was pondering what liquid to make my next partner for my late-night studying session, considering my focus had already run out, when I suddenly heard a bewildered "Huh?" from behind me. I turned around. Standing there was the girl who had become my younger step-sister roughly half a year ago —Ayase-san.

"Ah, sorry. Was the A/C too loud?"

"Not at all. I had my door closed. I just didn't think you'd be here this late," she said and raised her head to look at the

clock, which said it was already 11 pm. Normally, I'd be sitting in my room studying by this time.

"Want some hot chocolate?" She asked, pointing at my empty cup.

"Honestly, that sounds pretty good right now."

"Then I'll make some. I'm gonna drink some myself, anyway."

"Thanks."

She turned on our electric kettle, took out the hot chocolate mix from the drawer, and picked out a cup for herself and a larger mug. With all that prepared, she sat down on a chair. In the meantime, I took out the milk from the fridge, washing the cup I had just used for the coffee. I accepted the larger mug from Ayase-san, poured milk in there, and put it into the microwave. To finish it off, I pressed the button on it that said "Milk."

Meanwhile, Ayase-san was busy mixing the cocoa powder and sugar in her cup. She poured a bit of the hot water from the kettle into her cup and continued mixing. Normally she looked like a cool beauty, but now she was just twirling her spoon around in her cup, which gave her a much more immature and youthful image. The microwave beeped.

"It's warm."

"Thanks."

Ayase-san put half of the chocolate powder mix into my cup, pouring the warm milk on top.

“It’d taste even better if we added a secret ingredient, like butter.”

“We don’t have to go all out for some late-night hot chocolate, you know.”

“Well that’s true. But I have to say, it’s pretty rare for you to study in the living room this late,” Ayase-san said, still mixing her hot chocolate.

“I was actually doing just fine in my own room, but I started losing focus, so I decided to change location. I thought a different environment might give me different results, or something like that.”

“I see,” Ayase-san nodded. “I think I get what you mean.” She finished mixing the hot chocolate and placed the cup in front of me. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

Then she began working on her own portion. It might seem ordinary, but she always begins everything by preparing the share for other people first. It’s very much like her. She probably didn’t want mine to get cold while she prioritized herself. I think that living with Ayase-san has allowed me to become more sensitive to the actions of other people around me.

“Okay, done.” Ayase-san made a satisfied nod and put the cup to her mouth, taking a sip.

I could see her throat move, her eyes closing slightly like she was relaxing. I joined her.

“Mhm, delicious,” I said.

“You could’ve started without me.”

“But I would have felt bad for spoiling the taste.”

“You’re weird,” Ayase-san said with a wry smile.

The scent of the hot chocolate tickled the tip of my nose. Time was passing in a leisurely and comfortable manner. We both took another sip.

“It sure has gotten cold lately.”

“It’s December, after all.” She spoke in a calm way, and my attention unintentionally drifted towards her moving lips.

Her rose-colored lips—They reminded me of that Halloween evening, which caused my cheeks to turn hot. We both desire to touch each other like lovers. Through that kiss, we’ve confirmed that. Back in Fall, I was perfectly fine and happy to simply feel her warmth next to me. And yet, only one season after that, I can’t be satisfied with just staying next to each other. I guess humans can take for granted any fortune they have been given.

That being said, our end-of-term exam period was right after that, so we haven’t even kissed since then. We both care about our grades a lot, so we decided to talk things through and came to the conclusion that we should separate our private and public lives. Plus, we’d have to do that sort of thing when nobody else is around. And since we’re also siblings studying at a high school, we share our living space with our parents.

Conducting ourselves as lovers that bypass the line of brother and sister in this situation is probably much harder than for the standard couples. I poured some more hot chocolate down my throat and started thinking. Can’t we

increase the times we're allowed to seek each other's touch? And that's when I remembered something: My birthday is in December. And so is Ayase-san's birthday. We talked about the exact dates just last week, and I found out that Ayase-san's is on the 20th. Mine on the other hand is on the 13th. And as expected, we pretty quickly decided to just celebrate both of them on the 24th. Both Ayase-san and I smiled at each other, realizing that it'd be the same as ever.

"What's up? Did you remember something funny?" Ayase-san gave me a confused look.

"Ah, well, something like that."

"Oh, really?" She didn't even ask what I had been thinking about as she got up from her seat.

She wrapped her hands around the cup, presumably to warm them up, and headed back towards her room. Midway there, she seemed to have remembered something and turned around. Quietly, she trotted back to the table where I sat.

"About our birthdays."

"Huh?"

I could feel my heart rate spike. Realizing that the person you like is thinking about the same thing at the same time as you are sure gives you an adrenaline boost.

"How about we actually celebrate each other's birthdays properly?"

"You mean on the 13th and 20th?"

“Yep. We’ve never had anybody celebrate them with us on the actual day, right?”

“I... guess you’re right.”

“I figured. And I... well... want to spend it... not just as siblings, you know.”

I understood what she meant. I felt the same way.

“I get you.”

“And there was something I wanted to discuss with you.”

She said that she only wanted to tell me after exams were over, but she changed her mind. She told me about a conversation she had with my old man around the time of Halloween.

Even if you break the law, and you’re dealt severe punishment with no room for you to claim innocence, I won’t ever deny that you’re part of my family. No matter what it may be.

Hearing what my old man said about us really made me think. How cool can you be, dangit?

“I feel like Akiko-san would say the same thing. Though definitely not in front of you, Ayase-san.”

“Probably.”

Her words sounded indifferent, but I could see how her cheeks relaxed a bit. She’s really happy, I imagine.

“But that statement made me start thinking.” Ayase-san took a deep breath, making an expression like she wasn’t sure if she should say what she wanted to say or not.

However, her mouth did open eventually.

"If it's our family, they might accept the relationship we are in, no?"

I started thinking. She might be right.

"Dad would definitely be honest about how he felt. If he hated the idea, he'd say that, and he'd forbid us, too. He can be pretty stubborn despite the way he looks..."

Even with all the previous drama with my mother, he never complained in front of me. All he did was apologize.

"However, I'm not sure if Akiko-san could truly be honest with us if she didn't feel comfortable."

"So you think your father would accept us, but you're not sure about my mother. Could I ask why you think that?"

"What I'm afraid of is that Akiko-san might regret getting married again."

"But, Asamura-kun, knowing them..."

"I know full well that Akiko-san isn't that sort of person. However, my actual mother never showed her discontent openly. So I'm worried Akiko-san might just clam up all her genuine feelings... and I just can't cast aside that possibility."

"That's..."

"Not gonna happen," is probably what she wanted to say, but she held back. Her self-restraint just made me feel apologetic. A painful memory of mine has crossed the line of being just a memory and is now bringing me to the point of

thinking something rude about Akiko-san. However, there's just a thread of worry clinging to my mind that both Dad and Akiko-san are only getting along well now that there's still love between them. And since I can't read minds, I can't discard the possibility that she's just acting happy on the surface. And I know what happens if you carry this feeling deep inside you for too long without letting it out. All too well... Because the only time they didn't fight in front of me was when we celebrated my birthday.

Ayase-san took a short breath and spoke up.

"I was the same."

I gasped. I forgot. Ayase-san would also grieve the possibility of my father regretting the marriage with Akiko-san.

"Before I talked with your father, I was just as worried as you are right now."

"I... see..."

"Yeah. But I won't tell you to talk with Mom, either. Even if she tells the same thing, you and I are still different. There's no guarantee you'll feel the same way I do."

"Yeah, that makes sense."

"So... I think it's okay if we don't come clean just yet," Ayase-san said and smiled.

Her expression made it seem like she was reassuring me, and it made my heart feel lighter.

"We can discuss the plans for our birthdays later. I'm going back to studying now."

“Yeah, I’ll continue here for a bit longer.”

“Don’t stay up too late, okay?”

“Right back at you.”

Her back, covered with a white cardigan, moved towards the door and eventually disappeared. I let out a sigh and grabbed my cup. The faint remains of chocolate powder stuck to my throat, not allowing me to comfortably swallow it all down.

Chapter 1

December 11th (Friday) - Asamura Yuuta

The sound of the final bell ringing came from the speakers inside the classroom. The teacher swiftly disappeared out into the hallway, and as joyful voices filled the classroom, my classmates moved their chairs and desks out of the way to simply have fun. Now that we had received our end-of-term exam results, most of them seemed refreshed and relieved. The boy with the large back in front of me towered up and grabbed the back of the desk. He's probably heading over to baseball practice like always—Or so I thought.

“One more thing, Asamura.”

I was surprised when he spoke to me. Normally, Maru would just give me a brief goodbye and dash off to his practice.

“What’s up?”

“I’ve got a club meeting now, but do you mind tagging along until we get to the clubroom?”

“Huh? The clubroom? Why?”

“There’s something I wanna give you.”

“Well... sure?”

It's not like I have to get home early or anything. With that thought in mind, I tagged along with Maru, grabbing my bag so I could go home right after talking to him. When I glanced outside the hallway windows, I could see all the trees in the courtyard with their barren branches, no leaves in sight. It really made me realize that winter had come. With no more leaves to obscure the view, I could see the courtyard below quite clearly. A slight breeze was blowing a few lonely leaves along like the last remains of fall.

“Oh yeah, Maru. How did you do on your exams?”

“Hm? I scored a total of 828 points.”

“As expected, huh?”

He's keeping up his position as a regular in the baseball team while also scoring respectable results. By the way, I got a total score of 819.

“I still can't compete against you, Maru. I do feel like I've been working pretty hard, though.”

“Hm... Well, you don't have to set me up on a pedestal, you know?”

“I guess you're right.”

My grades have gone up compared to the last standardized tests, and the distance between Maru and I has grown smaller, as well.

“You've improved a lot since last summer, right?”

“It’s probably thanks to the extra classes I took during summer break.”

“Just that?”

“Huh?”

“Well, whatever.”

After that, Maru kept walking without saying another word. Once we stepped out of the front entrance, the cold breeze made my body shiver. My fingertips tensed up, too. I can’t help but feel sorry for the sports club members practicing in this cold. Someone from the go-home club like me can’t even hope to compare. After a bit more walking, I spotted the clubroom building. It consisted of two floors, resembling a regular two-floor apartment complex. The baseball club’s clubroom was located next to the courtyard.

What first greeted me as the door opened was the scent of sweat. And right after, I picked up another scent of citrus deodorant, like it was trying to cover up the initial stench of sweat. The lockers next to the walls were stuffed with the club members’ personal belongings and other gear. Some were neatly organized, others had gear stuffed into them carelessly. In one corner of the room stood a metallic container that looked like umbrella storage, except it was holding metal bats. Some of the club members were changing while talking about this and that, and they called out to Maru as he arrived.

They even gave me a polite greeting when they saw me with Maru. He introduced me as his classmate, and they humored me with a brief conversation. I think it’s probably more because I’m Maru’s friend and less because I’m their senior, but they were interacting with me with respect and politeness. That, however, made me feel like I was standing

out like a sore thumb, like I didn't quite belong. I waited near the entrance of the room as Maru took out a plastic bag from his locker and stuffed his backpack in its place. During that time, Maru's juniors talked to him about whatever came to mind.

"Sorry for the wait."

"Totally fine."

I didn't dislike seeing that Maru was this popular. Even if it didn't involve me, I felt happy.

"So, is this what you wanted to give me?"

"Yep. I didn't feel too confident about leaving it in the classroom."

He was carrying a small plastic bag next to his waist. I went ahead and took a brief glance inside it after he gave it to me. It turned out to be a bunch of manga volumes. Not to mention the size wasn't a regular paperback pocket edition (a small B6, 17x11cm), but a B6-sized one that was a bit bigger, about 18x13cm. It's the kind of size you often see when it comes to young adult manga. And there were three whole volumes in there. I see now why he didn't want to bring these into the classroom.

"And all these are for me?"

"My newest recommendation. This one's great. I can see it being the next big hit!"

"Really? I'll look forward to reading that, then."

But that also got me thinking. If this was all he wanted to give me, then we could've met up elsewhere so that he

didn't have to lug it around—and when I got that far in the thought, I realized where he was going with this.

"I bought them ahead of time. This Sunday's your birthday, right?"

Only now did I realize that this was supposed to be my birthday present.

"You didn't have to..."

"It's interesting, you know? Though they're a bit unorthodox at times."

"I mean, when *aren't* your recommendations like that, Maru?"

"Haha, good point. Then again, I've got just as much taste for the orthodox, so you can read it without having to worry."

"Yes, yes. Thanks, I'm happy."

I was poking a bit of fun at him, but I was genuinely happy. I didn't expect him to even give me a present, though. He never brought up the subject of my birthday, and he didn't give me a present last year, either. This couldn't have been a bigger surprise. And on the subject of birthday presents, I remembered something Maru had told me half a year ago. Something about him celebrating someone else's birthday. He talked himself out of it when I asked for who it was, though. Maybe that's when he started becoming interested in giving other people presents. I should give him something for his birthday.

"Since we can't meet up on Sunday, I figured now's the day."

“You’ve got practice on Sunday, yeah?”

“Sorry we can’t celebrate it together. Well, I doubt you’ll be lonely on your birthday.”

“Don’t be like that. I’m really happy.”

“Well, it’s nothing major, so don’t sweat it. Talk to you later.” Maru waved his hand and made his way to the back of the room.

I decided to start heading home myself when a club member suddenly called out to me. I wondered what he wanted. He seemed to be a fellow second-year student like us, at least.

“Does Maru sometimes talk with Narasaka-san?”

I certainly didn’t expect *her* name to come up.

“Huh? Narasaka... you mean that...?”

“Yeah. That really cute girl.”

“So... what about her and Maru?”

“There’s a rumor going around that those two have been talking with each other all friendly-like.”

“Well... I haven’t heard anything about that.”

I wasn’t lying. Maru didn’t tell me anything. And even if I did know something, I wouldn’t tell everyone who asked.

“I see...”

Maru himself had apparently avoided the topic or remained silent about it, so there wasn’t much to gain from the person

in question. However, he didn't deny the fact that they were talking at all. Since they're both at the top of the student year in terms of grades, people have started assuming that maybe they're regularly talking or even dating.

"Okay, got it. Sorry to keep you here."

"Don't worry about it."

I bowed briefly and left the baseball club's room. I made my way to the bike storage area while thinking about the conversation that happened just now. Are Maru and Narasaka-san dating? Honestly, I think it's just a misunderstanding, but if that were to be true, then that would mean both of them are hiding their relationship from me and Ayase-san. It's a secret relationship.

Then again, it's not really something they would have to go public with. They know about my sibling relationship with Ayase-san, but there's no need to go all the way and say we basically love each other. There's no meaning to parading around with a sign saying "We started dating today"—

"Hold on..."

That's not entirely true. If you think about it in terms of animal society, then it makes sense. They would want to show off that they've entered a physical relationship as a male and female animal. That's why humans have wedding ceremonies and engagements and the like. Plus, if a regular boy and girl start dating like an average couple, a majority of people will congratulate them. And if you like being congratulated, then it'd be worthwhile to reveal such secrets.

Then again, considering how popular Narasaka-san is, I feel like quite a few people would have complaints at the fact

that she's dating someone. Then it'd make sense to keep it a secret... But she's not some kind of idol, so there's not really any harm in making it public... If so, then would keeping quiet about their relationship be kind of strange after all? Anyway, I'm jumping the shark here. In modern society, the question of being married or not shouldn't be brought into consideration when discussing lifestyle or work. There's no need to completely specify everything like that...

"Phew..."

I let out a sigh. All that thinking caused my head to almost overheat. As long as I don't know if Maru and Narasaka-san are really dating, thinking about the what-ifs and possibilities is a waste of time. I stuffed my bag into my bicycle's basket and stomped down on the pedals. I've got a shift at a bookstore to get to.

Since it was December, the sun was already starting to set. The sky peeking out between the gaps of the buildings was already looking like a red curtain, and the LED lights inside the Shibuya Town Center were beginning to light up. Everywhere you looked, your sight was filled with decorations, lights, and the sounds of countless people. The tree standing in front of the train station was riddled with electronic lights, and the Hachiko statue behind it had a red ribbon around it, which made the good boy look like he was smiling in pride. Not to mention the countless advertisement screens on and above the buildings that were advertising all sorts of winter sales that were going on.

The bookstore I worked at wasn't much different. Red, green, and white lights were everywhere, and the glass door at the front had speckles of white sprayed on it to resemble snow. I swear... it's still two full weeks before Christmas.

With these thoughts filling my mind, I entered the bookstore. Walking around inside, I let out another faint sigh. A bookstore usually is an establishment that doesn't experience much difference when it comes to events like this, but since we're pretty close to the entertainment district, we usually experience a larger number of customers. And today it seems that it might be the same. After seeing the manager and hearing his plans for the shift, I couldn't help but let out a voice of surprise.

"Wait, Yomiuri-senpai is taking the day off because she's not feeling well?"

"Exactly. That's why it'll be just you and Ayase-san today. I know it'll be rough, but I'm counting on you two."

"Yes, I understand."

Just the two of us for the whole shift... that's gonna be rough. I'll have to go all out for today. I went to the changing room, changed into my uniform, and stepped outside again, when—

"I'm sorry for being late!"

Ayase-san arrived, still wearing her uniform.

"It's fine, you're still on time."

We've got another ten minutes until our shift starts, so there's no need to rush like that. I greeted our other colleagues who had been taking care of the cash register up to this point as I headed to the back. Since there were only two other people taking care of the cash register, we'll probably be bound to follow in their tracks until another one of our late-shift colleagues gets here. That's why I'd like to check the storage for now...

"Ah, crap. I think I should have checked the bookshelves first."

I looked at the mountain of books on our stage and groaned to myself. Even if I knew how many magazines we had in storage, it doesn't matter much if I don't remember how packed the displays at the front are. At the cash register, I could use the computer to confirm how much stock we have of certain things, but it's questionable if I'll be able to make the time to check the actual situation up front. If Yomiuri-senpai were here, she definitely would have checked the stock on the store shelves first. What a blunder. I lightly bit my lip and looked at the time. I had three more minutes before the take-over. There was nothing more that I could do. I missed my reliable senior as I made my way towards the cash register.

"It's time. We're taking over!"

"Oh, thanks a bunch."

"Good luck, you two!"

The two employees who had previously been looking after the cash register bowed their heads slightly as they thanked us, leaving room for Ayase-san and I. We didn't have much time to talk, as the next customers were already waiting in front of us. I immediately switched into customer service mode, dealing with their requests like I was in a trance. Once one customer left with their purchase, the next one placed their book in front of me. There was no time to even breathe.

The storm of customers was especially fierce today. It must be because the Christmas season was slowly creeping up on us, but a lot of them wanted their purchases wrapped and prepared for gift-giving, which takes extra time for us to

take care of. Adding a plastic cover is one thing, but wrapping it like a present goes well above and beyond that. For starters, you can't use regular wrapping paper. There were a lot of customers asking for the special Christmas-themed one, so we had to check that with them first. This usually means we had to show them both kinds of wrapping paper and ask them directly. Then again, the majority of them went with the Christmas one, which wasn't surprising considering the season.

And of course, you can't forget about the ribbons. The tape is relatively easy to handle, but wrapping it in any wrong or clumsy way will only make it look second-hand, and you have to start over. After you finish the cross and add a bow at the top, you need to get in with your scissors. You can't cut it straight; you need to cut it loose from a downward angle to really create that vanity vibe. Now that I think about it, I kinda feel bad for the customers I had when I had just started out here. And while internally groaning at every wrapping request, I once again started thinking about what present to give to Ayase-san, which has been on my mind a lot these days. That being said, I was still careful to not ruin any of my wrapping for the customers.

A birthday present, huh? I began thinking while letting my hands move automatically, almost like a robot. Honestly speaking, I still had no plan or present in mind. What should I even give her? What would she be happy to receive? Even when I prepared a present for Narasaka-san, I basically let Ayase-san handle everything. Thankfully it all worked out since she knows Narasaka-san's preferences.

"Good work, you two."

The manager's voice brought me back to reality. While I was absentmindedly working, the number of customers lining up

in front of the registers had decreased drastically.

“You’ll get help soon, just power through the rest.”

“Yes.”

The pain of Yomiuri-senpai’s absence had once again been made clear to us. We had absolutely no time to tend to the situation at the bookshelves or displays. We had been standing at the cash registers the entire time.

“That was rough. Thankfully we’ve got a bit of breathing room now,” Ayase-san said.

“It’s pretty tough with just the two of us, yeah.”

“I’m a bit worried about Yomiuri-san.”

“I hope it’s just a seasonal cold... But I guess we’ve gotta be careful ourselves.”

Once I confirmed that we had a brief break of customers, I quickly stepped away from the cash register.

“I’ll go check out the situation in the store.”

“Please do.”

While being careful to not rush around like a maniac, I went to check the number of magazines on the displays and books inside the bookshelves. And I also looked around to see if any customer needed help. Sure enough, I found a husband looking for a certain mystery series his wife had asked him to buy, so I quickly guided him to where it was. I figured it would be a novel, but it turned out to be a comic, and after I guessed one publisher, it was actually another, so even helping him out cost me a bit of time.

Once I made it back to the cash register, I was greeted by another line of customers. I guess I can't waste any more time looking after the shopping area. I went back to the counter and opened up a second cash register. After around an hour, another employee came to help us, and we were finally able to take a breather.

When our shift ended and we stepped out of the bookstore, the darkness of night was already greeting us. The streets were illuminated by the Christmas lights, lighting our way home as I pushed my bike while Ayase-san walked next to me. Every breath I let out was snow white, and holding the handlebars was painfully cold. Gripping them even slightly made my fingers hurt immediately.

"Don't you have any gloves?" Ayase-san asked from next to me.

"I'm always afraid my hands will slip from the handlebars if I wear any. Well, it's just a problem of sensation, I guess."

Objectively speaking, it's a bit dubious if it will make my hands slip easier if I wear gloves. Then again, there are special gloves specifically made for bikes, so considering my own safety, it might be best for me to buy them. Some schools in the Tokyo area are already adjusting their school regulations to make people with bikes wear helmets as they travel to school. Suisei High still isn't affected, but maybe it won't take too long until we are. And in that case, they might go ahead and add regulations to require gloves, too.

"Then you definitely need some," Ayase-san commented after listening to my thoughts.

I could pick up a faintly worried tone from her voice. When I noticed that, I couldn't find the courage to just lightly respond "I'll be fine."

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I’ll look into that.”

Though I don’t know how I feel about getting an actual helmet in addition to some gloves.

“You’re not wearing a scarf, either. Aren’t you cold?”

“That one’s definitely too dangerous. What if the scarf gets caught in the gears while I’m riding my bike?”

“I see. That makes sense.”

“I’d have to either tuck it inside my clothes or get one of those neck warmers. That being said, I’ve never really been bothered by the cold that much.”

“I see,” Ayase-san nodded. “But it’s freezing today, no? Hey, turn your bike this way.”

“Huh? But that’s really hard to walk, no?”

I didn’t know what exactly her reasoning was, but I moved the bike away from the roadside, putting it between me and Ayase-san. It made me feel like the distance between us had grown, which disappointed me a bit. Following that, Ayase-san moved her left hand towards the handlebar of the bike, placing it on my left right hand—Ahh, I see.

If I kept the bike in the same position, Ayase-san would have to stretch her arm past me as we walked, which would be a pain to do and kind of dangerous. Thanks to this, I could feel the warmth of her glove covering the back of my hand.



“Is it a bit warmer?”

“Ah... yeah...”

“It would have been too dangerous otherwise, so this is all I could come up with.”

“I know, thanks.”

She had to be careful not to press her hand against mine too much, but even this was enough to cover my hand from the wind, and it allowed me to feel her warmth, if only a bit. After that, we simply continued to walk next to each other in silence. We couldn’t avoid running into other people passing us by, and I couldn’t help but be conscious of how they must look at us holding hands like this. Though I do understand that it’s not exactly something that stands out like a sore thumb. In order to hide my own embarrassment, I opted to bring up the exam results we had gotten back today. When I told Ayase-san my score, she reluctantly confessed hers—815 points. Since I had 819, I won with a small 4-point difference, which caused Ayase-san to comment with a defeated expression.

“I lost again...”

“It’s just four points, so that’s really small stuff. Plus, it’s amazing that you got a 94 in modern literature.”

It’s impressive that she’s increased her grades that much in only half a year. Plus, I’m still attending a prep school on the side. If Ayase-san joined my prep school, she’d probably leave me in the dust right away. She might even get into the top 10 of the student year with ease. But when I mentioned that, Ayase-san shook her head.

“I have no plans of going there.”

“Well, it costs a lot, so I understand.”

Plus, there's also Ayase-san's personality of how she never wants to rely on anyone else, so she's probably dead-set on achieving everything with her own studying capabilities.

"I mean, I'm not so stubborn as to say I'll never go... But I just wouldn't want to trouble my family if that resulted from me attending prep school. And just as you said before, sometimes it's important to also rely on others."

"Oh, that? Well, I basically just stole that from Yomiuri-senpai, though."

"But it's just that right now I don't really feel like going, I guess?"

"If you ever change your mind, just let me know. I'll help you get prepared for everything."

"Thanks," Ayase-san said, as I felt her putting a bit more strength into the grip of her hand on top of mine.

It wasn't an oppressive pressure that wouldn't let me move, but it conveyed her warmth even more fiercely than before. My breath was still white, the winter breeze entering through my collar was freezing, and yet that one hand was scorching hot.

"Plus, if we were together..."

Her faintly muttered words didn't reach my ears. When I turned my head to look at her, she had already directed her gaze forward, piercing through the darkness of the night. The crowd of people and nightly noise slowly but surely grew more distant as we started walking down a narrow street that directed us toward our home. After we passed by the yellow lights of a parking lot, we—my step-sister and I—saw the lights of our flat in the distance.

Upon entering our home, we first looked at the dining table. A vinyl bag sat there, which seemed to contain a lunch box or something of that sort. After that, our attention was drawn to the small note attached to it.

‘Dinner!’

I quickly checked my LINE messages. My old man had sent me one, which said *‘I bought you some snacks for when you get back from work.’*

We checked inside the bag. “Oh, gyoza,” I said.

“And this here is sweet-and-sour pork and pepper steak.” Ayase-san took out the contents of the bag and placed them on the table.

Since our shift had to be adjusted, neither Ayase-san nor I had the time to get home after school and prepare anything for dinner. He probably knew this and had bought this for us. And as for the person in question, he most likely had already eaten and gone to bed. Akiko-san, naturally, is still at work.

“Do you want any soup, Asamura-kun?”

“We should have some boil-in-the-bag soup. I’m good to go with that. What about you, Ayase-san?”

Since she nodded in agreement, I stuffed my hand into the food shelf and grabbed a bag of corn soup. It’s the granular type. While the electric kettle was boiling some water, I took out two soup bowls and placed them on the table. In the meantime, Ayase-san placed the vegetables from the plastic bag on several plates. If it was just me, I’d simply eat it cold with the plastic tableware that came with it, but Ayase-san always warms up the food, and she likes using our own tableware instead. Apparently, it’s her policy to make it look

as good as it tastes, and seeing the steaming vegetables on the blue plates does increase my appetite. After adding some hot rice, we got together and started eating.

"So that's the sauce you use, Asamura-kun," Ayase-san muttered.

"Huh? Is it weird?" I asked, confused.

Both of us were using the tare sauce from a small plate in front of each of us to eat the gyoza. At a glance, I couldn't tell the difference, but upon closer inspection of her sauce, I finally realized what she meant.

"That's a sweet one, right?"

"Yep, sweet. Are you only using soy sauce?"

"Huh? Isn't that what you normally eat with gyoza?"

"It's gotta be sweet, no?"

"...Well, is it good?"

"That's my line."

I can't even imagine the taste. I just blurted that out in the heat of the moment, and Ayase-san slid her small plate toward me. She's probably telling me to try it out. But my body came to a sudden halt. Can I really use the same plate as her? Even amongst families, there are instances where you wouldn't want to share something. I personally am the type of person who isn't bothered by it, but still. I'm conscious about it for a different reason. Instead of dwelling too long on it, I just told myself that this was a normal thing for a family to do.

I dunked my gyoza into her sweet sauce and took a bite. Since it was still warm, I felt the steaming juices fill my mouth as the skin covered my teeth. Along with that was the flavor of the sweet sauce. It's different from the taste I'm used to. But it's not too sweet for me to eat. It's just as tasty, I just can't explain it.

"I see, so that's what it tastes like."

"Is it good?"

"Yep, I think so. I feel like it's a bit lacking in some areas, but the taste is a lot more refined."

"Right? And it's even better with pepper."

"What's Akiko-san's preference?"

"She's the same as me. Soy sauce is a bit too rich-tasting for her."

"I see. Ah, wanna try mine, too?"

I slid my small plate over towards her. Ayase-san grabbed one piece of gyoza with her chopsticks, put it into the soy sauce, and carried it back to her mouth, only to momentarily pause. However, she quickly continued and stuffed it into her mouth.

"Mhm, it tastes like soy sauce."

"Shocking, right?"

We took back our respective plates and continued to eat in silence. Around the time we finished our dinner, I brought up the topic that I had been thinking about on the way home.

"So, about our birthdays."

Ayase-san raised her head.

“Hm? You mean the presents we’ll give each other?”

“Yep, I was thinking about a present to get you. Is there anything you want?”

“Ah, I was gonna ask the same thing.”

So she’s the same, huh? We do really resemble each other when it comes to things like this. I doubt either of us would be happy if we received something we wouldn’t enjoy. And that’s exactly why we both wanted to check anything beforehand. That’s why we decided to ask each other instead of coming up with something ourselves.

“Also, the price. I’d rather not have it be something too expensive.”

“True. You’re trying to save money, after all.”

“So... is there something you’d like, Asamura-kun?”

A question like that out of the blue isn’t gonna be an easy one to answer. That being said, I knew that saying “Anything would be fine” is absolutely out of the question. It’s like saying “I’m fine with anything” after being asked what you’d like to eat. Instead, I just asked her to give me a bit of time to think about it.

