

# ACCIDENTALLY BECOME A FATHER

## Chapter 4: The Memory That Shouldn't Exist

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I was looking at someone I had met before.

I lowered the photo slowly.

"Do you know who your mother is?" I asked.

She nodded once.

"I know."

"Did you want me to know?"

She didn't answer immediately.

Her eyes dropped to the photograph.

Then rose back to meet mine.

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"Papa already knows, right?"

I didn't answer.

Because she was right.

And because something was moving inside my head.

Not a clear memory.

Not yet.

Just fragments.

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Stage lights.

The metallic smell of dismantled scaffolding.

The low hum of equipment.

Voices echoing in a half-empty venue.

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And her.

Standing there.

Kanzaki Sayaka.

I had been sitting in the most inconspicuous part of the venue. Behind a massive speaker near the crew stairs.

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My uniform was still clean.

My shift hadn't started yet.

My job was always after the concert ended.

Teardown.

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On stage, the lights were only half-lit.

The audience hadn't entered yet.

Just a sound check.

She stood alone in the center of the stage.

No stage smile.

No camera expression.

Just a tired woman repeating the same song over and over.

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She stepped down from the stage.

Her shoulders slightly slumped.

She stopped not far from where I was sitting.

Perhaps because I wasn't staring at her.

I wasn't looking at her at all.

I was looking at the structure of the stage.

Calculating how long it would take to dismantle.

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"Working after this?" she asked.

I looked up slightly.

"Yeah."

"You're not going to watch?"

"Listening is enough."

She gave a faint smile.

"You don't like idols?"

"I didn't say that."

She waited.

"For someone like you," she said, "that's a cold answer."

I thought about it briefly.

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Not long.

"You're pretty. Your voice is good."

She blinked.

Waited for more.

There was nothing more.

"That's it?" she asked.

"Yeah."

Most people would have asked for a photo.

Or an autograph.

Or said something exaggerated.

I didn't.

My supervisor called my name from across the venue.

I stood up.

Walked past her.

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"You're weird," she said quietly behind me.

"Maybe," I replied.

And that should have been the end of it.

But it wasn't.

Another venue.

Another concert.

Smaller this time.

The teardown was halfway done when I sat down in the back row.

Away from everyone.

That's when I noticed her.

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A little girl.

Sitting alone.

Her feet didn't reach the floor.

They swayed gently.

She wasn't cheering.

Wasn't waving.

Wasn't calling out.

She was just watching.

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Quietly.

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I sat in the empty seat beside her.

Not because I wanted company.

But because it was the quietest place.

I had bought two drinks earlier.

One cold tea.

One small juice box.

I placed the juice box on the seat between us.

She looked at it.

Then at me.

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"Can I?" she asked.

I nodded.

She took it with both hands.

Polite.

Careful.

We didn't talk.

We just sat there.

Watching the same stage.

Watching the same woman.

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Occasionally, I gave her snacks from my pocket.

She accepted them every time.

At the time, I didn't know who she was.

Just someone else's kid.

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Not my concern.

Not my responsibility.

Just someone passing through the same space.

Under the same lights.

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I blinked.

The memory ended.

The apartment came back into focus.

The small table.

The document.

The photo.

And the girl sitting in front of me.

Watching me.

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Waiting.

"We've met before," I said.

She nodded.

"I know."

A pause.

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Then she added,

"I remember."

My fingers tightened slightly.

"Remember what?"

She looked directly into my eyes.

And said quietly—

"I remember Papa gave me juice."

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