“How about a neck warmer?”

“Ah, because of what we were talking about before?”

On the way home just now, she did mention that I looked cold, especially around my neck. I just said that wearing a scarf would be too dangerous. Following that train of

thought, it's quite likely she had considered giving me a scarf as a present. And since a neck warmer isn't too expensive, it'd make for a good gift.

"What about you, Ayase-san? Anything in particular you want?"

I received an immediate response.

"Soap I could use for bathing."

"Soap...?"

I didn't quite expect that answer. When thinking about presents, I think the majority would want something that symbolizes or shapes the love someone has for you.

"I mean, even if I receive something that'll stay with me every year, I'll end up wearing presents all over my body at some point, and if the presents end up broken or ruined, I'll be forced to throw away something that was one precious to me. If that's the case, I'd rather get something that can be used up from the start."

That train of thought is very much like Ayase-san. At first glance, it might seem cold and distant, but if you flip it around, it makes it sound like Ayase-san is giving her opinion under the premise that our relationship and exchanging presents will continue for years to come. It's not gonna be over after just one birthday. She speaks this way because I'm someone she'll keep exchanging presents with...

"Got it. Then, your present **this year** will be soap."

Ayase-san understood what I meant by that statement and showed me a happy smile.

Chapter 2

December 11th (Friday) - Ayase Saki

The shortened homeroom ended with the teacher stepping out of the classroom, and the tense atmosphere abruptly relaxed. My classmates began discussing their Christmas plans prematurely, and I busied myself checking through the answer sheet I had just received. I had scored a total of 815 points, which is a pretty satisfactory result.

“Sakiii! Your face tells me you’ve scored quite well in the examination, Sire!” Maaya jogged over toward my desk.

“Sire...? Were you watching another historical anime again?”

“I am who they call the Failing Grade Samurai.”

“I can already see you getting mown down during your first encounter.”

“Maybe ronin would sound cooler?”

“Both are fine. Both will get you sliced immediately. Also, can we stop with the whole samurai stuff already?”

“Hmph, then we can just go with... Erm...”

“Again, I don’t care either way.”

She seemed oddly fixated on this whole historical act, but as I personally couldn’t be bothered, so I just ignored it and moved on.

“You’re as cold as ever, Saki! We’re almost halfway through December, so can’t you at least warm up a bit during this season? Then I’d stick to you like a moth to a lamp! I wanna see a warm and puffy Saki-tan!”

“Can you not treat me like a stove? So, how did you fare?”

I was talking about her exam results, of course.

“801! No yakuza, no oaths, and no identification! That’s all I’m gonna say¹!”

“What does that even mean?”

“Since you’re such an innocent li’l Saki, you get a candy!”

“Sure, sure.”

Maaya took out non-existent candy and placed it into the hand I offered her.

“You’ve gotten a lot better at playing along with other people’s jokes! I guess I’ve gotta thank Asamura-kun for that.”

“Why’d you suddenly bring him up out of nowhere?”

Maaya didn’t respond. She simply grinned at me. I realized too late that I had been baited. But no matter what I say now, I fear she’ll just make fun of me again, so I just sealed my lips tightly and dealt with the shame.

“And how about you?” Maaya asked.

“I got 815 points.”

“Ohh! No wonder you made such a victorious grin! That’s amazing.”

“I wasn’t making that sort of—”

...Or was I? I may have had that kind of face. I feel like I did. I could tell that my cheeks were loose enough to move on their own. And I think I sounded pretty excited, too. And as if to answer my thoughts, the people around us grew noisier, too. They were saying things like “The air around Ayase-san is different from usual...” and “That’s the first time I’ve seen her smile,” and so on. You’re joking, right? I must have smiled before today, right?

“Why are they all acting like they’re seeing a rare animal at the zoo?”

“I mean, that attitude of yours is on par with a metal slime when it comes to rarity.”

“Can you stop using examples I don’t understand...?”

“I’m saying that you usually act like THE cool beauty. But it’s not something as cool as that, and more like you’re simply insensitive and you don’t care if people like you or not. Even though you’re super sensitive when it comes to what other people think of you.”

Maaya’s words may have sounded like harsh stabs where it hurt, but she’s not wrong. I personally was just surprised to hear this much positivity coming from my classmates.

“A 14-point difference, huh? Almost there... I’m definitely not gonna lose next time!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Kaaaaah! Your shit-eating grin is even more annoying just because you won against me once!”

“I’m not grinning, okay?”

“So, Saki.”

What is it now?

“Your birthday’s coming up, right?”

“Ah, yeah. So?”

Her expression of frustration and defeat vanished in an instant and she seemed oddly excited when she asked me that. It’s honestly tough keeping up with her at times, considering how quickly and how often she changes the subject.

“I wanna give you a present! But I dunno what you’d want!”

“You don’t have to give me anything.”

“But I will! I definitely will! I so so will! I wanna because I wanna!”

“Right.”

“Actually, isn’t Asamura-kun’s birthday soon, too? You said it’s pretty close to yours.”

“His birthday is one week before mine.”

“He?!”

“That’s just a third person pronoun. Calm down.”

There was absolutely no deeper meaning to that, geez.

“Huh? But if that’s the case...”

“On the 13th.”

“That’s the day after tomorrow! Aww, man! Why didn’t you tell me?!”

“Huh...? I mean...sorry?”

“So you both have it on a school-free day? And I can’t exactly invite someone else’s boyfriend on a Sunday to give them a present...”

“Again, he’s not—”

“So if he’s just your brother, can I ask him out somewhere?”

“...No.”

She kept grinning at me, but I decided to give no comment on the reason. I’d rather just have her think that I’m a brocon.

“Then you’ll just have to give him my present instead.”

I’m sure Asamura-kun would be fine not getting a present. But Maaya’s the type of person who’s super bothered by that sort of thing. And it’s not related to the fact that she’s friends with his step-sister. This is just the way she ticks. And since I knew that, I can’t just refuse her offer.

“If you’re looking for a present for Asamura-kun, I think anything chill is fine. Either way, we’re gonna hold both our birthday parties on the 24th along with our parents.”

“So you’ll be together with your brother for Christmas!”

“Are you still going on about that?”

“Guess I can’t get between the two of you, then. What a shame. I was hoping we could meet up on Christmas.”

“I’m fine like this, okay? And don’t you already have a party planned with everyone?”

“Huh? Oh, I’ve got some other stuff to do that day—”

Oh, really? I guess that’s not a thing, then.

“Well, you know! Even if I threw a party like that, it’d be crawling with couples! I don’t wanna spend my Christmas like that! Haha!”

...*Hm?*

“Really?”

“Yep, yep! Since we’re in high school now, it’s not weird for people to have those types of relationships here and there, right?”

...What was that pause about? Maybe Maaya’s already got some kind of special relationship with a special someone? I don’t think she’d tell me, at least... Would she?

“Those types of relationships...”

“Are you interested by any chance?” Maaya asked as she shoved her face close to mine, which caused me to

frantically shake my head.

"Welp, it's still a bit too early for you, Sakicchi."

"Why are you acting like a senior now?"

She flashed another grin, which almost caused me to burst out with a bewildered "No way!" but I know her. This is a leading question. Or rather, a leading expression. She's not leading me anywhere, but that face alone almost caused me to slip up. Narasaka Maaya really is a dangerous individual. She manages to carry secrets herself while easily digging up those of others. And my thought process is weird today. Knowing Maaya, I figured she'd tell me if she had someone like that. And if she doesn't, then that means it's actually pretty normal to keep that sort of relationship a secret. Plus, I don't even know if Maaya is going out with someone or not.

The stressful time at work ended in a heartbeat. Yomiuri-san didn't come to work today, which is pretty rare. Thanks to that, we were ten times busier than usual. We were practically leashed to the cash register, not even able to check on anything inside the actual store. When I looked up, I saw the various lights covering the trees standing at the side of the road. The seasonal music coming from the stores was almost drowned out by the employees declaring ongoing sales. It really makes you realize that Christmas is right around the corner.

As Asamura-kun walked next to me, he kept his bike closer to the road, slowly pushing it along as he matched my pace. Lately, we've been walking home together like this when we finish work. But his hands holding the handlebar looked awfully cold. I asked him why he wasn't wearing gloves, and he responded that it made him feel like his hands would slip

from the handlebars. He spoke about it in terms of safety, but he also mentioned that he might have to wear a helmet and gloves eventually because of school regulations.

“Then you definitely need some,” I said with a bit of bewilderment, and in response he said he’d look into it.

“You’re not wearing a scarf, either. Aren’t you cold?”

Naturally, one reason I had asked this was because his neck looked as cold as his hands, but I was more curious if he actually owned a scarf or not. After all, a scarf would make a perfect present for a birthday. However, Asamura-kun explained that wearing a scarf while riding would be even more dangerous. I guess he’s right. But even so, I couldn’t let his hands stay freezing like that, so I opted to place my hand on top of his. It didn’t do much since I was wearing gloves, but it should at least protect his hand from the cold breeze.

Shortly after that, we entered a small side alley, away from the main street. The number of lights around us grew fewer, with barely anyone walking past us anymore. That’s probably why I had managed to pull this off. It’s all thanks to nobody looking at us. Even though I was just placing my hand on his, my heart started pounding like crazy. I was worried that he might feel my pulse on his hand, but at the same time, I was hoping for that to happen.

“How did you do on your exams?” Asamura-kun suddenly spoke up, which caused my heart to almost leap out of my chest.

“Ah, um, I got 815 points.”

“You’re getting better and better, huh?”

So he said, but his score was 819 points. I know it's not that big of a difference, and we weren't competing or anything, but the first words that left my mouth were—

“I lost again...”

Why is it that I don't want to lose against Asamura-kun when it comes to scores? My own competitive spirit surprised me. I must have sounded fairly disappointed and frustrated, because Asamura-kun, nice as he is, began saying that this difference was just because he attends prep school, and he even praised me for coming this far in modern literature after receiving a failing grade months ago. He even said I'd easily pass him if I attended a prep school myself.

“I have no plans of going there.”

“Well, it costs a lot, so I understand.”

That's one part of it. But the bigger reason why I won't take him up on his suggestion is that I can't show my own weakness to others. I'm scared of just relying on others unconditionally. And I haven't learned the skill of actually doing that, either.

“If you ever change your mind, just let me know. I'll help you get prepared for everything.”

But since Asamura-kun was so supportive, I started to feel regrets. Money and my disposition are one thing, but the biggest reason why I'd rather not attend his prep school is a completely different one—I'm worried that I won't focus on classes and will just stare at Asamura-kun the entire time. Of course, there's no way I could tell him that. I'd die of embarrassment.

Our flat came into view, which allowed my head to finally return to regular working mode. More specifically, I started pondering what to make for dinner. Asamura-kun and I both came home at the same time, after all. And because of our shift, I had no time to come home earlier to prepare anything. The only thing we have that I could get ready quickly is...

Or so I was thinking, but when we entered the apartment, we were immediately greeted by a plastic bag standing on the table in the living room. It turned out to be food that my stepdad had bought. Some vegetables, sweet-and-sour pork, gyoza, and pepper steak. I could feel my cheeks relaxing. What an insightful act. I don't know if Mom asked him to do this, but knowing Asamura-kun's father, he may have very well come up with the idea himself. I prepared everything on the plates as Asamura-kun got the rice and soup ready. Then we ate.

Right after that, we realized that we used different sauces for our gyoza. We exchanged them so we could both have a taste of the other person's, but as I thought, I still don't really like soy sauce too much. I think he also eats his fried eggs with soy sauce, right?

Oh yeah, something caused me to hesitate then. It was when I borrowed his sauce. It made me think "Wait, isn't this...?" but I quickly took a bite anyway. Getting flustered over an indirect kiss? And this is even more indirect than just regularly indirect... and I'm still conscious of it? What am I, a grade school kid?

In the end, we both continued to eat in silence. Just when I felt like I couldn't bear the silence any longer, Asamura-kun brought up the subject of birthday presents. This made me happy, so I responded in turn. When I said that I didn't need

a special gift or anything thoughtful, Asamura-kun gave me a dubious look. But if this relationship isn't going to end someday, then we still have the memories we created together. If we can obtain new precious memories each and every year, then I think that's enough of a present to have. After all, these memories shine much more brightly than anything of physical value.

The reason I came to think this way is probably because of my father. He was always obsessed with monetary or physical value. When I was still young... When he was still kind to me, Mom and I gave him presents pretty often. And when his company started moving into an office building for their employees, he got engrossed with this kind of value. After a while, he began saying stuff like "You live thanks to what I've bought, yet you still complain?" He was tied down by monetary value. That's why I'd rather not get anything like that.

But that's only half of it. The other half is because I remember the moment I saw Mom's back when my father left us. Her back was quivering as her shoulders were hanging low, but when she turned around to hug me, she showed no tears. She didn't want me to worry. But even so, I could feel her grief. I still can't fully believe that this emotion I feel, and that this relationship we share, will last forever. And if there is ever a day when it all comes crashing down, then I'll just feel more pain at looking at all the mementos I have. That's why I don't want any presents like that.

...It's very much like me to think about the pain of losing something before even receiving anything.

¹In the original, it's "Yama mo ochi mo imi mo nai," and if you take the initial character from yama, ochi, and imi, you get **yaoi** (BL).

Chapter 3

December 13th (Sunday) - Asamura Yuuta

Saturday passed without anything major happening. The following Sunday marked my birthday, but as the world's most average high school student, I wasn't celebrated with singing birds or fanfare when I opened the front door. Instead, I attended the morning classes at my prep school like always. After the first lecture ended, we had a brief break.

I figured I might as well grab a coffee, so I headed to the break area with the vending machines. Down the hallway and taking a turn, I arrived at an area about one-third the size of a regular classroom, which had large tables that seated six, the size you'd see in a school cafeteria, plus several folding plastic chairs to sit on. After I bought a cup of coffee with milk and no sugar, I blew a few times on the steaming brownish liquid and looked for an open seat. That's when I spotted a familiar girl—Fujinami Maho.

One seat was open in front of her. Our eyes met as she raised her head, and I sat down.

“Good morning.” She greeted me with a faint mumble.

“Morning. What’s up? Catch a cold?”

More than her height, the white mask she was wearing stood out most right now.

“I wouldn’t have come to attend classes if I had a cold. I’m just protecting myself. The air during these winter days is so dry, it makes it easier to catch colds and other infections.”

“Ah, makes sense.”

“Grandma always told me to wear a mask whenever it’s cold outside.”

I just nodded in silence. This “Grandma” she spoke of was actually the person looking after her right now. After Fujinami’s parents died and some trouble brewed up with her relatives, she was taken in by this person, who is now caring for her.

“Well, even this mask isn’t going to protect me from the cold wave.”

“Even so, it’s better to be protected than absolutely defenseless. When I was young, I had this period where I would constantly wash my hands like a maniac.”

“Only when you were young?”

“I caught a cold right before my birthday, so I couldn’t eat my birthday cake. So I swore to myself that I wouldn’t catch a cold the next year.”

“Ah, so your birthday is during the winter season? Is it close?”

“Actually, it’s today.” I shrugged while responding.

“Is that so?” Fujinami stood up and headed to the vending machine without saying a thing.

She took out some change from her pocket and bought a can of hot corn potage. I was busy wondering if she’d gotten hungry when she returned to her seat and placed the can in front of me.

“Here’s your birthday present. Though it might be a bit heavy to have with your coffee.”

“Huh...?”

“Also, it’s nothing much.”

“Ah, no, it’s fine. Just...”

I didn’t expect her to give me anything, so that surprised me—quite a bit, actually.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. It’s nothing expensive, so you don’t need to thank me. Plus, I think you’ll get the real present from your girlfriend later.”

I flashed a wry smile.

“Anyway, if you’d excuse me.” Fujinami turned her back toward me, and I sent her off with a slight bow as I grabbed the can.

She said it wasn’t anything special, but I was pretty happy to have somebody celebrate my birthday.

I had another shift in the evening. I got to the bookstore about twenty minutes before I had to work, so I figured I might as well check the state of the shop today, walking

around the place with my sports bag on my shoulder. It looked like we'd have a good number of customers again today. While I was busy counting the magazine copies we had on the display, I felt someone poking my back.

“Yo, Junior-kun.”

Turning around, I was greeted by the sight of Yomiuri-senpai, her black hair as long and glossy as ever.

“Ah, yes. Hello.”

“How fare thee?”

“...What?”

What did she say?

“‘How fare thee’ means—”

“I get it, I get it. It’s basically ‘How are you?’, right?”

I think people would say that at the beginning of a letter or something like that.

“Exactly! I’m surprised you know.”

“Well... this is the first time I’ve been greeted like that, though. More importantly, are you feeling better already?”

We moved away from the main area so that we wouldn’t get in the way of the customers. Before she answered my question, however, she pointed toward the office in the back and started making her way toward it. She probably didn’t want to bother the customers. I nodded and tagged along.

“I’m back to 100%, yep. But I swear it feels like it’s been such a long time. So you were worried about me, huh?”

“Well, yeah. I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“I was actually pretty much back to full health two days ago, but everyone from work said to make sure and take one more day off.”

“Was it a cold?”

“Yeah. My throat was killing me and I had a fever of more than 39° Celsius.”

“That must have been hard on you.”

“T’was, t’was. Applause, applause, like I was clapping my hands at a shrine!”

As always, her statements had a bit of an old man vibe to them... which means she’s back to normal. A flawless recovery, I dare say. Either way, we continued our conversation until we reached the office. We did knock, but nobody was present after we entered.

“I was actually trying to be careful, you know? I guess the endurance karaoke from a week ago is what dealt me the final blow. But I couldn’t help it, we got all the people from high school together.”

“So it was like a class reunion?”

“Two of my former club colleagues are getting married next month.”

“Huh?!” I couldn’t hold back my surprise.

“Mao-chan of all people, too. She said she’d probably be the last one, and yet she’s got so much of a head start. They apparently promised to do it after they graduated from their

technical school, but she was angry since it took half a year longer than planned.”

“Ah, right... Um, congratulations?”

“I’m not the one who’s getting married, you know.”

“I know, but...”

I seriously didn’t know how to even respond to that. Then again, if they were classmates of Yomiuri-senpai, then they’re proper adults, and there is nothing that is “too fast” in modern society.

“She was having a major case of marriage blues, though. So we all went out for karaoke to hear out all her grumbling and complaints. Yep. You’d best be careful, Junior-kun.”

“Right...?”

Since all that sounded like it was from an entirely different world, I couldn’t exactly comprehend how and what I should even be careful of. Seriously. I’m drawing a blank here.

“When two absolute strangers engage in a social partnership contract, they’ve got a lot of friction and strife awaiting them.”

“Is that so?”

“That’s how marriages often work. You’re experiencing Romeo and Juliet at its finest, Junior-kun.”

“The encounter of two people who couldn’t be more different?”

“You’ve got the Capulet Family who belong to the sauce faction when it comes to fried eggs, and then there’s the

salt and pepper faction headed by the Montague Family. The rift between these two is insurmountable.”

“I feel like Shakespeare is turning over in his grave right about now.”

“A difference in values gives birth to strife, leading to tragedy. How sorrowful t’is. By the way, what faction do you belong to, Junior-kun?”

“Fried eggs? I prefer soy sauce.”

“A third faction rises from the ashes! Personally, I’m all for ketchup. What if the soy sauce family speaks against our marriage? Oh, Romeo, why must thou be a soy sauce worshiper? Please, let us cast aside our seasonings! Actually, let’s just give up on the whole marriage thing.”

“The only thing I completely understand is that I’m absolutely lost as to what you’re trying to tell me, so I give up. Anyway, what is it you wanted to talk about?”



"Oh, yeah. Junior-kun, today's your birthday, right?" Yomiuri-senpai said as she placed a paper bag on the desk.

“Yes. Well... I’m surprised you knew.”

“Saki-chan told me. Hers is next week, isn’t it?”

“Correct.”

“She’ll get her present later. But this is for you.” She said and took out another smaller plastic bag.

Judging by the shape, I figured there were books inside. Since she nodded while handing it to me, I figured it’d be fine to open it up.

“Whoa... These are...”

So many classic books. She probably bought them at a second-hand or antique bookstore. I spotted Plato’s “The Apology of Socrates,” Descartes’ “Discourse on the method,” Camus’ “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason” and even Nietzsche’s “Thus Spoke Zarathustra.”

“This... is quite the collection.”

“All handpicked by Judge Yomirui Shiori, my recommended set of philosophy must-reads. Though they don’t have any particular order or organization to them, and some are completely unrelated.”

“That’s still plenty. I would have had trouble getting my hands on all of these since I’m just a high school student. And I’ve been holding back on buying them in case they’re too hard for me to read. I did look through them in the library, though.”

“I was really wondering if I should give you a sex toy as a present instead, but I was worried that I’d get in legal

trouble for giving that to a minor, so I went with something a bit more orthodox.”

“I’m glad you chose the philosophy book set.”

“I’m sorry it turned out to be such a boring present.” She apologized with a serious expression, which made the whole adult toy thing seem like she was actually being serious and not just pulling my leg.

These kinds of thoughts make it even more likely that I’ll catch a cold because it causes my body temperature to skyrocket.

“Anyway, thank you very much.”

Just as with Fujinami-san’s can of potage, I felt genuinely happy about a surprise present. I always thought it’d be better to be clear about what you would like as a present, but getting something unexpected like this doesn’t feel so bad. Since she gave me a lot of older books and classics, it’s probably gonna take me a lot of perseverance to read through them. Even so, a bookworm like me would never reject getting a book as a present. And they’d offer me a lot of reading time in return, too.

Once my shift was over and I returned home, Akiko-san had already left for her work at the bar, but my old man was still awake. I guess he was waiting with Ayase-san for me to come back home. Maybe it was because it was Sunday and she had more time, or maybe because it was my birthday, but it seemed like the dinner Ayase-san made was quite a bit more luxurious and feastful for the eyes. There was roast beef as the main course with salad and potato potage. As we sat down at the table, my old man said “Phew, you went all out today, huh?” and nodded to himself.

“Oh, right. It’s your birthday today, Yuuta.”

“You remembered?” I spoke with a surprised tone of voice. I was actually not expecting my old man to remember.

“Of course I would!” He gave me a sour look.

“Since we said we’d celebrate both mine and Ayase-san’s birthdays on Christmas, I figured you’d forgotten the actual date.”

“Well, Saki-chan’s extravagant dinner gave me a bit of a hint, I guess.”

“So you did forget?”

“Hahaha.”

“Don’t expect that laughing will cause me to forgive you.”

He tends to do that when trying to avert the blame. Then again, I wasn’t angry either. This is just another casual exchange we tend to have.

“Now, now.” Ayase-san chimed in with a wry smile and started passing out rice bowls filled with steaming rice.

She then set down three pairs of chopsticks, poured tea into our teacups, and filled the table with plates. Wiping down the table was my old man’s duty. As it turns out, Akiko-san and Ayase-san had always split up their work when it came to routines like this, but both my old man and I were never the type to wipe the table before dinner. We figured it’d make more sense to do that after it got dirty.

That being said, Akiko-san working as a bartender made her quite peculiar when it came to cleanliness and tables. As

you'd expect, Ayase-san was influenced by her. And now it's our turn to be influenced by Ayase-san.

"Time to dig in."

We all spoke in unison and started eating. After chewing on the roasted beef once or twice, my old man opened his mouth and said "It's delicious!" with great gusto.

"Your cooking is wonderful, Saki-chan."

"Didn't you say the same thing yesterday?" I said.

"I'll say it again and again. That's just how delicious it is!"

Is this what you call being an overly-doting parent? Then again, Ayase-san just played it off with a slightly bashful "This isn't much," and explained that she made it with a rice cooker.

"...You can do that?"

"Yep. Even pudding and pancakes. Rice cookers nowadays have so many different possibilities. It's great."

"I had no idea."

I'd only ever used them to cook rice. I didn't think you'd have such a large range of options with a simple rice cooker. The roasted beef was evenly warmed, with a beautiful pink color on the inside. It wasn't too hard to chew, either. Instead it filled my mouth with its juices at every bite. Combine that with its sweet sauce and rice that tastes like onions and soy sauce—

"I could eat this forever," I said.

“Thanks. I’m glad my efforts paid off.” Ayase-san smiled happily.

As I thought, she made it because it was my birthday today. Just that realization alone caused me to feel itchy with happiness. Lost in thought, I realized that I’d stopped eating, so I frantically munched up the last bit of rice.

“I’ll grab myself some seconds.”

In order to hide my embarrassment, I opted to stand up and went back to the rice cooker. After we finished eating, my old man went to prepare the bath, and Ayase-san and I were working on cleaning the dishes when she whispered into my ear.

“Come to my room later, okay?”

My heart jumped. Ayase-san looked at me and simply moved her mouth—And that movement formed the word **Present**. I could easily read what she meant to say, even without being an expert at it.

Once my old man entered the bath, I went to Ayase-san’s room and knocked on her door. After receiving permission to enter, I snuck inside. Ayase-san had been waiting for me.

“So... this here is from Maaya.”

“From Narasaka-san...? Wait, is this a present for me?”

Ayase-san nodded. This was my fourth surprise today. Maru, Fujinami-san, Yomiuri-senpai, and even Narasaka-san had prepared a birthday present for me. I would have never imagined that.

“Let’s start with Maaya’s present.” She handed me a book wrapped in paper.

Three out of four people gave me books as a present...

“...Do I really look like that much of a bookworm?”

“Wait, you aren’t?” Ayase-san’s genuine surprise made me feel conflicted.

What surprised me even more was the book that greeted me when I removed the wrapping paper. The cover read “The Seven Rules To Follow That Will Make You Succeed in Love.” And something was stuck between the pages, almost falling out. It turned out to be a card that said HAPPY BIRTHDAY, along with a short written message that read ‘This’ll help you to capture Saki’s heart, honey~’. I think my expression was distorted in disbelief for a bit, because Ayase-san sounded worried.

“What’s wrong? Is it not good?”

“No, no, it’s perfect. Don’t worry.”

I closed the book and wrapped it up again in the paper. What in the world is she thinking? I’ll just pretend I didn’t see that.

“And this here is from me.”

She handed me her own present, wrapped neatly with paper of a bright red color. Upon opening it up, I was greeted by the neck warmer I had expected. It felt pleasant to the touch, like it was made of quality material. She probably had chosen a bright color for it so I’d stand out when pedaling the streets at night on my bike. I did know what I would be

getting beforehand, but I still felt happy even without the surprise.

“Happy birthday.”

“Thank you.”

“Though you’ll get a cake with candles on Christmas.”

“Yeah, I figured. But the same goes for you, Ayase-san. Let’s all celebrate together as a family.”

“Yep.”

In one week, I’ll be the one giving Ayase-san her present. And since it’s another Sunday—Oh, right. I realized something odd about this whole thing. Namely, the thing about handing out presents in secret...

“Since we’re siblings, it’d be fine if we just give each other our presents with other people around, no?”

“It’s really hard to figure out where to draw the line... But I’d prefer it if there weren’t too many eyes around,” Ayase-san said, which caused me to start thinking again.

“Maybe we could take an earlier shift and then eat out somewhere together?”

“Wha... Eating out?” Ayase-san raised one eyebrow and then looked at me. “But it’s just once a year... And my birthday, so...”

“I’ll look for a store, then.”

“Yep, let’s do that.”

We heard my old man yelling “The bath’s free!” which caused both of us to jump in surprise, but he immediately went into his bedroom. We decided to discuss the details over LINE, and I left Ayase-san’s room.

Chapter 4

December 13th (Sunday) - Ayase Saki

The hands on the clock next to my pillow were moving towards midnight. I finished all my studying for tomorrow, finished my bath, and as if she had waited for that exact time, a message from Maaya came in. After putting her brothers to bed, getting her own studies done, and watching the currently-airing late-night anime, she texts me during this time pretty often. For crying out loud... I turned on speaker mode and answered Maaya's call.

'Sakiii, did you give Asamura-kun my present?'

That's the first thing she asks me?

"I did."

'Oh! And how did it go?'

"I'm not sure. He had a weird look on his face, though I don't know why."

'I see, I see... Good, good. Hee, hee.'

...Something about this is making me feel extremely suspicious.

“You gave him a book, right?”

Judging by the shape and weight, I don’t think I’m wrong, at least...

‘*Yep, yep! Asamura-oniichan loves books, after all!*’

Why’d she suddenly change her tone when saying that? And why did it sound like she was grinning to herself? Actually, Asamura-kun is my brother, and not Maaya’s. And yet whenever it’s just the two of us talking together, she’ll start calling him ‘Onii-chan’ and such. Maybe it’s because of that, but I’m starting to feel like they’re actually siblings, and I’m just a friend.

“It **was** just a book...right?”

‘*Of course, of course. Not to mention a book that should definitely help a young lad like him through the many problems that life may throw his way!*’

Sounds fishy. I should investigate that.

“Really? That sounds interesting. I should borrow it from him after he’s done with it.”

‘*You can’t! You hear me?!*’

She didn’t even waste a single second, not even a microsecond to immediately tell me off... Yep, I’ve gotta ask him about it tomorrow.

‘*But anyway, what did you give him?*’

I sighed in disbelief at how nonchalantly my friend could change the subject and responded.

“A neck warmer.”

We discussed it beforehand and decided on presents for the other person. I'd consider that to be a suitable method. It'd be such a waste to give the other person something they wouldn't like. However, Maaya didn't seem to feel that way.

“Whaaat?! No waaay!”

Since the call was on speaker mode, I was thinking I'd be able to handle the volume a bit better, but her voice still reverberated inside my brain.

“Wh-What's that reaction for?”

And since she seemed so shocked, even I found myself becoming worried.

‘That’s so boring! It’s got no personality to it!’

“You’re exaggerating. It’s perfectly normal.”

‘That’s not the problem! Sasaki no Jou!’

“I thought you called me ‘Sasakinosuke’ earlier...”

‘How about Sasakigorou?’

“No thanks.”

‘Anyway, forget about that! Don’t try to change the subject!’

Wasn’t she the one who did that not even a minute ago?

‘A surprise is the true spice of a present! Don’t you know that?!’

She seemed oddly displeased. Also, why is a surprise what’s important, of all things? I think that giving the other party a surprise present has pretty much zero chance of being

beneficial for the other person. It's basically like you're both strangers. Isn't it much more respectable to be aware of the other person's preferences? However, Maaya didn't seem to particularly enjoy my response. She's trying to tell me that the joy of a surprise improves the other party's mood or something along the lines of that.

'The argument of usefulness is something you talk about on the daily instead!'

"What do you mean?"

'Things you need and want are things you should be telling each other at any given moment! Why did you give him something boring for a special event like this?!'

"Because this is a special event?"

'If you just give him what he expects, he'll never remember it. The surprise is what makes the present and event memorable! The idea is to betray their expectations and get their hearts really racing, you hear me?!'

"R-Right...I guess?"

As expected, Maaya's example was extreme. But since she always talks about anime, games, or manga, I can't follow her at all. Instead, it makes me assume she may just be making stuff up. I mean, if I followed her advice, then I'd just feel restless, not knowing if the other person liked the present or not. And at some point, I'd probably just ask. I wouldn't want them to hate my present, after all.

...The importance of a surprise, huh? I mean, if Maaya is that adamant about it, then maybe I should actually give it some thought. But since it's already too late now, I shouldn't stress over it too much. Because even if it *is* that

important, I can just try again next year. And I should ask him if he likes surprises or not.

However, Maaya wasn't done yet. She gave me a long oration about surprises and what makes them great. As my eyelids grew heavier, we both just stopped talking and ended up ending the call. I rolled around on my bed, feeling the urge to hug my pillow.

If a surprise really is that important, then I wish she'd told me sooner.

Chapter 5

December 19th (Saturday) - Asamura Yuuta

The digital clock next to my pillow said it was 6:30 am. Even the slightest move allowed a cold breeze to enter beneath my blanket, making me shiver in terror. Outside the window, I could see nothing but darkness. Since we're close to the winter solstice, it will probably be another 15 minutes before the sun starts to rise. By the way, winter solstice refers to the day the sun is at its lowest when reaching the deep south. Its face appears for a brief time at the east and sinks back down again like it's playing hide and seek. Thanks to that, the nights are much longer and the sunrises far away, especially here in Japan.

"And I hate getting up when it's still dark outside." I pulled the blanket over my head and once again thought about my plans for the day.

Tomorrow, it'll be one week since my birthday. In other words, it's Ayase-san's turn. And the present she wanted was "Soap I can use in the bath." When I did a quick search online, I found a special store in my local Shibuya area that focuses on bath goods in particular. That's where I decided to buy the soap. Because my plans were packed with prep school and part-time work, I didn't have any time to go

shopping before today. Since the bath goods store is close to the prep school, I'll be using the time between my lectures to buy it.

In my mind, I came up with a detailed schedule. And while I was pondering that, a certain thought that had been on my mind asked for attention. After receiving unexpected presents from Fujinami-san and Yomiuri-senpai, and realizing the joy of experiencing a surprise like that, I'm starting to feel like I want to give Ayase-san a bit of a surprise, too. After all, a surprise is the best spice when it comes to love—or so it said in "The Seven Rules To Follow That Will Make You Succeed in Love," the book Narasaka-san gave to me. Though I still don't know if I should believe anything it says in there or not.

Of course, I don't want to be bothersome to her, like some kind of prank. It should be something that'll catch her by surprise but make her feel happy in return. For example, add an extra ingredient on top of the initial present. Since I didn't have to get up early, I was spending a much longer time rolling around in my bed than normal when suddenly my alarm rang. Out of shock, I threw the blanket up into the air. When I looked outside, it had already become bright.

I changed out of my pajamas and headed into the living room, where I ran into my old man, who had no work today, and Akiko-san sitting on the sofa. Since she had just gotten home from work, she'll probably head to bed soon.

"Saki already finished her breakfast and went back to her room."

Akiko-san was about to stand up, but I told her I'd be fine and made her sit down again. I could see my breakfast already on the table. The rice is in the cooker, and the miso

soup is probably inside the pot. I warmed up the miso soup and served myself some rice. For the main entrée this morning, we've got salmon munière, and when I pulled off the aluminum foil, I was greeted by still-lukewarm pink flesh. When I reached for the soy sauce, I remembered my conversation with Ayase-san when we ate gyoza together. I decided to instead try the fish without adding anything else and stuffed it into my mouth—Mhm, sweet.

That was the first impression I got. And it wasn't just the sweetness from the butter. The lemon atop the munière seasoned with salt and pepper had strong enough of a flavor for me to be able to pick up on it independently. Maybe she held back on the seasoning a bit? Tasting fish like this felt like a new world had opened up in front of me. I was just so used to my own preferences. And the fact that it actually tastes good made me feel oddly frustrated.

It seemed like keeping the salt & pepper seasonings to a minimum was standard for the Ayase Family, so if I want any more than that, I should go to the seasoning rack in the kitchen and grab what I want. This is just another way of adjusting to each other. We didn't want to force the preferences of our families on each other. I grabbed my beloved soy sauce from the seasoning rack. I poured a bit on a small plate and tried my second bite with that instead. It tasted the same as ever, and it was delicious.

“Hmm... So this just means...”

...I'm a fan of soy sauce? I feel like I just went through some kind of psychology test that guesses my personality based on my food preferences.

“.....ta.”

My thoughts went back and forth, round and round, when a voice brought me back to reality. It came from my old man. I looked away from my food and over at him.

“Sorry, did you call me?”

“Sure did. Were you lost in thought?”

“Well... A bit, yeah. Anyway, what’s up?”

I rid myself of my food philosophy thoughts. It’d be rude for me to ignore him, after all.

“We’re gonna go see my parents this year. Are you okay with that?”

“I’m... fine.”

I reflexively looked over at Akiko-san, but she just smiled at me.

“I’ve already told Saki about this. You’re the last one, Yuuta-kun. Do you have any plans by any chance?”

“No, I’m fine.” I panicked a bit and nodded.

My old man’s family lives in Nagano. He apparently went to a university in Tokyo, which is why he moved up here. And he stayed here after graduation. Our family in Nagano has the tradition of meeting up every year for New Year’s, and I’ve participated in these events many times over. When I was in grade school, my real mother also tagged along for them. However, I don’t think she ever really opened up to our relatives. On the way home, she kept complaining about them, and I was forced to listen to her despite having complicated feelings about it. Since I got along with them quite well, it felt like she was pouring water on my parade.

"That's good. Then we can all go together," Akiko-san said with a smile.

That means Ayase-san is fine with it, too. But that caused me to have another question.

"What about your family, Akiko-san? Are you fine not visiting them?"

Personally, I think that the idea of going back to visit your family for New Year's is a rotten tradition that's outlived its welcome, but I can also understand the desire of wanting to see your children at least once a year. And as for my question, Akiko-san responded with a wry smile.

"My relatives all love to live freely. They're not the type of people to gather for an occasion like this."

That being said, she was thinking of visiting them next year for Obon in August. Because of the marriage and everything surrounding it, it would have been too stressful to visit them at the end of the year also.

"Well, I've been working basically every year up to this point, so I'm gonna take it easy for once."

"And I've got five days of vacation starting the 29th."

Considering that Akiko-san works at a local bar in Shibuya, I feel like that place would be crowded with people during New Year's... But it seems that my doubts must have shown on my face.

"I'm always helping out at work, so I've got special time off at least for this year."

"That's good."

My old man's practically a slave when they entered a busy period, but Akiko-san's schedule doesn't seem that much lighter, either. Plus, there's no guarantee she can just get Saturday and Sunday off, either. That's why I want her to get some good rest at least over the holidays. However, she's got a bad habit of looking after family matters during the rare times she doesn't have to work, and she had already started saying stuff like "I want to let Saki enjoy her break, so I'm going to cook for all the children in her stead and make their favorite food!"

"If anything, I'm sure that Ayase-san would want her mother to rest up. I'll gladly help with the cooking if need be."

"Mother..."

"Huh?"

Oh, did she mishear me? I was actually talking about Ayase-san...but the way she seemed so overjoyed, I couldn't correct her—and I didn't have to, either—so I just swallowed any comment.

"I agree with Yuuta. I think you're allowed to take a break at least during our winter vacation. The children over there aren't so young that you have to look after them, either. And I know how you keep making smaller dishes on the side all the time."

"Huh? R-Really?"

"Of course. The gratin you made last week was delicious."

"I'll make some more, then."

"Thanks." My old man smiled, and Akiko-san did the same.

Thanks for the treat. I already feel full.

“Ah, now that I think about it...”

Akiko-san’s words just now sparked another thought in my mind.

“What kind of food does Ayase-san like?”

Akiko-san looked at me.

“You mean her favorite food?”

“Yes. You just mentioned the children’s favorite food, so I was wondering.”

“Hmmm...” Akiko-san put one finger to her lower jaw and started thinking. “When she was younger and I got busy with work, I couldn’t exactly feed her the most luxurious of foods. I think she maybe likes dishes that take a bit longer to prepare, like stuffed cabbage rolls or beef stew.”

I see. So basically boiled stuff.

“But I think she’d prefer beef stew more if it was from a restaurant.”

“Huh? Really?”

I didn’t see Ayase-san as the kind of person who would dine out, which is why I couldn’t hide my surprise.

“We had this restaurant for delicious western food in our neighborhood, and she absolutely loved the beef stew from there.”

“Is that so?”

“I tried making it at home once.”

Apparently, she couldn’t quite nail the taste. She seemed confused as to why ordinary meat from the supermarket wasn’t good enough.

“Speaking of food, you two will be eating out before coming home from work tomorrow, right?”

“Yes. We’re going to eat together... with the people from our part-time job.”

Ayase-san and I had told our parents that we’d be dining out tomorrow after our shift. We couldn’t exactly come home late without informing either of them, after all. That being said, the fact that we’d be with people from work was a lie. I don’t like deceiving our parents like this, but it was necessary to hide our bigger secret in return. I just hope this doesn’t spiral out of control like typical clichéd TV dramas.

“And you wanted to know Saki’s favorite food because it’s her birthday?”

“Well, um... it’s not a birthday party, but I figured I might as well. But please keep the fact that I asked a secret.”

“What a good older brother you are.”

“Haha, this much is normal.”

Exactly, this is perfectly normal. A good older brother would try to make his younger sister’s birthday a bit better. This sort of thing is normal for regular siblings. The two of us dining out shouldn’t be that weird, either. Basically, we’re keeping a tight line in a way that allows us to hide our relationship behind the fact that we’re siblings. And after

finishing my now-cold breakfast, I made my way to prep school as I usually did.

Once the morning lectures had ended, our fifty-minute break began. If I wanted to buy a present for Ayase-san, it was now or never. I should have enough time to bring it home and be back in time for afternoon classes. With that decided, I quickly packed up my things and left the classroom. As I walked down the hallway towards the entrance of the building, I happened to run into someone I knew quite well.

“Oh? Are you already heading home for the day?”

It was none other than the tall girl Fujinami.

“I actually have something to do, so I’m heading out during our break...”

“Is that so? Then don’t mind me.”

After a brief conversation, we quickly walked past each other. After leaving the main building, I immediately spotted the grey winter sky above me. The wind blowing through the streets made the power lines vibrate, creating a high-pitched sound. I buttoned up my shirt and sped up a bit. The bath goods store I was heading towards was located in a multi-purpose business building near the Shibuya train station. In fact, that building harbored several of those shops, but after a quick search online, I decided to only check out one due to time constraints. That being said, upon reaching the front of the shop, I wavered a bit.

It’s really hard to just waltz in there. Maybe it’s because today was a Saturday, but several female customers were inside the store, and there was not a man in sight. I figured that there’d be little to no gap between the two genders

when it comes to bath goods, but I guess I was painfully mistaken. Not to mention that, although the brown-and-white basic color store itself wasn't that big to begin with, they offered a wide assortment of goods. Ayase-san had simply said she wants soap she can comfortably use during a bath.

In the end, I made up my mind and stepped inside. I didn't feel too comfortable being surrounded by women in a store like this, but it was all for the sake of Ayase-san's present—or so I told myself. Still, I wonder where they keep the soap? I started to panic a bit when I found nothing that looked at all familiar to the soap packages I knew.

“Are you searching for something in particular?”

Somebody suddenly called out to me, which made my heart jump a beat. When I turned around, I was greeted by a woman wearing an apron and a big smile on her face. She's probably an employee who works here.

“Well...”

“Would you like me to help you?”

She made sure to speak with a nuance that meant she'd only do it if I actually needed it, all to make sure she didn't put too much pressure on me... She's a professional. Since I work in a bookstore and deal with customers myself, I can tell. Some customers may have some trouble talking with a random stranger, especially when it comes to an employee. And needless to say, I was one such customer.

“I'm looking for the soap...”

“That would be over here.”

“Ah, thank you very much.”

She immediately moved away after a brief conversation. I guess she realized I wasn't too comfortable talking to employees. At least she didn't pressure me by telling me her recommendations and whatnot. When thinking of soap, I could only think of rectangular boxes filled with simply-shaped soap, but the bath soap that filled my view right now was completely different from what I had pictured. Everything in sight was brimming with colors. Some boxes were even translucent, shining brightly like gemstones. Not the plain old white soap I had been thinking of.

It was probably designed this way to allow the customer to see inside. The singular pieces of soap were packed into vinyl packages that were basically see-through, and the seal of the goods for testing was cut open, too. I was curious and picked up a single piece. On the label, it said “Camomile,” which had the same scent as certain herb tea, and the lavender soap similarly smelled like lavender. There were even scents from foods or other plant-based goods. Considering the price of the neck warmer, I could probably afford two to three of these. But the question is... which ones?

“Which would match Ayase-san's preference...?”

As you'd expect, I'm not familiar when it comes to scents and fragrances. The same goes for Ayase-san's taste. However, I can use Maru's advice today.

'For the person you're interested in, you want to make it obvious that you care for them.'

It's important to buy presents with the thought that the person is going to keep them. However, we're still almost strangers. There's no way to accurately guess the other

person's tastes and interests. That's why Ayase-san and I had the whole conversation about which presents we'd prefer. That being said, that was basically the bare minimum of information. We have fulfilled a necessary condition for success, but we haven't cleared the mission yet.

I subconsciously touched my collar with my left hand. Around my neck was the neck warmer I had received from Ayase-san about a week ago. I'm sure that, when Ayase-san bought this for me, she wasn't just going around thinking '*Any neck warmer will do.*' She probably thought about the color, shape, or texture for a long time. And in return, she was thinking about me throughout the entire process. It's easy to understand if you look at the color. It matched the clothes I usually wore on a day off. Or rather, it was the perfect match for the outfit we had bought the last time we both went out together. The reason it had no particular pattern on it or any crazy fabric was explained by what she told me. That if I'm going to wear it on the regular, plain is better than flashy.

And because she had thought about all of this, I can tell how much she cares about me. This being the case, I should do the same when picking out the bath soap. And not just pick out whatever random one looks the best and most stylish. Let me think. What clothes does she usually wear, and what accessories? I should probably pick something a bit more reassuring and brilliant. I spotted soap in the shape of a rose but stopped myself when I started reaching for it. The idea of looking stylish is like an armament to Ayase-san, as well as her policy.

When would she use the body soap? She always takes her bath last. When she's already done with everything for the next day, when she wants to get rid of all the stress that has built up over the day, and when she just wants to head to

bed right after. Would she really need something flashy or stylish, considering that? When I looked around, I saw body soap that had images of flower petals engraved into it, but also other pieces of soap that were rather simple.

After a bit more thinking, I decided to go with the chamomile, lavender, and lemongrass soap (all of them herbs that have a relaxing effect), as well as a bubble soap pouch that was hanging at the side of the shelf. I thought the pouch would be like a small bag to store the soap, but instead, it was something you use when the soap creates foam... which I found out after reading the manual.

Once I got everything I wanted, I carried the stuff to the cash register, asking for gift wrap. It turns out the employee serving me was the one who had initially guided me to the soap. Upon hearing my request, she responded with a friendly "Of course." They weren't using regular Christmas wrapping paper, but rather a special one for gifts—I think—which had flower patterns on it. She showed me this and asked if I was okay with it.

I nodded and she immediately began wrapping, carefully folding it around the small boxes. As I watched her, I remembered how hard it was for me to learn the whole ordeal. And at the same time, I was painfully reminded about how stressful work would be again today as I watched a professional at her work. I didn't do so verbally, but I still thanked her for doing it beautifully. And once I finished paying, I quickly left the place behind me.

My classes at the prep school ended, too, so I made my way to work. I had finished changing into my uniform and entered the office when I realized that quite a lot of my colleagues were present, all part of the same shift as me. I guess we're pulling out all the stops today. Besides Ayase-

san, Yomiuri-senpai, and I, there were three other employees. I guess this is the natural course of events once we get close to Christmas. The store seemed crowded, too. And as expected, we didn't have much time to talk. Instead, we immediately went to work at the cash register. Once we were finally given a moment to breathe, I waited for a time when it was just Yomiuri-senpai and I in the office.

"Um, Senpai, can I ask you something?"

"If we strike a deal. 100 yen for three minutes."

"...I'll treat you to some canned coffee someday."

"You really understand me, Junior-kun! So, what's this about Saki-chan?"

My heart rate sped up. How did she know?

"A mature lady like me has no problem seeing right through what a young lad like you is thinking. So out with it, boy. What happened? Wanna know how to rent a room at a hotel? Don't ya think that's a bit too soon for y'all? But if yer gonna do it, then go full speed ahead."

"You're not getting off the hook for pulling dirty jokes just because you talk like an old geezer with a southern dialect."

Her brain truly is that of a perverted old man. And I believe we've clearly reached the territory of sexual harassment at this point. Wait, no... I'm gonna run out of the three minutes I was given at this rate. Will two cans of coffee get me through this, I wonder...

"I was wondering if you knew any good western restaurants around here that offer beef stew?"

“Beef stew? Oho, oho, you’ve graduated from being the passive boy, huh? Going in for the big meat now, I see.”

“Can you not misinterpret my statements to an absurd degree?”

It took a sharp glare from me to get Yomiuri-senpai to take my question seriously.

“Western restaurants, huh? Well, I know a lot. From the expensive places where Kudou-sensei took me to even smaller establishments that are a bit nicer on your wallet. But do you have any other condition for it other than the fact that they serve beef stew?”

“Good question... Since I’m still in high school, it shouldn’t be too expensive, but...”

“Oho, oho?”

“But I’d be great if it was a restaurant that sounds out from the rest of them. A place that could make for a good surprise.”

“Quite the list of demands you’ve got there. And that means you’ve got a surprise in mind...” Yomiuri-senpai grinned at me. “You’re inviting Saki-chan out on her birthday, aren’t you? It’s tomorrow, right?”

“Well, yes.”

“How nice! Going for a date at a delicious place! I’m so jealous!”

“We’re going as brother and sister. That’s why I was hoping I could get some of your advice.”

“How boring... Well, well. Ah, so that’s why your shift tomorrow ends at 6 pm? And considering the time you need to get there, you’d probably eat dinner at around 6:30 to 8 pm...”

How has she even figured out my exact schedule? Sometimes, I’d really like to have a glance inside that woman’s head to figure out what exactly this prim and proper university girl is thinking.

“When did you become Sherlock Holmes, Yomiuri-senpai?”

“This is elementary, my dear Watson! And did you know that Sherlock doesn’t actually canonically say that?”

Really? It’s such a famous phrase that even I’ve heard of it.

“Phrases that originate from the idea that a character might have said that leave a much bigger impression than the actual words that were quoted. That’s how memes are born, too.”

“Okay...?”

“Anyway, back to the original topic. I’ll look into it and send you some locations via LINE later, so leave it to me~ Sparkle~” She said and waved her hand at me, immediately turning her back towards me.

I’ve never met a person who voiced sound effects like this.

“Thank you very much!” I said as she left the room.

I wondered why she was in such a rush, but a glance at the time explained it all. The three minutes had passed and our break was over. I’ve gotta say, she’s one hell of a senior. In a lot of ways, that is. But I didn’t have much time to think,

so I hurried back to work myself. Immediately, I was met with a larger number of customers than before, which made me feel slightly discouraged. With how rough things were right now, I already started dreading the actual day of Christmas.

The sky above us was as black as a screen with its power cut. Instead, the lights of the entertainment district lit up the world around us. We were on the way back home, Ayase-san walking next to me as I pushed my bike.

“You’re wearing it, aren’t you?” Ayase-san asked as she looked at my neck.

Thanks to the lights around us, I could see her delighted expression.

“Of course. I really appreciate the warmth, so thanks a lot.”

“I’m glad it’s doing a good job. Also, did you already decide on the restaurant for tomorrow?” Ayase-san asked me as her hair gently swayed.

“Not yet. But I’ll make sure to place a reservation in time.”

I had asked both Maru and Yomiuri-senpai about it, but neither of them has responded to me yet. I’m gonna look into it myself again once I get home. Though I’m a bit worried that everywhere might be already pretty packed. After all, tomorrow is the closest Sunday to Christmas. Maybe people are already making reservations with that in mind... and what if I can’t find anywhere? Well, worrying about it won’t help me out at all. I’ll just have to find something.

“Look forward to it.”

That being said, I blurted out these words in the heat of the moment which made me internally shed a tear. Now I definitely can't mess up.

"Hm...? Yeah, I will." Ayase-san did look a bit perplexed after hearing my statement.

It's probably because I said something I normally wouldn't. That was close. Ayase-san is really sharp when it comes to this stuff, so she might figure out I'm planning something other than the present. And since I have no confidence that I'll be able to come up with a proper excuse, I instead opted to go with silence. Thankfully, we quickly reached the flat after that, and we ate dinner together as always.

"See you tomorrow."

"Yep, good night."

I watched Ayase-san return to her room as I did the same. After getting into the bath, I checked the internet once again, and I got a message notification. The preview showed Yomiuri-senpai's name. I quickly booted up the app. I was immediately greeted with a list of URLs to the various western restaurants she had found. I sent her a message thanking her when another message came in.

'The ones at the top are recommendations from Kudou-sensei, but they're probably already full of reservations (Although I can guarantee the taste is amazing!). That's why I looked up a few more that probably still have space. Do your best~ '

Reading all the way to the end, I couldn't help but flash a wry smile. What exactly is she expecting me to do for her that she's cheering me on like that? I sent her another message of gratitude and looked through the various

restaurants. Just as she had said, the ones at the top were already fully booked. And they were a bit too expensive for my taste. Since it was late at night, none of them were open anymore, but they luckily offered online registration for reservations. Maybe that's why she picked them out. I found a restaurant that offered beef stew and was affordable for high school students like us, and then looked into their open time slots. One of the restaurants was part of a business complex close to the entertainment district and train station, located up on the higher floors.

The site told me that they were getting pretty booked on reservations, so I quickly put in a reservation under my name and for two people. I was really nervous, since I was reserving at a restaurant for the first time in my life. I sighed in relief when I got another message from Yomiuri-senpai.

'Hey, hey. Are there any good movies coming out lately? One you'd like to watch?'

A movie? That's a bit abrupt. I went to the movie site I usually use and checked the movies I had already bookmarked. I scrolled through the movies that were about to come out.

"Ah, right. Because it's this weekend."

I totally forgot, but there's a new movie coming out from a famous director. It's his newest work after three years. I've been looking forward to it, so I've avoided any kind of material about it, which is why I only know the name. But since the director's previous works were all great, I'm sure this one will also end well. I like how that director conveys the never-changing daily life of the characters. It's only been screening for a day, but I bet social media is full of positive reviews. Of course, I'm not gonna look at them

because I don't wanna be spoiled. I copied the title to my chat with Yomiuri-senpai and said '*Maybe this one?*'

'Ohh, that one. I see, I see. That's a possibility!'

It seems like she knows about this movie already. Why did she even ask me, then? Maybe she wants to watch a movie together like last time? That being said, now that I've realized how I feel towards Ayase-san, I wouldn't feel right going to watch a movie with another girl.

'Why did you even ask me?'

I asked her on a whim when Yomiuri-senpai responded like she had been waiting for me to ask that.

'I'm gonna spoil everything about the movie for you!'

She's the same Yomiuri-senpai as always, thank God.

'Please don't.'

I've waited three years for this. I seriously hope she's joking, but I'd rather not take any chances. Then again, she probably just wants to watch a good movie. I'm feeling a bit embarrassed now for assuming things. I tried to forget about this blunder and sent her another word of gratitude for helping me, plus a quick good night message. Tomorrow is Ayase-san's birthday. After checking that the reservation went through, I let myself fall asleep in peace.

Chapter 6

December 19th (Saturday) - Ayase Saki

I should have expected that Omotesando would be crowded on a Saturday like this. The street was so full of people that at times I couldn't even see the sidewalk ahead of me. The highway was so crowded with cars that it must be absolute hell to be driving there. Not to mention that it was currently lunchtime, so the majority of people were walking around in search of food. I took out my phone and checked the map. We were talking about a cafe near the prep school, so—Wait, this prep school... The name sounds familiar.

“Sakiii! Over here!”

I raised my head when someone called my name. Looking ahead and down the street, I spotted a girl jumping up and down while waving her hand at me. I tried my best to fight my way through the crowd and reach her.

“Maaya, this is so embarrassing!”

“What is?” She asked me with a straight face, which made me doubt myself.

Am I the weird one?

“Oh, whatever,” I said and stood next to Maaya.

We were standing in line for a cafe with a smaller terrace on the outside, which had three tables that sat four people each. Even now, despite the fact that it was pretty chilly outside, the place was packed. And we were waiting in line for this cafe which had a...French...or maybe an Italian name. Personally, I just wanted to get inside as quickly as possible. Luckily, an employee came out and asked the other guests for their reservations. It didn't take long for our turn to arrive.

“I have a reservation for Narasaka; Two people.”

“Yes, a reservation for 12:30 pm for Narasaka-sama, I can confirm.”

After this, we were guided to our table inside the cafe. The concept of this place seemed to be “An oasis inside the big city jungle.” It was plastered with green everywhere and decorative plants were lined up at every corner. Deep inside the store, there was even a small pond of sorts, emitting the sound of running water. We were brought to a table by the window, offering a view of the street outside. On the table was a small plaque that read “Reserved”. The table was beautifully set for two people.

Upon sitting down, I spotted the prep school across the street that I had seen on the map. That's when I realized that it made sense for me to remember this place since it's the same prep school Asamura-kun attends. Out of curiosity, I checked the current time: Half past 12. He's probably about to finish his last lecture for the morning.

“What's this? What's got you so engrossed with that place?”

Upon hearing Maaya's voice, I quickly tore my gaze away from the glass and back towards her.

"Nothing."

"Ooooh?"

"Come on, let's figure out what we're going to eat."

I was going to hand her a copy of the menu that was sitting on the table, but she waved her hand at me.

"No worries, I already finished ordering everything when I put in the reservation. It's my treat today~"

"Really?"

"I can't wait for the pancakes... So what were you looking at?"

"Again, I wasn't looking at any—"

"Oh, it's Asamura-kun!"

My face immediately turned back towards the window. Only then did I realize that this may have been a trap set up by Maaya, but I actually spotted Asamura-kun in front of the building. He had just stepped out of the prep school's entrance, and he started running somewhere. Since he's on break now, he might be going out to eat someplace. He quickly vanished amongst the crowd of people though, so I didn't know where he went.

"That's a cram school, right? I had no idea he attended one."

"He's been taking classes since last summer."

“Oh...hoh...hoho...You’ve got your older brother’s daily activities memorized down to a T, eh? Oh yeah, his grades went up, didn’t they?”

Where did she even hear that from? But it was true, so I nodded. Then again, I think this much knowledge would be normal between close siblings like we are.

“So it’s thanks to that cram school. Still, he must have been in a rush. I was waving my hand at him but he didn’t even see me.”

“You...what?”

She waved at him through the window? Isn’t she embarrassed to do that? I looked around in a panic, but thankfully all the other customers were too busy with their own food to look at us.

“Yep, and he didn’t even see me!”

“Well... Are you really surprised by that?”

Omotesando is a street big enough to support two lanes of car traffic. And since the sides of the street were filled with sidewalks, it was actually pretty hard to see across to the other side. And I bet it’d be even harder to see inside a cafe like this. Not to mention that you wouldn’t expect some crazy girl to just wave at you like she did. Personally, I’m happy he didn’t see us. I didn’t want him to think I came all this way out here just to meet him.

“But Saki, you spotted him immediately, right?”

“Ack... Th-That’s...because we’re siblings?”

“Hee, hee.”

“Again, it’s not what you think...”

She keeps pushing the conversation in whatever direction she wants. Well, I’m used to it by now.

“Apologies for the wait, here is your order.” An employee arrived at our table.

Upon seeing what they brought, I couldn’t keep my voice under control. Maaya simply said yesterday that we should celebrate my birthday at a popular pancake store, so here we are. And since she never made it sound like anything special, I figured we’d just be eating some pancakes together. But this is...

“Happy birthday, Saki!”

The tray the employee set down didn’t have pancakes on it. Instead, it was adorned with a genuine cake that had “Happy Birthday” written on it. Not to mention the adorable candles on top of the cake. The employee took out a lighter from her apron and lit them up, too. She then began singing happy birthday, and Maaya joined in. Since they did it at a considerable volume, it started getting attention from other customers.

“Come on, come on! Blow out the candles!”

I panicked and did as Maaya told me. Everyone started applauding right after. Ah, so much attention... Everyone’s looking... They were all smiling at me. I’m happy to have this many people celebrate for me, but this is still way too embarrassing. I’ve never had a birthday celebration like this before.



"This is how you do a surprise! Tehe!" Maaya puffed out her chest with a bright grin on her face, which soon looked quite smug.

“That final ‘Tehe’ was unnecessary.”

“But now you know how it feels!”

“I didn’t need to...”

“Hee, hee. You’re happy though, right?”

“Well... it doesn’t feel bad, at least.”

“Anyway, here’s my present.”

“Huh? But, you’re already treating me to something...”

“This isn’t much. So c’mom, open it up.”

Since it fit into the palm of my hand, I was careless and didn’t think it was anything major. But when I opened the package, I was greeted by—chapstick.

“You can’t have enough of these, right?”

“Yeah...”

I gazed at the object in my hands and admired Maaya’s sense once more. First, the design of the container is cute. It wasn’t particularly flashy, as it was fairly cylindrical in shape, but the narrow part in the middle, and the color of the lid and fitting with the handle, all make me think that it looked pretty nice. When I turned it over and opened it up, I was greeted with a bright red color. It had a certain charm to it but wasn’t so gaudy that it could cause problems for a high school student to wear.

“And it’s moisturizing, too. Perfect for this season.”

“...Thanks.”

I realized that she had given this present a lot of thought. I didn't dislike living with just my mother up until now. That being said, since we had to prioritize our own lives over anything, it was hard for me to request anything as a birthday present from her. So having my birthday celebrated by a friend like this might be a first for me. Then again, I've never had a friend wish me a happy birthday before. I only recently became friends with Maaya, too. I guess we only really got this close after she went to see Asamura-kun for the first time. That's probably why I didn't expect a present in the first place.

"Sooo? How's it feel to be on the receiving end of a surprise?"

"I'm frustrated."

"The heck!"

"Hee, hee."

Thank you. But if it was something this important, then I wish she'd told me sooner. I feel frustrated that I couldn't do something like this for Asamura-kun's birthday. If I knew how happy one would feel to be surprised, I would have thought of something. But at least the pancakes were delicious.

Later that day, our shift at work ended. I walked next to Asamura-kun as always on the way home to our flat. As we passed the entertainment district, the lights around us started to decrease in number, and the stars in the sky began to illuminate our path instead. Upon the dark canvas that was the night sky, I spotted a belt of three stars. I wonder what that constellation is called? Maybe Asamura-kun knows? I glanced at him. More specifically, his neck.

“You’re wearing it, aren’t you?”

“Of course. I really appreciate the warmth, so thanks a lot.”

I had no idea I’d feel so happy to simply see him wearing the neck warmer I had bought for him. And tomorrow, it’s my own birthday. We got permission from our parents to dine out as just the two of us. This’ll be my first time spending my birthday with the person I like. I think I might pass out from the excitement. I asked him about it, and he said he had yet to find a good reservation. “Look forward to it,” he said. Those words made me feel dubious for a moment.

“Hm...?” I let out a voice in the heat of the moment, but quickly followed it up with “Yeah, I will” and pretended that I didn’t notice.

‘Look forward to it’...? That’s an odd way of phrasing things. If he had already found a restaurant, it would make sense. But he just said he hasn’t put in a reservation yet. So I’m supposed to look forward to it without even knowing where we’re going to eat? Doesn’t that mean he’s plotting something? I was so lost in thought about it that I stopped talking at all. And since Asamura-kun didn’t say anything either, we spent the rest of our way home in silence. But unless I’m just assuming things... Could it be possible that Asamura-kun is preparing a surprise? If so, then I shouldn’t think about it too much. I wouldn’t want to ruin his surprise, especially after I had just learned about how nice it was to surprise someone like that. Thus, I’m going to just look forward to it without knowing a thing.

Once we made it back to our apartment, Asamura-kun and I finished dinner, and I returned to my room. I got everything ready for the next day, took a relaxing bath, and entered my

bed. I set up an alarm and started to reminisce about today's events. Next time, I'm definitely giving Maaya a surprise for her birthday, too. And I also wonder what Asamura-kun is planning for tomorrow's dinner. Plus—I still couldn't forget Asamura-kun's words he uttered in the heat of the moment.

He told me to look forward to it. It was slightly different to him saying "I'm looking forward to it," but I just can't help but think he's planning something to surprise me. Snuggling deeper into my bed, I kept thinking.

Doesn't this mean that I've gotten better at reading Asamura Yuuta's thought process and body language? Since I'm still not very good at modern literature, I don't have much confidence in being able to read what he's thinking... But I'm looking forward to the answer I'll get tomorrow night. It's weird. When my father left home back then and Mom was out working, I never looked forward to Santa's present... and yet here I am, waiting in excitement for my own birthday.

Engulfed in the warmth of my blanket, my mind slowly drifted toward the dark abyss that is sleep. Once I wake up, it'll be my 17th birthday, so... Good night.

Chapter 7

December 20th (Sunday) - Asamura Yuuta

I felt restless all day. The moment I got up, I was feeling a mixture of nervousness and excitement. This feeling didn't go away even during my shift at work. And it didn't take long for the promised time to arrive. It was currently 6 pm. Just thirty more minutes. With Christmas right around the corner, the streets grew more crowded by the day. It didn't quite feel right to leave work early during such a storm. Especially during the latter half of December, since working in a bookstore was always pure hell.

As delivery halts over the New Year's, the schedule for releases is always pushed forward, forcing new releases out sooner than usual. This in return meant we had to pack the shelves with them. This is what we call 'preemptive stocking.' It's basically the result of the authors and editorial departments apologizing with tears in their eyes as they send us all the releases early and force this hellish schedule upon us. If we get twenty copies of a release that we usually would only get about ten of per week, then we'll start running out of space on the flat displays, forcing us to get creative in book placement, and we need to create more displays for each series, too.

And since the customers don't know that all of this is happening behind the scenes, they end up getting confused and ask us employees for help. When someone is lost in this world, there are others who have to work their butts off. That is how this world continues to turn. Honestly, I have nothing but gratitude. I just hope I can help someone when they're feeling lost.

Oh yeah, Yomiuri-senpai will be coming in for a shift today when Ayase-san and I are leaving. Before leaving, I worked on organizing the shelves some more. I want to at least lessen the workload for my other colleagues. Once my shift was over, I headed over to the office.

"Huh?"

I opened the door and was surprised to see that Yomiuri-senpai was sitting there. Since my other colleagues from the 6 pm shift were already walking around inside the store, I didn't expect to see her still in here this close to work.

"What a rare sight."

"Are you accusing me of skipping work, by any chance?"

"Not at all. I would never."

"You're telling me to get out of here, then? How cruel... Waah, waaah, waaaaah!"

"Your fake crying skills need some work."

"Tee hee."

No matter how much I try to be the straight man, it just feels like she's playing with me.

“Phew...” I sighed right as Ayase-san slipped into the office.

“Huh? Yomiuri-senpai, shouldn’t you...?”

“I’m not skipping work!”

“Ah, so you were late?”

“That’s not the case either, Saki-chan. I was waiting for you! Come with me. Since I couldn’t give you the present last week!” She said and dragged Ayase-san over into the women’s changing room.

“Huh? What? Huh?”

“Don’t resist now. Just leave everything to Uncle, yeah?”

So she’s finally admitted to being a creepy middle-aged man? Wait, more importantly, our manager was sitting at his desk watching this from start to finish. And even though Yomiuri-senpai was late for work, he didn’t say a thing.

“Is it really fine for her to keep up this attitude at work?”

“Well, this place just doesn’t function quite the same without Yomiuri-kun,” the manager said with a defeated smile.

“Is that so?”

“Just think of it as something that’s necessary to guarantee maintaining the level of teamwork that makes our bookstore run.”

I didn’t think he’d be this attached to Yomiuri-senpai’s ethics. I really can’t underestimate her. And she didn’t seem to be lying either, as she returned from the locker room after giving Ayase-san her present and stepped out onto the

main store while waving her hand at me. I was a bit curious why she was grinning like that, but oh well.

After a bit of waiting, Ayase-san returned, changed from her uniform, and we left the store together. It was a bit past 6 pm, but we should make it in time for the reservation at 6:30. For now, we were walking towards the building with the restaurant inside of it. On the way, I brought up Yomiuri-senpai's present, but Ayase-san wouldn't tell me anything. It probably wasn't something she could easily talk about... But there's no way Yomiuri-senpai would give her junior from work anything unorthodox... Right?

"Is it here?"

"Hm?"

We reached the building in question while I was lost in thought. While looking at the signs on the outside wall showing off all the different establishments, Ayase-san commented with a worried tone.

"This place seems pretty expensive. Are you sure about this?"

"It's actually a place that caters to families, so the price is very reasonable."

We stepped inside the elevator and rode up to the floor in question. The upper floor harbored several Western but also Japanese-themed restaurants. After briefly looking for the restaurant in question on the floor map, I spotted a larger place close to the entrance.

"Ah, this is it."

It was a well-lit place with a peaceful atmosphere. The restaurant offered plenty of space with tables here and there that didn't make it feel too cramped. Since we were used to the noise from the always-packed family restaurants, it felt like we had entered an entirely new world. However, as I had previously stated, I mostly saw young couples or families with children sitting at the tables. It definitely seemed fancier than the average family restaurant, but it resembled the atmosphere at a hotel venue.

"This is the first time I've come to a place like this..."

"Well, it's your birthday, so let's make it a memorable one."

I told the employee my name, and we were guided inside the restaurant. They brought us to a table for four, and we seated ourselves opposite of each other.

"But why here? Is this place famous or something?"

"Ah. About that..."

Even the reveal of the surprise is making my heart race. I think keeping a poker face is much easier than such a grand reveal.

"I was told that the beef stew here is especially good."

Up to this point, Ayase-san's eyes looked a bit droopy, presumably since she was a bit tired from work, but when I finished my sentence, they shot wide open in shock.

"Wha...?"

"Well... I heard you liked beef stew, so that's why."

She's not gonna say that her preferences have changed, right? But right when I started feeling worried, Ayase-san's expression changed into that of disbelief.

"You knew?"

"I asked Akiko-san, sorry."

This was the best surprise I could do, considering she already knew what present she'd get. When I gave her that explanation, her mouth opened again in a daze, but her expression quickly changed into that of discontent.

"Not fair."

"What?"

"I wanted to do it, too. It's not fair that you're the only one."

"Ah, um... O...kay?"

"I wanted to give you a surprise."

"Ah..."



I guess that makes sense. She prefers to give more than take, after all. I may have had my share of fun surprising her like this, but I can see why she's displeased. That being

said, I think this is the first time she's actually said "Not fair" while pouting like that. It showed her genuine feelings with a bright expression, unlike how she was when we just met. This must show how much she's opened up to me, right? When I think about it this way, I can't help but think that she's cute.

The employee removed the plaque that said "Reserved" from our table and offered us both the menu. And while we were reading through that, forks and knives appeared on the table.

"This all looks delicious... Can I order this?" She pointed at the beef stew special as she asked me.

"Of course."

We both ordered the beef stew set. It didn't take long for the food to be carried to our table, too.

"It is still quite hot, so please be careful."

Just as the employee said, I could see a faint line of steam rising from the plate that held the stew. The scent of sauce wafting up from the thick demi-glaze tickled my nose to the point that I felt starving. And from the brownish ocean, I could see lumps of meat poking out. It was the main ingredient of this stew—beef. The orange carrots were cut up into thin sticks and then sliced up once more. Next to them was the beautifully green broccoli. The mushrooms cut into slices contradicted the brown sauce with their white skin in the center, creating a bright color parade of red, green, and white. In short, it looked absolutely delicious.

Upon stabbing my fork into the meat and cutting it a bit, the meat immediately fell apart. Taking about half of that lump

of meat, I carried it to my mouth—and I felt a painful heat burn along my tongue.

“Ouch ouch ouch!”

“A-Are you okay?”

I guess I bit off more than I could chew, literally and figuratively. In a panic, I reached for my glass of carbonated water and gulped about half of the entire thing down. The employee stepped towards our table and filled my glass with some more water.

“Thank you very much.”

As you’d expect from a professional working in the food industry, they pretended like they hadn’t even witnessed my failure and just offered me more water. Using this, I took another small sip from the glass.

“Phew, that was hot...”

“Probably, yeah. I’ll be careful.” Ayase-san used her knife and fork to beautifully cut the meat.

Upon securing a small piece of meat, she carried it to her mouth and showed a blissful smile.

“Delicious!” She was happy, saying that it tasted similar to the beef stew she loved to eat as a child. “I wonder what the difference is from the beef stew we make at home...”

“You don’t know either?”

“Yeah...when it comes to boiled stuff like this, the taste of the individual ingredients sorta melts into the sauce, right?”

“Ah, that is true.”

That is something I learned recently by helping with cooking at home.

“But in this case, the taste of the meat itself is still concentrated, right?”

While discussing this, I took another bite from the beef stew. Once our bellies were stuffed, I took out my present for her. Just as she had requested, it contained the soap. She accepted my present and opened the wrapping.

“Ah... it’s a bubble soap pouch.”

“That’s just the bonus.”

“Thank you. I’m really happy.” Ayase-san smiled at me. “The soap is great, too. Honestly, it feels like a waste to use it. I was a bit curious as to which one you’d pick, but this isn’t what I expected.”

Considering her choice of words, she probably realized that this soap was supposed to have a healing and relaxing effect. If so, then the advice Maru gave me seemed to have worked out. Then again, that in itself was pretty embarrassing to realize.

“So...um, I’m really happy about all of this... So if you’re okay with it...” Ayase-san placed her small bag on the table, taking out an envelope. “Won’t you come to watch a movie with me after this?”

She took out a paper and showed me the front side. It turned out to be a ticket for a movie that was screening today at 8:50 pm at the movie theater near the Shibuya train station. And most surprising of all is that the title sounded oddly familiar. As expected, you could say, since it’s the latest movie after three years from the director I’ve

been following. And of course, this wasn't a coincidence either.

"Did..."

"I got them from Yomiuri-sean as a birthday present. Just now, actually. She said 'Use them as you'd like! Since I bought two of them, you can watch the movie together with Asamura-kun, right?'"

Yomiuri-senpai truly is a terrifying tactician.

After our dinner ended, we immediately made our way to the movie theater in question. Since the tickets were limited to today, we didn't want to waste Yomiuri-senpai's goodwill. Or so I made up excuses to myself, but I really wanted to watch this movie too. I've been waiting three years for this, after all. Thankfully, we just barely made it in time.

Here in Tokyo, minors are not allowed to do any sort of business past 11 pm. The same would go for movies, as you couldn't watch any that went beyond that limit. Thankfully, the film today ran from 8:50 to 10:50 pm, probably making for a runtime of about 100 minutes after you counted ads and such. Once again, Yomiuri-senpai's scheduling ability is no joke. She'd be a great manager or secretary.

"But we have to leave as soon as the movie is over, right?" Ayase-san asked, and I nodded.

Since we'd be home late, we contacted our parents. They gave us permission as long as we'd head right back home right after it ended. They said it would be fine if we called a taxi, too, but I think we'll be fine even without that.

"What kind of movie is this, even?" Ayase-san looked at the display at the movie theater.

Shown on the poster were a boy and girl, presumably in high school. However, I had no idea what exactly it would be about.

“Is it a horror movie? Maybe fantasy? Or science-fiction?”

“Actually, I don’t know.”

Ayase-san looked at me in surprise.

“You don’t?”

“I was avoiding any kind of information about it. I didn’t want to get spoiled accidentally.”

“Oh... You were really looking forward to it, then?”

“Well, I guess you could say that.”

Being told this to my face made me feel a bit embarrassed, and I realized how much I had been anticipating this movie. We skipped the concession stand and soon it was our turn to present our tickets and enter the 3rd theater. Our seats were located in the dead center but a bit towards the back of the audience. They were perfect seats that would let us watch the movie without having to strain our necks upwards.

That being said, the pressure you feel from such a huge screen can’t be compared to the small TV at home. Unless you’re a millionaire who has their own home cinema with a 1000-inch screen. That being said, actually watching it in a large cinema like this gives it another feeling. It’s like you’re experiencing everything along with your fellow comrades around you. Upon reaching our seats, we had just started to relax when the advertisements started playing and the lights dimmed. Shortly after, the actual movie began.

Shown on the screen was the sort of high school you'd see anywhere. Through the windows, you could see inside the classroom, and the camera approached a silhouette sitting in the corner. It was a girl with black hair, the same one that had been shown on the movie poster. Her hair color was different, but she resembled Ayase-san a bit. The beginning of the film showed the introverted girl's everyday high school life. Then, one day before summer break arrived, a theft happened in the classroom.

Everyone immediately suspected the girl. Even her friend she believed she was on good terms with didn't take her side, which left her no choice but to wander through the town, riddled with despair, and she ended up getting run over by a truck and dying. For a moment, I thought we'd be dealing with an *isekai* development, but that wasn't quite right. Instead, she traveled back in time. Now that she had been given a second chance, she made friends with someone else, and although she managed to avoid the previous incident, something else happened and she was once again betrayed, causing her to experience despair yet again.

After meeting failure upon failure, the girl closed her heart completely, blocking off any warmth from the outside. However, one day, a transfer student arrived. It was the other character shown on the poster—a boy with bright-colored hair. After everything the girl had gone through, she didn't open up to the boy at first. But he kept talking to her day after day, and the warmth he brought with him slowly began to melt her frozen heart. And then the fateful day arrived once more.

On the last day before summer break, the situation escalated, and the girl was under suspicion of having committed a murder. Who was the true perpetrator? And

why was she forced to repeat this over and over? The young boy revealed himself to be from the future.

'Put simply, this is a phenomenon akin to a time oscillation pendulum with you as the center. Leaving you alone like this could cause a ripple in time and destroy space and the universe as a whole.'

And in order to heal this wound, he traveled back ten thousand years to the past.

'That's why you approached me?'

Upon hearing the girl's question, the boy shook his head. Even in the distant future, they had no idea what could have caused this.

'Then why?'

'Since you didn't have faith in anybody anymore, you treated me, who was estranged and unfamiliar with the common sense of this time, just like everyone else. We managed to adjust to each other without any prejudices. Plus... your miso soup was really delicious. We sadly don't have that anymore in the future where I come from.'

He explained that the idea of miso soup had died out in the world he was born in. That made me snicker, and the girl on the screen smiled along with me. After that, the boy embraced the girl. He spoke with a gentle tone and said 'I'll save you from this place.' In return, the girl began weeping and crying like a small child.

I could see Ayase-san move next to me. She was leaning forward, her gaze drawn towards the screen. A single tear ran down her cheek. I frantically looked back at the screen. It feels like I saw something I shouldn't have. And at the

same time, I made a vow. I want to treasure her no matter what.

The movie reached its climax and the ending song started playing. After roughly 103 minutes, the movie ended. And I instinctively knew that day, Ayase-san's 17th birthday, would be something I would never forget.

Chapter 8

December 20th (Sunday) - Ayase Saki

Yomiuri Shiori-san dragged me to the small locker room. I really think her shift is gonna start soon, so should she really be spending this much time with me? She opened up her locker and took out her bag, followed by a white envelope, which she offered to me.

“Here you go.”

“Huh?”

I reluctantly accepted the envelope. “What’s this?”

“It’s your birthday present!”

A present that fits into a small envelope? Maybe it’s some kind of coupon or a gift card? Her body language made it seem like she expected me to open the envelope, so I did so, taking out a piece of paper. It turned out to be tickets for a movie. Although I didn’t recognize the title. The screening was scheduled for... 8:50 pm. The date was what surprised me the most.

“Wait. This is for today, right?”

“Exactly. Go watch that with Junior-kun, won’t ya?”

“With... Asamura-kun...?”

I mean, she did buy two tickets. But even if she suddenly gives these two to me...

“You should have enough time after you finish your dinner, right?”

“...Well, I guess we do.”

Needless to say, Yomiuri-san had already questioned me about my plans for today, and she found out that Asamura-kun and I made plans to eat dinner together. I hadn’t gotten the exact details from Asamura-kun yet, but the plan was for us to leave work at 6 pm since his reservation is at 6:30. Even if we take our time eating dinner, we should be able to make it to the movie theater just in time. Also, all we did was tell her about the time we’re gonna leave work, so how did she manage to guess our schedule perfectly to then buy tickets like this? I feel like playing hide and seek with her is impossible. And she even surprised me with movie tickets as a birthday present... Is it really okay for me to accept these?

“Um... Thank you very much.”

“Izz fine, izz fine! Even if I gave ya something proper, you’d probably just see me as a clingy senior with heavy presents, so this much is nothing...”

“No, I would never—”

I don’t think I would ever feel that way, to be honest.

“It happens a lot. Pretty rare, though.”

“Which is it?”

Is it rare or not? I can’t tell.

“They’re gonna expire today anyway, so at least take them with you. You don’t have to use them. But I should probably tell you—” Yomiuri-san started grinning. “That movie... Junior-kun really wants to watch it.”

My eyes shot wide open.

“I made sure of it beforehand. So I’m sure he’ll be happy.”

“Urgh...”

Will he really be happy? I began thinking, especially about what had been on my mind the past few days—Relating to Asamura-kun’s birthday. Although I managed to give him a good present, I didn’t do it with any kind of surprise. And here I am, cursing my past self for not considering that important. But with these tickets, I could maybe surprise him.

“Hee, hee, hee. Feeling motivated now? I bet you’re looking forward to it now!”

“Erm, well... I might as well, yes.”

I wonder if Yomiuri-san caught on to Asamura-kun’s and mine relationship, and now she’s secretly trying to support us?

“Um, why are you going this far...?”

The reason my momentum dropped towards the end of the sentence was that I realized I was probably just imagining things my way in my head. Plus, Asamura-kun called her the

personification of a creepy middle-aged man, but looking at her beautiful appearance with long black hair, if she turned out to be my rival in love, then I don't think I could win against her...

"Why? Because I wanna have some juicy spoilers talk with you two! All the other critics were praising the living hell out of it, so I wanna have a discussion about it."

"Huh? Is it a difficult movie to understand or something?"

"Not at all! ...I think. Well, that's why I want you to watch it. I've already watched it myself."

Yomiuri-san's gaze was serious, so it didn't seem like she was teasing me—then again, she teases me all the time, so I can't be too sure—but she was probably genuine about this. And personally, I feel like it'd be a waste not to watch it after getting the tickets as a present.

"I understand. I'll make sure to enjoy it with Asamura-kun." I gave her my thanks and accepted my birthday present.

We left work and headed to the fashion building near the train station. The 6th floor was basically full of restaurants and other food stalls. And Asamura-kun took me to a western restaurant on that floor. I was happy that it turned out like a pleasant place, but something still felt off. It didn't seem like the kind of place Asamura-kun would frequent. Why did he choose this place? I asked him, and the response he gave was—

"I was told that the beef stew here is especially good."

I was baffled. Beef stew is one of my favorite dishes. And according to him, he asked Mom about that. Since the present itself had no element of surprise to it, he wanted to

pull off a proper surprise in a different way. And as he said, my heart skipped a beat. I was really happy. But at the same time, I started sulking. I couldn't surprise him, and yet he made me this happy.

An employee brought us the menu. The omurice and the curry both looked delicious. Especially the cream-topped pudding with caramel sauce poured over it... Wait, no. I'm not here to eat sweets.

“This all looks delicious... Can I order this?”

In the end, I wanted to try the beef stew. When I looked at the side dishes it came with and the price, it was the one thing I wanted. And the stew that arrived in front of me was even more amazing than I had expected. Why does beef stew from restaurants always look better than the one we make at home? I've had this question for ages now. Asamura-kun attempted to give me an answer.

“Maybe there's a difference with the meat?”

“Probably. That would explain a lot... I'd like to try making this myself.”

Maybe it was just a difference in procedure after all? A feeling of displeasure rose within my chest that stabbed my heart. Past memories I had locked away came flashing back in my head. When I was much younger, we would often eat at a private restaurant near our house. I still can't forget the taste of the beef stew they served. I couldn't believe that something so delicious could exist in this world. That is true, and that I realize. But... I don't think this feeling is just related to the food itself.

My mother has gotten married again, this time to Asamura-kun's father—Taichi-san, who turned out to be a kind person

who could make Mom happy. Last Halloween, when Mom took time off work, she said this:

'With Taichi-san, I've started to think I could take a few more breaks.'

When I heard that, I was relieved from the bottom of my heart. Right now, Mom can take time off. It's different from how it was before. That wasn't the case years ago. When my father just up and left, she couldn't rely on our family, so she did her best to raise me on her own, even cooking food for me every day. Even as a child, I understood how hard it must be for her, so around the time I got into middle school, I began learning how to cook to lessen her burden. I have no complaints about Mom's food. It's as delicious as ever.

But even so, there were foods she couldn't make simply because she was so busy. Things that take a lot of time to prepare. These kinds of dishes simply didn't fit our lifestyle. My father was a show-off, so he always took us to fancy-looking restaurants. But since he was too much of a show-off, he always scolded us about our manners. It may have not been so bad if that was simply the kind of family I was born into.

However, we went to places like this maybe twice a year, so even if you expect a young girl in grade school to show perfect manners, it'll just make her too nervous to even enjoy the taste. I was too terrified to even make a sound, because my father would then scream my name and scold me. To me, dining out was like a ritual where failure was not allowed.

On the day the divorce went through, Mom did seem a bit exhausted, but she also seemed refreshed. And that's when she took me to a simple western restaurant in the

neighborhood, not some luxurious restaurant with a stiff atmosphere. I ordered orange juice, which I gulped down wildly after burning my tongue from the beef stew. The corners of my mouth were drenched with sauce, and Mom wiped it away with a smile.

Since all the other customers were also families with children, it felt like we were all one big family, going out to eat. And the beef stew I ate on that day... was ready-made and boiled, always ready for the next customer. The soft sensation of the meat was made with the customers in mind. Inside the meat, the juices felt like they could melt anybody's frozen heart. It filled my mouth with the taste of relief and peace.

"Anyway, this is your present."

I was pulled back to reality. Asamura-kun handed me a small bag with my present inside. I did ask for simple usable soap, but it turned out to be aromatic soap with a relaxing effect, one that smelled like pleasant herbs. I could tell that Asamura-kun put a lot of thought into it. I'm going to use this while taking a bath after taking off my armament. Having a relaxing and healing effect is perfect for that time. It felt like he was telling me that it was okay to relax.

Could I really? Could I really rest more? Up to this point, it's always just been Mom and I—Always, always. But I can't openly show these emotions.

"So...um, I'm really happy about all of this... That's why, if you're okay with it..." I showed him the tickets I got from Yomiuri-san.

The tickets for the movie Asamura-kun supposedly wanted to see. And his expression told me enough. It made me

happy that I had tried to surprise him. Thank you very much, Yomiuri-san.

The idea of watching a movie always had something special to it compared to other entertainment. Despite the fact that there are other people all around, it feels like that place exists simply for you. Or maybe it allows you to fully immerse yourself. Not too close but not too far, simply experiencing the same thing together—I've never experienced that before.

As for the movie itself, it was pretty interesting—but also very scary. The female protagonist was betrayed by her classmates over and over. She was involved in accidents, and doubted by everyone, and every time she tried to reach for help, she was cruelly rejected. After she died in an accident, she traveled back in time, only to once again taste the same despair. By the time the male protagonist appeared, her heart was already frozen and broken to pieces.

The boy declared himself to be from the future and trying to avoid this endless spiral... but since the girl had been hurt too many times, she didn't believe that he truly wanted to help her. Since she had been betrayed so much, the girl saw everybody around her as an enemy. The reason I realized that this may have been influenced by Andersen's "The Snow Queen" is probably because Asamura-kun had told me about it before. Basically, the scar the girl carried in her heart was like the piece of the devil's mirror that stabbed Kai in the eye and heart, whereas the boy who came from 10,000 years in the future to help her would be Gerda. The fact that the gender roles were reversed was probably in the mind of modern themes.

Before I had even realized it, I was glued to the screen. The time the boy and girl spent together was a mere two weeks right before the summer break. In this short time, there's no way the boy could manage to melt the girl's frozen heart—is what I would have thought a year ago.

The scene of the climax arrived. On the screen, the boy was embracing the girl.

'I'll save you from this place. That's why, just **let it all out.**'

Upon hearing those words, the girl returned the boy's embrace with all her might. Normally, I would never show such a weakness, especially not in public. But... I think it's because Asamura-kun is right next to me. I should be alone, and yet I'm not. It's the magic of the cinema. Feeling a presence next to me, I was probably allowed to feel this relief.

—I can't.

I tried my best to hold it in but failed. A warm and wet sensation ran down my cheek. The ending song started playing, and even after the credits started rolling, I found myself unable to move. Right before the lights came on, I finally managed to wring my voice out of my throat.

"Can I head to the toilet for a moment?" I asked but didn't wait for a response, and I hastily stormed inside the toilet.

I checked my makeup in the mirror. As expected, the foundation under my eye had suffered a casualty. If I had known this would happen, I would have prepared stronger makeup. Realizing my blunder, I sighed. To think I would actually cry like that. I was surprised at myself, only to then realize I hadn't cried for the longest time.

I opened up my pouch to fix my makeup, only for my hand to stop. I looked at myself in the mirror once again. It was a bit messy, but not so much that I absolutely had to fix it. I mean, we're just going to head home after this, right? It's dark outside, and we won't be looking at each other's faces much, either. When I looked at the area around my eye, I was reminded of the Snow Queen. In that movie, tears were what melted the piece of the devil's mirror. And thus, the boy's heart began to regain its warmth.

...Maybe I don't have to fix it. We're just going home, and Asamura-kun is right by my side. At least for now, **I don't need any armament.**

Chapter 9

December 24th (Thursday) - Asamura Yuuta

“Now we’ve only got half of our high school lives left, huh?”

I didn’t plan for anybody to hear the words I mumbled to myself, but my good friend sitting in the seat ahead of me unexpectedly turned his large upper body around—Actually, aren’t we still in the middle of our short homeroom?

“Asamura. Starting next year, we gotta put an even bigger focus on our entrance exams.” Maru commented with a quiet voice.

Our homeroom teacher at the front of the class was telling us to be careful during winter break. And with that voice in one ear, I couldn’t help but gulp at Maru’s statement. Entrance exams, huh? Maru continued with a tone of resignation.

“We’ll be adults in no time, after all.”

“I don’t mind the idea of growing up, though.”

If anything, I didn’t like the idea of always staying a child. I don’t want to be sheltered for the rest of my life. Well, the fact is that growing into an adult does seem like an

exhausting process. I just remembered my old man's face... Actually, maybe not that much? Since I can't remember his exhausted expression after his remarriage, I guess he's feeling a lot better now that my old mother is gone.

"You're the type of person who wants to become an adult quickly, huh?"

"And you don't, Maru?"

"Good question. Since growing up means learning more and more, I'd love some kind of time chamber to just live my life at ease."

"Ohhh."

So he wouldn't have as much time as he'd like if he followed the path of the baseball professional.

"I wouldn't be able to watch all the seasonal anime."

"That's your problem?!"

"I was joking."

I couldn't believe my ears and leaned forward as I said that. Was he teasing me or being serious? I still can't quite tell. The sun tickled my nape, making me turn towards the window. It was shining brightly on the outside. Even during the mid-afternoon, the sun was low, beaming directly on Maru and I: The people sitting next to the windows. Thus, sleepiness assaulted me. The words from our homeroom teacher started to resemble a lullaby, but since a few more minutes would be all it took to end classes, I put up with it.

Finally, the bell rang from the speakers and our homeroom teacher's mumbling came to an end. All our classmates

sighed in unison and then cheered. Our homeroom teacher shook their head once and then left the classroom, warning us one last time not to overdo it.

“We’re still in our second year. Why do they have to give us this whole speech just because it’s Christmas?”

“Huh?” I tilted my head in confusion when Maru said that.

“Illicit relationships and all that. There’s no way I’ll let some adolescent bastards destroy my precious break, right?”

“Agreed. I’d feel the same way.”

“So dear older brother isn’t worried at all?”

Maru using that teasing tone with that vocabulary caused my eyes to shoot wide open.

“What?”

“Knowing Ayase, she’ll probably have plans tonight, no?”

“Tonight?”

“Like a Christmas date. Don’t you think so?”

It took an awfully long time before the meaning behind his words reached my brain. Is he implying that Ayase-san has date plans today? Well, any bystander wouldn’t know just what kind of relationship Ayase-san and I have. There might be people who would try to invite Ayase-san out on a Christmas date. And at the same time, it might seem weird if she rejects each and every invitation. Maybe she’ll even agree to one... No, there’s no way.

Suddenly, I felt a vibration close to my chest and frantically sat up straight. When I took out my phone, I saw that I had

gotten a new LINE message. On the lock screen, it said “I’m coming home after shopping,” and the sender was Ayase-san. So she’s coming home after running some errands... See? I knew it.

“What’s wrong? Did Ayase-san say she hates her older brother now or something?”

“There’s no way she’d talk like the little sister out of some weird anime.”

“So it was Ayase-san, huh?”

“Urk.”

“You’re so easy to read.”

“I think you’re just too sharp when it comes to this type of stuff.”

“And? Don’t you have to respond, Mr. Older Brother?”

“Nope, it’s fine.” I put my phone back in my pocket and stretched.

Meanwhile, Maru grabbed his bag and stood up.

“Anyway, catch you on the flip side, Asamura.”

“Yeah. We probably won’t see each other again until New Year’s, so... happy new year?”

“True, I doubt we’ll run into each other during winter break, so make sure to have a good start to the new year.” Maru turned his back toward me with one hand in the air, walking out of the classroom.

I watched him walk off into the distance and then looked around the classroom once more. Half of our classmates had already left the classroom, presumably because of their clubs or just to head home. Meanwhile, I pondered if I should stop by the bookstore myself. Really, what a needless worry to have... Oh yeah, today's gonna be a Christmas party at home, I forgot.

The kitchen walls were sparkling. Naturally, this wasn't thanks to me. Akiko-san was the one who suddenly said "I'm going to give this place a good cleaning today." And of course, she pointed at the kitchen when she said that. Ayase-san and I had offered to help out. Since my old man and I rarely cook, the kitchen was still fairly clean, and we finished getting it all shiny after roughly two hours. This was at roughly 3 pm, so after a break and a few snacks—

"All that's left is to prepare the dinner, so you can take it easy now, Yuuta-kun," Akiko-san said and kicked me out of the kitchen, probably because she was looking forward to a thorough cooking session with her daughter. Thus, I had no other choice but to return to my room and open my bag. I grabbed the book I had just bought and turned to the first page, leisurely enjoying my reading time. The next time I raised my head, I realized that the inside of my room started to grow dark. The sun had long set. I read the last bit of the book and then sighed.

—That was great. I read through it all in one sitting. I can't believe I read the first volume of a heavy hardcover science fiction story in just two hours, not to mention a translated one. I started to feel like I myself had a grave duty on my shoulders that forced me to travel through space and time. Now I understand why this would receive a Hollywood adaptation. I closed the book when I heard Akiko-san and

Ayase-san indulging in a pleasant conversation. Upon poking my head out of the room, Akiko-san spotted me.

“Yuuta-kun, could you turn on the TV?”

“Why the TV?”

“I just wanted some white noise. A movie or something like that will do.”

“Ah, I see. Got it.”

I searched for the remote and turned on the next best streaming service I could find. If she wants some noise in the background, then a channel specifically for movies should do that trick.

“Would you prefer a Japanese movie? Or maybe a Western one?”

“A western one. With subtitles is fine, too.”

“...You’re really using this as BGM, huh?”

Then again, even the lines can deliver plenty of excitement on their own, even if you can’t understand them. I booted up a special service for it and chose a random movie befitting the Christmas season. It seemed to be a comedy movie for children. I’ve seen it many times before.

Something about children being left behind by their parents and doing this and that. It seemed to land itself pretty well, as they created sequel after sequel. Then again, it’s got a very Hollywood-esque approach where it’s unclear if there’s any connection between the series. Maybe the parents are divorced in the sequel? I can’t let down my guard even with family movies like this.

“Thanks, Yuuta-kun!”

“Um... is there anything I can help with?”

“Make it so that you’re starving!”

“...Huh?”

So, should I do some light training? I glanced over at Ayase-san, who simply hummed to herself while swinging around the frying pan. I guess I shouldn’t break her concentration, at least.

“Well, feel free to call me if you need a hand.”

“Okaaay!”

After cleaning the bath and checking the water level, I went back to the living room. I sat down on the sofa and went back to watch the currently-airing movie. Shortly after, Ayase-san joined me on the sofa, which probably meant that they were done cooking. Even though there was space for another person between us, I was reminded of the night we watched the movie together. I looked over at Ayase-san, wondering if she was watching the movie, but she was going through her vocabulary collection. And since Akiko-san was with us, I wasn’t even quite sure how to interact with Ayase-san.

Then again, watching TV as a family would be... normal, right? I’m thinking about it too much. When I looked over at Ayase-san again, she had put her earphones into her ears and was listening to something as she worked through her vocabulary. She’s not showing any intention of talking to me. Nor is she watching the movie. It’s like we’ve gone back to how we were a year ago.

“I’m home.” My old man arrived home with a plastic box in one hand.

He said he’d be home at around 7 pm, but it was already half an hour past that. He walked past us and directly into the kitchen.

“I grabbed the one you ordered, but the place was crowded, so it took me a bit. Sorry.”

“That’s totally fine!”

He brought back a whole cake that was twelve... maybe fifteen centimeters in diameter? Why can I tell? It’s because I decided against eating cake when Ayase-san and I were out to eat dinner. Then again, we just didn’t have the confidence to finish a whole 12cm cake right after dinner. Still, a 15cm cake might be tough, even for four people... But I guess we can just keep any leftovers for tomorrow.

“Let’s leave this for after dinner,” Akiko-san said and put the cake in the fridge with a grin.

Since we had prepared for the end of the year, our fridge and freezer were pretty packed.

“Yuuta-kun, could you carry this and this for me?”

“Sure.”

She handed me some beer and non-alcoholic champagne, which I carried to the dinner table. I guess we’ll need glasses and a corkscrew, too. After making enough space in the fridge, Akiko-san pushed the box with the cake inside. In the meantime, Ayase-san began warming the food, and I carried the heater to the table. By the time my old man

came back after changing into a more comfortable outfit, the dining table was already set.

“Wow, that looks mouthwatering.”

The main focus of today’s Christmas dinner was standing in the center of the table: Herb-flavored grilled poultry. That being said, it wasn’t just any ordinary chicken meat, it was actually genuine turkey meat that we in Japan tend to enjoy on special occasions like this. Though I guess this is normally eaten in other countries around Thanksgiving. It had less fat than regular chicken meat, which is why it’s found frequently on menus for people on a diet. It wasn’t an entire turkey, either, but the amount of meat waiting on the plate to be eaten was big enough for me to doubt if we could finish it. My old man apparently had ordered it online, choosing the roasted option.

“Maybe something with pasta would have given this a more Christmas-y feel?” Akiko-san commented as she looked at the fully-loaded table.

I mean, we’ve got a turkey as the main course, but there’s still enough rice to make us feel stuffed, and we’ve got regular miso soup, too. In terms of Christmas colors, this is definitely on the weaker side of things. Ayase-san spoke up, attempting to provide a follow-up.

“Erm, I think this should be fine. We made some regular salad, too. I think this’ll do as a Western Christmas dinner. Just look at all the dressings, too. Which would you prefer, Stepdad?”

“I’ll go classic Japanese.”

Really, what kind of origin does Christmas even have at this point? I had no problem with a Christmas dinner, but that

thought left me bewildered.

“We also prepared some pickled vegetables. Here, there’s some pickled cabbage and cucumber. You like those. Right, Taichi-san?”

“I sure do. Thanks.”

“Mom... Pickles would have been eno—”

Enough—she probably wanted to say but swallowed her words. She probably realized that this wasn’t enough to comment on. Ayase-san and I flashed a wry smile and sat down. Christmas is supposed to be about love and peace, after all.

“Anyway... Merry Christmas! And Yuuta, happy birthday!”

“Dad, you gotta say that on the actual day...”

“That makes sense. My bad. Happy birthday, Saki-chan. And Merry Christmas!”

“Thank you very much.”

“Happy birthday, you two. Now you’re both 17,” Akiko-san said as she looked at both our faces.

Our parents cracked open their beer, with Ayase-san and I having our non-alcoholic champagne, as we put their glasses together for the toast. As you’d expect, Akiko-san’s miso soup was absolutely delicious. Just as my old man had said, arguing about Japanese or Western style is a trifling matter. And today, the miso soup was tofu-based. Beautifully-sliced white tofu combined with green onions. The soup itself was made from red miso. Taking a sip from it, I realized something.

...Did she make this with Christmas colors in mind? Well, it should be fine for at least today.

“The sauce is delicious, too.”

“And the meat is so pleasant to chew. I guess I scored a good hit with this one.”

Akiko-san and my old man shared impressions about the food, telling me that my judgment wasn’t too far off. After our dinner ended (during which I held back a bit to leave some room for cake), we had some after-dinner coffee and started cutting the cake. The top of the 15cm cake read “Merry Christmas” written with chocolate and a Santa Claus-shaped biscuit next to it. It felt almost like a shame to cut up a cake this beautifully decorated with white cream. Inside the spongy slices of the cake, I spotted the red meat of several strawberries. That’s typical for Christmas, all right. You’ve gotta have shortcake.

“It’s better to keep it classic than to experiment and ruin the day, right?” My old man said.

Well, he’s not wrong. I poked my fork into the slice of the cake given to me by Akiko-san, and we proceeded to celebrate our first birthdays and Christmas as a family. My old man was happy that my grades had gone up compared to last summer, and asked if Ayase-san had any interest in attending a prep school, too.

“If you’re worried about the money, then...”

“No, it’s okay. If I started something new now, I’d probably only get distracted.”

It was a response full of restraint as you’d expect of her, but my old man still accepted it. Thinking about it, before they

moved in with us, Ayase-san and Akiko-san had been living alone together. Getting used to suddenly living with two men must be extremely difficult. Not to mention that my old man and I had been living here before, and they moved in with us. The change in the environment alone must have been oppressive... Man, it's already been half a year since I first met Ayase-san.

"If you change your mind, then tell me whenever, okay?"

"Thank you very much... Stepdad."

Adding that last part of the sentence caused my old man to start smiling happily. Good, he's growing to become a wonderful helicopter parent.

"Personally, I'm much more worried about Yuuta-kun. Are you even finding time to relax and enjoy yourself?"

"...Isn't it the other way around? I figured you'd be worried if I'm studying enough."

"I've never once had to worry about that," my old man commented from the sidelines.

Yeah, I don't remember my old man ever telling me to "Go study." That being said, he was very peculiar and attentive to any calls from school that were about me. I don't remember how long he's been like that, but it's probably been since after my mother left. He'd ask me to show him my report card, as well as all the question sheets up to middle school. Plus, he wouldn't even say anything while reading through them. He'd just nod to himself, asking if there was anything I didn't understand. It felt like he was looking at x-ray pictures of me. And then, a few days later, textbooks and reference books for the subjects I was having trouble with suddenly appeared on my desk. That in itself

created a lot of pressure. Though once compulsory education was done and I got into high school, he just asked for the report card and nothing else.

“Yuuta always loved reading books ever since he was a child. Your life as a student is short, so you’ve gotta have fun from time to time.”

“So you say, but I’m enjoying myself, you know?”

“Really? Well, as your parent, I’m happy to hear that. But leaving that aside...” My old man stopped and winked at Akiko-san.

She stood up and opened the door to their bedroom. From there, she returned with a plastic bag that was hidden behind the door.

“Here, these are our birthday presents for you.”

“Hm? This...”

“Are these books?” Ayase-san asked, confused.

The objects wrapped in the Christmas package were quite thick, and the main reason Ayase-san and I could guess that they were books was because we’re used to wrapping books in the first place. We’ve seen this familiar sight many times over.

“Can I open it?”

“Of course.”

I gave my old man, who kept grinning to himself, a dubious gaze, and removed the wrapping paper. As expected, it was a book. Not to mention...

“A university entrance exam workbook?!”

“I figured this would come in handy since you’re getting into studying soon. You don’t have one yet, right?”

“Well, I don’t, but...”

Ayase-san was just as bewildered as I was, and I didn’t blame her. After all, the present we received from our parents on Christmas of all days was the “University and Faculty Entrance Exam Question Collection.” Since the front cover was red-colored, some people have taken to calling it an *akahon*, or “red book.” Normally, you’d start gathering these after you set your eyes on your dream university, but these are for all shared problems. Not to mention that it had five copies for all the subjects I had problems with. Needless to say, I was very grateful for this. After all, they could easily surpass the price of three hardcover books together. Allowing me to have them at hand whenever I want will surely come in handy. However...

“This really doesn’t feel much like a present, though.”

“Once you’ve become an adult, you’re free to live your lives as you’d like, but right now, it’s entrance exam time.”

“Do your best, you two,” Akiko-san said with a smile.

“Thank you very much. I’ll do my best.” Ayase-san thanked the two of them and lowered her head.

At that time, Ayase-san and I experienced the weird taste of an odd Christmas present, still not knowing why exactly my old man and Akiko-san kept winking at each other. From the TV, we heard the voices of the child protecting their house from thieves.

That night, right when I went to bed in order to get some good sleep, I heard faint sounds. I opened my eyes amidst the darkness. I looked around, spotting nothing out of the ordinary in my room. Or rather, I couldn't see anything at all. I grabbed my phone and turned on the screen, checking the time while I was at it. It was almost half past midnight. I had just fallen asleep a bit ago. Then again, I now have winter break starting tomorrow, so sleeping in a bit wouldn't hurt.

I then turned my phone around to light up the area around my door. I spotted a small box next to the door that wasn't there before. What's this about? In order to get it, I'd actually have to get out of bed... But I was oddly curious. I peeled off my blanket, which caused my body to shiver from the cold air. I felt the urge to hug myself to warm myself up a bit. I turned off the A/C since I didn't think I'd actually get out of bed again. After making my way to the box, I picked it up and returned to my bed, turning on the light next to my pillow.

Since it was wrapped with a ribbon on it, I could tell immediately that this was supposed to be a Christmas present. And it's from Santa Claus. That name immediately came to mind, but I quickly shook my head. I'm not a young child anymore. But how long has it been since I've gotten my hopes up like that? So this is the main gift, huh? I mean, I was happy about getting the *akahon* for Christmas and my birthday, but I guess that was just a distraction from this, huh? Was my old man the type of person to pull stuff like this? Then again, it might be Akiko-san's influence.

There's a good chance Ayase-san has received the same thing on her end. I took off the wrapping and checked the contents. Immediately after, something fell to the ground.

“...Is this a letter?”

A present with a card? Upon checking the card, I found that the text was quite lengthy. And it started with ‘To Yuuta, who will be an adult next year’—So basically, since things will be messy and stressful next year, they decided to celebrate us becoming adults a bit ahead of time.

“Oh yeah, we’ll have to focus on entrance exams starting next year...”

Becoming a third-year in high school means you’ll have a constant stomach ache from the stress. It’ll probably be hard to give us something when we’re constantly under that much pressure. I checked inside the box.

“It’s a watch... Not to mention...”

It turned out to be a wristwatch from a manufacturer even I had heard of. As a high school student, its price made it something absolutely unattainable. Even a used one could sell for a hefty amount. It would be the perfect present to celebrate one’s employment.

—*To Yuuta, who will be an adult next year.*

I felt the gravity of the message written on the card. Next year, I’ll be 18. I could even get married at that age. And then I’ll become independent. Though I never really thought about it until now. The idea of working feels so unbelievable. The regular schedule would be to attend university, graduate after five to six years, and then start working—Actually, finding work isn’t so easy from what I’ve heard. You need a good amount of luck to find a good job. But I need it to eat food and be independent... and get married...

I shook my head left and right. That last part isn't important right now. I took the wristwatch out of the box and put it around my wrist. The silver belt glistened with a light color under the LED light of my room. It wasn't nearly as heavy as I expected, and wearing it felt quite comfortable. But for now, I put it back into the box, which I placed next to my bed.

...I want to be able to earn enough money so I can afford this kind of wristwatch. And for that, I need to work hard. I snuggled back under my blanket, and even after I turned off the lights next to my bed, the silver shine of the wristwatch remained visible behind my eyelids.

Chapter 10

December 24th (Thursday) - Ayase Saki

Once the end-of-term ceremony ended, I headed out to buy the ingredients Mom had asked me to get (which were vegetables and various seasonings) and headed right home. Tonight, we're having a combined birthday and Christmas party at home. Mom took the day off and said she'd be cooking for today, so I wanted to get home as quickly as possible to help her. Upon arriving, I opened the front door that I had completely gotten used to by this point. I said "I'm home" and took off my outdoor shoes.

"Welcome back. You're quicker than I thought." Mom was already standing in the kitchen.

Even though it was only slightly past noon.

"Let me help."

"Oh, my. I'm perfectly fine on my own, so why not get some rest?"

There's no way I can let her handle all the work—but I can't say that.

"I'm fine, I'm not tired. Also, here."

I placed the plastic bag of groceries on the dining table.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll get changed and then come to help you.”

“Aren’t you a bit stubborn today. I wonder who you take after...”

You, Mom. But I swallowed that comment and headed into my room. Once I was done changing, I immediately returned to the kitchen.

“What are you making today? Any particular ideas?”

“Since we’re celebrating Christmas and both of your birthdays, I was thinking of making it a bit more luxurious than usual. Rice, miso soup, salad, and meat.”

That... sounds pretty much the same as our regular dinner, no?

“But this is the meat we’ll be working with!” She swung open the fridge door and showed me the situation inside.

Whoa, that piece of meat is huge! Not to mention that it was packed into several smaller packages.

“This... isn’t regular chicken, is it?”

“It’s turkey meat.”

“How...? When...?”

It’d make sense if it was duck meat. They sell that in the local supermarkets. But although I see it more frequently now than I used to, a turkey of all things is still a rarity over

here, like I'd have to enter the land of dreams to get a bite. How did she...?

"Is this already grilled?"

"Cooking this from raw would be a bit too much, even for me. I do know a recipe for it, but that would take up far too much time. You'd have to grill it and then let it freeze for three days, prepare everything the day before, stuff it, and put it together again... which is delicious, but I might as well save the time, right?"

"Y-Yeah, sounds rough."

"That it is. And that's why we ordered it roasted. Or rather, Taichi-san did. It just got here not too long ago. We just have to warm it up." She closed the fridge.

"That means we can leave the meat for last... What else?"

"Rice, salad, and miso soup."

"Huh? But that doesn't take that long..."

"Oh? Are you getting the wrong idea, by any chance?"

Huh?

"Oh, Ayase-san. Welcome back."

I turned around to see Asamura-kun coming out of his room.

"Ah, I'm home."

"And you're awake I see, Akiko-san. Are you already preparing dinner?"

“I was actually thinking of cleaning the kitchen first.” She said to Asamura-kun, pointing at the kitchen.

Oh yeah, it’s close to the end of the year, after all.

“I’ll help,” Asamura-kun said, and I followed immediately after.

“Me too.”

“My, you didn’t have to, but thanks.” Mom said with a smile, but I knew that cleaning the kitchen was hard work.

You use a lot of oil when cooking, after all. And that tends to leave nasty stains.

“Though... it’s surprisingly clean.” I looked at the wall and commented.

“Well, my old man and I rarely use the kitchen, after all.”

“I bought the cooking oil only after moving here, too. I don’t think they used it here before,” Mom chimed in with an explanation.

Just as she said, if you don’t use any kind of oil while cooking, there’s no way the kitchen would get too dirty... That explains why Asamura-kun was so shocked when he saw me cooking tempura. He wasn’t used to frying stuff.

“I was also thinking of cleaning the ventilation fans too, but that’s a lot easier.”

“We’ve put them through a lot of work, after all.”

“I didn’t think you could make food like tempura and such at home...”

“Oh, Asamura-kun... Of course you can.”

“Yeah, yeah...” Asamura-kun showed a sour smile.

He did say he wanted to attempt it himself at some point, but he'd have to watch and learn first, that's for sure. That being said... Huh, I guess cleaning this year won't be so hard. For the ventilation fans, we can just remove the filter, wash it in the kitchen sink or the bath, and clean it with some detergent... or maybe not even that. And we probably won't have to soak the tiles around the stove with detergent to get rid of the oil stains either. That all sounds fairly easy.

“I don't think it'll take too long.”

“Then let's get it over quickly with the three of us, yeah?”

Mom sighed.

“Fine, but first we have to get the preparations for dinner out of the way,” she said, and Asamura-kun and I nodded in response.

It took us roughly two hours, but the kitchen was soon squeaky clean again. We had a break with some snacks after that, and eventually returned to preparing dinner. I think Mom had been looking forward to cooking with me, because she pretty much chased Asamura-kun out of the kitchen. He reluctantly made his way back to his room. Another two hours passed in the blink of an eye. We made miso soup, and salad... It really didn't feel much like Christmas dinner. In fact, it was probably still on the light side, until Mom told me that Stepdad was buying a cake she ordered.

A cake after dinner?! I'm already scared of stepping on the scale tomorrow. Maybe having a lighter dinner is better,

after all. Using the cabbage and cucumbers I bought, Mom started working on something. She put the vegetables we cut into a Ziploc bag and swung it around. Is she going for something lightly pickled? But it's Christmas today, right? Then again, we're also celebrating Asamura-kun's and mine birthdays. In that sense, it's not too weird to keep it traditional. But... pickled stuff for a birthday party is still unorthodox.

"What's that weird face for, Saki?"

"Well, I'm your daughter, after all."

"Then you'll surely meet someone as great as Taichi-san."

"Yeah, yeah."

After my father left us, I wasn't quite sure about Mom getting married again. Maybe I was just cautious. It's hard to imagine, but I have very few memories of Mom talking about men when she was home. She probably ignored love altogether while raising me. Plus, thanks to her work, she most likely ran across a lot of unsightly men, so I wouldn't have been surprised if she developed a mistrust towards men in general. After she brought up the subject of remarriage, we talked about my father once at home. Reminiscing over that, Mom said:

'It's hard for two strangers to get along with each other.'

She had taken a break around that time. It was rare to see her drink at home, but she gently tilted the glass mid-air and the ice inside made clanking sounds while bumping against it.

'Him and I couldn't get along. But if not for him, then somebody else wouldn't have saved me.'

'I... guess so?'

'That's just how life works. There's no one who looks perfect in everyone's eyes. It's just as the young kids of today say. "You stan who you can," right?'

That was the first time I'd heard that.

'So, this... Asamura-san? Are you sure about being with him?'

'For now, yes.'

"For now...?" Now I'm worried.'

'I'm not confident enough to lie to you and say that we'll be together for the rest of our lives. I thought we'd be fine before, but things didn't work out. But... I think it'll at least last until you get married or I get a son-in-law.'

And what if I have no intention to do either?

'But... then why did you feel like getting married again?'

'Because he went through the same pain that I did, maybe?'

'Ah... Right, he's also divorced.'

'That's right. At the very least, I doubt the same thing will happen again. Well, it might just be wishful thinking on my end, but you can't change your life while not straying from your path once or twice.'

I found myself thinking *Is that how that works?* Like it wasn't even my problem. What does it even mean to get married? I never really gave it much thought, so I have no way of seeing it the same way as Mom does. But I've found my own choice in life. I want to be able to earn enough money to

support myself without the help of a husband. I want the strength to stand on my own two feet.

'Yes, yes. And if possible, I want you to call Taichi-san "Stepdad," if possible.'

That comment caught me by surprise. The words she told me didn't even reach my brain immediately. "Stepdad"—If I had to guess, it's probably Mom's desire for me to openly accept Asamura-san, as he'll probably feel a lot of pressure suddenly having a daughter-in-law at what you'd call a difficult age.

'If not, things will get confusing.'

—I was wrong.

'Confusing?'

'I mean, Yuuta-kun's family name is also Asamura. It'd be confusing who you're talking to otherwise, right?'

'Yuuta... Who is that?'

'Oh? Did I not tell you? He's Taichi-san's son. Asamura Yuuta-kun.'

'So he... has a child?'

'He's 16, just like you. And since his birthday is one week before yours, he'll be your older brother. Yuuta-oniichan sounds good, and Yuuta-nii has a nice ring to it as well. Then again, you're basically twins since your birthdays are so close.'

No, we are not. I've never heard of non-blood-related twins.

'This is the first I've heard of this.'

'Well now you have. And I think you'll get to meet him next week. So you have two choices. Either call Taichi-san "stepdad," or call Yuuta-kun "Onii-chan." I'm fine with either one, so it's your choice.'

I don't remember much about what happened after that. I feel like the day ended after a bit more banter and idle talk. Either way, I was really thrown off at this sudden revelation. Not to mention that I'd be meeting him so soon. I really wish she'd told me sooner. Mom said that "At least you learned before the actual day, right?" but I couldn't back a comment.

'There's no way anybody would just keep quiet about that until the day of the meeting!'

It's been more than half a year since then. Even if I asked Mom once more if she thinks she'll be fine, she'll probably respond with the same "For now." Mom knows that love doesn't last forever, and she's prepared for that. Even so, I feel like stepdad and Mom really resemble each other. It's hard to really pin it down, but I can see that Mom has been a bit more open and relaxed since she met him. Since she's willing to take proper breaks and not work herself to death, I'm very thankful for that. Everything is much better than her ruining her health.

Mom and father were not a good match for each other. In their ten years and more of being a couple, they never managed to adjust to each other even once. Instead, father could only see Mom the way he painted her in his mind.

While talking about this and that, Mom and I proceeded with our preparations for the dinner. Time passed to the point stepdad should come home soon, and Asamura-kun appeared from his room again. He was probably taking a

nap or reading a book like he always did. Asamura-kun's a bookworm, after all. Mom called out to him.

"Yuuta-kun, could you turn on the TV?"

"Why the TV?"

Apparently, she wanted to have a movie running in the background to create a bit of white noise. We couldn't see the TV screen from our position, but we heard the voice of an energetic boy. And since it was playing Christmas songs, it was probably a Christmas movie. Asamura-kun sat down on the living room sofa and watched the movie.

I could see his profile from here. And that sight reminded me of when we first met. I was so nervous I just created my own image of Asamura Yuuta, which he brushed aside instantly. Our parents probably watched our exchange in concern, but his words gave me a feeling of relief and peace. He made me realize that he wouldn't force any expectations on me. And that's why I said what I did back then.

'I won't have any great expectations from you, so I want you to do the same for me.'

Since that day, Asamura-kun has always been in my view...

We finished preparing everything for dinner, and Mom said I could take a break. I took off my apron and started thinking. When I went back to my room, I spotted the vocabulary cards I had scattered on my desk. It's winter break starting today, so there's no particular reason I have to practice class material, and studying for entrance exams right now isn't really worth it since we'll have dinner soon, anyway. The best I could do is work through my vocabulary cards some more.

I connected my earbuds to my smartphone and started playing some lofi hip-hop. A faint tune with rain sounds in the background tickled my ears. I grabbed my vocabulary cards and left my room, heading out to the living room. The TV was still playing the Christmas movie, but I was listening to my own music, so I couldn't hear any of the lines or sounds. That being said, I could wait here for Stepdad to come home. I sat down next to Asamura-kun and started flipping through my cards.

Bounce—To deflect something. Okay, got it.

Concern—To get involved with someone or something.

Ah, this is also in the context of showing concern for someone. Isn't *worry* something similar? I stopped flipping through the cards and started thinking. I looked this up before in the dictionary. The difference between it and *worry* is that *concern* isn't used when some sort of troublesome incident happens. It has more of a connotation of doing something to prevent the thing that is making you worry. It's important to help and not just worry, after all. Though I don't know how important that difference will be to remember.

Consider—...Consider? Um, thinking about doing something?

I worked my way through my vocabulary cards while enjoying a pleasant rhythm entering my ears. And this continued for a bit longer, with Asamura-kun next to me just enjoying the movie.

I don't quite know what woke me up that night. However, it was probably that I noticed something amidst the darkness. A faint ray of light entered my room that was otherwise pitch black. The door was open.

"I thought I closed it..." I mumbled to myself and stood up.

I turned on the light next to my bed and spotted a small box standing next to the open door.

"Santa...?"

I remembered back to the time I actually fell for the whole 'Santa' thing back in grade school. Though when I said "Thanks, Mom" to her the next morning, Santa stopped coming. I put on my cardigan and reached for the present. It wasn't anything huge. It fit pretty snugly into the palm of my hand. I removed the ribbon and undid the wrapping paper to see a white box. On top of the box was a letter that started with the words "To Saki."

It was from my mother, writing about the gratitude she had for me as her daughter, and how she was worried that she may have put too much pressure on me. Why is it always so embarrassing to read a genuine letter from your family? ... But I still read the letter a bit more, and then opened the small box. Inside was a bracelet from an expensive manufacturer. I returned to the letter.

Knowing you, there's a good chance you might try to become independent right after graduating from high school

I nearly jumped in shock when I read that. I never clearly voiced that desire, and yet she had already seen through me.

And since that is probably what is going to happen, since you're my daughter, you'd never waste any money. You're stubborn, after all.

“Because I’m your daughter, yeah...” I looked at the bracelet in my hand.

That’s why I’m giving you this bracelet as a present. Next year, it’ll be nothing but entrance exams filling your mind, so I want to give it to you now while you still have some freedom. If push comes to shove, you can even sell it. It’ll allow you to buy food for at least a month. Use that time to ask for help from someone, okay?

She even knew I had trouble relying on others.

“But... I just got this as a present. Who in their right mind would tell the other person to sell their present if push comes to shove?”

Actually, there’s one person right here, huh? Mom continued the letter by apologizing for making it something expensive like this, but she wanted me to let her do this for me, and then she ended the letter like that. I couldn’t hold back a sigh. She knew that writing a letter to go along with it like this would make it hard for me to return it. I put it around my wrist for a bit and then placed it back on my bed, and the faint light from my lamp illuminated it with a bright silver color. I poked my finger at it.

“I’m not afraid of working my butt off. I’ll repay you ten-fold for this someday.” I declared, though with a meek voice.

If anything, it felt more like I was praying. I carefully put the bracelet back into the box and put it away. I won’t ever think of selling this. I’m going to put this on whenever I see the people who are important to me. I made it so the bracelet was visible from outside the box and stored it next to my bed, then snuggled under my blanket.

“Thanks, Mom.” I mumbled and looked inside the box one last time before I closed my eyes.

Even amidst the darkness, the faint silver shine was still visible. The size of it could fit atop an angel’s head like a halo, right? Though halos are supposed to be gold. Well, it’s a small difference. The faces of all the people I care about flashed up behind my eyelids and then vanished.

Merry Christmas. I hope they all continue to be happy.



Chapter 11

December 31st (Thursday) - Asamura Yuuta

The sky was grey, my breath white, and the cold air blowing against my cheek hurt ever so lightly. At around 6 am, the sky to the east began to light up ever so faintly, but it was still pretty much dark out. When we have to get up and leave this early, it becomes pretty clear that Tokyo and Nagano are quite a distance apart from each other. You could reach the tourist spot Karuizawa with the bullet train, but since my old man's family lives fairly deep in the mountains, that's not gonna work.

We'll only be there for two nights, but preparing everything was still a hasty mess. We all went around the house checking for what we needed, what we needed to buy, and what we wouldn't need. It's honestly been a while since I've experienced this much stress. In fact, the last time was probably when Ayase-san and Akiko-san moved here. Back then we moved together like a flock of birds moving everything inside the house.

In contrast to that, we're now actually acting like a family, preparing to head out for what could be considered a vacation, and I didn't dislike this feeling. The one who seemed the most nervous out of all of us was Akiko-san.

These two haven't held a marriage ceremony yet. In other words, this is the first time she'll meet my old man's relatives. Though she's met my grandparents at least. I think they had a meal together.

In order to get married, an adult man and woman only need each other's consent, and the family can't go against their decision from a legal standpoint. Even if they were against Akiko-san being my old man's wife, there's no reason to worry. At least, again, legally and on the surface. However, reality is always cruel and realistic. Plus, unlike random acquaintances, it's hard to completely cut your relatives off from your life. If they hate you, it eats away at your mental state. Whether that's a grandmother, cousin, or parent.

...Or even your step-sister. Even if you hold genuine dislike towards the other person, you'll regularly run into them, so it's hard to avoid each other. And since Akiko-san pretty much was fighting a long-distance battle, she didn't hold back when it came to thorough preparation. The fight had already begun. And she'd be fighting the enemy on their home turf.

We packed everything necessary into a bag, which included drinks, snacks, a change of clothes, toiletries, and a wallet— Basically regular traveling equipment, but the most important thing was souvenirs for the family, after all. These we hadn't forgotten. Three boxes of wrapped snacks for the three families were all stored away in the trunk of the car.

Akiko-san glanced down at the checklist in her hand, making sure we had packed everything. Part of that was New Year's presents for the younger children. She even had their names written down with the corresponding amount. This is probably thanks to her experience serving customers as a bartender. She must have asked for all the names of these

children from my old man. Once again, she's displaying perfectly adult behavior and what is expected from an adult. Being mindful of your surroundings lets you get off without major problems, and you don't lose out on much. It's the way of the adult, I guess.

When I imagine myself getting married, and realize that the same thing will be expected of me, I can already feel my head hurting. And it gives me stomachaches. I do like my cousins, but that doesn't change the fact that all this extra work sounds like a pain. Can you just have these sorts of important social gatherings and events on social networks instead? But even as my thoughts drifted around, my hands kept moving.

Then again, most of my belongings easily fit into a sports bag. I don't need to change that often, and the only thing I can't forget is my school homework. When I was younger, I'd usually take like three or four copies of books with me, but now I can just save them on my phone. Sometimes the progress of technology isn't so bad.

"I think it's time to head out," my old man said, so we headed to the parking lot outside our flat.

"This is the first time the four of us have headed somewhere together, huh?"

"Oh yeah, that's right." Akiko-san nodded at my old man's statement.

If you live in a big city like this, you rarely have to use your car. So this'll be the first time we're all traveling together.

"I haven't even taken a ride in Stepdad's car yet."

"Don't worry, he drives safely," Akiko-san said.

It sounds like she has experienced my old man driving before. By the time we left the parking lot, the sky had already begun to light up halfway. We all hopped in the car, closing off the cold air from the outside. And since we'd be heading to Nagano during the winter, the tires had already been changed into winter ones. If we used the Kan-Etsu and the Joshin-Etsu Highways, and if there weren't any traffic jams or snow on the road, we should reach our destination in about four hours. And since it's near the end of the year, there's a good chance we'll encounter both. That's why we estimated our arrival would be in the afternoon. And that's also why we left this early.

"I think it'll just be Akiko-san and I next year. You two will be busy with entrance exams, and then you'll find your own relationships once you enter university. In fact, we might not get many more chances to travel with the four of us. That's why I wanted us to go together as a family this year at least. Although it might be a bit boring since there's not much to see..."

"You both have to prepare for entrance exams starting next year, after all. How time flies."

My old man and Akiko-san both said the same thing. Basically, this could be our last time going on a trip. These words reverberated deep inside of me. I put on my seatbelt and leaned against my seat, thinking to myself.

Our last time, huh? I glanced over at my step-sister, sitting on the opposite side of the back row. She had her earphones in as she gazed outside the window and up at the sky turning bright. She seemed to have noticed my gaze. She removed one earbud and looked at me, which made her medium-length hair sway a bit.

“What’s wrong?”

My heart skipped a beat.

“Ah, it’s nothing... I was just thinking that you might be tired since it’s this early.”

“Actually... I might be a bit sleepy.”

My old man heard that and spoke up.

“You can always take a nap if you’d like, Saki-chan.”

“Thank you. But I’m fine for now.” She put her earbud back in and entered the world of music once more.

She had her face turned towards the window, not looking at me. Even though we’re close enough for our elbows to almost touch, she felt so distant... and it made me feel lonely. No, calm down. This is for the best, actually. Ayase-san and I are siblings still in high school, and we’re sharing the same living space with our parents. We can’t do anything that would cross the line of us being regular siblings, and we can’t let anybody find out either.

Once all the doors were closed and the tires started moving, the sound of the wind outside soon disappeared, and the slight vibration began to lull me to sleep. My eyelids began to feel heavy, but thanks to the periodic conversations happening between Akiko-san and my old man, I somehow managed to stay awake. After experiencing a slight traffic jam, we passed the junction at Ooizumi and finally got onto the Kan-Etsu Highway. Using that, we traveled north into Saitama Prefecture.

During the ride, it was mostly our parents doing the talking, with the topics being about whatever came to mind, about

life and the world—as well as Akiko-san’s homemade cooking... So basically, it was the same as ever. As for myself, I would periodically comment on their conversation, but not participate much. Even so, I realized that Akiko-san must have been really nervous. And my old man probably realized it too. Then again, I understand that she must feel a lot of pressure. Especially when it comes to the eyes of our relatives.

For example, what would happen if Ayase-san and I made our relationship public? It’d just make things awkward for us, as well as our parents. Realistically speaking, we’ll be attending school while living with our parents. That means we’d run into them every morning despite everything being so awkward. I don’t even want to think about it. That being said, I can’t even think of stopping the relationship I have with Ayase-san. Can I really give up on the girl I love this easily? I mean, it’d be one thing if she began to hate me.

But once I started thinking about that, another possibility rose inside my head. What if my relationship with Ayase-san were to end prematurely? And despite that, we’d still have to continue being siblings? Our relationship as brother and sister wouldn’t disappear. Even if one of us gets married to someone else. I’m the older brother, and Ayase-san is the younger sister. Logic says that’s how things will go, and both of our families see each other this way. Well, things would be different if our parents happened to break up—What am I even thinking? I shouldn’t even consider that possibility. I shook my head.

“Is anything wrong, Yuuta? Motion sick?”

“I’m fine. I just had a nasty thought is all.”

“Did you forget your homework?”

“...I have that with me, don’t worry.”

So my old man thinks that the worst thing filling my mind is homework? Well, I doubt he’d even consider that I’d be thinking about love and whatnot. Especially in close relation to his own daughter-in-law. And yet I let out another sigh that could be easily misunderstood. Meanwhile, Ayase-san’s face was still glued to the world outside the window. It had cleared up fully, and the sun had come out to greet us now that we had reached more nature. Before, it was only peeking between the high-rise buildings of Shibuya. Both sides of the highway now are riddled with either trees or fields. It would have been beautiful scenery, but the winter season made it look dead and barren, creating a painting of black and brown. In the distance, we could see the snowy mountains.

Two hours into our drive, we opted to take a break at a rest stop.

As we drove further north, the sights around us changed from brown-ish to brown with a few touches of white here and there.

“There’s some snow left.”

“When it snows up here, it stays for a while.”

“As you’d expect of Nagano,” my old man said.

“Is this your first time seeing Nagano during the winter, Akiko-san?” I asked.

“I came here to ski many years ago.”

“Can you ski?”

“If you refer to skiing as ‘rolling down a mountain,’ then yes.”

I don’t think that counts...

“How about you, Taichi-san?”

“Me? Of course. Before moving away because of university reasons, I lived up here.”

“I had no idea...”

That’s surprising. While we were talking, the car entered a tunnel and passed through it. Thanks to that, the scenery opened up a bit further. The number of houses grew fewer, and you could see smaller hunts, the distance between each of them growing larger. After passing through another tunnel, my old man said “Once we’re past Saku, we’ll reach Komoro.” The next time we’ll see the Hokuriku Bullet Train while driving on the Joshi-Etsu Highway will be at the Saku Interchange past Karuizawa. From there on out, we’ll pass through Komoro and Nagano, with my old man’s hometown even farther past there.

Then again, just dropping names left and right doesn’t make it any clearer. Even I don’t remember everything around here, I’m just listening to the explanations my old man is giving Akiko-san along the way. When I looked to my side, I saw that Ayase-san had raised herself up and was gazing at the scenery outside with even greater interest than before.

“Curious about something?” I asked her, and she turned around like she’d forgotten I was even there.

“Erm, not really. Just that over there.” She pointed outside the right window, and I turned around to look where she was pointing.

It was on the opposite side of the highway. There stood a single home surrounded by fields that were covered with white makeup. It had a roof made out of tiles, standing out more than anything else amid this scenery.

“That old building?”

“Yeah, it looks pretty old. Isn’t that one of those old Japanese-style houses?”

“Yep.”

I think you call them that if they’ve been around for more than 50 years after construction. From the choice of words, it sounds a bit like it’s an odd building, but considering these were built in the 1950s and earlier, that’s right when the Second World War ended.

“That home just now looks the oldest out of all of them.”

The scenery outside the car flew past us incredibly quickly, as there were no scattered and withered trees. Even so, you could see some houses popping up left and right.

“That one’s just that much older than the rest, I guess.”

“But it had an antenna on top of it.”

“It did? I’m surprised you could tell.”

“Maybe that just caught her attention first.”

My old man caught on to our conversation and joined in.

“Around here, it’s nothing but mountains. You don’t get any signal or internet. If you want to watch TV, you’ve gotta rely on cable or satellite.”

I nodded.

“It ruins the elegance, though.”

“It’s a necessary sacrifice if you live here.”

“That is true. When I was still young, I had to fight for my internet connection, but now they’ve pretty much got the same as in the big city.”

“Makes sense.”

“Do you like this sort of stuff?” I asked Ayase-san, and she nodded.

“Old-fashioned buildings, shrines, temples; I like the stuff that has kept its shape over the passage of time.”

“So, like castles?”

“Yep, castles, too. And stone walls.”

“Stone walls... Just the stone walls?”

Ayase-san nodded. She seemed oddly delighted at that.

“When looking at older castles, even if the castle itself breaks apart, the stone walls keep standing. Only the stone walls, or the ditches... Maybe even the pillars, too. Any ruins of that.”

“And looking at that stuff is fun?”

“It really is. If you look at the way they built the walls and piled up the stones, you can have a good guess as to when it was built. So the people who understand a lot about this context can figure out quite a lot with small hints like that. And when I heard about that, I was engrossed. It’s amazing

that people can see and understand things that should have disappeared by now.”

“I didn’t even know there was a difference in the way you’d stack stones to build walls.”

“Really? I think we worked through that in our textbooks before... Maybe not? I tend to remember these things from picture collections or videos.”

“There are videos?”

“Of course. Just look up ‘Castles in Japan’ and you’ll find a ton. I rarely watch any videos, but these types of videos have always interested me.”

“You’re quite engrossed with Japanese history, then?”

She nodded once more. That reminds me. In the last two exams, she always had a perfect 100 points when it came to Japanese history. So she’s a fan of history in general? That’s a bit surprising... but also not really. Ayase-san turned her head back towards the window and mumbled.

“That’s why I like these sorts of old buildings. They’re brimming with memories and facts about the past. Now that I know there’s more around here, I’m really looking forward to this.”

Well, it’s true that Shibuya doesn’t have any old buildings like what she’s talking about. As for Nagano... Maybe the Shimazaki Touson Temple? That one’s frequently mentioned in our Japanese textbooks. ‘By the Ancient Castle at Komoro, White Clouds Grieve The Wanderer,’ one of the textbooks said. The black and white scenery outside the window briefly lost all its color, like it had turned into a photo primary with a sepia hue.

The car brought us further and further away from civilization, deeper into the mountains, and the buildings disappeared amongst the snow. We went down from the highway after passing Komoro and Nagano City, deeper into the woods. After drifting up a mountain road that twisted left and right like a snake, we reached a basin. Finally, we spotted a tall bungalow in the distance. There was no parking lot. Instead there was a large open area in front of the building, with the snow shoveled to the side. In one of that area's corners, my old man parked the car.

“We’re here.”

We all got out of the car. The cold breeze made my body tremble. The area was covered with snow, and without it being shoveled to the side, we’d probably be knee-deep in here. Even the breath coming out of my mouth was white, my cheeks turning red from the cold air.

“This yard is quite big.” Ayase-san looked around as she stretched.

“It’s not so much of a lawn,” My old man answered, “It’s just that nothing was built here. Well, they’ve got plenty of land to use.”

“And what an elegant home,” Ayase-san said as she looked at the large bungalow in front of her.

“Old things are still old. I was told my grandfather built this.”

The building in front of us with its tiled roof was much older than 50 years, which qualified it as one of Ayase-san’s beloved Japanese-style houses.

“Amazing...”

“The inside’s been kept up. And it’s pretty comfy, too. But more importantly, Saki-chan, Akiko-san, let’s head inside. We don’t have to freeze out here.”

“Yes, Taichi-san.”

“I’ll help carry the luggage, Dad.”

“Yeah, let’s split up the weight.”

My old man and I took care of the heavy luggage. He led the way as we headed for the entrance. Next to him was Akiko-san with a stiff expression, with Ayase-san and I behind them. We had left our house so early, but the sun had already started moving towards the West. As she let out white breath over and over, she gazed at the bungalow ahead of us.

—I enjoy looking at older buildings. They’ve brimming with memories and facts about the past.

Just what is she seeing in that house right now?

“I’m home.” My old man shouted as he opened the front door.

Every time I hear this word, it makes me realize that this truly is the place he was born.

“Yeees,” a voice came back from deep inside, followed by the sounds of footsteps approaching us.

The person who appeared was my father’s mother, meaning she was my grandmother.

“Welcome back, Taichi. Kanae and the others have just gotten here,” She said and flashed a peaceful smile.

Her back had still yet to start to stoop, and her voice was brimming with energy. She really never changes. And what a relief that was. My old man nodded and Akiko-san bowed politely.

“Thanks for having me, Mother-in-law.”

“Yes, yes, I haven’t seen you in a while, Akiko-san.”

Grandmother seemed a bit relieved at seeing Akiko-san practically frozen stiff. Following that, Akiko-san wrapped her arm around Ayase-san’s back.

“And this... is my daughter Saki.”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Saki.”

Ayase-san took a step forward and bowed politely as her mother had. Since our parents had met my old man’s grandparents during a weekday, both Ayase-san and I were at school and didn’t participate. So this is likely their first meeting.

“Yes, welcome, welcome. I’ve been waiting to meet you, Saki-chan.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

“Wonderful. Make yourself feel at home, okay? But for now, come on in. Everyone’s in the living room, so I’ll go prepare some tea now.”

“Ah, let me help you,” Akiko-san spoke up.

Grandmother showed a perplexed expression for a moment, but then responded with a flat “Sure.”

“That being said, I’ll show you to your rooms first.”

“Yes.”

We took off our shoes at the front entrance and followed my grandmother through the entrance hallway. Well, I’ve been here plenty of times, so I don’t need any guidance. However, Ayase-san raised a quiet voice right as we went inside.

“It’s a hard-packed floor...” She seemed oddly impressed.

I was a bit confused at her statement, but quickly realized she was talking about the floor we were standing on. I mean, I bet she’s seen it before, but maybe this is her first time actually experiencing it? Classic Japanese residences usually have a bit of space between their floor and the ground in order to let wind pass through underneath. Since Japan is known for its humidity, it’d immediately ruin any wooden-built buildings without this air gap. That’s why there’s a difference in height when you enter a hallway. The entrance is usually on ground level compared to the rest of the building. That’s where you take off your shoes and step up, or more accurately step in. The part where the entrance is the same level as the ground is what you call *doma*, and if the doma is made out of stiff mortar, then you have a *tataki*, which is what Ayase-san was talking about.

But of course, Ayase-san should be more knowledgeable about this sort of thing than I. I can’t forget that she scored a perfect 100 points in Japanese history during our last exams. Even as we walked down the hallway, Ayase-san inspected various areas of the building. The initial hallway we walked through immediately split up into two paths, going left and right. If we went left, we’d get to the kitchen. However, grandmother didn’t take that route and went right instead. As we followed her, the hallway changed into an *engawa*, the traditional external corridor going alongside a

garden. The storm shutters to our right were all inside specifically-built boxes, directly blocking off the garden. At first glance, it may look like an open veranda, but if you close the storm shutters, it becomes a regular hallway again. Meanwhile, the sun shone brightly and illuminated the hallway from its western position in the sky.

“So spacious...” Ayase-san’s murmur reached my ears.

The left side was blocked off by typical sliding screens, but there were at least three rooms next to the engawa. The living area was the room in the center. The one in front was my grandparents’ sleeping area, and the one in the back belongs to my old man’s older brother and his wife. My old man’s name may be written with the kanji for older brother, but he’s actually the second-oldest son.

It’s also not visible from here, but further in the back (or north) harbors three more rooms, which will be the guest rooms for these next few days.

“Wahaha!”

We heard laughter coming from deeper within the room.

“My, my, they’re awfully lively today.” Grandmother made a bitter smile and opened the sliding screen.

We were greeted by a large Japanese-themed room. The majority of the Asamura Family had gathered already. Starting with my grandfather and his eldest son (who is my father’s brother and my uncle), a few other adults were sitting around the table, which made the tatami room seem much smaller. The low table—about the height of two tea tables—was filled with drinks and snacks.

“Taichi has arrived.”

“Oh! Finally! Must have taken you a long drive from Tokyo.”
An elderly man stood up with a loud voice.

He’s my grandfather. His hair has already turned snow-white, his forehead is blank, but his voice has the same energy as it did years ago.

“It’s been a while, Akiko-san. Are you doing well?”

“Yes. It’s nice to see you again, Father-in-law.” Akiko-san bowed her head, which focused all the attention in the room on her.

Whoa, look at this pressure. The only two people in this room who have met Akiko-san before are my grandparents. My uncle, his wife, their son, my aunt, her husband, and their two children were all meeting Akiko-san for the first time. It was practically 7 vs 1... Wait, there’s one more person. A woman in the center of the room. I don’t know her.

“Yes, yes. Let’s leave the introductions for later. I’m sure they must be tired, so I’ll show them to their rooms.”

“R-Right.”

My grandmother read the room and broke up the atmosphere. I was a bit curious about the unfamiliar woman, but we just exchanged brief greetings and then left after grandmother. Walking down the hallway, we were brought to the room the furthest in the back.

“Please use this room this year. I’ve already prepared futons and everything.”

“Thanks, Mom,” My old man said.

The guest room was as Japanese as you'd expect, about thirteen square meters in size, with four futons stacked atop each other in the corner of the room. The scent of tatami material was especially strong. It's probably because this place isn't usually used. And this is where we'll be spending the next two days, huh?

...Hold on a second. Here? All four of us? When I realized this, my heart started beating faster. This means... Ayase-san and I will be sleeping in the same room?

"I'm sorry we couldn't find more rooms for your children this year, the thing is—"

Right as grandma started trying to explain things, we heard a voice from beyond the sliding screen, coming from my cousin Kousuke-san. My old man answered him, and the sliding screen moved to the side. As expected, he's my cousin, currently eight years older than me. He graduated from university two years ago, and he's working now. And a woman was with him. The same woman I had just seen in the large hall. She's probably the same age as him, seeming like a polite and collected person.

"Hm? What's up, Kousuke-kun?"

"Ah, well, there's someone I'd like to introduce to you..." He said and stepped aside for the woman to take a step forward. She lowered her head.

She had semi-long hair that fluttered as she did this, and she introduced herself as Nagisa. After that, Kousuke-san said "We've gotten married" with a bashful expression.

"Oh, really?! Congratulations, Kousuke-kun!" My old man grinned as he congratulated Kousuke-san.

Personally, I was absolutely shocked. Until last year, he didn't even mention having a girlfriend. Apparently, Nagisa-san is a year younger than Kousuke-san, and they were members of the same circle at university. Basically, they've been dating for several years... No, this isn't weird. He's eight years older than me, and he graduated from university two years ago. I guess he wouldn't tell his cousin who is 8 years younger than him about his love life. My old man called Akiko-san and Ayase-san over and introduced them. Kousuke-san glanced at Ayase-san and then back at me.

"So, you've got a younger sister now, Yuuta?"

"Ah, yes."

"Oh, huh. I thought you'd gotten married, too."

I knew he was joking, but for a split second, the inside of my head went blank. Ayase-san and I...? Married...?

"There's no way I did. I'm still in high school."

I really tried my best to not show my confusion in my voice. Still, what is he saying? And in front of our parents, no less. But this is the kind of person he is, so I can't say I'm surprised.

"I was just joking, you know?"

"I know, I know."

...But still, Kousuke-san got married? It felt like my cousin had suddenly grown up to become an actual adult.

"I didn't even know you were part of any circle, Kousuke-san."

I pushed the luggage into the corner of the room as I spoke to Kousuke-san. My old man took Akiko-san into the hall in order to formally introduce her to the rest of our relatives, leaving just me, Ayase-san, Nagisa-san, and Kousuke-san in the room.

“I wasn’t too passionate about it, so I never mentioned it.”

“But he was the best at skiing.”

Kousuke-san seemed to remain modest but Nagisa-san threw in a follow-up. Even though they had just gotten married, they were already in perfect sync. Maybe that’s why they got married so quickly.

“Skiing?”

“Yeah, it was like a ski gathering of sorts. Well, it’s not a big skiing event or anything, and compared to the other folks here, I’m beginner level.”

“Can all people from Nagano ski?” Ayase-san joined in on the conversation.

What a rare occurrence. Normally she didn’t participate in other people’s conversations.

“Well, we’re better off than regions with less snow, for sure.”

“And that’s where you met Nagisa-san?” I asked, to which both of them suddenly looked all bashful, fumbling over their own words.

Seeing a cousin who’s eight years older than I am acting like that made even me embarrassed.

“Well, about that...”

“Right?”

Something's going on between the two of them. After exchanging a few glances, they were willing to explain how they got together.

“I was just thinking I wanted to try out skiing, see. A friend of mine who knew that Kou-chan could ski set me up for a meeting.”

“And I had no idea, I was just dragged to the cafeteria.”

“So, they introduced me to Kou-chan, saying stuff like ‘He’s really good at it, so why not have him teach you?’—”

“And before I knew it, I was training her.”

“Did you now...?” Nagisa-san smiled, but her eyes made it clear that this wasn’t how things really played out.

“And what was he like, then?”

“My friend tried everything to get him to help me, but he was all sour about it. Saying ‘There’s plenty of people who are as good as me’ or ‘As long as you keep a good center of gravity, skiing down the mountain is easy’, and so on.” Nagisa-san explained.

“I see.”

“So he was playing hard to get, then.”

“Again, I’m sorry...”

“It made me feel like you hated me, even though we’d barely met.”

“If you’d just been honest and said you wanted to teach me, then I would have—”

“So you would’ve taught any girl as long as she asked you to?”

“Ack, ugh... That’s not what I meant...”

Nagisa-san snickered to herself. Kousuke-san tried to clean his slate.

“I’m just not used to being praised excessively...”

“You should be more confident in yourself, Kou-chan. Plus, that’s what made me interested in you in the first place.”

“Huh? Really?”

I didn’t expect that, so I let out a shocked voice.

“Yes. I liked how he didn’t put himself up on a pedestal like he was some kind of being greater than the universe. It made me realize how genuine and honest of a person he is.”

“Erm... thanks.”

“Hee, hee.”

They’re absolutely head over heels, I see. Still, if they’ve been dating since their second year in university, then they’ve been dating for almost six years now. It sounds like quite a long time, but they still act like a couple that just got together. Because I’ve been watching my old man and Akiko-san flirt right in front of me for the past year, I thought I’d gotten enough maple syrup and cream poured over me to finally became used to it, but seeing it from my cousin of

all people, who never showed any interest in romance, completely threw me off.

“I get it...”

I heard a faint whisper that barely reached my ear. Looking to my side, I saw Ayase-san leaning forward, listening to their story with awe and excitement. I had no idea what exactly she meant by that, but once she noticed I was staring at her, she immediately turned her head away.

“But your decision to get married came out of nowhere, right?” I asked, looking back at Kousuke-san.

Not even my old man knew about it, but wouldn’t at least our grandparents know when the papers started coming in?

“We haven’t had the ceremony yet,” Kousuke-san responded.

Apparently, it’ll happen in half a year. Basically, they added their names to the family register, just like my old man and Akiko-san did.

“Do you not plan on holding a ceremony?”

“Not exactly. I want to have one. The thing is just... I would have preferred to propose a bit later than this.”

“Huh...?”

For a split second, my gaze moved towards Nagisa-san. Wouldn’t a woman be a bit annoyed if her soon-to-be husband said such a thing? However, she didn’t seem too bothered by it.

“It’s just—and Dad and the others don’t know about it either—but I’m going to be transferred overseas.”

“Overseas?!”

“Yeah. For two whole years.”

“When?”

“This spring.”

“That’s right around the corner!”

“That’s why we can’t really have a ceremony right now. Getting everything ready takes a lot of planning and all that.”

“We can’t even find a place, either... Although we did try.”

“The way things stand right now, it’d have to happen after next summer.”

“I... see...”

Since I had never even thought about all of that, I couldn’t comment much. I can’t even imagine that.

“Yes. I mean, if you really had to, you might be able to find a place, but considering how many relatives you have, Kousuke-san, it’d probably be hard to get them together on the right day, let alone at the perfect place.”

“And of course, anywhere that’d work really well like that is already fully packed. Plus, there are also Nagisa’s preferences to take into account. We guys don’t care much for traditional or Western and all that, but women want to be clear about their dress or traditional robe.”

“Can you not make me sound selfish?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. But once I head over there, I can’t guarantee that everything will be done in two years.”

“I don’t wanna wait.”

Nagisa-san seemed like a patient type, but she could voice her emotions when she needed to. That’s what makes her such a good match for Kousuke-san. He’s not too good at reading other people’s thoughts, after all.

“That’s why we at least decided to put our names into the family register. She wants to come with me, after all. Luckily, my company is fine with us moving together.”

“So you’ll both be moving overseas... When did you hand in the form?”

“The 24th.”

“Huh...? Wait, this month?”

“Yep.”

Well, I guess it makes sense that nobody would know.

“We’ve been living together for the past half year, so that day is when we technically made it official by handing in the form. Plus, it makes it easier to remember our anniversary.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage to forget it even then, Kou-chan. If I don’t remind you, you’ll completely forget my birthday.”

“No way, no way.”

“Reaaally?”

“Come on, have some faith in me.”

These two really are close, huh?

“Anyway, Yuuta. I think we should head back now.”

“Good point, then Ayase-san and I will also—”

‘Go with you’—is what I wanted to say when I heard small footsteps approaching. After that, the sliding screen swung open as two children came in cheering “Yuu-chan, let’s play!” They then immediately leaped at me.

“Yuu-chan, Yuu-chan! Let’s play!”

“Let’s play!”

Everything got really noisy really quickly.

“Oh, Takumi! Mika! It’s been a while,” I said and picked up the two grade school children.

I had just seen them last year, but they really grew up a lot. The older boy was Takumi and the younger girl was named Mika. They’re both the children of my old man’s younger sister, so they’re my cousins. Also, Takumi’s two years older than Mika.

“Hey, hey, Yuu-chan! Look! I got a monster!”

“Got a monster!”

“That’s not true! You got a ring, Mika! I got the monster!” Takumi held the plush monster as high into the air as he could.

Mika saw what her brother was doing and also held her toy ring high in the air. Of course, we weren’t talking about a

genuine ring you'd buy as an adult or anything like that. It was a plastic one about the size of a small ball. The part where you'd put a jewel or gem had a magic circle drawn on it. It might be some kind of merch from an anime or something. I bet Maru would know.

"Then this is a ring monster!"

"No way! Oh, whatever! Hey, Yuu-chan, let's play!"

"Let's play!"

"Calm down, calm down."

Children really do whatever their brain tells them to.

"Hey, who's this beautiful lady?" Mika asked while clinging to me.

"That's Ayase-san," I answered, and then I realized something.

They don't understand what this means. She's keeping her family name for convenience in our daily lives and at school, but our relatives were introduced to her as Asamura Saki. Here in my old man's hometown, they're still relatively old-fashioned. Namely, the family names are taken over by one party. And if I call her "Ayase," wouldn't it sound like I'm rejecting her as a family? If so, maybe I should introduce her as "My younger sister Saki" ...? Or simply "Saki-chan" could also...? No, I can't. That's not possible for me.

Mika for her part turned around, pointing at Kousuke-san and Nagisa-san.

"Ko-chan, Na-chan!"

“Yes, yes. But, you shouldn’t point at people, okay?”
Kousuke-san said as he rubbed Mika’s head.

“Okay!” She said and then looked at me.

“Yuu-chan!”

“Ah, yeah. Hello.”

“And, um... Aya...A-chan!”

“Huh? Ah, yes?” Ayase-san seemed bewildered, responding with a questioning tone of voice.

In response, Mika tilted her head in confusion, like she was wondering if she had made a mistake. Which she did. Ayase isn’t her last name, but her first name. However, even if I introduced her as Ayase Saki or Asamura Saki, it would only confuse her more. Plus, A-chan should work out just as fine. A bit of an emergency solution, but nothing should be weird even if she continued to call her that.

“Hey, hey, Yuu-chan!”

“Hm?”

“Is A-chan your friend?”

“No, she’s my little sister. Though we only became a family recently.”

Mika once again tilted her head in confusion. I guess she’s still a bit confused.

“Mika, remember what your mother said? Uncle Taichi got married again.”

“And you get a little sister when you do that?”

I flashed a bitter smile. How could I explain it so that she understands it? I thought about it, but there's no real explanation that might get through. I instead opted to change the subject. I think that, when I was their age, I also played with Kousuke-san the same way. Because when I was Takumi's age, my mother wouldn't give me much attention anymore. It was only two days over New Year's, but playing with Kousuke-san was a small salvation for me.

"So, you two. What should we play?"

"A game!"

They both spoke at the same time.

"A game, huh?"

The game they were referring to isn't some regular card or board game you'd see during family gatherings, but genuine console games. As expected of the digital age we live in.

"I'll go borrow it from Mom!" Takumi said and stormed out of the room.

Mika frantically chased after her older brother, and she would have tripped while doing so if I didn't catch her in time. Instead, we opted to head back to the hall together. Takumi told his mother that he wanted to play the game, probably on a phone or a handheld console. We took the console and made our way to a room with a TV. I could understand that all the difficult talk from their parents and relatives would be too boring for little children like them. I always felt the same way. Kousuke-san helped me set it up, and since we had four controllers, four people could play at the same time.

“Yuuta, can you take care of the small ones?” Kousuke-san asked me, and I nodded.

With that, he and Nagisa-san returned to the hall where everyone else was sitting. They might want to talk about the marriage if I had to guess. After they left, they quietly closed the sliding screens, leaving Ayase-san, the two kids, and I in the room.

“Let’s play, Yuu-chan!”

“Sure. What should we play?”

I booted up the console, looking for games. I specifically looked for a co-op game that the four of us could play and spotted a fitting title.

“This should be fine... Are you two okay with that?”

As expected, the both nodded along energetically. I personally wasn’t too familiar with that game itself, but I had played it once since Maru recommended it to me.

“You too, Ayase-san. Join us.”

“Huh? But, I don’t know this game.”

“It’s simple. Plus, it’s co-op. We’re all playing together.”

If they hadn’t brought in their own game console, I would have used my tablet instead. But this allows us to play together on the big screen, which I’m a big fan of.

Meanwhile, the game booted up. We could see four small cooks on the screen. We have to control them and prepare meals for the customers. Of course, it’s not that simple. There are time limits for the orders, and the kitchen layout keeps changing. However, if we all work together, we can

easily clear each level. It's basically an action-based puzzle game.

Sitting in front of the screen, the four of us began playing. Immediately after, the four miniature cooks appeared and responded to the movement of our controllers. We started cutting the vegetables and putting the meat into the frying pan. Orders came flying, and so were the plates and ingredients. All we could hear were the complaints from the customers that their orders were late. As you'd expect from the two kids, they were used to playing and effortlessly worked through the orders as they gave each other comments. Ayase-san and I could barely even keep up with them, in fact.

"A-chan! A-chan!" Mika called Ayase-san.

It seems like both Takumi and Mika have gone with 'A-chan' now.

"Wh-What?"

"Your meat is gonna burn!"

"Huh?"

Ayase-san rushed to the frying pan, but the meat was going up in flames before she could do anything.

"Ahhhhh!"

Following that, the ingredients caught fire, and so did the entire kitchen. For a moment, I admired Ayase-san's panicked voice because I never got to hear it, but I didn't have much time to admire it. Ayase-san had completely started to get flustered and couldn't keep up with everything that was going wrong.

“Calm down, Ayase-san!”

“What do I—?”

You can put out the fire with a fire extinguisher. Well, the food is ruined either way. However, we ran out of time and thus failed the stage.

“I’m sorry.”

“A-chan, are you bad at cooking?”

“Hey, now, Mika. Ayase-san is a great cook. This is just because it’s a game. But we can clear it next time. Right, Ayase-san?”

“You don’t have to protect my pride like that. That just hurts even more.”

“Huh?!”

I didn’t mean for that to—

“I mean, it’s true that your cooking is delicious.”

“But the meat caught on fire, and so did the kitchen.”

“That’s just because this is a game. This sort of stuff happens.”

“I won’t lose next time.”

“You’ve just gotta get used to it, and you’ll pass me by in no time.”

“So frustrating.”

I've never seen Ayase-san this worked up. Well, I know she hates losing.

"A-chan, A-chan!" Mika tugged on Ayase-san's sleeve. "Mom said that siblings should get along!" She said and turned towards Takumi. "Right, Onii-chan?"

Takumi nodded.

"Do you hate Yuu-chan?"

"Of course not..."

"Then you should try and get along. Should we teach you how to do it?"

"Um...please do?"

Why'd she turn that into a question? It's weird to see. Ayase-san can easily stand her ground against an assistant professor's argument about philosophy and psychology, but she has no way of winning against small children.

Meanwhile, I'm used to dealing with Takumi and Mika, and I faintly remember the way I was treated when I was their age. However, the way I see things, Ayase-san rarely meets her relatives. The difference in experience really shows here. And I knew that Takumi and Mika have always been pretty close.

"Onii-chan, let's make up!" Mika grabbed Takumi's arm.

"Yes, yes. Mika, I'm sorry."

"I forgive you."

"Yes. Now let's get along."

They both said and then pushed their cheeks together, hugging the other person. For a second, all sense of reality was erased from my mind. It felt like I was watching a foreign movie. Because they were both pretty cute, it felt like I was witnessing a scene from a religious movie where two angels appeared. After that, the two angels snickered. Aunt Kanae-san's husband actually has non-Japanese grandparents, which gave the two children an extra boost of an angelic atmosphere. But, then it happened—As we watched over this heartwarming scene, Mika suddenly kissed Takumi on the cheek.

“And, done.”

“Now it’s your turn, Onii-chan and A-chan!”

We were both pushed closer to each other, as Ayase-san and I froze up. Huh? This is how you make up? The two angels with their cheeks still rubbed against each other looked at us with a gaze of “Not gonna do it?” But, no matter how close you may be as siblings, you won’t just kiss the other like that, right? I don’t think so, at least.

“Are you not going to make up?”

“Um, no, we’re already getting along just fine.”

“Yeah...”

“Ayase-san?”

Something was off about her.

“Children! The food is ready!”

We heard a voice from the hallway, pulling us back to reality. I sighed and put my hands on the tatami mat behind

me. One of them slipped and I panicked for a moment. By the time Ayase-san and I had taken distance from each other, the two kids had already dashed out of the room screaming “Food!”

“I guess we should go, too?”

“Yeah.”

It felt like we both had just woken up from a dream as we slowly walked down the hallway. My heart kept beating painfully loud, making me wish it’d at least calm down before we made it back to everyone else.

Our relatives had all gathered already in the large room that they were using as a banquet hall. I think the room was about 25 square meters in size, and three low tables were pushed together in the center of the room. On top of them was the food, which looked like it would be sukiyaki today, since three gas cookers were placed on the tables. On top of them stood the iron pots, with the soup stock already boiling inside. When it comes to sukiyaki, vegetables are one of the most basic ingredients. Lotus root, gobo, shiitake mushrooms, field mushrooms, winter mushrooms, onions, crown daisies... with chicken being the main meat. I think most people are used to beef, but here in the Asamura Family, we usually go with chicken.

Why? I don’t know. Maybe it’s because of the cheaper price, maybe it’s a simple tradition, only God knows. That being said, I like chicken so I don’t mind. Besides that, they also prepared traditional food for the holidays. And in keeping with a more traditional approach, all of it was handmade. Rolled omelet with fish paste, mashed sweet potatoes with sweetened chestnuts, black soybeans, herring roe, steamed seasoned fish paste, kelp... Looking at it from a broader

angle, it was all typically Japanese and mostly brown in color, but the crimson and white from the fish paste, the red from the shrimp, and the yellow-ish color from the rolled omelet fish paste and mashed potatoes created a brighter color spectrum.

Out of all the traditional food, I liked the rolled omelet with fish paste the most. I remember I used to get scolded all the time because that's basically all I ate. But when you have the taste of a child's palate, that's about the only thing that really tastes good. Maybe it was only after I grew up and entered high school that I started to enjoy grilled fish, herring roe, and all sorts of other things like black soybeans. Plus, the environment can have a huge impact on your tastes and how they develop.

As expected, all our relatives were already seated around the table. They had opened up their beer cans and were talking with each other, our parents with them. Once Ayase-san and I arrived, my grandmother and Akiko-san brought the drinks for us minors and bottles of water and tea. After all of us had seated at the table, we clapped our hands together.

My grandparents and their oldest son (My old man's older brother) with his family (which includes Kousuke-san as his son) are living here in this house. My old man lives down in Tokyo, and his sister and her family live down in Chiba. With all of us gathered together here, we're... 14 people, Ayase-san and I included. To me, this scenery wasn't anything out of the ordinary, but Ayase-san's expression made it clear that she was a bit taken aback.

We clinked our glasses together and began munching away at the food, and my old man once again introduced Akiko-san and Ayase-san to our relatives. Akiko-san had already

finished her initial introduction before, but since Ayase-san had only mentioned her name before, she was now asked about her age, how she was doing at school and all sorts of things. I feel like if we were in Tokyo right now, our relatives wouldn't ask much more than her name, but the traditions here still are fairly old-fashioned. After a while, my grandmother threw Ayase-san a lifeline with "Come on, that's enough," and Ayase-san was finally allowed to sit back down. She seemed relieved.

Taking her place was Kousuke-san, who introduced Nagisa-san, and our relatives began questioning her. Meanwhile, I turned to Ayase-san, mumbling a quiet "Well done" to her, and pouring some tea into her cup.

"Thank you."

"Wanna try some of the food? I'll grab it for you."

"Then... I'd like some rolled omelet with fish paste. I like it quite a lot... Um, did I say anything weird? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Not at all, not at all. I just like it myself."

I grabbed some of the rolled omelets and placed them on a small plate close to me. Ayase-san accepted this and carried some to her mouth.

"So this is the taste Stepdad grew up with. I see, that's why Mom..."

I don't quite understand what made Ayase-san so satisfied, but I didn't want to be obstinate and question her either. After that, we just continued to eat in silence while listening to the conversations of our relatives here and there. Kousuke-san went to university in Saitama, but after his

graduation, he returned to Nagano. Basically, he ended up in a long-distance relationship with Nagisa-san. He came to visit every weekend in his car, until he eventually got himself such a cute wife—according to his own words. That's one conversation I heard.

"I was feeling worried since we wouldn't be able to see each other anymore. Well, the internet and modern technology allow me to see his face every day." Nagisa-san said and Kousuke-san nodded along.

That's why they decided to hand in their marriage registration before moving overseas. Hearing about this predicament, I thought about what I would do in that situation. What if I wouldn't be able to meet Ayase-san anymore...

"Well, Kousuke gets lonely easily. He never wanted to be left alone at home, and was always following us." Uncle Kouta said, which made Kousuke-san act embarrassed.

But even so, his embarrassing past continued to be revealed by his father. Literally everything, from good to bad, admirable to embarrassing. Kousuke-san resigned himself to his fate with a wry smile, but Nagisa-san listened with great interest. Listening further, Nagisa-san mentioned that she had been living with Kousuke-san in his house since last summer when his transfer overseas was decided, but she herself had no idea how to handle her own job. And if she found a job, what would she do about it once she left with Kousuke-san, and so on? Though that's their personal problem, and normally I wouldn't give it much thought, I started listening in rapt attention like it was about myself. I was surprised at my own subconscious behavior.

A realistic relationship between a man and a woman is different from the ones depicted in movies or books. Fiction is always sparkling and something to aspire to, making it easy and so that everything will always work out. However, the world we live in is painfully realistic. You won't encounter a dramatic roadblock that gets in the way of your love, and all the problems coming your way are nothing more than chores to overcome.

Getting the procedure done at the local government office, telling the people around you and meeting with relatives that know the other person's past and get curious about your own. Having your grandparents tell you that they want to have grandchildren soon. As the average age of married couples continues to increase, a lot of them decide to not have children, but that's a bit more of a sensitive topic, I think. And as expected, Nagisa-san is just smiling and letting our relatives talk and talk.

"So mature..." Ayase-san mumbled, and I looked over at her. Ayase-san was bad at just smiling and waving.

Meanwhile, Akiko-san was pouring her grandparents another drink as they talked. She continued the conversation with a smile, going into full bartender mode. No matter how she may feel on the inside, she's showing absolutely no hint of an issue on the outside. She's acting the same way as my biological mother did. Each year, she faked it until she made it.

In the few years after their divorce, whenever the family got together for New Year's, my old man was always on the receiving end of the interrogation. He kept on being questioned about why he ended the relationship, but he never blamed my mother, just saying that a lot happened. If Ayase-san and I were to get married, how would the people

here react? Would we be able to even keep proper communication going?

Time passed, and night arrived. We remained seated in the large hall, eating New Year's soba, and talking about all of the events from the past year. Mid-way, Takumi and Mika fell asleep, so I helped Kousuke-san put them to bed, but other than that, I was just listening to our relatives talking. In the meantime, Ayase-san sat still like she didn't quite fit in.

"Should we head out now?" My grandfather stood up, everyone following after him.

Ayase-san also stood up but seemed a bit bewildered.
"Um...head out where?" She whispered in my ear.

"To visit the shrine and stay there until midnight. We're going there by car, but since it's pretty cold, you should make sure to dress up warmly. Also, I'd recommend you take a bath after we get home, too."

"We're going right now?"

"Yeah, so we're in time for when the clock turns over."

Ayase-san's eyes grew droopy as if the sleepiness had already started getting to her.

"I mean, you can also just stay here and sleep if you're tired. Which would you prefer?"

"...I'm going."

This tradition is something that's relatively common. You make your way to a shrine before the clock strikes midnight, and welcome the new year with your relatives. After changing into warm clothes, we left the residence. Luckily it

wasn't snowing, but we were still deep into the mountains of Nagano. The temperature was getting closer and closer to what would be considered freezing. The moment we opened the front door, a cold breeze hit us, which made my body tremble. The cold was creeping up from my legs up to my head.

My old man hopped into the car, and until the car's heat really started up, that was probably the coldest for me, as I still had my coat on my lap. After that, the entire Asamura Family headed for the shrine in their three cars. The first taste of the New Year's bells came from the car's radio.

We arrived at the shrine and my old man parked the car. After getting out, I put on the coat, making sure I buttoned it up to not freeze immediately. I haven't forgotten Ayase-san's neck warmer either, so I was fully prepared.

Meanwhile, Ayase-san had put on her gloves, and even her cap, snuggling up into her duffle coat that should keep her plenty warm. The mustard-yellow amidst the cold and white night suited her quite well. After that, Akiko-san approached us and handed us pocket warmers.

"Put these in your pockets, okay?"

We gratefully accepted them and did as we were told. As expected of Akiko-san, she's perfectly prepared. As with the front of the Asamura residence, the snow was shoveled to the side here, too, and created a large wall. With this much snow, visiting a shrine like this wouldn't normally be possible. That thought always made me thankful to the poor souls who do the snow shoveling each year.

"This is pretty deep into the mountains," Ayase-san said.

"Well, yeah. It is a rear shrine, after all."

“A rear shrine?”

“When you go up this path, there are actually several shrines. You know the mythical story of the Ama-no-Iwato, right? The gods related to that are resting here.”

“Ah, yeah. Of course I do. When Amaterasu was angry with the gods and hid in the cave of Ama-no-Iwato, the other gods started a banquet to draw her out again, right?”

“Y-Yeah, that.” I gave a bewildered comment at Ayase-san’s added explanation and talked about how we’d always go to the rear shrine every single year. “By the way, we’ll be walking for around two kilometers now.”

“Huh?”

“And we’ve got some long stairs on the way, so you should be prepared for some heavy muscle pain tomorrow.”

“I was never told about this.” She glared up at me.

“You could wait in the car where it’s warm, you know? What’s it gonna be?”

“...I’m definitely going. I don’t wanna wait here all by myself.”

“Well, let me know if it gets too much. Next time, you can wait in the house,” I said in the heat of the moment and Ayase-san looked at me in shock.

“Next time?”

“I mean, this is a yearly tradition, so...”

“Ah, next year. Got it. You’ve gone through this many times already, after all. Okay, I’ll let you know if it gets too much.”

“That'd be great.”



Even this might be another small type of an adjustment. But that was just a brief thought that filled my mind.

Akiko-san fell in line next to my old man who started walking ahead, with Ayase-san and I right behind him. Once we reached the large torii shrine archway, Ayase-san took out her smartphone. She booted up her camera app and took a picture. The resulting flash from the camera momentarily lit up the darkness around us, revealing the wooden archway much better, as well as the endless sea of snow right behind it. Needless to say, she was careful not to blind the other shrine visitors.

“Hey folks, don’t get left behind, okay?” My old man called out to us, so Ayase-san and I sped up a bit to catch up.

It was really hard work making sure we wouldn’t slide back down. We passed by the corner of the shrine archway, as the center of the path was the passage for the gods. The shrine pathway ahead of us stretched so far into the distance that we couldn’t see the end of it. Although they did their best to keep it free from snow, the white mixture beneath our feet mixed with the white beauty and salt, so any careless movement would cause us to land on our faces.

Ayase-san naturally wasn’t used to this environment, so she almost slipped a few times. I took it upon me to teach her a few tricks to make it through this mess a bit better. The idea is to use the back of your sole to stomp on the ground first to get a better grip. After we made it past the next shrine archway, we were able to walk on even ground for a while. After another 15-minute walk, we finally reached another waypoint.

We saw a reddish gate in the distance, which was the midpoint. The large gate had a thatched roof attached to it, which would have green grass growing on it if it weren't winter. Right now, it was covered by white makeup like the rest of the world around us. The red gate with its *shimenawa* rope hanging down on its sides stood tall and imposing like it would not allow the entry of any misfortune. As I expected, Ayase-san took out her phone and took another picture. She really loves these older buildings, huh? I looked ahead and at the gate in front of us.

"When it's this old, you can really feel the history it's gone through."

"Hm, I don't think it's just that."

"Huh?"

"I don't think that's the only reason you can feel the history. Maybe it's because we're actually observing the way the buildings have been treated?"

"The way they've been treated?"

"Let's say you found an old tumbling doll, a *daruma*, without its eyes. That's because nobody offered its wish to it—that nobody used it. So you would feel sadness seeing an old and forgotten *daruma* without its eyes."

"I see, I see."

"Plus, wooden buildings and structures unprotected from wind and rainy weather need to be attended to by people, or they will rot away and disappear. You see buildings breaking down and collapsing in places where no one lives anymore, right?" Her words reminded me of what she told me when we drove to Nagano earlier today.

They're brimming with memories and facts about the past. And that's probably what Ayase-san meant. Even the rustic and countrified red gate in front of us isn't just a sign of the times, the fact that it's still standing here means that it has been taken care of over the years.

"Exactly."

And that is what Ayase-san referred to as the 'Old memories.'

"Are you doing some criminal profiling, Ayase-san?"

"Pro... what now?"

"It sometimes pops up in detective genres. They call it criminal profiling. They statistically analyze the crime and the person who committed it."

"How is that different from a regular investigation?"

"They don't identify the criminal. Instead, they statistically establish that people who commit crime X have portrait Y, and that's all they can work with. Because there are exceptions in every field. The murder may have been the same, but the motive could be entirely different from the previous case. Or rather, because they assume that the motive is different. That's why the whole 'Who done it' genre exists."

"...You really love mystery stories, Asamura-kun."

"I'm not too familiar with them myself, but—"

At work, we've got someone who's absolutely into mystery stuff. The silhouette of a charming Japanese beauty with long black hair flashed up in the back of my head.

“...Well, it’s basically knowledge I read about in a book. Just like how you’re interested in how an old building ended up in its current state, yeah?”

“I... think so.”

“Like ‘My Grandfather’s Clock,’ then.”

‘My Grandfather’s Clock’ is a song about a clock that moves every single day, from the day the grandfather was born until the day he died. The inspiration for that song was an actual clock, too. The current appearance of things that were once created, once given to you by someone still holds the traces of how they had been treated from the moment they were brought into this world. The clock coming to a halt symbolizes the life of the grandfather.

“Don’t sing that.” Ayase-san immediately warned me.

“Hm?”

“Don’t.”

“Do you not like it?”

“I’m gonna cry.”

Amidst the reigning darkness, even with the faint candles lighting the way, I could barely make out Ayase-san’s expression. But even so, her different attitude from her usual dry behavior is what was making me stare at her face.

“Ah... Got it.”

We walked up the stairs, past the stone guardian lion-dogs, entering deeper into the shrine. The water at the washbasin was frozen, not allowing us to wash our hands. Moving up to

the front shrine, we put the 5-yen coin we prepared into the offering box and rang the bell. A dry clanking sound rang through the air. We then bowed two times and clapped our hands together in prayer another two times. Excluding the idea of keeping your wishes secret, this was standard procedure at every shrine. When we clapped our hands together again, I felt the entire past year play in my head. It's like my thoughts were being organized.

The idea of the first shrine visit of the year had begun back in the Heian period, called a *toshigomori*, and when you combined it with the idea of the *ninenmairi*, basically what we are doing right now, the intention is to reflect on the past year while also welcoming a new year. Or that's what just went through my mind.



A lot has happened this year. My father got remarried, and Ayase-san came to join our family with her mother. This happened barely six months ago. I suddenly found myself

with a younger step-sister who was the same age as me. And seeing how she was the exact opposite of me, I was truly bewildered. I ended up helping her for the exams when she struggled with modern literature, and we both ended up going to the pool with our classmates from school last summer break. That's also when I realized that I like Ayase-san.

And what an oppressive realization that was. Since our parents had suffered greatly in their past relationship, we didn't want them to suffer like that again, so we worked together to allow our parents the happiness they deserved, and acted like what was expected from us, namely to be perfectly normal siblings. Through many back and forths, we became honest with our feelings for each other. That's when we promised to start dating while acting like "Normal but relatively close siblings" in front of our parents. However, on the night of Halloween, we happened to share a kiss—

All of these memories ran through my head like revolving lanterns. I pulled my hands away and slowly opened my eyes. Since a line of other people were waiting behind us, I didn't have time to get particularly emotional. After another bow, we moved away from the offerings box. While walking to where our parents were waiting, I turned towards Ayase-san.

"What did you wish for?"

"I was too busy remembering everything that happened this year, I didn't have any time to wish for anything," she said with a bitter smile.

Realizing that she was the same as me, I let out a snicker. We walked the same way back and reached the parking lot, where Ayase-san turned back to look at me.

“Ah, we didn’t draw any fortune slips, huh?”

“Oh yeah, I’d rather not miss out on that. We usually do that every year.”

My old man heard us talking.

“Then let’s do that before we get home.”

We hopped in the car and headed to the central shrine. Since the original location for the fortune slips was closed due to the winter season, we had to drive all the way there. And when Ayase-san opened her slip—

“Terrible fortune...”

“They put these in here even during New Year’s...?”

“What about you, Asamura-kun?”

“Small fortune.”

She glared at me yet again. Hey now, this isn’t my fault, right? I mean, I was the one who wanted to draw fortune slips...

“Well, you can just leave it here and forget about it. The stand’s over there.”

Looking over to where my old man pointed, we could see several folded papers tied to a rope. Ayase-san did the same with her fortune slip. She was smiling again as she walked away, but I bet she was still concerned about it. With the ringing New Year bells behind us, we left the shrine. And just like that, a new year began.

Chapter 12

December 31st (Thursday) - Ayase Saki

“It’s a hard-packed floor...” I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

Asamura-kun’s family’s house (or Stepdad’s family) was much bigger than I had imagined. Not to mention that it was relatively old. Judging by the architecture, it was probably built in the early Showa period. It had tiles for a roof, with a *tataki* at the *doma*. After stepping into the doorway, the hallway shone brightly like ebony, making it obvious how well it had been looked after.

I really love these kinds of old, Japanese-style houses. Looking at buildings and furniture that has survived the passage of time thanks to the care of the inhabitants tells me the story they went through, and I like doing that. The hallway that was hidden by the covered storm shutter was illuminated up by the winter sun’s shine. It was directly connected to the garden, and the covers of the storm shutters had faint signs of rain remaining on them.

But leaving that aside, I was feeling a bit... no, I was extremely nervous. To be perfectly honest, I was scared. I began to regret that I had so nonchalantly agreed to come

with the others, but at the same time, I felt disgusted at myself for my unfriendliness, and I wanted to cry. I'm different from Maaya, who can open her heart to practically anybody within three minutes. Stepdad's mother seemed like a genuinely nice person, and she was smiling throughout my introduction, but I still can't fight this sense of nervousness assaulting me. From the sliding screen to the left of us, I heard loud banter.

"My, my, they're awfully lively today." Stepdad's mother said, opening the sliding screen.

There were several people sitting around a table in the large Japanese-style room. Met with the pressure emitted by them, I took a step backward.

"Taichi is here."

"Oh! Finally! It must have been a long drive from Tokyo."

An elderly man with white hair responded and stood up. He's probably Stepdad's father. And to me, he's my step-grandfather.

"It's been a while, Akiko-san. Are you doing well?"

"Yes. It's nice to see you again, Father-in-law." Mom lowered her head, which caused all of the gazes in the room to focus on her, and soon they moved to me.

Since even I could tell it wasn't 100% welcoming feelings that were packed into this gaze, I felt my heart growing heavy. I don't think they hold any particular resentment toward us, but it was more like they didn't know how to interact with us.

"Yes, yes. Let's leave the introductions for later. I'm sure they must be tired, so I'll show them to their rooms."

Stepdad's grandmother said and let us escape.

She pushed the sliding screen shut again, cutting off all the gazes from the inside, which let me breathe in peace again. The fists I had formed in fear started to relax, too. But still, they felt very sweaty. I was feeling sick, like I was about to throw up. Is this how every person feels when they meet the family of their marriage partner, especially if it's a remarriage? Maybe my armament was a bit too much in a place like this. I took a deep breath and wondered if I should have dyed my hair black for at least these few days. Maybe I'm thinking about it too much.

In the end, high school students like us are allowed to act this way. The same goes for university students. If you reach this sort of age, wearing makeup, accessories, and these sorts of things is perfectly normal. Since even Suisei High allows this, it should be normal in today's day and age—is what I would like to think, but the sheer pressure of everyone's gazes caused me to falter. I took another deep breath. Calm down. I didn't come here to fight.

We would all be staying in a room of around 13 square meters in size. Seeing the four separate futons in the corner made me realize that we'd all be sleeping in the same room. Basically, Asamura-kun and I would be sleeping much closer than usual. I mean, our parents will be with us, but still... Wait, that means he'll see my sleeping face when I get up in the morning, and even my position when I sleep? Do they... really only have this room?

"I'm sorry we couldn't find more rooms for your children this year, the thing is—"

Yep, this was the only room. While I was thinking this, the sliding screen to our room was pushed to the side. A man and woman entered, both of them looking around 25 to 26 years old. I immediately guessed that they were a couple. The woman was constantly looking at the man, after all. Asamura-kun called him “Kousuke-san.” He is Asamura-kun’s cousin and 8 years older... which means he’s 25. Yep, just as I guessed. And the woman standing next to him said that the two had gotten married recently.

“Oh, really?! Congratulations, Kousuke-kun!” Stepdad was beaming with joy.

Meanwhile, Asamura-kun stared at them in disbelief, his mouth open. He’s definitely surprised by this. Maybe this is the first time he even found out that his cousin was dating someone. Meanwhile, Stepdad introduced Mom to them, and I said my name s well.

“So, you’ve got a younger sister now, Yuuta?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Oh, huh. I thought you’d gotten married, too.” He spoke with a teasing tone, so he probably knew that I was Asamura-kun’s step-sister the moment he stepped into the room.

“There’s no way. I’m still in high school.” Asamura-kun returned with a calm tone, but I could tell that deep inside, he was definitely panicking.

After we moved the luggage into the corner of the room, Stepdad and Mom went over to our other relatives. Left behind, Asamura-kun and I talked with the other two—Kousuke-san and Nagisa-san. They had gotten to know each other from the same friend group in university. They started

dating ages ago, but they're still as lively as newlyweds. They also explained the reason they had handed in the marriage form before holding a proper ceremony.

Namely, the fact that Kousuke-san will be moving overseas for his job. And Nagisa-san decided to follow him. That's why they wouldn't be having the ceremony yet. Or rather, that they wouldn't make it in time before they left. Honestly, I realized I was underestimating what it meant to hold a marriage ceremony. To think you'd have to start looking for a venue half a year prior. Getting married in itself sounds like a lot of trouble.

Plus, I never would have imagined myself wanting to hold a marriage ceremony at one point. The man and woman in front of me had begun walking the path of life only a few years earlier than I. It was definitely possible that my life could take a similar path to theirs. And although I wanted to ask a lot more questions, Asamura-kun's younger cousins arrived. They were a brother and sister, both in grade school. They had bright-colored hair and cute facial features. It felt like they could brighten up the room with just a smile. They seemed fairly clingy with Asamura-kun, hanging off of him as they asked to play together, and Asamura-kun gladly accepted the offer.

It was decided that we'd be playing games, so we moved to a room with a TV. Kousuke-san and Nagisa-san went back to the other adults, and we stayed here with the children. Watching all of this unfold, I had to admire Asamura-kun once more. Seeing him handle the young children so well made me think of him like a young father. For a moment, I wondered if he'd be this kind of a father if he ever had children, but I then shook my head in a panic because I was clearly jumping the gun here. First of all, you can't become a father all on your own. You can't have children as a single

man. For that, you would need a wife, and—Wait. Again, I'm thinking too far into the future.

As it turns out, the two children were pretty good at playing games. Since the last time I had played any games was back when Maaya came to visit, it went pretty much how I would have expected, but I've got a pretty bad sense when it comes to games. In the game in question, we were small cooks who were grilling meat, cutting vegetables, swinging around pots and frying pans and cleaning the dishes. In reality, I had repeated these simple acts over and over, but with a small controller, I couldn't get a good feeling for it. In the end, my meat caught on fire and burned down the whole kitchen.

“Ahhhhh!”

“A-chan, are you bad at cooking?”

Words sharp like an arrow stabbed me right where it hurt. I felt myself close to tearing up. I knew I shouldn't be so sensitive when it came to what young children like them said. When I looked at Asamura-kun, he was just smiling and nodding.

“Hey, now, Mika. Ayase-san is a great cook. This is just because it's a game. But we can clear it next time. Right, Ayase-san?”

“You don't have to protect my pride like that. That just hurts even more.”

Realizing that this was all because I couldn't deal with young children frustrated me even more. But I just don't know what to do, so I can't help it. I'd have a much easier time dealing with adults. I just can't handle kids. Sitting here made me feel like I'd rather be going through another

lecture by Assistant Professor Kudou. I reminisced about the time I was the same age as these two. At that time, I thought that every adult other than my mother was an enemy. Just imagining how the past me would think if she saw me like this makes me feel terrified.

Since I've seen the bad side of adults, I have no confidence that I actually seem like an adult in their eyes. Baseless assumptions that they hated me and whatnot started to fill my mind instead. When we were called in for dinner, I was already mentally exhausted. And yet this was where the real fight would begin. When we're all sitting together, I'll have to introduce myself to our new relatives, alongside Mom. It made me realize that marrying someone means that you have to deal with their relatives and other children, something completely different from just studying or talking about fashion.

Sitting in the large banquet hall of the Asamura Family, I once again introduced myself. After that, all of the other relatives did the same. But I'm sorry, I can't remember anything after that. By the time I was getting sleepy because I had eaten too much—

“Should we head out now?” Stepdad's father said and everyone stood up at the same time.

They talked about visiting the shrine. Asamura-kun explained that it'd be fine for me to stay here if I was feeling sleepy, but there was no way I'd stay in this huge of a house all by myself.

“...I’m going.” I responded briefly and followed after Asamura-kun.

I’m glad he’s here with me. Mom is way too busy staying around Stepdad and the other relatives and has no time to

even look at me. I don't want to drag her down just because I don't feel too secure here. If not for him, I probably would have holed myself up in my room. Really, I'm so glad he's here.

The shrine we headed to was located deep in the mountains. Or up the mountain, depending on how you'd like to phrase it. Not to mention that it would take a whole two kilometers of walking to reach that place. Can you imagine how long that would take? But I also didn't want to wait for them to come back in the car. Plus—

“Well, let me know if it gets too much. Next time, we can let you wait.”

He probably said it without meaning too much by it, but I was happy. He was saying that we would come here again next year. I understand that he said that because he cared about me, but he was ready to leave me behind. I understood that two kilometers were nothing to scoff at, but once we actually started walking, it became pretty fun. I've always enjoyed looking at antiques and older buildings. I may not be as passionate as some kind of history buff, but indulging in a building's past has always been interesting to me. Not to mention that the winter scenery at night and the various parts of the shrine made me excited, too. Plus, talking with Asamura-kun about it helped me cheer up.

“It's just like how you're interested in how an old building ended up in its current state, yeah?”

Being told that by Asamura-kun made me gasp. I've never once looked at myself from such an objective perspective. Humans can't normally observe their own appearances. And maybe I never totally understood what kind of person I truly was. Maybe I could never truly see myself because of the

armament I wore. If so, then keeping it at a moderate defensive level should be fine, right? How would I know if my armament hadn't turned into the skin of a hedgehog? I just don't want to get hurt. This doesn't mean I'm fine hurting others.

I think it took us around 40 minutes of walking one way. On the way there, it passed midnight, and we were greeted by the new year. Reaching the offerings box, we threw our change inside and put our hands together. Closing my eyes, the memories of the past year flew around inside my head. The memories of the last few months were especially prominent. Back in June, Mom and I moved in with Asamura-kun and his father. After meeting him, my way of life drastically changed. My father had left an immensely negative impression on me when it came to men. I didn't want them to have any control over me or my life. I did my best at school to be able to live independently and live on my own two feet, but I also didn't want people to see me as some studying addict who could only do that.

Thinking back on it now, the offer of an exchange I made towards Asamura-kun was one of the most embarrassing things I had ever done, even if I did it in order to not have any debts I owe to other people, and to not have to rely on another man. That's why I made that bet with my body on the line. And yet Asamura-kun scolded me. I think it started back then... I had begun chasing after his shadow.

I chose to work at the same bookstore as Asamura-kun did, realized that I held romantic feelings for him, and still opted to lock these away and call him Nii-san. Standing here, it makes sense. It may have looked like I was choosing my own future for myself, but in the end, it all reverted back to him. On the day of the open campus when I met Kudou-sensei, she told me that being too narrow with my field of

view would be the enemy of all reason and wisdom. She argued that I should keep an eye open for other men—And yet, Asamura-kun suddenly confessed to me.

That's why we both agreed to be friendly siblings who are on good terms. And that we would allow anything that would fall under that idea. We adjusted to each other and decided that we would suppress our feelings of wanting to cross that line.

After we finished our prayer, Asamura-kun spoke up. “What did you wish for?”

“I was too busy thinking about everything that happened this year. I didn’t have time to wish for anything.”

“Same here,” Asamura-kun let out a snicker.

Looking at his eyes, he gave off the impression that he had organized his thoughts and feelings, the light in his eyes making it seem like he was feeling refreshed. When he shows me that kind of expression, it makes me realize... Realize that I like him.

Asamura-kun said that there would be a “next time.” So that’s what I’ll wish for. I hope that I can come here again with Asamura-kun next year.

Chapter 13

January 1st (Friday) - Asamura Yuuta

Thus, a new year arrived—Despite my wish, my awakening in the new year was neither peaceful nor relaxing. After returning from our shrine visit last night, I took a bath to warm my chilled bones and snuggled deep into my futon, and I didn't even remember when I fell asleep. I did have a good sleep, but the first thing that greeted me after waking up was severe pain all over my body. My calves especially were screaming in agony.

If you walk down a mountain path late at night with your legs one step away from slipping for a whole two kilometers, anyone in your situation will end up like this. There's no exception. I ended up this way, so let's just accept this hell as the expected result.

“Yuu-chan, breakfast is ready!”

The sliding screen swung open, and Takumi stormed into the room. He's brimming with energy even this early in the morning. That's a young and healthy child for you. Takumi leapt into the air and slammed his body onto me.

“Breakfast!”

“Gah! So cold!”

“If you don’t eat, it’ll be gone!”

“I get it, I get it! Tell them I’ll be right there.”

“Okieee!”

He ran away without closing the sliding screen. What an innocent brat he is. I’m just glad he jumped onto my futon and not Ayase-san’s. Oh yeah, where even is Ayase-san? I realized that I was the only one left in the room. All the other futons had been neatly stacked together in the corner of the room. Wasn’t Ayase-san really tired? She’ll really do anything to not show me her face right after waking up, huh? I finished changing and headed to the banquet hall.

“Good morning,” I said and looked around the room.

This was still the same room we had the party last night, but now the low tables were piled high with breakfast. The furthest seat away from the entrance was where my grandfather sat, and the closest was Takumi and Mika. My old man sat between them. As for an open seat...There’s the one next to my old man and across from him, but Akiko-san is probably going to sit next to him anyway, so I opted to sit down across from him... But then I realized why Akiko-san and the rest weren’t present yet, so I lifted the hip I had just begun to lower.

At around the same time, my grandmother came back to the room. Behind her were the female squad, carrying today’s main focus of our breakfast—*zouni*, which was basically soup that contained rice cakes and vegetables, on a tray and towards the table. They probably prepared this last, as leaving it standing around for too long would ruin the food.

"You can sit down. You'd only be in the way if you stood around."

Or so my grandmother said—And Ayase-san placed a bowl of zouni in front of me.

"She's right, Nii-san. Have a seat."

"Ah, okay."

Her gaze made me shut up and I obediently sat down on the floor cushion. I guess I overslept a bit too much, huh? I've gotta be careful tomorrow.

"If we need more, we can always prepare it, and if you wanna eat some while it's grilled, then just say so."

Everyone responded to my grandmother's words and breakfast began. The shape of the rice cakes for the zouni varies depending on where they're from. In Japan, in the Asamura main family, we keep it simple and straightforward. I put my mouth to the bowl, using my chopsticks to keep the rice cakes and shiitake mushrooms away to enjoy the soup. The scent of Japanese parsley tickled my tongue. The liquid filled my body and warmed me up from the inside. It felt like I was washing away the exhaustion from our shrine trip last night.

During the entire breakfast, there is one thing that made me curious. It didn't look like Ayase-san's chopsticks were moving much. When we all began eating, she didn't seem too different, but now that I'm getting a better look at her, her gaze was on the ground, and she was sighing pretty regularly. After we finished breakfast and cleaned up everything, I decided to call out to her as she sat on the porch.

“Can I sit next to you?”

“Go ahead.”

Now that I had permission, I sat down next to Ayase-san. My legs were turned towards the garden, so I kicked them up and down a bit. After that, I carefully built up a conversation. I said that she seemed a bit down during breakfast. It might have just been my imagination. But even so, I was curious how she felt. I wanted to know if she was okay. After all, it wasn’t just Akiko-san here anymore. She must be feeling a bit alienated.



"Not at all," she said.

I expected that response. But I kept looking at her. She narrowed her eyes.

“I was just thinking that the start of the new year didn’t go too well.”

“Huh? Are you talking about the fortune slip?”

She nodded. I was honestly surprised. I had always seen Ayase-san as the type of person who wasn’t shaken by such spiritual tellings.

“It’s not that I have absolute faith in it. There’s no way some paper like that would have the power to turn my life around.”

“So you’re bothered by it to the point you have to act strong about it.”

“Ah,” Ayase-san raised a bewildered voice. “Yeah, I guess so...”

“Well, I can understand how it might drag you down. This is part of the reason fortune-telling is still a thing.”

“Not just that... I think. Say, Asa—Nii-san.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you ever thought about something that would definitely not happen when you were given a fortune?”

“Something that would definitely not happen?”

“For example, if it said that tomorrow you’d wake up and find out you’ve turned into a woman.”

“That’s an interesting idea, but… I don’t think I would live my life any differently.”

“Right? But look at it from the opposite side of the same coin. What if you felt like it could actually come true?”

Basically, she’s saying that, taking our relationship into consideration, this “terrible fortune” could very well happen. Honestly, it’d be easy to just scoff at her worries and move on. I could say it was just a random fortune slip, and that tying it to the rope basically nullified it, and whatnot. But what would happen if I were that nonchalant about it? A shrine fortune slip really doesn’t matter much. It’s just a means to show fortune. The thing that makes you decide to believe in that vague fortune-telling, the thing that causes you to see things that aren’t really there—that’s your own heart. So I started thinking.

“Wanna head out for a walk?” I continued as Ayase-san raised her head. “I know just the spot around here.”

“A recommendation from Asamura-kun… I’d like to see that.”

After we both put on our coats, we left the house.

We didn’t walk too far. Some snow had accumulated already, but it had already been compacted into the ground by other people, and the path was flat. But I still didn’t want her to feel tired, so I told her to tell me when she couldn’t walk anymore. But when I looked at her face, she seemed to be doing fine. We made our way up a slight hill with thickets to the left and right. Since this was a regular road, we had enough space to walk on the sides. Once we reached a place with a cliff to the left, we turned right. After making our way through the thickets, the scenery in front of us was

—

“Whoa... A lake.” Ayase-san swallowed her breath.

Past the thicket, there was a beautiful lake.

“Let’s get a bit closer. Right over here.”

We went down several stairs that had been freed from the snow already. Farther down was a small hut. I don’t know what use it has now, or ever had, but it’s been there since I was a young child. Going down towards the lake, we reached the edge of the thicket. Beyond it was untouched snow, and roughly ten more steps would get us to the water’s surface.

“We can’t go any further than this or we might slip.”

“Yeah... But wow. The frozen surface looks like a mirror.”

The blue sky above us looked like it had been copied and pasted down onto the ground, surrounded by snowy white clouds. There was no breeze, either, so the frozen lake was smooth and solid.

“Nice, right?”

“Yeah...”

“I like to come here during the winter. I think I’ve only been here two times during the summer, and once when it was fall and all brownish-red everywhere. But honestly, I never get tired of this sight. Depending on the season, the scenery in the lake’s reflection changes.”

“Like the leaves turning red?”

“In fall, yeah. In summer, there are cumulonimbus clouds, and cirrocumulus clouds when it turns to fall. At night, you

can see the moon and stars. On windy days, it creates waves that distort the sight like you're looking at it through tinted glass."

"I see. This is wonderful. You found a wonderful place. Is this area famous?"

"Not exactly. This isn't a tourist attraction or anything."

"So you found it yourself."

"It was just pure luck. When I was still young, there was barely anything here. As a child, you'd get bored immediately. Having Kousuke-san with me was fine and all, but he couldn't be with me 24/7—"

Yep, it was just a coincidence. When the other adults got together, I didn't want to see my mother and didn't care about the rest of them, so I just walked around randomly and stumbled upon this place. She put on a fake smile whenever she interacted with our relatives, but I could see through it clearly. She was way different from the mother I knew at home. Especially her voice and expression.

"Well, that allowed me to find a great place like this, where I could just relax and stay away from all the trouble. It's not all bad, in the end. It's all about turning misfortune into fortune, y'know."

"Asamura-kun..."

"So, about that terrible fortune of yours—"

I don't know if these words will help her to cheer up. But I had to say them.

"Are you having fun right now, Ayase-san?"

“Right now...? Are you not talking about today or yesterday?”

“I’m just... asking in general, I guess?”

Ayase-san started thinking like she was taking a deep dive into her own heart, and responded after a brief break.

“Yeah. I’m having fun... I think.”

“Same here.”

She gasped and looked at me in surprise.

“And think about it. The ‘terrible fortune’ you pulled last night is reflecting on the current situation. Meaning that this enjoyable time is the worst possible outcome, right?”

“Huh? Um... Maybe?”

“That’s at least how it works on paper. So, anyway, if this is already as low as it can get, then there’s no need to be worried. After all, it won’t get any worse. In fact, it’s only gonna get better from now on.”

“Erm...” Ayase-san looked at me in disbelief, like she was chewing on my words.

I don’t blame her. I was half aware that I was just pulling stuff out of thin air. But then she looked at me and—Burst out laughing.

“Pfft... Ha...ahaha, that’s a bit of a stretch, don’t you think?”

“I mean, I think it’s a perfectly logical deduction?”

"Ah... haha... I don't think you can use the word 'logical' for that."

"But if you think about it that way, all your worries suddenly sound stupid, no? Basically, depending on your thought process, you can turn even a bad fortune into something positive."

"I... guess so. Haha." Ayase-san rubbed one eye.

I mean, I didn't think it'd be funny enough to make her shed a tear.

"Yeah... Thanks. You were worried about me, right?"

"Well, yeah... I'd always worry about the person I love."

The person I love, huh?

"Asamura-kun..."

"Personally, I don't want to see you forcing yourself to smile when we're here."

Like that person did.

"Yeah. I'm glad I came here. And I got to see you interacting with your younger cousins Takumi-kun and Mika-chan."

"Me?"

"Yeah. It made me realize what a good older brother you are. Meanwhile, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't interact with them like you did. I can't remember how my parents or relatives treated me when I was their age."

This time, I was the one bewildered. I see. She's never dealt with relatives that much before. She made that obvious

when she first brought Naraka-san over to my house.

'What a happy family you are. Everyone's close and friendly.'

That's what Ayase-san said. The 'Everyone' part of the statement was much more important than I had thought it was at first. I had Kousuke-san, Takumi and Mika. I was always surrounded by friendly relatives. However, Ayase-san had nobody but Akiko-san.

"I don't know how to act or interact with those children. I've never had an experience like that. So I was a bit scared."

"Then..." I spoke up. "You don't have to rush things. Taking things one step at a time is just as important."

"One step at a time..."

"I don't see any reason to panic. Even if you're not perfect right now, even if you're worried about us growing up into respectable adults or not. Let's just grow together?"

"Grow... together..."

"Yeah." I nodded and Ayase-san put her hands together in front of her chest, nodding back.

She gently caressed the bracelet shining on her wrist.

"That's a beautiful bracelet."

"Yeah... It's wonderful, isn't it?" She said and gently caressed her bracelet.

After that, Ayase-san and I just observed the surface of the lake in silence. As a breeze passed us by, we both headed back to the residence.

That evening, after we finished dinner, Ayase-san and I were once again playing a game with Takumi and Mika, which was a racing game where you try to obstruct other players using items. Ayase-san seemed to be doing much better with this game, and she even beat me several times. However, Takumi and Mika were even better than that, always at the top of the ranking. I figured that it wouldn't be nice to use too many items against Mika, so I left Takumi to battle her while I mainly fought against Ayase-san. If it was me, she'd definitely have a chance.

Like this, time went on and we played for almost two hours, and the two of them ended up falling asleep. Children have what you'd believe to be an endless reserve of energy, which they use up all at once and then fall asleep on the spot if they run out of it. That's the kind of creatures they are.

"My, my, they should at least head to their beds if they want to sleep." Aunt Kanae sighed.

"Yuuta and I will carry them over."

Kousuke-san grabbed Takumi, and I picked up Mika. Ayase-san offered to help out, but I said that she should at least let me handle all the physical babor, so she reluctantly stepped back.

"I'll go back to my room, then," she said and headed to the room the four of us were staying in for one more night.

After seeing her off, Kousuke-san smiled.

"She's a good girl."

"Yes. A little sister I can be proud of." I said without thinking too much about it.

We put the two children to bed, and Kousuke-san returned to the banquet hall. I headed to the kitchen since I was feeling a bit hungry. There's food in the banquet hall still, but going there would just get me captured and pulled into their conversations. On the way to the kitchen, I heard my grandparents and my old man talking.

"How are things with her?"

My grandfather spoke with a somewhat worried voice, bringing up the name of my mother. I was surprised and stopped in my tracks. Why would he ask that now, when things are going great with Akiko-san? My mother was good at keeping up appearances. On the surface, she was always smiling and laughing with grandfather. That's why both my grandparents were surprised by the divorce. My old man said that he was at fault for everything that had happened, but I can't agree with that. After all, she got married to the person she cheated on Dad with only half a year after their divorce. And since then, we haven't heard a peep from her.

My old man said that although he agreed to the remarriage, he said he was still not fully on safe land. Akiko-san seemed a lot more pleasant than my mother on the outside, but we learned that this wasn't everything. Logically, it made sense. When my old man introduced Akio-san as his marriage partner, I was worried that she might be deceiving him too. My mother seemed much more docile with nothing negative on the surface, only for things to suddenly come crashing down. Akiko-san definitely has more flashy looks and works at night in the big city, so it made sense for grandpa, who had no experience of life in Tokyo, to think that she doesn't seem as good of a partner as his previous wife.

Grandmother tried to soothe grandfather and his words, but he kept pressing my old man further. Plus, he said that Akiko-san's daughter Saki had her mother's flashy looks and seemed rather cold and blunt. That's why he seemed to be worried. However, that was something even my old man couldn't just let slide.

"It's okay. They are both wonderful people that you don't have to worry about, Dad." He said without a glimmer of hesitation.

Grandfather was a bit taken aback, but he was not stepping down.

"You say that, but what about Yuuta? He's in high school, and he's suddenly got himself a new mother and sister. Isn't that too much for him to handle?"

"That's not—"

"Can you truly say that, Taichi?"

"..."

My old man was at a loss for words. He probably didn't want to speak for his own son. I think it's this genuine care and seriousness that didn't make him a good fit with my mother, and that's what brought him and Akiko-san together. That's what I think, at least. I remembered his straightforward response to grandfather just now, and spoke up through the sliding door. The argument inside the hall stopped. I named myself and stepped in front of grandfather.

"I have absolutely no complaints about Dad's remarriage with Akiko-san." I declared.

"Yuuta..."

“And this also goes for **Saki**.”

I couldn’t afford to call her “Ayase-san” right now. I needed to set her on the stage as a single individual—and that I accepted her into my family.

“She’s not the type of person you see her as, Grandpa. She may have a hard time interacting with people at times, but I’m the same way. Saki is kind, sincere, and a truly hard-working person.”

“Yuuta...” My old man looked at me with dampened eyes.

And now, my grandmother chimed in.

“Gintarou-san, don’t you remember what Takumi said? He taught Saki-san how to play that whatsit game because she was so bad at it, but she was very earnest about listening to his advice.”

I kept a straight face on the outside but couldn’t stop myself from groaning mentally.

“It means she was doing her best with the help of someone else, right?”

“W-Well.”

“Plus, you weren’t exactly the most welcoming when it came to Saki-san either, remember?”

“Yeah, but with her hair dyed like that—”

“That much is normal nowadays. Did you already forget that Kanae dyed her hair red a long time ago?”

Receiving this follow-up attack from grandmother, grandfather had nothing else to say. He probably realized

there was no winning this argument. Meanwhile, grandmother looked at me as she gently narrowed her eyes. Somehow, I feel itchy all over.

“Yeah, I see... Well, if you are that adamant about it. But to think our docile Yuuta would go this far...”

“Enough of this then, Gintarou-san?”

“Yeah, I won’t say anything more for now. Yuuta, your birthday has already passed, right? How old are you?”

“I’m 17 now.”

“I see. Then you’ll be an adult next year... And you could find a wife.”

“A wife... That’s still a bit too early for me.”

“Well, Kousuke brought it up out of nowhere.”

Since I couldn’t comment on that, grandmother came to the rescue.

“Yes, yes, surely. But, that’s enough, Gintarou-san.”

“Yeah. Taichi, let’s drink some more.”

“Erm... I can’t drink that much, I have to drive home tomorrow, remember?”

While the two headed back to the banquet hall, I opted to return to my own room. I laid down in my futon and reminisced about the incident just now. If... if our family found out about my relationship with Ayase-san... Then even if they won’t accept us here any longer, I just have to stay resolute like my old man did.

Let's both do our best—Saki.

Chapter 14

January 1st (Friday) - Ayase Saki

I hurriedly turned off the lights and snuggled up into my futon to pretend that I was asleep. My heart was racing painfully fast. The sliding screen opened, and I felt Asamura-kun entering his own futon. Our futons were on opposite ends of the room, with our parents in the center. It was good enough that we wouldn't be too conscious of each other while sleeping in the same room, and it allowed me to not show my defenseless side to him.

He... didn't notice, right? My heart beat faster and faster. I felt it thumping right up to my ears, showing no signs of calming down. My face felt hot. Even though it was below freezing outside, I felt like I was sweating beneath my futon. Worried that he might hear me breathing heavily, I pulled the blanket over my head.

'Saki is kind, sincere, and... a truly hard-working person.'

That's what Asamura-kun said. Not to mention that he called me Saki. Not just Ayase-san, but **Saki**.

I wanted to go to the toilet, but I realized that Asamura-kun wasn't sleeping in his futon yet. However, my drowsy brain

didn't think much about it and just accepted this as a fact as I left the room. After almost ending up lost in the large hallway, I made my way back to the room when I heard Asamura-kun's voice. I didn't mean to peek inside, I just went a bit closer to listen. This allowed me to hear his voice clearly. And without any hesitation, he said that—That he doesn't have any complaints when it comes to Mom's marriage with Stepdad.

And not just that, he even protected me. I don't know what led to him saying that, but—I didn't expect him to praise me and call me kind, sincere, and hard-working. I was worried if I could even live up to these expectations. I was happy, but at the same time I was scared. I don't know what it means to be liked. I haven't done anything to make other people like me. I've kept my armament to block off anyone who's tried to approach or attack me in any way.

But, when there was a person I wanted to get along with, I had no armament or equipment that would allow me to do so. I've just been doing everything in my power to be able to live all by myself without the help of anybody else. I never saw any need to get along with people. But all of that came crashing down half a year ago. I won't have any great expectations from you, so I want you to do the same for me.

When I said these words to Asamura-kun half a year ago, I never would have imagined that he would come to like me. On the contrary, the only reason I wanted to get along with Stepdad was so that Mom could finally be happy. But to my surprise, Asamura-kun not only accepted this contract of us adjusting to each other, he even took the time to always talk things through with me.

At some point, I fell in love with him, and I even began seeing Stepdad as not just the person Mom married, but as

a genuinely caring individual. I began wanting to care for him because the person I like does the same.

I bet I could have avoided coming here with a well-made excuse. I could have said that I had to study, said that I had to work, or even just said I simply didn't want to. I doubt they would have forced me to come. I agreed to come because I wanted to. Just as Stepdad said on the way here, there's no guarantee we might get another chance to travel together like this, and Mom said that all of his relatives are genuinely nice people. I want to come to like the people that the person I cherish also cares for.

However, dealing with relatives I wasn't even directly related to, let alone these people who live so far away, was much more difficult than I had imagined. In a place like this, with relatives from what felt like a foreign family, adjusting to each other and understanding the other party takes time. In that case, you need someone to take your side, to act as your shield as they enable you to build up a conversation—A shield. And this time, it was Asamura-kun who did that for me.

Or maybe you could even call a cushion. The same goes for Stepdad, of course. Thanks to that, my step-grandfather's gaze towards us should become a lot softer starting tomorrow. Without his prejudices, it in return makes it easier for me to interact with him. Of course, that's all because he acted as the shield between me and his relatives. Even though I had decided to live independently and all by myself, I started thinking that I wanted to walk next to someone—Next to Asamura-kun.

I focused my attention on any sounds outside the room, but nobody was nearby. Mom and Stepdad are probably busy talking with our relatives. Right now, it was just Asamura-

kun and I in this room. I carefully pulled the blanket off me and moved towards his futon, gently touching his shoulder. Touching him without first adjusting to each other isn't like me. Not to mention that our parents could see this at any given moment. But even so, I called out his name, packed with all my feelings.

"Thank you, **Yuuta-kun.**"

I pushed myself closer to his back until I almost touched him, indulging in the warmth I felt on my hand, which then passed through my own body. Just like ice melting away, the reason and logic in my mind lost their shape and became a twisted unsightly shape like a non-uniform mineral. But even so, I came to adore this twistedness. And during the few seconds it took until Asamura-kun woke up in shock and called out my name, which felt like an eternity to me, I simply indulged in the warmth he gave me.



Afterword

Thank you very much for buying volume 6 of the novelized [Gimai Seikatsu] series. I'm the original creator of both the YouTube version and this novel series, Mikawa Ghost. And this time, I believe I have to bring up the news that most of you have most likely heard about already. That's right, I'm talking about the anime adaptation. The other day, a glorious anime adaptation for [Gimai Seikatsu] has been announced, with the cast of the YouTube series being enlisted for the actual anime. There couldn't be any better news, don't you think? I was truly delighted to hear of this decision. And it's all thanks to the fans who have supported this series all the way until now. Thank you so much. It will take quite some time until the broadcast, but I hope you look forward to it.

Finally, my thanks. My illustrator Hiten-san, voice actors and actresses Nakashima Yuki-san, Amasaki Kouhei-san, Suzuki Ayu-san, Hamano Daiki-san, Suzuki Minori-san, video director Ochiai Yuusuke-san, and everyone else from the YouTube version, as well as my editor O-san, mangaka Kanade Yumika-san, and everybody else from the publishing and editorial department, and finally all my dear readers: Thank you very much.

This has been Ghost.